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## POETICS OF ENCHANTMENT: LANGUAGE, SACRAMENTALITY, AND MEANING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARGENTINE POETRY

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POETICS OF ENCHANTMENT: LANGUAGE, SACRAMENTALITY, AND  
MEANING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARGENTINE POETRY

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Adam Gregory Glover

Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

1995

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### POETICS OF ENCHANTMENT: LANGUAGE, SACRAMENTALITY, MEANING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARGENTINE POETRY

This dissertation explores the relationship between language, sacramentality, and enchantment in three twentieth-century Argentine poets: Francisco Luis Bernárdez (1900-1976), Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), and Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972). It seeks to ask and answer two fundamental questions. First, to what extent might it be possible to understand the conception of poetic language characteristic of modern poetry as an articulation, however muffled and secularized, of a sacramental apprehension of language and world? Second, how might such a conception be related to what Max Weber famously called “the disenchantment of the world”? The dissertation begins with a broad overview of the development of the concept of disenchant within Western culture and then proceeds to a reading of the three poets mentioned above. Special attention is given throughout both to historical and political context and to the specific ways in which Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik understand and employ poetic language. In each case, I attempt to show how, among both secular and religious poets, language retains vestiges of a sacramental understanding of the world.

**KEYWORDS:** Enchantment, Sacramentality, Francisco Luis Bernárdez, Jorge Luis Borges, Alejandra Pizarnik

Adam Glover

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10 December 2011

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POETICS OF ENCHANTMENT: LANGUAGE, SACRAMENTALITY, AND  
MEANING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY ARGENTINE POETRY

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Max Weber (1864-1920) cannot be said to have shed many tears over what he famously called “the disenchantment of the world,” a rather anemic and ultimately misleading translation of the German *die Entzauberung der Welt*. I say misleading for two reasons. First, in English “disenchantment” carries primarily subjective connotations (people become “disenchanted” or “disheartened” or “disillusioned”), whereas the German *Entzauberung* refers more properly to the “dis-charming” or “un-magicking” of the world itself. Second, for Weber the world was never really “charmed” or “magical” in the first place. Indeed, in his view, our unfortunately belated discovery that Democritus had been right all along meant nothing so much as the shedding of an illusion, our final and glorious manumission from the fetters of superstition and irrationality. Yet despite a certain buoyant sanguinity that flickers about the pages of his books and essays, Weber’s own attitude toward the spiritual and moral implications of disenchantment was at least partly ambivalent. To be sure, Weber denied the applicability of general laws in sociological explanation and resisted Positivism’s insistence on causal determinism, but he nevertheless remained convinced of the nearly total explanatory power of the natural sciences. In “Science as a Vocation” (1915), for instance, a late essay first delivered as a lecture at the University of Munich, Weber argued that the rationalization or “intellectualization” inherent in scientific explanation entail “that there are in principle no *mysterious, incalculable powers at work*, but rather that one could in principle master everything through *calculation*” (13-14). And yet Weber also seems to have recognized that, on the far side of the giddy scientific optimism peddled by the positivists and their

sympathizers, *something* would have to fill the vacuum left by our dearly departed religious and moral convictions. Indeed, in a 1916 essay, he offered up an alternative, suggesting that nothing less than *art* takes over where traditional religion leaves off and “provides a *salvation* from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism” (“Religious” 342).

It is precisely at this conceptual crux in Weber’s work that I would like to situate my own thesis. Before going any further, however, I should note that Weber appears here merely as a cultural landmark; that is, I do not intend to engage his work directly, but rather to use his name as shorthand for both the general spiritual and existential crisis that beset Western culture perhaps as early as the onset of the Scientific Revolution and one possible response to that crisis (i.e., art). My real interests lie elsewhere, specifically in Latin America, and more specifically still in Argentina, where my goal, stated in the broadest possible terms, is to think through the problem of disenchantment in three twentieth-century Argentine poets: Francisco Luis Bernárdez (1900-1978), Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), and Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972). The question I wish to raise is simply this: how did Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik experience disenchantment and how, if at all, did they think of poetry as a possible remedy? There is, of course, something arbitrary about asking just this question of just these poets. That arbitrariness has at least two sources: first, why poetry and disenchantment in general? And, second, why Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik in particular?

The short answer to the first question is that the idea that poetry might have something important to say about disenchantment is by now a commonplace. As M.H. Abrams has convincingly argued, the great achievement of Romantic poetry was to

resituate traditional religious concepts and plot patterns within a thoroughly naturalistic framework and so to provide a progressively secularized culture with a “new mythology” (13, 65-7). In the post-Romantic tradition, this idea perhaps found its most forceful articulation in Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), who, in “The Study of Poetry” (1888), noted that “more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (76-77). The point, of course, was partly exhortatory: to call poets to seek “higher destinies” and so to facilitate the creation of what Northrop Frye has dubbed “a new scriptural canon” (22). Yet Arnold’s exhortation was also firmly rooted in what he, like Weber, took to be an indisputable historical fact, namely, that in the face of the waning influence of traditional religion, human beings would have to look elsewhere for their moral and spiritual coordinates.

The second question is more complicated and much more important. I have chosen Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik not because they belong to the same generation (they do not), nor even because they show any great poetic affinity (they do not), but rather because they offer three radically—and instructively—different answers to the same question. And yet those answers, however divergent, move in the same conceptual space and together form a constellation of possible responses to the spiritual dis-ease that characterizes a disenchanted world. Bernárdez stands as the central figure of the thesis, and, for reasons I shall attempt to elucidate, I intend to read Borges’s and Pizarnik’s poetry in light of his. I place Bernárdez at the center because, as a devout Catholic, he seems to have been less troubled by disenchantment than his more secularized coevals.

This owes in large part to the fact that Bernárdez's Catholicism already contains within itself the resources to respond to (or, better yet, to preempt) the problem altogether. As Andrew Greeley has recently argued, from a purely Catholic perspective, it is misleading to speak of "disenchantment" at all, since Catholics *already* "live in an enchanted world," one sustained by a "sacramental imagination" that sees reality as imbued with (and hence a revelation of) God's presence (1, 108). The notion of "sacramentality" or "the sacramental imagination" is central to my analysis of Bernárdez, and it is against this backdrop, very broadly construed, that I would like to situate Borges and Pizarnik.

### 1.1. Sacramentality and Sacramental Poetics

"Man is unavoidably a sacramentalist," writes the twentieth-century British poet David Jones, "and his works are sacramental in character" (Jones 150). Yet to assert without further explanation that human beings are unavoidably sacramentalists is to risk misunderstanding, since, as Jones notes, terms like "'sacrament' and 'sacramental' are likely to give off overtones and undertones that for a number of disparate reasons have a kind of narrowing effect" (150). For Christians, on the one hand, "sacrament" and "sacramental" carry "a specialized meaning" and have a "special aura" about them; for non-Christians, on the other hand, such terms are likely to appear too parochial, too wedded to a particular theological discourse to be useful in other contexts. What remains obscured, in either case, is sacramentality's "primary meaning," which, according to Jones, has to do quite simply with the human capacity for making signs:

For about fifty milleniums [*sic*] (perhaps for immeasurably longer), [human beings] have made works, handled material, in a fashion that can only be described as having the nature of a sign. We have ample archeological evidence to show us that paleolithic man [...] was a sacramental animal. We know, for

instance, that this creature juxtaposed marks on surfaces not with merely utile, but with significant, intent; that is to say a “re-presenting,” a “showing again under other forms,” an “effective recalling” of something [that] was intended. (Jones 150)

The basic sense of *sacramentum* as “sign-making” is already present in the earliest recorded uses of the term. In his history of the Latin language, the Roman historian Varro (116 BC – 27 BC) defined *sacramentum* as a sum of money deposited by the plaintiff and the defendant in a lawsuit: “the winner of the suit received back his deposit from the temple (*suum sacramentum e sacro auferabat*), while the loser’s deposit went into the treasury” (169). Later, Julius Caesar (100 BC – 44 BC) used *sacramentum* to refer to the oath taken by soldiers upon joining the Roman army. For both authors, moreover, *sacramentum* has the character of an act of signification: in Varro’s case, an act signifying the truthfulness of one’s claim, and in Caesar’s an act signifying obedience to one’s general and fealty to one’s fellow soldiers (Van Slyke 246-47).

In Christian thought, the Latin *sacramentum* was popularized by Tertullian (155-220) as a translation of the Greek *mysterion*, a term meaning secret doctrines or teachings and which, in the New Testament, refers to the mysteries of the Christian faith and ultimately to Christ himself.<sup>1</sup> Tertullian employed *sacramentum* in a variety of different ways, but, as before, the primary sense—and the one that would come to predominate in the post-Nicene period—had to do with sign-making. Tertullian himself used the term *sacramenta* to refer to what we would now call “types” or “figures” (that is, Old Testament figures that somewhat point to or signify Christ), while Saint Augustine wrote in a letter to Marcellinus that “when signs pertain to divine things they are called

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant biblical passages include Matthew 13.11, Ephesians 6.9, Colossians 1.26, 1 Timothy 3.16, 2 Thessalonians 2.7, and Romans 16.25-26. See also de Andia (422-23), Mohrmann (141-46), and van Roo (36-44).

sacraments” (cited in Schwartz 4). In one sense, of course, the relationship between signification and sacrality is inherent in the concept of the sign itself. Summarizing a standard medieval definition, the French philosopher and theologian Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) writes that “le signe est ce qui rend présent à la connaissance quelque chose autre que soi” (*Oeuvres*, II: 98). The key phrase is “autre que soi”: since signs work by evoking something *other*, something *beyond* the sign itself, the very act of signification reveals an openness to transcendence, a receptiveness to the sacred. To signify is therefore always to transcend.

Yet sign-making is only half of the story of sacramentality. The other half is *efficacy*. According to the catechism of the Council of Trent, “A sacrament is a thing subjected to the senses, which has the power not only of signifying but also of effecting grace” (cited in Schwartz 7). The Tridentine definition recapitulates a long tradition of Christian reflection on the nature of sacramentality, one that reaches its apogee in Augustine, who characterizes sacraments as visible signs that both represent an invisible reality and contain that reality within themselves. The Augustinian language of containment is crucial, since the whole point of sacraments is that they not only *refer* to a transcendent reality but also *participate* in that reality. The clearest example of the sacramental sign as both referential and participatory is, of course, the Eucharist, wherein the host at once signifies the body of Christ and *is* that body.

But even the Eucharist depends upon an act of signification more fundamental still: that event whereby, according to Christian doctrine, the *Logos*, the second person of the Holy Trinity takes on flesh and dwells among us. The specific miracle of the Eucharist, then, is that it “re-presences” Christ’s body and so makes it ever-available, as

sacrament, to the Church. In this sense, one might say that poetic language is always prompted by a kind of Eucharistic longing: the longing to render present what is absent, not merely “in select figures of speech,” but rather in “the very poetic enterprise” itself (Schwartz 8). For if, as Heidegger (and others) would have it, art manifests a world, brings beings to presence, then its model, however unacknowledged, is always that Eucharistic act of signification which brings to presence not only being, but the transcendent source of being. George Steiner makes the point like this: “At every significant point, Western philosophies of art and Western poetics draw their secular idiom” from the “postulate” of “the ‘real presence’ of the incarnate Christ in the eucharist” (*Grammars* 67). That “postulate,” Steiner says elsewhere, owes less to Catholic Christianity’s pervasive influence on Western civilization and more to the fact that the very assumption of the possibility of meaningful communication is, at bottom, “a wager on transcendence,” a “wager on God” (*Real* 4).

Nowhere is this poetic longing for “real presence” more palpable than in the tradition of poetry stretching from Romanticism to the avant-garde (the tradition to which Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik are all, in various ways, heirs). Indeed, as Gerald Bruns has argued, modern poets consistently construed poetic language not merely as a tool for describing reality, but rather as “an activity which brings the world into being for the first time and which maintains it there as the ground of all signification” (206). Examples of this view of language abound—from Hölderlin’s words that “originate” like flowers (*Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn*) and Darío’s “botón de pensamiento que busca ser la rosa,” to Valéry’s remark, in *The Art of Poetry*, that poetic language gives us “l’idée d’une nature enchantée, asservie, comme par un charme, aux caprices, aux prestiges, aux

puissances du langage” (*Oeuvres* 1:450). In each case, the language of modern poetry reveals a sense in which the sacrament of the Eucharist functions as that toward which poetic discourse tends, asymptotically, as toward a limit.

I take up the relationship between sacramentality and modern poetics in more detail in Chapter 3. For now, though, it may be useful to pause for a moment and ask why the idea of sacramentality looms so large in a thesis dedicated to questions of disenchantment and re-enchantment. The least that can be said is that the relationship is hardly coincidental. Without wishing, at this point, to assign blame (or praise), it is surely safe to argue, as Regina Schwartz in fact has, that Reformation-era debates about the Eucharist “became the occasion for the worldview we regard as ‘modern’ to begin to be articulated” (9). It was, after all, precisely the modern scientific reevaluation of space and time, matter and language which, at least in part, led the Reformers of the early and mid-sixteenth century to abandon the traditional understanding of the Eucharistic sacrifice. If the doctrine of transubstantiation depended upon a sacramental conception of space and time which allowed for the conjunction of spatially and temporally disparate events, then a new, distinctly modern understanding of physical space insisted that no single body could occupy two different spatial locations and hence that Christ could not simultaneously be at the right hand of the Father and present in the host. If a logic of sacramentality required a literal interpretation of Jesus’s words, “Take and eat; this is my body,” then a modern logic of human physiology managed only to construe that command as an invitation to cannibalism. Finally, if the sacrifice of the mass demanded the coincidence of sign and referent in the Eucharistic bread and the wine, then a distinctly modern logic of representation insisted that signs always “stand in” for



something absent and therefore never signify themselves.<sup>2</sup> In nearly every significant respect, modernity plotted its basic coordinates as a rejection of the sort of sacramental worldview that saw creation as everywhere infused with the presence of God. It is in this sense, moreover, that Schwartz has argued that the dismantling of “sacramental thinking” was a “necessary condition” of the birth of modernity (11), and that Weber himself saw Protestantism’s devaluation of sacramentality as the “logical conclusion” of the “great historical process [...] of disenchantment” (*Protestant* 105). But if the birth of modernity at once spelled the death of sacramentality and the final triumph of disenchantment, then modern poetry, understood as the attempt to translate the sacramental logic of the Eucharist into a secular idiom, might well serve as the occasion not only for the resacramentalization of the world, but also for its re-enchantment.

## 1.2. The Argument

That, it should be noted, is not my argument. It is merely a question. The goal of the rest of the dissertation is not so much to answer it as to navigate it: that is, to explore the various ways in which Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik negotiate the intersection of poetry, sacramentality, and enchantment. In very general terms, the argument I wish to make has two parts. First, I argue that Bernárdez construes poetic language as explicitly sacramental and that he marshals this understanding of sacramentality as a response to the problem of disenchantment—or, better, that Bernárdez’s understanding of sacramentality explains why disenchantment is not really a problem for him at all. Second, I argue that Borges’s and Pizarnik’s responses to disenchantment can be plausibly construed as so many variations on Bernárdez’s. I begin with Borges, who shares something of Bernárdez’s optimism about poetry’s capacity to put us into contact

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<sup>2</sup> My account is deeply indebted to Schwartz (10-11).

with transcendence, but whose optimism is tempered by a deep sense of irony, one that issues from his experience of disenchantment as *nostalgia* for a mode of existence that has long since faded. The task of poetry, in Borges's view, is therefore one of *recovery*, of restoring to the world something of its antique splendor. Finally, I turn to Pizarnik, who, like Borges, believes that the world has grown disenchanted but for whom it is not enough simply to have noted this rather obvious fact. Instead, Pizarnik thinks that the appropriate response to disenchantment is not re-enchantment, but rather a kind of steady, unblinking contemplation of the nihilism that disenchantment inevitably carries in its train. In Pizarnik's poetry and prose, this desire not only to recognize but also to *experience* meaninglessness takes the form of a process of *desacramentalization*, an attempt to drain the world of the last vestiges of significance and so to glimpse reality in all its nihilistic purity. I hasten to add that the idea of "experiencing" disenchantment is perhaps slightly obscure, and I tend to dedicate a significant portion of the chapter to its explication. To get a rough idea, though, one might imagine the difference between analyzing the chemical components of fire (which is what Weber does) and deliberately setting oneself ablaze (which, I argue, is what Pizarnik does). The paradox, however, is that, in her poetry, Pizarnik avails herself of the same religious or "sacramental" rhetoric as do Bernárdez and Borges, such that her attempt at desacramentalization itself obeys a sacramental logic.

The thesis thus has a threefold movement: from an explicit sacramentalism in Bernárdez, through an ironic form of sacramentalism in Borges, and finally to an inverted sacramentalism in Pizarnik. Yet another way of describing this movement would be to say that for Bernárdez the world was always already enchanted and that poetry simply

participates in that enchantment; that for Borges the world once was (but no longer is) enchanted and that the task of poetry is precisely one of *re-enchantment*; and that for Pizarnik, disenchantment is not so much a condition as a goal, not so much as problem to be solved as an end to be achieved. This argument will be developed over four chapters.

### 1.3. Chapter 2: The Idea of Disenchantment

Any attempt to say how, if at all, modern poetry might be related to the question of the disenchantment of the world requires some account of how that world grew disenchanted in the first place. Narratives of disenchantment are, of course, legion, and I see no need to hitch one's cart to any single theoretical horse. But to work with too broad and amorphous a concept is either to grant oneself unlimited license to rove through the last 500 years of intellectual history or else to condemn oneself to forty years' wandering. To avoid both extremes, I adopt a two-pronged strategy. For questions related to the general contours of disenchantment, I shall lean heavily, though also largely implicitly, upon Charles Taylor's monumental study *A Secular Age* (2007), not only because it advances a highly original thesis about the nature of secularization, but also because it gives the impression of being a compendium of everything that might intelligently be said about the subject. In addition to Taylor's, I have also found useful the following studies: Albert Béguin's *L'âme romantique et le rêve* (1937), Alister McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism* (2004), two studies by Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* (1993) and *The Enlightenment and the Foundations of Modernity* (2004), as well as the useful collection of essays edited by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (2009). The second prong relates more specifically to the question of disenchantment in the Hispanic tradition, where I have relied on a number of studies of

*modernismo*, especially Cathy Jrade's and Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot's, as well as a series of highly influential essays by Octavio Paz, including *Los signos en rotación* (1965) and *Los hijos del limo* (1974).

For the purposes of this Introduction, I take as my starting point “Los signos en rotación” where Paz locates the problematic of modern poetry in the absence of an integrating “imagen del mundo” (314). If Medieval and Renaissance poets still retained something of the ancient understanding of the world as a meaningful, well-ordered *kosmos*, modern poetry from Romanticism onward inherited the desire for (even the expectation of) cosmic meaningfulness but with only the faintest of convictions that such meaning was discoverable to the human mind (314-15). Weber, as I have already noted, called the shift from the former view to the latter “the disenchantment of the world,” but Paz makes the point rather more dramatically: it is not, he says, that a disenchanted world is hollow or empty or meaningless, but rather that it is no longer a “world” in any meaningful sense. Indeed, Paz continues, the success of technological society depends precisely upon “la negación del mundo como imagen”: the negation, that is, of any conception of the world as possessed of antecedent meaning or value, as bearing a kind of solidity or substantiality not immediately convertible into what Heidegger called a *Bestand*, a neutral stockpile of raw materials susceptible to the infinite and arbitrary machinations of the market. “Es la desaparición de la imagen del mundo,” Paz concludes, “lo que hace posible la técnica” (317-18).

One could begin the narrative of this disenchantment or “de-worlding” with any number of proper nouns—Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza—but common ones will do just as well: the death of God, the waning of traditional forms of religious belief, the

mathematicization of space; the substitution of the rhythmic cadence of cyclical time for the grating chromaticism of linear temporality; the transformation of physical reality into inert, uniform, extended matter; the abandonment of the rich, variegated textures of nature for the abstract monotony of the city. These themes, together with the individualistic dictates stemming from the Protestant Reformation, the triumph of capitalism, the mechanization of the means of production, and the relegation of questions of meaning and value to the private sphere, all conspired to create a world in which those things that once made reality seem delightful and mysterious, charmed and magical, were consigned to the realm of risible, if not dangerous, superstition. Even more significant, however, is the effect these changes had on an entire generation of European and Latin American artists and intellectuals. For if Heidegger was right to say that Nietzsche's "death of God" entailed not only that Platonic and Christian metaphysics, those erstwhile guarantors of everything "absolute," had lost all power, but also, and more frighteningly, that human life had lost all purpose and direction, then disenchantment could only mean what José Olivio Jiménez has termed "la experiencia del vacío" (21) or what Nietzsche himself, at the beginning of *The Will to Power*, called "that uncanniest [*unheimlichsten*] of all guests"—nihilism (7).

As the previous paragraph suggested, my treatment of disenchantment has a broadly narrative structure. That narrative, in turn, has two basic protagonists: the Scientific Revolution, on the one hand, and the Protestant Reformation, on the other. In each case, I shall be concerned, very generally, with how these two phenomena contributed to the production of a modern, disenchanted world and, more specifically, with how disenchantment prompted a revision of our understanding of human language.

The question of language is fundamental not only because my thesis has poetry as its central theme, but also because the reevaluation of language occasioned by the emergence of modern science played a significant role in Protestantism's assessment of Catholic sacramentalism. Seeing the scientific revision of language as of a piece with Protestantism's critique of the Eucharist will, I hope, put us in a better position to appreciate the relevance of sacramentality to the enterprise of modern poetry. The chapter concludes with a brief sketch of the implications of this general narrative of disenchantment for Latin America. For the sake of explanatory continuity, however, I have generally postponed specific questions concerning disenchantment in Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik until subsequent chapters, where they can be treated in greater detail and with greater attentiveness to the peculiarities of the individual poets.

#### 1.4. Chapter 3: The Sacramental Imagination: Poetry and Enchantment in Francisco Luis Bernárdez

Francisco Luis Bernárdez was born in 1900, one year after Borges, in Buenos Aires. Despite obvious differences of religious and poetic temperament, Borges and Bernárdez moved in the same intellectual and literary circles and imbibed a similar set of influences, most significantly, an early penchant for *ultraísmo* (an Hispanic fusion of Futurism and Imagism), which both would, quickly and mercifully, abandon. Indeed, while Bernárdez's earliest poetry—*Orto* (1922) and *Bazar* (1922), both published the same year as Eliot's *The Waste Land*—hewed closely to *posmodernista* and *ultraísta* principles, the publication of *Cielo de tierra* (1937) and *El Buque* (1938) marked a decisive shift in his poetic trajectory. For it is with these two collections that we are first introduced to

Bernárdez the specifically *Catholic* poet. And it is there, more significantly, that we see the first inklings of a distinctly Catholic poetic “response” to disenchantment.

Before saying how Bernárdez fits into the problematic outlined in the previous chapter, a few comments are in order about his place in the development of Argentine Catholicism in the first half of the twentieth-century. Bernárdez came of age, poetically and intellectually, on the cusp of a decisive moment in national and ecclesiastical history. In 1864, Pope Pius IX appended a *Syllabus of Errors* to his encyclical *Quanta Cura* detailing the Catholic Church’s official response to various political, social, and philosophical manifestations of modernity (liberalism, rationalism, socialism, communism, and so on). The document—“un drapeau antimoderniste et antilibéral,” as Mallimaci describes it (“Catholicisme” 114)—not only set the tone for the Church’s subsequent engagement with modernity, but also established the basic rhetorical contours of right-wing Catholic reactionism. Among Argentine Catholics, the surge of anti-modern reactionism emerged as a response to the liberal reforms instituted during the presidency of Julio Roca (1843-1914) in the early 1880s and coincided both with the so-called *Renouveau Catholique* in France and with a specifically poetic *Renacimiento Católico* in the Southern Cone (Martínez Fernández 79-80).<sup>3</sup> This latter movement—which, in addition to Bernárdez, included poets like Jacobo Fijman (1898-1970), Leonardo Castellani (1899-1981), and Leopoldo Marechal (1900-1970) in Argentina, and Dimas Antuña (1894-1968) in Uruguay—was catalyzed in part by the creation of so-called *Cursos de Cultura Católica* in Buenos Aires in 1922 and in part by the publication, six

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<sup>3</sup> In the thesis proper, I shall have occasion to say more about the Catholic Literary Renaissance in France, which can be traced back at least to the turn of the century (and, on some accounts, even earlier), but whose zenith dates from the 1920s and 1930s. Its major poet, Paul Claudel (1868-1955), was a decisive influence on Bernárdez. Important precursors include Léon Bloy (1846-1917) and Charles Péguy (1873-1914). See Dunaway, Marx, and Schloesser for a good overview.

years later, of the inaugural issue of the journal *Criterio*, to which Borges and Bernárdez would, at various times, contribute. Both *Criterio* and the *Cursos* were roughly contemporaneous with a series of similarly reactionary gestures, both political and literary, across Europe: the *Renouveau Catholique* in France, the appearance of conservative, and ultimately fascist, movements in Spain and Italy, a series of papal encyclicals (including *Lamentabili sane exitu* in 1903 and *Pascendi* in 1907) which criticized modernism in all its guises (Perrot-Corpet 223), the publication in 1919 of the first issue of the Italian neo-classical journal *La Ronda* (Heremetet), and T.S. Eliot's radically critical *After Strange Gods* (1934), to cite only a few examples. Although *Criterio* was initially conceived as a way to chart a middle course between the twin materialist heresies of liberal capitalism and Marxist communism, after 1932, when Gustavo Franceschi (1881-1952) became editor, the journal drifted increasingly to the radical right. That drift became excruciatingly apparent during the Spanish Civil War. Throughout the 1930s, Franceschi himself systematically defended the *franquista* cause, while another frequent contributor, the fiercely anti-Semitic Argentine cleric Julio Meinvielle (1905-1979), saw the Spanish nationalist cause as a "guerra santa" fought to hold at bay at the forces of secular modernity ("Guerra santa" 227). In one sense, of course, Franceschi's and Meinvielle's support of Franco is unsurprising. The overwhelming majority of European and Latin American Catholics saw the Spanish Civil War as the latest installment in a half-century-long conflict between Catholicism and modernity and would have construed a victory by the *Frente Popular* as the final, and perhaps irrevocable, eclipse of Catholicism in Spain (Doering 489).



Yet while the dominant mode of response to modernity among Latin American Catholics fell somewhere along the lines of Franceschi's and Meinvielle's authoritarian nationalism, it was hardly the only option. One of the goals of this chapter is to sketch a kind of Bernardian alternative. That alternative has two central components, both of which owe a great debt to the French philosopher Jacques Maritain. The first, unsurprisingly, is a rejection of any form of authoritarian politics which would, as it were, impose traditional Catholicism upon an increasingly secular polity. On this point, Bernárdez follows Maritain closely. Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, he penned a number of sharp critiques not only of Franco-style fascism, but also of the sort of Catholic nationalism which held up the state as "una especie de entidad de derecho casi divino," while at the same time lobbying for a version of political internationalism that set him at odds with the regnant ideology of nationalist organs like *Criterio* ("Maritain" 431). The second component has to do with a reevaluation not only of the appropriately Catholic response to modernity, but also—and more fundamentally—of what the problem of modernity was supposed to be in the first place. For Franceschi, Meinvielle, and other like-minded Catholic nationalists, on the one hand, modernity meant nothing so much as the eclipse of ecclesiastical influence on broad social and cultural issues. Hence their support for the military coup of 1930; hence their support of compulsory religious education in Argentina's public schools; hence their support of Franco; hence their support, in other words, of any form of political arrangement they imagined capable of reasserting Catholicism's lost social and cultural authority. Bernárdez, on the other hand, remained deeply suspicious of the suggestion that politics provided the most appropriate tools for combating secularization, precisely because he remained deeply suspicious of

the suggestion that secularization was a primarily *political* phenomenon. Which is not, of course, to say that it was not a political phenomenon *at all*; it is rather to say that, for Bernárdez, the problems went much deeper (or took an importantly different form). Like Weber, Maritain, and Schwartz, Bernárdez construed the problem of disenchantment as, at least in part, a problem of desacramentalization, and he believed that the proper response to that problem was to reappropriate, in poetic form, the tradition of Catholic sacramentalism.

I should confess at once that Bernárdez nowhere makes this argument quite so clearly and straightforwardly as I have presented it here. Though he wrote a great deal of poetry throughout his life, he remained consistently (and, in some cases, maddeningly) silent about the process of composition and about the precise motivation of his verse. His overall philosophical, theological, and poetic vision cannot therefore be read off his texts, but must instead be inferred, surmised, deduced, teased out of a set of texts—poems—which do not, as a genre, lend themselves to the discursive exposition of complex philosophical positions. But, difficulties notwithstanding, this chapter is dedicated precisely to such an exposition: that is, to developing an account of Bernárdez’s “sacramental poetics” that derives largely, though not exclusively, from a close reading of his poetry. The account moves in two directions: first, toward an understanding of the world itself as sacramental and, second, toward an understanding of poetry as participating in that sacramentality. This twofold motion converges on the question of music.<sup>4</sup> The association of poetry and music is, of course, a commonplace, but Bernárdez

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<sup>4</sup> Both Bernárdez’s affinity for music and its centrality in his poetics are critical commonplaces. Barufaldi refers to Bernárdez’s “visión melodiosa del universo” [melodious vision of the universe] (50), and Alonso Gamo argues that music is that without which “no podría comprenderse ni interpretarse en

is unique in the sense that he links the inherent musicality of the universe and the musicality of poetry directly to the question of sacramentality, and specifically to the Eucharist.

I will flesh out this argument in more detail later, but to give some sense of what I am proposing, note that the reason one might wish to say, with Walter Pater, that poetry aspires to the condition of music is that poetry, like all the verbal arts, is shot through by a distinction between sign and meaning, signifier and signified. If I say, “The dog is brown,” you could, if you wanted, attend exclusively to the meaning of the words, allowing the materiality of the signs to dissolve into their semantic content; but you could also attend exclusively to the *materiality* of the words, so as to hear them as sounds minus meaning. In practice, of course, and especially in the case of poetry, we do not usually make this sort of distinction, but the distinction is certainly there, and it explains, at least in part, a certain deep-seated anxiety among modern poets about the insufficiency or inadequacy of language. In music, by contrast, no such distinction is possible, nor ought you to try to make one. In music, material sign *just is* meaning; the one is indissociable, even at a conceptual level, from the other. The inseparability of sign and meaning in music is crucial because it immediately suggests a Eucharistic resonance. For in the case of music, as in that of the Eucharist, the material sign has been completely transubstantiated into its expression, such that the distinction between message and meaning, between signifier and signified, finally disappears. It is partly for this reason that Denys Turner has argued recently that music is “prototypically Eucharistic” (Turner, *Faith* 116). For Bernárdez, moreover, since the world itself is already melodious and

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modo alguno su poesía” [his poetry cannot be interpreted or understood at all] (111). Bernárdez also dedicated a number of sonnets to composers (Mozart, Hadyn, and Gluck, among others).

musical, the world is also already sacramental, so that the poet, by aspiring to reproduce poetically the musicality of the universe, also participates in its sacramentality (and, by extension, takes part in the transcendent). Indeed, for Bernárdez, poetry's tendency to aspire to the condition of music is merely a symptom of its tendency to aspire to the condition of theology.

#### 1.5. Chapter 4: The Splendor of the Tigers: Borges and the Poetics of Re-Enchantment

Bernárdez's sacramental poetics is in many ways the central thread of the thesis as a whole. My intuition is that the question of a poetic response to disenchantment hinges precisely on the question of sacramentality, on the conviction that signs are not, as Saussure would have it, merely differential, merely arbitrary conventions linking “sonido y sentido” (Paz, *Corriente* 55), but are rather deeply intertwined with the reality to which they refer. Analogy, as I noted before, is the standard critical term for describing this view, but at times I am inclined to think—and for this point I will argue at some length—that “analogy” is just a secularized, heterodox version of sacramentality. Jorge Luis Borges, the poet with whom I shall be principally concerned in this chapter, does not, of course, use the language of sacramentality, but his difference from Bernárdez on this point is primarily terminological (and so of no real consequence). But if Borges is, in an important sense, a sacramental poet, his sacramentalism is emphatically not of the same variety as Bernárdez's. Articulating the difference between the two poets on that score will be the primary task of this chapter.

My treatment of Borges rests on a set of intuitions. The first, corroborated by Borges himself in that wonderful prose poem “Borges y yo,” is that there is not one, but

rather *two* Borges: the Borges of the short stories—impersonal, ironic, and cerebral—and the Borges of the poetry—passionate, personal, and human. The second (and, I hope, more original) intuition is that these two sides of Borges’s personality are not, as is often suggested, irreconcilable; indeed, seeing how they fit together can tell us something important about his response to the problem of disenchantment. I wish to suggest that if one read only the latter, poetic side of Borges’s personality, one might get the impression that he and Bérnardez were of the same piece: both accord poetic language a quasi-divine status, and both see it as capable of putting us into contact with transcendence. The problem, of course, is that whereas Bérnardez is, in a very real sense, a one-dimensional poet, the ironic, impersonal side of Borges’s personality sits uneasily with his penchant for making extravagant, metaphysically pregnant claims about the power of poetic language. To show how these two poles of Borges’s personality hold together—and to see what that might tell us about the problem of disenchantment—I proceed dialectically. I begin with Borges the poet and argue that this Borges is a naïve sacramentalist: he views the poetic word as endowed with certain magical, world-transforming qualities. Next, I turn to the ironic, impersonal author of the prose fiction, the Borges who drank deeply from skeptical and nominalist wells and who therefore viewed language, in the words of the narrator of “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” as a system of “torpes símbolos arbitrarios” (*Obras* 572). Finally, I ask whether and to what extent Borges manages an approximate synthesis of these two positions.

The point of tracing this dialectic will be twofold: first, to give some sense of how Borges understands the problem of disenchantment; and, second, to show that his response to that problem depends fundamentally on the possibility of *re-enchantment*.

The concept of “re-enchantment” is itself exceedingly complex, and I dedicate a significant portion of this chapter to its explication. For now, though, I wish to make a single point, very briefly, about the centrality of irony to my analysis of re-enchantment. Irony, of course, comes in many flavors, but I shall have principally in mind Paul de Man’s account (itself of Baudelairean provenance) which sees irony as involving a “split” within or “doubling” (*dédoublement*) of the self (211-221). This split, by turns, has the effect of allowing the self to step back from itself (so to speak) and to assess or criticize itself from the perspective of a detached observer. This account of irony is especially useful for understanding Borges’s vision of re-enchantment. As I noted earlier, for Bernárdez the problem of disenchantment is not really a *problem*; as a Catholic, he already lives in an enchanted, sacramentalized world. For Borges, by contrast, the problem of disenchantment very much *is* a problem, simply because he does not see the world as always already enchanted, but rather as *once, but no longer, enchanted*. And this means, in turn, that Borges’s understanding of disenchantment has an indelibly temporal (or, one might say, narrative) quality. The narrative itself is familiar enough: it begins in idyllic innocence (enchantment), passes through a fall into division and fragmentation (disenchantment), and ends, finally, with a return to the unity and happiness of the origin (re-enchantment). The role of irony should, perhaps, be obvious: since it is, in some sense, the same self that passes through each of these stages, the self that emerges in re-enchantment is able to look back on its former, “enchanted” self and compare the two. The result of that comparison is almost always disappointing: the experience of re-enchantment never quite equals the intensity of that original enchantment which it echoes.

All of this is likely to sound unduly abstract. In order to flesh it out, I trace the development of an image that recurs throughout Borges's poetry: the tiger. I take my lead from three key texts: "*Dreamtigers*" (1960), "El otro tigre" (1960), and "Mi último tigre" (1984). The image of the tiger is a good place to start, not only because it condenses a number of classic Borgesian themes (time, dreams, the relationship between language and reality, and so on), but also because it functions in Borges's work as a key symbol of enchantment. I begin with "*Dreamtigers*," where Borges lays out with exquisite precision the exact contours of the threefold drama of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment I mentioned earlier. Next, I look at "El otro tigre," which I read as the delineation of the intrinsic logic of "*Dreamtigers*." In both cases, however, the problem is the same: Borges begins by postulating a real, extra-textual tiger (usually drawn from the nostalgia-laced memories of his childhood) and then attempts to conjure the tiger poetically. And, in both cases, the endeavor fails: despite the promise of its re-incantatory potential, poetry always (and necessarily) falls short of the task it sets for itself. The distance between "el tigre verdadero" and the "tigre de símbolos y sombras," as Borges puts it in "El otro tigre," remains forever unbridgeable.

With this conundrum in mind, I turn, finally, to "Mi último tigre," published in *Atlas* (1984) only two years before Borges's death. I argue that while "Mi último tigre" does represent a reconciliation of sorts, it is, most emphatically, not a synthesis of the Hegelian variety. Indeed, to the extent that "Mi último tigre" allows us to glimpse the possibility of authentic re-enchantment, it does so precisely by suggesting that re-enchantment—insofar as this means the unproblematic restoration of a magical, meaning-filled world—is itself impossible. But this is only half the story, since, for Borges, the

recognition that re-enchantment is, strictly speaking, impossible does not mean simple surrender; it means, instead, and to put the point rather bluntly, that *we must lie to ourselves, delude* ourselves into thinking that the stories we tell (stories about, say, tigers) are in fact true, even though we know they are not. It means, finally, and as Borges himself puts it, that we must cultivate a capacity for “esa espontánea suspensión de la duda” that characterizes all imaginative fiction and which, under conditions of re-enchantment, takes on nearly metaphysical proportions (*Obras*, II:213). Joshua Landy has termed the sort of delusion appropriate to re-enchantment “lucid self-delusion” (“Modern Magic” 110). For Borges, the possibility of re-enchantment rests precisely on the potential efficacy of such self-delusion.

#### 1.6. Chapter 5: Alejandra Pizarnik and the Achievement of Disenchantment

I turn, finally, to Alejandra Pizarnik, in many ways the outlier in my study. Born nearly four decades after Borges and Bernárdez, Pizarnik moved in a different poetic milieu and was, in nearly every imaginable way, a different sort of poet. In light of these differences, a few words are perhaps necessary to justify her inclusion.

The first point to mark is that one could object *a priori* to Pizarnik’s place in my thesis only if one imagined that temporal and spatial proximity furnish the best (or perhaps the sole) context within which to write literary history—if, that is, one adopted a broadly *generational* approach to the literary criticism. To view literature generationally is to suppose that one could discover significant correlations between art and human experience if only, as Wilhelm Dilthey argued in the latter half of the nineteenth century, one were able to determine which writers received the “same fruitful impressions” during



their “formative years” (48),<sup>5</sup> or which ones, as Ortega y Gasset put it some years later, shared a similar “sensibilidad vital” (17). Unsurprisingly, such an approach enjoyed a certain vogue, especially in *Germanistik*, in the years immediately following the First World War, on the assumption that national catastrophes are uniquely capable of producing the sorts of “fruitful impressions” necessary for generation formation. This is probably true, and I have no particular objection to it. All I mean to suggest is that this is not the *only* way to study literature, and if one’s concerns are, shall we say, less historical than thematic, it may not even be the best way. Which, let me be clear, is not to suggest that historical considerations can be held in complete abeyance. Clearly, they cannot. It is rather to say that history ought not always be allowed to play trumps and that Fredric Jameson’s directive, “Always historicize!” is at least as guilty of ideological encrustation as the ahistorical naiveté it seeks to overcome.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The full quotation reads as follows: “Ein Individuum kann nur studiert werden, indem aufgrund der gemeinsamen Bedingung dieselben Individuen, welche in bestimmten Jahren dieselben fruchtbaren Eindrücke empfangen haben, ins Auge gefaßt werden” (48).

<sup>6</sup> The full quotation appears in the opening paragraph of Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981): “Always historicize! This slogan—the one absolute and we may even say ‘transhistorical’ imperative of all dialectical thought—will unsurprisingly turn out to be the moral of *The Political Unconscious* as well” (ix). Two things might be said in response. First, the historicist notion that “false universalization” constitutes the ideological procedure par excellence is the most common Marxist (and feminist) criticism of psychoanalysis. By attaching determinative importance to concepts like the Oedipus complex and the nuclear family, the psychoanalyst effectively transmutes an historically determined form of existence into a facet of the universal human condition. But is it not possible that the inverse is true as well? Is it not possible, in other words, that the Marxist tendency to what Slavoj Žižek calls “over-rapid historicization” blinds us to “the real kernel which returns as the same through diverse historicizations/symbolizations” (50)? The second point to notice is more directly related to Jameson’s text itself. The most appropriate response to the directive “Always historicize!” is to ask whether that very directive ought itself to be historicized. If, on the one hand, we insist that “Always historicize!” *should* be historicized (say, by constructing a narrative of the development of historicism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual history), then it is not at all clear in what sense historicism could be called “absolute” or “transhistorical.” If, on the other hand, we wish to insist (as Jameson in fact does) upon the absoluteness and transhistoricity of historicism, then one can only ask whence historicism derives its privileged status. Why, in other words, does historicism get to be absolute and transhistorical when nothing else does? Yet even if a compelling answer to that question were forthcoming, it would be no matter, since if historicism is itself absolutely or transhistorically true, then there seems to be at least one truth (namely, the truth of historicism) which is unhistoricizable and hence that historicism, as a general thesis, is false.

But these, in any event, are only negative considerations, ones designed to short-circuit the suggestion that treating Pizarnik together with Borges and Bernárdez is somehow categorically mistaken. There are positive considerations as well. The most important one is this: if Octavio Paz is right to argue that the history of modern poetry from Romanticism to the avant-garde is the history of the gradual displacement of a broadly analogical view of language in favor of a broadly ironic view of language, then Pizarnik represents that moment at which the ironization of language reaches its terminus—the moment at which, to quote Paz, the poetic word in which the *modernistas* evinced so robust a faith finally “termina en aullido o silencio” (*Hijos* 109). Indeed, part of my argument will be that Pizarnik stands as the precise dialectical negation of the poet with whom I begin the thesis: if Bernárdez views the world as always already imbued with a certain kind of sacramental significance, Pizarnik not only fails to see that significance, but goes one step farther in the opposite direction. In her view, the appropriate response to disenchantment is not, as it is for Borges, to attempt re-enchantment, but rather to contemplate, with a kind of unblinking sobriety, the nihilism that disenchantment inevitably carries in its train. This is what I wish to call, slightly modifying a phrase of Simon Critchley’s, “the achievement of disenchantment” (165-214). I say “achievement” because disenchantment, for Pizarnik, is not a condition, but a project, a goal, indeed, as I shall argue, the *telos* of the whole of her literary production.

My argument for this claim begins with a commonplace that Pizarnik’s poetry aims not so much at communication or signification as at the *critique* or *negation* of communication or signification.<sup>7</sup> The argument’s originality stems from my articulation

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the notion of the “critical poem” see Running. For more on the development of this theme in Pizarnik, see Rodríguez Francia (*Disolución*), Piña (*Poesía*), and García-Moreno.

of the precise manner in which Pizarnik carries out that “negation” of the poetic word. That argument proceeds in three stages. I begin with a broad overview of Pizarnik’s poetry and the critical tradition it has inspired. The second part of the argument takes its coordinates from a recurrent image in Pizarnik’s oeuvre: the desire for self-dissolution, to erase the boundary between subject and object. This desire, I suggest, can be fruitfully understood in terms of what the French philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1965) has called “limit experiences”: those moments in which individual subjectivity runs up against its limit and threatens to dissolve. For Pizarnik, moreover, the desire to push experience to its limit takes the specific form of a desire to transmute the body into text. In “El deseo de la palabra,” first published in *El infierno musical* (1971), the poet writes: “Ojalá pudiera vivir solamente en éxtasis, haciendo el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo” (*Poesía* 269). The quest to render one’s body consubstantial with poetry recalls one of the principal themes of this dissertation: sacramentality, specifically its Eucharistic variety. In fact, I would like to suggest that the desire to “hacer el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo” functions, if I might allow permit myself an ugly neologism, as a kind of *self-eucharistification*, the transubstantiation of the poet’s body into pure sign. Both significant and problematic in this respect is the term “éxtasis,” which, in its etymological sense (*ek-estare*, to stand outside oneself), is simply a synonym of the dissolution of subjectivity. Yet since subjectivity is a condition of the possibility of meaning, and since the transubstantiation of body into text entails the dissolution of subjectivity, Pizarnik’s self-eucharistification also implies the negation of the possibility of meaning. Herein lies the inescapable paradox of her poetics: the moment of absolute *meaningfulness*, the moment at which the gap between sign and meaning finally vanishes (“haciendo el

cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo”), is also the moment of absolute *meaninglessness*. It is in precisely this sense, moreover, that Pizarnik stands as the dialectical negation of Bernárdez’s sacramentalism. For if Bernárdez’s poetics is ordered by both a sacramental vision of reality and poetry’s participation in that reality, then Pizarnik simply draws from this vision a logical (though, no doubt, unintended) consequence, one that acts simultaneously as culmination and a negation, a saturation of meaning that is also a denial of its possibility.

For both poets, moreover, the question of the relationship between poetry and meaning turns precisely on the question of music. In Pizarnik’s case, the connection is particularly evident in a series of poems from *El infierno musical* (1971), though perhaps even more so in “El sueño de la muerte o el lugar de los cuerpos poéticos” (1968), which I shall afford special attention. The difference, of course, is that whereas Bernárdez construes music as a moment of Eucharistic presence wherein the distance between sign and meaning finally collapse, Pizarnik tends to associate that same collapse, not with a plentitude of meaning, but rather with its absence, with the dissolution of subjectivity, indeed with death.<sup>8</sup> Bernárdez’s “música que eterniza lo que abrasa” (*Ciudad* 12) becomes, for Pizarnik, “el infierno musical” (*Poesía* 268). Thus it is that the latter “achieves disenchantment” by way of the same sacramental logic that former had employed to combat it.

### Conclusion

The above is, in a rather large nutshell, the argument I attempt to make. The idea, of course, is quite capacious: the sheer quantity of primary source material is itself daunting,

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<sup>8</sup> This theme appears, among other places, in “Artes invisibles” (*Poesía* 80), “Las promesas de la música,” (*Poesía* 233), and “El sueño de la muerte” (*Poesía* 254).

and no mere mortal could reasonably expect to emerge from the jungle of second-order commentaria with anything but the slightest modicum of sanity intact. Fortunately, there are a number of mitigating factors. The first is that while an adequate treatment of each of the poets I have chosen would require three separate theses, I in no way intend to offer an exhaustive, global interpretation of any of them. My interest lies in one highly specific question. Of the three, Borges is, obviously, the most studied (a recent search of Dissertation Abstracts International yielded nearly 300 hits, only a handful of which, however, deal explicitly with his poetry). Pizarnik criticism, by contrast, is still somewhat in its infancy (a similar search yielded only 17 hits), and nothing of substance has been written about Bernárdez in over a decade. Perhaps more importantly, these three poets have never been studied in conjunction. The final (and, in my view, most decisive) factor is Bernárdez's centrality in the thesis. By reading Borges's and Pizarnik's poetry in light of Bernárdez's religious concerns, I hope to test another, as yet unstated hypothesis, namely, that the sorts of answers one gives to theological questions will determine, at least to some extent, the sorts of answers one gives to all other questions. I do not intend to argue explicitly for this hypothesis, but it does seem to me that a "theological" (for lack of a better word) reading of Borges and Pizarnik might offer a new and illuminating perspective, especially in an intellectual climate where secularism has, for a variety of reasons, become something like dogma.

## Chapter Two

### The Idea of Disenchantment

#### Introduction

“Disenchantment” is a concept so massively indefinite and polymorphous that any attempt to trace even its general contours is bound to appear misbegotten. We speak, to be sure, of “secularism” or “the death of God” or “the end of faith” with some regularity—and sometimes in triumphalist tones—but we speak broadly, impressionistically, and usually with only the faintest notion of what we mean. In a certain respect, this is irreproachable. At a crucial juncture in his landmark study of secularization, Charles Taylor recognizes that in order to grasp the peculiar sense of meaninglessness that seems to inhere in modernity, we must “venture on some phenomenology” (*Secular* 307). He then proceeds to adduce a list of descriptors. The world lacks “weight, gravity, thickness, substance.” Those things that “mattered up to now fail.” There is a “deeper resonance” that seems missing and that “we feel should be there” (*Secular* 307). Elsewhere, similar sorts of descriptions abound: we are “straying as though through an infinite nothing,” Nietzsche has his Madman say (*Gay* 120). “All that is solid melts into air,” write the Marx and Engels of *The Communist Manifesto* (70). “Things fall apart,” says Yeats (187). We are “plunge[d] into frenzy and disintegration,” says Heidegger (85). “We are the hollow men,” writes Eliot, “headpieces filled with straw” (*Collected* 79).

Despite differences of angle and emphasis, these sentiments are bound together by a vague but unavoidable sense that, under conditions of disenchantment, the world has grown pale, fragile, dull, flat, and unbearably light. Even more crucially, in each case (with the possible exception of Marx and Engels) the intuition is that with the loss of

transcendence, in the absence of an overarching, unifying account of reality, something irrevocable may have been lost. I hasten to underscore the subjunctive mood of the last sentence, since not everyone responds in the same way. Millions still trudge dutifully to church each week, and even those who prefer to sleep in on Sunday morning probably do not contemplate with any regularity the vapid meaninglessness of their lives (much less the “contradictions of capitalism” or the “malaises of modernity”). Some people probably do not think about these sorts of things at all. Thus, in the first part of this chapter, I attempt a detailed—though, of course, necessarily selective—account of the concept of disenchantment in Western culture. Because the subject of this dissertation is the relationship between disenchantment and poetry, I shall be especially concerned with the effects of disenchantment on language—and this in two respects. First, I examine the impact of the Scientific Revolution not only on our understanding of the natural world, but also of the linguistic tools we use to navigate it. The two are indissociable, since the emphasis on observation, calculation, and methodological precision inherent in the scientific method required the development of a new form of language, one whose goal, as Brian Vickers notes, was to “avoid doubt and ambiguity” and to achieve “unquestionable univocity” (“Recovery” 430). The models for such a language were, of course, mathematics (which, as Galileo declared, is nature’s native tongue) and logic, both of which, at least on an optimistic reading, had the virtue of being largely insusceptible to the polysemy and ambiguity of “everyday” language. In what follows, I intend not only to describe this shift, but also to examine its impact on what might be called an “Orphic” view of language, one that sees words as something more than tags we

hang on pre-existing bits of external reality and instead as an active forces capable of creating rather than simply referring.

Next, I turn to the Protestant Reformation, where the radical divorce of the sacred from the secular gave rise to what Alister McGrath calls “the ‘desacralization’ of nature” (200). The Reformation interests me not only because it is there that the issue of sacramentality, specifically as it impacts upon modern poetry, takes center stage, but also because the Protestant attack on the doctrine of transubstantiation was symptomatic of a broader assault on the sacramental understanding of the universe characteristic of medieval Catholicism. That attack had the effect not only of calling into question the Church’s institutional sacramental structure (baptism, communion marriage, confession, and so on) but also, and more broadly, of casting doubt on whether any “this-worldly symbolic action could have transcendental efficacy” (Scribner 482). Poetry and language, as Thomas Greene has argued, were hardly exempt from this critique, since the question of whether the host merely *recalls* Christ’s body or actually *becomes* that body is, at root, a linguistic question about the relationship between a representation and the thing it represents (32). Framing the Eucharistic controversy occasioned by the Reformation in linguistic terms will, I hope, put us in a better position to grasp the implications of sacramentality for the modern poetic enterprise.

In the second section of the chapter, I examine the question of disenchantment in Latin America. Here the material is significantly less rich and variegated, no doubt in part because Latin America has not experienced modernity in the same way that Europe did. Yet the sense of meaninglessness was still acute, especially among the *modernistas*, who, as Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot has argued, experienced modernity as “un acontecimiento



apocalíptico” which had “el carácter de ‘crisis religiosa’, de pérdida de fe, de duda religiosa, de temor del ateísmo” (13). The sources of this discontent are, with various differences of emphasis and inflection, largely the ones mentioned earlier: industrialization, bourgeois capitalism, materialism, consumerism, Comtian and Spencerian positivism, and so forth. Despite these similarities, a peculiar set of historical circumstances meant that Latin America’s experience of, and response to, disenchantment were somewhat different from Europe’s. The goal of the final portion of this chapter is to bring that peculiarity into focus and thereby to set the stage for the rest of the thesis.

## 2.1. Sources of Disenchantment: Revolutions and Reformations

To tell the story of the disenchantment of the West would be to tell a story coextensive in nearly every detail with the history of the West itself, and to pick up that story any point along the way would be to risk not only arbitrariness but also distortion. The challenge is both to keep arbitrariness to a minimum and, where possible, to justify it. However one chooses to tell the story of disenchantment, the two historical phenomena singled out for special treatment in this section (the Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation) must figure centrally. But even if the Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation are not the only noteworthy sources of Western disenchantment (and, obviously, they are not), they do provide a useful frame for understanding the various poetic responses to disenchantment that I intend to consider in subsequent chapters.

### 2.1.1. The Scientific Revolution

The Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represents one of the few truly epochal shifts in Western civilization. In slightly more than one hundred years,

the whole Aristotelian-Ptolemaic apparatus that had furnished Western culture with its cosmological coordinates for nearly two millennia yielded to Galilean and Copernican heliocentrism and, a bit later, to Newtonian physics. The earth dutifully abandoned its post at the center the solar system and began to orbit the sun (though not, as Aristotle might have liked, in a perfect circle), while the solar system itself become one among others. There are, to be sure, still Aristotelians among us, and our vocabulary is still haunted by certain vacant metaphors (“sunrise” and “sunset,” for instance) that touchingly reveal their pre-Copernican provenance; but these vestigial locutions illustrate nothing so much as the fossilizing conservatism of grammar, and when we use them we do so, of necessity, ironically—aware that we have reached into the calcified recesses of our collective psyche and extracted a linguistic utensil somewhat analogous to a Bronze Age spade.

Whatever its eventual social, cultural, and linguistic implications, the emergence of a specifically modern, scientific vision of the world was conditioned by a more fundamental philosophical shift, a change in our basic understanding of the nature of reality. The single most important component of that shift was from a conception of the universe as embodying what Charles Taylor calls an “ontic logos” (*Sources* 144) to a conception of the universe as an inert mechanism. According to a broadly ancient view, the universe embodies, antecedent to all human reflection, a certain orderliness, a certain teleological orientation that naturally directs things toward a predetermined end. Plato’s Ideas, for instance, exist only as intelligible reality. They are not the sort of thing you can touch, smell, taste, see, or hear. But everything you *can* touch, smell, taste, see, or hear exists only insofar as it participates in those Ideas. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, for

instance, is “beautiful” only insofar as it approximates the Idea of Beauty, just as the proposition “Democracy is better than fascism” is true only insofar as it approximates the Idea of Truth. The fact that the universe already contains within itself a meaningful, intelligible order suggests, moreover, that to be rational (or just or good or whatever) is simply a matter of getting oneself into the appropriate relationship with that order, of catching a vision of the meaning already inherent in the world. Indeed, for Plato, to know (*eidenai*) is simply to commune with or participate in the forms (*eidos*). The universe, in other words, sets the rules of the game, and everything else finds its value and significance to the extent that it plays along (Dupré 16-18).

The first and most decisive step in the emergence of what might be called a “scientific worldview” was precisely the rejection of this understanding of the cosmos as a meaningful, teleologically ordered whole. To reject the notion of the cosmos as an ordered, meaningful whole (to reject, that is, the very idea of a *kosmos*) is simply to fail to see it as a possible source of meaning or significance. But if meaning no longer inheres in reality itself, then where exactly does it inhere? In a letter to Guillaume Gibieuf, Descartes provided a clue: “je ne puis avoir aucune connaissance de ce qui est hors de moi, que par l’entremise des idées que j’ai eu en moi” (cited in Taylor, *Sources* 144). Descartes’ transposition of Plato’s “idées” from the realm of cosmic objectivity into the subjective confines of the human mind (“en moi”) is symptomatic of what Taylor calls the peculiarly modern orientation toward “inwardness”: the tendency to locate moral, spiritual, and epistemological norms within the human subject rather than in the external world. And while this orientation and its consequences are perhaps epitomized in the disembodied solipsism of the Cartesian ego, the idea is hardly indigenous to Descartes.

One finds it, for instance, in St. Augustine, whom Phillip Cary credits with the “invention of the inner self,” and perhaps even in Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa (*Sources* 129, 537). Whatever its ultimate source, the inward turn entailed a fundamental reinterpretation of the relationship between human beings and the cosmos. First, since the cosmos was no longer seen as bearing within itself a meaningful order (since, that is, the Ideas have been relocated within the human mind), the index of rationality could no longer be whether and to what extent one gets oneself into an appropriate relationship with that order. But this way of stating the matter, though I think accurate, is at least potentially misleading. For it is not that Descartes no longer has any interest in “aligning” himself, in some sense, with the external world, but rather that the nature of that alignment has changed. For Plato, on the one hand, the universe sets the terms (so to speak) by imaging or “bodying forth” a transcendent world of Ideas that has normative force for how we structure our lives; with Descartes, by contrast, the world loses its meaningfulness, its normativity, its capacity to define the parameters of goodness and rationality. Instead, knowing becomes a matter of “copying” or “mirroring,” and epistemological claims are adjudged instances of knowledge just insofar as the ideas “en moi” accurately represent the objective world “hors de moi.”

This split between “inner” and “outer,” besides generating the modern version of the problem of the skepticism (and indeed the whole problematic of modern epistemology), also yielded the specifically modern posture toward the world that Taylor calls “disengagement” (*Sources* 155). The posture is evident in Descartes’ radical mind/body dualism and, more generally, in the Enlightenment’s tendency to disengage from lived traditions and subject them to critical scrutiny (Kant’s *sapere aude*, for

instance). Yet, as before, the full implications become most apparent in epistemology. The disengaged subject is, quite precisely, a “subject,” something placed or thrown beneath (*subiacere*), something responsible for the weight—or, less metaphorically, the intelligibility—of the world placed atop it. But “subject” is a dialectical term and so requires for its intelligibility the presence of its opposite: the object. The turn inward, the invention of subjectivity, thus demands the simultaneous invention of objectivity; or, stated differently, the “subjectification” of the human induces, by a kind of dialectical necessity, the “objectification” of the world, the transformation of nature into an objective “thing” which autonomous human knowers submit to examination, analysis, and dissection.

The simultaneous production of subjectivity and objectivity had profound implications, not least because it radically altered the structures of meaning, the way in which the human subject comported itself toward and derived significance from the world. Louis Dupré summarizes the matter like this:

Whereas previously meaning had been established in the very act of creation by a wise God, it now fell upon the human mind to interpret the cosmos, the structure of which had ceased to be given as intelligible. Instead of being an integral part of the cosmos, the person became its source of meaning. Mental life separated from cosmic being: as meaning-giving “subject,” the mind became the spiritual substratum of all reality. (*Passage* 3)

The goal of this newly minted subject’s engagement with the world was still knowledge, but “knowledge” no longer meant, as it did for Plato, a grasp of the cosmos as an ordered, meaningful whole. Instead, for Descartes and the rest of the modern philosophical tradition, rationality came to mean something like disinterested observation, the capacity to extract oneself from ordinary experience and see the world from the perspective of a neutral spectator. And the “world” one observes from this neutral, disengaged perspective

is not of course Plato's orderly, meaning-filled world, but rather a glob of inert matter, a dead mechanism susceptible to manipulation in roughly the way one manipulates the buttons on a microwave or the pedals of an automobile.

#### 2.1.2. Modern Science and the Disenchantment of Language

The disengaged posture toward nature characteristic of modern science also necessitated a fundamental revision of language, one that ultimately yielded the displacement of Latin as the language of knowledge and learning and its replacement by the various vernaculars of early modern Europe. The seeds of the Latin-vernacular debate were sewn well before the outbreak of the Scientific Revolution. In *De vulgari eloquentia* (ca. 1302), for instance, Dante had argued for the superiority of the vernaculars on the basis that only they, not Latin, were sufficiently pliant and expressive to permit the metaphorical disclosure of transcendent truth. By the middle of the sixteenth-century, the intellectual firmament had changed. Both Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo delle lingue* (1542) and Joachim du Bellay's *Défense et illustration de la langue française* (1549) contended in their own ways for the primacy of the vernacular, but not, as Dante had argued, because it permitted symbolic expression of transcendent truth in a way that Latin did not. Quite the opposite. Both saw Latin as, in effect, a needless redundancy. Since all languages have basically the same semantic range, since all are capable of describing more or less the same array of observable phenomena, why torment yourself with deponent verbs and ablative absolutes when you already know French or Italian perfectly well?

This indifference to linguistic peculiarity, as Louis Dupré has shown, tracked a progressive devaluation of language's expressive potential in favor of its descriptive accuracy. The shift is unsurprising. As the fledgling scientific enterprise sought a

*mathesis universalis* to describe what it took to be a uniform, mathematically describable reality, it also required a language that would “remain as close as possible to an exact description of experience” (Dupré 110). Thus Francis Bacon (1561-1626) decried the humanist “cult of words,” while Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) contrasted the “magical allure” of rhetorical eloquence with the philosopher’s vocation “to know and to demonstrate the truth to others” (cited in Dupré 110-11). Slightly later (and with considerably more ambition), the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) imagined a universal conceptual language capable of transcending the vagaries and contingencies of the historical languages and expressing logical, mathematical, and metaphysical truths in a single, comprehensive symbolic system. Though Leibniz eventually abandoned the project (because it was too difficult, not, as with Borges’ Funes, because it was still too vague and imprecise), the very desire for such a system indicates not only the magnitude of the transformation of our understanding of the world wrought by modern science, but also the extent to which that transformation demanded a fundamental reconceptualization of the human being as, in Aristotle’s phrase, a *zoon logon echon*.

One, perhaps slightly tendentious way of summarizing that reconceptualization would be to say that modern science requires a distinctively non-poetic form of language, one that pairs sign and referent isomorphically and thereby suppresses the metaphorical and connotational excess characteristic of natural languages. Another, perhaps even more tendentious way would be to cast the scientific reevaluation of language as symptomatic of what Hans Gadamer has dubbed *Sprachvergesenheit*—the “forgetfulness of language.” To “forget language,” according to Gadamer, is to see it as a mere “tool,” an

“instrument” with a “wholly secondary relation to the thing” (414). More specifically, it is to treat language as “pure sign,” a transparent, univocal indicator whose sole function is to point (*Verweisen*) and whose very being dissolves into its referentiality (417). *Sprachvergessenheit* finds its natural corollary in Heidegger’s diagnosis of Western philosophy as a tragically protracted case of *Seinsvergessenheit*, a forgetfulness of the mystery of existence and a concomitant willingness to transmute being into an artifact of reason (the most salient example of which, for Heidegger, was Plato’s postulation of the Forms). And while Gadamer, like Heidegger, traces the phenomenon back to Platonism—specifically to the substitution, in the *Cratylus*, of the concept of *eikon* (image) for that of *semeion* (sign)—it clearly achieves something like an apotheosis in Bacon, Leibniz, and others. For the desire to fix the semantic range of words, to excise from language all expressive, evocative, or poetic potential is simply the inescapable linguistic correlative of an ontology that sees the world as so much mathematizable matter—uniform and homogenous in space and time and with roughly the depth of a Cartesian coordinate plane.

What Gadamer goes on to note (and on this point Heidegger is suspiciously, though perhaps predictably, silent) is that the “forgetfulness of language” is in fact a theological forgetfulness (418-426). According to classical Trinitarian theology, Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is the *Verbum Dei*, the perfect and complete expression of the nature and substance of God the Father. This has important linguistic implications. If, as orthodox Christianity contends, the Son is consubstantial with the Father, then language, which also bears the impress of the divine image, simply cannot be “pure sign,” a naked indicator that merely points to reality. Instead, language bear some



necessary relation to that reality and to the thought that thinks it—indeed, in Gadamer’s words, must be “consubstantial with thought” (420). Even more importantly, human language must be in some sense creative, evocative, productive; it must have the capacity not only to describe reality but also to evoke it, to call it to presence. As the Prologue to the Gospel of John makes clear, the *logos* was that through which “all things were made” (John 1.3). It was precisely this sort of *logos* theology, moreover, that animated the Renaissance humanist pursuit of verbal perfection (Dupré 111) and that undergirded the Romantic conception of the poet as a visionary possessing special insight into the nature of reality and capable of discerning otherwise undetectable relationships among its various parts (Bruns 53-4; Béguin 52). And it was precisely the rejection (explicit or not) of this *logos* theology that poised scientific thought to reject the understanding of language it presupposed.

Unsurprisingly, the universe that emerges from the process I have been describing is what Taylor calls a “neutralized” universe, one no longer understood as “the embodiment of meaningful order which can define the good for us” (*Secular* 149). What Gadamer helps us to see is that this “neutralization” implies not only the disenchantment of the world, but also the disenchantment of language. For if the world is merely a uniform, inert, mathematically quantifiable mechanism, and if language is merely a transparent, univocal tag we hang on that mechanism, it is difficult to see how either could be rendered significant, consequential, meaningful. Nietzsche saw this point clearly. In *The Gay Science* he wrote:

A “scientific” interpretation of the world might therefore still be one of the most stupid of all possible interpretations of the world, meaning that it would be one of the poorest in meaning [...] An essentially mechanical world would be an essentially meaningless world. Assuming that one estimated the value of a piece

of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, and expressed in formulas: how absurd would such a “scientific” estimation of music be! What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it? Nothing, really nothing of what is “music” in it! (sec. 373)

Nietzsche’s idea is that while scientific explanation can indeed tell us a great deal about how the universe works—how certain atoms in certain combinations yield this or that substance, or why, if you jump from a building of a certain height, you will almost certainly die—it cannot tell us what the universe is all about, what it is up to, what it *means*. And it cannot tell us this any more than counting up the number of words in Hamlet can tell us whether the famous “closet scene” perhaps involved something slightly less benign than ordinary maternal affection, or any more than a mass spectrometric analysis of Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* can tell us whether that most famous of Spanish mystics was experiencing the direct presence of God or just having an orgasm.

Yet a mechanistic world is not only an “essentially meaningless” world. It is also a world that possesses nothing in the way of wholeness or integrity. On the one hand, to see the world as the embodiment of meaningful order would be to see it as akin to something like a novel or poem (the analogy is hardly original). We do not normally think it appropriate to rip the pages out of a novel and reassemble them on the basis of personal predilection, just as we do not normally think it appropriate to modify the order of the quartets in a sonnet—partly, no doubt, because the author disposed his text in just the way he did for a reason, and our task as readers is to grasp the intelligibility already inherent in it, not to create our own. To see the world as a mechanism, by contrast, is to see it as rather like one of those collections of “magnetic poetry” which feature single words or fragments printed on small magnetic tiles that can be affixed to metallic

surfaces (usually refrigerators or filing cabinets) and rearranged to form phrases, sentences, or even whole poems. Unlike a novel or a Shakespearean sonnet, “magnetic poetry” has no integrity of its own, no intelligible structure, no meaning. In fact, the whole point is that it lack such a structure, since it is precisely the assumption that the various tiles were not *intended* to be arranged in any particular order that legitimates my arranging them in whatever order I please.

The basic idea should perhaps now be clear. If you imagine the world as bearing no meaning within itself, then you might also be led to imagine it as infinitely manipulable, infinitely rearrangeable. It requires no great reserve of mental energy to see how such an understanding of the world might yield what is perhaps the most distinctive byproduct of modern scientific rationality: the technological mastery of nature. The connection is already present in Bacon (whose rape metaphors are still a source of embarrassment) and, if only embryonically, in Descartes, who in a famous passage from the *Discours* argued that once we grasp the elementary principles of modern physics, we shall have rendered ourselves “maistres & possesseurs de la Nature” (qtd. in Taylor, *Sources* 149). For Weber, the Cartesian-Baconian desire to submit the world to human mastery and domination constitutes the fullest expression of modern disenchantment. In “Science as a Vocation,” he argued that the world grows disenchanted when its inhabitants assume that “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation” (139). Weber sometimes makes this point in terms of a distinction between *Zweckrationalität* and *Wertrationalität* (Germain 36). On the one hand, *Wertrationalität* (which means, literally, “worth-rationality,” but which might be rendered idiomatically as “substantative rationality”) refers to a form of rationality oriented towards ends which are (seen as)

valuable in themselves. Monks, for example, engage in certain ascetic practices because they believe that the end to which those practices are oriented (i.e., a life wholly consecrated to God) is itself objectively valuable. The end is therefore set in advance, and the means derive their rationality from the rationality already inherent in the end which they help to realize. On the other hand, *Zweckrationalität* (literally, “purpose-rationality,” but more idiomatically, “means-ends rationality” or “formal rationality”) is a mode of reasoning which attempts simply to determine the means most appropriate to a given end. As Germain notes, *Zweckrationalität* is “formal” or “non-substantive” because its aim is merely to “find a way to get from one point to another,” not to “determine whether the endpoint is a goal worth pursuing” (36). To borrow an example from Umberto Eco: cleaning one’s ear with a Q-tip is more *Zweck*-rational than cleaning one’s ear with a screwdriver, not because ear-cleaning is somehow objectively rational, but rather because if you are going to clean your ear, it is better (more efficient, less dangerous, etc.) to do so with a short plastic stick to either end of which small bits of cotton have been affixed (*Interpretation* 145). In this instance, the question of objective value (“Is it good to clean one’s ear?”) has been bracketed, and the only remaining issue is technical: what is the best, most efficient means of achieving the end in question? To say, then, that the world is disenchanted when everything can be mastered by calculation is just to say that disenchantment occurs when *Zweckrationalität* displaces *Wertrationalität*—that is, when the world is stripped of all objective value and reduced to the level of a mere “thing” for the purposes of human technical mastery.

The Weberian distinction between “substantive rationality” and “formal rationality” can be mapped rather neatly onto the Marxist distinction between “use-value”

and “exchange-value.” Weber himself hinted at the connection. “The modern capitalist concern,” he wrote in *Zur Frage des Friedensschließen* (1915/16), “is based inwardly above all on calculation [*Kalkulation*]. It is a system of justice and administration whose workings can be rationally calculated [*rational kalkuliert*], at least in principle, according to fixed general laws, just as the probable performance of a machine can be calculated” (*Gesammelte Werke* 142). These two streams converge most clearly in the work of the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács (1885-1971). For Lukács, the modern scientific conversion of the world into an inert “thing” to be dominated and mastered by human beings (Weber) is mirrored in the phenomenon of commodity fetishism (Marx). As capitalistic modes of production grow ever more rationalized and mechanized, “the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker” are progressively eliminated and “his work is reduced to the mechanical repetition of a specialised set of actions” (*History* 88). At the same time—and to revert for a moment to Marx himself—the organic relation between laborer and product is replaced by a situation in which the “social character of labour” appears as an “objective character stamped upon the product of that labour” (*Capital* 72). This, of course, is commodification—the process, according to Marx’s celebrated description, whereby “a definite social relation between men” assumes “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (72). For Lukács, moreover, commodification is not merely an economic phenomenon. It has implications for all aspects of human life. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1939), he argued that the “crisis” of modern culture is precisely the crisis of “reification” (the genus of which commodity fetishism is a species). Just as modern scientific rationality invites us to see the natural world as a “thing” that can be mastered by technical reasoning, so capitalist

modes of production invite us to view everything (ourselves included) in similar terms. The worker assumes that the laws of capitalist production answer to a reified “natural order” and that that order sets the terms, not only for economic modes of production, but also for all forms of human interaction with the world (104). Reality itself therefore becomes a fetishized commodity, and “rationalization of the world,” as Lukács notes, “extends right into the soul of the worker” (88).

### 2.1.3. The Protestant Reformation

“Soul” is just the right word. The development of disenchantment was not, as the preceding account perhaps suggested, merely a move from religion to secularity but also an evolution within religion itself. Long ago Weber both detected a link between the so-called “Protestant work-ethic” and the rise of capitalism in early modern Europe, and, perhaps more significantly, saw Protestantism’s devaluation of sacramentality as the “logical conclusion” of the “great historical process [...] of disenchantment” (*Protestant* 105). More recently, Regina Schwartz has argued that the dismantling of “sacramental thinking” was a “necessary condition” of the birth of modernity (11), while Alister McGrath, himself a Protestant theologian, has linked Reformation thought to the emergence of atheism as a viable intellectual alternative (198-99). Not, of course, that this thesis has gone uncontested—both Scribner and Walsham think it somewhat overstates the case and therefore requires significant modification—but it has rarely been rejected outright. Since I have neither the desire nor the competence to advance an original thesis on the matter, I will accept it virtually without modification.

Protestantism finds its place in the narrative of disenchantment largely by virtue of what McGrath calls its “divorce of the sacred and the secular” and concomitant

“desacralization of nature” (200). Whereas medieval Catholicism construed the world theophanically (that is, as a manifestation of God’s glory), the major Protestant reformers restricted Christian piety almost exclusively to biblical revelation, insisting, in McGrath’s words, that “the ways and will of God were to be known through the Bible, and preaching based on that sacred text” (202). The Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), for instance, “refused to acknowledge that spiritual reality could ever be known through the material world” and accordingly cast divine revelation as a “form of information” about Christianity’s “great foundational truths” or “the moral duties of believers” (202-3). In the *Institutes* (1536), Calvin likewise counseled that we “rien chercher de Dieu sinon en sa Parole; d’en rien penser sinon avec sa Parole; d’en rien parler sinon par sa Parole” (195).

The implications of this turn to biblical revelation as the locus of Christian faith were immense. In the first place, the devaluation of nature as a source of knowledge about God went hand in hand with a radically new approach to biblical interpretation. For the first fifteen centuries of Christian history, the allegorical method was an important (if not always the preeminent) mode of scriptural exegesis. Rather than simply a strategy for wresting multiple meanings from the words of a text, or a license to play fast and loose with difficult or obscure passages, allegory in fact served as a reminder that meaning does not inhere exclusively in language and that the world to which language refers is itself symbolic of a higher, invisible reality (Wirzba 65). Allegorical interpretation thus not only assigned meaning to material objects, but also construed the whole of creation as revelatory of its Creator (Harrison 2-5).

The Reformers denied both the legitimacy of allegorical exegesis and the ontology that underwrote it, a denial epitomized in the slogan *Sola Scriptura*, which not only established the Bible as the sole source of religious authority, but also restricted scriptural interpretation to the literal, historical sense. As Peter Harrison has argued, the Protestant rejection of allegoresis, besides fundamentally altering the way the Bible was read and interpreted, also had the effect of confining meaning to the domain of language and so of stripping the world of its sign-like status. The insistence on textual literalism thus entailed a non-symbolic conception of nature and the demise of the system of analogies, resemblances, and sympathies that had defined medieval Catholicism's vision of reality (Harrison 4, 28-33, 107-120). In this sense, moreover, the Reformation proved complicit in the rise of modern science. By releasing the natural world from the concerns of biblical interpretation, the Reformers simultaneously opened the door for the mathematical, casual, and mechanical categories imposed by Descartes, Galileo, and others.

The Reformation's assault on allegorical exegesis paralleled an iconoclastic fervor that centered on those elements of Catholic piety—candles, incense, statues, stained-glass, etc.—presumed to bridge the material and spiritual realms. The motivation for such a critique, as well its connection with Protestantism's insistence on textual literalism, is relatively straightforward: if meaning is restricted to language, if the material world no longer resonates symbolically, if the visible no longer bodies forth the invisible, then all those material objects that once participated in a complex web of symbolic meanings similarly fall mute. Iconoclasm also went hand in hand with a full-frontal critique of the Catholic Church's sacramental system, especially the chief



sacrament of the Eucharist, which the major reformers judged uniquely superstitious and idolatrous (Harrison 116-7). In the case of the Eucharist, as in that of allegorical exegesis, linguistic issues once again loomed large, since to call into question Catholic Eucharistic theology was to have called into question not only a particular piece of religious dogma but also a particular understanding of language. Indeed, as Christopher Elwood has argued, the Protestant rejection of Catholic Eucharistic theology was in effect a “semiotic revolution,” a fundamental “reinterpretation of what is involved in the process of signification” (4-5). Fully to grasp the implications of this “revolution,” however, requires some understanding of the linguistic issues at stake.

#### 2.1.4. Conjunctive and Disjunctive Semiotics

Imagine a word (“clock,” say), and now imagine two ways of thinking about it. One way would be to say that the graphic sequence “c-l-o-c-k” (or the sound it makes when articulated orally) has nothing to do with the clock sitting across the room from me. We just decided to call the thing over there a clock, and that fact alone explains the graphic and acoustic signs associated with it. The relation between the two is purely stipulative, purely a matter of convention, and if we were in Madrid or Moscow or Tehran we would no doubt call it by a different name. This way of thinking about the relation between signs and thing, which Greene calls “disjunctive semiotics,” has been academic orthodoxy at least since Ferdinand de Saussure declared that words derive their significance, not by reference to the “real” world, but rather by reference to other words. Yet it is not the only way. A somewhat more ancient view, which Greene labels “conjunctive semiotics,” has it that words and things go together naturally, substantially and hence that there is something about signs that binds them irrevocably to the thing to

which they refer. Cratylus, from Plato's eponymous dialogue, is perhaps the earliest philosophical exponent of such a view, but it had ardent defenders in Europe at least until the seventeenth century (Greene 30) and has received considerable attention in recent anthropological literature. Witness, as one example among many, Robin Horton's claim that traditional African religions see a "unique and intimate link between words and things," such that the former "appear bound to reality in an absolute fashion" (226).

It is tempting, admittedly, to attribute such an understanding of language to the pre-rational backwardness of so-called "primitive" cultures—or, if it lingers too long after man has stopped dragging his knuckles and carrying a club, to a pathological incapacity to grasp the linguistic sign as the arbitrary imposition it so obviously is. Thus Locke chides his seventeenth-century readers for persisting in the antediluvian superstition that words have some "natural connexion with our Ideas" (III.ix.4: 477), while Paul de Man labels the same notion the "cratyllic delusion" (16). But Locke and de Man move too quickly. If conjunctive semiotics seems quaint and old-fashioned to us urbane, demystified post-structuralists, it nevertheless exercised a profound influence on the history of linguistics. In fact, Brian Vickers has argued that the conjunctive-disjunctive distinction framed the more general distinction between "occult" and "scientific" mentalities in early modern Europe. Says Vickers: "In the scientific tradition [...] a clear distinction is made between words and things and between literal and metaphorical language. The occult tradition does not recognize this distinction: words are treated as if they are equivalent to things and can be substituted for them. Manipulate the one and you manipulate the other" ("Analogy" 95). The distinction is perhaps slightly more jagged than Vickers' comment suggests, and some room must surely be made for

overlap, but it nevertheless seems basically correct. At least at an intuitive level, an “occult” or “magical” conception of the universe surely requires a theory of language that fails to distinguish too sharply between signs and referents, since magic depends fundamentally on the assumption that words do not simply refer to things but also interact with them, manipulate them, change them. The most basic of magical gestures is, after all, the “spell,” a term that derives from the Old English *spellen*, meaning simply “to speak.” Thus Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the Italian philosopher, translator of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and quintessence of Vickers’ “occult tradition” argues that words have “a certain natural power (*naturali quadam potestate*)” and that the “world binds itself together [...] and everywhere links with itself in the mutual love of its members and so holds together” (cited in Greene 30). Implicit in Ficino’s remark is, as Borges has observed, a theory of causality that “postula un vínculo inevitable entre cosas distintas” and sees the world as “un juego preciso de vigilancias, ecos y afinidades” (I: 230-31). Or, to put the point another way, whereas the “scientific” mind sees language as an external tabulator, a system of arbitrary indicators that runs parallel to reality and for which one might just as easily substitute mathematical operators (recall Leibniz’s *characteristica universalis*), the “occult” mind sees language as substantially, materially, and causally complicit in the world. Language, in this latter sense, is not “about” the world, does not “refer” to something outside itself; it is, rather, a part of the world (at least as much rocks and tables and chairs). And just as casting stones entails some risk of bodily harm, so, too, does casting words.

### 2.1.5. Real Presence: The Eucharistic Controversy and Protestant Semiosis

The distinction between disjunctive and conjunctive semiotics—or else something very much like it—lay at the heart of the Eucharistic controversy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Stated in terms unjustifiably vague and imprecise, traditional Catholic Eucharistic theology demanded a particular view of language, a particular understanding of how signification works. There is perhaps no better way to approach this issue than through the lens of the official Catholic response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the thirteenth session (1551) of which was dedicated entirely to the question of the Eucharist. The first Canon of that session reads:

Si quis negaverit, in sanctissimae Eucharistiae sacramento contineri vere, realiter et substantialiter corpus et sanguinem una cum anima et divinitate Domini nostri Iesu Christi ac proinde totum Christum, sed dixerit, tantummodo esse in eo ut in signo vel figura aut virtute, anathema sit. (Session 13, Can. 1)

If anyone denies that in the sacrament of the most Holy Eucharist are contained truly, really and substantially the body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and consequently the whole Christ, but says that He is in it only as in a sign, or figure or force, let him be anathema. (Session 13, Can. 1)

The last line is crucial. The key Protestant move was precisely to argue that Christ appeared in the Eucharist “in signo vel figura” and to deny what, in the following Canon, the Tridentine council calls *conversio* or *transsubstantiatio*: the idea that, upon consecration, the wine and wafer maintain their “accidental” properties (i.e., they still look like bread and wine) but “transubstantiate” into (i.e., really, actually become) the body and blood Christ. Even more important is the understanding of signification that the doctrine of *transsubstantiatio* implies. For to say that the bread and the wine, while still looking like bread and wine, nevertheless really become the body and blood of Christ, is

to say that a sign may somehow contain that to which it refers, that it may simultaneously *signify* a reality and *be* that reality. And that, of course, is precisely what the Protestants denied.

The major reformers espoused different and highly nuanced views of the Eucharistic sacrifice, and those views should not be conflated or confused.<sup>9</sup> Even so, certain general contours are discernible. For the purposes of my argument, Calvin's position is the most significant, especially as concerns his clear and categorical rejection of transubstantiation as a form of magic or sorcery. In the *Institutes*, he writes: "Car il ne nous point ici imaginer un enchantement ou conjuration de magiciens, comme s'il suffisait d'avoir murmuré les paroles sur les créatures insensibles" (700). Calvin's argument has two slopes. The first is simply that the transubstantiation is unscriptural, that it results from a bizarre unwillingness to interpret that crucial line, *Hoc enim est corpus meum*, as the metaphor it so plainly is. The other slope is steeper and more slippery—though, for just that reason, much more interesting. What the defenders of transubstantiation fail to grasp, Calvin argues, is that "le signe, quant à l'essence, diffère de la chose figurée" (684). He accuses them, in other words, of a linguistic error, of failing to grasp the relationship between words and things. By rejecting the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist, then, Calvin not only rejects a theological doctrine but also swaps a view of language that countenances the possibility of a coincidence of word and thing for one that, as Christopher Elwood puts it, insists on "a critical distinction between sign and signified" (157).

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<sup>9</sup> For a detail and nuanced account of these differences, the reader may wish to consult Thomas Davis' masterful study of Reformation treatments of the Eucharist.

The term normally used to describe this position is nominalism, and though Calvin was clearly not a nominalist in the sense that Locke or, early, Nicholas d’Autrecourt (1299-1369) was, his insistence on an essential distinction between “le signe” and “la chose figurée” points in that direction. Yet the nominalism implicit in Calvin’s critique of Catholic Eucharistic theology was hardly a Protestant innovation. Like the sundering of “grace” and “nature” that made possible the emergence of a distinctly modern scientific worldview, it too had roots in late-medieval Catholic thought. I have already mentioned d’Autrecourt, but his views were condemned as heretical by Pope Clement VI and appear to have exercised little influence on subsequent thought. The key figure seems to be William of Ockham (12-88-1348), who, near the beginning of the *Summa totius logicae* (ca. 1323), argues that while words can be said to refer to things (or “bring them to cognition” – *in cognitionem facit venire*), they are not “natural signs” of anything (*vox nullius est signum naturale*) (49). Ockham’s nominalism stands in diametric opposition to an older view of language which saw *res* and *verbum* as indissociable. A sign, according to this view, not only signifies the reality to which it refers but also participates in it, and it does so, as noted before, on the basis of a logos theology that conceives human language as analogous to the divine *verbum* which first brought the world into existence (Dupré 104). For Ockham, by contrast, a sign is merely a symbol (in the mathematical or logical sense), an indicator that points to reality but bears no natural relation to that reality.

Nominalism, as Dupré has argued, “essentially changed the nature of language,” since by “depriving words of the intimate link with the real that the eternal Word [...] had established with all of creation,” it seriously impaired language’s capacity to make

transcendent, spiritual reality present within immanent, material reality (*Passage* 103-4). The effects of this shift on poetic language were massive, albeit subtle. Even if the early Italian humanists (Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch) evinced little sympathy for nominalism (or scholastic philosophy in general), its influence on the subsequent poetic tradition is undeniable. First, and somewhat paradoxically, nominalism expanded the scope of poetic language's metaphorical potential, since by loosening the bond between *res* and *verbum*, it allowed language to "develop freely beyond its function of naming the real" (105). But expanded linguistic creativity came at a price. On the one hand, Protestantism's metaphorical interpretation of the Eucharist tended to "flatten" symbolic language into metaphor and simile (Ross vii-xi). On the other hand, as language lost its perceived natural connection with reality, it increasingly came to be viewed as an impediment to, rather than a conduit of, scientific knowledge. In fact, most early modern nominalists saw language as, at best, a necessary evil, a "verbal screen" positioned between reality and the human mind (Dupré 105).

This dual tendency reached its apogee, in the Spanish tradition at least, in seventeenth-century *cultismo* and *manierismo* and especially in the poetry of Luis de Góngora, whose metaphorical pyrotechnics so radically elide the link between word and things as to erect what Dámaso Alonso has called "una barrera irreal entre la mente y el objeto mismo" (73). Indeed, a number of recent critics have attempted on precisely these grounds to resuscitate a view of the author of the *Soledades* as an essentially anti-Catholic, anti-sacramental poet who deliberately refuses transcendence and willfully glories in "radiant, material self-sufficiency" (Dolan 223). Góngora is, of course, an extreme case, but he is nevertheless representative of a tendency—and one which, as the

documents of the so-called Góngora Controversy show, had a significant number of defenders in seventeenth-century Spain. What that tendency reveals, at least in part, is what can happen (though not what inevitably happens) when language is stripped of its “sacramental value,” when, in other words, it ceases to participate in the transcendent Logos which alone secures the meaningfulness and intelligibility of the world. But it also reveals—and this is simply a corollary of the last sentence—what can happen to poetic discourse when an essentially Eucharistic logic ceases to govern the relationship between signifier and signified; when signs no longer function as channels of transcendence; when the material world, to borrow a line from Gerard Manley Hopkins, is no longer “charged with the grandeur of God.”

No one has insisted on this latter point more stridently or more eloquently than George Steiner. “At every significant point,” writes Steiner, “Western philosophies of art and Western poetics draw their secular idiom” from the postulation of “the ‘real presence’ of the incarnate Christ in the eucharist.” The endless “availability of the Saviour in the wafer and wine of the eucharist,” he continues, “conditions not only the development of Western art, but at a much deeper level, that of our understanding and reception of the truth of art” (*Grammars* 67). Steiner is, admittedly, given to the occasional hyperbole, but his argument finds additional support in, of all places, the work of Jacques Derrida, who suggests that the intrinsic meaningfulness of the sign necessarily presupposes a theological understanding of signification: “The intelligible face of the sign remains turned toward the word and the face of God [...] The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth” (13-14). Steiner’s and Derrida’s conviction that meaningful signification requires the assumption of sacramental presence is in many



ways the guiding intuition of this thesis; and, as I shall try to show in the following chapter, the goal of Francisco Luis Bernárdez's "sacramental poetics" is precisely to restore to language (and especially to poetic language) something of its sacramental depth, and to do so within the explicit confines of Catholic orthodoxy. But before turning to Bernárdez, I would like to round out my treatment of disenchantment by looking at some of its manifestations in Latin America.

## 2.2. Varieties of Disenchantment in Latin America

The story of disenchantment in Latin America merits separate treatment in this chapter, not only because it is to specifically Latin American responses to disenchantment that my thesis is ultimately dedicated, but also because Latin America's experience of disenchantment and secularization was in some respects quite different from Europe's. Before proceeding, I should note that the tale of disenchantment I wish to sketch in the rest of this section has two axes. The first is simply a continuation of the narrative I have been pursuing so far: disenchantment as the progressive "unmagicking" of the world. The second axis has to do with the evolution of concrete political and social arrangements in Latin America (and, more specifically, in Argentina) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both cases, my sketch is necessarily cursory and selective. Details shall be supplied in later chapters, especially as they relate to the work of the three poets to whom my dissertation is devoted.

### 2.2.1. Disenchantment and the New World

The first point to notice is that Latin American was an *engine* of secularization long before it was a *subject* of secularization. "What could I do," wrote the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary and naturalist José de Acosta (1539-1600) as he entered the tropics for the first time on course for the Americas, "but laugh at Aristotle's philosophie" (qtd. in

Harrison 82). The particular bit of Attic wisdom that elicited the Spaniard's amusement was Aristotle's suggestion that the tropics were too hot to support life, a claim contradicted not only by the fact that Acosta was alive and well in the tropics, but also by the dizzying array of plants and animals he had observed during the voyage. Acosta's laugh at Aristotle's expense was itself symptomatic of a more general epistemological crisis occasioned by the discovery that Europe was in fact not all there is, all there was, and all there ever will be. That crisis was a long time coming. By the middle of the sixteenth century, nearly everyone acknowledged that Ptolemy's maps were seriously flawed and that Aristotle's biological speculations had been somewhat prejudiced by geographical limitations (Harrison 82-3). The discovery of the New World, however, added additional pressures, not least of which was the strain that the influx of knowledge placed upon medieval Christianity's symbolic understanding of the world. Harrison summarizes the issue like this:

Prior to the age of discovery, a symbolic world existed in which a discrete set of natural objects had provided a ground for the composition of unlimited variations on eternal themes. The meanings of things were always accessible through reference to a rich literary tradition. Now, however, what had once been a coherent universal language was inundated by an influx of new and potentially unintelligible symbols. In this expanded lexicon of natural objects there existed signs for which the familiar symbolic associations were totally lacking. (91)

This epistemological and hermeneutical crisis paralleled a theological one. Among the disquietudes visited upon the Spanish in the New World was the recognition that the peoples of the Americas seemed conspicuously absent from biblical history. For the medieval Catholic mind, it must be remembered, history was essentially Christian history, and Christian history involved a highly coherent narrative that began in the Garden of Eden, climaxed with Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday, and would finally

terminate with the eschatological establishment of the Kingdom of God. How *los indios* fit into that narrative was a matter of some confusion. Acosta advocated monogenism—a view which saw Adam and Eve as the sole progenitors of the human race—and speculated that the inhabitants of the New World must have arrived by land bridge (Ford 28). Other chroniclers accepted the somewhat more convenient explanation, at least from an imperialist perspective, that America had in fact fallen outside the purvey of the Bible’s otherwise universal scope and then construed the Conquest as in some sense a repetition and elaboration of biblical history (that is, as an attempt to write America into a story from which it was inexplicably absent). Indeed, the earliest Spanish chroniclers of the New World (González de Nájera and Góngora Marmolejo, for instance) frequently compared the events of the Conquest to events in the Old Testament, thus imbuing the Spanish colonial enterprise with eschatological significance (Lafaye 669). These interpretations—often forced, sometimes fantastical, rarely convincing—reveal not only the fecundity of the Christian tradition and the ingenuity of its custodians, but also the degree to which the new wines of scientific advancement and geographical expansion strained the old wineskins of traditional theology and cosmology.

That strain did not materialize in Latin America until much later, and even then its character was importantly different from similar manifestations in Europe. This owes largely to two general factors. The first is that Latin America arrived late to the party. When disenchantment began to gather steam in Europe, there was quite simply no “Latin America” to disenchant. The second reason is that Spain’s resistance to Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment thought meant that the culture it exported to the New World was to a considerable extent insulated from the principle sources of secularization

and modernization. As late as 1930, for example, the Spanish journalist and philosopher José Díaz Fernández (1898-1941) argued that the absence of Reformation thought “supuso en España el cierre de fronteras ideológicas y la imposibilidad de sembrar la semilla de la libertad de pensamiento” (385-86). When it did happen, Latin American secularization owed much to the influence of positivism (of both Comtian and Spencerian flavors), which, as Leopoldo Zea has argued, was, with the exception of Scholasticism, the most decisive philosophical influence on the Latin American thought (47).

The story begins somewhat earlier, however. By 1830, most of Latin America had achieved independence. Yet independence was only half the battle, since emancipation from Spanish colonialism entailed the necessity of elaborating some conception of an autonomous—and, in all likelihood, secular—nation-state. Unsurprisingly, the demands of national allegiance clashed with the spiritual universalism of Roman Catholicism. “The church condemned national allegiance as heretical,” says Edward Williams, and “nation-builders reciprocated by damning both pope and religion” (“Emergence” 261). The nation-building project thus went hand in hand with the process of secularization, and indeed it was not until Vatican II (1962-1965) that Rome finally made its peace with the idea of nationalism.

### 2.2.2. The Argentine Generation of 1837

The tale was no different in Argentina, where the push toward secularization coincided with what is usually called the Romantic Period and centered around the so-called *Generación del 37*, a group of progressive, Europeanized intellectuals—among them Esteban Echeverría (1805-1851), Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810-1884), and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888)—all of whom were born on the cusp of independence (9

July 1816) and who came of age during the oppressive regimes of Juan Facundo Quiroga (1788-1835) and Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877). Politically liberal and vehemently anti-Spanish, nearly all the members of Argentina's *Generación Romántica* decried Spain's baleful influence on Latin America and saw liberation from Spanish cultural dominance as key not only to Argentine modernization, but also, and more specifically, to the construction of a modern Argentine nation-state (Williams, "Secularization" 200). In his *Dogma socialista* (1846), for instance, Echeverría insisted on "la emancipación del espíritu americano" as a necessary condition of "la salvación de la patria" (40, 12), adding that "el único legado que los americanos pueden aceptar y aceptan de buen grado de la España [...] es el idioma" (64). Similarly, in his celebrated short story "El matadero" (written in 1839, but not published until 1871), Echeverría divided the blame for the death of an unnamed *unitario* between the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877) and the Catholic Church, itself simply a side-effect of a more general Iberian cultural hangover. Sarmiento likewise cast Spanish colonialism as the source of the barbaric *caudillismo* of Facundo and Rosas, and prophesied the eventual triumph of modern progress over "las tradiciones envejecidas" of Spain (*Facundo* 12).

But the anti-españolismo of Sarmiento and his cogenerationists hardly amounted to simple negation. Its logic was markedly dialectical. For if Spain's opposition to the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment represented for the Generation of 1837 the antithesis of the intellectual and political triumphs of modernity (Guerrero 172), then France, as Sarmiento put it in the "Introducción" to *Facundo*, was "el crisol en que se ha estado elaborando, mezclando y refundiendo el espíritu moderno" (15). In this sense, the slogan, "civilización y barbarie"

that serves as the metaframe of Sarmiento's interpretation of post-colonial Argentina is as much a contrast between Buenos Aires and the provinces as between Paris and Madrid. Or, perhaps even better, it is a distinction not only between two geographical locations, but also between two fundamentally different ways of looking at the world: on the one hand, the Spanish inclination toward otiose philosophical and metaphysical speculation, and, on the other, the French and English commitment to real, tangible social melioration through hard-nosed empirical (i.e., scientific) observation (Williams, "Secularization" 211).

This latter way of drawing the contrast received particularly acute expression in Alberdi's polemical distinction between "science" and "literature." "La misión de las universidades en Sud-América," he wrote in a posthumous collection of economic essays, "es difundir la ciencia, con preferencia a la literatura," for science is "la luz, la razón, el pensamiento frío y la conducta reflexiva," while literature is "la ilusión, el misterio, la ficción, la pasión, la elocuencia, la armonía, la ebriedad del alma: el entusiasmo" (*Escritos* 520). In the following paragraph, he added: "La literatura es la hermana de la espada: un elemento auxiliar de la guerra. Canta sus héroes, consagra y eterniza sus glorias: es la cultura intelectual de las edades heroicas. Prolongar esa edad, es retardar la madurez y el progreso de las sociedades" (520). Alberdi's invidious contrast between *ciencia* and *literatura* suggests not only a distinction between two ways of looking at the world, but also a rudimentary theory of history (one modeled, perhaps, on Hesiod's taxonomy of the Five Ages of Man). The difference, of course, is that for Hesiod the passage from the Golden Age to the Iron Age is a narrative of decadence and decline (with the exception, ironically enough, of the Heroic Age), whereas for Alberdi history is mostly on the up.

But this is unsurprising, particularly in view of the Enlightenment ideology of perpetual progress that so thoroughly characterizes his work. Equally unsurprising is Alberdi's link between literature and "entusiasmo," an idea that finds its most immediate source in Adam Smith's celebrated line, "Science is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition" (which Alberdi had cited only a few paragraphs earlier), but which ultimately recalls Socrates' suggestion, in the *Ion*, that poetry is not so much a matter of skill (*techné*) as of madness, divine possession, or inspiration (*enthousiasmos*). Socrates's larger point is to call into question the poetic enterprise itself, and though in this dialogue he only makes Ion look like a bit of a fool, he would later issue an official condemnation of all the mimetic arts. Alberdi's position was more radical still. By hitching literature to "enthusiasm," and subsequently rejecting both, he not only condemned literature as an impediment to progress, but also rejected, at least implicitly, the theological understanding of artistic creation implicit in Socrates' account. Alberdi's claim was therefore not only a scientific or economic or social claim, but also a religious one: to leave poetry behind was also—and necessarily—to leave religion behind.

But this was only half the story. If it is true that the gospel of progress peddled by the Generation of 37 contributed to Argentine disenchantment in the broadly Weberian sense of "un-magicking," it is also true that Sarmiento's and Echeverría's attempt to forge a modern Argentine nation itself underwent a parallel process of disenchantment; and it was precisely this latter variety of disenchantment that framed the social and political context in which Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik lived and wrote. Problems emerged very early. In the first and second decades of the nineteenth century, independence leaders waved the banner of liberalism as an alternative to the economic

and social arrangements imposed by the Spanish Crown, but sweeping liberal reforms proved difficult to implement in societies marked by a deep and recalcitrant colonial legacy. Indeed, in the years following independence, liberal governments across Latin America remained fragile, understaffed, and broke. Most took out loans to maintain basic services, and many defaulted (Chasteen 124). Within a decade or so, the ebullient utopianism of the early days of independence had basically vanished, and Latin American revolutionary leaders grew increasingly convinced that their fledgling republics had been “fundadas bajo el signo del desencanto” (Rojas 24). By the 1830s, disenchantment was complete as conservative *caudillismo* definitively supplanted the brief ascendancy enjoyed by post-independence liberalism.

### 2.2.3. Positivism, Modernism, and the Crisis of Secularization

In Argentina, the conservative backlash against early liberalism was epitomized by the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas, who ruled the country in some capacity or other from 1829 to 1852. As suggested above, the members of the Generation of 37 saw in Rosas the incarnation of the sort of the regressive, barbarous traditionalism that the May Revolution was supposed to have overcome; and it was precisely in response to Rosas’ ascent to power that Sarmiento articulated what Nicolas Shumway calls Argentina’s “guiding fiction”: civilization versus barbarism. As the later Alberdi would argue, however, the division between the “backward” provinces and “civilized” Buenos Aires amounted in reality to a division between “two countries.” “Buenos Aires y las Provincias argentinas,” Alberdi wrote in 1865, “forman como dos países extranjeros uno de otro. Como esa división tiene como objeto la explotación de un país por el otro, una profunda enemistad los divide y hace ser enemigos naturales en el seno de la unión o federación, que no los



liga sino para hacer efectiva esa explotación” {Buenos Aires and the Argentine Provinces form two countries foreign to one another. Since that division has as its objective the exploitation of one country by the other, a profound enmity divides them and creates enemies in the heart of the bosom of the union or federation, which joins them together only to facilitate that exploitation] (*Obras* VI: 329). Comments like these reveal not only Alberdi’s burgeoning sympathy for the *federalista* cause, but also the question at the heart of Argentine politics, past and present: who should rule—the Porteño elite or the provincial masses?

Never was this question more acute, nor the division it presupposed more palpable, than in the years following Rosas’ abdication. On 3 February 1852, Justo José de Urquiza (1801-1870), with the help of allies in Paraguay and Brazil, defeated Rosas in the Battle of Caseros. In Rosas’ wake, Urquiza united all the provinces, except Buenos Aires, under a single government, the Confederation, headquartered in Paraná (Shumway 216-17). A year later, the Confederation ratified Argentina’s first constitution, again without the support of Buenos Aires, and for the next five years, Buenos Aires and the United Provinces functioned as, in effect, two separate countries. Though Buenos Aires would eventually rejoin the Confederation in 1859, and though Urquiza’s two immediate successors (Mitre and Sarmiento) were old-school, Unitarian liberals, the 1860s and 1870s saw the rise and flourishing of nationalism in Argentina. Unlike Unitarian liberalism, Argentine nationalism had no political party, no clear-cut agenda, no single spokesperson, and no catalogue of phrases and ideas. What it did offer, however, was a set of counternarratives to what Shumway calls “liberal mythologies of nationhood” (291). If the members of the Generation of 37 advocated governance by a small,

Europeanized, Porteño elite, nationalists advocated populism and inclusive democracy; if Sarmiento cast the gaucho as an impediment to Argentine modernization, nationalists like José Hernández (1834-1886) turned an outlaw gaucho into a national hero; if the Porteño elite saw immigration and Europeanization as the panacea for Argentina's various maladies, the nationalists promoted nativism, autochthonous values, and the recuperation of Spanish heritage as an alternative to liberalism's enthrallment to U.S. and French models (Shumway 291-96; Rojas 231-33).

It is tempting to imagine that the emergence of nationalism as a viable ideological alternative to Unitarian liberalism cast the die for all subsequent Argentine history; but, in reality, nationalism's ascendancy merely cemented an element latent in Argentine politics since the time of independence: the conflict between those who would distribute political power throughout all sectors of society and those who would concentrate it in the hands of a liberal elite in Buenos Aires. And, in 1880, the pendulum swung once again in favor of liberalism as Julio A. Roca (1843-1914) took over the presidency in the wake of Nicolás Avellaneda's (1837-1885) departure. If Avellaneda's presidency had been characterized by a declining economy and mounting debt (both aggravated by the Long Depression in Europe), under Roca, Argentina entered a period of unparalleled social and economic progress. The population grew precipitously, from around two million in 1869 to nearly eight million in 1914. During the same period, nearly six million immigrants, mostly from Europe, flooded into Argentina, more than half of which, according to government estimates, settled in the country permanently. In terms of infrastructure, railroads, which in 1880 covered only 1,570 miles, increased to 17,350 miles by 1910, and the improved transportation infrastructure yielded innovations

in cattle ranching and the emergence of a commercial agricultural industry that made Argentina one of the world's leading beef exporters (Lewis 54-66). At a social and political level, perhaps the most decisive event of Roca's first term was the passage in 1884 of the *Ley de educación común* (Nº 1420), which made primary education compulsory for all Argentine children and severely limited the Church's educational monopoly. Not only was Law 1402 the crowning achievement of what Cayetano Bruno calls Argentina's "década laicista"; it also had the effect of disrupting an otherwise symbiotic relationship between the Roman Church and the Argentine, a relationship that dated back to the time of the Conquest and which would not be restored for nearly a half century.

At the level of ideology, positivism provided the social and political justification for the reforms instituted by the Generation of 1880 (Mead). Positivism, as noted before, was influential throughout Latin America, but its influence was perhaps most pronounced in Mexico, where the ideas of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) became something like the official ideology of the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915). The introduction of positivism into Mexico can be dated with relative precision to Gabino Barreda's "Oración cívica," delivered in Guanajuato on 16 September 1867. There Barreda suggested, on Comtian grounds, that "el orden material [...] sea el garante cierto y el modo seguro de caminar siempre por el sendero florido del progreso y de la civilización" (448, 460-1). But Latin American positivists were hardly unreflective imitators of Comte and Spencer. Barreda, for instance, added "libertad" to the Comtian diptych "ordre et progrès" (a slogan that still adorns the Brazilian flag), while Argentine positivism was, as José Gaos notes, "un positivismo *sui generis*," one which, in addition to Comtianism proper,

included various admixtures of French and German Romanticism, traditional Roman Catholicism, *krausismo*, and Hegelian Idealism (30). Another difference, perhaps the decisive one, was that European positivism emerged in the wake of the triumph of natural science, while in Latin America positivism predated the ascendancy of science. European positivists, in this sense, had an easier go than their Latin American counterparts: since scientific naturalism proved a compelling metaphysic in its own right, positivism simply piggy-backed on its success. Early in the second half of the nineteenth, however, Latin America had almost nothing in the way of a scientific culture (Ardao 517-18). What this meant, in part at least, was that Argentine positivism proved much more aggressively ideological than its European cousin. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that aggressiveness took the form of a rigid dichotomy, one that worked itself out in philosophical terms as a contrast between positivism and scholasticism (Zea 27) and, in broadly cultural terms, as a contrast between the “promise of modernity” and the “inertia” of traditional Catholicism (Mead 645-48).<sup>10</sup>

For nearly half a century, it worked. The social, political, and economic progress associated with the Generation of 1880 and underwritten by positivism held sway in Argentina until 1930, when a military coup toppled the government of Hipólito Yrigoyen (1852-1933), whom both Bernárdez and Borges supported. The coup, which enjoyed the full support of the nation’s Catholic elite (Ben-Dror 32-3), marked not only the end of Argentina’s fragile democracy, but also the beginning of a series of profound social transformations that would culminate in the presidency of Juan Domingo Perón (1895-1974), who ruled Argentina from 1946-1955. In retrospect, Perón’s rise to power cast the

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<sup>10</sup> For more on Argentine positivism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see the essays collected in Biagini, as well as the volume edited by Greenwood.

die for rest of twentieth-century Argentine history as a succession of military coups and dictatorships; but, for liberals of the time, the emergence of *peronismo* meant nothing so much as a return to the barbarism of Rosas-style *caudillismo* that had dominated nineteenth-century Argentina (Fraga 158-59). In their view, history had in some sense come full circle: the barbarians were once again at the gates, and the Sarmientan dream of a liberal, progressive Argentina seemed all but dead.

The emergence of Argentina as a modern, industrialized nation-state paralleled the rise of *modernismo*, a movement which, with the possible exception of Magical Realism, would eventually become Latin America's most enduring contribution to world literature. If Argentine intellectuals in the early and mid-1800s began using positivism to fashion what Karen Mead calls a "national ideology" (645), then it was also in the 1880s that a group of Latin American poets began to articulate a kind of anti-positivist counternarrative. While Latin American positivism proved generally less dentulate than its European counterpart, it nevertheless generated a great deal of antipathy, especially among artists. As early as 1876, just nine years after Barreda's "Oración," the Mexican journalist and poet Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera (1859-1895) indicted "ese asqueroso y repugnante positivismo" as inimical to the spiritual, transcendent aims of art (54). At this early stage, objections to positivism were primarily aesthetic and tended to parallel more general critiques of literary realism; but, as Rafael Gutiérrez Girardot has argued, positivism's intellectual and artistic implications were far more expansive. While secularization and disenchantment were, from a sociological perspective, simply objective social phenomena, they were experienced by poets and artists as "un acontecimiento apocalíptico," one that had the character "de 'crisis religiosa', de pérdida

de fe, de duda religiosa, de temor del ateísmo” (75-6). The primary concern, of course, was that positivism’s insistence on crude utility left little room for the spiritual, transcendent, and artistic dimensions of human existence, a worry dramatized, among other places, in Rubén Darío’s well-known short story “El velo de la reina Mab” (1888).<sup>11</sup>

This recognition of the crisis of secularization, though present in Darío and others, nowhere received more acute (or, indeed, more prophetic) expression than in the Cuban poet and essayist José Martí (1853-1895), who grasped, perhaps better than any of his contemporaries, the tensions and contradictions inherent in modernity. In the justly famous “Prólogo” (1882) to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde’s justly forgotten “Poema del Niágara,” Martí cast the modern world as an unsettlingly, vertiginous mixture of “elaboración y transformación espléndidas” and “el desmembramiento de la mente humana” (*Obras* VII: 224, 226); likewise, in *Versos sencillos* (1891) he described modernity as “¡La edad [...] de los labios secos! / De las noches sin sueño! de la vida / Estrujada en agraz” (127). Martí also saw clearly that the birth of the modern world signaled at once the death of traditional religious sensibilities and the necessity of forging a new form of spirituality on the basis of poetic language. “¡Ruines tiempos,” he wrote in the “Prólogo” to Bonalde’s poem, “en que los sacerdotes no merecen ya la alabanza ni la veneración de los poetas, ni los poetas han comenzado todavía a ser sacerdotes!” (*Obras* VII: 222). The idea that poetry should assume the role once played by religion became one of *modernismo*’s (and, more generally, modern poetry’s) principal leitmotifs and

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<sup>11</sup> “El velo de reina Mab” explores relationship between artistic beauty and the emphasis on crude utility that characterizes (in Darío’s view) the modern world. The tale ends when four artists who have sought Queen Mab’s guidance are enveloped in the Queen’s veil: “el velo de los sueños, de los dulces sueños, que hacen ver la vida del color de rosa” (*Azul*... 92). The implication, of course, is that only by renouncing (or at least being shielded from) the world does artistic creativity remain possible.

eventually prompted Octavio Paz to aver that “la poesía es la religión secreta de la era moderna” (*Hijos* 151). But the development of what Ryan Spangler calls Martí’s “religion of poetry” was premised on an acute diagnosis of the spiritual and existential malaise of late-nineteenth-century Western culture, of which Martí offered the following celebrated description:

Nadie tiene hoy su fe segura. Los mismos que lo creen, se engañan. Los mismos que escriben fe se muerden, acosados de hermosas fieras interiores, los puños con que escriben. No hay pintor que acierte a colorear con la novedad y transparencia de otros tiempos la aureola luminosa de las vírgenes, ni cantor religioso o predicador que ponga unción y voz segura en sus estrofas y anatemas. Todos son soldados del ejército en marcha. A todos besó la misma maga. En todos está hirviendo la sangre nueva. Aunque se despedacen las entrañas, en su rincón más callado están, airadas y hambrientas, la Intranquilidad, la Inseguridad, la Vaga Esperanza, la Visión Secreta. ¡Un inmenso hombre pálido, de rostro enjuto, ojos llorosos y boca seca, vestido de negro, anda con pasos graves, sin reposar ni dormir, por toda la tierra—y se ha sentado en todos los hogares, y ha puesto su mano trémula en todas las cabeceras! ¡Qué golpeo en el cerebro! ¡qué susto en el pecho! ¡qué demandar lo que no viene! ¡qué no saber lo que se desea! ¡qué sentir a la par deleite y náusea en el espíritu, náusea del día que muere, deleite del alba! (*Obras* VII: 225-26)

Jiménez calls this passage “la primera toma de conciencia del mundo moderno entre los que hablamos español” (“Introducción” 12), and it would indeed set the tone for *modernismo* as a response to the problem of disenchantment and modernity.

In large part, that response took the form of what Girardot calls the “‘sacralización’ del mundo” (82), the attempt to restore to nature something of its erstwhile dignity and charm. The principal engine of that restoration was, of course, poetic language, and indeed the idea of poetry as a sacred vessel capable of imbuing the world with meaning and significance became one of the fundamental premises of *modernista* aesthetics and metaphysics. Examples abound. For the Colombian poet José Asunción Silva (1865-1896), poetry is “un vaso santo” [a holy vessel] (Jiménez,

*Antología* 84). For the Cuban *modernista* Julián del Casal (1863-1893), poetic language is what remains when “ante el último Dios flota quemado / El postrer grano de fragante incienso” (121); and for the Mexican poet Enrique González Martínez (1871-1952), poetry is the “fuente sagrada” which holds “el oculto sentido” of “todas las cosas” (284). Darío is even more explicit: “En el principio está la palabra como manifestación de la unidad infinita, pero ya conteniéndola. *Et verbum erat Deus*” (221).

But, as before, the central figure is Martí. “La poesía es sagrada,” Martí himself wrote in *Versos libres*, and poetic language, in appropriately inspired hands, has the capacity to compensate for the attenuation of traditional spirituality (156). Furthermore, like his Romantic predecessors (perhaps most notably Wordsworth), Martí saw a return to the unblemished splendor of nature as the sine qua non both of spiritual regeneration and of the renovation of poetic language. “La poesía ha de tener raíz en la tierra, y base de hecho real” (V: 191), wrote Martí in an article on the Cuban poet Francisco Sellén (1838-1907); likewise, in *Versos libres*, he contrasted the savagery and defilement of the “grande ciudad,” where human bodies have become “desechos, / Y fosas y jirones” and where people make love “de pie” (*Versos Libres* 125, 127), with the sacrality of the natural world: “en el divino altar comulgo / De la naturaleza: es mi hostia el alma humana” (*Versos libres* 158). The link between poetry and sacramentality reappears in an essay on Oscar Wilde, where Martí hitches modernity and disenchantment precisely to the problem of desacramentalization: “La devoción a la belleza y a la creación de cosas bellas es la mejor de todas las civilizaciones: ella hace de la vida de cada hombre un sacramento, no un número en los libros de comercio” (XV: 366).<sup>12</sup> The metaphor could

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the religious element in Martí (and, specifically, for the idea of poetry as a substitute for traditional religion) see Spangler.



hardly be more apt, since the contrast between “sacramento” and “número en los libros de comercio” suggests a distinction not only between two understandings of the human being but also between visions of signification; if, on the one hand, the sacrament is materiality turned toward spirituality, immanence open to the irruption of transcendence, then the number in the ledger book is its precise opposite: the attempt to enclose human beings and the world they inhabit in the strictures of the mathematical formula, to reduce the significance of human life to a crude pecuniary calculus.

It is in this light, moreover, that Paz’s reflections on poetry and modernity acquire their full significance. “Desde su origen,” he writes, “la poesía moderna ha sido una reacción frente, hacia y contra la modernidad: la Ilustración, la razón crítica, el liberalismo, el positivismo y el marxismo” (*Hijos* 10). Further, in their effort to safeguard the possibility of genuine artistic creation against the pressures of modern rationalism, the Latin American *modernistas* discovered (or, better, rediscovered) a more ancient tradition—one, in Paz’s words, “tan antigua como el hombre mismo” (10). At the center of this vision is a distinctive conception of the universe, of language, and of the relationship between the two. It says, in the first place, that reality is not simply inert matter susceptible to scientific analysis and technological manipulation, but rather a kind of sign, a system of analogical “correspondences” in which every element acquires its significance by virtue of its relationship with every other element. Language—and especially poetic language—finds its place within this scheme not only because the poetic word participates in the interplay of sympathies and correspondence already present in the external world, but also, and more importantly, because the poet occupies the space of a privileged reader who possesses special insight into the nature of reality and is capable

of discerning otherwise undetectable relationships among its various parts. The idea is that, since the poet is capable of discerning such relationships, poetry is accordingly capable of healing the sense of fragmentation, of alienation that seems to define modern life. Indeed, as Paz noted in the celebrated 1943 essay, “Poesía de soledad y poesía de comunión,” in the face of the rationalist wasteland bequeathed to us by modernity, poetry “procura tornar sagrado el mundo; con la palabra sacramenta la experiencia de los hombres” (*Primeras letras* 295). It is of course true that the exuberance of this analogical vision was tempered by the corrosive presence of irony, a concept that might be glossed simply as an awareness that the aspiration to unity, to harmony, to meaningfulness exists only as a fragile and temporary abeyance of the skepticism that plagues any attempt to think about meaning under conditions of modernity. Says Paz: “La ironía muestra que, si el universo es una escritura, cada traducción de esa escritura es distinta. [Bajo la ironía] la palabra poética termina en aullido o silencio” (*Hijos* 111).

The dialectic of analogy and irony in some sense defines the trajectory of modern poetry from Romanticism to the avant-garde. In the subsequent tradition—to which Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik all in various ways belong—the question of whether and to what extent poetry can function as response to disenchantment and meaninglessness grew even more vexed. It is to that question that the rest of my thesis is devoted.

## Chapter Three

### The Sacramental Imagination: Poetry and Enchantment in Francisco Luis Bernárdez

#### Introduction

Chapter 1 was devoted to the theme of disenchantment in Western culture in general and Latin America in particular. The present chapter takes up the poetry of Francisco Luis Bernárdez (1900-1978), an avant-garde poet who, in the wake of a profound religious experience in 1926, turned almost exclusively to religious verse. Throughout this chapter, I shall be concerned both with Bernárdez's sacramental conception of poetic language and with how that conception allows him to address (or in some cases to circumvent) the issues raised in Chapter 1.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. First, I situate Bernárdez within the Buenos Aires avant-garde of the early- and mid-1920s. Next, I describe the cultural context of Roman Catholicism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Argentina. Here I shall be particularly concerned with how Latin American Catholics understood the relationship between the requirements of their faith and the pressures of modernity. Third, I attempt to situate Bernárdez within this context and argue that while the vast majority of Argentine Catholics construed modernization as a problem to be combated in political, social, and cultural terms, Bernárdez himself adopted a somewhat different posture. Against this backdrop, I turn, finally, to a detailed account of his sacramental understanding of poetry.

#### 3.1. Bernárdez and the Buenos Aires Avant-Garde

Although it has only become clear in retrospect, Borges's return from Madrid to Buenos Aires in 1921 marked the beginning of the avant-garde in Argentina. By 1920, when Futurism, Dadaism, Creationism, and Cubism had already swept across Europe,

Argentine poetry remained trapped in the exasperatingly prolonged satyr play of *postmodernismo*: a diffuse collection of otherwise unremarkable early twentieth-century poets distinguished primarily by the somewhat ambiguous feat of having come “after” *modernismo* (Lacunza 31-4). The harsh rhetoric is not accidental. From the perspective of the newly minted avant-garde, it was precisely *postmodernismo*’s bizarre attachment to a set of antiquated aesthetic principles that explained Argentina’s seeming poetic backwardness. In a 1921 article entitled “Ultraísmo” and published in *Nosotros*, Borges left little room for doubt about the need for total rupture. “Antes de comenzar la explicación de la novísima estética,” he wrote, “conviene desentrañar la hechura del rubenianismo y anecdotismo vigentes, que los poetas ultraístas nos proponemos llevar de calles y abolir” (*Textos recobrados* 126). Borges’s critique had two targets: first, the belated *modernistas*, whose “apuntaciones de colores y evocaciones versallescas o helénicas” amounted to “una porfía desatinada e inútil”; and, second, the so-called *sencillistas*, who based their poetry “en lo común y corriente” and aimed at scrapping “de su vocabulario toda palabra prestigiosa” (126). The former, Borges wrote, were guilty of senescence, of perpetuating an artistic program that “se halla a las once y tres cuartos de su vida, con las pruebas terminadas para esqueleto”; the latter, by contrast, erred in thinking common, everyday language an appropriate model for poetic creation (126). Even more important was that both groups failed to grasp what, in the same article, Borges called the “elemento primordial” of lyric poetry: metaphor (127). It was precisely this lack that the *ultraístas* sought to supplement.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The centrality of metaphor in avant-garde aesthetics is well known. In his landmark 1925 essay, *La deshumanización del arte*, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) called the capacity to make metaphor “probablemente la potencia más fértil que el hombre posee” (36), while in 1927, Federico García Lorca—and with him the entire *Generación del 27*—appropriated Góngora’s

Four years after Borges's manifesto appeared in *Nosotros*, a young Francisco Luis Bernárdez published *Alcándara* (1925) in the *ultraísta* magazine *Proa*. Bernárdez had by then published three volumes of poetry—*Orto* and *Bazar* in 1922, and *Kindergarten* in 1923—but it was in *Alcándara*, as he noted years later in the preface to his self-edited *Antología poética* (1946), that “mi canto suena con su timbre personal” {my song strikes it personal tone] (11). Born in Buenos Aires in 1900 to a Galician family, Bernárdez had spent much of his childhood and adolescence in Spain, where, during the early 1920s, he came into contact with a number of important Peninsular poets, including Juan Ramón Jiménez and Antonio Machado (Cruz, par. 6). Upon returning to Argentina in 1925, Bernárdez dove headlong into the Buenos Aires avant-garde. That same year, he met with Borges, Güiraldes, Leopoldo Marechal, and Oliverio Girondo to discuss the future of the journal *Martín Fierro* and what he himself called its “demoledora campaña de revisión artística” (“Prólogo” 10-11). Although his contributions to the journal were sporadic (five entries in 1925 and only one in 1926), involvement with *Martín Fierro* put Bernárdez into contact with a number of key players in the Buenos Aires literary scene, especially Güiraldes, whose work he admired deeply and to whose *Obras completas* (1962) he would later contribute a prologue (Gamo 9-11).

The year of his return to Argentina Bernárdez also took over Güiraldes's position as editor of *Proa*, co-founded two years earlier by Borges and modeled upon the Spanish magazine *Ultra* (Williamson 103). Yet by 1925 *ultraísmo* was losing traction. *Ultra* had

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“imagen poética” as the paradigm of avant-garde poetics. Though *ultraísmo* did not contribute much to existing avant-garde currents in terms of stylistic or thematic innovation, its openness to European artistic currents—it was, as Anderson notes, a “kind of catch-all movement” (157)—made it an important mechanism for the dissemination of avant-garde ideas in the Spanish-speaking world. For more on *ultraísmo* in general, see Videla's foundational study. For more on Argentine *ultraísmo*, see Ibarra. For Borges and *ultraísmo*, see Williamson (*Borges* 130-38) and Running (*Borges*). For Bernárdez and *ultraísmo*, see Lacunza (*Francisco* and *Obra*, ch. 2).

ceased publication in March 1923, and its Argentine counterpart would soon follow suit. Though *Martín Fierro* continued publishing until 1927, *Proa* printed its last issue in January 1926, the same year that Bernárdez returned to Europe, this time to Paris, where he again collaborated with Güiraldes. Bernárdez continued contributing poems, articles, and reviews to *Martín Fierro* from France, but his direct participation in the Argentine avant-garde had all but ended.<sup>14</sup> In a certain respect, the split was unsurprising. For a variety of reasons (political, poetic, religious), Bernárdez had always maintained a somewhat uneasy relationship with *ultraísmo*. The Argentine avant-garde (especially those associated with *Martín Fierro*) prided itself on political neutrality. And so in 1927, when Bernárdez joined the *Comité de Jóvenes Intelectuales*, a short-lived political action committee established by Borges himself on behalf of the re-election of Hipólito Yrigoyen, the editorial board of *Martín Fierro* issued a statement disavowing all ties with the organization. A public spat ensued, after which neither writer would again contribute to the publication (Williamson 189).

Despite this early collaboration, certain political differences between Bernárdez and Borges surfaced in 1929 when the latter declined Alfonso Reyes' invitation to work on the newly founded journal *Libra*. In a diary entry dated 29 May 1929, Reyes cited Bernárdez (as well as another Catholic writer, Leopoldo Marechal) as reasons for Borges's demoral: "Borges se retira de *Libra* (de la redacción nominal), aunque seguirá colaborando, por ciertos leves choques con Marechal, pero, a la vez, porque tiene compromisos amistosos con muchos literatos 'impuros' que Bernárdez no quiere aceptar"

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<sup>14</sup> With one exception: two years later, in 1929, Bernárdez co-edited (with Leopoldo Marechal) the magazine *Libra*. Rose Corral has prepared a facsimile edition of the journal's single issue.

(279). In an interview many years later with Fernando Sorrentino, Borges himself offered the following explanation:

Recuerdo que Alfonso Reyes había fundado una revista, llamada *Libra*, y me invitó a colaborar en la revista. Pero, como en esa revista colaboraban muchos nacionalistas [...] le escribí una carta a Reyes diciéndole que [...] como no soy nacionalista ni quiero que me tomen por tal [...] prefería no colaborar en la revista [...] yo sabía que si veían mi nombre junto al nombre de Marechal o al nombre de Bernárdez—que también era nacionalista en aquel momento—la gente iba a meternos en *le même panier*, como dicen los franceses. (Sorrentino 25)

It seems, however, that Borges may have overstated the case. Bernárdez did publish a number of civically themed poems (“La bandera” and “La patria,” in 1932 and 1947 respectively), but neither he nor Marechal was a militant nationalist (Álvarez 541).

Indeed, in a 1952 article published in the Argentine weekly *Criterio*, Bernárdez confessed sharing Jacques Maritain’s “razonable optimismo” that “la verdadera y única sociedad perfecta de nuestra época vendría a ser la comunidad internacional políticamente organizada” (“Maritain” 432). Finally, in his own reflections on *Libra*, Bernárdez includes Borges among the writers who met with Reyes at the Mexican embassy in Buenos Aires, but makes no mention of politics—and, indeed, no mention of Borges’s refusal to collaborate.<sup>15</sup>

In any event, the political differences, real or imagined, between Bernárdez and other members of the Argentine avant-garde are somewhat beside the point. It was not primarily politics that explained Bernárdez’s uneasy relationship with his coterie, but rather a set of poetic and religious issues that distinguished him not only from the Argentine avant-garde, but also from the main currents of twentieth-century Latin American poetry. At the end of the nineteenth-century, the *modernistas* set

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<sup>15</sup> In another interview (with Osvaldo Ferrari in 1984), Borges told an almost identical version of the same story, though in this case the magazine in question was *Cuadernos del Plata* (also founded by Reyes) rather than *Libra* (100-101).

the tone for subsequent Latin American verse by rejecting what they saw as the stagnant traditionalism of Spanish verse in favor of French Parnassianism and Symbolism. The decision stuck, and much of subsequent Latin American (and Argentine) history can be understood as, in Borges's words, "un voluntario distanciamiento de España" (I: 271).

Partly because of sensibility, and partly because of his own extended sojourn in Spain, Bernárdez himself resisted French influence (with the notable exception of Paul Claudel). In a 1960 article in *Criterio*, for instance, he lamented the fact that "nuestros países se han acercado cada vez más a Francia," and added: "El que observe su literatura [Argentina] notará que la influencia española es casi nula en ella. En la poesía rioplatense de nuestros días, pocos somos los que seguimos la línea clásica peninsular: Molinari, yo, Vocos Lescano y quizá nadie más" ("Lengua y política" 618). The "línea clásica peninsular" in question referred to the poets of the Spanish *Siglo de Oro*, especially Fray Luis de León, San Juan de la Cruz, Calderón de la Barca, and Lope de Vega, all of whom Bernárdez read intensely during the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> Unsurprisingly, Bernárdez's attachment to this tradition rendered his commitment to avant-garde aesthetics somewhat tenuous (Lacunza, *Obra* 179-180).<sup>17</sup> In an article published in the Argentine daily *Clarín* one year before his death, he had made it clear that the avant-garde, for all its glory and promise, had been merely a passing phase:

Después de la agitación vanguardista—que en Buenos Aires había empezado a producir sus buenos efectos, pues la literatura comenzaba a "descongelarse"—ocurrió aquella especie de diáspora que nos arrancó a las mesas de la discusión estética y nos redujo a nuestros límites individuales, al ámbito de nuestra particular intimidad, con el fin de que estuviésemos en condiciones de intentar la difícil realización de nuestra obra personal. ("El bien" 3)

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<sup>16</sup> See Lacunza (*Obra* 129-132) for a discussion of Bernárdez's treatment of the poets of Spain's *Siglo de oro*.

<sup>17</sup> Unlike the members of the Spanish Generation of 1927, Bernárdez showed little interest in synthesizing avant-garde techniques and sensibilities with a respect for the Spanish poetic tradition.



After the agitation of the avant-garde—which in Buenos Aires had begun to produce positive effects, since literature had begun to “thaw out”—there occurred a kind of diaspora that ripped us away from the aesthetic discussion tables and reduced us to our individual limits, to the confines of our specific intimacy, such that we were placed in the position of having to carry out our own personal work.

From the late-1920s to the end of his life, Bernárdez’s “obra personal” remained indelibly linked to an attempt to cultivate a form of poetics faithful to, and expressive of, a broadly Catholic vision of the world (Lacunza, *Obra* 180). The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an explication of that poetics. Let us begin, however, by describing the cultural context of Roman Catholicism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Argentina.

### 3.2. Argentine Catholic Culture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In 1922, the same year Bernárdez published his first two collections of poetry, a group of lay Argentine Catholics founded the *Cursos de cultura católica*. The group’s chief goal was to supplement a perceived lack of Catholic instruction in the country’s liberal universities and, as their founding document puts it, to cultivate three elements indispensable to Catholic social, cultural, and intellectual progress: “un criterio, una armoniosa visión total y el sentimiento agudo de la responsabilidad que entraña nuestra profesión de fe católica” (cited in Medrano 9). The focus, at least initially, was theological instruction rooted firmly in Thomistic philosophy and aimed at bringing the Catholic faith to bear on broader social and cultural questions. In his *Reflexiones sobre la condición de la inteligencia en el catolicismo* (1942), Tomás D. Casares (1895-1976), one of the group’s founders, noted that the *Cursos* “nacieron de la conciencia que una generación católica tuvo de su indigencia intelectual y de que la raíz de esa indigencia estaba en el divorcio de la fe y la inteligencia” (70). The scope soon expanded, however,

to include other aspects of culture, especially arts and letters.<sup>18</sup> The *Cursos* counted among its founding members a number of poets (Dimas Antuña and Miguel A. Camino, to mention only two), and 1927 saw the creation of *Convivio*, a forum for debate and discussion among Argentine Catholic artists designed to explore the artistic implications of the burgeoning Neo-Thomistic renaissance in the Southern Cone. *Convivio* was directed by César Pico, but Bernárdez played an important role in its conceptualization. “Recuerdo una larga tarde compartida con Francisco Luis Bernárdez y Leopoldo Marechal sobre el tema de la poesía,” wrote Octavio Derisi, an Argentine cleric and historian of the *Cursos*: “Nace así ‘Convivio’, para los artistas” (“Evocación” 72). According to María Rodríguez Francia, the experience at *Convivio* was especially significant for Bernárdez, who, having lived in Spain during the initial years of the *Cursos*, missed the formal theological training available to other members. *Convivio* picked up the slack and provided Bernárdez with “una formación teológica” essential both to the development of his specifically Catholic “cosmovisión sacral” and to his understanding of poetry as “una emanación de lo eterno del ser” (*Perspectivas* 71). Besides fostering conversation, *Convivio* also published an eponymous journal and hosted conferences, poetry readings, concerts, and artistic exhibitions (Medrano 12-13). In 1928, Borges himself was invited to inaugurate an exhibit of works by the Uruguayan painter Pedro Figari.<sup>19</sup>

That same year, 1928, also saw the publication of the inaugural issue of *Criterio*, a weekly magazine to which Bernárdez would contribute throughout his life and which,

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the *Cursos* in general, see Burdick (30-31), Derisi (*Universidad* 15-26), Devoto (231-262), Ghio (58-60), Medrano, Navarro Gerassi, and Saranyana (236-43).

<sup>19</sup> The event was reported in *Criterio* (27 September 1928, no. 40). See Nobile for a detailed account of Borges’s relationship with Argentina’s Catholic intelligentsia.

for a short time, served as the principal cultural organ of the *Cursos*.<sup>20</sup> Though it remains in publication today, *Criterio* broke ties with the *Cursos* in 1930 when Zacarías Vizcarra, a Spanish bishop and ecclesiastical censor, complained to the Vatican that the publication had strayed from orthodoxy. The Church intervened, took over the journal, and forced the resignation of then-editor Atilio dell'Oro Maini. In the wake of Maini's departure, the members of the *Cursos* founded another journal, *Número*, while *Criterio* itself grew increasingly politicized (Medrano 21). In 1932, riding a wave of anti-democratic sentiment across Europe, the radically anti-Semitic Argentine priest Julio Meinvielle (1905-1979) presented a series of lectures entitled "Concepción católica de la política" under the auspices of the *Cursos*. There he suggested a modified version of fascism as an authentically Catholic alternative to the crude materialism of both communism and democratic liberalism.<sup>21</sup>

*Criterio*'s drift to the radical right belonged to a series of anti-modernist, reactionary gestures across Europe—a series of papal encyclicals (including *Lamentabili sane exitu* in 1903 and *Pascendi* in 1907) which criticized modernity in all its guises (Perrot-Corpet 223), *L'Action Française* in France, the emergence of fascist movements in Spain and Italy—as well as to a series of broader changes within Argentine Catholicism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From Independence onward (to say nothing of the colonial period), the Catholic Church enjoyed a more or less symbiotic relationship with the Argentine government. That symbiosis ended, however, when the reforms proposed by the Generation of 1880 turned Argentina into a liberal, secular state. Of particular importance was the 1884 *Ley de educación común* (no.

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<sup>20</sup> See Montserrat for an intellectual history of *Criterio* from its founding through the late 1960s.

<sup>21</sup> For more on Meinvielle, see Ben-Dror (49-56) and Ghio (59-62).

1420), which banned compulsory religious education in Argentine public schools. The new law, which the Church interpreted, no doubt rightly, as a direct affront to its cultural authority, fomented intense anti-liberal, anti-modern sentiments among Argentina's Catholic elite. The year of its passage, José Manuel Estrada, president of the *Asociación Católica de Buenos Aires*, called for the *Primer Congreso Nacional de los Católicos Argentinos*, and wondered aloud whether the liberal reforms were not perhaps a "conscious conspiracy" at the "highest level of the government to put into effect a Masonic program of anti-Christian revolution" (cited in Burdick 24). Later the same year, Argentine Catholics formed their own political party, *La Unión Católica*. The *Unión* failed to exercise any real political influence (most Argentine Catholics, it seems, preferred to remain affiliated with traditional political parties), but the backlash generated by the reforms set the stage for a half century of active Catholic opposition to Argentine liberalization and modernization.<sup>22</sup>

The confrontation between the Catholic Church and the Argentine state must be seen, however, in the context of the larger confrontation between Catholicism and Modernity. In 1864, Pope Pius IX appended a *Syllabus of Errors* to his encyclical *Quanta Cura*, which detailed the Church's official response to various social and cultural "pests" (liberalism, rationalism, socialism, and communism, among others). The document—"un drapeau antimoderniste et antilibéral," as Mallimaci describes it ("Catholicisme" 114)—not only set the tone for the Church's subsequent engagement with modernity, but also established the basic rhetorical contours of right-wing Catholic reaction. Such reaction saw its first official manifestation in Latin America in April 1899 when Pope Leo XIII

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<sup>22</sup> For more on Law 1402 and the backlash it generated among Argentine Catholics, see Baigorria (145), Auza (*Católicos* 25), Zuretti (328), Martínez Paz (111), Floria and Belsunce (185).

convened the *Concilio Plenario de América Latina* in Rome. The Council followed Pius IX's lead and offered condemnations of various unsavory components of modern society (liberalism, socialism, freedom of press, and so on), but its primary goal was to effect what Ben-Dror calls the "Romanization" of Latin American Catholicism: that is, the reorganization of the Latin American Church under direct Vatican control (25). The implications were twofold. The first was to ensure orthodoxy among Latin America's ecclesiastical elite. The second and more significant effect was to mobilize Latin American Catholicism against what, four years later, Pope Pius X would call the "portentous errors" of the modernists (*Pascendi*, 1903). The "modernism" in question here had two distinct but related senses. First, it referred simply to a preference for progress and innovation over tradition. In another sense, modernism referred to a movement *within* Catholicism that promoted historicist approaches to the Bible, secular political arrangements, and the synthesis of Catholic dogma with modern philosophical systems (especially Kantianism and Bergsonism). The two senses are not easily dissociable, and taken together, they constitute two sides of the same progressive, liberalizing coin which late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Catholicism saw as a threat to its own ascendancy and in opposition to which it defined itself.

In Argentina, the rising tide of conservative Catholic reaction to liberalization and modernization came to a head in 1930 when a military coup, led by José Benito Uriburu (1868-1932) and spurred by the 1929 Wall Street crash, toppled Hipólito Yrigoyen's government. The coup, which initiated what Floria and Belsunce call Argentina's "Neo-Conservative Restoration," enjoyed the full support of its Catholic elite, who saw Uriburu's rise to power not only, in Mario Amadeo's words, as "el punto terminal de la

democracia liberal en Argentina” (23), but also as an opportunity to reassert the political and cultural influence lost during the years following the reforms of the 1880s. The Church’s support for the new regime found its ideological basis in what came to be called “integral Catholicism,” a deeply anti-modern current defined by its attempt to institute a “social, intransigent, exclusif et maximaliste” version of the Catholic faith (Marchason). The program, whose goal was nothing less than “la construction d’une société chrétienne” (Mallimaci, “Catholicisme” 114), peaked in 1943 when, at the Fourth National Eucharistic Conference in Buenos Aires, the army officially consecrated itself to the Virgin Mary while the government—first under Arturo Rawson (1885-1952) and then under Pedro Pablo Ramírez (1884-1962)—reinstated compulsory Catholic education in public schools (Ben-Dror 93).<sup>23</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the goals of integral Catholicism dovetailed with those of Argentine nationalism. Both groups resented foreign influence (cultural, political, economic, or otherwise), favored hierarchical and corporatist forms of social and political arrangement, and saw economic liberalism and participatory democracy as inimical to social cohesion and religious orthodoxy. Indeed, most integral Catholics were also radical nationalists (a fact which perhaps explains Borges’s tendency to infer nationalism from Bernárdez’s Catholicism), while many nationalists saw the Church as an indispensable component of Argentine national identity. Leopoldo Lugones (1874-1938) was a notable exception. Although Lugones shared with Catholicism an antiliberal, antileftist bias, he nevertheless remained steadfastly anticlerical. Similarly, Lugones saw Christianity, like democracy, as an engine of egalitarianism and therefore opposed to his own worldview predicated upon “order, hierarchy, and power” (Burdick 29).

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<sup>23</sup> For more on integral Catholicism, see the bibliographical entries by Mallimaci and Mignone.

Never was the collusion between Catholicism and nationalism more evident than during the Spanish Civil War. As early as 1931, *Criterio* had published an article by the Spanish journalist and political theorist Ramiro de Maetzu (1875-1936) denouncing the Republican government and arguing that “la justicia acompaña a los revolucionarios” (359). Throughout the mid-1930s, Gustavo Franceschi (1881-1952), editor of *Criterio* from 1932 until his death, systematically defended Francisco Franco’s regime against charges of fascism and argued that “el movimiento español responde a una doctrina que lo avecina a Oliveira Salazar pero no a Mussolini, por no mentar a Hitler” (351). By 1937, *Criterio*’s pro-Franco rhetoric reached a frenzied (and tragic) pitch when Meinvielle cast “la guerra española que han emprendido tan gloriosamente los nacionalistas españoles a las órdenes de Franco” as “una guerra santa” (“Guerra santa” 227).<sup>24</sup> Meinvielle’s rhetoric was over-the-top, but not entirely surprising. The vast majority of European and Latin American Catholics construed the Spanish Civil War as the latest installment in a half-century-long conflict between Catholicism and modernity and “foresaw, in the event of the victory of the republic’s Frente Popular, the annihilation of Spanish Catholicism and the triumph of the Communist International” (Doering 489). For a Catholic Church already reeling from the encroachment of modernity, resistance to the eclipse of Catholicism in Spain could have only seemed a matter, quite literally, of life and death.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For more on *Criterio*’s treatment of the Spanish Civil War, see Montserrat (9-13). *Criterio*’s support for the nationalist cause stood in marked contrast to the more nuanced and modulated view of *Sur*, another important Argentine monthly. See King (66-68) for a full account of the relations between the two during the war.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the Argentine response to the Spanish Civil War, see Compagnon (“Death Throes”) and Quijada.

### 3.3. Bernárdez's Contexts: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary

To this point, I have presented the conflict between Catholicism and modernity (in Latin American and beyond) in primarily political terms: that is, as a battle between two opposing visions of social, political, and cultural arrangement. But to imagine that the quarrel was conducted exclusively (or even primarily) in such terms is to obscure two important facts. The first is that behind issues of political power and cultural authority, stood a host of philosophical, theological, and literary questions—questions about the fundamental nature of reality and the place of human beings in it. These questions do not fall neatly under the liberal-progressivism/Catholic-reaction rubric. The second fact is that while the dominant Catholic response to modernity fell somewhere along the lines of Franceschi's and Meinvielle's authoritarian nationalism, this was hardly the only option. The postwar period saw the emergence, especially in France, of a group of Catholic artists and intellectuals interested in rethinking Catholicism's relationship with modernity. This *Renaissance Catholique*, catalyzed both by a renewed interest in Thomistic philosophy and the conversion of a slew of important French intellectuals (Léon Bloy, Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, Jean Cocteau, Gabriel Marcel, and, especially, Jacques Maritain), paralleled—and, in many cases, influenced—the resurgence of Catholicism in the Southern Cone.<sup>26</sup> The key figure, for reasons that will become clear

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<sup>26</sup> See Schloesser for a thorough account of the postwar *Renaissance Catholique* in France. Another figure that ought to be mentioned in this connection is the American-turned-British poet T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). Eliot's influence upon Latin American letters was early and profound. At age sixteen, Octavio Paz's happened upon Enrique Manguía's Spanish translation of *The Waste Land* (published in *Contemporáneos* in August 1930), a discovery that forever changed the Mexican poet's vision of poetry (Boll). During the 1930s, Eliot's poems and essays, as well as numerous critical commentaries, were published in magazines throughout Spain and Latin America. León Felipe's translation of "The Hollow Men," for instance, appeared in *Contemporáneos* in 1931, while "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Ash Wednesday" were printed in *Sur* in 1937 and 1938, respectively. Later, in 1944, *Criterio* published "The Journey of the Magi" (Young, "T.S. Eliot" 88-89). Critical commentary on Eliot by Latin American writers is also substantial (Young 98-106). Even Borges published two short articles on the poet in *El Hogar* (1936



shortly, was Maritain, who, in dialogue both with classical Christian theology and with various postwar avant-garde currents, articulated a compelling alternative to the oppositional posture that so long defined the Church's posture toward the modern world. That alternative, in turn, had two central components. The first was a rejection of any form of authoritarian politics that would, as it were, impose traditional Catholicism upon an increasingly secular polity. The second component involved a reconceptualization not only of the appropriately Catholic response to modernity, but also of how to understand the fundamental problem of modernity itself. This reconceptualization attempted to move away from the view (common to Meinvielle and Franceschi) that secularization and modernity were problems for which politics (usually some form of fascism, however modulated) provided the most appropriate solution and toward the view that the problem was, at root, philosophical, theological, and literary.

In the following section—the final movement of my prelude to a detailed examination of Bernárdez's poetry—I attempt to tease out these issues. My goal is

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and 1937, respectively). For more on Eliot's reception in Latin America, see especially Young ("Introduction").

Of even greater significance for the present chapter, however, is Eliot's participation in the so-called Catholic Intellectual Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. Eliot read Maritain on Aquinas while in France in 1926 and began immediately to entertain the possibility of a neo-Thomistic revival. Unlike Maritain, however, Eliot's concerns were rather more cultural than philosophical or theological. He saw in Aquinas's reinterpretation of Aristotle the embodiment of the unity of European culture and imagined that an examination of that culture might provide a model for unity in contemporary Europe (Ackroyd 155). In 1928, just two years after Bernárdez's experience at the Notre Dame Cathedral, Eliot converted to Anglicanism, but, as before, the conversion seems to have been prompted at least as much by a "search for order and authority" as by "genuine intellectual inquiry" (156). Later, in 1940, Eliot published *The Idea of a Christian Society* where he argued that the collapse of Christianity would inevitably entail the disintegration of Western culture (249). The text, both in title and content, echoed Meinvielle's "Concepción católica de la política" (1932), but with one crucial difference: though not exactly a convinced democrat, Eliot was not a fascist. In an article published in *Criterion* 1928, for instance, he wrote that both "Russian communism and Italian fascism seem to me to have died as political ideas, in becoming political facts" (282). Likewise, on the question of the Spanish Civil War, Eliot occupied an ambiguous middle ground between Maritain's support for democracy and Meinvielle's hysterical *franquismo* (Ackroyd 243). As far as I have been able to determine, Eliot's influence on Latin American Catholics was limited, at least relative to Maritain's.

twofold. The first is to make explicit the various ways in which the concerns of the postwar avant-garde coincided with those of the burgeoning Catholic renaissance. The second is to situate Bernárdez within this broad problematic and to show that, despite certain affinities with Maritain's project, he managed to carve out a place for himself—a place which, though attentive to Maritain's concerns, was nevertheless uniquely his own.

### 3.3.1. The Realist Attitude and the Sacramental Alternative

In a very precise sense, the nineteenth century was the century of Realism. In science and philosophy, in literature and art, in history and sociology, the age counseled careful attention to the details of the physical world, close observation of empirical phenomena, and a studied indifference to that whatever stubbornly resisted submission to scientific explanation. This was not, however, a realism for its own sake, but rather one born of the suspicion that all those matters that had once exercised the human mind (God, the soul, angels, heaven, hell, and the like) were so many needless distractions, abstruse metaphysical trivialities whose primary function was to impede our slow, but certain, march toward full intellectual maturity. In his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-1842), for instance, Auguste Comte suggested, somewhat presumptuously, that anyone who reflects on his own intellectual development will see that “il a été successivement, quant à ses notions les plus importantes, *théologien* dans son enfance, *métaphysicien* dans sa jeunesse, et *physicien* dans sa virilité” (65). Comte's narrative of *la lois des trois états* is as dubious as it is unsurprising. The notion that the Scientific Revolution finally rescued the human race from the penumbral twilight of infancy and augured our entrance into the bright morning of adulthood is simply a rendition in a different key of modernity's first attempt at self-definition—namely, the Enlightenment concept of the modern world as an

Age of Reason emerging from the shadows of a uniquely irrational and superstitious Age of Faith. The fall of the Roman Empire, so the story goes, inaugurated a tragically protracted period of cultural regression in which the achievements of pagan antiquity were systematically repressed by a corrupt, brutish, and unlettered ecclesiastical hierarchy. During the regrettable historical interlude that came to be called, though only in retrospect, the “Dark Ages,” learning stalled, scientific inquiry languished, witches (and books) were consigned to the flames, and Western humanity remained trapped in a state of more or less permanent adolescence. Then, at long last, the Enlightenment, with its gospel of Reason, Progress, and Tolerance, finally breached the citadel of religious fanaticism and ushered in an age of scientific discovery and social, political, and technological advancement.

My version of this narrative is purposely triumphalistic. As Jürgen Habermas has argued, partisans of the Enlightenment entertained the “extravagant expectation” that the arts and sciences “would further not only the control of the forces of nature but also the understanding of self and world, moral progress, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness” (45). Central to that expectation was the idea that secularization—i.e., the ascendancy of rationalist modes of thought and social organization—might finally supersede the “irrationalities of myth, religion, [and] superstition” and thereby release us from the “arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures” (Harvey 12-13). Needless enslavement to religious superstition, so it seemed, constituted the final obstacle to social utopia.

The twentieth century shattered that optimism. Gas chambers and concentration camps sat uneasily with the ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, while the splitting

of the atom suggested that the price of untrammelled scientific progress might in fact be nuclear apocalypse. Even more unsettling was the suspicion that all those horrors were perhaps not simply accidental effects of an improper or incomplete application of Enlightenment ideology, but rather a manifestation of its secret essence. Such, at any rate, was the thesis advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), who argued that the Enlightenment was destined to turn on itself and transmute a gospel of liberty and toleration into a tool of domination. While the destructive potential of modern forms of rationalism and scientism was perhaps not fully apparent until after World War II, the First World War had made contributions of its own. 1915, for instance, saw the first deployment of poison gas on the Western Front, while in 1916 the British military introduced the tank to break the deadlock of trench warfare. That same year, Louis Mairer, a French soldier, wrote from the trenches: “La raison se perd devant le spectacle d’une lutte scientifique où le progrès sert au retour de la barbarie, devant le spectacle d’une civilisation qui se retourne contre elle-même pour se détruire” (cited in Schloesser 10). The very narrative that had promised to save humanity now threatened to destroy it.<sup>27</sup>

In light of the fact that an ideology of perpetual scientific progress and rational social melioration had turned Western Europe into a slaughter-bench, it is unsurprising that artists and intellectuals in the early 1920s sought new modes of cultural expression as a “way of restoring meaning” after the “chaotic trauma of the Great War” (Schloesser 4). Equally unsurprising is that that search should have taken the form of an attempt to rehabilitate interest in what the *First Surrealist Manifesto* (1924) called that “part of our

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<sup>27</sup> See the first part of Fauque’s study for a good account of the plight of Enlightenment ideals in the wake of World War I.

mental life which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer” (8). André Breton’s immediate concern in that text was the way in which the “superior reality of dreams” challenged standard positivistic accounts of rationality and causality. His larger goal was to break free from “the reign of logic,” to shuffle off the “realistic attitude,” and thereby to access a higher, as well as inner, *sur-réalité* beyond the confines of the realism, naturalism, and positivism to which nineteenth-century writers had limited themselves (9-10). Another way of making this point would be to say that Surrealism signaled a renewed interest in *transcendence* among otherwise secular intellectuals. Or, even better, the goal was not simply to privilege transcendence over immanence, but rather to explore the various ways in which immanence and transcendence interpenetrate, become entangled, modify one another dialectically. “I believe,” Breton wrote in the same text, “in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality [...] into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak” (22). The “free play of dreams,” in other words, is not supposed to annul physical reality, but rather to reveal a new, systematically occluded dimension of that reality—in much the same way, perhaps, that grace is said to perfect, rather than destroy, nature.<sup>28</sup>

Breton’s surrealism was only one, albeit the most influential, of a number of what Schloesser calls “dialectical realisms” that populated the postwar European artistic scene. Barely a year after the publication of the *First Surrealist Manifesto*, the German historian and art critic Franz Roh (1890-1965) published *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (1925). Two years later, Fernando Vela, a disciple of Ortega y Gasset, translated Roh’s text into Spanish, a fact which helps explain why *realismo mágico* tends to be associated with Latin American, rather than German, literary history. Like Breton’s

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<sup>28</sup> Schloesser likewise calls attention to the sacramental character of Breton’s project (111).

Surrealism, Roh's Magical Realism had as its goal not to hide the real under a cloak of magic, but rather—and in good dialectical fashion—to show that “mystery [...] hides and palpitates behind” reality itself (16). Around the same time, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), at once influenced by and disillusioned with Surrealism, began exploring “dialectical images”: a kind of “literary montage” in which “disparate elements would be juxtaposed” to induce a “profane illumination” (Schloesser 113). Drawing both on Baudelaire's allegorization of Paris (in “Le cygne,” for instance) and his own theory of allegory (developed most thoroughly in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [1928]), Benjamin endeavored, as he put it in *The Arcades Project*, to “educate the image-making medium within us” (458): that is, to train us to view our broken, fragmented world as an allegorical representation of a world (now lost) of meaning and splendor.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.3.2. Jacques Maritain: Between Catholicism and Modernity

Breton, Roh, and Benjamin were convinced secularists, but their projects showed important affinities with the goals and aims of traditional religion. Perhaps no one perceived this affinity more acutely than Maritain, the Catholic philosopher and theologian whose 1920 book, *Art et scolastique*, revolutionized Catholicism's understanding of its relationship to modernity—and, more specifically yet, its relationship to modern art. The project's implicit model was Baudelaire, Maritain's boyhood hero, who in “Le peintre de la vie moderne” (1863), suggested that the peculiar problem of modern art had to do with the need to respect its “composition double.” Art, said Baudelaire, “est fait d'un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d'un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l'on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion”

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<sup>29</sup> This paragraph owes a great debt to Schloesser (112-4).

(*Curiosités* 455). To forsake the relative and circumstantial, he continued, would be to render art “indigestible, inappréciable, non adapté et non approprié à la nature humaine.” To forsake the eternal, in turn, would be to abandon its “qualité essentielle” (453). The artist’s task, then, is one of reconciliation—of the circumstantial and the eternal, the relative and the invariable, the real and the sur-real.

Maritain’s great contribution was to have seen that the best way to realize the dialectical aims of modern art was by recasting those aims in explicitly theological terms. He did so in two related ways. The first was to retool the Aristotelian notion of hylomorphism, which then allowed Maritain to reject realist interpretations of mimesis—“mere imitation” he called it (*Art* 95)—and to argue instead that art ought to seek a “spiritual resemblance” with its object (96). The second was to reconceptualize the relationship between art and sacramentality. In *Art and Scholasticism*, he argued that, unlike “scientific truth” (“scientific” in the old sense of any organized body of knowledge), art is always “apprehended *in the sensible and by the sensible*, and not separately from it” (25, italics in original). This means, in the first instance, that even if art is, as Maritain later puts it, “the divination of the spiritual in the things of sense” (96), the accent always falls upon “the things of the sense,” that is, upon the physical, material medium of artistic creation. Yet if this is true, it is also true that for the artist matter is never *merely* matter; instead, it is always matter-as-potentially-meaningful. Ink, parchment, slabs of marble, and splotches of paint are therefore never fully reducible to their material composition, since those materials are always potentially something *other* (sculptures, paintings, poems, and so on). But to have said that matter is always charged with a latent potentiality for meaning is already to have made two other extraordinarily

important claims. The first is that positivism's account of matter as inert and lifeless simply will not do. The second is that art is always sacramental in character: like the sacraments, art, though by its very nature material, nevertheless functions as a vehicle for the transmission of transcendence.

Maritain's influence in Latin America was immense and prolonged.<sup>30</sup> In a 1948 article in the *Revue Thomiste*, Alceu Amoroso Lima (1893-1983), a Brazilian philosopher and convert to Catholicism who wrote under the pseudonym Tristão d'Athaïde, credited Maritain with "une vraie renaissance" of Thomistic thought in Latin America and added: "depuis 1925 jusqu'à nos jours, je crois qu'aucun penseur européen n'aura été en Amérique l'objet d'autant de références, de citations, de commentaires, de livres publiés pour ou contre ses idées, de suppléments spéciaux de journaux ou de revues, de centres d'études en son nom" (14, 16). According to d'Athaïde, what attracted Latin American intellectuals to Maritain was both his rejection of positivism's cult of scientific rationality and his insistence on "la profonde compatibilité entre la intelligence humaine et la vérité" (15). When "la raison nous avait paru insuffisante," d'Athaïde continued, "et ne nous révélant qu'une partie inférieure de la réalité," the French Thomist revealed a whole new world beyond "la matière brute" (14).

Maritain would not visit Argentina until 1936, but his influence was felt much earlier.<sup>31</sup> In 1924, Atilio dell'Oro Maini, the director of the *Cursos* and future editor of *Criterio*, attended Maritain's courses at the Paris *Institut Catholique* and, soon after, invited the French philosopher to visit Buenos Aires (Compagnon, "Bergson"). The

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed account of Maritain's reception in Latin America from the 1920s to the 1970s, see Compagnon (*Jacques Maritain*). For Maritain's influence on Argentine Catholicism in the late 1920s and early 1930s, see Finchelstein (139-143).

<sup>31</sup> Derisi's otherwise useful treatment of the *Cursos* incorrectly reports that Maritain visited Buenos Aires in 1926 (*Universidad* 23).



following year, Maritain's work began appearing in Argentine periodicals. In 1925, he published an essay on the role of German thought in modern philosophy in the *Circular informativa y bibliográfica de los Cursos de Cultura Católica* (Buenos Aires). Three years later, another essay, "Santo Tomás y la unidad de la cultura cristiana," appeared in *Criterio* in a series of three weekly installments (from 22 November to 6 December). In 1936, Maritain finally visited Argentina, where he delivered a lecture at the *Cursos* on "La persona humana" and a series of presentations on Freud and Bergson at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (Derisi, *Universidad* 27).

The visit coincided with the onset of the Spanish Civil War, and almost immediately after arriving, Maritain found himself embroiled in a polemic with Meinvielle on "el problema español" (Montserrat 10). Maritain and Meinvielle held a number of incompatible philosophical opinions (particularly as concerns the properly Christian understanding of the human person), but their squabble reached its boiling point when Maritain refused allegiance to Franco and declined to call the conflict a "holy war." Meinvielle, no doubt supposing Maritain a reliable ally in the Church's war against modernity, construed the demurral both as an instance of misguided politics and as a direct affront to the Catholic faith. "Cuando Maritain se imagina que ambos bandos en España luchan por conquistas temporales está profundamente equivocado," he wrote in *Criterio* in 1937: "Los comunistas luchan por el *odio a Cristo*; los nacionalistas por Cristo, cuyo amor no quieren dejarse arrebatar" ("Guerra santa" 494). In another article published the same year, Meinvielle abjured argument altogether and resorted to name-calling, labeling Maritain "el filósofo abogado de los rojos españoles" and lambasting him for consorting with "los judaizantes y comunoides de *Sur* y de la pasquinería

porteña” (“Desvaríos” 227). By this time, Maritain had returned to France, but the polemic continued, mostly through letters, for several months.<sup>32</sup>

The Meinvielle-Maritain debate is important not only because it suggests that Maritain’s reception in Latin America was, at the very least, ambiguous, but also because it permits a more nuanced appreciation of the relationship between the French *Renaissance Catholique* and its Argentine counterpart. First, as noted earlier, the resurgence of Catholicism in France came as a direct response to the trauma of the First World War. In Latin America, by contrast, the war did not have the same “formative role” that it had for Europeans. In fact, to the extent that they were affected by it at all, Latin American intellectuals tended to construe the war less as a conflict between French “civilization” and German “barbarism” and more as the collapse of Western Europe itself (Compagnon, “Death Throes” 279). That collapse, moreover, was a catalyst for a widespread resurgence of *Hispanidad* among Latin Americans. The most visible effect of that resurgence was the great wave of conversions to Catholicism in the pre-war and inter-war periods (Quijada). Another effect—this one of equal importance—was an historical revisionism aimed at mending what Compagnon calls Latin America’s “broken affiliation” with Spain. In 1917, for instance, as the debate raged about whether Argentina should join the war on the side of the United States, President Yrigoyen made 12 October (the date Columbus discovered the New World) a national holiday. Three years later, the Chilean government followed suit (Compagnon, “Death Throes” 286). In Argentina, the revival of Hispanophilic neo-nationalism received its initial impetus from Manuel Gálvez, whose *El solar de la raza* (1916) constituted a virtual paean to Spanish

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<sup>32</sup> Part of the epistolary exchange was printed in *Criterio* on 12 August 1937. See Orbe for a full account.

race and culture “en clave nacionalista y católica” (Quinziano 79). Other publications followed, including *Criterio* (already discussed) and *La Nueva República*, a right-wing weekly edited by young Argentine intellectuals enamored of Primo de Rivera and committed to bringing his model of authoritarian government to the River Plate (Compagnon, “Death Throes” 287).

### 3.3.3. Bernárdez, Catholicism, and the “Theologization of Poetry”

Bernárdez, as most commentators have noted, was deeply sympathetic to the resurgence of *Hispanidad* in Argentina, though his affinities with Spain were rather more cultural than political.<sup>33</sup> One example of this sympathy was a later article on Edgar Allan Poe published in *La Nación* in June 1952 that described Spain as “la fecundísima causa de casi todo lo que positivamente en el orden de la historia y de casi todo lo que indudablemente podremos llegar a ser un día en el terreno de la cultura” (*Copa* 147). Of particular importance to Bernárdez’s life and work was the centrality of his Galician heritage. In a lecture delivered in Galician at the Galería Fernández in Buenos Aires on 19 September 1952, Bernárdez called himself “arxentino pelo nascimento, mais galego pelo nobre sangue” (2). Indeed, Bernárdez’s admiration for Galician culture came to influence not only his commitment to the Spanish poetic tradition, but also his estimation of the government of Francisco Franco. Another article from 1948 called the Franco regime a “dictadura” and lamented the fact that Ortega y Gasset’s legitimate desire for “una nacionalización de aspiración liberal” had degenerated “en nacionalismo estatista y tiránico” (*Mundo* 228). Four years later, Bernárdez returned to the same theme when he argued that twentieth-century European fascism had taken “el funesto y especioso

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<sup>33</sup> See Barufaldi, Gamo, Martínez Fernández, and Rodríguez Francia.

postulado” of the state as “una especie de entidad de derecho casi divino” to its “últimas y más arriesgadas consecuencias” (“Maritain” 431).

By the mid- to late-1950s, Bernárdez’s criticism turned to questions of language politics. In “El idioma prohibido” (1954), a spirited defense of the language of his ancestors, Bernárdez criticized the Franco regime’s “incomprensible persecución” of Galician and added: “resulta verdaderamente inexplicable, de puro absurdo, que el gobierno del general Franco, es decir, de un hijo de Galicia, persiga de manera tan implacable al pueblo de las cuatro provincias del noroeste hispánico en lo que él tiene de más espiritual, o sea en su idioma” (333).<sup>34</sup> On a number of occasions, Bernárdez would invoke the Romantic notion of language as the spiritual essence of a people, usually as a prelude to a more general argument for regional autonomy and against state intervention in linguistic matters. In “Defensa del idioma” (1958), for instance, he argued that language is “[u]na entidad casi carnal en la que lo importante no es el sistema de células de que está íntimamente tejida sino el espíritu que la informa y la mueve” and that linguistic differences are natural expressions of “los ideales y las formas de vida vigentes” of different peoples (731). Likewise, in “Lengua y política” (1960), he wrote that languages are “seres vivos, que nacen, que crecen, que se reproducen” and hence that any “intervención estatal” was bound to disrupt the normal process of linguistic development (618).

In addition to his commitment to the preservation and dissemination of Galician language and culture, Bernárdez’s affinity for Spain was also conditioned by his Catholicism. Here, as before, that affinity seems to have had less to do with the ephemera

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<sup>34</sup> Bernárdez wrote and published on Galician themes throughout his life, both in Spain and Argentina, and both in Spanish and Galician. See Valcárcel López for a thorough account.

of national politics (as was the case, at least apparently, of Meinvielle and Franceschi) and more to do with a deep-seated commitment to a broadly Catholic worldview. Gamo, for instance, emphasizes the degree to which “la religiosidad y la acendrada fe católica [...] alumbran y condicionan todo su pensamiento” (96), while Barufaldi notes that the “centro iluminado que vibra unitariamente a través de la obra y deja señalada su verdad personal” was precisely Bernárdez’s “visión cristiana del hombre y de la naturaleza” (26). Bernárdez’s devotion to the Catholic tradition owes partly to the Thomism to which he was exposed at Convivio and the *Cursos* and which left a permanent mark on his work (Martínez Fernández 86; Gamo 137-142). The other great source was no doubt the poetry of Spain’s *Siglo de Oro*. The Spanish critic Juan Manuel Martínez Fernández, for instance, divides twentieth-century Argentine religious poetry into three “vías” (“la vía teológica,” “la vía del franciscanismo,” and “la vía del intimismo”) and places Bernárdez firmly in the former. Bernárdez’s verse, he writes, “bebe en el clasicismo hispánico de autores como Fray Luis de León, San Juan de la Cruz o Gonzalo de Berceo,” and Bernárdez himself “siempre se ve deudor en la doble cara de lo poético de ese aire clásico de la poesía religiosa hispánica” (78). In an earlier study, Ana María Rodríguez Francia had arrived at virtually the same conclusion, drawing attention to “[la] repristinación de lo hispánico y sus formas tradicionales” as the hallmark of Bernárdez’s verse (*Perspectivas* 61).

Both Martínez Fernández and Rodríguez Francia owe an immeasurable debt to the Argentine critic and anthologist Roque Raúl Aragón, whose 1967 *Antología de poesía religiosa argentina* was the first attempt to trace the general contours of twentieth-century Argentine religious poetry and to situate Bernárdez within it. Besides his

enormously beneficial contextual work, Aragón also provides a number of guideposts which, with minor modification, are absolutely crucial to understanding Bernárdez's poetry. The first is the poet's participation in Argentina's *Renacimiento Católico*, which, as I have already noted, centered around the *Cursos* and *Criterio*, and which Aragón himself characterizes as a response to "la conciencia de crisis que conmueve la estructura de la nación" in the first quarter of the twentieth-century (71). The second has to do with what has been called Bernárdez's "teologización de la poesía" (80). The phrase is Martínez Fernández's but the idea belongs to Aragón, who understands much of Bernárdez's oeuvre as an attempt to translate the contents of scholastic theology into verse. "La poesía empieza abriéndose a la teología en lugar de coincidir con ella, a su modo, en el objeto que le es común," he writes: "Hay estrofas de Bernárdez, p. ej., que son la versificación de argumentos escolásticos" (42). This is true, as far as it goes: large swaths of Bernárdez's poetry (especially the sonnets) indeed draw on scholastic argumentation in both form and content. But the idea is also potentially misleading.

In the first place, Aragón's account of Bernárdez's "theologization" (or, perhaps better, "scholasticization") of poetry fails to countenance the vestigial presence of *modernista* and *ultraísta* elements in his work (even in the later, more explicitly religious parts). The presence is "vestigial" for two reasons. First, by the 1930s Bernárdez had moved decisively beyond the *ismos* of his poetic adolescence (his first three collections of poetry, as noted earlier, were excluded from the 1946 *Antología poética*). Second, as Rodríguez Francia has shown, the remnants of Bernárdez's apprenticeship in the Argentine avant-garde are detectable in his later poetry only at the level of style, specifically in the use of metaphor and simile as forms of "acceso a lo inefable" (69).

Because Rodríguez Francia has already studied this issue in convincing detail, her conclusions need not be repeated here (58, 65, 69-73).

It is perhaps worth noting that the coexistence of traditional and modern elements in Bernárdez's poetry suggests an important similarity between his project and Maritain's. Yet on this point one cannot be entirely certain. Bernárdez rarely mentions Maritain, and his only direct treatment of the French philosopher came in a short 1952 article published in *Criterio*. From that article we gather that Bernárdez shared Maritain's antipathy for fascism as well as his aversion to the sort of nationalism that views the state as "una entidad personal colocada por encima del pueblo organizado" ("Maritain" 431), views that would have set him at odds with the reigning ideology of Catholic nationalist organs like *Criterio*. We also know, from the same text, that Bernárdez held Maritain's conviction regarding the "primauté du spirituel" (431) and his understanding of the relationship between art and sacrality. Indeed, in a 1977 article in *La Nación*, Bernárdez linked the emergence of modern technological society not only to the waning of spiritual values, but also to the decline of poetry as a legitimate mode of artistic discourse:

Esta de hoy es la tiránica civilización del número, de la masa ciega e informe, del rebaño indistinto—que no reconoce al Buen Pastor—de la materia múltiple, anónima y mortal. La democracia es su espejo. La industria absorbe todo su quehacer. La Máquina, con mayúscula, es su ídolo, su Becerro de Oro, su expresión íntima y completa. En un mundo así, ¿qué lugar queda para el espíritu? Quizá tampoco haya sitio para el arte. Y menos aún para la poesía. (*La Nación*, 16.10.1977)

Bernárdez's reference to "la tiránica civilización del número" recalls José Martí's opposition between human beings as "un sacramento" and human beings as "un número en los libros de comercio" (*Obras* 15:366). Further, the implied synonymy of "arte" and "espíritu" echoes the sentiment (common to Breton, Roh, Benjamin, and Maritain) that

the recovery of the spiritual dimension demands a reconceptualization of the artistic enterprise, particularly in an age whose most perfect expression is the hypostatized Machine. Like Maritain, then, and unlike the Catholic nationalists of *Criterio*, Bernárdez saw modernity as a problem that transcends the vagaries of national politics and instead raises fundamental literary, theological, and philosophical questions about art, human life, and the universe that both inhabit.

The second respect in which Aragón's account of Bernárdez's "theologization of poetry" is potentially misleading is that it gives the impression that poetry is somehow theology's handmaiden and that poetic language is, in a rather pejorative sense, merely the dress of theological thought. This is partly true, but it does not really get to the heart of the matter. Bernárdez does use poetry as a medium for the elaboration of theological ideas, but, even more significantly, his verse becomes an instrument for expressing an all-encompassing sacramental worldview, one opposed in nearly every detail to the vulgar materialism of a mechanized, technologized, secularized, disenchanted world. To mark this difference, let us replace the concept of "the theologization of poetry" with *the sacramentalization of poetry*. The genitive should be understood both objectively and subjectively: it refers at once to something that poetry *does* and to something that *happens to* poetry. Bernárdez's sacramentalization of poetry, to put the point somewhat differently, has two poles: one linguistic, the other ontological. The linguistic pole involves the way in which poetic language, though itself material, serves as a mechanism for the transmission of transcendent reality. The ontological pole, by turns, involves the way in which poetry's sacramental function holds only to the extent that it participates in and makes manifest a sacramental presence latent in reality itself. That is, poetry at once



sacramentalizes (it bridges the visible and the invisible) and is itself sacramentalized (it, like the rest of the material world, participates in a transcendent reality that grants it being and significance).

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to fleshing out these ideas. My account moves in two directions, both of which track the broad contours of disenchantment described in Chapter 1. First, I try to show how for Bernárdez a sacramental understanding of poetic language allows us to perceive the world as infused with the presence of God. The description is deliberate. My claim is not that Bernárdez's poetry functions as a mechanism of "re-enchantment," but rather that it allows us to glimpse the enchantment already latent in reality. The importance of this distinction will become clearer when I take up Borges's poetry in Chapter 3. Second, I argue that Bernárdez's sacramental poetics has implications for how we understand language itself. For just as the disenchantment of the world implies the disenchantment of language, so Bernárdez, by casting poetic language in sacramental terms, provides the resources for "redeeming the sign" from the effects of disenchantment.

#### 3.4. Bernárdez's Sacramental Poetics: A Preliminary Distinction

Most of Bernárdez's poetry from the mid-1930s onwards can be described as broadly sacramental. My account of it, however, rests on a general distinction between two varieties. First, there are poems I shall call "properly sacramental," texts that are, for want of a better term, *about* sacraments, and primarily about the Eucharist. Second, there are "allegories of sacramentality," texts in which Bernárdez's sacramental vision overflows the confines of institutional religion and expands to a cosmic view. I borrow this general taxonomy from Rogelio Barufaldi, who identifies love as the central theme of

Bernárdez's poetry and distinguishes its manifestation "en el mundo cristiano" from its manifestation "en la naturaleza" (65, 109). The primary modification I would like to make to Barulfaldi's scheme is to suggest that these two "manifestations" are perhaps not as clearly distinguishable as he proposes. Specifically, Bernárdez's Eucharistic poems provide a kind of cipher for interpreting his "allegories of sacramentality." Thus understood, Bernárdez's poetry as a whole is not simply "theological" in a vague, atmospheric sense, but rather specifically "sacramental."

#### 3.4.1. The Transition to Sacramentality

The interval between 1926 and 1937, the most significant period in Bernárdez's poetic production, coincides with the 33 poems collected in *Cielo de tierra* (1937). The first seven poems were written in Buenos Aires in 1926 and 1927, and the last 26 were written in Córdoba from 1935 to 1937. Unsurprisingly, the earlier poems (including one dedicated to Norah, Borges' sister) still bear the impress of Bernárdez's avant-garde years, while the later poems reveal his growing interest in Catholicism as well as the first hints of a poetic transformation that would eventually turn the sometime *ultraísta* into a disciple of San Juan and Fray Luis. The decade-long transition was marked by an almost complete poetic silence and punctuated by two key events. In 1926, Bernárdez resigned as editor of *Proa* and returned to Paris where, at Notre Dame Cathedral, he claimed to experience an apparition of the Virgin Mary. Years later, he recounted the experience in the autobiographical "Poema de las cuatro fechas" (also published in *Cielo de tierra*):

La iglesia de Nuestra Señora de París era propicia como ninguna.  
Después de una noche vacía resolví descansar a su sombra segura.  
El recuerdo de los obispos de piedra resonaba en las naves profundas.  
Mi vida era como la muerte junto a la vida eterna de sus sepulturas.  
La pasión arreciaba sobre mi cuerpo como el viento sobre la llanura.  
Mi juventud era un torrente sonoro, pero tenía las aguas turbias.

Unas manos blancas decían la misa del alba en una capilla oscura.  
Cuando sonó la campanilla me pareció que se levantaba la luna.  
Su resplandor era tan bello que me cubrí la cara con las manos sucias.  
Nuestra Señora me decía, sonriendo, que no me abandonaría nunca. (*Antología* 56)

The second event, also recounted in “Poema de las cuatro fechas,” came six years later, in 1932, when a life-threatening illness forced Bernárdez to abandon Buenos Aires for Córdoba:

Como una herramienta gastada carecía de todo sentido mi cuerpo.  
Me habían dicho lentamente las palabras terribles: Estás muy enfermo.  
Yo me sentía separado de los demás por un muro de sufrimiento.  
Como las rejas de una cárcel mi cama tenía los barrotes de hierro. (*Antología* 56)

Bernárdez described both events as “puntos cardinales” in which “el mundo de mi memoria está repartido” (57), and both contributed not only to his personal spiritual development, but also to his development as a religious poet.<sup>35</sup> The Virgin Mary appears frequently in Bernárdez’s later work (Rodríguez Francia, *Perspectivas* 81). In “Soneto del dulce nombre” (1937), for instance, she is the “energía misericordiosa” that fires the poet’s soul (*Cielo* 70), while in “Ave María” (1945), part of a series on the *Via crucis*, she is a “Río de miel / Para los labios / Que tienen sed” and a “Pequeña flor / En el desierto / Del corazón” (*Ruiseñor* 101). In other cases, Mary’s function is less personal than cosmic. In “Soneto a la natividad de la Santísima Virgen” (1947), she plays the role of a redemptrix who comes “para que la muerte / dejara de vivir en nuestra vida” (*Estrellas* 29), while in “Encuentro de Jesús y María” (1947), also part of *Via crucis*, she shares in Christ’s suffering and so contributes to the salvation of the human race (*Estrellas* 101-103). Finally, in “Oración a Nuestra Señora de los Buenos Aires” (1937), a Catholic reinscription of Borges’s “Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires,” Bernárdez

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<sup>35</sup> The other two events narrated in the poem are the death of the poet’s mother and his first encounter with Laura, his future wife. I shall return to the latter in a moment.

portrays the Virgin as the protagonist of an apocalyptic drama that spans the history of the Argentine capital from its foundation to its final redemption (*Cielo* 94-97).

Despite Mary's importance in Bernárdez's poetic corpus, the stay in Córdoba was far more significant in both spiritual and poetic terms. There, in the solitude of a long convalescence, he began work both on *El buque*, arguably his most ambitious poem, and on a series of shorter poems that represent what Lacunza calls "ese despertar [...] a la luz celestial, ese vuelco de amor divino" that would characterize the rest of his poetry (*Obra* 68).<sup>36</sup> Most of those poems are sonnets, and many lend credence to the idea that Bernárdez's verse amounts to a "theologization" of poetry. "Soneto de la unidad del alma," for instance, summarizes the Augustinian account of human memory, understanding, and will as *vestigia trinitatis* (*Cielo* 55). Similarly, "Soneto de la encarnación" treats, in manifestly Thomistic fashion, the startling paradox whereby the Creator condescends to the level of creature ("el Criador se vuelve criatura") in order to annul the effects of original sin ("pagando la deuda originaria").<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the poem as a whole seems framed as a response to a question posed during a scholastic *disputatio*.

Such considerations aside, however, Bernárdez's treatment of the Trinity and the Incarnation is nevertheless significant because it allows us to glimpse the broad outlines of his sacramental vision. For Augustine, the *vestigia trinitatis* are the "marks" or "traces" of God's presence in creation. As he puts it in the *De trinitate*: "It is therefore fitting that, as we look at the creator understood through the things that are made, we

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<sup>36</sup> Since fragments of *El buque* began appearing in *La Nación* in 1935 (two years before the publication of *Cielo de tierra*), strict adherence to chronology would require that I treat it first. It seems clear to me (and to most other Bernárdez scholars as well) that the poems collected in *Cielo* are conceptually prior to *El buque* in the sense that they are drafts and sketches of which *El buque* is the full elaboration.

<sup>37</sup> For Aquinas's complete account of the Incarnation, see *Summa theologiae*, IIIa, q. 1, aa. 1-6. For more on Bernárdez's use of "terminología tomista," see Gamó (137-142).

understand the Trinity, whose mark [*vestigium*] appears in creatures in a fitting way” (VI:10).<sup>38</sup> The sacramental potential of this line of reasoning is easy to see: if created reality bears the marks of the vestigial presence of God’s Trinitarian life, then the physical world becomes a manifestation of the divine, a signifier that points beyond itself to the transcendent source of its existence. To see the world as marked by the *vestigia* of the triune God is thus already to see it as sacramental. Even more important than the Trinity in this respect is the Incarnation. When the creator “se vuelve criatura,” he not only pays the debt of original sin, but also definitively overcomes the ontological chasm between the physical and the spiritual, between immanence and transcendence. As the moment when a portion of the physical world (Christ’s earthly body) functions most explicitly as a vehicle for the transmission of God’s presence, the Incarnation is thus also the *conditio sine qua non* of all Christian reflection on sacramentality.

Nowhere is this connection more apparent than in the Eucharist, that is, Holy Communion, Catholic Christianity’s chief sacrament. Indeed, to the extent that the Eucharistic sacrifice renders Christ’s body present in the host, it repeats, sacramentally, that event whereby, according to the Gospel of John, the *logos* became flesh and dwelled among us. Unsurprisingly, the Eucharist was central not only to Bernárdez’s spiritual life, but also to his understanding of poetic language. To get a sense of its implications, let us begin by reading two poems (one briefly, another in detail) where Bernárdez takes up the issue explicitly.

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<sup>38</sup> “Oportet igitur, ut Creatorem per ea quae facta sunt intellectum conspicientes, trinitatem intelligamus, cuius in creatura, quomodo dignum est, apparet vestigium” (my translation).

### 3.4.2. Sacramentality Proper: The Eucharistic Redemption of Sign and World

Bernárdez composed two explicit meditations on the sacrament of the Eucharist, “Poema del pan eucarístico” and “Poema del vino eucarístico” (*La Nación*, 1946 and 1947 respectively). Both belong to a long tradition of Eucharistic poetry: from Fray Luis de León’s “Pan de ángeles” and San Juan de la Cruz’s “Que bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre,” to Góngora’s “Al santísimo sacramento,” Lope de Vega’s *Conceptos divinos al santísimo sacramento* (1615), many *autos sacramentales*, and finally to Claudel’s “Hymne du Saint Sacrement” (*Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1909) and García Lorca’s “Oda al santísimo sacramento del altar” (1928). Bernárdez’s debt to Claudel is especially significant. Stylistically, the French poet’s long, luxuriant, unrhymed lines seem to have inspired the 22-syllable line Bernárdez deploys both in the Eucharistic poems and, to somewhat greater effect, in *La ciudad sin Laura* (1938). Thematically, the “Hymne du saint sacrement,” indeed the totality of *Corona Benignitatis Anni Dei* (1915), provides the liturgical model for Bernárdez’s poetry.

The differences, however, are at least as important as the similarities. In the first place, Claudel’s *Corona* is what I am tempted to call a “liturgical epic,” a poetic rendition of the totality of Christian liturgical experience, while Bernárdez’s much humbler project comprises a series of restrained, unassuming texts which no doubt imply the totality of the Church’s liturgy yet never evoke it directly. Further, Claudel’s poem possesses a frenetic energy, a surplus of religious feeling (exemplified most clearly by the profusion of imperatives and apostrophes), as if, to put the point in Lacanian terms, traces of “real” doubts, uncertainties, and anxieties seeped through cracks in the poem’s symbolic edifice. Bernárdez’s principal rhetorical mode, by contrast, is the simple declarative sentence.

“Este licor eterno y vivo nos da su luz desde el altar de los altares,” reads the first line of “Poema del vino eucarístico.” Here, as Barufaldi notes, the passionate search for ecstasy normally associated with religious, especially mystical, poetry has been “intellectualized” (22), replaced by a quiet conviction in “las serenas certezas cristianas” (21).

The calm, intellectualized tone of Bernárdez’s Eucharistic poems makes them ideal resources not only for understanding how Bernárdez views the Eucharist, but also for spelling out its implications for poetic language. Both “Poema del vino eucarístico” and “Poema del pan eucarístico” might serve these purposes, but since the latter is somewhat more explicit, I limit my attention to it. The poem’s opening lines read:

Yo, que lo miro con mis ojos, sé que este pan es el Señor de cielo y tierra.  
Yo, que lo gusto con mi boca, sé que este pan es el Señor que nos espera.  
Sé que la forma de las formas vive feliz en este trozo de materia. (*Estrellas* 75)

A number of contexts (liturgical, semiotic, epistemological, and ontological) overlap here. The first point to notice is that the poem’s dramatic theme—the poet’s meditation on the Eucharistic bread—belongs to the broader, liturgical context of the Mass. The speaker is therefore not simply *reflecting* upon the Eucharist, but also *participating* in it. The liturgical context is mirrored, in turn, by the semiotic model implicit in Bernárdez’s treatment of the Eucharistic elements. Each of the three opening lines has a tripartite semiotic structure: first, the subject or poetic voice (“yo”); second, the sign (“este pan”); and third, the referent (“el Señor de cielo y tierra”). This triadic model stands in marked contrast to the dyadic semiosis that one finds, among other places, in de Saussure’s distinction between *signifiant* and *signifié* and seems instead to recall C.S. Peirce’s definition of the sign as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (99). The difference between Saussure’s dyad and Peirce’s triad is

crucial for two reasons. First, since the Eucharist is, by its nature, a celebration that implicates the celebrant, it requires a model of signification that takes the interpreter into account. The liturgical context of Bernárdez's poem thus demands a theory of semiosis that goes beyond structuralist and post-structuralist orthodoxy. At a more abstract level, it seems plausible to suggest that if signs in general are to be meaningful, they must, at a minimum, be meaningful *to someone*. There must, in other words, be an "interpretant" (to use Peirce's term) for whom the sign is meaningful. Saussure's dyadic scheme, on the contrary, has no place for the notion of meaningfulness-to. Since the process of signification amounts to a series of oscillations *internal* to the sign in which signifier and signified displace one another in an endless motion of differing and deferral, Saussurian semiotics explains the differential production of signification *within* the sign but has almost nothing to say about how that signification relates to its interpreter (Davies 229-230).

The recovery of a triadic model of semiotics dramatized in Bernárdez's poem is the first step not only towards a critique of what Thomas Greene has called "disjunctive semiotics," but also towards an understanding of the Eucharistic "redemption of the sign."<sup>39</sup> It is not the final step, however. In addition to linguistic questions, Bernárdez's poem raises a host of epistemological and ontological issues. To get a sense of their implications, let us return to the text.

The opening lines of "Poema del pan eucarístico" operate according to a contrast between the perceptual and the epistemological, that is, between what the poet *perceives*

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<sup>39</sup> The phrase is Oliver Davies'. Disjunctive semiotics is basically structuralist orthodoxy: since signs refer to other signs rather than to the external world, the relationship between sign and meaning is wholly arbitrary. Its opposite, conjunctive semiotics, tends instead toward the identification of word and world, of sign and meaning, and so accords language a density or potency capable of interacting with and transforming reality (Greene 38). I return to this idea in Chapter 3.



and what he *knows*. In the first line, he “sees” the bread “with his eyes” but “knows” that what appears to be bread is in fact “the Lord of heaven and earth.” Likewise, in the second line, the poet “tastes” the bread “with his mouth,” but “knows” that what appears to be bread is in fact “the Lord who waits for us.” This distinction between what *appears* to be the case and what in fact *is* the case is central not only to Bernárdez’s text but to all Catholic reflections on the Eucharist. Official Catholic doctrine has it that, upon consecration, the Eucharistic elements (the bread and the wine) *actually become* the body and blood of Jesus Christ while nevertheless retaining bread-like and wine-like qualities. Hence the paradox (and hence the opening lines of Bernárdez’s poem): the bread *appears* to be bread but is *actually* the body of Christ.

This paradox is usually explained in terms of the Aristotelian distinction between *substance* and *accident*. Substances can exist independently of all other things of that kind (i.e., all other substances) except their parts, while accidents, by contrast, exist only by inhering in substances. A “horse” is a substance in this sense, and “whiteness” is an accident, since horses exist in their own right, while whiteness exists only as a white *something* (for instance, a white dog or a white napkin).<sup>40</sup> In Catholic Eucharistic theology, Aristotle’s conceptual apparatus gets translated by Saint Thomas and others as follows: before consecration, both the bread and the wine are substances; both exist as stand-alone entities in their own right. Upon consecration, however, the substance of the bread is evacuated and replaced by another substance: the body of Christ. Replacing one substance for another is called *transubstantiation*. The bread, to be sure, still *looks like* bread, still *tastes like* bread, but this is only because it retains accidental bread-like

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<sup>40</sup> Other examples of substances include tables, planets, atoms, and humans; other examples of accidents include being square, weighing ten pounds, being-taller-than, and so forth.

qualities. At the level of substance, what appears to be bread has in fact become the body of Christ.

The strangeness of this account hardly needs to be pointed out. It attempts to explain an already peculiar piece of religious doctrine in terms of a metaphysical scheme that most of us are likely to find bizarre, if not unintelligible. The goal, however, is to understand, not to criticize, and the first step towards understanding is to note that Bernárdez's meditation on the Eucharist begins, paradoxically, with a moment of profound skepticism. As the poet observes the host, he asserts, against all empirical evidence, that what appears to be bread is actually something else entirely. Normally, such a denial of the reliability of the senses would function as a prelude to a "spiritualizing" or "idealizing" philosophy which, in Platonic fashion, rejects the mutability of the material world in favor of the certainty of ideas (Milbank, *Truth* 89). In Bernárdez's case, however, sensory skepticism is no sooner posited than undermined. As noted above, the opening lines of "Poema del pan eucarístico" share a three-part semiotic structure: sign (bread), meaning (Christ), and interpreter (poetic voice). The poem's peculiarity owes to the manner in which the speaker relates the former two elements. Under ordinary circumstances, the "something" to which signs refer is necessarily *other than* the sign itself; the distance between sign and referent is what makes signification possible. In Bernárdez's poem, by paradoxical contrast, just the opposite occurs: the bread does not merely *signify* Christ; it *is* Christ ("sé que este pan es el Señor de cielo y tierra"). In one sense, of course, this is exactly what we should expect: the miracle of the Eucharist lies precisely in the manner in which it renders the body of Christ "really present" under the species of bread and wine. In another sense, however, the coincidence

of sign and meaning in the host also marks the Eucharist as the point at which signification reaches an extreme of plenitude. The materiality of the Eucharistic sign (the bread) is so transfigured by signification, so “full of meaning,” that the object it signifies (the body of Christ) takes on bodily presence (Davies 230-1). The Eucharist, then, appears as something like the limit of signification; it is where language performs most perfectly its function of rendering present what is absent and where the boundary towards which language, insofar as it attempts to be meaningful, always tends. In this sense, to the extent that language attempts to signify at all it attempts to become Eucharistic.

This recognition of the Eucharist as the site of semiotic plenitude should not, however, blind us to another important matter: namely, that even as the sign takes on the bodily presence of its referent, its materiality (i.e., accidental qualities) is nevertheless preserved. The point is crucial for reasons both epistemological and linguistic. First, the persistence of accidents means that, despite a moment of initial skepticism, “appearances” are not finally “disowned as mere illusions” (Pickstock, “Thomas” 165). In fact, Eucharistic skepticism immediately doubles back on itself in a deepened and intensified reaffirmation of the reliability of sensory experience. Not only are accidents still there, but we have now also learned that certain sensory phenomena are sustained “by a divine physical presence in the world” (165). Further, the persistence of the bread’s accidental properties also entails the persistence of the Eucharist *as sign*. The process whereby the host is so transfigured by signification that its referent, the body of Christ, takes on presence does not, for all that, annul the bread’s sign-like status. This means, in turn, that while it is correct to assert that the bread is *actually* the body of Christ, it would nevertheless be wrong to say that the bread is *simply* the body of Christ, since it is also

and at the same time a *sign* of that body. In other words, Christ's body is present in the Eucharist, but not in the same way it was present in first-century Palestine, or in the same way it will be present in the eschaton. Specifying the precise nature of that presence is a tricky matter. The least unsatisfactory approach is probably to say that Christ's body is present "sacramentally" in the host, where the adverb is less a definition than a formal condition: that is, a bodily presence compatible with the simultaneous presence of the bread's accidental qualities (and hence where "sacramental" is allowed to retain its primary meaning of "sign-making") (Turner, "Darkness" 152).

However parsed, the simultaneous preservation of Christ's bodily presence and the bread's semiotic character is important because it is only through such preservation that the Eucharist makes possible a genuine "redemption of the sign." If, on the one hand, the presence of Christ simply obliterated the bread's accidental qualities (taste, color, shape, and so forth), the host could no longer be said to function like a sign and any attempt to speak of a "Eucharistic semiotics" would be illegitimate. The preservation of those qualities, on the other hand, means not only that the moment of Eucharistic "real presence" still belongs to a thoroughly linguistic economy, but also that it belongs to a linguistic economy in which language is, so to speak, maximally significant.

This last point is especially noteworthy inasmuch as it helps us combat certain caricatures of Christian thought that have been disseminated by partisans of post-structuralism. The most pernicious and misleading of such caricatures is no doubt the suggestion that Christianity's goal is to attain some state beyond words, some "real presence" outside the mediating structures of language. John Caputo, for instance, one of the ablest interpreters of Jacques Derrida on religion, comments that were theology to

achieve its ultimate aim, it “would have managed to lift itself up into a pure presence above time and history, above language and the play of the trace, above the mediation of the trace and *différance*” (47). Bernárdez’s text responds by showing just how problematic this suggestion is. Eucharistic “real presence” is neither the transcendence of language, nor the annihilation of the sign, nor even a moment of extra-linguistic ecstasy in which words finally dissolve in a shimmer of mystical effervescence. Quite the opposite. The Eucharist brings us closer to language than ever, not only because it is in the Mass that the body, as word, is given to be eaten (literally), but because it is the point at which language reaches its ideal limit—where words, as vehicles of meaning, become most fully themselves (Pickstock, “Thomas” 168).

Yet if Bernárdez’s Eucharistic semiosis ultimately preserves the materiality of the sign, it does so in a deeply peculiar way. According to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the substance of the Eucharistic bread is replaced, upon consecration, by the substance of the body of Christ. This suggests, in turn, that since accidents only exist by inhering in substances, the bread’s accidental qualities now inhere in the substance of the body of Christ. Yet this is impossible. Accidental properties are properties that a substance can either gain or lose without ceasing to be the substance it is. But since all of God’s properties are essential to God, he cannot be the subject of accidental qualities. What, then, is the status of those properties (taste, color, shape, and so on) that once inhered in the substance of the bread but which, after consecration, cannot be said to inhere in the substance of the body of Christ? In what do they inhere?

The short answer is that they do not inhere in anything. They are, to borrow a term from Catherine Pickstock, “free-floating accidents” (*After* 273). This conclusion has

a number of implications. First, while the doctrine of transubstantiation is framed in the Aristotelian categories of substance and accidents, it finally exceeds those categories. In Aristotle's view, to claim to have located an accident that inheres in no substance is to say something not so much wrong as unintelligible. Second, the central mystery of the Eucharist (the conversion of the bread into the body of Christ) is in fact accompanied by another, secondary mystery: the existence of accidents which, miraculously, do not belong to any substance. This means, in turn, that the Eucharistic bread does not exist in the same way that we take other bits of the physical universe to exist (that is, either as substances or else by inhering in substances). Instead, they exist in what might be termed a state of "pure contingency," not dependent upon any finite substance, but rather directly sustained by their participation in divine being (Pickstock, *After* 260). To say, moreover, that the material elements of the Eucharistic bread exist "purely contingently" is also to say that they have no existence "in themselves": they are groundless, without foundation, a moment of absolute fortuity suspended over an abyss of nothingness (Hart, *Beauty* 250). Even more importantly, as accidents that inhere in no finite substance but are instead sustained directly by divine being, the material elements of the Eucharist exist only as signifiers, that is, as visible signs that disclose the invisible reality of God. Theirs, in other words, is an existence entirely exhausted by signification, wholly constituted by the manner in which they manifest the substance of the body of Christ. They are, as it were, all smile and no cat.

For Bernárdez, however, the peculiar linguistic and ontological status of the Eucharist is not limited to the Eucharistic elements themselves. The last four lines of the first stanza of "Poema del pan eucarístico" read as follows:

Sé que el océano sin fondo cabe sin mengua en esta gota que destella.  
Y que la selva sin orillas está encerrada en esta brizna carcelera.  
Sé que el volcán inextinguible se manifiesta en esta chispa de inocencia.  
Y que el amor inenarrable tiembla escondido en esta lágrima serena. (*Estrellas*  
75)

These lines dramatize a motif that recurs throughout the Bernardian canon. The poet begins with a meditation on some small, unassuming object (in this case, the Eucharistic host) and, suddenly, that object turns out to have implications for the whole of the created order. The motif is especially evident in “Estética de la copa de agua” (*La Nación*, 1951), a short prose-poem where the poet, seated at his writing desk in the early morning hours, desperate for inspiration, contemplates a small cup of water. No sooner does he observe its “claridad” and “simplicidad,” its diaphanous “lección estilística,” than his inspiration returns, and what appeared a rather banal essay on water morphs into a theological tract on God’s sacramental presence. Almost immediately, water is no longer simply water, but a metaphor for the divine substance: “el ubicuo ser que constituye gran parte de los demás seres y que alimenta con su propia substancia la vida de casi todas las vidas del orbe” (*Copa* 12). In the wake of this recognition, moreover, the world itself acquires a sacramental valence: in “la grandilocuencia de las cascadas” the poet recognizes traces of “la voluntad celestial”; in “las gotas mezcladas al vino eucarístico” he perceives “[la] figura de la humanidad”; and in “el caudal de la pila,” he discerns “[la] llave sacramental de los cielos” (12). The closing lines reveal more explicitly still the poem’s theological import: the desperate search for inspiration, the text’s initial occasion, now turns out to be a search for something far more cosmic—namely, “la sed de la hermosura,” which, the poet adds, “es, en cierto modo, verdadera sed de Dios” (14).

“Poema del pan eucarístico” obeys a similar logic: a meditation that begins with the Eucharistic elements ends by suggesting that those same elements have implications for all of creation. In this case, Bernárdez makes the point with a rhetoric of containment: “cabe en,” “encerrada en,” “se manifiesta en,” “escondido en.” And yet what exactly is the character of that relation? One answer would be that all the things Bernárdez mentions (oceans, jungles, volcanoes, and so forth) are actually *contained in the* Eucharistic host—perhaps because the host is in fact the divine substance and because God is, after all, responsible for the creation of oceans, jungles, and volcanoes. Another, more fruitful answer is that Bernárdez means to suggest something slightly less literal, perhaps that the Eucharist is in some sense an *image*, an *allegory* of the rest of creation. But in what sense? Here we must recall a few points. First, to say that the Eucharist is an image of creation is to say that whatever can be predicated of the Eucharistic elements can also be predicated, in some analogous sense, of the world itself. And what can in fact be said of the Eucharistic elements is that they manifest God’s presence directly. Analogously, the created order itself, on this reading, would constitute what the abbot in Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa* (1980) calls “materiale teofania” (115): that is, an appearance or manifestation of the divine in and through the world’s very materiality.

The point is stronger still, however. It is not only that the Eucharistic elements *manifest* God’s presence; rather, as accidents that inhere in no finite substance, those elements exist only by virtue of their direct participation in divine being. Analogously, Bernárdez’s Eucharistic universe has no existence “in itself,” no depth except what is granted to it by the divine substance. Like the elements of the Eucharist, the oceans, jungles, and volcanoes of Bernárdez’s poem exist “purely contingently,” a series of “free-



floating accidents” sustained in being by partaking of divine being. At this point, moreover, the distinction between substance and accident—the very distinction in terms of which the doctrine of transubstantiation is framed—begins to unravel. Earlier, the Eucharist seemed to constitute a special case in which accidents exist without inhering in any particular substance. Now it seems that the Eucharistic was no exception at all and instead that the totality of the created order likewise shares this peculiar characteristic. *All* created being is finally “accidental” when compared with the divine substance (Pickstock, *After* 261). The created order as such is thus “pure surface,” wholly constituted by the light it reflects, like a mirror without a tain (Hart, “Mirror” 548).

Admittedly, this line of thought runs some risk of collapsing into pantheism. To avoid such a conclusion, we must recall the *semiotic* nature of the Eucharist. Even as the Eucharistic host is so transfigured by signification that it takes on the bodily presence of its referent, the materiality of the host is nevertheless preserved. And this means, in turn, that while the Eucharistic bread in some sense *is* Christ’s body, that same bread nevertheless also functions as a sign that *manifests* or *signifies* Christ’s body. Further, if, to deploy some Augustinian categories, the host occupies a middle space between pure *signum* and pure *res*, the same appears to go for the whole of creation. Despite the fact that material reality is constituted by its participation in divine being, that reality preserves both its materiality and its status as *sign*, that is, a semiotic vehicle for the manifestation of divine presence. For Bernárdez, then, the Eucharist, far from being a miraculous exception within the created order, is in fact an allegory of creation itself, a condensed image of what, at the level of created being as such, is always the case.

From the perspective of this “Eucharistic ontology,” moreover, there is never any question of *re-enchantment*, of restoring to the world its lost magic. For, in this view, it is not as if the world were a reified commodity to which “enchantment” might be added or from which it might be subtracted. Indeed, one way of analyzing the idea of a “Eucharistic ontology” would be to say that it imagines a universe the elements of which could not, even in principle, be fetishized (in Marx’s strict sense). For Marx, fetishization occurs when the value that accrues to an object by virtue of its participation in a given social texture is mistakenly supposed to inhere in the object itself. To take a classic example: money’s capacity to serve as the “universal equivalent” of all other commodities is really just a function of the fact that money occupies a particular position within a social reality. In everyday capitalist interactions, of course, this function—money’s capacity to “embody wealth”—appears as what Slavoj Žižek calls “an immediate, natural property of a thing called ‘money’,” as if money in itself, in its very materiality, were “the embodiment of wealth” (Žižek 30-31). In a Eucharistic universe, by contrast, such fetishization is impossible, since the world, conceived Eucharistically, has no “natural properties,” no “objective value,” indeed, no “reality in itself.” All its properties are instead products of its relationship with and dependence upon divine existence. In this sense, Bernárdez’s universe is one which could not, even in principle, be reified, rationalized, commodified, subjected to the strictures of Weberian “technical rationality.” And this, of course, is just another way of saying that it could never become disenchanted.

### 3.4.3. Allegories of Sacramentality

This labored account of the logic of the Eucharist is not meant to stand on its own. It is instead the ground for reading a number of other manifestations of sacramentality in the Bernardian canon. Such is the project of the following two sections. I begin by describing Bernárdez's understanding of the relationship between music, poetic language, and sacramentality, with particular attention to *El buque* (1935), as well as to a series of what I shall term "musical sonnets" published in *Las estrellas* (1947). As we shall see, however, the confrontation between music and poetry generates a unique conundrum, one that cannot be solved on its own terms. In search of an alternative solution, I turn to *La ciudad sin Laura* (1938), Bernárdez's best-known poem, and the one in which his vision of sacramentality receives its fullest expression.

#### 3.4.3.a. Sacramentality and Musicality

Music was central to Bernárdez's poetic enterprise. Gamo, for instance, has argued that "el elemento musical" is "aquel sin el cual no podría comprenderse ni interpretarse en modo alguno su poesía" (164). This is true in at least two related senses. At a formal level, music functions as a sort of limit-case of all artistic possibility, an idea which itself is something of a commonplace. When Walter Pater suggested that all art aspires to the condition of music, he meant that while the other arts (especially the verbal ones) are founded on a distinction between sign and meaning, music is that form of expression in which the gap between material sign and expressive content collapses. The distance between what music *is* and what it *means* is null, since the one is indissociable, even at a conceptual level, from the other. This property affords music what no other form of artistic expression (except perhaps dance) enjoys: self-identity. If, as Derrida would have

it, linguistic meaning is always a matter of slippage and aporia, difference and delay, this is because the two aspects of the linguistic sign (signifier and signified) never fully coincide. As soon as a signifier is put into play, it is immediately and perpetually displaced down a line of other signifiers. Music, on the contrary, escapes this necessity. There is never any question of whether, if at all, the musical sign coincides with its meaning, precisely because the two are, by their nature, identical. In this sense, music stands as the impossible ideal: it is what language could be if it escaped the play of difference and deferral. Which is just to say: if it ceased to be language.

In addition to its formal importance, music plays a sacramental role in Bernárdez's poetry (109). This, of course, is almost a tautology. Bernárdez never hints at a distinction between "sacred" music and "secular" music, and, in any event, his understanding of the relationship between music and sacramentality seems to have less to do with theme or genre and more to do with ontology. Music, in other words, is not necessarily "religious" or "sacramental" because it was written for a religious occasion (e.g., the Mass, a wedding, a funeral) or because it was composed by a particular composer. Rather, music is sacramental because it is that form of artistic expression which, by its very nature, opens upon transcendence. Put somewhat differently, music, for Bernárdez, has the very shape of sacramentality—and, even more specifically, the very shape of the Eucharist. It is the most perfect manifestation, not merely of divine presence in the world, but also of the manner in which that generalized presence is mediated by the very specific mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharistic host.

For Gamo, the confluence of these two strands—music as formal limit and music as expression of sacramentality—constitutes the kernel of Bernárdez's poetic vision

(165). Although the question of music pervades the Bernardian canon, it is particularly important in a series of poems collected in *Las estrellas* (1947). All the poems save one are sonnets, and each bears the name of a canonical classical composer. The first point to notice, then, is that these poems do not treat “music as such,” but rather what might be termed “music as a series of proper names.” The implicit model is, of course, Fray Luis de León’s celebrated *Oda a Francisco de Salinas* (Martínez Fernández 109).<sup>41</sup> One should perhaps not attach too much importance to this fact, since, as Gamo notes, none of the sonnets is sufficiently detailed to allow us to identify individual composers (169). Without the title, for instance, it is unlikely that one could deduce that “Soneto a Haydn” is in fact about Haydn.

The use of proper names is significant, however, to the extent that it underscores Bernárdez’s general tendency to construe music not as an inert, impersonal “thing,” but instead as an active, personalized, indeed human, force (Martínez Fernández 110-11). This tendency is especially apparent in “Soneto a Palestrina,” the first of such sonnets. After drawing an implicit comparison between Palestrina’s music and the Virgin Mary (“Virgen de toda mancha y toda herida”), the speaker adds:

Tu voz de serafín, que no se olvida  
Del corazón lejano y vagabundo,  
Escucha mi silencio moribundo  
Y penetra en la sombra de mi vida. (21)

The sudden infusion of music into a world otherwise dominated by silence, death, and darkness (“mi silencio moribundo,” “la sombra de vida”) characterizes all of Bernárdez’s musical sonnets, and, indeed, the vast majority of his musical poetry in general. Equally characteristic is the manner in which music itself takes on properly human qualities,

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<sup>41</sup> Gamo (168-69) also draws attention to certain affinities between Bernárdez and the Spanish poet Gerardo Diego (1896-1987) on this point.

“hearing” the poet’s silence and “penetrating” the dark shades of his life. On this point, the sestet is more explicit still:

Baja despacio al fondo de mis penas,  
suelta mis lazos, rompe mis cadenas,  
sufre los sufrimientos que sufrí;  
calla un momento en mi prisión oscura,  
recoge mi esperanza y mi amargura,  
y, subiendo hacia Dios, llora por mí.

Here the personification of music assumes a more or less identifiable form—more or less because while line 11 (“sufre los sufrimientos que sufrí”) appears to refer to the substitutionary atonement wrought by Christ’s death on the cross, the last line suggests a reference to Mary (“llora por mí” is, after all, but a slight variation on the penultimate line of the Ave Maria: “ruega por nosotros pecadores...”). Fortunately, nothing much rests on settling this question, and, in all likelihood, the conflation was intentional, not only because of the centrality of the Blessed Virgin to Bernárdez’s spiritual life, but also because if, for St. Paul, Christ is the “one mediator between God and man” (1 Timothy 2.5), then Mary, by virtue of her faithfulness, is (to use a phrase authorized by Pope Benedict XV) the Mediatrix of All Graces. The point to notice, in any event, is that by construing music anthropomorphically, Bernárdez also makes it clear that music, like Christ (or Mary or both), actively transmits grace to the created order and therefore participates in the drama of human salvation.

Like “Soneto a Palestrina,” the second musical sonnet, “Soneto a Scarlatti,” also begins with a moment of darkness, “El corazón, perdido en la espesura...” (27), which is no sooner posited than overcome by an infusion of musicality:

El corazón, perdido en la espesura,  
Concierta su emoción con la del viento,  
Y el alma pone en paz su movimiento

Con los latidos de la selva oscura. (27)

The reference to “la selva oscura” recalls the opening lines of Dante’s *Inferno* (“Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura...”), and indeed the dramatic sweep of the *Commedia* as a whole—from the dark bowels of Hell to the heights of Paradise—provides a model for Bernárdez’s musical sonnets. In these lines, the central theme is the relationship between the poetic voice and the natural world, a relationship described in explicitly musical terms: the “concert” of the poet’s heart and “la [emoción] del viento,” the rhythmic coincidence of the poet’s soul with “los latidos de la selva oscura.” This way of understanding human beings and the world in which they live resonates deeply with the Romantic project of overcoming human alienation from the natural world by effecting what Wordsworth, in the “Prospectus to *The Recluse*,” called the nuptial union of the “discerning intellect of Man” and “this goodly universe” (31). If, as Wordsworth believed, the pressures of modernity threaten to drive a wedge between nature and the human mind, then poetic language works to counteract this division and therefore to mend the broken relationship between humanity and the cosmos. In this sense, Bernárdez’s poem, like Wordsworth’s, contains an implicit critique of one of the primary engines of disenchantment: the subject-object dichotomy. If modernity’s tendency towards what Charles Taylor calls “disengagement” has as its natural corollary the transformation of the natural world into a static, objective “thing” which autonomous human knowers submit to examination, analysis, and dissection, then “Soneto a Scarlatti” counteracts this tendency by imagining the poetic voice’s transaction with nature in terms of a principle of dynamic motion. This is true even at the lexical level, where terms like “movimiento,” “emoción,” and “latidos” predominate. For Bernárdez, then, the

relationship between poet and world is less like the relationship between subject and object and more like the relationship among notes in a musical composition: a series of melodic intervals, of harmonies and rhythms, of points and counterpoints, all of which remain perpetually in motion and which are constituted by and through their interrelationship.

The second quatrain specifies further still the musical ontology that governs the poem as a whole:

Y, juntos en un solo pensamiento,  
Con el ansia de cada criatura,  
El corazón feliz y el alma pura  
Viven de tu sonoro encantamiento. (27)

These lines reiterate the unity of poetic voice and external world (“juntos en un solo pensamiento”), and then identify the precise source of that unity: “tu sonoro encantamiento.” Especially significant are the quatrain’s final two lines, which suggest that the poet’s “corazón feliz” and “alma pura” are in some sense dependent upon music’s capacity to “enchant”—as if the latter somehow furnished the ontological ground for the former. Here the Eucharistic connection should not be missed. As noted earlier, the world, viewed eucharistically, has no existence “in itself,” no being except what is granted to it by participation in divine being. In “Soneto a Scarlatti,” music functions as the Eucharist’s precise analogue. If the standard account asks us to imagine “enchantment” as an external additive applied to an otherwise neutral “world” (as one might apply makeup to a face, or whitewash to a wall), then Bernárdez invites us to see enchantment not as something that happens *to* the world, but rather as something *intrinsic* to it. Musicality, in other words, is not something applied to the world from the outside. Instead, all things (“cada criatura”) derive their very existence from the fact that they



participate in (“viven de”) music’s incantatory power. Indeed, one might say that Bernárdez’s musical universe is permanently enchanted, not because Scarlatti’s “sonoro encantamiento” is superadded to an already existing reality, but rather because reality is *constituted* precisely by being “in-toned,” “en-sung,” “en-chanted.” The world, in short, exists only insofar as it is song.

The idea that music is in some sense constitutive of reality immediately suggests a mythical resonance, one that finds its echo in the Orpheus myth. In Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid writes: “There was a hill, and, on the hill, a wide area of level ground, turfed with fresh blades of grass: shade was absent there: but when the poet, born of the god, sounded the strings of his lyre, shade gathered there. Jupiter’s Chaonian oak-tree came; and Phaethon’s sisters, the Heliades, the poplars...” (qtd. in Bruns 206). The list continues until each tree in the catalogue makes its appearance. Orpheus exercised a rare fascination on modern poets, not least because his ability to call things to presence suggested an understanding of poetic language that had less to do with mimetic correspondence between word and world and more to do with poetry’s capacity to “create” or “fashion” the world (Bruns 206). This idea appears in Novalis’s suggestion that our “destiny” is to “fashion the earth [*zur Bildung der Erde*] (57), though perhaps more clearly in Rilke’s claim, in the third of his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, that “Song is Being”: in other words, that it is only on the basis of poetic language that the world acquires full reality and significance.

But while “Soneto a Scarlatti” does resonate with the Orpheus myth, it would be wrong to call Bernárdez an “Orphic” poet in the strict sense. As the musical sonnets make clear, it is not the *poet* whose language sustains the world in being. Instead, reality is

already constituted by music, and the poet simply takes part in its song. The same idea becomes even clearer in “Soneto a Haydn,” the last of the series. The opening quatrain reads:

Tu canto se despierta entre las rosas,  
Abre sus grandes ojos pensativos,  
Y anima las tinieblas silenciosas  
Con el calor de sus destellos vivos. (30)

Here Bernárdez’s tendency toward personification reaches something like an upper limit. Music wakes and sleeps; it sees and thinks; even its “destellos” are alive. More important yet is the manner in which music’s personified, human qualities are implicitly transferred to the natural world itself. In “anima las tinieblas silenciosas,” for instance, we ought to hear resonances of the original Latin *anima* (“breath,” “wind,” “air,” “breeze,” “spirit,” “soul,” and so forth). The Latin *anima* also gives the Spanish (and Italian) *alma* (soul). Thus when music “animates” the world’s darkness, it effectively “breathes into,” “in-spirates,” even “en-souls” that world. Under music’s influence, an otherwise inanimate reality suddenly (and miraculously) takes on life. Further, in the second half of the octave, the “in-spiration” or “en-soulment” of the world is paralleled at the sonic level by the proliferation of open vowels: “**avanza**,” “**a** través de **la calma** de **las cosas**,” “**aviva**,” “**aparta las espinas dolorosas**” (31). The point is significant. While consonants are formed by bringing the various bits of the mouth (teeth, tongue, lips, palate, throat, and so on) into commerce with one another, vowels are nothing but sounded breath (Abram 241). Further, in the Christian tradition breath is often represented as the very form of God’s presence in the created order. In Genesis, for example, Adam becomes a living creature precisely when God breathes into his nostrils the breath (*ruach*) of life (Genesis 2.7). Likewise, in the New Testament, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is

accompanied by the sound of “a rushing mighty wind” (Acts 2.2). In Bernárdez’s text, then, form and content converge: the sonnet not only describes God’s sacramental presence, but also dramatizes it. The poem *is* what it is *about*. Which means, of course, that it approaches the condition of music.

The first half of the sestet develops in still greater detail the motif of musical personification:

Mientras recorre la emoción del mundo  
Dicta con su fervor meditabundo  
Leyes al mar y números al viento. (32)

The key word here, “dicta,” recalls the primordially generative act whereby God, according to Christian thought, speaks the world into existence. Not only that: the act of musical “dictation” (so to speak) also has the effect of compelling all of reality to obey a kind of musical logic—as if creation itself were a piece of music, an exquisitely wrought symphony in which the most fundamental components of the created order (sea and wind) are governed by a set of rhythms and measures (“leyes” and “números”). Perhaps it would be better to say, not that Haydn’s song “compels” reality to obey a musical logic, but rather that it elucidates, spells out, renders explicit a logic already inherent in that reality. This reading chimes both with the Christian-Platonic notion that a transcendent order permeates material reality and with my interpretation of Scarlatti’s “sonoro encantamiento” as constitutive of, rather than added to, the created order.

In either case, the music that infuses all of creation at last finds its way, in the second half of the sestet, into the poet’s own personal experience:

Y cuando al fin penetra en mis dolores,  
Los inflama hasta el fondo con su acento,  
Y con su acento los reduce a flores. (32)

Here the sacramental logic that characterizes most of Bernárdez's poetry undergoes an inversion. In "Poema del pan eucarístico" and "Estética de la copa de agua," on the one hand, the sacramental motion is outward: the poet begins with some common, everyday object (the host, a cup of water, etc.) and then proceeds to delineate that object's implications for the rest of the created order. In this case, on the other hand, the motion is inward: whatever sacramentality is inherent in creation acquires special intensity or focalization in the poet's own life. But the logic is sacramental nonetheless—and in a very peculiar way.

Notice, in the first place, that the tercet's key rhetorical move involves the transformation of the poet's "dolores" into "flores": music, says the speaker, "penetra en mis dolores" and "los reduce a flores." But this is not a replacement without remainder. Instead, vestiges, both sonic and graphic, of "dolores" remain even after the latter is replaced by "flores." At the rhetorical level, that vestigial remainder ("-lores") not only attests a certain phonaesthetic relationship ("dolores" and "flores"), but also recapitulates the opening line where Haydn's "canto se despierta entre las rosas." In the context of the Bernardian corpus, however, it hints at something much more significant. In the first place, the transformation of "dolores" into "flores" is what we might call a semantic change: one meaning ("pain") is exchanged for another meaning ("flowers"). Despite this semantic change, however, certain superficial (i.e., orthographical) qualities remain constant. A profound change at the level of semantics is therefore accompanied by a relatively insignificant change at the level of orthography. Now suppose we think of semantics as analogous to the Aristotelian category of substances. What a concept *means* is essential to it as a concept, and so semantic differences, like substantial differences, are

differences of a fundamental nature (as fundamental as the difference between “dolores” and “flores”). But if meaning is substantial in the relevant sense, then spelling is purely accidental. Different graphic and sonic arrangements can and do signify the same concept (*book, Buch, libro, livre, librum*, etc). The analogy between semantics and substances, on the one hand, and orthography and accidents, on the other, suggests a hidden Eucharistic logic in Bernárdez’s sonnet. Just as the transformation of the Eucharistic bread into the body of Christ involves a substantial change without an accidental change, so music’s transformation of the poet’s “dolores” to “flores” involves a profound semantic (i.e., substantial) change with only a minimal orthographical (i.e., accidental) change. In this sense, the sonnet dramatizes, rhetorically and grammatically, the phenomenon of transubstantiation. It is also here that the text renders most explicit the connection between music and the Eucharist. If, in the second quatrain, the sonnet approaches the condition of music by both describing and dramatizing God’s “animating” presence in the world, then in the final tercet, music has the effect of producing transubstantiation at the level of language. The transformative power of music is thus analogous to the transformative power of the Eucharist. The former is, so to speak, an allegory of the latter.

The analogy, of course, is far from perfect. In transubstantiation, the substance of the bread is replaced completely by the substance of Christ’s body, while the bread’s accidental properties remain unaffected. In the shift from “dolores” to “flores,” by contrast, the substantial (i.e., semantic) change does entail certain changes, however minor, at the accidental (i.e., orthographic) level. Two things might be said in response. The first is that all analogies are imperfect. A perfect analogy would no longer be an

analogy—it would be a definition. The second point to notice is that, for Bernárdez, poetic language’s failure to reproduce perfectly the condition of the sacraments (and hence also the condition of music) is what constitutes that language as sacramental. This is no doubt a paradoxical assertion, and I shall return to it in a moment when I take up *La ciudad sin Laura*. For now, however, let us flesh out in a bit more detail Bernárdez’s understanding of the relationship between sacramentality and music.

The themes latent in the musical sonnets come to a head in *El buque* (1935), perhaps Bernárdez’s most important poem and for which he was awarded the 1935 Premio Municipal de Poesía. Bernárdez began work on *El buque*, a *silva* divided into 152 stanzas of five lines each, during his long convalescence in Córdoba in the early 1930s and dedicated it to the *Cursos de cultura católica*. Upon publication, the poem was read as a straightforwardly mystical in the tradition of San Juan de la Cruz and Teresa de Ávila. Thus Gamo, for instance, detects in the poem “el camino o ascesis del alma hacia Dios seguido por adivinación y relación entre evidencias lejanísimas,” and adds: “Con todo rigor prosigue aquí Bernárdez su ‘vía’ mística. El camino es el mismo que siguieron un San Juan o una Sta. Teresa” (99, 103).<sup>42</sup> The poem’s subsequent reception has revised Gamo’s interpretation, but his basic insight—that *El buque* shares certain unmistakable characteristics with the mystical poetic tradition, broadly construed—has never been rejected outright.<sup>43</sup>

That resemblance is evident from the outset, when the speaker, alone in the dark solitude of his home, hears a sound and rushes out to the garden to investigate. Unsurprisingly, the sound turns out to be music (“un canto,” as the poet calls it), and the

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<sup>42</sup> Another critic, Carmen Valderrey, also notes the extent of the poem’s debt to “la poesía mística de Santa Teresa y de San Juan de la Cruz” (213).

<sup>43</sup> See Martínez Fernández (90-96) and Rodríguez Francia (84).

remainder of the poem is occupied by the poet's attempt to discern its source and significance. Even before the sound appears, however, Bernárdez foreshadows what will become the text's central theme: the difficult, complicated relationship between music and poetic language. He writes:

Mi canto, si lo fuera,  
Disiparía como por encanto  
La sombra duradera.  
Pero mi pobre canto  
Sería canto si no fuera llanto. (66)

These lines recapitulate the basic theme of the musical sonnets: the poet's solitude and despair is pierced by a sudden infusion of music. In this case, though, the music introduced to dispel "la sombra duradera" is internal rather than external: "Mi canto." Unfortunately, this substitution immediately generates a set of problems. No sooner does the poet announce his "canto" than it is undermined by a counterfactual: "si lo fuera." The simultaneous affirmation and negation of the "incantational" power of the poet's verse (or, more precisely, the simultaneous affirmation and negation of its status as a "canto") is spelled out almost syllogistically in the rest of the stanza through a series of variations on the lexical unit "-anto." The poet's "canto," if it were indeed a "canto," could produce the "encanto" necessary to dispel the darkness; but, sadly, the poet's "canto" is not a "canto" but a "llanto" and so inadequate for the production of enchantment.

That inadequacy depends at least in part upon a play on the various possible meanings of *canto*. Teasing out those meanings requires a brief historical and etymological digression. On the one hand, *canto*, from the verb *cantar*, refers simply to the action or effect of singing, that is, of producing melodious sounds with the voice

(*RAE*, def. 1a-b). In this sense, its closest English equivalent would probably be “song” (*OED*, def. 1). In a somewhat more technical sense, *canto* refers to the divisions of a poetic work (*RAE*, def. 5). More significantly for the purposes of the present argument, *canto* is related to the English word “chant,” which, unlike song, has decisively sacred overtones. In so-called “primitive” religions, shamans employed chants to harness the powers of nature, often for the purpose of healing (de Rosen 589). Among the *Rifāʿīyah*, a group of Muslim mystics (Sufis) found in Egypt, Syria, and Turkey, chants were used to achieve *melboos*, a state of mystical ecstasy (Ripinsky-Naxon 52). In Christian practice, chants are employed in monastic contexts and in the Church’s liturgy, both as a form of worship and as a way of preparing celebrants for participation in the Eucharist (“Liturgical” 681). Despite obvious differences, chant functions in each case as a musical conduit of the sacred, one that conjures away the drab mundanity of ordinary existence and opens immanence to the inflowing of transcendence.

Etymology points in the same direction. The English “chant” comes from the French *chanter*, which in turn derives from the Latin *cantare* (itself a frequentive of *canere*). Each form is cognate with the Indo-European root *\*kan-* (“to sing”), a root also shared by the Greek *eikanos*, which refers generically to any bird that sings at sunrise. Poetic tradition has made much of this connection.<sup>44</sup> In his *Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley compared the poet to a bird “who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds” (516). In “Ode to a Nightingale” (1884), Keats invoked the nightingale’s song in an abortive attempt to drive out “the weariness, the fever, and the fret / Here, where men sit and hear each other groan” (463). But the Bernardian link is

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<sup>44</sup> For a good account of this matter in Greek and Latin poetry, see Chandler. For the Spanish tradition, see Blecua. For the English tradition, see Doggett.



stronger still. Just as sacred chants summon the presence of the divine, and just as Orpheus's music calls the world into existence, so the rooster's matutinal aria symbolically dispels the darkness of night and signals the birth of a new day.

Here the two meanings of *canto* ("song" or "music," on the one hand, and "chant" on the other) acquire special significance for our reading of *El buque*. While Bernárdez's text is indeed a *canto* in some sense (a "poetic song," generically construed), its inability to dispel "la sombra duradera" appears to disqualify it as "chant" and, as the poem also suggests, to cancel its ability to produce "encanto." The fact that Bernárdez uses *canto* to mean both "song" and "chant" sheds further light on the nature of this failure. If we say, as we must, that Bernárdez's verse both is and is not *canto*, then we will also say that his language is at odds with itself, that it is not self-identical. Each time the term "canto" appears, it wavers between two possible meanings and never fully coincides with either. As Derrida and others have shown, the absence of self-identity is constitutive of language itself. In this case, however, that absence has to do less with a philosophical claim about the relationship between signifiers and signifieds and more to do with a rhetorical feature of Bernárdez's poem. By highlighting a rupture or slippage within his own language, Bernárdez also signals implicitly its divergence from music, which, unlike verbal language, does not depend upon the signifier-signified distinction and therefore does possess something in the way of self-identity. In this sense, the notion that Bernárdez's verse both is and is not *canto* takes on dual significance. On the one hand, it is *canto* in the generic of "poem" or "poetic song." And yet, on the other hand, it is not *canto* both because, unlike sacred religious chants, it is incapable of summoning the presence of the divine, and also because it lacks the self-identity, the coincidence of sign and meaning

characteristic of music. I shall return to this idea at various times throughout the rest of this chapter.

As *El buque* proceeds, the poet's failed attempt to overcome despair through the power of poetic language appears at the linguistic level. The stanza cited above rhymes consonantly in the pattern ababb. The a-lines specify the problem ("la sombra duradera" and the counterfactual "si lo fuera"), while the first two b-lines suggest the solution ("encanto" and "canto"). The final line, then, is where some sort of synthesis ought to occur—where, in other words, the poet's verse ought finally to achieve the status of a "canto." And yet it does not. Indeed, it *cannot*. The reason has everything to do with the structure of the poem itself. Note, in the first place, that the poem's rhyme scheme demands that the fifth line rhyme with the second and fourth. Unfortunately, the poet has already exhausted the two most obvious choices with which to end the line ("encanto" and "canto," in lines two and four respectively). He is thus left with two options: he could reuse one of the terms, or select a new one. Neither option is fully acceptable. On the one hand, the very banality of an identity rhyme would decisively undermine the poem's incantatory power. If, on the other hand, the speaker selects a different term ("llanto," for example), he will find himself in roughly the same predicament, since, aside from the exigencies of rhyme, its precise identity is inconsequential. With "canto" and "encanto" ruled out as possibilities, no available words will carry off the feat required. In this way, the stanza itself is structured so as to make the poet's assertion of his own verse as a "canto" capable of producing "encanto" virtually impossible. And this means, in turn, that the poet is struggling, not only with "la sombra duradera," but also with the very structure of his own language.

The idea that Bernárdez has bumped up against the limits of his own language should be cast against the backdrop of a broader understanding of the prosody of *El buque*. In the lines cited above, for instance, the various words associated with the lexical unit “-anto” (“canto,” “encanto,” “llanto,” etc.) appear to function as *ripios*: that is, terms introduced to fill out a line or to ensure metrical uniformity. Generally speaking, *ripios* are thematically inconsequential, their purpose instead being to guarantee conformity to an established scheme. In this case, by contrast, the effect of guaranteeing such conformity (especially via the staccatoed repetition of “-anto”) is to make the poem sound plodding, halting, and awkward, rather more like an oddly placed cymbal crash than a finely wrought melody. The irony, of course, is that Bernárdez’s unmelodic prosody occurs in a text dedicated not only to the exaltation of the sonorous expression of music—the production of *canto*—but also to an attempt to make poetry take part in that sonority.

It is not difficult to see how the contradictory pull of Bernárdez’s poetics—exaltation of music and unmusical prosody—both brings him in line with and separates him from the modern poetic tradition, especially Symbolism and *modernismo*. For the Symbolists, music was not only an “exceptional art,” but also the end to which all poetry ought to aspire (Lehmann 194). “De la musique avant toute chose,” wrote Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) in the opening line of his “Art poétique,” a notion Elizabeth McCombie construes as an attempt to infuse poetry with “a kind of unhindered weightlessness” and thereby to draw attention away from the poem’s semantic content and toward its “rhythmic and sonorous qualities” (3). Even more significant in this respect than Verlaine was Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), who, in “Crise de vers” (1895), distinguished “le

double état de la parole”: on the one hand, “brut ou immédiat,” on the other “essentiel” (*Divagations* 246). By “brut ou immédiat” Mallarmé referred to the way in which words, under ordinary conditions, serve a communicative function. In this text, the preferred metaphor is economic. Language, he says, is “une pièce de monnaie” or a “monnaie d’échange,” since just as money may be exchanged for any number of other commodities, so language serves the function of “exchanging human thought” (*échanger la pensée humaine*), that is, of transmitting ideas from one person to another (246).

But if ordinary language is communicative and representational, poetry by contrast seeks the complete dissociation of sign and referent, one in which words no longer *refer* to external reality but instead contain their significance wholly within themselves. The point of this distinction is twofold. First, as Andrew Lehmann notes, Mallarmé’s conception of the “essential word” allows the poet to convert “the brute unpoetical quality of unorganized language” into “sonority or musicality” and thereby to achieve “the standard of expressiveness which we call poetry” (159). Second, by emphasizing “the ‘musical’ quality of poetry,” the poet also guarantees the “self-sufficiency” of his creation. If language is no longer referential, it is likewise no longer beholden to external criteria of evaluation (147). Modern poetry made much of this notion. In a letter to Valéry dated 5 May 1891, Mallarmé himself suggested that poets “pillage and plagiarize [*pillier et démarquer*]” music in order to transform their own “mute” and “insufficient” artistic medium into a “high symphony” (*Oeuvres* 805-6). Somewhat later, Rubén Darío would write that all verse ought to have both “[una] armonía verbal” and “una melodía ideal” (*Prosas* 15), while another French Symbolist,

Rémy de Gourmont (1858-1915), argued that language “a dû être d’abord purement musicale, sans aucun accord avec la réalité” (cited in Lehmann 147).

Significantly, Mallarmé’s emphasis on the “musical” quality of poetry is often framed in the language of “chant,” a connection that also appears in Baudelaire’s *L’art romantique* (1868), where the father of modern poetry links chant, in both a poetic and religious sense, to poetic language, as symbolized by the lyre: “La lyre exprime en effet cet état presque surnaturel, cette intensité de vie où l’âme chante, où elle est contrainte de chanter” (364). Baudelaire picks up the same thread a few pages later when he suggests, on the basis of the etymological relationship between *chant* and *enchantement*, that “l’art, poésie et musique surtout, n’a eu pour but que d’enchanter l’esprit” (374). Mallarmé himself plays on this etymological link in a short essay on Théodore de Banville, where he suggests that “l’antique délire du chant” returns us to “l’enchantement édéen” (cited in Abbott 190). For Mallarmé, however, chant is not simply a vehicle of enchantment but also constitutive of his poetic aesthetic. Indeed, as Abbot remarks, Mallarmé’s aesthetic ideal—poetic language’s capacity to “suggest” (*suggérer*) objects rather than “name” (*nommer*) them—is inseparable from his understanding of poetry as chant (183-84).

That Bernárdez was familiar with this tradition is beyond question. Despite his resistance to the *afrancesamiento* of Hispanic verse, he must have known that any account of the relationship between music and poetry would evoke immediate Symbolist resonances. All the more paradoxical, then, that Bernárdez’s treatment of precisely that theme should have taken the form of a poem whose prosody is as awkward and unmelodic as that of *El buque*. The likeliest explanation is that Bernárdez’s prosody is not only unmusical but also *deliberately* so—in other words, that the Argentine poet

consciously distances himself from the tradition exemplified by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Darío, and others. If for Baudelaire poetry has as its fundamental task to “enchanter l’esprit,” and if Mallarmé’s “antique délire du chant” carries us back to “l’enchantement édéen,” then Bernárdez’s own verse is “llanto” rather than “canto” (in the relevant sense) precisely because it is incapable of generating the “encanto” necessary to dispel “la sombra duradera.”

In a certain respect, this conclusion is unsurprising. As I have suggested throughout this section, Bernárdez’s verse seeks not so much to “musicalize” poetry as to underscore the poverty of poetic language with regard to musical expressiveness. Such, indeed, is the theme of much of the rest of *El buque*. The idea announces itself as soon as the poet first hears the sound that he will later identify as music. The first intimations are, as one might expect, vague and indistinct: “una cosa / Que vaga por la noche tenebrosa” (66); “un rumor parecido / Al de la sangre por el cuerpo humano” (67); “un rumor insistente” (67); “un rumor incesante” (67); and “un aire cuyo nombre / No parece de viento / Sino de música sin instrumento” (68). This final observation, in which the poet at last identifies what he hears as music, constitutes the turning point of the poem. In the following stanza, the speaker adds:

Música solitaria,  
música pura, música directa,  
música necesaria,  
música predilecta  
de la Música, música perfecta. (68)

These lines echo Fray Luis’s “música estremada” (81), a description which Bernárdez, in a gesture of simultaneous evocation and distancing, suggests but fails to reproduce exactly. In general terms, however, the stanza seems to answer to the broadly

Rousseauian notion that music, in its purest and most original form, was melody produced by a single human voice in a state of heightened passion (45). And yet it turns out that music's simplicity is itself part of the problem. Almost immediately, the speaker proceeds to confess his own limits: "Comprendo fácilmente / La música del cántico estupendo," he says, "Pero apenas comprendo / Lo que la música me está diciendo" (69). In these enigmatic lines the poet uses the same verb (*comprender*) to describe what at first blush appear to be two diametrically opposed states of affairs: he "understands" the music but he does not "understand" what it says. Clearly, *comprender* is being used in two distinct senses, and those two senses in turn seem to answer to the distinction between discursive and intuitive forms of knowledge. Discursive knowledge, on the one hand, is a mode of knowing in which the mind moves through a series of premises to a conclusion. First I know that all men are mortal; then I know that Socrates is a man; and then I know Socrates is mortal. Discursivity is therefore inherently temporal, and its relationship to language (also inherently temporal) is hardly accidental. Intuitive knowledge, by contrast, refers to a form of knowing that lacks any such temporal dimension. In the *Summa*, for instance, Aquinas argues that angels, rather than proceeding step-wise from premise to conclusion, instead behold "at once" the whole range of their knowledge (Ia, q. 58, a. 3). The same applies to divine knowledge. For a somewhat more mundane example one might think of the way in which master geometers are often able to "see" the truth of a proof without working through each of its steps.<sup>45</sup> In either case, the key question is whether and to what extent Bernárdez's intuitive "comprehension" can be translated into the discursive confines of poetic language.

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<sup>45</sup> I owe this example to David Bradshaw.

The answer, it turns out, is that such translation proves impossible, and indeed the rest of the opening section (up to the point where the poet first glimpses the boat) is occupied by a series of attempts not so much to understand what the music is saying as to explain why the poet in fact *cannot* understand what the music is saying. The first explanation is linguistic:

[La música] Dice cosas perfectas,  
Pero no con palabras minuciosas  
Sino con indirectas,  
Y muchas otras cosas  
Indecibles de puro misteriosas. (70)

The key contrast here is between the mode of expression proper to music and the mode of expression proper to poetic language. If, for Mallarmé and others, this distinction holds only to the extent that poetry fails to achieve its proper goal, then for Bernárdez it is inherent in the nature of language itself. On the one hand, says the poet, music “dice cosas perfectas.” But “perfect” in what sense? The answer has to do with the fact that poetry, like all the verbal arts, depends upon what Valéry called “cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens” (*Cahiers* 4:782). Valéry’s point was that language rests upon a distinction between sign and meaning, signifier and signified, since how a word sounds when spoken (or what it looks like when written) is always distinguishable from what it means. Again, to follow an argument made clear in Derrida, linguistic signification is always a matter of delay, of deferral, of traversing the (intraversable) distance between sign and meaning. In music, by contrast, no such distinction between signifier and signified is possible. Music does not *mean* anything in addition to what it *is*. The material sign (the sound) *just is* the meaning; the one is indissociable, even at a conceptual level, from the other.



Surprisingly, both musicologists and linguists have been reluctant to take up the relationship between music and language, a reluctance explicable at least in part by the fact that musicology as an academic discipline emerged at a moment in Western history when aesthetic theorists began to reject the mimetic, representational principles of the eighteenth-century and instead to see music as an independent, autonomous, even “absolute” form of art (Thomas 12-13). Linguists have also generally resisted the temptation to see music as a form of language.<sup>46</sup> In his *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (1966), for instance, Benveniste argued that music has a syntax but no semantics, since musical “meaning” cannot be translated into language (2:54-56; Thomas 13). Julia Kristeva likewise argues that while language and music are “organized according to the principle of the *difference* of their components,” the binary “phonematic differences,” so central to linguistic signification, “are not pertinent” in music (309).

Among philosophers the story is different. For Pythagoras and his followers, music was the ordering principle of the universe, and indeed the Greek term *mousike* included not only what we call “music” but also poetic meter (McCombie 1). Somewhat later, Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues* (1781) advocated the restoration of unity between poetry and music. In the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer famously imagined music as the most direct expression of Will—an idea taken up, in modified form, in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)—while Hegel suggested that music and visual art constitute the thesis and antithesis of which poetic language is the synthesis

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<sup>46</sup> There are a few notable exceptions. Umberto Eco, for instance, argues that music has the form of a language, but one “freer and differently structured” (*Struttura* 356). See also the essays collected in Raffaele Pozzi’s *La musica come linguaggio universale*. For a general account of the relationship between music and language in the French Enlightenment, see Thomas (12-33).

(*Aesthetics* 2:960).<sup>47</sup> Of even greater interest is the Jena Romantic Friedrich Schlegel who, anticipating Walter Pater by more than half a century, suggested that “[e]very art has musical principles, and when it is completed it becomes music” (cited in Bowie, *Music* 101). Schlegel’s sense of the completeness or perfection of music finds a certain resonance in Wittgenstein who, in a series of *Notebooks* written between 1914 and 1916, noted that music is “a kind of tautology, it is complete in itself; it satisfies itself” (40). The point, for Schlegel as for Wittgenstein, is that music is characterized by a kind of self-sufficiency precisely because it depends neither upon the adequation of reality and visual representation (as in pictorial art) nor upon the coincidence of word and object (as in language), but instead contains its meaning, its significance wholly within itself. Yale theologian Denys Turner translates this line of thought into theological terms when he characterizes music as “proto-typically Eucharistic,” since in the Eucharist, as in music, the material sign is so completely transubstantiated into its expression that the distinction between sign and meaning finally disappears (Turner, *Faith* 116).

*El buque* seems to presuppose an analogous account of the relationship between music and poetry. For if music, on the one hand, says “cosas perfectas,” the poet’s own words are “minuciosas,” an adjective that can mean “detailed,” “meticulous,” and “thorough,” but which, in Bernárdez’s text, perhaps also retains overtones of the Latin root *minuere*, meaning “to lessen, reduce, diminish.” Two additional considerations lend credence to this reading. First, “minuciosas” contains the Latin *minus*, which, when contrasted with “perfectas” (in the sense of *perficere* – “complete, thorough, finished”), suggests that the poet’s language is in some sense deficient, imperfect, or “less than.”

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<sup>47</sup> For Schopenhauer, see Bowie (*Music* 193-201). For more on Hegel, see Bowie (*Music* 105-137) and Donelan (68-96).

Second, “minuciosas” is a kind of anagram, however imprecise, of “música.” That imprecision is part of the point, however, since poetic language functions only by distorting and disfiguring the pristine self-sufficiency of musical expression. For Bernárdez, then, poetic language amounts to a diminished or deficient mode of expression, one which, because of its dependence on the signifier-signified distinction, is incapable of rivaling the expressive capacity of music.

This explanation of the poet’s inability to duplicate the qualities of music in poetic language, though true, remains insufficient. In the following stanza, the speaker reiterates again his fundamental quandary—“¿Quién es esta persona / Cuyo canto parece que viviera?”—and attempts once more to track down the sound’s source: “Me acerco a la ventana / Para ver el causante del concierto” (71). Six stanzas later, he adds: “Sin perder un momento, / Busco resueltamente la salida,” all the while “imaginando algún procedimiento / para saber qué huésped me pide alojamiento” (72). Yet the search is hopeless. “Pero me desconcierto,” the poet confides, a line which, by contrast with “el causante del concierto,” not only underscores the unmusicality of Bernárdez’s own verse, but also, and especially in light of the reflexive construction, transfers that unmusicality from poem to poet. By this point, moreover, the conclusion is foregone: “Por más que lo procuro, / No logro comprender lo incomprensible” (72).

Then, suddenly, without warning, as if in a flash of inspiration, the speaker hits upon the solution:

Pero inmediatamente  
Llego a la conclusión indefectible  
De que, si la corriente  
Del canto es perceptible,  
La fuente original es invisible. (73)

Bernárdez's reference to "la corriente" and "la fuente original" recalls not only San Juan de la Cruz's "fonte que mana y corre" (202), but also Fray Luis's *Oda*, in which Francisco de Salinas' music "lleg[a] a la más alta esfera, / y oye allí otro modo / de no perecedera / música, que es la fuente y la primera" (82). In conceptual terms, however, the stanza is patently Thomistic: since human knowledge is limited to the categories of experience, the invisible "fuente original" is accessible only as it is revealed in the perceptible "corriente." Or, in other words, if one cannot know the cause directly, one can at least grasp it through its effects. But this Thomistic logic, together with the "conclusión indefectible" it yields, also conceals an admission of failure. If the poem's opening section is concerned with an attempt to identify the source and meaning of the mysterious sound, then the poet's recognition that the "fuente original" of the canto is invisible—"no permite / Que sepa dónde tiene su escondite," he says later (97)—suggests that his original intention was thwarted and hence that the search for knowledge ultimately failed to yield fruit. In fact, it was partly on the basis of just such an assumption that the subsequent critical tradition revised Gamo's initial interpretation of the poem as straightforwardly mystical. Martínez Fernández puts the objection succinctly: since the poet never achieves a moment of union with the divine, one cannot speak of an "experiencia mística" without qualification (96). Rodríguez Francia agrees and opts to label the poet's experience as "apophatic" rather than mystical, since in her view, the product of the poet's search is not mystical knowledge but the recognition that the object of that search is inexpressible in language.

But even this reading is not, in my view, totally accurate. It is true, of course, that the poet's initial response to the music is an awareness of the object's incomprehensible

(and hence ineffable) nature, and Rodríguez Francia's interpretation might work if the poem were to stop here, which it does not. Note, in the first place, that the Thomistic logic that governs the stanza is also a sacramental logic. When the poet recognizes that the sound's "fuente original" is accessible only insofar as it is mediated by and through material reality ("la corriente / Del canto"), he also recognizes, however implicitly, that the visible order is a conduit of the invisible order: that the spiritual reveals itself in the material, and that the material, in turn, functions as a symbol or sacrament of the spiritual. In light of this recognition, the poet confesses "la inutilidad de mi desvelo" (74) and contents himself with investigating the sound's varied effects within the material realm. To the extent that the poem generates what Martínez Fernández calls "conocimiento espiritual" (92), it does so indirectly, on the basis of how the divine manifests itself in the created order.

Almost immediately, the poet realizes that if the created order owes its existence to an invisible "fuente original," then he, too, owes his own existence to that same source: "Mi cuerpo no era mío / Sino de la corriente / Formada por el alma transparente" (74).<sup>48</sup> Three stanzas later, the theme recurs: "El corazón ardía, / Pues otro, superior, era su fuente" (75). Here the sacramental character of material reality is transferred to the poet himself. As the poem proceeds, the speaker extends the analogy further still, imagining his own body as a conduit of divine grace:

Y el fuego soberano,  
[...] podía por la mano  
llegar a su destino,  
*haciendo de mi sangre su camino.* (77, my emphasis)

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<sup>48</sup> A later poem, "El destello" (first published in *La ciudad sin Laura*), echoes the theme of the poet's own being as but a spark or *chispa* of some larger, cosmic principle. There the speaker suggests that he will not find "la suspirada huella / que conduce a la vida suspirada [...] / hasta volver a ser [...] / el fuego que soñé, la luz que fui" (27).

The created order's progressive irradiation by music—which, the poet has now discovered, “está relacionada / Con el astro que veo” (80)—soon yields further knowledge. More important than knowing “el motivo / Del canto que me inunda,” the speaker says, is recognizing that it is accompanied by “un sonido que me da la vida” (80). More important than discerning “la causa y el significado / Del canto prisionero” is allowing one's soul to be conformed to “lo que regenera / Las almas por adentro y por afuera” (87). Finally, more important than unraveling “la clave / Del canto incomprensible” is resting “dulcemente” in the knowledge that the “sonido” it produces “borra los pecados” (90, 98).

The poet's evaluation of music's capacity to remit sins constitutes the poem's theological climax, but it is only intelligible in light of a stanza that occurs earlier, when the poet is still casting about for an explanation of the mysterious sound:

La música del pan  
 es como la que digo, pero con  
 una ternura tan  
 grande que la razón  
 al sentirla se vuelve corazón. (78)

These lines distill with exquisite precision the contours of Bernárdez's musical vision of sacramentality. They suggest not only that music embodies certain Eucharistic qualities, but also that the Eucharist itself has the shape of music. The correlation is achieved through two puns. First, the stanza's opening line, “La música del pan,” might mean simply “the music of the bread,” in which case it would refer both to the Eucharistic wafer and, somewhat more obliquely, to the manner in which the coincidence of sign and meaning in the Eucharist mirrors a similar coincidence in music. The same line, however, might also allude to “the music of [P]an,” the half-god, half-goat deity of shepherds,

flocks, and rustic music (Merivale 227). A minor figure in the Greek mythology, Pan was resurrected by the Romantics and, during the course of the nineteenth century, came to replace the somewhat less edgy Apollo as the preferred deity of English poets (Hutton 43). The second pun—“es como la que digo”—ties these apparently disparate references together. By playing on the two meanings of “como,” Bernárdez suggests that “la música del pan” is at once spoken (“digo”) and eaten (“como”), thus implicitly confirming the phrase’s dual valence. If, on the one hand, “pan” is taken to mean “bread,” then the phrase “la música del pan” evokes the Eucharistic host and corresponds to “como” (the host, after all, is consumed during the Mass). If, on the other hand, “pan” is taken to refer to the Greek deity, the phrase evokes music proper and corresponds to “digo” (as when a poem is recited, declaimed, sung by a rhapsode).

The symbolic yoking of music and bread, speaking and eating, invites, indeed forces, us to envision an explicit link between music and Eucharist. Not only, in other words, do the Eucharist and music share certain features in common. Bernárdez also asks us to see that music itself has a Eucharistic structure and, inversely, that the Eucharist has a musical structure. But the implications reach further still. If, as the musical sonnets suggest, reality is enchanted because it is *constituted* by being “in-toned” or “en-sung”; and if, as “Poema del pan eucarístico” suggests, the world exists only insofar as it is sustained in existence by divine being, then the sacramental character of the created order is inseparable from its musical character. To say, then, that the created order, like the Eucharistic elements, exists only insofar as it is sustained in existence by God is just to say that the created order exists only insofar as it, like music, is *performed*. Indeed, according to the fourth-century Cappadocian theologian Gregory of Nyssa, creation itself

is nothing other than a “wonderfully wrought hymn to the power of the Almighty” (Hart, *Beauty* 275).

But this conclusion reinforces a concern raised earlier. If music is, in some sense, paradigmatically sacramental, and if, as is clearly the case, Bernárdez’s poetry never quite manages to achieve the status of musicality, then a question presses: what, exactly, is the relationship between poetry and sacramentality? The question presses even harder when we recall that Bernárdez’s most explicit and sustained treatment of music comes in a poem the prosody of which is not only unmusical but *deliberately* so. If this is true, then in what sense, if any, can Bernárdez’s poetry legitimately be called “sacramental”? Such is the fundamental question of the present chapter. On it hangs the very possibility of a sacramental poetics.

The immediate answer is distressing. To the extent that poetic language seeks to rival music’s expressive power, it always and inevitably fails. Further, if music, like the Eucharist, marks the site of the coincidence of sign and meaning, and hence the point at which signification reaches an extreme of plenitude, then poetic language is always a kind of second-rate substitute, a form of expression which, because of its dependence on the signifier-signified distinction, inevitably disappoints. If music is sacramental, then poetic language is not, and the very idea of a “sacramental poetics” threatens to crumble under the weight of its own incoherence. In search of a solution to this quandary, let us turn now to *La ciudad sin Laura*.

#### 3.4.3.b. Sacramentality and Eschatological Hope

*La ciudad sin Laura* was published in 1938, but its origins are more remote. Bernárdez met his future wife, Laura González Palau, in Córdoba in 1932, and the two married



seven years later (Martínez Fernández 84). By 1933, just as he set to work on *El buque*, Bernárdez had already begun to compose a series of love sonnets.<sup>49</sup> These poems do not mention Laura directly, but their thematic continuity with *Ciudad* leaves little doubt that she inspired them. For instance, “Soneto a la doncella lejana,” like *Ciudad*, begins with an extended meditation on the absence of the poet’s beloved, an absence framed by the repetition of the adjective “inaccesible”: “Inaccesible al viento que suspira,” “inaccesible al pálido destello,” “Inaccesible al agua que delira,” “inaccesible al sol y a todo aquello / que alrededor de su persona gira” (89). Thematically, the lines recall the theme of the inaccessibility of divine music in *El buque*, though in this case, of course, Woman takes the place of music as the emblem of inaccessibility. The substitution is unsurprising, especially given Romanticism’s emphasis on the capacity of love to overcome human fragmentation, alienation, and selfishness. Indeed, one need only recall Darío’s *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905) for a sense of how thoroughly the *modernistas* internalized that tradition.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, in the first half of the sestet, Bernárdez reveals his own debt to *modernismo*: “la doncella en su mundo de diamante / inclina la cabeza lentamente / para escuchar en el remoto mundo” (90). Yet if the first half of the sestet looks back, the second half looks ahead, anticipating one of the central themes of *La ciudad sin Laura*:

el eco de un latido muy distante,  
la resonancia de una voz ausente  
y el sonido de un paso vagabundo. (90)

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<sup>49</sup> Some of the sonnets were published together with *La ciudad sin Laura*; others were published a few months earlier in *Cielo de tierra*.

<sup>50</sup> See Abrams (292-99) for a thorough discussion of love in the Romantic tradition. See Jade (Modernismo 77-87) for Darío’s interpretation of romantic love as a means of transcendence, and Scarano (357-58) for Darío’s attempt to combine “la mujer como signo eucarístico” and “la poesía como vivencia sensual” in order to convert base sensualism into “misticismo sensualista.”

Echoes and resonances permeate Bernárdez's Laura poem, and, as we shall see, they conspire to produce what I should like to term "presence within absence." In "Soneto a la doncella lejana," as elsewhere, that absence-filled presence is modeled on *El buque*'s distinction between "fuente original" and "corriente perceptible": between the poet's perception and what he takes to be its ultimate, absent perception. In this case, what the poet perceives ("el eco," "la resonancia," "el sonido") is framed as part of a subjective genitive ("de un latido muy distante," "de una voz ausente," "de un paso vagabundo"). The thrice-repeated "de," which links the poet's perception to its source, marks the distance between the two and so furnishes the precise measure of the title's "lejana."

Another poem, "Soneto ausente" (also written in Córdoba in the early 1930s and published in *Cielo de tierra*) anticipates, though from a somewhat different angle, the theme of absence that characterizes *La ciudad sin Laura*. "Soneto ausente" is an exquisitely fashioned phenomenology of space and time, one whose central concern is the manner in which the vagaries of subjectivity influence our experience of external reality. Like all of Bernárdez's Laura poems, "Soneto ausente" is predicated on the absence of the beloved, but in this case that absence has a strange effect:

El sentido del tiempo se me aclara  
desde que te ha dejado y me has traído,  
y el espacio también tiene sentido  
desde que con sus lenguas nos separa. (123)

One is tempted here to recall Heidegger's argument, first advanced in "What is Metaphysics?" (1929), that beings only appear against a background of nothingness and hence that absence is a precondition of presence. Bernárdez, of course, does not quite match Heidegger's philosophical gravitas, but his point does tend in the same direction,

namely, that Laura's absence is what throws the world of space and time into full relief.

The sestet develops this notion further still:

Desde que somos de la lejanía,  
el espacio, que apenas existía,  
existe por habernos separado.  
Y el tiempo que discurre hacia la muerte  
no existe por el tiempo que ha pasado  
sino por el que falta para verte. (124)

Here epistemology gives way to ontology. Space, according to the speaker, exists "por habernos separado," while time exists not as a series of past events but as a measure of the interval between the present and the poet's future reunion with his beloved. Not only, then, does the beloved's absence clarify the meaning of space and time; it also furnishes their conditions of existence. In the course of a more general discussion of spatiality and temporality in Bernárdez's poetry, Carmen Valderrey rightly points out that love, far from lulling us into "una visión ingenua de la realidad," forces us instead to "tomar conciencia de toda su dureza y limitación" (216). For Valderrey, moreover, the poet's recognition of his own spatiotemporal limitations leads not to despair, but to a renewed "confianza en su superación" (217). "Para el amor," she concludes, "no existen barreras insalvables. Su omnipotencia culmina con la victoria sobre los límites espacio-temporales" (217). *Omnia*, to quote a Roman poet, *vincit amor*.

While this interpretation is not incorrect, it does put the emphasis in the wrong place. Absence, distance, and separation appear in Bernárdez's poems (especially his love poems) not simply as obstacles to be overcome. They are, rather, constitutive elements *both* of his account of sacramentality *and* of his understanding of enchantment. This notion emerges most clearly in *La ciudad sin Laura*. As noted above, Bernárdez's invocation of Laura has as its primary referent a concrete historical personage, his wife,

but it also alludes to the most famous Laura in all of literary history: Petrarch's beloved and the subject of so many of his poems.<sup>51</sup> The allusion was not lost on Bernárdez, who appended to the first edition of *La ciudad sin Laura* an epigraph taken from Petrarch's *Rime sparse*: "ove l'aura si sente." Bernárdez's invocation of Laura thus has not only historical and biographical but also poetic implications. As John Freccero has shown, Petrarch's own treatment of Laura acquires poetic significance on the basis of the pun *Laura-Lauro*, since by creating a poetic image of his beloved the Italian poet simultaneously constitutes himself as "poet laureate" (Freccero 37). The analogy with Bernárdez on this point is hardly perfect—Petrarch had almost no personal interaction with his Laura, whose very identity is still a matter of dispute—but there remains a sense in which the Argentine poet sees Laura as constitutive not only of his poetic persona, but also of his own, and his work's, existence.

*La ciudad sin Laura*, however, should be read not only in terms of the Petrarchan tradition, but also, within the Bernardian canon, as the culmination of the love sonnets collected in *Cielo de tierra*. It is a poem in which the Bernárdez's meditation on absence (specifically, the absence of the beloved) receives special focalization and where the precise contours of his understanding of sacramentality receive their fullest expression. The text as a whole is framed as an incantation whereby the poet's voice calls to presence (or attempts to call to presence) an absent object. The opening two stanzas read:

En la ciudad callada y sola mi voz despierta una  
profunda resonancia.  
Mientras la noche va creciendo pronuncio un  
nombre y este nombre me acompaña. (11)

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<sup>51</sup> The scholarly literature on Petrarch's Laura is, of course, vast. See especially Freccero and Trapp.

The lines' Orphic overtones should not be missed. Nor should the fact that they gather together and synthesize the guiding motifs of Bernárdez's earlier poetry. "[L]a ciudad callada y sola," for instance, recalls the air of solitude and obscurity that characterizes the opening of the musical sonnets, while the "profunda resonancia" not only evokes "Soneto a la doncella lejana," but also foreshadows the emergence of music as one of the poem's key themes. Equally significant is the reference to "mi voz," which recalls Bernárdez's tendency to attribute human qualities to music. In the following stanza, the speaker renders explicit the poem's musical frame: "En el sonido con que suena siento el sonido de / una música lejana" (11). The repetition of s-sounds ("en el sonido con que suena siento el sonido") contributes to the hushed, airy tone of the text as a whole. More important still is the manner in which these lines repeat, in modified form, the standard Bernardian distinction, developed most fully in *El buque*, between perceptible effect ("el sonido") and invisible source ("una música lejana"). The difference, of course, is that in this case, unlike in *El buque*, the distinction has been internalized: the poet's *own* voice owes its existence to an external cause, and so the very act of enunciation by which the poem is framed ("pronuncio / un nombre") is itself the product of the poet's participation in what, in the following stanza, he calls "aquella hoguera que eterniza lo que abrasa" (12).

By making an act of enunciation ("pronuncio / un nombre") the centerpiece of the poem, Bernárdez both alludes to Orpheus's power to call things to presence, and underscores the text's Eucharistic overtones. As Michael Merz has argued, the Eucharistic sacrifice is, at least in part, a "kommunikatives Handlungspiel" in which the priest's utterance both communicates information and effects a change in physical reality

(136).<sup>52</sup> In *La ciudad sin Laura*, the speaker presents himself as a priest whose very words call to presence an absent object. And just as Christ's presence on earth (first in the Incarnation and subsequently in the Eucharistic host) opens up the material world to influence of the divine, so invoking Laura's name yields a transformation of the created order:

El dulce nombre que pronuncio para poblar este  
desierto es el de Laura.  
Las cosas son inteligibles porque este nombre de mujer  
las ilumina.  
Porque este nombre las arranca de las tinieblas en  
que estaban sumergidas.  
Una por una recuperan su resplandor espiritual y  
resucitan. (12)<sup>53</sup>

The parallel between these lines and the musical sonnets is unmistakable. If in the "Soneto a Haydn," music "anima las tinieblas silenciosas" (*Estrellas* 30), then in *La ciudad sin Laura*, the very mention of the beloved's name "arranca [las cosas] de las tinieblas en / que estaban sumergidas." If in the "Soneto a Scarlatti," a "corriente melodiosa" ressurects the world from death and man from the inert lethargy of dreams (*Estrellas* 28), now, at the sound of Laura's name, "[l]a obscuridad desaparece" and "el sueño silencioso / se disipa." Finally, if Palestrina's "voz de serafín" penetrates the "sombra" of the poet's life (*Estrellas* 21), then "este nombre de mujer" illuminates the world of matter and renders it intelligible.

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the relationship between the Eucharist and speech-act theory, see Bieritz (257-58), and Sherry ("Enchantment" 580-83).

<sup>53</sup> The *modernistas* (and especially Darío) frequently put Eucharistic imagery to erotic use. In "Ite, missa est," for instance, the beloved's "espíritu" becomes "la hostia de mi amorosa misa" (*Prosas* 50). Elsewhere in *Prosas profanas*, the Eucharist appears linked to whiteness. "Blasón," for example, speaks of an "ala eucarística" (30), while "Para una cubana" refers to a "blancura eucarística" (38). The Bernardian difference should not be missed, however: whereas Darío employs the Eucharist as a rhetorical trope, Bernárdez (so I have argued) builds upon it a worldview. Or to put the point somewhat less theoretically: Darío *uses* the Eucharist; Bernárdez really believes in it.

When *El buque* and *La ciudad sin Laura* were published in a single volume in 1941, Bernárdez himself noted the parallel between his treatment of erotic love and his treatment of music: Both texts, he said, “brotaron de diversos manantiales pero nacieron de una misma llama: el amor” (3).<sup>54</sup> What has generally gone unremarked, however, is another—and, in my view, even more significant—connection between the two. I suggested earlier that one of the central issues raised by the musical sonnets is the inadequacy of poetic language in the face of music’s perfection and precision. If the coincidence of signifier and signified establishes music as the highest form of artistic expression (and, to recall Pater’s words, that toward which all the other arts tend), then language always lags behind, plagued by difference, absence, and delay and therefore incapable of delivering the signifiatory plenitude characteristic of musicality. Strangely, the absence characteristic of language is repeated, in modified form, in *La ciudad sin Laura*. I say strangely because *La ciudad sin Laura* is not only Bernárdez’s best known love poem, but also the one in which his passion for Laura receives its most complete expression.

And yet it is also a poem characterized primarily, and true to its Petrarchan original, by absence. To be sure, the poet declares Laura’s presence throughout the text—“Nunca he sentido como ahora la vecindad de la mujer que estoy cantando” (13); “Cuando el amor está presente no puede haber nada / escondido ni lejano” (14)—but he declares that presence *only within absence*. The final two lines read: “El ser que nombro es el que, siendo, me da una vida / sin dolor ni sobresalto” (16). If the poem begins with the enunciation of Laura’s name (“pronuncio / un nombre”), that is also where it ends—with a name, a naked signifier which, like all signifiers, simultaneously evokes the thing

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<sup>54</sup> See also Barufaldi (34-35).

it signifies and underscores its absence. Indeed, for Bernárdez, Laura remains absent precisely to the extent that she remains a sign, a “nombre” inscribed in the interval between “being” and “naming” (“[e]l ser que nombro”) and hence in the interval between presence and absence. The whole of the poem, then, is structured not only according to the apparently innocuous preposition *sin*, but also according to the absence that characterizes language as such. As with *El buque* and the musical sonnets, so with *La ciudad sin Laura*: language insinuates itself and drives a wedge between language and reality. “Pure presence” is never reached, “mystical union” remains unattained.

Bernárdez’s emphasis on Laura’s absence echoes not only Petrarch but also the latter’s forebears, especially the Provençal convention of *amor de lonh*. This idea, associated primarily with the twelfth-century troubadour Jafré Rudel, makes distance and lack of satiation essential conditions of desire’s persistence (Mazzotta 66, 139). Petrarch took up the theme in connection with his own Laura, whose name, as the pun *Laura/l’aura* suggests, is the very figure of elusiveness and who appears, in Giuseppe Mazzotta’s words, only “by being invisible” (63). Despite this tradition, however, Bernárdez does not, as love poets are often wont, make the beloved’s absence an occasion for despair and anguish (“Lagrimar sempre è ’l mio sommo diletto,” writes Petrarch in *Canzoniere* 226). Quite the opposite. *La ciudad sin Laura* is, without exception, optimistic, even ecstatic. “Mi vida entera permanece porque este nombre que / recuerdo no me olvida,” says the speaker, “Porque este nombre me sostiene con emoción desde su / tierna lejanía” (13). A little later, he adds: “Nunca he sentido como ahora la vecindad de la mujer que estoy / cantando,” for “cuando el amor está presente no puede haber nada escondido / ni lejano” (14). These lines are enigmatic, even maddening. How,



after all, are we to square the poet's sense of joyous exuberance with the fact that *La ciudad sin Laura* takes its lead, precisely, from the beloved's absence? How is it, in other words, that Bernárdez's erotic passion springs not from the beloved's presence but from her absence?

The answer, I think, has to do with the fact that, unlike Petrarch's Laura or Rudel's Hodierna or even Don Quixote's mostly imaginary Dulcinea del Toboso, Bernárdez's Laura exists within a present absence that is nevertheless inscribed within a horizon of hopeful expectation. And this, in turn, is just to say that Bernárdez's poem has an *eschatological* structure, one that hinges not on the actuality of present consummation, but rather on the hope of future consummation.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, Bernárdez's Laura finds an analogy in the Church, likewise suspended between the "now" and the "not yet," present absence and future presence, God's self-revelation in the Incarnation and its consummation in the eschaton at the end of human history. The poem's penultimate line makes the point clearly: "Entre la dicha y mi existencia la diferencia que hubo ayer se va borrando" (15). The key image is "se va borrando," which suggests that the poet's reunion with the beloved is neither complete nor incomplete but instead inscribed in that eschatological space (dramatized by the gerundive) between pure present and pure future.

We thus come to the heart not only of Bernárdez's understanding of erotic love, but also of the relationship between poetic language, sacramentality, and enchantment. If *La ciudad sin Laura* is structured eschatologically, then so is Eucharistic sacramentality itself. Indeed, for all the talk of *praesentia realis*, Eucharistic sacrifice turns upon the

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<sup>55</sup> This feature reveals more clearly than any other the poem's affinity with the mystical tradition. As Denys Turner has argued, mystical literature tends almost invariably to emphasize *desiderium* over *fruitio* and to situate the lover-beloved relationship in the interval between betrothal and consummation (*Eros* 84).

notion of absence, precisely because the Eucharist functions *as* Eucharist only to the extent that the Kingdom of God is not yet fully realized and hence only to the extent that Christ remains absent. As Denys Turner has argued, the communication of Christ's presence in the Mass necessarily "fails of ultimacy," simply because the "Eucharist is not yet the kingdom of the future as it will be in the future," but instead "points to it *as absent*" ("Darkness" 157). In this sense, Turner adds, the Eucharistic sign is caught up in an "eschatological two-sidedness": "it is affirmation interpenetrated by negation, presence interpenetrated by absence" (157). This, of course, is just another way of saying that the Eucharist is a sacrament, a sign, and therefore invariably implicated in the interplay of presence and absence that characterizes signification as such. But—and this point should not be missed—the Eucharist is not *merely* a sign. It is instead what Catherine Pickstock has called a "temporally ecstatic" sign, a sign which, though rooted in the present, nevertheless exceeds that present, stretching out toward its future eschatological consummation.

It is in the context of *La ciudad sin Laura*'s eschatological temporality that we ought to situate not only Bernárdez's understanding of the relationship between music and poetry, but also the entire question of enchantment. If, as I argued earlier, Bernárdez's various attempts to make poetic language match the richness of musical expression always end in failure, then it now seems that language's inability to achieve the condition of music is precisely what constitutes it as sacramental. As poetic language strains to render itself coincident with music, it imitates the temporal ecstasy of the Eucharist, which likewise reaches beyond itself and points to the full actuality of Christ's presence in the eschaton. And if, for Bernárdez, the Eucharist is in some sense an

allegory of the whole of the created order, then not only poetic language but also creation itself exists in this same mode of temporal ecstasy. The world, in other words, is never simply the world. It is instead the world stretched out beyond itself, facing the future in a posture of hopeful expectation. For Bernárdez, then, enchantment is less fruition than expectancy, less the satiation of desire than its persistence. It is a future that is never fully present (though never fully absent either) and which can only be longed for, not grasped. It is, in a word, hope.

The centrality of hope is the single most important feature of Bernárdez's sacramental conception of poetic language, not least because it draws together the various senses of "sacramental" that this chapter has deployed. The eschatological temporality of the Eucharist is repeated in an erotic key in *La ciudad sin Laura*, which situates the poetic voice within the temporal interval between the present and the poet's future reunion with his beloved. This erotic transposition of sacramental hope is repeated by turns at yet a higher level of abstraction in poetic language itself, which, unlike music, has an eschatological structure inasmuch as it reaches out toward, though never coincides with, its object. It is precisely this temporal suspension, this lack of consummation coupled with hopeful expectation, that most fully characterizes Bernárdez's vision of enchantment.

Our next chapter moves from Bernárdez to Borges. Borges's understanding of the nature poetic language echoes in certain respects Bernárdez's sacramental vision, but his treatment of the problematic of disenchantment is ultimately different. That difference owes to the fact that Borges does not write within any single comprehensive metaphysical or theological system. Thus while Bernárdez sees poetic language as

participating in the sacramentality of the created order, for Borges the only enchantment to which poetic language may rightly lay claim is an enchantment it itself produces. Yet another way to understand the same point would be to say that for Borges enchantment is always also reenchantment: restoring the world to a condition it once enjoyed but has now lost. The very idea of “reenchantment,” however, raises questions of its own. The following chapter attempts to tease them out.

## Chapter Four

### The Splendor of the Tigers: Borges, Magic, and Re-enchantment

#### Introduction

The reader may by now have objected that “sacramental” is not an aesthetic or critical terms. Its proper home is theology and, more specifically, Catholic theology. The present chapter, on Borges’s poetry, will trade sacramentality for analogy, a term that does have plenty of critical currency. The motivation for the swap is twofold. First, Borges (1899-1986) does not share Bernárdez’s Catholicism and as a result does not have explicit recourse, either philosophical or linguistic, to the sacramental vision that so informs the latter’s poetry. Second, while sacramentality is still very much an imported term, analogy has come to define the way in which literary historians think about modern poetry.<sup>56</sup> But this shift is merely terminological: analogy and sacramentality, though not exactly synonyms, nevertheless share an unmistakable family resemblance, and that resemblance makes it possible to treat the former as a modality of the latter.

The shift from sacramentality to analogy, however, tracks another shift, this one real and substantial. A guiding theme of my treatment of Bernárdez was that, from an explicitly Catholic perspective, disenchantment is not really a *problem* at all, since Catholicism already contains within itself the resources to respond to (or, better yet, to preempt and dissolve) the problem altogether (Sherry, “Disenchantment” 369-70). Since Bernárdez already sees the world as in some sense sacramental, his poetry simply participates in that sacramental structure. With Borges the story is somewhat different.

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<sup>56</sup> The scholarly literature on this topic is substantial and growing, and I will discuss some of it in detail later. As an initial approximation, the reader may wish to consult the following: Greene (38-42), Jiménez (36-41), Jrade (*Rubén*), (Nicholson (*Evil* 1-13, 151-153), Paz (*Hijos* 58-77) and (*Poetry* 60-72), Tracy, and Vickers (“Analogy” 98-163).

The most obvious difference is religious. Although Borges was fascinated by theological themes, he professed no faith and was not a religious poet in the sense Bernárdez was. One implication of this difference is that whereas Bernárdez's Catholicism afforded him the conceptual resources to combat the spiritual and metaphysical anxiety that beset his more secularized coevals, Borges's agnosticism meant not only that he experienced the full of weight of modernity, but also that he, unlike Bernárdez, saw in poetic language the possibility of a *response* to the disenchantment it entailed. I underscore "response," because for Borges the problem of disenchantment is also and at the same time a problem of *re-enchantment*, that is, of *restoring* a sense of charm and magic to a world that has grown indisputably bereft of both. The "re" in re-enchantment constitutes the conceptual crux of this chapter, and much of what follows can be understood as an attempt to delineate its precise implications. Let us begin, however, by introducing another of the chapter's central themes.

#### 4.1. Borges, Poetry, Magic

*Ya no es mágico el mundo. Te han dejado.  
Ya no compartirás la clara luna  
ni los lentos jardines. Ya no hay una  
luna que no sea espejo del pasado,*

*cristal de soledad, sol de agonías.  
Adiós las mutuas manos y las sienes  
que acercaba el amor. Hoy sólo tienes  
la fiel memoria y los desiertos días.*

*Nadie pierde (repites vanamente)  
sino lo que no tiene y no ha tenido  
nunca, pero no basta ser valiente*

*para aprender el arte del olvido.  
Un símbolo, una rosa, te desgarras  
y te puede matar una guitarra. ("1964, I")*

If disenchantment is to be understood in the broadly Weberian sense of “un-magicking,” then re-enchantment is at least in part a question of “*re-magicking*.” And if poetry is to have any bearing at all on the problematic of disenchantment, then it is at least plausible to suppose that that bearing will have something to do with poetry’s relationship to magic. Borges hints at this idea in the poem cited above. If titles are to be trusted, Borges wrote the poem—the first of a two-part sonnet sequence published in *El otro, el mismo*—in 1964. Though the immediate occasion of the text remains uncertain,<sup>57</sup> its mood and tenor are clear enough. The tolling “Ya no,” repeated three times in the opening quatrain, establishes from the beginning an unmistakable sense of melancholy and nostalgia, while the text as a whole operates according to a series of contrasts which have their ultimate basis in a temporal distinction between the misery and anguish of the present (“espejo,” “soledad,” “agonías,” “desiertos días,” “pierde”) and the irretrievable glory of the past (“luna,” “lentos jardines,” “mutuas manos,” “sienes,” “amor”). Borges neatly distills the central theme in the first half of the opening line, “Ya no es mágico el mundo,” on which the rest of the poem is a set of variations.

Some 20 years later, Borges would return to the theme of magic, but in a different context. “Escribir un poema,” he wrote in the “Inscripción” to *Los conjurados* (1985), “es ensayar una magia menor” (*Obras* III: 541).<sup>58</sup> Leaving aside for the moment questions both about the stand-alone meaning of these two texts and about their relationship within the Borgesian canon, the conjunction of the first line of “Inscripción” and the first line of “1964” yields a miniature version of a narrative at least as old as the biblical triptych of

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<sup>57</sup> A failed love affair seems a likely candidate, though it is unclear which one. In early 1963, Borges became friendly with María Esther Vázquez, a former employee at the National Library in Buenos Aires, but their relationship continued until at least 1965 (Williamson 355-57).

<sup>58</sup> Except where otherwise noted, all references to Borges will be to the four volumes of his *Obras completas* and will assume the form used here.

Paradise, Fall, and Redemption: the world was once magical, no longer is, but might be again someday. As M.H. Abrams has convincingly argued, this three-part religious plot served the Romantics and their progeny as fodder for a variety of secularized narratives of redemption. The details vary from writer to writer, but nearly all such narratives begin in primal unity, pass through a fortunate (because indispensable) fall into division and fragmentation, and end with a return to the unity and happiness of the origin. On Borges's retelling, the language of "magical" replaces the Romantic terminology of "unity," but the plot's general contours are the same—as, most importantly, is the mechanism of restoration: if the world no longer is (but once was) magical, and if poetry itself is a form of "magic," then for Borges, as for the Romantics, the path back to primordial harmony is paved by nothing less than the creative potential of poetic language.

Even at this early stage, however, the matter is significantly more complex, since, on Borges's account, poetry is not simply magic, but rather a "lesser magic." Among ancient Greek magicians, the distinction between "greater" and "lesser" (or "high" and "low") magic was to some extent technical. When Apollonius of Tyana was accused of miracle-working with the aid of demons, for instance, Philostratus (ca.170-ca.247 A.D.), writing in his defense, distinguished the magic of the *goēs* (wizard, practitioner of "black" magic) from that of the *magos* (magus) and argued that while Apollonius was indeed endowed with special divine powers, he was no *goēs*—that is, his magic was not of the sort capable of compelling nature and the gods to act against their will (Dickie 210). In *The Satanic Bible* (1969), the American occultist Anton LaVey (1930-1997) adopted a version of the same distinction, reserving the term "greater magic" for



ritualistic (or ceremonial) magic and the term “lesser magic” for spontaneous and impressive (though ultimately inconsequential) displays of the sort of conjuring typically associated with magic shows. It is unlikely that Borges had in mind anything more than an imprecise version of this dichotomy, but his description of poetry as “una magia menor” is nevertheless significant to the extent that it raises a host of questions about the precise nature of poetic magic and, even more importantly, about the efficacy of such magic in a world that, for a variety of reasons, seems to have grown distinctly unmagical. To phrase the question in terms of a vocabulary to be developed later in this chapter: if poetry can, as the Romantics seem to have thought, provide an alternative to traditional forms of religious belief and thereby effect a “re-enchantment” or “re-magicking” of the world, is Borges’s attenuated “magia menor” sufficiently robust to do the trick? Can such lesser magic, in other words, negate the “Ya no es mágico” of the opening line of “1964” and restore to the world something of its lost charm?

The goal of this chapter is to flesh out, in four parts, an answer to these questions. First, I describe Borges’s understanding of the nature of disenchantment, where disenchantment refers both to the general sense of meaninglessness and malaise consequent upon the cultural and intellectual shifts outlined in Chapter 1 as well as to a set of social and historical phenomena specific to Borges’s life and career. Second, I argue that Borges, like so many other poets in the modern tradition, saw in poetry the possibility of a response to these concerns. Next, I complicate this picture by suggesting that Borges’s penchant for irony and skepticism sits uneasily with his fondness for making extravagant, metaphysically pregnant claims about the reincantatory potential of poetic language. Finally, I attempt a sort of synthesis of these two apparently conflicting

tendencies. By tracing the development of a single image, the tiger, I argue that Borges articulates a highly original and distinctly modern poetic response to the problem of disenchantment.

#### 4.2. Borges and the Varieties of Disenchantment

To say that Borges experienced disenchantment like most other twentieth-century intellectuals is to say little more than that he was heir to the tradition described in Chapter 1. Central to that tradition is the suspicion that the world no longer makes sense, that reality no longer resonates with meaningfulness and purpose. In “Los signos en rotación” (1965), Octavio Paz identified the problem as the absence of an integrating *imago mundi*. If medieval and Renaissance poets still retained something of the ancient understanding of the world as a meaningful, well-ordered *kosmos*, modern poets from the Romantics onward inherited the desire for, even the expectation of, cosmic meaningfulness but with only the faintest of convictions that such meaning was indeed discoverable (314-15). This component of Borges’s work is almost too well-known to merit mention. The Borges we all know is the Borges of labyrinths, of mirrors, of dreams, of forking time, of the universe as “un infinito juego de azares” (I: 460); Borges the skeptic, the nominalist, the Berkeleyan idealist; the Borges for whom, as Víctor Bravo has shown, “el desencantamiento del mundo” and the absence of “Dios o los dioses” reveal nothing so much as “la insustancialidad de lo real” (84). Even so, a few comments are perhaps still in order.

The first point to notice is that Borges’s skepticism about the possibility of meaning under conditions of disenchantment has two poles: one epistemological, the other linguistic. The epistemological pole has to do with whether, if at all, the human

mind is capable of grasping the nature of reality at its deepest level. On this point, the critical consensus is nearly universal: whatever the character of the universe might be, deciphering its overall structure and order exceeds the limits of human cognition (Frisch 49). Any number of Borges's texts might be adduced in support of such a claim. Among the stories, one thinks of "La lotería en Babilonia" (1941) where the inscrutability of the lottery functions as a symbol of the inscrutability of the universe (I: 456-60), or "La biblioteca de Babel" (1941) where the universe, which "otros llaman la Biblioteca," is composed of an indefinite series of "tomos enigmáticos" and where the human being, "el imperfecto bibliotecario," is "[una] obra del azar o de los demiurgos malévolos" (II: 466). Among the essays, one thinks of "Los avatares de la tortuga" (1939), where Borges asks us to admit "el carácter alucinatorio del mundo" (I: 258), or "La esfera de Pascal" (1952) where "la historia universal" is reduced to "la historia de unas cuantas metáforas" (II: 14), or else "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" (1952), where Borges confesses that "no sabemos qué cosa es el universo" (II: 86). In each case, the point is the same: regardless of how much one knows—and regardless of how well one knows it—the complexity of the universe means that one always ends, as Borges puts it in the prologue to *Atlas* (1984), with "la certidumbre casi total de su propia ignorancia" (III: 401).

The second, linguistic pole of Borgesian skepticism is a corollary of the first: if we do not know "qué cosa es el universo," it follows that "no hay clasificación del universo que no sea arbitraria y conjetural" (II: 86). Or, put somewhat differently, if the universe is finally unknowable, it is also finally unnameable. Ana María Barrenechea makes this point—and in so doing speaks for a large swath of critics—when she says that, for Borges, "las lenguas son, en último término, simplificaciones de una realidad

que siempre las rebasa” and that “nuestra condición de hombres, imponiéndonos la comunicación mediante palabras, nos impone la metáfora y la alegoría, es decir, el engaño” (77-78).<sup>59</sup> The key text in this connection is “El Aleph” (1949). Near the end of that story the narrator confides that his “desesperación de escritor” resides in the fact that while the Aleph’s revelation is instantaneous and eternal, the transcription of that revelation will inevitably be temporal and successive, since the mechanism of revelation, language, is itself necessarily temporal and successive. To this theme Borges returns obsessively. In “La luna,” published in *El hacedor* (1960), he suggests the following “ley de toda palabra”: “siempre se pierde lo esencial” (II: 196). Likewise, in “Funes el memorioso,” he rejects even that most perfect of languages—the one in which “cada cosa individual [...] tuviera un nombre propio”—as “demasiado general, demasiado ambiguo” (I: 489). As before, the point in each case is that the soldierly rigidity of language is no match for the world’s protean fluidity (III: 202), and that any attempt to use language to access the nature of reality at its deepest levels is destined not simply to failure but to *necessary* failure.

The last two paragraphs concerned what one might call the “philosophical Borges”: the Borges who treats problems of perennial concern, of interest to human beings *qua* human beings without regard for their particular social and historical location. And though it is possible to read Borges—and though many critics in fact *have* done so—as an essentially ahistorical writer removed from or indifferent to the vagaries of history and politics,<sup>60</sup> recent developments in critical theory have rendered such interpretations not so much wrong (what could it mean, under conditions of postmodernity, to call an

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<sup>59</sup> For more, see the following: Barrenechea, Bravo (123-243), Castillo, Frisch (49-74), Mills, Rest, Sharkey, and Shaw.

<sup>60</sup> See, among others, Barrenechea and the opening pages of Balderston’s study.

interpretation *wrong*?) as incomplete.<sup>61</sup> Every writer, as we now know, exists in a particular place, at a particular time; and no matter how transcendent, no matter how transcultural, no matter how Shakespearean (in Ben Johnson's not-for-an-age-but-for-all-time sense), writers are always subject to the contingencies of the historical moment in which they live. If disenchantment, then, is in some sense a transhistorical phenomenon, it is also a phenomenon with concrete, local ramifications. Indeed, what I wish to suggest in the remainder of this section is that, quite aside from this general sense of disenchantment consequent upon the intellectual and cultural developments described in Chapter 1, another form of disenchantment inhabits Borges's work, one more closely related to Argentine political history and to a set of circumstances specific to his own life. As before, this variety of disenchantment has two poles: one has to do with Borges's evaluation of Argentine political history, the other with Borges's relationship with his ancestors.

Chapter 1 offered a brief summary of Argentine political history from independence to the middle of the twentieth century, with special attention to the fortunes of the broadly liberal vision of the national identity espoused by Sarmiento and other Unitarian members of the Generation of 1837. From his earliest texts onward, Borges's estimation of this tradition is, without exception, positive. "Rosas," an early poem first published in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923), says of the sometime *caudillo* that even "Dios lo habrá olvidado," and that his memory now deserves nothing so much as

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<sup>61</sup> Williamson's biography is the best, most richly contextualized treatment of Borges. Unfortunately, however, his interpretations of Borges's actual texts suffer from a crudely reductionistic biographism which attempts to read Borges's work as a direct manifestation of (and hence as exhaustively determined by) social, historical, and familial circumstances. I have relied on Williamson primarily for historical documentation rather than interpretive corroboration. For a more theoretically sophisticated treatment of Borges's understanding of history, the reader may wish to consult Jenckes's monograph, *Reading Borges after Benjamin*.

“limosnas de odio” (I: 28-9). In a note added before the text’s inclusion in Emecé’s edition of his *Obras completas*, Borges commented, in direct allusion to Echeverría’s classic tale, “Sigo siendo, como se ve, un salvaje unitario” (I: 52). Likewise, in “El escritor argentino y la tradición” (1932), he rejected the nationalist suggestion that Argentina’s literary tradition finds its most authentic expression in gauchesque poetry (I: 267-274), while in an interview with Fernando Sorrentino, he lamented the fact that Argentina had selected “el *Martín Fierro* como obra representativa” (215-16). Finally, in the *Dedicatoria* to his complete works, Borges thanked his mother, Leonor, for, among other things, “el oprobio de Rosas” (I: 9), an opprobrium borne out in the late story “El evangelio según San Marcos” (1970), which amounts to a Pierre Menard-like rewriting of Echeverría’s classic anti-Rosas tale “El matadero” (Haberly 49-50).

In any event, Borges’s admiration for the Unitarian tradition (and hence his distaste for Rosas) appears to have at least two sources. The first has to do with what, in the “Prólogo” to *La rosa profunda* (1976,) he calls “el culto de los mayores,” his deep sense of respect for a series of illustrious ancestors, all of whom fought, in one way or another, on behalf of the Unitarian cause (Fraga 79). The other source is Borges’s admiration for Sarmiento, that most famous of Unitarians. In a 1973 interview with Fernando Sorrentino, for instance, Borges remarked, “Yo creo que Sarmiento es el hombre más importante que ha producido este país,” and added: “si hubiéramos resuelto que nuestra obra clásica fuera *Facundo*, nuestra historia habría sido distinta” (cited in Fraga 157). A year later, in his prologue to a new edition of *Facundo*, Borges returned to the same theme, suggesting that Sarmiento’s civilization-barbarism dichotomy is “aplicable al entero proceso de nuestra historia” (*Prólogos* 205). Comments like these

make clear that Borges read Sarmiento's celebrated dichotomy not simply as an historical curiosity, but rather as a reflection of the entire sweep of Argentine history.

Like so many other Unitarian sympathizers, moreover, Borges discerned Sarmiento's particular pertinence in the events surrounding the rise to power of Juan Domingo Perón in the mid-1940s (Fraga 158). "La peligrosa realidad que describe Sarmiento," Borges wrote in 1944, "era, entonces (cuando lo leía) lejana e inconcebible; ahora es contemporánea" (*Prólogos* 199). More than a quarter century later, when asked about the relationship between Rosas and Perón, Borges responded: "Yo creo que deben de haberse parecido bastante. [...] Creo que Rosas debe de haber representado en su época una calamidad igual a la de Perón" (Fraga 110). The precise nature of that calamity (or at least Borges's interpretation of the precise nature of that calamity) is the stuff of legend. In August 1946, only two months after Perón took office, Borges, who then worked as a low-level assistant at a municipal library, was informed that he had been "promoted" to the position of Inspector of Chickens and Rabbits. In his "Autobiographical Essay," Borges recounted the experience like this:

I went to the City Hall to find out what it was all about. "Look here," I said. "It's rather strange that among so many others at the library I should be singled out as worthy of this new position." "Well," the clerk answered, "you were on the side of the Allies...what do you expect?" His statement was unanswerable; the next day, I sent in my resignation. (214)

Borges clearly read the situation as a direct insult, but the facts of the case are still in dispute. Indeed, it seems that Borges and his friends may have somewhat exaggerated the story to score political points against Perón. First, there was apparently no such position as Inspector of Chickens (or of Rabbits). Second, it is difficult to understand why someone like Borges should have attracted the attention of the new president (who

presumably had more important matters to see to after being elected). Finally, the official government view was that Borges had been placed on the dismissal list, not as a matter of personal insult, but rather because of his record of absenteeism at the library and his history of public opposition to Vice-President Perón (Williamson 292-94). What is certain is that for reasons both public and private, the late 1940s and early 1950s constituted a period of intense disenchantment for the writer. In June 1946, Borges broke with Estela Canto, his girlfriend of two years (Williamson 275, 291). Earlier that year, he had assumed the editorship of *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, a new literary review which, after Estela's departure, Borges used to indulge his own sense of disillusionment. There he published a number of thinly veiled autobiographical poems like "Límites," which ends, "La muerte me desgasta, incesante" (II: 227), and "El poeta declara su nombradía," which ends, "Mis instrumentos de trabajo son la humillación y la angustia; / ojalá yo hubiera nacido muerto" (II: 228), as well as a series of luridly titled pieces in collaboration with Bioy Casares: "El infierno mental," "Un infierno de fuego," "La abolición del pasado," and "Crucifixión."

The loss of Estela, as Williamson notes, was "calamity enough," but fate contrived to render Borges's luckless romantic life coincident with Perón's ascendancy to the presidency (Williamson 291-92). Here, too, personal concerns loomed large, since in 1948 Perón imprisoned Borges's sister, Norah, for distributing anti-government literature. Personal matters aside, however, Borges also opposed Perón for purely ideological reasons. He believed, rightly or wrongly, that the new Argentine president was a Nazi. "The political situation in Argentina is very serious," Borges wrote in the Uruguayan daily *El Plata* in 1945, "so serious that a great number of Argentines are becoming Nazis



without being aware of it” (cited in Monegal 391). A year later, Borges delivered a lecture at a gathering of the *Sociedad Argentina de Escritores* (SADE), a group of anti-fascist, pro-democratic writers and intellectuals whose numbers had dwindled under Perón (Williamson 297). There he harshly criticized the Perón regime and argued that writers have a duty to resist tyranny:

las dictaduras fomentan la opresión, las dictaduras fomentan el servilismo, las dictaduras fomentan la crueldad; más abominable es el hecho de que fomentan la idiotez. Botones de nombres, ceremonias unánimes, la mera disciplina usurpando el lugar de la lucidez. Combatir esas tristes monotonías es uno de los muchos deberes del escritor. (“Palabras” 114)

In 1950, at the behest of a group of friends, Borges somewhat reluctantly agreed to assume the presidency of SADE. That same year, he published “La muralla y los libros,” a thinly veiled attack on Perón’s xenophobic cultural policies, and continued lecturing throughout Argentina (Williamson 312). The lectures were, at least ostensibly, non-political. But, as Borges noted in an interview, he often used them to poke fun at Perón and his supporters. “There was little else I could do,” he said. “I didn’t feel capable of doing much else. All this used to make me very depressed” (59-60). Borges dramatized this sense of disenchantment in the short story “Diálogos del asceta y del rey,” first published in *La Nación* in 1953. There he imagined a dialogue between “dos arquetipos”—a king, who is “una plenitud” and an aesthete, who is “nada”—and wondered whether there might exist any form of “magia” by which “el cero, el asceta, pueda igualar o superar de algún modo al infinito rey” (*Textos* 302). The allegory, as Williamson points out, could hardly be clearer: what could a dissident writer (an aesthete, a zero) hope to achieve in the face of the Peronist political machine? How effective could a blind, feeble quinquagenarian really hope to be (“Borges” 288)? Indeed, by the mid-

1950s, Borges's malaise was all-pervasive. "During those ten years," he told Richard Burgin in 1969, "the first thing I thought about when I was awake was, well, 'Perón is in power'" (120).

Perón, however, was not immortal. His ouster during the *Revolución Libertadora* brought much in the way of recompense for stalwart anti-Peronists, and Borges was no exception. In 1955, he was appointed director of the National Library. A year later, he received the National Prize for Literature and was named to the Chair of English and American Literature at the University of Buenos Aires (Williamson 335). But the situation remained dire. Although no longer in power, Perón continued to exercise political influence from his exile in Spain. In 1958, the radical dissident Arturo Frondizi (1908-1995) won the presidency, but only after having wooed the Peronist vote. A decade and a half later, to Borges's dismay, Perón reassumed the presidency, which he held until his death in 1974, when he was succeeded by his third wife, María Estela Martínez. Perón's continued influence, both direct and by proxy, on Argentine politics led Borges to believe that the *Revolución* of 1955 had failed to achieve its most basic aim: democratic regeneration (Williamson 327). Perhaps the most insidious and longest lasting effect of Peronism, then, was that it rendered Borges more or less permanently disenchanted about the very possibility of Argentine democracy (336). How, after all, is one supposed to foster democratic governance in a country where the majority of the electorate, if left to its own devices, will re-elect someone like Perón? How, in such a case, can one trust "the will of the people"? These sorts of questions, as Williamson notes, left Borges in the unenviable and paradoxical situation of wishing to support democratic governance, while also convinced that democracy could only be implemented

by an unrepresentative elite. Together with the fact that Borges broke with Estela Canto precisely in order to dedicate himself to political matters, the failure of Argentine democracy (or, even stronger, the failure of the *possibility* of Argentine democracy) could have only meant that Borges had “squandered” the last opportunity to render his life meaningful (Williamson 337).

The sense of political disenchantment that plagued Borges during and after the Perón presidency paralleled another variety of disenchantment, this one closely related to what Borges, in the “Prólogo” to *El otro, el mismo*, calls “el culto de los mayores” (II: 235). In an influential essay from 1980, Ricardo Piglia argued that Borges’s entire oeuvre is based on a “mito de origen,” an attempt on Borges’s part to legitimize his status as an Argentine (and as an Argentine writer) by offering an “interpretación ideológica” of his place in society and his relationship to literature. That interpretation, Piglia continues, takes the form of a “narración genealógica” firmly rooted in the “dos linajes” from which Borges descends: on the one hand, the maternal line (founders, conquerors, military heroes) and, on the other, the paternal (intellectual and erudite, with close ties to English literature and culture) (87-88). The opposition between “el culto al coraje y el culto a los libros,” between battlefields and libraries, not only constitutes “el núcleo básico de la ideología en Borges,” but also provides Borges with the resources for viewing himself as the dialectical synthesis both of familial history and of Argentine national history.<sup>62</sup> That synthesis proved unstable, however. For even if, as Borges claims in “Poema de los dones” (1960), “me figuraba el Paraíso / bajo la especie de una biblioteca” (II: 187), the

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<sup>62</sup> In a later essay, much indebted to Piglia’s, Beatriz Sarlo offers the early poem “La Recoleta” (published in *Fervor de Buenos Aires*) as an example of how Borges viewed himself as in some sense the final chapter of a familial (and national) romance (44-5). Jenckes (“Against”) challenges this reading, though, in my view, somewhat unconvincingly.

paradise of books remained at odds with another kind of paradise, this one represented by that side of the family composed of the brave, decorated military heroes who died fighting for the *patria*. And though Borges claims to have known early on that “mi destino era literario” (Sorrentino 31), he nevertheless harbored a persistent nostalgia for what Williamson calls “el destino épico de sus mayores,” a nostalgia exemplified by, among other things, his obsession with tigers (“Borges” 24).

Borges himself aspired to the life of action, but a number of factors (poor eyesight, physical infirmity, and so forth) conspired to thwart those ambitions. Instead, he wrote poetry. This “instead” is deliberate. Throughout his work, though especially toward the end, Borges openly laments the misfortune of having been condemned to a life of books. “El puñal,” first published in *La Nación* in 1952, frames the conflict explicitly. There Borges describes a dagger given to his father by Luis Melián Lafinur, but now locked “en un cajón” on the writer’s desk dreaming its “sencillo sueño de tigre.” “Otra cosa quiere el puñal,” confesses the poet, but immediately adds that he himself is unsuited for the task: “A veces me da lástima. Tanta dureza, tanta fe, tan impasible o inocente sabiduría, y los años pasan inútilmente” (II: 327). A later poem—“Espadas,” from *El oro de los tigres* (1972)—again draws an explicit contrast between a possible life of adventure and heroism and a sedentary life of books. While others, the poet begins, were afforded the good fortune of wielding swords, his own fate was that of poetic enumeration: “Gestas he enumerado de lejanas / espadas” (II: 461). The closing lines, where the poet addresses the sword directly, are emblematic: “Déjame, espada, usar contigo el arte; / yo, que no he merecido manejarte” (II: 461).

These lines are indeed emblematic because the gap between word and thing, between poetry and its object, between enumerating swords and actually wielding swords is central to Borges's understanding of the nature of disenchantment. For the moment, however, I would like simply to point out that for Borges to write poetry is already to have tempted disenchantment; it is already to have resigned oneself to a kind of second-rate substitute. And if, as I shall argue in the rest of this chapter, poetry is ultimately incapable for Borges of meeting the re-incantatory demands of the modern poetic tradition, it is at least in part because of this initial deficiency, this initial sense that poetic language is always already positioned at a tragically intraversable remove from the object at which it aims. The implications of this claim are twofold. First is the familiar notion that words are always in some sense inadequate to their object. Second is the much more important claim that the inadequacy of language is redoubled by the fact that Borges attempts to use poetic language to recover an object (in this case, the sword and all it implies) which is itself unrecoverable. Borges *writes* about swords precisely because he knows he cannot *use* them, and he makes of that disenchanted knowledge a central theme of his poetics. Before proceeding to an elaboration of these ideas, let us turn briefly to how the modern tradition has conceived poetry's relationship to the problem of disenchantment and the solutions it has proposed.

#### 4.3. Poetry and Re-enchantment in the Modern Poetic Tradition

The modern poetic tradition was heir to a dual legacy. On the one hand, it inherited a wounded, disjointed, and in some sense irrevocably desacralized world. At the same time, it took up another, subterranean current. On Octavio Paz's telling, this current had its roots in pagan antiquity, resurfaced among the Renaissance Neo-Platonists, filtered

through the various hermetic and occult traditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and shaped Romanticism's vision of the world, before receiving classic expression in Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondances" (1857) and notable Hispanic gloss by José Martí: "El universo habla mejor que el hombre" (*Obras* XVI: 252). The idea, simply put, is that reality is a kind of hieroglyph, a complex weave of signs and symbols, all of which correspond to one another and which, taken together, constitute a harmonious totality. The implications of such a view are immediate and substantial: in the face of disenchantment, universal correspondence makes it possible to see the world not as a diffuse amalgam of discontinuous parts, but rather as unified, coherent, and meaningful (Paz, *Poetry* 61; Paz, *Hijos* 73).

This dual inheritance—disenchantment and universal correspondence—goes some ways towards accounting for what Paz has called the "two principles" of modern poetry: analogy and irony. If analogy answers to the sense that the world constitutes a meaningful whole in which every element corresponds to every other element because everything belongs ultimately to the same luminous totality, then irony is its deconstructive opposite: a dissonance in the concert of harmony, a tear in the fabric of correspondences (Paz, *Poetry* 61). One can begin to appreciate this tension by comparing Baudelaire's vision of correspondence with that of his most important predecessor, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist and theologian who, in the wake of a profound spiritual crisis around 1745, elaborated a theory of vaguely Plotinian provenance which posited a relationship of "universal sympathy" between natural and divine realms (White, *Emmanuel* 432). As Borges himself noted in a 1978 lecture, Swedenborg first conceived his theory of correspondences as a strategy of biblical

exegesis—one which, in Kabbalistic fashion, sought hidden, spiritual meanings in even the most mundane of scriptural passages—and then, on the authority of the venerable “two-book” theory of revelation, applied the same hermeneutic to the natural world (“Emanuel” 57).

With only this rough sketch in place, the Baudelairean difference is easy to see. Whereas Swedenborg construes correspondence as a vertical relationship between immanence and transcendence, Baudelaire’s “correspondences” have been systematically lateralized (Wilkinson 217-18). Indeed, though the poet’s opening image suggests a vertical relationship between the physical and the spiritual (“La nature est un temple”), subsequent images are decidedly horizontal, sensual, this-worldly: the “*fôret de symboles*,” the commingling of “*les couleurs et les sons*,” and the “*parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants*,” to cite only a few examples.<sup>63</sup> This important difference notwithstanding, Swedenborg’s influence on French and Latin American literary culture was immense, and Borges was no exception.<sup>64</sup> Besides the essay just mentioned, references to Swedenborg appear scattered throughout his work, including a laudatory sonnet in *El otro, el mismo*.<sup>65</sup> The precise nature of Borges’s attitude toward the ideas and thinkers he expounds (and sometimes celebrates) is, of course, notoriously difficult to determine, not least because his characteristically detached, impersonal style tends to coat everything with a glaze of irony. Whatever his actual views, Borges clearly recognized that the founding assumption of Swedenborg’s project—and not only of his, but of all

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<sup>63</sup> See Wilkinson (217-18) for more on Baudelaire’s secularization of Swedenborg.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholson (*Evil* 1-13, 151-53, and *passim*) details the influence of Swedenborg and the occult on Latin American (specifically Argentine) poetry; the Spanish Critic Ramón Xirau (90-95) offers a similar account, though with more attention to Coleridge, of the influence of various occultist doctrines like analogy and universal correspondence on the poetry of Borges, Lezama Lima, and Paz. See also the studies of Darío and esotericism by Skyrme and Jade (*Rubén*).

<sup>65</sup> For a detailed account of Borges’s appropriation of Swedenborg, see Báez-Rivera. See also Christian Wildner’s interview with Borges on Swedenborg.

conceptions of reality premised on analogy and universal correspondence—is an understanding of the cosmos as an essentially unified, harmonious totality (“Emanuel” 57; Béguin 63-73). The notion of “cosmic unity” is crucial simply because without it analogy is unintelligible. That is, unless the world constitutes a unified whole, there is no reason to expect anything but an ultimately arbitrary relationship among its various constituent parts. But if analogy necessarily presupposes cosmic unity, it also presupposes something else: a fall from grace, the loss of paradise, a moment of disintegration in which primal unity ruptures and spews forth the bewildering multiplicity of the visible world (Nicholson, *Evil* 2). If cosmic unity is what makes analogy intelligible, then cosmic fragmentation is what makes it necessary. Indeed, as Béguin points out, the chief task of analogy, from Romanticism onward, was precisely to annul the effects of fragmentation and thereby restore humanity to its “ancienne harmonie avec la nature primitive” (75). The principal engine of this restoration was a conception of the poetic word as in some sense analogous to the divine *logos* that first brought the world into being (Bruns 53-4; Béguin 52). According to this view, the poet is a visionary, a magus possessing special insight into the nature of reality and capable of discerning otherwise undetectable relationships among its various parts. The process of *poiesis* is therefore “littéralement créateur” (Béguin 52). By writing a poem, the poet participates, quite literally, in the re-creation of the world, in the restoration of the broken—though analogically related—shards of reality to their original, primal unity.

To think of poetry as “literally creative,” however, is to think of language as something more than a purely verbal transaction, a tag that we hang on pre-existing bits of external reality. It is, instead, to see words as an active force, as capable of *doing*



things, of *creating* rather than simply *referring*. Examples of this view of language populate modern poetry—from Darío’s “botón de pensamiento que busca ser la rosa” (131) to Valéry’s remark, in *The Art of Poetry*, that poetic language gives us “l’idée d’une nature enchantée, asservie, comme par un charme, aux caprices, aux prestiges, aux puissances du langage” (*Oeuvres* I: 450). But a vision of language as active rather than passive, as productive rather than merely referential is not only central to an analogical vision of the world. It is also—to reintroduce one of the main themes of this chapter—central to a conception of poetic language as magical. Paz himself draws the connection in a series of comments on André Breton and Surrealism. Not only, he says, did Breton fail to distinguish between poetry and magic, but he also construed the former as “efectivamente una fuerza, una sustancia o energía capaz de cambiar la realidad” (*Corriente* 55). Paz’s appeal to “energía” is unsurprising. Aristotelian in origin, the concept of *energeia* went through a number of incarnations in classical rhetoric, middle- and neo-Platonism, Orthodox Christian theology (Bradshaw), and early modern rhetorical theory, before undergoing a series of important modifications at the hands of the Romantics.<sup>66</sup> Of those modifications two merit brief mention. First, whereas early modern rhetoricians tended to think of “energy” as a *component* of poetic utterance, the Romantics (and preeminently Coleridge) virtually *identified* it with poetry and so made “energetic speech” constitutive of poetic language itself (Bruns 48). But, second, the Romantics also accorded energetic (that is, poetic) language a quasi-divine status and so rendered it capable not only of miming reality, but also of transforming it (Bruns 3, 52).

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<sup>66</sup> Bruns (42-67) offers a good account of the development of *energeia* in rhetorical theory and modern poetry. For a more detailed account of the centrality of *energeia* or “energy” in Coleridge’s (and, more generally, Romanticism’s) conception of poetic language, see Greene (222-243).

These twin revisions implied not only a new poetics, but also a new metaphysics (or, rather more precisely, the homecoming of an ancient one). On the one hand, poetry from Aristotle onward had assumed a basically realist ontology and a correspondence epistemology, the natural aesthetic concomitant of which was, of course, mimesis. Since thought and language “divide reality at its joints” (to use Plato’s metaphor), the artist’s task was to trace its ligaments and sinews with as much precision and fealty as possible. The Romantic poets, by contrast, endeavored to recover an older understanding of language, one compatible with what Ernst Cassirer calls that “wholeness” characteristic of “the mythical picture of the world” in which “all the differentiations of things are dissolved into a mythical-magical chain of causality” (118). On this view, the origins of which perhaps lie in the Orpheus myth, the sorts of distinctions and dichotomies (subject/object, substance/accident, word/thing, etc.) endemic to philosophical thought teeter under the weight of a conception of reality that regards “the world of things and the world of names” as forming “a single undifferentiated chain of causality” and so as belonging to “one self-enclosed whole” (118). Rilke perhaps put this point best in the third of his *Sonette an Orpheus* (1922): “Gesang ist Dasein.” Poetry is being, existence is song because it is only under a distinctly poetic resolution that reality appears in its most dramatic relief, acquires its full weight and splendor.

Perhaps now the connective tissues linking a magical (or “energetic”) conception of language to the question of disenchantment are becoming clearer. Borges gestures at the connection when, in the “Prólogo” to *La rosa profunda*, he writes that one of poetry’s “deberes” is to “tocarnos físicamente, como la cercanía del mar” (III: 77). The image is at once refreshingly concrete and infuriatingly abstract. It amounts, on the one hand, to a

straightforward simile about the magical potential of poetic language: poetry should “touch us physically,” so the analogy goes, like the “nearness of the sea (touches us physically).” The problem is that “nearness” is a concept, not a thing, and so can no more “touch you physically” than can the number 17. This means, paradoxically, that if poetry is indeed supposed to touch us physically, it is supposed to do so in the same way as something that cannot touch physically in the first place. But perhaps the paradox is part of the point. By asking us to imagine that poetry is capable of touching in the way that nearness touches, Borges is also asking us to view poetic language as somehow indifferent to a particular class of dichotomies—a class which, in this case, has exactly one member (the conceptual and the concrete), but which, if extended metonymically, might include a wide range of similar dichotomies: the body and the mind, the physical and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible, and so forth. But if, for Borges, poetic language can indeed blur distinctions as hoary as these, it has already gone some ways toward addressing the central concern of this thesis: disenchantment, the loss of an integrating *imago mundi*, the sense that reality no longer constitutes a unified, meaningful whole. This means simply that if the problem of disenchantment is at least in part a problem of fragmentation, then poetry, by allowing us to overlook certain kinds of pernicious (though perhaps inevitable) dichotomies, might also be in a position to grant us access to a pre-fragmented world and so to permit us to glimpse reality in its unspoiled unity, its pristine innocence.

Extravagant though it may sound, Borges alludes, however obliquely, to just this conclusion. For poetry to “touch us physically,” he says in the same text, would be for poetry to restore to language its “primitiva y ahora oculta virtud” (III: 77). And to restore

to language its “primitiva y ahora oculta virtud” would be nothing less than to return to what Borges elsewhere describes as that Adamic state, now disfigured by the Fall, in which “el nombre es el arquetipo de la cosa” (II: 263), or else to what Paz, in *El monogramático*, calls paradise’s “gramática ontológica” according to which “las cosas y los seres son sus nombres y cada nombre es propio” (96). On such a view, poetry’s task would be to achieve what Borges’s simile only suggests: the reduction of the distance between word and world, thing and meaning, the visible and the invisible to its final vanishing point. It would mean, in other words, what Paz variously calls “la renovación del pacto primordial” between human beings and nature (*Corriente* 56), “la reconquista de la inocencia” (*Hijos* 61), “una vuelta al principio del principio” (*Corriente* 56). In short: the restoration of paradise.

In the same essay on Surrealism, Paz goes on to note that Breton’s magical conception of language stands opposed to Saussure’s. For Breton and the surrealists, language is not merely differential, not merely an arbitrary convention linking “sonido y sentido” (*Corriente* 55). This last point is crucial, registering as it does the general sense that an understanding of language as magical presupposes what Thomas Greene has called a conjunctive, rather than a disjunctive, semiotics (21, 26). Disjunctive semiotics is basically structuralist orthodoxy. Since signs refer to other signs rather than to external world, the relationship between sign and meaning is wholly arbitrary. Conjunctive semiotics, by contrast, tends toward the identification of word and world, of sign and meaning, and so accords language a density or potency capable of interacting with and transforming reality (Greene 38).<sup>67</sup> The importance of conjunctive semiotics for magic

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<sup>67</sup> Greene goes on to trace this vision of poetry as incantatory or spell-like (and its attendant semiotics) from the early German Romantics, through Coleridge in England and Whitman in America, and

should be clear. The most fundamental of magical gestures is, after all, the spell, a term that derives ultimately from the Middle English *spellen*, meaning simply “to speak”<sup>68</sup> And unless language can indeed *affect*, rather than simply *refer to*, reality, it is difficult to see how anything like a spell could get off the ground.

The clearest example of “magic” in this sense of “making something happen with words” is, of course, the Eucharist, not only because the priest’s utterance, “Hoc est corpus meum” (of which “hocus pocus” was a common contraction), effects a real, substantial change in the wafer, but also because it is in the Eucharist that sign and meaning achieve perfect coincidence.<sup>69</sup> The host, in other words, does not merely *signify* the body of Christ; it *is* the body of Christ. Or, to put the same point more tortuously, the host signifies what it is by being what it is, and it is what it is by signifying what it is. One could even argue, as George Steiner has, that any coherent account of literary meaning (and, *a fortiori*, any account of language as magical) presupposes something like Eucharistic “real presence” and so amounts to nothing less than a “wager on transcendence” (*Real* 3-4). In this sense, one might see the emphasis on the incantatory potential of poetic language in the tradition that stretches from Romanticism to the avant-garde as, at root, a form of heterodox sacramentalism, the rendition in a secular key of a fundamentally theological motif.

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finally to the line of French poets leading from Hugo and Nerval to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Valéry (38-42). On a related note, Brian Vickers has persuasively argued that the distinction between conjunctive and disjunctive semiotics lies behind the broader division between scientific and occult mentalities in early modern Europe: “In the scientific tradition [...] a clear distinction is made between words and things and between literal and metaphorical language. The occult tradition does not recognize this distinction: words are treated as if they are equivalent to things and can be substituted for them. Manipulate the one and you manipulate the other” (“Analogy” 95).

<sup>68</sup> The Spanish equivalent of “to cast a spell” (*encantar*) has a similar etymology, from the Latin *canere*, meaning to sing or chant (RAE).

<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the Reformers frequently described the Eucharist in terms of magic and sorcery. In the *Institutes*, for instance, Calvin calls it “un enchantement ou conjuration d’art magique” (632). Likewise, Heinrich Bullinger described the Eucharist as “a horrible pollution of the sacraments of God” and a form of “magic” (cited in Greene 32).

Borges himself seems to have recognized (and endorsed) modern poetry's tendency to aspire to the condition of theology. In the prologue to *El otro, el mismo*, for instance, he writes:

La raíz del lenguaje es irracional y de carácter mágico. El danés que articulaba el nombre de Thor o el sajón que articulaba el nombre de Thunor no sabía si esas palabras significaban el dios del trueno o el estrépito que sucede al relámpago. La poesía quiere volver a esa antigua magia. (II: 236)<sup>70</sup>

Borges's comment here borders on the sacramental. The Dane's invocation of Thor blurs the distinction between the natural and the divine, not because of some referential confusion, some primitive incapacity to control the semantic range of a particular signifier, but rather because the physical and the spiritual are so deeply interwoven that to invoke the one *just is* to invoke the other. Furthermore, in this text and others, Borges links poetry's sacramental or "magical" character—specifically, its capacity to transcend the subject-object, signifier-signified divide—to the question of musicality. In the same prologue, he notes, following Pater, that all art aspires to the condition of music because "en ella [la música] el fondo es la forma." Indeed, while one can paraphrase a novel or "referir las líneas generales de un cuento," music is that form of art in which conceptual content *simply is* expressive medium (II: 236). In this light, Borges continues, poetry is "un arte híbrido" (II: 236), an impure amalgam "de un concepto y de un sonido" (III: 139), a "sistema abstracto de símbolos" subjected "a fines musicales" (II: 236). One way of summarizing this line of thought would be to say that poetic language, in Borges's estimation, is characterized primarily by *desire*: a longing (*eros*) to transcend itself, to become that which it is constitutionally incapable of becoming. Poetry therefore always

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<sup>70</sup> Borges returns to this image frequently. In "Brown resuelve ser poeta," for instance, we read: "haré que las communes palabras / —naipes mercados del tahúr, moneda de la plebe— / rindan la magia que fue suya / cuando Thor era el numen y el estrépito, / el trueno y la plegaria" (III: 82). See also the "Prólogo" to *El oro de los tigres* (III: 457).

already assumes a transcendental posture, an orientation towards ecstasy (literally, “standing outside oneself”). At the same time, however, poetry’s hybridity, its “impurity” (III: 139), means that the desire it incarnates is a “desire” in the very precise sense which the Spanish poet Luis Cernuda (1902-1963) afforded the term:

[...] El deseo es una pregunta  
Cuya respuesta no existe,  
Una hoja cuya rama no existe,  
Un mundo cuyo cielo no existe. (Mujica 287)

Poetic language, for Borges, thus in some sense allegorizes the dialectic of spiritual desire: the longing for transcendence together with the recognition that the consummation of such longing is finally impossible.

I will return to this idea in moment (section 3.4, below). For now I wish simply to highlight a few of its implications for Borges’s understanding of the nature of the project of re-enchantment. First, insofar as “poetry wishes to return to *that ancient magic*,” its task is at once linguistic and theological: on the one hand, to collapse the distance between words and things, that is, to approach, however asymptotically, the mystery of music in which “fondo” and “forma” achieve perfect coincidence; and, on the other hand, to awaken within us a sense of the mystery of being, that is, to blur the line between nature and God to such an extent that when we name a material object, it remains unclear whether we name the object itself or the transcendent source of its existence. Second, insofar as “poetry wishes to *return* to that ancient magic,” whatever awakening it induces will also and at the same time be a *re*-awakening, a *vuelta*, the restitution of an erstwhile mode of existence that has long since faded. And so: poetry as both “*return* to magic” and “return to *magic*,” as “*re*-magicking” and “*re-magicking*,” as, precisely, re-enchantment.

#### 4.4. Borges and Irony

Yet if poetry, for Borges, is at least potentially *una vuelta a la magia*, a re-enchantment of the world, then a question presses: how exactly are we to understand this “re-enchantment”? There are actually two questions here: how do we read “enchantment” and how do we read “re”? One temptation is to reduce the latter to the former and so to see the re-enchantment as the restoration of a straightforward, unproblematic version of enchantment. On this view, enchantment and re-enchantment would be virtually indistinguishable (except perhaps in terms of temporal priority, since an enchanted world, it seems, would necessarily precede a re-enchanted one). But such a move would be overhasty. In the first place, a properly enchanted, rather than merely *re*-enchanted, world would seem to be recognizable only from the outside. In other words, if you lived in an enchanted world, you could not know (or reflect upon the fact) that you lived in an enchanted world, since to know (or reflect upon) something is, obviously enough, to treat it as an object of knowledge. But to treat something as an object of knowledge is to assume a particular posture toward it, specifically, a posture of distance or detachment. And to view an enchanted world from a perspective of distance or detachment (as a Western anthropologist might observe the funerary rites of a non-Western tribe) is to cease to *live* in that world. Nicholas Paige rightly notes in this connection that “*re* carries a powerful hint of estrangement” (159) and goes on to specify the relevant distinction between enchantment and re-enchantment in epistemological terms: “[i]f enchantment implies belief, re-enchantment implies something more like the memory of what it might be like to believe” (159). But this does not seem exactly right. The inhabitant of a re-enchanted world might well hold exactly the same beliefs (about, say, sprites or fairies or



magic carpets) as the inhabitant of an enchanted world, and so the difference between the two cannot be that the one believes while the other remembers what it might be like to believe. The difference, rather, will have something to do with the attitude one takes toward those beliefs. If, for instance, you live in an enchanted world and believe that carpets sometimes fly or that boogeymen occasionally reside under the beds of naughty children, then these are simply beliefs you hold about the world, ways you take the world in fact to be. If, by contrast, you live in a re-enchanted world (and are cognizant of yourself as living in a re-enchanted world), then you may hold precisely the same beliefs, but with this difference: whereas enchanted beliefs are simply beliefs about the world, re-enchanted beliefs are simultaneously beliefs about the world and beliefs about their own status as beliefs about re-enchantment.

This point can be made in any number of ways. One would be to say, in the spirit of Paul de Man, that re-enchantment requires a certain degree of *dédoublement* in which self A<sub>1</sub> holds some belief *x* while self A<sub>2</sub> reflects, perhaps ironically, upon the fact that A<sub>1</sub> holds *x* (208-212). Another way would be to say, with Susan Stewart, that re-enchanted beliefs are always partly self-referential, since they are at once about the thing in question (magic carpets, for instance) *and* about the fact that they are about the thing in question (74). A final way would be to say that the language of re-enchantment is necessarily a metalanguage: a language that reflects on its own status as language. In Borges's case, however, the concept of disenchantment is yet more complicated still. Indeed, though a variety of scholars have dedicated studies to his appropriation of various "enchancing"

doctrines and traditions—Kabbala, Neo-Platonism, mysticism, magic, and so forth<sup>71</sup>—nearly all of them reach the same conclusion: Borges may employ any number of philosophical and religious ideas in the process of literary creation, *but he does not actually believe any of them*. The conclusion is unsurprising. Borges’s skepticism (Castillo) and nominalism (Rest), to say nothing of his importance as a forerunner of postmodernism (Frisch), are as well known as his tendency to appraise religious and philosophical ideas for aesthetic value rather than truth value (II: 153). Jaime Alazraki neatly summarized the issue like this:

Al bajarlas [las doctrinas religiosas y filosóficas] del pedestal divino y convertirlas en literatura fantástica, Borges sublima su escepticismo esencial en arte [...] al hacer literatura con las doctrinas de la teología y las especulaciones de la filosofía, ha mostrado que su valor reside no en ser la revelación de la voluntad divina o el diseño del esquema universal [...] sino en ser invenciones o creaciones de la inquieta imaginación de los hombres. (*Prosa* 59)

For Alazraki’s Hegelianized Borges, the movement from religion to art is, like all things Hegelian, a conceptual drama in three parts: (1) the initial plausibility of religious doctrine gives way to (2) an “essential skepticism,” which is in turn (3) sublated (*aufgehoben*) into an appreciation of religious dogma for its aesthetic potential. The process is thus one of simultaneous destruction and preservation: religious doctrine *qua* doctrine is destroyed, while religious doctrine *qua* aesthetic potentiality is preserved. Yet another way of putting the same point—and this time in a less obviously Hegelian register—would be to say that art, for Borges, is a kind of ironic religion, where “ironic” should be taken in a highly specific sense.

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<sup>71</sup> See Alazraki (“Kabbalistic”) for Borges and the Kabbala; Magnavacca for Borges and Neo-Platonism; López-Baralt for Borges and mysticism; and Menton for Borges and magical realism. It should be noted that these studies focus almost exclusively on Borges’s prose.

In a brilliant article on the psychology of laughter, the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) located the essence of irony in what he called the ability to “se dédoubler rapidement et d’assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son moi” (*Curiosités* 215).<sup>72</sup> The notion of “self-doubling” is key to the ironic consciousness, since, in a very basic sense, irony means distance—the capacity to step back from our ordinary dealings with the world and contemplate ourselves and our lives from the perspective of a detached observer. For Baudelaire, moreover, the self-detachment inherent in irony has the effect of creating a bifurcation within the self. Consider a simple example. Suppose you are walking down a sidewalk when you trip on a raised portion of concrete. Since human beings walk upright, we tend to believe in our superiority over the natural world. The fall, however, reveals that this sense of superiority is simply a mystification. Powerful though we may be, a small depression in a walking path can still, quite literally, bring us to our knees. But also, and more importantly, this revelation of mystification has, in Baudelaire’s view, the effect of creating within us two distinct “selves”: a former, mystified self which believed erroneously in its superiority to the natural world and a second self that has become conscious of that mystification. It is here, moreover, that irony takes root, for by allowing the demystified self to take some distance from its mystified counterpart, the fall-induced *dédoublement* permits the demystified self to contemplate, with detached incredulity, its erstwhile mystification, to see the arrogance (and humor) in fancying oneself superior to the natural order, and so to read the mystified self as a whole in this skeptical light. And yet if the arrogant, pre-fall self was simply a mystification (and hence subject to the ironic gaze of the demystified,

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<sup>72</sup>My reading of Baudelaire’s essay owes a great debt to de Man (204-220).

post-fall self), what guarantees that the ostensibly demystified self is not just another mystification? What, in other words, guarantees that the second, post-fall self cannot be subjected to the same ironization to which it subjected the mystified, pre-fall self? And what, in turn, guarantees that the self that ironizes the post-fall self cannot itself be ironized? One could repeat this question ad infinitum—which is what all ironists do. As Paul de Man notes, “irony engenders a temporal sequence of acts of consciousness which is endless [...] the recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness” (220). And this is simply because the “ironic mind” is unwilling to “accept any state in its progression as definitive,” because it is endlessly obliged to view its own actions and thoughts *sub specie ironiae*. The ironic self therefore never achieves what de Man calls “authenticity,” but instead simply experiences its own inauthenticity in ascending degrees of intensity (204).

Unsurprising in this light is the thesis, perhaps first advanced in Georg Lukács’s classic *Theory of the Novel* (1916), that irony is the principal rhetorical posture of the modern novel, a fact which serves to distinguish modern narrative prose fiction from the epic, its most important historical antecedent. Whereas epics are essentially totalizing narratives that rest on a comprehensive vision of the cosmos, the novel emerges in a world in which “the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given” and in which the very possibility of “meaning” has “become a problem” (56, 46). For Lukács, moreover, the primary difference between the two narrative modes is theological. If the epic poet relies on the direct inspiration of the Muses to underwrite the veracity of his tale, the novelist inhabits “a world that has been abandoned by God” (88) and must therefore resign himself to the necessity of subjective interpretation. But since the modern novelist

writes without the epistemological guarantee of the Muses, the reader of the modern novel also finds herself in a highly precarious situation, one to which Borges himself draws our attention in one of his own reflections on narrative fiction. In “El arte narrativo y la magia” (1932), Borges insists on “esa espontánea suspensión de la duda” as a necessary condition not only for the appreciation and enjoyment of narrative, but also, we can safely assume, for its production (I: 226). The key word here is *suspension*, which suggests that irony and doubt are the default, baseline postures and that what Borges later calls “nuestra continua fe en [las] palabras” is simply a moment of willful credulity induced for the purpose of aesthetic bliss and then safely stowed away lest we begin tilting at windmills of our own (I: 227). For Borges, then, narrative fiction, by its very nature, demands the simultaneous production of faith and doubt, of gullibility and skepticism, of belief and disbelief. Further, the transitory abeyance of an otherwise permanent incredulity that makes fiction work has the effect of generating a sort of Baudelaireian *dédoublement* within subjectivity—indeed, of creating two distinct “selves”: the self temporarily enraptured by the “magia” of the narrative and the self that contemplates the enraptured self from a perspective of detached skepticism. Reading and writing are thus always acts of irony in Baudelaire’s sense.

This complex interplay of ironies, of simultaneous belief and disbelief, is precisely the rubric under which we ought to understand Borges’s ascription of magical, re-incantatory power to poetic language. One must stress the provisionality of this conclusion, however, as it will require further revision in light of a more detailed analysis of Borges’s poetry. But we must first confront yet another difficulty. While Alazraki and others are right to see Borges’s attitude toward religious and philosophical doctrines as

generally skeptical and ironic, it is not immediately obvious how such a view might be reconciled with apparently straight-faced, non-ironic statements like “La poesía quiere volver a esa antigua magia” (II: 236) or “La misión del poeta sería restituir a la palabra [...] su primitiva y ahora oculta virtud” (III: 77) or “Un volumen de versos no es otra cosa que una sucesión de ejercicios mágicos” (III: 202) or “Escribir un poema es ensayar una magia menor” (III: 451). These statements (and others like them) suggest a conviction about, even a faith in, the power of poetic language that is at least *prima facie* incompatible with a thoroughgoing skepticism of the sort typically attributed to Borges. One way to diffuse the conflict would be simply to deny that they are non-ironic: Borges says them, but surely we cannot take them seriously. Another way would be to understand the two views as in fact incommensurable and to add the more general premise that we ought not to expect maximal, or even minimal, consistency from imaginative writers. If one opted for this latter line, it would not be difficult to frame the issue as a conflict between prose and poetry. While the prose fiction is what earned Borges his reputation as a postmodern master of irony and skepticism, it is in the poetry—and, more specifically yet, in the prologues to the poetry—that he seems most willing to suspend that skepticism and to construe language as magical and sacramental. Both of these alternatives seem possible but are ultimately unsatisfying. The former would require us to read against the rather plain sense of Borges’s language, while the latter appears to be an unnecessarily hasty concession. I propose, by contrast, to see two competing tendencies in Borges’s work: one towards making rather extravagant claims about the re-incantatory potential of poetic language and another towards viewing all such claims with ironic incredulity.<sup>73</sup> The key question, then, will be this: how can we

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<sup>73</sup> Guillermo Sucre raises the same question, “¿cómo puede—es la pregunta inevitable—haber una

articulate a Borgesian conception of magic that is (1) attentive to Borges's measured skepticism about religious and philosophical doctrines, but also (2) mindful of the magical potential he frequently ascribes to poetic language? I would like to try to answer this question by tracing the evolution of a symbol that recurs throughout Borges's work: the tiger. I shall argue, first, that the tiger is an important (albeit problematic) symbol of enchantment for Borges. Next I try to show how Borges's use of the tiger allows him to articulate a compelling (though, again, problematic) account of the role of poetry in the re-enchantment of the world.

#### 4.5. Borges, Tigers, and the Dialectic of Re-enchantment

Of the many symbols for which Borges is rightly famous, the tiger is perhaps the most idiosyncratic and elusive. Its elusiveness derives, at least in part, from its baffling polyvalence within his symbolic universe (Loubère 310). Allow me to concentrate on two related connotations. As Rodríguez Monegal rightly notes, the tiger, by virtue of its association with ferocity and violence, symbolizes Borges's sense of nostalgia for a life of action and exploit (primarily of a military variety) which the poet idolized in his ancestors, but which, for a number of reasons, he was unable to reproduce in his own life (*Borgès* 111). The tiger, then, much like the sword and dagger, functions as an emblem of an heroic past, a "destino épico" which is now irrecoverable. It thus stands as a representation of the "personal" component of Borgesian disenchantment outlined in the previous section. Besides this purely personal valence, however, Borges's treatment of the tiger also has somewhat broader implications. If the tiger connotes a highly personal

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coherencia en su obra?" and offers an answer similar to mine: "Pensar que existen varios Borges es una de las mejores fórmulas para recuperar la tranquilidad. El poeta Borges, más humano y sencillo, viene a compensar de este modo al fabulador de ficciones, inhumano y acaso inaccesible. No se cree que pueda haber una coherencia en su obra: el Borges que construye laberintos es en sí mismo laberíntico. Sin pretender reducirlo a una sola pieza, creemos, por nuestra parte, que esa coherencia existe" (83-4).

desire to recover a lost past, it likewise dramatizes, as Williamson notes, a more general “quest for union with the Absolute” (435). This latter sense is especially clear in the late short story “Los tigres azules” (1983) and perhaps even more so in “La escritura de Dios,” where the enigma of the tiger is identified with the enigma of the divine itself (Bravo 93).<sup>74</sup>

These two poles—the personal and the universal—converge in Borges’s explanation of how exactly he came to be fascinated by tigers. “The tiger, I remember, was one the first things I saw in my life,” he told Luis Dávila in a 1976 interview (Burgin 169), though he later confessed being unable to recall whether “mi primer tigre fue el tigre de un grabado” or “aquel, ya muerto, cuyo terco ir y venir por la jaula yo seguía como hechizado del otro lado de los barrotes de hierro” (III: 424). The blurring of life and literature is already a familiar Borgesian theme in its own right. In the case of the tiger, however, it acquires additional layers of significance and complexity. In the first place, Borges describes his tiger as “ya muerto.” That “ya” appears, moreover, to vacillate between two different meanings: “now” and “already.” On both interpretations, of course, the tiger is dead (at least from the perspective of the poet’s present). Yet if “ya” is taken in the second sense, one might be inclined to wonder whether Borges’s “primer tigre” was not *already* dead and so, to borrow an idea from Derrida, *always already* incapable of serving the poet as an original, unconditioned, transcendental signified.

In addition to the ambiguous status of Borges’s “original” tiger, another layer of complexity owes to the manner in which Borges associates tigers with his own childhood.

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<sup>74</sup> For more on Borges’ tigers, see Loubère, Rodríguez Monegal (*Jorge* 110-112), and Bravo (92-94).



“I can say that in the course of my life I have felt attracted to the tiger,” he told Dávila in the same interview, “because I felt attracted to the tiger as a child” (Burgin 170). But Borges’s youthful fascination with the tiger is intimately—and importantly—related to another key motif: his blindness. As his eyesight deteriorated, the yellow of the tigers was the only color that retained any vividness. In “El oro de los tigres” (1972), he writes:

Con los años fueron dejándome  
Los otros hermosos colores  
Y ahora sólo quedan  
La vaga luz y la inextricable sombra  
Y el oro del principio. (II: 515)<sup>75</sup>

The “oro del principio” of the last line is clearly a nostalgic reference to Borges’s own adolescence, but it also harbors an oblique allusion to Hesiod who, in *Works and Days*, arranged human beings into five “races,” Gold to Iron, in descending order of peace and harmony. In this way, Borges deftly links a nearly universal theme (the Golden Age) to a highly idiosyncratic one (the gold of the tigers) and thereby simultaneously universalizes the personal and personalizes the universal. Besides satisfying with remarkable precision the conditions of Coleridge’s definition of the symbol—“the translucence [...] of the general in the special” (438)—this deflation of the universal/particular dichotomy also makes explicit what I have so far only hinted at: namely, that the tiger, for all its ambiguity, clearly stands as an emblem of the restoration of a paradisiacal age of innocence and harmony. Borges makes this point rather unambiguously with the term “hechizado” (III: 424), a passable translation of which might well be “enchanted.” But, as I have already intimated, the tiger’s enchantment is problematic at best. The rub has to do precisely with the question of the relationship between life and literature. For if, on the

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<sup>75</sup> For a detailed account of Borges’s blindness, see his essay “La ceguera” in *Siete noches* (III: 276-86).

one hand, tigers represent lost childhood innocence, a moment of luminous vision that has now sunk into the “gray mist” of blindness (Burgin 169), they also have a rather precise philosophical analogue: the desire for the truly real, for full presence outside of writing. Such desire, as Jacques Derrida told us many years ago, is connate with Western philosophy itself. In Borges’s case, however, the possibility of immediate, extra-textual presence is no sooner posited than undermined. Borges’s originary tiger always already inhabits a kind of penumbral space between the shimmering presence of vision and the shadowy absence of writing. Was it, after all, the tiger from the book or the one at the zoo? Was it the “tigre de un grabado” or the one “del otro lado de los barrotes de hierro”? The answer remains unclear.

The blurring of the distinction between “the real” and “the (merely) literary” haunts all of Borges’s meditations on the tiger. Inasmuch as the tiger stands as a symbol of enchantment, precisely the same distinction destabilizes any attempt to articulate a coherent Borgesian narrative of *re*-enchantment. For if the tiger already straddles the line between the real and the illusory, between the actual and the textual, then whatever re-enchantment it generates remains forever unsettled by the possibility that the supposed moment of original presence was always already *scriptural*, always already plagued by the absence characteristic textuality. Borges did not find a solution to this dilemma until very late in his poetic career, but the solution he *did* find was at once highly original and distinctly modern. To give some idea of its contours, I wish to look at three poems that deal explicitly with the image of the tiger in relation to the question of re-enchantment: “*Dreamtigers*” (1960), “El otro tigre” (1964), and “Mi último tigre” (1984).

#### 4.5.1. “*Dreamtigers*”<sup>76</sup>

I take up “*Dreamtigers*” first for two reasons: it is chronologically prior to the other two poems I wish to consider in this section, and it lays out with remarkable clarity the threefold drama of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment that has served as the frame for this chapter as a whole. I should point out before going any further, however, that my reading of the poem is unapologetically metapoetic. Although “*Dreamtigers*” is, at least in part, the narrative of a dream (albeit a very lucid one), that dream is analogous to the process of poetic creation and hence the poem itself is a commentary on *poiesis*. This assumption should be relatively uncontroversial. Any distinctly modern brand of poetry must be, as Schlegel put it in *Athenäum* 238, “simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry”—that is, at once a poem and a philosophical reflection on the nature of poetry. Likewise, the dream has been, at least since Romanticism, the *locus primus* of poetic inspiration (Béguin 81). In “El otro tigre,” which I shall have occasion to analyze shortly, Borges draws this connection rather more explicitly.

“*Dreamtigers*” is divided into three interlocking parts. The first begins, unsurprisingly, in childhood: “En la infancia yo ejercí con fervor la adoración del tigre.” The association of tigers with youth is what we have come to expect from Borges, but, in this case, he adds a series of significant qualifications:

no el tigre overo de los camalotes del Paraná y de la confusión amazónica, sino el tigre rayado, asiático, real, que sólo pueden afrontar los hombres de guerra, sobre un castillo encima de un elefante.

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<sup>76</sup> The Spanish text of the poem appears in *Obras* (II: 161). I shall therefore dispense with parenthetical citations.

The important word here is “real,” which Borges links to what he elsewhere calls “el culto al coraje,” his well-known idolization of physical strength and military prowess (specifically as it relates to his ancestors). But “real” also implies a metaphysical posture, a certain vision of the nature of ultimate reality. In this latter sense, the term acquires additional significance by association with “adoración,” a word that carries unmistakably religious overtones (besides “adoration,” the closest English equivalent would probably be “worship”). The confluence of such theologically and metaphysically charged language suggests that, for Borges, the tiger is not simply an emblem of nostalgia. It is also an eccentric, highly personalized mythology that functions as a surrogate for lost (and irretrievable) forms of religious belief. Yet despite its eccentricity, Borges’s mythology of the tiger still operates according to the logic of the most traditional of philosophical and religious narrative; it still posits a moment of enchantment, of pure, unmediated contact with the transcendently real, where, to borrow a phrase from Derrida, “presence” is “signified in its brilliance and glory” (286). To associate enchantment with “the real,” as Borges manifestly does, is already to incline oneself toward a naively dualistic metaphysics that imagines reality as divided into a series of crude binary opposites: true/false, real/illusory, authentic/inauthentic, permanent/transitory, original/copy, and so forth. I do not, at this point, wish to “deconstruct” or otherwise call into question these dichotomies; suffice it to note that if one begins with the transcendently “real,” then one has already set oneself up (so to speak) to adjudge whatever does not attain to that ideal as a shadowy simulacrum, the umbral derivative of a resplendent original (such, at any rate, was Nietzsche’s verdict on all “two-world” systems).

In Borges's case, this threat begins to materialize in the poem's second and shortest section: "Pasó la infancia, caducaron los tigres y su pasión, pero todavía están en mis sueños. En esa napa sumergida o caótica siguen prevaleciendo." Here Borges recapitulates the opening line—"En la infancia..."—but only to inform us that the phase of his commerce with tigers that I have termed "enchanted" has now definitively ended. Most significant in this respect is the verb *caducar*, which means, of course, to weaken or attenuate (as in the English "caducity"), but which also resonates deeply with the Latin *cadere*, meaning "to fall." Taken in this broad, reverberative sense, the tigers' "caducation" (so to speak) would be not only the inevitable concomitant of the passing of childhood, but also a kind of fall, indeed *the* Fall: an idiosyncratic Borgesian reinscription of an archetypal myth (recall here my earlier comments about "el oro del principio"). Such a fall would count, then, as the decisive moment of disenchantment: the point at which the "real-ness" of the childhood tiger finally gives way to a brittle, enfeebled "pasión" that is now only a specter of its former self. But this "fall" is not only a loss (though it is of course that as well), but also a relocation—or, better yet, an *internalization*: the tigers that the poet once watched in "una de las jaulas en el Zoológico" are now "en mis sueños." Internalization has become something of a technical term in literary criticism, where it refers to a tendency among Romantic poets to recast sweeping religious and political narratives in psychological terms.<sup>77</sup> Borges very much participates in this tendency, not least because his internalization, like the Romantics', serves as but the dialectical prelude to what can only be called "re-enchantment." Indeed, the second, "disenchanted" portion of "*Dreamtigers*" bleeds

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<sup>77</sup> See Bloom (*Ringers*) for more on this point.

almost indiscernibly into the third, “re-enchanted” one. Having told us that tigers “siguen prevaleciendo” in “mis sueños,” the poet continues:

Dormido, me distrae un sueño cualquiera y de pronto sé que es un sueño. Suelo pensar entonces: Éste es un sueño, una pura diversión de mi voluntad, y ya que tengo un ilimitado poder, voy a causar un tigre.

The shift from a consideration of dreams in abstract terms (“en mis sueños”) to the narrative of some particular dream (“un sueño cualquiera”) coincides both with the beginning of the poem’s third and final movement and with an important change in the poet’s self-conception. At precisely this point, the narrative voice—which has, up to now, merely recounted a certain childhood passion for tigers—becomes a distinctly *poetic* voice. That is, Borges is no longer simply narrating or reporting or even describing. He is instead making, creating, *poetizing*. The object of that *poiesis* is, of course, the tiger, the poem’s central image and a key Borgesian symbol of enchantment. But if the tiger means enchantment, and if the poet endeavors to restore, poetically, the weak, “caduated” tigers to their former splendor, then “*Dreamtigers*” itself is nothing less than the narrative of an attempt to induce, as if by a sheer act of will, the re-enchantment of the world.

The locus of this “re-enchantment” is, of course, the dream, which Borges describes in terms suggestive of divinity (“una pura diversión de mi voluntad,” “un ilimitado poder”). It should be noted in passing that, at least in the twentieth century, the relationship between artistic creation and “dreams” is linked indelibly to Surrealism, a movement for which Borges had little sympathy.<sup>78</sup> In this particular case, his displeasure is explicit: by noting both “Éste es un sueño” and “sé que es un sueño” Borges makes

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<sup>78</sup> Borges’s aversion to Surrealism is well-known. When asked whether he felt “in any way indebted” to the movement, Borges responded: “Well, as a matter of fact, I know very little about surrealism. But I hope it’s better than Ultraism” (Burgin 80).

clear that his dream does emulate the “logic” of Breton’s “automatisme pur,” but rather remains thoroughly lucid, fully within the jurisdiction of the poet’s faculties.

Yet if the poet of “*Dreamtigers*” is not exactly a surrealist, he *is* something of a magician, at least in the sense described above. To put the same point in a slightly different, but compatible, fashion, with that exceedingly bizarre phrase—“voy a causar un tigre”—Borges places himself squarely in the company of the *poeta deus*, the poet whose “primera condición,” as Vicente Huidobro once told us, “es crear” (par. 5).

Composing the genealogy of this idea would be a fascinating enterprise. To give only the briefest of sketches, Béguin was certainly right to locate its immediate source in an analogy, supplied (perhaps unwittingly) by Christianity, between poetic utterance and divine creation (Béguin 62). The Septuagint, for instance, renders the opening verse of Genesis, “In the beginning God poetized [*epoiesen*] the heavens and the earth,” and the Greek version of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381) calls God, literally, the “poet of heaven and earth” (*poieten ouranou kai ges*). But one cannot get from divine creation to full-fledged, poetic *creacionismo* on Christian terms alone, since, in Christian thought, the act by which God brought the world into being *ex nihilo* is unique and unrepeatable, and hence the power to create (in that strict sense) is an exclusively divine prerogative.<sup>79</sup> To begin with “the poet of heaven and earth” and arrive at the poet of “*Dreamtigers*,” one would, at the very least, have to take a long detour through Kant’s Copernican Revolution, which made human knowledge a function, not of the external world, but rather by the categories of the understanding; from there pass to the German

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<sup>79</sup> This does imply that Borges was influenced by, or had any sympathy for, Huidobro’s *creacionismo*. Just the opposite in fact: Borges openly mocked it (Sucre 17). It seems to me undeniable, however, that “Voy a causar un tigre” bears a certain *creacionista* undertone, even if that undertone drips with irony.

idealists where, in Fichte for instance, one discovers that the I's positing of the not-I depends upon the I's prior positing of itself as a self (and hence where the world is very much a "creation" of the subject); then to the Jena Romantics, where one finds Novalis arguing that artists "are called to fashion [*zur Bildung*] the earth" (57); further on to Nietzsche, whose Will to Power as "the will to the creation [*Schaffung*] of the world" (*Jenseits* 11) is at once an audacious declaration of artistic autonomy and the inevitable, though probably unintended, upshot of a Kantian conception of reason and subjectivity which, bereft of any objective coordinate (e.g., Plato's Forms, Christianity's God), rests on nothing so much as a blind faith in its own voluntaristic self-assertion; then, finally, to "modern" poetry in all its sundry variants: symbolism, where "tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre" (Mallarmé, *Oeuvres* 378); *modernismo*, where Darío's "botón de pensamiento" (Darío 131) strains mightily to become a rose; and Surrealism, where the unconscious is manumitted from the fetters of oppressive social and moral conventions and granted license to seek a *surrealité* beyond the confines of the mundane.

This is a rough sketch, and one Borges might not himself have offered. It does, however, give us some sense of the philosophical assumptions that must be in place for a poet (or anyone) to entertain the idea of "causing" a tiger: a conception of the human subject as intoxicated by the sublimity of its own power and freedom and as capable of carrying out colossal feats of untrammelled volition.<sup>80</sup> In Borges's case, however, the poet's pretension to God-like creativity turns up illusory:

¡Oh, incompetencia! Nunca mis sueños saben engendrar la apetecida fiera.  
Aparece el tigre, eso sí, pero disecado o endeble, o con impuras variaciones de  
forma, o de un tamaño inadmisible, o harto fugaz, o tirando a perro o a pájaro.

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<sup>80</sup> Loubère comments that, in this poem, Borges "can only create reality by an act of Schopenhaurian will" (314).



The apostrophized “Incompetencia” derives its force by contrast with the “real” of the opening line: the tiger’s “impuras variaciones de formas” betray the poet’s ineptitude precisely because they fail to attain to the splendor of the tigers of his youth. In this sense, White is right to detect “a tinge of Platonic idealism” in Borges’s feverish quest for the “real” tiger (“Allegory” 277), though one might wish to swap “Platonic” for “Schopenhauerian,” since the mechanism of restoration in “*Dreamtigers*” is not the intellect but the will, not Socratic anamnesis but a kind of ebullient voluntarism (though one which, admittedly, has an anamnestic component). The distinction is small but important. It suggests that, for Borges, re-enchantment is not simply restoration, but rather *re-creation*, the forging anew of a vanished paradise that is now only dimly perceptible (and only in dreams at that). In this sense, a Borgesian “poetics of re-enchantment” would be, very precisely, a *poetics*, an act of *poiesis*, of creation, indeed of *procreation* (“nunca mis sueños saben *engendrar* la apetecida fiera”). But—and this is equally crucial—inasmuch as Borges’s poetics of re-enchantment is, very precisely, a poetics, it is also a *failed* poetics, one that never quite manages to carry off the re-incantatory task it sets for itself. In a certain respect, the explicit failure of the poem at the thematic level is already implicit at the level of poetic language. In the first place, “*Dreamtigers*” is not in any obvious sense a poem at all. It is not in verse, it has no apparent rhyme or rhythm, and its prosody tends toward the prosaic and declarative. Further, the language of the poem itself appears to dramatize the declared incompetence of its author. In fact, the lines that follow the strange apostrophe “¡Oh, incompetencia!” are characterized by the repetition of hard “d”-sounds (“engendr**ar** la apetecid**a** fiera [...] disecad**o** o endeb**le**”), as well as by a flurry of repeated vowels sounds (“**o** hart**o** fugaz, **o**

tirando a perro o a pájaro”) which not only make the lines awkward to read, but also lend them a stilted, amateurish air.

If poetry is a kind of magic, to put the point in Borges’s own terminology, it is a distinctly *minor* magic and so is incapable—this late in the game, when the buoyant optimism of the Romantics has all but faded—of restoring to the tiger (and, by implication, to the world) its antique enchantment. Yet what is it about poetry—and specifically about Borges’s poetry—that renders its particular brand of magic so inept, so ineffectual? Why is it incapable of producing re-enchantment? What, in other words, accounts for its peculiar “minor-ness”? To answer these questions, I turn now to “El otro tigre.”

#### 4.5.2. “El otro tigre”<sup>81</sup>

Taken as a whole, “*Dreamigers*” builds an elaborate three-part drama of enchantment, disenchantment, and (ultimately failed) re-enchantment around a single image. But the poem still remains very much at the level of anecdote, and so lacks the resources to allow us to articulate a coherent account of Borgesian re-enchantment. If “*Dreamtigers*” is an anecdote, however, “El otro tigre” is the delineation of its intrinsic logic, a rigorous, theoretical exposition of which “*Dreamtigers*” is the aperçu.<sup>82</sup> At first glance, though, the otherwise substantial differences between the two texts are barely perceptible:

Pienso en un tigre. La penumbra exalta  
La vasta Biblioteca laboriosa  
Y parece alejar los anaqueles;  
Fuerte, inocente, ensangrentado y nuevo,  
Él irá por la selva y su mañana  
Y marcará su rostro en la limosa

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<sup>81</sup> The full text can be found in *Obras* (II: 202-3). As before, I shall dispense with parenthetical citations.

<sup>82</sup> The observation is not original. Ferrer calls “El otro tigre” “una elaboración más amplia y trascendental de ‘*Dreamtigers*’” (279).

Margen de un río cuyo nombres ignora.  
(En su mundo no hay nombre ni pasado  
Ni porvenir, sólo un instante cierto.)

The poem's dramatic situation is clear enough. Inside a vast library, the poet begins to think about a tiger. Although it appears explicitly only once, the library is significant inasmuch as it prefigures, however indirectly, what eventually will become the poem's main theme: the relationship between language and reality. At this point, however, "El otro tigre," like "*Dreamtigers*" before, remains very much anecdotal. And, again as in "*Dreamtigers*," that anecdote turns on an attempt to place the poet into immediate contact with the tiger. In this case, though, the mechanism of immediacy is not so much the generation *ex nihilo* of a tiger ("voy a causar un tigre") as the obliteration of the spatial and temporal distance that stands between poet and object. As the book stacks slowly dissolve into twilight, the poet, undeterred by "las bárbaras distancias" and "los convexos / mares y los desiertos del planeta," "deciphers" the tiger's stripes and "senses" the outlines of its ossature just beneath its quivering skin. From a remote Latin American solitude, the speaker has a vision of the tiger prowling through the jungle, observes its footprint on a muddy riverbank, smells the scent of deer in the morning air. Finally, as if it were close enough to touch, the poet addresses the creature directly:

Desde esta casa de un remoto puerto  
De América del Sur, te sigo y sueño,  
Oh tigre de los márgenes del Ganges.

Despite the sense that we are here on the verge of a dramatic discovery, the poem nevertheless represents the tiger as markedly absent, both because of the sudden and unexpected reinscription of geographical separation ("América del Sur" / "las márgenes del Ganges") and because of the apostrophe ("Oh tigre"), which, as Jonathan Culler has

argued, is the paradigmatic rhetorical figure of absence.<sup>83</sup> The significance of the apostrophe-as-figure-of-absence becomes especially pronounced in the second stanza, where the poem's narrative, anecdotal tone changes definitively:

Cunde la tarde en mi alma y reflexiono  
Que el tigre vocativo de mi verso  
Es un tigre de símbolos y sombras,  
Una serie de tropos literarios [...]

These lines are crucial, since it is here that Borges's text first becomes conscious of itself as a text, where, to borrow a phrase from Paul de Man, it first recognizes "the 'rhetoricity' of its own mode" (136). The deployment of literary-critical terms ("vocativo," "símbolos," "tropos") contributes to this sense, but the key word is "reflexiono," which repeats at a higher level of abstraction the "Pienso" of the opening line and shifts the poet's rhetorical posture from the merely descriptive to the reflective. For while the object of "pienso" is the tiger itself, the object of "reflexiono" is rather the *act of thinking* about the tiger. This move from "thinking about tigers" to "thinking about thinking about tigers" also signals a "split" in the poetic voice, one that effectively creates two distinct texts (or at least two distinct textual layers) within the poem. The first layer corresponds to the opening stanza, where Borges simply describes the tiger; the second layer (which might rightly be called "metatextual") corresponds to the second stanza, where Borges steps back from the first layer and offers a critical commentary on his own description of the tiger. The fusion of poetry and criticism should already be

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<sup>83</sup> For Culler, apostrophe is the "characteristic trope of lyric" because it at once dramatizes the central desire of the poetic tradition and reveals that desire to be illusory. "[T]o apostrophize," he says, "is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire" (139). Despite such pretensions, however, apostrophes are, in the first place, poetic *conventions*. Since apostrophe is always "an indirect invocation of the muse," the apostrophic "O" refers not to the empirical world, but rather "to other apostrophes and thus to the lineage and conventions of sublime poetry" (143). In this sense, Culler concludes, apostrophe is the "sign of a fiction which knows its own fictive nature" (146).

familiar, especially in light of Schlegel's comment about modern poetry as the "poetry of poetry"; but, familiar or not, it nevertheless has the effect of establishing distance between poet and object of *poiesis* and so of inscribing irony at the heart of the poem.

Irony, as suggested earlier, is the primary obstacle to attributing to Borges a straightforward, unproblematic view of the magical, re-incantatory potential of poetic language. In this case, it assumes a very particular form. Once the poet has stepped back from his text and contemplated it from a perspective of detached, impersonal incredulity, he is no longer "in" the poem: that is, he is no longer unselfconsciously absorbed in the process of poetic creation. He has become, instead, a critic, a reader, an estranged and alienated onlooker who views his poem, with its pathetically frail "tigre vocativo," not as a steppingstone on the path toward an encounter with the "tigre de las márgenes del Ganges," but rather as exactly what it is: the conjuring of a frail and ineffectual "tigre de símbolos y sombras." This distinction between the poem's textual and metatextual elements—and the ironic "split" they entail—is also significant because the process of re-enchantment always involves a certain kind of "doubling," a diremption within consciousness between a former self that held a set of "enchanted" beliefs and a latter self that reflects upon those beliefs. To this distinction the textual/metatextual distinction in "El otro tigre" appears to correspond almost exactly. The only difference is that, in Borges's case, the distinction is not so much distinction as rupture. The following lines begin to make clear why:

Al tigre de símbolos he opuesto  
El verdadero, el de caliente sangre,  
El que diezma la tribu de los búfalos  
Y hoy, 3 de agosto del 59,  
Alarga en la pradera una pausada  
Sombra [...]

This is the heart of the poem. Here the radical disjunction between “the real” and “the illusory” teased out of “*Dreamtigers*” becomes most explicit, and here the poet makes clear that the source of that disjunction is language. The opposition, signaled by the verb phrase “he opuesto,” could hardly be less ambiguous: by “opposing” the “true tiger” to the “tiger of symbols,” Borges at once recapitulates the dualistic metaphysics of “*Dreamtigers*” and makes it clear that the “verdadero tigre” is “verdadero” precisely to the extent that it is *not* the “tigre de símbolos.” But if the “true tiger” is non-symbolic (and necessarily so), then Borges’s understanding of the relationship between poetry and disenchantment becomes strangely paradoxical. Poetry, on this view, is simultaneously the instrument by which he endeavors to restore to the world something of its lost charm *and* what renders that restoration impossible. Or, to employ a turn of phrase of which the later Derrida was particularly fond: poetic language is simultaneously a condition of the *possibility* and a condition of the *impossibility* of re-enchantment, at once its primary mechanism and its chief impediment.

In the poem’s immediately subsequent lines, the inexorable antagonism between the “real tiger” and the “linguistic tiger” acquires an additional shade of significance:

[...] pero ya el hecho de nombrarlo  
 Y de conjeturar su circunstancia  
 Lo hace ficción del arte y no criatura  
 Viviente de las que andan por la tierra.

Here the critique of poetic language grows stronger still, as the poet’s sense of his tiger’s “fictionality” is thrown into sharper relief. Further, by contrasting the “tigre de símbolos” with “[una] criatura / viviente” (and, a little earlier, with “el [tigre] de caliente sangre”), Borges not only repeats the fashionable allegation that language is somehow inadequate to or distortive of reality, but also suggests that the process of “naming” or “conjecturing”

(that is, of using language) is in some sense tantamount to murder. He suggests, in other words, that to force a diverse and multiplicitous world into the inflexible parameters of human language is inevitably to leave that world bloodless and moribund. Of course, even this latter view is not exactly novel. One recalls, for instance, Mallarmé, who in “Crise de vers” (1895), suggested that when the poet says “une fleur,” what he invokes is not an actual, physical flower, but rather the concept or idea of a flower: “l’absente de tous bouquets” (858). Somewhat more dramatically, Maurice Blanchot claimed that when I name some particular bit of the world, I must in some sense abstract away “sa réalité d’os et de chair” (325). In the case of Borges’s poem, the important thing to notice is just how radically this understanding of poetic language differs from the view explained earlier in Section 2. For while the “Borges of the prologues” (to borrow a phrase from José Miguel Oviedo) is given to making enthusiastic claims about the power of poetic language, Borges the poet is considerably less sanguine, considerably less inclined to see language as capable of suturing back together the fragmented shards of a disenchanted world and more inclined to see it as the very occasion of that fragmentation. The difference is crucial. Inasmuch as the tiger stands as a symbol of enchantment, and inasmuch as the attempt to generate the tiger poetically is, at best, a distortion or simplification and, at worst, a kind murder, then a Borgesian “poetics of re-enchantment” not only fails but *necessarily* fails. The attempt to induce re-enchantment by way of poetry is, in Borges’s view, not the sort of task that one could, even in principle, bring to completion, simply because the mechanism of that re-enchantment, language, is structurally defective, always already situated at an intraversable remove from the reality to which it ostensibly refers.

It is in this light, moreover, that we should read the poem's final stanza:

Un tercer tigre buscaremos. Éste  
Será como los otros una forma  
De mi sueño, un sistema de palabras  
Humanas y no el tigre vertebrado  
Que, más allá de las mitologías,  
Pisa la tierra. Bien lo sé, pero algo  
Me impone esta aventura indefinida,  
Insensata y antigua, y persevero  
En buscar por el tiempo de la tarde  
El otro tigre, el que no está en el verso.

In an interview with Richard Burgin, Borges remarked that “El otro tigre” is “supposed to be endless,” since “the moment I write about the tiger, the tiger isn’t the tiger, he becomes a set of words in the poem” (20). That is to say, as soon as the tiger is invoked, named, poetized, it ceases to be “el verdadero tigre” and transforms into a shadowy signifier, a mere sign marked, as signs inevitably are, by absence. This means, in turn, that despite a certain Hegelian resonance, Borges’s “third tiger” is purely arbitrary: it is not the tiger of synthesis, not the final step in a long and arduous dialectic at the end of which language and reality finally achieve glorious reconciliation. It is instead the tiger of postponement, of infinite deferral, a third that might as well be forty-sixth or a seventy-fifth. Borges’s quest for a “poetic re-enchantment” is therefore always already a nonstarter. All his efforts notwithstanding, the tiger “en el verso” will never have the same kind of solidity or substantiality as its “real” counterpart. That is, it will never be anything but a tiger “de símbolos y sombras,” a “serie de tropos literarios.” In this sense Ferrer is right to call “El otro tigre” “una elaboración más amplia y trascendental de ‘Dreamtigers’” (279), since, in light of the former poem, it is simply not the case that the latter tiger just *happened* to come out warped and misshapen (as if the poet ought simply to have tried harder), but rather that it *necessarily* came out so. The “Incompetencia” of



*“Dreamtigers”* is thus not an incompetence peculiar to Borges. Rather, it is an incompetence inherent in the practice of poetry itself, a necessary concomitant of the fact that poetry traffics in language and that language, as Borges himself puts it in “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” is but a system of “torpes símbolos arbitrarios” (II: 85).

And yet, despite this virtually absolute assurance of failure, Borges is, as White says, “irresistibly drawn to track down the pure reality of the tiger-in-itself, and in so doing to go beyond his own poetry” (“Allegory” 277). Sucre makes the same point: “Más allá de la resistencia de las palabras, más allá de un mundo que se le escapa, existe para [Borges] el espíritu poético que intenta una trascendencia” (71). Comments like these should make clear that, despite its undeniable irony, despite its more or less explicit recognition that poetry is inadequate to the re-incantatory task, “El otro tigre” still operates according to an epistemological principle that distinguishes sharply between “the real” and “the unreal” and insists that only the former is, in the end, sufficient. The poet’s “apetecida fiera” is still “el que no está en el verso,” even as he confesses that his tiger will be always and inevitably “un sistema de palabras.” In this sense, Sucre is almost certainly right to say that Borges’s poetry is riven by an ineradicable tension between the desire to “seek the inaccessible” and the knowledge that such a search is finally “impossible” (80). I say “almost certainly,” however, because while *“Dreamtigers”* and “El otro tigre” do indeed presuppose a distinction between the real and the illusory that renders the task of re-enchantment impossible (or at least exceedingly difficult), the final poem I wish to consider does not. It is there, in fact, that the distinction at last comes unraveled.

#### 4.5.3. “Mi último tigre”<sup>84</sup>

I come round, finally, to “Mi último tigre,” published in *Atlas* (1984) only two years before Borges’s death. By any reasonable criterion, “Mi último tigre” is not poetry: it has no evident rhythm or prosody, no rhyme or meter, no similes or metaphors—nothing, in other words, that might tempt one to include it in that hallowed class of verbal artifacts we call “poems”. It is, instead, and in a way more evident even than “*Dreamtigers*,” a narrative, a tale, the quaint, unassuming précis of a life-long obsession. But despite its almost disarming banality, “Mi último tigre” nevertheless stands as the perfect bookend not only to a study of Borges’s commerce with the tiger, but also to an account of his understanding of the nature of re-enchantment. I would like to say that this is because the poem effects the final reconciliation of the tensions inherent in “*Dreamtigers*” and “El otro tigre,” specifically the enmity between language and reality, between “el tigre verdadero” and “el tigre de símbolos y sombras.” That would, however, be partly misleading. While “Mi último tigre” does indeed represent a reconciliation of sorts, it is, most emphatically, not a synthesis, not the restoration of that Pazian paradise in which “las cosas y los seres son sus nombres y cada nombre es propio” (*Mono* 96). Quite the opposite. To the extent that “Mi último tigre” makes it possible to see language and reality as constituting a luminous, unified totality, it does so by suggesting that we shrug off the distinction between language and reality, between “the real” and “the (merely) apparent”—that we stop worrying, in other words, whether the tigers we invoke are “en el verso” or not.

Little of the poem’s substantial philosophical import is apparent, however, in the long opening paragraph, of which I cite only the first two sentences.

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<sup>84</sup> The poem appears in *Obras* (III: 424). As before, I do not provide from parenthetical citations.

En mi vida siempre hubo tigres. Tan entretejida está la lectura con los otros hábitos de mis días que verdaderamente no sé si mi primer tigre fue el tigre de un grabado o aquel, ya muerto, cuyo tercer ir y venir por la jaula yo seguía como hechizado del otro lado de los barrotes de hierro.

The first sentence restates the opening line of “*Dreamtigers*,” while the longer second sentence repeats the familiar Borgesian theme of the relationship between life and literature, reality and language. The remainder of the first paragraph is occupied by a casual, untailored summary of the poet’s interaction with the tiger: from his father’s encyclopedias and Blake’s “tyger,” to Chesterton’s “emblem of terrible elegance,” Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, and that “tigre platónico [que] puede buscarse en el libro de Anita Berry, *Art for Children*.” The turning-point, however, the justification for the poem, comes at the end of the first paragraph: “A esos tigres de la vista y del verbo he agregado otro que me fue revelado por nuestro amigo Cuttini, en el curioso jardín zoológico cuyo nombre es Mundo Animal y que se abstiene de prisiones.” Here Borges contrasts explicitly the verbal and visual tigers of his youth with an “other” tiger. And yet this “otro tigre” is not the “otro tigre” of “El otro tigre.” As the poet immediately adds: “[e]se último tigre es de carne y hueso” and not a flimsy “tigre de símbolos y sombras.” He continues: “Con evidente y aterrada felicidad llegué a ese tigre, cuya lengua lamió mi cara, cuya garra indiferente o cariñosa se demoró en mi cabeza, y que, a diferencia de sus precursores, olía y pesaba.” At first glance, the poet seems once again on the verge of metaphysics: the tiger “de carne y hueso” that “olía y pesaba” sounds very much like the “apetecida fiera” of “*Dreamtigers*,” or the “tercer tigre” of “El otro tigre”—the tiger, in other words, “que no está en el verso.” Could this, then, be it? Could the tiger of “Mi último tigre,” which is neither “el tigre de un grabado” nor a “tigre de símbolos y

sombras,” finally be the “real tiger”? Could the long Borgesian drama of re-enchantment finally have come to an end?

Surely we have read too much Borges to be so naive. The first hint that we are on the wrong track is the manner in which the poet introduces his “last tiger”: “A esos tigres de la vista y del verbo he agregado otro.” The key word is *agregar*, which suggests that “Mi último tigre” operates not according to a logic of synthesis or reconciliation, but rather one of simple accretion. The “last tiger,” in other words, bears no dialectical relation to its precursors. It does not weave them into a tidy, remainderless unity, does not overcome the enmity between language and reality, does not finally bring the “the real tiger” into harmonious concert with its symbolic opposite. It is neither the restoration of the Golden Age nor Odysseus’s glorious return to Ithaca, neither the Second Coming nor the final chapter of the epic of *Geist*.<sup>85</sup> The “last tiger” is, in the end, just one among others. On this point, the poem’s final sentence is unambiguous:

No diré que ese tigre que me asombró es más real que los otros, ya que una encina no es más real que las formas de un sueño, pero quiero agradecer aquí a nuestro amigo, ese tigre de carne y hueso que percibieron mis sentidos esa mañana y cuya imagen vuelve como vuelven los tigres de los libros.

The first phrase—“No diré que ese tigre...”—is startling. It at once undermines any pretension on the poet’s part to having recovered something like a “real tiger,” and suggests a decisive change in Borges’s attitude toward the very question of the “real” (and, by implication, the merely “apparent” or “illusory”). In the previous two poems, the poet’s recognition of the tiger’s irreality was followed hard by an irremediable sense of vanity, of futility, of failure (the “Incompetencia” of “*Dreamtigers*,” the shadowy “tigre vocativo” of “El otro tigre”); in each case, the distinction between “reality” and

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<sup>85</sup> Compare the following lines from Borges’s “Arte poética”: “Cuentan que Ulises / harto de prodigios, / lloró de amor al divisar su Itaca / Verde y humilde. El arte es esa Itaca” (II: 221).

“appearance” served as an occasion for the poet to lament the incommensurability of language and reality and so to sink back into nostalgia for a moment of lost enchantment which is now, and despite our best poetic efforts, irrecoverable. In “Mi último tigre,” by contrast, Borges’s recognition of the tiger’s irreality does not yield skepticism or nostalgia, but rather—and quite unexpectedly—an expression of gratitude: “pero quiero *agradecer* aquí a nuestro amigo, ese tigre de carne y hueso.” This sense of gratitude is extraordinarily important, not least because it signals a radical reorientation in the poet’s attitude toward his tiger. Part of that reorientation has to do with the nature of gratitude itself. As Peter Costello has argued, in the act of gratitude “one recognizes the other as another self, as a co-participant in experience” (3). Gratitude thus means recognizing the other as other, and so of transforming subject-object relationships into intersubjective ones. The tiger, on this view, is no longer an object to be submitted to philosophical and linguistic scrutiny, but instead a subject to be engaged, respected, valued, and finally thanked.

It is perhaps unsurprising in this light that no sooner does Borges swap skepticism for thanksgiving than he stops asking a certain class of questions—questions about the relationship between language and reality, about whether an enfeebled, poetic tiger could ever be “really real,” or about how a shadowy “tigre de símbolos” might ever attain the splendor of the tigers of his youth and so restore to the world (and to his own life) the glistening “oro del principio.” Further, if it was precisely this ineradicable skepticism—this inability to bridge, poetically, the gulf between the real and the apparent—that rendered “*Dreamtigers*” and “El otro tigre” ultimately inadequate to the re-incantatory task, then Borges’s “último tigre” represents the possibility of authentic re-enchantment.

It does so not because it is more “real” than the other tigers (this he explicitly denies), but rather because Borges *simply stops asking whether or not the tiger is real*. That is, in “Mi último tigre,” the distinction between “real” tigers and “illusory” tigers, which had dominated the earlier tiger poems, fades into the background as Borges trades skepticism for gratitude, epistemology for doxology. The “magic” of “Mi último tigre,” then—its capacity for generating re-enchantment—resides not so much in being able to produce a real tiger as in allowing us to stop worrying about whether our tigers are real or not. Indeed, by refusing to say that “ese tigre que me asombró es más real que los otros,” Borges effectively brushes aside the distinction between “true” and “illusory,” between “reality” and “appearance” and thereby evades the very problem that had plagued the other two tiger poems. In this sense, “Mi último tigre” is not so much a synthesis of the tensions inherent in “*Dreamtigers*” and “El otro tigre” as their deconstruction—or, better yet, their *oblivion*. Borges, in other words, does not induce re-enchantment by conjuring up the “real tiger” (and thereby resolving the problem of the enmity between language and reality), but rather by conjuring away the very distinction that generated the problem in the first place.

#### 4.6. Modern Magic, Self-Delusion, and the Possibility of Re-Enchantment

The “magic” of “Mi último tigre” is quite different from the magic of “*Dreamtigers*” or “El otro tigre,” and farther still from the sort of magic that modern poets in general tended, if only ironically, to ascribe to poetic language. But it is nevertheless a variety of magic—and, I suggest, of a distinctly “modern” variety.

In mid-nineteenth-century France, when a certain credulity still existed among the uneducated peasant classes toward the tricks and ruses of self-proclaimed sorcerers, Jean-

Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871), the undisputed father of the modern art of conjuring, constructed a series of “experiments” to demonstrate that the sort of “miraculous” feats performed by those claiming for themselves supernatural powers could be easily repeated using only the methods and techniques of modern science. Robert-Houdin’s point was, of course, entirely deflationary, his goal to show that any residual belief in “real” magic was but a capitulation to the grossest of antiquated superstitions and so something a civilized, enlightened society ought long ago to have shuffled off. As a magician, however, Robert-Houdin also had to make a living, and to make a living as a magician requires a certain gullibility in one’s audience, a certain willingness to participate in the production of illusion. The problem, of course, was that this gullibility could not be of the same sort Robert-Houdin associated with the peasant classes, since to encourage precisely that credulity would amount to counteracting the very project of disenchantment.

In his memoirs, *Confidences et révélations* (1868), Robert-Houdin hit upon a brilliant solution to the dilemma. There he distinguished between the “ordinary man” (*l’homme vulgaire*) and the “clever man” (*l’homme d’esprit*) and argued that whereas the former sees in conjuring performances a challenge to his intelligence and therefore an intellectual battle from which he must emerge triumphant, the latter

est venu dans le seul but de jouir d’illusions et, loin de mettre obstacle aux tours du physicien, il est le premier à en favoriser l’exécution. Plus il est trompé, plus il est satisfait, puisqu’il a payé pour cela. Il sait, du reste, que ces amusantes déceptions ne peuvent porter atteinte à sa réputation d’homme intelligent. C’est pourquoi il s’abandonne avec confiance aux raisonnements du prestidigitateur, les suit complaisamment dans tous leurs développements et se laisse facilement égarer. (139)<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> For a more detailed account of Robert-Houdin, see Landy (“Modern Magic”).

Robert-Houdin's point here is that in order to be deceived by a magic show, you must in some sense *want* to be deceived, *want* to be duped. To put the same point another way: modern magic is, very precisely, an illusion, a deception to which one submits knowingly and willingly, but which does not, for that reason, necessarily lose any of its power.

Joshua Landy has very helpfully termed the sort of delusion inherent in modern conjuring "lucid self-delusion" ("Modern Magic" 110). By this he means a delusion that is none the worse off for having recognized itself as deluded—simply because it does not care, because it has chosen to proceed *as if* the lies it tells itself were in fact true. "Mi último tigre" gestures at the same idea. The key term is "gestures." Unlike Robert-Houdin's *homme d'esprit*, Borges does not seek actively to delude himself; he does not stare down a mountain of evidence and then intentionally lie to himself about the appropriate conclusion to draw. Borges's "self-delusion" is rather more passive and indirect. Rather than deny an obvious truth, or assert an obvious falsehood, Borges instead resists the urge to ask that question—"Is the tiger real?"—which might elicit either true or false answers. And yet to fail to ask a question that one knows really ought to be asked is itself a kind of delusion, a deliberate, voluntary, lucid suspension of one's rational faculties. It is precisely this suspension, moreover, that grants Borges the liberty no longer to care whether his "last tiger" is "más real que los otros." And he no longer cares because the restoration of the transcendently real tiger no longer defines the parameters of re-enchantment. The distinction that made those earlier poems go is no longer operative. In other words, Borges trades the search for the "real tiger" for the recognition that our tigers are, always and inevitably, unreal. And yet, at the same time, he also recognizes that our acknowledgement of the tiger's unreality need not



compromise its re-enchanting potential—provided, of course, that we do not endure too long in our skepticism, that we do not press the question, “Is this tiger *really* real?” too hard. It is on this possibility of self-delusion, however oblique and indirect, that Borges wagers re-enchantment.

The key question, of course, is whether it works. Can Landy’s “lucid self-delusion” do the trick? This is also the question that provides the most explicit link between this chapter and the previous one. Bernárdez’s treatment of the problem of disenchantment, so I argued, rests upon a broad (and broadly unquestioned) Catholic vision of the universe, one in which God’s sacramental presence everywhere infuses the created order. Poetry, according to this view, need not concern itself with its own inadequacy, precisely because the task of poetic language is not to supply the world with meaning, but rather to participate in the meaning already inherent in reality. Borges’s poems account for, and dramatize, that brand of participation, but only in attenuated, ironic forms. Can, then, Borges’s “lucidly self-deluded” version of Bernárdez’s straightforward sacramentalism effect the re-enchantment it promises? The obvious answer seems to be no. Of César Vallejo Jean Franco writes: “as soon as we recognize that myth is nothing but a construction that men put upon reality in order to understand it, then it ceases to be effective” (85). But isn’t that the question? Is it, after all, the case that myths surrender even the slightest measure of efficacy as soon as they are recognized as myths? Does the fact that we acknowledge that the sort of certitude that might characterize genuine enchantment has been forever closed off to us mean that the re-magicking of the world is always futile, always hopeless?

The possibility of re-enchantment hangs on this question. While there is no way of settling it in the abstract, Borges's trio of tiger poems suggests that as long as we think in terms of "the real" or "the (merely) illusory," "the given" or "the projected," "el verdadero tigre" or "el tigre de símbolos y sombras," we condemn ourselves to perpetual disappointment; as long as we hold out for full meaning outside of language, for pure presence outside of difference, we will be satisfied with nothing less than actual redemption (whatever that happens to be). But this puts us in a rather precarious situation. It means, on the one hand, that we must recognize that our myths—our "tigers"—are illusory (because, after all, they *are*), but it also means, on the other, that we cannot take them as *merely* illusory (for that would mean stripping them of all re-incantatory potential). And so we must perform something of a balancing act: we must approach the myths we tell ourselves with a kind of wide-eyed lucidity, fully aware that they are illusions; but we must also, in Landy's words, "preserve our illusions," not only because "they are *our* illusions, indicative of who, at a deep level, we are," but also because only by deluding ourselves does existence remain tolerable ("Nietzsche" 13). As Nietzsche told us once, lies are a "condition of life [*Lebensbedingung*]" (*Jenseits* 6).

Near the end of "Fragmentos de un evangelio apócrifo," Borges himself says nearly the same thing: "Nada se edifica sobre la piedra, todo sobre la arena, pero nuestro deber es edificar como si fuera piedra la arena" (II: 390). We must build, in other words, as if the sand were stone. And we must never ask whether our tigers are real.

## Chapter Five

### Alejandra Pizarnik and the Achievement of Disenchantment

#### Introduction

Last chapter's reading of Borges invites a multiple reevaluation, not only of the central Borgesian image of the tiger, but also of the entire problematic of language, knowledge, and reality that Borges's work so often evokes. If my readings are correct, the caricature of Borges (drawn mostly from his prose fiction) as an inveterate skeptic both of the power of the human mind to know reality and of human language to name it must, at the very least, be revised. The raw materials for such a revision have in a sense been right before our eyes. Even setting aside the modernist bromide that art's function is to "impose order upon chaos" (Eagleton 49), there is surely something to be said for the fact that Borges's attacks on the possibility of knowledge and meaningfulness take the form of exquisitely wrought pieces of imaginative fiction in which language "works" and does so marvelously. One potential avenue for future research, then, would be to ask not what Borges's texts *say* about meaning but rather how they *enact* meaning; or else, set in less stark terms, to see how those texts might be constituted by a tension between surface detail and narrative structure. In some cases, this will likely entail reading Borges against himself. For example, "*Dreamtigers*" is largely about the poet's inability to reconstruct the tiger as an emblem of meaning; and yet, by casting that failure in narrative form, Borges recontextualizes his own skepticism as part of a larger, meaningful whole.

However illuminating such alternative readings might be, they are not the task of this dissertation. Instead, the present chapter turns to Alejandra Pizarnik. In many ways the outlier in my dissertation, Pizarnik was born in 1936, nearly a decade after Bernárdez

and Borges had established themselves as important figures in the Buenos Aires literary scene. Her first collection of poems, *La tierra más ajena*, appeared in 1955, followed by *La última inocencia* in 1956 and *Las aventuras perdidas* in 1958. These early collections, as Susana Haydu points out, not only revealed Pizarnik's debt to the Romantic and Surrealist traditions, but also intimated the principal themes of her subsequent work: death, madness, solitude, and, perhaps most significantly, a preoccupation with questions of language and meaning (Haydu 24-26). Indeed, language and meaning are the twin foci of this chapter. I shall be particularly concerned to argue that Pizarnik construes the process of poetic creation not as productive of meaning, but rather as the site of its undoing. In this sense, moreover, Pizarnik stands as the perfect bookend to this study. If, for Bernárdez and Borges, poetry signals the possibility (however vague and imprecise) of meaningful language, for Pizarnik poetry always and only signals its impossibility. Or, to the point in my own terms, if Bernárdez and Borges view poetic language as a possible site of re-enchantment, Pizarnik views it, on the contrary, as the locus of the achievement of *disenchantment*.

This compact and perhaps rather cryptic summary will, I hope, become clearer as the argument develops. The chapter proceeds in broad strokes as a series of interlocking steps. I begin with a brief account of Pizarnik scholarship, followed by an attempt to situate the poet in terms of what Octavio Paz has called "el poema crítico." Next, I turn to Pizarnik's debt to surrealism, especially as mediated through the French medievalist and librarian Georges Bataille (1887-1962). Using Bataille's notion of "limit experiences" as a starting point, I identify the central motif of Pizarnik's poetics as the desire to render oneself consubstantial with poetic language—or, to use her phrase, "to translate oneself

into words.” I will also be interested along the way in showing how, on the basis of this notion, Pizarnik takes up and modifies the themes of sacramentality and music that proved so important for Bernárdez and, somewhat more obliquely, for Borges.

### 5.1. Pizarnik and the Critical Tradition

Alejandra Pizarnik is a myth. “Basta nombrarla,” writes Argentine critic Luis Chitarroni, “para que en el aire vibren la poesía y la leyenda” (5). But myths are funny things. In her foundational 1991 biography, Cristina Piña lamented the “silencio crítico” that hangs over the work of “una de nuestras poetisas más estimables” (*Alejandra* 24), while as late as 2002, Raquel Garzón averred that, even thirty years after her death, Pizarnik remained “el nombre más enigmático de la literatura argentina” (2). Part of that enigma owes to the way in which myths, as Roland Barthes once observed, tend to “de-historicize” or “naturalize” a reality that is “undoubtedly determined by history” (11-12). In Pizarnik scholarship, the mythologizing impulse found fertile soil in a propensity to read the poet’s work in light of her untimely death (voluntary or not) by overdose at age thirty-six. The same tendency has given rise in turn to what Cristina Piña calls “El mito Alejandra Pizarnik” (*Poesía* 20-30), which Susan Chávez-Silverman glosses as an inclination to treat “Pizarnik more as a suicide than as a poet” (“Ex-centric” 220).<sup>87</sup>

Yet the aura of suicide is not by itself sufficient to explain the enigma of a poet who, in *El infierno musical* (1971), described her own work as a series of “gestos inconclusos, objetos ilusorios, formas fracasadas” (*Poesía* 293) or who, in a journal entry from December 1968, confessed writing poems “que ni yo comprendo” (*Diarios* 464). Of far greater significance is the fact that Pizarnik’s verse is, quite simply, difficult. The

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<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the back cover of the 2001 Lumen edition of Pizarnik’s *Prosa completa* refers to “la mítica poeta argentina Alejandra Pizarnik.” Among critics especially inclined to “mythologize” Pizarnik, one might mention the following: Bajarlúa, Beneyto, Korembli, Parra, and Roggiano.

difficulty in question answers to what George Steiner, in reference to Mallarmé and Celan, has termed “ontological difficulty” (*Difficulty* 41). If most of the problems one is likely to encounter in a poem are lexical, grammatical, or cultural in nature (and hence resolvable by recourse to some reference book or other), ontological difficulties emerge when the “contract of intelligibility” between poet and reader ruptures (46). Such ruptures answer to modern poetry’s understanding of language as sustained, in Octavio Paz’s words, by “la negación de la palabra” (*Arco* 257). Modern poetry is difficult, in other words, not because of complicated syntax, obscure mythological allusions, or semantic ambiguity, but rather because, at least since Mallarmé, it takes as its fundamental premise a radical skepticism about the very possibility of meaningful language.

Faced with such difficulty, Pizarnik scholars have resorted to what can only be called critical paraphrase. Indeed, since 1972, the year of her death, Pizarnik criticism has been characterized by the proliferation of attempts to “classify” or “situate” the poet within any number of theological, philosophical, and literary trends. Alicia Borinsky, for instance, argues that Pizarnik’s aversion to “la literatura mimética” places her in the line of Darío’s *modernismo* and Huidobro’s *creacionismo* (294, 297-8), while Haydu traces the same aversion to the influence of the German Romantics, especially as filtered through Albert Béguin’s classic study *L’Ame romantique et le rêve* (1937) (24). Melanie Nicholson gets at the same point from a different angle, situating Pizarnik within an esoteric tradition that found its way into Romanticism, Symbolism, and *modernismo* through the Renaissance Neo-Platonists and the various hermetic and occult doctrines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (*Evil* 66-94). Somewhat further afield, Leonardo

Senkman has suggested that while Pizarnik was not an orthodox Jew, the prevalence of themes of alienation, homelessness, and errancy reveals “una inconfundible voz judía” (337).<sup>88</sup> Likewise, Depetris (157-64) and Reischke (90-91) claim that while the poet was not religious in any traditional sense, the recurrence of silence in her work suggests affinities with the mystical tradition. Further afield still, Carlota Caulfield has detected intertextual resonances of *Alice in Wonderland* in Pizarnik’s poetry and prose (3-10), while Juan Malpartida suggests that the poet passed directly “[d]el jardín de Alicia [...] al castillo de Kafka” (40). Ana María Rodríguez Francia, an Argentine critic also responsible for a study of Bernárdez, agrees: “[u]niverso kafkiano el de esta poesía” (“Cuestionamiento” 127).

In a certain respect, critical paraphrase is unavoidable. All interpretation, as Fredric Jameson once noted, amounts finally to “an allegorical operation in which a text is systematically *rewritten* in terms of some fundamental master code” (43). What is remarkable in Pizarnik’s case is less the existence of such allegorical reinscription than its intensity and diversity. Yet, appearances notwithstanding, the chaos surrounding the poet obeys a certain kind of logic and is reducible to a handful of guiding threads. The first is the centrality of Surrealism, to which I shall return in a moment.<sup>89</sup> The second thread involves the dialectical relationship between two impulses in the Pizarnik corpus. The easiest way to grasp that dialectic is to view Pizarnik as poised between two competing traditions: on the one hand, Romanticism, Symbolism, and *modernismo*,

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<sup>88</sup> Piña (*Poesía* 337-345) and Reischke (91-3) also take up Pizarnik’s relationship with her Jewish heritage.

<sup>89</sup> Numerous critics have commented on Pizarnik’s debt to surrealism. See among others Depetris (88-101), Lagmanovich (895), Lasarte, Piña (*Alejandra* 53-4), Raggiano (50), Reischke (94-7, 111-125), Running (“Poetry”), Silverman (“Ex-centric” 1-52), Stratford (49-57), and Wilson. I shall return to this topic below.

which used poetic language as an instrument to restore a broken, fragmented world to its lost harmony and unity; and, on the other, the avant-garde, which not only lost the older tradition's faith in language but also made the knowledge of that loss central to its own aesthetic (Jrade, *Rubén* 127-36).<sup>90</sup> Piña frames the issue clearly by dividing Pizarnik's understanding of poetry into two mutually exclusive categories: "la poesía como instancia absoluta de realización," which corresponds to the broadly *modernista* heritage, and "la poesía como muerte y desestructuración del sujeto," which corresponds to the broadly avant-garde heritage (*Poesía* 93, 97). For Piña, moreover, Pizarnik's poetry develops (conceptually, if not always chronologically) as a movement from the former to the latter: an initial search for meaning that is finally undermined by the realization that that search is futile.<sup>91</sup>

I shall say more in a moment about the relationship between this dialectic and Pizarnik's engagement with surrealism. For now, though, I should like to note that my argument will be that the two terms of the dialectic are in fact one and the same. If the critical tradition tends to view Pizarnik as a Romantic poet who learned all too well the deflationary lessons of the avant-garde, I suggest that her poetry is framed throughout as a search for non-meaning. I term this paradoxical inversion, whereby the Romantic search for unity and harmony passes over into its opposite, the "achievement of disenchantment." To call disenchantment an "achievement" is to make two different but related points. On the one hand, the official story, sketched in Chapter 1, might lead us to

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<sup>90</sup> Octavio Paz famously described the shift from *modernismo* to the avant-garde as a shift from an analogical to an ironic understanding of poetic language. See Paz (*Hijos* 58-77 and *Poetry* 60-72) and Jiménez ("Introducción" 33-41).

<sup>91</sup> Many scholars have made a version of this argument. See, among others, Wilson (87-8), Lasarte, Depetris (96-110, 164-72), Kunheim (*Gender* 74-5). I will return to them throughout the present chapter.



believe that disenchantment occurred, so to speak, when we were not looking. Once upon a time, the world was rich, vibrant, and meaningful. Then everything changed, and now the task is somehow to recover a sense of that lost meaningfulness. If, by contrast, disenchantment is an achievement, this story will have to be revised. Specifically, it will turn out that complete disenchantment—that is, the complete emptying-out of meaning from the world—will be rather difficult to accomplish. On the other hand, if for Pizarnik disenchantment is indeed an accomplishment, then, as noted a moment ago, it will no longer be the case that her poetic development has two broad movements—a search for meaning that, in the end, proves illusory—but a single movement. The search for meaning will have *always already* been a search for non-meaning.

The bulk of the present chapter is devoted to an explication of that achievement, and to an account of how Pizarnik effects it by recourse—sometimes explicit, sometimes not—to the same sacramental vision that characterizes Bernárdez’s poetic enterprise. Let us begin, however, by returning to the question of modern poetics as a critique of language.

## 5.2. Modern Poetry and the Critique of Language

In a 1963 essay on Octavio Paz’s *Salamandra*, Pizarnik identified Friedrich Hölderlin as the first modern poet because, she said, he was the first to make poetry itself poetry’s explicit theme (Pizarnik, “Premio” 90-93). One might wish to quarrel with Pizarnik’s choice of poets (perhaps on the grounds that it accepted too uncritically the idiosyncrasies of the later Heidegger), but there can be little doubt that the latter half of the eighteenth century saw the emergence of a radically new, and specifically modern, aesthetic sensibility that Hölderlin in fact represents. The roots of that transformation lie in the

work of the Jena Romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel, for whom modernity meant nothing so much as the collapse of all traditional forms of authority (Bernstein, “Poesy” 149). For most of its history, Western art drew its standards and canons from independent, external sources (sometimes from widely accepted artistic paradigms, as in the case of the Homeric epics, and sometimes from extra-artistic philosophical reflections, as in the case of Aristotle’s *Poetics*). Either way, the criteria were not only given in advance but also universal. As a result, one produced good art (a good sonnet, say, or a good tragedy) to the extent that one hewed closely to them. Modern art, and Romanticism in particular, emerged when those pre-established canons of evaluation no longer commanded universal assent and hence when questions like “What is art?” or “What counts as a work of art?” no longer had obvious, uncontroversial answers. One implication of that shift was that the aim of the modern artist could no longer be understood as formal perfection within defined parameters, since such parameters had disappeared, but instead as innovation, originality, and novelty. (In this sense, the novel is, almost by definition, the paradigmatic genre of Schlegelian romanticism.) Yet the impulse to originality generated problems of its own. To the extent that modern art sought to be original, it had also to *legitimize* itself in terms of some criterion or standard (the notion of “pure originality” is, after all, completely unintelligible). But if such standards do not come from independent, pre-established authorities, then where?

Schlegel’s answer was that the work of art itself must provide the standard. “In all its descriptions,” he wrote in *Athenaeum* fragment 238, “this poetry should [...] always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry” (195). To say that poetry must be both “poetry and the poetry of poetry” is just to say that poetry must become conscious of

itself, reflect on itself, furnish an account of its own existence. And this, by turns, is just to say that art must cease to be *merely* art and become instead the philosophy of itself, a transcendental “critique” (in the Kantian sense) of its own conditions of possibility. Modern poetry would then necessarily be a twofold enterprise: a work of art and a philosophical reflection on the work of art (Bernstein, “Poesy” 150-4).

But acute self-consciousness is often existentially paralyzing, and it is perhaps unsurprising that Schlegel’s call for “critical poetry” should have modulated into what Paz termed “el poema crítico.” For Paz, of course, critical poetry is “critical” not only because it reflects on its own conditions of possibility (the Kantian move), but also because it criticizes the very possibility of poetry itself (*Arco* 257). The key figure in the development of the critical poem in this latter sense was the French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), who, in the classic essay “Crise de vers” (1895), famously identified poetry with “la parole essentielle,” a form of language which no longer aims at communicating or signifying, but rather at evacuating words of all relation to the world of things. “A quoi bon,” Mallarmé asked, “la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant, si ce n’est pour qu’en émane, sans la gêne d’un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure?” (*Oeuvres* 865). Mallarmé’s intention was hardly to lament the collapse of referentiality, but rather to bring to its logical conclusion a line of thought that began, arguably, with Hegel’s reflections on speech as a dialectic of signification and negation in the Jena Lectures of 1803-4 (Bruns 91).<sup>92</sup> The idea is that since language already functions by stripping things of their singularity and materiality so as to render them conceptually graspable, the goal

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<sup>92</sup> Hegel: “The first act by which Adam made himself master of the animals was to impose a name on them; that is, he annihilated them in their existence as beings” (cited in Bruns 191).

of poetry (or what might be called, rather more precisely, *la poésie pure*) is simply to nudge this process along: not to summon objects to presence but to return them to what Mallarmé calls “sa virtualité” (866).

For Mallarmé the “radical separation” of word and world was a precondition for returning language to the “pristine universe of nothingness” in which alone “the essence of beauty is to be found” (Bruns 101-2). Among his successors, however, the Mallarméan ideal proved horrifying. Language, now severed from reality, threatened to devolve into absolute meaninglessness (Running, *Critical* 13). In Latin American letters, the trajectory that ultimately yielded despair about the possibility of poetic communication began its life as an evolution within *modernismo*. If the early *modernistas* (Martí, Darío, and Herrera y Reissig, among others) took as their model “the Romantic metaphysics of integration and the unrelenting Romantic quest for innocence” (Jrade, *Rubén* 127), a later generation of *modernista* poets (notably Lugones) swapped faith in the poetic word for a vision of language characterized by doubt, dissonance, and skepticism (Jiménez, “Introducción” 38-40). Paz famously described the shift from the former to the latter as the change from an analogical to an ironic worldview. At the linguistic level, such a shift tracks what Jonathan Mayhew, in his study of the Galician poet Claudio Rodríguez, calls the displacement of the “motivated sign” by the “arbitrary sign” (19).<sup>93</sup> If motivated signs are those in which “the sound of the word is motivated by its meaning” (18), arbitrary signs suggest a view of language in which words refer not to the external world but to other words (Paz, *Corriente* 5-6).

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<sup>93</sup> The same distinction appears in the Romantic polemic about the relationship between allegory and symbolism (Mayhew 21). See also Bruns (1-10, 232-51).

Mayhew's account of the "arbitrary sign" suggests unmistakable affinities with the structuralist and post-structuralist notion that language is a "differential network" in which no one-to-one link exists between signs and referents (Norris 24). In the subsequent Latin American tradition, this view would achieve something of an apotheosis. René de Costa, for instance, has discerned in Huidobro's *Altazor* a process of "de-writing" in which language dissolves into nonsense (147-154). Likewise, the poetry of César Vallejo represents, according to Jean Franco, "an attempt to find a 'deconstructionist' language" that seeks not only to unsettle the traditional link between word and world, but also to "cast doubt on the very possibility of communication" (qtd. in Running, *Critical* 26). In prose fiction, the story is much the same. Roberto González Echevarría has argued that the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier discards the Romantic notion of the writer as the restorer of harmony and views her instead as, in Jade's words, "a transmitter of the emanations from a plenum of nothingness" (*Rubén* 141). Near the end of *Rayuela*, Horacio, in response to a question posed by Babs, likewise remarks on the eclipse of the poet as the redeemer of humanity: "Hasta hace unos veinte años había la gran respuesta: la Poesía, ñata, la Poesía. Te tapaban la boca con la gran palabra. Visión poética del mundo, conquista de una realidad poética. Pero después de la última guerra, te habrás dado cuenta de que se acabó" (Cortázar 504). It would surely be amiss to round out this list without mentioning Borges, the subject of the previous chapter and a poet for whom, as Donald Shaw notes, language "can never tell us anything about the ultimately real, or about life, except that they are unknowable" (23).

That Pizarnik belongs to this general problematic is hardly a matter of dispute. Rare is the critic who fails to mention the extent to which her verse is haunted by a

profound “frustration with language” (Running, *Critical* 87), or populated by “images of desolation” (Zeiss 82), or “marked by a corrosive sense of absence and failure” (García-Moreno 67), or characterized by an “incapacité à dire ce que elle veut” (Stratford 84).<sup>94</sup> Even the spatial organization of her poems—short lines surrounded by oceans of white page—seems to reduplicate, typographically, their content (Running, *Critical* 88). Few texts in the Pizarnik canon make this point as clearly as “En esta noche, en este mundo,” first published in *Árbol de fuego* (Caracas) in December 1971. As a whole, the poem proceeds as a series of movements and counter-movements which first create a set of expectations in the reader and then undermine them. In this sense, the poem not only describes the failure of poetic language, but invites its readers’ participation in that failure. The first stanza, for example, opens with what appears to be a simple declarative phrase about the nature of language: “en esta noche en este mundo / las palabras del sueño de la infancia de la muerte” (*Poesía* 398). As the steady accretion of genitives threatens to nudge the line into unintelligibility, the poet abruptly cuts off: “nunca es eso lo que uno quiere decir.” The following lines repeat, in a somewhat different fashion, the same pattern of proposition and retraction:

la lengua es un órgano de conocimiento  
del fracaso de todo poema  
castrado por su propia lengua (398)

Here, again, readers are invited to participate in the process whereby the poem at once describes and dramatizes its own failure. If the first line, taken in isolation, gives voice to a relatively straightforward claim about the capacity of language to generate knowledge, such a claim is undermined immediately by the second line, which reveals that the knowledge produced by language can only be knowledge of its own failure. The text thus

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<sup>94</sup> See also Amat, Aronne-Amestoy, Camara, Heidi Gai, and Kuhnheim (“Unsettling”).

operates by creating expectations in the reader (“la lengua es un órgano de conocimiento...”) and then undermining them (“...del fracaso de todo poema”). The experience of reading is the progressive revelation of the poem’s own self-negation—that is, of the way in which it systematically denies the conditions of its own possibility.

Unsurprisingly, that self-negation takes as its starting point a radical skepticism about language. Language “castrates,” the poetic voice says: “nada es promesa / entre lo decible,” because “todo lo que se puede decir es mentira” (398). Pizarnik’s suspicion of any meaningful communication has the paradoxical effect of making language itself the primary obstacle to poetic creation and so of establishing a conflict at the heart of the poetic enterprise. Poetry, in her view, is impossible because its medium is ultimately incapable of faithfully transmitting truth. And yet what accounts for this skepticism and the conflict it engenders? The explanation comes when, a few lines later and alluding directly to Breton’s famous remark, “Les mots font l’amour,” Pizarnik declares:

no  
las palabras  
no hacen el amor  
hacen la ausencia  
si digo agua ¿beberé?  
si digo pan ¿comeré? (359)

That words “make absence” is almost definitional. Because signs “stand in” for absent objects, their very presence underscores implicitly the absence of what they signify. The two rhetorical questions that follow reinforce this point. While the term “water” cannot be drunk, nor the term “bread” eaten, their enunciation nevertheless has the effect of making more real, more present, the absence of the objects to which they refer. Besides highlighting the absence that inheres necessarily in human language, the rhetorical questions also intimate a poetic ideal according to which poetry is truly poetic only to the

extent that it is *poiesis* in the most robust sense: that is, only to the extent that it is capable of repeating the primordially generative act whereby God speaks the world into existence. And this, in turn, is why language “castrates”: because it renders poetry impotent and sterile; because signs as absence-makers always stand opposed to the creative, productive aims of the poetic imagination. And that, finally, is why “en esta noche, en este mundo, / [...] todo es posible / salvo / el poema” (360).

Yet if Pizarnik’s place within the tradition of “critical poetry” is undisputed, other questions still linger. Among the most significant is perhaps this: what might drive a poet to such a relentless interrogation of language? What, in other words, accounts for such radical skepticism about the very possibility of communication? Pizarnik’s poetic inheritance is no doubt part of the explanation, but is something else afoot as well? Something hidden in the deep recesses of her lived experience? Something she never thematizes explicitly but which nevertheless exerts a hidden, subterranean influence on her poetic production? Here the biographical issue is unavoidable.

Pizarnik was born in 1936 to Russian Jews who fled the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, just ahead of Stalin’s “Great Purge,” and settled in Argentina. Shortly after her birth in Buenos Aires, World War II broke out in Europe, and the poet’s childhood, as her older sister Myriam reports, “was overshadowed by the parents’ melancholy, a reaction to their awareness of Nazi horrors” (qtd. in Piña, *Alejandra* 32). The 1940s and 1950s likewise saw the emergence of increasingly authoritarian governments in the Southern Cone, a trajectory that culminated in the 1966 military coup and the subsequent establishment of an authoritarian-bureaucratic state. In his study of Argentine history, Juan Corradi characterizes the “authoritarian experiment on which the nation embarked



in 1966” as “an episode of cultural brutality” in which “Manichean sloganeering and anti-intellectualism” systematically suppressed “creativity and critique” (88) and “[v]iolence became the dominant communicative strategy” (106).<sup>95</sup> Add to this the fact that Pizarnik’s father also died in 1966 and it is easy to see why Laura García-Moreno should like to interpret the “negativity” of her poetry in explicitly socio-political terms. Indeed, for García-Moreno, the risk of a “radical loss of meaning and communication” in Pizarnik’s work owes to nothing so much as the way in which “an unassimilable post-war historical legacy,” together with “a moment of national crisis in Argentina,” all piled atop “a tainted paternal signifier,” predisposed the poet “towards a negative structuration within the symbolic” (68-70). “The end of a totalitarian era in one continent,” García Moreno continues, “and the approach of an increasingly totalitarian order prevented her [Pizarnik] from mourning personal and historical losses,” which, in turn, “hindered her from dwelling at ease in the house of language and being” (71).

It must be admitted that the *prima facie* case against any argument of this variety is overwhelming. Pizarnik’s work, as García-Moreno admits, “refuses to offer any transparent clues about its historical or temporal location” (67), and in a diary entry from 1961 Pizarnik herself wrote: “Nunca pensé en mis circunstancias personales: familia, estudios, relaciones, amigos [...] Como si aceptarme con mis circunstancias personales llevara implícito un renunciamento a algo fabuloso” (*Diarios* 187-88). That one “never thought about” one’s own personal experiences does not of course mean that one was not influenced by them, and Hamlet’s mother was probably not the first to wonder whether the lady doth protest too much. Even so, the critical consensus seems to be that Pizarnik’s attitude toward politics was at best indifferent and at worst openly hostile. According to

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<sup>95</sup> I owe my knowledge of Corradi’s work to García-Moreno (71-2).

Nicholson, for instance, the changes in Argentine politics in the 1960s “went virtually unnoticed by this young writer,” while “even the larger events of the decade of the 1960s made no notable impression on her” (*Evil* 71). The contemporary Uruguayan poet and novelist Cristina Peri Rossi makes nearly the same point: “Pizarnik estuvo encerrada en un mundo interior que nunca dejó penetrar como protagonista la experiencia de los otros [...] de ella podemos decir que fue una gran poeta sin que las experiencias del mundo exterior—las colectivas—la rozaran” (588).

Various factors conspired to create this disposition. On the one hand, Pizarnik’s rejection of political commitment is at least partly explicable, as Ivonne Bordelois notes, in terms of family history: “La historia de su familia judía, diezmada sucesivamente por los nazis y los comunistas, le otorgaba un total desinterés por cualquier clase de sacrificio en aras de una ideología correcta” (54). Bordelois’ observation finds its corroboration in a journal entry dated 24 November 1960 in which Pizarnik, only a few months after arriving in Paris, described “el comunismo y el socialismo de mis amigos” as “un nauseabundo convencionalismo,” adding: “Yo estoy en contra. Ni religión ni política ni orden ni anarquía” (*Diarios* 170-1). Nearly a decade later, Pizarnik made her political apathy more explicit still, when, in a 1969 letter to the Spanish writer and painter Antonio Beneyto, she gently mocked fellow Argentine writer Julio Cortázar’s enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution: “Cortázar está sumamente politizado desde hace un tiempo. Por lo tanto, si quieres que te responda, escríbele en términos de *rebelde* enamorado de Cuba [...]. No me estoy burlando de Cortázar, a quien tanto quiero, pero no creo en sus dotes

políticos (ni seguramente él tampoco a pesar de sus esfuerzos por engañarse)” (*Dos letras* 28).<sup>96</sup>

Quite apart from her sense that political commitment hovers somewhere between delusion and tragedy, Pizarnik also articulated purely aesthetic reasons for rejecting the politicization of art. In a short 1967 article in *El Pueblo* (Córdoba), she argued that writers who give themselves over to “presuntos deberes fantasmas de índole política-histórica” invariably betray “el compromiso central de todo escritor”: the obligation to “escribi[r] bien en vez de escribir mal” (*Prosa* 308). The antagonism between the aesthetic and the political is characterized in Pizarnik’s view by an inverse proportionality: to the extent that writers engage politically, they necessarily surrender a measure of independence and authenticity (Reischke 26). If, for Sartre, a writer is *authentique* just insofar as he is *engagé* or *embarqué*, for Pizarnik committed literature is rather more like what Vladimir Nabokov once called “topical trash” (315). As the poet herself put it in the same essay: “Un poema político no sólo es un mal poema sino una mala política” (*Prosa* 308). For Pizarnik, then, political commitment always threatens to devolve into illusion, and every form of political engagement is, in the end, little more than an ideological trap (Reischke 28).

This is not to say, of course, that Pizarnik’s work ought to be interpreted in a socio-political vacuum. Apoliticality is, after all, a political position, and not choosing is in fact a choice. Nor is it to say that García-Moreno’s historically contextualized reading is wrong—only that it is not obligatory. And, at any rate, there is another kind of context. If the first wave of Pizarnik scholarship focused on her poetry and prose narrative, the

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<sup>96</sup> On Pizarnik’s political disengagement, see also Piña (*Alejandra* 81), Kunheim (*Gender* 222), and Reischke (26-28).

recent publication of the *Correspondencia* (1998), *Prosa completa* (2002), and *Diarios* (2003) has signaled a shift among scholars to the study of her readings of, and engagement with, other literary texts (Goldberg 91). This shift suggests an emerging consensus that any interpretation of Pizarnik's work in terms of Argentine social and political reality in the 1960s and 1970s must be supplemented by a reading attentive to the various ways in which the poet's literary interests influenced her development as a writer.

Of those literary interests none looms quite as large as surrealism. The remainder of this chapter seeks to bring Pizarnik into conversation with select threads of the surrealist aesthetic. I begin with Pizarnik's fascination with the dissident surrealist Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and then proceed to a broader account of surrealism's influence on Argentine letters in general and on Pizarnik in particular. To be clear: I do not intend to offer a complete account either of Pizarnik as a reader or of her engagement with surrealism. These topics have been broached by other critics, and their conclusions need not be repeated.<sup>97</sup> My goal instead is to use surrealism as a way of approaching the central question of this chapter: how, and to what extent, does Pizarnik negotiate the loss of meaning consequent upon the disenchantment of the world? Let us begin by taking up the notion of "limit experience," a theme that shall serve as the general frame for that discussion. Broaching that theme will also provide an opportunity to discuss Pizarnik's time in Paris, arguably the most productive of her poetic career.

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<sup>97</sup> See note 3 (above) for a list of scholars who have taken up Pizarnik's relationship with surrealism.

### 5.3. Pizarnik, Bataille, and the Idea of Limit Experiences

In 1960, Alejandra Pizarnik did what so many Latin Americans before and after her have done: she traveled to Paris. The French capital has long exercised a rare fascination on Latin American artists and intellectuals. For Sarmiento and the other members of the Generation of 1837, Paris was a beacon of light and progress and a political model for Argentina's own fledgling republic. For subsequent generations of Latin American writers, it meant not only an escape from political instability, but also new avenues for publishing and a broad, literate readership (Weiss 1-6). Over time, however, what began as a practical necessity became, as David Viñas notes, a rite: "Se viaja a París para santificarse allí y regresar consagrado" (46-7). Viñas' characterization is mostly correct. Octavio Paz, to cite only one example, wrote *El laberinto de la soledad* in 1949 in Paris and then returned to Mexico in 1953. Others stayed much longer. Cortázar, for instance, remained in France until his death. So did Severo Sarduy, though for different reasons.

Pizarnik felt the allure of Paris with particular acuteness. Not only did she wish to repeat the pilgrimage undertaken by her literary forebears; she also desired to escape her parents' bourgeois life in Buenos Aires. "Yo estoy aquí y mi corazón en Europa," she wrote in an early 1959 letter to Rubén Vela (*Correspondencia* 43). Despite her enthusiasm, Pizarnik's time in Paris was difficult. She lived in a constant state of penury and depended for financial subsistence almost entirely upon her parents' reluctant largesse (Bordelois 53). She also worked part time but hated her job. "Casi todo lo que hago en la oficina es maquinal y rutinario," she wrote to León Ostrov in 1961 (*Correspondencia* 53). Yet, as Weiss notes, the poet's "material difficulties" were "almost like a test" (63), both to determine whether she could manage the squalid,

bohemian lifestyle of the French *poètes maudits*, her most important influences (Piña, *Poesía* 17-23), and to gauge the possibility of living, as she put in a journal entry dated 11 April 1961, “por y para la literatura” (*Diarios* 200).

Central to that “test” was the absolute inconceivability of returning to Buenos Aires. In a 1961 letter to her parents, Pizarnik wrote: “no puedo volverme ya definitivamente—es importante, en todo sentido, continuar para mí en París; más que importante es primordial y me haría un efecto catastrófico cortar bruscamente este lento crecimiento que se inició en mí desde que llegué” (*Correspondencia* 90). Pizarnik did mature as a writer in Paris, and years after her return to Argentina she would describe the period between 1960 and 1964 as “el único período en mi vida en que conocí la felicidad y la plenitud” (*Correspondencia* 288). During her stay in the French capital, Pizarnik met a number of important writers and intellectuals, including Simone de Beauvoir, Julio Cortázar, Severo Sarduy, and Octavio Paz, who would later contribute a prologue to *Árbol de Diana* (1962), her first collection of poems written in Paris (Bordelois 68-70). None, however, proved more influential than Georges Bataille (1897-1962), the French medievalist, librarian, and sometime surrealist whom Piña dubs “su padre en el reino de la creación” (*Alejandra* 210). Pizarnik herself corroborated Piña’s claim in an undated letter from Paris to Ivonne Bordelois: “Mi lectura de fondo sigue siendo Georges Bataille” (*Correspondencia* 242).

By the time Pizarnik arrived in Paris, Bataille was already a central figure in the French avant-garde. Although initially attracted to surrealism, his fascination with evil, horror, mutilation, and perversity soon proved too much for Bretonian orthodoxy. The *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1929), for instance, called him “paradoxical and

embarrassing” and placed him among the “excrement-philosophers” (184-85). Bataille’s status as what one critic calls “the prophet of transgression” (a turn of phrase that would no doubt have pleased Pizarnik) took shape early on (Noys 1). In 1926, he wrote a book entitled *W.C.* but later burned the manuscript because it was, in his own estimation, “violently opposed to all dignity” (qtd. in Stoekl x). “The Solar Anus,” a short surrealist text populated by images of death, decay, and excrement, appeared in 1927, followed by the pornographic novel *The Story of the Eye* (1928). Bataille would not break publicly with Breton until 1936, but already in 1929 he had joined with other dissident surrealists, including Michel Leiris, André Masson, and Joan Miró, to found the journal *Documents* (Chénieux-Gendron 107; Noys 6).<sup>98</sup> In 1937, the year after the split with Breton, Bataille, together with Roger Caillois and others, founded the highly influential *Collège de Sociologie*, a loosely-knit group of French intellectuals dissatisfied with surrealism and intent on recovering the social dimension of human existence in the wake of what they perceived as Breton’s inordinate emphasis on the privileged individual unconscious.<sup>99</sup>

Unfortunately, Pizarnik never gives precise details of her engagement with Bataille. We do not know which of his books she read and which she did not. Even so, her own texts supply sufficient, albeit indirect, evidence to render guesswork largely unnecessary. In fact, Melanie Nicholson has dedicated a study to Pizarnik’s debt to Bataille, and since I disagree with some of her conclusions, I shall take it as my point of departure.<sup>100</sup>

Other affinities notwithstanding, what links Pizarnik indelibly to Bataille is the

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<sup>98</sup> See Ades and Baker for a thorough account of the journal, together with primary source material.

<sup>99</sup> For more on the *Collège de Sociologie*, see Hollier, Moebius, and Richman. For an account of its influence on Latin American letters (Octavio Paz in particular), see Santí (Introducción).

<sup>100</sup> See Pérez for another account of Pizarnik’s debt to Bataille.

question of death, which, as Nicholson rightly notes, not only “arises at every point” in Bataille’s work, but is also a “thematic center of gravity” of Pizarnik’s (“Alejandra” 12). More important than death in its generic, biological sense, however, is what Nicholson calls “sacred death,” that is, death as a “transcendence of the individual existence” (12). Bataille took up this theme in his 1957 study *L’Erotisme* (translated as *Death and Sensuality*), arguing that “death alone [...] introduces that break without which nothing reaches the state of ecstasy” (26). Bataille’s invocation of “ecstasy” should be taken in the etymological sense: *ek-stare*, “to stand outside oneself.” Death in turn produces such ecstasy because it signals the termination of subjectivity, the moment at which the self ceases to exist as a self. Yet death is not only an ending but also a new beginning. For just as it “points to the dissolution of the individual ego,” it likewise marks the “return to a state of unity,” the restoration of the individual subject to the cosmic wholeness whence it came (Nicholson, “Alejandra” 12).

Nicholson identifies numerous instances of this “ecstatic or unitive aspect of death” in Pizarnik’s work (14). In “Extracción de la piedra de la locura” (1968), for instance, the poet writes: “Tú sabes que nunca sabrás defenderte, que sólo deseas presentarles el trofeo, quiero decir tu cadáver, y que se lo coman y se lo beban” (*Poesía* 249). These lines, as Nicholson points out, evoke Bataille’s discussion of ritualistic cannibalism, where “human flesh eaten in the communion feast following sacrifice is held as sacred” because “it points to a reintegration of the corpse (and the individual discontinuous life it represents) into the community” (13). In another passage from “Extracción,” Pizarnik takes up the same theme: “Hundirme en la tierra y que la tierra se cierre sobre mí” (*Poesía* 249). Here again Nicholson detects a Bataillean resonance. “The use of the



personalized infinitive [...] marks the statement as a death-wish,” she writes, while the subsequent description signals a desire to “sin[k] into the earth” and “be reabsorbed into the natural world” (13-14). The speaker’s death thus yields her reintegration into a larger economy of continuity.

Nicholson’s emphasis on Pizarnik’s debt to Bataille is accurate, but her yoking of a cluster of terms (death, ecstasy, unity, continuity, and so forth) is highly problematic. Indeed, it is on this point that I disagree with her reading. Perhaps the easiest way to appreciate that disagreement is to understand how Nicholson makes Bataille’s concept of death part of a quasi-Hegelian dialectic in which the alienation and separation that characterize individual existence are overcome by a moment of “negation” (the “antithesis”), which, in turn, reincorporates the individual into the community and thus restores the “continuity” between life and its opposite. Admittedly, Bataille does often speak in such Hegelian terms, but always and only to signal an impossibility. In a late essay on Hegel and sacrifice, for instance, he argued that the “privileged manifestation of Negativity is death” and, further, that “death alone assures the existence of a ‘spiritual’ or ‘dialectical’ being, in the Hegelian sense” (12). The reference here is to the opening chapter of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), where Hegel suggests that although death is “of all things the most dreadful,” we should not “shrink” from it, because only by “tarrying with the negative” does thought “convert it into being” (19). This is a classic expression of what might be called the Investment Theory of Negativity: the notion, adumbrated in Nicholson’s treatment of Pizarnik, that death is but a prelude to reintegration into some larger unity or totality. But this is not Bataille’s own view of death, here or elsewhere. In fact, to the Hegelian notion of death as “dialectic” Bataille

opposes what he calls “atheistic mysticism.” If, for Hegel, the negativity of death is “only the matter of a certain period,” then it is a period from which the atheistic mystic never escapes, without “being able to transpose it into being, refusing to do so and maintaining himself in ambiguity” (17). For Bataille, then, death is not an “event” that could function as part of a dialectical movement toward another, transcendent existence, but rather “a provocation and an infinite withdrawal” (Gemerchak 187). It is a moment of negativity that never gets taken up (*aufgehoben*) in a moment of positivity.

The reason that death cannot do the sort of work that Hegel wants it to do is, to put it crudely, that death is fundamentally unknowable. Bataille argued in the same essay on Hegel that if death is to do any dialectical work, it must at some point become an object of consciousness (that is, one would have to be conscious of one’s own death). But this is impossible, since death could become an object of consciousness only “at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being” (19). The Lithuanian-born French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas would later call this phenomenon “le paradoxe de l’heure dernière”: “si tu es, elle n’est pas; si elle est, tu n’es pas” (59). And so, although death is negativity’s “privileged manifestation,” the revelation that it promises “never takes place,” since at the moment at which it could take place, “the human being himself ceases to be” (Bataille, “Hegel”) 19). Bataille makes this paradox explicit when he notes that “the only true death supposes separation and, through the discourse which separates, the consciousness of being separated” (16). In other words, “true death”—that is, dialectical, Hegelian death—requires both the annihilation of consciousness and consciousness of that annihilation. Which is just to say that it requires the impossible.

I have labored this point to make clear that Bataillean death is not, as Nicholson's reading of Pizarnik would have it, the restoration of continuity, a boundary which, once crossed, opens upon a plenitude of meaning. It is, instead, a limit that can only be approached asymptotically, in ever-ascending degrees of intensity, but never actually reached. This line of reasoning has two immediate and paradoxical implications. The first is that the desire for death, because it is a desire for the dissolution of the conscious subject which is the bearer of meaning, is not the desire for a plenitude of meaning but rather for its absence. The second implication is that the Bataillean death-wish is not a desire for death *per se*, but rather a desire to bring oneself "close" to death, to "experience," to the extent possible, what cannot properly speaking be experienced at all (Hollywood, "Beautiful" 223). The French writer Maurice Blanchot put the point best when he described Bataille's understanding of death as "the experience of non-experience": that is, the desire to experience the absence of experience in which death consists (*Entretien infini* 310).

Bataille gets at this conclusion in a number of different ways. In the opening pages of *Inner Experience* (1943), for instance, he remarks that the title refers to what "one usually calls mystical experience: the states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least of meditated emotion" (3). And yet, he continues, the two cannot simply be collapsed into one another since whereas traditional mysticism leads to "some end point given in advance" (i.e., union with the divine), inner experience, on the contrary, "leads to no harbour" but instead to "a place of bewilderment, of non-meaning [*nonsens*]" (3). Later in the same text, and in others as well, Bataille specifies further the link between non-

meaning, ecstasy, and death. Of particular relevance is his description of contemplating the photograph of a Chinese torture victim. In order to induce ecstasy, he says,

I had recourse to upsetting images. In particular, I would gaze at the photographic image—or sometimes the memory I have of it—of a Chinese man who must have been tortured in my lifetime. Of this torture, I had had in the past a series of successive representations. In the end, the patient writhed, his chest flayed, arms and legs cut off at the elbows and at the knees. His hair standing on end, hideous, haggard, striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp. (119)

The point of such contemplation, Bataille immediately adds, has nothing to do with the “sadistic instinct” and everything to do with the manner in which, by projecting himself onto the photographed victim, Bataille likewise shares in the man’s pain and thereby brings himself as close as possible to an otherwise impossible experience: the experience of the dissolution of subjectivity in death (119-120). In a certain respect, Bataille’s project bears some similarity to Artaud’s “theater of cruelty,” the idea of which was to rupture the spectator’s staid, ideologically sedimented conception of reality by representing violent and painful scenes, thereby restoring “a passionate and convulsive conception of life” (Artaud 66). Indeed, as Hollywood notes, because death cannot be experienced *in propria persona*, the dissolution of subjectivity occasioned by Bataille’s meditative practices is necessarily a “dramatization” (229). And yet precisely this “dramatization,” this attempt to experience another’s death as one’s own, yields the ecstasy Bataille seeks: an annihilation of the subject that is also the gateway to “a place of bewilderment, of non-meaning” (*Inner* 3).

“El deseo de la palabra,” a poem first published in *El infierno musical* (1971), Pizarnik’s last collection of poems, links death, ecstasy, and non-meaning in a broadly Bataillean fashion. The opening lines read: “La noche, de nuevo la noche, la magistral sapiencia de lo oscuro, el cálido roce de la muerte, un instante de éxtasis para mí,

heredera de todo jardín prohibido” (*Poesía* 269). Night is a guiding motif in Pizarnik’s verse, and, as Fiona Mackintosh points out, the poet’s “creative rhythm” was guided by a “largely nocturnal existence” (62). This fascination with night has its roots in Romanticism’s penchant for dark, gloomy settings and answers, in Harold Bloom’s words, to the peculiarly Romantic link between “night and the creative life, the life of the poet which cannot be lived in the common day” (*Shelley’s* 7). The same fascination reappears among the so-called *poètes maudits*, on whom Pizarnik modeled her own life and whose poetry profoundly influenced her (Mackintosh 123-128; Piña, *Poesía* 17-23).

Night appears throughout Pizarnik’s work in close proximity both to death and to ecstasy, sometimes with overtly mystical connotations.<sup>101</sup> In “El deseo de la palabra,” the key term is “roce”: death’s “graze,” not death itself, produces ecstasy. For Pizarnik, then, as for Bataille, ecstasy occurs not through death itself but rather through its proximity. Yet Pizarnik, quite unlike Bataille, appears to make night, death, and the “ecstasy” occasioned thereby a source of knowledge. Both “magistral” (from the Latin *magister*, “teacher”) and “sapiencia” (from the Latin *sapientia*, “wisdom”) suggest that the poet entered the forbidden garden anticipating some revelation. As the text proceeds, however, the promise of knowledge proves illusory. The fifth stanza reads: “He malgastado el don de transfigurar a los prohibidos (los siento respirar adentro de las paredes). Imposible narrar mi día, mi vía. Pero contempla absolutamente sola la desnudez de estos muros. Ninguna flor crece ni crecerá del milagro. A pan y agua toda la vida” (*Poesía* 269). “Los prohibidos” refers both to the “pasos y voces” the poet hears “del lado sombrío del jardín” and to the “risas en el interior de las paredes” (269). These are strange, shadowy

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<sup>101</sup> “Piedra fundamental” (1971), for example, describes the poet’s desire to “tragar noche” (*Poesía* 265) and “hacerme una con la noche” (264). Both expressions suggest a version of the classical notion of *unio mystica*.

figures who occupy an ambivalent, liminal space between existence and non-existence. “No vayas a creer que están vivos,” Pizarnik says of them: “No vayas a creer que no están vivos” (269). The poet’s “don de transfigurar,” in turn, harbors an oblique allusion both to Christ’s Transfiguration and to the familiar Romantic notion that poetry’s task is not simply to describe reality but also to transform it (Bruns 3, 52). But that “gift” has been “squandered.” The poet is now incapable of narrating “mi día, mi vía” (another oblique theological reference, this time to the *via crucis*), and from her work “ninguna flor crece ni crecerá” (269). The promise of knowledge, which was itself premised on the transfiguratory power of poetic language, turns out to be an illusion.

More significantly still, the fifth stanza of “El deseo de la palabra” hints that the poet is not alone in her “jardín prohibido” (a sense generated by the proliferation of first-person verbs in the opening three stanzas), but is instead accompanied by another, the anonymous subject of “contempla.” Pizarnik’s verse is populated by various poetic personae and often assumes a dialogical form in which the speaker addresses or engages a “tú” (Zeiss 282-324; Chávez-Silverman, “Trac(k)ing” 91-92). Here, as elsewhere, that “tú” remains unidentified, but, in the fourth stanza, the speaker addresses it directly: “Tú ya no hablas con nadie. Extranjera a muerte está muriéndose. Otro es el lenguaje de los agonizantes” (269). With these lines, the poem’s dramatic situation crystallizes. “Tú ya no hablas con nadie” reads like a follow-up comment, as if the poet had asked a question, received no answer, and then deduced that her potential interlocutor was incapable of responding. We quickly learn why. The rest of the line reveals that the poetic voice speaks not merely with an “other” but with a dying other, one incapable of communicating with the speaker precisely because “el lenguaje de los agonizantes” is

“otro.” In this light, the opening stanza’s reference to “el cálido roce de la muerte” acquires a new valence. The poet’s “brush with death” is not a brush with her own dissolution but rather with that of another, the unidentified subject of “contempla,” whose agony the speaker has been contemplating all along. Like Bataille, then, Pizarnik understands death’s ecstasy, its “instante de éxtasis,” as a state brought on by the observation of the death of another. Further, just as Bataillean ecstasy leads to “a place of bewilderment, of non-meaning” (*Inner* 3), so Pizarnik’s contemplation of “los agonizantes” creates a situation in which the “magistral sapiencia” of the first stanza cedes to the recognition that poetry is incapable of carrying off that “miracle” whereby, to cite a famous example, Darío’s “botón de pensamiento” might be “transfigured” into a “rosa.” “El roce de la muerte” thus signals a limit experience in two distinct senses. First, it induces ecstasy by bringing the poet to the brink—but only to the brink—of her own dissolution. Second, and more importantly, the poet’s experience signals the limit of meaningful communication. The language of her dying companion is “otro,” and hence their encounter coincides with the moment at which words fail and meaning is no longer possible.

#### 5.4. “¿Qué significa traducirse en palabras?”: Art, Meaning, and Death

For Pizarnik, then, as for Bataille, the experience of limits (exemplified by death) is coincident with the experience of meaninglessness. Her negotiation of such experiences manifests itself in a variety of different ways. First is the simple desire for her own death. Pizarnik returns to this theme constantly, and its recurrence, as noted earlier, has given rise to a vulgar biographism that seeks to read her work as function of her apparent

suicide in 1972.<sup>102</sup> Second is the representation of death in Pizarnik's literary production. "El deseo de la palabra," in which the speaker observes a dying "other," is exemplary in this respect, but the idea emerges even more clearly in *La condesa sangrienta*, where Elizabeth Báthory's "ecstasy" (the term appears three times in Pizarnik's version of the tale) is induced by "contemplating" (which makes four appearances) the torture and death of her helpless victims (*Prosa* 282-296).

Yet a third way in which a fascination with limit experience crops up in Pizarnik's work involves the question of sexuality. Pizarnik had a tumultuous relationship with her own sexual identity and appears to have experienced sexual intimacy as alienation rather than communion.<sup>103</sup> A journal entry dated 7 May 1961 reads: "Lo posterior a la risa, lo que queda después de haberme reído es exactamente lo que queda después de haber hecho el amor toda la noche: un gusto a muerte, un desierto de cenizas" (*Diarios* 203). Despite this general dissatisfaction, Pizarnik does seem to have enjoyed non-standard sexual experiences, especially masturbation and orgies, at least in part because of their theoretical fecundity. "Lo que me fascina de la masturbación," she wrote in her journal on 11 April 1961, "es la enorme posibilidad de transformaciones que ofrece. Ese poder ser objeto y sujeto al mismo tiempo...abolición del tiempo, del espacio" (*Diarios* 200).<sup>104</sup> For Pizarnik, as Sala notes, masturbation is "la imagen de una materialidad dialéctica" (130) because it represents the dialectical overcoming of the subject-object dichotomy. At

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<sup>102</sup> Pizarnik frequently takes up the theme of her own death in her journals. See, among other places, *Diarios* (185-188, 209, 223-225, 229-230, 256, 278, 285-286). Nearly every critic has something to say about Pizarnik and death, but see especially Chávez-Silvermann ("Ex-centric" 205-231), Piña (*Poesía* 20-30), and Depetris (18-20). For a thorough study of the journals, see Sala.

<sup>103</sup> For more on Pizarnik and sexuality, see Chávez-Silvermann ("Trac(k)ing"), García-Serrano, and Foster.

<sup>104</sup> Later that same month, Pizarnik made a similar remark about orgies: "Imposible ninguna orgía si me levanto a las 8 para ir a la oficina. Si es orgía tiene que abolir el tiempo y si el tiempo está abolido no tengo por qué levantarme temprano para ir a la oficina" (*Diarios* 203). See also Sala (130-132).



the same time, however, the dissolution of subjectivity consequent upon self-gratification bears a striking resemblance to the dissolution of subjectivity in death. Both are “limit experiences” in that they produce ecstasy by bringing one to the limit of one’s own subjective experience. Further, as in the case of death, Pizarnik likewise associates masturbation’s “enormous possibility of transformations” with her own incapacity for meaningful communication. In the same journal entry, she situates her affinity for masturbation in terms of an “imposibilidad congénita de comunicarme espontáneamente con los otros, de sobrellevarlos, de tener amigos, amantes, etc.” (*Diarios* 200). As before, the limit of individual subjectivity—“ese poder ser objeto y sujeto al mismo tiempo”—is coincident with the limit of the possibility of meaningful communication.

More important than any of these various modalities of limit experience is another—one that implicates life, poetry, and the relationship between them. Lidia Evangelista speaks for a host of scholars when she suggests that Pizarnik’s “utopía” is “[la] fusión absoluta entre la palabra y el mundo” (43). Later she adds: “la búsqueda del abrazo abarcador entre vida y poesía es la utopía de una palabra/cuerpo. Traducirse en palabras es la tentación suprema del sujeto poético” (47).<sup>105</sup> The phrase “traducirse en palabras” appears in Pizarnik’s 1968 poem “Extracción de la piedra de la locura,” but it signals a motif that recurs throughout her oeuvre: the desire not only to collapse the distance between poet and poem—between the subject of poetic expression and the content of that expression—but also to *become* the poem, to render oneself consubstantial with one’s work. Such a desire answers, at least in part, to what Ronald Bush has called “the *ne plus ultra* of poetic modernism”: the aspiration to translate, without remainder,

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<sup>105</sup> See also Kunhiem (*Gender* 77), Piña (*Poesía* 18-8 and *Alejandra* 53), Reischke (26-33 and *passim*), and Wilson.

lived experience into artistic expression (70). An important corollary (or, perhaps, the necessary condition) of this quest for “immediacy” is the concomitant desire to collapse the distance between meaning and referent, sign and thing—the most pristine manifestation of which is, of course, to translate body into work.

This trope will be the guiding thread of the remainder of the present chapter, and I shall return in a moment to its various manifestations within the Pizarnik canon. Before taking up that discussion, however, it is perhaps worth pausing to note, as many indeed have, Pizarnik’s debt to more orthodox, non-Bataillean varieties of surrealism.

Surrealism’s reception in Argentina is a vexed issue. After World War II, the avant-garde trends of the 1920s and 1930s reemerged in Buenos Aires, but by then the artistic scene was so eclectic (as indeed it had been since the days of the Florida-Boedo polemic) that nothing like a surrealist “movement” took root (Depetris 92). In fact, in her study of Argentine surrealism, Graciela Maturo prefers to speak of “proyecciones del surrealismo en la literatura argentina” rather than a “movimiento” and identifies only one “grupo surrealista válido,” that of Aldo Pellegrini and his followers, in the two decades after the war (110).

Pizarnik’s relationship with surrealism is more complicated still. Juan-Jacobo Bajarlía, a professor of journalism at the University of Buenos Aires, claims to have introduced the poet to the movement during a series of *tertulias*, attended by Pellegrini and Enrique Molina, at the home of Oliverio Gironde and Norah Lange. “Ella escuchó mis observaciones,” Bajarlía wrote, “y prometió estudiar los modelos que le proponía” (45). Bajarlía’s “modelos” stuck, at least in the mind of critics, and the first generation of

Pizarnik scholars treated her surrealism as a given.<sup>106</sup> More recent studies—beginning with Francisco Lasarte’s 1983 article and culminating with Chávez-Silverman landmark 1991 study—have definitively remapped the scholarly landscape. Neither of these studies (nor others like them) denies Pizarnik’s debt to surrealism; instead, each attempts to show that her engagement with the movement was tempered by what Jason Wilson calls “a strong critical sense of not imitating blindly what she read” (77). This “critical sense” is perhaps clearest in Pizarnik’s rejection of a central surrealist motif: the search for a secular version of transcendence.<sup>107</sup> If, for Breton, surrealism’s task is to liberate us from the shackles of drab mundanity and grant us access to a higher reality, for Pizarnik, as Lasarte notes, “la búsqueda de una experiencia poética trascendental” crumples under the weight of a relentless, indeed “absolute,” critique of poetic language (867). Wilson makes a similar point, with special reference to the fusion of life and poetry: “The act of writing words down, however carefully [...] always leaves the living poet behind. Words cannot be inhabited; they betray the speaker, leaving only a ghost there, but not the self” (87). Depetris summarizes the emerging scholarly consensus by reference to what she calls “la condición trágica del hecho poético”: if Pizarnik wished to fuse life and poetry in a moment of absolute plenitude, her skepticism about the meaningfulness of language led ultimately to “la imposibilidad de unir ser y palabra” and the rupture of any “acceso a la dimensión trascendente” (106).<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See Chávez-Silverman (“Ex-centric” 2-4) for a good summary of this critical tendency.

<sup>107</sup> See Johnson for a helpful account of the theme of transcendence in Surrealism.

<sup>108</sup> While it is clear that Breton thought surrealism capable of granting us access to a transcendent or “superior” reality, Lasarte, Wilson, and Depetris appear to think that the movement’s search for an alternative source of transcendence was to be carried out primarily by way of art. Yet it is by no means obvious that this is true. In the *Manifesto* of 1924, for instance, Breton wrote: “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life” (26). Later, the *Second*

My own position can be located somewhere between these two extremes. Pizarnik indeed rejects the possibility of secular transcendence. Yet at the same time, she does not, as Depetris's comment suggests, give up the desire to render her own body consubstantial with the poetic word. Rather, that desire undergoes a fundamental transformation. If, on one reading, the fusion of poetry and life yields a plenitude of meaning in which the distance between sign and referent is reduced finally to a vanishing point, then, for Pizarnik, the act of translating oneself into words comes finally to be associated with death—which, as indicated above, signals not a fullness of meaning but rather its absence. My argument for this claim proceeds in two discrete but dialectically interrelated steps. First, I argue that Pizarnik's quest to "become language" finds its model in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, a doctrine which in turn frames orthodox Christianity's understanding of the Eucharist. In this sense, her articulation of an otherwise secular poetic ideal takes on a distinctively theological, even sacramental, character. Second, I argue that whereas for Bernárdez the Eucharist is a moment of absolute plenitude, for Pizarnik it becomes the site of the dissolution both of the poetic subject and the possibility of meaningful poetic language. The prospect of full meaning thus finally passes over into its opposite and becomes the condition of its own negation.

During the course of this argument, I shall concentrate special attention on two collections of poems: *Extracción de la piedra de la locura* (1968) and *El infierno musical* (1971). Both belong to the final period of Pizarnik's output, and both are characterized by

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*Manifesto*, he suggested that "The simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd" (125). In neither case does art play a prominent role (or indeed appear at all) in Breton's characterization of surrealism. This difference, however, does not appear seriously to compromise their argument. If anything, framing the matter in artistic (and, more specifically, poetic) terms strengthens, however unintentionally, the basic point about Pizarnik's deep divergence from Breton's movement.

an overwhelming sense of alienation and despair (Haydu 20). This shared condition makes them important resources for investigating how, in her most mature work, the poet negotiated the question of poetic meaning. To flesh out this claim, let us begin by looking at some of the ways in which the idea of “translating oneself into words” appears in the Pizarnik canon.

#### 5.4.1 Writing, Ritual, and Eucharist

In her treatment of Pizarnik and Bataille, Nicholson suggests that the desire to die and be reabsorbed into the earth recalls the practice of ritualistic cannibalism. Yet, for Pizarnik, it is not only the longing for death that evokes ritual. In “El poeta y su poema” (*Extracción*, 1968), she employs the same idea to describe her writing “technique”:

[A]dhiero la hoja de papel a un muro y la contemplo; cambio palabras, suprimo versos. A veces, al suprimir una palabra, imagino otra en su lugar, pero sin saber aún su nombre. Entonces, a la espera de la deseada, hago en su vacío un dibujo que la alude. Y este dibujo es como un llamado ritual. (*Prosa* 299-300)

Various critics have pointed out the analogy between writing and the plastic arts, and the centrality of painting and drawing to Pizarnik’s aesthetics is widely recognized.<sup>109</sup> Even more significant, however, is the manner in which Pizarnik makes of writing itself a ritual (Reischke 32-35). In the scenario described in this passage, the poet’s “dibujo” functions as a kind of talisman designed to conjure the presence of the poetic word. The process of composition thus assumes the paradoxical form of a visual incantation.

In other texts, Pizarnik expands the ritual aspect of writing, linking it to the notion of sacrifice. In “Solamente las noches” (1972), composed the year of her death, she writes: “he querido sacrificar mis días y mis semanas / en las ceremonias del poema” (*Poesía* 427). A similar notion appears in the *poètes maudits* who, Prometheus-like,

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<sup>109</sup> For a thorough treatment of this issue, see Leighton. See also Mackintosh (48-53).

risked the perdition of their own souls by transgressing established moral boundaries and descending into “forbidden zones” (Pizarnik’s “jardín prohibido”) in search of “shocking and outrageous knowledge” (Showalter 237). In Pizarnik’s case, the sacrifice of life for poetry assumes a highly specific form. In a 1962 article on Antonin Artaud she wrote: “el sufrimiento de Baudelaire, el suicidio de Nerval, el precoz silencio de Rimbaud, la misteriosa y fugaz presencia de Lautréamont, la vida y la obra de Artaud... Estos poetas, y unos pocos más, tienen en común el haber anulado—o querido anular—la distancia que la sociedad obliga a establecer entre la poesía y la vida” (*Prosa* 269). In a journal entry from the previous year, Pizarnik had expressed a similar desire for her own life: “Deseos de escriturarme, de hacer letra impresa de mi vida. Instantes en que tengo tantas ganas de escribir que me vuelvo impotente. Digo escribir por no decir cantar o bailar, si se pudieran hacer estas dos cosas por escrito” (*Diarios* 218). As these lines make clear, Pizarnik’s ideal is not merely to trade life for poetry but to make poetry of life itself, an ideal that answers to one of this dissertation’s conceptual cruxes: the felt inadequacy of sign to meaning. Later in the same journal entry, Pizarnik wrote: “El lenguaje me desespera en lo que tiene de abstracto” (*Diarios* 218). This sense of language’s debilitating imprecision recalls both Borges’s claim that words are but “torpes símbolos abstractos” (*Obras* II: 85) and Bernárdez’s juxtaposition of music’s expressive richness with his own “palabras minuciosas” (*Buque* 70). But there is one crucial difference. For Bernárdez and Borges, language proves inadequate because of its inability to satisfy an external criterion: because it cannot attain the status of *canto*, or because it cannot conjure “the other tiger.” For Pizarnik, by contrast, inadequation involves not merely language’s failure accurately to depict external reality, but also its failure adequately to

express the feelings and emotions of the poetic subject herself. The problem of linguistic representation has been internalized. This internalization, moreover, explains another desire: “hacer letra impresa de mi vida” (*Diarios* 218). If language’s fundamental problem is that it is powerless to externalize the poet’s interiority (which, as M.H. Abrams’ famous lamp-metaphor suggests, is among the central obsessions of the Romantic and post-Romantic traditions), then “translating oneself into words” cuts off the problem at its root. The thought seems to be that by rendering herself consubstantial with language, Pizarnik could guarantee that her words fully express the contents of her consciousness, simply because the two are, in the end, the same thing.

“El deseo de la palabra” (*Infierno*, 1971), a text already discussed at some length above, is more explicit still on this point. The final stanza reads:

Ojalá pudiera vivir solamente en éxtasis, haciendo el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo, rescatando cada frase con mis días y con mis semanas, infundiéndole al poema mi soplo a medida que cada letra de cada palabra haya sido sacrificada en las ceremonias del vivir. (*Poesía* 269-270).

These lines deploy the same vocabulary as “Solamente las noches,” but in almost perfect inversion. In the latter, the poet sacrifices her own life (rendered, in both texts, as “mis días y mis semanas”) in the “ceremonies of the poem.” In the former, by contrast, the poem’s words are sacrificed in the “ceremonies of life.” Yet the two descriptions should be taken as complementary rather than conflicting. Both correspond to what Ivonne Reischke describes as Pizarnik’s understanding of textual authenticity, namely, the requirement that “life and writing must become one” (33).<sup>110</sup> The language of “authenticity”—which, it should be noted, Pizarnik herself does not use—suggests a Heideggerian (and, perhaps, Sartrean) resonance, one echoed by Pizarnik’s debt to

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<sup>110</sup> “Pizarnik entwirft hier die Utopie, sich ganz ihren Texten einzuschreiben” (33). “Here Pizarnik sketches her utopia: to write herself fully into her texts.” The translation is mine.

Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin. Even more important, however, is the link Reischke establishes between artistic authenticity and ritual. Only by conceiving poetic creation as ritualistic sacrifice, she seems to suggest, does the writing subject fully realize her task. What Reischke does not point out, however, is that Pizarnik's conception of writing as ritual does not answer to ritual in some vague, atmospheric sense but instead to one highly specific ritual: the Eucharist, where the substance of the bread and wine are replaced by the body and blood of Christ. To be sure, Pizarnik neither speaks the language of sacramentality nor thematizes poetic creation as an expression of a sacramental understanding of reality. Even so, as we shall see, she appears clearly to have recognized the irreducibly theological nature of her project.

In "El verbo encarnado," a short 1965 essay on Antonin Artaud first published in *Sur*, Pizarnik linked the French surrealist's anxiety about the inadequacy of language to his "extraordinaria necesidad de encarnación" (*Prosa* 271). "[La] imposibilidad de sentir el ritmo del propio pensamiento," she continued, together with "[la] imposibilidad de sentir vivo el lenguaje humano," bespoke a "prodigiosa sed de liberar y de que se vuelva cuerpo vivo aquello que permanece prisionero en las palabras" (271). Pizarnik's comments take the form of a critical reflection on Artaud, but, as is often the case among poet-critics, they tell us at least as much about Pizarnik herself as about their ostensible subject. Especially significant in this light is the essay's title, "El verbo encarnado," which frames the notion of "translating oneself into words" as a secularized, poetic allegory of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Indeed, it would be difficult not to detect in this foundational Pizarnikian motif a distinctively Trinitarian logic. Whereas the Neo-Platonic *nous* is the prism through which the undifferentiated unity of the One is



refracted, Christian thought has no place for a tale of unity and multiplicity. Instead, the *Logos* is at once perfectly expressive of, and consubstantial with, the Father. The gap between the author of the expression and its content, between poet and poem, is always null and void. In fact, the poetic character of that relationship is so pronounced that David Hart has described Christ as “God’s supreme rhetoric,” the one in whom “sign and significance are one” (320). If the Father, in other words, is “the poet of heaven and earth,” as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed has it, then the Son is at once ontologically continuous with the poet *and* the content of his expression.

The ontological relationship between Father and Son—which, as Hart’s comments suggest, is also a linguistic relationship—thus provides the model for Pizarnik’s own quest for poetic “authenticity.” The desire to “become language” figures as a repetition of the Incarnation of the *Logos*—the “word made flesh,” in the words of the author of John’s Gospel. But if Pizarnik’s poetic ideal is Incarnational, it is also Eucharistic, since the real presence of Christ in the host recapitulates, both symbolically and actually, the presence of the divine *Logos* in the human person Jesus of Nazareth (Pickstock, *After* 273). To the extent, then, that the desire to translate oneself into words “gets to the core of her [Pizarnik’s] poetics” (Wilson 87), that poetics has an explicitly sacramental character, one modeled on the coincidence of sign and meaning characteristic of the Eucharist. Such Eucharistic overtones acquire additional significance in light of the poet’s fascination with Bataillean “limit experiences.” If the Eucharist itself is already a conceptual limit (the upper threshold of linguistic meaningfulness), then in Pizarnik’s recontextualization it becomes instead an *experiential* limit. Not only, in other words, does the gap between sign and meaning collapse. So does the much more

fundamental gap between the source of poetic expression and its contents, between what one *is* and what one *says*. The line separating subject and object, poet and poetry, narrows and finally disappears as the poet's own subjectivity dissolves into the poem itself. In this sense, linguistic self-translation points not merely to the sacramentalization of poetic language, but also to the sacramentalization of the poet's own body. Pizarnik's quest to render herself consubstantial with her own poetry repeats, in a different key, the mystery of transubstantiation, whereby Christ takes on real, bodily presence in the Eucharistic host.

#### 5.4.2. Death, Music, and the Absence of Meaning

As for Bernárdez and Borges, Pizarnik's desire for meaning is finally sacramental. Translation of the poet's body into language not only recalls, but also takes as its model, the coincidence of sign and meaning in the Eucharist. And yet if Pizarnik's "self-transubstantiation" signals a plenitude of meaning, it also, and at the same time, marks the dissolution of the very possibility of meaning. This is a paradoxical assertion, and the remainder of the present chapter addresses its exposition. First, however, let me clarify a few of its implications.

As noted earlier, scholars have tended to group Pizarnik's development into two broad movements: (1) a search for meaning that, in the end, (2) proves illusory. My claim, by contrast, is that there are not two distinct movements but a single one, and hence that the search for meaning is *always already* a search for non-meaning. The very condition of meaning—the Eucharistic translation of the poet's body into poetry—is thus the condition of non-meaning. In this sense, the same sacramental conception of language

that fueled Bernárdez's understanding not only of language but also of the universe becomes, at one and the same time, both the apogee and the nadir of meaningfulness.

The best way to appreciate the force of this paradox is to return to the idea, highlighted by various critics, that Pizarnik's understanding of poetic authenticity turns on sacrifice (Kuhnheim, *Gender* 77; Reischke 33-39). The first point to notice is that the sacrifice in question is not sacrifice in the standard sense, that is, the offering of some external object (a fatted calf or a nubile virgin) as an act of propitiation or worship. Instead, for Pizarnik, sacrifice is always *self-sacrifice*. "[H]e querido sacrificar mis días y mis semanas / en las ceremonias del poema," she writes in "Solamente las noches" (*Poesía* 427). "Hundirme en la tierra y que la tierra se cierre sobre mí," we read in "Extracción de la piedra de la locura" (*Poesía* 249). In a certain respect, the emphasis on self-sacrifice is unsurprising. The first instance of ecstasy, self-translation into words, seems to suggest, if not entail, the dissolution of the poet as an individual subject. In the process of "becoming poetry," Pizarnik ceases to be the subject she once was. At the same time, however, it raises a critical difficulty. On the one hand, the act of becoming language, of "translating oneself into words," is the specifically Pizarnikian condition of signifiatory plenitude—her "utopia," as Reischke terms it (33). And yet, on the other hand, that very condition undermines the plenitude it promises. Indeed, it now appears that the sole way of guaranteeing complete meaningfulness (i.e., the translation of the poet's body into language) is coincident with the dissolution of the poetic subject *as* subject (i.e., with her death). The problem, of course, is that *the two moments cannot coincide*. Even without the benefit of a comprehensive theory of subjectivity, it seems relatively uncontroversial to claim that the very idea of meaning presupposes a conscious

subject *to whom* or *for whom* events or experiences are meaningful. (This is why trees or automobiles or bits of caulk cannot be said to experience the world as meaningful.) In Pizarnik's case, however, the condition of meaning is precisely the dissolution of her own subjectivity. No sooner is full meaningfulness achieved than it is short-circuited by the fact that, at that very moment, there is no longer any subject *to whom* or *for whom* the experience could count as meaningful. In this sense, Pizarnik's sacramentalization of her own body turns on itself. Meaning passes over seamlessly into its opposite. The two are finally indistinguishable.

That is the argument in abstract, conceptual terms. Let us now turn to how it manifests itself in Pizarnik's poetry. This task will, by necessity, be messier and less exact than its conceptual counterpart. It is also more important, not least as a way of guarding against the suspicion that my account of Pizarnik's poetics is rather less drawn *from* her texts than imposed *upon* it. To facilitate matters, I shall organize the discussion around two guiding themes. The first theme, ecstasy, has already received sustained treatment in this chapter. The second theme, music, links Pizarnik's sacramental understanding of poetic creation to that of Bernárdez, though, ultimately, at the opposite end of the conceptual spectrum. Let us take these two themes in order.

As noted earlier, "El deseo de la palabra" associates the notion of translating oneself into words with ecstasy: "Ojalá pudiera, vivir solamente en éxtasis, haciendo el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo" (*Poesía* 269). Here, as elsewhere in the Pizarnik canon, ecstasy should be understood in the etymological sense of "standing outside oneself." Linguistic self-translation counts as "ecstatic" in the relevant sense because it entails the fusion of poet and poem and hence the dissolution of the poet's individual subjectivity.

Earlier in the same poem, Pizarnik had made another reference to ecstasy, this time in an importantly different context: “El cálido roce de la muerte, un instante de éxtasis para mí” (*Poesía* 269). In this line, as noted above, ecstasy is the result of an encounter with death, specifically the dying “other” with whom the speaker dialogues throughout the poem. Taken together, these twin invocations of ecstasy have the effect of linking the poet’s desire to translate herself into words, on the one hand, with the experience of death, on the other. As such, they dramatize the paradox elucidated in the previous two paragraphs. If ecstasy is the effect both of an encounter with death (as it is for Bataille), and of linguistic self-translation, then ecstasy also, and paradoxically, signals the moment at which absolute meaningfulness and absolute meaninglessness fold into one. The condition of meaning is thus also the guarantor of its opposite. The achievement of meaning is at the same the achievement of its absence.

In the same text, Pizarnik also links ecstasy with music, the second of the guiding themes of our discussion. Just before the reference to making a poem of her own body, she writes: “En la cima de la alegría he declarado acerca de una música jamás oída” (*Poesía* 269). “[U]na música jamás oída” recalls Fray Luis’s “música estremada,” but its precise valence in “El deseo de la palabra” remains unclear. To grasp its full import, we must situate the poem not only in the context Pizarnik’s later poetry—primarily *Extracción de la piedra de la locura* (1968) and *El infierno musical* (1971)—but also in terms of her more general reflections on music. In “Una tradición de la ruptura” (1966), a short review of Octavio Paz’s *Cuadrivio* (1965), she wrote that all great poets oscillate between “los dos extremos de la palabra: la música y el significado” (*Prosa* 235). Pizarnik’s comments are significant because they suggest what might be termed a

“continuum of meaning” that runs from “meaningful” on the one end to “music” on the other. On this point, moreover, the Bernardian difference should not be missed. If for Bernárdez music is poetry’s telos—the supreme instance of meaningfulness toward which language invariably strives—then for Pizarnik music is meaning’s opposite. To the extent that poetry seeks to be meaningful, it moves progressively farther from musicality. Conversely, to the extent that poetry seeks to be musical, it also moves progressively farther away from meaningfulness. The two poles are, for Pizarnik, mutually exclusive.

It is important to note at this point that Pizarnik’s association of music and meaninglessness is not merely an arbitrary linkage, but instead a plausible alternative interpretation of the relationship between music and meaning that Bernárdez appears not to have countenanced. For Bernárdez, on the one hand, music is the apogee of meaning because it represents the abolition of the distinction between signifier and signified—the very distinction which, on a poststructuralist analysis, renders language slippery, imprecise, and unreliable. Pizarnik, by contrast, begins with the relatively uncontroversial premise that signification only occurs when signs point to *something other than themselves*. That, one might argue, is just what it means to be a sign. Yet if signs work only by pointing beyond themselves, then musical signs, which are entirely immanent to musical expression itself, do not signal a plenitude of signification but rather its absence. By collapsing the distance between signifier and signified, music likewise collapses the space within which signification might take place and hence where meaning might be produced. So whereas Bernárdez sees in music the upper limit of meaning, for Pizarnik complete meaningfulness passes instantly (and almost imperceptibly) into its opposite,

the meaningless. What for Bernárdez counts as the achievement of enchantment thus counts for Pizarnik as, precisely, the achievement of disenchantment.

It is perhaps unsurprising in this light that, lines before the phrase “*haciendo el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo*,” Pizarnik invokes “*una música jamás oída*” (*Poesía* 269). For in a rather clear sense, the translation of oneself into language is a kind of material-linguistic allegory of the mode of signification proper to music. Just as music folds signifier and signified into one, so Pizarnikian linguistic self-translation collapses the difference between the internal contents of one’s consciousness and the external expression of those contents, such that what the poet *means* and what the poet *is*— semantics and ontology—become finally identical. For Pizarnik, moreover, the result of both processes is to annul the space in which signification occurs (or could occur) and hence to press the possibility of meaningfulness to, and beyond, its breaking point.

Equally unsurprising is that, in a series of poems from both *Extracción de la piedra de la locura* (1968) and *El infierno musical* (1971), Pizarnik also associates music with death, that is, the end-point of meaninglessness. The opening lines of “*La palabra del deseo*” (1971), for instance, read:

Esta espectral textura de la oscuridad, esta melodía en los huesos, este soplo de silencios diversos, este ir abajo por abajo, esta galería oscura, este hundirse sin hundirse. (*Poesía* 271)

The association of “melody” and “bones” suggests a synecdoche between music and death, a sense reinforced in the second stanza when “esta melodía en los huesos” is replaced by “[e]l dolor en los huesos” (271). In the third stanza, the theme becomes yet more concrete:

Posesiones no tengo (esto es seguro; al final algo seguro). Luego una melodía. Es

una melodía plañidera, una luz lila, una inminencia sin destinatario. Veo la melodía. Presencia de una luz anaranjada. Sin tu mirada no voy a saber vivir, también esto es seguro. Te suscito, te resucito. Y me dijo que saliera al viento y fuera de casa en casa preguntando si estaba. (271)

As the poet moves through an imprecise “spectral texture,” she hears a sound—“Luego una melodía”—which subsequently materializes: “Veo la melodía” (271). The paradox of a “visible music” is resolved in the final stanza once it becomes clear that the “melody” in question is in fact the poet’s own verse: “La soledad sería esta melodía rota de mis frases” (271). Here the “melodía en los huesos” from the opening stanza is externalized and made visible as “esta melodía rota de mis frases.” The movement from inner to outer obeys the same logic as Pizarnik’s desire to “hacer letra impresa de mi vida” (*Diarios* 218) or “hac[er] el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo” (*Poesía* 269). The goal, in both cases, is not simply to externalize the internal contents of the poet’s consciousness, but to render those contents *identical* with their external expression, thus reducing to nil the gap between what is *meant* and what is *said*.

Yet the process of externalization fails altogether. The “melody in the bones,” when externalized in the poet’s “phrases,” comes out “broken.” It is certainly tempting to suppose that the problem here is analogous to the one that emerges in Bernárdez’s work, where poetry seeks to attain, but is ultimately incapable, music’s expressive richness. That disparity would, in turn, explain why “la melodía en los huesos,” when translated into poetic language, appears as a set of broken, mangled fragments. Such a conclusion, however, fails to reckon with Pizarnik’s own assertion that music and meaning occupy opposite “extremes” of the same continuum. If, moreover, music is already properly “meaningless,” there can never be any question of translating “musical meaning” into “linguistic meaning,” simply because there is nothing to translate in the first place. The



difference could hardly be more pronounced. For Bernárdez, the problem is language, the inability of which to rival music's expressivity (i.e., to achieve the status of "canto") likewise accounts for poetry's inability to produce "encanto." For Pizarnik, on the contrary, the problem is music itself, which is already meaningless and which, when translated into poetic language, could not, even in principle, produce anything but a set of meaningless fragments. To put it another way, if Bernárdez sees music as the key to "encanto," Pizarnik sees music as precisely what inhibits our access to meaning, what keeps us permanently trapped in the realm of fragments, broken melodies, and disillusionment.

Another text, "El infierno musical" (1971), sheds still further light on Pizarnik's understanding of the relationship between music and poetry. The opening lines read: "Golpean con soles / Nada se acopla con nada aquí" (268). At a literal level, the first line creates an atmosphere of dry, scorching aridity, which acquires special importance in light of Pizarnik's nocturnal predilections. The sense is reinforced at the metaphorical level, which harbors unmistakably musical overtones. "Golpe," on the one hand, refers to the basic unit of measure of a musical composition ("beat" or "pulse" in English). "Sol," on the other hand, corresponds, in solfège syllables, to the fifth tone of the major scale (do-re-mi-fa-sol-etc.). Significantly, the fifth, or "sol," tone is also the moment of maximum tension, the sound which the ear most wishes to hear resolved by a return to the scale's tonal center. Yet Pizarnik's text promises no such resolution. The "soles" pound, throb, beat, and pulse but never resolve. Tension is maximal and relentless.

Such tension helps in turn to explain the second line: "Nada se acopla con nada aquí" (268). *Acoplarse* is, of course, related to *copla*, which lends the phrase musical and

poetic connotations. Further, the absence of *acoplamiento*, or “fittedness,” appears to recall Pizarnik’s description of her own poetry as a series of “gestos inconclusos, objetos ilusorios, formas fracasadas” (*Poesía* 293). “El infierno musical” adds another descriptor to the list. Toward the center of the same poem, the speaker notes: “La cantidad de fragmentos me desgarran” (*Poesía* 268). “Fragmentos” takes its place alongside “gestos inconclusos,” “objetos ilusorios,” “formas fracasadas,” and “melodía rota”: descriptions not only of Pizarnik’s verse, but also, and more generally, of the poetic universe she inhabits. Even more significant, however, is the presence of “cantidad,” which resonates with “canto,” a key Bernardian motif. Although the two do not share a common etymology—“cantidad” derives from *quantitas*, “canto” from *cantus*—the explicitly musical context of “El infierno musical” makes their association nearly inevitable. As noted in Chapter 2, “canto” can refer generically to the action or effect of singing, but it also has decisively sacred overtones (as in the English “chant”). For Bernárdez, the term’s sacred resonance is of central importance because it is only poetry’s status as “canto” that could, hypothetically, guarantee its capacity to produce “encanto.” For Pizarnik, by contrast, all “canto” is already, so to speak, a “canto de fragmentos”—not, as should by now be clear, because poetic language is incapable of rivaling the expressive potential of music, but rather because music is characterized antecedently by the sort of unintelligibility, the lack of meaningfulness inherent in fragments. Rather than “chant,” then, Pizarnik’s “canto” is instead simply a “cantidad”: an accumulation of senseless, meaningless, disconnected fragments and hence always a kind “des-canto.”

The link between music (“canto”) and meaninglessness is adumbrated only faintly in “El infierno musical.” Another poem, “El sueño de la muerte o el lugar de los cuerpos

poéticos,” first published in *Extracción de la piedra de la locura* (1968), is on this point far more explicit and consequently far more significant. “El sueño de la muerte” is an extraordinarily complicated text, and we shall have to proceed slowly not only to catch its meaning (if indeed it has one) but also to grasp its significance for the questions raised in this chapter. The opening paragraph reads: “Toda la noche escucho el llamamiento de la muerte, toda la noche escucho el canto de la muerte junto al río, toda la noche escucho la voz de la muerte que me llama” (*Poesía* 254). Let us begin simply. The speaker lays the scene next to an unidentified river at night. The anaphoric “toda la noche escucho...,” thrice repeated, is accompanied in each case by three distinct, but clearly related, tags: “...el llamamiento de la muerte”; “...el canto de la muerte junto al río”; and “...la voz de la muerte que me llama.” The tags progress, most obviously, via the substitution of a single noun: “llamamiento” becomes “canto” becomes “voz.” It would be mistaken, however, to construe such progress as ethical or dialectical (which, for Hegel and Marx at least, would also count as ethical), primarily because it remains unclear how the move from “llamamiento” to “canto” to “voz” could be understood as progress at all, except perhaps in a trivially spatial or chronological sense. These terms should, on the contrary, be seen as roughly, though not precisely, synonymous iterations of a single, overarching theme.

Less significant than the presence or absence of some meaningful pattern is the very temptation to find one. Although such temptation is perhaps endemic to all critical praxis, it is one which Pizarnik’s poetry (and indeed the whole tradition of Pazian “poesía crítica”) works to undermine. Especially important in this respect is “la voz de la muerte que me llama,” which performs three crucial functions. First, it rounds out the stanza by

linking the final clause to the first: “el *llamamiento* de la muerte.” Second, the pun on “llama” (both “call” and “flame”) connects death to the central theme of the collection as a whole: *el infierno musical*. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the line constitutes death itself as a speaking subject (i.e., the subject of “llama”). The conversion of death, the very emblem of meaninglessness, into subject is, as we shall see, central to the poem’s narrative and thematic development.

Without wishing to ascribe any particular dialectical significance to the trio *llamamiento/canto/voz*, it is nevertheless worth pointing out that, of the three terms, “canto” is by far the most significant, not least because it is, with one exception, the only of the three terms repeated in the remainder of the poem (and the only one which, without exception, becomes a dominant theme). It will be some time, however, before that theme’s full import becomes apparent. Meanwhile, we can note that, as the poem proceeds, the speaker’s perspective begins to shift. If, in the first paragraph, the poetic voice is situated “next to the river,” by the fifth paragraph she inches closer and peers into its depths: “Más desde adentro: el objeto sin nombre que nace y se pulveriza en el lugar en que el silencio pesa como barras de oro y el tiempo es un viento afilado que atraviesa una grieta y es esa su sola declaración” (254). The description is maddeningly imprecise, as indeed the poet herself seems to recognize. In the following sentence, she retreats into straightforward, almost prosaic paraphrase: “Hablo del lugar en que se hacen los cuerpos poéticos —como una cesta llena de cadáveres de niñas” (254-255). As the final phrase suggests, the metaphorical impulse proves difficult to repress, though it is not entirely clear what is supposed to be “like” a “basket full of young girls’ cadavers.” The

“place of the poetic bodies”? the “poetic bodies” themselves? the process of making poetic bodies?

Equally unclear is what “poetic bodies” are in the first place. One option would be to see them simply as poems (as when we refer to some or other poet’s “corpus” of work). This is partly correct, but it does not go far enough, especially given that central Pizarnikian motif of “making the body of the poem with one’s own body.” Viewed in this light, “los cuerpos poéticos” are neither poems nor bodies in any straightforward sense. Or, rather, they are both: “étrange fusion de chair et des mots,” as Mariana Di Ció puts it (91). Still, their meaning remains uncertain. Perhaps we can get a little traction by attending less to the bodies themselves and more to the “lugar” in which they find themselves (i.e., “el *lugar* de los cuerpos poéticos”). In the middle third of the poem’s long sixth paragraph, the poet offers the following description:

Un mundo subterráneo de criaturas de formas no acabadas, un lugar de gestación, un vivero de brazos, de troncos, de caras, y las manos de los muñecos suspendidas como hojas de los fríos árboles filosos aleteaban y resonaban movidas por el viento, y los troncos sin cabeza vestidos de colores tan alegres danzaban rondas infantiles junto a un ataúd lleno de cabezas de locos que aullaban como lobos, y mi cabeza, de súbito, parece querer salirse ahora por mi útero como si los cuerpos poéticos forcejearan por irrumpir en la realidad, nacer a ella... (255)

The subterranean space (“un mundo subterráneo”), together with the patently grotesque descriptions (“un vivero de brazos, de troncos, de caras”; “los troncos sin cabeza”; “un ataúd lleno de cabezas de locos”), recall the Pilgrim’s sojourn in hell in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, though the text’s most immediate literary ancestors are probably Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer* (1873) and Huysmans’ *Là-Bas* (1891). Thematically, the lines are significant insofar as they clarify for the first time the precise valence of “el lugar de los cuerpos poéticos,” which it now turns out to be the site of poetic creativity, where poems

are formed and from which poetry as such emerges. The poem itself is thus an allegory of the process of poetic creation, a meta-poem which, in good Kantian (or Schlegelian) fashion, reflects upon the conditions of its own possibility.

Such reflection finds its guiding metaphor in the act of procreation: “[U]n lugar de gestación.” She adds later: “mi cabeza, de súbito, parece querer salirse ahora por mi útero” (255). These lines, but especially the second, reinforce the analogy between procreation and poetic creativity, and also implicate the poet in the very process she describes. The following lines make the point even more clearly. After the reference to “mi útero,” the poet continues: “como si los cuerpos poéticos forcejearan por irrumpir en la realidad, nacer a ella, y hay alguien en mi garganta, alguien que se estuvo gestando en soledad, y yo, no acabada, ardiente por nacer, me abro, se me abre, va a venir, voy a venir” (255). The alternation between first- and third-person verbs has the effect of blurring yet further the line between observer and observed, subject and object, to such an extent that the distinction between that mysterious “someone” in the poet’s throat and the poet herself threatens to collapse.<sup>111</sup> The point to notice, in any event, is that the poem is not simply about poetic creativity in the abstract, but rather, and more specifically, about Pizarnik’s own process of poetic creation. She, too, is being born as a poetic body.

But the question still lingers. What does it mean to be born as a “poetic body”? What are its conditions? How does it work? Before attempting to answer these questions, let us recall two of this chapter’s central threads. I suggested earlier (section 4.5) that Pizarnik’s conception of poetic creativity turns on the notion of sacrifice and, more specifically, self-sacrifice. Likewise, in section 4.4., I argued that the Pizarnikian ideal is

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<sup>111</sup> If that “someone” is indeed another person and not simply an aspect of the poet’s own personality. See Zeiss (282-324) and Chávez-Silverman (“Trac(k)ing” 91-92).

not simply to write poetry but to turn oneself into poetry, to render one's body consubstantial with the poem itself. Yet both of these motifs, as noted throughout, conceal a paradox. For while each indicates the absolute apogee of poetic meaningfulness, each likewise signals the suspension of meaningfulness in the dissolution of the poet's subjectivity (i.e., in death). The achievement of complete meaningfulness thus coincides with its opposite.

"El sueño de la muerte" draws this connection with exquisite clarity. In order to see how, we must return to an earlier stage in the poem's structure (the end of paragraph 4), where a crucially important figure reappears—one that was introduced in the first paragraph and then receded into the background but which nevertheless haunts the text throughout. Immediately after the reference to "el lugar de los cuerpos poéticos," and just before the reference to "un lugar de gestación," the poet notes: "Y es en ese lugar donde la muerte está sentada, viste un traje muy antiguo y pulsa un arpa en la orilla del río lúgubre, la muerte en un vestido rojo, la bella, la funesta, la espectral, la que toda la noche pulsó un arpa hasta que me adormecí dentro del sueño" (254-255). The description of death seated on the riverbank links this paragraph to the first and thus supplies the primary context of the poet's account of the generation of poetic bodies. Death has presided all along over the procreation of poetic bodies. The place where such bodies are made is also death's. Further, the depiction of death playing a harp recalls the Orpheus myth, according to which, as noted in Chapter 2, Orpheus's doleful melodies effectively call the world into existence. The lines' Orphic resonance is especially significant because it suggests not merely that poetic bodies come into existence in proximity to death, but also that death is their efficient cause. It is as if death called them into being.

The mechanism of such causation is, unsurprisingly, “canto.” Indeed, the poem is characterized fundamentally not only by the juxtaposition of “muerte” and “canto,” but also by the representation of the former as the *source* of the latter. Near the end of paragraph 9, for instance, the speaker says: “La muerte [...] se alejó cantando.” A paragraph later she notes: “el canto de la muerte se desplegó en el término de una sola mañana, y cantaba, y cantaba” (256). And again: “[La muerte] cantaba en la mañana de niebla apenas filtrada por el sol” (256). And yet again: “También cantó en la vieja taberna cercana del puerto” (256). And finally: “La muerte está cantando junto al río” (256). To the extent, then, that “El sueño de la muerte” is an allegory of poetic creation, it also suggests that the locus of *poiesis* (that is, the site of the production of “canto”) is finally to be found in death—that poems have their ultimate ontological basis in an encounter with death and, by implication, that poetic creativity is purchased only at the cost of life.

Yet if death is the ultimate source of creativity in the abstract, it is also the ultimate source of the poet’s own verse. “La muerte es una cosa,” she writes. “La palabra es una cosa, la muerte es una cosa, es un cuerpo poético que alienta en el lugar de mi nacimiento” (*Poesía* 255). The presence of “alentar” (literally, “to breathe”) reinforces the significance of death’s “canto” as the primary engine of *poiesis* (“canto” is, after all, simply the action of producing melodious sounds with the voice). In a somewhat more expansive sense, “alentar” also harbors an oblique reference to the Book of Genesis, where Adam becomes a living being when God “breathe[s] into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2.7). In this instance, of course, death, not God, is responsible for that primordial act of generation, a fact which turns on its head the traditional order of creation. Further, the lines have the effect of telescoping the two untranscendable



horizons of human existence: birth and death—or, better yet, of making one the condition of the other. Death (which, like poetic bodies themselves, is both word and thing) is not merely present at the poet's birth but is also the agent of that birth, casting its breath about, as though fanning tinder to start a fire. The birth of the poem, of the "poetic body," is thus precisely coincident with the death of the poet. The one is achieved only at the expense of the other.

Pizarnik returns to this motif near the end of the poem, but with a subtle variation: "Yo, asistiendo a mi nacimiento. Yo, a mi muerte" (256). Here the telescoping of birth and death—terms which occupy syntactically analogous positions in the line—is second in importance only to the elision of subjectivity, rendered poetically via the untensed, subject-less gerundive. That death and the breakdown of subjectivity should coincide is, in one sense, utterly unremarkable. For Pizarnik at least, the latter is basically the definition of the former. Within the broader context of "El sueño de la muerte," however (and, indeed, within the still broader context of *Extracción de la piedra de la locura*), that dissolution is simultaneous with what might be termed the "subjectivization" of death. As the poet's own subjectivity recedes, death itself ceases to be merely a concept and begins not only to take on the characteristics of personhood, but also to usurp the role of poet as the source of poetic creativity—or, more precisely, of "canto."

We can appreciate the significance of this inversion or transference of subjectivity (which is also an inversion or transference of the site of the production of "canto") by comparing "El sueño de la muerte," the collection's next to last poem, with "Cantora nocturna," the first. The opening lines of the latter text read: "La que murió de su vestido azul está cantando. / Canta imbuida de muerte al sol de su ebriedad" (*Poesía* 213). The

identity of “la que murió” remains unspecified but is plausibly construed as the poet herself or, perhaps, as one of the various poetic masks she dons. In either case, what we do know is that whoever is singing is not death itself, which functions syntactically as the object of a preposition. The same general pattern recurs two stanzas later when the speaker notes: “Expuesta a todas las perdiciones, ella / canta junto a una niña extraviada” (213). Here death takes the form of “perdiciones” (which, according to the *RAE*, can mean “condenación eterna”) and remains external to the poet, who in turn remains the source of “canto.” The poem’s final line—“Ella canta” (213)—at once solidifies this arrangement and presages its dissolution, since the ambiguous “ella” could refer to anything grammatically feminine and singular, a category that includes both the poet and death.

The ambiguity implicit in “ella” becomes even sharper in “El sueño de la muerte,” where subject and object swap places definitively as the poet’s features are transferred subtly to death itself. If, in “Cantora nocturna,” the poet “canta junto a una niña extraviada” (213), then in “El sueño de la muerte,” death “está cantando junto al río” (256). Likewise, if in “Cantora nocturna” the poet “murió de su vestido azul” (213), then in “El sueño de la muerte” death itself is “la muerte azul” (256). Finally, and most significantly, in the earlier poem, the poet is the subject, both grammatically and ontologically, of “canto.” In “El sueño de la muerte,” the already ambiguous “ella” of the final line of “Cantora nocturna” undergoes its decisive transformation. The poet no longer sings, is no longer either subject or source of “canto.” Instead, it is death who “cantaba en la mañana de niebla apenas filtrada por el sol” (256), and death who “cantó en la vieja taberna cercana del puerto” (256), and, finally, death who “está cantando junto

al río” (256). Death is not simply the site of poetic creativity. Death itself is a poet, indeed *the* poet, the very foundation of poetic creativity.

#### 5.5. Conclusion: The Achievement of Disenchantment

For Pizarnik, then, to write verse is to rendezvous with death and, finally, to surrender to it. Poetic “canto” is always a death-song, not only because it takes its inspiration from death, but also because death itself turns out to be poetry’s source and agent. On this point, the Bernardian resonance is indeed too resounding to pass over unremarked. For Bernárdez the world is already “en-chanted” or “in-sung,” already constituted at its most fundamental level by “canto.” The poet creates by participating in that pre-existent enchantment. Reality, in other words, already shares the structure of music (which, it should be noted, is also the structure of sacrament), and the poet merely participates in that musicality.

Surprisingly, Pizarnik’s model of poetics is also broadly participatory, though in a rather different way. The key term is still “canto,” and the poet still creates by partaking of that “canto,” indeed by allowing it to take over the role of agent of poetic creativity. And yet this superficial structural analogy bespeaks a much more important dissimilarity. The best way to appreciate that dissimilarity and its implications would be to note that while both Bernárdez and Pizarnik employ the term “canto,” they inflect it in profoundly different ways. Those respective inflections have the effect of nudging the term’s semantic valence in two diametrically opposed directions. For Bernárdez, poetic “canto” takes its lead from the ontological “canto” already inherent in the world, which, as David Hart notes, is itself but a “wonderfully wrought hymn to the power of the Almighty” (Hart, *Beauty* 275). Reality is already enchanted, and poetic “canto,” which

has no need of effecting “en-canto,” instead simply participates in it. In Pizarnik’s case, by contrast, the association of “canto” with death has the effect of disrupting the straight Bernardian line between “canto” and “en-canto” (and hence also the link between poetry and enchantment). Reality for Pizarnik is also already imbued with “canto,” but it is a “canto” that has its source not in the primordial creative act of a loving God, but rather in the destructive power of death.

What for Bernárdez counts as the guarantor of enchantment (the “canto” already inherent in reality) comes for Pizarnik to emblemize its opposite: “des-encanto.” This is not only because disenchantment itself is always a matter of death: the death of meaning, the death of the world as a unified, meaningful whole, “la desaparición de la imagen del mundo,” in Paz’s words (*Signos* 318). It is also because poetic “canto” is purchased only by participating in death, and hence only at the price of life. “Poetics bodies” are born only when the poet accepts death and indeed dies: “Yo, asistiendo a mi nacimiento. Yo, a mi muerte” (*Poesía* 256). And this means that, for Pizarnik, disenchantment is not merely accidental, not merely the result of a botched attempt to produce enchantment. Instead, poetic creativity, insofar as it is successful, always yields disenchantment because it is always a matter of death and because death is, by turns, always a matter of the dissolution of the condition of meaning’s possibility.

Another way of stating the same idea would be to say that for Pizarnik disenchantment is an *achievement*. Just as for Borges the recovery of the “other tiger” would count as the achievement of enchantment, so for Pizarnik authentic poetic creation (i.e., the birth of a “cuerpo poético”) has as its condition the dissolution of the very possibility of meaning (i.e., the death of the subject). Thus we can say that the Pizarnik

canon is ordered, as if teleologically, by a desire for death's "canto": that is, the negation of "canto," or, more simply, "des-encanto." It is also in this sense that Pizarnik stands as the precise dialectical negation of Bernárdez's enchanted, sacramental vision. For Bernárdez, the world's musicality finds its analogue in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Reality is en-chanted because it is Eucharistic and Eucharistic because it is en-chanted. As suggested earlier, Pizarnik's desire to "hacer letra impresa de mi vida" obeys this Eucharistic-cum-musical model, but it does so in an exceedingly paradoxical way. If for Bernárdez both music and Eucharist open upon meaning in its deepest, most capacious, most plenitudinous sense, then for Pizarnik both music and Eucharist point in precisely the opposite direction: to the complete absence of meaning. The Eucharistic structure of Pizarnik's desire to "hac[er] el cuerpo del poema con mi cuerpo" has at its final product the dissolution of the poet's subjectivity and, for that very reason, the destruction of meaning.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

This project drew its first breath as a series of vague, imprecise intuitions about the relationship between enchantment, sacramentality, and poetic language. The initial prompting question had two basic parts. First, to what extent might it be possible to understand the conception of poetic language characteristic of modern poetry as an articulation, however muffled and secularized, of a sacramental apprehension of language and world? Second, how might such a conception be related to what Max Weber famously termed “disenchantment”? The yoking of “sacramentality” on the one hand and “disenchantment” on the other was hardly fortuitous. As I showed in detail in Chapter 1, the Reformation critique of medieval Catholicism’s sacramental apparatus effectively prized apart the immanent and transcendent spheres, thus making it possible to construe the natural world as a closed system of efficient causes explicable in purely mechanical terms (McGrath 198-199; Schwartz 11; Weber, *Protestant* 105). It was precisely this “desacramentalization,” moreover, that not only generated the sense, as Weber put it, that “one could in principle master everything through *calculation*” (“Science” 13-14), but also served as the “logical conclusion” of the “great historical process [...] of disenchantment” (*Protestant* 105).

Yet if desacramentalization and disenchantment are as closely related as Weber’s comments suggest, then it is at least plausible to suppose—and this is my dissertation’s core intuition—that any account of *re*-enchantment will also and at the same time be an account of *re*-sacramentalization. The ensuing analysis of Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik was designed to test that intuition. Not, of course, that my analysis established

any simple, straightforward correlation among poetry, sacramentality, and enchantment. Nor was that its goal. The idea, instead, was to *explore* the relationship, to understand the various ways in which those themes might come into commerce with one another. Indeed, it was largely this commitment that dictated the selection of such disparate poets. In this sense, my thesis is sustained by a tension between similarity and difference: a tension, that is, between very different poets who nevertheless take up quite similar themes. Perhaps, then, the best way to give a sense of its value—to answer, in other words, the ever elusive “so what?” question—is by sketching the broader implications of those similarities and differences.

Let us begin with some important differences. The first point to notice is that while Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik each take up the theme of enchantment, their respective treatments of that theme develop in two broadly different directions—directions which correspond to what might be termed the concept’s “Germanic” and “Romanic” potentialities. For Borges, on the one hand, “enchantment” and “disenchantment” move within the conceptual field of Weber’s *Entzauberung*: the sense that in modernity the world “loses its magic” or becomes “unmagical.” Borges’s specifically Weberian apprehension of disenchantment dictates in turn that his response should take the form of an understanding of poetic language as “magical” and of *poiesis* itself as “re-magicking.” Bernárdez and Pizarnik, on the other hand, hear in “enchantment” echoes of the Latin *cantus* and so construe the problematic in terms of song, chant, and *canto*. Poetic language, in this view, takes its coordinates less from magic and more from music. This latter category then undergoes a further differentiation. For Bernárdez music marks the highest point of meaningful expression: that Eucharistic

moment where sign and signifier fold into one and signification reaches its plenitude. For Pizarnik, by contrast, music occupies the far end of a continuum that runs from meaning to non-meaning. By collapsing the distance between sign and signifier, it also obliterates the space wherein signification could occur. Despite this divergence, both Bernárdez and Pizarnik nevertheless construe music as a kind of poetic ideal, but with crucial differences. Whereas Bernárdez views music as the goal toward which poetic language, insofar as it strives to be meaningful, inevitably tends, Pizarnik views the transformation of language into music (“canto”) as coincident with the moment of death and the emptying-out of meaning. To read Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik together, then, is to have a sense not only of the range of possible interpretations of enchantment and disenchantment, but also of how poetic language might be brought to bear upon them.

Yet another significant difference has to do with the very notion of sacramentality. Of the three poets, only Bernárdez develops and employs an explicit, positive account of the sacramental character of poetic language—one modeled, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, on the Eucharist. Borges’s understanding of poetic language, by contrast, trades the explicitly religious concept of sacramentality for the quasi-religious concept of analogy. Analogy, as noted in Chapter 3, has a long and complicated history, but in nearly every case it has two central components: first, an understanding of the world as a unified, luminous totality in which everything relates or corresponds to everything else; and, second, an understanding of poetry as having the capacity to put us into contact with that totality. Analogy shares certain family resemblances with sacramental, and indeed my account of Borges’s treatment of the symbol of the tiger revealed unmistakable affinities with a sacramental apprehension of the world. Despite



their shared secularity, Pizarnik is, on this point closer, to Bernárdez than to Borges. Her understanding of poetry as “self-translation into words” echoes the traditional Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. And if, as I argued in Chapter 4, the Incarnation provides the necessary framework for all Christian reflection on the Eucharist, then Pizarnik’s “incarnational” poetics is also a “sacramental” poetics. This is not to say, of course, that Pizarnik is a Eucharistic poet in precisely the same sense that Bernárdez is. It is merely to say that her work is not fully intelligible except within the context of certain ideas (incarnation, real presence, and so forth) distinctive of Christian thought.

Such differences notwithstanding, the similarities among Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik are far more decisive—and, as it happens, far more illuminating of the implications of my work for our understanding of modern poetry in general. The first of such similarities is the existence of a distinctively theological substrate in modern poetry’s conception of poetic language. In a certain sense, this is unremarkable. If Romanticism was at least in part a response to the crisis of Enlightenment reason, it was also an attempt to recover some of the mystery, religious or otherwise, that the Enlightenment had sought to overcome. Among poets, as detailed in Chapter 3, that project took the form of the rehabilitation of an older, mythical conception of language, one whose origins lie in the Orpheus myth, but which underwent a variety of modifications before finding its way into Romanticism proper. That poets in the modern tradition sought to replace a broadly scientific understanding of language with a broadly mythical one is beyond dispute and now finds itself among the *idées reçues* of scholarship on modern poetry (Abrams; Bruns 3, 48, 52; Cassirer 118; Greene, 38-42, 222-243; Paz, *Primeras letras* 295). The originality of my account lies in having shown

that the tradition stretching from Romanticism to the avant-garde and beyond is susceptible to an analysis not only in broadly religious or mythical terms, but also in terms of a specifically theological understanding of sacramentality.

This conclusion has at least two important implications. First, it places my work in the line of scholars like John Milbank and Louis Dupré who have for some time been engaged in an attempt to re-narrate the story of modernity from an explicitly theological perspective. According to the standard account, modernity is the narrative of our slow but inevitable manumission from the fetters of authority and superstition. Here one might recall Comte's so-called "law of three states"—which likens the progression from theology to metaphysics to the natural sciences to the stages of human biological development—or Kant's suggestion that "enlightenment" is but "humanity's emergence from self-imposed immaturity" (58). What this account omits, according to Milbank, is the degree to which secular modernity "is actually *constituted* in its secularity by 'heresy' in relation to orthodox Christianity" (3). To the extent, then, that modernity defines itself as an "age of reason" destined to overthrow a uniquely irrational "age of faith," it is at once a project of liberation and an attempt to repress its own irreducibly theological origins. And yet, as Freud well knew, whatever is repressed inevitably returns. One of the subterranean currents of my thesis has been to suggest that when the ghosts of religion visit themselves upon an otherwise secularized world, they often come bearing poems.

The first implication leads naturally to the second: if poetic language is the site (or one of the sites) of theology's irruption into secularity, might it not be possible to detect the refractions of a dimly glimpsed sacramental vision in other Latin American poets? To what extent, in other words, might the entire history of twentieth-century Latin American

poetry be describable in sacramental terms? Indeed, to speculate in terms yet more expansive: is poetry really susceptible to complete secularization? Can a form of art that began its life as a gift from the Muses ever do without some form of transcendence, some sense, in the words of Federico García Lorca, that the world is charged with “un poder misterioso que todos sienten y que ningún filósofo explica” (110)? Is not the idea of “secular poetry” finally a *contradictio in adiecto*?

The final point of contact among Bernárdez, Borges, and Pizarnik is also perhaps the most fecund, at least in terms of an understanding of modern poetry in general. It has to do with the sense that in each case poetic language turns out to be, in one sense or another, a *failure*. For Bernárdez language fails to attain the richness and expressive power of music; for Borges it fails to recover the shimmering iridescence of the “other tiger”; and for Pizarnik the poet must finally give way to Death itself as the agent of poetic creativity. But how are we to explain the fact that such otherwise disparate poets nevertheless share a sense that poetry is finally incapable of delivering on its promises? A complete answer would no doubt require an exhaustive study of each poet, but it may still be possible to speak in somewhat more general terms. Indeed, Octavio Paz’s narrative of modern poetry as the gradual displacement of analogy by irony, together with Thorpe Running’s study of “the critical poem,” have laid the groundwork for any attempt to answer the question. Despite their indisputable value, what each of these accounts overlook is that language’s problematic status in the post-Romantic tradition is not merely the product of an evolution *within* poetry. Rather, it has to do as well with a dispute about the relationship between poetry and another form of art, painting, that dates back at least to the German *Aufklärung* of the early and mid-eighteenth century. As I

shall try to show briefly, poetry emerged victorious from that dispute, but its victory was pyrrhic: the extravagant claims made on its behalf had the paradoxical effect of exacerbating the problems they intended to solve. In what follows I do not intend to give a detailed account either of the polemic itself or of its implications. My goal is rather more modest: first, to suggest in very broad terms how such a story might be told; second, and thereby, to provide a bit more context for understanding the fate of poetic language in a disenchanted world.

The fundamental problematic of this dissertation—how the human subject might render meaningful an otherwise meaningless world—was also among the issues addressed by modern aesthetics from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Part of the problem, as suggested throughout, was the sense that, in the wake of the scientific revolution and the emergence of capitalism, the natural world had grown disenchanted, that circumambient nature no longer possessed anything in the way of substantiality or depth (Bowie, *Aesthetics* 4). The flipside of disenchantment's coin was a crisis of subjectivity. By reducing the material world to a mechanism exhaustively describable in the abstract language of mathematics, scientific rationalism also had the effect of effacing nature as a possible source of meaning for the subject. The subject that emerged as a result of disenchantment thus came to resemble nothing so much as the Cartesian ego, which, having successfully doubted all that can be doubted, was left with no succor but the tedious echo of its own cogitations (Bernstein, "Introduction" x).

No sooner, however, was the subject cut off from nature as a possible source of meaning than questions arose about how the chasm between the two might be bridged. One answer involved the privileging of so-called "aesthetic reason." The idea, briefly,

was that works of art, because they are bound to a particular material medium (marble, bronze, paint, etc.), always presuppose a conception of nature (or some bit of nature) not merely as inert, extended matter but rather as the potential for meaning-making. Under Michelangelo's gaze, the slab of marble that is to become David is not *simply* a slab of marble, but also and at the same time potentially something else: a meaningful work of art. But since artistic mediums are at once irreducibly material and yet also the loci of sense-making, they may also hold the key to restoring meaning to the natural world.<sup>112</sup>

And yet even his solution did not long endure. Indeed, the centrality of artistic mediums as a response to the crisis of Enlightenment reason came under pressure as early as Gotthold Lessing's celebrated essay "Laocoön" (1766). The ostensible task of Lessing's essay was to combat the presumption that painting and poetry are two sides of the same artistic coin and hence that whatever "is right for the one is to be granted to the other also" (27). For Lessing such a tendency has the effect not only of obliterating the specificity of painting and poetry, but also of asking each to perform tasks for which the other is better suited. So, in his justly famous sixteenth chapter, Lessing sets out to deduce, from "first principles," the proper limits of both art forms (80). That deduction depends in turn on an account of medium-specificity. The basic idea is that painting, because it employs "figures and colours in space," is an essentially *spatial* art, while poetry, which employs "articulate sounds in time," is an essentially *temporal* art (81). But if painting is essentially spatial, and poetry essentially temporal, then painting can imitate only those subjects which exist together side-by-side in space, while poetry can imitate only those subjects which succeed each other in time. The former Lessing calls "bodies,"

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<sup>112</sup> I owe this account of art as sense-making in a medium Bernstein ("Poesy" 143-147).

the latter, “actions.” Hence bodies are the proper subjects of painting, and actions are the proper subjects of poetry (81).<sup>113</sup>

As Bernstein has shown, however, what looks at first blush like an innocuous, objective account of the inherent limitations of two venerable forms of art amounts finally to “the slaughter of painting” (“Introduction” xiii). The problem emerges when Lessing sets out his so-called “rule of the pregnant moment”: the notion that the painter, because the “material limitations” of his craft restrict him to a “single moment in time” (38), must select the most propitious of such moments for his representation. The point of climax, of greatest emotional intensity, is, contrary to what we might expect, also the least advisable. For the moment of climax is where the action comes to a halt: everything that precedes it is but instrumental foreplay, and everything that follows somehow dissolves into the droll banality of the morning after. The painter must therefore select a moment that is full of both past and future: just after Laocoön begins to sigh, but just before his sigh breaks into a shriek. And yet why just such a moment? Because only by representing a subject that is bursting with potentiality does the painter grant free play to the imagination; only thus, in other words, does he allow us to exercise our fancy by imagining the body he describes as part of a temporally extended action. This analysis has two principle upshots. First, human imaginative freedom is more valuable as a source of meaning than material nature. This value judgment explains in turn why representing subjects at the moment of climax—where bodies, divested of past and future, appear frozen in their materiality—is less desirable than representing bodies in such a way as to maximize (human) imaginative potential. The second upshot is but a corollary of the first:

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<sup>113</sup> See also Bernstein, “Introduction,” xii-xviii, to which my account is much indebted.

namely, that poetry is the higher of the two arts because it is more closely linked to, and more productive of, human imaginative freedom (Bernstein, “Introduction” xv).

If Lessing loosened the knot linking art to a revalorization of disenchanted nature, Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) finally tore it asunder. Before turning to Schlegel, however, it may be useful to pause for a moment and reflect on the implications of Lessing’s argument. The first point to notice is that the rule of the pregnant moment is designed to supplement a lack inherent in the pictorial arts (i.e., the inability to represent temporally extended action), a lack which is itself a product of the fact that painting is restricted by its material medium in a way that poetry is not. But to subordinate painting to poetry on the basis of material limitations is already to have said not only that material-specific artistic mediums are part of the problem, but also that poetry is valuable *precisely because* it permits us to take leave of nature, to pursue artistic creativity without reference to anything except the free play of the human imagination.

Schlegel pressed this division further still. In *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1797), written when he was barely twenty-five, Schlegel distinguished ancient from modern art on the basis of a further distinction between “natural culture” (*natürliche Bildung*) and “artificial culture” (*künstliche Bildung*). Whereas ancient art took its coordinates from nature, modern art, which emerged after nature had lost its normative power, instead pursued “individuality that is original and interesting” (32). According to Schlegel, the criteria of originality and individuality stand in for modern art’s lack of universally accepted norms and standards: if you can no longer write “objective” tragedies—because such things no longer exist—you can at least write interesting ones. Yet to stress the individual’s capacity to create interesting and original art is already to devalue nature as

the source and ground of creativity. And this indeed is Schlegel's conclusion. Whereas Greek poetry's "natural *Bildung*" committed it to mimesis as the upper limit of artistic expression, for the modern poet, imitation is the "skill of a copyist," rather than the product of a "free art" (32).

But if human freedom is inherently more valuable than material nature—and this Schlegel says explicitly: "freedom has predominance over nature" (55)—then that form of art which most privileges freedom will also be the most valuable. Only poetry fits the bill: "Poetry is a *universal* art because its organ, *fantasy*, is already incomparably more closely related to freedom, and more independent of external influence" (42). By poetry's "independence from external influence" Schlegel seems to mean that poetry is less constrained or limited by the materiality of its medium than the plastic arts. In fact, several pages later, he argues that painting and sculpture, which depend for their vitality on properties borrowed from nature (marble, linseed oil, and so forth), are "hybrids" because they fall somewhere "between pure nature and pure art" (59). Poetry, by contrast, is the only "pure" art because its "tool," the arbitrary linguistic sign, is an entirely human product and hence "endlessly perfectible" in a way that nature is not (59). And yet so to emphasize poetry's purity is not only to further devalue material nature as a source of meaning; it is also to widen the chasm separating the human subject from the natural world by insisting on an understanding of the latter as, almost definitionally, "inhuman." It was precisely this chasm, let us recall, that was at least partly responsible for the problem of disenchantment in the first place.

This brief sketch of poetry's fate at the hands of Lessing and Schlegel tells us nothing definitive about any of the poets treated in this dissertation. But since, as Octavio



Paz has shown, the tradition of modern poetry began its life among the German Romantics, it does permit us to draw some broader conclusions about what an account of the relationship between poetry and disenchantment must include. First, it must take into account the way in which poetry, Romanticism, has been itself complicit in aggravating the problems that led to disenchantment. As poetry becomes progressively less associated with nature and progressively more linked to human freedom, it not only surrenders its capacity to restore meaning to the material world, but also contributes to what Charles Taylor has termed “disengagement”: modernity’s tendency to detach us from meaningful social, moral, and religious traditions and practices. A second conclusion follows naturally: any truly “incantatory” poetry would be one that resisted the Schlegelian temptation to restrict poetic creativity to the human imagination and thus to exacerbate the diremption of subject and object that so characterizes a disenchanted world. The most appropriate category for any such project is, I still believe, the sacramental. Not because sacramentality is invariably religious, but rather because the sacramental is the site of nature’s self-transcendence, where the material world appears as the locus of meaning and significance.

Near the end of *Minima Moralia* (1951), Adorno remarks: “The only philosophy which can be reasonably practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (247). Disenchantment is that despair. The sacramental is its redemption.

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# Adam Gregory Glover

Vita

## Education

Ph.D. Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky, December 2011 (expected)  
Thesis Title: "Poetics of Enchantment: Religion and Meaning in  
Twentieth-Century Argentine Poetry" (Director: Enrico Mario Santí)  
Ph.D. Minor: Philosophy (18 graduate hours expected by December 2011)

M.A. Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky, May 2011

B.A. (hon.) in (1) Spanish Language and Literature, (2) Philosophy, and (3)  
Classical

Languages and Civilizations (minor)

Georgetown College, Georgetown, Ky., 2007

Honors Thesis: "Aquinas and Derrida on Naming God"

## Teaching Experience (full classroom responsibilities)

1. **Visiting Assistant Professor of Spanish and General Studies**, Department of Modern and Classical Languages, Georgetown College, Georgetown, KY, 2011-2012.
2. **Teaching Assistant, Department of International Studies**, University of Kentucky, 2010-2011
3. **Teaching Assistant, Department of Hispanic Studies**, University of Kentucky, 2007-2010

## Publications

1. "Borges, Poetry, and Meaning." In *The Pluralist* [Journal of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy] (Forthcoming Spring 2012).
2. "Arcades in Early Nineteenth-Century Madrid." Translation of "Sobre los pasajes en el Madrid de la primera mitad del siglo XIX," by Carlos Sambricio. In *Città e storia* 5.1 (2010): 159-181.
3. "Buffett the Ironic Pirate." In *Jimmy Buffett and Philosophy*. Ed. Erin McKenna. Chicago: Open Court Press, 2009.
4. "Various Geometric Demonstrations." Translation of Leonard Euler's "Variae Demonstrationes Geometriae" (1748) from the original Latin. 2006. *The Euler Archive*. Dartmouth College. <[www.math.dartmouth.edu/~euler](http://www.math.dartmouth.edu/~euler)>

## **Academic Awards and Scholarships**

- I. Graduate (University of Kentucky)
  - 1. Kentucky Graduate Student Conference – Best Presentation (2nd place)
  - 2. McCreary Award for Best Second-Year Graduate Student (Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky, Spring 2009).
  - 3. Kentucky Opportunity Fellowship (Non-Service Fellowship, 2007-2009)
  - 4. Daniel Reedy Fellowship (2007-2009)
- II. Undergraduate (Georgetown College)
  - 1. Dean's Honor Award (top academic award at Georgetown College), 2007
  - 2. Top Graduate in Philosophy, 2007
  - 3. Top Graduate in a World Language, 2007
  - 4. Parks Baptist Scholarship (Full tuition, room, board – 2003-2007)
- III. Honors Societies
  - 1. Phi Kappa Phi, Georgetown College, 2007
  - 2. Eta Sigma Phi, National Classics Honors Society, 2007
  - 3. Who's Who Among Students in American Colleges and Universities, 2006.