
Senior Projects Spring 2017

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2017

A Path of Stories Wrapped Around Itself: A translation and aesthetic reading of Guillermo Meneses' short story "La Mano Junto al Muro"

Samuel Rotter Bechar
Bard College, sr4115@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017



Part of the [Latin American Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Rotter Bechar, Samuel, "A Path of Stories Wrapped Around Itself: A translation and aesthetic reading of Guillermo Meneses' short story "La Mano Junto al Muro"" (2017). *Senior Projects Spring 2017*. 279.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017/279

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

A Path of Stories Wrapped Around Itself:

A translation and aesthetic reading of Guillermo Meneses' short story

"La Mano Junto al Muro"

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of
Bard College

By
Samuel Rotter Bechar

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2017

Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful to my advisor Marina Van Zuylen for her incredible help throughout this arduous process. Your advice, insights and kind considerations have transformed this project into something that exceeded way beyond my expectations. I cannot thank you enough for your patience and commitment.

A very special thanks to Professor Melanie Nicholson for taking the time to help me with the translation.

Gracias Carolina por ser mi asesora, confidente, compañera de armas y consejera.

Lastly, I want to also dedicate this work to my homeland Venezuela. Mientras escribo estas palabras sólo sueño con verte liberada de los tiranos que te oprimen.

To my parents,

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Translation: The Hand Against the Wall.....	20
Analysis: Spirals, Confusion and Faceless Shadows.....	39
Conclusion.....	68
Bibliography.....	72
APPENDIX A: La Mano Junto al Muro.....	75



“Lo que podría separar una cosa de otra en el mundo del tiempo sería, apenas una delgada lámina de humana intención, matiz que el hombre inventa; porque, al fin, lo que ha de morir es todo uno y sólo se diferencia de lo eterno.”

Introduction

“Hay aquí un camino de historias enrollado sobre sí mismo como una serpiente que se muerde la cola” (Here lies a path of stories wrapped around itself like a serpent that bites its tail) this is perhaps Caracas-born author Guillermo Meneses’ most famous line in his award winning short story “La Mano Junto al Muro” (*The Hand Against the Wall*). The sentence, which has now become a popular reference amongst Venezuelan literature enthusiasts, expresses not only Meneses’ literary technique and form in this particular short story, but it also conveys a deeper message in regard to his and my homeland: Venezuela. During his long career as a writer, Meneses was deeply concerned with the cultural and social problems that Venezuelan society was facing at the time; problems which have been only exacerbated and deepened, continuing to deteriorate in the decades that followed his work. Much of Meneses’ writing expressed an overall discontent with the state of Venezuelan society and its artistic institutions and throughout his life he was a political activist (formed part of the historical “Generación del 28”) particularly during the time period when Venezuela was facing the longest lasting dictatorship in its short history as a nation. His ideological convictions were so committed to his activism, that they ended up costing him an unjust sentence of two years in a labor camp and prison.

After the fall of the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez and its 25 yearlong government, Meneses proliferated as one of the most cultured and engaged members of Venezuela’s intellectual circles. In these years that followed, he became a lawyer, educator, judge, columnist, essayist, social critic and an essential part (if not founder) of the Venezuelan literary avant-garde. It is worth mentioning that when Meneses published “*La Mano Junto*

al Muro," Venezuela was considered to be one of the most prosperous countries in all of South America (Venezuela's GDP in 1950 was the 4th largest in the world) but this prosperity, like in many other Latin-American countries, only benefitted a small and elite ruling minority. Perhaps what attracts me the most about his writing is the fact that history has granted him an almost "prophetic" quality. Meneses was a writer that was deeply aware of the problems his society faced in the middle of the twentieth century and it was under his impression that the best way of tackling these issues was to appeal to people through culture and more specifically, literature. The image of the ouroboros (Snake that bites its tail) can be used now (even though it was originally conceived as being completely unrelated to politics) as a metaphor of stagnation, historical repetition and an almost inevitable destiny to repeat our flawed ways as a people, recurrently propelling to fall prey to the same mistakes, forever condemned like the Buendías in García Marquez's novel *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

In the year 2017, almost 56 years after his short story was published, Venezuela has lost much of its cultural heritage to political turmoil, oppression and a humanitarian crisis brought on by a 19 year long communist inspired kleptocracy. As a consequence of this, the Venezuelan national sentiment has been transformed into a sense of national grief, despair, humiliation, disappointment, senseless violence (it is now considered the most violent country in the western hemisphere) and fear. Meneses, who was considered in Venezuelan literary history as one of the most innovative, experimental and revolutionary writers of his time, has now been lost in the collective memory; dragged into nothingness alongside dozens of other authors, painters, filmmakers and musicians, nowadays only appreciated by a small amount of enthusiasts and academics that wish to give these figures recognition

and respect. “Se trata de libros que fueron, en sus días, eminentes, pero que la indolencia americana olvidó en algunos casos, y las nuevas generaciones desconocen (...) Libros que si se salvaran de una catastrofe suramericana dirían bien qué significó para la humanidad de su tiempo este trozo del mundo nuevo”¹ (Alberto Lleras, review for *Espejos y Disfraces*). As Lleras notes, great minds and revolutionary art has emerged from our frequently ignored land, and it is in supremely difficult times like the one’s we face today that we must take pride and attempt to honor a tradition of art that is born from the love of art and our reflection of social discontent and struggle.

As we explore the entirety of his work, it becomes clear that Meneses believed that art had the capacity of elevating a people and its culture. During the earlier writing periods in his life, he constantly wrote literature about the most oppressed and unfortunate members of society. But after a series of disappointments, both with his fellow artists and the political and social situation of the country (particularly the coup d’état against president Medina Angarita in 1946), his writing shifted dramatically. His political and social disenchantment was so grave, that his own wife Sofia Ímber (founder of the Caracas Museum of contemporary art) would later state that he “was so affected by the event (the coup d’etat) that he decided to leave Venezuela” which he did by moving to Bogotá in 1946 and eventually to Paris, where he writes “*La Mano Junto al Muro*” while working for the Venezuelan embassy.

From this moment on, the Meneses concerned with moralist and nationalist-oriented literature that wished to reinforce a positive national and cultural image comes to

¹ “These are books that were eminent in their day, but that American indolence has led them to be forgotten in several cases (...) books that if were to be salvaged from a South American catastrophe, would transmit what that piece of a new world meant for mankind at the time.”

an end. But from this political and emotional disappointment a new disenchanted, nihilistic and authentic Guillermo Meneses was born; an author that comfortably broke away from his past and created a very different kind of literature that sought to create a new or “reshaped” literary experience that was anti-mimetic, cerebral and concerned with literature and its own limitations.

When “La Mano Junto al Muro” was published in 1952, it had won “Concurso de Cuentos El Nacional” the most prestigious short story award that existed in Venezuela at the moment and caused a considerable social reaction. According to Venezuelan literary historian Javier Lasarte, very few people at the time had the capacity to appreciate the literary innovation that the story represented. Amongst the judges who awarded him and praised his work was Arturo Uslar Pietri, who was, alongside Romulo Gallegos, perhaps one of the most famous Venezuelan authors of his time. Uslar Pietri is known in literary history as the writer and scholar that first coined the term “magic realism” with his colleague and friend Alejo Carpentier. Later on in his life, almost twenty years after Meneses published “La Mano Junto al Muro,” Uslar Pietri expressed very eloquently in a speech, the importance and influence that Meneses has had in Venezuelan literary history:

Guillermo Meneses es uno de los escritores más valiosos que ha tenido este país. Él representó de una manera muy cabal una ruptura muy importante que fue la ruptura con el costumbrismo tradicional. Esa ruptura se hizo y se cumplió espléndidamente, porque romper con el costumbrismo no era, y así lo entendió Meneses, romper con Venezuela. (...) Toda su obra es una obra venezolana, toda su obra está hecha sin seguir modas, no porque sea malo seguirlas o no seguirlas, sino porque en trance de sinceridad y de creación, Guillermo Meneses tenía que quedarse solo con una realidad que lo rodeaba.²

² “Guillermo Meneses is one of the most valuable authors that this country has ever had. He represented, in a very thorough way, a rupture with what had been traditionally done. That rupture was done splendidly, because Meneses understood that breaking from tradition was not breaking with Venezuela. (...) All of his work is Venezuelan; all of his work is done without following any trends, not because following them would be bad, but because in a

(Meneses, 624)

“La Mano Junto al Muro” represented not only a rebirth in Meneses’ *oeuvre*, but also marked the beginning of a new kind of Venezuelan experimental writing that would later on influence many other authors in the generations that followed. But unlike Uslar Pietri, who was fascinated with Meneses’ story and his ability to push artistic and conventional boundaries, a certain amount of the people that read the “La Mano Junto al Muro” were confused by its content and puzzling nature, and pertaining to a very conservative and very catholic society, they deemed it to be obscene, vulgar and immoral.”

Amongst the most appalled (unsurprisingly) was the Catholic Church. This was in part because the main character of the short story (if she can be called a character at all) is a prostitute and the entire tale centers on a deteriorating brothel at the edge of the sea. But what at the time was seen as vulgar and inappropriate I now see as a literary project that is daring, brave, revolutionary and that faces society’s problems and realities even if they are hard to swallow and make us feel uncomfortable. The kind of conservatism he faced during his time sought to permeate and hide reality from the masses. That doesn’t mean of course that he is the first writer in history to subvert the status quo, but within Venezuelan literary history, he stands as one of the boldest and most progressive.

Even though the public’s reaction was somewhat negative (it had happened to him before with his short story “Borrachera” (Drunkenness) which made him lose subscribers to his literary magazine *Elite* for “being obscene, concerned with vice, perverted and filled

trace of creation and sincerity, Guillermo Meneses had only the reality around him to keep.” (Said during the presentation of his book *Cinco novelas* on March 3rd 1972)

with grotesque and disgusting prostitutes”)³ the fact that a work of literature had the capacity to be a public matter in a Latin-American society seems today an almost impossible and remarkable feat. In response to these critics, Meneses wrote a resounding statement in which he stated that “(...) este cuento produjo, frente a elogios que me enorgullecen, una serie de criticas relativas al supuesto fondo “inmoral” del relato. Creo que quienes criticaron “La Mano Junto al Muro” desde el punto de vista moral, no entendieron mi trabajo.”⁴ Nevertheless, the fact that a short story managed to cause such an uproar and public reaction impregnates it historically with controversy, subversion and force (perhaps our very own version of what that followed Stravinsky’s Parisian premier of The Rite of Spring.)

After Meneses won the *El Nacional* award, he consecrated his position as one of the most recognized avant-garde writers to break away from the *criollismo* literary movement that preceded him and dominated the literary sphere of his time. *Criollismo*, which is the main philosophy of his earlier work, preoccupied itself with creating a literature that was truly “Venezuelan” and expressed Venezuelan culture, psychology, myth and way of being. In other words, it was a literary movement that wished to create a national identity through its writing. As Meneses himself writes in a preface to *Diez Cuentos*:

Se presentó una nueva manera de comprender las “cosas venezolanas,” de tal modo que no eran para nosotros motivos de simple pintoresquismo sino conocimiento de los problemas que mantenían a Venezuela en un estado social y en un ordenamiento

³ Meneses, 17

⁴ “This short story produced; in contrast to compliments I take pride in, a series of criticisms concerning the supposed “immoral” background of this tale. I think that those who criticized “La Mano Junto al Muro” from a moral standpoint did not understand my work.” (From his book *Antología del Cuento Venezolano*)

politico que considerabamos insoportable. El criollismo anterior era de turistas. El nuestro lo teníamos dentro como testimonio.⁵

(Meneses, 45)

Despite the fact that the *criollismo* literary movement sought to create a sense of “Venezuelan identity” through its art, it should not be confused or misinterpreted as an artistic endeavor that is “picturesque” or that wished to place Venezuelanism on a pedestal and celebrate its way of being through a manipulated or propagandist form. If anything, it was quite the contrary. *Criollistas* were brutally critical, honest, cruel, vivid and wanted to transmit through their knowledge and insight what they considered to be the internal problems and moral complications of a society and national identity that existed within an unacceptable state. The best example of this literary movement is perhaps Romulo Gallego’s *Doña Barbara*, a modern novel that centers on Venezuelan landowners and the historical *caudillismo* that affected these rural and agricultural areas. Later on, it became the first Venezuelan novel to be translated into foreign languages (more than forty languages nowadays) and gain international attention.

A major theme that concerned *criollistas* during their time was the massive migration that was taking place in Venezuela after its massive oil boom in the 1920s. They were witnessing a period in Venezuelan history that was marked by the discovery of large reserves of “black gold” (petroleum). For the first time in its history, Venezuela was shifting from a agricultural economy into a rapidly growing oil producing nation. (By 1929 it was

⁵ “A new way of understanding “Venezuelan things” was presented in such a way that for us it was not about simple picturesque representations, but rather, concerned with the problems that were maintaining Venezuela in a social and political order that we considered to be unbearable. The *criollismo* before us was that of tourists. Ours was inside of us as testimony.”

one of the world's largest oil producers and is now considered to hold the largest reserves in the planet.) As a consequence of this oil boom, a lot of Venezuelans began to leave the fields in which they had been living for decades in search for better opportunities in the "thriving" oil sector. But what should have been a moment of economic progress that benefitted the entire population ended up producing an elite minority and countless slums that surrounded their new oil-funded structures.

To *criollistas*, this new industry was culturally destructive. Thousands of people that were living in the most rural parts of the country moved into miserable urban conditions and were now beginning to lose their cultural heritage. Uslar Pietri personally addressed this problem in an article he published in 1936 titled "Sembrar el petróleo" (To plant oil) in which he writes that: "Que en lugar de ser el petróleo una maldición que haya de convertirnos en un pueblo parásito e inútil, sea la afortunada coyuntura que permita con su súbita riqueza acelerar y fortificar la evolución productora del pueblo venezolano en condiciones excepcionales."⁶ Venezuelan society was at the focal point of the *criollismo* movement, a concern that is evident when we read retrospectively the moral content of their Works and makes our heads shake when we realize that we are living these problems on a much grander scale, and that all that wealth that requires little effort for it to be sold, has made us a parasitic nation with the largest inflation rate in the planet, wide-spread corruption and jaw-dropping levels of impunity.⁷

⁶ "Instead of oil being a curse that transforms us in a parasitic and useless people, let it be a fortunate conjunction that accelerates and strengthens the evolution of the Venezuelan people in exceptional conditions." (Uslar Pietri, 1)

⁷ The Venezuelan NGO "Observatorio Venezolano de violencia" (Venezuelan observatory of violence) issued a report this year that 98% of crime in Venezuela goes unpunished.

After more than twenty years of collaborating with his nation's most developed literary movement, he rebelled against it. Through his rebellion, he was attempting to create a new literary experience that would change the way we think about writing, time, fiction, and the experience of reading itself. It would be an understatement to say that his goal was ambitious. Being an avid reader of Sartre, his attempt is undoubtedly an existentialist one that seeks to be authentic and transformative. Following the path of his contemporaries such as Juan José Arreola, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Juan Carlos Onetti, Meneses was participating in a new wave of Latin-American literature that wanted to lay nationalisms and folklorism to rest and create an avant-garde and aesthetically focused form of literature, inspired by artistic movements that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century (Such as Surrealism, Dadaism and Cubism) and had promoted through their work, subversion against artistic institutions and tradition.

In a preface to a collection of his short stories, Meneses writes that during his exiled youth in Madrid, he was reading and being influenced directly by modernism and literary realism⁸. During this period of his life, he was a traditionalist and a realist, focusing his attention and concerns on authors such as Balzac, Faulkner, Zola and Proust. His earlier short stories such as "Adolescencia" and "La Balandra "Isabel" llegó esta tarde" certainly seem to reflect it. But it is important to note that these literary genres were his main sources of inspiration as a young man, when he wasn't well known as a writer and was still emerging in the literary scene. Twenty years later, as he is engaging in this new radical and

http://www.eluniversal.com/noticias/sucesos/aseguran-que-impunidad-incide-elevado-indice-inseguridad_637762

⁸ Meneses, 44

personal literary movement, he finally breaks away from his earlier influences and begins to explore uncharted territory.

The time period in which Meneses undergoes this transformation is not simply circumstantial or coincidental. The decade of the 1940s could be said to have been his most transformative. Meneses himself states that he read both Heidegger and Sartre and it could perhaps be assumed that he also was reading Albert Camus.⁹ Regardless if he was directly or indirectly influenced by these authors, he was still living in a historical moment in which existentialism was beginning to become all the more prevalent in the intellectual circles of his time. If we associate this new surge of existentialist philosophy that advocated for authenticity, responsibility and individualism with his political and cultural disenchantment, we can begin to comprehend a bit more deeply the intellectual transformation that was taking place inside of him.

Meneses' disenchantment transcended just Venezuelan society and its literature. The twentieth century was a century of change and of loss. The soul, as he writes in his essay "El tiempo perdido y desmenuzado," is no longer a symbol of passion or myth. Instead, it has become a subject of rational study. As a consequence of this, he was now witnessing what he deemed to be the "collective loss of heroes."¹⁰ In the face of this new emerging social and intellectual phenomenon, his entire approach to art and literature changed. Now, man becomes his own invention but is conditioned by the world that surrounds him. We live on the surface of reality, a surface that does not demand us to explain in absolute ways the relationship between subject and existence.

⁹ Lasarte, 89

¹⁰ Meneses, 437

Meneses' intellectual transformation was one that took place over more than thirty years of writing. Taking this into consideration, it feels unjust to condense the evolution of his thought in such a simplified way. Nevertheless, we have no other choice but to express as faithfully and concretely as possible a literary transformation that could have been its very own subject for a different project. That being said, let us now examine Meneses literary trajectory summarized as followed by Venezuelan literary critic Javier Lasarte Valcarel:

El vi(r)aje es el siguiente: el punto de partida es una narrativa de corte populista evidentemente vinculada al criollismo precedente que ubica sus escenarios en la encrucijada histórica del tránsito del mundo rural al urbano, de intención didáctica y moralizante reformulada (...) el de llegada, la narrativa del desencanto, que instala el discurso en un espacio que se pregunta por los límites y el carácter de la escritura y la revisa en relación de su quehacer con el mundo de la historia toda vez que el escritor ha asumido su condición de excluido o derrotado.¹¹

(Lasarte, 78)

Meneses' transformation (from populist and traditionalist writer to an avant-garde writer) can be better understood with Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. In this work, Bürger states that although most avant-garde movements have key distinctions from one another, they all share a common feature when it comes to their art. "A common feature of all these movements is that they do not reject individual artistic techniques and procedures of earlier art but reject that art in its entirety, thus bringing about a radical break with tradition" (Bürger, 109). The avant-garde seeks to break away from artistic institutions

¹¹ "The journey (turn) is as follows: the starting point is a populist narrative that is clearly linked to the preceding *criollismo*, which situates its scenes within the historic crossroads that represented the transit from the rural into the urban world and had a reformulated didactic and moralist intention.(...) The point of arrival is a narrative of disenchantment that is expressed within a space that questions the limits and character of writing, revised in relationship to the author's responsibility when he or she feels defeated."

through a constant destruction of tradition and the construction of a new art form beyond its limits. But this movement is endless and never conclusive, given that art that was at its moment “avant-garde” may become traditional through time and in desperate need to be subverted by a new generation of artists that carry on the task.

Looking back on Meneses’ history, it becomes clear that although his *post-criollismo* writing does not align itself clearly with any literary movement, it certainly partakes in the subversive common feature of the avant-garde. Meneses makes a personal shift that changed the nature and function of his art. Instead of serving a social function and operate within the artistic institutions of bourgeois society, he focuses on aesthetics with the intention of creating an art that is partly detached from the praxis of life, while also being concerned with the nature of literature in relation to time and symbolic representations of the proletariat.

Even if we recognize Meneses’ work as being avant-garde, there is still much ambiguity in terms of how exactly and concretely he subverted the literary institutions he had once come to be a part of. This is exactly what distinguishes one avant-gardist movement from another: the way they specifically rebel artistically against the artistic status quo. To label something as “avant-garde” just grants the notion that a form of artistic subversion is taking place, but how it specifically achieves this subversion is still unknown. In Meneses’ case, I recognize certain qualities in his short story that could associate him (not to a full extent) to both Cubism and Surrealism. This will be further discussed later on in the text, but at the moment it is worth mentioning that cubist aesthetics call into

question “the linear system of representation”¹² that had prevailed since the Renaissance, a feature that is undoubtedly present in “La Mano Junto al Muro.” Cubists wanted to challenge the linear perspective that was prevalent in their time not just to break away from linearity, but to also incorporate multidimensional accounts that could be simultaneously present.

Guillermo Meneses was taking on an endeavor to create a new kind of literature that actively challenges the reader by turning to cubist, surrealist and metafictional devices. He embraces a new kind narrative that is non-linear, circular and unlike any other Venezuelan writers of his time. Metafictionally speaking, Meneses manages to completely blur the lines between narrative and the reality of the text itself. What is being read is constantly morphing from events that are supposed to be taking place, to the speech of faceless narrators, and from there, to the notion that the text is recognizing itself as a work of literature. All these three layers of reality are at play with one another and it is through them that the text stands out as a work of literature.

These metafictional, surrealist and cubist devices allow him to transmit a trance inducing (and abrupting) quality to his work. It is a tale that at first sight appears to be a detective story but ends up becoming, through surrealist play of language, a reflection on the human condition.¹³ This reflexive meditation is incredibly effective on the reader because it is transmitted through a stylistic tone that is so complex and intense that it demands from us our full immersion if we wish to understand it. This tone, just like cubist art, is purposefully obscure and non-didactic. It is not a text that feels that it must reveal or

¹² Bürger, 109

¹³ Lasarte, 93

explain itself to the reader. Most readers are not usually accustomed to literature that demands so much from them, but since we read to understand what is being said and transmitted, we are naturally inclined to attempt to disentangle this web of surrealist events that are taking place. We are curious about the unraveling of the story (the murder) and feel confused when it amounts to nothing. There is no resolution to the enigma, only the enigma itself. But the enigma feels to be an enigma because it is presented in a form that is almost hypnotizing. Through repetition Meneses destroys and reconstructs the plot of the story like a spiral that is gaining more and more clues through its reconstruction, even though these clues, as we mentioned before, amount to nothing in terms of plot and excel in their aesthetic quality.

“La Mano Junto al Muro” is a short story that recognizes death as the inevitable outcome of human existence. Everything that exists in the narrative is a mere reflection of a reflection; its existence is generated through mirrors and it is constantly being submitted to dichotomist contrasts (fleeting and eternal, dynamic and still, fiction and metafiction, concrete and abstract, doubt and certainty...). This kind of subversive literature, which seeks to make us reconsider our relationship to elements of our daily lives, seems to fall in line with Surrealist techniques. As André Breton says himself:

It was most important of all (...) to attack the forms of conservatism: artistic, political, ethical and to make arms against what has already been done, thought, said yesterday, in honor of what is being done today.

(Caws, 30)

Whatever appears to hold any ground on reality inside the narrative slides into nothingness, which in this case is understood as a state of confusion that is characterized by a lack of grasp of the imagery that is being presented, and the awareness that the author

is essentially “playing” with our minds. This other dimension transports us as readers back to a position that recognizes the words themselves on a piece of paper. Avant-garde writing (surrealism and cubism included) such as this tends to concentrate on the aesthetic qualities of the text and the aesthetic variations in which it is presented. In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger connects this style over plot concern and choice with the writings of Theodor Adorno.

The mode in which Adorno operates, in which I situate Meneses’ writing, proceeds from an endless amount of opposition between “solidification and dissolution, representation and life, metaphysical closure and deconstruction, general and particular, quantity and quality.”¹⁴ It is worth noting that this first mode of thought is associated with not just Adorno, but also with Breton and Artaud. Meneses’ writing is situated amongst the first mode of thought because it seems to be also concerned with the oppositions between representation and life, a concern he expresses throughout his work through the metaphor of the mirror.

In terms of the plot itself, it can be said that, as Borges might suggest, *La Mano Junto al Muro* is not saying anything (content wise) that has not already been said before (It is the story of a miserable woman that has been a prostitute since she was a small girl and lives the filthiness of men through a constant state of forgetfulness). But as Bürger proposes while referencing Adorno’s writings: “One of the central theses of Adorno’s aesthetics, “the key to any and every content (*Gehalt*) of art lies in its technique” becomes clear” (Bürger, 20). But it is not only in this sense that they align with one another aesthetically. Many of Adorno’s concerns on contrasting elements (such as solidification and dissolution) can also

¹⁴ Bürger, XVI

be identified in Meneses' text. The particularities of this claim will be explored further on in the textual analysis of the text itself.

This new stylistic focus in his work transforms the text into a narrative that possesses words with multiple meanings that may produce (ideally) an endless series of interpretations. Just like in a cubist painting, the main focus shifts around the object and the treatment of the text itself, blurring the lines between consciousness, fiction, reality and time. Again, this literary feature of non-didacticism and transfiguration appears to be intimately connected to surrealism and its proposed notion that there is a "capillary tissue" that allows the interconnection and free circulation between states of being, emotions, worlds, as well as the verbal and visual.¹⁵ With this award winning short story, Guillermo Meneses is presenting the reader with an enigma that is unresolved, intertwined, repetitive, constantly being destroyed and rebuilt within emptiness and shifting emphasis sporadically, wrapping around itself like a spiral, beginning and ending in the same moment, like a serpent that bites its own tail.

Taking all of this into consideration, I have decided to translate "La Mano Junto al Muro" into the English language, with the intention of sharing this innovative piece of literature with an English speaking audience. Needless to say that this is not an easy endeavor. If we take into consideration the complex interworking of the web of literary devices that are being used within the text, we come to realize that this translation cannot by any means only address what is being said. A feature more important than the actual information is the poetics of the text itself. Given its difficulty to be justly transmitted into another language, one is tempted to summon Walter Benjamin's theory on translation

¹⁵ Caws, XXVIII

which denounced that a inferior translation “which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information - hence, something inessential” (Benjamin, 69). But although Benjamin sees translation as practically an impossible task, he does recognize that the task of the translator consists in finding the intended effect.¹⁶

In the case of “La Mano Junto al Muro”, it can be said that the intended effect of the text lies in disturbing the reader while imparting its poetic beauty and obscurity in an almost trance inducing way. But the recognition of this intention does not necessarily mean that one is closer to be able to transmit its intended effect. Reproducing in another language a text that is purposefully confusing, as ironic as it may seem, is a difficult task because the sort of confusion we are dealing with is not dependent on incoherence or poor writing. It is an intellectually conceived non-mimetic work of art whose effect on the reader could be compared to the sort of “confusion” we experience when we attempt to understand a cubist or surrealist painting. Nevertheless, I am not as critical of translations as Benjamin. I believe that translations are more about what you gain from the new text rather than what you lose. Perhaps through the act of translating a new metaphysical and transcendental quality that is present in the text can manifest itself and become all the more appreciated.

Even though every translator is a reader, and every reader has his own interpretation of the text, my intention is not to generate a translation based on my own considerations, but rather, to situate myself in Meneses’ position and attempt to produce the translation that I think would have best resonated with him. Each word has been chosen carefully and considerably in order to transmit the most of its original intention. In

¹⁶ Benjamin, 76

other words, my translation is intended to be a humble one. It seeks only to be transparent and highlight the original text. I believe that being both Venezuelan and a native Spanish speaker will allow me to transmit more faithfully Meneses' aesthetic choices. Following in the footsteps of Nabokov's views on translation, I will be providing within the translation, a somewhat detailed account on how and why many of the English words came to be chosen. This of course will not entail the extreme demands that Nabokov sets up for himself when he writes that he wants "translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity" (Nabokov, 83). It is simply recognizing Nabokov's point that there should be an interpreter's explanation of his choices, and any clarification what the original text was supposed to be transmitting through its choice of words.

I feel the need to recognize that every translation is a collaboration between its author and the translator; and all collaborations of this kind are mysterious. It is unavoidable for me, regardless of how faithful I attempt to be to the original text, to inhabit Meneses' style with my own linguistics in the translation. Despite of this unavoidable recognition, this is a translation that seeks to create a text that its translator hopes would have satisfied its original author, and is by no means a "re-imagining" of the text.

A feature of "La Mano Junto al Muro" that is beneficial to me as a translator is the fact that it appears to be a text that exists outside of time. Very few things within the text situate it in a specific historical moment. This in turn allows us to appreciate and read the text without necessarily having to understand the culture that existed around it. Just like

Borges insinuates in his short story "Pierre Menard: Autor del Quijote,"¹⁷ the text transcends history while at the same time being subjected to the time period in which it is being read, gaining with each generation a whole new set of interpretations. I like to think that this story is an immortal cycle that exists suspended outside of space. Perhaps it was a work ahead of its time or at least determined to change the course of Venezuelan literature. It is existentially bound and therefore, the themes and messages it expresses are still enlightening to this day. Needless to say, this ineffable quality is intimidating, but at the same time, it is why a translation that takes place sixty-six years after it was originally published is still relevant.

After the following translation, I will provide an in-depth analysis of the tale that closely examines the way that all the literary devices and stylistic qualities that were mentioned above (as well as other that have gone unmentioned) are expressed within the text like a "path of stories that wraps around itself like a serpent that bites its tail."

¹⁷ Menard (perhaps without wanting to) has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aeneid* and the book *Le jardin du Centaure* of Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure. To attribute the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce is this not a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual indications? (Borges, 44)

La Mano Junto al Muro¹⁸

By Guillermo Meneses.

(1951)

The Hand Against the Wall

Translated by Samuel Rotter Bechar.

(2017)

The port city night erupted in lightning, in flashes. Voices of fear and passion elevated their flame towards the stars. A scream (You were born today!) shivered in the hot air as the woman's hand lay on the wall.¹⁹ The scandal ascended over the tropical sky when the man said (or thought): "Here lies a path of stories wrapped around itself like a serpent that bites its tail."²⁰ It is still unknown if there were three sailors. Maybe it was me who resembled a green lizard; but, how are there two caps in the mirror of *Bull Shit's*²¹ room? Her life could be reeled out of that mirror... or her death..."

¹⁸ All definitions provided have been consulted with both the dictionary of La Real Academia Española and the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

¹⁹ In this sentence, the word "lay" was chosen as the closest approximation to the word "sostuvo." The original word is somewhat ambiguous because it can also be translated as "rested on" or "held on to." But there is no explicit connotation of whether the hand was grabbing on to the wall or was just supported by the wall.

²⁰ The word "lies" was used to translate "hay aquí" in a way that could convey the poetic nature of the man's speech. To say "there is here" would have felt too casual and ordinary. The phrase "wrapped around" is a translation of the word "enrollado" which could also be translated as rolled, wound and coiled. "Wrapped around" was chosen because it is the image that felt to convey most effectively the image of a spiral going around and eating itself.

²¹ "Bull Shit" is in italics because it is the original word that Meneses chose. It is not a translation from a Spanish swear word.

The woman's hand lay on the old wall; her hand of painted nails rested on top of the pitted²² rock; a small hand, wide, ordinary²³, in contact with the robust cold wall, enormous, centuries old, built in ancient times to withstand the graze of time and nevertheless, already destroyed; broken in its old age. Because he was looking at the wall, the man thought (or said) "In this wall lies a path of stories wrapped around over itself like a serpent that bites its tail."

The man spoke of many things. Before- when they entered the room, when he found in the mirror the white circles that were the sailors' caps- he whispered: "Your life could be reeled out of that mirror... or your death..."

The man spoke a lot. He said his word before the mirror, before the wall*,²⁴ before the matured night sky, as if someone could understand his words. (The only one that understood him at the right time was the small individual wearing the tilted hat, the one

²² "Pitted" is used here to translate a word that has no direct translation: "Carcomida." The word references the material state of an object that has been consumed by exposure to a pest or the forces of nature throughout time. Another possible word could have been "gnawed," but it felt to be inappropriate in this case because it implies that something has bitten into it and Meneses states that the wall is deteriorating through its subjection to the passage of time.

²³ The original word that was used in this sentence is "vulgar." Although there is a direct translation for this word in English (also vulgar) I have changed it to "ordinary" because it conveys more faithfully the Spanish connotation which, although may come to mean the same as in English, can also be used for its original purpose, which meant "belonging to the common folk." Therefore, I have decided to change it to "ordinary" in order to avoid any confusion.

²⁴ This "Wall" is the translation of "pared" which refers to the inside or outer walls of a structure. Being the wall one of the most important elements in the story, it is important to clarify that "muro" in Spanish means the outside wall that serves a protective function (like the wall of a castle) and its usually separated from the territory it protects. Unfortunately, these two distinct objects are expressed using the same word in English (wall). So in order to avoid any confusion, every time there is an instance of "pared" and not "muro" I will put an asterisk.

who intervened in the story of the sailors and could be considered –at the same time- a detective or a sailor.)

When he looked at the wall, the man gave serious explanations, he said: “They brought these rocks all the way here from the ocean; they pressed them together with lasting mortar; now, the mineral elements that formed the wall are returning in a slow breakdown towards their primitive forms; a path of stories that wraps around itself like a serpent that bites its tail.” The man spoke a lot. He said: “Within this wall lies the disease of what loses cohesion; leprosy of the bricks, of the lime, of the sand. Fortitude corroded by the anguish of what it is becoming.”

The woman’s hand lay on the wall. Her fingers, extended over the roughness of the rock, felt the hardened cold of its side. The nails drummed in a movement that said “here, here” or, perhaps, “goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.”

The man answered (with words or thoughts): “The rock and your hand form the balance between what can disintegrate²⁵ and what is lasting, between the rushed escape of the instants and the slow disappearance of what tries to resist the passage of time.”

The man said: “A hand is, barely, more firm than a flower; barely less ephemeral than petals, similar to a butterfly. If a butterfly would stop its fluttering over the rugged wall in a second of rest, its legs could move in a gesture similar to that of your hand, saying “here, here” or, perhaps, “goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.”

²⁵ “What can disintegrate” is a replacement for the word “deleznable,” which means “something that breaks easily, is inconsistent and offers little resistance” and not have a direct translation in the context that Meneses is employing it.

The man said: "What could separate one thing from another in the world of time, would be a thin sheet of human intention, a nuance that man invents; because, in the end, what must die is all one and only differs from the eternal."

That is what the man said. And he added: "The story of this slum is held between your hand and that rock: the path of stories wrapped around itself like a serpent that bites its tail. Here lies the slow decadence of the wall and the life that it contained. Your hand says what happens when a castle facing the sea changes its destiny and becomes a house of merchants; when, between the walls of a defensive fortress, the metal of arms is confused with that of coins."

The man laughed: "You know what happens? ... It falls, simply, in the port's commerce par excellence: the traffic of coitus." He closed his laugh and severely concluded: "But you have nothing to do with this; because when you arrived, the series of transmutations was already made. The defensive castle had already been a house of merchants and was now a brothel."

True. When she arrived, the commerce of lips, of the smiles, of the wombs, of the hips, of the vaginas, had a traditional sense. The slum was mentioned as the center for coitus inside the port. When she arrived, this was – between the thick walls of what used to be a fortress- an immense beehive formed by miniature cells that were forged for sexual activity and time was also divided in particles of active minutes. (Now you. Enough. Goodbye. Now you. Enough. Goodbye Now you. Enough. Goodbye.)²⁶ And the coins were

²⁶ "Enough" is a translation for "Ya," a word that could mean either "stop or enough" or "right now." In this case, "Enough" is chosen because of its progressive motion (From sex, to having enough, to having to do it all over again.)

arranged like the ticking minutes of a clock.²⁷ Like the backs, whose place had been held inside the walls of the ancient castle, could cut life, desire and love. (That's called love, right?)

But when she arrived this already existed. She had no reason to know the path stories that, according to the man, could be read on the wall. She did not have to know how the wall was formed with the proud intention of a defensive castle facing the sea, only to end up becoming a commercial center for coitus after having been a house of merchants. When she arrived, the dungeons that were limited by cardboard partitions already existed inside the beehive.

Her struggle commenced with her dragging herself, decisive and opportunistic²⁸, making sure to pick up every crumb that someone abandoned, anxious for coins. With her nails – those same thick and bitten nails that rested on the rugged wall- she pulled off coins: coins that were worth a piece of time and stored as if they were life itself. Distressingly opportunist²⁹, was she. The gesture of biting her nails, only anguish: nothing more than the uneasy woodworms, the menial rain of anguish inside her life.

Now, her hand laid on the wall. A flat hand, with the rude and worn down petals of the nails over the ancient rock made of dilapidated stories, rock on its way back towards broken insignificance, for having lost the intention of being a castle in the mediocre enterprise of merchants.

²⁷ In this sentence, I had to add “arranged in the form of a clock” in order to preserve the poetic value and clarify the phrase “sentido de reloj” which in this case is used to mean “something that expresses a certain feeling or object.”

²⁸ “Opportunistic” is used to translate the word “aprovechadora” which does not have a direct translation and means “to make the best of something or an opportunity.” But it holds no negative connotation, unlike “oportunista” and “opportunist.” Nevertheless, this is the closest word that is able to convey the original without major alterations.

²⁹ See footnote 21.

She knew nothing. For many years she lived inside of the monster that was that fortress, warehouse, brothel. She knew nothing. The slum was pinned in its weight over the edges of the mountain, dozing absurdly under the sun. Dark, heavy, hurt by the passage of time. Under the sun, under the brilliant breath of the sea, the slum was a monster. An old and shriveled monster, with hard wrinkles that were scabs, residue, dirty, dark honey produced by water and light, by the air's thousand tongues of fire that is continually grazing that path of stories that wraps around itself – just like a serpent- and says how the castle over the sea became a slum of coitus and how the hand of a distressed woman can fall on to the wall (Just like a flower or butterfly) and express in her movement “here, here” or “goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.”

She knew nothing. When she arrived, the present already existed and what came before could only be found in the words of a man that would gaze at the wall and decide to speak. This already existed. And she was inside of this. The men gasped a little; they poured inside of her their filthiness. (Or their love). She took the coins: the measure of time. She would store in her nightstand a piece of life. Or of love. (Because that is called love). She slept. She awakened dirty from all the filths of the world, impregnated of dirty honey like the monstrous slum under the wind of the sea. Her head painfully rang and she could listen inside herself the clumsy slip of a tenacious phrase: “I love you more than my own life.” (When? Who?) One. She thinks he had a moustache, that he spoke Spanish like a foreigner and had dark skin. “I love you more than my own life.” Who could be distinguished in all those memories? A man was laughter, desire, gesture, brightness of the tooth and saliva, arabesque hair over the forehead. Then he was a shadow amongst many. A shadow in the dark tunnel crossed by flashes that were existence. A shadow in the black trap crossed by

flashes, by thunderous explosions, by rockets and stars of burning color, by the lights of the cabaret, by a found improvised phrase: "I love you more than my own life."

But everything was a useless brightness, like the story wrapped around itself and she knew nothing of the rock or the stories or the lights that broke the shadow of the tunnel.

Only when she spoke with that man, when she heard him talk the night of the encounter with the three sailors (if it was three sailors) she knew something about it. She was latched on to her tunnel like the mollusks that live stuck to the rocks of the shore. She was in the tunnel, receiving what arrived to her cell: a violent strike³⁰, a dirty wave of foam, a word, a blazing burst of lights or stars.

Inside the tunnel, moving among the shadows of existence, she produced multiple times the wordless pantomime of the maiden that invites the sailor: the smile over the shoulder, the skirt raised skirt to the thigh and looking at how it was rubbed between the sailor's fingers.³¹

That is how the man who people called Dutch³² arrived. Who anchored inside the tunnel for a long time. Strapped to the tunnel because of his drunkenness. He would call her *Bull Shit*. Surely that was a swear word in the Dutch's language. (What does it matter?) When he said *Bull Shit* to a group of foreign blonde sailors they all laughed. (What does it matter?) She stored her laugh in the laugh of everyone else. (What does it matter, then?)

³⁰ The original word used here is "envión" which does not have a direct translation. It is defined as a strike that moves the object it has stricken.

³¹ A slight alteration ("looking at how it was rubbed between the sailor's fingers") was made here in order to be able to translate the phrase "Mirar como se forma el roce entre los dedos del marino." Which literally would mean "And look at how the friction was formed between the sailor's fingers."

³² Original name used by the author.

what does it matter?). Certainly Dutch could well have wanted to make fun of her. Nothing mattered because he was also shipwrecked inside the tunnel, tied to the entrails of the monster that slept next to the sea. He would change occupation; he was a marine, chauffeur and an office worker. (Or was it that all drivers, office workers and marines called her *Bull Shit* and she called them all Dutch.) And if he changed occupations, she changed houses inside the slum. Everything was the same. Around everybody, next to everybody, over everybody – whether their names were Dutch, *Bull Shit* or Juan de Dios³³- there was the slum, the monster that dripped bleak juices under the light, under the wind, under the brightness of the sun and the sea.

It did not matter if Dutch was an office worker or a chauffeur. It did not matter if *Bull Shit* lived in this cell or another. Just that, from certain rooms, one could see the blue world- tall, faraway- of water and air. Men whispered in those rooms; a lot of them wanted to stay like Dutch; they would say: “This is beautiful!”

The night of the encounter with the three sailors (if there actually were three sailors) the one who³⁴ would proclaim speeches appeared. He was a strange man. (Although, truth be told, she would affirm that they are all strange). He spoke to her with affection. Like a friend, like a boyfriend one might say. He came to declare, very seriously, that he wished to marry her. “Exchange vows, legalize love, join in marriage.” She laughed at him the same way that she laughed when Dutch called her Bull Shit. He persisted; he said: “I would bring you to my home; I’d introduce you to my friends. You would enter the

³³ Original name. Refers to Saint John of God, but it can also be used to describe a generic name like “Mr. So-and-so.” John Smith and so on.

³⁴ “The one who” is used as an English substitution for “El que.” This is a translation choice that is continuously repeated throughout the text.

hall looking very elegant and very worthy; the Madams would greet you by extending their bejeweled hands; some of the men would insinuate a reverence; no one would know that you are drunk from cheap rum and misery; they would pretend to surprise in you a certain form of strange elegance; they would pretend that you are distinguished and strange; you would laugh at everyone just as you laugh now; suddenly, you would let go an obscene and rounded word. It would be marvelous?"

He looked at her slowly, as if he was observing an old³⁵ painting. The woman was laying her flat hand of bitten fingernails against the wall. He continued: "I would take you to a friend's house that collects stained glass, porcelains, paintings, figurines, pretty ancient objects, from the time that these rocks were united in lasting mortar in order to form the wall of the castle that faces the sea. He would examine you as if he was observing an ancient painting; he'd say, probably, that you look like a Flemish virgin. And its true, you know? Chastity and prostitution are almost the same. You are, in a certain way, a virgin; a virgin born between the hands of a friar that is tormented by theoretical visions of ascetic lubricity. A Flemish virgin! If I took you to my friend's home, he would say that you are just like a Flemish virgin, but... But none of that is possible, because the friend that collects antiques is me and we have fought a couple of days ago over a woman that lives here with you... and that is you."

One strange man. All strange. One felt in love. ("I love you more than my own life").

One hated her: he who she did not remember the next morning. ("You? You were with me

³⁵ Although the original word that is used here is "antiguo" which directly translates to "ancient," I have chosen to use "old" instead because unlike in Spanish, English tends to refer to things that are "ancient" as belonging to antiquity (Ancient civilizations) and that is not what Meneses is referring to.

last night?" "You don't remember?" he said). There was a tremulous anger in his question, as if he were waiting for change of coins and looked at his empty hands. Men are strange. A woman cannot get to know a man. And much less when the man has undressed himself and proceeded to engage in coitus with her: when he has started to gasp, to squeal, to yell out his thoughts. Some scream "Mother!" Others remember the names of the women that – they say- care for deeply. As if they desired that the mother or other women were present in their coitus. They gasp, scream, squeal, they want her -who supports their weight- to accompany them in their worries and get naked in her nakedness. Then they smile affectionately: "You don't remember?"

They are all strange. She never remembers anything. She is inside the tunnel's shadow, in the entrails of the monster, like a mollusk that is stuck to the rock where, every once in a while, the undertow arrives: the dirty undertow of the sea, the flash of a word, the sparkle of the cabaret lights or the stars. She is here, merged onto the monster without any memories. Faraway, the sea. She can see it in the shaking mirror of her room where, now, two sailor caps hang from it. (But, weren't there three sailors?) The sea even looks beautiful sometimes. Basking in sun and wind. Though, little is known inside of here. Droplets of dirty honey have devoured everything; they have intervened in the story of the wall over which the woman's fingers drum ("here, here" or "goodbye, goodbye, goodbye."); they have made the story of the mineral elements that return towards their primitive form after having lost their destiny of fortress facing the sea, they've written the story that wraps around itself and forms a circle like the serpent that bites its tail.

She never remembers anything. She knows nothing. She arrived here. There was a dog in her childish games. Together, the dog and her would bark their hunger through the

nights, when in the gusts of hot air the music, the laughter and the curses arrived. She, since she was a girl, in that darkness, determined to take the coins. She, in the entrails of the monster: in the dark entrails, dark even in the presence of wind of sun and salt. She, wet from dirty undertows, alongside the dog. Just Like, after, she was alongside the other large dogs that barked upon her their anguish and the names of their dreams. In any case, she could lean out sometimes through the window or the mirror and look at the sea or the sailor's caps. (Two caps; maybe three sailors)

Because it is almost possible to affirm that there were three sailors: the one that looked like a green lizard, the one with the tilted hat, the one with the bluish cigarette. If it is the case that a sailor forgot his cap in the ship and bought a cap in the port's shops, then it was three sailors; if not, we must think of other theories. The fact is that it was the other one who held a cigarette between his fingers. (Or the dagger)

She looked at everything, as if from the background of the sky's mirror. Perhaps, like the background of the mirror in her room, trembling like the flutter of a butterfly, like the tapping of her fingers over the roughened wall. If she were to be asked what was going on, she would have remained silent or, in the best of cases, she would have answered with whatever phrase is picked up from the language of drunkenness and the brothel's encounters. She would have said: "Mother!" or "I love you more than my own life" or, simply, "My name was *Bull Shit*". Whoever heard her would have laughed, but if they actually had tried to understand, their face would have turned serious, because those expressions could mean something very grave in the ears of hungry animals that live in the entrails of the monster, in the speech of the people that lay their hands on the wall of what

used to be a castle and move their fingers to drum “here, here” or “goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.”

What happened that night of the encounter with the three sailors (Let’s say there were three sailors) moved her, it sunk her in the lights of a dazzling mirror. Truth is, she always had a mirror in her room: a mirror trembling with life like a butterfly, moved by the vibrations of the vessel’s siren or the steps of someone approaching her bed. Sometimes, the mirror reflected the sea or the sky or the lamp covered by colored papers – like a carnival balloon- or the shoes of he who had put to rest his weariness in the scrambled pallet.³⁶ The mirror moved, shaking full of life like the hand of a woman that drums on the wall, because it hung from a long cord tangled to a nail that, at the same time, was plunged on the wood of the pillar that held the ceiling. Just like that, the mirror trembled from every movement in the room, from the passing of air, from everything.

From a long time ago, the woman lived there, in that room where men whispered at dawn: “This is so beautiful” and would tell stories of their mothers and other women that they claimed to have loved. When the man that gave speeches was there, so were the sailors; at least, the mirror upheld the image of two sailor caps, thrown on the bed sheets and next to the small phonograph. (Two sailor caps). The woman that laid her hand on the wall could see the cap’s white circles in her bedroom mirror. Two circles: two caps. (Which could make one think that there were two sailors, although it is also possible that another sailor disembarked without a cap and bought a cap in the port’s shops). There were two

³⁶ Although this sentence may seem to be strange, it is just as strange in Spanish. The entire story is riddled with these instances of non-didacticism, and their translations are done in a way that preserves as much as possible their strangeness and obscurity.

caps on the mirror and because of that, perhaps, the man who spoke so many extraordinary things said: “Your life could be reeled out of that mirror.”

Through that mirror one could arrive, at least, to the encounter with the two sailors. (Let’s say there were two; that there wasn’t one more that left his cap in the ship and bought a cap in the port’s shops.) Through the mirror, a path can be made to the encounter with the two sailors. Just as on the rock where the women’s fingers that drum laid, one could read the story of what changed its destiny of castle into enterprises of commerce and whorehouse.

She was in the cabaret when the sailors approached her. One was brown and the other pale. In (With them?) there was a green shadow and, at times, one or the other (or, perhaps, someone else) seemed to be a puppet of fire. A hand with gloomy sweetness – brown, with a bluish back – offered her a cigarette, the white cigarette ignited at its ember: “Do you want it?” She looked at the burning fire close to her lips; she felt it, hot, next to her smile. (The cigarette’s ember on the mouth of the sailor). Before that (an hour; maybe a whole life) she had fallen into the misty haze. The cigarette’s smoke formed another cloud, a cloud that went through the hand from which, between its fingers, came the little white tube. She took it. She can remember her own hand with the wide band similar to a bride’s ring. Next to the band was the cigarette’s ember and the man’s mouth: the saliva in the smile; next to the one who smiled, the other one the reddish silhouette and, also, the one that resembled a green lizard. He did not have a sailor’s cap, but a small and felted hat that was tilted. (Almost certain that there were three, although after it would be said that it was two sailors and the third person a detective, which may be possible, given that detectives, as everyone knows, use tilted hats with the wing over the eyes.)

It started in the cabaret. She –the woman that laid her hand on the wall- lived on the higher floor. The room with the trembling mirror was on top of the dance hall. From it, the sea or the sailor’s caps or the woman’s life could be seen. Thirty women above, in thirty dungeons of the great hive; but it was only from her room that the distant blue could be seen, just like she was the only one to enjoy the luxury of a phonograph, nevertheless, she was nothing more than another one of the thirty women that lived in the thirty cartridges of the upper floor, just like, in the cabaret, where she was just another one amongst the many that drank beer, anise or rum. Another one, although she was the only one with a wide band, similar to a bride’s ring.

All of a sudden, the lights of the cabaret started to move: blue paths, yellow dots, blue wheels and the sailors’ smiles, the saliva and cigarette smoke between the lips. She also sipped the clouds of blue³⁷; but the dance of the cabaret lights had already begun. Red and green paths, yellow wheels, dots of fire repeated by the cigarette’s ember. She laughed. She could hear the laugh that had fallen from her mouth.³⁸ The lights twirled, her laugh was threshed like the count of a burning necklace, and alongside the lights and laughter, people moved very slowly, between circles of shadow and mystery. The men –each one- with a smile nailed between their lips: the reddish silhouette just like the one who resembled a green lizard and the one with the tilted hat. (The one that produced the doubt of whether there were three sailors). She nodded in a dancing gesture³⁹ and felt her head graze the

³⁷ “Clouds of blue” is purposefully used rather than “blue clouds” to emphasize Meneses original order of words. In Spanish, this kind of adjective displacement (“Sorbió las azules nubes también”) serves a poetic function by making the text seem both odd and formal.

³⁸ Gender is introduced to make the sentence have grammatical sense in English.

³⁹ Part of the meaning is missing. The original word is “ademán” and does not have a direct translation besides “gesture.” But the word “ademán” means a gesture that also conveys the subject’s mood or state of mind.

lights and laughter when she faced the mirror: the trembling mirror of her room in which its silver swam the two sailor caps. All of that happened as if it had ascended towards death. Because of that, he screamed: "You were born today!" and the man said: "Your life could be reeled out of that mirror."

But, that was after. Certainly, the sailors approached: a hand, a mouth, the green shadow and the reddish splendor. The one they called Dutch was present that night or, maybe, another night similar to it. (A night like the many nights that are born in that tunnel, in the entrails of the monster, in an instant of the great darkness crossed by the flashes that was life there.⁴⁰ Dutch was there. Or, perhaps, not. No; certainly, not. It was the one with the speeches, the patient talker, who was there. The woman lifted up her hand in a dancing gesture; her nails opened five red petals towards the bulb's light. She stood up; she felt in her body how everything within her would usually stretch. She looked (in her inner mirror or the trembling mirror of her room) her slipped head floating between the cabaret's light bulbs and the glow of the high and serene sky. She moved –slowly and brilliantly– on to light bulbs, stars, mirrors. The voice, the smile, the sailors' cigarettes were words, gestures, signals that indicated the man's chest. (His wallet or his heart). As if she were traversing ramps of mystery, her steps would take her towards the one who was resting on the cabaret table. She set aside mirrors, lights, stars went through clouds of smoke. The three sailors accompanied her (it was three then): the one that seemed like a green lizard, the one with the reddish splendor and a bluish shadow on his hands, the one with a tilted hat over his left temple. When she arrived to the table, she grazed the chest of the man that was sleeping. "Bullshit" he said. "Ah! You're Dutch." "Dutch? Dutch? You pull out a word from

⁴⁰ See quote 33.

your shadow and you think it is a man. No, I am not Dutch; nor am I the one that said *I love you more than my own life* or the one that spoke to you about women he deeply cares for. I am another heart and another coin.” The voices of the two (or three?) sailors ordered her: “Go up with him.”

They glanced at each other before the mirror. She would say that she didn’t step on the stairs, that she didn’t walk in front of the bar, that they walked –all of them– the ramps of mystery and went through the doors that are always between mirrors. Through the paths of mystery, through the paths that unite a mirror with another, they arrived (or were there before) and glanced at each other from the mirror’s door. (Them and their shadows: the woman, the sailors and the one that, before, slept on the cabaret table showing everybody his heart). The one with the tilted hat was not in the mirror. The other one, the one that slept when they were below, spoke; when he gazed at the sailors’ caps, he told the woman: “Your life could be reeled out of that mirror.” (He could have equally said: “your death”).

The woman was outside the room; her thick hand of gnawed nails lay over the rough rock of the wall. Through the door she could see the sailors’ caps in the mirror’s crystal. The man had started the phonograph, and from it, a sweet song played. The sailors were approaching. Suspended over the black disc, the brilliant needle sharpened the music: that melody where words would swim, similar to Dutch’s words when he would say something more than Bull Shit, similar to caps suspended on the reflection of a silver glass.⁴¹

⁴¹ Original word is “azogado” which literally means an object that has been covered in “azogue,” another word for mercury, meaning that it is transformed into a mirror or is an object capable of reflection.

The man listened as he was lying towards the phonograph. One of the sailors advanced towards him; the one who had offered the cigarette of bluish smoke. The woman looked at the sailor's hand, nervous, active, charged with desire. (If coin is the measurement of love, then someone can desire a coin the same way they desire a heart). She understood it as follows: "The gesture of someone who touches a coin can be similar to the phrase *I love you more than my own life*; perhaps, both, mirrors of a same nonsense or a same anguish." The hand – desirous, bustling, active– headed towards the site of the wallet or the heart. The man turned his head; he looked at the sailor face to face. The one who had a splendor of ember laughed with an empty smile like the tapping of a drum, like the movement of women's fingers that lay on the wall. The man leaned out again over the phonograph's melody. The other one's laugh fell over the music's rhythm and the man bathed in the music and the laughter.

The sailor's gesture threatened again when the woman drew the attention of the one who listened to music. Completely still –her hand on the wall– she hissed at him.⁴² He went towards her; he paused to look at her, like a connoisseur that gazes upon an old painting; it was then when he said: "In this wall lies a path of stories that bites its own tail. They brought these rocks all the way here from the ocean; they pressed them together with lasting mortar to make the wall of a defensive castle; now, the mineral elements that formed the wall are returning towards their primitive forms: fortitude⁴³ corroded by the anguish of a distorted destiny."

⁴² See quote 34.

⁴³ The original word used here is "reciedumbre," which translates directly to both strength and fortitude depending on the instance. In this case, since what is being described is the wall of a defensive castle (also called fortress) I have chosen "fortitude" because it hails from the latin word *fortis*, which is the same root from which "fortress" hails from.

The woman looked at him from the sky's mirror, her head high amongst the stars. Before that became true, the woman looked at how the sailor's cigarette shined between his finger: a cigarette made of metal, poisoned with venoms from the moon⁴⁴, shining of death. Her fingers (it sure was extraordinary that two hands were united to mineral elements and could simultaneously mean, although differently, the slow disappearance of what was made to resist the passage of time), her fingers drummed on the wall. "No, no, no."

It was then that he proposed to her, when he compared her to a Flemish virgin, when he said: "I will take you to the home of a friend that collects antiques; he would say that you are just like a Flemish virgin; but none of that is possible, because that friend is me and we have fought over a woman that lives in this house and that ...is you."

The sailor's gesture with the poisoned metal of the cigarette –or the dagger's– was so slow that it appeared to be made out of smoke. Slowly, he would raise his flame, his cigarette, his dagger, the burning moonish smoke of death. She moved the fingers on the wall; she was drumming the words: "no, no, careful, here, here, good bye, good bye, good bye." The man said: "I love you more than my own life. You look like a Flemish virgin. *Bull Shit.*"

Now, the sailor was laying down his flame. She saw him. Screamed. The night was cut by lightning and flashes. (Shots or stars). The one with the tilted hat shot sparks with his revolver. Someone jumped towards the night. There were screams. A woman ran towards the woman lying on the wall; she screamed: "You were born today!" The man repeated: "*Bull Shit*, virgin, I love you."

⁴⁴ Could also be translated as "moonish venoms."

Her hand sled alongside the wall; her body detached; her fingers grazed the ancient rocks until they fell to a pool⁴⁵ of her blood; there, together with the wall, in the blood that began to grow cold, her fingers said one more time: “Here, here, careful, no, no, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.” A useless drumming that faltered over the man’s words: “I love you more than my own life, *Bull Shit*, virgin.” The one with the tilted hat affirmed it: “She is dead.”

Later on, the one with the speeches was commenting: “This is a path of stories that wraps around itself like a serpent that bites its tail. It is still unknown if there were two sailors” The one with the hat opposed: “There are two caps on *Bull Shit’s* bed.” “In the mirror,” rectified the one with the speeches; “her life could be reeled of that mirror. Or her death.”

Voices of fear and passion were elevating their flame towards the stars. The woman’s hand laid still along side the wall, on the pool of her blood.

⁴⁵ The original word used in this sentence is “pozo” which directly translates into “well.” This is a common expression in Spanish literature (“El pozo de su sangre”) and so to preserve this kind of common literary expression I have decided to replace it with “pool” (“the pool of her blood”).

Analysis: Spirals, Confusion and Faceless Shadows

This literary analysis for *La Mano Junto al Muro* will be focusing on the aesthetic qualities and literary devices that are taking place in the text and not the “meaning” that is to be found within it. This is not done to undermine the narrative or the plot of the text. My role in this analysis is to highlight these qualities rather than providing a personal or philosophical interpretation. In any case, if this work would have as its purpose to assign a certain “meaning” to this text, it would be of no use to anyone beside myself. All interpretations of meaning exist on a personal level and adjudicate the text one out of multiple (if not infinite) meanings that it can come to possess. In his essay “The Death of the Author” Roland Barthes writes that “We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author- God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture” (Barthes, 146). Barthes recognizes, in a similar way to German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that words are ambiguous metaphors that do not possess a single metaphysical quality of definition. What words “mean” or “imply” now falls onto the reader, who could now be understood to be another author, given that no story will ever mean exactly the same to any two individuals.⁴⁶

Every reading of the same text will inevitably be an inherently different experience which may produce a different conclusion, view, interpretation, and so on. Therefore, I

⁴⁶ The simple notion that language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and “objective” world is no longer tenable. Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own meaning. (Waugh,3)

assume that my role in this project is to analyze the short story in relation to the ways that the text functions and operates, that is to say, the way that it is transmitted. Therefore, any personal interpretation is left on the hands of the reader.

“Here lies a path of stories wrapped around itself like a serpent that bites its tail.”

When the man with speeches says these words, do we know exactly what he is referring to? Is it perhaps the story of the murdered woman? What is her story? The man with the speeches does not seem to only be referencing what supposedly happened to this woman within the narrative. So what is really the path of stories that wraps around itself? Perhaps one could insinuate that through this statement the narrator is expressing that he is aware of the existence of the text in which he is a part of, and in which he exists as a mere reflection. This phrase, which repeats itself multiple times throughout the text, holds the key to understanding the aesthetic qualities according to which the narrative is constructed. Not only does it represent a degree of metafictionality (since the man is elucidating the narrative that he is helping the narrator create), but it also is the blueprint of its textual architecture.

At first glance one may object to this claim by implying that the man is simply metaphorically describing the life of a victimized prostitute. But if we look deeper into the ways that the text is presented to us, we realize that the written story starts and ends exactly in the same moment. What would happen if we just take the first paragraph of the text and contrast it with the last? We would find that everything that has been said in regard to her murder is part of a poetics of speech; a narrative that plays with time in whatever way it pleases, crossing deliberately the boundaries between past, present, action

and conscious thought. All that we have been told exists as the spiral that the man is referencing to as “the serpent that bites its tail.” But what does it mean when we say that a text is presented as a spiral? Well, firstly we must understand that spirals are illusory curves that only appear to be moving closer or further from their central point. In the case of “La Mano Junto al Muro” it is doing both at the same time. The story begins to distance itself from the initial conversation between what we can imply to be two detectives, with the implicit hopes of revealing the circumstances and perpetrators of the murder. But as we begin to distance ourselves, we find that the text is once again returning to this initial moment, as if it were dependent and reluctant to leave it. Then, the text continues. It appears to finally set itself in motion to untangle the enigma, but then, as we can expect from a spiral, we realize that the text was still heading to the initial moment inside the narrative. “La Mano Junto al Muro” is told as a conversation between faceless figures and a mysterious narrator. The story exists inside its own literary universe as speech, that is to say, as a written text that we as readers are experiencing as it unfolds. In other words, it recognizes its artificial nature. So the path of stories spiraling unto itself is not only the story of the murdered prostitute, but also the way that these events are aesthetically presented. The path of stories is the text itself, written and designed by Guillermo Meneses and experienced by us as readers travelling through these circuitous paths.

The illusion of the spiral: when we observe its movement, it appears to have a direction, but when studied up close, we realize that its motion is circular, static and doggedly repetitive. Part of untangling the enigma of this tale is recognizing the multiple dimensions that the text is referencing. It could be said that the spiral is a metaphor that operates on multiple levels.

Firstly, the life of a prostitute that is stuck in a cycle of misery that she never remembers. Secondly, the aesthetic architecture of the text, and thirdly, its metafictional connotations, as Meneses himself writes in a later essay in 1971: “Yo dije en ese cuento (como pude) el misterio del tiempo: un misterio que se muerde la cola y forma el Cero: la serpiente de la nada” (Meneses, 619).⁴⁷ In order for us to comprehend how he is presenting the mystery of time, we must come to understand that all of these levels are dependent on one another, like a babushka doll that slowly uncovers the transition from one dimension to the next. From the man’s speech we witness the woman’s story, and through the telling of the story we recognize that their destinies (the woman’s and the story) are intertwined. From this realization, we realize that the story returns to its starting point, revealing the mystery of time in relation to man. In this tale, time is subjected to human creation, and all it reveals is that:

What could separate one thing from another in the world of time, would be a thin sheet of human intention, a nuance that man invents; because, in the end, what must die is all one and only differs from the eternal.
(Meneses, 209)

The only element to withstand the passage of time is time itself. Meneses is hinting at its relative nature, particularly when subjected to human consciousness. All moments have the potential of being both fleeting and eternal, just as the text recognizes that every paragraph could be extended towards infinity if one can bend time through fiction. After all, what is being narrated in this tale is a single movement of a hand against a wall, one brought on by

⁴⁷ “I said in that short story (as I could) the mystery of time: a mystery that bites its tail and forms a zero: the serpent of nothingness.”

a “thin sheet of human intention” which sets the spiral in motion until the hand finally falls, and both the text and its subject, die.

Before delving further into the text, I want to mention my use of Gerald Kamber’s book “Max Jacob and the Poetics of Cubism.” As I mentioned in the introduction, Meneses does not personally align himself with any specific literary movements of his time. I would very much like this to remain that way. But not identifying or being part of a certain artistic movement does not mean that Meneses and cubist writers do not share some particular similarities. Given that it will allow us a deeper comprehension of the ways that these literary devices are being put to use, I have concluded that it is through a cubist/surrealist aesthetic frame of study that we will be able to have more profound understanding of the way that this text is constructed.

In the preface to Meneses’ anthology “Espejo y disfraces,” Venezuelan literary critic José Balza writes that: *Un secreto de su prosa está en el ritmo. El afán por respirar pausadamente, por recortar una frase contra la otra, aunque éstas sean breves o prolongadas, lo hipnotiza*⁴⁸ (Meneses, X). The rhythm in “La Mano Junto al Muro” relies heavily on repetition, which serves as its main reference points. The tale is constructed and torn down repeatedly through its repetition, granting the rhythm of the tale a constructive function. This positive (constructive) and negative (destructive) movement within the text is made possible through its circular and repetitive nature. Certain phrases allow him to go back to previous moments within the story and rewrite it in accordance to his playful and confusing enigma. This in turn, is not only hypnotizing for Meneses, but for us as readers as well. If we were to think of this tale as a song, these repetitive phrases could be seen as the

⁴⁸ “A secret of his prose is in its rhythm. The eagerness to breathe slowly, to trim one phrase over another, even if these are short or prolonged, hypnotizes him.”

chorus, the return to a neutral standpoint from which reconstruction becomes possible. But what is even more surprising is realizing that these phrases operate on two levels. The first is its way of reconstructing a subplot within the narrative, and the second is the way that it also contributes to the text's structure as a whole. So these repetitive phrases are both unique to their own subplot, and constitutive of the grander whole. If we were to understand this text as a building, these repetitive phrases are the foundational blocks on which the rest of the structures rely upon.

An example of the way that these repetitive phrases contribute to the tale's rhythm could be the following:

Only when she spoke with that man, when she heard him talk the night of the encounter with the three sailors (if it was three sailors) she knew something about it.

(Meneses, 212)

The night of the encounter with the three sailors (if there actually were three sailors) the one who would proclaim speeches appeared.

(Meneses, 213)

What happened that night of the encounter with the three sailors (Let's say there were three sailors) moved her, it sunk her in the lights of a dazzling mirror."

(Meneses, 216)

All of these phrases were taken from the very beginnings of paragraphs. Notice how they are all just slight variations of each other. They are all referencing the night of the encounter, and they all have the same parenthesis that posits the uncertainty of whether there were actually three sailors. And just as each one of these phrases is a slight variations of the same, so is the text that follows each of these repetitions. These phrases allow

Meneses to return to a neutral vantage point from which he can now reconstruct his narrative.

In his work *Towards a Reinterpretation of Cubism*, Winthrop Judkins recognizes that the first attribute in cubism could be understood to be “the liberty taken by the artist in pulling his objects to pieces and then rebuilding them into an independent composition” (Judkins, 270). If we were to apply this feature to “La Mano Junto al Muro,” we would need to replace “objects” with fragments of prose that are separated by the repeated phrasing. If we embrace this perspective, the repetition present in the text now assumes a new importance and serves the function of both destroying and rebuilding the narrative in a new way. Each reconstruction is a new construction of itself, but it is also still dependent on its original source. In “La Mano Junto al Muro,” each new construction presents the reader with new “clues” or “revelations” in regard to the prostitute’s murder. But as we noticed in the end of the tale, these clues amount to nothing. Therefore, each reconstruction could be said to be the reconstruction of an enigma that teases the reader in its direction by implying that it is leading towards an answer, when in reality it is just leading to the very beginning, allowing us only to understand the “clues” themselves but not the actual mystery.

But an aspect that complicates this even further, is that within each of these reconstructions, parts of the previous constructions are still present in the new. An example of this could be found in the phrase “ “here, here” or, perhaps, “goodbye, goodbye, goodbye” “ which is stated eight times through the text (five times identically and three times with slight variations). These kinds of phrases are what Balza labels as “verbal tics;”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Meneses, XII

phrases that through their onomatopoeic quality return us to the short story's beginning and manages to blend several temporal moments in a simultaneous movement. Consequently, this produces a loss of sense of temporality and prevents us from following the story in a linear and coherent way. These kinds of literary techniques are also present in cubist art and literature, as Kamber suggests: "Duality, plurality and simultaneity of vision are the tools Jacob has used to demolish the everyday world and also to build a new world, a world of art" (Kamber, 25). Let us take this passage as example:

All of a sudden, the lights of the cabaret started to move: blue paths, yellow dots, blue wheels and the sailors' smiles, the saliva and cigarette smoke between the lips. She also sipped the blue clouds; but the dance of the cabaret lights had already begun. Red and green paths, yellow wheels, dots of fire repeated by the cigarette's ember. She laughed. She could hear the laugh that had fallen from her mouth.
(Meneses, 219)

Here one can witness both the differences and commonalities that Meneses' text may come to have with cubist art. Cubist painting, unlike literature, can instantaneously present the viewer with all of the elements present in his work. Literature, on the other hand, depends on temporality and makes it impossible to form a single entity within a single moment or instant. As we read this passage, we can recognize that there is no movement. All the images occur within the same moment, and it is this moment that we can isolate as if it were a painting. When we attempt to imagine or conceptualize these images in our heads, they all exist simultaneously but in a very strange way. It is as if the images were metamorphosing into each other "Red and green paths, yellow wheels, dots of fire repeated by the cigarette's ember." This kaleidoscopic imagery expresses a movement in and out of recognizable representation and it is not surprising that their recognition is made elusive. This is a feature that does not just apply to this passage, but also to the text as a whole. In *Theory of the Avant* Bürger ties this sort of fragmentation and superimposition of reality

with the writings of Adorno: “The semblance (*Schein*) of art being reconciled with a heterogeneous reality because it portrays it is to disintegrate as the work admits actual fragments (*Scheinlose Trümer*) of empirical reality, thus acknowledging the break, and transforming it into an aesthetic effect” (Bürger, 78). In “La Mano Junto al Muro” specific moments are constantly being subjected to fragmentation and reinterpretation; none of them having any more validity than others. A single moment is turned into an impressionist picture that blurrily sews the image together. But none of these descriptions could be said to be consistent with life. All of this happens, as Adorno states, with the recognition of its artificiality and breaking-away from empirical reality.

Throughout the work, there is, as Kamber suggests “a refusal to provide the reader with a tangible referent.”⁵⁰ The simultaneity of vision that Meneses is creating plays with the reader in a way that he feels to be thrown around in his imagination. Concise and simple images begin to lose form and merge into one another, carrying the reader in to a realm of his imagination that cannot fully conceive what is being described, to the point where, instead of having a sequence of images, we are simply brought back into the material reality of the text.

Let us consider this passage for example:

A man was laughter, desire, gesture, brightness of the tooth and saliva, arabesque hair over the forehead. Then he was a shadow amongst many. A shadow in the dark tunnel crossed by flashes that were existence. A shadow in the black trap crossed by flashes, by thunderous explosions, by rockets and stars of burning color, by the lights of the cabaret, by a found improvised phrase: I love you more than my own life.

(Meneses, 211)

⁵⁰ Kamber, 46

As we read, we go from imagining a man with the most vague of characteristics (because he could be any man) to him just being another shadow. Perhaps this could also metaphorically represent the way that all of Meneses' text shifts continuously into the shadows. The last sentence of the passage is an amalgamation of images that are intertwined into one another and offer no clear imagery of what they are referencing. What is a "shadow in the black trap crossed by flashes"? It almost appears to be a paradoxical phrase, conceived through the use of oppositions. From darkness and shadow we are crossed with a multitude of lights that the reader is not sure of what they are, where they are and when they are occurring. But after we have been subjected to this abstract imagery, we are catapulted to a past reference that is expressed only through words ("I love you more than my own life.")

In regard to this simultaneity, Kamber states that in cubist literature this aesthetic technique "comes from taking one object for another, one aspect for another, or one sentiment for another. (...) As quickly as the senses perceive the image, it becomes something else; the reader is constantly obliged to superimpose another impression on the original one, but without discarding the original" (Kamber, 46). It can be argued that a very similar effect is taking place in this passage. From a faceless man we are thrown into shadow, and from shadow we are transported to a disparate succession of images that convey light inside of the tunnel, until we reach the cabaret and a man (who could perfectly be the same man from the beginning of the passage) being with her sexually and declaring his love. But the extent of this simultaneity is expressed well beyond a single passage. The simultaneity also operates within the text's repetition, making us impose the old impressions we had on certain events, on to the new reconstruction that we are now

reading. The phrase "*I love you more than my own life*" will become a phrase that is repeated continuously throughout the text and will serve Meneses, like many other of his "verbal tics," as a way of making the reader superimpose past impressions with the new reconstruction he is providing the reader.

As I have mentioned before, a great deal of the images in Meneses' text express an absurdity that can also be found in surrealist works. In his book *The Poetics of Surrealism*, John H. Matthews highlights that "So far as an object (...) turns away from its supposed destination, taking us somewhere different as it ignores its designated purpose, it is dear to surrealists" (Matthews, 5). This kind of supplanted purpose or "destiny" can be found in multiple instances of the tale. The one that can be most obviously highlighted is the image of the castle: "Just as on the rock where the women's fingers that drum laid, one could read the story of what changed its destiny of castle into enterprises of commerce and whorehouse." Later on, he also refers to the whorehouse as a beehive. Although the narrator is stating that the castle changed its destiny, there is not only a shift in its "objective" destiny (to be a defensive fortress) but also a change in its purpose and definitions. This in turn unsettles the reader, who cannot bask in the realist Balzacian orderly sense. It is an anti-mimetic tactic that also expresses his artistic subversion and links him even more intimately to surrealism and the avant-garde. It goes from being a simple wall to a castle to a house of merchants to whorehouse to beehive, into the path of stories that wrapped around itself. Things that appear to hold meaning are eventually bent, broken and transformed until the point that we doubt our relationship to these objects that conform our daily lives and expose their dependency on human subjectivity.

Another aspect of Meneses writing that has gone unmentioned and that could be related to cubist literature is his use of dualities throughout his short story. Several instances of a dualistic contrast can be found concerning many aspects such as time (static and dynamic), Memory and forgetfulness, reality and fiction, shadow and light, life and death and so on. These oppositions have the capacity to disintegrate the ordinary and highlight the separation that exists between our realm and the one to be found in his poetic literature. The entire story feeds on these oppositions and they play a pivotal role in hinting at the reader about the text's metafictional function. Meneses himself claims to have tried to create a story that could address the mystery of time, and it is through dualities that he is aesthetically achieving this attempt to materialize the mystery of time in literature. Take this passage for example:

The man answered (with words or thoughts): "The rock and your hand form the balance between what can disintegrate and what is lasting, between the rushed escape of the instants and the slow disappearance of what tries to resist the passage of time."

(Meneses, 208)

The woman's hand against the wall is the axis of this spiraled text. The only human action that takes place beyond the speech of the text (that is to say, everything that happened before the woman's hand was laying against the wall) could be understood to be a single hand movement. By having these events unfold in this particular order, the allusion suggests that the entire story is a story in itself and that it takes place until the woman and her tale finally die. The narrative hangs from a thread of opposition between the rock and her hand; between what is mortal and fragile and what is meant to endure the passing of time.

By now we should be well aware that “La Mano Junto al Muro” is an experimental text that is constantly challenging the reader. When we say that a text is “confusing,” the word tends to be associated with a somewhat negative connotation because it is usually an undesirable trait on part of the author. This is not the case in “La Mano Junto al Muro.” As I mentioned in the introduction, he is deliberately attempting to confuse us through his narrative, explicitly desiring to be purposefully puzzling and elusive. A possible reason for why Meneses is aesthetically choosing to create such a non-mimetic text can be found in Bürger. “The organic work of art seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. The opposite holds true for the avant-gardist work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact” (Bürger, 72). Realist or Balzacian texts attempt to enrapture the reader through their “natural flow,” while Avant-Gardist works like Meneses’ aspire to a very different kind of phenomenon. The anti-cathartic elements, such as self imposed doubt and absurd imagery, break the flow of the narration and make the reader become actively conscious that he is engaging in the act of reading a text. It is, as Bürger suggests, an artifact that wishes to be recognized as such and wants the reader to consider its artificiality by prompting a new kind of literary experience that requires to read critically, doubt the narrators identities and ask the reader to consider the purpose underlying this work.

That being said, it is important to note that Meneses is not creating a text that is simply “confusing.” Labeling a story like this with that term seems to be too vague and open-ended. As I previously mentioned, his confusion could be said to be a coherent one. It does not simply require a chaotic appearance of unrelated words or images. It goes way beyond that. It is a non-mimetic elusiveness that is very sophisticated and requires a great deal of effort on his part for it to be conceived. But this kind of purposeful obscurantism can

also be found in cubist and surrealist literature. As Kamber writes: “The last device (in cubist technique) is a persistent obscurantism, a refusal (except in rare instances) to provide the reader with a tangible referent, or to furnish him explicit transitions” (Kamber, 46). Kamber suggests that this purposeful opacity is done in such a way that the reader feels himself to be solving a jigsaw puzzle that offers no resolution in terms of it being able to provide an answer. It is a short story that is unable to be related to any conventional story, it exists on its own, answering to no particular literary movement.⁵¹

Just like in cubist literature, “La Mano Junto al Muro” is also deliberately attempting to create a jigsaw puzzle that cannot be decoded. A maze, so to speak, in which no matter what path you take, will always lead you to the same place (the beginning). This mysterious tension and psychological play is not meant for the reader to reveal the answer. Rather, its purpose is to show the power and capacity that these aesthetic qualities can come to possess. Its authenticity lies in that illusion; in its deceitful convincing and playful manipulation. It merely appears to be a puzzle; it is an illusion brought on by a masterful play of words and insinuations.

When we think about this story in relationship to time itself, we come to realize that the characters, especially the prostitute, are nothing more than faceless shadows that are being used in a literary experiment that is seeking to disintegrate spatial planes and our

⁵¹ It is worth mentioning that while researching the work, the only instances that were to be found to resemble the story were the works of the French *Nouveau Roman*, which emerged several years after “La Mano Junto al Muro” was published. Lasarte notes in his essay *Nacionalismo Populista y Desencanto. Poéticas de Modernidad en la Narrativa de Guillermo Meneses* that Robb Grillet’s *La Jalousie* serves as a great comparison for understanding the structure. (Lasarte, 93)

perspective of time within literature. It's puzzling nature operates on two dimensionalities. The first concerns the story of the murdered prostitute and the second is focused on a metafictional level.

Concretely, the confusion on the first level (the story of the murdered prostitute) operates through multiple ways. We are confused about the murder because we cannot create a coherent narrative of the events that are taking place. Even the narrator (who we are not even sure is just one person or two) is confused about them. Even though he is omniscient, the narrator deliberately doubts himself. Take these separate instances for example:

What happened that night of the encounter with the three sailors (Let's say there were three sailors) moved her, it sunk her in the lights of a dazzling mirror.
(Meneses, 216)

Through that mirror one could arrive, at least, to the encounter with the two sailors. (Let's say there were two; that there wasn't one more that left his cap in the ship and bought a cap in the port's shops.)
(Meneses, 217)

He did not have a sailor's cap, but a small and felted hat that was tilted. (Almost certain that there were three, although after it would be said that it was two sailors and the third person a detective, which may be possible, given that detectives, as everyone knows, use tilted hats with the wing over the eyes.)
(Meneses, 218)

These comments, confined to their parentheses, serve the narrator as a way of integrating a second voice into his own; a voice that is doubtful, uncertain and only complicates things even further. There is a deliberate attempt to confuse and break the flow of the narrative. Nothing can be taken as absolute; everything in the tale is subjected to change and transformation. The prostitutes enigma centers around the possible killer (or killers) who

are supposed to be one of the sailors that is mentioned throughout the text, but later on even one of the narrators (the man of the speeches) is involved in the crime and the sailors identities become impossible to distinguish from one another, making it impossible for us not only to know who the actual killer is, but also the identities of the involved suspects. Examining the characters even further, one realizes that all the clues that are presented (like the number of sailors) have no coherent development. There are supposed to be two or three, but if we even try to deduce who they can possibly be, we hit a wall of tangled identities. To highlight this, let us attempt to identify the killer. These are the following men mentioned throughout the text:

-Dutch.

-The man who said *I love you more than my own life* (who could also be the man of the speeches).

-The man with the tilted hat (who is said to be the man that looks like a green lizard)

-The man of the speeches.

- The One who hated her: he who she did not remember the next morning.

-Someone who looked like a puppet of fire.

- The one with the reddish splendor and a bluish shadow on his hands.

- The one that spoke to you about women he deeply cares for.

- The man who slept on the cabaret table showing everybody his heart.

All of these men are presented as being suspects in the tale (the two or three sailors present when the murdered occurred) but distinguishing who is actually perpetrating any of these actions is an impossible task. By the end of the tale, we do not know who did what

or when, and the killer, who even speaks before he murders her, utters phrases from all the different characters that were mentioned before.

“I love you more than my own life, *Bull Shit*, virgin.” The one with the tilted hat affirmed it: “She is dead.”

(Meneses, 223)

This phrase holds a special significance in the story. Every phrase that is divided by a comma is presented throughout the tale as a defining characteristic to a suspect. I love you more than my own life was supposed to be the man that screamed as they were having sex, *Bull Shit* is the nickname that Dutch gave her (“similar to Dutch’s words when he would say something more than *Bull Shit*” (Meneses, 29)) and virgin is referencing the man that would take her to his “friend’s home, he would say that you are just like a Flemish virgin, but... But none of that is possible, because the friend that collects antiques is me and we have fought a couple of days ago over a woman that lives here with you... and that is you.” (Meneses, 222) Why does Meneses purposefully lay out distinct characters, only to later compound them all into a single person? One may be tempted to say that it is a very straightforward way of revealing that all of these men were actually the same person and that she (“who never remembers anything”) confuses the same man as different people.

Strangely enough, a passage in the text seems to also suggest it:

She would store in her nightstand a piece of life. Or of love. (Because that is called love). She slept. She awakened dirty from all the filths of the world, impregnated of dirty honey like the monstrous slum under the wind of the sea. Her head painfully rang and she could listen inside herself the clumsy slip of a tenacious phrase: “I love you more than my own life.” (When? Who?) One.

(Meneses, 211)

Although this passage does suggest confusion on her part, it also highlights how the narrator exists outside of her own perspective. He is not conditioned by what the woman lives even though she is his main concern. So the argument that the previous phrase was a revelation that they were all the same man falls short. It could perhaps be true if the prostitute's perspective was the only prevailing one in the narrative, but it is not. The prostitute is the axis on which the story spins around but we never actually get to hear her speak or get a clear perspective on her part. Although she is the main object of focus of both the men and the narrators in the tale, we only learn of her through the eyes of others. Another possibility that is worth considering is that it is the narrator who is confusing all these faceless characters and revealing their ethereal nature. In his essay *Toward a reinterpretation of Cubism*, Judkins highlights that a feature that is present in all cubist art is a "compounding of identities" (Judkins, 276). Usually, this feature is used in relation to objects present in cubist paintings. But as Kamber shows, it is possible to extrapolate these aesthetic features into written text: "When the art critic speaks of plastic elements, we must substitute visual elements, and when he speaks of painted surface, verbal coherence, in order to transpose the concepts from one medium to the other" (Kamber, 25). So, how do we relate a compounding of identities to the text? We must substitute the plastic elements with visual elements, which in this case can be the male characters of the tale. These characters appear to be distinct but start to blend into each other progressively, losing any individual characteristics as the story flows, to the point that they have all become this one single character who happens to be the murderer.

To whom can we attribute this compounding? Is it Meneses or the fictitious narrator who is playing these games? Is there a difference? Who even are these narrators and can

we tell them apart from one another? All that we know with certainty is that they are our sole source of information and one of them speaks from an omniscient perspective. But having said all this, even the most concentrated and critical readers are tempted to make sense because the narrator is indirectly asking us to do so. There is a formula for achieving this indirect request, but in this particular case, the framing of the story as a detective's tale does set for us some preconceptions. For example:

(The only one that understood him at the right time was the small individual wearing the tilted hat, the one who intervened in the story of the sailors and could be considered –at the same time– a detective or a sailor.)

(Meneses, 208)

We notice that Meneses is subtly implying that the two men conversing are detectives, and that implication, although faint, is enough for us to have a subconscious preconception of this tale as being a mystery or a thriller and so we try to deduce who is the detective, who is the murderer and how the woman was robbed of her life. As Balza himself says in *Espejo y Disfraces*: “¿Qué mirada entra y sale de los laberintos psíquicos, para contárnosla? ¿Quién recoge esos datos, y los reitera, haciéndolos variar? Estas preguntas usuales, se estrellan contra el comienzo que es idéntico al final; cuyos límites encierran una de las obras de ficción más fascinantes de la escritura en América Latina” (Meneses, XI).⁵² Upon the realization that our questions will only crash, we have two choices that are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, we undergo an anti-cathartic experience as we realize that the perceived puzzle we have been reading is a maze that leads nowhere aside than the same (or perhaps greater) confusion it expressed in its beginning.

⁵² “What gaze enters and leaves the psychic labyrinths in order to tell us? Who is compiling these facts and restating them in different ways? These usual questions crash unto the beginning, which is identical to the end; whose limits enclose one of the most fascinating works of Latin American fiction.”

To understand more about anti-catharsis, there is no greater innovator and avant-garde artist than Bertolt Brecht to explain this revolutionary phenomenon in art. In an essay titled *The German Drama Pre-Hitler* (written in 1935) he writes the following:

Catharsis is not the main object of this dramaturgy (non-Aristotelian drama). It does not make the hero the victim of an inevitable fate, nor does it wish to make the spectator the victim, so to speak, of a hypnotic experience in the theatre. In fact, it has as a purpose the “teaching” of the spectator a certain quite practical attitude; we have to make it possible for him to take a critical attitude while he is in the theatre (as opposed to a subjective attitude of becoming completely “entangled” in what is going on.)
(Brecht, 78)

Even though Brecht is referring to the kind of avant-garde theatre he was creating, its ideas could be extrapolated to Meneses’ text. It can be argued that the confusing tension that is present in the text exists as a coming in and out of the kind of hypnotic experience that Brecht is describing. As we read, the traditionally conceived drama in the time of Meneses was still following Aristotle’s recipe for catharsis.⁵³ Because of this, we are drawn to relate to the protagonist and want to be hypnotized all the way through her climatic and intriguing murder. But as we mentioned before, this attempt only amounts to the conclusion that this desired resolution would never come. Through this imposed confrontation with our artistic pre-dispositions, we are forced to accept a new perspective and appreciation for the text. It is possible that Meneses is accomplishing (through his own terms) the critical attitude that Brecht is also seeking from his spectator. This attitude could perhaps be a more “aesthetic attitude” in which we intellectually focus on the aesthetic characteristics of the text rather than the developments of the characters in the plot. Consequently, this non-cathartic perspective opens up a new kind of enigma, which

⁵³ Brecht, 87

can be revealed when we attempt to expose the narrator's identity and relationship towards the text.

Consider the identity of the two narrators. When referencing narrators in his book, Tzvetan Todorov writes that "we have a quantity of information about him (the narrator), which should allow one to know him, to place him precisely; but this fugitive image cannot allow itself to draw near, and it constantly assumes contradictory masks, dashing from that of an author in flesh and bone to that of some character" (Todorov, 415). These so-called "contradictory masks" operate in "La Mano Junto al Muro" through many layers of the narrative. The narrator is generating a narrative through a dialogue with a secondary narrator that is not aware of his existence, while at the same time commenting on his own words through parentheses and providing characters with narrations of their own (like the One who said I love you more than my own life and would bring her to his friends house). These strange occurrences transform the text into a game of hide and seek with a narrator that is now lost in time, speech, characters and mirrors. The narrator's identities are completely unknown to us and their tones could be said to be almost identical, clouding our ability to recognize them. Take this fragment for example:

He closed his laugh and severely concluded: "But you have nothing to do with this; because when you arrived, the series of transmutations was already made. The defensive castle had already been a house of merchants and was now a brothel."

True. When she arrived, the commerce of lips, of the smiles, of the wombs, of the hips, of the vaginas, had a traditional sense.

(Meneses, 209)

This is the definitive passage in which the focus shifts from the man of the speeches to a mysterious narrator. Oddly enough, the narrator seems to be responding to the man of the speeches even though he is supposed to be narrating what he is supposedly saying. It might

seem small, but that “true” at the beginning of the second paragraph exposes a great deal about the narrator’s relationship. Throughout the text they say very similar things and emphasize the same metaphors (like the monster in the slum). Just like the men in the tale, the narrators begin to merge into one another to the point where either one of them could be saying the same thing. It seems as if the man with the speeches and the omniscient narrator are equally informed, with the slight exception, we may come to argue that the man of the speeches is not aware that he is in a tale. But their differences go beyond that. These teasing masks are interchanged freely as the text flows with little regard for the reader. It is part of its Avant-Gardist nature.

In his essay *Asedio a la figura del Narrador*, Carlos Moriyón Mojica provides a detailed account of the relationship between these two narrators, defining their narratological functions through the works of Todorov, Oscar Tacca and Norman Friedman. He explains it as follows:

A nivel del ENUNCIADO, es posible distinguir DOS TIPOS DE NARRADORES, uno EXTERNO. (...) cuya categoría se correspondería con la de un NARRADOR > PERSONAJE se identifica, en la clasificación de Tacca, con un narrador *externo* — *suprasciente*— que dada la relación de sus conocimientos estrecha sus distancias en relación con el autor implícito, con el personaje y con el lector implícito.

El otro narrador, INTERNO, y al que podríamos llamar aquí CO-NARRADOR, sería, por el contrario, un narrador *interno* —*equisciente*—, caracterizado por su presencia en los acontecimientos en carácter de TESTIGO — (...) lo que lo ubicaría en la categoría todoroviana del NARRADOR = PERSONAJE.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ “In terms of the TEXT it is possible to distinguish TWO KINDS OF NARRATORS, one EXTERNAL (...) whose category would correspond with Todorov’s NARRATOR> CHARACTER, Tacca’s external-omniscient narrator, whose relationship extends towards the implicit author, the character and the implicit reader.

(Moriyón Mojica, 98)

More concretely, we can say that the omniscient narrator (the one that is nameless and responds to the one with the speeches) is the main narrator and can be defined as external, possessing a broad dominion of the situation and the characters (even their thoughts) and only narrating in the third person. The man of the speeches also holds a broad dominion of the situation and the characters, but his knowledge is far much more limited than his nameless contributor. For example, only the main narrator is aware of the woman's childhood and life-long misery:

There was a dog in her childish games. Together, the dog and she would bark their hunger through the nights, when in the gusts of hot air the music, laughter and curses arrived. She, since she was a girl, in that darkness, determined to take the coins.

(Meneses, 215)

As we can see, unlike his co-narrator, this omniscient narrator has access to the character's intimacy. The other narrator (the man with the speeches) could be considered to be an internal narrator, characterized by his role as witness and who narrates in both the first and third person and is aware of his role as narrator.⁵⁵ The man of the speeches knows the story of the slum and the events surrounding the murder, but it is only the omniscient narrator who can give us insight into the character's past and consciousness. But this is not the case either. He is aware that all that is being said is speech because he too is addressing a faceless man as he tells the story and who could be said to be us (the reader). Another

The other narrator is INTERNAL, and who may call here CO-NARRATOR. He operates as an internal narrator that speaks from a third-person subjective viewpoint, characterized by his presence in the events as a WITNESS, (...) which would situate him in the tolorovian category of NARRATOR=CHARACTER."

⁵⁵ Moriyón Mojica, 98.

way they are different from another is that the man of the speeches is not aware of the presence of the omniscient narrator. A feature that they both certainly share is that neither one of them is offering concrete “viewpoints” within their narrations. Instead, they offer cerebral and conscious narrations. In other words, it is a tale of poetry and memory and not of sight.⁵⁶ “En “el hombre” descansa todo el peso teórico del texto. El dice abiertamente las tautologías; y la misma vida anterior de ella no existe, hasta que él comienza sus discursos” (Meneses, XIII).⁵⁷ Both narrators share tautologies (the phrases that are constantly being repeated and reimagined) making it more and more difficult to identify one from another as the story progresses. But what does it mean that all the theoretical weight of the text rests on “the man?” In order to answer this, we must transport ourselves to the next and last level of the Menesian puzzle: metafiction.

In the prologue to *Diez Cuentos*, Lasarte writes that in “La Mano Junto al Muro” “cosas y seres que parecen ser diferentes están allí para revelarse como mascararas indiferenciadas que se congregant en la voz del “hombre que decía discursos” es decir, en la escritura, otro disfraz.” So far, we have explored how our impression of the text changes from a murder mystery into an aesthetically conceived enigma and now, we must come to consider how it transforms itself into a work of metafictional literature that is questioning the very nature of writing and reading.

In order to soothe any doubts concerning the term “Metafiction,” Waugh provides in her book *Metafiction* a quick and concise definition for the term:

⁵⁶ Moriyón Mojica, 100.

⁵⁷ “All the theoretical weight of the text rests on “the man.” He openly says the tautologies; and her very own life does not exist until he starts his speeches.”

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.

(Waugh, 2)

If we link Lasarte's quote to Waugh's definition of metafiction we become aware that all these indifferent masks that are sliding into each other throughout the text are serving Meneses a utilitarian function for him to explore the principles that were determining traditional and conventional narratives. This does not mean that Meneses' concerns only operate on a metafictional level, the form and the content are also equally as considered and thought through, but their existence is serving him in a way that through them he is indirectly presenting us with new forms of literary creation that are open, ambiguous, and inapprehensible.⁵⁸

The object that is linked the most to his metafictional concerns is the mirror. The symbol of the mirror is present throughout several of his novels and short story's and represents an idea that encompasses much of his work during the most experimental phase of his writing. A riddle concerning a mirror is repeated over and over again in the man's speeches with slight variations, it states:

Her life could be reeled of that mirror. Or her death.

(Meneses, 207, 208, 209,219, 221, 223)

Between the life and death that could be reeled out of Meneses' mirror lies the infinite. All that exists in life must be subjected to the mirror that exists within all of us and allows us to "reflect" upon existence through our use of language and thought. Everything that exists

⁵⁸ Meneses, 27

inside the mirror is a costume because that is the condition of existence and writing.⁵⁹ Literature becomes a reflection on life and costumes (or “masks”) become a game of pretending. “Dutch? Dutch? You pull out a word from your shadow and you think it is a man” (Meneses, 220). The author plays with the reader by distancing himself from the work and masking his identity behind narrators, genres, temporal moments, and the speeches of faceless characters. As Detweiler once wrote: “All art is “play” in its creation of other symbolic worlds; “fiction” is primarily an elaborate way of pretending, and pretending is a fundamental element of play and games” (Detweiler, 51). When we submerge ourselves in Meneses’ narrative, we are playing his game, going along with his puzzle and letting him trick us so that we may uncover what is hidden underneath. What lies on the other side of the story’s mirror? Maybe Meneses tells the answer to us:

They glanced at each other before the mirror. She would say that she didn’t step on the stairs, that she didn’t walk in front of the bar, that they walked –all of them- the ramps of mystery and went through the doors that are always between mirrors. Through the paths of mystery, through the paths that unite a mirror with another, they arrived (or were there before) and glanced at each other from the mirror’s door.
(Meneses, 220)

What can we find behind the mirror’s door? Perhaps the mirror is what connects Meneses to the world of literature. As I previously stated, Meneses commented on the fact that he had sought out to represent in his work the mystery of time. The realm that these faceless figures are traversing (the doors that are between mirrors) is what comes to exist outside of time and from where every part of the enigma is created, torn down and reconstructed once again. In *Metafiction*, Waugh writes that “The metafictional response to the problem of

⁵⁹ Meneses, 30

how to represent the impermanence and a sense of chaos, in the permanent and ordered terms of literature, has had much more significant influence on the development of the novel as genre” (Waugh, 12). Literature’s “order,” confinement to time and need for coherence prevents us from ever portraying the full extent of human consciousness since it is never linear, rarely coherent and ultimately non-transferable. But that being said, that does not mean that we can’t create literature that attempts to resemble the chaotic movement of our consciousness, which has the ability to access distant memories, dream, think abstractly, feel multiple things simultaneously and so on.

All of these conscious possibilities, like Meneses text, correspond to the same being and mind. That is why all of the identities and places are playful masks, which are later revealed to be one and the same. All of Meneses’ shadows and ambiguous costumes began to become intertwined as the story developed and finally untangle themselves when the story comes to an end:

Her hand sled alongside the wall; her body detached; her fingers grazed the ancient rocks until they fell to a pool of her blood; there, together with the wall, in the blood that began to grow cold, her fingers said one more time: “Here, here, careful, no, no, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.” A useless drumming that faltered over the man’s words: “I love you more than my own life, *Bull Shit*, virgin.” The one with the tilted hat affirmed it: “She is dead.”

(Meneses, 223)

Here, the woman’s hand, after many reconstructions, finally slides from the wall into a pool of her blood. The main aesthetic devices that served a repetitive and reconstructing function come together alongside both of the narrators. The passage compounds the identities of the characters by providing the murderer with phrases that were meant to distinguish one character from another, makes present the two narrators, and links the

moment to the very beginning. The passage that follows presents the enigma of the path of stories and how it could be reeled out of a mirror. “El espejo es el espacio de la escritura, escenario y escena. Nada existe fuera de él y la imagen que proyecta es virtual y equívoca, como todo en el cuento” (Meneses, 30).⁶⁰

The story openly recognizes to be a story; it knows it exists as a reflection of a mirror and does not present itself as anything more than just text. This condition of self-awareness, proper to metafictional writing, allows Meneses to be free in his writing, to create and conceive a text where language conveys a multitude of meanings that operate simultaneously. Through its puzzling play, Meneses forces us to reconsider the purpose of his words and the way that so many other texts have been conventionally created using imitative templates. Without this puzzling and enigmatic feature, he could not produce or provoke a Brechtian kind of anti-cathartic response that pushes the reader to think intertextually and consider the text in terms of its aesthetic quality. Having this in mind, we must reconsider the passage that opens this translation, which will now shine a light on Meneses’ metafictional message:

What could separate one thing from another in the world of time, would be a thin sheet of human intention, a nuance that man invents; because, in the end, what must die is all one and only differs from the eternal.
(Meneses, 209)

“La Mano Junto al Muro” is that nuance; that thin sheet of human intention that attempts to distinguish one thing from another, only to later remove its masks and reveal that it is all ONE. This is the main purpose of its puzzling nature; it calls into question the nature of

⁶⁰ “The mirror is the space of writing, stage and scene. Nothing exists outside of it, and the image it projects is virtual and misleading, like everything in the story.”

literature and its relationship to time. It is a tale that transcends the margins of the text. It calls for subversion and artistic rebellion, creating art for the sake of art. It pushes boundaries and breaks what is not meant to be broken, encouraging us to think differently by embracing our creative freedom. All through the enigma of a faceless woman that wraps around itself like a serpent that bites its tail.

Conclusion

“Time is moving along,” I said to the great linguist, “and this meeting must be concluded.”

But I would not like to leave without knowing what you think about the task of translating.”

“I think as you do,” he replied; “I think it’s very difficult, it’s unlikely, but, for the same reasons, it’s very meaningful.”⁶¹

-The misery and the Splendor of Translation, José Ortega y Gasset.

There is no “right” way to translate; no alchemist formula or methodological process that will always render a translation “correct.” There are only subjective concerns and preferences when it comes to translating a work of literature, some of which could be argued to be more relevant than others. As I read multiple accounts on translation theory, the only conclusion that I related to are those acknowledging that translations are mysterious collaborations, essentially free and bound only by their original source. My intention was not to generate a sort of Borgesque translation where a “re-imagining” of the original takes place. As I translated “La Mano Junto al Muro,” I made a conscious effort to replace as little as possible of the original. There were several instances where I felt compelled to change or reformulate entirely a sentence, but as Ortega y Gasset mentions in his essay *The Misery and Splendor of Translation*: “The simple fact is that the translation is not the work, but a path toward the work. If this is a poetic work, the translation is no more than an apparatus, a technical device that brings us closer to the work without ever trying to repeat or replace it” (Ortega y Gasset, 61). My role as a translator during this project has only been to draw the reader closer to Meneses, not to myself. I wanted my presence in this

⁶¹ Ortega y Gasset, 60

literary encounter to be as invisible as possible. I am, in a sense, simply arranging a meeting between English speakers and Meneses, so that the reader may submerge himself in the strangeness and foreignness of the author's language.

Guillermo Meneses was not an artist and intellectual locked in his ivory tower. He was a promoter of culture, an educator and an advocate for progress, subversion and change. His relationship to his country was profound and contributed greatly to his early literary style. But that same love and commitment was what sentenced him to a profound sense of disenchantment, making him unsatisfied and yearning for something different both in society and the realm of the arts. And from this disenchantment, a new pursuit for authenticity emerged which sought to question the foundations of literature; a pursuit that he publicly initiated with "La Mano Junto al Muro." Nevertheless, his once recognized and cherished legacy seems to have been somewhat lost since his death in 1978. Perhaps the most difficult part of this translation and commentary was finding reliable secondary sources about his writing. Nothing more than a few biographical paragraphs exist in English and in Spanish very few essays or books existed and even less had been digitalized. But what for some people may seem to be a disadvantage, I saw as a motivation. The lack of critical work concerning Meneses' literature in the English language only inspired me to delve even deeper into his work. As much as I admired authors such as Borges, García Marquez, and Cortázar, I knew that if this project would focus on them it would be just another paper amongst hundreds concerned with the same or a similar topic. For this reason, this project has as its goal to bring in a new and underrepresented voice in to academia and be able to provide any English reader with at least a small insight into Guillermo Meneses' life and work.

“La Mano Junto al Muro” was chosen over other of Meneses’ short stories because of its historical significance and complexity. When I first encountered it, I did not know what to make of it. It appeared to me like a lost piece of a mystic’s writings. It was unlike anything that I had read before and felt determined to understand it. Something about it made it feel like it was ancient and simultaneously modern, dynamic and innovative. As mentioned in the analysis, the story is aesthetically created using techniques very similar to those employed by some of the most influential artistic movements of the Twentieth century. There is surrealist transformation of the ordinary through the subjective self and a cubist opacity that is generating a fragmented and sometimes simultaneous maze that only has one way in and one way out: The Beginning. But these similarities are not absolute or determining, they are just parts of a broader “Menesian” literature and have simply served as a useful shortcut by helping us understand more clearly what is aesthetically occurring.

Lastly, I incorporated to these aesthetic devices a new layer of mirrors: the symbol that represents Meneses’ ultimate metafictional deliberation concerning the nature of Time, literature, and their relationship to one another. Meneses presents us with a “playful” view on literature that appears to suggest that all fictional writing is but a game of pretend between the author and the reader. But what would happen if everything came crashing down and all the masks and costumes ultimately collapsed and revealed the man on the other side of the mirror? We would find Meneses laughing, drawing time as a circle and winking at our entangled brains. What starts as mystery, becomes an enigma and ultimately, a game of “hide and seek” with the author.

Meneses is considered one of the fathers of the Venezuelan avant-garde not because

his story served as a template for others, but because he proved both to himself and his contemporaries, that an “authentic,” intellectual and Venezuelan literature is possible. Man is now his own invention. “La Mano Junto al Muro” is a to call for freedom; an appeal for us to question with skepticism the foundations of art and society and realize that they are social constructs that do not obey an “objective truth.” His hope, perhaps, is that such a foundation could be replaced (at least in literature) by something new, different, and able to make the reader undergo a conscious experience unlike any other. This in turn could restore language’s power to change our perspective, making us far more aware of its impact on us and on the world. How have we gone from Bull Shit’s murder to this apprehension? Just follow the “path of stories that wraps around itself like serpent that bites its own tail.”

Works cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*. Ed. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977. 142-48. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1978. 69-82. Print.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "Pierre Menard: Author of the Quixote." *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writing*. Ed. Donald A. Yates, James East Irby, and Andreì Maurois. New York: New Directions Corporation, 1964. Print.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "The German Drama: Pre-Hitler." *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. John Willet. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. 77-81. Print.
- Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1984. Print.
- Caws, Mary Ann. *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002. Print.
- Detweiler, Robert. "Games and Play in Modern American Literature." *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 17, no.1, 1976, pp. 44. Web.

Judkins, Winthrop. *Toward a Reinterpretation of Cubism*. *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 30, no. 4,

1948, 270–278. Web.

Kamber, Gerald. *Max Jacob and the Poetics of Cubism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971. Print.

Matthews, John Herbert. *Toward the Poetics of Surrealism*. Syracuse: N.Y., 1976. Print.

Meneses, Guillermo. *Diez Cuentos*. Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1968. Print.

Meneses, Guillermo. *Espejos Y Disfraces*. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1981. Print.

Moriyón Mojica, Carlos. *Asedio a La Figura Del Narrador*. Thesis. Universidad Pedagógica

Experimental "Libertador", 1988. Web.

Nabokov, Vladimir. "Problems of Translation: "Onegin in English". *The Translation Studies*

Reader. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. New York: Routledge, 2000. 71-83. Print.

Ortega Y Gasset, José. "The Misery and Splendor of Translating." *The Translation Studies*

Reader. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. New York: Routledge, 2000. 49-63. Print.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Categories of Literary Narrative*. *Papers on Language & Literature*,

vol. 50, no. 3/4, 381-424. Web.

Uslar Pietri, Arturo. "Sembrar El Petróleo." *Diario Ahora* [Caracas] 14 July 1936: Web.

<http://webdelprofesor.ula.ve/economia/ajhurtado/lecturasobligatorias/sembrar%20el%20petroleo.pdf>

Valcarcel, Javier Lasarte. "Nacionalismo Populista Y Desencanto. Poéticas De Modernidad

En La Narrativa De Guillermo Meneses." *Juego Y Nacion: Postmodernismo Y Vanguardia En Venezuela*. Venezuela: Fundarte, 1995. 77-96. Print.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London:

New Accents (Methuen &Co),1984. Print.

APPENDIX A: LA MANO JUNTO AL MURO (Original Version)La Mano Junto al Muro

Guillermo Meneses

La noche porteña se desgarró en relámpagos, en fognazos. Voces de miedo y de pasión alzaron su llama hacia las estrellas. Un chillido (¡«naciste hoy!») tembló en el aire caliente mientras la mano de la mujer se sostuvo sobre el muro. Ascendía el escándalo sobre el cielo del trópico cuando el hombre dijo (o pensó): «Hay aquí un camino de historias enrollado sobre sí mismo como una serpiente que se muerde la cola. Falta saber si fueron tres los marineros. Tal vez soy yo el que parecía un verde lagarto; pero ¿cómo hay dos gorras en el espejo del cuarto de Bull Shit?... La vida de ella podría pescarse en ese espejo... O su muerte...».

La mano de la mujer se apoyaba en la vieja pared; su mano de uñas pintadas descansaba sobre la piedra carcomida: una mano pequeña, ancha, vulgar, en contacto con el frío muro robusto, enorme, viejo de siglos, fabricado en épocas antiguas para que resistiese el roce del tiempo y, sin embargo, ya destrozado, roto en su vejez. Por mirar el muro, el hombre pensó (o dijo): «Hay en esta pared un camino de historias que se enrolla sobre sí mismo, como la serpiente que se muerde la cola».

El hombre hablaba muchas cosas. Antes -cuando entraron en el cuarto, cuando encontró en el espejo los blancos redondeles que eran las gorras de los marineros- murmuró: «En ese espejo se podía pescar tu vida. O tu muerte».

Hablaba mucho el hombre. Decía su palabra ante el espejo, ante la pared, ante el maduro cielo nocturno, como si alguien pudiese entenderlo. (Acaso el único que lo entendió en el momento oportuno fue el pequeño individuo del sombrero ladeado, el que intervino en la historia de los marineros, el que podía ser considerado -a un tiempo mismo- como detective o como marinero).

Cuando miraba la pared, el hombre hizo serias explicaciones. Dijo: «Trajeron estas piedras hasta aquí desde el mar; las apretaron en argamasa duradera; ahora, los elementos minerales que forman el muro van regresando en lento desmoronamiento hacia sus formas primitivas: un camino de historias que se enrolla sobre sí mismo y hace círculo como una serpiente que se muerde la cola». Hablaba mucho el hombre. Dijo: «Hay en esa pared enfermedad de lo que pierde cohesión: lepra de los ladrillos, de la cal, de la arena. Reciedumbre corroída por la angustia de lo que va siendo».

La mano de la mujer se apoyaba sobre el muro. Sus dedos, extendidos sobre las rugosidades de la piedra, sintieron la fría dureza de la pared. Las uñas tamborilearon en movimiento que decía «aquí, aquí». O, tal vez, «adiós, adiós, adiós».

El hombre respondió (con palabras o con pensamientos): «La piedra y tu mano forman el equilibrio entre lo deleznable y lo duradero, entre la apresurada fuga de los instantes y el lento desaparecer de lo que pretende resistir el paso del tiempo».

El hombre dijo: «Una mano es, apenas, más firme que una flor; apenas menos efímera que los pétalos; semejante también a una mariposa. Si una mariposa detuviera su aletear en un segundo de descanso sobre la rugosa pared, sus patas podrían moverse en gesto semejante al de tu mano, diciendo «aquí, aquí», o, acaso, «adiós, adiós, adiós».

El hombre dijo: «Lo que podría separar una cosa de otra en el mundo del tiempo sería, apenas una delgada lámina de humana intención, matiz que el hombre inventa; porque, al fin, lo que ha de morir es todo uno y sólo se diferencia de lo eterno».

Eso dijo el hombre. Y añadió: «Entre tu mano y esa piedra está sujeta la historia del barrio: el camino de historias enrollado sobre sí mismo como una serpiente que se muerde la cola. Aquí está la lenta decadencia del muro y de la vida que el muro limitaba. Tu mano dice qué sucede cuando un castillo frente al mar cambia su destino y se hace casa de mercaderes; cuando, entre las paredes de una fortaleza defensiva, se confunde el metal de las armas con el de las monedas».

Rio el hombre: «¿Sabes qué sucede?... Se cae, simplemente, en el comercio porteño por excelencia: se llega al tráfico de los coitos». Cerró su risa y concluyó severo: «Pero tú nada tienes que ver con esto; porque cuando tú llegaste, ya estaba hecha la serie de las transmutaciones. El castillo defensivo ya había pasado por casa de mercaderes y era ya lupanar».

Cierto. Cuando ella llegó, el comercio de los labios, de las sonrisas, de los vientres, de las caderas, de las vaginas, tenía ya sentido tradicional. Se nombraba al barrio como el centro comercial de los coitos en el puerto. Cuando ella llegó ya esto era -entre las gruesas paredes de lo que fue fortaleza- el inmenso panal formado por mínimas celdas fabricadas para la actividad sexual y el tiempo estaba también dividido en partículas de activos minutos. (-Tú ahora. Ya. Adiós. Tú ahora. Ya. Adiós. Tú ahora. Ya. Adiós) y las monedas tenían sentido de reloj. Como las espaldas, cuyo sitio habían tomado dentro de los muros del antiguo castillo, podían cortar la vida, el deseo, el amor. (Se dice a eso amor, ¿no es cierto?).

Pero cuando ella llegó ya existía esto. No tenía por qué conocer el camino de historias que, al decir del hombre, se podía leer en la pared. No tenía por qué saber cómo se había formado el muro con orgullosa intención defensiva de castillo frente al mar, para terminar en centro comercial del coito luego de haber sido casa de mercaderes. Cuando ella llegó ya existían los calabozos del panal, limitados por tabiques de cartón.

Inició su lucha a rastras, decidida y aprovechadora, segura de ir recogiendo las migajas que abandona alguien, ansiosa de monedas. Con las uñas -esas mismas uñas gruesas y mordisqueadas que descansaban ahora sobre la rugosa pared- arrancaba monedas: monedas que valían un pedazo de tiempo y se guardaban como quien guarda la vida. Angustiosamente aprovechadora, ella. El gesto de morderse las uñas, sólo angustia: nada más que la inquieta carcoma, la lluvia menuda de angustia, dentro de su vida.

Ahora, su mano se apoyaba sobre el muro. Una mano chata, gruesa, con los groseros pétalos roídos de las uñas sobre la piedra antigua, hecha de historias desmoronadas, piedra en regreso a su rota insignificancia, por haber perdido la intención de castillo en mediocre empresa de mercaderes.

Ella nada sabía. Durante muchos años vivió dentro de aquel monstruo que fue fortaleza, almacén, prostíbulo. Ella nada sabía. El barrio estaba clavado en su peso sobre las aristas del cerro, absurdamente amodorrado bajo el sol. Oscuro, pesado, herido por el tiempo. Bajo el sol, bajo el aliento brillante del mar, un monstruo el barrio. Un monstruo viejo y arrugado, con duras arrugas que eran costras, residuos, sucio, oscura miel producida por el agua y la luz, por las mil lenguas de fuego del aire en roce continuo sobre aquel camino de historias que se enrolla en sí mismo -igual que una serpiente- y dice cómo el castillo sobre el mar se convirtió en barrio de coitos y cómo la mano de una mujer angustiada puede caer sobre el muro (lo mismo que una flor o una mariposa) y decir en su movimiento «aquí, aquí», o «adiós, adiós, adiós».

Ella nada sabía. Cuando llegó ya existía el presente y lo anterior sólo podía estar en las palabras de un hombre que mirase la pared y decidiese hablar. Ya existía esto. Y ella estuvo en esto. Los hombres jadeaban un poco; echaban dentro de ella su inmundicia. (O su amor). Ella tomaba las monedas: la medida del tiempo. Encerraba en la gaveta de su mesa de noche un pedazo de vida. O de amor. (Porque a eso se llama amor). Dormía. Despertaba sucia de todos los sucios del mundo, impregnada de sucia miel como el barrio monstruo bajo el viento del mar. Su cabeza sonaba dolorosamente y ella podía escuchar dentro de sí misma el torpe deslizarse de una frase tenaz. «Te quiero más que a mi vida». (¿Cuándo? ¿quién?). Uno. Ella piensa que tenía bigotes, que hablaba español como extranjero, que era moreno. «Te quiero más que a mi vida». ¿Quién podría distinguir en los recuerdos? Un hombre era risa, deseo, gesto, brillo del diente y de la saliva, arabesco del pelo sobre la

frente. Luego era una sombra entre muchas. Una sombra en el oscuro túnel cruzado por fogonazos que era la existencia. Una sombra en la negra trampa cruzada por fogonazos, por estallidos relampagueantes, por cohetes y estrellas de encendido color, por las luces del cabaret, por una frase encontrada de improviso: «Te quiero más que a mi vida».

Pero todo era brillo inútil, como la historia enrollada sobre sí misma y ella nada sabía de la piedra ni de las historias ni de las luces que rompían la sombra del túnel.

Sólo cuando habló con aquel hombre, cuando lo escuchó hablar la noche del encuentro con los tres marineros (si es que fueron tres los marineros) supo algo de aquello. Ella estaba pegada a su túnel como los moluscos que viven pegados a las rocas de la costa. Ella estaba en el túnel, recibiendo lo que llegaba hasta su calabozo: un envi3n, una ola sucia de espuma, una palabra, un estallido fulgurante de luces o de estrellas.

Dentro del túnel, moviéndose entre las sombras de la existencia, fabricó muchas veces la pantomima sin palabras de la moza que invita al marinero: la sonrisa sobre el hombro, la falda alzada lentamente hasta el muslo y mirar cómo se forma el roce entre los dedos del marino.

Así llegó aquel a quien llamaban Dutch. El que ancló en el túnel para mucho tiempo. Dutch. Amarrado al túnel por las borracheras. La llamaba Bull Shit. Seguramente aquello era una grosería en el idioma de Dutch. (¿Qué importa?). Cuando él decía *Bull Shit* en un grupo de rubios marinos extranjeros, todos reían. (¿Qué importa?). Ella metía su risa en la risa de todos. (¿Qué importa, pues?, ¿qué importa?). Bien podía Dutch querer burlarse de ella. Nada importaba porque él también estaba hundido en el túnel, amarrado a las entrañas del monstruo que dormía junto al mar. Él cambiaba de oficio; fue marino, chofer, oficinista. (O era que todos -choferes, oficinistas o marinos- la llamaban Bull Shit y ella llamaba a todos Dutch). Y si él cambiaba de oficio, ella cambiaba de casa dentro del barrio. Todo era igual. Alrededor de todos, junto a todos, sobre todos -llamáranse Dutch, Bull Shit o Juan de Dios- estaba el barrio, el monstruo rezumante de zumos sombríos bajo la luz, bajo el viento, bajo el brillo del sol y del mar.

Daba igual que Dutch fuera oficinista o chofer. Daba igual que Bull Shit viviese en uno u otro calabozo. Sólo que, desde algunos cuartos, podía mirarse el mundo azul -alto, lejano- del agua y del aire. En esos cuartos los hombres suspiraban; muchos querían quedarse como Dutch; decían: «¡qué bello es esto!».

La noche del encuentro con los tres marinos (si es que fueron tres los marineros) apareció el que decía discursos. Era un hombre raro. (Aunque en verdad, ella afirmaría que todos son raros). Le habló con cariño. Como amigo. Como novio, podría decirse. Llegó a

declarar, con mucha seriedad, que deseaba casarse con ella: «Contraer nupcias, legalizar el amor, contratar matrimonio». Ella rio igual que cuando Dutch le decía Bull Shit. Él persistió; dijo: «Te llevaría a mi casa; te presentaría a mis amigos. Entrarías al salón, muy lujosa, muy digna; las señoras te saludarían alargando sus manos enojadas; algunos de los hombres insinuarían una reverencia; nadie sabría que tú estás borracha de ron barato y de miseria; pretenderían sorprender en ti cierta forma rara de elegancia; pretenderían que eres distinguida y extraña; tú te reirías de todos como ríes ahora; de repente, soltarías una redonda palabra obscena. ¿Sería maravilloso?».

La miró despacio, como si observase un cuadro antiguo. La mujer apoyaba sobre el muro su gruesa mano chata de mordisqueadas uñas. Él continuó: «Te llevaría a la casa de un amigo que colecciona vitrales, porcelanas, pinturas, estatuillas, lindos objetos antiguos, de la época en la que estas piedras fueron unidas con argamasa duradera para formar la pared del castillo frente al mar. Él te examinaría como si observase un cuadro antiguo; diría, probablemente, que pareces una virgen flamenca. Y es cierto, ¿sabes? Son casi iguales la castidad y la prostitución. Tú eres, en cierto modo, una virgen: una virgen nacida entre las manos de un fraile atormentado por teóricas visiones de ascética lubricidad. ¡Una virgen flamenca! Si yo te llevara a la casa de ese amigo, él diría que eres igual a una virgen flamenca, pero... Pero nada de eso es posible, porque el amigo que colecciona antigüedades soy yo y hemos peleado hace unos días por una mujer que vive aquí contigo... y que eres tú».

Un hombre raro. Todos raros. Uno se sintió enamorado. («Te quiero más que a mi vida»). Uno la odió: aquél a quien ella no recordaba la mañana siguiente. («¿Tú?, ¿tú estuviste conmigo anoche?». «¿No recuerdas?», dijo él). Había temblor de rabia en su pregunta; como si estuviese esperando un cambio de monedas y mirase sus manos vacías. Los hombres son raros. Una mujer no puede conocer a un hombre. Y menos, cuando el hombre se ha desnudado y se ha puesto a hacer coito sobre ella: cuando se ha puesto a jadear, a chillar, a gritar sus pensamientos. Algunos gritan «¡madre!». Otros recuerdan nombres de mujeres a las que -dicen ellos- quieren mucho. Como si desearan que la madre o las otras mujeres estuviesen presentes en su coito. Jadean, gritan, chillan, quieren que ella -la que soporta su peso- los acompañe en sus angustias y se desnude en su desnudez. Luego sonrían cariñosos: «¿No recuerdas?».

Todos raros. Ella nunca recuerda nada. Está metida en la sombra del túnel, en las entrañas del monstruo, como un molusco pegado a la roca donde, de vez en cuando, llega la resaca: la sucia resaca del mar, el fogonazo de una palabra, el centelleo de las luces del cabaret o de las estrellas. Ella está aquí, unida al monstruo sin recuerdos. Lejos, el mar. Puede mirarlo en el tembloroso espejo de su cuarto donde, ahora, están dos gorras de marineros. (Pero ¿es que no eran tres los marineros?). Hasta parece hermoso el mar a

veces. Cargado de sol y viento. Aunque aquí dentro poco se sepa de ello. Gotas de sucia miel lo han carcomido todo; han intervenido en la historia del muro sobre el cual tamborilean los dedos de la mujer («aquí, aquí» o «adiós, adiós, adiós»); han hecho la historia de los elementos minerales que regresan hacia sus formas primitivas, después de haber perdido su destino de fortaleza frente al mar, han escrito la historia que se enrolla sobre sí misma y forma círculo como la serpiente que se muerde la cola.

Ella nunca recuerda nada. Nada sabe. Aquí llegó. Había un perro en sus juegos de niña. Juntos, el perro y ella ladraban su hambre por las noches, cuando llegaban en las bocanadas del aire caliente las músicas y las risas y las maldiciones. Ella, desde niña, en aquello oscuro, decidida a arrancar las monedas. Ella, en la entraña del monstruo: en la oscura entraña, oscura aunque fuera hubiese viento de sol y de sal. Ella, mojada por sucias resacas, junto al perro. Como, después, junto a los otros grandes perros que ladraban sobre ella su angustia y los nombres de sus sueños. De todos modos, podía asomarse alguna vez a la ventana o al espejo y mirar el mar o las gorras de los marineros. (Dos gorras; tal vez tres los marineros).

Porque casi es posible afirmar que fueron tres los marineros: el que parecía un verde lagarto, el del ladeado sombrerito, el del cigarrillo azulenco. Si es que un marinero puede dejar olvidada su gorra en el barco y comprarse un sombrero en los almacenes del puerto, fueron tres los marineros; si no, hay que pensar en otras teorías. Lo cierto es que fue el otro quien tenía entre los dedos el cigarrillo. (O el puñal).

Ella miraba todo, como desde el fondo del espejo del cielo. Acaso como desde el fondo del espejo de su cuarto, tembloroso como el aletear de una mariposa, como el golpetear de sus dedos sobre la rugosa pared. Si le hubieran preguntado qué pasaba, hubiera callado o, en el mejor de los casos, hubiera respondido con cualquier frase recogida en el lenguaje de las borracheras y de los encuentros de burdel. Hubiera dicho: «¡madre!» o «te quiero más que a mi vida» o, simplemente, «me llamaba Bull Shit». Quien la escuchase reiría pero, si intentaba comprender, enseriaría el semblante, ya que aquellas expresiones podían significar algo muy grave en el odio de los hambrientos animales que viven en la entraña del monstruo, en el habla de las gentes que ponen su mano sobre el muro de lo que fue castillo y mueven sus dedos para tamborilear «aquí, aquí», o «adiós, adiós, adiós».

Lo que le sucedió la noche del encuentro con los tres marineros (digamos que fueron tres los marineros) la conmovió, la hundió en las luces de un espejo relumbrante. Verdad es que ella siempre tuvo un espejo en su cuarto: un espejo tembloroso de vida como una mariposa, movido por la vibración de las sirenas de los barcos o por los pasos de alguien que se acercaba a la cama. En aquel espejo se reflejaban, a veces, el mar o el cielo o la lámpara cubierta con papeles de colores -como un globo de carnaval- o los zapatos del que se bahía echado a dormir su cansancio en el camastro revuelto. Se movía el espejo,

tembloroso de vida como la angustiada mano de una mujer que tamborilea sobre el muro, porque colgaba de una larga cuerda enredada a un clavo que, a su vez, estaba hundido en la madera del pilar que sostenía el techo. Así, el espejo temblaba por los movimientos del cuarto, por el paso del aire, por todo.

Desde mucho tiempo antes, la mujer vivía allí, en aquel cuarto donde los hombres suspiraban al amanecer: «¡Qué bello es esto!» y contaban cuentos de la madre y de otras mujeres a las que -decían ellos- habían querido mucho. Cuando el hombre que decía discursos estaba allí, también estaban los marineros; al menos, el espejo recogía la imagen de dos gorras de marineros, tiradas entre las sábanas, junto al pequeño fonógrafo. (Dos gorras de marineros). La mujer que apoyaba la mano sobre el muro podía mirar los círculos blancos de las gorras en el espejo de su cuarto. Dos círculos: dos gorras. (Lo que podría hacer pensar que fueron dos los marineros, aunque también es posible que otro marino desembarcase sin gorra y se comprase un sombrero en los almacenes del puerto). En el espejo había dos gorras y por ello, acaso, el que hablaba tantas cosas extraordinarias dijo: «En ese espejo se podría pescar tu vida».

A través del espejo se podría llegar, al menos, hasta el encuentro con los dos marineros. (Digamos que fueron dos; que no había uno más del que se dijera que dejó su gorra en el barco y compró un sombrero en los almacenes del puerto). A través del espejo se puede hacer camino hasta el encuentro con los dos marineros, igual que en la piedra donde se apoya el tamborileo de los dedos de la mujer puede leerse la historia de lo que cambió su destino de castillo por empresas de comercio y de lupanar.

Ella estaba en el cabaret cuando los marineros se le acercaron. Uno era moreno, pálido el otro. Había en ellos (¿junto a ellos?) una sombra verde y, a veces, uno de los dos (o, acaso, otra persona) parecía un muñeco de fuego. Una mano de dulzura sombría -morena, con el dorso azulenco- le ofreció el cigarrillo, el blanco cigarrillo encendido en su brasa: «¿Quieres?». Ella miró la candela cercana a sus labios, la sintió, caliente, junto a su sonrisa. (La brasa del cigarrillo o la boca del marinero). Ya desde antes (una hora; tal vez la vida entera) había caído entre neblinas. El humo del cigarrillo una nube más, una nube que atravesó la mano entre cuyos dedos venía el tubito blanco. Ella lo tomó. Puede recordar su propia mano, con la ancha sortija semejante a un aro de novia. Junto a la sortija estaban la brasa del cigarrillo y la boca del hombre: la saliva en la sonrisa; al lado del que sonreía, el otro la silueta rojiza y, también, el que parecía un verde lagarto. No tenía gorra sino sombrerito de fieltro ladeado. (Casi cierto que eran tres, aunque luego se dijera que fueron dos los marineros y esa tercera persona un detective, lo que resultaba posible, ya que los detectives, como lo sabe todo el mundo, usan sombrero ladeado, con el ala sobre los ojos).

La cosa comenzó en el cabaret. Ella -la mujer de la mano sobre el muro- vivía en el piso alto. Sobre el salón de baile estaba el cuarto del tembloroso espejo donde se podía mirar el mar o las gorras de los marineros o la vida de la mujer. Treinta mujeres arriba, en treinta calabozos del gran panal; pero sólo desde el cuarto de ella podía mirarse el lejano azul, como también sólo ella tenía el lujo del fonógrafo, a pesar de lo cual era nada más que una de las treinta mujeres que vivían en los treinta cuartuchos de piso alto, lo mismo que, en el cabaret, era una más entre las muchas que bebían cerveza, anís o ron. Una más, aunque sólo ella tenía su ancha sortija, semejante a un aro de novia.

De pronto, las luces del cabaret comenzaron a moverse: caminos azules, puntos amarillos, ruedas azules y la sonrisa de los marineros, la saliva y el humo del cigarrillo entre los labios. Ella sorbió las azules nubes también; pero ya antes había comenzado la danza de las luces en el cabaret. Caminos rojos, verdes, ruedas amarillas, puntos de fuego que repetían la brasa del cigarrillo. Ella reía. Podía oír su propia risa caída de su boca. Las luces daban vueltas, la risa también se desgranaba como las cuentas de un collar encendido y junto con las luces y la risa, se movían las gentes muy despacio, entre círculos de sombra y de misterio. Los hombres -cada uno- con la sonrisa clavada entre los labios: la silueta rojiza igual que el que semejaba un verde lagarto y el del sombrero ladeado. (El que produjo la duda sobre si fueron tres los marineros). Ella cabeceaba un ademán de danza y sentía cómo su cabeza rozaba luces y risas cuando se encontró frente a un espejo: el tembloroso espejo de su cuarto en cuyo azogue nadaban las dos gorras marineras. Todo ello sucedió como si hubiese ascendido hacia la muerte. Por eso, una vez chilló: «¡naciste hoy!» y el hombre dijo: «En ese espejo se podría pescar tu vida».

Pero, eso fue después. Ciertamente, los marineros se acercaron: una mano, una boca, la sombra verde y el rojizo resplandor. Aquel a quien llamaban Dutch había estado esa noche o, tal vez, otra noche parecida a ésta. (Una noche como tantas de las noches nacidas en el túnel, en la entraña del monstruo, en un instante de la gran oscuridad cruzada por fogonazos que era la vida allí). Estaba Dutch. O, acaso, no. No; ciertamente, no. Era el de los discursos, el paciente hablador, quien estaba presente. La mujer alzó su mano en un gesto de danza; sus uñas abrieron cinco pétalos rojos a la luz de las bombillas. Se levantó; sintió en su cuerpo cómo ella toda tendía a estirarse. Miró (en el espejo de sí misma o en el espejo tembloroso de su cuarto) su cabeza deslizada en ascensión entre las bombillas del cabaret y entre las luces del alto cielo sereno. Se movió -lenta y brillante- sobre bombillas, estrellas, espejos. La voz, la sonrisa, el cigarrillo de los marineros eran palabras, gestos, señales que indicaban el pecho del hombre. (Su cartera o su corazón). Como si atravesara rampas de misterio los pasos de ella la llevaban hacia el que descansaba sobre la mesa del cabaret. Apartó espejos, luces, estrellas; atravesó nubes de humo. Estaba acompañada por los tres marineros (eran tres, entonces): el que parecía un verde lagarto, el del rojizo resplandor y la sombra azulenca en las manos, el del pequeño sombrero ladeado sobre la sien izquierda.

Cuando llegó a la mesa, rozó el pecho del hombre que dormía. «Bull Shit», dijo él. «¡Ah! ¡Eres Dutch!». «¿Dutch? ¿Dutch? Sacas de tu sombra una palabra y piensas que es un hombre. No, no soy Dutch; tampoco soy el que te dijo *te quiero más que a mi vida* ni el que te habló de otras mujeres a quienes quiere mucho. Soy otro corazón y otra moneda». Las voces de los dos (¿o tres?) marineros ordenaron: «Sube con él».

Ante el espejo se miraron. Ella diría que no pisó la escalera, que no caminó frente al bar, que caminaron -todos- las rampas del misterio y atravesaron las puertas que hay siempre entre los espejos. Por los caminos del misterio, por los caminos que unen un espejo a otro espejo, llegaron (o estaban allí antes) y se miraron desde la puerta del espejo. (Ellos y sus sombras: la mujer, los marineros y el que, antes, dormía sobre la mesa del cabaret mostrando a todos su corazón). El del pequeño sombrero ladeado no estaba en el espejo. El otro, el que dormía cuando estaban abajo, habló; al mirar las gorras de los marineros, dijo a la mujer: «En ese espejo se podía pescar tu vida». (Igual pudo decir, «tu muerte»).

La mujer estaba fuera del cuarto, apoyada la gruesa mano de roídas uñas sobre la rugosa piedra del muro. A través de la puerta veía las gorras de los marineros en el cristal del espejo. El hombre había echado a andar el fonógrafo, del cual salía la dulce canción. Los marineros se acercaban. Suspendida sobre el negro disco, la aguja brillante afilaba la música: aquella melodía donde nadaban palabras, semejantes a las palabras de Dutch cuando Dutch decía algo más que Bull Shit, semejantes a gorras suspendidas en el reflejo de un vidrio azogado.

El hombre escuchaba tendido hacia el fonógrafo. Hacia él avanzaba uno de los marinos; el que antes había ofrecido el cigarrillo de azulados humos. La mujer miraba la mano del marinero, nerviosa, activa, cargada de deseo. (Si una moneda es la medida del amor, puede alguien desear una moneda como se desea un corazón). Ella lo entendía así: «El gesto de quien toca una moneda puede ser semejante a la frase *te quiero más que mi vida*; acaso, ambos, espejos de una misma tontería o de una misma angustia». La mano -deseosa, inquieta, activa- se dirigía al sitio de la cartera o del corazón. El hombre volvió la cabeza, miró cara a cara al marinero. El que tenía en sí un resplandor de brasa ríe con risa hueca como repiqueteo de tambor, como el movimiento de los dedos de la mujer sobre el antiguo muro. El hombre volvió a inclinarse sobre la melodía del fonógrafo. La risa del otro caía sobre el ritmo de la música y el hombre se bañaba en la música y en la risa.

El gesto del marinero amenazó de nuevo cuando la mujer llamó la atención del que escuchaba la música. Quieta -su mano sobre el muro- lo siseó. Él fue hasta ella; se quedó mirándola, como un conocedor que mira un cuadro antiguo; fue entonces cuando habló: «Hay en esta pared un camino de historias que se muerde la cola. Trajeron estas piedras

desde el mar, las apretaron en argamasa duradera para fabricar el muro de un castillo defensivo; ahora, los elementos que formaban la pared van regresando hacia sus formas primitivas: reciedumbre corroída por la angustia de un destino falseado».

La mujer lo miraba desde el espejo del cielo, alta entre las estrellas su cabeza. Antes de que ello fuera cierto, la mujer miraba cómo entre los dedos del marinero brillaba el cigarrillo: un cigarrillo de metal, envenenado con venenos de luna, brillante de muerte. Los dedos de ella (y sí que resultaba extraordinario que dos manos estuviesen unidas a elementos minerales y significaran a un tiempo mismo, aunque de manera distinta, el lento desmoronamiento de lo que fue hecho para que resistiese el paso del tiempo), los dedos de ella repiquetearon sobre el muro. «No, no, no».

Fue entonces cuando él propuso matrimonio, cuando la comparó a una virgen flamenca, cuando dijo: «Te llevaré a la casa de un amigo que colecciona antigüedades; él diría que eres igual a una virgen flamenca; pero no es posible, porque ese amigo soy yo y hemos peleado por una mujer que vive en esta casa y que... eres tú».

El gesto del marinero con el envenenado metal del cigarrillo -o del puñal- era tan lento como si estuviese hecho de humo. Lento, alzaba su llama, su cigarrillo, su puñal, el enlunado humo encendido de la muerte. Ella movía los dedos sobre el muro; tamborileaba palabras: «no, no, cuidado, aquí, aquí, adiós, adiós, adiós». El hombre dijo: «Te quiero más que a mi vida. Pareces una virgen flamenca. Bull Shit».

Ya el marinero bajaba su llama. Ella lo vio. Gritó. La noche se cortó de relámpagos, de fognazos. (Tiros o estrellas). El del sombrero ladeado lanzaba chispazos con su revólver. Alguien saltó hacia la noche. Hubo gritos. Una mujer corrió hasta la que se apoyaba en el muro; chilló: «¡Naciste hoy!».

El hombre repetía: «Bull Shit, virgen, te quiero».

La mano de ella resbaló a lo largo del muro; su cuerpo se desprendió; sus dedos rozaron las antiguas piedras hasta caer en el pozo de su sangre; allí, junto al muro, en la sangre que comenzaba a enfriarse, dijeron una vez más sus dedos: «Aquí, aquí, cuidado, no, no, adiós, adiós, adiós». Un inútil tamborileo que desfallecía sobre las palabras del hombre: «Te quiero más que a mi vida, Bull Shit, virgen». El del sombrero ladeado afirmó: «Está muerta».

Más tarde el de los discursos comentaba: «Ésta es una historia que se enrolla sobre sí misma como una serpiente que se muerde la cola. Falta saber si fueron dos los marineros». El del sombrero se opuso: «Hay dos gorras en la cama de Bull Shit». «En el espejo», rectificó el de los discursos; «la vida de ella puede pescarse en ese espejo. O su muerte».

Voces de miedo y de pasión alzaban su llama hacia las estrellas. La mano de la mujer estaba quieta junto al muro, sobre el pozo de su sangre.

Paris, 1951



Illustration by Venezuelan artist, Francisco Maduro.