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Literary Invention and Critical Fashion: Missing the Boat in the Sea of Lentils

Abstract

In pursuing the relation of *Sea of Lentils* (1979) to the Spanish American literary canon, I argue that while Benítez-Rojo's novel did not fall into the category of the already canonized—and therefore was spared a parricidal gesture of the Post-Boom writers—neither did it belong amidst the previously marginalized texts. I suggest that *Sea of Lentils* concentrates its internal critique of language and representation around the process of remembering in a manner that is radically at odds not only with the "traditional" historical novel, but with the official voice of the ascendant *testimonio* as well. Moreover, the notion of memory as unpredictable "turbulent flow" and the breaking down of a globalizing *grand récit* into "fractal" *petites histoires* lead us toward chaos theory and Postmodernism. I conclude that while *Sea of Lentils* prefigured a variety of concerns that were to become dominant in the 1980s, it essentially failed to satisfy the more immediate expectations of invention on the part of "technocratic" critics, on one hand, and, on the other, of "culturalists" longing for a genuinely Latin American and "authentic" discourse.

Keywords

Sea of Lentils, Benítez-Rojo, Post-Boom, critique of language, memory, postmodernism, *récit*, *petites histoires*, technocratics, culturalists, discourse, novel, Cuban literature

Literary Invention and Critical Fashion:
Missing the Boat in the *Sea of Lentils*.*

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If I were to choose a single important novel that, regrettably, became the critics' blind spot in the receding horizon of the Spanish American narrative Boom (and in the looming horizon of what we customarily call the Post-Boom), I would name Antonio Benítez Rojo's *Sea of Lentils* (1979).¹ In pursuing the relation of *Sea of Lentils* to the Spanish American literary canon, one could argue that of many causes for this text's long neglect by critics, far and away the most powerful were political pressures and historical contingencies.² My concern, however, lies elsewhere, and I realize that because of my specific focus, Benítez Rojo's novel will be treated in an unduly narrow way. What I want to explore, following Murray Krieger's lead, is the linkage between literary invention and critical fashion. According to Krieger, we can look at the history of theoretical fashion since the American New Criticism as a series of movements:

Each movement, as a would-be empire, can be seen as deriving its force for change more from the kind of literary culture it wishes to bring into being than from its commitment to advance its internally directed argument toward theoretical truth. It is thus related to literary change as the latter stimulates the rise and fall of literary fashions, with a subservient literary criticism anxious to defend and expand the influence of a particular brand of literary invention. (184)

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The study of Spanish American literary criticism proves to be no exception to Krieger's model. In a recent article, Hernán Vidal argues—albeit in a somewhat schematic way—that over the last three decades the field of Latin American criticism has been plagued by an ideological split between the “technocratic” criticism and the “culture-oriented” criticism. Whereas the first trend draws inspiration from many imported theories that ignore the social problems of the cultures being studied, says Vidal, the second one “sets as its goal direct contributions to the cultures from which its material for study comes, addressing itself to the academic establishment only as a very secondary interlocutor” (115). Throughout his article Vidal makes an indictment of the first trend, which he perceives as obsessed with endless innovation for innovation's sake and concerned only with its own perpetuation rather than with “Latin American social needs” (116 *passim*).

Even though a basic knowledge of the Spanish American novel's trajectory and its corresponding criticism will be assumed throughout this paper, as part of the background it may be useful to recall that *Sea of Lentils* was first published in 1979 in the wake of the Boom, among the debris of magical realist and self-referential artifacts. If we were to combine Krieger's and Vidal's terminologies, we could say that in the late 1970s the critical empire of “technocratic deviations” (Vidal) entered its third stage, that “of the empire in decline” (Krieger). At the same time, the burgeoning development of “culture-oriented” studies signalled the first stage of the empire-to-be, which, in my opinion, defined its turf in the intellectual marketplace by focusing on the testimonial narrative.³ We can catch a glimpse of this phenomenon in Seymour Menton's comment, where he underscores the importance of this new genre in the 1970s and early 1980s: “The only novelistic genre capable of competing with the New Historical Novel is the testimonial or nonfictional novel” (190). As he points to the decline of testimonial production in the 1980s, “paralleling the decline of the revolutionary guerrilla movements throughout Latin America,” Menton makes an important value judgement concerning *testimonio*:

Even at its height, the testimonial novel never attained the high productivity, the great variety, and the outstanding artistic quality of the New Historical Novel. As a possible indication that the testimonial novel is being replaced by the NHN, Elena Poniatowska published the historical novel entitled *Tinísima*, based on the life of Tina Modotti, in late July 1992. (190-91)

To take up where Menton leaves off, I would argue that by the early 1980s *testimonio* was canonized as a super-genre of sorts that was seen to have changed for ever the paradigm of subaltern (under)representation in Latin America. Unlike the metacritical or interpretive trends so characteristic of the “new novel” associated with the Boom, the approach that appears to have prevailed in *testimonio* criticism until the late eighties opted for seeing testimonial writing “as an authentic narrative,” where “truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history” (Yúdice 17). The long procession of *testimonio*’s interpreters who fostered the view that, unlike any other discourse, *testimonio*’s truth claims are not captives of the prisonhouse of language, includes Juan Ramón Duchesne, René Jara, Renato Prada Oropeza, Ileana Rodríguez, Hernán Vidal and George Yúdice. Widely differing as their works are, at the initial stage of the genre’s consolidation they seem to share one feature: an uneasy relationship with the most obvious fissures between the warp and the woof of the testimonial texts, including those, we may add, that read suspiciously like novels.

This seems a fitting moment to mention that all this was happening at a time when two disciplines which bear “family resemblance” to *testimonio*—history and anthropology—had long been involved in an intense process of self-questioning. In the early seventies, Clifford Geertz and Hayden White pointed out respectively that the ethnographer’s and historian’s activities consist in producing discourses and that textual analysis should therefore take precedence over traditional claims to objectivity and truth. It is understandable, of course, that reading testimonial texts against the grain of the subaltern’s voice or in the light of Derridean negation of “outside the text” could have been perceived as destabilizing the political underpinnings of the genre. Nonetheless, there was something disconcerting in making truth claims without taking into consideration the post-structuralist wisdom of the textuality of “truth.” Even though a number of critical works published since the late eighties appear to have modified the presupposition that revealing *testimonio*’s rhetorical ploys or even outright lies will convict it politically, there are still few attempts to find a critically productive ground between those critics who focus on exploring textual resistance and those who would rather not disturb the surface of a coherent meaning. We are well into the third stage of *testimonio* trajectory, with its textual productivity in decline and critical enterprise still divided between rival claims to have captured *testimonio*’s “true” identity.

For better or worse, *Sea of Lentils* was published during the first stage of this new critical empire built around *testimonio*. According to Krieger, this stage is always extremely vigorous, radical and incautious in its exclusions (186). The critics' priority mission at that time consisted in opening up room in the Latin American canon to accommodate—in addition to *testimonio*—womens' texts, subaltern autobiography, non-Western experience and other areas of writing heretofore unrecognized or considered non-literary. Benítez Rojo's novel did not fall into the category of the already canonized—and therefore was spared a parricidal gesture so often displayed by the Post-Boom writers towards their "stellar" predecessors—but neither did it belong amidst the previously marginalized texts, now suddenly brought to center stage. Another important issue to keep in mind, as we look at *Sea of Lentils*' curious destiny, is its relationship to the kind of novels that we had all become familiar with since the 1960s and whose hallmark was all-pervading invention. Among the most suggestive lessons to be learned from Jacques Derrida, the one concerning the connotations of the word "invention" should be helpful in bringing this particular point in focus:

within an area of discourse that has been fairly stabilized since the end of the seventeenth century in Europe, there are only two major types of authorized examples for invention. On the one hand, people invent *stories* (fictional or fabulous), and on the other hand they invent *machines*, technical devices or mechanisms, in the broadest sense of the word. Someone may invent by fabulation, by producing narratives to which there is no corresponding reality outside the narrative (an alibi, for example), or else one may invent by producing a new operational possibility (such as printing or nuclear weaponry). (32)

As we look at the few comments specifically devoted to *Sea of Lentils*, we realize that the novel did not satisfy the critics' expectations as to a new "operational possibility." In his ground-breaking *Latin America's New Historical Novel*, Seymour Menton, while recognizing Benítez Rojo's role in the process of shaping up the "new historical novel,"⁴ places it at the more "traditional" end of the narrative spectrum:

The high degree of historicity in *Yo el Supremo*, *El mar de las lentejas* and *Noticias del imperio* distinguishes these three New Historical Novels from others within the genre, such as the much more fanciful and pseudo-historical *Terra nostra* and *Los perros del Paraíso*, and the totally apocryphal *La renuncia del héroe Baltasar* 'The Resignation of Baltasar the Hero' (1974) and *La noche oscura del Niño Avilés* 'The Dark Night of the Boy Avilés' (1984) by Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá. (25)

When commenting on Part I of Carpentier's *El arpa y la sombra* (1979), Menton argues that, "like Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo* and Antonio Benítez's *El mar de las lentejas*, [it] is completely realistic, mimetic re-creation of two chronotopes. . . ." (21, emphasis mine). Whereas Menton discusses *Sea of Lentils* only in passing, Lucrecia Artalejo's *La máscara y el marañón (la identidad nacional cubana)* offers, to my knowledge, the most extensive analysis of this novel. Much as we can learn from Artalejo's well-informed study of the historical background, if we go along with her line of reasoning we must conclude that *Sea of Lentils* is some sort of last-ditch effort to preserve the traditional realist model and the sanctity of the referent. We need not go into further detail to push Menton's and Aralejo's arguments to a point where it becomes obvious that *Sea of Lentils* could not quench the "technocratic" critics' thirst for spectacular invention or, to put it in Derrida's militant terminology, new "weaponry."

It is in that direction that I will probe further by suggesting possible ways in which one could remain sensitive to the non-traditional nature of discursive representation in *Sea of Lentils* while being aware of the fact that social experience and historical "facticity" are by no means transposed into a mere play of "fanciful" forms and signs. Incidentally, Benítez Rojo's concern with the limitations of post-structuralist approaches with respect to Latin American literature is summarized in his response to a recent questionnaire about the future of literary studies in this area:

the practice of deconstruction shows, in turn, its weak side: the impossibility of connecting the literary discourse to the national discourse. Since the very concept of the nation—as an imaginary construct—varies widely, a deconstructionist who is consistent in his/her enterprise cannot engage in an analysis of national literatures. Moreover, from his/her critical perspective—and I repeat,

we are talking about a consistent deconstructionist—the infinite and random flow of textual signifiers would never reach the point of stability necessary to locate it, along with other texts, within the same topographical space. (“La literatura caribeña” 17)

It is, indeed, the history of a specific “topographical space”—the Caribbean—that sets the stage for *Sea of Lentils*. Derived from a wealth of archival research, the novel juxtaposes—and interweaves to a certain extent—four story lines, succinctly summarized by Ricardo Repilado:

1. The life of Antón Baptista, from his departure for America with the second voyage of Columbus (1493) until his death in La Española after 1510.
2. Pedro de Valdés’ journey with the armada of his father-in-law, Adelantado Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, in July 1565, until the death of Jean Ribaut in Florida in October of the same year.
3. The chronicle of de Ponte family and their relations with the Hawkins, from don Cristóbal’s youth at the end of XVth century until John Hawkins’ first journey to America in 1562.
4. The death of Philip II of Spain in El Escorial on September 13, 1598. (162-63)⁵

Its historical grounding notwithstanding, *Sea of Lentils*—like most historical novels considered by Menton under the label of “new”—disables the very category of “historical novel” as it draws on Hayden White’s wisdom that historical truth “remains captive of the linguistic mode” (*Metahistory* xi). In terms borrowed from Linda Hutcheon, *Sea of Lentils* can be subsumed under the label of “historiographic metafiction,” which raises the problem “of how the intertext of history, its documents and traces, get incorporated into an avowedly fictive context, while still somehow retaining their historical documentary status” (Hutcheon 302-03).

Shifting my focus away from the more general problem of modal taxonomy and towards Benítez Rojo’s “reinvention” of the Caribbean past, I would like to suggest that *Sea of Lentils* concentrates its internal critique of language and representation around the process of remembering. Obviously enough, the mnemonic process has also a pervasive role to play in the testimonial genre and to compare both may be a revealing exercise. I would like to echo here the conceptualization of Maurice Halbwachsh in *The Collective Memory*, which points out to basic

affinities and differences between a testimonial situation and a historiographical one:

General history starts only when tradition ends and social memory is fading or breaking up. So long as a remembrance continues to exist, it is useless to set it down in writing or otherwise fix it in memory. Likewise the need to write the history of a period, a society, or even a person is only aroused when the subject is already too distant in the past to allow for the testimony of those who preserve some remembrance of it. (modified translation quoted in Terdiman, 32)

If there is, then, a single element that draws together the otherwise distinct modes of *testimonio* and historical discourse, it is the presence of memory, however diverse its incarnations may be.⁶ I should also underscore the fact that whatever may be true about the perennial character of the notion of history as testimonial remembrance, one must not undertake a reading of Spanish-American *testimonio* and *Sea of Lentils* without recognizing the fact that the institutional legitimation of the former and the publication of the latter happened at a time when, as Andreas Huyssen has aptly put it, “the notion of memory has migrated into the realm of silicon chips, computers, and cyborg fictions” (249).

In my view, *Sea of Lentils* embodies the mnemonic process in all its difference from the poetics of remembrance in mediated testimonials. This difference is nowhere nearly as obvious as between *Sea of Lentils* and *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966). This *testimonio* can justly lay claim to being the foundational text of the new genre with its premise to recover the unspeakable experience of the oppressed and the world of the disenfranchised threatened by oblivion.⁷ With its eyes set on groups and individuals excluded from historiography, *testimonio* claims to rectify, restore, rewrite and “set aright.” In Barnet’s rendering of Esteban Montejo’s testimonial, Esteban’s memory becomes subservient to the editor’s desire for order. Barnet identifies the problem of failing memory as related to his interlocutor’s narrative insufficiency, namely his inability to tell a coherent, chronological story. “In many cases my informant was unable to remember precisely,” he mentions on one occasion and elaborates later: “Esteban’s life in the forest is a remote and confused period in his memory” (8). The superseding voice of the editor, suggests Barnet, is meant to bring a restoration of order

to this chaos, substitute for an absent voice, fill in the interstices of amnesia.

Whereas—as I have argued elsewhere—Barnet attempts to find his way between the Scylla of chaos and the Charybdis of discursive order by usurping the power as to what to reveal, how and when, *Sea of Lentils* delights in digressions, misrememberings and obfuscations of the mnemonic process. Moreover, whereas Barnet's *testimonio* appears to be written with a view towards closure, history in *Sea of Lentils* is “a perpetual lack” (de Certeau, 42). While Barnet practices what Greimas calls the strategy of “objectivizing camouflage” (685) whereby all “marks of enunciation” are erased, *Sea of Lentils* is rather ostentatious in highlighting the vicissitudes of narration. Instead of a simulacrum of a seamless text, the novel displays the randomness of bits and pieces of “history” that have somehow made it into the realm of discourse. Arguably, *Sea of Lentils* lends itself to being read not for what it manages to recover from the past, but for *how it makes us remember*. Hence, as a possibility of reading Benítez Rojo's novel as a critique of *testimonio*. By critique I do not mean criticism of a specific testimony that would contest or invalidate it, a procedure described by Paul Ricoeur as “a test of its veracity, a search for imposture, whether it be . . . misinformation in the juridical sense or more fundamental deception (plagiarism, sheer invention, reshuffling of facts or the hawking of prejudice and rumors)” (100). What *Sea of Lentils* brings to light is a “turbulent flow” of stories told, withheld and never to be told, and the ongoing tension between forgetting and denial, the censorship of memory and trauma, the act of witnessing and the act of telling.⁷

In terms of Jean-François Lyotard's ethical philosophy, *Sea of Lentils* hinges upon the premise that with remembrance there also comes the politics of forgetting. For King Philip of Spain—dying alone “before a stack of files and folders” (71)—a joyful ringing of bells triggers a recollection of his own ruling informed precisely by the “politics of forgetting” and designed to declare official history:

The deaths and losses that occurred, no matter what their number, we should greet with happiness and not with weeping; the churches and the monasteries of the realm shall thank the Lord, and every show of mourning shall be banned. (72)

This process of distortion by misremembering is political “in that it subordinates what has happened and has passed on to emergence and survival” (Lyotard 8). While one might be uneasy about interpreting *Sea of Lentils* as a commentary on recent events in Cuban history—operating under the guise of a historical novel—it is nonetheless tempting to align Benítez Rojo’s work with a key text of Cuban revolutionary discourse, Fidel Castro’s “Historia me absolverá” (1953). In his self-defense speech (presented during his trial after the attack on the Cuartel Moncada), Castro follows a pattern similar to King Philip’s confession-recollection. For both, absolution is the heart of the matter and that, as Terdiman points out, implies the neutralization of memory (77). The model of confession bears an intimate relation to the politics of forgetting, as “it closes the gaps, collects the so-called past in the service of the future” (Lyotard 8).⁹ After “the thorny hours of his general confession gathered in his bowel like a feculence of pain,” the dying monarch realizes that the act of confession has obliterated only a fraction of the sins “that the scepter and the orb had brought him to commit”:

Through his eyelids, now half opened, as he saw the friar signal the cross of absolution by his pillow, he learned that he had just repented something; perhaps it was the English springtime, cold and unsettling, when he had wished for Mary’s death, so that he could marry Elizabeth Tudor. (33)

Memory as an archive of experience is a complex puzzle, and *Sea of Lentils* underscores its random, incomplete and chaotic nature. While the dying king “had begged God to make his last night be a sweet one, to let none but his most pleasant recollections usher him toward death,” the final display of images brings forth unwanted memories which he would rather blot out:

At first, when he had seen himself a child playing in a mock tourney, and when his mule had been led by that Francisco Borgia whom he loved so much, it seemed to him that El Greco’s angels would hold prizes and victorious allegories above his bed—why not San Quentin, Lepanto, Florida, Lisbon, Las Terceras, and above all the vindicating triumph of Antwerp? But the moth-eaten roll of his failures, of all that had brought him fear and shame, had begun to unfurl before him. . . . (15)

In addition to the gripping tale of remembering as a “turbulent flow,” there is also a different kind of memory inscribed in the royal story. It is certainly not without significance that Philip II is dying in his chamber at San Lorenzo el Real. El Escorial is a monument, an archive, a museum, a memorial *organized* by the politics of forgetting from the very moment of its inception.¹⁰

It was then, in the Royal Chapel, as the priest raised up the Consecrated Host, that he first glimpsed his earthly mission: martyrdom, quiet martyrdom, persevering martyrdom; he would look for a region in Castile that radiated peace and quiet grandeur, and there he'd build a basilica to suit his need and taste, a monastery out from which he'd rule as none had ruled before. . . . (60)

In his discussion of the memory of the memorial (highly indebted to Freud), Lyotard points out its highly selective character:

it requires the forgetting of that which may question the community and its legitimacy. This is not to say that memory does not address this problem, quite the contrary. It represents, may and must represent, tyranny, discord, civil war, the mutual sharing of shame, and conflicts born of rage and hate. . . . As re-presentation it is necessarily a sublation (*re-lève*), an elevation (*élévation*) that enthralls and removes (*enlève*). (7)

As Philip delves “into the mass of documents concerning the Armada” (73), he attempts to forget human the pain and humiliation hidden behind every sign, hoping to erase it without a trace:

Once a page was read, the paper withered, cracked, caught fire, and disappeared in a burst of flame, to leave a residue of moaning ashes, drowning gasps, ships drifting aimlessly, roaring rocky outcrops, frozen gales, garbled prayers, and ugly curses, promises to God and Satan drowned out by the blast, the thunder, and the darkened rain, and over all the evil came the coarse, vulgar laughter of Elizabeth Tudor. (73)

What this passage makes evident is what (on a more theoretical level) Lyotard articulates in terms of dangers of representation:¹¹

Whenever one represents, one inscribes in memory, and this might seem a good defense against forgetting. It is, I believe, just the opposite. Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten, because it could be effaced. (26)

This observation is revealing in that (writing as he is in the post-Holocaust era) Lyotard poses memory as a mechanism whereby human suffering can be made ordinary, dismissed, “taken care of,” exorcised (26). In the memory of the dying king, from a long procession of names, faces and events, only some “take color, shape, and resonance” (18). Others disappear, get distorted, effaced. Like “a certain Luis Ortiz, an old man in gaiters who had charge of the accounting office,” whose memorandum triggers royal memory: “I’ll send him up before the Inquisition. Had he already done so? It was strange that he didn’t remember. What had become of that Luis Ortiz?” (156). Pedro de Ponte, on the other hand, gets a more privileged treatment among those summoned by the old man’s reminiscing:

Behind the table, on his feet, bent over slightly in his black silk tunic, we can see, in flesh and blood, that dark-bearded man, transfigured now by a shaft of light descending from the rafters, whose slow, vaporous hand is stretching out like a reflection toward the abacus’s ribs; the figure is no wraith, in truth it seems like a conjecture, the recollection of a name, still vague, inside the memory of the old king who lies in his agony of death upon a bed of putrefaction; this man, or name, or whatever it may be, thickens, takes on substance as he begins to thrum the abacus’s beads with a lutenist’s light dexterity, and the objects on the table are reborn, summoned to a distant afternoon when Pedro de Ponte, in his customary tunic, takes up his pen and moistens it, then enters sums upon the pages of a heavy book with locks of brass. (17)

But once “re-presented,” the figure lends itself to erasure and obliteration in a manner that seems to exemplify Lyotard’s conceptualization: “Pedro de Ponte, once recalled, begins to vaporize . . . and vanishes in the dust. What could be the secret he concealed?” (18).

This is where Lyotard’s insight may prove helpful again to link *Sea of Lentils* with other texts predicated upon the use of memory. In Lyotard’s words, to fight against forgetting involves a fight “to

remember that one forgets as soon as one believes, draws conclusions, and holds for certain. It means to fight against forgetting the precariousness of what has been established, of the reestablished past" (10). I would argue that *Sea of Lentils* points out the dangers inherent in ascribing undue importance to discourses such as *testimonio* on the basis of their supposed authenticity and irrefutability. Unlike Barnet (and most critics responsible for canonizing *testimonio*) *Sea of Lentils* perceives the constitutive strength of any remembrance in its perpetual "lack." What we know about Pedro de Ponte, for example, is "nothing more than the chimerical biography of Don Cristóbal, plus a few facts about his life, not many, drawn from town council minutes, reports, genealogies, and trials . . ." (94). As the narrator lays out a brief chronology of de Ponte's life, he indicates the need to "check some of the data in his chronology for what they might reveal," but he proceeds with his task in an arbitrary, random manner, choosing "for example the entry dated 1559" (96). As a text laced with parody of unself-conscious historiographical operations, *Sea of Lentils* emphasizes, however, the open-ended character of discourse of history, its reluctance to establish closure, its ability to contest silence from innovative perspectives and new evidence. Again, Lyotard's remarks on the task of a historian speak eloquently on this point:

The referent is invoked there through the play of monstration, of naming and of signification, as proof administered to underscore a thesis (antimemorialist, in this case). But this argued "proof" (which itself has to be proved) gives rise to scientific argumentation whose stakes are cognitive; is it true that it was like this? In this way, the value of the probe is submitted to other probings, to renewed argumentation, and thus to infinity. (9-10)

The reality of the referent in *Sea of Lentils* may be deferred, but it is not negated. The narrator-historiographer exercises his power to realign the past departing from the very blanks that official lies and misrememberings had bleached out. Moreover, he reenacts Lyotard's opposition between "that which is 'well known' and 'that to-be-known.'" Time and again, for instance, the narrator urges that we "have recourse to the Inquisition's rotted files" (100) in order to achieve not "the reality of the referent" (which is impossible) but "the better approximation of its proofs" (Lyotard 10). All in all, the narrator

in *Sea of Lentils* adheres to the protocols governing the ethical task of the historian, as described by Lyotard:

It is never a mistake when historians, exposed to that memorial-forgetful history, reach for their books, search the archives, put together documents, and subject them to an internal and external critique and reconstruct, as one puts it so innocently, what has *really* happened. Historians choose, simply because of this claim to “realism,” to confront the community with what menaces it, that is, with the forgotten of the memorials, with discord, rather than serve the political projects of legitimation and perpetuation. (9)

Let us return to the initial concern of this paper—the place of Benítez Rojo’s novel within the context of the Post-Boom. *Sea of Lentils* engages in the problematic practice of writing history in a manner that renders obsolete the notion of a historical novel, and further dwelling on this point would amount, I am afraid, to restating the obvious. Despite the fact that (like any other text) *Sea of Lentils* is forced to preserve as an instrument the very same language whose problematic nature it unveils by focusing on gaps, arbitrary manipulations and imperfections of memory, it stipulates its own conventions and attains a theoretical self-consciousness that is radically at odds not only with the “traditional” realist novel but with the official voice of the ascendant *testimonio* as well. Moreover, the notion of memory as unpredictable “turbulent flow” and the breaking down of a globalizing *grand récit* into “fractal” *petites histoires* lead us, inevitably, from *Sea of Lentils* toward chaos theory and Postmodernism. This topic undoubtedly warrants a closer look in regard to Benítez Rojo’s more recent work, but I would venture to suggest that *Sea of Lentils* appears to have spearheaded the self-conscious use of chaos theory in narrative practice through which it might have broken whatever “horizon of expectations” critics shared at the time of its publication.¹² From the vantage point of today I can see that while *Sea of Lentils* prefigured a variety of concerns that were to become dominant in Spanish American letters and criticism in the 1980s, it essentially failed, on one hand, to satisfy the more immediate expectations of invention on the part of “technocratic” critics and, on the other, the longing of the “culturalists” for a genuinely Latin American and “authentic” discourse that would supplant existing models of subaltern representation.

Notes

1. *Sea of Lentils* takes its title from the name “La Mer de Lentille,” given by a French cartographer, Guillaume de Testu, to the sea surrounding Puerto Rico, La Española, Cuba, and Jamaica. For more details on this topic, see Eduardo C. Béjar (124-25) and Lucrecia Artalejo (166-67). Terms “boom” and “Post-Boom” are easily bent into inoperable concepts and one cannot use them without misgivings. They are acceptable, in my opinion, as long as they remain appropriately nuanced, particularly in relation to the notion of the “new novel.” Closely related to my own thoughts in this regard is Donald Shaw’s “On the New Novel in Spanish America.”

2. It would be more than an oversimplification to put Benítez Rojo at either side of a revolutionary/counterrevolutionary watershed. For lack of a better solution, I proposed the notion of “marginalization within” in order to avoid the double bind of a binary opposition in relation to Benítez’ short stories. Cf. Sklodowska, “La cuentística de Benítez Rojo: la experiencia revolucionaria desde la marginalidad.”

3. For a much needed nuancing of these sweeping remarks, see Philip Swanson’s “Boom or Bust?,” where he points out that the biggest issue for critics of the new novel “is how to reconcile the political dimension with the issue of the problematization of reality and literature’s relation to it” (81).

4. Seymour Menton’s own pioneering contribution to the body of critical work on *The Sea of Lentils* is summarized in a footnote in *Latin America’s New Historical Novel*: On May 4, 1982, I gave a talk entitled “Antonio Benítez, la nueva novela histórica y los juicios de valor” (Antonio Benítez, the New Historical Novel and Value Judgments) at the annual conference of the Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I compared Benítez’s two novels, *El mar de las lentejas* (1979) and *Paso de los vientos* “Strait of the Winds,” the latter incomplete and still unpublished (188).

5. Translation is my own.

6. Terdiman’s conceptualization of the contestatory powers of memory is also worth mentioning in the context of *testimonio* and Benítez Rojo’s work situated “in the margins” of revolutionary discourse: “The privilege of counterdiscourses is the obverse of their limitation: because they have not yet become triumphant or transparent, they have an analytic power and a capacity to resituate perception and comprehension that their dominant antagonists cannot exhibit. We should note, however, that such discourses of difference and of contestation inherently exercise a mnemonic function. *They recall the dominant’s other*; they restore to its flattened, false totalizations the presence of the subjects and the perspectives that it has not been able to subsume and

has consequently sought to exclude. Dominance, of course, is itself sustained by memory—but a selective, highly ideologized form of recollection that brackets fully as much as it restores. But although memory sustains hegemony, it also subverts it through its capacity to recollect and to restore the alternative discourses the dominant would simply bleach out and forget. Memory, then, is inherently contestatory” (19-20).

7. In a lucid commentary, Antonio Vera-León indicates a possibility of linking testimonial narratives with the ongoing debate around revolutionary self-narratives: “With testimony, literary language constructs the voice and memory of the speaking witnesses as referents on which to ground the self. Those voices and memories are in turn refracted into a discursive field through the intervention of the transcriber, a subject of written culture, whose function consists of articulating a self in terms of national memory and history. Personal memory and subjectivity are thus translated into the collective language of social memory that would anchor them” (66).

8. The vocabulary of this passage is borrowed from Andreas Huyssen’s article, “Monument and Memory in Postmodern Age” and Richard Terdiman’s book, *Present Past: Modernity and Memory Crisis*.

9. Since Richard Terdiman’s brilliant account of the confessional mode bears upon our discussion of both texts, I quote it *in extenso*: “We might conceive confession as a subset of autobiography—but particularly the autobiography of sin, of error, of transgression. Its practices of avowal are governed by liturgical, juridical, and—in the modern period—psychological or psychoanalytic rituals that despite their evident diversity have as their common purpose some form of individual or social purification” (see Hahn, “Contribution à la sociologie de la confession,” 54). “In essence they are designed to free the future from the past. Thus, as in the performance of the Mass itself, absolution *takes away* sin, and thereby rewrites the penitent’s history. Consequently, the past that is the referent of confession is always an ‘inauthentic’ one—or is made to become so. It is narrated not in the service of memorialization, but of erasure. Thus if confession is a species of autobiography, it is one that significantly subverts its genus” (76-77).

10. The following passage from Freud’s “Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis” establishes a curious analogy between reminiscences of hysterical patients and the symbolism of monuments: “I should like to formulate what we have learned so far as follows: *our hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences*. Their symptoms are residues and mnemonic symbols of particular experiences. We may perhaps obtain a deeper understanding of this kind of symbolism if we compare them with other mnemonic symbols in other fields. The monuments and memorials with which large cities are adorned are also mnemonic symbols. . . . But what should we think of a Londoner who paused today in deep melancholy before the memorial of Queen Eleanor’s funeral instead of

going about his business. . .? Or again what should we think of a Londoner who sheds tears before the Monument that commemorates the reduction of his beloved metropolis to ashes. . .? Every single hysteric and neurotic behaves like these two unpractical Londoners. Not only do they remember painful experiences of the remote past, but they still cling to them emotionally; they cannot get free of the past and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate" (SE 11:16-17, emphasis original).

11. Terdiman's conceptualization of memory and representation differs from Lyotard's. Terdiman indicates that we construct the past, and the agent of this construction is memory. For him, "memory is the present past" (8), the equation that "makes memory pretty much coincident with *representation*—which the function by which symbols, or simulacra, or surrogates, come to stand for some absent referent. Of course, the referents of memory are always absent. The past is gone" (8).

12. It is worth noting that, to my knowledge, chaos theory did not raise to critical prominence in literary criticism until mid-eighties. With *The Repeating Island*, Benítez Rojo became a particularly explicit (albeit cautious) spokesman for "chaos theory" in literature. In a recent survey of personal reflections on the future of Latin American literary studies, he has observed that "the language of chaos theory speaks in terms like 'the butterfly effect,' 'strange attractors,' 'bifurcation,' 'iteration,' 'fractals,' 'loops,' 'self-similarity,' etc. "How are we supposed to translate this jargon into the language of literary criticism? Moreover, given the fact that chaos basically refers to physics, chemistry, mathematics and other sciences, how can we transfer their concepts into our field of inquiry, literature? Here, following a little bit Michel Serres's lead, I find it useful to connect the sciences and the humanities through metaphors. It is possible to analyze a text from the perspective of chaos without adopting the jargon of chaos" ("La literatura caribeña y la teoría de caos" (18).

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