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'Antonio Dal Masetto (1938-): a study of a writer's craft, and an exploration of his place on the Argentine literary map.'

Gwendolen Norah MacKeith

University College London

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*In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed*

'In my Craft or Sullen Art' from *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), Dylan Thomas (1914-1953)

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Introduction - Who is Antonio Dal Masetto?

I became interested in the work of Antonio Dal Masetto through reading his weekly column in the Argentine newspaper *Página/12* when I lived in Buenos Aires for a period in 2002. These were short observational pieces about characters and situations in the city with a narrative perspective which seemed to denote an ‘outsider’. As an outsider myself, I found this voice inclusive and intriguing and also sometimes very funny. It struck me that the perceptions in this column were more profound than material I might have expected to appear in a daily broadsheet newspaper. The style of the writing appealed to me; this cool observational tone, a gentle humour, a simple prose and a certain implicit quality which reminded me of poetry. This was my initial subjective response.

Antonio Dal Masetto was born in Intra, Italy, to a family of farm labourers. In 1950, at the age of twelve, he and his family emigrated to Argentina. For many Italians post-war Italy offered them few prospects while Argentina promised a more hopeful future. The family settled in Salto, in the province of Buenos Aires. In interviews Dal Masetto has talked about how difficult this transition was for him between countries, languages and cultures and he has described how he believes that this experience informed his identity as a writer. Dal Masetto learnt Spanish through reading books at his local library. He chose these books himself at random. He left school at a young age and did not go to university. Before becoming a full-time writer he worked as a painter

and decorator, a door-to-door salesman, a public servant and a journalist. This information is mentioned in the inside cover of almost all of Dal Masetto's books and is obviously regarded as relevant to his profile as a writer. It places him socially and intellectually at the margins of a literary scene.

Novelas *Bildungsroman* - *Siete de oro* (1969) and *Fuego a discreción* (1983)

Dal Masetto published his first collection of stories, *Lacre*, in 1964 which won a mention for the Casa de las Américas prize, Cuba. However, this collection has never been republished since its first edition in 1964.¹ It was Dal Masetto's first novel, *Siete de oro* of 1969 that was his literary debut. *Siete de oro* has a flavour of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1955), not in the sense of 'spontaneous language' (the language is in fact measured and restrained), but in the sense that this is an Argentine road trip which tells the story of a group of friends who have rejected traditional values and are experimenting with the excesses of freedom. They take a train from Buenos Aires to go and stay in a house by a lake in Barriloche where the dynamics of this group unfold. Although the narrator is on the periphery to this drama, he is central to the narrative. This journey to the south becomes his internal exploration where scenes of the present are interspersed with memories. Some chapters are self-contained, detailed portraits of characters who are not integrated into the rest of the novel but seem to exist as separate stories. Chapter four, for example, describes the arrival to Buenos Aires of the narrator as a teenager and his relationship with the owner of a seedy pensión, a middle-aged woman, 'la Gallega'. In chapter six the narrator encounters Raimundo, a compulsive liar who tells wildly imaginative stories and then confesses: 'Me gusta inventar' (p. 67). Chapter thirteen describes a trip to Brazil

¹ Unfortunately, I have not been able to find access to this collection.

where the narrator and a friend sleep with a prostitute, Vanda. These cameos seem to reflect something of the narrator's identity and are interspersed with the narration of a present in Barriloché. The narrator gets together with Eva, but this relationship becomes confused with a relationship of the past, with Bruna, who he is trying to forget. There is a near death of the child of Dardo and Luisa, Pedro. This shakes up the group, most particularly the narrator, from a state of apathy and indifference which characterises the tone of the novel.

Miguel Briante describes the novel on the back cover of the 1991 edition as 'mucho más que un libro, es un mojón del tiempo: del arrebatado tiempo de los 60 y del desconcertado tiempo de estos días en que vuelvan las mismas dudas y las mismas furias. Es un clima, un lugar donde la memoria descifra claves de lo que se perdió y de lo que aún no se ha perdido.' Yet despite Briante's claim that the novel captures the sixties in Argentina, there are few specific markers for a particular social context. In chapter 7, for example, the narrator arrives to Buenos Aires as a teenager and becomes swept up in a demonstration. We are told there are slogans, but not what they say, and nor is the narrator himself interested to find out. However, although the year of publication was 1969, we can infer that this scene could recall the workers' strikes of the late 50s, after the Revolución Libertadora which overthrew Peron in 1956, or the student demonstrations of the early 1960s. In the year of its publication, *Siete de oro* would have also resonated with recent events at the time, in particular the civil uprising in Córdoba, 'el Cordobazo', in May 1969. As Briante intimates, the novel captured a restless generation who were questioning yet were unsure of what to believe in and what the future held.

Fuego a discreción came out in 1983 and included many of the same marginal characters of *Siete de oro* and the same disconnected narrative voice in search of meaning and identity. The novel opens ‘Aquel fue un verano como pocos. Me había separado de otra mujer, me había quedado sin lugar donde vivir y sin trabajo. Daba vueltas por las calles, soportaba el calor y la falta de objetivos, comía salteado, me encontraba con conocidos de otras épocas, me alentaba diciéndome que no todos tienen la suerte de poder recomenzar desde cero.’ Set over seven days during a summer in Buenos Aires, the narrator goes between alcohol fuelled conversations with old friends and meetings with old lovers and new lovers. A liaison with an ex-girlfriend, Vera, early in the novel and a possible return to their relationship reminds the narrator that his freedom is under threat and must be closely guarded. While others engage with life, the narrator observes from the periphery but does not take part. The novel is interspersed with intense, poetic chapters in italics which narrate a mythical and symbolic world in which there is horror, torture and cannibalisation. These parts of the novel bear a strong relationship to the latent violence throughout the narrative.

Written over ten years after *Siete de oro*, the novel follows the years of dictatorship in Argentina, during which Dal Masetto did not publish. He has insisted in interviews that his silence was because he moved to Brazil and dedicated himself to life, rather than to writing. However, violence is an indisputable presence throughout the novel. Like *Siete de oro*, although the social context described is ambiguous, the reader cannot ignore a disturbing back drop of historical events which are suggested. In chapter twenty two the

narrator witnesses a body, recently shot, being disappeared by two men in uniform who pull up in a vehicle to dispose of it. The city itself seems empty, under-populated - a battleground after the battle. This inevitably refers to state repression between 1976 and 1983, which covers the period of Dal Masetto's silence.

Novelas negras: *Siempre es difícil volver a casa* (1985), *Bosque* (2001) and *Hay unos tipos abajo* (1998)

Dal Masetto's third novel *Siempre es difícil volver a casa*, published in 1985, became an instantaneous best-seller. Four characters, Jorge, Dante, Cucurucho and Ramiro are men, like the narrators of *Siete de oro* and *Fuego a discreción*, who believe in nothing. Because they have nothing to lose, they decide to rob a bank in a provincial town, Bosque. Three vagrants under the trailer of a truck witness the arrival of the robbers and form a kind of sinister chorus predicting tragedy in the town. The community turns on the robbers and tries to hunt them down with a viciousness which becomes savage and all-consuming. The novel depicts the innate hypocrisy and cruelty of ordinary people and becomes an obvious metaphor for Argentine society during the dictatorship when taking the attitude of 'no te metás' made them accomplices to the tragic consequences of a brutal regime.

The sequel to *Siempre es difícil volver a casa*, *Bosque*, was published in 2001. Muto arrives to Bosque wanting to know more about what happened to one of the robbers, Dante Arditi, who was assassinated by the residents of the town and for whom, twenty

years earlier, Muto's wife left him. He poses as the scriptwriter of a film in order to carry out his investigations. This causes a fuss within the community and the inhabitants of Bosque are anxious to give their own accounts of what happened as well as secure a small part in the film. In these reports, we meet many of the same characters as in *Siempre es difícil volver a casa*, as well as new characters. In Muto's investigations he uncovers more secret histories of the events surrounding the robbery. Each chapter leads Muto closer to finding out what really happened, yet he himself becomes involved in the story. He begins a relationship with Leda, the daughter of a corrupt, yet influential solicitor, Varini who played a significant role in *Siempre es difícil volver a casa*. The novel ends with Muto committing a robbery, completing Dante Arditi's unfinished business and by making the getaway his enemy never achieved. The girl, Leda, goes with him and this is one of the rare instances in Dal Masetto's fiction where there is some gesture towards romantic closure, although it is hardly whole-hearted. The narrator says to himself: 'No va a durar mucho'.

Hay unos tipos abajo, published in 1998, is set over the last weekend of the world cup in 1978 when Argentina played Holland. At the height of the regime's repression, the military government decided to host the world cup in order to gain popularity and raise morale within Argentina as well as to distract from the increasing international media attention to the human rights abuses which were being carried out. However, despite this specific historical backdrop, the rest of the novel is highly enigmatic. Its suspense and tension derives from what is suggested but not fully articulated. The main protagonist of the novel is a journalist, Pablo, who realises that there are men parked in a car outside his

flat watching his movements. The novel takes on a nightmarish quality with the presence of these dark, persecutory figures who remain outside Pablo's apartment block, but do not act. It is never confirmed that it is him they are waiting for, and if they are, when they will strike. The suspense is unrelenting both for Pablo and for the reader. The horror threatens to take place but never does. Pablo loses his girlfriend, Ana, and he begins to lose his mind but he does escape. The novel ends with Pablo taking a train out of Buenos Aires with just one bag, so as not to provoke suspicion. He laments that he had to leave his typewriter behind.

Novelas italianas: *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* (1990) and *La tierra incomparable* (1994)

The theme of immigration is particularly present in the novels *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* (1990) and its sequel, *La tierra incomparable* of 1994, although perhaps in a more oblique sense, it is a presence in all of Dal Masetto's work. *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* reads as a fictional memoir of Agata, a post-war Italian immigrant to Argentina, recollecting her life in Italy up until the point she was forced to leave with her two children, her husband having gone ahead of her. In the background is the rise of fascism, the partisan resistance, the German occupation, bombings and the poverty stricken Italy which Agata has no choice but to abandon. This is not an uncommon story, it was a difficult choice made by many rural Italians who emigrated to the new world at various stages of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century as a response to their opportunities becoming increasingly restricted.

In the novel Agata remembers her childhood, her adolescence, her parents, the death of her mother and her first love. These are rites of passage which are experienced by most people. Dedicated to his mother, Dal Masetto has described in interviews how the novel was based on his mother's life story which he took from the conversations with her he recorded over a period of fifteen days.² As is the case with much of Dal Masetto's work, these series of stories are retold in such a way to find the poetic and transcendent in unremarkable life events which happen to everyone.

La tierra incomparable continues with the character of Agata at its centre. It narrates her return to Italy at the age of eighty. Agata begins her visit staying with her niece and her bigoted husband who makes racist remarks about immigrants. She then meets with her childhood friend, Carla, who has lost her mind, and it is Carla's granddaughter who becomes Agata's guide to the Italy she left behind. There is no place for nostalgia in this novel. It characterises the contrast between the way things are remembered and the way they really are. The friendship established between Agata and Silvana becomes the most significant relationship in this novel. Their conversations symbolise an encounter between two very different generations who remain a mystery to each other. Agata witnesses the painful and inexplicable breakdown of Silvana's childless marriage. She leaves Italy not having found her past but rather having been confronted with a future she does not understand. This novel was awarded el premio Planeta in 1994.

² Verónica Chiaravalli, 'Una historia de dignidad', La Nación, sección 6/Página 3, 17 Febrero 2002.

Demasiado cerca desaparece (1997)

Like *Siete de oro* and *Fuego a discreción*, this novel is in the tradition of a *bildungsroman*: the protagonist of *Demasiado cerca desaparece* is an adolescent boy of 14 years old, *Ciro*, who leaves his home in the country to go to Buenos Aires in search of a beautiful girl, *Bea*. The title refers to the fact that he only ever glimpses her fleetingly. Whenever *Ciro* gets close, she disappears. He is also in search of his identity and of his vocation (he hopes to be a writer). He sets himself the challenge of not sleeping so as to be alert to everything he experiences. As is the case with a number of Dal Masetto's other novels, *Demasiado cerca desaparece* is structured around a series of encounters with other characters who make brief appearances, yet seem to reflect something about the main character in question, in this novel, *Ciro*. These portraits are reminiscent of the stories published in *Página/12*, later published in *Gente del bajo* (1995). The Buenos Aires depicted in the novel is of an ambiguous era. In fact the novel is strangely atemporal. *Ciro* hitches a ride with a truck driver (*Gallo*) who hates all other motorists on the road, a nurse, *Julia*, the clairvoyant, *Roxanna*, *Bonafanti* the painter, all of whom tell him their life stories. *Bonafanti* encourages *Ciro* to see the creative potential of the city of Buenos Aires, that it *is* possible to capture life in art.

Tres genias en la magnolia (2005)

This novel came out in two editions, one for teenagers and one for adults. It tells the story of three 11 year old girls, *Vale*, *Leti* and *Caro*, who embark on a journey of discovery in their own neighbourhood, *Los Aromos*. When an unknown woman, *Ángela*, appears to them offering three puppies, and then mysteriously disappears with them, the

three girls begin an investigation through which they meet characters who acquaint them with the adult world. The girls begin to conduct secret meetings at a Magnolia Tree where they invoke an imaginary being, Kivalá, and invent fable-like narratives which seem to reflect on this adult world they are uncovering. In their investigations they witness the corrupt dealings of the town senator and his associates who are terrorising the neighbourhood in order that the inhabitants sell up and leave a particular block of land so that they can redevelop it with vast profit. The three girls attempt to expose this to the rest of the community but their rude awakening is that they find that the adult world doesn't want to know. They ask themselves: 'No será que nadie quiere ver nada'(p. 204). This novel, like *Siempre es difícil a volver a casa* and *Bosque* comments on a society's willingness to 'turn a blind eye'.

Cuentos en *Página/12*: *Ni perros ni gatos* (1987), *Reventando corbatas* (1988), *Amores* (1991), *Gente del Bajo* 1995), *El padre y otras historias* (2002), *Crónicas argentinas* (2003) and *Señores más señoras* (2006)

The newspaper *Página/12* was founded by Jorge Lanata in 1987 and Dal Masetto was invited to contribute weekly and would continue to contribute regularly for over fifteen years. Previously he had been writing a similar column between 1982 and 1986 for a newspaper, *Tiempo Argentino*, entitled 'Estado Civil Solo' and then between 1985 and 1987 for *El Periodista de Buenos Aires*, where the column was entitled, 'El Francotirador'. Many of Dal Masetto's contributions to *Página/12* were reprinted in his collections of short stories: *Ni perros ni gatos* (1987), *Reventando corbatas* (1988),

Amores (1991), *Gente del Bajo* (1995), *El padre y otras historias* (2002), *Crónicas argentinas* (2003) and *Señores más señoras* (2006). He stopped writing for *Página/12* in 2003.

Often these stories feature a character, 'el hombre', who observes a scene or a character he comes across in the city, Buenos Aires. He might be crossing the street and notice an intriguing figure, or sitting at a bar and witness a compelling conversation. At other times 'el hombre' is more central in the story; we are inside his apartment, rather than in a plaza or a café. These are small everyday sagas which are narrated in such a way as to make them dramatic and compelling. They also sometimes capture the absurd and humorous.

El padre y otras historias contains stories which did not appear first in the *Página/12*. These pieces have an autobiographical flavour which particularly touch on the immigrant experience. The title story, 'El Padre', for example, describes the arrival of the narrator's family to Argentina from Italy and their settling in Salto, Buenos Aires. His father went first to Argentina, so there was a separation of two years. This story is a particularly detailed portrait of the father who is a tough yet mysterious man of few words, described by the narrator as 'un montañés callado y tímido'. In the most recent collection of short stories, *Señores más señoras* (2006), we recognise 'el hombre' but these stories focus particularly on men and women and the interaction between couples.

Existing criticism on the work of Antonio Dal Masetto to date

Existing criticism focuses mainly on the sociological content in Dal Masetto's work.

There are three theses which centre on this aspect: 'Antonio Dal Masetto: un italiano en la literatura argentina' by Aquilina Di Giannantonio (Università degli Studi di Trieste: 2003), 'La identidad italiana en la novela argentina a partir de 1980: Discurso e inmigración en textos de Antonio Dal Masetto, Mempo Giardinelli y Héctor Tizón' by Adriana Corda (Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 2004) and *Tra memoria e finzione. L'immagine dell'immigrazione transoceanica nella narrativa argentina contemporanea* by Ilaria Magnani (Reggio Emilia: Edizioni Diabasis, 2004). Ilaria Magnani is also Dal Masetto's Italian translator. There is also an article entitled 'La presencia del universo poético italiano en las novelas de Antonio Dal Masetto' by an Italian critic, Adriana Langtry (Milan: 2005) in which she integrates the theme of exile and immigration with an exploration of a textual exchange between Italy and Argentina. In the sense that this article is about the question of influence, it comes closest to my own enquiry.³

A further thesis, 'Periodismo y literatura en la obra de Antonio Dal Masetto' by Agustín Edgardo Berón (Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires: 2002), makes historical, political and sociological readings of Dal Masetto's column in *Página/12*. When I come to

³ This article is in the process of submission, but has not yet been accepted for publication. It was shown to me by kind permission of the author.

discuss the column in my last chapter I take a different position, as well as a different selection, to Berón in my reading of these stories.

In this thesis I aim to explore an area which has not been thoroughly addressed, except in brief reviews. As I state in my title, my intention has been to explore Dal Masetto's writing, paying particular attention to the craft of this fiction. I consider his work in the context of other writers and other works and provide a literary history of his development as a writer, although I do not chart this development in a linear way. Rather than a survey of Dal Masetto's work, I have chosen to discuss the novels and stories which I feel best illustrate the influence relations which I examine as well as being characteristic of Dal Masetto's style. They are also the novels and stories which I judge to be the best of his work, with the exception of *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* which I have not discussed.

¿Por qué Dal Masetto?

On a research trip to Buenos Aires in April 2005 I was often met with the question: '¿Pero, por qué Dal Masetto?'. This question was posed to me by most people who took an interest in what I was researching. Among my Argentine friends at the University of Buenos Aires, Dal Masetto did not feature in their constellation of significant contemporary writers (or significant writers of the 60s, 70s and 80s for that matter). Indeed, Dal Masetto's name is absent in the bibliographies I have seen for the course 'Literatura del Siglo XX' at the University of Buenos Aires both in the year 2002, when I attended the course, and in 2005, the year of my research visit. Beatriz Sarlo has written

about *Fuego a discreción* (1983) in relation to the dictatorship, but apart from Sarlo's contributions, I am not aware of any other studies of Dal Masetto's work carried out by academics based at the University of Buenos Aires.⁴ In the light of this lack of critical interest in Dal Masetto, I had to justify my choice and address this question presented to me by both strangers and by friends: '¿Por qué Dal Masetto?' Why, indeed.

First, in order to form a response to this question and to ascertain what possible place Dal Masetto could occupy on an 'Argentine literary map', it is necessary to give a brief overview of the nature, and history, of the existing critical field.

***Sur*, Contorno, 'the boom' and beyond**

The literary magazine, *Sur* (1931- 1970), dominated literary criticism in Argentina in its most influential years. Founded and edited by Victoria Ocampo, the magazine published and translated some of the most important writers of the twentieth century. These included, among many others, Samuel Beckett, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, André Gide, Graham Greene, Henry James, Franz Kafka, Wallace Stevens, Virginia Woolf and, of course, Jorge Luis Borges. The magazine had a 'universalist' stance; as well as publishing Argentine contributors, it took a keen interest in foreign writers, particularly European writers. The magazine associated with Amado Alonso, a critic heading the institute of philology at the University of Buenos Aires. This was a school literary criticism which concentrated on form and style, leaving aside the consideration of a social context. Although this by no means presented a unified theoretical approach to

⁴ Beatriz Sarlo 'Política, ideología y figuración literaria', *Ficción y política: La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar*, ed. Daniel Balderston, (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1987) pp. 30 - 59 as well as 'La novela como viaje', *Punto de vista*, año VII/No. 21 agosto 1984, p. 27.

literary criticism for *Sur*, it did echo Ocampo's attitude that the magazine should explore 'el arte por el arte' without the interference of a political discourse. However, for a younger generation of writers and intellectuals, *Sur* was a rarefied official institution which they found to be removed from the troubled social reality in which they lived. As I mention in my first chapter, when *Sur* turned its back on the Cuban revolution, it was rendered irrelevant for many members of this younger generation.

The failure of *Sur* to engage with such significant events led to the development of a new school of criticism which modernised the genre by making literature and politics inextricable. This new school of criticism can be seen to be represented by the emergence of the magazine *Contorno* (1953 - 1959) headed by Ismael and David Viñas, Adolfo Prieto, Oscar Masotta and Noé Jitrik who, like many of their contemporaries, were especially influenced by the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre, particularly in works such as *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), appealed to young Argentine left-wing intellectuals who were principled, yet disillusioned with Peronism, or indeed any other political party in Argentina at the time. In his study of the magazine, William Kutra describes the confusion of this generation as 'understandable':

the political landscape was in complete disarray. The Peronist coalition was splitting apart, and the parties of the ideological Left had united with those of the Right in opposition to the government in power.⁵

Sartre offered a kind of political thoughtfulness and an activism which promised to make a difference. In terms of literature, his notion of the politically engaged intellectual

⁵ William H. Kutra, *Contorno: Literary Engagement in Post-Peronist Argentina* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1988), p. 23.

presented a convincing alternative to what Viñas and his generation perceived to be the Argentine literary tradition which they stood to inherit. This tradition, in their view, was not ‘committed’ in the sense Sartre meant it. Jorge Luis Borges, for example, was dismissed by *Contorno* writers Héctor Murena, Adolfo Prieto and, at the time, by Noé Jitrik as a master of technique who did not respond adequately enough in his writing to the historical and political reality in which he lived.⁶ It was Roberto Arlt who, ignored by *Sur*, was recovered and hailed as the great Argentine writer to replace Borges.

David Viñas published *Literatura argentina y realidad política* in 1964 and Oscar Masotta published *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* in 1965. *Literatura argentina y realidad política* provided a methodological model for studying socio-literary relations in Argentina and in *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* Masotta echoed this all-encompassing approach to culture and history in his recovery of Arlt from a ‘revolutionary’ perspective.

I quote from Masotta’s introduction of his study of Arlt:

el buen poeta y el buen pintor supieron siempre que no hay sensaciones aisladas, así como los psicólogos han terminado por burlarse de los fisiologistas que hablaban de estímulos puntuales y de respuestas del organismo estrictamente adecuadas a ellos, hoy se sabe que el corazón de la vida es totalitario, que toda verdad es síntesis, recuperación global de la totalidad de los niveles de la existencia histórica [...] No hay política y economía por un lado y arte, vida y sociedad por el otro. Sólo hay un todo indiscernible: vida, política y arte a la vez; economía y vida a la vez.⁷

⁶ I qualify Noé Jitrik’s dismissal of Borges with ‘at the time’ because Jitrik’s position in relation to Borges did not remain fixed. An essay of 1981, ‘Complex Feelings about Borges’, is collected in *The Noé Jitrik Reader: Selected Essays on Latin American Literature* (London: Duke University Press, 2005). First published during the dictatorship, he evaluates the work of Borges and puts this together with the sense of betrayal at Borges’ relationship to the military government.

⁷ Oscar Masotta, *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Alvarez, 1965), pp. 15 – 16.

Such texts were seminal in radically modernizing the nature of literary criticism by making a social context integral to the reading and justification of a text.

At the same time as these developments within the critical field in Argentina, there were important developments in the reception of Latin American fiction as a whole. Between 1960 and 1967 several works by Latin American writers achieved unprecedented success in an international literary market - the historical phenomenon which became known as 'the boom' in Latin American fiction. Some of the novels most frequently mentioned as being significant in this increase of literary consumption are Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* of 1949, José Donoso's *Coronación* of 1957, Juan Carlos Onetti's *El astillero* of 1961, Carlos Fuentes' *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* of 1962, Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* of 1963, Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad de los perros* also of 1963, Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* of 1967 and Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres* also of 1967.

Julio Cortázar understood 'the boom' as a growing readership which signified a mobilised 'pueblo latinoamericano':

me parece un formidable apoyo a la causa presente y futura del socialismo, es decir, a la marcha del socialismo y a su triunfo, que yo considero inevitable y en un plazo no demasiado largo. Finalmente, ¿qué es el *boom* sino la más extraordinaria toma de conciencia por parte del pueblo latinoamericano de una parte de su propia identidad? ⁸

⁸ cited by Angel Rama in his essay 'El Boom en Perspectiva', *Más allá del boom: literatura y mercado* (México: Marcha, 1981), p. 61.

David Viñas, on the other hand, interpreted the ‘boom’ as something more malign. In his essay ‘Pareceres y digresiones en torno a la nueva narrativa latinoamericana’ (1981) he expresses the view that, in retrospect, the boom offered more to the market than it did to literature. He rejected the idea that this commercial interest in Latin American fiction was stimulating to artistic production. Rather, he argued, it was a degrading influence.⁹ He attacked the culture of literary celebrities and questioned whether inside this prison of mass consumerism writers would be able to exercise their own moral authority as well as their own standards towards their serious craft. Others shared, and continue to share, Viñas’s deep suspicion of mass culture expressed in this essay of 1981. The Argentine novelist and critic, Daniel Link, for example, in a recent review of Tomás Eloy Martínez’s novel *El vuelo de la reina* (2002) is critical of the thinly veiled and ‘superficial’ representations of historical events. He argues that while the novel claims to make reality and fiction coincide, in the great Argentine tradition of Borges, what it actually does is to make ‘novelizaciones históricas para consumo de las masas’. He argues that the novel’s objectives are aimed towards an industry which is inevitably at odds with the creation of good art.¹⁰

It seems that *Contorno*’s legacy still remains. Among Argentine intellectuals of a leftist persuasion, there is a demand that literature should be socially responsible as well as immune to a commercial literary market. Exactly this was demonstrated by a conversation I had with one Argentine academic based at the University of Buenos Aires,

⁹ David Viñas, ‘Pareceres y digresiones en torno a la nueva narrativa latinoamericana’ in *Más allá del boom: literatura y mercado* (Mexico: Marcha Editores, 1981), ed. Ángel Rama.

¹⁰ Daniel Link, ‘Políticas del género’, *Leyenda Literatura argentina: cuatro cortes* (Buenos Aires: entropía, 2006), pp. 139 – 153.

and her voice was one of a consensus. When I asked how she viewed Dal Masetto's work, she talked about Dal Masetto's first two novels, *Siete de oro* (1969) and *Fuego a discreción* (1983) as being acceptable as part of a 'cultural project'. She cited the publication of *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* (1991) as the point at which Dal Masetto lost his artistic integrity and fell into the trap of a commercial literary market. She described Dal Masetto's Argentine readership as an apathetic middle class who are nostalgic about their Italianate roots and become sentimental when they listen to Tango. Her suggestion was that they read to be entertained, and to be entertained is to be mindless – it is what the bourgeoisie do to indulge and escape social reality.¹¹

Presumably *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* did have a wide commercial appeal because the story was not unusual and would have appealed to an immigrant readership who wanted to explore their history and identity in this fictional work and it did indeed become a best-seller. In fact a number of Dal Masetto's novels could be described as best-sellers and several have been reprinted, which is an indication of his ongoing readership and book sales. His third novel, *Siempre es difícil volver a casa* (Emecé, 1985), for example, was a best-seller in 1985 and 1986.¹² His first five novels have

¹¹ Walter Benjamin takes this position in his essay 'The Author as Producer' in which he talks about the 'bourgeois author of entertainment literature' who is destined to reinforce his own 'class interests' whilst failing to represent 'the proletariat' (p. 85), Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock, intro. by Stanley Mitchell. (London: NLB, 1973).

¹² Among other novels, *Siempre es difícil volver a casa* features a number of times in the *Clarín* list of top best-selling novels on 21 of November 1985, on the 28 of November 1985, 12 December 1985, 19 December 1985, 26 December 1985, 2 January 1986, 9 January 1986, 16 January 1986 and in the list of top best-selling novels in the culture section of *La Razón* on the 24 of November 1985, 8 December 1985, 15 December 1985, 22 December 1985, 29 December 1985 and on 12 January 1986.

Novels which have come out in 2nd editions have been *Siete de oro* (1969, 2nd edition Planeta, 1991), *Fuego a discreción* (1983, 2nd edition Sudamericana, 1991), *Siempre es difícil volver a casa* (1985, 2nd

come out in second editions and no doubt his readership has also been generated to a large extent by the popularity of his weekly contributions to *Página/12*. There can be no doubt that in the case of *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida*, Agata's story would resonate with many people, but I disagree with the view expressed by the academic I met with that Dal Masetto's novels are products to be passively and thoughtlessly consumed by his readers.

In Argentina, this scepticism about what is perceived as 'popular' could be interpreted as a hang-over from Peronism: the bad aftertaste of Perón's endorsement of popular culture and his stifling of an educated middle class. Middle class resistance to this popularism may have been the cause of an understandable and ongoing refusal to see any interface between 'low' and 'high' culture. Daniel James in his study *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946 – 1976* (1981) describes Perón capitalising on certain features of the Tango in his speeches which was effective in a creating a certain sentimental response in his audience.¹³ When the academic I spoke with alluded to the nostalgic, tango-loving readers of Dal Masetto, perhaps this was her association.

edition Sudamericana, 1992), *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* (1990, 7th edition Sudamericana, 2003) and *La tierra incomparable* (1994, 2nd edition Sudamericana, 2003).

¹³ In reference to a speech made by Perón in the Plaza de Mayo on 17 October 1945 he writes: 'Towards the end of that speech Perón evoked the image of his mother, 'mi vieja': 'I said to you a little while ago that I would embrace you as I would my mother because you have the same griefs and the same thoughts that my poor old lady must have felt in these days' The reference is apparently gratuitous, the empty phraseology of someone who could think of nothing better to say until we recognise that the sentiments echo exactly a dominant refrain of tango – the poor grief-laden mother whose pain symbolises the pain of her children, of all the poor. Perón's identification of his own mother with the poor establishes a sentimental identity between himself and his audience with this tone of nostalgia he was touching an important sensibility in Argentine popular culture of the period.', p.23, Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Although I found this conversation a challenging point in my investigations, it did help me to identify some of the reasons why Dal Masetto has largely remained outside a critical discourse in Argentina. It also helped me to form a response as to why, in my view, his work should not be critically ignored.

What Does the Butterfly Mean?

One friend I discussed my investigations with referred to a story by Dal Masetto which she had read in *Página/12*. The title of the piece was ‘Mariposa’ and describes a butterfly entering a man’s flat and staying there for a few days before he opens the window to allow it to fly away. Nothing more happens in the story other than this: a man, a butterfly, and the man’s reflections about the butterfly. She was frustrated by what she perceived to be its banal lack of meaning. What’s the point? What does it mean? But the story is characteristic of Dal Masetto’s style. It is a detailed observation of an apparently insignificant everyday event:

Ve cómo se pierde rápido en la luz del cielo y la imagen le produce una felicidad breve y al mismo tiempo un sentimiento de pérdida. Se pregunta: ¿Hice lo correcto abriendo la ventana? ¿Debería haberla retenido? ¿Hice bien en dejarla ir?¹⁴

Wanting to know what the butterfly symbolised seemed to echo Viñas, and ultimately Sartre, in their demand that a text, and its critic, be explicitly conscious of its context. There is no obvious context represented in Dal Masetto’s piece about the butterfly. The butterfly could symbolise nothing and many things. The text is open.

¹⁴ Antonio Dal Masetto, *Página/12*, 14 June 1993.

Dal Masetto began his career as a writer in the wake of the 1959 Cuban Revolution and all the ripples of political and literary activity it caused (*Lacre* was published in 1964 and *Siete de oro* came out in 1969). And yet what seems significant about Dal Masetto's work, particularly in these early stages, is the absence of what might be described as the Sartrean imprint – a mark which was so characteristic of the time.¹⁵ In the work I have chosen to discuss, there is an open and implicit quality in Dal Masetto's work which resists political interpretation, or indeed any other kind of interpretation.

I suggest that Dal Masetto's limited critical attention is not only due to his relative commercial success but also due to the 'open' nature of his work, its resistance to politicisation as well as to intellectualisation, which leaves the critic somewhat at a loose end. His lack of involvement in any kind of literary group or experimental trend also makes him an outsider to this critical field.¹⁶

What pervades the particular discourse I have been describing is not only the demand that literature be 'committed' but also that it be avant-garde, experimental or innovative in

¹⁵ Elisa Calabrese and Luciano Martínez describe this in their study *Miguel Briante, Genealogía de un olvido* (Buenos Aires: Beatriz Viterbo, 2001):

'La fuerte impronta Sartreana con su concepción de la literatura como compromiso del intelectual, tan ligado a la actividad cultural de ciertas revistas que nucleaban grupos de intelectuales que se proponen transformar en esa dirección los modos de hacer crítica literaria.' (p.15)

The last essay included in a collection by Juan José Sebreli, *Escritos sobre escritos, ciudades bajo ciudades 1950-1997* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1997), is 'Idas y vueltas con Sartre'. Sebreli describes the indelible first impression Sartre made on his generation:

'Entre 1947 y 1948, en tanto estudiaba en la Escuela Normal, las editoriales Sur y Losada publicaban los primeros Sartre en castellano, *El existencialismo es un humanismo*, *La Náusea*, *Teatro*, y su fascinación no lograba empañar ni algunas malas traducciones. Las generaciones posteriores de lectores no pueden imaginar el deslumbramiento que éstas provocaban en aquellos años cuando la era sartreana estaba en su apogeo.' (pp. 516-517).

¹⁶ I do not see Dal Masetto's affiliation with *Eco contemporáneo* as significant in this respect because it was a marginal magazine with an anarchic ethos which is difficult to pin down both aesthetically and ideologically.

some way. Innovation is the route to affecting the reader's consciousness by allowing them to participate in the aesthetic act as well as, by implication, society. If a writer does not offer innovation then he or she offers nothing at all. This is the well known sentiment expressed by Bertolt Brecht and by Walter Benjamin in his essays about Brecht's theatre.¹⁷ In fact, I sympathise with this point of view but am uncomfortable with it as a dogma in relation to Dal Masetto's work.

A place on a map

In an interview with Guillermo Saavedra published in *Clarín* on 4th of July 1991 Dal Masetto was asked:

¿Creés que formás parte de una tradición dentro de la narrativa argentina? ¿Podés colocarte en familiaridad con otros escritores?

And he replied:

- Yo diría – y esto con absoluta falta de pretensiones – que la mía es una aventura muy personal e intuitiva. Nunca me incluí en clanes, ni en grupos. Siempre me mantuve al margen, social e intelectualmente, del mundo de los escritores. Desde luego, no me considero un intelectual y, si me apuran, ni siquiera me atrevo a admitir que soy un escritor; apenas alguien que cuenta historias.

¹⁷ 'Brecht has coined the phrase "functional transformation" (*Umfunktionierung*) to describe the transformation of forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia – an intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production and hence active in the class struggle. He was the first to address to the intellectuals the far-reaching demand that they should not supply the production apparatus without, at the same time, within the limits of the possible, changing that apparatus in the direction of Socialism.[...] It is not the spiritual renewal, as the fascists proclaim it, that is desirable; what is proposed is technical innovation.' (p.93)

Cuando alguien me dice “escritor”, pienso en los monstruos que consideré escritores durante toda mi vida y me siento un poco avergonzado.

Certainly there is very little explicit bookishness in his writing. Mostly the illusion is created of a voice which is not the voice of an intellectual. On the surface of Dal Masetto’s fiction, the more significant relationship is not with other writers or other texts, as in the legacy of Borges, but with the intuitive relationship to characters encountered and observed, as well as with the self.

Among the writers critics might loosely associate with Dal Masetto might be Osvaldo Soriano or Tomás Eloy Martínez. Although they have little in common as novelists, Soriano and Dal Masetto are often grouped together because of some shared features. They might both be described as ‘provincianos’ with an ‘outsider’ perspective in their writing which recalls the detached perspective of the Algerian outsider, Meursault, who narrates the Albert Camus novel, *L’Etranger* (1942). They both also made regular fictional contributions to *Página/12* from its inception in 1987. The merging of journalism and fiction characterises the work of Eloy Martínez, and is true to some extent, of Dal Masetto’s stories, particularly those written for *Página/12*. However, the particular criticism of superficiality launched by Daniel Link at Martínez’s work of ‘novelizaciones históricas para consumo de las masas’ would not apply to Dal Masetto. Dal Masetto’s titles do not particularly invite readers who would like to read ‘novelizaciones históricas’. While *La novela de Perón* (1985) or *Santa Evita* (1995), for example, are titles which make references to historical figures, titles such as *Oscuramente*

fuerte es la vida (1991) or *La tierra incomparable* (1994) (lines from Salvatore Quasímodo's poems) indicate the open and poetic qualities of the novels.

I cannot defend Dal Masetto against the claim that there is a variability in the quality of his creative output to date. I concede the point that not all of his work maintains the same standard. This is surely true of many good writers who produce some excellent novels, amongst, more than likely, some less good novels. However, my aim would be to correct the view that this variability is grounds for the dismissal of Dal Masetto's work as a whole. I stress that, in this thesis, the works I have chosen to discuss are those which I judge to be significant in contemporary Argentine literature. I argue that the strongest parts of Dal Masetto's writing occupy a valid place on an Argentine literary map.

While Dal Masetto's lack of overt politicisation may seem like a retreat into personal consciousness, what this detachment from overt social reality actually does is to create a distance of reflection and contemplation that militates against an obvious ideological stance in the reader. Although his work does not stand as a call to political action through its innovation or experimentalism, it does nevertheless stand to affect the reader's consciousness.

In my view, the main trigger for affecting the reader's consciousness is the quality of ambiguity which Dal Masetto is committed to throughout his work (and which I have described throughout this thesis). Ambiguity engages the reader at a deep level and forces him or her to take part and think. This ambiguity takes the form of disruptive plot

lines, open characters, elliptical conversations and an overall reticence and economy with words. We also experience elements or episodes in Dal Masetto's narratives which bear no relation to their context. In *La tierra incomparable*, for example, as I describe in my third chapter, we encounter a character, Dino, who is not seen or heard of again in the novel. He appears to Agata and Silvana as they drink wine in a café and describes a waking hallucination of being trapped in a battery farm while battery chickens peck at wounds on his body. Dino's presence and his waking hallucination are strange and out of context both to Agata and to the reader, and the effect is unsettling. These elements act on the reader almost subliminally, leaving us uncertain as to what we have perceived in the text, or unknowingly absorbed.

We are held at arm's length by Dal Masetto's fiction, left in a perpetual state of questioning which allows us no certainty or resolution. Always denied the whole picture, Dal Masetto's reader is forced to engage at an active and creative level by imagining everything which is left out. Thus despite Dal Masetto's evident popular appeal, he cannot be accused of inviting a passive reader who will be gratified by a comfortable sense of causality or of recouping traditional closure. It is not possible to construe Dal Masetto's reader as the passive consumer of art.

'Against Interpretation'

I have found Susan Sontag's seminal essay 'Against Interpretation' (1964) particularly relevant in this respect and I have used this essay to support my reading of Dal Masetto's work. Her argument is symbiotic with the open nature of his writing. She begins the

essay by describing the polemic between Plato and Aristotle about the value of art. For Plato art is useless because all it does is imitate in an ultimately untruthful way. For Aristotle art has a therapeutic value because it allows humans to exorcise strong emotions which might otherwise have no outlet. Sontag points out that both sides of this argument lead to an emphasis on content rather than form and she suggests that this has informed much of Western thinking about art. Sontag dismisses this preoccupation as 'a subtle or not so subtle philistinism' and claims that this inclination to focus on content leads inevitably to the acts of 'interpretation' which she is against.¹⁸

For Sontag, interpretation can mean the transformation of a text where it is shoehorned into a certain meaning in order to meet the demands of a certain audience. She cites the origins of this tendency in the reception of ancient texts by later readers who found some aspect problematic. She makes the example of Christian and Hebrew readings of the *Song of Songs* as being "spiritual" interpretations of what is 'clearly erotic' (p.6). Sontag describes the modern tendency to interpret, however, as digging "behind" the text in order to get at its 'true meaning'. She names the two most prominent culprits of this tendency as Marx and Freud for whom 'to understand *is* to interpret' and asserts that this 'is the revenge of the intellect upon art' (p. 7) whereby art is reduced and impoverished. She remarks: 'interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone'. (p. 8)

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), p. 5. Henceforth all further page numbers will be cited in the text.

In place of interpretation Sontag advocates an attention to style and form, as opposed to content: 'What is needed, first, is more attention to form in art.' (p. 12) She praises critics who, in her view, do just that. Among those she mentions are Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin and Randall Jarell. She writes regarding their work: 'These are essays which reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it.' (p. 13). I borrow this statement as my own critical approach to Dal Masetto's work, although in fact as Sontag herself acknowledges, this is not to say that it is not possible to engage with meaning. Sontag makes a distinction between interpretation as Sontag herself clarifies this in her essay:

Of course, I don't mean interpretation in the broadest sense, the sense in which Nietzsche (rightly) says, "There are no facts, only interpretations." By interpretation, I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain "rules" of interpretation. (p.10)

Sontag's closing statement to her essay is: 'In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' and this thinking bears a strong relationship to the ideas of Barthes. Barthes emphasised the text's autonomy, its ambiguity and the need for form and style to be of paramount importance to the critic, as well as the role of pleasure in reading.

In this sense the work of Sontag and Barthes challenges a Sartrean demand of 'commitment' in art. In fact, Sontag notes in her introduction to *A Roland Barthes Reader* that the early work of Barthes was itself a response to Sartre and existentialism. Barthes's first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), is a direct challenge to Sartre's notion that a writer must be 'committed'. He defends the text against the protestant ethic that a work of art must have a 'use' and instead emphasises the pleasure of the text. For

Barthes the sources of writing are private and indomitable. He describes how he conceives of language in his chapter 'What is Literature', itself an echo of the title of Sartre's book of 1947, from *Writing Degree Zero*:

Indifferent to society and transparent to it, a closed personal process, it is in no way the product of a choice or a reflection on Literature. It is the private portion of the ritual, it rises up from the writer's myth-laden depths and unfolds beyond his area of control. It is the decorative voice of the hidden, secret flesh; it works as does Necessity, as if, in this kind of floral growth, style were no more than the outcome of a blind and stubborn metamorphosis starting from a sub-language elaborated where flesh and external reality come together. Style is properly speaking a germinative phenomenon, the transmutation of a Humor.[...] style is always a secret; but the occult aspect of its implications does not arise from the mobile and ever-provisional nature of language; its secret is recollection locked within the body of the writer.¹⁹

I construe the debate as between Sartre and Barthes but the debate was perhaps more importantly enacted between Sartre and Camus as Mario Vargas Llosa discusses in his book, *entre Sartre y Camus* (1981). Vargas Llosa also points out that they formed two sides of an age-old polemic:

Resumidos hasta el esqueleto los términos de la polémica, surge la sospecha de que Sartre y Camus fueran apenas los efímeros y brillantes rivales de una disputa vieja como la Historia y probablemente durará lo que dure la Historia.²⁰

Literary Reception – A Question of Influence

My aim to analyse the craft of Dal Masetto's writing is in keeping with Barthes and Sontag in the stress they place on form and style. However, my analysis of form and

¹⁹ *A Roland Barthes Reader*, Edited and with an introduction by Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 33-34.

²⁰ Mario Vargas Llosa, *entre Sartre y Camus* (Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1981), p. 14.

style cannot be considered in a vacuum, it relates to the question of influence. I therefore address three major literary influences, as well as more minor instances of influence, in Dal Masetto's work. I have chosen to explore in the main part the literary relations with Julio Cortázar, Cesare Pavese, Roberto Arlt and, to some extent, Hemingway, but not because they are the only ones. Of course Dal Masetto is writing out of an entire tradition, the intricacies of which are infinite and sometimes undetectable. I have chosen to discuss these particular literary relations because they are prominent and, at times, explicit.

By addressing a number of significant influences I exclude the possibility of a critical approach which conceives of influence as a one-to-one confrontation. *Contorno* associate, Héctor Murena describes the necessary parricide of a preceding generation of writers. Like Murena, my critical approach to influence engages with a preceding literary tradition rather than one particular literary forefather.²¹

My exploration of Dal Masetto's place in the context of an Argentine literary tradition is not done in order to make historical interpretations of his work. Rather, I aim to provide a background which will help to inform my analysis of form and style. This is a kind of literary history which Hans Robert Jauss proposes in his essay 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory'. He describes reading literature within the context of its origins, although he stresses that he does not view literature as the imitation or

²¹ I am obviously alluding to Harold Bloom here and his study *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) which I have chosen not to draw on for this reason stated in the text.

representation of history, but rather as a complex relationship between other works in the past and the audience which receives it. He writes:

If the life of the work results “not from its autonomous existence but rather from the reciprocal interaction of work and mankind,” this perpetual labour of understanding and of the active reproduction of the past, cannot remain limited to the single work. On the contrary, the relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception. Put another way: literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject – through the interaction of author and public.²²

While Barthes insists on the importance of the unadulterated aesthetic perception in reading, Jauss insists that ‘aesthetic perception is no universal code with timeless validity, but rather – like all aesthetic experience – is intertwined with historical experience.’ (p. 148). These two different approaches are not mutually exclusive: they can be integrated if literature is not seen as simply another version of history but it is also not seen as immune to historical experience and the literary works which precede and inform its origins.

While my general approach is ‘against interpretation’, I do make some readings of the work which I hope illuminate the influence relations I discuss, rather than taking the focus away from them. I do also acknowledge that while I assert Dal Masetto’s work as resisting interpretation, there are instances where a political interpretation is possible, or

²² Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Translation from the German by Timothy Bahti, Introduction by Paul de Man (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 15.

even obvious, but I propose that these are the less successful parts of his writing and the parts I have chosen not to discuss.

Outline of Chapters

In my first chapter I explore Dal Masetto's affiliation with the fringe literary magazine *Eco contemporáneo* (1961-1969) and compare the magazine to *El escarabajo de oro* (1959-1974), its Sartrean contemporary. Antonio Dal Masetto is seen to come out of 'la generación mufada' – writers and artists who suffered a kind of urban frustration but did not see political commitment and revolution as the solution to disenchantment.²³ Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) is shown to be a significant to a generation of young writers at this time. In 1963 issue 6/7 of *Eco contemporáneo* publishes a letter from Cortázar to the editor, Miguel Grinberg, and his 'generación mufada' praising their activities and makes particular reference to an excerpt published by Dal Masetto in a previous issue: 'en cuanto al capítulo de Dal Masetto, lo único que quisiera es poder continuar la lectura hasta el final, porque me agarró de las dos solapas'. In my second chapter I describe the literary relation between Dal Masetto and Julio Cortázar with particular reference to Dal Masetto's first novel of 1969, *Siete de oro*, and Cortázar's novel of 1963, *Rayuela*. Affinities are identified as well as a necessary departure.

In the spirit of Borges' essay 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' (1932) the Italian writer, Cesare Pavese (1908-1950), despite not being Argentine, is included as part of an Argentine literary tradition inherited by Dal Masetto. As I have already mentioned Dal

²³ Miguel Grinberg coined the term 'la generación mufada' for the writers associated with the magazine. 'La mufa' is a lunfardo term for urban frustration or depression.

Masetto himself was born in Italy and emigrated to Argentina at the age of 12. The reception of Pavese in Argentina is surveyed through the emergence of translations and reviews of his work which filtered into Argentine publications from the early 1950's until the late 1970's. The literary relation between Pavese and Dal Masetto is then explored through a comparison between Pavese's last novel *La luna e i falò* (1949) and *La tierra incomparable* (1993), as well as Dal Masetto's earlier novel of 1983, *Fuego a discreción*.

In the fourth chapter, Dal Masetto's weekly contribution to *Página/12* (1982-2003) is discussed: a column blurring the line between fiction and journalism. An inevitable comparison is made with Roberto Arlt's 'aguafuertes porteñas' published in *El Mundo* (1928-33). I propose that the column reflects a sense of everyday Buenos Aires at the same time as transcending time.

Finally, Gregory Rabassa argues that a translation 'ought to be the closest possible reading of a work.'²⁴ A translation of a fragment of *Siete de oro* is included in the thesis as the closest possible reading of Dal Masetto's text as well as a commentary on this translation process. This word by word level of attention to the writer's craft is in keeping with Sontag's commitment to revealing 'the sensuous surface of art'. An analysis of the stylistics of Ernest Hemingway's prose helps to inform the translation into English.

²⁴ Gregory Rabassa 'If This Be Treason: Translation and its Possibilities'. *Translation: Literary, Linguistic, and Philosophical Perspectives*. William Frawley, ed. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), p. 23.

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A revolutionary scene: two Argentine literary magazines - *El escarabajo de oro* (1959-74) and *Eco Contemporáneo* (1961-69).

I have chosen to discuss these two magazines, *El escarabajo de oro* and *Eco contemporáneo*, although they are by no means the only publications of this kind to come out of Argentina during the 1960's. Quite the contrary, they are two amongst many. In his study, *30 años de revistas literarias argentinas (1960-1989)*, José M. Otero documents an outpouring of literary journals during this period.

Eco contemporáneo and *El escarabajo de oro* are samples of this literary climate.

Antonio Dal Masetto acted as editorial secretary to *Eco contemporáneo* for the duration of the magazine. I have chosen to discuss *El escarabajo de oro* because it serves as a foil to *Eco contemporáneo*. Together, the two magazines typify the important and widespread debate among magazines published in Argentina and Latin America during the 1960's, adopting two different perspectives on literature's relationship to revolution.¹ These perspectives are developed in the magazines through the writers they publish. In general terms, *El escarabajo de oro* and *Eco contemporáneo* gravitate towards two opposite poles: that of revolutionary social practice on the one hand and a revolution in style on the other. Their respective ideological stances can be seen to develop through evolving attitudes to the Cuban Revolution and the ongoing reverberations that Cuba had

¹ This debate is characterised by Susan F. Frenk in her article 'Two Cultural Journals of the 1960's: *Casa de las Américas* and *Mundo Nuevo*', where she compares the two magazines and their respective ideological stances, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Volume 3, number 2: 1984, pp. 256 – 276.

among Latin American intellectuals. *El escarabajo de oro* takes the Sartrean line that a politically committed writer will produce politically committed writing, remaining loyal in their support to Cuba. *Eco contemporáneo*, in contrast, makes a distinction between the politics of a writer and the realm of the imagination, advocating absolute freedom for the writer and being openly ambivalent in their attitudes towards Cuba. Through his affiliation with *Eco contemporáneo*, I propose to cite Antonio Dal Masetto within my account of this debate.

In this chapter I describe *Eco contemporáneo* and have quoted considerably from contributions to the magazine as well as the editorials. This is done in order to give a flavour of the magazine and at times the quotations are not necessarily followed by in depth analysis. Archival issues of *Eco contemporáneo* are not readily available, although having written that, I have consulted an almost complete set of issues at the British Library. Full sets of *El grillo de papel* and *El escarabajo de oro*, on the other hand, are available on CD rom.

One aspect which *El escarabajo de oro* and *Eco contemporáneo* shared was their commitment to represent and provide forums to literary trends which were alternative to the mainstream literary establishment. Certainly *El escarabajo de oro* took this mainstream literary establishment to be partly represented by the internationally renowned *Sur* magazine (1931-1970), edited by Victoria Ocampo and her associates.

Sur turned its back on the Cuban revolution and so was rendered irrelevant for many members of the younger generation. Victoria Ocampo printed a statement in the magazine which condemned the editor José Bianco's visit to Cuba and led to his resignation. The cultural importance of *Sur* began to tail off during the 1960's and, in his study, John King partly attributes this decline not only to the lack of engagement with Cuba, but also to gaps arising in the magazine. *Eco contemporáneo* and *El escarabajo de oro* can be seen to fill some of these gaps. Although he acknowledges that *Sur* did publish some Beat poets John King credits the more significant exploration of Beat poetry to editor Miguel Grinberg and his magazine, *Eco contemporáneo*. He also notes the absence in *Sur* of writers who concerned themselves with social problems, Juan Gelman for example, and acknowledges that these writers were given alternative forums by *Eco contemporáneo*, *El escarabajo de oro* and two other publications, *Hoy en la cultura* and *Zona de la poesía*. The development of these writers can be mapped out in these alternative magazines.

El escarabajo de oro (1959-74)

El escarabajo de oro was formed in 1959 by editors Arnaldo Liberman and Abelardo Castillo under a different name, *El grillo de papel*. It was banned by the police after its first six issues and re-emerged as *El escarabajo de oro* in 1961 subtitled as 'revista sospechosa'.² The magazine appeared every two months in a broadsheet format publishing poetry, short fiction, theatre scripts, essays, literary criticism, reviews, interviews, letters and illustrations. The ethos of the magazine was clear from the beginning; a publication which would take a firm, leftist ideological stance, taking up the

² The title *El escarabajo de oro* refers to Edgar Allan Poe's story, 'The Gold Bug'.

social writers and social concerns which literary establishments like *Sur* had ignored. Editorial meetings would take place in cafés which was in contrast to the elite Ocampo salon. In an anthology of poetry, *Generación poética del sesenta*, published in 1975, Horacio Salas, who was himself a contributor to the magazine, recalls the meetings:

En el viejo Café de los Angelitos de Rivadavia y Rincón, que aún mantenía el hábito de prestigio porteño otorgado por el tango de Cátulo Castillo, los viernes a la noche, entre docenas de pocillos nos reuníamos los integrantes de la redacción de la revista *El Grillo de Papel*, que un año más tarde transformaría su nombre en *El Escarabajo de Oro*.³

He also describes the shared values among writers working on the magazine:

La mayoría de nosotros andaba alrededor de los veinte años, algunos teníamos una sólida formación en ciertos clásicos políticos y desconfiábamos de la cultura oficial, los suplementos dominicales y la capilla de la revista *Sur*, a la que juzgábamos ajena a los problemas nacionales.⁴

Among the Argentine contributors the following were included: Abelardo Castillo, Liliana Heker, Arnoldo Liberman, Alejandra Pizarnik, Horacio Salas (poetry); Miguel Briante, Julio Cortázar, Liliana Heker, Ricardo Piglia, Horacio Quiroga, Ángel Rama, Ernesto Sábato, Lelia Varsi, (fiction); Miguel Briante, Miguel Grinberg, David Viñas, Liliana Heker, Julio Cortázar, Abelardo Castillo (literary criticism); Miguel Briante, Abelardo Castillo, Liliana Heker, Arnoldo Liberman (reviews); Roberto Arlt, Beatriz Guido, Liliana Heker, Abelardo Castillo, Marta Lynch, Ricardo Piglia (interviews); Abelardo Castillo (theatre); Abelardo Castillo, María Rosa Oliver, Ernesto Sábato, David Viñas (essays); Julio Cortázar, Marta Lynch (letters); Carlos Alonso (illustrations).

³ *Generación poética del 60*, ed. Horacio Salas (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, Ministerio de Cultura y Educación, 1975), p. 9.

⁴ Horacio Salas, p. 11.

Latin American contributors included: Mario Benedetti, Ernesto Cardenal, Nicolás Guillén, Nicanor Parra, Augusto Roa Bastos, César Vallejo (poetry); Carlos Fuentes, Augusto Roa Bastos (living in exile in Buenos Aires); Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra (criticism); Gabriel García Márquez, Nicolás Guillén, Alejo Carpentier, Rubén Darío, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Augusto Roa Bastos (interviews); Juan Rulfo, Nicanor Parra, Mario Vargas Llosa (essays).

International contributors included: John Ashbery, W. H. Auden, Samuel Beckett, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, James Joyce (translated by Pablo Neruda), Langston Hughes (translated by Rodolfo Neuman), Antonio Machado (poetry); Bertolt Brecht, Witold Gombrowicz, Cesare Pavese, Jean-Paul Sartre, Dylan Thomas (fiction); Bertolt Brecht, Max Brod, Lawrence Durrell, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Jean Genet, Witold Gombrowicz, Graham Greene, Juan Goytisolo, Eugène Ionesco, Franz Kafka, Malcolm Lowry, Arthur Miller, Henry Miller, Vasco Pratolini, J.D. Salinger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Oscar Wilde (interviews); Samuel Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, Tennessee Williams (theatre); Roland Barthes (essays); Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann (letters).

Evidently there are some writers who could not have contributed directly to the magazine – Quiroga, Pavese, Kafka, Joyce. This drawing on both living and dead writers suggests that *El escarabajo de oro* may have lifted pieces from other publications even though sources are very often not acknowledged in the text. I have not included the names of the translators of some international contributors because they are mostly not mentioned.

Writers from all over the world were published in the magazine, as well as from Latin America and Argentina itself. However, those who seemed to be given the most prominence in the magazine were the writers who entered into the debate of the revolutionary capacities of literature, irrespective of their nationality. They flirted with writers who did not take on revolutionary responsibilities in their writing but only gave them marginal space in the magazine. Lawrence Ferlinghetti is interviewed in issue 20 of the magazine of October 1963, in which he openly declares no feelings of accountability in his writing to revolutionary causes and no loyalty to the Cuban revolution. I quote the interview entire:

¿No cree usted que el camino seguido por ustedes evade al escritor norteamericano de su responsabilidad histórica?

Yo no soy responsable ante la historia. Yo sólo soy responsable ante mi mismo y ante aquellos a quienes he disgustado.

Usted escribió un poema a Fidel Castro. ¿Se trata de un gesto aislado o existe un movimiento de opinión favorable a la revolución cubana entre los jóvenes escritores norteamericanos?

Es un gesto aislado...pero representa también a los jóvenes poetas y a un movimiento.

En Latinoamérica pensamos que el mac-cartismo no ha muerto. ¿No tiene Ud. temor de convertirse en una nueva víctima?

No. Nadie cavará nuestra tumba. Nosotros mismos la cavaremos.

¿Pueden los escritores norteamericanos escribir con libertad?

Somos libres. Publicamos en cualquier sitio. Nuestros textos no son censurados. Permanecemos sin compromiso.

¿Qué juicio crítico emitiría Ud. sobre su propia obra?

Un eructo, un roquido, un bostezo, un pedazo de papa media cruda, dos docenas de exclamaciones, cuarenta y tres sonoras carcajadas en hilera y el llanto de una canción mientras los imbéciles continúan cayéndose de los árboles. ⁵

⁵ *El escarabajo de oro*, Año 4 - No. 20 Octubre 1963, p. 2.

Clearly, Ferlinghetti is not carrying the banner of support for Cuba and is evasive of being pinned down by any kind of ideology. No doubt it is for this reason that this interview is brief when compared to the space dedicated to interviews with Jean-Paul Sartre and his writings in *El escarabajo de oro*. Sartre is a more significant writer but it is also the case that his words seem to be held as the mantra of the magazine.

John King asks the important question in relation to Sartre when including him as part of the *Sur* group: 'Which Sartre?' and 'When?'.⁶ Needless to say, *Sur* magazine published a different Sartre to the Sartre published by *El escarabajo de oro*. A translation of the story 'La Chambre' first appeared in the March-April issue of *Sur* of 1939 which was to be the only piece of fiction by Sartre to be included. Later, in April 1946 (no. 138), an essay entitled 'Retrato del antisemita' appeared, followed by the last contribution Sartre made, entitled 'El existencialismo es un humanismo' serialised in numbers 147-149. A review of his book *Reflexiones sobre la cuestión judía* then appeared in December 1948. Sartre was criticised for being anti-Marxist in his essay 'El existencialismo es un humanismo' but, no doubt, it was his ambiguous attitude towards communism that made him appealing to *Sur* magazine. However, Sartre did come to align himself with the communist peace movement in the face of the Korean War and his commitment to the role and responsibility of the intellectual became discordant with *Sur* and Ocampo did not go on publishing him. Sartre asked the question *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947) and

⁶ John King, *Sur: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and its Role in the Development of a Culture, 1931-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.85. Henceforth all other page references will be cited within the text.

Sur did not (want to) address it. This was exactly the line of questioning which *El escarabajo de oro* replicated.

The editors of *El escarabajo de oro* consistently claimed literature as an effective vehicle for social change/revolution. In issue 4. of the magazine, Castillo/Liberman write in their editorial:

No hablamos de una generación de genios; decimos otra cosa: gente responsable, que piensa en el Arte como una herramienta de trabajo, un arma, que a la manera del diente del lobo o la cornamenta del toro - en el verso de Horacio - utiliza cada uno lo mejor que puede, la empuña para inquietar las conciencias, para ir forjando, con todos, ese inaudito avatar de siglos y pasión esperanzada que es la Historia. ⁷

This did not seem to change throughout the publication of the magazine. In the very beginning, when the magazine was still known as *El grillo de papel*, it followed Sartre and de Beauvoir's visit to Cuba in 1960 with great interest.⁸ An interview appeared in *Le Monde* in which Sartre asked what a novel could do before a child dying of hunger.⁹ In this interview he advised writers from poverty-stricken countries to stop writing until their countries had reached an adequate level of health, education, social justice and prosperity. This approach would seem very much in keeping with Castro's approach to Cuba where practical necessities were given priority over the development of culture. *El escarabajo de oro*, however, remained convinced of literature as a revolutionary tool

⁷ *El escarabajo de oro*, Año 2, No. 4, Noviembre – Diciembre 1961, p. 1.

⁸ *El grillo de papel* Año 2, No. 6. Octubre - Nov. 1960, pp. 4 – 5.

⁹ Interview with Jacqueline Piatier, 'Jean-Paul Sartre s'explique sur *Les Mots*,' *Le Monde*, 18 avril, 1964, trans. by Anthony Hartley, *Encounter* XXII, 6 June 1964, p.62.

despite their literary hero, Sartre, declaring literature redundant in 1964 and refusing the Nobel prize.

Eco contemporáneo (1961-1969)

Eco contemporáneo was founded by Miguel Grinberg in 1961 and appeared more sporadically than *El escarabajo de oro*. It published poetry, fiction, letters, essays, reviews, chronicles and illustrations in the format of a small paper bound booklet, varying in the number of pages from issue to issue.

Argentine contributors included: Miguel Grinberg, Gregorio Kohon, Alejandro Vignati (poetry); Julio Cortázar, Antonio Dal Masetto, Gregorio Kohon (fiction); Miguel Grinberg (essays); Walmir Ayala, Antonio Dal Masetto, Miguel Grinberg, María Rosa Oliver, Alejandro Vignati (notes); Raúl González Tuñón, Miguel Grinberg (chronicles); Abelardo Castillo (studies); Héctor Tilbe (illustrations).

Latin American contributors included: Ernesto Cardenal, Rosario Castellanos (poetry); Clarice Lispector (fiction); Clarice Lispector (notes and commentaries); Ernesto Cardenal (translation).

International contributors included: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Kahlil Gibran, Allen Ginsberg, William Carlos Williams (translated by Coronel Urtecho and Ernesto Cardenal) (poetry); Lawrence Ferlinghetti (fiction); Allen Ginsberg, Henry Miller

(criticism and essays); Albert Camus, Thomas Merton, Henry Miller, Dylan Thomas (notes and commentaries).

Editorial meetings took place in a warehouse which housed leather goods and belonged to the father of editor, Miguel Grinberg.¹⁰ Like the meetings in cafés of the *El escarabajo* group this was also in contrast to the elite Ocampo salon.

El escarabajo de oro and *Eco contemporáneo* shared a commitment to giving space to alternative literary trends and social writers. However, while *El escarabajo* adopted a challenging pose in relation to *Sur* magazine, a lively debate also took place between *El escarabajo de oro* and other alternative magazines. *Eco contemporáneo*, for instance, emphatically presented itself as non-leftist magazine, thus challenging publications like *El escarabajo de oro* and their ideological convictions. The stance which *Eco contemporáneo* took seems to be in response to reading, rejecting (and also assimilating) other left-leaning magazines, perhaps *El escarabajo de oro* in particular.

In issue number 5 (1963) subtitled, 'Integrar América' Grinberg writes:

Los que nos demandan "definición ideológica" no pueden comprender cómo esta Revista publicó en su número anterior trabajos de la muy "izquierdista" María Rosa Oliver y del muy "reaccionario" Walmir Ayala. Menos entenderán en éste, la inclusión de material del "pro-Cuba" Raúl González Tuñón y del "anti-Cuba" Marco Denevi; del "marxista" Pratolini y del "fascista" Gombrowicz. Sépase que nos rige un concepto de CALIDAD HUMANA que nada tiene que ver con la Política.

¹⁰ I learned this in conversation with Gregorio Kohon, associate and contributor of poetry and fiction to *Eco contemporáneo* (London, 2004).

In response to this editorial a brief article is then published in *El escarabajo de oro* entitled 'PEACE', and then in brackets '(pis)'. It reads:

"Eco Contemporáneo" (Nº 5) ya comienza a albergarle el alma una sensación, no sé: indescriptible. Como una gárgara de luceros del alba. Como haber triscado, cual cabritillo en celo, por las cataratas del Niágara. Como estornudar arcángeles. Como hacer inhalaciones de gofio o darle un mordiscón a la Virgen de San Sixto. Mariposil, digamos. " **nos rige un concepto de CALIDAD HUMANA que nada tiene que ver con la Política**", leímos, " **esperamos que seres tiernos, pacíficos e insobornables, liberen sus voces**". ¹¹

This description of *Eco contemporáneo* seems to parody Ferlinghetti's irreverent, absurd and anarchic response to the question: '¿Qué juicio crítico emitiría Ud. sobre su propia obra?' when he replied with a stream of nonsensical metaphors. *Eco contemporáneo's* ideology is obviously being mocked by *El escarabajo de oro*. 'Peace' (or 'pis') is somehow insubstantial.

Eco contemporáneo was primarily concerned with a particular (young) generation and their place in the world. Miguel Grinberg coined the term 'la generación mufada' for the writers associated with the magazine. 'La mufa' is a lunfardo term for urban frustration or depression.¹² In issue no. 4 (1962) of the magazine he writes in a letter to Jack Kerouac:

¹¹ *El escarabajo de oro*, issue number 18-19, 1963, año IV, p. 17.

¹² An entry in the José Gobello *Nuevo diccionario lunfardo* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1991) states: 'MUFA. Lunf. Mal humor, mala disposición de ánimo ("Aquella mañana Laura amaneció con mufa, como él oía decir a su marmolista italiano". Rojas Paz, *Mármoles...*, 110).[...]Del véneto **star muffo**: estar melancólico, triste éste del ital.**muffa**: moho; **venire la muffa al naso**: encolerizarse). **Mufar**: transmitir mala suerte. **Mufar(se)**: cobrar mala disposición de ánimo. **Mufado**: malhumorado; perseguido por la desgracia.' (p.175).

Aquí cada uno de nosotros que ve lo que otros no quieren ver, que siente lo que otros no quieren sentir, y no tiene dónde aplicar sus energías creadoras, dice que está en la mufa. (p. 4)

While *El Escarabajo de oro* took Jean-Paul Sartre as their literary model, *Eco Contemporáneo* took the US Beats. The concept of heightened consciousness for the Beats contrasted with Sartre's notion of existentialism. Sartre's thinking had a practical application. For Sartre, being aware of one's own volition and having heightened consciousness implied a duty to be politically active. For the Beats, being conscious meant something different. It was about individual revelation and was not necessarily a call to political action. In issue number 4 of 1962, an essay by John Clellon Holmes is translated and published, 'el Hipster: rebelde de la Generación Beat'. He writes:

Ser *beat* es estar en el fondo de la personalidad de uno mirando hacia arriba. Ser existencial, más en el sentido de Kierkegaard que el de Jean-Paul Sartre. p. 83

It is not surprising that the Beats were not embraced by Cuba. They promoted freedom of the individual emphasising self-exploration and spiritual revelation through the extremes of hedonism. Allen Ginsberg was invited to Cuba by the revolutionary magazine *Casa de las Américas* in 1965. However, Ginsberg's behaviour during his visit was so provocative that it caused Antón Arrufat to resign his editorship and led to Ginsberg's deportation. In an interview with Allen Young in New York, September 1972, Ginsberg discusses this visit.¹³ He describes Castro delivering a speech in which he stated an official position on homosexuality; that it was degenerate and abnormal and

¹³ Allen Ginsberg, ed. David Carter, *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958-1996* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 329-332.

championed the Young Communist League for naming homosexuals to the authorities so they could be sent to work in the sugar-cane fields.

Apart from saying that Che Guevara was 'cute', Ginsberg puts his greatest mistake down to referring to a rumour he had heard that Castro's brother, Raúl, was gay. In the interview Ginsberg criticises the rigidity of the police bureaucracy and their heavy handed approach to marijuana, beards, sexual experimentation, sociability and homosexuality, as well as Castro's censorship of the press which only seemed to publish a one-sided party line. He was critical of the closed-mindedness and lack of 'spiritual communism' that he witnessed in the country. For Ginsberg it was not a cultural revolution, encouraging new thinking, hope and mind expansion. To him it was conservative and bound by a 'Catholic mentality'.

When Ginsberg was deported, three soldiers came into his hotel room, one of them saying that he was head of immigration and asked him to gather his things because he was going to be sent on the first plane out of Cuba. As he left, Nicanor Parra was sitting in the lobby of the hotel. Ginsberg shouted out to him to tell his hosts at *Casa de las Américas* that he was being deported as he had not been allowed to telephone to warn them. When he asked one of the officers why he was being deported, he was told it was 'For breaking the laws of Cuba'. Ginsberg concluded from this response that it had something to do with having talked freely about Castro's gay policy, the control of the press and the prohibition of marijuana.

Ginsberg's visit to Cuba can be taken as a symbolic scene. It highlighted a split between two different versions of revolution. Castro conceived of revolution as being primarily concerned with improving education, literacy and hospitals. In 1961 he made these priorities clear when he issued the statement 'Palabras a los intelectuales'. Ginsberg's revolution was a revolution of the mind where challenging social institutionalisation and permitting sexual experimentation were central.

Ginsberg already had his reservations about Cuba even before his visit. He wrote a letter in Athens 1961 which was translated and re-published by *Eco contemporáneo* in 1963 and then later appeared in a pamphlet series in 1966. It was entitled, *Prose Contribution to the Cuban Revolution*:

Now the Cuban Revolutionary government as far as I can tell is basically occupied by immediate practical problems & proud of that, heroic resistances, drama, uplift, reading & teaching language, and totally unoccupied as yet with psychic exploration [...] And also I see that there has been no evidence of real technical revolution in Poesy or language in recent Cuban poetry - it still is old hat mechanistic syntax & techniques. So that it is obvious that any, meaning ANY, mediocre bureaucratic attempt to censor language, diction or direction of psychic exploration is the same old mistake made in all the idiot academics of Russia and America. Arguments about immediate practical necessities are as far as I can tell from afar strictly the same old con of uninspired people who don't know what the writing problem is, and don't have any idea of the consciousness problems I'm talking about. ¹⁴

Ginsberg's version of revolution was the kind of revolution which *Eco contemporáneo* chose to identify with. The magazine was not anti-Cuba although they were certainly not loyal to Cuba in the way *El escarabajo de oro* can be seen to be. *Eco contemporáneo*

¹⁴ Allen Ginsberg *Prose contribution to Cuban Revolution* (Detroit: Artists' Workshop Press, 1966). This also appeared in *Eco contemporáneo*, vol. 2, no. 5 (Winter 1963), pp. 83-90.

was far more interested in the kind of ‘psychic exploration’ Ginsberg describes, the revolutionising of poetry and consciousness itself. This included the enhancing effects of unrestrained sexuality as well as recreational drugs.

Apart from the US Beats, *Eco contemporáneo* also found an important model in the rebellious spirit of Witold Gombrowicz. In his diary account of his experiences of Argentina, *Diario argentino*, Gombrowicz describes being introduced to the literary circle surrounding the *Sur* group by the poet Carlos Mastronardi. He conveys the impenetrability of this clique and describes the awkwardness of having dinner at the home of Bioy Casares with his wife, Silvina Ocampo, and their dinner guest, Jorge Luis Borges. He struggles to understand the rapid conversation of Borges and asks himself what he and Borges could possibly share or communicate to each other. He differentiates himself from this company by claiming that he is interested in ‘lo bajo’ of Buenos Aires while they are interested in uptown Buenos Aires, he is interested in shady Retiro, they are interested in the lights of Paris, he is interested in youth, they are interested in old age. He mocks their superiority and their lack of contact or interest in a younger generation:

‘¡Ah no ser juventud! ¡Ah, tener una literatura madura! ¡Ah, igualar a Francia, a Inglaterra! ¡Ah, crecer, crecer rápidamente!’¹⁵

He berates their lack of engagement with the grittiness of the world:

¹⁵ Witold Gombrowicz, *Diario argentino* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1968), p. 37. Henceforth all other page references will be cited within the text.

Lo que les reprocho es no haber elaborado una relación con la cultura mundial, más un problema de amor; si queremos conocer la verdadera posición del artista debemos preguntar: ¿de qué está enamorado? Para mí era evidente que ellos no estaban enamorados de nada o en fin, de un folklore bastante esquemático e inocuo. Pero ninguna chispa auténtica brotaba entre ellos de esa masa oscura de belleza “inferior”. (p. 38)

But this notion of ‘lo bajo’ is not entirely transparent. Juan José Saer notes this in his essay ‘La perspectiva exterior’:

El hecho de sentirse como lo dice tantas veces en el *Diario*, el más pobre, el más desesperado de los hombres, explica quizás su preferencia por lo que llama “lo bajo” [...] por los seres oscuros, de los que ni el atractivo erótico, ni la manifestación viviente de su famosa inmadurez, bastan para explicar su interés. Aunque pueda parecer absurdo tratándose de Gombrowicz, hay un elemento militante en esa afinidad, una oposición deliberada a los círculos intelectuales y poéticos de Buenos Aires. Aquí, dice, únicamente el vulgo es distinguido.¹⁶

Gombrowicz himself writes of his own dismissal at the end of the evening spent at the home of Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo :

Decidieron, pues, que yo era un anarquista bastante turbio, de segunda mano, uno de aquellos que por falta de mayores luces proclaman el *élan vital* y desprecian aquello que son incapaces de comprender. (p. 39)

Gombrowicz was translated and published in issues 5, 8 and 9 of *Eco contemporáneo*.

The magazine may have been identified with this sense of exclusion from the intellectual elite of the *Sur* group. Gombrowicz was also, in fact, published by *El escarabajo de oro*, although it is presented by *Eco contemporáneo* as if they have given him his first

¹⁶ Juan José Saer, ‘La perspectiva exterior’, ed. José Tcherkaski, *Las cartas de Gombrowicz* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI de Argentina Editores, 2004), p. 112.

opportunity of recognition in Argentina.¹⁷ In issue no. 5 (1962) Gombrowicz is quoted as saying:

“Rechazado por las revistas y suplementos literarios más importantes del país, veré con emoción, después de tantos años, mi apellido en letras de molde en el *Eco contemporáneo*. ¡Gracias, jóvenes Mufados, gracias!” (p.46)

It is difficult to identify what connection *Eco contemporáneo* might have had with the style of Witold Gombrowicz's work. The absurd and anarchic nature of his first novel translated into Spanish, *Ferdydurke*, is not obviously echoed by *Eco contemporáneo* writers. As a personality he may have been important as an alternative representation of national identity. He was not a writer who looked towards Paris, he wrote satirically that being Polish excluded this possibility: ‘los polacos por lo general no son “finos” ni están a la altura de la problemática parisiense.’ (p. 39) Gombrowicz reinforced alternative notions of Argentine identity which were not ‘europeizante’. Nor were they preoccupied with what it means to be Argentine. I quote again from *El diario argentino*:

el argentino auténtico nacerá cuando se olvide de que es argentino y sobre todo de que *quiere ser* argentino; la literatura argentina nacerá cuando los escritores se olviden de Argentina... de América; se van a separar de Europa cuando Europa deje de serles problema, cuando la pierdan de vista; su esencia se le revelará cuando dejen de buscarla. (p. 96)

Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke* (1937) was translated by a workshop in a café confitería, Rex, on la calle Corrientes under the guidance of the Cuban novelist, Virgilio

¹⁷An article, ‘Polonia, señoras y un malentendido’, appeared in *El escarabajo de oro*, Año IV, No. 30, Julio 1966 and a story, ‘El banquete’, appeared in Año, No.39, Julio – Agosto 1969.

Piñera, in Buenos Aires and was published in Spanish in 1947. However, as Ricardo Piglia points out, while Gombrowicz sets himself up in opposition to Borges, he comes close to the ideas expressed in the essay 'El escritor argentino y la tradición':

¿Qué quiere decir la tradición argentina? Borges parte de esa pregunta y el ensayo es un manifiesto que acompaña la construcción ficcional de "El Aleph", su relato sobre la escritura nacional. ¿Cómo llegar a ser universal en este suburbio del mundo? ¿Cómo zafarse del nacionalismo sin dejar de ser "argentino" (o "polaco")? ¹⁸

In a sense they are in agreement that literature with national identity does not have to be nationalistic literature. Gombrowicz affirmed an alternative concept of national identity. *Ferdydurke* and Dal Masetto's third novel, *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida*, could not be more different in most respects yet they share this theme. Gombrowicz offered a novel about Polish society to be translated into Spanish and be published as Argentine fiction, insisting that a novel about the immigrant's culture of origin might speak as much about the culture of Argentina as a novel set directly in Argentina. It is for this reason that Ricardo Piglia provocatively names him as the best writer to come out of Argentina.¹⁹ Similarly, *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* is set almost entirely in Italy but it is the typical life story of many Argentines from Italian extraction. If it is not their own life story, it might be their mother's, grandmother's or great-grandmother's story.

Another significant figure to *Eco contemporáneo* was Henry Miller. He seemed to offer a perspective on sexuality and creativity which becomes part of the discourse of the

¹⁸ Ricardo Piglia, '¿Existe la novela argentina?', *Las cartas de Gombrowicz*, ed. José Tcherkaski (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI de Argentina Editores, 2004), p. 93.

¹⁹ 'El mejor escritor argentino del siglo XX es Witold Gombrowicz.' (Ricardo Piglia), <http://www.literatura.org/wg/wgbare2.htm>.

magazine. An essay by Miller is published in issue number five (1962) entitled 'el mundo del sexo' in which he discusses his novels *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* and how he conceives of human sexuality:

Me parece que el sexo era mejor entendido, mejor expresado, en el mundo pagano, en el mundo de los primitivos, y en el mundo religioso. En el primero se exaltaba sobre el plano estético, en el segundo sobre el plano mágico, y en el tercero sobre el plano espiritual. En nuestro mundo, donde sólo rige el nivel bestial, el sexo funciona en un vacío. (p. 13)

In a similar vein to the US Beats, Miller describes pursuing a higher level of spirituality through sexuality. In issues three and four of *Eco contemporáneo*, this notion of spirituality in the primitive suggested by both the US Beats and Henry Miller is taken is assimilated by Miguel Grinberg in his editorials and essays as well as in the choice of material which is published in these issues. Grinberg writes:

Tuvimos desde una Edad de Piedra hasta una Edad de Atómica. Time Magazine y los psicoanalistas han machacado bastante con la Edad de Angustia. ¿No es hora ya para la de Alegría, la del Amor, la de ese pedazo de carne imponderable llamada Hombre? ²⁰

In an interview many years later, Antonio Dal Masetto describes the importance of Henry Miller to him not so much in terms of direct stylistic influences on his writing, but rather as offering a *modus vivendi* which would allow the freedom to write:

Una vez pasé un año cosiendo expedientes en un tribunal. En esa época estaba leyendo a Henry Miller. Me apasionaba su propuesta libertaria, ese Miller combativo, dueño de su vida y amante de las mujeres.

²⁰ *Eco contemporáneo*, Año 1, No. 4, Diciembre 1962, p. 16.

Y no sé qué página habré leído cierta noche en la pensión, que a la mañana siguiente pensé en Miller durante todo el camino hasta la estación de Constitución, y cuando llegué me dije: *no voy nada a trabajar*. Y no fui. Al otro día, tampoco. Y no volví más [...] A veces a uno le hacen la clásica pregunta acerca de si la literatura influye en la vida de la gente. Yo no sé, pero a mí un día Henry Miller me dijo *no vayas más a los tribunales*, y yo le hice caso. Y eso me cambió la vida.²¹

It is interesting to look at the illustrations found in issues number three and four. Henry Miller's essay 'El mundo del sexo' is illustrated by Héctor Tilbe who seems to be indebted to primitive art in this work. His figures are angular and ape-like. Similarly in issue number four, the image on the front cover, by Norberto Gómez, is of two abstract figures with open mouths. The right hand figure seems to be eating his own hand and his torso is distorted. They are also reminiscent of primitive art. Later, these kinds of images are more scarce in the magazine but they feature quite prominently in these two early issues of 1962. These depictions of raw humanity are in contrast to the humorous political cartoons found in *El escarabajo de oro* from around the same period.

A Ginsberg poem appears translated by Miguel Grinberg in issue number 4 entitled 'Canción' ('Song') which has a refrain: 'el peso[...]es amor' (pp. 73-75) and ends

Los cálidos cuerpos
brillan juntos
en la oscuridad,
la mano avanza
hacia el centro
de la carne,
la piel tiembla
de felicidad
y el alma viene
gozosa hasta el ojo -

sí, sí,

²¹ Verónica Chiaravalli, *Suplementario Literario de la Nación*, Vol. 6., 29 Octubre 1997, p. 6.

eso es lo que
yo quise,
siempre quise,
siempre quise,
regresar
al cuerpo
donde nací.

This exaltation of ‘love’ and longing to go back to something, or re-create some paradise which has gone before, the lover/mother’s body, contribute towards the ideological stance of the magazine. Ginsberg’s poem is shortly followed by a poem by an Ecuadorian poet, Simón Corral, entitled ‘Utero’ in which he expresses similar ideas:

Utero, nervaduras largas y finas
sexo largo y fino.
Adentro la sangre no se resbala
(nunca la sangre está en demasía)
adentro la sangre es tenue.
Allí se nada se grita se pelea.
El hombre es allí un gran nadador;
suave, fino y desesperado.

[...]

Eso, lo grande debemos amar, alejémos de esos momentos de abandono en los que no sentimos ni siquiera el peso de la amada en nuestros brazos, en los que el duro cielo de invierno no nos recuerda la lluvia torrencial que fecunda los campos y limpia las ciudades, pese a que la lluvia muchas veces tapa las alcantarillas de nuestra casa; alejémos de la disolución, de aquella perra occidental, que lame las canillas y la lengua

Utero, sólo el perro ama sinceramente
allí somos perro-vertiente.
Pares y dispares que llegan o no
allí todos son hombres.

This proposes a vision of man which challenges the consumerism of capitalism claiming real humanity in the primitive, sensual world.

It was far more rare for *El escarabajo de oro* to tend towards these kinds of ideas.

Sexuality does not figure as part of their revolutionary discourse as it does so emphatically in *Eco contemporáneo*.

Julio Cortázar was embraced in equal measure by both *El escarabajo de oro* and *Eco contemporáneo* and was not published at all by *Sur* during the 1960's. According to John King, he was never a core member of the *Sur* group and was only published by the magazine eight times, and those contributions were mostly book reviews. His last contribution to the magazine came in 1951 in issue 195-196: a poem entitled 'Masaccio'.

Cortázar was among many of the 'boom' writers who, absent in *Sur*, were taken up by other magazines. *El escarabajo de oro* published his fiction (issues 21, 26-7, 30, 34, 41, and 42) as well as criticism (issue 46) and a letter (issue 48). In 1960 *El grillo de papel*, published the stories 'La continuidad de los parques' in issue 4 of the magazine and 'Los amigos' in issue 6 from the collection, *Final del juego* (1956). A review by Abelardo Castillo of *Las armas secretas* also appears in *El grillo de papel*, identifying Cortázar as one of the best and most important Argentine writers of the time.²²

When both *El escarabajo de oro* and *Eco contemporáneo* started out, Cortázar was not yet the politically committed figure he would later become. His first short story to be published was 'Casa tomada' which appeared in the magazine *Anales de Buenos Aires* in 1946, of which Jorge Luis Borges was the editor. *Bestiario* appeared in 1951 and established Cortázar as an important writer to take note of. *Final del Juego* was published by a minor Mexican publishing house in 1956. Both these collections of stories were not themed by social causes or written with any kind of social realism. So it

²² *El grillo de papel*, Año 1, No. 2 Diciembre 1959 - Enero 1960, pp. 19-20.

seemed that *El escarabajo de oro* and *Eco contemporáneo* became interested in Cortázar primarily for his dynamic writing style and not, initially, for any particular revolutionary discourse which he broached through his writing. However, the development of his political thinking was to become significant for these two ‘revolutionary’ magazines.

It was in 1963, the same year that *Rayuela* was first published, that Cortázar made the first of his visits to Cuba. This visit bonded him to the Cuban Revolution and while he had some criticisms of the regime over time, overall the bond would prove to be a lasting loyalty. In 1967 he wrote to Roberto Fernández Retamar, the editor of *Casa de las Américas* at that time, and expressed some of his thoughts on the matter. In this letter he describes his experience of living in Paris and yet, through the Cuban Revolution, finding his ‘verdadera condición latino americana’ in a way that he had never discovered it before. He outlines a new perspective in which he did not think that he would be satisfied by being a writer who dealt only with ‘mera creación imaginativa’, that the confusion of his times would have to enter into his work in some way, although he resists defining explicitly how it would manifest itself. Paul Valéry had been tremendously important for Cortázar, but he was uncomfortable with the lack of interest in the human drama surrounding him in Valéry’s work. For this reason, Cortázar argues that his writing lacks a fundamental understanding of the human condition. He began to admire writers who were witnesses to their times. He concludes in this letter that to justify the role of the writer, there has to be an engagement with ‘las conciencias de los pueblos’.²³

²³ Julio Cortázar, ‘Carta a Roberto Fernández Retamar (Sobre “Situación del intelectual latinoamericano”’, *Julio Cortázar: Obra crítica/3*, Edición de Saúl Sosnowski (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1994), pp. 29-43.

Nevertheless, this political commitment was not an inhibiting factor in Cortázar's fiction. Despite his new commitment to revolutionary causes, he stressed the need for fiction to have its own autonomy and not be intruded upon by ideological criteria. In 1971 when the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla was tried and convicted for crimes against the revolution in Cuba, many significant Latin American writers withdrew their support. Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa and Juan Goytisolo condemned what they saw as a Stalinist regime, while Gabriel García Márquez and Cortázar reaffirmed their loyalty to the cause. However, Cortázar reiterated his thoughts on art with respect to socialism in an open letter to Cuba. He stated his support but advocated total freedom for the writer.

In response to these ideas Cortázar was taken on by Oscar Collazos in a debate which was published as a booklet, *Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura*.²⁴ It comprises three essays on this matter, the third by Mario Vargas Llosa. Collazos argued vehemently against Cortázar's insistent defence of the imagination against the intrusion of politics. In response to Collazos, Cortázar upheld his position by asserting that Latin America needed Che Guevaras of literature; revolutionaries of literature not the literature of revolutionaries.

Cortázar had a nurturing role for a younger generation of writers. He acted as a paternal literary figure, writing letters of encouragement to the editorials of magazines such as *El escarabajo de oro* and *Eco contemporáneo*. A letter from Cortázar to Miguel Grinberg appears in issue number 6/7 of *Eco contemporáneo* in 1963 and demonstrates his support

²⁴ Oscar Collazos, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, *Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 1970).

and interest. He writes regarding the previous issue commenting on some of the material: 'Mufa y revolución' by Miguel Grinberg, 'A pesar de la enorme distancia' by Jorge R. Vilela, a chapter from the novel 'El pirámide y la cucaracha' by Antonio Dal Masetto and the magazine's homage to Witold Gombrowicz. He suggests that the magazine shows work that is more than just an 'eco', in the sense that it does not just reflect other existing work, it is itself original. He asserts that a number of the contributors have their own voice which stand out as original among Argentine writers, even among Latin American writers altogether. He writes of Dal Masetto: 'en cuanto al capítulo de Dal Masetto, lo único que quisiera es poder continuar la lectura hasta el final, porque me agarró de las dos solapas.' This is the opening chapter of a novel serialised in *Eco contemporáneo* which was never published as a whole, although these chapters do demonstrate some features and even fragments of text which could later be found in *Siete de oro*.

Antonio Dal Masetto emerges as a silent contributor of the magazine only publishing fiction and not taking part in the animated editorials, discussions and essays surrounding the themes which the Beats address and with which the magazine engages and replicates. In number 4 of *Eco contemporáneo* of December 1962, Dal Masetto published a short story, 'La Plaza'. It stands apart from the general content of the magazine. It does not broach typical Beat themes and the style is restrained and considered in contrast to the unleashed stream of consciousness of Miller and Ginsberg. Other contributions to this issue of the magazine are Miguel Grinberg's homage to the Beats, the translation of Ginsberg's poem, 'Song', and the other writers who feature and also seem to be disciples of the US Beat generation. 'La Plaza' can be seen to foreshadow the 'crónicas' which

Dal Masetto would later write for *Página/12*, demonstrating a style which is consistent with these later stories and indicating that Dal Masetto's identity as a fiction writer had already formed at this early stage. The language is simple and unadorned and his use of adjectives is sparing. 'La Plaza' is narrated in the first person and describes a tragi-comic situation of the narrator, desperate to be alone, finding himself in the company of a man who wants to commit suicide. The humane humour and the outsider perspective of the narrator are reminiscent of Dal Masetto's later contributions to *Página/12*. I quote the first paragraph of the story entire:

El hecho de que ese individuo que hacía ya una hora había venido a sentarse en la otra punta de mi mismo banco acabase de comunicarme que había decidido suicidarse no era lo que más me irritaba. Lo que me había molestado desde el principio era que estuviese allí. Y la seguridad de que, de un momento a otro, volvería a hablar, me haría preguntas o comenzaría a contarme cosas que no me interesaban. En otra oportunidad, quizá, hubiésemos podido charlar e incluso llegar a ser buenos amigos. Pero eran las cinco de la mañana, dentro de poco amanecería, y yo deseaba estar solo. Hubiese podido intentar explicárselo, pero sabía que era inútil. Sin duda volvería a repetirme que había decidido matarse, como si eso lo excusase o le otorgase derechos. Por otra parte, ni en ese momento ni ahora, sabría decir qué me parecía más trágico, en determinadas circunstancias. Si un hombre que decide suicidarse u otro que opta por seguir viviendo. Quizá él estuviese pensando que era merecedor de un poco de compasión y es probable que no le faltase cierta razón. A la larga se acaba por descubrir un insospechado fondo de egoísmo en el propio retiro, esa noche lo vi con bastante claridad. Y aunque esa conciencia no de una certeza – la de ser más fuertes que ese mundo que nos condena a una especie de destierro diario – es también en esa conciencia aislado para siempre. Es eso, pienso, lo que a menudo nos vuelve tan implacables. (pp. 18-19)

Dal Masetto's involvement with the magazine can be seen to develop an important and lasting philosophical approach to his own writing, while his stylistic influences are not obviously derived from the literary heroes of *Eco contemporáneo*. In terms of subject matter, however, his first novel, *Siete de oro* can be described as an Argentine *On the*

Road.²⁵ Dal Masetto may have consolidated his own notion of the life and conduct of the writer through the magazine. As mentioned earlier, Henry Miller was important in this respect.

Gombrowicz was ideologically ambiguous. While Miguel Grinberg described him as a 'fascista', the aspects of Argentina to which he gravitated seemed to imply the kind of 'spiritual communism' Ginsberg was talking about. *Diario argentino* conveys his interest in the underworld of Buenos Aires. 'La Plaza' illustrates that Dal Masetto chose to look to similar aspects of the city: a scene in a public place (la plaza), in the middle of the night and featuring two characters who are on the outskirts of society. In Dal Masetto's later crónicas, he would go on writing stories gleaned from witnessing scenes such as these of Buenos Aires street life.

²⁵ Beatriz Sarlo argues that the novel as a journey is used by Dal Masetto as a motif in a number of his novels, 'La novela como viaje', *Punto de vista*, año VII/No. 21 agosto 1984, p. 27.

Rayuela (1963) to Siete de Oro (1969): comparing Julio Cortázar's cult novel to the first novel published by Antonio Dal Masetto of 'la generación mufada'.

While Cortázar was not being read by the literary mainstream in the early or mid-sixties, he had already published important and influential works which were being read by an alternative literary scene. *Eco contemporáneo* and *El escarabajo de oro* are testimony to this fact. The novel, *Rayuela* (1963), was not at first embraced by critics. When Rodolfo A. Borello came to the defence of *El último round* in 1970 he reminded readers that while *Rayuela* was by then recognised as important, it had also been panned by mainstream critics when it first appeared.¹ In translation, outside of Argentina, it was dismissed by both the *The New York Review of Books* and *The Times Literary Supplement* during the mid-sixties.²

¹ Rodolfo A. Borello 'El último combate de Julio Cortázar,' *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 247 (July 1970), pp. 159-164.

² 'This striving towards a new mode of consciousness, the real subject of the book, will be sympathetically received in Paris, where Señor Cortázar makes his home and where the mark of an "advanced" writer is his search for a pure distillation of consciousness that refuses to concur in any conventional act such as the making of moral judgements. How a life so emptied of significance can engage the interest of a reader of novels, I don't know, but that is the sort of question one doesn't ask. Certainly, to say that *Hopscotch* is monumentally boring would not be felt by its admirers as a disabling criticism, since that, among other things, is what is evidently intended to be, and *vive le sport*.' John Wain, *New York Review of Books*, April 28, 1966, p. 18.

The review published in the *Times Literary Supplement* is similarly scathing. It suggests that Cortázar's good reputation is undeserved, being 'perhaps rather too extravagantly promoted on the Continent and in the United States' and the interest in structure and patterns in the novel are dismissed as 'superficial' and 'unsatisfactory'. *TLS*, March 9, 1967, p. 181.

Yet *Rayuela* can be understood as a highly influential novel. In a sense, it may have served as a kind of manual, or suggested guidelines for the developing writers of the 1960's who were reading Cortázar avidly. Liliana Heker, who reviewed *Rayuela* at the time of its publication in *El escarabajo de oro*, remembers how it was revered by her generation:

Rayuela se instaló entre nosotros como una obra sagrada y cada una de sus palabras fue ubicada en el cielo platónico de la literatura: cuestionarlo era condenarse.³

Through the characters of *Rayuela*, certain principles for writing are implicitly prescribed by Cortázar. Those following these prescriptions can be traced among some Argentine writers who were surfacing at the time. I will take Antonio Dal Masetto's first novel, *Siete de oro*, as an example.⁴ However, while this chapter does propose an influence relation between *Rayuela* and *Siete de oro*, it is also a comparison between the novels which examines affinity as well as a departure.

Cortázar not only offered technical principles for writing, he also offered his own beliefs and questions about the nature of creativity and its relationship to revolutionary politics. I suggest that *Siete de oro* is an implicit critique of *Rayuela* in this respect. *Siete de oro* was the first novel to come out of 'la generación mufada' and is very much written in the spirit of what the *Eco contemporáneo* group understood 'la mufa' to be. As seen in the

³ Liliana Heker, *Las hermanas de Shakespeare* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1999), p. 168.

⁴ In a review published in *Página/12* when *Siete de oro* came out in a second edition in 1991 with Planeta, Rolando Graña mentions novels which were written in the shadow of *Rayuela* and which, he argues, have not stood the test of time: 'Ahora bien ¿quién se acuerda hoy de *Para comerte mejor*, de Gudiño Kieffer, de *Siberia blues*, de Néstor Sanchez y de tantas novelas escritas a la sombra de *Rayuela*', 'Una novela que resiste', *Página/12*, Miércoles 26 junio de 1991, p. 27.

previous chapter 'la generación mufada' claimed literature, not politics, as the saviour to their state of urban depression.

In terms of content, I draw attention to what *Rayuela* and *Siete de oro* have in common at the outset. At the centre of each novel is a writer who is not writing. Oliveira is a middle-aged poet who, in the first half of the novel, finds himself living in Paris where he forms a group of like-minded bohemians who name themselves 'el club de la serpiente'. Together they thrive on a constant stream of intellectual conversation. Oliveira becomes involved with La Maga but when that relationship disintegrates, so does the club. The second half of the novel takes place in Buenos Aires where Oliveira's meditations continue.

The writer in *Siete de oro* is the unnamed narrator of the novel. He is on a road trip to Barriloche with a club-like group of friends. Scenes of Barriloche are interspersed with scenes set in Buenos Aires and relationships with women are alluded to. Like *Rayuela*, the narrative includes conversations, described memories and a certain detached introspection. Both Oliveira and the unnamed narrator of *Siete de oro* are restless, searching for something to quell their unrest. Their lives are transient and hedonistic with no sense of purpose or direction. Family life is rejected in favour of these groups of friends who are anarchic and unconventional. This is a way of living where there are no real emotional ties, not even to the friends or lovers who substitute family life. Both

novels are about these writers' search for their 'elusive salvation' from a life without meaning.⁵

Literary language rejected

As I described in my first chapter, Cortázar appealed to a generation who were immersed in the question of revolution and what it meant to be a revolutionary writer. *Rayuela* explored themes which Cortázar had written about in his non-fiction. In his challenge to Oscar Collazos's essay, 'La encrucijada del lenguaje', he championed literary innovation and excellence and made a distinction between the potentially flat literature of revolutionaries and the much more exciting potential of 'Che Guevaras de literatura': writers in the world of literature who were the equivalent to Che Guevaras in the world of radical politics. This sentiment is described in the novel. In chapter 79, Morelli, a fictional author whose notes on the nature of writing are inserted in the text, discusses the need for 'mensajeros' in the novel as opposed to 'mensajes'. The implication here is that in order for literature to change people's consciousness, it must do so in a way that is integral to the writing or the writer himself, rather than through the message it conveys. The creative act of reading must induce this shift. Morelli likens a message with no messenger to the meaninglessness of the idea of love if there is no-one who is actually doing the loving.

Una narrativa que no sea pretexto para la transmisión de un "mensaje" (no hay mensaje, hay mensajeros y eso es el mensaje, así como el amor es el que ama); una narrativa que actúe como coagulante de vivencias, como catalizadora de nociones confusas y mal entendidas, y que incida en primer término en

⁵ This phrase is taken from Jason Wilson's essay 'Julio Cortázar and the Drama of Reading': '*Hopscotch* remains a novel about elusive salvation', *Modern Latin American Fiction: A Survey*, ed. John King (London: Faber, 1987), p. 182.

el que la escribe, para lo cual hay que escribirla como antinovela porque todo orden cerrado dejará sistemáticamente afuera esos anuncios que pueden volvernos mensajeros, acercarnos a nuestros propios límites de los que tan lejos estamos cara a cara.⁶

This principle informs the novel, rejecting artificial literature with the accusation that it induces apathy. Literature must be integrated with real life in order to incite activity and shifts in consciousness. Cortázar meant this in a political sense.

Through his characters, Cortázar explores the need to revolutionise the building blocks of literature: language itself. In discussions in the text, there is a commitment to linguistic cleansing and a determination to employ the language that people use everyday, throwing out unnecessarily decorative, self-consciously literary words. In chapter 112, in a letter to Morelli, Oliveira writes:

lo que me repele en “emprendió el descenso” es el uso decorativo de un verbo y un sustantivo que no empleamos casi nunca en el habla corriente; en suma, me repele el lenguaje literario. (p. 358)

This is a continuation of, or a prequel to, depending in which order you are reading, a discussion in chapter 99 in which Ronald talks about Morelli's desire that language should be returned to its simple roots. To use 'bajar' instead of 'descender' when 'descender' is not necessary, to use 'descender' when it is entirely appropriate and not just for decorative effect. Language should be simple and direct and not only that, it must also reflect national identity. The linguistic style of writing in *Rayuela* has a strong Argentine identity, rather than what might be perceived as a more 'literary' Spanish

⁶ Julio Cortázar, *Rayuela* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1970), p. 453. Henceforth all other page references to *Rayuela* will be made within the text.

identity. In fact, Spanish culture is mocked by Oliveira. He parodies a dialogue between two Spaniards in his notebook:

DIÁLOGO TÍPICO DE ESPAÑOLES

López. -- Yo he vivido un año entero en Madrid. Verá usted, era en 1925, y...

Pérez. -- ¿En Madrid? Pues precisamente le decía yo ayer al doctor García...

López. -- De 1925 a 1926, en que fui profesor de literatura en la Universidad.

Pérez. -- Le decía yo: "Hombre, todo el que haya vivido en Madrid sabe lo que es eso."

López. -- Una cátedra especialmente creada para mí para que pudiera dictar mis cursos de Literatura.

Pérez. -- Exacto, exacto. Pues ayer mismo le decía yo al doctor García, que es muy amigo mío ...

López. -- Y claro, cuando se ha vivido allí más de un año, uno sabe muy bien que el nivel de los estudios deja mucho que desear.

Pérez. -- Es un hijo de Paco García, que fue ministro de Comercio, y que criaba toros.

López. -- Una vergüenza, créame usted, una verdadera vergüenza.

Pérez. -- Sí, hombre, ni qué hablar. Pues este doctor García...

Oliveira estaba ya un poco aburrido del diálogo, y cerró el cuaderno. (p. 280)

In the circularity and self-referential nature of this conversation Cortázar, through Oliveira, is satirising the superiority and insularity of Spanish culture as well as highlighting a lack of engagement with modern times. In contrast, a version of the Spanish language is established which bypasses Iberian culture and has more inflections of Parisian slang and Argentine lunfardo than Castilian Spanish.

Cortázar emphatically uses 'Vos' as opposed to the Spanish 'tú'. So does Dal Masetto in *Siete de oro*, although he gives the impression that this is not a stance to make the novel emphatically Argentine. Moreover, it is in keeping with Cortázar's precedent that literature should reflect the everyday in its use of language. While perhaps Cortázar may

be all the more Argentine in his style because he is the exile writing outside of Argentina, Dal Masetto seems to be demonstrating the sentiment of Gombrowicz's assertion in his *Diario argentino* - that an Argentine literature will be born when Argentine writers stop asking themselves what it means to be an Argentine writer. This seems to aptly describe the sense of Argentinidad in *Siete de oro*. It is not emphatic, rather it emerges unselfconsciously.

Fragmentation and the open work

Rayuela is a fragmented novel with an open structure and lack of obvious plot. On the opening page of the novel the reader is invited to either choose his or her own sequence of chapters or to follow the haphazard sequence recommended by the 'Tablero de dirección' where, to begin with, chapter 73 is followed by chapter 1 and so on. A collage effect is created not only by this anarchic structure but also because every so often fragments of seemingly unrelated text are injected into the narrative. These can be quotes from other writers, song lyrics, absurd or random thoughts or extracts from newspapers or magazines. Chapter 130, for example, consists of an article from *The Observer*, London, quoted in English, which advises what to do if a boy gets his foreskin trapped in the zip of his flies.

This kind of fragmentation was echoed by Dal Masetto in *Siete de oro*. A number of chapters in the novel are seemingly unrelated interruptions which could exist as isolated and self-contained short stories. Indeed two of them are published in anthologies and

lack nothing from being outside the context of the novel.⁷ I propose that this characteristic is evidence of an influence relation between *Rayuela* and *Siete de oro*. I would argue that Dal Masetto would not have been able to adopt such an open structure in *Siete de oro* had *Rayuela* not gone before.

For Cortázar, this use of fragmentation may have been the literary analogue to the use of collage in Surrealist painting as well as to the Surrealist notion of the 'objet trouvé'.⁸ Perhaps it was also the literary analogue to the freedom of jazz. Martin Luther King at the Berlin Jazz festival of 1964 talked about jazz as a much needed expression for not only black Americans but also for Modern man.⁹ Certainly Cortázar was breaking the confines of the novel as an inadequate genre to express the climate of the time. In the notebook he kept while composing *Rayuela* he writes emphatically:

De ningún modo admitir que esto pueda llamarse una novela. Llamale 'subtítulo' ALMANAQUE¹⁰

Rayuela ends like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), with an awareness that a modern work of art does not finish itself, which arguably is the inbuilt logic of fragmentation. Cortázar

⁷ 'Vanda', chapter 13 of *Siete de oro* appears in *Veinte nuevos narradores argentinos*, ed. Néstor Sánchez. (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1970), pp. 27-43.

'La Gallega', chapter 4, appears in *Los mejores cuentos de argentinos de hoy*, ed. Juan Carlos Martini (Buenos Aires: Editorial Rayuela, 1971), pp. 253-266.

⁸ André Breton writes about this use of collage in the work of Lautréamont in his essay, 'Le Surréalisme et la peinture'. *Surrealism and Painting*. Translated by Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 4.

⁹ Geoff Dyer, *But Beautiful* (London: Cape, 1991), p. 175:

'I think the human race today may be going through things it never experienced before, types of nervous frustration and thwarted emotional development which traditional music is entirely incapable of not only satisfying by expressing. That's why I believe jazz is the new music that came along just in time [...] in particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man.'

¹⁰ Julio Cortázar, Ana María Barrenechea, *Cuaderno de Bitácora de Rayuela* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1983), p. 166.

breaks the enchantment of reading in *Rayuela* so as not to give into the traditional escapism and apathy of the reading bourgeoisie. Indeed, this effect is achieved. We are repeatedly reminded that we are reading, wrenched out of the novel by its sudden interruptions and self-conscious style. Alternatively, on the whole, the fragmentation in *Siete de oro* is more half-hearted. The fragmentation is much more a flirtation with an aesthetic effect rather than an attempt to break the enchantment of reading.

‘Existencialistas criollos’¹¹

Rayuela and *Siete de oro* are existentialist novels, existentialist in the sense that they are concerned with existence and with the nature of freedom and free will. The novels depict characters in limbo, living in a state of suspension, without roots or a permanent sense of home. In the Parisian half of the novel, Oliveira stays the night with La Maga but not as her long-term partner. They go from one friend’s house or pensión to another. The members of ‘el club de la serpiente’ and the club-like group of characters from *Siete de oro* exist by borrowing money from friends or from relatives to live from day to day. The narrator of *Siete de oro* describes a totally rootless lifestyle with ex-partner, Bruna, in Buenos Aires:

Ahora podía ver con qué poco se había construido todo. Siempre sin plata, siempre a la persecución de una cama. Vista desde afuera, nuestra actividad parecía limitarse a eso. Los amigos, los pocos que teníamos, nos veían ir y venir, aparecer y desaparecer, como si escondiéramos algún secreto. Nuestra única arma era esa complicidad silenciosa. Carmela, una

¹¹ This term was coined by Rolando Graña in his review:

‘Por cierto, hay personajes hoy casi impensables: los principales personajes del libro hablan y piensan (aunque nunca lo digan ni citen texto alguno de Sartre o Camus) como existencialistas criollos. Deambulan, evocan, se demoran en las cosas con una capacidad de introspección que el tiempo, la decadencia del psicoanálisis o simplemente la televisión abolió en los jóvenes de hoy.’

amiga de Bruna, a cuya casa íbamos para bañarnos o comer, nos preguntaba: “Por dónde andan? Dónde hacen el amor?”. Había de todo. Horas pasadas en mesas de cafés, con un vaso de vino delante. Mañanas odiosas en que despertábamos sin saber qué haríamos ese día, la luz filtrándose por la ventana, yo poniéndome serio, bostezando, diciéndole como en un juego: Amor, es ahora o jamás. Tardes enteras sentados en un cine de barrio viendo tres películas del Oeste, policiales, dramas, comedias.¹²

Rayuela and *Siete de oro* are novels imbued with a melancholy which is derived from a sense of exile. Oliveira experiences literal exile, as Cortázar did, an Argentine living in Paris. But he also experiences internal exile. He is unable to make lasting or intimate connections with other characters in the novel, even when he returns to Buenos Aires. Throughout *Rayuela* there is a heavy sense of loss and solitude; a kind of solipsism where there can be no faith in the other and no purpose to investing in human bonds. In this way Oliveira is an outsider, not just geographically but spiritually and emotionally. The same kind of internal exile can be said of the narrator of *Siete de oro*. In fact, the entire novel can be seen as centred on this problem of being an outsider. In memory, the narrator is even an outsider in his own family:

Mi madre desde la cocina preguntaba si queríamos café. ¿Se dirigía a mí? Tenía la sensación de que no era conmigo con quien estaba jugando, de que no era a mí a quien servían cuando me sentaba a la mesa, sino a aquel otro que se había ido hacía tiempo y en cuya representación y aparecía de vez en cuando. (p. 56).

Much of *Siete de oro* poses this question of how to escape detachment, how to reconnect and reinvest in an emotional life, not just with other people but also with the self.

¹² Antonio Dal Masetto, *Siete de oro* (Buenos Aires: 1st edition 1969, this edition Planeta, 1991), p. 180. Henceforth all other page references will be made within the text.

At the end of chapter five Dal Masetto's narrator describes some stones at the side of the lake:

Después poco a poco comencé a distinguir las piedras. Pero se me aparecían alejadas, como cubiertos por una capa de celuloide. Sin embargo, tal vez por eso, más nítidas, definidas, como si fuese la primera vez que las veía. Me puse de rodillas y comencé a tocarlas una a una. (p. 59).

This could remind us of the scene from *La Nausée* when Roquentin looks at the roots of a tree and is stigmatised by a similar, although perhaps more intense, kind of detachment. He too is distant from this natural object, obstructed by a sense of heightened self-consciousness like the 'capa de celuloide' in the extract above.

I was in the municipal park just now. The root of the chestnut tree plunged into the ground just underneath my bench. I no longer remembered that it was a root. Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, slightly bent, my head bowed, alone in front of that black, knotty mass, which was utterly crude and frightened me.¹³

Yet this detachment is not simply written as realist psychological profiling of these characters: Oliveira, the narrator of *Siete de oro* or Roquentin. Rather, it is an effect created by Cortázar, Dal Masetto and Sartre designed to provoke a certain reaction in the reader. It acts in a similar way to the fragmentation found in *Rayuela* and *Siete de oro*. The reader is not able to escape passively and unquestioningly into literature. This detachment and solipsism raises serious questions. How can we believe in or have faith in the other? How do we trust that love, romantic love, is not just something we can only

¹³ Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938, trans. from the French by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 182.

read about in novels? These writers do not allow their readers the comfort of being reassured in beliefs he or she might otherwise take for granted.

Los ríos metafísicos – muses from the underworld

Nevertheless, potential objects of love, or at least objects of human connection, in these novels are given a great significance. The first chapter of *Rayuela* is addressed to 'La Maga', Oliveira's girlfriend in Paris. At other points in the novel she is dismissed by Oliveira as a silly and emotional woman but in this opening chapter he is searching for her. In this instance La Maga is an awesome and mystical figure who is feared by Oliveira.

Nunca te llevé a que madame Léonie te mirara la palma de la mano, a lo mejor tuve miedo de que leyera en tu mano alguna verdad sobre mí, porque fuiste siempre un espejo terrible, una espantosa máquina de repeticiones, y lo que llamamos amarnos fue quizá que yo estaba de pie delante de vos, con una flor amarilla en la mano, y vos sostenías dos velas verdes y el tiempo soplaba contra nuestras caras una lenta lluvia de renunciadas y despedidas y tickets de metro. (p. 17)

This is almost poetry, an elegy - the language is open. What does it mean that Oliveira was standing before La Maga with a yellow flower in his hand and that she replied to him with two green flames? In a sense they are speaking in different symbols. Two people trying to communicate with each other but failing to do so and this creates a feeling of loss and of melancholy.

The fourth chapter of *Siete de oro*, is addressed to a similar kind of figure; a woman from the seedy underside of the city. It is an inserted episode which relates the narrator's first experience of Buenos Aires as a young man. He arrives to the city from the provinces and is introduced to a pensión which is run by a woman whom he refers to as 'La Gallega'. The first sight of her pensión is of bedbugs being burnt from the springs of a bed. He is nineteen and she is older, married with a husband and two daughters. When the narrator is unable to pay for his board she propositions him and he accepts: no-strings-attached sex in return for free food and board. The narrator paints La Gallega as a ruthless, jealous and pathetic woman although, despite these attributes, or perhaps because of them, his encounter with her becomes valued and important.

'La Maga' and 'La Gallega' seem to have similar symbolic functions. They are both representative of underworlds. Through them the narrator of *Siete de oro* and Oliveira are in touch with a baseness and sensuality which is linked by both Dal Masetto and by Cortázar to a kind of vitality and passion for writing. The figure of 'La Gallega', despite being a sordid and unpleasant character, becomes a necessary muse to the narrator:

Trato de recuperarte, te necesito de esos años oscuros, quiero hacer algo con ellos, quiero construir o destruir, pero hacer algo. Voy labrando mi pasado de la misma forma que trabajo mi futuro. En ese mundo de malos olores, ratas, chinches y cucarachas, tu cuerpo aparece a veces como una luna pálida, irradia un poco de claridad alrededor. Tu cuerpo es mi bandera en el recuerdo confuso de esos días. No abre ningún horizonte, no redime nada, pero es lo único claro, ondea como una sábana, se mantiene, oscila, no quiere decaer. (p. 47)

Similarly, La Maga is linked to a creative source. She is immersed in what Oliveira refers to as 'los ríos metafísicos' while he can only experience them by standing on the

bridge as they pass by. Oliveira cannot 'participate' in them although they seem to lead to the authenticity he is seeking as an artist.

Yo describo y defino y deseo esos ríos, ella los nada. Yo los busco, los encuentro, los miro desde el puente, ella los nada. Y no lo sabe, igualita a la golondrina. No necesita saber como yo, puede vivir en el desorden que es su orden misterioso, esa bohemia del cuerpo y el alma que le abre de par en par las verdaderas puertas. (p. 116)

In this way Cortázar, through Oliveira, is championing contact with 'los ríos metafísicos', being in touch with this aspect of human life. This theme seems to be crucial with respect to the two novels in question.

I return here to Miguel Grinberg's definition mentioned in chapter 1 of what it means to be in 'la mufa': seeing what others do not want to see, feeling what others do not want to feel and having no outlet for their creative energies. The definition of this state is reflected in *Siete de oro*, the narrator could certainly be said to be in 'la mufa', in the company of a group of people who can also themselves be said to be in 'la mufa'.

Although, I would argue that Grinberg's definition is also a fitting description of the character of Oliveira in *Rayuela*. These are characters who see what others do not want to see, who feel what others do not want to feel and perhaps, most importantly, the narrator of *Siete de oro* and Oliveira 'no tiene(n) dónde aplicar sus energías creadoras': they are writers who are not writing. They are also men who do not, or cannot, love. And 'los ríos metafísicos' seem to connect these two things: love and writing. If Oliveira and the narrator of *Siete de oro* were to believe that love was not just a fiction to be

indulged in by the fantasist reader, then they would be swimming in the 'ríos metafísicos'
– the true path to creativity.

Dal Masetto's protagonist has a short-term relationship with the character Eva, a friend of Luisa and Dardo, the couple he is with in Barriloché. While she becomes emotionally involved, he remains cut off. Eva comments that he is a man who can invoke love, although he cannot feel love himself:

Eva me tomó de la mano, me llevó hasta la ventana y me preguntó cómo la estaba pasando. Me besó.

-Yo te quiero mucho a vos -dijo.

Dije que era lindo saberlo.

-A vos siempre te han querido. Estoy segura. Sos vos el incapaz. (p. 167).

Oliveira has a conversation with La Maga in which he too rejects falling into patterns of emotion, love and relationships:

-No te veo llorando - dijo la Maga-. Para vos sería como un desperdicio.

-Alguna vez he llorado.

-De rabia, solamente. Vos no sabés llorar, Horacio, es una de las cosas que no sabés.

Oliveira atrajo a la Maga y la sentó en las rodillas. Pensó que el olor de la Maga, de la nuca de la Maga, lo entristecía. Ese mismo olor que antes... "Buscar a través de", pensó confusamente. "Sí, es una de las cosas que no sé hacer, eso de llorar y compadecerme."

- Nunca nos quisimos - le dijo besándola en el pelo.

-No hablé por mí - dijo la Maga cerrando los ojos -. Vos no podés saber si yo te quiero o no. Ni siquiera eso podés saber. (pp. 105-6)

But instinct threatens to get through to Oliveira (as well as to the reader) in the description of her primeval smell: 'el olor de la Maga, de la nuca de la Maga' and it makes him sad and nostalgic, it brings a sense of loss. Oliveira is not a young man and

La Maga is not his first love. But the connection with this aspect of La Maga and himself is halted, interrupted. He leaves his fleeting thought, “‘Buscar a través de’”, undeveloped, blurred, confused. Perhaps ‘looking behind’ would be connecting with the self and with emotion, threatening the composure of indifference.

This indifference and impotence in the face of love finds a history in the existentialist novels of Sartre and Camus. In *La Nausée*, Roquentin’s sexual relations with women are without ties or real emotional engagement:

She never says no and I follow her into one of the big bedrooms on the first floor, which she rents by the hour or by the day. I don’t pay her: we make love on an *au pair* basis. She enjoys it (she has to have a man a day and she has many more beside me) and I purge myself in this way of a certain melancholy whose cause I know only too well. But we barely exchange a few words. (p. 17)

In *L’Etranger* Meursault is similarly detached. He agrees to marry Marie but freely admits that he does not love her. Their clash of perspectives has an almost comic effect:

That evening, Marie came round for me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said I didn’t mind and we could do it if she wanted to. She then wanted to know if I loved her. I replied as I had done once already, that it didn’t mean anything but that I probably didn’t. ‘Why marry me then?’ she said. I explained to her that it really didn’t matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Anyway, she was the one who was asking me and I was simply saying yes. She then remarked that marriage was a serious matter. I said, ‘No.’ She didn’t say anything for a moment and looked at me in silence. Then she spoke. She just wanted to know if I’d have accepted the same proposal if it had come from another woman, with whom I had a similar relationship. I said, ‘Naturally.’ She then said she wondered if she loved me and well, I had no idea about that. After another moment’s silence, she mumbled that I was peculiar, that that was probably why she loved

me but that one day I might disgust her for that reason. I didn't say anything, having nothing to add, so she smiled and took my arm and announced that she wanted to marry me. ¹⁴

In his cult study (*The Outsider* of 1956) Colin Wilson, the alternative British critic much quoted by the *Eco contemporáneo* magazine as representative of 'el hombre marginal', linked the inability to love in the characters of Roquentin and Meursault to freedom and the sense of unreality that a certain kind of freedom can bring:

The last pages of the novel have revealed Meursault's secret; the reason for his indifference is *his sense of unreality*. All his life he has lived with the same sense as Roquentin: *All this is unreal*. But the sense of unreality doesn't torment him [...] He accepts life; sunlight, food, girls' bodies; he also accepts the unreality. It is the trial that pulls him up, 'with a brutal thunderclap of Halt' (Well's phrase). The prospect of death has *wakened him up*, thereby serving the same function as Roquentin's nausea. It has, admittedly, wakened him up too late as far as he is concerned. But at least it has given him a notion of the meaning of freedom. Freedom is release from unreality. ¹⁵

Later Wilson suggests that 'Love is impossible when there is a prevailing sense of unreality' (p. 44) and while Sartre proposes that this sense of unreality can be broken by terror ('freedom is terror'), Wilson argues that it is not terror but crisis which breaks unreality and sets men free. (p. 43).

A dead baby and poetry

I now turn to two episodes of crisis in *Rayuela* and *Siete de oro*. Interestingly they both concern the death, or the near death, of babies. In chapter 28 of *Rayuela*, La Maga's child, Rocamadour, dies and Oliveira is the first to discover that he is dead. In chapter 14

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. from the French by Joseph Laredo (London, Penguin: 1981), pp. 44-5.

¹⁵ Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (London, Picador: 1978), p. 40. Henceforth all other page references will be cited in the text.

of *Siete de oro* the child of Dardo and Luisa, Pedro, is found by the narrator, drowned in a shallow tank of water. He attempts to revive the child before alerting the other characters. In the end, in contrast to Rocamadour's death, Pedro survives.

When Oliveira realises that Rocamadour has died, there is an incomprehensible putting off of coping with the situation. He knows that he should turn on the lights, begin the whole process of alerting La Maga and attempting to revive Rocamadour but he chooses not to, deeming it to be pointless:

La mano de Horacio se deslizó entre las sábanas, le costaba un esfuerzo terrible tocar el diminuto vientre de Rocamadour, los muslos fríos, más arriba parecía haber como un resto de calor pero no, estaba tan frío. "Calzar en el molde", pensó Horacio. "Gritar, encender la luz, armar la de mil demonios normal y obligatoria. ¿Por qué?" Pero a lo mejor, todavía... "Entonces quiere decir que este instinto no me sirve de nada, esto que estoy sabiendo desde abajo. Si pego el grito es de nuevo Berthe Trépat, de nuevo la estúpida tentativa, la lástima. Calzar en el guante, hacer lo que debe hacerse en esos casos. Ah no, basta. ¿Para qué encender la luz y gritar si sé que no sirve para nada? (p. 176)

Instead Ronald and Babs arrive with news of a suicide attempt made by an acquaintance, Guy. Unmoved, they gossip about Guy being revived in hospital. Like Camus's Meursault who refuses to pretend to show emotion that he does not feel about his mother's death, Oliveira's response to Rocamadour's death is similarly unconventional.

The scene of Rocamadour's death further affirms and intensifies the distaste for family life that is found throughout the novel. Oliveira relates to La Maga's identity as a mother in hostile terms. He shows disgust for her when she has changed Rocamadour's nappy:

La Maga tapó a su hijo que berreaba un poco menos, y se frotó las manos con un algodón.
- Por favor lavate las manos como Dios manda - dijo Oliveira - . Y sacá toda esa porquería de ahí.
[...]*Desde hace días estás convertida en lo que se llama una madre.* (pp. 100-1)

‘Madre’ almost becomes a dirty word. Yet being in the presence of La Maga with Rocamadour seems to provoke feelings of loss in Oliveira at same time as an anxiety that if instinct (the parenting instinct) is given into, then it will obliterate the intellect. Oliveira struggles to tolerate the two co-existing.¹⁶

Me dolía reconocer que a golpes sintéticos, a pantallazos maniqueos o a estúpidas dicotomías resecas no podía abrirme paso por las escalinatas de la Gare de Montparnasse adonde me arrastraba la Maga para visitar a Rocamadour. ¿Por qué no aceptar lo que estaba ocurriendo sin pretender explicarlo, sin sentar las nociones de orden y de desorden, de libertad y Rocamadour como quien distribuye macetas con geranios en un patio de la calle Cochabamba? Tal vez fuera necesario caer en lo más profundo de la estupidez para acertar con el picaporte de la letrina o del Jardín de los Olivos. (p. 28)

and

...estoy condenado sin apelación, pronto a ese cadalso azul al que me izan las manos de la mujer cuidando a su hijo, pronto la pena, pronto el orden mentido de estar solo y recobrar la suficiencia, la egociencia, la conciencia. Y con tanta ciencia una inútil ansia de tener lástima de algo, de que

¹⁶ The critic, Steven Boldy, suggests that Rocamadour is associated with the body which is being neglected while la Maga and Oliveira are tending to, what is to them, the more important matter of culture, *The Novels of Julio Cortázar* (Cambridge University Press: 1980), p. 35:

‘La Maga is in many ways ‘body’ [...] I believe that her real body is her sick child Rocamadour, denied by La Maga and Oliveira in favour of culture: la Maga sends him off to the country *nourrice* whenever her penchant for singing Hugo Wolf is most active, and for Oliveira, he had been a “bucket of cold water, he didn’t know why” (37:4). There are constant references which relate Rocamadour to excrement and evil smells, to which Oliveira reacts with alternating rejection and repression [...] Rocamadour dies, in one sense, as a result of this repression and neglect, but it is here that what might be termed scatological redemption begins.[...]After the death of Rocamadour, a reminder of the urgency of the situation, there is an increasing emphasis on excrement right up to the end of Oliveira’s stay in Paris, corresponding to an increasing rejection of culture, which is insistently associated with Buenos Aires and the Argentinians, described as a “race of full-time readers”. The baby, in Cortázar’s mind, is unpolluted by too much reading.

llueva aquí dentro, de que por fin empiece a llover, a oler a tierra, a cosas vivas, sí, por fin a cosas vivas. (p. 117)

Family life, in particular a child, can interfere with the freedom of the artist. In the first quote above order is set up against disorder and freedom is set up against Rocamadour. This recalls the English novelist, Cyril Connolly's famous assertion that 'the pram in the hallway is the enemy of good art'. And yet, symbolically, the figure of Rocamadour also seems to be the root of art itself. Being in the presence of La Maga and her baby has the power to break a sense of unreality and to create connection with living things, 'cosas vivas'. Oliveira talks about being saved by the smell of his pee: 'Lo único que me va salvando es el olor a pis de este chico.' (p. 97). Rocamadour is associated by Oliveira with instinct and, arguably, love. This, in turn, is connected to writing:

No quiero escribir sobre Rocamadour, por lo menos hoy, necesitaría tanto acercarme mejor a mí mismo, dejar caer todo eso que me separa del centro. Acabo siempre aludiendo al centro sin la menor garantía de saber lo que digo (p.28)

To be in touch with Rocamadour, as La Maga is, is to be swimming in the metaphysical rivers. For Oliveira, to write about Rocamadour is to get closer to the centre of himself and to the centre itself, although he does not know what that centre may be. Neither can he quite face it. This recalls the fear of André Breton when confronted with the real access to Nadja and her contact with the unconscious - so terrifying he flees it.¹⁷

¹⁷ 'How many times, unable to endure it any longer, desperate to restore her to a true conception of her worth, I virtually fled from her presence hoping to find her, the next day, as she could be when she herself was not desperately blaming my strictness and seeking forgiveness. In these deplorable respects, however, it must be admitted that she spared me less and less, and that finally we could not avoid violent discussions which she aggravated by attributing them to trivial causes which did not exist.' André Breton, *Nadja*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard with an Introduction by Mark Polizzotti. (London: Penguin, 1st edition 1960, this edition, 1999), p. 135.

Siete de oro echoes the spirit of *Rayuela*; the same bid for freedom. It describes characters who challenge conventional notions of family life. Like Oliveira and the Club in Paris, the characters of *Siete de oro* form a similar alternative to the nuclear family. This was the Surrealist ideal; to live the poet's life unfettered by family ties or conventional roles in society. For the Surrealist, the traditional nuclear family only served to reinforce conservative and bourgeois values. The narrator of *Siete de oro* hangs around a group of peers where there are practically no generational differences, although Dardo and Luisa do have a young child. However, in the case of both novels the bonds between characters fail to actually make a replacement for family life, because of the distance and detachment that affects many of characters, most especially in the main protagonists of the novels.

Two abortions take place in *Siete de oro*, the abortion of Eva's friend, Patricia, which in turn triggers the memory of the abortion of Bruna and the narrator's child. He recalls the episode. They borrowed money for Bruna to have the abortion and return to a temporary home of the narrator's *pensión* while she recovers. The chapter ends with the narrator lying in the bed with Bruna:

Pensé que estábamos juntos en nuestra cueva, que estábamos bien. Pensé que nunca más debíamos salir de allí. Pero Bruna no dormía. Abrió los ojos, frotó la cabeza contra mi mejilla.
- ¿Sabes una cosa? -dijo-. Tengo ganas de hacer el amor.
- Loca - le dije. Descansá. Y sobre todo tratá de no moverte. (p.137)

With this dialogue comes a sense that everything will begin again, ending up with the same situation - an unwanted pregnancy, an abortion and so on. The outlook is a pessimistic one with no real hope or faith in a good future. Like the death of Rocamadour, these unwanted pregnancies become symbolic of this pessimism. And yet the near death episode of Pedro, the child of Luisa and Dardo, stands out against Cortázar's bleak picture.

When the narrator discovers Pedro he attempts to resuscitate him, not knowing exactly how to, but guided by something instinctual: 'Había leído en alguna revista acerca de ese tipo de respiración artificial. No tenía idea de cómo se practicaba. Me remití a lo elemental' (p.152). At first the child does not seem to respond but after a while, he begins to show signs of recovery so the narrator calls for others to come to his help. This is in contrast to the puzzling lack of action of Oliveira, Babs, Ronald and Gregorovious when Rocamadour dies. In Cortázar's scene, no attempt at revival is made. In Dal Masetto's scene there is an attempt to bring Pedro back to life and he does in fact survive. It also becomes an epiphanic moment for the narrator. He returns from the hospital and witnesses the house he left like a scene frozen in time. At first he narrates with the same familiar detached perspective we encounter throughout most of the novel:

Entré por la ventana, prendí el farol y recorrí las habitaciones. La mesa estaba preparada, sin tocar, igual que al mediodía. En un costado, el vaso de vino que yo no había terminado, el libro. Había una silla derribada en medio del comedor: una silla de paja con la madera sin pintar. Me quedé con el farol en la mano, espiando ese mundo en reposo. Miraba los platos y los vasos brillar en los bordes, el pan, los cubiertos, el lugar destinado a Pedro. Me sentí como quien recorre a escondidas el escenario de un crimen. Aquella quietud me hacía pensar en un gran acto de violencia, en la ruptura de un orden. Tuve la impresión de que algo había golpeado de pronto el

lugar, por sorpresa. Y lo que quedaba era un montón de objetos sin sentido, abandonados a sí mismos como hubiese en un desierto, como si cada una de esas cosas hubiese vuelto a su estado primero, a un reino de silencio. Estas ideas me dieron frío. (p. 155)

and then this detached perspective begins to shift:

Había visto con qué rapidez todo aquello, objetos y sombras, paredes y muebles, incorporados a una imagen de paz, cargadas de significado, había sufrido un retroceso; se habían convertido en cosas muertas. Había visto esa quietud, la estaba viendo punto por punto a la luz escasa del farol, y era como un aviso. (p. 156).

This 'aviso' can be understood as a warning against indifference. This brush with death (Pedro's) is the kind of crisis which Wilson refers to. It seems to connect the narrator to life again, to Pedro's future but also to a symbolic future which does not exist in other parts of the novel.

Pensé: Derroté a la muerte. [...] Pensé y me lo repetí, que había sido yo quien lo había sacado de aquel hoyo de agua sucia. Que nadie, salvo yo, sabía lo que sentí en el momento de apoyar mi boca contra la suya, al contacto de aquellos labios vencidos, cuando tomé impulso desde mi pecho y lancé la primera bocanada, cuando recurrí a aquel soplo de aire gastado para intentar recuperar para él todo un futuro, dichoso o desgraciado, pero cargado de acontecimientos y posibilidades. (p. 157)

The experience connects the narrator to memories of Bruna, which is, perhaps, one of the few allusions in the novel to a once loved object:

De esa confrontación de vida y muerte surgía un balance de cosas pasadas, nuevamente la cara de Bruna, los años perdidos. (p. 158)

El balbuceo

What does it mean that Pedro survives and Rocamadour dies? The language associated with Rocamadour by Cortázar is interesting, starting with his name. Within the word is ‘amador’, reminiscent of ‘amor’ and this is significant. Rocamadour is associated with love. He is also pre-language and communicates with La Maga with sounds but without words. When she is feeding him, she coaxes him by also speaking a kind of baby language:

Revolviendo la leche fue hasta la cama y trató de hacer tomar unas cucharadas a Rocamadour. Rocamadour chilló y se negó, la leche le caía por el pescuezo. “Topitopitopi” decía la Maga con voz de hipnotizadora de reparto de premios. “Topitopitopi”, procurando acertar una cucharada en la boca de Rocamadour que estaba rojo y no quería beber (pp. 152-3)

This is perhaps the root of poetry, primeval sound and rhythm which at times takes precedence over the meaning of the words themselves. Cortázar wrote sparingly on the act of writing but what he did write endorses this idea. In the introduction to *Último round* (1969) he observes no ‘diferencia genética’ between poetry and the short story. This affinity could be extended to his prose in general. On the source or essence of his short stories Cortázar wrote:

...la verdad es que en mis cuentos no hay el menor mérito *literario*, el menor esfuerzo. Si algunos se salvan del olvido es porque he sido capaz de recibir y transmitir sin demasiadas pérdidas esas latencias de una psiquis profunda, y el resto es una cierta veteranía para no falsear el misterio, conservarlo lo más cerca posible de su fuente, con su temblor original, su balbuceo arquetípico. ¹⁸

The ‘balbuceo’ is the babbling which babies make before they have learned to talk. It can be likened to the infant’s (and indeed the adult writer’s) stammering in their struggle

¹⁸ Julio Cortázar, *Final del juego*, edición de Jaime Alazraki (Madrid: Anaya, 1995), pp. 15-16.

to express primitive emotion within the constraints and limits of language and the spoken word. The words are not an end unto themselves, just a medium. As Cortázar writes in this same essay, language is just ‘un teléfono de palabras’.

If this is so, then the death of Rocamadour is the death of the true poet and the death of the potential poet in Oliveira. And when the true poet dies, so does everything else: ‘el club de la serpiente’ and Oliveira’s life in Paris, the relationship with La Maga, La Maga herself disappears and it is suggested that she has committed suicide. Some readers may even interpret the end of *Rayuela* as Oliveira’s suicide.

After the episode of Pedro drowning in *Siete de oro*, a chapter (18) ensues in which the narrator is engaged with emotion as well as with words. Although this optimism is perhaps not sustained until the end of the novel, Dal Masetto may be proposing that this is where freedom, if only momentarily, can be found. The imagery associated with being on a ship out at sea creates a sense of liberation, most particularly a liberation from detachment:

Hay palabras que a veces acuden y acuden. Palabras como sotavento, barlovento, mesana. Son voces de mi juventud, sonidos que todavía me pertenecen. He hecho lo mío olvidado de esta riqueza. He tenido mujer, un hijo, he odiado, luchado, participado. Y de pronto me enfrento con este olor de sal tan viejo como mis deseos. Lo aspiro en un balcón, sobre una calle del barrio San Telmo, en una cocina donde abundan las cucarachas y generalmente escasea la comida. Y me sorprende como la primera vez me sorprendió la descripción de un aparejo o una vela. Esta casa tiene la proa vuelta al sudeste. Está mal de aspecto, la castigaron demasiadas lluvias, pero sigue firme en sus cimientos, las paredes han sido levantadas según métodos antiguos, las puertas giran sin problemas sobre sus bisagras, encastran en sus marcos como mi cuerpo encastra en el cuerpo de la mujer con la cual me entiendo. [...] Esta noche, al acostarme sobre las sábanas grises, además del fragor de los motores, además de la charla inútil de los muchachos que se reúnen en la

esquina hasta la madrugada, tal vez haya un rumor de cordaje en mi pieza. [...] La memoria tiene la forma de una estría donde sigo arrojando cosas rotas. También la mano del amigo que hace media hora se apoyó sobre mi brazo ha quedado atrás, pertenece a la misma espuma. En mi mente subsisten sonidos como ecuador, trinquete, foque, sextante. Lo que llama desde la noche no son sólo sirenas de ambulancias, gatos en celo, ecos de carnaval. Fumo mi último cigarrillo a la luz del velador, espero, escribo. (pp. 187-8)

At the end of this passage, the narrator is waiting/hoping and writing (again) and these verbs are significant. They indicate hope and a future for the writer. He inhabits words like 'sotavento, barlovento, mesana' and 'ecuador, trinquete, foque, sextante' but not because of their meaning. Rather, he is like a Dylan Thomas: 'I had fallen in love with words...what the words stood for, symbolised or meant was of very secondary importance. What mattered was the sound of them...'.¹⁹ We learn language not as a science but as a sometimes inadequate instrument to serve the expression of primeval emotion – including love. This is what Oliveira cannot do. In the form of Rocamadour, he lets the 'balbuco' in him die out.

Sartre and Camus were central to a world debate about politics and the relationship of art to politics. As I mentioned in my first chapter, Sartre gave up on art as an answer, famously asking what purpose a novel could serve before a starving child. In Argentina the revolutionary question was central to many thinking people. A magazine like *El escarabajo de oro* is one of many magazines produced at the time which testify to that debate. Cortázar too was searching for an answer and, on the face of it, he did find some solution in revolutionary politics. His fiction begins to reflect this explicitly with stories like 'La reunión' (*Todos los fuegos*, 1966) based on true happenings in the life of Che

¹⁹ Dylan Thomas, 'On the Words in Poetry', *Early Prose Writings* (London: Dent, 1971), p. 154.

Guevara. Interestingly, however, his fictional character, Oliveira is searching but does not seem to find an answer.

“Sólo la belleza podrá salvarnos”

In *Siete de oro* Dal Masetto hints that poetry may be the salvation his narrator is looking for. This is very much in keeping with the sentiment of *Eco contemporáneo* where politics is definitely not the answer. In the last lines of the novel the narrator describes waiting to be reunited with Bruna, with whom he has had a problematic and painful relationship. Although it may be elusive, love is not a fiction. A connection between humans is present and real - albeit in a fragile way:

Me vino a la memoria una frase de Bruna: “Sólo la belleza podrá salvarnos”. Creí comprender que para mí, en ese momento, la belleza era esa posibilidad de participación y esa distancia, la fugitiva expresión de cada cara que el fuego arrancaba a la oscuridad, la fuerza y la paz que me rodeaban, ese rumor de viento y agua, esa grandeza y esa humildad que la noche no se cansaba de sugerir. Me abracé a una roca y mantuve los ojos fijos en esas imágenes. Una vez más me dije que a lo largo de mi vida no había habido más que un desfile de nombres anónimos. Y me dije también que esa noche estaba más cerca de esas sombras avivadas por las llamas de lo que lo había estado nunca de nadie.

Después los muchachos desaparecieron. El fuego se apagó. Quedaron chispas girando sobre las piedras. Me levanté, trepé hasta la ruta y emprendí el camino de regreso. Pensé que en unas horas más, en la estación, iría a encontrarme con una desconocida. (pp.203-204)

We can understand ‘la belleza’ as the aesthetic experience which ultimately saves ‘la generación mufada’, jolting them out of ‘la mufa’ – the dead-end urban depression which Miguel Grinberg describes in the *Eco contemporáneo* magazine. This sentiment echoes the ending of Breton’s *Nadja*: ‘Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all.’

The last sentence of *Siete de oro* could suggest a new beginning or, depending on how you read it, a relegation to the meaningless repetition of human lives and the pointless circularity of romantic love: ‘Pensé que en unas horas más, en la estación, iría a encontrarme con una desconocida.’ Bruna, in reality, is not actually a ‘desconocida’.

Cortázar avoids poetry or beauty as his solution. Like the traditional avant-garde he wants to break the escapism of literature and get out of the library. He does not want to become a Borges - ‘podrido de literatura’.²⁰ *Rayuela*, therefore, does not finish with an ending but rather with a sense that the search continues.

Siete de oro, on the other hand, can be read as an implicit critique of *Rayuela* on this front, most importantly through the symbolism of the saved child. The loaded present tense verbs of ‘espero, escribo’ offer a future for the writer and move towards literature rather than towards political action. An alternative is offered to Sartre’s prohibitive position that there was no place for the novel whilst there was human suffering in the world. Dal Masetto continued to write novels after *Siete de oro* and these subsequent novels became less and less concerned with undermining the restrictions of the conventional novel genre. Although the detached perspective continues in later works, the fragmentation of *Siete de oro*, for example, is not repeated in the same way.²¹

²⁰ Borges said this in an interview with Carlos Peralta. The format of the interview was unconventional. Peralta said a word and then Borges was invited to give: ‘una respuesta, una definición, una anécdota, una asociación de ideas o una negativa’. In response to the word ‘Sol’ he replied: ‘estoy podrido de literatura. No podría contestar hablando del sol, no suelo pensar directamente en el sol, sino en imágenes, textos, relatos del sol’. ‘La electricidad de las palabras’, *Encuentro con Borges*, James Irby, Napoleón Murat, Carlos Peralta (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1968), p. 107.

²¹ Chapters from subsequent novels could not be extracted so easily and exist as self-sufficient units of text outside the novel.

I would argue that Dal Masetto does not fear that literature will be escapist. His version of a reader is not the reader-protagonist of Cortázar's short story 'La continuidad de los parques' (*Final del juego*, 1956) who sits luxuriating in his leather chair hoping to escape into fiction, only to be murdered by one of the characters in the story. Dal Masetto's emphasis is that literature does have the power to capture authenticity. Reading and writing are worthwhile activities, activities which may even, at times, bring salvation.

The fact that Cortázar should refer to his reader in *Rayuela* as a 'léctor cómplice' is telling - as if reading is being party to a guilty, almost criminal activity. Dal Masetto relinquishes this guilty baggage through the myth he creates for himself as a writer. In a later autobiographical work, *El padre y otras historias*, he writes about arriving to Salto from Italy as a young boy after the Second World War. His description of his parents depicts them as uneducated members of a labouring work force. In contrast to Borges's description of his father's private library, Dal Masetto describes in interviews the literary education he gave himself through borrowing books from the local library in Salto. On the inside sleeve of all of his novels he mentions his humble beginnings: 'En sus comienzos fue albañil, pintor, heladero, vendedor ambulante de artículos del hogar, empleado público y periodista.' In this way, Dal Masetto is angling himself in cultural politics, claiming to know life from the inside and claiming literature as the tool with which to represent it. So Cortázar's rigorous demand that literature should justify itself against the accusation of escapism is rendered irrelevant.

All this is not to say that Dal Masetto, or other writers of his generation would have read *Rayuela* as a call to abandon writing in favour of taking up revolutionary arms. Quite the opposite. We don't read the book by its pessimistic closure. *Rayuela* showed new and exciting possibilities to the world of fiction writing. Above all it was an inspiration to a younger generation of Argentine writers, like Dal Masetto, who far from being discouraged, were spurred on into writing more.

3

'La impronta Pavésiana': an examination of the impact of the Italian Writer Cesare Pavese (1908 - 1950) on the work of Antonio Dal Masetto.

In this chapter I will explore the formative influence of the Italian twentieth century writer, Cesare Pavese, on the work of the contemporary Argentine writer, Antonio Dal Masetto. I will look at the reception of Pavese in Argentina when translations of his work began to filter into publications in Buenos Aires from the early 1950s. Through an analysis of Dal Masetto's reading of Pavese, I will explore the ways in which Dal Masetto has brought something of the spirit of Pavese's work to his own writing.

This connection is not arbitrary. Dal Masetto himself is candid in a number of interviews about the importance of Pavese's work in his own formation as a writer. In fact, when asked about the question of influence, Dal Masetto invariably mentions Pavese as pivotal, often alongside Albert Camus. In an interview published in *Carta cultural* in 1991 Dal Masetto remarks: 'Si tengo que hacer nombres repito lo que dije otras veces: Camus y Pavese [...] Camus y Pavese fueron como amores primeros.'¹

In an article published on 25 May 2003 in the advent of a new translation of *La luna e i falò* (1950) into Spanish by Silvio Mattoni, the Argentine novelist Guillermo Saccomanno writes of the resonance and importance of Pavese's work to an entire generation of Argentine writers: 'Una conexión que se impone al volver sobre Pavese es

¹ H. M. G., 'Antonio Dal Masetto. La paciente fé del pescador', *Carta cultural*, 27 Julio de 1991, p.3.

su influencia considerable en nuestra literatura de los sesenta.’² He makes particular reference to Antonio Dal Masetto, as well as Miguel Briante, as bearing ‘la impronta pavesiana’ and refers to Dal Masetto’s collection, *El padre y otras historias* (2002) as ‘cuentos pavesianos’. I would extend this comment further to say that Pavese’s imprint is not only found in this particular instance of *El padre* but has infused all of Dal Masetto’s work.

My argument is that Pavese’s influence on Dal Masetto goes beyond literary method or practice. It is also a geographical connection and a particular shared perspective. To cite another example of this kind, Gabriel García Márquez describes a similar influence relation between himself and William Faulkner. In conversation with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, García Márquez describes a significant influence such as this: ‘I believe a real influence, an important influence, is when an author’s work affects you so profoundly it alters some of your ideas about the world and about life in general.’³ He suggests that this is the way his reading of William Faulkner acted on him. According to him, Faulkner’s influence had more to do with the atmosphere of his novels rather than with literary technique: ‘With Faulkner the analogies are geographical rather than literary. I realized this when I was travelling through the south of the United States long after I’d written my first novels. The scorched, dusty towns and the defeated people I came across on that trip were very similar to the one I conjure up in my stories.’⁴

² Guillermo Saccomanno, ‘El oficio, el fuego’, *Página/12*, 25 May 2005, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-582-2003-05-25.html>.

³ Gabriel García Márquez and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, *The Fragrance of Guava: Conversations with Gabriel García Márquez* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 48.

⁴ Gabriel García Márquez and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, p. 47.

In another instance García Márquez described Faulkner as ‘a writer who has had much to do with my soul’.⁵ He seems to be saying that Faulkner speaks to the core of him, which is a private realm, and through this private, intimate dialogue, Faulkner has profoundly affected the world view manifest in his writing. By drawing a parallel with García Márquez’s terminology in relation to Faulkner, I will explore an aspect of Pavese’s influence on Dal Masetto which goes beyond the literary.

Like García Márquez and Faulkner, Pavese and Dal Masetto have a direct geographical link; they were both born in the North of Italy to parents living in a rural setting. Pavese endlessly reflects this land in his work. He writes a poem in his first collection of poetry, *Lavorare Stanca* (1936) entitled ‘Gente Spaesata’, ‘Displaced People’. It tells of people who’ve ‘had enough of sea.’: ‘Troppo mare. Ne abbiamo veduto abbastanza di mare.’⁶ The sea mirrors their displaced state of nothingness and monotony. Yet this is not a sea which separates them and carries them away from their home country. In Pavese this state of alienation and uprootedness comes from a mythical nostalgia for a rural Italy which is under threat by city life and the modern age. Pavese’s perspective is that of an exile, although in fact he never lived for any great length of time outside Italy. Dal Masetto, on the other hand, did actually leave Italy. His family moved to Argentina because of poverty and lack of prospects in 1950. Dal Masetto describes in interview the experience of being uprooted at the age of 12: ‘Sufrió mucho en el traslado. Me sentía un

⁵ Gabriel García Márquez ‘Gabriel García Márquez Meets Ernest Hemingway’, *New York Times*, July 26 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-marquez.html>.

⁶ Cesare Pavese, *Disaffections: Complete Poems 1930-1950*, trans and introduction by Geoffrey Brock (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p. 32-3.

marciano en el mundo.’⁷ A state of alienation is characteristic of Pavese’s entire body of work, even though he never experienced any prolonged period of literal uprootedness. However, my hypothesis is that on one level Dal Masetto’s experience of reading Pavese was, in fact, the experience of reading his own life, or reading himself. I propose that this sense of recognition nourished his own identity and formation as a writer.

A reading experience of this nature is characterised by T.S. Eliot in his essay ‘What Dante means to me’ (1950)

Such early influences, the influences which, so to speak, first introduce one to oneself, are, I think, due to an impression which is in one aspect the recognition of a temperament akin to one’s own, and in another aspect the discovery of a form of expression which gives a clue to the discovery of one’s own form. These are not two things, but two aspects of the same thing.⁸

For Eliot, the writer’s persona and the form and expression of that persona become inseparable.

There is a story entitled ‘El tren’ in *El padre y otras historias* (2002), the collection which Saccomanno refers to in his article as ‘cuentos pavesianos’. The memoir describes a moment in which the narrator recalls himself as a little boy standing by his father’s side on the station platform of Fondotoce, Italy, as they watch a train approaching. He tells us that it is just after the war. The train seems menacing to him and he becomes terrified:

⁷ Antonio Dal Masetto, *historia de vida*, interview by Agustina Roca, *La Nación Line*, 12 July 1998, <http://www.literatura.org/Dalmasetto/Dalmasetto.html>.

⁸ T.S., Eliot, *To Criticise the Critic and other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 126.

Sé que estaba anocheciendo, que el tren surgió de golpe, sin que nada lo anunciara, y entró en la estación con tal trueno que me paralizó. Sé que cuando me recobré hice un comentario asombrado y mi padre sonrió y dijo algo que no podré recuperar. Ésa es la imagen. El ojo de un cíclope - fuerza y furia - abalanzándose desde las sombras y un chico paralizado. ⁹

This is reminiscent in atmosphere of a passage in Pavese's last novel, on which Saccomanno focuses his article, *La luna e i falò* (1950). The narrator of the novel, Anguilla, a man who returns to Italy after forty years of living in the United States, describes the train and the journey which first took him to America. In parallel with the original, I also quote from the first Spanish translation of the novel which was published in Buenos Aires in 1952 by Losada, translated by Romualdo Brughetti.:

Poi venne il treno. Cominciò che pareva un cavallo, un cavallo col carretto su dei ciottoli, ed già s' intravedeva il fanale. Lì per lì avevo sperato che fosse una macchina o quel carretto dei messicani. Poi riempi tutta la pianura di baccano el faceva faville. Chi sa cosa ne dicono i serpenti e gli scorpioni, pensavo. Mi piombò addosso sulla strada, illuminandomi dai finestrini l'automobile, i cacti, una bestiola spaventata che scappò a saltelli; e filava sbatacchiando, risucchiando l'aria, schiaffeggiandomi. L'avevo tanto aspettato, ma quando il buio ricadde e la sabbia tornò a scricchiolare, mi dicevo che nemmeno in un deserto questa gente ti lasciano in pace. Se domani avessi dovuto scapparmene, nascondermi, per non farmi internare, mi sentivo già addosso la mano del poliziotto come l'urto del treno. Era questa l'America. [...] Più avanti nella notte una grossa cagnara mi svegliò di soprassalto. Sembrava che tutta la pianura fosse un campo di battaglia, o un cortile. C'era una luce rosastra, scesi fuori intirizzito e scassato; tra le nuvole basse era spuntata una fetta di luna che pareva una ferita di coltello e insanguinava la pianura. Rimasi a guardar un pezzo. Mi fece davvero spavento. ¹⁰

Luego vino el tren. Al comienzo parecía un caballo arrastrando un carrito sobre los adoquines, y ya se entreveía el farol. De repente pensé que podía ser un auto o el carrito de los mejicanos. Después llenó toda la llanura de ruidos y lanzaba chispas. "¡Qué imaginarán las serpientes y los escorpiones!", pensé. Se me vino encima sobre la carretera, iluminando desde sus ventanillas el

⁹ Antonio Dal Masetto *El padre y otras historias* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2002), pp. 50-1.

¹⁰ Cesare Pavese, *La luna e i falò* (Torino: Einaudi, 1st edition 1950, this edition 2000), pp. 62-3.

automóvil, los cactus, un animalito que huyó a pequeños saltos; y enfilaba sacudiendo, reabsorbiendo el aire, abofeteándome. Tanto lo había esperado que, cuando la oscuridad volvió a caer y la arena a gemir, me dije que ni en el desierto esas gentes lo dejan a uno en paz... Si mañana hubiese debido escaparme, esconderme, para no dejarme internar, habría sentido sobre mí la mano del policía como el paso del tren. Esta era América.[...] Más avanzada la noche, me despertó una algarazca de perros. Parecía que toda la llanura fuese un campo de batalla, o un corral. Observé una luz rojiza, bajé del camioncito todo aterido y desencajado; entre las nubes bajas había surgido una tajada de luna que parecía una herida de cuchillo ensangrentando la llanura. Me quedé un rato mirándola. Realmente me dio miedo.¹¹

Like the train in Dal Masetto's memoir, Pavese's fictional train becomes wild and unbounded, an animal or a monster with a thunderous roar. There is also a shared atmosphere of fear and amazement. No doubt, in the case of Dal Masetto, this is a moment in the author's life which really happened and yet it seems to take on an added resonance or embellishment, as memories can do. It is possible that the added resonance or embellishment could come from literature. I propose that Pavese was, for Dal Masetto, as Eliot puts it, 'an introduction to himself'. In the memoir itself Dal Masetto himself admits that there is some aspect of his memory which does not seem to belong to him:

El recuerdo del primer tren arrojándose sobre mí llega desde muy lejos, tanto que a veces me cuesta aceptar que es mío y que no me ha sido relatado por otra persona.¹²

This quote may touch on the problem of memory and age. Dal Masetto is writing about this experience many years later and the younger self depicted in the memoir may be experienced as an 'other'. The memory may also actually belong to someone else – a

¹¹ Cesare Pavese, *La Luna e i falò, La Luna y las fogatas*, traducción de Romualdo Brughetti (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1952; 2nd edition, Ediciones Siglo Veinte, 1978). pp. 67-8.

¹² *El padre y otras historias*, p. 50.

parent's retelling of an event. Or perhaps the image from the train actually comes from a photograph or a painting. However, my inference is that this 'other person' Dal Masetto refers could also be Cesare Pavese.

In an email written to me on 14th May 2006 Dal Masetto himself cited *Il luna e i falò* as well as *Il mestiere di vivere* as the works by Pavese which he had been most struck by ('De Pavese recuerdo especialmente *La Luna y las fogatas* y su diario, *El Oficio de vivir* ') Certainly, this admission by Dal Masetto justifies close attention to *Il luna e i falò* in an analysis of the influence of Pavese's work on Dal Masetto's. Nevertheless, I am not proposing in the connection I make between Dal Masetto's memoir and *Il luna e i falò* that the excerpt quoted above manifests a debt which is owed solely to Pavese. I even accept the possibility that Pavese and this 'otra persona' could even be, in actual fact, unrelated – the repetition of the train motif nothing more than coincidence. But what I do propose, in a general sense, is that a Pavesian perspective can be recognised in Dal Masetto's work and this is the argument I will elaborate on.

Guillermo Saccomono has emphasised the literary exchange between Italy and the Americas through the relationship of the work of Pavese and Dal Masetto. An American perspective helped to shed light on an Italian context post-second world war and an Italian perspective helped to shed light on a post-dictatorship Argentine context:

Si para los italianos la literatura americana representó un prisma para interpretar la realidad de la posguerra, a Antonio Dal Masetto (nacido en Italia en 1938, pero escritor argentino), el modelo de Pavese [...] le permite elaborar historias tersas y austeras en las que se percibe, como un don, el

poder de nombrar hechos y cosas sensitivamente, organizado, en otras palabras, una manera de entender la vida aquí.¹³

For the purposes of this chapter I will pay particular attention, among other works, to a comparison between Pavese's last novel before his death in 1950, *Il luna e i falò* (1950), the novel to which Saccomanno refers in his article and is quoted above, and Dal Masetto's novel *La tierra incomparable* of 1993. At the outset the comparison between *Il luna e i falò* and *La tierra incomparable* is an obvious one to make because it is one of the clearest manifestations of their shared themes; in particular the theme of exile and all its various expressions. Both novels are stories of return, a return to the motherland, Italy - the two main protagonists having left Italy for the Americas (North America for Anguilla, the narrator of *Il luna e i falò*, and Argentina for Agata, the main protagonist of *La tierra incomparable*).¹⁴ Towards the end of the chapter I will also discuss some short stories by Pavese from his two collections *Noche di festa* (1953) and *Racconti* (1960) in comparison with Dal Masetto's novel, *Fuego a discreción* (1991). *Fuego a discreción* also bears the clear 'impronta pavesiana'; a novel narrated by a character in a Pavesian state of exile and alienation, although not in the literal sense we find in *La tierra incomparable*.

¹³ Guillermo Saccomanno, 'Dal Masetto en su propio árbol de los zuecos', *Página/12*, 14 July 1990, p.27.

¹⁴ Elio Vittorini also wrote a novel about a protagonist who returns to Italy, in pursuit of a myth of the motherland: *Coloquio en Sicilia* (1941).

***Il luna e i falò* (1950) and *La tierra incomparable* 1993) – synopses of the novels**

Like *Siete de oro*, both *Il luna e i falò* and *La tierra incomparable* have non-linear, non-chronological structures which gives the impression of an apparent absence of plot. The main protagonists of the novels are also not the heroes whom we come to know everything about. In fact, both Anguilla and Agata become receptacles for the stories of other characters who cross their paths, encountering them in person or in conversation or reminiscences. The novels become the collective stories of all the characters who accumulate throughout the novels. With this patchwork-like composition, the reader is charged with piecing together the narrative, making invisible associations which bind the text.

In *La luna y las fogatas* (1950), Anguilla is a forty-year-old orphan whose adoptive parents are dead. He is estranged from his adoptive siblings and is ignorant of their whereabouts. Having spent 20 years in North America, Anguilla returns to Langhe, Italy, hoping to resettle. On his return to the area he grew up in, it is Anguilla's childhood friend, Nuto, with whom he is reunited. Nuto guides Anguilla round his old haunts as well as telling him about the events which have taken place in his absence. Memories of childhood and also recent memories of life in North America are interspersed with events narrated in the present, and the boundaries between past and present are only loosely demarcated. There is also little to distinguish the narration of episodes of high drama from everyday ordinariness. There are several shocking events in the novel which are conveyed to us dryly by the narrative voice amidst descriptions of the arid, sometimes

monotonous rural life. Anguilla befriends a crippled boy, Cinto, in whom he recognises aspects of himself. Cinto's father, Valino, is a poor farmer living in the house Anguilla grew up in. Valino ends up killing his woman and her mother out of desperation and tries to kill his crippled son, Cinto, before setting fire to their home and hanging himself in the midst of it. Anguilla also learns about the brutal fates of the three beautiful daughters of his old employer, Sor Matteo. Silvia dies in a bed filled with her own blood in a botched attempt to abort an unwanted child. Her sister Irene marries a man and they live in one room and he beats her. Santina, the youngest and most beautiful of the three sisters, is shot and then burnt at the stake because she is discovered to be a Judas of the clandestine Partisan cause. This fire, in particular, is the bonfire to which the title of the novel refers.

In *La tierra incomparable*, Agata is an eighty-year-old widow who returns to Italy alone. Like Anguilla, she too has become estranged from members of her family and is also reunited for the first time since leaving Italy with her childhood friend, and now elderly widow, Carla. However, Carla's mind has disintegrated and it is Carla's granddaughter, Silvana, who becomes Agata's companion during her stay. In *La tierra incomparable*, Agata is searching for something to represent the past. At one point in the novel this takes the form of searching for some belongings her son buried in their garden before they left Italy. She returns to the house she once lived in with her family and asks permission of the strangers who now inhabit the house if she may look for this 'tesoro' by digging in their garden. The strangers agree but Agata fails to find it. The expectation is that in finding the 'treasure', Agata will also find a key to recapturing and recovering the past. But this is impossible and it is the future which Agata becomes faced with. The novel

centres on Agata's unresolved and puzzling encounter with Silvana and Silvana's description of her tormented marriage to a painter and writer, Vito. Agata is left with something she doesn't understand. The 'revelation' she is seeking becomes this relationship with the young woman Silvana, although even at the end of the novel what it teaches her is neither clear to her or to the reader.

Through these texts I will 'elicit affinities' by drawing attention to echoes of Pavese in Dal Masetto's writing in a way which I hope to be illuminating of Dal Masetto's work.¹⁵ I aim to show how Dal Masetto's reading of Pavese may have provided, as Saccomanno suggests, a way of understanding and writing about his own Argentine context. But before addressing Dal Masetto's reading of Pavese in particular, I will first discuss the reception of Pavese in Argentina in general.

Cesare Pavese in Argentina

Sacomanno mentions in his article of May 2005 that the most significant part of Pavese's fiction has been translated into Spanish in Argentina by Atilio Dabini and Osiris Troiani. He mentions Marcelo Ravoni as the translator of his poetry. However, other translations of Pavese's novels, stories and poetry did appear over a period between the early 1950's and the late 70's. His other translators included: Herman Mario Cueva, *Allá*

¹⁵ I take this phrase 'elicit affinities' from a study of the influence relation between Ezra Pound and Rémy de Gourmont by Richard Sieburth in which he proposes an approach to influence which aims to 'elicit affinities rather than stress debts'. Richard Sieburth, *Instigations* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 26.

en tu aldea, (Buenos Aires: Goyanarte, 1954), *El hermoso verano*, (Buenos Aires: Goyanarte, 1956), Alberto Luis Bixio *Noche de fiesta* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1957), Rodolfo Alonso, *Trabajar cansa; Vendrá la muerte y tendrá tus ojos* (Buenos Aires: Lautaro, 1961), *Feria de agosto* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1968), A.V. ¹⁶ *El compañero* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1964), Horacio Armani, *Poemas inéditos: Poemas elegidos* (Buenos Aires: Fausto, 1975).

Translations of Pavese's poetry appeared in fringe literary magazines: *Agua Viva*, *Aleph*, *El Barrilete*, *Diario de Poesía* and *El escarabajo de oro* to name a few. ¹⁷ Pavese was also published in *Sur* magazine. John King notes that the format of the magazine changed in 1952 to include more book reviews in an effort to incorporate new writing. ¹⁸ Pavese's novel, *El diablo en las colinas* (*Il diavolo sulle colline*, 1949), the story of three young men who, over the course of a summer, roam the Piedmont vineyards, hills and villages in a hedonistic rampage, was serialised in *Sur* over the course of a year in 1952, translated by Hermán M. Cueva. ¹⁹ An essay by Pavese, 'Poesía y libertad', was also published in a special Italian issue of the magazine in number 225 in 1953, also translated by Cueva. ²⁰

¹⁶ This publication found in the Biblioteca Nacional in Buenos Aires gives nothing more than the translator's initials.

¹⁷ Issue 3 of *Agua Viva*, translated by Gianni Siccardi, issues 2 and 4 of *Aleph*, translated by Adelina Lo Bue, issue 7 of *El Barrilete*, translated by Héctor Miguel Ángeli, issue 28 of *Crisis*, issue 17 of *Diario de Poesía* translated by Oscar Vitelleschi and an essay by Pavese was published in the first issue of *El escarabajo de oro*, the translator of Pavese's essay is not acknowledged by the magazine.

¹⁸ John King, *Sur: A Study of the Argentine Literary Journal and Its Role In the Development of a Culture, 1931-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 150.

¹⁹ *Sur*, 207-8, enero - febrero de 1952, pp. 23 - 54. Serialised next in 208-209, marzo - abril 1952, pp. 85 - 121 and 211-212, mayo - junio de 1952, pp 63-110.

²⁰ Poets in translation were Giuseppe Ungaretti, Eugenio Montale, Salvatore Quasimodo, Umberto Saba, Alfonso Gatto, Vittorio Serini, Leonardo Sinisgalli and Sandro Penna.

In the same issue as the first excerpt from *El diablo en las colinas*, a review by F.J. Solero is published. The review is of *Crónica de los pobres amantes* (*Cronache di povere amanti*, 1947) by Pavese's peer, Vasco Pratolini. In this review, Solero dismisses the novel as too heavily reliant on the influence of North American literature as well as failing in its attempts to capture life in art. His claim is that Pratolini does not offer anything transcendent or lasting. He begins his argument with the assertion that a street which Pratolini describes in his novel, calle Corno, no longer exists, with the suggestion that in years to come, neither will Pratolini's novel. He describes the novel as:

una exposición de la vida, no una profundización de la vida.[...] recogeremos la impresión de que Pratolini, como tantos otros escritores que manejan esa tan ponderable y utilizada corriente norteamericana, hace de la literatura una especie de periodismo realístico-poético de regulares proyecciones, sin ninguna trascendencia, puesto a explicar una circunstancia actual, que puede o no solicitarnos en el instante y dejar de interesarnos radicalmente en el porvenir.²¹

While it is our concern to look at the reception of Pavese, rather than that of Pratolini in *Sur*, there may be some parallels to be drawn. Pratolini's translator, Attilio Dabini who was also Pavese's translator, writes in response to the review in a subsequent number of *Sur* (213-214, July - August 1952, pp.156-8). His defence of Pratolini seems to anticipate a similar attack on Pavese. While Dabini makes it clear that he respects the right of each reader to take their own view, he draws attention to some of Solero's claims as being factually inaccurate.

²¹ F.J. Solero. Review of Vasco Pratolini's novel *Crónica de los pobres amantes* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1951). *Sur*, 207-209 enero - febrero de 1952, pp. 117-8.

Dabini challenges Solero's assertion that Pratolini is a writer 'sin más realidad humana y artística que la imitación de ciertos escritores norteamericanos.' He writes: 'Puede ser que existe una narrativa semejante; pero no es ciertamente la de Pratolini, Moravia, Pavese, Vittorini, Alvaro, Piovene y algunos otros, que proviene de un largo y trabajoso proceso de formación.' He quotes a letter entry to *Sur* from an Italian critic, Dario Puccini, which seems to illustrate his own views. Puccini corrects Solero's claim that calle Corno no longer exists in Florence:

Como pueden atestiguar miles de florentinos y muchísimos italianos que la han buscado por haberla conocido en la novela de Pratolini, la calle de Corno existía y aún existe, muy parecida a la descrita en la novela. La cosa tendría poca importancia si el crítico no basara en ella todo su artículo. De buenas ganas ofreceríamos, si pudiésemos, un viaje a Italia al comentarista para que viese lo vivos y actuales que son el espíritu y el ambiente de la novela de Pratolini.²²

Puccini also notes two other mistakes in the same issue, this time in the notes to the first excerpt of Pavese's novel, *El diablo en las colinas*. The notes suggest that Pavese's suicide was because of his disillusionment as a communist. It is also said that he was the director of a magazine, *Cultura e realtà*. Neither of these two claims is true:

Cada uno es libre de pensar como quiere, pero la verdad (ningún anticomunista en Italia ha formulado semejante suposición) es que Pavese no se mató por desengaños políticos ni por haber roto con su partido. Más aún: nunca dirigió la revista "Cultura e realtà", en la que colaboró dos veces solamente, y siguió escribiendo en "Rinascita", revista dirigida por Togliatti. Quien quiera comprender bien a Pavese puede leer su volumen de *Ensayos* (póstumo): verá que la personalidad de Pavese es mucho más compleja y profunda que cualquier esquema preconstituido de intelectual atormentado por la libertad, etcétera.²³

²² Dario Puccini, *Sur*, 213-214, julio - agosto de 1952, p. 157.

²³ *Ibid.*

Mistakes must be inevitable in any kind of publication but Puccini seems to be sensitive to more than just biographical inaccuracies. He seems to be anxious that Pavese is being misread, or not read deeply enough, by the critics, editors and readers of *Sur*.

Suicide – a political act?

In a later issue of *Sur* (221-222, March - April 1953) a review of *Entre mujeres solas* (*Tra donne sole*, 1949) is published by Juan José Sebreli, a young contributor to *Sur* whom John King cites as one of the more radical and politically engaged contributors who wrote for the magazine between 1952 and 1955.²⁴ He seems to take the line which Puccini insists is mistaken. He reads both *El diablo en las colinas* and *Entre mujeres solas* as testimonies to Pavese's Communist sympathies. He focuses on Pavese's constant obsession in these novels with suicide and suggests that the theme of suicide has wider implications and is not just a foreshadowing of Pavese's own suicide in 1950. He writes:

El suicidio es a la vez una determinación subjetiva y un hecho social; está ligado, como todo acontecimiento humano, a una situación histórica concreta. Turin de 1950, como cualquier ciudad o pueblo italiano o europeo de posguerra o, mejor dicho, de entreguerra, con un recuerdo y una espera de muerte, sólo busca afirmarse positivamente en tanto que existencia momentánea, fugaz, sin pasado ni futuro, quemándose en el fuego de las pasiones, agotándose en el instante, o sea destruyéndose, no se hace sino deshaciéndose.²⁵

²⁴ John King, pp. 156-157.

²⁵ Juan José Sebreli, 'A propósito de 'Entre Mujeres Solas'' *Sur* (221-222 marzo-abril de 1953), pp. 115 - 116.

Sebreli diagnoses this preoccupation with suicide as Pavese's comment on a generation of bourgeoisie in crisis. His argument is that the novels reflect a deprived youth in post-war or inter-war years who have nothing better to do than live hedonistically and unproductively in the present without hope of building a future. Sebreli goes on:

Ese sentido festival y deportivo de la vida que podríamos llamar la "moral de suicidio" está estrechamente ligado, no sólo a una época, sino a una clase social: la burguesía. Es el burgués, más que nadie, quien siente que todo se derrumba porque es su clase la que está en crisis. Todo burgués es un suicida en potencia. La mayoría de los personajes de Pavese (menos Clelia y el comunista Beccucio, y en "El diablo en las colinas" los tres compañeros y la familia de Oreste) son burgueses con vocación suicida [...] Nacer en "cuna de oro" es la maldición con que Pavese carga sus héroes, pecado original del que nunca se podrían limpiar y que los irá hundiendo cada vez más el fracaso, en la impotencia, en la inutilidad.²⁶

Sebreli makes a generalisation from *Entre mujeres solas* about 'the majority' of Pavese's characters. However, this comment does not account for those characters who are not bourgeois yet contemplate or actually do commit suicide. We can think of Cinto's family, the crippled boy whom Anguilla befriends in *La Luna y las fogatas*. Cinto's father Valino brutally murders the women of his family before hanging himself in the midst of his burning house. Valino is not bourgeois, he is extremely poor. There are many instances of suicide, attempted suicide, thoughts of suicide and Sebreli's diagnosis does not account for them all. In Pavese's short story, 'Suicidi', written in January 1938, published in the collection *Noche di festa* (1953), Carlota, the check-out girl with whom the narrator has an affair, kills herself because she cannot evoke love in him.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 117.

In fact, suicide appears as a kind of leitmotif throughout Pavese's poetry and fiction. If it is a political and historical symbol, it is not only that. Pavese seems to create an aesthetic of suicide. Suicide in Pavese's fiction is a mysterious event, as it is in life. We can never know what lies beyond death. This deliberate appeal to the unknown as a narrative strategy is something which is true of Pavese's writing in general and, in turn, is true of the writing of Dal Masetto. Suicide is not just a response to political impotence and inactivity. To read beyond this is to get closer to the heart of Pavese's meaning.

Sebreli may have had his own political agenda. He published a book, *Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana y alienación* in which he theorises about the nature of class structures in Buenos Aires society. His chapter on 'Las Burguesías' echoes the observations he makes about Pavese's characters. He describes the bourgeoisie in Buenos Aires in the 1960's: 'la edificación de los petulantes palacios de Barrio Norte señalaban el rango social de sus poseedores, como un escudo de armas, y respondían a la característica de "consumo ostensible e improductivo".'²⁷ For Sebreli, Pavese's novels may have been resonant for him because they explored the political perceptions of his generation. It may be that Sebreli's reading is also not wrong but, in Puccini's words, Pavese has to be understood on the level which is 'complejo y profundo'. Sebreli's interpretation does not sufficiently account for the mystery of Pavese's obsession with suicide. Perhaps it is too easy to see Pavese's dilemma being the choice between two clear paths, that of political action or political negation, as Sebreli seems to suggest:

²⁷ Juan José Sebreli, *Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana y alienación* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1965), p. 29.

Sin decirlo en ninguna parte, nos está sugiriendo en cada página que no nos quedan más que dos caminos a seguir, o ayudar al nacimiento de una comunidad de producción: elegir la vida, o aceptar suicidarse con esta sociedad artificial en la que todo marcha concientemente hacia la muerte.²⁸

It was the fringe cultural magazines which picked up Pavese more significantly, reading deeper than his political affiliations as Dario Puccini prescribes. They were reading him on the level of a writer who went beyond politics. This would seem to echo the philosophy expressed in *Eco contemporáneo* and its 'generación mufada'. The things which Pavese wanted to, or was compelled to write about, were areas which defied intellection.

Una presencia providencial

Saccomanno cites Néstor Sánchez in his article of May 2003 to describe the powerful impact of Pavese on Sánchez himself and on his generation in the 1960's:

“Para nosotros, en aquel entonces, fue una presencia providencial, poco a poco monocorde y sofocada, sin otros caminos posibles que el de oficiar su retórica, pero capaz de señalar como muy pocos una amplitud tácita en esa relación personal (y necesariamente apasionada) con un lenguaje evasivo que era a su vez la búsqueda de una manera de vivir, o de admitir que no vivimos.”

This description is dense and loaded. It seems to suggest a number of things without being entirely transparent. One asks what exactly did these writers of the 60s sense was being suffocated in Pavese's writing and was it something they too had to suppress? What was it about monotony that made it a meaningful quality in Pavese's work? Why

²⁸ Ibid, p. 119.

was this language 'evasivo' and how did it search for a way of living or as a way of indicating that these people weren't living?

There are obvious speculations which can be made. Pavese's infiltration into Argentine literary culture during the 50s and 60s anticipated General Onganía when censorship and the need to leave things unsaid was a pressing reality. But is all that is being suffocated just politically dangerous? The notion of Pavese's use of language being a search for the way to live may have connections with the Beat philosophy of finding a heightened state of consciousness through the mind-expanding medium of literature, along the lines of Ginsberg's 'revolution of the mind'. Or before that, Surrealism.²⁹ Like Pavese's prose, Sánchez seems to omit something of his meaning.

Pavese's impact was evidently still lasting in the 1970's. In 1974 Ricardo Piglia selected letters from Pavese's published correspondence, translated by Marcela Milano, and published them in number 14 of *Crisis* (pp. 33-38) under the title of 'Las cartas de un amor siempre imposible'. They were all letters to women who were in Pavese's life in one way or another - his various wanted and unwanted lovers, his colleague Bianca Garufi with whom he wrote *A Fuoco grande* (1959), his sister. Yet these letters are presented not so much for their anecdotal, biographical value but rather come to illustrate

²⁹ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated from the French by Richard Seaver and Helen R Lane, (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1974):

'Far more serious, in my opinion - I have intimated it often enough - are the applications of Surrealism to action. To be sure, I do not believe in the prophetic nature of the surrealist word. "It is the oracle, the things I say." Yes, *as much as I like*, but what of the oracle itself?...Surrealism is the "invisible ray" which will only one day enable us to win out over our opponents. "You are no longer trembling, carcass." This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.', pp. 44 - 47.

that impossible love is a philosophical standpoint. Pavese is quoted in an introduction to the letters: 'No nos matamos por amor a una mujer. Nos matamos porque un amor, cualquier amor, nos revela en nuestra desnudez, miseria, nada.' (Letter to a friend, Turin, 25 November 1945).

It seems that Pavese was not just significant for a generation of Argentine writers because of his literary production but there was something relevant to them in his personal outlook evident in his published letters, his diaries, the most famous diary being *Il mestiere di vivere*, translated into Spanish as *El oficio de vivir*. Like Saccomanno and Sánchez intimate, there is a sense in which Pavese touches on an existential state which looks towards death. The inability to connect with living and with life only brings 'miseria, nada'. Indeed, any introduction to Pavese never fails to mention his suicide as an indispensable piece of information to accompany his work. In the Argentine context a similar phenomenon is the case of Alejandra Pizarnik comes to mind. Her early suicide will be mentioned more often than not in introductions to her poetry. With Pizarnik, and as Sebrelli suggested as well in the case of Pavese, suicide and a pull towards death is an artistic preoccupation. It is not simply a biographical fact.

Antonio Dal Masetto's reception of Cesare Pavese

In Dal Masetto's novel *Hay unos tipos abajo*, a thriller set over the few days of the world cup of 1978, the narrator Pablo recalls an error in a translation of Pavese's collection of stories, *Feria de agosto* (1946):

Por fin se tiró en el sillón y comenzó releer el primer cuento de *Feria de agosto* de Cesare Pavese. Se detuvo en el curioso error de traducción -- mariposas en lugar de amapolas -- que había descubierto por casualidad, una semana antes, al cotejarlo con el texto original en una revista italiana. El error aparecía en la primera página y se repetía seis veces más en las siguientes. Lo había marcado con cruces en los bordes. Pablo tenía el libro desde hacía años, lo hojeaba a menudo, y ahora se quedó pensando que al abrirlo, cada vez, se había encontrado con esa palabra errada que había reiterado en su cabeza la correspondiente representación errada.³⁰

I quote this simply as explicit evidence of Dal Masetto's reading of Pavese in translation and his observations about the nature of those translations.

When I wrote to Dal Masetto to ask him about his first encounter with Pavese he replied describing his early formation as a writer when he first moved to Buenos Aires in 1956 at the age of 18 from the province of Buenos Aires, Salto:

Al principio, cuando llegué a Buenos Aires a los 18 años no leía nada o casi nada en italiano, simplemente leía lo que encontraba en las librerías de libros usados o libros que me prestaban, y todos eran en castellano. Tampoco leía revistas italianas. En aquella época estaba demasiado ocupado en sobrevivir y adaptarme a la nueva realidad de ese mundo con el que debía enfrentarme, así que lo italiano quedó en segundo plano. Todo lo que leí, lo que me formó, fue en español. De Pavese recuerdo especialmente *La Luna y las fogatas* y su diario, *El oficio de vivir*.³¹

³⁰ Antonio Dal Masetto, *Hay unos tipos abajo* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1998), pp. 43-44.

³¹ Email received by me on 14th May 2006.

This evidence of Dal Masetto reading Pavese in Spanish is an example of Borges's version of being an Argentine writer in his essay, 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' (1950). Pavese, although he is in fact Italian, becomes an Argentine writer. The Brughetti translation I quote from in this discussion becomes the Pavese Dal Masetto would have encountered.

Cesare Pavese as Translator and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

Pavese was passionate about North American literature and he produced a great body of North American literature in translation. Critics have emphasised how important it is for Pavese to be read as a translator. Among others he translated Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Gertrude Stein, Herman Melville, Mark Twain and Dos Passos into Italian. Pavese's biographer, David Lajolo, asserts that Pavese's translations were seminal in opening a new era of fiction in Italy.³²

Pavese claimed translation as a way of writing what he wanted to say without having to own what he was saying. Lajolo emphasises this is in his view of the significance of translating for Pavese as a writer:

Pavese's translations opened the way to a new period in Italian fiction. They were a contribution not only literary but also political. Through his translations Pavese showed his longing for freedom and his need to break the scheme of nationalistic rhetoric, to discover new cultural and

³² Davide Lajolo, *An Absurd Vice: A Biography of Cesare Pavese* (New York: New Directions, 1983), p. 101.

social horizons [...] Without being a man of action and without engaging in political commitments, he allied himself, through his studies and literary works, with those who wanted to quash the Fascist rhetoric of extreme nationalism. In order to comprehend Pavese's enthusiasm and also his doubts in the whole course of his public life, one must understand his role as a translator.³³

Yet Pavese did not only voice his political persuasions through translation. Certainly some of his comments on his translations seem to refer to his admiration for the way they constructed language. For example he praised Mark Twain for creating poetry out of everyday American idioms:

Mark Twain [...] undeniably touched the chords of real poetry - and created a language of his own, of great originality in the stylistic tradition of America, nourished by many dialects from the river valley...³⁴

Of the works Pavese translated, a significant influence on him and, in turn, filtering through to Dal Masetto, was that of Melville's *Moby Dick*. An important aspect of this influence might have been what Solero noted in Vasco Pratolini: 'una especie de periodismo realístico-poético'. In *Moby Dick*, Melville combined almost encyclopaedically accurate descriptions of whaling, navigation and the sea, with passages which seem to transcend the concrete and the literal. The chapter on 'The Whiteness of the Whale' is abstract and undoubtedly poetic; poetic in the sense that its essential substance cannot be reduced. Even Ishmael admits this: 'To analyse it, would seem impossible'. 'Whiteness' has no rational, concrete meaning. In fact, at times the

³³ Davide Lajolo, pp. 96-97.

³⁴ Davide Lajolo, p. 101. Lajolo takes this quote from articles published by Pavese in *La Cultura* in the 1930's.

reasoning is somewhat mad: 'The Albino is as well made as other men - has no substantive deformity - and yet this mere aspect of all-pervading whiteness makes him more strangely hideous than the ugliest abortion.'³⁵ While it may be a powerful comparison, it is not rationally clear why the Albino must be compared to 'the ugliest abortion'. These passages, like poetry, seem to defy rational explanation.

Melville constantly digresses in the novel so that the bare bones of any kind of story line disappear below the layers and layers of detailed deviations. This freedom from a conventional plot and sense of an open-ended work has been taken on by Pavese and by Dal Masetto. Their prose is poetic in the sense of this open-endedness - that no final meaning can be arrived at.

Consider again the passage which I quoted earlier at the beginning of this chapter. The episode from *La Luna y las Fogatas* in which Anguilla describes the train and the journey which brought him to the States. Like the menacing whiteness of the whale, the train and the moon hold a similar unnamable terror, a sense of *mysterium tremendum*.

In the case of Dal Masetto's story, 'El tren', like Melville's Ishmael and his admission that it would be 'impossible' to know what the whiteness means, Dal Masetto tries - and fails - to analyse the image of the train:

³⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or, The Whale*, 1851 (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 208.

Si insisto en analizarla, si me esfuerzo por fijarla en unas líneas, es porque a veces tengo la impresión de que ahí hay algo que valdría la pena rescatar, una huella, una señal, algo. Pero no sé qué es. No sé en qué dirección va, hacia dónde me lleva, si me lleva a alguna parte.³⁶

'A harsh blade of light' – inheritance of Style

There is a clear inheritance of style from Pavese in the work of Dal Masetto. Certainly Pavese's use of language is a particular aspect of his work which Dal Masetto has admired. In an interview published in the literary supplement of *Clarín, Cultura y Nación*, he expressed this admiration when asked '¿Cuál es tu "música" preferida dentro de la narrativa?'. He replied 'La de Pavese, sin dudas. Es el tipo más musical que leí en mi vida. No conozco otro autor que alcance tal nivel de intensidad, de belleza, por el solo encadenamiento de las palabras en las frases, de las frases en un párrafo. Te produce un placer que va mucho más allá del contenido.'³⁷

Critics and translators have commented on Pavese's use of Piedmontese dialect words as well as Italian depression slang, idioms and nuances to rhythmic effect.³⁸ I cannot comment confidently on this, except to say that in comparison, while Dal Masetto's use of Spanish is relatively plain and neutral, he too incorporates aspects of Argentine slang into his prose. His style is not Roberto Arlt's - a heavy use of lunfardo, excluding of the reader unfamiliar with porteño slang. Rather, touches of slang are interspersed with a

³⁶ *El padre y otras historias*, p. 52.

³⁷ Guillermo Saavedra, 'Acechar el misterio de lo cotidiano', *Clarín, Cultura y Nación*, 4 July 1991, pp.1-2.

³⁸ William Arrowsmith in the introduction to his translations of *Lavore stanca* discusses the difficulty of putting these aspects into English, *Hard Labour* (New York: Viking, 1976), p.xii.

rhythmic and refined poetic language. Adriana Langtry in her study, 'La presencia del universo poético italiano en las novelas de Antonio Dal Masetto', accounts for the refined aspect of his language by connecting it to the influence of Italian nobel prize winning poet Salvatore Quasimodo. She describes an interface between Dal Masetto's mother tongue, Italian, and his use of Spanish through which something of the exile's experience of 'here' and 'there' is conveyed:

A través de un juego lingüístico de fuertes contrastes en el que la refinada lírica italiana choca con la aspereza de la jerga porteña, la aparición del intertexto en lengua madre repropone la antigua dicotomía identitaria entre el "aquí" y el "allá."³⁹

Clearly a sensitivity to the musicality of words is important. Dal Masetto refers to a conversation with Miguel Briante in an anecdote included in *El padre y otras historias* (2002), 'Encuentro', in which they assert that 'la prosa no es más que nostalgia de poesía' (p. 48). Perhaps within that nostalgia for poetry, as Langtry suggests, is also a nostalgia for 'allá'. Poetry is connected to a sense of belonging, origins and home which has been lost.

While an examination and comparison of style in two different languages, Italian and Spanish, could be problematic despite the linguistic similarities, there are some qualities in Pavese's use of language which are evidently literally transposed into Dal Masetto's use of Spanish. I have been limited in my reading of Pavese because of not knowing Italian and have read Pavese in Spanish translation, as Dal Masetto would have read him,

³⁹ Adriana Langtry, 'La presencia del universo poético italiano en las novelas de Antonio Dal Masetto' (Milan: 2005), in the process of submission for publication.

while also consulting Italian readers who have given advice on some parts of the original texts.

Doug Thompson has commented in particular on Pavese's lack of adjectivisation. He suggests that the lack of adjectives is part of Pavese's distinctive method for depicting dispassionately observed scenes. Thompson describes a passage from *The Devil in the Hills*:

Most striking in this narrative is the total absence of adjectives and even though Pavese has a keen eye for detail, it is through verbs and nouns that it operates here. Adjectives would have suggested interest, might even have been mistaken for approval.⁴⁰

As Thompson infers, part of Pavese's narrative technique is to avoid giving his prose a particular slant that could be understood and a single persuasion or perspective.

Something of this technique can be perceived in this extract from *La Luna y las Fogatas*.

It is the opening paragraph of the novel. I quote the original as well as the Brughetti translation:

C'è una ragione perché sono tornato in questo paese, qui e non invece a Canelli, a Barbaresco o in Alba. Qui non cci sono nato, è quasi certo; dove son nato non lo so; non c'è da queste parti una casa né un pezzo di terra né delle ossa ch'io possa dire « Ecco cos'ero prima di nascere ». Non so se venga dalla collina o dalla valle, dai boschi o da una casa di balconi. La ragazza che mi ha lasciato sugli scalini del duomo di Alba, magari non veniva neanche dalla campagna, magari era la figlia dei padroni di un palazzo, oppure mi ci hanno portato in un cavagno da vendimmia due povere donne da Monticello, da Neive o perché no da Cravanzana. Chi può dire di che carne sono fatto? Ho girato abbastanza il mondo da sapere che tutte le carni sono buone e si equivalgono, ma

⁴⁰ Doug Thompson, *A Study of the Major Novels and Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 179.

è per questo che uno si stanca e cerca di mettere radici, di farsi terra e paese, perché la sua carne valga e duri qualcosa di piú che un comune giro di stagione.⁴¹

Existe una razón por la cual he regresado a este pueblo, aquí y no a Canelli, a Barbaresco o a Alba. Aquí no he nacido, es casi seguro; dónde he nacido, no sé; no existe en estos parajes una casa ni un pedazo de tierra ni huesos que me permitan decir: “He aquí cómo era antes de nacer”. Ignoro si procedo de la colina o del valle, de los bosques o de una casa con balcones. La muchacha que me dejó sobre los peldaños de la catedral de Alba, quizá era la hija de los dueños de un palacio, o bien me han traído en una cesta de vendimar dos pobres mujeres desde Monticello, desde Neive y, ¿por qué carne estoy hecho? He recorrido bastante mundo para saber que todas las carnes son buenas y se corrompen, y por eso uno se cansa y trata de echar raíces, de hacerse tierra y pueblo, para que la propia carne tenga valor y dure algo más que una simple vuelta de estación. (chap. 1, p. 9)

The only adjective Pavese uses in the original is ‘poor’: ‘povere donne’. It is also the only adjective in the translation: ‘pobres mujeres’.

In this opening paragraph there is an absence of feeling in describing what could be quite a painful life history. It is also a voice which focuses on not knowing, it offers the reader no certainties to latch onto, or rather, the only certainty is a non-certainty: ‘Qui non cci sono nato, è quasi certo’ / ‘Aquí no he nacido, es casi seguro.’ There is marked indifference in the tone of voice of the narrator. He does not seem to care where he has come from, he is uninterested in his origins: ‘oppure mi ci hanno portato in un cavagno da vendimmia due povere donne da Monticello, da Neive o perché no da Cravanzana. Chi può dire di che carne sono fatto?’ / ‘[...] o bien me han traído en una cesta de vendimiar dos pobres mujeres desde Monticello, desde Neive y, ¿por qué no desde Cravanzana? ¿Quién puede decir de qué carne estoy hecho?’. The ‘perché no’ / ‘por qué no’ is a throwaway comment suggesting that he might as well be making it all up as he

⁴¹ Cesare Pavese, *La luna e i falò*, (Torino: Einaudi, first edition 1950, this edition 2000), p. 9.

goes along, that he has no real inclination to get to the bottom of his story. Anguilla refers to his mother as 'la ragazza' / 'la muchacha' rather than 'mia madre' / 'mi madre' as if his feelings towards this imagined figure are utterly detached and impartial. The description of wanting to last a bit longer, 'perché la sua carne valga e duri qualcosa di piú che un comune giro di stagione' / 'para que la propia carne tenga valor y dure algo más que una simple vuelta de estación' as a reason for putting down roots is an understatement of the spiritual longing people experience in trying to find a sense of belonging or 'home'.

Armanda Giuducci in her study *Il Mito Pavese*, comments on Pavese's style as having this quality of an observant, dispassionate and all-encompassing eye:

We are dealing with something more than conciseness. We are dealing with the abolition of any gradation of effects indicative of where the meaning is to be found. We are dealing with a kind of neurosis which is, in a way, elegant (if you will allow me to use the word) by virtue of which everything is cast, as in the schizophrenic's vision (if you will still permit the expression, for it serves as an example), under a harsh blade of light which never varies in intensity.⁴²

Anguilla shows no preference for one preferred theory of his origins to another. They are all equally possible and valid, equally interesting or uninteresting as versions of his possible beginnings. Finally putting down roots seems to be arbitrary, not informed by being particularly drawn to a place or connecting with a place. Neither is there real discrimination between people: 'tutte le carni sono buone e si equivalgono' / 'todas las

⁴² Doug Thompson *A Study of the Major Novels and Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 195. This is Thompson's translation of an extract from Armanda Giuducci's book *Il Mito Pavese* (Florence, 1967), p. 418.

carnes son buenas y se corrompen'. This is not an idea of all men being equal but a sense of no emotional attachment between humans.

Now consider this passage by Dal Masetto from *La tierra incomparable*. This extract is also the opening of the novel:

Ese lunes - dos días después de cumplir ochenta años - Ágata se despertó y ahí estaba la idea. Se le apareció mientras emergía del sueño y ahora llenaba todo el espacio de su pensamiento.

Todavía con los ojos cerrados, sin moverse, Agata la reconoció y la analizó. No era una idea nueva. Las escasas palabras con que hubiese podido resumirla y expresarla eran las mismas que la habían acompañado durante cuarenta años: desde el momento en que, después de cruzar el océano con sus dos hijos, había desembarcado en el puerto de Buenos Aires, donde la esperaba Mario, sus marido, y había comenzado su destino de inmigrante. La idea siguió con ella en ese pueblo de llanura donde se habían radicado y todavía vivía, donde habían trabajado duro y visto crecer a los hijos, y partir a uno de ellos hacia la ciudad, y después los casamientos de ambos, la llegada de los nietos, las navidades que los reunían a todos una vez al año, la muerte de Mario. Y el tiempo había seguido pasando.⁴³

Like Pavese, Dal Masetto's use of adjectives and adverbs is sparing. The adjectives he does use are neutral: '*nueva* idea', '*trabajado duro*'. It seems necessary to a discussion of the lack of adjectivisation in both Pavese and Dal Masetto to mention Hemingway who surely plays a part in this spare use of language. In his essay 'American Ripeness' Pavese describes the depths of this kind of writing in Hemingway: 'The realism of [...] Hemingway, will variously seek the whole man, that second reality which underlies appearance; it will seek to "name" things in order to release from them the explosive

⁴³ Antonio Dal Masetto, *La tierra incomparable* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1994), p. 9.

spiritual charge'.⁴⁴ Interestingly, Pavese's admiration of Hemingway led him to decline being his translator because of liking Hemingway's writing 'too much'.⁴⁵ Dal Masetto often mentions Hemingway as a literary influence in interviews and that much is clear. Hemingway seems not only present in Dal Masetto and Pavese in their use of language, there is also a principle of storytelling at work. Their fiction calls to mind Hemingway's famous guidance to writers using the analogy of the tip of the iceberg: 'If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of these things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.'⁴⁶ Indeed, this seems apt to describe the openings of the novels which I quote above.

Dal Masetto's terse and restrained style of narration seems to convey a similar indifference to that shown in the opening of *La luna y las fogatas*. However, while the novel is narrated in the third person, it is a narration which is closely identified with the main protagonist, Agata. It knows her thoughts. However, while we may learn some of her thoughts, we are not allowed real intimate access to her. Her life events are listed in this first paragraph dispassionately. This is a life condensed into concrete episodes and no one particular episode is more accentuated than another - they all simply happened. They too appear in an indiscriminately 'harsh blade of light', as Armanda Guiducci puts

⁴⁴ Cesare Pavese, 'American Ripeness', *American Literature: Essays and Opinions*, trans. from the Italian by Edwin Fussell, (London: University of California Press, 1970), p. 184.

⁴⁵ According to the introduction to *The Selected Works of Cesare Pavese*, trans. and with Introduction by R.W. Flint (New York: New York Review Books, 2001). p. x: 'He liked Scott Fitzgerald so much that he once confided in a letter that he didn't dare translate him, as he had not translated Hemingway for the same reason.'

⁴⁶ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, (Reading: Arrow, 1932; this edition, 1994), p. 169.

it in reference to Pavese, which seems to bleach out the idiosyncratic responses in Agata to such life events. Agata's wish to return is an 'idea' rather than a longing.

Nevertheless, through this understatedness, the character of Agata emerges. Beneath her apparent impartiality the reader might imagine a latent passion, although we are rarely given explicit evidence for this in the text. The reader does identify with Agata to an extent but is tactfully excluded from actually knowing about her private internal world. This becomes a compelling narrative technique. We read on in order to catch glimpses of this private world and the private history which eludes us in these matter-of-fact descriptions of her life story. Romeo Giger's analysis of how Hemingway's text works on the reader serves as a good account of how Pavese and Dal Masetto's fiction can also function in this way:

The author no longer depicts everything in detail but hints at what might have been there. He does not supply ready-made emotions; they are now inherent in the text. Nevertheless the "facts" are still present; they have merely gone into hiding. They continue to exert their influence, however, not overtly; the reportorial element has been made subservient to the needs of art. And instead of being merely an exploration of the surface, the fictional account is a sounding-rod driven deep down into the "underwater part" of being. Through the archetypal pattern which now emerges, the story becomes personally meaningful to everyone of us and readable at a creative level. We are no longer told; we are made to experience.⁴⁷

As I mentioned earlier, due to these impartially observant narrative perspectives both Anguilla and Agata also become receptacles for other people's stories. The reader is then forced to ask in what way, if any, do the other characters' stories shed light, if only obliquely, on the stories of the main protagonists themselves?

⁴⁷ Romeo Giger, 'The Creative Void: Hemingway's Iceberg Theory', *Swiss Studies in English*, 93, 1977, p. 32.

Francesca Gibson in her doctoral thesis, 'Themes of Exile in the Early Works of Cesare Pavese' (University of Reading, 1992), pays particular attention to the use of this narrative device in Pavese's novel *La Spiaggia* (1941).

Il compagno, la casa en collina, Il diavolo sulle collina, Tra donne sola and La luna e I falò are all first person narratives and in each the narrator is undoubtedly the main protagonist, yet at the same time he or she can also function, to varying degrees, as a kind of spectator or observer of events around him or her, events which at first sight would seem to concern solely the other characters and not the main protagonists at all. [...] If *La Spiaggia* has a 'fault', it can be said to be that Pavese succeeds too well in his aim of making his narrator appear to be a detached observer, to the extent that he is almost completely marginalised from the text, and that his drama is almost completely lost sight of.⁴⁸

We could equally ask if this narrative technique might also have eclipsed a real sense of the central characters themselves in *La Luna y las Fogatas* and *La tierra incomparable*.

Gibson obviously sees this as a weakness in the case of *La Spiaggia* but is she missing the point? In the case of the novels *La luna* and *La tierra*, it seems to me to be a crucial aspect of the intrinsic functioning of the narratives. I would argue that it forces the reader into the more 'difficult' role of co-author. We are given the freedom to read a story below the surface of the novel which is not immediately accessible or obvious. The narrators are not eclipsed but veiled by the text so the onus falls on the reader to fill in the gaps (sometimes gaping), that prevent us from knowing the main protagonists' stories on a first reading. To me it seems that neither Agata nor Anguilla are ciphers. Rather, they

⁴⁸ Francesca Gibson, 'Themes of Exile in the Early Works of Cesare Pavese' (University of Reading, 1992), pp. 260-261.

are mysterious and subjective fictional personalities who stay with us long after reading the books, perhaps for this very quality of outsidership which Gibson identifies. As Giger argues for a 'creative level' in the experience of reading Hemingway, I would argue that Pavese and Dal Masetto plant seeds in our imagination which stimulate our own individual creation of who these characters might be.

The Unsaid

In both *La Luna y las Fogatas* and *La tierra incomparable* there is a sense that a great deal of the novels' power lies in what is deliberately *not* said in as much as what is said. This is much more than just an economy of style. As mentioned above, much of Anguilla's and Agata's life story is simply omitted. It is the details of other people's lives which is given precedence. We are not let in on Agata's intimate memories. Instead it is her companion, Silvana's life, which we are led into. With Agata we become the witness, or voyeur, to the painful breakdown of Silvana's marriage. But even that life and that relationship remains ultimately elliptical.

As readers of *La Luna y las Fogatas* we are given insight into Anguilla's occasional trains of thought but at times they seem to hold an incomprehensible and impenetrable logic. Why is there a breakdown in the relationship between Anguilla and his American girlfriend Rosanne? The description of their parting is elusive:

Poi una sera mi disse che tornava dai suoi. Restai lí, perché mai l'avrei creduta capace di tanto. Stavo per chiederle quanto sarebbe stata via, ma lei guardandosi le ginocchia - era seduta accanto a me nella macchina - mi disse che non dovevo dir niente, ch'era tutto deciso, che andava per sempre dai suoi. Le chiesi quando partiva. - Anche domani. *Any time*.
Riportandola alla pensione le disse che potevamo aggiustarla, sposarci. Mi lasciò parlare con un mezzo sorriso, guardandosi le ginocchia, corrugando la fronte.
- Ci ho pensato, - disse, con quella voce rauca. - Non serve. Ho perduto. *I've lost my battle*.
Invece non andò a casa, tornò ancora alla costa. Ma non uscì mai sui giornali a colori. Mi scrisse mesi dopo una cartolina da Santa Monica chiedendomi dei soldi. Glieli mandai e non mi rispose. Non ne seppi piú niente. (Chap. XXI, p. 114)

Una tarde me dijo que volvería a su casa. Quedé perplejo, porque en realidad no la creía capaz de eso. Estaba por preguntarle el tiempo que permanecería ausente, pero ella, mirándome las rodillas - estaba sentada junto a mí en el auto -, me dijo que nada debía alegar, que todo estaba resuelto y se iba para siempre a casa de sus padres. Le pregunté cuándo partía.
Mañana mismo. *Any time*.
Llevándola de vuelta a la pensión, le dije que podíamos vivir juntos, casarnos. Me dejó hablar, sonriéndome apenas, mirándome las rodillas, arrugando la frente.
- Lo he pensado - dijo con aquella voz ronca -
De nada sirve. He perdido. *I've lost my battle*.
En cambio no regresó a su casa, volvió a la costa. Pera nunca salió en las páginas de colores de los diarios. Me escribió meses después una postal de Santa Mónica pidiéndome dinero. Se lo remití y no tuve respuesta. No supe más de ella. (pp. 123-4)

The reader will ask what has happened here. What was the battle Roseanne feels she has lost? Was it trying to reach Anguilla and trying to evoke love in him? Is there even some suggestion that she is pregnant and that is why she writes asking for money? Our suspicions are never proved or disproved. In this sense Pavese's narration is once again Hemingway-esque. We can recall stories such as 'Hills Like White Elephants' in which a dialogue between a man and a woman takes place. Nothing is said explicitly about their predicament but we gather an intense emotion by all that is not said and by the growing symbolism of the information which is offered to us by the text. The woman

awaits what her partner refers to as ‘an awfully simple operation [...] It’s just to let the air in.’⁴⁹ We assume as the story continues that what the man is referring to is an abortion. We perceive the woman’s wish to have the baby and her potential vulnerability in relation to the father of the child: ‘You’ve got to realize,’ he said, ‘that I don’t want to do it if you don’t want to. I’m perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to do.’ (p. 367). The reader knows that he is evidently not ‘perfectly willing’ to go through with the pregnancy at all. He denies what is obvious to the reader - that of course the pregnancy ‘means’ a great deal to the woman in the story. At the beginning of the dialogue the woman looks at the hills, white and dry in the distance as says ‘They look like white elephants’ and her partner replies ‘I’ve never seen one’ and drinks his beer. ‘No, you wouldn’t have.’ she says. This exchange seems weighted. Among other mysterious things it seems to tell of the woman’s capacity to look into the future; she can imagine what it would be like to have a child, she can also imagine what damage will be done to the relationship if they abort their baby. Her partner cannot imagine either futures clearly; he seems to deny both. The woman and the reader know this. The title comes to resonate with these undertones. While this is only a glimpse of this relationship and these lives (there is so much we don’t know about these two characters) Hemingway’s narrative is powerful and compelling.

Silence and the unsaid in literature and perhaps art in general can mean so many different things. It can mean oppression, repression, suppression, shame, death, defensiveness, the sign of thought (speech can halt or avoid thought), a space for meditation, a complaint, a

⁴⁹ Ernest Hemingway, *The Essential Hemingway* (St. Albans: first edition 1947, this edition Panther Books, 1977), p. 365. Henceforth all further page references will be cited in the text.

part of a dialogue, experience that cannot be put into words. Susan Sontag in her essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence' (1967) remembers John Cage's conclusion after experimenting with no sound in a chamber when he was confronted with the sound of his own nervous system and heart. He said 'There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound'. She argues that pure silence does not, in fact, exist either conceptually or actually, and that an artist who uses silence, uses it to create a presence. It is a 'full void' or 'an enriching emptiness'.⁵⁰

But of the many silences there are, we have to consider which one is the silence we encounter in Pavese and Dal Masetto. While they both must have encountered political repression at other points in their writing, 1949-50 in Italy, or 1993-4 in Argentina were not particular times of political censorship. So, if the silence is not a silence of political oppression, what is the 'void' 'full' of, or the 'emptiness' 'enriched' by?

Nicoletta Simborowski in her study, *Secrets and Puzzles: Silence and the Unsaid in Contemporary Italian Writing*, draws attention to Primo Levi as a writer who, even in his most emotive prose, is never explicit about horror; he leaves that part of his narrative out. She writes:

I suggest that the element of *ritegno* or restraint is a singularly powerful influence throughout Levi's writing career. It represents an important aspect of his personal poetics⁵¹

⁵⁰ Susan Sontag 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1969), pp. 3 - 34. Octavio Paz also wrote a poem about Cage's experiment: 'Lectura de John Cage'.

⁵¹ Nicoletta Simborowski, 'Writing and Restraint in Primo Levi', *Secrets and Puzzles: Silence and the Unsaid in Contemporary Italian Writing* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 23.

In *If This is a Man*, Levi describes the Italian Jews waiting to be transported to the concentration camps. They live their last night before the journey as the last night before death. He writes 'Many things were then said and done among us; but of these it is better that there remain no memory' refraining from subjecting us to disturbing detail.⁵² One feels this is his wish not to alienate the reader by disturbing or distressing them. Simborowski is keen to emphasise that Levi's reticence is by no means a lack of emotion. In the case of Pavese and Dal Masetto, however, violent events are told matter-of-factly and in passing with the characteristic indifference we encounter throughout the novels. It is as though these violent events become the backdrop for the real happenings in the novels which we are not told about, which have taken place off-stage.⁵³

Silence can be seen as what best defines poetry. The careful and attentive use of few weighted words to create as vivid a meaning as possible. Certainly you could characterise Pavese and Dal Masetto's prose as 'poetic' in this sense. Theirs is not a reticence, it is a silent awe when faced with experience which cannot be put into words.

While it may be possible to eliminate some kinds of silence in Dal Masetto and Pavese, it may not be possible to identify exactly what kind of silence or silences we encounter in their work. In my view, the silence is a resistance to interpretation or to absolutes or finality. The reader who is looking for the obvious will be frustrated and the reader who wishes to interpret will be faced with any number of interpretations because the silence

⁵² Primo Levi, *If This is a Man The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf, with an intro. by Paul Bailey and an afterword by the author (London: Abacus, 1988), p. 22.

⁵³ This again is reminiscent of Hemingway and his iceberg principle of narrative.

leaves things open. I believe this is a tendency towards mystery and unknowability to which both Pavese and Dal Masetto are inclined. Saccomanno would seem to agree:

El caso Pavese es, por sus características, de una rigurosidad y coherencia extremas. Basta cotejar las anotaciones de su diario con su poesía y narrativa para advertir hasta dónde todas y cada una de sus palabras responden a una intención meditada largo tiempo y en silencio. La asunción de silencio, en este punto, es clave en su escritura lacónica, más confiada en lo que se calla que en el desborde. [...] con sutileza, Pavese sortea la ilustración fabulera del mito y, en vez de apelar a lo pedagógico, prefiere, como moral narrativa, insinuar el misterio.⁵⁴

Dal Masetto follows this model. Agata realizes that it is the experience of being with Silvana, not the treasure her son buried which she cannot find, that is the revelation she is looking for. Silvana is the oracle she can learn from although she never articulates to herself, and therefore not to the reader either, what it is she has learned:

Le hacían saber que también en este presente, con sus desconciertos había un mundo que debía ser visto y vivido, y complementaba lo otro, lo que ella esperaba encontrar. Le pareció que bastaba quedarse ahí, con Silvana, y algo nacería. Y que así, esperando, comenzaba a conocer y a comunicarse con la mujer joven que tenía al lado. Sentía que aquello era igual que tocarse. (p.100)

Sentía que la historia de Vito y Silvana, lo poco que todavía sabía de ellos, los conflictos que los ataban y los separaban, formaban parte de su aprendizaje ante este Trani nuevo que había encontrado al volver. (p. 227).

Perhaps what Agata learns from her observations of Silvana cannot be put into words.

Perhaps the effect of reading this is that we too have a deeper, albeit private, and individual revelation which we come to in this contemplative space in the text.

⁵⁴ Guillermo Saccomanno 'El oficio, el fuego', *Página/12*, 25 May 2005, <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-582-2003-05-25.html>.

Abruptness, the open work

I mentioned Primo Levi's apparent wish not to distress the reader with talking explicitly about disturbing material. There are many instances in *La Luna y las Fogatas* and *La tierra incomparable* where disturbing events interrupt the narrative in a seemingly uninvited and unrelated way. As I mentioned earlier, these interruptions recall the rambling structure of Melville's *Moby Dick*, as well as Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela*.

In *La tierra incomparable*, Agata and Silvana encounter an acquaintance of Silvana, Dino, while drinking wine in a café. He tells them a harrowing yet seemingly arbitrary story. The telling of this story is unprovoked by them, he just launches into it, and Agata has the impression that Silvana may have heard it before. Dino describes working in a battery farm for chickens and how badly the animals were treated. He tells this with an intensity which makes it almost disturbing. He describes having a cut on his leg and the hens pecking his wound. He tried to kick them off him but he is unable to stop them entirely. He can't get out of the pen because it is locked and his work colleague does not come to rescue him. The experience takes on the quality of a waking hallucination, although the reader is unsure as to what significance it might hold:

Unos meses después dejó el criadero y se dedicó a otra cosa. Pero nunca pudo sacarse a los pollos de encima. Ahora mismo lo volvían a acosar. Lo acosaban todo el tiempo.

Calló, tomó vino y Silvana le preguntó si soñaba con eso, si se trataba de un sueño. El dijo que a veces le pasaba soñando, pero en general le sucedía estando despierto. Estaba ahí, contra la pared, defendiéndose, esperando. Y su compañero que nunca llegaba para abrir la puerta.

Ahora Dino sonreía. La expresión de su cara era de alguien que carga una gran pena y se esfuerza por parecer risueño. (p. 185)

Agata then asks herself if this man Dino was really there, he seemed so strange and out of context: ‘Aquel hombre había llegado como una aparición a través de la luz del mediodía, se había ido, y ahora Agata se preguntaba si alguien había estado realmente ahí hablando con ellas.’ Indeed, his appearance is strange and out of context to the reader too. There is something deeply unsettling about a presence or an object in a novel or a film or any work of art which seems out of context or which one cannot make sense of. It seems to defy narrative reason. But does it make sense in an associative way? I would compare this to how the appearance of some uninvited memories seems random and illogical and yet they have a symbolic capacity and can be a way of expressing what cannot be put into words. I would argue that Dino’s interruption of Agata and Silvana’s conversation has a similar function to an uninvited memory in this sense. Dino’s cameo appearance (we never see or hear of him again in the novel) is sandwiched between Silvana talking about the father she never knew and then talking about the troubled relations with her husband, Vito. Something of Dino’s story seems to express being trapped in and tormented by a state of solitude. Sontag in her essay on Pavese of 1962, ‘The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer’ characterises a typical problem in Pavese’s fiction as that of ‘lapsed communication.’⁵⁵ It would seem that ‘lapsed communication’ is an apt way to describe Silvana’s marriage to Vito. Silvana and Agata then go on to talk about Silvana’s relationship with Vito. Agata asks herself if he too really exists because Silvana’s portrayal of him is so contradictory.

⁵⁵ Susan Sontag, ‘The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer’ (1962) in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 39.

Another disturbing and abrupt interruption comes later in the novel when the child of Silvana's friend, Ada, is knocked down by a car and killed. Silvana is the person who has to break the news to Ada. In conversation Silvana's reaction to the death is puzzling to Agata, and to the reader:

- No era sólo dolor - dijo como para sí misma.

Agata se quedó mirándola sin entender.

- ¿Qué? - preguntó

- Hablo de Ada.

Agata asintió.

- No era sólo dolor lo que sentía.

Silvana hizo una pausa y Agata esperó, pendiente de sus labios.

- Había otra cosa.

- ¿Qué cosa?

- También había alivio.

Agata esperó de nuevo. Después dijo:

- ¿Alivio de qué?

- De no tener un hijo creciendo en este mundo.

Ahora Agata no se animó a mirarla.

-¿Ella confesó eso? - preguntó.

-No.

-Es una deducción tuya.

-Sí.

Otra vez permanecieron en silencio. Por fin Agata dijo:

-Es un pensamiento horrible. (pp. 234-5)

Like Dino, we do not encounter Ada again. It seems that she may be there to tell us more about Silvana and Agata's reaction to Silvana than anything else. But what exactly *does* it tell us about Silvana? It suggests something of her state of mind. That death is better than living, that there is a severe pessimism about the future where Silvana does not want children herself and where the death of a friend's child becomes a relief, rather than a tragedy. The reader may share Agata's reaction. It is a horrible thought that a mother

would be relieved at her son's too early death. But through Agata's averted gaze, Dal Masetto allows us to know nothing more than this. Silvana's private history and private experience is only ever hinted at through instances such as these. Once again, intimate access to a character is denied.

In *La Luna y las Fogatas* we learn of similarly disturbing histories or events of characters who make fleeting appearances. They are never 'on stage' long enough for us to invest in them as characters and we are not encouraged to invest in them. Do we really pity Cinto, the crippled boy? Perhaps we do not know him well enough to. It seems that even at the height of the drama of Cinto's father, Valino, murdering his family and killing himself, it is not these events which are at the heart of the novel, rather they teach us something about Anguilla.

But these unsettling interjections, while they may express something, ultimately resist explanation. Rather they reflect the arbitrary and disturbing way things happen in life. There is no poetic justice in Ada losing her son or Cinto being crippled, with a murderous father. Both Pavese and Dal Masetto refuse to present a digestible novel which puts artificial order and sequence into life where, in fact, there is none. They deny the reader both narrative reason and a comforting version of causality.

Inheritance of themes

La Luna y las Fogatas and *La tierra incomparable* are both novels which typify Pavese's and Dal Masetto's life themes as writers; that of exile and the unending journey, or

unattainable return. However, the themes of exile, journey and return cannot be understood in a literal sense in the work of Pavese and Dal Masetto. Francesca Gibson helpfully points out that Pavese cannot really be described as an exile, never having lived outside of Italy for any significant period of time. She writes:

A biographical approach can thus only take us so far. It would appear that exile was a state of mind for Pavese rather than a product of his actual experience, and that he liked to regard himself as living in a state of isolation or separation well before the brief period in his life when he found himself to be literally living in exile.⁵⁶

In biographical terms Dal Masetto would qualify more readily for the category of exile, having been forced to leave Italy due to poverty and lack of prospects at the age of twelve. Nevertheless, a more biographical or sociological approach to both novels leads us to a dead end because this approach would fail to grasp the real artistic preoccupations in the texts. Both novels touch on exile in its metaphysical sense. Here we can return to Melville in that *Moby Dick* described a metaphorical state of exile which may have been a powerful model to Pavese and, indeed, in turn, to Dal Masetto. Francesca Gibson discusses *Moby Dick* in reference to Pavese as a novel which explored modern man's state of exile through the endless grappling with the sea. She writes:

Moby Dick is based on the epic form of the momentous and mythic journey-quest. But at the same time Melville chose this framework in order to illustrate all the better the inner life of his most important character Ishmael, and his sense of alienation, a theme dear to many Romantic, Decadent and also modernist writers.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Francesca Gibson 'Themes of Exile in the Early Works of Cesare Pavese', (University of Reading, 1992), p. 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 43

This metaphysical and non-literal state of exile is expressed so clearly and fundamentally in the work of Pavese and Dal Masetto. In fact, at the points at which exile does become more literal in the novels is where they become, perhaps, less successful.

Beyond the literal – metaphysical exile

Italo Calvino saw Pavese at his weakest when he attempted to write politically.

Sacomanno also notes this: ‘Quizá las zonas más forzadas de la novela, como apunta Italo Calvino, son aquellas en las que Pavese, hombre de su tiempo, se impone la política.’ The same might be said of Dal Masetto. I would argue that Dal Masetto’s political comments in his fiction could just as easily be expressed in an essay. His comment is straightforward and transparent. For example, consider this passage from *La tierra*:

Agata se puso a hojear un diario y le llamó la atención el título de una nota y la foto que la ilustraba. La nota relataba la odisea de un barco de fugitivos de Somalia, un carguero con 4.500 prófugos, entre ellos 400 niños, que viajaba a la deriva tratando de ser recibido en algún puerto y era rechazado por todos los países. Desde el barco partían desesperados pedidos de auxilio. Se les habían acabado los víveres; el clima era tórrido durante el día y las noches heladas; los vómitos, diarreas y enfermedades de todo tipo estaban convirtiendo el barco en un hospital flotante. En la foto se veía a la gente apiñada en cubierta sosteniendo letreros que decían: “Ayuda por favor”. Y una larga banda blanca con una inscripción que el diario traducía así: “Allá impera la ley de la jungla, nosotros nos hemos convertido en gacelas y sólo nos queda huir”.

Agata trataba de descifrar, en la foto borrosa, las expresiones de las caras. Pensó en su barco, en Génova, en la gente que la había acompañado en aquel viaje hacia América. (p.43)

Does Dal Masetto dramatise this successfully in terms of fiction? Does this extract reach further or deeper than an essay or piece of journalism?

Milan Kundera describes how far reaching the writing of Franz Kafka is:

If I hold so ardently to the legacy of Kafka, if I defend it as my personal heritage, it is not because I think it worthwhile to imitate the inimitable (and rediscover the *Kafkan*) but because it is such a tremendous example of the *radical autonomy* of the novel (of the poetry that is the novel). This autonomy allowed Franz Kafka to say things about our human condition (as it reveals itself in our century) that no social or political thought could ever tell us.⁵⁸

And as Umberto Eco put it in his study *The Open Work*:

It is easy to think of Kafka's work as "open": trial, castle, waiting, passing sentence, sickness, metamorphosis, and torture - none of these narrative situations is to be understood in the immediate literal sense.⁵⁹

But is the passage quoted above from *La tierra incomparable* open in this way? I do not think it can be said that it is. The reading is singular and closed. It seems to me that there is only one reading open to us here and it is relatively straightforward - the extremity of the conditions for these humans is shown, the only reaction in the reader can be sympathy and compassion. A comparison is made between this situation and a reverse migration out of Italy, rather than into Italy. The implication is that nothing has changed and that Italy repeats the bad treatment of immigrants who have not choice but to leave their country, forgetting that Italians were similarly forced to leave their country and faced difficult times trying to make lives for themselves in other countries only a few generations previously. Dal Masetto does reflect different attitudes to immigration through characters in the novel. Agata's estranged niece is married to a reactionary man,

⁵⁸ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. from the French by Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. 117.

⁵⁹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* trans. by Anna Cancogni, introduced by David Robey. (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 9.

Ercole, who voices the reactionary view that immigrants should be sent back to where they came from. But essentially all characters lead to the same conclusion - the disapproval of inhospitable Europe and the compassion for the plight of immigrants. The overall comment is, as Silvana says to Agata: 'A usted le tocaron tiempos difíciles, pero éstos no son mejores.' (p. 120) The treatment of immigrants is no more civilised now than it was when Agata herself was an immigrant.

There are a number of instances such as these in the novel - documentary-like, remaining on the level of something reportorial, rather than the 'explosive spritual charge' which Pavese described in reference to Hemingway's journalistic prose. Agata watches a programme on television about racist attacks on immigrants. It all unfolds on television and the experience of reading these parts is also almost like watching television. It is a bombardment of information which is presented flatly. There is no imaginative participation of the reader required. This is in stark contrast to other regions of the novel such as the elliptical conversations Agata has with Silvana. The passage quoted above is in contrast to other passages in the novel which I would describe as '*open*' in the sense Eco meant.

All this seems to lend support to Francesca Gibson's view that the theme of exile for Pavese (and by extension for Dal Masetto) is the exploration of an existential question, rather than a historical-political one. The political exploration of exile is where Dal Masetto's text seems at its weakest. Milan Kundera's characterises the heart of the novel as being an existential question or dilemma. It seems that the question at the heart of *La*

Luna y las Fogatas and *La tierra incomparable* is not about literal exile, it is metaphysical exile. Rather like *Rayuela* and *Siete de oro* the novels ask: ‘is it possible to overcome isolation and make a true and meaningful connection with another human being?’

***Fuego a discreción* and Pavese’s legacy of the problem of women**

Finally, I would like to discuss Dal Masetto’s novel of 1983, *Fuego a discreción*, to further illustrate ‘la impronta pavesiana’ in Dal Masetto’s work. This is a novel which is set over a few days in Buenos Aires during the late 1970’s. The backdrop of the novel is a summer which is so hot it is persecutory; a metaphor for the lurking presence of the sinister military at the time. Unlike *La Tierra incomparable* and *La Luna y las fogatas*, *Fuego a discreción* is not a story of an exile’s return and yet it too is a novel centred on a character in an existential state of exile and alienation. In this novel we encounter the same narrator we encounter in *Siete de oro*; in terms of the central preoccupations, *Fuego a discreción* is *Siete de oro* written again.

Beatriz Sarlo characterises the novel as about a journey, although the narrator never leaves Buenos Aires:

Novela del viaje y del camino, como la del Dal Masetto cuyo motor es un desambular sin itinerario (podría decirse: despojado, en apariencia, de significación) por espacios donde, desde el

título, se ha disparado fuego a discreción y se encuentran fragmentos dispersos e incomunicados de experiencias.⁶⁰

In *La tierra incomparable*, Agata's journey is to return to her homeland and yet she discovers that she is unable to find the same Italy she left behind. In a sense the title lets us know this from the beginning. It is a homage to Salvatore Quasimodo's poem 'La Terra Impareggiabile' – the title poem of a collection written between 1955 and 1958. The title of Dal Masetto's novel and Quasimodo's poem indicates that not only will the motherland remain incomparable to the new country travelled to but the exile will also never find the same motherland on their return. They lose a sense of anywhere being home.

An atmosphere of alienation is true of *Fuego a discreción* which is summarised in its first paragraph:

Aquel fue un verano como pocos. Me había separado de otra mujer, me había quedado sin lugar donde vivir y sin trabajo. Daba vueltas por las calles, soportaba el calor y la falta de objetivos, comía salteando de otras épocas, me alentaba diciéndome que no todos tienen la suerte de poder recomenzar desde cero.

This is a character who is rootless, he has no job, no relationship and no home. He fleetingly inhabits other people's homes but never stays long. He chooses, rather, to be on the outside. In this way he is like the narrator of *Siete de oro*, a man who can only participate in life from a distance. The narrator of *Fuego a discreción* contemplates an aeroplane passing through the sky as he waits for an ex-girlfriend in her flat:

⁶⁰ Beatriz Sarlo 'Política, ideología y figuración literaria', *Ficción y política: La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar*, ed. Daniel Balderston (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1987), p. 52.

De otro lado, encima de los edificios, un avión surgió lento y elegante como un pez. Hubo una tardía explosión de sol en una de sus alas. Me dije que esa posibilidad de mirar desde arriba, de participar a la distancia, era la única forma en que podía relacionarme con las cosas. Y había como un vago orgullo en comprobarlo. Ese paisaje tan complejo y ajeno, esos colores, esas figuras que corrían diez pisos más abajo, me pertenecían de algún modo. Me bastaba con mirar y sentir que era así [...] Frente a mí, el vidrio del ventanal había comenzado a devolverme mi propia imagen de jugador empedernido. (pp. 18-19)

Un amor impossible

I would argue that this narrator's perspective is a Pavesian narrative perspective. We can recall the narrator of Pavese's short story 'Suicidi' (*Notte di festa*, 1953) a man who becomes involved with a cashier girl, Carlotta, for whom he feels almost nothing yet he is haunted by her suicide, apparently carried out for love of him. Like the narrator of *Fuego a discreción*, he too would rather watch life from a distance than participate in it. I quote from the original as well as from an English translation as I have not had access to Spanish translations of the stories published in *Notte di festa*:

Non sono fatto per le tempeste e per la lotta: se anche in certe mattine scendo tutto vibrante a percorrere le vie, e il mio passo somiglia una sfida, repito che null'altro chiedo alla vita se non che si lasci guardare.⁶¹

I am not made for storms and struggles: and if, on certain mornings, I go down full of zest for a walk around the streets, and my past seems a perfidy, I repeat that I ask nothing more of life than being allowed to watch.⁶²

A theme common to Pavese and Dal Masetto in their fictional exploration of this kind of alienation and living on the outside is the impossibility of love. Ricardo Piglia obviously saw the theme of impossible love as significant when he selected Pavese's letters and

⁶¹ Cesare Pavese, *Racconti* (Torino: Einaudi, 1994) p. 178

⁶² Cesare Pavese, *Festival Night*, trans and with an introduction by A. E. Murch (London: Peter Owen, 1964) p. 163.

published them in *Crisis* with the title 'Cartas de un amor imposible'.⁶³ Pavese's story mentioned above, 'Suicidi', expresses this pessimism. In *La tierra incomparable*, the relationship between Silvana and Vito is doomed with some disturbance embedded between them which is never entirely explicit in the novel. Vito makes a suicide attempt in Silvana's presence; a tacitly violent act which seems to threaten any kind of hope for the reader about the possibility of love between a man and a woman.

Anguilla in *La Luna y las Fogatas* does not find love. The relationships he has with Nora and Rosanne in the States are peripheral to his life. Any real emotional engagement is absent. His adolescent crushes on Sor Matteo's daughters are more significant and come the closest to some kind of intimacy in the novel. Perhaps the only tender moment in the novel is a memory of Silvia resting her head on Anguilla's shoulder as he drives the cart back from a fairground where they have spent the evening. This is a miniscule instance of bliss:

Partimmo al chiaro dell'acetilene, e poi nel buio della strada in discesa andai adagio, ascoltando gli zoccoli. Quel coro dietro la chiesa cantava sempre. Irene s'era fatta su in una sciarpa, Silvia parlava della gente, del ballerini, dell'estate, criticava tutti e rideva. Mi chiesero se avevo anch'io la mia ragazza. Dissi ch'ero stato con Nuto, a guardar suonare.

Poi poco alla volta Silvia si calmò e un bel momento mi posò la testa sulla spalla, mi fece un sorriso e mi disse se la lasciavo stare così mentre guidavo. Io tenni le briglie, guardando le orecchie del cavallo. (p.162)

Salimos a la luz del acetileno, y luego en la oscuridad del camino, al llegar a la pendiente, contuve la marcha del caballo, atento al sonido de los cascos. El coro detrás de la iglesia continuaba. Irene se había envuelto en una bufanda; Silvia hablaba y hablaba de la gente, de los

⁶³ This theme was also explored by Piglia in his fiction. His story, 'Un pez en el hielo', centres on Pavese's suicide as a response to his repeated rejections in love. Ricardo Piglia, *La invasión* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1967).

bailarines, del verano, criticando a todos y riendo. Me preguntaron si tenía también yo mi amiga. Les dije que había estado con Nuto oyendo la música.

Silvia, poco a poco, fue callándose y en un raptó feliz puso su cabeza sobre mi hombro, me sonrió y preguntó si la dejaba estar así mientras yo conducía. Tomé las riendas, mirando las orejas del caballo. (pp. 172-3)

There is no intimacy other than this in the novel. And it is not just Anguilla for whom love is impossible. Irene, Silvia and Santa meet horrible ends in their quests for love; Irene's botched and fatal abortion, Silvia's violent husband, and Santa's execution.

While Dal Masetto's female characters do not, on the whole, meet such brutal ends, Dal Masetto expresses little faith in his fiction that love between men and women can be lasting and good. My inference is that one of the significant factors in this lack of faith and all it symbolises is Pavese's legacy.

In his fiction, Pavese associates women with people who are greedy for intimacy. The narrator of the short story, 'Suicidî' *Notte di festa* (1953), [*Festival Night* (1964)], is utterly contemptuous of the woman, Carlotta, who seeks a private and intimate relationship with him:

Il mio rancore non colpiva lei; colpiva ogni limitazione e ogni asservimento che la nostra intimità accennasse a crearmi. Siccome non l'amavo, il suo piú piccolo diritto su di me mi appariva mostruoso. C'erano giorni che darle del tu mi faceva ribrezzo, mi avvilliva. Chi era per me questa donna, per tenermi a braccetto? ⁶⁴

My bitterness did not trouble her; what did hurt her was any restraint, any resentment, that our intimacy tended to create in me. Since I did not love her, it seemed to me monstrous that she

⁶⁴ Cesare Pavese, *Notte di festa* (Torino: Einaudi, 1961), p. 187.

should have even the slightest claim on me. There were days when it made me shudder to address her as an intimate friend, an equal. I felt degraded. What was this woman to me, that she should take my arm? (p. 172)

The story ends with the narrator telling us abruptly and matter-of-factly ‘che l’avevano trovata un mese prima, morta nel letto, col gas aperto.’ (p. 196) / ‘they had found her dead in bed, with the gas turned on.’ (p. 180)

‘Viaggio di nozze’ is from the same collection, *Notte di festa* (1953) and tells the story of a man who marries a woman whom he does not love and becomes suffocated by how much she loves him. This narrator does confess to us that looking at his wife, ‘Io provavo un’ombra de risentimento a quel segno di una gioia che non sempre dividevo. ‘Lei mi ha sposato e se la gode’, pensavo.’ p. 30 / ‘I felt a twinge of jealousy at this sign of happiness I did not always share. “She’s married me and she’s enjoying it,” I thought.’ (p. 32). Having not had a honeymoon they decide to go away to a hotel for a day or two. This makes Cilia happy and yet it is so unbearable to the narrator that he has to get away from the situation. He says he is going for a walk but stays away all night and Cilia presumes something terrible has happened to him. She fears him dead. In his recalling of the incident, the narrator has some insight into his actions:

Ora intravedo la verità: mi sono tanto compiaciuto in solitudine, da atrofizzare ogni mio senso di umana relazione e incapacitarmi a tollere e corrispondere qualunque tenerezza. Cilia per me non era un ostacolo; semplicemente non esisteva. Se avessi soltanto compreso questo e sospettato quanto male facevo a me stesso così mutilandoi, l’avrei potuta risarcire con un’immensa gratitudine, tenendo la sua presenza come la mia sola salvezza. p. 41

Now I can glimpse the truth. I become so engrossed in solitude that it deadens all my sense of human relationships and makes me incapable of tolerating or responding to any tenderness. Cilia,

for me, was not an obstacle: she simply did not exist. If I had only understood this! If I had any idea of how much harm I was doing to myself by cutting myself off from her in this way, I should have turned to her with intense gratitude and cherished her presence as my only salvation. (p. 44)

Yet the story ends flatly. The insight and compassion cannot last. As a response to Cilia's distress the narrator remarks 'Neanch'io - e la senti sussultare - neanch'io mi sono troppo divertito a Genova. Pure non piango.' p. 43 / 'even I haven't enjoyed myself much at Genoa. Yet I'm not crying.' (p.45) In this throwaway remark which brings the story to a close, the narrator shows a lack of engagement with Cilia's level of distress as well his own part in causing it. This anticlimactic, blunt ending to the story keeps the reader on the outside and does not allow us to take away a reassuring sense of resolution, insight or compassion. This is characteristically Pavese.

Like the women who seek intimacy which Pavese's male characters are so contemptuous of, we, as readers, are similarly warded off. Pavese's narrative voices rarely take on a confessional, conspirational or confiding tone which might draw us in but rather they often exclude us from the private moments which would allow us to know them more intimately. Susan Sontag in her short essay on Pavese remarks that the erotic scenes, perhaps the potentially intimate scenes in his fiction, are 'curiously avoided'.⁶⁵ Anguilla is mostly cold and emotionally cut-off. He does not invite us in; in fact, at times he seems to fend us off with his abrupt and unemotional delivery of dramatic events. Anguilla arrives in the aftermath of Valino's homicide and suicide and describes the scene coolly. Like the narrator of 'Viaggio di nozze', there is a slight sense of flippancy in Anguilla's

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag, 'The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer' (1962) in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 40.

account. His inclusion of the dressmaker's comment makes the tone of his own narration somewhat gossipy:

Siccome el Valino era morto in peccato mortale, non volle saperne di benedirlo in chiesa. Lasciarono la sua cassa fuori sui gradini, mentre il prete dentro borbottava su quelle quattro ossa nere delle donne, chiuse in un sacco. Tutto si fece verso sera, di nascosto. Le vecchie del Morone, col velo in testa, andarono coi morti al camposanto raccogliendo per strada margherite e trifoglio. Il prete non ci venne perché - ripensadoci - anche la Rosina era vissuta in peccato mortale. Ma questo lo disse soltanto la sarta, una vecchia lingua. (p. 145-6)

Como Valino había muerto en pecado mortal, le negó la bendición de iglesia. Depositaron el cajón sobre la escalinata, mientras el cura refunfuñaba sobre los cuatro huesos ennegrecidos de las mujeres metidos en una bolsa. Todo se hizo, en secreto, hacia el atardecer. Las viejas de Morone, cubierta la cabeza con el velo, acompañaron a los difuntos hasta el cementerio, recogiendo por el camino margaritas y tréboles. El cura no fue, pues - recapacitando - recordó que Rosina también había vivido en pecado mortal. Pero esto lo dijo solamente la modista, una lengua viperina. (p. 156)

Like the narrators of 'Suicidi' and 'Viaggio di nozze', when one acquaintance tells the narrator of *Fuego a discreción* news that an ex-girlfriend has committed suicide, with an insinuation that it may have been for love of him, the narrator's response is similarly detached

:

...me preguntó si sabía que Elda se había suicidado, en Brasil, hacía menos de un año. Le dije que no, que no estaba enterado. Lo cual era cierto. Pero el tono de mi voz no debió ser el adecuado porque inmediatamente comentó:

- Parece que no te importa.

No fue una apreciación, sino más bien una acusación.

-No, no me importa - dije

Vi que se indignaba, pero se contuvo.

- ¿Cómo es posible? Vos la conociste bien, anduviste con ella - protestó.

- ¿Y eso qué tiene que ver?

- ¿Cómo qué tiene que ver? Era una mujer maravillosa. A vos te consta. (p.52)

His manner is almost irritated in his response to this news. He does not try to feign any kind of regret.

The narrator sleeps with an ex-girlfriend, Vera, at the beginning of the novel and is troubled from the very start of their re-encounter by any tendencies towards intimacy on her part. When she confides in him, he is disconcerted, even perturbed: 'Pese a todo lo que nos separaba, aquella confianza se registró en mí como una molestia. Fue igual que si acabase de perder algo' (p. 14). He enters the homes of women but seems almost allergic to staying there; women and their homes are experienced by him as a kind of trap. Like the narrator of *Siete de oro* and the narrator of Pavese's 'Viaggio di nozze', he is a man who evokes love but cannot feel love himself. We can recall Eva saying to the narrator in *Siete de oro*: 'A vos siempre te han querido. Estoy segura. Sos vos el incapaz.' (p. 167)

The logic of Pavese's thinking in relation to women in his fiction is sometimes oblique. Consider Anguilla's thoughts in the company of Nora, a woman he dated in the States. These thoughts are brutal and violent with a hidden sense of reasoning. Due to the length of this extract, I quote only in translation:

Ahora comprendía por qué de tanto en tanto en los caminos se encontraba una muchacha estrangulada en un auto, or dentro de una pieza, o en el fondo de una callejuela. ¿Que ellos también -esas gentes- tuviesen deseos de echarse sobre la hierba, concordar con los sapos, ser dueños de un pedazo de tierra del tamaño de una mujer, y dormir, realmente, sin miedo? Sin embargo el país era grande, había espacio para todos. Había mujeres, había tierra, había dinero.

Pero nadie tenía bastante, nadie por más que se hiciese rico se detenía, y el campo, los viñedos también, parecían jardines públicos, parcelas fingidas como aquellas de las estaciones, o bien estaban sin cultivar, tierras quemadas, montañas de hierro viejo. No era un país para resignarse, descansar la cabeza y decir a los demás: “Por mal que me vaya, dejadme vivir”. Esto es lo que daba miedo. Ni siquiera entre ellos se conocían; atravesando aquellas montañas se comprendía a cada vuelta del camino que nadie se había parado allí jamás, nadie las había tocado con las manos. Por eso a un borracho lo cargaba sobre un tonel, lo metían dentro, lo abandonaban como a un muerto. Y tenían sobre sí no sólo la borrachera sino también la mujer malvada. Llegaba el día en que uno, por sentirse vivir, por darse a conocer, destrozaba a una mujer, la mataba mientras dormía, le rompía la cabeza con una llave inglesa.

Nora me llamó desde la carretera, para bajar a la ciudad. Tenía una voz, con la distancia, como la de los grillos. Tuve un acceso de risa, ante la idea de que hubiese intuido mi pensamiento. Pero estas cosas no se comunican a nadie, de nada servía. (pp. 23-24)

It is ironic when Anguilla says ‘Ahora comprendía por qué de tanto en tanto en los caminos se encontraba una muchacha estrangulada en un auto, o dentro de una pieza, o en el fondo de una callejuela’, the irony being that the explanation which follows is definitely not as transparent as the words ‘Ahora comprendía por qué’ would seem to suggest. Yet there seems to be a clear relationship between women and land: ‘¿Que ellos también -esas gentes- tuviesen deseos de echarse sobre la hierba, concordar con los sapos, ser dueños de un pedazo de tierra del tamaño de una mujer, y dormir, realmente, sin miedo?’. In this way he expresses an association between women and roots, inclusion, belonging and home. But there is some sense in the passage quoted above that while the women and the land are available in America, they remain unreachable or intangible. Yet perhaps in the fiction of both Pavese and Dal Masetto women and roots are not just intangible, they are also vehemently resisted. Rather than a symbol of loss, yearning, or painful excusion, they come to stand for a trap. The narrator of *Fuego a discreción* describes intimacy with ex-girlfriend Vera as losing something. He seems

proud of his self-image as ‘un jugador empedernido’. Being solitary, heartless, or even cruel, becomes a kind of strength.

‘Las posibilidades de amor en los intersticios de la guerra’

There are three poetic chapters in *Fuego a discreción* (chapters 6, 15 and 26) which are printed in italics and can be read as an abstract commentary on the rest of the novel. They seem to take on a mythical resonance. Like Anguilla’s internal dialogue about women being strangled, shot in their sleep or bashed with a spanner, the atmosphere in these chapters is similarly primitive, intense and violent. Beatriz Sarlo describes these inserts as ‘voces que cuentan que han nacido, atravesando los siglos, luchando en campos de batalla cuyos nombres mentan lo fabuloso y lo desconocido. Se habla de una guerra y de las posibilidades del amor en los intersticios de la guerra.’⁶⁶ These chapters in italic, while enigmatic, seem to be more passionate than the indifferent Pavesian narrator we encounter for the most part in *Fuego a discreción*. They communicate with the reader on an intense, confessional level. The first chapter in italics, chapter 6, opens:

Mi nombre fue muchos nombres. Ahora soy un guerrero cansado, arrojado a la sombra de este templo en ruinas, entre paredes ajenas, rodeado de cosas ajenas. Nada me pertenece. Sin embargo, todavía subsiste en mí la misma actitud de espera. Estoy indagando en el aire, en lo que está en el aire, en lo que se oculta detrás del aire. Cae el día y me conduce de vuelta a las llanuras de sal, a las marismas. Batallas, escaramuzas, vigilias. El enemigo avanza sobre la ondulación del terreno, su cuerpo incierto se acomoda entre el cielo y la tierra, tiene forma de mujer. Es el momento de atacar. Y yo atacaba, buscaba el centro, el fondo de la cuña, la matriz, el manantial de sangre, la vieja compañera. Emergía de esos encuentros como una bestia manchada, humeante, sucio de heridas mías y ajenas. Mis combates eran una furia callada.

⁶⁶ Beatriz Sarlo, ‘La novela como viaje’, *Punto de vista*, año VII/No. 21 August 1984, p. 27.

Buscaba inmediatamente la soledad. No para celebrar, sino para calmarme del asombro que en mí siempre adquiriría toda forma de exaltación. (p. 41)

Like Anguilla's internal dialogue about a woman strangled in a car, this passage is not immediately easy to fathom. It has an intense, anarchic quality. We are compelled to ask questions like: where does the war-like atmosphere come from? why does the enemy have a woman's body? It seems that these chapters, chapter 6 in particular, work in the way which poetry works. In fact, this passage reads like a lyrical prose poem. It is a voice stripped of identity which does not seem to belong anywhere nor does anything belong to it. It is also a voice which, as Sarlo puts it, speaks of 'una guerra y de las posibilidades del amor en los intersticios de la guerra'. An alienated figure emerges, an intensified and symbolic version of the central character of the novel. This alienated figure seems to engage in the battle with women. Intimacy is a war and yet to enter into it is a chance to escape alienation. Like Anguilla describing the yearning to 'ser dueños de un pedazo de tierra del tamaño de una mujer', this voice associates a sense of belonging and roots with womanly places. He seeks out 'el centro, el fondo de la cuña, la matriz, el manantial de sangre, la vieja compañera'.⁶⁷ And yet this 'stab' at belonging and arriving at 'el centro' fails and the voice is relegated once again to a state of solitude and alienation where even some wounds don't even seem to belong to him; 'sucio de heridas mías y ajenas'. Women only serve to highlight a sense of exclusion.

The sentiment of the enemy taking the form of a woman's body in the passage above is reminiscent of a comment in Pavese's diary. He wrote: 'Pensa male, non ti sbaglierai.

⁶⁷ This 'centro' can be likened to the 'centro' Rocamadour and La Maga offer to Oliveira in *Rayuela*.

Sono un popolo nemico, le donne, come il popolo tedesco.’⁶⁸ / ‘Think the worst. You will not be wrong. Women are an enemy race, like the Germans’⁶⁹. Indeed *La Luna y las fogatas* seems to exemplify this attitude. In the case of Santa, the novel illustrates the familiar idea of ‘la belle infidel’, the more beautiful a woman is, the more traitorous she is likely to be.

Pavese’s misogyny was self-professed. He writes in a diary entry of 1938: ‘Non si sfugge al proprio carattere; misogino eri e misogino resti’ (p. 86) / ‘One cannot escape one’s character: a misogynist you were, and still are.’ (p. 77). *La luna y las fogatas* characterises any profound kind of interaction between men and women as a battle - and losing one at that. I suggest that this characterisation is shared by Dal Masetto.

Eden before Eve

In his essay, “‘Some strangeness in the proportion’”: ‘L’occhio vergine’ and the myth of Eden in Pavese’s poetry, 1930-35’, Doug Thomson talks about a myth of Eden in Pavese’s poetry but perhaps his comment can be extended to Pavese’s fiction and, arguably to aspects of Dal Masetto’s fiction. For Thomson, Pavese’s notion of the myth of Eden may well be pre-Eve. It is a male-centred utopia, the garden before the fall, before Eve arrived to mess everything up. Thompson describes it as such:

⁶⁸ Cesare Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere: Diario 1935-1950* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000), p. 320. Henceforth all further page references will be cited in the text.

⁶⁹ Cesare Pavese *This Business of Living: Diaries 1935-1950*, trans. by A.E. Murch, with Jeanne Molli (London: Quartet Books, 1980), p. 281. Henceforth, all further page references will be cited in the text.

A world renewed according to a certain male-centred ideal, perhaps suggestive of a nostalgia for Eden even prior to the creation of Eve, but essentially it is of a world in which there is no longer any struggle for survival, in which 'le mani [tenute] dietro la schiena' is an image of total security from want. The spiritual journey departs from a sense of inadequacy and exclusion but arrives at a kind of imagined bliss of exaltation, inclusion and freedom. [...] In fantasy, the 'impossible return' can always be made.⁷⁰

The narrator of *Fuego a discreción* defends the masculine experience and a world without women. It seems it is the only world he can really comfortably inhabit in his mind. Chapter twenty two describes a bleak and troubling street scene. The narrator has turned his back on another potential relationship with a woman, Renata who desperately tries to convert him to psychoanalysis with comic and ultimately unsuccessful consequences. The narrator leaves Renata and her psychoanalyst, Roberto, and aimlessly wanders the streets. The suffocating heat of the summer is claustrophobic and menacing. He comes upon a body, recently shot and when a vehicle arrives with two anonymous figures who take the body away, the narrator reflects in the aftermath of this disturbing scene. He describes a masculine defence as a response to what he has witnessed:

La sangre, la palabra, todo cuanto se opusiera a la muerte, aun a través de la muerte misma, suscitaría siempre un cambio, introduciría una cuña en la mole compacta, produciría seguramente un temblor en algún remoto engranaje. El hombre primitivo que había en mí percibió como si algún lejano ancestro acabase de incorporársele y reeditase una o muchas situaciones similares. Como entonces, como volvería a ocurrir en el futuro, comprendí que acababa de recuperar, nuevamente, un aliado, que esa fuerza era mi única posibilidad, que acaba de investirme con una vieja herencia, una especial forma de masculinidad que resucitaba para mi vida cosas adormecidas o mutiladas, los cimientos vacilantes del orgullo y dignidad. (p. 184 -5)

⁷⁰ Doug Thomson, "'Some strangeness in the proportion': 'L'occhio vergine' and the myth of Eden in Pavese's poetry, 1930-35". *Onde di questo mare': Reconsidering Pavese*, ed and intro. by Rossella Riccobono and Doug Thomson. (Leicester: Troubador, 1988), p. 26.

Arriesgarse a vivir entre los hombres (y las mujeres)

As I suggested earlier, to me the principal artistic preoccupation of Pavese and of Dal Masetto is the problem of other minds. The artistic expression of this is the relationship between men and women and the possibility, or impossibility, of romantic love - the frustration of the failure to establish communication with the other. Fundamentally, if you believe in love between two people then you believe that man is not alone. At the end of *Fuego a discreción*, the narrator goes and hides in a water tank during a storm to escape the company of other men (and perhaps more significantly, women). It has the potential to be the final disembarkation from reality and severing of a connection to other human beings: 'imaginé que afuera el agua había roto amarras, se había desprendido de los pilares que lo sujetaban a la tierra y navegaba sin destino sobre un mundo condenado'. But the narrator does, in the end, emerge. He writes on the walls of the tank with the blood of a dead pigeon: '*Amor ya no es la palabra / Ahora la palabra es: fuerza*'. He sets another pigeon trapped in the tank free saying "“Andá, tratá de vivir”". The last lines of the novel are characteristically enigmatic:

Cuando bajé esa escalerita me sentí como un mono que después de una larga meditación hubiese resuelto arriesgarse a vivir entre los hombres. (p. 220)

I liken this to the last lines of *Siete de oro*:

Pensé que en unas horas más, en la estación, iría a encontrarme con una desconocida. (p. 204)

There is a sense of starting again and engaging with life in the ending of both novels and from that, a sense of hope. The ending of *Fuego a discreción* seems to denote a

departure from primitive man with a willingness to live 'entre los hombres' (and I would add 'y las mujeres'). Through the suggestion of willingness to take this risk *Fuego a discreción* is not a wholly pessimistic novel.

Perhaps if Pavese had written *Fuego a discreción*, his narrator might not have emerged from the water tank. For Pavese suicide rears its head as a possible solution to the problem of other minds. Indeed it is well known and much discussed that Pavese himself committed suicide at the age of forty two in 1950. While this has to be understood as a private act, it does echo the presence of suicide in Pavese's creative output. Suicide also lurks in the fiction of Dal Masetto. Vito, Silvana's husband, makes a suicide attempt, seemingly as a response to their non-functioning marriage in *La tierra incomparable*, and yet while the narrator of *Fuego a discreción* gets drawn towards death, ultimately an instinct for life and survival prevails. The narrator loses sensation in his body cramped into the cramped water tank: '[...] el cuerpo entumecido, agarrotado, perdió toda sensibilidad y se disolvió también en la negrura'. However, sensation returns to the body and he begins moving again: 'A ciegas, gateando, raspándome las rodillas al arrastrarme, fui percibiendo cómo ese deslizarse ponía en mi cabeza y en mis dientes una tensión desconocida, la excitación de algo que se parecía a una cacería y donde se acrecentaba un antiguo compromiso de supervivencia.' (pp. 218-19)

The price of poetry

What is it which saves Dal Masetto's fiction from despair where Pavese's fiction falls into despair? It is interesting to compare the epigraphs of *Fuego a discreción* and then

that of *La Luna y las fogatas*. For Pavese - 'ripeness is all' (Shakespeare, *King Lear*) and for Dal Masetto 'Aquel que desea pero no obra engendra peste', 'He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence' (William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Pavese's epigraph recalls Edgar speaking to his father, Gloucester, at the end of the play. Gloucester is frail and ready to give up, but his son urges him to go on with the suggestion that we have to await our destined time for death - fruit only falls when it is ripe. It is ironic, then, that Pavese did in fact take his own life, dedicating the novel to Constance Dowling, the American actress he was in love with who rejected him: 'For C, Ripeness is all'. Dal Masetto's epigraph, on the other hand, seems to suggest a little manifesto which perhaps harks back to the *Eco contemporáneo* sentiment described earlier - that literature is the salvation and the cure to alienation. If the artist can act, in the Surrealist sense, he can survive. Doug Thomson in the same essay mentioned earlier suggests that Pavese too had this notion in his early work but lost it: 'More or less until the misfortunes of 1935-6 befell him, Pavese had imagined, it seems, that poetry could save him. Sounding his own experience of the world, through different formulations of personal myth, he sought to reveal himself to himself and, armed with this knowledge, he hoped or maybe even believed that he would be able to measure up to the real world on its own terms.' (p. 34) But in the end, a faith in poetry did not relieve his work from a relentless melancholy and an almost obsessive rumination of painful themes without resolution. Moreover, I would argue that this painful rumination is actually the source of creativity itself for Pavese. While Cortázar seems to associate the metaphysical rivers (the true path to the imagination) with women and primeval intimacy, for Pavese the source of creativity does not come from women but from the absence or loss of them.

Like Odysseus who returns to his love, Penelope (who has been waiting for him for twenty years), only to leave again the next day, for Pavese to in any way arrive at or resolve the issue of romantic love would mean the end of the journey, and thus the end of writing. In this way the woman does become the enemy – the figure who could potentially rob the male artist of his freedom and creative prowess.

As we have seen, Dal Masetto conceives of creativity with a conflation of both Cortázar's notion of intimacy and the metaphysical rivers being the key to true art as well as Pavese's suspicion of intimacy being exactly what kills it off. *Fuego a discreción* does end with a sense of willingness to escape detachment so in this way it is not a sequel to *Siete de oro* but a rewriting of it. We did not begin *Fuego* with the meeting of a Bruna-like character in which we discovered the next stage of this fictional encounter. The story did not take us to what happened next, but rather what happened before – again.

As Susan Sontag identifies, Pavese is typical of the modern artist who makes of himself a human sacrifice in order to create good art. She writes with reference to Pavese: 'For two thousand years, among Christians and Jews, it has been spiritually fashionable to be in pain. Thus it is not love which we overvalue, but suffering - more precisely, the spiritual merits and benefits of suffering. The modern contribution to this Christian sensibility has been to discover that making of works of art and the venture of sexual love as the two most exquisite sources of suffering.' (pp. 47 – 48) Both Dal Masetto's and Pavese's pact with suffering is that the experience of pain will become poetry. Failure in love, solitude, misery and ultimately, in Pavese's case, suicide are the trade-off for authentic creativity.

Antonio Dal Masetto's weekly column in *Página/12* (1987 - 2003): an enquiry.

The object of enquiry in this chapter is the column written by Antonio Dal Masetto, which was found on the back page, the 'contratapa', of the Argentine daily broadsheet newspaper, *Página/12*. Dal Masetto's column was published weekly on any day between Monday and Friday and had been a feature of the newspaper since its founding in May 1987. He stopped making this contribution to *Página/12* in 2003.

In this study I will give a brief description of the background and nature of *Página/12*, then elaborate on the nature of the column itself and how it came to be. I will touch on the relationship between fiction and journalism in Latin America as part of my discussion, as well as the history of the *Modernista* chronicle. I will then explore Barthes' understanding of the *fait-divers* with reference to the column, finally making a comparison with Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas* (1928-33).¹

As I mentioned in my introduction, there is an existing study of Dal Masetto's column by Edgardo Berón: 'Periodismo y literatura en la obra de Antonio Dal Masetto' (Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires: 2002). Berón asks the question 'qué relación se establecía entre los cuentos de contratapa — de Dal Masetto — y el resto del diario' and he argues

for a significant relationship. However, while Berón's study focuses particularly on pieces which were published during the period of economic crisis in 2002, most of which have not been reprinted in collections of stories, I focus on those pieces which are found in anthologies which span between 1987 and 2002.² In this way the objects of our enquiries differ from one another. The stories I examine survive outside the context of *Página/12*.

Brief history of *Página/12*

During the last military dictatorship, unsurprisingly, investigative reporting of good quality was one of the many casualties of this period of brutal political repression. So too were the journalists who 'disappeared' because of the obvious threat they posed of exposing the unpalatable truth. The Argentine journalist, Oscar Raúl Cardoso describes the impact of the repression on the press:

The straight complacency of local major news organisations with the military regime, openly sympathetic to the coup d'état even before it materialised, and the fear of editors and reporters of becoming -- or having a relative, a friend or a lover become -- a desaparecido (missing person) and another unaccounted prisoner in the dungeons of pain and death of the juntas made the Argentine press a silent partner to the national tragedy, a ghost that still haunts the media.³

One newspaper which did speak out against the military dictatorship was the English-speaking newspaper, *The Buenos Aires Herald*. It published a list of the disappeared for which the editor at the time, Andrew Graham Yooll, was forced into exile in 1976. After

² The only piece I do refer to which has not been re-printed in a book is 'Depre' which was published in *Página/12* on 18 June 2002.

³ Rosendo Alvéz, *Journalism in Latin America: Democracy's Vanguard Newspapers in Latin America – VI: Argentina: Página/12*, <http://www.utexas.edu/coc/journalism/lajou/vanguard6.html>.

the fall of the regime, *Clarín* published dramatic material which exposed the mass assassinations and human rights abuses committed by the military. However, the Argentine press needed a more general sea change to significantly affect the approach to news reporting after such a long period of censorship. Rosendo Alvéz was a correspondent in Buenos Aires for the Rio de Janeiro's daily *Jornal do Brasil* between 1979 and 1982 and then 1985-87. He writes that:

One of the most important factors in provoking the change of tone of Argentine press coverage was created in Buenos Aires, in May 1987. The name of this catalyst was *Página/12* [...]The newspaper was named after one characteristic of the poor conditions surrounding its launching: the first issue had only 12 pages, the maximum size editor Jorge Lanata, co-editor Ernesto Tiffenberg, and investor Fernando Sokolowisky thought they could afford. ⁴

However, *Página/12*, despite its modest beginnings, rose to success. Its emphasis on humour, its daring mockery of authorities, often on the front page, and its distinctive satirical style seemed to fill a niche in the market. John Barham, a British correspondent for the *Financial Times*, remarked on the command of its readers in 1992:

How is it that a muckraking, strident anti-establishment newspaper launched on a shoestring five years ago has become one of Argentina's best selling and most influential newspapers? *Página/12* is now required reading among businessmen, diplomats and politicians as well as its target readership of professionals, students and left-wingers. It has built up an average daily circulation of 110, 000 with a diet of punchy news, investigative journalism, opinion and cultural columns. ⁵

How Dal Masetto's column first began

⁴ Rosendo Alvéz.

⁵ Rosendo Alvéz

Dal Masetto first began writing a weekly column for a newspaper, *Tiempo Argentino*, between 1982 and 1986. In this publication his column was entitled 'Estado Civil Solo': stories of a typical urban divorcee who lives alone, buys groceries, cooks, sees his children on the weekend, friends, bars, a few girlfriends and so on. Then between 1985 and 1987, he wrote a similar fortnightly column for a newspaper, *El Periodista de Buenos Aires*, where the column was entitled, 'El Francotirador'. When *Página/12* appeared in 1987, Dal Masetto was invited to contribute. I wrote to Dal Masetto to ask what the original intention of the column was and he replied in an email on 3 August 2003:

Supongo que la propuesta que me hicieron entonces fue una columna estrictamente periodística, pero me las arreglé para trampear un poco y seguir con lo que me gustaba y me gusta. No hacer periodismo sino escribir ficción, o por lo menos algo intermedio, pequeñas narraciones que aludieran a la realidad inmediata y pudieran aparecer en un periódico. Y que además, su carácter de material relacionando con la ficción, le diera una permanencia mayor que la simple noticia de un diario.

Dal Masetto's fellow contributors to the 'contratapa' have been writers such as Osvaldo Soriano and poet, Juan Gelman. Gelman writes hardheaded political commentaries about national and world issues. Dal Masetto's column does not, on the whole, deliver such political or journalistic pieces.⁶

When I wrote to Tomás Eloy Martínez to ask him, as one time literary editor of *Página/12*, how he viewed Dal Masetto's columns. He responded in an email on 21 July 2003:

⁶ Dal Masetto has written equally political pieces, although these are rare. On 12 February 2003 he published a piece in *Página/12* entitled 'Hilter' in which he compared George Bush to Hitler and called for people to stand up to his actions. I have limited this study to what seems to be, to me, his general style and also those pieces which stand the test of time and therefore can be treated as literature.

Lo que puedo decirle es que esas columnas no se publicaron como ficciones sino como fragmentos de realidad, semejantes a los aguafuertes que Roberto Arlt daba a conocer en el diario “El Mundo” sesenta años antes. Los lectores leían esas columnas, como todo lo que aparece en el diario, con la impresión de que allí se narraba la verdad. Los textos de Dal Masetto aparecían los miércoles, según creo recordar. Otro columnista importante, Osvaldo Soriano, que publicaba los domingos, a veces escribía ficciones paródicas, y así eran consideradas por el lector. No creo que sucediera lo mismo con las de Dal Masetto.

According to Eloy Martínez the columns are not read as fiction but ‘con la impresión de que allí se narraba la verdad’. Dal Masetto’s style is, at times, distinctively literary. Some of his pieces have a quality and a profundity that gives them life beyond the newspaper and the date that the column was published. In this way, I refer to them as literary. As Ezra Pound defined it: ‘Literature is news that STAYS news’.⁷

Dal Masetto’s pieces do not adhere to a formula. There seems to be a range of styles and forms as well as variability in quality. The pieces which I have chosen to refer to are those which have been selected and republished without their original dates, in the four collections: *Ni perros ni gatos* (1987), *Reventando corbatas* (1988), *El padre y otras historias* (2002) paying particular attention to *Gente del bajo* (1995). Other collections of the stories which have been republished which I have not referred to are: *Crónicas argentinas* (2003) and *Señoras más señores* (2007). In these stories, we are given windows into ‘la vida cotidiana’ in Buenos Aires. They speak of the immediate reality of porteño culture but they also speak about scenes which touch on what is timeless and universal.

⁷ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber, 1st edition 1934, this edition 1991), p. 29.

In the collection *Gente del Bajo* the stories are windows into the lives of people who inhabit a particular zone in Buenos Aires - that lower part of the city which slopes down towards Retiro. Dal Masetto himself writes:

El material de las historias incluidas en *Gente del Bajo* proviene de los bares cercanos a la esquina de Paraguay y Reconquista, de varias ventanas y de algunos mínimos dramas de interior en los que me tocó jugar o me adjudiqué el papel de protagonista principal. Esas fueron las fuentes de alimento y esa geografía.⁸

The stories are always narrated in the third person, although often there is the presence of 'el hombre,' a fictional persona whom Dal Masetto first began to develop in his column 'estado civil solo', published in *Tiempo Argentino*. The single, separated man living alone in the city, supposedly typical of a particular kind of urban man of the times. By using 'el hombre' as the title of the principal character in the stories, Dal Masetto is also lending a universal significance to this figure. He implies that he is writing about mankind through the observations of an individual.

As I see it, the narratives which appear in the four collections fall into three different groups. The first are those which are driven by dialogue where 'el hombre' is peripheral to the drama. The second group are those pieces where 'el hombre' is central, contemplating some absurd or profound predicament which is amusing or troubling him. The third group are those windows which are created by the narrative which allow us to spy, on some solitary figure (often a woman), or figures (often a couple), who are

⁸ Extract from the *Clarín* supplement, *Cultura y Nación*, Buenos Aires 14 December 1995, <http://www.literatura.org/DalMasetto/dmbajo.html>

unaware of being observed. We do not hear what they say but through our narrator we speculate about their thoughts and conversations.

1) Narratives driven by dialogue

These pieces often form a series. In one sequence of stories ('Impossible', 'Uña Flamígera', 'Icaro', 'Sofía'), Pedro, a short man, is in love with a giant woman, Sofia, whose fingernails are so huge that she can write on them; 'está hablando por teléfono, no tiene una hoja a mano y registra el mensaje en la uña. También anota listas de cosas que quiere comprar, borradores de cartas, ideas y a veces poemas.'⁹ The problem in their relationship is that they cannot make love because whenever they do, it always results in Pedro being injured. Pedro comes to El Bar Verde to seek advice about what he should do, 'La amo, yo la amo, pero mi cuerpo le tiene miedo' (p. 125). In these tragi-comic conversations, we follow the saga of their unusually impossible love.

Some phrases become a leit-motif in conversation between particular characters. In another sequence of stories ('Drama', 'Sigue el drama', 'Drama sobre drama' and 'Levadura') 'el flaco' speaks about the continuing drama with his mother and the strange dynamic between them. She is prone to jumping to supernatural conclusions. When he returns home parched from a night of drinking, he gulps the water in which his mother keeps her dentures at night. She is then convinced that her dentures are possessed and have a thirst of their own. 'El flaco' comes to the bar to discuss her delusional beliefs. Each story ends with 'el flaco' and 'el hombre' deciding that the best solution would be

⁹ Antonio Dal Masetto, *Gente del Bajo*, (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1995) p.138. All further page references to *Gente del Bajo* will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

for her to see a psychoanalyst. In 'Sigue el drama' 'el flaco' says 'No va a ser fácil' and 'el hombre' replies 'Tenga fé'. (p.31) This becomes the leitmotif of their conversations together. The following stories in the sequence all end on 'el hombre's' words, 'Tenga fé'.

In his interview in *Cultura y Nación*, Dal Masetto talks of frequenting a number of bars in particular: 'El Bar Verde, el Bárbaro en la cortada Tres Sargentos, el Tronío que es en realidad un restaurante y también un bolichito que ya no existe, sobre San Martín, que se llamaba El Rubí'.

These narratives show keenly observed characters which emerge through their dialogues and developing predicaments. Some characters are friends, others are bar acquaintances. One has the impression that Dal Masetto has been part of, or has eavesdropped upon many conversations and transcribed them in a way which reveals a dramatic structure and crafts a narrative. Many of the narratives focus on a dialogue between characters whom we begin to get to know because their stories unfold at each instalment. Thus the stories are arranged in the collection, *Gente del Bajo*, not appearing one immediately after the other, but staggered in between other tales. Dal Masetto explains that this is how the stories surfaced in reality:

El hecho de que muchas historias se prolongaran a lo largo de las semanas y a veces de los meses es la razón por la que en *Gente del Bajo* de vez en cuando aparezcan los mismos personajes continuando una aventura que se desarrolla en cinco o seis etapas. No están puesto juntas, sino alternadas entre otras, porque así era también como ocurrían.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Cultura y Nación*, <http://www.literatura.org/DalMasetto/dmbajo.html>.

2) El hombre is central

In other narratives, no external voices are heard. We encounter the internal dialogue of 'el hombre', although the narration is still in the third person. El hombre is faced with a situation which may be trivial but the contemplation of it becomes all consuming. At times the situations are comical and there is self-mockery. In the piece entitled 'Derrota' (pp.23-6), he is faced with the problem of how to enter a shop, think about buying something and leave with the feeling that he has made his own decision about the outcome irrespective of the interference of shop assistants. In this instance, 'el hombre' fails and is pressured into making a deposit on something he does not, in the end, want to buy. This small instance offers an opportunity for the reader to identify with the scenario and also with the ridiculous but absorbing internal battles which people have with themselves. In 'Poeta', el hombre is troubled by the relentless chirping of a cicada in his apartment while he is trying to sleep. At first it fills him with nostalgia but then it drives him to distraction until he finally finds it and kills it. With this small act comes the punishment that he will not be able to sleep. El hombre finds his apartment becomes a hostile place and is forced to leave and go walking through the city at night. (pp. 241-3)

3) El hombre, the spy

In some pieces el hombre silently observes a solitary figure or figures. Dal Masetto characterises himself as a spy who sits in bars preying on the stories about the characters

who frequent them. In an interview with *La Nación* he describes the way in which he finds the inspiration for his 'crónicas' in 'los bares del Bajo':

Yo espero en esas mesas, como un cazador con la escopeta amartillada, que caiga la historia. Si uno está alerta siempre tratando de robar cosas en un lado y en otro para alimentarse. ¹¹

In this way he enters into the worlds of characters, capturing something about them and reflecting on the responses they evoke. Through keenly observed detail, the character's begin to evolve. At times Dal Masetto does not presume to understand them; he shows rather than tells. These pieces work like a poem. Outside the text whole worlds are gestured to but unspoken. In 'Mujer en el balcón', el hombre observes a pregnant woman from his balcony who talks to herself and who is unaware of his gaze. When a bird falls onto her balcony she nurses it by feeding it water and stroking it on her belly. At this sight of her, el hombre finds himself captivated and the lines of an unidentified poem spring to his mind.

These narratives are often poignant and sometimes poetic. They do more than transcribe a concrete reality. showing evidence of a poetic imagination. As Tomás Eloy Martínez indicates, these articles are offered to readers of *Página/12* as 'fragmentos de realidad', as stories which tell 'la verdad'. However, we cannot know to what extent characters from el Bajo have been depicted as they are and to what extent they have served to draw out the characters which already existed in the internal world of the writer. Dal Masetto himself acknowledges this ambiguous and ultimately unknowable correlation:

¹¹ Agustina Roca, *Antonio Dal Masetto Historia De Vida, La Nación Line*, 12 July 1998, <http://www.literatura.org/DalMasetto/dmnacion.html>.

Por lo tanto, volviendo al tema de la elaboración, quizá yo no haya oficiado más que como un simple acopiador de historias que, armadas, completas, daban vueltas por ahí. O también - me gusta jugar y abandonarme al placer inocente de esta sospecha - podría pensarse en la posibilidad de que fuesen las propias historias las que me buscaban, de que me hubiesen aceptado como alguien con derecho a capturarlas y contarlas, y entonces se me manifestaran insistentes a través de los propios personajes, los reales, los adivinados a distancia y sobre todo, fundamentalmente, mediante esas voces que en las calle nocturnas del Bajo andaban y andan siempre resonando y susurrando cosas por el aire.¹²

This is perhaps an inevitable exchange; fiction draws on reality as journalism touches on fiction. The relationship between fiction and journalism is a field which has been explored by Aníbal González in his study, *Journalism and the Development of Spanish American Narrative*. He asserts that ‘both narrative fiction and journalism thrive in a murky rhetorical frontier, an ill-defined territory of mutual borrowings where nothing is quite what it seems.’¹³

The Crónica in Latin America

In Agustina Roca’s interview with Dal Masetto for *La Nación*, she refers to his pieces as as ‘crónicas’. If this is so, then we may relate them to a long history in Latin American journalism and in particular to the *Modernista* chronicles.¹⁴ The prose work of the Spanish American *Modernistas* has been somewhat overlooked at times because of the brilliance of their poetry. They did, however, write essays, short stories, novels and were dedicated to the journalistic form of the crónica. González describes this genre:

¹² *Cultura y Nación*, <http://www.literatura.org/DalMasetto/dmbajo.html>

¹³ Aníbal González, *Journalism and the Development of Spanish American Narrative*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p 10.

¹⁴ The crónica goes as far back as the 15th Century and the discovery of the New World.

[...] brief articles on virtually any subject, written in a self-consciously literary style, that were meant to be entertaining as well as informative. In fact, however, the Modernistas made much more of the chronicles than what they were originally intended to. The chronicles became literary laboratories for the Modernistas, places where they tried out new styles and ideas and made these known to other writers. In many instances, chronicles account for more than two-thirds of an author's published writings, as can be seen in the *obras completas* of such major Modernistas as Martí, Nájera, Darío, Nervo, and Gómez Carrillo.¹⁵

This was, of course, the work they got paid for and this may explain the amount they generated in this genre.¹⁶

Through the *crónicas* the Modernistas created a new path for the Spanish American narratives which were to follow them. In this form they wrote about issues which were not obviously literary and began to value writing about the world from an empirical perspective. What is more, they began to undermine the Romantic notion of the 'author', moving out of themselves and observing the life around them. The *crónicas* tended towards textual brevity, eliminating elaborate or complex passages and appealing to a broader readership. José Martí published *crónicas* during the 1890's in the newspapers, *La Patria*, *La Nación*, *El Partido Liberal* (Mexico), the *Revista Venezolana* and *La Opinión Nacional*. In these *crónicas*, Martí avoided the use of the first person. González notes that:

Martí sometimes inserted himself in his chronicles as a sort of eyewitness, but even then he used the third person, referring to himself in a curiously disparaging fashion as "a certain outcast," "a stranger," or "an insect."¹⁷

¹⁵ Aníbal González, p 84.

¹⁶ González' description of these chronicles as 'literary laboratories' is interesting. In the case of Dal Masetto many characters found in his column in *Página/12* later find themselves in his novels.

This is interesting with respect to Dal Masetto's pieces and his use of the third person although his narration is loyal to this figure of the spy or outsider, the man who is not fitting in with society, unmarried, single, without a proper job and so on. As González points out, in Martí's pieces we find aphorisms and principles such as 'Everything that exists is a symbol' and 'Art is a form of respect', 'To say it is to see it'.¹⁸ These seem to be applicable to the artistic approach which is found in Dal Masetto's writing, where the writer is a mediator who communicates a world through the symbols he observes. This notion is also explored by Barthes in his identification of the symbol in the *fait-divers* in his essay 'Structure of the Fait-Divers'.

The *fait-divers*

Barthes writes about the *fait-divers* as a journalistic phenomenon which he identified in the French press at the time he was writing the essay (this collection of essays was first published in 1964). His understanding of the *fait-divers* is indeed applicable, to some extent, to the pieces which are published in Dal Masetto's column.

'Total news'

One important distinguishing feature of the *fait-divers* is that they are self-contained stories and can exist without the context of a wider knowledge. Barthes makes the distinction between an assassination and a murder. The assassination has political

¹⁷ Aníbal González, p 92.

¹⁸ Aníbal González, p 93.

implications which are current, a murder (found in the *fait-divers*) is an event which exists of its own accord without necessary political knowledge or background information:

Thus an assassination is always, by definition, partial information; the *fait-divers*, on the contrary, is total news, or more precisely immanent; it contains all its knowledge in itself; no need to know anything about the world in order to consume a *fait-divers*; it refers formally to nothing but itself; of course, its content is not alien to the world [...] it constitutes an immediate, total being which refers, formally at least, to nothing implicit; in this it is related to the short story and the tale.¹⁹

While Dal Masetto's columns are about porteños and are expressly written for a porteño readership, they are frequently self-contained and depict microcosms which do not rely on knowledge of porteño culture to be significantly engaged with. It seems that things quintessentially porteño are a further aspect of recognition rather than an excluding feature of the stories. Dal Masetto often names particular streets or plazas in Buenos Aires but the events he narrates are meaningful without knowledge of the places or kind of people he mentions.

We encounter characters not always reminiscent of stereotypes we are familiar with. Although we may identify with them readily, they are often idiosyncratic. In the sequence I mentioned earlier ('Drama', 'Sigue el drama', 'Drama sobre drama' and 'Levadura') accumulating details are revealed through the conversation 'el flaco' has with 'el hombre' and serve to create a self-contained and self-referential story. The notion of a series may suggest that each piece is not wholly self-contained and relies on

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. from the French by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 186-7.

the familiarity with previous episodes but as Barthes adds in a note, ‘Certain *fait-divers* are developed over several days; this does not violate their constitutive immanence, for they still imply an extremely short memory.’²⁰

The *dramatis personae*

Barthes identifies in the *fait-divers*: “the *dramatis personae* (child, old man, mother, etc.), emotional essences responsible for vivifying the stereotype.’ (p. 188). Through his observations of characters, Dal Masetto, through ‘el hombre’, tunes into their ‘emotional essences’ and breathes life into what might otherwise be a more two-dimensional portrayal, such as we may find in other kinds of journalism (people are often defined in terms of their gender, profession or social status). In ‘Escena porteña’ el hombre observes a mysterious woman figure who is difficult to classify in social terms. Dal Masetto is prepared to leave her social position as ambiguous: ‘La mujer tiene una cara noble, pacificada y es fácil deducir que debió haber sido hermosa. Todavía lo es. Sobre todo si uno se detiene en los ojos claros. Lo que resulta difícil de establecer es si se trata de alguien que está a punto de ingresar al universo de la mendicidad o si ya ingresó’ (p. 161). Dal Masetto goes on to describe her peculiar act of ringing a bronze bell in her right hand and when the sound has died down she says ‘Se puede’ or ‘No se puede’. We are unsure of what she means by this but her words and her poignant presence hold an emotional resonance for the characters who gather and ask ‘¿Qué hace?’ Is she their conscience, some kind of collective psyche? This ambiguity seems to be a crucial element to how the story operates.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, p. 187.

The object

Barthes explains the importance of the 'prosaic, humble, familiar object: *gangster routed by a poker. Murderer identified by his bicycle clips. Old man strangled by the cord of his hearing aid*' (p. 190) in the *fait-divers*. In 'Esceña porteña' the bronze bell is a 'humble, familiar object' which begins to have much more meaning than its domestic function as an object which calls for attention at a door, or to signify the end or beginning of something. It begins to call for the attention of all the porteños in the street. The effect is that they become alerted to something more intangible. 'El hombre' observes their growing curiosity '...como si en aquel campanilleo intuyeran un principio de verdad, la inminencia de una revelación'(p. 162). What is revealed to them are parts of themselves. When the woman utters 'No se puede' she causes the porteños whom she has gathered to launch into their own personal sadnesses: 'Esta última sentencia, grave, pesada, fatídica, aparentemente irreversible, acaba de arrojarlos a todos al fondo de un pozo. Y allá abajo permanecen, sumidos en la penumbra y en una inexplicable inquietud, solos con sus soledades y sus impotencias. Allá es donde pasan los segundos siguientes, hundidos en el desconcierto, sin otra expresión que el silencio'(p. 164).

The power of signs

Barthes continues his exploration of objects and suggests that in them are 'the infinite power of signs, the panic sentiment that signs are everywhere, that anything can be a sign' (p. 191). In 'Escena porteña', it seems that the characters also experience this 'panic sentiment' about the possibility of a sign. 'El hombre' perceives this apprehension

in the gathered people's faces: 'cree percibir cómo crece la curiosidad y posiblemente también la ansiedad' (p. 162).

Deranged causality

A further feature of the *fait-divers* is 'deranged causality'. Barthes illustrates this phenomenon with examples:

An English man enlists in the Foreign Legion: to avoid spending Christmas with his mother-in-law. An American coed is forced to leave school: her bust measurements cause an uproar in all her classes. All these examples illustrate the rule: minor causes, great effects.' (p. 190)

'Deranged causality' can be identified in the stories which feature the impossible love affair between the giant woman, Sofía, and the small man, Pedro ('Imposible', 'Uña Flamígera', 'Icaro', 'Sofía'). From the issue of their disproportionate bodies come the great effect of Pedro's dramatic injuries and their mutual distress about their relationship not working. Similarly, in 'Herencia' a woman needs her husband's fingerprint to sign documents after he dies so she simply removes it from the corpse and keeps it in a matchbox for when she requires it. In 'Adopción' a couple from Belgrano are unable to have children and so, supposedly, they adopt a chimpanzee.

Co-incident

Barthes also argues that co-incident can dictate the structure of the *fait-divers*:

It is chiefly the repetition of an event, however anodyne, which marks it out for the notation of coincidence: *the same diamond brooch is stolen three times; a hotelkeeper wins the lottery whenever he buys a ticket, etc.*; why? Repetition always commits us to imagining an unknown cause [...] it possesses a certain meaning, even if this meaning remains suspended: the “peculiar”, the “uncanny”, the “curious” cannot be a matter, “innocent” notion [...] it inevitably institutionalizes an interrogation. (p. 192)

This ambiguity in the sign and in the meaning of repetition or co-incident seems important to how the *fait-divers* thrives.

In the story ‘Burlas’, Luis, a friend of ‘el hombre’, experiences a series of co-incident encounters with animals. He claims that every animal he meets sticks out its tongue at him, sparrows and cats in the street, horses at the hipódromo, tigers at the zoo. The reader does not accept this as an “innocent” notion’ but rather questions playfully what this could mean. In this case the ‘interrogation’ lies in where the ‘Burla’ is located. Is it the animals playing with Luis or the writer playing with the reader? This is a further ambiguity on which Dal Masetto’s stories seem to thrive.

Co-incident designed

Barthes claims that ‘another relation of coincidence is the one which relates two terms which are qualitatively distant: *a woman routs four burglars* [...] there is a kind of

logical distance between the woman's weakness and the number of burglars, and the *fait-divers* immediately begins to suppress this distance.' (p. 192) What is more is that Barthes cites a reversal of 'certain stereotyped situations'. This is evident in the story which evolves in the series about Sofía and Pedro and their impossible love. There is a logical distance between a woman's body and her capacity to inflict injury. Furthermore, stereotypically speaking, it is the woman who is potentially intimidated or overpowered by the man. The situation which emerges in this story thwarts that expectation - and to comic effect. Barthes cites this reversal of intention and expectation in classical tragedy. Thus, in this 'symmetrical design', the *fait-divers* is ultimately a literary genre.

Although Barthes refers to the *fait-divers* as applicable to modern journalism it is not, as he himself suggests, a modern concept - he has related it to classical tragedy. González shows that it is also applicable to journalism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Spanish America.²¹ Indeed, José Martí's aphorisms ('Everything that exists is a symbol', 'Art is a form of respect', 'To say it is to see it') seem to echo Barthes' understanding of the *fait-divers*.

Comparison with Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas*

As Tomás Eloy Martínez suggests, perhaps the most relevant comparison we can make with Dal Masetto's columns are Roberto Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas*. As an Argentine novelist writing about porteño culture, this is his obvious inheritance. Roberto Arlt began writing his crónicas for *El Mundo* in 1928 and his pieces commanded tremendous popularity, so much so that on the days that his essays appeared, the subscriptions for *El*

²¹ González discusses the *fait-divers* with reference to Ricardo Palma's *Tradiciones peruanas* (1872-1883).

Mundo nearly doubled. His readers awaited his pieces to hear more of Arlt's observations about 'la vida cotidiana' in Buenos Aires which, like Dal Masetto, he gleaned from spending his free time frequenting cafés and bars, strolling the streets and observing the behaviour and idiosyncrasies of the porteños. Both Arlt and Dal Masetto were immigrants from Europe, Roberto Arlt from Germany, Dal Masetto from Italy, and also both were self-educated, neither having attended university. In their newspaper work they seem to share a commitment to write in a way which values national identity. Their subject matter is almost always rooted in the 'cotidiano' of Buenos Aires and it is the porteño reader to whom the language, style and references are most immediate.

Roberto Arlt's agenda was also obviously political. Many of his columns were attempts to expose social injustice and inequality, often writing about the bad conditions of the hospitals in Buenos Aires and frequently observing characters who were working class or powerless and deprived in some way. Beatriz Sarlo, in her study *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930*, describes how journalism in the 1920's was developing new aspects. The population had a 93.36% rate of literacy and newspapers were appealing increasingly to a reading working class. Arlt's articles were born out of these developments. Pieces were reliably self-contained and brief so that readers could engage with them in their entirety during the short journeys between home and work.²²

The political climates in which Arlt and Dal Masetto have written are, of course, important considerations when examining their newspaper work. Indeed they cannot be

²² Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930*. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988), pp. 18 – 20.

directly compared without acknowledging the changes which were brought by the seventy years which come between their writing. Roberto Arlt was writing at a time when the class divide was gaping. Yrigoyen was re-elected in 1928 but he was ineffective in preventing Argentina nearing a time of economic difficulties, which were the result of the worldwide depression, and neither could he defend against a military coup in 1930 which exacerbated the struggling economy and caused widespread unemployment. The immigrant middle class population, to which Arlt belonged, was grievously affected by these unstable times. His criticisms of Argentine society are unguarded and overt. However, despite a military government, according to studies of his *Aguafuertes*, Arlt's pieces in *El Mundo* were never censored.

Dal Masetto's column came at a point when Argentina was emerging from a nightmare, signified by the end of the military dictatorship after the Malvinas war in 1982. As I mentioned earlier, in my brief description of the history of *Página /12*, there was resolve among some journalists to take a much more searching approach to reporting. It was the original intention of the newspaper to appeal to a readership which was left wing and inclusive of working class people. Dal Masetto's columns were ideal in length for the kind of reading Sarlo describes in her study; pieces which can be read by someone in one sitting, perhaps on the train or bus to and from work. This echoes Edgar Allan Poe's writing about the function of the short story and the importance of its brevity to allow a reader to consume a piece in one sitting.²³ The *fait-divers* also articulates this brevity.

²³ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', *A Study of the Short Fiction*, ed. Charles E. May (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1991), pp. 127-129.

While Arlt's pieces were at times obvious indictments of social injustice, Dal Masetto's seem to have a different atmosphere. Many of the stories to which I give attention in this investigation were written between 1987 and 1995 - a period during which Argentina saw two presidents, Raul Alfonsín, a Radical leader and Carlos Menem, the Peronist. Under Ernesto Sábato's editorship, the material which was revealed in *Nunca Más*, gave accounts of human loss which was on a different scale to the social injustice which Arlt railed against in his *Aguafuertes porteñas*. The almost unreadable content would leave writers struggling to find words.

Dal Masetto's title for his collection, *Gente del Bajo*, could have political implications. Indeed, 'gente' in Spanish-America has proletariat associations and 'del bajo' has some suggestion of the underdog of a forgotten and under-represented people.²⁴ However, while Dal Masetto does write some parodying and explicitly political columns, the stories which re-appear in his collections are not politically driven in the way which we encounter in Arlt's *Aguafuertes*.

Attitude towards the bourgeoisie

Arlt is contemptuous of bourgeois hypocrisy. He observes, for example, that outward appearance is valued over and above inner goodness. In her study of Arlt's *Aguafuertes porteñas*, Victoria Martínez draws attention to dress as a particularly important symbol in

²⁴ Mariano Azuela's novel about the Mexican revolution is entitled *Los de abajo* with an obvious ideological significance.

Argentine culture, as indeed it is in many cultures, at the time when Arlt was writing: 'Clothing can also be examined as a semiotic model that represents social position and status.'²⁵ In his piece, 'Tenía un solo vestido', Arlt conveys this through a conversation between two men in which one explains to the other that he ended his relationship with a less wealthy girl because she only had one dress. Martínez observes in the context of this story that: 'Clothing acquires further significance as a code for female desirability. The ownership of one dress indicates an appalling lack of social grace and understanding of the importance of appearance. As one man states "la personalidad de la mujer es su vestido."' ²⁶

In Dal Masetto's story, 'Café', 'el hombre' is sitting at a table in a confitería when a new customer enters. He observes him and through these observations the character of this customer emerges:

El hombre entiende muy poco de ropa, de moda, de elegancia, pero cualquier tonto se daría cuenta que todo lo que ese fulano lleva encima es mercadería de primera calidad: traje, camisa, corbata, reloj, anillo. Sin detenerse, el tipo echa una displicente mirada al salón, sigue en línea recta, elige y toma literalmente posesión del sitio donde va a sentarse. Sin dudas, se trata de alguien que sabe lo que quiere. Lo único que desentona, que molesta en tanto aplomo, en tanta armonía, es un breve e intermitente paradeo en el ojo derecho. (p. 31)

The observations which 'el hombre' makes challenge the image which 'ese fulano' intends to project. The twitching of the right eye is a single, small detail but it seems to be powerful enough to contradict and undermine this smooth, immaculate exterior.

²⁵ Victoria Martínez, *The Semiotics of a Bourgeois Society: An Analysis of the Aguafuertes porteñas by Roberto Arlt*. (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998), p. 86.

²⁶ Victoria Martínez, p. 86.

Nevertheless, we are not sure what this imperfect right eye means. It seems to speak of inner unrest, a private self which contradicts the outward appearance. Here the writing seems to follow José Martí's aphorism that 'To say it is to see it' or that 'Everything that exists is a symbol.' In observing this man, if indeed he actually existed, Dal Masetto may have been looking for an imperfection in this man's appearance or may even have invented it but it does not seem to be the case that this is necessarily to fit into an ideological point of view. While Arlt transmits a conversation in order to make an observation about a particular social stereotype, Dal Masetto is less interested in conveying this man's social significance and more concerned with describing a particular detail which glimpses something of this man's character.

Form and structure

The structure of Arlt's writing denotes a directed and argued format where he aims to convince the reader of a particular point of view. The articles have three main sections which are frequently headed by a title which is authoritative and indicates something of the drama to come. Arlt's titles are unambiguous, sometimes emotive, often comic and come directly to the point, such as 'Una hermana fea y otra linda no deben salir juntas' or, on a more serious note, 'Un cuidador de locos se ahorcó en el Hospicio de las Mercedes'. Each paragraph then has a separate subheading. The first section is a statement which makes a point directly. For example 'El amor en el subterráneo' opens with: 'He observado que los andenes de las estaciones del subterráneo son lugares preferidos por los empleados que hacen el amor. Sobre todo a la mañana, a mediodía y a

la tarde, desde las seis en adelante.’²⁷ Then follows a narrative in which Arlt illustrates this statement with his observations of these couples who meet and interact on the metro. The third section is then a conclusion upon the events and characters which have been observed and Arlt explicitly expresses an opinion. In this instance he ends the piece with: ‘¿Qué tienen de la vida estas gentes? ¿Cinco minutos a la mañana, un cuarto de hora a mediodía, cuarenta minutos como máximo a la noche?...Es muy poco para resignarse a trabajar los trescientos días hábiles del año.’ (p. 95)

Arlt’s format which drives toward delivering an opinion is in contrast to Dal Masetto’s columns which are not divided into sections and are often given single word titles. These titles create an atmosphere and provide only a partial indicator as to how the story should be read. They allow for reflection and can sometimes offer more than one meaning or resonance. The title of ‘Café’ carries no suggestion of the narrator’s attitude towards the figure it depicts.

Language and lexicon

The language which Roberto Arlt employed in his *Aguafuertes* was not a ‘literary’ vocabulary. He incorporated into his narrative a porteño dialect and lunfardo which was a challenge to what was expected by some circles from him as a ‘literary’ writer. In his study of the *Aguafuertes*, Daniel Scroggins notes that in this use of lunfardo, Arlt is identifying with the proletariat.²⁸

²⁷ Roberto Arlt, *Aguafuertes porteñas*, 1933 (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1995), p. 93. All further page references to *Aguafuertes porteñas* will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

²⁸ Daniel C. Scroggins, *Las Aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1981).

Dal Masetto's use of language is similarly free of literary formality or artifice. The language is simple, unadorned and immediately accessible to the reader. It is also clear from the content of the stories that the world he communicates is not artificial or removed. As I mentioned in my first chapter, Dal Masetto does not avoid the use of lunfardo, although he does not seem to make a studied point of incorporating it into his dialogues. Nevertheless, Dal Masetto is not anti-literary in his pieces. In the story I mentioned earlier, 'Mujer en el balcón', verses of poetry spring to the mind of el hombre:

A la memoria del hombre que espía acuden, sin buscarlos, los versos del viejo poeta peninsular (a los que hace muchos años, el trovador oriental le pusiera música). Los recita mentalmente mientras observa el pausado y mecánico movimiento de la mano de la muchacha que acaricia el pájaro: "La dulzura / el aire duro de esta nueva primavera / tu presencia que ronda mi vida como un soplo / ahora que en vos / inocente / inexorable como el destino de los mundos / alienta subterránea / la vida" (p. 61) ²⁹

It is also interesting to note that in the words 'la inminencia de una revelación' (p. 162) in 'Escena porteña', Dal Masetto echoes Borges's words in his essay 'La muralla y los libros.' ³⁰ This may not be a conscious intertextuality but whether it has gone noticed or unnoticed by the author, the censor in Dal Masetto is not, in the vein of los parricidas mentioned in chapter 1, hostile to such literary allusions so that they are screened out.

²⁹ I have not been able to ascertain who this viejo poeta peninsular may be.

³⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras Completas II* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996), pp. 11-13:

'Eso concordía con la tesis de Benedetto Croce; ya Pater, en 1877, afirmó que todas las artes aspiran a la condición de la música, que no es otra cosa que forma. La música, los estados de felicidad, la mitología, las caras trabajados por el tiempo, ciertos crepúsculos y ciertos lugares, quieren decirnos algo, o algo dijeron que no hubiéramos debido perder o están por decir algo; esta inminencia de una revelación, que no se produce, es quizá, el hecho estético.'

Exaggerated dialogue; stereotypes and idiosyncrasies

The dialogue which Arlt incorporates into his pieces is sometimes exaggerated. Martínez argues that this is a device he uses to emphasise a point. In the piece entitled 'Un novio ideal', Arlt relates a conversation between two women about one woman's model potential son-in-law:

[...] tiene muy buenas intenciones. Aparte del empleo, dos veces por semana da lecciones particulares. Y hay que ver cómo se está relacionando con eso de las lecciones. Ahorra todo lo que gana. No fuma, no bebe, no toma café, no le da por ir a los teatros, el cine no le interesa y, sobre todo, hay que ver lo respetuoso que es.
(p. 105)

Through this exaggerated dialogue, Arlt satirises a certain kind of puritanical and philistine attitude. Presumably Arlt has parodied a conversation between prospective mothers-in-law which, as he saw it, was typical of a certain social class.

Dal Masetto exaggerates dialogues to a similar effect. In a piece which was published on 18 June 2002, Dal Masetto parodies the kind of circular conversations about depression which were heard and written about in the press in the aftermath of the 2001 December economic collapse. In the story, 'Depre', a conversation in a bar takes place in which the 'parroquianos' discuss the fact that they are depressed and cannot get out of bed. They lament that no-one is able to perform simple daily tasks and that businesses are losing out because people don't even have the strength to get out of bed, not even to go to a bar. Through their conversation, a solution emerges - if people cannot get out of bed to go to a bar, then why not bring the bed to the bar?:

- Contratamos africanos que son expertos porteadores, gente acostumbrada a los safaris y a cobrar poco.
- Ya lo estoy viendo, miles y miles de camas cruzando la ciudad hacia todos los destinos. Socios, éste es el negocio del siglo, nos vamos a llenar de oro.³¹

The proposal of bringing beds to bars gets more and more exaggerated and absurd. Thus the real and heavy conversations which were taking place are made light of. Humour becomes a redemptive tool with which to write about the despondent atmosphere of the time.

In the series mentioned earlier featuring el hombre's friend, Luis, the conversations also become increasingly exaggerated. Luis is a neurotic character whose obsessionality is first revealed by his complete inability to hand over his typewriter to 'el hombre' in 'Máquina', even though he has agreed to lend it to him. This neurosis escalates as the series unfolds. Luis feels his apartment has been taken over by little creatures in 'Bichos' and he tries to get rid of them with the help of an exorcist. Luis then fears the mockery of animals which he claims stick their tongues out at him whenever they see him in 'Burlas' and 'Zoológico'. Finally in 'Primavera' it is 'hembras' which are persecuting him:

- ¿Y ahora quién te persigue? - pregunta el hombre.
- Las hembras.
- ¿Qué hembras?
- Todas.
- Ponéte contento.
- Esto es serio. (p. 131)

³¹ Antonio Dal Masetto, 'Depre', <http://200.61.159.98/diario/contratapa/13-647-2002-06-18.html>.

This exaggeration, rather than emphasising a point, which we have seen in 'Un Novio ideal' and 'Depre', seems to caricature an idiosyncratic personality. The conversations and situations which we encounter through the character of Luis are exaggerated to comic effect. The outcome are stories which are unexpected and, at times, absurd.

In contrast with Dal Masetto's exaggerated depiction of idiosyncrasies, it has been argued that the way in which Arlt describes characters in his *Aguafuertes* is sometimes stereotypical. For him characters are often defined by their gender or social status rather than by individual characteristics or names. Martínez suggests that 'the unchanging nature of the character types throughout five years of essays supports an ideological configuration of characters on the part of the author. These people represent Argentine society and their behaviour is determined by society's expectations or traditions.' (p. 20) One aspect of this ideological vision which Arlt held, was his opposition to the bourgeois institution of marriage. This becomes evident in the one stereotypical Arltian character – the young woman who is anxious to coerce her partner into marriage.

Unreliable/ reliable narrators

We encounter one of these young women characters in 'Un Novio ideal'. Her name is 'Coca' and she is the girlfriend of the tedious puritanical man who can allow no pleasure but is good at saving money. He claims that cinema is indecent and forbids Coca to go there. In response to this story, Arlt subsequently wrote a piece entitled 'Dos ancianas y

el autor' in which he supposedly discovers that this 'novio' truly exists and is called 'Coco':

Señora 1 - ¿Leyó usted la nota de "Ar"?

Señora 2 - Sí; y me causó alguna gracia[...]

Yo tenía miedo de que el novio de la nena dijera algo por la nota que publicó ese sinvergüenza; pero, por suerte. Coco está tan ocupado con los estudios que no lee el diario nunca.

(Asombro del autor que escucha en silencio). ¿Cómo? ¿Coco existía?...Es fantástico!...³²

In this way Arlt puts his reader in a state of doubt as he shows himself to be an unreliable narrator. In Arlt's admission that he sometimes invents characters, the reader can wonder about which story was fiction and which came from real life. Is it the first story, as Arlt suggests, or is it the conversation he hears between the two Señoras in 'Dos Ancianas y el autor' which is invented?

Arlt makes the point which Mario Vargas Llosa, among others, has made emphatically, that truth can emerge from fiction, sometimes more readily than from journalism.³³ Arlt causes his reader to be uneasy about being too complacent about truth and artifice and keeps him on his mental toes. This also has implications about challenging prejudice and the social assumptions we make.

As I have mentioned, like Arlt, Dal Masetto uses fictional devices such as exaggeration to comic and satirical effect. However, one distinction between their approaches is that Dal Masetto rarely undermines his pieces by suggesting that he is an unreliable narrator.

³² Victoria Martínez, p.154.

³³ Mario Vargas Llosa, *La verdad de las mentiras* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990), pp. 12 - 13.

While we may intuit some embellishment or invention in his stories, Dal Masetto's communication does not work on a level of questioning a social reality. At times, Dal Masetto does acknowledge the writer's tendency to invent or project into what he sees but this seems to be a straightforward admission. (El hombre in 'Espía' observes a couple and admits that he may be inventing the interaction which he perceives between them). Dal Masetto's pieces seem to provoke reflection rather than a searching doubt about the nature of social reality. However, I would argue that Dal Masetto's constant use of ambiguity does not allow his reader to read unquestioningly. There is always the presence of doubt and uncertainty in his work.

But like Arlt, Dal Masetto conveys suspicion about the nature of journalism in relation to the truth. It is significant that *Gente del Bajo* should open with the story 'Adopción' which depicts a telephone conversation between el hombre and his friend, Esteban. Esteban, we learn, is renowned for being a liar and inventing stories. He rings up supposedly with a newspaper article from 1927 about a couple who lived in Belgrano and were unable to have children and so adopted a chimpanzee. The narrative provides an internal commentary by 'el hombre' who does not believe a word he says. 'Mentiroso, mentiroso...Todo inventado' (pp. 12-13). Esteban hopes to reinforce this story with quotes from the newspaper in order to make his story more reliable. To 'el hombre' the newspaper is obviously unconvincing validation. The possibility of exaggeration and of lying is raised by this piece. We read the rest of the collection with this in mind. However, in this instance, Dal Masetto is locating the unreliability not in himself as narrator but in the newspaper and in a character who has a reputation for being

‘economic’ with the truth: ‘Esteban es un apasionado investigador de archivos, bibliotecas, hemerotecas. Es conocido por eso y por ser un gran mentiroso.’ (p. 11).

Relationship with the reader

While Dal Masetto is frequently present as the figure of ‘el hombre’ in his pieces, Victoria Martínez writes: ‘Arlt rarely presents himself as a character in the stories he relates. At times Arlt simply relates his observations or tells the reader something that he overhears, in other cases he relies upon the accounts of a second party who tells him of a particular experience, or sometimes another person tells Arlt about something he has observed.’³⁴

Nevertheless, while the narratives may have come to Arlt second hand, he nearly always narrates in the first person and in this way his communication with his readers is direct. At times, he explicitly addresses his readers. In the piece entitled ‘Me hacen hablar de la suegra’ Arlt offers advice to those men contemplating marriage: ‘Sí, amigo lector, el día que usted vaya de visita a una casa y oiga a una respetable anciana decirle, con digno continente, “¡Ah! ¡Si usted hubiera conocido a mi difunto esposo!”, huya, huya sin mirar atrás, sin pensar ni un minuto, porque usted está en presencia del león vestido de cordero.’ (p. 115) For Arlt these women are those who try to coerce men into marriage, whether they be mothers-in-law or girlfriends, they are deceptive and not to be trusted. In ‘Me escriben simpatías’ Arlt supposedly quotes eleven women who have written to the newspaper, outraged that they will no longer be trusted by men. One woman writes: ““Si

³⁴ Victoria Martínez, p. 40-1.

por culpa de sus malditos artículos llevo a perder mi novio, iré yo al diario a decirles cosas que posiblemente ninguna mujer le ha dicho”.’ (p. 120) Arlt’s point thus proved.

The pattern of communication in Dal Masetto’s pieces are inverse to Arlt’s. ‘El hombre’ is almost always present in the stories and the style of narration, in the third person, then relates to the reader in an indirect way. However, the effect of this is that the reader may easily identify with ‘el hombre’ and be intimately engaged with the drama of the story. As I mentioned earlier, using ‘el hombre’ as the title of the character in the stories Dal Masetto is also lending a universal significance to this figure. In ‘Espía’, ‘el hombre’ spies upon a couple in a café. Through the narration the reader too becomes a spy, identified with the character of ‘el hombre’. He makes certain observations about their behaviour and through the narration we hear his internal dialogue as he tries to ascertain what is happening between them. ‘El bigote’ asks the waiter for more and more whiskeys while ‘la morena’ orders coffee. He becomes more and more out of control and she, more and more in control. As the tale unfolds ‘el hombre’ gets more and more identified with the man who is being rejected. He begins to believe that he knows what is going on between them:

En este momento - piensa el hombre que espía - se siente capacitado para comprenderlo absolutamente todo. O por lo menos eso es lo que debe estar diciendo, aunque no ignora que es una mentira más y que lo único real, lo único que va entendiendo cada vez con mayor claridad, mientras habla y habla y la morena fuma y fuma y mira hacia la calle, es que tanto despliegue de inteligencia, brillantez y generosidad, nada podrá contra la valla que ahora los separa y que no deja de crecer. (p. 20)

This identification by el hombre with 'el bigote' gets so intense that he can no longer bear it and is forced to leave:

“No quiero ver ese final”, se dice el hombre que espía. Paga, se levanta, pasa cerca y les echa una última ojeada. Todavía piensa: “Ojalá no se caiga del todo ojalá consiga terminar la cosa con cierta dignidad”. Ojalá. Pero lo cierto es que no le tiene mucha fe. (p. 21)

Through the observations made by 'el hombre' we begin to realise this couple's predicament but we also learn more about 'el hombre' himself. As he identifies with 'el bigote' we, in turn, become more and more identified with 'el hombre'. Fears and memories of rejection are evoked by the couple in 'el hombre', which are then, in turn, evoked in the reader. At the end of the piece, there is an ambiguity as to what extent the reality of the situation was found in the couple and to what extent it was found in 'el hombre'.

The writer, the voyeur

This interaction between the writer and the subject and also between the reader and the writer is a kind of vicariousness and, at times, a voyeurism. From the removed and solitary position of the spy, 'el hombre' looks on at this couple in the bar and experiences their interaction as if he were directly involved. We never encounter el hombre with 'su mujer' and it is rare that his engagement with women is first hand. In one of the few episodes where 'el hombre' does engage directly with a woman it is unsuccessful and ultimately painful in 'Ropa nueva'. In this tale 'el hombre' feels convinced of his attractiveness in a new shirt. He is spurred on by this confidence to dance and talk with a

woman. There is a possibility that she may go home with him, although, in the end, she decides not to. When he returns home and looks in the mirror, he thinks that the confidence his clothes lent him was an illusion: 'Se mira sin entusiasmo y reflexiona que, en realidad, ese color no le sienta tan bien como había creído' (p. 195)

Like Pavese whose fictional first person narrator in 'Suicidi' asks 'nothing more of life than being allowed to watch', women and relationships are more easily experienced as a spectator. In the stories there is an awareness of this phenomenon. In 'Amor, Amor' two adolescents are faced with a Romeo and Juliet situation. Rómulo and Enriqueta live in the same apartment block, with parents who detest each other and 'el hombre' finds himself living between them and in between their impossible love affair. He asks himself whether it is each other that they are in love with or love itself. The narrator also questions 'el hombre's' own motivation for wanting to help them to be together and there is an acknowledgement that in his helping them he may himself be gratified. When he climbs precariously out of his window in order to deliver a note from Rómulo to Enriqueta, the narrator asks: '¿Es el hombre realmente tan temerario? Tal vez sí, tal vez no. Pero en esta oportunidad lo empuja el contagio de tanto amor enamorado del amor.' (p. 36). The events in the story are dramatic, ending with 'el hombre' driving with Enriqueta to meet Rómulo at the train station where they will elope. Despite obstructions, 'el hombre' succeeds in re-uniting them and sending them on their way. When this is done 'el hombre' finds himself alone again and a mood of nostalgia descends: 'Observa cómo el tren se pierde. Queda el andén vacío, queda el gran luz al fondo, quedan algunas palomas y queda un rumor de nostalgia. ¿Qué tal?' (p. 37) 'El

hombre' is satisfied with this vicariously experienced love and the traces of nostalgia it leaves behind.

Once again - impossible/possible love and women

Despite Arlt's damnation of marriage as an institution in bourgeois Argentine society, he does seem to believe in romantic love as a universal experience and also in the possibility of a lasting and meaningful bond between men and women. I mentioned earlier 'El amor en el subterráneo' in which Arlt observes lovers and gives value to these brief yet crucial interludes which they spend in each others' company. He resists being mocking or disparaging of these romantic encounters. Dal Masetto shares this view, although unlike Arlt, he does not convey the same kind of faith in its lasting capacity to make people happy. Even though the Sofia and Pedro saga is clearly comical, it seems to reinforce a general theme which we have seen throughout this analysis of Dal Masetto's work - that love is impossible. In fact, as mentioned in relation to Pavese, it is almost as though the pleasure in love is in the impossibility itself. Even in the moments when love is working it is at the expense serious things happening in the rest of the world. In 'Café con leche' a couple stir sugar into each others' coffee while staring into each others' eyes. Meanwhile a robbery is taking place on the street outside. 'El hombre', on this occasion, is contemptuous, clearly provoked by their obliviousness:

se pregunta hasta cuándo pensarán seguir así, revolviendo, mirándose a los ojos u susurrando frases seguramente amorosas. ¿Será que siente envidia por tanto enamoramiento? Lo cierto es que ya no sabe qué película inventar para tratar de llamarles la atención e interrumpirlos.³⁵

Yet in his observation of them alone, women are not regarded in hostile terms. When ‘el hombre’ spies on or observes a solitary woman, his treatment of them is very often sympathetic. In ‘Elegancia’, Dal Masetto uses the first person – the voice of ‘el hombre’. While he sits on a bench a woman who is dressed elegantly walks by, absorbed in her own thoughts. The gaze is not intrusive, it does not scrutinise her, but through his subtle observations a story begins to build. We find that her high-heeled shoes and shoulder pads do not protect her from humiliation and defeat. She is holding a letter in her hand which she rips up and throws to the wind. ‘El hombre’ observes:

Yo no podía verle más que la espalda. Pero cierta vibración me hizo saber que lloraba. El viento le daba de frente. La camisa se le inflaba y se sacudía como una vela. Las hombreras se le corrían todo el tiempo hacia atrás y llegaban hasta los omóplatos. Y todo el tiempo ella tironeaba de la parte delantera de la camisa para volver a colocar las hombreras en su sitio. Y su elegancia trastabillaba.³⁶

At other times I would argue that the women depicted become symbolic, almost mythical figures. The woman ringing the bell in ‘Escena porteña’ has a timeless and mythical presence and her words have a legendary resonance, ‘Se puede’, ‘No se puede’. Similarly, in ‘Mujer en el balcón’ the pregnant woman is described: ‘La figura se desdibuja y es como si llegara de otras épocas, de días lejanos en el pasado, de días por venir: una muchacha intemporal acariciando un pichón de pájaro o un pájaro herido o un

³⁵ Antonio Dal Masetto, *Reventando corbatas* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero Editor, 1988), p. 197.

³⁶ Antonio Dal Masetto, *El padre y otras historias* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2002), p. 71.

pájaro distraído'. This sight of her stimulates the recollection of poetry and so she becomes a kind of muse.

Another muse emerges in 'Muchacha que baila'. 'El hombre' stumbles away from a new year's eve party to find a girl dancing by the side of a fountain on the corner of Córdoba and Carlos Pellegrini. She appears 'como si se hubiese materializado en un rápido juego de esta nueva luz del año que empieza' and dances in such a magical way that 'el hombre' wants to capture her mentally and keep her to sustain him for the coming year.³⁷ She holds the power of an antidote to a troubling social reality: 'Sabe que la ciudad tiene y tendrá como siempre dolores, traiciones, horrores. Pero ahora tiene también la muchacha de la fuente'. As he watches her, 'el hombre' is joined by a young man who sits by his side and also watches the dancing girl. '¿Quién será?' 'el hombre' asks him, 'Vaya a saber' replies 'el joven'. Like the woman on the balcony this girl is without a name or specific identity. The girl also defies being identified by her age: 'la muchacha carece de edad. Podría tener doce años, podría tener veinte.' Passing a bottle between them 'el hombre' and 'el joven' wonder about whether she actually exists: "A lo mejor no existe." "Yo la estoy viendo hace un rato." "Yo también la estoy viendo, pero a lo mejor igual no existe." "Eso es cierto." "Bueno, lo importante es que esté ahí." In her anonymity, ambiguous age and in being virtually supernatural, she seems to attain mythic status. However, one aspect which these figures seem to share is a capacity to bring transcendence to uncertainty, delivering hope and inspiration. In this way they embody the classical concept of a muse.

³⁷ Antonio Dal Masetto, *Ni perros ni gatos* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero Editor, 1987), pp. 215-7.

The presence of children

González Lanuza observes that although the figure of the adolescent is important to Arlt, he excludes the presence of children in his *Aguafuertes*.³⁸ Perhaps this is further confirmation that Arlt is mainly concerned with a more adult world and with characters whose predicaments have a bearing on a political constellation. This is not true of Dal Masetto's pieces. Child characters often feature as part of a scene. In many instances we encounter a character who is referred to as 'la hija Daniela'. Her presence is often the catalyst for intimate reflection.

In 'Plaza', 'el hombre' finds himself in Plaza San Martín where he observes her playing and experiences 'los mismos contradictorios sentimientos de siempre, una mezcla de placer y angustia' (p. 63). While watching her engrossed in her play, 'el hombre' believes that he may be able to escape troubling thoughts:

Y por un momento cree saber que puede liberarse, desentenderse de todo cuanto está ocurriendo más allá de esta isla. Liberarse de la realidad, de las amenazas, de las muertes, de los miedos, de las desesperanzas. (p. 64)

Daniela's play offers resistance to the troubles which exist beyond her sphere. 'El hombre' begins to perceive her activities as evidence of a meaningful existence, and he feels himself to be engaged with, rather than alienated by life: 'En el centro de esa

³⁸ 'Los niños están prácticamente ausentes de las *aguafuertes*, igual que del resto de su obra, salvo los que "nacieron viejos" o "el hermanito coimero" ya que aprendió a monetizar las necesidades de efusión erótica de la hermana que está de novia, es decir, los niños que ya no lo son. La infancia es esa zona de la existencia que no le interesó literariamente, en involuntario propósito de olvidar la suya. Sus personajes, a partir de su primera novela, fueron los adolescentes, y continuaron siéndolo sea cual fuere la edad que les atribuyera.' Eduardo González Lanuza, *Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1971), p. 75.

especie de templo abierto al cielo, entre esa multitud de fieles sin cara, en la cita sin tiempo, cree finalmente percibir, como seguramente lo percibió otras veces, que está participando de una ceremonia invencible.’ Here we can recall ‘el centro’ which was offered to Oliveira by Rocamadour. La hija Daniela serves as a figure who offers an escape from alienation: ‘busca una vez más en su hija. Ella le está dando la espalda, pero ante la insistencia de su mirada gira la cabeza rápidamente, levanta la mano y esboza un saludo. En la fugacidad de ese gesto el hombre pretende descubrir , no sólo la complicidad de siempre, sino también una conformidad, una aprobación a todas esas solitarias divagaciones suyas.’ (p. 65)

In ‘Arena’ el hombre sits on a beach and around him he has fleeting impressions of ‘gestos, muecas, miradas, frases, enojos, intolerancias, gruñidos, insultos, amenazas veladas, descortesías’.³⁹ By his side his ‘pequeña hija’ is playing. She is oblivious to the observations which ‘el hombre’ makes. They are next to a rock onto which thousand of tiny mussels are clinging. The small child forces one of these tiny mussels from the rock and in this gesture ‘el hombre’ floods with thoughts:

[...] contempla la desición, la obstinación, el esfuerzo, la arbitrariedad de esa mano que, inocente, impulsada quién sabe por qué deseo, qué capricho, qué sugerencia venida vaya a saber de dónde, por el mandato del azar o de alguna extraña deidad, impide que ese molusco adherido hasta hace un instante a la roca madre, ese sólo entre cientos, entre miles, ejerza la posibilidad única que le ha llegado desde siempre y ahora anulada para siempre, de desarrollarse y completar el ciclo de su oscura y misteriosa vida. (pp. 52-3)

³⁹ Antonio Dal Masetto, *Reventando Corbatas* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero Editor, 1988), p. 51.

La hija and her uncomplicated engagement with life seem to be the source of these thought provoking 'brevísimo dramas'. She also seems to offer the licence to experience vulnerability in the face of the arbitrariness of life.

In 'Pista de baile' el hombre observes a little girl and ascertains that her two separated parents sit at separate tables to facilitate her spending time with both of them. She goes from one table to another, crossing a dance floor, relating to each parent in turn. We then encounter a moment which like the moments in 'Arena' and 'Plaza', is suspended in time and seems to touch on what is universal:

La nena se despide de su padre y comienza a cruzar por última vez la pista. Se detiene en la mitad, a medio camino entre ambas mesas. Gira la cabeza y se queda así, los ojos fijos, minúscula, imprecisa. El hombre, sentado en su rincón, ha estado esperando este momento y presta atención. Durante unos segundos cesa todo ruido, el tiempo se detiene y ahí permanece la luz de los tubos fluorescentes, tal vez (piensa el hombre) símbolo de una realidad más vasta, imagen que sugiere otras imágenes, legiones de niños y legiones de otros que han dejado de serlo hace mucho tiempo, que dudan, se debaten, preguntan, no encuentran solución, oscilando siempre entre complejas y dudosas paternidades.⁴⁰

Dal Masetto seems not only interested in the world of children but in the world of adolescents too. In the piece entitled 'Adolescente' 'el hombre' observes a teenage girl who is writing in a café. Like la hija Daniela, who is totally absorbed in her play, this teenage girl is totally absorbed in her writing. Like the couple stirring sugar into each other's coffee, she does not notice that a woman has just been robbed by a motorcyclist outside the café and she continues writing 'lejos de todo'. As she writes 'el que espía siente que ese fervor lo contagia y la hace bien' and he concludes:

⁴⁰ Antonio Dal Masetto, *Reventando Corbatas* (Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero Editor, 1988), pp. 120-1.

Ahí, en un rincón del bar, en alguna parte de la ciudad, entre maderas lustradas y macetas de gajos colgantes, ella es un pequeño sol, irradia energía. Y el que espía piensa que, entre las muchas cosas por hacer, también sería bueno intentar escribir la adolescente que escribe, retener de algún modo ese destello de prepotencia y de alegría.⁴¹

These moments which are observed by ‘el hombre’ are not necessarily social observations. Moreover, they stand as testimonies to particular moments or stages of life which are fleeting but may touch people more deeply and universally.

***Página/12* in retrospect**

It is an apparent contradiction to use a genre published with a specific date to write pieces which aspire to be timeless. Nevertheless, this makes them an intriguing phenomenon; that they function simultaneously in two places. I was drawn to these pieces when living in Argentina in early 2002 when I would read the newspapers, trying to understand the troubled economic and political situation. I was struck by Antonio Dal Masetto’s column because it seemed to provide a space for reflection amongst the political commentary which at times could be wrangling. I would argue that this is the most important quality about this voice; it is unintrusive and only gestures to reality from the sidelines, never professing to own the ‘truth’. The epigraph to both *Gente del Bajo* and *Reventando corbatas* is a quote from Mark Twain, *Un reportaje sensacional*:

⁴¹ Antonio Dal Masetto, ‘Adolescente’, *Página/12*, 14 September 1994, p. 27.

Le explicaré [...] el Difunto y yo éramos mellizos y nos mezclaron en la bañera cuando solo teníamos dos semanas de edad y uno de nosotros se abogó. Pero no supimos cuál. Algunos creen que fue Bill. Otros, que fui yo.

This acknowledges the ambiguous relationship between truth and re-telling and the impossibility of ever reaching a categorical reality. There is no single story to be told, but many possible versions. Like the contribution I mention in my introduction, 'Mariposa', the butterfly means nothing and many things. The piece resists any single reading. It is in this capacity to convey 'una escena cotidiana' at the same time speaking about the universal human experience which is the value of Dal Masetto's column.

Chapter 4 of *Siete de oro* (1969) – A translation.

'La Gallega' is taken from Dal Masetto's first novel of 1969, Siete de oro. It was published separately as a short story in an anthology of Argentine writers in 1970, Veinte nuevos narradores argentinos, edited by the Argentine novelist and poet, Néstor Sánchez. 'Gallego' or 'Gallega' is a derisive slang term used in Argentina to refer to an immigrant from Spain.

Gallega, when I arrived at your door I brought nothing more than bewilderment and the recent trace of my teens. I brought dregs of naivety and impatience, a fever in the blood which would have been difficult for me to explain. I was stubborn: a closed-minded and ignorant provincial boy. I watched the days go by, didn't know what I was looking for. I've hung on to a few of these things, dropped others. Or perhaps everything's changed. Still, like then, I don't know much about myself. Just as on that morning, when I got off the bus which had brought me to Buenos Aires, I did what I did best: surrender myself and wait. I spent the day wandering among the pigeons and the newspaper sellers, straying and returning to the same plaza. Plaza Once, Plaza Miserere. At dusk, that demonstration appeared at the end of the street. I picked up my bag

and joined in. Newspapers rained down from the balconies and windows and the demonstrators made them into torches. I heard the chants and managed to catch sight of a couple of placards, but I couldn't figure out what their cause was. The flames, the confusion, those people crowding the balconies made me forget everything: the recent flight from home, the need to get my bearings.

I moved through those bodies, looked up above, opening my eyes, trying not to lose my suitcase. When someone shouted something from a window, it seemed as though it was me they were calling to. The march didn't last long. A couple of bangs went off. The crowd braked, moved backwards, dispersed through the side streets. I sprinted aimlessly, following everyone else, stopping with a group of ten or twelve in front of a bar. The police were throwing tear gas in every direction from the corner of the street. The people I was with ripped up paving stones and threw them back. I caught a glimpse of someone wounded on the other side of the street. A gas canister fell

on top of us. We all took refuge in a bar. Another one landed just at the door of the bar and the inside filled with gas. It was chaos. I barged my way through, got out and ran to the corner of the street. Someone ran and turned the corner with me. He was a skinny guy wearing a white shirt. We went to wash our faces in the fountain of a square. I asked him what the demonstration was about. He didn't know. He said that he had joined in for nothing more than to chuck a couple of rocks at the police. I explained that I had just arrived to Buenos Aires. He told me not to worry, that he knew a cheap boarding house. With that promise I followed him all night. He was a sinister kind of man. He had yellow eyes. I didn't once see him laugh. He didn't ask me a single question, nothing about me interested him. He talked about his matters as if he'd always known me. When we were walking along he put his hands in his pockets and it was as if he were walking alone. He had a bet on at the races for the following day: if it paid off, he could stop work forever. I followed him with my suitcase. From time to time I asked:

'This boarding house, is it far?'

'No, no it's not far, we'll go there later,' he'd reply.

We sat in a couple of bars, I joined him in a few of glasses of wine.

He told me that if I wanted to burn a few pesos he knew a girl who charged very little, living right there on the main avenue. I didn't want to complicate things for myself, I would have preferred to just put my suitcase down, have a bed, a safe place where I could go to stay, and after that anything could come along. I told him this.

'But she charges next to nothing,' he insisted.

We went to find her. She was at a table in a bar, with another girl.

He signalled to them and they came over. We bought them a drink and went to a nearby hotel. When we had finished he came up to me and told me the price. As a matter of fact, it didn't seem all that expensive to me. Then we went on walking. Now I didn't dare ask him anything. As we were heading towards the shore dawn was about to break. Two nights without sleeping and the wine had left me in a bad way. I could have laid down right there on the grass,

under the weight of the last stars. We stopped by the water. The sun was just about to come out. Suddenly the guy went mad. He climbed the parapet and began to thrash about and scream:

'Here it comes, here it comes, right now, now, now.'

He was writhing around, straining his voice and smashing his head. I thought the best thing to do was to imitate him. So I stood by his side and started to thrash about and scream, until the sun had completely come out. Then we walked back into the centre in silence. In the first light the buildings had been tinted pink. It was then that I thought I was really in the city.

We stopped before a door.

'It's here' he said.

It was early, I had to kill time in the bar at the corner of the street and he joined me. He left me a telephone number so that I could call him, for anything I needed. I called him the next day, he came and told

me he'd been invited to a party, asked if I could lend him a suit. I lent it to him and never saw the guy again.

Anyway, he was the one who brought me to your door. He belonged to that class of people who drift in and out of your life leaving an image which returns from time to time over the years. After him I met many more. Often they are the people whose names you don't even remember, the ones you know nothing about except the memory of a few hours, a few gestures and words which time deforms and changes the colour of - I mean, they're the ones who add to this frustrated and impotent feeling. Sometimes I wonder what face I'd have in your memory, what place I occupy. That morning I went up the stairs to your boarding house like someone entering a temple. The first thing I saw, in the narrow inner patio, was a guy sprinkling the springs of a bed with kerosene. Then he set fire to it. The bedbugs sprang out between the metal slats by the handful and

burnt up with a brief crackle. The guy shouted towards the back and you appeared. You stood before me like someone facing an enemy:

'What is it you want? Where do you work?'

You eyed me up and down. The dog following you barked at me without letting up. You shouted at it to get out.

Then, furious, you took off one of your shoes and threw it at it. The dog fled. You put on your shoe again, said that there was a bed available in room five, advanced payment. You showed it to me. It was a room with no windows, stained walls, a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, stale air. There was hardly any room to move. One guy was asleep there, the rest had gone to work. When you left me alone he lifted up his head and said hello. He was an old man. He told me his life story straight away. His leg was in plaster, he hadn't gone out for weeks. He was retired but had no pension. Recently he had worked as a waiter in a bar in *La Boca*, until a reversing bus had broken his leg. You had tried to throw him out several times, but he had nowhere to go, he'd run out of money. What could he do? The

other occupants of the room complained because he smelt bad. He would talk endlessly. He'd laugh. He lifted up his pillow and took out a knotted handkerchief, handed me some change and asked me to go out to buy half a litre of wine. He urged me to make sure no one saw me, least of all you. So this is how it started. I paid you for half a month because I couldn't manage any more. I set about finding work. So began that nomadic time which I can't recall without feeling uneasy. I whiled away days going from one place to another with a newspaper under my arm, walking everywhere so as to not waste money on buses. A moment came when I knew the answer before I'd asked the question: too young, lack of experience, no references from previous jobs. I thought perhaps there was no room for me in the city. My time ran out and I had to suffer you. You used to come into the room, shout that if I couldn't pay I had to go, that you weren't about to house vagrants. It was useless trying to answer you back, I had to wait until the explosion was over. I spoke to you several times, asked you to have patience, gave you my watch,

the only thing of value I possessed. I was getting to know you. I saw how you operated in that house, in that dirty world where you felt like a goddess, where you stirred strong passions, parading yourself every day, making yourself admired and desired, where your thirty eight years competed with the nineteen years of your eldest daughter and before long would surely compete with those of your other daughter who was only twelve. In these contests you always came out victorious. You knew it and it was your greatest pride. Carmen, the Paraguayan girl who did the cleaning, also served as a point of reference to establish your high rank. Men smelt out your game, they sniffed it like dogs, followed it, responded faithfully to your movements and innuendo. They were all strong and timid provincial men, full of stifled tenderness and violence. You passed by the rooms showing off your enormous tits inside those tight-fitting jumpers. If you were in a good mood you shouted out with your Spanish accent:

'Get up, bums, to work!'

You used to sing tacky Pedrito Rico songs.

You filled the whole house with that greed and zeal of yours.

Someone from indoors would yell, 'Olé!' at you.

Without stopping, raising your voice still more, you would answer

back:

'Olé.'

Finally I lowered my expectations and began to mark the ads which were looking for manual labour. I walked through the area of factories, breathed that thick air, looked at the people's faces, but I always resisted ever actually going in. I found work for ten days as a sales assistant in the summer sale at the *Gath y Chaves* department store. For eight hours my task consisted in rolling up the pieces of fabric which the customers had unrolled. Then I entered the world of sales. I sold, or tried to sell, blenders, polishing machines, sewing machines, hoovers, fridges, paintings, costume jewellery, brooches, soap. I travelled the whole of greater Buenos Aires; I turned bitter. At midday I shared a sandwich with Horacio, one of the guys

working with me. We sat down by the side of the railway line, munching as we watched the trains go by. When I earned a bit of money I always did the same thing. First I used to go down Corrientes avenue and choose a cheap book from one of the reduced tables. Then I sat myself down in a bar, asked for a ham and cheese special and had my shoes shined. These were my luxuries once a month.

I made friends with Juan, my bedside neighbour, a guy recently arrived from Tucumán who wrote letters regularly to his girlfriend. He had one of those little books, an *Amorous Secretary*, which included 30 letters and their respective replies. He copied them in their corresponding order, without changing a single word. It was an arduous task for him. He got the table ready, the paper, the biro and didn't move from there for an hour. One day he made me read a letter from Elsa. Then I discovered that she too used that very same *Amorous Secretary*. From letter number one onwards. Still, Juan

awaited her letters with impatience. He threw himself on the bed and read those lines attentively, half a dozen times. He invited me to compete with that little book. He was satisfied with my first letter and from then on I served as his amorous secretary. One night you came into the room; it was after supper, everyone was there. You dried your hands on your apron, started talking about this and that. You laughed, teased. There was desire in your eyes and in your teeth. You asked me to show you the palm of my hand. You ran your nail across my skin, said lots of silly things, following each phrase with a cackle. Everyone else laughed. You had chosen me. Everybody realised, except me. The next day Carmen, your accomplice, stopped me in the corridor and spoke to me in secret: 'The señora says she doesn't want anything to do with you because you're very young, she doesn't want commitment.'

I didn't answer her, but I understood that the thing was said and done. That afternoon you called for me and we had a conversation for the first time, leaning on the balcony of the room that overlooked

the street. You gave me a series of instructions. You said that you were a married woman, with a husband, with children, that you had responsibilities, therefore you had to be careful. You asked me, above all, not to go with other women. You were worried that I could infect you with some disease. From time to time you offered me a grape from a bunch you had in your hand. I still hadn't said a word. I listened, agreed to everything. The next day I didn't go out. You came to see me early in the morning.

'Why didn't you go to work?' you said.

And laughed. We made love in Carmen's small bedroom, while she guarded the corridor. From then on you began to call me Tanito, the little Italian, and so did everyone else. I gained a certain prestige among the men in my dorm. Generally I ate alone, before or after everyone else. My plates were fuller, I could have seconds. You sent me fruit and sweets. Carmen brought me those gifts as if they were love letters:

'The señora sent these for you.'

You used to sing from the kitchen at the top of your voice. From that day on your cackles and your songs were meant for a particular audience. The guys looked at me and winked. Every time you passed by you pressed into me, mouthed off to the people indoors, infected everyone. When you were in a good mood you bloomed like a schoolgirl. Your joys, your rages, were your only measure of things. Anything that didn't revolve around you, didn't exist. You were demanding, imposing, you had your own rules. It would have been difficult to defeat you. But perhaps, and this I think now, you didn't have such high hopes. And that toughness which you displayed day after day was nothing but a reflection of your limitations. I didn't know much about you, hardly anything. Only once did you let a few words slip. You told me that you had had a boyfriend, from your village, you loved each other, that you were very young. He had been killed in the Spanish Civil War. You were the most lovely girl of that pueblo, men were crazy about you. As for your husband they had made you marry him, or something along

those lines. It didn't interest me to find out more. And even to this day it probably wouldn't interest me either. Perhaps all of this, this evocation, is nothing more than a pretext, a desperate attempt to anchor myself, to endure.

Meanwhile I had stopped working. I went out from time to time, to pretend that I was. You bought me presents: a shirt, a ring, a jumper and I had to put up with jealous scenes. After the first time there wasn't a single day you didn't require me. Any hour or place was good. The dormitories, the kitchen, the bathroom. You hounded me. At any moment, when I least expected it, I heard the door open and I saw your gold tooth glint in the half light. But soon I came to realise that this erotic sorcery had no other end than to satisfy me, to keep me, sate me. For you, for your pleasure, you kept the afternoons free so that we could meet somewhere else and we went to some hotel, far away from there. Then you really spread your plumage. You covered yourself in jewels, in furs, cologne, lingerie. That was when

you demanded your share. I didn't behave badly. I was patient and managed to satisfy you. I often recall all the times I worked in those beds to give you pleasure. You paraded naked in front of the big mirrors, showed yourself off, praised your own white and solid body.

'I look like a young girl. Don't you think I look like a young girl?'

You used to say. I said that you did. Yet, after those months, the first time I slept with a girl of my own age I threw myself back on the bed and shouted:

'How lucky we are to be young!'

One day two guys had a fight. They had started in the dormitory and ended up on the patio. They were rolling around on the floor.

One of them was bleeding from his nose and his ear. You joined in with a broom and started whacking them with it. You dealt blows with relish. They had to pick themselves up. One went away,

shielding himself. But the other, the one who was bleeding, snatched

the broom and challenged you. Then you kicked him between the legs. He bent over and fell down, squirming around. You went on hitting him and insulting him, shoved him with the sole of your shoe.

'So you were gonna hit me? Bastard, swine - hit me?' you yelled.

Before returning to the kitchen you warned them that if they weren't both out in half an hour you'd throw them down the stairs. No-one doubted that you'd do it. We had already seen you in action fifteen days earlier. One of the guys had made friends with Maria, your youngest daughter. He invited her into his room when he was alone; apparently he showed himself to her and touched her. That day you drove him to the stairs punching him with your bare fists, you pushed him, took off your shoes and threw them at his head, like that time with the dog. Then you brought out his things and hurled them down amidst insults and curses. All the other occupants in the room danced around you, trying to contain you, trying to make you see sense.

'No, not that. That's mine,' they said.

Maria had ended up falling in love with me. She came into my room before going to school, waking me up with a kiss on the mouth. Then she sat down on Juan's bed, chatting to me for a while. She was petulant and astute. Living among men had served as a learning experience. I gave her a drawing I'd done. Days later I found it underneath my pillow, torn to pieces. I tried to ask her what had happened, but she avoided me. When I was finally able to talk to her she said:

'If I believed what they're saying about my mother and you I'd have to hate you.'

I don't remember what story I invented. We went on being friends and more than once the three of us went out together. We went to the plazas, to the cinema. I paid attention to Maria. She pretended to enjoy herself. In reality, the only thing she did was to spy on us. You just laughed. Your other daughter, on the other hand, openly hated me. But she must have hated me out of habit, because she hated you and because she'd seen many like me passing through. When you

two argued you were like two bus drivers with road rage. We heard every detail from the first room through to the last. Five minutes later you passed by singing. Your daughter locked herself up and played records at full volume. Your husband wasn't around during the day, he looked after another boarding house which you had in Palermo. One afternoon I was sitting on my bed, the door opened and she appeared brandishing one of my shirts. She was furious. She threw it at me as she shouted:

'This shirt is yours, isn't it?'

I grabbed it as it flew by and almost without looking at her, threw it back.

'No, it's not mine' I said.

'It's not yours?', she shouted.

She slammed the door and went. Then I realised that she had found it among the clothes which Carmen washed for you. Someone, no doubt your eldest daughter, must have pointed it out. When you came back from being out and about you asked for details. You were

laughing. I prepared myself for getting through the night. I was scared that your husband would come in and stab me. To get to my corner, first he had to pass the wardrobe and the table, then advance through the passage made by my bed and Juan's. Before lying down I found some string and tied it between the door and my bed, a net made of thread twenty centimetres above the floor. Anyone who wanted to get near in the dark couldn't help but trip up, causing various objects to fall which would wake me up. The guys laughed. A week later you moved me to a little room at the back, past the bathroom and kitchen, next to the room of a guy from Córdoba, cut-off from the rest of the house. There I was alone and could lock myself in with a key. As for the Cordobés guy, I knew of him from seeing him pass in the corridor. He didn't say much, I didn't know what he did for a living, he told me he'd been there for a year, that he paid on time. That man, el Cordobés, is another specimen of the dark breed. Later I got to know quite a few, and above all one whom I loved. One who used to say when he wrote to me: 'Brother of the

same shadow'. But he was a poet and more mad than any of them and that's another story.

My little room was connected with el Cordobés's room by a closed door. I discovered his mania only three days later. One night he woke me up with a fury of jazz. I looked at the time: it was three. I picked up a shoe and threw it against the dividing door. I waited and then did it again. I went out into the corridor and thumped at the other door. I wanted to open it but it was locked. The concert lasted over an hour. The following night the same thing happened. This time it lasted longer. I shook the doors again, without success. I decided to speak to him. But when I confronted him, on another day, he carried on as if he hadn't seen me and locked himself in. He had a beguiling face which disarmed you. The nocturnal sessions continued. One evening I waited for him to come back, I went out into the corridor and blocked his way with my hand. He stopped and looked me in the eye, fixedly. We stayed like this, staring each other out. Suddenly he dodged me, slipped between my body and

the wall and went into his room. He put on a record there and then. Over the following days I didn't thump on his door or try and talk to him; I plotted my revenge. One morning I went out with Horacio, loitered in the streets with him and saw, on a dirt road, next to the gutter, a dead cat. I wrapped it up with sheets of newspaper and put it in my briefcase between the fridge catalogues and the applications for bank loans. It smelled putrid. I took the train back and prepared my plan. I locked myself in and waited with the light switched off. When I heard him I put my eye to the keyhole. I knew his rituals: the first thing was to take soap and a towel and wash himself in the bathroom. They were the only minutes that he left the door open. I saw him go by, went out, half opened his door and threw the cat on the bed. I tiptoed away and came back at dinner time. I didn't notice anything strange. That night there was no music. The following morning your shrieks woke me. You were furious, talking about smashing people's faces in, kicking everyone out on their ass, calling us all bastards. I went out to see what had happened. On the wire

fencing of the patio, amongst the sheets and washed clothes, was the cat, hanging there. That night the concert was more infernal than ever. Some days went by without change followed by a period of silence. One evening I saw that his door was half open and I leaned in. El Cordobés was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. On both sides of the pillow, next to his ears, facing each other, were two speakers. The bookshelves, the table, the floor, everywhere was full of records. I went in. He looked at me, unsurprised. I heard him speak for the first time.

He said: 'I'm tired of all these records. I feel like grabbing them and throwing them out into the middle of the patio.'

'Good idea. I'll help you.' I said.

I picked up a pile and made as if to go out. He hesitated, sat up and copied me. We went a few metres down the corridor, lent out and threw them down. We went back to get more. We started running back and forth. In just a few minutes the room was empty. The

patio, on the other hand was left scattered with broken records. At that time there was nobody in at the boarding house. You were having a siesta. You turned up when you heard the racket but we had already finished. We were made a little jumpy by the exercise. We heard your swearing. You came to thump at the door. You beat it with a stick, I thought you were going to break it down. You insulted el Cordobés, threatened to kill him, with calling the police. You didn't know that I was inside too. El Cordobés was leaning against the wall and said:

'Now I feel better.'

I waited, studied him. We chatted for a bit, about this and that. He had a strange way of expressing himself, clumsy, as if his words were tumbling out. From that day on he'd come to look for me and we even met a couple of times in a café for a coffee or a glass of wine. I didn't want to claim a single one of the records which were salvaged. But a week later two or three new ones appeared and he made a gift of them to me. It was the first time that I sat down to listen to music.

Through him I got to know Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, Mulligan, Gillespie, Coltrane. Then he went rapidly down hill. He started drinking a lot. Sometimes, for no reason, he'd looked at me and say: 'Thank you.'

One afternoon we saw an ambulance go by.

'I'd rather be underneath it than inside', he murmured.

One night a shriek woke me. I went into his room and turned on the light. El Cordobés was sitting on the bed looking straight ahead. He was talking to himself.

'I had a dream,' he said. 'I dreamed I was in prison, a model prison.

I couldn't get out, I wanted to get out and I couldn't even though I had the best marks for behaviour. I fulfilled all the necessary prerequisites for leaving, but I couldn't leave, just like now.'

He lay back, sat up straight again, put on a record, took it off, went back to bed. Suddenly he startled and asked:

'Who is it?'

He moaned, snorted, whined, uttered some name. Then he lurched towards the basin by the side of the bed and vomited. The images of that night also belong to what, for me, symbolise your boarding house. The figure of el Cordobés, bent over, broken by convulsions and bellowing, putting his fingers down his throat, trembling in fits of coughing. And his body, naked, skinny, yellow, insignificant, kneeling in the middle of the bed, his head thrown back, desperately drinking from the rim of a bottle of water, drenching his neck and chest, his eyes bulging, as if he were sipping at the last minutes of his life. He went on like this, lying down, writhing around, uttering incomprehensible words. I held his head and tried to calm him down. I called him by his name. I stayed there with him until dawn. Then things got worse. At the end of the month, in one week, everything happened which I prefer not to talk about. El Cordobés ended up locking himself in his room and refusing to come out. They had to force the lock and took him away in a straightjacket.

You quickly replaced him with another tenant, making no comment about him other than this:

'He was mad.'

Everything was like that in those days. Asphyxia and madness.

Your kingdom too, born out of a kitchen, a patio, a series of rooms, and the brief freedom that the incidental bed stood for in which you lay with me or whoever else, that too was a closed circle, starved of light. But if I forget your songs, your yelling, your way of walking amidst the gaze of men, your smile, that pathos you faced the day with, I would also forget those years of learning. And this is what I don't want. I try to recapture you, I need you, I need those dark years, I want to make something out of them, I want to create or destroy but do something. I go on labouring my past in the same way that I work on my future. In that world of bad smells, rats, bed bugs and cockroaches your body sometimes appears like a pale moon, radiating a little clarity. Your body is my banner in the confused memory of those days. It opens no horizon, redeems

nothing, but is the only clear thing, fluttering like a sheet, going still, quivering, unwilling to fall down.

Later in room number five, after the little room at the back, all the ones that followed carried your voice and the taste of you. The little room on Cangallo Street, on the fifth floor, the darkest of them all. A recently married couple came to live next door. The week they arrived he pinned her against the wall with eight gun shots, downstairs, beside the front door. The home of the Russian who slept with his daughter, his pride and joy, who he wanted to make into a great ballerina.

'We are the strongest,' the Russian guy used to say to me. 'We thrash everyone else. We will only respect France.'

And then that cabin Osvaldo found for me in one of my worst moments, on a wasteland, by San Martín Street. There was nothing more than a box spring and a mattress on a dirt floor. The wind and

water filtered in, the candle went out. And next door was a house in ruins, that old man living in it who wandered around the grounds all day, talking to himself with a colander on his head.

And the room on Ayacucho Avenue: that maniacal butler, half witch, who lent me books. He assured me that he knew an old man in the North, who could predict the future. In order to know my destiny I had to cut a tuft of my pubic hair and send it to him. One day I stopped in front of the mirror, took down my trousers, cut a lock and gave it to him.

In the Rivadavia boarding house, there was that gay neighbour who came to knock on my door to tell me his woes. When things were going well, on the other hand, he took me out for coffee. He walked through Corrientes like a champion, greeting all the waiters in the bars, the newspaper boys, the doormen at the cinema, the cigarette vendors. He used to say to me:

'I've slept with this guy, went to bed with that guy.'

He stopped to get his shoes shined by some young boy.

'Tell the gentleman how many times you've gone to bed with me,' he would say.

'Uh-huh,' the boy would answer smiling and shaking his head.

There was that guy who wanted to get me involved in stealing cars.

That other one who proposed setting up a fruit business with me.

He'd found a stall. Every morning we got up at dawn to go to

Abasto. We bought apples, grapefruits, oranges, which we then sold

on street corners. There was Isabel, that tubuculous whore who lent

me money, who specialised in sailors. She got them drunk in any old

place, took them to a hotel practically dragging them by their shirt

collar and nicked everything they had. More than once I found her at

dawn bringing them up the stairs, like someone hoisting a casualty.

And from all corners that smell which your home had marked me

with.

One day you told me that you had just bought an apartment in Caballito: another boarding house. That afternoon you would go there to clean. You gave me the telephone number and address. I called you and went. It was the fourth floor of an old building. You showed me the rooms, the kitchen, the bathrooms, the bedroom you'd chosen for yourself, with a balcony looking onto the street. It was a strange afternoon. I had a cold which had been dragging on for a week, I was uncomfortable. I had the feeling that I was far away from everything, that I couldn't touch anything. I went around those rooms like a robot. I heard your voice, I looked at you against the bare walls, watched the patches of overcast sky through the window, I asked myself what I was doing, what we were doing in that empty house. You had brought a radio, a Spanish music programme came on. You weren't well either. The beds only had mattresses. You asked me, in the same way you ask someone if they want salt at the table, if I wanted sheets. I said yes. You had brought some clean

sheets. With my cold I made love without pleasure. The ironed cloth seemed like cardboard against my skin. I reached for you without finding you, with a clumsiness and lack of appetite which made me feel worse. You said something curious:

'I feel as though this were the last time that we will sleep together.'

When I left, you came with me to the lift. You were talking to me at the moment it arrived. Someone else called it from down below. I didn't want to wait and decided to go by the stairs. On the landing of the third floor I heard someone running up. A man crashed down on top of me and punched me without giving me time for anything. He struck me full in the face and threw me against the door of an apartment. It was your husband. He cornered me with punches and kicks. I didn't feel like fighting, I wanted to go, I wanted to be left in peace. I defended myself with just one hand, in the other I had my briefcase. I didn't respond to his blows. I only stretched out my arm in front of me and tried to keep him at a distance.

'What are you doing?' I said.

'What do you mean what am I doing?' he said breathing fitfully, and became still more incensed.

I had to let go of the briefcase. Then, who knows with what intention, he bent down, picked it up and escaped upstairs. I chased him. I went up several steps. I threw myself at him and grabbed his legs at the knees. We both fell face down the length of the stairs. We stayed like that, paralysed. I would have been able to stay there for an hour, two, I was in no rush, it wasn't wholly uncomfortable, I had no wish to do anything else. I looked at his trousers worn out on the ass. I felt bored. Some neighbours had leant out, asking:

'What's going on?'

Finally he threw the briefcase behind him. I picked it up and left.

Outside, with my numbness weighing down, as I was going further away I tasted something new: the taste of liberation which went with having left all this behind. Your house, your beds, your tutelage. I began to walk towards anywhere. I thought that I had nowhere to go, that I couldn't return to the boarding house anymore, that I didn't

have a peso in my pocket and that everything was starting all over
again. Olé.

A commentary on the translation of a fragment from *Siete de oro* (1969).

In his essay ‘If This Be Treason: Translation and its Possibilities’ Gregory Rabassa writes: ‘a translation ought to be the closest possible reading of a work.’¹ I include a translation as part of my exploration of Dal Masetto’s fiction for this reason; as the ‘closest possible reading’ I can give. The process of translation brings the reader-translator close to how a work of fiction is put together, with its consideration at a grassroots level of the basic tools of words and syntax. It puts the reader-translator in touch with a writer’s method and craft. In this way, my aim in the commentary has been to conceptualise the translator’s practice in this process at the level of words rather than to theorise on the nature of translation itself.

To include a translation in my thesis is in keeping with my overall approach; a commitment to revealing what Susan Sontag characterises in her seminal essay, ‘Against Interpretation’ (1962), as ‘the sensuous surface of art’². We can understand the ‘surface’ of a text to be its language. Translation requires a text to be taken to pieces in order to be put back together again. It requires a very thorough, almost obsessive attention to the

¹ Gregory Rabassa ‘If This Be Treason: Translation and its Possibilities’, *Translation: Literary, Linguistic, and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. William Frawley (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), p. 23.

² Susan Sontag ‘Against Interpretation’, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001): Sontag writes in reference to critical work she praises: ‘These are essays which reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it.’ (p. 13).

text's 'surface', its language. This is not, however, a disregard for the meaning or spirit of the text. Of course, every translator takes part in the hermeneutic act at each small decision which is made in the process of translation. Even at the first stage of a 'literal' translation, interpretations are being made. As I mention in my introduction, what is important about Sontag's approach is that she advocates free and unstructured interpretations which meets the text on its own terms, rather than following a particular orthodoxy which risks making the text servant to the tools of interpretation.

Many metaphors and analogies have been drawn to describe the process of translation.

The translator Willard Trask compares translating to acting:

I realized that the translator and the actor had to have the same kind of talent. What they both do is to take something of somebody else's and put it over as if it were their own. I think you have to have that capacity. So in addition to the technical stunt, there is a psychological workout, which translation involves: something like being on stage. It does something entirely different from what I think of as creative poetry writing.³

A translator studying a writer is something like an actor studying a character in order to prepare for a role. The actor asks: 'what's my character's motivation?'. The translator asks something of a literary equivalent - 'how is a text crafted?', 'what are the invisible workings behind a text which create its overall effect?'. The experience of translating Dal Masetto has been an attempt to get under his writing skin and into his writing shoes. It has been an attempt to discover at a fundamental level what makes Dal Masetto's fiction 'tick'.

³ Willard Trask, *The Poet's Other Voice* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), pp. 13-14.

However, having made these analogies of closeness, ‘psychological workouts’ and inhabiting the author’s skin, translation as a process also cannot help but highlight insurmountable distances. Cultural contexts create gaps which are only awkwardly straddled by a translation. In this sense while the translator ‘ought’ to give the ‘closest possible reading’ of a work, the closest possible rendering invariably is a much more difficult task. In this sense no matter how close my reading of Dal Masetto’s work is, attempting to render it in English does not always bring me closer to his prose, at times it brings me up against the limitations of my own language and culture.

Existing translations of Dal Masetto’s novels are Italian translations of *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida*, *Oscuramente forte è la vita* (Omicron, 1995) by Ilaria Magnani, *Siempre es difícil volver a casa*, *È sempre difficile tornare a casa* (Einaudi, 2002) by Laura Pariani and *Bosque*, which kept the same title in translation, (La Lettere, 2004) and *Hay unos tipos abajo*, *Strani tipi sotto casa* (La Lettere, 2002) were translated by Antonella Ciabatti. *Hay unos tipos abajo* and *Siempre es difícil volver a casa* are translated into French: *Deux hommes à l'affut* (Seuil, 2001) and *Les noces du fou* (Seuil, 1994) translated by Isabelle Gugnon. *Siempre es difícil volver a casa*, *Noche Eine Nacht* and *Bosque* are also translated into German (Rotpunktverlag, Zurich) but I have not been able to confirm the translators and publishing details. There is no existing translation of Dal Masetto’s first novel, *Siete de oro*, and there are no existing English translations of his work.

I initially began a project of translating Dal Masetto's third novel, *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* (1990). I considered including and commenting on extracts from this translation but soon realised that this would be too much material to treat in a satisfying way unless I dedicated a considerable proportion of my thesis to it. Translation is only a part of my exploration of Dal Masetto's fiction and therefore I could not afford to dedicate as many words as I would have needed to, in order to make a discussion of a translation of *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* worthwhile. I plan to return to the project of translating the novel in the future but for the purposes of this chapter I decided to deal with a much shorter and more self-contained unit of text.

Dal Masetto's first novel *Siete de oro* was published in 1969. As I mentioned in my second chapter, two anthologies of Argentine short stories came out in the 1970's which both included extracts from *Siete de oro*. These were chapters four and thirteen of the novel. Chapter four was published as an extract in *Veinte nuevos narradores argentinos* (Monte Avila: Caracas, 1970), edited by Néstor Sánchez. 'Vanda' (chapter thirteen) was published in *Los mejores cuentos argentinos de hoy* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1971), edited by Juan Carlos Martini. As we have seen, like Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (1963), *Siete de oro* is fragmented in structure. Chapter four, the chapter which I translate, bears no direct narrative relation to the chapters which come before or after it and the story is not deformed by being uprooted from the novel. 'La Gallega', as well as 'Vanda' (chapter 13), among other chapters in *Siete de oro*, are self-contained stories with their own internal narrative completeness. The character who is referred to as 'La Gallega' has a cameo appearance in the novel; we do not encounter her again. This is not to say

that this particular chapter is in any way dispensable, only that the novel, *Siete de oro*, is not reliant on it in a structural way to make sense of an overall linear plot.

In the 'La Gallega' chapter, or story, the narrator is a nineteen-year-old 'provinciano', who arrives to Buenos Aires with just a suitcase and nowhere to stay. In the chaos of a demonstration he meets a sinister man who introduces him to 'La Gallega' herself, a Spanish woman who is the landlady of a seedy boarding house. When the narrator is unable to find work and has no money for rent, he is seduced and exploited by her - sexual favours in return for free board and extra helpings at meal-times. While there is clear hostility from the narrator towards 'La Gallega', this story is also a kind of homage, or dedication to her. She becomes as significant as la Maga is to Oliveira. The narrator addresses 'La Gallega' directly. The story begins:

Gallega, cuando llegué a tu casa no traía más que desconcierto, las marcas recientes de la adolescencia, un resto de ingenuidad y una impaciencia, una fiebre en la sangre que me hubiese sido difícil explicar. (p. 33)

Gallega, when I arrived at your door I brought nothing more than bewilderment and the recent trace of my teens. I brought dregs of naivety and impatience, a fever in the blood which would have been difficult for me to explain. (p.194)

I have chosen to translate 'La Gallega' in particular because it seems to crystallise many important aspects of Dal Masetto's work at an early stage in his writing career. The fictive memory of 'La Gallega' can be read as symbolising an early writing manifesto, indeed the narrator describes her body as his guiding 'bandera':

Pero si olvidase tus canciones, tus gritos, tu forma de andar entre las miradas de los hombres, tu risa, ese patetismo con que enfrentabas los días, me olvidaría también de aquellos años de aprendizaje. Y eso es lo que no quiero. Trato de recuperarte, te necesito, necesito de esos años oscuros, quiero hacer algo con ellos, quiero construir o destruir, pero hacer algo. Voy labrando mi pasado de la misma forma que trabajo mi futuro. En ese mundo de malos olores, ratas, chinches y cucarachas, tu cuerpo aparece a veces como una luna pálida, irradia un poco de claridad. Tu cuerpo es mi bandera en el recuerdo confuso de esos días. No abre ningún horizonte, no redime nada, pero es lo único claro, ondea como una sábana, se mantiene, oscila, no quiere decaer. (p. 47)

But if I forget your songs, your yelling, your way of walking amidst the gaze of men, your smile, that pathos you faced the day with, I would also forget those years of learning. And this is what I don't want. I try to recapture you, I need you, I need those dark years, I want to make something out of them, I want to create or destroy but do something. I go on labouring my past in the same way that I work on my future. In that world of bad smells, rats, bed bugs and cockroaches your body sometimes appears like a pale moon, radiating a little clarity. Your body is my banner in the confused memory of those days. It opens no horizon, redeems nothing, but is the only clear thing, fluttering like a sheet, going still, quivering, unwilling to fall down. (p.220)

'La Gallega' represents the creative impulse to the narrator - something with which he wants 'to create or destroy but do something'. Dal Masetto suggests that creativity is fuelled by real life, the dark aspects of experience which a writer, or artist, is compelled to make something out of. 'La Gallega' runs a bedbug and cockroach infested boarding house and sings sentimental songs by a Galician crooner, Pedrito Rico. She sleeps with a string of tenants passing through her guest house and is not afraid to roll up her sleeves and get into brawls with men. But it is suggested by the narrator that 'La Gallega' is a point of departure for him. The narrator comes of age through his experience with her and, in this sense, it is a kind of Bildungsroman in one chapter. She is a catalyst in the

writer's early formation. 'La Gallega' is the beginning, the seed. From here the writer is born.

This story registers contact with and access to a less affluent side of the city as a crucial part of this formative experience. The narrator conveys a wish to represent people from an underworld, those whom he refers to as the 'estirpe de los oscuros' - the dark breed. 'La Gallega' herself is included in this dark breed as well as the other characters encountered in the story: among them the shadowy, yellow-eyed crook who brings the narrator to 'La Gallega's' boarding house in the first place, the unnamed man from Córdoba who plays jazz records all night and eventually loses his mind and then that poet who is mysteriously alluded to yet we come to know very little about:

Ese, el cordobés, es otro ejemplar de la stirpe de los oscuros. Después conocí a unos cuantos, y sobre todo a uno a quien quise. Uno que cuando me escribía decía: "Hermano de la misma sombra". Pero era un poeta, estaba más loco que ninguno y ésa es otra historia. (p. 43-4)

That man, el Cordobés, is another specimen of the dark breed. Later I got to know quite a few, and above all one whom I loved. One who used to say when he wrote to me: 'Brother of the same shadow'. But he was a poet and more mad than any of them and that's another story. (p. 214)

This fragment has a strong sense of time and place. Miguel Briante describes the novel on the back cover of the 1991 edition of *Siete de oro* as being 'mucho más que un libro, es un mojón del tiempo: del arrebatado tiempo de los 60'. The description of the demonstration which the narrator gets swept up in at the beginning of the story with the police responding with tear gas could evoke workers' strikes of the late 50s, after the Revolución Libertadora which overthrew Peron in 1956 or the students demonstrations of

the early 1960s, or the growing student worker alliance in opposition to General Onganía's military rule between 1966 and 1970.. The mention of particular plazas, street names or the wasteland near Calle San Martín roots the story firmly in the city of Buenos Aires as well as its described culture of boarding houses, bars, prostitutes, shoe-shiners and quarrelsome bus drivers. The infernal nightly jazz sessions played by the narrator's neighbour (el Cordobés) capture a musical climate of the times where, as I mentioned in my second chapter, jazz came to speak for a particular generation who experienced modern life as chaotic. La Avenida Corrientes was, and remains, a lively street full of new, remainder and second hand bookshops. The *Gath y Chaves* department store was a cultural landmark in Buenos Aires - an Argentine homage to British stores like Marks and Spencers.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay 'The Translator's Task', argues that translators, as well as artists, should not think of their audience.⁴ However, while Benjamin discusses a translation's audience in a theoretical sense, there can be no doubt that, in practical terms, a translation's many possible audiences are an inevitable consideration when the aim is to get a translation published. For the purposes of this chapter, I have aimed this translation towards a commercial British market and have translated this fragment with a hypothetical anthology or literary magazine in mind.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations*, 1968 (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 78-9.

Of the various problems of translation which I have encountered in this translation, I have grouped the discussion into four subheadings: 'Loss', 'Local', 'Voice, Slang and Rhythm' and finally, 'The Status of the Original'.

I have drawn attention to the literary relation between Cesare Pavese and Ernest Hemingway, and in turn with Dal Masetto, in my third chapter. In this commentary on my translation, I involve critical material which describes the work of Ernest Hemingway as part of my discussion. When working on my translation, the prose of Hemingway not only presented a literary equivalent, as well as cultural equivalent, in English, but the critical descriptions of Hemingway also helped me to articulate some important perceptions about Dal Masetto's prose. As I have already discussed, there is an obvious aesthetic affinity between Dal Masetto and Hemingway which includes an elliptical style of narration, as well as a shared lack of interpretation or bookishness - but it was Mark Schorer's account of Hemingway's writing (see page 261, 'for good fighters do not talk') which struck me as a particularly accurate description of the voice in this extract. In fact, in reading Schorer's description, it actually captured for me something crucial about Dal Masetto's writing as a whole. In the story, 'el Padre', from *El padre y otras historias* (2002), the father, a rural Italian immigrant, is described as 'un montañés callado y tímido.' Like Dal Masetto's fiction itself, many of the characters he depicts are not 'wordy' but a compelling depth is suggested by their silence. Both Hemingway and Dal Masetto seem to trust in what is not said as much as in what is said as their aesthetic principle. In this way, important echoes and reflections between Dal Masetto and

Hemingway opened the text for me in an illuminating way and also supported the development of some of my translation strategies.

Loss

Eugene Nida's view of translation is that from the outset a loss of 20% in meaning is inevitable even when the communication takes place in the same language. So, a translation is condemned to a bare minimum loss of over 20% even before the translator has begun.⁵ Certainly in the case of this translation, considerable loss takes place in the first crucial word of the first sentence: 'Gallega'. This refers at once to the character to whom the story is dedicated. To the Argentine ear this word is not uncommon. 'Gallega', or 'gallego', is a derisive slang term used by Argentines to refer to Spanish immigrants. In his study of Spanish immigration to Buenos Aires, *Cousins and Strangers*, José C. Moya describes the Spanish musician, Francisco Gambin, refusing to be referred to as 'gallego' by Juan Manuel de Rosas:

At about midcentury, when Juan Manuel de Rosas asked the musician Francisco Gambin, "Are you *gallego*?" he responded, "No, sir, I am a native of Cádiz." The dictator impatiently replied, "Well, *gallego* from Cádiz."⁶

It is a word with a history of derogatory undertones. Needless to say, there is no English equivalent to 'gallego'. Our closest comparison in a British context would be the English relationship to Irish immigrants: a 'paddy'. The derision of the Irish with jokes told at

⁵ Eugene A. Nida, 'A Framework for the Analysis and Evaluation of Theories of Translation', in *Translation: Applications and Research*, ed. by Richard W. Breslini (New York: Gardner, 1976), pp. 47-91.

⁶ José C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigration in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 15.

their expense conveys something of the flavour of how 'gallego' might sound to a native speaker. However, this approximate equivalence in context offers nothing in resolving this particular problem of translation.

On resigning myself to the fact that no universal English equivalent for 'gallego' exists, possible translations for 'La Gallega' presented themselves as 'Spanish Woman' or 'Galician Woman' or 'Woman from Galicia' but these sounded bland, weak and wooden. They also seemed to suggest mystery and exoticism in this woman's Spanish-ness when it is not 'La Gallega's' intrinsic Spanishness which is relevant, what matters is her Spanish immigrant-ness in an Argentine context - and the demeaning slang term used by the narrator to name her. My decision, in the end, was to leave 'gallega' untranslated and to provide the reader with a note (the only one) at the beginning of story to explain the term. The word seemed significant enough in the story to warrant an explanation rather than a 'make-do' translation. Asking the reader to refer to one note seemed to be a minimal expectation when compared to the views of some regarding the inadequacy of translations. In an article which is a critique of Gregory Rabassa's translation of the Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez's novel *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, Gerald Guinness reminds us that Nabokov advocated that 'those who want to read Rilke in German should *learn German*'.⁷ In the spirit of Nabokov, Guinness' position is similarly extreme. Ultimately he dismisses Rabassa's efforts:

⁷ Gerald Guinness, 'Is *Macho Camacho's Beat* a Good Translation of *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*?', *Images and Identities. The Puerto Rican in Two World Contexts*, ed. Asela Rodríguez de Laguna (Oxford: Transaction Books, 1987), p. 187.

Macho Camacho's Beat is as good a translation as one is likely to see, but a “dangerous semicomprehension” is just what it gives. Better, in my opinion, buy a good dictionary of Puerto Rican slang and work one’s way through the original text, page by page and line by line. That way in which we “trans-late” ourselves into Luis Rafael Sánchez’s world is the only really “good” sort of translation there is.⁸

While on the whole I am not in agreement with Guinness’ stand, I concede a danger of ‘semicomprehension’ in this particular instance and feel justified in leaving the Spanish word untranslated.

Local

Other problems of translation came not out of untranslatable words, but from specific cultural references which made the story difficult to be “led across” into English.⁹ At one point in the narrative, ‘La Gallega’ and her eldest daughter are described as being like ‘colectiveros’ when they argue. To some readers the comparison will make sense. To a Porteño, this refers to bus drivers in Buenos Aires who drive maniacally, competing for free reign of the road, yelling fervently when their path is obstructed by other buses or anything else. To translate ‘colectiveros’ in a word-by-word sense would leave some English-speaking readers in the dark. Not every reader can be expected to make the same cultural associations. Bus drivers in London, for example, can indeed be aggressive, can drive maniacally and yell when something gets in their way but the phenomenon is not necessarily so common as to create a national stereotype.

⁸ Gerald Guinness, pp. 194 - 5.

⁹ This is Gregory Rabassa’s expression. His analogy is that ‘Some books are very mulish about being “led across”’ (from one language and culture into another), p. 24.

I tried to think of equivalent stereotypes or expressions which exist in English to describe two people passionately rowing. The conventional idioms which came to mind strayed far away from bus drivers: cats, cat and dog, fishwives and so on. These idioms seemed to be out of place in the context of the translation. I was keen to keep the idea of the 'colectiveros' if possible because the comparison seemed to add to the character of Buenos Aires in the story. I decided to keep the idea of aggressive bus drivers but to embellish the English to make the associations clear:

Cuando ustedes dos discutían parecían colectiveros. Desde la primera hasta la última pieza nos enterábamos de los detalles. Cinco minutos después vos pasabas cantando. Tu hija encerraba y ponía el tocadiscos a todo volumen. (p.42-3)

When you two argued you were like bus drivers with road rage. We heard every detail from the first room through to the last. Five minutes later you passed by singing. Your daughter locked herself up and played records at full volume. (p.15)

This is by no means an absolute solution to this local social description. Ultimately the cultural reference is lost in translation. 'Bus drivers with road rage' can only be an approximate equivalent. I am also aware that using 'road rage' to convey the behaviour of bus drivers in Buenos Aires makes this translation more susceptible to going past its 'sell-by date'. It dates the translation as contemporary because at some point 'road rage' may seem very old fashioned. I am also committing an anachronism. While road rage may not be a modern phenomenon, it is a modern expression. I am using a late 80's

expression to translate a 1960's text.¹⁰ In response to problems such as these, Gregory Rabassa admits defeat. He writes:

Translation is hard put to extend its life beyond its time. A translation, no matter how good, is apt to be too contemporary and rarely endures.¹¹

At one point in the text there is a reference to a singer, 'Pedrito Rico'. 'La Gallega' listens to his music and sings his songs. This particular cultural reference presented a problem firstly because I had never heard of him and suspected that a hypothetical English reader would not have either. However, I managed to find recordings of his songs on the internet and was able to download and listen to them as well as look at photographs on websites. With this information, I inserted an adjective to describe his music. 'Tacky' seemed most apt to describe his sentimental, nationalistic and nostalgic Spanish songs.¹² This seemed to fit in with the narrator's view of 'La Gallega' as crude and raw.

Gath y Chaves was similarly a cultural landmark which required some inquiry as that too was an allusion which I was unfamiliar with. In the translation I inserted 'department store' to qualify the reference for the English reader: 'I found work for ten days as a sales assistant in the summer sale at the *Gath y Chaves* department store.' (p.8)

¹⁰ According to a behavioural analyst, Matthew Joint, "Road Rage" is a term that is believed to have originated in the United States[...] In the late 1980's, drivers in the United States, apparently frustrated by increasing congestion, began fighting and shooting each other on a regular basis, victims of what the popular press termed "road rage". 'Road Rage', <http://www.aaafoundation.org/resources>, March 1995.

¹¹ Rabassa, p. 24.

¹² <http://www.amarguillo.com/pedritorico.htm>

Voice, Slang and Rhythm

I mention 'gallega', 'colectiveros', 'Pedrito Rico' and '*Gath y Chaves*' as examples of concrete problems which the translation presented but there were more general and far-reaching strategies which needed to be developed in order to approach the text. The translator Margaret Sayers Peden suggests that, 'Perhaps the single most important step in translation is that of finding the narrative "voice"'.¹³ Certainly the character of a narrator is encoded in his or her voice. This particular narrator's voice was confessional, yet unreflective, eloquent but never formal or bookish. The Spanish is clearly identifiable as Argentine with the use of voseo and specifically Argentine terms such as 'colectiveros' and 'biromes' but the language resembles little of a writer such as Roberto Arlt, who, whose prose excludes the reader unfamiliar with Lunfardo. Dal Masetto's prose is un-Arlesque in this sense; Lunfardo vocabulary is virtually absent, although Argentinismos such as 'pibe', 'tipo' and 'flaco' crop up from time to time. In describing the characteristics of a voice in Spanish, the question is then posed in translation: what would be the equivalent of this voice in English?

Suzanne Jill Levine in her book *The Subversive Scribe* describes finding a good match between her Jewish American English and Guillermo Cabrera Infante's Cuban Spanish when translating *Tres Tristes Tigres* - an equivalence which she claimed to be absent in an earlier pairing with the British poet Donald Gardner who first translated the novel. According to Levine, Gardner's cockney British English was ill-fitting for the novel and

¹³ Margaret Sayers Peden, 'Translating the Boom: The Apple Theory of Translation', *The Latin American Literary Review*, Volume XV, January - June 1987, no. 29, p. 170.

it was unrealistic to expect Gardner to get to grips with a more appropriate American English in a two week visit to New York. In Levine's view a translator cannot try to learn a version of their mother tongue in order to undertake a translation, they have to in some sense have *lived* that version:

Gardner had to work with the French translation since his knowledge of Spanish was rudimentary; and since Cockney was not the best equivalent for spoken Cuban, he was planning a trip to New York to brush up on American vernacular. Our Havanan in London thought it dubious that two weeks in another town would change a man's linguistic habits, so he was relieved when I appeared, equipped with Spanish vocabulary and doubtful double entendres signifying everything.¹⁴

Cabrera Infante confirmed the suitability of his pairing with Levine in an interview with Rita Guibert:

that sense of humour characteristic of New York Jews, which is based on play upon words and confronts reality with strict verbal logic. Nothing was closer to my purpose in *TTT* than the philosophy of life expressed by the Marx brothers, and in Jill Levine my three Marxtigers had met their Margaret Dumont!¹⁵

In an ideal world authors find their linguistic soul mate in their translator. But in a real world of publishing deadlines and translators struggling to take on enough work to make a living, can this ideal partnership always be attained? While Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Suzanne Jill Levine might be an ideal match, there must be many pairings between author and translator which are not, on the face of it, so obviously well suited. There must also be more hidden affinities between writer and translator. What did a translator

¹⁴ Suzanne Jill Levine, *The Subversive Scribe* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1991), pp. 21-2.

¹⁵ Rita Guibert, 'Interview: Cabrera Infante,' *Seven Voices* (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 414.

like Borges, for example, have in common linguistically and experientially with a writer like William Faulkner when he translated *The Wild Palms*?¹⁶

Levine seems to suggest in general that there is more linguistic affinity between Latin American Spanish and North American English. When translating Manuel Puig's *Boquitas pintadas* (1968), she describes finding an equivalence for Lunfardo slang in the United States:

Lunfardo, an urban slang spoken in the *barrio sur* of Buenos Aires is heavily Italianate. But does the relationship between Italian and Spanish find its equivalent in the United States? In the United States, Italian immigrants recall associations with the Mafia, as opposed to the social superiority of "Mayflower" Americans. The Argentine equivalent of the *Mayflower* type is the *criollo*, the native whose ancestry goes back to the first Spaniards to set foot on American soil. (p. 62)

And yet there have been non-North American translators of Latin American fiction who, by Levine's standard, fall short of this advantageous linguistic affinity. Roberto Arlt (perhaps heaviest of those writers exported from Argentina in his use of Lunfardo) has been translated into English by the British translator, Nick Caistor. And Caistor's translation does not attempt an Americanisation. It is evidently not always the case that an Argentine writer must be paired with a US translator. And yet perhaps some obviously British words are jarring in translating Latin American fiction. For example, when I gave my translation to a reader one of his comments was that he repeatedly tripped up on the word 'bloke' whenever it appeared. He could believe that he was in Buenos Aires until he encountered it - when he found himself abruptly back in the U.K..

¹⁶ William Faulkner, trans. by Jorge Luis Borges, *Las palmeras salvajes* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1951).

While 'bloke' may be the English equivalent of 'pibe' or 'tipo' or 'flaco' for me personally, I took my reader's comment on board and used the word 'guy' instead. As Levine suggests with her example of Donald Gardner, the linguistic habits of a translator are inescapable and it is problematic for a translator to use a vocabulary which is totally outside the realm of his or her experience. But 'guy' seemed natural enough to me and neutral enough to keep a sense of place open, rather than pinning the translation down to what, for my reader, with the word 'bloke' became London.

Gregory Rabassa in his essay, 'The Ear in Translation', remembers translating the famous passage in *Rayuela* in which Oliveira, in his attempt to build a bridge between one room and another, hammers his finger with a nail. Oliveira's cursing presented a challenge to Rabassa:

I remember a specific case during the translation of *Hopscotch*. Oliveira, the protagonist, was attempting to straighten some nails with a hammer during the wild bridge building episode in the second part of the novel. Naturally enough, at one point he hit his thumb with the tool. The Spanish expletive that he directed at the nail made reference to the whore that bore it. No one would say that in English this side of Hemingway. Rather than going to a book I went to the thesaurus of my experience (feeling close enough to Oliveira in this case) and to what I had heard as well as what I had said. I wrote what I and many like me would have said in English under such circumstances, chiding the nail for incestuous proclivities directed towards its dam. But in such cases one must always keep the person speaking in mind. There are times when one must decidedly not use his own instincts but must rely on an acute and remembering ear. There are far too many "goshes" and "gollies" in the mouths of stevedores and other rough and grown men. Cases like that are examples of times when the ear has not served the translator because it had never heard or was evidently turned off when he should have been absorbing the true equivalent in English.¹⁷

¹⁷ Gregory Rabassa, 'The Ear in Translation', *The World of Translation* with an Introduction by Gregory Rabassa (New York: Pen American Centre, 1971), p. 83.

Like Oliveira's cursing, 'La Gallega' at one point swears at one of two men who get into a fight on the patio of the boarding house but he is so provoked by 'La Gallega's' interference in the fight that he turns on her. Her response is to kick him between the legs and swear at him:

Pegarme a mí, hijo de puta, mal nacido, pegarme a mí. (p. 41)

Which I translated as:

'So you were gonna hit me? Bastard, swine - hit me?' (p.210)

'Son of a bitch' is the obvious translation for 'hijo de puta' and yet has such a distinctly North-American flavour that it would have felt inauthentic to try and incorporate it into my translation even though, in a word-for-word sense it is the closest translation. I decided to translate 'hijo de puta' as 'bastard' because although I was not 'feeling close enough' to 'La Gallega' to write what I would say under the same circumstances (were I ever to find myself in a fight!), to my ear, this was the English equivalent that I know. As Levine suggests that Donald Gardner could not be expected to competently use American vernacular, not being American, it would have felt contrived using the words 'son of a bitch' because I have never witnessed a conversation when that particular insult has been used seriously, except in films. 'Malnacido' I then translated as 'swine' which is not an especially contemporary insult but seems to have an enduring strength. Sarah Adams, a literary translator from French, spoke on the subject of slang at the summer school conference at the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia on July 11th 2005. At the time she was working on a novel *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* (2004) by a North African French writer, Faïza Guène, which was heavily flavoured by a Parisian

street slang. She spoke about her search for an English equivalent being informed by listening to teenagers in similarly multicultural areas in London (Brixton and Hackney) as those in Paris where the novel is set. However, she was wary of using what she described as the ‘photocopy’ equivalent of this language because she was aware of how fast changing slang is. A word can become outdated overnight. However, in listening to British street slang, she described being struck by how some of the most frequently used insults had very old roots in English, which could be traced as far back as to Shakespeare. The example she gave of a particularly potent insult was ‘you *fool!*’. Like ‘fool’, ‘swines’ arise from time to time throughout Shakespeare.¹⁸

Apart from a language and vocabulary for the translation other characteristics of the voice were related to an overall feeling and rhythm of the prose. This voice had a poetic sensibility but with a syntax that could sometimes be distinctly abrupt and choppy with its long and list-like sentences followed by its firing-off of short staccato-like sentences. On my first stab at a literal version, I was struck by how jerky, awkward and unmusical Dal Masetto’s prose came out in English. It was tempting to run the shortest and most abrupt sentences into each other and cut up the longer list-like ones to smooth over the jerkiness and create a bit of fluidity. This was perhaps the bad translator’s impulse - an impatience to, above all, instantly create attractive-sounding language in the translation.

¹⁸ In *Richard III*, Act V, Scene II, line 11, Henry Earl of Richmond says of Richard III:

‘In your embowell’d bosoms, this foul swine
Lies now even in the centre of this isle’

and in the induction of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Scene I, Line 32, a Lord says of Christopher Sly on finding him drunk and asleep

‘O Monstrous beast! how like a swine he lies!’

But Margaret Sayers Peden reminds translators that: 'If the style of the original is awkward, the translator cannot be held at fault - the rule of a good translation is that a bad novel is bad in a second language.'¹⁹ Of course, I am not suggesting that the text at hand is 'bad' writing but Peden's guidelines do point towards tackling the awkwardness of language in the original and not smoothing it over in translation. Smoothing things over, by Peden's standards, would be to write a bad translation. What is more, I found that on reading and re-reading the original, the deliberateness of this choppy kind of syntax became more and more apparent. It seemed to create a certain anti-lyricism which, despite the memoir-like quality of the piece, would not allow the reader to be seduced by musicality and fall into nostalgia. In fact, the syntax emerged as the spine of the prose and therefore could not be significantly disturbed.

I tried to develop a strategy which could incorporate a preservation of Dal Masetto's syntax in translation. That said, I ignored this principle entirely in addressing the long and list-like opening sentence of the story and made a bold decision to chop it in two. In my view, as one sentence in English, it was buckling under the pressure of carrying the rest of the story. Somehow in Spanish it was 'muscular' enough as an opening sentence but in English it was not as authoritative and its list-like nature seemed to open the story with a trailing-off. As much as I struggled to create a single sentence in English with 'drive', I could not find a way to create something with authority without breaking it. I decided that, in this particular instance, it was more important that the opening of the story was punchy than that the original syntax was observed. I was reassured in this decision when I considered Anne McLean's recent translation of Carmen Martín Gaité's

¹⁹ Peden, p. 160.

novel *Lo raro es vivir* (2001) where she breaks up the opening sentence of the Spanish with, I imagine, a similar motivation in mind - to create a beginning which is compelling, rather than losing the reader in the first sentence. I would argue that this is not, in Peden's terms, making the translation easy where the original is awkward. I put this down to the necessity of a strong opening of a text in translation.

Some translators, when developing strategies for translation, draw on literary equivalents of the original in their own language. In translating Alfredo Bryce Echenique first novel, *Un mundo para Julius* (1970), Alita Kelly drew on J D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1953):

In translating a text that relies so heavily on the narrator's spoken language, the translator must search for some point of contact between cultures. I believe J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1953) goes some way to providing this; the Brycean voice in translation cannot be exactly like that of Salinger's younger, less sophisticated first person narrator, but Holden Caulfield too belongs to a privileged social class and has attended expensive private schools, yet he too speaks ungrammatically without this always being a deliberate affectation, and his slang expressions date him as having grown up in a similar time frame as Bryce's narrator.²⁰

As I have mentioned, it was the fiction of Ernest Hemingway which became the literary model from which I could take some guidance, from a technical and stylistic point of view, for my translation. Of course, it would be simplistic, and ultimately insincere, to make Dal Masetto a parody of Hemingway in English. While Hemingway may have provided some stylistic guidance - a flavour of rhythm and a firm, terse syntax - his fiction could never have provided a vocabulary or spirit for the translation.

²⁰ Alita Kelly, 'Translation as Cultural Translation: Working with Alfredo Bryce Echenique's First Novel', *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 2, 1998, p. 256.

I also referred to a translation into English of a novel *Nadie alzaba la voz* by an Argentine writer, Paula Varsavsky, also translated by Anne McLean. Varsavsky's prose had a similar syntax in Spanish to Dal Masetto's and she had also been likened to Hemingway.²¹

As well as my own direct and close reading of Hemingway's prose, critical descriptions of Hemingway's writing have partially informed my translation strategies. I have found Sheldon Norman Grebstein's chapter, 'Further Observations on Style and Method' in his book *Hemingway's Craft*, useful in my search for a language which could represent Dal Masetto's fiction in English.²² It is a careful and detailed account of how Hemingway's writing operates with examples which illustrate his analysis at a word by word or sentence by sentence level of attention.

Grebstein identifies an indebtedness in Hemingway's prose to Pound and Imagist poetry where images are juxtaposed with a simplicity and lack of description owing to Chinese and Japanese poetry – where it is the naming of the object itself which matters. In the spirit of Imagist poetry, I tried to create a plain language in my translation, choosing words which were simple, familiar and monosyllabic. For this reason, in the first sentence, I decided to translate 'adolescencia' as 'teens'. As far as I am aware, there seems to be only one word in Spanish to mean 'adolescence': 'adolescencia'. Thus

²¹ Paula Varsavsky, *No One Said a Word*, translated from the Spanish by Anne McLean (Ontario: Ontario Review Press, 2000). On the back page of the English translation a reviewer Elena Castedo is quoted:

'With a sparseness that brings Hemingwayesque echoes and a minimalist emotional restraint, the narrator, Luz Goldman, skilfully guides us through the complexities of her own psyche.'

²² Sheldon Norman Grebstein, 'Further Observations on Style and Method', *Hemingway's Craft*, with a preface by Harry T. Moore (Illinois: Southern Illinois Press, 1973), (pp. 132 – 147).

'adolescencia' serves as both a formal academic term as well as an informal and familiar term. In English 'adolescence' is, on the whole, academic. 'Teens' is the more informal and familiar alternative in English. I felt, therefore, that 'teens' suited the voice in the translation. The word 'adolescence' would have given the voice a trace of bookishness that was not present in the original. The choice of the word 'teens' also had a positive aural effect - a monosyllabic simplicity. I chose 'dregs' for similar reasons – its implied physicality, its monosyllabic simplicity and familiar register.

As with the example of the word 'dregs', avoiding traces of bookishness often meant that I translated Spanish words into English words with an Anglo-Saxon root, rather than a Latinate root. For example, in the opening paragraph of the extract the narrator describes himself at the time he first meets 'La Gallega'. He tells us he was uncertain, impatient, stubborn, closed-minded and ignorant and so on, not knowing what he was looking for.

Then he tells us:

De esas cosas conservo algunas, he perdido otras. (p. 33)

Which I chose to translate as:

I've hung on to a few of these things, dropped others. (p. 194)

'Conservar' finds English equivalents in 'conserve' and 'preserve' which would stay closest to the Latinate root of the word in Spanish. However, I felt this voice, in English, would sound most natural if I used words which would conform to the need in English language for words to be pinned down to 'things'. Hanging on and dropping implies an object and thus a sense of physicality which lends itself more easily to the 'thingness' of

English than the more abstract words: 'conserve' or 'preserve'. This was also in keeping with Imagist poetry where primacy is given to the object.

As well as words and syntax, the process of translation drew my attention to the structure of Dal Masetto's prose in this extract. The story is broken into paragraphs in what seems like quite an unnatural way. The narrator sometimes launches into changing the subject completely between one sentence and another. At one point he describes his role as the 'amorous secretary' and in the next sentence switches to another episode entirely, describing 'La Gallega' coming into his dorm and 'choosing' him. I suppose by Peden's account, the bad translator will be itching to break the structure into two paragraphs. But again, this is arguably part of the style. Grebstein notes something similar in Hemingway:

...the size, structure, and relationship of paragraphs are integral to the overall effect. Short paragraphs emphasize or highlight shifts in character or mood. Long paragraphs recreate the flow of thought or reproduce the continuity of a single action. Hemingway also gains the impression of immediacy by often combining different activities or changing focus to different characters within the same grammatical or structural unit, both sentence and paragraph. Transitional markers between successive paragraphs tend to be unobtrusive. (p. 135)

This emphasis on action, as opposed to reflection, is true of Dal Masetto's fiction. The language is transparent and would seem to reject any words which might suggest interpretation or analysis - words such as *because*, *therefore* or *however*.

In Hemingway's story, 'A Clean Well-Lighted Place', an atmosphere of discontent is conjured by the presence of an old deaf man who cannot sleep and drinks at a café while

two waiters tend to him. We are told by one of the waiters that the old man made a suicide attempt the week before - tried to hang himself and his niece cut him down. It is getting later and later and the younger of the two waiters is anxious to close up for the night; he has a wife waiting for him at home. The older of the two waiters sympathises with the old man and wants to provide him with a 'clean well-lighted' place to see him through the night as he too suffers from not being able to sleep.

In this story emotion is held well below the surface. Only manifestations of concrete facts are described. When the waiters speculate about the cause of the old man's suicide attempt, they conclude that his despair must have been about 'nothing'. 'How do you know it was nothing?' asks one of the waiters. 'He has plenty of money' replies the other, as if lack of money would be the only cause for despair worth mentioning. The older waiter's thoughts which bring the story to a close are matter-of-fact and almost flippant keeping a firm lid on the potential desperation which may lie beneath. When the waiter considers his own inability to sleep he ends on a self-diagnosis of 'insomnia' thereby stating the obvious and keeping the less obvious well-shrouded:

He disliked bars and bodegas. A clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing. Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in his bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.²³

Consider now Mark Schorer's description of Hemingway's prose in this respect in

Kenyon Review, of 1941:

²³ Ernest Hemingway, 'A Clean Well-Lighted Place', *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, 1932 (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 72.

The style which made Hemingway famous - with its ascetic suppression of ornament and figure, its insistence on the objective correlative and the unreflective (for good fighters do not talk), its habit of understatement (or sportsman boast), the directness and the brevity of its syntactical constructions, its muscularity, the sharpness of its staccato and repetitive effects, 'the purity of its line under the maximum of exposure,' that is, its continued poise under the weight of event of feeling - this style is an exact transfiguration of Hemingway's moral attitude toward a peculiarly violent and chaotic experience. His style, in effect, is what he has instead of God.²⁴

As I have mentioned, this attitude of good fighters not talking, and reflection of this attitude in the language used, seems apt to describe Dal Masetto's voice. When the narrator tells the story of the jazz-frenzied man from Córdoba who loses his mind, he does not want to go into the really distressing ending to that man's story:

Al cabo de un mes, en una semana, ocurrió todo eso de lo que prefiero no hablar. El cordobés terminó encerrado en su pieza y se negó a salir. Tuvieron que romper la cerradura y se lo llevaron con chaleco de fuerza.

Lo reemplazaste rápidamente por otro inquilino. De él no hiciste otro comentario que éste:
-Estaba loco. (p.47)

At the end of the month, in one week, everything happened which I prefer not to talk about. El Cordobés ended up locking himself in his room and refusing to come out. They had to force the lock and took him away in a straightjacket.

You quickly replaced him with another tenant, making no comment about him other than this:
'He was mad.' (p.22)

In a way, 'La Gallega's' comment 'He was mad' is in keeping with the nature of the narrator's voice. The narration, like 'La Gallega's' statement, issues the facts where, under the pressure of distressing events, it keeps 'the purity of its line'. Interestingly, Schorer's visual description of Hemingway's writing is echoed by Joseph Warren Beach

²⁴ Mark Schorer, 'The Background of a style', *Kenyon Review* 3: 1941, pp. 101-5.

in his essay 'Ernest Hemingway: Empirical Ethics', where he describes Hemingway's prose in terms of a line drawing:

His fiction will not be thought of in terms of painting. It is black and white line drawing. And its special merits are such as to be had in this medium.²⁵

If distress is not gone into by Dal Masetto's narrator, neither is love. The only character whom the narrator says he loves is the poet who writes to him as 'hermano de la misma sombra' but this character is relegated to 'another story'. This adds to a sense that emotion is very much present but is controlled and contained by the pure and restrained style:

[...] era un poeta, estaba más loco que ninguno y ésa es otra historia. (p. 214)

In the opening paragraph the tone is confessional but not self-analysing or concerned with self-knowledge:

Miraba caer los días, no sabía qué buscaba. De esas cosas conservo algunas, he perdido otras. O tal vez todo haya cambiado. Como entonces, sé poco de mí. (p. 33)

I watched the days go by, didn't know what I was looking for. I've hung on to a few of these things, others I've dropped. Or perhaps everything's changed. Like then, I don't know much about myself. (p.194)

²⁵ Joseph Warren Beach, 'Ernest Hemingway: Empirical Ethics', *American Fiction*, ed. Joseph Warren Beach (New York: Atheneum, 1972), p. 99.

And even though the whole chapter is focused on 'La Gallega', the narrator declares he is not interested in analysing her either. He has no interest in her history or asking himself why she is the way she is:

No supe mucho de vos, casi nada [...] no me interesó averiguar más. Y aún hoy es probable que no me interesaría. (p. 40)

I didn't know much about you, hardly anything [...] It didn't interest me to find out more. And even to this day it probably wouldn't interest me either. (p. 207)

The emotion directed towards 'La Gallega' is ambiguous and remains un-interpreted. The narrator's experience of her is described by the physical - her smell, her taste, her home, her body, her teeth. At the end of the story the narrator describes making love to 'La Gallega' for the last time, with a cold. His lack of taste is evocative of the whole scenario:

Fue una tarde rara. Yo arrastraba un resfrío de una semana, me sentía molesto. Tenía la sensación de estar lejos de todo eso, de no poder tocar nada. Recorrí esas piezas como un autómatas. Oía tu voz, te miraba contra las paredes desnudas, miraba los pedazos de cielo pardo a través de la ventana, me preguntaba qué estaba haciendo, qué hacíamos los dos en esa casa vacía. Habías llevado una radio, pasaban un programa de música española. Vos tampoco estabas bien. Las camas tenían solamente los colchones. Me preguntaste, del mismo modo que en la mesa se pregunta si uno quiere la sal, si quería sábanas. Dije que sí. Trajiste unas sábanas limpias. Con mi resfrío hice el amor sin gusto. La tela planchada contra la piel me parecía de cartón. Te buscaba sin encontrarte, con una torpeza y un desgano que me hicieron sentir peor. (pp.49-50)

It was a strange afternoon. I had a cold which had been dragging on for a week, I was uncomfortable. I had the feeling that I was far away from everything, that I couldn't touch anything. I went around those rooms like a robot. I heard your voice, I looked at you against the bare walls, watched the patches of overcast sky through the window, I asked myself what I was

doing, what we were doing in that empty house. You had brought a radio, a Spanish music programme came on. You weren't well either. The beds only had mattresses. You asked me, in the same way you ask someone if they want salt at the table, if I wanted sheets. I said yes. You had brought some clean sheets. With my cold I made love without pleasure. The ironed cloth seemed like cardboard against my skin. I reached for you without finding you, with a clumsiness and lack of appetite which made me feel worse. (pp. 224-225)

As Schroder points out in his review, this literary technique of good fighters not talking embodies T.S. Eliot's notion of the 'objective correlative'. In his essay, 'Hamlet and his Problems', *Hamlet* is dismissed by Eliot as Shakespeare's weakest play. It is, for him, 'an artistic failure'. Eliot's argument is that the events and actions in the play do not justify the emotions experienced by the character, Hamlet. If the play is about a mother's guilt, Gertrude is 'incapable of representing' the feelings which are provoked in her son. Hamlet's response to his guilty mother is 'in excess' of her actions, out of proportion with what actually happens. By way of a response to Shakespeare's supposed inadequacy in this instance, Eliot proposes that:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.²⁶

It would seem that the narrator's description of his last encounter with 'La Gallega' in the passage quoted above evokes emotions through 'external facts' and 'sensory experience'. The un-lived in home, the overcast sky, the bare walls, the cold the narrator is suffering from, the cardboard-like sheets and the relationship itself help to build an impression of

²⁶ T.S. Eliot, 'Hamlet and his Problems', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1948), p. 100.

gloom, sterility, numb boredom and, above all, isolation. The cold is particularly evocative of a blocked-up and cut-off state which is true of the narrator throughout the story. It is a state where he is trapped inside his own head, debilitated by his passivity and lack of contact with strong emotion. I have attempted to capture a voice in translation which conveys a sense of this diffident apathy, its irony, as well as to suggest a stifled passion which lies beneath.

The Status of the Original

Informally I gave a draft of this translation to the assistant editor of a small London arts magazine, *Ambit*, established since 1959, which publishes fiction and poetry and art work. She agreed to read it with an editor's eye and a hypothetical view to publication. Her overall response was that she thought it was worth publishing and would refer it to the editor of the magazine, Martin Bax, for consideration. However, she questioned the structure of the story and suggested that her potential readers would be lost at the point at which the narrator begins to list all the characters and places which were marked with 'La Gallega's' smell: the husband shooting his new wife, the Russian man who sleeps with his daughter, the man who spends all day talking to himself with a colander on his head, the car-stealing crook, the maniacal butler, the tubercular whore, the gay neighbour and so on. She felt this was an undigested part of the story which would, in her view, limit its chances of publication. She suggested that the author could be approached about the possibility of cutting that part out. Although I could see her point, I felt responsible that this surgery was potentially too drastic.

Theo Hermans writes about a tendency to revere the original in respect of translation; that the original is sacred and far superior to any attempt to translate it. Hermans identifies the beginnings of this attitude in the first translations of the bible. In the bible, a divine, text, the word of God is pure and sacred and must not be distorted in any way. To disrespect the bible by translating it inaccurately or untruthfully is to commit a grave crime. So when it comes to translation, literature in the original in general inherits this reverence and high status.²⁷

Borges in his essay 'Las versiones homéricas' argues against an unquestioning high status of the original text in literary translation. He writes:

Presuponer que toda recombinação de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador 9 es obligatoriamente inferior a su original H – ya que no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de *texto definitivo* no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio.²⁸

Borges insists that each of the several existing translations of Homer's *Odyssey* have their value. They are all faithful in their own way - as well as all being ultimately unfaithful because not one of them can recreate the experience of the *Odyssey* of a contemporary of Homer.

²⁷ Theo Hermans, 'Translating "Rhetorijckelijck" or "Ghetrouwelijck": Dutch Renaissance Approaches to Translation', *Standing clear : a festschrift for Reinder P. Meijer*, eds. by Jane Fenoulhet and Theo Hermans (London: Crossways, 1991), pp. 8-9.

²⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Las versiones homéricas', *Obras completas I* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996), p. 239.

Borges's lack of reverence for the original as the ultimate and definitive text has been shown to be evident in his own practice as a translator. Fernando Sorrentino in his lecture delivered at the Cervantes Institute in June 2005, 'Enmienda, trastrueque y reducción de un señor difunto (II)' exposes Borges, alongside Adolfo Bioy Casares, as translators of dramatic liberty and licence when they put together an anthology with Silvina Ocampo of fantastic literature, *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, and translated H.G Well's story 'The Story of the Late Mr Elvisham'. Analysing the translation Sorrentino detects that:

[...] los antólogos no sólo quitaron oraciones enteras y comprimieron pasajes sino que, además, modificaron las ubicaciones de algunos sintagmas: «era blanco y tenía dos sellos rojos» y «pasó un ómnibus y el ruido era exactamente igual al de un tren» no están donde estaban «it was a white packet he had given me, with red seals at either end and along its edge» y «a bus went by, and sounded exactly like the rumbling of a train». Por último, no deja de constituir una curiosidad el hecho de que, en el viaje del inglés al español, una de las *three frogs* londinenses se haya esfumado en Buenos Aires.²⁹

This transformation in Spanish of Well's story makes the hypothetical dilemma of *Ambit's* proposal of potential surgery to Dal Masetto's perhaps less daunting. Ultimately, of course, the decision would lie with the author because in this instance, unlike H.G. Wells at the time the Borges/Bioy-Casares anthology was published (1952), the author is alive. If Dal Masetto took Borges' position, no text would be definitive. In fact, some changes have been made between the first 1969 edition of *Siete de oro* and its later republication in 1991. The novel was also published in the United States in 1980 under a

²⁹ Fernando Sorrentino, 'Enmienda, trastrueque y reducción de un señor difunto (II)' www.cvc.cervantes.es/trujaman/anteriores/junio_05/08062005.htm, 5 June 2005.

different title, *El ojo de la perdiz*. This might suggest a lack of rigidity about the original text being sacred.

In her article, 'The Arduous Journey', Margaret Sayers Peden draws a parallel between translator and critic:

The goals of the translator and critic are identical: to discover and to interpret the essence of the text, to determine what makes it distinct from other texts [...] and to communicate this knowledge. But it is in the mode of communication that the roles of translator and critic diverge. The critic communicates the text by explication; the translator, by recreation.³⁰

My aim has been to interpret the 'essence' of this sample of Dal Masetto's text and to communicate my understanding of his work through this 'recreation'.

³⁰ Margaret Sayers Peden, 'The Arduous Journey', *The Teller and the Tale: Aspects of the Short Story*, ed. Wendell M Aycock (Texas: Texas Tech. Press, 1982), pp. 65-6.

Conclusion

To summarise, I have provided a historical context for Dal Masetto's beginnings as a writer through his affiliation with the *Eco contemporáneo* magazine. I have explored significant literary relations with important Argentine writers: Julio Cortázar, Cesare Pavese (an Argentine writer in the sense Borges meant it) and Roberto Arlt. Through these literary relations I have framed Dal Masetto in an Argentine literary tradition. Finally, I have offered a technical analysis of Dal Masetto's prose through my translation of an excerpt from *Siete de oro* as well as a commentary about this process of translation.

During the course of this project I have been in contact with Antonio Dal Masetto. I have met with him in person in Argentina as well as corresponded via email and I quote from these emails in this thesis. Dal Masetto has been consistently warm, un-intrusive to my investigations and always willing to respond to any questions I have had but his co-operation has been combined with an apparent overall lack of concern with the voice of critics.

I have also interviewed Dal Masetto. This interview took place in Palma de Mallorca in June 2004. I have not, however, used any material from our conversation explicitly in this thesis. At the time I had read almost all the existing interviews with Dal Masetto and found that I was unsuccessful in my attempts to lead him away from formulated answers and to get him to talk about his writing in a way which did not repeat statements in previous interviews. This might be true of many writers in interview. They guard their

private craft with a set narrative about their work and the myth of his or her formation as a writer. It takes a skilled interviewer to get behind this defence and evoke a spontaneous and illuminating response. Some writers, indeed artists, may also be effective in designing a critical framework through which their own work should be read, a framework which becomes difficult to deviate from or even to defy. This is obviously not the case with Dal Masetto. He does not make interpretive remarks about his own work, nor does he engage with his work as part of a constellation of other Argentine writers. This was made clear by him in the interview with Guillermo Saavedra I quoted in my introduction. When asked by Saavedra how he would contextualise his work in terms of an Argentine tradition, he made it clear that the personal and intuitive relationship he had with writing was most important to him, that he did not identify himself with any literary group or movement and that he had always kept himself at the margins of any kind of literary scene. 'Yo no soy un intelectual' he says in another interview published in *El País* in 1994.¹

So, Dal Masetto does not construct an identity for himself as an intellectual. He does not comment, in a critical capacity, on his own work or the work of his contemporaries. The identity he does construct for himself could even be construed as the *anti*-intellectual.

But I propose that the opposite is in fact true.

Ricardo Piglia cites Borges as the anti-intellectual in Argentine literature. While the library can be paradise (for example in the preface to *El hacedor*, 1960), books also

¹ Cristián Kupchik, 'La obra de Antonio Dal Masetto: El premio a veces llega', *El país cultura*, Año VI, número 274, viernes 3 de febrero de 1995, pp. 1-3.

become the disease, the nightmare.: '[...] la lectura, los libros, la biblioteca lleva siempre en los relatos de Borges a la enfermedad y a la muerte.'² As discussed in chapter two, Cortázar suffered this cynicism. For Dal Masetto reading and writing almost present a strategy for mental health, firmly rooted in a strong work ethic. Value is given to the role of the writer. As I have mentioned already, 'writer' follows the list of other jobs performed by Dal Masetto mentioned on the inside cover of all of his books since *Fuego a discreción*: 'En su juventud ejerció oficios tan diversos como los de albañil, pintor, heladero, vendedor ambulante, empleado público o periodista.' Writing is 'un oficio': a service, a calling, a trade. Rather than an indulgence, for Dal Masetto this is a necessary vocation.

As Guillermo Saccomanno noted in his article, 'El oficio, el fuego', the writer as tradesman was clearly emphasised by Pavese: 'su diario debe leerse como el archivo secreto de sus elaboraciones teóricas sobre el oficio de escribir. Para Pavese, la escritura no es más que esto: un oficio. Pero un oficio religioso.' In interviews Dal Masetto imitates this view of himself as 'un obrero de palabras' where the daily discipline of writing is not losing himself in dangerous pleasure but is characterised as vital hard work.

Dal Masetto's creative output has been constant since the publication of *Fuego a discreción* in 1983. He delivered a piece of fiction weekly for *Página/12* for a period of over fifteen years. As was the case for the cronistas modernistas as well as for Roberto Arlt financial necessity played a part in this regular production - the attempt to make a living out of writing. Interestingly for Arlt, the financial incentive for the writer did not

² Ricardo Piglia, *Crítica y ficción* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1986), p. 83.

lead to a cynicism about the value of literature. For Arlt the struggle to make life meaningful is associated with the role of reading and writing. In his novel *El juguete rabioso* (1926), poetry strikes the delinquent character of Silvio down as he's stealing books: 'Ché ¿Sabes que esto es hermosísimo? Me lo llevo para casa'.³

What will Dal Masetto's work offer to other writers who follow him? I propose that he presents a model of the writer as a necessary witness to history. The world is transmitted with a lyricism which trusts that there is truth in the observation of detail as well as in silence and the unwillingness to interpret, or to say too much. Dal Masetto's work offers a model of writing which creates a space in the text to contemplate feelings, including the difficult ones. But these feelings are never held too closely - always at a distance which will keep the reader thinking.

³ Roberto Arlt, *El juguete rabioso* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1958), p. 32.

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Appendix

**Extract translated, chapter four from
Siete de oro (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1991). Original page numbers
included.**

CUATRO

GALLEGA, CUANDO LEGUÉ A TU CASA no traía más que desconcierto, las marcas recientes de la adolescencia, un resto de ingenuidad y una impaciencia, una fiebre en la sangre que me hubiese sido difícil explicar. Era testarudo, un provinciano cerrado e ignorante. Miraba caer los días, no sabía qué buscaba. De esas cosas conservo algunas, he perdido otras. O tal vez todo haya cambiado. Como entonces, sé poco de mí. También aquella mañana, cuando bajé del ómnibus que me traía a Buenos Aires, hice lo mejor que sabía hacer: abandonarme y esperar. Pasé el día moviéndome entre las palomas y los vendedores de diarios, alejándome y volviendo a la misma plaza. Plaza Once, Plaza Miserere. Al anochecer, al fondo de la calle, apareció aquella manifestación. Levanté la valija, me mezclé y me fui con ellos. Desde balcones y ventanas llovían diarios que los manifestantes convertían en antorchas. Oía los gritos, alcancé a ver un par de carteles, pero no lograba entender qué se proponían. Las llamas, la confusión, aquella gente asomada, me hicieron olvidar todo: la reciente huida de casa, la necesidad de ubicarme.

Avanzaba entre aquellos cuerpos, miraba para arriba, abría los ojos, trataba de no perder la valija. Cuando, desde una ventana, gritaban algo, me parecía que era a mí a quien se dirigían. La marcha duró poco. Se oyeron un par de estampidos. La gente frenó, retrocedió, se dispersó por las calles laterales. Corrí al azar, siguiendo a los demás. Me detuve con un grupo de diez o doce frente a un bar. Desde la esquina los policías tiraban bombas de gas hacia todas partes. Los que estaban conmigo arrancaban baldosas de la vereda y contestaban. Alcancé a ver un herido, del otro lado de la calle. Una bomba cayó encima de nosotros. Nos refugiamos todos en el bar. Otra vino a dar justo en la puerta y adentro se llenó de gas. Era una confusión. Me abrí paso, salí y corrí hacia la esquina. Alguien corrió y dobló conmigo. Era un muchacho flaco, de camisa blanca. Fuimos a lavarnos la cara en la fuente de una plaza. Le pregunté a qué se debía la manifestación. No sabía. Dijo que se había sumado nada más que para tirarle un par de piedras a la policía. Le expliqué que yo acababa de llegar a Buenos Aires. Dijo que no me preocupara, conocía una pensión barata. Con esa promesa lo seguí toda la noche. Era un tipo siniestro. Tenía los ojos amarillos. No lo vi reír una sola vez. No me hizo ninguna pregunta, no le interesaba nada de mí. Me hablaba de sus cosas como si me conociese desde siempre. Cuando caminábamos se metía las manos en los bolsillos y era como si anduviese solo. Los burros: tenía una fija para el día siguiente, si se llegaba a dar se paraba para siempre. Yo lo seguía con mi valija. De vez en cuando le preguntaba:

—¿Esa pensión queda lejos?

El me contestaba:

—No, no queda lejos, después vamos.

Nos sentamos en un par de bares, lo acompañé con algunos vasos de vino. Me dijo que si quería gastarme unos pesos conocía a una que cobraba poco, paraba ahí

cerca, en la avenida. No tenía ganas de seguir complicándome, hubiese preferido dejar la valija, tener una cama, un lugar seguro donde ir a parar, y después que viniese cualquier cosa. Se lo dije. Pero él insistió:

—Cobra poco.

Fuimos a buscarla. Estaba en la mesa de un bar, con otra. El les hizo una seña y vinieron. Las invitamos con una copa y fuimos a un hotel allí cerca. Cuando terminamos él se acercó y me dijo el precio. Efectivamente, no me pareció caro. Seguimos caminando. Ya no me atrevía a preguntarle nada. Cuando enfilamos hacia la costanera estaba por amanecer. Las dos noches sin dormir y el vino me habían dejado mal. Me hubiese acostado allí mismo, en el pasto, bajo el peso de las últimas estrellas. Nos detuvimos sobre el agua. Estaba por salir el sol. De pronto el flaco enloqueció. Se trepó al parapeto y comenzó a moverse y a gritar:

—Ahí viene, ahí viene, ya, ya, ya.

Se retorció, forzaba la voz, se descalabraba. Me pareció que lo mejor era imitarlo. Así que me paré a su lado y comencé a moverme y a gritar, hasta que el sol hubo asomado del todo. Después volvimos en silencio hacia el centro. Con la primera claridad los edificios se habían teñido de rosado. Entonces pensé que estaba realmente en la ciudad.

Nos detuvimos ante una puerta. Dijo:

—Es acá.

Era temprano, tuve que hacer tiempo en el bar de la esquina y él me acompañó. Me dejó un número de teléfono para que lo llamara, por cualquier cosa. Lo llamé al día siguiente, vino y me dijo que lo habían invitado a una fiesta, si podía prestarle el traje. Se lo presté y no lo volví a ver más.

Fue él, en resumen, quien me llevó hasta tu puerta. Pertenecía a esa clase de gente que entra y sale de la vida de uno y deja una imagen que a lo largo de los años

cada tanto vuelve. Después de él conocí a muchos. Con frecuencia son esos tipos de los cuales ni siquiera recuerdo el nombre, de los cuales nada sé salvo el gusto de unas horas, gestos y palabras que el tiempo deforma y cambia de color, son ellos, digo, los que aumentan esta sensación de molestia e impotencia. A veces me pregunto qué cara tendré yo en tu memoria, qué lugar ocupó. Aquella mañana subí la escalera de tu pensión como quien entra en un templo. Lo primero que vi, en el angosto patio interior, fue a un muchacho que rociaba con querosene el elástico de una cama. Después le prendía fuego. Las chinches salían a puñados de entre las ranuras de metal y se achicharraban con un chisporroteo breve. El muchacho gritó hacia el fondo y apareciste vos. Me enfrentaste como se enfrenta a un enemigo:

—¿Qué desea? ¿Dónde trabaja?

Me estudiaste por todos lados. El perro que te había seguido no cesaba de ladrarme. Le gritaste que se fuera. Después, enfurecida, te quitaste un zapato y se lo tiraste. El perro huyó. Volviste a calzarte, dijiste que había una cama libre en una pieza de cinco, pago adelantado. Me la mostraste. Era una pieza sin ventanas, con las paredes manchadas, la bombita desnuda colgando del techo, olor a encierro. Casi no quedaba espacio para moverse. Había un tipo durmiendo, los demás se habían ido a trabajar. Cuando me dejaste solo él levantó la cabeza y me saludó. Era un viejo. Inmediatamente me contó su historia. Estaba enyesado, hacía semanas que no salía. Se había jubilado, pero no cobraba. Ultimamente había trabajado de mozo en un bar de la Boca, hasta que un colectivo al retroceder le había quebrado una pierna. Vos habías intentado echarlo varias veces, pero no tenía dónde ir, se le había acabado la plata. ¿Qué podía hacer? Los otros ocupantes de la pieza se quejaban porque tenía mal olor. No paraba de hablar. Se reía. Levantó la

almohada y sacó un pañuelo anudado. Me alcanzó unas monedas y pidió que fuera a comprarle medio litro de vino. Me recomendó que no me dejara ver por nadie, sobre todo por vos. Así empezó la cosa. Te pagué medio mes porque no me alcanzaba para más. Me dediqué a buscar trabajo. Comenzó esa época de peregrinaje de la cual no puedo acordarme sin malestar. Perdía los días yendo de un lado al otro con el diario bajo el brazo, caminando todo el tiempo para no gastar en colectivos. Llegó un momento en que ya me conocía las respuestas de antemano: demasiado joven, falta de experiencia, sin referencias de trabajos anteriores. Pensé que tal vez no hubiese lugar para mí en la ciudad. Venció el plazo y tuve que aguantarte. Entrabas en la pieza, gritabas que si no podía pagar debía irme, que no estabas para mantener vagos. Era inútil tratar de contestarte, había que esperar a que terminara la explosión. Te hablé varias veces, te pedí que tuvieras paciencia, te entregué el reloj, lo único de valor que poseía. Te fui conociendo. Vi de qué manera te movías en esa casa, en ese mundo sucio donde te sentías como una diosa, donde provocabas pasiones fuertes, donde te exhibías cada día, te hacías admirar y desear, donde tus treinta y ocho años competían con los diecinueve de tu hija mayor y pronto seguirían compitiendo con los de tu otra hija que tenía solamente doce. De esos enfrentamientos salías siempre victoriosa. Lo sabías y era tu mayor orgullo. También Carmen, la paraguaya que hacía la limpieza, te servía de referencia para establecer tu reinado. Los hombres olían tu juego, lo husmeaban como perros, lo seguían, respondían fielmente a tus movimientos e insinuaciones. Eran todos provincianos fuertes y tímidos, llenos de ternuras y violencias contenidas. Pasabas delante de las piezas exhibiendo tus tetas enormes dentro de esos pulóveres ajustados. Si estabas de buen humor gritabas con tu acento gallego:

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—Arriba, vagos, a trabajar.

Cantabas canciones de Pedrito Rico. Llenabas toda la casa con esa avidez y ese celo. Alguien desde adentro te gritaba:

—Olé.

Sin detenerte, levantando más la voz, contestabas:

—Olé.

Finalmente renuncié a mis pretensiones y comencé a marcar los avisos donde pedían peones. Anduve por la zona de las fábricas, respiré ese aire espeso, miré las caras de la gente, pero siempre me resistí a entrar. Conseguí trabajo por diez días como cadete de ventas en una liquidación de Gath y Chaves. Durante las ocho horas mi tarea consistía en enrollar las piezas de tela que las clientas desenrollaban. Después entré en el mundo del corretaje. Vendía, trataba de vender, licuadoras, enceradoras, máquinas de coser, aspiradoras, heladeras, cuadros, fantasías, broches, jabones. Recorrí el Gran Buenos Aires; me amargué. Al mediodía compartía un sandwich con Horacio, uno que trabajaba conmigo. Nos sentábamos al costado de la vía, comíamos mirando pasar los trenes. Cuando cobraba algo de plata hacía siempre lo mismo. Primero recorría Corrientes y en las mesas de saldos elegía un libro barato. Después me sentaba en un bar, pedía un especial de jamón y queso y me hacía lustrar los zapatos. Eran mis lujos de una vez por mes.

Me había hecho amigo de Juan, mi vecino de cama, un tucumano recién llegado que se carteaba regularmente con su novia. Tenía uno de esos libritos, un Secretario Amoroso, que incluía unas treinta cartas con sus respectivas respuestas. Las copiaba en el orden correspondiente, sin cambiar una sola palabra. Para él era una tarea ardua. Preparaba la mesa, el papel, la birome y no se movía de ahí durante una hora.

Siete de Oro

Un día me hizo leer una carta de Elsa. Entonces descubrí que ella utilizaba el mismo Secretario Amoroso. A la carta número uno contestaba con la respuesta número uno, y así. Pese a ello Juan esperaba al cartero con impaciencia. Se tiraba sobre la cama y leía esas líneas con atención, media docena de veces. Me ofrecí para competir con aquel librito. Quedó conforme con mi primera carta y desde entonces le serví de secretario amoroso. Una noche entraste en la pieza; fue después de cenar, estábamos todos. Te secaste las manos en el delantal, comenzaste a hablar de cualquier cosa. Te reías, provocabas. En los ojos y en los dientes se te notaba el deseo. Me pediste que te mostrara la palma de la mano. Paseaste tu uña por mi piel, dijiste muchas tonterías, acompañaste cada frase con una carcajada. Los demás también se reían. Me habías elegido. Todos se daban cuenta, menos yo. Al día siguiente, Carmen, tu cómplice, me paró en el pasillo y me habló en secreto:

—Dice la señora que no quiere tener nada con vos porque sos muy jovencito, no quiere compromisos.

No le contesté, pero comprendí que la cosa estaba hecha. Esa tarde me mandaste llamar y conversamos por primera vez, acodados al balcón de la pieza que daba a la calle. Me hiciste una serie de recomendaciones. Dijiste que eras una mujer casada, con marido, con hijos, que tenías responsabilidades, que por lo tanto debías cuidarte. Me pediste, sobre todo, que no anduviese con otras mujeres. Temías que pudiese contagiarte alguna enfermedad. Tenías un racimo de uvas en la mano, de vez en cuando me convidabas. Yo todavía no había dicho una palabra. Escuchaba, asentía a todo. Al día siguiente no salí. Temprano, viniste a verme. Dijiste:

—¿Cómo, no fuiste a trabajar?

Y te reías. Hicimos el amor en el cuartito de

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Carmen, mientras ella montaba guardia en el pasillo. A partir de entonces comenzaste a llamarme Tanito y así me llamaron todos. Entre los muchachos de la pieza adquirí cierto prestigio. Generalmente comía solo, antes o después que los demás. Mis platos eran más abundantes, podía repetir. Me mandabas frutas y dulces. Carmen me traía esos obsequios como si fuesen cartas de amor.

—Te manda la señora.

Vos, desde la cocina, cantabas a todo pulmón. Desde ese día tus carcajadas y tus canciones tuvieron una dirección bien definida. Los muchachos me miraban y me guiñaban un ojo. Cada vez que pasabas te asomabas, gritabas cosas para adentro, contagiabas a todo el mundo. Cuando estabas de buen humor florecías como una colegiala. Tus alegrías, tus furores, eran para vos la única medida de las cosas. Todo cuanto no girara a tu alrededor no existía. Exigías, imponías, tenías tus propias leyes. Hubiese sido difícil derrotarte. Pero tal vez, esto lo pienso ahora, no te hicieras demasiadas ilusiones. Y esa fuerza que demostrabas día tras día no fuese sino un reflejo de tu limitación. No supe mucho de vos, casi nada. Una sola vez se te escaparon algunas palabras. Me contaste que habías tenido un novio, uno de tu pueblo, se querían, eran muy jóvenes, te lo habían matado en la Guerra Civil. Eras la más linda de aquel pueblo, los hombres se volvían locos. Con tu marido te habían obligado a casarte o algo así. No me interesó averiguar más. Y aún hoy es probable que no me interesara. Tal vez todo esto, esta evocación, no sea más que un pretexto, un intento desesperado, una manera de aferrarme, de durar.

Mientras tanto yo había dejado de trabajar. Salía de vez en cuando, para disimular. Me hiciste algunos regalos, una camisa, un anillo, un pulóver. Tuve que

soportar algunas escenas de celos. Después de la primera vez no dejaste de requerirme un solo día. Cualquiera hora y lugar eran buenos. Las piezas, la cocina, el baño. Me acosabas. En cualquier momento, cuando menos me lo esperaba, oía que abrían la puerta y veía brillar en la penumbra tu diente de oro. Pero pronto creí advertir que ese malabarismo erótico no tenía otro fin que el de satisfacerme, de retenerme, de saciarme. Para vos, para tu goce, reservabas las tardes en que nos encontrábamos afuera e íbamos a algún hotel, lejos de allí. Entonces desplegabas todo tu plumaje. Te cubrías de joyas, de pieles, de colonia, de ropa interior. Ese era el momento en que exigías tu parte. Yo no me portaba mal. Era paciente y lograba satisfacerte. De todo lo que trabajé en esas camas para darte placer me acordé muchas veces. Vos te paseabas desnuda delante de los grandes espejos, te exhibías, elogiabas tu cuerpo blanco y sólido. Decías:

—Parezco una muchacha. ¿No es cierto que parezco una muchacha?

Yo decía que sí. Sin embargo, después de aquellos meses, la primera vez que me acosté con una de mi edad me tiré de espaldas sobre la cama y grité:

—Qué suerte ser jóvenes.

Un día se pelearon dos muchachos. Habían comenzado en la pieza y terminaron en el patio. Estaban en el suelo, revolcándose. Uno sangraba de la nariz y de la oreja. Vos acudiste con un cepillo de piso y empezaste a pegar. Golpeabas con ganas. Tuvieron que levantarse. Uno se alejó, cubriéndose. Pero el otro, el que sangraba, te arrancó el cepillo y te enfrentó. Entonces le tiraste una patada entre las piernas. Se dobló y cayó retorciéndose. Seguiste golpeándolo e insultándolo, lo empujabas con la suela del zapato. Gritabas:

—Pegarme a mí, hijo de puta, mal nacido, pegarme a mí.

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Antes de volver a la cocina les avisaste que si no se iban los dos en media hora los tirarías por la escalera. Nadie dudada de que lo harías. Ya te habíamos visto en acción quince días antes. Uno de los hombres se había hecho amigo de María, tu hija menor. La invitaba a la pieza cuando estaba solo, parece que le mostraba lo suyo, la tocaba. Ese día lo llevaste hasta la escalera a sopapos limpios, lo empujaste, te quitaste los zapatos y se los tiraste por la cabeza, como aquella vez del perro. Después sacaste sus cosas y se las fuiste arrojando entre insultos y maldiciones. Los demás ocupantes de la pieza bailaban a tu alrededor, trataban de contenerte, de hacerte razonar, te decían:

—Eso no, que es mío.

María había terminado por enamorarse de mí. Entraba en mi pieza antes de irse a la escuela, me despertaba besándome en la boca. Después se sentaba en la cama de Juan y me daba charla un rato. Era astuta y caprichosa. Vivir entre hombres le había servido de escuela. Le regalé un dibujo hecho por mí. Días después lo encontré sobre la almohada, roto en pedazos. Traté de preguntarle qué había pasado, pero me esquivaba. Cuando finalmente pude hablar con ella me dijo:

—Si tuviese que creer lo que dicen de mi madre y vos debería odiarte.

No recuerdo qué historia inventé. Seguimos amigos y más de una vez salimos los tres juntos. Ibamos a las plazas, al cine. Yo me dedicaba a María. Ella fingía divertirse. En realidad, lo único que hacía era espiarnos. Vos te reías. Tu otra hija, en cambio, me odiaba abiertamente. Pero seguramente me odiaba por costumbre, porque te odiaba a vos y porque habría visto pasar a muchos como yo. Cuando ustedes dos discutían parecían colectiveros. Desde la primera hasta la última pieza nos enterábamos de los detalles.

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Cinco minutos después vos pasabas cantando. Tu hija se encerraba y ponía el tocadiscos a todo volumen. Tu marido no estaba en todo el día, atendía otra pensión que tenían por Palermo. Una tarde, yo estaba sentado en la cama, se abrió la puerta y apareció blandiendo una camisa mía. Estaba enfurecido. Me la tiró mientras gritaba:

—Esta camisa es tuya, ¿no?

La tomé al vuelo y casi sin mirarla volví a tirársela.

—No, no es mía —dije.

—No es tuya —gritó.

Dio un portazo y se fue. Después me enteré de que la había encontrado entre la ropa que Carmen lavaba para ustedes. Alguien, seguramente tu hija mayor, se la había señalado. Cuando volviste de la calle preguntaste los detalles. Te reías. Yo me preparé para pasar la noche. Tenía miedo de que tu marido entrara y me acuchillase. Para llegar hasta mi rincón había que pasar primero entre el ropero y la mesa, después avanzar por el pasadizo formado por la cama de Juan y la mía. Antes de acostarme busqué piolín y tendí, entre la puerta de entrada y mi cama, una red de hilos a veinte centímetros del suelo. Cualquiera que quisiese acercarse a oscuras no tendría más remedio que tropezar, provocando la caída de algunos objetos que servirían para despertarme. Los muchachos se reían. Una semana después me hiciste mudar al cuartito del fondo, pasando el baño y la cocina, al lado de la pieza del cordobés, aislado del resto de la casa. Allí estaba solo y podía cerrar con llave. Al cordobés lo conocía de verlo pasar por el patio. Era un tipo que no hablaba, no se sabía de qué trabajaba, me dijiste que estaba desde hacía un año, que pagaba regularmente. Ese, el cordobés, es otro ejemplar de la estirpe de los oscuros. Después conocí a unos cuantos, y sobre todo a uno a quien quise. Uno que cuando me escribía decía:

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"Hermano de la misma sombra". Pero era un poeta, estaba más loco que ninguno y ésa es otra historia.

Mi piecita comunicaba con la del cordobés por una puerta que ahora estaba clausurada. Descubrí su manía sólo tres días después. Una noche me despertó una furibunda música de jazz. Miré la hora: eran las tres. Tomé un zapato y golpeé en la puerta divisoria. Esperé e insistí. Salí al pasillo y golpeé en la otra puerta. Quise abrir pero estaba con llave. El concierto duró más de una hora. La noche siguiente se repitió. Esta vez duró más tiempo. Volví a sacudir, sin éxito, las dos puertas. Decidí hablarle. Pero cuando lo enfrenté, al otro día, siguió de largo como si no me hubiese visto y se encerró. Tenía una cara de alucinado que desarmaba. Siguieron las sesiones nocturnas. Una tarde esperé su regreso, salí al pasillo y le cerré el paso con la mano. Se detuvo y me miró fijo a los ojos. Estuvimos así, sosteniéndonos la mirada. De pronto me esquivó, pasó de costado entre mi cuerpo y la pared y se metió en su pieza. Inmediatamente puso un disco. En los días siguientes yo ya no golpeaba ni intentaba hablarle; urdía venganzas. Una mañana salí con Horacio, lo acompañé a corretear y vi, en una calle de tierra, junto a una alcantarilla, un gato muerto. Lo envolví con hojas de diarios y lo metí en el portafolios, entre los prospectos de heladeras y solicitudes de crédito. Olía a podrido. Tomé el tren de vuelta y preparé mi plan. Me encerré y esperé con la luz apagada. Cuando lo oí llegar puse el ojo en la cerradura. Conocía sus costumbres: lo primero que hacía era tomar jabón y toalla y lavarse en el baño. Eran los únicos minutos que dejaba abierto. Lo vi pasar, salí, entreabrí su puerta y tiré el gato sobre la cama. Me fui en puntas de pie y volví a la hora de cenar. No noté nada raro. Esa noche no hubo música. A la mañana siguiente me

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despertaron tus alaridos. Estabas furiosa, hablabas de romper cabezas, de echar a todo el mundo a patadas en el culo, tratabas a todos de hijos de puta. Salí a ver qué pasaba. En el alambre del patio, entre las sábanas y la ropa lavada, estaba colgado el gato. Esa noche el concierto fue más infernal que nunca. Pasaron unos días sin variantes y luego sobrevino una época de silencio. Una tarde vi que la puerta estaba entreabierta y me asomé. El cordobés estaba acostado de espaldas, la mirada en el cielo raso. A ambos lados de la almohada, junto a las orejas, mirándose entre sí, había dos parlantes. Los estantes, la mesa, el piso, todo estaba lleno de discos. Entré. Me miró sin sorprenderse. Lo oí hablar por primera vez. Dijo:

—Estoy cansado de todos estos discos. Tengo ganas de agarrarlos y tirarlos al medio del patio.

Dije:

—Buena idea. Te ayudo.

Levanté una pila e hice ademán de salir. Dudó, se incorporó y me imitó. Recorrimos los pocos metros del pasillo, nos asomamos y los tiramos. Volvimos a buscar más. Fuimos y vinimos corriendo. En pocos minutos la pieza estuvo limpia. El patio, en cambio, quedó esparcido de discos rotos. A esa hora no había nadie en la pensión. Vos dormías la siesta. Acudiste al oír el estrépito, pero ya habíamos terminado. Estábamos un poco agitados por el ejercicio. Oíamos tus maldiciones. Viniste a golpear la puerta. Le dabas con un palo, pensé que ibas a romperla. Insultabas al cordobés, lo amenazabas con matarlo, con avisar a la policía. No sabías que también yo estaba adentro. El cordobés se había apoyado a la pared y dijo:

—Ahora me siento mejor.

Yo esperaba, lo estudiaba. Charlamos un poco, de cualquier cosa. Tenía una forma rara de expresarse, atropellada, como si hablase a borbotones. Desde ese

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día me buscó e inclusive nos encontramos un par de veces afuera para tomar un café o un vaso de vino. De los discos que se salvaron no quiso recuperar ninguno. Pero una semana después apareció con dos o tres nuevos y me invitó. Era la primera vez que me sentaba a escuchar música. Por él conocí a Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, Mulligan, Gillespie, Coltrane. Después fue decayendo rápidamente. Comenzó a tomar mucho. A veces, sin motivo, me miraba y me decía:

—Gracias.

Una tarde vimos pasar una ambulancia. Murmuró:

—Prefiero estar abajo que adentro.

Una noche me despertó un alarido. Fui a su pieza y prendí la luz. El cordobés estaba sentado sobre la cama, miraba hacia adelante. Hablaba solo. Decía:

—Tuve un sueño. Soñé que estaba en la cárcel, una cárcel modelo. Y no podía salir, quería salir y no podía pese a que tenía las mejores notas en conducta. Llenaba todos los requisitos necesarios para salir, pero no podía salir, igual que ahora.

Se echó, volvió a enderezarse, puso un disco, lo sacó, volvió a la cama. De pronto se sobresaltaba y preguntaba:

—¿Quién es?

Se quejaba, bufaba, gemía, pronunciaba algún nombre. Después se abalanzó hacia la pileta que había en un costado y vomitó. También las imágenes de esa noche pertenecen a lo que, para mí, significó tu pensión. La figura del cordobés, inclinada, desarmándose en contorsiones y rugidos, metiéndose los dedos en la garganta, temblando en los accesos de tos. Y su cuerpo desnudo, flaco, amarillo, insignificante, arrodillado en medio de la cama, la cabeza echada hacia atrás, bebiendo desesperadamente del pico de una botella con agua, chorreándose el cuello y el pecho, los ojos

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desorbitados, como si estuviese sorbiendo los últimos minutos de su vida. Y así siguió, acostándose, revolcándose, pronunciando palabras incomprensibles. Le abracé la cabeza y traté de calmarlo. Lo llamé por su nombre. Me quedé con él hasta la madrugada. Después las cosas se precipitaron. Al cabo de un mes, en una semana, ocurrió todo eso de lo que prefiero no hablar. El cordobés terminó encerrado en su pieza y se negó a salir. Tuvieron que romper la cerradura y se lo llevaron con chaleco de fuerza.

Lo reemplazaste rápidamente por otro inquilino. De él no hiciste otro comentario que éste:

—Estaba loco.

Todo era así en aquellos días. Asfixia y locura. También tu reinado, que se desarrollaba entre una cocina, un patio, una fila de habitaciones y la libertad breve que representaba la cama accidental donde te acostabas conmigo o con otro, también eso era un círculo cerrado, le faltaba luz. Pero si olvidase tus canciones, tus gritos, tu forma de andar entre las miradas de los hombres, tu risa, ese patetismo con que enfrentabas los días, me olvidaría también de aquellos años de aprendizaje. Y eso es lo que no quiero. Trato de recuperarte, te necesito, necesito de esos años oscuros, quiero hacer algo con ellos, quiero construir o destruir, pero hacer algo. Voy labrando mi pasado de la misma forma que trabajo mi futuro. En ese mundo de malos olores, ratas, chinches y cucarachas, tu cuerpo aparece a veces como una luna pálida, irradia un poco de claridad. Tu cuerpo es mi bandera en el recuerdo confuso de esos días. No abre ningún horizonte, no redime nada, pero es lo único claro, ondea como una sábana, se mantiene, oscila, no quiere decaer.

Después de aquella pieza de cinco, después del cuartito del fondo, todos los que siguieron llevaron tu

voz y tu sabor. La piecita de la calle Cangallo, en el quinto piso, oscura como ninguna. Al lado vino a vivir una pareja de recién casados. A la semana de llegar, él la crucificó de ocho tiros contra la pared de abajo, al lado de la puerta de entrada. La casa del ruso que dormía con la hija, su orgullo, de la que quería sacar una gran bailarina. El ruso me decía:

—Somos los más fuertes. Los destruiremos a todos. Respetaremos solamente a Francia.

Y aquella casilla que me consiguió Osvaldo en uno de los peores momentos, en un terreno baldío, por San Martín. No había más que el elástico y el colchón sobre el piso de tierra. Se filtraban el viento y el agua, la vela se apagaba. Y al lado esa casa en ruinas, ese viejo que la habitaba y se paseaba todo el día por el terreno, hablando solo, con un colador en la cabeza.

Y la pieza de la calle Ayacucho: aquel mucamo maniático, medio brujo, que me prestaba libros. Me aseguraba que conocía, en el norte, una vieja capaz de adivinar el futuro. Para saber mi destino debía cortarme un mechón de pelos del pubis y enviárselos. Un día me paré frente al espejo, me bajé los pantalones, me corté un mechón y se lo di.

Y la pensión de Rivadavia, aquel vecino homosexual que venía a golpearme la puerta para contarme sus penas. Cuando las cosas le iban bien, en cambio, me invitaba a tomar café. Se paseaba por Corrientes como un triunfador, saludaba a los mozos de los bares, a los canillitas, a los porteros de los cines, a los vendedores de cigarrillos. Me decía:

—Con éste me acosté, con aquél me acosté.

Se detenía para hacerse lustrar los zapatos por algún muchachito. Le decía:

—Contále al señor cuántas veces te acostaste conmigo.

—Uh —contestaba el chico sonriendo y moviendo la cabeza.

Estuvo aquel flaco que quería meterme en el robo de motos. Aquel otro que me propuso el negocio de la fruta. Había conseguido un carrito. Todas las mañanas madrugábamos para ir al Abasto. Comprábamos manzanas, pomelos, naranjas, que después vendíamos en las esquinas. Estuvo Isabel, aquella puta-tuberculosa que me prestaba plata, cuya especialidad eran los marineros. Los emborrachaba en cualquier parte, se los traía al hotel casi a la rastra y les sacaba todo lo que podía. Más de una vez me la encontré a la madrugada subiendo a uno por la escalera como se sube a un herido. La lista sigue. Y en todas partes ese olor con que tu casa me había marcado.

Un día me dijiste que acababan de comprar un piso por Caballito: otra pensión. Esa tarde irías a limpiar. Me diste el teléfono y la dirección. Te llamé y fui. Era el quinto piso de un edificio viejo. Me mostraste las piezas, la cocina, los baños, el dormitorio que habías elegido para vos, con balcón a la calle. Fue una tarde rara. Yo arrastraba un resfrío de una semana, me sentía molesto. Tenía la sensación de estar lejos de todo eso, de no poder tocar nada. Recorrí esas piezas como un autómatas. Oía tu voz, te miraba contra las paredes desnudas, miraba los pedazos de cielo pardo a través de la ventana, me preguntaba qué estaba haciendo, qué hacíamos los dos en esa casa vacía. Habías llevado una radio, pasaban un programa de música española. Vos tampoco estabas bien. Las camas tenían solamente los colchones. Me preguntaste, del mismo modo que en la mesa se pregunta si uno quiere la sal, si quería sábanas. Dije que sí. Trajiste unas sábanas limpias. Con mi resfrío hice el amor sin gusto. La tela planchada contra la piel me parecía de

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cartón. Te buscaba sin encontrarte, con una torpeza y un desgano que me hicieron sentir peor. Dijiste una cosa curiosa:

—Siento como si fuese la última vez que nos acostamos juntos.

Cuando me iba, viniste conmigo hasta el ascensor. En el momento en que llegaba me hablaste. Volvieron a llamar el ascensor desde abajo. No quise esperar y decidí ir por la escalera. En el rellano del tercer piso oí que alguien subía corriendo. Un tipo se me vino encima y sin darme tiempo a nada me tiró una trompada. Me alcanzó en plena cara y me mandó contra la puerta de un departamento. Era tu marido. Me arrinconó a puñetazos y patadas. Yo no tenía ganas de pelear, quería irme, quería estar tranquilo. Me defendía con una sola mano, en la otra tenía el portafolios. No contestaba los golpes. Solamente estiraba el brazo hacia adelante y trataba de mantenerlo a distancia. Le decía:

—¿Qué hace?

—¿Cómo qué hace? —decía él con la respiración agitada, y se enardecía más.

Tuve que soltar el portafolios. Entonces, vaya a saber con qué intención, se agachó, lo recogió y escapó hacia arriba. Lo perseguí. Me llevaba varios escalones. Me arrojé y le abracé las piernas a la altura de las rodillas. Caímos los dos boca abajo a lo largo de la escalera. Permanecemos así, inmovilizados. Hubiese podido quedarme ahí una hora, dos, no tenía apuro, no estaba del todo incómodo, no tenía ganas de nada. Miraba su pantalón gastado en el traste. Sentí que me aburría. Se habían asomado algunas vecinas, preguntaban:

—¿Qué pasa?

Finalmente él tiró el portafolios hacia atrás. Lo

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solté y me fui. Afuera, con el peso de mi embotamiento, a medida que me iba alejando saboreaba algo nuevo: el gusto a liberación que me aportaba el haber dejado atrás todo eso. Tu casa, tus camas, tu tutela. Comencé a caminar hacia cualquier parte. Pensé que no tenía adónde ir, que ya no podía volver a la pensión, que no tenía un peso en el bolsillo y que todo comenzaba de nuevo. Olé.