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Ec-static Images: Reading Spirits in Eduardo L. Holmberg's Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac

Zoe Allen
Bard College, za2924@bard.edu

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Ec-static Images: Reading Spirits in
Eduardo L. Holmberg's *Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac*

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

by
Zoe Allen

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To my family, for everything. For teaching me to love language. For teaching me to keep my eyes peeled and to see for myself. For teaching me to seek meaning in all things. For allowing me to be curious, for asking questions, and for never letting things be easy.

To my advisor, John Burns, for seven months of meetings, for all of your edits, and for all of your advice. For your guidance, your encouragement, and your enthusiasm. For making this process exciting.

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To my friends, for being there. For making me laugh, for letting me talk, and for listening. For being a part of my little world and for letting me be a little part of yours.

To everyone, here now and somewhere else, who I have loved and who has loved me in return.

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Introduction:

“La escritura construyó las raíces, diseñó la identificación nacional, enmarcó a la sociedad en un proyecto, pero si por un momento los hombres concernidos por esos designios se hubieran puesto a reflexionar, habrían convenido en que todo eso que resultaba tan importante eran simplemente planos dibujados sobre papel, imágenes grabadas en acero, discursos de palabras enlazadas, y aún menos y más que eso lo que las conciencias alcanzan a soñar a partir de los materiales escritos, atravesandolos con la mirada hasta perderlos de vista para solo disfrutar del sueño que ellos excitan en el imaginario, desencadenando y encauzando la fuerza deseante.”

Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada*

To draw a map of Argentina, place your left hand overtop a piece of paper and trace its contours, guiding your pen up the tips of your fingers and down along the line of your wrist. Imagine that Buenos Aires lies somewhere below your thumb nail, Uruguay to the right of your pointer finger and Chile in the unmapped space to the left of your pinky. The country's interior spreads itself beneath your palm, the Pampas in the fleshy space at the base of your thumb, Patagonia extending through your wrist and stopping midway down your forearm, Cape Horn at your elbow.

Now imagine, overlaid atop this map, one of your hand's own nervous system, a network of channels drawing information through the skin, into the body, and back out again, electrical impulses traveling through your fingers, down your arm, and back up it once more. This, too, is a

map, albeit one with a more overt temporal aspect, a taking pulse of the present. Within the confines of your hand, the virtual space of the map contracts, everything contained within its borders rendered simultaneous. The present becomes not just a temporal state, but a feeling, something to reach out and touch. This process of mapping, an overlapping system of body, text, and geography is the principal concern of this project. The aim of this study is to provide an analysis of Eduardo L. Holmberg's 1875 "fantasía espiritista," *Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac*, focused on the themes of communication and knowledge production. Understanding nineteenth-century spiritualism as a method of conceptualizing trends in mass communication during the era, the project will examine how spiritualist thought influences the novel's portrayal of communication both between individuals and across distance. My goal here is not merely to analyze the information presented in the novel, but to understand, more generally, how information travels within it. To do so, I examine two central moments within this process: reception and transmission. Before that, however: some background.

In his 1984 survey of Latin American literary history, *La ciudad letrada*, Ángel Rama elucidates the existence of what he terms "the lettered city," the nexus of written discourse and state power overtop of which, he argues, Latin American societies were founded. In the historical formation of these societies, Rama claims, the written word functioned not merely as a descriptive tool, but as a transformative device. The word served not only a rationalizing function, making the previously unmapped space of the Americas legible to colonial administrators, but a creative one. Within the pages of colonial legislature, Latin America was essentially brought into being at the same time that it was described, not just mapped, but reconstituted as a mappable space. While this process of imposing order occurred, on an abstract level, linguistically, its practical application fell to an elite group of *letrados*, members of a

specialized class tasked with administering the institutional and legal codes of the lettered city. The position of authority which these men occupied was not just administrative, but necessarily textual. The *letrados* drew their power from their proximity to the written word. It became their domain, and within it they thrived.

A third generation member of one of Argentina's leading families, Eduardo L. Holmberg was a lifelong member of the lettered class. Born in 1852 in Buenos Aires, Holmberg came of age during a period of relative political stability within Argentina. While both his father and grandfather had participated directly in military struggles for Argentine independence, the former spending a period of exile in Chile with future president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Holmberg's own intervention upon Argentine national identity, if it was to occur at all, seemed destined to take place solely within the realm of culture. As Antonio Pagés Larraya remarks in his (excessively complimentary) 1957 introduction to Holmberg's collected stories: "si en el pasado [la casa de Holmberg] se vincula a magnos sucesos de la vida nacional, él la asociará a las nobles tareas civilizadoras que el país iba a emprender una vez zanjadas las dificultades de su organización" (10). In preparation for this civilizing mission, Holmberg received an education typical of the nineteenth-century elite, learning Greek and Latin alongside various other European languages, and, in a move befitting his social class, went on to study medicine, a profession he never practiced after receiving his doctorate in 1880.

While he might, in an earlier generation, have participated in its consolidation, Holmberg inherited the lettered city in a moment of crisis. The latter half of the nineteenth-century witnessed a profound modernization of the Argentine cultural landscape, and, with it, the roles available to the lettered class. From 1860 onwards, notes Paula Bruno, Argentina's intellectual community "sufrió constantes modificaciones por el arribo de sabios y eruditos de otras latitudes,

la convivencia de hombres de diversas edades y los reacomodamientos entre los recién llegados y los ya establecidos” (14). Shut out from positions as arbiters of state power, either occupied by members of earlier generations or made irrelevant by the country’s modernization, many would-be *letrados* found themselves working instead as journalists, essayists, and writers of fiction. Disillusioned with a society which, despite its veneer of progressivism, offered little way forward for the progressive minded, this new generation of intellectuals constituted a dissident group within the lettered city. Here, “within” is the operative word; while they might have sought a renovation of the lettered city, the new *letrados* expressed little interest in dispensing with the overarching cultural structures which enabled the system to function, nor were they intent on abdicating the privileged position which they occupied within it. Dissidents of the lettered city sought not to contest the hegemonic power of the written word, but to democratize it. Campaigns for educational reform worked to incorporate a greater portion of the country’s population into the preexisting system, while those already enmeshed within the lettered city fought to extend the reach of the written word beyond its prior limits. As Bruno argues, “El nuevo traje de intelectual trajo consigo novedosas formas de usar la palabra; se definieron vocabularios y aparatos críticos compartidos para ‘decir’ la sociedad y se estabilizaron pautas de circulación y aceptación de saberes” (15).

This conceptual expansion of the written word, both the creation of a new critical vocabulary and the infrastructure which would allow it to travel, was paralleled by a symbolic remapping of Argentine national space. If Argentina’s coastline, historically a center of commerce, industry, and political and cultural institutions, can be said to contain the general location of the geographic present, the country’s interior would seem to hold within itself the remnants of a national past. Consider the geographic determinism of Sarmiento’s 1845 work

Facundo: civilización y barbarie, an openly racist treatise on the degenerative influence of the Argentine countryside, the constant evocations of the frontier in *gauchesco* literature from José Hernández's 1872 epic poem *Martin Fierro* onward, or, albeit more self consciously, the narrator's hallucinatory descent into the past in Borges' 1953 story "El Sur."¹ In a kind of Benjaminian historiographic play, this landscape of the past was often reconfigured to suit the needs of a troubled present. As Rama argues, "no hubo mayor problema en trasladar la naturaleza a un diagrama simbólico, haciendo de ella un modelo cultural operativo donde leer, más que la naturaleza misma, la sociedad urbana y sus problemas, proyectados al nivel de los absolutos" (70). Here, the past becomes not merely a projection of the present, but a kind of hypothetical future as well, a space conducive to the elaboration of speculative fictions. The type of symbolic mapping to which Rama refers, like all other cartographic practice, is necessarily forward facing. In its diagrammatic function, this map of the past invites not only reading, but, as a matter of course, reasoning. It not only reveals the location of the present, but suggests the possibility of a way out of it, if only one could puzzle through the material presented. For Holmberg, this search for the future leads him not to the past but, rather curiously, to Mars.

Holmberg's second novel, *Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac: En el que se refieren las prodijiosas aventuras de este señor y se dan á conocer las instituciones, costumbres y preocupaciones de un mundo desconocido*² brings its protagonist firmly beyond the geographic limits of the Argentine nation only to, somewhat ironically, confine him once again within it. The text, to provide a brief summary, is concerned with the passage of the human soul from one

¹ Interestingly, Borges' narrator Juan Dahlmann is, like Holmberg, a German of *criollo* descent through his maternal line. Within the story, Dahlmann's romanticization of his maternal ancestors leads him to undertake a journey South, both the location of his family's estate and, ostensibly, of authentic Argentine culture. The similarities between the two texts merit further examination; unfortunately, such comparison is beyond the scope of this investigation.

² For the sake of brevity, the title of the novel has been abbreviated to "*Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac*" or simply "*Viaje maravilloso*" in all subsequent references to the work.

planet to the next. Eager to enter into the great beyond, the titular Nic-Nac, who functions as both the protagonist and primary narrator of Holmberg's novel, travels to Mars by means of spiritual displacement. Starving himself to death on the advice of German medium Dr. Friedrich Seele, Nic-Nac liberates his soul from its corporeal bonds in order to explore the far reaches of the universe. On Mars, however, Nic-Nac soon finds himself confronted with an uncanny reflection of his own society. In his exploration of the Martian nation Aureliana, a barely disguised version of late nineteenth-century Argentina, Nic-Nac makes visits to two of the country's major cities: Theosophopolis (City of God and Wise Men) and the nation's unnamed capital. In Theosophopolis, a monstrous amalgamation of two distinct settlements (Theopolis and Sophopolis), Nic-Nac finds a city divided. The Sophopolitans, luminous, lively, and intellectually curious, exist at odds from their Theopolitan counterparts, taciturn, morose, and pharisaic. The two groups are divided not only by disposition, but by history, the Theopolitans having kidnapped the women of Sophopolis at an undefined point prior to Nic-Nac's arrival. The capital presents a similar problem, the city fraught with partisan infighting instigated by the periodical press. Upon his return to Theosophopolis in the novel's final chapters, Nic-Nac finds the city in flames, having erupted into civil war in his absence. During the conflict, Nic-Nac's body is vaporized and his consciousness returned to his body on Earth, where the editor's postscript to the novel alerts us that he has been confined to a mental institution after refusing to deny the reality of his experience on Mars.

Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac made its first appearance in the November 29th, 1875 edition of the Argentine newspaper *El Nacional*. The novel was serialized over the course of the next twelve weeks, the final portion of the text appearing on February 21st, 1876. Like Holmberg himself, the novel existed at a critical juncture. The mid-1870s were not only “[el]

período que coincide con el más alto nivel de prestigio y popularidad experimentados por el espiritismo en Latinoamérica” (Cano, 18), “el primer momento de propagación del positivismo y del materialismo científicista” (Pagés Larraya, 35), but a period of increasing public interest in what would later become science fiction. Indeed, during the years between 1871 and 1875, *El Nacional* serialized Spanish translations of several of Jules Verne’s novels. While this development has likely more to do with Verne’s own celebrity than with any public demand for science fiction narratives (popular European fiction, already proven successful abroad, was a safe, and thus favored, choice for serialization), these works, and the generic conventions which developed around them, were quick in capturing the public’s imagination.³ So too did they capture Holmberg’s.

As Holmberg himself would write in 1878, two years after the completed publication of *Viaje maravilloso*:

Esos hombres de la ciencia que se mantienen completamente aislados del mundo que los rodea sin alcanzarlos, no son seguramente los que derraman el calor y la luz de la verdad en las masas populares. Su palabra tiene el frío del hielo, del número desnudo; y *el pueblo, curioso por naturaleza, pero cuya curiosidad ha sido mal encaminada, necesita la forma animadísima de un Julio Verne para poder escalar paso a paso las maravillas de la Naturaleza desplegada en todas sus creaciones.* (qtd. in Cano, 80, emphasis added)

Here, novels like Verne’s are not merely tools through which to entertain, but to inform. Across the pages of the newspaper, popular fiction mixed indiscriminately with the intellectual projects of the lettered class. Indeed, the very idea of popular fiction during the period in question owed as much to the parameters imposed by the periodical press as it did to the preoccupations of the

³ The publication of Verne’s work in *El Nacional* during the 1870s corresponded with a period of significant interest in utopian fiction within Argentina. In a 2004 survey published in *Revista Nautilus*, Carlos Abraham provides a detailed catalog of the major works of utopian literature produced in the country during the century following 1850. Although, Abraham notes, the utopian genre flourished in Argentina in the decades following the publication of Verne’s work, scholarship on Argentine utopias has been lacking. Abraham attributes this lack of attention not only to contemporary Argentine intellectuals, but to the authors of utopian fiction themselves. While utopian works appeared frequently throughout the century surveyed, there appears little creative continuity between them. Thus, Abraham argues: “existe una literatura utópica argentina, pero no existe una tradición de literatura utópica argentina” (13).

elite. Chief among these preoccupations, both of this elite at large and of Holmberg himself, was that of scientific education. As Gioconda Marún writes, “En la Argentina las ideas de progreso, de avance social e individual [...] se canalizan en el fomento del estudio de las ciencias naturales” (15). If the aim of Holmberg’s fiction was to suggest a path forward, it would have to do so “A través de la ciencia,” a medium which offered not only “una mejor percepción del futuro, sino al mejoramiento de la tecnología, la economía, el arte, [y] la salud” (14).

Holmberg himself was a naturalist by trade, if not by training. After finishing his undergraduate studies at the Universidad de Buenos Aires in 1872, Holmberg embarked on scientific expeditions to Patagonia and Bahía Blanca, gifting his findings to the Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires. In 1875, he was appointed as a professor of natural history at the Escuela Normal de Profesoras, where he was denounced, alternatively, as a sectarian, an atheist, and a materialist for prohibiting the religious or moral interpretation of the natural phenomena studied (Marún, 20). The same year, he collaborated in the founding of the Jardín Zoológico de Buenos Aires, La Academia Argentina de Letras, and La Academia Argentina de Ciencias Exactas, Físicas, y Naturales while continuing his work with La Sociedad de Ensayos Literarios and the publications *El porvenir literario* and *El naturalista Argentino*, which he had assisted in founding in 1871.

If Holmberg’s literary project is, at its core, pedagogical, the very existence of *Viaje maravilloso* raises several questions. The first of these is quite simple: if the novel is an educational tool, then what, exactly, are we as readers meant to learn from it? The second is slightly more complex. It is worth noting, at this point, that the text is almost self-assertively difficult to read and written with a consistent irreverence towards both its own content and the expectations of its audience. It is also worth noting that, while Holmberg’s narrative is certainly

entertaining, *Viaje maravilloso* is, simply put, not a good book. Whether it be an unfortunate byproduct of the novel's serialization or the simple result of Holmberg's own irreverence (one reviewer of Holmberg's scientific writing describes his style as "algo incoherente, de una incoherencia que a él mismo no le preocupaba" (Burkart, 10)), the text abounds in contradictions, frequently undermining its own claims or appearing in cases to forget its own premise, alternatively descending into long parenthetical discussions or simply neglecting to mention significant developments within the plot.

This said, we might ask, given Holmberg's persistent interest in public education and his ostensibly genuine belief in the role of literature as a pedagogical tool, why is his supposed message couched within a narrative which is so often obscure, difficult to apprehend, and not taken seriously by its own author? In response to these questions, I would like to suggest that Holmberg's novel does not merely teach about the world, but teaches how to read it, opening up a space of productive doubt which allows for the elaboration of alternative, future realities within the everyday. Holmberg's writing, I argue, functions as a kind of translation, one which, to borrow a term from Mieke Bal, is necessarily ec-static.⁴ Holmberg's transcription of social conditions involves not only a process of transcendence, a conceptual "moving beyond" in line with that of spiritualist thought, but one which is, by nature, joyful. While, for the purposes of this analysis, I try to take Holmberg at his word as often as possible, I would be remiss in neglecting to point out that, above all else, the novel is *fun*, not merely humorous, but refreshingly irreverent. Holmberg himself says as much. Once asked to clarify the tone of one of his stories, he responded with a refusal: "Y yo ¿qué sé de esas cosas? La única escuela literaria

⁴ Bal's notion of ec-static translation is developed in the second chapter of *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, in which she describes it as a process by which "translation, far from helping us to confine the object, liberates it from confinement, de-centring it, and its readers, into ec-stasy" (64). This ec-stasy "knows no centre, either on the picture plane or in the fiction, in the guise of linear perspective's vanishing point" (81).

que puedo obedecer es la de la espontaneidad de mi imaginación; mi única escuela científica es la de la verdad” (qtd. in Crash Solomonoff, 22). With this in mind: a map of the soon to come.

The first chapter of the project examines how the ideas of reading and writing are developed throughout the novel. Focusing on the spirit-image system which Holmberg establishes at the beginning of the work, a metaphysical framework wherein images function as immaterial expressions of the soul, I describe the way in which *Viaje maravilloso* offers opportunities for the reading of reality and the subsequent discernment of underlying social conditions. Later on, I identify scenes where reality is shown to be written, or reconstituted through description, in an attempt to understand how what has been read is then represented once again.

In the project’s second chapter, I extend my analysis of how the novel conceptualizes reading through an examination of the work as a form of social critique. Focusing more heavily on the novel’s depiction of Martian society, the project examines both Holmberg’s critique of 1870s Argentina and the solutions which he does (and does not) offer to the social issues presented. Here, I am not so much interested in the constitutive aspects of Holmberg’s critique but in how, exactly, he presents his vision of Argentine society. More concisely, I am interested not in Holmberg’s critique itself, but the way in which it is informed by the ideas on reading and writing which he develops earlier in the novel. While the project’s first chapter is structured around the idea of reception, the second is focused on the transmission of ideas and the subsequent communicative breakdowns which occur when individual perceptions are disseminated on a broader scale.

Chapter two begins with a discussion of telegraphic transmission within 19th century Argentina as I attempt to situate the novel within a larger discourse on communicative

(im)possibilities during the period in question. From this point, the project moves on to discuss the issue of literary transmission. Through a close reading of the novel's introduction and conclusion, as well as other moments within the text where the press is mentioned, I examine the way in which *Viaje maravilloso* understands the newspaper as a method of disseminating information. This analysis is supplemented by an investigation of Holmberg's own relationship to the press as a public intellectual as well as an examination of the impact of serialization on the novel form.

The project concludes with an analysis of Leonardo Kuntscher and Santiago Miret's 2012 graphic novel adaptation of *Viaje Maravilloso* as I attempt to suggest future uses for Holmberg's work. Returning to Bal's notion of ec-static translation, I posit Kuntscher and Miret's adaptation as a continuation of Holmberg's pedagogical project, one which attempts to apprehend reality through the use of images.

Chapter 1:

“Our thoughts act materially and carry with them a kind of effluvium. They may stamp themselves upon an object, upon a sheet of paper.”

Camille Flammarion, *Death and its Mystery*

1. On Spiritualism:

Spiritualism is a border ideology. It straddles the line between cultures, between regions of the globe, between science and religion, between belief and doubt. Spiritualism is at once a religious practice, an esoteric, intellectual pursuit, a method of scientific inquiry, and, alternatively, none of these things at all.⁵ Late nineteenth-century conceptions of spiritualism were necessarily fluid. Connected alternatively to the telegraph, Christianity, the body, immigration, globalization, and industrialization, spiritualist ideology was, for a time, both omnipresent and undefinable, constantly assimilating itself to new environments as it was introduced to them.

⁵ The distinction between the terms “spiritualism” (*espiritualismo*) and “spiritism” (*espiritismo*) was a topic of semantic debate among nineteenth-century intellectuals. As Luis Cano explains, “el Espiritualismo se funda en un entramado de tendencias teóricas integradas bajo el supuesto de que los individuos en el mundo real son un complejo de relaciones constituidas por una dimensión material y otra espiritual y que la segunda de estas dimensiones, en marcado contraste con los planteamientos materialistas, mantiene una existencia empírica después de la muerte.” Conversely, spiritism “se define como un conjunto de prácticas que permiten establecer una conexión entre el mundo material y el espiritual” (15). For the purposes of this paper, my use of “spiritualism” is more general, encompassing both the theoretical aspects of spiritualist belief and its scientific or religious manifestations within spiritist practice.

In his essay “The Global Occult: An Introduction,” Nile Green describes occultism as both symptomatic of and constitutive to modern culture. Emerging from “the auspicious conjunction of colonialism, technology, transportation, consumerism, and globalization” (385), late nineteenth-century occultism existed as a kind of hybridized, transnational religious culture, one founded in both the exchange of ideas between disparate areas of the globe and the technologies which enabled this communication. Occult practice worked to upend contemporary hierarchies of knowledge, appropriating scientific language for pseudoscientific use, co-opting mass communication technology to assist in esoteric practice, and privileging areas of the globe otherwise confined to the periphery. Occult activity thrived within the margins; traditionally centered in industrial or port cities with little prior history as producers of religious knowledge, occultism allowed for a counter mapping of the world, emerging from within areas of the globe previously neglected by the intellectual class. With its emergence in and around hubs of transit, occultism also thrived in areas of cultural exchange, drawing upon the spiritual and religious practices of seemingly unconnected groups in order to constitute itself as a unique ideology.

In this way, spiritualism functions as a method of translation. Spiritualist practice is, at its root, a process of carrying over. Spiritualism promises the formation of a kind of connective tissue between realms, a bridging of the chasm between material and spiritual worlds through which information might travel. Communication is received from the beyond and relayed within the here and now, changing form as it moves across distance. Not only is spiritualism a translation of content, however, it is also, to return to Green’s point, a translation of social context. In an increasingly interconnected world, a world in which increasingly rapid communication with individuals across the globe had suddenly become commonplace, spiritualism provided a means through which to conceptualize the ever expanding scope of

human connection. Spiritualism thus functioned as a way of synthesizing the changes inherent to modern communication; just as information could pass from one end of the globe to the other, so too could it cross the barrier between life and death.

In the Argentina of 1875, this method of translating circumstance was nothing new. In the introductory chapter of *Borges and Translation*, Sergio Waisman argues for the centrality of translation within Argentine literature, locating its emergence within what he terms “a series of distorted translations” (21) of both Western European and local culture. Through a dual process of inter- and intra-lingual translation, nineteenth-century Argentine writers read and reinterpreted both foreign texts and native histories, creating a hybrid literary culture upon which their project of nation building was founded. For Waisman, this literature not only emerges from the tension between foreign and local, but thrives within it. Translating from the margins, Argentine writers troubled literary ideas of ownership and originality, appropriating and recontextualizing so as to create a national literature which reflected conditions within the country.

This idea of translation as a form of creation provides an interpretive lens through which Eduardo L. Holmberg’s *Viaje maravilloso del Señor Nic-Nac* might be understood. Within the novel, Holmberg utilizes spiritualist concepts to develop a theory of reading and writing from the periphery. Just as the spiritualist medium receives messages from afar, capturing fragments of the beyond for dissemination among the here and now, so too does Holmberg gather distant knowledge for use within his writing. Drawing upon a combination of both European theoretical work and local circumstance, Holmberg receives information from disparate areas of the globe and translates it for dissemination among his audience within Argentina. Thus, in his function as a public intellectual, Holmberg engages in a kind of reading of reality, attempting to capture a moment in history so as to discern its essence. In the dissemination of this deeper truth,

Holmberg functions as a conduit through which otherworldly information may pass. Through his transcription of social context, Holmberg engages in a form of literary mediumship, a kind of spectral authorship wherein he both actively interprets and passively transmits the social conditions of his time.

2. *Reading through Spirit-images:*

From its opening sentence, Eduardo L. Holmberg's *Viaje maravilloso*, casts doubt upon the truth of its narrator's claims: "algunos pretenden que el viaje es impracticable y se apoyan en el mal éxito que han tenido otras tentativas análogas" (3).⁶ Nic-Nac, who appears here not as a man but as a topic of debate, is incapable of verifying the facts of his own story, a task which comes to fall, it seems, to the public. This readership is divided as to the truth of Nic-Nac's claims, "unos negando el hecho, otros compadeciendo a su autor, algunos aceptando todas y cada una de las circunstancias del viaje" (5); they are, however, invested in his story. The Nic-Nac frenzy which consumes the public forms the outer frame of the novel itself, ostensibly Nic-Nac's own recollection of his marvelous journey. Nic-Nac, we learn, holds the people's imagination captive for two days, overshadowing news of a potential coup, before he, too, is forgotten. This disappearance from the public consciousness, however, is short lived; only one day later, an unnamed publishing house announces the release of Nic-Nac's story in novel form.

Within the ever turbulent space of the public imagination, doubt comes to play a central role. Here, information is conveyed not through firsthand experience but through words, through secondary descriptions and immaterial renderings of what has already occurred. In order to accept as truth what is presented, one must necessarily take a leap of faith, suspending disbelief

⁶ All quotes are copied verbatim from the original 1875 text published in *El Nacional*. I have not corrected for spelling or typographical errors found in this printing.

as to the fantastic nature of Nic-Nac's story and choosing to ignore the voices of his detractors. To believe Nic-Nac is to trust in the unverifiable, to read into the author's experience for the discernment of a kind of truth which is not apparent at first glance. While not necessarily intuitive, the novel suggests this kind of reading as one of myriad benefits. Concluding the introductory portion of the text somewhat enigmatically, the author of the book's preface counsels that "en nuestros tiempos, las ideas serias no cumplen su destino sino envueltas en el manto de la fantasía" (7). While the voyage described may thus be but a superficial fantasy, something deeper lives within, something which, *Viaje maravilloso* suggests, must be discerned.

The narrative itself begins with a description of the author's metaphysical preoccupations. Dissatisfied with the myopia of modern science and eager to enter into the great unknown, the regions of the universe neglected by the scientific discourse of his day, Nic-Nac attempts a conceptual liberation of the spirit from its corporeal bonds. Linking spirit to image, Nic-Nac describes a process through which the soul might travel great distances, freed of its material casing. This spirit-image ideology is developed through the example of a black cat who is seen but not felt:

Este gato es real bajo el punto de vista de la investigación primera, pero este gato no es sustancial [...]

Este gato aparece virtualmente; —no es ni un reflejo, ni una sombra, pero es un gato. Lo veo y aunque no lo palpo, podría asegurar que su naturaleza es comprensible.

¿Quién puede negar que en virtud de fuerzas desconocidas, sea posible emprender viajes extraordinarios, como sería el caso de este gato, cuyo cuerpo y espíritu hallándose quizá a doscientas leguas de distancia, viene a impresionarme con su imagen real, si, real, aunque no es materia? (10)

The cat which Nic-Nac perceives visually is both real and not; while its image conveys to the narrator that it is, indeed, a cat, this image itself is but an image. The very aspect of the cat which allows Nic-Nac to understand it as such, its visual appearance, is also, then, the mark of its

irreality.⁷ Here, Nic-Nac is not merely *seeing* a cat, but *interpreting* a representation of the cat's material presence. He continues:

La imagen no es material, y sin embargo es perceptible. Un espejo rendija una figura, la devuelve con todos sus elementos... y esa imagen no es espíritu tampoco. ¿Podría acaso dársele el nombre de material espiritual?

[...]

Pero sí al espíritu acompaña la imagen; si en esta se conserva la fuerza sensual, libre en tanto de la materia, ¿no es posible penetrar en el mundo de lo desconocido e interpretar el Universo? (11)

Rather than discount this portion of the text as simple pseudoscience, I'd like, for a moment, to take Nic-Nac's claims at face value. Within the text at large, these metaphysical musings not only offer a seemingly theoretical basis for the novel's internal logic, but they provide instruction for how, exactly, Nic-Nac's experience is to be read. If the images of things can be understood as conveying within them their essence, so too can Nic-Nac's narration, an immaterial rendering of a supposedly real experience, be understood as relating some essential truth. The mantle of fantasy which encases the novel's "serious ideas" is, then, no more than a projected image, a reflection of the spirit encased within the material of society. What's more, Holmberg argues, this process of divination enables not merely a kind of social analysis, but a metaphysical one. Holmberg asks us not only to look *within*, but to look *beyond*, extending our initial leap of faith to move outside of conventional ideas of what reality *is*, and, subsequently, to enter into a new realm of possibility. Here, then, Holmberg's project is not simply to subvert realism, but to articulate an alternate version of reality itself, one which offers greater room for imaginative interpretation. In this, his recourse to images takes on further significance. As Bal alerts us, "Mystical experience cannot, by definition, be 'expressed,' [...] it is always an

⁷ A black cat makes an appearance in "El sur" as well, also subject to the narrator's musings on the nature of reality: "pensó, mientras alisaba el negro pelaje, que aquel contacto era ilusorio y que estaban como separados por un cristal, porque el hombre vive en el tiempo, en la sucesión, y el mágico animal, en la actualidad, en la eternidad del instante" (190).

after-effect. It comes after the shattering of language, and is situated in a void, which requires a new mode of ‘speaking’” (78). If words themselves cannot express experience, then images might provide a more faithful method of inquiry.

In making these metaphysical claims, Holmberg draws heavily upon the work of French astronomer and occultist Camille Flammarion, whose writings circulated widely throughout Latin America at the time of the novel’s publication.⁸ Flammarion’s influence on Holmberg’s writing has been much discussed,⁹ Holmberg himself making direct reference to the other author (“espíritus brillantes como el de Flammarion” (184)) in his novel’s conclusion. This said, the most obvious precursor to *Viaje maravilloso*, and for Holmberg’s spirit-image ideology, is Flammarion’s 1873 story “Lumen”, originally published as part of the collection *Stories of Infinity*. The text consists of a series of dialogues between a mortal man, Quaerens, and the disembodied spirit of his deceased friend Lumen. Within the work, Lumen describes a process of spiritual displacement; freed of his mortal body, he travels through space in spectral form. Looking back upon the Earth from his place among the stars, Lumen is afforded a glimpse into human history, the light emitted by Earth’s past having traveled for eons before catching his eye deep within space. These images of the past are, like Nic-Nac’s black cat, a projection. While Lumen cannot access the material of history, he can understand it by way of the images it casts off. Though the events he witnesses are not real, their visual rendering carries with it their

⁸ Flammarion’s work first appeared in Spanish in 1873, with the release of *La pluralidad de los mundos habitados* by influential Madrid-based publishing house Gaspar y Roig. *Contemplaciones científicas, Historia del cielo, Los mundos imaginarios y los mundos reales*, and *Narraciones del infinito, Lumen e Historia de un cometa* were published by the same organization over the course of the next two years (Cano, 97). These writings were also circulated within Argentina in the original French, and would have been accessible slightly earlier, during the late 1860s (Pagés Larraya, 45).

⁹ For a more complete account of Flammarion’s influence on Holmberg, see Cano, Luis C. *Los espíritus de la ciencia ficción : espiritismo, periodismo y cultura popular en las novelas de Eduardo Holmberg, Francisco Miralles y Pedro Castera*. Chapel Hill, U.N.C. Department of Romance Studies, 2017.

essence, allowing him to see them “as they were” without having to view their enactment firsthand.

Recounting his experience as a witness to the French Revolution, Lumen elaborates upon this process of historical projection. After describing what, exactly, he saw within the past, he offers the following commentary on his experience:

I was not present during the events of 1793, since that was the year of my birth, and I felt an inexpressible interest in being thus a witness of these scenes of which I had read in history. ... I was intensely interested at being thus a witness of this vanished epoch. But you may imagine how much greater was my surprise, and how much more I was astonished, *that I beheld in 1864 events actually present before me which had taken place at the end of the last century.* (30, emphasis in original)

While Lumen makes clear that he was and is not present during the events he sees projected, they are nonetheless present before him. Here, Flammarion’s use of the word “vanished” is noteworthy; while Lumen may be able to view the events of the Revolution, the act of viewing alone cannot resurrect the Revolution itself. What Lumen sees is not a moment in history, but the essence of this moment, reverberated throughout space. This idea is reaffirmed by Lumen’s own justification of his experience. Although Lumen himself is skeptical as to the reality of what he has seen, its truth is confirmed by the presence of other witnesses to the same vision: “the old men of the mountain had preceded me in observing these phenomena, and they had seen, and analyzed, and conversed on them as actual facts without knowing anything of the history of our world” (31). These men, unaware of the material which encases the events they perceive, in this case, the historical context in which the Revolution took place, are nonetheless capable of comprehending its meaning, reading its essence through a reflected image.

Within this explanation, Flammarion draws a clear distinction between things and their images. In response to his friend’s claim of having witnessed the revolution, Quaerens remarks:

“Visions are essentially illusory. We cannot admit their reality even though we see them” (30).

This sentiment is echoed several times throughout the dialogue: “It was no mirage, no vision, no spectre, no reminiscence, no image; it was reality” (48); “the real events of your life, not merely images of them” (53). As in Holmberg’s work, Flammarion’s images are at once divorced from the reality they reflect and tethered to it. Considering the possibility of other Earthly worlds, Lumen describes a series of planets both identical to and fundamentally distinct from Earth:

I asked myself if another world analogous to the Earth might not also be symmetrical to it; and then I worked out the geometry of the problem, and the metaphysical theory of images. I arrived at the conclusion that it was possible for the world in question to be like the Earth, but in an inverse form. When you look at yourself in a mirror, you notice that the ring on your right hand appears to be on the ring-finger of your left hand. This explains the symbol. [...] Nature of necessity repeats herself, reproduces herself, but still under all forms plays the game of creation. I thought therefore that the world on which I saw those things was not the Earth, but a globe like the Earth, the history of which was precisely the opposite of yours. (71-72)

Here, Flammarion suggests that Earth and its analogies are unified only through their incoherence; Lumen’s vision of the revolution is accurate only insofar as the world on which it occurs is the opposite of Earth. Within the theoretical system established, a truly symmetrical double of the planet would be impossible and, likewise, so too would the events occurring upon it. This system of inversion, a process of mirroring which simultaneously distorts reality and allows for it to be better understood, runs parallel to Holmberg’s earlier suggestions as to the nature of fiction. If serious ideas can only gain traction when cloaked in fantasy, then fiction itself becomes a kind of funhouse mirror, contorting the images of reality it reflects in order to reveal it at its most fundamental level.

Central to this analogy between event and image is the idea of the double, which both Holmberg and Flammarion return to at several points throughout their respective works. The black cat, perceived by Nic-Nac, is at once material and immaterial, flesh and image; the other

Earth which Lumen describes is analogous and yet not symmetric to our own. These images are at once diametrically opposed and intrinsically linked, dueling halves of the same fragmented whole. This idea of division is significant; within their respective works, these doubles are not mere doppelgangers but divergent aspects of the same Janus-faced entity; they do not exist individually, but instead complement one another within a system of totality. The workings of this system are further elaborated by Dr. Friedrich Seele, the German medium from whom Nic-Nac seeks spiritual counsel in the novel's second chapter:

El espíritu ... y particularmente el espíritu de cada uno de los hombres, no es sino un parte mínima de un espíritu universal, sólo y único, del cual es emanación directa. Así como al materia se compone de átomos, el espíritu universal está formado de espíritus atómicos, en los cuales existen todas las fuerzas que caracterizan la vida humana en su forma espiritual. En ellas las sensaciones se manifiestan con toda su pureza, y encierran la imájen, ó sea lo perceptible. Carecen de peso, de resistencia y de impenetrabilidad, pero son visibles por encerrar la imájen. (15)

This total integration is also the mechanism through which spirit images may be perceived:

“porque los sentidos del hombre forman parte de un espíritu, y como este es de la misma naturaleza que el otro, siendo ambos á su vez integrantes del espíritu universal, la imájen se percibe por medio de las funciones propias de los sentidos” (15-16).¹⁰

Here, this act of doubling is intimately linked to travel. If the cat's image can travel through space in order to pass through Nic-Nac's retina, Holmberg asks us, what would prevent the same from occurring with that of any other lifeform? In response to this question, the novel suggests two mechanisms by which the soul might travel: death and dreaming. The first of these

¹⁰ Here, Seele's use of the word “atómico” is of interest. As Nic-Nac himself remarks, there is something fundamentally contradictory about the idea of an atom composed of distinct parts: “cómo se explica que siendo el espíritu simple, puesto que le habeis denominado atómico, ó mejor aún, átomo espiritual, pueda constar de partes con fuerza propia, siendo así que la condición esencial del átomo es la de no tener partes” (16). As Pablo Crash Solomonoff notes in his annotations to Holmberg's text, this confusion might be attributable to contemporary uncertainties as to the existence of the atom, which was, at the time, more closely associated with philosophy than with positivist scientific thinking. Late nineteenth-century positivists maintained “que el átomo es incognoscible, lo mismo que el espíritu y el concepto de Dios. [...] El átomo que presenta como principio elemental de la materia, no se podría sujetar al examen de los sentidos y solo se acepta como una hipótesis” (qtd. in Crash Solomonoff, 41n20).

suggestions is made by Nic-Nac himself, who concludes that, given that the constitutive aspects of the “átomo espiritual” are but “cualidades que se manifiestan por vibraciones llamadas sentidos,” it is possible that, in death, “el espíritu se separa de la materia, conservando los sentidos y la imájen” (16). In response, Seele extends this possibility to the realm of the living:

Sí, y aún antes de la muerte. ¿No habéis observado que durante el ensueño todas las funciones corpóreas conservan su intensidad en el espíritu? ¿No habéis contemplado vuestra imagen flotando en el espacio a la manera de un ave o de un astro, y que esta imagen percibía todos los fenómenos sensibles? Y sin embargo, la materia estaba muerta, aunque los fenómenos vegetativos continuaban. (16)

Dreaming, like the interpretation of images or the reading of reality, is a fundamentally imaginative act. Just as the images which Holmberg and Flammarion describe must travel in order to reach their recipient, so too must the mind exit the conscious world in order to perceive the mysteries of the universe. To seek truth through dreams is to take yet another leap of faith, to understand the unconscious as not merely a synthesis of the waking world but as a world in its own right.

This discussion of death and dreaming provides the bridge between this metaphysical theory of images as an intellectual exercise and its practical application within the novel, Seele concluding his conversation with Nic-Nac with the suggestion that, should he choose to embark on the kind of spiritual journey which they have just discussed, he must first starve himself to death. Following his decision to do just this, Nic-Nac engages in a retreat into fantasy analogous to that of dreaming: “Iba a comenzar desde aquel momento a privarme de todo aquello que debilitara el espíritu, fortaleciendo la materia. Como prueba de mi energía, pasé el resto del día leyendo la descripción de las bodas de Camacho” (18). While this reference to *Don Quixote* is primarily of comedic value, a starving man testing his will by reading a description of a feast, it also signifies a dreamlike descent into the unreal. As Rachel Ferriera Haywood alerts us in her

reading of the novel,¹¹ the wedding of Camacho in the second volume of *Don Quijote* is the event which immediately precedes the episode of the Cave of Montesinos, one of the more overtly fantastic sections of the text. Upon being lowered into the cave, Quijote remarks: “de repente y sin procurarlo, me salteó un sueño profundísimo, y cuando menos lo pensaba, sin saber cómo ni cómo no, desperté dél y me hallé en la mitad del más bello, ameno y deleitoso prado que puede criar la naturaleza, ni imaginar la más discreta imaginación humana.” While his journey may have begun as a dream, Quijote makes clear several times that the events he witnesses in the company of Montesinos were not illusions, but in fact reality: “Despabilé los ojos, limpiémelos, y vi que no dormía, sino que realmente estaba despierto” (624-625). When Sancho Panza questions this version of events, pointing to the temporal discrepancy between the three-day length of Quijote’s supposed journey and the hour he spent within the cave, the good knight retorts: “como no estás experimentado en las cosas del mundo, todas las cosas que tienen algo de dificultad te parecen imposibles” (633). This allusion works as yet another injunction to look beyond the surface of Nic-Nac’s tale. If the aspects of the narration which follow are but a dream, an imaginative journey into the unconscious, then their value can be understood as existing not in their veracity but in their function as a synthesis of the conscious world. As *Don Quijote* himself remarks at the outset of the novel’s twenty-second chapter: “No se pueden ni deben llamar engaños . . . los que ponen la mira en virtuosos fines” (616).

Immediately following this section of the text, Cervantes himself alerts readers as to the potential falsities of Quijote's experience. Copying a note which he claims to have found written in the original manuscript of the text, he interrupts the narrative with the following notice:

si esta aventura parece apócrifa, yo no tengo la culpa, y, así, sin afirmarla por falsa o verdadera, la escribo. Tú, lector, pues eres prudente, juzga lo que te pareciere, que yo no

¹¹ For Haywood Ferreira’s analysis, see “The First Wave: Latin American Science Fiction Discovers Its Roots.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, SF-TH Inc, 2007, pp. 432–62

debo ni puedo más, puesto que se tiene por cierto que al tiempo de su fin y muerte dicen que se retrató della y dijo que él la había inventado, por parecerle que convenía y cuadraba bien con las aventuras que había leído en sus historias. (634-635)

This, once again, is a command to look beyond, to trust not simply the text, but one's own judgment of it.

These imaginative (and intuitive) leaps are once again linked to the act of doubling which occurs within the texts discussed. Movement between spaces, either physical locations or imaginative states, both produces a double and allows for the reconciliation of the two halves. Take, for example, Holmberg's description of Nic-Nac's death and the subsequent transportation of his soul to Mars. While Nic-Nac's death displaces his soul first from his body and then from that of the Earth itself, propelling him into the ether in a whirring mass of other spirits, it functions also as a form of unification. As Nic-Nac is made distant from his human body and from humanity as a whole, he is incorporated into what he terms the "universal soul". Indeed, he asks the reader, "¿Que es la luz sobre los mares, junto a estos átomos luminosos que centellean en torno mío, y que no son sino otros tantos espíritus integrantes del alma universal?" (22). This simultaneous displacement/unification is further enacted through the rapid spinning which propels the cloud of souls upwards in their journey towards Mars. At the speed with which the mass moves, the souls within it blur together, becoming indistinguishable from one another. As they continue their flight, they begin to literally overflow their bounds, spilling into others as they become distant from themselves: "El torbellino gira, ondula, se desborda, fluctúa y se aleja, y con él se alejan, fluctúan, se desbordan, ondulan y giran los espíritus, a semejanza de una niebla de luz arrastrada por un soplo divino" (22-23). Within this whirlwind of souls, identity is erased at the level of the individual and reconstituted as membership within the group at large. At

the same time, however, individual identity is reaffirmed, made distinct in its inextricability from that of others.

This fragmented, overflowing self, propelled upwards into the vastness of space, observes with a perspective both omniscient and ignorant. Nic-Nac himself, although “casi [tiene] ya el don de la omnisciencia,” consciously ignores the direction in which the mass of spirits travels (22). It is this perspective which, Holmberg suggests, allows for the world to be understood. In this fragmentary state Nic-Nac, “alma sin cuerpo, espíritu-imágen sin materia” can at last “penetrar los secretos de [su] nuevo mundo” (26). While Nic-Nac, once firmly on Martian soil, comments that he considers himself “mas ignorante que en la Tierra” (31), he quickly regains his powers of interpretation. As Seele counsels, Nic-Nac’s momentary ignorance is but the result of the newness of his body: “Es porqué no estáis habituado aún al cuerpo que aprisiona vuestro espíritu; — quizá en breve tiempo ois oiré lo contrario” (31). Once again, the body takes on a double role, at once a prison for the spirit and a means through which to become closer to it. While Nic-Nac’s new body limits his power of perception, rendering him momentarily ignorant of his surroundings, it suggests new possibilities for his interpretation of his environment. This ignorance, a feeling of foreignness both from one’s self and one’s surroundings, allows for the emancipation of the senses. Nic-Nac regains his powers of interpretation only through disorientation; he must lose himself in order to find meaning on Mars.

While Nic-Nac’s death splits him, literally, in two, dividing immortal soul from material body, it allows for the reconstitution of his being as a “spirit-image”, a visual representation which gives form to his soul’s essence. Thus, Nic-Nac’s division is also a form of unification, while he himself is split between Earth and Mars, he is made whole on each planet individually, rendered lifeless matter on Earth and embodied essence on Mars. Within both Holmberg’s and

Flammarion's writing, observation and exploration appear as parallel acts. In *Viaje maravilloso*, the interpretation of the world is a way of receiving an essentially foreign object; in order for something to be seen, and thus understood, its image must make its way towards the viewer. *Lumen*, likewise, describes images which must literally travel across space in order to be received. Observation, then, becomes a way of accessing the otherwise inaccessible. To observe is, to borrow a term from Moretti, to engage in a form of "distant reading," to receive what is foreign and to understand it within the context of one's own existence.

3. *Spirit Writing*:

In his 1922 work *Death and its Mystery* Flammarion further develops the "metaphysical theory of images" which he touches upon in "Lumen": "Every thought acts with more or less intensity, virtually as an agent that is called 'material' acts — as a projectile, a stone, a bit of metal, — and may project itself afar. If a man thinks of a murder, he emits into the air a murder-element" (84). Just as objects themselves project into the ether reflections of their essence, thoughts, also, are cast out into space. In this way, thought itself becomes a method of inscription; what is thought effectively re-writes reality, intruding upon and subsequently troubling perceptions of the visual world as an unbiased reflection of what exists. In attempting to make sense of what is seen, one must not only contend with reality itself, but with the ways in which others have interpreted it. Indeed, as Flammarion maintains in the epigraph to this chapter, "our thoughts act materially and carry with them a kind of effluvium. They may stamp themselves upon an object, upon a sheet of paper" (84). Every thinker of thoughts is thus an author of reality; thought is not merely a subjective interpretation of reality, but a constitutive aspect of it. Just as life itself can be read for the discernment of a deeper truth, so too, then, can it be written.

In her essay “Typewriter, Pianola, Slate, Phonograph: Recording Technologies and Automisation” Aura Satz interrogates this idea of spectral authorship. Examining the impact of new technologies of telecommunication on Victorian spiritualist practice, Satz details a process of progressive bodily alienation. As these technologies created greater distance between the working hand and the work it produced, functioning as intermediaries between human expression and its written record, so too did spiritualist practice become preoccupied with the performance of disembodiment, showcasing sights and sounds which do not originate within the body but instead from somewhere beyond. Central to Satz’s analysis is the role of the operator/medium, a similarly intermediary figure through whom distant messages may pass. A passive vehicle for communication, the operator/medium transcribes the words of others, herself alienated from the written work she produces. Despite this alienation, however, the operator/medium remains an integral aspect of the messages she relays. While her presence may be neglected, the information she communicates is necessarily suffused with it.

With spiritualist practice increasingly conceptualized in technological terms over the course of the nineteenth century, the medium was understood to be a type of mechanical messenger, much like the telegraph or telephone. As Allan Kardec, one of the leading theorists of spiritism at the time would suggest in 1857, “Mediums are simply electrical machines that transmit telegraphic dispatches from one point which is far away to another which is located on earth. Thus, when we wish to dictate a communication, we act upon the medium just as the telegraph employee does upon his apparatus” (qtd. in Satz, 37). This shift in perception was connected to a change in how the act of writing itself was conceptualized during the era. As Satz writes:

Writing was beginning to travel far beyond its writer with a temporal immediacy it had never before achieved, and this same feat suggested the reverse, that is to say, that the

writing originated from some far-away agent. The mediated distance of these technologies runs parallel with the concurrent prevalence of spirit writing, slate writing, and talking boards, or Ouija boards, in spiritualism, where authorship is relayed to the distant afterlife. (39)

Within this system, the physical act of writing, of transmitting information, is displaced from the idea of authorship, of creating something which can be transmitted. In this way, Flammarion's spiritualist writing of reality runs up against the kind of mediated writing which characterized much of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century spiritualist practice. While the two ideas might seem to contradict one another, however, they often combined. Satz writes that the mediated distance between text and writing hand "created the opposite effect of a persistent reassertion of the sense of presence heralded by the disembodied voice, and the tangible tactility of the hand. Thus, the hands of the medium are seen to remove themselves from the subject as they operate unconsciously ... and yet the entire experience is characterised by the reiteration of disembodied materialised hands floating nearby" (41). While the operator/medium, then, is removed from her own writing, her presence is both necessary to and inextricable from the act of spirit writing itself.

Within Holmberg's *Viaje maravilloso*, the author occupies both roles at once, becoming, through the act of literary transmission, both operator and medium. While Holmberg as Nic-Nac transcribes the events he witnesses so as to liberate their meaning from its material casing, Holmberg as the author of the work at large, more specifically, of the frame which encases Nic-Nac's narration, is but a medium through whom Nic-Nac's words pass. Just as reading, then, appears within the text as a form of travel, so too does the act of writing. Indeed, the separation of Nic-Nac's soul from his mortal body, one of the first moments of travel described within the novel, is accompanied by an act of spirit writing: "Junto a la mesa en que escribía, el médico que contribuyó a liberar mi espíritu, contempla azorado una hoja de papel sobre la cual van

apareciendo estas líneas espontáneamente” (21). The author of these lines, revealed in the next paragraph to be Nic-Nac’s “genio subordinado”, is implied here to also be the author of the book at large.¹² Like the medium who produces without creating, Nic-Nac writes without the conscious desire to express himself. The words which this “genio subordinado” writes appear automatically, unconnected to the will of their author; they are not products of desire but the result of the soul’s detachment from the body.

Following this detachment, the act of writing begins to appear with greater frequency. Here, however, the importance of the written word lies not in its transcriptive, but in its communicative function. After his arrival on Mars, Nic-Nac experiences “vivos deseo de hablar, pero de hablar con un individuo que me entendiera, o a quien yo pudiera entender” (41). This desire is reflective of a promise made by Seele early on in the novel, the medium advising Nic-Nac that once his soul has been freed from its material casing he will gain the ability to “comunicar directamente con el resto de los espíritus libres ó esclavos que pueblan los demás astros, ó bien los que habitan en el eter” (18). Indeed, it is only after Nic-Nac’s journey to Mars that the black cat, “ya no en espíritu-imájen sino en cuerpo real y tangible” (44), begins to speak, interrupting the narration with periodic meows. Once on Mars, Nic-Nac begins to write reality, surveying, describing, and naming with taxonomic detail. The novel’s seventh chapter consists entirely in a description of Martian geography, incidentally analogous to that of Earth. This information is not revealed within the narration but is instead presented as a sort of aside, Nic-Nac interrupting his own account with a verbal map of the planet. We are not told *how*, exactly, Nic-Nac comes to learn the names of the Martian continents, and yet within the novel

¹² Nic-Nac’s reference to “estas líneas” is necessarily vague. Within the context of this passage, his narration implies that *Viaje maravilloso* is being written at the same time that it is read (“estas líneas” being the lines which include “estas líneas”) or, alternatively, that Nic-Nac’s “genio subordinado” possesses the ability to foresee the events of the novel before they take place. While neither possibility is explored again, I believe that, as it pertains to this portion of the text, Nic-Nac’s claim deserves to be taken at face value, if only momentarily.

this naming is authoritative. When describing their location on the planet, Seele, who has been transported to Mars alongside Nic-Nac and the doctor present at the moment of his death, uses the same terms, implicitly validating Nic-Nac's observations.

Within these observations, Martian reality is created at the same time that it is described. In a kind of biblical turn, Seele, a guiding force on Mars as he was on Earth, allows Nic-Nac to name one of Mars's mountains after its Earthly counterpart. Noting the similarity between the Martian landscape and that of his homeland, he baptizes it "Nevado de Famatina". While this naming process is largely unofficial, occurring entirely between Nic-Nac and Seele, it nonetheless carries weight within the novel. When Nic-Nac, having discovered that Seele is not, in fact, a German medium but "el génio de la montaña", questions the validity of this naming ("Deseo saber, ante todo, por qué razón vos, Seele, alemán, sois el génio del Nevado de Famatina") he is met with derision: "Vos mismo le habeis dado este nombre; la culpa será, pues, vuestra. Si ello os desagrade, yo no puedo evitarlo" (38). Thus, Nic-Nac's naming of the land, initially a simple observation as to the geographical similarities between Mars and Earth, comes to constitute an act of creation. While Nic-Nac might doubt the applicability of the name he has chosen, he cannot choose another; the mountain, whatever its name before or after, has become, at least for the duration of the narrative, Nevado de Famatina.

At the same time, however, this baptizing of the land is somewhat tongue in cheek. When Nic-Nac remarks that, having stopped to eat in a Martian orange grove, he and the Doctor have "comido la primer fruta" (44), his companion responds, "la primera! pues si Adam hubiera hecho lo que acabáis de hacer, comiendose veintitres naranjas, seguramente no vuelve a curar de una formidable *entero-colitis*" (44-45). The Martian Eve, for her part, "será como todas. Tendrá cabeza, brazos, piernas, cuerpo, y algo que carece la Academia Española" (45).

Explorers of an unknown land, Nic-Nac and the Doctor set out to examine their new home. As the Doctor suggests: “Lo mejor que podemos hacer ... es examinar esta ciudad, luego sus habitantes, sus costumbres despues, y emprender una serie de investigaciones mas o menos útiles” (47). This series of investigations consist largely in observing and subsequently articulating what Nic-Nac and the Doctor understand Martian society to be. Like Nic-Nac’s contemplation of the black cat and Lumen’s witnessing the events of the French Revolution, these observations constitute another instance in which reality is read. Coming upon an unknown Martian city, the pair attempt to ascertain its essence by reading the plaque at its entrance. The city’s name, Theosophopolis, which the Doctor informs us means “City of God and Wise Men”, tells exactly what it contains: God and wise men.

Like the city itself, its inhabitants can also be read for the discernment of their essence. While the residents of Theopolis are taciturn and morose, the Sophopolitans, Nic-Nac informs us, are by nature creatures of communication: “No hemos podido aún oírles hablar, pero parece que la verbosidad es un rasgo muy propio ds su existencia. Las palabras, á juzgar por el continuo movimiento de sus labios, pierden allí su carácter de elemento de relacion indispensable, para convertirse en flujo crónico” (50). This judgment is once again both an observation and an act of creation; while Nic-Nac has yet, at this point, to interact with the Sophopolitans, his assessment of their character is nonetheless revealed to be correct.

At the funeral of one of the Sophopolitans, the first Martian event to which Nic-Nac and the Doctor are witness, Nic-Nac spots a hidden writer: “tenia una cartera abierta en la mano izquierda, y mientras observaba la ceremonia, interrumpia de cuando en cuando su examen para mirar el reloj que llevaba en la misma mano, en tanto que con la derecha, trazaba en la cartera algunas lineas, al parecer apuntes,” (69). The writer, revealed at the end of the chapter to be a

local madman, is one of the novel's many doubles. Just as Nic-Nac himself attempts to represent Martian reality through the transcription of his experience there, so too does the Martian madman, albeit with a more explicit, and explicitly sinister purpose. Passing by the man as he exits the temple, Nic-Nac and the Doctor pass overhear the following calculation: "dado la cantidad de oxígeno que encierra un volumen determinado de gas producido por la evaporacion de un Sophopolitano, averiguar los medios de quemar los barrios de Theopolis con todos sus habitantes" (71).

This kind of insane authorship returns us once again to the concept of mediumship. As Jill Galvan describes in *The Sympathetic Medium*, automatic writing "reminds us that séance mediumship involved not only a sensitive body but also, in many cases, compromised psychological control over that body. Mediumship helped to inform the Victorians' understanding of automatic behaviors, which entailed a reversion to a partly or wholly unconscious state" (62). In their function as conduits through which information about reality may pass, both Nic-Nac and the Martian madman are thus displaced from the conscious world and relegated to a place of insanity. This displacement, like the acts of travel which occur throughout the novel, functions to divide the characters in two, marking them as both wise and insane. At the same time, then, that the men exist as producers of knowledge, the knowledge they produce is marked as suspect. This mark of suspicion sets the stage for the next portion of Nic-Nac's journey, one which concerns not the reception of information, but its transmission.

Chapter 2:

“Every new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts.”

John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air*

1. *Una cuestión de baile y de telégrafo: Argentina at Communicative Crossroads*

In an 1871 caricature published in the satirical newspaper *El Mosquito*, telegraphic communication is depicted as a kind of dance (*Figure 1*). The drawing, which appears under the heading “Actualidad,” shows a monkey with a human face suspended in midair as he hops along a telegraphic cable. This wire-dancing monkey-man is urged forward by another man, who stands below him dressed as a lion tamer, whip in hand. It is captioned, succinctly, “Una cuestión de baile y de telégrafo.” Here, the dance depicted is not an expression of the self but one of circumstance. The man atop the wires moves not in accordance with any internal desire to do so (that is, to pursue pleasure), but along the lines imposed by those around him (to avoid pain, in this case, the sting of the whip). Put differently, this dance is not communicative in a typical sense; it does not express anything of the individual, but rather, the larger forces which compel the individual to act. Telegraphic communication is thus as coercive as it is connective, the same technology which worked to enable contact between individuals ultimately functioning to implicate them within a system of obligation.

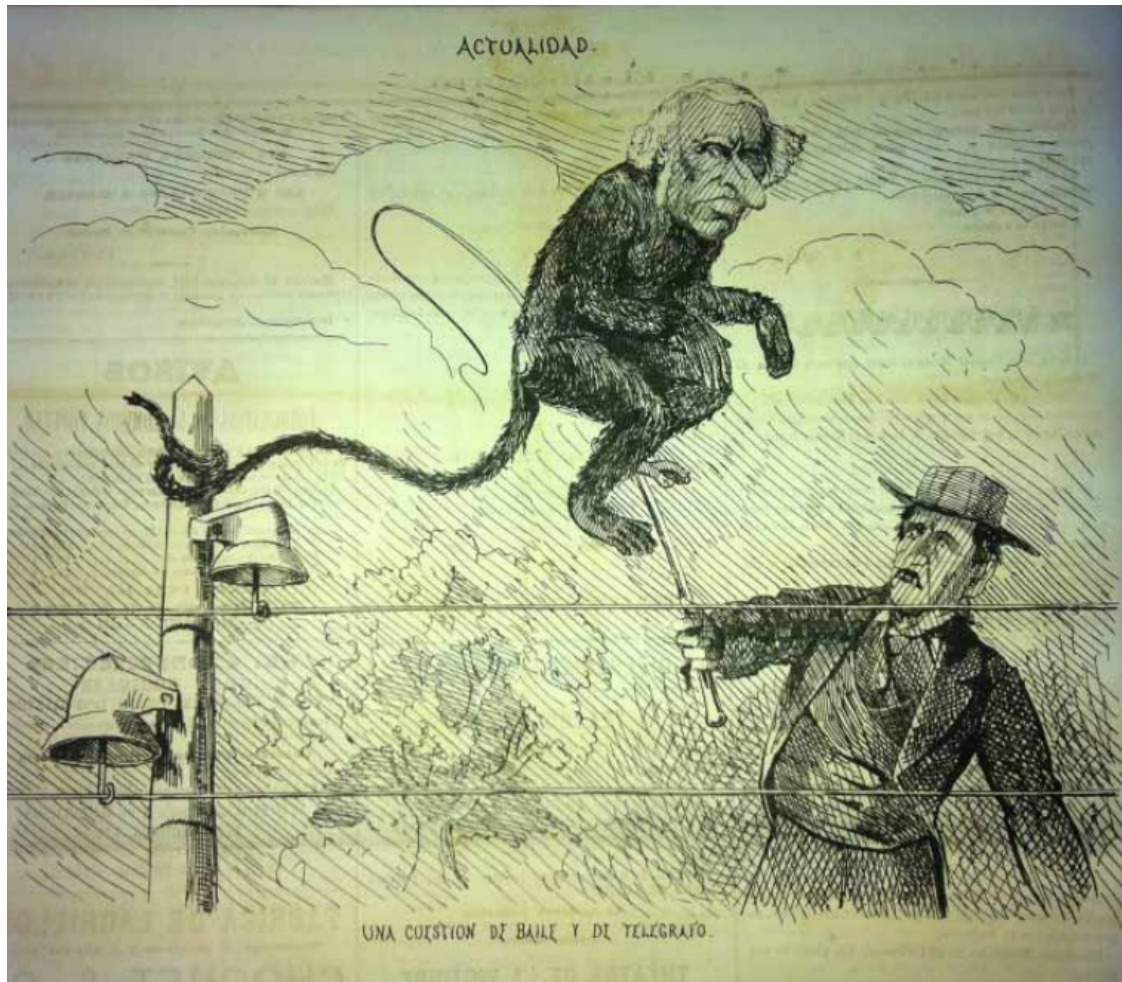


Figure 1: *El Mosquito*. 22 Oct. 1871: 2. “Una cuestión de baile y de telégrafo.” Reproduced in Bottaro, Mayra. “Wiring the Body, Wiring the World: Accelerated Times and Telegraphic Obsessions in Nineteenth Century Latin America.” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2014.

As rapid, cross-global communication became increasingly feasible during the nineteenth century, fears began to surface as to the possibility of this communication’s breakdown. At the same time that new communication technologies brought people together, they worked to create distance, emphasizing the gaps which existed between individuals. This distance was not just physical, but relational, telegraphic networks making plain the imbalance of power inherent to the relationship between producers and consumers of information. The telegraph as an instrument of control was a recurrent theme in Latin American print media during the latter half of the nineteenth century, scientific discourses on telegraphy mixing freely with theories of

political economy as newspapers like *El Mosquito* fought to control public opinion on the new technology. Indeed, in an 1873 cartoon which appeared in the October 12 edition of the publication, the theme of tightrope walking appears again, albeit attached to a slightly different notion of telegraphic power. In the image, then-president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento uses a telegraphic cable to, quite literally, transcend the constitution, which lies below his feet as he marches across the wires (*Figure 2*). The caption reads: “¡Imbeciles! Como si el Presidente no pudiera estar en todas partes! ¡La Constitucion [sic]! ¿Sin el Presidente, sin yo, que es ella? Y yo el presidente, para que la necesito?”

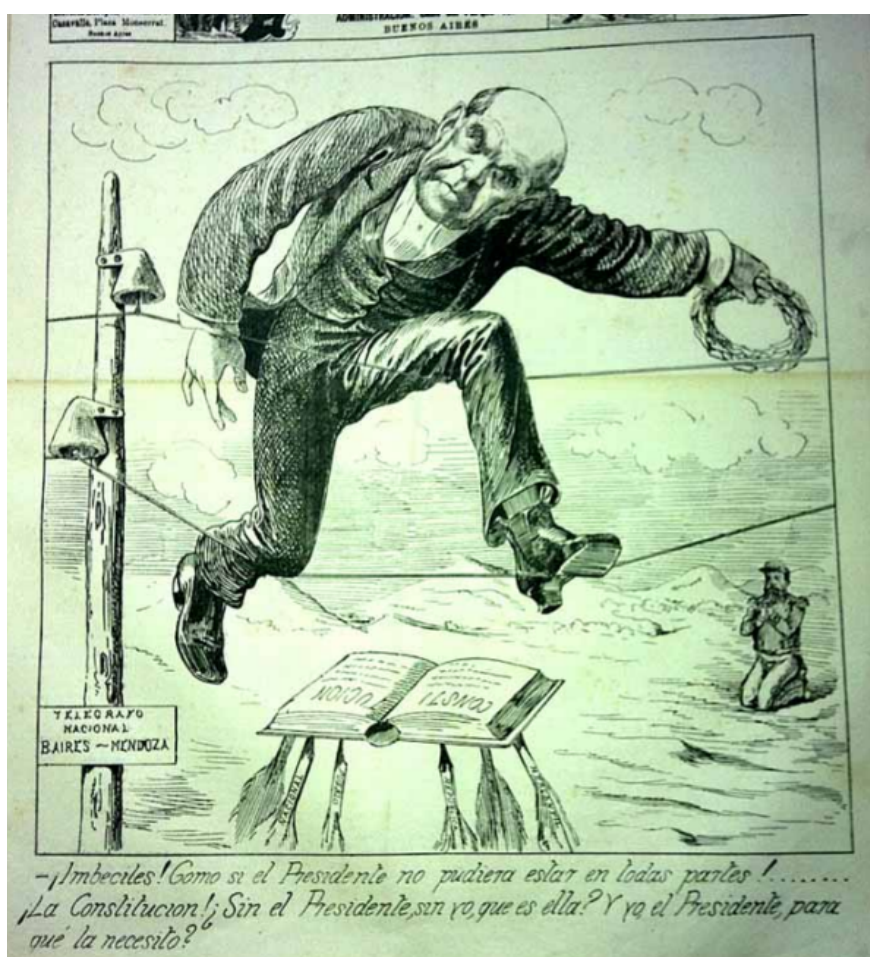


Figure 2: El Mosquito. 12 Oct. 1873: 1. “¡Imbeciles! Como si el Presidente no pudiera estar en todas partes! ¡La Constitucion! ¿Sin el Presidente, sin yo, que es ella? Y yo el presidente, para que la necesito?” Reproduced in Bottaro, Mayra. “Wiring the Body, Wiring the World: Accelerated Times and Telegraphic Obsessions in Nineteenth Century Latin America.” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2014.

Further complicating this question of power was the specter of incommunicability, the ever present fear of communication's impossibility. In his 1999 history of communication, *Speaking Into the Air*, John Durham Peters points to the concept's status as both a bridge and a chasm, the very idea of communication calling up both "the dream of instantaneous access and the nightmare of the labyrinth of solitude" (5). At once a mechanism for the bridging of gaps and a marker of their very existence, the communication technologies which dominated the late nineteenth-century psyche were an ever present marker of the contradictions inherent to the society of the time. Indeed, at the same time that these technologies suggested new paths forward, the lines of communication which they offered were necessarily marked by a sense of precarity. Nineteenth-century citizens were, like *El Mosquito's* tightrope walking monkey-man, left in a state of suspension, the whip of technological modernization at their backs and the nightmare of incommunicability below their feet. One misstep, and they risked a fall into the abyss.

As Peters argues, interpersonal communication as understood within contemporary discourse became possible only following the advent of mass or mediated communication. This is not to suggest that communication as such came into existence only following the introduction of mass communication technology, but that it was, and is, necessarily understood within a more general context of how information travels. Communication is not, then, a freestanding process enabled by communication technologies, but rather, the byproduct of the communication technologies in existence during any given era. Just as ideas of communication in the twenty-first century are a necessary byproduct of the internet's omnipresence, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century communication was haunted by the specter of the telegraph. My use of the word haunted here is intentional: during the period in question, telegraphic communication was

frequently associated with a kind of spectral presence. Indeed, much as communication itself was conceived in relation to the telegraph, so too was it understood through the lens of spiritualism.

Peters writes:

Spiritualism, and its later scientizing offshoot physical research, is a chief vehicle for the formation of ideas about communication in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The word, voice, or image of a person dead or distant channeling through a delicate medium: this is the project common to electric media and spiritualist communication. Indeed, all mediated communication is in a sense communication with the dead, insofar as media can store ‘phantasms of the living for playback after bodily death.’ (142)

The telegraph, perhaps the most emblematic technology of the modern, is an almost perfect kind of spiritualist machinery, a form of “communication without embodiment, contact achieved by the sharing of spiritual (electrical) fluids” (Peters, 139). While telegraphic contact was necessarily mediated, both by the telegraph itself and by the workers who operated it, the invisibility of these mediating forces enabled the fantasy of instantaneous, soul to soul communication which this new technology promised. As Peters notes, “the nineteenth century saw unprecedented transformations in the conditions of human contact, along two axes in particular: transmission and recording. The key changes are registered in the terms tele- and -graphy, so ubiquitous in subsequent media nomenclature. Tele- suggests a new scale of distances ... -graphy suggests new forms of inscription” (138).

Not only did telegraphy prompt a revolution in transmission and recording, but it suggested possibilities for the radical restructuring of the world as such. As Peters comments, “The capturing and dispersion of signals meant that the visual and auditory signs were no longer tied to the presence of the person’s body.” Put differently, “the separation of communication from transportation meant the conjuring of a parallel universe in which personal replicas dwelled and abided by laws other than those that apply to us mortals” (140). This parallel universe is not a mere double, then, of our own, but a completely different realm of possibility. The telegraphic

selves which reside within this universe are not only eternal, their presence outside of time and space allowing them to extend beyond the mortal lives of the individuals they replicate, but they are unconstrained by the laws which govern interpersonal interaction. As Mayra Bottaro argues “new media technologies modify bodies’ capabilities and create different connections to what lies outside them, giving bodies different ways of registering the world; they can change, for example, the relationships of bodies to discourse and language.” Thus, she concludes, “The telegraph dramatically altered understandings not only of communication but of textuality itself, of the status and power of externalized language” (434).

During a period of rapid modernization, and one of ever increasing global interconnectedness, this hypothetical new world took on a new significance, especially among members of Argentina’s intellectual community. By 1885, Argentina was home to over 600 telegraph offices, more than twice that of any other country in Latin America. This development represented the culmination of an almost 40 year process, first news of the new technology reaching the country in 1847 through Sarmiento himself, who came into contact with the telegraph in the course of his travels through France and the United States (Bottaro, 423). In the Argentine context, advances in communication technology enabled a rapid contraction in the virtual physical space of the nation, allowing for faster, more functional communication within its borders. With the passage of the 1875 “Telegraph Law”, Argentina’s government gained the ability not only to expropriate private lands for the construction of telegraphic wires, but to make use of the country’s natural resources in the construction of telegraphic posts. This process, Bottaro alerts us, was necessarily one of conquest, not merely of the land itself, but of the indigenous peoples who populated it. Among the logistical problems which the internal frontier posed to telegraphic expansion was the interference of indigenous communities, who made

frequent attacks on telegraphic lines in their struggle against the government's militia (426). At the same time that the telegraph allowed for the deletion of distance within the nation's interior, it also worked to enable the collapse of international space, most significantly, that of the Atlantic. Within a technologically modernized Argentina, communication with the outside world (Western Europe and the United States being of specific importance) was occurring more quickly, and with fewer interruptions, than ever before. As Eduardo L. Ortiz puts it, "The submarine cable removed time lags: Argentina ceased to live in the history of history, taking the pulse of the present, as events happened" (68).

This said, just as developments in the field of communication brought about fears of communicative breakdown elsewhere in the world, so too did they provoke latent anxieties within Argentina. As Nora Catelli and Marietta Gargatagli demonstrate persuasively in *El tabaco que fumaba Plinio*, an anthology of "escenas de la traducción" in Spain and Latin America, the idea of translation appears frequently within discourse on the construction of Argentine national identity. Here, fragmented or incomplete translations exist as both a source of anxiety, giving form to fears of communication's impossibility, and a point of departure from which new ideas begin to emerge. Much like translation (and spiritualism, as we saw earlier), telegraphic communication is a process of carrying over. The information it relays is, by necessity, mediated and, as such, subject to human error. At the same time, then, that translation and telegraphic communication allowed for a strengthening of the nation's virtual borders, so too did they threaten to dissolve them.

In a letter dated December 30, 1875, Juan Maria Gutierrez articulates his rejection of the Real Academia Española's offer of membership in terms of a defense of Argentine linguistic identity. Gutierrez's rejection, however, is not founded on linguistic grounds (his Spanish is

ultimately interchangeable with that of his interlocutor), but “por razones que nacen del estado social que nos ha deparado la emancipación política de la antigua metrópoli” (qtd. in Catelli and Gargatagli, 382). As Catelli and Gargatagli remark in their notes on the letter, those active in the intellectual circles of the time held the conviction that “La lengua de América debía ser la expresión de repúblicas libres, la de España —la misma pero también otra— se les figuraba un modelo exterior de oscurantismo y atraso” (381). The language of Spain is, here, not only a link to a past which the Argentine intellectual community sought to move beyond, but a potential limit to the nation’s future. Gutierrez and his contemporaries saw language as the mechanism through which Argentina might develop itself, not merely in cultural terms, but within national literature and science. It is upon these grounds that Gutierrez raises the following questions:

¿Estará en nuestro interés crear obstáculos a una avenida que pone tal vez en peligro la gramática, pero puede ser fecunda para el pensamiento libre? [...] ¿Qué interés verdaderamente serio podemos tener los americanos en fijar, en inmovilizar, al agente de nuestras ideas, al cooperador en nuestro discurso y raciocinio? ¿Que puede llevarnos a hacer esfuerzos por que al lenguaje que se cultiva a las márgenes del Manzanares, se amolde y esclavice el que se transforma, como cosa humana que es, a las orillas de nuestro mar de aguas dulces? ¿Quién podrá constituirmos en guardianes celosos de una pureza que tiene por enemigos a los mismos peninsulares que se avecinan en esta Provincia? (qtd. in Catelli and Gargatagli, 384)

Here, the importance of language lies in its intranational, as opposed to international, function.

The communicative role of language, as conceptualized by Gutierrez, is not to enable the passage of information between countries, in this case Argentina and Spain, but to provide a means through which individuals within a single nation might come to share an understanding of their national circumstance. Notice Gutierrez’s repeated use of the word “nuestro.” Spanish, here, is no longer simply Spanish as such, but “our Spanish,” a language in its own right and, subsequently, something vulnerable to the perils of translation.

Gutierrez himself suggests as much. The linguistic element which he identifies as most quintessentially Argentine, the plurality of language and dialect within the nation's borders, is also, he suggests, one of the country's greatest challenges, in his words: "uno de los datos con que grandes problemas sociales han de resolverse" (383). In his description of the country's linguistic environment, Gutierrez contrasts the fluidity of everyday language with what he understands to be the "immobility" of the academic register:

En las calles de Buenos Aires resuenan los acentos de todos los dialectos italianos, a par del Catalan que fue el habla de los trovadores, del gallego en que el Rey Sabio compuso sus cantigas, del francés del norte y mediodía, del galense, del inglés de todos los condados, etc., y estos diferentes sonidos y modos de expresión cosmopolitan nuestro oído y nos inhabilitan para intentar siquiera la inamovilidad de la lengua nacional en que se escriben nuestros numerosos periódicos, se dictan y discuten nuestras leyes, y es vehículo para comunicarnos unos con otros los porteños. (383)

Thus, while linguistic plurality might enliven Argentine Spanish, this new dialect, and the European languages which influence it, necessarily run up against the language of bureaucracy. Once again, communication appears as both a bridge and a chasm. While developments in communicative style, in this case, language itself, open the door to radical possibilities for social restructuring, they also threaten the framework upon which society itself is founded.

Just as ideas of translation were instrumental in constructing an Argentine linguistic identity within the Spanish language, so, too, were they crucial in the nation's dealings with surrounding indigenous communities. First published in Buenos Aires in 1881, Estanislao Zeballos' *Viaje al país de los araucanos* relates a scene from the author's 1879 expedition to La Pampa. Following the discovery of a paper half-buried in the side of a sand dune by a soldier attached to their party, Zeballos and his team unearth the library of Mapuche chief Calfucurá. Buried within are not only records of the *cacicazgo's* communication with settlers, but the very materials which enabled these interactions to occur:

Estaban alii ... las comunicaciones cambiadas de potencia a potencia entre el gobierno argentino y los caciques araucanos, las cartas de los jefes de las fronteras, las cuentas de comerciantes que ocultamente servían a los vándalos, las listas de las tribus indígenas y sus jefes, dependientes del cacicazgo de Salinas, los sellos gubernativos grabados en metal, las pruebas de complicidad de los salvajes en las guerras civiles de la república a favor y en contra alternativamente de los partidos, *y en medio de tan curiosos materiales no faltaba un diccionario de la lengua castellana*, de que se servían los indígenas para interpretar las comunicaciones del ejército argentino, de los jefes militares, de sus espías (este archivo muestra que eran numerosos) y de los comerciantes. (qtd. in Catelli and Gargatagli, 380, emphasis added)

Published in 1876, Lucio V. Mansilla's *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* likewise stresses the significance of translation in mediating between European and Indigenous understandings of the world:

Ser lenguaraz, es un arte difícil; porque los indios carecen de los equivalentes de ciertas expresiones nuestras. El lenguaraz no puede traducir literalmente, tiene que hacerlo libremente, y para hacerlo como es debido ha de ser muy penetrante. Por ejemplo, esta base; Si usted tiene conciencia debe tener honor, no puede ser vertida literalmente; porque las ideas morales que implican conciencia y honor no las tienen los indios. Un buen lenguaraz, según me ha explicado Mora, diría: Si usted tiene corazón, ha de tener palabra, o si usted es bueno no me ha de engañar. (qtd. in Catelli and Gargatagli, 394)

Of interest in both passages is the direction in which language travels. While Gutierrez's Spanish transforms itself to accommodate the presence of European immigrants in Argentina, it does not change in relation to the region's indigenous communities. While Spanish is translated into indigenous languages and vice versa, little linguistic hybridization appears to occur. Mansilla's assertion that gaps in translation occur "porque los indios carecen de los equivalentes de ciertas expresiones nuestras" is key to understanding this unidirectional translation process. Here, the imagined disjunction in communication between settlers and their indigenous interlocutors is not merely a problem of language, but one of concepts. If language is, as Rama claims "el instrumento que con mayor alcance regía el orden simbólico de la cultura" (68), then this refusal to hybridize necessarily places the two groups at odds with one another, complicating the very idea of communication's possibility.

Holmberg himself had a personal stake in both of these national linguistic processes. At the time of *Viaje maravilloso*'s publication in *El Nacional*, Holmberg belonged to a literary society known as "La Academia Argentina." The group, among other things, collected and published definitions of common "argentinismos", creating a dictionary of over 4,000 words which they donated to the country's Instituto de Investigaciones.¹³ Similar to his interest in documenting Argentina's language was Holmberg's lifelong involvement in the exploration of the country's interior. On these expeditions, Holmberg and fellow researchers acted not only as geologists and geographers, but as archaeologists, linguists, and folklorists, both introducing rural Argentina as a topic of academic discussion and producing an understanding of the country's interior as home to supposedly authentic Argentine tradition.¹⁴ By the time of the novel's publication, Holmberg had already participated in several scientific expeditions within Argentina. Retracing Darwin's steps through Las Pampas and into Patagonia, a journey which appears, fictionalized, in his first novel *Dos partidos en lucha*, Holmberg came into direct contact with members of Argentina's indigenous population for the first time. This encounter influenced Holmberg's work throughout his life, though it appears most notably in his 1910 epic poem *Lin-Calél*, a work of *indigenista* writing composed on the centennial anniversary of Argentina's independence.

¹³ Holmberg was not only invested in the study of language, but in *how* language was to be studied. Antonio Pagés Larraya relates a (possibly apocryphal) exchange between Holmberg and a defender of "el método filológico para el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras" at an 1896 conference: "que se afirme que sólo la filología puede realizar la enseñanza de los idiomas entre nosotros, es casi un insulto a los programas oficiales, que, buenos o malos, valen más que todas las filologías enseñadas a muchachos de 15 años, que no han aprendido con ellas ni griego, ni latín, ni inglés, ni francés, y que no saben, a pesar de ellas, distinguir entre un alia y un farol." A month later, Holmberg would give his own conference on the subject, declaring that "[la filología] ciencia de un tanto imaginativa y, por consiguiente, sujeta a contradicciones, no es de aplicación práctica en la enseñanza secundaria. Los idiomas no son consecuencia sino base de la filología, y para compararlos es necesario conocerlos previamente. Un cerebro joven tiene hambre de hechos y no de teorías" (qtd. in Pagés Larraya, 26).

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the geographic exploration of Argentina's interior and its sociocultural ramifications, see Oscar Chamosa's *The Argentine Folklore Movement: Sugar Elites, Criollo Workers, and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism, 1900-1955*, University of Arizona Press, 2010.

More specific to Holmberg's own experience were debates concerning Argentina's trajectory as a nation. Topics of particular interest to Holmberg himself included education, immigration, and the relationships between science, religion, and the state, as well as that between intellectuals and the masses. For Holmberg, and for many others of his generation, these interests crystalized in the push to improve scientific literacy within the country. As Gutierrez notes, late nineteenth-century Argentina saw a massive influx of European immigrants, a development which, for many, threatened to reveal "a lack of unity at the heart of the Argentine nation, which had no shared language, race, culture, or history on which to erect a national sensibility" (Page, 22). This wave of immigration, which brought with it the subsequent problems of linguistic and cultural difference, put at risk not merely racial concepts of nationhood, but those founded upon shared values. In this context, "The nation is unable to function, as it should, as a space for reasoned debate, the exchange of views among equals, and the education of all" (Page, 22). With this in mind, Holmberg's literary production can be viewed not only as an attempt to make scientific knowledge accessible, but as an effort to establish a discursive community insulated from the perils of social difference.

2. *Communication on Mars*

Within the novel, we see these fears of communication's impossibility represented in the communicative breakdown which occurs between characters, as well as through the distance between Nic-Nac's understanding of the world and that of his contemporaries. This breakdown occurs first on Earth, with the dissemination of Nic-Nac's story in the local press. Not only does the transmission of Nic-Nac's tale interrupt the spread of serious, political news, but it also creates a rift between those who believe him and those who do not. In this, *El Viaje Marviloso* divides communication on two fronts: first, it momentarily stops the flow of information from

the press to the people, not only distracting readers from legitimate news but also impacting subsequent perceptions of said news; second, it interrupts communication between individuals, presenting an issue which must be debated and thus, if only for a short time, putting other conversations on pause. This division is representative not merely of a problem of trust, but one of how, exactly, information is relayed. Rather than being understood on its own, news of Nic-Nac's journey is interpreted in light of similar attempts: "algunos pretenden que el viaje es impracticable y se apoyan en el mal éxito que han tenido otras tentativas análogas" (3). His narrative, then, is necessarily mediated not only by the newspaper as a form, but by the discourse which surrounds it.

More abstractly, the written dissemination of the account creates a rift between its status as a personal retelling and its existence within the culture at large as a piece of work to be analyzed. Nic-Nac's first person narration of his experience on Mars functions as both an instance of person-to-person communication and communication between one individual and the masses. While popular fiction "crea otro mundo, quizá utópico, realidad virtual compartida entre amigos" (Marún, 28), this process was necessarily troubled by modernization:

Con el proceso de democratización de la modernidad, empieza a desintegrarse la élite cultural y paulatinamente se produce una integración de las culturas que incide en la democratización de los textos. Desaparecen las distinciones entre cultura alta y baja, y el mercado es ahora el gran filtro de estos textos. Ya no ocurre, como antes, que las personas pueden tener una conversación de sobremesa sobre un tema común o algún libro, es decir personas que han visto las mismas pinturas, escuchando los mismos conciertos, leído los mismos libros. (Marún, 29)

Thus, while the transmission of information through the press might offer a chance at the democratization of knowledge, the communicative possibilities it presented were hampered by the heterogeneity of its audience.

While Holmberg establishes the problem of communication early on in his writing, it is only on Mars that we see the results of this communicative rupture brought forth to their fullest extent. Nic-Nac's spiritualist interpretation of the world around him is a largely hermeneutic exercise wherein he "reads" images textually so as to discern within them a hidden meaning. This reading is not only an individual practice (that is, Nic-Nac draws his conclusions alone and his narration is presented as authoritative in its representation of his experience) but it is a practice of individual disembodiment. It is worth noting once again that Nic-Nac is only able to undertake this analysis of his environment once separated from his body on Earth. In his own attempt at apprehending reality, Nic-Nac deals in essences, abstractions of what supposedly "is". When placed in conversation with those of others, however, these interpretations of the world run up against alternative readings.

The core belief of spiritualism, according to Peters, is that "Communication happens best when bodies and language are transcended in favor of more ethereal modes of thought transference" (64). "Meaning," he writes, "is separable from media, content from form. Signs, like bodies, are the containers of spirit." The task of communication, then, "is to move beyond, behind, or above sign-bodies to the immediate purity of meaning-minds" (64). Within this system of belief, words themselves are harbingers of communicative breakdown as their meaning cannot be standardized across contexts. Within a society already divided, the instability of words portends an even greater danger. In this context, words present not only the opportunity for misinterpretation, but for interpretation in bad faith, communication blocked not only by a lack of understanding but by deliberate misunderstanding.

Within Theosophopolis, communication between the inhabitants of the two cities is not simply lacking, but is presented as wholly impossible. In direct contrast with the spiritualist unity

of Nic-Nac's observed world, Theosophopolitan society is fundamentally divided amongst itself. While Nic-Nac's perception of the world makes clear the interconnectedness of things, his experience on Mars emphasizes the profound lack of unity inherent to modern society. This social fragmentation is represented first in religious terms. While the inhabitants of Theosophopolis are, like all Martians, Christian, the residents of Theopolis are "cristianos transformados", perverted by a divergent understanding of religious doctrine. As the ciccerone who guides Nic-Nac through the city remarks: "el rasgo caracteristico de su vida es la exaltacion de una cualidad abominable: la hipocresía; y esta cualidad, convertida por ellos en dogma, ha derramado mas males sobre Marte que todos las guerras y abusos Marciales" (78). This religious understanding of social disjunction meshes nicely with the spiritualist framework which is articulated earlier on in the novel. As Melanie Nicholson argues in the introduction to her work *Evil, Madness, and the Occult in Argentine Poetry*, the esoteric worldview is "a profoundly religious stance, if we take *religious* in its original sense of *religare*, meaning 'to bind back.'" She continues: "Virtually all esoteric thought begins with the principle of primordial unity, the notion that the world as we know it is the result of a fall, the shattering of an original whole. Human existence, in this view, takes on meaning only to the extent that it participates in the effort to bind back the fragmented elements, to reunite existence and essence, the contingent and the absolute" (xiii). While Theosophopolis itself is the product of a fall of sorts, the theft of the Sophopolitan women a kind of original sin which mars all subsequent interactions between residents of the city, its inhabitants are left divided as to their stance on reunification. While the Sophopolitans, men of science, dedicate their lives to the pursuit of absolute truth, the Theopolitans luxuriate in hypocrisy. Their desire is not to "bind back", but to live within the areas of fragmentation which the fall has produced.

Only a few pages later, Nic-Nac witnesses an instance of this hypocrisy firsthand. After a seemingly polite encounter with a Theopolitan woman (she bids he and the Doctor farewell with a simple “que el espíritu bueno os acompañe”), our hero is confronted with the disjunction between the woman’s words and the apparent motivation behind them:

Pero ¡oh desgracia! un viento súbito levantó su falda, y vimos brillar una especie de culebra de acero, símbolo talvez del *espíritu bueno* que nos hubiera acompañado si hubiésemos aceptado su invitacion. Y sobretodo ¿qué peor espíritu que la presencia de sus mujeres horribles, cuyas manos, segun se nos acababa de decir, eran manos cadavéricas en brazos animados? Nó, mil veces nó. (80)

Nic-Nac’s attention to the woman’s hands is telling. Throughout his travels thus far, the significance of writing has been emphasized repeatedly; in Nic-Nac’s spiritualist reception of the world, writing functions as an act of incantation, the crossing of the threshold between the “here” and the “somewhere else”. Indeed, as noted in the first chapter of this paper, Nic-Nac’s own death, and his passage into the Martian otherworld is accompanied by an act of spirit writing, the spontaneous apparition of written words on the page. As Peters asserts: “The communicative stance of the dead can only be one of dissemination.” Indeed, “The dead are tutors in the art of reading traces where dialogue is impossible. Communication with the dead is the paradigm case of hermeneutics: the art of interpretation where no return message can be received” (149). Nic-Nac, dead on Earth and alive on Mars, occupies a unique position within this framework. As he takes in the world around him, Nic-Nac “reads traces” so as to make sense of his environment. At the same time, he disseminates these interpretations, like the dead, in a manner which is wholly one-sided. While Nic-Nac’s story exists within the realm of public discourse, he is incapable of receiving the return messages of his audience.

In his encounter with the Theopolitan woman, Nic-Nac is faced with the very problem which his own account presents to readers. The Theopolitan woman, like Nic-Nac, occupies a

liminal space between life and death; while her hands are those of a corpse, they come attached to living arms. Unlike Nic-Nac, however, whose writing hand is liberated by death, the woman's hands are rendered inert. The arms which move these hands are not alive but simply "animated", set in motion by an unknown, outside force. While Nic-Nac's death, then, performs a communicative function, allowing him to better understand, and later transmit, the world beyond his own, the dead hands of the Theopolitan woman serve only to represent communication's absence. No unity exists between the woman's words and her actions, her existence and her essence. Her hands do not write so as to transcribe a hidden truth; they can provoke only horror.

The problem of communication between Sophopolitans and Theopolitans extends beyond the realm of the interpersonal, going so far as to impact the legal structure of the city. As the cicerone tells Nic-Nac, "Todos los Theopolitas prefieren el mas extraño aislamiento. El gobierno podría someterlos á la ley general, pero comprendéis bien que por antipáticos que ellos sean, no por esto se les debe obligar á modificar por completo su costumbre; no molestan á nadie (solo una vez lo hicieron), no tratan de hacer propaganda de sus principios negativos; hé ahí por qué no se les obliga" (96). Despite residing within the same geographic space as the Sophopolitans, the Theopolitans exist outside of Sophopolitan legal structure. Their legal autonomy, however, is not a product of their status as a protected class, for instance, but a condition of their continued noninterference with the functioning of Sophopolis. This unspoken agreement is, at best, a placeholder. When Nic-Nac inquires as to what might happen should the Theopolitans cease their compliance, the cicerone responds, flatly: "Incendiaríamos so ciudad, como la incendiaremos tambien el dia que tengamos suficiente enerjía para vengar la afrenta que nos hicieron en épocas pasadas" (96).

3. *Textual Transmission: The Martian Press and Narrative Negation*

Even within Sophopolis, a city supposedly united in its scientific ambitions, communication between citizens is stunted by petty rivalry, Nic-Nac witnessing a series of nasty spats between scientists of different academic disciplines as he makes his way through the city. Within the Academy itself, which functions both as an intellectual and judicial forum, communication fares no better, the transmission of information subject to frequent debate, as are the laws which regulate it. During the academic session in which Nic-Nac participates during his time in the city, this topic appears almost immediately: “en la conferencia anterior se ha tratado de una cuestion importantísima, cual es de un juicio critico publicado no ha mucho en uno de los periodicos de esta ciudad” (101). Here, the issue of criticism in the press is not merely a problem of unprofessionalism or of potential misinformation, but one of security; as one member of the academy counsels, “El articulo crítico, señor presidente, debe haber sido escrito, á no dudarlo, por un Theopolita” (103).

Taken together, these considerations prompt the speaker to ask the following questions of his audience:

¿tiene derecho un individuo de servirse de la prensa como de un vil instrumento de venganza? ¿Puede impunemente insultar al país en que vive, desacreditarlo, ultrajarlo, difamarlo, so pretexto de criticar un libro? ... Y bien: ese autor á quien yo no conozco, ni deseo conocer, servirá del blanco, ó bien de punto de apoyo, para que establezcamos las bases de lo que provisionalmente puede llamarse “Ley Aureliana.”(104)

While the proposed law might suggest a radical development in the city’s periodical culture, the cicerone dismisses it out of hand, explaining to Nic-Nac that “nada nuevo vamos á oir por hoy. La prensa de oposicion será siempre la prensa de oposición, y al tratar de organizarla, la Academia no hará sino desquiciarla mas” (113). This disillusionment is fitting for Holmberg’s time. While the press seemed to promise a space beyond the reach of the State, “la mayoría de

los órganos periodísticos, que siguieron siendo predominantemente políticos como era ya en la tradición romántica, retribuyeron servicios mediante puestos públicos, de tal modo que las expectativas autónomas del periodismo se transformaron en vías de acceso al Congreso o a la Administración del Estado” (Rama, 62).

While the theme of writing has appeared elsewhere in the text thus far, Nic-Nac’s experience of the process is primarily one of creation. Writing allows Nic-Nac to, at various points, either transcribe his experience of reality or to construct a new reality through the act of transcription. Conversely, Nic-Nac’s experience of the written word on Mars is not one of creative potential but one of limitation. Just as the members of the Sophopolitan Academy are preoccupied with the potential abuse of the press, so too is this portion of the text concerned with the issue of textuality as a set of governing structures.

Upon entering the capital city of Aureliana, Nic-Nac remarks that he and Seele’s bodies “ya no tienen aureola”; while the residents of Theosophopolis, even temporary ones like Nic-Nac and the Doctor, radiate light, the citizens of the capital are remarkably dim. Seele is quick to explain this new development: “Lo que significa que es inútil en la capital. Allí hay más positivismo, y el pueblo aprecia más un reflejo amarillo del mejor de los metales, que todas las aureolas que se ostentan en Sophopolis” (143). Here, Nic-Nac’s entry into a space of positivistic certitude allows for an even more profound expression of communication’s failure. Indeed, immediately following this explanation, Seele begins an impassioned critique of the capital’s periodical culture:

Las instituciones son republicanas, y en uno de esos momentos en que el pueblo se prepara á representar su autonomía, la prensa de uno de los dos grandes centros se manifiesta altamente contraria, hostil diremos, á la opinión del otro centro. Comienza la lucha. Todo marcha bien. La indignación llega al colmo, y en vez de insultarse de individuo á individuo... nó...esto es muy poco es necesario prodigar algunas blasfemias á la propia pátria, cansada ya de tan monótona evidencia. Mientras el natural del país,

solamente el, toma cartas en el asunto, puede creerse que se le mirará como á un desgraciado, que habla porque goza del don de la palabra, ó que escribe porque no ignora el arte de trazar signos, pero cuando el extranjero toma parte, y en vez de mantener la neutralidad que le asegura su bienestar, el aprecio y respeto de sus nuevos conciudadanos y de la Nación entera, la escena varía de caracter; los insultos toman un aspecto mas grave, *el grajo se viste con las plumas de los pavos reales, para decirles IMBÉCILES y los pavos reales, que ven un hermano en el grajo..... no le arrancan las plumas, porque asi conviene á que pertenecen*, posponiendo la dignidad de la pátria, el fuego del sentimiento nacional, ese fuego sagrado que una vestal celeste debe animar perpétuamente, á todos los intereses mezquinos de pasiones que cada cual pretende ennoblecer con razon ó sin ella. (147-148)

Despite the vehemence with which he voices this critique, Seele suggests that the situation is unsalvageable, stating that he will do nothing to fix it and advising Nic-Nac to do the same. This doctrine of nonintervention appears to have an effect on Nic-Nac, who accepts, before entering the city, Seele's offer of temporary invisibility, so as to more easily "penetrar ciertos misterios" (149).

Interestingly, the disappearance of Seele and Nic-Nac's bodies does not entail a total annihilation of their physical forms but rather a kind of physical displacement; as to the state of their bodies, Seele explains, "Los llevamos en estado latente" (149). At the same time that the body is rendered invisible, however, we are nonetheless made to remember its presence, Nic-Nac commenting upon the existence of his "garganta invisible" (149). This simultaneous absence/presence manifests itself again in Nic-Nac's first experience within the capital city; although he remarks that "Allí no se distinguen como en Theosophopolis dos agrupaciones perfectamente características" (152), the first interaction he witnesses between the city's inhabitants is one of division, the capital's citizens fighting amongst themselves as to what, exactly they witnessed as Nic-Nac and Seele entered the city. While the pair are, indeed, invisible, something of their presence remains observable, which the capital's residents interpret, alternatively, as either a meteorological or psychic phenomenon.

Almost immediately, this debate begins to expand outward, becoming more than a mere disagreement amongst individuals as it is taken up by the capital's press: "asi es que inmediatamente el eco nato de las opiniones del pueblo, la prensa se apoderó del hecho, y lanzó torrentes de comentarios sobre la verosimilitud de la opinion de que aquellas dos luces fueran accesibles á la investigacion humana" (154). This partisan division manifests itself not only along political lines, but along ethnic ones, each of the capital's major immigrant groups taking a different stance on the issue. Within the novel, it is never resolved.

From this point forward, the novel begins to lose track of itself, taking a series of bizarre, ultimately irrelevant, turns. Nic-Nac himself omits almost all of the events which follow, addressing his audience directly to justify this decision:

me veo, digno, en el caso de suprimir una gran parte de mi libro por razones muy aceptables que creo llegan á cien: la primera que no la he escrito; la segunda. que no pienso escribirla por ahora, sino mas tarde; la tercera ahorrarnos malos ratos con la narracion de mi viaje maravilloso si acaso os ha causado uno ó mas disgustos su lectura; la cuarta originaros un disgusto si acaso os ha proporcionado uno ó mas buenos ratos la lectura de mi viaje maravilloso. dejando las noventa y seis razones que faltan á cuenta de vuestro buen criterio, si lo teneis, ó si no lo teneis, á cuenta de vuestro criterio malo. (174)

This aside constitutes a kind of parenthetical remark, one that exists in a liminal space both inside and outside of the text it amends. As Molly Monet-Viera explains, a parenthetical remark "interrupts the flow of discourse, as it represents the suspension of the body of a narrative so that an explanation or addition can be made. Parentheses allow for an outside discourse to enter into the dominant one, at times subverting it by offering an alternative point of view" (128). In this case, the alternative view which Nic-Nac offers is one of negation. After witnessing firsthand the abuses of the written word only pages before, Nic-Nac reestablishes control over the text by, quite simply, refusing to provide one. Shortly afterwards, Nic-Nac, too, is negated. Returning to Theosophopolis after his long absence, Nic-Nac finds the city in flames, the residents of the two

settlements engaged in a civil war. Caught in the crossfire, Nic-Nac is vaporized and his soul returned, once again, to the whirlwind of spirits which brought him to Mars in the novel's first section. In lieu of any closing remark, Nic-Nac articulates only "un vago presentimiento" (183) that his soul will soon return to Earth. With this, the work concludes itself.

4. Textual Transmission: The Editor

As Nic-Nac's soul spirals into the ether, the narrative returns, briefly, to Earth, passing into the hands of the novel's unnamed editor. "Cuando cayó en nuestras manos la obra del Sr. Nic-Nac," begins this portion of the novel, "comenzamos á leerla con la firme conviccion de que quizá resolveria alguna cuestion importante ... Horrible desengaño!" (184). From this point onwards, the preceding narrative becomes grounds for contestation, the editor alternatively validating or flatly dismissing Nic-Nac's account of his supposed journey. While the editor is happy to appropriate Nic-Nac's narrative for his own purposes, stressing that, regardless of the novel's veracity, "el planeta Marte no solo es habitable, sino que está habitado" (184), he questions almost immediately the truth of Nic-Nac's claims: "se nos permitirá preguntar: ¿hasta qué punto debe admitirse la narracion del Sr. Nic-Nac? ¿estamos obligados, por ventura, á sostener la realidad de un viaje tan original? ¿se encuentra sujeto esté á los limites de lo posible? ¿es positivo lo que afirma?" (185).

This critique extends beyond a mere questioning of Nic-Nac's story, as the editor goes on to appraise the literary merit of the work itself, denouncing what he terms "Esa vaguedad indefinible de los conceptos" (185) before providing the grounds for his ultimate dismissal of the novel. Nic-Nac, the editor reveals, is not simply a less than competent writer, but is, in fact, insane: "Pero, ¿quién es Nic-Nac? ¿dónde está? Ah! en una casa de locos!" (186). This revelation necessarily complicates the question of textual authority, which, prior to this point,

had barely been a question: Nic-Nac, whether we choose to believe him or not, is ultimately the arbiter of his own experience. Regardless of whether or not the journey is real, Nic-Nac's decision to preserve it in writing is nonetheless intentional. The editor's declaration that the narrator is mad thus does not merely cast doubt upon the truth of the narrative, but upon the soundness of its composition. If *Viaje Maravilloso* is but the ravings of a madman, what does it mean to read the text analytically, as Nic-Nac himself instructs us to do in the novel's introduction?

The editor, like all other readers of *Viaje Maravilloso*, begins his reading of the novel with the assumption that its author is of sound mind, only to be alerted as to the fact of Nic-Nac's insanity afterwards: "Al terminar la lectura de su libro, hemos recordado este hecho, y nuestra indignacion nos ha congestionado los globos de los ojos en sus órbitas respectivas" (186). This outrage, however, lasts only momentarily before it is replaced, once again, by doubt: "reflexionando luego, nos hemos preguntado: ¿Es Nic-Nac un hombre sensato?" (186).

Paragraphs later, the question of Nic-Nac's sanity is resolved once again, not through further examination of his work, but through the testimony of the asylum's director:

El Director del Establecimiento, hombre instruido y observador incansable, ha manifestado que Nic-Nac es un ente original, afable, un tanto instruido, al que se le pueden creer muchas de las cosas que dice, exceptuando, empero, los medios de que se ha valido para transmigrar de la Tierra á Marte, y de este á aquella.

Bajo este punto de vista, no vacilamos en aceptar las opiniones del Dr. Uriarte; siendo no obstante doloroso el ver que un hombre que ha hecho lo que ningun otro hombre, se vea reducido á tan triste situacion. (186-187)

Once again, textual authority is up for grabs. While the editor appears to control this portion of the text (he is, after all, its author), his declarations are dependent upon the testimony of others. Despite the suggestion that Nic-Nac's insanity is common knowledge, something remembered rather than revealed, the editor's own experience of knowing is apparently insufficient.

Just as the narrator vacillates between belief and doubt in his reading of the novel, so too does his opinion of Nic-Nac himself waffle. Here, Nic-Nac appears as an object of simultaneous admiration, ridicule, and pity. While Nic-Nac is lauded for his originality, the persistence of his delusions is cause for scorn and, later, a kind of condescending sympathy. Reflecting on the unfortunate consequences of Nic-Nac's planetary mania (the diagnosis which he has received while institutionalized) the editor remarks upon the likely impossibility of our hero's release from the asylum: "He aqui verdadero abismo sin fondo, dentro del cual, si no encuentra a Seele, va a tener que precipitarse, sea negando su viaje que es lo que se desea, o bien confirmandolo con mayor tenacidad, que es precisamente lo que le tiene confinado en el establecimiento" (187). Having said this, the editor concludes his commentary on the novel with a hypothetical: if Nic-Nac did indeed embark on the journey recounted in the novel, where would he find himself once returned to Earth? This line of questioning is promptly concluded with a dismissal:

¿cuál es la situacion moral del individuo, si realmente ha verificado su viaje? ¿se resigna a su suerte? ¿puede arrastrarse en las miserias de una vida proseica, despues de haber sido deslumbrado por esplendores increíbles?

Pero nó, la razon se registre á aceptar el viaje de Nic-Nac, que quizá no ha sido sino una de aquellas largas inspiraciones cuyos elementos se elaboran en un éxtasis profundo, y el pobre soñador, el desgraciado loco, no tendrá mas consuelo que el que le proporcione un fresco chorro de agua, en forma de ducha, para calmar los arranques de su *Mania planetaria*. (187-188)

At risk of dwelling for too long on this portion of the novel, I would like to suggest that this five page section is, perhaps, one of the most significant aspects of the work. If the introductory portion of *Viaje Maravilloso* is a treatise on how to read the world, this section might be read as a kind of discourse on why, exactly, that idea was a waste of time. Even within a novel which enjoys poking fun at the pretensions of its narrator, this section would appear to present an abruptly pessimistic turn.

This reading of the novel is not uncommon. In his 2010 essay “The Globalization of the Novel and the Novelization of the Global: A Critique of World Literature,” Mariano Siskind posits *Viaje Maravilloso* as a work of inherent pessimism. Siskind argues for a re-reading of globalization, and with it bourgeois concepts of rationality, cosmopolitanism, and modernity, through the novel form itself. Positioning the novel as the “hegemonic form of bourgeois imagination” (337) which dominated the nineteenth century, Siskind argues that novels worked to produce powerful images of globalization, both introducing the concept to reading publics and locating them alternatively within either the global center or periphery. This analysis is structured around two complementary models, what Siskind terms “the globalization of the novel” and “the novelization of the global”. The first concept refers to the spread of the novel form as a parallel to Western European colonial expansion; the second, to the representation of an increasingly globalized world within these novels.

Within his analysis of this novelization of the global, Siskind places Holmberg’s *Viaje maravilloso* in conversation with the novels of Jules Verne. While both authors describe moments of fantastic or otherworldly travel, both the ways in which their protagonists journey and the images of the world which are produced vary drastically. Emblematic of early European science fiction, Verne’s novels imagine what Siskind terms the “*bourgeoisification* of the world” (345), imagining the world as a global space governed by the laws of bourgeois reason. Holmberg’s work, conversely, fails to imagine any kind of utopian social structure, both negating the alternate world created (alerting us to its existence as fantasy) and dismissing its very possibility (alerting us to Nic-Nac’s insanity).

While Holmberg’s novel is far from utopian, his articulation of doubt, I want to argue, *is*. Holmberg’s theorizing of doubt, from its appearance on the novel’s first page, is one

characteristic of late nineteenth-century Latin American intellectual culture: as Monet-Viera suggests, it “is neither a claim to objectivity nor a mode of rebellion against the scientific and industrial revolutions. Instead, it is a desire to believe, an anticipation, an intuition that a new notion of spirituality will develop. [...] It is the space of almost belief, a space of hesitation that allows for *fin de siglo* subjects to anticipate the coming of a future, but as yet unknown, god” (124). Indeed, the fantastic is not sustained by belief, but by hesitation. It is “the logical cultural expression of this desire to occupy a liminal space between belief and skepticism, a space that resurrects mystery in the face of positivistic certitude” (125). Consider, once again, Nic-Nac’s decision to leave his post-capital Martian experience unwritten. If the supposed certainties of positivist thinking can function only to produce discord, then perhaps doubt offers a kind of antidote.

With this in mind, I’d like to return, once again, to the editor. While this final portion of the novel represents his most sustained intervention upon the text, the editor makes an appearance earlier on in *Viaje maravilloso*, when he alerts us that Nic-Nac has plagiarized the following expression from Charles Dickens: “‘Aaaah!’ exclamé, interjeccion que se me hinchó la garganta tanto como un alfabeto” (116). The original quotation (“The final letter swelled in his throat, to the size of the whole alphabet.”) is taken from Dickens’ novella *The Chimes*, his sequel to *A Christmas Carol*. *The Chimes*, like its predecessor, takes place almost entirely within a dream, one which reveals a dystopian potential future. As in *A Christmas Carol*, this vision of the future serves an instructional purpose, ultimately compelling the protagonist to change his ways so as to avoid the outcome depicted. This allusion, I want to argue, is not incidental.

While Holmberg, himself both an admitted fan and early translator of Dickens (he presented his translation of *Pickwick Papers* the same year that *Viaje maravilloso* began to in *El*

Nacional), might have included this reference as a simple homage to a fellow writer, the explicitness with which he points to Dickens' work merits further examination. Indeed, Nic-Nac makes his plagiaristic exclamation immediately following the revelation that Theosophopolis is located within the nation Aureliana, the moment which establishes the most explicit connection between the events which Nic-Nac witnesses on Mars and their analogies on Earth.

In this context, Holmberg's reference to Dickens does several things at once. At its most basic level, it allows Holmberg a lighthearted, seemingly nonjudgmental way of undercutting Nic-Nac's literary ostentation. More abstractly, it enacts a dual process of (de)legitimization; by bringing Nic-Nac's account into conversation with the work of Dickens, Holmberg de-fictionalizes Nic-Nac's fictional account while simultaneously fictionalizing the novel's non-fictional aspects. Here, the suggestion that Nic-Nac exists within the same world as Charles Dickens grounds the narrative in reality, while Holmberg's creation of a fake editor once again fictionalizes it. In its final function, this reference serves as yet another injunction to look beyond the surface of Nic-Nac's narration. Like Holmberg's earlier reference to *Don Quijote*, Nic-Nac's mention of "The Chimes" commands that the reader not just look, but look past.

Conclusion:

“Un sueño el futuro, un sueño el pasado, y solo palabras e imágenes para excitar el soñar.”

Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada*

“The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [...] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

While Holmberg’s journey to Mars might have begun as a kind of speculative expedition to the future, he never quite makes it there. Despite its investigative pretense, the novel’s end returns us, almost exactly, to its beginning: November, 1875. For a long time, *Viaje Maravilloso* remained there. Following its initial publication in *El Nacional*, Holmberg’s work spent over a century out of print. The first attempt at reproducing the novel did not occur until 2006, when Argentina’s Biblioteca Nacional issued a reprint of the text with introduction and annotations by Pablo Crash Solomonoff. While the 2006 edition of *Viaje maravilloso* offers some updating for a twenty-first century audience, correcting the myriad spelling and grammatical errors found in the original and offering a series of explanatory footnotes, the text itself is, quite unfortunately, relegated to the past nonetheless. Although Solomonoff gestures towards the possibility of

bringing Holmberg's novel into the present (his introduction ends: "Para quien desee leer o escribir relatos policiales, de fantasía, o ciencia ficción en un país tan proclive a ella en otros aspectos, o tener una perspectiva diferente de una época de cambios no tan lejana [...], la obra de Holmberg constituye un punto de partida obligatorio, divertido y sorprendente por la actualidad y la originalidad de sus planteos" (24)), his intervention upon the text serves primarily to contextualize, rather than to explain or enact, Holmberg's literary project for a contemporary audience.

Published in 2012, Leonardo Kuntscher and Santiago Miret's graphic novel adaptation of Holmberg's work, *El Maravilloso Viaje del Señor Nic-Nac*, takes a different approach. Kuntscher and Miret frame their relationship to the original text as one not of resuscitation, but of rediscovery. The prefix "re-" is important here; "rediscovery" implies an inherent orientation towards the present, acknowledging the discovery which has come before while simultaneously differentiating itself from it. Indeed, Kuntscher and Miret's adaptation of Holmberg's text is an attempt neither to resurrect the work as it was nor to bring it into being as if for the first time. Rather, it seeks to apprehend the work with an eye towards the present, seizing it, to paraphrase the epigraph of this conclusion, as it flits by.

The graphic novel is not a mere reworking of the text, but a hybrid literary creation in its own right. Kuntscher and Miret bring together both Holmberg's literary influences and their own, compiling an index of references which spans from Aristotle to Argentine graphic novelist Héctor Germán Oesterheld. The second volume of Kuntscher and Miret's *El Maravilloso Viaje del Señor Nic-Nac* further clarifies the existence of the graphic novel as distinct from Holmberg's text, beginning with a disclaimer that: "El presente volumen de las aventuras de Nic-Nac es fruto de la licencia literaria de sus autores en la invención de personajes, situaciones, lugares y

tecnologías que expanden el universo presentado en la novela de Holmberg para así poder crear una obra acorde a los tiempos del corriente siglo y a sus propias manías planetarias” (7). Here, the pair’s creative liberties are not merely additive, but reconstructive, working to clarify the ambiguities of the original text. In some cases, this is done through references to Holmberg’s other literary creations, Kuntscher and Miret collaging together elements drawn from the Holmbergian canon so as to preserve the essence of the author’s work. In others, it is achieved through the use of images themselves, the pair utilizing visual language to supplement that which Holmberg leaves unwritten.

In *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities*, Mieke Bal suggests a method of reconciling the visual image with its literary counterpart, positing the image itself as both a translation and a metaphor. To do so, Bal invokes Walter Benjamin. Translation, as Benjamin puts it, both is and issues from the afterlife of a text. Each translator resurrects the work he translates from, bringing it into the moment of his own existence. In this way, translation is a kind of “continued life” (73), a phase within the greater history of a work of art. This textual afterlife is not simply the reanimation of a dead work for a living audience, but the transformation of the text itself into something with an animating force of its own. The translator should not merely restate what was said in the original (that is, he should not translate from the text), but should instead draw upon the text’s afterlife, conjuring up within his version something of the original’s essence. Indeed, the translator’s reference should not be the text itself, but what has remained of it across time.

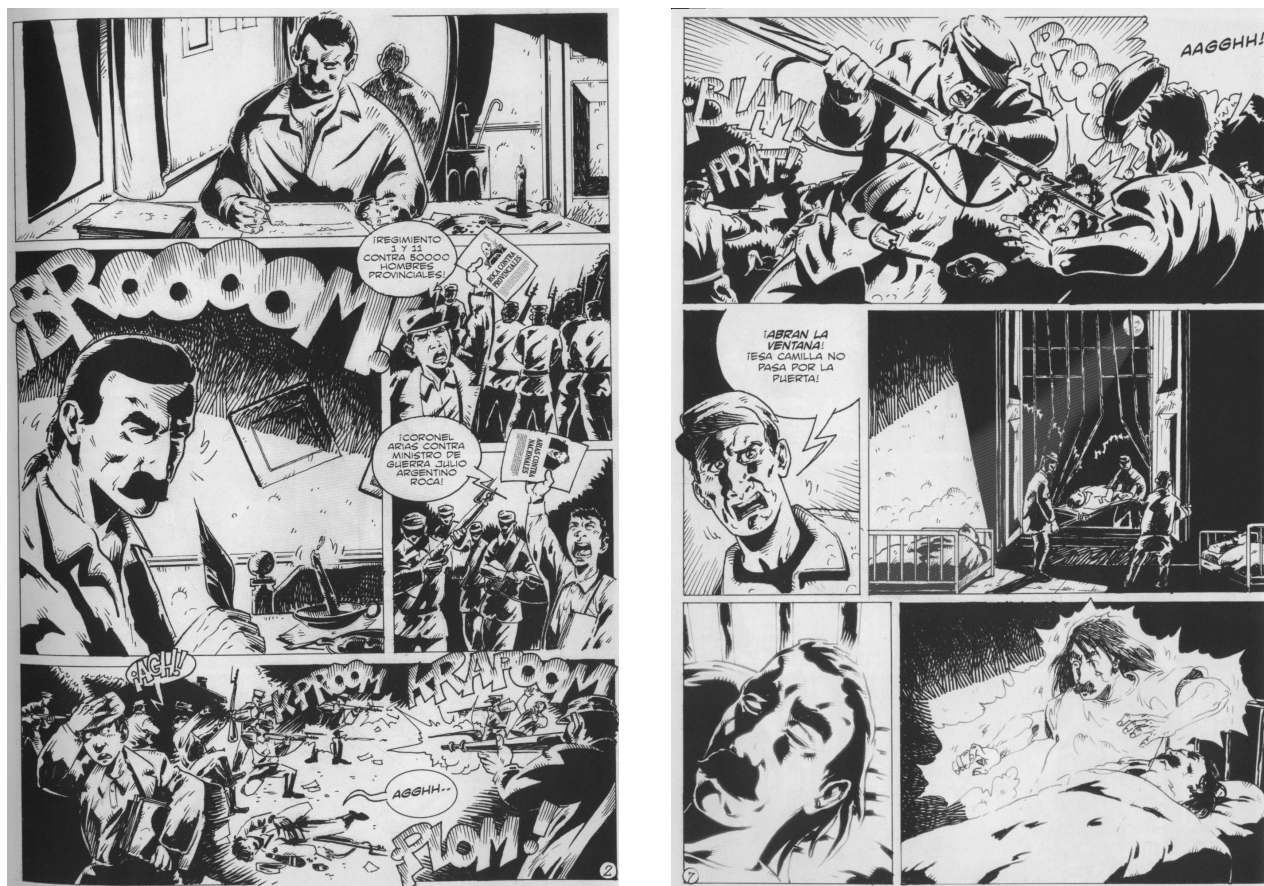
The task of the translator, then, lies not in remaining faithful to source text, but “in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (77). Benjamin’s translator does not merely convey the content of the work he translates, but calls into it, listening for the point at which he finds within his own

reverberated speech something of the original. It is within this framework of translation that I wish to situate Kuntscher and Miret's adaptation. Working through images, *El Maravilloso Viaje del Señor Nic-Nac* engages in a process of translation which is, to use Bal's terms, "multiple (dissipating), metaphorical (transforming), and active" (67), this is to say: ec-static. This translation does not merely produce an echo, but offers a continuation of Holmberg's spiritualist project, presenting a set of images through which the essence of the text might be read.

While timing in *Viaje maravilloso* is a bit tricky (though the outer frame of the novel is concurrent with its date of publication, Nic-Nac's narration begins in 1856), the novel begins and ends quite concretely within the year 1875. The graphic novel, by contrast, is set in 1880. While this decision might seem out of place in an adaptation which seeks to bring Holmberg's work into the present, Kuntscher and Miret's historical repositioning of the novel allows for a kind of past/future mapping analogous to that often undertaken in the literature of Holmberg's time. This temporal relocation enables the graphic novel to push harder on the critical aspects of Holmberg's work; by positioning the narrative within a historically well-documented period of transition, the pair presents a broad social critique more legible to a contemporary audience. Indeed, in the introduction to the first volume of the work, Kuntscher writes:

1880 es el umbral que marcó definitivamente el pasaje de nuestra Nación hacia la nueva división del mundo y las políticas de modernización del Estado frente a las ciencias y la educación, no sin acarrear un importante conflicto. La lucha entre la provincia de Buenos Aires y el resto del país por transformar a la ciudad portuaria en la capital de la Nación fue quizás la más cruenta revuelta de nuestra historia. Como ese enfrentamiento, la historia de Nic-Nac está en ese filo de transición entre la fantasía y el acontecimiento histórico. (8)

This idea of a transition between fantasy and historical fact is, within the graphic novel, manifested visually. In a series of panels early in the first volume of the work, Nic-Nac's spiritual displacement is placed in direct conversation with the events of the war around him (*Figures 3*



Figures 3 and 4: Kuntscher, Leonardo. *El Maravilloso Viaje del Señor Nic-Nac*, Vol. I y II. Illustrated by Santiago Miret, Anexia Ediciones, 2012. 2 vols.

and 4). The coexistence of these images within the space of the page functions not only to ground the narrative within its new historical context, but to suggest a parallel between the two events. In this context, the separation of Nic-Nac's soul from his mortal body is necessarily mediated by the presence of conflict, and this conflict is made constantly present.

The ability of the graphic novel to situate Holmberg's text historically without the use of explicit description is, in my view, the clearest echo of the 1875 novel. While Holmberg's work is inextricable from the period of its publication, it is also a text which is, by nature, oriented towards the present. Through his constant entreaties to look past the surface of his novel and through to something greater, Holmberg invites readers to investigate not only the context in

which his own work was written, but, by extension, their own. The possibilities for reading which Holmberg's literary project suggests exist, then, within a kind of constant present, one which must be seized again and again.

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