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**Privitera, Rodolfo. *Desde otro lugar*. Buenos Aires: Florida Blanca, 1997.**

In the cryptic opening story or vignette of Rodolfo Privitera's *Desde otro lugar*, there is the rather unsettling image of a decapitated head, wrapped in a sackcloth and impaled on a pitchfork. The head is dislodged and the cloth is removed to reveal a bloody face. And this image is a fitting one to inaugurate this collection of short narratives, since amputation, dismemberment, and mutilation are the operations that most aptly characterize not only the elements of the stories, but the style of narration and authorial psychology as well. As one character declares, "hicieron que olvidáramos el cuerpo, lo mutiláramos (91)." And yet this mutilated "body" could just as easily refer to the *corpus* of writing which comprises the collection and, in the author's view, the act of writing itself.

The title provides the collection with a fitting aporia, since Privitera is well aware that it is impossible to narrate "from elsewhere." And yet the desire or nostalgia for an elsewhere reveals a peculiar mental partition (between here and there) which belongs exclusively to the realm of psychology or linguistics, a schism upon which Privitera seems to bestow the privileged moment of literature itself. There are echoes of Blanchot here (I am thinking of *The Space of Literature*) and it is perhaps no coincidence that Privitera is himself an important translator of twentieth-century French literature.

These "stories" emphasize multiplicity of place and authorial point of view, and highlight the diffuse and heterogeneous rather than monolithic and consolidated aspects and intersections of literature, memory, time, madness, language. The author rather methodically chooses to fragment his narration with the intention to disorient, and the most obvious outward manifestation of this technique is the portrayal of the human subject as cubistically divided into disparate body parts rather than as something unified and homogeneous.

In "El señor de la servilleta," for example, the "inner lives" of the characters are not scrutinized in favor of a portrayal of the outer image of a couple seated at a table in a restaurant who is perceived by those around

them. Hands are emphasized, as well as voices, backs, legs, eyes, and fingers. The wife is described as having a “neutral face.” In this particular story there is enough to discern an outline of a social commentary, since there is a dynamic or dialectic between the gourmandism of the couple, who cut their cheese “como si estuviera ante un ceremonial religioso (26),” and what they *perceive* to be the envy of the observers around them. And yet one gets the impression that social commentary is not entirely or exclusively what Privitera is after, unless the two seemingly opposed notions of social realism and the narrator’s fondness of surrealistic or hallucinogenic closures can be reconciled. In this case, the protagonist uses a body-sized napkin while dining, and comments to his wife, “Vos sabés Sara, que mi vida es mi obra y mi obra es sacarle lustre al mundo con detergente (25).”

The worlds conjured in these narrations are of such concision that the specifics of a socio-historic context have been deliberately omitted, resulting in phantasmagoric shade of a society whose underlying cohesion is both a real and a linguistic violence. (Thus the comparison, in both form and content, with Kafka is an inevitable one.)

And violence is also the common thread among these seemingly heterogeneous narrations. Drowned babies, murdered judges, assassinated Franciscan monks, beatings in broad daylight (to the disinterest of the onlooking crowd), institutionalization and sedation are elements that leave the reader with an unmistakable malaise. And the only repeated place-name in these stories is “Buenos Azotes,” so-baptized by a nineteenth-century general, who, in pursuit of Indians, declared, “Y si vuelven, no buenos azotes les daremos.” The allegorical reference of the place-name needs little explication. And yet, it is worth repeating, that is the *only* place name mentioned, and usually the violence of Privitera’s allegories is of too rarified a nature to lend itself to an explicit grounding, a here and now or a there and then.

If violence is the common denominator, it seems to take place in a realm that does not entirely pertain to the kingdom of this world. Privitera’s most notable achievement is in fact this tremendous force with which he instills the language of narration, a prose which progressively condenses out the prosaic from seemingly quotidian situations, or which transports them to a space which approaches the poetic. Thus violence is not merely a recurrent “theme” but an operation which the author has performed on narration itself. The narrator of “Obsesiones,” in recalling his experience in a mental asylum, explicitly juxtaposes this simultaneous bodily and linguistic mutilation:

Experimenté otras memorias, tal vez únicas en el mismo instante de su manifestación. Se desprendían de ojos languidecientes, labios en murmullos, brazos, manos, pecho de mujer, de hombre, sangre, humo, palabras, algunas de ellas incomprensibles (67).

Unfortunately, such a tenuous procedure can show the strain of the formulaic, specifically in the form of the at times predictable “surprise ending.” Thus the reader is half expecting the ant, which is the point of departure for a Platonic dialogue between two philosophers in “El gran bonete” will be crushed underfoot by one of the two dialecticians at the story’s conclusion. That is perhaps a caviling objection, though, and one that is more appropriately geared to the entire genre of short fiction. Privitera’s contribution to that persisting genre is a provocative one that in many aspects harvests the intellectual and historical tensions, movements and vicissitudes of this waning century.

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