

TOWARDS AGENCY: DIALECTIC *BILDUNG* IN LATE TWENTIETH  
CENTURY SPANISH AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING

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by

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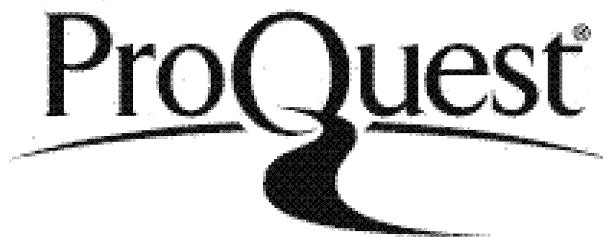
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Emma Louise Staniland

**Towards Agency: Dialectic *Bildung* in Late Twentieth-Century Spanish American Women's Writing**

This thesis is an interdisciplinary project formulated within a number of inter-related fields of study. At its broadest it represents a contribution to Latin American studies, but, within that, it has three main concerns: Spanish American women's writing, gender studies, and the intellectual debate on the relationship between gender and genre. Most specifically, it engages with the Bildungsroman, or development novel, whose widely recognised gender bias has generated scholarly interest in the theorisation of its 'female' version.

My study of six contemporary Spanish American novels illuminates the presence of this contested genre in women's writing from across the region, thus contributing to its critical evaluation as a narrative mode both possible in a 'female' form, and highly pertinent to the feminist aims of the authors. In Chapter One, I extract from the Bildungsroman's original narrative trajectory a dialectic framework consisting of the phases of 'thesis', 'antithesis' and 'synthesis'. This framework is then rearticulated in terms germane to my fields of study, in order to elucidate the texts' portrayals of the 'construction', 'deconstruction' and 'reconstruction' of gendered identities. The depiction of each of these developmental phases is investigated in the subsequent chapters by pairing novels and focusing on a different literary topos: in Chapter Two, 'myth', in *Eva Luna* (Isabel Allende, 1985) and *Como agua para chocolate* (Laura Esquivel, 1989); in Chapter Three, 'exile', in *En breve cárcel* (Sylvia Molloy, 1981) and *La nave de los locos* (Cristina Peri Rossi, 1984); and, in Chapter Four, 'the female body', in *Arráncame la vida* (Ángeles Mastretta, 1985) and *La nada cotidiana* (Zoé Valdés, 1995).

Overall, this analytical framework allows me to argue that, read as a cross-corpus portrayal of gendered *Bildung*, these novels project a transition from passivity to social agency. As a consequence, this thesis serves to highlight the contribution made by these women writers to the understanding of gendered identity as a social construction that remains open ended.

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## Introduction

### Towards Agency: The Dialectics of the Spanish American Female Bildungsroman

Since the Post-Boom of the 1980s, writing by women of the Spanish American region, both historical and contemporary, has gradually come into view as a rich body of literature that affords perspectives on life in that part of the world that were not previously represented in the regional canon. Susan Bassnett has posited that, until then, the literary 'family' of Spanish America was a family of 'Great Men', whose 'mothers, sisters and daughters remained absent, relegated in the popular imagination to a life spent somewhere quietly'.<sup>1</sup> More forthrightly, that 'quietness' has been described, by writers and critics alike, as a 'silence' – an imposed silence that needed to be broken, and one that reminds us that '[t]hroughout history there have always been persons who live in a community but are excluded from telling their stories outside an immediate group'.<sup>2</sup> In Spanish America, as elsewhere, for too long women's writing was considered to be for women and about women, with little to offer the world outside its feminised spheres.

Standing as testimony to the vital role of the written word as a medium for speaking out, the six novels that have generated this PhD thesis represent a period of ten years of Spanish American women's writing from the latter decades of the twentieth century, and from five of the countries of the region: Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Mexico and Uruguay. My chosen corpus is made up of texts that affirm the narrative possibilities opened up by a hard-won shift in the politics of representation, through their accounts of diverse individual experiences and socio-cultural variations, and do so in a variety of narrative styles. As a result, these texts come together as an appealingly heterogeneous corpus that gives a strong sense of the colours and textures of Spanish American women's writing. However, it is not their multifariousness per se that will be the central concern of this thesis. Instead, what brings these novels into analytical focus is the fact that alongside their intrinsic differences can be found a thematic

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bassnett (ed.), *Knives & Angels: Women Writers in Latin America*, (London: Zed Books, 1990), p.1

<sup>2</sup> Mario J. Valdés, 'Story-Telling and Cultural Identity in Latin America' in Irene María F. Blayer and Mark Cronlund Anderson (eds.), *Latin American Narratives and Cultural Identity*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), pp.9-27, p.9

unity: all six texts will be considered for their critical representation of the development of gendered identities and, specifically, for their portrayal of different stages of a developmental process which takes place along a journey through three literary topoi: Myth, Exile, and the Female Body. Conceived of in more directly literary terms, this reading entails an understanding of the six texts as a cross-corpus re-working of the narrative trajectory of the traditional Bildungsroman, a sub-genre of the novel recognised for its capacity to narrate the development of the individual in dialogue with social context.<sup>3</sup> In other words, this is a genre that considers, to varying degrees, both individuality and community, as well as their mutually informative inter-relationship.

The Bildungsroman or, to use a common Spanish translation of the original German name, *relato de formación*, is a symbolic vehicle for voicing the individual's desire to be recognised and valued as part of a wider community, and remains a popular literary form some two hundred years after its inception in eighteenth-century Germany. This continued popularity reflects an equally constant relevance that is undoubtedly a result of its central narrative concern – the gradual coming-to-be of an individual in dialogue with their social surroundings. In many ways, this thematic focus can be understood as a particular formulation of the perpetual philosophical question, continually reconfigured but never fully answered, of what it means to be human: how to negotiate and understand our identity, how to accept and understand our place in the world.

In other words, this is a particular formulation of the concerns to which the novel form is credited with giving artistic expression, and the spread of the Bildungsroman beyond the cultural and historical boundaries within which it began is in line with a now global transfer of artistic trends and tendencies across temporal and cultural borders. The postcolonial literary history of Spanish American cultures, where European forms have played an important formational role in the development of more localised modes of written expression, stands as testament to the roaming of artistic influence in the modern and post-modern periods. Narratives of the Spanish American canon that adopt or inflect the shape of the Bildungsroman have been recognised through the broader academic study of literature from the region, as writes María Inés Lagos:

Como en otras literaturas, también en Hispanoamérica se han escrito novelas que pueden considerarse *Bildungsroman*. Sin embargo la crítica no las ha estudiado en

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<sup>3</sup> In recognition of its now accepted inclusion within the literary/generic vocabulary of English, I will not italicise the name of the genre as some critics do, except in citations of work by those critics who choose to do so.



conjunto de un modo sistemático, de manera que no existe un *corpus* reconocido sino más bien ejemplos destacados, como serían *Don Segundo Sombra* de Ricardo Güiraldes, *Las buenas conciencias* de Carlos Fuentes o *Las batallas en el desierto* de José Emilio Pacheco.<sup>4</sup>

Some fourteen years after Lagos's assertion that 'un *corpus* reconocido' of the genre in Spanish American literature had yet to be defined, Yolanda A. Doub writes in *Journeys of Formation: The Spanish American Bildungsroman* (2010), that '[i]n Latin America, the novel of formation has flourished, particularly in the last 100 years', before providing a 'partial list of noteworthy *Bildungsromane*':

Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* (1962), José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso* (1966), Alfredo Bryce Echenique's *Un mundo para Julius* (1970), Clarice Lispector's *A hora de estrela* (1978), Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* (1975), Antonio Skármeta's *No pasó nada* (1980), and Ángeles Mastretta's *Arráncame la vida* (1985).<sup>5</sup>

Doub's work thus stands as a new contribution to a growing critical corpus concerning the genre in Spanish American literature, placing itself alongside other, earlier studies such as Leasa Y. Lutes's *Allende, Buitrago, Luiselli: Aproximaciones teóricas al concepto del "Bildungsroman" femenino* (2000) and Julia A. Kushigian's *Reconstructing Childhood: Strategies of Reading for Culture and Gender in the Spanish American Bildungsroman* (2003), and responding to the deficit noted above by Lagos.

The thread that connects all of these studies, evident in most of their titles, is a concern for the place and role of gender in Spanish American works in the Bildungsroman genre. Lutes grounds her study in the belief that

el examen de las fuerzas formativas en la construcción de un sujeto femenino sacará a la luz las restricciones y frustraciones encontradas por la mujer en su desarrollo. Una articulación de la problemática de la realización femenina parece imprescindible para adelantar el proceso de liberación de la mujer de los límites superimpuestos por su contexto.<sup>6</sup>

Kushigian's work, in turn, argues more broadly 'for a critique of the grand narrative of coming of age, namely the Bildungsroman, and its traditional paradigm of normative human

<sup>4</sup> María Inés Lagos, *En tono mayor: Relatos de formación de protagonista femenina en Hispanoamérica*, (Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1996), p.9

<sup>5</sup> Yolanda A. Doub, *Journeys of Formation: The Spanish American Bildungsroman*, (New York: PeterLang, 2010), p.5. Doub's study focuses on the role of travel in her chosen corpus of *Bildungsromane*: 'The central problem in these formation narratives is the socialization of young people – notably the clash of individual freedom and social norms – and our contention is that travel is an essential catalyst in this process.'(p.1)

<sup>6</sup> Leasa Y. Lutes, *Allende, Buitrago, Luiselli: Aproximaciones teóricas al concepto del "Bildungsroman" femenino*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), p.11

development'.<sup>7</sup> It departs from the understanding that 'the theory of the Bildungsroman – self-realization, identity, and development – would look different if you took the female or marginalized experience as the norm',<sup>8</sup> and so she develops analytical 'strategies that unpack the self-realization process for both women and men, the marginalized and the majority, rich, poor and otherwise, valuing all experience as formational in the Bildung process'.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning as she does the prologue to her study of the Spanish American female Bildungsroman (whence the above citation), Lagos not only gives examples of the arrival of this European form on Spanish American shores, but also, less directly, signals the concurrent transfer of its particular biases at the level of gender: biases that are central to the concerns of this thesis. She does this by means of her own critical approach, which roots both genre and analysis of it in narratives by male writers, about male characters – a starting point common to studies of the female Bildungsroman that it will be necessary to echo here. That Lagos goes on to state her own analytical proposal to be 'una aproximación a los relatos de formación de protagonista femenina como *un subgénero aparte* (my emphasis)',<sup>10</sup> also reflects a frequent approach in which female versions of such narratives are read for their different portrayal of the process of *Bildung*, or development of the self, that constitutes the narrative thread of the Bildungsroman. This contrastive approach responds to a sometimes strict delineation of the genre, which limits its potential for narrating the coming-to-be of protagonists not native to the context of its inception. As Lutes confirms, a number of critics

han intentado delimitar el género por la época y cultura en que aparece, la del nacimiento de la burguesía alemana. Este método facilita la comprensión y definición del género, pero excluye a una plétora de obras que los círculos literarios aceptan como herederos de la tradición.<sup>11</sup>

Approaching the Bildungsroman in the terms established by studies that set out to demarcate its boundaries, I would argue, can provide a view of the form as ossified, and so beyond the possibility of reconfiguration. Moreover, given the level of interest that literary critics have taken in the genre, put in evidence by the large body of analytical studies of Bildungsromane from across the globe, its fencing-off in this way seems unfeasible. Instead, it only encourages

<sup>7</sup> Julia A. Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood: Strategies of Reading for Culture and Gender in the Spanish American Bildungsroman*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), p.15

<sup>8</sup> Julia A. Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood: Strategies of Reading for Culture and Gender in the Spanish American Bildungsroman*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), p.15

<sup>9</sup> Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood*, p.15

<sup>10</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.9

<sup>11</sup> Lutes, *Aproximaciones teóricas*, p.3

a revisionist approach that incites a desire to know why some critics might wish the genre to be so carefully guarded (and how they might theorise such categorisation), and what it is that those critics who are determined to reclaim the form believe to make its reconfiguration worthwhile.

In light of these critical patterns, the panorama of works on the female Bildungsroman elucidates its value as a literary form that enables expression of, and reflection on, the different socio-cultural formation of male and female gendered identities: a revelatory potential that has generated interest in the female Bildungsroman as a marginalised element of a broader canon. The consideration of the Spanish American female Bildungsroman more precisely, as Lagos's work and others like it testify, has come about as part of this widespread reclaiming of an important narrative space. Lagos takes Teresa de la Parra's *Ifigenia* (1924) and *Las memorias de mamá Blanca* (1929) as the earliest examples of regional female versions of the genre in her study, and provides examples from the 40s, 50, 60s, and 70s, before focusing on works from the latter half of the 80s: Ana María del Río's *Oxido del Carmen* (1986) *Tiempo de Ladra* (1991), Alessandra Luiselli's *Reina de corazones* (1986), *La forma del silencio* (1987) by María Luisa Puga, Elena Poniatowska's *La "Flor de Lis"* (1988) and *Antes* (1989), by Carmen Boullosa.<sup>12</sup> Lutes observes that it is during the 1970s, and as a reflection of the growth of impact of the feminist movement, that 'autoras feministas toman posesión de este genero de la novela, y llega a ser una de las formas predilectas de escribir para ellas.'<sup>13</sup> Doub concurs with both Lagos and Lutes, writing that 'there has also been a veritable boom of novels of female formation since the 1980s' – a comment that is of particular relevance to this study, whose corpus of primary texts consists entirely of post-1980 novels.<sup>14</sup> Doub, goes on to suggest the following texts as examples of the Spanish American female Bildungsroman: *Antonia* (María Luisa Puga, 1986), *Treinta años* (Carmen Boullosa, 1999), *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada sobre el verde limón* (Albalucía Ángel, 1985), *El penúltimo viaje* (Alicia Diaconú, 1989), and *Como agua para chocolate* (Laura Esquivel, 1987), which will be one of the texts considered in this study.<sup>15</sup>

These contributions to the discussion about the relationship between gender and this particular generic form, therefore, bring to light the existence of an important canon of Spanish American female versions of it. What each of the studies mentioned here bring to the

<sup>12</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, pp.55-56

<sup>13</sup> Lutes, *Aproximaciones teóricas*, p.4

<sup>14</sup> Doub, *Journeys of Formation*, p.5

<sup>15</sup> Doub, *Journeys of Formation*, p.5. According to my sources Esquivel's book was published in 1989, not 1987 as stated by Doub.

debate, is a different approach to reading the form, or reading texts for the form, thus underscoring its existence in a culturally- and gender-specific Spanish American 'female' version. It is with this previously doubly marginalised – non-European and non-male – version of the Bildungsroman that this thesis too is concerned. Through its interest in a particular genre and the relationship between that genre and women as a marginalised social and literary group, this study partakes in the important and ongoing debate surrounding the connections between gender and genre: a debate which can be understood to draw out one particular way in which the broader silencing of non-hegemonic stories has been achieved. However, starting from a point at which the fact of the existence of such a canon has been made very clear by preceding studies, this one can approach the genre from a new angle.

As will be explained throughout this introductory chapter, this thesis contributes to the study of the Bildungsroman by emphasising the form's value to our understanding of, specifically, the discursive formation of gendered identities. Rather than directly deploy generic categories as a means by which to justify the inclusion of the chosen novels, then, it is the novels themselves that have generated my analytical approaches, with the Bildungsroman serving as a contextualising backdrop for my analyses. The conceptual journey through three literary topoi that I described above, encapsulates the 'construction', 'deconstruction', and finally the 'reconstruction' of gendered identities. This threefold process is mirrored in the Hegelian dialectic, a model configured via the stages of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis and which serves to elucidate progression towards a desired end point or goal. Crucially, Hegel's philosophical mode, elaborated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), has been likened to the Bildungsroman and shown to be informative of the structure of the genre, so that, for the purposes of this thesis, the dialectic can be applied as a foundational theoretical structure facilitating the critical reading of the *Bildung* of gendered identities. This allows me to read the spectrum of these narratives as one that gives evidence to a variety of ways in which the complexities of gender formation in the post-modern world are perceived and narrated by Spanish American women writers. I will argue that one of the major differences between the trajectory of these Spanish American female Bildungsroman and that of the classical Bildungsroman, is that these contemporary women's narratives depict an interaction between society and individual that moves towards, not social compromise, but social agency.

Arranged in pairs, the six novels are read via this threefold framework as stories that together portray a progression from a point of imposed gendered identities, towards a form of

self-knowledge that is perceived as the first crucial step towards individual and henceforth social agency. Thus, Chapter One focuses on the role of myth in *Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende (1987) and in Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), analysing and evaluating the numerous ways in which the writers engage with myth as a topos ripe for the exploration of female gendered identity construction. Chapter Two considers exile in its various guises as the tangible and the metaphoric; as a space of entrapment and as a space of empowerment, exploring its function as a topos in which orthodox gendered identities may be deconstructed, interrogated and refuted. Here, *En breve cárcel* by Sylvia Molloy (1981) and *La nave de los locos* by Cristina Peri Rossi (1984) provide the material for analysis. Finally, Chapter Three turns to *Arrancame la vida* by Angeles Mastretta (1986) and *La nada cotidiana* by Zoé Valdés (1995), and to representations of the female body. It argues that these novels depict the body as the site of recuperation of a useable female gendered identity; one that provides individual and social agency and which is not simply marked by the signs of passivity that lead to female marginalisation within the symbolic and social orders. Hence, the overall picture of the development, or *Bildung*, of gendered identities that comes into view through this critical exploration affords insight into the discourses by which gender is inscribed within the specificities of the Spanish American cultural context. It also, however, sheds light on the processes by which individual agency is achieved through writing and representation, showing the texts in question to be driven by what the American poet Adrienne Rich has termed 'the energy of desire, summoning a different reality',<sup>16</sup> as they 'dwell on that dangerous cutting edge of possibility, stringing out bridges of words into the uncharted future'.<sup>17</sup>

In order to elucidate my critical intentions, the remainder of this first chapter of my study is structured in five parts, and works to locate the female Spanish American Bildungsroman within the socio-cultural, literary, and analytical frameworks that make most accessible its significance to contemporary Spanish American feminist literary criticism. What immediately follows is an overview of the *Bildung* of Spanish American literature itself, which serves to inform of the temporal and artistic co-ordinates of the texts studied in Chapters One, Two and Three. Particular attention will be paid to the elements of that literary history that make the Bildungsroman especially pertinent for Spanish American women writers in the late twentieth century, and to the fact that this is in part due to a concern with gender that is

<sup>16</sup> Adrienne Rich cited by Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez, *Women Writing Resistance: Essays on Latin America and the Caribbean*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2003), p.9

<sup>17</sup> Browdy de Hernandez, *Women Writing Resistance*, p.9

brought to the fore by the Bildungsroman and by the writers themselves, through both their identity and their thematic concerns. This detailed consideration of the Post-Boom as a literary wave to which the Bildungsroman has much to offer is one of the ways in which this thesis makes an innovative contribution to the study of the Spanish American Bildungsroman: providing a culturally specific contextualisation that serves to emphasise the form's import not just to women writers, but more particularly to Spanish American women writers of a Spanish American literary movement.

Subsequently, an overview of the classical Bildungsroman is interrelated with a consideration of its critical categorisation, showing how the genre has been defined in terms that threaten to render it inaccessible to marginalised or non-hegemonic developmental narratives. Before it can be claimed as a space for the expression of Spanish American female identities, the obstacles that such strict definitions present to its adaptation as a useful literary form must be overcome. I work towards re-definition through a careful re-reading of criticism on the classical Bildungsroman, which brings to the fore its inherent malleability and shows how that flexibility can be used to undermine the notion that the genre is invalid for the expression of women's (or otherwise non-hegemonic) self-development. The penultimate section of this chapter draws together these ideas, elaborating my point that in the structure of the genre itself inheres a framework whose form not only undermines the stringent delineation of the Bildungsroman, and legitimisation of that on the grounds of gender difference, but which, moreover, makes available a more meaningful reading of the six Spanish American novels chosen for analysis. It is at this stage, in the last section of this chapter, that the role of the dialectic as a process that mirrors and structures *Bildung* will be fully explained.

### **The *Bildung* of Spanish American Literature**

There exists within Spanish American literary studies a recognisable tendency to locate prose fiction of the latter half of the twentieth century within or in relation to the important waves of literature known as the Boom and the Post-Boom. As any qualifying or characterising process, this tendency is at once useful and potentially prescriptive. The novels with which this thesis is concerned were published between 1981 and 1997, and so, chronologically speaking, might all legitimately be considered 'Post-Boom' texts in line with a generalised association of the Boom with the 1960s and 1970s, and view of the Post-Boom as having emerged as a recognisable literary movement of coherent stylistic and thematic tenets, during

the 1980s. An important feature of the latter artistic mode that is of major relevance for the present study is the comparatively far greater presence of women writers within its ranks; what Ángel Rama has famously referred to as the ‘masiva irrupción de escritoras’.<sup>18</sup> A clear understanding of Post-Boom concerns and of the stylistic traits that they inspired, as Donald Shaw has noted, is necessarily grounded in a comparative grasp of its predecessor, the Boom, so that the shifts that took place between the two movements can properly come into focus.<sup>19</sup> In particular, it is important to note that the Post-Boom can be understood to have, at least in part, defined itself through a sense of opposition to the typical characteristics of Boom writing.<sup>20</sup> Shaw warns against ‘perceiving in [the Post-Boom] too radical a break with the immediate past’, and suggests instead recognition of ‘a gradual intensification of certain tendencies that were always present in the Boom’; of a ‘change of emphasis rather than a new departure’.<sup>21</sup>

I believe however, that the role of the oppositional aspect of the Post-Boom’s identity must concurrently be awarded due importance for, as Jean Franco insightfully posits:

A rebellion against a literary heritage, the invention of new forms of expression – these are seldom gratuitous exercises. They usually indicate a deep discontent with existing interpretations of experience and a disparity between the artist’s attitudes and those expressed in his [sic] literary tradition. There is a gulf between experience and existing forms, and only the invention of new forms can bridge this gulf.<sup>22</sup>

Underlining why it is that art evolves in tandem with life, Franco points to a *need* for antagonistic or oppositional artistic visions that enable, participate in, and reflect change on the socio-cultural plane. Given that the male/female gender opposition is a keystone of Western social and symbolic orders, it is unsurprising that this need is one that has been made apparent through the relationship that each gender has, has had, or has been able to have, with different artistic movements and forms. Whilst certainly not the only issue taken up in Post-Boom narratives, the critical treatment of gender is valued as one of the major changes to have taken place in the transition between the two waves, and is also recognised to be in large part a result of the new female presence already mentioned. Argentine Post-Boom writer Mempo

<sup>18</sup> Ángel Rama, ‘Los contestatorios del poder’, *La novela latinoamericana 1922-1980*, (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, 1982), p.468, cited by Shaw in *The Post-Boom*, p.18

<sup>19</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.3

<sup>20</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.6

<sup>21</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.6

<sup>22</sup> Jean Franco, *The Modern Culture of Spanish America*, (London: Pall Mall Press, 1967), p.15

Giardinelli reflected on the 'powerful' effect of this shift on Latin American literature in a lecture delivered at the Americas Society in 1994, remarking:

I do not believe in feminine or feminist literature (literature has no sex), but I think that one of the most noteworthy and original aspects of Latin American literature is the sudden materialization of a remarkable generation of writing women. It is they who are introducing the most original changes in theme, point of view, writing techniques and experimentation.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst Giardinelli may refute the existence of either a 'feminine' or 'feminist' literature, he still conceives of women writers' influence as one of direct 'change' at a number of levels, as opposed to the softer 'change in emphasis' that Shaw describes, and there can be no doubt that the contributions he identifies are largely a consequence of experiencing life as women. This change is further demonstrated through a focus on the quotidian and on personal experience that Allende, a frequently cited spokesperson for the Post-Boom generation, has emphasized, claiming that '[e]l testimonio de primera mano me parece fundamental'.<sup>24</sup>

The significance of women being able to write about life just as men have written about life from their perspective has been a central concern of literary feminism from its outset. Because, as Pam Morris has explained, '[i]t has traditionally been believed that creative forms of writing can offer special insight into human experience and sharpen our perception of reality',<sup>25</sup> it is clear that a female presence within any culture's literary canon can expand its representational panorama. Morris also makes the point, very applicable to the Spanish American literary scene, that 'in many cultures the literary canon is esteemed as the most prestigious form of representation'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, placed in its broader socio-cultural and historical context, the emergence of women writers onto the Spanish American literary scene is of particular significance because of the crucial role that the artist/writer has been awarded in Spanish American society since independence: a direct result of the social turmoil instigated by tumultuous postcolonial social arena in which literature played a vital role, negotiating in writing a world too confused to be made sense of without artistic distance. Edwin Williamson posits that from this arena grew 'two great themes': 'first, the aspiration to found a just social order' and 'secondly, the quest for an authentic American identity'.<sup>27</sup> Two umbrella themes

<sup>23</sup> Mempo Giardinelli, 'Reflections on Latin-American Narratives of the Post-Boom' in *Latin American Literature and Arts* 52, (1996) Spring, p.87

<sup>24</sup> Isabel Allende, quoted in Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.11

<sup>25</sup> Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction*, (Oxford; Cambridge; Mass.; Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p.7

<sup>26</sup> Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, p.8

<sup>27</sup> Edwin Williamson, *The Penguin History of Latin America*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.286



that he contends 'remain as vital today' as in the early nineteenth century, regardless of the fact that 'political circumstances would ... change the terms in which they were presented at different periods and in different countries.'<sup>28</sup> Williamson suggests that the 'quest for identity gave the artist a major role in society', so that 'in times of great crisis the creative writer seemed best qualified to articulate the destiny of the nation' and that as a result the 'successful creative writer in Latin America enjoyed a moral power and public status' that literary figures in Europe had 'rarely, if ever, been accorded'.<sup>29</sup> Writing almost thirty years previously, Franco concurs that

An intense social concern has been the characteristic of Latin-American art for the last hundred and fifty years. Literature – and even painting and music – have played a social role, with the artist acting as guide, teacher and conscience of his country. The Latin American has generally viewed art as an expression of the artist's whole self: a self which is living in a society and which therefore has a collective as well as an individual concern.<sup>30</sup>

Her assessment is supported by Boom writer Fuentes in *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (1969), when he keenly expresses this sense of political responsibility, describing the Spanish American writer as 'el portavoz de quienes no pueden hacerse escuchar'.<sup>31</sup>

En países sometidos a la oscilación pendular entre la dictadura y la anarquía, en los que la única constante ha sido la explotación; en países desprovistos de canales democráticos de expresión, carentes de verdadera información pública, de parlamentos responsables, asociaciones gremiales independientes o una clase intelectual emancipada, *el novelista individual se vio compelido a ser, simultáneamente, legislador y reportero, revolucionista y pensador* [my emphases].<sup>32</sup>

This heartfelt declaration of what it means to be a writer in Spanish America drives home the fact that since independence Spanish American literature has served as a forum for political engagement, one major aspect of which, Franco and Williamson emphasise, is an engagement with the question of identity. Writing again in 1994, when the Post-Boom was well underway, Franco remains convinced of these important ties between literature and socio-political concerns in Spanish America, speculating that '[a]t a moment when some critics are

<sup>28</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.286

<sup>29</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.513

<sup>30</sup> Franco, *The Modern Culture of Latin America*, p.1

<sup>31</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, (Mexico: J.Mortiz, 1969), pp.11-12

<sup>32</sup> Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, p.11

proclaiming the 'death of the book', Latin-American writers are convinced of the permanence and necessity of literary culture.<sup>33</sup>

Taking into account the prominent social status and resultant agency of the Spanish American writer clarifies the importance of my six chosen authors – Allende, Esquivel, Mastretta, Molloy, Peri Rossi and Valdés – having claimed their places within this tradition. The political significance afforded to literature in the Spanish American cultural sphere means that for women not to be writing – or at least not to be being published – means not having access to a highly privileged, powerful form of self-expression and social interaction. The recovery of that realm of communication was therefore essential to the entrance of women into the public sphere, and to the expression of their 'testimonios de primera mano' to use Allende's words once more; testimonies that could then introduce into the cultural history of their respective nations, and the region as a whole, an interest in identity more specifically at the level of gender. Therefore, one crucial aspect of the move away from the Boom that played a role in the formation of the Post-Boom was a discontinuation of a gender bias in representational terms that, as Giardinelli points out above, had important consequences for the literature that was to come. Fundamentally, gender was absorbed *as* socio-political concern as the Post-Boom's orchestra of new voices continued to infuse literature with the social and political realities of the region. Overall, the Boom to Post-Boom transition appears as one characterized by a kind of synthesis. At least in terms of the concerns of the writers involved, it was not a direct break that initiated a new literary tradition *per se*, but rather more a blending of old concerns with new ones. Nonetheless, as Franco demonstrates above, any change at the level of content inflects a need for stylistic change also. Despite the fervent declaration made by Boom writer Fuentes about the responsibility of the Spanish American writer's task, a significant amount of the criticisms directed at his generation and their literary output, writes Shaw, came from the political left on the basis of their deployment of 'radical forms of experimentation' that were

alleged to encourage elitism and to distract the reader from what is seen as the really appropriate strategy: that of concentrating attention on themes of social injustice, authoritarianism, the will to revolution, and so on.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jean Franco, *An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature*, Third Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.345-346

<sup>34</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.6

This is directly connected to the modernist sensibilities of the Boom writers, a factor that complicated their engagement with the traditional understanding of the Spanish American writer as one conscious of a 'collective as well as an individual concern'.<sup>35</sup> Williams concurs with this understanding, writing that the 'modernist experimentalism that characterized the Boom was essentially individualistic, predicated on the right of the artist to creative freedom'. How could it be possible for 'such individualism [to] be reconciled with revolutionary commitment'?<sup>36</sup> To take his assessment of central Boom figure Carpentier as an example of this, Williams describes the Cuban novelist as a 'modernist writer, fundamentally interested in the individual consciousness as opposed to social reality'.<sup>37</sup> Undoubtedly, some critics would question the simplicity of this characterisation of a writer whose works are known and admired for their complexity, and one of which – *El siglo de las luces* (1962) – focuses in large part on the idea and nature of revolution. Even so, Williams's point serves to demonstrate that the influence of literary modernism on the Boom writers often put a degree of distance between that generation and the more traditionally outward foci of the Spanish American regional canon up until that point.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, this was recognised by Carpentier himself in 'Conciencia e identidad de América' (1981). Therein he cites Michel de Montaigne's admiration of the people of the American continent; of the

indómita tenacidad de esos hombres, mujeres y niños capaces de arrostrar los mayores peligros para defender sus libertades, su obstinación en desafiar todas las dificultades y hasta la muerte antes de someterse tan indignamente a aquellos que se afanan en dominarlos y en abusar de ellos.<sup>39</sup>

He refers to Montaigne's ultimate vision of a 'futuro de luz para ese mundo nuevo' and urges the contemporary Latin American writer to work towards this aim: 'Ojalá nuestros novelistas contribuyan con su obra a la edificación de ese futuro de luz ... Ésa es su tarea y habrán de cumplirla'.<sup>40</sup> Crucially, he underlines the need for an understanding of the individual 'siempre

<sup>35</sup> Jean Franco, *The Modern Culture of Latin America: Society and the Artist*, Revised Edition, (London: Penguin, 1970), p.11

<sup>36</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.555

<sup>37</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.546

<sup>38</sup> There is not room here for an in-depth engagement with the widely discussed relationship between modernism and Latin America, and between the modernist literary aesthetic and the Boom, however these connections are discussed in detail in *Modernism and its Margins: Reinscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America* by Anthony L. Geist and José B. Monleón (eds., 1999), Donald L. Shaw in *The Post-Boom in Spanish American Fiction* (1998), Philip Swanson in *The New Novel in Latin America* (1995), R.L. Williams in *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America* (1995)

<sup>39</sup> Alejo Carpentier, 'Conciencia e identidad de América' in *La novela latinoamericana en vísperas de un nuevo siglo y otros ensayos*, (Madrid: Siglo XXI Editores S.A., 1981), pp.79-158, p.158

<sup>40</sup> Carpentier, 'Conciencia e identidad de América', p.158

relacionado con la masa que lo circunda, con el mundo en gestación que lo esculpe'.<sup>41</sup> As Shaw points out, this essay, amongst others written after the writer's return to Cuba after the Revolution, reflects his changing political sensibilities in a way that evokes a clear message: 'there is a need to return to more popular and socially orientated novels'.<sup>42</sup>

It was the political events that had taken place during the 1970s – the decade at the end of which Carpentier wrote the above-cited piece and one so badly marked by authoritarian regimes, 'the systematic abuse of human rights' and guerilla warfare – that provided the backdrop and impetus to the new generation's literary output,<sup>43</sup> 'helping to reawaken among Post-Boom writers ... a sense of a different relationship between fiction and its sociopolitical context'.<sup>44</sup> This revised understanding of the connection between art and life was negotiated through a neo-realist style that implicitly revised the Boom writers' perceived tendency to believe that 'innovative works or [sic] art in themselves operate against the status quo and have a social effect'.<sup>45</sup> Instead, the literature of the new generation, according to Antonio Skármeta, would be '[v]ocacionalmente anti-pretenciosa, pragmáticamente anti-cultural, sensible a lo banal, y más que reordenadora del mundo ... simplemente presentadora de él'.<sup>46</sup> The nomenclature 'neo-realism' acknowledges the continuation of some of the ambiguity with which the Boom generation has approached the question of 'reality', as opposed to a simple return to the traditional realism common to Spanish American literature of the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> In relation to this, Shaw credits Swanson with having made the point that when considering the role of realism in the Post-Boom, 'we must always ask ... what ingredient it is that they add to a realistic style or outlook to carry it beyond old-style realism'.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the Post-Boom is typified as realist in its intentions to be 'presentadora' of its socio-political and temporal locality, but without forgetting the legacy of the previous generation's work, found in the form of a profound interrogation of what reality is, how we perceive it, how we can name it and how both it and questions about it can be portrayed or explored in

<sup>41</sup> Carpentier, 'Conciencia e identidad de América', p.157

<sup>42</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.7

<sup>43</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.557

<sup>44</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.13

<sup>45</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.13

<sup>46</sup> From Antonio Skármeta, 'Al fin y al cabo es su propia vida la cosa más cercana que cada escritor tiene para echar mano' (1979), quoted Shaw, *The Post-Boom in Spanish American Fiction*, p.9 It is noteworthy that Skármeta's article title echoes Allende's comment on the pertinence of firsthand experience and testimony to her work as a Post-Boom writer.

<sup>47</sup> Philip Swanson, *The New Novel in Latin America: Politics and popular culture after the Boom*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.3

<sup>48</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.19

literature. To give one significant example, it is useful to refer to Roberto González Echevarría's idea of the 'retorno del relato', summed up by Shaw as 'a rediscovery of linear storytelling without the fragmentation and the unexpected shifts in time sequence, undermining patterns of cause and effect',<sup>49</sup> that had been key features of Boom experimentalism. In sum, in its confrontation with 'the tragic impact of events in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Central America' the Post-Boom narrative was shaped by 'a greater emphasis on content, directness of impact, denunciation, documentality or protest'.<sup>50</sup>

As I inferred earlier, this stylistic transition played a decisive role in the full expression of the thematic concerns that became central to the Post-Boom generation, including their focus on life in the region, in contrast to the universalism and totality of the Boom writers sweeping narratives. In 'Mis raíces están en los libros que escribo' Allende states: 'Siento que soy latina, que represento lo latino y si mi obra puede dar voz a esa mayoría silenciada habré cumplido con una pequeña misión porque la gran tarea está en el plano político'.<sup>51</sup> Here, she acknowledges the connection between the Post-Boom writers' politically informed drive to write, and to the specificities of the contemporary socio-political arena that she wishes to portray in that writing. This focus on the present, a sense of immediacy that is also reflected in and enhanced by the formal return to more realist narrative modes, takes on a further significance at the level of content, in the clear prioritisation of youth and of youth culture, of 'television and films, pop music, sport, casual sex, and drugs: a fun culture that provides the context of the *rites of passage into adult life*' [my emphases].<sup>52</sup>

A shift from what was in hindsight seen as the elitism and labyrinthine narratives of the Boom writers to a greater interest in popular culture was a significant element of the didactic aims of the Post-Boom. It is also one of the aspects of Post-Boom writing that has contributed to its greatly debated alignment with Postmodernism in some critical accounts of its aesthetic and politics. Santiago Colás, in his seminal work *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm* (1994), writes that:

Probably the criteria most often agreed upon for distinguishing between the modern and postmodern cultural sensibilities is their respective attitudes towards mass culture. Modernism defined itself in opposition to mass culture.

<sup>49</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.21

<sup>50</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.13

<sup>51</sup> Isabel Allende, from 'Mis raíces están en los libros que escribo' in *Cambio 16*, (Madrid), no. 1048 (22 December), p.121, cited in Shaw *The Post-Boom*, p.11

<sup>52</sup> Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.17

Postmodernism embraces its form and contents, incorporating them within new artifacts [sic] that blur the distinction between high and low culture.<sup>53</sup>

Colás's work is an important contribution to the debate on the relationship between Latin America, postmodernity, and postmodernism as the latter's vehicle for cultural expression, and he warns therein of too simplistic an application of postmodernism theory to Latin American fiction. As Raymond L. Williams points out, just as Latin America has had a different relationship with the modernity, and therefore with modernism than the western world, so too does it have a different relationship with postmodernity and with postmodernism as the philosophical and cultural expression of this historical period.<sup>54</sup> Williams explains in the preface to *The Postmodern Novel*, that Latin America is 'concurrently a region of premodern, modern and postmodern societies',<sup>55</sup> clearly describing the irregularity with which postmodernism, as modernism before it, has taken hold of the region:

Many of its rural areas, small communities and villages are still premodern, most of its major cities have been undergoing an intense process of modernization since the 1930s and 1940s, and some urban sectors of Latin American society are as postmodern as Los Angeles, Boulder, Miami, New York, and Paris.<sup>56</sup>

If, as Jameson famously stated, postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism, it is easy, in light of Williams' description of the variable nature of Latin American societies, to understand why those have not, indeed could not have, the same experience of, or relationship with postmodernism, as European and North American societies. Shaw, as well, remains tentative of applying the term to Spanish American literature in too straightforward a fashion, writing:

There is no obvious consensus about the meaning of postmodernism as a term in itself, and there is no agreement about whether and how it could be applied to – in our specific case – the Post-Boom (assuming we know what that term means) [...] [We must remain] aware that we are trying to explain one mystery (the Post-Boom) in terms of another (postmodernism).<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Santiago Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America: The Argentine Paradigm*, (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1994), p.ix

<sup>54</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p.26

Concluding a discussion of Habermas, Jameson and Lyotard's individual perspectives on postmodernity and postmodernism, Hutcheon writes that '[those three], from their very different perspectives, have all raised the important issue of the socio-economic and philosophical grounding of postmodernism in postmodernity.' From my own understanding of these issues, and within the context of this study, I feel it justifiable to also place culture within this relationship.

<sup>55</sup> Raymond L. Williams, *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America: Politics*, p.v

<sup>56</sup> Raymond L. Williams, *The Postmodern Novel in Latin America: Politics*, p.v

<sup>57</sup> Donald L. Shaw, *The Post-Boom in Spanish American Fiction*, p.167

Colás, in the end, suggests a mediated approach to the use of this mode in Latin American literary studies:

[A]s I further investigated the concept of postmodernism, I felt frustrated by what seemed to be unnecessarily abstract and reductive, universalizing readings of some of my cherished Latin American texts. At the same time, I suspected the outright rejection of all postmodernism theory as a foreign, imperialist position [...] If Latin American culture didn't quite fit the categories of postmodernism theory, neither did these seem to be quite alien to it. Perhaps the proper approach lay somewhere in between.<sup>58</sup>

Whilst the relationship between the Post-Boom and postmodernism is not central to the aims of this project, it is worth emphasising here that aside from the historical alignment of the appearance of the Post-Boom, the onset of post-modernity, and its cultural expression in postmodernism, some of the approaches to representation and analysis by which postmodernism is characterised do provide useful ideas through which to approach a reading of Post-Boom works. Thus, as Colás suggests, the careful application of a European analytical approach can be justified by its usefulness in facilitating meaningful engagement with writing from the region. This is exemplified by one description of postmodernist achievements, proposed by Linda Hutcheon:

What postmodernism does is to denaturalize both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response, whilst retaining the historically contested power of both. This is the ambivalent politics of postmodern representation.<sup>59</sup>

Replacing the word 'postmodernism' in the above account with 'Post-Boom', creates an equally informative description of the latter, hence giving an indication of at least some of the reasons why the postmodernist mode and the Post-Boom can be understood to have a mutually informative relationship.

More specifically for the concerns of this project, it is the relationship between the Post-Boom, postmodernist literary techniques, and feminism that counts here; one made possible by the pluralism that was a significant feature of postmodernist approaches and which will be of import to my analyses of the texts under consideration here. In his piece 'Rethinking postmodernism (With some Latin American Excurses)', Wladimir Krysiniski writes:

Postmodernism distinguishes itself from modernity by way of its anti-dialectic vision of the world, by its acknowledgment of the repetitive nature of political and

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<sup>58</sup> Colás, *Postmodernity in Latin America*, pp.x-xi

<sup>59</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.34

social events, by its rejection of a stable and unequivocally decipherable meaning ... and by its welcoming of plurality and the heterogeneous nature of discourses.<sup>60</sup>

Postmodernist discourses' grasp of pluralism and diversity, their rendering it *permissible* has, as Franco has also noted, facilitated the opening up of representational spaces for women by making gender politics and its discourses marketable.<sup>61</sup> Without this kind of sea-change in the politics of representation, it is hard to imagine quite such a burst of female literary activity as that entailed by the Post-Boom coming into view.

I would argue that it is this move towards a more inclusive realm of representation that also permitted and encouraged the focalisation on youth culture that became another prominent feature of Post-Boom writing, for the traditional patriarchal structures whose foundations had seemed so indestructible, but that feminism and postmodernism have gone a long way towards destabilising, are predicated as much on the grounds of age as on the grounds of class, race and gender. The newly developed interest in young Spanish America, and the role of present and forthcoming younger generations, is undoubtedly connected to the future oriented desire for socio-political change. There is something inherently optimistic about this forward-looking vision, which clearly plays a part in Allende's view of her generation: 'Somos gente más esperanzada ... Este es un punto bien importante de lo que ha marcado a nuestra ola'.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, perhaps not surprisingly, this focalisation on youth, as opposed to maturity, seems also to be embodied by the Post-Boom writers themselves, as much as by the 'personajes adolescentes' that they installed as the 'núcleo básico de la experiencia y la aprensión de lo real'.<sup>63</sup> Even when the representative writer's accounts of their work seem to refute the optimism that is highlighted by Allende and seemingly inherent to this thematic investment in youth, there appears to be a clear identification with the experience of adolescence based on a recognition of the pertinence of the socio-political growing pains that led to them writing in the first place. For example, Giardinelli refers to 'el fiasco del 68, de

<sup>60</sup>Wladimir Kryszinski, 'Rethinking postmodernism (With some Latin American Excurses)' in Richard A. Young (ed.), *Latin American Postmodernisms*, (Amsterdam; Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1997), pp.9-25, p.11-12. The critic's use of the term 'anti-dialectic' here does not chime well with the use of the dialectic in this thesis. Here, however, Kryszinski seems to conceive of 'dialectics' not in Hegelian terms, hence as a movement between two oppositions that can only result in the favouring of one half over the other, rather than as a three-fold process that shifts beyond such dualism and into a third phase of synthesis. He thus exemplifies other possible approaches to the concept. As I discuss later in this chapter, the latter definition is the understanding of 'dialectic' used throughout this study.

<sup>61</sup> Franco, *Introduction to Spanish American Literature*, p.346

<sup>62</sup> Isabel Allende, cited in Shaw, p.10

<sup>63</sup> Juan Armando Epple, 'El contexto histórico-generacional de la literatura de Antonio Skármeta' in *Del cuerpo a las palabras* Silvia Cáceres (ed.), pp.101-115, p.108 cited in Shaw, p.17



Vietnam, de la pérdida de la revolución social latinoamericana y la llamada muerte de las utopías' as the backdrop to writing that 'contiene una elevada carga de frustración, de dolor y de tristeza por todo lo que nos pasó en los 70s y 80s, una carga de desazón, rabia y rebeldía'.<sup>64</sup> Their identity as the 'younger generation', following in the footsteps of the great literary figures of the Boom, having to cut their own path but without disregarding the wisdom that had been attained by those who had gone before them, echoes the narrative trajectory that is implied in Shaw's above-cited reference to the 'rites of passage into adult life', as well as the qualities of postmodernism, born of realism and modernism, put forward by Hutcheon.

What is coming into view here is the *Bildung* of Spanish American literature itself, up until the moment at which women's writing could become a prominent part of its identity. Emerging from the overview of the qualities and characteristics of Post-Boom writing is an image of a dynamic movement that wishes to engage with as much immediacy as possible with a knowable and experienced social reality (however unstable such a concept may be), with the issues that are at play in that reality, and with their effect on the lives of those individuals who partake in it. The great theme of identity, formulated in relation to social and cultural context and recognised as a key feature of Spanish American writing since independence, is thus engaged with in its contemporary guises. Youth and gender become central vehicles for this literary interaction with identity, and plurality is championed in the interrogation of the relationship between individual and social context. Williams reflects on 'the prominence of women's writing in the years following the Boom' in terms that echo this sense of development, aligning it with 'the true historical significance of the general flowering of Latin American literature since the 1920s'.<sup>65</sup> He posits that it was the deeply engrained masculinist ideologies of Latin American societies that led to the establishment of authoritarian regimes, and that these were eventually driven to a 'terminal crisis of authority' during the 1970s – the decade that was the political backdrop to the Boom and the Post-Boom.<sup>66</sup> Literature, therefore, served as the chronicle of these socio-political developments, so that

[r]etrospectively ... it can be appreciated that from the late 1960s the writers of the Boom and the post-Boom had been registering the progressive impotence of Hispanic patriarchy – in the subversive language games of novelists ... in the dictator novels of the mid-1970s, in the new fascination with the egalitarian ethos

<sup>64</sup> Mempo Giardinelli, 'Variaciones sobre la postmodernidad o ¿Qué es eso del posboom latinoamericano?' in *Puro cuento*, (Argentina) 23 (1990), p.30 cited in Shaw, p.12

<sup>65</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.563

<sup>66</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.563

of international mass culture, in the literature that bore testimony to the repressions of the authoritarian state, and finally, *in the burgeoning of women's writing* [my emphases].<sup>67</sup>

Williamson thus ends his study at the point at which this one begins, in the 1980s and with the Post-Boom generation who took up the task that he envisages as the most essential to the possibility of change in Spanish American society: the 'critique of patriarchy [that] may point to an eventual reconciliation of Latin American national identities with the inescapable pluralism of modern culture.'<sup>68</sup> It is this pluralism that creates the need for a renegotiation of gendered identities like that instigated by female novelists such as those six whose work is my interest here, and so we return to Franco's point regarding the necessity of shifting artistic forms as a means by which to take stock of human experience. Yet more concretely, what comes to the fore here is the need for an artistic form that can encapsulate not just particular experiences, but the experience *of change and development*. In taking stock of the different ideas voiced in this overview of the history of late twentieth century Spanish American literature, there emerges a literary history parallel to a process of painful exploration that has enabled a gradual maturation towards a sense of identity, albeit one that remains in constant flux. To be more precise, this is a gradually evolving response to the central question, thematised in literature since before independence, of what it means to be 'latinoamericano/a'. This can be envisaged as the travelling, at the levels of individual, nation and region, along the same developmental trajectory agonizingly evoked by Giardinelli in his description of the generation of writers of which he is a part; a generation whose own process of self-discovery appears embodied in their youthful protagonists. In light of this overview, the next section turns to the Bildungsroman, as a genre that, serving to frame narrative engagement with burgeoning identities, is particularly suited to contemporary Spanish American writers. As I will argue later in this chapter, Spanish American authors take the Bildungsroman as a flexible form which enables them to inject dynamism and movement into their quest for gendered agency. However, in order to understand how this is made possible, first the characterisation and theorisation of the genre require review.

### The Classical Bildungsroman

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<sup>67</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.563

<sup>68</sup> Williamson, *History of Latin America*, p.566

The genre that has most affinity with the process of 'becoming' is rooted in post-Revolutionary Europe; a time and place also feeling the aftershocks of mass social and political change.<sup>69</sup> The narrative focus of the initially Germanic, but soon popularly European, sub-genre of the novel known as the *Bildungsroman* is the developmental processes of its youthful protagonist and the journey towards selfhood. As such, Paul McAleer writes, 'the *Bildungsroman* of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stands as a cultural record of the way in which the self was conceived during this period of history.'<sup>70</sup> Reflecting the shift in Western thought that occurred at that time, which saw modern man placed firmly at the centre of what was now 'his' world, the *Bildungsroman* is a literary form that engages above all with the emergence of the self within its social context. Evidently, there is a contrast here between a literary tradition that is driven by 'the bourgeois ideology of individualism',<sup>71</sup> and the outward focus of the Spanish American canon as discussed above; a contrast that might seem to diminish the pertinence of the *Bildungsroman* to the works considered in this thesis. This point has also been taken up by Kushigian, in her study on the Spanish American *Bildungsroman*, when she underlines that 'Latin American literature does not belong to the individualistic tradition embodied by the literature of the United States and Europe.'<sup>72</sup> She refers back to the 'foundational fictions of the last two centuries' that 'struggled for the establishment of a national character or cultural identity unique to the political, socioeconomic, historical, linguistic and natural conditions of their citizens', and characterises that endeavour as having 'articulated at once a national and personal "I"'.<sup>73</sup> Even the classical *Bildungsroman*, however, articulates a growing towards the self that can only take place through informative interaction between individual and society. As a consequence, one of the

<sup>69</sup> Lutes also notes that 'En las últimas décadas ha resurgido un interés en los temas asociados con el desarrollo del adolescente. Tal interés no le sorprende al enterado, puesto que la misma sociedad sufre de crisis de identidad. Ella se ve metida en un proceso que se dirige hacia la toma de conciencia, o bien étnica o bien de tipo de auto-valoración como en los casos de los varios grupos marginados por la sociedad tradicional'. In saying so, she implicitly acknowledges the relationship between the individual and the society of which they are a part that is central to the formulation of the genre, and one of the aspects of it that make it particularly pertinent to Spanish American writers such as those discussed in this thesis – this despite its origination in a social context of a more individualistic tradition. Lutes, *Aproximaciones teóricas*, p.2

<sup>70</sup> Paul McAleer, 'Transsexual Identities in a Transcultural Context: Jaime Bayly's *La noche es virgen* and the Comic *Bildungsroman*' in *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, vol.15, Nos.2/3, August/December 2009, pp.179-198, p.179

<sup>71</sup> Patricia Alden, *Social Mobility in the English Bildungsroman*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1986), p.4, cited in Paul McAleer, 'Transsexual identities', p.179

<sup>72</sup> Julia A. Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood: Strategies of Reading for Culture and Gender in the Spanish American Bildungsroman*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003), p.18

<sup>73</sup> Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood*, p.18

main contributions of the Spanish American version to what is now a global canon of the sub-genre is the narration of burgeoning selfhood that sees a shift in emphasis rather than in thematic foci, through a 'communal and relational structure that frequently critiques the failures of individualism.'<sup>74</sup>

Turning now to take a closer look at the narrative concerns and stylistic choices of the Spanish American *escritoras* in question here, I find the trajectory of self-development encapsulated and codified by the Bildungsroman to be, to varying degrees, in evidence in their texts – at once individually and across the corpus they jointly form as a group of six literary works. Given the arguments put forward above outlining the innovative contributions that regional versions of the form have made to the renovation of the genre, however, this must not be understood to imply that they simply appropriate the shape and story of the traditional Bildungsroman. Rather, as Kushigian observes,

The voyage of discovery and encounter with the self assumes for the Latin American text the European, indigenous, African, or eastern past, but not so much out of reverence to this history as with a need to manipulate the aesthetic and political, and *unsettle codes of identity*. This would explain the enormous appeal of the Bildungsroman as a self-defining statement that overrides the need to identify solely with a canonical text or an accomplished author of renown [my emphasis].<sup>75</sup>

The appeal, she implies, is that this genre offers a level of freedom not necessarily associated with other 'great' literary forms. Aligned with this argument is my reading of Allende's, Esquivel's, Peri Rossi's, Molloy's, Valdés's and Mastretta's novels as ones that exploit possibilities for adaptation via a re-encoding of conventions that, to borrow McAleer's useful words, 'moulds and reshapes the form to the extent that its manifestations and functions, while still recognisable, operate in a very different way.'<sup>76</sup> Most specifically, I see the narrative course of the genre echoed in their focus on the developmental trajectories through which gendered identities come into view within the social and symbolic orders of Spanish American patriarchies.

Kushigian's above-cited remark that the form is particularly appealing in its potential malleability is one with which I strongly agree, but which also contrasts greatly with a large body of critical material that focuses rather on the limitations of the form for the expression of

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<sup>74</sup> Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood*, p.18

<sup>75</sup> Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood*, p.19

<sup>76</sup> Paul McAleer, 'Transexual identities', p.180

non-hegemonic identities. In order to engage with these issues, a critical detour via the European roots of the genre is required, to a time when, Franco Moretti writes,

[v]irtually without notice, in the dreams and nightmares of the so-called ‘double revolution’, Europe plunges into modernity, but without possessing a *culture* of modernity. If youth, therefore, achieves a symbolic centrality, and the ‘great narrative’ of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being, this is because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*.<sup>77</sup>

Here, Moretti makes a direct connection between the historical moment of that emergence, and its thematic focus on youth. He sees that focus as a by-product of the onset of modernity, which initiated a shift in the social and symbolic significance given to the different stages of human development. Moretti goes on to provide an illuminating overview of the social shifts that made this focus on youth both possible and necessary, taking in the changes from feudal to industrialized societies and the ensuing movements within the class structure, through to the impact of these broad reaching metamorphoses on change and development as embodied in the individual social subject. He conjectures that inter-generational relationships were previously characterised by repetition, as roles were handed down in succession.<sup>78</sup> Youth, in this schema, was ‘a “pre-scribed” youth’, one with ‘no culture that distinguishes it and emphasizes its worth. It [was], we might say, an “invisible” and “insignificant” youth.’<sup>79</sup>

But when status society starts to collapse, the countryside is abandoned for the city, and the world of work changes at an incredible and incessant pace, the colourless and uneventful socialization of ‘old’ youth becomes increasingly implausible: it becomes a *problem*, one that makes youth itself problematic.<sup>80</sup>

During this tumultuous period, the trajectory of individual development changed dramatically, and these changes required a symbolic form for expression. The *Bildungsroman* was the form that could encapsulate such difference: a genre that was – could only be – a product of its time. It came about as a necessary forum for the artistic exploration of new experiences and conceptions of self-development and selfhood in a specific moment in the history of modern Western European civilization. The *Bildungsroman* ‘abstracts from “real” youth a “symbolic” one’ that is ‘modernity’s essence, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than the past.’<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, (London: Verso, 2000), p.5

<sup>78</sup> Moretti, p.4. Citing Karl Mannheim’s ‘The Problem of Generations’ in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, Paul Kecskemeti (ed.), London 1952, p.300 (fn 2)

<sup>79</sup> Moretti, p.4 Citing Mannheim ‘The Problem of Generations’ (fn 2)

<sup>80</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.4

<sup>81</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.5

Whilst the term 'Bildungsroman' has already been adopted into literary terminology in English, a translation of the native German word is helpful to underlining the genre's thematic concerns. It has been variably interpreted as the 'novel of development',<sup>82</sup> 'the novel of youth, the novel of education, of apprenticeship, of adolescence, of initiation, even the life-novel',<sup>83</sup> and 'the self-cultivation novel'.<sup>84</sup> All of these terms, despite their nuances, qualify Moretti's assessment of the form's primary concerns, as well as his indication that examples of it will be forward-looking narratives. This important tenet is further emphasized in possibly the most well-known definition of the genre, put forward by Wilhelm Dilthey, who describes the narrative trajectory of the form as follows:

A regulated development within the life of the individual is observed, each of its stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony.<sup>85</sup>

Further describing the patterns through which this kind of story takes shape, Dilthey writes that its protagonist

enters life in a blissful daze, searches for kindred souls, encounters friendship and love, but then ... he comes into conflict with the hard reality of the world and thus matures in the course of manifold life-experiences, finds himself, and becomes certain of his task in the world.<sup>86</sup>

In this summary, the narrative form is one that is constructed in a temporally logical order showing the protagonist's progression from the early stages of life to maturity – from the present towards the future. The narrative is also structured, though, by opposition. This is the 'problematic' youth highlighted by Moretti in another sense; problematic not only because unknown, but because the path it has to take is marked by challenges. The early events of the

<sup>82</sup> Stephen M. Hart uses this term as the heading of the first chapter of *White Ink: Essays on Twentieth-Century Feminine Fiction in Spain and Latin America* (1993) and it is echoed in the title of Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland's edited volume *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983)

<sup>83</sup> Jerome Hamilton Buckley quoted by Esther Kleinbord Labovitz in *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century: Dorothy Richardson, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), p.2 Labovitz also points out that Buckley insists on that one of the interpretations he provides 'quite replaces the label *Bildungsroman*' and that he recommends a study of the novels themselves as the best method for a full understanding of the true nature of the genre.

<sup>84</sup> Stephen M. Hart, *White Ink*, p.10

<sup>85</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1913), p.394, cited in Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch & Elizabeth Langland, *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, (Hanover, N.H.; London: University Press of New England, 1983), pp.5-6. According to Todd Kontje, 'Karl Morgenstern gets credit for inventing the term' but it was Dilthey who 'introduced it into common usage'. For references to Dilthey, original sources have not been used as they were unavailable in translation.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Todd Kontje, *Private Lives in the Public Sphere: The German Bildungsroman as Metafiction*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p.12

story, 'the blissful daze' that encases the search for 'kindred souls', 'friendship' and 'love' are all deeply personal experiences driven by the needs and desires of the self. But this harmonious meandering cannot last, and a clash occurs between these interior desires and the 'hard reality' that exists outside of the self. Fundamentally, if the narrative is to move forward this conflict must be resolved, and the nature of the resolution of this antagonism is an important indicator of the ideologies informing the classical Bildungsroman. Dilthey seems to suggest that resolution occurs via the *Bildungsheld's* (the protagonist of the genre) becoming 'certain of his task in the world'. In other words, he must leave behind doubt as to his place and role, thus allowing the fraught years of adolescence to give way to a settled phase of adulthood. Commenting on what this means for an understanding of the genre, Todd Kontje posits that:

The hero of the classical *Bildungsroman* as Dilthey defines it, engages in the double task of self-integration and integration into society. Under ideal conditions, the first implies the second: the mature hero becomes a useful and satisfied citizen. Viewed in this way, the *Bildungsroman* is a fundamentally affirmative, conservative genre, confident in the validity of the society it depicts, and anxious to lead both hero and reader toward a productive place within that world.<sup>87</sup>

Two important characteristics of the Bildungsroman come clear through Moretti's, Dilthey's and Kontje's readings of the form. Firstly, it is a narrative carried through the vehicle of a young central protagonist, who begins his journey in the early stages of life and ends it at a point of 'maturity' constituted by successful social integration. Secondly, it is a genre with didactic pretensions towards its reader that are, logically, motivated by the same aims of social integration. Moretti credits Goethe with being the first to 'codify' the shift in cultural values that lead to the materialization of the narrative, in the text that is read as the paradigmatic Bildungsroman: *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-6). Herein, Goethe envisages 'youth as the most meaningful part of life',<sup>88</sup> so that for his hero Meister, "apprenticeship" is no longer the slow and predictable progress towards one's father's work, but rather an uncertain exploration of social space'.<sup>89</sup> However, the 'uncertain exploration' of the protagonist to which this critic makes reference above comes across, in both his and Kontje's analyses, as retaining some of its predictability, because they describe the form's plotline as solidly constructed around a template that predetermines its course of action. 'Narrative transformations' are understood only to 'have meaning in so far as they lead to a

<sup>87</sup> Kontje, *Private Lives in the Public Sphere*, p.12

<sup>88</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.3

<sup>89</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.4

particularly marked ending'.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, it is portrayed that the *Bildungsheld* of the classical Bildungsroman is not aware – *must not* be aware – of the invisible hand guiding their progress from youth to maturity. This seems sensible, for recognition of such control might well provoke conflict, and it is the resolution of this conflict through acceptance that seems, in these interpretations, to be the ultimate aim of the narrative. Moretti writes:

it is not sufficient for modern bourgeois society simply to subdue the drives that oppose the standards of “normality”. It is also necessary that, as a ‘free individual’, not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as *one’s own*.<sup>91</sup>

At this juncture certain connections between autobiography and the Bildungsroman come into view, for in writing this character and the world in which he lives, the author (consciously or not) gives evidence of his own successful socialization; of his conviction and ‘confidence in the validity of the society that [he] depicts’,<sup>92</sup> and of his own location within a self-legitimizing discursive framework – a grand narrative. As a consequence, the genre begins to seem one that facilitates, or at the very least encourages, the control of individuality through mediation by social norms and through the incitement of the individual to have faith in the validity of that framework. This begs the questions: is the Bildungsroman a genre that facilitates indoctrination into hegemonic discourses? Is it, or could it become, a tool for oppression? And, if this is the case, what use could it be to the six Spanish American women writers central to this project?

To respond to these issues requires a simultaneous consideration of the teleological structure of the genre and its thematic interests. The notion of a telos will be explored below in relation to the theoretical frameworks of this study. For now the point needs to be made that the idea of a final or end point is not necessarily a problematic feature of this symbolic form. It could be, were it synonymous with closure, but this is not the case. Tomas L. Jeffers points out in relation to *Wilhelm Meister* that ‘the comic ending is remarkably open-ended, with many problems unsolved and with Wilhelm and the rest still afloat on the stream of history.’<sup>93</sup> Most significantly, it is the focus on such a destination that makes the Bildungsroman a future-oriented form, and this feature is one of its most essential and valuable. What matters is the ideal that is set out as a telos, for this ideal will be ideologically informed and arrival at it

<sup>90</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.7

<sup>91</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.16

<sup>92</sup> Kontje, *Private Lives in the Public Sphere*, p.12

<sup>93</sup> Thomas L. Jeffers, *Apprenticeships: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.24



encouraged by the course of the Bildungsroman narrative. In other words, the journey itself, and hence the individual that undertakes that journey, will be moulded by the intended destination. In the case of the classical Bildungsroman, the telos is maturity, and so the qualities deemed to constitute maturity within the social context described in the novel will be drawn out during the course of the protagonist's social apprenticeship.

Yet this is only one side of the story. What the above scenario means is that the individual in question is moulded by the external forces and structures surrounding him, but that he has no impact upon his surroundings – no agency. For this to be the case would seem, in many ways, deeply incongruous with the period of history that gave birth to the genre. Goethe's prototypical text was written in the wake of the Enlightenment and before the French Revolution had even come to an end. Man had been placed at the centre of his world, social mobility had become a possibility for the first time, the nature and importance of education and self-improvement had become pertinent issues in a way that they could not have been before. All of these ideas are clearly embedded in the form and content of the Bildungsroman, and so it seems impossible that the future could be reached therein by means of a complete collapse of the self under external forces; that the antagonism that Dilthey highlights in his summary of the form could end in the total loss of individual agency. Rather, it is *synthesis* that is the desired outcome of the meeting between selfhood and society. Moretti also refers back to the post-Revolutionary context of the genre's appearance to make a convincing argument that this desire for assimilation is the result of the Bildungsroman's location 'on the border between two social classes, and at the transition point between them: between bourgeoisie and aristocracy'.<sup>94</sup> He posits that the combination of these class structures within the genre, is a 'marriage' of the two' that presents

a way to heal the rupture that had generated (or so it seemed) the French Revolution, and to imagine a continuity between the old and new regime. It is the 'attempt at compromise' which Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* sees as the core of novelistic structure.<sup>95</sup>

Synthesis, here, is understood to be taking place both historically and socially; the structure of the novel is transposed onto the broad plane of world events.

Gyorgy Lukács, in a chapter entitled 'Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship as an attempted synthesis', explores the duality that is the necessary pre-condition to 'compromise'

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<sup>94</sup>Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.viii

<sup>95</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.viii

more strictly in textual terms, and in a way that emphasises the important presence of agency in the Bildungsroman. To begin with, he highlights the feasibility of reconciliation:

The type of personality and the structure of the plot are determined by the necessary condition that a reconciliation between interiority and reality, although problematic, is nevertheless possible; that it has to be sought in hard struggles and dangerous adventures, yet is ultimately possible to achieve.<sup>96</sup>

Lukács perceives the particular kind of 'interiority', which we can understand to be synonymous with the protagonist, to be the representation of a 'soul' that 'is not purely self-dependent':

its world is not a reality which is, or should be, complete in itself and can be opposed to the reality of the outside world as a postulate and a competing power; instead, the soul in such a novel carries within itself, as a sign of its tenuous, but not yet severed link with the transcendental order, a longing for an earthly home which may correspond to its ideal – an ideal which eludes positive definition but is clear enough in negative terms.<sup>97</sup>

Here, the words 'longing' and 'ideal' are key. The 'longing' for the 'ideal' becomes a driving force – a desire that engenders agency by being a force for self-motivation. The *Bildungsheld* is thus not a passive individual pushed unknowingly towards his prefabricated destiny, but the central character of a story that encapsulates

on the one hand a wider and consequently more adaptable, gentler, more concrete idealism, and, on the other hand, a widening of the soul which seeks fulfilment in *action*, in *effective* dealing with reality, and not merely in contemplation [my emphases].<sup>98</sup>

In this way, what may, at first, seem to be a rigid, didactic narrative portraying a fixed journey towards an acceptable maturity, and in doing so indoctrinating hegemonic social values, now appears as a more nuanced form.

It is the nature of oppositions that each side requires the other in order to maintain boundaries and therefore a sense of meaning. The Bildungsroman is an empowering genre precisely because, however it may be thematized or conceptualized, neither the interior 'soul' nor the exterior social force becomes dominant – a crucial synthesis is achieved that means whilst the individual may not be in complete control of the world around him he does have a level of agency. As much as he may be impacted and shaped by his surroundings, the

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<sup>96</sup> Gyorgy Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historic-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.132

<sup>97</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p.132

<sup>98</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p.133

individual too can have impact and give shape. Also significant, is that agency is gained, in part, because the individual is no longer alone in the world. Now that interaction has been made possible by the removal of the self from the isolated world of contemplation, community is feasible for the first time. This new part of life, writes Lukács,

is achieved by personalities, previously lonely and confined within their own selves, adapting and accustoming themselves to one another; it is the fruit of *a rich and enriching resignation*, the crowning of a process of education, a maturity attained by struggle and effort [my emphases].<sup>99</sup>

This is 'socialization as subjective growth'.<sup>100</sup> It is a journey towards satisfaction through belonging, in which '[o]ne's formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one's social integration as a simple *part of a whole*'.<sup>101</sup> Consequently, Moretti can state that

Even though the concept of the Bildungsroman has become ever more approximate, it is still clear that we seek to indicate with it one of the most harmonious solutions ever offered to a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization: the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*.<sup>102</sup>

Fundamentally, as is especially clear in Lukács account, the confrontation between the individual and the social in the Bildungsroman is not characterised by 'philistinism – the acceptance of an outside order, however lacking in idea it may be, simply because it is the given order'.<sup>103</sup> This is concretised also by Jeffers' interpretation of Goethe's central project as that of 'self-cultivation'.<sup>104</sup> 'Goethe's dominant principle', he asserts, was 'that the individual is born not for society's sake but for his own, and that society is essentially an arena in which individuals can collectively realize their own "capabilities"'.<sup>105</sup>

The Bildungsroman can thus be understood to narrate a personal engagement with the world that is recounted in terms of a push and pull between exterior and interior forces: a complex inter-relationship of social realities and expectations with individual desires and ambitions. That said, the contradictions at play across the above accounts are difficult to ignore: the genre is described as conservative but seems malleable in the face of individual desires; it is encouraging of the integration of the individual into the social, and simultaneously

<sup>99</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p.133

<sup>100</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.233

<sup>101</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.16

<sup>102</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.15

<sup>103</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p.134

<sup>104</sup> Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, p.13

<sup>105</sup> Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, p.34

a narration of individuality. Effectively, whilst this form may search for a 'harmonious solution', to use Moretti's words, whether or not it can ever really be said to achieve this is a question that remains unanswered. Moreover, if it does not achieve that goal, how can it be that it has endured so many changes over so much time? I believe that the longevity of the Bildungsroman rests precisely upon this instability. Despite the fondness of Western thought for the clarity of the binary opposition and its powerful organizational properties, the Bildungsroman narrative has survived in the interstice that exists between black and white, weak and strong, male and female, and other rigid binaries. This is made possible by the fact that the balance of power in the tug-of-war that structures its story can go either way, so that it can provide a conservative account of one individual's eventual succumbing to the dominant norms of their surroundings, but so can it account for a greater degree of rebellion and refusal. Ultimately, the nature of that dichotomy depends greatly on the identity and trajectory of the protagonist.

Goethe's protagonist was the middle-class white male that Moretti posits as an absolute necessity to the initiation of the genre. Given the privilege awarded by that economic, racial, and gendered social status, for Wilhelm's rebellion could have been construed as a mere rite of passage on his way to a maturity that *per se* afforded agency. From a feminist analytical perspective, it could be argued that, in the end, it would not have mattered what Wilhelm did, for even if he were to rebel and claim his agency in the world through this rebellion rather than through conformity, his actions would still have been legitimised by his powerful social identity. This would be an over-simplistic reading, however, that fails to take into account an important historical nuance in a narrative that, from a twenty-first century perspective, is likely condemned to seem conservative even in its most mutinous moments. Jeffers explains:

[L]et us do [Goethe] justice by thinking historically ... In the era of the French Revolution it was cutting edge to declare the rights of a burgherly man like Wilhelm, for whose talents the nobles of the Tower open a career ... Equality of opportunity, was (and actually still is) the beckoning ideal. [...] Goethe merits praise for having, in art speech, given body to that ideal at the birth of a democratic European civilisation.<sup>106</sup>

This reflection leads to two important points. Firstly, it emphasises the temporal contingency of the *Bildungsheld*. Secondly, it emphasises the centrality of the *Bildungsheld* as the embodiment

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<sup>106</sup> Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, p.34

of the ideals towards which the Bildungsroman drives: self-development and social integration (here expressed as 'equality of opportunity'), and agency as both a means to an end and an end in itself. These two issues have been explored by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal work on the genre, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)' (1979), where he assumes as his main category of analysis the way in which 'the image of the main hero is constructed'.<sup>107</sup> He writes:

No specific historical subcategory upholds any given principle in pure form; rather each is *characterized by the prevalence of one or another principle for formulating the figure of the hero*. Since all elements are mutually determined, the principle for formulating the hero figure is related to the particular type of plot, to the particular conception of the world, and to a particular conception of a given novel [my emphasis].<sup>108</sup>

For Bakhtin, the protagonist is the most formative feature of the various guises of the novel genre. However, he also points out the interconnectedness of the narrative vehicle and the other aspects of a given form's identity, understanding the protagonist as determined in relation to a certain 'conception' of the world. For if the protagonist influences the nature of the narrative, and the particular conception of the world influences the nature of the protagonist, then a change at the level of genre must also be by a changed conceptualization of either of those elements. In this account, the Bildungsroman becomes yet more malleable – able to negotiate new characters, and new contexts.

Comparing and contrasting the protagonists of 'the travel novel, the novel of ordeal, the biographical (autobiographical) novel, the *Bildungsroman*', Bakhtin summarises the primary characters of the first three sub-genres as, respectively, 'quite static, as static as the world that surrounds him',<sup>109</sup> 'always presented as complete and unchanging' with every one of 'his qualities...given from the very beginning, and during the course of the novel...only tested and verified',<sup>110</sup> and 'characterized by both positive and negative features', that are 'fixed and ready-made ... given from the very beginning'.<sup>111</sup> It is the last of these heroes that has most in common with the protagonist of the Bildungsroman as characterised by Bakhtin, in that the biographical protagonist is located at a point during the developmental trajectory of the *Bildungsheld* at which it is deemed that the narrator/protagonist (or both in the

<sup>107</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)' in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Trans. Vern W. McGee, Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds.), (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986), p.10

<sup>108</sup> Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman*', p.10

<sup>109</sup> Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman*', p.10

<sup>110</sup> Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman*', p.11

<sup>111</sup> Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman*', p.19

autobiographical novel) has achieved a perspective on life considered worthy of literary expression. In other words, the biographical protagonist, or voice, is the identity resulting from the successful negotiation of *Bildung*. Effectively then, to be denied the right to *Bildung*, is to be denied the right to travel a path of legitimisation, at the end of which identity and agency are to be found.

Thus, an important relationship between authority and the writing of the self is revealed, which in turn highlights the meaningful contrast between the *Bildungsbeld* as ‘the image of *man* in the process of becoming’ and the ‘ready-made hero’,<sup>112</sup> who is an ‘immobile and fixed point around which all movement in the novel takes place’ but whose ‘change and emergence do not become the plot’.<sup>113</sup> The relationship between the particular and the general – the relationship that makes agency matter – cannot be explored in the story of such a fixed character because the potential, mutual, impact of individual and society upon one another is made irrelevant by an unchanging central figure. According to Bakhtin, the Bildungsroman is an ‘incomparably rarer type of novel’ in which:

Changes in the hero himself acquire *plot* significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed. Time is introduced into man, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his daily life. This type of novel can be designated in the most general sense as the novel of human emergence.<sup>114</sup>

In this summary are highlighted the aspects of the form that have greatest significance for the aims of this project. Bakhtin underlines the possibility of ‘reinterpretation’ and ‘reconstruction’ that is brought about by the particularities of the role of the *Bildungsbeld* and therefore simultaneously indicates a manipulability that can allow the agency locked within this representative framework to be grasped by individuals previously denied self-expression. In line with Bakhtin’s work, this is a genre that is not only able to reflect social change, but cannot avoid doing so without undermining its own identity by shifting the conventions that centralise its protagonist; one who comes into view

along with the world and reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the

<sup>112</sup> Bakhtin, ‘The Bildungsroman’, p.20

<sup>113</sup> Bakhtin, ‘The Bildungsroman’, p.21

<sup>114</sup> Bakhtin, ‘The Bildungsroman’, p.21

transition point between one to the other. This transition is accomplished in him and through him.<sup>115</sup>

The epochal cusp upon which Bakhtin sees the protagonist to be standing is a location that insinuates the *moving beyond* dualism; a 'transition point' that recalls Moretti and Lukács's references to both 'compromise' and 'synthesis' which, I argued above, are reached by the successful negotiation of antagonistic oppositions between self and society. What all three seem to draw out in their study of the genre therefore, is its potential for the expression, exploration, and interrogation of subjectivity as dialectically formed and thus in a continual state of evolution.

It is because of this that the genre should not be disregarded as a consequence of misapprehension of its structural and thematic limitations. Were this to happen, narrative possibility would be exchanged for the rigidity of what Bakhtin classes as four other subcategories of the 'novel of emergence', in which a very different relationship between 'man' and 'world' is portrayed:

The world, existing and stable in this existence, required that man adapt to it, that he recognise and submit to the existing laws of life. Man emerged, but the world itself did not ... And everything in the world itself remained in place ... [T]he world, as an experience and as a school, remained the same, fundamentally immobile and ready-made, given. It changed for one studying it only during the process of study (in most cases the world turned out to be more impoverished and drier than it had seemed in the beginning).<sup>116</sup>

Through this description of the solidified context of the heroes of his other designated generic subcategories, Bakhtin stresses the potential that has always been inherent in even the most traditional examples of the form.

In light of these characterisations of the Bildungsroman, I argue that in order to become capable of narrating the development and social interactions of other kinds of characters – those not recognisable within its 'traditional' or 'classic' corpus – the genre must only undergo a number of shifts in focus already made possible by its inherent flexibility. Most fundamentally, in a genre that can only appear as its protagonist emerges, to change the characteristics of that protagonist cannot but bring new narratives onto its pages. Hence, overall, what might be perceived as the conservatism of the genre in its classical rendering

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<sup>115</sup> Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman*', p.23. Dividing the Bildungsroman canon into five further subcategories, Bakhtin includes Goethe's work within the final and 'most significant' of these; one in which 'human emergence is no longer man's private affair'. The citation given here extends his description of this fifth category.

<sup>116</sup> Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman*', p.23

cannot preclude the possibility of its adaptation to the contemporary and marginalised protagonist. If Jeffers's analysis is correct, and Goethe's idea was truly that society was but an arena for individual self-exploration, then surely any given self can undertake that journey? What this means is, it is not the form in and of itself that denies *Bildung* to non-hegemonic identities; not the text itself but the exterior ideological forces at work upon it. Reflecting and imposing these external pressures, some critics of the genre argue that to replace the paradigmatic white middle-class male protagonist with another combination of identity categories achieves only the destruction of the genre's internal boundaries, rendering it structureless and therefore meaningless as a framework for writing or for reading about self-development. I do not believe this to be the case, and in the following section propose an understanding of the form that highlights its potential for the depiction of all kinds of marginalised identities.

### Gender and the Bildungsroman

That the kind of changes to the genre I have argued to be possible have indeed taken place is indisputable, based on the evidence of the corpus of literature that has sprung up around the central tenet of narrating individual development. Classically cited examples include Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* (1813), Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830), Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1837), Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (1884), Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915), *The Magic Mountain* (1924) by Thomas Mann, Carson McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Why, then, the need to go to such lengths to excavate the roots of the genre in this way?

A brief glance at this list gives evidence of two important points for this project. Firstly, the number of narratives by and about women here is limited to two. Secondly, there are no Spanish American examples included alongside these European and North American texts. These culturally- and gender-specific lacunas can be understood to be the result of a broad understanding of the genre that does not recognise the flexibility that I have argued for above, but one refuted by the novels analysed in this study. Indeed, as I demonstrated at the start of this chapter and in reference to other critical works on the form, the Spanish American female Bildungsroman has already been recognised as an important element of the modern Spanish American literary landscape. What the above list infers, therefore, is that it has



not yet been accepted into the 'global' canon, and that the Bildungsroman continues to be seen as a male-dominated, European and Anglo-American genre.

Gender in the Bildungsroman must be confronted as an issue that has become central to the discussions in which the malleability of the genre has been both contested and explored. A dominant male presence, as both author and protagonist, is an accepted feature of the form. This bias is one of the most significant aspects of the Bildungsroman in terms of why this contested site of representation has become one of such intrigue and value to artists and scholars interested in the representation – or lack thereof – of marginalised identities. Rooted in its own historical context of production, this bias reflects a historical understanding of the differences between the genders. Todd Kontje points towards Thomas Laquer's argument that 'the concept of radical differences between men and women emerged for the first time during the late eighteenth century',<sup>117</sup> and himself signals two philosophical treatise by Wilhelm von Humboldt 'on the "natural differences between the sexes"'.<sup>118</sup> He summarises that from

today's perspective Humboldt's arguments sound like an attempt to place a pseudoscientific veneer on his contemporary cultural prejudices. Thus, he concludes that women are naturally passive, men active; men are rational, women imaginative. He associates the masculine with freedom, while identifying women with nature.<sup>119</sup>

Jeffers explains that Goethe's aforementioned 'dominant principle', the idea that 'the individual is born not for society's sake but for his own', 'applied mostly to upper-class or upwardly tending males like himself. Natalia, Aurelia, the Beautiful Soul [female characters from the *Wilhelm Meister*] notwithstanding, aspiring women and the working-class had in general no need to apply'.<sup>120</sup> To concretise the pervasiveness of such ideas at the time, Kontje also refers to Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic theory, in which 'the same cultural stereotypes' were deployed, 'ascribing beauty and grace to women while reserving dignity and the sublime for men'.<sup>121</sup> He emphasises that:

Neither Humboldt nor Schiller mean to degrade women. Both are delighted by the seemingly natural symmetry between the sexes, and both conceive of a human ideal that would unite the two opposites in one. Yet the way in which they formulate sexual difference effectively precludes the possibility of female development. As both Humboldt and Schiller stress, human freedom is absolutely

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Laquer, referenced by Kontje in *The German Bildungsroman*, p.6

<sup>118</sup> Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman*, p.6 the referenced works by Humboldt are 'On Sexual Difference and Its Influence on Organic Nature' (1794) and 'On Masculine and Feminine Form' (1795)

<sup>119</sup> Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman*, p.7

<sup>120</sup> Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, p.34

<sup>121</sup> Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman*, p.7

necessary for personal growth; by equating women with nature, they deny women any chance of participating in the process of *Bildung*.<sup>122</sup>

Jeffers, indicating the influence that this contemporary thought had on Goethe, understands the inherent bias in the author's work to be connected to a belief in the higher, organising power of 'nature'. He sees this belief to have informed Goethe's philosophical worldly vision; one in which 'life inclines towards some ... and away from others'.<sup>123</sup>

The individuals whom nature favored seemed to fall into the two or three categories central European societies tended to favor – Goethe making the not uncommon mistake of thinking that the way some things are and have been ("historically") is the way the "hidden [or higher] hand" wants them to be "naturally". This prejudice of class and sex was of course shared by his contemporaries, and passed on to his successors elsewhere.<sup>124</sup>

These, in short, were ideas on sexual and class difference that would prove both pervasive and durable, and their partiality is one of the primary reasons why grounding this study in a detailed consideration of the classical *Bildungsroman* is an informative starting point, despite the fact that the corpus of texts in question appear some two hundred years later on another continent. The changes that take place in the works of Goethe's successors throughout the two centuries that stand between him and my chosen corpus are of a variety and quantity that cannot be accounted for without deviating too far from my central argument: the feasibility of abstracting from the literary form a framework for the analysis of gendered identity development. Nevertheless, the gap created by this comparative approach is a meaningful one, for it allows that both sameness and difference become visible. Jeffers's remark that the prejudices that temporal distance reveals to be at work in Goethe's 'foundational example', the one 'to which successors' tend to 'pay at least tacit homage',<sup>125</sup> are still at play in later versions, confirms the strength of the genre's roots in eighteenth-century Europe, and so it seems that failure to account for these in new studies on the form would mean beginning on unstable footings.

Moretti also addresses the problematic of the genre's exclusivity in his own introduction, posing the rhetorical question: 'And the *Bildungsroman* of the others – women,

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<sup>122</sup> Kontje, *The German Bildungsroman*, p.7

<sup>123</sup> Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, p.33

<sup>124</sup> Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, p.34

<sup>125</sup> Jeffers, *Apprenticeships*, p.5

workers, African-Americans....?<sup>126</sup> He responds to his own query by explaining that the reason for these

exclusions lies in the very elements that characterize the Bildungsroman as a form: wide cultural formation, professional mobility, full social freedom – for a very long time, the west European middle-class man held a virtual monopoly on these, which made him a sort of structural *sine qua non* of the genre. Without him, and without the social privileges he enjoyed, the *Bildungsroman* was difficult to write, because it was difficult to imagine.<sup>127</sup>

Given what we know of the genre, it is clear that his argument is a sound one. What is not so acceptable, I argue, is the notion that this kind of privileging cannot change. Again, it would seem illogical for this to be possible, in view of the crucial ties between the character of the *Bildungsheld* and the world he inhabits. If, as Moretti suggests, the writing of such narratives was dependent on the existence of this model central character, then the genre itself would have become more and more irrelevant as social realities shifted. Whilst it is incorrect to say that gender and class equality has been achieved – even in so-called ‘modern’ or ‘developed’ parts of the world – nor is it realistic to say that the efforts of artists and critics to shine the spotlight on the underprivileged, oppressed and marginalised have been fruitless. The narratives of the Spanish America broadly, and of the Post-Boom specifically, give evidence to this. The deployment of the concept of *Bildung* by writers from that generation will be shown to play a significant role in the way in which they further the quest for equality by recuperating the symbolic form of the Bildungsroman, using it to interrogate the discursive development of culturally-specific gendered identities.

The centrality of the protagonist will be kept in focus now, because it is the nature of the relationship that a given protagonist can have with the social order in which they develop that constitutes the narrative thread of the Bildungsroman. To briefly re-cap, the history of the Bildungsroman is a male-dominated one, and one that gives clear evidence of the inter-relationship between life and art: the significance historically-awarded to male experiences of self-development has led to its predominant representation in literature, which has, in turn, reproduced ideals of male subjectivity and what characterises its achievement. It is important to hold on to the fact, however, that historical, social and cultural specificities are at play in this understanding of the form, and it has been recognition of these variables that has enabled the gradual expansion of the genre’s own boundaries beyond its eighteenth-century Germanic

<sup>126</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p.ix

<sup>127</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, pp.ix-x

roots, adding depth and nuance to the canon. I have highlighted the significance of what the genre has to offer our understanding of individual growth and development, emphasising the fact that the ultimate aim of the traditional Bildungsroman narrative is individual agency, even whilst this may be achieved only through a certain level of accommodation to the norm. I have argued also for the inherent malleability of the genre, against the grain of some critical approaches that marshal its boundaries to such an extent as to deny entrance of non-hegemonic identities into its symbolic order.

In large part, it is recognition of the significance of the genre not only for representation of selfhood, but also for the exploration of social and individual agency (or lack of agency) that has lead to critical revision of the Bildungsroman, and to the interrogation of its gender bias. This bias has been addressed in recent years by a number of feminist literary studies focusing on the notion of a female Bildungsroman. Such works have been informed by a variety of inter-related, mutually informative approaches including the introduction of gender as a category for analysis of the genre; the recovery of a corpus of 'lost' or previously ignored female texts that are understood to narrate the experience of female development; and the theorisation of the thematic and structural features of the newly established female canon in dialogue with feminist literary theory. This final stage culminates in a renewed understanding of the genre as one that exemplifies the important differences between male and female patterns of development and explores the socio-cultural issues at work in this difference. For example, the title of Esther Kleinbord Labovitz's study *The Missing Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (1986), clearly recognises a female absence in the genre's corpus. Labovitz points to the value of 'this discursive and all-encompassing vehicle' able to 'weave together so many threads of a life while positing philosophical and psychological questions'.<sup>128</sup> She writes that she was marked by the 'missing female heroine' whose 'failure to make an appearance in the novels of the nineteenth century when the Bildungsroman was at its height opened up questions of a historical, social, and cultural nature'.<sup>129</sup> Labovitz argues that the nineteenth century fictional heroine was most often traced up until a point of 'physical maturity' (in the event that her development was acknowledged at all), but is then abandoned by a narrative that fails to recognize her potential beyond that

<sup>128</sup> Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Missing Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*; Dorothy Richardson, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf, (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), p.1

<sup>129</sup> Labovitz, *The Missing Heroine*, p.4

point.<sup>130</sup> The consequence she argues, is that ultimately ‘this militat[es] against their designation as *Bildungsroman* heroines.’<sup>131</sup> The kind of story told about these women is not ripe for inclusion in the *Bildungsroman* canon. Labovitz’s search for the twentieth-century heroine is comparatively more fruitful, and she is motivated by it to state that the *Bildungsroman* does not need to be considered a less ‘viable structure for the female heroine by virtue of her different developmental process’. Rather, that heroine is ‘a vehicle advocating fuller exploration of women’s goals and expectations’ who thus facilitates ‘a redefining of the genre.’<sup>132</sup> This assessment of the plight of the (gradually appearing) female *Bildungsbeld* echoes the importance and centrality of the *Bildungsbeld* to the *Bildungsroman* narrative, and of the inevitably profound impact of a switch in the gender of the protagonist on the story that can or will be told. Rather than the external imposition of structural or thematic changes that remould the narratives, the replacement of one gender with another creates a redefinition of the genre from within, permitting the exploitation of the form’s inherent malleability.

In their slightly earlier study *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (1983), Abel, Hirsch and Langland depart from a related, but differently conceived, vision of the genre, establishing as their critical aim the transformation of ‘a recognized historical and theoretical genre into a more flexible category whose validity lies in its usefulness as a conceptual tool’.<sup>133</sup> Hence, in contrast to my own argument that the genre is *per se* a malleable one, these critics understand it to require an enforced revolution. Their critical perspective re-aligns with mine through our shared interest in gender, however. They acknowledge that ‘the definition of the genre has gradually been expanded to accommodate other historical and cultural variables’ but emphasise that limitations have remained because ‘[g]ender ... has not been assimilated as a pertinent category, despite the fact that the sex of the protagonist modifies every aspect of a particular *Bildungsroman*: its narrative structure, its implied psychology, its representation of social pressures.’<sup>134</sup> Both of these studies thus pull to the fore the lack of female presence in the *Bildungsroman* canon, and the inappropriateness of male developmental patterns – the goals and experiences that punctuate such narratives – to the expression of female experiences of the same.

<sup>130</sup> Labovitz, *The Missing Heroine*, p.5

<sup>131</sup> Labovitz, *The Missing Heroine*, p.5

<sup>132</sup> Labovitz, *The Missing Heroine*, p.5

<sup>133</sup> Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland (eds.), *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, (Hanover, N.H.; London: University Press of New England, 1983), pp.13-14

<sup>134</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.5

This problematic has been neatly summed up by Stephen M. Hart, who poses the important question: 'does the female *Bildungsroman* simply exchange the sex of its protagonist while retaining the same plot structure, character motivation and life experience of the male original?'<sup>135</sup> The answer to this question, as is testified by the array of critical works that engage with gender in this genre, is certainly that it does not. The male and female *Bildungsroman* must be differently structured, themed, and theorised. Recognition of this need is key, because it emphasises one of the *Bildungsroman*'s major points of value from the perspective of gender studies: that the formation of a genre that narrates self-development has to adapt so much in order to be able to narrate differently gendered selves is a fact that underlines the dualistic social construction of gendered identities. In order to better illuminate this notion, it is again useful to refer to a more classical conception of the structure and thematic concerns of the form. One of the most commonly cited summaries of the main events and consequences of the traditional *Bildungsroman* plot, put forward by Jerome Buckley in *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974), tells us that:

A child of some sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile to his creative instincts or flights of fancy, antagonistic to his ambitions, and quite impervious to the new ideas he has gained from unprescribed reading. His first schooling, even if not totally inadequate, may be frustrating insofar as it may suggest options not available to him in his present setting. He therefore, sometimes at quite an early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city ... There his real "education" begins, not only his preparation for a career but also – and often more importantly – his direct experience of urban life. The latter involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity.<sup>136</sup>

From the very outset of this résumé, limitations on the basis of gender can be perceived: the beginning of such journeys in the country and the ensuing movement to the city rests upon connotations of both locations that are numerous and oppositional. Hence, a more probing reading of the rural to urban transition reveals a move from the natural (symbolically feminised) world to the urban centre; from a world ruled by nature to one ruled by the forces

<sup>135</sup> Hart, *White Ink*, p.9

<sup>136</sup> Jerome Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p.17

of man; from the 'female' to the 'male'. Such an interpretation also sheds light on the formative relationships that become the impetus for the male protagonist to embark on this voyage of self-discovery. He rejects the antagonistic authority of the father and recognises the mother's incapacity to provide him with autonomy. The role of education, both formal and experiential, also emphasises the gendered limitations of this narrative. Formal education has been traditionally reserved for male children, whilst young girls are trained for a role in life that requires skills that can be learned at home. Experiential education as described by Buckley involves a sexual encounter that is imaginable within the frame of traditional girlhood only as a violent encounter of great social implications, and not as an exploration of individual desire and bodily impulses.

I will return to the differences between the Bildungsromane of the two genders below, but for now, it is useful to underline the fact that, broken down in this way, the structuring of the traditional narrative around a series of formative conflicts between the individual and their society is further put in evidence. Also made clear through close examination of this traditional composition, is the fact that the first issue needing to be addressed in any theorisation of a female (or indeed non white-male) version is the differing relationship that a female protagonist will have with her social context. Abel et al. remind us that '[e]ven the broadest definitions of the [genre] presuppose a range of social options available only to men'.<sup>137</sup> Buckley appears to police these boundaries yet further by stating that even whilst no example of the genre will follow his definitional pattern without deviation, any text that ignores 'more than two or three of its principle elements' cannot be considered a Bildungsroman within those terms.<sup>138</sup> As we have seen, his description and definition does, precisely as Abel et al suggest is common, outline a trajectory for development only made possible by the privileged socio-cultural position of the hegemonic male gendered identity, and in doing so imposes the limitations of gender as limitations on the text.

Such a focus on the position of both genders within the symbolic order has been a fruitful area of analysis of the gender bias of the Bildungsroman, leading to the contribution of a number of interesting arguments to the debate on whether the female Bildungsroman is actually possible. The debate has at times been characterised by a radicalism itself indicative of the dualistic nature of gender categorisation. One example of this hard-line approach to the

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<sup>137</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.7

<sup>138</sup> Buckley, *Season of Youth*, p.18

relationship between gender and the Bildungsroman is that taken by John H. Smith, who approaches the debate from a psychoanalytic perspective. Initially, Smith's argument departs from concern regarding the ways in which theorisation of the genre should be achieved, and echoes my own critical intentions by separating *Bildung* from *roman* as a means by which to make the genre category more inclusive. His purpose for doing this, however, differs from mine in that, rather than work towards making the Bildungsroman more accessible to non-orthodox representation, he returns to the delimitation of the genre on exclusive grounds of gender. He starts out his enquiry by stating that:

My goal will be to exploit (or at least to begin exploiting) the historical and conceptual richness of the term "Bildung" not so much in order to come up with a definition of *Bildungsroman* or criteria of in-/exclusion in the class of *Bildungsromane* but rather to develop an abstract tool applicable to an indefinitely large array of texts.<sup>139</sup>

As a consequence of this approach,

whether or not a given genre *is* in "reality" a *Bildungsroman* [becomes] less important than the interpretative results of seeing how *Bildung* as I shall define it, is narrativized in certain works [...] Membership in the class of *Bildungsromane* I would argue, is literally and figuratively open to interpretation.<sup>140</sup>

As Leasa Y. Lutes also recognises, however, Smith's account is frustrating in that he deploys Hegelian and Lacanian theories to argue that *Bildung* is a process that leads to the construction of a socially acceptable *male* identity, and cannot be otherwise construed. He begins by arguing that the concept is of particular use in 'discussing the way powerful narratives describe and reinforce the structure, namely "bourgeois patriarchy" that inscribes gender roles – writes them for us – in modern culture',<sup>141</sup> but ends by stating that

*Bildung* captures the long and conflictual form(ul)ation of male subjectivity which is made possible by a specific oedipal regulation of (the desire of) the Other. To the extent that *Bildung* is institutionalized in our society – through education and its narrativization in literature – it serves to propagate its triangular codification of Self-Other, male-female relations.<sup>142</sup>

As Moretti, Kontje, Buckley, and other critics of the Bildungsroman have shown, Smith is undoubtedly right to say that bourgeois patriarchy is the context within which the traditional pattern of *Bildung* makes most sense. However, his approach to understanding the reasons

<sup>139</sup> John H. Smith, 'Cultivating Gender: Sexual Difference, *Bildung*, and the *Bildungsroman*' in *Michigan Germanic Studies* 13.2 (1987), pp.206-25, p.208

<sup>140</sup> Smith, 'Cultivating Gender', pp.208-9

<sup>141</sup> Smith, 'Cultivating Gender', p.209

<sup>142</sup> Smith, 'Cultivating Gender', p.217



why this is the case lead him to take a perspective on both process and genre that stand in direct contrast to the pliability I have argued is an integral feature of the form. He claims that *Bildung*, and therefore the genre whose narrative thread is constituted by it, is simply not applicable to female developmental patterns. By extension, therefore, neither can narratives that give representational form to female experiences of development ever be considered Bildungsromane, and so Smith's initial desire to work towards inclusivity is left unfulfilled.

To briefly summarise his argument, Smith begins with Hegel, and presents an overview of his references to *Bildung* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He usefully recapitulates some of the aspects of Hegel's work that will be of use to my own theorization of *Bildung*, explaining that whilst Hegel is often

mistakenly understood as espousing an organic model of development, it is clear that *Bildung* means the individual's ability to speak and thus invert all the rhetorical forms and formulations that *are* society. The "gebildete" [educated/formed] individual comes to speak [a discourse of self-evident confusion] because the individual in the modern world recognizes that his "identity" resides in his ability to adopt roles. The learned individual, therefore, appears as master rhetorician, a divided self whose reconciliation with himself and his world can only come when he realizes that all the fractured discourses and roles "objectified" in the world are in fact part of himself.<sup>143</sup>

Most importantly for my purposes here, Smith emphasizes those aspects of Hegel's theorization of *Bildung* that are clearly applicable to social-constructionist readings of identity not as an organic process but as one that takes place through a dialogue between the individual and their social context. Thus, he concludes his section on Hegel by saying that

[t]aken together, Hegel's discussions of *Bildung* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* allow us to understand this concept as a social interaction of subjects in which they work through the dialectics of desire in the process of working towards forms of (self)representation. [...] As a product of *Bildung*, this self-consciousness has internalized social modes of representation that both constitute and fragment its identity.<sup>144</sup>

None of what Smith has argued so far is problematic for the assumption of a female Bildungsroman, however his next theoretical move, the application of a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, leads him to an analytical perspective that removes the possibility of female *Bildung*. Underlining Lacan's exploration of the role of desire in the formulation of the subject; the way in which '[e]ntry into the Symbolic Order is made possible by Lacan's

<sup>143</sup> Smith, 'Cultivating Gender', p.212. Thank you to Dr Ian Roberts of the School of Modern Languages at the University of Leicester for his provision of translations of the German sections of Smith's essay.

<sup>144</sup> Smith, 'Cultivating Gender', p.212

description of the Oedipus complex as the “No/Name-of-the-Father” (“Le Nom-de-Père”)’ Smith concludes that:

The individual boy – and here gender clearly becomes important – must socially regulate his desire of the (m)other and bow to the “no” of the father in order to gain entry into the patriarchal domain symbolized by the patronym. In giving up the (m)other he internalizes the now essential lack (desire of the Other) and adopts a painful and powerful position that mediates objects through a patriarchal signifying system. The individual is thus set on a trajectory, the end position of which [is] a patriarchal language that controls the individual’s desire even as it leaves him torn, alienated, symbolically castrated. [...] The movement from apprentice to master marks, therefore, the male subject’s acquisition of a voice in his father’s tongue, a movement that links expression inextricably to repression.<sup>145</sup>

Ultimately, Smith concludes that the goal of the Bildungsroman is ‘to represent the self’s developmental trajectory within the bourgeois patriarchal order and thereby to expose the structuration of (male) desire.’<sup>146</sup> In other words, that Hegel’s socio-rhetorical formulation of the journey towards selfhood allows us to understand *Bildung* as ‘the process whereby an individual experiences self-alienation in the form of different self-formulations in order to discover that both he and his society are nothing but mutually recognized self-representations.’<sup>147</sup> And that this combined with an application of a gender-specific Lacanian reading leads us to recognize that individual as ‘developing into a social being by mastering society’s language [and] adopting a *male* position within patriarchy’; ‘*Bildung* thus describes a very specific process of cultivating gender or gendered “identity” (that is torn in its role) within the modern patriarchal social structure.’<sup>148</sup>

In my opinion, Smith’s account of *Bildung* is essentially reductive. Primarily, it seems to simply ignore the fact that all the while the *Bildung* he describes is taking place, the self-in-process that is the subject of it, is formulating itself in relation to an Other to which he makes constant reference, yet never accounts for. To stand as an informative opposition in the process of identity formation, that Other also must *come to be*. Paradoxically, he actually argues that *Bildung*, as he has formulated it, ‘is a central form of the institutional cultivation of *gender roles*’ [my emphases] in the plural.<sup>149</sup> By saying this, he implicitly recognizes the ‘cultivation’ of an Other, but has defined *Bildung* in such exclusive terms that the richness of the concept is denied to anyone wishing to chart the parallel development of that complimentary element.

<sup>145</sup> Smith, ‘Cultivating Gender’, p.215

<sup>146</sup> Smith, ‘Cultivating Gender’, p.215

<sup>147</sup> Smith, ‘Cultivating Gender’, p.215

<sup>148</sup> Smith, ‘Cultivating Gender’, p.215

<sup>149</sup> Smith, ‘Cultivating Gender’, p.216

Part of the reason why Smith's analysis leads into a critical cul-de-sac is the fact that the world he describes is one in which even the predominant male figure has no agency at all: he is discursively constructed in the image dictated by the hegemonic order, speaks 'in his father's tongue', and has no choice but to be and do so. In this account, there is no moment of empowering self-recognition, in which the individual is able to take stock of the ideological imprint of the hegemonic order on their identity. In essence, Smith's version of *Bildung* stays in line with the reading of the Bildungsroman as a novelistic endeavour centred by compromise, conceived of in negative terms, allowing no space for agency and change. This model may suffice for a male protagonist in a male-dominated world, whose compromise might be understood to have no dangerous consequences for him; only assuring his dominant position. In contrast, as Lutes pertinently asks, '¿Puede o quiere la mujer integrarse en la sociedad burguesa contemporánea?'<sup>150</sup> In direct response to Smith, Lutes makes the excellent point that

[a]l considerar el dolor de la ruptura con el «yo» la constante necesidad de mantener la separación y represión del deseo, parece que el discurso masculino es la raíz de una experiencia altamente penosa. De hecho, uno podría proponer que el *Bildungsroman* en el ápice de su forma descubriría una especie de fracaso, la historia del rendimiento personal al descontento.<sup>151</sup>

This unhappy ending is the conclusive interpretation of the Bildungsroman as a model for conformity when read from a marginal, resistant perspective. Not only does Lutes expose the limitations of Smith's take on the processes of individualisation and socialisation. In doing so, she exposes the limitations of patriarchy by shining a light on it as a negative force even on those identities that are privileged by its value systems.

Whilst Smith consolidates the gender bias that is an important obstacle for feminist approaches to, and female versions of, the genre, and so does not provide a theoretical framework of analysis that is useful to feminist studies of gendered identity development, his approach is one that can be reconfigured and usefully redeployed. His study further exemplifies the way in which *Bildung* has been theoretically codified – in this case via psychoanalytic accounts of it – and how this interrelates with its generic codification in the form of the Bildungsroman. That approaches to the genre therefore need to account for both of these levels of codification is rendered all the more evident because of his initial separation of concept – *Bildung* – and genre – Bildungsroman. Much feminist criticism of the genre has

<sup>150</sup> Lutes, *Aproximaciones teóricas*, p.5

<sup>151</sup> Lutes, *Aproximaciones teóricas*, p.5

focused on its fixity of form and on ways in which the developmental process narrated therein necessarily differs from that of the male *Bildungsbeld*; a male character going through the process of self-development in a male dominated society. In this way the genre has become a means by which to expose female oppression: the stoppage of female *Bildung* in a male-dominated society. Problematically, however, in these readings the level of agency awarded to the protagonist is extremely limited. The structure of the traditional narrative is re-applied as a framework that simply confirms socialised gender roles and the hegemonic order within which they are constructed. If the traditional Bildungsroman narrates a *Bildung* that can take place only through a compromise perceived of in terms detrimental to individuality and autonomy, then the form will never be able to serve as the kind of revolutionary textual space required by feminism. The dialogue between society and individual that is the generating force of *Bildung* is portrayed as nothing more than a dictation. And yet the novels discussed in this thesis stand as evidence of the possibility of social change, or at least a belief in its possibility.

It is in light of this problematic that studies of the female, of the Spanish American, and of the Spanish American female Bildungsroman have much to contribute to discussions of gender in the genre's global canon. Kushigian remarks in the introduction to her study that she chooses to focus on regional examples of the genre 'because of the strong personal and cultural identities of their protagonists in a world often plagued by alienation.'<sup>152</sup> She goes on:

Spanish America has revived the Bildungsroman by transforming self-realization into the service of something larger, that is, a universal social goal. One point that distinguishes the Spanish American Bildungsroman is its ability to exploit the full potential of the genre. It reinforces the goal of forming, cultivating, and developing the self through transcendence, to become, as Nietzsche would conclude, the self beyond the self, reaching potentiality and understanding life from universal points of view.<sup>153</sup>

Kushigian's characterisation of the form here returns us to my suggestion, made earlier in this chapter in relation to the nature of Post-Boom writing, that the genre is of particular relevance to the late twentieth-century Spanish American woman writer. Clearly, for these authors the model of compromise cannot prove useful because, as Lutes has appositely asked, why would women want to conform to the norms of societies that confine and marginalise them? Lagos makes an important point about her own chosen corpus, by which she too highlights the

<sup>152</sup> Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood*, p.15

<sup>153</sup> Kushigian, *Reconstructing Childhood*, p.15

particular contribution that Spanish American women's writing can make to a study of the Bildungsroman:

Los relatos aquí estudiados se enfocan en el proceso de crecimiento de un personaje femenino dentro de un contexto social que establece claras diferencias entre masculino y femenino.<sup>154</sup>

In effect, Lagos emphasises, the Spanish American socio-political context is one in which the differences brought about through the discursive development of the genders are extremely evident, as the region's gender roles remain clearly polarised. As representations of this polarised social arena, Spanish American female Bildungsromane offer a particularly enlightening point of access to an understanding of the narrative techniques that differentiate the traditional male version from the female one.

Moreover, and as a corollary, they can make evident the ways in which the *narration* of the becoming of the self can make visible the *discursive nature* of gender formation. In her own discussion of these tenets, Lagos refers to Annis Pratt's seminal work *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1981), and cites her observation that in the female Bildungsroman in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, those values that are upheld in the male version come to be subverted.<sup>155</sup> This means that '[s]i la edad adulta significa independencia y autonomía para el hombre, para la mujer – por el contrario – es sinónimo de opresión y sometimiento.'<sup>156</sup> 'De ahí', Lagos sums up, 'que las etapas que caracterizan al *Bildungsroman* masculino no pueden aplicarse de la misma manera al femenino.'<sup>157</sup> In their study of nineteenth and twentieth century Anglophone formulations of the female Bildungsroman, Abel et al also signal a lack of independence in the protagonist, echoing my earlier discussion of Buckley's definition of the form's traditional male plotline:

While the young hero roams through the city, the young heroine strolls down the country lane. Her object is not to learn how to take care of herself, but to find a place where she can be protected, often in return for taking care of others.<sup>158</sup>

A further, related, characteristic pointed out in this study is a 'distinctive female I' which 'implies a distinctive value system and unorthodox developmental goals, defined in terms of community and empathy rather than achievement and autonomy.'<sup>159</sup> This emphasis on

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<sup>154</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.9

<sup>155</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.34

<sup>156</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.34

<sup>157</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.35

<sup>158</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.8

<sup>159</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.10

community is, then, a feature common to the female Bildungsroman that leads us back to Kushigian's non-gender specific characterisation of the Spanish American version, whilst again re-affirming the potential value of the genre to the Post-Boom in particular.

Drawing to a close their introductory overview of the female Bildungsroman canon from the nineteenth century through to contemporary fiction (writing in 1983), Abel et al usefully conclude that:

Women's developmental tasks and goals, which must be realized in a culture pervaded by male norms, generate distinctive narrative tensions – between autonomy and relationship, separation and community, loyalty to women and attraction to men. The social constraints on female maturation produce other conflicts, not unique to female characters, but more relentless in women's stories. Repeatedly, the female protagonist ... must chart a treacherous course between the penalties of expressing sexuality and suppressing it, between the costs of inner concentration and of direct confrontation with society, between the price of succumbing to madness and of grasping a repressive "normality".<sup>160</sup>

This edited volume focuses primarily on the Anglo-American canon, but also includes chapters on German and Brazilian examples. Throughout their consideration of the female form, these critics draw out a number of specific thematic shifts between male and female versions. They reflect on the role of adulterous relationships as 'brief escapes from the constraints of marriage and family obligations', but only as an 'option [that] also guarantees punishment' for the female protagonist,<sup>161</sup> thus serving as a means by which to maintain inequalities in socially inscribed gender roles. This trope can be connected to the fact that it is common for female Bildungsromane to 'show women developing later in life, after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient'.<sup>162</sup> Formal education, and its role in self-development, is yet another point of divergence, with this not affording the female protagonist opportunities for exploration of either self or the world that it does for the male.

Overall, Abel et al affirm their belief that whilst the genre 'has played out its possibilities for males, female versions of the genre still offer a vital form', because

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<sup>160</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, pp.12-13

<sup>161</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.8. It is worth noting here that, as will be seen in Chapter Three, this tenet appears in Ángeles Mastretta's *Arrancame la vida*, but that Catalina is not punished for her behaviour. Indeed, given the representation of her husband's unfaithfulness, the narrative might be seen to make it difficult for readers to judge her. Hence, this feature of Mastretta's narrative can serve as an example of one way in which contemporary Spanish American versions of the female Bildungsroman re-negotiate traditional plotlines in order to emphasise gender equality and female autonomy.

<sup>162</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.7

[w]omen's increased sense of freedom in this century, when women's experience has begun to approach that of the traditional male *Bildungsbeld*, finds expression in a variety of fictions. Although the primary assumption underlying the *Bildungsroman* – the evolution of a coherent self – has come under attack in modernist and avant-garde fiction, this assumption remains cogent for women writers who now for the first time find themselves in a world increasingly responsive to their needs.<sup>163</sup>

Again, I would argue, their statement here points to the timely value of the form to the Post-Boom woman writer, in line with my earlier argument that the injection of female perspective that is such a significant element of that literary wave, took place as a consequence of important socio-political and cultural shifts. Finally, it is significant that these critics emphasise the way in which their study, by '[e]xploring a multinational tradition', ultimately 'reveals similarities of women's experience across linguistic boundaries.'<sup>164</sup>

That Doub, Kushigian, Lutes, and Lagos, all make reference to *The Voyage In* in their studies of the Spanish American female Bildungsroman, is an important critical and theoretical cross-reference that confirms the validity of Abel et al.'s assertion.<sup>165</sup> These four studies build on the foundations laid by studies of the Anglo-American and more broadly European female Bildungsroman by further investigating and outlining the narrative techniques that are put to work in the regional version. Across their pages they consider the varied use of narrative perspectives (variation between first and third person points of view), narrative style (realist versus magical realist), and narrative structure (chronological versus non-chronological and retrospective plotlines) in the examples with which they choose to work. A critical consideration of the use of such techniques will punctuate my analyses of the six novels under consideration in the following three chapters, however a discussion of one specific aspect of narrative structure merits immediate discussion here, in the formulation of the structure of this thesis itself: the nature of the genre's 'ending'.

The ending of the Bildungsroman is the point at which, as I have already intimated, the genders' two distinct versions of the genre seem to diverge most. It is also, however, a feature that can be useful in showing the evolution of the female Bildungsroman as the 'subgénero aparte' that Lutes envisages it to be, as well as in demonstrating the special nature of what can be called the Post-Boom Spanish American female Bildungsroman. Because it is not possible

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<sup>163</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.13

<sup>164</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage In*, p.14

<sup>165</sup> Annie O. Esturoy also makes use of Abel et al's study in her work *The Contemporary Chicana novel: Daughters of Self Creation*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996)

for the female protagonist to come to a point of accommodation with the norm in the way that the male *Bildungsbeld* can afford to do – given that he does not run the risk of losing his social status, autonomy or agency in doing so – the ending of these new female versions can be expected to reflect a different response to the meeting between protagonist and socio-cultural context. In the conclusion to her study, Lutes remarks that ‘[l]as dudas principales’ regarding both the existences of the female Bildungsroman and its usefulness as a genre for women, ‘giran alrededor del concepto de la re-incorporación de la protagonist en la sociedad.’<sup>166</sup> It is undoubtedly as a corollary of this, that Abel et al. come to recognise that ‘[f]emale fictions of development reflect the tensions between the assumptions of a genre that embodies male norms and the values of its female protagonists’.<sup>167</sup> The ‘deaths in which these fictions so often culminate’, therefore ‘represent less developmental failures than refusals to accept an adulthood that denies profound convictions and desires.’<sup>168</sup>

This common end point in the closure of death is perhaps one of the most meaningful points of comparison between the early versions of the female form (to which Abel et al. are alluding here), and the Post-Boom Spanish American female novel of development. The ending with the death of the protagonist of a narrative about the formational dialogue between self and society is an important metaphor for the qualities and consequences of that inter-relationship. Lagos also considers the role of the ending in the meaning of the story that is told, remarking that in some examples ‘las protagonistas se resignan y aceptan soluciones convencionales a cambio de protección y estabilidad’,<sup>169</sup> but that there are also ‘finales abiertos que sugieren la posibilidad de una transformación si no inmediata por lo menos para el futuro’.<sup>170</sup> Annie O. Esturoy notes that the contemporary Chicana Bildungsroman ‘usually ends on a positive note in that it constitutes a new beginning for the protagonist’, who is now ‘ready to profit from her *Bildungs* [sic] process and shape her own life’.<sup>171</sup> These comments pull to the fore not only similarities between European and Anglo-American female *Bildungsromane* and the genre in Hispanic American cultures, therefore, but also a difference that represents a distinct and symbolic shift in the generic tradition. All of the narratives to be studied in this

<sup>166</sup> Lutes, *Aproximaciones Teóricas*, p.90

<sup>167</sup> Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, p.11

<sup>168</sup> Abel et al., *The Voyage In*, p.11

<sup>169</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.111

<sup>170</sup> Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.111

<sup>171</sup> Annie O. Esturoy, *Daughters of Self Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), p.4



thesis can be understood to share the more positive qualities observed here: open-endedness rather than closure, autonomy rather than conformity. Only one of the narratives – *Como agua para chocolate* – ends with the death of its protagonist, and even here the ending might be construed, thanks to the use of magical realism, as a positive resolution to a story of unrequited love.

It is clear, in light of the above discussion, that the adoption of this originally male, European form by writers from the Spanish American region has been achieved through the re-shaping of the form in order to make it appropriate to their needs. In this way, the Spanish American female Bildungsroman is a geographically-, culturally-, and gender-specific form of the novel of development that stands as supporting evidence for the analyses of the traditional genre proposed earlier on in this chapter; analyses which worked to expose its flexibility and the subsequently greater possibilities for agency that it has to offer. Those readings, and these novels, constitute a revisionist perspective that underscores the importance of this symbolic form as one able to illuminate the role of compromise in identity formation, but simultaneously able to elucidate potential for agency and empowerment. This agency lies in expression, in literature, and in the reclaiming of a voice with which to recount the *Bildung* of the Other: that of women and of non-orthodox gendered identities. In other words, it lies in the Bildungsroman as a reclaimed space of representation.

Nonetheless, even those detailed studies of the Spanish American regional canon that I have deployed in my discussion here, return to the question of the form's viability, and of the need to maintain its boundaries. For example, Lutes begins her Conclusion by saying that even whilst the genre's adaptation is a recognisable phenomenon, 'siempre es necesario a la vez verificar que las características presentes en un ejemplo concuerden adecuadamente con la definición de la especie como para poder justificar su inclusión en la misma.'<sup>172</sup> This constant return to the boundaries of the genre, I would argue, continues to underline the fact that its inherent flexibility continues to be, simultaneously, recognised and delimited, and so even as the existence of a female Bildungsroman has become a recognised phenomenon, we risk ignoring, through non-inclusion of texts not deemed 'fitting', the lessons that its examples have to teach us about the socio-cultural development of gendered identities. Here, Derrida's warnings about the simultaneous usefulness and limitations of genre are useful, for it is a

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<sup>172</sup> Lutes, *Aproximaciones Teóricas*, p.89

similar concern that has informed my own approach to the genre and to its Spanish American female formulations. He writes in *Parages* (1986):

a text can't belong to any genre. All texts participate in one or in several genres, there's no text without genre, there's always a genre and genres but this participation is never the same thing as belonging.<sup>173</sup>

The question that persists, therefore, is that of how to go about maximising the value of the Bildungsroman as a literary framework for interaction with gendered identities, without allowing its historical, problematic, masculinisation, and related tenets, to impede such critical excursions. In particular, I am concerned to further the understanding of what the genre has to offer in terms of excavating the foundations upon which gendered identities have been built, and the socio-cultural and political frameworks through which they are produced and reproduced. It is in this understanding of the value of the Bildungsroman as a genre that enables recognition of the socially constructed nature of gendered identities, that my study aligns itself most closely with that of Lagos, who quotes Teresa de Lauretis to make the role of this perspective in her own analyses clear: 'the representation of gender *is* its construction – and in the simplest sense it can be said that all of Western Art and high culture is the engraving of the history of that construction.'<sup>174</sup>

As I will now go on to argue (and as Smith's model, examined above, has suggested, but failed to demonstrate in a way that is useful to feminist literary critique), the answer to this theoretical conundrum lies in the process of *Bildung*, rather than the Bildungsroman more concretely. Within *Bildung* there is a structure that can be unearthed and used as a scaffold around which to build a new narrative form, one able to elucidate the formation of a female identity whose self-recognition is a source of empowerment. Furthermore, this scaffold can then be extended to function as an inclusive framework for the analysis of both gender and genre. In contrast to the exclusivity of the model constructed by Smith's reading of Hegel, which sets out from and never really leaves behind the historical context in which the latter was writing, it is a more revisionary approach to Hegel's work, and in particular his dialectic, that informs my own theorisation of *Bildung* and enables its recuperation as a model for the

<sup>173</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Parages*, (Paris: Galilée, 1986), p.264

<sup>174</sup> *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.3, cited in Lagos, *En tono mayor*, p.54. It is interesting to note de Lauretis's reference to 'high culture' here, in a study whose primary literature has been located within a wave of Spanish American writing understood to be informed by postmodernism and its, in Santiago Colás's terms, 'embracing' of mass (low) culture. We are thus reminded of the role of the Post-Boom female narrative in the deconstruction of the grand narratives of gendered identity, via the incorporation of those forms of writing previously regarded as of 'low culture' and, by extension, 'feminised'.

mapping out of the *Bildung* of the Other, and thus the Other Bildungsromane. Using this recovered structural and theoretical framework, it becomes possible to show how the authors whose works are studied narrate socially, culturally and historically specific experiences of the 'becoming' of the self, putting in evidence the discourses by which gendered identities are formed. The conflicts found in the texts are the result of the difficulties inherent to this process, which requires the internalization of an order that can survive only through the subordination of its female and/or feminised elements. The critique that these writers provide is born of the interrogation of that conflict; of the struggle between internal and external pressures that characterises the process of *Bildung*. The result of that critique is the expression of processes of development that moves beyond the frustrations of a Manichean world and into a creative third space characterised by agency and desire. Compromise can thus be reconceived as synthesis – not a negative giving up of the self in the name of conformity, but a positive combination of qualities and possibilities that projects forward, towards positive change. This is encapsulated in the Hegelian dialectic.

### The Dialectic

Dialectic's etymology from Greek "dialego," meaning to discuss or debate, highlights the ways the term was used to describe a process of analysis that assessed problems from many perspectives, taking into account opposing and contradictory points of view *in order to arrive at the truth* [my emphasis].<sup>175</sup>

From the poststructuralist and feminist perspectives that inform this study, Sophia A. McClennan's above definition of the dialectic starts out hopefully, emphasising the mode's roots in a multifarious, anti-totalising approach to analysis appropriate to my concerns here. Conversely, however, her definition also draws forth the fact that such an approach is inspired by a desire to arrive at a point of 'truth', a concept whose connotations of integrity and wholeness seem to contradict the possibility of its being reached through, or informed by, diversity. This proposed destination is one of the aspects of the dialectic that have encouraged a view of it as 'rigid and formulaic – an intransigent system of analysis',<sup>176</sup> and, arguably, this would seem particularly pertinent from a poststructuralist perspective that understands claims towards as fixed a concept as 'truth' to be highly problematic. For if, as Nietzsche has put it, truth is but a 'mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms...illusions of

<sup>175</sup> Sophia A. McClennan, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language and Space in Hispanic Literatures*, (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2004), p.37

<sup>176</sup> McClennan, *Dialectics of Exile*, p.37

which one has forgotten that they are illusions',<sup>177</sup> the dialectic, understood in the above terms, can only lead us to another *illusion* of truth.

McClennan herself does not explicitly connect the rejection of the dialectic with the critical approaches of poststructuralism, however she does explain that dismissal of the dialectic mode is particularly associated with its reduction to 'the dialectical triad'. This view, characterised by 'a simplified version' of the dialectic in which 'two opposing theses are unified in a "higher" synthesis',<sup>178</sup> is one in which further notions of fixed positions are at play, in an obvious leaning towards a problematic assumption of an ultimate or end point – or indeed of the desirability of such a location. What McClennan goes on to argue, though, is that the dialectic is in fact about 'change, process, and flux' and that as a result 'any theory that rests on the dialectic should be fluid and malleable to the concrete, material cases it addresses'.<sup>179</sup> To substantiate this, she usefully cites Frederick Engels' explanation of the dialectic in 'The Science of Dialectics' (1880):

the whole world, natural, historical, intellectual, is represented as a process – i.e., as in *constant* motion, change, transformation, development; and the attempt is made to trace out the internal connection that makes a *continuous whole* of all this movement and development [my emphases].<sup>180</sup>

Again here, in Engel's emphasis on *constant* evolution, the reduction of dialectic thinking to a triadic pattern of thought that facilitates arrival at an ultimate, superior, ossified position seems highly misguided. And yet Engels is unable to avoid reference to *wholeness* and to the search for unification – both terms which imply completion and therefore stasis – even whilst describing a process in *constant* motion. This creates a vision of the dialectic as a paradoxical framework, and it is easy to see how this quality might, from some perspectives, be seen as problematic. From a postmodern perspective, it is precisely in this contrary and often confusing nature – confusing in its refutation of a world organised by clear division and binary opposition – that the dialectic finds flexibility and, subsequently, strength. By engaging with incongruity, plurality and instability, the dialectic itself becomes incongruous, plural and unstable, and through this becomes adaptable. As an important consequence, even where wholeness and stability as an end-point might be the object of desire, the dialectic is always inhered with the possibility of continuation beyond limits traditionally perceived.

<sup>177</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On truth and falsehood in an ultra-moral sense', cited in Christopher Norris, *The Deconstructive Turn: Essays in the Rhetoric of Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1983), p.61

<sup>178</sup> McClennan, *Dialectics of Exile*, p.37

<sup>179</sup> McClennan, *Dialectics of Exile*, p.38

<sup>180</sup> Frederick Engels, 'The Science of Dialectics' cited in McClennan, p.38

This perpetual impetus and malleability is particularly prominent in Hegelian formulations of the mode, formulations which, as Sarah Salih points out, have contributed greatly to discussion of the dialectic:

Dialectic is the mode of philosophical enquiry most commonly associated with Hegel (although he was not the first to formulate it), in which a thesis is proposed which is subsequently negated by its antithesis and resolved in a synthesis. This synthesis or resolution is not, however, final, but provides the basis for the next thesis, which once again leads to antithesis and synthesis before the process starts all over again.<sup>181</sup>

The Hegelian Dialectic therefore conceptualises progress or development as taking place through three inter-related stages. Pushing through the phase of dualistic opposition, this philosophical mode facilitates a drive forward that is given momentum by the antagonism of oppositionality, rather than allowing opposition to instil stasis. As such, the dialectic is a model that lends itself well not only to poststructuralist critical approaches that push for change through uncertainty and lack of closure, but also to notions of growth and development.

If, in its destabilizing of antagonistic dualisms, the Hegelian dialectic is in tune with the poststructuralist endeavour to undermine the binary organisation of Western symbolic orders and the damaging effects of that structure, it is also this quality that allows an understanding of the dialectic as a useful mode for feminist criticism. Kimberley Hutchings advocates this grasping of Hegel's mode as a feminist critical tool, writing that

Hegel is battling with the same conceptual conundrum which is constitutive of feminist philosophy in the Western tradition. This is the conundrum of how to escape the conceptual binary oppositions (between culture and nature, reason and emotion, autonomy and heteronomy, universal and particular, ideal and real) which have associated women with the denigrated term and prescribed the exclusion of women from the practices of both philosophy and politics.<sup>182</sup>

Hutchings emphasises here one of the crucial crossover points of feminist and poststructuralist critical endeavours, and reinforces an understanding of Hegel's philosophy as a significant tool for both approaches; as a meeting point for feminist and poststructuralist ideas. Hutchings goes on to argue that as a direct result of the bias of the Western symbolic order, 'feminist philosophy ... is largely preoccupied with developing frameworks for thought which do not repeat the hierarchical binaries of the [inherently masculinist] tradition' and says

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<sup>181</sup> Sarah Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.3

<sup>182</sup> Kimberly Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press), p.2

that one 'important aspect of feminist attempts to re-think established philosophical conceptual frameworks has been engaging with canonic philosophical texts.'<sup>183</sup>

Her description of the aims and methods of feminist philosophy fall in line with those of this thesis, in which the dialectic will be deployed as an approach to the deconstruction of culturally instituted gendered identities in a canonic genre. Also pertinent is Hutchings' argument that, in particular, what she terms 'Critical Feminism' gives importance to aspects of Hegel's philosophy 'not explicitly concerned with women, sex and gender',<sup>184</sup> and that this strand of feminist work on his philosophy focuses on his *Phenomenology of Spirit* – precisely the element of Hegel's oeuvre that enables connections to be set up between the dialectic, the concept of *Bildung*, and therefore the Bildungsroman. Before I move on to explore these important connections, it is important to highlight one further possible point of contention in the application of Hegel's dialectic to poststructuralist and feminist approaches to gender. Whilst the use of Hegel's ideas in a study working from poststructuralist and feminist perspectives is justified by the fact that a mutual aim of all three is the blurring of boundaries between oppositional categories, still to be addressed is the aforementioned understanding of Hegel's vision of the dialectic as, nonetheless, a process culminating in a particular telos. Consequently, what is found here is a further reflection of the potentially problematic fixity that was discussed above as a perceived limitation of the classical Bildungsroman. This similarity, as will become clear, is not an arbitrary one, but rather one due to the significant interconnections between this philosophy and that genre. Moreover, just as the suitability of the Bildungsroman for the purposes of women writers has had to be argued out, for the dialectic to be a useful tool for the aims of this thesis the nature of Hegel's proposed ultimate destination needs to be reconciled with those aims.

The end point of the dialectic was characterized by Hegel as 'Absolute Knowledge', a concept whose explanation requires a brief exposition of Hegel's philosophical system. As the telos of that system, 'Absolute Knowledge' initially appears as a final resolution that does not, as in the dialectic turns that are necessary to its accomplishment, progress from synthesis back to thesis in order to induce yet another thrust forwards in development. Instead, it appears as

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<sup>183</sup> Hutchings, *Hegel and Feminist Philosophy*, p.2

<sup>184</sup> Hutchings usefully explores feminist philosophical approaches to and uses of Hegel in terms of four main feminist groups, whilst acknowledging that this approach entails a certain amount of reductionism. She includes Butler in her 'Postmodern Feminist' category. For the purposes of the aims of this study I have focused on the usefulness of the ideas put forward on their own terms regardless of the affiliation that Hutchings awards them within her own identifying categories.

a position characterised by notions of truth, perfection, stasis: a utopian end point. Clearly, the term 'absolute' does not sit comfortably with poststructuralist aims or approaches, so that in a project that claims to take such a critical stance, a dialectic approach could ostensibly be perceived as both un-useful and inappropriate. Moreover, when the central question of gender is added to this equation, and the dialectic thus given significance as a template for reading gendered identities and their development, Absolute Knowledge comes to represent the fixation of selfhood at a point of "accomplishment" established by the very symbolic orders that are the focus of poststructuralist critiques. In short, without careful justification, the application of a dialectic reading to gender presents a contradiction in theoretical terms. How, then, can the dialectic safely be used here without its teleological conclusion imposing further limits on gendered subjectivities and our understanding of them?

In *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), M.H. Abrams provides a schematization of Hegel's philosophy as one that 'falls into three major parts: the logic, the philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit'.<sup>185</sup> He continues:

The intricate total design of the vast Hegelian system thus asks to be imagined as an immanently compelled evolution of small dialectical circles which compose a continuum in the shape of three large circles, spiralling upward and widening outward until they constitute one great *Kreis von kreisen* that comprehends everything, by reaching the end which (although only implicitly) was in the beginning, and so returning to the beginning which (now become explicit, "comprehended" and therefore "concrete") is the end.<sup>186</sup>

Following this description, which underlines above all the inclusiveness of Hegel's system, Abrams explains that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the third and culminating part of this series of works that maintain a dialectical relationship with one another:

This last dialectical circle begins with the emergence of subjective spirit out of nature and closes with "Absolute Spirit"; but the final stage now constitutes a recovered unity of spirit with itself that "comprehends" (in the double sense that it incorporates and systematically understands) the totality of the differentiations which have evolved during the process of all three circuitous stages.<sup>187</sup>

Thus, at the end of the *Phenomenology* Absolute Knowledge is achieved; a state of being in which a fulfilling interconnection of logic, nature, and the human mind is finally accomplished. It is a moment of complete understanding, of a panorama so great that it calls to mind the

<sup>185</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Naturalism and Supernaturalism in Romantic Literature*, (New York: Norton & Company, 1971), p.226

<sup>186</sup> Abrams, *Naturalism and Supernaturalism*, p.227

<sup>187</sup> Abrams, *Naturalism and Supernaturalism*, pp.226-27 In this particular quote, Abrams use of "Absolute Spirit" can be taken as synonymous with the more usual "Absolute Knowledge"

‘Aleph’ of Borges’s short story of that name. Hegel writes that as a result of the relationships and processes at work in this dialectical progression ‘[t]he whole philosophy resembles a circle of circles’,<sup>188</sup> and so, I would argue, Absolute Knowledge appears as the end point at which this energetic system can be perceived to threaten to close in upon itself and thus end its cyclical drive forward. Or, as Jonathon Singer puts it, this is ‘the point where knowledge is no longer compelled to go beyond itself.’<sup>189</sup> Singer sees this as an end point that Hegel promises us, the point where ‘reality will no longer be an unknowable ‘beyond’, but instead mind will know reality directly and be at one with it.’<sup>190</sup> The great significance of this is that ‘[n]ow we can understand what all this meant: absolute knowledge is reached when the mind realizes that *what it seeks to know is really itself*.’<sup>191</sup>

What then, is the use of this kind of understanding of self to a study of gender? A useful indicator is Singer’s statement that throughout the *Phenomenology*, ‘although we set out merely to trace the path of mind as it comes to know reality, at the end of the road we find that we have been watching mind as it *constructs* reality.’<sup>192</sup> If we apply the dialectic narrative pattern of the *Phenomenology* to an understanding of gender as social construction (an aspect of identity discursively produced but masquerading as material fact), then on this particular trajectory Absolute Knowledge is the gendered self coming to know its gendered self, and to fully recognise the discourses by and through which it is produced – and produces itself. In effect, what we are working towards in these terms is a phenomenology of gender, or of the gendered spirit: a dialectically formed approach to an understanding of one particular aspect of selfhood. Most importantly, it is upon arrival at this point of self-recognition that agency is achieved. Without an understanding of the discursively-produced identities that we embody, these social constructions, which Judith Butler has argued can – precisely because they are *constructions* – be deconstructed and reconstructed, can never be questioned or reconfigured. In this sense, what the application of a dialectic model as a framework for reading the *Bildung* of gender can facilitate, is the exemplification, through literature, of Butler’s point that

[p]aradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of “agency” that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and

<sup>188</sup> Abrams, *Naturalism and Supernaturalism*, p.227

<sup>189</sup> Jonathon Singer, *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.92

<sup>190</sup> Singer, *Hegel*, p.92

<sup>191</sup> Singer, *Hegel*, p.92

<sup>192</sup> Singer, *Hegel*, p.92



arbitrary. [...] Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible.<sup>193</sup>

Hence, even if in some ways the notion of Absolute Knowledge might have presented a compromising and delimiting teleology, in relation to gender at least it becomes a fundamental driving force: the desirable and desired point of self-knowledge and agency. Here, just as for Hegel, 'Absolute Knowledge and true freedom are inseparable'.<sup>194</sup> Moreover, I would argue that the possibility of understanding Absolute Knowledge as a fixed and permanent position is undermined and reconfigured by its meeting with gender. For if the latter is understood as culturally and temporally contingent, it forces nuance into the possibility of any 'end point'. The gendered self that must come to be known will always be different. Hence, paradoxically, upon its collision with an understanding of gender as construction, Hegel's own system actually forecloses the possibility of its own complete closure: the achievement of Absolute Knowledge that would be necessary for the gendered self to recognise itself as socially, culturally, discursively constructed immediately reinitiates a new dialectical turn within which Absolute Knowledge is itself made subject. Perhaps it is this understanding of the potential of Hegel's system that Butler is expressing when she writes that 'Hegel remains important ... for his subject does not stay in its place, displaying a *critical mobility* that may well be *useful for further appropriations* of Hegel to come [my emphases].'<sup>195</sup>

According to Sarah Salih, Butler does understand the *Phenomenology* to 'be characterized by open-endedness and *irresolution* which contain more promise than teleology',<sup>196</sup> and the application of Hegel's dialectic as conceptual framework, and as a lens through which a rejuvenated reading of *Bildung* can be made, is precisely the kind of further appropriation of Hegel that Butler indicates is possible. Butler's impression of Hegel's dialectic is clearly one of a contemporarily useful philosophical mode that, whilst playing its part in the formation of the problematic metaphysical systems that have been a primary target for feminist revisions of categories of identity and the subject, is inherently one that can develop and progress, thus facilitating its redeployment regardless of the temporal distance between its nineteenth-century theorisation and, as here, Post-Boom Spanish American writing of the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>193</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.187

<sup>194</sup> Singer, *Hegel*, p.88

<sup>195</sup> Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1987), pp. xiv-xv

<sup>196</sup> Salih, *Judith Butler*, pp.4-5

Aligning itself with that belief, this project works in line with Butler's redefined dialectical model, characterised as one in which 'knowledge *proceeds through* opposition and cancellation, never finally reaching an 'absolute' or final certainty, but only positing ideas that *cannot be fixed* as 'truths'.<sup>197</sup> In this description of the dialectic advance, the latent stasis implied by the notion of an 'Absolute' ending is removed, and the mode is opened up to poststructuralist re-appropriation. Indeed, Butler's own seminal interrogations of 'identity categories including 'gay', 'straight', 'bisexual', 'transsexual', 'black' and 'white' have been achieved by, Salih summarises,

enter[ing] into dialectical engagement with the categories by which the subject is described and constituted, investigating *why* the subject is currently configured as it is and suggesting that alternative modes of description may be made available within existing power structures.<sup>198</sup>

Resonant here is the fact that, as has been argued above, genre stands as one such existing power structure, however the separation of *Bildung* and *roman*, by enabling the extraction of the dialectic model, facilitates a move beyond such power structures at the level of text and enables the focalisation of gender as subject of analysis. For this project, the list of 'identity categories' given above requires the addition of both 'man' and 'woman' – the oppositional identities foundational to the category of gender, and whose portrayal in the Bildungsroman has been shown to exemplify the fundamental role of difference in their inter-related formation. The approach taken to this study of gendered identities in Spanish American literature is similar to that of Butler in its searching out of a threefold process of development that drives at the production and questioning of gendered subjectivities. Crucially therefore, what is at stake here is not just knowledge of the gendered self, but also a critical grasp of the discursive processes through which that self is brought into being by being pushed towards an idealised – although nonetheless contingent – gendered subject position. In sum, Absolute Knowledge, knowledge of the self, will be configured in this study as knowledge of the *gendered* self: the result of a coming to know in detail the processes, discourses and practices by which gendered subjectivities are brought into being within the specifics of the Spanish American socio-cultural context as expressed in literature. Absolute Knowledge is the object of desire that propels the self towards this level of understanding and the agency for change that is the ultimate result of its achievement.

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<sup>197</sup> Salih, *Judith Butler*, p.3

<sup>198</sup> Salih, *Judith Butler*, p.4

### The Dialectic at Work: Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the Bildungsroman and the *Bildung* of Gender

For the spirit of the *Phenomenology* builds itself up only by ceaselessly destroying itself. It is propelled not by a transcendent Reason in the future, but by the devastating energy of its own immanent understanding, fleeing appalled from the errors of its own past. Spirit is thus the author of its own life, in which the 'power and labour of the Understanding', with its 'dissecting', its 'schematizing', and its 'pigeon-holing' are turned against the Understanding itself. As Spirit progressively abandons one form of Understanding after another, it testifies not to the impotence of Understanding, but to its power: "the most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power".<sup>199</sup>

The dialectically-formed progression towards a subjective truth and self-knowing in Hegel's *Phenomenology* has been likened to a Bildungsroman. Jonathan Rée here sums up the full consequence of Hegel's work and, at the same time, helps to bring to light one of the most important connections between Hegel, his *Phenomenology* and its dialectic formation, and the literature that is the primary material for study in this thesis. By describing the spirit of the *Phenomenology* as 'the author of his own fate', Rée draws together notions of writing, text, and agency – the object of desire that drives the dialectic progression towards self-knowledge. Rée himself makes much of this literary connection in his book *Philosophical Tales*:

The *Phenomenology* is ... a kind of *Bildungsroman*, a story of a wayfaring consciousness called Spirit, travelling from what Hegel calls its 'natural' state, along a road which, though it passes through all sorts of deceptions and disappointments, leads ultimately to 'absolute knowledge'.<sup>200</sup>

M. H. Abrams concurs with this literary understanding of the *Phenomenology*, explaining that 'it is deliberately composed not in the mode of a philosophic exposition or demonstration, but in the mode of a literary narrative' and that 'Hegel embodies this spiritual and intellectual history of mankind in the prevailing metaphorical vehicle of the *Bildungsweg*, or the educational journey'.<sup>201</sup> Abrams also notes that Hegel's text 'has a protagonist, whom he denominates as ... "the general individual" and "the general spirit"; that is, the collective human consciousness figured as a single agent'.<sup>202</sup> Whilst serving as further emphasis of the connections between Hegel's philosophy and the Bildungsroman, it must also be acknowledged that this observation recalls once more the lack of representational plurality that has been a central

<sup>199</sup> Jonathan Rée, *Philosophical Tales*, (London: Routledge, 1987), p.81

<sup>200</sup> Rée, *Philosophical Tales*, pp.63-64

<sup>201</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p.227-228

<sup>202</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p.228

focus of most critical discussions of the genre. Is this yet another reason to view Hegel's system as one so totalizing that his dialectical map must be seen as useless to the representations of marginalized identities? Underlining the double-jointedness of the system, Abrams refutes this possibility by pointing out that

the story he tells applies, however, to particular human minds, for each reflective individual is able to recapitulate the educational journey in his own consciousness, up to that stage where the generic human consciousness has reached in his lifetime.<sup>203</sup>

In context of this claim, Butler's notion of the continual movement of the Hegelian subject is further strengthened, along with the decision to apply a dialectic structure to the analytical reading of the *Bildung* of gender as represented in the works of contemporary Spanish American women writers. Crucially, this remains the case not in spite of, but because of the gender bias at work both in the classical Bildungsroman and in Hegel's philosophy, the fundamental factor upon which the need for studies like that of Hutchings rest:

The [particular] individual must also pass through the contents of the educational stages of the general spirit, but as ... stages of a way that has been prepared and evened for him ... In a boy's pedagogical process we recognize the history of the education of the world...<sup>204</sup>

As is obvious in this citation from the preface to the *Phenomenology*, both general and particular subjectivities were, for Hegel, clearly male. This means that the useful application of the Hegelian dialectic of self-development requires recognition of the fact that Hegel's 'general' subject is too general, and his 'particular' too particular to be directly applicable to the expression of non-orthodox, marginalised subjectivities. As a result of this obvious bias both Hegel's mode and the literary mode that it simultaneously echoes and informs, show themselves to be ripe for analysis from new perspectives.

From this point on, as elaborated in the following three chapters, this study entails the application of a dialectic reading to the formation of gendered identities in literature by Spanish American women writers. The dialectic's triadic structure of thesis, antithesis, synthesis will be drawn parallel with a threefold process of identity formation – with the *construction, deconstruction and reconstruction* of gendered identities – and thus will directly inform both the conceptual and critical structures within and through which this thesis explores the literary representation of gendered subjectivities. In order to give these three abstract stages a

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<sup>203</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p.228

<sup>204</sup> Abrams, citing Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), p.228

shape germane to my field of study, the stages will be explored in six contemporary narratives by Spanish American women writers through the topoi of, respectively, myth, exile and the body. Through the unearthing of a dialectic process of gendered identity development in the concept of *Bildung*, I will argue that the topoi function as vehicles for the exemplification of the discursive production of gendered identities, as well as literary spaces in which their renegotiation can begin.

## Chapter One

### Myth & Archetype:

*Eva Luna* (1987) by Isabel Allende and *Como agua para chocolate*  
(1988) by Laura Esquivel

As has been outlined in detail in the Introduction, the principle aim of this thesis is to provide an in-depth reading of a group of texts whose portrayals of the *Bildung* of gender identity are understood to be made more easily accessible, more readable, through their location within a dialectic framework. The application of this framework enables the revitalisation of traditional understandings of the Bildungsroman – the genre through which *Bildung* is narrativised – which is often seen as too limited to be useful to the portrayal of female and non-orthodox male identities because of its patriarchal bias and related proscriptive tendencies. Both of the novels that will be explored in this chapter, *Eva Luna* (1988) and *Como agua para chocolate* (1989), recount the lives of young female protagonists, charting their growth from children to adolescents and through to adulthood via significant episodes and experiences. In this way at least, they may be considered Bildungsromane in the traditional sense. As the introductory chapter has shown however, whilst thematically and in terms of their narrative chronology these novels may fit the rigid criteria so frequently imposed during characterisation of the genre, it is unlikely that, as Spanish American Bildungsromane with female protagonists, they will neatly conform to the developmental patterns that create the trajectory of the normative European male version, or even to those criteria that have come into view as a result of the process of attempting to define a female version of the ‘original’. This study now moves on to present close analytical readings of its primary texts within this previously established critical framework, elucidating the benefits to the study of gendered identities that are wrought by a focus on the dialectic patterns of development and a subsequently more inclusive approach to the Bildungsroman.

The present chapter begins the exploration of the three stages of dialectic *Bildung*. The *construction* of gendered identities (with a principal concern with female ones) will be explored here through the topoi of myth and archetype, in the aim of revealing the

foundations upon which gendered identities, according to Isabel Allende's and Laura Esquivel's texts, are built. Full, beginning-to-end conformity to generic categories is therefore less significant here than what the chosen texts can reveal about the initial phase of development. Both texts have been critically acclaimed for their re-writing of gender roles and for what is seen as their contribution to the cause of women's liberation via their feminist re-appropriations of both writing and literary paradigms. At the same time, however, they have both also been subject of an oppositional criticism for what is perceived as their essentialism, over-simplification of gendered identities, and reliance on stereotype. This contrary critical response has been particularly fervent in the case of Esquivel's novel, whose popularity with the reading public both in her native Mexico and beyond – it was into its eighth printing just two years after initial publication,<sup>1</sup> and has been translated, depending on one's source, into between twenty and thirty languages –<sup>2</sup> has been at once echoed and greatly contrasted by responses from some factions of her academic readership. That this dualistic response is strongly connected to different reactions to the text's approach to gender comes across very clearly upon review of the body of criticism on Esquivel's story, in which discursive consideration of gender roles, identities, and their formation is rife. The split between those critics who see the work as valuable and those that feel it is problematic from a feminist perspective is thus usually informed by individual approaches to/ definitions of 'gender essentialism', which is often made explicit by the vernacular deployed by the critics themselves. For example, Tony Spanos finds the novel 'extraordinarily original, totally different from what any other Latin American woman writer has done until now.'

That is, it seems to me, [Esquivel] wrote *Like Water for Chocolate* as from a second uterus, which is the kitchen and it becomes different conflicting metaphors throughout the novel. Although this type of novelty may appear highly incompatible to many feminist critics, other women writers and women in general whose message is to reject patriarchal dominion and to move beyond the confines of domestic life, Esquivel reclaims the kitchen as a very serious domestic sphere which is the most sacred place in the house, and from which the protagonist controls her destiny through her recipes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Spanos, 'The Paradoxical Metaphors of the Kitchen in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*' in *Letras Femeninas* 21, (primavera-otoño, 1995), pp.29-36, p.29

<sup>2</sup> See Spanos, 'The Paradoxical Metaphors of the Kitchen' and Shirley Yancey Kloepper, 'Balun-Canan and Como agua para chocolate as a Code of Communication for a New Image of Woman', (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Dissertation Services, 2000)

<sup>3</sup> Spanos, 'The Paradoxical Metaphors of the Kitchen', p.30

It is difficult to grasp precisely what Spanos means when he says that Esquivel wrote the text 'as from a second uterus', but his conceptual choice certainly conflates the female body with the domestic realm, so that even whilst he explicitly argues that that space is rendered positive within the novel he implicitly recognises its cultural genderedness. The pertinence of his choice of metaphor is heightened when juxtaposed with Diane Long Hoeveler's work on *Como agua para chocolate*. Hoeveler also adopts a terminology derived directly from the features of the text itself, which is structured around twelve cooking recipes – one for each month of the year – when she characterises its 'ideological agenda' as the presentation of a 'recipe ... for the construction of femininity'; 'the notion that women need to be the nurturers of both their culture and their families.'<sup>4</sup> She summarises the novel as one that recounts

an old platonic story mediated by down-home recipes and Mexican kitsch. It is a hybridized commodity, a text that attempts to mediate and therefore obviate the insoluble dilemmas that both Western and Mexican patriarchies have constructed for women. But it is ultimately a depressing saga of women defeated by their bodies, and as such I think that *Like Water for Chocolate* is, at best, problematic as feminist fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Hoeveler's concern for the role of the female body here is interesting in light of the literary topoi with which this thesis concerns itself, because it underlines the significance of that body as a locus for identity, an issue that is the primary concern of the final chapter of this study. More immediately though, it also emphasises the body as the site of definition in essentialist approaches to gendered identities, so that her vision of a cast of female characters 'defeated by their bodies' directly opposes Spanos's take on Esquivel's achievement, evoked through a uniquely female bodily space that *generates* life. In sum, these two samples of critical responses to *Como agua para chocolate* epitomise a dualism that, as stated earlier, characterises the body of critical work on the book overall. This dualism, I argue, results from an ambiguity in the text's treatment of gender that is one of the reasons why approaching this particular narrative via a close reading of the role of myth and archetype in its portrayal of gender roles and gendered identities is useful. Myth and archetype are themselves, a point that will be elaborated on shortly, both problematic and valuable in what they have to contribute to critical approaches to gender.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Like Words for Pain/Like Water for Chocolate: Mouths, Wombs, and the Mexican Woman's Novel' in Diane Long Hoeveler and Janet K. Boles (eds.), *Women of Color: Defining the issues, hearing the voices*, pp.121-132, pp.125-126

<sup>5</sup> Hoeveler, 'Like Words for Pain', p.126



Allende's novel seems to have proved somewhat less controversial from a critical point of view, whilst comparable in its commercial success. This can perhaps be taken as an indication that her treatment of gender, a common focus for academic studies on this writer's oeuvre in general also, is considered more progressive. Nonetheless, she too has been read as failing to be entirely successful in moving beyond essentialism in her feminist endeavour to re-write gender. This particular critical concern is often intertwined with an unease regarding the role of the 'real' in Allende's narrative; the troubled relationship between her Post-Boom engagement with the realities of contemporary South America and the fantasy with which her novelistic realism is decorated. Stephen Gregory writes convincingly on this point that

Allende seems caught between two contradictory artistic demands: the first tends towards realism and the need to 'tell it like it is'; the second seeks to seduce the reader by embellishing reality ... so as to make it more bearable or desirable. At its most extreme, this dichotomy generates a split between mind and body, head and heart, converted into an essentialist gender gap in which all positive value is given to body, heart and a traditional image of the female.<sup>6</sup>

On a similar note, although with a less exacting tone, Linda Gould Levine defines *Eva Luna* as a narrative that 'casts the reader into [a] postmodern world of uncertainty' and acknowledges that novels such as this, which give priority to 'the creative and imaginative process', must maintain 'a somewhat difficult relationship with external reality and political forces'.<sup>7</sup> Levine goes on to argue that Allende's understanding of the relationship between fiction and the socio-political sphere is one that renders it impossible for the characters that she invents in this story not to be politically engaged, and that she provides through

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Gregory, 'Scheherazade and Eva Luna: Problems in Allende's Storytelling' in *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* vol. LXXX, Number 1, (2003), pp.81-101, p.87. As suggested by its title, Gregory's article examines the use of the *Thousand and One Nights* as a point reference and as an implicit frame narrative in *Eva Luna*. One of his main points is that the overall thrust of the latter is a conservative desire to return to previous social structure, in contrast to the radicalism of the central female character that has been 'like duck soup to the literary wing of a reinvigorated post-1975 Latin-American women's movement' (p.84). Whilst this element of Allende's narrative will not be part of the discussion here, it is worthy of note due to the significance that Scheherazade has had as a point of reference for women writers and for Spanish American feminism in particular. See Helena Araújo, *La Scherezada criolla: ensayos sobre escritura femenina latinoamericana*, (Bogotá: Univ. Nacional de Colombia, 1989) and also Eliane S. Rivero, 'Scheherazade Liberated: *Eva Luna* and Women Storytellers' in Lucía Guerra Cunningham (ed.), 'Splintering Darkness: Latin American Women in Search of Themselves', (Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1990), pp.143-156 for a consideration of this literary archetype in relation to Allende's novel specifically.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Gould Levine, *Isabel Allende*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2002), pp.67-68

them a variety of political perspectives – even whilst these may be less overtly presented than in her earlier novels.

Levine touches here on an area of debate important to the academic study of the post-boom generation of writers, as discussed in the Introduction, and on an aspect of this literary wave which contributes to the value of approaching Allende's and Esquivel's novels via myth and archetype: The re-invention of reality often paradoxically requires and/or can be achieved by means of re-engagement and re-writing of the myths by which 'reality' is (in)formed. This kind of re-configuration, and the level of success with which it might be seen to be achieved, thus becomes a representational space within which the impact of the 'original' myth is exposed. Where the myths in question are, as here, those involved in and surrounding the construction of orthodox gendered identities, this space also becomes a critical one that facilitates a reconsideration of the impact of long-established patriarchal gender constructs on contemporary gendered identities. Hence, whilst I would agree that there is certainly room for criticism of Allende's and Esquivel's work due to, for example, what can be perceived as their reliance on clear cut characters, I would also posit an understanding of that reliance as one aspect of their narratives that might actually be more positive than negative. Whilst the structural, contextual, and thematic references to myths and archetypes in both novels do lend themselves to criticism for their failure to be forward-projecting, to produce new identities as frameworks for reference, it is possible to move away from the kind of negative response to these narratives that identifies their authors as failed feminists, and to focus instead on what can be derived from their works in terms of a greater understanding of the trappings of gender, its role and its norms.

It therefore seems appropriate to read these two texts for and through myth and archetype, and as stories that exemplify the initial *construction* of fixed gendered identities, be it through their subversive efforts or through their conservatism. Such an approach allows this study to search out what might be seen as negative aspects of the narratives and, as a result of locating them within the dialectic framework of this thesis, to re-evaluate their import to the endeavour to move beyond a Manichean perception of human identity. In short, to study these novels in this way does not require either the condoning or the condemnation of their representations of gender, but rather provides an ideal moment in which to explore what they have to say about both feminist revisions of gender limitations

and our seeming inability to ever truly sidestep the social and symbolic orders by which gendered identities are produced, policed, and propagated.

#### **Analytical Parameters: Myth and Archetype**

In the introduction to his informative overview of approaches to the study of myth, Robert A. Segal writes:

I have attended many a conference at which speakers fervently propound on 'the nature of myth' in novel X or play Y or film Z. Yet so much of the argument depends on the definition of myth.<sup>8</sup>

His own definition of myth is a broad one, but one that underlines the important relationship between myth and literature, by considering it simply as 'a story'. He also reminds us, though, that 'myth can also be taken more broadly as a belief or credo', giving the example of the North American 'rags to riches' myth and the myth of the frontier.<sup>9</sup> As a starting point for this study, I align myself with this understanding, reading myth as a term whose connotations immediately connect with literature and the study of it. I will also, however, bear in mind the complex connotations of the term, understanding it as one that can be perceived as contrarily as have been Allende and Esquivel's work, and thus approaching it from a variety of analytical perspectives. These further perspectives will be introduced as the chapter progresses, but beginning with an understanding of myth as story, it seems clear that the word cannot fail to call to mind narrative and/or storytelling as we think of the great classical myths of Greece and Rome and of the creation myths of any number of ancient civilizations – a connection which Segal affirms.<sup>10</sup> Myth also therefore implicitly draws forth the idea of something fictitious; a tale that may once have explained the order of things, but which we now understand to be a story, and only a story. Yet it is precisely within this understanding of myth as a previously acceptable explanation of reality that its durability lays: whilst we may now reject a mythical narrative, it was created as a means of mediating and explaining a reality that once was perceived somewhere, by someone. Susan Sellers concurs with this, writing that to see myth as 'purely fictitious',<sup>11</sup> 'appears to override the complex interactions between life and story

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<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.4

<sup>9</sup> Segal, *Myth*, p.4

<sup>10</sup> Segal, *Myth*, p.4

<sup>11</sup> Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.1. Here Sellers is citing *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of 'myth'.

that seem the generating force of myth'.<sup>12</sup> The key word here is 'generate', for whilst in Sellers's statement the relationship initially appears unilateral – myth is generated by the connections between the realities of life and the fictions of story – there is an implicit reciprocity that must be underlined: it is not the myth that generates the world, but the world that generates the myth...and the myth that generates the world...and so on. These are not just simple connections, but formational intertwinings.

This is particularly fundamental to a grasp of the role that myth can play in furthering our understanding of the ways in which gendered identities are produced. It will not be enough here to assume that myth is purely a fictional account, but nor will it be possible to rely on myths as solid explanations as to how and why gendered identities take the shape they do in the Hispanic American societies depicted by Allende and Esquivel. Instead, myth must be approached here from a more pluralistic and ambiguous – and therefore more potentially deconstructive – perspective such as that put forward by Michael Bell, who writes that "myth" inhabits a twilight zone between literature, philosophy and anthropology.<sup>13</sup> He is thus able to understand it as 'both a supremely significant foundational story and a falsehood' that we consequently deploy "relationally", so that one person's belief is another's myth'.<sup>14</sup>

Bell's study of myth comes via a concern for the tenets of modernism, and the function of 'mythopoeia', or 'mythmaking' in modernist literature. He recognises therein what he terms a 'double consciousness of living a world view *as* a world view', which is the result of a knowing grasp of the aforementioned relational nature of myth as applied in everyday life. He writes:

Self-conscious mythopoeia, recognising a world view as such while living it as a conviction, is a paradox succinctly formulated by Thomas Mann: 'although in the life of the human race the mythic is indeed an early and primitive stage, in the life of the individual it is a late and mature one.'<sup>15</sup>

Cited by Bell to better emphasise his own point, Mann's insight connects back to the Bildungsroman through its reference to the progressive stages of human life. His comparison of the role of myth on the grander scale of human history to that which it can

<sup>12</sup> Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, p.1

<sup>13</sup> Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). p.1

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, p.1

<sup>15</sup> Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism and Myth*, p.2

play in the individual human life emphasises the connection between the ancient and the present also made in Sellers's comment on the links between life and story being those that propel myth into existence. Moving beyond this externalised, objective, observation though, Bell's take on myth directly invests in the individual alluded to by Mann; in the self-consciousness that is a product of the combination of subjective and objective points of view. Thus, he illuminates myth's location in a borderland space as well as its subsequent potent malleability. Understood to be lying between the subjective and objective, internal and external, past and present, unconscious and conscious, myth can be both visible and invisible.

It is the potential danger of its invisible guises that becomes the primary concern for other critics. For example, Sellers also cites Robert Graves's definition of myth as performing the dual role of explaining conundrums such as worldly origins, and 'justify[ing] the existing social system and [accounting] for rites and customs.'<sup>16</sup> Here, myth is a legitimising discourse, or form of grand narrative, in the same way that it came to be for Barthes through his discursive consideration of it in *Mythologies* (1957, 1970). The French critic writes in the Preface to the second edition of this seminal work:

The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history. In short, in the account given of our contemporary circumstances, I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.<sup>17</sup>

It is upon this more negative understanding of myth as a cunning, inscribing force duping us into a certain understanding of the world that Barthes focuses in his work; myth as a 'system of communication',<sup>18</sup> which is 'by no means confined to oral speech' but can consist of 'modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech'.<sup>19</sup> In essence, in Barthes' view, myth is not *just* a language, but a semiological system. Because '[s]emiology is a science of forms',<sup>20</sup> and if myth is a

<sup>16</sup> Robert Graves paraphrased by Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, p.2

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Trans. Jonathon Cape, (London: Vintage, 1972), Preface, p.11

<sup>18</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.109

<sup>19</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.110

<sup>20</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.111

semiological system, it stands to reason that one way of engaging with myth is, as Barthes does in *Mythologies*, to study the variety of forms that myth adopts. *Eva Luna* and *Como agua para chocolate* are read here as two examples of myth's shape-shifting.

Understood through the approaches discussed above, myth itself can be broached as a site worthy of excavation precisely because it inhabits liminal spaces. Most significant though, I argue, is the fact that regardless of the approach taken to myth – be it understood as a positive revelatory force or a negative delineating one – it is always in the end seen to constitute or exist within a space of possible renegotiations. As was suggested earlier, then, myth is neither an entirely negative nor an entirely positive force, but one that must be carefully negotiated if its effects are to be recognised and its potentials drawn upon. In this approach, we hear echoes of Barthes's observation that 'there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely'.<sup>21</sup> Marina Warner also recognises Barthes' 'fundamental principle' to be 'that myths are not eternal verities, but historical compounds, which successfully conceal their own contingency, changes and transitoriness so that the story they tell looks as if it cannot be told otherwise'.<sup>22</sup> Warner acknowledges the influence of Barthes on her own approach to myth, one which emphasises not only its malleability but also its resultant continued relevance:

In common usage, the word myth rather invites dissent, implying delusion and falsehood. But my underlying premise ... is that myths are not always delusions, that deconstructing them does not necessarily mean wiping them, but that they can represent ways of making sense of universal matters, like sexual identity and family relations, and that they enjoy a more vigorous life than we perhaps acknowledge, and exert more of an inspiration and influence than we think.<sup>23</sup>

Warner's argument is, in turn, referred to by Sellers, who further endorses this belief in the malleability of myth as something that can

operate as a lens onto human culture in its historical and social context, binding the reader in stock reactions or else providing the starting point for new telling ... Myths offer ways of making sense of our experience and give crucial insights into the ideologies that govern our understandings. By scrutinising myth we can work loose its negative strangleholds, set new

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<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, also cited by Sellers, p.7

<sup>22</sup> Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters, Six Myths of Our Time: The 1994 Reith Lectures*, (London: Vintage, 1994), p.xiii

<sup>23</sup> Warner, *Managing Monsters*, p.xiii

variations into its weave and jettison those myths that cannot be satisfactorily altered.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, Sellers adds an important point of her own in contrast to one aspect of Warner's point of view:

While I agree with Warner that some myths must be re-worked and others rehabilitated (and that some should be deleted from our repertoire), I would also place emphasis on the importance of myth's ability to resist change. Warner, in my view, grants the individual with too much self-knowledge. My own experience of reading myth is that its knack of surviving all but the most sustained attacks can challenge us to confront issues we would rather avoid, force us to examine our prejudices, or perceive things in a new way. Myth's finely honed symbolism and form contribute to this process by lodging in the mind to re-emerge at unexpected, apposite, or occasionally unwelcome moments [...] I am suggesting that the different voices that contribute to the creation of myth may be instructive and prevent us from automatically rejecting tales which do not flatter our individual view.<sup>25</sup>

A number of elements of Seller's assessments of myth are pertinent to my own approach to the subject here. Firstly, her comment that Warner awards too much of a sense of self-knowledge to the individual encountering myth is of interest because it is precisely an improved level of self-knowledge (at the level of gender identity construction) and resultant agency that is the aim of the dialectic process of *Bildung* as it has been theorised in this thesis.

The connection between myth and archetype is usefully made by Annis Pratt, in her comprehensive study *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1982). Pratt grounds her study of archetypes through reference to a childhood encounter with the mythical tale of Daphne and Apollo, a tale 'similar to the stories of Alpheus and Arethusa, Pan and Syrinx, Zeus and Leda/Io/Europa/Danae and [which] also recurs in a wide variety of folk stories and songs, art, and sculpture'. As such, she states, 'it constitutes one example of a recurrent form, an archetype'.<sup>26</sup> She then goes on to provide a useful definition of this concept:

The term *archetype* derives from the Greek *archi*, a beginning or first instance, and *typos*, a stamp, and denotes the primordial form, the original, of a series of variations. This etymology contributes to a confusion between *archetype* and

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<sup>24</sup> Sellers, summarising Warner, *Myth and Fairy*, pp.7-8

<sup>25</sup> Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, p.8

<sup>26</sup> Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* with Barbara White, Andrea Lowenstein, Mary Wyer, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p.3

*stereotype*, a printing term designating the original plate from which subsequent imprints are made and connoting an excessively rigid set of generalizations.<sup>27</sup>

Within the parameters of this study, the reference made by Pratt to the importance of 'variations' to archetype is significant, for it again signals a level of malleability that parallels the dialectic as a model able to provide structure without enforcing rigidity – either in its processes or in the form of an idealised end point. This focus on archetype therefore becomes a further useful tool with which this study may engage with myth, without losing sight of the ambiguity that has been put forth above as an important characteristic of myth also. To reiterate, if flux is at work in myth, and archetypes are an aspect of myth, to search out archetypes in Allende's and Esquivel's novels is not necessarily to search out ossified characters who represent an inescapable norm, or who demonstrate the authors' failure to write critically informed characters that can serve as vehicles for the interrogation of gender as a category of identity. These novels are of interest not despite, but because of their population with metonymic, representative characters, rather than profoundly complex ones. They can tell us as much about so-called foundations as they can about potential shifts – precisely the kinds of shifts that will be more openly explored in the exile texts of Chapter Two. To search out these archetypal figures is to search out and closely read the characters who might give an indication of the kinds of identities that have been historically, socially and culturally fostered, but whose recurrence *with variation* indicates at one and the same time problematic *and* positive patterns, sticking points *and* possibilities for change. As far as the particular concern of this chapter goes – that is the exploration of those myths that can be seen to inform and surround gendered identities – the aim will be to search out and unpack the myths and archetypes that play a role in the construction of orthodox gendered identities, and indeed of non-orthodox ones (the characterisation of which is an inevitable upshot of the legitimisation of their opposite). In order to achieve its aim, this chapter will deploy a variety of definitions of and approaches to myth, all a result of the 'ongoing endeavour to connect mythology to human origins',<sup>28</sup> whilst continuing to bear in mind the fact that the aim here is to excavate the foundations of gender ideologies and to reveal the guises that they are shown to take on by these Spanish American narratives.

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<sup>27</sup> Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns*, p.3

<sup>28</sup> Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale*, p.3



### Mythologised Beginnings

As was explained in the previous chapter, of the features of the traditional Bildungsroman narrative, one primary recognised characteristic is a narrative trajectory tracing the protagonist's developmental journey from some point in 'early adolescence to young adulthood'.<sup>29</sup> As was also explained in that earlier discussion, both Allende and Esquivel's works will be treated here as ones that reflect at once a certain adherence to and a variation on that generic framework. In relation to myth specifically, there is one change made to the more traditional narrative structure that is of especial interest: both stories, rather than beginning at some point during the adolescent period of their respective female protagonist's lives, are rooted in depiction and/or description of their births. Tita's entrance into the world is the first major event in *Como agua para chocolate*, and the nature of her initiation into life bears important consequences for her personal story, establishing from the very start the role that will be hers:

Tita arribó a este mundo prematuramente, sobre la mesa de la cocina, entre los olores de una sopa de fideos que se estaba cocinando, los del tomillo, el laurel, el cilantro, el de la leche hervida, el de los ajos y, por supuesto, el de la cebolla. Como se imaginarán, la consabida de nalgada no fue necesaria pues Tita nació llorando de antemano, tal vez porque ella sabía que su oráculo determinaba que en esta vida le estaba negado el matrimonio. Contaba Nacha que Tita fue literalmente empujada a este mundo por un torrente impresionante de lágrimas que se desbordaron sobre la mesa y el piso de la cocina.<sup>30</sup>

A number of aspects of the recounting of this episode are significant for our understanding of the roles that myth has to play in this novel. First and foremost, the incredible and exaggerated events portrayed call to mind the marvellous occurrences of classical myths whose characters' destinies are deployed in order to *explain* certain realities, to become paradigms for the causes and consequences of the human world. Despite not yet having had time to develop her own personality, to make right or wrong choices, or to understand the world around her, from a feminist analytical perspective Tita is already an archetype – a symbolic figure of explanatory capacity. In part this is achieved by means of the language used and the details focused upon. The smells of the kitchen, the sound of Tita's cries as she emerges, the sight of the torrent of salty water that forces her into life,

<sup>29</sup> Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, p.2

<sup>30</sup> Laura Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate: novela de entregas mensuales con recetas, amores y remedios caseros*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), p.4. All subsequent references are taken from this edition.

are all deeply evocative, allowing the reader to clearly conjure the scene as it takes place, and thus awarding it a resonance that immediately implies how pertinent it will be to the story that follows. Furthermore, the exaggerated portrayal of fact, that is, of the birth fluids, in combination with an implausible yet nonetheless magical explanation for this exaggeration – that Tita knows already that she is destined for a romantically bereft existence – are stylistic tenets directly drawn from mythical narratives and lend Esquivel's writing a mythical air of its own. Finally, the mythologisation of Tita's lonely fate is compounded by the phrase 'que su oráculo determinaba': An oracle, defined as 'the instrument, agency, or medium (usually a priest or a priestess) through which the gods were supposed to speak or prophesy; the mouthpiece of the gods',<sup>31</sup> carries profound connotations of the other-worldliness upon which the power of myth is founded. Here, we are reminded of Sellers's comment (see page 60 of this chapter) that it is the relationship between reality as we experience it and reality as myth portrays it that awards myth its resonance.

Focusing more precisely on the effect of this on the portrayal of gender identity construction in the novel, the setting of these marvellous happenings in the kitchen, the traditionalised heart of the home, implicates the existence of restrictive ties to the family and to all the traditions inherent to that social unit, and draws directly on the normalised association of that space with women and not men. In choosing this setting for her story, as other critics have remarked,<sup>32</sup> Esquivel inserts herself within a female Mexican literary tradition through which these gendered connotations have been exploited in the aim of questioning female suppression, so that she might also be said to be investing in cultural and textual archetypes that have been created through the culturally specific literature of her native country. In this way her novel exemplifies the way in which life and art are brought together in the formation of such archetypes. Within the narrative itself, In *Como agua para chocolate*, tradition, established in dialogue with hierarchies of both age and gender, plays an explicit role in the construction of Tita's identity. The most important of the De

<sup>31</sup> Definition taken from the Oxford English Dictionary at <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.le.ac.uk/> (last accessed 11<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

<sup>32</sup> See Spanos, 'The Paradoxical Metaphors of the Kitchen', p.2. Spanos notes that 'Other famous Mexican writers, like Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz and Rosario Castellanos, have alluded to and written about the frustration and the confinement of the kitchen, belittling and mocking the sacred place of the house.' He also mentions Rosario Ferré's essay 'La cocina de la escritura' in which she uses cooking as a metaphor for the writing process. This essay is included in Patricia Elena Gonzalez and Eliana Ortega's edited volume *La sartén por el mango* (Rio Piedras, P.R: Ediciones Huracán, 1983).

la Garza family traditions, alluded to but not defined in the above-cited passage, dictates that the youngest daughter must care for her mother until the event of either her mother's or her own death, whichever comes first.<sup>33</sup> It is Tita's insistence on questioning the validity of this tradition that is the main generating force behind the narrative. The typified hostility of family members towards the desires of the *Bildungsbeid* is therefore present here, yet the negative consequences of this hostility for the female protagonist surpass the restraints that they imply for the male character, who even in the face of familial disapproval is free to set out on his journey of self-discovery. Tita's life, in contrast, is lived almost entirely within the carefully policed boundaries of the ranch, under Mamá Elena's watchful regard. Aside from the episode that sees her taken away by Dr Brown, who nurses her back to health after a mental breakdown, and a small number of mentions of trips to church, every major event in Tita's life – birthday parties, weddings festivities in honour of various family members, births, deaths, sexual encounters – takes place within the rooms and patio of the family home. In this, she is absolutely a female stereotype, and one that highlights the limitations of female experiences that feminism has also wished to expose. Taking all of the above into account; her mythified birth, her (potentially) banal domestic existence, her imposed spinsterhood, Tita, as a number of critics have underlined,<sup>34</sup> is a Mexican Cinderella; a cultural adaptation of a female archetype who is symbolic of the gender role assigned to women at birth. She embodies a trajectory of individual development that can be, and has been, read as a template for female gendered identities.

A more negative understanding of this paradigmatic character would read her as just as limited as the experiences that she stands for: a simple reflection of a life imposed by social ignorance, the unjustifiable categorisation of identity in line with gender, and in no sense the kind of role model that might be able to incite change. In many ways this is an acceptable interpretation, for it is true that despite her efforts Tita does not escape the iron hand of Mamá Elena in time to be able to make a life for herself, and she certainly

<sup>33</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.9

<sup>34</sup> Antonio Marquet makes this comparison in his article, '¿Cómo escribir un Bestseller? La receta de Laura Esquivel' in *Plural* supplement to *Excelsior* 237 (June 1991), pp.58-67, and his point is referenced by Monica Zapata in 'Like Water for Chocolate and the Free Circulation of Clichés' in Richard A. Young (ed.), *Latin American Postmodernisms*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), pp.205-220 (p.209), and by Shirley Yancey Kloepper in her thesis *Balun-Canan and Como agua para chocolate as a Code of Communication for a New Image of Woman*, (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Dissertation Services, 2000)

never sets out on the physical journey of discovery that a literary male counterpart would likely undertake. Especially significant to this reading is the ending of the novel, where Tita commits a fantastical suicide following Pedro's death, and the fire that engulfs the ranch immediately afterwards leaves behind only her recipe book, upon which the narrative structure of the novel – her life – is based. A more compact and symbolic remainder there could not be: that life is reduced to a text that symbolises female servitude. Added to this, the previously noted didactic intentions of the Post-Boom, the Bildungsroman, and myth too, it seems clear that concern as to the value of Esquivel's heroine, from certain points of view at least, may be justified. What lessons can future generations of women learn from a life of such self-sacrifice?

As has already been mentioned, however, there are critics who envision the character of Tita as a positive point of reference; as a 'mujer latinoamericana en el proceso de liberación'.<sup>35</sup> Tony Spanos reads the survival of the recipe book as a sign of Tita's escape from servitude, directly contrasting the above reading of its symbolic value, for example.<sup>36</sup> A reading that fits alongside Kathleen Johnson's assertion that, through Tita, Esquivel 'confronta el mito de la mujer silenciosa que acepta su destino' by writing a female character who '[a]cepta su feminidad pero denuncia implícitamente las expectativas que la sociedad tiene de ella'.<sup>37</sup> For Johnson, this is mainly achieved directly as a consequence of the story's action being based in the kitchen:

El discurso del la comida en *Como agua para chocolate* afirma el escenario doméstico como uno de los contextos más apropiados y cómodos para la mujer. Esquivel sostiene la noción de que el puesto de cocinera es una vocación significativa con un producto valioso. Mantiene que la preparación del producto culinario tiene valor en sí por su fin de nutrir la vida y como un rito que satisface los impulsos del hombre hacia lo sagrado. En vez de devaluar el hogar y la tarea doméstica, como instrumentos de supresión, Esquivel enfatiza lo positivo del impulso femenino doméstico.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly there is value in Johnson's perspective, and that of the other critics mentioned in this chapter who understand the book in similar terms, in that they make available as a space of empowerment one more usually understood from feminist perspectives as a space of subjugation. It is also interesting to note the parallels in place in Johnson's description

<sup>35</sup>Kathleen Johnson, 'Como agua para chocolate: Tita, una nueva imagen de la mujer latinoamericana', *South Carolina Modern Language Review* 1, no. 1 (winter 2002), p.4

<sup>36</sup>Spanos, 'The Paradoxical Metaphors of the Kitchen', p.5

<sup>37</sup>Johnson, 'Tita, una nueva imagen de la mujer latinoamericana', p.3

<sup>38</sup>Johnson, 'Tita, una nueva imagen de la mujer latinoamericana', p.6

of the kitchen as somewhere 'comfortable', and Katherine Ibsen's observations on the kind of fiction produced by Esquivel. Ibsen posits that 'just as the rituals of cooking provide Tita with a sense of security' the popular genres inferred in the text, such as the *novela rosa*, the *folletín*, and the *telenovela*, 'often rely on formulae [that provide] women with an order and a control that may not exist in their everyday world.'<sup>39</sup> This parallel can be usefully extended to include a statement by Allende on the comforting role of literature as she perceives it: 'En la novela podemos darle un orden ilusorio a las cosas, encontrar las claves de laberinto de la historia, remitirnos al pasado para tratar de comprender el presente y soñar del futuro.'<sup>40</sup> In a study of *Como agua* that examines Esquivel's deployment of clichés as a narrative technique, Mónica Zapata makes an interesting case for the role of repetition at the level of identity that also contributes to an understanding of the potential usefulness of Esquivel's reference to previously established conventions regarding both literature and gender.

If we consider that repetition is the principle on which the signifying chain is founded, that without the repetition of signs the subject does not become such, then we must recognise that clichés, as elements of language, bear something fundamental for the subject, who forges and sustains it and, furthermore, constitutes it in particular as a means of defense against schizophrenia.<sup>41</sup>

Again, here, the analogous relationship between repetitions at the level of textual and gendered identity, and the capacity of myth to articulate human experience through repetition of its own archetypes and narrative structures is drawn forth. In light of these ideas, new directions seem of less importance than the recognition of the inherent value of already existing spaces and the roles with which they are connected, as well as of the possibility of their reconfiguration. On the surface, this kind of approach offers potential for empowerment and for social change at symbolic if not practical levels. As further examination of Johnson's work shows, however, this kind of re-evaluation is not easy to achieve without reliance on precisely the discourses that it aims to deconstruct. It is difficult to ignore the problematic terminology that the critic herself uses, which seems only to underline the power of the 'mitos' that she claims Esquivel rewrites, and thus to

<sup>39</sup> Kristine Ibsen, 'On Recipes, Reading and Revolution: Postboom Parody in *Como agua para chocolate*' in *Hispanic Review*, vol. 63, no. 2, Spring, 1995, pp. 133–46, p.137. Cited in Stephen M. Hart, *Eva Luna and Cuentos de Eva Luna*, (London: Grant & Cutler, 2003), p.10

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Hart, *Eva Luna and Cuentos de Eva Luna*, p.10

<sup>41</sup> Zapata, 'Like Water for Chocolate and the Free Circulation of Clichés', p.213

undermine her own points: to state that Esquivel 'affirms' the domestic context as one of the most 'appropriate and comfortable' for women, and to talk of a 'feminine impulse' towards it, is only to reiterate the stereotypes that continue to underpin contemporary female gendered identities. Indeed Johnson puts in evidence her essentialist take on the text earlier on in her article by describing the language of the novel as 'femenino en el sentido de que usa palabras, metáforas, dichos y símiles que se asocian con las esferas femeninas'.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, these perspectives beg the question of how, precisely, and on what grounds we might choose to evaluate the success of a text in terms of its feminism. It would appear that Johnson and the critics with positions similar to hers stand alongside the author herself. In a number of interviews Esquivel has affirmed her own belief in the importance of the domestic sphere as a base for the formation of female identity. She has commented that the feminist movements of the sixties and seventies, in which she took part, devalued 'todo lo que tenía que ver con lo femenino, con la relación directa con la tierra, con la maternidad, con la emoción, con el hogar porque todas las actividades que se realizaban dentro del ámbito de la casa no tenían retribución económica'.<sup>43</sup> She has also made direct reference to the kitchen as a place which she holds in great regard, 'a sacred place ... a constant source of knowledge, of pleasure ... a generating centre of life'.<sup>44</sup> In another interview, she describes how the desire for change led to a movement outwards (where the home-space is conceived of as 'inside') that was ultimately fruitless:

Women didn't go outside the home until my generation. We put our hopes in the public world. We thought the things worth fighting for were outside the home, not inside. We went outside to change that world and we were hoping that a New Man, with a capital M, was going to emerge from that world. But, of course, now we're living in disillusionment because we're realizing that this didn't happen. Now we understand that the system and the progress that we established is, in fact, destroying us. [...] We wanted a New Man who would value things differently, who would value life, who would value every act in the home. We did not want the destruction of the public world, and in reaction to that, we're turning back into the private world. What we're finding

<sup>42</sup> Johnson, 'Tita, una nueva imagen de la mujer latinoamericana', p.3

<sup>43</sup> Interview by Anabel Campo, 'Laura Esquivel: el sabor dulce de la vida' in *Woman* 8 11<sup>th</sup> August 1993, (Barcelona; Spain, 1993), pp.21-22, cited in Kathleen Johnson, p.6

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Spanos, 'The Paradoxical Metaphors of the Kitchen', p.5

is that our private world, our own homes, will remind us where we are from, where we are going, and who we are.<sup>45</sup>

In many ways, therefore, the focus on the interior as opposed to the exterior realm in her novel appears to be a direct response to what she has experienced as the failures of feminism and a portrayal of a consequential, necessary, regression inwards towards a zone in which female identity may be rewritten for the better. Furthermore, her argumentation calls to mind Warner's and Seller's understanding of the possibilities for re-writing myth; its positive aspects kept on, its flaws removed. Nonetheless, it remains difficult to perceive of Esquivel's political and literary perspectives as non-essentialist within the frameworks that contemporary feminist thought has to offer, and I would argue that the domestic setting of the novel plays an important role in this limitation. As such, this particular author's work, read within the critical framework of this thesis, contributes to an understanding of the myths that, in turn, contribute to the construction of gendered identities.

This does not, though, necessarily preclude the possibility of the novel providing further re-configurations of gendered identities, for other thematic concerns are superimposed onto its domestic backdrop. One example of the way in which the novel reconfigures a thematic concern of the traditional Bildungsroman that contributes to the re-writing of the myths surrounding female identities occurs via its treatment of the theme of education. The male protagonist of the Bildungsroman is often represented as experiencing his formal instruction as a frustrating, unrewarding process.<sup>46</sup> This is the case for Tita also, because of what she perceives to be the inadequacies of her education. Differently from the traditional male *Bildungsroman*, whose conflict with his teachers is one that increases relative to a contact with the outside world that Tita does not have,<sup>47</sup> she is sheltered from the exterior world by an education that encourages her to focus her efforts inwards, onto family life and her role as ranch cook. Whilst the latter role becomes an important part of her identity, and an aspect of her life that she enjoys, her skills are not the product of formal or scholarly education and she recognises that she has missed out on something important because of her gender. Particularly useful demonstrations of her

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<sup>45</sup> Interview by Claudia Lowenstein, 'Revolución interior al exterior: an interview with Laura Esquivel (author of *Como agua para chocolate*)', *southwest Review*, 9/22/1994, 12 pages, p.8

<sup>46</sup> Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, p.3

<sup>47</sup> Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, p.3

academic frustrations are three references made by her to an etiquette manual by Manuel Antonio Carreño. This 'archaic manual of urbanity' was written 'during the nineteenth century period of positivism to establish norms of behaviour for Mexican society',<sup>48</sup> and is first mentioned by Tita at her sister Rosaura's wedding to Pedro – the man she is herself in love with and who claims to love her, but whom she cannot marry due to the family traditions governing her choices. Subsequent references are made in March, when Tita feels frustrated at Pedro's weakness in the face of Mamá Elena's tyranny, and then in April, when she finds herself alone in assisting at the birth of her niece, Esperanza:

Con impaciencia esperó a que todos comieran su pastel para poder retirarse. El manual de Carreño le impedía hacerlo antes, pero no le vedaba el flotar entre nubes mientras comía apuradamente su redaba.<sup>49</sup>

¡Maldita decencia! ¡Maldito manuel de Carreño! Por su culpa su cuerpo quedaba destinado a marchitarse poco a poco, sin remedio alguno.<sup>50</sup>

De qué le servía en ese momento saber los nombres de los planetas y el manual de Carreño de pe a pa si su hermana estaba a punto de morir y ella no podía ayudarla.<sup>51</sup>

A clear evolution in Tita's attitude towards the social regulations set out by this text is exemplified in these passages. At first she obeys the ideas expressed in them unquestioningly, but as her dissatisfaction and realisation of the injustice of her situation grows, she begins to angrily reject that ideology.

Ibsen has noted that Tita's angry rejection of the manual as cited above is symptomatic of the fact that she clearly 'feels circumscribed ... by this textually mediated tradition'.<sup>52</sup> She underlines within the text a privileging of 'orally transmitted knowledge' over the 'textually mediated discourse' that is represented by Carreño's manual,<sup>53</sup> and of 'the artificial rules of conduct' that it dictates, and which Mamá Elena and Rosaura uphold

<sup>48</sup> Shirley Yancey Kloefer, *Balun-Canan and Como agua para chocolate as a Code of Communication*, p.152. Kloefer provides interesting and useful information on Carreño's manual and its social and historical significance, however she claims that it is 'directly quoted three times in the novel' (p.152). This is not strictly true, but rather Tita refers to it to demonstrate her frustration in the face of the social regulations that delimit her life.

<sup>49</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.38

<sup>50</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.57

<sup>51</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.72

<sup>52</sup> Ibsen, 'On Recipes, Reading and Revolution', p.140

<sup>53</sup> Ibsen, 'On Recipes, Reading and Revolution', footnote 11, p.140. The example that Ibsen uses here is that of Nacha's voice whispering guidance to Tita as she endeavours to help Rosaura through childbirth. That this is an event from which men were traditionally absent – until recent times especially and certainly during the era in which the novel is set – is an issue that carries the feminisation of orally transmitted knowledge beyond the fact that the episode recounts a uniquely female experience in biological terms.



and reproduce.<sup>54</sup> Through this association with characters that Esquivel has described as representing 'the norm or the world of the masculine',<sup>55</sup> the written word, and the narratives it produces, also become masculinised, thus reinforcing traditional associations of orality (the spoken word) with the feminine and textuality (the written word) with the masculine. Continuing this chain of signification connects oral culture and the knowledge it communicates back to myth, and so, ultimately, recalls the traditional association of women with myth as an irrational discourse. Again then, we find ourselves faced with, not new directions but, at most, the revitalisation of orthodox gendered associations of the kind upon which the patriarchal symbolic order has been constructed. Moreover, should this have led to Tita fully rejecting the written word, and the kind of knowledge with which it has traditionally been associated, the reader may have been left with a protagonist unable to progress beyond those socially imposed limitations.

This is not the resolution with which Esquivel leaves her reader, however. Much later on, after Mamá Elena's death, Tita engages in battle with Rosaura to enforce her niece Esperanza's right to a decent education; one that moves beyond the boundaries of a firm knowledge of etiquette and domestic skills of the type that constitute the novel's subtitle. We are told that 'Esperanza asistió a la mejor escuela, con el objeto de pulir su intelecto. Tita, por su parte, se encargó de enseñarle algo igual de valioso: los secretos de la vida y del amor a través de la cocina.'<sup>56</sup> Consequently, we are presented not with an array of gendered associations that maintain the traditional male/logos, female/pathos division, but rather with a narrative that gradually draws to light the value of all learning and the opportunities for self-expression that it entails. Hence, another difference between Tita as the protagonist of a Post-Boom Bildungsroman and the traditional male protagonist, seems to be the differing attitudes towards knowledge with which they are endowed. Whilst the male character rejects formal education as the means to self-development, the female protagonist is more acutely aware not just of the advantages of education, but of its necessity to her gaining agency. She is not only alert to the power inherent in knowledge, but also understands that implicit to such an education is the crossing of the masculine/feminine, public/private divide. The female protagonist searches to challenge the codes that dictate access to knowledge by moving beyond the

<sup>54</sup> Ibsen, 'On Recipes, Reading and Revolution', p.140

<sup>55</sup> Loewenstein, 'Revolución interior al exterior: an interview with Laura Esquivel'

<sup>56</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, pp.239-240

limitations they set out, whereas the traditional male *Bildungsheld* rejects the possibilities for learning offered to him without directly challenging the doctrines that are enmeshed within those teachings. In this way, Tita can be seen to challenge the myths surrounding gendered identity, and the needs and capacities of individuals as they are seen to be when viewed through such a gender-biased lens.

In *Eva Luna*, the eponymous female protagonist has an attitude to formal education that is strikingly similar to that of Tita. Given the chance to learn how to read and write with the schoolteacher, Inés, Eva absorbs every morsel of knowledge offered to her:

Me puse obsesiva con el estudio, me fascinaba la historia, las letras y la geografía ... Valiéndome de una enciclopedia y de los conocimientos de mi maestra, yo viajaba por el mundo ... Leía el diccionario con pasión y podía pasar horas buscando rimas, averiguando antónimas y resolviendo crucigramas.<sup>57</sup>

It is in fact through her studies that Eva initially embarks on the journey of exploration that takes place as a physical journey for the male *Bildungsheld*. Her primary interest at this stage, however, is language, and the opportunities for self-expression that it has to offer her. An avid storyteller – a maker of myths – since early in her childhood, for the first time here she discovers what it means to be able to record all of the experiences that have thus far contributed to her own *Bildung* into an independent individual; something that Susan de Carvalho links to the narrative concerns of the Bildungsroman by saying that this ‘growth process towards literature is the primary focus’ of the novel.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Eva discovers the power of narrative as a means by which to mould reality, to manipulate and improve upon it, and make it makes sense for her:

Sospechaba que nada existía verdaderamente, la realidad era una material imprecisa y gelatinosa que mis sentidos captaban a medias. No había pruebas de que todos percibieran del mismo modo ... Si así fuera, cada uno vive en soledad absoluta. Ese pensamiento me aterraba. Me consolaba la idea de que yo podía tomar esa gelatina y moldearla para crear lo que deseara, no una parodia de la realidad ... sino un mundo propio ... donde yo imponía las normas y las cambiaba a mi antojo.<sup>59</sup>

In this way, Eva is enacting the understanding of myth as a malleable discourse that is put forward by Warner and Sellers, as well as the Barthesian analysis of myth as a language.

<sup>57</sup> Isabel Allende, *Eva Luna* (1987), (Barcelona: Random House Mondadori S.A., 2003), p.176. All subsequent references are taken from this edition.

<sup>58</sup> Susan de Carvalho, ‘Escrituras y Escrituras: The Artist Protagonists of Isabel Allende’ in *Discurso Literario* vol. 10, no.1, (1992), p.60

<sup>59</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.177

Rather than allowing the myths already in place to explain the world she lives in to be the primary guiding force in her life, she seizes the opportunity provided by the flexible nature of language to forge her own path and to escape the solitude that she perceives to be the only possible result of accepting the notion that we each experience a very different world. Moreover, here myth is a positive force that contributes to a sense of community and belonging at the same time as it allows for individuality: solitude is escaped and yet autonomy is achieved through the revision of accepted ideas. I would argue that this apparently unfathomable duality is a product of the Post-Boom ideologies informing Allende's work, and expresses her belief that '[m]i trabajo [es] un aporte al esfuerzo común por la causa de la libertad, la justicia y la fraternidad, en la cual creo'.<sup>60</sup>

Eva's mythologisation of her own life has its roots in her relationship with her mother, who encouraged her imaginative drive, and whose own beginnings are relayed to Eva in an equally mythological tone. The very first paragraph of the novel, setting the tone for the story that is to come, attributes a mythological aura to the story from the beginning:

Me llamo Eva, que quiere decir vida, según un libro que mi madre consultó para escoger mi nombre. Nací en el último cuarto de una casa sombría y crecí entre muebles antiguos, libros en latín y momias humanas, pero eso no logró hacerme melancólica, porque vine al mundo con un soplo de selva en la memoria. Mi padre, un indio de ojos amarillos, provenía del lugar donde se juntan cien ríos, olía a bosque y nunca miraba al cielo de frente, porque se había criado bajo la cúpula de los árboles y la luz le parecía indecente. Consuelo, mi madre, pasó la infancia en una región encantada, donde por siglos los aventureros han buscado la ciudad de oro puro que vieron los conquistadores cuando se asomaron a los abismos de su propia ambición. Quedó marcada por el paisaje y de algún modo se las arregló para traspasarme esa huella.<sup>61</sup>

Myth is evoked in this passage in a variety of ways. To begin with, as an introduction to the narrator's own identity, it is a creation story of sorts. It is also then imbued with the mark of mythology through references to the 'ancient'; the furniture that is described in this way, and the cultures that are called to mind through the mention of the books in Latin and the mummies. All of these induce the reader to think of 'other' worlds; once part of our own but now never truly knowable. Then, we are presented with references to a more specifically Spanish American world of mystery; the jungle and the indigenous

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Shaw, *The Post-Boom*, p.11

<sup>61</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.9

tribes that inhabit such mysterious places as those that seduced the conquistadors; where the hundred rivers meet and where the world is dominated by the uncontrollable power of nature (an important theme in the history of Spanish American writing towards which Allende gives a subtle nod here.) Finally, Consuelo, who will later be described to have a 'whip' of red hair that contrasts greatly with the jungle in which she grows up, is portrayed to have began her life in an 'enchanted' region, so that she herself seems a kind of mystical forest creature, who we are told has passed some vestige of that identity on to her daughter.

The passing down of this personal mythology from mother to daughter is a reflection of the oral rather than textual origins of myths, and also serves to remind of the importance of the spoken narrative to the indigenous cultures of Spanish America.<sup>62</sup> This orality is further reflected in the first person narrative perspective of the novel, which positions the reader in the liminal space between objectivity and subjectivity: this novel can be engaged with both as if being read *to* us, and/or as if we are the teller of the tale. Eva's matrilineal origins are thus presented to both her and her reader as follows:

Los misioneros recogieron a Consuelo cuando todavía no aprendía a caminar, era solo una cachorra desnuda y cubierta de barro y excremento, que entró arrastrándose por el puente del embarcadero como un diminuto Jonás por alguna ballena de agua dulce.<sup>63</sup>

The explicit connection made here between Consuelo and the bible via the story of Jonah is continued throughout the Catholic education given to her by the missionaries that take her in, and into the birth of Eva herself via the unusual circumstances surrounding her conception: she is the result of her mother's amorous affair with the indigenous gardener who works with them at the house of the eccentric Professor Jones. This affair begins on the day the gardener, at work in the garden, is bitten by a snake. Consuelo, who wishes to save the man from his now certain fate of being turned into a mummy by the Professor, hides him and cares for him. Eventually, writes Eva, the dying man's response to Consuelo's touch was an

<sup>62</sup> The importance of oral storytelling is mentioned by both writers in reference to their own childhoods and as an influence on their literary work. Allende has stated that 'I come from a family of storytellers, an oral tradition, and that helps a lot' (cited in Stephen Gregory, 'Scheherazade and Eva Luna: Problems in Isabel Allende's Storytelling', p.83), and Esquivel has talked about how in her family 'Nobody read stories – not ready-made stories. They just told them to me. They invented them...' (cited in Kloepper, *Bahin-Canán and Como agua para chocolate*, p.40)

<sup>63</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.9

[i]nesperada erección [que] consiguió conmover su corazón de virgen madura y cuando él la tomó de un brazo y la miró suplicante, ella comprendió que había llegado el momento de justificar su nombre y consolarlo de tanta desgracia.<sup>64</sup>

This erotic medicinal measure cures the gardener, and thus the story of Eva's conception becomes a re-telling of the biblical story whose role in establishing and legitimizing male domination in western cultures has been profound: that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This episode, in Segal's view, is one of the creation stories from the Bible (the second being that of Noah and the Ark) that can be qualified as myths, in line with the folklorist approach to myth as stories 'above all ... about the creation of the world'.<sup>65</sup> All of the motifs are in place to facilitate this reading: the garden, the deadly snake, a man and woman both of mysterious origins; and they become inextricably linked in the girl whose life is the result of their coming together – 'Eva, que quiere decir vida, según el libro que mi madre consultó para escoger mi nombre'.<sup>66</sup> This name constitutes a final defiance towards the original grand narrative – a claim that in Eve, reborn in Eva, inheres life and not death.<sup>67</sup>

Linda Gould Levine perceives a further symbolic meaning in the image of the snake here, related to the 'Guajiro tribe that resides in selected areas of Venezuela' (the unnamed but recognisable country where the novel is set).<sup>68</sup> She explains that according to the folklore of the tribe, the snake is a 'representation of sickness, death and danger', but that this negative significance can be changed when the snake is 'killed and water, the "principle of life," is extracted from it'. Levine sees this process to be symbolically completed here in the sexual act.<sup>69</sup> She further associates the creature with the myth of Apollo's shrine, in which a sacred snake was fed by a virgin, and comments that

[i]t is fascinating to see how Allende interweaves these different symbolic meanings into her newly transformed myth of her protagonist's creation ... Eva, the offspring of this hybrid combination of mythological symbols ... is

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<sup>64</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.24

<sup>65</sup> Segal, *Myth*, p.5

<sup>66</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.9

<sup>67</sup> Other critics, including Claudette Williams in 'Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna*: In Search of an Affirmative Feminist Discourse' (p.2) <http://www.iacd.oas.org/RIB%2029%2098/Williams2.htm> (last accessed 28th June 2004), Stephen Gregory in 'Scheherazade and Eva Luna: Problems in Isabel Allende's Storytelling' and Linda Gould Levine in *Isabel Allende*, have referred to the connection between the biblical Eve and Allende's protagonist, but not within the specific textual context of the (female) Bildungsroman.

<sup>68</sup> Gould Levine, *Isabel Allende*, p.60

<sup>69</sup> Gould Levine, *Isabel Allende*, p.60

born with a legacy of life bearing forces, femininity and renewal suggested by *luna* or moon.<sup>70</sup>

In Allende's rehearsal of the Christian grand narrative then, rather than responsible for the downfall of mankind, woman (represented by Consuelo) is recast as the life-giving saviour. Moreover, this is achieved by an act of carnal love outside of wedlock that transgresses a number of further doctrinal boundaries. Nonetheless, as Eva acknowledges,

[L]as circunstancias algo extrañas de mi concepción tuvieron consecuencias mas bien benéficas: me dieron una salud inalterable y esa rebeldía que tardo un poco en manifestarse, pero finalmente me salvó de la vida de humillaciones a la cual estaba destinada. De mi padre heredé la sangre firme ... A mi madre debo todo lo demás.<sup>71</sup>

Divine punishment for what, within Church ideology, was Consuelo's sin, never comes. In reversing the roles of Adam and Eve, she seems to have freed her daughter from the restraints of a narrative bequest that has for millennia contributed to the construction of rigid gender roles. Furthermore, it is worth recognising that the story of Adam and Eve, the story of mankind's movement from innocence (childhood), to knowledge (maturity), and the everlasting repercussions of this coming into consciousness, is perhaps the ultimate Bildungsroman.

On the other hand, there are a number of aspects of this re-writing that fail to move beyond the gender system that, on the surface, it seems to dislodge. Returning to Gould Levine's reading of the mythological symbols deployed in the portrayal of Eva's coming to life, and in particular the lunar references of her surname, we again find ourselves in the territory of essentialized gender associations. The connection of women with the moon is an age-old example of such associations, clearly based upon physiological cycles specific to the female body. To relate this, though, to 'femininity' as Gould Levine does, is to make a jump from such biological observances to a culturally informed notion not of 'female' but of what is perceptible as 'feminine', 'womanly', and thus 'appropriate'. I would argue that given her pro-female stance, Allende's desire here is to present a re-reading/re-writing of a myth of whose role in gender identity construction she is only too aware, and thus evidence of her having still fallen back on stereotyped notions of what it means to be a woman highlights the impossibility of ever truly removing such deeply engrained archetypal associations. Nonetheless, one aspect of Eva's personal experience

<sup>70</sup> Gould Levine, *Isabel Allende*, p.61

<sup>71</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.37

does serves to destabilise the symbolic gendered associations that her name draws over her: as Levine too goes on to point out, 'Allende provides an interesting twist consistent with the ambiguities of the text' when she has Eva stop menstruating between the ages of seventeen and twenty seven. This detail becomes a metaphor for the liberation of biological determinism, but enables the retention of the more positive associations that come with the connection between Eva, life, and Luna, moon, such as the renewal that Eva recognises: 'tenía la impresion de haber vivido varias vidas, de haberme vuelto humo cada noche y haber renacido por las mañanas'.<sup>72</sup> Consequently, even in reading Allende's choice of mythological reference points as a failure to move beyond the conflation of sex and gender, it can be recognised that she does once more underline the flexibility of myth by using it as a point of reference that can be manipulated in the way that Sellers suggests above – its negative inferences removed and its positive ones kept on. As Levine observes, this story is a Bildungsroman 'that reflects the individual's ability to use adverse social conditions to prosper rather than to be defeated'.<sup>73</sup> For it to be such, those adverse conditions – which cannot but be formed and informed by the limitations of patriarchal social and identity configurations, and therefore by the myths by which society and identities are formed and informed – must necessarily be shown to be at work.

### **Gender, Genre & Archetype: The Fairy Tale**

Given that the writers are themselves women, and given that the concerns and experiences of women are absolutely at the forefront of both stories, the acute focus upon the female characters that is in evidence in studies of Allende, Esquivel and their texts is perhaps an expected critical bias. However, in the context of a critical reading of the novels that focuses specifically on myth and archetype, it seems imperative that the male characters, and the resultant configuration of masculinity in relation to which the female characters are defined be considered too. Without the contrastive perspectives provided by insightful engagement with the male characters, I would argue, a limitation is imposed upon what can be gleaned from these narratives on the topic of gendered identities and the myths that inform their development and/or facilitate their solidification. This becomes more important in narratives that rely on the oppositional nature of archetypal characters

<sup>72</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.268

<sup>73</sup> Gould Levine, *Isabel Allende*, p.62. This observation is also highly applicable to *Como agua para chocolate*.

because the relational construction of gendered identities therein is not only unavoidable, but structurally necessary. In novels that focus so strongly on female gendered identity, as do *Eva Luna* and *Como agua para chocolate*, therefore, the portrayal of male characters is a narrative element of great importance.

In his seminal work *The Uses of Enchantment* Bruno Bettelheim, connects the fairy tale directly to the process of *Bildung*, and in doing so underlines the important role that the genre has to play in identity development. Much like myth more broadly has been seen simultaneously as a potential site of utopian vision and as one of negative paradigm, the fairy tale too has been understood as both a positive and negative site of representation; either as serving to explode or to propagate dominant social beliefs and organisational structures at the level of class and gender especially. This is a result of the fairy tale tendency to divide the world unequivocally, establishing regimes of heroes and villains, both of which will always conform to dominant ideologies. In *Como agua para chocolate*, we find a number of male characters whose roles, whilst marginal in terms of the narrative, are nonetheless fundamental to the gender formation of the female characters in the story. Pedro is the principal male character in this novel, and his portrayal is one that sheds light on the gender norms of Mexican society at the time in which the novel is set (and through historical allegory, those of contemporary Mexican society also). He first appears on the day that he comes to ask for Tita's hand, and leaves instead with permission to marry Rosaura. If Tita, as has been argued above, is a Mexican Cinderella figure, this story appears to err from the outset, as her Handsome Prince plans to marry the Ugly Sister. As far as Pedro goes however, his gender role remains largely unaffected, especially as the justification for his acceptance of Mamá Elena's offer to take the hand of the older daughter is that this is the only way in which he can be close to Tita, his true love. Thus, the Handsome Prince remains well within both his gender and genre roles: kind-hearted, self-sacrificing, wanting to rescue his love from her Ivory Tower (but without challenging tradition or social hierarchy, represented here by the de la Garza family's rule that the youngest daughter is to remain at home as her mother's caretaker). With the portrayal of her male protagonist taking such orthodox shape, it must be recognised that limitations are placed upon the shape of the female protagonist in opposition to whom he is formed. This kind of character formation (diegetically speaking) and gender identity formation (both intra- and extra-diegetically speaking) is conceived of through an antagonistic



dynamic informed only by the tensions of push and pull; a kind of formational deadlock in which the movement of each constitutive part is controlled, gauged, and limited by the other. It is therefore a coherent example of the usefulness and the significance of the dialectic as a conceptual framework for the deconstruction of gendered identities: [t]he third space brought into play by the dialectic process dissipates the antagonism of the simpler binary model by harnessing its inherent energies and turning them into a momentum forward.

The archetypal representation of Tita's male counterpart is furthered by the fact that it is Nacha, the indigenous ranch cook who is also, for all intents and purposes, Tita's Fairy Godmother, who recounts the motives behind Pedro's initially unfathomable acceptance; she provides the connection between the Prince and Cinderella, helping to draw them together, as in the traditional story. An important aspect of Nacha's role in Tita's formation is the link that she provides to the pre-Colombian cultures of Spanish America. Whilst no specifics are given as to Nacha's indigenous roots, her mystical influence on the youngest of the de la Garza girls is given further weight within the text's cultural context as a result of this identity. This is especially evident in what is perhaps the most significant episode of the novel; the preparation of the 'Cordonices en pétalos de rosa', 'una receta préhispanica' that Nacha whispers to Tita from beyond the grave. From this first posthumous communication, Nacha takes on a mythical role in the narrative, and also serves as a reminder of the oral roots of mythology and of its significance to Mexican, and other Hispanoamerican cultures both pre- and post-conquest. Furthermore, her godmotherly role as facilitator of Tita's hopes and dreams continues here as it is the recipe that she provides that enables her to finally express her true feelings for Pedro:

A la muerte de Nacha, Tita era entre todas las mujeres de la casa la más capacitada para ocupar el puesto vacante de la cocina, y ahí escapaban de su riguroso control [el de Mamá Elena] los sabores, los olores, las texturas y lo que éstas pudieran provocar.<sup>74</sup>

Further still, the emotional liberation provided by Nacha's prehispanic recipe causes a chain reaction that also liberates the youngest sister Gertrudis – an important character who will be discussed in more detail in below.

As a result of the author's deployment of these oppositionally formed stock-roles, positive characters open up spaces that must be filled by their negative counterparts. In

<sup>74</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.46

the article referenced above, Mónica Zapata coincides with the idea that the use of previously established templates for construction of both character and plot creates a need within the text for certain kinds of personalities to appear and events to take place. 'Tita is the cliché of the melodramatic character, to which Pedro is the perfect complement',<sup>75</sup> she writes. As regards the representation of gender, an important consequence of adherence to generic norms is the reproduction of gender stereotypes – something that underscores the important relationship between gender and genre as organisational categories. Zapata points out that the four women of the de la Garza family all embody stereotyped gendered identities; Getrudis occupies 'the territory of the bedroom', Rosaura plays 'the decent wife' and Mamá Elena represents 'paternal authority', so that 'all that remains for Tita is for her to wrap on the apron to channel the exchange of repression.'<sup>76</sup> Within the feminist framework of Esquivel's novel, through her role as the dutiful wife who fails to question the rules that govern her social context, and as a sister malicious enough to take part in the cruel set-up that delimits Tita's physical, psychological and emotional existence, it is the character of Rosaura that will carry the burden of negativity. Portrayed as entirely different from her younger sister, Rosaura is devoid of all of the virtues that are present in the positivised female characters of this novel: she is described by Nacha as a picky eater early on in the narrative,<sup>77</sup> and thus denied the connection to the warmth, productivity and nourishment represented by the kitchen in the text, and to the related activities that characterise and articulate her younger sister's personality and desires. The lack of these undeniably feminised qualities is reaffirmed later when her first baby is born and she fails to produce any milk. Fittingly, it is Tita who miraculously provides this, as further emphasis of her connection to nourishment:

Tita no alcanzaba a comprender lo que sucedía. No era posible que una mujer soltera tuviera leche, se trataba de un hecho sobrenatural y sin explicación en estos tiempos ... Tita de inmediato lo dejó [al bebé] que se pescara a ella, hasta que sació por completo su hambre y se quedó plácidamente dormido, como un bendito. Estaba tan absorta en la contemplación del niño que no sintió cuando Pedro entró en la cocina. Tita era en ese momento la misma Ceres personificada, la diosa de la alimentación en pleno.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Zapata, '*Like Water for Chocolate* and the Free Circulation of Clichés', p.212

<sup>76</sup> Zapata, '*Like Water for Chocolate* and the Free Circulation of Clichés', p.212,

<sup>77</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.28

<sup>78</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.77

Directly compared to the Roman goddess of agriculture and motherly love, in this episode Tita becomes the perfect synthesis of nature and nurture. She continues to feed her nephew, and we are told that 'tuvo desde ese día leche suficiente como para alimentar no sólo a Roberto sino a otros dos niños más'.<sup>79</sup> When Mamá Elena forces the new family to move away from the ranch, away from Tita's presence, the baby dies, proving once and for all Rosaura's negative force – a clear-cut opposition to Tita's life-affirming one.

Rosaura's own demise comes towards the end of the novel, and its manner continues to underline her distance from the qualities that Esquivel's novel connects to femininity, and the female gendered identity: she dies an unpleasant death after suffering from extended and acute digestive problems, and is discovered by Pedro:

una Rosaura de labios morados, cuerpo desinflado, ojos desencajados, mirada perdida, que daba su último y flatulento aspiro.<sup>80</sup>

This repulsive and degrading final moment is the end of a character whose life has been lived according to the rules and impositions placed upon her as a result of her gendered identity, but who is in many ways laden with the negativity that might otherwise have been reserved for Pedro, whose inability to reject social mores and use the power that was automatically his as 'un varón' to take control of both his and Tita's destiny is the foundation of many of his 'true love's' sufferings. Pedro is by no means a revolutionary character, but is the primary motive for Tita's own desire to loosen, as much as she can by the means available to her, the iron grip of her mother. Were her male counterpart as willing as she to disrupt the order of things, her story would have been a very different one. And yet, in *Rosaura*, the reader is confronted with another *female* character whose equivalent conformity is presented in a far more negative light. This raises important questions about the impact that Esquivel's approach to the portrayal of gendered identities can reveal about the expectations placed on men and women by social orthodoxies, and her acceptance or rejection of them.

Continuing with this line of argument, a closer consideration of Mamá Elena is also revelatory of what do begin to seem rather conservative portrayals of gendered identities on the part of this author. Mamá Elena is unlikeable primarily, I would argue, because she is a woman who takes on the role of an exaggerated patriarch. Described

<sup>79</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.79

<sup>80</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.233

always in terms of her power, control, cruelty and obsession with social mores, Mamá Elena comes to life for the reader via a torrent of adjectives that draw upon conventional portrayals of masculinity as a result of their oppositional relationship to the nurturing qualities assigned to traditional femininity. For example:

Indudablemente, tratándose de partir, dismantelar, desolar, destetar, desjarretar desbaratar o desmadrar algo, Mamá Elena era una maestra. Desde que Mamá Elena murió nadie ha podido volver a realizar esa proeza (con la sandía).<sup>81</sup>

The bracketing-off of the activity of watermelon slicing that provides the context for this description of the matriarch's personality emphasises the fact that the reader is encouraged to take her brutal precision here as a reflection of her character more generally speaking. Mamá Elena is rarely presented taking part in the activity of cooking per se; usually she is portrayed directing the preparations of foodstuffs for preservation or for important culinary events such as weddings and baptisms. Her domain is that of laying the groundwork and maintaining a well-run, organised household that presents the correct image to society. She is the one in control. Effectively, Mamá Elena is a female character depicted to have internalised the patriarchal order in which she lives, and it is this, above all, that masculinises her. Perhaps even more problematically, worse than simply having internalised the established patriarchal order, Mamá Elena can be seen to reign over a 'matriarchy more vicious than anything the patriarchy could construct to inhibit and enslave women within its confines'.<sup>82</sup> As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that it is her identity as a widow that drives her to this behaviour: as a widow, she finds herself in a position that is unique in the level of autonomy it allows the women of her time. (Significantly, the same value is attributed to widowhood by a secondary character towards the end of Ángeles Mastretta's novel *Arráncame la vida*, when the protagonist of that text also finds herself widowed at a young age.) Fully cognisant of the import and concurrent fragility of her situation, Mamá Elena is obsessive in her desire to protect what has become hers through the death of her husband – responsibilities and economic attributes – until her last breath.

Arguably the soundest confirmation of this analysis is an episode in which the symbology of the patriarchal system is used so overtly that it is hard to imagine that

<sup>81</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.98

<sup>82</sup> Hoeveler, 'Like Words for Pain', p.126

authorial intent was not at work therein. Recounted in the same chapter as the watermelon episode cited above, is the preparation of chorizo sausages, during which the phallic nature of the foodstuff is deployed not only in the evocation of Tita's growing sexual awareness and desire for Pedro, but also to symbolise Mamá Elena's collaboration with the male-dominated social structure. This part of the narrative begins as follows:

Por más empeños que Tita ponía en evitar que los recuerdos acudieran a ella y le hicieran cometer más errores, no pudo evitarlos al tener en las manos un trozo grande de chorizo y rememorar la noche de verano en que todos salieron a dormir en el patio.<sup>83</sup>

What Tita is induced into remembering is an encounter with Pedro on a hot summer night when the whole family is sleeping in hammocks on the patio. This is their first physical sexual encounter, and is ended by the ever vigilant Mamá Elena calling to find out where Tita has gone. The narrative backflash renders explicit the connection that is then more implicitly made between the phallic sausage and the phallus as the symbol of the order that Mamá Elena seems determined to uphold because her position in it is one of authority and subsequent security – however precarious: whilst the sausages are being prepared Tita learns that baby Roberto has died in Texas because he refused to eat after leaving the ranch. In her first act of outright rebellion towards her mother's wishes she destroys the sausages that have been prepared, leaving the matriarch and servant Chenchá to start again:

Con lo perfeccionista que era Mamá Elena y el cuidado que siempre ponía para que no quedara aire dentro de los chorizos, fue verdaderamente inexplicable para todos que una semana después encontraron los chorizos invadidos de gusanos en la bodega donde los había puesto a secar.<sup>84</sup>

Given that this rebellious act on Tita's part leads to the sausages, now symbolic of her mother's masculinised authoritarianism, being ruined, and that it is this event that leads to her temporary escape from the ranch because Mamá Elena now sends her away with Dr Brown, these episodes can be interpreted as the beginning of the end of Mamá Elena, and of the order that she has become representative of. Hence, whilst it would not be justifiable to argue that by the end of the novel Esquivel has portrayed the absolute undoing of the patriarchal world created within her diegesis, it does seem reasonable to suggest that steps have been made towards renegotiating gendered identities, and in

<sup>83</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.97

<sup>84</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.100

particular that the dangers of their polarization has been highlighted precisely as a consequence of the author's use of rather extreme stereotyping in her characterization.

One character in this novel who has not yet been brought into this discussion is the middle sister, Gertrudis. Whilst in essence a secondary character, in a reading that focuses on gendered identities as this one does, her figure takes on greater significance. This sister does not fit the archetypal patterns into which her other sisters, as a Cinderella figure and as an Ugly Sister, pertain to. She is neither as trapped by domestic servitude and tradition as Tita, nor is she as mean-spirited, insensitive or unattractive as their eldest sibling. Indeed, Gertrudis's life is, for a number of reasons, the most individualistic and diverse of all the figures portrayed in this text. Her adventurous existence begins when she is liberated by Tita's magical rose petal sauce, as mentioned above, when she makes her highly eroticized escape away from the confines of the ranch. Consumed by the sexual urges with which her younger sister's cooking has been imbued, she runs naked across the ranchland before being picked up by a revolutionary soldier who carries her away on horseback – whilst copulating. In specific relation to the Bildungsroman this episode is fundamental in its reconfiguration of generic and gender norms in numerous ways. Firstly, Gertrudis's escape is also the beginning of the exploratory journey that, as already stated, is the backdrop to the traditional male Bildungsroman narrative. Secondly, it makes absolutely overt the sexual encounters that Jerome Buckley indicates to be a vital feature of male versions of these stories,<sup>85</sup> and, yet more significantly, turns that encounter into one that is instigated by female desire: as she begins to feel the effects of Tita's aphrodisiac dish (which incidentally only produces nausea in Rosaura), Gertrudis

[e]mpezó a sudar y a imaginar qué se sentiría ir sentada a lomo de un caballo, abrazada por un villista, uno de esos que había visto una semana antes entrando a la plaza del pueblo, oliendo a sudor, a tierra, a amaneceres de peligro e incertidumbre, a vida y muerte.<sup>86</sup>

Ultimately, it is the rosy scent of Gertrudis's sweat, a by-product of her having been overcome with carnal desire, that draws Juan to come in search of her. The sexualisation of the journey that she embarks upon here continues as the reader learns that she spends some time working as a prostitute, not specifically out of economic obligation (even though she has now unsurprisingly been rejected by her mother), but in the hope of

<sup>85</sup> Jerome Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p.17

<sup>86</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.50

quelling her physical desires. Overall, the reversal of male and female roles that is achieved through these events renders Gertrudis, for this study at least, one of the more pertinent of Esquivel's characters. A certain amount of political weight is then later attributed to Gertrudis's crossing of gender lines when she joins the Revolution on the side of the rebels and takes her part in the Mexican tradition of the *guerrillera*. Fighting against the values of the Porfiriato, the dominant social order of which her mother is representative, Gertrudis comes to embody the desire for social change, and thus the possibilities for change at all levels of social organization – gender roles and identities included – with which the idea of revolution is always connected. In this way she is also the daughter that most clearly counteracts the negativities of Mamá Elena's character. The parallel between the formidable matriarch and the wicked Stepmother of the Cinderella story has not yet been drawn, but it is one that bears an impact on the reader's understanding of Gertrudis. Mamá Elena's cruel treatment of Tita clearly echoes that of the archetypal stepmother as she condemns her to a life of domestic servitude and denies her the right to play with her sisters.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, as Cherie Meacham has pointed out, she 'succeeds where the stepmother fails' by arranging the union of the Handsome Prince with the Ugly Sister.<sup>88</sup> As a woman herself, and in light of her cruelty, Mamá Elena comes to stand for the dangers that such conservative attitudes amongst women can represent for their own female counterparts and for successive generations of women (such as her daughters), as they stand as obstacles to the movement towards female liberation. Thinking extra-textually, it is also possible to see Esquivel's dominant matriarchal construction as a problematic one for the same reasons. Meacham, paraphrasing Adrienne Rich, writes that 'portrayals of powerful women as freaks of nature – castrating, perverted and even dangerous – demonstrate patriarchal preferences for dependant, malleable, "feminine" women, before pondering whether or not Esquivel's inclusion of such a cynically stereotyped female character is not rather antithetical to her apparently feminist aims.'<sup>89</sup> Had the author left Mamá Elena as a transparent personification of negative character traits without allowing the reader to explore her past, the answer to Meacham's question would surely be yes. However, an important episode in the story, that also adds

<sup>87</sup> Cherie Meacham, 'Como agua para chocolate: Cinderella and the Revolution' in *Hispanic Journal* 19, no.1 (Spring 1998), pp. 117-128, p.118

<sup>88</sup> Meacham, 'Cinderella and the Revolution', p.118

<sup>89</sup> Meacham, 'Cinderella and the Revolution', p.119

meaningful layers to the character of Gertrudis, shows the mother figure to be a more ambiguous individual than the traditional fairy tale villainess. The narrative time dedicated to the explanation of this woman's development into a cold-hearted stoic is testimony to the desire of the author to diverge from the original template. Through the discovery of a box of long-ago written love letters, Tita learns that as a young woman Mamá Elena fell in love with a mulatto man of illegitimate birth. Her marriage to Juan de la Garza was the result of her parent's discovery of her romantic secret. Tita learns through the discovery of the story of her mother's own 'amor frustrado' that her character was one directly informed by what had seemed to her the futility of any blatant rebellion in the face of a society ruled by race and gender prejudice.<sup>90</sup> Not able to be with the man she loved, who was mysteriously murdered before they could escape together, she accepted her fate. Until, that is, the death of her husband, whose absence she then exploited to its full potential, forging for herself a position of power and autonomy usually denied to women:

...sola he podido con el rancho y con mis hijas. Los hombres no son tan importantes para vivir ... Ni la revolución es tan peligrosa como la pintan, ¡pero es el chile y el agua lejos!<sup>91</sup>

In relation to this, Diana C. Niebylski comments that Mamá Elena, despite her cruel treatment of Tita, is 'also a paragon of strength' who

As a woman in charge not just of her family but of a wealthy ranch ... is able to keep her own at times when bigger and better men than she – the *hacendados* or landowners against whom the Revolution was fought – lost everything ...<sup>92</sup>

It is also, however, precisely *because* of her ability to be so absolutely ruthless, even towards her own children, that Mamá Elena is able to maintain this position in society. Hence, this 'wicked stepmother' subtly undermines the constricting traditions of her machista cultural context whilst simultaneously perpetuating them in her own paradoxical position as tyrant and protector. For this reason she stands as an example of Esquivel's more successful re-writing of the traditional fairytale, breaking down the polarities characteristic of that template and blurring the distinctions between black and white, good and bad, to creating characters more representative of the realities of women struggling for autonomy within

<sup>90</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.140

<sup>91</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.46

<sup>92</sup> Diana C. Niebylski, 'Heartburn, Humour and Hyperbole in Like Water for Chocolate' in Shannon Hengen (ed.), *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts, Contexts*, (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), p.188



cultures and cultural productions that work hard to negate the possibility of that improved reality.

Finally, returning to Gertrudis, the discovery that she is the illegitimate child of Mamá Elena and the mulatto man she was denied the right to marry, that her identity was forged at a crossroads of race, age, gender and genre, enables a more specific reading of the eldest sibling as a character representative of the stage of synthesis; a coming together of the oppositions set up by the established social order, and one that enables movement *forward* towards change. That she is not the central character of this novel is one of the key reasons why Esquivel's text is readable more as exemplary of the stage of the *construction* of gendered identities, or at most as making tentative steps towards the phase of deconstruction in the dialectic of *Bildung*, but without truly influencing the leap beyond myth and archetype as frameworks for representation. As Tita and Pedro observe Gertrudis's fantastical break for freedom, 'como mudos espectadores de una película ... se emocionaron hasta las lágrimas al ver a sus héroes realizar el amor que para ellos está prohibido.'<sup>93</sup> The limitation of Esquivel's narrative in terms of its potential for progressiveness, I argue, is the fact that Gertrudis and Juan become our heroes' heroes, but hence remain once removed from the immediate narrative frame of reference. The reader is instead left with two protagonists who are indeed 'mudos'; whose imposed silence wins over and denies them the opportunity to write their own story:

[h]ubo un momento, un solo instante en que Pedro pudo haber cambiado la historia. Tomando a Tita de la mano alcanzó a pronunciar:—Tita...Sólo eso. [...] Si Pedro le hubiera pedido a Tita huir con él, ella no lo hubiera pensado ni tantito, pero no lo hizo, sino que montando rápidamente en la bicicleta se fue pedaleando su rabia.<sup>94</sup>

[...]

Tita por su parte, intentó gritarle a Pedro que le esperara, que se la llevara lejos, adonde los dejaron amarse, adonde aún no hubieran inventado reglas que seguir y respetar, adonde no estuviera su madre, pero su garganta no emitió ningún sonido. Las palabras se le hicieron nudo y se ahogaron unas a otras antes de salir.<sup>95</sup>

The agency that is the intended final destination for the dialectic *Bildung* that this thesis searches out is given no strong role to play here. In Tita, Esquivel created a character who is self-knowing to a degree, rebellious to a degree, but lacking in the education and

<sup>93</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.55

<sup>94</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, p.54

<sup>95</sup> Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, pp.50-51

worldliness of the male *Bildungsheld* which would have given her a better vantage point from which to instigate change. As such, she is a character who underlines the conditions of the construction of orthodox female identities; and even whilst pointing to the interstices that indicate the possibility of change, emphasises the boundaries of the spaces in which that construction takes place.

I would argue that Allende's female protagonist has more in common with Gertrudis than with Tita, despite beginning her life firmly embedded in the domestic setting in which Tita's is spent. Although not as explicitly informed by any particular fairytale as *Como agua para chocolate*, Allende's text nonetheless employs thematic motifs and creates archetypal characters that echo the conventions of the genre. To begin with, Eva is an orphan; a character-type common to the generic cast.<sup>96</sup> Directly related to this, in that they are needed precisely as a result of her orphanhood, are the four characters that can be understood as varied reconfigurations of the archetypal fairy godmother; the figure who stands in direct opposition to the wicked stepmother, watching over the female protagonist. Some of Eva's 'godmothers' are more fairy-like than others, but all four conform to the cycle of departure and return that seems to be characteristic of these kinds of guardians, and which always ensures that the girl is never completely abandoned. The first of these is Eva's deceased real mother, who returns in spirit form when needed. According to Bruno Bettelheim, in the traditional *Cinderella* narrative 'the original good mother ... later ... reappears as fairy godmother',<sup>97</sup> and so here we see a direct parallel between Allende's narrative and the paradigms of one traditional fairy tale.

Secondly comes Eva's actual *madrina*, bestowed the title by Consuelo before her death. Ironically, however, she is the least nurturing of all of these figures, and in fact is responsible for setting Eva to work as a domestic servant at the age of seven, immediately after her mother dies. She thus becomes a kind of hybrid between the wicked stepmother who forces Cinderella into a form of domestic slavery, and the godmother who would usually ensure the protagonist's ultimate reward for her hard work and enable her to progress to a better life. The woman for whom Eva is sent to work by her *Madrina* is also described in such a way as to make her reminiscent of the archetypal wicked stepmother:

<sup>96</sup> Fiona Mackintosh, 'Twentieth-Century Argentine Women's Writing' in Donald Haase (ed.), *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p.154

<sup>97</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, (1976), p.248

...la doña había pasado buena parte de su vida en una notaría, escribiendo en silencio y juntando las ganas de gritar que sólo ahora, jubilada y en su casa podía satisfacer. Todo el día daba órdenes en su afán de hostigamiento, enojada con el mundo y con ella misma.<sup>98</sup>

*La Doña*, has been frustrated by the limitations placed upon her life, and as a result is now condemned to spend her retirement years exacting bitter revenge on those confined in her domestic space as she had been in a job whose silent activities are metaphoric of her female gender role and its related suppression. Only able to vocalise herself and her intense accumulated dissatisfaction in the domestic realm – as opposed to the public one symbolised by the notary where she worked – here we are presented with a woman whose likeness to Mamá Elena, and thus to the archetypal wicked stepmother (queen, witch) is not unapparent. Allende makes clear here, however, that which fairy tales do not: that this bitterness is a social malady that will become the legacy of the young heroine – Eva/Tita.

The third of Eva's 'godmothers' is Elvira who, although lacking in the magical qualities of the more traditional one, nourishes and nurtures Eva during their time together at the house of the *solterona*. Later on, nonetheless, Elvira is given a somewhat more ethereal, immortal quality in the aftermath of the apocalyptic flood brought on by a week-long downpour, at the end of which

... apareció flotando cerca de la Plaza del Padre de la Patria un ataúd de modesta confección, pero en perfecto estado ... Al abrirlo descubrieron a una anciana durmiendo apacible.<sup>99</sup>

Elvira has survived the flood thanks to this 'extraña arca',<sup>100</sup> and through an episode that humorously deconstructs the traditional binary opposition of life and death, finds her way back to her adopted granddaughter. Humour, according to Max Lüthi, is a concern of the fairytale, and one that I argue is not unrelated to the deconstruction of such fundamental oppositions. Indeed, as Lüthi also posits, fairy tales are

concerned with portraying essential processes in life. Testing, threatening danger, destruction – and salvation, development, and maturation – are portrayed before our minds eye in images which are unreal, but for just that reason fascinating.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.57

<sup>99</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, pp.240-241

<sup>100</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.241

<sup>101</sup> Max Lüthi, *Once Upon A Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 1976), p.115

Moreover, this episode is a true interweaving of fairy tale with other forms of myth, if we take into account Segal's earlier assertion that the story of Noah's Ark, clearly at work as a background reference here, is one of the creation stories from the bible that can be qualified as myth.<sup>102</sup>

During the time spent at the Spinster's house, despite the more routine role she has to play in Eva's life, Elvira's function is just what might be expected of a Post-Boom fairy godmother. In the same way that Mamá Elena is a character of greater complexity than those found in the conventional fairy tale narrative, hidden in Elvira's otherwise ostensibly conventional nature, and in stark contrast to her apparently ungrudging acceptance of her life, is a political awareness that she does not hesitate to pass on to Eva, who writes: Yo no estaba de edad de interesarme por la política, pero Elvira me llenaba la mente de ideas subversivas para llevar la contra a los patrones.<sup>103</sup> Elvira incites the dormant rebelliousness that Eva herself acknowledges, in hindsight, to be a fundamental part of her nature; a characteristic first demonstrated at the home of the *Solterona*, when Eva bluntly refuses to obey her *patrona's* orders and, when slapped for her insolence, snatches off the woman's wig before running away. Again, humour is given a role to play here as Allende's portrayal of Eva's act of violence as one softened by its comic effect, which is furthered by the image of the wig floating along in rainwater in the street.<sup>104</sup> When she is taken back to the house by her less than sympathetic *Madrina*, Elvira welcomes her with open arms, and tells Eva something that she later recognises as 'el mejor consejo que he recibido en mi vida.'<sup>105</sup>

—Así está bien pajarito ... Hay que dar bastante Guerra. Con los perros rabiosos nadie se atreve, en cambio a los mansos los patean. Hay que pelear siempre.<sup>106</sup>

By openly encouraging Eva *not* to remain passive in life, Elvira differs from the more traditional fairy godmother, a fact that is further demonstrated by referring once more to *Cinderella* as a paradigm of the genre. It is interesting to note that the protagonist of that tale is passive *vis á vis* the achievement of her desires – she has no choice but to be that way, for there is no way for her to work towards her dream. She has no agency beyond

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<sup>102</sup> Segal, *Myth*, p.5

<sup>103</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.74

<sup>104</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.62

<sup>105</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.69

<sup>106</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.69

the one chance to vocalise her wish to go to the ball – essentially an opportunity to improve her life by escaping her current drudgery through marriage. The only way to achieve that, which Cinderella has already done but does not know it, is to be passive, obedient, and respectful of those who have power over her. Nonetheless, it is only the magical powers, and knowledge implied therein, of the godmother figure that enables her to get her reward. Elvira, in contrast, offers the wisdom she has earned from experience, and in doing so directly discourages passivity in her *pajarito*.

Paradoxically, however, perhaps the key role of this kindly woman in Eva's life is that of introducing her to the radio soap; a world in which '[s]iempre triunfaban los pacientes y los malvados recibían su castigo'.<sup>107</sup> The world of the *telenovela*, another genre set to work in Allende's hybrid text, is structured around the same binaries of good and evil as the fairy tale. It can, in this way, be seen as a modernised version of the folk tale, reflecting the social mores, attitudes, and beliefs of its contemporary context. Subsequently, and typically of the equivocal nature of these Post-Boom godmothers, Elvira's recognition of the need for political change is contrasted by her uncritical enjoyment of these products of popular culture. She complains to Eva: 'Oye, pajarito, por qué en tus cuentos nadie se casa?';<sup>108</sup> a question that suggests her ultimate implication within the patriarchal order of her social context. She may be aware of the corruption inherent to that system on other levels, but remains critically unaware of the inter-relationship between institutions such as that of marriage, which has historically mediated the gender roles upon which patriarchal society is structured, and the broader spectrum of politics by which her country is governed. Elvira finds Eva's own stories pessimistic in contrast to those of the radio dramas, and unfulfilling as a result. In this, her character reflects an important point made by both Zipes and Lüthi about the role of 'need' in the production of fairy tale narratives, and the influence of this on the variety of versions of individual tales that can be found. Lüthi writes:

...the various needs of the times and of individual people are reflected in the styles of the storytellers and in the reaction of the hearers. "The fairy tale has no landlord" is a common expression in Greece. Each storyteller can tell it in his [sic] own way, so long as he faithfully retains the basic structure, and, thus,

<sup>107</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.73

<sup>108</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.73

the essential details with their deeper meaning not easily comprehended by reason.<sup>109</sup>

And Zipes contends:

...the tales are reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch and, as such, they symbolize the aspirations, needs, dreams, and wishes of the people, either affirming the dominant social values and norms or revealing the necessity to change them. According to the evidence we have, gifted narrators told the tales to audiences who actively participated in their transmission by posing questions, suggesting changes and circulating the tales amongst themselves.<sup>110</sup>

The role that need has to play in the changing of details in fairy tale narratives, as well as of the maintenance, as Lüthi posits, of the 'essential details' that carry the elements of the stories that are inaccessible to rational thought. Unlike in the oral tradition, the narrative of a written text cannot incorporate suggestions from its audience, however, it can continue to reflect the needs perceived by the author. Hence, as far as feminism in its Spanish American guises is concerned, it is feasible to read Allende and Esquivel's portrayals of gender as ones that reflect a perceived contemporary need on the part of their intended Spanish American (female) readership. A need not for radical change, but for beginnings.

Elvira, by reflecting the continued desire for a representation of the world constructed with Manichean simplicity, reminds us of one of the features of fairy tales that contribute to their usefulness and popularity: their capacity to break down the world and make sense of its complexities. Eva, in her more ambiguous approach to storytelling, makes a step towards deconstructing frameworks of meaning structured around dichotomies (whose constituent parts remain implicitly gendered). For this reason, Elvira's encouragement is one of her most important acts in Eva's life, and one in which she combines forces with Eva's final godmother figure, Mimí. It is Mimí, later on in the novel, who pushes Eva to take the final step towards the writing that will become the means by which she makes her way in the world:

Esa tarde llegó [Mimí] con una docena de pasteles y una pesada caja envuelta en papel de fantasía. Era una maquina de escribir. Para que empieces a trabajar, dijo.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Lüthi, *Once Upon A Time*, p.63

<sup>110</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, (London: Heinemann, 1979), p.5

<sup>111</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.234

The typewriter is imbued with magical qualities through the fantastical packaging in which it has been wrapped by Mimí, who is herself described as a 'creatura mitológica',<sup>112</sup> and as a 'creatura de ficción'.<sup>113</sup> More clearly and more directly than the other three figures discussed above, Mimí is attributed the magical status of the traditional godmother paradigm, and her function as a guide for Eva in the journey towards what is undoubtedly portrayed as her 'true' destiny also links her with the archetype. As a reflection of her more contemporary rendering however, the 'destiny' towards which she guides Eva is a vocation, not an imposed social role as wife, mother, with agency in the domestic sphere only. Eva's written creation – her own *telenovela* – has tangible political impact even though it is subjected to censorship at the hands of the leaders of the armed forces against whom the Guerilla revolt in which she takes part and about which she writes takes place<sup>114</sup>: even whilst within the fictional world she is not able to tell the whole story, the novel *Eva Luna* does include a full account of the events. As a consequence of this double narrative thread, Allende's writing acts out the possibilities of mythical reconfigurations even in the face of suppression. One way or another, Eva's experiences and the culmination of the political *Bildung* that she undergoes throughout the novel – her actual involvement in a political uprising and her recognition of the fact that the political ideals of the guerrillas cannot account for the social obstacles imposed by gender – will be recounted for the reader. Moreover, the fact of its censorship will also be revealed, permitting a double exposure of the realities of corrupt, male-dominated, politics. In view of this, the comments on the socio-political value, or lack thereof, made by Levine and Gregory and cited at the beginning of this chapter, must be reconsidered. Whilst on some level worries about the 'subordination of political concerns to narrative craft'<sup>115</sup> seem very valid, at the same time through this climactic event Allende shines a light on the nature of mythmaking in the context of twentieth century Spanish American politics. She at once reminds of and inverts the normalisation of a male dominated world view and of the historical narratives that may one day themselves become or be manipulated into harmful myths.

Returning to the discussion of the character of Melesio/Mimí, what is arguably most significant in terms of the impact that this character has on the representation of gender

<sup>112</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.236

<sup>113</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.238

<sup>114</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, pp.279-280

<sup>115</sup> Gould Levine, *Isabel Allende*, p.71

within the story, is the fact that she is a transsexual actress who performs gender in a number of ways. In the *telenovela* in which she stars, she plays the 'malvada Alejandra';<sup>116</sup> an iniquitous character demonstrative of the similarities between the unambiguous characters of the fairy tale and those of the world of the *telenovela*. Conversely, however, Mimi's androgyny – she never has the operation that would complete her transition from male to female biological form – means that whilst playing a character who works within the wider context of the genre as one half of the binary pair of good and evil, she concurrently problematises the binary through which sexual and gender identities are mediated. Ultimately accepted, even adored by the public, Mimi is a character through which Allende promotes boundary crossing in a number of ways; playing with the configuration of generic conventions by constructing a distinctly unpolarised character and then placing him/her in a neatly polarized performative role within what essentially functions as a metatext within the novel.

### Conclusions: The Myth of 'Outside'

Mimi, and Eva's other female guardians exemplify the kind of ambivalence that has been identified as a key feature in contemporary women's re-writings of fairy tale narratives. In the introduction to *Feminism and Fairy Tales*, Donald Haase presents an informative overview of the lines of argument that informed early feminist criticism of the fairy tale corpus. In particular he focuses on the work of Alison Lurie, who argued in the early seventies, when feminist interest in the genre began to develop, that folk and fairy tales could contribute to women's liberation as a result of their depiction of strong female characters, and Marcia R. Lieberman's rebuttal of the latter's claim in "Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale' (1972). Lieberman was concerned that popularisation of the best-known fairy stories by Disney had led to 'Cinderella, the Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White' having 'replaced the old Greek and Norse gods, goddesses, and heroes for most children.'<sup>117</sup> She thus reminds us of the important parallels between the roles of myth and fairy tale, even as she underlines the overlapping of the older form with a more contemporary one. Writing in the context of

<sup>116</sup> Allende, *Eva Luna*, p.233

<sup>117</sup> Marcia R Lieberman, "Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale' (1972), pp.383-384, cited in Donald Haase (ed.), *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p.1



the 1970s women's movement, she also emphasizes the need for the kind of socio-cultural critique that will question

whether those traits that have been characterized as feminine have a biological or a cultural basis: discarding the assumptions of the past, we are asking what is inherent in our nature, and what has become ours through the gentle but forcible process of acculturation.<sup>118</sup>

According to Haase, Lieberman's argumentation proved influential, and was deployed as part of a more generalised approach to fairy tales 'as evidence to demonstrate the sociocultural myths and mechanisms that oppress women.'<sup>119</sup> Gradually, Haase goes on to say, 'these oversimplifications of the fairy-tale's problematic relation to social values and the construction of identities gave way to somewhat more complex, or at least ambivalent, approaches.'<sup>120</sup> Giving examples of works taking this more pluralistic perspective, he signals Karen E. Rowe's consideration of the use of romantic patterns from fairy tales in adult women's fiction, which showed how fairy tale paradigms could be seen as influential also at that stage of life.<sup>121</sup> This is clearly a realisation of relevance to the work in consideration in the present study, as the authors draw upon fairy tale motifs and paradigms in order to exploit their didactic potential. In 1979 Rowe wrote:

Today women are caught in a dialectic between the cultural *status quo* and the evolving feminist movement, between a need to preserve values and yet to accommodate changing mores, between romantic fantasies and contemporary realities. The capacity of women to achieve equality and of culture to rejuvenate itself depends, I would suggest, upon the metamorphosis of these tensions into balances, of antagonisms into viable cooperations.<sup>122</sup>

Looking for a means to conceptualise her vision of the relationship between the fairy tale as a reflection of dominant social perspectives and the need and aims of the feminist movement at the time of her writing, Rowe refers to the dialectic in order to express that tension as an antagonism. Clearly then, she does not refer to it in its Hegelian guise, but rather in its simpler constitution as a push and pull between opposing factions. When she speaks of a need for these tensions to be resolved into 'balances', though, she points in the direction of the synthesis that is the final aim of the dialectic *Bildung* being explored in this

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<sup>118</sup> Lieberman, "Some Day My Prince Will Come", p.384

<sup>119</sup> Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, p.3

<sup>120</sup> Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, p.3

<sup>121</sup> Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, p.5

<sup>122</sup> Karen E. Rowe, 'Feminism and Fairy Tales', *Women's Studies* 6 (1979), cited Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, p.5. via Jack Zipes (ed.), *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, pp. 209-226, p.223

thesis. Consequently, Rowe's work links the fairy tale to that process of development, and to the need for balance, synthesis, to be a part of it. In other words, she characterises the resolution that had to take place between the fairy story and feminism in order that the former could be understood as useful to the latter, in the same way that this study conceives of the revolutions and resultant resolution that must take place as part of the development of gendered identity overall. Rowe's understanding of the role fairy tales might have in the (re)formation of gendered identities here takes the form of one of the circles within circles that compose the dialectic (of *Bildung*). More than just contributing to the structural integrity of the conceptualisation of this project however, Rowe's idea also contributes to our understanding of the usefulness of Allende's and Esquivel's ambivalence in their deployment of fairy tale motifs, where that might otherwise be read simply as ideological inconsistency: This ambivalence now becomes an act that simultaneously underscores the widely recognised role of fairy tales as a kind of 'literary discourse about mores, values and manners that facilitated the civilization of children according to dominant social codes',<sup>123</sup> that points to the continued relevance of such literary discourses to adult readers and that contributes, if not complete rupture, 'deconstruction and subversion, or at the very least, [the introduction of] ambiguity and thus the possibility of multiple readings and interpretations.'<sup>124</sup>

Thus returning to the broader context of this chapter, – the study of the myths that form and inform gendered identity development – it can be argued that whilst neither author is able to fully move beyond traditional gender roles, therein removing the effects of the myths that surround and are part of the fabric of their formation, what they do achieve as a consequence of their inconsistent representations, is to destabilize those myths. In fact, as this study progresses, it will become increasingly clear that a vital part of *Bildung* as it has been formulated for the purposes of this thesis is, precisely, coming to recognise the impossibility of ever *undoing* the effects of discourse. Consequently, by beginning, through their variations on the Bildungsroman, to outline the shape of the

<sup>123</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*, (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.3

<sup>124</sup> Patricia Anne Odber de Baubeta, 'The Fairy-Tale Intertext in Iberian and Latin American Women's Writing' in Donald Haase, *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, pp.129-147, p.134. De Baubeta notes that 'the persistence of the fairy-tale intertext demonstrates that these narratives, especially in their inverted subversive mode, still have a role to perform and something to say about the construction of gender and women's identity in Iberian and Latin American culture.' (p.144)

individual whose selfhood needs to be achieved, Allende and Esquivel can be understood to make a crucial first step on the dialectic path of *Bildung*, towards self-knowledge and agency. Ultimately, therefore, it is what might be termed as the indecisiveness of these texts that makes them ideal for the analysis of the stage of dialectic *Bildung* with which this chapter concerns itself, as they demonstrate at once the ways and means of orthodox gendered identity cultivation, solidification and perpetuation, and the possibilities of moving from here to a more distinct phase: that of deconstruction.

## Chapter Two

### Gender in Exile:

*En breve cárcel* (1981) by Sylvia Molloy and *La nave de los locos* (1984)

by Cristina Peri Rossi

The first story of exile in our tradition is the story of Adam and Eve. No matter how we interpret the story of their expulsion from the Garden of Eden – original sin or not – we may be certain of one thing: there is no way back to paradise.<sup>1</sup>

The harsh socio-political realities of the 1970s that were the historical prelude to the literature of the Post-Boom stimulated the prevalence of exile as a thematic concern within texts written during and after the years of dictatorship, as Spanish American writers tried to account for the traumas of life under authoritarian rule. Simultaneous to this textual catharsis came the revision of studies on the history of writing in the Latin American region that, Catherine Davies explains, 'brought to light the unjustified absence of women's writing' in previous versions of that history.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates that, whilst they may not have been visible, Spanish American women writers and their texts certainly were active previously to the now well-acknowledged upsurge of female writers during the Post-Boom. What is interesting, therefore, about Davies's use of the term 'absence' to describe the situation of these authors and their writing, is that it draws on a lexicon of terms whose meanings are profoundly associated with exile, thus connecting Post-Boom Spanish American literature with the issue of exile as political experience, as well as with exile as a metaphor for other kinds of marginalisation – including that of the woman writer within a male dominated regional canon. One of the authors whose work is to be studied in this chapter, Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi, has herself made the connection between her generation of writers as one 'marcada por la experiencia del exilio',<sup>3</sup> and between exile and her own identity as a Spanish American woman writer:

<sup>1</sup> Ian Baruma 'The Romance of Exile – Real wounds, unreal wounds' in *The New Republic*, Feb. 12<sup>th</sup> 2001, pp.33-40, p.2

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Davies, 'Gender Studies' in Efraín Kristal (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.183-199, p.184

<sup>3</sup> Susana Camps, 'La pasión desde la pasión: Entrevista con Cristina Peri Rossi', *Quimera: Revista de literatura* 81, September 1988, pp.40-49, p.44

me es difícil conocer el lugar que yo ocupo en la literatura hispanoamericana porque yo soy mujer y todavía hay pocas escritoras sudamericanas, teniendo en cuenta sus problemas de distribución por causas políticas y su práctica del exilio interno. Creo que soy una de las pocas escritoras que se exilió.<sup>4</sup>

More precisely, what is most significant in terms of the present study, is that connections between exile and gender result from the recognition of this female 'absence'.

Such connections are the theoretical starting point for this chapter, and as a consequence its figurative point of departure is a symbolic point of origin also featured in my analyses of myth and its connections to the construction of gendered identities. I argued in Chapter One that the story of Adam and Eve can be interpreted as the grand narrative that constitutes, in many ways, the ultimate Bildungsroman, giving shape to the story of mankind's move from ignorance and innocence to knowledge and maturity. Subsequently, through the particularities of the analytical framework of this study and the placement of the biblical story of origins within that, I proposed that this particular grand narrative be seen as one that partakes in the articulation of the *Bildung* of gendered identities. This connection is one that extends into my study of Peri Rossi's and Sylvia Molloy's narratives of exile. Formally, exile mirrors the movement outwards of the journey into the world that is one of the most significant episodes of the Bildungsroman's classical structure. It is this movement outwards, away from the home (or place of origin) and what are, at that moment of departure, seen as its constrictions, that initiates the formative adventure of the *Bildungsheld*.

Whilst this parallel is a very meaningful one, and one which will inform the following analyses of Cristina Peri Rossi's and Molloy's exile texts, a key distinction must be made between the naive *Bildungsheld's* exploratory adventure and the heightened level of self-awareness of the exile: whilst the young protagonist of the novel of formation embodies a process of development that is recognisable only in hindsight, the exiled individual is a figure of intellectual awareness: one fully cognisant of an enforced expulsion. Hence, the contrast that is in place, in terms of identity, is one between an identity that is in the process of becoming, and an identity that is in the process of being undone. A critical understanding of this traumatic, identity-effacing experience is central to exile studies, and the move towards defining the impact of exile has led to the setting up of two opposing camps that have, writes Sophia A. McClennan, 'tended to analyze [exile

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<sup>4</sup> Camps, 'La pasión desde la pasión', p.44

literature] according to a binary logic, where exile either produces creative freedom or it traps the writer in restrictive nostalgia'.<sup>5</sup> My own approach to exile as thematic concern falls in line with the first of these modes of reading, because it searches out the relationship between exile and the possibility of reconfiguring orthodox gendered identities. To be more precise, in this study exile is conceptualised as a free space in which the limitations of gendered identities, brought into being in ways like those discussed in the previous chapter, can be deconstructed.

It is primarily for this reason that this chapter begins in Eden. As the above citation by Ian Baruma describes, exile in the western tradition is interminably traced back to the Garden of Eden and its biblical protagonists. Exile is also, therefore, always connected to gender in this tradition. Yet more specifically, the biblical root of exile leads to the placing of blame for the expulsion from paradise firmly on womankind, as opposed to her male counterpart. As a consequence, when Baruma states that 'there is no way back to paradise',<sup>6</sup> he articulates something that resonates particularly strongly for the female gendered identity:

Dios había creado a Adán y lo había rodeado de plantas de aves y de peces, pero necesitaba un semejante. Entonces Dios lo acostó, lo hizo dormir y de una costilla de su costado, creó a Eva. Y Adán se regocijó. Los problemas empezaron porque ella era un poco curiosa y le hizo caso a la serpiente. Por culpa de Eva las mujeres tenemos mala fama en este mundo.<sup>7</sup>

In *La nave de los locos*, the character Graciela, the unconventional Eve to equally unconventional protagonist Equis's Adam, surveys a group of school children, asking them to describe Adam and Eve in Paradise. The above answer, given by one young girl, encapsulates the impact of the weight of this blame on the formulation of the female identity and emphasises that, from a female perspective, the impossibility of a return to paradise is in fact the impossibility of a return to an identity not symbolically marked by the actions of Eve. From the moment the apple was picked from the tree, difference was inserted into the relationship between Adam and his 'semejante' so that, 'between the two sexes a cleavage or abyss opens up'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> McClennan, *The Dialectics of Exile*, p.2

<sup>6</sup> Ian Baruma 'The Romance of Exile', pp.33-40

<sup>7</sup> Cristina Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, (Barcelona: Biblioteca del bolsillo, 1984), p.157. All subsequent references are taken from this edition.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women' in Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.148-159, p.141

In short, the story of Adam and Eve can be read as the story of the moment in which, in terms of identity, homogeneity became heterogeneity, and as the story of origin of the consequences of that 'difference'. This translation of the singular identity category of 'human' into two related but distinguished identities was tantamount to the establishment of a dualistic relationship that not only led to exile from paradise, but that also instigated a symbolic pattern through which exile would be re-enacted time and again in ideology and discourse:

Where is she?  
 Activity/Passivity  
 Sun/Moon  
 Culture/Nature  
 Day/Night  
 Father/Mother  
 Head/Heart  
 Intelligible/Palpable  
 Logos/Pathos.  
 Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.  
 Matter, concave, ground- where steps are taken, holding- and dumping-  
 ground.  
Man  
 Woman<sup>9</sup>

This list of binary pairs, set out by Hélène Cixous in *La jeune née* (1975), provides a textual representation of the kind of oppositions that are fundamental to the logic of dualistic thinking, and it renders clear the role of gender within those oppositions. Toril Moi underlines the value of Cixous's illustration as one that demonstrates how 'it doesn't matter which 'couple' one chooses to highlight: the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm'.<sup>10</sup> This observation is made explicit by the *mise en page* of the final pair, where the changing of the formula 'first half/second half' to that of 'woman' *under* 'man' encapsulates the perceived effect of Eve's actions on female gendered identity. Cixous thus highlights the crucial fact that dualistic thinking defies equality by inserting imbalance

<sup>9</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways out/Forays' in *The Newly Born Woman*, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, Trans. Betsy Wing, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp.63-132, p.63. This is the translation of *La jeune née*, the title of which evokes yet more strongly than that of the original the role of exile or expulsion in the formulation of the binary thought that Cixous critiques herein.

<sup>10</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1985, 2002), p.103. Moi goes on to discuss Cixous's location of 'death at work in this kind of thought'. This concept, whilst not crucial to my use of Cixous here, is interesting in its own perpetuation of the biblical notions surrounding exile, and Eve's role in the mortality of man.

into each pair, and by pushing that inequality to its full conclusion: an ideological standpoint from which one half of each opposition is considered to be dominant over its counterpart. Effectively, not only are all binary pairs gendered, but so is the imbalance that resides within them, and in the terms of the current hegemonic framework it is the feminized element that is always forced out from the powerful centre, and into the margins: in other words, into exile.

Hence, it is plausible to argue that it is actually within the workings of binary thought that the first connections between gender and exile are to be found: exile is the ultimate consequence of dualistic thinking. Moreover, dualistic thought comes to emphasize that the double meaning of the term exile, which is both identity *and* location, can also be applied to gender. When Cixous asks *where* woman is to be found in this system, she shows her to be *in exile*: in the marginalized element of each divided pair that is set up and maintained by the differentiation and prioritization of binary logic. Exile, in these terms, is at once a location and a gendered condition, thus making it possible to understand gender, too, as location. Julia Kristeva writes in 'La femme' that she understands 'by "woman" that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming and ideologies'.<sup>11</sup> This perception of female identity is one whose obvious parallels with exile are succinctly explained by Moi when she writes that if, as Cixous has shown,

femininity is defined as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness, – in short as non-Being – Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of *positionality* rather than essences. What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, if Cixous successfully highlights the position of women in binary thought, Kristeva emphasizes that the absence of any real female/feminine essence undermines the patriarchal symbolic order's attempts to naturalize the suppression of the female/feminine within its own structure. As a result, Kristeva deconstructs those pairs, and pushes their constituent elements into a more flexible relationship with one another; one that accounts for the possibility of relocation and, therefore, of redefinition. Moreover, through such a 'relational definition', one that is as 'shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself', Kristeva is able 'to argue that men can also be constructed as marginal by the symbolic

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'La Femme', cited in Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.162

<sup>12</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.165. Moi also refers to Luce Irigaray here.



order.’<sup>13</sup> This comment is particularly pertinent to the male protagonist of Peri Rossi’s text, for his masculine identity is marred by a problematic masculinity – Equis is impotent and so within the terms of the authoritarian patriarchal regime from which he is rejected, he is, he must be, marginalised. The portrayal of this identity takes place in part through what I will argue is a formulation of exile as a space that is conceived of as feminized, due to its related symbolologies.

This particular, gendered, textual construction of exilic spaces is, I believe, evident in Molloy’s novel too, in which a lesbian writer-protagonist withdraws from the outside world into a domestic space that is configured as a shelter from the identity constraints imposed through the hegemonic order. Kristeva’s definition of the feminine as positional or locational is therefore of great relevance to a study of exile in these two works; whilst such an approach might initially seem to contradict Kristeva’s anti-essentialist reading of the feminine, it will be argued that the texts in fact re-work and undercut the traditional female tropes and paradigms that are produced by the symbolic order to maintain and justify its oppression of the feminine, and that they find in exile precisely the kind of creative space required for such re-definition. In other words, the texts come to echo Kristeva’s location of ‘the negativity and refusal pertaining to the marginal in ‘woman’, in order to undermine the phallogocentric order that defines woman as marginal in the first place.’<sup>14</sup>

### **Spaces and Places of Exile: The Material and the Metaphoric**

The terminologies upon which my analyses of *La nave de los locos* and *En breve cárcel* depend are ones that have been contested by some scholars of exile studies. In order to compound the importance of notions of location and space to this chapter and the theories upon which it draws, my study of the texts is focalised through an analysis of spaces and places that are relational or formative to exile, as well as those spaces that become the place of exile. To make this possible however, it will be necessary to deploy the term in some of its more abstract senses, and therefore to confront one of the central debates that has emerged in the study of exile writing. This debate concerns the definition of the term itself, and in particular the way in which its more connotative meanings have

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<sup>13</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.165

<sup>14</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.162

been deployed in theoretical and critical debates and in the analysis of works of exile. McClennan refers to an 'increased scholarly interest in the exile as a metaphor for a new phase of social alienation' in which '[w]e heard of the theorist as exile, of inner exile, cultural migrancy, nomadism, dislocation, etc' and she laments the fact 'that the "exile" of [this] recent theory has tended to disregard the condition's necessary association with anguish and loss'.<sup>15</sup> In her own work, as a result, she aims to ensure that the material realities of empirical exile are acknowledged, by 'reconciling the *exile of theoretical discourse* with *concrete cases of exile* from repressive authoritarian regimes (my emphases)'.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that McClennan includes Peri Rossi as one of the authors that she studies in this text, for it is precisely this combination of the abstract and the literal in exile that is found in *La nave de los locos*. The continually changing and purposefully vague geographical and socio-political setting of the narrative, and the creation of a protagonist who seems the quintessential exile, results in a story that merges exile as an abstract and theoretical space that carries echoes of Kristeva's theory, with an exploration of the 'anguish and loss' involved in exile as political experience of which McClennan wishes to keep a hold.

In a similar vein, Amy Kaminsky makes reference to the theoretical treatment of exile, this time in the specific context of North American feminism in which, she explains, exile was used in the description of the 'cultural disenfranchisement [of] even privileged women'. She goes on to say that:

The evacuation of meaning of the term "exile" in this usage seemed to me [...] an ethical breach. It suggested a no doubt unintentional indifference to, if not an ignorance of, the suffering caused by the literal displacement imposed by the brutal and deadly military regimes of Latin America in the 1970s. The colours, shape and weight of the word "exile" were being eroded by the carelessness of those who picked it up and made use of it in their desire to name something else.<sup>17</sup>

Kaminsky's reference specifically to the 'colours, shape and weight' of exile, focus her reader's attentions on the fact that '[e]xile and all the processes related to it have a material

<sup>15</sup> McClennan, *The Dialectics of Exile*, p.1. In reference to Kaminsky's argument in *After Exile* (1999).

<sup>16</sup> McClennan, *The Dialectics of Exile*, p.1

<sup>17</sup> Amy K. Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora*, (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.xi

component' which is 'felt, experienced and known throughout the body',<sup>18</sup> so that whilst it is

theorized, interpreted, and/or represented through language, [...] without the emplaced human body, there is nothing to know or represent about exile and its aftermath.<sup>19</sup>

*En breve cárcel* is a novel that responds to Kaminsky's concerns by uniting the theoretical and the material elements of exile. Molloy's account of a woman protagonist's own personal and self-imposed exile into one room takes place in a textual world that is an antithesis to that of Equis and the other characters of *La nave de los locos*. Silent and primarily static, physical movement in Molloy's narrative is minimal, always short distance, and experienced only through the dualistic figure of the writer-protagonist. In short, the whole narrative is created by and through a movement *inwards* that reverses the enforced movement *outwards* of political exile. But it is due to the coupling of this insular perspective and the strong connections that are established between lived experience and the body that the novel is able to blur the boundaries between the abstract and the tangible, deconstructing the division between the literal and the metaphorical aspects of exile that too distinct a focus on either threatens to establish.

McClennan and Kaminsky show themselves to be primarily concerned about the fact that resonances of the material experiences of exile are lost through the term's theoretical and/or metaphorical application, and it is for this reason that they find the use of exile as a metaphor for other experiences of marginalisation to be problematic. In the case of McClennan, the desire to separate the literal from the metaphorical runs through into the definition of exile literature that she uses in the formation of her own study, set out in the introduction to her book. Following a discussion of the hierarchies of authenticity that have been applied to different exilic experiences,<sup>20</sup> and which, she explains, have led to numerous specifications being added to the term, she writes:

I would counter such a limited and confined notion of the meaning of exile with the following query: If the state of exile is a result of the individual's

<sup>18</sup> Amy K. Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora*, p.xi

<sup>19</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, p.xi

<sup>20</sup> McClennan explains that 'it is clear that certain exiles are considered to be more authentic than others and that each dictatorship or repressive regime produces "representative" exiles.' She gives the example of Juan Goytisolo, 'often considered to be a self-exile, since he was not forcefully thrown out of Spain', in order to show how this kind of standardization marginalizes other exilic experiences, and also mentions Cabrera Infante's coining of the term "invisible exile", used in reference to the status of Cuban exile in studies of the Latin American Diaspora. *The Dialectics of Exile*, p.21

perceived threat to the status quo, why should we expect the condition of exile to carry its own status quo? [...] If exiled writers use “exile,” or some variation of the word, to describe their condition, and if their writing attempts to represent the experience of exile, then these writers produce exile literature.<sup>21</sup>

This counter-definition is obviously informed by her focus on empirical exile, and so, when applied to the field of exile writing that focuses on the depiction of the material realities of deterritorialization, surely does expand the boundaries of the genre. I agree with her argument that different kinds of exile should not be entrapped within rigid prioritising structures, for there is no fair basis upon which to evaluate individual suffering. However, for different kinds of exile to truly not carry their own status quo requires that different uses of the term are not made subject to the imposition of hierarchies of significance either. To avoid such prioritization opens up the term, as well as the genre, and facilitates its use in the description and portrayal of other experiences of marginalization, as well as its insertion into the theoretical vocabulary that I would argue is necessary to the full reading of texts such as *La nave de los locos* and *En breve cárcel* – texts in which exile is ever-present, multi-faceted, and vital to the renegotiation of gendered identity that becomes one of both works’ principal objectives.

In fact, the etymology of the word ‘metaphor’ itself defends the metaphorical use of the term ‘exile’, and gives evidence to the fact that such a nuanced use of the term is not necessarily detrimental to a full understanding of the experiences expressed by its more literal meaning. The original Greek term indicates a ‘carrying from one place to another’,<sup>22</sup> so that metaphor actually works on the basis of a transfer of meaning that is only made possible by the awareness of similarity between one signified and another. Thus metaphor is produced in the space between two signifiers; in an interim that recalls the vagueness of exile as experience. It is in the face of this kind of deconstructive understanding of the production of meaning through a continual process of deferral that Kaminsky comes to question her own approach, writing that:

I have, of course, had to come to terms with the contradiction between this desire [to get beyond metaphor] and my conviction that in language there is no

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<sup>21</sup> McClennan, *The Dialectics of Exile*, p.21

<sup>22</sup> Definition by J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, fourth edition, (London: Penguin, 2004), p.507

“beyond metaphor,” that metaphor not only is the inevitable condition of language but is, at times, a gift of beauty and wisdom.<sup>23</sup>

What Kaminsky comes to terms with here is something of which Cixous seems acutely aware, and which she links specifically to the gendered production of ideology that is established in the above-cited list of dualistic oppositions, at the end of which she writes that there is ‘[a]lways the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized.’<sup>24</sup> Later in *La jeune née*, she returns to metaphor, and further emphasizes the connections between it and gender in the formation of the symbolic order:

The (political) economy of the masculine and the feminine is organized by different demands and constraints, which, as they become socialized and *metaphorized*, produce signs, relations of power, relationships of production and reproduction, a whole huge system of cultural inscription that is legible as masculine and feminine [my emphasis].<sup>25</sup>

This need is underlined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay ‘French Feminism in an International Frame’ (1981), where she writes that ‘[t]o change the stock of Imaginary counterparts which provides the material for sublation into the symbolic dimension is an important part of the project for a woman’s discourse’.<sup>26</sup> She substantiates this by citing the following passage by Catherine Clément:

Assuming the *real* subjective position that corresponds to this discourse is another matter. One would cut through all the heavy layers of ideology that have borne down since the beginning of the family and private property: that can only be done in the imagination. And that is precisely what feminist action is all about: to change the imaginary order to be able to act on the real, to change the very forms of language which by its structure and history has been subject to a law that is patrilinear, therefore masculine.<sup>27</sup>

Clément thus provides another, specifically feminist, perspective on the argument made above regarding the connections between the literal and the metaphorical meanings of

<sup>23</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, p. xi

<sup>24</sup> Cixous, ‘Sorties’, p.63

<sup>25</sup> Cixous, ‘Sorties’, p.81

<sup>26</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘French Feminism in an International Frame’, *Yale French Studies*, no. 62, Feminist Readings: French texts/American Contexts, (1981), pp.154-184, p.171

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Clément, cited in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘French Feminism in an International Frame’, pp.171-2. The ‘Imaginary’ that is referred to by Spivak here is what she terms ‘the Lacanian notion of the “irremediably deceptive” Imaginary, a “basically narcissistic relation of the subject to his [sic] ego; a relationship to other subjects as my “counter-parts”; a relationship to the world by way of ideological reflexes; a relationship to meaning in terms of resemblance and unity.’ Clément however does not deploy the term with a capital letter, and I therefore draw on the word’s more general, non-Lacanian definition, and in reference to the patriarchal symbolic order.

'exile'. Focusing on language, emphasising its association with, and domination by, the masculine, and presenting the imaginary as a means by which to undermine that masculinisation, she reminds us that the literal or the 'real' is also connected to the masculine. 'Exile' is a term whose meanings lend themselves well to a validation of this claim: the 'real' exile that Kaminisky and McClennan wish to hold on to is a *political* exile that remains symbolically tied to a male-dominated realm. Feminism's need to emphasise and interrogate the role of gender in the location of women by dominant discourses invokes an equally great need to hold on to the symbolic levels at which metaphor works. Consequently, in light of this argument that the real/literal is always implicit in metaphor, the feminisation of the metaphoric (and by extension the imaginary and the symbolic) becomes a powerful discursive and deconstructive tool that facilitates precisely the kind of undermining of the dominant social order that Clément calls for in the above passage. It permits an understanding of the 'feminine' as a theoretical space in which dualistic oppositions are placed in communicative rather than divisive relationships; as a kind of meeting place in which the renegotiation, or more precisely the *deconstruction* of meaning, and of identity, can take place.<sup>28</sup> In this chapter, exile will be read metaphorically, as a space that is feminised in this way, permitting a reading of the novels that emphasizes how they come to interrogate gendered identities through a redefinition of some of the symbolic associations that are connected to exile, and that are drawn upon by the patriarchal order in its attempts to justify the bounded location of identities in different spheres. Effectively, then, the reading of the novels presented here works to emphasize the important connections between exile and gender, the metaphorical and the literal, the symbolic and the real, and examines the textual representation of the possibilities for a renegotiation of gendered identities that are opened up by an understanding of the interconnections between them.

### The Gendered Spaces of Exile: Origin/Home, The Sea, and Dreams

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<sup>28</sup> Referring back to the broader triadic framework of this thesis, in which this chapter is situated as the prelude to the phase of synthesis in the dialectic *Bildung* of gender, the notion of a bringing together of opposites here might seem somewhat premature. I would insist, however, that this initial unification is undertaken solely with the aim of questioning and subsequently undoing fixed identity positions. Nonetheless, this structural parallel does recall the 'circles within circles' by which Abrams sees the dialectic to be formed (see Introduction, p.57).

The significance of 'home' to exile (as both experience and identity) cannot be exaggerated: home is the point of origin that, standing as opposition to exile, is precisely what makes exile possible. Critically, an understanding of the spatial concepts surrounding exile brings into focus the connections between gender and exile: 'allusions to territories, margins, outsiders, or one's place should not be slightly dismissed';<sup>29</sup> are not 'just metaphors, but names of actual spatial devices that maintain hierarchies of power and privilege'.<sup>30</sup> The gendered symbolism of home is borne of the fact that it is woman who is 'invested with the responsibility of representing, and even reproducing, home,'<sup>31</sup> so that traditional gender roles, determined by the rule of patriarchal heterosexuality, link the home space, the private and the domestic with the feminine, whilst the public and political spheres remain ideologically tied to the masculine. It makes sense, therefore, that the consequence of these symbolic associations is a differing relationship between the two genders and the home space itself that will also transfer into differing experiences of exile. If the discourses of gendered identity teach 'woman' to associate herself with 'home' and all that the term implicitly carries, both what she leaves behind and what she carries with her will distinguish her experience of expulsion from that of her male counterpart. This interpretation of the relationship between exile and heterosexual gendered identities is supported by Kaminsky:

The rupture that causes anguish in the male exile originates in the vital connection between the citizen (by definition male) and his country, which is severed in the condition of exile. Integrity for the male exile is possible only if he returns home, or if [...] he reproduces "home" in place of exile [...] The female exile, who was never completely at one with her country, experiences a different sort of split. It would be both cruel and naïve to suggest that women do not suffer in exile, but they may also have something to gain from exile as women, free of the oppressive sexism of the home culture. The rupture a woman experiences is not a rending from an always-nourishing home, but a mitosis, a split not from within but within the self, into two distinct beings – the self and the double – that can enable transcendence.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Margaret R. Higonnet, 'New Cartographies: an Introduction' in Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (eds.), *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*, (Amherst, Mass.: University of Arizona Press, 1994), pp.1-19, p.6

<sup>30</sup> Joni Seager, 'Blueprints for Inequality' in *Women's Review of Books*, 10.4 (January 1993), 1, quoted in Margaret R. Higonnet, 'New Cartographies: an Introduction', pp.6-7

<sup>31</sup> Amy Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*, (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.17

<sup>32</sup> Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic*, p.39

In this account, woman, already '[e]xiled within patriarchy and within the *patria*',<sup>33</sup> paradoxically central to and marginalized from a national space that she is given the task of symbolizing but denied full political agency in, can feasibly be understood to find opportunities for the freer exploration of her identity in exile, whilst the male gendered exile finds his identity problematised by that rupture. In *La nave de los locos*, as if to compound this understanding of the male experience of exile as one in which the fixity of identity is problematised, from very early on Equis is imbued with a sense of ambiguity and non-fixity, and is connected to exilic perceptions of origin that are clearly linked back to the feminine:

Extranjero. Ex. Extrañamiento. Fuera de las entrañas de la tierra.  
Desentrañado: vuelto a parir.<sup>34</sup>

Here, archetypal associations of woman with earth, and birth with uprooting, reinforce an understanding of woman as at one and the same time creator of, and location of origin. Thus, not only is she the cause of exile, but the place from which the first painful rupture is made. She is the initial site of expulsion, of rejection, of a forceful and painful separation, and the experience of exile is expressed as a repetition of all of these.

Yet from a heterosexual male perspective, despite the painful experiences with which she is associated, woman remains an object of desire. Moreover, and as a consequence of deeply embedded connections that have been seen to exist between woman and the concept of 'origin', the return or recuperation that is the inevitable object of desire for exile is also feminized:

La mejor manera que tiene un extranjero de conocer una ciudad es enamorándose de una de sus mujeres, muy dadas a la ternura que inspira un hombre sin patria, es decir, sin madre... Ella construirá una ruta que no figura en los mapas y nos hablará en una lengua que nunca olvidaremos.<sup>35</sup>

In this footnote, one of the many interjections that the author makes into the narrative, she deploys feminized notions of home so as to echo Kaminsky's assertion, made in a discussion of other exile stories written by Peri Rossi, that 'the male exile in these texts is lost, confused, alienated, and in search of himself via a reconciliation with his past and a connection with the feminine.'<sup>36</sup> Homeland and mother are clearly paralleled with one

<sup>33</sup> Higonnet, 'New Cartographies: an Introduction', p.14

<sup>34</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.10

<sup>35</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.38

<sup>36</sup> Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic*, p.37



another here, when Peri Rossi writes 'sin patria, es decir, sin madre'. Moreover, the suggestion that to know a woman from a particular country is to know the country itself collapses the categories of female gender and nation into one another, in a symbolic move that has important and restrictive implications for the female identity. In *After Exile* (1999) however, Kaminsky points out about this very same footnote from *La nave de los locos* that

Peri Rossi's stark identification of homeland with mother, her bland implication that the exile is always male, her apparently neutral observation of European women's eroticization of the racial other, and her presumption of universal heterosexuality, all encased in the language of sentimental romance, indicate that this advice be read ironically.<sup>37</sup>

Peri Rossi's male protagonist might seem the quintessential exile, and his story appears to give evidence to many of the gendered symbolisms that can be associated with exile and the spaces in which it is played out, but an ironic attitude such as the one Kaminsky reads here would undermine all of those assumptions. Supporting evidence for her reading is found in the fact that Equis's real origins are never revealed to the reader, something that is expressed as a conscious decision on the part of the author:

Haré notar, por último, que a diferencia de *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, obra en la cual el autor tampoco quiso nombrar el lugar donde su protagonista había nacido, es casi imposible trazar un mapa de los viajes de Equis por el mundo...<sup>38</sup>

Whilst a full explanation of the author's decision to keep secret the point of departure of her protagonist's nine-year journey is never offered to the reader, this anonymity as far as his own origins are concerned constitutes a severing of the ties that bind the individual to the cultural and ideological space that is known as home, and that always resonates with the feminine.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately then, this ambiguous characteristic establishes Equis as the vehicle for a narrative that, whilst reliant to some degree on the orthodox readings of the gendered spaces of exile and thus on orthodox readings of the gendered identities that such metaphors help to establish and uphold, begins to work towards a re-negotiation of gendered identity through exile.

There would therefore appear to be a paradox at work in Peri Rossi's novel that is also present in Molloy's text. The contradiction occurs through the fact that both writers rely on orthodox gendered readings of space and identity, even whilst they appear to wish

<sup>37</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, p.53

<sup>38</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.37

<sup>39</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.33

to devalue that kind of reading. This, I argue, is one of the crucial discursive techniques deployed in the texts in their attempts to devalue such gendered metaphors, and through that call into question gendered identity itself. Peri Rossi's novel highlights the feminization of the spaces that are connected to exile through a male protagonist, emphasising the organisation of gender along heterosexual lines. Fittingly, that male protagonist represents the political exile that might, as discussed above, be more readily associated with the male gender and its access to the discourses of power. Also fitting therefore, when interpreted via the logic of the symbolic order, is Molloy's focus on one female protagonist who facilitates an interrogation of exile in its more connotative meaning of marginalisation. Consequently, between the two novels, two differing experiences of exile are presented that are variably informed by the gender of the exiled individual, so that a masculinised and political male exile constituting a movement from centre to margin is contrasted with a feminized exile that takes the form of a movement inwards. This echoes and magnifies the insularity of woman's position within patriarchal culture and furthers the representation of female exile as one that does not necessarily have to move outside the realm of the nation, precisely because the position of woman in patriarchal culture is already very similar to that of the exile of either gender.<sup>40</sup>

It is this insular exile that is portrayed by Molloy in *En breve cárcel*, where from the very first lines of the text the reader is drawn into a world that hinges on a form of turning inwards in order to once again be able to project outwards:

Comienza a escribir una historia que no la deja: querría olvidarla, querría fijarla. Quiere fijar la historia para vengarse, quiere vengar la historia para conjurarla tal como fue, para evocarla tal como la añora.<sup>41</sup>

This introduction takes place through a third-person narrative perspective and in a present tense that gives the reader a sense that the act of their reading is occurring simultaneously to the process of writing. The result is that the act of writing, seemingly reinitiated upon each new reading of the text, takes on as much, if not more, significance than the story that it creates. That the process of the creation and development of the narrative is so evident is a stylistic element of this novel that calls to mind the narrative conventions of the Bildungsroman, which, as the narration of the development of an individual, is usually

<sup>40</sup> Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic*, p.36

<sup>41</sup> Sylvia Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981), p.13. All subsequent references are taken from this edition.

written in the third person. This narrative distance helps to conjure such stories as ones written from a perspective that enables reflection upon the events of the narrative and, most fundamentally, upon the impact of external events on the internal world of the protagonist. In Molloy's text this is transformed into the empowering possibility of a *self*-reflection facilitated by the narrative distance afforded by the use of this third person point of view. As is clearly expressed in the above quotation, the retreat into a self-imposed exile is made because of a need to achieve such perspective, because this will allow for the exorcism of a story whose current formlessness is haunting her. The story that needs to be 'fastened' (a compelling choice of word that seems to directly contradict the process of deconstruction that is enacted in the novel) gradually comes into view as that of a failed romantic relationship and of the emotional traumas caused by its problems and eventual collapse. That this relationship was with another woman, and therefore one that stands outside of the heterosexual framework of patriarchy, is the thematic feature of this story that has most consequence for my study of gender in the text, where gender is made a concern within the novel precisely as a result of this 'unorthodox' sexuality.

In light of the prominence of sexual identity within the story that Molloy's unnamed character writes, the gendered connotations of the space within which she chooses to go into exile are brought more clearly into view. On the very first page of the novel, the writer-protagonist describes the room in which she sits down to write as 'pequeño, oscuro', as one where the

exagerado cuidado de algunos detalles, la falta de otros, señala que ha sido previsto para otro uso del que pensaba darle; de hecho para el que ocasionalmente le da. Cuarto y amores de paso. No hay bibliotecas...no hay mesa para escribir y la luz es mala. Suplió esas deficiencias y ahora libros y lámparas la rodean, apenas eficaces. Sabe con todo que la protegen, como defensas privadas, marcando un espacio que siempre llamó suyo sin hacerse plenamente cargo de él. Como máscaras la ayudan: adentro, para salirse de ella misma: afuera, para protegerse de los demás.<sup>42</sup>

Because the narrative is situated in this very clearly domestic space, the labelling of domesticity as woman's realm is called into play in this novel right from the start, engaging traditional gendered, and spatial associations. However, normative gender/place relations are not simply deployed here, and then left un-interrogated. Rather this room is clearly a space of autonomy in which, via her very private and, as far as the reader knows, self-

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<sup>42</sup> Sylvia Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.13

imposed exile,<sup>43</sup> Molloy's nameless protagonist purposefully creates an environment for herself that is founded upon her own needs at the present time, and in which hegemonic norms will be defied. Firstly, in the above citation, she refers to the fact that this is occasionally the site of the fleeting romantic encounters, which the reader discovers are part of lesbian rather than heterosexual affairs – a clear transgression in terms of patriarchal norms. The primary consequence of this is that even whilst remaining geographically located within the socio-political patriarchal sphere (the room itself is in Buffalo, New York), the interior space is one that remains off-limits to masculine identity and its ideological and power relations. Connected to this, is the fact that the space is described as one that has been adapted, even whilst with limited success, into a Woolfian 'Room of One's Own': a space that facilitates contact with the self, inspiring writing for herself, about herself, in order to understand herself.<sup>44</sup> It is the desk, books and lamps that permit this textual exploration to take place that also protect her from the outside. Here, she will be able to respond to her needs:

Siente la necesidad de empujar, de irritar, para poder ver...para verificar fragmentos de un todo que se le escapa. [...] Encerrada en este cuarto, todo parece mas fácil porque recompone. Querría escribir para saber qué hay mas allá de estas cuatro paredes; o para saber qué hay dentro de estas cuatro paredes que elige, como recinto, para escribir.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Whether or not the protagonist lives and writes outside of Argentina as a result of political events is never made clear within the text. Nonetheless, Francine Masiello points out that whilst the novel may not be 'a response to military rule', its oppositional approach to gendered identities constitutes 'a stance against authoritarian discourses in a way that clearly situated Molloy as a dissident writer'. Francine Masiello, 'Subversions of Authority: Feminist Literary Culture in the River Plate Region' in *Chasqui* XXI.1, pp.39-48, p.42-3), cited by Marcia Stephenson in 'Lesbian Trajectories in Sylvia Molloy's *En Breve Cárcel*' in *MLN* vol. 112, no.2, March 1997, pp.253-268, p.254. Moreover, at times, the turns of phrase used in the writer-protagonist's description of her situation often deploy imagery and vocabulary that call to mind violent political oppression and exile as an induced escape: 'Piensa ahora, a veces, en marcharse de este lugar. [...] Ha contemplado varias posibilidades de fuga, como si no pudiera irse sin escapar a una vigilancia, como si ardiera siempre en este cuarto una lámpara desnuda en medio del techo' (*En breve cárcel*, p.125). In particular here the sense of exposure and the image of the bare lightbulb call to mind scenes of prison torture, evoking the myriad texts by Spanish American writers in which such scenes are more explicitly rendered. Consequently, whether or not Molloy's character is a political exile, her self-imposed marginalisation in response to the external pressures of the outside world is imbued with inferences of what some term 'real' exile, and thus underlines the importance of exile as metaphor for the communication and portrayal of the experience of social marginalisation and its effects on the individual.

<sup>44</sup> It is noteworthy that Molloy includes as an epigraph to her novel a citation from Virginia Woolf's 'An Unwritten Novel' (1921), in which Woolf famously referred to 'the eyes of others' as 'our prisons' and 'their thoughts, our cages'. Clearly such sentiments resonate with the protagonist's need to be alone in order to undergo the therapeutic process of writing by which the novel is formed.

<sup>45</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.13

Immediately then, there is something different about this particular domestic space, which cannot be taken as symbolic of the domestic domain in traditional terms. In this room, despite its inadequacies, there exists a sense of agency that is not usually implicit in understandings of the domestic/private as the opposition to the public/political. Here it is useful to compare Molloy's character with Tita in *Como agua para chocolate*, who is portrayed by Esquivel as reclaiming the hub of the domestic space, the kitchen, as a means to empowerment because therein she could exploit her magical cooking skills, but who nonetheless remains defined by the gender roles imposed upon her in part through the symbolic associations between femininity and that arena. Hence, whilst in many ways Tita's story can be interpreted, as suggested in Chapter One, as a retreat into a gendered space and as a reclaiming of its more positive associations, what is achieved in *En breve cárcel* is arguably a more straightforward refutation of imposed identity categories. Molloy's character is placed in a position of autonomy within the homespace as described here, without the aid of magic, and indeed without having to carve out a space for herself within the family and its organising principles. Rather, this space is fully hers; a private retreat dedicated to her desire for acquisition of knowledge and understanding of things that are important for her own sense of identity.

It is also, however, a space in the sanctity of which she wishes to learn about what exists 'más allá'; and so, ultimately, this room is a personalised space that serves not as one whose limits prevent access to 'outside', but that paradoxically enables contact with the socio-political arena through the facilitating mechanism of narrative distance. Subsequently, when the writer-protagonist refers to the space as one 'que siempre llamó suyo sin hacerse plenamente cargo de él',<sup>46</sup> she can be seen to be taking her present state of exile, however voluntary it might be judged to be, as an opportunity to claim back something that is always connected with and to her through her gendered identity, but that, because 'the home which is usually thought to be gendered feminine has also traditionally been subject to patriarchal authority of the husband and father',<sup>47</sup> has never truly been hers. This paradoxical situation reinforces my earlier readings of the female experience of exile as one that can present a kind of freedom simply not available within the confines of the masculinised national space. Furthermore, it is also structured around

<sup>46</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.13

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Duncan, 'Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces' in Nancy Duncan (ed.), *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p.131

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the dualism that constitutes the conflict between the individual, interior world, and the exterior, social world that is central to the narrative trajectory of the Bildungsroman. In terms of its response to generic conventions, therefore, the process of *Bildung* that takes place in this novel is one that reflects a retreat inwards that has been shown to be typical of female characters in novels that have been read as female Bildungsroman. Abel et al have observed that European nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels of female development show how '[c]onfinement to inner life, no matter how enriching, threatens a loss of public activity; it enforces an isolation that may culminate in death'.<sup>48</sup> They go on to provide examples of this pattern, and to underline the negative effects of such withdrawal from society:

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier succumbs to the lure of a spiritual landscape; isolated from society, starved for activity, Effi Briest in Fontane's novel looks toward the stars in search of a spiritual home, and dies. Turning away from marriage and adulthood, Rachel Vinrace sinks into a hallucinatory inner world that opens into death. Even if allowed spiritual growth, female protagonists who are barred from public experience must grapple with a pervasive threat of extinction.<sup>49</sup>

There is an important difference in this Spanish American take on such narrative processes, however, in that here what is portrayed is a temporary and necessary social death that has the aim of regenerating a sense of self that can then safely engage with the frameworks of the world with which it must engage. In other words, this act of voluntary exile is an act of self-preservation intended to re-draw the lines of self-identity. Most crucially, it is a movement inwards that, whilst connected to awareness of social oppression and in part a response to that, is also connected with agency through textuality. This female character, whose namelessness in the text frees her from the constraints of a male dominated linguistic system and its ability to label her with a particular identity, appropriates her chosen interior space as one in which she can locate herself in the role of author.<sup>50</sup> To be yet more precise, she places herself in the role of author of her 'self' – a

<sup>48</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage Out*, p.9

<sup>49</sup> Abel et al, *The Voyage Out*, p.9

<sup>50</sup> It is worthy of note that in *La nave de los locos* Graciela says 'Me fastidia la pregunta de quién soy y de qué hago ... Mi respuesta sería muy complicada. Imposible de resumir ... Aquí todos son extranjeros ... Si quieres puedes llamarme Graciela, dado que hay que dirigirse a las cosas y a la gente por un nombre.' (p.87) and the nine year old Percival asserts 'Me llamo Percival ... La gente cree que los nombres no tienen ninguna importancia, por eso lo preguntan enseguida. Pero nombrar las cosas es apoderarse un poco de ellas.' (p.139). Both characters thus reflect ideas on the role of language in dominant power structures and in the

highly empowered position that is achieved through a heightened level of self-reflexivity: in the words of Cristina Ferreira-Pinto, here the 'acto de escribir representa por tanto la composición de un relato y simultáneamente el proceso mismo de constitución del sujeto que escribe'.<sup>51</sup> With regards to this simultaneously writing and written self, Michael Hardin highlights the significance of the trope of the narrator-writer as a metafictional technique that enables authors like Molloy to 'write against a male tradition that is validated by its insistence on distinctions between self and other, subject and object, reader and author'.<sup>52</sup> This metafictional narration is one that permits the purposeful fragmentation of an imposed 'self', which takes place through the deconstruction of binary oppositions. Significantly for the present study, such oppositions are forced to break down as a result of the deployment of the dialectic structure, which provides the impetus necessary for a movement beyond simple dualisms. In many ways this can be configured as a form of repetition with difference, in which signification as the result of a process of repetition is confronted via the conflation of the writer and written subject. The identity that is produced through this metatextuality is one that is at once different and self-same.

This is almost literally reflected in the text through a number of meaningful episodes in which mirrors feature strongly. These begin early on in the novel, when the woman recalls her ex-lover Renata, whose penchant for looking in the mirror seems to be, for her, connected to an equal penchant for 'lo vago, la falta de límites', to a 'fervor por la ambigüedad' that the narrator-protagonist finds exasperating.<sup>53</sup> Whilst away together on a holiday by the sea (a recurrent presence in itself that will be discussed further below), they had stayed in a first floor room whose landing area was decorated with two interfacing mirrors, in which 'Renata tanto al subir como al bajar, se miraba ... en uno, en otro, en los dos juntos'.<sup>54</sup> Renata thus seems to possess a proliferation of selves, or perhaps of selfhood, and in her love for ambiguity is happy for the image of that self to appear in the

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organisation of society that contribute further to an understanding of the meaningfulness of Molloy choosing *not* to give her protagonist a name, as I argue above.

<sup>51</sup> Cristina Ferreira-Pinto, 'El rescate de la figura materna en *En breve cárcel*' in *Romance Notes*, vol. XXXVI, number 2, Winter 1996, pp.155-162, p.156

<sup>52</sup> Michael Hardin, 'Dissolving the Reader/Author Binary: Sylvia Molloy's *Certificate of Absence*, Helen Parente Cunha's *Woman Between Mirrors*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*' in *The International Fiction Review* 29 (2002), pp.84-96, p.84

<sup>53</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.21

<sup>54</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.22



empty spaces of the mirrors whose oppositional location, moreover, enables the repetition of that image to become infinite. In contrast, the writer looks for herself in the mirrors

de manera distinta, fingiendo desgano y como para corregir, para imponer un orden, no sabe cuál. En todo caso el orden que pretendía y aún pretende justificar a Renata ... el orden que quiere imponer al sentir la amenaza de una vaguedad compartida, de un vacío que invada el suyo.<sup>55</sup>

That the mirror is a site of a confrontation with the self that the narrator-protagonist finds difficult because of a lack of self-confidence or self-appreciation, is made clear by the fact that this first memory leads her to think of another lover, Vera, and the 'placer que sentía Vera al *contarse*, ante ella, ante los otros: la seguridad con que se ofrecía como ficción (my emphases)'.<sup>56</sup> It is clearly the desire to feel the same ability to 'contarse' that drives the production of the woman's text, for she describes herself as remaining 'pasiva ante ese relato' but simultaneously

a menudo irritada buscando la pausa que le permitiría entrar, introducir su propio relato, componer su cara, detener las palabras ajenas de Vera, obligarla a mirar: quería defenderse de la agresión que veía en esas anécdotas que se le brindaban, donde hasta la indecisión era compacta, impenetrable.<sup>57</sup>

These emotional responses evoke a desire to protect herself from the barrage of 'palabras ajenas' and to remind Vera of her presence by forcing her to look, just as Renata looked at herself in the mirror. In the face of the self-assuredness of these two women the writer-protagonist appears as someone who is self-effacing – passive and defensive, rather than active and vocal. Nonetheless, that passiveness is counteracted through her new active position as an author. In this way, writing and the self, and the kind of confrontation with the self that both the mirror and writing can permit, become intertwined within the narrative.

Ferreira-Pinto and Hardin have also noted the prominence of the mirror as both object and metaphor in this novel. Hardin conjectures that Molloy can use the mirror to 'question the integrity of the categories of self and other' because

[u]nlike conventional opposites, male/female, black/white, on/off, mirror opposites are "opposite" only in handedness – when one looks in a mirror and raises one's right hand, the mirror-self raises its left hand. As such, phallic binaries do not enter into the equation: there is no female/male function. A

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<sup>55</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.22

<sup>56</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.22

<sup>57</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.22

woman can see herself in the mirror and her other in the mirror at the same time; it is her and not her.<sup>58</sup>

Given the lesbian identity of the writer-protagonist, Hardin's point regarding the mirror's capacity to refute conventional oppositions also compels a reading of sexuality in these terms of sameness and difference. If in the mirror the woman can see herself and her non-self at once, so that sameness and difference become conflated, it becomes possible to understand the otherness around which inter-personal relationships are constructed in equivalent terms. Simply put, her reflection in the mirror reflects the possibility of the legitimisation of *homosexuality* even within the organisational terms of the hegemonic, heterosexual order where meaning and identities are produced through the coupling of *differences*, because it becomes a trope that exemplifies the possibility of sameness and difference existing together both in opposition and as one. This trope is highly significant in respect of the frameworks of meaning produced within the novel through the woman's preoccupation (alluded to in the previous quotation), with the imposition of order on a self often described in terms of extreme fluidity and superfluosity. This is because it allows for useful boundaries to be established without becoming prison walls that constrain selfhood. What this story seems to be about, in part is the search for a sense of self that is ordered, but that is not the product of a mandate on identity. The exilic space into which the writer-protagonist retreats so as to write creatively is one that makes possible this kind of re-ordering.

Foucault's conceptualisation of 'heterotopias' as spaces that enact a refusal of the norms surrounding them is useful in further exploring this idea, because he uses the object of the mirror to exemplify his neologism. Foucault defines heterotopias as

real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.<sup>59</sup>

In this way, Foucault's definition of heterotopic spaces chimes well with the needs of exile theory, as discussed above, to elucidate an account of exile as both tangible and metaphorical – as place (heterotopia) and non-place (utopia). The pertinence of his terms

<sup>58</sup> Hardin, 'Dissolving the Reader', p.92

<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias', (1967), <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>, p.4 of 9, (last accessed 11<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

to the consideration of exile and exilic spaces is furthered by the fact that his definition is predicated on the counterpointing of 'utopia', which in theorisations of exile always figures as the desired point of return that remains forever out of reach, and heterotopia. Yet more usefully, Foucault goes on to connect these two initially oppositional places through the space of the mirror that 'is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place':

In the mirror I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.<sup>60</sup>

Foucault's description of the mirror is one that portrays a site of encounter with the self that encourages the recognition of sameness and difference and of presence and absence all at once. His description of it as being able to give visibility back to the subject is also very meaningful to the reading of Molloy's story, in which the writer-protagonist clearly wishes to recover her own visibility by delineating herself through her writing. In more straightforward terms, the confrontation of the self within the mirror is a highly legible metaphor for the process of self-recognition with which this text engages in a more nuanced manner. Its added depth comes through the fact that the mirror trope is expanded and deployed to articulate the possibility of same-sex relationships, ones simultaneously constituted by sameness and difference, at the same time as standing as a sign for recovery and recognition of the self. Consequently, I would argue that such successful questioning of the categories of self and other ultimately affords a critique of subject positions more broadly, so that whilst focusing on gender and sexuality, this novel utilises the free space of self-imposed exile to underline the limitations of all identity categories. Thus, exile, both spatially and symbolically, here becomes a space and place of contestation of hegemonic norms – a heterotopia.

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<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias', p.4 of 9

### **The Trope of Liquidity: Fluidity and Excess as Ways Forward**

To re-cap, comparing the two texts as discussed so far, it can be understood that through the representation of Equis's and Molloy's writer-protagonist's experiences of exile, woman is freed from the constraints of an identity bound up in metaphors that leave her stranded: forever marginalized and yet always central; simultaneously symbolic of the causes of exile and of its object of desire. Paradoxically, exile as it is presented in these two texts is feminised and made, through its feminisation, a creative space free from the dominant ideologies that both rely on and perpetuate the very existence of gendered identities. Both texts become reliant to some degree on essentialised notions of the feminine in their representation of exile and exilic spaces, in order that they can redress those spaces as ones of freedom. Effectively then, in these two novels, and through the female perspectives that they represent, exile is presented as a positive, creative space in which the process of *Bildung* towards agency can be advanced. From this point, they are able to fully exploit those spaces as ones in which gendered identity itself can be called into question, for therein it no longer remains anchored down to the metaphors that justify and uphold relations of power.

Another of the symbolically gendered spaces closely associated with exile and that is deployed by Peri Rossi and Molloy as a positivised feminine trope is the sea. Implicit even in the title of Peri Rossi's text, this liminal space is a traditional female paradigm which plays an important role in the text's feminization of exile. This gendered sea is continually linked to the category of the feminine so that it comes to be a space in which the binary logic of the phallogentric order can be undermined, and through which the characters can further their search for an identity free from the gender constraints that this feminized space paradoxically relies upon. The connection of water to exile and the feminine begins in the movement that is the cause and consequence of exile, when the deviant individual, seen to have gone beyond, or moved outside of, the established norms of their social context, is forced to turn that ideological movement outwards into a geographical migration. Metaphors of excess and overflow are apt for the description of this situation, and call to mind understandings of woman as the embodiment of such excess which will also come into play in the discussion of the female body undertaken in the following chapter. For now, this symbolism serves to connection woman as exiled

from the political discourses that define and control the public sphere, woman as exile within the boundaries of the nation, and exile as a feminized and/or feminizing condition. In line with these metaphorical parallels, and in connection with arguments put forward above regarding the writer-protagonist's evident desire for order, in *En breve cárcel* the exploration of identity undertaken by the female protagonist is often achieved via links back to memories of her childhood in which the sea plays a key role. The nature of the text written here is arguably narcissistic – a concept that in itself implies a form of excess, and yet which is entirely necessary to the project the writer sets out for herself. The journey of self-discovery that the text entails can therefore be read as a direct contrast to what the woman appears to experience as an identity imposed on her as a young girl, to which the sea, both literally and metaphorically, is a remedy of sorts. She writes very early on in the novel that:

Aprendió de chica a controlar la zozobra, a negar cuanto pudiera llevarla del lado del desorden, del desmán, de la locura: se defendía con sus fantaseos, con su aislamiento, sobre todo con una conducta ejemplar. No sabe si soñaba; sí sabe que su necesidad para las reglas era tal que alguna vez preguntó si para rezar había que pensar en Dios – en la cara de Dios – o pensar en las palabras que decía.<sup>61</sup>

It would seem that a division was perceived by her in her childhood that taught her that the choice to be made, when presented with the opposing options of control, regulation and regularity, and disorder, excess, or madness, was clear. Nonetheless, she had to work hard in order to steer herself away from the appeal of anything that might lure her to make the wrong choice. The sea, when it appears in her writing, is presented as the antithesis to this rigidity; a space in which she could lose herself, free herself from the demands made on her identity:

...hoy quiere hablar del mar cuyo olor imaginó esta mañana al despertar. De chica lo deseaba con fervor diez meses del año, corría a mojarse los pies, a tocar el agua, en cuanto su padre ... detenía el automóvil en la playa ... En el agua desaparecían, en cuanto se sumergía, la gran cabeza de la que no sabe si piensa, la torpeza de su mano zurda, el pelo lacio tan lejano de los rulos rubios de su hermana Clara, los ojos que espían, sus preguntas.<sup>62</sup>

The ocean facilitated a distance from her own insecurities and concerns in much the same way that the room in which she writes now does; the clumsiness she associates with being

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<sup>61</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.28

<sup>62</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.28

left-handed, the confusion of her own mind, the comparisons of herself with a sister often presented as a norm against which she must measure herself, all disappear when she is surrounded by water. It also provides freedom from the perspectives of others, by which she is otherwise defined, described here as spying eyes, and connected to a sense of continual interrogation; both ideas that clearly call to mind the dangers of life in authoritarian territory for the individual deemed subversive or abnormal in any way as described at numerous points in *La nave de los locos*... The sea, therefore, facilitates the imposition of distance between herself and others that is precisely what is required for her to be able to locate her 'self':

Juega a atacar el mar (lo sigue haciendo), atraviesa la rompiente, necesita encontrar ese lugar preciso donde surgen las olas y se mantienen suspendidas, tan lejos del fondo, antes de desmoronarse. Ella se busca y se encuentra allí, es parte de esa inmovilidad única, y luego se entrega al buen regreso que la lleva entre la espuma a la costa desde donde volverá a buscar ese movimiento suspendido, que la devuelve completa. Dentro del mar vivía, ignoraba con deliberación los llamados de su madre quien, desde la costa, gesticulaba impacientemente...para que volviera.<sup>63</sup>

If the sea itself is taken as yet another metaphor for the feminised exile that Molloy's work presents to the reader, and given that it is through a connection with that liminal space that the young girl is able to establish a sense of self far away from the regulated life described in the first of the above three quotations, the female experience of exile as liberating and creative is again compounded here.

It might seem incongruous, therefore, that it is the mother figure who attempts to call the girl back in; who is 'cast as the lifeguard who will cut off the daughter's exploration of self symbolized by her solitary excursions into the sea.'<sup>64</sup> Marcia Stephenson writes that, although at times the mother figure is sometimes infantilised in the text through her neediness, this maternal figure can also be 'aggressive and "castrating"'. Stephenson points out that as a result of these contradicting characteristics, '[i]dentification with the mother is painful because [the daughter] locates in her at once an entrenched passivity and neediness that are unbearable to her.'<sup>65</sup> The mother, despite her gender, cannot be associated with the sea herself because of her internalisation of the symbolic order. The daughter/writer

<sup>63</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, pp.63-4

<sup>64</sup> Marcia Stephenson, 'Lesbian Trajectories in Sylvia Molloy's "En breve cárcel"' in *MLN*, vol. 112, no.2, Hispanic Issue, (March 1997), pp.253-268, p.265

<sup>65</sup> Stephenson, 'Lesbian Trajectories in Sylvia Molloy's "En breve cárcel"', p.264

therefore does not reject the mother in Freudian terms – because she sees reflections in her of her own inferiority – but instead precisely because she sees in her mother evidence of the constrictive symbolic order that her time in the sea allows her to escape. Thus, the sea becomes symbolic of a positive loss of self, because it is the loss, as Stephenson goes on to write, of ‘the self that is structured and regimented by the daily schedule, the rules and regulations of the “correct” way to live...’<sup>66</sup> The mother’s apparently inconsistent reaction to her daughter’s desire for the sea, and for the feminized and creative exile that it also comes to signify, is not in fact inconsistent at all, but is fitting to her role as a woman symbolic of the negative consequences of an unquestioning adherence to the gender and identity norms of the social order. Moreover, and most importantly, it is the author’s reliance on a traditional female paradigm that permits her to re-negotiate female gendered identity, and to symbolically liberate it from the constraints of the patriarchal order.

Exile is also connected to the sea through another episode from the woman’s childhood memories, recounted not long after the initial recollections of the sea discussed above. Here, the woman writer describes her other activities in the village where she spent the summer with her family, and remembers a small farm where she was sent to buy eggs from an old Arab woman:

En esa casa oyó un día, mientras la mujer seleccionaba los huevos y su hija Elise le mostraba con orgullo una cicatriz de apendicitis, un discurso que inauguraba una larga dictadura.<sup>67</sup>

This is the only certain reference to the Argentinean dictatorship made in the novel, and yet the fact that its occurrence links exile itself to the ocean and all that it signifies for the young girl, seems to have no negative effect on her fondness for the sea at all. Arguably therefore, this memory can be seen to have only compounded the woman’s vision of exile, the result of dictatorship, as a space associated with freedom and self-discovery.

In the second section of the novel the reader gains insight into another episode in which the woman’s childhood memories again contain watery spaces, and in which these spaces once more become associated with both a defiance of the regulations imposed on her life, and with times of self-discovery and understanding. Again during the summertime, but this time on a farm rather than at the village by the sea, she is told that there is a water tank in which she must not go swimming:

<sup>66</sup> Stephenson, ‘Lesbian Trajectories in Sylvia Molloy’s “En breve cárcel”’, p.265

<sup>67</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.66

Recuerda que, aterrada por las historias que le habían enseñado a asociar con ese tanque [...] – imaginaba manos que la arrastrarían para siempre al fondo; ella no podía aferrarse a los bordes porque el metal filoso le cortaba los dedos – , buscaba siempre los lugares secos de esa quinta...<sup>68</sup>

The fear instilled in her by the warnings given to her about the water tank, warnings that, whilst made for her own safety nonetheless represent the imposition of an order in which she has no voice, cause her to stay away from the watery places that the reader by now knows she feels an affinity with. It is not long however, before a desire to investigate that forbidden place overcomes her and one afternoon,

se atrevió a acercarse al tanque. Ya había jugado con los cardos y aburrida, sin ganas de armar distracciones que la alejaran del agua, cruzó una huerta, pasó al lado de un gallinero, desdeño las moras y, con cautela, tocó el borde filoso del tanque; luego, con la misma prudencia, metió la mano derecha en el agua verdosa, después la zurda... no surgieron otras manos. Durante un largo momento no movió las suyas, sumergidas, hasta que se le ocurrió agitarlas, chapotear, jugar con ellas asustando a las viejas de agua y los cucarachones que surcaban la superficie del tanque. Recuerda que hasta se agarró las manos, dentro del agua, como si se saludara, y se sintió muy contenta.<sup>69</sup>

In this second solitary excursion, the young girl confronts the fears that have grown up around the water tank, and in doing so is once again able to make contact with herself without the demands of others moulding her in accordance with their perception of how she, or her behaviour should be. This time, autonomy and contact with the self are symbolised by the image of her joining her own hands together under the water, 'como si se saludara'. This is an action that gives her a real sense of satisfaction and which imitates the entrapped position of woman in exile elaborated upon earlier: the circular and paradoxical lack of access to the political sphere that would make real exile a possibility and her role as representative of home. Here, however, the circularity created by the young girl's act of holding her own hands together is one that does not imply entrapment, but which instead resounds with independence. This detailed attention to and fixation with the body is a feature of Molloy's text throughout, and can, on many levels, be linked to the visions of excess and overflow already discussed in relation to water and liquidity as paradigmatically female tropes. References to the body are rife in this narrative, and the body as the site of subjectivity is at the heart of its recuperating project. For if this voluntary exile is undertaken with the aim of finding a free space in which to explore and

<sup>68</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.108

<sup>69</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.109



come to an understanding of her own identity, what must first be achieved is contact with her own body – the contact that is represented by the time spent playing by herself in the water, but which has apparently been lost as the writer has become an adult. Once more then, it becomes clear that water, and the sea most specifically, is undeniably connected to this woman, so that a yearning for that sea and other watery spaces is tantamount to a yearning for her own body. Kaminsky also points out that it is through writing as a mode of recuperation that this body is gradually brought into focus for the woman, saying that the ‘pages of the text become like layers of skin or scales – text as bodily secretion that contains, protects, and gives form to the body.’<sup>70</sup>

The desire to contain and protect that Kaminsky points out here is one created by a fear of excess that has grown in her since childhood, when she would more readily defy the control imposed on her life by authority figures. The contradiction that is thus found at the heart of her narrative project is that whilst she wants to give form to her body through her writing, she also desires the excess that she remembers so fondly and that is associated with a true knowledge of and relationship with herself and her identity, outside of the boundaries imposed on that identity by her parents, her sister, her romantic relationships, or indeed the social schema of which all of those people are a part:

Una clave, un orden para este relato. Sólo atina a ver capas, estratos [...] como las diversas capas de piel que cubren músculos y huesos, imbricadas, en desapacible contacto. Estreñimiento, erizamiento de la superficie: ¿quién no ha observado, de chico, la superficie interior de una costra arrancada y la correspondiente llaga rosada, sin temblar? En ese desgarramiento inquisidor se encuentran clave y orden de esta historia.<sup>71</sup>

Kaminsky also recognizes this contradiction, writing that ‘simultaneous with her desire for the order imposed by narration is the writer’s urge to break out of that which confines her.’<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, however, given that by the end of the story her desire to create such order in her life has not been accomplished, excess remains as a trait of both her identity and her experience.

Feminised visions of excess are a common feature throughout *La nave de los locos* too, and their connection with both the body and water echo those of Molloy’s novel. One such episode is Equis’s unconventional and brief love affair with a woman much older

<sup>70</sup> Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic*, p.103

<sup>71</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.23

<sup>72</sup> Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic*, p.103

than he, ('pensó venturosamente que por lo menos le llevaba treinta y cinco años ... Ahora debería tener por lo menos sesenta y ocho.'<sup>73</sup>), who is described in great physical detail to the reader. Through Equis's admiring gaze the reader sees the woman's 'ojos celestes y acuosos'.<sup>74</sup> Also noteworthy is the author's description of the couple as 'un hijo solícito que acompaña a la madre anciana; como un huérfano que ama a la madre',<sup>75</sup> in which their soon to become unorthodox relationship is described in more normalized and acceptable terms. As a consequence of this initial description, the change in their relationship that the reader by now awaits, but remains tentative of, appears as yet more of an excess than it might have done without the comparative shadow of such traditional interpretations of male-female and age relationships. This excess, carrying with it the trace of the feminised trope of liquidity, is reflected in the body of the 'vieja dama',<sup>76</sup> and fully appreciated by Equis:

Asiéndola contra sí, sin dejar de sostenerla por el talle, Equis se inclinó y hundió su mano bajo el vestido. Rozando fantásticas moles de carne blanda y tersa que parecían deshacerse – tibiamente – entre sus dedos, avanzando por nubes de algodón que al tocarlas mostraban pozos negros, como la luna, Equis llegó hasta el borde mismo del calzón.<sup>77</sup>

[...]

En cuanto al corpiño, que era de una tela firme y compacta, Equis lo desabrochó enseguida, satisfecho de escuchar el tic del cierre, al abrirse, y lo hizo descender por el arco de los hombros, dejando que la múltiple, láctea y mullida carne blanca se desparramara, escapándose de las manos, en abundantes pliegues...<sup>78</sup>

The choice of words here, including the verb 'hundir' to describe the protagonist's hand's contact with the woman's flesh, the adverb 'tibiamente' to describe this flesh that seems to 'undo itself' as he touches it, and adjectives 'láctea' and 'mullida' all rely on traditionally female metaphors to achieve their descriptive function, and contribute to the novel's patterns of portrayal of the feminine.

Equis never sees this woman again after their sexual encounter, but the other women that he meets on his travels continue to be associated with liquidity, even whilst in very different ways to the woman who becomes the object of his fleeting affections here.

<sup>73</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, pp.77-8

<sup>74</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.80

<sup>75</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, pp.80-1

<sup>76</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.76

<sup>77</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.83

<sup>78</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.83

Graciela, mentioned at the start of this chapter, is an important female figure in the novel, and Equis also meets her in Pueblo de Dios, the island populated by exiles who, just like Equis, 'parecen brotar de algún lejano confín, o haber nacido de sí mismos: no reconocen procedencia...'<sup>79</sup> From the first moment she appears in the story, the portrayal of Graciela plays on feminised descriptions that give her an almost primordial aspect:

...la quinceañera que los miraba, curiosa, masticando con obscenidad un damasco que dejaba deshacer sádicamente entre los labios, más que a sus cabellos lacios alrededor de la cara, con restos de yodo de mar y de caléndulas.<sup>80</sup>

The second time that Graciela and Equis meet, we are told that she

[s]iempre parecía recién salida de una inmersión en el mar, con residuos acuáticos en el pelo, en los brazos, en las piernas. Las gotas transparentes de agua se fijaban en los poros de la piel, se aferraban allí, como diminutas lentes. Como aquellas bolas de ópalo en cuyo interior hay menudas piedras de colores, filamentos vegetales, trozos de vidrio y pequeñas cuentas, dispuestas de manera irregular y cuyo conjunto – a través de la bola de sílice hidratada – nos fascina como el fondo del mar o la investigación de los cielos.<sup>81</sup>

Graciela is thus steeped in orthodox femininity. Despite the fact that no actual mention of that specific term is made, the imagery with which she is surrounded certainly enhances our sense of her gendered identity, demonstrating the informative power that such gendered tropes can have. Drawn in by these initial watery descriptions of her, Equis begins to associate Graciela with the exploration of sea and sky; of unknown worlds that remain outside of the organizational systems of his own environment – the environment from which he finds himself constantly on the run, but can never really escape.

Perhaps, if Equis were a different kind of male protagonist, the portrayal of Graciela, and indeed of the sixty-eight year woman from his earlier encounter, offered to the reader through his eyes could be interpreted as a reductive and essentialist vision of woman as nothing more than the object of desire. What we already know of Equis however, tells us that this is not the case. We have seen him 'fall in love', albeit briefly, with a woman whose age and body can both be argued to challenge the expected norms of desire for a man of his age, and thus to underline his unconventionality at the levels of gendered and

<sup>79</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.97

<sup>80</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.79

<sup>81</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.85

sexual identities.<sup>82</sup> Now, his encounter with Graciela, who is described by him as ‘en el esplendor de la edad; en el momento radiante hermosura en que la belleza, más que una cualidad de los rasgos o de la figura, es el resultado de un pasaje a la madurez’,<sup>83</sup> gives the first real hint at a personal problem that plays a crucial role in Peri Rossi’s deconstructive text. When Graciela interrogates him on his encounter with the elderly woman, and asks ‘¿Lo harías también conmigo?’,<sup>84</sup> his response is intriguing:

Equis se sobresaltó, como cuando su madre abría de improviso la puerta y lo sorprendió en el cándido entretenimiento de clasificar sellos; de alguna manera, entonces – y ahora – tenía la certeza de estar decepcionando, en parte, a alguien.<sup>85</sup>

The purposeful construction of these sentences, which invite the reader to expect a different scenario than the one described – one in which a mother intrudes on her adolescent son’s sexual explorations – signals the fact of Equis’s impotence, a character trait that has a significant impact on this male protagonist and on his role as a vehicle for the story being told. The significance of his sexual dilemma will be discussed further below, but for now its undisclosed presence in this conversation with Graciela can be seen to be informative of a reading of the imagery in which he cloaks her: sensitive as he is to the suffering that can be caused by the imposition of gender and sexuality norms on the individual, Equis, it can be argued, applies this imagery to Graciela in such a way that, rather than implying a fear of the unknown that woman so often comes to represent within hegemonic discourses, instead presents a desire to explore the unknown spaces that her body comes to signify. Therefore, rather than hold down the female gendered identity, forcing it to remain in the realm of the ‘outside’, Equis, as an outsider himself, sees Graciela/woman absorbed into ‘the largest global mass’ in such a way as to transform her

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<sup>82</sup> We can calculate Equis’s age as thirty three, because he says ‘por lo menos le llevaba treinta y cinco años, es decir que cuando él tuvo – sí: una vez tuvo – quince años ella ya tenía cincuenta. Ahora debería tener por lo menos sesenta y ocho’ (pp.77-78). I would argue that, as a result of this age difference, their coming together is one that clearly pushes at boundaries of expectation, challenging conventional inter-relationships between gender and age groups, and that Peri Rossi’s intent with this is precisely to emphasise Equis’s unusualness.

<sup>83</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.85

<sup>84</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.89

<sup>85</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.91

into 'an uncontrollable force of nature, mocking the constraints of the social arrangements that would seem to have defeated [her].'<sup>86</sup>

#### **Structurelessness and Dreams: excess and allegory as strategies of deconstruction**

That Graciela and Equis meet on an island primarily inhabited by fellow exiles, all of whom now live on the margins of the world, in an ex-centric place of non-belonging, recalls Equis's identity as a man with no origin, just as the above description of Graciela as a kind of mysterious sea creature attributes her with a sense of equally mysterious origins that come to underpin the reader's sense of her rootlessness also. Together, the two characters thus represent a lack of origin that, if placed in relation to the generic constraints of the Bildungsroman, leave them untethered from the social roots to which a classical *Bildungsheild* would eventually return and accept to some degree. In defiance of such generic patterns and social integration, the characters of Peri Rossi's novel, whilst not depicted as relishing their itinerant existence, seem clear about its comparative positivity given the alternative options they faced, so that acceptance of the norm is never a possibility and they remain as outsiders.<sup>87</sup> As a reflection of this irremediable ex-centricity, the structure of Peri Rossi's text, which does not need to attempt to re-locate its protagonists within a broadly acceptable framework, takes on a form that echoes the non-orthodox nature of the characters by which it is populated. The leitmotif of the tapestry that hangs in the Cathedral of Gerona, depicting the divine creation of the world – the moment of origin as explained by the Christian grand narrative – functions as at once a scaffold around which the story of Equis's meanderings is structured, and as a disconcertingly fragmenting element of the text, which interrupts Equis's story and thus

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<sup>86</sup> Anca Vlasopolos, 'Staking Claims for No Territory: The Sea as Woman's Space' in Higonnet *Reconfigured Spheres*, pp.72-88, p.75. Vlasopolos makes these comments using the category of the personal where I have substituted Graciela (as symbolic of woman).

<sup>87</sup> It is worth signalling that the secondary characters are not all exiles for the same reason, so that this refutation of norms can be understood to account for socially imposed limitations on identities of all kinds. Equis and Graciela remain of greatest interest for the purposes of this thesis, in that they are characters configured through a focus on aspects of their gendered identities – Equis for his problematic masculinity and Graciela as a feminist who has escaped the iron rule of her father. The island is populated also, however, by Morris, who falls in love with the extremely intelligent nine year old Percival and integrates himself into a triangular relationship (so one that moves beyond oppositional constructions) with the boy and his mother, and by Gordon, an astronaut who has been to the moon and is desperate to go back there. The narrative more broadly is populated also by characters such as Vercingetorix, who has survived being 'disappeared' to a cement factory for his political views, and gone into exile as a result of that horrifying ordeal.

further its lack of clear trajectory. The asterisked footnote that informs the reader of the location and nature of the artwork also points out what is, for Equis, its disconcertingly harmonious depiction:

Se trata de *El tapiz de la creación*, de la catedral de Gerona. En alguno de sus viajes, Equis vio este tapiz. Y se conmovió. A diferencia de la tapicería gótica, que combina elementos paganos y cortesanos con símbolos cristianos, el de la creación es mucho más austero, corresponde a esa religiosidad medieval capaz de construir un mundo perfectamente concéntrico y ordenado. Pero cualquier armonía supone la destrucción de los elementos reales que se le oponen, por eso es casi siempre simbólica. Equis contempló el tapiz como una vieja leyenda cuyo ritmo nos fascina, pero que no provoca nostalgia.<sup>88</sup>

The protagonist's reaction to the tapestry is ambiguously described using a verb, *conmover*, which means at once to be emotionally moved by something, but also to be shaken by it. Given Equis's difficult relationship with the ideological structures of the world around him, it is arguably the latter meaning that is most implied here. This is enhanced by its description as of a 'medieval religiosity', which locates the tapestry in a historical moment far away from the postmodern one of Equis's existential crisis and makes the tapestry representative of a past whose structural impositions have no place in the world as he experiences it. Rather, it embodies a problematic and constrictive world that can only be produced through the subordination of its unwanted elements. Equis's total lack of nostalgia in the face of this vision confirms him as a character who, regardless of the difficulties of the structureless world of exile in which he lives, does not suffer from the desire to return that is endemic in exiled individuals. Instead, his directionless journey is one dedicated to the undoing of the oppressive effects of binary thought, via the unpicking of the exilic processes by which it functions. Mary Beth Tierney-Tello connects the tapestry motif to the use of allegory in Peri-Rossi's novel, in which 'various characters act as virtual mouthpieces for expounding on ideas about the meaning of sexual and national identity and the nature of exile' so that 'the narrative often seems to suggest its own interpretation'.<sup>89</sup> She conjectures that this self-explanation is a typical feature of allegorical narratives, but also considers the particular trajectory of Equis's journey and the tapestry motif as further layers of the text's allegory. Echoing my own understanding of the

<sup>88</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.20

<sup>89</sup> Mary Beth Tierney-Tello, *Allegories of Transgression and Transformation: Experimental Fiction by Women Writing Under Dictatorship*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p.175.

tapestry, this critic also reads it as an image 'that strives to represent the origin of man' in such a way as to offer coherence in the face of chaos. She posits that

the allegorical mode used by Peri Rossi draws attention to ... a crisis of representation: due to the sociopolitical and literary contexts, the authority of the "world picture," indeed the very possibility of representing our world at all, has been cast into doubt. The nature of this crisis is brought into focus through the juxtaposition of the allegorical tapestry of the Creation, which depicts a fixed, closed representational order, and the counter-allegory woven by the series of tableaux of Eck's journey through our imperfect, fragmented, violence-torn contemporary society, which undoes the authority of the divinely "authorized" representation.<sup>90</sup>

Despite his lack of outright nostalgia for the old order, however, Equis is not portrayed as immune to the trauma that the loss of structure can cause, nor to the identity crises that can be engendered by the removal of limits potentially conceived of as comforting at the same time as restraining. In this he recalls the writer-protagonist of *En breve cárcel* who, as argued above, seems to seek order even whilst perceiving the negative effects of its constraints. Moreover, this ambiguous relationship with order, its necessity and the necessity of its rejection, is evoked in both texts through the portrayal of dreams. In *La nave de los locos* the author explains that:

Cuando [Equis] despierta de malhumor, es que oscuramente sabe que ha tenido una revelación, en el sueño; una clase de revelación tan poderosa e insoportable que ha sido preferible olvidarla. [...] El sentimiento de culpa que nace de esa traición a la enseñanza oculta de los sueños, le provoca mal humor.<sup>91</sup>

The example of his dreams that immediately follows, however, is 'un sueño repetido' that Equis does remember, and he is thus left with feelings of pleasure at its end. This, I argue, implies that the dream and its meaning are significant for Equis, and therefore also for the reader's understanding of Peri Rossi's tale. In line with this assumption, the dreamscape recounted here appears to continue the symbolic thread of water imagery, underlining how Equis's paradoxically orthodox and non-orthodox associations of women with water pervade his sleep too:

<sup>90</sup> Mary Beth Tierney-Tello, *Allegories of Transgression and Transformation*, p.175. This problematisation of the possibility of representation has been, as discussed in the Introduction (see subheading "The *Bildung* of Spanish American Literature", pp.8-18), a feature of Spanish American Boom and Post-Boom literary periods, and so Tierney-Tello's analysis of this work also serves to locate Peri-Rossi within a canon of recognized writers and literary aims, despite her own above-cited uncertainty regarding her position therein.

<sup>91</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.46

Como se trata de un sueño repetitivo, Equis sabe perfectamente que al final de la playa hay una casa alta, de piedra gris, con un balcón sobre el mar y que los días en que la marea sube es muy difícil llegar hasta la casa, ya que el camino de acceso esta invadido por las aguas, él no sabe nadar y las olas alcanzan grandes dimensiones. Como siempre la pesca se demora en virtud de las dificultades con los aparejos, a la hora de ir a la casa el mar ha crecido y emprende el camino con una sensación inminente de riesgo y peligro. Inevitablemente, Equis descubre que las aguas han trepado hasta el balcón y las olas acorralan contra el muro; no puede regresar, porque el mar, hacia atrás, ha invadido toda la costa; no puede avanzar, porque las aguas no se lo permiten. En el único lugar donde todavía hace pie (un pequeño borde de piedra, contra el muro), las aguas son muy azules, muy densas. [...]

A pesar de todo, despierta con la sensación de que el paseo y la pesca han sido agradables. Tanto placer le hace sospechar que, en realidad, no se trataba de pesca, sino de otra cosa.<sup>92</sup>

Given the presentation of water imagery in the novel as a feminised motif, it is possible to follow Equis's suggestion that this dream is not really about fishing, but about something else, and to re-apply feminised readings of water imagery, and the connections between woman, water and exile, in a re-interpretation of this dream sequence. One possible interpretation envisages the grey house at the end of the beach that Equis cannot reach as the homespace to which he, as an exile, no longer has access. The water that surrounds him keeps him from the building whose balcony looking over the sea is suggestive of authority and power, and especially of political discourse. The house, therefore, may symbolise the nation as homespace too. The fishing equipment that bears down on him and is stuck in the rocks can be understood to represent that which he carries in real life, not materially speaking, but ideologically so, that is the cause of his ejection from the realm of power symbolized by the grey edifice. It is also tempting to read the fishing equipment as a crude phallic symbol, so that his problematised masculinity is brought into play as a quality that contributes to his exclusion and to his remaining in the zone of danger, rather than within the safety of the hegemony symbolised by the house to which he would usually, as a man, have open access.

The question remains, however, what symbolic role the water in this dream can come to have. If still to be understood as feminised, representative of femaleness, it may compound, as it gradually makes difficult his entrance into the house, the idea that it is Equis's inability to deploy the phallic power with which he was born that is at the root of

<sup>92</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.49



his exile. If this is the case, the fact that Equis feels such pleasure when he wakes from the dream becomes highly intriguing:

Las aguas son transparentes y se puede contemplar en toda su extensión el tránsito de los peces. Pero además, Equis puede sumergirse en ellas hasta quedar tapado por las aguas, sin necesidad de nadar, sin mojarse, sin ahogarse, como si, en realidad, se tratara de aire.<sup>93</sup>

Tellingly, the water in this dream poses no real threat to Equis. Thus I would argue the dream can indeed be understood to '[tratarse] de otra cosa' (or even de 'Otra cosa'), as it provides one more positivised representation of exile from the patriarchal hegemonic order by deploying the metaphor of water in the representation of that exile as a space that opens up new and equally positive possibilities and experiences. What is more, the norms symbolized by the house built on sand are portrayed as threatened purely because of its location, as we wonder how long, in any case, a house built on sand will last at all. Subsequently, if womankind is found present here in the symbolism of water, the dream may also be seen to include insinuations that, eventually, the weight and inflexibility of the patriarchy will allow for its undoing, as its weak foundations are pulled out from underneath it by that feminised force. The illogical world of dreams is thus portrayed as one filled with meaningful revelations, with the capacity to undermine the rigidity and logic of the dominant social and symbolic orders, and with very positive effects for the exiled individuals who are at once within and outside that order: outside, because they are no longer allowed access to that order, and simultaneously inside, because they continue, even in their absence to be defined by the requirements that it imposes upon human identity. This illogical world can be read in gendered terms as a feminine space whose excess, free flow and alterity stands in opposition to the logic and definition of patriarchy. As a whole I read this dream as one about confrontation with difference, and the acceptance of difference as unproblematic. This interpretation relies upon the reading of water as a symbol of the womanhood (assisted by the noun 'agua' being gendered female in Spanish) that opposes Equis's assumed male identity, and into which he is able to delve (*'sumergirse'*) without negative consequences for his own selfhood.

Thus, the dream serves as a space of excess in which the subconscious can engage with the upsurge of real concerns, and where the fear of the feminine, as the threat to the dominant order, is brought under control. In this way the episode contributes to the

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<sup>93</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.47

overall thrust of the narrative of *La nave de los locos*, throughout which Equis makes a gradual progression towards an unquestioning acceptance of otherness, and especially gendered otherness. Indeed, the themes of exile, gender, dreams and the refutation of binary logic are ones that encircle the narrative of this novel by serving as its point of departure and the medium through which its conclusion is expressed. On the very first page of *La nave de los locos*, the reader is recounted a dream in the first person that begins with the receipt of an order: '«La ciudad a la que llegues, descríbela»'.<sup>94</sup> The narrator of the dream says: 'Obediente, pregunté: «¿Cómo debo distinguir lo significativo de lo insignificante?»'<sup>95</sup> Suggestively, no answer is given, and instead the scene switches to one where the owner of the narrative voice is in a field, working at the task of separating wheat from chaff:

Trabajaba en silencio, hasta que ella llegó. Inclínada sobre el campo, tuvo piedad de una hierba y yo, por complacerla, la mezclé con el grano. Luego, hizo lo mismo con una piedra. Más tarde, suplicó por un ratón. Cuando se fue, quedé confuso. La paja me parecía más bella y los granos, torvos. La duda me ganó.

Desistí de mi trabajo. Desde entonces, la paja y el grano están mezclados.<sup>96</sup>

The activity undertaken in this dream is a process that acts out the binary logic that is critiqued by both Peri Rossi and Molloy's novels, and their refusal of this divisive process is encapsulated in the character's decision to leave the work, and to allow wheat and chaff to remain mixed. Moreover, the intervention of the woman has added a blade of grass and a small mouse to the original mixture. Borrowing a phrase from Luce Irigaray's deconstructive interpretation of the Freudian account of femininity, Tierney-Tello uses

the notion of "an old dream of symmetry" to refer here to what Peri Rossi denounces as oppressive, patriarchal logic whereby representation and identity are founded upon binary systems that exclude and marginalize the other, unable to account for difference in any inclusive, pluralistic way.<sup>97</sup>

Her ensuing interpretation of the dream is succinct, and falls in line with my own understanding of the role that it has to play in the novel, when she reads it as

an oneiric reelaboration of the Fall of Man, which can be read, in this postmodern context, as the fall from the kingdom of the illusion of innocent

<sup>94</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.9

<sup>95</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.9

<sup>96</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.9

<sup>97</sup> Tierney-Tello, *Allegories of Transgression*, p.178

and unproblematic representation, from the prelapsarian realm where the realization of the master narrative still seemed possible.<sup>98</sup>

The novel, from this point on, presents a counter to the master narrative whose undoing begins here, and which is begun, specifically by 'the insertion of an active feminine element ("she") into the scene of representation' that causes Equis to find that

[s]uddenly ... it becomes impossible to sort the wheat from the chaff, to distinguish the significant from the insignificant, to make the decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion with the same surety as before.<sup>99</sup>

The difficulty of continuing to envisage the world in oppositional terms eventually translates into the events of the denouement of the novel (at least in as far as it can be said to have one given its lack of linear plot). The nineteenth tableaux, entitled *Londres*, begins with a dream narrative in which Equis is posed a question:

... una pregunta que flotaba como un enigma, como aquellos acertijos que los reyes, enamorados de sus hijas, proponían a los pretendientes. Príncipes, caballeros degollados en el insensato afán de resolver la oscura adivinanza que conservaba a las hijas para los padres. En el sueño, Equis escuchaba la pregunta: «¿Cuál es el mayor tributo, el homenaje que un hombre puede ofrecer a la mujer que ama?»<sup>100</sup>

As Equis's search for the answer to the enigma progresses, it becomes clear that the couching of the question within recognition of male desire for control of the female, configured through the father-daughter relationship, also points to the solution of the riddle, to which Equis will come through a number of encounters with disempowered women. In connection to this, Lucía Guerra-Cunningham emphasises the expression of the problematic through the 'tradicional instancia cardinal del cuento de hadas', whose 'paradigmas falologocéntricos' usually 'exalta[n] la inteligencia y sagacidad masculina', but argues that Equis's approach to answering the question encountered in the dream contradicts such paradigms by being driven by 'fuerzas motivadoras femeninas'.<sup>101</sup>

Ultimately, it is due to his own experience of oppression, subsequent expulsion, and the reasons for it, that Equis is a character so sensitive to the disempowerment of women. His impotence, already alluded to above, enables him to interact with women differently than might be expected of a more normative male protagonist. The intimate encounters

<sup>98</sup> Tierney-Tello, *Allegories of Transgression*, p. 178

<sup>99</sup> Tierney-Tello, *Allegories of Transgression*, p. 178

<sup>100</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.163

<sup>101</sup> Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, 'La referencialidad como negación del paraíso: Exilio y excentrismo en *La nave de los locos* de Cristina Peri Rossi', *Revista de estudios hispánicos* 23 (1989), pp.63-74, p.69

that he shares with the sixty-eight year old woman and with Graciela are never recounted in their entirety, and the reader is left with the sensation that this incompleteness of parts of his narrative is directly related to an incompleteness of the sexual act during those encounters. This notion is compounded through his interactions with the prostitute that he meets in a restaurant towards the end of the novel, and it is she who is influential in his realisation of the answer to his riddle:

Ella le miró con sorpresa. La noche antes le habían dado una paliza y tenía el rostro tumefacto. Uno de los ojos, hinchado, le lloraba, y el otro, deformado por el golpe, caía abajo, derramándose sobre la mejilla. («¿Cuál es el mayor tributo, el homenaje...?» repetía mentalmente Equis.)<sup>102</sup>

The remainder of this episode is interspersed by Equis's references back to the dream and with his internal repetitions of its central question, so that a gradual move towards the answer is insinuated throughout. Also crucial, is the fact that it is once in the room of the abused prostitute that Equis overtly acknowledges his sexual problem for the first time, telling her that he would not get undressed as she has done because '[h]ace mucho tiempo que no tengo una erección ... Y no me importa. No voy a hablar de eso ahora ni en ningún otro momento.'<sup>103</sup> The woman's response encapsulates an ideological position that stands as the summation of the novel's treatment of gendered oppositions, the power imbalance that they inform, and exile as the ultimate result of that imbalance: she says, '[p]or si te importa, encuentro en la impotencia una clase de armonía.'<sup>104</sup> Harmony, or balance, rather than the inequity of binary thought, is, in the eyes of the prostitute, the result of Equis having admitted to his impotence. Thus, as he stands naked in the room with her, 'con el sexo flácido entre las piernas, que no merecía ninguna observación de parte de nadie',<sup>105</sup> this unorthodox couple come to embody the consequence of the deconstruction of the phallogocentric order towards which Equis seems to have been unknowingly working throughout his global wanderings. The prostitute, now able to avoid another beating because she can convince her pimp that she has turned a trick, is at least temporarily safe in the company of Equis, who feels no need to enter into the sexualised power dynamic that might otherwise govern his interaction with her. The culmination of

<sup>102</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.184

<sup>103</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.188

<sup>104</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.188

<sup>105</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.188

Equis's realisation is compellingly expressed as he leaves the brothel but then finds himself watching a transvestite porn show where the all male spectators are

[a]rrrellanados en sus asientos, con esa falsa seguridad que les daba el ser mucho y anónimos, haber pagado la entrada, estar abajo y no arriba, tener el abdomen con grasa, el aliento pesado, el chiste fácil y un músculo reflejo entre las piernas ... [P]arecían haber retrocedido a algún estado de impunidad infantil, en el cual se sentían dominadores, irresponsables.<sup>106</sup>

The depiction of the crowd here contrasts greatly with Equis's immediately previous acknowledgement of his own, non-hegemonic, version of a masculine identity, and compels the reader to remember his ponderings, a few pages previously, as to

¿[q]ué haría una mujer con su tristeza? Había códigos y ritos para muchas cosas y un hombre triste entra a un bar, pide una cerveza ... es posible que termine la noche con cualquier mujer de la vida, eyaculando tristezas en otro culo, porque para eso tiene falo y paga, ¿dónde eyaculan las mujeres, en qué culo se descargan?<sup>107</sup>

It is thus that Equis comes to acknowledge that he has had the answer to his question for a long time, but has never dared to pronounce it. In the last pages of the novel he tells the story to Lucía, and exorcises himself of the oppression that the question carries with it whilst it remains unanswered: 'La respuesta es: su virilidad.'<sup>108</sup>

What the answering of the riddle constitutes, therefore, is the suggestion that phallogentrism must be brought to an end for the exiling processes of oppositional thinking also to cease. Equis becomes, through his story, an everyman who represents the possibility of ambiguity as a way forward, and who, further still, embodies the possibility of equality through the recognition and acceptance of difference, and it is ultimately the ambiguous space of dreams that carries this important message in Peri Rossi's work. In this way, the role of dreams in the structure and story of *La nave de los locos* calls to mind some of the characteristics of French feminist theories of women's writing, in which, Sally Kitch explains, male writing has been declared to be 'linear, diected, logical', whilst the '[f]emale form, according to such an approach, is more open, fluid and simultaneous, less "terminating" and linear'.<sup>109</sup> These characterizations, whilst problematic in their essentialism given that both *La nave de los locos* and *En breve cárcel* have been presented here

<sup>106</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.190

<sup>107</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.178

<sup>108</sup> Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, p.196

<sup>109</sup> Sally Kitch, 'French Feminist Theories and the Gender of the Text' in *Continental, Latin-American and Francophone Writers: Selected Papers from the Wichita State University Conference on Foreign Literature, 1984-1985*, p.3

as texts with deconstructive intentions, are nonetheless applicable to the work of both Peri Rossi and Molloy; and particularly to their deployment of dreams in their narratives. Crucially, this occurs in the same way that the essentialist female paradigms that have been discussed above have been deployed to work towards an undermining of the gendered logic of binary thought. Dreams are rife in Molloy's text too, which complies to a large degree with the French feminist notions of *écriture féminine*. Similarly to Peri Rossi's work, *En breve cárcel* is relatively unstructured – divided into chapters but with no plot as such – free flowing, and developed through a process of memory connections, so that the form of the protagonist's writing reflects the fact that her writing is personal, is for herself. The inclusion of dreams within the narrative compounds this personalization of the text, and adds to its flexible, unstructured nature. For both reasons, they are a crucial element of the project of self-discovery and understanding that the text entails, and are the point at which sexuality as a vital aspect of the deconstructive nature of the author's work comes into play. One of the most intriguing and most informative dreams to be found in the novel is one in which the writer-protagonist dreams of her dead father, who calls her on the telephone:

...la comunicación es mala, oye apenas su voz. Con dificultad empieza a distinguir palabras aisladas: primero la palabra Egeo, urgente, luego la palabra Éfeso, repetida varias veces. Es necesario dejar todo – le dice la débil voz de su padre – y viajar para ver a Artemisa.<sup>110</sup>

Reflecting on this moment in the novel, Marcia Stephenson contends that '[t]he father represents the law, the heterosexual norm, to whom that narrator continually looks for affirmation and guidance',<sup>111</sup> and that

the narrator's identification with the father, with masculinity, seemingly enables her to enact a desire for the female object as if to suggest that desire originates from a masculine, heterosexual position.<sup>112</sup>

The writer-protagonist of the story, however, undermines this position, for whilst the object of her desire is indeed feminine, it is not the object that she is told to search for by her father. Artemisa, as Stephenson also points out, 'is the maternal goddess whose abundant breasts are heavy with milk',<sup>113</sup> and thus the embodiment of the traditional,

<sup>110</sup> Peri Rossi, *En breve cárcel*, p.77

<sup>111</sup> Stephenson, 'Lesbian Trajectories', p.258

<sup>112</sup> Stephenson, 'Lesbian Trajectories', pp.258-259

<sup>113</sup> Stephenson, 'Lesbian Trajectories', p.260

patriarchal female role. Disassociating herself from this womanly image, Molloy's character prefers instead to align herself with Diana:

Ella prefiere otra Artemisa, otra Diana, la cazadora suelta, no inmovilizada por un pectoral fecundo, pero para esa figura no parece haber santuario estable. Sí la deleitan los pechos de esa otra Diana, pequeños y firmes, apenas perceptibles bajo la túnica... Disponible, armada de arco y flecha...no se detiene; no la lastran los racimos de pechos, maternos y pétreos, de su contrafigura, la enorme figura de Éfeso, cifra de la fecunda. No, la otra Diana, la que ella prefiere – la Diana suelta –, no es fecunda.<sup>114</sup>

Stephenson supports her interpretation of the father-daughter relationship as it is represented in the dream of Artemis and Diana, with Judith Butler's assertion that

[f]emininity becomes a mask that dominates/resolves a masculine identification, for a masculine identification would, within the presumed heterosexual matrix of desire, produce a desire for a female object...<sup>115</sup>

In light of this, the woman writer's defiance of her father's commands allows her undermining of the norms of the 'heterosexual matrix of desire' to become a twofold one. Not only does she deny the gender role that would be imposed upon her by rejecting the maternal archetypes presented to her and instead turn to a more independent female paradigm, but that choice leads her to a *masculinised* female figure. As a consequence, she maintains her female position, inserting the possibility of homosexual identification between women into the matrix. Of course, the irony still remains that in order to complete this process of deconstruction the same heterosexual positions that are its target have to be deployed, but both writer and text must nonetheless be understood to have, through the analysis of this dream world, made some progress towards liberating both sexual and gendered identity from the limitations imposed on them by the binary logic of the symbolic order.

### Conclusions: The Exile Novel as Anti-Bildungsroman

Throughout this chapter I have argued that by using and re-negotiating the female paradigms that are connected to the spaces of exile, Molloy and Peri Rossi fully exploit the innate connections between woman and exile that are set up by the processes of binary thought. Presenting the 'feminine' as something inherent to exile, and thus as something

<sup>114</sup> Molloy, *En breve cárcel*, p.78

<sup>115</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York; London: Routledge, 1990, 1999), p.53

connected with a possibility for new perspectives, the writers turn that enforced expulsion into a location from which individuals can develop their identity away from the watchful eyes of hegemonic discourses and the gendered binaries with which they organize and are organized. Through this approach to the subject of exile, the narratives develop differing strategies of representation and contestation of dominant ideas on identity construction: Peri Rossi's text articulates a confrontation with, and ultimate acceptance of difference through a male protagonist whose exilic wanderings encourage his engagement with the world from a variety of critical perspectives, while Molloy's text hinges on a treatment of gendered identity through the related category of sexuality, recounting the textual self-examination of a lesbian writer-protagonist whose story of selfhood requires a confrontation with ambiguity just as that of Equis does, only this time confrontation takes place through the recognition of sameness and the possibility of same sex relationships. It is in this way that their shared project is a deconstructive one, for it sets out to subvert the very notion of a world divided into two, and to replace it with one that accepts and even encourages open-ended, fluctuating and seemingly contradictory identities. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that they have to rely on the very tropes that are deployed in order to accomplish the privileging of man over woman, male over female and masculine over feminine, for in order to defy such paradigms, they must first name them, and make their presence felt. Nor is it surprising that such a contradiction is to be found in the writing of these two women, for, as Sophia McClennan explains:

...binary thinking, when applied to the cultural production of exiles, is unable to account for the ways that contradictory concepts coexist in tension within the same work. In fact ... the key tensions in exile writing are not merely twofold...but multiple.<sup>116</sup>

These contradictions and ambiguities echo what Tierney-Tello, cited above, has described as a 'crisis of representation'. In response to this I believe that Peri Rossi's and Molloy's stories can be usefully denoted 'narratives in crisis', refracting Jean-François Lyotard's reference to 'the crisis of narratives' in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).<sup>117</sup> In the introduction to that study, Lyotard makes reference to the 'metadiscourses' of modern science, and directly refers to 'the dialectics of Spirit' as an example of the kind of 'grand

<sup>116</sup> Sophia McClennan, *The Dialectics of Exile*, p.31

<sup>117</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, G. Bennington (ed.), B. Massumi (trans.), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxiii



narrative' to which modern sciences make 'explicit appeal' in order to legitimise their own structures of rationalisation.<sup>118</sup> Given that this thesis is itself structured in parallel with the process of *Bildung* elaborated in Hegel's take on dialectics in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the links, made available through Lyotard's words, between the notion of a metanarrative and the Bildungsroman as a similar, legitimising, framework for representation are highly important. This significance is heightened by the fact that the Bildungsroman has been contested as a space for representation of non-hegemonic identities, becoming itself a metanarrative that facilitates the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others.

In light of these connections I would argue that it is useful to conceive of Peri Rossi's and Molloy's 'narratives in crisis' as *anti-Bildungsroman*, because of their focus on the *undoing* of enforced identities rather than on the gradual coming to be of identity within the mould created by the dominant social order. As stated in the Introduction, it is not my intention to fit disparate texts into the mould of the Bildungsroman, be it in its classical or more revised forms. My aim is to elucidate a framework for reading that enables an understanding of the development of gendered identities, and of the growth towards a form of selfhood that engenders agency, rather than one limited by dominant socio-political ideas and ideals. Peri Rossi's and Molloy's texts are located within the section of this study that considers the phase of 'deconstruction', or, in Hegel's terms, that of antithesis. Because the narratives reflect this process of questioning and undoing so profoundly, they could not easily be included in a more traditional study of the Bildungsroman which works towards an eventual wholeness rather than fragmentation. Accordingly, what they have to say about (gendered) identity formation might not be conceived of as a necessary step in the growth towards a self-knowing gendered selfhood. Placed in the threefold structure of this thesis, however, the deconstructive process that the texts enact becomes an integral part of a greater process: a contribution to a gradual development of the critical understanding of gendered selfhood in the postmodern world. This means that to argue that *La nave de los locos* and *En breve cárcel* are anti-Bildungsroman does not remove them of their pertinence as primary texts in this project. Instead it highlights the usefulness of the interpretative framework established in this thesis as one that can make the primary use of the genre – that is, the portrayal of a model for self-development – more accessible. Ultimately, then, the location of these two novels (as well

<sup>118</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiii

as the four considered in preceding and following chapters) within this threefold structure, draws out the contributions that other kinds of stories can make to the elucidation of this fundamental human process.

In summary, these two novels, viewed within this framework, put in evidence the need for a phase of rejection of the norm, before the push beyond binary oppositions that is inscribed by the dialectic can take place. The texts articulate the need for an order, at the same time as they articulate the need for established orders to be interrogated and revised. This contradictory, simultaneous need for freedom and limits, linked to the experience of exile, can seem to be evoked via the dialectic, which first allows for deconstruction to take place, but also provides for a move beyond that confusion into a new phase in which lessons learned may be applied in order to engender an active and meaningful self. In other words, the dialectic is able to provide the structure without rigidity that the experience of exile seems to call forth. In this way, the exile texts studied in this chapter provide the stepping stone between the phase of identity construction, and the possibility of reconstruction that will be explored in the following section.

### Chapter Three

#### Agency and the Female Body:

*Arráncame la vida* (1986) by Ángeles Mastretta and *La nada cotidiana* (1995) by Zoé Valdés

This chapter is dedicated to the exploration of the final stage of *Bildung* as it has been articulated through the structure of this thesis, that of the phase of ‘reconstruction’, which will be explored using the topos of the body as the primary point of reference. In many ways this part of the threefold process of the dialectic is the most complex and difficult to define, for it is a point of culmination yet not an ending per se. Whilst it is the end point of this study, it is also a site of potentiality that needs to be left in a state of openness through its literary representation. In order for this to be achieved, an interaction must be made possible, via engagement with its socio-political and symbolic meanings, with a female body that is profoundly marked by hegemonic discourses. Most especially, the body is to be understood here as the site upon which gender, the category of identity most central to this thesis, is brought to bear and inscribed *as* identity. Thus, the body needs to be read here for both its symbolism and materiality; as the physical form that has been deployed in the foundation of dominant gender ideals within patriarchal symbolic orders, and as the material mechanism via which those ideals are expressed, acted out, and made part of everyday life in Western cultures.

It is as a consequence of the body’s multifarious role and manipulation that counter-theorisation of it has been a major focus of both feminist literary criticism and feminist studies more broadly. Judith Butler’s contribution to this debate is one that is of particular value to the present study as a result of its focus on the role of repetition in the formulation of gendered identity – a formative pattern that, I argue, can be positively interrupted by the dialectic. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler defines gender as an identity category that is brought to bear through the repetition of acts and ideas that legitimate some identities and exclude others:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive

appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.<sup>1</sup>

The formulation of an identity through repetitive acts that are legitimised by, and which effectively reinforce, the social order, is a process that can be seen to be paralleled by the generic regulation of the Bildungsroman as discussed in the Introduction, and in the resultant models for identity development produced by its (now contested) normative versions. The desire to encourage recognition of other kinds of Bildungsroman, and so other kinds of identities, to which this project seeks to contribute can therefore also be interpreted as a desire to underline the meaningful relationship between genre and gender, where both are understood as regulatory practises governed by the repetition of certain traits. In this way, the relationship between gender and genre brought about through the notion of the 'Other' Bildungsroman furthers an understanding of Butler's idea that it is possible for identities to be 'done' differently – for *Bildung* to take place differently.

Returning to the role of the dialectic in drawing forth these realisations, the stage of 'synthesis' to which this study now turns can be conceived of as a space in which repetition without difference is brought to an end. Instead, the antagonism inherent to the opposition between the stages of thesis and antithesis is negated by a push forward towards an accepted element of difference, even whilst retaining repetition through the inclusion of old elements in the creation of something new. In many ways, this recalls the dream that began *La nave de los locos*, in which the confusion of a mixed, non-binary organisational system is portrayed to have been brought about by the insertion of an active, female element. In the critical study of Mastretta's and Valdés's novels presented in this chapter, that active female element is the body and,

<sup>1</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.44. In a 2006 documentary about her work, Butler discusses the concept of 'Gender Trouble' as influenced by her own up-bringing and perceptions of gender and gendered identities as she was growing up. She mentions that her parents and grandparents were of generations of 'American Jews who understood that assimilation meant conforming to certain gender norms that were presented in Hollywood movies'. As a result, she says, 'looking around me trying to make sense of gender, I saw these extremely exaggerated notions of what gender was. But I think these were notions of Hollywood gender that came through Jewish assimilation and maybe 'Gender Trouble' is actually a theory that emerges from my effort to make sense of how my family embodied those Hollywood norms ... and how they also didn't. You know, they tried to embody them, and then there was some way in which they couldn't possibly. And my conclusion was that anyone who strives to embody them also perhaps fails in ways that are more interesting than their successes.' This discussion is of interest here due to its helpfulness in conveying Butler's articulation of gender as performative: the gendered identities she feels her parents adapted were made up through their repetition, or mirroring, of models that *already existed*. Their agency was not removed by the fact of 'doing' gender in this way, in that they could choose which acts to perform, however in order to successfully replicate the gendered model offered to them by Hollywood, those acts were limited by that pre-existing model. Paul Zajdermann, Dir., *Judith Butler: Philosophe en tout genre*, Documentaire Arte France & Associés, 2006 (10:12 mins)

expressed and explored via the body of the text, it serves as the space in and through which synthesis occurs. Moreover, it is through this synthesis that agency is gained, as the self-knowing female protagonists of the novels are able to recognise their identities as discursively constructed, and to retain the agency afforded by that knowledge by manipulating those same discourses. The body here then, is not simply the material form upon which gendered identities are inscribed. Rather it is the nodal point at which identity comes to be; to be done, to be undone, and to be redone.

*Arráncame la vida* (1985) and *La nada cotidiana* (1995) have both been critically recognised as female variations on the Bildungsroman,<sup>2</sup> and their structural and thematic references to the genre will be considered here as integral features of their portrayal of the female body as a site of resistance and source of agency. Images of and references to the body abound in both of these novels, so that its physicality, its sexuality, its symbology, and its consequent function as a vessel for identity both imposed and chosen, are closely intertwined in the process of gendered *Bildung* that they depict. The key moments and activities by which female development is seen to be punctuated will be shown to be connected to the body, as will the authors' redefinition of those moments and the socio-cultural ideologies through which they are invested with meaning. Three particular areas will structure this chapter: firstly, gender and nationhood, as the arena in which the female body is given a particular location in relation to politics; secondly, pregnancy and motherhood as defining roles and experiences that contribute to that locating; and finally, sex and sexuality as modes for self-exploration and the achievement of autonomy. The decision to discuss the connections made by the texts between the female body and national identity and politics before a detailed discussion of the more personal themes of sexuality and motherhood, enables a reading of the novels that is not limited by the chronology of their narratives. Responding to Butler's call for a successful genealogy of gender, this discussion of Mastretta's and Valdés's works traces backwards from the point of adulthood from which both are narrated, illuminating along the way how it is that the female identities portrayed here have been located within their particular cultural and national orders, and how they have resisted total sublimation into those orders through the physical body.

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<sup>2</sup> This observation is made, for example, about *La nada cotidiana*, by Thea Pitman in 'En primera persona: Subjectivity in Literary Evocations of Pregnancy and Birth by Contemporary Spanish-American Women Writers' in *Women: A Cultural Review*, 17:3, pp.355-67, p.57, and about *Arráncame la vida* by Claudia Schaefer in her book *Textured Lives*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), p.89

The two novels, whilst written almost a decade apart and set towards opposite ends of the twentieth century, share post-revolutionary settings, and the points of comparison provided by their respective portrayals of the political arena are highly valuable to a greater understanding of their broader critique of gendered identities. Catherine Davies has noted that Zoé Valdés is a Cuban writer who has, 'made a reputation for herself by criticizing the Cuban government and writing novels that some would call erotic and others pornographic' – a pithy assessment of the author's career and literary output that pulls to the fore the connections made in *La nada cotidiana* between the gendered body and the body politic.<sup>3</sup> In this, the last novel written before she left her homeland to live in France, Valdés locates the female body and gendered identity within Cuba's post-revolutionary nationalist discourse, showing it to be inextricably involved in the production of the female gendered national subject. She does not, however, depict this process of bodily appropriation only to leave the body in the passive state with which it is usually equated but, as will become apparent, writes it as a site of re-definition essential to the formation of her protagonist's individuality. Mastretta's novel, *Arráncame la vida*, is also given a post-revolutionary setting, in the politically turbulent Mexico of the 1930s and 1940s. It tells the story of Catalina Guzmán, and the life that she lives after being coerced into marrying, at the age of fifteen, a formidable and ambitious politician who is more than twice her age. Catalina is a female protagonist who gradually crosses the public/private divide usually emplaced along gender lines by learning to perceive of her body as an active rather than passive element in the construction of her selfhood. Catalina's development into a woman with a socio-political presence of her own, rather than defined by her marriage to a post-revolutionary political figure is paralleled with her gradual sexual autonomy and experiences of sexual pleasure. Thus, I will argue by foregrounding the physical body in a world that also plays upon its symbolic meanings in the formation of identity both writers initiate a re-codification of gender norms through which the binary standardisation of identity categories is undermined.

#### **Time Introduced into Woman: Social Context and the Political Body**

*La nada cotidiana* begins with an account of what might be considered an 'out-of-body' experience, in a chapter that itself seems to exist outside the main body of the text. Chapter One of the novel is a surreal episode set in a place where '[e]l espacio se

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Davies, *A Place in the Sun?: Women Writers in Twentieth Century Cuba*, (London; New Jersey: Zed Books, 1997), pp.223-4

transforma en nube blanca, pura';<sup>4</sup> a description intriguing in its evocation of a 'placeless' place, yet one which is unavoidably imbued with meaning as soon as it is linguistically evoked, through the equation of 'blanca' with 'pura'. As the chapter progresses, the reader realises that the setting is, in fact, purgatory, and therefore the female protagonist presented to us is in a liminal space somewhere between life and death, embodiment and disembodiment. Carmen Faccini has described this initial first chapter as an 'onírico, alucinado Capítulo Inicial' that 'adelanta, desde la perspectiva de la narradora, la Revolución como proyecto fracasado'.<sup>5</sup> Aesthetically distinguished from the following chapters by its presentation in italics, this section is also written from a third person narrative point of view that contrasts with the first person perspective of the rest of the novel. Faccini surmises that the reader 'anticipa así no una forma literaria que delate cabalmente una realidad referencial, sino una forma literaria que proyecta una realidad parcialmente percibida o, al menos, así retextualizada por Valdés'.<sup>6</sup> In other words, beginning the novel with a third person voice grants the writing a more objective, critical edge that distances it from the 'I' through which the protagonist will recount her own *Bildung* from this moment on. Yet, at the same time it also instils within that 'I' a critical tone that the reader will continually refer back to. This introductory chapter therefore reads as a meta-textual, fictionalized and mythologized literary creation by Yocandra herself, used to put forth her perceptions of how one becomes, and what it means to be, 'cubana':

*Ella viene de una isla que quiso construir el paraíso. El fuego de la agresividad devora su rostro. Los ojos casi siempre húmedos, la boca suplicante como la de una estatua de bronce, la nariz afilada.*

*Ella es como cualquier mujer, salvo que abre los ojos a la manera de las mujeres que habitan las islas: hay una tranquila indiferencia en sus párpados. También el cuerpo tenso, en contradicción con sus pupilas demasiado fluidas [my bold text].*<sup>7</sup>

The formation of this specific gendered national identity is overtly interlinked with the body in these first pages of the text through the physical characteristics and movements of the anonymous woman character. Hence, for the purposes of this study, this portrayal has an important function, as it begins an elaboration of the role that the physical body plays in the formation of identity, beyond the question of its sex.

<sup>4</sup> Zoé Valdés, *La nada cotidiana* (1995), (Barcelona: Ediciones Salamandra, 2004), p.14 All subsequent references are taken from this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Carmen Faccini, 'El discurso político de Zoé Valdés: "La nada cotidiana" y "Te di la vida entera"', <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/v07/faccini.html>, p.1, (last accessed 11th June 2010)

<sup>6</sup> Faccini, 'El discurso político de Zoé Valdés', p.1

<sup>7</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.13

In contrast to Faccini's and my interpretations of this chapter, Cristina Ortiz Ceberio interprets the nameless female more directly as Yocandra, the narrator-protagonist, rather than as a fictional character created by the fictional protagonist. She suggests that 'la narración de *La nada cotidiana* se sitúa en el momento anterior a la existencia de la narradora/protagonista, quien al iniciar su narración se retrotrae a un momento previo a su propia vida', and that as a result of 'esta focalización del discurso en un momento anterior a la existencia «terrena» del personaje, se apunta al lector que se va a enfrentar a un discurso que parte de un momento previo al condicionamiento cultural'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, for this critic, the free-floating figure here is Yocandra, temporarily located outside of discourse. Alternatively, my interpretation of this mysterious female figure as an imaginary character, invented by Yocandra as a vehicle for the expression of her own critical position on the gendered national body) means that the portrayal of this woman in an 'other-worldly' space achieves something in opposition to Ceberio's reading: rather than prove that *La nada cotidiana* is a story whose roots are to be found in a moment prior to the acculturation of the individual, the character presented by Yocandra instead serves to make visible, and then to revise, the cultural meanings inscribed upon the female body. Thus, the episode reminds us that the body is never freed of the meanings that are inscribed upon it, because, as Butler has elucidated in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), without those meanings it simply ceases to exist:

The process of that sedimentation or what we might call *materialization* will be a kind of citationality, the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the "I".

In this sense, the agency denoted by the performativity of "sex" will be directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which s/he opposes. The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practise, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.<sup>9</sup>

Butler's formulations of the body and its relationship to or role in agency are crucial to the proper reading of Valdés's work, for it is an analytical position that denies neither the materiality of the body, nor its fundamental role in the establishment of orthodox gendered identities via the elision of the sex/gender distinction, nor the possibilities of

<sup>8</sup> Cristina Ortiz Ceberio, 'La narrativa de Zoé Valdés: Hacia una reconfiguración de la na(tr)ación cubana' in *Chasqui: revista de literatura latinoamericana*, vol. 27 no.2 (1998), p.116-127, p.122

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.15



re-defining the meanings with which the body is invested. In this sense, Butler's articulation of agency is one that negates the need for a moment prior to cultural conditioning such as that sought out by Ortiz Ceberio; a moment which might otherwise seem a pre-requisite for the re-writing of bodily meanings and the subsequent re-definition of resultant identities. Henceforth the idea of an 'outside' which is not itself defined by its relationship with the 'inside' becomes untenable, as is the possibility of any truly exterior position. Again, this can be seen to be inherent to the description above of the purgatorial space as 'blanca, pura': the meanings of the symbolic order continue to define from 'within' that 'outside' space. In short, Butler demonstrates that the relationship between discourse and the body is reciprocal: at the same time as the discourses of gender (and nationality) require an interface upon which to make their presence felt, the body is also only made 'visible' due to the meanings invested in it by those discourses. Power and agency are therefore configured here through recognition of the permanent interiority of all identities to hegemonic systems, and through an equal recognition of the chance to play with the very codes with which those identities are construed. Within the terms of this project, this is a form of synthesis whose recognition can be empowering for the marginalised individual.

The nameless female character with which the novel starts is an important feature of *La nada cotidiana* precisely because she begins the re-writing of identity that becomes a central concern for this narrative account of female *Bildung*. Part of the way in which she serves this purpose is via her connection to Eve, a female figure who has appeared in every chapter of this thesis – a fact that underlines both her significance for female identity formation, feminism and Spanish American women writers alike. The first line of the novel refers to the unknown woman as one who 'viene de una isla que quiso construir el paraíso',<sup>10</sup> a statement that links the woman figure with the symbology of the Garden of Eden and which strongly implies that the Cuban revolutionary dream was never fully achieved – at least from this particular female perspective. As previously mentioned, Faccini has described this chapter as a projection of the narrator's view of the Cuban Revolution as a 'proyecto fracasado'. She also points out that the fact of this line being repeated at the very end of the novel gives the text a closed, circular form. I understand this circularity to be a structural feature that concretises the representation of the Revolution as a failed attempt at social change by returning the reader right back to where we begin, implying via the

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<sup>10</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.13

body of the text that nothing has changed during the period depicted. The sexed, and subsequently gendered body, however, is not imbued with such a sense of limitation, in line with my above suggestion that in this novel the body serves as a vehicle for agency by means of its re-codification. Rather, it is through this anonymous female body that Valdés's social critique of her native homeland is put across most fervently. It would therefore be erroneous to take this apparently negative perception of the Revolution as denigration of the idea of resistance towards dominant ideologies in broad terms, for, in a way reminiscent of the eponymous protagonist of Allende's *Eva Luna* as discussed in Chapter One, the possibility of a fresh start comes to be symbolized here by the female body: 'Dirige su cabeza hacia sus senos al aire libre. Está completamente desnuda y no siente vergüenza'.<sup>11</sup> Just as Allende's protagonist is not weighed down by the legacy of her socially unorthodox conception, by the 'sin' of her mother, the body of the nameless female of this episode is written in terms that refuse the association of her naked sex, which she openly studies in a mirror as she awaits her judgement,<sup>12</sup> with shame or guilt. Moreover, by the end of the oniric first chapter, this positivity appears to have marked the woman's body and identity, as she awakes on a beach, 'todavía desnuda, acostada en la arena, el mar alrededor de ella acariciando su piel afiebrada'.<sup>13</sup> The sea washing over her, yet another recurrent motif encountered in other parts of this study, takes on a symbolic meaning, signifying a cleansing process and a fresh start. Miguel Angel González-Abellas has interpreted the sea in the novel as a source of hope for Cubans in that it presents a possible escape route.<sup>14</sup> Yet here it is the sea that carries the woman back onto the island, and thus, in a sense, prevents her escape. Instead, it is *she* that brings hope to an island that 'queriendo construir el paraíso, ha creado el infierno',<sup>15</sup> by signifying the possibility of resistance; a potentiality with which she has been gradually invested throughout the dreamscape.

Just before the angel who will decide her fate, who introduces himself as '[é]l que decide',<sup>16</sup> casts his final judgement upon her, the woman 'piensa que siempre hay, en todas partes, ese «que decide». Y que nunca ha sido ella, precisamente, quien ha decidido por sí misma'.<sup>17</sup> Almost immediately afterwards, however, she goes on to

<sup>11</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.16

<sup>12</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.14

<sup>13</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, pp.18-19

<sup>14</sup> Miguel Angel Gonzalez Abellas, "A aquella Isla": Introducción al universo narrativo de Zoé Valdés' in *Hispania*, vol. 83, no.1 (March 2000), pp.42-50, p.45

<sup>15</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.19

<sup>16</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.16

<sup>17</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.18

state that 'no quiere saber. No le gusta conocer, porque conocer para ella significa abrir brutalmente una cicatriz',<sup>18</sup> a claim that can be interpreted as recognition of the difficulty of making the passage from ignorance and innocence to knowledge and maturity. Yet it is knowledge that entails agency, as the construction of the self becomes visible through understanding of the discourses, like those tapped into in this highly symbolic episode, by which it is brought into being. Ultimately, and tellingly, the angel's judgement is made difficult by the fact that she has earned equal points towards entrance into both heaven and hell, so that he is confronted with a female figure who is 'mitad sereno, mitad impetuoso'.<sup>19</sup> That she is not condemned to either form of death by him, but instead 'obligada a volver a su isla' leaves the reader with an ambiguous female figure who although still 'obligada' by the 'higher' powers whose existence she has been able to acknowledge, is nevertheless in possession of a body that is portrayed as a vessel for new possibilities of redemption, thus negating the association of the female body with passivity. Returning, then, to sum up my initial argument that this first chapter is a metatextual one written by the protagonist, Yocandra, I believe it can be read as an articulation of perceptions of gendered national selfhood from a knowing perspective of self-recognition. In this way, the chapter can be read as an objective, fictionalised portrayal in which aspects of the process of gendered *Bildung* are condensed into an oneiric episode so as to be made more accessible. Juxtaposed with this, the main narrative frame (to be discussed in greater detail later) becomes yet more clearly an account of the processes by which the female protagonist has gained this critical perspective on identity formation.

Mastretta's novel also deploys a first person narrative point of view, and it too recounts the life of its protagonist in hindsight, so that the mature analytical perspectives of the now grown narrator-protagonist seep through into the story. Claudia Schaefer has described this narrative structure as the incorporation of 'Mastretta's contemporary questioning voice' into that of Catalina.<sup>20</sup> The result is a 'retrospective portrait of a string of epiphanies', through which

discoveries of the foci of power are combined in a process of demystifying traditional cultural values which if adopted would, in theory, make the adult Catalina merely repeat the role of previous generations of women.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.18

<sup>19</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.18

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Schaefer, *Textured Lives*, p.91

<sup>21</sup> Schaefer, *Textured Lives*, p.91

Furthermore, Schaefer also makes a direct link between the coming-to-being of Catalina, and the post-Revolutionary Mexico in which she lives, writing that such a

foregrounding of the woman's voice personalizes history to reveal both Catalina and Mexico as the result of change and experience; they are neither eternally docile social, political, and economic subjects nor stagnant identities. Rather, they embody the dynamic forces between the control and expression of one's own 'desires' (either national or individual), and the imposition of limits or restrictions from 'outside' (dictated norms that exclude, repress or forbid by public proscription or private internalized self-censorship).<sup>22</sup>

Both of these observations point to the opposition, vital to the Bildungsroman, between the nascent individual and their societal context, Schaeffer's use of the term 'embody' also echoing the thematic concerns of this chapter and reminding us of the significance of the body as the locus of identity. For these same reasons, Schaefer's observations also call to mind those of Bakhtin, discussed in the Introduction, who describes the Bildungsroman as a novel in which 'time is introduced into man',<sup>23</sup> so that the coming-to-be of the genre's protagonist parallels the coming-to-be of the world more broadly. Yet the male-focused genre which Bakhtin studied has been greatly changed here, and the creation of a narrative that elucidates a relationship between the female gender, the female body, and the sphere of politics, puts in evidence a valuable shift in representational possibilities. Consequently, this novelty underscores too the existence of Post-Boom concerns in Mastretta's work, as she creates a female *Bildungsheld* whose growing interest in the world beyond her designated domestic realm leads her to engage in socio-political thought and action, crossing the orthodox gender divisions of male/female, politic/domestic, exterior/interior and active/passive. Nadia Dolores Avendaño calls Catalina's growth 'a gradual transformation from an object to an active subject' – <sup>24</sup> a summation that encapsulates the shift from a mere 'body' to an integral 'being'. The novel overall, therefore, is an account from a perspective of discontentment that is informed by the recognition of individual agency; an agency that has at once come about through, and played a role in, Catalina's steady accumulation of knowledge regarding the limitations imposed on her social role as a consequence of her gendered one.

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<sup>22</sup> Schaefer, *Textured Lives*, pp.91-2

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin, 'The Bildungsroman', p.21

<sup>24</sup> Nadia Dolores Avendaño, *The Contemporary Female Bildungsroman in Angeles Mastretta, Isabel Allende and Lucha Corpi*, Ph.D., University of Arizona, 2003, p.48

### Possessing the Body: Marriage and the Legitimisation of Gender Roles

As Rachel Blau duPlessis has indicated is often the case, Catalina's marriage to Andrés serves as a 'trope for the sex-gender system as a whole',<sup>25</sup> and through her retrospective portrayal it becomes clear that Catalina has grown to envisage her marriage as a significant part of the framework within which her socio-cultural and gendered identity is consolidated. Her marriage is foregrounded in the narrative through the opening line of the novel, when she says: 'Ese año pasaron muchas cosas en este país. Entre otras, Andrés y yo nos casamos'.<sup>26</sup> The portrayal of the way in which the marriage comes about is one which emphasises the marriage ceremony as one that solidifies traditional gender roles by affording legitimacy:

Siempre me río en las bodas. Sé que tanta faramalla acabará en el cansancio de todos los días durmiendo y amaneciendo con la misma barriga junto. Pero la música y el desfile señoreados por la novia todavía me dan más envidia que risa.

[Una boda así] no me hubiera cambiado la vida pero podría haber jugado con el recuerdo como juegan otras. Podría evocarme caminando el pasillo de regreso, apoyada en Andrés y saludando desde la altura de mi nobleza recién adquirida, desde la alcurnia que todos otorgan a una novia cuando vuelve del altar.<sup>27</sup>

Here Catalina recognises the social status awarded to the bride in particular, and thus the social legitimisation that comes as a result of entering into a partnership that is characterised first and foremost by the heterosexuality of the couple. That she, to a degree, laments not having been able to enjoy this orthodox rite of passage also reminds the reader that, in Catalina, Mastretta has not created a protagonist who personifies a radical rejection of the hegemonic order. Rather, the character of Catalina puts in evidence the social realities and ideas of her historical setting, whilst nonetheless encouraging a reflection on institutions that continue to serve as the

<sup>25</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Endings: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985), p.3 cited in Danny J. Anderson, 'Displacement: Strategies of Transformation in *Arráncame la vida*, by Ángeles Mastretta' in *The Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol.21, no.1, (Spring, 1988), pp.15-27, p.19

<sup>26</sup> Ángeles Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida* (1986), (New York: Vintage Books USA, 1997), p.9 All subsequent references are taken from this edition. It is interesting to note that Catalina's first descriptions of Andrés, similarly to her descriptions of many characters throughout the novel (e.g. Chofi, p.174), focus on his physical appearance. She writes that 'Tenía las manos grandes y unos labios que apretados daban miedo y, riéndose, confianza. Como si tuviera dos bocas ... No era lo que se dice un hombre guapo. Tenía los ojos demasiado chicos y la nariz demasiado grande, pero yo nunca había visto unos ojos tan vivos y no conocía a nadie con su expresión de certidumbre.' Her investment in physical details is a feature of the protagonist that reflects her class status and social surroundings, but which also implicitly underlines the fact of the female gaze and active female sexuality by emphasising that women, too, look and can gain visual pleasure from looking. Secondly, the description of Andrés's mouth serves as a retrospective recognition of his duplicitous nature and of the role that he would play in her life as, simultaneously, lover and tyrant.

<sup>27</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.13

building blocks of patriarchy. Aída Apter-Cragolino has commented on this ambiguous quality of Mastretta's protagonist, saying that:

[c]omo personaje Catalina adhiere al comportamiento que le asigna la cultura, aunque como narradora encuentra la capacidad de criticar ese papel y denunciar el modelo. La narración no se limita entonces a denunciar los moldes a los que la sociedad ha sometido a la mujer, sino que indaga en los roles femeninos y sus relaciones con las maquinaciones del poder y los valores de la clase social en que se desarrolla el relato. Expresa de esta manera toda la ambigüedad con que las mujeres se han solidarizado y han apoyado y ayudado a consolidar las mismas estructuras que les han sometido.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of the duality that Apter-Cragolino succinctly describes here, Catalina comes to embody the dualism that is fundamental to Butler's conception of performative agency. Remaining at once within the hegemonic order, but acting against it by using her body as a space of autonomy and refusal, she is always at once inside and outside, central and marginalised, active and passive, material and symbolic. In short, Catalina is written as a space of synthesis that shows ambiguity, rather than fixity or certainty, to be formative of agency:

The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *discontinuity*, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this "ground." The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.<sup>29</sup>

The portrayal of the marriage ceremony as a rite of passage through which gendered identities are legitimised serves as a useful metonym for Butler's theory, because its identity as 'ceremony' is acquired precisely through the *repetition* of its constituent rituals. The role of repetition in identity formation can thus be seen reflected within this particular example of a social ceremony that contributes to the sedimentation of gender norms. What is more, the reading of Catalina's own wedding as a figurative representation of the theory of performative agency is advanced by her own recognition that her wedding was not the fairytale episode she alludes to above, and that as a result she cannot '[jugar] con el recuerdo como juegan otras'. Arguably, the unavailability of this orthodox memory contributes to her liberation, as she cannot refer to it in order to console herself in moments of loneliness or oppression as she

<sup>28</sup> Aída Apter-Cragolino, 'Jugando con el melodrama: género literario y mirada femenina en *Arráncame la vida* de Angeles Mastretta' in *Confluencia*, vol.11, no.1, pp.126-133, p.131

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.179

suggests other women do. Catalina, instead, has memories of a wedding that align with the realities of her marriage – realities whose gradual confrontation is fundamental to the growth of her autonomy and social presence.

Demonstrative of the importance of this discontent, and arguably of its impact on her critique of the patriarchal social order in the novel, is Catalina's retrospective description of Andrés's attitude to marrying her in the first place:

– ¿Están aquí tus papás? –preguntó  
[...]  
–Diles que vengo por ustedes para que nos vayamos a casar.  
–Ni siquiera me has preguntado si me quiero casar contigo –dije–. ¿Quién te crees?  
– ¿Cómo que quién me creo? Pues me creo yo, Andrés Ascencio. No proteste y súbase al coche.  
–Entró en la casa, cruzó tres palabras con mi papá y salió con toda la familia detrás.<sup>30</sup>

The focus here is on Andrés's macho arrogance and the domination that he has over Catalina and her family – a dominance afforded by his gender, political, and class status. This is further compounded by the descriptions of him at the ceremony, yanking her away from her mother ('me jaló') and brusquely vowing to the judge, '[I]a acepto, prometo las diferencias que el fuerte le debe al débil y todas esas cosas, así que puedes ahorrarte la lectura. ¿Dónde te firmamos?'<sup>31</sup> The strikingly oppositional and imbalanced roles into which these vows push the couple are then, quite literally, inscribed. The question of the signature to finalise the ceremony is depicted as the signing over of Catalina's 'original' identity, and her transformation into another of her husband's possessions. As she signs her name Andrés leans over her shoulder and tells her to write 'De Ascencio'. '¿Tú pusiste *De Guzmán*'?<sup>32</sup> she asks, only to receive an unequivocal reply: 'No m'ija, porque así no es la cosa. Yo te protejo a ti, no tú a mí. Tú pasas a ser de mi familia, pasas a ser mía'.<sup>33</sup>

The issue of these now legally sanctioned gender roles is connected to national politics by Andrés's rendering as a macho male politician, and Catalina's, initially, as the stereotypically passive female who knows nothing about the complexities of the public sphere:

¿De qué tanto hablaba el general? Ya no me acuerdo exactamente, pero siempre era de sus proyectos políticos, y hablaba conmigo como con las

<sup>30</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.17

<sup>31</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.18

<sup>32</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.19

<sup>33</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.19

paredes, sin esperar que le contestara, sin pedir mi opinión, urgido sólo de audiencia.<sup>34</sup>

This early episode, which follows her deflowering on a trip away with 'el general' (to be discussed below), demonstrates Andrés's stereotyped hypermasculinity and Catalina's concurrent ignorance and capacity for rebellion. Despite his lack of interest in her opinions, she dares to share one with him after listening to his monologues on a particular political opponent. Again, his response clearly reaffirms his view of their respective roles:

- [...] 'Y tú que te metes, ¿quién te pidió tu opinión?
- Hace cuatro días que hablas de lo mismo, ya me dio tiempo de tener una opinión.
- Vaya con la señorita. No sabe ni cómo se hacen los niños y ya quiere dirigir generales. Me está gustando, —dijo.<sup>35</sup>

Andrés seems to enjoy what he perceives as Catalina's insolence, as he sarcastically says that she is pleasing him. At this time, however, he remains unthreatened by her self-expression because he can still see her as he expects her to be; an ignorant woman whose lack of sexual knowledge and experience can be equated with a general ignorance towards life. Through Andrés's words here, Mastretta seems to subtly point towards the same equivalence being made throughout the story, as there is a clear parallel between Catalina's coming to know her physical self and her coming to know the realities of her socio-political surroundings. Moreover, as her knowledge of these realities increases, so does her awareness of the fact that she can use her body as a site of political resistance, precisely because it is one of the things that her manipulative and dominant husband wants from her.

A key sign of this recognition is the episode in chapter seven of the novel in which Catalina comes to terms for the first time with the evidence of Andrés's cruelty and corruption; evidence that has been visible for a long time, but which, by her own admission, she has preferred to ignore. '¿Quién hubiera creído que a mí sólo me llegaban rumores, que durante años nunca supe si me contaban fantasías o verdades?', she writes, before admitting,

Yo preferí no saber qué hacía Andrés. Era la mamá de sus hijos, la dueña de su casa, su señora, su criada, su costumbre, su burla. ¿Quién sabe quién era yo, pero lo que fuera lo tenía que seguir siendo por más que a veces me quisiera ir a un país donde él no existiera, donde mi nombre no se pegara al suyo ...<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.17

<sup>35</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.13

<sup>36</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.72



Up until this point, it appears, Catalina has taken refuge in the obligations that come with her role as Andrés's female counterpart, accepting the safety provided by the social script, and comforting herself to a degree with the thought that she could never really know the truth and could only continue to do her 'duty'. In the space of this one chapter, however, she recounts becoming witness to the murder of an Indian man in which she is convinced her husband has had a role, and also learns of the death of a man whom she had seen in discussion with Andrés and whose daughter had asked for her help in solving the mystery of his disappearance. Through these events, she is confronted with and finally confronts the truth about Andrés's character, and her own role as 'la cómplice oficial'.<sup>37</sup> On the night of this event, Catalina interrogates Andrés about his involvement in the murder and, as a result of his denial and her disbelief, refuses him the right to sleep with her for the first time:

—Quítate este vestido que pareces cuervo, déjame que te vea las chichis, odio que te abroches como monja. Ándale, no estés de púdica que no te queda. Me trepó el vestido y yo apreté las piernas. Su cuerpo encima me enterraba los broches del ligero.

—¿Quién lo mató? —pregunté.

—No sé. Las almas puras tienen muchos enemigos —dijo mientras sobaba su cuerpo contra mi vestido. Pero yo seguí con las piernas cerradas, bien cerradas por primera vez.<sup>38</sup>

After this first refusal to allow Andrés access to her body, Catalina begins an exploration of her sexual desires that goes beyond the limits of her marriage for the first time also; one which continues the interlinking of her reclaiming of her bodily self with her greater socio-political presence. Following an attraction for the character of Fernando Arizmendi, which Andrés cruelly exploits to emphasise his power over Catalina by encouraging her flirtations despite knowing that Arizmendi is gay, she meets, falls in love with, and has an affair with orchestra conductor Carlos Vives. Her realization of her sexual desire for him is evoked through a number of episodes where she watches him, again reversing the orthodox role of woman as the passive object being watched, and the male as the active onlooker. These are roles that appear to have always been more traditionally distributed between her and Andrés, as is suggested by the lack of positive portrayals of their shared sexual life. The second time she goes back to find Carlos as he rehearses, she describes how

<sup>37</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.72

<sup>38</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, pp.98-99 Eva Nuñez-Méndez also references this connection in 'Mastretta y sus protagonistas: Ejemplos de Emancipación Femenina' in *Romance Studies*, vol. 20, no.2, December 2002, pp115-128, p.116

[m]e gustaba cómo movía las manos, cómo otros lo obedecían sin detenerse a reflexionar si sus instrucciones eran correctas o no. Daba lo mismo. El tenía el poder y uno sentía claramente hasta dónde llegaba su dominio. Iba por la sala, se metía en los demás, en mi cuerpo recargado sobre el barandal del palco, en mi cabeza apoyado sobre los brazos, en mis ojos siguiéndole las manos.<sup>39</sup>

Later, at another meeting she describes looking at his back, arms and legs and explains how she is intrigued by him because of how different he is from everything she has known up until that point. In this way, her sexual attraction to him, described above in terms that still invoke a familiar power relationship (through the image of his hands controlling the orchestra), is one that comes to symbolise the possibility of a positive union of opposites rather than the problematic antagonism of the power play between her and Andrés. Carlos represents a political liberalism that directly contradicts the despotism of Andrés and his cronies, and the power with which his masculinity endows him does not force Catalina into a passive position. Quite the opposite is true as she remains the onlooker, gaining visual and physical pleasure from the sight of the object of her desires. The traditional divisions of male/female and passive/active are thus broken down in her pairing with Carlos, which engenders a form of synthesis not usually expressed, as noted by Blau DuPlessis above, via the portrayal of heterosexual romantic scenarios. What is more, the entrance of Carlos into the Andrés-Catalina pairing creates a triangle that echoes the structure and dynamic of the dialectic and opens up new possibilities by presenting Catalina with a fork in the road. Danny J. Anderson concurs with this reading of Carlos's role in Catalina's *Bildung*. He suggests that Mastretta's novel can be divided into two blocks of thirteen chapters, the first of which he argues are dedicated to Catalina's 'sentimental and political education',<sup>40</sup> with the second set showing how she 'has to depend on her ever evolving political and sentimental savvy in order to negotiate the triangle among herself, Andrés and [Carlos]' (whom she meets in chapter thirteen).<sup>41</sup> In the same way that the murders discussed above served to initiate her distrust of Andrés and her physical and symbolic distancing from him, Andrés's eventual murder of Carlos, and subsequent removal of all he has come to symbolise for Catalina, Anderson observes, 'is the catalyst that motivates her to take action.'<sup>42</sup> At this point, for the first time, she denounces Andrés to the

<sup>39</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.165

<sup>40</sup> Anderson, 'Displacement: Strategies of Transformation', p.16

<sup>41</sup> Anderson, 'Displacement: Strategies of Transformation', p.17

<sup>42</sup> Schaefer, *Textured Lives*, p.10

authorities, deploying the political knowledge she has gained thus far to take a stand against the tyrannical figure upon whom she was once completely reliant.

Even before Carlos's murder, however, Catalina is portrayed as conscious of this shift in the pattern of her existence:

A veces en las noches despertaba temblando, suda y suda ... miraba a Andrés con la boca media abierta, roncando, seguro de que junto a él dormía la misma boba con la que se casó ... un poco más vieja y un poco menos dócil, pero la misma. Su misma Catalina para reírse de ella y hacerle la cómplice, la misma que le adivinaba el pensamiento y no quería saber nada de sus negocios. Esos días, todas las cosas que había ido viendo desde que nos casamos se me amontaron en el cuerpo de tal modo que una tarde me encontré con un nudo debajo de la nuca. Desde el cuello y hasta el principio de la espalda se me hizo una bola, una cosa tiesa como un solo nervio enorme que me dolía.<sup>43</sup>

I would argue that, in a narrative that resounds with references to the physical body and presents it as an active force for change, the translation of Catalina's nervousness into physical tension is more than a realist description of the potential effects of stress on an individual. Instead the metaphorical value of the realist notion is exploited as a narrative strategy; as a means of underlining the importance of her physical form as a motivational source of power. Reinforcing such an interpretation is the fact that this narrative strategy then becomes part of a narrative link which again connects Catalina's body and her changing psychological outlook. Encouraged by her friend Bibi to go for massages to assuage her muscular pain, Catalina befriends a woman named Andrea at the spa she attends. One day the two women have a dispute about the possible consequences of an adulterous affair on Catalina's part, into which interjects the masseuse, Raquel, naming a woman that Andrés had murdered because she tried to end their affair.<sup>44</sup> In this way, the physical effects of her growing realisation about the kind of man she has married and the entrapment of the marriage itself, leads Catalina to discover yet more worrying evidence about Andrés's violent capabilities. Here then, it is her body, rather than Carlos, that serves as the catalyst for her growth towards the knowledge that will give her agency.

Valdés's novel presents the reader with an account of marriage that closely echoes the one found in *Arráncame la vida*, where female manipulation by dominant male characters is again foregrounded. Three years into her affair with a man she only ever refers to as *El Traidor*, Yocandra recalls, he comes to fetch her, exclaiming:

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<sup>43</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.197

<sup>44</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.199

—Oye, tenemos que casarnos, hoy mismo, ya lo arreglé todo, hace falta que nos casemos... Necesito una mujer, digo, una «compañera»... Me dan un puesto importante en un país lejano, en Europa, y tengo que ir casado.<sup>45</sup>

Again, as with Catalina and Andrés, the sentimental symbolism of the ceremony is cut short as *El Traidor* pays the lawyer conducting it to go straight to the vows of commitment. Yocandra describes in hindsight what she imagined saying to the judge; a telling contrast to the 'Sí, lo acepto por esposo' that she eventually utters:<sup>46</sup>

«mire, compañera abogado, yo lo conocí menor, pero ya pasaron tres años de encierro, y soy mayorcita y sé lo que hago. Y lo que hago es lo que él ordene, porque él es un hombre del mundo y sabe lo que hace, y siempre le ha salido bien. Él va por el camino correcto y yo detrás. Para eso soy su novia, o amante, o secretaria o criada —no, perdón, la compañera que trabaja en la casa, las criadas no existen desde que la Revolución triunfó—o...»<sup>47</sup>

The clear similarities between this speech and that by made Catalina, quoted above, when she attempts to define her role in Andrés's life, expose the subordination of women within the sex-gender system as a common experience, and one given importance in the works of contemporary Spanish American women writers. Additional connections are to be found here too in the fact that the political backdrop of Valdés's novel is personified by *El Traidor* and his obvious commitment to a regime that Yocandra is equally critical of, as expressed above in his insistence on deploying the rhetoric of post-Revolutionary Cuba in labelling her new role as his 'wife', or rather, 'Compañera'. Yocandra, however, unpicks this political terminology so as to reveal the identities for which it can stand as a facade when she searches for an appropriate label for her role in his life and can only produce terms — 'novia, amante, secretaria, criada' —with obvious gendered associations and attached social roles.

Continuing to consider significant points of comparison, just as Mastretta's novel links the female body with the male-dominated world of post-Revolutionary Mexican politics so as to underscore its inherent possibilities as a site of resistance and identity reconfiguration, it can also be said that Valdés's text explores the inter-relationship between the female body and Cuban nationalist discourse. Towards the end of *La nada cotidiana*, Yocandra exclaims outloud, '¡Ay qué orgullo siento de ser cubana! ¡Ay, qué terror siento de ser cubana!'<sup>48</sup> a statement that, through the gendered grammar of Spanish language, evokes in just one word the centrality of both gender and nationality

<sup>45</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.57

<sup>46</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.59

<sup>47</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, pp.58-9

<sup>48</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.183

to her sense of self. These are the two categories of identity found at the heart of the novel. Two discursively constructed categories that, whilst they can inform a conceptualization of the self, cannot account for the materiality of the body through which she lives out her life as a *cubana*. Like in Mastretta's story, however, this novel's focus on the physical body requires engagement with that body as a site of identity construction. Foucault's theory of the body, characterised by Lois McNay as 'radically anti-essentialist' even whilst it 'does not deny the materiality of the body',<sup>49</sup> proves useful to a reading of Valdés's text, precisely for its focus on the physicality of the body. Such a reading recognises the sex/gender distinction that is so crucial to an analysis of female gendered identity, whilst simultaneously allowing for a body that must also be recuperated in order that women's experiences can be re-evaluated. In 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Foucault refers to the body as

the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas),  
the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity),  
and a volume in perpetual disintegration.<sup>50</sup>

and refers to a need for 'the [exposition] of a body totally imprinted by history'.<sup>51</sup> His words here – '*inscribed surface*', '*locus*' of the self and '*volume in disintegration*', as well as the notion of something that can be 'exposed' with a revised historical approach – refer directly back to the physical, and thus present the body as something that is made tangible through the effects of history upon it. Foucault's words here are extremely informative to a reading of the second chapter of *La nada cotidiana*, which presents an account of the events surrounding Yocandra's birth, and of the alignment of her own identity with the inauguration of a new regime and a subsequent new identity for her country. Yocandra writes that

Cuenta mi madre que era el primero de mayo 1959, ella tenía nueve meses de embarazo, ya sabía que yo era niña. Cuenta que caminé y caminé desde La Habana Vieja hasta la Plaza de la Revolución para escuchar al Comandante. Y en pleno discurso comencé a cabecearle la pelvis, a romperle los huesos. La tuvieron que sacar en hombros hacia la Quinta Reina. Antes de salir de la concentración multitudinaria, al pasar por delante de la tribuna, el Che le puso la bandera cubana en la barriga ...<sup>52</sup>

The context and events depicted here imply that the symbolic manipulation of her female body by nationalist discourse has begun even before she is born, as her mother's pregnant belly is covered by the national flag by one of the leaders of the

<sup>49</sup> Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.28

<sup>50</sup> McNay, *Foucault and Feminism*, p.15

<sup>51</sup> McNay, *Foucault and Feminism*, p.15

<sup>52</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.21

Revolution. Bringing to bear Foucault's notion of a body made visible only by the meanings with which discourse invests it, as soon as she is born Yocandra is immediately wrapped in the same flag that 'el Che' had draped over her mother. Figuratively enveloped in all of the historical, cultural, and nationalistic meanings that the flag symbolises, her corporeality is invested with the responsibility of symbolising the new nation state. This envelopment in the symbology of the Cuban nation is then furthered through the name that is chosen for the baby girl. Yocandra is, in fact, a name that the protagonist chooses for herself later on in her life. Her given name is Patria, and is, significantly, chosen by her father; a choice that prefigures *El Traidor's* later application of the nomenclatures 'mujer' and 'compañera', both of which also tap into patriarchal and socialist rhetoric. Her father, a personification of the new proletariat who is called in from the sugar harvest to assist at his daughter's birth, is profoundly disappointed when he learns that she has been born just minutes into May 2<sup>nd</sup>, and so not on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the Day of the Revolutionary Workers. In her retrospective account, Yocandra shows herself to be fully aware of the reason for his dissatisfaction, and does not hesitate in linking it to the relationship between herself, her body, and the politics of her homeland, stating:

Yo aún era un bultico baboso del unto materno envuelto en la bandera cubana y ya comenzaban a reprocharme el no haber cumplido con mi deber revolucionario.<sup>53</sup>

Her father finds solace in the prospect of choosing a name for his new daughter, and seizes the opportunity to emphasise his own conformation with national ideals:

—Pues mire... Me gustaría ponerle Victoria... o mejor, mejor... ¡Patria!... ¡Patria es un nombre muy original!... ¡Soy el padre, el padre de Patria, de la Patria! ¡El padre de la Patria! ¡Carlos Manuel de Céspedes! ¡El primero que libertó a sus esclavos! ¡Qué par de cojones, qué toletón!<sup>54</sup>

Despite his insistence on the originality of the name he chooses for her, it becomes clear through his glorified speech that the name he chooses is much more about him and his identity than it is about his daughter, as Yocandra now seems linguistically marked with the weight of his socio-political responsibilities.

Reflecting on the important gendered associations that surround the word *patria*, Kaminsky writes:

The ideological divisions that align woman with private spaces (house/home) and man with public space (*pais/patria*) play out in interesting ways around these linguistic and affective divides. Surely both

<sup>53</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.26

<sup>54</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.27

men and women partake of the benefits of both home and *patria*. Surely, too, they have differential access to those benefits. But the gender divide cuts across these terms in another way: the affective (home/*patria*) is associated with the feminine, and the objective (house/*casa*/country/*pais*) with the masculine. Yet this second formulation doesn't work so smoothly either. On the one hand, the domesticity of the house and conventional notions of masculinity do not easily coincide; on the other, *patria*, with its masculine root, is unbounded space to which women have traditionally been denied access.<sup>55</sup>

These observations serve to emphasise the complex and often contradictory associations that are set up between the individual and their social context through language and naming. Of particular interest here, though, is Kaminsky's final statement, where she emphasises the etymology of the name originally given to Valdés's protagonist, and in light of which 'Patria' is a nomenclature that threatens to deny her access to her 'self'. Regardless of his assertions to the contrary ('un nombre muy original'), the reader understands that her Father has not chosen this name for a uniqueness that could reflect his daughter's individuality, but because it will fully subsume her within the body politic of the nation whilst simultaneously investing her selfhood with the role of embodying the values by which the body politic is held together. In sum, this politically loaded name functions as a signifier that turns her body into a metaphor of the state; an apparatus of power to be manipulated and controlled by the dominant forces of patriarchal logic. Patria/Yocandra's decision to change her name thus comes into view as a refusal to be defined by the terms of the national, cultural and political discourses that dominate in her social context.

Focusing on the relationship between power and language, Nanne Timmer terms this name change as the enacting of a desire to 'nombrar' instead of 'ser nombrada', and makes a connection between this personal re-naming and the use of nicknames for all of the other characters in the novel.<sup>56</sup> One example of this re-naming appears in an

<sup>55</sup> Kaminsky, *After Exile*, p.4

<sup>56</sup> Nanne Timmer, 'La crisis de representación en tres novelas cubanas: *La nada cotidiana* de Zoé Valdés, *El pájaro, pincel y tinta china* de Ena Lucía Portela y *La última playa* de Atilio Caballero' in *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. LXXIII, núms. 218-219, enero-junio 2007, pp.119-134, p.126. Timmer says: 'En vez de ser nombrada, ella quiere nombrar. Por eso sólo leemos los apodos de los personajes que la rodean. Amigos como "La Gusana", "EL Lince" y "El Nihilista" se contraponen a personajes como "El Traidor", "La Macha Realista" y "La Militonta"'. En estos juegos de palabras observamos una revaloración de lo que se consideraba femenino u homosexual, y una crítica al "macho-leninismo". Las características estereotipadas de personajes como el padre, un típico guajiro revolucionario, el traidor, su ex-marido, y Fidel Castro, llamado "quien tú sabes", se superponen. La extrema devoción de la mujer y la decepción consecuente recurren en los tres casos, lo cual se explica si tomamos en cuenta que "en la sociedad socialista ha ocurrido un traspaso de poderes en el cual el patriarcado ejercido tradicionalmente por el Padre y el Esposo ha quedado ahora en manos del Estado" (here citing Madeline Cámara Betancourt, 'Feminismo vs totalitarismo: Notas para un estudio de textos y contextos de mujeres, en Cuba contemporánea (1989-1994)' in *Bordes* 2 (1995), pp.54-64)). Timmer assessment is useful for its

episode early in the text that serves as a opportunity for the direct articulation of Yocandra's own feelings about the implications of her given name. When she crosses paths with an old school acquaintance, who she calls *La Militonta*, the girl tries to get Yocandra's attention by shouting her old name:

—Oye, Patria, ¿estás sorda? ¿No te acuerdas de mí?  
 —Es que me cambié el nombre. Ahora me llamo Yocandra.  
 La Militonta estudia de cabeza a pies mi indumentaria, su rostro se vuelve desconfiado, pregunta desafiante:  
 —¿Y eso por qué, tú? ¿No te sentías orgullosa de tu nombre?  
 [...]
 Creo que no merezco ese nombre, no estoy a la altura. Era demasiado para mí...  
 —¿Tú no te habrías vuelto «gusana», de esas de los derechos humanos?  
 [...]
 ... no me llamo más Patria porque siempre odié ese nombre, porque en la primaria se burlaban de mí, porque en el fondo respeto profundamente el significado de esa palabra ... ¿qué sentido tiene llamarse así?<sup>57</sup>

Her rejection of the name Patria is here connected even more directly to the context of post-Revolutionary Cuban politics and, suspiciously by *La Militonta*, to political 'dissidence' (critique) – a strong element of Yocandra's character and story from the outset and one that is continuously connected back to the question of gender. In this way, given all that it has been shown to stand for in terms of the female role in patriarchal and nationalist discourses, and the societies that they inform, the fact of changing her name can be perceived as a symbolic rejection of masculinised ideals, brought to bear on the world through language, by which national identity for both genders is defined.

Overall, the portrayal of the events of Yocandra's birth come to exemplify Ania Loomba's assertion that

[n]ational fantasies [...] play upon and with connections between women, land or nations [so that] the nation-state or its guiding principles [are] often imagined literally as a woman.<sup>58</sup>

Loomba goes on to explain that '[a]s mothers to the nation, women are granted limited agency',<sup>59</sup> and are controlled as 'the 'site' rather than the subjects of certain historical debates'.<sup>60</sup> This denial of access to power is highlighted by Yocandra's mother's

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underscoring of the role of gender in the critique of Cuban politics put forth in the novel, and for the interconnections that it makes between the act of naming and re-naming discussed above in relation to Yocandra specifically.

<sup>57</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, pp.35-6

<sup>58</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, (London: Routledge, 1998), p.215

<sup>59</sup> Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p.218

<sup>60</sup> Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p.222



experience, for whilst she begins the painful labour that will fulfil what patriarchal thought defines as woman's most valuable social role, Castro's political speech continues undeterred, as if to concretise the obstacles put in place between women, access to political discourse, and therefore social presence. Moreover, because neither her physical nor her symbolic absence from the speech impedes the completion of his discourse, this woman and her experiences can be read as symbolic of the limited impact of the Revolution on the lives of Cuban women. Catherine Davies remarks that the material conditions and legal rights of the vast majority of Cuban women did improve in post-revolutionary society,<sup>61</sup> however, Valdés, who is openly anti-Castro, seems to suggest through this episode, and indeed through the novel as a whole, that their symbolic status and the limits that it imposed upon their daily reality evolved very little. Rather, she underlines the fact that the 'universal socialist subject [is] implicitly male',<sup>62</sup> meaning that Revolutionary ideals produced a society still based on the traditional hierarchy of gender that prioritizes the male subject. The role of women continued to be a functional one justified by their biological make-up; allowing them to 'to be incorporated into the workforce', 'protected as mothers (and children) in the heterosexual nuclear family' and thus seen as 'producers and reproducers...'<sup>63</sup> In this way, the portrayal of Yocandra's birth closely echoes Foucault's description, in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), of the social role of women following the hysterisation of the female body. Here, he writes that the female body is placed 'in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children'.<sup>64</sup>

#### **Unorthodox Portrayals of Pregnancy and Motherhood: Redefining the Role of Women in the Perpetuation of the Symbolic Order**

It is to the importance of pregnancy and motherhood as social roles, rites of passage, and therefore as integral elements of the *Bildung* of female gendered identities that this chapter now turns. It is arguably significant, in light of what comes across in the novel as her general defiance towards the social expectations of her cultural and political contexts, that Yocandra is a female protagonist who does not have children, or who at

<sup>61</sup> Catherine Davies, *A Place in the Sun*?, p.118

<sup>62</sup> Davies, *A Place in the Sun*?, p.119

<sup>63</sup> Davies, *A Place in the Sun*?, p.119

<sup>64</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume One: The Will to Knowledge* (1976), (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p.104

least has not had any up until the point in her life from which she narrates.<sup>65</sup> There is an ambiguity in her attitude towards having children, however, expressed when her boyfriend at the time of writing her Bildungsroman tells her that he would like to have a daughter with her. She responds by saying:

No son tiempos para locuras. Diera lo que no tengo por ser estéril. Debo andar a la viva, nada más de oler semen me embarazo. –Bostezo, diciendo lo contrario a mis sentimientos, pero ¿para qué ilusionarnos?<sup>66</sup>

It seems that this female protagonist envisages having children as something that is not a possibility for her, and even that she may have aborted a pregnancy in the past. Although her real attitude towards this issue is not made clear, the reader assumes that they are connected to her negative perception of her circumstances at both an individual and more broadly social. The society described in the novel, as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter, is characterised primarily through lack – through the ‘nada cotidiana’ of the title – and as the novel draws to a close the effect of this on Yocandra’s psychological as well as physical existence is made increasingly evident.

Contrastingly, Catalina finds herself pregnant by Andrés at a young age, giving birth to her first daughter at just seventeen years old. As if to mark, via the structure of the narrative, the importance of this event in her life as a self-contained episode, a rite of passage, Catalina starts the fourth chapter of her narrative with a description of her first experience of pregnancy and early motherhood:

Tenía yo diecisiete años cuando nació Verania. La había cargado nueve meses como una pesadilla. Le había visto crecer a mi cuerpo una joroba por delante y no lograba ser una madre enternecida. La primera desgracia fue dejar los caballos y los vestidos entallados, la segunda soportar unas agruras que me llegaban hasta la nariz. Odiaba quejarme, pero odiaba la sensación de estar continuamente poseída por algo extraño. Cuando empezó a moverse como un pescado nadando en el fondo de mi vientre creí que se saldría de repente y tras ella toda la sangre hasta matarme.<sup>67</sup>

Focusing on the representation of these themes in fiction by Mexican women writers, Nuala Finnegan asserts that because of their biological role as reproducers, women ‘are the [...] vehicles through which the existing tyrannical power structures are perpetuated and upheld’, and that ‘[t]his raises the crucial question of the complicity of

<sup>65</sup> Yocandra also mentions that *El Traidor* was uninterested in having children (p.53).

<sup>66</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.163

<sup>67</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.39

women in the maintenance of the systems of power that oppress them'.<sup>68</sup> Catalina's descriptions of the experience of pregnancy concur with an understanding of that experience as one by which she is further oppressed within the patriarchal system, of which her husband is representative. In much the same way as her sexual and romantic involvement with Carlos, discussed above, serves as catalyst for her realisations regarding Andrés's political corruptness and cruelty, her displeasure during the experience of pregnancy is an earlier impetus for her recognition of the subjugation she suffers at the hands of her husband. Up until this point in her marriage Catalina has demonstrated extreme dependence on her husband in even the most banal details of her daily life. For example, when, early in their marriage, Andrés is briefly arrested as a suspect in a murder case, rather than focusing on the possibilities of his involvement, as she would later learn to do, one of her first concerns is: '¿Con quién me iba a acostar? ¿Quién me iba a despertar en las mañanas?'<sup>69</sup> Following her description of the nine months of pregnancy, however, she confidently acknowledges his role in her discomfort, stating that 'Andrés era el culpable de que me pasaran todas esas cosas'.<sup>70</sup> In doing so, she removes him from the role of comforter and protector, and instead connects him with a negative experience – one whose consequences would remain with her from that moment onwards in the child who, in accordance with social norms, would be primarily her responsibility. In effect, her sense of selfhood, still very much in the process of formation, has been radically impacted by the new gender and social role(s) to which she must now adapt.

It seems logical, therefore, that having made the connection between her oppression at the hands of Andrés, the system he embodies, and her body's biological capabilities, Catalina's resistance of man, system and biologically determined role increases from this moment onwards in the narrative. Recalling the birth of her second child, she writes:

Cuando [Sergio] empezó a llorar y sentí que me deshacía de la piedra que cargaba en la barriga, juré que ésa sería la última vez.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to traditional reverence of the motherly role, and a sense of fulfilment on both personal and social levels, Catalina's descriptions of both her pregnancies focus on the bizarre sensations that the growth of the babies produces within her body.

<sup>68</sup> Nuala Finnegan, 'Reproducing the Monstrous Nation: a note on pregnancy and motherhood in the fiction of Rosario Castellanos, Brianda Domecq, and Angeles Mastretta' in *The Modern Language Review* 96.4 (2001), p.1006

<sup>69</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.29

<sup>70</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.39

<sup>71</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.56

These physical sensations can be interpreted more symbolically also, and connected to the role that pregnancy has been argued to play in the subordination of women within the symbolic order. Catalina's words 'por algo extraño' highlight the nature of possession as an act that involves the crossing of limits or boundaries, as well as its inevitable mixing of the known and the unknown. In this particular case, given that she is carrying the child within the known bounds of her own body, the unknown has here been internalised by the breaking down of the traditional divisions between inner and outer – a binary opposition whose role in the creation of categories of identity was referred to at the start of this chapter. Butler writes that:

"Inner" and "outer" make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability [...] Hence "inner" and "outer" constitute a binary that stabilizes and consolidates a coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subject to displacement. If the "inner" world no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity becomes similarly suspect.<sup>72</sup>

It has already been suggested that, in a number of ways, Catalina is a character who is able to cross back and forth between the binary divisions that are fundamental to the patriarchal social structure (one of which is understood to be primary and masculine, the other secondary and feminine), and that she achieves this in part through the manipulation of her physical body as a locus of selfhood. In direct contrast to this is the paradigmatic machismo of Andrés, whose perceptions of gender roles throughout the novel are clearly oppositional. At least, that is, until the end of his life, where he too acknowledges Catalina's fluidity:

Nunca he podido saber lo que quieres tú. Tampoco dediqué mucho tiempo a pensar en eso, pero no me crees tan pendejo, sé que te caben muchas mujeres en el cuerpo y que sólo conocí unas cuantas.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, at an earlier stage of the narrative he also goes some way to recognising qualities in her that are stereotypically associated with the masculine: 'Eres una vieja chingona. Aprendiste bien. Ya puedes dedicarte a la política.'<sup>74</sup> In this way, even whilst he is an extreme example of patriarchal thought and its social power, Andrés serves here to voice a belief in female capacities beyond those to which their traditional gender roles limit them.

Cixous has described the possibilities of female identities defying patriarchally imposed limits as 'bisexual', and writes that 'for men this permeability, this

<sup>72</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 170

<sup>73</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.288

<sup>74</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.121

nonexclusion is a threat, something intolerable'.<sup>75</sup> Important parallels can be found between the this conceptualisation of 'bisexuality', and the concepts of 'inner' and 'outer' which Butler also assesses in terms relating to danger, saying that '[r]egardless of the compelling metaphors of the spatial distinctions between inner and outer, they remain linguistic terms that facilitate and articulate a set of fantasies, feared and desired'.<sup>76</sup> The process of pregnancy and those processes surrounding it – the movements of the sexual act, conception, the growth of a child inside its mother, and the final moment in which that new being is expelled – are dependent on the permeability of the female body; on its existence as a boundary that can be crossed and its ability to draw masculine elements into its own confines. Thus, read in relation with Cixous' concept of 'bisexuality', and Butler's understanding of the 'inner' and the 'outer', pregnancy is understood to call into question the 'coherent subject' that binary divisions work to establish.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, women are seen to challenge their own existence as subjects by performing a creative process that is reliant upon and yet destabilizes that very subject status. This might be perceived as the consummate irony of woman's place in the hegemonic symbolic order, and one that returns us to Finnegans' earlier assertion regarding the complicity of women in the order that subjugates and marginalises them. Through these symbolic associations woman come to be feared and controlled, so that the bodily abilities that permit her to reproduce the subjects necessary to the perpetuation of the system that oppresses her, actually reasserts her own subjugation. Cixous, however, goes on to reinforce her understanding of this bisexuality as something unique to women, providing a positive depiction that works against the patriarchal indictment of 'unboundedness'. A positive depiction that focuses on the constant fluctuations between male/female, active/passive, subject/object, inner/outer that are performed and metaphorised by the female physical form:

But there is a nonclosure that is not submission but confidence and comprehension; that is not an opportunity for destruction, but for wonderful expansion. Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveller in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Newly Born Woman' in Susan Sellers, ed., *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.35-46, p. 42

<sup>76</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.170

<sup>77</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.170

<sup>78</sup> Cixous, 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/ Forays' in *The Newly Born Woman*, (London: Routledge, IB Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1996), p.86

The nouns 'nonclosure' and 'expansion' recall here Catalina's repeated association with the ocean – a feminised trope that has been recurrent throughout the novels studied in this thesis and previously referred to in this chapter in connection with Yocandra. Its recurrence in this way is a strong sign of the impact of symbolic associations on tangible experiences. This is heightened through the fact that connection of this female protagonist and the sea begins in the first chapter of *Arráncame la vida* when Catalina goes on a trip to the coast with Andrés – a trip on which she loses her virginity to him. During this trip Catalina is indeed a 'traveller in unexplored places', both geographically and more intimately. Introducing this episode, she tells her reader that '[y]o no conocía el mar', and through this establishes a connection between the sea and an important moment in her coming-to-be through a coming-to-know of herself.

### ***Bildung*, Sex, and Sexuality: Rites of Passage and the Reclaiming of the Self**

This final section of the present chapter now considers in more detail episodes of these novels already pointed towards and implicit in, the discussions undertaken thus far; ones which draw forth the two authors' portrayals of sexual experiences and the subsequent discovery of female sexuality as a form of self-expression and agency. Continuing the consideration, initiated above, of the role of the sea in Catalina's *Bildung*, I turn to Elizabeth Grosz's interrogation of the female body's association with liquidity as one of the symbolic modes through which not female subordination per se, but the *need* for female subordination within the patriarchal symbolic order, is expressed. Her pithy summary of this idea is worth citing in full:

Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as a formless flow; as a viscosity entrapping; secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus, but self-containment – not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? I am not suggesting that this is how women are, that this is their ontological status. Instead, my hypothesis is that women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage. My claim is not that women have been somehow desolidified but the more limited one which sees that women, in so far as they are human, have the same degree of solidity, occupy the same genus, as men, yet insofar as they are women, they live themselves as seepage, liquidity. The metaphors of uncontrollability, the ambivalence between desperate, fatal attraction and strong revulsion, the deep-seated fear of absorption, the association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body (particularly but not only with the onset of puberty and in the case of pregnancy), its powers of cynical seduction and allure are all common themes in literary and cultural

representations of women. But these may well be a function of the projection outwards of their corporealities, the liquidities that men seem to want to cast out of their own self-representations.<sup>79</sup>

Grosz's hypothesis is usefully applied to a reading of the female body in Mastretta's text because it underscores the links between the 'metaphorics of uncontrollability' and the tangible existence of the female body. It also points directly to the inter-relationship that is set up between the two by the hegemonic order. As a result she might be seen to find a way around what Lois McNay has criticised in Butler's work, that is, that Butler fails 'to connect the symbolic construction of the body to other material relations in which this process takes place'.<sup>80</sup> The metaphors and tropes that Grosz points out are interlinked with the female body in *Arráncame la vida* through the image of the sea and its transformation into a trope with which the initiation of Catalina's self-knowledge (and therefore growth towards agency as envisaged by this study), is also entwined. During the early stages of their relationship, Andrés takes Catalina on a trip, during which she is completely under his influence:

Tenía quince años y muchas ganas de que me pasaran cosas. Por eso acepté cuando Andrés me propuso que fuera con él unos días a Tecolutla ... En realidad, fui a pegarme la espantada de mi vida. Yo había visto caballos y toros irse sobre yeguas y vacas, pero el pito parado de un señor era otra cosa. Me dejé tocar sin meter las manos, sin abrir la boca, tiesa como muñeca de cartón, hasta que Andrés me preguntó de qué tenía miedo.<sup>81</sup>

Catalina's narrative reflections on this moment in her life reveal her lack of comprehension of what was expected of her. In response to her obvious dumbfoundedness at his sexual performance, Andrés asks Catalina '¿No sientes? ¿Por qué no sientes?', to which she responds: 'sí siento, pero el final no lo entendí'.<sup>82</sup> Soon afterwards, nonetheless, she inadvertently admits to Andrés that she does not know what it is that she is supposed to have 'felt':

—¿Por qué no me enseñas? — le dije  
—¿A qué?  
—Pues a sentir  
—Eso no se enseña, se aprende — contestó.<sup>83</sup>

Andrés's reaction to her request demonstrates that, despite being much older and more sexually experienced ('[n]os empezaron a llegar rumores: Andrés Ascencio tenía

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.203

<sup>80</sup> Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p.35

<sup>81</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.13

<sup>82</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.12

<sup>83</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.13

muchas mujeres, una en Zacatlán y otra en Cholula, una en el barrio de La Luz y otras en México)<sup>84</sup>, he is as oblivious as the fifteen year-old Catalina to the female body's capacity for sexual enjoyment. That both sexes are ignorant to the possibility of female sexual pleasure also, therefore, comes to reflect within the fictional world of the novel a broader, socially interred disregard for the female body as anything more than a vessel for reproduction. Andrés's final comment in particular compounds this ignorance, reading as an evasion tactic through which he is able to disregard the fact that he knows nothing about Catalina's sexuality, body, likes or dislikes. In this way the episode takes on a more subversive meaning, for rather than simply reflecting orthodox power imbalances between male and female gendered identities, it serves to turn the female body into a space within which such hierarchical oppositions can be refuted. Most precisely, Andrés unwittingly admits here that there exists a part of Catalina that he is unable to control. Alicia Llarena refers to this notion of the unreachable in Catalina as 'lo esencial' in terms of the feminist merits of Mastretta's novel. She remarks that it is not 'su progresivo aversión hacia las normas sociales, ni [su] declaración de la igualdad' that matters in the novel, but rather 'la aceptación de esas regiones íntimas, diferentes y auténticas, que el general veía – temía, quizás – como lo único inasible, incontrolable, desconocido, en las múltiples mujeres que hay en su mujer.'<sup>85</sup> In a related interpretation of the episode, Jane Lavery recognises that 'the virgin's reliance on the male's sexual expertise reflects traditional gender and hierarchical power roles based on binary divisions', but proposes that Catalina's failure to reach orgasm is a form of resistance to Andrés's attempted sexual appropriation.<sup>86</sup> Catalina's first sexual experience thus serves as a subtle indication of the possibilities for female sexual autonomy that will then be explicitly explored in the novel.

In another episode, the significance of which has been recognised by a number of other critics, Catalina turns to another female, 'la gitana que vivía por el barrio de La Luz y tenía fama de experto en amores',<sup>87</sup> in order to learn precisely what it was that Andrés was referring to when he asked her if she could 'feel'.

– Aquí tenemos una cosita – dijo [la gitana] metiéndose las manos entre las piernas –Con ésa se siente. Se llama el timbre y ha de tener otros

<sup>84</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.11

<sup>85</sup> Alicia Llarena, 'Arráncame la vida de Ángeles Mastretta: El universo desde la intimidad' in *Revista Iberoamericana*, vol. LVIII, Abril-Junio 1992, Núm. 159, pp.465-475, p.471

<sup>86</sup> J.Lavery, 'The Physical and Textual Bodies in the Works of Ángeles Mastretta and Elena Poniatowska', in *Romance Studies*, vol.19 (2), December 2001, p.174

<sup>87</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.15. This episode is also considered in detail by J.Lavery, Eva Nuñez-Méndez and Claudia Schaefer, all of whom highlight its role in the connection of Catalina's body to her autonomy and ability to undermine dominant discourses on gender and sexuality.



nombres. Cuando estés con alguien piensa que en ese lugar queda el centro de tu cuerpo, que de ahí vienen todas las cosas buenas, piensa que con eso piensas, oyes y miras; olvídate de que tienes cabeza y brazos, ponte toda ahí.<sup>88</sup>

Lavery affirms the importance of this scene as one that ‘anticipates the autonomy and self-control which Catalina will later exert over her own body.’<sup>89</sup> Crucially, Catalina does not reserve this information for her next encounter with Andrés (or anyone else), as the gypsy woman suggests, but deploys her newly gained knowledge in solitary sexual experimentation. In doing so, she further derides traditional male/female/logos/pathos binaries by using her newly gained knowledge of her own physicality in order to *learn* how to *feel* pleasure – despite Andrés’s insistence that this was not possible. Lavery’s assertion that ‘the focus on the ‘physical’ derives from [Mastretta’s] determination to challenge the concept of woman as a site of lack, and to examine the ‘dark continent’ of female sexuality from a feminist perspective’ is put in evidence by this moment of the narrative,<sup>90</sup> which comes to represent a significant moment in the *Bildung* of this female protagonist. Catalina’s lack of a phallus is not simply remedied, but rendered irrelevant by the fact that she, representative of women more broadly, does not need to be penetrated by the male sex in order to reach orgasm – the moment of the sexual act that, according to paradigmatic macho male Andrés, ‘es lo que importa’.<sup>91</sup> As opposed to a site from which something is missing, the uniqueness of the female body is portrayed here in such a way that that this ‘lack’ – an abnormality only when placed in comparison with a masculinised norm – is turned into a positivised difference, and Catalina’s sexual liberation is again connected to her desire to be autonomous and through that autonomy construct her own identity.<sup>92</sup>

As if in recognition of the potential for autonomy that Catalina’s sexual self-explorations and consequent gain in self-knowledge afford her, Andrés overtly connects the female gender with the sea, tapping into the symbologies of liquidity and excess elucidated by Grosz above. As Schaefer has also noted, he remarks that ‘[m]e molesta el mar, no se calla nunca, parece mujer’,<sup>93</sup> a negative comparison that indicates

<sup>88</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.15

<sup>89</sup> Lavery, ‘Physical and Textual Bodies’, p.175

<sup>90</sup> Lavery, ‘Physical and Textual Bodies’, p.174

<sup>91</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.12

<sup>92</sup> Lavery, ‘Physical and Textual Bodies’, p.175. In this article, Lavery cites an interview that she held with Mastretta, in which the author describes female sexuality as ‘rica, prolongada y distinta’, highlighting ‘the importance of the multiplicity of female orgasm’ in contrast with the singularity of male orgasm. (p.180). It seems clear that these ideas inform her portrayal of Catalina’s sexuality in the episodes discussed here, in which the trope of excess is connected to female sexuality within the novel.

<sup>93</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.288

a fear of an incessancy that he cannot control. For Catalina, the associations are directly oppositional. The sea is connected to 'fleeting instants of liberation' and associated with a 'constant murmur' which 'seem[s] to remind her continually of her inner desires, in spite of and in contrast to the surrounding society.'<sup>94</sup> In an intriguing connection between such feminised metaphors and symbols, the means of the despot's own downfall is linked in the narrative to both liquids and to Catalina. It is through a gradual and prolonged intake of a 'black lemon' tea that his demise comes about. The tea, given to Catalina by a woman she had helped years before, was said to have beneficial effects on the health when taken in moderation. However, it is also known to prove addictive, and subsequent over-consumption to prove fatal. Catalina is in possession of this information, and so is able to regulate her own intake of the infusion. Andrés, on the other hand, refusing to believe that a simple tea could cause him any harm, drinks it in large amounts in the period leading up to his death. The fact that Catalina is ultimately implicated in Andrés's death is an element of the novel's dénouement that is left open to potential criticism from a feminist perspective, because it aligns traditional female symbolic associations with equally orthodox fears of the 'castrating' female. Contradictorily, however, it can also be read as another of the many examples in the novel of the stereotyped tropes of femininity being manipulated in order to strengthen the position of women within the symbolic order; a form of subversion from 'within' that is central to Butlerian conceptions of performative agency, outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

Regulatory discourses on the female body and sexuality are also called into question early on in *La nada cotidiana* through a critique of the upholding of virginity as a valued marker of successful femininity. That the two female protagonists of these novels have in common a number of significant developmental moments is an important marker of the commonality of certain experiences on the road to female adulthood, and one that is, hence, telling of the regulatory practises that contribute to the formation of gendered identities. The rite of passage of losing one's virginity is treated in *La nada cotidiana* too, although in a more analytically direct way than in Mastretta's narrative. Even as a young girl Yocandra refuses to perceive her virginity as something sacred that must be protected, and underlines the arbitrariness of its social symbolism by pointing out that 'era señorita por la vagina, pero no por otros

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<sup>94</sup> Schaefer, *Textured Lines*, p.103

«anabes».<sup>95</sup> This statement indicates a rebellious exploration of sexual pleasure in ways that might still be socially condemned, but which are not endowed with the same relevance to female gendered identity and its imposed parameters. Serving to further the critique of this method of regulating female sexuality, *El Traidor*, introduced above as the man who will eventually become Yocandra's first husband, actually refuses to sleep with her because '[él] no soportaba a los vírgenes, él no se atrevía a romper algo tan delicado y húmedo',<sup>96</sup> as a hymen. Yocandra ironically points out in hindsight: ¿[c]ómo iba a sospechar que mucho tiempo después, y muy a menudo, iba a desgarrar zonas más sensibles en mí: la dignidad, el alma, y toda esa mojonería tan importante para nosotras?,<sup>97</sup> implying a critique of the ideological control of the physical body as taking place to the detriment of the recognition of individual psychological and emotional development. At the time, however, she becomes determined to get what she wants by complying with the older man's particular perspectives on her body, and his own responses to the social mores that labelled that particular part of her as 'delicate'. She writes with tenacity that she left his house with the intention of purposefully ridding herself of her virginity:

Me abrió la puerta y por ella salió, no una jovencita asustada, sino un himen criminal. Un himen dispuesto a matar el primer pene que se atravesara en su camino.<sup>98</sup>

Through this episode we see the female character in a double bind, one in which she pursues her own desires by conforming to those of *El Traidor*. Nonetheless, her language here expresses not passivity, but action: her virginity is not something that will be taken away from her, nor will it be offered up by her as a signification of her femininity and compliance with gender roles, but as something that she will use in the pursuit of *her* desire. In this way, even whilst the limitations of hegemonic powers, symbolized by *El Traidor*, are not inescapable, her desire serves as a drive to resistance against the social definition of her being. Her body is changed from the foundation upon which her identity is constructed, into the means by which she might be able to gain self-definition. Again this recalls Butler's emphasis on the ever present possibility of 'reaction' against dominant discourses, even as the subject continues to be defined by his or her relationship with such ideologies. As the episode under discussion unfolds, the description of the way in which Yocandra effectively deflowers *herself*,

<sup>95</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.44

<sup>96</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.44

<sup>97</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.44

<sup>98</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.45

continues the exemplification of the reconfiguration of gender codes. She recounts that leaving the house of *El Traidor* she encounters 'un peludo' high on marijuana and drunk on rum, 'que no tenía idea de su destino, sólo sospechaba que tenía que salir de aquel marasmo'.<sup>99</sup> She kidnaps the stupefied man, hitch-hikes a ride in a General's car (which she halts by exposing her breasts), and takes him to a nightclub:

Le di cuatro bofetones, lancé dos jarras de agua fría en su imbécil cara y comencé a besarle para no perder la costumbre del romanticismo. En el pullman descosido y sudoroso, escuchando un bolero en la propia voz de José Antonio Méndez, él se abrió la portañuela, y se sacó el pito bien tieso. Yo ya tenía el blúmer por los tobillos. Evoqué la guillotina, y de un tirón me senté en la cabeza del rabo. Él chilló de dolor, ya no había lubricado lo suficiente. Costó trabajo, pero lo decapité. Sólo hubo un mínimo ardor y una aguada sangrecita. Mi himen había cumplido su cometido: matar a un tolete ... De Machoquí, mi destupidor, nunca he vuelto a saber.<sup>100</sup>

The portrayal of this moment in the protagonist's life directly contrasts with expected accounts of a young girl's first sexual encounter – a more normalised version of which is provided in *Arráncame*, where, as Lavery has observed, Catalina is dehumanised by Andrés's objectification of her.<sup>101</sup> Valdés instead portrays a female character who is in control of the event from the outset, but, more than this, she also recounts the scene in such a way as to evoke a rape scene of reversed gender roles. Machoquí, whilst not an unwilling accomplice and therefore not a disempowered victim, is nonetheless turned into the passive element in this scenario. The analogy drawn between Yocandra and a guillotine, however, is recourse to violent imagery that places her in the role of perpetrator of this sexual act; as a female castrator. It is also recourse to a chain of signification by which the reader is encouraged to recall the Revolution, tracing back through the French Revolution itself, so that the active female body becomes intertwined with the symbology of both resistance and power in a highly politicised manner.<sup>102</sup>

Protagonism in her sexual life is something that truly comes to the fore as a fulfilling area of Yocandra's existence as her active enjoyment of her body is represented and explored in the text through her relationship with the man she nicknames *El Nihilista* – a fellow dissident whose own work as a cinema director is made subject to censorship by the authorities.<sup>103</sup> The fact of an active female sexuality,

<sup>99</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.46

<sup>100</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, pp.46-7

<sup>101</sup> Lavery, 'Physical and Textual Bodies', p.174

<sup>102</sup> With reference to Cuban literature especially, the reader is reminded here of Alejo Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces* (1962) in which the guillotine features strongly as a revolutionary symbol.

<sup>103</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p. 146

again as opposed to a female body that bears a relationship to sex only through its reproductive function, is once more emphasised here through the literary evocation of a female gaze, recalling Catalina's close observations of Carlos's body. Much more explicit than that portrayal, however, Yocandra eulogises the physical beauty of her lover, and expounds at length their sexual activities on the night they first met and also during one evening that she refers to as '*nuestra nueve semanas y media*'.<sup>104</sup> Their shared rejection of the limitations of dominant ideologies is translated into the sexual relationship that these two characters share through the trope of excess. In particular, this is called forth by the focus, on the part of the narrator, on the number of orgasms that she has each time they are together ('[t]uve siete orgasmos, o mejor, me vine siete veces'),<sup>105</sup> and on bodily fluids – saliva,<sup>106</sup> sperm,<sup>107</sup> and 'mi licor vaginal' –<sup>108</sup> that tap into the metaphors of liquidity connected to female gendered identity by Grosz. What is more, this superfluity stands out greatly in a novel that focuses to a large extent, as indicated by the title, on the limitations of daily life in Cuba. Indeed, these quotidian limitations directly connected to the body, and then juxtaposed with the open-endedness that comes to characterise the sex-scene through the description of the meagre meal the two share beforehand:

Devoramos las pizzas, las tripas resuenan indecentes, protestando porque no quedan del todo satisfechas, sino más bien ahorcados ... Apuramos la botella [de vino] y nuestras cabezas apenas dan una media vuelta, entonces nos damos cuenta de que el vino no alcanza para desordenar al máximo nuestros sentidos y simulamos la deliciosa borrachera que suponemos debería acontecer.<sup>109</sup>

In many ways, the vibrant description of the sex-scene as a follow-on to this means that it comes across as a form of compensation for a sense of lack in relation to other areas of life. Yocandra's and *El Nihilista*'s crossing of the boundaries of each other's bodies is thus bound up in the novel with a redefinition of individuality (by their coming together) and experience (plentitude provided by their inter-relationship) through the materiality and pleasures of the body. This is a different form of bodily politics, in which the human form becomes the tool by which to react against socio-political and cultural limitations of a number of different kinds.

<sup>104</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.162

<sup>105</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.151

<sup>106</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, pp.153, 159

<sup>107</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, pp.154, 162

<sup>108</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.161

<sup>109</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.158

For these reasons it is significant that at this stage the novel takes on a self-referential style that, I argue, is reminiscent of the meta-textual beginning of this work. The result of such stylistic techniques is the underlining of the text as linguistic construction, and therefore as social comment rather than as a simpler form of realist narrative – the kind of escapist literature whose limitations have been traditionally associated with women's writing. It begins:

«Parece que los capítulos ocho de la literatura cubana están condenados a ser pornográficos.»

Así se expresará el censor cuando lea estas páginas. El censor que me toca por libreta, porque cada escritor tiene un policía designado.<sup>110</sup>

Yocandra's direct references to the censorship of literature by the Cuban state, because made at the start of the chapter in which she most explicitly portrays sex and sexuality, serve to comment in an equally explicit manner on political control of bodies both textual and sexual. Thus, she highlights the intimate connections between the physical body, the body of writing in which she describes it, and the body politic of which it is a constituent part. Put another way, as a result of her blatant confrontation with the established rules of censorship through her narrativisation of the body, the body of the text takes on the same task of questioning the discursive regulation of identity as Yocandra performs through her own physical form. It is thus that she condemns the censorship of female desire and its regulation via socio-political and cultural discourse.

The focus on literary censorship, therefore, now brings us back to the beginnings of this study, to the debate on literary genre and to the question of the possibility of the female *Bildungsroman* – or even female *Bildung* itself. Valdés has created a protagonist who narrates her own *Bildung* by placing the physical body *en relief*, and subsequently defies imposed limitations on self-expression thematically, politically and generically. In a sense, this pushing forth, beyond pre-established boundaries and towards self-expression is a movement also necessarily envisaged as a kind of excess, an overflow from one space into another; a blurring of boundaries and demarcations. In other words, it is a movement towards synthesis, whereby previously separated forms and characteristics are forcibly drawn together. The dynamism of this shift is mirrored in the growth towards agency that, I have argued, is encapsulated, metaphorised and performed in *Arráncame la vida* and *La nada cotidiana* through the female physical form.

More broadly, within the terms of the threefold structure of this thesis, arrival at the point of agency is the arrival at an end point that does not signify an ending *per se*.

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<sup>110</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.144

As with all of the novels studied here, both Yocandra's and Catalina's narratives end openly, projecting forwards into the future. Yocandra recalls, in her last paragraph,

amigos muy grandes que murieron, otros que se fueron y otros que se quedaron. Todos aquí, dentro de mí. Dentro de las palabras que sé más si soy yo quien las escribe. O si son ellas las que me escriben a mí:

*Ella viene de una isla que quiso construir el paraíso...*<sup>111</sup>

This, whilst not an entirely optimistic ending, is nonetheless a final paragraph that, through the image of the words being written or writing her, suggests continuation and potential by returning the reader to the start of a novel that, as I have already argued, begins with a female figure of hope and continuity. Catalina's ending is, in keeping with the stylistic differences between the two novels, somewhat more clear cut. The novel ends with the funeral of Andrés, whose textual demise cannot easily be disconnected from the text's obvious socio-political motivations, thus pointing hopefully towards a future without the form of patriarchal control embodied by her husband. Compounding this demise, and directly suggesting its necessity, a friend at the funeral tells Catalina that 'la viudez es el estado ideal de la mujer ... Se pone al difunto en un altar, se honra su memoria cada vez que sea necesario y se dedica uno a hacer todo lo que no pudo hacer con él en la vida.'<sup>112</sup> Shortly afterwards, in the last words of this female Bildungsroman, the sense of liberation described by this character appears to be developing within the protagonist herself, when she says she felt '[d]ivertida con mi futuro, casi feliz.'<sup>113</sup>

### Conclusions: 'Writing Beyond the Ending'

Throughout this chapter, and through Mastretta and Valdés's works, I have explored the viability of an agency, located in and performed through the body, by which a dynamic move towards new realities is made possible. These explorations have been underpinned by a Butlerian understanding of agency as something that is achieved not by stepping outside of discourse, but through recognition of the subject's continual state of interiority. Put another way, agency can be achieved through a gradual recognition and acceptance of the individual's discursive location and formation – the ultimate aim of *Bildung* as it has been conceptualised in this thesis. Thus, by reformulating, rather than rejecting the Bildungsroman as a generic framework for the

<sup>111</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, p.185

<sup>112</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.297

<sup>113</sup> Mastretta, *Arráncame la vida*, p.305

articulation of female *Bildung*, Mastretta and Valdés have been seen to establish a space of textual synthesis – a phase of reconstruction using a combination of old and new elements. This has in turn enabled them to highlight the female body as a space of synthesis within which inscribed identities can be renegotiated. The female body, in these works, is made visible as a site of identity that is, to borrow Butler's words, 'both constrained by certain kinds of cultural forces but not determined by them, and also open to improvisation and malleability and repetition and change.'<sup>114</sup> The possibility of continuity is invoked by both writers' use, in their final lines, of the strategy that Blau DuPlessis has termed 'writing beyond the ending'; a 'transgressive invention of narrative strategies ... that express[es] critical dissent from dominant narrative.'<sup>115</sup> Here, the dominant narratives in question are those grand narratives by which gendered identity formation is shown to be governed and explored, but also the grand narrative of the classical Bildungsroman. Through this formal technique, therefore, these two protagonists' *Bildung* is clearly shown not to end here, or with accommodation into their respective socio-historical contexts. Rather, to borrow once more the words of Jennifer Browdy de Hernández and Adrienne Rich, these are novels that 'dwell on that dangerous cutting edge of possibility, stringing out bridges of words into the uncharted future',<sup>116</sup> driven by 'the energy of desire' and 'summoning a different reality.'<sup>117</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Jill Stauffer, 'Interview with Judith Butler' in *The Believer*, [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview\\_butler](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview_butler), pp.1-8, p.7, (last accessed 11<sup>th</sup> June 2010)

<sup>115</sup> Blau DuPlessis quoted by Danny J. Anderson. Anderson applies this terminology in his own discussion of the ending of Mastretta's novel, however it is equally and usefully applicable also Valdés's text as discussed here.

<sup>116</sup> Browdy de Hernández, *Women Writing Resistance*, p.9

<sup>117</sup> Rich cited by Browdy de Hernández, *Women Writing Resistance*, p.9



## Conclusion

### From Uncharted Lives to Uncharted Futures

This thesis began with an introduction to the Bildungsroman as a literary genre, the continued popularity of which, centuries after its birth in eighteenth-century Europe, indicates that its capacity to express the process of ‘coming-to-be’ of the individual has enabled it to remain a vital generic form, and to cross temporal and geographical boundaries. In the introduction, I suggested that, as further evidence of this malleability, the Bildungsroman has been adapted by the six Spanish American women writers upon whose work my study focuses, and deployed in their explorations of gendered identities. It was also acknowledged, however, that the flexibility that would seem to be the very reason for its extensive travelling throughout global literature is one that has been contested – especially on grounds of gender. As a consequence, the texts in question were identified as ones ‘doubly-marginalised’ within the Bildungsroman canon; a marginalisation evocative of the invisibility, until recent times, of the Spanish American woman writer within her own regional literary landscape.

Taking these observations as a point of departure, an overview of Spanish American literature was then provided, in which the major role of the artist as a voice for socio-political and cultural concerns was emphasised. Recognition of this social presence led, in turn, to an informed understanding of the necessity of women writers also being able to claim their place within this tradition. Identifying their now greater visibility as an especially important tenet of the Post-Boom literary wave, I went on to outline the thematic and related stylistic concerns of that generation of writers, including their focus on localised social concerns, youth and popular culture, and their return to realism as a mode through which to engage with these issues. What came into view through this outlining, was an image of the Post-Boom as a late phase of a gradual growth towards identity that had taken place through literature: a growth that finally enabled women writers to contribute to the social voice searching to articulate an ‘I’ in which, moreover, the question of gender had taken on new importance.

It was then argued that in light of this artistic *Bildung*, in which literature, identity and gender was drawn together, the Bildungsroman, a genre through which the complex relationships between the personal and the social can be negotiated, appears as an especially valuable symbolic form for the Post-Boom author. However, given its

aforementioned delimitation on grounds of gender, before its full potential for the aims of Post-Boom women writers could be made clear, it was necessary to undertake a detailed excavation of its roots, thus to expose the reasons behind its perceived limitations. This critical venture revealed a form that had grown out of very specific historical and cultural circumstances, but also one whose tenets assured its potential for flexibility and subsequent adaptation for the expression of the development of other temporal, cultural and gendered inflections of personal identity. It was argued that what might, initially, be conceived of as a simple mould for the perpetuation of hegemonic norms at the level of gendered identities, was in fact a symbolic form that elucidated the possibility of reconfiguration by endowing its protagonist with agency. This is because, whilst the hinging of the Bildungsroman narrative on the tensions between self and society, its concern with the negotiation of external pressures and the role of those forces in identity formation, characterise it as a symbolic form highly apt for the consideration of gendered identities as discursively *constructed*, as a consequence of the internal dynamism of *Bildung*, it also discloses the possibility of *deconstruction* and *reconstruction*.

This potential comes into view most clearly when the process of *Bildung* that provides the narrative trajectory of the *roman* is temporarily removed of its literary guise, and considered on its own terms – as the structuring tenet of the genre. It was at this stage that the role of the Hegelian dialectic in my analyses was elaborated upon, through the recognised comparison of Hegel's *Spirit*, travelling through the dialectic stages of thesis, antithesis and synthesis towards Absolute Knowledge, (the point of self-recognition), with the *Bildungsheld* whose journey towards selfhood is narrated by the Bildungsroman. The re-articulation of that dialectic *Bildung* in terms germane to my primary material enabled a reading of it, informed by poststructuralist and feminist approaches to gendered identities, as a formational journey through the phases of 'construction', 'deconstruction' and 'reconstruction' of the gendered self. Ultimately, therefore, *Bildung* was reformulated here as the process of coming-to-know the gendered self as a discursively produced entity whose agency inheres, precisely, in that capacity for self-recognition.

In this way, throughout the Introduction, the primary aim of my thesis was established to be a reading of a corpus of Spanish American novels by women writers via the threefold framework provided by Hegel's Dialectic, in which each of its three stages was adopted as a lens through which to search out the authors' portrayals of specific phases of identity development. As a consequence, the analytical limitation of whether or not the novels in question could, or indeed should, be considered Bildungsroman, was

removed. Instead, it was made possible to consider the six works as a cross-corpus re-working of the genre's broader narrative trajectory towards agency. This approach enabled the detailed consideration of more finite aspects of the novels, so that three topoi became the foci of this thesis: myth, exile and the female body. Together they represent important trends in the academic study of Spanish American women's writing, and serve to elucidate the writers' critique of orthodox gendered identity formation.

The 'construction' of gendered identity was explored in Chapter One, through the topos of Myth, and in relation to *Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende, and Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate*. Here, I explored the ways in which the two writers turned to myth, archetype and the fairy tale (a genre related to the Bildungsroman), in their portrayals of female self-development, and considered both the usefulness and the limitation of such reference points to a critique of gendered identities. Overall, what came into view was an ambiguity in their portrayals that allowed neither for a reading of these novels as ones that presented a radical reappraisal of the question of gender and its social role, nor as works that fully conform to hegemonic models of femininity and masculinity. Rather, the importance of these texts to the findings of this study, came to be their insistent underscoring of the social codes, inflected by myth in a variety of ways, that govern gendered identity formation in the Spanish American context.

In Chapter Two, Exile served as the topos for the exploration of what might be considered the more radical phase of Dialectic *Bildung*, that of 'deconstruction', in which hegemonic structures and discourses on identity formation are most forcefully confronted. It was therefore apt to explore this stage through exile literature, in which traditional organisational structures are thrown into disarray through the experience of expulsion, leading to a similar crisis at the level of individual identity. The protagonists of the works studied in this chapter, Equis from Cristina Peri Rossi's *La nave de los locos* and the anonymous female writer-protagonist of Sylvia Molly's *En breve cárcel*, were seen to challenge dominant discourses on identity formation through their 'problematic' sexualities – he as an impotent male and she as a lesbian. It was posited that these highly deconstructive works portray the world of 'outside' that continues to be defined by its relationship with the 'inside', and thus underline the role of gender in the formation and workings of the binary systems by which hegemonic power bases are structured, informed, and upheld. In the final analysis, however, it was upheld that the protagonists of these texts come to reveal the interstices inherent to the dominant system, and begin in those

spaces of exile an exploration of selfhood that points to the possibility of reconfiguration that was the focus of the final analytical chapter of this project.

Chapter Three focused on the female body as the epicentre of identity, locating within it the agency towards which Dialectic *Bildung* is understood to drive. Through a study of *La nada cotidiana* by Zoé Valdés and *Arráncame la vida* by Ángeles Mastretta, the body was shown to be the location of performative agency: a dualistic site in which the material and the symbolic come together. Through a consideration of the themes and events through which these writers depict female *Bildung*, and of the constant presence of the body within those representations, I emphasised the portrayal of the female body as point of synthesis, in which the mythical construction and the exilic deconstruction of gendered identities meets in the reconstruction of an active, not passive female body. I argued that agency is located in this body precisely as a result of the writing 'I's newly achieved recognition of its simultaneous, dualistic, and paradoxical location, marked by hegemonic discourses and implicated in the perpetuation of the same, but nonetheless a site of resistance and potential self-redefinition.

Across the three analysis chapters, and throughout the three stages of gendered *Bildung* that they depict, a number of vital commonalities have come to light, suggesting the existence of common reference points for Spanish America women writers. It has become apparent, as the project has progressed, that the primary trope of each chapter was also at work in each of the other chapters, so that, wordcount permitting, it might have been possible to consider all six texts within each 'stage': the mythical cast to which Allende and Esquivel make recourse appears in Molloy's narrative as the writer-protagonist dreams of Diana and Artemis, and the mythical is invoked in Peri Rossi's portrayals of Graciela and in Valdés's oniric first chapter. Exile, as a location and as a condition, is also present as a result of *La nada cotidiana's* Cuban setting, and is connected to characters in *Eva Luna* both through their individual history and in its guise as a metaphor for social marginalisation. Perhaps most striking, however, is the heightened presence of the female body. Evoked symbolically, that sexed and gendered body is continually referred to as a site for the inscription of identity. Wherever it appears in these texts, the female body is imbued with the trope of excess, primarily explored in this study via the sea and other forms of 'liquidity' that came to play a significant role in my analyses of *La nave de los locos*, *En breve cárcel*, *Arráncame la vida* and *La nada cotidiana*, and which is stylistically inflected in Allende's and Esquivel's female Bildungsromane through their use of the fairy tale and magical realism – modes where the fantastical and the real spill beyond their boundaries and over

and into one another. This excess is connected to the sense of potential and dynamic that, as argued in my Introduction, is a fundamental characteristic of the Dialectic, and thus it is linked also to open-endedness in relation to both narratives and gendered identities. Materially, the body is foregrounded in the writings studied here as a lived experience; the fact of ‘embodiment’ continually underscored through the descriptions of physical and emotional sensations. As a result, its tangibility is intertwined with its metaphorical existence, and the reader is left with a sense of this body as a form of ‘wholeness’ – the nodal point described it in Chapter Three, through which all of the experiences described in these six contemporary female Bildungsromane, are lived out.

In this conclusion, I wish to emphasise this appearance of the female body because it seems to me to serve, when grasped *fully*, as a site of meaning of great significance to Spanish American women writers and their readers. This is because it is a site upon and through which Spanish American feminism can (and does) ground itself. Discussing the analysis of gender and the role of feminism as a critical strategy in Latin American studies, Kaminsky turns to a particular conceptualisation of ‘presence’ that, I would argue, chimes with the trajectory of this study and its culmination in the female body. She writes:

“Presence” does not rely on a psychoanalytic explanation of coherence; it is rather, a notion that posits the sense of self in the quest for transformation. Consciousness-raising is part of this process – it is transformative, collective, and can make for crucial changes in self-definition. This conscious positioning, enabling choice and agency, is what is at stake; not some (as of today) irreconcilable and unanswerable questions about the stability of the psychological subject or the subject as language effect. Presence is created in history and through language; it represents and is represented, but it also acts on material reality.<sup>1</sup>

In this summary, Kaminsky makes use of a number of terms and concepts – ‘quest for transformation’, ‘consciousness-raising’, ‘transformative’, ‘agency’ – that recall the vocabulary through which this project has been elucidated. Thus, whilst Kaminsky draws these key terms from the field of Latin American political practise more broadly, here they locate ‘presence’ in the Bildungsroman, and so inflect the argument, put forward in this thesis, that the genre has much to tell about what Spanish American women’s writing – as an important element of Spanish American feminism – has achieved, needs to achieve, and can achieve in the uncharted future.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaminsky, *The Body Politic*, p.25

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