

Almost the Same, but Not Quite:  
Re-Orienting the Story of the Subject in  
Cristina Fernández Cubas's *El año de Gracia*

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Cristina Fernández Cubas (Arenys de Mar, 1945) is one of Spain's most intriguing storytellers today. Famed for her works of short fiction, most notably *Mi hermana Elba* (1980), *Los altillos de Brumal* (1983), *El ángulo del horror* (1990), and *Con Agatha en Estambul* (1994), she has also released two novels, *El año de Gracia* (1985) and *El columpio* (1995), and more recently a play entitled *Hermanas de sangre* (1998). As the author herself tells it, she was unable to mold her creative ideas into stories that would one day be published until she left Spain to live in Latin America for two years starting in 1973. The return from this trip radically changed her perspective of the experiences in her past and her vision of the present:

El mismo día de la vuelta, nada más pisar el puerto de Barcelona, me di cuenta de la distancia que implica un océano y de lo engañoso, en cuanto a cómputo de tiempo, que significa cambiar de país pero no de idioma. Me sentí una extranjera en mi propia tierra, un ser completamente desarraigado, pero también, al poco, comprobé que, durante aquellos dos años al otro lado del océano, las cosas habían ido ocupando su verdadero lugar en mi memoria y en mi vida.

The very day of my return, no sooner had I set foot in Barcelona than I realized the distance implied by an ocean and the deception, with regard to reckoning time, involved in changing coun-

tries but not languages. I felt like a foreigner in my own land, a completely uprooted being, but also, after a little while, I confirmed that during those two years on the other side of the ocean things had gone about occupying their true place in my memory and my life. ("Elba: el origen de un cuento" my translation; 116)

Distance, deception, time, crossing to the other side and then returning with a new perspective, feeling foreign within the realm of the familiar, sensing sameness in a land of difference, finding the place of things in memory and in life—all these motifs intertwine in the fascinating fictions that this author has imagined. In exploring the experiences that influenced her life, that inspired her to tell her stories, Fernández Cubas also delves into the multiple facets of subjectivity. How do we define who we are? How do we develop our identities in contention with or in collusion with other people? How does all that we read influence our concepts of self and others? How might that vision change with time? How do the spaces that surround us contour the shape of what we see, of the way we see it, and of how we see ourselves? These issues indelibly inform the study of the subject, which may be viewed as that never-yet completed entity structured by forces such as the social, political, and cultural.<sup>1</sup>

The disorienting paradox of experiencing "otherness" and "sameness" all at once, both when living in the formerly colonized Latin America and after returning to Spain, emerges in the postcolonial thematics of Fernández Cubas's first novel, the story of a young Spaniard who is shipwrecked on a deserted island with only a mangy shepherd for company. The political dialectics of self/other found in the European's discovery and conquest of an unknown island in *El año de Gracia* evoke *Robinson Crusoe*, a fundamental literary expression of Western imperialism, and echo the chronicles of the *conquistadores* of the "New World." In Fernández Cubas's literary depiction of the European subject, however, she situates him—and he is male, like his canonical predecessors—on the margins of power in order to view the dynamic from a different perspective. As such, this novel may be seen as a Spanish revision of what Edward Said has called "Orientalism." Observing that "European culture gained in

strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (89), Said asserts that Europe has traditionally dominated the other in order to aggrandize itself: "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (89). Here the "Orient" may be extended to encompass the various empires of Western nations. If in Orientalism the West designates the other as a mirror of the self—a technique that has arguably shaped the novelistic Subject of the West since *Robinson Crusoe*—then Fernández Cubas's first novel subverts this paradigm of the Western novel. Her European castaway is at first overpowered by the other and then, in his struggle for control, comes to appreciate and learn from those different qualities instead of subsuming them beneath his personal dominance. Hence while *El año de Gracia* clearly foregrounds *Robinson Crusoe* as its model text, it also re-orientates the once supreme subject in the site of exclusion; moreover, he tells his story from a newly formed, hybrid perspective of the oppressor and the oppressed melded into one. In the process, the novel problematizes the binary relationships of power and polarization that underlie the foundational texts of Western subjectivity.

*El año de Gracia* is the first-person account of Daniel, a Spaniard who, at the age of twenty-four, abandons seminary life and his study of dead languages. Then Daniel's older sister, Gracia, grants him a year of financial freedom—a year of "grace"—to travel and explore life as he sees fit. The protagonist embarks on his adventures in Paris, where he has a love affair with a woman named Yasmine, but then, afraid that he is missing out on life, Daniel abandons his girlfriend to go to the port town of Saint-Malo. From there he sets sail on a boat called "Providence" with Tío Jean, a captain he meets at the wharf, and Naguib, Tío Jean's surly and sinister boat hand. Eventually Daniel suspects that the two men accepted him not for his questionable skills as a mariner but as a hostage to blackmail Gracia for money. During a frightful storm, Daniel's two captors argue and Naguib "falls overboard," according to Tío Jean.

Soon the ship wrecks and Daniel finds himself washed up on a barbed-wire-enclosed island that is deserted except for the presence of a primitive old shepherd, Grock, and some extremely violent sheep, all of whom are mysteriously covered with infected pustules. Since Grock nurses him through a raging fever and teaches him how to survive on the island, Daniel, in a position of submission, must learn the shepherd's language and obey his orders. One evening, the protagonist spies a Bible in the man's hovel and begins to read it out loud. Enthralled by Daniel's power of language, Grock acquiesces to his demands for more freedom on the island in exchange for weekly sessions when Daniel intones the Scriptures for him. Thus Daniel finds a way to regain a little power for himself.

One day, a plane arrives with scientists who drop off liquor for the shepherd, take Daniel's picture and interrogate him as to his presence there. Leaving behind medicine to prevent Daniel's contamination and warning him to steer clear of the old shepherd, the scientists promise to return in a week to rescue him after the medicine has taken effect. The protagonist marks his gratitude to Grock on their last evening together by giving the old man Tío Jean's red sheepskin jacket, which Daniel had rescued from the sinking ship and worn ever since. On the appointed day, Grock tries to prevent his only friend's departure by hitting him with the huge Bible, and then running onto the beach to distract the men in the plane. Seeing the figure in the red coat, the men shoot and kill him. Then, descending from the plane, they search for the shepherd. When Daniel finally reveals himself, dressed in Grock's sheepskins, they believe him to be the shepherd and, assured that the subject of their study of the effects of chemical waste on humans remains intact, they abandon him again. Later, a group of ecologists arrives in secret to document the chemical waste and they return Daniel to civilization as proof of the island's contamination.<sup>2</sup> Since they believe Daniel's manuscript about his experiences to be tainted as well, they burn it but supply him with a photocopy of the document. Eventually, Daniel meets a woman named Gruda McEnrich, who bothers him because she laughs at everything, but he marries her anyway. However, in or-

der to fall into peaceful sleep at night Daniel often ponders his experiences on the island, which he is loathe to share with anyone.

Of all Fernández Cubas's texts, *El año de Gracia* has elicited the most response from literary critics thus far. John B. Margenot III draws on intertextuality as a fundamental technique of parody and self-consciousness in the novel. Catherine Bellver studies Fernández Cubas's re-writing of the travel account as a rite of initiation ("El año de Gracia: El viaje . . .") and as a questioning and displacement of the privileged word ("*El año de Gracia* and the Displacement . . ."). In addition, she examines the literary intertexts that the author uses as metafictional targets of parody ("*El año de Gracia* and the Displacement . . ." and "*Robinson Crusoe Revisited* . . ."). Concha Alborg also points to the importance of the metafictional elements, and sees this novel as a return to the typical happy ending of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel. Casting the metafictional aspect in a different light, Phyllis Zatlin studies the novel as part of the genre of the fantastic ("Tales from Fernández Cubas . . ."). In another article, Zatlin notes the work's contribution to Spanish literature by women in its defamiliarization of the intertext of the male quest ("Women Novelists in Democratic Spain . . ."). Julie Gleue also points to the various literary models that *El año de Gracia* draws on and subverts, while studying the tension of the epistemological and ontological perspectives in the novel. In his turn, Robert Spires views the work as a process of *desaprendizaje* that unravels the way Western logic shapes identity ("El concept del antisilogismo . . .") and, in a separate study, he examines Fernández Cubas's depiction of gender as a discursive construct in this novel ("Discursive Constructs . . ."). Moreover, in *Post-Totalitarian Spanish Fiction* Spires features this novel as a fundamental text of post-Franco literature for its exploration of the impact of knowledge on the formation of the gendered human subject. These critics highlight key techniques that Fernández Cubas employs—particularly those of intertextuality and metafiction—in order to subvert the literary tradition that has shaped the Western subject.<sup>3</sup> I should like to take their analyses a step farther by examin-

ing Fernández Cubas's use of these and other tactics in her representation of colonial power as a cornerstone of Spanish subjectivity.

A postcolonial reading of this novel sheds light on the complexity of Fernández Cubas's subversion of unidirectional power dynamics as traditionally depicted in Western literature. The postcolonial approach considers how the imperial center has marginalized the other and how that other appropriates the center's language and culture in order to cultivate its own identity and interests under the guise of colonial domination. Homi K. Bhabha has studied this process in terms of "hybridization," which "reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention" ("Signs" 154). Hybridization hinges on the ambivalence of colonial power that establishes itself as originary and yet is only "confirmed" as such when it is viewed retrospectively from the margins of empire, where the image of the central subject has been repeated and proliferated. Such repetition is the only means of securing colonial power, yet at the same time it discloses the arbitrary nature of that power as origin.

Bhabha holds that the power of colonial discourse disavows the ambivalent character of its own foundation. As the center's discourse reproduces itself in different (colonial) contexts, it transmutes into something which is the same yet which is discriminated against for being notably other: "Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid" ("Signs" 153). The hybrid, then, is the re-citing of the colonizing discourse at the site of the colonized, which necessarily imposes a new perspective and an "other" interpretation of that discourse. As Bhabha stresses, hybridity "is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures" ("Signs" 156), but instead intensifies and propagates their tension.

Hybridization permeates *El año de Gracia*, for the entire novel can be seen as the repetition of colonial discourse that is so necessary to the institution of colonial authority and power. Part of Bhabha's postcolonial theorization poses colonial mimicry as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" ("Of Mimicry" 86). Thus, while mimicry applies to the colonized who repeats the image of the colonizer almost completely, it also encompasses the never total resemblance to that origin that can harbor a mockery of the origin's constructed and imposed norms. Mimicry as mockery questions the authority of colonial discourse by stressing the *difference* which that discourse prohibits: "Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the *fixation* of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations" ("Of Mimicry" 90). By manipulating colonial language and repeating the image of the colonial origin from the contextualized perspective of the dominated other, Fernández Cubas's text supersedes the boundaries of colonial discourse and challenges the validity of the borders themselves, as well as the hierarchies they impose.

The motif of the repetition and subversion of an authoritative origin emerges most prominently in *El año de Gracia* with the referent of *Robinson Crusoe*, an intertext whose pattern Fernández Cubas reverses.<sup>4</sup> As Catherine Bellver observes, "To subvert the validity of literary models, the author patterns her novel on the underlying structure of the very stories and archetypes she is trying to debunk" ("*Robinson Crusoe* Revisited" 106). While the Spanish protagonist is shipwrecked on a virtually deserted island, instead of the founder and ruler of his domain, he figures as the subservient Friday, attending Grock's every whim: "Aquel viejo simple no se parecía en nada al fiel Viernes de la única novela que, ironías de la vida, me había olvidado de evocar ante la visión del "Providence" en aquel día, en Saint-Malo . . ." "That simple old man in no way resembled the faithful Friday of the only novel that—the ironies of life—I had forgotten to evoke

on seeing the "Providence" on that day in Saint-Malo . . .' (124).<sup>5</sup> For Fernández Cubas's *Crusoe*, "Providence" is not the force that delivers him from the island, but the ship that carries him to it; the oxymoronic name of the port from which the boat sets sail, Saint-Malo, only increases this irony. The ex-seminary student who has spent most of his life mired in books expects his life to mirror the fanciful tales he has read. Yet he resists the idea that this experience could be a macabre version of the classic story: "Pero en la segunda mitad del siglo veinte, en Europa, no quedaba espacio para tierras ignotas, islas misteriosas o anacrónicas aventuras robinsonianas" "But in the second half of the twentieth century, in Europe, there was no room for unknown lands, mysterious islands or anachronous Robinsonian adventures" (72-73). Not only does Daniel fail miserably to live up to the standards of those literary constructs, his own adventures digress markedly from their tidy prototypes, for Fernández Cubas seeks to undermine them.

Similar enough to the power paradigm of *Crusoe/Friday* to mimic it, the dialectical relationship between Grock and Daniel also mocks the originary text with an inversion of power. Daniel's attempts to master his domain and rule his other are repeatedly stymied. He must depend on Grock's physical knowledge of the island, as fog submerges the entire place for much of the novel and distorts Daniel's sense of perspective. With his vision—the dominant sensory mode for the "rational man" in traditional Western literature—so inhibited, the protagonist comes to depend, like an animal, on his remarkably heightened sense of smell. Nonetheless, whereas Robinson *Crusoe* had a good sense of direction, Daniel's is quite poor. He would be hard put to find food without the shepherd to subdue the violent sheep and to teach him to make cheese. Moreover, the castaway is unable to cultivate corn or any other crop like the agriculturally adept *Crusoe* did, for the island is rocky and infertile except for a forest that ominously forebodes death and destruction. Far from being the resourceful power that enslaves the ingenuous and acquiescent *Friday*, Daniel is dominated by and dependent upon Grock for his own education and survival.

The manipulation of language figures prominently in the opposition of power between Daniel and Grock, a repetition of the historical colonial preoccupation with language as a tool of control (Ashcroft, et al. 7). Instead of imposing his language on the other, the castaway of *El año de Gracia* must master Grock's verbal signs. Daniel's erudite knowledge of dead languages ill serves him with Grock, who speaks a combination of English and Gaelic. This allusion to the English imperial domination of Ireland evokes the dialectic of colonial power, and Grock's use of "abundantes expresiones en gaélico" 'abundant expressions in Gaelic' (107) indicates that the "dominated" is not defeated. In his turn, Daniel tries to belittle Grock's language by calling it primitive and childlike—a classic tactic of the West towards its others. The two men eventually manage to communicate by reducing language to the essential act of naming. In fact, the first word Daniel hears Grock speak is "Grock," an act that establishes the Name of the Father and the law of patriarchy on the island. Founding himself as the origin, which must be reiterated in order to be verified, Grock repeats his name to encompass his property: the island is the Island of Grock and his beloved deceased dog is Grock. Of course, Daniel comes to contest Grock's status as the originary power on the island; gradually, the two become duplicate links within a chain of repetition when their identities are finally confused by the scientists and Daniel, too, becomes Grock.

Besides establishing a hierarchy of power, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* foregrounds a faith in instinct and technological innovation as fundamental to civilization, which Fernández Cubas's text mockingly repeats. Like Crusoe, Daniel believes that his technological acumen will save him from the repetitious cycle that seems to damn his fate. In contrast to Defoe's hero, who constructed boats with great skill, Daniel's numerous attempts to build a simple raft culminate in comical disaster, as he is capsized into the sea and dashed against the rocks, just like his original, calamitous arrival on the beach: "terminé . . . en una posición curiosamente idéntica a la que recordaba del día de mi despertar en la isla. El círculo, que tan ingenuamente creía cerrar, estaba dejando paso a un remolino" 'I ended up . . . in a position curi-

ously identical to the one I remembered from the day I awoke on the island. The circle, which I so ingenuously believed to be closing, was giving way to a whirlpool' (145). The repetition of the motif of the shipwreck introduces an intratextual irony that mocks Daniel's belief in his own intuition and ingenuity, just as it presents an intertextual parody of his literary forebear.

Two other targets of mimicry and mockery in *El año de Gracia* are the measurement of time and faith in God, fundamental constructions by which humans guide their existence. While Robinson Crusoe modulated his life on the island with an almost exact record of the passing of time, Daniel loses all temporal bearing, which for him becomes "esa presencia inaprehensible que me sentía incapaz de medir" 'that inapprehensible presence that I felt incapable of measuring' (87). Ironically, after his worldview and even his identity have been radically altered, he returns home to find that all these transformations happened in the mere span of exactly one year, "el año de Gracia."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Daniel's experiences as a castaway—culminating with his discovery of a sign floating nearby indicating that this, the Island of Gruinard, is contaminated—defy his faith in God:

Alcé la vista al cielo para descargar mi ira en el Todopoderoso y, a la vez, suplicar desesperadamente un milagro. Por un instante los ojos se me nublaron y el deseo me hizo creer que alguien muy semejante a Dios Padre se había compadecido de mi suerte y hacía acto de presencia en el mismo infierno. Pero, cuando me enjuagué las lágrimas, la ilusión se desvaneció. Ahí estábamos sólo él y yo. Yo, con el puño alzado contra el cielo, y Grock, en lo alto del acantilado, saltando y riendo como un niño.

I looked up to the sky to unload my wrath on the Almighty and, at the same time, to beg desperately for a miracle. For a moment my eyes clouded and desire made me think that someone very similar to Father God had taken pity on my luck and was putting in an appearance in hell itself. But when I dried my tears the illusion vanished. Only he and I were there. I, with my fist raised against heaven, and Grock, high atop the cliff, leaping and laughing like a child. (147-48)

The moment when Daniel lifts his gaze in search of God but sees only his master Grock, cackling and cavorting around, ironically

repeats, re-orientes and redefines the discourse of the "Supreme Being." The God/man dichotomy, which is both a justification for and a parallel to the power relation of colonizer/colonized, is undermined here by Daniel's gaze directed from a position of inferiority to Grock. This asymmetry exemplifies what Bhabha terms "this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" ("Of Mimicry" 86). Albeit unwittingly, Daniel's gaze deconstructs any faith he might have had in a Superior Being. Both God and time are unveiled as useless or irrelevant constructs, when seen from the colonized perspective on the Island of Grock.

Fundamental to mockery is its mimicry of discourse with the consciousness of its own *otherness*, its own *difference* from that discourse. In one highly amusing difference from the original discourse of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel's confrontation with the *sanguinarias ovejas* on the island before he ever meets Grock mimics Crusoe's masterful dominion of his island's placid goats. Finding a ewe caught between some rocks near her lamb, Daniel follows his instinct of pursuit instead of being daunted by the eczema and oozing sores bared in the patches on his prey's astonishingly hirsute coat:

Pero no era yo el que decidía, sino el instinto. Y fue él, sin consultarme, el que con maravillosa pericia logró sujetarlas, reducir la furia de la madre herida y convencerlas, a golpes de sogá o a pedradas, de que ahora se encontraban bajo mi dominio y no les quedaba otra opción que dejarse conducir dócilmente a mi cabaña.

Yet it was not I who decided, but instinct. And it was instinct that, without consulting me, managed to subdue them with marvelous skill, reduce the fury of the wounded mother and convince them, with blows from a rope or stones, that now they were under my dominion and they had no choice but to allow themselves to be driven docilely to my hut. (90)

Then the supposedly rational man launches into an insane fit of bloodthirsty revenge when the mother resists Daniel's efforts to milk her: "Despellejé el cordero con la saña de un loco; lancé la

cabeza a los ojos de su madre, sorbí la sangre aún caliente con ardorosa fruición y, con más rapidez que conocimiento, descuarticé una de sus piernas y ensarté los pedazos en el asador” ‘I skinned the lamb with the rage of a crazed man; I flung the head at the eyes of its mother, I sucked up the still warm blood with ardent and malicious pleasure and, with more speed than knowledge, I cut up one of its legs and rammed the pieces onto the spit’ (91). Daniel is immediately distracted from his sacrifice by the clamoring of other ewes outside as they watch a violent and bloody battle for power between two of their rams. This scene, humorously juxtaposed with the scene of Daniel’s own power play with the sheep, increases the would-be *conquistador*’s consternation at the ovine thirst for power:

. . . las ovejas, hasta entonces inquietas espectadoras, comenzaron a bregar entre sí, a lanzar gemidos estremecedores, a revolcarse a su vez por entre las piedras. Parecían presas de una agitación incontenible. Las más audaces lograron hacerse camino entre aquel hediondo rebaño y aproximarse al carnero herido. Nunca pude haber imaginado que las pezuñas de un cordero fueran capaces de rasgar la piel de un moribundo, arrancarle los ojos o despojarle en poco tiempo de sus entrañas. . . .

. . . the sheep, until then quiet spectators, began to fight amongst themselves, to utter alarming groans, to flounder about in turn among the rocks. They seemed prisoners of an uncontrollable agitation. The boldest ones managed to make a path through that foul-smelling flock and approach the wounded ram. I never could have imagined that the hooves of a lamb could be capable of rending the skin of the dying, rooting out his eyes or quickly stripping him of his entrails. . . . (93)

Unnerved by this gory display of female exultation at the defeat of their male counterpart, Daniel futilely fantasizes that his own female captive will have escaped by the time he returns to his shelter. Much to his horror, however, he finds her bucking and kicking, eager to join her cohorts in their ritualistic disembowelment of their overthrown leader. His terror at this scene soon whips into a frenzy: “El miedo se transformó en cólera, el desaliento en barbarie. Ejecuté a mi prisionera con la sevicia del desesperado. Apedreé, pataleé, apaleé, hasta que mi propia furia

se volvió contra mí y, chorreando sangre, golpeé con la cabeza las paredes del refugio” ‘Fear turned into rage, dismay into barbarity. I executed my prisoner with the abject cruelty of the desperate. I stoned, kicked, thrashed, until my own fury turned against me and, gushing blood, I beat my head against the walls of the refuge’ (94-95). Provoked by the prospective loss of dominion into a brutally animalistic confrontation, Daniel effectively crosses the borderline between self-control and savagery.

With the distinction of civilization and barbarism—an essential marker that serves as the dividing line between man/beast, self/other and Occident/Orient—thrown into hazardous question, it can only be a matter of time before the other fragile binaries collapse as well. Of course, Fernández Cubas is hardly the first to question this construct; among other critics both real and fictional, Crusoe himself referred to the inhuman violence of the Spanish civilizing mission in the “New World.” Shortly thereafter even Daniel cannot miss the irony of the supposed distance between civilization and barbarity when he learns that the Island of Grock is actually quite close to the Scottish coast—the nearest border of the British empire: “Había estado a punto de transformarme en un salvaje, y lo que en otros momentos me pudo haber parecido dramático se me antojaba ahora una perversa burla del Destino” ‘I had been on the verge of becoming a savage, and what at other times could have seemed dramatic, now felt like a perverse mockery of Destiny’ (103-04). Unable to appreciate the drama of the situation when it does not follow the literary script he expects, Daniel nonetheless begins to recognize that the geographical borders that delineate one empire from another are just as illusory and mutable as the moral judgments that separate the “enlightened man” from the “savage beast.”

As Daniel observes Grock’s dexterity on the island, he comes to realize that the distinction between culture/nature, refigured as the normal/the monstrous, can be inverted. The context of the island shapes Daniel’s view of this discourse: “no pude dejar de admirarme y comprender que quien realmente resultaba inapropiado y grotesco en aquel medio inhóspito era yo, y todo lo que antes me pudo parecer monstruoso adquirió los visos de la

naturalidad más tranquilizadora” ‘I couldn’t stop admiring myself and understand that the one who really was inappropriate and grotesque in that inhospitable environment was I, and everything that before might have seemed monstrous to me took on the glint of the most reassuring naturalness’ (105-06). By the end of the novel, when the scientists kill the red-clad Grock because they believe he is Daniel, and mistake Daniel for the old shepherd, the narrator recognizes that from the perspective of the true colonizers of that island *he* is the monster: “significaba que mi aspecto apenas difería del salvaje y viejo Grock. . . . [P]or primera vez, me reconocí deforme y monstruoso” ‘it meant that my appearance scarcely differed from that of the savage, old Grock. . . . For the first time, I recognized myself as deformed and monstrous’ (167). Daniel is definitively the colonized, the ostracized and monstrous other. The re-orienting of the discourse of normality/monstrosity within Grock’s empire radically affects its repetition by inverting the terms of domination.

The inversion of power as a repetitious and potentially cyclical process profoundly disturbs Daniel. The protagonist displays his aversion in his reaction to the rebellious sheep and in his dislike of Grock’s favorite biblical passage about the prophet Daniel’s vision of a mighty ram that dominates all the others and that is finally “conquered by an even mightier buck goat: “La lectura de aquel pasaje me llenó de inquietud” ‘The reading of that passage filled me with uneasiness’ (135). If the dominator is just one link in a successive chain of command, then he loses his status as uniquely powerful, as originary. Notably, while Daniel is disturbed by this biblical passage, Grock finds it hilarious. Within the text of *El año de Gracia*, the biblical text itself is a repetition of sorts, since it reflects the earlier confrontation between the sheep that Fernández Cubas’s Daniel witnessed, as well as the struggle between Daniel and Grock.

Finally, Grock’s death at the hands of the scientists signals that the two islanders’ very identities are switched, so that they come to repeat one another. Longing to pray over the new grave that he prepares for his slain friend, Daniel finds himself intoning this biblical passage that signals repetition, instead of appealing to the original power of God:

Y seguí escuchándome embelesado, imaginando que, bajo tierra, aquellos ojos cerrados habían vuelto a cobrar vida y me sonreían ahora, entre cansados y felices, por repetirle una vez más su historia predilecta, el enfrentamiento del macho cabrío con el carnero, la postración del pobre y espantado Daniel . . . ¿Yo mismo? ¿El profeta? . . . No, Daniel yacía bajo tierra, a mis pies. Vestía la zamarra roja del capitán, la misma con la que me conocieron los hombres del helicóptero. . . .

And I continued listening to myself entranced, imagining that, beneath the ground, those closed eyes had come alive again and smiled at me now, tired and happy, for repeating his favorite story one more time for him, the confrontation of the male goat with the ram, the prostration of poor, frightened Daniel . . . Me? The prophet? . . . No, Daniel lay beneath the earth at my feet. He was wearing the captain's red sheepskin jacket, the same one by which the men in the helicopter knew me. . . . (166)

The repetition of this story effects a transfer of power similar to the one it treats thematically, for Grock's desire for Daniel to read it to him each week caused him to surrender his position of absolute power over the castaway. The red coat becomes the metonymy that signals this type of power, as it is passed from the captain to Daniel to Grock, bringing an ephemeral and transient authority in its wake.

The image of the Bible as a tool of colonizing power is a key strategy of subversive repetition in Fernández Cubas's novel. The Bible is, after all, the archetypal Western text of origins. Bhabha notes that the discovery of the English book—with the Bible being the Good Book, the greatest Book of all—inaugurates the literature of empire: "The discovery of the book installs the sign of appropriate representation: the word of God, truth, art creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and narrative. But the institution of the Word in the wilds is also an *Entstellung*, a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition . . ." ("Signs" 147). Within the word hovers the potential displacement and deconstruction of the Word. Bellver has observed that in *El año de Gracia* "[t]he Bible is instrumental in [Daniel's] survival, but as a technique for manipulation rather than as consolation" ("*El año de Gracia* and the Displacement . . ." 223). Similarly, Spires has pointed out the imperialistic implications of Daniel's

use of the Bible as a tool of power over Grock (*Post-Totalitarian Fiction* 171-72, footnote 15). Yet Fernández Cubas dislocates the Bible from the hands of the colonizing European: Daniel finds the Word already in place upon his arrival to the island. He merely appropriates it from Grock to gain power over the tyrannical shepherd.

When the power paradigm is thus inverted Grock, too, re-appropriates the Bible as a tool literally to beat his dominator into submission so that he will stay on the island. This certainly qualifies as a displacement of the intended purpose of the Word. When the attack fails, Grock himself becomes a Christ figure as he is slain on the beach: “Al sonido de los disparos siguió enseguida un grito de dolor. Grock alzó los brazos, avanzó aún algunos pasos, de nuevo sonaron varias detonaciones, y el viejo cayó de bruces sobre las piedras para no levantarse jamás” ‘A cry of pain followed the sound of the shots. Grock raised his arms, advanced still a few steps more, various reports sounded again, and the old man fell headlong on the rocks, never to get up’ (159). With his arms outstretched, the Good Shepherd cries out and is sacrificed in Daniel’s stead. This post-colonial version of deliverance thus re-writes the inscription of savior and saved, center and margin.

The protagonist Daniel, like the prophet whose name he bears, is horrified by the transmutational, cyclical, repetitious nature of power such as the one embodied in the vision of the battling rams. Nonetheless, Fernández Cubas’s prophet comes to suspect that this might be a more accurate vision of reality than the notion of an inviolate originary power. Imagining himself as Grock, alone and awaiting the biannual arrival of the plane to deliver his liquor, Daniel contemplates the cyclical nature of existence:

Dos años era mucho tiempo. Algún barco podía estrellarse contra el acantilado en pleno invierno, un naufrago internarse por entre las brumas y repetir mi ciclo de esperanzas y sufrimientos. Y yo entonces, en un acto ritual, decidiría sacrificarme en aras de un nuevo Grock. Porque tal vez . . . mi antecesor no fuera más que un simple eslabón en una larga cadena de Grocks cuya historia, ahora, no tenía más remedio que hacer mía.

Two years was a long time. Some boat could crash against the cliff in the middle of winter, a castaway could penetrate the mist and repeat my cycle of waiting and suffering. And then, in a ritual act, I would decide to sacrifice myself for the sake of a new Grock. Because perhaps . . . my predecessor was nothing more than a simple link in a long chain of Grocks whose history I now had no choice but to make my own. (169)

As one more link in the chain of Grocks, Daniel is no longer the colonizer but a repetition of the colonized. When the ecologists discover him and take him away in their boat, back to “civilization,” he is afraid to look back at the disappearing island: “me entregué . . . evitando en todo momento mirar hacia atrás. No sé aún si en recuerdo de ciertas maldiciones bíblicas, o por el simple e irracional temor de verme a mí mismo, en lo alto del acantilado, agitando esperanzado una deteriorada zamarra roja” ‘I surrendered . . . constantly avoiding looking back. I still don’t know if in memory of certain biblical curses, or for the simple and irrational fear of seeing myself, high atop the cliff, hopefully waving a deteriorated red sheepskin jacket’ (174). Like the biblical Lot, who was forbidden to gaze back upon the conflagration of the wicked city of Sodom for fear he would repeat that wickedness, Daniel is afraid to look back upon the island for fear of seeing himself repeated there, as the victimized, polluted by-product of civilization’s technological quest for knowledge and power. His re-orientation on the Island of Grock has given him new insight into the working of power.

In keeping with the technological overtones of the power paradigm of “civilization” in *El año de Gracia*, the images of photographs or photocopies capture the idea of identity as non-originary but repetitious. Yasmine, the girlfriend that Daniel abandoned in Paris, was a photographer who, Spires argues, ultimately serves as a mere reflection of Daniel, for she is the inspiration of “a purely solipsistic exercise of constructing an other in his own image” (“Discursive Constructs” 137).<sup>7</sup> Grock laughingly shows Daniel an instamatic photo of a man, but does not recognize that the image that so highly amuses him is a replica of himself. The snapshot that the men in the helicopter take of Daniel in his red coat

eventually leads them to identify Grock in the red coat as Daniel, furthering the chain of repeated and replaceable identities. When the ecologists finally take Daniel to the hospital his photo is taken, revealing the ravages that the contaminated island wrought on him. Upon viewing it, however, the protagonist is unable to laugh, Grock-like, at the identity repeated there. Denying that the permanent changes in his sight and hearing were caused by the illegal contamination of the island, the medical establishment tries to erase the imprint of the pustules on Daniel's appearance. They create a replica of his former self, with the significant modification that he now must wear a mustache to cover some of the persistent scars on his upper lip—in Bhabha's words, it is a difference that makes him "*almost the same, but not quite*" ("Of Mimicry" 86).

Daniel's body bears the physical imprint of empire, whose dominion, disregard and contamination of Gruinard has changed him irrevocably. Although the protagonist returns to the site of "civilization," his tenure in the excluded zone of the island affects his vision, both literally and metaphorically. Spires has characterized Daniel as "a myopic prophet incapable of foreseeing a future order with no central base of knowledge and authority. His year of (G)race has been in vain. He has thrown away the opportunity provided by his sister to be 'otherwise'" (*Post-Totalitarian* 167). Although the ending of the novel is ambiguous and defiant of any absolute interpretation (as Fernández Cubas's texts usually are), I am inclined to argue that Daniel, like the blind prophets of lore, comes to see the de-centered authority of his civilization. This new "vision," while it might terrify him, also attenuates his identification with the colonizers, although he is unable to outwardly alter his life in any radical way once he returns to the center of that civilization.

*El año de Gracia*, published in 1985, as Spain was preparing to join the European Union, posits an alternate vision of power, then, even as it remembers a moment in history, World War II, when borders of national and cultural identity were being challenged. In 1942 the British dropped experimental anthrax bombs on the sheep-inhabited Island of Gruinard off the coast of Scot-

land in case the weapon should be needed against the Germans. First they had corralled all the sheep, apparently the only inhabitants of the isle, to see what the effects of the anthrax would be on them. The effects were so far-reaching that the island was quarantined until 1990 and is still generally shunned for fear of continued contamination (Harrison and "Britain's Anthrax Island"). Fernández Cubas's image of anthrax as a destructive weapon of power in *El año de Gracia* is prescient, for in 2001 anthrax in powdered form silently infiltrates another empire, the United States, in its centers of political control (the capital) and social communication (the office of the most visible patriarch of American news, Tom Brokaw, at NBC headquarters), killing random citizens in its wake.<sup>8</sup>

The image of anthrax evokes an insidious force that permeates borders and that holds the potential to turn back on those who would wield it as a weapon of power. In the 1940s the British buried all the dead, contaminated sheep beneath rocks, but somehow one carcass worked its way loose and floated across the bay to contaminate some livestock in a nearby village ("Britain's Anthrax Island"). As a powder and not a bomb, the appearance of anthrax in the United States is more subtle and insidious, and even more difficult to contain. In the 1940s, anthrax was an experimental weapon for a war between clearly demarcated entities and practices, dropped as a great bomb on a site (a Scottish isle) at the margin of a once-great empire (Great Britain). Four decades later Fernández Cubas's fictional rendition reworks the episode in a post-colonial questioning of national and cultural identity construction. The revised paradigm of power portrayed in her novel, wherein the colonizer is made vulnerable before the formerly powerless, is played out to a more marked degree in real life in the United States. Those who wield anthrax in the twenty-first century do so from within the imperial borders of the U.S., trying to cause its infrastructure to crumble from within, much like the perpetrators of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon turned the country's own planes against it as formerly inconceivable weapons of war. These new means of warfare challenge the notions of inviolate national borders and

identifiable individual bodies in conceptualizations of identity as they play out the politics of a postcolonial paradigm. Hence Daniel's vision of shifting power relations, as well as Fernández Cubas's, proves to be remarkably prophetic.

Daniel's experiences after leaving the island are recounted in the Appendix of the novel, which is like a sequence of chain links that explain the story just told—repeating parts of it, while adding significant additional bits of information. As such, the intratextual borders of *El año de Gracia* emphasize the distinctions between colonial and postcolonial representations of the story of the subject. Having returned to the “civilized” center and observing its depiction of the island, the narrator remarks that “La historia de la Isla de Gruinard no difiere demasiado de la de la Isla de Grock” ‘The story of the Island of Gruinard does not differ much from that of the Island of Grock’ (177). The versions are the same, except that the historical rendition of the events on the Island of Gruinard includes (or excludes) one difference: “no había una sola referencia a la existencia de Grock ni al trágico fin que, quién sabe desde qué secreto despacho, se me había destinado días atrás” ‘there was not a single reference to the existence of Grock nor to the tragic end that, who knows from what secret office, had been destined for me days before’ (177-78). Herein is another “*difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (“Of Mimicry” 86), except of course that this divergence changes everything—it silences the victim sacrificed to power in order to ensure the propagation of centralized power.

Like the cycle of history that Daniel cursed when he repeatedly failed at building his raft, his story spirals back on itself when he discovers it has been retold and distorted from still another perspective. The protagonist enters a café in Saint-Malo and a customer informs him that the owner, Naguib, was rescued from a sinking ship by another boat and that he started his restaurant, called “Providence,” with money that the captain, Tío Jean, had beneficently “given” him as his dying act. The protagonist's reaction to the news is revealing:

Me quité las gafas y, por unos segundos, mi tambaleante interlocutor se difuminó entre brumas y sombras.

—Sí. Una historia increíble—me limité a decir.  
Pero en mis palabras no se ocultaba ironía alguna.

I took off my glasses and, for a few seconds, my swaying interlocutor faded into mists and shadows.

I said only, "Yes. An incredible story."

But there was no irony hidden in my words. (182)

Naguib's story is a reconstruction, a markedly altered repetition of the "original" tale that readers hold in their hands. Yet even *El año de Gracia* itself is a repetition, presumably at least a printed copy of the photocopy that the ecologists made of Daniel's manuscript, which he wrote and re-wrote by hand during his stay on the island. At last, however, Daniel seems unperturbed when faced with disturbing repetition. There is no irony in his observation that the boat hand's story is incredible, perhaps because he finally understands that history, which is constructed by those with the power to make us believe, must be seen as unbelievable.

Like any good *Bildungsroman*, *El año de Gracia* is the story of how the protagonist confronts his fear. His is a fear of repetition, a fear of not being the origin but being an other that is the same and yet different, re-oriented in a different site. This need for dominance is exactly what postcolonialism undermines: "Such a reading of colonial authority profoundly unsettles the demand that figures at the centre of the originary myth of colonialist power. It is the demand that *the space it occupies be unbounded*, its reality *coincident* with the emergence of the imperialist narrative and history, its discourse *nondialogic*, its enunciation *unitary*, unmarked by the trace of difference . . ." ("Signs" 157). *El año de Gracia*, with its postcolonial perspective, undermines the myth of origins by mimicking and mocking those origins, by repeating them differently. This endeavor foregrounds the way imperial attempts to occupy *everyplace* inevitably establish hierarchical boundaries between the center (*someplace*) and the periphery (*no place*); it then challenges the validity of those associations by shifting the sites of dominance. By setting up repetitious chains of power, the postcolonial project of *El año de Gracia* undermines any notion that power and supremacy dwell only within the rendition of imperialist narrative. It engages conflicting visions of

power in dialogue with one another, interrogating the borders that define them according to the differences they exclude. In the process, Fernández Cubas's novel disorients the subject in order to re-orient the story that he tells as one that is almost the same but, importantly, not quite.

### Notes

1. For useful overviews of various theories of subjectivity, readers may consult Kaja Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics* and Paul Smith's *Discerning the Subject*.
2. Robert Spires draws a parallel between Spain and this island, for the latter is revealed at the end of the novel to have been chosen as a site for biological experimentation: "An island designated for wartime chemical experimentation clearly echoes the Spanish peninsula and its role just prior to World War II as a laboratory for new German and Russian weaponry" ("Discursive Constructs" 136).
3. For a sampling of critical approaches to Fernández Cubas's other texts, readers may consult Bretz, Ortega, Talbot, and Zatlin ("Tales from Fernández Cubas"), who signal the subversive element of the fantastic in Fernández Cubas's narratives, and Glenn, Pérez, Rueda, and Valls, who analyze the author's manipulation of language.
4. Numerous critics have noted the importance of the *Robinson Crusoe* referent in *El año de Gracia*. For analyses of this and other intertextual elements of this novel, see Bellver (especially "El año de Gracia and the Displacement . . ." and "Robinson Crusoe Revisited"), Gleue, Margenot, Spires (particularly *Post-Totalitarian Spanish Fiction* 156-72), and Zatlin ("Women Novelists in Democratic Spain").
5. *El año de Gracia* has yet to be translated to English; all translations of its passages in this article are my own.
6. Spires perceptively notes the repetitious, cyclical nature of the numbers of time and dates in Daniel's life (*Post-Totalitarian Spanish Fiction* 158).
7. Using Yasmine as an example, Spires argues that this novel, published on the eve of Spain's integration into the European Union, im-

plicitly criticizes the way communities propagate limiting constructs, such as gender, through repetition:

As represented in this novel, social bodies serve to construct and reinforce gender roles. Whereas iteration plays a creative role in Goytisolo's novelistic project, in Fernández Cubas's it has a normative and enervating effect. Communities perpetuate historical gender constructs responsible at least in part for a global state of entropy. This novel suggests that even the most radical centrifugal movement is inadequate to the task of dismantling a construct so securely anchored by social systems." ("Discursive Constructs" 138)

The paradox of iteration is that it can ingrain an idea even as, when repeated with a difference, it undermines it. While Fernández Cubas exploits both elements of this duality in her fiction, my study focuses on her tactics of subversion in repetition.

8. See Caistor for an overview of historical uses of anthrax as a weapon.

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