

# Modernity, Postmodernity, and Transgression in Sábato's esthetics: Poetic Dissemination, Defeat of Utopias, Returning Bodies

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## 1. The modernity/postmodernity debate in Sábato's work

To question whether Ernesto Sábato's work is involved in that area of revision and commotion of what has been called "postmodernist thought"<sup>1</sup>, leads, immediately and previously, to other questions: As far as Sábato's work is concerned, is the contemporary Latin American context recorded in the same socio-historical and cultural postmodernity as that seen in the central and hegemonic countries?, is it even proper to use the term "postmodernity" when we refer to Latin America? On the other hand, what are we talking about when we speak of "esthetic postmodernity"? Is it about a whole arsenal of procedures and poetics different from the modernist ones? Or is it about a recycling of esthetics and previous resources in the imposed conditions of a new context? Are there any esthetic features which we could call "postmodernist" in Sábato's work?

If postmodernity is associated with the phenomenon of postindustrialism (Lyotard) and postcapitalism (or to "late capitalism", Jameson), it would not be proper to talk, in fact—it has been adduced—, about postcapitalist and postindustrial societies in a Third World whose megalopolis shares some characteristics of postmoder-

nity in the developing countries, while many areas—most of them—depend on regional economies of subsistence, sunk in backwardness (Mazzei, 1990; Pérez, 1994; Castillo Durante, 1993).

Nonetheless, the weight that the hegemonic centers' economic process had over the periphery cannot be denied (particularly the crisis of the "*late Capitalism*" in the 70's; Colás 113-115), nor is it proper to conceive postmodernity, in our societies, in an evolutionist lineal sense. It is not about a new stage that replaces another, closed and finished, but, rather, about the problematic cohabitation, in the social texture, of several ethnic groups and cultures, of several sorts of culture ("high," "popular," "mass"), and of several degrees of technological and economic development. "Postmodernity" involves, in Latin America, a new look over this heterogeneous reality, complex and asymmetrical (García Canclini, 1992; Ferman 1994). A more attentive look to interactions, flows, movements, and interweaving than to closed oppositions. It has also been discussed, indeed, if applying the category "postmodernity" to Latin America does not suppose—once more—an alienating imposition by the hegemonic thought, a reduction of unknown things to known ones, which forcefully matches phenomena arisen in a different context from the central culture ones<sup>2</sup>. However, there are some Latin American intellectuals inclined to hold, rather, that Latin America has always been post-modernist *avant la lettre*—for instance, the philosopher Nicolás Casullo, interviewed by Ferman (1994: 47)—, since it has lived, from the beginning, in conflict with European Modernity, with an "off-centered look," and since it always suffered the western *ratio*'s criticism (Núñez 2001: 67). There are some who even proclaim Jorge Luis Borges<sup>3</sup> as the great forerunner (or founder) of postmodernist literature, or who consider literary postmodernity as the "first literary code that originated in America and influenced European tradition" (Fokkema's case)<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, even in those authors who do not tilt this far, the peculiar "Latin American postmodernity" in its literary manifestation has been seen not as a servile imitation of a literary fashion imported from Europe, but as a revision of the avant-garde utopian thought (the literary ones, and particularly the political ones), and as a sliding towards a critical resistance based not in the possibility of a radical and abrupt "jump," but in the subtle de-construction and re-construction of History (Colás 1994; Kohut 1997; Filer 1996).

Particularly about Ernesto Sábato we can affirm that, since his initial text, *One and the Universe* (1945), we can observe in his work an increasingly determined attack against the modernity which has established itself, since the Renaissance, as a realm of Reason and Quantity, where the nocturnal territory of the unconscious, of affectivity, and of sacredness is separated, violently, from the “positive” area, diurnal, of rationality and logical thought. His attack is inscribed in a current which he himself chose to call “phenomenological Neoromanticism,” and which—in his fictions—shows possible links with a speculative line that Scott Lash (1991) identifies as a theory of desire and an esthetics of transgression, and which is lined up with names such as Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida. From this point of view it may very well be said that Sábato assumes indeed a corrosive and subversive position towards the canon of that illustrated Modernity, towards that Century of Light in whose sleep reason “begets monsters.” Not quite so, on the other hand, towards the esthetic modernity, crossed by the passion for the new and the unknown (Compagnon 1993), and towards the avant-gardes which succeed each other searching to change life through the power of art, as it happens with the surrealist movement to which Sábato was so attached. In any case, we should be more precise as regards his appraisal of the so-called modernist esthetics. First of all, his disbelief in the value “progress” as far as art is concerned. The search for the new and the unknown is there in Sábato’s narrative as a metaphysical passion, not due to the arrogance of technical innovations, but for his will to widen the “doors of perception,” to drill the thick wall of conventions and prejudices which does not allow the eye to peer into the darkest center of reality. That is the virtue of the makers of “living metaphors,” as Ricoeur (1977; 1985) would put it, where the verbal discovery responds to a genuine semantic discovery, to a widening of the cognitive dimension, to an opening of unprecedented areas of reality. Both of them—Sábato and Ricoeur—would agree, indeed, on distinguishing the “living metaphor” from the merely ornamental one, in which there is not a profound transformation of the semantic area at all.

For the same reason, Sábato always objected to the purely ludicrous aspect of the avant-gardes (this being his great objection to the Argentine Martinfierrism), and condemned the artful commercial exploitation that certain surrealists (he especially refers to Dalí) made

of their life, their work, and of the scandalous movement “legend.”

In short, Sábato rejected (together with the postmodernists of the theory of desire) the Modernity of the rationalistic and logocentric Illustration; and he also adhered (with the above mentioned objections) to the subversive powers of the esthetic modernity—which began, in a way, with the romantic rebellion, insurgent against the dictatorship of illustrated rationality.

Other aspects remain to be pointed out. First, the presentation of the urban surrounding, in *On Heroes and Tombs* (1961), as Karl Kohut (1997 and an unpublished article) has shown, from a sensibility that could be considered as postmodernist in advance: the hybrid, Babelic, heterogeneous city, crossroads for ethnic groups and languages, for the old and the modern, which García Canclini (1992) will describe much later, is already present here in all its social strata, and the novel's language travels fluidly among several registers: from the philosophical reflection and the avant-garde literature, to the immigrant's jargon and the different speech inflections and popular imagery, from the Bible to the obscene *graffiti*, as well as spaces are multiplied: diurnal and nocturnal, public and secret, superficial and subterranean, through which his characters pass. Hybridism, and heterogeneity, are deepened, almost in a hallucinatory vertigo, in *The Angel of Darkness* (1974), where Buenos Aires' social life—refracted in the media mirrors—, particularly in the upper strata, reveals characteristics which are awarded to a vital attitude described—from the philosophical essay—as “postmodernist.” The fragmentation of meaning, the narcissistic and hedonistic individualism, the prevalence of vacuity under intellectual masks, and the axiological relativity which philosophers of the moment, from Lyotard to Finkielkraut, from Baudrillard to Lipovetsky have observed, either with critical inflections or with relative complacency: the scope of all this unfolds in *The Angel*, but against a background of sarcasm and acrid black humor, and is pierced by the foreboded imminence of a gigantic collapse. Beneath the frivolous and bright surfaces, the world rots, human beings are immolated in the name of the so-called values of an alleged “western and Christian civilization,” State terrorism takes its first victims and begins to dig holes in the collective memory making bodies disappear, turned into ghosts—what is denied and excluded from the community's conscience—which will break the protocols of death without returning to

earth, without finding a grave.

For Daniel Castillo Durante, *The Angel* is:

... one of the most ambitious attempts at trying to understand, through an apocalyptic metaphysics of Modernity, the use of State violence in a Latin American country. The novel makes a point of the failure of Modernity in a country (Argentina in the 70's) in which identity assumes the position of the conflict area and of the instability in the constitution of the 'Argentine' subject; in effect, the constitution of the Argentine identity evolves on the basis of denying the other (the black, the Indian, and the immigrant). (1999: 240)

Acutely critical, the textual ideology does not adhere indeed to the image of a world where "everything is disposable, expellable, expendable" (Castillo: 242), even, or above all, the bodies of those who still resist. On the other hand, if Modernity has failed, if reality crushes the utopias of leftists' and progressive persons' vicissitudes of that Modernity (here embodied in figures which could renew it or purify it, like Che Guevara, and his New Man thesis), we do not seem to observe either a different horizon for social hope. Against the breaking up of the community there persists, however, a solitary as well as a representative practice: the outpost of the artist, the writer, who willingly offer themselves to darkness. I will delve into this particular question in section 2.

We could also ask ourselves whether, apart from his plausible affinity with the "transgression esthetics" –topic I will expound below–, it is possible to point to Sábato's narrative techniques identifiable as "postmodernist." In that respect it would be good to remember that there is not a uniform critical agreement as regards the traits (structural or thematic) of an allegedly postmodernist literature nor as regards the Latin American authors who would represent it (Kohut: 1997; Barth: 1986). Andréas Huyssen holds the opinion that what is true to the postmodernist sensibility is to have overcome the oppositions that modernist esthetics still perceived as dichotomous alternatives; thus, the confrontation between "progress and reaction, left and right, past and present, modernism and realism, abstraction and representation, avant-garde and kitsch" (1991: 308). Or, going back to Barth, we might say that, precisely, the ideal postmodernist novel

will rise above the debate between realism and unrealism, formalism and 'contentism', pure art and committed art, elite narrative and popular narrative (Barth 33). This "dissolution of borders" between "art and life, artist and audience, high culture and popular culture,"<sup>5</sup> this relativization of the rigid oppositions seems to be the nucleus that returns most assiduously both in the works of authors of the last decades and in the critical reflection on the esthetic and cultural turn of postmodernity<sup>6</sup>. Doubtless heir to the romantic modernity and the surrealist avant-garde, Sábato's conception of the "total novel" stresses—in his avant-garde aspiration to the "correlation of distances"—the combining aspects of hybridism and heterogeneity, which reach its paroxysm in *The Angel of Darkness*: "Actually it would be necessary to invent an art that might put together pure ideas with dancing, screams with geometry. Something that could be realized inside a hermetic and sacred precinct, a ritual in which gestures were linked to the purest thoughts and a philosophical discourse to Zulu warriors' dances. A combination of Kant and Hieronymus Bosch, of Picasso and Einstein, of Rilke and Genghis Khan."<sup>7</sup>

A summary and an exacerbation of Ernesto Sábato's previous narrative work, *The Angel* is, perhaps above all, a metaliterary novel, one about the art of writing novels (or about the impossibility of writing them), where the author transfigures himself in character and moves inside daily spaces and inside the indefinite territories of the fantastic and the oneiric, together with the creatures of his own invention. Martín, Alejandra, Bruno, Tito d'Arcangelo, Juan Pablo Castel, Barragán the madman, Quique, return from *The Tunnel* and from *On Heroes and Tombs* to meet a creator who, far from being almighty and omniscient, lives (or survives) as baffled as they do, in the same ontological level. On the other hand, the character Sábato, heir to Fernando Vidal Olmos, takes on a similar incursion into the Blind territory (the forbidden side of knowledge, the desired and feared reencounter with the origin), and confronts creation as an act of risky metamorphosis, which concludes and complements Fernando's transformations and vicissitudes in his paroxysmal experiences in the Sewer. More than ever, writing is conceived and performed as the art of seeing in the dark to discover, with a nyctalopic eye, the negated dimension that hides from the weight and measure of daily reason. The anomaly of this look is refracted over the order of the novel we

read: construction in splinters, deliberately fragmentary, a multiform or seemingly inform *collage* which, like Picasso's *Guernica*, draws the scope of the world in ruins. Far from generic classifications and, at the same time, acme of them, *The Angel* is, in its way, a "total novel" which paradoxically illuminates, out of its breakings, the failure of the great stories, the fissure in the idea of totality. A text that seems to respond, like no other written by Sábato, to the perception that we call today "postmodernist." With a plurality of voices and looks, leaps in space and time, community memories and his own memories, letters, essays, poems, news items, personal diaries, interviews, debates, dialogues, nightmares, he resorts to all the genres of discourse and to all the registers of meaning. He establishes thus a choral reality, traversed by unexplainable visions that pierce, like a powder flash, the routine and perceptible texture of causality and leave in its center an explosion, the hole of a burn.

## 2. An esthetics (a gnoseology) of desire and transgression?

Seen cautiously by Habermas (1991) as "neo-conservative" people, opposed to the spirit of emancipation and progress in the Century of Light, Bataille, Foucault, Derrida, and their followers –adduces the German philosopher–, "justify an irreconcilable anti-modernism. They set in the sphere of the distant and the archaic the spontaneous forces of imagination, the experience of the self, and emotion. In a Manichean way, they opposed to instrumental reason a principle only accessible through evocation, being this the will for Power, the Being, or the Dionysian force of poetics." (143)

Any resemblance with Sábato's esthetics, certainly, is not a pure coincidence.

For Habermas, the "postmodernity" in French thinkers –based actually on the last spurs of modernist esthetics–, is nothing but a regrettable regression, a return to the irrational. The Argentine philosopher, Juan José Sebreli (1992), agrees with this, for he sees reproduced in postmodernist thought the romantic irrationalism. There, in romantic irrationalism, is precisely one of the most profound lines of filiation in Sábato's poetics. In a previous work (Lojo 1985) I thoroughly described the connections between Sábato's work and the German romantics' worldview, whose reverberations also spread to

surrealism.

The desire/transgression crux is central in the romantic pathos and it also crosses the postmodernist line that begins with George Bataille. It is about the desire of the absolute, and thus about an insatiable desire, perennially unsatisfied, which resorts, in order to widen the doors of perception, in order to break the limits of the human eye, to the systematic violation of those limits, to the incursion into the forbidden and the damned. If I had to sum up, finally, the lines of affinity between Sábato's poetics and this postmodernist esthetic-philosophical current, I would mention:

- a- A strong romantic and surrealist imprint.
- b- A transgressing experience of sacredness which resorts to images regarded as sacrilegious for the official Judeo-Christian religion, and subverts the traditional symbolism. The figure chosen to articulate this subversive vision of sacredness is, precisely, the eye, the sense of sight (in the same way as in Bataille's esthetics.)
- c- The questioning of representation esthetics, in order to set in motion the libidinal energy and turn visible what is invisible, what escapes both reason and sight (cf. Lyotard).
- d- An emergence, at discourse level, of everything that has been excluded from it: sexuality, madness, and above all, death (which is par excellence the pornographic thing in the society of our time, according to Baudrillard.)

We might question, nonetheless, taking into account a fundamental text in postmodernist philosophy: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, by Jean Baudrillard (1993), whether Sábato has not even gone beyond transgression esthetics, and whether, instead of multiplying the hermeneutical levels—metaphysical, psychoanalytical, sociohistorical—in reading Sábato's *corpus*, we should not take his work as the consummation of the poetic experience as the French philosopher defines it: an experience which transcends the "law of value" in language, which is linked to the primitive symbolic exchange articulated in sacrificial death, and which, therefore, does not leave a semantic or operative trace: it extinguishes itself in an absolute joy that overcomes both the distinction between Eros and Thanatos and the cumulative desire for sense.

Against the false "totality" of modern philosophy—false because it offers an emancipating account from the rational point of view, but

without taking in the irrational aspects—Sábato has proposed another possible vision which has its roots in the same primitive cultures that Baudrillard refers to, and he considers art as the only one territory capable of recovering that sort of unity today: the “pure ideas” together with “Zulu warriors’ dances” (quoted above): “Only through art is reality revealed. I mean the *whole* reality.” (*The Angel* 200; cf. also 179-80).

### 3. A theory of fragment and pretense.

In Sábato’s fiction the visible world—the world organized by the most “rational” or “spiritual” of the senses, that of sight—appears in two fundamental forms: as a hazardous set of fragments or splinters—perhaps a broken image of an absent totality—and as a distorted or degraded repetition of a lost “original.” The term “pretense,” so dear to Baudrillard, links both manifestations: fragments conjugate themselves in a chaotic phantasmagoria that pretends to have a feverish order, repetitions provide imitations or forgeries of the disappearing and inaccessible reality. If sometimes the “original” is known—the face whose features repeat, pervert and distort themselves in the family images, the childhood or beauty which lie beneath the layers of time—in other cases there is no original: we do not know who is hiding under the characters’ masks in *The Angel*. A dark and hazy entity reproduces itself ceaselessly in the seemingly unlike faces of Nene Costa’s, Schneider’s, Schnitzler’s, professor Gandulfo’s, or R’s. In this last novel the displaying of the image-pretense reaches its apotheosis: photographs, pictures, optical devices, mirrors, windows, glassware, shape a dizzying map of reality where everything is and is not what it looks like, and where life, finally, turns out to be snatched from the visual configuration illusory motion.

In several occasions in Sábato’s fiction the common world appears represented as an immense stage where many people wander sleepless (beings with no conscience), like automatons (beings with no will), and like ghosts (beings with no reality, or with another reality).

Fernando Vidal says in the Sewer:

As if that were an illusion, I remembered now the turmoil from above,

from the other world, the chaotic Buenos Aires with frantic string puppets: everything looked to me like a childish phantasmagoria, with neither weight nor reality. Reality was this other thing. (OHT 430)

Also Castel (TT 81), Martín (OHT 536), Marcelo (AD 435-436), Nacho (AD 441-442), Sábado (AD 98), Bruno (AD 453, 467), evaluate the visible reality as a phantasmagoric parade. Sleep, “the big sleep of hypnotized people” (OHT 351) is another of the images which Bruno, Martín (OHT 533, 535, 555), Fernando (OHT, 432), or Sábado’s mother (AD 98) resort to. Likewise, chaos (OHT 533), the sleepwalking of sleepers who think themselves awake (OHT 432, 533, 535, AD 87), the “infernal farce” (AD 87), or the “sinister carnival” (AD 266) are metaphors which are resorted to in order to refer to the “pretense order” that marks modern culture and even gets, in postmodernity, to lose all referents: it is about an original, not a fake one, but one definitely lost or non-existent, dissolved in the vertigo of infinite copies.

Is there a way out of this hell of multiplication which seems to be, also, a sign of the times that mark postmodernity? Certain absolute experiences that cross over the sight system, like Fernando’s in the Sewer, or Sábado’s in the tunnels, seem to offer one.

#### 4. The extreme experience: a return to the symbolic exchange?

Several times does Fernando Vidal question the reality of his visions in the Sewer:

So that as soon as I could get into the Eye, *everything would vanish like a millenarian pretense*. (OHT 437)

And all my pilgrimage through subways and sewers, my walking through the great cave and my final ascension towards the Deity *had been, then, a phantasmagoria produced by the Blind Woman’s magic, or the while Sect’s*. (OHT 442)

I have no doubt now that that being had the power to rule over the inferior forces; which, if they do not create reality, *are in any case capable of rising terrible pretenses out of time and space, or inside of them, transforming, inverting and distorting them*. (OHT, 445)

This questioning, of course, has to do with the narrative's fantastic nature, which troubles the event insertion in "normality's" frame (Barrenechea, 1978; Bessière 1974). But it is important to point out, in principle, that Fernando has doubts only about what he *has seen*, and not about his experience of darkness, of the blindness produced by feeling his way in the tunnels:

my descent into Buenos Aires sewers and my walk through the muddy subways inhabited by monsters had the carnal force and precision of something that I had doubtlessly lived: reason why I thought that also the rest, the journey to the Deity, had not been a dream but something I had actually lived. (OHT 442)

If Fernando's vision—received or created—is deceitful, ambiguous, ghostly—like the sacred Eye's phosphorescent light—, his personal experience lived thanks to "perceiving by touching": his punishment/salvation, his blindness, and his immersion in the waters, is essentially true, as well as the prophecy which announces his end.

His visions in the Sewer are "phantasmagorias" in another sense, too. We must remember that the immense prairie towers which Fernando passes through is the outlet for a "tremendous amphitheater" which he has mistaken for a cave up to now. The exit for this amphitheater cannot be but a stage for a prodigious drama with only one actor and an unknown audience. Maybe they are the inhabitants of that "vast cave" (OHT 432), those "invisible beings which moved in the dark" (OHT 432) and which remain dauntless before the performance. Fernando's resemblance with Oedipus as a Sophoclean hero has been repeated tirelessly. the link between Vidal's pilgrimage towards the Deity and the tragic representation itself But has not been taken into account.<sup>8</sup> Representation where Fernando, a new Oedipus, is also a new Dionysus who will come back to mother-earth's bosom; who will metamorphose insatiably—since Dionysus' essence is the mask (Lesky 1973: 60 and 63)—; and who will then die mangled, quartered, in a great cosmic cataclysm which, even though destroys, supposes also an "emancipation of individuation yoke" (Nietzsche 1967: 67). Because of this theatrical nature, as sacred as theater itself in its origins, Fernando's performances (a "black hero" representing humanity during his titanic adventure) are "phantasmagoric." If for "phantasmagoria" we understand the theater's "unreality" with re-

spect to daily life, and its capacity for establishing in the usual space a different reality. Both conditions would serve to define (Ortega y Gasset 1966) the very essence of theater.

Now, the topic of the *theatrum mundi* (which we refer to in the previous section) in doing *everything* unreal to the eye of the only spectator: God or the mortal who momentarily moves to the absolute point of view, to Eternity's eye, dissolves the magic, metamorphic, subversive nature of the theatrical representation which is born precisely from the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between "reality" and "unreality." If everything is theatrical, then nothing is so. But under the chaotic aspect of the *theatrum mundi* another stage is opened, another drama which suspends life conditions—the false life, the fake life of the upper world—in order to spread like a hallucination and a delusion which however holds "the Truth." A hallucination that is profoundly linked with the oneiric experience to which primitive people award the revealing power of an ultra or hyperreality that, at least in the Dionysian drama, is "true to this one" (the common world)—(Ortega y Gasset 91). A vision which, as Nietzsche's, "is all of it an apparition perceived during sleep and, as such, of an epic nature, but which, on the other hand, as objectification of a Dionysian state, represents not only the Apollonian liberation in looks, but, on the contrary, the destruction of the individual and his identification with the primordial being." (Nietzsche 1967: 67)

In the great theater of the Sewer some decisive situations occur that relate Vidal's personal experience to the process of primitive symbolic exchange and of poetic experience in its pure state (in Baudrillard's terms) beyond other possible psychoanalytic or religious interpretations. The final abolition of all pretense—and of all language used as a mere exchange value—goes primarily through the exacerbation of a link that is natural for the primitive, and sinister for a western civilized person: the relation with the so called "double." The exchange denial, the potency of only one aspect of spirituality, the wound of separation—Baudrillard holds—create a "double vampire, double avenger, irreconcilable soul" (164), "an image of all the rejected and forgotten dead ones."

That "double vampire," a symbol of the divisions and splits in the western culture denounced by Sábato, is the one that returns in

the “human-sized bird” (Castel), in Sábato’s various unfoldments (both the anthropomorphic double and the winged rat of the final metamorphosis), and it is the shape that governs Fernando’s transformations in the amphitheater. But this double’s apparition pinpoints also the possibility of an experience that may transcend denial and separation, and that can be appreciated with special intensity in Fernando’s vicissitudes.

In his ascension to the eye-cave, where the beginning and the end are condensed and whose glow is associated with the habitat of sea monsters (*OHT* 439), Fernando metamorphoses first into a fish, which instead of being expelled by the womb to its rebirth, is pushed through the tunnel towards its inner depth. The climax of the metamorphic movement occurs after the sexual intercourse with Her (Alejandra—the Blind one), transfigured in a deity with black skin and purple eyes. The changes not only encompass common zomorphic possibilities, but they reach to teratology and the fabulous world: batrachian, centaur, lewd unicorn, snake, swordfish, octopus, vampire, gigantic satyr, mad tarantula, lustful salamander, wizard, Minotaur, hungry dog, firebird, snake-man, phallic rat, flesh-masted ship, lewd bell tower (*OHT* 445-446).<sup>9</sup>

These metamorphoses end up always with the subject being devoured by the Deity, turned into a “flesh volcano,” and even though they lead to a universal destruction, there still are in them a sort of cosmic fullness, of absolute climax, of penetration to the Center:

... it was a flesh volcano, whose fauces devoured me and whose flaming entrails reached down to the center of the earth. (*OHT* 445)

Once more I felt the flesh volcano that went deep down to the center of the earth. (*OHT* 445)

I can feel the flesh volcano opening its fauces to devour me and I can feel its entrails reaching down to the center of the earth. (*OHT* 446)

These metamorphoses and the coupling-devouring cannot be interpreted as a mere “punishment,” while his union with Her is the consummation of desire, is the hero’s valued “wanted treasure.” The exhaustion and fulfillment of desire lead to death, but death (if we pay attention to the Deity’s message) is identified with origin (“This is

your beginning and end.”) There is, in this adventure, a considerable affinity with the metamorphosis in *Corn Men*: in both cases there is a journey that involves a hard previous preparation; a descent—whose end may be also, in Vidal’s case, that of using up his own darkness (Brunel 1975: 89) and finding a link between life and death (Brunel 90). In both situations the descent involves going back to the origins, what supposes meeting again the ancestral animality (the sacred animal as an exchange partner in sacrifice, Baudrillard would say). In such a context the metamorphosis is not a degradation but a greater participation in cosmic life.

For both Georges Bataille (1964) and Sábato, death and coupling “exchange their energies and glorify one another” (Baudrillard 180), are sacred forms of vital violence, of the excess and immoderation which life produces in its continuous generation and annihilation. A supreme experience of the individual’s dispossession in order to plunge into something else, the access to the cavity of the eye/womb and the copulation with the Deity suppose a decisive “loss”:

Then I lost the sense of daily life, the accurate memory of my real existence and the consciousness that sets up the big and decisive divisions which man must live with: heaven and hell, good and evil, flesh and soul. (OHT 444)

But this loss is also no worthless gain. The suppression of those oppositions with which the western and rational thought is articulated involves the access to a dimension that overcomes them because it ignores them: perhaps that dimension of symbolic exchange and absolute poetic pleasure Baudrillard talks about. Also Sábato lives his ritual coupling with Soledad like a devouring—*his* devouring, which allows him to reach the center of the universe, the germ of being, the cave of beginning and of death-resurrection, which will cast over the double-bat and over the permanence in the work eventually written (AD 419-420).

## 5. The symbolic ambivalence: beyond meaning and death

It can be said that ambivalence is the main point in Sábato’s fiction semantic articulation, inasmuch as it is confirmed in his fiction “an oxymoron structure . . . that unsettles the principle of no con-

tradition, because A is A and also not A, because eyes are blind and blindness is a visionary state,” “a paradoxical tension . . . , a dynamic ambivalence, an enantiotropy where ends meet and seem to transform one into the other with none of them definitely succeeding.” “But if it cannot be said that one end finally succeeds . . . , in given occasions the paradoxical tension seems to break out inside the undifferentiated unity.” (Lojo 1997: 20)

It is possible to ask oneself if it is the same ambivalence which Baudrillard refers to when he speaks about the symbolic exchange in primitive societies, or in the poetic operation. The French philosopher matches the latter with the sacrifice and quartering of a god whose body scatters and dissolves in the community leaving no trace (Baudrillard 1993: 238), and he puts himself on guard against the metaphor’s “positive economy,” against the analogical theories that find in it a palimpsest of plural senses:

Poetics involves the reversibility from one field to another and, therefore, the nullification of the respective values. While in metaphor valences mix with each other, get involved with each other, intertextualize according to a «harmonic» game . . . , in the poetic pleasure they nullify each other; the radical ambivalence is a no-valence.

This thesis, certainly daring, involves denying not only traditional linguistics, but the hermeneutics of poetic language; it involves getting rid of the theory of the unconscious, of all *dahinten*, background or semantic “remain,” which would turn out to be strange and external to the very poetic act. Beyond meaning, beyond discourse, beyond value and law, the symbolic ambivalence reveals and brings up to date death in the sacrifice of sense, and sets it in an insatiable motion of reversible circulation with life. Many hermeneutic theories have been applied, with more or less ingenuity, to Sábato’s texts and particularly to the Report on the Blind. Perhaps it is not mistaken to hold that the latter is, above all, the self-representation and self-consummation of the *poetic adventure* itself. The very chain of metamorphoses could be a symbol of this creative act that would make possible the immersion in the whole reality. It is Keat’s “chameleonism” interpreted by Cortázar:

the poet gets to annihilate the identities, which can only be kept through

the continuous effort of the reasoning mind. When this link is dissolved, the poet's soul is free to join all the conceivable manifestations of the universe, and merge with every form of life. The poet's experience, Cortázar goes on, is like a shaman's mystic trance. For the sorcerer, he observes, metaphors have a 'sacred value.' For him, A is not like B. It is B. The primitive man accepts an identification that makes the identity principle blow up. Both the shaman's and the poet's trance satisfy the sorcerer's/poet's yearning to achieve an omnipresence that is only possible through identity dissolution. (Hernández1979)

Here comes Sábato's criticism to the spirit that established the realm of quantity, whose weapons are "gold and intelligence" and whose procedure is "calculus" (Sábato H 29). Maybe it is thus overcome, by the final extermination of value, the "pretense principle" and the pretense hypostasis that postmodernity takes to the utmost.

The violation of the "code determinism" by the "symbolic disorder" (Baudrillard1993: 8) seems to open a breach for the irruption of reality in a language that has been changed into poetry. Maybe this return to the origin of vital practices previous to the false rational totality and the closing of signs is the mark of a post-modernist art announced, in some way, by the romantics and the surrealists.<sup>10</sup> Sábato, a critic of modernity as Illustration, a critic of postmodernity as a culture of pretense, might transcend, through the central proposition of his writing, the vertigo of reproduction, the chain of copies without an original, in order to overwhelm his hero with the—sacrificial—experience of dissemination that restores the broken links between the realities of life and death.

A daring nyctalope, a "*point suprême*" surrealist where the opposites and the assumptions of old ways of thinking are overcome, Sábato's artist might take to the utmost the avant-garde enterprise, to the exacerbation and the exhaustion of desire. In *On Heroes and Tombs*, the esthetic and metaphysical avant-garde project "triumphs" in a way in the "symbolic exchange," while there remains room for the utopian construction of a new society in Martín's journey to the South. In *The Angel of Darkness* the other avant-gardes' political project plunges into an exacerbated violence that reproduces over the victims of torture the Sewer's planetary catastrophe: "Everything has disappeared in a land that suffers earthquakes and fires that come back over and over again, between the screams and rending cries of people being

crushed by blocks of iron and concrete, bleeding, maimed, crushed by beams of burning steel. Before losing his consciousness he suddenly feels a sort of immense happiness: I AM GOING TO DIE, he thinks." (AD 438) Not even here there seems to be "remains" either: the bodies of the dead—Marcelo's body—, will sink, without trace, under the waters of the River Plate. A duplication, and at the same time a tragic reverse of the poetic adventure, this other sacrifice does not move the surface of an ignorant or indifferent country, which drifts, without knowing it, towards the end of times (or its time) and does not take charge (*blind* to what happens in the dark) of the minute and still underground destruction. But there remains an invisible "rest": the "missing"—"double avenger," "irreconcilable soul," "an image of all the rejected and forgotten dead ones" (Baudrillard)—that perhaps only the writer assumes, on himself, in transforming himself into a winged rat, in an imperceptible way to the others' eyes. Nobody sees the writer-bat, as well as nobody has seen, or will see the political "missing." In the narrative present of *The Angel* (the "first account") the erotic and poetic ecstasy is no longer there. Sábato (character) limits himself to redoing his youth steps on his way to the house on Arcos street, where years ago, his sexual union with Soledad has occurred. But the new journey does not take him now, as before, to the "center of the universe" (AD 420), to the mysterious cave of origin, but, simply, to plunge between garbage and rats, while he looks for an exit. His return to daylight, and to the familiar surrounding of the house, does not bring him back to the community "normality", but to the utmost estrangement: to embody, on his own body—now of a bat—, what is rejected and dark<sup>11</sup>.

In that, in what is rejected and dark, lies the truth (reality) that everyone else does not want to see. Nobody notices him when he comes back, though not as if he were a ghost, but—in a significant inversion—as if all the others were ghosts: "as if [Sábato] were a living person among ghosts." (423) He first meets the one who passes as himself, sitting at his desk. Then there comes his definite transformation: the fusion of the being and his double in the body of a winged rat, which turns out to be imperceptible even for the closest relatives ("People came, naturally. But they did not show any surprise. They asked him what was wrong, if he felt bad, if he wanted a cup of tea," 448). Those images, secret and persistent, that do not reveal them-

selves: that of the writer-monster—who “disappears” overwhelmed by a metamorphosis inaccessible to others—; that of the victim murdered secretly, whose body will not return to the visible world, not even as a corpse, can no longer be absorbed or exhausted in the poetic process. The estranged writer, with his excess of “night vision,” will remain—sleepless witness—in the inform, unclassifiable body of the novel we are reading, together with the unburied corpse of the other missing one, who will migrate even farther, in History’s flow, waiting for his reinsertion in the material and symbolic space of mother-earth, and in the virtual space of common memory.

### Notes

1. The category “postmodernity” is used, of course, in relation to many diverse fields: in principle, it is a historical category (though not all the authors agree as regards its appearance and periodicity) with manifestations in social life, and also in arts and thought. The crisis of the “great stories” or metastories (Lyotard) and of every idea of a harmonic and homogenic “totality”, the questioning of Modernity (and its hypertrophy of Reason and the idea of Progress), the axiological relativism, the crisis of ethnocentrism and the “universal pattern”; the “weak thought” (Vátimo), the critical rereading of western History (and quite particularly of one’s own History, in the case of Latin America), the discussion about the “death of ideologies” and the “end of History” are some of the fundamental lines explored by postmodernist thought.

2. See Antón Risco’s review in Steimberg (1996: 60).

3. John Barth, Umberto Eco, Hans R. Jauss, Charles Russell, Gerald Graff to whom the Latin Americans Carlos Rincón and Jaime Alazraki are joined (Risco 62; Ferman 82). Much has been written indeed about Borges’ relation not only with literature, but with postmodernist thought (See De Toro 1997). Borges’ case is certainly particularly complex. If Leopoldo Marechal defined himself at one time as a “romantic in language” but a “classic in thought,” it would not be rash to characterize Borges as a “classic in language” and a “postmodernist in thought.”

4. Ferman (1994: 81). Naturally, Fokkemas statement fails to recognize Rubén Darío’s Modernism, who undoubtedly had a decisive influence on Peninsular tradition. See also Steimberg (1996: 165).

5. See Malva Filer in Steimberg 1996: 42-43.

6. In the case of Latin American postmodernity, some phenomena have been associated to it, like magic realism, neo-baroque, carnivalization, dense intertextuality, parody (which has a strongly critical sense, and is not limited to a literary game); phenomena that emerge from the inner history of Latin American literature, and not from a simple recent assimilation of European techniques (Filer 1996; Risco 1996; Núñez 2001). On the other hand, some other forms, like the "testimonial," stand out as proper of this stage, closely related to the experiences of State terrorism, guerrilla, social struggles and ethnic claims, revolutionary attempts.

7. Sábato, Ernesto. *The Angel of Darkness*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980: 200.

8. A. M. Vázquez Bigi (1983) puts forward the idea of "tragic epic" to refer to Sábato's work, and he points out connections with *The Birth of Tragedy*, by Nietzsche, but he does not delve into the analysis of the Report as a tragic representation.

9. I have checked the last version of *On Heroes and Tombs* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990). In this version chapters XXXVI y XXXVII of the Report on the Blind, where Fernando's experiences are told, have been redone. This reworking supposes, above all, cuts that, according to our opinion, if perhaps stylistically result in a more austere imagery, and doubtlessly are more in accord with the author's current tastes, diminish the poetic ambiguity of the text, its rich irradiation potentiality. Since the author is still living, and since he has corrected his works several times, it cannot be said for sure that this will actually be the last version. In any case, we think that in the edition we dealt with for this article, the Report on the Blind reaches a semantic culmination of great impact, specially as regards the vertigo in Fernando's animal metamorphoses and the manifest assimilation of his coupling with the black-skinned deity to entering the cosmic center, the "center of the earth."

10. An excellent exposition of the complex relationships between avant-garde and postmodernity (as well as an evaluation and revision of the categories "modernist" and "postmodernist") can be seen in Amícola (2000: 37-48).

11. Daniel Castillo Durante says (1999: 242) in another article: "before the modern hero who aspires to be reborn out of his own ashes, the postmodernist dumping place subverts the question in interrogating knowledge capable of being reborn out of its own garbage." The periphery, devouring the Center's waste material, becomes paradoxically the "center of garbage." The writer, in *The Angel*, comes from garbage, and attempts to show to society

the remains of a System that crushes everything which is not good to it with an implacable ferocity.

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