

Only Joking? Gustavo Sainz and *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro*: Funniness, Identity and the Post-Boom

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If there is anything approaching a consensus on what distinguishes the Post-Boom from the Boom in Latin America, it would appear to have something to do with the relative accessibility of the former in reaction to (or, at least, in contrast with) the narrative complexity of the latter. In particular, this supposed accessibility is often related to the incorporation of humor and elements from popular culture.¹ The 1974 novel *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro* (*The Princess of the Iron Palace*) by the Mexican Gustavo Sainz, with its foregrounding of “pop” or youth culture, its playfully colloquial language and its apparent sense of fun, would therefore seem to be a perfect representative of the Post-Boom.² It betrays most of the characteristics that Antonio Skármeta has seen as typical of this new generation of writers (see Shaw 88-89), and Donald Shaw himself, following the line of Sainz’s contemporary and compatriot José Agustín, even regards Sainz, rather than (as is often claimed) Manuel Puig, as the key initiator of this trend in the Post-Boom (90). However, while it may be tempting simply to see a work like *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro* as a fun-culture rites-of-passage novel, the entire question of the Post-Boom’s attempted incorporation of humor and pop(ular) culture is highly problematic. One has but to think of some of the transitional novels of major Latin American authors: Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña* (*Kiss of the Spiderwoman*) (1976) where there is considerable instability in the relationship of the appealing and revalorizing popular movie narrations of the subaltern protagonist and the more “difficult” and “knowing” narrative structure of the text as a whole; Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La tía Julia y el escritor* (*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*) (1978) where the popular perspective in an essentially entertaining

novel is undermined by the ending's inscription of the power and authority of a mature "serious" author; or Carlos Fuentes' *La cabeza de la hidra* (*The Hydra Head*) (1978), another Mexican urban novel, where a (spoof?) spy-thriller plot line is combined uneasily with both literary self-reflexivity and external referentiality.³ *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro* may prove to be similarly less straightforward than at first sight. The most basic level of criticism would already seem to suggest this. The novel (and the more general phenomenon of the *Onda* or "Scene" with which Sainz was in the past associated) has been seen as either funny or serious, as a trivial glorification of youth culture or as a critical commentary on its underlying values.⁴ Perhaps a key to this uncertainty is the question of "funniness." Following Susan Purdie's terminology, wherein "joking" can be termed to refer to those occasions where the characteristic effect of "funniness" is generated, and glossing Lacan, "joking paradigmatically involves a discursive exchange whose distinctive operation involves the *marked* transgression of the Symbolic Law and whose effect is thereby to constitute jokers as 'masters' of discourse" (5).⁵ This idea of joking discourse operating as "the aberrant case whose marking defines the central field" (Purdie 158) provides a valuable inroad into the "problem" of reading Sainz's novel. In it the unnamed protagonist (the Princess of the title) gives an account of a series of comic adventures in which she transgresses the norms of family and gender while simultaneously inserting herself within them. Moreover, her transgressive narration is possibly neutralized by an implied commentary by an implied author to an implied reader. Yet, at the same time, the appeal of the bulk of the novel to the reader must rest upon the very transgressiveness of the *princesa* and her narration. Thus writing and reading (or speaking and listening) emerge, like notions of gender and family, as means of structuring reality, while those very processes, and the relationships between them, are concurrently problematized. It is frequently remarked that the shift from the modern to the postmodern is a shift from epistemology to ontology. In a parallel way, the slippage from Boom to Post-Boom may reveal, behind all the apparent transparency of the latter, a break with the "totalizing" tendency of the Latin American "new novel" and a surging mood of insecurity before an increasingly contingent sense of identity.

A commonplace, by now, of much contemporary critical theory is that identity is constructed rather than given. The very title of *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro* suggests this. The protagonist has no name to individualize her, but simply a title or definition of her role

given by her mother (“princesa”—a conventional, constructed identity) and her job (in the upscale department store the Palacio de Hierro). Indeed the title implies, echoing as it does the poem “Sonatina” by Rubén Darío (who is mentioned briefly at the end of the tenth chapter), that she is helplessly imprisoned in her role. Her identity is structured in particular by gender, family and, though more problematically here, class. There are countless examples of her parents pressuring her to mix in only appropriate circles and of her brother and uncle ensuring she comply with adequate standards of feminine behavior. She works in a shop while typing her male friends’ dissertations to help them get on in their careers and internalizes her subservient female role to such a degree that her narrative seems to reduce women to their sexual organs, a mere object of male sexual pleasure: her friend is seen patting her “vagina recién utilizada” ‘recently used vagina’ (94), while she suspects one of her boyfriends of chasing “alguna vagina calva y arrugadísima” ‘some bald, wrinkled vagina’ (221). However, the role models are hypocritical and the acquired role unsatisfying. Her parents’ social background is not high society, her father and uncle’s money comes from dubious sources and the protective uncle is a crook and rapist. In fact, it is hinted that her parents do not even care much about her at all: they do not even notice her (accidental?) suicide attempt and she is only able to talk about her true feelings or problems to the clients in the store. Her narrative, meantime, betrays increasing signs of thinly-disguised unhappiness. Yet her relationship to both role and models is quite complex. Her raunchy narration celebrates the world of sexual adventure and infidelity, pornography, drugs and violence at the same time as it brings out her unease. In a sense, echoing the earlier remarks on joking as a discursive exchange, this is a reflection of the Lacanian notion of the acquisition of identity: “man’s [sic] desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other” (cited in Purdie 169). This ambiguous identification with an oppressive masculinity is brought out in the first chapter. The novel opens with a confident female narrative voice introducing a character called Vestida de Hombre (Dressed Like a Man) seen confronting a policeman—a clear image of the usurping of male authority. Yet the next page offers an equally clear image of female insecurity as the Princess mentions her turned-in feet and tells us she is the center of attention at a nightclub to which she is sometimes denied access and never allowed to enter without her

brother. She insists on her popularity in the club even though she is clearly marginal to the main story being told (the very male-centered fight in the parking lot over a set of stolen hubcaps). Indeed, in the space of a few lines she goes from being “La Popular” ‘Miss Popularity’ to “la clásica pendeja” ‘a typical sucker’ (9). The chapter ends with an account of a bizarre encounter in a restaurant where the Princess’s tone of sexual confidence gives way to the powerful male sexuality of a manipulative maître d’. Her repulsion and rejection disguises an obvious sexual attraction, borne out by her subsequent relationships with largely similar sorts of men in the rest of the novel. And her relationship with her brother and uncle further bear out this pattern. Her abusive brother becomes a kind of best friend and mentor (78), while the cheerfully described rape of Vestida de Hombre is framed by references to her uncle, the perpetrator, as “simpatiquísimo” ‘real nice’ and a “muy buen tío” ‘great guy’ (143-44). Yet, although she likes men to be “un poquito cabrones” ‘on the mean side’ (81) and later feels excited at being kidnapped—“esa sensación de impotencia y disponibilidad me hacía femenina, me lubricaba” ‘that feeling of powerlessness, availability, usability made me feel feminine, made me feel all wet’ (277)—, she also yearns to be treated as she is rather than as she is seen, that is to be accepted on her own terms rather than as the object of an other (202) and later gets frustrated at her lover’s anger when she wants to talk seriously or more profoundly, saying: “es que puedo ser superrelajienta, superplaticadora, supertodo. . . , pero cuando trato de ser de otra manera y trato de ser un poco más seria y todo, ya nadie me conoce, nadie me entiende” ‘I mean, I can be super-good company, super-chatty, super-everything. . . , but when I try and act different, when I try and be a bit more serious and all that, it’s like nobody knows who I am anymore, nobody understands me’ (250).

Though the above examples may not reveal a fully postmodernist aesthetic in Sainz, there is certainly a difference from the modernist aesthetic of a Boom novel like, say, Fuentes’ *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*) (1962) where Artemio’s identity seems to be either a question of moral choices or some kind of existential given. What *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro* reveals is a break with the “totalizing” tendency of many modernist novels of the Boom which, for all their fragmentation and questioning of conventional theories of reality and realism, nonetheless seek to install some kind of alternative “viewpoint,” implying some kind of wholeness of vision. This can be seen in the differential treatment of the “city” in the

two types of novel. If Shaw's article cites the view that urban contexts are a feature of the Post-Boom, it is also clear that many of the major works of the Boom were urban novels and that there has, anyway, been a long tradition of Latin American urban fiction and even a trend in experimental urban writing that can be traced back to Roberto Arlt (1900-1942). As J. Ann Duncan has remarked of Fuentes and as could be said too of Vargas Llosa, the urban novels of the Boom offer a kind of "patchwork quilt" vision of society (15), whereas Sainz here gives more an image of the processes of construction of the individual within an urban setting.⁶ In this sense, as with family and gender, the streets of Mexico D.F. in Sainz's novel are "menacing, but . . . also adventurous" (Jones 16). Thus the immorality of the world described by the Princess is both a burden and a means of self-affirmation. Drugs, violence, theft, casual sex and infidelity are all ways of affirming identity in the vast urban metropolis as well as emblems of the corrupting models that shape identity. Of particular interest in this respect is the relationship—noted by Julie Jones— established between the family home and the city streets. Illustrating the pull between the demand for domesticity and the will to self-expression, the family home is associated with the world of the Princess's parents and, later, her husband (that is, the acquisition of a conventional female identity), while the outside world offers her the illusion of more presence and possibility. Again, though, the latter is more complex than Jones' idea of the assertion of individuality in the face of an impersonal metropolis, for the popularity the Princess acquires in the outside world is based on her internalization of patriarchal values while her opportunity for self-expression in the store as opposed to the family home situates her in another dependent social, economic and even gender (she later models clothes for the store) role. A further point here is that, in a novel largely about youthful adventures in the big city, the narrative perspective is that of a domesticated married woman. The Princess's husband, clearly a central presence in the grown woman's life, is defined in her narrative as an absence in so far as he is never identified and represents the only relationship with a male lover that is not described. Thus for all that her narrative may have the flavor of self-affirmation, it is in fact told from a perspective of complete socialization.

This last point leads us to the crucial (and, once more, ambiguous) role played by language in the construction of identity. Given the fact that the narrator is an older, married woman, her narrative emerges as an attempt to recreate a lost youthful and (illusorily) freer past. Jones

concludes her study with the observation that the Princess “is left only her way with words as a means of recreating the utopian street life that once conferred on her a feeling of plenitude and vitality” (22) and, indeed, it would seem that the exuberant colloquial and highly creative language that characterizes the protagonist’s narrative embodies the energy, rebelliousness, freedom and excitement she sees in her former youth. In giving voice to her past, the Princess may seem to be producing a classic loss-of-innocence tale, glorifying the youth and freedom which has been inevitably overtaken by the grimly corrupt or stultifying realities of adult life. Yet, as has already been suggested, that notion of youth and freedom is— in some sense, at least— just as much of a construct as any conventional, socialized adult identity. If the Princess is seeking to recuperate that constructed past in language, the implication may well be that she is not so much recuperating it as (literally) recreating it, that is actually constructing it as much as reconstructing it. From Lacan onwards, the link can be seen between the acquisition of identity and the acquisition of language. And, of course, Lacan’s concept of “subjectivity,” as opposed to mere identity, sees selfhood as acquired through interaction with others rather than in terms of the traditional humanist notion of the self as a given, autonomous essence. In this novel, then, the relationship of the individual to language may be seen in terms similar to the relationship of the individual to family, class, gender group or the city. Language in action is, in other words, also the process of the construction of identity. Or, what language constructs is, by definition, a construct. Casual references in the novel imply this: for example, to the Princess’s psychiatrist who, from one session to the next, interprets his written notes on her rather than interpreting *her* directly (78) or to the porn movies where the sexual activity seen by the viewer is acted out rather than literally carried out (280). At one stage, the Princess complains that one of her boyfriends, the Monje (Monk), only reads, studies and quotes poetry, and beseeches him instead: “no me hables de tus versos, si quieres vívelos, asúmelos, envuélvete en ellos . . .” ‘don’t talk to me about poetry, live it, be it, wrap yourself up in it . . .’ (137). This is almost immediately followed by a quotation from Oliveiro Gironde: “Hasta Darío no existía un idioma tan rudo y maloliente como el español” ‘Before Darío there was no language as crude or as smelly as Spanish’ (137). So, language, in some sense, fictionalizes reality and the Princess prefers to live that fiction. Indeed her own language, one might suspect, tends to fictionalize too: consider, for instance, her

highly stylized description of the kiss that precedes her loss of virginity (57) or the extremely romantic tone—punctuated by cinematic references hinting at the role of popular culture in forging her vision—of the account of her romance with the handsome Italian Yiovani (or Giovanni) in the seventeenth chapter (neither situation particularly meriting the language, one might feel). One could go even further and suggest that her narrative is a lie, either in part or (who knows?) possibly in its entirety. She lets slip at one stage that she lies to the Monk, or at least withholds the truth from him (179), and, of course, she is constantly two-timing her boyfriends. A small detail possibly gives her away: her allusions to the attentions of Carlos Stamatis in the eleventh chapter do not appear to square with her (now forgotten?) remarks on him in the fourth chapter. In the fifteenth chapter, too, she claims to have taped the telephone conversation with the government minister who has been harassing her, yet the evidence does not suggest that she did so. And is it believable that the First Lady gave her a present of a trip to Europe as a consequence of this? And— it seems— a gas station as well (of which there is no mention ever again)? Such details make other accounts less acceptable, such as the story of the Monk's ejaculation over her belly rather than in her vagina because he was actually penetrating the ghost-girl who had come between them in the haunted house where they were staying! In the light of all this, other episodes, which may have seemed merely odd (like the restaurant scene in the opening chapter and the related story of the waiter-cum-gangster-cum-pimp-cum-taxi-driver Capitán Tarcisio) may now seem over-embellished or invented. Her keenness to deny that she attempted suicide or had an abortion (despite hints to the contrary in what are really highly ambivalent reports) may equally now smack of falsehood. And the whole story of the affair with Giovanni may now seem a fabrication. However, the very interesting sixteenth chapter could be seen as providing an explanation for this tissue of possible untruths. The chapter draws attention to its own significance by its surprising shortness (only about a page long). Also it has a reflective flavor of sorts in that it is the only chapter to deal at all with her current (married, domesticated) situation. As if to convince the reader or herself that her days are full and meaningful, she comments that her telephone never stops ringing and lists a series of very unlikely phone calls, concluding: "Y así pasa el tiempo, pasa rapidísimo, como un coche esporte que corre hecho la madre ¿no es cierto?" 'And so the time just goes by, I mean it really flies, like a really cool sports car—you

know what I mean?’ (207-08). The suggestion is that she invents a life to fill the void that is her own. The quotation from Girondo that immediately follows reinforces the point. She has no joy in life and so is spinning a fictional alternative. She has turned herself into a fictitious character within her own fictitious narrative: “Pero dime / — si puedes— / ¿qué haces / allí, sentado / entre seres ficticios / que en vez de carne y hueso / tienen letras, / acentos, / consonantes, / vocales?” ‘But tell me— / if you can— / what are you doing / sitting there / surrounded by fictitious beings / who are not made of flesh and blood / but of letters, / accents, / consonants, / vowels?’ (208).

This last quotation from Girondo, however, takes matters a stage further. It suggests not just that the Princess’s identity is a fiction in the sense that it is a construct, but also that she herself is a fiction in that she is a character in someone else’s novel. The sheer virtuosity of her language creates the impression that her act of narration is a kind of performance, not just in the sense that it is designed to deflect attention from the underlying banality of her life, but also in the sense that it generates what is, ultimately, a work of fiction. When she refers at one stage to her boyfriend Mauricio, she comments that “ha entrado poco en esta historia ¿verdad?” ‘he hasn’t figured much in this story, has he?’ (87), inadvertently drawing attention to the fact that this is, after all, only a story. Having said that, there is yet a further dimension to the novel that encourages the view that the text’s emphasis on its own fictionality is not simply a continuation of that trend in the Latin American new narrative (by this stage rather old hat anyway) that plays with the idea that fiction is only fiction as a reaction to traditional realism’s alleged equation of fiction with reality. This is brought out in an anecdote told by the Monk. Korzybski does not flee when his students tell him a tiger is coming because he believes that “the word is not the thing,” but is then, unfortunately, eaten when the tiger does turn up (179). Is this a commentary on the new novel’s tendency to take refuge in unreality? Certainly, it suggests that behind “words,” there is some external reality. The point about the novel’s foregrounding of fictionality, then, may be to bring out the fictionality of the narrator in order to mark the presence of a separate implied author or, even, *the* author Gustavo Sainz. This brings us back to the question of humor and addresses an issue which should now be becoming quite striking: that, for a supposedly “funny” book, it all sounds rather serious so far. What the novel does, in effect, is to erect the strong presence of an implied author who offers a critical (or, at least, complementary or different)

perspective on the apparently frivolous narrative stance of his narrator-protagonist. The not especially bright or well-educated narrator provides the fun and games, while the intelligent and cultivated implied author conveys a serious reflection on them. Or the strong implied author, as creator of the narrator, is a powerful source of both humor and creative energy on the one hand and insightful reflection on them on the other.⁷

This is not at all unproblematic. The positing of an implied authorial presence may appear inevitably to devalue the Princess's narrative and the Princess herself (as autonomous forces at least) on which and on whom the novel's appeal to most readers would, one imagines, largely rest. In particular, if the implied author is figured as male, "he" problematizes his own implied commentary on the construction of female identity and the critique of the social construction of identity in general. If, in relation to the novel's use of humor, one accepts Purdie's contention that "the capacity to joke is connected with possession of that 'proper' language which commands full subjectivity, for it is that full subjectivity which patriarchy consistently denies to women and, by extension, to its other abjected groups" (128-29), then the implied author is properly powerful and the Princess as woman and, what is more, uneducated woman, is the mere target or butt of the implied author's commentary. Moreover, "Butts," says Purdie, "are definitionally lower than, more discursively inept . . . than, and above all *different from* Teller and Audience" (129). Thus an appeal is also made to an implied reader, figured as both male and educated or intellectual. Raymond L. Williams has already remarked that the expressions of pettiness and vulgarity that characterize the Princess's narrative "are effective strategies for fictionalizing a reader who is superior to the characters" (384). The implied commentaries on identity-acquisition examined above operate in a similar way, flattering the implied reader with insights that the protagonist lacks. Indeed the language she uses is often a marker for the implied reader to "read" her in a more knowing way, as in, for instance, her comic Hispanicized renderings such as Deiri Cuin, Nanci Güilson, Cherloc Jolms, Guachinton, Mayami, jolivud, jelou, and so on. Also, there is an implied higher narrative level aimed at a reader figured as intellectual. Gerald Martin, for instance, sees Joycean echoes, arguing that the entire novel "may be construed as one long homage to the Molly Bloom soliloquy" (245). And the novel contains an Acknowledgements section identifying the quotations at the end of each chapter as

belonging to Oliveira Gironde, which, for Williams, “distance the reader and make the [*princesa*’s] somewhat frivolous anecdotes a focus of analysis” (385). Not only are other allusions mentioned here (unmarked in the main text), but there is also a reference to the illustrations accompanying the original edition, provided by “importantes artistas contemporáneos” ‘important contemporary artists’ (285). The illustrations included in the edition cited here may be seen as providing another level of implied commentary.⁸ Noticeably, the pictures (including the cover) are (largely) of nude women, while the few male figures depicted are all clothed, reinforcing the idea of a male implied reader, for, as John Berger has noted in his *Ways of Seeing*, in painting, “women are depicted in a quite different way from men— not because the feminine is different from the masculine— but because the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of women is designed to flatter him” (64). One might even be tempted to gloss the earlier remarks on the Princess’s interpretation of her female identity in terms of male models by venturing the possibility that the lusty accounts of sexuality and defloration, though narrated by a woman, are actually inscribing a conventionally construed male notion of identity.

The matter of the novel’s “funniness” can now be examined more closely. Clearly, the pattern of an energetic fun-filled narration of bawdy adventures framed by a creating and controlling implied authorial presence reflects the liberation-versus-containment debate on the notion of “carnival.” The Bakhtinian position that carnivalesque behavior subverts Symbolic hierarchies by exposing them as arbitrary constructs rather than immutable givens can obviously be challenged by the claim that the culture based on such hierarchies, by authorizing and controlling such behavior, uses carnival as an ultimately constraining force. As Purdie says (and for “low” in the present context, read “female” or “uneducated”): “carnival, in inverting symbolic hierarchies, also reinscribes them: to create a socially low person as ‘King for the day’ in fact assumes that a ladder of social advantage is an eternal truth, and its carnivalesque nature asserts that this embodiment of the ladder is incorrect” (126). In *La princesa del Palacio de Hierro*, the entire narrative, in which raunchy rebelliousness appears to be voiced from a perspective of the narrator’s socialization into patriarchal structures and subservience to a male implied author, expresses this dilemma. The peculiar restaurant scene in the opening chapter is emblematic of this. It is based on a play between firstly a carnivalesque “world-upside-down” in which expected norms in a posh eatery are

“world-upside-down” in which expected norms in a posh eatery are overturned by the ribald antics of gay men, prostitutes and young hoodlums and secondly the extraordinarily authoritarian presence of the controlling *maître d’*. The Princess revealingly comments at one stage that “la situación se nos resbalaba de las manos” ‘the situation was sliding out of our control’ (18). Carnival here does not give authority to the subaltern figure but accentuates its loss or denial.

A look at the novel’s humor in terms of transgressing and marking of norms, as mentioned earlier, brings out a similar picture. If the Princess’s voluble language appears energetic and subversive from one point of view, from another it underscores the conventional idea (inscribed in joking discourse) that women’s speech is “inferior” in that women— especially when objectified in joking— are constructed as nagging, gossipy and as people who talk too much (Purdie 133). Moreover, the sheer linguistic excess of the Princess’s monologue and its constant appeals to its unnamed addressee points to an anxiety of positionality. In Purdie’s words: “Women’s speech typically demonstrates the apprehension that they have to work harder to gain attention by using redundant exaggeration, repetition and emphasis, and by naming their hearer; and seeks continual reassurance that they *are* being attended to by using ‘tag questions’” (139). A parallel expression of insecurity in the Princess is her repeated references to driving, women’s driving being another conventional topic of joking. The novel is full of scenes identifying men with their cars and depicting wild car chases and scenes of drunken driving. Yet the Princess is driven by men or takes taxis (the powerful *maître d’* is later said to become a taxi driver) because she is too scared to drive her own car, and when the girls are involved in a car accident they react hysterically and rush to locate their boyfriends so that they will sort things out for them.

Yet, in so far as the Princess herself is (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on point of view) characterized as a joker, she appears to invert the usual hierarchies by having fun at the expense of men. Again though, the transgression reaffirms the norm. Her comic two-timing, for instance, ultimately creates anxiety for her. More interestingly, her joking at the expense of “weak” men (itself an acceptable form of male joking) is inevitably founded on the idea that the desired norm is potent masculinity (rather in the way that “feminist” jokes about “tiny dicks” unwittingly support the implied desirability of “big dicks”). The most obvious butt in this context is the Monk, who, as his name implies, is, unlike “normal” men, studious, retiring, spiritual, virginal, malleable,

cowardly and (though the narrative is, once more, ambivalent on this point) not conventionally good-looking. However, not only do the numerous scenes in which she takes advantage of him or makes him look foolish betray the Princess's own slavery to conventional constructions of masculinity, but there are also indications that this view is false—the Monk gets one over on her at one point (109)—and that he is really something of a positive role model for her—she falls in love with him and says that she has learned a lot from him (183). In a sense, her inability to resist the social construction of the self erases the possibility of a more authentic self.

Joking, then, is an enactment of the processes of attempted affirmation and actual acquisition of identity discussed earlier. If the Princess is herself a “joker,” what she is seeking—as with her verbal reconstruction or renegotiation of her own history—is “the pleasure and power that all joking yields in its temporary resolution of th[e] contradiction [of identity]” (Purdie 147). But that resolution is ephemeral and therefore does not give the lie to Lacan's view that, given the inextricable link between language and identity, identity remains contradictory because language is contradictory. The Princess is joking, therefore, simply to convince herself that her life is somehow pleasurable or meaningful or authentic. Hence, she (or, more accurately, her construction) inverts Northrop Frye's theory of “comedy” based on the humanistic notion of the triumph of natural forces (see Purdie 153 ff.). Her youthful exuberance does not correspond to the festive celebration of an innate vitality, traditionally seen as the essence of comedy ever since Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, precisely because she is a construct rather than an essence. This is why the novel's ending is not the conventional “happy ending,” which became the definitional characteristic of comedy from Frye onwards. Conventional resolution through marriage is not provided. Indeed, the final chapter reveals a sense of anxiety before the marriage, is based on the absence of the husband as a character rather than his presence, and ends with a dream hinting at the pernicious influence of the mother as an image of the processes of socialization and the molding of identity. The epilogue, finally, is a passage from *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir and Estragon refer to those who need to “talk” about life more than to have lived it.⁹ Such talk is defined as “noise.” Life is thus seen as both constructed verbally and meaningless.

The problem with much of the above is, of course, the constant slippage between narrator and implied author (and possibly real

author). Who is the joker? The Princess? The implied author? Sainz? How far is the novel just joking? How far is it attempting to be serious? Is it a comment on reality? Is it a comment on the fictional construction of reality? Is it a comment on its own fictionality? There is no global resolution of these conflicting questions. The point is that what the novel reveals—consciously or unconsciously—is a radical insecurity about its own identity. And this sense of its own textuality—of the unavoidable intertextuality of narrator and implied author—inevitably incorporates both author and reader in the intertextual process. Each is in turn constructing and constructed in the process of writing and reading. Identity is thus about these processes of construction rather than about any previously given or eternal essence. This is the basic postmodern condition. It may also be the condition of the Post-Boom. Implicit in the complex narrative structures of much fiction of the Boom was the possibility of a key, of making sense of the labyrinth. In much of the fiction of the Post-Boom it is the very process of “making sense” of things that constructs the labyrinth. One aspect of the shift from Boom to Post-Boom, then, is the shift from product to process: a shift, in other words, from “text” to “textuality.”

Notes

1. See, for example, Shaw and my *Landmarks*, ch. 11.
2. All references will be to the Spanish original. The published English translation listed in the Works Cited, while capturing the broad tone of the expressively colloquial original, is not entirely satisfactory in some of the details of the text. I have therefore preferred to quote in Spanish throughout and offer my own translations. To maintain consistency I refer to other works first by their original Spanish titles.
3. For a fuller account of this tendency in the transitional period, see my “Boom or Bust?”
4. For a range of such views, see, for instance, Brushwood, Duncan, Filer, Jones and Williams.
5. The theoretical perspective on humor offered throughout largely follows Purdie.
6. Brushwood’s article makes a similar point.
7. Though much of what is being said here accords with some of the views of Roberto González Echevarría, the observations in the preceding paragraph do

not fully comply with his contention: "Cuando el autor aparece en la obra . . . lo hace como un personaje más de la ficción sin poderes superiores. . . . En la última novela hispanoamericana el relato es más importante que el lenguaje o el narrador" "When the author appears in a work, . . . he does so as another character in the fiction, without any superior powers. . . . In more recent Spanish American novels, story is more important than language or the narrator," quoted by Shaw (92). These observations also differ somewhat from Angel Rama's view, as summarized by Shaw, that "there is an absence of distance between the youthful authors (of the Post-Boom) and their often youthful characters, an (implicitly uncritical) identification between author and work" (91).

8. No illustrations are reproduced in the English translation.

9. In the English translation, the epilogue appears as the final chapter.

Works Cited

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