

THERE IS AN “OTHER” STORY: MISTERIOS DEL PLATA AND THE CASE OF FEMALE NOVELS IN XIX CENTURY LATIN AMERICA

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Until three decades or so, in the context of the Brazilian literary studies, a context that bears similarities with other academic contexts in Latin American countries, it would be unthinkable or, at least, it would not be regarded as a serious academic endeavor, to raise discussions on non-canonical literary production, particularly if these were grounded on a critique that sought to address the question of female authorship, that is, the unauthorized status of women as discursive subjects and their invisibility in literary historiography as a problem of patriarchal cultures. This was something that simply could not be done from within the existing disciplinary framework because non-canonical works were categorized as works that could not stand up to the referential values set by the parameters and conventions of the discipline. The mechanisms by which the discipline secured its epistemological domain, including here assumptions or claims of truth on the “literary” nature of certain objects whose aesthetic value were attested by way of their so-called representativeness, permanence and universality, integrated what we understand today as the literary institutional apparatus. From the point of view of its regulatory function within national cultures, this apparatus operated as a discursive power system through the agency of literary historians and literary critics, the guardians of canons and of literary traditions, in

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that they produced interpretations and critical validation to those works that deserved to belong to the literary system. The field of knowledge about woman and literature and approaches to include women in literary history did not exist within the framework of traditional disciplinary paradigms. One may say that both discipline and the literary institution functioned, not surprisingly, in compliance with all the other ideological apparatus of a patriarchal society.

In Brazil, literary studies, as Eneida Maria de Souza has pointed out in her “Literatura Comparada: o espaço nômade do saber”², has been largely marked by the privilege given to studies of textual nature, by the valorization of the intrinsic and immanent nature of the literary work as a result of theoretical influxes coming from stylistics, fenomenology, structuralism and semiology, not to mention by the influence of the New Criticism, whose major spokesman was the literary historian and critic Afrânio Coutinho. However, in the wake of the steady proliferation of theories since the 60’s and their impact on the stability of dominant disciplinary paradigms, literary scholarship in the 70’s and 80’s has undergone major shifts. On the one hand, there has been an expansion of the term “literary” to include texts that had not been acknowledged as legitimate objects of literary enquiry. The expansion is the result not only of the relativization of values ensuing from ongoing debates regarding canon formation and the institutionalization of literature and its processes of exclusion but also of the current understanding that literature is a historical phenomena, not dissociated from ideological practices and identity claims closely related to the preservation or transformation of existing systems of power in society. On the other, there has been a consistent movement, in all areas of knowledge, of disciplinary borrowing or “border crossing” as a result of an understanding that disciplines codify and impose limits to the production

² *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*, no.2, p. 22.

of knowledge and that in order to organize evidence, evaluate analytical claims and articulate conceptual frames to account for objects no longer conceived as essentialized and autonomous entities, there is a need to overcome the insularity of institutional practices and disciplinary systems.

For literary studies the issue of interdisciplinarity and its implications have not been worked out yet but it has certainly helped to forge a path-breaking shift regarding displacing the literary object from the strictly speaking field of the institutionalized literary, traditionally associated with the artistic or *belles lettres*, to the unstable field of force and of unresolved balances we call culture. In this environment, the literary is rearticulated at the point of intersection with the historical problematic of the constitution of culture(s), making possible inquiries that move from its artwork and ideological configuration to how it participates in historically situated discourses and traditions and how it engages culture-bound values and identities. This does not mean to dispense with poetics altogether but to locate literary forms within historically contingent spaces in order to ask new and different questions that pose a challenge to the notion of pre-given origins or models.

Working at the border of the disciplinary tradition we associate with the field of literary studies, comparative literature has become an area that has gathered strength and vitality in Brazil, particularly, and in Latin America, in general, and it is perhaps worth saying that its practices are informed by current epistemological and disciplinary changes as well as by an increasing awareness of its geopolitical and geocultural location. With a focus on intra-cultural and inter-literary communities, it has drawn from the awareness of the heterogeneity of historical, geographical and cultural realities, as well as of the multiplicity of local/regional factors that bear upon their processes. In this sense, comparative literature engages the broad discussion of literature as a vehicle for cognitive and emotional orientation in culturally diverse societies while posing the close relations between expressions of cultural identity and literary

identity. Such a move brings to the foreground issues such as the colonial legacy and the historical presence of hegemonic metropolitan cultures and their traditions.³ To what extent national literatures evolved in the “in-betweenness” space, between the powerful influx of colonization and their scenarios of exclusion, on the one hand, and local historical processes that pressed a demand for distinct identities, on the other, is a major question the complexity of which scholars have been trying to address. So, among us, issues that highlight the web of cultural threads that produce subjects, histories, loci and identities add innovative perspectives on canon-building, literary history, traditions and critical discourses. These are, of course, no longer conceived from an ideological base that used to hold on to the notion of literature as an abstract universal civilizing force but are regarded as constructs in the process of transcultural negotiation, a process that resists and intervenes in traditional discourses of essentialized claims about literary identities.

If the practice of comparative literature in Latin America is indeed cutting across major assumptions about literature bequeathed by models that come to be increasingly regarded as eurocentric, feminist theories and criticism have advanced a whole array of new questions that allow us to probe into the pervasive mechanisms by which patriarchal culture secured the effacement of women in literature. Not only were they assigned a marginal status as subjects in the field of literary production, but they were also silenced in the sense that their works did not count as literature, which means that they were considered lacking literary worth and, consequently, did not receive academic critical attention. It has been no coincidence that one of the main thrust of feminist criticism today is related with

³ Susan Bassnett in her **Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction** (Oxford, UK, Blackwell, 1993) sees the problem in this way: *The principle problem for writers and scholars in Latin America or in Africa, for example, has been to find ways of articulating their perceptions of their own cultural products in relation to the products of other cultures, particularly when those other cultures have also been their masters in all senses of the term* (p. 86).

women’s literary underrepresentation in national canonical formations. In fact, recuperating women’s texts and their narrative agency has evolved into one of the most path-breaking development in scholarship on “national histories”. The notion of history, as employed here, does not subscribe to a set of truth claims or empirical givens, but to an important argument about history as a discourse that narrativizes culture and in so doing, it formulates objects and subjects within a complex structuring that constitutes a social formation, which means that narratives that have been legitimized for articulating certain knowledge about the past can be read for its social and political effects. Thus, if canonical formation can be regarded as one instance of a nation’s past narrative, in which gender -investments in particular constructions of masculinity and femininity- constituted one of the means of male empowerment, it is of utmost historical importance to examine the narratives that have been suppressed and pushed to the nation’s margins and, as a consequence, excluded from the field of historical and literary inquiry. To address this problematic in the present means, for feminist criticism, a transformative intervention in the national discourses of culture as much as bringing to the foreground the renarration of history by women has far-reaching implications to the ways social imaginaries were produced and national identities were forged. In this context the critical interdependence of the categories of gender and nation is bound to bring insights that may contribute to pave the way to new literary histories. Asking about which pasts matters, we might answer with the words of the Brazilian scholar Wander Melo Miranda: “Um história da literatura latino-americana que não se resume ao arquivo-morto de uma totalidade sem fraturas requer, de saída, que se pense a literatura como perda da memória do *continuum* da História; que se revele criticamente, aproveitando a lição benjaminiana, a concepção de que a história como curso unitário é uma representação do passado construída por grupos e classes

sociais dominantes, que transmitem do passado só o que é relevante.”⁴ That is the reason why we must expand notions of the “literary” in order to uncover the articulation of those subjectivities and literacies situated beyond the limits of what traditional histories and writing can provide.

New old texts

One of the most significant outcome of the challenges posed by theoretical feminism to traditional models of literary histories is the revision of national canonical formations in terms of 1: interrogating the naturalized forms of representation and knowledge inscribed in institutionalized narratives of national identities of which canons are constituted; 2: throwing some light upon the ideological assumptions that give support to the imaginary apparatus of nation-building encoded in the literary canonical, a privileged site for the production of subjectivities, particularly in the XIX century. This revision is made possible by the recuperation of texts which were confined to restricted (feminine) spaces of the public literary culture of their time and were excluded by the mechanisms at work in the subtext of traditional historiography. At present, there is no doubt that the question of the woman as author, in a diversity of national cultures, is posing vigorous interrogations regarding long-held assumptions of a literary establishment that has traditionally operated under the prerogative of an exclusive male writing culture. Thus, the study of non-canonical texts is making possible the charting of significant absences and silences produced as effect of the processes of canonical formations and of the nationalist discourses embedded in their construction. These developments bring some inescapable demands. For one thing, it is necessary to reexamine the interpretive frames of reference through which understandings of XIX

⁴ In: “Nações Literárias”, **Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada**, no. 2, p. 35, 1994.

century literature have been crystallized, and that includes revising what we know about the novel form beyond the limits of the canonical, particularly if we consider the development and transformations of the genre in geographical and cultural locations struggling with colonial legacies in terms of engendering identities within contexts marked by relations of conflict, domination or resistance such as the ones in Latin America. In the XIX century, the novel was the literary genre *par excellence* that had a major impact in the constitution of the public sphere of political culture⁵, for it embodied the tensions in addition to the rhetorical ones, attendant upon the project of modern nationhood. As such, the novel became the domain where affirmations and negotiations of competing ideologemes of the nation were enacted. From this perspective, moving beyond the configuration of literary histories that take canonical formations as bases for their paradigm means to address the supplement of women’s texts and examine other narratives of difference in relation to the constitution of XIX century textualized “imagined communities”.⁶

As of today, except for the work by Doris Sommer entitled **Foundational Fictions: the national romances of Latin America**⁷ not much is known, from a coherent systemic point of view, about the development of the novel in our continent. Sommer’s thesis is that there is an analogy between discourses of erotic fulfillment and productive sexuality in canonical fictions and the ideology of

⁵ Defined by Lynn Hunt as a historical creation, it encompasses discourses and symbolic practices where values, expectations, and implicit rules express and shape collective intentions and, as such, it is in constant revision by its agents. (**Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution**. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, 10-11, 15-17).

⁶ The expression is taken from Benedict Anderson in his classical work **Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism**. London, Verso, 1983..

⁷ **Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America**. Berkely, University of California Press, 1991.

nationalism, in as much as these fictions catered to the political need of the newly independent countries to form a bourgeois liberal state by producing allegories of the mutually dependence between family and the state. In the body of novels examined, Sommer identifies a metonymic association between eroticism and the politics of nationalism in plots that are always solved by rhetorical solutions, happy endings as a result of alliances meant to overcome class, gender and race differences, a form of mending the fissures of the ideal bourgeois family. Sommer’s study has brought substantial insights into the role of the novel in advancing the construction of nationhood as a distinctly homosocial form of male bonding, thus confirming Benedict Anderson’s classical definition of nationhood as a “deep, horizontal comradeship”. However, because this is a study that focuses on the institutionalized level of the literary culture and, consequently, relies on the representational value of canonical texts, it cannot incorporate in its conceptual frame as well as in its analytical and methodological moves, novels authored by women which, with very rare exceptions, remain excluded from literary histories.

The notion that women’s writings produce different signs of identity and meaning, other interpretations of belongingness and sociality that contest the production of hegemonic subjectivities engendered by the mechanisms of interpellation present in the pedagogical discourses of *nationnes*⁸ has been approached from

⁸ This is a reference to the notions developed by Homi Bhabha in his **The Location of Culture** (London, Routledge, 1994). In his theoretical proposal of the nation as narration, Bhabha argues that the concept of the “peoples” emerges within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement that articulates the tension between representing the people as an *a priori* historical presence, a pedagogical object, and constructing the people in the performance of narrative, its “enunciatory” present. According to him “ the performative intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation’s *self-generation* by casting a shadow between the people as ‘image’ and its differentiating sign of Self” (147-148).

different angles and by scholars situated in different geographical locations. The discussions have centered on the boundaries of identity which the nation-state pose for women in order to promote the fiction of its homogenized entity and on the debatable notion of margin as a locus where difference is signified. The understanding that the concept of margin might be complicit with the discourse of the nation-state in the sense that it is the center that produces the conditions of the existence of the marginalized subject through discourses and practice, thus inhibiting its very emancipation instead of facilitating it, has raised the question of the oppositional logic inscribed in the concept’s double bind, thus making the deployment of its theoretical rhetoric quite ineffectual to explain the spaces of “woman” and “nation”. Such spaces have been defined as a series of textual, cultural and social affiliations produced through strategies of political and psychic identifications and discursive address that emerge in the act of enunciation, making women the performative subjects that destabilize the social imaginary of the “people as one”. Gloria Anzaldúa was one of the first feminist critics to call attention to the danger underlying the logic of the margin and to develop, instead, the notion of woman as the “borderland subject”⁹ from where Mary Louise Pratt has drawn to state on the article “ Las mujeres y el imaginario nacional en el siglo XIX” , “(...) las mujeres crean sujetos literarios situados en las fronteras de las ideologías nacionalistas, con un pie dentro de ellas y outro afuera.”¹⁰

⁹ **Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza** (San Francisco, Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

¹⁰ Revista de Crítica Literária Latino-Americana, XIX, no. 38, p.56.

Except for a few articles focusing on individual novels,¹¹ studies on how and from what perspective XIX Latin American women’s novels engage in the project of nation/narration, forcing us to confront the contradictory historical forms of the nationalist project and to broaden our frames of reference in relation to the role of the novel as a complex instance of resistance and identity have yet to be undertaken, particularly from a comparative cross-cultural perspective, what will certainly allows us to examine other histories of difference besides the one of gender, like race, class and sexuality across nations and regional borders, and the way connections and conflicts weave nationalities and their imaginaries.¹² One of the major difficulties in developing such a wide-range project lies in the recovery of texts that, because of their non-canonical status, were relegated to the “dead” archives of the nations’ past histories. Yet,

¹¹ In this respect, we may refer to: “Juana Manuela Gorriti y la problematización del discurso romántico-unitario” by Federico Chalupa; “Soledad Acosta de Samper: un intento fallido de literatura nacional?” by Montserrat Ordóñez; “Mujer, nación y otredad en Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. All these three texts appeared in the collection of essays **Mujeres Latinomericanas: Historia y Cultura, siglos XVI al XIX**. Luisa Campuzano, ed. Casa de Las Américas/Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Iztapalapa, 1997. Scholars such as Francine Masiello and Lucia Guerra Cunningham offer some insights on women’s writing in Argentina in their essays in **Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary criticism**. Hernán Vidal, ed. Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1989. See also: “A Mulher e a Pátria” by Sylvia Paixão, in **Letterature D’America**, Anno XVI, no. 66, 1996; “Mulher, Literatura e Irmandade Nacional” by Mary Louise Pratt (In: **Tendências e Impasses: O Feminismo como Crítica da Cultura**. Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, ed. Rio de Janeiro, Rocco, 1994) as well as “ ‘Don’t interrupt me’: the gender Essay as Conversation and Counter canon” in **Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada**, no. 4, 1998.

¹² It is worth mentioning the recent study by Gloria da Cunha, **Pensadoras de la Nación**, in which Cunha examines the writings by Marrietta de Veintemilla, from Ecuador, Mercedes Cabello de Carbonara, from Peru, and Luisa Capetillo, from Puerto Rico.

local research and editorial ventures have been under way in the last ten years, bringing works into visibility and turning them into objects of interpretive trends that answer for a thriving scholarship on nationalism and feminism.

From evidences based on critical readings of a body constituted of six novels authored by women from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru and Cuba - **D. Narcissa de Villar** (1859) by Ana Luiza Azevedo Castro, **Ursula** (1859) by Maria Firmina dos Reis, **Sab** (1859) by Gertrudes Gomes de Avellaneda, **Misterios del Plata** (1852) by Juana Manso, **Alberto el Jugador** (1860) by Rosario Orrego and **Aves sin nido** (1889) by Clorinda Mattos de Turner -it is possible to elaborate poignant analysis of how they read their own stories into the collective history of nationhood and struggled to find a voice of their own regarding the cultural expression of nationality, bringing to their narratives their own set of decoding practices mediated by particular circumstances of writing and the materiality it contains such as bodies, objects and landscapes, and the speech acts it (re)produces as “text.” Besides, the novels provide consistent elements that show how the writers appropriated generic forms of the novel that migrated from their original European contexts to the Latin American soil. The question of generic migration is an important one because it cannot be reduced to a mere formal question but be treated as part of the dynamic of cultural transfer and, as such, implicated in situations of cultural contact, exchange and contextual differences where transformations, displacements and subversions are the rule and simple continuities or imitations are the exception. In the case of the novels mentioned above, generic appropriations provide the elements with which the narrative dialectic of form and function accomplishes a signifying historical effect. In other words, they cannot be dissociated from the very historical problematic of writing the nation the narratives share and from the vision of the social/political processes this problematic entails. From this perspective, one hypothesis might be raised: that as a result of women’s work, there is actually a different development of the novel

form in Latin America, particularly if we compare such a development with the canonical novels or “foundational fictions”. By pursuing this inquiry further, it is possible to contribute to a history of the genre in Latin America that would be more integrative, that is, that would take into account gender systems and social history, as this has been done in some other geographical locations.¹³

The major theme around which the novels engender their signifying processes is the drama of nationhood and the violence that attended the establishing of the social contract that secured the bourgeois patriarchal rule in post-independence Latin American nation-states. With the exception of the Brazilian Maria Firmina dos Reis, an emancipated slave, all the other women writers benefited from the privileges of racial and class belonging that identified them with a white cultural elite. Yet, they shared the consciousness of a distinctive gendered position in relation to the hierarchical structure of identity and value that informed the system of political and social relations of power enforced by the white elite. By restoring conflict and tragedy to the center of their versions of the historical process of nationhood, their novels may be considered interventions in the socio-semantic field of what can be defined as the celebratory hegemonic narratives of masculine nationality. Even considering geo-cultural variables, contextual historical specificities and narrative maneuvers that might signal certain ambivalent textual/subject positionalities, the novels bring enough evidence of a narrative economy that disturb the narratives of national progress and bourgeois enlightenment which produced subjectivities compatible with the desired universal subject of the nation-state. While keeping the category of nation as a frame of reference, my approach to these novels feed on the idea of the interlocking dimensions of national and

¹³ In this regard, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, **Desire and Truth**. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990. Also, Deborah Ross, **The Excellence of Falsehood**. Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1991.

transnational fluidity in Latin America, thus avoiding the conception of Latin America as a uniform and culturally homogeneous entity. My hypothesis is that the novels’ difference lies on the appropriation of generic conventions of the European gothic novel, and that the presence of gothic tropes have a functional value in that they produce structural and signifying effects on the historical context of the novel’s action, what Roland Barthes calls “ the referential or cultural code of textual signification”.¹⁴ Taking the novel **Misterios del Plata** as a case in point, I would like to examine some aspects of the novel, make some observations in relation to **Amalia** (1851), authored by José Mármol and considered the first great Argentinian novel¹⁵ or, according to Doris Sommer, a novel that we might read as an epic in the sense that it depicts a period of conflict in order to project the necessity of national unity.

Beyond domestic fiction

Misterios del Plata, by the Argentinian writer Juana Manso¹⁶, was published in a serial fashion (26 chapters) in **The Ladies Journal**

¹⁴ S/Z, Trans. Richard Miller. Oxford, Basil Black well, 1990.

¹⁵ According to Elvira B. de Meyer in “El nacimiento de la novella: José Mármol. **Historia de la Literatura Argentina**/1. (Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1967) p. 225.

¹⁶ Juana Paula Manso de Noronha was born in Buenos Aires in 1819. In 1840, her family moved to Montevideo, Uruguay. In 1842, the family moved to Brazil, where Manso graduated at the Conservatorio de Rio de Janeiro. In 1844. Manso married Francisco Sá de Noronha, a Brazilian violinist. In 1845, they travelled to the United States where she began writing **Misterios del Plata**. Her life and works are to be the content of a bilingual work to be edited in France as part of the collection Archives. Other female Argentinian writers who deserve mention: Rosa Guerra, author of **Lucia Miranda** (1860), Mercedes Rosas, **Maria de Montiel** (1861), and Juana Manuela Gorriti, who wrote **Sueños y realidades** (1860) e **Panoramas de la vida** (1872).

during 1852¹⁷ in Rio de Janeiro, the city where Manso´s family lived in exile after fleeing from Argentina where the family suffered political persecution under the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. In this novel, Manso renders the drama lived by a family during a period of intense political struggle which divided Argentina in two nations: on the one side there were the Federalists, who upheld Rosas´ regime; on the other, the Unitarians, members of an enlightened elite who held on to the ideal of a civilized modern Argentina and who regarded Rosas bloody politics a set back for the development of the country, a retreat into barbarism.¹⁸ At the center of the partisan political struggle

¹⁷ In the final note that follows the last chapter, Manso explains that she started to draw the plan for the novel in Philadelphia, in 1846 and that she finished the writing in the Fortress of Gravatá, where she lived for 5 months, between the end of 1849 and beginning of 1850. She revealed that she was afraid of publishing the novel and that she could not publish the Epilogue for reasons out of her will. She just adds that with Rosas fall, Alsina was called to take part in the ministry of the new government and that, at the time of her writing the last chapters of her novel, he had withdrawn into private life. All my references to the text are from this edition. The reedition published in 1924, in Argentine, was extended and corrected by the editor, D. Ricardo Isidro Lopez Muñiz, who confessed having received an incomplete manuscript and having added an extra final chapter to the original edition, what might be considered an appropriation and adulteration fo Manso´s text if we compare it to the Brazilian edition of 1852.

¹⁸ After Independence in 1816, Argentina underwent a period of intestine struggles, mainly around the question of the status of the provinces which were curbed in their autonomy by the rising power of Buenos Aires (central government). The unitarians who ratified the Constitution in 1826 and who had the support of republican European liberals based in Buenos Aires, lost power in the 1830`s for the federalists who had the support of an agrarian elite and of a new generation of capitalists involved with cattle industry who sought local autonomy in alliance with provincial governments who resented the centralism of Buenos Aires. The dispute among the provinces for hegemony engendered the conditions for the empowerment of Rosas, proclaimed dictator in 1828. He ruled from 1835 to 1852, a system of military dictatorship in the name of the Federation that counted on the support of the

lied divergent ideas about the idea of nationhood. The novel’s plot line rests on the events that follow the capture and imprisonment of the head of the Avelhaneda family, Dr Alsina, as well as of his wife and son. Because Alsina, a leader of the Unitarians, had been condemned to death by Rosas in 1833, the family had taken refuge in the Eastern Side of the Prata (today Uruguay), whose governor was Ouribe. In 1838, they decided to come back to Argentina in order to lead the resistance against Rosas. But betrayed by Ouribe, who received money from Rosas in exchange for information on Alsina, the family is captured while going down the Paraná River on their way to the province of Corrientes. The story covers the period between 1838 and 1840, the period defined by the narrator as “ the times of terror”(p.166) in Argentina and the sequence of events encompasses the circumstances around Alsina’s trial for treason, including scenes of torture and mob violence, the plight of mother and son who escape being murdered and the strategic plan carried out by the wife Antonia who forges documents, disguises herself as an officer and succeeds in rescuing Alsina from prison, moments before his execution. In the end, the family is reunited and escape to the colony of Sacramento, one of the strongholds of the resistance that was to succeed in 1852.

The narrative draws from the historical conditions set by the lived experience of Manso’s family and, as it could not be otherwise, from

illiterate segment of the urban population. He suppressed the freedom of the press, dissolved the congress and tried to forbid the free navigation of the rivers Paraná and Uruguay. Rosas also tried, with the aid of his General Balcarce, to subordinate Paraguay and Uruguay to the Argentinian Confederation. Balcarce organized a secret society known as Mazorca that eliminated all suspects of conspiring against the regime, with a death toll of 22.000 victims. For twenty years, unitarians and federalists engaged in a civil war that threatened to break up the country. The unitarians called the federalists “barbarians”, while federalists called unitarians “savages”. The unitarians were urban intellectuals coming from bureaucratic offices and from the colonial universities, most of them writers who were passionately committed to the project of decolonization of the Argentinian culture.

an allegiance to the Unitarians oppositional political agenda. Hence the locus of the enunciation is not merely a formal instance of the narrative but the site where the writer projects and refracts herself as a subjectivity that organizes textual meanings and articulates social values in terms of what Kristeva defines as ideologemes.¹⁹ The pressures of this signature which is overdetermined by a set of unconscious and conscious motives – of gender, class, nationality and political orientation – molds the ideological stance of a narration that deploys of a series of discursive maneuvers designed to interpellate the readers’ civic sentiment so as to enhance identifications and alliances by which the narrator seeks validation to her writing: “nós escrevemos este romance nas agonias do amor pátrio que se extinguiu”²⁰ The historical present is thus mediated by a fictional manipulation that relocates the historical subject’s claim of a knowledge grounded on facticity to the narrator’s commitment to the political work of a writing that supports a specific regime of truth and values. In this sense, the personal/familial circumstances of political disempowerment are refashioned by the constitution of a narrative voice whose code registers a performative self-invention that affirms the right to occupy certain positions that had been confiscated by the state in the name of an idea of nationhood that turned out to be a mockery of a civilized modern nation.

As a narrative of nationality the novel is a hybrid phenomena, partly artistic-literary, partly historical-political and **Misterios del Plata** attests to this feature. By processing a transformative labor on an ensemble of representations grounded in history, the text situates itself in the field of force of a double movement, of the politicization of the fictional and of the fictionalization of the political, making

¹⁹ Segundo Kristeva, ideologeme is an intertextual function that can be read as “materialized” in the different structural levels of each text, extending along its development as social and historical referential markers. **Introdução à Semanálise.**

²⁰ No. 1, pág 7, 1º. de janeiro de 1852. All references to the text are from the Brazilian edition of 1852.

explicit its narrative project: to denounce the violence and repression unchained by Rosas’ dictatorship and to recover a lost ideal of nationhood. So, the compulsion to narrate, made explicit in the first chapters, fuels the desire to (re)tell a national identity story and to show how ruling based on the principle of absolute power has turned the nation’s body politic into a stage set for a collective tragedy. This explains why the narrative is steeped in standard gothic landscapes. In fact, the country itself is metonymically figured in the reference to a gothic mansion: “o gótico edificio, cujos carmómidos alicerces por toda a parte se desmoronam” (p.7). From this point of view one may say that the narration operates, on the symbolical level, as the structural repair of a trauma, of a political and intrapsychic nature, engendered by an experience that disorganized collective life and social relations and plunged the country into a fratricidal war (p.30).

The divided nation/home provides the dominant motif for a narrative where two antagonistic national constituencies are figured: – the victim/hero (Dr Alsina) and the despot/ruler (Rosas). These characters foreground the correlation and the difference between two distinct family scenarios; one pertaining to the private family in distress, outcast and homeless, threatened by extermination; the other one to the public official family, cast as representative of the nation and site of the exercise of absolute patriarchal power. As the story of the private family folds back and forth against the backdrop of the trajectory of the official/state family, the private and the public spheres become intertwined, encouraging an allegorical reading of the dual story - family and nation - that anchors **Misterios del Plata**. But, instead of the staple romantic love plot where lovers face obstacles to finally cross racial and class boundaries to strengthen alliances to forward the conciliatory project of nationality which, as Sommer points out, is embedded in Latin American romantic canonical fiction, Manso juxtaposes the trajectories of two families through whose values, roles and destinies she exposes the mystery of rosism, the

paradox of XIX century Argentina that even today, resists deciphering.²¹

It is this mystery that the narrative tries to uncover and explore, thus the haunted quality of its structure (sequence and actions) as well as of the representations of character and setting. The unfolding of the events draws a picture of sufferings and terrible deeds, an excessive representation of life that strips bare the facade of social conventions in order to focus on an essential conflict that produces intense confrontations. The scenes are saturated by symbolical dramatizations, combining standard features of melodrama, like hyperbolic figures, lurid and grandiose events, disguised identities and strange landscapes. From its very beginning, the atmosphere foreshadows doom. The idyllic romantic description of the sumaca *Francesca di Remini* that descends the Paraná River to Corrientes, taking Alsina’s family back to their homeland celebrates, in close detail, the countryside’s natural beauty, a mirror-like image of the moral character of the family. But the serenity of the scene is disturbed by the song of the curucú, a bird of bad omen that foreshadows things to come: “Algumas vezes cintilantes viam-se os olhos do Jaguareté; ou sobre o Tayá de flores grandes ostentava sua brilhante plumagem o Guaiá; e lá ao longe, semelhante a um lamento de dor, ressoava o gemido fatídico do pássaro agoureiro dos Guaranis, o melancólico Curucú sempre escondido no fundo das selvas mais impenetráveis”(p.31).

An awesome feeling of wrongdoing permeates the representation of numerous abominable acts, like deceit, treachery, torture, corruption, murder, vengeance, sadism, vandalism, debauchery and religious profanation. The development of the story articulates a major plot with sub-plots, the lines of which intersect in

²¹ This is observed in a recent book organized by Cristina Iglesia entitled **Letras y divisas; ensayos sobre literatura y rosismo** (Buenos Aires, EUDEBA, 1998). According to Doris Sommer, the enlightened elite could not reach a plausible explanation for Rosas popularity.

a complex narrative pattern, adequate to build up tension and suspense. In terms of characterization, Rosa is shown to be diabolical in a double sense: as a private man he takes pleasure in watching the suffering of others, particularly in the grotesque and eschatological games he plays with his favorite fools; as a public figure, he rules with an iron will, indifferent to the fact that civilized conventions are put aside for the fulfillment of personal political interests and ambitions. So his eyes are described as showing the deadly attraction of the serpent (p. 124), a contrast with the epithet repeated by his allies: “El resaurador”, the lawgiver. Under his ruling, the country is depicted as a madhouse, plunging into sheer fanaticism and irrationality. The counterpoint to Rosa’s demonization is Alsina’s idealization, a figure inspired in the democratic ideals of Jose Marti, the Latin American hero at a time when wars were fought for a cause and not for the service of men (p.110)²². In many senses, he looms larger than his party as an embodiment of the romantic aspiration of national brotherhood seen as a necessary step to advance the ideals of Americanism, articulated through the intense debate between civilizationXbarbarism that, instead of fostering unity, intensified the

²² This is voiced by Simon, an old soldier and former ally of Rosas, who had fought for the Independence and sees Alsina in the line of national heroes like Belgrano, Marti, Rojas de Dias and Bessares, all those who gave their lives for the common good of the nation. No capítulo “El tiempo de los tiranos” de seu livro **El espejo enterrado**, Carlos Fuentes define Rosas como o tirano hispano-americano arquetípico e coloca em discussão o embate entre unitários, liberais centralistas, e os federalistas, que eram automistas e regionalistas. Esses últimos propunham a autonomia das províncias o que, principalmente em relação àquelas mais isoladas, significava manter as bases de poder dos caudillos locais. Para Fuentes, Rosas, que era um estancieiro muito rico da província de Buenos Aires, se aproveitou do dualismo argentino através de uma estratégia enganosa, lutando a favor de interesses locais e ao mesmo tempo consolidando o poder central em nome de um federalismo ao qual só rendeu homenagem retórica. A narrativa de Manso aponta justamente a contradição entre palavra e ação no nacionalismo rosista. (Buenos Aires, Aguilar, Altea, Taurus S. A, 1992, pp. 383-409).

contradictions around what was at stake, that is, different political ideas of national progress.

The narration of the obstacles, sacrifices, sufferings and fatalistic determinations that hang over him and his family is inscribed in the romantic sentimentality and sensibility present in the XVIII century European novel like virtue under trial and heroism rewarded. Manso’s treatment of the mystery of rosism and her deployment of techniques and literary conventions illustrates the extent to which the novel’s historical mode was influenced and actually shaped by the gothic, a minor genre with an outsider status in the history of narrative genres and associated to novels written by women in Europe in the XVIII century. Recent studies on the gothic have brought insights into its political work by showing how it is a genre that seems to appear at times of great social stress, therein its focus on a confrontation with the uncanny other, in this case, the nation/home turned unfamiliar, an inhospitable territory under the sign of tyranny.²³ In the case of **Misterios** traditional gothic tropes²⁴

²³ See **Gothic Fiction: the British and American Tradition**. Ed. Diane Hoeveler and Tamar Heller. (New York, The Modern Language Association of America, 2003, pages 4-5. Also, **American Gothic Fiction**. Ian Lloyd-Smith. New York, Continuum, 2004.

²⁴ Their presence is overbearing throughout the narrative. For example: Rosas’ circus of horrors; the liberation of nature’s destructive forces in moments of tension, “a maldição de um Deus vingador” (p. 85); the apparition of a mysterious man (“o homem da nódoa vermelha”); the depiction of strange collective rituals like the procession and Rosas divinization, when his picture replaces that of Jesus in a church’s altar. The last scene of the boat that takes all those who are going to risk their lives to rescue Alsina is paradigmatic. The description of the boat appeals to the fears and desire of the reader for the enterprise to succeed: “Não sei, porém, aquelle barco, sombrio e rápido, cheio de vultos, mudos e immoveis, no meio das trevas, sem outro ruído que o movimento leve dos remos e da quilha rompendo a corrente, parecia ter alguma cousa de fantástico.... Sem a obscuridade que a todos envolvia; poderia adivinhar-se que todas aquellas figuras firmes e

such as persecution, imprisonment, torture, the tyrannical father, family doom, secrecy, disguised identities, strange landscape, victimized virtue and a sense of heroism associated with bravery are worked into a narrative structure and semantics steeped in the referentiality of the specific Argentinian historical context.²⁵ One example of the gothic transculturation is the conversion of the European medieval castle, with its meander of horrors, into the tower of an abandoned church convent. Symbol of a former colonial/clerical power, it had become a secret torture chamber where Alsina is taken by Rosas’ police. The historical codings embedded in the image point to the convergence of clerical colonial power and secular modern state power. The narrator evokes the role of the Catholic church in the enslavement of the Indian peoples (p. 204) and later, in another scene, refers to the prostitution of the church, its alliance with Rosas’ regime and its condescension in relation to his crimes, among which, the campaigns for the extermination of the Indian population for the sake of territorial expansion, as the one led by Rosas in 1833.

silenciosas erão as personagens de um drama senistro, cujo desfecho poderia ser a morte de todos” (p. 7).

²⁵ The presence of gothic tropes is overbearing. One may add Rosas’ circus of horrors, the liberation of nature’s destructive forces in moments of tension, “a maldição de um Deus vingador” (p. 85); the apparition of a mysterious man (“o homem da nódoa vermelha”), the depiction of strange collective rituals like the procession and Rosas divinization (when his picture replaces that of Jesus in a church’s altar) and the last scene of the boat that takes all those who are going to risk their lives illustrate the strong presence of gothic conventions. The description of the boat appeals to the fears and desire of the reader for the enterprise to succeed: “Não sei, porém, aquelle barco, sombrio e rápido, cheio de vultos, mudos e immoveis, no meio das trevas, sem outro ruído que o movimento leve dos remos e da quilha rompendo a corrente, parecia ter alguma cousa de fantástico.... Sem a obscuridade que a todos envolvia; poderia adivinhar-se que todas aquellas figuras firmes e silenciosas erão as personagens de um drama senistro, cujo desfecho poderia ser a morte de todos” (p. 7).

It's impossible to know for sure whether Manso had read Ann's Radcliffe's **Mysteries of Udolpho** (1794) the most acclaimed female novelist of the period to whom Walter Scott, one of the founders of the historical novel, rendered tribute a number of times²⁶. But there are two points that might lead us to believe that she did. First, Manso emphasizes in the Introduction that her novel has nothing to do with Eugene Sue's **Mystère de Paris**, what might be regarded as evidence that she was familiar with European novels. Second, her self-conscious references to being a woman and her concern with women's education when she affirms that her account of heroic resistance proves the necessity for women's enlightenment, signals her awareness of how much women's writing mattered to the context of a national literature. It is worth mentioning, at this point, that the female gothic tradition in England, thinking of major writers like Radcliffe's **Mysteries of Udolpho** and Clara Reeves' **The Old English Baron** (1778) blurs the boundaries of historical romance and gothic tales (if we consider the tradition set by Horace Walpole and Matthew G. Lewis) to foreground issues of patriotism in narratives of usurpation, that is, disputed legitimacy of the state, what attests to the gothic's self-conscious engagement, from its inception, with culture and nationality at the mercy of the evil of tyranny. This fact illuminates Manso's fictional anchorage in the gothic tradition, a form of production that makes visible the text's ideological stand in relation to the power struggle during Rosas dictatorship.

One may say that the aesthetic-political project of **Misterios** constitutes a symbolical act for its retextualization of history bears formal choices engendered by an interpretative desire which, in the last instance, aimed at bringing Rosas' downfall. The same intent we might identify in **Amália**, which had its first edition in Montevideo in 1851 and had its second printing in the newspaper *El Paraná* suspended in the period post-Rosas, that is, 1952. In the XIX century,

²⁶ De acordo com Ellen Moers em seu **Literary women**. London: The Women's Press Limited, 1978.

the novel had 15 editions, what attests not only to its wide readership, but to the fact that the novel played a major role in disseminating knowledge about Rosas’ regime through its vision of the terror unchained by his ruling. Mármol was one of the key intellectuals of the unitarian movement and a member of the romantic generation of 1837 who, like others forced to emigrate to countries like Chile, Bolivia and Brazil, left Buenos Aires to Montevideo, Uruguay in 1840, after having spent some months in the prison known as Rosas’ dungeon.²⁷

Amalia presents a long narrative, in two volumes, with digressions of philosophical nature, long descriptive scenes, including full details of house interior spaces and a miscellany of other materials such as historical documents, letters and catalogues with classification of government officials bearing name and rank. With the subtitle of “Novela Histórica Americana”, it provides a vivid account of the struggles against Rosas on the part of the resistance movements that spread across the Argentinian provinces as well as of the political maneuvers resulting from the French interest and presence in the region of the River Plata. The realist mode of the narrative conforms to the authorial intention to portray “la época dramática de la dictadura argentina, por las generaciones venideras”.²⁸ Mármol explains the reason for adopting a retrospective detached stance, the need to place some temporal distance between his generation and the generation depicted in the novel, which includes characters who were actually living at the present time of the narration. But his perspective is far from neutral when, in the first chapter, the narrator comments:

²⁷ The so-called romantic generation of 1837, according to David Vinãs, fell prey to a contradiction between its literary Americanism and political anti-Americanism. See **Literatura argentina y realidad política** (Buenos Aires, Jorge Alvarez, 1964, p. 8).

²⁸ **Amalia**. Paris, Librería de Garnier Hermanos, 1896. All references to the text are from this edition.

En la época à que nos referimos, ademas, la salud del ánimo empezaba à se quebrantada por el terror: por esa enfermedad terrible del espíritu, conocida y estudiada por la Inglaterra y por la Francia, mucho tiempo antes que la conociéramos en la América.

À las cárceres, à las *personerías*, à los fusilamientos, empezaban à suceder los asesinatos oficiales ejecutados por la Mazorca; por ese club de bandidos, à quien los primeros partidarios de Cromwell habrían mirado con repugnancia, y los amigos de Marat con horror (p. 6).

Even though in the development of the story Mármol explores tropes such as plotting, persecution, espionage, secrecy and betrayals to show how Rosas’ sinister political machinery takes a toll on society, infecting social relationships in a machiavelic fashion, the narrative economy does not feed on a gothic mode. Whereas in **Misterios del Plata** the plot presents a sequence of actions in a tightly-woven pattern that sustains a consistent suspense throughout the unfolding of the story, in **Amalia** the plot encompasses a wide panorama, a whole array of descriptive events peripheral to the central yet reduced plot sequence - the love story between Amalia and Eduardo Belgrano - and which includes scenes that take place across the border, in La Republica Oriental, today Uuruguay, what is commensurate with a view of history proposed by Leon Tolstoi, at the end of **War and Peace** : history should provide the “study of the movements of peoples and of humanity, and not the episodes from the lives of individual men”.²⁹ Given the text’s political interpretation of Argentinian history, **Amalia** also presents Rosas as a demoniac character, with “instintos animais” (p.61) but the somber atmosphere that is so pervasive in **Misterios**, including descriptions of natural landscape and phenomena that foreshadows doom is absent. This is to say that the narrative balances between a realist account of terrible historical events and the romantic impulse that makes Mármol’s heroes, spiritual embodiments of a romantic patriotic project.

²⁹ **War and Peace**. Constance Garnett, trans. (New York, Random House, n.d.).

One may say that the story brings forward two male heroes: Eduardo Belgrano, nephew of Manuel Belgrano, one of the greatest unitarian hero of the wars of Independence, and André Bello, the brave and cunning son of a federalist colonel who acts underground as a member of the unitarian resistance without his father’s knowledge. Belgrano is ambushed and Bello saves his life, taking him to a hideout in the outskirts of the city where his widowed cousin, Amalia, “la poética tucumana”(p.22) becomes his nurse. The couple falls in love while the search for Eduardo begins to take sordid turns. Bello engages in “heretical” political maneuvers, without scruples according to Eduardo standards but nevertheless, true to his beliefs, so he disguises himself as a federalist without being an orthodox unitarian, to save his friends and construct the opposition to Rosas. Amalia is depicted as an admirable, virtuous, educated and confident woman, and ready to self-sacrifice for the sake of Eduardo. One hour after they married, the house is broken in by Rosas’ police and, in the dramatic struggle that follows, Belgrano and Bello die. And so Amalia. And this fact deserves some comments.

According to Sommer’s thesis about the foundational fictions, the love story in **Amalia** integrates an “erotics of unity” that brings together the center and the periphery as a condition for national reconciliation, advancing the type of liberal social relation between regions and parties that could found the basis of a legitimate republican family. For Sommer, the end of the narrative resonates with a possibility in the sense that Amalia’s surrender to her love, in a space of one hour (the marriage takes place at 9:00 p. m., Bello arrives at 10:00 and soon afterwards, the police breaks in) projects the possibility of a child that will carry a little of both parents.³⁰ So,

³⁰ Sommer states: “Seu coração está reconhecidamente partido por causa da morte de Eduardo, mas o simples fato de que o amor deles foi consumada, da primeira vez que Amália se rendeu à paixão, promete uma sobrevida para o romance. Esse fato promete um filho...”. In the translated version of her work, previously cited. **Ficções de Fundação: os romances nacionais da América**

Sommer asserts that Mármol’s leaves the story with an open end, what allows her to read into it “o futuro nascente”, embodied in a pregnant widowed Amalia. However, an attentive reading of the text is likely not to warrant this interpretation.

In the last chapter, entitled “El tálamo nupcial”, the narrator tells of the arrival of Bello, who had to go on an errand to arrange for Belgrano’s emigration to Montevideo, and the exchange among the three friends when the police breaks into the house. When Eduardo is mortally wounded, the narrator describes the arrival of Bello’s father whose voice could not be heard by Eduardo “cuya alma, en ese instante, se volaba a Dios, y su cabeza caía sobre el seno de su Amalia, que debló exánime su frente, y quedó tendida en un lecho de sangre junto al cadáver de su esposo, de su Eduardo”.(p.,350.vol.II). In the last page of the narrative entitled “Especie de Epílogo” the narrator explains that, in the following day, when the neighbors entered the Quinta de Barracas, “ no encontraron sine cuatro cadáveres: el de Pedro, cuya cabeza había sido separada del tronco, y los tres miembros de la Sociedade popular restauradora” (p.352). To the same extent that there was no need to explain why the word unitarian was not used, there was no need to explain -as the chapter’s content made it clear- that Pedro was the household servant and that the other three were, obviously, Bello, Belgrano and Amalia. Bello’s fate is poignantly described in the last paragraph: he falls, with no sound and deprived of all strength, in the arms of a father who, with one word, had suspended the “puñal” but who had arrived too late.³¹ As for Amalia, she had voiced, much earlier, her wish: “Eduardo...yo no tengo nada en mi vida que no está en la vida del ser que amo, y cuando el destino de él fuese de prisa a la desgracia, yo precipitaría el mío para que fuésemos juntos” (p. 266).

Latina. Trad.Glúcia Renate Gonçalves e Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis. Belo Horizonte, Editora UFMG, 2004.

³¹ Sommer concedes that the conciliatory presence of the father could have saved the two friends.

In this context, textual evidence does not leave any doubt about the real extent of the tragedy, “el martirologio” resulting from Rosas’ tyranny and the failure of the unitarian project to gather enough support to overthrow his distatoship. The possibility of a republican family, based on the couple Eduardo/Amalia and also on Bello/Florencia is aborted and so the dream of the consolidation of a republic.

In the comparison between **Misterios del Plata** and **Amalia**, there are many convergences but the striking difference lies in the representation of the female characters - Antonia and Amalia - and the fate of the unitarian family. There is no question about their being the guardians of values and rituals of a class elite who lost political hegemony to a populist dictator under whose ruling women became victims and/or instruments of political oppression and persecution. But whereas Amalia’s range of actions is still much restricted to the domestic sphere -the angel of virtue, both in appearance as in behavior- Antonia’s role transcend the subordinate and passive role assigned to women in the drama of national (re)construction. She is determined not to let Rosas’ tyranny sacrifice her family and her chances for happiness. At the same time, she is smart enough to understand the importance of her husband’s role in the resistance movement. And that is why she is invested with historical agency to intervene in the course of events. The gothic mode, in the line of the female tradition, rather than the historical novel and its male perspective, would allow Manso to sustain this representation that inscribes what was repressed or silenced in the history of the nation-building process.

To evoke the gothic tradition is to remind, as Ellen Moers states in her **Literary Women** (1978), of its “thrust toward physical heroics, toward risk-taking courage as a gauge of heroism, long after male writers had succumbed to the prevailing antiheroic, quiescent temper of the bourgeois century, and admitted, with whatever degree of regret or despair, that adventure was no longer a possibility of modern life” (p.131). The gothic mode was the mode

that subverted domestic ideology by placing women in situations where they were called to face the unfamiliar, threats and risk-taking adventures that required their sense of autonomy, objectivity and self-confidence, not to say the capacity of their reasoning. In **Misterios**, Alsina is the true representative of a hero who can fulfill the historical demands posed by the liberal project of nation-building as a males’ affair, but he plays, throughout the narrative, an essential passive role. It is the wife Antonia who yields an image of empowerment as she becomes an active female identified yes, with the bourgeois domestic roles of wife and mother, but who ventures into strange and sinister places to scheme for the rescue of the husband. She disguises herself as a man to go to the harbor area to seek, in the taverns, human help to go forward with her plan. She also makes a deal with the English captain who will take her husband to Uruguay. And she presents herself in the prison as Manoel Torres, with a false letter with which she is able to justify the moving of her captured husband to another prison. It is not only her love for the husband that motivates her to embark on this very risky rescue mission that could bring death upon herself and the family, but her sense of duty and patriotism for she knows that if she were to succeed, her deed could eventually contribute to the reversal of the nation’s fate, that is, the restoration of a new social order, based on a rightful government that would guarantee democracy and freedom to its citizens.

Even if Antonia’s characterization, in large portions of the narrative, makes visible certain contradictions in the ideology of sensibility which informed the unitarians agenda, which placed women at the center of the civil project of improving society through feminine powers inherent in domestic virtues, making their roles “strategically private, evasive and less formally determined”³²

³² Francine Masiello in “Women, family and culture in mid-nineteenth-century Argentina”. In: **Cultural and historical grounding for Hispanic and Luso-**

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Manso's novel's leaves no doubt as to Antonia's decisive role as a character who is actually responsible for the outcome of the plot through the exercise, beyond the confines of domesticity, of courage, initiative, ingenuity and strength. In this sense we may say that the gothic mode, for Manso was more than a bundle of eccentricities intended to scare her readers. It was a fictional mode that mediated Manso's confrontation with history so that she could engage fears, anxieties and tensions in relation to the national question posed by the political history of her country during her lifetime. Furthermore, her image of woman as a symbol of a new nationhood dramatizes what was at stake within the very notion of domesticity upheld by the unitarians agenda. From this perspective, we may also say that **Misterios del Plata** adds to the genealogy of the female gothic as an example of continuities and changes of the genre across geographical and temporal borders, highlighting female agency, literary and fictional, in relation to dominant (masculine) ideologemes of nationhood.

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