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Brief Reflections on the Narrative Art of Carlos Franz: Memory as Catharsis and Redemption in *El desierto*^{*}

^{*}This text is a new version of my work *El desierto* by Carlos Franz; see de Toro (2008: 131-151).

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Introduction

El desierto (2005) by Carlos Franz is a consummate novel characterized by narrative power, vigor, and virtuosity of language, connecting in diverse ways anthropological and socio-psychological phenomena in the context of the fracture that the Pinochet dictatorship left in the recent history of Chile.

The greatness of this novel lies in the fact that it does not dwell in the realm of the so-called “*novels of the dictatorship*.” Rather, it is situated *beyond* all that, delving into the deepest regions of human behavior by way of captivating images, narrative strategies, and erudition, within a rhizomatic network of *forking paths*.

One of the main themes is the ambivalence toward experiences of terror, torture, and death, and the capacity to commit such criminal acts. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the situations of the victim and of the perpetrator.¹ A second theme is the phenomenon of memory, its mechanisms, its historical-collective and individual elaboration, as well as its treatment

¹ Often a victim becomes a perpetrator as in *Carne de*

perra (2009/2010) by Fátima Sime or in *La vida doble* (2010) by Arturo Fontaine, perhaps the most radical of this type; see de Toro (2013: 267-90).

and function. In this context we have to ask: Does memory work as a kind of catharsis? Does it have a redeeming function? Does memory build a strategy of survival, or with the passage of time does it lose its vitality and become an irrecoverable history? A third crucial theme in this essay is the possibility of representation or non-representation, of what can or cannot be said concerning the description of psychological and physical terror, and here the body, desire, and language play a fundamental role.

The invasion of memory and narrative strategies

The different artistic representations of the victim and the perpetrator or torturer, as well as the ways in which both are discussed in criticism, cultural theory, and sociology, are generally distributed so that each has an unmistakable and polarized place: the perpetrator represents the absolute demonic figure, who enjoys the suffering and degradation of the victim; the victim is the personification of the good and the noble, the heroic. The altruistic intentions of critics lead to the construction of a binary perspective of good versus evil and to simplifications that do not consider what is beyond our usual language, habits, and praxis.

This classic binary distribution was first questioned by playwright Eduardo Pavlovsky in the 1970s, but Carlos Franz introduces a substantial turn in *El desierto* (2005). His novel is based on the failed attempt of Laura to confess to her daughter Claudia her personal implication in past events at Pampa Hundida under the Pinochet dictatorship, connected with Claudia's question, "Where were you, Mama, when all those horrible things happened in your city?" (*ED*: 12 et seqq.). The question leads Franz (through Laura) to describe the most shocking and complex mechanisms of human behavior in limited situations. He offers not the usual political indignation that transforms literature into a mere ephemeral documentary pamphlet, but rather elucidates the phenomena of desire, sexuality, power, dependency, and terror, and the indelible traces they leave in the body and the psyche of the individual and collective groups.

Eighteen of the thirty five chapters are told by a narrator in the third person that oscillates between an omniscient and an impersonal tone, but Franz also employs the first person plural that renders him a witness of the past ("that hollow bone where the wind plays the flute at night, worrying us," *ED*: 18). The narrator in the third person mixes the present with the past: the arrival of Laura to Pampa Hundida after some decades of absence, and subsequent events, merges with the recent past in Berlin where she accepts the invitation to be a judge again in Pampa Hundida. The other seventeen chapters are reserved for the letter, printed in italic characters, that Laura writes to Claudia, a real tour de force of writing.

The narration is driven by different iterative strategies, such as the permanent leitmotiv that encloses enigmas like "Where were you, Mama?" or

by “explicit temporal superimpositions” (de Toro 1986/1992/2002: 39), that serve to bring parts of the novel together that are temporally and spatially separated.

The play with iterations, with *analepsis* and *prolepsis*, builds a labyrinth like a ball of wool that helps to connect all parts of the *diegesis*, configuring the totality of the narrated world and condensing the different paths of the events, producing a concretion of the different lines of action at the present of Laura coming back to Pampa Hundida: the events of twenty years ago do not only appear in the testimonial letter, but also during Laura’s second stay in Pampa Hundida for four days. In these four days, the letter and present events mix in Laura’s mind, an overlap that also takes place in the act of reading.

Pampa Hundida and the tragedy

The story can be briefly summarized: Claudia, born in Berlin, goes to Chile to study law and to get to know her father, Mario Fernández, whom she visits in Pampa Hundida. She learns about the dictatorship and its consequences, which raises many questions for her, such as the one addressed to her mother. Laura is thus plunged into a crisis, “awakening the monsters asleep in her memory” (*ED*: 13), as she is forced to explain the inexplicable, writing the above mentioned letter in which she tries not only to explain the tragedy to her daughter, but first of all to herself. Laura struggles with her past and searches to legitimize her behavior, to find an excuse for all that happened. But all her efforts will not be able to capture the unutterable, so she accepts the job as a judge and travels to meet Claudia in Pampa Hundida. There she has no alternative but to confront her past, assuming that “there are questions that can only be answered by life” (*ED*: 13). That travel to the past is like the liberation of an unfinished history, a tragic experience that had no catharsis; an incomplete tragedy.

In the letter, Laura describes her former husband as a weak and cowardly man. She, on the contrary, is a proud and arrogant woman, a victim of circumstances and in some way of her own cowardice. The perpetrator, Major Cáceres, is a violent man who builds an extermination camp in Pampa Hundida, in the abandoned buildings of the saltpeter processing plant. He represents the absolute law that later will materialize in the martial court. Laura’s tragedy begins the moment she hides a fugitive prisoner in her garden, whom she later betrays under torture and rape inflicted by Major Cáceres. This is also the beginning of the major’s and Laura’s “pact”: every time he orders her to come to him, he will torture and rape her with the promise to let one prisoner free. But the reality is another, unknown to Laura at that moment. The major lets the prisoners flee only to be recaptured at the border, where they are killed by the army and

² Patricio Guzmán deals with that historic tragedy in an exceptional film, *La nostalgia de la luz*; see my essay (2017: 144-157).

their corpses blown to pieces.² Much later, the major tells Laura the truth. Then, exasperated and betrayed, she beats the major and escapes with his horse through the desert running till the horse drops dead. She continues to Pampa Hundida on foot and falls into a delirium that lasts many weeks. Once recovered, she leaves Pampa Hundida while Cáceres sets his own house on fire. He survives but is completely disfigured.

Laura's second arrival in Pampa Hundida takes place during an annual syncretic religious festivity. Together with Claudia, she meets her former torturer who lives in complete reclusion and misery. He has waited many years to settle matters with her. In the meantime, Claudia has become part of an activist group of young lawyers and law students who want to put the major on trial in order to know what happened to hundreds of the disappeared.

Laura and Claudia let the major live. At this point, Claudia understands that Cáceres is her father and the reason why her mother lived in exile in Berlin and why she never spoke about the past. The moment that Laura wants to give Claudia the letter written in Berlin, a group of pilgrims jostles her and the letter is scattered by the wind.

The ambivalence of human behavior, victim / perpetrator: The unutterable

At that crucial moment in Laura's life, carnival and hell converge. The latter is that apocalyptic place configured at the beginning of the story: hell for Laura is the house of Major Cáceres twenty years before, revived in her confrontation with him. When Laura tells Claudia the truth about her own tragedy and the origin of her birth, the daughter experiences the revelation as guilt, but as a victim. There begins the Aristotelian *hamartia*, or tragic flaw, which has two sides: to recognize and accept the past expresses the situations of *éleos* and *phobos*, a deeply heartbreaking lamentation and deep anxiety that lead to the catharsis (for these concepts, see Aristoteles 1976 and de Toro 1993/1998). But we do not have a *katastrophé*, the end of Laura's life. On the contrary, she and Claudia do not kill the murderer with his gun; they refrain from this not out of pity or mercy, but in order to liberate themselves from that hell, acting from the same principle by which Laura refused to abort her baby: "so as not to give death another victory" (ED: 453). In this way, they break the logic of terror. Laura fires the gun, provoking a stampede of pilgrims, which carries Cáceres away while he cries like a wounded animal.

The testimonial-letter represents the written tragedy; the carnival of Pampa Hundida represents the last *peripeteia*, similar to Greek or seventeenth-century French tragedies, the very last decisive events that take place. *El desierto* is a tragedy with a happy ending like *Iphigenia in Aulis*, following Aristotle, the most beautiful of all tragedies, what the

theoreticians of the Italian Renaissance called the *tragedia con fine lieto* (see de Toro 1993/1998).

The testimonial-letter is also the synthesis of Laura's agony, which consists of not just pain from the torture, but also her *complicity* as a result of the "orgasm without heart" (ED: 291), of a "love" that cannot be called "love." For this reason she calls it "our pact" (ED: 288 et seqq.), a mix of desire and death, of Eros and Thanatos. Further, the testimonial-letter is the most brutal description of the ambiguity, hate, refusal, dependency, and affection, which Laura recognizes as "the Stockholm syndrome [...]" The hostage's affection for their captor, the victim's love for their executioner [...] obedience to the norm, the law, as the subject's gratitude to power" (ED: 378). This description has, at the same time, a meta-textual status as a commentary to Franz's narrative-psychological strategy: it summarizes his narrative intention.

At the core of the novel is Laura's subjugation and submission to the major through beatings and caresses, love and torture, under the pressure to repeat their first encounter again and again, as if it were the first time. She is grateful for the interruption of the lashing and its replacement with sex, revealing her absolute helplessness and the major's total domination. Besides, her dependence on playing the ritual in the conviction that each time the major will let a prisoner free, and in this way believing she helps the cause of justice, contributes to her developing feelings for the torturer. Laura's emotional and sexual dependency are evident when she does not take the chance to kill him. At one point, she has a knife in her hand and he is defenseless, lying on the floor; he challenges her to kill him but instead of doing so, she embraces him and has a "black orgasm" that for her represents "[being] alive in the midst of death, thanks to which I clung to death itself" (ED: 269).

The iteration of their ritual can be seen not only in the actions, but also in the rhetoric of the narrator and the characters, in a similar way to Sade's texts, like *Justine ou Les malheurs de la vertu*, where pleasure and Eros lay in the perversion, where language is the main outlet for an infinite and insatiable desire. The iterative rhetoric replaces the reality in both cases and establishes itself in the fantasy.

The structure of the novel

As mentioned above, we have two main narrative strategies: the testimonial-letter-tragedy with a cathartic function and the narration of the story. In the epilogue Franz's novel, following the tradition of Cervantes and Borges, introduces an "author-narrator." The real creator of *El desierto* is, apparently, Mario (ED: 460), who informs the reader about the events in the past, twenty years before. At the end, Franz quotes *Cien años de soledad*

in a virtuoso way: Pampa Hundida “begins to vanish” and is “swallowed up by the enormous oblivion of the desert” (ED: 461), like Macondo.

Mario is one of the last witnesses of a city in ruins, together with the “three little old ladies who spin and weave [...] and we’ve told them they can cut our thread now, we will not leave again” (ED: 463). Suddenly, the narrator is no longer Laura’s former husband, he simply reproduces “a story whose witnesses didn’t tell and whose heirs decided to forget” (ED: 463). This means that he invents the story, but at the same time he argues that only his written fiction, made out of fragments, will remain as vestige.

The epilogue is a metatext, a metafictional passage that has the function of effacing all structures that represent the “real” in the novel, underlining the fictional status of the text and impeding a univocal interpretation.

Summary

Carlos Franz’s novel is neither a crime narrative nor claiming an activist agenda, but is highly political in the sense of Derrida’s “*le politique*” in its intention and structure. Its message, if any, is entwined with destiny and history: nobody can escape it. Neither individuals nor the State can fool themselves and suppress traumatic experiences. Wounds and scars along with the deep traces of memory are indelible, and at an unexpected moment something or someone will pose urgent questions.

Laura can experience catharsis because of her courage in confronting the past from two decades ago in order to give herself and her daughter a future. This individual solution is what Chile has not yet really mastered and remains a central task for the present and the future, for its social, political, personal, and collective history, as we learn from the novel.

Besides its main theme, Franz brings to light historical problems of racism and persecution of minorities in the figure of Mamani: “The race, the race was his unpayable debt that he would never be able to bury” (ED: 332), a situation that still exists in Chile and Latin America despite recent advances.

Franz shows us the behavior of the new social actors characterized by pragmatism and opportunism, concerned only with the present and future, and with “progress,” but lacking the memory and courage to confront the historical past. The story’s characters want to forget the past and hide it, with the relative exception of Mamani or of Claudia and her friends who as young people still have ideals. Even Laura has not been able to deal with her past and she feels permanently the victim as the price she pays. Franz describes a society governed by personal interests and with a total amnesia of the past in order to avoid any risk in the present.

Finally, Franz shows us—like Pavlovsky in theatre from the 1960s to the ’90s—how close bad and good may be, showing that we can still count on a

subversive literature, one that gets at the depths in contrast to escapist literature. Franz practices his handicraft with virtuosity to produce a text that interweaves other texts and discourses in a literary web of transtextualities, in a fascinating performance that is free of mannerisms. He makes no pact with the trendy mainstream.

His novel has the merit to touch and convulse us; Franz leaves the reader in a very emotional state. He achieves in his novel what Diderot in his “Eloge à Richardson” (*OC* vol. XIII: 193) in the context of the Enlightenment praises in the novels of Richardson: to touch the reader in a way that the Enlightenment was not able to do, or adapted to Franz’s time, in a way that contemporary history and public protests have not been able to do.

He grazes an entire epoch as Dante did in his time in the *Divina Commedia* or Balzac in the *Comédie humaine*. In his prologue Balzac taught us that “French society was going to be the historian, I could only be the secretary” (“Avant-propos”: 22), and that is also somewhat Franz’s method.

He offers us a tragic and universal epic which we might well call the “Tragedy of memory” in Pampa Hundida, a site as momentous as Macondo.

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