

***DESIDERO ERGO SUM:***  
**ON THE METAPHYSICS OF DESIRE IN FELISBERTO HERNÁNDEZ'S**  
***LAS HORTENSIAS***

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis uses Lacan's rhetorical understanding of human desire to investigate in greater depth the role of desire in Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández's 1949 novella *Las Hortensias*. Chapter one looks at the dynamics of veiling and unveiling, of the female body, and of desire itself, which is both repressed into the subtext and expressed on the textual surface. Chapter two discusses the role of the sex doll—*Las Hortensias's* privileged object of desire—in determining the identities of the characters who remain in its thrall. The next three chapters suggest that the story's plot can be divided into two distinct phases: in the first, desire tends to follow a predominantly metaphoric logic, in which one love object is substituted for a number of others, while in the second it tends to follow a more metonymic logic, in which objects are displaced one after the other along a linear sequence. Desire in this first sense is the topic of chapters three and four, while desire in the second sense is the topic of chapter five. Chapter six looks at desire from a different angle: as an intersubjective, socially mediated phenomena, one which belies the notion that desire is an exclusively private, intimate affair. All chapters trace desire's operations primarily in relation to the story's protagonist, whose journey through the narrative is read as a kind of passage through Lacan's three orders—from the symbolic dimension of desiring subjectivity, to imprisonment within an imaginary realm in which desire is derailed, and finally to a traumatic encounter with the real, with the unsymbolizable experience of psychosis. Chapter seven examines the forces behind desire's derailment, while the thesis's conclusion reaffirms its guiding idea: that *Las Hortensias*, by presenting desire's promise of plenitude and presence as inextricably bound up with emptiness and absence, with philosophical issues of being and nonbeing, tells us something about its metaphysics, i.e. about the very nature of desire itself.

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*For Rob, with love*

Desire is the very essence of man.  
Baruch Spinoza

## Introduction

Perhaps the most distinctive thing about Felisberto Hernández's fiction is its insistent preoccupation with desire. Desire, particularly as it is expressed through eccentric kinds of sexuality, forms an intertextual thread running through his entire oeuvre. In "El balcón," for example, a young woman becomes erotically attached to her balcony. In "Menos Julia," a squire fondles girls' faces in a dark tunnel under his estate. In "El acomodador," an usher enjoys being stepped on by a sleepwalker. Zoophilia is suggested in "La mujer parecida a mí," in which a teacher falls in love with the narrator, whose perspective is that of a horse,<sup>1</sup> and in "Úrsula" (1969), whose narrator seduces an obese woman likened to a dairy cow.

This thesis will draw on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan to propose a reflection on the role of desire in one of Hernández's most well-known works: the novella *Las Hortensias* (1949), which tells of a man who goes mad after losing control of his desire for "Hortensias," or larger-than-life female dolls. To my mind, *Las Hortensias* counts as one of fiction's most subtle explorations of fetishism. But the story does not stop there; it explores several other of desire's more eccentric manifestations as well, which makes it perhaps Hernández's most exemplary text with respect to what Lacan calls desire's "paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous character" (2006 579).

If *Las Hortensias* is exemplary in Hernández's canon, the story is also, as this thesis will suggest, exemplary in a broader sense, in that it has something meaningful to say about desire itself. Hernández's constant evocation of unorthodox sexuality makes desire conspicuous, an object of scrutiny. By eschewing garden-variety desire in favor of more eccentric manifestations, the novella calls attention to desire, throws it into relief. By inviting us to attend to the categories through which we habitually view desire,

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<sup>1</sup> Short stories contained in the collection *Nadie encendía las lámparas* (1947).

he defamiliarizes it, like a poet defamiliarizes ordinary language by reshaping and intensifying it. By involving us in the mental universes of characters dominated by rarified erotic proclivities, the author brings us to view desire from other vantage points, using extraordinary cases to make legible desire's more ordinary operations.

*Las Hortensias* normalizes eccentric desire through characters whose strange behaviour is destigmatized; the extraordinary—making love to dolls—is, as Julio Prieto puts it, “entretejido[ ] indiferentemente en el ‘ritmo de lo ordinario’” (309). Hernández’s strategy of deliberately confusing the ordinary and the extraordinary generates an uncanny atmosphere in which the line separating normality from abnormality is never clearly drawn. Alberto Zum Felde remarks that were fetishism treated as merely a case of pathology, the story would lose aesthetic interest: “La simple locura,” he writes, “no interesa al arte sino a la ciencia.” Hernández’s skill lies in maintaining the psychological ambiguity of his characters, “tipos aparentemente normales, o, al revés, aparentemente anormales, en ambos casos, lo suficientemente dudoso para que [...] no sea inverosímil ni carezca de sentido” (23).<sup>2</sup> For Zum Felde, *Las Hortensias* is set against a “trasfondo psicoanalítico intuitivo” because, like psychoanalysis, it recognizes that the abnormal—perversion, neurosis—is a substratum of the normal, that in matters of sexuality and subjectivity, psychopathology “está virtualmente en el hombre normal, siendo la diferencia ambos estados, cuestión de grado y no de esencia” (24). By normalizing eccentric desire, *Las Hortensias* suggests that we are all to some extent abnormal, that the difference between normality and abnormality is that in the former the abnormality is played out more subtly.

This thesis will try to read *Las Hortensias* as a kind of literary *Tractatus Eroticus*, one whose dominant motifs—unorthodox sexuality, alienation, fear of death—can be seen as instances of a fictionalized theory of desire, a theory which, by destigmatizing desire's more eccentric manifestations, offers valuable insights into how desire might

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<sup>2</sup> Prieto points out that uncanniness produced by confusing notions of normality and strangeness is a key feature of 20<sup>th</sup> century fantastic literature (282). Frank Graziano highlights the special role desire plays in this genre: fantastic literature, he writes, “implicitly subverts the inhospitable order forbidding one's desires, it redesigns social reality to accommodate them, and it disavows both the subversion and the redesign, taking its actions for granted and presuming absolute objectivity and universality of this private kingdom catering to its needs” (23). Both uncanniness and the externalization of private desire are, as we will see, essential elements in *Las Hortensias*'s poetics.

actually function, into the distortions it imposes, into the types of disasters it might lead to. If one were to sum up this theory, one might say that it advances a kind of negative dialectics which privileges desire's shadow sides: the non-being grounding its being, the absence inhering in its presence, the deathliness written into its vitality. The thesis will suggest that the story invites philosophical reflexion insofar as it addresses our existential condition, our situation as constitutionally alienated subjects, as subjects torn between a desiring self and the ultimately impossible satisfaction of that desire. The story reminds us that one of our primary tasks as human beings is to come to terms with this alienation, and with its necessary corollaries: disappointment, frustration, angst.

I know of few stories that drive home so forcibly that desire is without natural closure, that wholeness is unattainable, that longed-for utopias are impossible, that our inner void can never be filled. The fact that these realities—what I will call the story's existential truths—are widely acknowledged doesn't make them any less scandalous, nor their repudiation any less devastating. What is exceptional about *Las Hortensias* is its piercing awareness that denying them can only make desire's darker sides darker, this planet bleaker, and heaven more remote. This, I think, is the story's intent: to shine a light into the void, to conjure up the hungry ghosts lurking within us so that we may see that the attempt to negate their nothingness only creates more desire, and hence more nothingness.

Desire pervades *Las Hortensias*, yet much of its pervasiveness is inextricable from its suppression, a kind of a conspicuity through absence, a flickering of presence and absence together. If fetishism is clearly evoked, the relationship of the text to desire's more disturbing manifestations—to desire as expressed in eroticized misogynistic aggression, in necrophilic and incestuous impulse—is one of repression, repression through ambiguation of direct statement, through metaphoric substitutions and metonymic displacements which both produce the reference to sexuality and withhold it. Through devious rhetorical means, the story evokes sexuality but also censors it, transforming potentially unsettling desires into socially acceptable meanings and generating a sexual tension which is everywhere apparent but nowhere explicit nor ever resolved. Were it not to obscure these desires, the story might prove too risqué for some readers, but so too might it prove unacceptable were it to police these desires too



thoroughly.

In *Las Hortensias*, rhetorical figures slip away from the illusion of reference as surely as its protagonists' desire slips away from its moment of consummation. This continuous *glissement* accords with Lacan's contention that the stabilization of linguistic meaning is as elusive as the fulfillment of desire; both slip out of reach the moment they come into view, both vanish in their very insistence. Sexually suggestive figuration envelopes Hernández's writing in what Frank Graziano calls an "erotic haze": "nowhere in his canon," he writes, "is there anything that even vaguely resembles a love scene or explicit sexual content, but in compensation for this specific [...] absence there is a general pan-erotic quality that maneuvers in nuance and imbues the text with a muted sexuality" (33). In *Las Hortensias*, rhetorical figures veil desires which dare not speak their names, repressed desires which never concretize but rather perpetuate themselves through the indefinite postponement of their consummation.

This thesis will attempt to unveil some of this repressed content, some of the story's latent and disseminated meaning, deriving from this analysis a greater understanding of 1) the role of desire in Hernández's rhetorical and narrative strategy, and 2) the philosophical dimensions of desire that, I believe, gain exemplary representation in this text. The thesis will attempt to read between the lines by attending to moments of ambiguity, absence, repetition, overemphasis, moments in which the text's internal censor, as it were, lowers its guard, offering a mode of access to the text's shadow meanings, to the sub-text(s) which run within it.

If desire is everywhere and nowhere, revealed and concealed in a poetics of mystification, then how best to demystify its mysteries? This thesis will propose that Lacan—specifically what Lacan says about desire and desire's intersections with language, subjectivity and death—provides a theoretical framework with which to break through some of the repression, a vocabulary with which to disperse some of *Las Hortensias*'s amatory haze and articulate some of its insights. Lacanian theory provides a repertoire of suggestive notions which will help me a) frame discussions about desire not only at the level of the story's contents (what the story says, explicitly or implicitly), but also at the level of its form (how it *works*), and b) suggest that, insofar as issues of desire are concerned, the story's formal elements to some extent conspire with its

contents.

Studying *Las Hortensias* with an eye to Lacanian notions is productive because doing so alerts us to dimensions of desire which otherwise might be overlooked. For if in Hernández's fictional world desire is a ubiquitous if surreptitious presence, Lacan's reconstituted Freudian world "is a world of desire as such." (1988 222). Desire is not just an object of investigation for Lacanian psychoanalysis, but its *raison d'être* as a discipline, a discipline which, as Fredric Jameson writes, views "the logic of *le désir* [...] as the organizing principle of all human thought and action" (340). This is not to say that there aren't any points of tension between these two worlds: if the bulk of the thesis focuses on what Lacan brings to *Las Hortensias*, it will also suggest that Hernández caricatures the phallic transcendentalism of Lacan's desire-centered discipline, that he radicalizes Lacan's notion of desire's "metonymic frenzy" by situating it within the context of consumer capitalism, and that his stylistic audacity resists the implicit conservatism of a theory for which submission to paternal authority is the *sine qua non* of sanity itself.

If Lacan's Freudian world owes its very existence to desire, this is because issues of desire subtend a constellation of some of its most important theoretical notions—the unconscious as language, language as a chain of signifiers, the symbolic and imaginary orders, the split subject and fragmented body. This doesn't mean that Lacan's understanding of desire is so broad as to be useless; even though it has no proper object, desire can still be defined as something both fundamentally mobile and evasive. This accords perfectly with desire's deviations in *Las Hortensias*, whose plot revolves around the sexual adventuring of a man who, the moment he thinks he's got what he wants, finds that his desire has moved on to something else, until his desire (and the plot) burn out completely. If for the Rolling Stones "you can't always get what you want," for Lacan and Hernández, you can *never* really get what you want, since both demonstrate that desire's hallmark lies not in its relation to any real object, but in its very impossibility, in non-being, in the fact that fullness of being can only come as endlessly deferred, which makes pursuing it as futile as "waiting for Godot in Samuel Beckett's play" (Bennet and Royle 171). This observation may sound obvious, even trite, but it bears repeating, for the attitude one takes regarding desire's unrealizability is of crucial

existential importance, playing a determinant role in how one experiences life's inevitable frustrations and disappointments, desire's undesirable offshoots.

Of course, using Lacanian notions to illuminate opacities in Hernández's fiction exposes the thesis to the same species of criticism Derrida leveled against Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter," namely that it uses Poe's text as a pretext for illustrating non-literary theories. Derrida rejects the reduction of literary works to the status of examples serving to confirm psychoanalytic "truths" and underlines the circularity in using psychoanalysis as a literary hermeneutics, an approach which "applies to the comprehension of a message the very principles of comprehension of which it is the vehicle" (473).

I'm not convinced, however, that Derrida's alternative deconstructive approach, which abandons interpretation in favor of, as Eagleton puts it, a "doctrinal obsession" with literature's "undecidability" (146), is any more satisfying than a psychoanalytic hermeneutics that acknowledges as inevitable its own circularity. As critics such as Jane Gallop or Slavoj Žižek have shown, notions from psychoanalysis—which is not primarily a theory of literary interpretation but an account of the mind—can be applied as hermeneutical devices without overlooking the literary text's formal properties or flattening its polysemic richness into variations on psychoanalytic themes. For Gallop, psychoanalytic criticism that is not to some extent hermeneutical ceases to be psychoanalytic; though the threat of reductionism is inherent in all thematic interpretation, any reading that totally forsakes thematic interpretation, she writes, "risks losing the bearings of a psychoanalytic identity" altogether (26).

Using psychoanalytic notions as hermeneutical devices in literary study doesn't necessarily mean a return to classical applied psychoanalysis, whose use of literature to justify its axiomatic notions was as part of an imperialist program to extend Freud's "empire of signs" to all aspects of human life. For one thing, Lacan's theories, unlike Freud's, don't constitute a totalizing system, a metalanguage based on preliminary definitions or fundamental axioms; if they use literature as a source of examples, they also present themselves as fundamentally literary, as sharing qualities with the very examples used to support their insights. For Lacan, there is no such thing as pure theory, no clear-cut distinction between theory and the literature it evokes; all theory is

in some sense literary in that it works by rhetorical figures. Psychoanalysis is no exception, working by figures such as metaphor and metonymy just as poems or novels do, which makes its truth claims just as fictional. Similarly, it could be said that, if fiction inhabits Lacan's theories, playing an ambiguous role in and for them, then theory, as suggested above, in some sense inhabits Hernández's fiction: by exposing the centrality of desire in human subjectivity, *Las Hortensias* constitutes a kind of literary psychoanalysis—not only a psychoanalysis *in* literature, but a psychoanalysis *of* literature as well, i.e. a subtle exploration of the role of fabulation in the desire of subjects.

For another thing, the fact that Lacanian theory doesn't constitute a metalanguage like Freud's does doesn't mean that it can't be used metalinguistically, i.e. as a kind of technical language into which Hernández's evasive, richly ambiguous story can be mapped. Using Lacanian theory in this way doesn't deny its own "literariness," or suggest that it is somehow epistemologically superior to the latter; as poststructuralism has shown, theoretical and literary texts, as different modes of language, share qualities—rhetorical structures, narrative forms—which allow them to be discussed together, much like different keys in tonal harmony share "pivot chords" which allow themes to transit from one to another. "There is," writes Jonathan Culler, "a metalinguistic function—language can discuss language—but there is no metalanguage, only more language piled upon language" (xi).

Peter Brooks points out that a psychoanalytic hermeneutics doesn't have to result in empty tautologies, as Derrida suggests, but promises existentially meaningful criticism. As a theory that says something about the world, psychoanalysis can help bring out what he calls the "human stakes" of criticism in a way that a strictly deconstructive approach cannot (43). As a demanding intertext that forces the reader to pass through a target language aimed at accounting for phenomena such as desire, psychoanalysis brings to light the "psychic investments of rhetoric" and the "dramas of desire played out in tropes" (43). This crossing of territorial boundaries, Brooks suggests, confirms and complicates our understanding of how the mind constructs the fictions by which we desire, "indeed by which we constitute ourselves as human subjects" (43-44).

If a psychoanalytic hermeneutics is necessarily circular, simultaneously giving both questions and answers, and necessarily thematic, uncovering recognizably psychoanalytic themes, then perhaps the answers given are less important than how one gets there, how one works with the text's linguistic details and formal structure in the production of meaning. A text as stylistically opaque as *Las Hortensias* can't be forced to mean just anything. It resists interpretation. Meaning will arise not from simply imposing psychoanalytic wisdom on it, but from collaborating with it. Brooks characterizes this collaboration by using a psychoanalytic term—transference—as a model to help us discover that in reading meaning arises neither exclusively from reader nor text, but from “the dialogic struggle” of the two (40). Brooks defines a model as a speculative instrument that describes one cognitive field in light of another so as to facilitate an “analogical transfer” of terms that helps us make new connections and see things that otherwise might escape notice (39). Psychoanalytic models, he says, can be used in literary study, not only as hermeneutical devices, but as “tools of comprehension,” as “discovery procedures” based on the assumption of an existential connection between the model and its application (40).

This thesis will stage an encounter between two cognitive fields: Lacan's theory of desire—and those of critics influenced by Lacan, such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Laura Mulvey—and Hernández's novella, using Brooks's notion of a model with which to shuttle from one to the other. This “analogical transfer” is likely to result in readings that prioritize to some extent the theoretical field over the literary field, inescapable, as Derrida rightly points out, in any hermeneutical approach. It is nevertheless hoped that such an encounter will succeed in producing readings that do justice to the richness and complexity of both.

Much of the recent critical attention devoted to *Las Hortensias* is psychoanalytically-informed and much of it deals with issues of desire. The most exhaustive is probably Graziano's *The Lust of Seeing* (1997), which aims to situate Hernández's narrative within the “psycho-cultural continuum” and by doing so gain a greater understanding of its psychosexual issues (20-1). However, Graziano's view of writing as a means of expiating personal demons, as a “means by which the voices are silenced, the getting rid of oneself by unloading onto the text” (15), seems to diminish

Hernández's work to the status of a defence mechanism erected against his neurosis, and despite persuasive textual analysis, his readings of author and characters according to classical Freudian categories such as clinical narcissism and unresolved oedipal conflict suffer from the diagnostic reductionism that tends to mar the psycho-biographical approach.

If Graziano tends to pathologize, Claudia Cerminatti, in *Una lectura de "Las Hortensias"* (2002), tends to moralize. Cerminatti discusses Hernández's story in terms of a key Freudian term—the uncanny—and notes its rather uncanny similarity to another story about a man who goes mad after falling in love with a female simulacrum: E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*. Cerminatti discovers the same uncanny-generating tropes—animism, the double, the blurring of the boundary between fantasy and reality—in Hernández as Freud discovered in his reading of Hoffmann, though she differs from Freud in interpreting madness in *Las Hortensias* as a kind of divine retribution for “el pecado de hybris.” The tragic fall of its protagonist, she claims, originates in his attempt to mock “los límites de la Realidad” (115) and to usurp the rule of God, substituting His Law with that of infantile desire (112).

A more nuanced reading of *Las Hortensias* can be found in Prieto's *Desencuadrados: vanguardias ex-céntricas en el Río de la Plata* (2002), which uses Lacanian theory to analyze what Prieto sees as Hernández's representation of the modern subject's “radical eccentricity” vis-à-vis itself and its desire. Prieto investigates the “contaminación discursiva” (37) between Freud and Hernández and reads *Las Hortensias* as a kind of “deformación irónica” of Freud's notion of obsessional neurosis (39). If Prieto signals Hernández's narrative manipulation of Freud, he also charts “una serie de confluencias [y] concomitancias” which align him with Lacan. Hernández and Lacan, he claims, can be read as parallel responses to the same Freudian pretext; each operates “una análoga radicalización del planteamiento freudiano” (41). Prieto's Lacanian perspective allows him to eschew the kind of psycho-biography practiced by Graziano and results in fascinating insights. His highly speculative readings, however, suffer from being only rarely substantiated by concrete textual analysis.

Ensuing chapters will build on these and other works while seeking to avoid their respective weaknesses: undue pathologization and moralism on the one hand, and

ungrounded abstract theorizing on the other. It will differ from them by using Lacan's rhetorical understanding of human desire to investigate in greater depth the constituent elements of *Las Hortensias's* stylistic opacity—the modalities through which desire's textual meaning is constantly deviated and delayed, through which its potentially disturbing subject matter is expressed and repressed, i.e. condensed and displaced by or into more comfortable symbolizations. The chapters will seek to say something about the forms desire takes, and how such forms generate narrative movement, how they animate a plot which in certain ways mimics the very desire it thematizes.

Chapter one will look at the dynamics of veiling and unveiling—of the female body, *Las Hortensias's* privileged object of desire, of desire itself, which is both repressed into the subtext and expressed on the textual surface, and of its existential truth, which, according to Lacan's Heideggerian perspective, takes fiction as one of its privileged fields of manifestation. Chapter two will use Lacan's notion of the signifier as an analogical model with which to shed light on the Hortensia doll's role in igniting and sustaining desire. The next three chapters will suggest that the story's plot can be divided into two distinct phases: in the first, desire tends to follow a predominantly metaphoric logic, in which one love object is substituted for a number of others, while in the second it tends to follow a more metonymic logic, in which objects are displaced one after the other along a linear sequence. Desire in this first sense will be the topic of chapters three and four, while desire in the second sense will be the topic of chapter five. Chapter six will look at desire from a different angle: as an intersubjective, socially mediated phenomena, one which belies the notion that desire is an exclusively private, intimate affair. All chapters will trace desire's operations primarily in relation to the story's protagonist, whose journey through the narrative will be read as a kind of passage through Lacan's three orders—from the symbolic dimension of desiring subjectivity, to imprisonment within an imaginary realm in which desire is derailed, and finally to a traumatic encounter with the real, with the unsymbolizable experience of psychosis. Chapter seven will examine the forces behind desire's derailment, while the thesis's conclusion will reaffirm its guiding idea: that *Las Hortensias*, by showing us the “paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous” dimensions of desire, by presenting its promise of plenitude and presence as inextricably bound up with

emptiness and absence, with philosophical issues of being and nonbeing, tells us something about its metaphysics, i.e. about the very nature of desire itself.



The nature of art would then be this: the truth of being setting itself to work.  
Martin Heidegger

## Chapter One: (Un)veiling Desire's Naked Truth

*Las Hortensias* opens with protagonist Horacio anxiously awaiting night to fall, when daytime worries dissolve into nighttime pleasures, which for him consist in static performances in which female dolls represent fantasy scenes within glass showcases. Horacio becomes erotically attached to a doll named Hortensia, a simulacrum of his wife, María Hortensia. A parallel bond develops between María, who is barren, and Hortensia, which she treats as a surrogate daughter. When Horacio has Facundo, his doll-maker, fit Hortensia with hot water tubbing to make her feel more human, and later with a vaginal cavity to make her more sexually accommodating, the doll starts to share the couple's bed, with María only dimly aware that Horacio's affection for their "daughter" has become more than just paternal.

At one point the narrator refers to Horacio's dolls as "locas sublimes" who couldn't care less whether they be dressed or undressed, whose only concern in the world is striking the right pose (85). This description of sex dolls as indifferent to their own nudity is probably the most explicit in a text characterized, as Graziano points out, by its muted eroticism, a striking image which, while seemingly incidental, offers a mode of access into one of the novella's most crucial dynamics: the dynamics of veiling and unveiling. For the novella's privileged object of desire—the female body—is constantly dressed and undressed, its veiling inextricable from its unveiling. This chapter will explore how veiling and unveiling support each other in a kind of dialectical movement, a movement which submerges some desires, while bringing others to the surface. Section one will focus on veiling, suggesting that the text uses metaphor to (un)veil subtextual (implicit) desire, while section three will focus on unveiling, suggesting that it intensifies textual (explicit) desire through striptease (and striptease's rhetorical counterparts: synecdoche and metonymy). Intersecting these sections will be a

discussion of Lacan's Heideggerian view that veiling and unveiling in fiction are related to a notion of truth, a view which will help us say something about the kind of truth (un)veiled in *Las Hortensias*, namely, the truth of desire.

### *What Veils (Un)veil*

In *Las Hortensias*, fetishistic and voyeuristic desire is more or less overtly depicted, but more extreme or disturbing manifestations of desire—in the form of rape fantasy, incest and necrophilia—are kept under wraps. This repressed content is hinted at by uncannily repeated representations of physical concealment, by a text abounding in textiles of various sorts, in costumes and covered faces, in masks, veils and curtained mirrors, signalling what Derrida notes as “the more than metaphoric equation between veil, text, and textile” (418).

In one of the story's fantasy scenes, for example, two friends appear wearing masks. The scene is set during carnival, also the setting of Horacio's first excursion to the Primavera department store, where his acquisition of yet another Hortensia spells the end of his Lent, or period of doll fasting. Like the two friends, the store dolls are also disguised, as if, in keeping with the carnival theme, they were about to attend a masked ball. The anonymity afforded by masquerade makes the bacchanalian revelries of carnival—a word sharing the same root as carnal—more socially acceptable, allowing revellers to more freely indulge in desires that during normal times might be frowned upon, which is perhaps why Horacio, who has no normal times, is so fond of costumes and masks.

Horacio himself appears in masquerade, wearing a black veil and yellow gloves (63), and finds ravishing one of his dolls even sweeter because “su pequeño antifaz parecía hacer más orgullosa su cabeza” (82). Veils, besides leading to uncanny identity confusions so frequent in *Las Hortensias*, evoke feminine modesty, whose violation Horacio finds so thrilling. They also evoke funeral shrouds, which makes Horacio's

defilement of the veiled doll suggestive of necrophilia. Horacio's own donning of a veil denotes shame associated with his misogynist and necrophilic urges, symbolizing, like his covering of mirrors, an attempt to block from view the dark desires lurking beneath his outward persona. If the veiled body is thus metaphorically associated with the desire for uninhibited pleasure, the violation of feminine virtue, the eroticization of death, and the concealment of shame, it can also be seen as a metaphor for metaphor itself, for what are metaphors, Bouhours writes, but "transparent veils which allow to be seen that which they cover," "costumes beneath which one recognizes the costumed person" (qtd. in Derrida 415). (The Latin origin of the English verb reveal [*revelare*] would seem to reveal something of metaphor's veiling logic: the prefix *re* (again) is added to the root *velum* (veil), suggesting that revelation occurs in the interval between veilings.)

However, people are not the only things to be costumed in *Las Hortensias*. As mentioned in the thesis introduction, the story itself is covered, shrouded in a veil that disguises the desires it constantly implies but never overtly states. If *Las Hortensias* uses metaphor to reach beyond the veil, offering brief, hazy glimpses of its sub-textual nether regions—a world of violent, morbid, incestuous desire—it also, paradoxically, uses metaphor to keep them veiled, mysterious, enigmatic. Of course, if it did not, if everything were explicit and unveiled, there wouldn't be much of a story to tell. But so too might there be no story if the veil were to stay firmly in place, if the textual textiles were so tightly woven that nothing at all could be seen through the veil. Hernández critic Jacinto Fombona contends that suggestive modesty of this sort is characteristic of all art, since it is in "el pudor donde se ve la esencia del arte que no es otra que la de un desvelamiento" (35).<sup>3</sup>

### *What Fiction (Un)veils*

Metaphor in *Las Hortensias* can thus be seen as something added to the nudity of its

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<sup>3</sup> While this is certainly true of *Las Hortensias*, it hardly seems true of all art—a painting such as Gustave Courbet's *L'origine du monde* certainly unveils, but it does so without conceding anything to modesty.

subtextual content. In psychoanalytic terms, it can be considered a kind of secondary revision of the story's repressed or primary material. For Freud, secondary revisions are formal devices that act on (veil) the thematic structure of a dream or story, covering up its literal meaning to mask its nudity. At the same time, this sub-textual material can be glimpsed at beneath the revisions, which both disguise and denude the meaning of what can be perceived without a veil.

Unveiling the nudity of what a story represses is a primary aim of psychoanalytic hermeneutics, which, as Lacan states, unveils in that "passion to unveil which has an object: truth" (2006 157). To unveil what *Las Hortensias* represses, then, would mean to treat the story as a kind of metaphoric body, to undress its literary garments and exhibit its naked truth, "exhibiting, denuding, undressing, unveiling," being, writes Derrida, "the familiar acrobatics of the metaphor of the truth" (2006 415). But what is the nature of the truth exhibited by psychoanalytic unveiling? Lacan understands it in the Heideggerian sense of a movement of *aleitheia*, as the manifestation of being, as the unveiling of the things themselves. "When we are open to hearing," he writes, "the way in which Martin Heidegger uncovers for us in the word *aletheia* the play of truth, we merely rediscover a secret to which truth has always initiated her lovers, and through which they learn that it is in hiding that she offers herself to them *most truly*" (2006 15).

Lacan follows Heidegger in seeing truth as unveiling herself most primordially in literature, which gives birth to manifestation, which allows being to *be* more fully. Literary fiction is the place where the possibility of truth-as-unveiling is put onstage, where truth offers up its nakedness for contemplation. Fiction here becomes the element for the manifestation of truth, which articulates itself through evasion, through the veiling devices of poetic language; as Lacan writes, "There is so little opposition between this *Dichtung* [poetic saying] and *Wahrheit* [truth] in its nakedness that the fact of the poetic

operation must make us notice, instead, the following feature which we forget in every truth: truth shows itself in a fictional structure” (2006 625).<sup>4</sup>

*Las Hortensias*'s poetic operations make us notice the truth of desire, which shows itself through the story's veiling devices—its metaphors, metonymies and other rhetorical strategies—which simultaneously hide its nakedness and put it onstage, giving it up for contemplation. Yet instead of laying bare the being of being, the story inverts the Heideggerian ontology and lays bare the being of non-being, the truth of desire as lack. For what it exhibits is not *Sein* in its glorious plenitude, but *Nichtsein* in its inert vacuity, the lack of being, or the being of lack, that which Lacan calls *manque-à-être*. The story locates this non-being in a place; its contours are an excavated hole, the empty vessels of hollowed out female forms—life-sized sex dolls, at once disguised and denuded as objects of desire and sites of lack. If *Las Hortensias* manifests desire's existential truth, the ineluctability of lack and loss in human life—what psychoanalysis calls the reality of castration—it does so negatively, by charting what happens when this truth is denied, when being is pursued through paragons of non-being, when presence is sought in effigies of absence, fulfillment in that which is empty

### *Unveiling As Seduction Scheme*

*Las Hortensias* represses some desires, while expressing others; if its intimations of violence, necrophilia and incest are, as mentioned above, revealed through metaphor, fetishistic and voyeuristic desires, in contrast, are put into vivid relief, explicitly unveiled. The novella thus integrates unveiling into its contents, making it part of its production process. For if it constantly covers the female body in fabric, it also partially removes it, making the reader complicit in a corporeal unveiling, in a fetishizing striptease that dramatizes the voyeuristic pleasures of the text and of reading itself.

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<sup>4</sup> If for Heidegger poetic language is the privileged medium for the manifestation of the truth of being, for Lacan the specificities of psychoanalytic truth manifest themselves in a rather different fictional structure: that of transference.

Like Heidegger and Lacan, Barthes also sees fiction as a site of unveiling, though he differs from the former by being more interested in the desire driving the unveiling than in the ontological status of the thing unveiled. For him, the literary text arises from a desire to write and to please; as an object of reading pleasure, it is itself a scheme of seduction. Writing is the “Kama Sutra” of language and reading an intimate, even carnal (carnavalesque?) affair (1975 19), “less a laboratory,” adds Eagleton, “than a boudoir” (83). Barthes understands reading as a form of pleasure seeking which involves gradually undressing layers of textual fabric, a striptease in which meaning or truth is slowly unveiled. In the striptease “the entire excitation takes refuge in the hope of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy’s dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction)” (1975 19). Striptease’s counterpart is the fetishistic notion of gapping: “Is not,” Barthes asks, “the most erotic place of a body where the garment gaps?” Gapping is the “intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing [...] it is this flash itself which seduces” (1975 19).

*Las Hortensias* seduces first by offering tantalizing glimpses of skin and then by staging a progressive unveiling of what the novella had hitherto kept veiled: the female body. The story’s contents thus conspire with its seduction scheme, which builds up excitation by continually covering up the objects it fetishizes, only to, in a glamorous public spectacle, (partially) uncover them. It does this as the reader approaches the story’s end, as she progressively unveils its layers of meaning, excited at knowing the end. Reading *Las Hortensias* thus fuses, in an erotically charged drive to see and to know, the voyeuristic and cognitive into one pleasure.

The female body is explicitly unveiled in the Primavera exhibition, which is staged as a kind of three-part striptease suite which opens with some flashes of skin and closes with the promise that sex dolls turn schoolboy dreams into reality. In the first movement, gapping fetishizes body parts by focalizing the gaze on them, in this case synthetic skin made visible by the dolls’ *décolletage*: in the viewing gallery “pasaban

toda clase de caras; y no sólo miraban las muñecas de arriba a abajo para ver los vestidos; había ojos que saltaban, llenos de sospecha, de un vestido a un escote y de una muñeca a la otra” (85).

If gapping intensifies fetishistic desire, so does the use of synecdoches, which are themselves fetishes and which themselves become more focalized, with the subjects of the fetishizing gaze (voyeuristic spectators) being replaced by parts (heads) and then by smaller parts (eyes). Some of these eyes feign interest in fashion, when in reality it is those places where garments gap, those interstices of skin flashing between edges, which summon their haptic gaze: “Otros ojos, muy prevenidos, miraban como si caminaran cautelosamente por encima de los vestidos y temieran caer en la piel de las muñecas” (85).

In the striptease’s second movement, a beach scene, considerably more skin is unveiled. Here a party of dolls have shed their evening gowns for bathing suits. Horacio fixates on two, one with fish painted on her shoulder blades, the other, presumably in a bikini, with red concentric circles painted on her exposed midriff. The circles resemble a shooting target, as if they were deliberately designed to lure Horacio’s gaze—and the reader’s imagination—onto the bull’s-eye of her naked skin.

In the third movement, a jungle scene, the dolls peel off even more clothing, appearing as topless indigenous and black women whose exposed breasts furnish the gaze with even more alluring bull’s-eyes. Just as Horacio’s desire drives him to pursue increasingly illicit situations, so too does it drive him to lust after increasingly exotic dolls, dolls with flowers and stripes painted on their dark skin “como caníbales” (86). The exoticism of these dolls, their being “othered” or exoticized as Native or African-American, objectifies them even further, making their nakedness more palatable to public morality, much like, as we will discuss in chapter five, the metonymic displacement of Horacio’s desire onto fetishized objects makes his eccentric sexual urges more acceptable to his conscience.

Again, Hernández amplifies the thematics of fetishization by extending them into the properly rhetorical field, with the proliferation of synecdoches prefiguring on a micro level Horacio's psychic fragmentation and the floating limbs that appear later in the narrative. Whereas in the beach section the narrator referred to the story's protagonist as Horacio, in the jungle section he is referred to synecdochically as "aquella cabeza" (86). Horacio himself thus becomes a fetish object, transformed by metonymy, which makes his totality as a subject present within an object or detachable part. Horacio is present not in *this* but in *that* head, "aquella" functioning here as a distancing adjective that has, like the othering of dark-skinned dolls who come not from *here* but from *there*, the effect of making him more like his dolls, non-beings whose detachable parts he will soon come to fetishize.



If *Las Hortensias* represses violent and necrophilic desires by veiling them in metaphor, it expresses fetishistic and voyeuristic desire by means of a striptease in which inert female bodies are unveiled, exhibited as fascinating objects of gazes and unconscious projections which never register them in their entirety, but rather cinematically zoom in on fetishized features and identities. Striptease highlights the formal processes at work within the story itself, which slowly and gradually unveils its meanings, but only by veiling them, by partial disclosure, by a *Dichtung* of provocative glimpses and substitute revelations—flashes of cleavage, two-piece bathing suits, semi-nudity. *Las Hortensias's* striptease stops before the desire it incites is ever satisfied, before unveiling what the schoolboy longs for: the full-frontal, which is only indirectly evoked (thinly veiled) in the image of the "locas sublimes" mentioned at the opening of this chapter. By partially denuding its dolls, the story teases the reader by evoking the promise of desire's fulfilment, only to repeatedly take it away. In doing so it unveils something of desire's naked truth: desire is a node of non-being, an abode of absence, a locus of lack, like the



sex dolls which incite it.

Si Dieu le Père a créé les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant leur nom, ou en leur donnant un autre que l'artiste les recrée.  
Marcel Proust

## Chapter Two: Sex Doll Semiology

In one of Horacio's fantasy scenes, a doll appears as a beggar with a dozen or so legs protruding from under her skirt. She is surrounded by an array of erect severed arms, each of whose hands points upward. Horacio, against his custom, does not bother to interpret the scene and expresses his dissatisfaction with it in the following words: "Qué mamarracho [...] esto es un jeroglífico estúpido" (73). Horacio dismisses the scene because he cannot decipher or make sense of it, he cannot situate its signifying elements—a whole whose parts have multiplied like cancer cells, parts whose extremities appear as if trying to wave down a mysteriously absent whole—into a narrative, into a coherent system of meaning.

Horacio's characterization of it as a "stupid hieroglyph" could well serve to characterize Lacan's signifier, which in isolation is as enigmatic and meaningless as an undeciphered hieroglyph. This chapter will suggest that Horacio's stupid hieroglyphs, his Hortensia dolls, may be read as a kind of metaphor or analogy for another signifying element: the Lacanian signifier. For both sex doll and signifier, as we will see below, are inert, empty, meaningless and indestructible, both are mere "things," non-beings that acquire being or meaning only by circulating within a matrix of intersubjective relations, both are objects of desire. In Hernández's narrative, the sex doll's circulation will not be limited to the libidinal economy of Horacio's "casa negra" or black house, but will continue indefinitely, like the signifying chains of language and desire, into the libidinal economy of the capitalist marketplace, and in doing so will shape the identities, not only of Horacio and María, but of all the potential consumers who might come into her possession.

Before examining the forces propelling this far-reaching circulation, a digression

is called for, one which will present the theoretical armature for much of what follows, namely Lacan's notion of the unconscious as the mediatory space between language and desire and fountainhead of the signifier.

### *All Hail the Signifier*

For Lacan the unconscious is not, as it was for Freud, an occult realm, a black box filled with chaotic and jumbled desires; in the Lacanian unconscious, desire is orderly and structured. Because the rhetorical structures of language—particularly those of metaphor and metonymy—penetrate down into the unconscious, wherein they play a “constitutive role” (2006 426), Lacan asserts that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (1998 20). In fact, unconscious desire has no existence outside language, no structure save the linguistic, “what it knows of the elemental is no more than the elements of the signifier” (2006 434).

Lacan is able to immerse Freud's discovery “in the purifying ocean of language” (Bowie 68) by borrowing his notion of the signifier from Saussure's sign theory, according to which linguistic meaning is produced by the interaction of the sign's twin components: the signifier, or acoustic image, and the signified, or concept. Unlike Saussure, who views the relation of the two terms as relatively fixed, Lacan views it as extremely unstable and posits the unconscious as an order of pure signifiers, an order in which signifiers *precede* signifieds. Lacan rewrites Saussure's famous semiotic algorithm s/S (signified/Signifier) as S/s, or “signifier over signified” (2006 414-5) in order to attribute priority to the signifier; in this “topology of the unconscious” (2006 163), the bar separating the two terms becomes the bar of repression, symbolizing the signified's inaccessibility as an object of unconscious desire. Responsibility for the production of meaning now falls exclusively on the capitalized signifier, the lowercase signified being reduced to a mere effect of the combinatory play of signifiers through which meaning elusively “insists” (2006 419).

Worthless in itself, the Lacanian signifier acquires value only by dint of its difference from other signifiers within a signifying system. For this reason, fixed meanings can never be pinned down since the differential nature of the signifier implies that its identity will vary according to its position in the system. The signifier is empty of meaning and indestructible: “every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing. The more the signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is” (1993 185).

Although Lacan often uses the term signifier to designate words, the two are not synonymous. A signifier is any inert material element “subjected to the double condition of being reducible to ultimate differential elements and of combining according to the laws of a closed order” (2006 152). As such, nonlinguistic things such as objects can also function as signifiers. To consider the itinerary of fictional sex dolls as analogous to such things may thus not be as outlandish as it first appears; Lacan’s empire of the signifier is far-reaching, his sign, as Malcolm Bowie points out, “even when divided with apparent technical precision into ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ [...] casts its net extremely wide” (55).

### *Metaphoric Signifiers, Ordinary and Transcendental*

Like Lacan’s signifiers, dolls in *Las Hortensias* have no fixed meaning. Their identities fluctuate according to the roles they perform within the novella’s various narratives, its closed orders or self-contained storyworlds whose limits are those of glass (private showcase and commercial window display), stone (the walls of the black house) or paper (the money generated by sex dolls as consumer commodities; the pages on which the text is written). In the framing narrative (the story of Horacio’s affairs with Hortensia and her successors), they assume the identities of daughter, wife, lover, spy, widow, Renaissance maiden and African queen. In the novella’s many embedded micro-narratives (Horacio’s fantasy scenes and the public exhibitions at the department store

which sells the dolls), identities are even more diverse, ranging from dead bride, social outcast, sponge-loving lunatic, ambitious career woman, aforementioned multipedic beggar, national folk heroine, and bikinied beach babe.

As one would expect, the dolls receive the identities projected onto them stoically, with one doll, “de nariz respingada,” appearing rather blasé about the whole business, as if saying to herself: “Y a mí qué me importa” (21). A doll can be dressed in thoughts as easily as she can be dressed in a summer frock or winter coat: “así como lo venía bien un vestido de verano o uno de invierno, también se le podía atribuir cualquier pensamiento; y ella, tan pronto parecía aceptarlo como rechazarlo” (21). Dolls are empty repositories—literally so in the case of the plumbed dolls—into which meanings (and fluids) can be deposited, but this is not to say that as discrete units they are indistinguishable one from the other: “si bien el vidrierista sabía acomodarlas y sacar partido de las condiciones de cada una,” muses Horacio, “ellas, a último momento, siempre agregaban algo por su cuenta” (21).

Just as gender in many languages serves to differentiate various classes of nouns, so too does gender serve to differentiate the various classes of dolls, with each acquiring its identity in a manner similar to that of the signifier, that is, by virtue of its difference vis-à-vis others. Neuter dolls, the hard-surfaced “non-Hortensias” lacking in hydraulics and certain crucial female features, contextualize the genuinely feminine dolls, the “Hortensias,” whose warmth, softness and pseudo sex organs enlist them in the performance of services once reserved for real women.

A single masculine presence completes the system. Horacio, in a class of his own, gladly engenders the other two with meaning (and his seed in the case of the feminine) until his metamorphosis into rigid dollishness makes him the avatar of the phallic function itself, the fulcrum on whose tumescence the system’s signification depends. Horacio thus becomes the embodiment of Lacan’s transcendental referent, the phallus as *the* primordial signifier, “destined to designate meaning effects as a

whole” (2006 579). On the one hand, his dollification lays bare the principle of *Las Hortensias*’s sense making, hypostatizing the phallus as the fundamental pole around which text’s meaning is erected and without which it would lack an anchoring point, without which there would be nothing more than a collage of bizarre showcase scenes and suggestive window displays, a heap of meaningless signifiers whose fragmentation is suggested by the profusion of fetishized body parts and severed doll limbs—the doll-as-signifier’s “ultimate differential elements”—that dot the narrative and anticipate its disintegration.

On the other hand, Horacio’s dollification can be seen as a caricature of Lacan’s transcendental referent, an implicit critique of what Derrida calls the “phallogocentrism” of a theory that apotheosizes the phallus as an ideal guarantor of meaning. Not only does this ideality introduce a metaphysical element into a purportedly anti-metaphysical theory, but it makes the theory intrinsically androcentric, for if “the phallus is not the organ that it symbolizes,” writes Derrida, “it mostly and primarily symbolizes the penis” (481). Horacio’s rigidity may make him the embodiment of the phallus’s indivisible, non-fragmentable integrity, but it also makes him so brittle that he shatters into pieces, if not physically then psychically, with the doll limbs serving as mirror images of his own mental disintegration, as symbols for his own impotence, his psychological castration. In the end, Horacio cracks under the burden of the phallic function, which, in Hélène Cixous’s words, bestows on him—as it does on all men in patriarchal societies—“the grotesque and unenviable fate of being reduced to a single idol with clay balls” (159). Were the transcendental status of Lacan’s “signifier of signifiers” to be revoked, Derrida points out, the entire edifice of his theory would collapse. Something like this happens in *Las Hortensias*: by unveiling the phallus as an idol, the text unpins its own linchpin and in doing so brings its own movement to a halt.

### *Petrified Immortality*

Besides being idiots signifying nothing, dolls in *Las Hortensias*, like signifiers in Lacan's sign system, are indestructible. During Hortensia's second birthday party, María is shocked to find her stabbed and bleeding water, an attack secretly orchestrated by Horacio as a pretext for sending her back to Facundo to receive her vaginoplasty. When María discovers this surgical enhancement, she leaves Horacio, but not before attacking the doll with a kitchen knife. Yet despite being "murdered" twice, Hortensia keeps coming back under new guises, uncannily returning with an insistence in proportion to the violence used to obliterate her.

If Hortensia comes back to life like a vivified corpse, she would also seem to transcend death; as eternally young and beautiful, Hortensia represents the denial of death inasmuch as she embodies it; since she is a mere thing, she has no life to lose; since she is already dead, she cannot die and is thus immortal. When Horacio realizes that Hortensia's butchered body has been left untouched for days following María's knife-crazed attack, he consoles himself by saying that she is only "resting" and that "menos mal que su cuerpo no se descompondría" (57). The doll's indestructibility has the effect of making Horacio uncomfortably aware of his own mortality, of his creeping decrepitude. In this the doll could be said to function analogously to the signifier, which also deals in death, annihilating the subject's being while at the same time allowing him to conceptualize mortality: as Lacan puts it, "the letter kills, but we learn this from the letter itself" (2006 719); "it is in the signifier," he writes elsewhere, "and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against the fact that he may soon disappear from the chain of what he is" (1992 295).

Yet at the same time, the signifier also allows the subject to supersede his mortality: since "the signifier already considers him dead, by nature it immortalizes him" (1993 180), an immortality achieved through petrification, the signifier functioning "to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject [...] to

speak” (1998 2007). Horacio is the very image of this subject; his *danse macabre* with sex dolls literally petrifies him, turning his organic matter into a stony substance, but one whose enduring properties do nothing to mitigate his mortal anxiety. Horacio’s doll dealings have turned out to be a Faustian bargain, requiring him to sell his soul, his *animus*, for the specific immortality of the inanimate. Like the signifier, the doll immortalizes, but the species of immortality it offers is the only one it knows: that of death, into whose image Horacio is reconstituted, recast as a monument, a frozen form, a statue whose “fijeza de muñeco” (86) “no representa [...] a ningún santo” (89).<sup>5</sup>

### *Literal signifiers*

The “thingness” of actual signifiers is emphasized in *Las Hortensias*, particularly when the signifiers in question are proper names. Horacio’s wife’s name is María Hortensia, “pero le gustaba que la llamaran María; entonces cuando su marido mandó hacer esa muñeca parecida a ella, decidieron tomar el nombre de Hortensia—como se toma un objeto arrumbado—para la muñeca” (14). The treatment of María’s middle name as a worthless thing, as an object easily discarded and then transferred onto another thing, prefigures the panoply of worthless things that will later litter the narrative, as the sexed dolls who inherit this name will be thrown out like trash once their value as props in Horacio’s desire scenarios has been exhausted. Horacio represses feelings of moral bankruptcy, which nevertheless resurface in a vague musing, in a mental image in which his first and last names appear inscribed on a worthless document, on “un cheque sin fondo” (47).

Upon waking one morning, Horacio calls to mind his name in order to interpellate a self that had apparently disappeared during sleep: “Se despertó [...] y recordó quién era él, ahora. Su nombre y apellido le parecieron diferentes” (47). The fact his own name appears foreign to him suggests a discrepancy between the signifiers and the

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<sup>5</sup> Desire’s mediations with death will be discussed further in chapter four.



document for which they were intended, that something like the schism between conscious vigilance and unconscious slumber somehow reproduces itself into the former. In another instance, Horacio closes a diary entry by underlining the materiality of his name, as if to reassure himself of his existence: “Aunque ese cuaderno lo leía únicamente él, firmaba las notas; escribía su nombre, Horacio, con letras grandes y cargadas de tinta” (14). This is the first time Horacio is named in the story, a christening that not only introduces him as principal protagonist, but does so in a way that thematizes his alienation, an alienation symbolized by the Lacanian bar dividing his real but inaccessible self (Horacio-as-signified) and its inert material representative (**HORACIO**-as-signifier), whose preeminence he highlights with heavy ink and, *à la* Lacan, with capital letters.

Horacio’s preoccupation with his name points to what Lacan calls the *aphansis* or fading of the subject, which, like the signified in the Saussurian algorithm, is eclipsed by the signifier, under whose bar it slips. For Lacan the subject *is* not; in a radical sense it has no being. The signifier forges its existence out of the real by assigning it a proper name and inscribing it in the symbolic order, re-imagined here as a worthless cheque. Horacio’s perception of his name as “different,” as an arbitrary label having no intrinsic connection to the thing it designates, echoes Lacan’s understanding of the proper name, which, despite having nothing to do with the subject, will go on to ground his subjectivity like no other, standing in for him while signifying his very absence: “due to the simple fact that it addresses him, he is absolutely nothing” (2006 708).

This signifier fractures the subject by driving the “real subject” underground and leaving a “rigid designator” in its place, excluding it from speech at the very moment it becomes represented in it. *Las Hortensias* can be read as the story of this exclusion, of the subject’s *aphansis*, a narrative which plots a man’s downward drift, his sinking under the bar, crushed under desire’s empty weight and the “sovereign signifierness of speech” (2006 438). Horacio surrenders his existence to the signifier’s power by

becoming one and gains in return the mute inertia of its rigid materiality, of its inanimate object-ness, a fetishist having become a fetish. Just as Hortensia once represented his wife, Horacio's metamorphosis sees him transformed into the rigid designator that once represented him; by the end of the novella, he has been reduced to nothing more than a lone and silent signifier, a signifier suffering the bliss of signifying nothing, of having removed itself from signification, from its imperative to combine with others and make sense. The evanescence of Horacio's subjectivity, his entrance into the non-sense of psychosis, coincides with the evanescence of the text itself, whose sense-making, like that of all texts, comes to a standstill, whose words, having exhausted themselves, sink into the empty space of the final page.

### *I is It (Alienation/Spaltung)*

Lacan describes the subject's fracture by the signifier as a *Spaltung*, a term Freud used to describe the dividedness of an ego caught between acceptance and disavowal. Lacan radicalizes Freud's notion, using it to characterize the subject's irremediable alienation from self and others, an alienation keenly felt, he reminds us, by Arthur Rimbaud, who proclaimed to the world: "*Je est un autre*" (2006 23). It is also keenly felt by Horacio, who reports being "desconocido de sí mismo" (45), who experiences "la impresión de estar viviendo en el cuerpo de un desconocido a quien robara bienestar" (59). For Lacan, the *autre* in question is the unconscious, which constitutes the subject as split by desire's essential insatiability; if the Cartesian cogito integrated the subject by grounding it in certainty, the Freudian *desidero* fragments it, grounding it in uncertainty, absence and lack (1998 154).

Horacio's unconscious splits him from his body, whose movements his conscious mind registers *après coup*: "le extrañó no verse sentado en el sillón; se había levantado sin darse cuenta" (12). This other directs him to the theatre of desire—"abrió la puerta, y en seguida se encontró con los pasos que daba ahora: lo llevaban a la primera

vitrina”—putting his feet into motion before his conscious mind can decide otherwise (12). His conscious mind does voice itself at times, reasserting its authority and marking his movements as its own: “conversaba en voz alta y comentaba estúpidamente lo que iba haciendo: ‘Ahora iré al escritorio a buscar el tintero’” (72). Horacio notes his direct experience like a phenomenologist, but one whose objectivity is compromised by critical self-judgment: “pensaba en lo que hacía como si observara a otra persona; ‘estás abriendo el cajón. Ahora este imbécil le saca la tapa del tintero. Vamos a ver cuánto tiempo dura la vida’” (72).<sup>6</sup> Horacio relates to himself as a mindless object, like one of his dolls, and, like Rimbaud, in the third person: *I is It*.

Hernández also represents *Spaltung* symbolically in the crack made to Hortensia’s nether regions or in the image of a woman’s fractured skull which Horacio evokes when describing to his scene-builders what he feels when looking at showcases: “cuando miro una escena me parece que descubro un recuerdo que ha tenido una mujer en un momento importante de su vida; es algo así, como si le abriera una rendija en la cabeza” (37-8). But nowhere is *Spaltung* more clearly announced than in another of Hernández’s texts, *Diario de un sinvergüenza* (1974), whose author-narrator contemplates the anguish of lacking “unidad leal antes el mundo” (372). Split in three by a body nervous “como un bandido que presiente la policía” (370), a self “con su vanidad [y] egoísmo inmenso” (372) and a conscience “que vigila desde lo alto” (374), a journal writer vainly attempts to track a subjectivity from which he is barred, which he cannot locate or even feel. Lacan’s split subject is amplified here, even hyperbolized; a kind of literary deformation of his notion of the subject’s “radical heteronomy” with respect to itself (2006 435-6) is at work in *Diario*’s “shameless” author, whose only consolation comes from the fact that he is not alone in being split “como un feudo que ha ido cediendo terreno a otros,” that “hay muchos ‘divididos’ sin

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<sup>6</sup> This would seem to be a clear allusion to Freud, who observed that patients suffering from paranoia often complain that “their thoughts are known and their actions watched and supervised [and that] they are informed of the functioning of this agency by voices which characteristically speak to them in the third person (‘Now she’s thinking of that again,’ ‘Now he’s going out’)” (416).

saberlo” (378).<sup>7</sup>

*Infinite Fetters and Objectified Subjects*

*Las Hortensias* indexes a relentless multiplication of dolls, a multilevel movement which sees the modest crew appearing at the beginning of the narrative expand exponentially as it progresses. In the first half of the story, Horacio keeps a small harem to use as performers in showcase scenes which employ a cast of only one or two, lucky divas who have the stage all to themselves. However, in the second half, he has his choreographers compose scenes “con más *personajes* que de costumbre” (71) and brings large mirrors into the galleries, thereby creating, through reflection, the illusion of an infinite number of dolls. Multiplication of wholes then becomes fragmentation into parts, as in the scene in which the multipedic beggar doll is surrounded by a grotesque quantity of limbs, and in another in which dolls quit the stage entirely, leaving only their severed arms and legs floating in a pool. This proliferation of unsexed showcase dolls has its parallel in the serial succession of sexed dolls that appear in the aftermath of María’s “assassination” of Hortensia. Whereas the novella’s first part charts the gradual migration of Horacio’s desire from his wife to her double, in the second it accelerates the displacement, with his desire jumping from one Hortensia to another in an increasingly frenzied journey along a chain, each of whose links promises satisfaction but ultimately delivers only more desire.

The process of doll multiplication does not stop here however, but continues on an altogether grander scale via the dolls’ industrial mass production. Horacio’s private playthings enter public consciousness as they are denounced by newspaper editorials and promoted by major department stores as the latest must-have items of the consumer economy. The potentially infinite nature of this dissemination is again

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of the heterogeneous or decentered self is not unique to Lacanian-inspired post-structuralism; Buddhism has always viewed the unified self as a necessary fiction, while contemporary neuroscience increasingly points to a self that, far from being unified, is diffuse, i.e. not localizable in any specific region in the brain.

emphasized by the insertion of mirrors in the dolls' commercial exhibition, which dazzles spectators by multiplying the dolls' reflections in an endless and self-perpetuating chain of mirror images. This play of multiplication, this inexorable accumulation of objects of desire at both the individual and socio-economic level follows the logic of Lacan's "signifying chain," a metaphor used to illustrate language and unconscious desire as constantly moving networks of signifiers whose concatenations fan out in all directions like "links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links" (2006 418). Like the imagistic and industrial multiplication of dolls, this self-replenishing necklace is potentially infinite, since it is always possible to attach other links and other chains to it *ad infinitum*. But it also follows the logic of the modernization process, in which capitalist market economies and massive urban concentration lay down the conditions for the proliferation of new and more radical forms of desire and alienation; as Prieto writes, *Las Hortensias* "ilustra con lacerante nitidez cómo el deseo [...] opera según el modo de la 'alienación' que invade las relaciones sociales en la configuración histórica del capitalismo" (323).

For Lacan the signifier's itinerary structures human subjects, who "model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain that runs through them" (2006 21). In fact the chain's fundamental principle resides in "a conception of the function of the signifier able to demonstrate the place at which the subject is subordinated to it to the point of being virtually subverted" (2006 593). Horacio and María's identities are determined by the trajectory of the Hortensia doll—a metaphoric signifier in Lacan's sense—a subject without subject matter whose emptiness allows them to articulate, to give form to their innermost desires and fears. As Fombona writes, the Hortensia doll "es capaz de acumular interpretaciones y ser el trampolín de lecturas que abren toda una multitud de espacios" (33). Like Poe's purloined letter, the doll functions as a *tabula rasa* on which anything may be written, on which any thought may be projected: "Hortensia era una de esas muñecas," observes Horacio, "sobre la que se podía pensar

cualquier cosa” (22). Through Hortensia, María is the mother she longed to be and the betrayed wife she feared becoming, a wife disgraced by a husband caught in the snares of a dreaded “other woman” who is not even a woman. Through Hortensia, Horacio is a modern day Pygmalion, an artist enamored with his own creation, and a lusty Lothario, an “atrevido fuerte” no longer enfeebled by “sangre débil y un corazón chico” (47).

The itineraries of Hortensia and her successors run through both husband and wife; they traverse their being like a tsunami which washes away their subjectivity, hollowing out their human core, leaving them like empty mindless objects, like dolls. Facundo fabricates the Hortensia doll, while Horacio and María fashion her with multiple identities through unconscious projection, and in doing so the doll constitutes them, their fates and fortunes, just as much as they constitute it. Hortensia’s existence situates María and Horacio on an intersubjective signifying chain whose insistence seems to turn them both into doll-like idiots: “ese hombre te ha dejado idiota,” a cousin tells María, “y te maneja como a una de sus muñecas” (69); Horacio’s craving for sex dolls leaves him with “la actitud de alguien que desde hace mucho tiempo sufre un cansancio que lo ha idiotizado” (87). By the end of the novella, María has resorted to impersonating a fetishized doll while Horacio has become one. As the title of the novella suggests, an inert, inanimate object—the Hortensia doll—ends up being the true “subject” of the story.



Like Lacanian theory, *Las Hortensias* casts doubt on the notion that human desire begins and ends in individual experience. It suggests that even our most intimate desires are configured by outside forces, forces which threaten to submerge us. As Prieto writes, Hernández prefigures Lacan by representing the subject “como anodina sucesión de capas de ‘exterioridad’—un sujeto heterónomo, hecho de cosas exteriores, ajenas al control del yo consciente” (302). For Lacan, the preeminent force is that of

language, which effectively liquidates human subjectivity by reducing it to a mere function of the sign system. In one sense, *Las Hortensias* seems to echo the radical anti-humanism of this (post)structuralist view, and even amplify it by dramatizing scenarios in which subjectivity is virtually obliterated under desire's empty weight. But in another, the story seems to offer a less radical, more humanist stance, for if it suggests that subjects are submerged by outside forces, it also suggests that this *aphansis* has something to do with a contingent and hence transformable process, i.e. with economic modernization, whose production system exploits human frailty, which in *Las Hortensias* is represented by Horacio's tragic inability to assume the full reality of desire, whose impossibility is as necessary to its definition as its possibility, whose intrinsic unrealizability must be accepted lest it dehumanize us further, lest our strings be pulled like those of doll-like idiots, whether by desire itself or by forces only too willing to profit from desire.

You are unable to know what the real source of your desire is, at least without hermeneutical work.  
 Michel Foucault

### Chapter Three: Metaphor's Creative Sparks

The preceding chapter drew a metaphorical or analogical correspondence between Hernández's novella and Lacan's theory by discussing the sex doll—the true “subject” of the latter and its privileged object of desire—as a metaphor for the Lacanian signifier, as an empty indestructible “thing” whose meaning is contingent upon its continuous circulation within a system of differential elements, a circulation which sustains its precarious identity as much as the precarious identities of the characters who remain in its thrall. This chapter will continue the discussion of sex dolls by examining further the notion of metaphor, first in terms of its *rhetorical* role in the narrative, i.e. as a deliberate figure of speech, and second in terms of its *structural* role in the narrative, i.e. as a substitutive operation in the articulation of its characters' desire. In each manifestation, metaphor offers the opportunity for understanding one thing in terms of something else, and it is this *something else*—what has been previously termed subtextual content, repressed material, literal *Stoff*—that will be of interest here, getting at the thing that metaphor veils (and unveils). If this thing is in the broadest sense desire, which in the narrative tends to hover around the female body, this chapter will attempt to explore desire's specifics, i.e. the individual female bodies—the sisters, daughters and wives— which desire takes as its objects.

To do so it will follow Lacan in viewing metaphor, not only as one of language's master tropes, but also as one of desire's master tropes, as a mechanism that (with metonymy) steers an individual's desire towards a series of substitute love objects standing in for the original lost object: the maternal body. For if this is borne out, as Lacan claims, in the narrative of a human life, it is also born out in fictional narratives such as *Las Hortensias*, which allow us to inspect metaphor, metonymy and other



rhetorical devices “under laboratory conditions, and in unusually concentrated forms” (Bowie 68).<sup>8</sup>

### *Being and Sex*

Lacan follows Roman Jakobson in viewing metaphor as the characteristic rhetorical device of poetry, and metonymy as the characteristic rhetorical device of the novel (2006 425).<sup>9</sup> Both are characteristic of Hernández, who privileges two literary forms—the short story and the novella—which, as halfway houses between poetry’s condensations and the novel’s expansions, are particularly amenable to a highly concentrated prose style rich in both suggestive metaphor and metonymic detail.<sup>10</sup> As Walter Rela suggests, the Hernández narrative comes into its own “precisamente cuando es actualizado el dinamismo correspondiente a los ejes metonímico y metafórico del lenguaje” (84). In Hernández, figuration underpins characterization, with frequent use of strange similes and startling synecdoches serving to focus attention on the subjective states of characters, a strategy which corroborates Lacan’s view that metaphor (and metonymy) not only systematizes language, but also channel the desire of subjects.

Metaphor’s co-naturality with poetry is certainly evidenced in *Las Hortensias*,

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<sup>8</sup> Applying psychoanalysis to literature is itself a kind of metaphorical practice, in that it is based on the analogy of reader to analyst. As Gallop points out, this analogy operates on the level of interpretation (“the exercise of power”), but not transference (“the structuring of that authority”)—in transference the analogy is of reader to analysand, since for the former it is the text that always has the last word (27).

<sup>9</sup> English critic and novelist David Lodge also follows Jakobson, proposing in *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1979) a theory of literary history in which literature swings between periods in which metaphoric imagery predominates (as in romanticism and modernism) and those in which metonymic imagery takes centre stage (as in classicism and realism). As a modernist work, *Las Hortensias* certainly privileges the metaphoric, as we will see below, though by no means does this make metonymic imagery any less operative, particularly, as we will see in chapter five, in its connection to fetishism.

<sup>10</sup> As Frank O’Connor observes in *The Lonely Voice: A Study in Short Fiction* (1962), short fiction, a form particularly well suited to expressing the experience of marginalization, has historically flourished among writers who, like Hernández, write in peripheral regions or unsettled social climates, such as Russia, Ireland or South America.

whose most “poetic” moments take the form of mixed metaphors or strange similes in which disparate, often primal elements—air, water, matter—slip into each other in a kind of Empedoclean drift. In a beautiful passage, one characteristic of Hernández’s lyrical style, spirit, silence and sound intermingle, with the latter merging into vapor and water into night:

Vagamente pensó en su alma; era como un silencio oscuro sobre las aguas negras; ese silencio tenía memoria y recordaba el ruido de las máquinas como si también fuera silencio: tal vez ese ruido hubiera sido de un vapor que cruzaba aguas que se confundían con la noche, y donde aparecían recuerdos de muñecas como restos de un naufragio (81).

In another, a bedroom *ménage à trois* consisting of husband, wife and doll evokes the intersection of three increasingly blurred identities: “Horacio, antes de entrar al sueño, tuvo la sensación de estar hundido en un lago tibio; las piernas de los tres le parecían raíces enredadas de árboles próximos: se confundían entre el agua y él tenía pereza de averiguar cuáles eran las suyas” (33).

Both Horacio and María read poetry, whose verses free themselves from the page and float upwards, “[esparciéndose] por el paisaje como si ellos formaran de nuevo las copas de los árboles y movieran, lentamente, las nubes” (68). Pangs of remorse are pushed away “como nubes [...] hacia algún lugar del horizonte” (47), though for Horacio, they have a nasty habit of coming back at night. María’s words are likened to small stones (9), sounds flee like rats (18), a door is left ajar “como una sonrisa falsa” (16), and Horacio’s manias are said to inhabit a fish tank (9), itself a metaphor for his viewing galleries, within which his doll desire swims until the glass cracks and it spills out into the larger narrative field.

If Hernández uses creative metaphors to evoke a kind of pre-Socratic realm of being, one in which the rift (*Spaltung*) between subject and object has yet to open up, he also uses deliberate rhetorical metaphors throughout *Las Hortensias* to veil and unveil sexual desire and its concomitant frustrations. In one instance, Horacio enters a

room in which fishing rods stand erect against a wall. Just as he is about to embrace a doll, he is startled by a sudden noise, the sound of a rod falling to the floor. The falling rod momentarily paralyzes him and metaphorically prefigures his own falling rod, as he is now too tense to make love to the doll: “no pudo poner la atención que hubiera querido en esta Hortensia” (76). This is not the first time Horacio’s impotence has been alluded to. After following him to his bedroom door in the novella’s opening scene, María caresses Horacio’s nose with her index finger; after doing this on another occasion, she penetrates his cheek “hasta que el dedo se dobló como una pata de mosca” (8-9). The image of a folding finger suggests María’s sexual frustration, the possibility that a gun-shy Horacio has not been paying her the kind of attention she would have liked.

This might explain why she leaves pins in Hortensia’s clothes; when Horacio attempts to kiss her over Hortensia’s body, he receives “un formidable pinchazo” (30). This little prick points to an desire in María to emasculate Horacio and recalls her threat to cut his eyebrows, a gesture whose castrating overtones become apparent if one considers the metaphoric relation, identified by Freud, between the lurking male eye—what Nabokov has called that “ever alert periscope of [...] shameful vice” (264)—and the male member (Freud 140). Francisco Lasarte makes this connection in his discussion of Hernández’s “El acomodador,” a story about a voyeur who uses his magically endowed capacity to see in the dark to spy on women in their nightdresses, but it is also apparent in *Las Hortensias*, in which stealing a pair of woman’s panties is used as a metaphor for doll gazing, panties with which the voyeur may penetrate a woman’s most private realm and which lend themselves to repeated violations: “cuando miro una escena me parece que descubro un recuerdo que ha tenido una mujer en un momento importante de su vida [...] me quedó con ese recuerdo como si le robara una prenda íntima; con ella imagino y deduzco muchas cosas y [...] al revisarla tengo la impresión de violar algo de sagrado” (37-8).

Finger penetration as sexual metaphor is further developed when Horacio asks

Facundo to make Hortensia softer, which would result, the doll-maker explains, in leaving her body so malleable that plunging a finger into it would leave a lasting hole (23)—exactly what Horacio desires. The theme of the vicissitudes of male sexuality is also suggested by the multiplication of phallic metaphors in the text: manservant Alex's pointy beard; the lighthouse into which an outcast flees after sex with a sailor; the knife with which, after cocking it cowboy-style like a gun, Horacio tickles the underarms of a young woman; the projectile-shaped pen—"una estilográfica en forma de submarino" (53)—used to sign a contract finalizing the acquisition of a sex doll. And Horacio himself, whose progressive stiffening, whose "fijeza de muñeco," resembles a kind of generalized priapism, as if his penis were punishing him for being excessively stimulated. Just as Horacio's erection escapes the genital zone to colonize his entire body, so too does his desire slip out of his private residence and into the surrounding society, perhaps even seeping into the actual world, into the desire of (some) readers.

### *E Pluribus Unum*

If Lacan follows Jakobson in viewing metaphor as determinant for poetry, he also follows the Russian linguist in expanding the definition of metaphor from a deliberate rhetorical device to one of the fundamental poles of language.<sup>11</sup> Metaphor concerns language's substitutive axis or "vertical dependencies" and involves the substitution of one signifier for another. Metaphoric substitution is an operation in which a signifier moves into the place of the signified, a crossing of the Saussurian bar that symbolizes the signifier's repression. Understanding this operation makes unconscious desire accessible to analysis as the substitution of a present signifier for an absent one creates a "creative spark" that can cast light on the meaning of what has been repressed (2006 422).

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<sup>11</sup> Because the term itself comes from the Greek for *transfer*, of which the psychoanalytic process Freud designated as "transference" is a synonym, some critics have argued that metaphor is *the* fundamental operation in both language and life, since it effects a transfer in linguistic relations congruent with the transfer in human relations designated by Freud (Chaitlin 590).

Metaphor's creative spark is what sets desire in *Las Hortensias* in motion, igniting its textual dynamics by substituting a single thing—the Hortensia doll—for a number of different ones—María's dead sister and imaginary daughter, Horacio's absent mother and jilted wife—all of which sink under the bar, a repression which transforms them into sub-textual phantoms, occult figures whose presence, like signifiers, is felt through their absence, an inaccessible presence, yet one that exerts its effects nonetheless. As the *modus operandi* (with metonymy) of the signifying chain, metaphoric substitutions allow Hernández to use the chain "to signify *something altogether different* from what it says" (Lacan's italics 2006 420-21), to suggest sub-textual or veiled meanings of which his characters are not consciously aware, but whose affective contents—María's guilt at not producing a child, the shame generated by Horacio's violent, necrophilic and incestuous desires—are implicit and may nevertheless be unveiled, brought to light. As Brooks writes, this sort of indirect suggestion—(un)veiling in Lacan's Heideggerian terminology—is an essential property of narrative, condemned as it is "to saying other than what it would mean, spinning out its movement toward a meaning that would be the end of its movement" (56).

Lacan claims his understanding of metaphor "correspond[s] exactly" to Freud's understanding of condensation, an unconscious mechanism wherein large units of meaning are condensed into smaller ones by making individual mental representations signify more than one thing, with one object thus representing a multiplicity of associated affects. In Lacanian terms, condensation consists of "the superimposed structure of signifiers in which metaphor finds its field" (2006 425).

Metaphor also finds a fertile field in *Las Hortensias*, in which large units of meaning are condensed into a unique unit of being—the Hortensia doll—whose status as an empty and meaningless "thing"—as herself a metaphor for the signifier in Lacan's sense—makes her the ideal structure for the vertical superimposition of multiple meanings or identities, or, in the terminology of rhetoric, the ideal vehicle for a

multiplicity of tenors. As a single unit in which various meanings are condensed, Hortensia's metaphoric structure, what Fombona calls her "vampirismo semiótico" (29), functions—to use another metaphor—much like a chord, which, as music's vertical axis, condenses in a single sound multiple musical meanings or notes. Each note of a chord brings with it an associated affect (timbre), affects which combine to create consonance or dissonance. (In *Las Hortensias* these are underlain by the ominous pedal note of machinery noise, which infiltrates the black house from an adjacent factory, uncannily punctuating the narrative at regular, rhythmic intervals.)<sup>12</sup>

*Las Hortensias* can be read as a gradual transition from consonance to dissonance, as a modulation from a major key—a period of domestic harmony in which the bright timbres associated with Hortensia's identities as metaphoric daughter and wife serve to hold María and Horacio's marriage together—to a minor key—a period of *Sturm und Drang* in which the dark timbre of the doll's identity as sex slave results in the destruction of the couple's marriage and their cherished doll. The close readings that follow will trace this movement by discussing desire as it is channeled through three metaphoric operations: the substitution of Hortensia for María's sister and daughter, and the substitution of Hortensia for Horacio's wife or mistress.

### *Metaphors We Love By*

Of multiple female identities metaphorically condensed into the Hortensia doll, that of sister is perhaps the most peripheral. When María surprises Horacio by having Hortensia appear suspended in a tree, she attracts the attention of her neighbours, who begin to congregate behind the black house's garden, peering like "suspicious fruits" through the foliage. María hears one shout to the others: "¡Apúrense, que apareció la difunta en un árbol!" (39). The people of the vicinity are drawn to the spectacle, but they

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<sup>12</sup> It's worth noting that Hernández thought of himself as musician before writer. He started his career as a concert pianist and composer and continued performing throughout his life. It is thus not surprising that critics such as Italo Calvino and Prieto have pointed out the musical properties of his narrative and the lyrical chromaticism of his language.

also gather to confirm a legend—one of the narrative’s many micro or embedded narratives—according to which the couple had allowed María’s sister to die so that they could claim her inheritance.<sup>13</sup> Burdened with guilt, they brought Hortensia into their lives as a way of (un)veiling their sin; as an effigy of the dead sister, the doll functions as an unconscious reminder of the couple’s crime. It also occurs to Horacio that Hortensia metaphorically stands in for María’s sister: finding María and Hortensia seated with a book in front of them, Horacio “tuvo la impresión de que María enseñaba a leer a una hermana” (19-20). María is not indifferent to the neighbours’ legend. When she and Horacio try to patch things up following their split, knowledge of the legend intensifies her guilt, not for letting her sister die, but for killing her daughter: “recordó la leyenda de los vecinos; y al pensar que realmente ella había matado a Hortensia, se puso a llorar” (77).

If Hortensia functions peripherally as a metaphoric substitution for María’s dead sister, more central to the narrative is her function as a metaphoric substitution for María’s unborn daughter. In the months following Hortensia’s arrival at the black house, Horacio notes “algo inesperado” in María’s interactions with the doll, that she seems to be occasioning curious infantile regressions in his wife: “María cantaba mientras vestía a Hortensia; y parecía una niña entretenida con una muñeca” (19-20). Intrigued by this development, Horacio remarks to his wife how reassuring it must be to share secrets with someone as tightlipped as Hortensia. María, taken aback, storms off, leaving Hortensia “como si hubiera sido una amiga que guardaba una discreción delicada” (20). The truth behind María’s defensive reaction will soon be unveiled: she has involved the doll in a most delicate of discretions, a matter touching the deepest insecurities of a woman unable to bear children. María is acting out a desire fantasy in which Hortensia plays the role of darling daughter, a metaphoric substitute for her absent daughter, the daughter that never was, the daughter whose being persists through non-being.

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<sup>13</sup> *Las Hortensias*’ many micronarratives will be discussed at greater length in chapter seven.

(María's later discovery of the truth about Horacio's adultery does nothing to snuff out the spark igniting her maternal desire, which simply sets on a new object: a cat, which comes to function as her Hortensia surrogate, a metaphor of a metaphor, a stand-in for an already absent presence.)

Horacio is perfectly willing to play doting dad in María's fantasy, partly because it shields him from suspicions regarding his own less innocent desires, and partly because it enriches them by making them more transgressive: not only does Horacio maintain relations with a doll metaphorically standing in for his wife, but also one which stands in for his unborn daughter, the *souçon* of incest serving to heighten the titillation. Horacio and María play out the illusion of happy family life lightheartedly. However, when María dresses Hortensia in a silk nightgown before bringing her into the couple's bed, the incest subtext is unveiled a little more, as the reader wonders whether not only father but mother as well may be perhaps a little too attached to darling daughter.

When the couple throws a party to celebrate their "daughter's" second birthday, Horacio delights his guests by presenting Hortensia on a tricycle, receiving their cheers with a touching gesture of paternal tenderness: "mientras recibía los aplausos y las aclamaciones, acariciaba, con una mano, el cabello de Hortensia" (36). That one of the tricycle's wheels falls off shortly thereafter suggests that this family fugue in three voices (one of which, by necessity, is mute) is about to become a family feud and considerably less harmonious.

Whereas Horacio gets comedic mileage out of playing proud parent, for María such role playing is not simply a matter of fun and games. When Horacio sends the doll back to Facundo's studio to be re-fabricated for warmth and flexibility, María becomes as frantic as a mother whose only child has been sent off to hospital for a dangerous operation. Horacio tries to calm her by putting things into perspective—"querida, no hay que perder el sentido de la realidad. Hortensia era, simplemente, una muñeca"—which



only makes it worse—“¡Era! Quiere decir que ya la das por muerta!” María is far from simply playing with dolls; she has developed a privileged relationship with an object whose absence represents the loss of her most trusted confidant, and, crucially, the tie that binds her marriage: “ella era más mía que tuya. Yo la vestía y le decía cosas que no le puedo decir a nadie [...] Ella nos unía más de lo que tú puedes suponer” (25).

When the refitted Hortensia returns home, María is ill-tempered with a waterlogged doll now much heavier and more difficult to dress than before. This prompts Horacio to speculate on the complexity of their relationship, on “los extraños matices de enemistad que había visto entre mujeres verdaderamente amigas y que no podían pasarse la una sin la otra [...] recordó que eso ocurre muy a menudo entre madre e hija” (32). Until now, the truth about María’s relationship with the doll has been only indirectly acknowledged. Full disclosure will come during Hortensia’s second absence, following her stabbing. This time it is Horacio who is nervous, not because he misses the doll, but because he fears the truth of his crime—that “él no sólo tenía por Hortensia el cariño de un padre, sino que quería hacer de ella una amante” (44)—may soon be unveiled. María innocently tries to console her husband, but, in a moment of dramatic irony, mortifies him instead: “Horacio, tú no me podrás engañar nunca; yo sé lo que te pasa [...]. Estás así por Hortensia” (page). Horacio, foreshadowing future madness by opening “ojos de loco,” is mortified because he believes that María has uncovered his secret desire, when in fact she is about to unveil her own: “Sí [...] querido [...] ella es como hija nuestra” (42).

If María and Horacio collaborate in projecting onto Hortensia the identity of daughter, they also collaborate in projecting another identity onto her: that of wife, or more specifically, that of María, making the doll function as a metaphoric unit, a kind of “vertical dependency” or condensation in which the three primary female identities—sister, daughter, wife—are simultaneously superimposed. María unconsciously encourages her husband’s fetishistic desire for a doll fashioned in her likeness, dressed

her clothes and scented in her perfumes. Horacio first kisses Hortensia at María's behest. María repeatedly invites Hortensia into the matrimonial bed; in one scene, Horacio wakes up and touches his wife's arm, only to find it cold. Horacio freezes in terror, believing his wife to have expired in her sleep. María then appears at the door, at which point Horacio realizes that "había tocado a Hortensia y que era María quien, mientras dormía, la había puesto a su lado" (24). Once Hortensia is refitted with hot-water tubing, María uses her for warmth: "puso el agua caliente a Hortensia, la vistió con un camisón de seda y la acostó con ellos como si fuera un porrón" (33). Horacio is also provided with Hortensia's company during his naps "para que él durmiera confortablemente la siesta" (49).

María is unaware that her anthropomorphic hot-water bottle has come to function as more than just a bedwarmer for her husband, even though she herself has created the conditions that make this virtually impossible not to occur. María realizes that to get through to a doll-distracted husband she must repress her own desire and objectify herself as a doll. This is evidenced when she has Hortensia appear atop a fig tree; Horacio kissed María for the first time as they were about to fall from a fig tree—they literally fell in love. It is also apparent in a surprise in which she has Hortensia fall into Horacio's arms as he opens the door. In both cases, María is trying to spark, through the logic of metaphor, reminiscence in her husband of a now absent desire, of the desire they once shared.<sup>14</sup>

If María unwittingly urges Horacio to become physically intimate with her metaphoric substitute, it is because doing so guarantees her a central position in his sexual orbit; if she can no longer compete with his dolls in capturing his attention, she may at least be assured of her continuing sexual attractiveness to him. Her attitude changes dramatically, however, when she discovers Hortensia's vaginoplasty, which

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<sup>14</sup> These dynamics will be discussed in terms of René Girard's notion of mimetic and triangular desire in chapter six.

drives her to violently stab her with a kitchen knife. She then plots revenge after reading a newspaper article denouncing Facundo's plans to industrially manufacture sex dolls modelled and named after Hortensia—and by extension herself—metaphoric female substitutes capable of providing unlovely men with the “amor silencioso, sin riñas, sin respuestas agobiantes, sin comadronas” for which they so yearn (69). Her plans are soon foiled, however, when María—one of the couple's twin servants—informs her that Horacio's latest doll, a “divine blonde,” looks nothing like her nor wears her clothes. María is devastated, not by the fact that she has been eclipsed in Horacio's desire by another doll, but by the fact that the doll no longer functions as her metaphoric substitute, but rather her metonymic displacement.

If María's desire drives her to use the doll both as a metaphoric proxy for her unborn daughter and as her own proxy in an attempt to vicariously re-seduce her husband, in Horacio's desire Hortensia initially functions as a supplement to María before gradually moving into her place and eclipsing her entirely as her metaphoric substitute. Horacio becomes aware of such dynamics during Hortensia's first absence, when he discovers how uneasy he is being alone with his wife. In his eyes, María's very essence has become inextricable with that of the doll: “María podía ser, como antes, una mujer sin muñeca; pero ahora él no podía admitir la idea de María sin Hortensia” (26); their identities become so entwined that Hortensia is present even in her absence: “miró varias veces a María en silencio y por fin creyó encontrar en ella la idea de Hortensia” (26). Because they have become virtually indistinguishable, the order of María's many surprises with the doll is easily inverted: “algunas veces tropezaba en Hortensia para caer en María” (27). These reversals foreshadow the metaphoric counter-substitutions which close the novella, in which María surprises Horacio by impersonating his dolls and in doing so precipitates his insanity.

Horacio realizes that Hortensia, besides being María's alternative mode of being, is also her embellishment, her finishing touch: “Hortensia no sólo era una manera de

ser de María sino que era su rasgo más encantador” (27). Hortensia adds to María in a way that makes her more attractive, like a painter whose most beautiful creation is a flattering self-portrait: “descontarle Hortensia a María era como descontarle el arte a un artista” (27). An artist who produces no artwork, however, is no artist at all, and for Horacio, María *sans* Hortensia is similarly meaningless: “cuando él fue a buscar a María y se encontró simplemente con María, ella le había parecido de una insignificancia inquietante” (27). Hortensia makes María interesting, allowing her to develop an otherwise colorless personality: “si María no tocaba el piano—como la amante de Facundo—en cambio tenía a Hortensia y por medio de ella desarrollaba su personalidad de una manera original” (27).

Horacio soon comes to the realization that his admiration for dolls is no longer “purely artistic” and that he has indeed fallen in love with Hortensia. Confusing Hortensia with María no longer functions to make the latter more appealing and when Horacio asks himself what it is about Hortensia that makes her so seductive, he realizes that it is no longer her status as a supplement, as a sexy accessory item to his wife: “él había sido tan tonto como para creer que Hortensia era un adorno para María, cuando en realidad las dos trataban de adornarse mutuamente” (30-31). This is a key moment in the evolution of Horacio’s desire; it signals the growing independence of artwork from artist, of copy from prototype, and announces the properly metaphoric process through which Hortensia crosses the bar and eclipses María, a process whose logic can be seen as analogous to that of the signifier, which eclipses or represses the signified, which, writes Bowie, “has an active, colonizing power over the signified” (65). The signifier “‘anticipates’ the signified, ‘encroaches upon it’ and ‘enters into it’” (65), much like Hortensia, who anticipates, encroaches upon and ends up entering into María, whose subversion, her *aphansis*, is no less significant to the narrative than Horacio’s.

María disappears off Horacio’s radar because thoughts of statuesque beauties make him unable to be mentally present to an ordinary wife, with her real-life demands

and defects. María is just too volatile to offer Horacio the “amor silencioso” he craves. Hortensia, on the other hand, is the ultimate low-maintenance lover: her only prerequisites are that she be dressed (so that she can then be undressed) and filled with water, tasks easily delegated to the servant twins. Hortensia eclipses María in Horacio’s desire because she represents a perfect metaphorical version of her: noiseless, dependable, and easily serviced. Hortensia is Horacio’s dream-wife: she looks like María, but drives like a Toyota. Or better, a Mercedes, whose elegance she shares as a representative, in Horacio’s fantasies, of a noble family (31). If she is Horacio’s dream-wife, she is also, as Fombona writes, the dream-woman of patriarchy, functioning like “las perlas de Donna Reed en la televisión americana de los años cincuenta: la imagen de la mujer que permanece incólume mientras la casa, emblema de lo doméstico, funciona ordenadamente” (34).

Hortensia’s triumph signals a kind of literary intimation of what Baudrillard refers to as the death of metaphysics, the liquidation of signifieds under the reign of the signifier, a reign in which simulacra (images or copies) subvert and indeed create referentials (that which they ostensibly represent). Like the Borgesian territory that no longer precedes the map but is rather engendered by it, María ceases to function as tenor or model in the rhetorical workings of Horacio’s desire and will herself be reconstituted in the image of her vehicle or second order simulacra. If by reappearing as a doll María submits to the latter, making her own reality coincide with its simulated models, Horacio generates models of a feminine real without reality, *an Other deprived of its Otherness*, an idealized and “hyperreal” (Baudrillard 219) object of desire reproduced from the memory of real women, but without their malignant properties and inevitable human frailties.

In *Las Hortensias*, as in Baudrillard’s simulation theory, “it is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication,” but rather of metaphorically substituting signifiers of the real for the real itself, an operation which deters “every real process by its

operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes” (219). Horacio’s desire furnishes him with an abundance of such operational doubles, metastable sex machines offering welcome relief from reality’s vicissitudes through the chimera of a love “sin riñas, sin respuestas agobiantes.” Some of these automata even come embedded in ready-made fantasy scenes: Horacio’s showcases—erotic Disneylands, “deterrence machine[s] set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real” (220).<sup>15</sup>



As we saw in the first section of this chapter, many but not all the rhetorical metaphors used by the narrator or characters have to do with being or sex. For instance, Horacio uses a deliberate A is B metaphor to describe María: he calls her his “darling olive” and claims that her greenish hue comes from rubbing her skin with olives (8). If his dolls are, as suggested above, hyperreal sex machines offering themselves for deflowerment, María is a flower, an attractive but delicate ornamental. To extend this horticultural metaphor further, it could be said that *Las Hortensias* addresses its readers as gardeners, asking them whether the cultivation of demanding ornamentals is really worth the effort, especially since lifelike synthetic simulacra are so readily available. For Horacio it is not, which is why Hortensia, as much of this chapter has tried to show, comes to function for him as a metaphoric substitute, a plastic flower with the added freshness of sharing María’s middle name, a signifier synonymous with hydrangea, a shrub whose name comes from the Greek meaning water (*hudro*) and vessel (*ageion*). Hortensia’s vessels—her tubing—require repeated waterings, but this inconvenience is

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<sup>15</sup> Horacio is not the only figure to become ossified following a surfeit of escapist doll playing; as Baudrillard notes, Disneyland’s “deep-frozen infantile world happens to have been conceived and realized by a man who is himself cryogenized: Walt Disney, who awaits his resurrection at minus 180 degrees centigrade” (219).

minor given her unwilting and freely given beauty. Does beauty thus given ultimately satisfy desire? In Horacio's case, the answer is unambiguously no. But *Las Hortensias* leaves Horacio's desire not just unsatisfied but crushed. For it is not desire's metaphoric substitutions and condensations themselves that do him in, but rather his attempt to outwit the reality of absence and non-being to which these operations give rise, and which are as much a part of desire's meaning as its promise of presence and being. It is to such negations—and their intimacies with metaphor—that we will now turn.

Desire is present whenever something flows and runs, carrying along with it interested subjects [...] towards lethal destinations.  
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

## Chapter Four: Metaphor's Lethal Blows

During his pre-dinner nap, an unnamed man—the narrator waits eight pages before disclosing Horacio's name, leaving that task, as it were, to Horacio himself—dreams of a small lamp casting light on an empty table around which stand a group of men, one of whom is lecturing about blood circulation, explaining: “Es necesario que la marcha de la sangre cambie de mano; en vez de ir por las arterias y venir por las venas, debe ir por las venas y venir por las arterias” (8). The lit table uncannily foreshadows the one on which María, “como si fuera a operar, y [con] puñaladas cortas y seguidas” (51?), will perform her surgery on Hortensia, causing the doll to bleed fine jets of water and thus forcing a change of direction—a “cambio de mano”—in her hydraulics, which now flow outward fountain-like instead of inward. Horacio's dream announces the theme of circulation—of the waters that will flow in and out of Hortensia's tubing, of desire, which will slip from doll to doll, and perhaps of the signifier itself, whose continuous displacement through the text's arteries and veins—its signifying chains—cannot be halted without the text itself coming to a halt. But it also announces the theme of reversal, a change in direction that will find expression in Horacio's fetishistic desire, which instead of flowing toward live objects (people), flows towards dead ones (dolls).

There is one flow, however, whose movement will not be inverted, for which a change in direction is ontologically impossible—the flow of life towards death. Horacio's existential dread before his impending doom, the fear and trembling aroused by the absolute certainty that his being—that *all* being—is *Todesein*, what Heidegger called being-unto-death, compels him to deny this ineluctable truth by fleeing into non-being, into the Hortensia doll, whose presence, like that of the invisible body on the dream table, subsists through signifying absence, through its status as a symbol of lack, as a



monument to death. This chapter will examine the role of death in *Las Hortensias*, for death casts its shadow over the whole text, analysis of which may unveil one of its key insights: that death partakes in sustained intercourse, not only with metaphor, but with desire itself. The chapter will suggest that a macabre setting and the ubiquity of blackness tropes flag death as one of the text's key elements, before mentioning one of its paradoxes: that it is Horacio's very aversion to death that pushes him deeper into its embrace. This paradox will be articulated in light of Lacan's view of metaphor as an operation that generates and sustains desire by vivifying dead love objects, but at the cost of murdering the real. For Lacan, metaphoric operations are activated by patriarchal authority, which humanizes *Ur* desire—the primordial, incestuous desire for the mother—by repressing it, by driving it into the unconscious. The chapter will close by arguing that if Horacio's desire is insufficiently humanized in Lacan's sense, so is Hernández's prose, whose delinquency makes his novella in some sense less conservative than Lacan's patriarchal theory.

### *Death tropes*

The first line of *Las Hortensias* tells of machinery noises from a nearby factory circulating among the vegetation of a private garden. Connected to this garden is a darkly painted house. The action begins *in medias res* as a tall man, the owner of the house, shields his eyes from the bright light of his foyer after coming in from an autumn evening. Before exchanging words with his curiously statue-like wife, he retreats to the darkness of his bedroom, a twilight zone separating “las preocupaciones del día de los placeres de la noche” (8). The physical and temporal darkness of this opening *mise en scène* generates a morbid atmosphere that will persist throughout the novella, most notably through the repeated use of blackness tropes, which, like motifs such as machinery noise and Horacio's liberally consumed “vino de Francia,” punctuate the text at regular intervals, giving its prose a certain rhythmic quality, a vaguely mechanized or

automatic character that subtends a plot centred on blurring the boundaries between desire for life and desire for death.

Blackness tropes are everywhere. Drops of wine are described as “lágrimas negras” (10) and leave black stains (24); Horacio shares his black house with a black cat, a piano he calls “su caja negra” (18), and a wife and doll who wear black clothes; his nocturnal pleasures include ravishing a doll in a black veil, something which he will later wear himself, and attempting to ravish another fetishized for her black skin. This constant recurrence of the colour black functions to create the text’s uncanny effects, compulsively repeating in veiled or disguised form—as metaphor—what in Lacanian terms might be called one of its master signifiers, i.e. those signifiers which, through their insistence, assume a kind of structural role in the closed circuit of the text, signifiers whose gravitational force sucks all others into its orbit. If *Las Hortensias* presents unusual concentrations of metaphor and metonymy, language and desire’s master tropes, it also presents desire and desire’s dialectical or unconscious other—death—as master signifiers of both text and perhaps life itself.

### *Dol(l)ing out Death*

When Horacio’s contemplation of his showcase dolls is interrupted by the sound of a slamming door, he leaves to investigate. When he opens the door, another doll falls into his arms. This is Hortensia’s dramatic first appearance in the narrative and one that quickly establishes her kinship with death. For Horacio interprets the incident as an omen that María will soon die; as Hortensia falls towards him he imagines her saying “Abrázame porque María morirá” (18). Although María, who had propped the doll against the other side of the door as a joke, shows no signs of illness, Horacio is so terrified by the thought of her dying that he has Hortensia fabricated as her metaphoric substitute as a “consolation” in his widowhood.

But this is only the ostensible reason. Horacio's real interest is not the persistence of his wife's soul but his own; he is concerned with her health only insofar as she may make his own rendezvous with the Grim Reaper more bearable. In Horacio's mind, the bell tolls for him and not for his wife; "HORACIO is the keeper of HOURS," Graziano writes, "the one with the minutos a toda hora, the one whose clock is ticking" (115). Horacio's fear of María's mortality thus disguises a narcissistic obsession with his own, an obsession which, in a curious inversion of the Narcissus myth, reveals itself not in love for his own image, but in aversion to it. Horacio has all the mirrors of the black house covered because he sees in his reflection, particularly in that of his waxlike skin, confirmation of his own moribundity. And this reflection is associated, unsurprisingly, with more "dead" dolls representing more scenes of death: "El color oscuro de su cara le hacía pensar en unos muñecos de cera que había visto en un museo la tarde que asesinaron a un comerciante [...] muñecos que representaban cuerpos asesinados y el color de la sangre en la cera le fue tan desagradable como si a él le hubiera sido posible ver, después de muerto, las puñaladas que lo habían matado" (55). Horacio's mirror phobia is rooted in the need to preempt the horrifying realization that his deathly pallor is not limited to his face but seems to be spreading: "Cruzó [...] frente al espejo del tocador; pero [...] se dio cuenta que ahora la piel de sus manos tenía también color de cera" (55).

Horacio finds relief in the thought of María vivifying Hortensia by handing her soul, but is literally mortified by an unexpected consequence of this metaphoric transfer: the doll seems to be doling out some of her deathliness to him, a deathliness which manifests itself in his frequent cold-shivers, paleness and mental and physical exhaustion; as the narrative progresses, Horacio becomes increasingly half-dead and ghostlike, prowling the black house's "silencio somnoliento" (11) "como un sonámbulo" (62), like one of his dolls, one among many "seres hipnotizados" (22).

### *Of Murder and Metaphor*

Horacio flees into his dolls because their inert anthropomorphic bodies allow him to neutralize his death dread by objectifying it. Dolls are ideal receptacles for condensing macabre projections, perfect for the role of playing dead humans in his inner theatre, because as lifeless objects they are already, so to speak, dead. But dolls materialize death in another more fundamental way: they metaphorically substitute themselves for absent or dead objects—María's murdered sister or unborn child, Horacio's absent wife or dead mother—for objects whose lack of being enlists them among the ghosts of lives past or indeed of lives never lived at all. By signifying nonbeing and death, the dolls ignite desire through metaphor's "creative spark," a spark whose illumination turns their absence into presence, whose ignition vivifies what is inalterably dead. Horacio senses this when he tries to describe what he feels when gazing at a scene, whose appeal lies for him in satisfaction gained from extracting something living (a memory) from something dead (a female cadaver): "Cuando miro una escena me parece que descubro un recuerdo [...] que ha quedado en una persona muerta; yo tengo la ilusión de extraerlo de un cadáver; y hasta espero que el recuerdo se mueva un poco" (37-8).

### *Murdering Das Ding*

The morbid logic of the Hortensia doll would thus seem analogous with the morbid logic of Lacan's signifier, for both metaphorically stand in for the objects they signify, substituting themselves for the real object, the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*, the unutterable thing, which in *Las Hortensias* would seem to beat around the bush of shame, the wordless shame of a woman for her barren womb, or of a man whose desire leads him back to the primordial womb. Both sex doll and signifier presuppose the absence or death of the things they signify: as "the symbol of but an absence," Lacan writes, "the signifier [...] materializes the instance of death" (2006 16). Both sex doll and signifier deploy themselves in a symbolic matrix, one in which "nothing exists except on a

supposed background of absence. Nothing exists except in so far as it does not exist” (2006 392). Just as María’s cat will stand in for her “murdered” doll which in turn stands in for her *unborn* child—which, according to Lacanian theory, would stand in for her absent phallus—just as one mute corpselike doll will replace another in Horacio’s frenzied serial monogamy, the absence inhering in one signifier can only be substituted by another signifier, equally marked by absence. As Bowie writes of the symbolic order, but which also rings true for Hernández’s text, deathliness is “written into [it] and present at all its functions” (87).

For Lacan, the death in question is that of the real, which, in his Heideggerian terminology, “ex-sisted” before being dissected at the signifier’s in-sistence. As Bruce Fink explains, the symbolic “cuts into the smooth façade of the real, creating divisions, gaps, and distinguishable entities and laying the real to rest, that is, drawing or sucking it into the symbols used to describe it, and thereby annihilating it” (24). In this light, Hortensia’s role as substitute daughter, for example, may be seen as that which allows María to lay the reality of her childlessness to rest; in her function as metaphor, as a signifying substitution, Hortensia cuts into this empty space, obliterating it at the very moment that she symbolizes it. Hortensia-as-daughter thus vivifies as she mortifies, bringing an unborn child into existence, making it capable of being talked about, but at the cost of liquidating its being, in other words, of liquidating the traumatic reality of its absence.

For Lacan, words “kill” the things they symbolize; “the being of language,” he writes, “is the nonbeing of objects” (2006 524), which is why it is no accident that the tomb appeared as the “first symbol” in human history (2006 262-3). As a symbol, the Hortensia doll’s various condensed beings or identities presuppose the nonbeing of the objects she symbolizes, which is perhaps why death figures are ubiquitous in *Las Hortensias’* Stygian world, a world in which characters shield their eyes from the light and in which the coffin-like black house, a house whose upper chambers “daban la

impresión de que tendrían alejada una muerte que llegaría del cielo” (62), a house which houses other coffins—the wardrobe in which Hortensia appears wearing Horacio’s clothes (18), or Horacio’s grand piano, described as “un gran ataúd” whose silence “velaba a un músico que había muerto hacía poco tiempo” (62). This figurative casket becomes a literal one when María puts Hortensia’s mangled body inside the piano as a “surprise” for Horacio, who is met by “la visión del pelo de ella enredado en las cuerdas del instrumento y la cara achatada por el peso de la tapa (63), a gruesome vision the shock of which freezes him as if someone had threatened him with a revolver (62). Horacio unwittingly prognosticates his own fate when expressing his reaction to this latest of María’s surprises, the last of which will push him into insanity’s lethal hold: “Esa mujer me va a matar a sorpresas” (63).

#### *Dead Desire and Metaphoric Malfunction*

For Lacan, desire emerges from the signifier’s assassinations: “the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire” (2006 262). Desire, death and the signifier are thus coextensive, the first borrowing “its subtle body from death as it is actualized in the signifying sequence” (2006 525). This sequence, as we have seen, is ignited by metaphor, whose substitutions vivify “dead desire” by bringing to the present something absent, by calling forth repressed or sub-textual desires, desires that dare not speak their name but as symptoms, i.e. in veiled and displaced form. The insistence of dead desire is powerfully alive within the signifying chains of Hernández’s narrative, and nowhere more so than when Horacio contemplates sexual relations with his mother-in-law: “No sería muy grato,” he asks himself, “que yo entrara en amores con el espíritu de mi suegra en el cuerpo de Hortensia” (33). Horacio’s dead desire—the primordial taboo, the unconscious desire for the mother—is made acceptable by resurfacing in the present through metaphor, a metaphor whose repressed signifier (the mother) is thinly

veiled but doubly displaced: not only is the forbidden incestuous desire rerouted onto a doll, but onto a doll inhabited by the spirit, not of his own, but of his wife's mother. The uncanny similarity between present and absent signifier, between Hortensia-as-vehicle and the mother-as-tenor, makes these displacements possible: in describing her doll-like mother, María reports that she “tenía una tranquilidad pasmosa; era capaz de pasarse horas en una silla sin moverse y con los ojos en el vacío” (32).

Lacan transliterates Freud's Oedipus complex into a “paternal metaphor” in which one signifier (the Name-of-the-Father) substitutes for another (the Desire of the Mother) (2006 465). The homophony of the former term emphasizes the father figure's role as both proscriber of incest (*le non du père*) and instigator of the symbolic (*le nom du père*), “the moment at which desire is humanized [being] also that at which the child is born into language” (2006 262). The father's law thus slips into the very nature of language itself and in doing so activates the metaphorical process as a whole. Horacio's insatiable lust for dolls, for surrogate dead females over which hovers an aura of maternal presence, suggests that perhaps the intervention of the paternal metaphor, which would have protected him against total intersection with his dolls, with the reified female (m)Other, was somehow interrupted or short-circuited, something which Horacio himself hints at when describing his father as a “bandido” having abandoned his son “antes que él fuera grande y se descubriera el fraude” (45).

By the same token, an interrupted paternal metaphor may also underlie Horacio's eccentric verbal utterances, the idiosyncratic way in which he inhabits the symbolic; “un borracho que no pudiera coordinar las sílabas” (20), Horacio addresses his wife as an olive (9) and includes among his favorite sounds those made by walking on “un piso de madera donde haya azúcar derramada” (38). Bizarceries of this sort signal a rebellious quality in Hernández's writing, which, as Prieto suggests, challenges the father figure of literary correctness and its campaign against textual unseemliness by proscribing the *noms* and *nons* of literary decorum: Hernández, he writes, “promueve el cultivo

deliberado de una ‘mala’ escritura,” “un estudioso ‘desaliño’ gramatical [y] un estilo ligeramente ‘negligente” (334). “Bad writing” may allow Hernández to better convey the continuity of desire, which, as Bowie writes, “can be preserved in writing only by driving the propositional structure of the sentence into a state of perpetual delinquency” (175).

The rebellious attitude evoked by Prieto may make Hernández more radical than Lacan, for whom submission to the father’s law stands as a precondition for the subject’s entry into the symbolic order, and hence into sanity itself, a position whose implicit conservatism Jameson has pointed out (373).<sup>16</sup> Though the difference between submitting to a patriarchal metaphor and submitting to patriarchy itself may be apparent to Lacanian feminists such as Jacqueline Rose or Juliet Mitchell, it is difficult to see how a theory that transcendentalizes the phallus can be anything but phallogocentric and patriarchal, despite its author’s repeated claim that the primordial signifier has nothing to do with the biological organ it primarily signifies. Hernández’s novella may thus be less conservative in its implications than Lacanian theory, but this may only be a matter of degree. For one thing, it is no less patriarchal, for if it advances a theory in which lack, absence and non-being are essential properties of desire, it also locates these properties in women (or more precisely, in their metaphoric substitutes), much like Lacan, and psychoanalysis generally, make women the site of castration, the prototype for all lack and absence in human life. In another sense, the novella has a conservative or carceral function in that it lays down scenarios of desire that work to suggest that if fulfilment is not the province of desire, *this is even more the case* in expressions that are socially frowned upon. Though I wouldn’t go as far as Prieto, for whom *Las Hortensias* enacts a kind of authoritarian imposition of order onto chaos, “una tarea higiénica, policial [que] cumpliría burguesamente con la función de detener ‘eso’—la fluidez [...] del deseo” (295), it does seem to me that the story contributes to the

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that more critics haven’t reinforced Derrida’s admonishment that too few read Lacan “in a problematizing and nondogmatic fashion,” that too few read him “otherwise than in an apologetic, orthodox and defensive manner” (1998: 60).



internalization of normative desire by showing the horrors befalling those who don't repress desire's non-normative manifestations, much like Judith Ressler's novel *Waiting for Mr. Goodbar* or Oliver Stones's film *The Doors*, both of which show the permissiveness of the 1960 and 1970s as a one-way ticket to personal destruction and, ultimately, death.

Craving is repetitive, it wallows in attachment and greed, obsessively indulging in this and that: craving for stimulation, craving for existence, craving for non-existence.  
Siddhartha Gautama (The Buddha), *Turning the Wheel of Dhamma*

## Chapter Five: Desire and Metonymy's Magic

When Horacio finds Hortensia's mutilated body after María's attack, the following words come to mind: "la cosa ya ha pasado" (52). Horacio is not shocked by "the thing," but accepts it passively, as if resigned to the inevitability of a wife as instinctively suspicious as María unveiling his adultery. Surprisingly, he neither laments the fact that Hortensia is now "dead" nor that María has packed her bags and fled. The doll's demise signals a new phase in the evolution of his fetish: with María now gone, Horacio's desire, having been ignited by the substitutive operations of metaphor, now slips along a kind of signifying chain, sliding from one sex doll to another in a frenzy of Don Juanism. If *Las Hortensias's* first half tells the story of the forces culminating in both Hortensia's destruction and the destruction of Horacio and María's marriage, its second half brings about a progressive intensification of fetishistic desire by telling the story of Horacio's serial liaisons with a succession of dolls. If in the former it is desire's metaphorical operations that tend to predominate, in the latter it is desire's metonymic displacements, as this chapter will suggest, that seem to take the upper hand. This is not to say that metonymy *replaces* metaphor, but rather that the novella is composed of two distinct narrative stages in which one of the two modes tends to overlap or overshadow—while continuing to interact with—the other.

This chapter will discuss the relationship between metonymy and desire, both in terms of metonymy's *rhetorical* prevalence in the narrative, i.e. as a deliberate figurative device, and in terms of its *structural* role as a mode of narration involving the chronological sequencing of situations in the plot, each of which revolves around desire for a new Hortensia doll distinct from, but in some sense metonymically contiguous to, her predecessors. In *Las Hortensias*, metonymy's effect lies in the interaction between

its rhetorical function—in which parts of the body are repeatedly used to evoke larger wholes—and its structural function—in which parts of the story (its distinct situations) stand in for or evoke a larger whole (the encompassing situation, the story itself). Intersecting these sections will be a discussion of the connection between metonymy and the psychoanalytic notion of displacement, a connection that can be seen as operating at both rhetorical and structural levels. Since metonymy and desire, particularly fetishistic desire, are inextricably linked in *Las Hortensias*, it seems productive to frame the discussions in light of Lacan's view of metonymy as an operation that, with metaphor, both systematizes language and channels the desire of subjects, as a master trope of both language and desire.

### *Parts and Wholes*

Lacan follows Jakobson in viewing metonymy as the characteristic rhetorical device of the novel. While *Las Hortensias*, as a short novel or novella, may not abound in metonymic detail to the same extent as, say, a Tolstoy novel does, it certainly makes repeated use of metonyms and synecdoches, which function to draw attention to fetishistic desire, a highly effective strategy given that the logic of fetishism—which involves substituting attributes or parts for larger totalities—is essentially metonymic. Fetishism reaches its culmination once Horacio starts to prefer the dismembered arms and legs of his dolls—fetishized parts of what are already fetishes—to physically intact dolls, but this development is preceded and prepared by less explicit instances in which body parts are consistently treated in a metonymic fashion.<sup>17</sup>

In one instance, Horacio alludes to his marriage by transposing its locus onto María's face, whose features metonymically register both its former happiness and impending doom. He examines this face “como si repasara los rincones de un lugar a

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<sup>17</sup> The fetishization of severed body parts will be examined in chapter seven in light of Lacan's notion of the fragmented body.

donde había ido todos los días durante una vida de felicidad” (42), imagining it as a serene, twilight landscape: “en una mejilla había un poco de luz dorada del fin de la tarde; y en un pedazo de la otra se extendía la sombra de la pequeña montaña que hacía su nariz” (44). There is a cinematic quality about Horacio’s zooming in on María’s face, about perceptual close-ups so close that the face itself fades out of focus and becomes a landscape in itself. One of his last kisses to his wife is rendered with characteristic lyricism: “parecía que el beso hubiera descendido en paracaídas sobre una planicie donde todavía existía la felicidad” (46). Horacio knows, however, that the placid plain will soon be bombed, that the truth of his adultery will soon be unveiled: “cuando María supiera todo [...] todos los lugares de la cara de ella serán destrozados” (44). He surveys the terrain, waiting for the bomb to detonate and war to be declared: “miraba los rincones de la cara de María seguro de que pronto serían enemigos” (49-50).

If Horacio’s eyes scan the Flanders Fields of María’s face like vigilant soldiers, they also perceive it, not as a *Gestalt*, as an organic whole, but as an assemblage of discrete parts—eyes, brow, cheeks, nose—whose details he studies with the curiosity and detached objectivity of a botanist studying natural phenomena. María is thus not a person, but a metonym for the natural order; if her fetishized face is an extension of the pampas, her eyes contain verdant jungles: “siempre me olvido de traer un lente,” he says to her from across the dinner table, “para ver cómo son las plantas que hay en el verde de estos ojos” (8). The first step in controlling Mother Nature consists in observing her carefully, preferably from a safe distance, which for Horacio means studying María’s face from behind a lens, opera spectacles being more practical than the botanist’s magnifying glass in discerning her vegetal qualities, in discovering whether “las sombras de [s]us ojeras son producidas por vegetaciones” (10).

María’s is not the only visual region to receive special attention in *Las Hortensias*: eyes belonging to the man Facundo nicknames “El tímido” are also

emphasized, a man whose desire, like Horacio's, is directed towards love objects of the passive, speechless, and anatomically correct variety. El tímido shares Horacio's lust for seeing, which the narrator signals by metonymically zooming in on his eyes: "traía unos ojos grandes embolsados en párpados que apenas podía levantar" (53). El tímido's prominent eyes betray a taste for voyeurism, while his gaze, which is so downcast he can scarcely look Facundo in the face, betrays the shame triggered by his fetishistic desire. For a man who avoids mirrors, Horacio meets his mirror image in this fellow fetishist, who, like himself, finds pleasure in seeing, but pain at being seen.

El tímido carries his eyes with him to the fetish dealer as if they were separate from his body, as if he could just as well have left them at home. The metonymic logic of fetishism thus extends into Hernández's prose, which cinematically zooms in on the visual organs, treating them as if they existed independently from the whole, as if their coalescence in the face were merely accidental. Synecdochical emphasis on attributes—on María's face, on El tímido's eyes, on the arms and legs of Horacio's dolls—has the effect of fragmenting the subjective totality, which disintegrates into discrete units; in *Las Hortensias*, wholes are *not* more than the sum of their parts, which makes them uncannily predisposed to falling apart.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, a story about fetishism can itself be turned into a fetish. By detaching *Las Hortensias* from its historical context and conditions of production, by treating it as a fascinating object in itself, one could say that much of the present thesis fetishizes it. One could even say that the thesis uncannily reenacts a displaced version of that which it is analyzing—a story about fetishism—much like an analyst in transference finds herself caught up in reenacting the life story of the person she is analyzing. Circumscribing the greater part of the discussion to the story itself may indeed reify it,

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<sup>18</sup> According to Melanie Klein, fetishistic preoccupation with body parts originates in the underdeveloped perceptual capacities of children, who relate to others not as whole subjects but as parts objects; it is only once the visual apparatus develops that subjects learn to perceive others as *Gestalts* rather than mere collections of disparate parts, a situation Hernández's narrator seems to be hinting at by repeatedly emphasizing the visual organs and various other body parts.

but this is in no way intended as an alternative to its social interpretation; it simply privileges one of a two-sided situation, the text's *Innenwelt* over its *Umwelt*.<sup>19</sup>

### *Foiling the Censor*

If Lacan follows Jakobson in viewing metonymy as determinant for the novel, he also follows him in expanding its definition from a simple rhetorical device to one of the fundamental poles of language. Metonymy is a mechanism which, with metaphor, determines the signifier's peregrinations; whereas metaphor concerns language's substitutive axis and vertical relations, metonymy concerns its combinatorial axis and "horizontal" relations, or ways in which signifiers are sequentially coordinated along the signifying chain (2006 421).

Lacan claims that this understanding of metonymy corresponds to Freud's understanding of displacement, an unconscious mechanism wherein the intensity of a disturbing affect linked to one mental representation is displaced onto another holding an associative connection to the original, the affective charge being repressed or veiled by its transfer from one object to another more socially acceptable one. In Lacanian terms, displacement consists of nothing more than "the transfer of signification that metonymy displays" (2006 425). Like metaphoric substitution, metonymic displacement lies at the heart of Horacio's fetishistic desire, allowing him to repress or veil guilt associated with sexual urges characterized by violence, necrophilia and incest by transferring them onto objects; through fetishization, Horacio is able to express his desire to sexually dominate women—to steal their virtue "como si le robara una prenda íntima," to force open "una rendija" (38)—without overwhelming his conscience. For Horacio, displacing sadistic desire onto objects passes through the censor of his superego, whereas the same involving real women would not.

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<sup>19</sup> The more social dimensions of desire in *Las Hortensias* will be touched on in chapter six. For a Marxist interpretation which situates the novella as a part within a larger whole, i.e. within the socio-historical context from which it arose, see Prieto pp. 232-4.

This becomes apparent once Hortensia is refitted for hydraulics and softness, for her warm and newly pliant body stirs up desires in Horacio to enact long-held sexual fantasies. When he decides to present her to party guests on a tricycle, Horacio fails to mention to María what provoked this idea, that he had seen a movie “en que un novio raptaba a su novia en un triciclo y que ese recuerdo lo impulsó a utilizar ese procedimiento con Hortensia” (35). Displacing desire from wife to doll provides Horacio with the opportunity to turn rape fantasies into reality, but to fully realize them, he needs more than just warmth and flexibility; he needs a doll who can accommodate him in every possible way. This is why he stages Hortensia’s “murder,” though what he really murders is the reality of María’s role as wife and lover.

If Horacio drops María as a third wheel to launch a *folie à deux* between himself and a fully serviceable new lover, his botanical voyeurism had already started to dehumanize María by reducing her to an object, but at least she remains an animate, biological object. Hortensia, by contrast, is inanimate and artificial, like the machinery noise with which, in moments of delusion, Horacio believes she communicates. Unlike Pygmalion, who prays to the Gods that life’s breath vivify his beloved Galetea, Horacio wishes for his synthetic creation only a sheen of naturalness, for were she to come alive and acquire feelings would disrupt the displacement, overwhelm his conscience and disqualify her for use as a sex toy; Horacio already has a live madonna in María, what he desires is an inanimate whore. Like Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, Horacio is “perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve, but it [is] Lilith he long[s] for” (Nabokov 20).

Desire’s metonymic displacement can also be seen operating at the micro level of Hernández’s prose. When Horacio is about to break into El tímido’s house and ravish his doll, the narrator describes the house’s door as “sucia como una vieja indolente” (74). The terms of this simile are startlingly dissimilar, but perhaps less so in light of the metonymic logic that underpins it, which suggests the displacement of an unwelcome affect (Horacio’s sense of dirtiness) onto an object (a dirty door), which is

then compared to a subject (a lazy old lady), whose only associative connection to the object lies in the fact that she too possesses an opening whose function is to accommodate pointy objects. Horacio finds inserting one such object (a key) into its receptacle (a keyhole) repulsive: “él revolvió con asco la llave en la cerradura” (74-5); by displacing repulsion from self to object, Horacio makes his own forthcoming insertions more acceptable to his censoring superego, displacement being, as Lacan writes, “the unconscious’s best means to foil censorship” (2006 425). The narrator’s uncanny simile defamiliarizes something as familiar as a door by identifying it with something radically dissimilar (a woman), a foregrounding which, like a dissonant chord at a scene of dramatic tension in a film, heightens the intensity of Horacio’s desire, while at the same time reiterating the crucial importance of metaphoric logic in a narrative which repeatedly stages the substitution (and counter-substitution) of the inanimate for the animate, of objects for subjects.

A kind of metonymic displacement also figures into Hernández’s use of third person narration, a strategy which distances the narrator from the sexually transgressive and morally unsettling desires it communicates.<sup>20</sup> Yet if this strategy distances the narrator, it does otherwise for the reader. Unlike in Hernández’s other novella *La casa inundada* (1969), in which a woman recounts episodes of emotional trauma to a detached first person narrator—the reader’s metaphoric surrogate—whose peripheral interventions frame the novella much like an analyst frames an analysand’s discourse in a therapeutic session, the effacement of *Las Hortensias*’ impersonal third person narrator tends to promote the reader’s identification with Horacio, whose desire is normalized as it fans out across the narrative milieu as a whole. As Francisco Lasarte writes, Hernández’s “manejo de una escritura oblicua y escurridiza [...] exige una lectura más activa, un proceso de naturalización que convierte al lector en un

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<sup>20</sup> As Graziano points out, third person narration also contributes to the destigmatization of Horacio’s desire: “The narrator’s nonchalant acceptance of the exceptional as commonplace serves to disseminate the protagonist’s peculiarities beyond his private rituals and across the textual reality as a whole, with the social milieu—constructed by that narrator—generally in tacit compliance” (22).



verdadero cómplice del narrador” (10).<sup>21</sup>

*Crawling, Slipping, Escaping*

If metaphor is the spark that ignites desire in *Las Hortensias*, then metonymy keeps its flame alight by expressing it as a process of continuous displacement. The infernal logic of Horacio’s desire is such that once it attains its object, once it gains access to a new doll, the doll ceases being desirable. Horacio then fixes his desire on other dolls, and then others, in a movement analogous to that of metonymy, which Lacan defines as a process in which one signifier implies another in a potentially infinite series. For this reason, Lacan writes, “desire *is* a metonymy” (2006 439) and metonymy is “the vehicle of desire” (2006 715), the rails on which desire “crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret” (1998 214). Desire is transitive because it is caught in a labyrinthine network (language) whose rails (metonymy) extend forever: “The enigmas of desire, with its frenzy mimicking the gulf of the infinite...are based on no other derangement of instinct than the fact that it is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the desire for something else” (2006 431).

For Lacan desire’s frenzy activates the signifying chain; its eternal extension makes it the dynamo behind language’s transformational operations, sustaining metaphor’s substitutive condensations and metonymy’s word-to-word displacements. Desire is, as Bowie puts it, “the purest quicksilver” (130), “the insinuating genie that runs through the endless concatenations of language” (131). This genie also runs through *Las Hortensias*, mercilessly transforming each of Horacio’s anticipated satisfactions into a new vacancies and deadening him in the process. If the substitutive operations of metaphor supply narrative desire with a “profusion of junctions, loops and branch-lines,” then metonymy’s displacements keep it “on the rails, and always pressing ahead to the

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<sup>21</sup> Not all critics have appreciated this conversion. In discussing the “estado sutilmente grosero” in which many of Hernández’s stories appear, Ruben Cotelo writes: “A esta altura del siglo estamos curados de espanto en asuntos de perversiones; lo reprochable consiste en que se nos haga partícipe de ellas” (107).

next destination” (132).

The move towards metonymy corresponds to a shift in gear concerning the relation between the novella’s described and narrative time. During the stage in which desire is articulated more metaphorically, narrative tempo proceeds in a kind of retardando covering a longer expanse of time and describing extended periods, such as Horacio and María’s marriage pre-Hortensia, in only a few passages. During the more metonymic stage, it becomes more frenetic, proceeding in a rising crescendo and focusing in detail on short periods as the sequence of events accelerates and intensifies. It is in this sense that metonymy plays a structural role, for the sequencing can be seen as a chain of metonymic displacements on the part of the narrator, who takes the narratee on an increasingly frenzied journey from situation to situation, episode to episode, with each implying the other and each constituting a contiguous part—a metonym—standing in for a larger whole: the complete evoked situation.<sup>22</sup> Many of these situations compulsively repeat the same pattern: a sex doll stimulates Horacio’s desire, whose frenzy fizzles out as the doll inevitably fails to satisfy, leaving him no choice but to pursue another sex doll, and then another, in a process of continuous metonymic displacement in which each doll serves as a prop in pursuit of more desire. Graziano describes this pursuit, not in terms of metonymy, but as a kind of metaphorical hunting expedition, one in which one doll is dumped for another “because the hunt is more libidinized than the prey” (205).

The remainder of this chapter will chart Horacio’s doll hunting, the vertiginous journey of his desire as it “crawls, slips and escapes” ferret-like from situation to situation, from sex doll to sex doll, following it as a train speeding along metonymy’s rails, as an enigma whose frenzy mimics the very infinite abyss into which Horacio will ultimately be delivered.<sup>23</sup> Whereas chapter three identified *Las Hortensias*’s key

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<sup>22</sup> For Jakobson and Lodge, structural metonymy of this sort functions in almost all narrative.

<sup>23</sup> An account of Horacio’s descent into the abyss will be given in chapter seven.

metaphoric substitutions, the following will reconstruct the sequence consisting of its key metonymic displacements, each of which conforms to the same pattern: a new doll ignites Horacio's desire, yet once it comes into reach, desire yields to disillusion, frenzy to burnout, until another doll comes onto the scene, reigniting the cycle.

The first displacement is made possible by María's departure from the black house, which opens up exciting new prospects for Horacio; released from the ball and chain of marriage, he may now enjoy as many dolls as he pleases in whichever way he pleases. The anticipation of adultery, not only against his wife, but also against his now defunct mistress, fills him with long-forgotten vitality. In contrast to earlier episodes of depressive lethargy, he now is possessed by youthful vigour, able to dominate events "con el impulso de un hombre joven" (54). Horacio's vigour stems from the fact that Facundo had been working on a new line of dolls, knowledge of which allows Horacio to metonymically displace his erotic attention from a single now worthless object to a multiplicity of more promising ones. The new dolls are to be mass-produced according to plans that Facundo had acquired from a manufacturer in some unspecified "northern country." After buying one, Horacio has the twins dress her in an evening gown and then dines with her in front of his servants, informing them that they are to defer to her as "la señora Euralia" (65). Euralia thus becomes not only Horacio's new sex toy, but the new lady of the house, assuming the privileged position once occupied by Hortensia and María before her.

Euralia maintains a metonymic continuity with Horacio's anonymous showcase mannequins, from which she is indistinguishable but for two significant details: her hydraulic plumbing and feminine attributes. Although she is physically distinct from Hortensia and has been fabricated according to different methods, Euralia also maintains a metonymic link to her predecessor in one important way: she shares her name; in the same way that María shed her middle name by giving it "like a discarded object" to Hortensia, the deceased Hortensia bequeathes her name, not just to her

successor, but to the potentially unlimited number of mass-produced feminine forbears she has inspired. As Facundo explains, the generic name of his new sex dolls is “Hortensia,” “pero después el que ha de ser su dueño le pone el nombre que ella le inspire íntimamente” (53). The signifier “Hortensia” thus functions as the doll’s surname, while her owner chooses her first name as he would for his newborn daughter.

(If Ms. Euralia Hortensia functions as Hortensia’s metonymic displacement, there is one sense in which she is also María’s metaphoric substitute, for her arrival at the black house replaces one spy with another. María’s honed her career as a spy in surprises prepared to furtively observe her husband and in listening in on his conversations. Euralia becomes known in the house as “the spy” after Horacio asks his Belorussian manservant his opinion of her: “muy hermosa señor. Se parece mucho a una espía que conocí en la guerra” [65].)<sup>24</sup>

Horacio’s desire is worked into a frenzy as the excitement generated by his elegant new companion incites him to pursue an ever-increasing number of objects. Renewing his showcase sessions, he has tall mirrors brought into the salon to multiply the number of dolls appearing in his field of vision and has his set-designers compose scenes with even more dolls. Into this visual extravaganza he brings Euralia, whom he kisses while gazing “con glotonería” at all the other dolls (71). So much lustful seeing, however, leaves him exhausted and irritable, as no amount of dolls (or reflections thereof) can satiate him. He finds himself “divided and pulverized by metonymy” (Lacan 1998 154); like signifiers, which admit no fixed meanings, his desire admits no universal satisfaction, as bouts of bingeing on doll images come followed by periods of despondency and isolation. As Graziano puts it, “Horacio exits his dolls more vacuous than he entered, more drained, as he hastens back to the compulsive search for replenishment his promiscuity somehow never satisfies” (217).

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<sup>24</sup> In a fascinating autobiographical parallel, Hernández’s third wife, María Luisa de Las Heras, was an actual Russian spy responsible for coordinating Soviet spying activities across Latin America, a fact of which her husband, an avowed anticommunist, was apparently never aware.

Desire's second metonymic displacement or situation occurs after Facundo points out to Horacio the house in which El tímido pays nightly visits to Euralia's "sister," or, as he jokingly calls her, Horacio's "sister-in-law" (73). The image of a doll spending her days in solitary confinement rouses Horacio from his torpor; his decision to secretly pay her a visit magically lifts him out of depression and fills him with the same frenzy that accompanied his initial excitement over Euralia. By orchestrating a tryst with El tímido's doll, he breaks free from his ennui and again plays manly conquistador, one whose mission consists in encroaching upon a rival's territory and pillaging his most prized possession. Horacio's audacious claim to El tímido's doll is based on no other right than that of metonymic continuity, i.e., the fact that the signifier, her surname "Hortensia," like Euralia's, links her back to another doll, his twice-murdered love, and ultimately his wife.

Horacio sequesters the doll, carrying her to a secluded spot at a river's edge "con el cuidado que pondría en manejar una mujer desmayada" (75). Since she hasn't been filled with water, the perfumed doll is lightweight and cold; despite hints of María (who is prone to fainting) and the original Hortensia (who wore María's scent), Horacio is put off by the doll's corpse-like coldness and finds himself once again "muy desilusionado" (76). The tryst with Euralia's sister turns out to be a failure; instead of more pleasure, eroticizing the forbidden and furtive yields only more pain. Returning home, Horacio considers jumping off desire's metonymic rails for good by moving to another country and never looking at dolls again (76). If he resolves to forsake his statuesque sirens, it is because he now seeks exile from a kingdom in which he no longer appears as their ruler, but rather as their slave.

Following the failed tryst, Horacio resolves to throw Euralia out; she who was once enthroned as queen is now treated like trash. Yet predictably enough, the frenzy of desire returns even stronger, its extension towards new objects irrepressible. Horacio convinces himself that getting back on desire's metonymic rails was somehow

predestined, that another relapse into *voluptas* inevitable: “se entregó a pensar en la recaída de su vicio como en una fatalidad voluptuosa” (82).

Horacio finds the sequestered doll’s metonymic displacement, the third in the plot’s chronological sequencing, in Facundo’s department store, which greets him with a display featuring a bevy of mannequins dressed and arranged by the same designers who work on his showcase scenes. When he singles out the sole Hortensia, i.e. a sexually modified doll, in the bunch, Horacio is so excited he considers ravishing her on the spot, a move even more rash than breaking into El tímido’s house. He flees the scene, however, when a salesclerk casts him a suspicious look, as if to suggest that his dirty thoughts, like the fashion mannequins, were on display for all the world to see. Instead, he has the doll, who is dressed in a wine-coloured Renaissance costume and whom he calls Herminia, installed in a rented house and hires two employees, one to fill her with water in preparation for biweekly visits, another to clean up afterwards.

Yet even access to Herminia in the safety of a rented house proves unsatisfying, and Horacio soon finds himself back at the Primavera during its grand exhibition, which presents Facundo’s mass-produced dolls to the general public. When Horacio sets his sight on one, “una negra de aspecto normal” with “dos cabecitas de negros con boquitas embetunadas de rojo” painted on her breasts (86), it’s love at first sight. He then finds Facundo, who possesses crucial knowledge: whether this Hortensia—exotic but not too much so that she be unappetizing—possesses the requisite attributes to metonymically displace Herminia in the rented house and make her the next link on the signifying chain of Horacio’s desire. Like Barbie, Horacio’s life-size Barbies come in a wide variety of metonymically contiguous identities: Carnival Hortensia, Russian Spy Hortensia, Renaissance Hortensia, and now African-American Hortensia. Like the pop song dedicated to Mattel’s (in)famous fashion dolls, owners of Facundo’s dolls can do their hair (or have their servants to it for them) and undress them anywhere: “en general, las muñecas [...] sólo pensaban en la ‘pose’ que mantenían y no se les

importaba si las vestían o las desnudaban” (85).

African-American Hortensia ends up being the last link on Horacio’s daisy (or hydrangea) chain. María’s appearance in his fantasy world brings the metonymic sequence to a close and causes Horacio to fall off desire’s metonymic rails and exit the symbolic order for one of mutism and psychosis. Yet in one sense desire in the narrative doesn’t stop but keeps on going, for the mass production and commercialization of Facundo’s sex dolls allow it to slip from its moorings in the private sphere and enter the public, where it may find a potentially infinite number of objects through which to perpetuate itself. Desire in *Las Hortensias* thus becomes increasingly autotelic and self-generating, no longer interested in satisfaction (which, according to Lacan, signifies its obliteration), but rather its own infinite perpetuation.



During bouts of disillusion, Horacio intuits that his ice queens lack the magical powers necessary to fill in his emptiness, that as mere phantom women they are incapable of curing his loneliness, as if telling him: “nosotros somos muñecas; tú arréglate como puedas” (72). Although they tempt him with hints of heaven, he dimly recognizes that the only doors these *belles dames sans merci* seem permitted to open are those to an all too human realm whose governing principle is eternal frustration—the specific frustration of forever unsated desire. But instead of reconciling himself to this principle, Horacio chooses to deny it, to deny that desire is anything but pulverizing, lacking, and impossible, that its metonymic frenzy is necessarily unrelenting, its perpetuation possible only through the proliferation of more and more desire.

If *Las Hortensias* represents this as part of desire’s functioning, desire’s frenzy runs through its plot, which stages a metonymic chain, a sequence of situations in which desire’s fulfillment—accessing a new doll, getting to the full frontal, to the end of the story—obliterates desire while at the same time constituting its meaning; as Brooks

writes: “the contradictory desire of narrative [drives] toward the end which would be both its destruction and its meaning, suspended on the metonymic rails which tend toward that end without ever being able quite to say the terminus” (1996 58). *Las Hortensias* moves forward through metonymy, but its meaning can only be grasped, satisfied, once its dynamics have come to a stop; its desire functions like a motor, “a motor insisting—as narrative does—toward the unnamed meaning, the name that could be recaptured only in a recapitulative movement starting from the end” (Brooks 1996 58). *Las Hortensias*, whose engines continue to resonate even after Horacio’s desire withers to nothing, is the whole of which each situation is a part, the story of a man whose desire for ontological unity, for “a hole [...] to make himself whole” (Graziano 121), for a condition unsullied by *Spaltung*, is as inexorable as it is impossible, whose necessary lack of satisfaction gives fetishism and death as the only alternatives, but whose total satisfaction would also signify dissolution and death.



Desire and repression operate in society as it is, and are affected by its every changing phase. Surely reason is to be found, first and foremost, at the core of maddest desire!  
Félix Guattari

## Chapter Six: Desire as an Intersubjective Relation

Horacio first elaborated his doll fantasies within the glass walls of his galleries, out of which they slipped and came to dominate life within the stone walls of the black house. In what the last chapter called the narrative's metonymic phase, his fetishistic desire emerged from its den and entered the light of the larger world; released from confinement, it is now expressed in department stores and rented houses, and even à *ciel ouvert*, as Horacio—as oblivious to others as a madman “que se ha olvidado de vestirse y anda desnudo” (27)—begins taking his dolls for walks in the park. Desire's metonymic displacement thus corresponds to a movement from inside to outside, and from particular to general, as the sex doll's industrial production makes them available to the larger public. If previous chapters examined how *Las Hortensias* manifests desire as played out through metaphoric substitutions and metonymic displacements, this chapter will discuss desire's extension as an *intersubjective* phenomenon—for if desire, as Lacan claims, is indeed channelled through linguistic modalities, it must also be socially mediated and in some sense outside or between individuals, the notion of a private language being, as Wittgenstein pointed out, impossible. The discussion will proceed in three steps. First, it will look at desire's transindividual character in light of a polyvalent Lacanian notion—that individual desire is always “the desire of the Other”—a notion which highlights the function of others in configuring one's most seemingly private desires. Second, it will show how *Las Hortensias* establishes structural parallels between the private and public spheres in a way that resonates with what Lacan calls the *extimacy* of desire, or its intrinsic exteriority. The chapter's final section will examine how desire's intersubjective character is manipulated by consumer capitalism, whose logic mirrors Horacio's consumption of sex dolls. That Horacio flees intimacy by turning

to fetishized objects for sexual gratification, preferring one-sided subject-to-object romance over the give and take of relationship, doesn't make his desire any less intersubjective.

*Desire of, for and qua the Other*

Lacan underlines the intersubjective nature of desire with his often quoted phrase: "man's desire is the Other's desire" (2006 525). In French, the genitive *de* of this phrase points to both the subject's incestuous desire for the mother as primordial Other and its desire to be the object of another's desire. Much of Graziano's study of *Las Hortensias* centers on this first sense, analyzing the Hortensia doll as a prosopopoeia or "trope for the replication of the mother imago" (205) and Horacio's Don Juanism as a "search, ever to be disappointed, for the adequately nurturant mother" (200). Graziano bases his claims in details from Hernández's biography, particularly in his relationship with his real-life mother (whose name was Juana Hortensia Silva), though I'm not sure we need to leave the text to find evidence of incestuous desire for the mother, which is manifest in Horacio's aforementioned fantasy about relations with a doll inhabited by the spirit of María's mother.

María's desire typifies the second sense, which re-articulates Hegel's notion that human desire is essentially the desire to be recognized. María is introduced in the novella's opening paragraph as a motionless apparition in Horacio's field of vision, resembling a Greek statue on a pedestal: "vio a su mujer detenida en medio de la escalinata [...] le pareció que su mujer tenía puesto un gran vestido de mármol y que la mano que tomaba la baranda recogía el vestido" (7). The narrator then reports María's thoughts, which register not her husband's outward appearance but his mental state and betray a yearning for his affection: "ella se dio cuenta de que él venía cansado [...] y esperó con una sonrisa que su marido llegara hasta ella" (7). María wants nothing more than to be the object of Horacio's desire; her desire for recognition is desperate

enough that it drives her to transform herself into an effigy of an effigy, into an object that had ostensibly been modeled in her own likeness.

(The novella's opening thus offers glimpses into the consciousness of its two protagonists, announcing desire as it closes in on its objects, on the frozen female form on the one hand, and on the marital other as locus of recognition on the other. Graziano claims that the narrator's consciousness is synchronized with that of Horacio, that it is "as though the protagonist were speaking through the narrator, as though Horacio had contracted a third-person mouthpiece [...] to construct an ambiance in which his obsessions make supreme sense" (23). While this is no doubt true, it is only partly so; like the subject of a two-part fugue, Hernández's effaced third-person narrator jumps back and forth between the consciousnesses of Horacio and María in a kind of bifocal counterpoint in which the latter is no less significant than the former.)

The desire that leads María to objectify herself also evidences another meaning of Lacan's phrase about man's desire, one which points to the subject desiring *qua* Other (2006 690); not only does it desire *what* the Other desires, but *from its point of view*, as if it were another person. The idea that another's desires invade one's own is suggested when María says to herself: "me gustaría que Horacio supiera que camino sola, entre árboles, con un libro en la mano" (68). The reader senses that María's perambulation is perhaps motivated less by a desire for fresh air and literary nourishment and more by a concern to appear as a dignified object within Horacio's gaze, only this time not as a classical statue, but as an actor performing a poignant role in a film directed by her husband. María is so attentive to Horacio's desires that they sabotage her own; by assuming responsibility for covering the house's mirrors, by promoting showcase scenes as an antidote to his depression, and, most significantly, by facilitating his erotic attachment to Hortensia, María effectively entrenches his fetish and subverts any chance she might have at repositioning herself as primary recipient of his love.

Lacan's phrase points to the fact that objects become desirable, not because of their intrinsic value, but because they are desired by others. For Lacan there is no such thing as private desire; all desire is socially mediated, a product of dialectical interactions with the perceived desires of others. René Girard elaborates this point, arguing that desire is fundamentally mimetic, that is, learned by imitating the desires of others.<sup>25</sup> For Girard, the structuring of desire in novels frequently involves triangular rivalry, in which two subjects (typically men) compete for a desired object (typically a woman). Horacio's foolhardy pursuit of the forbidden doll can be read as the enactment of this triangle, one in which his own desire becomes invaded by or reducible to that of El tímido, with Facundo as go-between. Following Girard's logic, Horacio desires the doll, not because she is intrinsically desirable (at least to Horacio), but because she is desired by a mimetic rival. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, the male "homosocial" rivalry in these triangles often becomes more important than the desire for women, who, as mere tokens of exchange, tend to be excluded from relations of desire altogether. In the Horacio-El tímido-forbidden doll triangle, the desire of the third term need not be excluded: as a mere thing, it was never there to begin with.

Other instances of mimetic rivalry are discernible in *Las Hortensias*, though the typical gender dynamic is curiously inverted. One showcase scene, for example, depicts two female board members of an orphanage for girls, one of which, to the chagrin of the other, has just been elected president. The theme of feminine rivalry, not to mention the presence of so many young girls, titillates Horacio and echoes the previous scene depicting the two friends in love with the same man, which itself echoes the narrative's main romantic triangle: Horacio's idea of María and Hortensia in competition for his love. The fantasy of being a coveted object of desire reverses the gender configuration in more conventional romantic triangles and suggests a certain identification with the feminine on Horacio's part, the inverse of which would be the traditionally masculine

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<sup>25</sup> The recent discovery of mirror neurones may lend empirical support for this claim.

characteristics (desire for power and authority) evoked by the ambitious board members. Gender reversal is also suggested by Hortensia's brief appearance in drag (14) and by the repeated motif of Horacio as the passive recipient of falling female bodies (13, 36, 81). The chiasmus of dialectically opposed terms (in this case masculine versus feminine) is one of the novella's salient rhetorical strategies, the most sustained being that of subject versus object, terms which are presented as uncannily reversible in their opposite.<sup>26</sup>

### *Agony and Extimacy*

Facundo's mass-produced dolls are formally launched into the marketplace during an exhibition at the Primavera, the city's most prominent department store. This coming out ball for sex dolls is a huge success; just as Horacio wondered whether his African queen was the real thing or not, the staging of Hortensias with non-Hortensias has everybody wondering which is which.

Facundo's marketing *coup* would have impressed even Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew and inventor of modern marketing, whose provocative public relations stunts exploited Freud's theories to manipulate the masses, making them want consumer goods they didn't need by directly appealing to their unconscious desires. The Primavera's PR people appeal to the public's desire for pleasure looking (scopophilia), which Freud identified as one of the basic components of human sexuality. For Freud, scopophilia is rooted in the child's voyeuristic curiosity, in its desire to unveil the private

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<sup>26</sup> Instances of falling bodies occur with uncanny frequency in *Las Hortensias*: Horacio, who once kissed his wife as they fell from a tree, kisses the forehead of a showcase doll as she falls from a chair; Hortensia falls into Horacio's arms as he opens a door, after which Horacio falls on top of her as he loses control of his tricycle. The sudden movement of inanimate objects both excites and terrorizes Horacio, triggering brief moments of confusion in which it is unclear whether an object's displacement is simply a matter of gravity or whether it results from the object's own agency, in which case, horror of horrors, it was never an object to begin with and has perhaps been scrutinizing him with its "unmoving mockery" (76) all along. These momentary confusions cede to generalized psychosis at the end of the novella, in which Horacio loses the ability to distinguish between subject and object altogether. Horacio's confusions contribute to the story's uncanny effects; as Freud writes, "one of the surest devices for producing [...] uncanny effects [...] is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton" (135).

and forbidden, and persists into adulthood as the pleasurable of using other people as objects for sexual stimulation through sight. In *Las Hortensias*, simulacra of people are used as objects, adding a fetishistic *frisson* to Horacio and the public's pleasurable looking.<sup>27</sup>

The exhibition functions like an open house of sorts, only here it is not real estate on display, but the exotica formerly contained within the fantasy world of Horacio's showcases. What was purportedly an intimate affair at the start of the narrative—a man's voyeurism and fetish for dolls, the metaphoric substitutions and metonymic displacements of his desire—has now been unveiled as public and "extimate," *extimité* being a Lacanian neologism used to describe how unconscious desire, which at first glance may appear as an exclusively private phenomenon, subsists both internally and externally. Since the unconscious *is* language, and since language is intersubjective, the unconscious is "transindividual" and hence exterior to the subject (2006 214), exteriority—"the fact that the symbolic is located outside of man"—being "the very notion of the unconscious" (2006 392). As Prieto observes, "en Felisberto, como en Lacan, el inconsciente—como el lenguaje—está en el plano de las 'cosas exteriores'" (302), existing *between* people rather than springing from their inner depths.

Hernández emphasizes the exterior, intersubjective nature of Horacio's desire by bringing it out of the shadows and into the bright lights of a department store, establishing direct structural parallels between the black house's private galleries and the Primavera's public ones. Just as Euralia was brought onto Horacio's viewing platform, making her the only Hortensia in a room full of non-Hortensias, so too did Herminia appear in the Primavera's gallery as the sole sex doll in a posse of unsexed mannequins. Private and public galleries are similarly choreographed: both are divided

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<sup>27</sup> Scopophilia is perhaps most famously illustrated in Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, in which the pleasurable looking of Humbert Humbert consists in observing the nymphets of this world, in stealthily discerning, "by ineffable signs—the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame forbid me to tabulate—the little deadly demon among the wholesome children." Like Euralia or Herminia standing alone in a glass playground of rigid asexual mannequins, "*she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power" (17).

into two sections, each depicting a different scene or “legend,” the result of a collaboration between set-designers and writers who, like Facundo, work for both Horacio and the department store. Just as Horacio installs full-length mirrors around his showcases, so too do his set-designers install floor-to-ceiling mirrors in the store gallery; in both cases a *mise-en-abyme* is created in which reflections provide for an infinite proliferation of fetish objects, a veritable moveable feast for Horacio and the public’s gaze and vivid illustration of the endlessness of desire’s potential metonymic displacements.

The public is mesmerized by the spectacle of glamorous sexed dolls lurking in the midst of the innocent and unsexed; like Horacio, they lose themselves in silent ponderations as to which among the wholesome—“las muñecas honestas” (53)—are sexually serviceable. One spectator has the bad luck of attending the exhibition with his wife, whose suspicions he tries to thwart by making his eyes (again metonymically emphasized) appear less alert than they really are, by lowering his gaze (another metaphor for something which rises and falls) when it really wants to project upward: “un hombre arrugaba las cejas y bajaba los párpados para despistar a su esposa y esconder la idea de verse, él mismo, en posesión de una Hortensia” (85). Like El tímido’s eyes, this husband’s (un)veil shameful thoughts and function as windows to Horacio’s desire, as mirrors reflecting his no longer localized lust. Horacio’s desire even extends into the minds of the genuinely innocent, infiltrating the minds of young Cinderellas with naughty speculations: “una jovencita [...] pensaba que el esplendor de algunos vestidos tenía que ver con el destino de las Hortensias” (85).

### *Sex Dolls, Capitalism and Disposable Objects of Desire*

The displacement of Horacio’s desire onto Euralia, his Russian spy, represents a small revolution in the narrative’s fetish economics, signalling the transition from the small-scale artisanal production that gave birth to Hortensia, who was handcrafted in a studio

by Facundo and his assistants, to large-scale production along (presumably) American lines. As a trial doll in this new Fordist mode of production, Euralia is the Model-T of sex dolls and could easily be called Plastic or Silicon Lizzy were the narrator ever to mention what Hortensias dolls are made of. Facundo thus passes from craftsman to capitalist, making handsome profits off his clients' shame-ridden desire. He gets a taste of just how lucrative the sex doll trade can be when a sheepish client is so eager to close a transaction that he buys a doll on the spot "casi irreflexivamente," paying in cash despite Facundo's exorbitant prices and having seen only a few trial models (53).

Facundo abandons the obscurity of his studio after he is hired by the company that owns the Primavera to direct and integrate the production of its fashion mannequins and its new line of sex dolls. Facundo's business acumen contributes to his upward mobility, making him one of the winners in the socio-economic transition from traditional society, in which people's sexual desires are confined to the private sphere, to a modern mass-consumer society, in which they are publicly validated and celebrated as cash cows for corporate industry, despite warnings from socially conservative newspapers such as *La Noche*, whose editorials denounce how the sex doll, "esta nueva falsificación del pecado original...se abre paso en nuestro mundo" (70).

If Barthes described consumerism as "a machine for showing desire" (1990 136), then Hernández's story puts this machine on display, exhibiting how desire is moulded by prevailing socio-economic conditions which, in the context of consumer capitalism, make private and public desire virtually indistinguishable. As Prieto writes, *Las Hortensias* "evidencia la imposibilidad creciente, en una sociedad de consumo, de diferenciar el ámbito privado del eros y el espacio público de la transacción cultural o económica" (323). Horacio's "private" desire is thus doubly alienated and *extimate*, first for being invaded or robbed by the Other, then for being reconfigured by the market. The plans Facundo receives to mass produce sex dolls, their entry on the market at a leading department store, the savvy marketing techniques used to sell them—these



forces conspire to instill in the fictional male consumer “la idea de verse, él mismo, en posesión de una Hortensia,” transforming the private tastes of an eccentric aficionado into a generalized social phenomenon.

In the story, fetishistic and voyeuristic desire—capital in a system requiring a *laissez-faire* in matters of both moral and market regulation—thus become common currency, much like pornography today, whose dissemination via the internet is reconfiguring desire in unprecedented ways, making a cornucopia of previously unimagined erotic possibilities available to anyone with a laptop. In comparison to internet porn and its virtually limitless opportunities for lustful seeing, *Las Hortensias*’s veiled eroticism, with its costumed dolls and giant mirrors, seems at once crude and quaint.

Consumerism was in full swing in 1949, when, during a sojourn in Paris, Hernández wrote *Las Hortensias*. The author localizes it in the Primavera, which is perhaps modeled on the French capital’s famous *Le Printemps* department store. (This is the only identifiable reference in the novella, whose author privileges a kind of Beckettian *lieu vague* in which the lack of a particularized time and place enhances the dream-like and uncanny atmosphere.)<sup>28</sup> Like all department stores (which appear to have been superseded by strip malls and box stores as nerve centers for the consumer economy), the Primavera makes what were once artisanal novelties—life-sized sex dolls—accessible to the masses through industrial production. In consumer societies, goods are cheap and readily available, which also makes them easily disposable; like Horacio, who throws out his dolls once the illusion of their feminine virtue is no longer plausible, consumers are inclined to discard items once their novelty has worn off or technological innovation has rendered them obsolete, a dissipation of nature’s resources whose consequences have only recently become clear. Horacio’s feverish

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<sup>28</sup> Indeterminate settings and the preoccupation with inner rather than outer realities (along with Hernández’s right-wing activism) may explain the relative dearth of critical interest in his work during the politically charged decades of the 60s and 70s.

desire for Hortensia dolls not only compulsively repeats a cycle whose metonymic frenzy “mimics the gulf of the infinite,” but it also mimics the very cycle of consumption that makes the modern consumer economy viable in the first place: that commodities, like *Las Hortensias*’s sex dolls, first be desired, summarily used and finally disposed of (the sooner the better) once newer more exciting models come on the market.



Hernández and Lacan remind us that desire is fundamentally intersubjective and extimate, that objects are desirable, not because they are valuable in themselves, but because they are desired by others. This makes them equivalent and exchangeable; *le désir de l’autre*, writes the latter, “diminish[es] the special significance of any one particular object, but at the same time [...] brings into view the existence of objects without number” (1953 12), an existence which *Las Hortensias*—a story which charts an exponential increase in desire objects—brings into view in exemplary fashion. The notion that desire’s objects are equivalent and exchangeable is particularly pertinent in the context of consumer capitalism, whose production methods make goods cheap and widely available and whose marketing mercilessly exploits the mimetic nature of desire (keeping up with the Joneses) while trying to persuade consumers that, in Lacanian terms, their *manque à être* springs from a *manque à avoir*. Hernández’s novella can thus be seen as offering an implicit critique of this system, which is parasitical to the workings of desire, which uses pornographic images to profit from the frailties of those who, like Horacio, are too given to the flesh to resist the sexual utopia it promises them, which seduces like Hortensia dolls seduce Horacio: by promoting the fantasy that desire’s metonymic flow can be dammed up, that the subject’s emptiness, its lack of being, can be filled in with stuff, with SUVs, plasma TVs, and iPods, what Lacan would call *objets petit a*, substitute objects which promise to satisfy desire but—agonizingly—only create more. It also underlines the inequities of a system in which there are clear

winner and clear loser, for if Facundo has the acuity to profit from the new economy and its promise of paradise through consumer goods, Horacio, who invests his desire capital recklessly, is one of its many bankrupted victims, crushed in his own private market crash.

Our meddling intellect  
 Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: -  
 We murder to dissect.  
 William Wordsworth

## Chapter Seven: Desire's Derailment

In one of *Las Hortensias's* gallery scenes, a doll sits at a table. Horacio imagines her a prisoner in a castle waiting for death's liberation, though his writers have scripted another story: that of a woman, made pregnant by a sailor, living as a recluse in a lighthouse, where she obsessively repeats the following words: "que mi hijo sea solitario y que sólo escuche al mar" (16). Horacio endorses this account, though his initial interpretation of her destiny will prove uncannily analogous to his own; as a prisoner of his own fantasies, Horacio's liberation will come, not in the form of death *per se*, but in the form of death's mortal proxy: insanity. The account is also revealing, for like the woman, Horacio will retreat from society after indulging in forbidden sex, and like her unborn son, he will find solace, not in the sound of waves, but in the drone of machines. Retreat from society but also from desire, which toward the end of the narrative spins off its metonymic rails as Horacio abandons language's intersubjective dynamics for solitude and the seeming safety of static images, which seduce him with spectacles that end up freezing him in their very likeness. This final chapter will examine the forces behind the derailment, focusing on the role of spectacle, on showcase galleries which bring together, initially at least, *Las Hortensias's* imaginary and symbolic dimensions. It will look at how these galleries capture the gaze, structuring it along patriarchal lines, with men as seeing subjects and female bodies as seen objects, before examining how the fetishistic desire to idealize these bodies is coextensive with the drive to destroy them. It will then examine the proliferation of what Lacan calls fragmented body phantasmagoria, suggesting that the gallery scene populated by dismembered doll limbs—the most dramatic of the story's spectacles—mirrors Horacio's psychic fragmentation and symbolizes his desire's disintegration.

*Imaginary Captation, Matryoshka Dolls and the Male Gaze*

Horacio's showcase galleries, like the Primavera displays, function as storehouses for the text's image content, as realms in which the (mind's) eye enjoys its status as sovereign sense. The materials exhibited therein can be seen as traces of what Lacan calls the imaginary. If the symbolic is the ever-changing order of language and desire, then the Lacanian imaginary is the stable order of image and imagination, a preverbal realm whose logic is essentially visual and spatial. For Lacan, the imaginary connotes illusion, fascination and seduction; its power is that of *captation*, which in French denotes both the image's captivating, almost hypnotic effect and its potential to capture the gaze, freezing the seer in disabling fixations. For Lacan, the symbolic's cognitive force is superior to that of the imaginary, a fantasy world whose false fixities are wilfully constructed by the subject in a vain attempt to extract himself from the flux of becoming. *Las Hortensias* echoes this subject, its journey toward the imaginary, its gradual disappearance in the fantasy world of the showcase scene. The novella charts Horacio's captation by fascinating, seductive spectacles in which female dolls function as false fixities which captivate and ultimately capture him, leaving him frozen and disabled, a prisoner in a glass gallery against whose walls his fists will pound "como pájaros contra una ventana cerrada" (91).

In the narrative's initial stages, Horacio's galleries function as privileged loci for the mediation of imaginary and symbolic orders. Horacio uses the spatial configurations of dolls and objects in his showcases as raw material on which to base interpretations, generating stories in which the static elements presented before him constitute but single moments in a larger narrative. In doing so, he submits the imaginary's phantasmic constructions to symbolization, integrating its frozen forms into the movement of language and desire; as Bowie remarks, "although [Lacan's] symbolic has 'priority' of the imaginary, the latter gives it content, and work to do" (99). Horacio's gesture, his "work," could thus be seen as a metaphor for literary creation itself, whose

work consists of transforming imaginary material into symbols (signifiers), which are mastered by being integrated within a closed symbolic circuit (a narrative); as Jameson puts it, “the relationship of the literary text to its image content is [...] not that of the production of imagery, but rather of its mastery and control” (376).<sup>29</sup>

Like his dreams, Horacio’s scenes are stories-within-a-story, embedded narratives in which his two intimately connected obsessions—dolls and death—reappear as enigmas, as metaphors whose referents (signifieds) in the framing narrative are occulted. Each scene, each enigma variation, represents a story composed of hieroglyphs—“muñecas un poco más altas que las mujeres normales” (9)—whose meanings can only be gleaned through a hermeneutical process, with Horacio forming an initial interpretation which is then compared to the “legend” accompanying each scene, legends which “en pocas palabras debían expresar la situación en que se encontraban las muñecas que aparecían en cada habitación” (10). After scrutinizing a scene, Horacio measures the distance separating his interpretation of the original *Stoff* from the official account provided by his authors. The reader then repeats this process, using Horacio and the authors’ readings as pieces that fit into a puzzle that fits into a larger puzzle, i.e. the macronarrative, whose meanings are as opaque as those of the micronarratives embedded in it. The text is thus structured something like a collection of Russian dolls—Hortensia’s “post-mortem” replacement is just that: a Russian doll—in which a smaller doll nests in a larger one, which nests in a larger one still, with the largest containing the whole set.

There is something cinematic about Horacio’s little scenes, whose visual dimension gives them a fixed, immobile quality comparable to the frozen images on film screens. As Jean Andreu notes, the darkened salon, the piano accompaniment, the intermissions, “todo hace pensar que la ‘casa negra’ es la configuración de una sala de

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, something similar could be said about the relationship of this thesis to Hernández text, a relationship in which the latter is submitted to a kind of secondary elaboration which reorganizes, systematizes and domesticates its disparate elements.

proyecciones cinematográficas y que el ruido de las máquinas es el del proyector (o de la cámara) que produce la ficción visual” (30). Like films, gallery scenes are made to be seen, yet they nevertheless promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation between observing subject and observed objects. Like a lit aquarium in a dark room, they are presented in conditions contrasting the glass galleries’ brilliance with the darkness of the viewing salon and exploit conventions portraying a world magically indifferent to its spectator. As Mulvey notes in her analysis of scopophilia in cinema, such conditions manipulate visual pleasure by creating the voyeuristic illusion of being a spectator surreptitiously looking in on a private world (170).

Horacio’s scenes create seductive private worlds in which voyeurism may be enjoyed to the full, where imagistic pleasure is structured in ways that mirror the dominant patriarchal order. The galleries constitute an imaginary regime in which women are the objects of desire and men the desiring subjects, in which the active male gaze projects its desire onto passive female figures, the latter being simultaneously looked at and displayed as sexual objects, with representations of the fragmented female body, as we will see below, used to intensify the voyeuristic objectification. At the same time, the reader is invited to narcissistically identify with Horacio (and the public) as an “invisible guest” in visualizing women in their role as exhibited objects, projecting his or her mind’s eye onto him as fictional surrogate in such a way that makes, as Mulvey writes, “the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincide [...] with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (173).

The erotic look is represented in one of the Primavera displays, wherein multiple eyes have colonized the female body: “a otras [muñecas] les habían pintado, por todo el cuerpo, ojos humanos muy brillantes” (86). It’s as if these pan-optical mannequins have themselves transmogrified into mirrors, reflecting back a gaze so powerful that it has literally pierced its object, having occupied, illuminated and hence unveiled, under

harsh electric lighting, the mysteries of the hitherto dark continent of the female body. Having synecdochally escaped their owners—Horacio, the other male voyeurs guiltily encircling the display—the privileged and now rebellious organs invert the looking and looked at dyad, shining their *Schaulust* backwards, turning seer into seen and surveying from all parts, as if to affirm Lacan’s observation that “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (1998 72).

Omnipotence is thus jeopardized by the very female figure exhibited before the gaze, a figure which, according to Lacanian theory, threatens to arouse the castration anxiety it originally signified. Horacio neutralizes this threat through fetishization, which allows him to escape anxiety by transforming this figure from a terrifying signifier of lack, absence and non-being into reassuringly benign object, into a doll whose physical beauty is build up in a way that makes the object satisfying in itself. Women for Horacio thus become divested of danger, frozen into static statues, turned into overvalued icons. Idealization of the female figure, however, is counterbalanced by its aggressive devaluation, another way of neutralizing its otherness, with pleasure derived from ascertaining guilt (for having been castrated) and sadistically meting out punishment. This is consistently borne out in *Las Hortensias*, whose most disturbing moments are those in which the fetishized female body is subjected to repeated acts of violent aggression.

#### *Todestrieb, Insect Armour and Disjecta Membra*

Horacio idolizes his dolls as high-minded aristocrats whose dominant expression is that of “grandeza humillada” (86), while María builds Hortensia up as the perfect daughter. Both are driven to construct the Hortensia doll as an ideal love object, an erotic drive simultaneous with its dialectical opposite: the urge to destroy it, to obliterate its wholeness by fragmenting it into discrete, dehumanized parts. In the narrative, erotic desire constantly flirts with demolition and death, an intimacy revealed in the



contradictory nature of its characters' drives. Lacan understands drives as particular instances of desire, with Freud's eros, or constructive tendency, and his *Todestrieb*, or destructive tendency, being fundamental aspects of all drives: "the distinction between the life drive and the death drive [...] manifests two aspects of the drive" (1998 257). Each drive carries with it its own impossibility; each is desire unsuccessfully trying to satiate itself. Failing to find satiation, each all but pursues its own extinction: "every drive is virtually a death drive" (2006 848). The more fervently Horacio pursues his fetish, the more insatiable his desire becomes; it is the very lack of satisfaction, the very remoteness of that Shangri-La in which lofty queens accommodate his every whim and fancy, that makes its pursuit all the more thrilling and yet all the more doomed. For the more fervent the pursuit, the more destructive it is to the self, whose only preservation lies in the renunciation of desiring, which for María and Horacio means destroying the object of desire, in the latter's case dethroning his queens, pushing them off their pedestals and smashing them to pieces.

Destruction appears throughout *Las Hortensias* in images of shattered or disfigured bodies: from the image of Horacio sleeping, like María's cat, "con el cuerpo arrollado" (46), to that of María's face, whose corners "serán destrozados" (44); from the image of a dead woman's cracked head (38) to stabbed wax dolls in a museum; and of course the images of once cherished Hortensia, who at various points appears "con un cuchillo clavado debajo de un seno" (40), "el cuchillo de picar carne" "en el vientre" (52), or with her head crushed by the piano (63). Images of severed body parts also populate Horacio's dreams, one of which takes place in a dark room in which "andaba volando un brazo blanco" (60). For Freud, images of dismembered bodies are manifestations of the uncanny, the uneasiness produced by the resurfacing of repressed psychic material: "Severed limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm [...] feet that dance by

themselves [...] all [...] have something highly uncanny about them, especially when they are credited [...] with independent activity” (150).<sup>30</sup>

For Lacan, fragmented body images express not just uneasiness, but the “dehiscence” at the heart of man, a primordial sense of discord originating in the motor uncoordination of the neonatal months (2006 78). Lacan believes we retain an active memory of this malaise, that we preserve our early sense of physical disarray by means of an archaic fantasy called *le corps morcelé* or fragmented body. This fantasy lies at the heart of human destructiveness and typically comes to the fore during moments in which the subject faces a particularly aggressive disintegration of his or her ego. As Bowie observes, dismemberment fantasies are “a burden that all self-aware membered creatures bear,” creatures whose *Spaltung*, “first revealed to Freud in dreams, is...re-imagined by Lacan as nightmare” (25-6).

The fantasy of a body once experienced as dismembered and amorphous arouses anxiety, an anxiety which nourishes the ego’s desire to fortify itself under the armor of a secure bodily *I*, which for Lacan is symbolized in dreams of fortified structures, camps and stadiums, manifestations of the subject’s quest for a “proud, remote inner castle” that will protect its besieged ego (2006 78-9). Horacio’s desire for ego fortification is symbolized in the scene in which the outcast doll, first perceived as a prisoner in a castle, has found refuge in a lighthouse, something which Horacio, besieged by intrusions of the real in his fantasy world, will also find by locking himself in the black house’s guest room. But Horacio’s desire is only not represented metaphorically; it also takes on a literal dimension in his progression towards dollish rigidity, a progression which perhaps alludes to another story about anxiety and alienation: Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, in which a man finds himself transformed, not into a

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<sup>30</sup> Besides fragmented bodies, the double, animism, the omnipotence of thought, repetition and the breakdown of boundaries between fantasy and reality all count among those elements Freud catalogues as likely to produce uncanny effects. All are signaled in Hernández’s text, which makes the uncanny, that “something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open” (148), one of its essential poetic properties.

doll, but into a giant bug with a stiffly arched front and armor-plated back. Horacio's body becomes similarly stiff, with his movements likened to those of a bug: "Levantó la cabeza, con el cuerpo rígido, y empezó a abrir la boca moviendo las mandíbulas como un bicharraco que no pudiera graznar ni mover las alas" (91). Kafka's hero wakes to the sight of his numerous legs waving helplessly before him, an image reminiscent of Horacio, who falls off his tricycle and lands on his back "haciendo movimientos de insecto" (36). Like the multipedic woman crawling "como si fuera una araña" in another of his dreams (73), Horacio repeatedly scurries about making movements "más cortos que de costumbre" (50), turning his body spider-like "con pequeños movimientos de sus pies" (87).

Horacio becomes increasingly in danger of being split apart by a retrospective pull towards fragmentation, a dynamic in which the doll or insect-armor's very rigidity risks shattering his ego's sense of integrity. What comes undone is not so much his physical organism, but its representation mirrored by dolls, a vivid illustration of an instance in the Lacanian repertoire of fragmented body imagos, the "heterogeneous mannequins," "baroque dolls," "trophies of limbs," which, in addition to images of bodily catastrophes—"castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring and bursting open"—torment the species (2006 85). In such examples, adds Bowie, "the child, itself so recently born, gives birth to a monster: a statue, an automaton, a fabricated thing...From spare parts, an armored mechanical creature is being produced within the human subject, and developing unwholesome habits and destructive appetites of its own" (25-26). Horacio's habit of making love to baroque (or rather renaissance) dolls, his insatiable appetite for mechanical humanoids, evokes "the perverse air of *jouissance*" associated with the fragmented body (Bowie 27), unveiling it a site of both horror and desire.

Lacan sees fragmented body phantasmagoria illustrated by Hieronymus Bosch, whose pictorial designs make tangible the rifts that permanently disfigure incarnated

human subjects. Such rifts are also tangible in portraits of Horacio persecuted by Bosch-like images of a mouth “horrorosa como un pedazo suelto de intestino” (76), of organs appearing “revueltos, caídos y pensando insoportablemente” (45). But Horacio’s fault lines are nowhere more visible than in his fetishistic desire for the *disjecta membra* of his mannequins, a desire stemming from the anguished perception, crystalized in the vision of his anemic appearance in the mirror, that fortress ego may soon be destroyed. Horacio defends against this by fixing his attention on dismembered dolls, by having scenes composed of their disconnected limbs—“un brazo encima de un espejo, una pierna que sale de debajo de una cama, o algo así”—asking Facundo—“como un chiquilín que pide recortes a alguien que trabaja en madera”—to send him his unused arms or legs (56).

*Las Hortensias*’s most graphic depiction of the fragmented body, however occurs in the novella’s penultimate scene, the first of two organized by María as a means of coaxing Horacio out his mutism, his “quietud de muñeco” (89). In this scene, severed arms and legs appear floating among plants in a dimly lit pool of circulating water. The scene is presented without a legend, with Horacio flummoxed at the sight of floating body parts and their various combinations and collisions. In one combination, the soul of a foot bobs up among branches, which looks to Horacio like a face, followed closely by its leg, likened to “un animal buscando algo” (90). In another, a leg seems to be pursued by a hand and its arm, with limbs chasing each other and randomly colliding “como fieras aburridas en una jaula.” In the most grotesque combination, one highly evocative of Freud’s image of independently minded limbs “dancing by themselves,” the fingers of a hand interlace with the toes of a foot, with the latter’s leg becoming erect, assuming “la actitud vulgar de apoyarse sobre el pie” (90).



The fact that the pool scene is presented without a legend signals the end of the showcase gallery as a mediatory space in Horacio's interactions with the imaginary and the symbolic. If the dismembered body parts symbolize the death of his desire, then they also symbolize his renunciation of language, his exit from the symbolic. By the end of the narrative, Horacio has more or less given up speaking and no longer bothers to interpret his scenes, to submit them to the symbolic's dissections. Trading speech for vision, Horacio has become a prisoner of the imaginary realm and simply stares at his scenes glazen-eyed and immobile, like an animal captivated/captured by a car's headlights at night. The dancing body parts are thus left to float around like signifiers whose combinations no longer incite desire, no longer fit into any circuit of meaning, "stupid hieroglyphs" which have fallen out of the signifying matrix altogether and reverted to their primitive thing-ness, to the inert material elements they always were. By arresting "the frenzy mimicking the gulf of the infinite," Horacio goes off desire's rails and becomes something like a railway network himself: unnatural, fabricated, rigid. His suspension of the signifying chain causes his desire to seize up in a "perverse" fixation, freezing him in "the fascinating image of the fetish" (Lacan 2006 431), trapping his gaze within the imaginary's dazzling voyeuristic objectifications. Horacio's metamorphosis into a motionless statue, into a stiff corpse-like figure, coincides with the closure of the text itself; his quiescence is aligned with that of the plot, whose motion—ignited by metaphor's sparks, sustained by the fuel of metonymy—also comes to a standstill.

In the end one loves one's desire and not what is desired.  
Friedrich Nietzsche

## **Conclusion: *Las Hortensias* and the Metaphysics of Desire**

If Renaissance Hortensia signifies the rebirth of Horacio's desire, then Black Hortensia signifies its African summer. With the black doll sequestered from her jungle scene and (he presumes) installed in the rental house, Horacio arrives at the house as a King Leopold arriving in the Belgian Congo: ready to inspect and plunder his exotic new possession. Yet the mission goes terribly wrong, and rather than consume the fruits of conquest, Horacio finds himself plunged into his own heart of darkness: a female form is indeed waiting in bed to receive him; yet when he peels back the covers to kiss her, she who was supposed to be his silent sex slave slaps him violently in the face. Instead of reuniting with his doll, Horacio is stunned to find María there instead, who has discovered his two-timing and painted herself black in a vengeful attempt to displace her own displacement, a metonymic counter-displacement of doll by woman which enacts at the same time a metaphoric counter-substitution, an inversion of the order of her previous surprises, which had the doll pretending to be her. María's revenge is bittersweet, though, as the shock of her surprise throws Horacio into a state of doll-like catatonia, leaving him speechless, "casi inmóvil," with "ojos fijos, como si fueran de vidrio" (89).

*Las Hortensias* closes with María's attempt to lure Horacio out of his "quietud de muñeco" (89) by organizing a final fantasy scene in which nuns pray before a dead queen. When Horacio enters the showcase, one of the nuns reaches out and touches him; again it is María, who has disguised herself as a doll, this time not to punish him, but to beg forgiveness. María's second appearance in Horacio's fantasy world pushes him into a strange mechanized psychosis, imprisoning him for good within the glass box of his imaginary, reducing him to a "juguete de cuerda" whose strings are no longer pulled by desire, but by the hand of the real, whose touch is trauma, the intractable,

unsymbolizable touch of something before which, as Lacan writes, “all words cease and all categories fail” (1998 164). María causes Horacio’s desire to slip from its rhetorical moorings and wash up on the surface of the real “como restos de un naufragio” (81); her appearance within his imaginary triggers a disastrous disturbance of his symbolic order, a short-circuiting of the grid, which shuts down entirely as its signifiers are sucked into the amorphous auditoria of “el ruido de las máquinas,” a kind of primeval, undifferentiated All, an evocation of the real, whose roar may at any moment “submerge what the ‘reality principle’ constructs [...] that goes by the name of the ‘outside world’” (Lacan 2006 324). In the last line of the narrative, Horacio is seen crossing the garden of the black house “en dirección al ruido de las máquinas” (92), whence he came in the first, thus completing a narrative arc whose two points are the beginning of desire and its end.

This thesis has attempted to show *Las Hortensias* as a story whose plot is modeled by desire as a rhetorical and intersubjective phenomenon, by Horacio and María’s desire, which carries the reader forward, onward, through a succession of metaphoric fantasy scenarios and metonymic fetish objects, before coming to rest in the quiescence of the inorganic, in “el ruido de las máquinas.” What precipitates Horacio’s absorption into this pre-desire state is a pathological terror of lack, of the nonbeing that haunts his very core, a terror which creeps up on him, hollows him out, “idiotizes” him, leaving him as dumb as “un hombre de palo” (89).

*Las Hortensias* is a story about desire turned demonic, about desire as it drives a man to fill in his nonbeing with sex dolls, themselves effigies of nonbeing, defiling and then discarding or destroying them like cheap consumer goods. But the process turns out to be self-defeating, since by necessity nonbeing cannot be negated, nothingness cannot be annihilated. It also turns out to be self-generating, since the desire that sustains it unveils itself as implacable, without natural closure, secretly in love solely with itself, with its own accelerating motion as it cycles through its objects, meaningless

and empty “things” whose mass production makes them even easier to pick up and throw out.

In *Las Hortensias* nonbeing is embodied in women, which are depicted as the ultimate signifiers of lack, as representing the antithesis of phallic plenitude. The objects of Horacio’s drive to defile and destroy are not real women, however, but their metaphoric stand-ins, a metonymic displacement of desire from subject to object which saves him (and the reader) from desire turned evil, from desire as it realizes itself through the horror of incest and misogynistic violence.

What hastens Horacio’s journey (and the narrative’s plot) along desire’s metonymic rails is the promise that by dominating Hortensia dolls, by dominating these symbols of nonbeing, these monuments to death, Horacio is somehow dominating nonbeing and triumphing over death itself. His doll fetish is thus a defence against the reality of lack, against the scandal that desire’s lack of satisfaction, far from being a remediable deficiency, *is an inescapable part of being human*. This is the existential truth about desire *Las Hortensias* unveils, and Horacio imperiously repudiates it, embarking instead on a mission to conquer his own fifth column, i.e. the lack that threatens to sabotage him from within, by audaciously conquering it from without, i.e. in the very paragons of lack itself—in sex dolls—whose vacuity beautifully accommodates his own through unconscious projection.

Yet the mission backfires, producing the exact opposite of its intended effect: the more desperately Horacio attempts to annihilate nonbeing, the more of it he creates, the more feverishly he tries to fill in his own emptiness, the deeper it becomes, the more defiantly he tells death *thou must die*, the more surely he slips into its lethal embrace. Horacio’s only way out of this self-defeating, self-generating repetition compulsion is to dominate yet more dolls (and drink more wine) to the point where his vitality dwindles to nothing, to the point where metaphor’s spark and metonymy’s magic no longer



determine desire, whose flame, like the plot itself, exhausts itself, burns out, ceases to be.

For Horacio, Hortensia's ersatz vagina opens the gates to paradise, and he is powerless not to enter. Yet his pursuit of perfect plenitude, his quest to rule as king in a pleasure dome swollen with being, was doomed from the start because the longed-for Xanadu, the sexual utopia, like all utopias, could never possibly be brought to fruition, since to do so would undo it, would bring it into the flux of becoming, into the symbolic—desire's dimension—and thus into lack. In *Las Hortensias'* symbolic matrix, desire teeters perpetually on the brink of satisfaction without ever actually getting there, except perhaps negatively, by passing into its dialectical other, into insanity, into death. Its disturbing meanings are repressed, making it a desire that dare not speak its name but through veils, through metaphoric substitutes, simulacra of the real, of the ineffable, of the impossible, a desire whose forward march is waylaid by imaginary captation, before being displaced from subjects onto fetishized objects and part objects, metonymies and synecdoches that foil the censor and mystify the reader, whose desire to “get” the text in its entirety, to master all its meanings, is also foiled.

In an attempt to get at desire, to glimpse at some of its truth, this thesis has examined *Las Hortensias* like Horacio examines his dolls: voyeuristically, as a kind of fetishized metaphoric body. Yet any pleasure derived from the masculine urge to peel back a story's veils, to probe its subtextual nether regions, is, as Barthes reminds us, a tenuous thing indeed, constantly under threat of dissolution by its seduction schemes, by strategies working to undermine the reader's interpretive authority, to disarm her ego in an experience of textual *jouissance* which, in *Las Hortensias*, as we have seen, is generated by accumulating desire scenarios in which sex dolls are stripped nearly naked, in which sex dolls metaphorically stand in for mothers, wives and daughters, in which sex dolls serve as props in a series of fantasies—an affair with a beautiful Russian spy, a tryst with a neighbour's secret lover, an anonymous encounter with

masked women during carnival. In *Las Hortensias*, erotic fantasies displace each other in rapid succession, with readers invited to narcissistically identify with their fictional surrogate, with a rapacious Don Juan as he carves another notch onto his bedpost, as he adds another victim to his list of conquests. Reading about desire in this story—a story about seduction, a story which seduces—thus solicits desire in reading, an interpellation which conjugates the pleasure of interpretive mastery with, as Barthes would say, the *jouissance* of its loss.

Much has been lost in the encounter, but something, perhaps, might still be kept: *Las Hortensias* points to desire's metaphysics, to its existential truth, whose being it unveils in the negative: in emptiness, in non-being, in the impossibility of its own plenitude. Desire, it shows us, is a non-negatable nothingness. In doing so, it brings us closer, perhaps, to our own dimly perceived "dead desires," and to our condition as split subjects, forever haunted by lack, absence and death, by the reality that were our dreams of heaven to be fully realized down here on earth, they would most surely turn into nightmares.

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