A POETICS OF FAILURE. INDIVIDUALISM AND THE STATE IN POST-DICTATORIAL
SOUTHERN CONE DETECTIVE FICTION

by

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Abstract

My dissertation *A Poetics of Failure: Individualism and the Post-Dictatorial State in Southern Cone Detective Fiction* engages with a major genre in contemporary Latin American literature: detective fiction. It focuses on a singular aspect of the genre: the historical and literary tensions between individualism and the state. Since the inception of the detective story in the 1840s with Edgar Allan Poe, this tension has traditionally been embodied in the private eye (e.g. Dupin, Holmes, Poirot) and policemen (e.g. Scotland Yard officers such as Lestrade or Japp). I read these personifications as archetypes that amount to an *ego contra mundum*, in the words of the British literary historian Ian Watt. I examine how this tension is reproduced, problematized, subverted and surmounted in novels written in Latin America, especially by Southern Cone authors such as the Argentinean Ricardo Piglia, the Chilean/Mexican Roberto Bolaño and the Brazilian Rubem Fonseca. My close reading of their work shows the extent to which they all share what I call a common “poetics of failure.” I see this failure as twofold, both political and aesthetic. There is the defeat of the left in the region (a local translation of the broader post-Cold War context), and also the crisis of representation in attempts to portray in fiction this defeat at the hands of a dictatorial state. My dissertation provides an account of what Latin American authors tell us about their Anglo-American models. Whereas Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle laid the foundations for a tradition that would portray the state as a disabled yet perfectible entity, these contemporary Latin American authors re-imagine the genre by revealing the extent to which what once seemed to be an Anglo-American criticism of the state, can be actually read as its veiled apology.
Lay Summary

This dissertation examines how detective stories portray individualism and the state. In the first chapter, I analyze the Anglo-American classics. In the remaining four chapters, I focus on the way both individualism and the state are reproduced in more contemporary fiction written in Spanish and Portuguese by Argentinian, Brazilian and Chilean authors. Traditionally, detective stories written in North America and the United Kingdom have been regarded and understood as a liberal critique to the modern state. By contrast, my close reading of their Latin American counterparts shows that authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, even Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler, actually have contributed to build and secure constituted power, by attributing a perfectible potential to the state and by falling into an unrealistic endorsement of individualism.
Preface

This dissertation is an original, unpublished, and independent work conducted by Fabricio Tocco.
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Introduction

“¿A quién le importa quién mató a Roger Akroyd [sic] si nadie sabe (oficialmente) quién fue el responsable de la matanza de Tlatelolco o quién ordenó el asalto de los Halcones el 10 de junio?”

Carlos Monsiváis, “Ustedes que jamás han sido asesinados”

In 1888, Friedrich Engels wrote to British author Margaret Harkness that he had learned more about French history from Honoré de Balzac’s novel sequence The Human Comedy “than from all the professed historians, economists, and statisticians of the period together” (439). Echoing Engels’s quip, Cuban novelist Amir Valle cites the Spanish-Mexican writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II who claims that “to understand current Latin American societies, you have to read Latin American detective fiction” (Valle 100). With this maxim as its starting point, the following dissertation engages with a series of texts that are part of a boom of detective fiction published during the last decades in Latin America. Originally a nineteenth-century genre for the masses in the English-speaking world, detective fiction has experienced this popular success in Latin America only recently. As Valle notes, it is in the 1990s when this boom takes place, with the publication of many authors that engage with what the critics have called the “neopolicial” or “nueva novela negra.” Major publishing houses have published and promoted the works of Paco Ignacio Taibo II in Mexico, but also Leonardo Padura in Cuba, Luis Alfredo García-Roza in Brazil, Ramón Díaz Eterovic in Chile, among many others. The narratives I analyze here are part of that boom, though they also go beyond it. Some of them have been bestsellers, like Roberto Bolaño’s 2666, but they are also complex texts that surpass the formulaic conventions of the genre to comment on the political and the historical in a more problematic way. Seeking what Engels found in Balzac, this dissertation focuses on the Argentinean Ricardo Piglia, the Chilean Roberto Bolaño and the
Brazilian Rubem Fonseca, and the ways in which they build on and break with their precursors in the detective story tradition, from Edgar Allan Poe to Jorge Luis Borges.

This dissertation therefore covers a wide historical period, across many countries. It begins in the 1830s with the American Poe’s Dupin (set in Paris) and it ends in the 2000s with the Chilean Bolaño’s 2666 (set on the American/Mexican border). Throughout, however, it focuses on a very particular aspect of the genre: the historical and aesthetic tensions in the literary representations of individualism and the state. In the following chapters, I examine two main problems: on the one hand, the ways in which these traditional tensions have been reproduced and/or re-written in Latin America. On the other, the extent to which Latin American stories (especially those written during the post-dictatorial period) help us understand differently the portrayal of the state and individualism in classic English and North American detective fiction. Despite its historical range, this dissertation puts a special stress on fictional texts (novels and short stories) produced and published in the 1990s by authors from Southern Cone countries. The reasons for this demarcation respond to a common past that Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Paraguay share: namely, a past marked by the transnational Operation Condor, which helped to implement neoliberal economic policies in the region through dictatorship. By the time that most of these detective fictions were written, most South American states had abandoned the military rule that had ravaged the region for much of the second half of the twentieth century. By contrasting the model with their forerunners, this dissertation aims to give an account of what Latin American authors can tell us about their Anglo-American models.

This dissertation has five chapters, each of which deals with detective fiction written in the context of a different national literature. The first chapter, “The Anglo-American Detective: Ego contra Mundum,” traces the inception and consolidation of the tension between individualism and the state and the way it developed in the English and North American literary tradition as a stable
rivalry. I explore the historical causes of these tensions, always connecting them with their literary representations in the founding authors of the genre—Poe, Conan Doyle, Christie, Hammett, and Chandler—from the 1840s to the 1930s.¹ This chapter fleshes out a close reading of their work through the prism of these tensions and it establishes a constellation of concepts that will reappear throughout the dissertation. To begin with, this chapter owes a great deal to the British scholar Ian Watt’s *Myths of Modern Individualism*. But whereas Watt focused on earlier mythical figures of European literature (Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe), I adopt his opposition of the individualist hero against the world, an *ego contra mundum*, for an analysis of the literary, historic and political tactics of classic detective fiction.² I am particularly interested in the work of personification in these texts, i.e: the embodiment of political abstractions (individualism, the modern state) in specific literary characters (the private eye, the policeman). I examine these embodiments as problematic narrative strategies, in which the classic Anglo-American detective is a mind without a body, and the state is a body without a mind. Poe’s Dupin or Conan Doyle’s Holmes are intellects divested of a corporeal frame (we barely hear about their physical appearance), but they are still able to incarnate (i.e: to embody, to give a concrete body form to) …

¹ The reasons why I choose to include these specific canonical expressions of the genre are related to a problem of literary reception. With the exception of Agatha Christie, all of these writers were white, male and wrote in English. During the late-nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century, these pre-requisites were essential to ensure the circulation of their work through literary translations, and their eventual influence in the public discussion of foreign literary fields, such as Latin America. By the time that the Latin American authors examined in this dissertation were producing their own work, these canonical Anglo-American authors were established and “safe” models to look to. Their detective fictions were translated into Spanish and Portuguese multiple times, read, imitated and frequently criticized. Of course, reducing Anglo-American detective fiction to these five canonical authors entails excluding other important works, such as those partaking in the African American tradition. Authors such as Chester Himes (in the 1950s and 1960s) and more recently Walter Mosley or Hugh Holton Jr. (1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century), engaged with detective fiction in substantially different ways, compared to their white counterparts. Namely, to denounced the unwritten politics of race that are fundamental to understand the American state. Although an interesting comparative study could arise from their points of contact with Latin American authors, the work of these African American writers did not constitute a central part of the genre’s reception in the Southern Cone until very recently. Even if some of their works (mainly Himes’s and Mosley’s) were translated to Spanish, these translations are belated and their influence is perhaps stronger in detective stories written by the Cuban Leonardo Padura or the Mexican Paco Taibo II, because of their cultural proximity to the United States.

² The main link between Watt and my Southern Cone detective fiction corpus can be traced in the common trans-Atlantic heritage of Don Quixote’s individualism against the world, which appears explicitly in Fonseca’s final scene in *Agosto*, and more subtly in Piglia and Bolaño. We will examine these links thoroughly in the following chapters.
the mythical attributes of individualism. I also explore this intellect without a body in terms of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito’s concept of *immunitas*, i.e. as a privilege of being exonerated of one’s debts towards society. I argue that the classic private eye endorses individualism through this exoneration. By contrast, the modern state is portrayed in terms not of positive attributes but of negative lacks, that I call “symbolic disabilities,” i.e. corporeal mutilations or incapacities that impede or diminish the agency of a body not at a literal but at a metaphorical level. The state, in classic detective fiction, is imagined as a maimed body, located in disfigured characters, mainly policemen, who cannot speak, see, read, listen, act, or think, and who, as a result, are always perceived to be inferior to an always successful and undivided self incarnated in the detective.

The second chapter, “Argentina. *Mundus contra Me. A Subverted Rivalry,*” explores the subversion of this rivalry: the state against individualism. The inversion of subject and object in the title of this chapter is neither an arbitrary permutation of syntactic functions nor a whimsical alteration of concepts: it aims to capture the way in which Argentine detective fiction emphasizes the all-pervasive agency of a criminal state against an impotent failing self. Like the first chapter, this one, too, engages with the canonical authors of the genre, through the prism of this rivalry. Equally, it spans a long period of time, from the 1940s (especially, Jorge Luis Borges and Rodolfo Walsh) to the 1990s. The second half of the chapter pays special attention to two texts by Ricardo Piglia: “La loca y el relato del crimen” and *Plata quemada*. I claim that Borges, Walsh and Piglia exhibit a productive subversion of *ego contra mundum*: their texts show an *ego*, an intellectual self that has lost the immunity it once had in the classical detective story. The *ego*, in Argentina, fails at the hands of the dictatorial state because it relies on knowledge. The disembodied intellects that feature in classic Anglo-American fiction relied on knowledge and literacy: the ability to read signifiers, clues, and make sense of them to solve a case. Those were the elements that brought success to the detective. Instead, in Latin America, the individualist hero, its immunity system
breached, gets infected with the symbolic disabilities that in Britain and North America were a monopoly of the state. In Argentinean detective fiction, it is the private eyes who cannot read, speak or see, and their symbolic illiteracy, muteness and blindness, respectively, are what cause them to fail against mundus. Knowledge, once useful, is now irrelevant or itself a cause of failure. I link the subversion of this rivalry between ego and mundus to the dictatorial experiences that crowded the country’s history and the way they re-shaped the understanding of what individuals can do and what a modern state is or can be. Through the lens of Argentine detective fiction, I offer a re-reading of the Anglo-American tradition and the way it imagined the state in contractualist terms.

These first and the second chapters explore the tensions between individualism and the state through a panoramic survey of texts and periods. The third, the fourth and the fifth chapters, by contrast, each offer a close reading of one particular text. The third chapter, “Chile. Ego intra Mundo,” addresses the self within the world, the invasion of destabilizing individualist forces inside the state. The boundaries between individualism and the state that once were solid in Anglo-American detective stories, and even in Argentina (where despite the subversion, the rivalry prevailed), start to crumble in Chile. This chapter focuses on Roberto Bolaño’s Estrella distante, examining the way the author reproduces the tensions between a criminal mastermind (who works for the dictatorial state) and the private detectives who chase him. Once more, the notion of symbolic disabilities helps us to read this tension: Bolaño imagines a state whose criminal members seem to endure the symbolic muteness required by the censorious rule of Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorial regime. At first, the novel seems to meet the conventions of the genre and its horizon of expectations in Latin America. But I show how Estrella distante breaks with tradition by displaying a selective state muteness. These variations of the symbolic disabilities of the state are but symptoms of a literary and a political device that no longer works: personification. This
malfuction takes place on both levels of representation: aesthetic and political. Characters who are supposed to embody the state disobey their mandate, relinquishing that pact of absolute silence. Challenging genres that go beyond detective fiction, such as the dictator novel, I show how Bolaño puts at center stage a state (whose crimes against humanity remain beyond comprehension) that paradoxically cannot be represented. Similarly, private investigators fail to incarnate the heroic individualism they are expected to, becoming instead reluctant detectives, still affected by symbolic paralysis and illiteracy, like their Argentine counterparts. This crumbling of the boundaries that once separated individualism and the state is expressed in terms of the opposite of personification: fragmentation and a tendency towards depersonalization. In the third chapter, the concept of the multitude, a depersonalized agent, features for the first time. The ego of the criminal mastermind and the private eyes blend into one, diluted into the amorphous multitude of the Chilean diaspora in Europe as well as of the desaparecidos, the missing victims of these crimes against humanity.

The fourth chapter, “Brazil. Mundus Contra Mundum. A Crumbling Rivalry II,” reads another instance in which this rivalry crumbles, due to a world, a state that goes against itself. This chapter analyzes Rubem Fonseca’s Agosto (1990), in which the boundaries between ego and mundus are again challenged (as in Bolaño) from within the agents of the state. But whereas in Estrella distante the state’s contours are defied by one individual actor, in Agosto this defiance is polyhedral, in other words, multitudinous. The tensions between two philosophical concepts, the multitude and the people, are at stake here: once individualism starts melting into the thin air of the acephalous multitude, the crumbling state desperately tries to recapture individuals, enclosing them under the oppressive category of the people. Here, again, personification is prominent as it is intertwined with its political dimension: personalism, after all, is rooted in the figure of the individualist leader that the state and the people presuppose. This paradox is one of the issues that
this chapter addresses in the figure of a detective (who works not privately but within the state) and his double: one of the most important personalist politicians of Latin American history, Getúlio Vargas. Fonseca’s text shares with the other Latin American narratives that both individualist heroes and state officers experience symbolic disabilities, such as muteness, blindness, illiteracy, and paralysis. In this chapter, I also examine the blurred boundaries between national mythology and historiography as well as the mythification of personalist leaders through the narration of the past. To put it differently, I study the novel as a device that exposes the literary dimension of historiographic accounts narratives, which ultimately resorts to personification to the same extent as detective stories.

The fifth and final chapter, “Coda. The Mexican-American Border seen from Chilean Eyes,” analyzes Roberto Bolaño’s 2666, specifically “The Part about the Crimes.” The chapter concludes that Bolaño presents the final collapse of the ego contra mundum opposition. In Estrella distante and Agosto this rivalry crumbled but ultimately it remained in force. By contrast, I claim that Bolaño’s narrative strategy in this text is to dissolve both private detectives and public policemen, rendering this traditional tension obsolete. Even though he still reproduces the traditional symbolic disabilities, (amongst which the most important is unintelligibility), there is in this novel a shift in the author’s literary project, which now differs radically from his previous detective stories: there is no room left for any remaining vestiges of personification, not even in fragments, as there was in Estrella distante. The main novelty of “The Part about the Crimes” can be attributed to the consolidation of depersonalization as a force that affects all agents involved in crime equally: criminals, bystanders, police officers, but also the victims, all lose their personhood and dissolve into mundus. Yet although this all-pervasive depersonalization affects all these figures, it does so with opposing results, always at the service of constituted power. Therefore, I highlight a new issue, victimhood, and how it is defined by gender. I focus on how Bolaño
represents masculinity and femininity within the conventions of the detective genre. Finally, I hypothesize a more emancipatory outcome of this depersonalized world, by reading the body of the victims as a multitude, as a driving force of constituent power. The conclusion that follows, “Nec Ego Nec Mundus: from Failure to Community,” explores what is left after the ruins of this collapse: neither individualism nor the state, but a multitudinous community.

The predominance of male authors in this corpus can be explained following the double axes previously mentioned. In terms of aesthetics, as the Finnish critic Jopi Nyman claims, hard-boiled fiction (the branch of detective fiction that had most impact in Latin America) partakes in “the chain of fictions of American masculinity” (35). As Nyman points out, “hard-boiled fiction is very much like its precedents such as the Western in its attempt to provide the male character with social dominance” (35). A similar phenomenon takes place in terms of the political. Argentine Feminist anthropologist Rita Segato, in her recent essay La guerra contra las mujeres (2016), claims that “the history of men, the historical process of masculinity, constitutes the DNA of the state and its masculine genealogy reveals itself daily” (94). As Nyman notes, detective fiction displays, too, a masculine DNA, since it “aims at a reaffirmation of a disrupted masculine social order” and it does so through “the privileging of a masculine language to a vision of social order based on a masculine authority” (3). Nyman links these traces of masculine domination to detective fiction because he understands that masculinity is expressed in a delusion of sovereignty: “the masculine fantasy of all-knowing omnipotence is a dream that comes through in hard-boiled narratives and continues in the work of […] contemporary writers” (4). There are, of course, many female authors who engage with the genre in Latin America. Especially in Argentina and Mexico, novelists such as Luisa Valenzuela, Claudia Piñeiro, and Myriam Laurini, among others, have written detective fiction that has enjoyed a positive critical and commercial reception. I chose not to include them in this dissertation because the problem of individualism and the state, understood
as a conflict (and a fantasy) of masculine sovereignty, is not particularly explored in their novels.

My male corpus is relevant to my research questions on the one hand because, as Segato claims, state sovereignty has traditionally been thought and embodied by men and men only. On the other hand, the fantasies and anxieties of masculinity are incarnated in the figure of the private detective and the policemen, while women (especially in hard-boiled fiction) are often reduced to the trite and misogynist figure of the femme fatale. The fact that my corpus is so overwhelmingly male, then, is an important part of my argument: that sovereignty is inextricable from the problem of masculine individualism and power.

The theoretical framework behind this dissertation is eclectic and, like its corpus, wide-ranging. Nonetheless, there is an underlying logic that follows a consistent path. My analyses draw on and aim to contribute to recent debates on political and literary theory, concerning the people and the multitude, the community and the state of exception, personhood and depersonalization. This is why my framework relies on two distinct branches of Continental Philosophy: French Post-Structuralism and Italian Post-Marxism. The names of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes will often appear next to those of Roberto Esposito, Giorgio Agamben, Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri. Beyond this, the work of a previous generation of thinkers was also useful to shed light on the detective stories examined here: above all, essayists who belong to the Marxist and the Structuralist tradition, such as György Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Mandel, Émile Benveniste, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser, not to mention the founding fathers of these traditions, Marx himself and Ferdinand de Saussure. Their work, nonetheless, is systematically read through the lens of Post-Structuralism and Post-Marxism. Perhaps, the author with whom this dissertation resonates the most is Roberto Esposito. A whole arc could be drawn following his books, from *Immunitas*
(2002) to Communitas (1998), via The Origins of the Political (1996) and The Third Person (2012), all of which are key to read the literary projects of Piglia, Bolaño and Fonseca.

In the end, I argue that post-dictatorial Southern Cone detective fiction is imbued with a transnational “poetics of failure.” But how can “failure” be the material for a poetics? A close reading of their works shows the extent to which these authors put failure at center stage: all their detectives fail to solve their cases, in one way or another, at the hands of the state. Yet their portrayal of failure must not be understood in a neo-Romantic way. These authors do not celebrate failure, but nor do they condemn it. Instead, they take it as a common problem that is, once more, twofold: aesthetic and political. The poetics of failure is a re-elaboration of the literary genre of detective fiction. It is a poetics because it is also a theorization of failure, and its narrative impacts in the literary and the political. It is a poetics that resonates with a common political counter-discourse that crosses the Triple Frontier, the Andes, the Río de la Plata, even the Río Bravo. A poetics that reformulates an obsolete literary convention, because it understands it as a political device that offers a conservative endorsement of individualism and a veiled apology for the oppressive mechanisms of the contractualist tradition. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, the poetics of failure responds to this literary convention by dismantling its narratives: it unmask the fictional silhouette of the state while simultaneously underlining the structuring structures that coerce individuals. It is a poetics that re-appropriates an Anglo-American literary genre to make it plausible in Latin America, where the modern liberal state cannot possibly be understood through the lens of those who once created it.
Chapter 1: The Anglo-American Detective: Ego Contra Mundum

“The detective [...] is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. [...] He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.”

Raymond Chandler, The Simple Art of Murder (1950)

1.1 A Literary Antagonism

1.1.1 A Stable Rivalry

“The facility with which I shall arrive, or have arrived, at the solution of this mystery, is in the direct ratio of its apparent insolubility in the eyes of the police” (“The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe 120), announces proudly Chevalier August Dupin. In this announcement, the first detective in literary history is not solely claiming to have solved a crime. Edgar Allan Poe’s hero is also inaugurating a rivalry that will be reproduced by many of his successors in different geographical settings and historical situations, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. For although detective stories have often been read as a modern translation of an old literary opposition (the conflict between good and evil, the cop chasing the thief), there is in fact a second underlying battle at stake: a rivalry between a sleuth who confronts not only the criminal but also the police. Since Poe, detective stories exhibit a tension between an individualist hero and the state, embodied respectively in a private detective and an officer of the law. The first manifestations of such a rivalry can be seen at the dénouement of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe’s first detective story, published in 1841. When Dupin solves this locked-room mystery case, he shows a sense of achievement not only because he has solved the puzzle, but more importantly because he is “satisfied with having defeated” G—, the Prefect of the Parisian Police. Dupin attributes his victory to a series of deficiencies in his opponent. Unlike himself, G— is “too cunning to be profound,” his wisdom shows no “stamen” and he has a “reputation for ingenuity” (139; Poe’s italics). The fact that at the close of this story the narrator, Dupin’s anonymous sidekick, describes
G—, “the functionary,” as a failed officer who “could not altogether conceal his chagrin at the turn which affairs had taken” (138-139) emphasizes the importance of this hierarchy, setting the foundations for the genre. As the Argentine essayist Josefina Ludmer claims in her essay *El cuerpo del delito*, “the constellation of crime, in literary speech,” is defined by “the tense and contradictory correlation between subjects [...] and the state” (15). Solving a crime, then, is a twofold task: what is important is not merely restoring social order but doing so in the face of the state.

The first reproduction of this rivalry created by Poe can be found in Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet*, the first novel featuring Dupin’s successor, Sherlock Holmes, at the end of the nineteenth century, in 1887. At the beginning of this story, the private detective admits to his famous companion Dr. Watson that he is reluctant to join the Scotland Yard officers, Tobias Gregson and Inspector G. Lestrade (whose middle name, “G.,” evokes Poe’s Parisian police prefect), when they beg for Holmes’s help. His hesitation fades when he accepts the case in the hope that he will “have a laugh at them, if I have nothing else” (25). Again, in the same way that Dupin seems more concerned about outwitting G—, Holmes, beyond his duty of investigating a crime, is also defined by his superiority over his state counterpart. This rivalry reappears in an inverse way in another of Doyle’s stories, one of the rare times in which Holmes almost fail to solve a case: “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” (1903). The original element of this story is that it is Holmes’s own client, McFarlane, who is the suspected murderer of a builder named Oldacre. McFarlane goes to the private eye to help him prove his innocence by investigating the crime at the same time as the police do. In that McFarlane is the main heir of the assassinated man, the Scotland Yard goes for the obvious and assumes that it is he who is responsible for the killing. When every hint seems to point that to this conclusion, Holmes tells Watson, with a “haggard and anxious face” (309), feeling “pale and harassed” (309): “It’s all going wrong. I kept a bold face before Lestrade, but [...] I believe that for once the fellow is on the right track and we are on the
wrong [...]. I fear [...] our case will end ingloriously by Lestrade hanging our client, which will certainly be a triumph for Scotland Yard” (312). What anguishes Holmes here is striking. It is almost irrelevant whether the suspect is guilty or innocent. What matters is that Holmes should be the one deciding that, not Lestrade. The eventual punishment of an innocent man, or a guilty one for that matter, must be funneled through him and him only. Of course, by the end of the story, Holmes reveals that McFarlane is innocent and discovers that everything is a set up by the builder Oldacre, who was seeking personal revenge against his heir. Yet Holmes’s initial bemoaning and reluctance show that he cares not so much about justice itself as about being the one responsible for making that justice.

Conan Doyle continued to write Sherlock Holmes stories almost until his death, in 1930, nearly a century after Edgar Allan Poe imagined the first private eye. It was then that the successors of Dupin and Holmes multiplied profusely, especially in the United Kingdom, where the genre flourished during the so-called “Golden Age of Detective Fiction,” sometimes also described as the classic era of Murder Mystery narratives. Agatha Christie, G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy L. Sayers, and others created private detectives who replicated this tension between individualism and the state. In the United States, on the other hand, the impact of the Great Depression produced a variation of the genre that has been influential during the rest of the twentieth century well beyond the Anglo-American literary field: hard-boiled fiction. Aside from the formal differences between British and American authors, in Dashiell Hammett’s foundational novel of hard-boiled fiction, Red Harvest (1929), the traces of the opposition between the individualistic hero against the state officers are still there. For instance, this tension features in the way that the Continental Op, the private eye of the novel, blackmails a murderer into a confession: “If you won’t talk, I will, to Noonan. If you’ll come through to me, I’ll do what I can for you” (113). Noonan, of course, is Hammett’s version of G—or Lestrade: an incompetent Chief of Police. All these examples show
the extent to which proving the police wrong is a fundamental goal for the classic detective in Anglo-American stories, a motivation that often exceeds the mere resolution of the puzzle or the identification of a guilty suspect. From the 1840s to the 1950s, both the United States and the United Kingdom went through substantial historical transition and international conflict, from crucial warfare to the reconfiguration of their territories (civil war, annexation of neighbouring regions, loss of colonies, etc). Faced with a state whose contours and political nature were constantly being altered, these authors set the foundations of a literary rivalry that remained stable. All seem to agree that what was at stake was who opened the way for justice, not justice itself.

Regardless of the specific realizations of the American or the British state that Poe, Doyle or Hammett were writing about, they all give a similar importance to confronting state officers in their fictional worlds through a male character that they imagine as a solid individualistic hero, “a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man” (41), as Raymond Chandler defined him in his essay The Simple Art of Murder (1950). It is true that there were women detectives: the historical Pinkerton National Detective Agency, located in Chicago, hired women as early as 1856; in literature, there were female characters as early as 1841, when British novelist Catherine Crowe published an anonymous series of short stories featuring a female private eye, which quickly became a best-selling book, The Adventures of Susan Hopley. Yet Crowe’s initiative had few heirs, to the point that even famous women authors writing in the twentieth-century, such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham or Ngaio Marsh, the four “Queens of Crime,” would imagine their sleuths under the precepts of masculine domination as strong men, with the exception, of course, of Christie’s Miss Marple. In Anglo-American detective stories, women were usually portrayed not in the active function of the private eye but that of the passive role either of the femme fatale or the victim. In Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” for instance, the murdered characters are women. In his essay “The Philosophy of
Composition,” Poe himself reflects on his own poem “The Raven” concluding that “the death […] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (25). Of course, this has to do less with a political aim to denounce gender violence, than to partake in an aesthetic fashion that is rooted in the Romantic ideas of the sublime. In any case, it is masculinity, associated with power, knowledge and force, that dominated the constitution of the private eye as an individualist myth, the only one capable of truly challenging the state.

1.1.2 From History to Literature: Individualism against the State

This stable rivalry has historical roots that go beyond literary speech. As a matter of fact, the tensions between the individual and the state neither belong to nor start with detective stories. For the German historian Jacob Burkhardt, both individualism and state are concepts that arose together as an opposition in Renaissance Italy, the former being a reaction, a product, of the latter. Particularly in Florence, the cradle of the European bourgeoisie, where “the despotic states […] created a personal desire for eminence across a wide range of aesthetic and scholarly subject areas, and also fostered a new emphasis on the values of private life” (qtd in Watt 121). In the 1940s, Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci observes in his analysis of Poe’s detective stories a disdain “towards the judicial apparatus, which is always discredited and thus paves its way with the private detective or amateur” (“Sul romanzo poliziesco”; quadernidelcarcere.wordpress.com, my translation). Following in Gramsci’s footsteps, German philosopher Ernest Mandel opens his Social History of the Crime Story (1986) by linking this discredit to more specific socioeconomic causes. He dates this hostility towards the police to the first half of the nineteenth century, precisely

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3 This sentence is not included in Buttigieg’s English translation of Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks. The original Italian text states: “l’atteggiamento del sentimento pubblico verso l’apparato della giustizia, sempre screditato e quindi fortuna del poliziotto privato o dilettante.”
the period in which Poe founds the genre. According to Mandel, this contempt was fed by “the
great majority of the middle classes and the intelligentsia” (12). Thus, the origins can be found in
an element that appears already in Poe and Conan Doyle but also in other instances of Anglo-
American detective fiction: social class. “In most Western countries,” says Mandel, “the state
apparatus was still anachronistically, semi-feudal, an institution against which the bourgeois class
had to fight [...] to consolidate its economic and social power” (12). In this light, Dupin’s arrogance
towards the Parisian Prefect of Police or Holmes’s sense of competition with Scotland Yard can
be seen as a literary translation of a historical struggle to consolidate a still emerging class in front
of a still decaying social order. Mandel goes on to claim that “where the state was already
bourgeois (Britain, France, Belgium, Holland and the infant United States) the liberal bourgeoisie
preferred it to remain weak, confident that the laws of the market would suffice to perpetuate its
rule” (12). Not coincidentally, it was in the national literatures of these countries that detective
fiction rose as a popular literary genre almost two hundred years ago. This chapter will deal
especially with Anglo-American case studies, but even some of their heroes are from Francophone
Europe, mainly Christie’s Poirot, a retired Belgian policeman who moves to London.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Mandel argues, the vestiges of the feudal order are mirrored
in the way the emerging European and North American bourgeoisie regarded the bureaucratic
modern state, whose “spending was considered [...] an unproductive deduction from surplus value
that would do no more than reduce the amount of capital that could be accumulated,” (12) and
whose “police was considered a necessary evil, intent on encroaching upon individual rights and
freedoms. This is why the motto of the bourgeoisie was that the weaker the state was, the better”
(12). Nonetheless, there is a remarkable historical transformation at the same time that Poe creates
Dupin and G—. It is then, according to Mandel, when “all that began to change between 1830 and
1848 [...] . The violence and sweep of [...] rebellions struck fear into the bourgeoisie for the first
time” (12). In other words, the social reputation and the political value of the police changes as a result of uprisings led by an agent that was traditionally seen as diametrically opposed to the individual: the multitude. This is why, according to Mandel, the bourgeoisie realized that “perhaps their power would not reproduce itself eternally through the operation of market laws alone [and] a stronger state and a correspondingly more powerful police force were needed to keep a watchful eye on the lower orders, on the classes that were ever restive, periodically rebellious, and therefore criminal in bourgeois eyes” (12). Once the bourgeoisie managed to snatch the modern state from its aristocratic remains and took full control of its resources, it mimicked the robust size of the apparatus that they inherited. Thus, they would preserve their power in the face of a new class they produced themselves, the proletariat, especially, when it gathered to demonstrate in the increasingly crowded cities. In short, they would solidify a social order that relied heavily on impersonal bodies (the law and its enforcement agencies, the parliament and the police) to contain and subjugate undesired agents that were equally impersonal, such as the multitude. In more recent detective stories written beyond the Anglo-American literary field, this third agent would become more prominent, breaking the binary opposition between individualism and state.

Drawing from Burkhardt, Gramsci, and Mandel, the conflict underlying this rivalry ought not to be read merely as textual antagonism but also as the literary representation of an unresolved socio-historical conflict. For it is precisely to the mid nineteenth-century that the consolidation of the modern state takes place as well as the emergence of detective stories as a literary genre. Both phenomena are inextricably linked at their very core. Conversely, as Watt tells us, the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville’s On Democracy in America, a book published in French in 1835, features in its English translation of 1840 a footnote apologizing for the literal adoption of individualisme because the translator is unaware of any “English word exactly equivalent to the expression” (Henry Reeve, qtd. in Watt 240). It is no coincidence that it is also in the 1840s that
the word “individualism” first appears in English dictionaries (Watt 283), to almost simultaneously appear embodied in Poe’s Dupin. Significantly, according to Watt, not only the word individualism but also the appearance of the word “myth” can be dated to the same decade (228).

The two poles of the opposition I address in this dissertation are strongly intertwined. Early detective stories deploy individualism in direct relationship with a hostility towards the state without which it would have no raison d’être. One piece of the story cannot be conceived or justified without the other. In “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin introduces G— as a “contemptible” man even though he “had not seen him for several years” (Poe 200), while Watson says about Lestrade that his “insolence was maddening” (Doyle, “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” 314). To put it differently, in Poe and Doyle, both G— and Lestrade are not individuals but representatives of the state, while the detectives are the true individuals that stand for individualism itself due to their idiosyncratic and peculiar personalities. Dupin and G— feature in the three detective stories written by Poe during the 1840s, which will become the foundational tales of the detective genre: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). In each case, they incarnate a rivalry that will later be embodied by sundry private detectives and policemen from late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century Anglo-American detective stories. In this chapter, I will focus on a series of examples in which this rivalry is prominent: Poe’s Dupin against G—; Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes against Inspector Lestrade; Christie’s Hercule Poirot against Inspector Japp (also an officer of Scotland Yard); Hammett’s Continental Op against Personville’s crooked Chief of Police Noonan; and Chandler’s Philip Marlowe against LAPD Lieutenant Nulty.

The monotonous attributes of these state men without qualities are often announced in their names. Poe names G— following the early nineteenth-century Romantic trend of redacting names and years to make them look vaguer. The Parisian Prefect of Police does not even have a full name,
only an initial and a dash. Unlike his counterpart Dupin, he is neither singular, nor does he have an identity, a family, a lineage. He is almost anonymous. He is a non-entity, a nothing, which is recaptured a century later by Raymond Chandler when he names his LAPD Lieutenant “Nulty,” which is reminiscent of the word “null.” Similarly, “Lestrade,” which in Italian (le strade) points to the streets, is the man who possess a mundane knowledge only. Lestrade, and his colleague Gregson (again, a simple son of a Greg, an ordinary person), are lightly appraised by Sherlock, who in turn carries in his name the mark of the Old English “scir,” i.e: “bright” (Online Etymology Dictionary): he defines them as “the pick of a bad lot” (Doyle, A Study in Scarlet 24), the most you could expect from a mediocre institution such as Scotland Yard. Lestrade is “quick and energetic, but conventional” (24), that is, he has a prosaic personality incapable of even a minimum degree of imagination. For all the nuances that can be found in each author’s work, there is in each of them a common construction of the police as an entity that, although necessary, represents an instance of inferiority in contrast to the singularity of their private sleuths. “I’ve always had a secret hankering to be a detective” confesses Poirot’s sidekick, Captain Hastings, at the beginning of Agatha Christie’s first novel The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1916). “The real thing—Scotland Yard? Or Sherlock Holmes?” he is asked, to which he answers “Oh, Sherlock Holmes by all means” (12). This trend for private detectives, and their proliferation as the individualist heroes of early detective fiction, echoes the historical conflicts of the period examined by Mandel. The various characters that incarnate the state police force are a necessary foil to the private eye. They are textual functions: none of them are really interesting as characters in their own right, but for what they stand for. They all embody a doctrine, following a specific narrative strategy that is fundamental to understand detective fiction in Anglo-American literatures and beyond: personification. Detectives and policemen give a corporeal identity to immaterial abstractions: individualism and the modern state. Yet they do so in different ways, almost as if they have been
imagined in light of opposing modes of personification: whereas the detectives personify individualism by being singular and remarkable, the policemen personify the state by being nothing, emptied nobodies. Hence the success of Dupin, a character filled with mythical attributes, is “in the direct ratio” (Poe 120) of the failure of the police, an institution defined by lack.

One of the main ideas that features in the Theory of the Novel (1920), by the Hungarian philosopher György Lukács, resides in a distinction between the types of hero appearing in the epic and in that genre’s main successor: the modern novel. Lukács claims that “the epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual” (66) but a collective figure whose essential characteristic “is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community” (66); by contrast, it is only the novel that depicts individuals as such. The world of the epic is “a homogeneous world” (32) in which there is no room for individual characters to emerge because “even the separation between man and world, between ‘I’ and ‘you,’ cannot disturb its homogeneity” (32).

According to Lukács, the novelistic hero brings a distinct novelty: he is detached from his community. For Lukács, as Goldmann says, “if there is to be a novel there must be a radical opposition between man and the world, between the individual and society” (171). Thus, the rivalry between the individual and the state could be understood as an exacerbation of Lukács’s prerequisite: a detective story poses an even more explicit opposition between a specific kind of individual and a precise form of organized society. The rivalry goes a step further: Dupin and his heirs are not solely individuals; they are individualism itself incarnated. On the other hand, G—and his successors are not individuals at all; instead, they evoke a depersonalized entity, the modern state.

The exacerbation of Lukács’s opposition could be, then, read as an update of a Renaissance trope coined by the British literary critic Ian Watt: the “posture of ego contra mundum” (122). In his Myths of Modern Individualism (1996), Watt examines how Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan,
and Robinson Crusoe constitute the four myths that epitomize and endorse modern individualism. The different incarnations of the classic detective, not included by Watt in his study, reproduce this logic of a self against the world, only to a more specific purpose: to criticize the hindrances of the modern state. Like these myths, the classic detective operates “without any regard whatsoever to race, people, party, family or corporation,” adopting “the posture of ego contra mundum […] unaffected by, and hardly even noticing, the normative intermediaries between [itself] and the existential social and intellectual realities around” (122). Regardless of its particular incarnations (Dupin, Holmes, Poirot, The Continental Op, and so on), it is the archetypical figure of the private eye as such that shares several of these features. Equally, Watt says his four myths “are not completely real, historical persons; yet their audience yields to them a kind of genuine existence” (233). The same applies, for instance, to Sherlock Holmes, whose “house” opened at the fictional detective’s address on Baker Street, London, in 1990 and is visited every year by hundreds of thousands of tourists from all over the world. In his Seminar on “The Purloined Letter,” French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan already identifies these mythical dimensions when he defines G— as “a hapless prefect of police who plays the role, classic in this kind of mythology, of someone who has to find what is being sought after, but who cannot but end up losing the thread” and Dupin as “the character, more mythical still, who understands everything” (Lacan, Seminars 194). The mythical dimension of these founding characters holds for their heirs. Holmes, for example, even considers himself superior to his model: “No doubt you think that you are complimenting me in comparing me to Dupin [...] Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow” (Doyle, A Study in Scarlet 21). This intertextual gesture reinforces the individualist dimension of the private eye as a myth, unable to share with his forerunner a sort of symbolic title, only available to a sole heir: that of the wittiest detective.
Borrowing Watt’s terms, the tradition inaugurated by Poe rewrites the *ego* through the figure of the private detective as an embodiment of individualism, *contra mundum*, against a world, now rewritten under the form of a modern state that coerces him. Watt identifies *mundus* with a specific period in European history: the Counter-Reformation. The mechanisms that coerce his myths, essentially, are religious constraints; in turn, the counter-mechanisms that make them modern is the way in which they exert their agency. Watt cites French sociologist Émile Durkheim, who claims that ancestral myths unite societies: “the main function of myth was to maintain and strengthen social solidarity. For instance, totemic animals strengthen each group’s quasi-religious identity as opposed to that of other groups” (qtd. in Watt 230). Watt’s individualist myths, instead, do not unite societies but go against them. The paradigmatic example, perhaps, is Don Quixote’s tilting at windmills or, even more clearly, his unilateral release of galley slaves that were imprisoned by the rule of the Spanish King. It matters little if the state is an absolute monarchy as in Cervantes or an emerging liberal republic as in Poe, the myths of modern individualism follow their own rule above the law. Beyond the different historical periods and geographical settings, what is at stake in Watt’s *ego contra mundum*, is an issue that resides at the core of the political: the problem of sovereignty. Who is in charge? Who wields power? Don Quixote or the Spanish Monarch? Dupin or G—? Holmes or Scotland Yard? Alternatively, what is also at stake is the literary portrayal of this political conflict: how to represent representation? Early Anglo-American detective fiction problematizes this by personifying the impersonal institutions of the state in a body signifying nothing, opposing it to an individual that signifies, perhaps, much more than humans actually can, thus, producing an asymmetric rivalry.
1.1.3 An Asymmetric Rivalry

In literature, rivalries are indeed problematic: the line that separates the individualist hero and the state is frequently crossed in the classic detective story. The rivalry between *ego* and *mundus* is configured under the assumption that the boundary between individual and state is stable. Yet the permeability of this boundary appears when G— hires Dupin to solve the murders of the Rue Morgue and his success is such that he is called upon once more by the Parisian Police to solve “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842). As his sidekick says, Dupin “found himself the cynosure of the policial [sic] eyes; and the cases were not few in which attempt was made to engage his services at the Prefecture” (Poe 144). In Anglo-American detective stories, the *ego* is not only constrained but it is also coveted by *mundus*. Lestrade says of Holmes that he has been “of use to the force once or twice in the past, and we owe you a good turn at Scotland Yard” (Doyle, “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” 303). The state officers do not only contend against their individualist competitor, they are also fascinated by him. Hammett’s Continental Op is hired as an associate member of the Continental Detective Agency’s San Francisco office to solve the murder of newspaper publisher Donald Willsson. In the fictional town of Personville (ironically renamed by the narrator as Poisonville, a city filled with vice), he works closely with the city police, under the supervision of Chief Noonan. According to Argentine novelist and critic Ricardo Piglia, “to a certain extent, since Dupin, the detective is […] the police’s trustworthy man” (“Sobre el género policial” 69). Nonetheless, even when the police rely on the private detective to collaborate with them, this power relationship is more of an asymmetrical competition than an amiable collaboration. The private eye may be a confidant of the state police, but this does not mean that he is on their side. He is on his own side and his side only. If he works with the police, it is to take advantage of them and outwit them as much as he can. Dupin, for instance, operates as a privileged individual who “shall have no difficulty in obtaining the necessary permission” from the Prefect
of Police to see “the premises with our own eyes” (118). Similarly, when he visits the crime scene with Dupin, his sidekick mentions: “We came again to the front of the dwelling, rang, and, having shown our credentials, were admitted by the agents in charge” (119). But what are these so-called “credentials”? The sidekick does not say. Apparently, no explanation is needed to justify this quasi-supernatural privilege: neither Dupin nor the narrator work for any private or public institution that can attest for their legitimacy to investigate crime. Yet they manage to be admitted by the authorities. This privilege shows the extent to which Dupin is not just another citizen, but someone who holds power enough to surmount the hindrances usually applied by the state to its citizens. His individual wit is so strong, it surmounts the rules that a whole institution has for itself: it is difficult to imagine a junior officer, for instance, repeating the words of the private detective,—not to mention, the tone of his voice. In the voice of the sleuth resides the asymmetry of this rivalry: its amplification, its incidence, its confidence, are in clear contrast with the silence of the state officers.

This asymmetry looks even sharper in the hostility and fascination that shape the relationship between sleuths and policemen. Especially in the fact that these hostility and fascination are usually unidirectional. Sleuths often use the frailty of the thin line that separates them from state officers as a strategy to obtain information that might help them solve their case and take personal credit. The permeability of this boundary reappears in Hammett’s *Red Harvest*: When he is interrogating a witness, the Continental Op says: “‘I want five minutes’ talk with you. I’ve got nothing to do with Noonan except to queer his racket. I’m alone’” (52). Even if he is ultimately working for the city police, he manipulates the witness in this interrogation by underlining his autonomy from the state. Conversely, police officers do not display the same grudge towards the individualist hero that he holds for them. By contrst, they admire private investigators, in the same manner that Holmes esteems not Scotland Yard but a challenging opponent, such as the criminal
mastermind, Professor James Moriarty. G—, Lestrade, and Japp are fascinated by Dupin, Holmes, and Poirot. When Holmes finally solves “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder,” for instance, Lestrade utters his astonishment: “This is the brightest thing that you have done yet, though it is a mystery to me how you did it” (318). Instead of regretting his defeat, he is even relieved that Holmes has proven him wrong: “You have saved an innocent man’s life, and you have prevented a very grave scandal, which would have ruined my reputation in the force” (318). Similarly, Scotland Yard inspector Jimmy Japp acknowledges “there’s no man’s judgement I’d sooner take than” Poirot’s (Christie 115). Both parties are aware of their rivalry; but neither the hostility nor the fascination are reciprocal.

Yet this asymmetry evolves as the genre does. In hard-boiled fiction, this unrequited fascination vanishes. In Red Harvest, for instance, Chief Noonan convinces the Continental Op to get involved in a shooting only to try and get him killed because the Police Prefect has “guessed” that his antagonist is “going to make a nuisance” of himself (53). From Hammett onwards, police officers are no longer so enthralled by private detectives. All the idealization of the private eye’s unmatchable wit begins to slowly fade away, clearing the way for a more realistic representation of the agents involved with crime investigation. But regardless of the degree of idealization of the classic detective, in Hammett and Chandler, the state still needs the individualist hero; who in turn still does not truly need the state. In other words, the state is symbolically dominated, in Bourdieu’s terms, by the private individual. It is not without reason that G— or Lestrade must go to Dupin’s or Holmes’s offices to get their cases solved. The facility with which these rivals are so detached from each other resides on the one hand in a set of “symbolic disabilities” ascribed to the body of the state and on the other hand a supplementary series of mythical attributes assigned to the private detective, related in one way or another to individualism.
1.2 The Anglo-American Private Detective: A Disembodied Mind

1.2.1 Loneliness and Immunity: The Mythical Attributes of Individualism

Lukács (117), Goldmann (64), and Watt (238) all agree that individualism reaches its peak only when modernity is consolidated, during the nineteenth century, at the very same time that the first detective stories were shaping the classic model of the detective. According to Lukács it was then when “the inner importance of the individual has reached its historical apogee: the individual is no longer significant as the carrier of transcendent worlds [...] he now carries his value exclusively within himself” (117). No wonder, therefore, that it is also then when the private detective emerges as a triumphant character. When Tocqueville travels through the United States, he distinguishes individualism, “a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth” from “égoisme (selfishness) [...] a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with himself and to prefer himself to everything in the world” (qtd. in Watt 240). For Tocqueville, individualism is a “mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends” (qtd. in Watt 240). Whereas egoism is “a psychological term,” individualism is “a social description” (235). In brief, individualism is the institutionalization of egoism. It is it a new social order, an unprecedented way of structuring societies that must be understood as a consequence of major historical events and processes (colonisation, industrialisation, the American Independence, the French Revolution), that reshaped the West during its gradual abandonment of feudal economy. “Individualism,” obviously, is not the same as “individual.” Whereas the latter is already present in Descartes’ cogito ergo sum, which was established in the 1630s; the former is a programmatic idea that does not appear as such until after the Romantic movement, nor it can be understood without these historic events. Individualism, then, can be defined as a new social order that puts centre stage the individual, positioning it above what thus far had organised societies: community.
One of the main attributes of individualism that leads to the detective’s success against the state is loneliness. Dupin’s anonymous sidekick describes the prevailing atmosphere of the sleuth’s house in these terms: “Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. [...] We existed within ourselves alone” (Poe 108). Equally, when Watson meets Holmes he thinks “my companion was as friendless as a man as I was myself” (Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* 17). Hastings introduces himself and his master Poirot as individuals also lacking “near relations or friends” (Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 5). In one scene in *Red Harvest*, the Chief of Poisonville Police Noonan offers the Continental Op a few policemen to help him: “Would you like me to leave a couple of the boys with you, just to see nothing else happens?” (Hammett 67). Yet the Continental Op refuses to work in a team, because, as Chandler puts it, he takes pride in his loneliness; he is, quintessentially, a lonesome male (The Simple Art of Murder 42). The ways individualism was regarded in Western Societies, of course, underwent many transformations from the 1840s till the 1930s. When Tocqueville writes about individualism in the United States, he is one of the few not to describe it in derogatory terms. But both from the left and the right, individualism originated as a negative concept, criticized by thinkers of a diverse spectrum, from counter-revolutionary authors such as Edmund Burke and Xavier de Maître to one of the founders of utopian socialism, the Welsh philanthropist Robert Owen. Despite their political differences, they all used the term “individualist” as an insult to describe their political opponents. As Watt reminds us, it is only after the 1830s that the idea of putting the individual at the center of the political consolidated and evolved to a more positive light. From Tocqueville to the Manchester School, individualism changed the reception of Watt’s four myths, whose individualistic drive was initially conceived and perceived as excesses, sins, or, more generally, as behavior that was not supposed to be mimicked by their readers, but later shifted to a more admirable feature.
The first period of detective stories, specifically with Poe and Doyle, is a direct inheritor of this post-Romantic sensitivity. Watt claims that “in the Romantic period all four of our myths were widely recognized as having a universal importance, partly at least because they presented individualism as the most desirable human quality” (172). Inaugurated by Edgar Allan Poe, the most Romantic of American authors during the peak of the Romantic period in American literature, it is no coincidence that the detective genre extols the uniqueness of this illustrious upper-class individual. Even if hard-boiled detectives are far from being Romantic characters in the same way as Poe’s, their individualist subjectivity still is a given, an inheritance of Romanticism. Their individuality is never questioned. After the Great Depression this celebration of individualism must perhaps be nuanced in terms of survival in a hostile urban setting. But beyond the differences that separate these distant periods, detectives work alone, after all, because it is more praiseworthy to solve a case by oneself than as part of a team. Like the mythic figures discussed by Watt, these detectives are generally “stripped of any family connection” (123): they “exist in a domestic vacuum [...] either they have no recorded parents, siblings, wives or children, or they are alienated from other family members,” sharing the same “degree of isolation from the wider world around” (123). In a nutshell, private detectives are a paradigmatic exacerbation of individualism, which is encapsulated in domestic isolation. But why is this endorsement of isolation so prominent in the configuration of the classic detective? Perhaps, the reasons can be found in that seclusion allows for one of the main driving forces of individualism: individual freedom. Thanks to his seclusion, the private detective is more effective than the teams led by the state police. Being stripped of society, detached from any family or community, allows him to get rid of the bureaucratic constraints that would hinder his efficiency.

It is true that this loneliness is never absolute. Like Watt’s individualist myths, while the private eye does not “have close and trusting relationships with like-minded men or women,” he
“form[s] [his] only close tie with a male servant” (123). Though detached from society due to his unmatchable wit, the detective seldom works fully alone: he tends to be accompanied by a sidekick, who is often the narrator of the stories that tell his tale. Nevertheless, they are two lonelineses together, or as Watt describes Don Quixote and Sancho, they “form a duality of solitaries” (234). And despite their isolated position, there is still a hierarchy that establishes another asymmetrical relationship between them, which, unlike the one facing the detective against the state policeman, should be understood not as a rivalry but as an uneven alliance. The fascination the detective exerts on his subordinate is conspicuous and also unidirectional. Holmes, for instance, describes himself as “a conjurer [who] gets no credit once he has explained his trick.” He admits to Watson that “if I show you too much of my method of working, you will come to the conclusion that I am a very ordinary individual after all” (A Study in Scarlet 36), to which his companion replies: “I shall never do that [...] you have brought detection as near an exact science as it ever will be brought in this world” (36). This uneven alliance, indeed, is transformed in the twentieth-century with the cynical tone of hard-boiled fiction. For instance, in the way that Hammett introduces the Continental Op’s sidekick, Mickey Linehan, who comes from the “Continental’s San Francisco branch [because he] had wired for help” (117). This may lead us to think that the Continental Op is not as self-sufficient as his predecessors, but his sidekick again functions mainly as an inferior counterpart, described in ways that are not that different from a state antagonist. Linehan was “a big slob with sagging shoulders and a shapeless body that seemed to be coming apart at all its joints. His ears stood out like red wings, and his round red face usually wore the meaningless smirk of a half-wit. He looked like a comedian and was” (116). There are significant similarities between the way that the narrator depicts the private’s eye sidekick and the way it portrays state officers: through lacks and distortions, a “shapeless body,” disproportionately big ears, etc. All these physical features point to a hierarchy in which the detective is superior. In
all cases, the sidekick never influences completely the elucidations of his master. When the time comes to solve crimes, all the credit goes solely to the private detective who, impervious to the constrictions of society (be it the policemen’s or his sidekick’s), turns into an immune superhero.

The second attribute of individualism that defines the private eye is immunity. In “Typologie du Roman policier,” a structuralist analysis of detective stories, Tzvetan Todorov discusses “the detective’s immunity” to death (44). According to Todorov, “we cannot imagine Hercule Poirot [...] threatened by some danger, attacked, wounded, even killed” (44). Holmes is “temporarily killed” in “The Adventure of The Final Problem” (1893) only to return in The Hound of the Baskervilles (1901) because Conan Doyle needed the money only his most famous invention could bring in. This imperviousness to threats and vulnerability transcends early detective stories and it remains a convention that continues in hard-boiled fiction. This is why the Continental Op boasts that he has “framed millions, and nothing happened to me” (132). Piglia, in turn, establishes a sort of immunity to corruption: “In Chandler, everything is corrupted except for Marlowe, an honest professional who does his job well and does not get contaminated; he actually seems an urban expression of the cowboy” (“Sobre el género policial” 70). Chandler himself puts it in this way: the detective is “a man […] who is not himself mean […] neither tarnished nor afraid” (The Simple Art of Murder 41). This is true for Chandler’s detective and also for his forerunner: Hammett’s The Continental Op, who is impervious to Noonan’s corruption. In brief, the immortality and the honesty of the private eye add another layer that configures him not only as another modern myth of individualism, but also as a forerunner of twentieth-century superheroes, which is why Lacan defined Dupin as a “prototype of a latter-day swashbuckler, as yet safe from the insipidity of our contemporary superman” (“Seminar on The Purloined Letter,” Lacan.com). While Watt’s myths of modern individualism all die (punished, except for Crusoe, because of the abuse of their
individualist drive), classic detectives endure and even if they get involved with questionable means, it is for the sake of honest ends that distinguish them from criminals.

The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito revises in his work the concept of “immunity” by returning to its original Latin meanings. He argues that immunity should be understood as a “protective response in the face of a risk” that he labels “contagion,” i.e.: “the rupture of a previous equilibrium and the consequent need for its reconstitution” (*Immunitas* 2). He thus goes beyond the medical and political sense of immunity and contagion, merging them in a bio-political meaning: “Latin dictionaries tell us that the noun *Immunitas* [...] is a negative or privative term whose meaning derives from what it negates or lacks, namely, the *munus*. [...] (a task, obligation).” Someone who is immune is “exonerated, exempted [...] from the *pensum* of paying tributes or performing services for others [...] Those who are immune owe nothing to anyone” (5). What is the private eye exempted from paying? To begin with, he does not seem to be obligated to obey the same rules that apply for the rest of society, as seen, for instance, when Dupin gets by without credentials to visit the crime scene of “The Purloined Letter.” The *munus* negated by the private eye, thus, is related to the duties imposed by the modern state to its citizens. Following Esposito’s reading of immunity as a privileged and unilateral autonomy towards the community, it could be argued that the classic private detective displays a threefold immunity: not solely to death as Todorov argues, but also to the state and to failure. None of these three elements affect the classic detective. This proto-superhero’s immunity turns him into an exception: he is entirely lonely and immune when restoring social order, i.e: when he gathers in the fruits of his labour.

1.2.2 Labour and Money

Following Max Weber, Watt sees modern individualism as a “force which Protestantism had done much to bring to birth” (40). It is no coincidence that Crusoe, Watt’s last myth of modern
individualism (the only one detached as a secular myth), shares the fact of being conceived in Protestant societies with Dupin, Holmes, Poirot, The Continental Op, or Marlowe. By the nineteenth century, of course, religious morals have been out of the scope for such a long time that the threat to individualism no longer comes from religious doxa but from political habitus, linked not to the church but to the modern bureaucratic state. Unlike Faust, Don Quixote, or Don Juan, none of the early private detectives struggle against their sinful deeds (such as their pride, for instance), nor they are punished because of them. In this sense, they share with Watt’s myths their arete but are exempt from their hubris: this is why they are closer to the also unpunished Crusoe, conceived in the early eighteenth century, “in the context of developing individualism” (Watt xv). The punitive element, closely linked to death or hell, is no longer at stake in early detective stories. If there is punishment, it is solely confined to the criminal. What is at stake, though, is the relationship that private detectives establish with a habitus that, as Weber shows in his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), is closely linked to religion: labour. Richard Henry Tawney, in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926), states that “the distinctive note of Puritan teaching was [...] individual responsibility [whose] qualities arm the spiritual athlete for his solitary contest with a hostile world” (qtd. in Watt 163). This same teaching informs the early private detective’s almost Calvinist sense of self-importance and strenuous commitment to the lonely task of detection. As will be explored in Chapter 4, subsequent detective stories exacerbate both this loneliness and this commitment to labour in the shape of neoliberal workaholism, by depicting individuals who are deeply (and solely) engaged with their jobs, disregarding their families when and if they have them, ratifying Lukács’s motto that “to be a man in the new world is to be solitary” (36), and prolonging the domestic vacuum that Watt ascribes to his myths.

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4 Except for Chesterton’s Father Brown stories, religious agents are generally absent from early detective stories.
From the first scene of *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes’s singularity resides in a paradox involving his commitment to perform labour in a successful fashion: he appears to have no clear profession but at the same time he displays an obsessive devotion to his cases. When Watson meets him for the first time, he is “absorbed in his work” (9), spending his days at the medical laboratory “from morning till night” (8). Similarly, when the Continental Op is invited by a female character to “go down to Salt Lake” he replies “can’t, sister. Somebody’s got to stay here to count the dead” (158). A strict work ethic permeates both of them. The very professions of detectives, far from being arbitrary, are part of the endorsement of individualism against the bureaucratic corporatism of the state. While Dupin, Holmes, and Poirot work for themselves as amateur freelance investigators (never fully joining any team or working as employees), the Continental Op and Marlowe are professional independent agents hired by corporations. Beyond these variations a common factor remains: they all work for the private sector. By contrast, G—, Lestrade, Japp, Nulty, and Noonan are public policemen. They all work for the metropolitan police of their cities: the Parisian Prefecture, London’s Scotland Yard, Los Angeles or the fictional Poisonville’s Police Department. In short, while detectives are immersed in the market, policemen are constricted by the state. Christie’s initial description of Poirot, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), states that he “had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police” (19). The fact that he is no longer an officer of the state but a retired policeman, based in London to run a private detective agency, is no coincidence. It reproduces the literary boundaries between individual and state that are at the core of the asymmetric rivalry between them. Similarly, the fact that the Continental Op does not work strictly for himself but for a private agency does not diminish his sense of individualism: “It’s right enough for the Agency to have rules and regulations, but when you’re out on a job you’ve got to do it the best way you can” (117), he says, contrasting his individual effectiveness to the strictures of the Continental Operation Agency, a
fictional corporation, inspired by the historical Pinkerton National Detective Agency. The same can be said about Philip Marlowe, whose cases start only once he becomes a private sleuth after being dismissed, for insubordination, from the District Attorney’s office of Los Angeles County.

The labour performed respectively by private detectives and state policemen, according to Mandel, is linked to an underlying class distinction between them. G— or Lestrade were modeled on state policemen who “were not rich entrepreneurs or gentlefolk; [nor] members of the ruling class, but generally belonged to the lower middle class” (14-15). Instead, “the real hero of the criminal detective story [...] had to be not the plodding cop but a brilliant sleuth of upper-class origins. And that is what Dupin and Holmes [...] are” (14-15). As Poe’s narrator becomes acquainted with Dupin, social class is precisely one of the first attributes he notices: “This young gentleman was of an excellent —indeed of an illustrious family” (107). Inversely, Marlowe introduces Lieutenant Nulty with the comment that he “looked poor enough to be honest” (Chandler, Farewell, My Lovely 212). The class abyss that separates them is visible from both sides. The new subjectivity of the private eye, that would put the self at the centre of artistic representation, must be understood as the product of a twofold cultural shift of views and attitudes towards individualism. Firstly, in its relationship with labour: “Whereas Genesis had presented labour as a curse for Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God’s command,” says Watt, “the Protestant ethic taught that untiring stewardship of the gifts of God was a paramount and religious obligation” (122). This resignification of labour, from the Jewish to the Protestant worldview, is clearly present in Dupin or Holmes, especially, the sense of work as duty to oneself. This brings to the second relationship of this twofold cultural shift: namely, the one that individualism establishes with loneliness. Watt points out that “previous traditions had made leaving home a punishment. Aristotle wrote in Politics that the man ‘who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god’ Among the Greeks and the
Jews, banishment from the social group was regarded as a personal catastrophe” (112). After Romanticism, working by oneself is longer a negative attribute. While for Lukács, the modern novel’s “loneliness […] is the torment of a creature condemned to solitude and devoured by a longing for community” (38), the private eye’s loneliness enhances his commitment to his labour and the merit of his detecting skills, considering the fact that he solves most of his cases alone, often barely needing to move from his desk.

Even in hard-boiled fiction, when the detective leaves his office and goes to the “mean streets” his loneliness remains unaltered. Daniel Defoe, in a chapter of his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) entitled “Of Solitude,” argues that seclusion is not only to be relished but also experienced in contact with others: “I enjoy much more solitude in the middle of the greatest collection of mankind in the world, I mean, at London […] than ever I could say that I enjoy’d in eight and twenty years confinement to a desolate island” (qtd. in Watt 150). Loneliness and labour are thus inseparable from their necessary contrast: the people and its formal representation in the modern state. This helps to explain why the solitary freelance work of these early detectives is performed in Europe’s most populous cities, London and Paris, the only ones whose population surpassed a million inhabitants from the 1850s till the 1870s (Chandler and Fox 303-342).

The relationship between this lonely individual and society cannot but be tense, due to the role and the ever-shifting contours of both market and state. Holmes describes himself as “an unofficial personage” (25), underlining the parastatal dimension of his job. Hesitating to take on the case of *A Study in Scarlet*, he portrays his task almost as if it was a clandestine one performed in the shadows: “Supposing I unravel the whole matter, you may be sure that Gregson, Lestrade, and Co. will pocket all the credit […]. He knows I am his superior and acknowledges it to me; but he would cut his tongue out before he would own it to any third person” (25). Public recognition becomes vain for Holmes as what is its value when compared with his own private delusion of
greatness? Despite being this “unofficial personage,” he acts as if he were a supervisor of the Scotland Yard officers. For instance, when Lestrade and Gregson remove the corpse of a victim, they only do so once Holmes authorizes them. The following dialogue illustrates the asymmetry that involves both parties and cast doubts on the “unofficial” nature of Holmes’s position:

“Have you made any inquiries as to this man Stangerson?”
“I did at once, sir,” said Gregson. “I have had advertisements sent to [...] newspapers [...] .”
“Have you sent to Cleveland?”
“We telegraphed this morning.”
“How did you word your inquiries?”
“We simply detailed the circumstances [...]” (30).

Rather than simply taking advice from an external consultant, Lestrade and Gregson seem to be reporting to their boss. Likewise, the Continental Op treats his sidekick, a co-worker from the Agency, as his subordinate: “I don’t want you birds to send any writing back to San Francisco without letting me see it first” (Hammett 118). The power structure is clear: the classic Anglo-American detective commands crime investigation with an entitlement of authority that seems naturally obtained. Dupin, Holmes, the Continental Op, they are all egos who order the world, in the twofold meaning of the verb: they put in and give orders.

Before his failure to locate the purloined letter, G— confesses that he is driven to succeed because “the reward is enormous” (203). In early pre-hardboiled detective stories, money might motivate crime, but rarely its investigation. Even if G— offers this generous reward admitting he is “perfectly willing to take advice and to pay for it [...] fifty thousand francs to anyone who would aid me in the matter” (207) and Dupin replies “fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter” (207), payment is not the sine qua non that it is in Hammett or Chandler. Dupin welcomes the money as a reward, as a financial recognition of his unmatched knowledge, not because he needs it for his survival. As Derrida reminds us, Dupin holds “a remnant of his paternal inheritance, apparently surrendered without calculation to the
debtor who knows how, by calculating (‘rigorous economy’), to draw from it a rente, an income, the surplus-value of a capital that works alone” (“The Purveyor of Truth” 105). So Dupin does not really need income. Instead, hard-boiled detectives, because they are depicted in terms of a more realistic aesthetic, must engage with more prosaic financial concerns in their lives. As Piglia argues, Hammett and Chandler display “a narrative mode […] that is linked to a materialistic […] sense of reality” (“Sobre el género policial” 69). According to Piglia, Marlowe or the Continental Op are professionals, “someone who does a job and receives a salary whereas in Poe or Holmes the detective is often an amateur who ‘selflessly’ volunteers to decipher an enigma” (69). Although, it should be nuanced that the hard-boiled private detective does not, strictly speaking, earn a salary but an occasional remuneration for his services: he is not a working-class wage earner; he is an upper-class freelancer, a social class that puts him in a superior dimension in front of the state officers. Holmes sees himself as above bureaucratic and material hindrances, thus aiming to be regarded beyond social material recognition, not even claiming credit once he has solved “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” (1903). When Lestrade asks him: “And you don’t want your name to appear?” he replies: “Not at all. The work is its own reward. Perhaps I shall get the credit also at some distant day, when I permit my zealous historian to lay out his foolscap once more — eh, Watson?” (319). Of course, the irony of the scene is that this “distant day” is re-signified and actualised with every reading of the story. Holmes is satisfied with what he regards as a much more valuable reward than mundane compensations: literary glory, a key component to make him another myth of modern individualism.

The absence or presence of money entail the twofold nature of the classic detective. With hard-boiled fiction, money becomes dominant in the configuration of the investigation and the condition that allows the resolution of crimes. Poirot emerges as an eccentric character when Hastings first describes him as “a great dandy” (Christie, The Mysterious Affair at Styles 12).
Dupin and Holmes could also be seen as dandies: precisely because of their lack of need for money. As Piglia mentions, in “early detective stories [...] material relationships appear sublimated: crimes are ‘free’ precisely because the gratuitousness of the motive strengthens the enigma” (“Sobre el género policial” 70). That Holmes does not need financial compensation directly relates to the fact that despite his commitment to perform labour successfully, he is still an idle aristocrat who can afford to be “the most incurable lazy devil that ever stood in shoe leather” (Doyle, A Study in Scarlet 25). Holmes is not a medical doctor or student, but an amateur whose profession is not that different from his other addictions linked more to dandy leisure: cocaine, chess, or the violin. Dupin, Holmes, or Poirot might receive money for their work, but they value more the immaterial recognition of having bested the state. By contrast, the Continental Op and Philip Marlowe could not conceive of working without financial compensation. When Hammett’s detective discusses the case with his client, even if working alone is still an imperative, isolation is not enough: “You really want the town cleaned up? [...] I’d have to have a free hand [...] run the job as I pleased. And [...] a ten-thousand-dollar retainer [...] If you want the job done, you’ll plank down enough money” (42-44). The Continental Op is no longer an amateur sleuth working for pure intellectual pleasure. Unlike his predecessors, he is a professional hired to solve a case in exchange for money, who, like Crusoe, “earns his rewards by his activity” (Watt 165). While the presence of money will lead not only to professionalization but also to corruption, its absence paves the way for an obsessive passion for knowledge.

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5 This sublimation could also be understood in gender terms: as Elisa Glick defines, the dandy is “at the center of debates about the history of the homosexual in the West” (129). In other words, the dandy, “the premier model of modern gay subjectivity” (129), is located in the antipodes of the state, whose DNA not only is masculine but is also perceived as straight, even though that is not always necessarily the case. As Rita Segato claims, to define the masculine sovereign in terms of “heterosexuality” is not accurate, because, strictly speaking, we know little about his sexuality” (94). To be sure, the problem of the classic detective’s queerness opposed to the state’s perceived heteronormativity is a fascinating one, if unfortunately beyond the scope of this dissertation.
1.2.3 From Knowledge to Success

In *The Figure of the Detective* (2013), Charles Brownson defines the classic private detective as someone who “embodies the context of rationality as a spokesman for the power of thought and intelligibility of the universe, which is possible a more important function than solving the crime” (14). The private eye’s individual uniqueness is linked to this “passion for definite and exact knowledge” (Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* 8), a feature that conversely ends up isolating him: “No man lives or has ever lived who has brought the same amount of study and of natural talent to the detection of crime which I have done” (22). Even if Holmes sometimes regards the results of this uniqueness as negative because “there is no crime to detect, or, at most, some bungling villainy with a motive so transparent that even a Scotland Yard official can see through it” (22), his complaints are only apparent. They introduce a case to be solved, a case that interrupts this absence of challenges, thus highlighting the privileged zenith in which he is in thanks to his knowledge. The private eye’s is the voice of truth because it is the voice of science: the laws of physics, forensics, and the natural sciences in general are embedded in his speech, which dissects the arguments of his opponents, proving them wrong and illogical. While according to Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig, it is the state that is supposed to be the Hegelian “embodiment of Reason” (115), in these early detective stories the opposite is true: it is not the state that embodies reason but its antagonist, this intellectual, mythical super-hero who stands for individualism. This is the case since the first detective story: before getting into the intricacies of the plot of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), when the narrator introduces Dupin’s psychological traits, exclusively in a positive light, he underlines this thought-reading process, which will lay the foundations for the detective as this intellectual myth: “At such times I could not help remarking and admiring [...] a peculiar analytic ability in Dupin” (109), he asserts, favouring the reader’s identification with his puzzlement and fascination towards the private eye. When he first meets
Dupin, he goes on to remark: “I was astonished, too, at the vast extent of his reading; and, above all, I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervour, and the vivid freshness of his imagination” (105). The Anglo-American private detective’s virtues are first and foremost cerebral. Or, rather, while he gives corporeal entity to individualism, at the same time he is but cerebral drive, pure wit and reason bereft of an actual body and emotions but filled with the by-products of knowledge: imagination, literacy, erudition, empathy, intelligibility, eloquence, powers of observation. As for his eloquence, Derrida argues that Dupin “is the only one who ‘speaks’ in the story. His discourse dominates with loquacious, didactic bragadocio, truly magisterial, handing out directives, giving directions, righting wrongs, teaching everyone” (“The Purveyor of Truth” 110). Lukács, at his turn, claims that “the language of the absolutely lonely man is [...] monological” (38). Once more, loneliness is depicted in a positive light: talking alone does not imply alienation but power. Knowledge, in Foucauldian terms, confers power on the private eye, because it bestows upon him a direct control of truth.

Holmes’s knowledge is directly linked not only to his eloquence but mainly to his ability to read. Literacy is fundamental to understand the detective as another myth of modern individualism. In “The Adventure of the Red Circle” (1911), Scotland Yard’s Gregson shares intelligence with a Mr. Leverton, an American officer of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, the largest private law enforcement organization at the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite the evident strength of this alliance, the Scotland Yard officer expects that “as usual, [Holmes] knows a good deal that we don’t” (8). Holmes, mysteriously, always knows. And knowledge is by no means an innocent attribute. In Dupin’s last appearance, “The Purloined Letter,” it takes a different shape: slyness. It is fair to say that Dupin even acts like a criminal to outwit his interlocutors, G—and D—, the state officer and the criminal mastermind. In order to identify the location of the purloined letter, he robs the robber. He becomes a rogue, mirroring the criminal. By the same token, in order to attract
the potential criminal of *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes uses Watson’s name to post an ad because “If I use my own, some of these dunderheads [Scotland Yarders] would recognize it and want to meddle in the affair” (42). Dupin’s and Holmes’s slyness are at the service of a behaviour that may sometimes be considered outlawry but in the end shares the aim of contributing to solving the crime at all costs. This sly use of knowledge will only be exacerbated in the Continental Op and Marlowe, the urban rascals.

As Brownson claims, “the classic detective ultimately provides his rational explanation” (58), which is always the correct interpretation of the case, making him the one and only triumphant character. Knowledge, in all these forms, guarantees success to the individual who knows how to manage it. Hence Mandel’s observation: “The detective story is the realm of happy ending. The criminal is always caught. Justice is always done. Crime never pays. Bourgeois legality, bourgeois values, bourgeois society, always triumph in the end. It is soothing, socially integrating literature, despite its concern with crime, violence and murder” (47). Similarly, several decades previously, Siegfried Kracauer, in his treatise *On The Detective Novel* (1923), had claimed that “the end of the detective novel is the undisputed victory of reason” (73). In this rational knowledge lies the expectation that the classic detective will eventually reveal “who has done it.” An expectation that is always met: in contrast with the failing state, Dupin solves each of the three cases in which he features. This same high rate of success can be seen in subsequent detectives: Holmes and Poirot, strictly speaking, fail only once and, even then, only partially.

The success of this myth of individualism is taken for granted as a normalized product of his disembodied flawless mind. And these expectations are often met thanks to a mastery of knowledge, which will eventually triumph, if only after confronting a series of obstacles. Argentine thinker Daniel Link describes this process as follows: “Poe’s Dupin is the one that can see what no one else can. Other authors will camouflage this boastfulness portraying the detective
as someone who, even if he does so belatedly, eventually sees what is evident. That is Marlowe’s case […] one of the reasons why […] he became famous: like the common man, [he] does not see things immediately. But in the end, he knows” (7). Thus, success and failure are defined according to the horizons of expectations of the genre. In Red Harvest (1929), the private eye must solve a murder but second and more important he is hired to clean up the fictional Poisonville, a task that he accomplishes, among other things, by getting people killed. “You know now that your son was killed by young Albury […]. All’s lovely and peaceful again” (64) says the Continental Op to his client to later insist “I’m not licked, old top. I’ve won. You came crying to me that some naught men had taken your little city away from you. […] Where are they now?” (202). In reading these final sentences of the book, it is hard not to agree with Kracauer and Mandel: social order is successfully restored thanks to the private detective who, immune to death, state interference and failure, imposes the rational mastery of his knowledge, making individualism succeed against a failing state.

1.3 The Anglo-American State: A Dismembered Body

1.3.1 From Blindness to Illiteracy: The Symbolic Disabilities of the State

Whereas Anglo-American detectives embody individualism through a set of mythical attributes, in other words, with elements that magnify their image; policemen are defined by symbolic deficiencies that, in one way or another, shrink the state’s dimensions. Dupin displays an omnipresent and strong voice; G—, by contrast, is notable for his muteness. Holmes shows a high level of literacy that allows him to read situations faster and better; Lestrade, instead, is essentially unlettered. Whatever private sleuths have is conspicuous by its absence in state officers. This asymmetry, as has often been noted, offers a foil for the main character: policemen are eclipsed by the mythic attributes of the private eye, who shines all the more thanks to the mediocrity of his
counterparts. It is because of these lacks that state officers are doomed to failure at the hand of the individualistic hero. But of course, the different embodiments of the Anglo-American state are not merely defined by their opponents. Beyond the mutually necessary relationship that both poles hold, officers can still be read by themselves, as autonomous characters that follow a twofold pattern. They are constituted through a set of encompassing metonymies: they firstly evoke the institution of the police in its entirety. In turn, the police personify the modern state. Like a Russian doll, they are a part for the whole, which at the same time is a part of an even greater whole.

This set of metonymies shows a gradual personification of the state. In philosophical discourse, the contractualist tradition, rooted in European thinkers of the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, had equally imagined the modern state in corporeal terms. Anglo-American detective fiction shows a continuity in which this imagination persists. The title of British philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), the most important early modern treatise on sovereignty, is named after a mythic creature, a sea monster of Jewish tradition. A supernatural animal of huge proportions in Jewish scriptures, the Leviathan embodied the sovereign in European contractualism in so far as the sovereign was humanized and, more specifically, masculinized, in the frontispiece of Hobbes’s book. Designed by French artist Abraham Bosse, the image famously features a giant crowned body of a bearded male, composed of many other men. These specific attributes, charged with masculinity in the same way as early detective stories, show the extent to which, sovereignty, as Argentinean feminist thinker Rita Segato often observes, has traditionally been a matter circumscribed to men (*La Guerra contra las mujeres*, 94). Similarly, a century later, in his treatise on the *Social Contract* (1762), Swiss thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau still relies heavily in the medieval trope of the body politic, a rewriting of the equation of the King with the state, in which the human body acts as a metaphor for the republican sovereign. Yet both Hobbes and Rousseau imagine the state as amorphous, abstract and depersonalized. As Samuel
Mintz mentions, “Leviathan and Hobbes's sovereign are unities compacted out of separate individuals” (2), they are not individuals themselves. Early detective stories personify the mythic figure of the omnipotent state, who would no longer be shaped in the prestigious figure of the King but in mundane and prosaic policemen with proper names.

The very same recourse to personification that Poe and his heirs use to build private sleuths as embodiments of individualism is present in the construction of characters such as G—, Lestrade or the Inspector Japp. What distinguishes them is that while the private eye has a well-defined personality, the policemen’s individuality is blended into the amorphous and depersonalized image that philosophers used to imagine the state. The personification of the state in mutilated bodies shows the hollowness of the state. And it does so through a set of symbolic disabilities: “A consideration of the police institution encounters nothing essential at all. Its power is formless, like its nowhere tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states” (“Critique of Violence” 287), argues Walter Benjamin. This will be a common pattern in detective stories, in Anglo-American literature and beyond: the permanent dismembering of policemen’s body as a symptom of the lacks that the modern state exhibits on a more general level. While Dupin, Holmes, or Poirot are pure wit, bereft of a corporeal entity, the state has a body marked by figurative mutilations. Sometimes these symbolic disabilities are phrased as blindness, sometimes as deafness: Lacan describes the Parisian Police as the “glance that sees nothing” and, particularly, G— as “a deaf man” (“Seminar on The Purloined Letter,” Lacan.com). One of the most prominent symbolic disabilities is related to the inability to speak, i.e. symbolic muteness. Hence Dupin’s characteristic mode is soliloquy; all the other characters are left silenced for most of the three stories in which he features. After hearing Dupin’s speculations on “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” his sidekick says: “I stared at the speaker in mute astonishment” (120). A similar silent fascination characterizes G—, the Prefect of the Parisian Police. Their silence enhances Dupin’s
individual force to the detriment of the voice of the state, which remains speechless, and thus powerless, unable to utter narratives. The body of the state also faces paralysis when Dupin claims that the apparently unsolvable murders of the Rue Morgue “have sufficed to paralyze the powers” (120) of the police. Immaturity could be read as yet another symbolic disability such as when Dupin says of G—that “many a schoolboy is a better reasoner than he” (Poe 208). Likewise, Watson compares Lestrade to “a child asking questions of its teacher” (Doyle, “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” 320). The individualistic hero’s seniority, which is more symbolic than literal as most characters are middle-aged men, assumes more knowledge on the side of the private eye. This asymmetry of knowledge evidences the hierarchy in which the private sleuth and the state officers are embedded.

Because of these symbolic disabilities, the body of the state also produces negatively-charged affective encounters. “I found that [Holmes] had many acquaintances, and those in the most different classes of society. There was one little sallow, rat-faced, dark-eyed fellow, who was introduced to me as Mr. Lestrade” (17), says Watson of his first meeting with the Scotland Yard inspector. The Continental Op describes the looks of Poisonville police officers similarly: “The first policeman I saw needed a shave. The second had a couple of buttons off his shabby uniform. The third stood in the centre of the city’s main intersection […] with a cigar in one corner of his mouth” (Hammett 4). The negative affect of these encounters goes beyond the surface of the policemen’s physicality. Policemen are not merely “a shabby, shifty-eyed crew” but one “without enthusiasm for the job ahead of them” (Hammett 51). Their body, then, informs the apathy that will lead to their incompetence to solve crimes. The Continental Op introduces Noonan to the readers as “a fat man with twinkling greenish eyes” (22). The sleuth constantly reminds the reader of Noonan’s weight, bestowing on him an unpleasant negative affect that follows in his wake. All through these narratives, the reader is reminded of the physical characteristics displayed by the
different incarnations of the dismembered state. As for the body of the detectives, the reader knows that the Continental Op is a “fat, middle-aged, hard-boiled, pig-headed guy” (85). Equally, Poirot is famous for his moustache, but references to the detective’s body are rare compared to the attention given on the one hand to his flawless mind and on the other hand to the policemen’s symbolic disabilities. Similarly, Marlowe describes LAPD Lieutenant Nulty’s office as a “smelly little cubbyhole” (228), its floor covered with “dirty brown linoleum” (212). He first introduces him as a “lean-jawed sourpuss with long yellow hands” (211). The bodies of state officers and the spaces they move in insist on these kinds of physiological anomalies, that often echo their negative psychological features. Both Lestrade and G— were based on the same historical state policeman: the first chief of French Sûreté Nationale, Eugène-François Vidocq, whom Dupin first describes by conceding that he is “a good guesser, and a persevering man” (118). Nonetheless, because he lacks “educated thought, he erred continually by the very intensity of his investigations” (118). His constant ineffectiveness is rooted in his physicality, specifically in his symbolic blindness: “He impaired his vision by holding the object too close. He might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in so doing he, necessarily, lost sight of the matter as a whole” (118). G— or Vidocq, unlike Dupin, do not have sufficient knowledge to see properly. Dupin can “see” in the sense of having the ability to observe beyond the surface. This is why, more than a century later, Derrida will call Dupin “the purveyor of truth” (“The Purveyor of Truth” 65). The historical and the literary policemen, by contrast, share a common deficiency linked to blindness: “impaired […] vision,” “lost sight.”

The state’s symbolic disabilities go beyond physical characteristics. The state policemen lack all the by-products of knowledge (imagination, literacy, erudition, empathy, intelligibility, eloquence, powers of observation) that are so iconic of the sleuth, almost as though these by-products were attached to his body. In fact, the most prominent disability of the policemen is not
physical but intellectual and rooted in class: the inability to read. Symbolic illiteracy is grounded in the historical process that Mandel and Derrida underline when they describe the socio-economic differences separating the prototype of the private eye and the state officer. Vidocq is illiterate (“without educated thought”) and it is this disability that prevents him from solving cases. To put it differently, because the state cannot read in Anglo-American detective stories, it is not fit to maintain power, or more broadly, it cannot uphold sovereignty. The inability to interpret clues accurately is often reproduced in early depictions of policemen. G—, Lestrade, Gregson, Japp all share this structural illiteracy. Lacan claims that in G— “everything is arranged to induce in us a sense of his imbecility. Which is powerfully articulated by the fact that he and his confederates never conceive of anything beyond what an ordinary rogue might imagine” (Seminar on “The Purloined Letter” Lacan.com). Lacan’s description of the Parisian policeman also holds for his inheritors. In A Study in Scarlet, Holmes asks Gregson if he remembers a particular case, to which the officer of course replies negatively. “Read it up—you really should,” responds Holmes (29). The private eye has often read everything there is to be read well before his adversaries. And the fact that this literacy is a source of pride for him shows that there is something at stake in this advantage. Equally, in “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” (306), Lestrade is unable to read documents containing important clues such as the draft of the will; he seems to be incapable of inferring more inventive conclusions that could go beyond his first impression. Lestrade defines himself as “a practical man” (315): “When I have got my evidence I come to my conclusions,” he acknowledges (314). He is depicted as someone who refuses to problematize reality. He does not subject himself to the complexities of the written word. Similarly, Nulty admits he “ain’t quite bright” (233). These are the non-attributes that define the classic policemen in Anglo-American detective stories: they are naive, overly literal, incapable of perusing reality as a text to grasp its connotations, unable to interpret creatively or think laterally as the individualist hero does.
The illiteracy of the police resides in the fact that they are incapable of understanding a language in which the private detective is perfectly fluent. This becomes evident, for instance, in *A Study in Scarlet*, when Holmes goes beyond the easiest explanation thanks to his linguistic knowledge: when he reveals that “Rache” is not an allusion to a “Rachel” (as Lestrade thinks) but the German word for “revenge” (34). Again, in “The Adventure of the Red Circle” (1911), Holmes’s knowledge of Italian enables him to solve the case. But what is at stake here are not merely specific skills such as being good at German or Italian. It is not a problem of tongues but of language, more broadly, an element that will be reproduced in detective stories beyond the Anglo-American tradition. It could be argued that the fundamental reason why the police fail is strongly connected to this symbolic illiteracy. G—, Lestrade, and Japp are unable to read because they fail to interact with what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order, the realm of language. While symbols remain illegible for the police, “Dupin makes linguistic, mathematical, religious observations, he constantly speculates about the symbol” (“Seminar on the Purloined Letter” 202). Language and force, the Symbolic and the Real, incarnated in the private detective and the state policemen respectively, are constantly opposed in these texts.

The Continental Op, for instance, is rebuked by his client in those terms: “You’re a great talker [...] I know that. A two-fisted, you-be-damned man with your words. But have you got anything else? Have you got the guts to match your gall? Or is it just the language you’ve got?” (Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*, 42). Of course, this opposition must be nuanced, since The Continental Op displays more than the mastery of symbols, and one of the main innovations that Hammett offers to distinguish his private sleuth from his forerunners is that he is a tough man on the mean streets. His toughness, perhaps more connected with force, with a willingness to enter the Real, seems to mark the difference between the “hard-boiled” detective and the “armchair investigator.” But even so, The Continental Op’s eloquence is in direct opposition to force,
encapsulated in “the guts.” From Doyle to Hammett there is a transition in the figure of the
detective, who is portrayed gradually more and more as an aggressive man, but his intellectual wit
remains a common attribute. As Walter Benjamin claims, “state power [...] has eyes only for
effects” (“Critique of Violence” 292). Its blind body has been designed not to decode but to
execute, to perform, even if it does so with another main component that structures the portrayal
of the state in Anglo-American detective stories: ineptitude.

1.3.2 From Incompetence to Corruption

In one of the very first scenes of A Study in Scarlet, Holmes mocks Scotland Yarders as follows:
“You are doing so well now that it would be a pity for anyone to interfere.’ There was a world of
sarcasm in his voice as he spoke” (33). His air of superiority is mainly rooted in his competence:
unlike his antagonists, he knows he has the aptitude to solve crime. Similarly, Poirot complains
about Inspector Japp, confessing that he is “disappointed” in him since “he has no method!”
(Christie, The Affair at Styles 131). Having no method entails lacking rationality, knowledge of
how to structure the interpretation of a case. In Poe, Doyle, and Christie, the state’s incompetence
is rooted in this lack. In Poe, for instance, the Parisian police are always late to understand the
crime scene, where everything has been solved by the private eye even before their arrival —a
genre convention that will be reproduced for decades. By contrast, in line with the historical
transformations of individualism, hard-boiled detectives and policemen display something that is
absent in Dupin, Holmes, and Poirot: a loss of innocence. They add a less naive layer to the
dismembered body of the state: its evident ties with criminality. In Red Harvest, policemen are no
longer incompetent agents, unable to solve crime; on the contrary, now they are crooked agents
who help to cover up for criminals or they sometimes are even criminals themselves. Hammett’s
novel opens with this paradigmatic shift in the detective story tradition: The Continental Op,
leafing through the newspapers, reads: “The Herald said the chief of police could best show his own lack of complicity by speedily catching and convicting the murderer of murderers” (13). Here, the fact that the state police are unable to solve crime is no longer due to their illiteracy or their incompetence, but to their structural corruption that must be concealed in order for them to survive.

In Hammett, but also in Chandler, “crime […] is always surrounded by money: murders, theft, scams, blackmailing, kidnapping, they are all grounded in economics” (Piglia, “Sobre el género policial” 69-70). The appearance of money is inseparable from the rise of corruption. In hard-boiled stories, the state’s inability to solve crime is no longer linked to bureaucratic ineptitude but to immorality. What the dismembered body lacks is now no longer competence, but honesty. Poisonsville’s police, for example, receive bribes from the criminals (56); by contrast, the Continental Op does not accept even a bonus from his client because the private agency that hired him has “rules against taking bonuses or rewards” (63). Corruption is thus circumscribed to and is a monopoly of the state. The lack of participation of the private eye in these state affairs is what magnifies his figure still more, in contrast to the mundane interests of his adversaries. Infected with corruption, the body of the state ends up resorting to force so as to conceal its own criminal structure. In Red Harvest, “there’s no use taking anybody into court, no matter what you’ve got on them. They own the courts, and, besides, the courts are too slow for us now” (118). The grim state depicted in hard-boiled fiction, embodied in Chief Noonan, is exacerbated when he wants “to hang the killing” (38) on innocent bystanders to clean his name from a massive corrupt scheme in which he is involved. “I flatter myself that I can distinguish at a glance the ash of any known brand, either of cigar or of tobacco. It is just in such details that the skilled detective differs from the Gregson and Lestrade type” (Doyle, A Study in Scarlet 35), says Holmes. In other words, what distinguishes ego and mundus is that the private eye holds the knowledge to interact with language while the police only knows (and it is trained to) interact with what is not susceptible to symbolized through
language: force. Inversely, as Benjamin claims, “a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding’ language” (“Critique of Violence” 289), to which the state officers are somehow unable to access. Whereas knowledge would bring success to the sleuth; force would doom the policemen to failure.

1.3.3 From Force to Failure

Both these “symbolic disabilities” and the corruption of the state result in two symptoms: the recourse to force and its subsequent permanent failure. Incapable of dealing with anything else other than physical coercion, the state depicted in these early detective stories tries to compensate for its symbolic disabilities by displaying its right to sheer force: “Our official detectives may blunder in the matter of intelligence but never in that of courage” says Watson about the Scotland Yarders (Doyle, “The Adventure of the Red Circle” 10). When Holmes is momentarily paralyzed, unable to solve “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder,” Lestrade threatens him by saying: “you may look for your tramp, and while you are finding him, we will hold on to our man” (306). Because Scotland Yard has the right to coerce, it seems that this temporarily inverts the asymmetric rivalry between the individual and the state. But in the end, the monopoly of corruption (and force) is what makes them fail. In the classic detective story, the state is the only entity able to apply force, and this exclusiveness is seen not as powerful but as a lack. It is seen not as an asset but as a flaw, not a mythical attribute but as yet another symbolic disability. Facing his frustration to locate “The Purloined Letter,” G—only can resort to the fact that he is in possession of a set of keys, “with which I can open any chamber or cabinet in Paris. For three months a night has not passed, during the greater part of which I have not been engaged, personally, in ransacking the D–Hotel” (203). Thus, state power becomes useless without the literacy of symbols: being able to open any door is not enough to solve a case. When G— shows up at Dupin’s office to hire him for
the case, his frustration becomes explicit: “He had been piqued by the failure of all his endeavours to ferret out the assassins” (146) says the sidekick. G— admits that they have even searched for the purloined letter with “a most powerful microscope” (205) and have still failed to find it. Even when the police have the latest technology available, the individualist hero’s interaction with symbols beats the disabled state in the end. Dupin compares G—’s proceedings to “a sort of Procrustean bed” (208), to illustrate his rigid methodology of looking for clues that lacks the right dosage of creativity. In the Greek myth, Procrustes would physically attack visitors to make them fit the size of his bed, and so he stands for a whimsical standard to which agreement is forced. G— holds “a certain set of highly ingenious resources […] to which he forcibly adapts his designs. But he perpetually errs by being too deep or too shallow” (208). Here, once more, force is inextricably linked to failure as its main cause.

Weber’s definition of the state as “the only human Gemeinschaft which lays claim to the monopoly on the legitimated use of physical force” (Basic Concepts in Sociology 136) is rewritten by Pierre Bourdieu in his lectures at the College de France. For the French sociologist, the state does not detain the use of force only. The state could also be described as the “monopoly of legitimate physical and [also] symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, On the State 4). In this sense, the rivalry encapsulated in the ego contra mundum consists in a competition in which an individualist hero (focused on symbols) defeats a series of embodiments of the state (centred on physical force) by solving crime. The early detective aims to become an agent more powerful than the state. It aims to replace and occupy its task of imposing a narrative or an interpretation that could explain the causes of a given crime. In a nutshell, it aims to become the sovereign. Only that this individualist hero has a head-start on the competition due to his mythical relationship with symbols. As Lacan explains, force, without knowledge, becomes sterile and leads invariably to failure as when Parisian policemen are unable to find the purloined letter: “Why don’t the
Because they do not know what a letter is. They don’t know that because they are the police.” (Seminars 201) This lack of knowledge structures and defines the police institution. Lacan goes on by saying that “every legitimate power always rests, as does any kind of power, on the symbol. And the police, like all powers, also rest on the symbol. [...] Except there’s a small difference between police and power. Namely that the police have been persuaded that their efficacy rests on force [...]. Thanks to [that], they are as powerless” (Seminars 201). The state police are expected to solve crime under a mistaken premise: in their competition against the private eye, they are demanded to restore order, although they were created to preserve it. If they cannot engage with symbols, it is because they belong to what Lacan calls the order of the Real, the realm of death and the right to impose it: “for the police there is only reality and that is why they do not find anything” (Lacan, Seminars 202). According to Benjamin, the police is located “in a kind of spectral mixture” (“Critique of Violence” 286), between the death penalty and the enforcement of the law, rendering the state an impotent entity, again using a metaphor of symbolic disability: “The ‘law’ of the police really marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections within any legal system, can no longer guarantee through [it] the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain” (286-7). Similarly, holding the right to exert violence whenever it considers it necessary circumscribes the police to be “powerless,” as Lacan says:

Believing in force, and by the same token in the real, the police search for the letter. As they say — We looked everywhere. And they didn’t find, because what was at stake was a letter and a letter is precisely nowhere. [...] Why don’t they find it? It is there. They have seen it. What did they see? A letter. They may even have opened it. But they didn’t recognize it. Why? They had a description of it —It has a red seal and a certain address. Now, it has another seal and it doesn’t have that address. You will tell me —What about the text? Well, that’s it, they weren’t given the text. (Seminars 201; italics in original).

“The text” evoked here, of course, is the purloined “letter” in its twofold meaning: as a printed message and as a symbol or character. The illiterate, impotent and thus incompetent police are
doomed to failure not only because they can aspire solely to force but also because they are unable to decode signifiers.

The private eye dwells in a different dimension, in which everything is legible, any element of reality can become a signifying text, a clue, a hint that would help him to solve crimes. This is why detectives fail only exceptionally. At the beginning of “The Adventure of the Yellow Face,” Watson excuses Holmes’s failures, which nonetheless are only of a relative nature: “In publishing these short sketches [...] it is only natural that I should dwell rather upon his successes than upon his failures” (Doyle 1), he admits, only to clarify that “this not so much for the sake of his reputations […] but because where he failed it happened too often that no one else succeeded, and that the tale was left forever without a conclusion. [...] It chanced that even when he erred, the truth was still discovered” (1). Holmes does fail to interpret what really happened with the Yellow Face in the Norbury cottage, but this is an exceptional and innocuous failure: unlike Lestrade’s misreadings, Holmes’s causes no collateral damage. No innocent man is imprisoned because his account of the puzzle does not match what really happened. At the end of the case, he tells Watson: “If it should ever strike you that I am getting a little over-confident in my powers [...] kindly whisper ‘Norbury’ in my ear, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you” (9). Individual failure irrupts here in the classic detective only to humanize the private eye, to underline his limitations, aiming for a more realist tone that will become gradually prominent in subsequent detective stories, especially in hard-boiled fiction. As with any literary genre, the detective story must evolve to renew the literary horizons of expectations of its readers. In Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926), for example, the narrator-murderer Dr. Sheppard is not discovered in time by Poirot and commits suicide before he can be punished. Nevertheless, in the end he is still identified as the criminal and the promise of restoration at the hands of the individualist hero remains intact: individualism, embodied by Poirot, eventually finds the truth. During these early stories, even if
some hard-boiled authors occasionally introduce a degree of failure to provide their narratives with a more realist tone, unsolved cases are rare, individual failure is not dominant but peripheral, in Jakobson’s terms (77-85), unlike the state’s failure which is constant and unavoidable, even inherent to its structure.

1.4 Conclusions: The Persistence of Individualism

Watt considers the exemplars of his modern myths of individualism to be holders of “an undefined kind of ideal, [who] do not succeed in reaching it. They are not, in any obvious sense, achievers, but rather emblematic failures. Moreover, they are either punished for their attempt to realize their aspirations” (234). The individualist private detective, ever successful, presents a shift away from these myths. While still embodying individualism, they portray it in a more favourable light. By contrast, the Anglo-American state is imagined as yet another “emblematic failure.” In the late-nineteenth century, individualism was still far from being understood as a doctrine prone to failure, but just a few decades later, literary approaches to individualism will differ considerably.

According to Goldmann, the philosophical crisis brought by the First World War challenges the very foundations of individualism: “whatever were the individual values on which one claimed to found human existence, they now appear insufficient and outdated” (166). As with any other intellectual trend, a historical and dynamic concept, individualism has undergone significant changes ever since. The first traces of this historical transformation can be detected in Hammett’s Red Harvest (1929) and Chandler’s Farewell, My Lovely (1940), in which the degree of individualism gradually moves away from their forerunners’ blind endorsement of its boundless powers. Chandler’s typically cynical rhetoric is translated in Marlowe not taking himself seriously, as when he overthinks his deductions and says to himself “shut up, dimwit” (Farewell, My Lovely 251), an attitude that would be inconceivable for Holmes. Marlowe knows the constraints of his
wit, for instance, when while listening to Lieutenant Nulty, he acknowledges: “I turned over a few witty sayings in my mind, but none of them seemed amusing” (269). Similarly, when negotiating the fee that he expects for the case, the Continental Op manages to convince his client to hire him, by stating that he would be able to do the job since “when I say me, I mean the Continental [Agency]” (44). The Continental Op, in this sense, is less individualized than, say, Dupin. He still works alone, but when he needs to back up his image, his self is no longer enough. This is why he needs to resort to a private corporation to endorse him. This shift is consistent with Goldmann’s ideas on the attenuation of individualism in the interwar period, with its “disappearance […] on an economical level (a process that Marxists have observed as […] the transition from classic to imperial capitalism) and the analogous transformation in the novel precisely marked by the disappearance of the individual character and the biographical account” (My translation). Despite its attenuation, individualism remains triumphant in Anglo-American fiction. Chandler exalts Marlowe’s emblematic uniqueness when he says that there are “seventeen hundred and fifty cops” in Los Angeles and “they want [Marlowe] to do their leg work for them” (Farewell, My Lovely 236). Whereas the realist narratives mentioned by Goldmann dilute the individual character, detective stories preserve it.

This triumph of individualistic narratives in Anglo-American detective fiction is valid even today, almost two centuries after Poe. For instance, in recent mainstream TV crime shows, whether from the United States or the United Kingdom, such as Twin Peaks (1990), True Detective (2014), Broadchurch (2013), The Killing (2011), Sherlock (2010) the sleuth solves the case in the end and

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6 Joy N. Humes’s translation of Goldmann’s essay does not include a series of paragraphs that appear in the original, amongst which there is this observation that is located in page 183 of the French original, which states: “disparition de l’individualisme sur le plan de l’économie (processus que les penseurs marxistes ont enregistré sous la forme […] de passage du capitalisme classique à l’impérialisme) et la transformation homologue du roman caractérisée précisément par la disparition du personnage individuel et du récit biographique” (“Introduction aux premiers écrits de Lukács,” in Lukács, Georg, La théorie du roman, Gallimard 2005, 183).
outwits the state, even when he works within it. All these contemporary narratives, heavily influenced by the hard-boiled tradition, recapture the intrinsic corruption of the state in that murderers are often policemen themselves. But they still need the individual to be victorious, they still rely on the hero vanquishing the coercive state. There are, of course, a few exceptions, in which detectives do not succeed, the most emblematic of which is *Unsolved. The Murders of Tupac and the Notorious B.I.G.* (2018), the storyline that explores the failed attempts by LAPD and the FBI to find a single culprit for the killing of the hip-hop legends after two decades of investigation. Of course, *Unsolved* partakes not so much in the detective story tradition but more in the non-fictional genre of True Crime. But even then, individualism remains unquestioned, since failure to solve the case is explained in terms of structural issues that have more to do with race in American society than with the insufficiency of individualism.

In Latin America, individualism holds an opposite status. This is especially true in the Southern Cone, where the Anglo-American detective story has been deeply influential. Alternatively, in mainstream Latin American detective fiction, like *Four Seasons in Havana*, the quartet of novels written by Cuban novelist Leonardo Padura, both the successful detective and the conventional endorsement of individualism are very much preserved as in their North American models. “A man can’t expect always to have it his own way” Lestrade warns Holmes in “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder” (314). This is probably the biggest lesson that writers from Argentina, Brazil, and Chile have incorporated in their particular take on the genre, that goes beyond the demands of market-oriented fiction. Specifically, during the past few decades, above all from the 1990s onwards, in the period of post-dictatorship, failure seems to permeate Southern Cone detective stories, constituting a transnational “poetics of failure.” Failure no longer affects only the state officers’ performance but also the private detectives. Of the different treatments of individualism in the modern novel, Watt argues: “We must see the sixteenth-century Faust not as
the martyr of individualism but as its scapegoat [...] the symbolic figure upon whom were projected the fears of anarchic and individualistic tendencies of the Renaissance and the Reformation; his damnation was the Counter-Reformation’s attempt to anathematize the hopes that a more optimistic generation had cherished” (46). Watt goes on to clarify that “the anathema, finally, was itself to fail” (46), since individualism became gradually a mainstream way to understand, to imagine and to conceive not only the literary but also the political. Classic Anglo-American detective stories, inaugurated with Poe’s announcement of Dupin’s victory “in the eyes of the police” (120), dwell in this historical period, where individualism was not execrated but celebrated, to the apparent detriment of the state. As the following chapters will show, in Latin America, this anathematization of individualism reappears, to replace its endorsement. Now divested of religious connotations, this condemnation of individualism is still joined by a critique of the state. Nonetheless, its standpoint will be considerably different. In Latin America, the classic Anglo-American detective critique of the state will be reproduced, but also subverted and surmounted by a more contemporary comment on the neoliberal state, understood as a complex by-product of post-dictatorship. Reading the variations of *ego contra mundum* in the work of Argentinean, Brazilian and Chilean authors enable a re-interpretation of Poe, Doyle, Christie, Hammett and Chandler and the ways they imagined the modern state.
Chapter 2: Argentina. Mundus contra Me

“Hay que hacer la historia de las derrotas.”

Ricardo Piglia, Respiración artificial

2.1 Importing Detective Stories during Argentine Dictatorship(s)

2.1.1 Appropriating a Foreign Genre through Parody

Addressing a client, Don Isidro Parodi, Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares’s detective, takes up “his favourite gripe: he railed on and on against the Italians, who had wormed their way into everything—not excluding the state penitentiary” (19). Beyond the evidently parodic echo suggested by his surname, there are at least two layers of irony here: on the one hand, because Parodi himself is both in jail and has Italian ancestry. On the other hand, these two characteristics are also parodic in themselves: especially during the first half of the twentieth century, Italians connoted uncultured and uneducated immigration in the eyes of the Argentine criollo elite, since most of the diaspora that settled in Argentina during 1850s-1950s came from the Mezzogiorno, Italy’s poorest, Southern, region. A hairdresser who solves cases while serving time in jail for a crime he has not even committed, Parodi is diametrically opposed to his sophisticated Anglo-American models, who are from Northern European countries (Dupin is French, Holmes is British, Poirot, Belgian), an ancestry that implied refinement and sophistication in Argentina. Besides, even if Anglo/American sleuths had a playful relationship to knowledge (solving cases, for them, was first and foremost a chess match), they still fought crime in earnest. This distinction laid the foundations for a radical shift in the ways the private eye (and subsequently, individualism) would be imagined in Latin American literatures from the second half of twentieth-century onwards: whereas Dupin or Holmes were upper-class sleuths, Parodi is a newcomer, an ordinary, even vulgar, character. Even by contrast with hard-boiled detectives, Parodi, a barber operating from
jail, seems more mundane. As the Argentine critic Cristina Parodi describes him, “Don Isidro is an illiterate, simple, silent man who has a practical knowledge made of sensibility, incredulity and skepticism” (13). Yet these very features are reproduced by Don Isidro’s successors not only in the Argentine tradition but throughout the Southern Cone.

The prevalence of this kind of parody, that can be a means of sullying the aura of the private eye, is one of the main elements that distinguishes the early production of detective stories in Argentina. According to Argentine literary historian J. J. Delaney, parody “will become gradually more prominent in our detective stories” (618). Parody is already present in one of the first national manifestations of the detective story, Eustaquio Pellicer’s “El botón del calzoncillo” of 1918. Detective stories were written in Spanish, especially in Buenos Aires, as early as the late nineteenth-century (Delaney 607-634), soon after their Anglo-American models. One of the very first detective stories in Spanish was Luis Vicente Varela’s La huella del crimen, written and published in Buenos Aires in 1877 (See Picabea, “¿Qué define al policial argentino?”). Yet it was with Borges that the genre attained its current prolific production and unparalleled canonical status. His Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi (1942), co-authored with Bioy Casares, introduces this use of parody as a means of producing what theorists Itamar Even-Zohar and José Lambert define as an “imported genre,” i.e.: a literary form created in a foreign context, often seen as a dominant aesthetic field in a complex network of poly-systems. According to Even-Zohar, the importation of cultural productions is mainly related to translation. Snatching a literary work from other literary systems often entails an acknowledgement that the exporting party of the transaction, (in this case, the United States or the United Kingdom), holds a higher symbolic capital than the importing party. It shows an implicit reverence for the foreign literary system, an element that is often present in parody. Literary translations, then, lead to the translated works being “detached from their home contexts” (Even-Zohar 18). But for Lambert, by contrast, importing a genre “exceeds mere
translations” (250, my translation). Yet both critics agree that importing a literary work is a re-appropriation that transforms the alien setting in order to incorporate it to a national repertoire. Borges and Bioy Casares’s series of 120 translations under the name of “The Seventh Circle” (evoking the circle that Dante allocated to criminals in his Inferno) can be read as way of literary importation, but even more so their own production, e.g: these six stories featuring Parodi. Whereas Holmes is an enthusiastic investigator, Don Isidro is a reluctant detective, another characteristic that will be subsequently reproduced in other parts of Latin America. As Cristina Parodi notes, Don Isidro “does not seem to enjoy his task of detection: he gets worn out by his clients” (14). Unlike Holmes, he “is not interested in fame” (14) or literary glory. Don Isidro, whose “wisdom does not come from a supernatural intelligence nor from an extraordinary knowledge” (13), lacks the mythical attributes that his Anglo-American forerunners had. In short, he is a hero despite himself, he does not want to embody the myth of modern individualism that the horizon of expectations mandates him to be.

Parody is inextricably linked to tribute. While, at first glance, ridicule gives the impression of disrespect, as Linda Hutcheon remarks, “parody […] is a form of imitation […] characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (6). In importing detective stories to the Southern Cone, Borges and Bioy Casares were subject to an ambivalent influence: on the one hand, parody entails a great deal of fascination; but on the other, it implies an awareness of the implausibility of importing a genre without strenuous appropriation. Borges and Bioy’s playful tone, with absurd situations that mock and yet at the same time pay tribute to their foreign models, is reproduced in Argentine literature in subsequent decades, from the 1940s to the 1980s, under a series of dictatorships. Here as elsewhere, parody functions as “a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance, […] as a conservative force in both retaining and mocking” its models, and as a “transformative power in creating new syntheses” (Hutcheon 20). As Cristina
Parodi reminds us, Don Isidro, like Dupin, is also an “armchair detective,” except that his “office” is a jail (14). This integration of criminality and the law, or rather the dissolution of their imagined boundaries, will also be heavily reproduced by Borges’s inheritors.

One of these inheritors, Velmiro Ayala Gauna, a journalist from the rural Argentine province of Corrientes, created an inspector named Don Frutos Gómez a few years after Don Isidro Parod’s stories were published. Writing about the more contemporary Swedish detective fiction writer Hanning Mankel’s parallax position between Scandinavia and Africa, Slavoj Zizek claims that: “The main effect of globalisation on detective fiction is discernible in its dialectical counterpart: the powerful re-emergence of a specific locale as the story’s setting—a particular provincial environment. In a global world, a detective story can take place [...] anywhere: in the Native American reservations in the US, [...] in Venice and Florence, in Iceland” (“Mankell, the Artist of the Parallax View”). Zizek explains that “there is, of course, in the history of detective fiction, a long tradition of eccentric locales,” and he cites Christie’s *Death Comes at the End* (1944), set in Ancient Egypt. “However,” he continues, “these settings clearly had the status of eccentric exceptions, [...] their appeal [...] relied on the distance towards the paradigmatic locations,” such as London or New York City. Writing during the 1950s, several years before the very idea of “globalization,” and the distinction between “global” and “local,” set in, Velmiro Ayala Gauna engages with this “particular provincial environment” *avant la lettre*.

Displacing the figure of the detective to a countryside filled with *gauchos*, he portrays Don Frutos solving his cases in the (fictional) small town of Capibara Cué, somewhere near the Paraná River. Ayala Gauna’s short stories pay attention to local details and folklore to a degree that would be inconceivable in either the urban Californian settings of Chandler and Hammett, or the sophisticated English countryside atmosphere devised by Christie. As the Argentine critic Jorge Lafforgue states, “these Southern lands [are] very far from the British countryside, the American
cities and the Californian coasts” (149). It is through parody that Ayala Gauna bridges this vast geo-cultural distance. Like Don Isidro, Don Frutos is an ordinary and parodical character, a man without qualities, who is more reminiscent of Anglo-American policemen than of mythical private eyes. Ayala Gauna’s “Don Frutos’s Investigation” (1955) gives the reader a glimpse of this rural environment in which everything seems to be inverted when compared to the Anglo-American models: “With his noisy spurs, Don Frutos Gómez […] entered his wrecked office […] and sat in an old straw chair […] waiting for the mate that one of his lazy agents was preparing” (52). Following Zizek, this scene can be read merely as an “eccentric exception.” But, unlike Christie, Ayala Gauna does not rely “on the distance towards the paradigmatic locations” in the same way that Christie writing about Egypt does. Ayala Gauna creates Don Frutos as a rural Argentine translation (in Lafforgue’s words, “a nationalization” [151]) of Dupin. Far from exploiting exoticism to seduce urban readers, Don Frutos highlights an anti-heroic setting, evoking the amateur and precarious conditions in which individualism must be embodied in Latin America.

When one of Don Frutos’s assistants asks him why he does not use fingerprinting, he responds: “What footprints, son? […] We do not use them footprints here. We keep it simple” (Ayala Gauna 55). Although fingerprinting had in fact come to Buenos Aires several decades earlier, introduced by the Croatian-born Argentine anthropologist and police official Juan Vucetich, such technological imports have yet to arrive in Capibara Cué, a metonymy of rural Latin America. Through this gap, Ayala Gauna underlines the class abyss that separates his rural detective and the sophisticated myths of modern individualism created in the Anglo-American literary field. Parody, in Ayala Gauna, goes even further than in Borges and Bioy, since he ridicules not only the detective but also murderers: in “Don Frutos’s Investigation,” this turns out to be (like Parodi) an Italian immigrant. Don Frutos manages to solve the crime because the victim’s injuries show the criminal’s ignorance of local knife-work: “the injuries were small and here […] a knife
is a work instrument, we use it to butcher, to cut herbs […]. As soon as I checked, I knew that the incision was made from top to bottom and I said to myself: Gringo” (59). This tension between foreign and local, between gringos and criollos, constantly reappears in Argentine detective stories. Borges explores this tension in his essay “Our Poor Individualism” (1946) and concludes that the hero of classic Hollywood crime cinema, an honest journalist who is endorsed because he “seeks out the friendship of a criminal in order to hand him over to the police,” is seen by the Argentine spectator as an “incomprehensible swine” (57). According to Borges, this is due to the consensus that in Argentina “the police is a maffia” and that “the Argentine, unlike the Americans of the North and almost all Europeans, does not identify with the State” (57). By contrast, Borges proposes Sergeant Cruz from Martín Fierro (1872) as the ultimate national hero, even though Cruz is a traitor who helps a deserter, an anti-hero who is worlds away from the flawless and immune Anglo-American detective, whose slyness instead is used for benevolent purposes to restore social order.

If, for Hutcheon, parody entails the creation of a “new synthesis,” what synthesis does the Argentine parody of Anglo-American detective fiction create? Inaugurated by Borges and Bioy, adopted by Ayala Gauna and others, this synthesis reimagines the tensions between individualism and the state, by subverting its traditional features. According to Cristina Parodi, “Borges would not be Borges if a celebrated tradition or innovation would not provoke in him a movement of […] rebellious fidelity” (14). This is the synthesis that Borges establishes and most of his successors will reproduce: one that derides and at the same time perpetuates the archetype inaugurated by Poe, venerating him and creating a bridge with a foreign tradition that ensures the transnational continuity of the genre through its radical transformation. As I will show, on the one hand, the private eye, once a successful hero, becomes now a failing individual who has lost any mythical stature and immunity his Anglo-American literary precursors may once have had. On the other
hand, in Argentina, the state is no longer portrayed as an entity that despite its incompetence or corruption is still willing to collaborate with the detective in solving crime; instead, the state is now the main source of crime itself. The subversions are particularly prominent in Borges’s reformulation of Poe, his short story “La muerte y la brújula” (1942), and later in Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación masacre* (1957), a book of non-fiction journalism that, despite its explicit intention to represent reality without the mechanisms of literary artefacts, echoes hard-boiled fiction.

### 2.1.2 The Loss of Immunity

“It is true that Erik Lönnrot did not succeed in preventing the last murder, but that he foresaw it is indisputable” (76): thus Borges introduces his private detective in “La muerte y la brújula.” Written towards the end of the so-called “Infamous Decade” (1930-1943), the period that began with the first dictatorial interruption of Argentina’s constitutional order and eventually led to the rise to power of Juan Perón, Borges’s short story depicts Lönnrot’s failed attempt to solve a series of enigmatic murders that follow a cabalistic pattern in a fictional city that is unnamed but allegorical of Buenos Aires. Marcelo Yarmolinsky, a Hasidic rabbi and a scholar, is killed in a hotel on a third of December. Lönnrot is in charge of solving his murder. On the rabbi’s typewriter, there is a message. Its content is hermetic, echoing the Talmudic tradition of interpreting cryptic passages of the scriptures. It states: “The first letter of the name has been uttered.” Lönnrot interprets the message as a signifier that ends up being misleading: he believes the murder is related to the Tetragrammaton, YHVH, the four-letter name of God that features in several books of the Torah. On the third of January and of February, a second and a third murder take place. In each case, a similar message is left stating (in turn) that “The second” and “The third letter” have been uttered. Lönnrot, convinced of his reading, falls into the delusion of confirming his thoughts in reality, and predicts, accurately, that there will be a fourth murderer on the third of March. Except that the
fourth victim is the private eye himself, who falls into the trap of the criminal mastermind he is chasing, Red Scharlach. Whereas the first message was written by Yarmolinsky before, who before getting killed was writing about the Tetragrammaton; the other messages were intentionally written by Scharlach, trying to lead Lönnrot to his death.

Lönnrot’s failure to solve his case is paradoxical: in fact, he does successfully reveal the murderer’s identity and foresees the last crime of a series, but it is in doing so that he fails to prevent his own death. As Cristina Parodi puts it, Lönnrot “triumphs because he has failed” (9). His success is what makes him fail. The subversion of these outcomes is located at the core of Borges’s literary project: in a very similar vein to Don Isidro, Borges defines his equally parodic detective Erik Lönnrot as Dupin’s heterodox heir: “Lönnrot thought of himself as a pure thinker, an Auguste Dupin, but there was something of the adventurer in him, and even a little of the gambler” (76). Despite his wish to be like his model, the fact that Lönnrot is described as an adventurous gambler points to a divergence: on the one hand, Lönnrot (unlike Dupin and all his Anglo-American forerunners) fails to really solve the crime and subsequently to restore the social fabric, because the killer remains impune. On the other hand, this divergence haunts the configuration of Latin American private detectives for decades, signalling the unfeasibility of faithfully reproducing the traditional Anglo-American mythification of individualism.

Just as Dupin had to outwit both G—and D—and Holmes had to beat Scotland Yard as well as Moriarty, Lönnrot has an analogous pair of antagonists: the police officer in addition to the criminal mastermind. The depiction of the policeman, an anodyne caricature named Inspector Treviranus, reproduces the tradition of hostility towards the state in so far as he is a practical man who likes to present himself as unfamiliar with cerebral speculations, closer to force and alien to knowledge. He is not interested in Lönnrot’s “rabbinical explanations,” merely in “the capture of the man who stabbed this unknown person” (77). Treviranus distances himself from Lönnrot in
that the latter is constantly reading and (over)thinking in order to reveal the truth. Like his predecessors, Borges’s sleuth relies on knowledge to solve the puzzle: “[Lönnrot] […] began to read while the Commissioner questioned the contradictory witnesses to the possible kidnapping” (161). While Treviranus acts, guided by his anti-intellectual motto “no need to look for a three-legged cat here” (77), Lönnrot devotes his time to reading. There is an asymmetry in their degree of literacy. The narrator says that in order to identify the murderer, Lönnrot “suddenly become a bibliophile or Hebraist, he ordered a package made of the dead man's books and carried them off to his appartment. Indifferent to the police investigation, he dedicated himself to studying them” (78). Without reading, nonetheless, the symbolically illiterate Treviranus predicts what happens before Lönnrot does: he foretells the causes of the first crime as well as the possibility that the third one is a simulation, something that goes unnoticed by Lönnrot who, despite all his reading skills, is too earnest to understand the fictional contours of these murders. But it is still Lönnrot who, thanks to his ability to read, manages to “solve” the case when he shows up at the encounter with the criminal mastermind, where the fourth murder takes place. Treviranus, by contrast, remains imprisoned by the limitations of his role as a state officer. His name itself implies that he is unable to foresee this fourth murder: as Paiva Padrão reminds us, Treviranus’s Latin etymology “tres vir,” three (not four) men, already points out to an insufficient series of three murders (27).

According to Cristina Parodi, one of the main narrative strategies that Borges follows in this short story is identifying the “intelligibility of the real” with “legibility” (2), i.e: reading reality as a text. This applies particularly to Lönnrot who is, first and foremost, a bookish hero who sees himself as a holder of a high degree of literacy. In this sense, he reproduces Holmes’s passion for knowledge but, as Parodi points out, Lönnrot goes a step further. He is not interested in the book’s materiality, for instance, but strictly in its textuality. Whereas Holmes “would have been able to identify the type of paper and would have made an effort to locate the place where this paper is
sold,” Lönrrrot’s interest is purely meta-literary: “he is solely interested in the text as an object that refers to other texts” (Parodi 8). Lönrrrot’s interest in a higher degree of abstract knowledge embodies, even more than Holmes, the mythical attributes of the individualist hero. Yet at the same time it is because of his intellectual approach that Lönrrrot falls into the trap laid by Red Scharlach, the criminal mastermind. Here, Borges presents a rupture with tradition, as Lönrrrot is outwitted because of the one thing that hitherto distinguished his forerunners: reading clues accurately. In other words, the private eye is defeated in his own realm, of knowledge and literacy. The private eye misreads Scharlach’s signifiers until the end of the narrative, something that would be rare for Anglo-American detectives.

In detective fiction, signifiers, that is, the clues that the sleuth follows, refer to crucial meanings: life and death. After carefully examining books on Jewish mysticism, Lönrrrot has reason to believe that the fourth and last murder is actually the third and penultimate one. His inferences, though, are nothing but the product of Scharlach’s deception. His criminal opponent has guided him to make him believe that there is a fourth crime so that he will show up at Triste-le-Roy, alone, to be killed. Borges thus displaces successful individualism (traditionally ascribed to the private eye) onto a wittier criminal mastermind, while at the same time relocating failure (typically the outcome of state investigations) with the detective. In the same way that Dr. Shepperd commits suicide before Poirot can conclude that he is the murderer in Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), Scharlach gets away with murder before Lönrrrot can solve the puzzle. Both cases portray a private eye who fails to discover the murderer on time. The crucial difference is that in Christie’s novel, the promise of the restoration of order remains intact as the detective is ultimately rewarded with the disclosure of truth. Borges, by contrast, subverts tradition by punishing Lönrrrot with death, because of his misreading of Scharlach’s scattered hints as if they were real. As Cristina Parodi concludes, “the dénouement does not reestablish order but
imposes disorder” (10). Borges inverts the expectations of the genre concerning the success of the private eye and the soothing effect of conservative closure that the happy ending has in the readers of the genre.

Scharlach assassinates Lönnrot in Triste-le-Roy, a fictional space located at the south of “an industrial suburb where, under the protection of a political boss from Barcelona, gunmen thrive” (82). Argentine critic Elisa Calabrese reads this passage of the story in dialogue with its historical background. She claims that Scharlach is a “distorted image of Ruggero […] the most prominent sidekick of the conservative caudillo Alberto Barceló, who made it to the governorship of the province of Buenos Aires” (41). Calabrese reads this as Borges’s political commentary against a corrupt government’s attempt to restore conservative policies, after having ousted the first democratically elected president Hipólito Yrigoyen who was favoured by the author in his youth. The rupture with tradition here consists in the fact that Borges’s criminal mastermind is not merely someone that the state officers care to cover up for a small bribe as Hammett’s Noonan would do with Poisonsville’s crooks. Now the private eye is chasing a criminal who operates at the behest of the state apparatus itself. Scharlach evokes a notion that will be often reproduced in subsequent Argentine fiction: the idea that crime impregnates and infects the different layers of the state, canceling out the hitherto-flawless private detective’s agency. Despite the knowledge that Lönnrot accumulates, literacy does not bestow on him any immunity to failure. Instead, his literacy is actually the cause of his downfall.

North American Medievalist Suzanne Akbari points out that “both vision and language are imperfect mediators, open to deception. Yet, paradoxically […] they represent the only possible approaches to knowledge” (qtd in Frellick 6). As with any other detective, it is only through reading and seeing that Lönnrot may access the truth. Nevertheless, knowledge does not make him the successful hero he is supposed to be according to the horizon of expectations of the genre. The
symbolic blindness and illiteracy, hitherto ascribed to the police, is now problematised in the body of the private detective: is it a lack or an excess of vision and literacy that leads to his loss of immunity? Incapable of reading between Scharlach’s lines, in the end Lönnrot fails because of his distorted relationship with language and knowledge, because reading is too much but at the same time not enough or not well done to affect the world effectively. “La muerte y la brújula” introduces the reader to a new world in which, as the Spanish critic Francisca Noguerol notes, it is the criminal, not the private eye, who is “conceived as an individual of extraordinary abilities” (3). By contrast, Lönnrot is a “failed hermeneut […] the conventions of detective fiction are here inverted: the detective fails to imagine an explanation that leads him to death, turning him into the hunter hunted” (3). Scharlach’s main “extraordinary ability,” of course, is his superior literacy.

Originating in Lönnrot’s own flawed body, language and knowledge act like a counterforce. Whereas knowledge and literacy traditionally bestowed success on the private eye, or inversely, it granted them immunity against failure; here it is this distorted relation with knowing and reading what destroys the sleuth’s immunity. As Esposito points out: “the immunitary paradigm does not present itself in terms of action, but rather in terms of reaction—rather than a force, it is a repercussion, a counterforce” (Immunitas 7). To put it differently, knowledge works as an autoimmune reaction that attacks the detective’s immunity from within, eradicating his perennial flawlessness. If immunity, in Esposito’s terms, can be defined as an exemption from paying tribute to the rest of society (“those who are immune owe nothing to anyone” [Immunitas 5]), here Lönnrot’s is clearly lost, divested of a privilege he has not inherited from his forerunners, because he does pay for his failure with death. And there is no one to blame but himself. Borges, thus, starts a tradition that will prove to be very productive in Latin America, where the private detective is no longer an exception, radically different from the multitude that surrounds him in the urban environment in which he operates. Unlike Dupin, Holmes and the like, Lönnrot must obey the
same rules that apply to the rest of society and has lost his status of a privileged unilateral autonomous agent towards the community. After all, a dead detective who can neither make his success public nor bring the criminal to justice is no hero at all; still less, when the criminal who has outwitted him is closely linked to the state apparatus, his classic rival. Lönnrot may not be blind or illiterate like Poe’s Parisian Prefect of Police, G—, but his vision and his readings are no longer flawless. Borges’s short story is a forerunner of a trend that becomes more prominent in post-dictatorial detective stories: the loss of the private eye’s immunity and his failure to solve cases because of his symbolic disabilities, once ascribed exclusively to the state. And by “loss of immunity,” I do not allude merely to Todorov’s immunity to death (violated when Scharlach kills Lönnrot), but also the destruction of immunity to failure and to the state.

2.1.3 Reporting Crime: The End of the Game of Chess

Written in the context of the “Revolución Libertadora,” the dictatorship that overthrew the personalist president Juan Domingo Perón in 1955, the Argentinean journalist Rodolfo Walsh’s Operación masacre reconstructs the police execution of a group of male citizens, through the testimony of the seven would-be victims that survive the event. Walsh examines how, the night of June 9, 1956, the Buenos Aires Provincial Police illicitly shoots these men in the garbage dump of José León Suárez, on the outskirts of the city, under the premise that they were involved in an attempted Peronist countercoup. In the book’s prologue, Walsh mentions that he first heard about these executions while he was in “a coffee shop in La Plata” (17), playing chess, the same game that Dupin, Holmes, or Marlowe, (when solving their own crimes), would play both literally and figuratively. On these same two levels, Walsh abandons the game of chess, he interrupts the playful narration of crime as the revelation of an enigma to focus on reporting this historical and political crime instead. He presents his quest for a publisher who would take the risk of letting the
testimonies go public during the dictatorship as a heroic and individual triumph: “So I wander into increasingly remote outskirts of journalism until finally I walk into a basement on Leandro Alem Avenue […] and I find a man who’s willing to take the risk. He is trembling and sweating because he’s no movie hero either, just a man who is willing to take the risk, and that’s worth more than a movie hero” (20). Here, journalism inherits the space for the classic private’s eye individualism to flourish, as Walsh himself is both the chronicler of the events and in the text acts like a detective. Journalists, like him and the publisher of the book, rewrite mythical individualism from a purely aesthetic dimension (the “movie hero”) to a more flesh-and-bone mundane hero, who turns out to be even more heroic because he lacks supernatural attributes.

The individualist attributes that help Walsh “solve” the case are no longer related to wit but to prosaic persistence. Walsh presents himself as an ordinary investigator who is closer to Don Isidro and Don Frutos than to Dupin, Holmes or even Marlowe. Nevertheless, even this small portion of heroism soon comes to an end. Walsh later admits that his story “gets more wrinkled every day in my pocket because I walk around all of Buenos Aires with it and hardly anyone wants to know about it, let alone publish it” (20). This admission only reinforces the belief that publishing his work to bring the massacre into light will eventually reinstate justice to the public sphere. Solving the case, for Walsh, is more about successfully reporting—instead of revealing—the crime. As with detective stories, it only takes the masses to know the truth in order to restore the social fabric in which criminals are punished and the victims are given their due. But this belief on the ultimate benevolence of the state, like the vestiges of individualistic heroism, is short-lived, too. Whereas the initial appendix of Operación masacre opens “I wrote this book for it to be published, for it to act […] to bring them to light in the fullest way possible, to provoke fear, to have them never happen again” (185), the second one (1964) closes:

So, I asked myself if it was worth it, if what I was chasing was not a fantasy, if the society we live in really needs to hear about these things. I still don’t have an answer. In any event,
you can understand how I may have lost some […] faith in justice, in compensation, in democracy, in all those words, and finally, in what was once, but is no longer, my trade. I am rereading the story that you all have read. There are entire sentences that bother me, I get annoyed thinking about how much better it would be if I wrote it now. Would I write it now? (222)

Walsh’s rhetoric of progressive disillusion is aimed both at the state (here alluded to in the reference to “justice, […] compensation, […] democracy” which are suddenly banished from history and reduced to language, mere “words”) and at individual agency (evoked in “my trade,” namely, journalism). Neither can bring the criminal to justice. Walsh’s disappointment is rooted in the assumption that, even under dictatorship, a modern state is expected to be lawful and just. From a post-dictatorial perspective, this disappointment may sound naive. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that capital punishment had never been legal in Argentina till then. Even before its formal independence from Spain, the death penalty had been abolished along with slavery in an assembly held in 1813. It was only during the 1950s that the “Revolución Libertadora” unilaterally reintroduced capital punishment and extra-judicially executed its own citizens for the first time in a conflict other than riots, independence, or civil wars.7 Thus, these state executions and the subsequent cover up imply a historical loss of innocence. Disappearance of individual bodies and concealment of crime in the hands of the state become in Operación massacre (as Osvaldo Bayer suggests in the book’s prologue) a prelude to the 1976-1983 dictatorship’s genocide that systematically and illegally executed tens of thousands of citizens, leaving no trace of their corpses or reliable register of their execution that would allow anyone to assess their magnitude. The bodies of the five executed workers were found in the José León Suárez garbage dump, the state never fully admitting that it had kept them as political prisoners, since they were arrested before the declaration of martial law.

7 An infamous exception must be mentioned. In democratic times, Yrigoyen’s government violently supressed a rural worker’s strike in Santa Cruz, between 1920 and 1922. In an episode that historiography would call “Rebel Patagonia,” the Army executed around 1500 workers.
Besides disillusion, Walsh is obsessed with the illegality of the way in which the victims were captured and subsequent executed: the martial law that was supposed to justify these acts only came into effect after midnight, an hour after the workers had been randomly arrested in their homes. What emerges from Walsh’s text is that midnight is an arbitrary boundary. His obsession is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s observation that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule” (“On the Concept of History” 279). As Giorgio Agamben comments in his State of Exception, following Benjamin, exception is a permanent and inherent condition of modern states. Now following Esposito, it could be argued that in Argentine detective stories it is no longer the individual but the state that holds the exception, that owes nothing to anyone. Immunity is transferred from an individualist hero (whose agency is increasingly reduced) to the state. Since for Walsh there is no midnight: the chronological change of dates does not entail a substantial change in the way the Argentine dictatorial state treats its citizens.

Therefore, Walsh rewrites the tension between state and individualism in two ways. Like Borges, he transposes the traditional attributes and lacks assigned to individualist heroes and the state. This transposition can be read following the notion of symbolic disabilities that were so prominent in classic detective fiction. To begin with, whereas the Anglo-American private eye’s voice was the voice of truth and science, Walsh has no voice at all, he is infected with the symbolic muteness that once was circumscribed to state officers (like Poe’s Parisian Prefect of Police G—) only. Walsh, as a character in the narrative, acts like a private eye, working in the outskirts of the state. But despite his persistence, he displays a distinct failure: his knowledge of the case and his thorough narration of the fact do not grant him any kind of recognition from the dictatorial state that these arbitrary crimes were committed by its own agents. Not a single one of them were punished or publicly acknowledged as criminals. Therefore, Walsh is not that different from
Lönnrot: both identify the murderer thanks to their relationship with knowledge, but knowing is no longer enough, because it does not entail any kind of repercussion outside language. Walsh may be allowed to express himself in written form, he may even eventually have the chance to get his story published under the dictatorship. His voice, nevertheless, is not and shall not be heard.

In the Epilogue to Operación masacre, Walsh explicitly discusses how this symbolic muteness affects also the state: “three editions of this book, about forty published articles, a bill presented to Congress, and countless smaller initiatives have all served to pose the question to five successive governments over the course of twelve years. The response has always been silence” (173-174). Having said this, it must be nuanced that this silencing is asymmetrical: while it is imposed to individuals by disregarding the legitimacy of their voice, it is freely chosen by state officers to build their dictatorial narrative. Furthermore, because it chooses not to listen, the Argentine state no longer merely displays symbolic muteness but deafness as well. Beyond having to deal with the classic obstacles, the detective is now competing against a deaf-mute body that does not speak because it no longer wants to hear or help in revealing the truth. Hammett’s Noonan or Borges’s Treviranus may be corrupt or simple-minded but they are still policemen invested in fighting crime, even if they occasionally benefit economically from it. Walsh’s Buenos Aires province police officers are closer to Scharlach, the gunman at the service of a state that no longer entails an inefficient group of officers, but a squad of murderers, not different at any point from the criminals that they are supposed to chase.

This asymmetry shows the extent to which immunity, in Argentine detective stories, is no longer an attribute of individualist heroes, it belongs rather to the state. Snatched from the individual, the state now inherits the privilege of not owing nothing to anyone, it can proceed as it sees fit without having to pay anything in return. Operación masacre thus marks a milestone in Argentine history, that will allow the state under subsequent dictatorships not just to connive with
crime but to practice systematic terror against its own population with the presumption that it will remain ever immune and unpunished. Thus, Both Borges and Walsh pave the way for the post-dictatorial poetics of failure, in which neither individuals nor the state are in a position to restore social justice.

2.2 The Post-Dictatorial Detective as a Failed Intellectual

2.2.1 From Parody to Memory

Following the parodic tradition inaugurated by Borges in the 1940s and practiced by Ayala Gauna during the 1950s, Osvaldo Soriano wrote his first novel Sad, Lonely and Final (1973), in the early 1970s, right before the most recent Argentine dictatorship. Soriano plays with the limits of plausibility, by setting a homonymous alter ego in the streets of Los Angeles in order to solve cases with none other than Chandler’s Marlowe. Parody is again present in the very title of the book that paraphrases one of the final lines of Chandler’s The Long Goodbye (1953) when Marlowe bids farewell to his friend Terry Lennox: “I said it when it was sad and lonely and final” (378). Similarly, during the early 1980s, Juan Sasturain’s private detective, Etchenike, corrects his clients saying that his surname must be pronounced “Etchenaik” not with a Spanish but with an English accent. As Borges foretold in his essay “Our Poor Individualism,” the abyss between Anglo and Latin America becomes explicit in detective fiction. With this abyss in mind, Sasturain writes in his first detective novel Manual de perdedores (1985): “But [private detectives] do not exist […] it is a Yankee invention, pure literature, cinema and TV shows… Or do you think that guys like Marlowe […] ever existed? […] Have you gone mad like Don Quixote and believed that you could live in real life whatever you read in books?” (58). It is no coincidence that Sasturain evokes Don Quixote, one of Ian Watt’s myths of modern individualism, to discuss the cultural distance that separates Anglo and Latin America. Already in the title of the novel (which Sasturain
dedicates to his parents because they did not teach him “to win”) there is a link between parody and failure, recovering Borges’s precedent.

Through the use of parody, then, Argentine detective stories constantly remind the reader: “do not take us seriously.” But should we? Parody is not solely used for the sake of entertainment; it is not there just to convey a light form of mass consumption. It is also a mechanism that expresses a different consciousness when compared with its models, a poetics that admits the impossibility of reproducing the earnest heroism of an immune and successful individualist myth in Latin America. A poetics of failure that contrasts with the Anglo-American private detective, who was also conceived for entertainment while always taking seriously their faith in knowledge as a means to successfully restore the social fabric. As the Argentine novelist Carlos Gamerro claims: “a Marlowe, for our reality, would be as exotic or implausible as a Sherlock Holmes or a Miss Marple; and if it were possible, he would end up floating face down in the Riachuelo River in the middle of the first chapter” (“Disparen sobre el policial negro”). Detective stories in Argentina follow this quest for literary realism, that moves from Borges’s fictional setting in his metaphysical short story “La muerte y la brújula” to the garbage dumps of José León Suárez in Walsh’s non-fiction piece.

Nonetheless, parody disintegrates, especially after Sasturain, from the late 1980s onwards. The tone of post-dictatorial detective stories becomes gradually less parodic. The game of chess has been abandoned. As parody becomes less prominent, a different kind of crime narrative emerges, focusing on the recent dictatorial past. In this sense, it could be argued that Walsh’s way of narrating crime triumphed over Borges’s still playful one. This can be explained through two causes. On the one hand, once detective stories were no longer perceived to be an imported genre, once they were read as a local production with its own canonical authors (some of them even recognized internationally, such as Borges himself); subsequent generations of authors did not feel the need to resort to parody as their forerunners had. On the other hand, the main inheritor of both
Borges and Walsh, Ricardo Piglia, along with other writers of his generation (born in the late 1930s and early 1940s and raised during the First Peronismo), such as Miguel Bonasso, Juan José Saer, and Mempo Giardinelli, among others, write detective stories from a different historical background: that of post-dictatorship. They hark back in their stories to the past, preferably to the 1970s, to come to terms with national traumas of genocide.

Does this mean that these Latin American adaptations are unfaithful to their models? According to Argentine philosopher José Pablo Feinmann, Argentine detective stories have “not obeyed” the conventions of detective fiction. By contrast, they have operated “in the boundaries of the genre,” using it “as a metaphor or a parable of the political” (223-224). Whereas English mystery stories address murder as a cerebral puzzle, and North-American hard-boiled uses it to depict social and political corruption during Prohibition and the Great Depression, neither is really interested in examining murder as a social conflict entrenched in historical issues. But one of the main laws that Even Zohar and Lambert describe for poly-systems is precisely the “submission to the conventions of the importing literature” (252). In this sense, the Argentine appropriation of Anglo-American detective fiction works as a perfect example of what Zohan and Lambert label “imported genres”: the submission of imported conventions could only be valid if they were parodic to better fit in a geo-cultural context, perceived itself in a clear antithesis of its distant but ever captivating Anglo-American models. If there is such a thing as a Southern Cone detective fiction, it can be traced in this consciousness that originates first in the Argentine reception and re-appropriation, and is later re-exported, south-south, to Brazilian and Chilean literatures. These three national literatures are also marked by a common historical legacy, that of the transnational Operation Cóndor, that shape the ways in which detective stories were conceived first as parody, then as memory. Despite the gradual abandonment of humor and parody at the hands of more earnest accounts of the recent past, Borges’s influence remains prominent in post-dictatorial
detective stories, mainly because of this structural gesture of subverting the rivalry between ego and mundus. From Don Isidro Parodi onwards, the mythical stature of individualism will diminish more and more, in the same way that the boundaries that in Anglo-American fiction separate law and crime increasingly start to crumble. Paraphrasing the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, Gamerro insists on the impossibility of producing local detective fiction after the experience of genocide: “after El Olimpo clandestine detention centre it is not possible to practice hard-boiled fiction” (“Dispares sobre el policial negro”). By equating the effects that Auschwitz had on Western culture with the effects that the dictatorship had on Argentine literature, he claims that the bloodiest of the country’s twentieth-century experiences changes the paradigm in which state, individualism, and crime ought to be read. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom, or Scandinavia, countries where detective fiction is profusely cultivated as it is in Argentina, the re-definition of the state after the dictatorial experience offers a singular historical framework. The impact of this context should not be solely circumscribed to Argentine literary production, since it can also be found in Brazilian and Chilean novels.

Gamerro suggests that in order to make post-dictatorial detective stories plausible, a possible narrative strategy is setting fictions far from Argentina. Certainly, there are examples that follow this prescription, such as Giardinelli’s Lonely are the Dead (1985), Saer’s The Investigation (1995), or Guillermo Martínez’s The Oxford Murders (2003), which take place in Mexico City, Paris, and Oxford, respectively. Yet there are contemporary detective fictions that do take place in South American cities. The stories and novels that will be examined in this dissertation are set in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Concepción, and Rio de Janeiro. It could be argued that these novels observe Gamerro’s displacement not in geography but history, since they usually take place in the past. In each of them, the detective, in one or way or another, fails to restore the social fabric at the hands of a brutal state apparatus. With Feinmann, I may inquire how is it possible to depict a
criminal state in a genre usually meant for mass entertainment: “What happens with detective stories when crime is not only in the streets, but it is there [...] because the state is the main responsible of its existence? What happens when the police, far from embodying the image of justice, personifies instead the image of terror?” (215). Feinmann never fully answers. He states that whereas North American hard-boiled fiction equates law with crime and the police is portrayed as unreliable, “in Argentina, the police, in order to be plausible, must still play the role of the villain” (220). But police officers such as those described by Walsh, and later Piglia, are not just villains: they are successful and immune ones, often to the detriment of a defeated detective. Recent Scandinavian TV crime shows, such as *Forbrydelsen* (2007-2012) or *Bron* (2011-2018), and their North-American remakes, have depicted policemen as murderers. Yet the investigator still catches them in the end and these personifications of evil get punished. In one way or another, detectives end up restoring social order. Post-dictatorial Southern Cone detective fiction’s distinctive feature, by contrast, is not only that detectives not only fail to get the criminal, but also that their agency is dismantled by the state against which they are competing. Both displacements and transpositions (from present to past; from success to failure) allow Southern Cone authors to deal with the trauma of dictatorship, by intertwining the narration of crime with the narration of memory.

2.2.2 Labour and Failure

Emilio Renzi is the incarnation of the private detective in most of Ricardo Piglia’s novels and detective stories from the 1970s to the 2010s. Featured for the first time in “La loca y el relato del crimen” (1975), Piglia introduces him as follows: “Emilio Renzi was interested in linguistics but he earned a living writing literary reviews in the newspaper *El Mundo*” (97). Renzi’s twofold nature (doubly linked to knowledge: an aspiring neurolinguist and emergent journalist) reveals
what he is by saying what he is not: a detective disguised as a non-detective. The same can be said about most of the private eye’s embodiments in Argentine post-dictatorial detective fiction: its private detectives are always private but never detectives \textit{per se}. As Feinmann points out, that is “an essential feature of Argentine detective stories: it does not display neither policemen nor detectives” (213). Why is it so? Because, as Héctor Hoyos claims, the answer to this absence (that Hoyos notes in Colombian detective fiction, too) is “not due to how realistic but how plausible this archetype can be” (63). With Borges and Bioy Casares’s hairdresser as a parodic model, most of the authors who engage in the genre envision anomalous embodiments of the classic Anglo-American individualist hero. Whereas Ayala Gauna created a rural inspector, Walsh inaugurated the tradition of depicting the private eye as a journalist. The latter will be followed by Piglia, who displaces his journalist from a non-fictional realm to a more contemporary auto-fictional one.

During the 1970s and 1980s, several detective novels written by Argentine authors of Piglia’s generation, such as Soriano’s \textit{Sad, Lonely and Final} (1973), Giardinelli’s \textit{Lonely are the Dead} (1985) and Bonasso’s \textit{Memory Where it was Burning} (1990), embodied auto-fictional journalists turned into one-time investigators. A later generation of writers, born in the 1960s, brought up even more heterogeneous incarnations, tied to the recent demilitarization of Argentine democracy, such as Tony Hope, the retired navy cadet of Carlos Feiling’s \textit{Electrified Water} (1992), and Felipe Félix, the ex-combatant of the Falklands War turned into a hacker in Carlos Gamerro’s \textit{The Islands} (1998). More recently, Eduardo Sacheri contributed to this tradition, moving from the military to the judiciary, with his Inspector Chaparro, the attorney who inquires into an old crime in \textit{The Question in their Eyes} (2005). Martínez continued this auto-fictional tradition in \textit{The Oxford Murders} (2003), with a mathematics graduate student playing the role of the sleuth, whereas Claudia Piñeiro imagined for \textit{Betibú} (2011) a female detective fiction novelist in charge of a real investigation. Finally, back to Piglia, by the time of \textit{Ida’s Journey} (2013) Renzi has become a
lonely middle-aged South American professor who, like his author, teaches literature at Princeton. Beyond the ways in which they engage with labour and the task of detection, all these characters share a common factor: they are all, in one way or another, intellectuals who fail to solve their cases because of their intellectuality, in the same vein as Lönnrot and Walsh.

As for Renzi’s knowledge of neurolinguistics and his dexterity first as a journalist, all his bookish skills are at the service of detection. But there is a sense of malfunction, and of implied failure, in the way Piglia constructs him right from his first appearance: trained in science but compelled to work in something trivial such as “writing short literary reviews on the devastated panorama of our national literature” (97), contrary to the upper-class detective, Renzi is a failed intellectual. He is a sleuth who, like Parodi or Don Frutos, investigates from an underclass position, as his profession is somewhat below his social status. As Renzi himself admits in Ida’s Journey (2013), successful sleuths are no longer of any use: “we detectives no longer solve crimes, but at least we can narrate them” (151). Renzi is limited to organizing the narratives around crime and their aftermath. Unlike the classic detective, who would symbolize an endorsement of the limitless power of individuals, Renzi’s individual agency is circumscribed, or rather, reduced to the task that once was reserved to sidekicks: narrating, instead of solving puzzles and restoring social order. In “La loca y el relato del crimen” and the novel Plata quemada, Renzi inherits, to a certain extent, Walsh’s role, namely, writing about a case he cannot really solve or even have an impact on.

In other words, the story of Lönnrot, Walsh and Renzi, is the story of the impossibility of holding political sovereignty. Renzi becomes a chronicler who can merely accumulate facts to capture them through language. This is why in Plata quemada, Comisario Silva describes Renzi as “that disrespectful kid, with his glasses and curly hair, with his goose face, foreign to the real world and the danger of the situation, who seemed a parachutist, a legal aid lawyer or the youngest brother of a convict that complains about the treatment that criminals suffer in police stations”
Renzi’s intellectual appearance informs his total lack of harm in relationship to state violence. Charles Brownson claims in *The Figure of the Detective* (2013): “Here is the contemporary problem of knowledge in naked reality, set in a world of political power, wealth, and cynicism that has become all too familiar. The detective detects nothing. In the end he is not even sure of his own identity. He has been invoked—snatched up—not to repair the torn fabric of society but to help tear it farther” (157). Renzi’s account, far from what a classic private detective would do, indeed helps to tear the fabric of society farther. If, as Lacan saw, symbols helped Poe’s Dupin to solve the purloined letter case, here they have an inverted outcome: they paralyze Renzi and condemn him to constant failure. In Lacanian terms, the post-dictatorial private detective remains a prisoner of symbols. Renzi inherits Lönnerg’s distorted relation with language to delve into the autoimmune reaction that eradicates his immunity. The very aspect that once constituted its mythification is now what heads him towards failure: knowledge.

### 2.2.3 From Knowledge to Failure

Whereas the Brazilian scholar Idelber Avelar (“Alegorías de lo apócrifo: Ricardo Piglia, duelo y traducción”) tackles the theme of failure in Piglia’s first two novels, *Artificial Respiration* (1980) and *The Absent City* (1987), Rodrigo Blanco Calderón (“Piglia y Gombrowicz”) examines this issue in the same novels and his first *nouvelles*. In fact, according to Blanco Calderón, silence has shaped Piglia’s entire career in the way he positioned himself in the Argentine literary field: in so far as he was often “silent,” only publishing five novels from 1970s till the 2010s. His scarce production, especially when compared with more prolific writers such as Puig, Saer, or Aira, is explained by Blanco Calderón as “keeping a distance from success and the silent vocation for failure” (27). I share their reading that examines failure in the sense of “defeat,” but I also understand it in terms of “malfunction,” following the twofold translation that the word has in
Spanish, as “derrota” and “falla.” I believe that failure is not only key to reading Piglia’s two canonical first novels, but it has been prominent ever since Renzi’s first appearance in “La loca y el relato del crimen” (1975). This short story, it must be nuanced, was published right before the formalization of dictatorial rule in Argentina, which took place with the military coup of March 24th, 1976. Nonetheless, the narrative portrays an oppressive atmosphere that was already very much present during the government of Isabel Martínez de Perón, the widow of the then late General Juan Domingo. A short-lived government (July 1974-March 1976), this period worked as a prelude to the dictatorship that, despite being originally democratic, was rooted in an extremely draconian policying of citizens through the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance. The Triple A, a far-right death squad with close relations with the Argentine Federal Police, engaged in State Terrorism to an extent that showed a seamless continuum with the following dictatorial experience. Thus, Piglia portrays this oppressive context by focusing in the absent presence of the police institution before the dictatorship.

“La loca y el relato del crimen” is a somewhat simple story. A homeless and psychotic woman, “a beggar, who was a bit crazy and used to say her name was Angélica Echevarne” (97), speaks up the causes and the detail of murder that takes place in a location close to where she usually begs. No one but Renzi knows how to understand her language. The Madwoman happens to be the one holder of truth as she is the only witness of a crime. At first sight, Renzi’s symbolic literacy seems to reproduce the traditional endorsement of individualism that features in classic detective stories. His speech is deemed to be “triumphal” (101), made of the typical digressions that boast knowledge and erudition, updated now to late twentieth-century neurolinguistics. Renzi explains to his supervisor at the newspaper he works for:

In a delusion that the madman repeats, or better, he is forced to repeat some verbal structures that are fixed, as in a mould [...] that then gets filled with words. In order to examine this structure, there are thirty-six verbal categories that are named logical operators. They are like a map, you arrange them in order, and you can realize that the
delusion makes sense [...] Whatever does not fit that order [...] is what the madman tries to say despite the repetitive compulsion. I examined this woman’s delusion with this method. If you pay attention, you will see that she repeats a series of formulas, but there is a series of words [...] that are excluded [...]. I separated those words and what remained? —said Renzi, lifting his face to look old Luna. [...] “The fat man waited for her in the corridor and he didn’t see me, and he talked about money and that hand shone, the same one that made her die” Do you get it? —concluded Renzi, triumphal—, the assassin is fat Almada. (100-101)

Renzi’s knowledge, which comes from “five years at the university specializing in Trubetzkoi’s [sic] phonology” (97), has prepared him to decrypt Echevarne’s broken speech. Renzi is the only one who seems to have the privilege of overcoming symbolic unintelligibility. An “incomprehensible story” (97), the Madwoman’s speech allows the narrative to hold an enigma, a puzzle to be solved by the successful private eye who can decode “a series of linguistic laws, a code that is used to analyze the language of a psychotic person” (100). Nonetheless, heroism, once more, is short-lived. Like Lönrot and Walsh, language distances Renzi from mundus rather than truly enabling him to read it. This is why his newspaper supervisor “old Luna decided to send Renzi to cover the news because he thought that forcing him to get involved in that story of cheap whores and pimps was going to do him well” (97). The contact and the exposure with mundus aim to transform the private eye in the successful tough guy of North-American hard-boiled fiction stories. But what he gets, instead, is sheer failure.

Piglia deepens Walsh’s social futility of revealing the truth of a crime. In the dialogue that closes the short story, old Luna warns Renzi that solving the case will only be a mere anecdote in his career: “Have you learnt this at the university? [...] What are you going to do with all these papers now? A dissertation [...] Calm down, kid. Or did you think that we care about semantics in this newspaper?” (101). Renzi insists: “we must publish this [...] so Antúnez’s lawyers can use it. Can’t you see that this guy is innocent?” (101). But old Luna refuses. After his supervisor’s ban, Renzi writes the story, “The story of the crime” which is no other than the short story written by Piglia. The fact that the Argentine author uses the same paragraph to open and conclude his story
suggests that the only outlet for truth is reserved not to journalism (understood, here, as a pristine narration of facts) but to literature. Renzi’s writing, like Walsh’s, does not lead to the punishment of the murderers and seems to be circumscribed to literary speech. If in Walsh, individualism was embodied by a failing journalist, in Piglia it is personified in the failed intellectual hero, except that the myth is no longer effective. The Madwoman’s speech, “that has been repeating the same for the past ten hours without saying anything” (100), may have a meaning. That does not imply anything in the actual restoration of the social order. It may signify something to Renzi, but it literally signifies nothing for the world, as identifying the murderer verbally does not lead to his punishment.

Like Lönnrot and Walsh, Renzi endures symbolic muteness, since the criminals remain unpunished, his voice is not heard by his audience, only by Old Luna. The real murderer is shielded “from above” (98), which the story connects to the state: “fat Almada did it, but he is protected from the top,” says Renzi (98). The sleuth’s symbolic muteness seems to point out that the cause of failure is something that was but no longer is enough to restore social order: knowledge. The story opens with an endorsement of individualism that vanishes into thin air by the end. In Piglia, the detective’s observation skills are useless in the face of state power. Like Lönnrot and Walsh, Renzi solves the case: he identifies the murderer, but that does not alter the social order, nor it restitutes justice. Piglia’s originality resides in that Renzi’s hopes to have an impact in the world by revealing a truth are destroyed from the beginning. Unlike Walsh, Piglia writes absorbed in post-dictatorial skepticism: once revolution has been defeated by a counter-revolutionary dictatorial state, Piglia is no longer able to believe that restoration is even available and condemns his detective to symbolic muteness.

Knowledge is thus circumscribed by force to a sterile game, divested from the traditional effect it once may have had in Anglo-American stories. Piglia can only conceive knowledge but
within the strict boundaries outlined by state power. Old Luna tells Renzi: “All this play on words looks great but let’s stop here [...] Don’t get into trouble. If you mess with the police, I will fire you” (101). His warning somehow foretells the leitmotiv of the soon-to-come dictatorship: do not get involved, do not dare to alter the social order or to interfere with the state. Blaming state officers out loud for its crimes will not affect social justice at all. As previously quoted, Brownson believes that, when cases remain unpunished or unsolved, detective stories are engaging in a bitter social comment, which precisely states this “impossibility of knowledge” (84). The unsolved case of the Madwoman, by contrast, expresses something different. It is not so much that knowledge is no longer possible but that it is not useful: divested from the state apparatus, without force, it is as useless as burnt money. Piglia’s poetics of failure entails that knowledge does not pay. Renzi’s symbolic muteness leads to a sterile literary mythification. Speechless, the detective’s knowledge is restricted only to his privileged use of literacy: writing.

2.3 The Argentine State: Deaf-Mute Body

2.3.1 Money and Failure

The individual’s symbolic muteness finds its counterpart in the state’s symbolic deaf-muteness. In “La loca y el relato del crimen,” the state and its police are deliberately silent and indifferent. As usual, policemen are depicted as incompetent, always eager to settle for the first suspect they find: “the police stopped Juan Antúnez that same morning […] and the case seemed to be closed” (97). Nevertheless, there are no characters fully embodying them. As a matter of fact, it is the private sector and its individuals, (the newspaper and its supervisor) who are in charge of restraining themselves, without the need of any state coercion. As the supervisor tells Renzi: “I have been in this business for thirty years and I know one thing: you don’t mess with the police. If they told you that the Virgin Mary was the murderer, you just write that” (101). A deaf-mute state, a state, that
as Piglia himself defines, is a body that “on the one hand does not say and on the other hand forces to say” (qtd. in Pellicer 97), either through systematic torture or through imposing its own narratives, is a state that has no real competitors. The mere possibility of positing a rivalry of a competitive ego against a flawed mundum is un-plausible. Renzi does not compete with a state officer to reveal the truth. He lacks a G—, an Inspector Lestrade, or a Treviranus to contend against. Instead, his rivals do not belong to the state apparatus but to the private sector itself: on the one hand, Luna, his own supervisor, who has absorbed (normativized in Foucauldian terms) the criminal nature of the police and internalized the authoritarian rule of the state as his own. On the other hand, Rinaldi, a police reporter from La Prensa, the competition of El Mundo, Renzi’s newspaper, who is infected with the same monstrous attributes that once were ascribed to the state: Rinaldi’s “skin was fluffy, as if he were just emerged from the water” (98). He also boasts about being “able to smell a criminal a block away” (98) and contends with Renzi in terms of knowledge, when he states that the Madwoman’s broken speech “seems a parody of Macbeth […] The story told by a madman signifying nothing.” At which Renzi responds: “By an idiot, not by a madman […]. And who told you that it means nothing?” (99). Renzi’s display or bookish erudition, by the end of the story, would prove to be the vain rectification of a powerless savant, a failed intellectual, who is defeated by power structures he cannot control.

Something different happens in Plata quemada (1997), where the police seem to be more present and embodied in specific characters. Published at the end of Menemismo in the late 1990s, but written through more than three decades, Piglia’s novel narrates a crime that took place in the 1950s, the story of a gang of criminals who raided a bank in downtown Buenos Aires and escaped with three million of pesos in cash to Montevideo. After six weeks, the criminals found themselves surrounded by three hundred military policemen both from Argentina and Uruguay. From a very early scene, Renzi introduces the Superintendent of the Buenos Aires Police, Comisario Silva, who
“does not investigate, simply tortures and uses the accusation as his method” (Plata quemada 60). The inherited hostility towards the state police appears now, not exclusively in the voice of the narrator-detective, but in that of the criminals, who, much more than Renzi, are the real protagonists of the novel. “Policemen are always more scared than criminals, they do it all just for a little salary, for their pension” (110) rants el Gaucho Dorda in the final scene: Policemen “have their woman at home complaining because the cop earns too little, spends all the night out, under the rain” (110). Dorda goes on to wonder “who could even think to be a policeman, only a sick guy, only someone who does not know what to do with their lives, a ‘pusillanimous’ dude (he had learnt that word in jail and he liked it because it made him think on someone without a soul)” (110-111). Entrenched in the Liberaij, an emblematic building of Montevideo, along with his brother and his lover, el Gaucho Dorda contrives against the officers while he resists their massive shooting, for fifteen hours. They have been ambushed and besieged after a long pursuit, for committing one of the most impressive bank robberies that had taken place at the other side of the River Plate in Buenos Aires. Dorda’s rant reproduces not so much a conventional criminal’s speech but a private entrepreneur’s underestimating the lives of public functionaries, these sick and pusillanimous wage-earners who take no risks in life and prefer the security of permanent employment offered by the state, those who “become cops to have their future assured and thus they lose their life” (110). Hostility towards the state, once funnelled through the voice of the classic figure of the private detective, takes place here by blending them with unreliable testimonies, that are nothing but an illustration of a concept that Piglia himself coins: the idea of “paranoid fiction,” a kind of exacerbation of detective stories that is especially prone to suspicion towards delusive speeches, fighting against each other in order to claim their right to truth. Individualism, here disguised in the form of the criminal mastermind, pervades the speech of Dorda.
Delusions and paranoia towards the state in *Plata quemada* can be read in the light of Michael Foucault’s notion of “state-phobia”: “You have all heard of the art historian, Berenson. He [...] said something like: ‘God knows I fear the destruction of the world by the atomic bomb, but there is at least one thing I fear as much, and that is the invasion of humanity by the state.’ I think this is the purest, clearest expression of a state-phobia, one of the most constant features of which is its coupling with fear of the atomic bomb. (“10 January 1979” 76)”. Foucault then goes on to clarify that this state phobia “is not that recent since Berenson expressed it around 1950-1952,” instead, it “runs through many contemporary themes and has undoubtedly been sustained by many sources for a long time: the Soviet experience of the 1920s, the German experience of Nazism, English post-war planning” (76). Foucault, who coined this term in 1979, ascribes his notion of “state-phobia” to the Cold War, when authoritarian states were regarded with fear by a dominant liberal trend. Still, he does not necessarily circumscribe it solely to that historical period. He understands it to be “one of the signs of the crises of governmentability” (76), whose embryonic manifestations hark back as early as the sixteenth century, to reappear in the “second half of eighteenth century, which manifest itself in that immense, difficult, and tangled criticism of despotism, tyranny, and arbitrariness” (76). Cold War state phobia, according to Foucault, mirrors these embryonic manifestations in that they are both ambiguous. Although he does not explicitly develop the nature of this ambiguity, he is referring to the duality of both the disdain and fascination that the state exerts upon individuals.

The phobia has also had many agents and promoters, from economics professors inspired by Austrian neo-marginalism to political exiles who, from 1920, 1925 have certainly played a major role in the formation of contemporary political consciousness, and a role that perhaps has not been studied closely. An entire political history of exile could be written, or a history of political exile and its ideological, theoretical, and practical effects. Political exile at the end of the nineteenth century was certainly one of the major agents of the spread of socialism, and I think twentieth century political exile, or political dissidence, has also been a significant agent of the spread of what could be called anti-statism, or state-phobia. (76)
What Foucault outlines is the international trajectory followed by the origins of neoliberalism, a traveling economic school arising in Vienna, (by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek, fathers of Austrian Neo-marginalism) and moving via England to Chicago, where it will be further elaborated. As David Harvey explains in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), from there neoliberalism will be exported as a first test in the global south, i.e: Chile and Argentina, during their last dictatorships in the 1970s, to later return to the north in the 1980s, under the democratic governments of Regan, Mulroney and Thatcher.

Gaucho Dorda’s rant is certainly infected by this neoliberal state-phobia. When, still besieged in the Liberalj, he shows blunt mistrust towards the speech of the Montevideo police, who despite insisting that “the police guarantee the life of delinquents before the very Judge” receives only “new and worse insults” (125) for an answer. Renzi, once more a journalist in charge of compiling and narrating the events for the newspaper *El Mundo*, depicts the criminals in the same light of individualist delusions: while policemen are starving, Dorda and his sidekicks are “eating chicken and drinking whisky, in addition to which they still had three million pesos to divvy out” (126). Individualism infects the criminals’ discourse: “And you, how much do you earn? You’ll be killing each other over small change” (126) brags Dorda’s partner, el Nene, whose delusion of grandeur displays a fantasy that rectifies or rather transiently solves class resentment. Usually an outcast that must steal to earn an income, el Nene now perceives himself to be above the wage-earning policemen, thanks to the bank robbery. The loot of three million of pesos makes him, if for but one night (and even if it will be the last one of his life), into the paramount myth of individualism: the self-made man, who is able to enjoy good food and alcohol, to look down on the police officers, the hungry working class suffering through the cold Montevideo night, who are risking their lives for a scant if steady wage while at the same time securing the social order established by constituted power.
The criminals’ individualism, moreover, is tinged not only with these delusions of grandeur but also with sheer, albeit justified, phobic suspicion. The state from which el Gaucho Dorda and his partners are running certainly looks to them no different from Foucault’s description of despotic, tyrannical, and arbitrary states against which there has been developed a history of phobia. Beneath the apparent benevolence of the Uruguayan state police to ensure their human rights, Renzi says that el Nene knows that “the police was looking for something else” (97). As Gamerro claims, what triggers the shooting is the conflagration because “this time the burglars rebelled and refused to make a deal with the police” (“Para una reformulación del género policial argentino” 49). In Renzi’s words, “it is more likely than” the police “wanted to kill them instead of catching them alive to prevent them from secretly incriminating them in the operation without receiving the part of the loot that had been agreed” (97). Policemen are secretly involved in the robbery, and their main interest is to execute the group in order to keep both their share and their public image intact.

Max Weber’s fear of the state in the form of obedience ressonates with Foucault’s state phobia. Alongside his famous definition of the state, Weber points out that “obedience is determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope” (“Politics as a Vocation” 79). What is robust, thus, is not the state body but its powerful effects upon the multitude that must obey them. When Piglia describes the Argentine state as sick, he imagines it as a body that far from being robust is soulless and finds its incarnation in these pusillanimous policemen, “someone without a soul,” a characterization that resonates both with Weber and with Foucault’s definition of the state as a body that “has no heart, as we all know, but not just in the sense that it has no feelings, either good or bad, but [...] in the sense that it has no interior” (Foucault, “10 January 1979” 77). This empty body can be traced in Renzi’s description of the policemen’s voice:

And then the voice that ordered them to surrender. It was the police. The voice arrived in a distorted way, in falsetto, a typical voice of a guanaco, devious and arrogant, emptied of
any feeling different from humiliation. Men that yell, confident that the other will obey or sink. That is the voice of authority, that is heard through the loudspeaker in the cells, in the corridors of hospitals, in the patrol cars that carry inmates in the middle of the night through the empty city to the basements of police stations in order to give them a smack (102).

Here the state has inherited the same symbolic disabilities than the classic Anglo-American state once had: filled with different sorts of distortion and deformities, it is a monstrous body whose voice is either too loud or out of tune. But beyond these negative characterizations, it is a voice that has been “emptied,” it is a hollow voice, whose oppressive effect relies precisely in this hollowness. It is in this sense that the state’s lacks, underlined by Piglia, differ from the ones pointed out by his Anglo-American models. This portrayal of the state goes beyond an ascertainment of its negative attributes. The main lack of the state is not simply that its officers cannot speak nor that they do not know how to operate efficiently. The main symbolic disability of the state, Piglia reveals, is that it lacks content, it is a vacuous silhouette.

Piglia resorts to the traditional figure of speech used by his forerunners to depict the state: personification. The impersonal institution of the police, invariably compared to repulsive animals, is embodied in the figure of “el Comisario Silva” whose presence is demanded by Dorda and his companions in a similar way: “If the fag swine of Silva is around, tell him to come himself to negotiate, tell him not to chicken out” (110). The physical dismemberments of the body of the state evokes its symbolic counterpart: the absence of a soul, a heart, a voice or even a human constitution; not only masculine cruelty, as Foucault warns us, but also emptiness. These two elements, force and hollowness, go beyond the inherited symbolic disabilities of the state featured in the Anglo-American detective stories. Through mere force, the policemen will eventually shoot to death the three criminals after the 15-hour Numantine resistance. But since policemen have empty soulless bodies—i.e: bodies lacking among others the ability of literacy—they fail to read the situation well enough to recover the money, to reinstate it to the financial system. Piglia himself mentions in an interview that burnt money is no different than counterfeit money (qtd. in Carrión
435). As Bruce and Wagner point out, the destruction of the money entails an even more severe failure as, once it is turned to ashes, it is non-productive and hence non-rational: “As the bills metamorphose into ash, money is gradually divested of its function of guarantor of rationality” (4). Even laundered money, despite its origins stained with crime, can still be of use to the market. But once incinerated, the bank notes are suddenly located at the opposite side of the spectrum of where they are supposed to be, i.e. the space of fluidity. It is not a coincidence that the aquatic metaphors alluding to cash are very prolific in economic discourse: “liquidity,” “flow,” “circulation,” “laundering,” “leaks,” “waves,” “stagnation,” “splattering,” all of which are reminiscent of David Harvey’s concept of “fluidity” as central to Marx’s conception of capitalism (A Companion to Marx’s Capital 34). As long as money keeps flowing and circulating, it fulfills its utilitarian purpose. “Burnt, money is reduced to its ultimate materiality, ashes, the illusion of its intrinsic value shattered end and with it its referential status with regard to all that it measures (time, work, commodities)” (Bruce and Wagner 5). Once the flow is interrupted, once water cannot extinguish the fire, the logic of money and its meaning are cancelled. As the siege drags on, a curious multitude gathers outside the Liberaij building and starts clamouring for punishment. The fact that they are burning money makes el Gaucho Dorda and his sidekicks look more criminal than mere thieves, deserving an even worse sentence. They are seen as authors of “a nihilist act and an example of pure terrorism” (Piglia, Plata quemada 103). Like and Bruce and Wagner claim, “as it disappears into smoke, money appears to be what is most valuable in society, representing, beyond its exchange value, the values upheld by society and even the sheer fact that society has such values [...] What is destroyed with the bills exceeds their material existence, and affects the entire imaginary make-up of the crowd, its actual perception of what is ‘the real’” (4-5). This is

8 Spanish has even more aquatic metaphors than English: “el hundimiento general de una economía” or “un escándalo que salpica la imagen de una corporación.”
why it is so relevant to look to the relationship between the punishment of the criminal mastermind
and Piglia’s re-elaboration of Argentina’s recent traumatic past.

2.3.2 Money and History

As he discloses in his epilogue, Piglia began working on *Plata quemada* during the late 1960s,
(just a few years after the historical crime took place), to publish it only during the late-1990s.
What began as a non-fiction journalistic account of a contemporary crime, in the style of Capote’s
*In Cold Blood* or even more Walsh’s *Operación masacre*, “trying to stick to the facts” (Piglia,
*Plata quemada* 171), ends up as a reconstruction of the past with a far from negligible dose of
literary invention. This is why Piglia quickly corrects himself elsewhere stating that he tried to
“stick to the facts just like I imagined that their protagonists have lived them” (qtd. in Fresán
“Arquitectura del encierro,” Carrión *El lugar de Piglia* 305). In this regard, *Plata quemada* became
one of the many post-dictatorial detective fiction novels written in the Southern Cone that hark
back to recent past events to deal with trauma and memory. As Piglia acknowledges, “the events
were now so distant and closed, that they seemed the lost memory of a lived experience […] That
distance has helped me to work on the story as if it were the account of a dream” (*Plata quemada*
171), and dreams are unavoidably filled with subjectivity and invention.

In “Useless to Revolt?” Foucault claims that:

Revolts belong to history. But, in a certain way, they escape from it. The impulse by which
a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, “I will no longer obey,” and
throws the risk of their life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seems to me to be
something irreducible. Because no authority is capable of making it utterly impossible:
Warsaw will always have its ghetto in revolt and its sewers crowded with rebels. And
because the man who rebels is finally inexplicable; it takes a wrenching-away that interrupts
the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons, for a man to be able, “really,” to prefer
the risk of death to the certainty of having to obey. (*Le Monde* 5-1979)

Foucault is thinking here of the Iranian Revolution, but Piglia’s gang of criminals, “who will no
longer obey” either, surely displays this same desire to revolt, by resisting in a besieged building
and subsequently burning their stolen money, thus momentarily interrupting rationality, productivity, and history. While for Foucault this Benjaminian “interruption of the flow of history, and its long chains of reasons” leads to religion, Piglia’s escape from history, from the 1960s to the 1990s, results in literary mythification, as he unabashedly admits when he explains the writing process of the novel, “as if I would find myself before an Argentinean version of a Greek tragedy [where] the heroes decide to face the impossible and resist, choosing death as their fate” (170). In a way, it could be argued that they succeed because they fail, they become myths because, having failed to escape with the money, they resist the state’s rule. Therefore, they invert the fate of Borges’s Lönnrot, who fails because he succeeds. The most prominent metaphor of this mythification is encapsulated in their Numantine resistance: “On the TV screen, the Nene and the Gaucho realized that [...] they were trapped in a sort of capsule, lost in space, a submarine (said Dorda) that ran out of gas and lies on the rocks in the bottom of the sea. The gunshots were like bombs that shake them without wiping them out” (108). But, as in “La loca y el relato del crimen,” the myth no longer works. What then is Piglia’s bitter “social comment” in Brownson’s terms? Plata quemada offers a resolution (we know from the beginning of the story who robbed the bank) and unlike the short story there is even punishment as all the criminals are executed in cold blood. But is there restoration? The burnt money implies that there is not: the ashes of the burned banknotes will not be able to return where they once belonged, that is, the Provincial Bank of Buenos Aires, and thus, to the fluid circulation of the market.

This absence of literary restoration resonates with another historical one: that of post-dictatorship. During the 1990s, crimes against humanity committed during the dirty war, after being punished but halted in the 1980s, were pardoned by the government of Carlos Saúl Menem, in a series of legal measures that would neutralize all dissent from the left, helping to impose the neoliberal post-soviet world’s pensée unique, which the dictatorship itself had previously paved
the way for. It is difficult not to think of “burnt money” as an inversion of “sweet money,” the popular name for the result of the implementation of the monetarist doxa during the administration of Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-1981). The dictatorial state’s endorsement of neoliberal policies aimed to generate foreign investment through the purchase of cheap American dollars (thus creating the feeling of “sweet [easy] money”), but failed, solely generating unprecedented debt (escalating from $7.8 to $45 billion of dollars in only just seven years), structural unemployment, and hyperinflation. An updated monetarist doxa returned in the 1990s during Menem’s administration in a much more effective way, legitimized by the IMF and the Washington Consensus. The convertibility of the Argentine peso to the US dollar reversed the recession (if temporarily) and ended the sky-high inflation that had haunted the Argentine economy. Amidst this apparently triumphant monetarist doxa, Piglia puts centre stage his poetics of failure, disintegrating money, divesting it of its utilitarianism. If in Hammett and Chandler, money made it possible to investigate crime and resolve social problems; in Plata quemada it has the opposite effect: money ensures that crime remains unsolvable. Similarly, if hard-boiled fiction posited a state that was corrupt but still perfectible, the image of burnt money enables Piglia to imagine the state as a body that cannot be perfected because it does not have any content. To a certain extent, Piglia has learnt Chandler’s lesson and taken seriously the idea that the state, (which in Farewell, My Lovely is personified in the figure of Lieutenant Nulty), is a null body. Menemismo, during the 1990s, spread monetarist policies that fostered middle-class individualism as its highest drive for economical growth: the public delegitimization of unions, the favouring of the private versus the public sector, the promotion of individual capitalization system for retirement plans, the deep deregulation of collective bargaining agreements and the systematic dismantling of most social achievements that have been protecting the working class since Perón’s administration during decades are only some examples. At its peak, Piglia anathematizes and condemns individualism
to failure. As Avelar claims, “if in the exactitude of representation, appropriated by the State, our narrations have become archival citation in the bureaucratic machine, the only way is to invent false and apocryphal stories” (“Alegorías de lo apócrifo: Ricardo Piglia, duelo y traducción” 1). In short, since the state has coopted public memory through the systematic misrepresentations of facts, all that remains is literary mythification against that narration of history.

At the same time, the Gaucho Dorda and his gang see themselves as political subjects who evoke another resistance, a historical one that was fundamental for Piglia’s constitution as a writer: the Peronist resistance from the 1950s till the 1970s: “We are political exiled who struggle for the return of Perón” (Plata quemada 111), they say. British critic Jason Wilson reads this passage as evidence that the novel “sentimentalizes these thugs,” establishing parallels between these 1960s criminals and the 1970s political “urban guerrillas who raided banks and were decimated by the police and military in orgies of violence” (“The Tragic, Seamy Underbelly of Buenos Aires”). Although the Peronist tradition evoked here encapsulates a symbol of resistance against the post-dictatorial state, under Menemismo (which subverted the Peronist movement to adapt it to neoliberalism); it would be far-fetched to interpret this Piglia’s nostalgia for the guerrilla. The police in Plata quemada execute a group of men, which may evoke the execution narrated in Operación masacre. But although they declare themselves to be “followers of Perón,” Piglia’s thieves are not said to be killed on the presumption that they were involved in a political party. The men here have clearly committed a crime and the state does not chase them arbitrarily. It executes them extra-judicially not because of what they are thought to believe in, but because of what they do. To put it differently, it declares to kill them not because of ideology but out of habit. Therefore, Piglia’s literary mythification goes beyond a nostalgic celebration of the pre-dictatorial past: instead, it takes part in a counter-discourse. In his own words, that is what literary speech must create: “a sort of imaginary counter-economy that conveys well whatever is not being sad in
society’s dominant collective imagination’” (qtd. in Carrión 435). As Argentine critic Julio Prema
t puts it, this is a fictional counter-discourse that is “rooted in a way of saying things which resists
dominant narratives, that are equally fictional” (125). Premat cites as an example of this counter-
discourse, within the plot of the book, the scene that I previously discussed, when Gaucho Dorda
invents a meaning for the word “pusillanimaous,” equating it with the wage-earning policemen. The
very act of burning the money, for Premat, is way of introducing another counter-narrative (126),
mainly, because, unlike the official narrative of the state, it does not claim to purport meaning.

This counter-discourse, then, rewrites the traditional rivalry between individualism and the
state so as to confront the individualist rhetoric of 1990s post-dictatorial neoliberalism, negating
the all-mighty aura that individuals were promised in neoliberal doxa. Whereas the Anglo-
American manifestations of state phobia that I have examined in the first chapter are inseparable
from an endorsement of individualism; Argentine detective stories’ engagement with state phobia
is not. Renzi’s chronicle of the siege cites Piglia’s own work, namely “La loca y el relato del
crimen,” in that both are allegories of a defeat that affects mainly individuals. According to the
horizon of expectations of the genre, after all, individualism is expected to perform a constructive
task: restoring the social fabric. By contrast, here, they engage in a destructive one. Dorda and el
Nene may succeed in burning the money, but they do not manage to escape alive with it. Like
figures from a tragic myth, they are punished and die. As for the state, even if symbols are still
illegible for the police, that does not matter any longer. As in “La loca y el relato del crimen,”
symbols, or legibility even, are useless. In the end, the police fail, but individuals fail too.

In Plata quemada there may be myths, but its heroes are defeated and there is room only for
paranoia, fear, and failure both of the individual and the state in providing social justice, which
remains circumscribed to literature precisely because it has been banished from history. As Piglia
himself claims: “history is written by the victors and narrated by the defeated” (Crítica y ficción
 Literary narration, thus, emerges as a response to a state discourse whose failure is captured in fiction, only to escape, in a Foucauldian way, from its victory in history. Both Piglia’s short story and novel take part in what he himself considers to be “a narrative that flows underneath, that is tied with the defeat of the segments of society that have been dominated and defeated by the State” (212). By putting failure and defeat centre stage, through literary mythification, he offers a counter-narrative that aims to defy the triumphant narratives of the post-dictatorial state.

2.3.3 From Incompetence to Arbitrariness

The Argentine detective stories examined above subvert but still rely and linger on the reproduction of the classic rivalry between an individualist hero against a state that is still linked to incompetence and corruption. These attributes are rewritten in multiple ways. The most interesting of them is inaugurated by Walsh, when the typical state policemen’s ineptitude is displaced to their inability not to solve crime but to commit them. Walsh’s Buenos Aires provincial police appears indeed as cruel but not exclusively so: they are also useless when they have to execute, since they actually fail to accomplish their plan. After all, seven of the twelve men due to die manage to escape their execution. Even more interestingly, incompetence is reshaped in the form of arbitrariness, as in Walsh’s conclusion at the end of his book that “the government did not have the slightest idea who its victims were” (112), because most of them were not really involved in the rebellion against the dictatorship that prompted the repression. As a matter of fact, some of them were not even activists and the state police were not aware of it. From the survivors’ testimonies, Walsh manages to reveal that “the prisoners don’t know where they are going or why” (64). The absence of martial law allows Walsh to re-read the workers’ arrest as their arbitrary kidnapping; and, ultimately, their state execution as sheer murder. Nevertheless, these facts do not change the legitimacy of the state and its symbolic domination of individuals: its officers’ sense
of entitlement to illicitly punish individuals and remain unpunished themselves. After all, it should be reminded that none of the officers were actually imprisoned. As Beasley-Murray points out, it is precisely this arbitrariness which is key to understand the very symbolic domination of the state to its subjects. This, he says, “is legitimated and arbitrated by institutions and officials who need not be aware of what they are doing” (Posthegemony 192). This broad theoretical definition tallies thoroughly with Walsh’s policemen. Despite this arbitrariness, or perhaps because of it, Walsh is defeated by the dictatorship’s deaf-muteness because “power is most effective when it is symbolic” (191). It is the selective absence of a state narration, i.e: the way the state positions itself through silence, what produces an aura of might, in Michael Taussig’s terms. Through its deaf-muteness, the state appears to act with a calculated motivation that does not necessarily correspond with the arbitrary nature it actually operates with.

The symbolic muteness of the Argentine state is both powerful and persuasive, because as Bourdieu points out “what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying” (Outline of a Theory of Practice, 157). Silence, a naturalized habit, allows the state to mask its arbitrariness with the illusion of competent control of the social order. In Los años setenta de la gente común (2014), the Argentine historian Sebastián Carassai addresses the social perception of authority on the Argentine dictatorial state:

The maxims “it must be because of something” or “he must have done something” can be read as something more or even different than mere complicity or ignorance. These were the phrases of a society that clung to the belief that the state had returned and attributed and ultimate, unknown, and even unattainable rationality to the representatives of a power that at the same time was imposed on them, but at least ideally sheltered them from a greater chaos. […] The previously mentioned maxims tend to be interpreted in reference to the people who suffered from the repression. If one instead observes the other pole of repressive action, the state agent who exercises it, the questions that these maxims open are not related with the assumed criminal, terrorist, or “subversive” activities of those repressed, but rather with the knowledge of the agent that represses. […] The State, to exist efficiently, needs that its citizens suppose in it an unlimited, occult and even secret knowledge. (186)
Carassai defines this “secret knowledge” as “a civil superstition” (187) that bestows an omniscient dimension on the state. Far from the state incompetence and arbitrariness that emerges in Walsh, whose officers are unable to even execute effectively all their prisoners, Carassai’s book describes the perception of the Argentine dictatorial state as a competent all-knowing entity, because as he himself notes “one thing is what power is, and another thing, often different, is how it is perceived” (184). Carassai supports his claims through a notion coined by Taussig, which can be read as a supplement to Foucault’s “state phobia” and Weber’s displacement of the state’s robustness to the fear that it generates: the idea of “state fetishism,” “the sacred and erotic attraction, even thraldom, combined with disgust, which the State holds for its subjects” (Taussig, “Maleficium: State Fetishism” 111). Despite its apparently robust constitution, the state is nothing but a fiction or a mask, like the emptied voice of the police in Plata quemada, that conceals something else. Individuals who exert state power may look incompetent to commit or conceal crime and may fail to do so in secret, but its reasons are never questioned by civil society because of the assumption of the state’s omniscience.

Feinmann’s claims about the absence of “police nor detectives” (213) in Argentine detective stories can be seen now in a more nuanced light. It is not so much that there are no characters embodying the police. For in fact, there are plenty policemen, such as Borges’s Treviranus, Walsh’s Buenos Aires provincial police or Piglia’s Silva. Its absence resides in the fact that the state, through the organized criminal institution of the police, remains silent and impervious to individuals. As Taussig suggests, “above all the Dirty War is a war of silencing. There is no officially declared war. No prisoners. No torture. No disappearing. Just silence consuming terror’s talk for the main part, scaring people into saying nothing in public that could be construed as critical of the Armed Forces” (“Terror as Usual: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of History as State of Siege,” The Nervous System 26). While Taussig is here talking about Colombia’s dirty war in the
1980s, a similar case could be made about the Argentine experience under dictatorship in the late 1970s. Except that this state’s silence has a counterpart in an absence that is only selective. Despite its neoliberal rhetoric of a lighter state, it actually takes a strong present apparatus to implement systematic state terrorism or neoliberal policies that go against the multitudes. As Beasley-Murray explains, a neoliberal state then should be “understood as a radical reconstruction” of its “contours.” Since, they “relinquish direct control of the economy, but are highly interventionist in other arenas” (102). Even when it seems absent, (or especially when it does) the state is actually all-pervasive, as Foucault insists in several passages of his Birth of Biopolitics (1979).

Taussig’s reflection on the state builds on the English anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe Brown, for whom “there is no such thing as the power of the State; there are only, in reality, powers of individuals —kings, prime ministers, magistrates, policemen” (qtd. in Taussig 112). What Taussig names the “fetishism of the state” is what conceals this overlapping between concrete individuals and an abstract depersonalized entity. As Carassai says, “if the State is a fetish, if it does not exist […] but rather in small doses, in concrete people who are only ideally in harmony with the rest of the agents of the State, the subjects need to believe in its real existence as the only way of not feeling themselves abandoned” (184). The fictions read in this chapter all seem to unmask this fetish. The clearest example is Walsh himself who reveals the extent to which the state becomes a blank space at the service of constituted power, specific citizens made of flesh and bone, enabling them to impose their interests upon constituent power through sheer arbitrary force.

Bearing in mind this selective absence and fictional nature of the state, Argentine detective stories can be read through a common denominator: unlike Anglo-American detective stories (which despite their criticism of the state still relied heavily in its Hobbesian fictions of benevolence, e.g.: its constitutions, its social contract, its separation of powers), all the cases examined in this chapter
seem to agree that the state’s hollowness and its mute-deafness are structural. In a nutshell, they all seem to say: there is no such thing as a benevolent state.

### 2.4 Conclusions: Connivance and Sovereignty

Following Marx and Freud, the Argentine essayist Josefina Ludmer claims that crime “found cultures” (14). But this equation between crimes and not only cultures but specifically democratic states and crime is, of course, neither original nor particular to Argentinean literature. German author Hans Magnus Enzenberger claims in *Politics and Crime* (1964) that “even the more ‘progressive,’ ‘civilized’ constitutions allow for the killing of people and permit it” (23). The state, by definition, is inseparable from crime and its most characteristic expression: murder. This “original political act thus coincides with the original crime. An ancient, intimate, and dark connection exists between murder and politics, and it is retained in the basic structure of all sovereignty to date. For power is exercised by those who can have their underlings killed” (22). Foucault historicizes this “dark connection” of sovereignty along with the origins of detective stories in 1840s: “It was then that the long cohabitation of the police and criminality began. The first assessments had been drawn up of the failure of the prison, people knew that it didn’t reform, but on the contrary manufactured criminals and criminality, and this was the moment when the benefits accrued from this process of production were also discovered: criminals can be put to good use, if only to keep other criminals under surveillance” (“Prison Talk” 45). Foucault’s use of the term “cohabitation” instead of “marriage” to define the non-conventional nature of the relationship between the police and criminals reflects here the illegitimate albeit institutional nature of the ties between state and crime. In the original French text, Foucault uses the term “concubinage”: *concubinatus*, an Institution practiced in Ancient Rome, that allowed men to enter in an informal but legally recognized relationship with women other than their legal spouse.
This relationship between state and crime is somewhat not formal as marriage but nevertheless inherent to one another because of its *de facto* institutionalization.

Foucault sees in Vidocq (the historical figure from whom Edgar Allan Poe created G—) the perfect metaphor of this concubinage: a former criminal who is integrated into the state as the first head of the Sûreté Nationale, the French National Police. Vidocq condenses the connivance of state and crime: he is used by the state to manage criminality because he knows it from the inside. “Vidocq [...] was for a while a smuggler, a pimp, and then a deserter. [...] Then he became absorbed into the system. Sent to forced labour, he emerged as an informer, became a policeman, and ended up as head of a detective force. And, on a symbolic level, he is the first great criminal to have been used by the apparatus of power” (“Prison Talk” 45). The modern police, born from a failure (that of the prison) that permeated the modern state with criminality, nurture its force with “rehabilitated” criminals whose destructive agency is used to manage crime in a more efficient way. If Enzenberger and Foucault have a point when they claim that connivance is inherent to any modern state, what is the particularity of the Argentine case? For Feinmann, North American hard-boiled fiction’s more realistic poetics already insinuates the connivance between state and crime: “In Hammet and Chandler, the police as an institution does not present more moral attributes than the criminals. Corruption and violence are their constant features” (215). Nevertheless, state policemen depicted by Borges, Walsh and Piglia are not merely “violent and corrupt.” As Gamerro points out, corruption cannot be embodied in specific characters because it is inherent to the institution as a whole: “in Argentina, there are no corrupt policemen: the police, as an institution, is inherently corrupt” (“Para una reformulación del género policial argentino” 48). Whereas in Hammet and Chandler the boundaries between state and criminality are blurred but still exist, the Argentine state no longer mirrors criminals: it is the personification of criminality itself.
Argentine detective fiction, written from a post-dictatorial viewpoint, enables a re-reading of its Anglo-American models, unmasking the camouflaged criminal, arbitrary, and fictional nature of the state that has always been there but remained concealed within them. The detective stories read in this chapter allow a re-interpretation of how Anglo-American detective fiction imagined their democratic states through literature. Despite their differences, early detective stories from England and American hard-boiled fiction both make a similar claim about the state: if only it were not so lethargic or corrupt, in the end the state apparatus would function. Despite (or even because of) its ineptitude, the state is treated as perfectible. Argentine post-dictatorial detective fiction, by contrast, exhibits the state’s lacks not as actual lacks but as an inherent part of its irreversible criminal and empty nature. If, according to Italian philosopher Antonio Negri, contractualism is an apology for constituted power (128), seen in this new light, Anglo-American detective stories, far from criticizing the state, participate in this feature of contractualism: what according to Poe, Doyle, Christie, Hammett, Chandler appears to be a critique of the state, from the point of view of Borges, Walsh and Piglia, can be read as its blatant apology.
Chapter 3: Chile. *Ego Intra Mundo*

“Y el cielo escucha el paso de las estrellas que se alejan”

Vicente Huidobro, *Altazor*

3.1 Reimagining Neoliberalism after Chile’s Dictatorship

3.1.1 From South to North: Bolaño narrating Chile from Europe

“[He] was called Graham Greenwood and like a true North American he had a firm and militant belief in the existence of evil” (102), states the narrator of *Estrella distante* (1996) about a minor character in the book. In this novel, defined by his own author as “a very modest approximation to absolute evil” (Manzoni 201), the Chilean Roberto Bolaño takes part in the detective story genre rewriting the traditional tension between individualism and state. Like his Argentinean counterparts, he does so by equating the post-dictatorial state with crime. Bolaño himself once declared the influence of the Argentine literary tradition in the Southern Cone, when he wrote to the Mexican writer Carmen Boullosa that in Latin America there were “only two countries with an authentic literary tradition, namely Argentina and Mexico” (Manzoni 106). Nevertheless, Bolaño will portray in an original manner the Chilean dictatorial experience: although equated, the state and the criminal relationship in the novel is no longer transparent but problematized instead. Thus, the ways in which Bolaño represents “absolute evil,” far from being “determined” and “militant,” are opaquer and more nuanced.

Reimagining Latin American history, Bolaño, (like Piglia), harks back his narrative to the recent past to deal with the trauma of genocide, setting his novel in the context of the 1973 Chilean coup d’état that deposed Salvador Allende’s democratic government, and the first years of Pinochet’s subsequent dictatorship. As Bolaño himself warns the reader in its preface, *Estrella distante* is in fact a rewriting of “El Infame Ramírez Hoffman,” the last chapter of his previous novel *Nazi Literature in Americas* (1996). An expanded retelling of his own work, the novel tells
the story of a character who has multiple identities, names and roles. Alberto Ruiz-Tagle a.k.a. Carlos Wieder is an airforce pilot, a spy infiltrated among literature students at the Universidad de Concepción, who subsequently becomes the assassin of two of them (the Garmendia sisters). He is also an avant-garde poet, a performance artist who writes visual poems with his aircraft. Tagle/Wieder is a character defined by his Latin American origins: “he had a hard look peculiar to certain Latin Americans over the age of forty, quite different from the hardness you see in Europeans or North Americans” (Estrella distante 144-145). This distinction resonates with the way Argentine detective fiction distinguishes itself from its Anglo-American models to represent the peculiar political differences of Latin American history. Tagle/Wieder’s story is told by an anonymous narrator, who traces, following the narrative strategies of detective fiction, the whereabouts of Tagle/Wieder over two decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s. In the novel’s final section, a private detective, Abel Romero, hires the narrator to help identify Tagle/Wieder’s whereabouts, to get him ultimately executed in Blanes, on the outskirts of Barcelona, Spain, from where Bolaño (reimagining Chile’s dictatorship from Europe) wrote and published most of his prize-winning work with the Catalan publishing house Anagrama.

Whereas in his later Los detectives salvajes (1999) or 2666 (2004) (that will be examined in the last chapter) Bolaño chooses to portray Mexican cities, Estrella distante is one of his “Chilean novels” (along with Nocturno de Chile) and is mainly set in Concepción. Like his Argentine counterparts, Bolaño uses the detective genre as a narrative strategy to talk about something other than the specific crimes portrayed in the plot. As discussed earlier, the narrative strategy that could only reconcile the abyss between Anglo and Latin American detective stories, according to Borges and his first disciples (Ayala-Gauna, Soriano, Sasturain), was parody. Bolaño, instead, manages to do what no other Argentinean novelist from his generation (Piglia, Saer, Giardinelli) did: he bridges South and North through memory, while at the same time becoming an author whose career
was launched and promoted in Europe and North America. Bolaño re-appropriates and re-exports a genre that had already acquired canonical status in Latin American literature. And it is thanks to this that he would later become a best-selling author in Europe and Anglo-America, his work translated into multiple languages, often marketed as the new post-boom novelist that came to represent Latin America in the genre of “world literature,” a position once held by García Márquez and Vargas Llosa. It is not a coincidence that most of Bolaño’s novels take place in different corners of Latin America, going comfortably from Chilean Patagonia and the Argentine Pampa to the Sonora desert and the Mexican-American border, passing through Acapulco or Mexico City: this narrative strategy makes it easier to reach more potential readers, interpellated by a re-appropriation of what Zizek, as discussed in the second chapter, calls “eccentric locales.” In the late 1990s, Marcelo Cohen wrote: “the European publishing industry needs a new Latin American star […] Bolaño […] seems like a good candidate for the position” (Manzoni 34). This is one of the many novelties that appears with Estrella distante: the fact that memory can also be absorbed by the market as a coveted commodity. Two decades after Cohen’s prediction, Bolaño indeed has fulfilled this position, confirming at the same time Idelber Avelar’s claim that “the erasure of the past as past is the cornerstone of all commodification, even when the past becomes yet another commodity for sale in the present” (The Untimely Present 1). Bolaño tackles the dictatorial experience of the Southern Cone by re-imagining memory in order to transform it into a literary product that successfully circulates in literary systems and is quickly absorbed by its market.

Estrella distante’s relationship with its models is therefore more complex than the Argentine case studies, since the book contrasts its elaboration of Latin American history with the United States, where detective stories were created a century and a half earlier; but also, Europe (particularly Spain, where the novel ends). This twofold axis is not merely related to literary but also more broadly to political history, namely Operation Condor. On the one hand, the United
States appears alluded as the spectre behind it. As David Harvey points out in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007), Chile was relevant to the United States. After all, Pinochet’s dictatorship in the 1970s was “the first experiment with neoliberal state formation” and the fact that it was “backed by US corporations, the CIA, and US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger” (7) is not a marginal anecdote but instead “provided helpful evidence to support the subsequent turn to neoliberalism in both Britain (under Thatcher) and the US (under Reagan) in the 1980s” (9). According to Harvey, “not for the first time, a brutal experiment carried out in the periphery became a model for the formulation of policies in the centre” (9). On the other hand, whereas the United States appears in the novel through its meddling presence, Europe is more prominently depicted (subordinated only to Concepción) as a space generated by the dictatorship: the Chilean diaspora and exile affecting the main characters, problematic embodiments of individualism and the (dictatorial) state: Romero, the anonymous narrator, and Tagle/Wieder, the private detectives and the criminal mastermind that works for the state. These tensions, between literature, history and politics, are mirrored in the ways Bolaño redefines in his novel the borders between individualism and the state, destabilizing (even more than his Argentine models) the traditional *ego contra mundum*.

3.1.2 Dictatorship and Neoliberalism

Tagle/Wieder performs his most important flight/poem from the Military Airport El Cóndor. There, he exhibits his aerial poetry before “a motley and democratic crowd milling among festive marquees” (*Estrella distante* 31), made of “generals” (42) and civilians. Bolaño’s choice of this airport, of course, is neither innocent nor arbitrary, since its name references a vulture that holds a prominent symbolic place not only in the Southern Cone imaginary but also in the Andean countries, Chile being at the intersection of both groups. Both the condor and the aircraft that resembles it work as metonymies of Tagle/Wieder’s (and therefore, the Chilean dictatorial state
that he is expected to personify) preying predisposition towards his defenceless victims. The Andean condor has its counterpart in a paratextual element: the quintessential avant-garde American artist Andy Warhol’s *Bald Eagle* (1983). A reproduction of this painting of the national bird of the United States (featured on its seal) appears on the cover of the original edition published by Anagrama in 1996. Both the Andean Condor and the American Bald Eagle are birds of prey that constitute founding myths symbolizing different regions of the Americas. Yet they are merged in a transnational political event that encapsulates both of them: Operation Condor. Implemented by Southern Cone dictatorial states with material and symbolic support from the United States administration, Operation Condor acted beyond state borders.

For Santiago Quintero, Tagle/Wieder’s “use of aircraft, under the dictatorial context, could also be read or remembered as an oppressive act of force […] that evoked images such as the bombing of the the Palace of La Moneda in 1973” (166), the seat of the President of the Republic of Chile where Salvador Allende was ousted. Because Operation Cóndor was transnational, the image of this vulture aircraft, and its flights, nonetheless, should not be reduced to national borders. Instead, there is here a veiled mention to a specific type of traveling that goes beyond Pinochet’s dictatorship, namely: death flights. One of the many extrajudicial systematic killing practices implemented by military aircraft, death flights were imported from Europe to Latin America, where they later circulated transnationally. Invented in the 1950s by the French state during the Algerian War, against urban guerrilla, death flights were profusely practised both in Argentina and Chile during the 1970s. Although there is no direct representation of Tagle/Wieder dropping any of his victims from a plane, it is not a coincidence that he is a military pilot. This ellipsis can be read in terms of a crisis of representation that is fundamental to understand Southern Cone detective fiction. A crisis of representation that relies, first and foremost, in the problem of personification: it is a crisis to represent politically and literarily. There is no explicit portrayal of
other murders, yet the narrator (and everyone in the novel) knows that the pilot/poet committed them. This is not the only significant elliptical scene, since the difficulty of representing the dictatorial experience is one of the main topics of *Estrella distante*.

This resistance to representation points to another transnational practice implemented by Southern Cone dictatorships: the void left by disappeared bodies. Without corpses, there is not only no evidence but also no autopsies. Thus, the state, maintaining its immunity, dodges the possibility of an accurate account of what happened. Tagle/Wieder’s aerial performances can also be read as deferred death flights in which the deaths have already taken place but are reincorporated in language through the pilot/poet’s hermetic verses. “Some of those who were close to Wieder, however, were aware that he was conjuring up the shades of dead women” (33), says the anonymous narrator, after claiming that “although the poem went on to contradict itself, it would have been clear to an informed, attentive reader that the girls were already dead” (32). Being able to surmount illiteracy is what in the end restores the certainty of the victims’ death. This is why the anonymous narrator will be hired later by Romero: because, like any good detective, he has this ability to read. Argentine dictator Jorge Videla (one of the counterparts of Pinochet on the other side of the Andes) famously declared in 1979 that whoever was missing was “an incognita” who “does not have an identity, it is neither dead nor alive, it is missing” (“Ni muerto ni vivo… está desapareido”). Reading precisely disambiguates the indefinite status of the *desaparecidos*.

A paramount case of what Esposito, following Derrida and Plato, names *pharmakon*, Operation Condor, with its systematic disappearing of bodies, must be understood as a joint effort, a transnational “vaccine” (state terrorism) that presented itself as a neutralization of an equally international “poison” (urban and rural guerrilla warfare). As Esposito mentions, “nothing reinforces the host body politic better than an ill that has been dominated and turned against itself” (*Immunitas* 124). According to him “the point of intersection between political knowledge and
medical knowledge,” i.e.: the core of biopolitics, “is the common problem of preserving the body” (121-122). The ways that Southern Cone dictatorships claimed to preserve the state body are thus closely linked to a self-inflicted poison, aiming to eradicate the foreign agent, Soviet influence, that was disturbing an imaginary equilibrium of the region. In fact, in the 1970s, equating communism with cancer was a commonplace often revisited by constituted power. But of course, beyond cold war slogans, what was guiding these dictatorships to operate beyond state borders was precisely the selective reassembling of their external and internal contours. Far from being an anti-revolutionary transnational movement (as their slogans promoted), these regimes triggered instead what Italian philosopher Paolo Virno calls the “counter-revolution of the New Right” (“Do you Remember Counterrevolution?”): namely, the implementation of neoliberal practices without dissent. Virno focuses on the ways Italian parties paved the way for this New Right to emerge in a democratic context during the 1970s and 1980s; but during that same period, in Latin America, after having brought down Allende’s government in 1973, the Chilean military dictatorship absorbed the possibility of a revolution from the left with a similar counter-revolution. In Jean Franco’s words, after Pinochet’s regime, dissent from the left “was decimated” (“Preface,” Richard viii). Despite being functional to reassure constituted power, both in Italy and the Southern Cone, this counter-revolution was a revolution, nonetheless. A conservative “revolution in reverse […] an impetuous innovation of modes of production” (Virno, “Do you Remember Counterrevolution?” 141) that generates a new order that in turn produces new subjectivities. In Estrella distante, this “new order” is paradoxically encapsulated in one of the few traditional cornerstones of the engaged Latin American left (from Neruda to Gelman): the poetic word. Tagle/Wieder’s aerial poetry is perceived to be “the New Chilean poetry,” carrying the slogans of this transnational foreign policy that, once it was rehearsed in Latin America, was safe to re-import in Europe and the North America, where it was originally conceived (from the School of Vienna
to Chicago). But knowledge, of course, cannot be applied without force. A counterpart of the academic Chicago Boys, the Chilean military, such as Raúl Iturriaga, Manuel Contreras, or Miguel Krassnoff were also trained on American soil, far from University think tanks, at the U.S. Army School of the Americas. The narrator of Estrella distante says that “under the sponsorship of various companies, Carlos Wieder was flying to the South Pole” (43). From the beginning of the novel, the pilot’s origins are linked to the Chilean oligarchy: he “once said that his father or his grandfather used to have an estate near Puerto Montt” (4). Tagle/Wieder, whose performance flights were not only attended but also funded by financial powers and the social class he represents, encapsulates both the pen and the sword, the two arms of the Chilean dictatorship, while at the same time it problematizes its boundaries.

3.1.3 A Crumbling Rivalry

Bolaño engages in the traditional tension between ego contra mundum by merging crime and state, too. Nevertheless, the main difference resides in that here the rivalry starts to crumble, its borders gradually seeming more blurred. In Estrella distante, the Chilean seems to embody the criminal state in a concrete public officer. At first glance, Tagle/Wieder, a military pilot for Pinochet’s regime and a criminal mastermind, appears to be the usual metonymy of the dictatorial state. But, as Ezequiel De Rosso points out, “a purist would hardly see in Bolaño an author of detective novels; what seems clearer is that he is a reader of detective novels that writes about a generic matrix producing a narrative that can be read from the genre but that does not satisfy its basic premises” (135). One of these unsatisfied “basic premises” is related to the fact that the horizon of expectations of the genre would dispose the reader to think that Tagle/Wieder should work as this traditional embodiment of the state. Instead, what Bolaño does is more complex. The pilot/poet’s relationship with the state is more problematic: he may temporarily represent the state but
ultimately does not fully embody it. Though he works for the state willingly, he displays a resistance to personification. In short, the state tries but fails to make him stand in for it.

On the other hand, there is no singular private detective to take all the credit in solving the puzzle. What’s more, there is really no puzzle to be solved (as in Borges) or denounced (as in Walsh or Piglia). Neither Romero nor the anonymous narrator are responsible for revealing or reporting who is the murderer, but in one way or another they are hired to track Tagle/Wieder down. From early on the novel, the narrator discloses that the poet/pilot is the murderer of the Garmendia sisters, two of the narrator’s university friends. There seems to be then an absence of a whodunit logic. In other words, there is already a displacement of what needs to be solved: it is not a matter of who but of where. Establishing Tagle/Wieder’s whereabouts alludes to and mirrors the unknown whereabouts of his own adversaries: the narrator, but also his friends from Concepción, the desaparecidos, the missing ones of Pinochet’s dictatorship.

All these narrative strategies are ways through which Bolaño displays the mitigation of personified individualism, dismembered in fragmentary identities. Whereas the state criminal can no longer fully embody the state; the private detective can no longer synthesize all the mythical attributes, discussed in the first chapter, having instead to share them. Far from being unified and undivided heroes and villains (“individual,” etymologically means, “indivisible,” i.e.: that which cannot be divided [Online Etymology Dictionary, www.etymonline.com/search?q=individual]), they are fragmentary. As examined in the first two chapters, whereas successful Anglo-American private detectives often outwit the state, Argentine writers invert the outcome of this tension by producing multiple failing detectives against a successful murderer state. In both cases the nature of the rivalry, clearly embodied in respective singularized characters, was never questioned and remained stable. In this Chilean novel, there is something new: the personification of these abstract ideas and entities (individualism and the dictatorial state) still exists but is now fragmentary and
reticent, its characters resisting in one way or another (either because of their problematic individualism, their multiple identity or even their passiveness) the reproduction of their incarnations, respectively, of *ego* and *mundus*. This fragmentariness does not solely affect the *mundus* but also the *ego*; it is all-pervasive. In one of the final scenes of the novel, the encounter between the narrator and Tagle/Wieder, the two are explicitly mirrored: “Then Carlos Wieder came in and sat down by the front window, three tables away. For a nauseating moment I could see myself almost joined to him, like a vile Siamese twin, looking over his shoulder at the book he had opened […], so close he couldn’t fail to notice, but […] Wieder didn’t recognise me. He had aged. Like me, I suppose” (144). This blending of the two characters points to the twofold blurriness of two traditional now crumbling boundaries: on the one hand, the borders between *ego* and *mundus* examined in the first chapter; on the other, the borders between crime and justice, that were clearly demarcated in the second chapter. The dissolution of these traditional boundaries introduces a displacement. *Ego contra mundum* is replaced with an *ego intra mundo*, an individualist self who gets intertwined with the state, by fragmenting its identity into a multiplicity of selves: the *Döppelganger*, that features not only in Tagle/Wieder but also between him and his adversaries. When he starts his job as an investigator for Romero, the narrator has a very eloquent nightmare that depicts a shipwreck: “the galleon began to sink, and all the survivors were cast adrift on the sea. I saw Carlos Wieder, clinging to a barrel of brandy. […] And only then, as the waves pushed us apart, did I understand that Wieder and I had been travelling in the same boat; he may have conspired to sink it, but I had done little or nothing to stop it going down” (122) There is here an equation between the oppressor and the oppressed, between culprit and victim(s), that seems to be absent in the Argentine detective stories examined in the previous chapter.
3.2 The Post-Dictatorial Detective as a Hitman

3.2.1 From Individualism to Fragmentariness

Bolaño portrays a very canonical private detective, who can quickly fulfill the horizon of expectations of the detective stories genre and its requirements of personification: Abel Romero, an embodiment of individualism in the style of the most classical private investigator. “During the time of Allende, Romero had been something of a celebrity in the police force” (*Estrella distante* 112). Thus, he seems to fulfill the “basic premise” of the genre. Romero owes his reputation to having successfully solved a classic case in only one day, before Pinochet’s coup. The case is reminiscent of Poe’s Rue Morgue crime, since it is a locked room mystery case at “a boarding-house on the Calle Ugalde in Valparaíso” (112) whose door was “bolted and jammed shut from the inside with a chair” and whose windows were “shut from the inside” (112). Moreover, Romero, like Christie’s Poirot, is a former state policeman who becomes a private investigator. So far, he seems to epitomize the figure of the classic detective. But whereas Poirot’s work as state policeman in Belgium is less relevant than his endeavours as a private investigator in the English countryside; Bolaño historicizes and delves into Romero’s belonging to a specific kind of state: a socialist democratic one. Once a state officer who received “the Bravery Medal, awarded by Allende in person” (115), Romero’s leap to the market is not merely an allusion to the mythical individualism of the private detective. It is also a comment on one of the main factors that neoliberal doctrine promotes: the selective privatization of the public sector that has taken place systematically under its administrations. After Allende’s defeat, bereft of the state power and the authority his former position held, Romero becomes only interested in money. The case he is hired to solve is going to allow him to come back to Chile after a long exile in France. Romero does not care about his one task: solving the case. That is what the narrator concludes: “from his tone of voice I could tell he didn’t give a damn about the films, the magazines, or anything at all, except perhaps returning to
Chile with his family” (124). Romero is reduced to exchange value, expelled from the state to the market, his skills and services outsourced to a mysterious and anonymous client that hired him to find the criminal poet/pilot’s whereabouts in Europe.

If Romero is the most evident detective of the novel, like any classic private investigator, he does not work alone. He is helped by the story’s narrator who recounts the adventures of both Tagle/Wieder and Romero. At first sight, the narrator seems to inherit the task that Anglo-American detective stories had originally assigned to the sidekick. But he goes further than Watson ever could have, because it is only thanks to his ability to read that Romero can find Tagle/Wieder’s whereabouts: “he was trying to track down Carlos Wieder. […] There’s money in it, said Romero, if you help me find him. And he looked around the flat as if he were calculating my price” (116-117). Whereas in Poe, Doyle or Hammett the private detective would hold the monopoly of literacy in the face of their less witty sidekicks, Romero has to delegate (or better, to purchase, to subcontract, to outsource) the ultimate task of detection, which traditionally has been linked to reading. Like Piglia’s Renzi, the narrator is hired because of his ability to read. Estrella distante’s novelty resides in the fact that signifiers are reformulated through more original types of language. When Romero subcontracts the narrator, he justifies his decision because of the latter’s knowledge “on poetic matters” (117): “Wieder was a poet, I was a poet, he was not. To find a poet, he needed the help of another poet” (117), says the narrator. Nonetheless, it is not exactly classic symbolic literacy what helps the narrator to succeed in his detective task. He is bookish, his literacy is actually more literal than symbolic, since it applies to a direct contact with letters, i.e.: reading, not situations, but texts. Or rather, reading reality as if it were a text. Of course, not any type of text but a specific modality, governed by laws and conventions: poetry. In terms of Roman Jakobson’s communication theory, what Romero wants from the narrator, is his ability to decode the poetic function of Tagle/Wieder’s messages. By contrast, the narrator discovers the pilot/poet’s artistic
signature through visual language, while watching snuff movies and pornography that Romero gave him. Nonetheless, what the narrator does is still an act of reading, since he detects Tagle/Wieder’s authorial footprint behind the frame. Private detection, here, is related not to deciphering more or less intelligible signifiers but to interpreting the opaque language of images which are fundamental in the plot of the novel.

What is also interesting about the narrator is that he accepts this task so passively: “he opened his suitcase, took out an envelope and handed it to me. In the envelope were three hundred thousand pesetas. I don’t need this much money, I said after counting it. It’s yours, said Romero […]. You’ve earned it. I haven’t earned anything” (148-149), the anonymous narrator replies. After having identified Tagle/Wieder in Blanes, the narrator accepts the money only reluctantly: he takes it because he really needs it to survive, but he never fully acknowledges the merit of his task. He becomes a reluctant detective, thus crashing all the expectations of private initiative and wit, especially considering that he has personal reasons to find the culprit. Whereas Holmes and Watson held clearly delineated personalities, (we could easily tell who was the private detective and the sidekick), here the undivided entity of the private detective crumbles into an undistinguishable and problematic entity, where individualism can no longer be embodied accurately and in a unified way.

3.2.2 From Personification to Depersonalization

This attenuation of individualism also affects the murderer in an original way, since Tagle/Wieder actually has multiple identities. For the sake of clarity and in order to respect his Döppelganger nature (that clearly cites Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), I will refer to him as Tagle/Wieder, even where the text names him otherwise, and despite the fact that he actually goes under many more names in the novel. Tagle/Wieder is informed by Carlos Ramírez Hoffmann-Emilio Stevens, the main
character of *La literature Nazi de América*’s last chapter, whose plot structure is reproduced and expanded in *Estrella distante*. But even in the latter, Tagle/Wieder is a poet who, very much like Fernando Pessoa (also a conservative avant-garde poet), has sundry heteronyms, such as Jules Defoe and R.P. English. Each name is linked to a different moment and occupation in Tagle/Wieder’s life. He is Ruiz-Tagle when he works as a disguised self-taught poet among the left-wing Literature students of Universidad de Concepción. Jules Defoe is his pseudonym when he signs his literary articles in far-right-wing French magazines, once he is exiled in Europe. R.P. English is his name when working as a cameraman in the European porn industry. Finally, the narrator starts referring to him as Wieder only from the moment at which he murders his first victims (the only murder that the narrator describes explicitly), to later become an airforce pilot. Furthermore, the *Döppelganger* combination (indicating paternal and maternal affiliations) of mixed Spanish (Ruiz-Tagle) and German (Wieder) surnames cite cultural and historical meanings that go beyond the text. While the doubled surname is a common practice in Spain, in South America it traditionally implies European (and therefore, superior) lineage of ancient (often wealthier) settlers. Bibiano says about it: “What a nerve, said Bibiano, stealing a good name like that” (45). Ruiz-Tagle cites *criollo* aristocracy and old money that contrasts with subalterns (*mestizos*, indigenous, slaves). The German part, on the other hand, cites the Nazi presence in Chilean (and Argentinean) Patagonia. The genealogy and multiple connections between German and Southern Cone dictatorial experiences, prominent in Colonia Dignidad, would be later explored by Bolaño in a great deal of his work, particularly in *2666*. The narrator’s University colleague, Bibiano, offers different etymologies for the state officer’s German name: “*Wider* (*widar* or *widari* in Old High German) means ‘against,’ ‘contrary to,’ and sometimes ‘in opposition to.’ And he showered the reader with examples: *Widerchrist*, ‘the Antichrist’; *Widerhaken*, ‘barb, hook’; *widerraten*, ‘to dissuade’; *Widerlegung*, ‘refutation, rebuttal’; *Widerlager*, ‘buttress’;
Widerklage, ‘counter-accusation, counter-plea’; Widernatürlichkeit, ‘monstrosity, aberration’” (41). All of them are immediately mocked by the narrator, who ironically mentions that all these words seemed to his friend Bibiano “charged with significance” (51). Nonetheless, no etymon says much about Tagle/Wieder’s identity.

Tagle/Wieder is not only ambivalent (his avant-garde tradition that belongs both to the left and to the right) but also polysemic. Not only because of the polyhedral etymology of his surname, but also because the multiple meanings that his second name, “Tagle,” triggers go beyond Pinochet itself. “Tagle” is reminiscent of the Frei family, who gave Chile two presidents (before and after Pinochet): Eduardo Frei Montalva (1964-1970), his wife the First Lady María Ruiz-Tagle, and his son, one of the first post-dictatorial presidents, Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle (1994-2000). “Tagle” cites a seamless pre and post-dictatorial subjectivity despite the recent Chilean history being “pitted with discontinuities” (Beasley-Murray 276): a subjectivity that, like Tagle/Wieder’s, was accomplice and supporter of the coup and later collaborated to keep in silent forgetfulness Pinochet’s crimes against humanity.

Austrian literary critic Leo Spitzer examined in Don Quixote “a peculiar aspect of Cervantes’s novel […] namely, the instability and variety of names given to certain characters (and the variety of etymological explanations of those names)” (135). Spitzer coins the terms “polionomasy” and “polietymology” to describe this onomastic and etymologic instability. Spitzer notes that Cervantes refuses to pin down Don Quixote’s name, introducing instead a myriad nicknames and epithets. He records at least eleven variations: Quijada, Quesada, Quijana, el ingenioso hidalgo, Alonso Quixano, pastor Quijotiz, Don Azote, Don Jigote, Quijotísimo, El Caballero de la Triste Figura, and El Caballero de los Leones. Whereas for Spitzer, Cervantes’s choice is related to Romantic individualism, conveyed in a “glorification of the artist” (136), in Bolaño, Tagle/Wieder’s onomastic, semantic and etymological instability point to
depersonalization. Who is Tagle/Wieder? Is he a poet, a literary critic, a spy, a porn/snuff videographer, a pilot or a murderer? Is he all of them simultaneously? Or are neither Tagle nor Wieder the real him? Is there a real him? Multiplicity and depersonalization, different forms of resistance to personification, seem to claim that there is no authenticity nor any possibility of a coherent individualist narrative. Bolaño’s use of “polionomasy” and “polioetymology” can be read, then, not only as a sparkle of depersonalization, but as a response to the detective story tradition and its endorsement of individualism: although Tagle/Wieder reproduces the criminal mastermind, his fragmented self is hardly a solid personification of evil.

The novel ends with the identification of Tagle/Wieder’s. After a long investigation of his whereabouts throughout Europe, the anonymous narrator finally ends up identifying the pilot/poet in a bar. But before he does, the anonymous narrator describes the aged the murderer in terms of negation: “He didn’t look like a poet. He didn’t look as if he had been an officer in the Chilean Air Force. He didn’t look like an infamous killer. He didn’t look like a man who had flown to Antarctica to write a poem in the sky. Not at all” (145). The narrator, unable to identify Tagle/Wieder positively, has to resort to anaphoric negations to articulate the criminal’s fragmentary and depersonalized entity. In the first pages of the novel, Tagle/Wieder’s poems are also defined by negation: “as if the poems he had submitted for our criticism were not his own” (11). When the pilot/poet (like the narrator) becomes a missing exiled in Europe, one of the main challenges that are faced in the search of his whereabouts is that he almost seems not to have existed at all: Romero “travelled around Italy looking for people who had encountered English, showing them a photo of Wieder […] but everyone he talked to seemed to have forgotten the cameraman, as if he had never existed or had no face to remember” (125). Tagle/Wieder, with his forgotten, almost inexistent face seems to have here no real (id)entity. This picture shows the poet/pilot displaying a “photogenic pallor” (46), a shadow, a ghost that resembles many other ones.
Once more, the image ratifies the signifiers. The blurry portrait mirrors his multiple names: Tagle/Wieder is depersonalized, his phenotype resembling “thousands of men in Europe” (136) but also “many other figures, other faces, other phantom pilots who had flown from Chile to Antarctica and back” (46). As many critics have pointed out (Paz Soldán & Winks, Carini), *Estrella distante* draws not only from the detective genre but also from the Latin American dictator novel. It is significant, then, that instead of representing the Chilean dictatorial state with its supreme representative, Augusto Pinochet, Bolaño chooses an obscure Eichmann-like middle-ranking public officer to perform that task. It is in this regard that the Chilean author problematizes personification, making it more opaque and fragmented. This fragmentation exhibits a gradual tendency towards the complete absence of personification, i.e: depersonalization, that is fundamental to understand Bolaño’s *2666*, his response to his own literary project, that I will examine in the last chapter.

### 3.2.3 From Impunity to Vigilantism: Success or Failure?

In *Immunitas*, Esposito develops the notion of *compensatio*, a prominent concept in modern legality, defined by him as a “counterforce to a [...] force to be neutralized in such a way as to restore the original equilibrium” (81). Criminals are often punished on this basis, which “has a consolatory function” (82): before the impossibility of restituting the damages caused by crime, the law acts in order to bring “back to equilibrium the pans of the balance scale tipped to one side by the ‘weight’ of a debt, a deficiency, or a lack” (81). *Compensatio*, “the reinstatement of a shattered order” (81), is fundamental for detective story dénouements, that since Poe has repeatedly posed “the idea that social fragmentation could suture through imagination by means of the figure of the detective and the knowledge of truth” (De Rosso 18). *Estrella distante* portrays an act of vigilantism. Tagle/Wieder is never taken to court to receive judiciary punishment for his
crimes against humanity. After this act of vigilantism, is social equilibrium restored? Is social order and justice re-established? Is the poet/pilot’s punishment an expression of social justice or is it an enhancement of individualism in the form of personal revenge? Bolaño makes the question of restoration through detective stories more problematic. Because, in fact, as the Argentine sociologist Juan Carlos Marín points out, “crime is not an ‘abnormality’ but the other way around; what is normal, what is dominant as a means of social normalization, is crime” (qtd in Ludmer 17). Or, as Esposito puts it, the law does not “have the task of protecting the community from conflicts, but, on the contrary, through them” (Immunitas 49), mainly because there is no order without conflict, rather “conflict is order” (Esposito’s italics 50). Detective stories portray an ideal order whose conflicts are perfectly demarcated as exterior and accessory. As established in the first chapter, Ernst Mandel defines them as “the realm of happy ending,” where “the criminal is always caught. Justice is always done. Crime never pays. Bourgeois legality [...] always triumphs in the end” (47). This insistence on happy endings conveys the illusion of a fictional order freed from conflicts. When conflicts (crimes) arise, the detective needs to compensate this lack of equilibrium. As Héctor Hoyos claims, “the dénouement of detective stories in Latin America doesn’t come with a restauration of order” (61). It is in this sense that failure is a symptom of the political and the historical. As Hoyos says, this “narrative resolution represents the impossibility of establishing an order” (61). Diametrically opposed to what he calls “the promise of the traditional detective story, which ultimately order prevails over chaos” (61), the failure to meet the genre’s horizon of expectations is linked to this need of demonstrating the implausibility of detective stories in Latin America.

Furthermore, it is the need to display the impossibility of state benevolence and of triumphalist individualism. But what would the triumph of bourgeois legality be in Estrella distante and how does it question the state and individualism? As in the Argentinean detective
stories, if the state is equated with the criminal, there is no possibility of restoration in the first place. Categories of success or failure, in terms of happy endings or their absence, become obsolete as such but pave the way instead for a different categorical dimension. Several critics have noted the extent to which failure is one of the main issues that Bolaño, like Piglia, tackles in his work. Diego Trellez Paz, for instance, claims that detectives in the Chilean author’s novels “orient their adventures around perpetual quests that […] often lead to failure or en up tragically” (276). Trelles Paz later concludes that what Bolaño’s *Los detectives salvajes* has in common with Cortázár’s *Rayuela* is “the existential anxiety of a whole generation doomed to failure” (368). De Rosso, too, speaks about failure in the detective stories written by Bolaño and other coeval Mexican novelists such as Ignacio Padilla and Jorge Volpi. According to him, their stories display “an investigation […] doomed to failure, because these narratives do not assume truth (soothing mechanism of detective stories) but its appearance as the only possible verifiable variable when the account ends” (141). Here De Rosso equates success with the social closure that Bolaño’s detective stories lack: “a typical procedure” in the Chilean’s narrative” is “the systematic disappointment of the expectations of a reader who is specialized in the genre” (135). “Failure,” here, is formal, tied to the conventions and the betrayal to complying with the horizon of expectations of a given literary genre. But what is the political nature of this failure beyond literature? What has Bolaño’s generation failed to do? Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas cites Bolaño’s own words in his novel *Los detectives salvajes*, in terms of generational failure as “the story of a generation, mine and Bolaño’s and that […] we could name ‘the May 68 generation,’ a catastrophic generation […] that has left its survivors —us— ‘confused in the same failure’ (102). Failure, a literary topic that exceeds detective stories and even the modern novel, is particularly emphasized in Southern Cone narratives to funnel a common political post Cold-War sentiment. The Chilean author himself discloses the generational element of his own work, which he defines as “a farewell or a love letter
to my own generation, who was born in the fifties” (Entre paréntesis 37). Of course, what Bolaño refers to here as his generation is not a de-historicized chronological group of people but a historical and political one: “Those who have chosen in a given moment to become activists to give the little we had (which was also a lot): our youth. And we gave it to a cause that we believed to be the most generous of the world and to a certain extent it was, but also wasn’t” (37). In brief, Bolaño is alluding to the Latin American left, that in their twenties were protagonists of the armed struggle in the 1970s. A political generation that failed to constitute power before the dictatorial experiences that would subsequently defeat them with a neoliberal counter-revolution aimed to reassure constituted power instead.

This lack of narrative closure, the denial to succumb to the horizon of expectations, amounts to the refusal of reproducing once again “the triumph of bourgeois legality” (Mandel 47). Nevertheless, it is crucial to ask a question that is both formal and political, both literary and historical. A question that lies at the foundation of the detective story tradition: Who has done it? Who is taking revenge? Yes, Tagle/Wieder is a murderer, but who wants to murder him? Whodunit? Who is Romero working for? Who paid for the execution? Romero does not disclose the identity of his mysterious client. He only reveals that the latter is wealthy enough to afford him: “I thought that Bibiano might have hired Romero. I said so. No, it’s not your friend, Romero said. He wouldn’t have enough money to get me started” (140). The intellectual author of vigilantism, instead, is someone who “has real money” (140). This second ellipsis leaves a vacant agent, an implied subject of an impersonal sentence. In linguistic terms, this ellipsis displays a null-subject language, whose syntax lacks an explicit subject: “x wants to kill Tagle/Wieder.” Who in the story has both reasons to get rid of him and the resources to do it other than the Chilean post-dictatorial state itself? To investigate this mystery (a mystery that the book itself leaves open), it is important to examine the ways in which the dictatorial state’s force is depicted, through
Tagle/Wieder and beyond him, in terms of a series of symbolic disabilities that were inherent in both the Anglo-American and the Argentine state: muteness, illiteracy, and paralysis.

3.3 The Chilean State: A Listening Body with Selective Muteness

3.3.1 Muteness and Literacy

Some critical readings of Estrella distante have noted the powerful presence of silence in the text. Mazoni understands it as an allusion to the complicity between Chilean society and the crimes purported by the state. Bruña Bragado mentions that “the symbolism of silence regarding guilt, disappearance and the question of how to talk on behalf of others” (Manzoni 47). Nonetheless, none of them examine how this structural lack of speech operates in the novel following a selective criteria that goes beyond these issues. Furthermore, none of them examines something even more relevant: the moment in which the silence of the state has been breached. Silence, a chosen forbearance from speech, must be understood as symbolic muteness because the absence of speech, in the Chilean dictatorial state, is not subjected to choice, it is rather forced. This is why a close reading of this symptoms is needed to shed more light on the text. From the novel’s first page, Bolaño draws attention to this symbolic muteness, encapsulated in the embodiment of the state: like his Anglo-American and Argentinean models, Tagle/Wieder “wasn’t particularly talkative” (3). The reader knows that the poet/pilot speaks only because the narrator constantly underlines the muteness of the former. Except for that, his voice can barely be heard. Whereas Tagle/Wieder does not speak much, his victims do: “Most of us there talked a lot” (3). Like Poe’s Dupin or Doyle’s Holmes; the narrator, Bibiano, the Garmendia sisters, and others talk profusely and discuss passionately among many things about “travel (little did we know what our travels would be like)” (3). This unimagined and unimaginable future of traveling condenses a twofold allusion: state terrorism secured by Tagle/Wieder’s commitment to muteness and the exile of citizens that the
dictatorial practices produced. The muteness of the state, thus, is contrasted with the verbosity of its victims. The narrator insists on depicting the silent dimension of Tagle/Wieder and the ways in which his succinct speech is articulated. For instance, when he would occasionally speak, the pilot/poet “talked as if he were living inside a cloud” (4). The image of the cloud evokes blurriness (through which Tagle/Wieder’s plane flies) to mutate into symbolic unintelligibility: whereas he seldom intervenes, when he does, his voice obfuscates rather than reveals meaning.

Despite his lack of clarity, Tagle/Wieder’s speech sounds more “neutral” than his victims’ and that is what distinguishes them: “We spoke a sort of slang or jargon derived in equal parts from Marx and Mandrake the Magician […] while Ruiz-Tagle spoke Spanish” (6). Paradoxically, even if he is the only one to disregard political jargon (or perhaps precisely because of that), the poet/pilot (not his politicized left-wing victims) manages to successfully affect the other’s behaviour with his speech. His house is a space of sheer symbolic muteness: “Rather than breaking the close silence of the flat, [his] words accentuated it” (9). Amid this all-pervasive muteness, his house lacks “something unnameable” (7). Whatever cannot be named (i.e.: spoken) points to an absence of signifiers, which in turn alludes to the impossibility of signifying, echoed in the many ellipsis of the novel that engage with a crisis of representation. As Manzoni claims the all-pervasiveness of Döppelgangers ought to be read as a rectification of history: “the illusion of becoming another person, of displacing to another space and time whatever cannot be explained, to put it differently, the horror that resists speech, the indescribable, works as an imagination game that enables the construction of a world in which history could rewind, in which death is not definitive” (41). Whatever is lacking in Tagle/Wieder’s depersonalized and mute house is the horror that resists being transformed into speech. A horror that cannot overcome symbolic muteness and unintelligibility; the real that is not susceptible of being symbolized.
The lacks of the poet/pilot’s house are nothing but an extension of his own symbolic muteness that goes beyond the impossibility of vocal speech. When Tagle/Wieder drives to kill his the Garmendia sisters, his victims cannot hear even his car lurking outside their house: “a car appears on the dirt road, but the twins don’t hear, because they’re playing the piano or busy in the orchard or stacking firewood at the back of the house with their aunt and the maid.” (19) When he does speak or even when he drives, the poet/pilot is subjected first and foremost to the protection of the state’s symbolic muteness.

As De Rosso points out, voice is the cornerstone that distinguishes “the investigator from the force of the State and the criminal” (134). What distinguishes the private detective is his “ability to hold the word that organizes the narrative” (134), which is contrasted to the symbolic muteness of his adversaries (be it the state or the criminal, regardless of them being merged into one figure or not). In this regard, the verbose narrator and the silent Tagle/Wieder reproduce the traditional conventions of the genre. Nevertheless, whereas the Argentinean state is portrayed prominently in terms of deaf-muteness, its silence joined with an indifference for its citizens; the Chilean state, by contrast, is portrayed hearing its own citizenry very thoroughly. Tagle/Wieder is described as “a very good listener” (12) and he is receptive to the student’s criticism of his poems: “He listened; […] and accepted even the harshest comments without protest” (11). He even listens carefully to his female victims reciting poems (“closing his eyes the better to listen” [20]) before he murders them. Moreover, he discusses the enforcement of silence as a theme in his own declarations after his performances: “Silence is like leprosy, declared Wieder; silence is like communism; silence is like a blank screen that must be filled. If you fill it, nothing bad can happen to you” (45). This cryptic equation between silence and communism, (which Tagle/Wieder understands to be as contagious as a disease), seems to introduce a paradox: the dictatorial Chilean state can only overcome its own symbolic muteness by a different form of language: not through
communicating meanings with intelligible signifiers but by rendering them opaque enough so that its recipients would hear that something important is being said without fully grasping its content. Thus, the Chilean dictatorial state distinguishes itself from whomever dares to contend its authority by means of exposing them to symbolic unintelligibility. Tagle/Wieder “speaks” by filling white screens (be it paper or the sky where he writes his poems) with undecipherable written words, compensating (and funnels) the entirety of his oral muteness.

Before killing the Garmendia sisters and their aunt, Tagle/Wieder is reluctant to read what allegedly is his own poetry. In other words, he is reticent about transforming a written text (that may not be even his) into speech. Thus, he temporarily remains mute also in a written form, entangling the state’s symbolic muteness with a written form unintelligibility: the symbolic illiteracy of its victims. After a few minutes of resistance, however, Tagle/Wieder ends up reading his poems and only after that, does he murder his victims. Before dying, they endure this symbolic illiteracy: “in their innocence,” says the narrator, the sisters “think they understand, but they don’t understand at all” (Bolaño’s italics 20). Their aunt equally states that her own nieces’ poems remain beyond her ability to read: “Veronica, dear, I didn’t understand a thing” (20). Symbolic illiteracy, here, is circumscribed to the victims only. By contrast, Tagle/Wieder knows. In the Garmendias’ house, he holds the monopoly of literacy. He understands the meaning of his own poems: he is aware that they encapsulate his subsequent actions, i.e. his first killings and the disappearance of his victims’ bodies. The pilot/poet does understand the political implications and the underlying meaning of “the New Chilean Poetry” that he once discussed with the Garmendia.

In the beginning of the story, before the coup, the murders and the subsequent disappearances, the narrator and Bibiano are compiling poems in order to publish them. Tagle/Wieder is considered to be part of the anthology, but his “three poems were short; all less than ten lines” (13). Ironically, the narrator describes Tagle/Wieder’s writing as “very Japanese”
alluding to the short nature of haikus. Even if his voice is funneled only in written form, Wieder’s sparse speech is mirrored in the short length of his poems, which “it’s as if they weren’t his poems” (14). Even in his writing, his meager voice is not his. Tagle/Wieder does not own his speech. The depersonalization of his voice amounts to a twofold reason: on the one hand, the fact that he does not speak but instead is spoken by the state’s narrative; on the other hand, that his hermetic poems respond to the logic of avant-garde aesthetics. Whereas for Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovski, “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (9), the mandate of avant-garde poetry was to enhance as much as possible this sense of unfamiliarity. In the pilot’s poems, form informs form: the increase of unfamiliar signifiers is in direct relation with the decrease of the text’s length. Despite his fragmentary personality and his selective muteness, in Tagle/Wieder’s speech “you could sense a force in the way he talked, the purity and sheen of the absolute, the reflection of a monolithic will” (44). Why is Tagle/Wieder’s poetry, speech and performances succinct? Because his force does not reside in the content of his enunciation but in their avant-gardist shock effect, which in political terms can be read through the oppressive impact that his brevity and his systematic use of muteness generate. Again, this is reminiscent of Weber’s definition of the “obedience” towards the state as something that “is determined by highly robust motives of fear and hope” (“Politics as a Vocation” 79). What is robust in the state is not the content of its voice but the formal effect it generates.

But as mentioned above, there is an even more significant passage of the novel that must be addressed: when the symbolic muteness of the state is breached. Tagle/Wieder displays a rupture with symbolic muteness only once and that will cost him his position in the military and even his ability to stay in Chile. This rupture manifests a slippage: his resistance to fully embody the state. Once he becomes famous, during the first decade of Pinochet’s dictatorship, in the years that Chile
was formally under a state of exception (enacted from 1973 to 1979), Tagle/Wieder organizes a party, where he exhibits pictures of his own. These pictures are portraits of females, seemingly dead, looking like “broken, dismembered mannequins” (88), including “the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons” (88). There is here the third significant ellipsis of the book: the reader never learns who these women are because “the photos were of poor quality, although they made an extremely vivid impression on all who saw them” (88). The room where the pictures are displayed does not meet the requirements of the space. Their poor quality hinders an accurate visualization of them: “The room was lit in the usual way. There were no extra lamps or spotlights to heighten the visual effect of the photos” (85). As with the skywriting, obscured by clouds, wind and storms, the quality of the reception of Tagle/Wieder’s photos is poor. Perhaps precisely because of that, they have all the more impact: the blurriness (the difficulty to read the poems or to see the pictures) is a direct cause of its force. Whatever remains under symbolic illiteracy, whatever privileges the prominence of form over the clarity of content, or better, whatever funnels content through form is functional to the speaker’s power over the recipient. It is in this symbolic illiteracy that the dictatorial practice resides: not coincidentally Southern Cone dictatorial states never fully acknowledged to society who (and how many) were its victims or the treatment they have received. After seeing Tagle/Wieder’s portraits, one of the guests invited to the party reacts with muteness and illiteracy: “She stared at Wieder as if she were going to say something to him but couldn’t find the words. Then she tried to get to the bathroom, unsuccessfully […] vomiting in the passage” (86-87). The guest, unable to convey her repugnance with words, has a silent reaction, vomiting instead. At the party, symbolic muteness is all-pervasive: “There was hardly any talking” (87) and “after the initial hubbub, suddenly everyone fell silent. It was as if a high voltage current had run through the flat leaving us dumbstruck” (89). If this exhibition is an act of (non)verbal communication, it is as if the speaker (Wieder) infects the recipient (his audience) with symbolic
muteness; or better, what the speaker communicates to his recipients is essentially the prominence of imposed silence. There is, nonetheless, a moment when silence ends. At midnight, Tagle/Wieder takes the floor. Paradoxically, he interrupts symbolic muteness by asking for silence: “he climbed onto a chair in the living room, called for silence and said […] that it was time to plunge into the art of the future” (84). The pilot/poet opens the door to the bedroom where the pictures are exhibited and then, and only then, does he truly “speak” through his pictures, revealing the authentic nature of the new art, the “new Chilean poetry”: he intervenes in the public discussion about what is going on in the dictatorship. He manages to do so without words but with images, a more explicit representation of state terrorism, in spite of their bluriness. The pictures reveal the true nature of the dictatorship: disappearance, torture and genocide.

When the state intelligence realizes that Tagle/Wieder is disclosing its genocide practices to an audience that may be small but still is not supposed to explicitly know about them, its agents burst in on the party and confiscate the exhibited pictures under a mute atmosphere: “the Intelligence agents left as quietly as they had arrived, carrying three shoe boxes […] containing the photographs from the exhibition” (91). The narrator emphasizes that the officers of the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (DINA) operate without uttering a single word in public. Locked with the pilot in the room where the pictures are exhibited, they display symbolic muteness, acting “without a word from the agents, who were completely focussed on their work” (91). After admonishing Tagle/Wieder, only muteness remains: “only silence” (91). If they stop the exhibition, it is because of the poet/pilot’s rupture with the state. The pact of silence is breached by the very same instrument that once ensured it: revolutionary poetry. After all, dictatorial states do not like avant-garde poetry. As Catherine Belsey reminds us, “both Nazism and Stalinism deplored the avant-garde. National Socialism endorsed Classicism and pronounced modern art decadent; Stalin promoted Socialist Realism at the expense of the experimental forms that had
developed immediately after the Revolution” (104). In a way, it could be argued that the DINA officers replace Tagle/Wieder because he relinquished the personification of the state, becoming themselves its surrogate (more reliable) incarnation. They cover with more symbolic muteness what failed to be silenced. Esposito asks himself “what else is a surrogate [...] if not a device that substitutes a presence, thereby reaffirming its absence?” (*Immunitas* 82). This is exactly what the DINA officers do. Replacing Tagle/Wieder underlines a slippage: the resistance to personification. Even better, the replacement questions the very possibility of reproducing the traditional strategies of embodiment that may once have worked in the Anglo-American tradition but remain implausible in the Southern Cone.

Through the exhibition of these pictures, Tagle/Wieder displays the reassurance of his force in the same way as he does with his flight-performances, but at the same time he ends up contradicting the state’s silence on genocide and exposing a misunderstanding: he breaks an unspoken contract, which should not be surprising since despite engaging with symbolic muteness in a thorough manner, the poet/pilot nonetheless had condemned silence explicitly when he equated it with leprosy. To a nutshell, Tagle/Wieder himself becomes a victim of symbolic illiteracy, since he is punished by the state for speaking unrestrictedly, for betraying a fundamental premise of the dictatorship: that the state may speak only with the condition that it does so through selective ellipsis, never relinquishing its own immunity nor publicly acknowledging its responsibility in the crimes against humanity before constituent power. It is by violating his symbolic muteness that Tagle/Wieder not only betrays the state but also loses the right to embody it, a fundamental convention that relies in the horizon of expectations of detective fiction. Equally, he loses his monopoly of literacy at the hands of Romero and the narrator, who despite his inability to read Russian or Latin, will still eventually “read” his mute authorial presence behind the cameras of porn films, and identify him two decades later in Europe, to get him killed.
3.3.2 Illiteracy and Force

The length of Wieder’s writing is directly linked to its hermeticism. Like the objects that accompany the exhibited pictures, his verses “were few but telling” (89). An avant-garde author, Tagle/Wieder starts his aerial writing cryptic biblical verses in Latin, an unintelligible language for most of his audience. His texts are deliberately cryptic and illegible for the multitude. Critics have often pointed out the extent to which Estrella distante (1996) draws on the Chilean lyrical poetry tradition. Among many others, Santiago Quintero has found Tagle/Wieder to be an inverted far right-wing parody of leftist intellectuals such as the Chilean poet Raúl Zurita, who as Diego Trelles Paz recalls “made someone write his verses in the sky of New York” (297). Gareth Williams himself cites Zurita’s poem “The New Life,” which was “transcribed by five airplanes over the skies of Manhattan” (“Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño” 133) in the 1980s. Zurita’s anaphoric verses equates God with different elements in upper case: “MY GOD IS HUNGER / MY GOD IS SNOW […] MY GOD IS PAMPA / MY GOD IS PAIN” (qtd. in Williams, “Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño” 134). Indeed, these verses inform one of Tagle/Wieder’s poem that also includes five different definitions: “Death is friendship,” “Death is Chile,” “Death is responsibility,” “Death is Love,” “Death is Growth.” As he will in 2666, Bolaño invokes here a literary tradition that goes well beyond that of detective stories, even that of the modern novel. Furthermore, Tagle/Wieder’s anaphoric verses are more reminiscent of poets that go beyond the Chilean literary field, too. For instance, European and North American modernist authors whose commitment to fascism was explicit, such as the English Wyndham Lewis, the Italians Filippo Marinetti and Gabriele d’Annunzio, the Spanish Manuel Machado, the North American Ezra Pound and, in the Southern Cone literary tradition, the Argentine Leopoldo Lugones. Ascribing death to concepts that are usually their antithesis, after all, was one of
Francoism’s *leitmotivs*, as in founder and first commander of the Spanish Foreign Legion Millán-Astray’s motto “Long Live Death.”

One of the main elements of fascism that exerted an influence in modernism and avant-garde movements amounts to two juxtaposing obsessions: between the old and the new and between action and thought. As American scholar Juliet Lynd states, Tagle/Wieder’s performance (a word whose etymology points at “accomplishment” [Online Etymology Dictionary www.etymonline.com/search?q=performance]) “reminds the reader that the public avant-garde happening [...] is susceptible of being appropriated both by the right and the left” (178). After all, the revolutionary inauguration of a new era is an element shared by both of the most prominent avant-garde political and cultural movements of the twentieth-century: fascism and communism, the new man in the new world. If Tagle/Wieder’s literary work is expressed in political terms as revolutionary (they are going to “revolutionise the Chilean poetry” [15]) it is also because they point to another prominent and more recent political movement: neoliberalism. Of course, this tension between the old and the new does not belong exclusively to fascism. Like the Franco-Chilean cultural theorist Nelly Richard underlines, the Chilean “neoliberal democracy is divided” (9) on the one hand, by the new, which amounts to “the exacerbated rhythms of capitalist globalization, whose promiscuous regime of commercialization dissolves hierarchies of values and transcendent meanings” (10); and on the other hand, by the old, which is related to “the moral conservatism of sectors that need to oppose, in the cultural sphere, this dissolving force of the same market that they so clearly uphold economically, seeking a value-based refuge against the mercantile de-sacralization in a retrograde defence of the purity and integrity of national traditions” (10). This contradiction between past and future is one of the many elements shared by fascism and neoliberalism. Neither quite solve this contradiction, remaining actually located in the utmost core practices of its regimes.
“Revolution,” in *Estrella distante*, does not imply what is often understood as Leftist uprisings. Instead, it means its opposite: counter-revolution. The verb “revolutionise,” assigned to Tagle/Wieder’s poems, is an ironical reference to the failure of Socialist parties, (whose motto was revolutionary), at the hands of conservative dictatorships. As Virno claims, it is important to understand “counterrevolution” neither merely as “violent repression […]” nor simply as “the reestablishment of the social order that had been torn by conflicts and revolt” (“Do you Remember Counterrevolution?” 141). “Counterrevolution” also means “literally revolution in reverse […] an impetuous innovation of modes of production, forms of life, and social relations that, however, consolidate and again set in motion capitalist command” (141). In a nutshell, counter-revolution instrumentalizes the new to secure the old. When the narrator and Bibiano consider including Tagle/Wieder in an anthology they prepare when they are students at the University of Concepción, another character says that the pilot’s poems take part in the new Chilean poetry. “You mean the poetry he’s planning to write? asked Bibiano sceptically” (*Estrella distante* 15), to which this character replies: “That he’s going to *perform*” (Bolaño’s italics, 25). Tagle/Wieder’s New Chilean poetry, like Pinochet’s counterrevolution, “actively makes its own ‘new order,’ forging new mentalities, cultural habits, tastes, and customs—in short, a new common sense” (Virno, “Do you Remember Counterrevolution?” 141). As an avant-garde writer, Tagle/Wieder does not merely write but “makes” his poems, through a happening that blends visual and experimental poetry with verses from the *Vulgata*, (the new and the old, the technology of the aircraft and the antiquity of the bible), as a performative expression of neoliberal force.

Even more broadly, Tagle/Wieder goes beyond contemporary literature, citing a more ancient literary trope: the rivalry between arms and letters, the sword and the pen. In Gareth Williams’s words, “poetry” is established in *Estrella distante* “as a relation, forged in violence, to the exceptional status of sovereign command” (“Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto
Wieder’s poems, then, epitomize the individual intellectual’s knowledge and state’s depersonalized force all in one. This trope, that harks back as far as the Middle Ages or later the Spanish Golden Age period, features in works by the Marquis of Santillana or Garcilaso de la Vega, both military officers who devoted their time to writing poems themselves. It is even thematized in the thirty-eighth chapter of Cervantes’s _Don Quixote_, where the knight errant pronounces a speech arguing in favour of the superiority of arms, ironically in a literary text. It is not a coincidence that Bolaño himself cites this chapter in his “Speech of Caracas,” read at the Rómulo Gallegos Award in 1999 for _Los detectives salvajes_. Trelles-Paz believes that it does not matter if Zurita was a representative of the left resistance to Pinochet’s dictatorship; for him, he still informs Tagle/Wieder because “the fake biographies of Nazi writers resound with real facts of real writers that […] are not far-right winged” (296). Similarly, for Santiago Quintero the equation between the narrator’s and Tagle/Wieder’s diasporic biographies is a sign of Bolaño’s “monstruous criticism against the double standards of the Chilean left as well as the systematic impunity that they conceded to many of the authors and leaders of the regime, such as Manuel Contreras and Augusto Pinochet” (172). Tagle/Wieder’s ambivalence, according to De Rosso, makes him “both a devilish character and a symbol of a whole generation” (136). By contrast, I believe that Bolaño is doing something more complex than a unidimensional critique, or at least one that is not solely enclosed in national issues. The keys to understand _Estrella distante_ go beyond the Chilean literary field and its recent history. They point instead to a broader literary tradition: Don Quixote (presaged in Bolaño’s retelling of his own work, as he explicitly mentions in the preface of the novel, under the influence of “the increasingly animated ghost of Pierre Ménard” [1]), a quintessential myth of individualism fighting against the world as Ian Watt has shown, informs Tagle/Wieder more than Zurita, whose aerial poems have allowed critics to establish far-fetched comparisons.
Whereas in Anglo-American and Argentine detective stories individualism was embodied in private investigators, in Bolaño individualism affects their rival: the officer of the state. Because even if he works at the service of the state, Tagle/Wieder is essentially an individualist, who is susceptible to literary mythification, his mythic stature equated with Jonah’s: he “travelled inside the cloud like Jonah inside the whale” (79). In the Scriptures, the Jewish prophet travels to Nineveh to warn its residents to repent of their sins: he carries and conveys the message of the sovereign will to the multitude. In the same way, Tagle/Wieder’s flights warn Chileans through aerial poems that they should subject themselves to what seems to be the state’s narrative. But these texts, despite representing the conservative and neoliberal narrative of the state, are still signed by him. Moreover, unlike his victims (who are sheltered middle-class literature students), Tagle/Wieder calls himself a self-taught poet, who erases with force what has been written or could have been written by them. Ultimately, there is yet another significant difference between the fictional pilot/poet and Zurita: whereas the latter made someone else put his aerial poems in writing; the former, instead, performs himself his own text. He acts and writes simultaneously.

Read from the beginning of the twenty-first century, the merging of the poet and the soldier, of literacy and force, of individualism and the state, may seem counterintuitive. After decades influenced by Sartre’s littérature engagée, the Latin American literary field, where writers are often seen and valued in terms of their political commitment with the left, usually expected to endorse struggles that would enhance constituent power (from the human rights movement in the Southern Cone to indigenismo and testimonio in other parts of Latin America), Tagle/Wieder, as a poet, does not seem plausible. Despite the emancipatory and democratic dimension that writing appears to have nowadays, since its appearance, writing seemed to “favour rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind” (102), as Claude Lévi-Strauss claims in his Tristes Tropiques. The French antropologist’s conclusion, drawn after his research among Brazilian illiterate
indigenous civilizations, can be easily illustrated in the Latin American literary field, especially in
the figure of the sentinels of its constituted power: the traditional trope of the sword and the pen, 
although inaugurated in the Middle Ages, has been recently rewritten and reformulated in 
twentieth century literature. In 1924, Leopoldo Lugones, for instance, advocated for the coming 
of “the hour of the sword” in a speech commemorating the centennial anniversary of the Battle of 
Ayacucho, a motto that was used by the first Argentine dictatorship, only six years later, in 1930. 
More recently Mario Vargas Llosa frequently intervened in the public debate in favour of 
constituted power. To sum up, many Latin American authors have promoted conservatism (either 
in the shape of a fascist state or the all-pervasiveness of the free market), by fighting emancipation 
with their words as if they were their swords.

Against English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s metonymic adage, which claimed that “the 
pen is mightier than the sword,” Wieder’s pen (the ink left by his aircraft in the sky after him) is 
as mighty as his force, mainly because his skywriting performances expose the uneven distribution 
of literacy between him and his victims. As Lévi-Strauss claims, writing is a technology of power 
that works mainly through contrast, by “enhancing the prestige and authority of one individual — 
or one function— at the expense of the rest of the party” (Tristes Tropiques 290). This authority, 
in ancient civilisations, was conferred on the scribe, who was “rarely a functionary or an employee 
of the group as a whole” (291). In brief, despite his collective duty, the scribe was essentially an 
individualist agent who emerged above the multitude. Of course, Lévi-Strauss works with a 
Brazilian indigenous population whose illiteracy was literal. This is what he is alluding to when 
he remarks that “for thousands of years […] and still today in a great part of the world, writing has 
existed as an institution in societies in which the vast majority of people are quite unable to write” 
(290). Instead Tagle/Wieder, a symbolic scribe, defamiliarizes language by rewriting it such that 
his readers (despite perfectly mastering the Spanish alphabet) cannot read in a symbolic level. His
hermeticism is not merely yet another characteristic that defines him as an avant-garde poet, it also imbues his audience with a generalized symbolic illiteracy that immobilizes his audience: “Perfectly formed letters of grey-black smoke on the sky’s enormous screen of rose-tinged blue, chilling the eyes of those who saw them” (25). The pilot/poet puts in written form the narratives of the state, which paralyze (freeze) the multitude of inmates who happen to be readers of the poem. The women readers-spectators “following the plane’s loops attentively like us, but in heartrending silence [...] All […] were frozen” (27). Whereas most readers would identify the meaning of the Latin verses if translated to Spanish, the performance still manages to obscure the meaning. The multitude’s symbolic illiteracy is a means of reaffirming constituted power’s force: the dictatorial state can only preserve its constitution not through speech (its representative barely speaking) but through its systematic and multidimensional (oral and written) denial. Tagle/Wieder is reminiscent of what Lévi-Strauss calls “the primary function of writing, as a means of communication,” namely, “to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings” (Tristes Tropiques 292). The unintelligibility of the biblical verses is mirrored in that of the multitude, who instead reproduces “an unintelligible murmur” (29). The narrator, an inmate who happens to be in one of the concentration camps of Concepción in front of which Tagle/Wieder performs, admits that he has no clue of what the biblical aerial poems mean: “I didn’t understand anything” (30). An educated poet, Tagle/Wieder’s knowledge provides a contrast with the multitude’s ignorance. It is precisely this ignorance before writing, this symbolic illiteracy, which subjugates them to constituted power.

Later, once the aerial text fully switched to Spanish, Tagle/Wieder writes a disciplinary command “LEARN,” aimed at all these left dissidents watching him. For Gareth Williams, “LEARN […] is a contentless command” (“Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño” 137). Divested of meaning, in the end this Spanish imperative verb is no different than
Latin: Tagle/Wieder’s threat “does nothing more than guarantee the witness’s exclusion from the true content of sovereign will” (137). The witness, the multitude watching below, remain benighted before this order. As Williams says, “LEARN” is “a command that commands its own commandment. It is sovereign command in force but without significance or specific content” (137). Again, the concision of the message’s form is far more eloquent than its content: the state, through Tagle/Wieder, says more by saying less. It reassures its constitution by selectively refraining from conveying explicit meaning. And this reassurance is directly linked with the inability of the state’s victims to “decipher the language of sovereign will” (136). Once more, the constitution of the dictatorial state can only be founded on its victims’ symbolic illiteracy.

As Williams points out, “Wieder’s poem calls attention to the inauguration in Chile of a new divine kingdom—the return of the commanding God of the Old Testament hand in hand with the on-going history of Nazism” (“Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño” 136). The tension in these flights between the new and the old are reminiscent of the rupture with tradition and what Octavio Paz calls “the tradition of the rupture”. I am talking, of course, of the avant-garde movements, such as the one created by another Chilean poet, Vicente Huidobro, in 1931, that of “creationism.” The Vulgata verses belonging to the Genesis (i.e: the creation of a new world) should be read as an allegory of the new conservative era, the emergent constituted power under Pinochet’s dictatorship. After all, Huidobro’s “Altazor,” like a Condor, is also an aerial biblical fallen angel. Tagle/Wieder is “the new era’s major poet” (Bolaño, Estrella distante 35) and his poems, “declared his admirers, heralded a new age of iron for the Chilean race” (43). But what is really “new” about these times? Where Bolaño ironically writes “new times” and “iron age,” it must be read the times in which Latin America, according to neoliberal rhetoric is “modernized,” “freed” from “anachronistic” communism. In terms of Nelly Richard, Tagle/Wieder’s new revolutionary poetry works “a denarrativization of memory orchestrated by voiding its historical
reference” (9). The creation of a new world, a new order, a new poetry, annihilates the memory of whatever may have come before that inception.

In a later aerial happening at La Moneda palace, the seat of the President of the Chilean Republic, Tagle/Wieder performs only in Spanish. Even then, his speech remains unintelligible: “Some pedestrians saw him: a beetle-like silhouette against the dark and threatening sky. Very few could decipher his words: the wind effaced them almost straight away” (80). When he writes his sixth verse, nobody can read it: “When the strip came into sight, he wrote: Death is communion. But none of the generals or the generals’ wives and children or the senior officers or the military, civil, ecclesiastical and cultural authorities present could read his words. An electric storm was building in the sky” (81). In this scene, (where the military state appears already detached from Tagle/Wieder, watching his performance from below) signifiers remain not only unreadable but also unread. What is the difference? The answer can be found in William Faulkner’s verse of one of his poems collected in The Marble Faun and A Green Bough that works as the epigraph of Estrella distante: “What star is there that falls, with none to watch it?” Speech is social: if meanings cannot circulate, if words cannot be uttered or read, if symbolic muteness prevails, meaning cannot exist either. Nevertheless, meaning remains irrelevant. As Williams claims, for Agamben the absence of meaning is inherent in the state of exception, defined precisely as “a law that is in force but does not signify anything” (‘Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño’ 137). It is important to ask again the question once made by Lévi Strauss and later recovered by Derrida: “What links writing to violence?” (Derrida, Of Grammatology 102). In the case of Tagle/Wieder, the fascination that his flight and his writing exert on his audience does not depend on the semantic dimension of words but upon their performative force. While Tagle/Wieder delays the writing of his poems in the sky, flying away, the multitude waits for him, puzzled by his absence: “A few began to get the uneasy feeling they had been tricked […] staring at a sky that would yield only
rain, not poetry” (79). Most of the audience engage in futile conversation. They do speak: they discuss “the latest rumours, who’d been promoted to which position or the grave problems the nation was facing” (80), but their shallow speech is divested of meaning as well. Tagle/Wieder’s temporary absence (and its corresponding silence) speak for themselves.

If Tagle/Wieder resists becoming a personification of the state, is he really mundus or is he ego? When he betrays the state’s silent pact, he becomes ego, an individualist rogue, who follows his will only. But beneath his depersonalizing heteronyms, he also becomes mundus, which here no longer relies in the state but the multitude. After all, Tagle/Wieder ends up being punished by the state he once represented and becomes one more of the many exiled Chilean citizens in the European diaspora, not so different from his victims nor his executioners, Romero and the narrator. Tagle/Wieder shows that this opposition between ego and mundus starts to collapse. Through him, the individualist ego merges into a mundus that is also ambivalent, polysemic and susceptible of symbolic paralysis.

3.3.3 Force and Paralysis

Whereas Tagle/Wieder’s force stems from the multitude’s illiteracy, it also produces a ricochet effect of symbolic paralysis in everything that surrounds him. In the beginning of the novel, this paralysing effect is presaged when Bibiano surprises Tagle/Wieder with an unexpected visit. In the encounter between their two bodies, the speech of the criminal produces a voluntary affective paralysis in Bibiano: “prolonging the conversation precisely to keep him there” (9). This immobilising effect is recovered in the final scene of the novel, when the narrator and the pilot/poet meet (without fully meeting) in a silent bar, “almost empty” (143), located in the coastal Catalan town of Blanes. The imminence of the criminal’s presence provokes a generalised set of symbolic disabilities in the detective. Before Tagle/Wieder even shows up, the narrator, who originally was
hired because of his literacy, is unable to read, remaining prisoner of unintelligibility: “I opened the book [...] and tried to read. After a few pages I realized I wasn’t understanding anything. I was reading, but the words went scuttling past like beetles, busy at incomprehensible tasks” (143). In the silent bar, illiteracy, unintelligibility and muteness are merged with immobility: “Nobody came into the bar; nobody moved. Time seemed to be standing still.” (143). The poet/pilot’s force, a problematic metonymy of Pinochet’s dictatorial state obliviously disturbing the space of the Chilean diaspora in Europe, temporarily cancels motion even before he is actually present. As a contagious disease, the imminence of state power affects the narrator even physically, causing him uneasiness: “I started to feel sick” (143), he says. As soon as the pilot/poet enters the bar, his proximity affects the narrator to the point that the criminal makes him almost faint, without even recognizing his countryman. Once the murderer leaves the bar, the narrator tries to resume his reading but, once more, fails: “I tried to go on reading, but I couldn’t” (146). Even after having identified him, symbolic illiteracy cannot be surmounted.

We do not witness the moment in which Romero executes Tagle/Wieder. There is only yet another failed attempt by the narrator now to imagine the scene: “I tried to think of Wieder. I tried to imagine him alone in his flat, an anonymous dwelling, as I pictured it, on the fourth floor of an empty eight-floor building, watching television or sitting in an armchair [...] as Romero’s shadow glided steadily towards him. I tried to imagine Carlos Wieder, but I couldn’t” (147). This significant last ellipsis works as an extra-textual symbolic paralysis: Bolaño’s own inability to represent the murder itself with words and his subsequent choice to do it with silence instead. It can only be inferred that the execution has taken place because the detectives, expected to be the heroes of the story, still endure the same symbolic disabilities that once were reserved for the state only. After having identified the pilot/poet, the narrator carries this set of symbolic disabilities with him out of the bar and projects them into the detective Romero, who “gestured in reply, but
it was too dark to see what he meant” (147). Whereas during dictatorship, it was only the state whose messages remain under comprehension, here the private eye, too, is unintelligible. The narrator states that he cannot see Romero’s “face, but [he] could tell by the voice emanating from his rock-still silhouette that he was making an effort to be convincing” (147). Romero is here trying to legitimise to the narrator his act of vigilantism, but his body suffers from paralysis, which is mirrored in the narrator, who, unable to see the detective’s face, suffers also from symbolic blindness. Both the fact that Romero’s body is utterly immersed in immobility and his resilient symbolic muteness, (only partially overcome with an unconvincing narrative), are in direct relation with the narrator’s inability to see clearly. While Romero leaves the scene allegedly to murder Tagle/Wieder, the narrator waits for him and tries once more to think, but fails again: “I tried to think of Wieder. I tried to imagine him alone in his flat […] but I couldn’t” (147). In this last elliptic scene, thus, symbolic paralysis affects not only action but even thought and overflows the text, expanding to the crisis of literary representation above mentioned.

According to Williams, *Nazi Literature in the Americas* “ends with a sense of paralysis that derives from the inability to truly measure distribution for past action” (“Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño” 132). The same could be argued about these final pages of *Estrella distante*. Both stories are set “in a context in which the democratic/revolutionary horizon of collective politics has been reduced to the utmost individualism of identifying one’s former enemy, and nothing else” (132). Both stories portray individualism and vigilantism with an ambivalent meaning. The vengeful outcome is nothing but bittersweet. On the one hand, Tagle/Wieder’s alleged execution creates the mirage of this individualist success: Romero and the narrator end up getting paid for their hitmen assignment and their enemy gets his comeuppance. What Esposito names *compensatio* seems to take place: with the murderer’s execution, post-dictatorial democratic order appears to be restored. Romero (an officer who worked for Allende’s
regime in the 1970s) regains his symbolic and material capital and the narrator revenges the murders of his youth friends and colleagues. But the problem is that neither Romero nor the narrator seem particularly satisfied with nor convinced by this outcome. Neither of them believes in the mythical dimension of individualism any longer, their individualist speech remaining ages away from being persuasive. As a matter of fact, killing the pilot/poet has not healed their symbolic muteness to the slightest degree: after the implied execution, Romero and the narrator leave Blanes for Barcelona and their trip is still defined essentially by muteness and paralysis: “Along the way Romero made a couple of attempts to start a conversation. [...] I said nothing or replied with monosyllables. I didn’t feel like talking” (148). Right after Romero comes back from Tagle/Wieder’s house, the narrator describes him paying attention to quintessential features of the traditional private detective: his sight and knowledge. But his knowledge points to failure, since his eyes are “eyes ready to believe that anything is possible but knowing, too, that nothing can be undone” (148 Bolaño’s italics). In the original Spanish text, Bolaño uses the word “remedio,” a synonym of solution: Romero’s eyes know that nothing has a solution, a remedy. This word here is not innocent: it is reminiscent of Esposito’s re-elaboration of the pharmakon concept above mentioned. “Disease and antidote, poison and cure, potion and counter-potion: the pharmakon is not a substance but rather a non-substance, a non-identity, a non-essence” (Immunitas 127). Vigilantism, a depersonalized remedy/poison, seem to be not enough: there is a sense that somebody has “won,” that someone’s force prevailed. And it is neither Romero’s nor the narrator’s.

Before turning the pilot/poet in to Romero, while in the silent bar, the narrator emphasizes that the criminal has more entity that the depersonalized multitude: “He seemed self-possessed. And in his own way, on his own terms, whatever they were, he was more self-possessed than the rest of us in that sleepy bar, or most of the people walking by on the beach or invisibly at work, getting ready for the imminent tourist season” (145). In the end, Tagle/Wieder’s individualist
entity, despite his fragmentariness and depersonalization, prevails even over his own death. “Finally, when we arrived at the Plaza Cataluña station, we began to talk.” (148), says the narrator after finishing the silent trip away from the murder scene. It is only when their train ride finishes, that symbolic paralysis and muteness recede temporarily. “I asked him what it had been like. Like these things always are, he said. Difficult.” (148). Romero’s euphemistic response is more eloquent than an explicit account of the murder could ever have been. Romero has just avenged his nemesis. Nevertheless, he describes it merely as a difficult task. “Difficult,” he says, not satisfying in any way. When they are about to bid farewell, Romero and the narrator’s symbolic paralysis and muteness recur once again: “We stood there for a while on the edge of the pavement waiting for a taxi, not knowing what to say” (149). The euphemism “difficult” conveys the dissatisfaction of the private detectives, who despite having accomplished their task, remain paralytic and silent, ages away of becoming the embodiments of successful individualism they are expected to be.

3.4 Conclusions: Neoliberalism and State Terrorism

Because Bolaño deliberately chooses an elliptical dénouement, the reader will never know the cause of this dissatisfaction. Perhaps the answer should be found in the issue of whodunit above mentioned. If somebody from the Chilean administration is Romero’s wealthy client, the countryman who “made a fortune in the last few years […] and in Chile too, not abroad” (137), then what prevailed, through its violent use of symbolic muteness, illiteracy and paralysis, is the conservative force of the post-dictatorial state. Thus, the state ensures its transition to democracy by eradicating the possible threats that could sully its criminal past, while at the same time it secures symbolic muteness with its brand new capital, accumulated after two decades of neoliberalism. After all, muteness is essential during the transition to democracy, which was founded as Jean Franco claims on “the restructuring of the economy on neoliberal principle” which
“promoted a business class that is impatient of reminders of the past” (“Preface,” Richards: viii). Muteness is inextricably linked to the suppression of any possible reminiscing voice that could question the democratic nature of this transition. If this were the case, then *Estrella distante* does not portray a case of vigilantism, but of state terrorism in democratic times.

As Esposito points out, the enactment of state laws follows an immunitary paradigm before vigilantism. If according to him “immunization” is “a protective response in the face of a risk” (*Immunitas* 1), here the Chilean state, then, would not only mirror its risk. After all, an ex hitman at the service of a dictatorial state, that had banished him for insubordination, is a risk for the silent pact of the transition. Following Esposito, it could be argued that the Chilean state’s immunization neutralizes this risk while at the same time it improves the mechanisms that it once created during the dictatorship: the now democratic state, through (un)lawful means, “not only takes [revenge] into its own hands but actually perfects into a form that connects prevention and cure” (Esposito, *Immunitas* 40). This ability to improve the mechanisms of its domination is inextricably connected to the systematic use of symbolic muteness, as Romero never discloses the identity of his client.

Derrida, who wrote extensively about the prominence of the voice in the figure of the verbose Dupin, establishes that one of the main causes for the pre-eminence of voice (the opposite of muteness) over writing is in direct relation to Saussure’s classic opposition between meaning and signifiers. Because “voice is the closest to the signified” (*Of Grammatology* 12), phonic articulations dominate writing, which in turn is closer to signifiers. If phono-centrism points to the subjugation of the sound over the mute letter, *Estrella distante* portrays an inversion, where voices seem subsumed to meaningless signifiers. To put it differently, Bolaño’s novel builds a world in which which this very verbosity is now subjugated by the silent literacy of the murderer (post)dictatorial state. Whereas the connotation of the state officer’s silence in “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” as Derrida shows, is there as a foil to extol Dupin’s loquacity, here silence takes
on new connotations that, as we have seen, are less naïve and are related to the impunity of criminal practices performed by the selectively silent state itself. Silence, in *Estrella distante*, cannot be separated from censorship or torture. In short, it is are inextricably linked with the constitution of the *desaparecido* itself, that can only exist as such because of state’s selective silence.

Writing, according to Derrida, refers to the “dead letter […] a carrier of death” (*Of Grammatology* 17). The pilot/poet, with his selective and ambivalent use both of literacy and symbolic muteness (sometimes at the service of the dictatorial state, sometimes at the service of his own individualist poetic interests), wields that domination personally until its own depersonalized mechanisms end up dominating himself. For Derrida, along with this pre-eminence of voice comes the superiority of presence over absence, because the present voice is always perceived to be more reliable than writing. By contrast, writing remains always “degraded” for having been produced in absence. It is in this sense that Romero and the narrator are instruments of these depersonalized mechanisms as well. Ultimately, that is what the most important ellipsis of the book points to: the fact that an anonymous client, who is both silent and absent, ends up holding much more agency and power than anyone else in the plot. This way, Bolaño exacerbates what he had read in Borges, Walsh and Piglia: the failure of the individualist *ego*(es) before an ambivalent and crumbling but still persistent *mundus*. 
Chapter 4: Brazil. Mundus contra Mundum

“To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’
It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.”

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

4.1 Rewriting Individualism and the State after the Brazilian Dictatorship

4.1.1 Individualism within the State

“All authority contains, in a way, something corrupt and immoral,” (207): this is how Inspector Mattos, the main character of Rubem Fonseca’s masterpiece Agosto (1990), defines the state police of Rio de Janeiro, for whom he works. Whereas in the Argentinean and Chilean stories examined in this dissertation, the detective was often private but rarely a detective per se (Renzi is a linguist/journalist; Romero, a hitman, etc); in this Brazilian novel, the investigator is a more conventional inspector who instead belongs to the public sector. Nevertheless, this distinction does not stop Fonseca from reproducing the traditional tensions between mythical individualism and the post-dictatorial state. Even though Mattos is an officer who works within the state apparatus, ultimately, he is not significantly different from a private sleuth working against it.

Certainly, narrating crime investigations from the perspective of a public detective is not a recent invention created by Fonseca: Mattos partakes in an old Anglo-French tradition that re-signified the state as a space that was capable not only of hindering individualism but also of including and containing its heroic dimension. This tradition was practised especially since the 1930s by New Zealand writer Ngaio Marsh and French author Georges Simenon. Marsh’s Alleyn (an officer in London’s Metropolitan Police) and Simenon’s Maigret (the commissioner of the Paris Brigade Criminelle) forgo the model of state policemen as incompetent that once was embodied by Lestrade or Japp. Alleyn and Maigret, working within the state, are portrayed as witty
as their private models. Like Dupin or Holmes, they solve cases successfully despite working not for themselves or for private companies but for a bureaucratic entity. This Anglo-French tradition was imported to the Southern Cone, especially to Brazil, not only by Fonseca but also by Luis Alfredo García-Roza and the ten novels he devoted to his Inspector Espinoza (1996-2014). This import, like the ones examined so far, is nothing but problematic. In a region marked by the Operation Condor, where the state was consistently portrayed not only as ineffective but also criminal, Fonseca imagines a policeman who works for a post-dictatorial government whose main constitutive elements are corruption and abuse of authority. The fact that Mattos works for the Brazilian state may mean that their agencies are aligned. However, this alignment is only apparent and does not imply an absence of tensions between individualism and state, but rather its rewriting.

Brazilian detective stories share many elements with their Southern Cone counterparts. To begin with, there is again an equation of crime and state. Both in Fonseca’s and García-Roza’s works, as well as in Bernardo Kucinski’s more recent K (2011), the investigated murderers are either policemen or agents who belong, in one way or another, to the state. Equally, regardless of their position in the private or the public realm, detectives often fail to restore the social fabric, leaving their cases ultimately open or unpunished. Finally, the Brazilian tradition shares a similar trajectory to the Argentinean, oscillating from parody to memory, in the course of the transition from dictatorship to post-dictatorial democracy. In the 1970s, for instance, Luis Fernando Veríssimo’s Ed Mort (1979) short stories, influenced by Borges and Bioy’s parodic tone, reproduced the figure of a precarious investigator. “Mort, Ed Mort,” an allusion to “Bond, James Bond,” is also a pun: his last name sounding like an Anglicized version of the Portuguese word “morte,” i.e.: “death”). This is how this parodic detective from Copacabana, the popular neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, introduces himself. Ed Mort, the narrator reiterates in a comic tone, is a detective so poor that he has to pawn his gun to pay the rent on an office that has no
chairs, tables or even clients, just a few cockroaches and a mouse named Voltaire. As in Parodi, humor reappears in playful names: Voltaire, the rodent, is the only one that always volta (i.e: “returns” in Portuguese) to Mort’s office, to compensate for the absence of customers. Even when the sleuth does have clients, their cases are usually ludicrous, making him yet another unemployed worker from a South American country. Veríssimo’s urban stories are reminiscent of Parodi but also Don Frutos, whose dismantled rural office is devoid of fingerprinting techniques, among poor gauchos in the Pampa.

Also like in post-1983 Argentina, after the last Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1985), these parodic expressions gave way to more serious narratives harking back to the past to explore the dictatorial experience. Fonseca’s Agosto constitutes a paradigmatic example. The novelty that distinguishes this Brazilian detective novel is that the exploration of memory is not solely carried out through a narration of a crime set in the past, but also in the retelling of the historical events and political personalities that preceded and even provoked the dictatorship of 1964. This novel relies not so much on the melancholic examination of memory but on a more detached rewriting of history. What is also distinctive in Fonseca is that the representatives of the state are not synthesized in a singular villain. They remain, instead, in a more amorphous and multitudinous dimension, that explicitly includes the detective himself, his colleagues as well as the politicians and their accomplices. The second chapter examined the ways in which Argentinean detective stories depict a state that was deliberately absent, silent and deaf to its citizens. The third chapter explored how Bolaño’s Estrella distante portrays the Chilean state as selectively silent, though thoroughly hearing (spying on) its citizens through a concrete (albeit resistant) embodiment. In this chapter, I look at how this Brazilian detective story represents the state as an inescapable presence, that, paradoxically, mirrors the Argentinean absent state, allowing a common transnational reading.
4.1.2 Personification and Personalism

The fact that Brazilian detective stories have more ties to Argentina than to the Chilean tradition is rooted in history. Chile’s longest-serving head of state, the dictator Augusto Pinochet, lasted in power for almost twenty years, after decades of democratic governments. By contrast, Argentineans and Brazilians have witnessed sundry military regimes interrupting their democracies more often and with different military officers in power (Videla, Viola, Galtieri, Castelo Branco, Geisel, Figueiredo, among many others), succeeding each other sometimes in a matter of months. This distinction can be read in the ways political representation has understood a type of individualism, a sort of personification of sovereignty, at the service of the state and constituted power: personalism. In Argentina and Brazil, the cult of personality was not funnelled through dictatorial regimes as it was in Chile, but in populist democratic administrations, like Juan Domingo Perón’s (1946-1955, 1973-1974), and Gétulio Vargas’s (1930-1945, 1951-1954), which produced an idealized and heroic image of their controversial leaders. This powerful image permeated and conditioned the history of their countries, polarizing its political spectrum ever since. Perón and Vargas shared a common dictatorial past. Whereas Perón was an Army general who worked as a Minister of Labor for the dictatorship (1943-1946) that preceded his own democratic government; Vargas provoked a self-coup to stay in power, extending his first four-year term under a dictatorial regime named the Estado Novo (1937-1945) and returned to power as a democratically elected president in 1951. Unlike Pinochet, the personality of Perón and Vargas only became a national cult as a result of their populist democratic administrations. The fact that both ended abruptly in the mid 1950s (in Brazil, with Vargas’s suicide in 1954; in Argentina, with a military coup that overthrew Perón in 1955) only reinforced this Argentine-Brazilian personalist tradition. More recently, this reappeared in the presidencies of Lula Inácio da Silva (2002-2010) and Néstor and Cristina Kirchner (2003-2015), who carried the labourist legacy of their
forerunners, now bereft of the military past that their models once held, while still preserving a strong personalist aura.

Fonseca’s Agosto tackles this peculiar Southern Cone personalist tradition by blending a detective story with a historical account of the collapse of Gétulio Vargas’s final term as president, which ended in his suicide and, with it, the defeat of Brazilian populism at the hands of constituted power, encapsulated in the military. Fonseca, a former policeman who became a novelist in the early 1970s, published Agosto in 1990, only five years after the end of the last Brazilian dictatorship. Like his alter ego Mattos, the novelist was a law student turned into a police inspector during the 1950s. His novel harks back not to the last dictatorship but to August of 1954, during the final turbulent days of Vargas’s presidency, in order to delve into several agents belonging to the political sphere who would play a leading role during the subsequent decades: from Vargas’s unstable democratic successors (Cafê Filho, Juscelino Kubitschek, João Goulart) to the civil and military leaders who would oust them only ten years later (the then journalist and later governor Carlos Lacerda, or the marshal Castelo Branco, among others). Fonseca stages the political scenario that not only preceded but also enabled the longest and bloodiest dictatorship in the country’s history. Thus, he juxtaposes two different post-dictatorial moments: the one he is writing about and the one he is writing from. In French linguist Émile Benveniste terms, he places side by side the énoncé (the past, what is said) and the énonciation (the present, the act of saying). In Agosto the énoncé informs the énonciation: Fonseca, writing about Vargas’s post-dictatorial government in the mid-1950s, is also alluding to his own post-dictatorial context in the late 1980s.

4.1.3 Literature and History

To juxtapose these two historical moments, Fonseca blends history with literature. All the historical figures who feature in the novel share their protagonism with a singular fictional
detective: the Inspector Alberto Mattos, who tries (and fails) to solve a conventional crime that is loosely connected with a state crime. On the one hand, Mattos investigates the fictional murder of Paulo Gomez Aguiar, a businessman, involved in import goods. On the other, he incidentally ends up following a political crime that becomes crucial for Brazilian history in the twentieth century: known in the national historiography as the “Crime da Rua Tonelero,” the failed assassination attempt against Carlos Lacerda, a staunch anticommmunist and conservative journalist and politician. Lacerda was Vargas’s main adversary and, after the president’s suicide, a participant in the coup d’etat that in 1964 ousted João Goulart, the Minister of Labour during Vargas’s administration. Although Lacerda survived the attack, Rubens Vaz, a major who happened to be with him, was inadvertently killed.

Regarding this political crime, the horizon of expectations of a reader that may be acquainted with these facts and proper nouns does not hold any major surprises. As Sue Wasserman notes, each crime “works inversely”: the fictional murder “has already taken place and the reader accompanies a police detective investigating the crime”; instead, in the historical murder, “the reader is privileged with knowing” (165) that the main instigator (or “intellectual author”) of the assassination attempt against Lacerda was Vargas’s personal bodyguard, an Afro-Brazilian named Gregório Fortunato, the “Black Angel” (“Anjo Negro”). Fonseca recaptures the first twenty-four days of August 1954, in which the military (not the police) disclose the involvement of Fortunato (and hence Vargas’s administration, i.e.: the state), in the attack. The scandal, capitalized on by this lurking military who then even toyed with the idea of a coup, would stain the president’s reputation to the extent that it would eventually result in his suicide.

What breaks with the horizon of expectations of this historical novel is both the effects that the personalist leader’s suicide elicits in the fictional hero of the novel (Inspector Mattos) and the literary re-elaboration of the political proper nouns above mentioned. One of the conclusions that
can be drawn after reading *Agosto* is that these literary effects inform the reader about history with an eloquence that is often absent in historiographic accounts. A few hours before Vargas takes his own life, for instance, his brother Benjamin remembers the speech of Gustavo Capanema, a pro-government politician, defending the president against the pressure that the military and the opposition have imposed to achieve the leader’s resignation: “He, Getúlio Vargas, president of the Republic, could not abandon his post […] He had to stay, in face of the exigencies of the political majority that supported him” (265). Vargas’s duty to stay in power seems to be tied to something even more sacred than electoral accountability: “He had, further, a duty to his name. The name of the president was a sacred name. The president was like a king, like a prince. He governed in the name of the monarch of the world [who] established that the name of the president had something of the sacred to it” (265). According to Capanema’s personalist speech, what matters is something inherent not to a contract with the leader’s constituency but something that he understands to be an instance of the leader’s personality, something inherent to his personhood: his name.

This is one of the main problems that the novel addresses: the functions of proper names that crowd the text. Blending a fictional detective story with these political proper nouns is one of the elements that distinguishes Fonseca. None of the Argentine detective stories examined in the second chapter feature the proper names of Videla or Galtieri, for instance. Piglia’s *Plata quemada* does mention Perón, but only in passing, in a brief paragraph. In a novel that is first and foremost about Pinochet’s dictatorship, Bolaño names the dictator only twice. Tagle/Wieder is neither Pinochet nor Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle nor his father Eduardo Frei Montalva, but an echo of them all combined. What is interesting is that although both Piglia and Bolaño are mainly engaged in earnest accounts of memory, when they allude to political proper nouns, they do so through humour. In *Estrella distante*, for instance, Pinochet appears through the lens of “Rebeca Vivar Vivanco, better known as Madame VV, an ultra-right-wing painter” who is so conservative that
“for her, Pinochet and the generals were a spineless lot who would end up turning the Republic over to the Christian Democrats” (52). In Plata quemada, el Gaucho Dorda mentions Perón but only with a euphemistic allusion to his military rank: “We are political exiled who struggle for the return of [the General]” (Plata quemada 111, translation modified). Dorda defines his gang in cynical political terms, not because he is actually identified with Perón, but only to get some compassion from the police.

Yet the fact that politicians are explicitly mentioned in Agosto does not necessarily mean that the state is solely embodied in them. Even if Gétulio Vargas is constantly alluded to throughout the text, it is only the novel’s final pages that are devoted explicitly to him. As a matter of fact, the reader barely hears him speak. Except when he pronounces his last words to his barber that “it doesn’t matter” (266), that he does not want to shave; Vargas is an absent presence that haunts the novel by displaying the selective symbolic muteness of the state. The scenes portraying his suicide have an impact on a character who is actually fictional and much more important for the plot: the detective Mattos, whose name, though fictional, is charged with symbolic meaning that sheds more light on the historical events and tensions than the myriad of politicians’ surnames like Capanema or Vargas himself, that history would make either irrelevant or crucial. All of them, fictional and real proper names, share a problematic and multitudinous embodiment of the state.

Bolaño’s criminal mastermind Tagle/Wieder, despite his resistance to embodying the Chilean dictatorial state, is portrayed as the only one who summons constituted power, paralleling Pinochet’s personalism. He encapsulates all the force of the state in his individual figure. Fonseca’s representation of the Brazilian state is less concentrated in a single character. Like Tagle/Wieder, Mattos merges ego and mundus, but in different ways. To begin with, Mattos is a law student who becomes a policeman, following then an inverse trajectory from Tagle/Wieder’s: instead of fleeing the state, he goes towards it. But more importantly, Mattos does not embody the state alone, since
he shares this embodiment with all the mentioned politicians and with his own colleagues. Although Mattos is indeed the protagonist of the novel, Fonseca delves into all these other agents of the state bestowing them a more even protagonism: politicians like Vargas and Fortunato, policemen like Mattos’s colleagues, Rosalvo and Pádua, personify the state equally. The presence of proper names, eclipsed by and entangled with fictional names, thus, obfuscates more than it reveals facts about the past.

In *Agosto*, as in most of my corpus, literary representation mirrors political representation; personification reflects personalism, literature echoes history. Yet these reflections, due to their literary nature, are not transparent, but distorted ones. In any mirror, obviously, everything is flipped: all images are portrayed in the opposite way. A historical novel, *Agosto* works as a curved mirror, whose convex or concave regions generate altered images. Despite their distortions (or precisely because of them), these images express things that historiographic accounts may not be able to. In short, Fonseca, by narrating the events of August 1954, does not provide a pristine reflection but a critical commentary on history and the way historiographic accounts narrate it. Whereas historiographic and political debates either censure or endorse personalism in a monolithic way, a literary re-elaboration of its mechanisms provides more nuances to understand how it affects history in a critical way, namely, as inseparable from the anonymous multitude it convokes. *Agosto* is a pertinent example of this critical re-writing of history.

4.2 An Individualist Detective Working for a Post-dictatorial State

4.2.1 Sickness and Politics

Fonseca’s *Agosto* displays two *leitmotifs* that mirror each other: the traditional hostility towards the police and its officer’s mental and physical uneasiness. These *leitmotifs* are located in Mattos’s speech and body. As with the previous problematic embodiments of the state, the policeman rarely
speaks, and decides to do it only selectively. His sidekick Rosalvo describes him as “very laconic” (167), only to nuance afterwards that “he always talked a lot when angry” (167). Mattos speaks only when he gets (becomes) mad. To put it differently, he speaks only when his symbolic muteness is transmuted to (or in contact with) madness. “Silence” says the narrator seven times in just a few paragraphs (153-155): that is Mattos’s reaction when he learns that Alice (his ex-girlfriend and the current wife of a suspect in the case he is investigating) has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He fears contagion of what he perceives to be his own potential psychotic nature, rooted in his genetic background: “Knowing there were several crazy people in his own family, he considered it possible he himself might suffer a psychotic episode” (155). This is the way Mattos “talks”: not so much through words as through non-verbal infectious symptoms. One of the figures that does constantly reappear in his words is his awareness of the institution’s negative reputation in Brazilian society: “That was another unpleasant thing about being a cop: when people didn’t hate him, they feared him” (10). The bad image of the police obsesses Mattos to the point that when trying to charge a husband with domestic violence, one of his colleagues describes him as “more Catholic than the pope” (26) to later add that even the wife will be against the police if they proceed with the case. “Everybody’s against us, always” (26), he insists on disregarding his colleague’s warnings and takes the case to the end, only to witness how the husband is quickly absolved after paying a small bail. Whereas Bolaño depicts reluctant detectives, Mattos is closer to Borges’s Lönnrot or Piglia’s Renzi, sleuths that take themselves too seriously, a feature that contributes to their ultimate failure.

After this episode, the detective questions his ability to suture the social fabric by applying the law: “Mattos took an antacid from his pocket, stuck it in his mouth, chewed, mixed it with saliva, and swallowed. He had complied with the law. Had he made the world any better?” (27). The intake of antacids points to the second leitmotif: the state officer’s mental and physical
uneasiness (even more transparent than his own words) tied to his individualist drive to “make the world a better place.” To begin with, “Mattos,” a conventional Portuguese surname, has (like Tagle/Wieder’s) an eloquent and polysemic etymology: it comes from the Italian matto and malato and the German mat, meaning, respectively, “mad,” “sick,” and “tired.” (Dizionario Etimologico, www.etimo.it/?term=matto). His surname anticipates and synthesizes the policeman’s mental and physical multiple sicknesses: his chronic fatigue and his growing duodenal ulcer perceived as a tangible symptom of his madness. Ultimately, the German mat comes from Eastern languages (from Arabic and Persian harking back to Sanskrit), which brought to the West the lexicon of chess, a game that is extremely prominent in detective stories from Poe to Walsh. Specifically, the word “checkmate.” Not coincidentally, the Portuguese word for “chess” is “xadrez,” the very same slang word that Fonseca uses to refer to jail, because of the gridded vision that prisoners used to have of the outdoors from their cell windows. Mattos, the ever tired, ill and mad detective, will checkmate and be checkmated at the same time when he opens the doors of the “xadrez.”

Most critics who have written about Agosto (Wassermann, Schnaiderman, Waldemer, among many others) have noted the prominence of Mattos’s ulcer, but there is hardly any close reading of the moments in which it features as a symptom of unsolved political tensions. The interiority of Mattos’s body informs its exteriority: the pain recurs when the detective’s will is hindered by the state. Through the ulcer, a metonymic sickness, Fonseca reproduces the symbolic disabilities of the state to rewrite the tensions between individualism and the post-dictatorial state. Thus, he displays the transference of figurative mutilations (such as muteness or paralysis) traditionally ascribed to the state, now endured by individual heroes such as Mattos, not because he works for the state but because he goes against it. Both symptoms manage to overcome his immunity, that aims but fails to protect him from corruption and politics.
Mattos’s twofold immunity is on the one hand tied to the classic feature of hard-boiled fiction defined by Piglia as the “immunity to corruption” that I discussed in the first chapter: the detective’s imperviousness to the state’s crooked activities. Even if he works for the Brazilian state, Mattos functions against (or in spite of) its criminal acts. The policeman’s individualism resides in his autonomy before the state’s oppressive rule: an honest but controversial officer, Mattos never accepts dirty money unlike his colleagues, he frequently discharges suspects that he considers to be innocent and organizes strikes to complain about the overpopulation of Rio de Janeiro’s jails. On the other hand, he displays an original and somewhat more interesting type of immunity: against politics. At the end of the novel, almost as an affective reaction after he encounters Vargas’s corpse, Mattos releases all the inmates from the police station holding cells, where they once were crowded together. Until that very moment, the state policeman constantly defines himself as indifferent to the major political events that are narrated in the background. Even if Brazilians are supposed to be witnessing what their historiography considers to be one of the most important moments of the twentieth century, Mattos does not care about anything beyond his own performance as a policeman. If he seems to care about the poor state of the Rio de Janeiro’s jails, he firstly does not justify it in ideological terms, but because it affects his own performance. When the Major of the Army asks him if he cares about government corruption, Mattos declares that “the only thing that worries me is doing my job well” (207). He seems to be just a simple employee who cares only about doing the right thing.

Mattos’ physical uneasiness is tied to his speech. Specifically, his ulcer first features when he is introduced early on in the novel and it is closely linked with his symbolic muteness. The scene depicts Mattos obliviously and silently listening to Lacerda’s speech, to which he does not react with any opinions nor words. The narrator presents the officer as follows: “Early in the morning of August 1, 1954, police inspector Alberto Mattos, tired and feeling pain in his stomach,
popped two antacid tablets in his mouth” (3) to alleviate his pain, as if that were his bodily reaction to the speech, i.e: to politics. His sickness acts, thus, as an immunitary counterforce that responds without words to what he considers the nauseating state of Brazilian politics. His ulcer shows his repugnance against mundum, the world he wants to make better but cannot. The internecine conflicts of Brazilian history are echoed in his ulcerated body. If Gregório, Vargas’s bodyguard, defines “Lacerdism” as “a contagious disease, worse than gonorrhoea or syphilis” (6), Mattos’s body responds to this infectious disease with another disease: his own ulcer. Like Tagle/Wieder, who overcomes his own symbolic muteness with alternative forms of signifiers, (the ink of his aircraft, the blurred portraits of his victims, etc); Mattos’ ulcer speaks for itself and on behalf of him, thus compensating for his selective silence. The sickness of “lacerdismo” reappears later on, when Mattos’s crooked colleague Rosalvo shows up at the police station with newspapers funded by Lacerda, filled with corruption stories involving Lutero Vargas (the president’s oldest son) and “Jango” Goulart. Rosalvo comments on each of these stories and asks Mattos if he wants to hear more, to which he responds monosyllabically, “No” or succinctly, “I’m not interested” (23). Facing Mattos’s lack of verbosity, Rosalvo insists, obtaining in return his colleague’s symbolic muteness: “The inspector remained silent” (23). When cornered to answer if he sides with Vargas or Lacerda, Mattos asks back without really answering: “Do I have to be one kind of shit or another?” (23). His elusive answer (which is actually a question) seems to put him above and beyond the public debates of the moment. His reaction exhibits a resistance to get involved in the res publica, an ambivalent attitude towards politics. Mattos seems to side with Vargas rather than with Lacerda, but before the leader’s final downfall, he does not express a public opinion on the subject.

These diversions remain constant until the climax of the novel: the moment of the jail evacuation. Is the release of the inmates an act of individualist vigilantism? Should Mattos’s act be read as an endorsement of individual freedom, (i.e: another of the main attributes of
individualism) or quite on the contrary an act that goes well beyond the limits of the self? It is important to note that, in this act, Mattos stops being apolitical. He no longer seems to agree with his previous claim that “the best policeman would maybe be an automaton who knew the law well and obeyed it blindly” (207). Being the best cop is now divorced with obeying the law, and it can only be possible by breaking it. After all, if the Brazilian state incarcerates arbitrarily and massively, obeying its laws would not be something that “the best policeman” should do. Mattos becomes political because he does something for others without even thinking about the consequences that the infraction could have for his career or even for his own individual freedom. His colleague Pádua warns him that releasing prisoners is futile, especially amidst the chaos brought by Vargas’s suicide: “Runaway prisoners won’t matter to anyone” (273), he says. The things that Mattos has fantasized the most, namely, inverting the rule of the state, i.e: imprisoning at gunpoint his own corrupt and abusive colleagues to liberate the prisoners, has for Pádua an effect that will affect no one. It will not only be a useless event but a depersonalized one, with no authorship to be remembered. For Mattos, instead, his act will actually have an effect on someone: himself. “It matters to me. I want it to be that way” (273), he responds to Pádua. It is only thanks to this crucial moment that Mattos manages to surmount his own symbolic paralysis and muteness. In his own way, this is how he acts and speaks. Paradoxically, acting more individualistically than ever, (engaging in an act that endorses individualistic freedom and that may matter to him only), he merges his self with the inmates. After all, doing something about the state of the Rio de Janeiro jails was what he always wanted to do and was not able. At once, he breaks the law (becomes corrupt) and intervenes in the collective (becomes political), as if the two were inextricably linked.

Mattos, the good cop, is the promise of a benevolent state. He never takes bribes and usually starts his shift on time, and when he does not it is because he gets delayed trying to assist citizens. This benevolence is encapsulated in this immunity against corruption and politics. Mattos’s
“neutrality” fulfils the fantasy of contractualism, a European political tradition that becomes problematic in front of Latin American Personalism. After all, the fiction of a benevolent liberal state relies among other things in the balanced neutrality of its three powers. Contractualism justifies the existence and the authority of the liberal state in this balanced benevolence, that would be preferable both to an absence of order and to the concentration of power in one individual. Mattos’s neutrality and benevolence are shattered when he contravenes the law, because he does not only release innocent prisoners, but also criminals: “I let all the prisoners out of lockup. All of them, even the convicted ones” (273), he tells Pádua. Mattos’s rupture with the fictions of neutrality and benevolence inverts the very nature of a practice that, as I discussed, Agamben argues is at the core of the state: arbitrariness. If the prisoners were once condemned regardless of them being guilty or not; Mattos does the opposite following the same arbitrary criteria: he releases them in an extra-juridical way, beyond their actual responsibility in previous crimes. At the beginning of the novel, when he checks on the crowded inmates, Mattos admits to them: “None of you should be here. But there’s nothing I can do” (22). Till here Mattos remains ambivalent. Why does he think these prisoners should not be there? He does not say whether they should be released because of the overcrowding in jail or because they were not guilty at all. When he finally releases them, when he realizes that there is actually something he can do, there is a disambiguation. Mattos does not choose to transfer them to a different facility to balance the overpopulation of the jails of Rio de Janeiro: instead, he frees all the prisoners for good, making a silent statement that stresses the state’s arbitrariness. Since neither Rosalvo nor the prisoners cannot comprehend this arbitrariness in which they are immersed, they endure symbolic unintelligibility, muteness and paralysis before Mattos: “I don’t understand, sir,’ said Rosalvo […] The prisoners didn’t understand the inspector’s order and remained motionless inside the lockup” (272). While he orders them to evacuate the cells, the selectively silent Mattos transfers his symbolic muteness to
the inmates: “One by one, in silence, the prisoners began leaving” (272). Symbolic disabilities, in *Agosto* too, are highly contagious between state officers and its victims.

Mattos does not give any verbal explanation to anyone on why he does this. Again, his non-verbal symptom speaks for itself: “Everyone Out! […] shouted the inspector. His stomach burned” (272). As soon as he gives his command to the uncomprehending prisoners to leave the *xadrez*, his ulcer recurs. Significantly, the smell of the inmates’ sickness, an external echo of his own disease, is what strengthens his call: “The prisoners pressed against the wall when Mattos entered the cell. The repugnant smell of poverty, dirt, and disease strengthened even further the inspector’s resolve” (272). In this final scene, Mattos’s “sickness” is re-signified as a social product of the state’s carelessness towards its subalterns. By smelling the others’ disease, his ulcer (his individual drive against the post-dictatorial state) stops being a personal medical condition to become a collective problem. Mattos’s body expresses how, as feminist thinker Carol Hanisch once said, the personal is political. Similarly, a few days before this dénouement, thinking he will agitate and infuriate Mattos, Rosalvo tells him about Vargas’s most recent pardon of prisoners, to which his colleague replies: “They should never even have been arrested […] Arresting a macumba priest or a fence is stupid. A prisoner costs society money, he spends some time in jail, and comes out worse than when he went in” (167). The dénouement provides disambiguation: in the end, the liberation of the prisoners had little to do with Mattos’s obsession of performing his duty in a less crowded and precarious environment nor with this speech that points to the futility of over-incarceration. His crucial decision is more related instead with a performative statement that reveals not what he thinks but more literally (and affectively) what he had in his guts (his ulcerated stomach): the irreconcilable tensions between his individual drive and the systematic incarceration practices of the Brazilian state. In these tensions, Mattos resists the personification of the state like
Tagle/Wieder but goes a step further by simultaneously problematizing the figure of the individualist detective as well.

4.2.2  Force and Agency

Over the course of the novel, the narrator constantly interrupts Mattos’s dialogues with his colleagues, superior or suspects, to bring back the ulcer’s *leitmotif*. Despite constantly taking pills and drinking milk to alleviate his pain, Mattos never heals. These iterations punctuate the plot, regulating its pace, constantly bringing back the eternal return of the repressed pain. In one of the first frustrating dialogues between Mattos and Rosalvo, not even after having “drunk half a litre of watery milk” (53), the ulcer’s ache recedes. Despite being able to sense “the taste of milk in his mouth” (54) much later, the remedy proves to be not enough facing his frustrations: “the acidity had yet to pass completely” (54). Mattos’s pain is a symptom that remains impossible to soothe until the moment of his death. It recurs even at the end of the novel, after he has solved his main tension against the state—the jail evacuation. Vargas’s suicide only worsens Mattos’s sickness. Having released the prisoners, seeking some more milk to find relief, he wanders the tumultuous streets of Rio de Janeiro, crowded with people who cannot make sense of the traumatic event. Mattos walks amid “the crowd of people forming immense lines near the Catete Palace to see the dead president; […] looking for a bar open at that hour to drink a glass of milk. But they were all closed. [His] stomach ached fiercely” (274). The impossibility to consume the remedy in the midst of confusion only externalizes Mattos’s body internal impossibility to heal.

A symptom that cannot be soothed is a response to a wound that does not heal. This is precisely how Esposito defines “force.” The Italian philosopher, drawing from Simone Weil’s reading of the *Iliad*, concludes that state force “is not the wound destined to cicatrize into the ‘regularity’ of politics, but its in-eliminable foundation” (*The Origin of the Political* 78). In the
same way that Mattos’s tensions against the state, encapsulated in his incurable ulcer, cannot be extirpated from his body; state force resides at the core of the political. Esposito understands force “not as measurement but as a universal constant of, and invariable in, human nature” (78). Similarly, the fact that Mattos’s immunity end up being overcome by corruption and politics seems to suggest that not only force but also systematic crime, i.e: corruption, is inextricable from the political. As Esposito himself says elsewhere, that order (a given arrangement of society, e.g: dictatorships, democracies, etc), is not supposed to suppress conflict, because “conflict is order” (Immunitas 50; Esposito’s italics). Order, then, should not be expected to neutralize force or corruption because they always return as a repressed symptom, like Mattos’s ulcer. As Gareth Williams claims, following Esposito, force is the “most intimate wound of the political, situated at the very heart of […] the political itself” (“2666, or the Novel of Force” 6). Mattos’s incurable ulcer aches more intensely when the similarly “incurable” force and corruption of the Brazilian state presents itself unabashedly hindering his agency (or Vargas’s), almost as if it were the only silent response that he can offer. And perhaps, this is what Fonseca is trying to illustrate with Mattos’s ulcer and madness: in an opposite albeit similar way to the portrayals of the Argentine absent and mute state, the representation of an all-pervasive Brazilian state sheds a light to the fictional silhouette of contractualism, too. Whereas Argentine detective stories would stress the hollowness of the state to emphasize its manufactured foundations, Fonseca conveys a similar sense of this fictional dimension of the state, without relinquishing its overwhelming presence that colonizes the most private corners of its people: its intimacy. In the end, Mattos’s inability to embody that “automaton who knew the law well and obeyed it blindly” (207) points to the impossibility of a benevolent state as a whole. If force constitutes the core of the political, then a social contract based not on force but on tacit consent between the asymmetrical parties that constitute the state (mainly its leaders, its three powers, and its people) becomes implausible.
From the beginning of the story, the narrator delves into Mattos’s immunity to corruption and his inability to subject himself to the state’s force. His honesty is depicted negatively and explicitly attributed to his madness by his colleagues. Unlike Pádua or Rosalvo, Mattos does not fit in the systematic criminal nature of the state: “the inspector’s honesty was considered by the lawbreakers as a threatening manifestation of […] dementia” (5). In one of the final scenes, Mattos discovers that Pádua killed “o Turco Velho,” the Old Turk, one of Mattos’s prisoners. He then accuses him: “Pádua, I know you killed Old Turk. I can’t just do nothing, knowing what I do. I can’t be an accomplice” (230) he says, to stress his own imperviousness to state connivance with crime and the arbitrariness of its force. To which Pádua replies: “You’re not being an accomplice. You’re gonna do nothing simply ’cause there’s nothing you can do […] I know you’re a good cop, but not even Sherlock Holmes could prove I killed that guy. […] You need to stop suffering over nonsense. That’s why you have the ulcer” (230-231). Pádua sees Mattos’s ulcer and madness as a common symptom of this unsolved tension: he believes that Mattos suffers because he wants to, because he deliberately chooses not to play the game. In here as in elsewhere, Pádua insists on reminding Mattos that it is his individualist desire for autonomy, in the face of the state’s force and corrupt nature, that will lead to his downfall. During one of their first encounters, Mattos has just rehearsed in small doses what he will end up doing on a grand scale: he has released some innocent homeless people that Pádua had locked up. When Pádua finds out, he admonishes Mattos: “Did you let those dirtbags I arrested go?” he asks, to which Mattos replies: “Yes. […] I cut the red tape and called headquarters, and they gave me the information on the phone” (50). When he unilaterally surmounts the hindrances of the state apparatus, Mattos puts himself above the other policemen in the same way as private detectives once did from outside of the state. But the traditional heroism that this unilateral behaviour once had no longer works. That is why Pádua does not applaud him (like Watson would Holmes), but scolds him instead: “Holy shit! That’s
illegal, don’t you know that? You put yourself at risk for a bunch of scumbags. You expecting some kind of medal […]? One of these days you’re gonna get fucked—they’ll open up an internal investigation and kick your ass out” (50). Even though Pádua and Rosalvo constantly commit illegal acts, they do so following their self-interest insofar as they would not risk their own immunity. The reason why they regard Mattos as a madman is that he is honest when he must be corrupt and gets involved with illegality when he should be protecting himself from the state’s rule. The novel’s dénouement confirms Pádua’s views, since it is Mattos’s autonomous agency, amidst the hindering criminal state, that will break his immunity to politics and corruption and subsequently to death. In other words, it is Mattos’s urge to unilaterally wield force within the state what will make him fail in the end.

Mattos admires Delegate Hermes Machado, the policeman who imprisons one of the hitmen that tried to kill Lacerda. At one point, he asks Hermes why he joined the police in the first place. “I’m with the police because of vanity,” Hermes replies, “vanity is man’s great motivator. […] I can make arrests, something that no judge, no Supreme Court justice, no president of the Republic can do” (103). Mattos admires in Hermes precisely what he thinks he lacks himself and could possess: omnipotence. Of course, Hermes’s omnipotence is nothing but a mirage, a traditional attribute of mythical individualism: a delusion of grandeur. Whereas for the classic private eye, vanity meant the ability to hold the monopoly of truth, here vanity entails what was supposed to be the most impersonal attribute of the state: the monopoly of force. Being able to wield power within and above the state, in Agosto, includes the most important expression of a presidential republic: the personalist leader. Mattos must therefore be read as a literary re-elaboration, a problematic Dopplegänger of Getúlio Vargas. Because, paradoxically, neither of them can truly wield power. Whereas Mattos wants to be seen as a good police, the legacy of Vargas is closely linked to that of a good policymaker. Both know how to “police” well, following
Foucault’s notion of the polysemic French word *police*, meaning simultaneously “policy,” “politics,” and the “police institution” (“The Political Technology of Individuals” 153). Often called by his working-class constituency “the father of the poor,” Vargas was seen as a benevolent leader, who granted them unprecedented rights to education and health care. During his first administration, in 1932, he granted unrestricted suffrage to women. Nevertheless, due to the anti-democratic pressure that the military and the opposition subjects him to, the Vargas portrayed in Fonseca’s novel can no longer govern. Equally, the Comissário Mattos cannot truly “govern” the small jail of Rio de Janeiro as he pleases. Both share a common impotence that is diametrically opposed to the masculine fantasy of omnipotence and sovereignty. Mattos cannot impose his until the end of the novel. In the meantime, he has to content himself with toying with it only in small doses. When he tries but fails to speak with Senator Vitor Freitas, the politician’s secretary tells the policeman that he feels threatened by his draconian tone: “Don’t forget, inspector, that we’re not in a dictatorship, a minor-level policeman can no longer threaten a federal senator protected by constitutional immunities without suffering the grave consequences of that criminal and arbitrary act. Your superiors will be informed of what’s going on” (105). Mattos hangs up, takes an antacid, and moves on to keep working on his case. Again, what he lacks belongs to someone else: Freitas’s constitutional immunity, which amounts, once more, to the mirage of omnipotence.

But, why does Fonseca insist on Mattos’s toying with the limits of his own agency? What is at stake is the issue of what policemen (who are used to having a free hand to act as they please during dictatorial regimes) are and are not allowed to do in post-dictatorial democracies. To put it differently, Fonseca partakes in the common Southern Cone poetics of failure because he questions who really wields constituted power within the state apparatus. Though Fonseca’s ostensible theme is the 1950s post-dictatorship, in which Vargas was a legitimate democratic leader, having relinquished authoritarianism, at the same time he is elliptically writing during and about the new
late 1980s post-dictatorial context. Thus, he asks how much the brand-new post-dictatorial Brazilian democracy is truly democratic. *Agosto*, after all, is not only a detective story but also a historical novel that, as such, responds to a typical convention of the genre: problematizing the past to speak about the present. Therefore, when Fonseca addresses the boundaries of Mattos’s agency to wield force, he is writing not only about the 1950s but also about the fresh memory of a recently finished dictatorship and conflictive transition to democracy. Southern Cone post-dictatorships entailed that the military had been replaced by democratically elected politicians to lead the state. Especially during the late 1980s, these transnational transitions to liberal democracies were promoted as an exemplary case of the triumph of contractualism: liberal democracies, local and foreign Fukuyamans would insist, were here to stay, as an irreversible and inalterable order, immune to interruptions. But of course this contractualist fantasies were already present in the speech of Latin American dictators much earlier. The Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano, for instance, says that “in 1965, Roberto Campos, economic tzar of Castelo Branco dictatorship, announced that ‘the era of charismatic leaders surrounded by a romantic aura is giving place to a technocracy’” (212). This very same dictatorial motto, ironically, is recaptured in post-dictatorial democratic times. With post-dictatorship, the clearer visible face of constituted power, which once was personified by dictators and authoritarian personalist leaders, has become all-too blurred into civilians that openly compete for and dispute power relying on their constituency. Reading Fonseca leads to two fundamental questions in this regard: first, can the state (whose force is inextricable from its very core) function benevolently? Second, where did constituted power go? In this new order that promises not to allow dictatorial or democratic personalism, underneath which face will constituted power be hidden? *Agosto* does not answer these issues, but it sheds light on the anxieties and tensions that post-dictatorship produces in individuals in the figure of its main detective.
4.2.3  *Madness and Knowledge*

When Mattos releases the prisoners, Rosalvo thinks: “This time the guy has really gone crazy” (271). When Pádua finds out, he defines Mattos with the very same word: “You’ve gone crazy!” (272). Both policemen understand Mattos’s autonomy as a product not of a political decision but of his madness. They regard Mattos’s individual agency not as a result of reason but as its absence. Mattos’s eccentricity shows clearly when he is contrasted with his foils. Brazilian writer Boris Schnaiderman describes Mattos as an “intelligent, cultured and sensitive policeman” (2). These are the traits that distinguish him from his fellows. It is in this sense that madness can be read in terms of class. Closer to Dupin, Holmes, Lönnrot or Renzi; Mattos belongs to a higher status than most of his colleagues. In his famous essay on *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault defines madness as a complex concept, a notion that changes throughout history. One of the elements that is crucial in its multiple definitions is the close relation that madness holds with exclusion. Since the Renaissance, madmen have often been physically separated from European society in places that were once reserved for lepers. Even if Mattos wants to exclude himself from the state’s corrupt network, even though he thinks highly of himself when compared to his working-class colleagues, he cannot be truly excluded, because, as Foucault reminds us, any kind of exclusion produces at the same time another parallel form of community of the excluded (“Stultifera Navis” 7). Mattos, a “functional madman,” displays a sophisticated individualism that permeates the representation of the state, which once was a space circumscribed to incompetence and sheer force. He aims to be detached from society, listening to opera and expressing unconventional ideas for a common officer. These traits outline the ambivalent figure of this individualistic detective, who nonetheless chooses to work for the state.
Due to his madness, Mattos suffers symbolic illiteracy: he reads too much and that prevents him from seeing the world the way he should. As one of his lovers, Salete, points out, excessive reading leads to madness: “I think you read too much. Dona Floripes said that a man who frequented her house went crazy from so much reading” (66). Like Lönnrot, Renzi or the Estrella distante’s anonymous narrator, the fact that Mattos reads too much leads to his inability to read at all. Pádua stresses Mattos’s symbolic paralysis in similar terms: “you’re not capable of using those shitty guns” (273). Fonseca’s detective reproduces here a tradition that harks back to Dupin: because of his upper-class background, which conditioned him to be well-read, Mattos is unable to interact with the Real and its realm of life and death (encapsulated here in the ability of using guns), making him, too, a prisoner of the symbolic order. Culture, language, books, in short, symbols, instead of clarifying how to read reality, end up stupefying him. Again, the eloquent etymologies behind the detective’s surname inform his personality. Mattus, in Late Latin, means “stupid”: somebody who is in awe for whatever he has learnt (as a “student”) and thus becomes paralyzed, incapable of thinking clearly. Reading, for Mattos, does not necessarily amount to understanding what he reads. The abundance of signifiers fails to produce meaning that could reconcile Mattos with mundus and its mechanisms.

Mattos’s tension against the state, like Tagle/Wieder’s, is an inheritance of a European myth not only of individualism but also of madness and symbolic illiteracy par excellence: Don Quixote. Both share what Foucault considers to be “the most important […] form” of madness, namely, by “[Romanesque] identification,” (translation modified)9 whose “features were fixed once and for all by Cervantes” (“Stultifera Navis,” 28). Mad because he has read too much, Mattos reproduces the very kind of madness that is Don Quixote’s: a “punishment of knowledge” (Foucault, 9 The translation was modified because Foucault uses romanesque in the original. The original English translation states “romantic,” which misses the sense of romance, related to the novel more than to Romanticism.
“Stultifera Navis,” 26). Both heroes partake in the classic tradition of madness as punitive consequence of an excess of literacy. But madness is not only a consequence of knowledge, “madness fascinates because it is knowledge” itself (Foucault 21). After all, madness produces meaning. It matters little if that meaning remains unintelligible for some. The ability to hold knowledge and meaning, (i.e: the monopoly of truth), is one of the main attributes of mythical individualism in Anglo-American sleuths. “The madman often tells the truth” the proverb goes; or, as Foucault claims, since the late Medieval theatre “the Madman […] stands centre stage as the guardian of the truth” (14). Nevertheless, like Don Quixote, madness will not bring success to Mattos in the same way that holding the monopoly of truth once did to Anglo-American detectives. Instead, his madness leads to his failure.

Schnaiderman notes the influence of Cervantes in the shaping of Mattos: he describes the detective as “a bit Quixotic in his rallies and attempts to humanize the treatment of inmates” (2). Schnaiderman is surely thinking of the passage in Cervantes’s novel in which Don Quixote famously releases a chain of galley slaves. Mattos is mad for the same reasons as the Spanish knight, who is perceived by the freed prisoners as somebody who “was not quite right in his head as he had committed such a vagary as to set them free” (Cervantes 311). In these terms, one of Cervantes’s Spanish guards expresses his astonishment at the situation: “He wants us to let the king’s prisoners go, as if we had any authority to release them, or he to order us to do so!” (309).

With both Mattos and Don Quixotte, what is perceived as madness is their individualism unleashed against the world, their common delusion of believing that they can wield force before the state. When he is first confronted with the galleys, Don Quixote gets puzzled. Sancho, who does not suffer from symbolic illiteracy and is thus well versed in practical things, explains: “That is a chain of galley slaves, on the way to the galleys by force of the king’s orders” (297), to which Don Quixote responds with his well-known innocence: “Is it possible that the king uses force against
anyone?” (297). Both Mattos and Don Quixote express themselves as if their authority were higher than it actually is. Don Quixote acts as though he were more powerful than the Spanish King; Mattos acts as though he were mightier than the Brazilian President.

This is what defines their common madness: an individualist delusion of grandeur, that prevents them from functioning in the world. It excludes them from the world, in Foucauldian terms, by including them in the imaginary community of the heroic madmen. The crumbling of the hitherto stable ego’s agency and mundus’s force produces a new mundus in which not only one ego but many egos (nos) are diluted. Whereas the knight errant releases the galley slaves because he believes he must succour these “unfortunates who against their will were being carried where they had no wish to go” (219), the reasons behind Mattos’s investment in the prisoners’ freedom remain a mystery. At the same time, in releasing the inmates, Mattos becomes, like Don Quixote, a myth of individualism. What distinguishes the Brazilian detective from Cervantes’s myth is that Mattos acts as a consequence not only of reading too much but also as a result of grief in front of Vargas’s suicide. The president’s suicide letter famously reads: “I take my first step on the road to eternity. I leave life to enter history.” But what is “entering history” reduced to once Vargas is dead? A suicide letter, which for any other individual would mean the ultimate trace of intimacy, becomes a narration of the Brazilian state, a story that shapes the ways the reader should understand history. Examining the role this letter has in Fonseca’s novel can shed more light on the crumbling so far examined: ego contra mundum, individualist agency against state force, madness and knowledge.
4.3 The Brazilian State: *Mundus contra Mundum*

4.3.1 Historiography and Mythology

Vargas’s suicide letter ends paradoxically with a sentence that indicates not closure but inception: “Entering history,” which only seems to be possible after actually exiting it. The death of the man paves the way for the birth of myth. Vargas, after all, was considered by other politicians as “one of those men who are ageless” (Fonseca 31), i.e: eternal. This is precisely how French theorist Roland Barthes defines the concept of “myth”: it “deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. […] In it, history evaporates” (152). This is why as English historian James Dunkerley notes, “history,” in Vargas’s letter, points not so much to the past as to the future, not “the general history of the past but the particular history of the great” (30). The letter thus aims to shape Brazil’s future in a very distinct way: “The only future [Vargas] provides for is one under his shadow” (Dunkerley 30). In the novel, the leader’s shadow affects, first and foremost, Mattos. Through the affective encounter between the politician’s corpse and the detective’s sick body, Fonseca somehow amalgamates their figures. The coupling of Vargas/Mattos becomes only prominent when the inspector sneaks into the presidential palace: “Where would the president’s body be? His stomach ached. He put three antacid tablets in his mouth. He needed to see Getúlio’s body” (268). Here, again, the connection between Mattos’s ulcer and the internecine conflicts of Brazilian history are explicit. It is almost as if some part of Mattos has died with the leader, re-signifying what he meant only a few days earlier when he told one of his girlfriends that “Vargas is part of my life” (256). The investigator yearns for contact with the president’s corpse before its burial, but their encounter is filled with negative affect, which in turn produces symbolic disabilities. Hastening to leave the ground floor of the Catete palace, which is filled with a multitude that endures symbolic unintelligibility, a “number of people moving to and fro, yelling incomprehensible orders” (269), Mattos finally reaches Vargas’s bedroom. Except that he is
symbolically blinded, seeing the body but missing the face: “Through the half-open door, Mattos saw what he was looking for. There he was, Getúlio Vargas. […] The movement of the people prevented Mattos from seeing the president’s face” (269). The impossibility of seeing a face amounts to a cancellation of what the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls a “face-to-face” ethics. Without the encounter between Vargas/Mattos’s faces, there is a rupture of “the conjuncture of the same and the other” (80), there is no “direct and full face welcome of the other by me” (80). Something gets broken in Mattos in this instant of symbolic blindness, since it is immediately thereafter that he releases the prisoners, almost as if it were its direct consequence.

Mattos’s rebellion amounts to a kind of symbolic (mythical) suicide that echoes Vargas’s real (historical) suicide. Unlike his leader, Mattos does not kill himself. Nonetheless, his act of releasing the inmates is similar to what Dunkerley defines as “political suicide,” i.e.: “the self-destruction of a political career, policy or party rather than a life” (1). Indeed, his self-destructive drive is not gratuitous. Pádua’s last words to Mattos are: “Did you know today is St. Bartholomew’s Day?” (273). The reference to this figure of Christian hagiography alludes to martyrdom, which is often a key component not only of religious history but also of political suicides. “For the faithful,” says Dunkerley, “political suicide constitutes a final terrestrial act of vindication of both person and cause” (13). So it is for the secular Mattos but also for Vargas, the other “saint” that St. Bartholomew echoes in Rosalvo’s words when he learns about the president’s suicide: “The old man’s become a saint, like every politician who dies in office in this shit hole of a country” (Fonseca 271). Through his death, Vargas becomes a secularized version of a central component of Christianity, that Dunkerley attributes to Allende only but I believe that also applies to the Brazilian leader. Martyrs project “an image of resurrection” (Dunkerley 19-20), the eternal continuity of the Messiah, the personalist leader, the all-pervasive father who never abandons his orphans despite his absence. Watt concludes that myths “persist in our memories, and in some
sense even become a part of us; they are [...] larger than life” (233). According to Esposito, “personhood [...] is that which, in the body, is more than body” (*Third Person* 11). In the figure of a personalist leader, this “corporeal surplus” is even more pronounced, since the person of the leader survives the death of the body through mythification. Thus, Vargas will not be perceived by his survivors as another statesman, another irrelevant and forgotten proper name that only can be captured by a history textbook. He will be perceived instead as a myth who, like martyrs, will have to be venerated (with all the corresponding rituals) and remembered. The issue is by whom?

### 4.3.2 Multitude and People

Beyond his death, what is the actual component that sanctifies Vargas? The answer can be found in Rosalvo’s rant: “Those military guys are really stupid. [...] If they’d left Getúlio alone, the senile old man would’ve died in disgrace [...] But the military backed him up against the wall, without giving him a chance to save face. [...] The people had already taken the old man’s picture down from the wall, now everything’s going to start all over” (271). In *Agosto* the Brazilian state is a suicidal state, a state whose members go against each other, a sort of *mundus contra mundum*. Paradoxically, this suicidal state produces a new mythical *ego* in the figure of a problematic personalist leader it attempts to destroy but only ends up magnifying. In turn, this new myth returns the favor by reassuring the state’s continuity. In a way, the myth of the Father of the Poor, Fonseca is telling us, can be read as what Roland Barthes calls “a myth of Order” (150). Vargas’s letter states his aim of “being always with you” (qtd. in Dunkerley 30). But who exactly is this “you,” the recipient of the leader’s company? Precisely, the agent that makes Vargas holy: “the people,” who will put their leader’s picture on the wall again. Right before Vargas’s suicide, the narrator says that “the prestige of President Vargas and his government had for months been suffering a continuous process of attrition and had, in that month of August, hit its lowest level of popular
approval” (Fonseca 246). The President’s suicide renews his crumbling contract with his people, including the previously apolitical Mattos. Individualism gets diluted in them but at the same time gets enhanced in the individual figure of Vargas, the statesman.

In his treatise on *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau already contemplates the “mortality” of the state: “The body politic, as well as the human body, begins to die as soon as it is born” (“The Death of the Body Politic”). What is interesting about this analogy is the inherently self-destructiveness of both bodies. Rousseau does not see the state’s death as a consequence of warfare with states for instance. Instead, the state “carries in itself the causes of its destruction” (“The Death of the Body Politic”). In Fonseca’s novel, Rousseau’s analogy becomes more literal since the death of the statesman seems to entail the downfall of the state he embodies. In Latin American presidencialist democracies, when personalist leaders such as Vargas die the stability of the state seems to be at stake. Something similar happened more recently when Néstor Kirchner or Hugo Chávez did. But for Rousseau, states often return to life because of legislative power. The legislature (that for the Swiss philosopher fulfills the function of the heart), not the executive branch, guarantees the preservation of the state. Fonseca suggests the continuity of the Brazilian state after 1954 in quite different terms, namely, in direct relation not with impersonal institutions but with the personalist mark that the leader leaves in his people.

Paolo Virno distinguishes two competing concepts that are fundamental to read this final scene of *Agosto*. On the one hand, the Spinozian notion of “multitude” points to “a plurality which persists as such in the public scene, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One” (*A Grammar of the Multitude* 21). On the other hand, the Hobbesian concept of “the people” which “is somewhat that is one, having one will, and to whom one action may attributed” (Hobbes, qtd. in Virno 22; Virno’s italics). The contrast between the multitude’s heterogeneous multiplicity and the people’s homogeneous unity is not the only
difference between the two. Virno says that, according to Hobbes, the people follows a specular logic, constituting a transparent mirror of the state, becoming its “reverberation,” its “reflection” (A Grammar of the Multitude 22). The multitude, instead, “shuns political unity, resists authority,” but more importantly it “does not enter into lasting agreements, never attains the status of juridical person because it never transfers its own natural rights to the sovereign” (23). To sum up, “the multitude is anti-state, but precisely for this reason, anti-people” (23). Both cannot coexist in the same time and space: “if there are people, there is no multitude; if there is a multitude, there are no people” (23). What is interesting about this distinction is the inability of the multitude to “enter into lasting agreements” (23). Unlike the people, the multitude cannot sign contracts. When Vargas commits suicide, he renews a contract with his constituency, but in doing so transforms the multitude of bodies that accompanies his coffin into what Hobbes defines as “the people.” In turn, his people preserve and justify the existence of the state. The change of category is not a mere semantic distinction, in that it is charged with a fundamental political difference. If it is impossible to contract (to tame) the multitude, the personalist leader’s suicide must be read as a renewal of the bond that unites him with his people as well as a conservative reconstitution of the state. Ultimately, after the riots following Vargas’s suicide are contained, everything goes on as usual in Rio de Janeiro. Fonseca encapsulates this restitution of order in the novel’s final paragraph, which ends with the weather forecast for August 26th 1954, an image of routine and continuity par excellence. Agosto seems to suggest that Vargas’s suicide, despite being perceived as leaving chaos behind actually reestablishes unity, reinstating boundaries that otherwise would have been breached. That is what Rosalvo means when he moans about the aborted withdrawing of Vargas’s picture from the wall by the people.

After releasing the prisoners, Mattos joins the multitude flooding the president’s funeral, “shouting Getúlio’s name and waving white handkerchiefs” (275). While they carry Vargas’s
coffin, they cry out loud the very name of their leader (a proper noun considered to be sacred) to compensate for his absence. Following Gramsci, Marx and Derrida, Indian philosopher Gayatri Spivak engages with the notion of the subaltern in direct relation with proper nouns. According to her, the reason why subalterns cannot speak is that they do not own a name; they can only be named through their representative: “the absence of the non-familiar artificial collective proper name is supplied by the only proper name ‘historical tradition’ can offer — the patronymic itself— the Name of the Father” (73). Like subalterns, the multitude, an anonymous entity that cannot be constituted or defined by a person, (in other terms, an agent that cannot be personified), does not own a “collective proper name.” But unlike subalterns (or the people), the multitude’s impossibility to have a name assigned remains impervious even in front of a leader. Once a collective group can be named, i.e: defined, it is no longer a multitude. After all, a prerequisite for signing a contract is having a signature, i.e: a proper name. The transformation from the multitude to the people can only happen with this assignation of a proper noun. This is why in Hobbesian terms, the contract between the state and the people is symmetrical and specular: because the people can only exist as long as it is named by its paternalistic and personalist statesman, the sovereign, the masculine embodiment of the state. In the same way that Marx showed the extent to which “a man named Napoleon would restore” the French people’s “glory” (Spivak’s italics 73); Fonseca uses these “patriarchal metaphorics” (Spivak 73) to show how “historical tradition” operates in the mythification of the Brazilian “father of the poor.” By “entering history,” Vargas, like Louis Bonaparte, restores the mirage of “glory.” His proper name becomes a signifier that gives meaning not only to his own legacy but also to the Brazilian people and, therefore, to the preservation of the Brazilian state beyond his death.

Even when the military tries to disperse the multitude, Mattos stays with them. As Virno points out, “in the absence of the state, there is no people” (A Grammar of the Multitude 22): when
the coffin is taken away to be buried, the personalist leader’s presence fades away, turning the people temporarily into the multitude again, which in turn endures sheer symbolic muteness: “A sudden, eerie silence fell over the crowd” (275). The fact that the multitude cannot speak may be read as a twofold crisis of representation, that is simultaneously political and literary. Contrasted with the people, the multitude now seems nothing but a group of bodies left alone in their orphanhood. The absence of the representation of a leader mirrors their literary silence. But this silence vanishes (along with the multitude itself), when they shout his name. The elegiac apostrophe produces the renewal of the contract between the personalist leader and its constituency beyond death: “I leave to the ire of my enemies the legacy of my death […] the answer from the people will come later…” (270), reads the fake note said to be found on the president’s deathbed. Lourival Fontes, Vargas’s propaganda minister, and other writers and politicians who sneaked into the presidential bedroom right after the suicide, fabricated this note as Vargas’s symbolic will. The note echoes another personalist leader’s last words, which are often misattributed to Eva Perón (because it is the epitaph on her tomb) but belong in fact to Tupac Kátari, the indigenous Aymara leader: “I die but will return tomorrow as thousand thousands” (Robin & Jaffe, 199). The fabricated message enhances Vargas’s myth and gives meaning to martyrdom. This is, after all, what “entering history” means: I may have died but my mythical stature will prevail in my people, who survive me and will act in my name; I, the incarnation of the state, may temporarily be absent, but the continuity of the state remains assured in them. This renewal of the contract has a twofold effect: it reinforces the crumbling state and it suppresses the possibility of a boundless multitude, rioting in the streets, destabilizing social order.

We must only observe how this multidão (the original Portuguese uses this word, whereas the English translation often features the more neutral word “crowd”) behaves early on in the novel, when it faces the uncharismatic opposition leader, Carlos Lacerda. Having survived the
attack on his life, he publicly addresses them at the headquarters of his political party, trying but failing to contain their anger. “The shouts from the [multitude] drowned out his words” (Fonseca 148; translation modified), says the narrator. The multitude’s boundless voice eclipses the politician’s, even when the latter is amplified by a loudspeaker. Vargas’s nemesis ends up suffering symbolic muteness, his “inaudible words” (148) being replaced by the national anthem, a paradigmatic instance of the nation-state. The contrast with the funeral scene is evident: there is a disconnect between the leader and the multitude, whose “wrath did not subside” (148), resulting in riots and police repression. Unlike Vargas, Lacerda fails to be in tune with the multitude. The different outcomes of the two scenes show what is often absent in history textbooks, which often reduce their narration of the past to the enumeration of proper names and sheer chronology: that personalist leaders and dates like August 1954 only enter history as long as they are symbolically fed by the multitude.

As Zizek reminds us, following Lacan, “symptoms are by definition never ‘innocent’” (“From Jouce-the-Symptom,” Lacan.com). Mattos knows what he is doing when he releases the prisoners. Like Don Quixote, Mattos knows he is not insane. He is just using his symptom (his ulcer, his “madness”) to unleash his individualist drive. Similarly, when Vargas writes that he “enters history” by dying, that is not a pointless act but a self-inscription in the national mythology that will be recaptured by the people. As Waldemer concludes in his reading of Agosto, “the violent demise of an important public figure such as Getúlio Vargas is precisely the sort of phenomenon that historiography has tended to privilege. Fonseca’s Agosto reminds that, when Getúlio Vargas chose his dramatic exit, he displayed a sound understanding of how history and historiography operate” (38), namely, by producing myths. Whereas the exclusion of criminality and madness, in Foucauldian terms, enables the constitution of individual identity (“The Political Technology of Individuals” 146); in Fonseca, madness allows its exacerbation, updating individualism as a myth
that cannot be separated from the many (the jail’s prisoners, the politician’s constituency).

Dunkerley notes that Vargas’s political suicide “was motivated by the loss of power” (27). By using their symptoms, Mattos and Vargas reinstate lost power to project their ego above the state. But whereas Mattos’s individualism aims to destroy the state; Vargas’s strengthens it.

The problematic *Doppelgänger* relationship that connects Mattos with Vargas suggests that the personalist ex-dictator and president, far from “entering history,” has actually entered Brazilian mythology. Whereas historiography aspires to deal with facts in a scientific way, in order to reveal “truth;” mythology understands myths as sheer language, as narratives that once claimed to seek “truth” but became not facts but artifacts. Vargas’s death exceeds the notion of “fact”: his suicide turns his life (and legacy) into a monument that overflows rational knowledge. His letter claims that his death cannot be reduced to a date; it is not just data; it is also an encounter between the leader and the people that produces affect. Furthermore, it is an encounter that does not have to be final, because myths can always be revisited. Myths happen to operate effectively not only in literature but also in certain accounts of history that privilege personalities and their proper nouns over more complex multitudinous process. For instance, what happens to historiographic accounts that take Vargas’s letter itself as a document? The authenticity of this letter, Dunkerley reminds us, has been often disputed, in a very similar way that Fonseca describes the note fabricated by the ministry of propaganda. Does Vargas’s letter belong to the realm of fiction, literature, myth? To what extent can it be considered a document, an aseptic fact? Can *Agosto* itself be considered a document that speaks about Brazil in the 1950s? With this historical novel, Fonseca puts at center stage the thin line that separates what is fake from what is real, history from literature.

In Virno’s terms, on the other hand, positivist accounts mimic the renewal of the state’s contract: they eliminate the complex and dynamic notion of multitude, turning them into the simplistic and static Hobbesian notion of the people —“static” not only in the sense that it is not
proactive, but also in the sense that it cannot be understood without the state. Historiography, especially positivist approaches, by definition aims to reconstruct history in an aseptic way, like the automaton that Mattos first thinks policemen should be. Often neglecting the intellectual paradigm shift produced by the linguistic turn, historiographic accounts, still in the 21st century, claim their right to truth, or at least, they posit a closer perspective from which historians can observe history, more privileged, for instance, than novelists. In a nutshell, historiography aspires to act like a mirror, a symbol that according to Foucault epitomizes madness: “a mirror which, without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumption” (“Stultifera Navis,” 27). Fonseca seems to agree with Foucault in that, like madness, historiography “deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive” (27). To put it differently, historiography, despite its scientific aspirations, is no different than Narcissus, a myth. One definition of myth, according to Watt, is that they “try to answer more or less factual or rational questions” (228). They are an interpretation of mundus. Both history and myth, ultimately, are narratives that use language to give these hermeneutical accounts of the world. They also share their relationship with time: “one of most important functions of myth is that it anchors the present in the past” (Cohen, qtd. in Watt 233). So is the aim of historical novels, but also of any historiographical account. Through the distorted reflection of Mattos on Vargas, Fonseca erases the boundaries that historiography sets to distinguish itself from mythology. Like Lévi-Strauss, Fonseca wonders: “When we try to do scientific history, do we really do something scientific, or do we too remain astride our own mythology in what we are trying to make as pure history?” (Myth and Meaning 18). But, whereas for the French anthropologist, “history has replaced mythology and fulfils the same function” (18), Fonseca seems to be closer to Barthes, for whom there is no real substantial difference between mythology and historiography. This is Fonseca’s comment on historiographic
narrations: he believes that historiographic accounts are, like Barthes’s myths, basically made of “language” (9). In his semiologic analysis, Barthes claims that “the very principle of myth” is to “transform history into nature” (128). Similarly, historiography renders invisible the ties that it maintains with the ambiguous nature of language.

For Waldemer, the meaning of failure in the novel lies precisely in this tension between mythology and historiography. According to him, Mattos’s “ultimate failure,” combined with “the novel’s anticlimactic conclusion” is in direct relation with a statement that Fonseca wants to make about history: Mattos fails, so Waldemer claims, because his “history of the crime is consigned to oblivion, not because his interpretations of events is insignificant or incorrect, but simply because it will never enter the official record” (37). Mattos fails, despite having solved the case, because unlike Vargas he does not manage to enter history. “Here Agosto reminds the reader that historically marked phenomena, prior to ‘becoming history,’ are themselves potentially evanescent, escaping oblivion only because they are recorded and accorded privileged meaning” (37). Indeed, there is here as Waldemer points out “an underlying critique of official history’s presumed authority” (33). Understanding documents as reliable evidence, historiography often deliberately forgets that in order to access facts it must use language. And words can lead to mirages, distorted mirrors, symbolic illiteracies that often display temptations, such as reproducing personalism through personifications, neglecting the role of the boundless and anonymous multitude. As Barthes puts it, “myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification” (143). It is no coincidence that one of the epigraphs that introduces Agosto is from Carlo Ginzburg, a historian who fought against this positivist conception of history, which, like myths, naturalizes events and sanitizes personalities. Fonseca seems to say that historiography, not only literature (myths), ends up obscuring history, because both share the same aesthetic charms.
“The relation which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning” says Barthes, “is essentially a relation of deformation” (121). A kindred relation maintains histography with the true history it purports to portray: it manipulates its object of study through distortion, for instance, by amplifying the figure of a politician over the role of the agent that put him in that place: the multitude.

If “entering history” expresses the extent to which the state prolongs its presence through time; a close reading of the depiction of the Brazilian state in Agosto exhibits the way it also colonizes its subjects in space.

4.3.3 Privacy and Community

The Brazilian state appears in Fonseca’s Agosto visibly spatialized. The plot unfolds in Rio de Janeiro, then the country’s capital. The constant presence of the city and its urban spaces cites the all-pervasiveness of the state. Wherever the city is represented, the state reaches that space too. What is interesting about this novel is that state power features mainly not in public but private spaces. This physicality of power, often represented in the façade of public monumental buildings like the Catete Palace itself, is here funnelled to that space where whatever is public is supposed to be cancelled out: intimacy. Throughout the novel, the all-pervasiveness of Brazilian state power reaches the utmost intimate corners of the city: brothels filled with politicians coming from the congress that is located on the other side of the street; a small jail; the bedrooms of the president and the inspector, etc. This detective story evidences what French philosopher Louis Althusser claims in his definition of the modern liberal state: namely, that it “is neither public nor private” (244), but permeates both poles indistinctly. Mattos, one of the incarnations of the state in the novel, sways between these two poles, not knowing “what his world” is, feeling “like a stranger in his nebulous world and in the world of others, too” (Fonseca 257). In short, he is alienated both from ego and mundus. Similarly, the spatial representations of the Brazilian state show the extent
to which its power violates the porous boundaries between public and private, neutralizing their distinction, offering a variation: Agosto features not only the traditional rivalry of an ego against the state, but also the state against itself, mundus contra mundum.

It is in this sense that Agosto is a critique not only of positivist historiography but once more of contractualist theory. After all, it was Hobbes who famously defined the “state of nature” as a war of all against all, a bellum omnium contra omnes. Yet the Rio de Janeiro depicted in this novel is not a lawless territory. By contrast, its mundus contra mundum points to a conflictive albeit thoroughly organized social order. This distinguishes Agosto from its counterparts: not only subjects but also the capital city incarnates the post-dictatorial state, a liberal democracy that fails to accomplish what social contracts aspire to: namely, consensus not only between the leader(s) and their people but also between leaders themselves. The overwhelming presence of the city evidences the structural criminality of the state that paradoxically can ricochet against itself. Ultimately, it is one of the most intimate members of the president’s staff, his own bodyguard Gregório Fortunato, who ends up destabilizing Vargas’s government and causing his downfall. A downfall that in the long term would have lasting consequences since after the coup d’état a decade later against Goulart, it would end up delegitimizing any attempt of progressivism in Brazilian politics for almost forty years.

Fortunato is introduced as a “voluminous body” filling a “small elevator” leading to the third floor of the presidential palace, where Vargas’s “modest bedroom” (Fonseca 2) is located. The defeat of Vargas’s government is somehow announced in this slippage between content and container captured here by the “Black Angel”’s large body in a space he barely fits. Fortunato is characterized by his inability to fit in interior spaces, not only in his workplace but also according to his wife “he was becoming a visitor in his own home” (31). Everything about the bodyguard is bigger than it should be, even his own pictographic representation: after he is incriminated, a
newspaper features a “large photo” (85) of him, almost as if it would overflow the front page. Like the crooked cops Pádua and Rosalvo, Fortunato is a rogue element of the state, a state that cannot contain itself just as it fails to contain the multitude without transforming it into a people.

Therefore, Fonseca does something new: he does not dismember the state; he enlarges it. To put it differently, instead of portraying its selective absence, he pictures the state’s overwhelming presence. Perhaps, this is why Agosto is introduced not only through an epigraph from Carlo Ginzburg but also by the famous definition of history from James Joyce’s hero Stephen Daedalus in Ulysses: like history, the state’s presence too seems to be a nightmare from which every character in the novel tries (but fails) to awake. In turn, Joyce’s citation echoes Marx’s opening of his essay on Louis Bonaparte: “the tradition of all past generations weighs like an Alp upon the brains of the living” (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, 1).10 It is in this regard that Fonseca’s Agosto could not be more timely: the Brazilian state, a state whose nightmarish past does not allow emancipation, a state that cannot help but to destroy itself repeteadly. But beyond this singularity, Fonseca does share a significant element with his counterparts: his use of literary distortions, which I have been naming “symbolic disabilities.” Fortunato, like the Brazilian state, has an elephantiasic body whose limbs are symbolically swollen, unable to be seized inside the scarce spaces that the Catete Palace has to offer. Be it its “small elevator” or the presidential “modest bedroom,” the fact that the bodyguard cannot be easily accommodated in these spaces points beyond a mere anecdotal description of the features of his body. The adjectives are there not as an innocent evocation of a character that most of the novel’s readers would recall from their own youth. Whereas Vargas plans to enter history, the state’s officers cannot enter nor even easily

10 Other translations prefer “nightmare,” instead of the weight of a Mountain Range to convey Marx’s German original “lastet wie ein Alp.”
remain within the official space they have been assigned because the state is unable to contain itself.

Vargas’s suicide takes place in the very same “modest bedroom” that Fortunato guards at the beginning of the novel. The bedroom is located at Catete Palace, then the president’s residential mansion. During the dictatorship, in 1970, the building was turned into the “Museu da República” that still today features Vargas’s blood-stained pyjamas, a metonymy of intimacy, as one of its most prominent elements. Dying in his bedroom is the fate that Vargas shares with Mattos (who gets killed that same day), as well as with Paulo Gomes Aguiar, the victim in the case that Mattos is investigating and that triggers the whole plot, twenty four days earlier. Bedrooms hold physical boundaries that aspire to produce intimacy. Nevertheless, in Agosto they are constantly violated. There is no room for privacy in the novel, as is shown when Alice “violates” Mattos’s personal space, redecorating his house, and entangling him with her husband, who is the criminal that the Inspector is (unknowingly) after. When Alice moves in to his apartment, she interrupts the typical domestic vacuum in which myths of modern individualism are embedded, destroying the detective’s isolation and detachment from mundus. Another eloquent example can be found at the end of the novel, when Mattos goes back home only to be assassinated in his own bedroom by the murderer of the case he is investigating: Chicão, an Afro-Brazilian thug who Mattos has fatally mistaken for Fortunato: Chicão is “a powerfully built and angry-looking black man who seemed to be Gregório Fortunato” (170). In another clear case of a problematic Döppleganger between individuals and state officers, it is no coincidence that Chicão’s name features the masculine sufíx -ão, an augmentative of “Chico,” a pseudonym of the proper name Francisco. This augmentative is a morphological articulation of the enlargement of the ever present state. Chicão, a distorted reflection of the state, enters Mattos’s house without even having to force the door.
Perhaps the most eloquent example of the state’s intrusive presence in its people’s intimacy comes when Mattos himself enters Vargas’s bedroom: “The confusion at the Catete Palace was so great that Inspector Mattos had no difficulty in entering; he didn’t even have to show his police id. The reception area was deserted. Behind the doorman’s counter was only the bronze statue of the Indian Ubirajara grimacing in rage” (Fonseca 268). Here the traditional physicality of the state, encapsulated in the bronze statue decorating the Catete palace, is overshadowed by the confused multitude and the deserted reception that enable an officer of the state to invade the president’s room without even having to confirm his identity. An identity that, thanks to Mattos’s political suicide of releasing the prisoners, is about to crumble and becomes here, as a prophecy, depersonalized. Mattos accesses the core of the government without even having to prove how he belongs to the state. In the crime scene, one of the forensics recognizes Mattos: “He knew the inspector and considered his presence at the scene natural” (70). Again, there is no coincidence here: Mattos’s presence in the intimate space is perceived as natural because the all-pervasiveness of the Brazilian post-dictatorial state (here incarnated in the inspector) has become all-too naturalized in daily life to the extent that nobody questions it. This constant permeation shows the extent to which citizens try to maintain a separation from each other by seeking refuge in intimacy, but they fail. Mattos tries to keep his immunity to corruption, thinking highly of himself, believing that he is removed from the world. Nevertheless, he is actually connected with everyone as much as anyone else. This is why he ends up joining the multitude in the end and why he gets to access Vargas’s room so freely. Similarly, Vargas tries but fails to maintain his separation from the state’s rogue elements, the pressure of the military that wants to oust him or even his own propaganda minister, who sneaks into his bedroom to tamper with his will. In Agosto, mundus cannot help but go against mundum from within, without clearly demarcating a separate entity.
4.4 Conclusions: Community and Corruption

Beyond this explicitly excessive spatialization, Fonseca portrays the Brazilian state as an entity whose parties are inextricable from each other. August of 1954 in Brazil can be definitely read through Walter Benjamin’s notion of “a moment of danger” (“On the Concept of History” 391), a delicate historical instant in which the Brazilian state experienced a systematic crumbling, a disintegration of its constituent elements (both its representatives and its people). For Benjamin, the “danger” behind this instant was the appropriation of the past by constituted power, the instrumentation of history as “the tool of the ruling classes” (“On the Concept of History” 391). Fonseca rewrites the past not by trying to reconstruct thoroughly the ways things happened. Instead, he snatches the past from historians narrating his own biographic and historical memory of Vargas’s suicide, and re-appropriating this moment that, as Benjamin feared, was used as a tool by constituted power. What is interesting is that Fonseca does so by putting centre stage a political phenomenon that could never have been praised by contractualist theorists or positivist historians: corruption. Since, in Agosto, it is corruption that is the only binding agent that keeps everything together, the sole element that agglutinates the crumbling state and produces community. Addressing corruption is one of the many genre conventions that features in detective stories, especially since the origins of hard-boiled fiction. But there is something different about Agosto. Whereas in the other books here discussed, corruption was perceived as a malignant element that is inseparable from a criminal state against which private detectives would fight, here, corruption, first resisted but later embraced by the public detective, generates not only negative but also positive affective encounters. Corruption brings not only self-destruction at the hands of rogue elements of the state like Fortunato; it also brings connection. It is only after Mattos relinquishes his immunity to corruption, it is only when he, too, becomes corrupt (like Fortunato, Pádua or Rosalvo), that he is able to release prisoners who otherwise would be unfairly imprisoned.
Conversely, it is only when he lets himself mix with others that are somehow stained by corruption (like Alice or Vargas and his constituency), in other words, only when he becomes the multitude, that he reconciles with himself.

Thus, Fonseca rewrites the *Gemeinschaft*-*Gesellschaft* dichotomy proposed by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. Whereas the notion of *Gemeinschaft* describes rural societies, organized with ties that are personal, motivated and mutually indispensable; the *Gesselschaft* involves urban societies, organized with ties that are impersonal, arbitrary and responding individualism. Tönnies distinguishes communities from societies in that the former are defined by intimacy: a *Gemeinshaft* is first and foremost “all intimate, private, and exclusive living together” (33). In the Rio de Janeiro of the 1950s portrayed in *Agosto*, the Brazilian state appears as a criminal network that ultimately does not truly differ from a community. A state that has the keys to all the bedroom doors in which “intimate and private” life happens. A state that entangles all its members, making them dependent on each other, paradoxically, because they follow their own individualist self-interest. During the past few decades, in many transitions to democratic regimes in Latin America, corruption has been closely linked to individualistic self-interest. Corruption defined the systematic illicit gain of rogue elements of the state (as in Collor de Melo’s administration in Brazil [1990-1992] or in Ménem’s administration in Argentina [1990-1999], among many others). More recently, corruption was cynically used as an electoral weapon by constituted power to impeach, imprison or delegitimize progressive democratic leaders (Dilma Rousseff in 2013, Lula da Silva in 2018, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner since 2015 to today). In *Agosto*, instead, corruption is tied not solely to self-interest but to what seems to be its opposite: community. There is a democratization of corruption in the novel that breaks with its monopoly at the hands of constituted power in the same way that the fictionalization of the past democratizes history and releases it from the conservative temptations of historiography.
In this twofold democratization, as well as in all the other singularities that seem to distinguish the Brazilian state, there is a claim of the implausibility of the contractualist theory in which not only Southern Cone constitutional republics were built but also their very models. In Latin America, along with “every politician is corrupt,” there is often a commonplace that claims that the state is permanently absent. As a result of this absence, this commonplace insists, the state fails to protect the people from themselves. Fonseca, by contrast, shows the opposite. This opposition of absence and presence can be seen in many ways. An absent state does not speak, for instance, as it can be glimpsed in the common symbolic muteness of the Argentinean and Chilean state in Piglia and Bolaño. But this opposition can also be read in the relationship that the authors establish with history: whereas in *Plata quemada* el Gaucho Dorda and his partners “escape history” and in *Estrella distante* Tagle/Wieder becomes a Deleuzian line of flight with his elusive aircraft; here Mattos/Vargas do not escape but rather willingly want to enter history. Nonetheless, the antithesis proves irrelevant because in *Agosto*, the state is tangible in every corner of private life. Despite that, it fails to contain itself and serve its population in the very same way as absent states. Therefore, despite these differences, the authors that I have examined deal with a common problem. By re-elaborating the Argentinean, Chilean and Brazilian post-dictatorial experiences and their conflicts with contractualism, they all reveal what remains concealed in the literary representation of Anglo-American states read in the first chapter: the manufactured dimension of the foundational contract that the apologists of the state claim exists but which, like Vargas’s suicidal letter, proves to be sheer mythology.

In the next and last chapter, I will explore the contemporary rewriting of tensions between individualism and state when they are in direct contact with the Mexican-American border. I will examine not only Latin American but also Anglo-American detectives again, now through the lens not of Anglo-American authors but of a Southern Cone writer such as the Chilean Roberto Bolaño.
himself. I will show how notions that I have examined, such as symbolic muteness, blindness, illiteracy and unintelligibility, personification, personalism and depersonalization, community and multitude, go a step further in an exacerbation of the poetics of failure.
Chapter 5: Coda. The Mexican-American Border seen from Chilean Eyes

“There are still subjects, of course — but they’re specks of dust of the visible and permutations in an anonymous bubble”

Gilles Deleuze, Negotiations, 1972-1990

5.1 Projecting Southern Cone Dictatorships to North American Democracies

5.1.1 From Chile to the Mexican-American Border

“Living in this desert [...] is like living at sea. The border between Sonora and Arizona is a chain of haunted or enchanted islands. The cities and towns are boats. The desert is an endless sea. This is a good place for fish, especially deep-sea fish, not men” (“The Part about the Crimes,” 2666 440-441). This is how Lalo Cura, one of the many state detectives that crowd Roberto Bolaño’s 2666 (2004), describes the Mexican-American borderland. Far from Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro or Concepción, the Chilean author’s novel takes place in Santa Teresa, a fictional town surrounded by this desert. Unrelated to the many homonymous real towns located throughout Mexico or in the south of the United States, Santa Teresa is a token toponomy drawn from Catholic hagiography, that displays at least two layers. On the one hand, it is a tribute to the tradition of North American classic hard-boiled fiction: in the 1940s, Canadian author Ross Macdonald gave the name of Santa Teresa to his fictionalized version of Santa Barbara, California, where his private sleuth Lew Archer operated, following the model of Philip Marlowe. On the other hand, Bolaño chooses to set his plot in a vague and fictional town to prevent immediate identification with the city that he is actually talking about: Ciudad Juárez.

At first sight, then, this novel takes place in a desert space unfit for human life, a territory completely alien and diametrically opposed to the mentioned South American urban settings. Nevertheless, deserts, traditionally linked to extreme aridity, are reimagined here in terms of their opposite: the fluid sea. In fact, Lalo Cura’s aquatic image looks like the antithesis of a desert, the
very element that they lack by definition: the water found only in their oasis. A desert that is actually an anti-desert, then, Santa Teresa’s fluidity points to many elements that would reappear throughout the book. The most obvious is that which porous borders share with big urban spaces: cash flow. Both in Plata quemada and Agosto, money, (especially dirty money), is an agglutinating element that organizes the social fabric in detective stories that follow the hard-boiled tradition. Equally, imagining the desert as an endless sea resonates with the many aquatic spaces from which the female victims of the crimes portrayed in this book emerge. These spaces follow the logic of what Rita Segato calls “pedagogies of cruelty”: the victims, reduced to a multitude of dead bodies, appear in streams, oil deposits, even containers filled by nitric acid.

As Brett Levinson and Gareth Williams have noted in their reading of 2666, the naturalist brutality of these represented crimes cannot be separated from one of Bolaño’s obsessive leitmotifs: the link between political violence in Latin America and Nazism that is already announced in one of his early works, the encyclopedia of fictional far-right-wing writers, La literatura nazi en América (1996). A link that would reappear throughout his work, from Estrella distante to 2666. Yet unlike Argentina, Brazil, and especially Chile, neither Mexico nor the United States have experienced fascist dictatorships. Thus, the last chapter will not deal with a series of imports from North to South nor with the circulation from South to South. Instead, this final case study involves a projection from South to North: a juxtaposition of Southern Cone dictatorships put side by side with the contours of American territory and the crisis of representation produced by their genocidal and feminicidal violence. This desert must be then read through a lens that is rooted not only in Mexico or the United States, but in recent Chilean history. This fluid desert has to do not only with the Mexican-American border, but also with the German post-war diaspora and its links with the Southern Cone. A desert that is closer to Paul Schäfer’s Colonia Dignidad
and the specters of Erich Priebke, Josef Mengele and Adolf Eichmann wandering in the Patagonia, than to Sonora or Chihuahua.

5.1.2 An Obsolete Rivalry

Our first chapter explored a stable rivalry in which the ego, the classic private sleuth, would often triumph over a hindering but tamable mundus, the image of the Anglo-American democratic state. The second chapter noted the ways in which that rivalry was inverted, as a truly monstrous mundus, the post-dictatorial Argentinean state, whose criminal force always defeats a maimed ego, divested of all agency. The third chapter explored the ways in which Estrella distante shows how this rivalry could be destabilized. In this novel, Bolaño depicts both ego and mundus starting to crumble. Their once rigid embodiments become problematic in the bodies of a reluctant detective and an individualist state officer who ultimately refuses to stand for the Chilean dictatorship. Moreover, in so far as the post-dictatorial state infiltrates the task of private detection and is behind the execution of Tagle/Wieder, an ex-military pilot, during democratic times; the boundaries that once distinguished the state and individualist heroes become blurrier still. Finally, the fourth chapter gave an account of an all-pervasive self-destructive mundus, the Brazilian post-dictatorial state, in which there was no room for individualism, a state that featured a constant violation of intimacy.¹¹ All these literary re-elaborations of recent history share a transnational, transcultural, and multilingual poetics of failure. In Buenos Aires or in Montevideo, in Concepción or in Rio de Janeiro, detectives ultimately fail, in one way or another, at the hands of a post-dictatorial state.

¹¹ A lack of individualism, of course, does not necessarily imply an absence or a rejection of the notion of “individuals.” In Fonseca, individuals are still at play. Hence, the exploration of Mattos’s personality in detail, following the tradition of North American hard-boiled fiction, or even the mythical figure of Getúlio Vargas’s personalism.
The Mexican-American border, a confine where states start and at the same time end, seems to be alien to this common Southern Cone historical and generational conjuncture. Nonetheless, there is in 2666 an exacerbation of the poetics of failure, that has now fully colonized not just individualism but also any possible narrative that could work (even unwillingly) as an apology for the modern state. In Bolaño’s *Estrella distante*, after Pinochet’s neoliberal redefinition of the state’s contour, the Chilean state’s spectrum re-emerges in democratic times more solid than ever to engage in state terrorism to protect its own immunity. Similarly, in Fonseca’s description of Brazil in 1954 the state appears to be crumbling but finally survives the death of Vargas, its most important statesman. By contrast, in Santa Teresa individuals and the state are no longer disintegrating; they have already collapsed. In the desert, it is no longer plausible to speak about either individualism or the state.

In a post-NAFTA world, Watt’s notion of *ego contra mundum* arrives at its exhaustion, a point of no return. By portraying the asymmetric and selective effects of the distribution of neoliberal depersonalization, Bolaño shows how the narratives that once nurtured these opposing categories are no longer eloquent to explain the world. Even if Bruno Bosteels still reads in the work of Paco Taibo II (one of the main contemporary detective fiction Mexican), “the conflict between the mental superiority of the lonely detective and the essential corruption of the official ruling apparatuses” which “bring us back […] to the old liberal, or anarchist libertarian, dilemma of the individual against the state” (267), in Santa Teresa there is no such dilemma. This asymmetric but stable rivalry, that was first subverted, became gradually blurrier, and started to crumble, no longer exists and is now completely obsolete to narrate the political and the historical through the lens of detective stories.
5.1.3 Failure and Depersonalization

In the fluid desert of Santa Teresa, what persists beyond this obsolete rivalry is a deepening of a poetics of failure, where “failure” maintains its twofold dimension, both political and aesthetic. What Argentine literary critic Ezequiel De Rosso notes when he describes *Estrella distante* as a “systematic disappointment of the expectations of a reader who is specialized in the genre” (135) is even more evident here. This novel’s deliberate refusal to meet the horizon of expectations of the detective genre is related to the refusal of closure. Bolaño’s *Estrella distante* at least left room to imagine some sort of closure through the elided execution of Tagle/Wieder, who may very well have multiple personalities or stand for other entities such as the Chilean state under Pinochet, but ultimately is still identified and singularized as an individual person who is held accountable for crimes against humanity. *Estrella distante* and *Agosto* feature Doppelgängers, fragmented subjects and occasional depictions of the multitude that sometimes becomes the people. “The Part about Crimes,” by contrast, portrays a multiplicity that is even more radical than mere duality or disjointed identities. Despite their problematic personality, Tagle/Wieder and Mattos/Vargas, the individualist figures examined in the third and fourth chapter, could still choose either to melt into or to abandon the multitude as they pleased.

Santa Teresa is a different world altogether. Only seven years separate Bolaño’s first detective story from his last one, yet there is a major shift in his literary project. Almost as though he had realized that the narrative strategies he used to portray the traumas of the Chilean dictatorship were no longer valid to narrate Latin America, the Chilean author uses a different approach to portray the effects of crime in the Mexican-American border. I am not solely alluding to a mere change of setting, but to the degree that depersonalization vanquishes any temptation of personification, the impossibility of creating a solid image of a state. To put it in Émile Benveniste’s words that belong to linguistics but can still be understood in political terms, it is as
though Bolaño had understood that the “‘we’ is not a quantified or multiplied ‘I’; it is an ‘I’ expanded beyond the strict limits of the person, enlarged and at the same time amorphous” (“Relationships of Person in the Verb” 195). In short, the multitude is not made of singularized individual iterations; it is instead a formless expansion of the ego. This is why the multitude no longer appears as an optional space to sojourn as a tourist, as Wieder does playfully through his heteronyms or Mattos does when he joins Vargas’s followers. The ego can no longer decide when to join the nos: now the multitude is everywhere. Whereas in Agosto there was no room to escape the state’s presence, in “The Part about Crimes” there is no refuge against the overwhelming power of the multitude. This can be seen in the profusion of characters that crowd the book: detectives, criminals and a succession of barely distinguishable female victims.

In this novel there is no single detective but all too many, and none of them are heroic, or even anti-heroic. On the one hand, there are the Mexican policemen: Pedro Negrete, chief of Santa Teresa police; his assistant, Epifanio Galindo; Lalo Cura (a play on words that evokes “la locura” or “madness”), a former drug-dealing thug who is recruited to become a junior patrol officer; Juan de Dios Martínez; and many others. On the other hand, there are the Chicano sheriff of the fictional Huntsville, Harry Magaña, and the ex-FBI agent Albert Kessler. Going further than Fonseca’s portrayal of the indistinction between public officers and private sleuth as well as public space and intimacy, Bolaño materializes an even more porous boundary between these poles in his fictional Mexican-American border. Whereas Magaña and Kessler, for instance, may be public officers in the United States, once on Mexican territory, out of their American jurisdiction, they are no different from a private sleuth and, to a certain extent, vigilantes intruding on the sovereignty of another state. This correlation between nationalities and the public and private sector (most Mexicans detectives work for the state; while Americans act as private sleuths) is no coincidence. Mexican officers cite the stiff and slow bureaucracy inherited by and inherent in Hispanic culture,
and the American characters allude in part to hard-boiled tradition and more broadly the efficiency and pragmatic characteristics that in Latin America are usually linked to American multinational corporations, institutions, and even military interventions, which have often been welcomed by constituted power. It is not a coincidence that Bolaño chooses to name the fictional equivalent to El Paso (the American city that neighbours Ciudad Juárez) “Huntsville,” a city of hunters.

*2666* is structured in five long chapters. Each, as many critics have noted, pays tribute to different popular genres, which Bolaño adapts and transforms to his own eclectic writing. I will focus on the fourth chapter, “The Part about the Crimes,” which engages with the detective story tradition. The book’s longest, this plotless, formless, and complex chapter aims to represent the hundreds of femicides in Ciudad Juárez. Starting in 1993, along with the beginning of the implementation of the NAFTA treaty, the reader learns about maquila working-class women heading to work and being murdered in ever more brutal ways. The reader also witnesses a group of local policemen that all too belatedly and slowly take on the task of solving these crimes, inevitably failing every time. The unmanageable multiplicity of the crimes is mirrored in the equally numerous detectives, whose failure grows in proportion to the reader’s expectation of closure. The unsatisfied expectations drawn from the failure of local state officers, for instance, increases when policemen from the capital or abroad equally fail to grasp the femicides, let alone solve them. This rhetoric of frustrated repetition and accumulation points to socio-economic and historic causes. When American detectives get involved, the reader expects (along with Santa Teresa’s characters) that the mystery of the femicides will finally be solved. A great deal of 1990s neoliberal policies, such as the NAFTA treaty itself or the Washington Consensus, were informed by such expectations: if we, Latin Americans, cannot solve our conflicts by ourselves, if we are the problem, then opening our borders to foreign investment and multinational corporations, and welcoming institutions located in and regulated by the North (the IMF, the World Bank, the
American government, etc), must surely be the solution. These and other ways in which history informs literature are the main element that this chapter shares with the rest of this dissertation.

5.2 Mexican State Detectives and American Private Sleuths: Impotent Minds

5.2.1 From Knowledge to Depersonalization

Despite its formless and expectation-defying plot, “The Part about the Crimes” does not entirely break with the Latin American detective story tradition. It connects with the past in many ways, the most evident of which is the relationship between failed individualism and knowledge. This continuity reappears in the configuration of some of the many detectives that feature in the novel. For instance, the Santa Teresa press defines ex-FBI agent Albert Kessler’s legitimacy as an investigator in direct relation to “a tacit acknowledgment that the Mexican police had failed” (453). Ironically named a “modern-day Sherlock Holmes” (480), Kessler, the promise both of successful individualism and the benevolence of the neighbour state, holds the monopoly of knowledge: he gives international lectures on crime and works as a consultant for “action movies” in which “the good guys always win” (723). But his theoretical contemplations amount to little when faced with the task before him. For all his erudition, he is yet another spectator of a mundus that experiences an unintelligible collapse. Ultimately, his knowledge leads to the very same failure that Mexican policemen experience. Kessler is no different than Lönnrot, Renzi, or Mattos, in that he may know a great deal about criminals but cannot really stop them. Equally, the young Lalo Cura is defined by knowledge, being the only state policeman who reads the “books no one read and that seemed destined to be rat food” (344). Whereas in Agosto, madness was in constant tension with rational knowledge; what is “mad” on the Mexican-American border is the very possibility of investigating crime. The books that Lalo reads, outdated treatises such as John C. Klotter’s Techniques for Police Instructors (1963) or Söderman and O’Donnell’s Modern Criminal Investigation (1941), cause the
more experienced Epifanio to admonish him: “Don’t you know, you snot-nose bastard, that there is no such thing as modern criminal investigation?” (414). This echoes what Renzi hears from el viejo Luna in “La loca y el relato del crimen”: “Have you learnt this at the university? […] What are you going to do with all these papers now? A dissertation?” […] Calm down, kid. Or did you think that we care about semantics in this newspaper?” (101). Here, too, Bolaño shows a shift in his literary project: whereas in Estrella distante knowing how to read snuff movies was still essential for the anonymous author to find Tagle/Wieder, in “The Part about the Crimes,” knowledge is a useless delusion, a distracting game of chess that succumbs to a mundus where only force prevails. Here Bolaño is closer to Piglia and Fonseca as at the same time he goes beyond both them and his own previous work.

A second continuity in Bolaño’s novel is the traditional equation of crime and state. This equation appears in Pedro Negrete’s encounter with Pedro Rengifo, one of Santa Teresa’s most powerful drug-dealers, in which they treat each other as friends because they are namesakes: both Pedros mirror each other, rendering again the boundaries between law and crime, state officers and drug dealers, indistinguishable. In fact, structural connivance between state and crime pervades the text and points to an unalterable status quo that reassures a malevolent order. This can be observed, for example, when one of the criminals is thought to have fled Santa Teresa and crossed the border. Then, “an arrest order was also issued by the proper American authorities, in case the suspect […] had made it to the United States, although oddly enough no coyote […] who might have helped him cross over was questioned” (307). On the border, the systematic criminal activities practised both by private and public sector become transnational as it affects agents of society who are involved with both territories: the “coyotes” who help migrants to navigate their clandestine journeys north.
What is original in this novel is to be found less in the rewriting of the tensions between knowledge and failure or the equation of crime and state, than in the more tangible presence of a notion already announced in *Estrella distante* that here takes centre stage: depersonalization. To begin with, this can be traced in the way the narrative fleshes out its many investigators and criminals only in a perfunctory way, not focusing on any one in particular. The state officer to whom the novel pays most attention is Juan de Dios Martínez, who as Deckard observes is “one of the more morally invested detectives” (365). Like Fonseca’s Mattos, Juan de Dios is the promise of the benevolent state: he is immune to corruption and he sees himself as solely focused in the Quixotic task of undoing wrongs. But whereas Fonseca pays a great deal of attention to Mattos’s personality, neither Juan de Dios nor any of his colleagues (Lalo Cura, Epifanio Galindo, etc) are real protagonists standing out from the other policemen.

“Containing the stories of a teeming number of people,” David Kurnick notes, “the novel refuses the orienting perspectivalism of character. The heroic detective simply disappears [...]: more precisely, his witnessing, investigative, emotive, and *collating* functions all migrate to the level of the book’s form” (117). This multitude of detectives is but one of the many shapes that the novel takes to express depersonalization: after all, a bunch of useless detectives amounts to no detective at all. As Kurnick claims, “*2666* demands that we take an interpretive distance from the category of the individual. The novel is indeed ‘character driven’ [...], but only in the sense that character here drives beyond itself: Bolaño’s individuals relentlessly direct our attention to the structures in which they are enclosed” (118). Therefore, when the Chilean author constructs characters, he does so not so much to construct mythic figures as to emphasize the impersonal web of networks in which they are immersed. Any hero that personifies individualism, to a one extent or another, toys with the mythical attributes once held by classic Anglo-American sleuths. But when Bolaño resorts to personification, he does it to accentuate not individualism but
depersonalization. Kurnick claims that “The Part about the Crimes” lacks a “crusading detective” (116). *Estrella distante* featured detectives that, however reluctant or fragmentary, still constitute a “crusade.” Romero and the anonymous narrator’s journey through the Chilean diaspora in Europe to find and punish Tagle/Wieder can clearly be read as a crusade, as a path that seeks redemptive closure. So can Mattos’s battle to release the prisoners from the jail. In “The Part about the Crimes,” by contrast, subjects are empty and divested of purpose.

Beyond this conspicuous absence of an anti-heroic detective, and more interestingly, depersonalization appears at a linguistic level. Specifically, with the constant use of the Spanish third person pronoun, *se*. The pronoun *se* lacks a clear equivalent in English, the closest option being the gender-neutral, and indefinite pronoun “one.” Bolaño’s pronominal leitmotif, thus, often gets lost in Natasha Swimmer’s translation, which prefers to use the passive voice or a vague first-person plural pronoun. Spanish linguists Ignacio Bosque and Javier Gutiérrez distinguish two slightly different variations of this pronoun. On the one hand, there are syntactical constructions made with the impersonal pronoun *se* which “lacks an explicit subject” (416). In their treatise on Spanish syntax, Bosque and Gutiérrez provide a very relevant example of this linguistic oddity: “the sentence *Se vio al criminal salir corriendo* expresses the fact that somebody has seen him, but it does not allude to any specific witness” (416). Therefore, “sentences with *se impersonal* include an implied subject” (416). It is not so much that *se* denies the existence of subjects, rather that *se* makes personhood blurry, keeps it vague, often because it remains unknown even to the speaker.

Two of the most important characteristics of the impersonal *se* reside in that “it is circumscribed to an unspecific or indeterminate interpretation” (416) and that “it is circumscribed to people” (416). On the other hand, we have the passive reflexive *se*, which according to Bosque and Gutiérrez is used in the “typical official language of the government” (419). Whereas
recovering the implied subject with the passive reflexive *se* is possible, with the impersonal *se* it is not. They give the example of the sentence “*se firmaron los tratados de paz,*” in which the implied subject is substituted by the passive reflexive pronoun *se*, i.e.: peace treatises were signed (by the ambassadors), for instance (419). The main distinction between these two variations of *se* can be seen in a morphological issue: number. Because the number of agents remains unknown in impersonal sentences, they can only be conveyed in the singular. Passive reflexives can take the plural form because *se* introduces a verb that is in agreement with the objective complement.

Bolaño toys with the blurry boundary that distinguishes the variations of these pronoun. The subject behind one of the novel’s *leitmotifs*, “*se cerró el caso,*” following the criteria established by Bosque and Gutiérrez, is not only implied, it is deliberately ambiguous. At first glance the suggestion is that the case was closed by the police, but the novel’s sentences resist personification in specific syntagmata such as “Pedro Negrete,” “Lalo Cura” or even the impersonal institution of the fictive Santa Teresa Police as a whole. The agent responsible for closing the case remains unknown. The subjective complement repeatedly remains vacant, implying a multiplicity of potential culprits: drug dealers, the government, corporations, all can wield their force to close a case. At the same time, because the agent remains unknown, no one is held responsible. This impersonal use of the pronoun is not unpremeditated. It is a morphological articulation of political depersonalization.

After the first femicide, for example, Negrete asks his staff: “Do we know who she is? [¿*Se sabe quién es*?],” to which “they all said no” (Bolaño, “The Part about the Crimes,” 278). Here, Negrete uses *se* to conceal and to reinforce the shield that protects the accountability of individual policemen: all agree to say that nobody knew anything. Even more problematic is that the narrator, too, replicates Negretes’s usage of impersonality, as if reproducing the syntax of official language mentioned by Bosque and Gutiérrez. Of yet another of the unsolved crimes, the narrator says that
“the ballistic analysis, which was never made public, was later lost for good [no se dio a conocer jamás ... se perdió]” (280). The impersonal pronoun indicates that nobody in particular has lost the analysis, while at the same time exempting anyone of doing so. Here as elsewhere, se systematically denies the possibility of closure at a syntactical level by avoiding the mandate of having to ascribe action to a subject.

This use of the impersonal pronoun is the material way in which depersonalization works as Bolaño’s response to individualism, turning it into an “entirely residual” (Kurnick 117) element that no longer holds any mythical dimension. When sentences consistently lack a subject or an agent, actions become orphans: things just happen, events merely take place without anybody to execute them or be accounted for, much like impersonal meteorological phenomena. As Bosque and Gutiérrez note, in this regard, Spanish verbs are even more charged with impersonality than English ones. “Nieva” or “llueve,” for example, are self-sufficient, they do not even require a pronominal subject to express meteorological phenomena, unlike English (“it snows”) or even French (“il neige”) (353). In the same way that we say “it rains” in the impersonal third person (both in English and Spanish), in Santa Teresa women’s murders just happen daily, as natural and normal as a rain shower. Women get killed and the language used to describe these killings gives the impression that they are killed “by no one” and that their murders remain unsolved “by no one.” Bolaño seems to suggest that the normalization of femicides (i.e.: the process by which they become part of nature) is rooted first and foremost in the depersonalization brought by language.

Esposito deals precisely with the political implications of this impersonal dimension that can be found in language. In his close reading of Benveniste’s study of personal pronouns, Esposito focuses in “Benveniste’s insistence on the difference of the third person, in both its pronominal and verbal forms, from the first and second person” (The Third Person 14-15). Unlike I or You, the third person is the only one that “can be defined as a ‘non-person’” (15). Specifically, in
Spanish, this is particularly valid not only for the personal pronouns él/ella but even more so for the impersonal pronoun se, which is a morpheme semantically charged with impersonality. Furthermore, the use of se excludes the involvement of whomever pronounces it, connoting “anyone but me.” It is used mainly to express lack of agency: nobody does anything to provoke or close cases, cases get closed. The third person, Esposito claims, is not related to subjects like the first or the second person, but it is actually its negation: “it refers to something, or even to someone, but to a someone who is not recognizable as this specific person, either because it does not refer to anyone at all or because it can be extended to everyone” (107). Bolaño’s use of se dwells between these two poles, “at the point of intersection between no one and anyone” (107). As Benveniste puts it, because the third person “does not imply any person, it can take any subject whatsoever or no subject, and this subject, expressed or not, is never posited as a person” (qtd. in Esposito 107). This definition can be clearly traced in the ways Bolaño builds characters bereft of their personhood: anyone can commit femicides and as a result no one is perceived to do.

But what are the implications of this depersonalization? It is here when I want to come back to a figure of speech that belongs both to literature and to the system of justice: personification. Diametrically opposed to the impersonal, personification was used since Poe, Doyle and Christie in their detective stories to personify ideas through characters. Whereas the criminal mastermind, like Poe’s D— in “The Purloined Letter” or Doyle’s Moriarty, embodied evil; their private eyes incarnated the mythical attributes of individualism (personal wit, individual knowledge, etc.), that would restore justice and legality. The very question that defines this early period of the genre relies on personification: the whodunit logic that structures the narrative. The “who” of the question presupposes an individualised subject. Even if hard-boiled fiction authors like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler are not so concerned about the enigma of the murderer’s identity, they still typically delve into the individual personality of the detective, a unique anti-hero, thus
reproducing, albeit in a different way, the mythical attributes of individualism. In fact, Kurnick underlines that in hard-boiled fiction there is already a gesture of depersonalizing crime. He understands “hard-boiled fiction’s torque on classic detection as a depersonalization—substituting a systemic criminality (the collusion of state and industry) for an individual mastermind (i.e.: Moriarty)—” (117). Unlike Piglia or Fonseca, the Chilean author resists such exploration of the detectives’ personality. This is why according to Kurnick ‘Bolaño takes the process a step further by vaporizing the detective himself’ (117). A rejection to resort to personification is here at stake.

Depersonalization is present also in the portrayal of criminals. In the same way that there are no heroic investigators, so there are no well-defined state villains: there is no Tagle/Wieder, no evil dictatorial South American policemen. Beyond their traditional barriers, private detectives and state policemen share a symbolic impotence: they all are bereft of any possibility of wielding force. By depersonalizing individuals and the state, Bolaño does not divest merely individuals of agency, but also the last corners of human condition itself. If there is a villain in the story, it is dissolved in the market, an impersonal social agent that resists personification, because it follows a depersonalized pattern—it’s most evident metaphor being its invisible hand. If Poe created a genre that made things (ideas and concepts such as individualism) into persons (characters), Bolaño, a century and a half later, depicts persons as things that serve the market. Personification, through depersonalization, is replaced by commodification. The impotence of wielding force that equally afflicts the characters of “The Part about the Crimes” is insistently portrayed in terms of a series of misunderstandings. In this sense, too, the reader is no longer in Renzi’s or Mattos’s realm of the mere futility of knowledge, but in that of its impossibility.
5.2.2 From Depersonalization to Unintelligibility

Unintelligibility reappears throughout “The Part about the Crimes,” in various guises. To begin with, the anonymous narrator’s detailed tone discloses the extent to which the meticulous narration of singular crimes “obfuscates more than it reveals” the “illegible unique humanity of each women murdered in Juárez,” since “the repetitive prosody [...] does not bring into evidence the singularity of the individual lives lost” (Jelly-Schapiro 85), just as it hardly helps the reader to understand femicides as a structural problem. There is a rupture, between signifiers and their traditionally ascribed meanings, that permeates not only the narrator’s voice but the way it depicts its characters. All too often entangled in situations that they cannot grasp even partially, criminals, law officers, bystanders and victims are all affected by symbolic unintelligibility. The narrator’s description of one of the murderers as “a polite and generally clean-looking man, from which it was deduced that he had showered at [his victim] Rebeca’s house” (Bolaño “The Part about the Crimes,” 325) provides precise but irrelevant facts that do not help render things understandable.

Similarly, when one of the murderers confesses unabashedly that he has killed his own mother, his statement as to why he drove a piece of wood into her vagina remains incoherent: “he had done it to teach her” (309), he declares to the police. “Teach her what? asked the policemen [...] To take him seriously. Then he lapsed into incoherence” (309). In the original, what falls into symbolic unintelligibility is not even the subject but language itself: “sus palabras se volvieron incoherentes.” As if it had agency of its own, this impersonal and incomprehensible language can definitely be identified with one of the many structures that Kurnick sees as enclosing individuals. Words replace people and speak through them in an indecipherable way. Along with unintelligibility, characters endure symbolic muteness. None of them speak; they are instead spoken by a language that rules them. All the lost agency and voice of depersonalized individuals is condensed here in a language that has control over them. Another murderer, a husband who kills
his wife, is unable to confess clearly to the police: “He talked about his parents, it wasn’t clear whether he meant his own parents or Adela’s, who had witnessed the murder” (408). Again, here Bolaño breaks with the tradition of the detective story by dissolving yet another fundamental convention of the genre: the criminal’s confession, in which evil starts to deploy its rationale. In “The Part about the Crimes,” just when the reader feels he is about to make some sense of it all, meaning escapes. Whereas words were once understood as signifiers to which investigators would rely on to solve cases or understand the motivations behind them, they have become here all too blurry.

Symbolic unintelligibility, like depersonalization, is an all-pervasive force. It permeates the aggressors but also their victims, even their mourning, like the family that grieves for their daughter with “words that meant nothing or whose ultimate meaning only they could understand” (318). Similarly, the mother of another victim mourns her disappeared husband, picturing him in Arizona or California, and “these thoughts paralyzed her (in them everyone, including her husband, spoke a different, incomprehensible, language)” (316). The wife never hears from her husband again after he leaves home to cross the border. In addition to causing symbolic unintelligibility, his disappearance also provokes symbolic paralysis. Almost as if the absence of subjects would provoke the absence of meaning. It seems that unintelligibility is actually caused by depersonalization.

This is why it is important not to read this “incomprehensible language” in a simplistic way: Santa Teresa, a border town immersed in bilingual interference, gives the reader the initial impression that unintelligibility is linked to a twofold language barrier. On the one hand, between the local dialect and the standard Mexican Spanish from Ciudad de México; on the other, between Mexican Spanish and American English. As for the first boundary, the narrator claims that the homeless of the clandestine garbage dump El Chile, where bodies are often found, “spoke a slang
that was hard to understand” (466). Equally, the Chilango Sergio González fails to follow the inscrutable Norteño jargon of the local policemen. But their dialect is incomprehensible even to themselves: “They said: *engarróteseme ahi*, or *metateado*, or *peladeaje*, or *combiliado*, or *biscornieto*, or *bola de pinole*, or *despatolado*, or *sin desperdicio*, as if they were uttering the names of gods or steps in a ceremony that even they didn’t understand but everyone had to obey” (297). Later in the novel, not even Juan de Dios Martínez can escape this curse. After watching midnight TV shows filled with “Mexican channels and American channels, channels with crippled madmen who […] uttered unintelligible greetings, in Spanish or English or Spanglish, every last fucking word unintelligible” (420), he suffers from symbolic impotence (“he simply couldn’t turn off the light” [420]) and insomnia. Both the “foreign” journalist and the local policemen are trapped in the same impossibility of knowledge, communication or understanding.

As for the second boundary, the intrusion of the English language on the Mexican-American border seems to explain the all-pervasiveness of unintelligibility. The murder of Lucy Anne Sander, an American tourist in Santa Teresa, for instance, triggers US interference into the femicide cases, embodied in the American Sheriff Harry Magaña, who is introduced in a sarcastic tone that underlines his hybrid condition of Chicano. Like the Chilango journalist Sergio González, Magaña is alienated from the policemen’s jargon and their local (lack of) *modus operandi*. He does not understand puns, *albures*, the masculine practice of word play in Mexican Spanish that entails often misogynist sexual double entendre, and he “looked Mexican, but he spoke Spanish with a gringo accent and his vocabulary was limited” (326). Magaña himself later admits that even after weeks trying to solve the case of Lucy Anne, south of the border, he speaks Spanish “less and less” (347). But whatever it is that alienates the Chilango Sergio González and the Chicano Harry Magaña, whatever excludes them from the state police, it is also what at the same time includes them. There is no clear distinction between the internal and the external boundaries of Santa
Teresa. In the end, all the characters share the same symbolic disability: none of them can understand the femicides through language. It matters little whether Sergio González cannot follow Norteño or whether Magaña becomes paradoxically less fluent in Spanish, because their local counterparts are circumscribed to the same impossibility of knowledge as they are.

This is an impossibility that goes beyond specific tongues. Magaña “dreamed of a street in Huntsville. [...] We have to get the girls at the bead factory! shouted someone behind him” (352). Somebody cries, a voice pointing at the *maquiladoras*. The reader does not know whose voice this is, but its depersonalized force is eclipsed again by an unintelligible language: “he photocopied documents that seemed to be written in a language not of this world” (352). Another key character, Florita Almada, has visions in which the murderers “speak Spanish, a mixed-up Spanish that doesn’t sound like Spanish, it isn’t English either, sometimes I think they speak a made-up language, but it can’t be made up because I understand some words, [that] are incomprehensible to me” (450). Magaña’s nightmares as well as Florita’s visions, affected both by depersonalization and unintelligibility, are obscured by an otherworldly language that is neither Spanish nor English, nor even Spanglish. Something similar happens to Erica, Lucy Anne’s friend, when she asks the police in English: “Who did this to Lucy Anne? [...] The policemen looked at her uncomprehendingly. The nurse translated and the police said they didn’t know yet.” (322) Whatever is lost in all these examples does not lie in specific language barriers between Spanish and English, or Norteño and Chilango, since not even translations can make these conundrums intelligible.

It is not so much a problem of tongues (*lenguas*) but of language (*lenguaje*) itself. This is precisely how Benveniste understands the universality of pronouns, as “both a problem of languages in general and a problem of individual languages” (“The Nature of Pronouns” 217). According to him, if “all languages possess pronouns” (217) it is because pronouns point to “a
problem of language in general” (217). This is why Bolaño consistently uses the impersonal third-person pronoun, a linguistic universal that goes truly beyond its particular realization in Spanish. The constant use of *se*, in this sense, mirrors the unintelligibility of this otherworldly language in which characters speak, hear, dream or hallucinate. An early sign of how unintelligibility resides in language more than its specific cultural realizations takes place when one of the first victims is found by a janitor of a nearby school. Here, unintelligibility materializes itself even beyond words. Shocked after seeing the victim’s impaled corpse, the janitor goes back to the school where he finds the cook. She addresses him with “a gesture as if to ask how it had gone” to which he responds with “another gesture, impossible to decipher” (294). In Santa Teresa, even gestures fail to convey meaning. What otherwise might have been an efficient signifier in nonverbal communication, here is not enough. This nonverbal unintelligibility shows the extent to which language, beyond its particular realizations in specific tongues, is insufficient to apprehend brutality.

It is in terms of unintelligibility that the Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato opens her interpretation of the Juárez femicides. For Segato, “the only viable hypothesis for the enigmatic crimes that […] presented themselves as unintelligible” is that they “seem to partake in a big communicative machine whose messages become intelligible only for those who […] study thoroughly the code” (“La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez” 80). For Segato, the problem is that Mexican society has failed to understand these crimes in a semiotic way, missing the “expressive dimension” of violence, and as “any detective knows: […] any act of violence, as any speech act, has a signature” (93). Segato ascribes meaning to acts that seem to be beyond rational explanation. For instance, she argues that “in the language of femicides, the female body also means territory” (93) and rapes are an “allegorical act par excellence of the Schmittian definition of sovereignty: legislative control over a territory and over the body of the other as [its] annex” (84). In short, Segato believes that femicides are a complex tongue, a cryptic
code that nonetheless could still be read: “the femicides are messages broadcasted by a subject author that can only be identified […] through a rigorous reading of these crimes as communicative acts” (91). If only they could be decoded properly; if only we knew how to read them, the femicides could be understood, i.e. “solved,” and systematic violence against women could be stopped.

Santa Teresa offers a gloomier prognosis: in “The Part about the Crimes,” unintelligibility wins out, because Segato’s signifiers of violence resist the temptation of meaning. It is not just that Bolaño leaves the reader without closure. He also systematically avoids offering clear patterns that could enable interpretation. Whereas it is true that most murdered women work in the maquilas, others do not: Isabel Urrea, one of the first victims, for instance, is a middle-class journalist. Some women are mothers, and some are pregnant, but others are not. The narrator’s ironic tone reminds the reader that not even the places in which bodies are found follow a clear pattern: “to contradict some voices that were timidly beginning to be raised, she died at home and her body was found at home, not in a vacant lot, or a dump, or the yellow scrub of the desert” (309). Bolaño also leaves his readers without signifiers. The reiterated amputation of breasts, for example, is read by police officers as evidence: “We have a serial killer, like in the gringo movies” (370), they quickly conclude. But this must be read ironically. In fact, they are nothing but deceptions that point somewhere else: there is no language to understand and no code to decipher. What in classic Anglo-American detective stories, or even in their Southern Cone reformulations, was unintelligible only to simple-minded state policemen or to confused detectives, is here unintelligible to society as a whole.

In his Introduction à la littérature fantastique, the Bulgarian critic Tzvetan Todorov examines a literary genre, the fantastic, that is closely linked to early detective stories, especially in the figure of Poe who set the foundations of both. Todorov observes that classic realistic stories that feature the irruption of a disturbing supernatural element (Hoffmann, Nerval, Maupassant)
often depict a world characterized by he calls “pan-signification,” a world in which “relations exist on all levels, among all elements of the world” (112). This is a “highly significant” world, in which “everything is charged with meaning. Even more: beyond the primary, obvious meaning, one can always discover a deeper meaning (a super-interpretation). […] Every object, every being means something” (112-113). What Todorov states about these supernatural stories, can also be said about traditional detective fiction. In Poe, in Conan Doyle, in Christie, even in the Southern Cone detective tradition, the world still has legibility, and everything is legible in the world. Every little thing is as a potential clue. Yet in Santa Teresa, this omnipresence of signifiers and its full potentiality of meanings are now obsolete.

Bolaño thus depicts state officers and private detectives who suffer from this structural symbolic unintelligibility that causes them to fail to solve the femicides. What they miss is not so much how to read messages, but the fact that such messages are no longer readable; not that individual signatures are hidden beneath complex communicative acts, but that individual agency is not enough to apprehend the nature of these crimes. In a nutshell, they fail because depersonalization is not legible. As Gareth Williams says in his reading of the novel, “in the desert we are left without legibility” (“2666, or the Novel of Force” 17): breaking with the detective story tradition, there are no longer symbols for readers to read or detectives to detect. Everything remains within the realm of the unintelligible. And whatever cannot be understood becomes invisible.

5.2.3 From Unintelligibility to Blindness

Because events that are beyond interpretation become all too natural, they escape visibility. Unintelligibility, linked to linguistic disruptions, provokes blindness, too. The same symbolic blindness that once affected the state (in the Anglo-American tradition) and individualist heroes (in their Southern-Cone replication), now permeates both sides of the opposition as yet another
form of depersonalization. “No one saw anything then, in part because […] there wasn’t enough public lighting” (295) says the narrator, constantly commenting on how hard it is for the inhabitants of Santa Teresa to see, due to the precarious conditions in which they live. But it is equally hard for them to be seen: the witnesses who find the first corpse, for example, agree that “we’ve never seen her before. She isn’t from around here, poor thing” (278), and later a teenager girl “one day left school and was never seen again” (317). Even facial composure of criminals fails to reproduce a visible image: “they couldn’t come up with so much as a convincing sketch of him” (420). This invisibility is often stressed as one of the attributes that haunts most characters, especially but not limited to the victims. For example, the cars in which they are typically kidnapped often have tinted windows that hinder any possible witness’s vision. In the same way that the narrator gives the impression that there is a hidden language that no character can fully grasp; there seem to be things that cannot be seen by most of them either.

Nonetheless, the inability both of rendering things visible and of becoming visible is not plainly literal, but also symbolic. In the same way that (inter)linguistic barriers are insufficient to surmount language unintelligibility, the lack of proper streetlights is hardly enough to explain this constant impairment of sight. On the one hand, women’s invisibility, in Santa Teresa, points to the almost ghostly aspect of their bodies, which reflects their lack of social ties within the city: “What surprised the reporters most was that no one claimed or acknowledged the body. As if the girl had come to Santa Teresa alone and lived there invisibly until the murderer or murderers took notice of her and killed her” (368). There are multiple iterations of this description along with the leitmotiv that often accompanies reports of the discovery of a corpse: “There was no passport or appointment book or anything that might identify her” (279). This constant absence of papers, a metonymy of legality, the documentation that presupposes social visibility and guarantees a
minimum degree of rights, is nothing but another way in which Mexican society is symbolically blind towards its depersonalized victims.

The destruction of their faces, perhaps the most significant part of the female body in Western poetry (Petrarchism, Neoplatonism, Spanish Golden Age, etc), as they are mutilated or dissolved by nitric acid is yet another trait of depersonalization. After all, the main element that a piece of identification requires is the bearer’s face. The destruction of faces mirrors its material correlation, namely the absence of papers: divested of their faces, the distinctive human feature that could compensate for their lack of legal identity, that could distinguish them as unique persons, they become depersonalized entities, prevented from seeing (literally) or being seen (symbolically). Whereas in the Rio de Janeiro of Fonseca’s Agosto there is an ephemeral suspension of Levinas’s ethics of the “face-to-face” when Mattos cannot see the face of Vargas’s corpse, in Santa Teresa this suspension has become the norm. Without faces, the female victims can no longer partake in the “the conjuncture of the same and the other” located in “the direct and full-face welcome of the other by me” (80). In this mutilation, they lose personhood.

Symbolic blindness does not only affect the victims. As with unintelligibility, every character is subject to it, even the murderers. Two of the suspects, “the Cifuentes siblings were hardly any more substantial than a pair of ghosts. There were no photographs of them. The descriptions he could come up with were vague, when not contradictory” (389). Miguel, one of the main suspects in the murder of Lucy Ann Sander, “vanished into the bushes” (319) right before she too disappears. The one character who seems to be immune to symbolic blindness is Florita Almada. A Tiresias/Cassandra-like prophet and psychic who speaks up for the safety of women on Mexican TV, Florita alone publicly denounces the brutality that takes place in Santa Teresa. She expresses her accusations in terms of visions and continually uses the verb “to see”: “She said she had seen dead women and dead girls. A desert. [...] A city. [...] ‘¡It’s Santa Teresa! I see it
clearly now. Women are being killed there” (343-344). The narrator stresses that “she had been granted the gift of sight. She saw things no one else saw” (336) and tells us that “she knew how to find a meaningful explanation for everything that happened to her” (336). In short, amidst a desert of unintelligibility and invisibility, Florita can interpret, i.e: she can see beyond. Perhaps she is the only character who truly inherits the mythical attributes of individualism.

Paradoxically, Florita is partially blind: “Before she became a seer she had been an herbalist, which was her true calling, or so she said, because seer meant someone who sees, and sometimes she didn’t see anything, the picture was fuzzy, the sound faulty, as if the antenna that had sprung up in her brain wasn’t installed right” (336). Beyond the ironic tone of the narrator, the paradox resides, of course, in the fact that, like Tiresias, she is said to be the only one that can truly see, despite her own physical sight impairment. Significantly, she remarks on the policemen’s symbolic blindness, encapsulated in their black sunglasses: “That makes me think […] about the dark glasses worn by some of our political leaders or labor bosses or policemen. Why do they cover their eyes, I ask?” (361). These sunglasses are reminiscent of and mirrored in the tinted windows of the assassins’ cars: they obscure what goes on behind them, making it impossible for the reader (infected with both unintelligibility and symbolic blindness too) to understand and see. Both the sunglasses and the tinted windows elicit the expectation of “a hidden truth” that remains invisible or rather inexistent. In one of her last appearances, Florita finishes her speech with a shift. She stops using the verb “seeing” to now switch to “talking.” By repeating “I’m talking about Santa Teresa” (362), she makes clear the one symbolic disability that she is not immune to: deaf-muteness. Like Cassandra, her prophecies, visions and warnings are systematically ignored.

But what about Bolaño? What is his symbolic blindness? Despite the triumph of unintelligibility, there is in the book an insistence on narrating the femicides through fiction or fictionalized versions of the real. Santa Teresa is, after all, not in fact Ciudad Juárez. The 111 cases
of femicides are not strictly speaking a paraphrase of the historical ones. I read this insistence as a symptom of an underlying presumption: the belief that literature can still hold some constituent power against constituted power. As Deckard notes, “given the proliferation of documentary and journalistic books about the femicides, including the reporter Sergio González’s [...] the novel might be said to justify its own necessity by demonstrating this failure” (360). Written testimony or audiovisual documentaries are rooted in an attempt to portray facts accurately. In a very similar way to Piglia and Fonseca, Bolaño seems to be saying that facts are not enough. Over the past few decades, as Alberto Moreiras recalls, “high literature has suffered a drastic loss of cultural capital [and] is no longer effective [...] in the fight against late-capitalist globalization” (192-194).

Bolaño’s literary project seeks to regain this effectiveness for fiction. He wants to contend that facts are not as convincing as their poetic re-elaboration. Fiction, not testimony, not trans-medial discourses, not journalism, ought to be more effective to narrate the desert, to engage with history and politics. “The Part about the Crimes” can thus be read as an attempt to report femicides by recovering literary mythification when everything else, audiovisuals, journalistic articles, academic thought, forensic evidence, has failed.

If depersonalization leaves no room for mythical literary heroes, which myths does Bolaño side with? Certainly not Florita Almada’s Tiresias or Cassandra. Because, unlike her, he deliberately does not give voice to the victims. Whereas in Southern Cone detective stories it was the state and the private investigators who suffered from symbolic muteness, in Santa Teresa this same silence systematically affects the victims as well. Schapiro talks about the “muteness of the individual victim” (86), in that the (soon to be) murdered women barely speak in the novel. The reader does not hear from them except through the statistical data conveyed by the narrator. The reader learns their age, their weight, their height; sometimes, even their full names. But the narrator never explores their thoughts about a situation that affects them first and foremost. Bolaño chooses
not to make them speak, keeping them in a symbolic muteness that has to be a calculated narrative strategy, a literary project that contests not only documentary discourses, but also literature itself, even beyond the tradition of the detective genre. After all, a great deal of the Latin American left during most of the twentieth century followed Marx’s imperative taken from his description of the nineteenth-century proletariat: “they can not [sic] represent one another, they must themselves be represented” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 84). Through poetry, novels or plays, writers such as Neruda, Guillén, Vallejo, García Márquez, Arguedas, among many others, understood literature as a commitment with the different expressions of Latin American subalterity, and that engagement had necessarily to be funneled through a ventriloquism of the voice of the oppressed. Thus, in his poem “Heights of Macchu Picchu,” Neruda claims “I come to speak through your dead mouth” (96) and demands to “speak through my words and my blood” (97). Neruda’s poetic voice, thus, personifies the voice of the oppressed.

By contrast, Bolaño refuses to let these women speak through him, voluntarily imposing a veil (a symbolic blindness) on himself. Unlike Neruda and a great deal of the Boom and the Post-Boom generations, he does not engage with what Moreiras defined as “a prosopopoeia of the dead,” i.e: a “foundational trope that will bring posthumous, metonymic life to those who already have died” (200). In this gesture, too, the Chilean novelist breaks up with the tradition of personifying (“prosopopoeia” is the technical term for personification) ideas in characters. He holds onto literature without turning to the traditional literary strategies of seeing everything through fiction and relinquishing the inherited entitlement of representing what cannot be represented by itself. He positions himself at an equidistant place in the Latin American tradition, far from the Boom and the subsequent generation of writers who engaged in *testimonio*. Bolaño situates himself against his forerunners’ stress on literary aesthetics, because unlike them he prefers not to pretend to decipher nor to embody that space that remains ever unintelligible: the
voice of the dead. In the same way that in *Agosto*, when Fonseca represents the heterogeneous and unintelligible multitude as bodies who in front of a personalist leader are turned into the homogeneous and readable notion of people; the “prosopopoeia of the dead” (which could perhaps be read as a populist literary device), when seizing the subaltern’s voiceless voice, makes it readable and erases it simultaneously. Bolaño chooses not to pursue this strategy.

The myth that remains for Bolaño to side with, thus, is no other than Sisyphus. Bolaño rolls the immense boulder of narrating these femicides, knowing that he is failing but assuming his stoical task as necessary, in the same way that Santa Teresa’s amorphous group of “policemen, moving wearily, like soldiers trapped in a time warp who march over and over again to the same defeat, got to work” (“The Part about the Crimes,” 416). Bolaño writes from this defeated Latin-American left that no longer believes in what they consider to be outdated strategies of engaging with politics. Whereas Kurnick observes the absence of an individualist hero, Gareth Williams suggests that the actual hero is repetition, “the true master” (“2666, or the Novel of Force” 9) of the novel. And Sisyphus (that Marx equated with the limitless “labor of accumulating” [“Chapter 3: Money, Or the Circulation of Commodities” 185]) is nothing but sheer repetition.

As Trelles Paz argues, Bolaño’s detectives are “demoted heroes” that “present themselves as invulnerable […] because, even when they imagine the failure of their quests and battles, they still undertake them” (360). Florita tries to show what has been hidden. Bolaño, alternatively, shows what has already been shown repeatedly and *ad nauseam* by journalists such as the Chilango Sergio González and others, even by himself over the course of hundreds of pages. Like his detectives, he does not relinquish the (pre-announced) failed attempt. Except that he does so by defying his ineffective forerunners’ narrative choices. He proposes a new way of narrating from a (defeated) post-dictatorial left: rather than humanizing victims, he articulates their own (and his own) symbolic muteness and blindness in order to make “audible the gendered structures of
reification” (Shapiro 86). Otherwise, what if any is the need of narrating yet again these crimes other than, as Deckard says, to spot a discursive failure? If Florita can “see” the femicides through visions (without actually seeing them), Bolaño, without having witnessed these femicides, invites the reader to experience the magnitude of their brutality through literary discourse, by imagining beyond facts and personifications, aided by classical mythology but also challenging both modern literary tradition and the presumptions of the Latin American left, as well as surpassing the need to appropriate voices that after all are impossible to seize.

5.3 The Mexican-American Border: An Infertile Body

5.3.1 Money and Depersonalization

Money plays a pivotal role in “The Part about the Crimes,” as it does in the tradition of detective stories it is built on. But Bolaño confers on it an original element: instead of merely triggering crime and its investigation, here money (and especially the market that enables its accumulation) replaces the state as the main structural framework that is inherent to crime. Unlike the state, which has officers, money depersonalizes crime, liquifying its main agents: detectives, policemen, criminals, but most importantly, the victims. Money is behind the elegiac if often monotonous catalogue of female victims. Filled with names and surnames, this catalogue elaborates on the victims’s origin and the socio-economic function that their bodies once performed in life. Thus, the 111 fictional women, an accumulation of corpses through the pages, is reminiscent of the capital they would produce and enable to be accumulated while working for multinational companies. Whereas financial accumulation entails the transformation of socially necessary labour into money that in turn generates capital, the novel’s piled-up corpses imply the transformation of female necessary labour into their own commodification and their subsequent death. Unlike the former, the latter is the product of economics and the aftermath of social surplus. This is why
Shapiro describes this list in terms of accounting as a “ledger of murders” (85): the catalogue of victims is a book of economic transactions, which enhances the notion of female corpses as yet another negative asset on a foreign corporation’s ledger.

Capital accumulation, along with the thorough description of women’s mortal remains, is depicted in “The Part about the Crimes” as an irrational heap. Reading Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, Max Weber comments on “the earning of more and more money [...] so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendent and absolutely irrational” (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism 18). Whereas accumulating capital is often understood as a useful means for human happiness, Weber claims that for the founding father, instead, making money was closer to an irrational command divested from any purpose. Wealth accumulation, thus, enables and actually encourages its wilful perpetuation and exponential growth.

Likewise, Santa Teresa is the site of the assassination of women without any political aim. In the same way that the multitude of characters that crowd the novel are subjected to language, they are also subjected to money. As Deckard notes, “the accumulation of characters’ stories, like the accumulation of bodies, seems without purpose, ultimately realistic in its very meaninglessness” (364). The purpose of these killings does not respond to any issues that could be explained in utilitarian terms: they lack the rhetoric of immunity used by the Southern Cone dictatorial states. No criminal justifies the femicides as a means of extirpation of a foreign agent from the body of the nation, like Tagle/Wieder does when he compares communism with leprosy, a disease that must be eradicated. Enumerating corpses, like accumulating capital, is purely “an end in itself” (Weber Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism 18). This lack of purpose is mirrored in the absence of systematicity: as Brett Levinson points out, “each [murder] functions as one more atrocity in a disconnected but repeating series” (182). At first glance, they look like
isolated events. It is worth spelling out, though, that this absence of connection is only superficial and paradoxical. What is at stake in these iterations is not so much related to the repetition of disjointed events but to the common thread that unites most of its victims: their gender. Almost without exception, all are women who are killed between their teens and their thirties years of age, i.e.: with a few exceptions, most of them are within a reproductive period.

Just as their executioners do not acknowledge that their depersonalized murders follow any particular political agenda (they kill their victims neither because of their relationship with any political party nor because they are activists of a subversive cause), there is no single intellectual author behind the crimes. There is no “great Latin American dictator” orchestrating a systematic genocide that is supposed to decimate some ideology, nor is there a conventional serial killer murdering for private motives. In Santa Teresa, evil, too, resist personification: it is not incarnated in a character but disembodied and scattered through the population. Femicides are perpetrated in a spontaneous and erratic fashion, that is closer to the dynamics of wealth accumulation than to genocides perpetrated by military dictatorships. As Natasha Wimmer puts it, “Capitalism, the World Bank and the international drug trade replaced caudillos, death squads, and political persecution as the new faces of evil” (qtd. in Deckard 1). Unlike either the Anglo-American canon of detective fiction, its Southern Cone replications, or even more broadly the above mentioned Latin American littérature engagé (Asturias, García Márquez, Cortázar, among many others) that would partake in the dictator novel, in “The Part about the Crimes” the criminal mastermind is not incarnated in just one social agent.

Paraphrasing Carl Schmitt, Zizek claims that the great lesson to learn from him is that “the enemy is by definition always […] invisible, it looks like one of us, it cannot be directly recognized […] The big problem and task of the political struggle is that of providing/constructing the recognizable IMAGE of the enemy” (“From Homo Sucker to Homo Sacer” 110). The boom
generation constructed this recognizable image by personifying the enemy in the singular figure of the dictator. Bolaño, according to Williams, still believes in the Schmittian opposition of “the inherited trenches and fortifications of the friend/enemy divide” (“Sovereignty and melancholic paralysis in Roberto Bolaño,” 139). But unlike his forerunners, he re-constructs the enemy by disembodifying (depersonalizing) its image. Williams claims that *Estrella distante* partakes in “an eternal return of the same with only nominal difference” (139). In this posthumous novel, there is a difference that goes beyond the nominal. Once more, this is why Bolaño resorts to the use of the third person: “because it does not refer to anyone at all or because it can be extended to everyone” (Esposito, *The Third Person* 107). Anyone and everyone kill: thieves, policemen, drug dealers, businessmen, workers, husbands. None of them has much in common with each other. The only true thing that they have in common is that they are not women. In the Mexican-American border imagined by Bolaño, there is room only for the purest arbitrariness and depersonalization: the fact that anyone kills creates the mirage that nobody does.

Nevertheless, however much these femicides are bereft of clear political purpose, they do not necessarily lack a cause. Despite this absence of connection, murderers do not kill women for no reason. They do it because they are women, the only social agent that escapes the logic of “everyone kills.” As Kurnick claims, “these crimes submit to no overarching logic and have in common only an evident structural misogyny” (130). The victims, although equally depersonalized, still have a common gender identity, while the blurriness of the perpetrators’ personality finds its limit in the structure that affects all of them: masculine domination. Santa Teresa’s subjects are not important as individuals *per se*; they are reduced to the functions they perform in society. Far from being free as promised by neoliberal *doxa*, everyone is subjected to language, money and also to gender. According to Bourdieu, “sexual harassment does not always aim at the sexual possession that seems to be its exclusive goal: in some cases, it may aim at sheer
possession, the pure affirmation of domination” (*Masculine Domination* 21). Something similar could be claimed about the way Bolaño depicts these killings preceded by anal, vaginal and oral rape as well as by the amputation of breasts and nipples: beyond any utilitarian purpose, the femicides are rather an end in themselves, in the same way that financial accumulation can be. This does not free them from having a distinct cause: the reinforcement of masculine domination in the face of the feminine body.

5.3.2 From Waste to Infertility

In “The Part about the Crimes,” male characters treat women as a disposable excess, even though they are indispensable. Or precisely because they are. Like Piglia in *Plata quemada*, Bolaño inscribes money, popularly valued for its utilitarian dimension, as the other side of a same token: ashes, waste. In his reading of the novel, John Kraniauskas invokes the notion of the *homme jetable* (44), literally, the man who can be dumped, i.e: derelict human beings, whose condition was produced by economic inequality inherent to capital accumulation. Kaniauskas attributes the concept to Étienne Balibar, but in fact it is Bertrand Ogilvie who coined the term. In the mid 1990s, drawing from the Latin American idiom *población chatarra* (the people who live among rubbish dumps and whose socio-economical condition blurs the boundaries between their bodies and the place where they roam), Ogilvie takes the idea of disposable human beings to describe “these masses of population that do not access the national and international circuits of production and exchange” (128). Likewise, Balibar understands them from the perspective of structural unemployment brought by “the destruction of traditional activities [which...] leads to a situation [...] in which millions of human beings are superfluous” (12). Balibar insists that nobody needs them and precisely for this they are at the same time “excluded from labour [...] and kept within
the boundaries of the market” (12). Waste, in Balibar’s definition, works then as a metonymy: humans, reduced to a labour that can now be discarded, become residual themselves.

As Ludmer reminds us in the beginning of *El cuerpo del delito*, more than a century earlier, in his analysis of wealth creation, Marx had already equated a “superfluous population” with the criminals that were removed from “the labour market” (“Apologist Conception of the Productivity of All Professions” 388). According to Marx, even criminals and the unemployed, at first sight the most superfluous sectors of the population, are indispensable for capital because they accomplish extremely productive aims: not only do they lower wages but also, they create institutions without which capital could not function. Marx mentions “the whole of the police and of criminal justice, constables, judges, hangmen, juries” (388). An updated version of Marx’s list could include police reporters and the more recent industries related to forensics and criminology or even entertainment, in the shape of detective fiction books, films, TV shows or videogames. While crime takes a part of the superfluous population off the labour market and thus reduces competition among the labourers—up to a certain point preventing wages from falling below the minimum—the struggle against crime absorbs another part of this population. Thus, the criminal comes in as one of those natural “counterweights” that bring about a correct balance and open up a whole perspective of “useful” occupations (388).

This twofold nature, both indispensable and excessive at the same time, is the peculiar element of the feminine victims depicted by Bolaño, who not only are integrated in the labour market, but actually constitute the heart of its productive growth. In a nutshell, they embody an aporia: they are superfluous (their bodies constantly discarded) and yet also absolutely essential for the economic circuit in which they are immersed, since the economy of Santa Teresa operates to a great extent only because of their constant labour. Like Juárez, the mythical urban space created by Bolaño both attracts women (with the lowest rates of female unemployment and the
highest rates of femicides in all of Mexico) and repels them (by discarding their bodies as garbage).
The women described in this elegiac “ledger of murders,” therefore, are not solely residual; they also perform a highly productive function. They are an excess created by the same financial capital to which they are simultaneously indispensable, not only in terms of production but in terms of reproduction, since there cannot be society without women’s labor and fertility. If they are “disposable,” as Shapiro notes, they are also “replaceable” (86). While each individual woman can be substituted by another, women as a whole cannot.

Both waste and productive drive, these female characters should be read not so much in the light of Ogilvie’s homme jetable but in terms of another similar and contemporary albeit more pertinent notion: Giorgio Agamben’s homo sacer. In his reading of this “figure of archaic Roman law” (Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, 47), Agamben talks about its “inclusive exclusion” (7). This twofold dimension is embodied in each of the female characters that appear in Bolaño’s fictional list: they are sacred bodies because of their indispensable attributes for capital accumulation (as a docile and inexpensive workforce) while at the same time they also are sacrificed bodies because of their condition of excess. The narrator’s forensic tone that never fully engages affectively with the victims records the extent to which the logic of masculine domination considers the feminine body to be the excess of a society without which it could not function. Cast aside by the selective and unequal distribution of capital that has affected generations of Mexican and Central American workers, these female victims, transformed into the waste of society, work in the maquilas of Santa Teresa in subhuman conditions. Their existence is no different from the “bare life” of the homo sacer, which Agamben defines as “a life that may be killed by anyone — an object of a violence that exceeds the sphere both of law and of sacrifice” (Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, 57).
Whereas the Oxford English Dictionary defines “sacrifice” in terms of slaughter as offering and the DRAE defines sacrificio in terms of “killing for a cause,” Bolaño’s list of women does not fit in neither of these definitions. Rather these victims are located, like Agamben’s homo sacer, in “a zone of indistinction between sacrifice and homicide” (55). As seen in the figure of the third person, anyone — thieves, policemen, drug dealers, businessmen, workers, husbands — can “kill with impunity” (47) and “this violence [...] is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide” (54). Both within and beyond the law, women are immersed in Santa Teresa’s market and exposed to the vulnerability it generates. Their dismembered bodies are a foil for the sovereign masculine body of the state, which lawfully decides who is liable to be killed “without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice” (55). This impune occidi, the sovereign’s ability to kill the homo sacer, ratifies the reading that the femicides depicted by Bolaño should be understood not as a means (a sacrifice for a bigger cause) but as an end in themselves, in line with Weber’s interpretation of capital accumulation and Bourdieu’s views on masculine domination. If these femicides have an aim, it is the self-reinforcement of the dominant order (regardless of its origin, whether class, gender or sovereignty). If Bolaño portrays them is to emphasize the extent to which we lack freedom in times of free trade agreements and are instead ambushed and trapped in its economic and political structures.

In these terms, without meaning or motivation, the narrator describes the “few industrial sheds where the maquiladoras stored their reserve parts, and paths off the highway that melted away like dreams, without rhyme or reason” (“The Part about the Crimes” 396). Bolaño maps this blurred boundary in a “zone of indistinction” between what is productive and what is expelled from production, between Mexican and Central American female labour and insatiable North American capital, between abstract depersonalization and concrete bodies, between the dominated female corpses and the masculine territory in which they are found. Furthermore, this anomic
threshold of neoliberal democratic states is more than just some mere decorative scenery to impress the reader; it is above all a metonymy of the corpses themselves. The first body “ended in a ditch behind which rose the walls of an abandoned dairy in ruins” (443). Waste-grounds, cliffs, deserts, vacant lots, highways, streets, alleys, hills, cars ready to be sent to the scrapyard, dumpsters, warehouses, industrial parks, streams, ditches, oil deposits: the spaces in which the female corpses emerge are hostile territories that have their climax in a container filled with nitric acid.

This conjunction of female fertility and death, ever more sinister and crueler, recalls a literary tradition that again goes beyond that of detective stories. Bolaño’s prose is informed by Spanish Golden Age poetry, which placed the ephemeral degradation of the female body in contrast to their youth. The tercets of Spanish poet Luis de Góngora’s sonnet, “While trying to compete with your hair,” evoke this well-known trope. Here, the lyric masculine voice sings to his female addressee, inviting her to enjoy herself before it is too late: “enjoy neck, hair, lip, brow, / before, what in your golden age / was gold, lily, carnation, shiny glass / turn into not only silver or drooping violet, / but also you and it together / into earth, smoke, dust, shadow, nothing.” Bolaño, who, as Kraniauskas points out, was above all “a poet who only began to write novels towards the end of his life in [as] a means of making money” (37), rewrites Góngora’s tierra and polvo through its most dreadful by-products: these spaces in which bodies emerge impersonally.

As with Ogilvie’s población chatarra, the corpses and these residual spaces are merged and mixed up: they are the ruins that allude to any commodity that is first coveted and swiftly excreted by a voracious market, abandoned under the open sky of the border. Female corpses, like the waste in which they are camouflaged, are concealed from the public sphere. Bodies are “thrown” on dumps in order to be hidden and invisible. These macabre spaces are not only the physical site of the crimes, Bolaño seems to say, but also, like language and money, they are somehow their culprits. Since the dark streets themselves render these women invisible, swallowing them up “like
black holes, and the laughter, that came from who knows where, was the only sign, the only beacon
that kept residents and strangers from getting lost” (“The Part about the Crimes” 497). These
somber spaces are thus metonymies of the bodies decomposing next to and along with the garbage.
All these spaces converge in Santa Teresa, a huge garbage dump, which should be read as an
update of the tradition of the Latin American boom, if closer to the hellish realism of Rulfo’s
Comala than to the magical Macondo of García Márquez.

Sergio Villalobos-Rouminot underlines this hellish dimension of Santa Teresa. By contrast,
Kurnick questions this “image of hell” because he says that “there is nothing metaphysical about
the violence on the US-Mexico border depicted in 2666” (132). Kurnick is right when he claims
that this is not a religious hell, but because Bolaño takes the reader to the entrance of Santa Teresa
through the gates of a hell that is informed not by religion but by literary tradition. It may not be a
religious space for punishment (quite on the contrary, nobody gets what they deserve) but a space
only functional to the accumulation of capital, waste, habit and crime, all embodied in women’s
corpses. It is no coincidence that the first victim mentioned is named Esperanza. Like in Fonseca,
onomastics announces and informs the nature of the text: Esperanza is an allusion to Hesiod’s
Works and Days, for which Elpis, the ancient Greek embodiment of Hope, is the last human
attribute that remains immune to the catastrophe unleashed by the opening of Pandora’s box.
Hesiod’s text is the source of the Spanish proverb “la esperanza es lo último que se pierde,” that
roughly translates in English as “hope is the last thing to die.” Esperanza, of course, also cites the
famous verse of Dante’s Inferno: “Abandon hope all ye who enter here,” a literary hell that
amounts to a city, a città dolente.

The fact that the reader is warned to abandon all hope in Santa Teresa from the start should
not be neglected as it has been in most of the readings of the novel: unlike the Anglo-American
foundational models and Southern Cone detective fiction, the horizon of expectations, Bolaño
warns the reader, will now be different. Once more, depersonalization absorbs personification, which does not work any longer: hope, like individualism or the modern state, can no longer be funnelled through a literary character because reified humans have no personality at all. This “secular hell” is also informed by literary tradition in the sense that it evokes the antithesis of the traditional space of fecundity named in the Latin trope locus amœnus: the locus eremus, the infertile wasteland that engulfs women during their reproductive years. It is no coincidence that Bolaño locates the origins of this neoliberal accumulation in the 1980s, linking it to an infertile plot of land, owned by an “upper-middle-class landowners, and many had gotten rich selling desert plots to the maquiladoras that set up shop this side of the border in the eighties” (432). These spaces, which are infertile and infertilising, suggest a displacement: they evoke the place (spatial and non-spatial) that society has already prescribed to female bodies even when they are (re)productive. The thin border between space and bodies entails a sinister logic. Society finds women’s bodies in the same place that it had initially put them while still in life: in that of waste.

5.3.3 Neoliberalism and Immunity

The female corpses are separated by these infertile spaces through an ostensibly porous boundary. This boundary, then, must be read as a breeding ground for what Esposito calls “contagion,” those infectious forces that aim to overcome the resisting counterforce of immunity. If Segato is right when she reads the female body as an allegory of territories to be conquered, then the thin threshold that separates both biological and political bodies must be understood as a common element, through which waste flows seemingly without any restrictions. This is what is at stake, for instance, when the novel describes corpses decomposing in contact with the contaminated water of a stream. In an even more sombre tone, when one of the last women is found all that remains of her body is her skeleton, her flesh having been absorbed by the ground a long time before. Corpses are infected
by and merged with the space in which they emerge. After all, the “contagion” of infectious phenomena such as depersonalization, and its by-products (unintelligibility and symbolic blindness as well as the complex relationship between money and waste), circulates among and affects the different bodies of society involved in the femicides: victims, victimizers, witnesses, accomplices. As Esposito posits, the risk of contagion “has to do with trespassing or violating borders” (Immunitas 2). If contagion is so all-pervasive, it could give the impression that there is no border, no real distinction between bodies (women’s and the state’s, the biological and the political).

“The Part about the Crimes,” of course, is more complex than that. Along with the list of female victims, Bolaño offers a series of fictitious (mainly US) multinational companies, conveniently settled in this all too porous border, for whom the female victims work. These evoke the historical *maquiladoras*, factories that have been present on the Mexican-American border since the 1960s, but that multiplied exponentially after the signing of NAFTA in 1994. The maquiladoras, a disembodied image of the market, can be read following what Esposito names the “immunitary paradigm.” When everything else trespasses thresholds, the *maquiladoras* inherit the Anglo-American private’s sleuth exemption that gives them the entitlement to not be trespassed. Whereas Dupin, Holmes, Marlowe or the Continental Op were immune before society, the only ones who “owe nothing to anyone” (Immunitas 5), here it is a depersonalized market that owns this privilege. The meaning of *immunitas*, according to Esposito, is diametrically opposed to its dialectical antonym: *communitas*. Whereas the first means that which lacks the *munus* (the Latin prefix *im* meaning “without”); the second one means that which bears it (*cum*, its contrary, means “with”). “Those who are immune,” he says, are exempted to engage with the *munus*, (which in Latin means “a task, obligation, duty” [5]). To put it differently, the immune ones are “exempted [...] from [...] paying tributes or performing services for others” (5), they are absolved “from the
obligation of the *munus*, be it personal, fiscal, or civil” (5). Indeed, these maquiladoras are excused from paying duty to the Mexican state due to neoliberal policies that favour the privilege (the immunity) of the market over the commonality of the multitude of inhabitants of Santa Teresa.

Moreover, these *maquiladoras* constitute an illusion of immunity for their employers and employees. They produce the temptation of unrestricted individualist accumulation for their former, while at the same time they create the mirage of trickle-down economics, a nineteenth-century *laisser-faire* theory, regurgitated by 1980s neoliberalism. This theory forecasts that unrestricted capital accumulation, in the end, should drip into the working class, as a natural consequence of lower taxes and the promotion of business in underdeveloped areas. This is what is at stake when the narrator says that one of the female victims, a worker in one of the *maquiladoras*, was expecting a promotion before being murdered by her partner (and also her co-worker), after quarrelling with him about whether or not to emigrate to the United States. It is due to that expectation that she prefers to stay rather than to emigrate. She “had never crossed the border,” and “at Nip-Mex, […] she was well liked by her bosses, which meant she had hopes of a quick promotion and a raise” (488). She refuses the gloomy prospect of geographical mobility (becoming an illegal in America) for the equally flickering promise of social mobility (being promoted in an American company in Mexico in a future that never quite materializes). These two somber options amount actually to no option at all. This lack of choice is precisely what gets her killed: her partner murders her because she defends her right to stay working in the unsafe and poor underbelly of Santa Teresa, and thus preserves her own confinement. Nip-Mex, the multinational company that promises a better future for its workers, is also the agent that ends up enabling these same workers’ destruction, through the precarious conditions that makes them consider fleeing the country or staying to wait for a better future that is constantly postponed.
Whereas in the rest of my corpus, the narratives that once endorsed individualism and justified the existence of the modern state are gradually crumbling, in *2666* they have already collapsed. The portrayal of trickle-down economics as sheer deceit, as pure fantasy, is only one instance of this downfall. “The Part about the Crimes” outlines the shadows projected by a boundless market that has engulfed the state and the individuals. After several decades of neoliberal policies in Latin America (accentuated in the 1990s with NAFTA and the Washington Consensus) that naturalized the otherwise problematic link between individual agency and social mobility, Bolaño offers a contradiction: the triumph of the market, rather than empowering individuals as its slogans promise, actually paralyzes and devours them. Capital accumulation, as well as its promising carrot and stick, works to a great extent thanks to the immunity held by the American *maquiladoras*, which become wealthier and more powerful due to their exemption from paying their fiscal *munus*. And they do so at the expense of both the Mexican state, which loses valuable tax income to strengthen its public institutions, and its individuals who, far from sharing the freedom circumscribed to the market, are subjected to the rigid structuring structures of gender, class, and political sovereignty examined above.

On the Mexican-American border, of course, the market is not solely summarized in the *maquiladoras*, but also in the drug trade. As Kraniauskas notes, what links the two is “the importance of laundering” (42). What they have in common is a sort of oligopoly of immunity: they are the only social agents entitled to avoid what is required from the rest of the community, since neither *maquiladoras* nor cartels have to pay taxes, owe explanations to civil society, or are punished when committing illegal acts. Holding the privilege of immunity unilaterally is what reinforces their power. Esposito’s *immunitas*, nonetheless, is a productive and ambivalent concept: it is helpful for reading not only the market but also the Mexican state. According to Kraniauskas, Santa Teresa is “neither the USA nor Mexico” (43), the two states that allow and welcome this
indulgence towards the transnational market. By contrast, it is a “narco-territory” that “is simultaneously global whilst, parasitic, crossing and containing some of each [country]” (43). In this vein, one of the novel’s countless Mexican characters tells Harry Magaña that “Arizona, Sonora, New Mexico, Chihuahua, it’s all the same” (527). Despite the blurriness of the border that separates these territories, there is still a series of elements that enable a reading of the Mexican state and its subjugation to the immunitary paradigm.

There is an example early in the chapter. An anonymous senior member of “Multizone-West, a subsidiary of a multinational that manufactured TVs [...] hoped the body would be removed as soon as possible” (282). After bribing the police, he alludes to the issue of taking responsibility: “Well, said one of the executives, you’ll take care of everything, won’t you? The policeman said yes, of course, and tucked the money the other man handed him into the pocket of his regulation pants” (282). Immunity, linked to the impersonal third-person, exhibits its reactive counter-force against community: nobody murders, nobody solves the crimes, nobody takes responsibility, to ultimately create the mirage that nobody dies, even as femicides continue to accrue. “Taking care of everything” means to accept illicit money and remain silently complicit; it implicitly entails perpetuating the immunity of the market, which in turn subjugates the state and individuals.

Another instance of this subjugation can be found when a nurse and witnesses argue about who will respond for one of the first victims. “How can I take responsibility for a person when I don’t even know her name?” says the witness while the victim suffers and ends up dying (281). Nobody pays for her ambulance. Individuals and the state alike become paralyzed and are incapable of acting on time due to indifference and financial constraint. Several pages later, another fictional maquiladora, File-Sis, claims not to have any employees registered on its payroll. When Efrain Bustelo, a low-level state policeman, investigates one of the suspects, he asks the company
for “the lists of workers going back six months” (389). The corporate response consists solely of maintaining its immunity at all costs: “he was told that a filing error had regrettably caused them to be lost or mislaid. Before Efrain Bustelo could ask when they might locate the lists so he could take a look at them, a File-Sis executive handed him an envelope full of cash and Bustelo forgot the whole business” (389). The records are gone, if they ever existed, and corporations will do anything to endorse that void. Equally, when Magaña’s body is disappeared after his murder, the American consul demands the state of Sonora to locate his whereabouts. Pedro Negrete, chief of the state police, uses the transient dimension of the border as well as Magaña’s clandestine situation to reassure the state immunity.

But the main element that distinguishes the way immunity works is that while they are successful in protecting the market, they now fail to do the same with the state. This distribution of immunity has effects that are at the same time selective and asymmetric. Like depersonalization, it benefits constituted power at the detriment of constituent power, putting the state officers somewhere in the middle. This in-between location points to the dominant-dominated position of the state in relation to the market, to use Bourdieu’s terms. After a few years of consecutive femicides, Klaus Haas, a German who owns a store in Santa Teresa, is saddled with responsibility for the femicides. But, as Kurnick points out, of course this “revelation is wholly anticlimactic,” because the reader knows very well that “while Haas is obviously a violent man, he is just as obviously not ‘the’ author of the hundreds of killings, if of any” (130). As a matter of fact, Haas is nothing but the most prominent of the constant scapegoats that the state police finds to cover its own failure, since the beginning of the chapter. Equally, once the first suspected murderer is quickly absolved, his innocent colleague is incriminated in his place by the police, because the appearance of justice (the fiction of order) is more important (and less costly) than actually investigating criminals. In Santa Teresa, the state does speak: it says, “here is the criminal.” Even
when it knows it is not. Whereas Anglo-American detective stories depicted an incompetent state that did not know, and Southern Cone ones perceived a criminal state that did not want to know, the state on the Mexican-American border is portrayed as an entity that is more concerned to make its citizens think that it knows, because, like the market, it needs to produce mirages to sustain itself within the margins of constituted power. The state’s need to make its citizens believe in its all-pervasiveness itself reveals its own frailty.

Nevertheless, unlike the Southern Cone cases here studied, the mirages of the state do not fully work on the Mexican-American border. In the same way as we do not believe in the individual and its narratives, Bolaño seems to posit that we no longer believe in state narratives. This is what distinguishes Santa Teresa’s scapegoats from, for instance, the ones that can be seen in the narratives of Piglia or Fonseca: while in the Southern Cone scapegoats merely expose the close ties between state and criminality; in the Mexican-American border, scapegoats work as a failed *deus ex machina*: they are introduced to suddenly solve an insoluble conflict. Like Harry Magaña and Albert Kessler, scapegoats appear in the plot as an ephemeral restoration of meaning, they show signs of a possible happy ending, only to immediately frustrate these expectations. They are thus more related to a failed attempt to strengthen the immunity of the state than to merely underline its criminal nature.

In Piglia there is a state that succeeds in its production of scapegoats (in “La loca y el relato del crimen,” the innocent Antúnez goes to jail in place of Almada, the real murderer), underlying Renzi’s failure to impose the truth through knowledge. Similarly, in Fonseca’s *Agosto* scapegoats are there to remind the reader of the systematic over-incarceration of Brazilian prisons. In “The Part about the Crimes,” the state also fails, because after scapegoats like Haas are imprisoned, the femicides do not stop but keep on growing. Even if Piglia or Fonseca were far from offering a veiled apology of the state as their Anglo-American models would do, they still believed in the
efficacy of its crumbling voice. Bolaño goes even further, showing that state's narratives, in the same way as that of its coeval individualism, fail to withstand close examination. This is what is being conveyed when the narrator says that “the speed with which the murder of Silvana Perez was solved obscured the previous police failures” (345). Partial resolutions of isolated cases are yet another example of how the state police is no longer immune, because its smoke screens cannot compete with its more unmanageable structural failure. As new femicides accrue, the success of state detectives is short-lived. Later on, the narrator states: “The Santa Teresa police issued a public statement in which it ultimately and vaguely evaded any responsibility. The killer might easily have been a driver headed to Chihuahua from Baja California, and the dead woman might have been a hitchhiker picked up in Tijuana, killed in Saric, and randomly buried here” (354). The ironic tone shows that the narrator no longer engages with the state’s voice, which communicates, but “vaguely,” and is unabashedly subjected to shunning public responsibility, excusing itself in implausible coincidences, in the impersonal third-person as well as in the border’s porosity. Far from enduring the symbolic muteness circumscribed to its female victims, the Mexican state speaks. But its language is weak, and (as its policemen) impotent.

5.4 Conclusion: Depersonalization and Multitude

Neoliberal depersonalization and its by-products (unintelligibility, symbolic blindness and immunity) affect all social agents in the novel but they do so in an asymmetric and selective way. On the one side, there are the victimizers and their accomplices. For them, depersonalization is actually something positive. Murderers, along the institutions of the state and the market, are depicted in the novel as amorphous ghostly entities. They all hide themselves beneath a diffuse web of agents, who are either anonymous (nameless fugitive men, multinational companies, cartels) or whose names cannot function as the subject of a sentence, unable to compete against
the all-pervasive impersonal third person. Whereas the market appears in the form of illegal (narco) or legal (maquilas) business (i.e: not clearly personified in any prominent character), the state also resists personification, shrouding itself in the sundry mass of failing policemen that amount to no successful detective. These different forms of depersonalization all point to self-protection. They can be read as counterforces that aim to immunize the market and the state, to wash them away from any public liability regarding the crimes. Both the market and the state are more concerned about maintaining their immunity to social disapproval than about restoring social order. In other words, they are more engaged in protecting and polishing their own image, in ensuring that they face neither costs nor damages. Whereas the market denies the identities of its employees; the state refuses to be held responsible for the flawed protection of its citizens. In doing so, both secure power in their invisible hands. On the other side, there are the victims, the female workers, whose depersonalization, far from benefiting them in any way, turns them into bare life. All the freedom and agency that they lack belongs exclusively to their victimizers.

In a nutshell, the asymmetry that affects victimizers and victims is none other than the one that structures the problematic hierarchy between constituent and constituted power. In “The Part about the Crimes,” beyond the all-pervasiveness of depersonalization and its by-products, and although there are no mythical heroes left in the plot, the reader still knows very well who the depersonalized villains are. Of course, these two types of powers can often be juxtaposed: constituent power can easily become constituted once it has been absorbed by the structure of the state, and inversely even then constituted power can still be productive and creative in the same way as constituent power. Despite this, the asymmetric distribution of depersonalization’s effects (positive for some parts of society, detrimental for others) inextricably separates the victimizers from the victims.
Ultimately, the mute and invisible victims of the novel amount to the multitude, a heterogeneous group of bodies that can neither be reduced to the Mexican people (most of them, after all, are immigrants from Central America, i.e: transnational bodies) nor to the traditional working class. By contrast, this multitude is exhibited in the broader notion of constituent power. Bolaño does make the point that not all of the victims can be identified as workers but as women. Gender makes obsolete the use of class or the boundaries of the nation-state. A depersonalized and faceless multitude, these mutilated victims are equally opposed to personification and to any kind of state representation. If Santa Teresa’s depersonalization is shown to benefit constituted power, is the opposite possible or even conceivable? Is there room for a depersonalized justice that could be functional to constituent power instead? At first sight, Bolaño seems to say there is not. His multitude is divested of its agency and affective constituent power, enduring symbolic muteness, blindness and unintelligibility. It remains ever unable to relish the privilege of exemption that is circumscribed to constituted power.

When Esposito analyzes the history of impersonality in the literary tradition, he refers to the “novelist’s withdrawal behind the scenes” (The Third Person 131) that finds its apex first in Flaubert and later in Kafka. Bolaño’s withdrawal is even more radical, because through the systematic use of the third impersonal person he withdraws, like them, his own voice but simultaneously the character’s. Still, his constant use of the oppressive impersonal third-person can be read in a different light. Perhaps, it can be understood as a new expression of the path that, according to Esposito, was inaugurated by French novelist Maurice Blanchot in the 1950s: a different way of engaging with the collective, the multitude, through making visible its non-personal dimension. When Charles de Gaulle returns to power in 1958, Blanchot writes against him that “the power of refusal is accomplished neither by us nor in our name, but from a very poor beginning that belongs first of all to those who cannot speak” (qtd in Esposito, The Third Person
Perhaps, this is the meaning of the impersonal third-person leitmotif that punctuates the narration of every crime, *se cerró el caso*, “the case was closed”: in the path inaugurated by Blanchot, Bolaño, too, “makes impersonality not only the mode and form of the political act, but also its content” (Esposito 132). Perhaps, this is the ultimate political implication to this linguistic feature: the inversion of the oppressive impersonality of the law, the market and the state into an impersonal emancipatory form of collective justice.

Even more, there is a deeper reading that goes beyond the skepticism of the book. Femicides, as Segato defines them, are “crimes without a personalized subject that are performed on an equally depersonalized victim” (“La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez” 93). Due to their depersonalized characteristics that impede us from apprehending them and that grant the long-term impunity of their authors, Segato identifies femicides with genocides, crime against women as crimes performed by a sort of “second state,” a parallel state that in Mexico takes the shape of the *narcoestado* (97). That is why she stresses the importance of creating “new juridical categories” (93). Detective stories and the system of justice they portray are entrenched in the principles of liberal contractualism, rely heavily on personhood. In short, they depend on the opposite of depersonalization: personification. From their inception with Poe, detective stories are structured around the subject, either in the figure of the private detective, embodiment of individualism, or the criminal mastermind, often also been personified in a single individual. The personification of the individualist subject, as I discussed in this dissertation, is fundamental to the construction of the detective genre. Bolaño’s narrative strategy of liquifying individuals, and focusing on the multitude as a whole, can thus be read in a different, less dreary light. If “the multitude produces the common and the common enables the multitude to produce further” (Beasley-Murray 260), his reformulation of the detective story, exposing the asymmetric distribution of immunity, can also be read as a radical recovery and re-signification of something
that has all too often been bastardized in almost three decades of post-Communism and the growing naturalization of the immunitary paradigm: the idea of community.
6. Conclusion. *Nec Ego Nec Mundus*: from Failure to Community

6.1 Failure

“João dizia que havia um ônus a pagar pelo ideal artístico: pobreza, embriaguez, loucura [...], solidão, fracasso.”


Why think about the state today? In 1999, British Scholar Susan Strange coined the neologism “Westfailure” as part of a claim that “the system known as Westphalian has been an abject failure” (345). According to Strange, state sovereignty “has failed” (346) because of its inability to “manage and control the financial system” (345). Strange writes right after the late 1990s Asian financial crisis, and although she clarifies that she does “not mean to say that it is collapsing, only that it has failed to satisfy the long term conditions of sustainability” (346), the role of the state since has become even more problematic. Collapse, according to Strange, is slow: “the signs of decline and ultimate disintegration appear some while before the edifice itself collapses” (346). As these Latin American detective narratives imagine the post-dictatorial state, they also expose the signs of its collapse.

After all, as Jon Beasley-Murray suggests, “it is in Latin America that the failure of modernity’s social contract is most evident” (285). This failure manifests itself from Concepción, Montevideo, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro to Ciudad Juárez. A recurring theme of these texts is that the narrative of individualism no longer works in a genre where it once did. Whereas individualism persist elsewhere, in Latin America, by contrast, the detective, private or public, always fails, in one way or another, at the hands of the post-dictatorial state. At the same time, even if the state wins out, it still fails to secure at least a mirage of contractualism at the hands of an order that privileges constituted power only. The way these detective stories imagine the state, following Bourdieu’s terminology, is as a dominated dominating force. On the one hand, it
dominates the individual and the people; on the other, it is dominated by the market. This also resonates with Strange’s Westfailure in terms of the inability of the state to contain the “financial system.”

This common understanding of failure also features in non-fictional texts written by the authors I have analyzed. In the last volume of his posthumously published diary, for instance, Piglia writes extensively and explicitly about failure. He sees failure as part of his individual self, “the secret story of my life” (*Los diarios de Emilio Renzi III. Un día en la vida* 154). But like João, the main character of Fonseca’s “A arte de andar nas Ruas do Rio de Janeiro,” Piglia also believes that the very “condition of art” (70) is failure, the “driving force” both of his diaries (154) and his novel *Respiración artificial* (71). This can also be claimed about “La loca y el relato del crimen” as well as *Plata quemada*. Putting failure center stage, then, constitutes a poetics: in Piglia’s words, “a sort of negative epic” of “those who have failed” (71). This poetics is not individual, but collective, linked to his generation and their defeat by constituted power. As Ana María Amar Sánchez claims, defeat is central to understand this use of failure: in Latin America, “where governments are behind the crimes and laws protect murderers, success is always suspicious” (qtd. in Hoyos 64). Whereas for Hoyos, this “culture of defeat” appears in Colombian detective stories as a “trait of national identity,” defeat is central and transnational in the poetics of failure of the Southern Cone authors that I have examined. In a diary entry from 1982, Piglia observes that as dictatorship in Argentina ended, so did (in parallel and perhaps surreptitiously) “an age in which a better reality was possible, an era in which he and his friends […] had triumphed because they were still alive and fighting but they had also been defeated, their bodies filled with scars, they were survivors, they were casualties of war” (159). Similarly, in the last article of his posthumous book *Entre paréntesis*, Bolaño defines his own novel, *Los detectives salvajes*, as the attempt to portray a “generational defeat” (327). A similar case can be made about *Estrella distante* and 2666.
or even Fonseca’s *Agosto*. According to Susan Strange, the fact that the Westphalian state “survives despite its failures only shows the difficulty of finding and building an alternative” (346). The stories that I have examined oscillate between these two poles: the prolongation of the ruin and the implausibility of choice.

In 1991, Gilles Deleuze claimed in an interview for *Le Nouvel Observateur* that “the bloody failure of socialism is on everybody’s lips, but no one sees capitalist globalization as a failure, in spite of the bloody inequalities that condition the market and the populations who are excluded from it” (379). Now, almost three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Deleuze’s observation seems more relevant than ever. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the foundations of global capital were rooted in the unrestricted transnational circulation of commodities (NAFTA and the proliferation of free trade agreements that mimicked it) and even of labour (via Mercosur or the Schengen Area) across the boundaries of porous states. The world order produced by the Great Recession of 2008 has challenged these foundations with a surge of personalist leaders in mainstream politics who aim to restore nationalist, protectionist, and/or racist policies, thus marking a new stage in the ever-changing history of capitalism. Strange, in the late 1990s, diagnosed our present scenario: “immigrants, unemployed, refugees, peasants, and all those who already feel that globalisation does nothing for them and are inclined to look to warlords, Mafias or extreme-right fascist politicians for protection” (346). The uneven effects of globalisation, i.e: of transnational neoliberalism, are what led Strange to claim that the foundations of the Westphalian state, once an indispensable requirement for the existence of global capital, were starting to crumble. This gradual transformation redefines the silhouette of what the state used to be and what it is becoming, even if this collapse leads to a new conservative order, even if all this redefinition takes place for the sake of the survival of capitalism itself.
Written during the 1990s, most of the Latin American narratives examined in this dissertation share Strange and Deleuze’s interpretation of failure: they question classic contractualism as well as the different regional translations of neoliberalism, that during post-dictatorship were deemed unquestionable thanks to the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc and the subsequent installation of what French journalist Jean-François Kahn named “pensée unique,” the single thought that regulated the limits of what was politically possible. Despite its multifaceted aspects, Piglia, Bolaño and Fonseca offer a counter-narrative with a common critique: faced with the triumphant narrative of globalization (whose flaws, as Deleuze noted, went unnoticed by most); they put a poetics of failure at centre stage. But this prominence of failure and its oscillation between ruins and lack of choice does not have to be read as a bleak prognosis of the future in a nihilistic and unidimensional way. Beyond this ambivalent oscillation, the poetics of failure offers, instead, a more emancipatory possibility: a different understanding of community.

6.2 Community

“I contain multitudes”

Walt Whitman, “Song to Myself,” Leaves of Grass (1855)

In Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community (1998), Esposito offers a re-reading of the concept. He opens with a concern that is reminiscent of Deleuze’s words: “Nothing seems more appropriate today than thinking community, nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms” (Communitas 1). After examining the meanings of community for Heidegger and Bataille, among others, Esposito argues that a return to the idea of community can have an emancipatory dimension that is far from the nostalgic and oppressive way in which the concept
currently features in mainstream politics, but also far from the defeated Communist order. Communism is dead, long live the Community! To imagine the future of community, Esposito, paradoxically, looks to a remote past: he harks back to the Latin etymology of the word. What is common, concludes the Italian philosopher, is not what is proper (the territory, the land, the nation), because what is “proper” is private. This distorted notion of the common is more defined by exclusion than by inclusion, because what is private always belongs to a necessarily limited number of owners. Instead, community should be understood as “what belongs to more than one, to many or to everyone, and therefore is that which is ‘public’” (Communitas 3). What is common, then, is not circumscribed to boundaries of ethnicity, class, religion or gender, it rather belongs to everybody. For Esposito, “community” cannot be confined to the realm of we (that is so often appropriated by constituted power), it is rather intertwined with the impersonal third person that operates throughout Bolaño’s “The Part about the Crimes”: community is anyone and no one.

According to Esposito, then, community is not a property, not an asset that belongs to subjects. “It isn’t having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack” (6). It is in this regard that his understanding of the concept is indebted to Agamben’s “coming community,” whose members are not “tied by any common property, by any identity” (The Coming Community 5). The common and the proper, far from being synonyms, are antonyms. The members of the coming community are also defined by Agamben in terms of lack: “They are expropriated of all identity” (5). In other words: community cannot be identified with attributes but with depersonalizing lacks. Moreover, communitas is diametrically opposed to immunitas. Whereas immunitas is that which lacks a munus, a duty to others, communitas is what includes that duty, cum munus. But that duty must be read not as a attribute but as a lack, a debt towards society: “The munus is the obligation that is contracted with respect to the other […] Munus […] is giving something that one can not keep oneself and over
which […] one is not completely master” (Esposito’s italics, Communitas 5). In the same way that in “The Part about the Crimes” subjects are surpassed by an unintelligible language, they are transcended by communitas. Esposito claims that “community cannot be thought of as a body, as a corporation in which individuals are founded in a larger individual” (Communitas 7). To put it differently, community cannot be subject to the state nor to a personalist leader that represents it. Community cannot be reduced either to the people or to civil society.

The poetics of failure resonates with Esposito’s radical hermeneutical shift of community’s meanings. This sense of community appears in brief albeit fundamental narrative glimpses, such as when, in Fonseca’s Agosto, Inspector Mattos and the multitude in Rio de Janeiro are divested of Gétulio Vargas’s coffin. It reappears in the mourning for the speechless women of Bolaño’s “The Part about the Crimes” or the desaparecidos under Pinochet that feature in Estrella distante. But more broadly, these iterations of community are intertwined with the poetics of failure because the latter posits the dissolution of traditional representations of individualism and the state, the I (ego) and the We (nos), and it rethinks both categories as bodies filled not with attributes but lacks. The poetics of failure overcomes the myth of individualism embodied in Anglo-American detectives while it aims to challenge the very possibility of personification itself, in a literary and a political way: respectively, in the pulverization of the private eye and of the sovereign. Once the symbolic disabilities of the state have infected individuals as well, everyone in the community, individualist heroes and state officers, the private eye and the policemen, are structured by their lacks: blindness, deafness, muteness, impotence, infertility, paralysis, illiteracy and unintelligibility, and so on. Everyone and anyone are equalized by lacks, thus constituting an acephalous and impersonal community.

The poetics of failure shares the impersonal dimension of Esposito’s communitas, as shown in the arc whose path goes from personification to depersonalization, from a solid and stable ego
to the impersonal third person. From the ruins of a crumbling post-dictatorial state, a potential for a new understanding of community arises. This is a way of interpreting the all-pervasive symbolic disabilities that contaminate the dismembered bodies of the private eye as well as that of the police institution in Latin American detective fiction. Despite the attempt to make them embodiments of individualism or the sovereignty of the state, these characters are ultimately engulfed by community. Because, as Esposito puts it, “community isn’t an entity nor is it a collective subject, nor a totality of subjects, but rather is the relation that makes them no longer individual subjects because it closes them off from their identity with a line, which traversing them, alters them” (Communitas 139). This “line” is the cum, the “with” in communitas.

As a result of this line, there is no room for individualism or for the state as we know it in this understanding of community. Tagle/Wieder, first portrayed as a great individualistic personality, ends up melting into the thin air of the Chilean diaspora in Europe, and ultimately becomes indistinguishable from his victims. Something similar happens to Mattos when he becomes political and corrupt and, subsequently, when he joins the multitude in the streets: his individuality is dissolved to be assimilated by the crowd. The systematic use of the third person, in “The Part about the Crimes,” swallows up any “specks of dust” of personhood, as Deleuze would put it. This is also a way of reading the presence of the multitude that invades both the individual and the state in these narratives. Even if Esposito does not explicitly mention the multitude, ultimately, it is not that alien to the common: both are “only lack and not possession, property, or appropriation” (Communitas 139). If the community cannot be identified with the people, it must then be aligned with the multitude. The poetics of failure, then, pulverizes the

12 The fact that this multitude is defined by its engulfment of individualism and by its subsequent lack of personality (it doesn’t have a “we” that would exclude those who do not share “our” attributes), this does not necessarily mean, again, that these multitude may not allow for individuals. After all, Bolaño still introduces us to characters, however precarious and depersonalized they may be. Whether the Spinozian notion of multitude must be understood as a subject of political struggle or not exceeds the scope of this dissertation, and is an ongoing discussion in political theory.
incarnation of the traditional masculine sovereign while at the same time offering the emergence of an impersonal multitude, one that is emancipated from class and gender oppressive mechanisms.

6.3. *Nec Ego Nec Mundus*

Watt finds that the twentieth-century rewriting of the classic myths he studies, specifically Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947) and Michel Tournier’s *Vendredi* (1967), no longer display “an endorsement of individualism” (274). After examining these detective stories, something similar can be said about the private eye in Latin America. Likewise, Theodor Adorno once wrote that Franz Kafka’s work exhibits “a skepticism towards the ego” (250). As shown in this dissertation, a kindred skepticism hovers over the works of Piglia, Bolaño and Fonseca, who in this regard are inheritors of Kafka. After all, Renzi, B. and Mattos are far from being heroes, reproductions of a masculine self that in Anglo-American detective fiction has traditionally been represented as a flawless and stable *ego contra mundum*. Not even their anti-heroism is heroic. By contrast, this “skepticism towards the ego” constitutes a radical critique of individualism at a time when the individual was at the core of neoliberal politics. German-Catalan theorist Robert Caner-Liese claims that Kafka aimed to “unmask this ego that presents itself as compact, consistent, univocal and solid” (16). Caner-Liese cites Adorno’s description of a self who is gifted with an “identical, instrumental and virile character” (Horkheimer and Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment” 26), and who “believes to be able to amplify his limitless masculine domination” (Caner-Liese 16). The fictional world portrayed by Piglia, Bolaño and Fonseca is indebted to this Kafkaesque critique of the self, as all their individuals are utterances of failure. Following an arc, in which the *immunitas* of the masculine embodiment of sovereignty gradually vanishes, from Borges’s Lönnrot to the multitudinous detectives of Santa Teresa, this skepticism towards the *ego* leads to an engulfing of the individual by an all-pervasive community.
To articulate this skepticism, all these narratives resort to detective stories as a means of social commentary. But they also share something less evident: in one way or another, they all establish a dialogue between this tradition and at least one other genre. They all combine a dominant genre, detective fiction, with a peripheral one that adjoins them. Piglia’s “La loca y el relato del crimen” and Plata quemada draw from Walsh’s non-fiction novel; Bolaño’s Estrella distante and 2666 can be read as responses to both the dictator novel and testimonio; Fonseca’s Agosto engages with the historical novel. Despite their differences, what these adjoining genres have in common is that they all rely heavily on factuality. In this tension, between literary elaboration and the mirage of the transparency of data, between myth and historiography, between imagination and information, the former always overcomes the latter. Yet mythification is not meant, as it once was, to endorse individualism but to destroy it.

On the other hand, most of the narratives examined in this dissertation put at center stage an alter ego, which is the very condition of existence of another literary genre: autofiction. A genre that is fundamentally contemporary with the post-dictatorial context in Latin America (and more broadly, with post-modern literature), autofiction toys with factuality to render it irrelevant. Emilio and Renzi, after all, are Piglia’s middle and second last name. Renzi features in most of Piglia’s work and follows a parallel life path. The preface to Estrella distante states that the story was written in Blanes, where Bolaño spent the last years of his life and also where the denouement of the story takes place. The anonymous narrator/author claims to have written the story with the help of Arturo B., a pseudonym that alludes to Arturo Beñariño, a character that reappears constantly in Bolaño’s work. Fonseca, like Mattos, was also a policeman who became a commissioner during Vargas’s last administration. Nonetheless, these alternative selves are not at the service of glorifying the subject; they partake instead in a common strategy of fragmenting it. A similar case can be made for the Doppelgängers (Tagle/Wieder, Mattos/Vargas) and madmen (Piglia’s
Madwoman Angélica Echevarne, Bolaño’s Lalo Cura and Fonseca’s Mattos) that also permeate these texts. As Foucault claims, “madness is the déjà-là of death” (“Stultifera Navis,” 27). This inherent preeminence of death in madmen reminds the reader of the limits of the individual, at a time in which individualism and its alleged boundless powers (of consumption, of production, etc.) are constantly advertised. Alter egos, Doppelgängers, and madmen are all different forms of attenuations, fragmentations of individualism, that lead to its ultimate engulfment by community.

Unlike Kafka, who still believed in (and feared) the power of the state, with its oppressive bureaucratic structures; the poetics of failure espouses a skepticism that is not only aimed towards the ego but also towards mundus. This twofold skepticism is what distinguishes Piglia, Bolaño and Fonseca from their Anglo-American precursors. Despite their apparent disdain towards the state, Poe and his heirs still fiercely believe in its perfectible potential. They might toy with the incompetence of its officers, they might question its efficiency or even its good intentions, but ultimately, they still think the state is necessary. They cannot think beyond the apology for classic Westphalian sovereignty. This is why the poetics of failure constitutes a radical criticism of the state, that arises from the fact that in Latin America the state failed to camouflage its servility towards constituted power, it failed to secure the mirage of contractualism, either in its neoliberal or in its populist translation.

This dissertation demonstrates how the tensions between individualism and the state are inaugurated, reproduced, and consolidated in Anglo-American detective fiction to be later problematized, subverted, and overcome in Latin America. Ultimately, this dissertation lays the foundations for how we should read and study detective fiction henceforth. By focusing on the exceptionality of Southern Cone reformulations of the genre, I hope to have shed light on their truly radical critique of the state in Latin America and it renders obsolete Anglo-American narratives of individualism. Furthermore, this dissertation exposes a critique of the state that goes
substantially beyond when compared to the Anglo-American canon. Against Watt’s *ego contra mundum*, Piglia, Bolaño and Fonseca rewrite this opposition, transforming *ego contra mundum* into *nec ego nec mundus*: neither the individual nor the state. In their stead, they announce the emergence of a radical and unprecedented community.
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