

REFIGURING UNIVERSALISMS: THE CASE OF THREE POSTMODERN
SPANISH NOVELS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Refiguring Universalisms: The Case of Three Postmodern Spanish Novels

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This dissertation seeks to understand why novels of the post-Franco period have engaged with the theme of universality. The project traces the evolution of the terms “universal,” “universalism” and “universality” in the twentieth century, and explains the ways in which postmodernist fiction and literary theory have criticized these notions for their tendency to assert master narratives at the expense of marginalized cultures. Although their association with imperial discourses has contaminated universalisms, it is argued that three metafictional novels by authors Bernardo Atxaga, Enrique Vila-Matas, and Javier Cercas attempt to move beyond the particular by affirming the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans. Drawing on ecological theory and continental philosophy, this project engages a close reading of the primary texts and concludes by proposing new cosmological understandings of selfhood. It is shown that Atxaga, Vila-Matas, and Cercas highlight literature’s capacity to forge new networks of relationship between humans, nature, material objects, and historical influence.

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Introduction

This project began as an attempt to solve a puzzle that emerged when I taught Javier Cercas, Enrique Vila-Matas and Bernardo Atxaga's novels *Soldados de Salamina* (2001), *El mal de Montano* (2002) and *Obabakoak* (1989) in a course on post-Franco Spanish fiction. The novels are postmodern insofar as they exhibit qualities such as narrative fragmentation, temporal rupture, and metafictional blurs between truth and fiction. However, in the process of discussing these works with students, I discovered that the narrators in all three texts conceive of *being* beyond the confines of particular identities. Since postmodern novels generally reject notions of the universal, I started to wonder: how is it possible that these texts would frame the transcendence of the particular self in a positive light? In the process of answering this question, I arrived at the conclusion that the version of postmodernism that the authors posit is both deconstructive *and* reconstructive in nature. The novels rebuff that there is such a thing as a cohesive ego, but the texts also reconstitute the subject as part of an all-encompassing network of relationships. The novels analyzed in this dissertation represent a phenomenon that I refer to as "interconnective" universalisms. As such, Atxaga, Vila-Matas, and Cercas embrace universals not only to dissect the separateness of the self, but also to posit a new constellation of relationships between humans and the nonhuman.

Defining the Universal

The definitions and uses of "universal," "universality," and "universalisms" are not always clear. At the root of "universal," we have "universe." Universe derives from Latin origins and it is composed of uni-, or "one," and versus or "turned." In its adjective

form, “universal” begins to take on the form of a rule. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* the “universal” is defined as that which “affects, or [is] done by all people or things in the world or in a particular group; applicable to all cases.” In reality, the idea of the “universal” does not necessarily deny the diversity and the multiplicity of beings. It points to properties that are shared by all the beings that belong to a given universe. Although it is possible to think of the attempt to *universalize* aspects of the world as a gesture of totalization, there is also an inherent sense of diversity and multiplicity built into the definition of this concept.

Contemporary debates on universals trace back, in many respects, to the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. Kant applied the term *universal* to discuss the bases on which humans had the ability and imperative to act in moral ways. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), Kant writes: “Any action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law” (24). Kant engages the term *universal* on dozens of occasions in *Metaphysics*, yet he does not interrupt the flow of his writing to define what it means. For the most part, the term is used in descriptive collocation with “rights” and “laws.” There is no way to know why Kant does not take the time to define a term he uses on a frequent basis. However, we can speculate that it would have been problematic to draw attention to the definition of the “universal” itself as an effort along these lines may have destabilized the supposedly self-evident truths around which *universals* are meant to revolve.¹

¹ Although it is outside of the scope of this project to do so, it would be useful to conduct a statistical and quantitative analysis of the recurrence of the term *universal* in different bodies of philosophical and literary texts. One could get a sense of what other terms it emerges with and begin to speculate on how humans have thought of the universal in terms of a larger network of conceptual and linguistic relationships.

A decade after the publication of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Hegel pursued a more abstract line of thinking about universals in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1809). While Kant conceptualizes universals in terms of the rights and freedoms of the self, Hegel brings these ideas into the sense of awareness and the relationship between the human and what he calls “the Spirit.” *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* begins with a reflection on the ways in which consciousness relates to the external world and to itself. The splitting of the “thinking I” from the “object that is I,” is the preoccupation driving the first part of his analysis. He writes: “The I is the universal, the simple: it distinguishes and also suspends the distinction, and has on the universal, the simple itself for the object... I am the universal, but when I say ‘I,’ I have myself as object. I am this movement in myself, being-for-self. I relate to myself, universal to universal” (165). Hegel’s discussion of universals and universality seeks to understand how consciousness relates to itself. As he moves through his analysis, he eventually posits the notion of a Spirit, and abiding entity that exists beyond the materialized in the human body.

Behind or beyond the embodied self, there is the transcendental I, the Subject, with its *a priori* categories for the perception and process of reality. Nevertheless, consciousness also depends on the contrasts of material reality. Hegel turns to nature in order to give an example of what he means by the universal when he writes that, “we find plenty of universals – space, time, the process of becoming self identical, becoming as a universal...” (160). As with Kant, Hegel also employs the term “universal” as a kind of flexible modifier – there is always a “universal something.” For Hegel, time and space are universal, yet the process of “becoming self identical” and “becoming as a universal” is included in the realms of what goes beyond the particular. The self-identity involves

some sense of the Spirit, but Hegel is also interested in grounding his explication of the universal in relation to the human self.

In the work of both Hegel and Kant there is a sense that the term “universal” modifies another term and that this concept is also subject to the processes of becoming. To qualify something as universal was not done at the expense of denying the diversity or multiplicity of the world. Instead, these philosophers evoked the term in their efforts to conceptualize human rights, consciousness, and the designation of elements of the universe.

Archetypes and New Criticism

In a more recent field of inquiry, the emergence of New Criticism in twentieth-century American literary scholarship marked a watershed moment in which thinkers aimed to systematize an epistemological framework of textual analysis. New Criticism diverged from the philological methods of literary analysis that had prevailed before. New Criticism offered a new set of parameters and transferable sets of knowledge that literary analysts could apply to any text.

Psychoanalysis figured prominently in the New Critics’ quest to establish a “science” of literary criticism. For many of the New Critics, the theory of archetypes developed by Freud’s protégé Carl Jung proved pivotal. In his analysis, the archetypes were a component of the collective unconscious, which he defined as “the repository of man’s experience and at the same time the prior condition of this experience [-- it] is an image of the world which has taken aeons to form” (95). In “The Assimilation of the Unconscious,” Jung writes, “We shall probably get nearest to the truth if we think of the conscious and personal psyche as resting upon a broad basis of an inherited universal

psychic disposition which is as such unconscious, and that our personal psyche bears the same relation to the collective psyche” (147). The unconscious is the place where all the universals reside. In Jung’s framework, this phenomenon results from the collection of physiological and psychological instincts over the thousands of years of human evolution, but there is also a “cosmic” and enigmatic dimension to the world of the archetypes. Jung’s analysis of this realm had an important impact on literary criticism in the twentieth century. In the following passage from the essay entitled, “The Archetypes of Literature,” Northrop Frye describes the potential for archetypes to lay the foundation for unifying the disparate elements of criticism:

An archetype should be not only a unifying category of criticism, but itself a part of a total form, and it leads us at once to the question of what sort of total form criticism can see in literature. Total literary history moves from the primitive to the sophisticated, and here we glimpse the possibility of seeing literature as a complication of a relatively restricted and simple group of formulas that can be studied in primitive culture. (116)

Frye had no reservations about turning criticism into a “total form.” The study of literature, according to Frye, has to discover a set of common denominators that can be used to analysis any work of literature: “myth is the central informing power that gives significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle.” New Critics were not just interested in an explanation of the *universals of life* (although their ideas depended on the assumption they exist) – they wanted to create a toolbox that allowed us to systematize patterns of character, plot, and literary structure. That is to say, the New Critics were not only paying attention to certain properties that they understood as shared by every literary tradition, and focusing the “science” of literature on those properties. They took a value position regarding those universal properties and assumed that those properties, because they were universal, were essential to all human conditions and collectivities.

The Deconstructionist Turn

Post-structuralism emerged as an intellectual tendency to sow epistemological doubt into the claims of scientific certainty proffered by New Critics. A watershed work in this movement was Paul de Man's deconstructionist treatise *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (1979). De Man begins the book by suggesting that literary formalism has been a difficult trap for critics to escape. He argues that "semiology [...] demonstrated that the perception of the literary dimensions of language is largely obscured if one submits uncritically to the authority of reference..." (5). Semiology provided a way to break out of the confines of formalism with its ability to dismantle the "myth of semantic correspondence between sign and referent" (6). According to De Man, meaning is no longer attached to words in the automatic ways that New Criticism proposed. (4) This development brought a new freedom as the referents of terms were thought of as detached from their signifiers. The new autonomy of the signified allowed for a greater range of "indeterminacy," and allowed critics a new space to analyze texts in more flexible ways than the New Critics had embraced. De Man developed readings of texts by exploring the linguistic and grammatical structures of words and phrases. His criticism played an important role in driving the trends of literary analysis in a more postmodern direction.

Postmodern art, literature, film, and architecture generally represent an embrace of ambiguity and indeterminacy. Fredrick Jameson considered these developments from the perspective of Marxism in his book *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (1991) Jameson regards postmodernism as a development of the cultural logic of late-capitalism. His argument contends that various stages in the development of

capitalism (market capitalism, monopoly capitalism, late capitalism) have corresponding shifts in the modes of cultural production.

Although a critic of postmodernism, Jameson manages to sidestep embracing a universal definition of the movement that has heralded the death of the unified subject. He explicitly avoids providing a closed definition of postmodernism and instead suggests that he has not “tried to systematize a usage or to impose any conveniently coherent thumbnail meaning, for the concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory” (xxii). However, if there is a central idea to Jameson’s open-ended explanations of postmodernism, it is the emphasis on the “death of the subject.” In

Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson argues:

The representational paradoxes involved in any narrative whose fundamental category is the postmodern "group" can then be articulated as follows: since the ideology of groups comes into being simultaneously with the well-known "death of the subject" (of which it is simply an alternate version) -- the psychoanalytic undermining of experiences of personal identity, the aesthetic attack on originality, genius and modernist private style, the waning of "charisma" in the media age and of "great men" in the age of feminism, the fragmentary, schizophrenic aesthetic alluded to above (which in reality begins with existentialism) -- the consequence will be that these new collective characters and representations that are groups cannot any longer, by definition, be subjects. This is, of course, one of the things that problematize the visions of history or "master narratives" of either bourgeois or socialist revolution (as Lyotard has explained), for it is hard to imagine such a master narrative without a "subject of history."
(348)

The first paradox to which Jameson draws attention relates to representation. There is a collapse at the level of the subject that undermines the very notion of conceptualizing different identities. How does one actually celebrate the rise of marginalized groups that were cast aside in previous discourses if the subject is dead? There is also an extent to which Jameson performs elements of the postmodernist literary approach. One gets the

sense that the “fragmentary,” and “schizophrenic” discourses to which he refers are influencing his nomadic shift in focus from subjects to master narratives.

The term “universal” is not a key factor in Jameson’s analysis. However, there are threads of continuity between his definition of postmodernism and that of Linda Hutcheon. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism developed as a reaction against the push to understand the world through totalizing systems of knowledge:

Like much contemporary literary theory, the postmodernist novel puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin. (57)

The items on Hutcheon’s list are not interchangeable synonyms for *universality*.

Nevertheless, the passage makes clear that liberal humanism sought to establish systems around which knowledge and truth could be organized. The postmodern sensibility treats with skepticism any attempt to construct centralized or hierarchical forms of knowledge.

According to Hutcheon, the collapse of the epistemological “center,” coincides with a rising importance of the margins. Modernism and its discourses of centralization created the terrain on which the negation of postmodernism could emerge. Hutcheon indicates not only what postmodernism rejects, but also what it asserts:

The move to rethink margins and borders is clearly a move away from centralization with its associated concerns of origin, oneness (Said 1975a; Rajchman 1985) and monumentality (Nietzsche 1957, 10) that work to link the concept of center to those of the eternal and universal. The local, the regional, the non-totalizing (Foucault 1977, 208) are reasserted as the center becomes a fiction— necessary, desired, but a fiction nonetheless. (58)

The terms from the passage serve to reinforce this point -- “center,” “local,” regional,” – they cast universality and postmodernism along spatial and temporal lines. Hutcheon reveals the underlying tenets of multiculturalism and cultural relativism, which emerged as alternatives to the impositions of centralizing discourses. The definitive answers and meanings of life no longer resided at any geographic or conceptual center. The parenthetical mention of Foucault indicates that he was also a relevant figure in this trend. To be certain, Foucault’s genealogical approach intended to peel away the arbitrary choices made by the disciplinary approaches to knowledge construction. Foucault’s analysis illustrated the extent to which Truth needs to be replaced by “truths.”¹

In his *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale focuses on the ontological and deconstructionist aspects of postmodern narrative. His work examines the qualitative transformation that occurred when postmodernism replaced its predecessor, modernism. Unlike modernist fiction, McHale writes, “... the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological” (10). McHale suggests that a hallmark of the postmodern text is its tendency to question the nature of reality asking, “what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?” (10). According to McHale, postmodern narratives figure writing as an activity analogous to death and the ontological undermining of the idea of the self. He writes, “... Texts about themselves, self-reflective, self-conscious texts are also, as if inevitably, about death, precisely because they are about ontological differences and the transgression of ontological

¹ The move to consider the importance of those on the margins, from a historical standpoint, coincided with the emergence of postcolonial discourse, as the celebration of the peripheral over the centripetal represented the movement toward autonomy from the discursive control of the West on decolonized parts of the world.

boundaries” (231). McHale brings the question of ontology to the forefront, but he focuses on how this approach allows for the existence of multiple universes:

... to “do” ontology in this perspective is not necessarily to see some grounding for our universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing other universes, including “possible” or even “impossible” universes — not least of all the other universe or heterocosm, of fiction. (27)

The “heterocosmic” mode of ontology grasps the world beyond a singular universe. An *other* universe becomes virtually activated in the mind the moment one starts reading a fictional text. The ideas of ontology McHale offers help establish a foundation for reconsidering how to think of universes, even cosmologies in postmodern fiction, beyond the familiar features of the rejection of totalizing systems, and the preference for fragmentation. However, in spite of the openness of his inquiry into the mode of existence of a text, and the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it entertains, in his critique he remains within the paradigm of semiology. For McHale, it is still the symbolic nature of texts that reigns supreme in our considerations of postmodern ontologies. This model does not account for the ways in which the novels analyzed in this dissertation push into more radical responses to McHale’s questions on the modes of existence of a text and the worlds it imagines. The novels analyzed herein envisage the ontologies of literature as a *thing*.

Reimagining the Universal

Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality, (2000) a book that was published as a series of discussions and debates among Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, and Judith Butler explores the possible limitations of the postmodern rejection of universality. The authors outline the ways in which the universal has been problematic in the past, but also look for

ways to recast the concept in a more philosophically rigorous direction. Judith Butler acknowledges the colonizing abuses of universality:

The question of universality has emerged perhaps most critically in those Left discourses which have noted the use of the doctrine of universality in the service of colonialism and imperialism. The fear, of course, is that what is named as universal is the parochial property of dominant culture, and that 'universalizability' is indissociable from imperial expansion. (15)

Butler reflects on the thinking processes that underpin multiculturalism and cultural relativism without necessarily invoking those categories by name. According to Butler's logic, if the problem is that colonial expansion and imperialism attempted to universalize the world, then the solution is to resist this phenomenon by affirming multiple cultural perspectives in favor of metanarratives.¹

The authors of *Contingency* experiment with ways to reframe "universality" so as to dislodge it from its trappings in the hegemony of Western discourse, and from its usual characterization as a discourse of exclusion. Butler suggests that universality does not have to signify colonial oppression, and literary theorist Terry Eagleton has made a similar argument in his book *After Theory*. Eagleton suggests that the rigid rejection of universality in favor of pluralism has perhaps led, paradoxically, to a new form of totalizing tyranny:

Universality just means that when it comes to freedom, justice, and happiness, everyone has to be in on the act. In on whose act, however? That of white Western males who assume that their own idiosyncratic version of humanity should apply to everyone else? This is certainly one of the primary ways in which the idea of universality has been touted, and the postmodern objection to it is to that extent perfectly just. It is just typically unpluralistic of postmodernists to imagine that this is *all* that universality can mean. (116)

¹ It should be noted that the attempt to homogenize other cultures under the domain of imperialist actors has functioned more as a feature of capitalism and its necessity to create a unified world market open to financial exploitation, than early colonialism and its relative tolerance or imperial manipulation of cultural otherness.

Eagleton prompts us to consider how to expand an otherwise narrowly defined phenomenon. He refers to the universal as an “act,” and by doing so, he brings a theatrical dimension to the debate. There is a sense that the act of universality is still something of an artifice, a rhetorical discourse that may or may not be paralleled by real world analogues.

The other challenge to the universal resides in the fact that postmodern theory emerged from the womb of European philosophy. Postmodernism, itself a product of purported Western universality, attempts to unmask the faulty suppositions and arbitrary nature of the universal and to put an end to the “act” of universality, as Eagleton refers to it. However, the unrelenting critique of the universal through the method of deconstruction runs into a problem the moment it aims to ideologically institutionalize or universalize its own anti-universal praxis.

The *use* of universals raises the question of *who* is using them. Judith Butler suggests that those groups normally excluded by hegemonic social structures also have the opportunity to appeal to the universal:

the assertion of universality by those who have conventionally been excluded by the term often produces a performative contradiction of a certain sort. But this contradiction, in Hegelian fashion, is not self-cancelling, but exposes the spectral doubling of the concept itself. (38)

The clash between being a particular that makes claims to the universal does not pose a contradiction in need of absolute resolution, but that instead may remain in constant tension. Butler writes:

The main terms of modernity are subject to an innovative reuse — what some might call a 'misuse' — precisely because they are spoken by those who are not authorized in advance to make use of them. And what emerges is a kind of political claim which, I would argue, is neither exclusively universal nor exclusively particular; where, indeed, the particular interests that inhere in certain

cultural formulations of universality are exposed, and no universal is freed from its contamination by the particular contexts from which it emerges and in which it travels. (40)

The “misuse” of the terms of modernity flows from the fact that groups making claims to the universal are making a generalization of phenomena that are actually particular.

Butler explains that in those instances in which a group aims to invoke the universal, it should be aware of the fact that its own particularity could be contaminating the process.

Her analysis in the passage above does not take into consideration that the excluded groups have the option of appealing to other meanings of the word “universal.”

The idea of “cosmopolitanism” also figures prominently in the discussion regarding how cultural groups make claims to universal principles. In her essay, “Cosmopolitanism, Universalism and the Divided Legacies of Modernity,” Amanda Anderson makes an important distinction between exclusionary and inclusionary cosmopolitanisms. Throughout the essay, Anderson highlights the beneficial aspects of universalism and cosmopolitanism while remaining vigilant of the shadow sides of both those concepts. The passage below opens a pathway to understand how it is possible to reimagine universality in more constructive ways:

In exclusionary cosmopolitanism, little to no weight is given to the exploration of disparate cultures: all value lies in an abstract or “cosmic” universalism. In inclusionary cosmopolitanism, by contrast, universalism finds its expression through sympathetic imagination and intercultural exchange. (268)

Anderson seeks an avenue beyond the “cosmic universalism” that has been associated with Western imperial discourses. The antidote she provides is affective in nature -- inclusionary cosmopolitanism relies on an ongoing sympathetic connection between cultures. In the following passage, she highlights one of the possible pitfalls of new universalism and cosmopolitanism:

The narrowly ethical versions can sometimes appear to over-emphasize a heroicized individual cultivating its relation to otherness and to global diversity: here cosmopolitanism risks becoming an art of virtue of the nineties that stands in for broader-based political programs. (286)

The potential problem with universal acceptance is that it borders on ego gratification for politically correct, “open-minded” Eurocentrics. What the passage compels us to consider is how to engage universalisms and cosmopolitanisms in a way that still acknowledges the fact that those coming from positions of privilege could fall into the trap of self-congratulatory triumphalism. Nevertheless, Anderson seems to presuppose that cosmopolitanism is an option only available to the privileged and as Butler makes clear, this is not the case.

The point is that universals can be practiced in an effective way or not, but it is not a phenomenon related exclusively to Western subjects. Anderson illustrates the pitfalls of ethnocentrism, but what about discovering the generalizations that establish connections across cultures? Although Anderson favors inclusionary cosmopolitanism over “cosmic” universalism, this dissertation will aim to show that there is also a cosmic dimension to inclusionary universalities. For the novelists featured in the analysis herein, there is an insistence on notions of accessing aspects of primordial existence that contemporary life papers over.

In other instances, the universal has been thought of as the background or measuring stick against which particular cultural cases are measured. At times, the culture that places itself at the forefront of human history claims the universal space, and measures other cultures in terms of their deviation from the established norm. Another version of the universal relates to the idea of establishing a set of universal human values. In spite of historical and cultural diversity, there is a need for a shared morality that is

demanding by the planetary consequences of our individual and collective actions and behaviors.

The Challenge to Historicism

Historicism sensitizes our understanding of the past to the specificities of cultural difference and the contingencies of previous events. The turn to historicism in a variety of humanistic fields has promoted the close analysis of specific moments in time and has revealed the richness offered by micro-histories. This approach has led to a move away from overgeneralization as scholars have narrowed the focal angle of historical analysis. But what happens when the focus zooms back out and one takes a view that sees beyond the particulars of historical events? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider to what degree it is possible to map moments in time in broader relation to rest of history. With respect to history, the tension between the universal and particular relates directly to determining the appropriate scale and scope of analysis.

While Butler and Eagleton navigate the colonialist dimensions of universality, Žižek suggests that the reason for the waning emphasis on the “big picture” has occurred because of the tendency in historiography to raise the particular of certain circumstances over universal values. What has become universalized is precisely the *doxa* that all interpretation must be reduced to the multiplicity of differences and particulars. In his contribution to the *Contingency* collection, however, he raises the following moral issue:

... What are the limits of the historicist criticism of false universals? Is it not much more productive, for inherent theoretical as well as for political reasons, to maintain the paradoxical notion of the Universal as simultaneously impossible and necessary? (10)

Historicism has worked to expose what he refers to as false universals — the more one delves into historical specificity of a situation, the less consistent the case is with some kind of universal pattern. While Žižek does not invalidate the historicist penchant to tease out the particulars of events as they unfold in specific historical contexts, he does question the potential automaticity of abandoning universality altogether. He poses the interesting solution of holding universality within the paradoxical bind of being morally and politically imperative. It is a mistake, he suggests, to reduce universality to *only* a phenomenon of totalization or homogenization.

Laclau articulates this idea of synthesizing the universal and particular in another way in “Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity.” He proposes the following way to connect the universal and particular: “The universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining the particular, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity” (101). As Laclau asserts, the emergence of the universal does not necessarily explain away the particular or reduce the nuances that emerge in local situations, but rather seeks to maintain a constant dialogue between particulars and the larger context of which they form a part. This dissertation considers the degree to which the scale of analysis of the past is flexible enough to incorporate possibilities of universal interconnectivity that temporarily suspend the particulars that root a given self in a specific culture.

The Spanish Case of the Universal

The idea of the universal was mobilized by Francoist ideological and historiographic discourse in an attempt to bring back the Spanish empire. As cultural

production trended in a postmodern direction throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, literary authors made it a priority to unsettle narratives of national centralization. One of the aims of the Falange was to reclaim Spain's place within the "universal history of humanity". In this sense, the universal was deployed as a teleology in which history would march progressively toward Spain rediscovering its "national glory." After the nationalist victory, Franco went on to suppress non-Castilian languages and to assert National Catholicism. Francoist historiographers played a key role in trying to assert a notion of a universal history.

In his book *Narrating the Past: History and the Novel of Memory* David Herzberger discusses the role Menéndez y Pelayo's ideas played in providing historiographers with an idea of how to assert a universal history:

[A] critical component of Menéndez y Pelayo's influence on Francoist historiography hinges upon the concept of universal history. Menéndez y Pelayo consistently ascribed to Spain a unique and permanent historical personality rooted in its spiritual past (i.e., what makes Spain different) that compels the nation to envision its history both within a larger frame of chronological time and beyond the geographic bounds of the Iberian Peninsula. (25)

Herzberger affirms once again the importance of space and time in conceptualizing the issue of the universal. In this case, the focus is on Francoist historiography, a discourse that sought to assert chronological time as flattening into a kind of mythic evocation of the past. The notion of folding the distribution of time into a singular dimension of space is something Herzberger traces back even further in literary history to Augustine's *City of God* and Vico's *Scienza nuova*. He writes: "In general terms, universal history posits that the past is an untold story whose events can be joined into a coherent whole following a design located in the events themselves" (25). Herzberger argues that that to achieve the "idea of universal history, the historiographers of the regime assumed divine guidance at

the point of origin, but also granted an implicit structure to narration centered within the events themselves” (26). In his book *Engineers and the Making of the Francoist Regime*, (2014) Lino Camprubí analyzes the role engineers played in crafting the Francoist project. He explains that the ideologues of the Spanish National Research Council under Franco looked for ways of unifying science and knowledge under the framework of ecumenicalism:

The official propaganda of CSIC explicitly posed the sanctification of science as one of the institution’s main achievements: “the tree of science is now rooted at our fatherland’s heart, and it points towards Heaven, that is, to God and Truth.” This ideal ran together with that of a Christian modernity, that Ibáñez Martín displayed against a “literature that attempted to construe a fictional antagonism between the modern and traditional *Spains*: the Spain of theology, of ecumenical thought, of the Christian and universal vision...” (48).

Camprubí’s analysis illustrates the degree to which National Catholicism attempted to fuse its political and theological visions into a modern science. As he explains, the “Christian and universal vision” served as a foundation for one of the regime’s architects, Ibáñez Martín, to try to suppress any notion that Spain is split into modern and traditional halves.

Given these elements of historiographic background, many of the literary responses to Francoism aimed to dismantle this project of constructing a universal vision. Narratives that broke with cohesion, and the push toward a discursively challenging literary style were seen as artistic weapons in the fight to resist the regime’s attempts to assert its ideological prerogatives.

Robert Spires traces the evolution of literary anti-Francoism in his *Post-Totalitarian Spanish Fiction*. He argues that there is a distinction between the opposition to Franco expressed in Juan Goytisolo’s *Juan sin Tierra* and Carmen Martín-Gaité’s *El*

cuarto de atrás. This observation that has important implications for the literary engagement with the universal: “Goytisolo chose Cuba and North Africa as the setting for the action of his novel because he wanted to divorce himself and his reader both geographically and linguistically from Spain as the authoritative center” (64). Goytisolo’s choice to emphasize spaces outside of the Peninsula echoes Hutcheon’s assertion that postmodern literature lives at the margins and periphery. This literary approach functioned to counteract the centripetal forces of unification, totalization, and universalization that had dictatorial implications during the Franco era. Spires contrasts this approach to Martín Gaité who “chose to operate from the center of Francoist Spain as she focused on the repressive and ideological apparatuses created by the regime to dictate not merely political thinking but gender roles as well” (64).

Despite the different approaches employed by Martín-Gaité and Goytisolo, the goal of their experimental literature was to undermine Francoist claims to legitimacy. Their narratives served to dissipate claims to universal truth that Franco had sought to convey in his National Catholic discourse. The use of postmodern strategies of dispersal, fragmentation, and multivocality in their work functioned as mechanisms to stymie the regime’s attempts to monopolize truth.

In addition to viewing the idea of postmodernism as a struggle of writers to break from the yokes of Francoist teleological universality, scholars have debated the merit of the postmodern approach in general. Postmodern literature from the eighties and nineties largely continued in the tradition of rejecting universality. Indeed, Gonzalo Navajas and Cristina Moreiras-Menor have viewed much of the cultural production in the late twentieth-century as lacking a collective project, and as mired in speculative violence and

melancholia. In her book *Cultura herida: literatura y cine en la España democrática* (2002), Moreiras-Menor summarizes this phenomenon in the following way: “La ausencia de un proyecto colectivo, la negatividad (la integración en Europa se vive en muchos sectores desde la sospecha), y la falta de mirada utópica caracterizan la España posolímpica” (19).

For Gonzalo Navajas, the emergence of postmodern cultural production helped free Spain from the “burden of the transcendental” notions that have characterized ideological literature in Spain throughout its history. Navajas argues that Spanish literature and culture have entered a “post-metaphysical era...a time in which the overly ambitious and absolutist utopian proposals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have become unmasked and disqualified” (New Spain 178). Navajas engages with terms that are part of the associative orbit of universality: transcendence, utopia, the metaphysical, collective identity. These concepts are not equivalents of the universal but share correlative affinities with them all the same. For Navajas, those texts which reclaim the importance of the self and the narrative subjective view, allow the artist to break from centralized projects of narrative nation-building. (175-178) In his book *Postmodernity in Spanish Fiction and Culture* (2010), Yaw Agawu-Kakraba praises Navajas for “effac[ing] all universal principles and systems as well as all rational Enlightenment values as a way of explaining the world” (17). Agawu’s project agrees with the main idea that Spanish postmodern literature rejects universality, and also takes issue with previous critiques of Spanish postmodernism for not acknowledging non-canonical texts sufficiently.

Other scholarly analyses of the postmodern novel in Spain explore the engagement with self-awareness. In *True Lies: Narrative Self-Consciousness in the Contemporary Spanish Novel*, Samuel Amago focuses on the polarizing potential of postmodernism in Spanish literature, arguing that the literary approach has become a battleground among critics with one camp supporting its redemptive features, and another decrying its abandonment of ethics. For Amago, the redemptive qualities of the postmodern text reside in the ability to foreground the narrativization of experience. His book explores the ability of self-conscious fiction to create valuable insights into the nature of identity. This dissertation also aims to demonstrate the ethically redeemable elements of Spanish postmodern fiction. However, by contrast to Amago, my analysis will call into question the very assumption that experimental literature in Spain altogether rejected the main tenets of the modernism.

The critics of Spanish literature thus far surveyed offer valuable insights into contemporary postmodern Spanish culture. Nevertheless, the consensus that the postmodern novel unilaterally disavows universals and its associated concepts, overlooks the ways in which certain novelists have worked to reintegrate modernist values back into fiction. As we turn to ecological and object-oriented ontologies, the possibilities for resuscitating the engagement with universals in contemporary Spanish novels are expanded.

The Contributions of Ecological Theory

The idea that there is an ontological split between society and nature has often been taken as a given. In the background of cultural analysis, be it modern or postmodern, there is often an underlying assumption that humans are distinct from the

rest of nature. According to the anthropologist Phillipe Descola, the acknowledgement of difference across cultures implicitly assumes a fundamental difference between humans and nonhumans. Cultural relativism challenges any totalizing universalism in liberal humanism, but leaves untouched a natural universalism. Descola explains: "... relativism [is] possible only when buttressed, more or less openly, by a natural universal order serving as a backdrop from which an infinity of particular cultural formulas emerge with vividness." (78) Descola critiques the notion that the natural, nonhuman world represents the canvas onto which the portraits of cultural otherness are painted.

The age of the Anthropocene makes it especially impossible to think through this kind of separation between the nonhuman elements of the natural world and human culture. Timothy Clark describes the Anthropocene as the convergence of natural causality and human action:

The Anthropocene, as a bewildering and often destructive intercontamination of human aims and natural causality, manifests itself in innumerable possible hairline cracks in one's familiar world and its weathers. It challenges us to think counter-intuitive relations of scale, effect, perception, knowledge, representation and calculability. (9)

Clark deepens the idea of deeper element of involuntary subjectivity that already came into fruition with the Freudian postulation of the unconscious. Humans are not just out of rational control because we are subject to the will of impulses and instincts, but also because there is an increasing symbiosis of the humans and the climate. The boundaries of what could be considered a "natural event" are undermined. In theory, "nature" was never separate from humans, but with the ability of human behavior to influence the climate the two have converged now more than ever.

Among the implications of ecological crisis is the need to reconfigure dichotomies such as nature/society, human/non-human, and the subject/object. But the way to challenge this form of universalism is not merely to posit Nature as a cultural construct, since this strategy simply privileges one term in opposition to the other. The way out of considering “Nature” as separate is to reconfigure altogether the interaction between the human and the nonhuman while avoiding the pitfalls of naturalistic reductionism and cultural constructivism.

In his article, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that “the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (1). Chakrabarty charts out three key views of the human: the universalist-Enlightenment view, the postcolonial-postmodern view, and the figure of the human in the age of the Anthropocene, “the era when humans acts as a geological force on the planet” (2). Though Chakrabarty insists that none of the three views on the human supersede the other, it is the view of the human as a geological force that most acknowledges the sense of scale involved with any approach to analyzing the human condition. He writes: “Humans, collectively, now have an agency in determining the climate of the planet as a whole, a privilege reserved in the past only for very large-scale geophysical forces” (9). Climate change affects all of humanity, although not at the same rate. According to Chakrabarty, the key feature of our contemporary age is that we are increasingly compelled to think about the human condition on a species-scale. Every individual is embedded in anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic environments although

this does not mean that one should fall into the trap of conceiving of human life as purely biological. The human, from this perspective, has become more-than-human.

Humans and nonhumans are engaged in an activity that we can best describe as depersonified subjectivity. The novels featured in this dissertation explore this complex overlap between the ways in which nonhuman entities enter and interfere with the landscapes of human interaction. The new universalism-infused literature of Spain posits cosmological understandings that provide an alternative to the deconstruction of everything into smaller bits of the particular – the transcendence posited in the texts analyzed here is secular in nature, but there is a move nevertheless to think of experience in terms of the infinitely generalizable frameworks of *being*.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter One, I argue that Bernardo Atxaga's *Obabakoak* reveals a fundamental continuity between the ontologies of self, nonhuman biological forms, and material objects. The starting point for the novel is the short story "Esteban Werfell," which takes place in Obaba, an imaginary space that evokes a Basque village. The main character of the story is a young boy named Esteban who has to negotiate the conflicting influences of Catholicism and European cosmopolitanism on his identity. As an émigré from Germany, Esteban's father makes every possible effort to prevent his son from going to church and culturally assimilating to the village. By the end of the story, the universal that opens for Esteban is established when he manages to reconcile these quasi-universal influences on his psyche. At one point, he hypothesizes whether the practice of selecting memories from the past instead should be replaced with a non-judging retrospection on life as an

entirety – this alternative approach emphasizes the unity of everything that has occurred and avoids the natural tendency one may have parsing one event from another.

The other narratives in *Obabakoak* expand the development of the theme of universals by blurring the distinctions between the human and nonhuman. In the second short story of the novel, there is a mythic narrative in which a young boy transforms into a boar. The witness for this event is a church canon who has to decide whether to believe what he has seen occur with his own eyes even though it contradicts Christian doctrine. The whole narrative is told in the contents of a letter that was found in a basement. The paper on which the letter was written is deteriorated and throughout the story the reader gets the palpable sense the materiality of the document conditions the narrative in ways that suggest an agentic power of *things*. The novel conceives of the universal as flattening the ontological distinctions between selfhood, nature, and the nonhuman material world.

I pursue this idea of the agentic power of *things* further in Chapter Two which centers on Enrique Vila-Matas's *El mal de Montano*. In this novel, Vila-Matas inverts the paradigm of human subjects and literary objects by recasting selves, *things*, and literature as intricately connected on a shared continuum of being. As with other novels he has written, Vila-Matas incorporates a large degree of reference to and citation of other literary authors. At a certain point, the proliferation of all these voices coalesces into a single authorial note of literary creation, a phenomenon theorist Alain Badiou refers to as “univocity.” The narrator envisages himself and his life as an ongoing literary construction, and although it initially causes him grief that he is unable to see life other than through the lens of the literary text, his acceptance brings him into a transcendent space. Chapter Two also draws on Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, which argues that

when observed through a certain lens, inanimate objects behave as if they were alive. Whereas Atxaga brings the individual into universal connections with the memory of the past and with elements of nature, Vila-Matas provides even firmer insistence that the domains we believe to be sacred and *particular* to the human are all part of a horizontal continuum of matter. At a critical juncture in the narrative, the protagonist in *El mal de Montano* suggests that he wants to merge the acts of writing and reading on a single, universalized plane. This gesture points to one way in which the ego is abandoned for a broader sense of self-conceptualization that blurs the lines between self-definition and literary practice.

In Chapter Three, I claim that Javier Cercas's novel *Soldados de Salamina* represents a controversial attempt to rework universals into Spanish historiography. Scholars have seen the novel as an example *par excellence* of historiographic metafiction because of the ways in which the text seamlessly blends non-fictional documented facts with fictional constructions. These observations have illuminated important aspects of the text, but Cercas also affirms the repetitions in history and privileges the universally extractable aspects of the Spanish Civil War. In order to decode the connections that allow Cercas to reveal the "secreto esencial" of the Sánchez Mazas narrative, Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy proves crucial. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche establishes the ways in which "Dionysian" events place the self in universal harmony with others and the surrounding environment. Nietzsche claims that music goes beyond poetry or any written form as a direct communication of emotion. As such, the soldier who saved Sánchez Mazas life sang and danced to *Suspiros de España* prior to the day of the botched execution. Cercas describes the soldier as having been moved by invisible forces. During

Javier's conversation with a fictional Roberto Bolaño, the Chilean author defines the figure of the hero as influenced by "forces" as well. The hero, to be heroic, must be moved by something irrational.

Nietzsche's ideas of the eternal return also resonate with Cercas's novel. Drawing on the notion of historical repetitions playing out in the arenas of war and personal heroism, Cercas demonstrates the ways in which war creates a platform for establishing transhistorical connections among literary phenomena. The idea of the universal emerges as a form of redemption of history that celebrates an anonymous Republican soldier who the narrator imagines marching inexorably toward nowhere at the end of an unwinnable war. In the closing gambit of the novel, Cercas informs the reader that, with this image in mind, he finally has figured out how to structure his book.

The analysis of the three chapters of the dissertation endeavor to position a limited corpus of Spanish postmodern fictional texts as a collective *particular* with the potential to rescue and rework *universals*. The novels propose new cosmological understandings at the phenomenological and ontological levels. In terms of phenomenology, the narrators expand their particular sense of self. Through the methods of careful self-introspection, insatiable literary analysis, and archival research there emerges a relative fusion between the perceiver and the perceived. In terms of ontology, the novels emphasize the centrality of *things* and the expansion of the human being into the realm of the nonhuman. The context that makes this refiguring the universal possible in the contemporary Spanish novel is the fact that the authors wrote these novels after the consolidation of democracy in Spain. Although the notion of transcendence and finding a place beyond the particular was formerly embedded in the project of National

Catholicism and Francoism, these novels establish a new paradigm to revisit the universal and articulate its non-imperial possibilities.

Chapter 1. From Basque Particularity to Universals in Bernardo Atxaga's *Obabakoak*

Bernardo Atxaga's *Obabakoak* (1989) exemplifies Spanish postmodern novels that have embraced universal notions. As scholars such as Mari José Olaziregi have noted, the novel is undeniably postmodern with its use of metaliterary devices and its emphasis on narrative fragmentation (61, 141, 246). In terms of its structure, the novel is comprised of three main sections, each of which is subdivided into short stories or fragments. The first section, "Infancias," consists of three Bildungsroman narratives. The second section of the novel, "Nueve palabras en honor del pueblo de Villamediana," recounts a writer's experience living in a parochial Castilian village. The final part of the novel, "En busca de la última palabra," represents the work's most explicit engagement with metaliterary tactics.

Obabakoak does more than celebrate fragmentation and self-conscious narrative, however. The novel focuses on the subjective experience of its various narrators in ways that allow us to reframe the notion of the universal. Atxaga accomplishes this task by illustrating the limitations of focusing on particulars for the sake of the *particular*. The novel draws attention to specific objects of interest such as the landscape, characters, animals, natural systems, and common objects. However, in the process of inviting the reader into to the *particular* worlds these entities inhabit, he also manages to blur the boundaries that separate human from non-human. Through this strategy, he reimagines the universal as a space that transcends difference.

Atxaga explained his appeal to universal categories in an interview with Annabel Martín. During their discussion, which was published in English, Atxaga explained that *Obabakoak* "instead of leading me towards a kind of *costumbrismo* or parochial

particularism, [writing about] those animals [in *Obabakoak*] opened the door to a universal symbolic sub-text” (196). Atxaga’s comment suggests that he envisages the universal as a mythic and archetypal repository from which *particular* narratives draw their influence and inspiration. Given the interview with Martín, one might assume that the significance of the universal in *Obabakoak* relates to finding the place of the Basque particular within a larger transcendent context. However, in many respects, the novel does the opposite, as it narrates what happens in a small village, Obaba, when the characteristics that make it an idiosyncratic place are challenged by the encroachment of two universal discourses: Catholicism and secular cosmopolitanism. In first narrative of the novel, “Esteban Werfell,” the protagonist is caught in the crossfire between the feuding camps of the local religious institutions on the one side and his atheist father on the other. Esteban eventually finds a way to reconcile the dueling impact these influences had on his psyche.

The novel also challenges the sanctity of the *particular* by: 1) illustrating intersections between human and non-human identities and redefining the human in ways that are interconnected with materials in the environment, natural systems, and animals, 2) treating memory and perception as activities that are necessarily caught up in networks that blur the lines of human exceptionalism and suggest a universal interconnectedness between selfhood and the world, and 3) suggesting that literary texts must move beyond the anecdotal and connect themselves to their literary predecessors, including unknown or unrecognized ones outside the tradition of literature in Euskera. The novel does not negate the importance of the local or particular, but instead, brings universals into relief as if to allow the reader to view them in a process of holistic integration. Atxaga indicates

the ways in which universal discourses often function as a form of prejudice or social exclusion, but also illustrates the role that non-particular ways of being that the narrators of the different stories embrace play in enriching lives.

Esteban, Caught Between Universals

In her article, “*Obabakoak*: El infinito virtual,” Cristina Ortiz develops the concept of the *infinito virtual*, a phrase Atxaga himself has employed to describe the village of Obaba. Ortiz argues that Atxaga’s narrative embraces heterogeneous narration and engages in a rapid alteration of points of view. The *infinito virtual* functions as a space in which anything goes, and allows Atxaga to put elements into play that a rational mind might find incongruous, misplaced, or otherwise inappropriate. Ortiz explains that, ultimately, “toda esa multiplicidad de juegos narrativos tiene como punto de fuga el pueblo de Obaba” (107). According to Ortiz, Atxaga’s Obaba is, “el escenario que amalgama discursos o relatos heterogéneos que se yuxtaponen e interceptan sin que ninguno monopolice definitivamente el texto” (106). In Ortiz’s analysis, there is a lurking sense that she acknowledges something universal in *Obabakoak*. She frames the issue as one in which this “amalgam of discourses” never manages to “monopolize” the text. There is a world of “multiplicity” and “heterogeneity,” yet there is a sense in which all these elements converge at a “vanishing point.” Although Ortiz does not express the argument in quite this way, the harmonious cohabitation of worlds in *Obabakoak* make it possible to reimagine a universal space as one in which the self becomes redefined beyond the limiting particulars that culture imposes.

Atxaga sets the stage for a clash between distinct cultural values that occurs throughout the novel “Esteban Werfell,” the first short story of the novel. This narrative,

in fact, creates a template for understanding the nature of universals that applies to the other, more fragmented and digression-laden elements that comprise *Obabakoak*. The story is told from the third person, but the third person narrative encases the intermittent diary entries Esteban Werfell writes. In his journal, Esteban recalls the ways in which he was caught between the secular, cosmopolitan values of his father and those of the Catholic church. He explains this struggle from the vantage point of an older age, after his retirement as a schoolteacher, as he sits in a library and writes.

Early in the narrative we learn that Esteban's father is a German émigré and manager of a local mine in Obaba. For the better part of Esteban's childhood, he manages to keep his son away from the local church. The canon of the local Catholic church, on the other hand, holds Esteban's parents in disrepute for having a child out of wedlock, and schemes to find a way to get Esteban to merely enter the church. The struggle between the father and the canon to influence Esteban personifies the struggle between the church and secular cosmopolitanism, both of which are discourses with claims to universal values. Indeed, from the timeline Esteban presents, we can assume that he came of age some time in the early twentieth century, a moment when modernization spread to the peripheral areas of Spain at a vertiginous pace. As such, his adolescence is marked by the struggle between rising technological forces represented by the local mine and the insulated provincial culture embodied in the figure of the church canon. In the following passage, Esteban casts the conflict between the interests of his father and the religious cultural *doxa* of the village. In the following fragment from one of his diary entries, he writes:

El odio entre el canónigo y mi padre no era, por decirlo así, exclusivamente intelectual. Tenía que ver con algo más que con la actitud iconoclasta que el

ingeniero Werfell había adoptado nada más encargarse de la dirección de las minas de Obaba. Y ese algo más era mi existencia. (31)

The canon knows Esteban was born out of wedlock and resents the fact that that he was the only young member of the community not attending church. His presence represents a challenge for what is otherwise universally true in Obaba: that everyone goes to church and, at least formally, adheres to its doctrine.

On the opposite side of the struggle is the father, who senses that the threat of raising his son in a provincial place will prevent the young Esteban from being immersed in the same milieu of cosmopolitan values. For the father, Obaba represents a remote outlier to the universal spread of secular modernism. All of this presents a conundrum for Esteban -- will he mature into a mainstream Obaban and attend church like his friends or take on his father's cosmopolitan identity?

The key moment of this struggle comes when Esteban finally receives permission to attend church. The canon invites Esteban to sit next to him during mass. While the organ is playing, Esteban begins to fixate on the flame of a candle below the balcony. As he watches the flame, he moves into a trance and has the hallucination that a young girl is flying in the air with the candle. The fact that Esteban moves into an alternate state of consciousness during his first visit would appear to suggest that he has played perfectly into the canon's hand. Indeed, the music of the organ, the singing of the chorus, and the visual of the candle flame carry Esteban into a sublime state. However, what unfolds ends up laying the seeds for Esteban to fall under the definitive influence of his father.

The girl Esteban imagines to be flying in front of him introduces herself as Maria Vockell and she tells him her address in Hamburg, Germany. She asks him if he knows what love is and tells him to visit her. Esteban nods yes to her question and tells her he

will definitely visit her. The next thing he knows, the canon and his friends are shaking him and waking him up from having fainted. For the rest of the day, Esteban cannot erase Maria's face from his mind. When Esteban tells his father what happened, the engineer sees an opportunity to manipulate his son. We discover that Maria Vockell is the name of an opera singer, and the address she told him happens to be the address of Esteban's father's friend. Esteban's father, concerned that his son would culturally assimilate to the local culture of Obaba, seizes the opportunity of his son's hallucination to impersonate the young girl by becoming his pen pal. He tricks his son by writing letters to Esteban under the aegis of the German girl and pretends, the whole time, to be the conduit of translation and correspondence between Esteban and Maria. The father even involves his friend, who lives at the address in Hamburg which Maria utters, to participate in the ploy. The epistolary relationship with Maria proves sufficient to compel Esteban to attend college in Germany, and in effect, the father's wish to keep his son imbued in the cosmopolitan.

The climax of the story comes when we learn that Esteban has finally visited the address in Hamburg shortly before drafting the journal entry he is writing. After his father passes away, he meets the friend who still lives at the address Esteban had always believed was Maria's. The friend presents Esteban with a letter from his father. It was something the father had instructed the friend to give to his son only if he came looking for Maria. In the letter, the father apologizes to Esteban for having misled him. He asks for his forgiveness. He writes:

Me gustaría llamarte a mi lado y explicarme ante ti abiertamente, sin recurrir a esta carta, pero no me atrevo. Si algún día vas en busca de Maria Vockel, Theodor te entregará esta carta y sabrás la verdad. De lo contrario, quedará en secreto. Sea como sea, te pido perdón una vez más, mil veces más. (47)

Although the father succeeds in having Esteban follow his path into cultural cosmopolitanism, we discover that Esteban holds no resentment toward him for his manipulation. In addition, Esteban holds no resentment toward Obaba – neither to its values, nor its place in his life. For the father and the canon, the values consistent with cosmopolitan secularism and Catholicism represented mutually exclusive universals – ones that could not ideologically co-exist in peace. For Esteban, however, these streams of influence equally shaped his formation. The idea that he can simultaneously hold within his being these disparate discourses is best captured in the hallucination scene described above. The sublime moment at the church that could have turned into his conversion to Catholicism instead functions as the starting point for eventually succumbing to his father's influence.

To return again to Cristina Ortiz's idea of the *infinito virtual* – whereas her analysis takes the "space" of Obaba as the key indicator of how ideologies become processed and reconciled, it is also important to acknowledge the degree to which the characters, particularly Esteban, succeed or fail at integrating competing universal claims into a new system of understanding. The clash of universal positions demonstrates that Atxaga's novel offers an engagement with competing discourses. In the early stages of his life, Esteban has to grapple with the conflict between the secular and Catholic influences on him. As negotiates the tensions between these worldviews and the ways in which the canon and his father sought to shape his thinking, he creates a kind of third space that is greater than the sum of the Catholic and secular parts. He integrates the quasi-universals of both parochial Catholicism and cosmopolitanism into his way of being. This sense of integration is captured in the ways in which Esteban discusses his

life in the diary entries included in the story -- the juxtaposition between the particular and the universal filters into his philosophical reflections and the ways he perceives himself in his broader environment.

Human, Not Too Human

Atxaga unsettles the categories that normally define the human, not by challenging the universal claims of the category of humanity, but by suggesting that non-human agents play a larger role in defining the human self than is readily apparent in everyday life. In the first story that comprises the novel, “Esteban Werfell,” Atxaga provides a prelude to this thematic thread. The narrative emphasizes the surrounding material environment and the presence of non-human actors as the circumstantial conditions within which Esteban deploys his literary practices. At key moments, inanimate objects surrounding writers and readers intervene and leave their imprint on the meaning-making process.

From the beginning of the story, Atxaga blends subjective experience with inanimate elements of material reality. In the initial passages, Esteban’s identity is cast as an extension of his library collection, which contains his and his father’s books. The opening passage describes the conditions under which the protagonist writes his memoir:

Encuadrados la mayoría en piel y severamente dispuestos en las estanterías, los libros de Esteban Werfell llenaban casi por entero las cuatro paredes de la sala; eran diez o doce mil volúmenes que resumían dos vidas, la suya y la de su padre, y que formaban, además, un recinto cálido, una muralla que lo separaba del mundo y que lo protegía siempre que, como aquel día de febrero, se sentaba a escribir. (25)

There are palpable metonymic interconnections between his writing practice, his thinking process, and the memory of his father’s words. In addition to setting the scene by

describing his library books, the omniscient narrator describes the fourteen journal notebooks on his shelves. This metaphorical fortress of solitude allows Esteban to conduct the elegant self-observation explored in his diary entries, and to cast his relationship with his father and his deceptive move to keep his son culturally isolated from the religious and parochial influences of Obaba. The blurring between the self and surrounding scene relates, at least initially, to the rituals and objects around the practice of writing. The narrator constructs an metonymic field of relationships that connects his thinking process to his engagement with his material surroundings, to the memories associated through what he perceives through the senses:

Quizá fuera excesivo pensar así acerca de algo como los cuadernos. Probablemente. Pero no podía evitarlo, y menos cuando, como aquel día, se disponía a abrir uno nuevo. ¿Por qué pensaba siempre en lo que no deseaba pensar? Su padre le había dicho una vez: No me preocupa que tengas pájaros en la cabeza, lo que me preocupa es que siempre sean los mismos pájaros. Era verdad pero nunca había sabido las razones que impulsaban a ello. (32)

Atxaga makes jumps in time that suggest that events are not necessarily casually related. Instead, they could also be viewed as mutually arising factors. That is, the mental tug that draws Esteban's attention to the notebooks occurs simultaneously with his drift toward judging his thought process and remembering his father's words about the "birds in his mind." The entanglement of these factors puzzles Esteban himself. As the end of the passage affirms, he does not know the underlying cause of his thought patterns, and as he moves through the environment, there is an increasing sense that the domains of his autonomous psyche actually overlap with the material objects by which he is surrounded.

The cross between materiality, writing, and human agency comes to the fore in the second narrative of the novel as well. In a different short story entitled "Exposición de la carta del Canónigo Lizardi," Atxaga plays with the notion of the found object. On this

occasion there is also a focus on the object of a letter. In this case, the narrator has found a letter at the bottom of a basement floor many years after it was never sent to its intended recipient. The following is the first passage of the narrative, where we see the importance of the material contact of the physical letter with its environment:

Se trata de una carta que ocupa once hojas de la clase que llaman holandesa, ilegible en alguna de sus partes debido a la humedad del sótano donde, al no haber sido enviada en su día, ha permanecido durante muchos años. La primera hoja, que es la que ha estado en contacto directo con el suelo, se encuentra particularmente deteriorada, y tiene tantas manchas que apenas si es posible entender algo de lo que el canónigo decía en ese comienzo. (59)

Atxaga brings materiality to the fore by demonstrating the ways in which the content of the letter has been affected by its sullied state. As the first-person narrator reveals what he reads from its contents, it becomes clear that certain elements have gone missing because of the degrading factors of time, humidity, and deterioration. Indeed, the meaning of the letter and its interpretation are caught up with the physical realities of the state of preservation of the document. As with most chronologies where the earliest events are less accessible than the most recent, it is the early part of the story told in the letter that is least legible because of the fact that the first page of the document had direct contact with the ground.

Another dimension of the human/non-human connection posited in this same short story relates to the relationship between humans and animals. In the discovered letter dating back to the early twentieth century, a canon of Obaba confesses to a friend the supernatural events he claims to have witnessed in Obaba. This friend is someone the narrator assumes to have held a higher position in the church hierarchy. In the letter, the canon claims that a young boy named Javier has turned into a wild boar. The boar starts to make its presence felt in the town by harassing the families who had always treated

Javier poorly. In his letter, the canon explains that the fact that the boar did not demonstrate a natural fear for humans has led people to believe that Javier turned into the boar. Once the boar starts causing trouble many of the villagers believe they have to kill him. The letter from the canon Atxaga describes the animal so as to suggest the ways in which its identity bordered on the human:

Yo no debería decir que el animal actuó con voluntad criminal, pues sé que no es lícito atribuir a los animales las potencias que únicamente corresponden al hombre. Y, sin embargo, estoy tentado de hacerlo. De lo contrario, ¿cómo explicar su empeño en entrar a la casa? ¿Cómo explicar los destrozos que luego, al ver que no podía romper la puerta, hizo en la hacienda...? (67)

For the canon, the apparent intentionality of the boar's acts, combined with the fact that it systematically attacks the families that had always bullied Javier, provide sufficient evidence for the canon to consider the possibility that the boy transformed into a boar. However, the canon is also aware of the taboo against suggesting this kind of anthropocentrism. The materiality of the letter and the intervention of the boar into the life of the town serve to re-center activity and intention away from the human. When he finds the boar in a cave crying for his mother after killing Matías, the canon is forced to decide what he believes more: what he witnesses with his own eyes or what the scripture tells him is true. To believe the scripture, he would have to discount what he saw as a mere hallucination. However, in order to believe what he saw, he would have to change his definition both of what it means to be human and what it means for a subject to exist in a body. Since the boar appears to straddle human and animal identities, the story challenges the taboo of crossing from human to non-human, animal beings. Indeed, while pre-modern or pagan views of the world understand the human and non-human crossing

as a given, both the modernist and Catholic religious viewpoints reject this understanding.

Humans: A Part of Nature?

In addition to drawing connections between human and non-human activity in the realms of inanimate objects and animals, Atxaga highlights the overlaps and entanglements between selfhood and nature. In another section of the novel, “Nueve palabras en honor del pueblo de Villamediana,” the narrator is an author who has recently moved to the small village of Villamediana, a place that presumably will spark literary inspiration for his writing. The reframing of self-identity as part of the universal emerges when the narrator identifies with some of the primordial forces of nature. In this respect, the linear way of thinking the universal is to understand self-identity as necessarily embedded in a larger network of actors.

Shortly after arriving in the town, he reflects on the weather conditions and comments on the susceptibility of his mood to exterior forces. When he describes his mood shortly after arriving in Villamediana he envisages a porous relationship between human and non-human qualities: “Hay cierta gente que se enorgullece diciendo que su estado de ánimo no depende del aspecto que ofrezca el día. Mi felicidad, dice esa gente, no depende del color del cielo, porque yo tengo mi propia climatología interior” (125). Here, Atxaga coins the collocation “interior climatology” in order to suggest that there is not a subject who feels the objective circumstances within themselves, but instead there is a kind of co-arising of weather and emotion that happens because of sensory networks of the body. Atxaga metaphorically evokes the idea that, for these individuals, the self is an

enclosed entity that operates independently of an “external” nature. The narrator follows up this comment with the following counterpoint to this notion:

Desgraciadamente ese orgullo no está a mi alcance. Si es cierto que perdura en nosotros el recuerdo de todo lo vivido y que en nuestras células permanece aún el hilo de los momentos primordiales, entonces, estoy seguro, el helecho y el musgo de los comienzos de mi vida influyen poderosamente en las variaciones de mi estado de ánimo. Mi espíritu es en lo fundamental semejante al de las plantas: revive con el buen tiempo, y se apaga con la lluvia o con el frío. (125-26)

The narrator conceptualizes human consciousness as a non-linear outgrowth of the forces of nature and considers it inseparable from the inner workings of plants and other forms of simple life. The assertion that memory and consciousness stem back to early life forms undermines the categorical and absolute separation of humans from plants and animals. It also calls into question the idea that human subjectivity can be ontologically defined as isolated from the physical and biological. The narrator’s conception of memory as vitally connected to ferns and mosses reflects the humbling, non-anthropomorphic form of self-definition that is at stake in Atxaga’s work.

To place Atxaga’s gesture of rooting consciousness in primeval life and his blending of human and non-human activity in a more theoretical context, it is useful to invoke what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the successive “humiliations” of humans brought about in modern discoveries of breakthrough thinkers. Žižek illustrates that there are multiple ways in which humans become reduced to the level of lower life forms and desacralized collections of matter. He writes:

First, Copernicus demonstrated that Earth turns around the Sun and thus deprived us, humans, of the central place in the universe. Then, Darwin demonstrated our origin from blind evolution, thereby depriving us of the privileged place among living beings. Finally, when Freud himself rendered visible the predominant role of the unconscious in psychic processes, it became clear that our ego is not even a master in his own house. (Žižek)

Drawing on Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud, he demonstrates how the modernization of humanity has pushed us further into the territory of the post-human.¹ Of the three humiliations Žižek mentions, the one that resonates most with *Obabakoak* is that of Darwin, whose work revealed the fallacy of considering human identity as sacredly separate from other species. Atxaga echoes the dismantling of the human-centered vision of the world with his connection of consciousness and memory to the ferns and mosses. Paradoxically, this association (although, not a reduction) of the human to a primeval essence is precisely the gateway toward the transcendent for the narrator of “Nueve palabras.” The connection with the fluxes of nature are akin to a kind of liberating version of the Freudian “oceanic feeling,” which Freud defined as a “oneness with the universe” (47). The overlaps between the narrator’s identity and nature, rather than existentially threatening the sanctity of his human identity, elevates it to another plane of awareness. An important aspect of conceiving universality in this way is that it goes beyond the assertion of a fundamental unity connecting human cultures. In this sense, the human exists as an extension of nature, not necessarily reduced to unintelligent biological and physical phenomena, but nevertheless entangled with non-human webs and relationships in ways that escape everyday awareness.

As we observed earlier, for the narrator of “Nueve palabras,” the weather patterns and mood exists as two, co-emergent parts of the same phenomenon. Another thinker whose ideas shed light on this approach on the relationship between the human and non-human is Henri Bergson. For Bergson, the complexity of human thought existed on the same spectrum with primitive stimulus-response behavior of simple organisms. Indeed,

¹ It is important to note that Žižek refers to the ego using the gender-biased language of “he.” He would have done better to use the gender neutral “it.”

for Bergson, the distinction between complex and simple life forms was governed fundamentally by the delay between stimulus and response. The differences between humans and simpler animals are quantitative, rather than qualitative, in nature. Elizabeth Grosz cogently synthesizes Bergson's approach to this problem in the following way:

The more simple the form of life, the more automatic the relation between stimulus and response. In the case of the protozoa, the organs of perception and the organs of movement are one and the same. Reaction seems like a mechanical movement... In the case of more complex forms of life, there is interposed both a delay, an uncertainty, between a perceptual reaction and a motor response and an ever widening circle of perceptual objects which in potential promise or threaten the organism – which are of “interest” to the organism. (98)

Even the most abstract forms of thought belong in the realm of stimulus and response that describe simple organisms, blurring the difference in delayed response that distinguishes “simple” from “complex” organisms. In this paradigm, the degree of sophistication in the organism merely exists on a spectrum, a sliding scale that draws the “ferns and mosses,” to which Atxaga refers, and human consciousness under a shared ontological umbrella.

Atxaga brings the abstract intellectual assertions of Bergson to life in the narrator of “Nueve palabras,” who reports on this sense that the movement of weather and mood are not separate events in a casual chain but are constitutively paired phenomena. In “Esteban Werfell,” this paradigm is pushed further as the self becomes integrated into the material settings and broader environment. Fiction is situated as a vehicle to describe the convergence between nature and selfhood. In “Nueve palabras,” once the narrator connects his “internal subjective” state and the weather patterns, his sense of autonomous subjectivity is immediately wrapped up with the non-human forces of nature.

“Nueve palabras” serves as one example of the ways in which Atxaga's novel reorders the relationship between the subject and object. The observer cannot be

extracted from the observed seen and there is no external or “outside” standpoint from which to view reality. Atxaga’s choice to root the actions and character development in inanimate surroundings evokes Bergson’s theories on matter and perception. For Bergson, the “image” functioned as the intermediary phenomenon that reconciled the duality between materialism and idealism. In his exploration of the relationship between memory and perception, the French philosopher elucidated the kind of congruence between self and world posited in Esteban’s reflection on his thought process and his surroundings. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson comments:

We have said that the body, placed between the objects which act upon it and those which it influences, is only a conductor, the office of which is to receive movements, and to transmit them (when it does not arrest them) to certain motor mechanisms determined if the action is reflex, chosen if the action is voluntary. (86)

Bergson conceived of reality constructed of images, a kind of synthesis between the higher order cognitive processes, on the one hand, and inanimate material life on the other. Any movement of the body-as-image in space brings about a shift in the way the universe is processed through consciousness. The issues of images and how bodies interact with other biological and non-biological forms arises in Atxaga’s novel with respect to memory.²

Memory and Dissolutions of the Particular

The appeal to the universal also emerges with Atxaga’s engagement with memory. Indeed, scholars have analyzed the relevance of memory in Atxaga’s work. In her article

² There is a potential to link Atxaga’s engagement with memory throughout *Obabakoak* to Marcel Proust’s idea of “involuntary memory.” In the famous incident of the madeleine from *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust reflected on the insight that memories have a way of asserting themselves and of surfacing into consciousness in arbitrary fashion. Proust figures more explicitly in the second chapter of this dissertation, but this could be a fruitful area of further analysis for a future study.

“De tal el palo, tal astilla: la huella de la memoria en *Obabakoak* y su adaptación cinematográfica, *Obaba*,” Jennifer Carolina Gómez Menjivar characterizes *Obabakoak* and its cinematic adaptation *Obaba* as texts that recuperate the memory of rural villages in northern Spain. Both works, she argues, signal that a key goal of the transition to democracy in Spain was to “rescatar las culturas que fueron suprimidas y oprimidas durante la dictadura” (9). Though Gómez Menjivar focuses on the cultural dimensions of memory and the notion of keeping the cultural tradition of the villages intact, it is important to note the degree to which Atxaga theorizes practices of recollection throughout the novel. The abstract engagement with how memory works represents a dimension of the universal quality of the novel. As such, what follows is an attempt to read Atxaga not necessarily through the lens of Francoist legacy as Gómez Menjivar does, but to interpret Atxaga’s philosophical engagement with memory.

The discussion of memory in the novel serves to call into question the cohesiveness of the self-identity and ego. In “Esteban Werfell,” the reader initially encounters Esteban nestled in an enclave of literary solitude, surrounded by his collection of books. As an adult, Esteban is hermetically cut off from the world and sits to work on his memoir, the main activity that has occupied his time since retiring from his profession of teaching. Despite this condition of self-imposed isolation with his memories, however, there is a crack in the bubble of introspection Esteban has created — there is a lone window that creates an umbilical cord of connection to the outside world. As the narrative progresses, it is revealed that his gesture of looking through the window onto the outside environment functions as a symbolic anchor for his thinking and writing about the past:

Aquella muralla de papel, de páginas, de palabras, tenía sin embargo un resquicio; una ventana desde la que, mientras escribía, Esteban Werfell podía ver el cielo, y los sauces, y el estanque, y la caseta para los cisnes del parque principal de la ciudad. Sin romper su aislamiento, aquella ventana se abría paso entre la oscuridad de los libros, y mitigaba esa otra oscuridad que, muchas veces, crea fantasmas en el corazón de los hombres que no han aprendido a vivir solos. (25)

The phantoms within Esteban relate to a general sense that he never quite reaches peace with his isolation. Indeed, the gesture of isolation would appear to be an affirmation of the particular over the universal of interconnectivity. Yet Esteban is pulled to the external sights and sounds through the window of his library, and each time his attention goes there, he recollects a different element of his past. The window, in particular, serves an important symbolic function in this dynamic. We know from reading the first page of Esteban Werfell that he is alone, and that the window, although not “breaking his isolation,” puts him in contact with something other than his books and his thoughts. Indeed, Atxaga structures much of the narrative in “Esteban Werfell” around the narrator’s gaze out the window. The exact nature of the linkage between what he sees out the window and his memories is never made clear, yet Atxaga does infer that Esteban’s observation of the park outside the window serves to trigger his thought and writing processes. If we consider the nature of the window, we notice that it is an object that separates as much as it connects any two spaces. This dual phenomenon of the window metaphorically stands in for the fraught relationship Esteban has with Obaba and cosmopolitan Europe – he is equal parts connected and disconnected from the two worlds.

As Esteban thinks through the relationship between memory and the past, he comes to conceptualize the place of particular memories within the total field of past events. His division of recollective practices into judging and non-judging memory

connects, as I will demonstrate, with the notion of circumscribing the particular within the folds of the universal. To start, he considers remembering the past in a way that makes no hierarchal distinctions between events. Early in the journal entry that he pens over the course of the story, he writes:

Es posible que la vida sólo pueda ser juzgada en su totalidad, *in extenso*, y no a trozos, no tomando un día y quitando otro, no separando los años como las piezas de un rompecabezas para acabar diciendo que tal fue muy bueno y tal muy malo. Y es que todo lo que vive, vive como un río. Sin cortes, sin paradas. (13)

This initial remark represents the view of the anti-memoir as Esteban questions the enterprise of reflecting on life in a way that selects and highlights certain elements of lived experience while omitting others. The passage gives voice to one side of Esteban's internal conflict over *how* to remember as he considers the possibly arbitrary nature of writing about the past with judgment. Indeed, the version of memory posited above reinforces the idea that though we are aware of a kind of impermanence of life, we nevertheless tend to inject a degree of solidity into events. The flow of states of existence and experience into one another begins to unsettle the boundaries that separate particular selves and human events from one another. Bergson theorizes how perception tricks ordinary awareness into separating life experiences into units of meaning. In the opening passages of his book, *Creative Evolution*, Bergson challenges this operating assumption that our cognitive samples of moments of reality are solid, and suggests that impermanence extends to defining the states themselves:

I say indeed that I change, but the change seems to me to reside in the passage from one state to the next: of each state, taken separately, I am apt to think that it remains the same during all the time that it prevails. Nevertheless, a slight effort of attention would reveal to that there is no feeling, no idea, no volition which is not undergoing change every moment...(1)

Bergson posits that change permeates every aspect of experience even though one is apt to think that there is an underlying, solid background. Since there is no such thing as a cohesive “state” of experience separate from another, then reality is ultimately one fixed state of what Bergson refers to as “duration.” Yet, as Bergson mentions in the passage, the component for acknowledging this state of affairs is that of *attention*. Atxaga, through the vehicle of Esteban and his memoir writing, suggests that it is only through the effort of attention that one might have an insight into the unceasing transience of reality.

Atxaga brings to light the passive, involuntary version of observation of the past. However, in the following passage, Esteban goes on to juxtapose this first mode of retrospection to a more judgmental one by comparing the function of memory to the eye:

Pero, siendo eso verdad, también es innegable la tendencia de nuestra memoria, que es casi la contraria. Como a todo buen testigo, a la memoria le agrada lo concreto, le agrada seleccionar. Por compararla con algo, yo diría que actúa como un ojo. (29)

Esteban connects the functioning of memory to the eye while he gazes out of his window to the roof of a shed in the park. His eyes work their way across over the monotonous brown color of the roof tiles only to stop at a red stain that marks itself out from the rest of the roof: “De esa manera actúa el ojo — siguió — y también, si mi idea es correcta, la memoria misma. Olvida los días corrientes; buscan en cambio, la luz, los días señalados, los momentos intensos” (37). Esteban prefaces the diary entry for the day with musings that juxtapose two notions of memory: one that considers the past as hierarchically divided into important and insignificant events, and another which suggests that when we view the past, we should suppress the all-too-human tendency to select and discriminate. The tendency to separate past events into discrete units functions at both the conscious and unconscious levels. At the conscious level, there is a tendency to recall

events as having occurred within contained periods of time, and as such to imbue them with a cohesiveness that Atxaga and Bergson suggest is a fiction of perception. At the unconscious level, there is a processing of events that seeks to sort them into containers that, once again, serve the legitimate purpose of creating distinctions between moments in time. Esteban punctures this notion with his hypothesis, which is one that resonates with Bergson's philosophy: time is an open flow whose divisions into distinct chunks only exist as psychological projections.

By connecting selective memory to the anatomical device of the eye, Atxaga suggests that in the same way that the attention of the eye is drawn to spots of light, so too is the process of recollection drawn to entities that appear most pertinent to the cohesiveness of a self-knowing identity. In Esteban's case it is his "eye" that not only creates a differentiated perspective on the past, but is precisely that which leads to a coalescence of his "I." By juxtaposing these two approaches to viewing the past, Atxaga questions the degree to which it is necessary or appropriate to hierarchically structure past events. Yet, as his journal entry progresses, it is clear that his vision of the past engages the selective eye, rather than the flattening of the whole past into a singular flow of duration.

One can further conceptualize his initial definition of judgmental and non-judgmental memory by connecting it with Bergson's theory of the ways in which perception creates illusory divisions in the past. Bergson's philosophy materializes in Esteban's efforts to write his autobiography, and to experiment with a way of thinking about the past that makes no distinctions and casts the particular into a flow of associative

and interconnected activity. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson explains the role of the ego in constructing the illusion that each event exists as a separate whole:

...As our attention has distinguished and separated them [states of existence] artificially, it is obliged next to reunite them by an artificial bond. It imagines, therefore, a formless ego, indifferent and unchangeable, on which it threads the psychic states which it has set up as independent entities. Instead of a flux of fleeting shades merging into each other, it perceives as distinct and, so to speak, *solid* colors, set side by side like the beads of a necklace: it must perforce then suppose a thread, also itself solid, to hold the beads together. (3)

Ordinary awareness, Bergson suggests, projects onto reality a kind of solidity of states.

Though no state remains for any longer than an instant, we nevertheless assume that while it lasts, it constitutes a demarcated and bounded unit of experience. That is, our conventional understanding of reality does not embrace the undifferentiated flow of events (as posited in Esteban's first definition of memory), but is parsed into bits of data. These are the bits of data that the memoir writer may tease out and distinguish.

The resonances between Atxaga and Bergson converge in a way that draws attention to universals. Atxaga ponders the possibility that memories have no hierarchal relationship and that events of the past are strung together in a seamless unity that belies any attempt to privilege one event of the past from another. In the first passage from Esteban's memoir cited above, he posits a non-discriminating form of memory where the past is a continuous, uninterrupted flow that nullifies our attempts to assert the importance of one event over another. In this view, the observer of past events merely allows the undifferentiated flow. This passive, non-discriminating approach to perceiving the past would allow Esteban to transcend the worldview that asserts each state of consciousness as separate from the next, rather than as indistinguishable parts of a single process of duration.

The hypothesis on memory that Atxaga posits, that the past could exist as one large flow without borders, invites the reader to consider that the human self making these distinctions is also nothing more than a continuity of those processes. Although it is true that Esteban chooses to narrate his life with a nod to the selected, particular details of his life, he does so while also conserving his awareness of the indistinguishable river of the past, the metaphorical representation of a universal flow in which all particulars ultimately participate.

The Ontology of Remembering Too Much and Too Little

The exploration of memory in *Obabakoak* does not end in the first part of the novel. In “Nueve palabras,” the narrator of this segment (who also connected his inner state to the outer weather patterns) prefaces the narratives on Villamediana, speculating on what it means to remember too much or too little. This maneuver marks a shift in the focus on memory transitioning away from evaluating the qualitative nature of recollection discussed above, contrasting judgmental and non-judgmental recollection to that of quantifying two cases of memory: amnesia and total recall.³ Atxaga explicitly explores this juxtaposition, and in doing so, further dismantles the idea of a particular self that holds onto memories.

Atxaga brings precisely this issue of the ontological nature of memory into perspective in “Nueve palabras,” when the narrator recalls an acquaintance of his family who, during a visit, began to miraculously recall details about the narrator when he was a

³Atxaga engages memory at the abstract and philosophical level, though it is also possible to draw out the implications of these juxtapositions of memory for Spanish society. Although it falls outside the direct purview of this study to evaluate those implications, it would be worthwhile to see how Atxaga’s philosophical engagement intervenes in debates on collective memory in Spain.

young boy. First, he discusses a man who remembered too much. In his childhood, the narrator knew a family friend who could tell anecdotes that had occurred years earlier with impossibly vivid detail. When the man who remembers too much tells the family one of these stories one day, he passes out and has to be taken to the hospital. This event occurs during the narrator's childhood.

The narrator establishes the memory of this event as a way to set up the fact that he is about to visit a different friend who is in the hospital and who suffers from exactly the opposite problem as the man who remembers too much: amnesia. The amnesiac friend fails to recognize the narrator upon his visit, and the doctor reassures the narrator not be alarmed or personally offended by this non-recognition. During their discussion the protagonist tells the doctor the story of "the man who remembered too much." Having heard the story of total recall, the doctor continues in the pedagogical direction established earlier in the discussion when he compares memory to a dam. He tells the narrator, "[y]o creo que la memoria es como una presa. Le da vida a todo nuestro espíritu, lo irriga. Pero igual que la presa, necesita de unos aliviaderos para no desbordarse. Porque si se desborda o revienta destroza todo lo que encuentra a su paso" (123). The doctor envisages memory as a force that occasionally goes untamed and must be domesticated by adequate amounts of forgetting of the past. In his commentary, there is a degree of personification of the memory that resonates with Bergson's own metaphors describing how the past cannibalizes and "gnaws" into the future. This personification of memory, present in both Atxaga and Bergson, suggests that it is a force that influences the degree to which the past influences present consciousness.

Drawing together the ideas of Atxaga and Bergson, it is possible to see the ways in which consciousness arises and functions as the regulating force separating past from present, or as a discerning awareness that teases from the past the data that it finds most useful to the functioning and future success of the organism. By contrast, the subjective experience of the universal arrives once the differentiating activity of selfhood and judgmental memory subside. In the final section of the novel, in fact, Atxaga identifies literature as the key domain for negotiating this kind of relationship between the relative and universal selves.

Atxaga's Metaliterature and Memory as the Instrument of Literature

The third and final part of the novel brings into focus the relationship between the particular and the universal by posing a question: what makes a story universally appealing? The part of the novel entitled "En busca de la última palabra," centers on a conversation between two friends who debate the criteria for literary quality. The narratives comprising this third part are framed tales, or "stories within a story," that the two friends either have written themselves or heard from someone else. Indeed, the conversation between the narrator and his interlocutor is then interspersed with the embedded tales that they reference while discussing the criteria for what makes a story compelling. In the conversation between the narrator and his friend, there is a return to the emphasis Atxaga places on evaluation and judgment. In the same way that Esteban contemplated the validity of qualifying certain past events as more important than others, here we find characters reflecting on what makes certain literary texts stand out as universally grounded rather than as merely anecdotal. In one of the exchanges, the narrator's friend explains how an author should approach the enterprise of writing:

Si es realmente bueno, tomará como material su propia experiencia, y captará en ella algo que sea esencial; extraerá de ella algo que tenga validez para cualquiera. Si es malo, nunca traspasará la frontera de lo meramente anecdótico. Por eso son buenos los cuentos que hoy hemos recordado. Porque expresan cosas esenciales, y no simples anécdotas. (204)

The passage expresses the penchant for writing a universal story, rather than one emphasizing the uniqueness of a particular culture and literature. Though the passage contrasts narratives of essential meanings to merely anecdotal ones, we could also read this juxtaposition as the conflict between writing in order to highlight the unique and particular characteristics of a specific culture as opposed to writing in a way that resonates with the timeless traditions of world literature. Atxaga suggests the writer needs to move beyond mere anecdotes, even if those offer something original to say, and find a pathway to a universally recognized mode of expression. The goal of a writer who aspires to be universal is to tap into something larger than himself or herself, or, even more extreme, become a medium for the voice of the universal to express itself. What makes the particularities of an ego a unique experience is the condition of being connected to the themes of the universal literary tradition.

Atxaga suggests this idea in a fragment of the last chapter entitled: “Método para plagiar.” Plagiarism is the main topic of conversation between the narrator and his literary cohort. Atxaga assigns the role of commenting on plagiarism to the character of the uncle from Montevideo, who had previously expressed his disdain for the practice of literary counterfeiting, but learned to embrace the practice after a symbolic dream. In the dream the uncle describes, he navigates a wild jungle filled with ferocious beasts. When he finally reaches a clearing where he thinks he is safe and alone, a mysterious figure approaches him. The uncle asks whether he is a shadow or a man of flesh and bones, and

the man identifies himself as Axular, one of the foundational writers of Basque literature.⁴

The following dialogue between the uncle and Axular embodies Atxaga's position on universals in literature. In the first part of the conversation, the Axular character denounces the romantic conception of literature with its emphasis on uniqueness. The lines that elaborate a theory of literature are spoken by Axular, while the interrogatives represent the prompts of the character of the uncle:

- ...yo ahora me refería a sus ideas literarias, los románticos consideraban que una obra es el resultado de una personalidad especial y única, y otros disparates por el estilo.
- ¿Y la metaliteratura?
- Pues eso, que los escritores no creamos nada nuevo que todos escribimos las mismas historias. Como se suele decir, todas las historias buenas ya están escritas, y si no están escritas, señal de que son malas. El mundo, ahora, no es sino una enorme Alejandría, y los que vivimos en ella nos dedicamos a hacer comentarios acerca de lo que ya ha sido creado, y nada más. Hace mucho tiempo que se dispipó el sueño romántico.
- ¿Para qué escribir entonces? Si todas las historias buenas ya están escritas...
- Porque, como dice alguien que no recuerdo, a la gente se le olvidan. Y nosotros, los escritores nuevos, se las recordamos. Y eso es todo. (319-20)

Atxaga contributes to the conversation on plagiarism and originality by suggesting that the role of the author is to make people remember. As the narrator's dialogue with Axular illustrates, the role of continuing the literary enterprise and creating new literature is to draw awareness to the literary tradition and ensure the passage of stories through the generations. A successful literary work will be one that is "plagiarism," insofar as it will draw on the repertoire of previously utilized narrative formulae. Narratives that fall

⁴ Axular was a priest best known for having written the ascetic book *Gero* (which translates to *Later*), published in Bordeaux in 1643. The main idea of the book was that man should unite with God and not get caught up with the trivialities of life or leave his religious obligations for a later time.

outside of this framework, Atxaga suggests, fall into the category of the anecdotal, and do not stand the test of time as a consequence.

By raising the specter of Axular, Atxaga places literary universality in conversation with the particulars of the history of Basque literature. In reality, his gesture of incorporating Basque specificity is more rhetorical than substantial, since nothing coming from Axular's dialogue seems particularly relevant to the early modern writer himself. Atxaga evokes a figure that serves as the historical marker for the origins of the Basque literary tradition, but also casts doubt on the possibility of original writing. Axular, rather than speaking with his own voice and seventeenth-century awareness, is ascribed words that correspond more closely with the positions on literature articulated by Atxaga himself.

Indeed, the conversation between Axular and the narrator's uncle maps directly onto the theoretical distinctions between romantic and postmodern approaches to literature, where the former emphasizes originality, while the latter questions the possibility of literary novelty. Through this dialogue, Atxaga posits that the emphasis on originality historically stemmed from the ideological preferences of the Romantic movement and its insistence on breaking with tradition. By contrast, from the perspective of what the character refers to as metaliterature, the main archetypes and narrative formulas represent an underlying constant, a repository on which any literary text inevitably draws.

A New Kind of Plagiarism

The focus on plagiarism, it should be noted, bridges the final section of the novel, with its focus on writing, to the earlier sections of the work where Atxaga explores

memory. Indeed, the thread that unites his exploration of memory with plagiarism is the idea of belonging. As Bergson's theoretical explication of memory illustrates, our conventional understanding that recollections of past events as objects that belong to a self is, at the very least, problematic. Likewise, Atxaga's emphasis on plagiarism, and its importance in the writing process, calls into question the degree to which literary productions trace back to the genius of a singular writer.

Though the narrator's take on literary originality in the last part of the novel favors the inevitability of plagiarism, there is a strand of eccentricity in his narrative that compels us to question whether Atxaga is being ironic with his insistence on the impossibility of literary originality. That is, in his quest to write as plagiarized a novel as possible, does Atxaga not pave the way for narrative innovation? Is his originality not precisely his insistence that high quality writing and effective storytelling cannot escape the clutches of influence? As an answer to this question, a significant part of his "original plagiarism" approach resides in his ability to *interpret* the received archetypes and narrative structures inherited from previous works. Atxaga does not produce an exact replica of the myths, folktales, or other influential narratives on his work. Instead, *Obabakoak* features his selective distillation of all those sources of influence into a curated final product. His work endeavors to simultaneously be faithful to literature while also to connect to the symbolic inheritance from the literary tradition.

By invoking the foundational figure to Basque literature, Axular, Atxaga not only introduces his manifesto for his position on literature – he also brings into focus the political discussions surrounding Basque nationalism. For the most part, Atxaga has

disavowed any political intentions in his decision to write his novels in Basque.⁵ Yet, in his analysis of *Obabakoak*, Nestor Rodríguez has discussed the degree to which it is necessary to see Atxaga's work as a political expression of Basque culture: "resulta difícil reparar exclusivamente en la dimensión literaria de un proyecto como *Obabakoak*, aun cuando su autor se proponga prescribir a sus lectores en castellano una lectura despolitizada de la misma" (189). For Rodríguez, the mere fact that Atxaga decided to write the novel in Basque represents a political gesture. In a sense the terrain for the debate Rodríguez introduced with his article shifted once Atxaga published more explicitly political novels, including *El hombre solo*, which thematized the political activism of ETA. Yet, just as Atxaga's decision to write in Basque could represent the assertion of Basque culture, it is also valid to consider the political implications of the author's professed affinity for universality. Atxaga's politics of universality would not be an attempt to universalize Basque culture or to elevate the Basque literary tradition over others – but instead an attempt to tease out the elements of subjective experience and literary expression that resonate across cultural traditions. For her part, Martín prefaces the interview with Atxaga discussed above by affirming his "constant struggle" to "avoid inhabiting the national writer paradigm." In this respect, the introduction of a universal discourse could be seen as an attempt to avoid being pigeonholed as a Basque writer, since that would preclude the possibility of being considered a quality writer in his own right.

⁵ *Obabakoak* was first published in Basque in 1988 and it was published in Spanish in 1989.

Conclusion

Although Atxaga confesses that he sought to go beyond the parochial particularity of the Basque reality in his interview with Martín, the details of *how* he maneuvers toward the universal creates the space for an in-depth literary analysis. The appeal to universals in *Obabakoak* unifies the thematic threads of memory, writing, and the relationship between humans and nature. To the degree that the novel embraces the universal, it does so not in order to obliterate or negate the particular, but instead, to see separate selves and objects as participating in networks of endless connectivity. The embodiment of this philosophical approach is “Esteban Werfell.” In that first narrative of the novel, the conflict centers on the cultural discourse of universality that centers on the struggle between Catholic values and cosmopolitan secularism. These two phenomena represent different phases of a process of modernization and integration of Basque country into the Spanish and European political economies, and both make claims to a universal discourse. There is a sense in which Atxaga reconciles the conflicting claims on universal truth that contributed to the development of Esteban. This first narrative of the text serves as a template for interpreting the rest of the novel as the various narrators of the stories going forward posit various ways of reconciling their own particular selfhood with a larger, interconnected sense of a universal sense of self.

Another version of the universal that Atxaga develops relates to the continuities between human and non-human identities. Throughout the novel, the narrators of the various stories posit a theory of memory in which the past is a continuous flow that belongs to no particular self; this theory views literary creation as necessarily circumscribed by the inherited traditions of the past. The treatment of memory and metaliterary narrative in the novel also provides a complex way of relating the

component parts of identity and experience to a holistic framework. When Esteban thinks about how to most effectively reassemble his past, he contemplates two choices of how to remember— one which emphasizes the idea of the separate self who distinguishes different parts of the past and creates a story of self that maintains his particularity, and another that considers the past as a reservoir of non-differentiable material. Given that the narrator ultimately opts for the former model in writing his own narrative, we see that Atxaga's appeal to universals in the novel is not dogmatic, nor is it meant to negate the existence of the particular.

The theoretical implications of the novel on selfhood and memory are significant. Atxaga decenters the human by suggesting that emotional and psychological experiences emanating from human experience overlap with nonhuman phenomena. In addition, Atxaga draws attention to the ways in which the surrounding material environment participates in the literary process – at key moments inanimate objects and natural events surrounding writers and readers intervene and leave their imprint on the meaning-making process. In this sense, the text sheds light on the illusions that hold up the particularity of the self.

The novel goes further than merely decentering the Cartesian subject – it recontextualizes selfhood in larger holistic frameworks and networks. Atxaga's reframing of the nature of the individual emphasizes the visceral feeling of unification between the inner life of the self and the external scene of material environments. Whereas the postmodern approach to the decentered subject finds no limit to the possibility of splitting reality into finer and finer particulars, Atxaga's novel enacts the conceptual retrieval of a larger whole to which the disassembled particular of the atomized self is related. The

human self emerges not as the subject outside of nature looking in, but rather as embedded within the fabric of all forms of biological interaction. *Obabakoak* reveals that nothing is quite particular without its connection to the universal – it considers the universal not an instrument of hegemonic control and exclusion, but instead, a tool of radical inclusivity. The new universalism that emerges is that of a sprawling network of integration, one that includes in its cultural framework the inclusion of as many entities as possible.

Chapter 2. Literature Coming Alive in Vila-Matas's *El mal de Montano*

In his novel *El mal de Montano* (2002), Enrique Vila-Matas integrates a dizzying array of ideas and citations from other authors into his narrative. The novel is comprised of five chapters: “El mal de Montano,” “Diccionario del tímido amor a la vida,” “Teoría de Budapest,” “Diario de un hombre engañado,” and “La salvación del espíritu.” In each one, Vila-Matas builds on the narrative of the literary critic José Gironde, who complains that his degree of reading has made it impossible to experience reality without the contamination of texts. He characterizes this condition as an illness and in the process of describing the *mal de Montano*, he constructs a sprawling and disjointed philosophy of literature. During his trips across the Atlantic, he writes one diary entry after another in which he subjects the reader to cited fragments and paraphrased ideas of over one hundred other authors, such as Robert Musil, Justo Navarro, Katherine Mansfield, Henri Michaux, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot, and Marguerite Duras.

Gironde considers multiple possibilities for overcoming his literary sickness, but one of the insistent tropes to which he repeatedly returns is the idea of *disappearance*. The novel begins with an epigraph drawn from French writer Maurice Blanchot: “¿Cómo haremos para desaparecer?” Vila-Matas employs the term disappearance as a way to describe and embrace the non-cohesiveness of existence and to define the fluid nature of boundaries that separate the self from the world. In fact, Gironde eventually decides that the only way to escape his symptoms of literary obsession is, paradoxically, to “disappear” into his own fictions and unify his self-identity with a totality of narrative texts. Although he decries his sense of isolation, he also finds reprieve when he finds a way to merge his identity with memory and literature. In this process, Vila-Matas creates

a new definition of literature that blurs the ontological distinctions between texts and readers, writers, animals, and memories.

There are three areas of theoretical inquiry that serve to unlock the significance of Vila-Matas's novel: "thing theory," intertextuality, and the Deleuzian notion of folds. Jane Bennett brings into relief new ways of seeing the relationship between humans and things in her book, *Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things* (2010). The *thing*, as Bennett conceives it, questions the conventional notion that inanimate objects are unintelligent and passive. She refutes the idea that objects only have "life" to the extent that we imbue them with it through discursive practices. Her argument illustrates that objects exert an actancy that is not reductive to the linguistic overlay we give them. As we read Vila-Matas along with Bennett, we see the ways in which *El mal de Montano* moves beyond conventional conceptions of the objects, selves and literature. As a parallel development to thing theory, there has also been work in intertextual literary studies that has sought to reimagine the relationship between subjects and objects. Patricia Yaeger's version of intertextuality paves the way for this when she discusses Deleuze's notion of *folds*.

El mal de Montano redefines the boundaries between literature and the self by suggesting that the only way to break free of literary addiction is not to reject literature but to disappear into a network of literary production and reception. The novel works to flatten the ontological differences between humans and nonhumans (including literary objects and events even if they may be anthropogenic), and creates a universal plane between the activity of writing and being. As we read Vila-Matas, we see that literature *acts* and involves itself in the world in a way that goes beyond semiotics – literature is

refigured as something more than communicative behavior based on signs and symbols and their properties.

Vila-Matas in Review

In *El mal de Montano*, as with several of his other novels, Vila-Matas employs techniques of fragmentation and literary self-awareness that lend themselves to be read within the standard postmodern paradigm. In her book *Tradition and Modernity: Cervantes's Presence in Spanish Contemporary Literature* (2009), Idoia Puig suggests that the *El mal de Montano* “[q]uestions the existence of a unified truth by submitting it to a plurality of consciousness, often times contradictory” (118). Puig is correct insofar as Vila-Matas does not adhere to a traditionally realist plot, but instead provides a combination of storytelling and literary criticism. *El mal de Montano* experiments with a variety of literary modalities and it even destabilizes the notion that the novel can be thought of as a cohesive category of writing. The second chapter provides a prime example of this phenomenon. The narrator embarks on the endeavor of constructing a dictionary of his favorite writers of the diary. Although he maintains the narrative flow of the text to some degree, the main focus shifts toward referencing key moments in other writers’ diaries. These features explain why Puig interprets Vila-Matas’s novel as a postmodern challenge to unified truth.

Aaron Hillyer also examines the connections between the Catalan author’s works and the philosophical thinking of figures that include Blanchot, Deleuze, and Agamben, in *The Disappearance of Literature: Blanchot, Agamben, and the Writers of the No* (2013). In the introduction to his book, Hillyer draws attention to ways in which Vila-Matas’s novels (which he reads in their English translation) echo Blanchot’s idea that

literature inevitably heads toward its own disappearance. According to Hillyer, the message at the heart of Vila-Matas's novel, *Bartleby & Co.* (2000) is the idea that "every book pursues non-literature as the essence of what it wants and passionately desires to discover" (9). For the narrator of *Bartleby*, Hillyer argues, "Literature has now entered a mode of self-annulment," where "denial," and "the writer's bad conscience" define literature more than any other qualities. (50) Hillyer consolidates these phenomena under the broader idea of "disappearance of literature." His idea is not that literary practices are dead, but that literature can no longer be trusted as a reliable representation of life.

Hillyer also argues that Vila-Matas focuses his work on the "decreation of reality." This critic observes that in *París no se acaba nunca* (2003), Vila-Matas narrates his experiences with LSD, a drug he claims helped him overcome his conventional relationship with reality. LSD allowed him to "open his visual field" and served as an all-around source of inspiration at a time when he still had not read much literature. It changed his perception and even influenced his decision to abandon his bourgeois style of dress as he opted to embrace cross-dressing. (115) Hillyer argues that Vila-Matas's "works enact their own decreation; they kill readers subjectively while bringing them to life textually" (121). He draws this idea from interpreting a passage from *París no se acaba nunca*. Hillyer writes:

As Vila-Matas writes of his early inability to understand this, "I never fully comprehended that it was unnecessary to kill readers textually. The thing is that style consists precisely in bringing them to life, instead of killing them off in addressing new readers with the greatest clarity and simplicity possible, no matter how strange what you want to say might be" (118).

The impulse to kill the reader textually relates to the idea that there is an implied reader to which a text is directed. In practice, this means that the author may not simply treat the eventual readers of the text as merely passive recipients of the author's work. Instead,

there is a sense in which the author already has a live and active sense of the reader, who is thought of as present in the act of narrative creation. Although Hillyer does not mention it, this idea is important because it reveals the ways in which Vila-Matas takes interest in what it means for non-animate things, such as imagined readers, to be alive. This idea suggests that Vila-Matas is interested in how the eventual reader of a text that is being written can be summoned to life at the moment the text is being written, and not just when the text is being read. Hillyer's analysis opens the space to further consider how LSD reframed Vila-Matas's phenomenological experience with life and literature – it allowed him to conceptualize anew his own self-identity and the inherent possibilities literature holds for creating reality anew. Indeed, as we read the novel through the lens of thing theory, it will become clear that Vila-Matas's engagement with literature is one that constantly challenges the boundaries between the living, the dead, and the thing. The element of Vila-Matas's novel that both Hillyer and Puig overlook is the degree to which the narrator reconfigures selfhood as integrated into a universalizing network of activity.

Theoretical Interventions: Things and Intertexts

In order to understand the new direction in which Vila-Matas takes postmodern Spanish literature, it is useful to draw on the theoretical lens offered by thing theory. Jane Bennett employs the term “thing-power,” which she describes in a first-hand, experiential fashion by recounting an anecdote of spotting a series of items hovering over a storm drain. For Bennett, it is often the unsettling quality of objects that animates them and turns them into *things*. She writes:

Stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt

something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of that rat, that configuration of pollen, that otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap. (4)

In her experience, she explains, she finds echoes with Stephen Jay Gould's idea of the "excruciating complexity and intractability of nonhuman bodies" (4). Bennett herself appears ensnared in the intractable *aliveness* of the objects she observes. The ideas she presents in *Vibrant Matter* draw, in fact, on W.J.T. Mitchell's analysis on the differences between the *thing* and the *object*. In his *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), Mitchell argues the following:

The thing appears as the nameless figure of the Real that cannot be perceived or represented. When it takes on a single, recognizable face, a stable image, it becomes an object, when it destabilizes or flickers in the dialectics of the multistable image, it becomes a hybrid thing. (156)

When the object remains identifiable, it is nothing more than an *object*. On the other hand, a *thing* is a special object, one that is often imbued with the quality of the uncanny. The *thing* has the capacity to "look back" at the observer. The "recalcitrance of things," as Bennett names it, not only relates to that which is conventionally understood as physical objects, but also cultural forms. In her discussion on where the theory of things came from, she explains that a significant form of thing-recalcitrance relates to cultural processes:

The initial insight was to reveal how cultural practices reduce what is experienced as the "natural." [...] many theorists also insisted on the material recalcitrance of such cultural productions... The point was that cultural forms are themselves powerful, material assemblages with resistant force. (1)

Drawing on Foucault, she explains how categories, which include "gendered, sexed, nationalized, and globalized," may have begun as cultural constructions and may be understood as "objects" in the sense of having recognizable meanings. However, over

time, these discourses came to behave in unexpected ways that destabilized their meaning as cultural constructions. In this respect, Bennett sets out to “highlight the active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life” (2).

Bennett’s theoretical and experiential reflections on this idea of objects and things inform our reading of *El mal de Montano*. Vila-Matas compels us to think of literature as something more than a practice of semiotic transmission of information from writer to reader. Throughout the novel, Vila-Matas undermines the binary contrast between active humans and the literary objects they create, and casts literature as a living thing that decenters the privileged space of human self-awareness and intelligence. The collapse of the distinction between fiction and reality that has occupied literature and literary studies alike, so it is important to note Vila-Matas is not referring merely to the capacity of fiction to construct “illusions of reality”. He is referring instead to an actancy that is not accounted for nor perceived or represented in the recognizable and stable face of literature as the object of literary or semiotic studies. In *El mal de Montano*, literature, in the broadest sense of the term, provokes affects that are not understood under this kind of framework. This novel compels us to think of literature beyond theoretical models of communication as post-structural and semiotic analysis would prescribe. Literature is conceptualized instead as something that intervenes in the establishment of humans as they relate to one another and nonhumans.

There is another important dimension to the breakdown between subject and object in Vila-Matas’s *El mal de Montano*. There is this sense in which literature is exploded in several directions at once, and that its scattered quality is itself evidence that it has a life and mind of its own. Literary scholars have been reexamining intertextuality

and polyphony by paying particularly close attention to the nature of the self that emerges when considering the patchwork and hybrid composition of texts. In her introduction to the *Polyphony Issue* of the PMLA, Patricia Yaeger, suggests that intertextuality has evolved in a more democratic direction over time. She differentiates between vertical and horizontal intertextuality: “Bloom and Bakhtin theorize a vertical relation between precursor and newborn texts; the belated, already-spoken-for poet or novelist wrangles endlessly with a precursor’s psychological (Bloom) or a stratified society’s multileveled (Bakhtin) power” (438). In the paradigm of vertical intertextuality, the writer has to wrestle with the influence of predecessors. The literary work is, from the moments of its earliest conception, subject to comparison with previous publication. Yaeger mentions Bloom, in particular, because of his book, *Anxiety of Influence* (1973).

Yaeger contrasts vertical intertextuality to the horizontal version, which has more democratic potential as it goes beyond the struggle between contemporary writers and their predecessors. She envisages a new polyphony, fomented by the global, digitally interconnected cultural world, as creating the possibility to reanimate intertextuality. Yaeger entertains ways of reconfiguring not only the relationships between texts, but also between subjects and objects. In the paradigm of literary intersection she proposes, literary works converge on a horizontal plane of union where the actors (subjects) and the acted upon (objects) may change roles at any moment. In the following passage, she applies the concept of intertextuality to Deleuze’s idea of “folds:”

It is the model of polyphony as entanglement that interests me here, figured in Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the fold. As Marjorie Levinson comments, “[i]nstead of a subject and object, an inside and outside when these are conceived as structurally distinct and (however infinitesimally) separated domains, the fold allows us to think differentiation, orientation, position, and therefore identity in

terms of topological variation, not objects and events, but ceaseless self-relation” (439).

This very gesture of integrating the above passage from Yaeger into this chapter is, in effect, an act of employing the logic of “folds.” At the explicit level, it is a passage from Yaeger, but Yaeger is citing Levinson who is in turn paraphrasing Deleuze. The chain of encased ideas that is triggered here represents an instance of the folding in of thoughts within thoughts—the network of interconnectivity of ideas that emerges reinforces the sense that objects and events exist in “ceaseless self-relation.” Yaeger amplifies Levinson’s points and argues that intertextuality is a literary practice that allows us to move beyond the subject/object binary. She cites another passage from Levinson, who argues that the boundaries “between the human and the natural, the biological and physical, the organism and the machine, the mind and the body, are now, at strategic points, breached” (434). The breach between these categories calls for a new vocabulary to replace the subject/object binary and, for Yaeger, intertextuality represents a formal vehicle for ushering in this new form of thinking.

In *El mal de Montano*, the narrator quotes other authors in order to create confusion as to where in the *folds* a given idea originated. Part of this development of folds relates to the way in which the novel conceives of the personal diary as the form of writing that most closely approximates a totalizing form of writing. Vila-Matas builds, for example, on the ideas of Robert Musil, who believed that the diary was the only “forma narrativa del futuro, pues contiene en sí todas las formas posibles del discurso...[e]n la versión de Musil el diario era el género sin atributos por excelencia...” (123). The diary has the quasi-universal capacity to embrace any genre of writing within its folds. Vila-Matas’s novel falls into line with this new conceptualization of

intertextuality insofar as it brings humans, literature, and things into a space of overlapping ontologies.

A New Intertextuality

For the narrator Gironde, literary sickness, or, the *mal de Montano* as he refers to it in homage to his son, is the inability to experience reality without the interference from literary texts. Early in the narrative he complains that: “Me asfixia cada día más la literatura, a mis cincuenta años me angustia penar que mi destino sea acabar convirtiéndome en un diccionario ambulante de citas” (17). As the first chapter and the rest of the novel progress, the reader bears witness to the multiple ways in which the network of literary texts that the narrator has read acts as a kind of barrier to his ability to write and experience reality in fresh and uncontaminated ways.

In “Allusion,” Gregory Machacek proposes an approach to intertextuality that is particularly useful for interpreting Gironde’s condition of literary overdose. In the article, he argues that literary analysis should distinguish between diachronic and synchronic intertextuality. Synchronic intertextuality represents the ways in which all aspects of a given culture mold the writing of a single text. Machacek suggests that Julia Kristeva originally conceived of the intertext along these lines, as the way in which “a variety of texts — not just works of literature but also other meaningful social phenomenon, such as a carnival — emerge from a particular semiotic order” (523). By contrast, the diachronic version of intertextuality focuses on the influences of past literary works of writers. Machacek argues that these versions of intertextuality have come to be used interchangeably and that the term intertextuality “has become a catchall, referring to various sorts of textual interrelation: the relationship between authors and their precursors

as well as the relations between texts and the reigning semiotic practices of a given historical moment” (524). His article proposes that scholars return to a distinction between intertextuality as inherited influence (diachronic) versus the influence from all elements of culture on the writing of a text (synchronic).

As Girondo describes his condition, the reader bears witness to the ways in which a blend of the diachronic and synchronic intertextualities influence the thinking and writing process of the self. Girondo rests at the intersection of the diachronic and synchronic intertextualities to which Machacek refers. In terms of the diachronic intertexts there is a way in which Girondo, as he documents his thoughts in his diary, invites the reader into an unfolding kaleidoscopic reflection of the texts he has consumed. With respect to the synchronic version, Girondo’s early decision to take a break from all things literature leads him back to nothing other than literature itself. One of the first remedies he proposes for his literary disease is to go into nature:

Bien pronto me pongo a pensar en tomates y espárragos y en todo tipo de productos naturales de la tierra y me olvidaré de tanta literatura. Al menos durante un tiempo, necesito no relacionar nada con la literatura, descansar como sea de ella. También, aunque sólo sea por un tiempo, voy a dejar aparcado este diario que se me estaba volviendo novela. Necesito no pensar más que en cosas naturales, meditar sobre cualquier zarandara que no pueda yo fácilmente relacionar con la dichosa literatura. (39)

In his journal, he writes about how going back to “productos naturales” could offer an avenue for escaping literature:

Bueno, basta ya de literatura. Por suerte, la peligrosa Nantes ya va quedando atrás. Voy a mirar el paisaje a ver si veo vacas tontas pastando en verdes prados bajo la hermosa lluvia. Cualquier cosa menos escribir o pensar en términos literarios. (39)

Shortly after discussing his need to turn to nature and think of things outside of the multiplicity of texts permeating his consciousness, he starts to describe those natural

products of the land using the poetic discourse seen above. As the narrator suggests in the passage, the act of gazing out the window of a train to escape literature reveals cows grazing on green pastures, and, as if propelled by involuntarily instincts, he transitions into capturing that very scene using poetic flourishes. The line “vacas tontas pastando en verdes prados bajo la hermosa lluvia” represents the impetus of literature with its ability to assert its will into the situation.

This phenomenon, at first glance, reinforces the deconstructionist notion, advanced by Jacques Derrida, that “there is no outside of the text,” (Smith 45). That is, is Girondo not simply echoing the idea that everything, including nature, is caught within the parameters of discourse? If this were the case, then Vila-Matas’s novel would echo the notion that all ontology eventually reduces to discourse and linguistic constructs. However, Girondo actually goes further than this concept by suggesting that literature is not just the trap inside which all ontology is contained, but that literary and cultural constructs exert a kind of thing-power. A whole host of objects call Girondo in an active and agentic way throughout the novel. In Girondo’s world, and in spite of his guilt-driven discussion of his literary illness, literature emerges not just as a symbolic *component* of reality, but also has the capacity, at times, to *be* reality.

To the degree that literature spills into the realm of nature and vice versa, in *El mal de Montano* intertextuality is reconfigured beyond its capacity to describe linguistic and semiotic constructs. Vila-Matas pushes literature past the parameters of symbolic representation and counters this model with one that foregrounds the material ways in which authors and readers participate in a more three dimensional network of cultural practices. Vila-Matas comes to new discourse to the synchronic and diachronic forms of

intertextuality proposed by Machacek: when literature intersects with life in the way that it does for Gironde, literature is not only interacting *in* time and *through* time, it is piecing the bubble of human relations themselves.

Literature as the *Thing*

Vila-Matas casts literature as an active, agentic thing. The crossing of ontological lines between literature, things, and selfhood emerged in the first passage of the *El mal de Montano*. In fact, this passage evokes the author's previous novel, *Bartleby y compañía*, which takes as its point of departure the protagonist of Herman Melville's novel *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853). As an office worker, Bartleby responds, "I prefer not to," to all of the tasks to which he is assigned. In *Bartleby y compañía*, Vila-Matas's narrator embraces this notion of work refusal, and decides to write a novel about writers who renounce the practice of writing.

The narrator of *El mal de Montano* picks up where Vila-Matas's previous novel had left off by suggesting that Montano has fallen victim to the same blocked condition as the "writers of the no." While Gironde complains that his form of literary sickness relates to his increasing incapacity to experience life without the intrusion from literature, Montano suffers from writer's block:

A finales del siglo XX el joven Montano, que acababa de publicar su peligrosa novela sobre el enigmático caso de los escritores que renuncian a escribir, quedó atrapado en las redes de su propia ficción y se convirtió en un escritor que pese a su compulsiva tendencia a la escritura, quedó totalmente bloqueado, paralizado, ágrafo trágico. (15)

Montano's decision to focus a novel on the writers who renounce their practice comes to have an immobilizing effect on his own productivity. His father, Gironde, believes that there is a causal relation between the recently published book and Montano's writer's

block. He cannot escape the “webs of his own fiction.” Vila-Matas focuses the condition of Montano using tangible, physical language to describe a condition that could otherwise be thought of as psychological. Montano is “trapped,” “blocked,” and “paralyzed.” While it is true that the idea of writer’s block is not uncommon when describing a writer, the initial passage sets the tone for the idea that literature in Vila-Matas’s world is a prime example of what Jane Bennett refers to as the “recalcitrant thing.”

In the face of this discussion on the way things take on a special quality, one may ask the question: Could the power of the previous literary things not simply be a question of psychology and imagination? Jane Bennett explains that there is indeed a tendency to attribute any feelings of thing-power back to the influence of culture and psychology. The person who experiences, for example, the uncanny feeling that a nonhuman thing is alive will often attribute this event to a cultural reference point or influence. Bennett writes, “The impulse toward cultural linguistic or historical constructivism, which interprets any expression of thing-power as an effect of culture and the play of human powers, politicized moralistic and oppressive appeals to ‘nature’” (17). This impulse toward constructivism means that a situation in which inanimate things strike humans as having agentic power would be explained as a deception of the senses or distortion of cultural inheritances that make it appear as though things are “coming alive.” Bennett argues, however, that the power of things goes beyond pure imagination or cultural influences and invites us to think about the ways in which things actually do intervene and get in the way.

Vila-Matas provides a twist to this idea through presenting the case of authors who struggle with the recalcitrance of their previous works, the resistant force of material

assemblages that behave in unexpected ways. Literature and the epi-literary phenomena that Vila-Matas points to throughout the novel offer an ideal case for thinking about how nonhuman things become active and get entangled in human relations and discourses. In this case, and not without irony, Montano's own cultural creations and contributions to cultural productions function as a net that holds his creativity hostage. Only one page into the novel, it becomes clear that Montano's condition exemplifies the ability of cultural forms to exert power on humans beyond their symbolic meaning and assert themselves and influence behavior as if they were not only signs, but also live beings.

Jane Bennett refers to the approach of considering that things could be alive as "vital materialism," which she defines as those who "try to linger in those moments in which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality" (17). In fact, she argues that engaging in the practice of vital materialism necessitates a kind of naïveté, in which the observer aims to remain cognizant of the commonalities between humans and "nonhumans – animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities" (18). She also acknowledges, however, that this possibly naïve approach has what Mitchell refers to as "the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes" (18). In this respect, one could consider Vila-Matas a vital materialist insofar as he creates these points of confusion between the boundaries of the human and nonhuman and conceptualizes literature as a kind alchemic space where naïve worldviews invoke premodern superstition.

And Another *Thing*: Memory

Among the *things* that emerge in *El mal de Montano*, Vila-Matas places special emphasis on the idea of memory. In the initial episodes of the novel, Gironde visits

Montano in Nantes, France with the intention of fighting the literary sickness that beleaguers his son and him. In the first encounter between father and son, Girondo visits Montano at his bookstore. The stage is a set for a classic oedipal conflict around literature to emerge. It is altogether fitting that Vila-Matas briefly mentions Harold Bloom in the book as the first chapter focuses so intensely on the legacies and influences readers and writers are forced to confront when they engage in literary practices.

In the case of *El mal de Montano*, a tense exchange full of sarcastic jabs ensues between the father and son. Montano reports that he has been having the special experience in which the anecdotes of others transform into events that he feels happened in his own life. Every time he attempts to write, he is unable to do so because of the intrusion of others' memories. In their dialogue, Montano explains that he has received the memory of the Spanish writer Justo Navarro. Montano goes on to explain that he cannot prevent these foreign fragments of consciousness from infiltrating his thought or writing process. In a dialogue with Girondo, Montano explains, "No es que no pueda ya escribir sino que cada dos por tres soy visitado por ideas de otros, ideas que me llegan de improviso, que me vienen de fuera y se apoderan de mi cerebro" (19). The rogue memories and ideas of others form another part of the "thing-powers" that are holding Montano hostage. The act of sitting to write activates more than a network of texts read and signs perceived or decoded in a variety of media. Sitting to write is the gateway into a network of more-than-literary objects. Although linked to conventional literary objects, this is a network that includes alien memories and the nagging and mysterious intervention of novels he has written. These books behave not only as intellectual

references but as beings exercising power independently from the human subjects who authored them.

The idea that the writer operates within the constraints of previous cultural productions recurs when, later in the chapter, Gironde receives an envelope that contains a story from Montano. It appears that Montano has broken his writer's block with the piece, and yet, based on Gironde's description of the Montano's narrative, it is clear that his son is still caught in recalcitrant webs of previous literature. The story begins with an epigraph that captures the all-encompassing net of literary production with which the writer must contend:

El cuento se abre con una cita de Macedonio Fernández con la que mi hijo seguramente trata de comentar irónicamente el fin de su bloque literario: “Todo se ha escrito, todo se ha dicho, todo se ha hecho, oyó Dios que le decían y aun no había creado el mundo, todavía no había nada. También eso ya me lo han dicho, repuso quizá desde la vieja hendida Nada. Y comenzó” (70).

It is altogether fitting that Montano resorts to a genesis narrative to rekindle his creative production. In the passage that he lifts from Macedonio Fernández, the issue at stake relates to the ultimate origins of both reality and the ideas presented in literature. The question posed in the fragment Montano acquires from Fernández is: what if before there was anything, literature, as a pre-being being had already said everything? One way to interpret the passage is to see it as a form of God's indifference toward the affirmation that everything has been said and written. A creative force of the universe such as God would not care, the logic follows, that someone tells her or him that everything has already been said. Another way to understand the passage is as a commentary on the figure of the writer. Fernández suggests that the process of creating the universe was always-already literary. To the degree that literature has *thing-power*, it has had it since

time immemorial. Before there was anything, God, or the impetus of creation, has already heard the statement, “everything has been said.”

The passage from Fernández offers Montano a way to start his story, which in fact deals with the evolution of literature through time. It reveals that another part of the web that held his writing in check was the existence of the literary tradition in all its vastness. As Montano had complained to his father earlier in the narrative, he was unable to sit and write without experiencing the intrusion of others’ memories. Gironde describes Montano’s story further:

El cuento concentra de manera admirable, en siete escasas pero intensas cuartillas, toda la historia de la literatura, enfocada como una sucesión de escritores habitados imprevistamente por la memoria personal de otros escritores que los antecedieron en el tiempo...la historia de la literatura vista como una corriente extraña de aire mental de súbitos recuerdos ajenos que habrían ido componiendo, a base de visitas imprevistas, un circuito cerrado de memorias involuntariamente robadas. (70)

The passage illustrates the degree to which Vila-Matas does not shy away from the anti-postmodern logic of totalization. As readers, we only know as much about the story as the brief description that Gironde provides, but we learn that Montano breaks out of his block by writing a “total history of literature,” that is ambitious and resonates with the kinds of novel Vila-Matas himself writes. Part of capturing the totality for Montano is by situating himself as a kind of antenna that is attuned to the intrusion of other writer’s memories. In other words, the passage also illustrates an understanding of the history of literature and of an individual text as phenomena occurring in a more-than-symbolic realm, with “supernatural” properties, a sort of more-than-textual intertextuality, a thing with properties and powers that exceeds the properties and powers of literature as the object of literary studies. Gironde describes the phenomenon of mobile memories as a

“strange current of mental air” that forms the closed circuit of inspiration from which writers through time draw. The narrative suggest that there is a story-telling impulse that has weaved its way through time and expressed itself through various authors. Being the committed literary critic he is, Girondo goes on to explain his reaction and analysis of the narrative. It is one of the many instances in which he blends the idea of reincarnating literature with the sense that there is lurking a universal more-than-literary memory behind and beyond every work of fiction. He explains:

Al concluir el cuento de Montano, jugué a imaginar que sentía la tentación de convertirme en ese relato, que sentía la tentación de encarnarme en él pasando a ser un cuento ambulante, pasando a llamarme 11 rue Simon-Crubellier, transformándome en un hombre-relato que lucharía contra la desaparición de la literatura reviviendo en su propia persona la historia abreviada de la memoria de ésta. (71)

The immaterial text can be a body for the reader. Neither the being of the short story nor the interaction between it and a human subject is fully accounted for with linguistic or semiotic theories. This is one of several versions of crossing the boundaries between human and nonhuman presented in the novel. In this case, the *hombre-relato* is the hybrid that Vila-Matas suggests rests at the intersection of the self and literature. The idea of humans embodying some aspect of literature, in the Spanish literary tradition, traces back to the Quijote, but in this instance, Girondo suggests that now that his son has written a story to escape his own literary block, he has to come to the rescue of literature itself. The disappearance of literature is deployed in its more denotative sense. Literature is under attack, Girondo suggests, and the story from Montano that situates itself as a brief and “as-total-as-possible” summation of all the literature of the world, offers a cue for him to evoke this heroic language as literature’s savior.

Literature, the Writer, and Nonhumans

In the second chapter, the novel introduces another metaliterary turn. Girondo exposes the fact that he has been lying all along: Montano does not exist and he has no son. In the process of confessing his own unreliability as a narrator, however, Girondo introduces threads of thinking that hint at an emerging emphasis on universals. This occurs when Girondo assures the reader that as he constructs his diary, which is also the novel we are reading, he will now be honest about his own life and identity and not “esconderme detrás de mis textos de creación” (108). He declares “...me hago el firme propósito de [...] decirle algo al lector sobre mí mismo, ofrecerle algunas informaciones verdaderas sobre mi vida. Me arrodillo pues en el altar de la vida real” (108). In his promise to the reader, he commits himself to “dios de la Veracidad” (108). This gesture signals the ways in which Girondo aims to connect the local truths of his life to a larger “god of Truthfulness.” This commitment to honest comes on the heels of his confession that he manufactured the identity of Montano in the preceding chapter. We discover that Montano was a fictional creation — his character functioned as a projected identity behind which the narrator hid in the first chapter. The revelation of Montano’s false identity coincides with the narrator’s decision to create a dictionary of the diary that contains entries on writers ranging from Salvador Dalí to Katherine Mansfield. In his “dictionary of the diary,” Girondo repeatedly cross-references other entries in the dictionary and other parts of the novel itself. With reason, he suggests that the diary is the genre most suited for self-knowledge.

The second chapter of Vila-Matas’s novel provides multiple instances of the “vital materialist” syncretic union between the human and nonhumans. The dictionary Girondo composes presents an opportunity to continue narrating his journey through his

literary past, but also provides a platform for more playful conceptualizations of ontological alchemy. While Gironde travels to Valparaíso, Chile, he spends a morning suffering from a hangover on the hotel balcony with his friend Tongoy and Rosa, Montano's girlfriend.

Tongoy appears and disappears periodically in the novel, but his role is similar to Montano's: he is a sounding board with whom Gironde converses and expands on his ideas of literature. Tongoy discovers that a fly is in his martini, and as it flaps its wings trying to escape its predicament, he decides to help the fly by using a spoon to remove it from the drink. The fly starts to recover from being soaked slightly by the martini, but the moment it is ready to fly away, Tongoy decides to crush it with his spoon. The incident sets into motion Gironde's networks of literary associations. At first, he begins to think about Marguerite Duras, who "en un fragmento de su libro *Escribir* cuenta cómo le conmovió la agonía de una mosca en su jardín de Neauphle-le-Château y cómo hasta quedó grabada en su memoria la hora exacta en que la mosca había dejado este mundo" (164). As is typical throughout the novel, an incident from the narrator's and others' quotidian experience invades his mental space. Gironde suggests that Duras and the scene from *Escribir* do not necessarily provide the ideal case with which to compare the incident involving Tongoy and the fly. Instead, he suggests that Katherine Mansfield and her story *La mosca* provide a more apt literary corollary to the scene he just witnessed. In the following passage, he suggests that it would not be an exaggeration to think of the fly that nearly survived Tongoy's martini only to be killed by him as a kind of reincarnation of Mansfield herself:

No creo que desvaríe si digo que esa mosca era la propia Katherine Mansfield, que se pasó media vida luchando contra la tuberculosis, luchando contra la

muerte: ‘Los relojes están dando las diez (...) Tengo tuberculosis. Hay una gran cantidad de humedad (y dolor) en mi pulmón malo. Pero no me importa. No deseo nada que no pueda tener. Paz, soledad, tiempo para escribir mis libros. (165)

The passage provides a new way for Gironde to discuss the central trope of the “illness of literature.” In most instances, the *mal de Montano* relates to the ideas of writer’s block and the intrusion of literary sickness. Yet in this instance, he considers Mansfield a prime example of a writer who heroically fought her own lethal condition. While Mansfield wrote against the clock of a disease that would eventually claim her, Vila-Matas compels us to consider the degree to which sickness itself writes.

In the diary entry following the Mansfield description, Gironde focuses on Henri Michaux. In the entry, Gironde adds another twist to the blurring ontologies of the animate and inanimate. While wandering his apartment looking for his copy of Michaux’s book *Ecuador*, he stumbles on an essay by Proust, in which he argues that critics of *Swann’s Way* mistakenly believed that the novel “era una especie de libro de recuerdos, entrelazados según las leyes fortuitas de la asociación de ideas” (168). From there, Gironde directly cites a passage from Proust’s essay in which he explained his method of the *fenómeno de memoria*. Gironde summarizes Proust in the following way:

Pasa entonces Proust a pedirnos que leamos, por ejemplo, *Las memorias de ultratumba*, de Chateaubriand, donde nos dice que puede verse perfectamente cómo este autor conocía también ese procedimiento de brusca transición, ese *fenómeno de memoria*. (168)

In his discussion of *fenómeno de memoria* the narrator defines Proust’s idea as the possibility of an abrupt transition in a story. Whenever a reader encounters in a text an illogical jump from one scene to another, they are bearing witness to this phenomenon of which Proust speaks. The narrative tangent Gironde travels regarding Proust leads him to

another connection. Girondo remembers a conversation with Jean Echenoz, another French novelist. Girondo explains:

[Echenoz] me habló de brascas pero eficaces transiciones en sus relatos. “Pasa un pájaro,” me dijo. “Lo sigo. Eso me permite ir a donde quiera en la narración.” Me pareció una lección muy interesante y a tener en cuenta y recuerdo que me dije que, vistas así las cosas, cualquier línea de un relato que me dije que, vistas así las cosas, cualquier línea de un relato podía transformarse, por ejemplo, en un ave migratoria. (169)

Echenoz describes a particular version of the *fenómeno de memoria*, one that could be considered a crossing of ontologies in which the line of a story could morph into a migrating bird. The passage places a new spin on Girondo’s travels of which there are many in the novel. In fact, Girondo points this out himself, when he retrieves something he had already said in the first chapter of the novel. As he does other occasions in the second chapter, he even quotes his earlier chapter to explain what the thinking behind that moment had been in the first place:

Esta lección de Echenoz en el bar Aviador la utilicé años después en *El mal de Montano* para trasladar con rapidez la acción de un paisaje chileno a Barcelona: “Ya en tierra, al mirar hacia lo alto, hacia el cielo sin nubes de San Fernando, vi pasar un pájaro. Lo seguí. Y me pareció que seguirle me permitía ir a donde quisiera, utilizar mentalmente toda mi movilidad posible.” (169)

In the space of one page, as both passages cited above illustrate, there are a multitude of converging metaphors. The first ontological line of distinction the narrator breaks is that between literature and animals, but this quickly passes to the narrator thinking of himself as the bird. After he sees the bird flying in the passage above, he suddenly ends up back in Barcelona. Thus, through this violation of conceptual boundaries that demarcate a flying animal from a sentence, Vila-Matas compels the reader to reconsider the possibilities and limitations of literature. The *thing*, as Bennett and others conceive it, provides a kind of nexus between the human and nonhuman that compel us to consider

just where the line needs to be drawn or erased between the flight of a line of literature and that of a bird. The narrator explains that following the line of flight of the bird would allow him to “go where he wanted to” and mentally “use all of his possibility” as the bird would.

Girondo also reflects on the ways in which his sense of self becomes entangled with his mother’s identity. In his dictionary entry about Rosario Girondo, he builds on the special life of *things*. Girondo traces some of the main themes that emerge from his mother’s diaries spanning from the 1950s to the 1970s. His mother was an avid writer and wanted her son to grow up to write as well. She hated her husband (Girondo’s father), and spent much of her marriage taking drugs in order to anesthetize herself from the emotional pain of the failed relationship. The following passage provides an illustrative sample of his musings on Rosario and the ways in which his own narrative style and language come to blend with the poems and fragments of his mother’s writing: “Mi madre. Siempre frágil y viviendo en el infierno matrimonial, perdida a veces entre los barbitúricos, soñando en trenes que arrollaban, silenciosa y sufrida enemiga de mi padre, al que de todos modos necesitaba para escribir el diario...” (130). In a fragment of *Teoría de Budapest* that Girondo cites, his mother relates a phenomenological experience she has with objects taking on a special significance:

Porque yo percibo lo que pasará y también percibo la segunda vida de los objetos y digo cosas que ni yo misma entiendo y que no merecen comentario (...) Yo percibo la vida secreta y huidiza que está detrás de lo que se ve, detrás de la realidad. Yo a veces veo esto, lo que llamo la segunda máscara, pero no tengo a nadie para compartir esa percepción. (132)

The idea of the second life of objects squares perfectly with Jane Bennett’s thing-power. At times, objects are just objects. At other times, objects take on a special life – they are

animated in ways that transcend our ordinary understanding and description of them. Of course, a skeptic might argue that this view is purely a result of her abuse of barbiturates. Nevertheless, Vila-Matas returns repeatedly to the special perceptual experiences that twist the conventional concepts that divide the world into animate and inanimate. As Hillyer's observations of Vila-Matas's earlier novel *Bartleby y compañía* illustrated, the experience with drugs invites the self into a special capacity for seeing reality from an unexpected angle.

After citing a page-long fragment from his mother's diary, the novel transitions to a section Vila-Matas titles "Comentario al fragmento de mi madre." In this section of the novel, Vila-Matas places another twist on the Yaeger's idea of folds and the oedipal discourses discussed earlier in the chapter. The relationship between Gironde and Montano was characterized by hostility and competition and ultimately resulted in the "killing off" the character of the son. On this occasion, we see the ways in which Gironde finds himself brought into the *folds* of his mother's identity. This occurs when Gironde sits smoking in front of a mirror while is alone for the weekend. He reports that he has nothing to do but write in his diary and, while under the influence of barbiturates, he starts to have a hallucination that sets the backdrop of his reflections on *Teoría de Budapest*.¹ While he smokes, his reflection in the mirror alternates between the image of himself and that of his mother. The incident suggests that Gironde's identity unfolds as it is revealed that he is really an extension of his maternal source. In order to signal the

¹ It should be noted that the scene narrate here has significant resonances with Vila-Matas's biography as a writer. He has claimed that the most important influence of any writer in his life has been that of Marguerite Duras. As we consider this extra-textual fact we may appreciate the way that his novel helps upend the Bloomian model of "Anxiety of Influence," which often emphasizes the transmission of authorial influence between men at expense and marginalization of women.

moments when this switch in the mirror's reflection occurs he punctuates almost every paragraph of the section with either the sentence "Y ahora, Rosa," or "Y ahora, José."

In sum, Vila-Matas goes from explaining how his mother's drug abuse contributed to an opening in her phenomenological experience, which she wrote about as the "second life of things," to a narration of his experience while reading her entries. This slippage of identities, in addition to the narration of flies and birds as incarnations of humans and as literary avatars serve to call into question the autonomy of particulars.

Disappearing into Literature

Throughout the novel, Vila-Matas creates a compelling circuitry among the text, self, thing, and world. As we see in the first chapter, the aliveness of things operates as a kind of menace to the creativity of the writer and the intellectual autonomy of the self. To the degree that literature is, in and of itself, alive and is not merely creating illusions of reality, it is a monster that taunts the writer and the literary addict alike. As the novel evolves, the entanglement of the narrator with the animation of literature becomes an avenue for curing his malady. It is not as though he definitively cures the disease at any point; there is no teleological march toward greater freedom from literary sickness that liberates him permanently. Girondo senses himself to be transforming into literature, and surrendering his identity to the book he is writing. It is not that literature is incarnating in Girondo, as we frequently hear in literature. The point is that Girondo is going through an embodiment, or metaphysical corporealization of literature.

In one sense, the notion that the self has the capacity to transform into literature is framed as a menace. In the diary entry on Franz Kafka, Girondo suggests that the Czech author's diary terrifies the reader with a cannibalistic notion of literature. He argues that

Kafka “sabía que no debía dedicar todo su tiempo a la literatura. Temía que la literatura lo chupase, como un remolino, hasta hacerle perderse en sus comarcas sin límites” (161). Drawing on Kafka as an exemplary figure for this phenomenon, Gironde conceptualizes literature as an all-consuming entity, one that spatially invades the boundaries of the self. He describes Kafka’s novel, *The Castle*, as a “novela infinita e incapaz de tener final, entre otras cosas” (162). The character of the Surveyor travels not between physical places to conduct his surveying, but rather, shuttles between interpretations and commentary: “Se detiene el Agrimensor en todos los recodos del imaginario camino y lo comenta todo” (162). For Gironde, there is a sense in which the practice of literary commentary in the Castle goes on indefinitely. When one takes into account some of the secondary literature on Kafka, it appears Gironde is on to something. In her book *Archetype, Architecture, and the Writer*, Bettina Liebowitz Knapp points out the degree to which Kafka connects human and nonhuman spheres. She argues that the “*Castle* may be considered a metaphor for the Self: the totality of the psyche... [it] is a complex of opposites and includes within its portals human and nonhuman beings, ideal and real concepts, good and evil forces” (67). Based on her analysis of *The Castle*, it is logical to see why Kafka’s novel would serve as a key reference point for Vila-Matas insofar as it creates seamless linkages among self, the psyche, and nonhuman forces.

There is, in a sense, a geographic dimension to the overlaps between the self and literature that Gironde evokes in his analysis of Kafka’s work. In the following passage, he describes the breaking of boundaries that separate literature from the nonliterary:

La literatura, me dije, está siendo acosada, como nunca lo había sido hasta ahora, por el mal de Montano, que es una peligrosa enfermedad de mapa geográfico bastante complejo, pues está compuesto de las más diversas y variadas provincias o zonas maléficas; una de ellas, la más visible y tal vez la más poblada y en

cualquier caso, la más mundana y la más necia, acosa a la literatura desde los días en que escribir novelas se convirtió en el deporte favorito de un número casi infinito de personas... (63)

There is a broader philosophical idea of the term he employs in order to redefine the relationship between the self and literature. The idea that literature is being eviscerated by the growing legions of those who believe themselves capable of writing functions as a decoy for the deeper sense in which he envisages disappearance. Aaron Hillyer notes that:

The disappearance at issue [in Vila-Matas's work] is not a permanent vanishing where artistic language is forever nullified. Rather, what Blanchot and Agamben reject most generally is a particular understanding of language, its signifying function, and then a certain subjectivity as well, or rather subjectivity itself, its persistence in the ego and individual in any identity. (9)

For Hillyer, Vila-Matas builds on Blanchot in order to develop a disappearance of the subject. Disappearance offers a way of separating subjectivity from the confines of language and the ego. In *El mal de Montano*, this idea has resonance as the narrator attempts to escape the intrusion of literature into his consciousness, and complains that he wants to disappear from literature. What he realizes is that the only way to resolve his literary malady is to escape into literature.

During a trip to Faial, he arrives at the conclusion that he needs to turn into literature not only in order to save himself, but also to save literature. It is at this juncture that Gironde casts himself as a modern day Quijote, who has to preserve a particular version of literary practice by himself embodying its qualities. It should be noted that the connection with the Quijote is not one in which he has lost his mind, and thinks he has become something he is not. Instead, it is as if the narrator is trying on the idea of becoming literature, of considering it as hypothetical possibility that allows him to think

of himself and cultural practices from a new vantage point. In this passage, we see Gironde entertaining the notion of defending his honor and the republic of letters by becoming literature incarnate:

Sería a partir de aquel momento conveniente y necesario, tanto para el aumento de mi honra como para la buena salud de la república de las letras, que me convirtiera yo en carne y hueso en la literatura misma, es decir, que me convirtiera en la literatura que vive amenazada de muerte a comienzos del siglo XXI: *encárame* pues en ella e intentar preservarla de su posible desaparición reviviéndola, por si acaso, en mi propia persona, en mi triste figura. (63)

Alonso Quijano's obsession with chivalric literature pushed him over the edge, and once he transformed into Don Quijote, he forever sought to defend the laws of chivalry as if he were a character in one of the many novels he had consumed. For Gironde, by contrast, it is the whole literary tradition that is threatened. In response to this threat, he endeavors to turn into literary texts and to turn into literature itself. Assuming that this goal is an impossible dream, could Gironde really be saying that literature is already itself alive?

The One Voice of Literature

Another aspect of the constant blending of the human and nonhuman throughout the novel relates to Vila-Matas's take on originality in authorship and literature. Early into the process of developing his dictionary of diary writers project, the narrator reflects on the importance of plagiarism and literary parasitism. The truth of the self, it turns out, is more of an amalgam of "external" influence. The narrator cites a long passage from Alan Pauls' book, *El factor Borges*, a work that argued that Borges, rather than defend himself against criticism of plagiarism, decided to integrate his opponents as "subaltern characters," figures that included translators, interpreters, librarians, and even brawlers. (120)

Girondo argues that early in his writing process, he himself identified with these subaltern figures, as his own early writing consisted of copying large sections of Cernuda poems while only sparingly interspersing original lines. The following passage illustrates the ways in which Vila-Matas cogently links the strands of writing, self-knowledge, fragmentation, and the negation of a totalized reality together:

No conocerse nunca o sólo un poco y ser un parásito de otros escritores para acabar teniendo una brizna de literatura propia. Se diría que éste fue mi programa de futuro desde que empezara a escribir copiando a Cernuda. Tal vez lo que he hecho es ir apoyando en citas de otros para ir conociendo mi exiguo territorio propio de subalterno con algunos destellos vitales y al mismo tiempo descubrir que nunca llegaré a conocerme mucho a mí mismo —porque la vida ya no es una unidad con un centro, “la vida”, decía Nietzsche, “ya no reside en la totalidad, en un Todo orgánico y completo. (123)

The idea that life no longer resides in a center point of organic totality would appear to merely echo the postmodern deconstruction of the Cartesian self. Vila-Matas draws on Benjamin’s idea that the only kind of work that made any sense should, “ser un collage de citas, fragmentos, ecos de otras obras” (124). For the narrator it is by identifying with this moving, and centerless world of dispersed and enmeshed literary representation that he finds a tentative sense of self-definition. However, the novel goes further than to simply embrace fragmentation and reject totality — it negotiates the tensions between them and affirms that there is a degree to which fragmentation can be captured within the self.

As the narrator systematically assembles an alphabetized dictionary of writers, he collects the multiplicity of literary voices under the aegis of his character and channels the variegated voices into the quirks and idiosyncrasies of his narrative personae. Though this may seem to be a mere reenactment of polyphony and the multi-voiced construction of texts, there is an important nuance of distinction — the narrator goes as far as defining

his sense of self as equivalent to the activity of literary proliferation. Girondo establishes equivalence between his own subjectivity and the literary dictionary in the following passage:

Me propongo trabajar discretamente en el interior de diarios ajenos y lograr que éstos colaboren en la reconstrucción de mi precaria autobiografía, que naturalmente será fragmentada o no será, se presentará tan fraccionada con mi personalidad, que es plural y ambigua y mestiza y básicamente es una combinación de experiencias (mías y de otros) y de lecturas. ¡Mi vida! Le sentará bien verse reducida a un diccionario breve, que voy a escribir pensando en el lector, pensando en el derecho que tiene éste a conocerme mejor. (107)

On the one hand, Vila-Matas acknowledges the expansive quality of literary proliferation, especially in an age of increased accessibility to texts. On the other hand, the narrator couples this expansion with the gesture of contraction as he collects these disparate texts under his own subjective agency and literary outlook.

The novel moves increasingly toward embracing univocity, or the universalization of voice. Although there are multiple narrative voices engaged throughout the text, Vila-Matas's unites them under Girondo's identity. To theorize Vila-Matas's move toward univocity, it is useful to invoke Peter Hallward's work on this idea. Hallward distinguishes between Deleuze and Badiou's thinking raised in his book *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* in which he explains that "[Deleuze's] univocity aligns [...] different sorts of reality on the same 'plane of consistency'" while Badiou's "univocity [disregards] the particularity of beings in favor of the abstract homogeneity of their being as being." (180). As Hallward explains, the difference between these two forms of univocity resides in the fact that in Deleuze's version, multiplicity persists even when it unites on a singular plane, while for Badiou, there is a sense in which the multiple voices actually lose their particularity.

What we initially encounter in the novel is a univocity akin to the Deleuzian version in which the multiple texts converge on a single narrative plane. The narrator's stream-of-consciousness journal entries prove to be a veritable patchwork of sweeping reference and citation to other authors and their work. However, Girondo also moves toward framing literary multiplicity along the lines of Badiou's "abstract homogeneity of their being as being," or in this case, "literature as literature." The more texts he brings to bear on his own literary understanding, the more the distinctions between them are blurred and they become part of the background, which made their multiplicity visible in the first place. The uniqueness and individuality of the writers he mentions become subordinate to his own narrative of working-through of his malady. His individuated and idiosyncratic nature becomes the universalizing template for consolidating the particulars of the various writers he outlines in his dictionary.

Vila-Matas conveys the move toward a unification of multiple voices by suggesting that Girondo's character itself comes to embody the literary tradition. Indeed, throughout the novel, he expresses the desire to transform his very being into literary texts. The rationale for this "becoming literature" is that it paves a way for his dissolution into the unwieldy forces of literary multiplicity. For Vila-Matas, it is the notion of disappearance that best captures the transformation of the self into literature. Drawing on the work of Blanchot and Musil, he writes:

Más bien a estas alturas del viaje de invierno mi problema es cómo hacer para desaparecer... cómo lograr ser una especie de hermano gemelo de MUSIL, Robert, que se disolvió en el tejido de su propia obra interminable. No hace mucho comenté que no era deseable que este diario fuera infinito como tampoco lo era que fuera mortal y tuviera un solo final. Ahora veo que lo realmente deseable tal vez sea desaparecer dentro de él. (177)

Here, Girondo's desire to disappear into the mix of voices becomes clear. Even when he writes about himself, there is a degree to which the cohesion of his selfhood becomes *othered*. A passage that reveals this phenomenon comes when Vila-Matas draws from Justo Navarro's idea that when writing about the self, it is natural that: "...Te agarras a lo que tienes más cerca: hablas de ti mismo. Y al escribir de ti mismo empiezas a verte como si fueras otro, te tratas como si fueras otro: te alejas de ti mismo conforme te acercas a ti mismo" (143). There is a reciprocal relationship between internal consciousness and external culture. The introspective, internalized gaze of autobiographical writing reveals instances of the external world of influences as it makes one aware of the alien forces operating within the individual psyche. The malady with which he struggles, in this sense, amounts to the fact that navel gazing practice of journal writing unfolds a disjointed tapestry of cultural proliferation. The productive element of this self-alienating quality of writing, however is that it delivers the individual from the pressure of needing to discover the objectified self.

The Self as Endless Transformation

The narrator goes through states of flux throughout the novel. At times, he feels capable of transcending his ordinary sense of self and to see groundbreaking connections between humans and nonhumans. At other times, he reverts back into the lamentation of his literary sickness and of a non-liberating disappearance of literature. For example, in the first chapter of *El mal de Montano*, Vila-Matas frames the textual saturation of life as inhibiting creative and intellectual autonomy. For Girondo, intertextuality initially operates as an oppressive force of influence that looms over his awareness. At the end of the first chapter, however, the narrator begins to break through his malady of literary

blockage after a sexual encounter with his girlfriend, Rosa. As such, the second and remaining chapters of the novel present a more horizontal, democratic version of textual multiplicity and integration.

In the later chapters of the novel, Vila-Matas elaborates on the notion of the writer disappearing into a horizontal network of influence. He conceives of authorial disappearance and suggests that the most productive intervention of the writer is to participate in universal transformation. The explicit reference to the universal surfaces, in fact, in Gironde's reflections on the qualities that make a diary one of high quality. He outlines the theoretical parameters that should govern autobiographical writing. In the following passage, he challenges the idea that the diary works as a tool for existential inquiry:

Al igual que otros diaristas, no escribo para saber quién soy, sino para saber en qué me estoy transformando, cuál es la dirección imprevisible – desaparecer sería la ideal, aunque tal vez no... No es revelación de una verdad lo que mi diario anda buscando, sino la descripción cruda, clínica, de una mutación. (213)

In this passage Vila-Matas challenges the idea that writing a diary reveals the self as fixed identity, but instead participates in the construction of the self as process.

According to Gironde, instead of upholding the stable self as the ideal object, the diary provides a "crude" or scientific rendering of the way in which the self can only represent a quality of change rather than a knowable object. His rumination touches on a paradox: to write means to give voice to the living subject and allow for empowering self-expression, but it also threatens to deceive the reader into translating the fluidity of thoughts and experiences of the writing into freezing the subject into a still image. As the focus on subject matter shifts in kaleidoscopic fashion over the course of the novel, the reader is drawn into the notion that self-identity is constantly constructed and

reconstructed: the caveat here is that literature presents the primary vehicle for capturing this ongoing transformation.

This theme of the transience of identity that Girondo explores in his reflections on the diary relates, in fact, to the development of Montano's character in the first chapter. While describing Montano, Girondo demonstrated the impossibility of locating the essence of that character's self — as he cycles through various emotional states the reader discovers that, in reality, Montano has no consistent identity beyond the ebb and flow of his unsettling shifts from engaging charm to vindictive spite. In the second chapter, this transition goes to an extreme as the narrator unveils the fact that he was an imaginary construct all along.

This emphasis on transience in *El mal de Montano* creates a new context for the discussion of intertextuality. In the first instance, the model of textual combination redefines the author, Girondo, converting him from creator into coordinator. However, Vila-Matas takes this displacement of authorial identity a step further by envisaging the proverbial “death of the author” as the constant and moment-by-moment “dying of the author.” As the author construes and deconstructs himself he reaches a creative apogee after conceiving his identity as a curator of multiple texts. Indeed, by the end of the novel, Girondo explains in more explicit terms his vision for authorial disappearance by rejecting creative immortality as the final goal of writing:

Si miramos con atención al mundo de hoy tan en transformación, veremos que lo que hace falta no es permanecer en “la eternidad perezosa de los ídolos” (que decía Blanchot), sino cambiar, desaparecer para cooperar en la transformación universal: actuar sin nombre y no ser un puro nombre ocioso. (297)

For a reader accustomed to experimental postmodern fiction, the favorable use of the term “universal” signals that Vila-Matas is either engaging in heterodoxy, or he is

discovering a new way of integrating the taboo concept of universality into the postmodern literary approach. The narrator conceives of the impermanence of the self as the highest goal of literary achievement, and disavows the pursuit of joining the immortal pantheon of canonical writers.

Vila-Matas envisages reality as flowing from a primal source: literature as a practice of converging human and nonhuman ontologies. On the other hand, the narrator moves increasingly in the direction of fusing with this anonymous, de-personified fabric of existence. In order to resolve this conundrum of discovering what precedes being, Vila-Matas introduces the idea of the reader-writer relationship, and its potential to create a space of unity that exceeds death and the immortality of artistic egos. He proposes that this fluidity of authorial identity serves to unify the practices of textual production and reception:

Hoy eres Gironde y mañana Walser y tu nombre verdaderos se pierde en el universo, quieres acabar con los mezquinos sueños de supervivencia de los escritores, quieres inscribirte con tus lectores en un mismo horizonte anónimo donde estableceríais por fin con la muerte una relación de libertad. (297)

Vila-Matas takes the notion of disappearance and the connection with universal transformation to a higher plane by positing it as a horizontal relationship between authors and readers. As the narrator speculates on the possibility of establishing “with death a relationship of liberty,” it is tempting to read the passage as a mere evocation of the proverbial “death of the author.” However, Vila-Matas adds a dimension of catharsis to the concept. The disappearance of the author allows Gironde to escape from the limitations of a fixed identity. The relationship between writer and readers is reformulated: readers do not give the writer an enduring name; rather, the writer achieves universality by dissolving himself in an anonymous community of readers. Vila-Matas

summarizes this process in one simple statement summarizing the work of writer Fernando Pessoa, who he considered to have this philosophy in his work: “El mundo externo *se convierte en su Yo*, es decir que su Yo hace suyo lo que está fuera de él” (183).

Conclusion

Vila-Matas’s novel differs from the standard postmodern paradigm not because it deconstructs the subject, but because it reconstructs it in novel ways that post-structuralism analysis has not explored. *El mal de Montano* diverges from postmodernism to the extent that it embraces an ultimate shared-ness of being that connects everything in a network. Vila-Matas redefines literary objects along the lines of *things* as they are conceptualized in Jane Bennett’s theory. Furthermore, Vila-Matas illustrates the potential for developing new vocabularies for the writing and interpretation of literature. Of course, the narrative nucleus for this line of questioning starts out as Montano’s narrative illness and his working-through of this sickness through diary entries replete with encyclopedic knowledge and reference to other writers’ work. These gestures initially appear to bear all the signals that the novel fits squarely into the parameters of the postmodern. However, my objective has been to develop a secondary reading that shows that Vila-Matas’s phenomenological musings pave the way to rediscovering what postmodernism has repressed or ignored: universal connections between phenomena.

Over the course of the novel, Gironde manages to draw heterogeneous cultural phenomena into what Yaeger refers to as *folds*. The dialectical play of self-inquiry disentangles the solid sense of ego-identity could lead to a game of deconstructive semantics, which negate both the particular sense of self and the universal sense of collective culture. Yet Vila-Matas overcomes this possible trap by affirming a synthesis

of self and literary universe that counteracts the alienating effects of postmodernism's penchant toward infinite deconstruction into particulars. The novel also negates the existence of pre-literary reality, and suggests that the multiplicity of texts contains reality within its universalizing fabric. For Vila-Matas, literature is the ideal platform and the material oxygen for staging a process of endless folding in of the subject.

Given these points, what is the prognosis for the literary sickness Vila-Matas defines as the *mal de Montano*? There are both optimistic and pessimistic ways of reading what happens to Montano in the course of trying to start his new novel in the midst of realizing that the only thing he can do is write a diary about writers of the diary. The pessimistic interpretation would view the writing process as a gradual fall from grace and of waning of the subjective power of the author. The writer starts to write as a way to self-express and have an influential voice in a culture. However, among all the possible topics fit for working into a novel, s/he eventually arrives at the taboo topic the heretic anti-writers who have abandoned the practice. This is precisely what Hillyer aims to get at with his idea of the "disappearance of literature" writ large. This pessimistic view considers the capacity and artistic license of the writer as potentially constrained by one wrong creative choice that sends him or her down the path of blockage. The power of the *thing*, in this paradigm, is equivalent to the disempowerment of a person who would otherwise be a creative and productive writer.

Nevertheless, there is also an optimistic interpretation of Montano's malady. Although he complains about the condition of being caught in the web of previous fictions (while also ascribing this condition to his apocryphal son) Girondo utilizes his state of literary despair to develop compelling insights into the vitality of objects. It is the

activity of nonhuman things which allow Montano, albeit temporarily and sporadically, to break out of writer's block. For Vila-Matas, authorial disappearance means something more than the proverbial "death of the author," as he not only negates the idea of an individual, insulated intelligence behind the text, but also posits the creative act of writing as a horizon of possibility for connecting readers and writers in a universalized circuit of interaction.

Chapter 3. *Soldados de Salamina* and the Unlikely Synchronicities of History

Javier Cercas's novel *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) represents a case of the appeal to universality in contemporary Spanish fiction. For the most part, scholars have viewed the text as congruent with the metafictional paradigm. (Satorras Pons, Amago) They have ascribed the ways in which Cercas blurs the boundaries between the historical and the imagined to the author's presumed postmodernist orientation. However, there are compelling ways in which Cercas embraces the idea of the universal despite the incongruence of this concept with postmodernism. In her book *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009), Susan Buck-Morss provides a framework to see how it is possible to frame universality, long considered as the quintessential, totalizing concept that postmodernism has made it to be, in favorable terms. For her, universal history rests on the idea that "Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences. A person's nonidentity with the collective allows for subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment" (133). Buck-Morss affirms this idea while drawing on the case of the Haitian revolution. However, her description of "subterranean solidarities" is transferrable to other contexts. Although it is not immediately apparent during the first reading of Cercas's novel, the idea of "common humanity" has strong resonances in Cercas's breakthrough work. In particular, the thematic focus on war and the solidarity between soldiers becomes a platform for affirming the commonalities between humans that transcend, even if temporarily, some of the divisions created by cultural difference.

There is a difficulty with viewing *Soldados* in the light of the universal. The focal point of the narrative is a leading figure of the Falange, a political organization that espoused a philosophy that Spain should return to its place in the universal. The Falange

defined the concept in a constrictive, politicized and utopian way and to suggest that Cercas is doing anything related to the universal that is not a direct criticism should raise our suspicions. That is, to the degree that Cercas rehabilitates the principles of universality, he is playing the dangerous game of a concept that has been contaminated by its association with Falangist ideology and Francoist rule. To make matters more complicated, the narrator of *Soldados de Salamina* observes the parallels between his life and that of Sánchez Mazas. As the some of the similarities between Sánchez Mazas emerge, the reader is invited to question the degree to which Javier has become enchanted by his subject of inquiry. In addition, Cercas also invokes the philosophical thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's shadow looms over *Soldados* especially because Cercas features conversation in the novel about the intellectuals and writers of the Falange, many of whom considered the German philosopher's ideas as applicable to the case of Spanish history and literature. In the light of these parallels and intersections, I argue that Cercas still manages to wrestle the idea of the universal away from its reactionary legacy.

The move toward the universal in *Soldados* occurs in multiple phases. Cercas starts with the level of the individual and the particular and focuses the reader's attention on a micro-history of the Spanish Civil War. Over the course of the novel, he moves beyond the particulars and contingencies of the Sánchez Mazas case and sees in it the potential to access generalized truths – there is a gradual move toward mapping a particular story onto more universal patterns. This approach to universal history is not meant to negate the specificities of history but to consider the transferable sets of

knowledge that emerge in local contexts and entertain their potential to provide explanatory models.

Another phase of the turn to the universal in the novel occurs in the final two chapters in which Cercas comes to define the hero as a set of impersonal forces that are detached from the deliberate control of the rational ego. He emphasizes the way in which music serves as a transcendent connector between actors from different disparate moments and contexts. The new way of thinking about the universal envisages a depersonified subject who exists at the service of solidarity and the affirmation of “common humanity” and “subterranean solidarity” posited by Buck-Morss. (133)

Engaging with the Sources of History

In the first chapter of Cercas’s novel, the question of how to write about history gradually leads the narrator to connect the findings of his research to contexts beyond the Spanish Civil War. For the most part, scholars who have analyzed the novel have emphasized the degree to which Cercas confuses nonfiction and fiction in the text. In one of the first scholarly articles on *Soldados*, “Memory and Metafiction: Re-membering Stories and Histories in *Soldados de Salamina*,” David Richter describes Cercas’s work as a “postmodern novel [that] affirms fragmentation in historical representation, a multiplicity of perspectives, and a re-consideration of the historical reading of the Spanish Civil War” (295-96). The theoretical precedence for this kind of postmodern historicism figured prominently in Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). For Hutcheon, it is ultimately the linguistic basis that unites both fictional and non-fictional texts which engage with history. The following argument has implications for *Soldados*:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense method of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refutes the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (93)

The genre of historiographic metafiction invites readers to question the degree to which texts possess the capacity to make truth claims. Since historical analysis and fiction are based on signifying discourses, her argument suggests that there is a degree to which even nonfiction texts must be read as fiction.

Cercas employs this model of historiographic metafiction by creating a seamless connection between fictional creation and nonfictional references, beginning with the first passage of the novel. The narrator explains how he first heard about Sánchez Mazas, then deepened his research, and finally considered his options of how to write about his findings. Along the way, Javier weaves details about his own life into the trajectory of the story. There is a degree to which he intermingles nonfictional biography with personal autobiography as this passage that opens the novel demonstrates:

Fue en el verano de 1994, hace ahora más de seis años, cuando oí hablar por primera vez del fusilamiento de Rafael Sánchez Mazas. Tres cosas acababan de ocurrirme por entonces: la primera es que mi padre había muerto; la segunda es que mi mujer me había abandonado; la tercera es que yo había abandonado mi carrera de escritor. (17)

The reader learns that the subject of the novel is the Falange leader Sánchez Mazas. But rather than provide more details on this figure right away, the narrator first describes elements of his personal life that shape his storytelling process over the course of the novel. The last item in particular points to a motif that recurs throughout the text: Javier's existential and identity crisis as a writer. In the same way that the narrator struggles to define himself and have success as a writer, his subject of inquiry, Sánchez Mazas, who,

as it will later be explained, also lived in conflict about the genre of writing that came to define his legacy.

Javier's claim to have abandoned writing proves to be hyperbole. We learn that after publishing books that received lukewarm reception, he pursues employment at a newspaper. One of his assignments is to interview Spanish writer Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, who relays to Javier a compelling anecdote about his father, Rafael Sánchez Mazas. During the Spanish Civil War, Sánchez Mazas, a published poet and a leading member of the Falange, narrowly escaped a mass execution. After he fled a chaotic dispersal of prisoners, a lone militiaman encountered him in the woods. Rather than kill or detain him, he spares his life by pretending not to see him.

Javier is left awestruck by the tale. He wonders who saved Sánchez Mazas's life and what motivated him to do so. In the aftermath of this conversation, he is inspired to research and write an article about the incident. In the article, he traces the parallels between Antonio Machado's final days and the moment of Sánchez Mazas escape. In the first chapter of the novel, Cercas includes an exact version of the article he published in *El País* in 1999, entitled "Un secreto esencial." Because Cercas included a full rendition of the article in the novel itself, an unanticipated connection emerges between ostensibly unrelated writers. The column ends with its author musing about the unknown identity of the militiaman who saved Sánchez Mazas's life and conjectures about what José and Manuel Machado, who supported the Nationalist cause, might have said to one another while visiting the grave of another poet: their brother Antonio. To know the answer to either or both of these mysteries would lead to an "essential secret," Javier claims.

Cercas learns early in his research that in order to tell the story of Sánchez Mazas, he will have to fill in gaps that were created due to the political expediency of keeping elements of what occurred secret. Javier gathers historical evidence on how he plans to turn his findings into material that will be read by the public. He explains, “Recorrí bibliotecas, hemerotecas, archivos. Varias veces viajé a Madrid, y constantemente a Barcelona, para hablar con eruditos, con profesores, con amigos y conocidos (o con amigos de amigos y conocidos de conocidos) de Sánchez Mazas” (70). One of the key archival sources Javier draws on is a newsreel from the early Franco era in which Sánchez Mazas provided an account of the incident to a group of enthusiastic supporters soon after making his way safely back to Nationalist territory in February of 1939. In that video, Sánchez Mazas provides a sanitized version of the story in which he omits the details about the soldier who spared his life and the Republican sympathizers who helped him survive the harrowing days in the forest. The account Sánchez Mazas provides, Cercas has reason to suspect, is distorted for political reasons. The Nationalist cause would not benefit from a narrative that painted Republican soldiers in a positive light.

Although the archival sources provide documented traces of the incident at Collell and Sánchez Mazas’s life and career, they are not entirely reliable in terms of reconstructing what actually occurred, as is made evident by the absence of the narrative of the Republicans who helped him. In this sense, even in the instances in which the narrator refers to documented sources to assemble the missing pieces of the publicly known narratives on Sánchez Mazas, Cercas introduces elements of doubt and unreliability.

Javier is explicit about his intentions of what he wants to do with his research. He is convinced that his career as a novelist has reached a dead end and that he should focus on journalism and nonfiction writing. His sources lend themselves to a kind of nonfiction retelling of the Sánchez Mazas escape and although he insists that he wants to turn his research into a *relato real*, he also establishes a tension between reliable and unreliable storytelling. Cercas writes:

[D]ecidí que, después de casi diez años sin escribir un libro, había llegado el momento de intentarlo de nuevo, y decidí también que el libro que iba a escribir no sería una novela, sino sólo un relato real, un relato cosido a la realidad, amasado con hechos y personajes reales, un relato que estaría centrado en el fusilamiento de Sánchez Mazas y en las circunstancias que lo precedieron y lo siguieron. (52)

Although he suggests that the book will be a work of nonfiction, Javier starts to introduce doubt as to the reliability of his sources. Through his research and his conversations with his contacts, he has the opportunity to meet the “amigos del bosque,” the Spanish Civil War survivors who had encountered Sánchez Mazas. During his days fleeing his botched execution, the *amigos* helped Sánchez Mazas until he could work his way back to nationalist territory. Javier is able to meet with members of the Figueras family and this provides him with important leads for his investigation. Cercas writes:

Pude conversar con su tío Jaume, con María Ferré y con Daniel Angelats. Los tres sobrepasaban los ochenta años: María Ferré tenía 88; Figueras y Angelats, 82. Los tres conservaban una buena memoria, o por lo menos conservaban una buena memoria de su encuentro con Sánchez Mazas y de las circunstancias que lo rodearon, como si aquél hubiera sido un hecho determinante en sus vidas y lo hubieran recordado a menudo. (71)

In this passage, the reader is enticed to trust, albeit in a limited way, the historical veracity of the narrative upon which he will later elaborate in the second chapter. Javier suggests that because of the importance of those events in their lives, the recollections of

his interviewees should be considered reliable. On the other hand, Cercas goes on to explain that the accounts provided by Ferré, Figureas, and Angelats “diferían, pero no eran contradictorias... así que no resultaba difícil recomponer, a partir de sus testimonios y rellenando a base de lógica y de un poco de imaginación las lagunas que dejaban, el rompecabezas de la aventura de Sánchez Mazas” (71). The reader learns about the degree to which conjecture, hypothesis, and imagination infiltrate the accounts he gathers from these survivors. While he reflects further on the possible distortions of memory, Javier explains the following point:

Por lo demás, los tres eran tan diversos que lo único que a mis ojos los unía era su condición de supervivientes, ese suplemento engañoso de prestigio que a menudo otorgan los protagonistas del presente, que es siempre consuetudinario, anodino y sin gloria, a los protagonistas del pasado, que, porque sólo lo conocemos a través del filtro de la memoria, es siempre excepcional, tumultuoso y heroico. (72)

Cercas subtly introduces a motif that he returns to repeatedly over the course of the rest of the narrative. He makes a connection between the filter of memory and the tendency to think that protagonists of the present ascribe heroism and exceptionality to events of the past --- there is a tendency to frame stories of the past within the parameters of literary genres. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White argues, “Providing the “meaning” of a story by identifying the kind of story that has been told is called explanation by emplotment...[it] is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is revealed to be a story of a particular kind” (7). For Cercas, the varieties of emplotment that allow him to write his *relato real* abound. As we saw earlier in the citation of the first passage of the novel, the narrator’s preoccupations about his identity as a writer exemplify how he overlays personal bias over his perspective on the past. Javier aims not to get lost in the particularities of the minutia of history and he instead wants to see the ways in which his

archival research and interviews allow him to position his findings in a broader constellation of historical events.

From Particular to Universal History

In his quest to follow history to its limits and reveal the deeper implications of his discoveries, Cercas begins to reinvigorate the idea of the universal in a way that scholars have not yet identified. This is not to say that scholars have not partially recognized the importance of the universal in *Soldados*. David Richter suggests that we should view Cercas's novel through the prism of Aristotle's conception of poetry and history. The issue of the universal comes to the forefront in the following passage where Richter defines the universal as a generalizable set of principles and knowledge about the world, Richter writes:

Aristotle is explicit in his affirmation that the difference between poetry and history is not merely the fact that one is written in verse and the other in prose. He distinguishes between them, instead, by stating that "The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen." Furthermore, poetry is more favored of the two forms since it expresses the universal while history expresses the particular. (287)

For Richter, the relevance of Aristotle to *Soldados* resides in the distinction between the moments of Cercas's narrative that are based on documented and testimonial sources, and the incidents that Cercas invents or fills in. With respect to the latter phenomenon, Cercas is engaging in the Aristotelian practice of poetry insofar as he relays moments of history by including what *could have happened* rather than only relating what, according to verifiable sources, *did actually happen*.

Although Richter considers Cercas's novel within the framework of Aristotle's poetry/history distinction, he does not pursue the fact that the favorable engagement with

the universal category constitutes a paradox. As we have seen, the postmodern novel has been celebrated as a genre of anti-totalization. Richter places *Soldados* within this category and suggests it is a novel that like others of its kind fragments reality and our epistemological reception of it. Through his application of Aristotle's poetics, Richter only briefly mentions that the universal does figure in the novel – it is simply not part of the scope of his study to examine the triggering of universality in a comprehensive way.

In a more recent article “Paraísos sesgados: De la intertextualidad pertinente en *Soldados de Salamina*,” Carles Ferrando Valero also suggests that Cercas integrates Aristotelian elements into the novel. He writes:

En sus conversaciones con el director de cine David Trueba, el autor Javier Cercas afirma, según su entendimiento de la *Poética* aristotélica, que ‘mientras la historia se ocupa de lo particular y concreto, [...] la literatura se ocupa de lo general’, añadiendo que a través de ‘la manipulación de verdades accidentales’ y ‘mediante la mentira’, la ficción alcanza ‘la verdad esencial.’ (156)

For Valero, this desire of Cercas to provide a narrative that reaches the “essential truth” is one of the most salient features of the novel. He suggests that in *Soldados*, “[N]o importa fundamentalmente la historia documentada de lo sucedido a Sánchez Mazas en Collell, sino la habilidad de ofrecer un relato de implicaciones trascendentales a partir de su manipulación literaria” (156). The concepts of *universal* and *transcendental* emerge in the passages from Richter and Valero cited above. Neither scholar however explores the potential contradictions that embracing these qualities present given that the novel is otherwise *postmodern*.

There is a distinction to be made regarding Cercas's postmodernist favoring of the universal that serves to clarify these potential gaps in the analysis of his novel. At the level of the *process* in the narrative, there is a deconstruction of historical truth that is

metafictional in nature. The process by which the narrator gathers evidence and illustrates the blurry lines between the facts and fiction of the past invites us to categorize the novel as postmodern. The evidence that the novel is postmodern mounts as the reader bears witness to the varying degrees of unreliability of the narration. However, evidence also emerges that suggests that Cercas aims to tell a story that goes beyond the particular times and places of the initial analytic scope. In this way, it is with respect to the thematic *outcomes* of the novel, the distilled messages and appeals that Cercas makes connections to a universal framework.

As he gradually disavows his promise to tell a *relato real* and focuses his narrative on essential truths reminiscent of the Aristotle's category of poetry, he moves against the historicist penchant for contextualizing events and understanding history with a sensitivity towards cultural and temporal particulars. This is a controversial move. How can one reasonably question the intellectual rigor of not overgeneralizing any aspect of history? Graham Harman has questioned whether the practice of historicism has gone too far. In his article "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism" he suggests that the move toward particularizing history and literature has emphasized contextualization to a fault:

All efforts to embed works exhaustively in their context are doomed to failure for some fairly obvious reasons, though one usually avoids stating them because they are often associated with people whose motives are viewed with suspicion. One of the obvious reasons is that, to some extent, the social conditions under which authors produced *The Epic of Gilgamesh* or *Frankenstein* are not entirely relevant to these works themselves. For one thing, these works travel well across space and time— and generally the better the work, the better it travels. (201)

The quality of a literary work rests on its ability to *travel* outside of its context and resonate with larger and larger patterns of history. This is what Cercas means when he

says that his goal in writing about these episodes is to access an “essential secret” — he wants to find the piece of the Sánchez Mazas narrative that travels outside of the constrictions of the specific case of the Spanish Civil War.

The reference to the battle of Salamis, both in the title of the novel and throughout the narrative, exemplifies Cercas’s pivot away from the particular. To date, the evocation of the battle has not been a central focus of the attention of scholars. However, if we examine the parallels Cercas constructs between his novel and the ancient battle, more clues about his orientation toward the universal are made evident. Historians have argued that the victory of the Greek city-states against Persia in the battle of Salamis preserved Greek civilization and allowed it to establish itself as an imperial power — it has become known as the battle that saved western civilization. Yet what is also crucial is the degree to which our knowledge of the event relies on historical sources. Herodotus’s historical writings and Aeschylus’s drama *Persae* are the foundational texts that have provided historians and classical scholars knowledge on what occurred there.

Aeschylus chose to tell the story of *Persae* from the perspective of the Persians, who were defeated by the Greek city-states. According to Aeschylus scholar A.F. Garvie, there is still a scholarly debate about the degree to which it is possible to rely on the tragedy as an accurate representation of the battle of Salamis, and there is still no consensus on who wrote about it with more historical accuracy: Aeschylus or Herodotus (Garvie ix-xxi). Garvie’s warning to readers of Aeschylus’s *Persae* in the following passage also applies to Cercas’s *Soldados de Salamina*:

If, moreover, we become too involved in the question of his historical accuracy, and forget for a moment that he is not a historian but a poet and a dramatist, we blind ourselves to the possible ways in which he may have shaped his presentation so as to serve his poetic and dramatic purpose. (xxi)

This cautioning also applies to the interpretive strategies that one must take to *Soldados de Salamina* insofar as the novel constantly plays with the distinction between historical fact and authorial creation. In the case of *Persae*, Aeschylus was experimenting with making human characters, rather than gods, the key figures in a drama.

Persae distinguishes itself from other works of Aeschylus in that it was his first work to deal with actual historical events and did not center on mythological characters and events around which most of his other works had centered. For Aeschylus, the battle of Salamis was a compelling enough of an event to place it on par with the drama of the gods, to imbue it with the same tragic importance that had otherwise been reserved for the myths. With *Persae*, Aeschylus disrupted the insulated space of mythological narrative and drama, and brought tragedy into the fold of particular history. The direct witnessing and participation in the events of Salamis provided Aeschylus an incentive to diverge from the reigning conventions of artistic conventions of his time by centering *Persae* on the reenactment of human events rather than mythological ones. The nexus that links *Persae* and *Soldados de Salamina* is war. As it will be explained, the impetus of war is what tears asunder the neat theoretical distinctions and boundaries between Poetry and History.

The Shadows of Falangism

Sánchez Mazas personally benefitted from the victory of National Catholicism in Spain and lived comfortably under Franco's rule until his death in 1966. At no point in *Soldados de Salamina* does Cercas indicate that the Falangist renounced his allegiances to Franco or even expressed remorse for his fascist politics. Given these factors, what is

the effect of rescuing the biography of a figure that helped the nationalist cause as Cercas's novel does? Is Cercas not engaging in a kind of complicity in the historical crimes with which Sánchez Mazas is associated? Carles Cerrando Valero has a thought-provoking response to this issue. In the second chapter where Cercas provides a fictional re-enactment of Sánchez Mazas's days following the narrow escape from the firing squad, there is an instant in which the Falangist protagonist "remembers" an Ezra Pound poem. It is the first moment of rest for Sánchez Mazas since his narrow escape; the lines of poetry he recites appear innocuous and do not necessarily trigger the suspicions of the reader. Owing to the diligent research of Cerrando Valero however, we learn that the poem he cites was not published until after Sánchez Mazas died. He writes:

A la luz de la evidencia histórica, resulta obvio que el Sánchez Mazas real jamás evocó 'Canto CXX', porque no pudo haberlo leído. Es por ello que Cercas, al introducir el intertexto, no sigue el principio de fidelidad histórica propia de un 'relato real', sino que reconoce más importantes las implicaciones trascendentales que, mediante el uso de la ficción, alberga su 'relato esencial.' (160)

Cercas creates an obvious breach in the historical and biographical plausibility of the novel by creating a situation in which Sánchez Mazas brings to mind a poem that he could not have possibly read. The part of the Pound poem that Sánchez Mazas remembers is the following: "Do not move / Let the wind speak / That is paradise." As Valero explains, the next stanza of the poem is omitted from *Soldados* — it reads, "Let the Gods forgive what I / have made / Let those I love try to forgive / what I have made" (152). Valero explains that these lines were interpreted as a kind of plea for forgiveness that Pound made for his fascist leanings during his career. Sánchez Mazas, by contrast, was never known for making the same apology. Valero explains:

Pero en cualquier caso, independientemente del grado en que las expectativas estético-políticas y las circunstancias históricas divergieron para ambos poetas, lo cierto es que Sánchez Mazas jamás tuvo necesidad de pedir perdón — algo que, a

diferencia de Pound, nunca le supuso contrariedad alguna. Por ello precisamente ‘Canto CXX’, que termina con una súplica al perdón de la divinidad y los seres queridos por parte de la voz poética, no puede aparecer íntegro en la novela de Cercas. El modo de presentación del poema, sesgado en el recuerdo de Sánchez Mazas, ejemplifica a la perfección la alteración de significaciones a través de una memoria incapaz de incluirlas en su totalidad. (152)

For Valero, the omission of the piece of Ezra Pound’s piece of poetry speaks to the inability to bring forgiveness into the totality of the situation. But Valero also sees this an irresponsible act on the part of the narrator who, he suggests, “juzga más importante la conmiseración del lector que la fidelidad con los hechos” (160). To have been faithful to the facts, the logic follows, the narrator would have had to include the Pound poem in its entirety. If he had done so, the stanza in which the speaker asks for forgiveness would have appeared and could have paved the way toward reconciliation.

One element that has not been explored deeply in the scholarship is the degree to which Falangist philosophy influences the ideology of the novel. In the early twentieth century, leading thinkers of the Falange believed that their task was to restore Spain’s place in a kind of universal space of “glory.” A leader of the Falange, and a person with whom Sánchez Mazas had strong political and personal ties, José Antonio, once stated that “una nación es una unidad en lo universal, es el grado a que se remonta un pueblo cuando cumple un destino universal en la Historia” (London 153). According to Stanley Payne, José Antonio preferred to characterize his position as “españolidad” rather than “españolismo,” since he conceived the former as based on broader, more eternal principles. (*Fascism* 145) The leaders of the Falange sought to justify their political ideas with a philosophy of transcendence.

In *Soldados*, Cercas discusses the desire of the Falange to universalize its politics insofar as he highlights the “vanguardist” political tendencies of the Falange. He writes:

“... El uso de la fuerza se hallaba en el mismo corazón de la fuerza de la ideología del falangismo, que, como todos los demás movimientos fascistas bastaba una minoría de hombres valerosos y decididos” (88). As a minority party, the Falange sought to restore Spain’s place in the universal. The philosophers Oswald Spengler and George Sorel were key influences for Sánchez Mazas and José Antonio. Yet the more likely source of the vanguardist politics the Falange intellectual leaders embraced would have been Ortega y Gasset, whom Cercas mentions once in the novel but does not identify as a key source of Falangist ideology. According to Payne, “José Antonio was an enthusiastic student of Ortega y Gasset and other theorists who advocated an elite. This belief in the role of what later came to be called the ‘creative minority’ was consonant with the simplistic political notions on which his father’s dictatorship had rested” (*Falange* 29). Another likely reason the Falange sought to shift away from an emphasis on “universalist” nationalism was to undermine the regional nationalisms in Spain. To move beyond the “mere nationalism” offered a way to undermine progressive sectors of the nationalist movements in Catalonia and Basque country. The Falangist universality not only based itself in an imagined mythology of Spain’s destiny to defend and embody civilization, it served as their rhetorical weapon against movements for national self-determination throughout non-Castilian regions of Spain.

Nietzsche en... Soldados de Salamina

The engagement with universality as a philosophical concept proposed in this chapter is more likely to be ascribed to Hegel than Nietzsche. For Buck-Morss’ study, it is clear that Hegel’s work on the universal offer a compelling way to observe historical events through the tools of his dialectics. However, in the case of *Soldados de Salamina*,

Nietzsche, the quintessentially anti-Hegelian thinker, also speaks of unifying the self to the universal. The idea of reading Cercas along with Nietzsche has been proposed before.

In her book *History, Violence, and the Hyperreal: Representing Culture in the Contemporary Spanish Novel* (2010), Kathryn Everly explores the connection between Nietzsche's idea of the usefulness of history and *Soldados de Salamina*. She writes:

Friedrich Nietzsche's understanding of the importance of problems of history as representative of cultural identity in *Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* can be translated to a Spanish context in order to better understand contemporary interpretations of historical events. For Nietzsche a focus on history and historical events is only useful if it leads to progress in the present. (17)

In her analysis, Everly explores the relationship between remembering and forgetting that is at stake in *Soldados*. Her analysis opens the space for further investigation of how Cercas's novel dialogues with the broader philosophical ideas of Nietzsche on how to instrumentalize our recollection of history for the progress of the future.

The relevance of Nietzsche's philosophy to *Soldados* is indirect given that the philosopher is never mentioned explicitly. However, Cercas does discuss the intellectual influences on Sánchez Mazas. Cercas points to the fact that Ramiro Ledesma Ramos and Ernesto Giménez Caballero were key collaborators with whom Sánchez Mazas created the publication *El Fascio*. The influence of Nietzsche on those thinkers is clearly established in Gonzalo Sobejano's *Nietzsche en España*. Sobejano writes:

El código nacionalista, católico e imperial, de Giménez Caballero, *Genio de España*, está impregnado de inmediatos y mediatos dejes nietzscheanos, en cuanto hemos de admitir que Nietzsche fue utilizado por predecesores españoles y por políticos extranjeros en diversos y quizá erróneos modos, pero en todo caso como fuente de energía subversión de valores, redención de decadencias y curación mediante la voluntad de poder y la jerarquía. (651)

Nietzsche was invoked for a broad spectrum of political purposes and at times his ideas were more abused than used. Sobejano explains that Giménez Caballero and Ledesma

Ramos drew on Nietzsche's ideas in their attempts to regenerate the national image of Spain. They leaned on the concepts of will to power and the *overman* as notions that could inspire a project to restore Spain to imperial dominance.

Although they are only mentioned briefly in *Soldados*, Giménez Cabellero and Ramiro Ledesma surface in Cercas's narrative. By virtue of the broader intellectual cross-fertilizations in play during that time, the presence of those two figures provide a gateway to considering the ways in which Nietzsche's intellectual influences on Spanish right-wing thinkers in the early twentieth century reverberate in *Soldados de Salamina*. One of the implicit evocations of Nietzsche in the novel occurs when Cercas describes the ways in which Sánchez Mazas immersed himself in fascist politics during his travels to Italy and sought to introduce them into Spain upon his return:

Sea como fuere, lo cierto es que saludó [Sánchez Mazas] con entusiasmo la Marcha sobre Roma en una serie de crónicas titulada *Italia a paso gentil*, y que vio en Benito Mussolini la reencarnación de los condotieros renacentistas y en su ascensión al poder el anuncio de que el tiempo de los héroes y los poetas había vuelto a Italia. (82)

In this passage Cercas mentions in passing the idea of heroes, and, in doing so, he plants a clue about the theme that plays a key role in the third chapter of the novel. Part of the concern for Cercas here is to define the intellectual ways in which Sánchez Mazas conceived of fascism as a model that would return culture back to the safe space of classicism and the invocation of cultures of antiquity. In his warped perspective, which Cercas goes on to sardonically critique, fascism would restore hierarchical orders that would allow for art to flourish. This return to the "time of heroes and poets" also allows Cercas to introduce another clue of how he will come to define the impersonal forces behind events. Sánchez Mazas revered Mussolini as the reincarnation of renaissance-era

warlords, but this rebirth of a specific kind of historical figure relates to an even more abstract notion of forces. In the following passage he establishes that the aspirations for Sánchez Mazas went beyond merely having an influence in writing:

A su vuelta al país, Sánchez Mazas entendió enseguida que para alcanzar su objetivo no sólo era preciso fundar un partido cortado por el mismo patrón del que había visto triunfar en Italia, sino también hallar un condotiero renacentista cuya figura, llegado el momento, catalizase simbólicamente todas las energías liberadas por el pánico que la descomposición de la Monarquía y el triunfo inevitable de la República iban a generar entre los sectores más tradicionales de la sociedad española. (83)

Cercas weaves the idea of the hero subtly in the second chapter from which this passage is drawn. However, the “liberated energies” that emerged in the aftermath of the monarchical overthrow allude to the role *forces* play in social processes. The idea that Sánchez Mazas came under the influence of the contextual features of his time and was pushed by the societal patterns and events is not particularly groundbreaking in nature. As we further bore into this idea of “liberated energies,” we also see that Cercas lays the groundwork to suggest that historical change is fundamentally impersonal. In particular, there is a sense in which the conversations relating to the political and intellectual influences on Sánchez Mazas subtly nod to Nietzsche’s “will to power.” Nietzsche argues that the categories of cause and effect in events are really semblances of a struggle between forces:

Two successive states, the one "cause," the other "effect": this is false. The first has nothing to effect, the second has been effected by nothing. It is a question of a struggle between two elements of unequal power: a new arrangement of forces is achieved according to the measure of power of each of them. The second condition is something fundamentally different from the first (not its effect): the essential thing is that the factions in struggle emerge with different quanta of power. (337)

According to Nietzsche, forces have a mind of their own. Each new arrangement of reality we perceive is not the effect of previous causes but rather a new configuration that emerges when one power wins over another. When forces clash, there is a struggle for domination between them as more powerful “quanta of power” overtake weaker ones.

With respect to the relationship between Nietzsche’s thought and the Falange, this description of the *will to power* that is echoed in *Soldados* could be seen as a way for Fascists to rationalize their ideology.² The rise of Nazism throughout Europe indeed indicates the course of social forces that exerted a certain degree of power and influence. Cercas affirms the idea of how *forces* influenced Sánchez Mazas and the fascist movement in Spain. And the intellectual lineage for this thinking traces back to Nietzsche. Nevertheless, with its emphasis on the role of music to create solidarity, *Soldados* also moves to detach Nietzsche’s ideas from those who sought to use them to advance the aims of the right wing. The idea of the universal that Cercas advances is the notion that certain moments allow for a momentary suspension of the individual difference. As we will see, this vision posits an alternative to the imperial version of universality that is characteristic of the Falangist discourse. Cercas accomplishes this by relying on Nietzsche’s idea of the *Ur-Eine*, the quality that connected the human to a deeper unity of primordial existence.

² There continues to be debate about the degree to which Nietzsche could be considered a foundational philosopher of fascism. See the collection of essays *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of Philosophy* (2002). Although it is clear that Falangist intellectuals found inspiration for their ideas in Nietzsche’s work, the scope of the argument in this analysis is to discover the ways in which Cercas manages to reclaim Nietzsche for a broader, solidaristic universality.

The Emergence of Dionysian Solidarity

In *Soldados*, Cercas conceives of Sánchez Mazas as a figure whose art had transformative political ramifications. As the narrator explains, Sánchez Mazas saw poetry as a vehicle to advance his fascist cause. The work of poets, Cercas suggests, did more than military maneuvers to defeat the Republic. Cercas affirms:

...Sánchez Mazas, que estuvo siempre al lado de José Antonio y desde ese lugar de privilegio supo urdir una violenta poesía patriótica de sacrificio y yugos y flechas y giros de rigor que inflamó la imaginación de centenares de miles de jóvenes y acabó mandándolos al matadero, es más responsable de la victoria de las armas franquistas que todas las ineptas maniobras militares de aquel general decimonónico que fue Francisco Franco. (51)

Cercas privileges poetry over military and political maneuvers as the key mechanism that facilitated the victory of rightwing forces in the Spanish Civil War. The novel incorporates some of Sánchez Mazas's poetry as Cercas examines the writer's work for indicators of his sociopolitical worldview. Although Cercas *explicitly* acknowledges the socially influential nature of poetry, he *implicitly* situates music as the genre that is even more deeply aligned with Nietzsche's conception of forces. In the following passage, Nietzsche describes the role of song in the tragic chorus – it provided a vehicle for the abandonment of self-identity and an embrace of the feeling of oneness:

Now hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbor, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn apart, so that mere shreds of it flutter before the mysterious primordial unity. (18)

The loss of a sense of self occurs when a person is in the throes of ecstasy and enters an altered state of consciousness. Nietzsche argues that the "*principium individuationis*," begins to disintegrate and that "Dionysiac stirrings... cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting" (17). This version of the universal is one that emerges when the boundaries of selfhood, cast as part of the realm of the *particular*, melt away

and all that is left is a primal version of oneness. Nietzsche suggests this can happen “under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life” (17). The feeling of being a separate self with a clear set of delineated boundaries gives way to something radically different, according to Nietzsche. As a result of this deconstruction of the unit of the self, what emerges is refiguring the identity that emphasizes its connections with everything.

The Dionysian element is nowhere better embodied in the novel than in the soldier who defies his orders and allows Sánchez Mazas to live. Cercas narrates this event in the second chapter where he takes the liberty to add hypothetical fictionalized versions of events to the nonfictional and biographical elements of the Sánchez Mazas episode. As such, the part of the novel that will be analyzed below represents a detour from the historically documented facts that comprise much of the rest of the story we read in the novel. In the passage below, the narrator tries to imagine the interactions the Falangist might have had with the *amigos del bosque*, the men who helped him work his way back to friendly Nationalist territory. Cercas writes:

Sánchez Mazas les había hablado de él la primera mañana en que estuvieron juntos, pero ahora, quizá porque la oscuridad impenetrable del granero y la elección tan cuidadosa de las palabras otorgaban a los hechos un suplemento de realidad, lo oyó como por vez primera o como si, más que oírlo, lo estuviera reviviendo, expectante y con el corazón encogido, quizás un poco incrédulo, porque también por vez primera —Sánchez Mazas había eludido mencionarlo en su primer relato. (119)

The scene establishes the intimate backdrop of the men hiding in the pitch dark of the granary. In the intimacy of the setting, Sánchez Mazas begins to relay more information about the fated soldier who allowed him to live. The reader learns that Sánchez Mazas

had left out an important part of the story he had originally told the *amigos*. Before the execution *en masse*, Sánchez Mazas saw this soldier create a strange scene that caught the attention of the prisoners and the guards. Cercas continues with the dramatization that speculates how this incident may have unfolded through the following monologue that Sánchez Mazas delivers while in hiding with the *amigos del bosque*:

[E]n vez de quedarse sentado en el banco, tarareando por lo bajo como siempre, aquella tarde se puso a cantar *Suspiros de España* en voz alta, y sonriendo y como dejándose arrastrar por una fuerza invisible se levantó y empezó a bailar por el jardín con los ojos cerrados, abrazando el fusil como si fuera una mujer, de la misma forma y con la misma delicadeza. (122)

In the scene Sánchez Mazas describes to the *amigos*, the soldier is swept up by an “invisible force.” With the reference to “force” Cercas invokes Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* once again. The soldier, in this instance, is not acting on his own accord but has come under the influence of something equal parts potent and intangible. The aspect of Nietzsche’s thought that is particularly compelling in this instance is his insistence that singing and dancing constitute activities that push humans past the limits of their conventional forms of being. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he writes:

Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the brink of flying and dancing, up and away into the air above. His gestures speak of his enchantment... he feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams (18)

Nietzsche suggests that singing and dancing have the potential to lead to the collapse of the barriers that separate the self from the world. A person under the influence of these forces becomes enchanted and has the potential to transcend the realm of “appearances” of life. *Suspiros de España* is the song that Cercas weaves throughout the novel that sutures together the narrator’s decision to write his book and Sánchez Mazas’s ability to

miraculously escape his demise. The passage below continues Sánchez Mazas monologue in his conversation with the *amigos*. We learn that the scene of the soldier dancing brought the prisoners and guards together in a moment of laughter. Sánchez Mazas goes on to explain:

[Y]o y mis compañeros y los demás soldados que nos vigilaban y hasta los carabineros nos quedamos mirándolo, tristes o atónitos o burlones pero todos en silencio mientras él arrastraba sus fuertes botas militares por la gravilla sembrada de colillas y de restos de comida igual que si fueran zapatos de bailarín por una pista impoluta, y entonces, antes de que acabara de bailar la canción, alguien dijo su nombre y lo insultó afectuosamente y entonces fue como si se rompiera el hechizo, muchos se echaron a reír o sonrieron, nos echamos a reír, prisioneros y vigilantes, todos, creo que era la primera vez que me reía en mucho tiempo. (122)

In this episode, a quality of the sublime breaks through the cracks of an otherwise bleak situation for both the Nationalist prisoners and the Republican soldiers. In the wake of the soldier singing *Suspiros de España* and clutching his rifle as if it were his dancing partner, the men who observe the spectacle break out in smiles and laughter. This Dionysian moment suspends the political differences of the prisoners and the guards. For the universal connections to emerge, the privileged capacity of song to move humans outside of their normative existence proves to be pivotal. Sánchez Mazas and Pere finish the conversation puzzling over the happy expression that broke out on the soldier's face when he allowed him to live. Cercas writes:

Angelats los sintió levantarse, tumbarse en la paja uno al lado del otro, junto a Joaquim, y los sintió también (o los imaginó) tratando en vano como él de conciliar el sueño, revolviéndose entre las mantas, incapaces de desprenderse de la canción que se les había enredado en el recuerdo y de la imagen de aquel soldado bailándola abrazado a su fusil entre cipreses y prisioneros, en el jardín del Collell. (123)

As the men try to fall asleep, the residuals from the earlier conversation condense in their collective contemplation of the song, which had “entangled” itself into their memory.

With the song, the image of the soldier plays in their minds while they prepare to fall asleep. Overall, this passage along with the others that emphasize the emotional influence of music, are deceptively rich with significance. According to Nietzsche, music even supplants literature in its ability to access the “impossible.” In the following passage, he places music beyond the plane of poetry in its capacity to construct a world of “universal validity:”

[W]hereas lyric poetry depends utterly on the spirit of music, music itself, in its absolute sovereignty, has no need at all of images and concepts but merely tolerates them as an accompaniment. Lyric poetry can say nothing that was not already contained, in a condition of the most enormous generality and universal validity, within the music which forced the lyric poet to speak in images. (75)

Poetry or other forms of literature may *try* to capture the general and universal condition. Yet it is only music that has the potential to *go there*. Nietzsche conceptualizes the sublime oneness as the domain of Dionysus. In Cercas’s novel, music unites the soldiers and prisoners into a web of unlikely commonality. These events of momentary sublime connection between the characters in conversation with Nietzsche serve to reconfigure the consensus that postmodernist deconstructions of experience and self are inherently anti-universalist. While the novel engages in a postmodern pastiche of invention and historical reference to biographical facts, it also funnels these discourses into moments of the sublime in which characters step outside of their socially prescribed roles.

Bolaño and the Impersonal Hero

The role of forces and depersonified subjectivity that emerge in the instance of the dancing and singing soldier intersect with the ways in which Cercas defines heroism in the final chapter of the novel. Although the figure of the hero in literature and other art

forms has been conceived as possessing a series of unique and *particular* characteristics, Cercas comes to reframe the concept as devoid of individuality. In the second chapter, Cercas mentions heroism in relation to how Sánchez Mazas saw the rise of Mussolini as an indicator of the potential return of “poets and heroes” cut in the mold of the cultures of classical antiquity. In the third chapter, he realizes that something is missing. He has chosen a Falangist poet as the central focus of his *relato real* and the life of this character could hardly be described as virtuous. As Javier comes to grips with the lack of heroic attributes of the central figure of the book he is writing, he also laments the fact that there is not a sufficient Republican perspective on the events at Collrell to balance out the otherwise Falangist informed account. These factors lead him to search for a Republican perspective on the firing squad and its aftermath, as well as a figure that would embody the qualities of heroism and compensate for the cowardice of Sánchez Mazas.

While puzzling over the missing hero needed to complete his narrative, Javier has a serendipitous encounter with Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño. Bolaño’s presence in the novel, to be certain, reinforces the universalizing interconnectivity between writers. The Chilean-born Bolaño spent the last years of his life living and writing in Spain, where he eventually died before many of his novels were published. He traveled the world and chronicled events based on his experience in his fictional work, and his presence in *Soldados* expands the sense of narrative influence in a transatlantic dimension. In particular, Bolaño’s novel *Los detectives salvajes*, embodies the cosmopolitan reach of his work as it takes place in and includes characters from many disparate locations such as Mexico, England, France, Spain, and Israel. It is precisely one of the incidents that he

narrates in that novel that becomes the source for Cercas to create the hero of the story: Miralles.

Miralles surfaces in the narrative when Bolaño tells Cercas about his time working as a guard at a camp ground in Castelldefels Catalonia. The event is drawn from Bolaño's biography and the Chilean writer fictionalizes elements of it in his novel *Los detectives salvajes*. During the time Bolaño spent working at the campground, he met a Republican veteran of the Spanish Civil War, Antoni Miralles. When he hears this anecdote, Cercas begins to speculate that perhaps this man was the soldier who found Sánchez Mazas in the woods and pardoned his life. This spawns an obsessive search to locate Miralles in hopes that this figure will unlock the "essential secret" that Javier mused about in his *El País* column.

When Javier complains to Bolaño that the book he has just written on Sánchez Mazas lacks a hero, Bolaño advises Javier simply to invent one.³ Cercas follows this advice and he eventually manages to find Miralles. Before searching for him, however, there is a dialogue between Javier and Bolaño in which the latter suggests that heroism resides not in the intrinsic nature of an individual self, but instead represents a quality that only materializes in individuals during certain historical junctures. It also introduces a conception of the hero that echoes Nietzsche's definition of subjectivity. In the following passage, Bolaño reflects on the paradoxical lack of volition that characterize the heroic act as a collection of forces that arrive unexpectedly to express themselves through individuals:

³ This maneuver calls to mind Cervantes's *Quijote* in which the narrator, struggling to find authors to contribute to the front matter of his book, is urged by his friend to simply create this material.

En realidad, yo creo que en el comportamiento de un héroe hay casi siempre algo ciego, irracional, instintivo, algo que está en su naturaleza y a lo que no puede escapar... el héroe no se puede ser sublime sin interrupción, y por eso el héroe sólo lo es excepcionalmente, en un momento o, a lo sumo, en una temporada de locura o inspiración. (148-149)

As Bolaño explains, there is something fundamentally irrational behind the heroic act. He defines the behavior of the hero in a way that echoes Nietzsche's definition of subjectivity: it is a collection of forces that arrive unexpectedly to express themselves through individuals. The comment implies that a conscious attempt to be heroic would backfire. A courageous act must instead be carried out with a certain level of abandon and renunciation of deliberate action. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche challenges the conventional distinction between actions and agents. He argues that when looking at actions of the past, it is customary for observers to attribute what behaviors back to a core being:

[There is] the great habit of seeing one occurrence following another but our inability to interpret events otherwise than as events caused by intentions. It is belief in the living and thinking as the only effective force – in will, in intention – it is belief that every event is a deed, that every deed presupposes a doer, it is belief in the 'subject' (295).

Nietzsche rejects the notion of a subject that exists prior to an act, and whose intention shapes events. The hero must lose a sense of self and act unselfishly in order to be characterized as such. Heroism is inspired by forces that remain outside the scope of awareness and heroic actions are without teleology and devoid of attachment to the outcomes. Nietzsche deconstructs the whole notion of *purpose* and its relationship to action. In *Will to Power*, he writes, "... 'purpose' requires a more vigorous critique: one must understand that an action *is never caused by a purpose*; that *purpose* and *means* are *interpretations* whereby certain points in an event are emphasized" (352). As an

alternative to the view that a substantial, preexisting subject acts with purpose in the world, Nietzsche offers the following alternative conception when he suggests, “a ‘purpose’ [could] be an *epiphenomenon* in the changes in the activating forces that bring about purposive action — a pale image sketched in consciousness beforehand that serves to orient us concerning events, even as a symptom of events, *not* as a cause” (352).

Cercas adds a dimension to this conception of the relation between purpose and event by suggesting that heroism also operates as more of a byproduct of irrational forces. With respect to writing and literature, the depersonification of the subject in the realm of heroism also carries over to the ways of thinking about authorship in *Soldados*. The writer, just as the hero, is akin to the “pale image” that “orients us” to the direction of events.

The Synchronicities of Writers

The conversation on the impersonal hero mirrors Cercas’s characterization of the practice of writing.⁴ At one point, Bolaño postulates that, “Para escribir novelas, no hace falta imaginación. Solo memoria. Las novelas se escriben combinando recuerdos” (151). The idea that writing privileges memory over imagination suggests that an author already has in his or her consciousness a recollection of experiences, the ingredients needed to generate the fictional material that is required to construct a narrative. This definition of writing as generated by memory holds another salient connection between *Soldados* and Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence, which affirms that all events have already

⁴ Though Satorras Pons makes brief reference to the connection between the involuntary conceptualization of writing and heroism in the novel, this study aims to connect this to the larger philosophical debate regarding subjectivity and historical repetition raised in Nietzsche’s work.

occurred an infinite number of times and will continue to occur *ad infinitum*. For this reason, he advocated the idea of *amor fati*: the unconditional affirmation of all aspects of life, regardless of the outcomes it produces.

The de-centered figures of hero and writer generated through the dialogue between Javier and Bolaño provide an interesting spin on both the eternal return and its relationship to *amor fati*. Bolaño's advice to Javier suggests that, given this infinitely looping recurrence of the past, the writer must surrender to that which can be recalled from the source of eternally recurring life events, rather than attempt to create a fresh narrative. Literary creation derives not from the imposition of an author's individual will; rather it emerges spontaneously as the return of the past into every present moment.

What this proposition suggests is that historical tasks become easily detached from their supposed doers. A prime example of this in *Soldados* is the fact that Cercas comes to write the book that Sánchez Mazas never could. The emphasis on *action* over *identity* is precisely what enables the narrator to situate himself as the resuscitator of an historical figure who helped foment the fratricidal violence that began with the Nationalist uprisings. The difficulty Javier faces in researching the events following Sánchez Mazas's escape from the firing squad stems from the fact that it would have been unwise to divulge both the act of mercy on the part of the soldier who spared his life as well as his companionship with Republicans in the forest during the days after his escape. To publicly reveal the story of what occurred after his botched execution would portray Republican sympathizers in a positive light, which is why Sánchez Mazas omitted key details from the narrative of his harrowing escape whenever describing it in

front of a public audience. This likely explains why Sánchez Mazas did not follow through with his promise to Figueras to write a book entitled *Soldados de Salamina*.

Other striking similarities surface between the narrator and his subject of inquiry. For the most part, Javier describes the leading figure of the Falange with unfavorable characterizations. Yet he also creates substantial parallels between Sánchez Mazas and himself that thematically unite them beyond their chronological and politically distinct identities. A significant element of this identification, in fact, resides in his inability to categorize himself as a writer:

Aunque sólo publicó un libro de poemas en vida, es posible que Sánchez Mazas se sintiera siempre un poeta, y acaso esencialmente lo fue; sus contemporáneos, sin embargo, lo conocieron ante todo como autor de crónicas, de artículos, de novelas y, sobre todo, como político, que es justo lo que nunca se sintió y lo que acaso esencialmente nunca fue. (80)

Sánchez Mazas identified himself foremost as a poet even though most of his peers knew him for the non-fictional chronicles he wrote over the course of his career. This parallels Javier's struggles to define his own career; we observe a reenactment of the same kind of existential angst that Cercas presumes afflicted Sánchez Mazas. The narrator creates a sense of continuity between his identities and those of Sánchez Mazas and Bolaño. Cercas closes the temporal, political, and creative gaps which separate historical forces and identities. Here we see the evocation of nostalgia and the belief in an invented paradise that Javier attributes to Sánchez Mazas:

Por lo demás, la aparente contradicción, que tanto ha preocupado a algunos de sus lectores, entre las belicosas ideas falangistas de Sánchez Mazas y su apolítico y estetizante quehacer literario se resuelve si admitimos que ambas son expresiones contrapuestas pero coherentes de una misma nostalgia: la del mundo abolido, imposible e inventado del Paraíso, la de las seguras jerarquías de un *ancien régime* que la ventolera inapelable de la historia estaba barriendo para siempre. (93)

Cercas then pivots toward regarding heroism and writing as continuities in familial relationships. In a gesture that parallels the title of the book in its evocation of a battle of antiquity, Cercas suggests that one should remember wars in a transhistorical fashion in which unique identities carry less priority than the larger gestures of sacrifice. He writes:

Se acuerda por lo mismo que yo me acuerdo de mi padre y Ferlosio del suyo y Miquel Aguirre del suyo y Jaume Figueras del suyo y Bolaño de sus amigos latinoamericanos, todos soldados muertos en guerras de antemano perdidas: se acuerda porque, aunque hace sesenta años que fallecieron, todavía no están muertos, precisamente porque él se acuerda de ellos. O quizá no es él quien se acuerda de ellos, sino ellos los que se aferran a él, para no está del todo muertos. (201)

By connecting his relationship with his dead father to the wider web of paternal relationships explored in the novel, Cercas conceives of his personal involvement not as bound by his limited biographical experiences, but as expanding to incorporate the eternally returning struggles that writers face. In this way, the narrator is merely accessing a repository of knowledge that holds within it the grief incurred by wars and the perennial struggle of writers to turn battles and their aftermath into retrospective representations. To remember the dead, Cercas suggests, is more than to mourn or seek redemption – it is to take part in the generative forces of creation.

Another synchronicity between the narrator and his subject of study is established when Javier has the opportunity to borrow Sánchez Mazas's diary. Jaume Figureas, the family member of some of the survivors who met Sánchez Mazas, hands the diary to Cercas at the end of their meeting. In another gesture of adding historical verifiability to the novel, Cercas includes a photocopied page from what we presume is Sánchez Mazas's actual diary in the text. Figueras asks Javier what he plans to do with the notebook and with the story in general. He responds, "Todavía no sé lo que haré —volví

a mentir, acariciando las tapas de hule de la libreta, que me ardía en las manos como un tesoro” (55). The notebook becomes a special kind of object. It is a “burning treasure” that offers itself as substantive documented evidence to support the testimonials Javier gathers over the course of the novel. This affectively charged object establishes a bridge between Javier and Sánchez Mazas. Not only is Cercas writing the book that goes by the title that Sánchez Mazas proposed and never used, but he also has the opportunity to temporarily possess and examine the material object of the Falangist’s diary.

After leaving the encounter with Figueras, Cercas makes another nod to the connection of the notebook with the idea of the sublime. In the following passage, the narrator’s thinking drifts from the notebook, to hearing a gypsy sing the very song that connects the soldier to Sánchez Mazas: *Suspiros de España*. In the following instance we see the way in which Cercas locates the narrator hearing this song after receiving the notebook. The notebook is not just a way for Javier to verify facts, because it also imbued with a sense of the sublime. Javier provides the following reflection:

Acaricié la libreta, pero no la abrí. Acabé de beberme el gin-tonic y, mientras me levantaba para irme, vi cruzar un Talgo por el paso elevado, más allá de la terraza llena de gente, y me acordé de los gitanos que dos semanas atrás tocaban pasodobles en la luz fatigada de un atardecer como ése y, al llegar a casa y ponerme a examinar con calma la libreta que me había confiado Figueras, aún no se me había desenredado de la memoria la melodía tristísima de *Suspiros de España*. (57)

The discussion with Figueras, which culminates in getting hold of Sánchez Mazas’s notebook activates an associational field with an event Cercas remembers experiencing days prior. There is a clear movement from what could be thought of as the prosaic simplicity of the notebook as an historical artifact to the space of music and artistic expressivity. It is this umbilical cord between facts and transcendent emotions that Cercas

sustains throughout the course of the novel. While the historiographic metafictional novel would seek to sow doubt between the historical true and the invented, Cercas goes beyond this model. He weaves history into the space of poetry, or what poetry is incapable of expressing and finds a kind of interconnectivity of experience that connects humans but that is also governed by a logic that is always beyond what can be comprehended by humans.

Another important connection between Javier and Sánchez Mazas is their common tendency toward utopianism. Cercas repeatedly describes the Falangist writer's approach to both politics and poetry as based in a desire to abolish the known world and establish a new paradise. In the following passage, the novel subtly draws attention to the elements of the poet's work that allude to the aesthetic origins of Sánchez Mazas's fascist politics:

Sus versos tienen una sola cuerda, humilde y viejísima, monótona y un poco sentimental, pero Sánchez Mazas la toca con maestría, arrancándole una música limpia, natural y prosaica que sólo canta la melancolía agri dulce del tiempo que huye y en su huida arrastra el orden y las seguras jerarquías de un mundo abolido que, precisamente por haber sido abolido, es también un mundo inventado e imposible, que casi siempre equivale al mundo imposible e inventado del Paraíso (80)

Though the narrator provides a critique of Sánchez Mazas's penchant for a destructive poetics and politics, the focus on issues of utopianism and an abolished world undergo an important shift at the end of the novel when he exhibits his own penchant for fantasy. Cercas repeatedly returns to this trope of an abolished, impossible world and conceives of these elements as the conceptual glue that link Sánchez Mazas's poetic and political concerns. When the narrator exhibits his own penchant for utopic fantasies, a synergistic alignment between the narrator and his subject of inquiry is solidified.

A Return to the Beginning

In the last chapter, Javier relies on the character of Miralles to fill in the identity of the otherwise anonymous soldier who spared the poet's life. After Javier miraculously finds and befriends Miralles, he pictures himself one day attending Miralles' funeral after he passes away. Javier imagines himself and his friends as the only ones able to prevent the Republican veteran from dying in obscurity. In doing so, he comes to stage precisely the kind of utopian refiguring of his own personal reality to save himself from the mediocrity to which he sees Sánchez Mazas having been condemned.

While feeling euphoric after his miraculous encounter with Miralles, Javier indulges multiple fantasy scenarios. The first of these is one in which he would leave his job and move into an apartment across from the residence where Miralles spends the final years of his life. In this vision, he celebrates the funeral of the veteran with the only two others who know him – Bolaño and Conchi. This image then fades before Javier's eyes and gives way to the image of a soldier who stands in for all soldiers:

Y habría un funeral y luego un entierro y en el entierro música, la música alegre de un pasodoble tristísimo sonando en un disco de vinilo rayado, y entonces yo tomaría a la hermana Françoise y le pediría que bailara conmigo junto a la tumba de Miralles, la obligaría a bailar una música que no sabía bailar sobre la tumba reciente de Miralles, en secreto, sin que nadie nos viera, sin que nadie en Dijon ni en Francia ni en España ni en toda Europa supiera que una monja guapa y lista, con la que Miralles siempre deseó bailar un pasodoble y a la que nunca se atrevió a tocarle el culo, y un periodista de provincias estaban bailando en un cementerio anónimo de una melancólica ciudad junto a la tumba de un viejo comunista catalán. (207)

Cercas envisages a hypothetical moment in the future in which this veteran of the Spanish Civil War would be acknowledged, albeit in a modest way, instead of forgotten by history. There would be music and dancing, and the mourning process would be celebratory in nature. With the reference to the “anonymous cemetery”, Cercas returns to

framing Miralles as a kind of blank canvas. The etymology of his name evokes “mirar”, which hints that there is something visual about his construction as a character and the role Javier sees for him in the narrative.

In accordance with this emphasis on the “scopic,” the last fantasy Javier entertains is built around the visual. During his return ride to Spain after meeting Miralles, he looks out the window of a train. The scenario condenses his own desire to make the anonymous soldiers of the Republican struggle visible with the historical fantasies of fascist and communist utopias. The passage is quoted at length, in part, because it is crafted as one long sentence that concludes the novel:

Vi mi libro entero y verdadero, mi relato real completo, y supe que ya sólo tenía que escribirlo, pasarlo a limpio, porque estaba en mi cabeza desde el principio («Fue en el verano de 1994, hace ahora más de seis años, cuando oí hablar por primera vez del fusilamiento de Rafael Sánchez Mazas») hasta el final, un final en el que un viejo periodista fracasado [...] feliz fuma y bebe whisky en un vagón restaurante de un tren nocturno que viaja por la campiña francesa entre gente que cena y es feliz y camareros con pajarita negra... (209)

The reader knows that, at the most explicit level, what passes before Javier’s eyes is the French countryside. But the real cinema that stimulates his mind is the coalescence of the narrative kernel around which his book will be constructed. It is as though the structuring and suturing of his book is happening of its own accord and is materializing involuntarily before his eyes. The parenthetical insertion of the first words of the novel “Fue en el verano...” loops the reader back to the beginning of the text that has just been read. Once again there is an evocation of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence in which everything that *can* happen, *has* happened, and *will* happen again. This is also why it was “already in his head since the beginning.” As the passage continues, Javier looks out the window, plans the

narrative he will eventually write (and has already written), but then also sees his own reflection. With no full stops, these lines continue the passage cited above:

...mientras piensa en un hombre acabado que tuvo el coraje y el instinto de la virtud y por eso no se equivocó nunca o no se equivocó en el único momento en que de veras importaba no equivocarse, piensa en un hombre que fue limpio y valiente y puro en lo puro y en el libro hipotético que lo resucitará cuando esté muerto, y entonces el periodista mira su reflejo entristecido y viejo en el ventanal que lame la noche hasta que lentamente el reflejo se disuelve y en el ventanal aparece un desierto interminable y ardiente y un soldado solo, llevando la bandera de un país que no es su país, de un país que es todos los países y que sólo existe porque ese soldado levanta su bandera abolida, joven, desharapado, polvoriento y anónimo, infinitamente minúsculo en aquel mar llameante de arena infinita, caminando hacia delante bajo el sol negro del ventanal, sin saber muy bien hacia dónde va ni con quién va ni por qué va, sin importarle mucho siempre que sea hacia delante, hacia delante, hacia delante, siempre hacia delante. (209)

This final passage represents the culminating stroke of genius of the text. At first glance, it is possible to see this as the narrator's way of congratulating himself for having located and rescued from cultural amnesia a forgotten communist hero of the Spanish Civil War. His attention then switches from the internal cinema in his mind to seeing his reflection *in* the window, which then blocks out of awareness the view of the French countryside *through* it. The image of his sad self then moves back into fantasy, and what emerges is a composite of three factors: 1) the inner thinking process, 2) the outside world in all the multivalent trappings that are symbolized by glass, with its reflective and translucent qualities, and 3) the history of an anonymous soldier who moves aimlessly through time and space.

The collapse of the inner thinking process with the outer environment is something that plays out even more explicitly in the other two novels analyzed in this dissertation. In this instance, Cercas situates this gesture in a frame of Spanish history's specificity. The passage conceives of the heroic soldier as emptied of particularized

qualities, as blindly moving in a state of deterritorialized indifference. The ultimate effect of war in this case is the molding of a heroic figure into one which continues his or her struggle despite the fact that the signs of his or her identity have been erased. To return again to Buck-Morss, it is not always moments of ostensible unity and harmony but also the turbulence of violent events that bring forth a kind of alternative universality. She writes:

[H]uman universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits. And it is in our empathic identification with this raw, free, and vulnerable state, that we have a chance of understanding what they say. (133)

In line with this idea of discovering the universal through rupture, the image of the “transnational soldier,” in the final words of *Soldados* embodies a poignant counterpoint to the Falangist approach to universality. There is a discontinuity that opens the space for a “raw, free, and vulnerable state,” as Buck-Morss frames it. Paradoxically, it is this bifurcating effect of war that has the potential to re-suture our understanding of reality in terms of a non-imperialist sense of the universal.

Conclusion

The sense of the universal posited in *Soldados de Salamina* evolves organically over the course of the novel. Cercas begins with a micro-history of Sánchez Mazas, but he gradually broadens his scope both temporally and spatially. In the first instance, the narrator suggests he will tell a *relato real* about Sánchez Mazas that is based on historically documented facts. However, the novel comes to embrace a blend between fiction and nonfiction. As readers, we are left guessing where to draw the lines between the biographical truth of Sánchez Mazas’s life and other historical events and fictional

creation on the part of Cercas. However, the text goes further than to sow epistemological doubt into our knowledge of the past as is the common strategy of historiographic metafiction. Scholars have pointed out the degree to which the novel, in this sense, embraces Poetry in the Aristotelian sense. Cercas skillfully blends what we know did happen during a period of Spanish history with what *could have* happened.

The aspect of the universal that has not been explored in the novel prior to this study, however, relates to Nietzsche's understanding of music and the Dionysian impulse. Cercas hints at the importance of tragedy to the battle of Salamis throughout the novel. This event became immortalized in historical consciousness due to Aeschylus' decision to write a tragedy based on the event. *Persae*, the tragedy of Aeschylus, invites us to read Cercas through the philosopher who most championed Greek tragedy: Nietzsche. Nietzsche provides a way of situating Cercas's work in a deeper theoretical context of what it means to write the universal into literature. Although it is not entirely expected, his ideas of will to power, eternal recurrence, forces, and the Dionysian provide a foundation for reclaiming, even if only partially, the universal from the grips of Falangist ideology.

The problem is that the German philosopher had a decisive influence on the intellectuals who formed part of the right-wing movements in early twentieth-century Spain. Cercas corrects against the fascist attempt to use Nietzsche by highlighting the instances of solidarity that pierce through the kind of imperial universality posited by the Falange. It is uncanny to see the way in which Buck-Morss, thinking on universality in the context of the Haitian revolution, is applicable. She illustrates that it is important to not leave the concept of the universal in the hands of the villains of history. She posits

that, “Perhaps the most deadly blow to imperialism would be to proclaim loyalty to the idea of universal humanity by rejecting the presumption of any political, religious, ethnic, class, or civilizational collectivity to embody this idea as its exclusive and exclusionary possession” (145). *Soldados de Salamina* recuperates the universal not as a discourse to glorify Spain or to declare the necessity of it reaching its destiny in the universal. Instead it offers a way to re-conceptualize the experience of the self and the construction of meanings as phenomena linked to forces that move individual identities beyond the particular.

Conclusion

Where do we draw the boundaries between humans and the nonhuman? This is not an entirely new question in literary or philosophical debates, and the works analyzed in the dissertation are not the first ones to problematize anthropocentric views of the world. However, this dissertation has sought to approach the human/nonhuman relationship from the starting point of a series of texts that affirm the importance of universalisms. Atxaga, Cercas, and Vila-Matas compel us to consider the ways in which human self is entangled in nonhuman networks. Reciprocally, their texts also give expression to the ways in which *things* act and assert will in a humanlike manner.

The analysis of Atxaga, Cercas, and Vila-Matas conducted in this project has sought to provide insights into their work, but it is also important to acknowledge that, at best, these works *approximate* universal qualities. “The Universal” as such is not a realm that one should deploy for the purposes of empire. As such, there is still a degree to which the exploration of the universal in these novels leaves space for ambiguity and indeterminacy. The exact nature and ontology of the sutures and disconnections between anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic forces, in the last analysis, are enigmatic and reside, to an extent, outside the realm of cognition.

To what degree are these postulations a departure from postmodernism? The postmodern approach does not reject the idea that human and nonhuman entities overlap in ways that problematize the conventional categorizations of these elements *per se*. It is a question of emphasis and orientation. As Jameson makes clear, a key component of the postmodern agenda, to the extent one could argue it had one, was to affirm the “death of the subject.” The fallacy that a coordinating center rules human activity is revealed, but this left the subject for dead. The spirit of deconstruction is to tear things apart, and it

leaves aside the question of whether it is possible to put things back together. In a sense, postmodernism ran up against the limitations of trying to universalize anti-universality. The intellectual backlash against these excesses emerges in the work of Eagleton, Butler, Anderson, and Laclau who together resuscitated theoretical issues that had been relegated to the dustbin of history. These thinkers stake a claim for the universal, and this project builds on their ideas by creating a tapestry between the theories of ontology and a bounded corpus of contemporary Spanish novels that express a desire to move beyond the paradigm of deconstruction *ad nauseam*. Another key difference is the fact that postmodernism, with its influences from semiology, consider texts as semiotic constructs.

Atxaga's *Obabakoak* and Vila-Matas' *El mal de Montano* offer a way out of the impasse of postmodernism and move beyond the confines of semiology. At first glance, both Atxaga and Vila-Matas's novels lend themselves to a standard postmodern reading. *Obabakoak* has a fragmentary narrative structure and one of the characters even utters the word "metaliterature." *El mal de Montano* takes as its protagonist a literary critic, and this novel relies heavily on the postmodernist strategy of intertextuality. Atxaga and Vila-Matas penetrate the surface experiences of daily life, or, in a sense, utilize these components to find deeper universal synchronicities. They report feeling a connection with the weather and natural systems, and reconstitute human identity as corporeal manifestation of literary texts and objects in their surroundings.

These moments of transcendence, however, are specific to certain times and places. The narrators of the three novels designate specific moments when they experience a phenomenological fusion with other selves or other elements of the environment. Viewed from this angle, the possibility to access a universal depends on

certain contingencies. Although the contingency could be the consumption of barbiturates (Vila-Matas), or the psyche-stretching traumas of war (Cercas), or the introspection into the deeper processes of memory (Atxaga), the point is that these brushes with the sublime represent more than an illusion – they instead provide insight into an underlying ontology.

There are different ways to go beyond the particular. For example, as a response to historicism, the return to universals affirms that although it is important to sensitize our analysis to the idiosyncrasies of time, there is something to be gained by looking at the generalizable patterns of the past. The question that emerges is: to insist on discovering the patterns of history, is it not possible that one will end up reifying a Western form of universalism? To classify this pattern-seeking endeavor as a form of “universal history” is problematic, but the salient feature here is the historiographic gesture to look through the particulars of the past and into the deeper narrative networks. There is something inherently enigmatic in this process, and to approach history with this frame of mind conjures the Jungian archetypes of New Criticism. Although the novels have an engagement with archetypal principles, the argument of this dissertation is that, when viewed from the perspective of ontological and ecological perspectives, there are ways of affirming universals that avoid the pitfalls of totalizing frameworks.

The finishing pages of *Soldados de Salamina* provide an example of how to deal with this pattern seeking in history. Cercas refers to the writers of multiple generations who have lived through wars and social chaos and suggests that, because they persevered and created art in the face of these challenges, they are the closest examples of personified heroism the novel has to offer. With the title of the novel, Cercas situates

himself in a lineage of authors that trace back to Aeschylus. The Greek poet chose the battle of Salamis as the subject of his first tragic work, a text that was especially significant because it was based on historical events of humans, not gods. Cercas evokes the ancient text, but also utilizes the mundane struggles the protagonist faces as a writer as leverage to a story that aims to still reach past the micro-histories it uncovers.

The eternal repetitions of history materialize in a poignant metaphor at the end of the *Soldados* when narrator-protagonist stares out into the French countryside through a train car window. Although he is peering out of a window, the countryside revealed through it vanishes from Javier's awareness twice. First, Javier's mind wanders back to Miralles, who is nothing more than the concocted symbol of all soldiers who endured despite all the dehumanizing conditions to which they were subjected. This dehumanization that could be considered humiliating to the soldier is resignified by the invocation of the Nietzschean sublime. The point is not to forgive the crimes of the Falange or other fascist forces that put this soldier in that place to begin with. Instead, the idea is to demonstrate that even hierarchical and fascist ideologies could not account for the underlying solidarities that the realms of music and art commandeer.

The second element of this looping phenomenon occurs when Javier's gaze out the window shifts to focus on his own reflection. In that moment, the novel he will eventually write comes into clear focus. He reveals the first lines of intentioned novel, and the reader soon realizes they are the same as the first lines of *Soldados de Salamina*. To return the reader to the beginning of the novel could lead us to think that there was nothing gained by reading the novel in the first place. The amount of territory we have traversed is technically zero. However, the affective dimension of the sublime, a salient

feature of all the novels analyzed in this project, provides a motivation to continue on. As with the anonymous soldier who the narrator imagines walking through a dessert in a tattered state, the point is not to worry that we are moving towards nothing, but rather that we keep moving.

New Directions

In the process of drafting the chapters for this project and in consultation with the dissertation committee members, new possible directions for expanding the ideas presented in this project were pointed out to me. One of the key subthemes that emerged in all three chapters was the importance of memory. The chapters did not delve too deeply into detail on Marcel Proust, but his idea of “involuntary memory” is brought up explicitly in *El mal de Montano* and implicitly in *Obabakoak*. In an expanded version of this project, I would chart some of the lineages of memory exploration in Proust and the work of Walter Benjamin to see to what extent the ecological theories and ontologies dialogue with Proust and his literary inheritors.

Gender is a key issue that would need to be addressed in an expanded version of this project. While the dissertation was built on the foundation of female theoreticians, the corpus of selected primary texts drew on male authors and narrators. To expand the project along these lines, I could start with an analysis of the degree to which concepts of universality have been gendered. It would be necessary to explore to what extent the new ontologies and cosmological understandings discussed in the dissertation adequately address the constructions of femininity and masculinity. A guiding question for the analysis of female-authored primary texts could be: do female authors envision a different form of universals? Is the tendency to engage in universal discourses a more

masculine, feminine or neutral tendency?

Another thread that this project could pursue is the theme of transatlanticism. Latin American authors figured as important characters and literary influences in all three chapters. To expand the project, I could start by examining in more detail the references to the lives and works of Latin American writers that populate the primary texts analyzed in this dissertation. One could compare and contrast the ways in which writers across the Atlantic have also considered new ontological frameworks. In Atxaga's *Obabakoak*, there is a story that is dedicated explicitly to César Calvo and Atxaga actually employs the method of Calvo by presenting a glossary of indigenous terms and their definitions. To cover the references to Latin American writers in Vila-Matas's work would have the potential to yield new lines of theoretical and textual inquiry. One way to narrow the scope of a transatlantic project along these lines would be to focus on writers who also lived under authoritarian regimes and dictatorships. One could make comparisons to the ways in which Spanish authors and Latin American authors have tarried with the universal within non-democratic contexts.

There are infinite ways in which the primary texts examined in this dissertation could be further "mined" for more themes and patterns salient for analysis. The account offered in this dissertation has sought, however, to understand them in the light of their counterintuitive suggestion that universalisms still have a role to play in contemporary life. The sense of universal and ontological cross-fertilization, on occasion, operates at subtle, unconscious levels of the text. Yet literary analysis that is informed by humans and nonhuman interconnectedness facilitated by ecological crises provides a way to unearth these elements in the novels. The novels leave us thinking about the trajectory of

writing and reading literature in the age of the Anthropocene and as we trace the symbiotic connections between literature and the environment, it is important to see universals not as stuck in a space of predetermined construction but as subject to the ebbs and flows of (non)human history. As the protagonist of Vila-Matas's *El mal de Montano* explains, the genre of the journal is not a representation of the person writing it, but rather a documentation of their constant mutation and transformation. In the same way, the ontological approaches to literature do not explain what literature *is*, they only provide a glimpse into what it is *becoming*.

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