Disillusion or Resistance? Memory and Politics in Narrative Fiction on the Cusp of the New Millenium

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"I'd rather be a failure than an accomplice" (Piglia 191) states Tardewski in *Respiración artificial (Artificial Respiration)*. The defeated abound in Latin American literature of recent decades; it might even be said that they have taken root in our culture, especially that of the Southern Cone. The tango, of course, provides us with numerous examples, but it is not my objective to study that kind of loser, nor his melancholic lament[2]. The corpus I am suggesting establishes a clear distinction, an irreconcilable distance, between resignation, acceptance, or even betrayal, on the one hand, and resistance: the power of memory in the face of defeat. The losers who refuse to give up have made the decision to persevere, and they stubbornly persist in their convictions. In a corrupt world of criminal governments and laws that protect assassins, victory is always suspect; it is only possible for those who have negotiated and colluded with power. To be an antihero who has been defeated, to be on the losing side, thus guarantees inclusion in an

[1] This article was translated by Cindy Schuster.

[2] This essay is part of a project that examines the intersections of literature, politics, and ethics in the figure of the loser in Latin American narrative of the last forty years.

ethically superior group of winners: that of those who have resisted and who base their victory on the proud acceptance of defeat. Losing thus proves to be a form of triumph that situates the protagonists outside the system and grants them a different order of success. The narratives that interest me are linked to history in a specific manner, and they have particular ways of representing the tensions among literature, politics, and ethics. This relationship might be defined as "oblique," and it is different from that which is commonly found in novels in which a historical event is explicitly interwoven with the plot. In principle, the corpus includes texts from the last forty years of the twentieth century, linked by their representations of these "loser" antiheroes, who function as metaphors through which the narratives relate versions that differ from the triumphant official story. This article only considers a part of that corpus: Argentine texts from the 1990's that propose variants of this figure. Many Argentine narratives from those years appear to "retell the facts," after a period of disillusion and defeat, yet they also suggest forms of resistance, and are perhaps the discourses that most clearly challenge, through imaginary courses of action, a world marked by the triumphalism of a corrupt government. Those experiences of horror and forgetting (a bloody dictatorship followed by a weak democracy that resulted in the *"fiesta menemista"*[3]), and the sense of powerlessness in a country devastated by winners with nothing admirable about them, are challenged by these narratives, which provide a response: imaginary solutions to the question of how to live, what to do when our history has been shattered and we are obliged to live among the victors. In other words, they

[3] This expression refers to the corruption and misuse of public funds under the Menem government (1989-1999). (Translator's note.)

are readings and representations of worlds marked by the trauma of a series of political defeats. To that effect, my focus is on narratives—not only from the Southern Cone—that propose ways to read and live with those defeats. Indeed, there are many Latin American texts whose protagonists take responsibility for the loss of the illusions of the 1960's and the destruction of various historical and political projects.

The defeated character links together different problematics, functioning as a nucleus that makes it possible to connect the narrative discourse with issues of politics and ethics, insofar as s/he represents the dramatization of conflicts debated and examined in other discourses. In all of these cases my objective is to analyze how literature has represented the situation of the loser (and the winner), what kind of strategies for survival it proposes, and what images it constructs of these figures. Literature has debated the issue of defeat and has presented alternatives for the loser, which in most cases are incompatible with the solutions that arise in the real world. Accordingly, the winners have inhabited various spaces in literary texts, almost always in open confrontation with that which they occupied–and occupy–in the real world. Far from the simplistic solutions of political and mediating discourses, these narratives expose the indissoluble bond that ties every decision to ethical and political choices.

The figure of the loser serves as the point of articulation of multiple meanings. Included in the "remains"–that which is left of the defeated historical projects–are various kinds of losers who carry with them pain, memory, the necessity of overcoming forgetfulness or finding refuge in it, as well as the capacity

for resistance or adaptation to the conditions imposed by the winner. This "residue" is not easily eliminated, whatever the strategy implemented by the winners. Over and above the multiple attempts to institute forgetting, it becomes necessary to take a position before what Alain Badiou calls *the event*, that situation that demands that the subject make a decision in order to preserve the memory of the experience as well as his own identity. The literature discussed here responds to this necessity through its diverse representations of the loser.

It must be understood that this affirmation of loss does not constitute a vocation or an acceptance of failure; on the contrary, to be among the losers, to refuse to yield, is to attain another dimension of triumph[4]. To that effect, it is imperative to remember how Badiou insists on linking ethics to politics. There are no ethics in the abstract, affirms the French philosopher; all ethics are specific to circumstances and are defined according to the political context in which they occur. Ethics, then, is the subject's loyalty to a truth that always exceeds public opinion or the common sense of an era. Badiou proposes an ethics of conviction, and this comprises his notion of resistance; it is the antithesis of the capacity for adaptation. Conviction is that obstinacy capable of enduring the most adverse circumstances, able to sustain the antiheroes of these stories through the acceptance of death, forgetting, loneliness, and marginality. If the refusal to yield is a key

[4] The majority of critics tend to read "defeat" as the failure of a historical project, establishing an overly simplistic relationship between the text and historical events. Idelber Avelar affirms that historical defeat and the subsequent mourning also implies a defeat for writing and a "mourning for the literary." He never sees these fictions as imaginary forms of resolving that mourning which, in many cases, propose other alternatives to the term defeat. On the other hand, the problem goes beyond the experience of mourning: to mourn is to generate forgetting and resign oneself. Nothing could be further from what these narratives propose; in them, mourning constitutes a form of struggle, resistance, and insistence on memory and the "triumph" of resistance.

principle of ethics, then we may consider the protagonists of these narratives, far from being failures, to be ethical heroes. And if to yield, to resign oneself, or to negotiate, is to lose one's dignity and identity; then it is essential to persevere, to continue on despite adverse circumstances. From this perspective, the only possible hero is the one whose triumph consists in not having betrayed and not having yielded to the "winners."

In Argentine literature, a body of work might be constituted containing milestones such as Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial*, Juan Sasturain's *Manual de perdedores*, or Juan José Saer's *Lo imborrable*. These books are "manuals for defeat" as Sasturain's hero proposes, following the advice of Marcelo Maggi, one of the protagonists of *Respiración artificial*, who declares, "we must write the history of defeats" (16). Those words, spoken by a character who will become a *desaparecido,* are charged with a political meaning that subsequent fiction picks up: as in *Respiración artificial,* these narratives seem to take on the telling of another story. Indeed, in Piglia's novel Professor Tardewski is a paradigm of defeat; he has opted to remove himself from all contact with success and praises "that strange lucidity that one acquires when he has succeeded in failing sufficiently" (161). At the end of the novel, Tardewski cites Kant's principles and makes them his own: to keep one's dignity and to persist in the search for justice and truth.

These characters, who have neither resigned themselves nor allowed themselves to be co-opted, possess what Badiou calls a "Promethean" ethics, which, contrary to any accord with the present, puts its stakes on the future. For that reason, the heroes I am concerned with here embody, better than many theoretical

essays, an ethical response and a plan of action in the face of the historical defeats of the 20th century. Obstinate in their commitment to construct a space of resistance, their refusal to incorporate themselves into the new state of affairs does not reflect a passive attitude; rather, it is a way of tenaciously constructing or reconstructing the path to a future victory. Let us not forget that the word "*derrotero*" (the means to achieve something) is derived from "*derrota*," (defeat) which in one of its early definitions meant "to clear the way overcoming obstacles." Resistance, then, is a form of clearing the way in order to reconstruct a world after defeat. Michel Onfray uses the term *Antigone's principle* to refer to the ethical obstinacy that refuses complicity with power. In his noteworthy work about "the rebel" or "the libertarian," Onfray defines a strategy that can be integrated with that of the characters considered here. It is a question of establishing "ethics and politics on the perpetual *terrain of resistance* . . . To resist, in other words, never to collaborate, never to yield . . . The rebels . . . put their pride far above the benefits of collaborating with the powers that be" (185). It is interesting that in this work the same motives that define the libertarian define the loser as well. The latter's conduct in no way implies passivity; on the contrary, Onfray associates rebelliousness with the intransigence of those who refuse to be co-opted.

Perhaps Juan Sasturain's story, "San Jodete, apostol de la desgracia," published in *La mujer ducha,* is the one which best sums up this trajectory of defeat. San Jodete's life condenses the transformation from failure to ethical loser. The story follows him from his canonical beginnings as a tango singer, that figure of popular culture typical of Discépolo's poetry, to his stint as a preacher, which ends

when “a green Falcon with no plates picked him up as he ranted at the passersby” (90), and the story closes with his death during “the dying days of the dictatorship” (91). His fate as a “political loser” connects him in turn to the protagonist of Sasturain’s previous novel, *Manual de perdedores*, who is described as “a flash that passed quickly through the newspapers in the mid-70’s . . . together with inconsequential satires or the deeds of Falcons the color of murky seas” (12). His life thus runs parallel to Argentine history; his project becomes less of a lament and takes on a political character, and in this way the protagonist differentiates himself from the defeated who, in his words, confuse “getting screwed with giving up” (104).

In other words, the protagonist serves as a vehicle for the reconstruction and transformation of a tradition that begins with the failed or frustrated character whose tragic destiny is inexorably fulfilled. Sasturain’s antihero becomes a figure clearly connected to particular historical circumstances, which he confronts with his project of “unresigned” loser. There are many indications of this link between History and San Jodete’s life: the character’s pet phrase (“You’re bound to get screwed, old man”) changes to (“You’re bound to get screwed, brother from the South”) until it evolves into a slogan (“San Jodete Together with the National Majorities[5]. Homeland or Colony. Let’s Face Up to Disaster.”). And these changes correspond to very specific moments in the 1970’s: the death of Perón (“By that time, the grande dame, Disaster, was flying between heaven and earth”), the military dictatorship (“He was back again . . . when the events of the autumn of ’76

[5] An allusion to the peronists, from their point of view or that of their sympathizers. (Translator’s note.)

happened"). Likewise, the story abandons the humor of the beginning, when the "quaint" figure is almost a comic parody of *costumbrismo tanguero*, to then become transformed into a story about dictatorship, loss, and learning how to live in defeat.

It is interesting to recall that this story was published in the 1990's together with two others, "Zenitram" and "El general Rosca, conquistador de la nada", whose protagonists are also losers anchored in specific historical circumstances. "Zenitram," especially, proves to be a pathetic South American Superman who reverses everything from his own name (Martínez) to the victorious trajectory of the North American character. But the most fundamental reversal refers to his exploits, which have transgressed "the rules imposed from the north." Because of this, the erstwhile fellow hero who comes to kill him reminds him: "You knew you shouldn't have gotten involved, mixed up with history . . . you knew you couldn't engage in politics" (232). Having grown old and in declining health, Zenitram is, as the narrator says, "a symbol of the *Poder Ser Nacional*[6]" (223), an Argentine superhero who in a not too distant future will represent the disaster into which his country has plunged. His rebellion against the rules imposed by the North will lead to his death; he is a failure of the future, of the 21st century, when there no longer appears to be any hope left in a science fiction Buenos Aires in which the worst predictions of the 90's have come true. In turn, "El general Rosca . . ." parodies and inverts General Roca, hero of the official version of 19th century history, who

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[6] *"Poder Ser Nacional"* is a pun that defies translatability, used by Sasturain to achieve a comic effect. The expression *"Ser Nacional,"* literally "National Being" refers to the idea of an essential national character. It has been used in various senses by different political factions in Argentina since the 1960's. By adding the word *poder* (to be able to) the meaning becomes ambiguous, denoting a (doubtful) possibility, thus implying a questioning of a national identity. *Poder* is also a noun that means "power;" suggesting, alternatively, something akin to "the power to be national." (Translator's note.)

conquered the "desert" and massacred the native populations of the south. The "glorious" past of Roca's genocide finds its antithesis in Rosca's expedition and his incoherent encounter with the "Indians" in the middle of the 20th century, which comes to an end in 1930, coinciding with the first military coup in Argentine history. While the antiheroes of the stories that take place in the past and the future undergo a temporal confusion, attempting to retell stories of the past in a present to which they appear not to belong, "San Jodete," on the other hand, is linked to the present time and the current political debate. His life is subject to political avatars, his defeat is that of a historical project and for that reason he does not give up; rather, he reaffirms until the end a capacity for resistance that culminates in the foundation of the Center for the Study of Disaster, his final attempt at resistance.

Marcelo Cohen's novel, *El oído absoluto,* is written in a very different narrative register—and for this alone it is of interest, insofar as it confirms the coexistence of certain constants that endure despite aesthetic variants. Published in 1989, it proved to be a narrative that anticipated the decade of the 90's. Cohen's narrative appears to announce Menem's presidency, and the *"fiesta menemista,"* which began that same year. The description of the land in which the story takes place, Lorelei, condenses elements of a past time, that of the dictatorship–with its armed men, forbidden zones, censorship, and control–with a grotesque, kitschy world, a kind of Disneyland offering the most banal of pleasures. Lorelei, with its settings intended for entertainment and consumption, is a utopia that has become the worst of nightmares, a media-saturated world governed by an absurd composer of optimistic songs. That world, which is simultaneously an object of desire for

many and a prison for others is also the place where the novel we are reading "was written;" indeed, the story closes with the place and date of its writing: "Lorelei, 1986-1989." Are we in Lorelei? Is Argentina Lorelei? Undoubtedly, the robots that illuminate the roads, dressed like gauchos, cowboys, and *cariocas*[7], "intended to soothe the traveler's soul" (28), or the concerts "where people forget everything" (132) recall a decade that might well be called "infamous."

However, in that world intended to anesthetize all capacity for reflection, the protagonists define themselves as beings whose only plan is "to go on waiting . . . until hope creates, from its own shipwreck, the wished-for thing" (147). Because of his resistance and his rejection of any complicity, Lotario, who organizes the text into a "before" and an "after" his arrival, is a key character. His story, which recalls that of Tardewski in *Respiración artificial,* is that of a "retreat"; it is the extreme form of the narrator's desire "to live on the other side of history," because "the air isn't clean [anywhere], even where there's no history that keeps on creating losers" (73). In this sense, Lotario's omniscient ear, described as "a mysterious form of memory" (243), is also a form of resistance because of its ability to distinguish sounds and withstand the perpetual narcotic music of Lorelei.[8]

El oído absoluto, in addition to taking a position of constant flight in the face of any fixation of meaning, is traversed by fragments whose structure allows us to read a narrative of defeat, a world in which the protagonists will always be

[7] People from Rio de Janeiro. (Translator's note.)
[8] The omniscient ear's capacity to remember refers back to the "tapestry of creation" in Cristina Peri-Rossi's *La nave de los locos (Ship of Fools).* Despite its incompleteness, the tapestry has a perfect geometric structure able to be reconstructed in the "frame of the mind" (21) in the same way that a symphony "advances from incoherence and fragmentation to a kind of unity" (Cohen 214) and the omniscient ear distinguishes each one of its notes.

outsiders who refuse to accept the imposed rules of the game. That grotesque Lorelei, incoherent yet at the same time so "familiar," anticipates a time and place in which disillusion and banality would be merely variations, "residual" effects of the previous horror.[9] Cohen's novel also coincides with Juan José Saer's *Lo imborrable*, a text in which the narrator, Carlos Tomatis–a recurring character in Saer's narratives–moves through his city like a stranger. The sense of not belonging, the alienation he suffers in a world that also seems to combine that of the dictatorship with many characteristics of the 90's, turn him into an outsider in his own land. Tomatis lives in "the confused half-light of the losers" (162), against the grain of his compatriots, "the indolent, suntanned crowd of winners" (182), he lives and goes "in the opposite direction" from the majority. His personal adversary, Walter Bueno,[10] an opportunistic official writer, is a typical winner, who nevertheless` will die in an accident. Meanwhile, our loser, encased in his silence because "not to act is the best solution," will keep alive the small flame "that continues to burn despite the whirlwinds of water and night shaking on the outside" (189). That is, in the midst of a world that seems to consolidate the dictatorship and the Menemist period, Tomatis withdraws, distances himself, appearing to do no more than survive and watch his step. Yet at the same time he retains the memory–that which is ineradicable–that seems to dissolve all around him in a world of

[9] The narrator does not neglect to point out the meaning of his writing: "That's what I mean, because there was a time when many things were concealed, novels like this one begin to be written. And they continue, they continue to be written" (293).

[10] The character of the obliging, pedantic, and successful writer Walter Bueno, is very reminiscent of Carlos Argentino Daneri, his predecessor in Borges's story "El Aleph" ("The Aleph"). In that story, the greater or lesser degree of realism in his work is also treated ironically, and he serves as the narrator's antagonist.

blurred horror, a world that is described metonymically, but whose presence is undeniable.

The Voice of the Infamous

Foucault has said that literature, "more than any other form of language, continues to be the discourse of "infamy," its task is to say that which is most unsayable, the worst, the most intolerable, the shameless" (201). Literature, therefore, not only provides us with readings of how to live as losers. It will also present us with winners, who are often represented ambiguously and paradoxically as a special kind of defeated character, appearing as figures of the present, always unpunished and unremitting in their practice of evil. Other versions of the loser appear as well; not all the defeated will act with integrity, and they will seek out diverse paths to adapt to the new circumstances. The triumph of political opportunism, the idea of adapting oneself in order to survive put forward by the winners, implies other ways of accepting defeat, numerous transactions, and multiple betrayals. The texts represent those "adaptations:" changes in behavior, the loss of dignity, and the dissolution of one's very identity.

It comes as no surprise that Borges's story, "Deutsches requiem," included in *El Aleph*, serves as a founding text for an entire tradition of narratives about "infamous winners." A narrative about defeat (the narrator, a Nazi, will be shot as a torturer and assassin), its aim is to demonstrate Germany's ultimate triumph. And it is in this sense that Borges's story is transformed into a text that anticipates

subsequent history, and not only that of Argentina.[11] Borges's character says: "Tomorrow I will die, but I am a symbol of future generations" (130). His message serves as a victorious legacy for the future: "an implacable era now hangs over the world. We forged it . . . If victory and injustice and happiness are not for Germany, let them be for other nations" (140-41). Borges's final note to the collection, in which he speaks of "the tragic German fate," thus takes on a clear meaning and defines the story as an attempt to understand that fate. Although it was defeated, Nazism in fact won the war; this is what the narrator, who is then the consummate figure of the victor, points out: it is the future that is at stake, and therefore he is unafraid; in a way he goes unpunished and is "reborn" in subsequent texts and in his assassins.

The narrator's "final victory," which anticipates many narratives linked to our history, turns him into a winner despite his apparent status as vanquished. His final victory is his belief in a terrible future and is due, as he himself lucidly observes, to the fact that the world has learned the lesson of violence and faith in arms. Borges's story reminds us of Agamben's reflection: "The birth of the [concentration] *camp* in our time appears . . . as an event that decisively marks the political space itself of modernity . . . The camp as a dislocating location is the hidden matrix of the politics in which we still live" (37-40). From this perspective, and in light of history, Borges's text anticipates our present and the triumph of the "banality of evil." Therefore, there is no true punishment for the protagonist; his

[11] Ricardo Piglia has also read this story as an anticipatory narrative. He refers to it in "El último cuento de Borges," in *Formas breves*: "The confession of the admirable (loathsome) Otto Dietrich zur Linde is in reality a prophecy, that is to say an anticipated description of the world in which we live" (63).

death is meaningless, inasmuch as his "cause" has triumphed. And this makes any representation of the figures that repeat him current, completely present; they are residues of evil, apparently defeated, whose "long career of evil," as Hannah Arendt writes with respect to Eichmann, "has [have] taught us the lesson of the terrible *banality of evil,* before which words and thought seem powerless" (443).

As in Borges's story, the narrator-protagonist of Luis Gusmán's *Villa,* is also an infamous character. Villa, a perfect bureaucrat of evil, again brings to mind the reflections of Arendt, for whom the monstrousness of the war criminal consisted in his being a "normal" person, an efficient cog in a monstrous machine. This unremarkable doctor, a collaborator who was present in torture sessions during the dictatorship, is, as he himself insists: "a professional government official" who bears no responsibility for the events. He is simply "a fly," someone who "flits around power" (86), hiding behind it and seeking protection from whomever happens to be his boss. Yet, this space in the shadow of the victors will not come without a price. Like many traitors in the corpus Villa has problems with his identity: his name turns out to be that of a dead man (67), his face appears blurry in photos (114), and he has nowhere to take refuge "from that light that begins to cross his face, exposing every feature, when he looks at himself in the mirror" (137).

His written report, that "monstrosity" (208) that he hides in a secret place and that–the reader knows–will never be made public, is the untold [hi]story to which no one has confessed. Indeed, although everyone knows about the presence of doctors and priests in the torture sessions and the death flights, none of them

(with the exception of Scilingo and his well-publicized confession,[12]) has testified to or written about this. Gusmán's novel, then, fills a gap: like the narrator in Borges's story, Villa takes us into the world of horror and shows from within, from the perspective of the infamous, a hell omitted from other discourses. The end of the narrative lets us know that this "doctor of memory" (83) has continued "practicing his profession" throughout the dictatorship and we assume that he remains unpunished and silent. This novel, written in 1995, revisits a past that continues to exist; the readers know that many Villas live among us, unpunished, in a shadowy zone where they keep their secret and where justice does not appear to reach.

Gusmán's latest novel, *Ni muerto has perdido tu nombre,* also shares this look at the present, heir to a terrible past, with other narratives from the period, especially Omar Prego Gadea's *Nunca segundas muertes.* Both take place in very specific historical circumstances as well: the post-dictatorial periods in Uruguay and Argentina. In both texts, some of the protagonists are assassins intimately linked to the dictatorships, and the counterpoint between losers and winners underpins the narrative. The two torturers in *Ni muerto has perdido tu nombre* somehow continue to torture unpunished. They are figures of the present; indeed, one of them repeats, "For me nothing has changed" (131), "I haven't changed" (146). For its part, *Nunca segundas muertes* erases the differences between the past (the time of the dictatorship) and the present, in an ambiguity in which here also, nothing has changed for the collaborationist traitor. The same methods (disappearances, death, kidnappings) can be carried out with impunity: " 'I asked

[12] For an analysis of the confession in *Villa* and its relationship to Scilingo's declarations, see Zubieta's essay.

you if you thought that we are witnessing a disappearance. I assume you understand that if this were to be the case it would be a serious matter. Don't you think so?' 'Of course. These days it would be extremely serious'" (19). Initially, it proves impossible to confirm in what time period the characters are speaking, and to which times they refer. The temporal equivocation is repeated and confirmed in the kidnapping of the protagonist (identical to that which he experienced during the dictatorship), and in his repetition of the same words minutes before they throw him from a boat into the River Plate: "in the end everything remains the same, he thinks, the same words or others like them, continue to be said in similar circumstances" (50).

It is interesting to consider the uncertain status of these "winners," who, although they are members of a discredited camp, are nonetheless not followers of a lost cause. They share this with the torturers in Gusmán's novel and the narrator of "Deutsches requiem." We might recall here Reyes Mate's observation in *La razón de los vencidos*: "The victors, inadvertently converted into vanquished after the war, climb on the bandwagon of the victors and appear again on the opposite side of the victims" (217). These characters are linked to forces that, although "defeated" or broken, finally prove to be on the winning side; they are part of a system that somehow protects them and within which they are able to develop and "triumph." The traitor's declaration in *Nunca segundas muertes* will be negated by the facts: "The war ended, *officially*, this time with losers and winners. Yes . . . everyone was a bit excessive, but now that's all in the past, a past we should forget" (136, my italics).

In *Ni muerto has perdido tu nombre*, although one of the assassins acknowledges that "times have changed," the fact that one of them is blackmailing a terrified survivor, demonstrates that they continue to go unpunished. In fact, the two torturers still practice the same forms of intimidation; time has not passed for them nor for their victims, whose search for the hidden truth forces them to look backwards and constantly relive the horror. As one of the characters, the son of *desaparecidos*, acknowledges: "he realized that, after many false starts he found himself in the same place. It was like walking on a treadmill" (86). The past and the present are confused; winners and losers continue to play the same roles despite the political changes that the fall of the dictatorships and the new democratic spaces presuppose.

This paradox positions them as unpunished assassins beyond the reach of the law and diametrically opposed to the ethical figures of the narratives mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Those antiheroes affirm their identity as long as they resist and refuse to be co-opted; but in these cases, on the contrary, identity is unstable; it is stolen from someone else, concealed, erased. In Gusmán's novel, the two assassins have taken their names from the band *Varela Varelita* because one of them was struck by his resemblance to one of the musicians. Doubles of each other because of the reiteration of the name (Varela and Varelita), and doubles of others whose names conceal their own and their "work," their faces appear to change in accordance with these identities: "I think that when you were Varela, you even had a different face," says Varelita (130). Duplicated names, *noms de guerre*: for the young protagonist, investigating the death of his disappeared parents means

combing through a network of false names and identities. In the same way that the dust from the quarry near the site of their murder covers objects and people, rendering them unrecognizable, and makes it necessary to walk with one's face covered, so too does the identity of each assassin become diffuse. Indeed, it is difficult for the reader, as it is for the other characters, to distinguish the differences between them; they are simply two assassins with interchangeable roles.

Those ghosts of the past, recognized through a shop window (in Prego Gadea's novel), or heard on the telephone (in Gusmán's novel), demonstrate the currency of that terrible past which has yet to be overcome; its appearance generates a sinister feeling and will produce similar results in a world marked, beyond the apparent changes, by the effects of the dictatorship. In *Nunca segundas muertes*, this will bring about the character's ultimate return to exile and his definitive abandonment of a country "that had become something unrecognizable, even hostile, in which the ghosts of those who were his friends and acquaintances lived" (147).

The two opposing roles, ethical loser and victor, embody the extreme alternatives that the narratives included in this corpus propose as forms of imaginary and fictional resolution of the experience of painful political defeats and historical conflicts. In all the narratives considered here, the victors–and Borges's story is fundamental to this reflection– continue as such during the apparent defeat brought by the new era, because it does not seem possible to restore justice or to make amends for the harm that was done. In this sense, all of the texts considered here dramatize a conflict that is impossible to resolve; they question forgetting and

the absence of reparations in the real world, and they emerge as written discourses in which the history and memory of the defeated continue to prevail. In a clear inversion of official discourse, they all question compensatory solutions, and in all of them narrative memory is a way of challenging those successful versions of history. As Ricardo Forster says in *Crítica y sospecha,* "a turn toward memory in order to grasp the impossibility of the past . . . allows us . . . to consider our present" (61) and he wonders, "Who can take responsibility for a defeat?" (62). Literature appears to have done that. To assume the loss, the path of resistance, and the rejection of the victors and their present, is also to choose to exercise memory. In the face of the disillusion caused by so much defeat and triumphalism, literary discourse affirms itself as a realm of debate and construction of solutions–imagined and imaginary–to our historical-political conflicts.

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