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Tonalities of Literature in Transition

The World of the End of the World,
or Marcelo Cohen's *El oído absoluto*

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IN A WELL-KNOWN FORMULATION, FREDRIC JAMESON CHARACTERIZES POST-modernity as an epochal shift coinciding with the tendential colonization of the planet by transnational capital. The postmodern is what ensues when even those territories previously considered to lie beyond the reach of market forces—that is, especially, nature and the unconscious—are found to have been assimilated into the calculating rationale of exchange and use. Such a world-historical transformation poses considerable difficulties for critical thinking in its endeavor to think the contingency of the present-day dominant regime of signification. One of the attendant effects of the hegemonic ascent of neoliberalism around the globe is that resistance to capital becomes difficult or impossible to define. In its relentless colonization of peripheral zones, capital appears to have succeeded in divesting itself of any identifiable—and hence finite—point of origin. Its agency is everywhere in general, and thus it emanates from nowhere in particular. Working in sync with the seeming defeat or exhaustion of all existing alternatives to free-market capitalism, the logic of the market also works to ensure that

any conceivable alternative to the market could only come into view at the expense of its own legibility.

The market today is a site of subreption in which a particular way of configuring meaning acts to conceal or efface the contingent nature of its own origin, dressing itself in the trappings of a natural, spontaneous order or an inevitable outcome. Perhaps the most obvious example is the teleological account of the free market put forth by thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama and Alejandro Portes, in which the transition to free-market economies around the globe signals the evolutionary triumph of a “natural” order over other mediated (and hence unnatural or fallen) means of organizing socioeconomic relations. The nature of what I am terming “subreption” is to project the sense that “it just happens,” and that “it” therefore cannot and ought not be contested. But, in this sense, how does the hegemonic emergence of the current global regime differ from those of other moments in the history of hegemonic articulations? Do not *all* hegemonic procedures come to pass when a certain particular manages more or less successfully to pass itself off as a universal? Perhaps the key difference between the dominant discourse of the present moment and those of other periods must be sought in the specificity of erasures being enacted today. The disappearance of ideological antagonism around the globe, together with the widely proclaimed “end” of a certain conception of history, coincides with the emergence of “consensus” as the new truth or telos of all politics. Whatever parallels it may evoke, “consensus” is not just another name for the universal status claimed by all hegemonies. Under the rhetoric of consensus, the conception of politics as praxis, as an open-ended venture that transforms the agent together with its field, is supplanted by an administrative realm in which no signifier—or rather, no gap between signifiers—could conceivably emerge to challenge the universality of the dominant discourse. Consensus is the ideogeme of the end of ideology itself.

The implications of this tectonic shift are especially difficult to unravel in a region such as Latin America’s Southern Cone, where the triumphant arrival of neoliberalism is not easy to separate—chronologically or ontologically—from recent histories of military dictatorship. In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, the term “transition” in fact applies to two

historical events: the transition from dictatorship to democracy coincides with the substitution of state economy by market economy. The postulation of a necessary or unavoidable link between these two transformations—to the extent that “democracy” comes to be seen as essentially synonymous with its liberal and neoliberal articulations—would seem to represent the inauguration of a new epoch for politics and for thinking. Transition thus names a sweeping reorganization of economic and political society characterized by, among other things, the wholesale privatization of the state. Just as profoundly, however, transition names an ontological transformation that affects what is felt to be conceivable and open to debate—in short, it affects the very horizons for thinking today. Transition in the Southern Cone is at least partially subject to Jean-François Lyotard’s assessment of postmodernity as a rupture in the “grand narratives” that provided the structuring principle for modern societies (Lyotard 1984). I am proposing “rupture” as a diagnostic term since it is not necessarily the belief in and desire for totalizing metanarratives necessarily that cease, but rather that the desire for this ontological ground cannot fully separate itself from a disavowal of its own underlying condition.¹ According to the legitimating and celebratory views of the transition, the prevailing meaning of history today is that we are living out the end of history. The final meaning of history is its own calcification qua historicity. Viewed from the perspective of values-oriented critiques of the transition, on the other hand, the hegemonic definition of transition is invariably seen as the onset of crisis. Synonymous with both the destruction of society’s collective bearings and the imposition of a new sense of direction, globalizing transition is a methodical disarticulation of these collectives themselves (Bourdieu 1998, 3; as quoted in Moreiras 2001, 268).²

This paper will approach the question of transition from several angles. While I am concerned with concrete problems that arise during the period I am calling “transitional,” I am also interested in exploring the notion of “transition” as a discursive (literary and theoretical) construct whose aims are not necessarily limited to the description of extradiscursive processes. In this latter sense, “transition” reflects two related endeavors: for one, an attempt to *name* an event whose consequences have perhaps not yet been

sufficiently registered and theorized, and at the same time, an endeavor to intervene in the scene it describes and alter prevailing understandings of history, the social, and even literature itself. My use of the term “transition” is therefore marked by an unresolved tension between constative and performative tendencies. It is my position that the distinction just made between the “concrete” and the “discursive” in fact describes a relation and not a simple opposition. While these two dimensions should not be conflated, neither should they be viewed in an unreflected way as comprising entirely separate fields. In the first part of this paper, I will suggest that the notion of transition from dictatorship to democracy is haunted today by the lingering problem of how to render justice for the crimes committed under military dictatorship. Indeed, recent history in the Southern Cone would seem to testify not only to the exigency of justice but also to what I will call its impossibility. This aporetic impasse at the heart of justice will frame the first part of my discussion. Then, the discussion will turn to Martin Heidegger’s meditations on mood and historicity. I will suggest that the problems attending transition in the Southern Cone present new challenges for any real attempt to think historically today. With Heidegger, I argue that “mood” affords a unique possibility for thinking today. The last section of this paper offers a reading of *El oído absoluto*, a 1987 novel by the Argentine writer Marcelo Cohen, which I use to advance a notion of “counter-foundational” writing as an attempt to mark or experience the limits of the hegemonic discourse of the transition.

STATE TERRORISM AND THE APORIAS OF JUSTICE

Under military rule, the state’s systematic use of terrorism to annihilate political opposition is seen retrospectively to have paved the way for the final and total consolidation of neoliberalism—understood as the ideology of the end of ideological conflict—during the transition period. Yet, insofar as historiographical analysis seeks to pinpoint the origin of the neoliberal hegemony, it also renders itself partially blind to the paradoxically latent temporality of the present situation. To see how this is the case, let us turn

briefly to the problem of justice as it has taken shape in post-dictatorship Southern Cone societies.

The reestablishment of representative democracy in the Southern Cone during the 1980s and 1990s is accompanied by popular calls for redress of crimes committed under military rule. The transitional regimes pragmatically sought to satisfy or dissolve these demands through various institutional channels (including the enactment of amnesty laws, the convening of truth commissions, and in some cases trials for military criminals followed by official pardons), in ways that also allow them to maintain the tacit support of the military. Needless to say, these pragmatic measures were regarded by many of the victims, their families, and supporters as inadequate responses to crimes that often bordered on the unimaginable. The wide gap between popular demands for justice and the measured institutional responses leads in many cases to an intensification of debates and conflicts over how to address the recent past and its inordinate history of terror. In the view of those who continue to demand justice, in defining justice exclusively as an administrative matter, the state shows itself to be less concerned with pursuing justice, and more committed to the goal of advancing institutionality as a corrective measure for a fragmented and disjointed society.

Patricio Aylwin, the democratically elected successor to Pinochet in Chile, articulated such a pragmatic prescription for administrative justice about which there is much to say. In his first address to the nation as president on 11 March 1990, Aylwin linked a successful transition to the aim of “*justicia en la medida de lo posible*” [literally, justice in the measure that it is possible]. Perhaps even more than its Argentine, Brazilian, and Uruguayan counterparts, the Aylwin regime was faced with the threat of a strong military which, after nearly two decades of authoritarian rule, still enjoyed the support of powerful sectors in Chilean society. Aylwin’s self-defined task was thus to do whatever necessary to ensure that the military would not return to intervene again, even if this meant ceding to the latter’s demands for impunity from the prosecution. In his inaugural address announcing the return of democracy following nearly two decades of military dictatorship, Aylwin defined the present and future horizon of justice as a symbolic intervention undertaken by the state, the true aim of which is to restore the

smooth functioning of what Lacan calls “the symbolic.” Institutional justice is determined in the time of post-dictatorship as the calculus of *adequatio*, as an act that conforms to *and* secures the being of the actual. But what is the nature of this actual configuration of things? And what exactly is the relation between “symbolic intervention” and the constitution of “the symbolic” itself? I will return to these questions after first discussing in more detail how the problem of justice makes itself heard in Southern Cone post-dictatorship societies.

An irony attends the calculative reason exemplified by Aylwin’s address. The truly disastrous effect of state terror is not to be found in the magnitude of the specific crimes committed by the state, as if those transgressions were simply “worse” or “greater” than other crimes committed in different contexts. If that were the case, the issue of justice would hinge only on finding or deciding as to the proper measure for each particular crime perpetrated by the state. Aylwin’s prescription notwithstanding (he calls for justice “*en la medida de lo posible*”), the problem of justice here is not reducible to a matter of measuring or calculating. The cumulative effects of state terror, seen as the suspension of the distinction between life and death, are felt by many to have precisely exceeded—and thereby abolished—all possibility of measure.³

Returning to Aylwin’s address, let us note that the naming of what is possible—and also, silently but unavoidably, what is not possible or what lies outside the realm of debate—can never, especially when comes it from the mouth of a president, be said to attain the neutrality of a purely descriptive statement. In defining in advance and according to necessity (“*en la medida de lo posible*”) the extent to which justice can be pursued, the calculating reason of the transition has the effect of consolidating and naturalizing the particular economic, political, and social configuration under which it issues. “Given that these are the conditions in which we find ourselves, let us act accordingly”: while it would seem that the conditional clause in this edict merely “describes” what kind of justice can reasonably be expected today, the main clause cannot avoid *altering* the conditional description by conferring legitimacy on the order it claims to summarize. What presents itself as a mere description in fact continues the work of a powerful mechanism of

reinscription, in which the contingent and violent origins of the present state of affairs are silently erased and rewritten as the unavoidable and necessary—and hence rational—nature of the real. In this phrase, *ought* is silently collapsed back into what *is*. The phrase “*en la medida de lo posible*” not only prescribes the degree to which justice is possible today, it also purports to describe the future: it presages what can be expected of the democratic society to come, and at the same time it defines the very future of justice itself. It offers the reassuring story that we act thus out of necessity, because things are as they are and because we cannot (or can no longer) remember that once things might have turned out differently. In this sense, transition enacts a refusal of the real, a foreclosure that would expel any trace of antagonism and contingency, or what is “out of joint,” from the arena of public discourse. A considerable array of difficulties thus accompany any attempt to think transition in the Southern Cone. Post-dictatorship societies of the Southern Cone are marked by a disjunction between two historical moments, a disjuncture that makes its appearance as the failure or refusal in one time to symbolize an excess of the other.⁴

The point I would like to emphasize here is not that administrative justice turns out to be no justice at all—though, judging from the cases in question, that is often the case. Instead, I am suggesting that the establishing of a necessary link between institutionality and justice, or the designation of institutional space as the sole proper and legitimate space for pursuing the question of justice, effectively suspends any and all debate over how “justice” should be defined and to what extent pursued. In the end, the securing of this link risks annulling the very possibility of justice by precisely—and paradoxically—refusing to acknowledge the *impossibility* that haunts every thought of justice. It amounts to a refusal of all that remains undecidable in relation to justice, and it likewise entails a number of important consequences for how we conceive of democracy and politics.

We can begin to elaborate this notion of the impossibility of justice by turning briefly to Jacques Derrida’s exposition on justice and deconstruction in his essay “Force of Law” (Derrida 1992). Derrida suggests that justice constitutes a theoretical-practical aporia: it names an experience of undecidability, or a boundary that we cannot traverse without exposing ourselves to

the possibility of contradiction, error, and unjust decisions. One of Derrida's ways of describing this aporia is by demonstrating that the thought of justice is marked by a constitutive incompatibility between the universal and the singular. On one hand, justice necessarily lays claim to *general* and *universal* applicability: in order to be considered just, a ruling or law must apply equally to all. In Derrida's terms, it must be iterable, or repeatable, citable, and knowable by all. However, justice cannot be accomplished through a calculated or mechanical application of rules. It necessarily addresses itself to *particular* cases in their *singular* character. But the aporia of which Derrida speaks is not a simple contradiction between general truths and particular demands. Rather, it stems from the fact that justice must not pause over this impasse; it can neither be content to deliberate endlessly over impossible decisions, nor can it know in advance that the decision it undertakes will result in a good end. Justice is invoked with uncompromising exigency; it calls for a decision for which we are always unprepared, but which must be undertaken *now*.

One can also describe the question of justice as marked aporetically by a heterogeneous temporality. For Derrida, no act or decision can claim to have implemented justice at any given moment in time. A given decision either has yet to be founded and accepted as a shared and just measure, or it is dependent on an already institutionalized rule that may or may not be just. And if the just nature of this earlier model could somehow be guaranteed (and Derrida would, of course, argue that this cannot be done), the dependent decision would then become a merely mechanical, calculating application. For Derrida, justice is always "*à venir*": its possibility belongs both to the instant of the decision and to the decision's future, and this co-belonging precisely prevents us from knowing the origin of the decision and its destination at the same time. And so the future of justice is in fact also its impossibility: "*l'à venir*" is not only a future time that might someday be realizable as present time, but also the chance or opening in the present (*in* but not *belonging to* it, as would a possession or essence) that gives the thought and hope of a future. "*L'à venir*" names a future that will be, as all futures must, fundamentally *different* from the present (but who can say how or why?) rather than a mere reproduction of the same. That there "is" a

future or that we “have” a future: futurity names the sheer fact that one can say this today, but without deceiving ourselves into thinking that the status of this future can be explained in terms of being or presence. Justice, then, is marked by an aporetic incompatibility between two notions of time and futurity. On one hand, a future-present which we must construct, shape or realize in a just manner (but what manner is that? who decides?). If our future is to have any chance of being just, we cannot merely await its arrival passively, but must be able to see our own hand in its arrival. On the other hand, the pure possibility of an other time, a temporal *différence* which is always already retreating from our view any time the future is determined as a specific future-present. If the future as future-present can be understood in terms of calculation and labor, the future as chance or possibility poses a limit for all calculation.

The administrative reason of the transition effectively relinquishes and silences the question of justice, I maintain, because it reduces what are in fact the constitutive aporias of justice I have just described to an array of contingent, phenomenal obstacles (the military, the international banking community, etc.) which prevent its full realization for the foreseeable future. By the same token, this rationality presents what is in fact a contingent circumstance (the fact that there would seem to be no existing alternatives to free-market capitalism) as a necessary development that can no longer be altered (neoliberalism as the end of history).

PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE AND THE DARKENING OF THE WORLD: HISTORICITY AS ATTUNEMENT

What becomes of post-Kantian philosophical thinking in the wake of the epochal transformations just described? Can such thinking respond to the specific challenges of the time of transition in the Southern Cone, in which proclamations of the end of history are superimposed over still-open or newly reopened wounds? Ever since Archimedes, it has been a principle of Western thinking that any substantive transformation of the world must begin by postulating the existence of a vantage point from which the world can be interpreted *as a totality*. The possibility of thinking something on the

order of a world presupposes thinking's capacity to posit for itself an outside, a locus external to the world from which the world could be made to come into view as a whole. This transcendental site of world-historical thinking has taken on various names in the history of the West: the Platonic Good, the God of Judeo-Christian tradition, the humanistic idea of Man, Enlightenment notions of progress and emancipation, as well as more recent reference points such as the People, *Patria*, and Party. Lyotard's account of postmodernism as "rupture" implies the collapse of this constitutive outside, and thus signals the withdrawal of any ontological ground from which to think—and thereby transform—the world as a whole.

A world never allows itself to be opened and then stuck back together beginning from a multitude of perceived objects reassembled after the fact; rather, it is that which in advance is most originally and inherently manifest, within which alone such and such a thing may come to meet us. The world's opening movement comes about in the fundamental mood [*Grundstimmung*]. The power to transport, integrate, and thus open, that a fundamental mood possesses is therefore a power to found, for it places *Dasein* upon its foundations facing its abysses. (Heidegger 1976, 140–41, as quoted in Haar 1992, 163)

Martin Heidegger would seem to have anticipated the problem described by Lyotard when he suggests at the beginning of *Being and Time* that thinking, in its effort to gain access to being, cannot separate itself from the particular historical determination of being in which any such thinking finds itself. That "we always already move about in an understanding of being" means that thinking, in asking about the being of beings, can find no approach to its object that is not already compromised by a certain tilt, marked by the predetermined and unquestioned understanding of being that shapes any given time and place (Heidegger 1962, 25). There is no neutral outside in which thinking could take refuge while attempting to arrive at an "objective" or "disinterested" knowledge of being. Thinking itself continually reproduces this silent predetermination whenever and wherever it thinks. And thus we only gain a tentative and insufficient grasp of the present crisis when we represent it to ourselves using the resources of histori-

cism—for instance, when we locate the emergence of this crisis within a diachronic sequence that begins with the nation-state and ends with the market. The belief in such a chronological evolution or regression is but a symptom of the silent determination of being that gives shape to the ideological constellation of modernity and postmodernity.

But the fact that thinking can never gain access to the world “as it truly is” does not mean that we can have no experience of the world as such. Whenever and wherever deliberation happens, thinking has already been exposed to what *Being and Time* terms the “facticity” of a world. World in this sense has little to do with how the planet is conceived by the technological view, i.e., as the sum of objects that can be calculated and consumed. Indeed, insofar as technicity takes *presence* and *utility* as its basis for thinking everything and anything, it precisely refuses the possibility of experiencing the origin of world in its facticity. Facticity affects and solicits beings prior to any determination of identity or essence. While Heidegger insists that the understanding repeatedly fails to grasp the disclosure that silently shapes every configuration of meaning, he names “mood” [*Stimmung*] as the register in which we first gain some awareness of the facticity of world (see Haar 1992). Certain emotions, Heidegger says, can prompt us to withdraw and step back from our routinized and calculating ways of relating to the world. Our everyday concerns, whose self-evident importance we ordinarily regard as beyond question, are arrested by the experience of anxiety, which is tantamount to the subject losing its footing in the world. This sudden separation from the everyday in turn clears the way for us to experience existence as enigma, as something irretrievably anterior to the world as it is apprehended by calculative reason. Mood registers what Heidegger terms the “factual totality” of being, or the manner in which being is *given* to us before thinking can assume a position of judgment over it. The experience of anteriority brings us to the awareness that there is no way into being, and that neither is there any way out; thinking cannot gain the distance it seeks in order fully to grasp, through affirmation or negation, what is both prior to and irreducible to its resources. Thinking cannot think its own origin in the world.

In his later work, Heidegger comes to view particular moods as belonging in a specific way to a given epoch in the history of being. Thinking finds

itself always already to have been “attuned” [*bestimmt*] to being in specific ways, prepared or tuned in by the “voice” [*Stimme*] of being itself. Certain dispositions seem to belong characteristically to a particular time and place and its specific way of experiencing being. Thus, the quasi-ahistorical *Stimmung* of which Heidegger speaks in *Being and Time* becomes *Bestimmung*, the determination of a particular epochal tone, climate, or appointment. For instance, speechless astonishment before the sheer fact of being constitutes a fundamental attunement for Greek thinking, whereas hyperbolic doubt (and its eventual calculated conversion into certainty) sets the prevailing tone for the modern, rationalist tradition. And finally, as the epoch of metaphysics comes to a close, terror attests to the panic that arises in the withdrawal of all ontological ground. In calling attention to the importance of history for *Bestimmung*, we should bear in mind that Heidegger’s analysis is not a historicist treatment of mood. The question of epochal specificity remains enigmatic to us insofar as our analysis of it cannot step out of its own location in history—nor can it ever fully assume this location as its own proper site, since it is always already dislocated through its indebtedness to mood.

The account of attunement as receptivity to the anteriority of being (or facticity) takes on an added depth in Heidegger’s later work, where it helps set the stage for a clarification of the historicity of being (see in particular Heidegger 1999). If mood attests to the radical anteriority of world, and if it is also necessarily aligned with a given epoch and its particular mode of experiencing being, mood in its specificity furthermore participates in constituting a given epoch. The Greek experience of being is not just reflected in speechless astonishment; it *is* this wonder that gives rise to a specific way of asking questions about the world. Mood as hearing is also attunement as first orientation; the interruption of the everyday that is prompted by anxiety is also—perhaps—the first step in opening up a new path for thinking. In order to see why this is the case, we must keep in mind that for Heidegger, being does not name a transcendental substance or subject that is simply and always already “there.” Rather, we must superimpose over the anteriority of being the thought that finite being must always be brought forth anew by human hands—even as being itself provides the pseudo-transcendental determination or truth of beings. Being only *is* when and where there is a

historical project underway; being names the distinctive manner in which a project is born, lives, and dies. And so what we could call, for lack of a better term, the “passive” meaning of mood—as mark of the irretrievable anteriority of being—is already inscribed by a kind of “activity” or *re*-mark. The effect or the mark participates in bringing about its own cause as projected being.

Heidegger suggests that the exact tenor of thinking’s attunement is wont to fluctuate, both from one epoch to another and within any given epoch itself. The sense of astonishment that defined the Greek experience of the world is no longer central to our own history and its way of questioning. Wonder is supplanted by doubt, and doubt in turn by certainty, and certainty finally by terror. At the same time, a new danger begins to show itself with the exhaustion of metaphysical system-thinking: technicity finds itself virtually alone in the world today. We no longer have recourse to “God,” “Reason,” “Man,” or any other transcendental point of reference that could mediate and mark the limits of the technological representation of the world. The unchecked spread of technological immanentism introduces a new species of intonation into the world today: a vague, nearly accentless mood which Heidegger terms the “distress of the absence of distress.” Self-assured and unquestioning, this flattened-out tone attests to a world that has already been mapped and measured in its entirety. This disposition is unable to open to an experience of the world and its happening as anything other than self-evident. The postulated end of the technological representation of the world is the reduction and anaesthetization of all mood. From this point of view, terror is not in fact the fundamental, grounding attunement of the postmetaphysical age. The predominant sense of our increasingly technified world is what Heidegger calls “distress,” a malignant disposition that is always already mutating into its opposite: self-assured effervescence as the complete absence of distress.

TRANSITION AND THE LITERARY
LIMITS OF SIGNIFICATION

I will now approach the questions of post-dictatorship and transition from a different angle, by addressing the status of mood and affect in contemporary

Southern Cone prose. What follows is a reading of Marcelo Cohen's 1987 novel *El oído absoluto*. The notion of using literature as a point of departure for reflecting on world-historical questions may have a somewhat anachronistic ring to it today, especially in a Latin American context. Such a project may seem better suited to the cultural modernism of the "Boom" era than to a time when literary criticism has apparently ceded its privileged position as interpreter of symbolic production to cultural studies. However, it is precisely the belated and disjointed nature of this link between literary aesthetics, history, and politics that is of interest to me here. Two lines of questioning will shape this reading of Cohen's text. The first suggests that we have reached the end of a certain influential way of understanding literature in Latin America, while the second argues that the exhaustion of this tradition is also—perhaps—an opening onto a new way of thinking about and experiencing the literary.

On one hand, the prominence of "mood" as a topos in recent Southern Cone novels suggests the need for a broad reassessment of how we understand literature today: of its status as an index of cultural production, as well as its possibilities and its limitations as a critical force in contemporary society.⁵ In many of these texts, the emergence of mood as an important literary topos often coincides with "negative" experiences—including disorientation, depression, shock, apathy, and numbness—that challenge traditional views of representation. Paraphrasing Freud's view of anxiety, we could say that these instances of literary affect are like warning signals pointing to an event that one feels to be imminent, and yet fails to take place—or has yet to be registered within a system of symbolic values and equivalencies. Mood as affect, however, does not necessarily function in these texts as an index of an extraliterary crisis; its presence also potentially serves notice of a metaliterary problem, one that affects literature's capacity to refer to its own situation. The specific way in which mood and affect emerge in these texts suggests that we have arrived at a crisis stage in literary modernity, a point at which literature is no longer able to situate itself in relation to tradition—and, for modern Latin American literature, this is to say that it no longer finds its supplementary support in the concept or the promise of the nation-state. Following Alberto Moreiras's analysis of the relation between literature,

culture, and the state in Latin America, let us call this crisis the demise of the culturalist concept of literature (Moreiras 2001).

If mood and affect at times point to a crisis of cultural foundations in post-dictatorship writing, these topoi also give shape in certain works to a reflection on this absence of ground as such. It is this reflection that will provide a point of departure for thinking what remains of the literary—or what emerges there for the first time—following the collapse of its culturalist ground. Certain post-dictatorship texts suggest a radicalized understanding of the literary aesthetic, in which the interruption of traditional forms of signification (metaphor, symbol, allegory) helps to engender a sensation of the sublime, of the existence of the unrepresentable. Or, better yet, it attests to a conviction that existence itself marks a limit for representation. The difference between this and traditional literary references to the sublime is that here, the marking of the limits of the imagination does not culminate in an incitation of reason—or literature—to take us beyond these limits, but rather signals a proscription (of what—if anything—could be said to lie beyond these limits) and a falling back.

Of course, the two lines of questioning I am describing do not constitute a total description of contemporary literary production in the Southern Cone, nor do the developments I am attempting to theorize rule out the presence of other tendencies, including attempts to salvage or reinvent some form of cultural-ontological ground for the literary. Indeed, I believe it would be more precise to say that literary attempts to reflect on the absence of ground on one hand, and endeavors to recuperate or reinvent some sort of ground (albeit in a form that literature knows to be purely tropological) on the other are at work simultaneously or co-intermittently in many of these texts.⁶

The setting of Cohen's novel is Lorelei, a mythical city-state presumably located somewhere in Latin America. While its administrators promote this locale as another example of Latin America's long history of utopian and developmentalist projects, the text in fact encourages us to see it as the instance of a relatively new phenomenon. Unlike traditional utopian projects, which always bore a necessary relation to nature as first ground, this is a world that has been entirely *produced*. Here nature has been reduced conceptually to a sum of commodities ready to be consumed. Even more

drastically, nature, as the substance upon which culture is traditionally thought to build, here turns out to have been fabricated by culture itself. To fill in the gaps in what Max Weber describes as modernity's utterly disenchanting nature, the designers of Lorelei have erected the "Columna Fraternal" [Fraternal Column], a laser tower that functions as colossal writing machine. The column inscribes the heavens with mediatized accounts of both the business of the city and the myriad conflicts and disasters that plague the world outside of Lorelei. This mediatic inscription process yields a pair of complementary images: a smoothly functioning "inside" in juxtaposition to a conflictive, embattled "outside." This is a simulated production process which serves to mask the fact that, in the technified world of Lorelei, the outside is no longer conceivable as alterity. That is, the identity of the outside turns out to be nothing more and nothing less than the specular double of the inside. The imaginary projection of the outside as the barbarous "other," replete with violence, antagonism, etc., lends support to a complementary image of an internal, proper space whose dissimulated fabrication would be synonymous with security, tranquillity, and universal accord. The unchanging climate of Lorelei is dedicated to the ceaseless reproduction of this sameness, of self-certainty and technological security as the self-evident ends of all social activity. At the same time, this production process also necessitates the repression of whatever threatens to disrupt the vast mediatic mirror that reconfirms this world to and for itself.⁷ Cohen's text offers an allegorical vision of Latin American modernity, revealing a perhaps unsuspected connection between the history of utopian thinking about the nation-state that begins with the generation of Bello, Echevarría, and Sarmiento, and the post-utopian epoch in which the political is increasingly redefined as administrative order of bureaucratic navigation. What at first appears as a simple contradiction (Lorelei is not the utopia its architects claim; it is in fact a dystopia) turns out to be a reflected form of identity. Through its endless refraction and dissimulation of images, the text slowly leads us to identify the grain of dystopia that was already at work in the utopian project itself. In a word, both the utopian tradition and its post-utopian simulacrum can be understood as consequences of the same silent determination of truth in terms of self-production or machination.

Cohen's novel resonates with a number of different literary traditions, including the utopian novel, science fiction, the detective novel, and the literature of exile. At the same time, one can approach the work with considerably less attention to plot content, reading as if the text were a collection of images, anecdotes, and aphorisms. One important anecdotal layer concerns a dazzling theory of music proposed by one of the principal characters, Lotario. According to his thesis, the origin of musical sense—or “musicality”—is to be found in what he terms *acordes* [chords or accords]. As aesthetic experience, music functions as a kind of universal memory, or as “*la presencia de lo perdido*” [the presence of what has been lost] (292). This paradoxical presence of absence is secured in the playing out of a differential sequence of musical units or chords, which Lotario tellingly likens to moods. When all is said and done, the succession of chords—insofar as it is found to be harmonious—will have been an accord: that is, it produces the feeling of a whole, of a unified work that exceeds the sum of its parts.

Creo que todos tenemos algo de la materia de la música. . . . El temperamento mismo está hecho de acordes. Cada acorde es un estado de ánimo, y uno unido a otro . . . forman el carácter de una persona. . . . Pero un acorde . . . es un conjunto armónico de notas. Do menor es do más mi bemol más sol, y por eso no puede definirse con un solo adjetivo. Y a mí me parece que con los sentimientos pasa lo mismo. (134)

[I believe that we all have something of musical material within ourselves. . . . Our very nature is made up of chords. Every chord is a mood, and one linked to another . . . form the character of a person. But a chord . . . is also an accord, a harmonic conjunction of notes. C-minor is C plus E-flat plus G, and therefore it can't be defined with any single adjective. It seems to me that it's the same way with feelings.]

As we see, each unit or chord is itself a harmonious assemblage of notes. Harmony arises not simply from the richness and plenitude of a particular combination, but from a kind of materiality that retreats behind the emergence of the melodious or the beautiful. A chord is not just a plurality of

notes whose individual senses have been determined in advance. Rather, like Saussure's alphabet, it is a multiplicity of differences: the sense of each note—*re*, for instance—is precisely the invisible and inaudible difference that places it between, while also distinguishing it from, *do* and *mi*. Harmony emerges from the gaps or absences that mutely recede before a particular conjunction of notes. Music shows us that sense or harmony, when and if it occurs, is either always already withdrawing or always yet to come.

Realismo es que una obra . . . cambie con cada grupo que la interpreta, con cada persona que le escucha. Para mí es larga, para Fulano corta, para un violinista acelerada, otro la ralentiza. . . . Siempre es la misma pieza, y siempre distinta. . . . Y también mi vida es distinta ahora que ayer, aunque sea la misma vida. (229)

[Realism means that a work . . . changes from one group of interpreters to another, with each person who listens to it. For me it's too long, for what's his name it's too short, for a violinist it's rapid, whereas someone else slows it down. . . . Always the same piece, and yet always different. . . . In the same way my life is not the same today as it was yesterday, although it continues to be the same life.]

Somewhat surprisingly, Lotario also declares that music in fact constitutes the only true realism. He does not mean that music is more adept than other forms of art at imitating nature. To be sure, music imitates nothing. Lotario's judgment of music as the truth of realism derives from the old conviction that music has to do with presentation in its purest sense: the presentation of presentation itself. Music provides a model, we could say, for thinking the origin of sense. At the same time, the musical medium attests to a tragic aspect of this process. The price that sound pays for becoming audible is that it must resign itself to its inevitable duplication, dissipation, and loss. In order to win the chance of a good hearing, music must relinquish all guarantees and deliver itself over to repetition, to the ear of another, which is in fact an echo chamber. In producing a work or a whole, music allows what is contingent (different interpretations, different days) to form an identity that appears necessary (the work, the life).

As the title of the novel suggests, the physiology of the ear plays a central role in this aesthetic theory. The eponymous “absolute ear” names a magical ability to divine or to reproduce precisely any given tone or key. The *oído absoluto* is an “inner ear” that remains immediately attuned to the voice of being.⁹ Lotario, in recounting his musical ambitions, announces that he wanted not just to possess such an inner ear, but actually to be this “*germen de la afinación universal*” [germ of universal tuning or completion]. His wish belongs to a certain understanding of art that prevails through much of modernity; Lotario shares with this tradition an aesthetic imaginary for which art would fill in the gaps and heal the fissures that arise through our interactions with the real. Art incorporates the terrifying void into its own mechanics—much like the physiological structure of the ear—and it thereby provides a saving passage to solid ground. Or, using different terms, we could say that aesthetic experience fashions a neutral space that would suture the rifts and antagonisms of the social field. Variations on this theme can be found not only in the cultural canons of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Lloyd and Thomas 1998), but also in more recent attempts to counteract the violence of globalization through a return to culture and tradition (see Moreiras 1999). In schematizing this aesthetic ideology, Cohen’s text also allows us to see the points where its culturalist ground has begun to waver. The point of Lotario’s self-undermining presentation is not that its viewpoint is simply mistaken. This aesthetic ideology is highly aware that what it refers to as the completion of a system (*afinación*) is in fact inhabited by gaps, silences, and excesses. Perhaps the crucial difference that separates Cohen’s text from the culturalism that it mimics resides in the question of how each aesthetic theory understands its respective relation to its own limits. The system outlined by Lotario claims to interpret and regulate these lacks and surpluses through its own devices, representing them as integral moments of rhythm and harmony. And thus the limits of the system do not prevent the system from constituting itself as such.

On the other hand, we can also find in Cohen’s text a view of writing as a counter-foundational practice. For Cohen, writing seeks out those moments that precisely do not fit into—and that in fact interrupt and ruin—the systematic production of harmonious wholes. “Hay momentos, si uno los descubre, que son extraordinarias averías en la red eléctrica que nos

alimenta, y en el desconcierto que acuñan se puede atisbar la anticuada audacia del vértigo” [There are moments, if one can discover them, that are extraordinary breakdowns in the electronic network that sustains us. In the disconcerting impression they impose on us, one can catch sight of the age-old audacity of vertigo] (11). Let us then modify the Weberian account of modernity alluded to above: technicity not only presides over the disenchantment of the world, it also unleashes a powerful operation of reinscription that obscures the traces of its own machinations in the world. Disenchantment is always already reenchantment through the projection of self-evident certainty. Counter-foundational writing aims to reveal the gaps that lie concealed beneath this projected semblance of a whole without gaps, fissures, or conflict. In so doing, it would renew the possibility of experiencing the origin or emergence of world as enigma. The difference between these two aesthetic attitudes can be articulated as a shift in tonality, in which *afinación* [attunement, completion] gives way to *desconcierto* [disconcertedness, uncertainty]. The distinction between these attitudes resides not only in the distance between two distinct tonalities, but also amounts to different understandings of tone itself. The nominal *desconcierto* evokes disorder, confusion, discord, agitation—all of which could be described as symptoms of the times, of the feeling that things are going badly with the world today. But in it we can also hear the transitive verb *desconcertar* (to upset, to bewilder, to disconcert) and the reflexive verb *desconcertarse* (to dislocate; to suffer a breakdown, as in a mechanism that no longer functions), which might contain one of the names for the task of disruption that counter-foundational literature sets for itself.

Some clarification is called for here as to the status of “tone” in what I am describing as postculturalist, counter-foundational writing. First, we cannot satisfactorily account for the matter of tone when we explain its prominence in contemporary literature as a reflection of the times in which we live; tonality is also a signifier that aims to intervene in the scene it helps describe. Second, as the text suggests (to wit, “if one can discover them”), these disjunctive figures and tonalities cannot be produced and orchestrated in a calculating manner, either by an author, the work, or a reader. These “moments,” which are of time but not necessarily of any specified

duration, are constituted by relation, by the act of reading. To speak of counter-foundational writing as I am doing is potentially misleading, then, since the term risks creating a rigid conceptual opposition based on authorial agency, opposing the intentions of Cohen to those of other writers and/or of earlier generations. This is far from what I have in mind. My purpose is to describe an epochal shift in how literature *reads*, a transformation that compels us to call into question the very stability of the disciplinary object known as “literature”—a change that is impossible to explain as the exclusive function of a specific author, work, or reader.

Heidegger describes a paradox that complicates the manner in which we can hope to relate to any fundamental attunement. A brief reference to this difficulty will help to clarify what I am trying to suggest about the literary in Cohen. On one hand, for reasons already outlined, fundamental attunement can never become an object of knowledge: to recognize or become conscious of it is already to have lost it. By the same token, fundamental attunement cannot be made the end or objective of a subject’s will: there can be no production of attunement where it does not already exist. Paradoxically, if we wish to experience a fundamental attunement, we must seek it out where it has already taken hold, and yet where it has not yet been aroused. Heidegger thus resorts to “sleep” and “awakening” as a tropological couplet to describe a possible relation to fundamental attunement:

‘Whatever is sleeping’ is in a peculiar way absent and yet there. When we awaken an attunement, this means that it is already there. At the same time, it expresses the fact that in a certain way it is *not* there. This is strange: attunement is something that is simultaneously there and not there. (Heidegger 1995, 60)

Neither presentation nor representation, consciousness nor unconsciousness—nor any other philosopheme for that matter—would seem capable of accounting for the relation between the thinking, representing, acting subject and attunement. It is a matter of entering into relation with something that is already there, but whose presence—or better, there-ness—is also marked by absence, withdrawal, or deferral. It is a matter of inciting what is always already there so that it can take place.

The narrative structure of Cohen's novel is marked by the intermittent emergence and retreat of a number of distinct tonal registers. This multiplicity belies the idea that a particular time receives its configuration from a single mood, or even from one general tendency or direction. Indeed, we could take "tone" to refer precisely to the structure of variation, alternation, and deferral at work in the textual determination of mood. Tone names not a particular mood with a determinate meaning, but rather the internal vibration and differentiations within a given configuration (Fenves 1993). Topoi such as "indebtedness," "mourning," and "perseverance" also point to key emotional registers in this work. A thought of debt in particular helps to strike a distinction between cultural modernity and post-dictatorship writing. As the narrator, Lino, describes it, "Me di cuenta de cuál era la bisagra del delirio de Lotario. La música podía ser la famosa sustancia inencontrable porque, como el zumbido de las moscas o los antojos del viento, no pagaba deudas" [I discovered the basis of Lotario's delirium: music could be the famous ethereal substance because, like the buzzing of flies or the whimsies of the winds, music doesn't pay debts] (293). Perhaps Lotario's culturalist ideology fails to settle its debts not because it prefers to ignore them, but because these debts are in some sense incommensurable.¹⁰ For writing in the wake of transition, on the other hand, what Lino elsewhere terms "*esta deuda angustiosa*" [this anguished or oppressive debt] imposes a weight that can neither be forgotten nor rendered habitual.

In his essay "Literature and the Right to Death" (1981), Maurice Blanchot describes literature as bearing two "slopes" or contradictory inclinations. The trope that mediates Blanchot's topographical account of literature is metonymy, a movement of displacement or slippage that yields repeated doublings or bifurcations within a given literary text. I believe that Blanchot's model, if indeed it is one, can help to illuminate some of what is at stake in Cohen's novel. *El oído absoluto*, I am arguing, is fundamentally concerned with the possibility or impossibility of a literary reflection on what I described in the first section as societal transition. But we should not therefore conclude too hastily that "transition" constitutes a stable, extraliterary point of reference for Cohen's text. Such a reading would reinforce a traditional concept of literature as mimesis.

Let us recall Blanchot's somewhat paradoxical claim that *literature begins when literature itself is called into question*. Blanchot is suggesting that literature ceaselessly brings us back to the fundamental instability of language. Cohen's novel offers a way of shedding more light on this seemingly self-referential definition. The text seeks to win new space for reflecting on the problem of transition by transposing what is ostensibly a problem for history, politics, economics, sociology, and so on, into a literary problem. *El oído absoluto* does not aestheticize the real, however. By "translating" the question of transition into the realm of the literary, Cohen's text accomplishes two things. First, it invites us to consider that what we so easily refer to as "reality beyond literature" is in fact a point of reference that is already mediated by processes akin to the mechanics of literary narration (metonymy, metaphor, and so on). Second, this transposition unleashes a destabilizing force that undermines what were once relatively stable sets of meanings and values, such as those associated with "tradition," "culture"—and especially "literature" itself—in order to reveal these latter as having been abandoned by their former ground. In other words, this "translation" into literature suggests that transition can be understood in terms of the Lacanian real. Cohen's novel interrogates the concept of transition, seeking the traces of a "remainder" that has yet to be acknowledged and registered in the passage from dictatorship to democracy and from state to market—and likewise asking after an "excess" that is produced and excluded as detritus during these processes.

Literary language participates in the destabilizing process described above by stripping concepts and structures of their self-evident standing. In narrating a story, literature necessarily does less—and more—than provide a faithful reflection of the world as it truly is. The lack—or the excess—that literature introduces into the world creates unsettling tremors in surrounding structures. Where once things stood in an accustomed, secure, and reassuring arrangement, the world suddenly appears in a strange and troubling light. According to Blanchot, literary language raises doubts about the veracity of appearances as such. Literature provokes our suspicion that the language we use on a daily basis is profoundly deceptive: language is in fact nothing more than a set of naturalized conventions that obscure the way things truly are,

while also artfully concealing from us its very artificiality. In the wake of this exposure, we might imagine that literature promises to recuperate the “truth” that is lost in the advent of representation. This promise constitutes one of the two “slopes” of which Blanchot speaks. In its desire to break away from the duplicity and false repose of ordinary words, literature endeavors to make itself into a work of negation and death—or rather, it seeks to convert death itself into a Work. While fully embracing its own negativity, literary discourse also seeks to name and inaugurate a new world based on the promise of a truth that would have freed itself of the falsity of appearances and illusion. The literary imagination promises a world where value would no longer be in decline. This, I repeat, describes only one of literature’s two faces.

In delving beneath the superficial veneer of words and appearances, literature also bears witness to a surprising discovery, which will constitute the other “slope” in Blanchot’s account. It finds that mere appearances and artifice do not in fact conceal anything of an ontologically positive nature, and that there is thus *nothing to hide*. What representation in fact hides is the reality that there is nothing to hide. With this startling discovery, which amounts to a “scandal” of representation, literature suddenly finds itself on the other “slope.” However, Blanchot’s analysis of this inclination, if followed to its conclusion, does not lead us to nihilism. In the void that opens beneath the superficiality of appearances, the literary gaze encounters the unexpected traces of being itself, a being that is *already there* prior to the distinction between truth and falsity. This gaze encounters being as its own shadow, bereft of plenitude, refusing to relinquish itself to presentation, revelation, or *aletheia*. This other slope serves as a conduit to what Blanchot terms “the world of the end of the world.” It points to being as existence, which thought can neither fully grasp nor elude.

At some point, Blanchot suggests, the two slopes must cross. If we follow one far enough, we find ourselves in the other. By introducing negation and death into the world, literature advances both the hope and the curse of the world. The phrase that punctuates the essay, “death ends in being,” precisely illustrates this idea. On one hand, “death ends in being” can be read as saying that death culminates in being as its fruition, in the sense that the literary tradition has always sought to make a Work out of death. With death

begins the afterlife of the symbol. At the same time, this phrase indicates that language introduces death into the world as a corrosive force capable of exposing the illusory nature of the ground literature seeks out. Language thus immerses us in existence without any recourse or escape. Or, to put this another way, the only way out, the only “end” to this history, is the collapse of every way out.

Blanchot’s account suggests a tragic endeavor to present what presentation itself destroys.¹¹ Perhaps the way to work through this seeming impasse is to assume a tragic resolution, although this is not necessarily to say a dialectical reconciliation. The tragic reading of Blanchot would amount to this: We must not imagine that the truth or essence of literature lies on one slope or the other. Nor, for that matter, can the division that appears where these two slopes come together be glossed over through a series of self-negating significations. On the contrary, we must think the one (let us say, the literary affirmation of freedom and new beginning) *starting with*—and not simply as the negation or dissimulation of—the other (the ineluctability of bare existence, of being without being).

Is transition, along with its attendant risks, disjunctions, and possibilities, properly speaking inside of or outside history? Where, when, and how does whatever it is that transition names *happen*? These questions are as much about problems of language and inscription as they are about politics and history.¹² The signifier “transition” names a site where thinking can take place and indeed *must* find a way to take place. For, if real thinking did not take place, there could be no real transition, but only an endless reproduction of the Same. As we have seen in the discussion of Heidegger, there can be no thinking that does not always already presuppose a certain ground. However, language’s capacity to refer to transition as a site for thinking can never be fully guaranteed; if transition “is” anything, it is decidedly a being-in-between, a being that is out of sorts with itself. As we live out the end of system-thinking and the collapse of metanarratives, the semblance of stable, solid ground continues to reproduce itself, albeit in spectral form, as the story of the end of all history. The chance that thinking can find a gap within this reproduction of the Same—and this is perhaps its only chance today—rests upon its ability to begin to listen otherwise.

Cohen's text enacts a refusal of two possible approaches to our contemporary scene. For one thing, it rules out a cynical, nihilistic embrace of the productionist representation of a world that has finally secured itself from antagonism and uncertainty. It likewise rejects the reactive attempt to beat back the incursion of globalized technicity through culturalist recourse to tradition or high art. What is left in the wake of this literary deconstruction of "transition" is an attempt to bring transition into view as an experience of groundlessness. To paraphrase Paul Bové, it is a literary attempt to be *of*—but not necessarily *for*—the time of globalization as "interregnum," as experience of the suspension of the old signifying regimes together with an opening onto something new—but what? For Cohen, literature can only open itself to this vertiginous moment through what the text terms "perseverance." Perseverance would call for resolve in the face of absolute destitution and darkening of the world, preparing itself for the incalculable leap of beginning anew.



N O T E S

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2001 Latin American Studies Association Conference in Washington, D.C. I would like to thank Alberto Moreiras for his feedback on that paper, and David Johnson for his helpful commentary during later revisions.

1. In view of the frequency with which Lyotard's phrase has been reproduced, it is perhaps time to ask whether the notion of "rupture," and such epistemological corollaries as "trauma" and "melancholia" do not themselves begin to function, albeit spectrally, as a kind of ground or metanarrative.
2. In this essay, it is my aim both to acknowledge Bourdieu's central concern about neoliberalism—namely, that as a political project it contains a concerted effort to destroy collectivities—while also calling into question one commonly held critique of "globalization," which is often described (reductively, in my view) as a process of societal fragmentation. If one aspect of globality today entails the destruction of certain social and ideological structures, it also presents us with another face that cannot in my view be reduced to a concept of negation or destructuration. In what follows, I will attempt to elaborate on this "other side" of globality, but without claiming any knowledge about what kind of future might be taking shape therein.

3. In addition to widespread restrictions on public life, detention without any legal process, and torture, the terrorist methods of the dictatorship also entailed “disappearing” those identified as opponents of the regime. The calculated effect of this strategy was to sever the subject’s ties to community (the community of the living and of the dead) by annihilating every trace of his or her existence.
4. According to many critics of the transition, the origins of this crisis of bearings in the Southern Cone should be sought in the dictatorship period itself. Judging from the large-scale privatization of formerly state-owned institutions in Argentina and Chile that began under military rule in the 1970s and 1980s, the neoliberal hegemony can be said to begin under dictatorship, and not with the relatively weak transitional regimes which officially adopt free-market policies after the return to representative democracy. In fact, neoliberalism could be said to have established itself in Chile as the “natural,” “necessary,” or “inevitable” orientation of political and civil society a decade prior to its ideological ascent in the United States and Great Britain under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations. Shortly after deposing the democratically elected Socialist government of Salvador Allende, the junta led by Augusto Pinochet turned over control of the Chilean economy to a group of technocrats who had received their training with Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago.
5. In addition to Cohen, a few examples of literary texts in which consideration of dictatorship and transition is overtly framed by questions of mood are Saer (1980), Elitit (1983), Soriano (1990), Piglia (1992), Mercado (1992), and Chejfec (1999).
6. This paper began to take shape as an imagined response to an article by Beatriz Sarlo (1993) in which she discusses the increasing dominance of visual media in post-dictatorship society. Sarlo reads Cohen’s novel as an early diagnosis of the triumph of mediated technicity in the Southern Cone. While I do not refer specifically to Sarlo’s text here, I am interested in exploring some of the points she raises, in particular where the issues of aesthetics, meaning, and technology both come together and seem to fly apart. But I also seek to show why the alternatives proposed in her recent work, which effectively pits the deconstruction of value against a return to cultural values, are ultimately based on a false opposition. Sarlo’s complaint is that deconstruction, or the attempt to think the limit of value-thinking, is fatally out of tune with the immediate concerns faced by intellectuals in Latin America, for whom the vindication of cultural value is a matter of intellectual life and death. I am suggesting, on the other hand, that there cannot be one without the other. I will return to this point by way of conclusion, where I take up a view of literature offered by Maurice Blanchot.
7. Perhaps the best example is the *pulseras anticóleras*, mass-marketed bracelets that emit a high-pitched whine whenever the wearer surpasses a certain level of agitation. These devices function not simply by encouraging the expulsion of unproductive emotions such as anger, but by precisely domesticating these states of sudden and unforeseen fluctuation, assigning them a readily identifiable and repeatable sign.
8. All translations of Cohen’s text are my own.

9. The Spanish *oído* refers to an “inner ear,” in contrast to *oreja* as outer ear or auricle. Nonetheless, the thematics put into play by this inner ear (including questions of hearing and attunement) also clearly resonate with the anato-physiological structure of the ear, which acts as a conduit and/or limit between inside and outside.
10. A thematic reading of the story would support this conclusion. Likewise, the narrator Lino and his girlfriend Clarissa are marked in their own ways by the experience of dictatorship. Both of these contexts point to certain events that emphatically mark a limit for responsibility and witnessing.
11. Allow me to clarify parenthetically what I mean (and do not mean) by a “tragic endeavor.” I am using “the tragic” in a modal sense, rather than a generic or periodic sense, to describe a way of thinking and feeling that informs various literary genres and periods. Hegel’s interest in tragedy as an exemplar of the dialectic can provide a point of departure, albeit one that Blanchot obliges us to move beyond. For Hegel, tragedy both illustrates Spirit’s wont to split itself in twain and go against itself, and likewise inaugurates the promise of reconciliation, or of making meaningful an event that otherwise exceeds our understanding. But the dialectical notions of catastrophe and reconciliation do not suffice for thinking what is at stake in Blanchot’s meditations on the literary. It would be necessary here to turn to that other thinker of German Idealism, Friedrich Hölderlin. In his essays and translations of Greek tragedy, Hölderlin reads the tragic as marking a rupture in the dialectic itself. It is not my intention to privilege one or the other of these views, but rather to situate the tragic between the thoughts of reconciliation and rupture. Lastly, I am not claiming for Blanchot’s argument that the tragic provides the ultimate meaning for all literature. It offers *one* model, and one that is always already differing from itself, at that. I discuss these ideas in greater detail in my forthcoming book (Dove 2004).
12. I take these questions to be central to the work of Nelly Richard, who has been criticized for reifying the notion of transition (which she consistently refers to as “la Transición”). It seems to me that, far from falling into the trap of idealization as her critics claim, what Richard is actually doing is attempting to think of the transition as a *material* event. This “materiality,” however, is not the same kind of materiality used to designate a concrete world that lies beyond language and discourse.

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