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Une mimesis ouvre la fiction du ton. C’est la tragédie du “Viens” qui doit être répétée (a priori répété en lui-même) pour résonner. Rien ne garantit la bonne intonation, celle-ci reste à la disposition et sous la responsabilité de l’autre.

—Jacques Derrida, Les Fins de l’homme

Although his oeuvre consists by and large of only two published works, a collection of short stories (El llano en llamas, 1953) and a novella (Pedro Páramo, 1955), the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo has been generally recognized as one of the major figures in Latin American letters. In a famous assessment, Carlos Fuentes describes Rulfo’s work as “not only the highest expression achieved so far in the Mexican novel...[but where] we also find a thread that leads us into the new Latin American novel, and to its relation with the so-called international crisis of the novel” (La nueva novela hispanoamericana, 17). Rulfo’s considerable influence upon Latin American cultural production during the Boom period and beyond is only in part a reflection of a set of formal innovations constituting one of the most distinctive breaks with the naturalist tradition in Latin America, and which moreover is widely seen to have prepared the way for the proliferation of the “new novel” and a stylized “magical realism.” At the same time, and as Fuentes’ remarks only begin to indicate, the mark left by Rulfo’s work upon Latin Americanist reflection also announces the collapse of the aesthetic ideology through which the value of literature has traditionally been upheld by the Western philosophical tradition. At the precise moment and through the very succession whereby Latin American literature lays claim to the unique and authentic expression of a singular, Latin American truth—and thus by extension to a place in the global cultural market that is no longer relegated to producing bad copies of European works—
this very literary act exposes a crisis situation in which the possibility of literature, or of its redemptive capacity, is radically unsettled.

The genealogical *fil conducteur* identified in Fuentes’ homage to Rulfo alludes simultaneously to a rupture and to the promise of an absolutely new beginning: Rulfo’s oeuvre, while reproducing some of the thematic concerns of the naturalist tradition, introduces within this citational space the force of a formal expression which shatters the framework of realism. Octavio Paz, meanwhile, has suggested that the singular status of Rulfo is due to a kind of poetic vision: while virtually every Mexican writer of this century has produced a commentary upon national character and the conditions of the revolution, Rulfo is the first to have provided what Paz nominates as an “image” for the ongoing interrogation of what it means to be Mexican—and modern. The exemplarity of the Rulfian oeuvre in many Latin Americanist circles is indebted to the idea that these two texts, while comprising a finite and exhaustible corpus, also constitute a successful combination—and it may well be the first Latin American work to receive this title—of universal or Western themes with an autochthonous, regional style. Rulfo’s contribution to the experimentation with popularized forms of speech (or “voz popular”) that was initiated in the early works of Azuela has often been understood as indicating that a proper Mexican or Latin American form—in contradistinction to the relations of dependency which characterized nineteenth century Latin American literature—has been won in Rulfo’s culmination and exhaustion of the revolutionary novel. On a similar note, Rulfo’s readers have acknowledged a doubly critical endeavor in his literary project: it seeks on one hand to dispel the supreme illusion of European universalism by affirming the existence of an alternative tradition and perhaps a different form of knowledge; and at the same time it underscores a contradiction within the very projection of
universality—and thus Rulfo’s work undertakes a demystification of the State’s own claim upon universality vis-à-vis the nation. According to these fairly standard readings, Rulfo’s work can be grasped as a celebration of the particular, and of particular sites of resistance to the homogenizing effects of global capital.ii

The complexity which marks the question of modernity in Rulfo can be elucidated by contrast with one of his contemporaries, the essayist and poet Octavio Paz. In his famous study of Mexican character (El laberinto de soledad, 1950) Paz poses the question of what it means to be both modern and Mexican. A scene of allegorical reflection serves as the threshold for this inquiry, in which Paz attempts to frame the Mexican Revolution within an essentially modern movement: he compares the emergent nation, which has suddenly undergone a catastrophic transition from oligarchy to bourgeois democracy, to an adolescent facing a rite of passage into adulthood. This time of transition and radical uncertainty is both a philosophical and an ethical moment, and it presents the nascent nation with a two-fold question: “What are we, and how can we fulfill our obligations to ourselves as we are?” (Paz, 9). A new dimension opens up through the asking of this question: it introduces a unique network of relations, in which the nation finds itself to have entered into an array of affiliations and responsibilities that could not have been anticipated before—and which at once pass through, bypass and exceed the geo-political boundaries which make it one nation-state among many—while at the same time it raises the promise of a certain freedom in the synthesis of authentic cultural expression with the overcoming of the historical experience of debt, dependency and tyranny. Paz’s two-fold question presupposes the Idea of Modernity as an absolutely new beginning. But Paz also indicates that the Revolution has in many ways failed to live up to this promise of a total renewal and a second origin, and that modern Mexico remains
caught within a contradiction: “We have an exuberant modernism with a deficient modernization” names one of the central themes of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Modernity, the reflection of a complete and self-identical national autonomy—or of a project of self-realization culminating in the nation’s identification with (and identity to) its Idea—remains only partially imprinted in the case of Mexico: the flourishing of modernism, of a newly instituted cultural production which has brought Mexico’s historical dependency upon imported (French) cultural capital to a close and initiated a new period of innovation and formal expression which takes “Mexico” as its stated object, exists in stark contrast to the withering of modernization and the disastrous failure of post-revolutionary reform measures such as the State-sponsored *reparto* program.

I would like to suggest, by way of turning back to Rulfo, that the diagnosis of an incomplete modernity masks another Pazian supposition, one which would place Paz well within the conflict he attempts to describe: the notion of a partial, bad modernity which is underway but not yet accomplished is governed by the unstated premise that artistic production, under the terms of modernism and via the assertion of a freedom of form which Paz discusses elsewhere as a poetic use of analogy, can somehow make up for, rectify or redeem the disaster of modernization in Mexico.iii But it is precisely the assignation of a redemptive or corrective potential to art which Rulfo’s text can be seen to challenge in its renewal of the question of culture vis-à-vis the local and the regional.iv Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, written five years after Paz’s *Labyrinth of Solitude*, likewise composes an allegorical treatment of the Mexican Revolution. With Paz, Rulfo calls our attention to the contradictory nature of Mexican modernity, to the dissymmetries arising between chronic underdevelopment and a prolific artistic and literary tradition. Likewise, Rulfo has been widely recognized as one of the principle influences in the twentieth century discourse of
mexicanidad, and has served as an important point of reference in various discussions of the question of Mexican culture and character, and of the divisions that divide these questions at the origin. However, the comparison between Paz and Rulfo and their respective notions of modernity also runs up against a limit: whereas Paz conceives of modernity as the End (conclusion or telos) of a process in which Mexico has yet to fully realize itself, Rulfo’s work conveys an understanding of modernity as an antinomial relation between the process of modernization and modernist poetics, and between images of cosmopolitan modernity and subaltern underdevelopment. With Rulfo, then, modernism cannot be adequately grasped as an event taking place despite a problematic modernization process; it must on the contrary be seen to occur alongside and as another facet of this problem. What Paz attempted to describe as the arrested result of an incomplete process is shown in Rulfo to constitute the two faces of a complete paradox. What remains to be shown, then, is how the recognition of an antinomy between modernization and modernism produces a shift within a modern understanding of the place and potential of art, and gives shape to Rulfo’s writing as an attempt to both remark and intervene in this dissymmetrical and contradictory relation.

THE EXIGENCE OF LO NUESTRO: DECONSTRUCTION, RESTITUTION AND THE LIMITS OF THE QUESTION

Pedro Páramo stages a scene strikingly reminiscent of the Pazian analogue between nascent nation and adolescent. The narrative begins with Juan Preciado’s first-person recollection of his journey to Comala—the town in which he was conceived, but from which he was exiled along with his mother prior to his birth—as a return to a primal scene. The narrator has promised his dying mother that he will seek out his father, whom he has never met, and—in the words of her final injunction—exigele lo nuestro, exact from him what is ours. This specular reflection
upon the origin assumes the form of an allegorical treatment of the Revolution and Mexican modernity, as we gradually discover an uncanny homology between the cacique and the post-revolutionary State. The speculative relation to the arch-origin likewise installs the issue of birthright, of culture and identity, within a tragic frame: the son’s passage into adulthood, in which he seeks to found a connection between the conflicting and mutually annihilating demands of maternal and paternal lineages, will also take shape as an aporetic encounter with an originary absence or silence. The tragic account of the origin in Rulfo prepares something akin to the knowledge confronting Sophocles’ Oedipus in his attempt to master the oracle: the hermeneutic will to mastery (which could be ascribed, mutatis mutandis, to both Oedipus and the discourse of positivism that informs much of Mexicanist self-examination) seeks to include itself within its own field of vision by encompassing or inserting itself at its own origin; this will to knowledge is ultimately confronted with the limit of its project—what might be called “fate,” “desire” or a certain “agency”—as that which is neither proper to the subject (in the sense of falling under his dominion) nor improper (as what could be dismissed or disowned). Hermeneutics must seek to reconcile itself and its projection of modern self-knowledge with an errant destiny which both is and is not its own, or through which the designation of “one’s own” suffers a cut that gives it to its fundamental possibilities while remaining out of reach or in a certain sense impossible and inaccessible to knowledge. The quest for paternal recognition will thus be obligated to identify with an originary crime.

THE TEMPORALITY OF TRANSITION: EPOCHAL SUSPENSION AND TRANSCULTURATIVE MODERNITY

Rulfo’s text is informed by a tenuous connection between tone and temporality, and between a nostalgic-depressive narrative and a thematic emphasis upon an arrested temporality.
Together, these indices underscore a differend at work between periphery and center and in the experience of transition. Such a “communication” between textual registers has provided criticism with the impetus for conceiving of a Rulfian counter-narrative which would oppose itself to the discourse of modernization even as it enacts some of the more revolutionary formal innovations in Latin American letters. Little has been said in this regard, however, of the relation between disillusionment with the complicit ideologies of revolutionary nationalism and modernization, the disastrous effects of which Rulfo’s text never ceases to document, and the facets of Rulfian poetics which have borne repeated comparisons to the European avant-garde. What, then, is the meaning of this odd juxtaposition between a work of delimiting universalizing claims of modernization and what could be described as a stylized modernist poetics? Between the corresponding affiliations and negations which Rulfo might share with modernist and avant-garde poetics; between, for instance, a critique of the ideological apparatus of modernization projects and an affirmation of formal autonomy in literary production, the assertion of a democratized space of literature in which it is, at least in principle, possible to say anything? It is conceivable that the dynamics of the particular Mexican and Latin American literary relations within which Rulfo’s oeuvre becomes legible have the effect of destabilizing the very (modernist) notion of freedom which the narrative performance would, viewed in isolation, seem to have claimed for itself. The relation between the competing strands of regionalism and cosmopolitanism in Rulfo raises the possibility of a rupture within the concept of authorial agency—understood as the ideal basis upon which meaning has traditionally been conceived in metaphysics. In re-marking a fundamental difference between modernization and modernism, the issues of meaning, artistic expression and agency are likewise implicated in the aporia they seek to describe. In this context, we can begin to see how Rulfo’s
work can be elucidated by reference to Ángel Rama’s theory of transculturation—or how, at the same time, the Rulfian text and Rama’s thesis can be seen to implicate one another.\textsuperscript{vii}

In order to see how transculturation might provide a response to the contradictory space of cultural collision, let us first refer to what Rulfo critics have identified as one of the principal formal indices of regionalism in \textit{El llano} and \textit{Pedro Páramo}: a somewhat stylized mode of discourse often referred to as a “voz popular,” which Rulfo himself has described as an attempt to expose written, literary language to the oral tradition of the Jalisco region. Of particular interest in this formal juxtaposition is the inflection it imparts to the literary. While criticism has frequently dealt with Rulfo under the premises of false (universal literature) versus true (local speech) mimesis, and with an effort to redress local culture in the face of universal Culture, there is an equally important formal maneuver being carried out in this substitution of the spoken for the written, and of the popular for the cultivated. If we attend to the differential character of these comparisons—and it can be shown that Rulfo’s commentary itself invites this attention—it should be possible to see how an understanding of literature as a space of poïsis and intervention takes shape. An asymptotic convergence of form and content in \textit{Pedro Páramo}—which also produces the unsettling of one by the other, or what could be described as an insistent stammering within Rulfian literary language—lends shape to the transcultural event as an encounter with the signifier.

The fault line of a sustained fabrication lies beneath the Rulfian text, one which has too often been ignored in critical discussions of regionalism in this author. In an often-cited interview with Joseph Sommers, Rulfo describes his prose as an attempt to convey “el lenguaje del pueblo,” the idiom of the people, for what it is: a spoken rather than written expression.\textsuperscript{viii} In particular, he
claims to introduce an economy of speech which presided in this rural area at the time of the Revolution (and which, according to Rulfo, still reflected much of the tradition prevailing at the time of the Conquest, when the region was populated by Spaniards and its indigenous populations displaced or destroyed) into his literary work, and to allow this spoken idiom to guide the composition of the written work. Elsewhere, Rulfo meditates on the orality he has attempted to transpose into writing, describing it in somewhat surprising terms: as a reserve or even a miserliness which extends beyond speech and affects the social and economic patterns of the community (and perhaps the very structure of relationality): “La gente es hermética. Tal vez por desconfianza no sólo con el que va, con el que llega, sino entre ellos. No quieren hablar de sus cosas, de lo que hacen. Uno no sabe a que se dedican. Hay pueblos que se dedican exclusivamente al agio. La gente allí no habla de nada” [“The people are hermetic. Maybe it’s because not only don’t they trust those coming and going, but they don’t even trust one another. They don’t want to talk about what they do. One never knows how they make a living. There are entire villages which dedicate themselves exclusively to usury. The people don’t talk about anything there”](Roffé, 43). ix The peculiar economy of speech which Rulfo here attributes to rural Jalisco—it stakes its claim to particularity by way of a pure resistance—finds its mirror image in his description of his own literary endeavors. While characterizing regional dialect as the object of his work, he also confesses that the literary process of transcription or translation is always somehow imperfect: “Lo que yo no quería era hablar como un libro escrito. Quería no hablar como se escribe, sino escribir como se habla. . . . Llegar al tratamiento que me he asignado. No es una cuestión de palabras. Siempre sobran, en realidad. Sobran un qué o un cuándo, está un dé o un más de más, o algo así” [“What I didn’t want was to speak like a written book. I wanted not to speak as one writes, but to
write as one speaks. . . To arrive at the form of treatment I had assigned myself. Something is always left over, really: there’s an extra what or when, there’s a surplus of or plus, or something like that”[(op cit, 55). Llegar al tratamiento que me he asignado: is this anticipated arrival not the fundamental circuit and impossible task of writing? The arrival at that point where one has assigned and signified (oneself): this is to indicate the enunciative force of a futurity and a potentiality which acts from within and underwrites the process of naming or writing; to name something is to give it an unspecified (and perhaps unspecifiable) value, it is to hollow out a space within the totality of a diction in which the thing will have found its meaning. The value writing gives to the regional idiom in Rulfo’s estimation is thus radically differential: it is derived not from its correspondence to an ideal and ahistorical referent but rather from its relation to other values, other (as)sign(ation)s. The limitation of this project of naming does not reside in misrepresentation, in the inadequate support lent to this or that trait, so much as it entails an over-production within (oral) production itself. It remains ambiguous to which realm of representation this “siempre sobran” refers (is it subaltern speech or transcultural writing?). The point remains, however, that mediation is fabricated here through the momentary appearance of representation itself, as the surplus or remainder from which the subaltern “lenguaje hablada” will have been registered in its written re-marking and its graphic supplementation. The description of a tradition facing annihilation at the threshold of modernity, and of an orality which must be polemically opposed to the Wester (written) tradition, reiterates the doubly catastrophic structure of the origin: of a new beginning which is already a radical loss. What is brought to the fore in the most exigent manner through orality, in Rulfo and elsewhere, is both Mexico itself (as an entity that takes shape in juxtaposition to the Western tradition) and the other of Mexico (or the subaltern topos which is
both engendered—precisely as detritus—and endangered within the modern process of nation-building). Speech, we might say, marks the difference of “Mexico” from itself (and, in this sense, it is very much “like” the letter $x$ in the name Mexico: as Alfonso Reyes and others have shown, this cross-like grapheme bears a mark of irreducibility to the linguistic, philosophical and geopolitical systems in which it is inscribed).

The antinomy which takes shape around the question of modernity in Rulfo’s work records a tenuous experience of encounter between cultures and between epochs. The notion of transition provides a dynamic register for examining both the movement of synthesis and that of effacement—for instance, an array of class-based, ethnic, communal and regional alliances, divisions, etc.—in the project of nation-building and modernization; and it thereby anticipates the reproduction of dissymmetry and loss within these transformative processes. The antinomial relation between modernism and modernization in Latin America compels us to look beyond progressive or sequential models for describing how change both takes place and is (or is not) recorded. Transition, by contrast, describes an accumulation or sedimentation of epistemological frames, of epochal designs or types which are not necessarily compatible or reconcilable with one another. Following Rulfo’s lead, we could describe epochal transition in Latin America as a kind of arrest or suspension: it is not simply that Mexico presents a “different perspective” with regard to historical conditions of production; indeed, the difference often axiomatically attributed to Latin America must be understood on the uncertain basis of a suspension between epochs (the Greek $epokh$—precisely means a suspension between). Transition thus gives us to think both an originary coalescence of forces and an equally fundamental dissemination of effects. A cumulative sequence of events—for example, leading in Mexico from the War of Independence to the Liberal reforms
of 1857, through the *Porfiriato* and culminating in the Revolution—is in turn complicated by what has *failed* to take shape and so remains unregistered in this sequential experience of history. And thus, whereas the Pazian hero emerges from the revolution with an eye toward the possibilities of the future, Rulfo’s passage into modernity is articulated otherwise: by turning back toward the past, toward the difference of filiation and inheritance (from) itself, and toward what remains to be thought in the chance encounter and contingency of the nation’s destiny.

**Figures of Transition: Caciquismo as Allegory of the State**

Rulfo’s transculturating allegory is informed by a series of figurations and displacements which together attempt to provide an image and a texture for the contradictory nature of the revolutionary project and its claim upon a certain Modernity, and to thereby also give shape to an unthought which haunts the process of reform and renewed modernization. Rulfo’s allegory suggests that the post-revolutionary State’s projection of a unified national subject bears a profound complicity with the phenomenon of *neo-caciquismo* as a counter-revolutionary force. The State seeks to sublimate, to define and then cancel out or raise to a higher value, the internal differences—of ethnicity, region, idiom, class, sex, etc.—which mark the nation prior to its unification under the very sign of the State; in so doing it aims to represent the nation as modern, as speaking with one voice and in one language within the confines of a single space or property. Likewise, in the Rulfian cacique’s outright denial of borders resonates the modern State’s attempt to be All. Pedro Páramo inaugurates a space of primitive accumulation by denying the very existence of boundaries: “No habrá lienzos. La tierra no tiene divisiones” (20). This renunciation of limits echoes the ironic circumstances in which the revolutionary caudillo Venustiano Carranza sought to dispel the radical demands of the Southern agrarian movement led by Zapata (“This
business of dividing the land is ridiculous”: see Womack, 47). What becomes apparent in the Rulfian repetition of revolution—as revolution within revolution or counter-revolution—is an absolute identity, always already disavowed, between Law and its other. The structuring of caciquismo as an attempt to incorporate and appropriate (seize and make proper) all boundaries suggests that the founding of the State upon the difference between Law and Crime is itself the crime; or that, in other words, the law (whether it is the informal rule of the cacique or the formal domain of the State) emerges as a particular (crime) in the process of passing itself off as universal (Law).

The homology between State and cacique in Rulfo runs the course of a platonic sequence in which the State simultaneously justifies and effaces its existence as necessity: it legitimates its own existence as well as the dissymmetries it permits and propagates on the dual basis of a past to be recovered and a future to be realized; and it effaces itself—as a particular discourse and interest—by passing itself off as an instance of universal and unimpeachable law taking shape beneath the projected image of a colossal and unified tradition. Statist mythology is the archivization of “what must have been,” of what will have been necessary, yet as a destiny unfolding under the sign of a radical alterity: what must have been—the naming of necessity—also takes on the form of what exceeds the capacity of understanding, for which the State is a conceptual supplement. Finite experience—the losses, lacks, uncertainties and contingencies which are part of a national history—is thus passed off as a merely temporary, accidental occurrence from which the nation, through the uplifting power of the State and in the nomination of a national destiny, will one day recover. By way of its organization of cultural production, the State enables the being of the nation to be posited as off-stage, as a reserve—and thus as removed
As the phenomenon of caciquismo reveals, the notion of an epochal suspension is not merely another way of describing a secondary theoretical model, a “hybrid” mixture of modern and archaic forms. It is itself the invisible source of a kind of production, of a generation of new forms from the juxtaposition of these repeated contradictions. In her study of agrarian societies in the Puebla region of Mexico, Luisa Paré (see Bartra, ed.) notes that the encounters between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in rural areas frequently call for the introduction of an agent of mediation, a third term which would negotiate between systems and through which their conflicting demands could pass. For rural Mexico, one such figure is the cacique: at once a reservoir of tradition and a facilitator of modernization, the cacique could be said, ideally, to suture a radically disjunctive and discontinuous social field. The cacique is undoubtedly at the forefront of capital’s incursions into rural sectors, as one who facilitates and enjoys the benefits of capitalist development. In this manner, the cacique’s estate typically organizes a large share of local production, and likewise initiates much of the economic contact with the outside. At the same time, the phenomenon of caciquismo is also deeply invested in an economy of traditionalism. The term “cacique” is derived from kassiquan, a Carib term which means “to keep house.” Caciquismo renews or pretends to restore a tradition of filiation, personalism and familiarity which can easily appear to counter the threat posed by the process of modernization and bureaucratization. As such, the cacique presents transcultural analyses with a fundamental irreducibility. Akin to the sovereign in medieval Europe, the cacique could be said to possess two bodies: but whereas the prince negotiates between the transcendent and material realms, the cacique facilitates relations between the “worlds” of capital and tradition, metropolis and periphery, in such a way that these domains
are prevented from collapsing in upon each other. In light of this mediating factor, the term “cacique” is perhaps rigorously untranslatable. This is to say that it is a figure of translation itself.

DEATH AND KNOWLEDGE, DISSOLUTION AND TESTIMONY: THE UNPRESENTABLE LIMITS OF COMMUNITY

Despite Rulfo’s declared intentions to allow an economy of simplicity to govern his work, Pedro Páramo is widely held to be one of the most difficult texts in the Latin American canon. Many of the interpretive problems arising during an initial reading of Rulfo’s novella can be attributed to the fragmentary orchestration of the text. Crucial shifts in time, place and narrative voice are frequently unannounced and must be reconstructed after the fact, and context must generally be pieced together by the reader retroactively. At the same time, the imagistic or visual dimensions of the text remain shrouded in darkness. Given the extreme poverty of the Rulfian landscape and the myriad hermeneutic problems which engulf the reading of the text, approaching Pedro Páramo could be described as undergoing an experience with blindness. The problematic of visibility also functions metaphorically: the opacity of images and the hollowing out of the visible field testify jointly to the revelation of a tragic connection between sight and blindness, between self-reflection and the limits of knowledge. The foreclosure of the image’s plenitude gives rise to uneasy premonitions regarding the imminence of the unknowable and unpresentable, which Juan Preciado himself faces in relation to his search for the paternal basis of identity and birthright.

In a certain sense, the absolute reduction of the visible picks up where we left off in the opening passage, in which the narrator was charged to “demand from [the father] what is ours.” The uncertainty surrounding this “ours” gives us over to the experience of a kind of responsibility which precedes any possible knowledge of exactly “to whom” or “to what” one is answerable: it
names a pure and incalculable opening which inaugurates the search for a reply, and which places one in a field of relationality even prior to the assumption of a proper place. This blindness arises at the site of an aporetic encounter within the search for self-knowledge, and can eventually be situated in the narrator’s ironic, postmortem testimony: “Me mataron los murmullos” [“The murmurs killed me”]. Occurring approximately at the midpoint of the narrative, this confession or recognition is spoken from the grave which he shares with Dorotea—formerly one of his guides in Comala. The prevailing sense of blindness, by which the reader cannot help but have been struck from the very beginning, is thus suddenly shown to have a “literal” basis—which, here, is also its basis in the real. The discovery of the narrator’s own death, arriving on the heels of a series of recognitions of the other as dead and perhaps of a universal disaster that seems taken place at some indeterminate point in the past, compels us to return to the beginning of the text (its first words are spoken by the narrator as an attempt to justify his actions and perhaps his very existence: “Vine a Comala porque. . .”), and to confront therein the realization that this testimonial account has all the while been directed toward another—and not to the reader at all (the narrator’s testimony to his dying amidst the murmurs also reveals retroactively that Dorotea has likely been the addressee throughout the first half of the narrative). Thus the reader’s recognition also calls attention to a level of misrecognition—the groundless act of appropriation and self-insertion through which we suppose ourselves as addressees—at which it was possible to begin reading in the first place. This startling diegetic reversal—it juxtaposes a number of important issues: testimony and memory with death; reading and recognition with misrecognition and violence—is structured similarly to a Hölderlinian “caesura”: a rupture in the rhythm of poetic verse coinciding with a radical transformation in our understanding of the text, or with an aporetic moment in its development.
Rulfo’s text could likewise be said to function prophetically, in a sense similar to the one described by Enrico Mario Santí (see his *Poetics of Prophecy*): it hinges upon and makes apparent a conflation of address and intention, a subreption which can only be recognized after the fact and on the basis of what it has produced, an errancy which is inseparable from the dynamic character of the legibility it founds. The creative act of poi_sis thus emerges as an event: our glimpse of an impropriety which accompanies the founding of communication, meaning and address opens onto a thought of an anarchic basis of political agency, or an errant destiny which haunts communication prior to intentional consciousness.

The *peripeteia* or reversal embedded in the Rulfian narrative also has important ramifications for post-revolutionary reflection. If the subject of Rulfo’s text is introduced initially as the nascent individual subject of the bourgeois Revolution, Juan Preciado’s assumption of the mortal place of witness signals the death of the subject of positivist metaphysics and the advent of a radically different topos. Rulfo’s statements to the effect that the *pueblo* constitutes the true protagonist of *Pedro Páramo* could be understood as indicating a heteronomous subject informed both by a series of contradictions and a multiplicity (rather than a simple plurality) of expression. The diegetic shift from Juan Preciado’s nearly univocal narration to a composite of fragmented relatos or recollections (all of the speakers in the second half of the novella are dead) thus gives shape to a reversal of form and genre, from a tragic-allegorical account to what could be termed a form of testimonial document.

I am thinking of the relatively recent emergence of *testimonio* writing as a distinctively Latin American phenomenon, and of the possibility that Rulfo’s text might have something important to say on the question of testimony. The testimonial ethos is indebted to the famous
gesture enacted by Pablo Neruda in his 1945 epic Latin Americanist poem, *Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu*. In Canto XII, the poet invokes the spirit of an unknown Andean slave through prosopopeia, a rhetorical gesture of figuration or masking which is carried forth in the unmarked difference between the multiple uses of *por* (meaning either “through” or “for,” and thus seeking to affirm a solidarity linking instrumentality and transcendence): “Sube a nacer conmigo, hermano / ... Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta / ... Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre” [“Rise to be born with me, brother / ... I come to speak for your dead mouth / ... Speak through my words and my blood”]. What the poet is here proposing lays bare the exorbitant weight of testimony: whether it entails speaking for oneself or for the other, prosopopeic speech claims to render an account of an experience for which there was no witness, and of which there were perhaps no survivors. The premise of the testimonio mode announces a self-distancing from classical mimesis, as can be glimpsed in the variety of means by which it seeks to distinguish itself from other modes of representation, and in particular from what it designates as “literature” (which might be seen by contrast to remain within the framework of an aesthetic ideology that testimonio specifically renounces). This inaugural gesture of the negation of mere literature also precisely enacts the literary basis of a family romance—in the broader sense, let us say, that Paul de Man would describe as “allegorical”: i.e. literature’s attempt to establish itself as its own outside, as a departure from what precedes it on the order of bad mimesis. The ethical proposition of testimonio arises through the promise of a mimetic restitution, of a redress through the gift of figure. The promise of restitution is sustained between two moments: the first remarks the site of a fall, of a prior lapsing on the part of the other into muteness; while the second pledges its own voice in exchange for what has been (and remains to be demonstrated as—that is, it will have been) lost. Prosopopeic
restitution seeks to define and repair an injustice by “giving voice to” or “speaking for” an other who is absent or silent, who has not been adequately represented or who has been “misrepresented,” and who has thus fallen out of being and truth. It gives voice to a silent other; and so this trope in fact figures the first principle of mimesis: a representation which brings the truth into view (Plato). Testimonio seeks to be the settling of an account that remains in arrears—and it must therefore reappear as symptom of the very deficiency it describes.

It would be possible to describe Rulfian allegory, in its documentation of a pattern of historical violence, schisms, contradictions and effacements, as a restitutive mode of representation. However, what is underway in Rulfo’s text is not only a redistribution and reformation of representation—from, for instance, the discourse of the master to those who continue to suffer the effects of dissymmetrical modernization—but likewise an intervention within the very symbolic or ideological system which, for instance, describes the politics of representation as a polemic between “individuals,” and between good and bad mimesis. Whatever the manner in which we choose to resolve the generic questions an anachronistic reading of Rulfo might provoke (Is Pedro Páramo a testimonial text? Is it “like” a testimonial text, in the sense of enacting key elements of a testimonio form or type? Is there a testimonial type?), there remains another order of distinction which the text could be said, retrospectively, to bring to theorizations of testimonio. If we begin to trace some of these key differences, we see that Rulfo’s text bears witness, through language and writing, to an event significantly more unsettling than testimonio theory would generally care to acknowledge.

Damiana Cisneros, one of the remaining inhabitants of Comala, characterizes Comala to
Juan Preciado as a place filled with echoes (25). As she describes it, the experience of place and of home is one of being entombed: literally, it is to be enclosed within hollowed-out walls or beneath the foundations. (The term she uses, *las piedras* or “the stones,” also bears a close etymological relation to “Pedro,” the name of the cacique; of course, “las piedras” can also evoke headstones or a crypt.) The figure of the sepulcher, as the site from which a link between memory and testimony is posited here, also bears the possibility of forgetting and annihilation: as we are gradually discovering, to be buried beneath the edifice of caciquismo (and the cacique’s own death is described in the final fragment as the toppling of a mountain of *piedras*) is to have run the risk of being reduced to nothing. Damiana’s sketch of Comala attempts to fill itself in by tracing a somewhat disconcerting pattern of acoustic distortions. The place is haunted by sounds which border on being impossible to identify: murmurs and rustlings, the echoing of footsteps behind one as one walks, the laughter of old voices “desgastada por el uso” (“worn away through use”). But she, a venerable resident, has long since become accustomed to these acoustic aberrations. Indeed, the sole impression she has been unable to habituate issues from the thought of a *fissure*, through which voices seem to address her: “Y lo peor de todo es cuando oyes platicar a la gente, como si las voces salieran de alguna hendidura y, sin embargo, tan claras que las reconoces” [“And worst of all is when you hear people talking, as if the voices were coming through some crack; and yet so clear that you recognize them”](25). Disembodiment of voice and testimony—the antithetical moment for prosopopeic restitution, against which it posits testimonio as an antidote—here coincides with its strange proximity to stone, wall and fissure, and to a certain prospect of immurement which could be understood as (a threat of) the absolute impossibility of memory or testimony.¹xiv It is difficult to judge once and for all what is being affirmed in this poetic image of
speech and rupture, or to say exactly where it ends up. Damiana’s *relato* has taken us through an entire loop of frightening transpositions and figurations: first, we are entombed as we speak; then, voice somehow continues despite this experience of absolute destitution and interment; and finally, something in the act of entombment itself seems to speak, producing in the listener a terror which might easily be described as petrification. Paul de Man has described a similarly vertiginous relation between prosopopeia and petrification in his essay “Autobiography as De-Facement.” These two tropes ostensibly represent diametrically opposed possibilities for representation: figuration promises to lend voice to—and thus revive or redeem—the fallen being of what has turned to stone, or of what has been subjected to a deprivation of voice and spirit, for which stone becomes the intermediate figure. It is important to note that the promise issued through prosopopeia remains thoroughly pedagogical in nature: despite what the pathos of the scene might appear to enforce concerning the absolute value of the other, poetry’s resurrection of the dead is not only carried out for the sake of the departed. On the contrary, mimesis as a pneumatic graft is here the restitution of the living to the living. It promises to redress (and this word should be heard with more than one accent: it also pledges to re-dress, to provide a mask to cover over) the mark of death which we the living have already suffered. And thus we could say that, in the prosopopeic scene, stone—as the antithesis of voice, as what calls for prosthetic figuring—is itself already entangled in the web of masking and figuration, it is itself a kind of mask for a mark that must not appear at any cost. At a certain point, then, the mimetic exchange between voice and stone runs the risk of losing sight of which is which: the epitaphic project, of bringing the ghostly trace of the other back to life through a corpus of rhetoric which could hardly be any less ephemeral itself, gives rise to a convergence and re-inflection of voice and spirit that might well provoke a terrifying
collapse of the distinction it seeks to repair. The line of communication between the living and the
dead also acts as a demarcation, over which *pneuma* is to be passed from animate to inanimate;
but this moment cannot avoid placing the end which gives in order to have received at the risk of
a certain contagion emanating from the other side.

Posing itself from within the negative figure of the rift, voice issues in Damiana’s evocation
as the pure difference of encryption: as a memorial and a signifier, the crypt or tombstone does not
stand for any existing thing, either actual or possible. Rather, it holds the place of something
removed from the realm of being. But in so doing it also marks this realm as a not-all. We might
say that this rift-mark brings absence as such into the world, as the materialization of a real. The
sepulcher is always more than a reminder of or substitute for the deceased, always more than a
hollowed out re-presence: it marks a site which wavers between presence and absence, strictly
irreducible to either. In a sense, the stone holds the place of relationality itself: of a shadow which
accompanies our existence, through which our words, deeds and memory often continue to
produce effects in our absence and after our death. It could even be said to indicate the necessary
status of absence for a certain conception of agency. One thinks, for instance, of Lacan’s reference
to the sepulcher—which lends support to the structure of the unconscious as both linguistic (i.e.
structured “like a language,” i.e. by the signifier) and heterotopic, absolutely irreducible to the
register of (re)presence—as the originary human artifact (on the ethical and pragmatic relation
between death, burial and language see both “The Field and Function of Speech” in *Écrits* and the
sections dealing with Sophocles’ *Antigone* in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*).

A grammatical movement distinctive to Rulfo’s work can help us to further explore the
fate of voice, representation and testimony in *Pedro Páramo*. There appears both in Rulfo’s short
stories and *Pedro Páramo* a proliferation of the conditional subjunctive mood, typically found in the comparative combination: “como si” + conditional subjunctive, or “(X was) as if it were (Y).” Although the frequency of this usage makes it infeasible to provide a complete account of its circumstances and effects here (for a broader sample of these occurrences see Ortega Galindo, 149-166), it should be sufficient to indicate that the grammatical, signifying basis of the “as if” structure is consistently strained by the character of the combinatory relations themselves. Instead of providing a richer description and an added dimension to the Rulfian topography (as one might expect from the frequent repetition of this trope of paradigmatic substitution), the emphasis in these formal juxtapositions falls upon an extreme distortion or dissolution of formal cohesiveness and context: in the substitution of one term for another, a face becomes stretched leather or a translucent, bloodless surface; voice becomes *hebras humanas* (human fiber, thread or hair); and so on.¹⁵ One possible strategy for interpreting this tendency would be to read it as the manifestation of a semiotic transposition—for instance, as marking a movement between signification and affect.¹⁶ In many instances in *Pedro Páramo* a proximity appears between this grammatically situated movement of distortion—which effectively suspends the dialectic of signification, refusing to convert negation into meaning—and various possible signifiers of affect, of a corporeal and somatic “language” which is strictly irreducible to the dialectics of negation and recuperation that governs sign-based systems of meaning. This semiotic rupture of the symbolic transfer bears a similarity to what is known in the visual arts as anamorphosis: viewed from a right angle, the anamorphic spot or “stain” is apparently nothing more than a meaningless, amorphous blob surrounded by integrated form and meaning; at an oblique angle, however, the stain suddenly emerges as intelligible, and precisely as the rest of the scene loses its proper perspective. The
A hermeneutic effect is to have produced two incommensurable registers of visibility and intelligibility—each of which, in both form and ideation, spells the dissolution or unintelligibility of the other (for instance, we encounter in Rulfo the uneasy superimposition of State and cacique). In other words, the relation between these registers is a non-relation insofar as the “perspective” of one level necessarily rules out the intelligibility of the other. But this non-relation in fact proves to be a real relation when we consider that the juxtaposition is never purely accidental or unmotivated (in the classical form of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, for instance, anamorphosis often signals the dissolution of the vanitas around the emerging form of a death’s head). We can begin to attend to a material dimension of this diegetic phenomenon with regard to what I have just indicated as the site of an intensified and distorted expression (such as sinewy voice and leathery face).

One of the most dramatic instances of this tendency occurs immediately prior to the narrator’s death, when he sees (or imagines) a woman “decomposing” before his very eyes: “El calor me hizo despertar al filo de la medianoche. Y el sudor. El cuerpo de aquella mujer hecho de tierra, envuelto en costras de tierra, se desbarataba como si estuviera derritiéndose en un charco de lodo. Yo me sentía nadar entre el sudor que chorreaba de ella y me faltó el aire que se necesita para respirar” [“The heat woke me just before midnight. And the sweat. The body of that woman made of earth, all covered in crusts of earth, went to pieces as if it were melting into a puddle of mud. I felt myself swimming in the sweat that flowed off her, and I couldn’t get enough air to breathe”](36).\textsuperscript{xvii} This description of corporeal and somatic dissolution is striking in the way it brings together a certain corporeal proximity (of a sexual encounter heavily burdened with
connotations of incest, immediately prior to Juan Preciado’s own death) with an unheimlich dissolution that ultimately cannot be separated from the vicissitudes of the language in which it is described. It is as if the anamorphic turn we have just discussed were being played out to the letter of the law: what could be described as the “phallic” structuring of diegetic perspective (the narrative projection of being by way of a scopic metaphor: the “zoom” focus which traces its own approach to this site simulates an asymptotic approach toward the place of truth) encounters its own limit in this very movement, as a dissimulation or dissolution of being. The affective cadence given to the anamorphic movement in Rulfo is underscored by the emergence of a polysemic and translational difficulty: in the reflexive desbaratarse (“to fall apart,” “to go to pieces”), which for Juan Preciado’s testimony describes the im-mediate shattering of his relation to the other, we can also hear one of the intransitive forms of desbaratar: “to speak nonsense,” as opposed to the voice of reason. The body of the other performs a double function in organizing the presentation of catastrophic dissolution. With the allegorical presentation of horror vacui, the somatic body indicates a site that has been evacuated of a former transcendence and which, thus hollowed out, appears to collapse under the weight of its own nothingness. At the same time, however, the body performs a second function which is perhaps antithetical to the first, negated possibility: while its capacity to function as a sign (and, in the onto-theological tradition, this is the essential capacity of the body: it houses soul or spirit and, by extension, its logical disposition is a pointing-beyond-itself) is arrested, it begins nonetheless to insist as the material of a different sort of signifying production. Here the nexus of somatic-corporeal dissolution “speaks” its own “language,” or rather it speaks precisely as it exhausts itself in the desolation of its “there.” Literal and figurative meanings here become intertwined and confused; the actual decomposition of the other in this
passage opens onto a tortured expression.

The encounter with the other does not avail the narrative subject of anything substantial or determinate—such as a reflection or a recognizable difference—with and against which it could constitute itself as being similarly recognizable. On the contrary, the other presents this subject with absolute difference, with decline and dissolution, through which recognition by the Other fails to arrive. But as we see in the exchange between appropriation and misrecognition which both grounds and un-grounds the narrative in its very legibility, this exposure to the other is in fact the condition of possibility for relation, and for the polyphony of *relatos* (accounts) which follow from the narrator’s death. We can attempt to understand this “exposure” by reference to the logic of iterability (see, for instance, Jacques Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context”). The speaking of truth presupposes the repeatability of its statement, by another and in the speaker’s absence. And hence truth is originarily subject to an incalculable possibility of misunderstanding; communication always and already entails the risk of its own failure, and thus spaces the “death” of its subject. However, I am interested in pursuing a sense in which the Rulfian meditation on language has to do with more than a clarification of logical propositions. We could say, without hoping to fully unravel the enigmatic knot of this relation, that Rulfo’s text attests to a certain kind of speaking, a praxis and a poi_sis, which begins at the site of a radical and an-archic loss. The “death” which Juan Preciado ascribes to the murmurs thus re-marks a dying into language, in the sense of an originary fall into the finite structure of relationality in which both communication and misrecognition (which is also precisely the limit and undoing of this structuring relation itself) happen. Diegetic death is the rupture of the narrative of communion with which the narrator initiated his journey; it gives rise to a manifestation of memory which is no longer the dream of
recovering presence through absence or redeeming life through the memorialization of a death. The texture of memory which emerges following the death of the narrator is comprised of a network of discrete, fragmentary and interwoven narratives, which bear witness first and foremost to the impossibility of ever rendering a complete and total account of the past (and this impossibility is also the limit of the cacique’s or the State’s memorializing projects). The experience with language upon which textual knowledge hinges in Rulfo is carried forth as a disorienting event, and as a speaking from beyond the grave, from a heterotopic site that cannot be fully integrated into the subject’s world, and which might instead be considered as a kind of “afterlife” which language itself brings toward the subject by unsettling it.

A clarification must be made concerning the vicissitudes of testimonial discourse in Rulfo, and particularly as this mode traces a movement from the anamorphic sequences forming the dominant motif of the first half of the text to a melancholic tone of fragmentary testimony which organizes the second part. A substantial number of the discrete accounts of caciquismo’s filial histories, which together comprise the second half of the novella as they filter into the principle narrator’s ear, are centered around the melancholic figure of the cacique’s childhood beloved, Susana San Juan. The complexity of her figure, and of the relation she presents to the cacique, cannot be adequately addressed in the space of this study. But it is important to at least indicate the specific limit her discourse brings to the hegemonic process, and of the crucial role it plays in the production of a tragic knowledge in the text. It is ultimately Susana San Juan who, arising as a radiant apparition within a field of dissolution, provides the cipher over and against which caciquismo must be read. xviii

Vacillation between figure and disfiguration, which we see transformed during the course
of the narrative from a stylized performance (again, the “desbaratarse” passage upon which this transformation hinges has been received by Rulfo criticism as an exemplary appropriation of an avant-garde poetics) to a question of testimony, receives what is perhaps its most brilliant expression in the text’s final passage, in which the cacique has just been mortally wounded by one of his unacknowledged, illegitimate sons, Abundio. Let us recall the argument that the modernist turn—or, to be more exact, the break with naturalism—in Rulfo poses serious problems for Octavio Paz’s treatise on Mexican culture with which we began, and for the inaugural role which Paz would like to establish for artistic modernism in Mexico: as a prosthetic supplement for deficient modernization and as the possible legislator of a new national unity and freedom. With Rulfo, the opposition between an “exuberant modernism” versus or despite a “deficient modernization” is transformed to demonstrate a paradoxical identity between these dissymmetrical poles, to the extent that the force of the former cannot be separated from the deficiencies or ruptures of the latter. Modernist freedom as it takes shape in Rulfo is indissociable from the expression of this rupture as a fundamental contradiction, a contradiction which the text itself helps to realize. Through this concluding passage, then, we encounter the engendering of a recognition akin to what Aristotle describes, for classical tragedy, as anagnorisis. The cacique’s dying gaze, lifted skyward, is confronted by the image of Susana San Juan, who has recently preceded him in death. The beloved’s radiant splendor is localized around the region of the lips and mouth, as a topos of affect and arrested—and, we must now add, arresting—expression:

Había una luna grande en medio del mundo. Se me perdían los ojos mirándote. Los rayos de la luna filtrándose sobre tu cara. No me cansaba de ver esa aparición que eras tú. Suave, restregada de luna; tu boca abullonada, humecida, irisada de estrellas; tu cuerpo transparentándose en el agua de la noche. Susana, Susana San Juan (70).

[A large moon filled the middle of the world. My eyes lost themselves looking at you [“se me perdían los ojos” could also render poetically an experience of being blinded], at the
moonbeams pouring over your face. I never tired of gazing on your apparition. Soft, caressed by the moonlight; your embullioned mouth humid and iridescent with stars; your body becoming transparent in the night dew. Susana, Susana San Juan.]

A redemptive reading would here understand Rulfo to have restored to subaltern experience, via the uplifted figure of Susana San Juan, something which had previously been lost (or of which she had been deprived): something on the order of identity and essence, whose return and redress is often rendered metaphorically when one speaks of “giving voice to the other.” I am suggesting, however, that the elevation of the poetic figure has to do with a kind of dignity that is not reducible to or exchangeable with the terms of an individual or collective essence: that is, it does not return the other to a previous state of wholeness or self-identity (and thereby render finitude a merely contingent state, as the redemptive discourse would seem to have it); on the contrary, it ushers forth an experience of finitude as a constitutive moment in identity and communality. The poetic presentation of the sublime image is supplemented by the figure of the “boca embullonada,” an “embullioned mouth.”xx It would seem that Rulfo has conceived this epiphanic moment and this relation to the other—or, more precisely, to the other’s death—as a space of reading: it consists in an address that is also the retracing of a mark, a repetition of what is only now seen to have marked the other for death before her time. Sublimation here is not the representation of anything which the other might once have held, only to lose. In this, the final denouement, the bullion materializes as the testimonial image par excellence (I am thinking here of the “dialectical image” described by Walter Benjamin: “an image is that in which the past and the now flash into a constellation. In other words: image is dialectic at a standstill.” [“Convolut N”: N 2a, 3]). The bullion marks and guards the testimonial secret, the (perhaps divine) Mystery of pueblo memory which caciquismo is finally unable to appropriate and consume; but it does so
by guarding *itself* at the same time, by keeping itself secret and refusing to confirm the existence of the secret. In what is simultaneously an address and a concealment, the bullion re-marks a heterotopic place, unlocatable within representation. But it also cites a tragic conception of finite relationality, in which finitude, mortality and transcendence are glimpsed only by way of a relation to the absolute alterity of the other: that is, to this other’s experience of mortality, via an exposure to which the cacique is suddenly both perpetrator and witness. The other, we might say, reveals me to my limits by showing me the existence of that place from which I cannot see myself. It is not that the cacique has found, by turning to the other, what he lacked in and of himself: on the contrary, it is through a relation of repetition—that is, through a kind of reading, the reiteration of a mark that is itself already a cite—that one is perhaps able to witness (as what precisely *does not return or reflect*) a certain limit within the economy of exchange and recognition that sustains the master discourse.

**ENDNOTES**

i. The studies of Rulfo’s formal innovations are too numerous to list here. Among the most influential are a group of relatively early readings: Carlos Blanco Aguinaga (“Realidad y estilo de Juan Rulfo”), Hugo Rodríguez Alcalá (*El arte de Juan Rulfo*), and Nila Gutiérrez Marrone (*El estilo de Juan Rulfo*). The realist-naturalist tradition with which Rulfo decisively breaks is exemplified in the post-revolutionary novels of Mariano Azuela; the *novela de la revolución* is characterized by pseudo-journalistic narration of events as well as a tendency to replace the cultivated language of literature with the popular language or spoken idiom specific to a certain region (in the case of Azuela and Rulfo, the district of Jalisco).

ii. Fuentes’ treatment of Rulfo at the beginning of his study of the Latin American “nueva novela” exemplifies this tendency, and is cited ubiquitously as proof of Rulfo’s efforts to transplant the Western tradition into a local context or idiom. Fuentes suggests that Rulfo has set out to re-engender Greek mythology in a Mexican context, and he thereby casts the principal narrator of *Pedro Páramo*, first as a “young Telemachus” in search of his father, and then as “Oedipus/Orpheus,” a lover/son hybrid; his mother as “Jocasta/Eurydice”; and so on *ad infinitum*. However—and this turn is frequently ignored in critical responses—Fuentes also indicates that this transposition entails a kind of negation: by disrupting the mythic claim to completion or closure, Rulfo seeks to preserve what Fuentes calls the “ambiguity” of the Mexican scene (notably the events of the Revolution and caciquismo). Latin American identity consists, at least in part, in its inability to cloak this ambiguity. When all is said and done, Fuentes’ reading of Rulfo
remains conventional insofar as it conceives of Rulfo as introducing a cultural translation strategy based on the identification and preservation of differences. I will be suggesting, meanwhile, that the notion of transculturation advanced by Ángel Rama presents Rulfo’s work in the context of a somewhat more rigorous demand: in appropriating translation as an interpretive key for Rulfo, it attempts to think the movement between cultural domains as a production rather than a safeguarding of difference. At stake in this distinction is an ontologizing of differences versus the difference of ontology, the difference which divides an ontological statement (for instance, a thesis on mexicanidad) from itself.

iii. For a discussion of modernism as an expression and realization of cultural autonomy, see Paz’s Los hijos del limo. While I am singling out Paz here as the platonic avatar of modernism, it should be noted that similar suppositions about the redemptive value of literature are also prominent—despite some clear differences in ideological frameworks—in a number of twentieth century Latin American literary discourses (including the “marvelous realism” promoted by Carpentier as well as more recent theorizations of testimonio as a literary or “post-literary” discourse).

iv. The question orienting Paz’s inquiry, of what it means to be modern, is subject to an originary division (what we might today call a tension between performative and constative valences of the enunciation “we moderns”) which reproduces itself in the historical antagonism between cultural modernism (presupposing an essential distinction between “high” and “popular” culture, where the former comes to stand for an autonomous domain governed by the freedom of formal innovation and freedom from external constraints and determinations, and represents a standing reserve of humanism in opposition to the homogenizing forces of globalization: that is, “high” culture is conceived as a reservoir of Spirit, etc.) and a process of social modernization. Of course, Latin America is not unique in manifesting a chronic disequilibrium between cultural modernism and socio-economic modernization. What is often taken to constitute the “original event” of European modernity is in fact multiple and heteroclitic, divided between an industrializing process which begins in England and only later takes root on the Continent and a cultural modernism initiated at various sites on the Continent. For a sustained discussion of these conflicts, see Néstor García Canclini’s Culturas híbridas. With Latin America, the differend between modernism and modernization has to be thought out along at least two potentially conflicting lines of analysis: modernism as a reflection of (or on) an incomplete modernization process; and modernism as a site of strategic resistance to the total project of modernization. García Canclini’s clarification of the ambivalent stakes of modernism and the paradoxical character of Latin American modernity also functions as a critique of Paz’s framing of Mexican culture. The demonstration of a strategic necessity at work in the disparity between modernism and modernization (where Paz, in García Canclini’s view, indicates only a contingent and temporary failure) serves to unmask the privilege which Paz uncritically accords to “high” art, and it highlights what might be considered an unstated premise of many modernist aesthetic ideologies, including Paz’s: by pitting modernism as a compensation for (a lack of) modernization, high culture veils its interest in recreating the dissymmetrical conditions in which it is produced. This critique of Paz is accurate as far as it goes. But it seems to me that it stops short of fully addressing the complexity of Paz’s text: why, to begin with, is the focus of The Labyrinth of Solitude divided between a discussion of the relation between modernization and modernism and an analysis of a Mexican expatriate community living in the Southern United States, which is oriented not by the desire for high culture but rather by a conception of itself as the negation of high culture? I wonder whether the elitism which could be said to underlie Paz’s project does not eventually undermine itself in a way. As García Canclini points out, the elitist project hinges upon the capacity to determine or consolidate a distinction between “high” and “popular” culture: that is, elitism is the capacity to arbitrate cultural capital. What happens, then, when a modernist project such as Paz’s—which is ultimately an attempt to create that which it claims is lacking—finds itself indebted to, and already contaminated by, a topos it pretends to regard with horror, in the figure of the Pachuco and in view of this latter’s anti-ethos of pure dissimulation?

v. Critical studies of Mexican literature have generally sought to ground post-revolutionary expression in a dyadic ontology: following the Revolution, the novel is based either on a regionalist or a universalist perspective (see, for instance, John Brushwood’s studies, Mexico in its Novel: A Nation’s Search for its Identity [1966] and Narrative Innovation and Political Change in Mexico [1989]). Ultimately, this is more than one thesis among many about the Mexican novel. It is a thesis on the nature of culture itself: a given form of expression or perspective belongs either
to the Western tradition (and, by extension, to the European claim upon this tradition as its own, or as the first avatar of a proper, Latin American place in the Western canon), or it belongs to an “other” tradition (which, in Latin America, is frequently conceived as a recovered or an invented tradition, an indigenous or nascent autochthonous tradition). What this either/or thesis neglects to consider is that the concept of the Other (of) tradition—or the Other (of) culture: autochthony is in many cases another name for “nature”—is itself a perpetual by-product of (Western) culture, and that every attempt to conceptualize or verify the existence of “the Western tradition”—of a self-identity expressing itself as the tradition—has invariably taken its first step by positing the Other (whether this other is ultimately something to be overcome or to be recovered). In view of this perpetual slippage within the determination of tradition and culture, the work of Rulfo provides a crucial turn and the possibility of drawing out an elaboration. What remains to be determined is whether or not this turn can be said to contain more than a merely “subjective” (as Carlos Blanco Aguinaga describes it) or “negative” (in Neil Larsen’s view) value.

On the other hand, a number of recent studies, following Ángel Rama’s influential analysis of transculturulation in subaltern Latin American literature, have argued that the Rulfian oeuvre is in fact an attempt to mediate between traditions, to strike some sort of reconciliation or alternative between the apparently ineluctable forces of modernization and the desire to check the homogenizing effects of global capital and retain a space from which it might be possible to think the difference of any given cultural domain. (See, for instance, Neil Larsen’s chapter on Rulfo in Modernism and Hegemony and Alberto Moreiras’s response to Larsen in “Transculturación y pérdida del sentido.”) It should be noted that what is perhaps too hastily termed a movement toward reconciliation in Rulfo is not the same as an attempt to uphold the semblance of a seamless transition between cultures and epochs, or to produce a happy ending to the modernization narrative. On the contrary, the mediatory function identifiable in Rulfo’s work has the effect of destabilizing some of the basic premises of “narrative” itself—understood as the projection of a continuous and causal chronology, and, not infrequently, as the project of (re)colonizing difference as such.

vi. For citation purposes I will be referring to fragment number rather than pagination (an index of fragments is found in the back of the Catedra edition edited by José González Boixo). In a much longer version of this paper I have argued that the mother’s injunction functions as the threshold of the work: its enigmatic demand calls for repeated reading and reinterpretation, and it likewise stages a missed encounter through which the hermeneutics of reading is seized by the awareness of its object as what it has left behind or rendered mute. The maternal appeal brings into proximity a number of competing and perhaps irreconcilable interpretive strategies, which I can only briefly summarize here. For instance, it opens the door for a deconstructive reading of the discourse of mexicanidad, and of the complicit relation between post-revolutionary cultural production and the State’s projection of a unified national subject (or in terms of what García Canclini calls “the invention of tradition”). Likewise, it invites a psychoanalytic treatment of the injunction: the demand to “exact from him what is ours” can be shown to enjoin a radically questioning disposition toward the Father and his Name, and to call for a literal reading of its letter (“demand from him, what is ours?!”). And, at the same time, this call lays bare the excessive stakes of the demand for justice, and attests to a restitutive conviction whose strategic and ethical status remains irreducible to the discourse of deconstruction and to the fundamental “question of being” from which deconstruction is a departure. Through the unrelinquished necessity of re-reading the maternal injunction introduces a theoretical aporia: it marks, in fine, a realization that no discourse can fully assume the place of the universal without re-engendering the very crisis it would claim to resolve. This indigestible limit, however, is also the condition of possibility for the discourses of deconstruction, psychoanalysis and restitution.

vii. Rama’s Transculturación narrativa en América Latina provides an important basis for examining the relation between regionalism and universalism in an author such as Rulfo. I have discussed the relation between Rama’s theory of transculturulation and Rulfo’s allegorical treatment of the Revolution and modernization in greater detail elsewhere. The crucial point for our purposes here pertains to the specific lesson which Rulfo’s oeuvre brings to Rama’s theorization of subaltern literature as an attempt to mediate between cultures. Contrary to what one might expect, Rama does not argue that the task of the transculturating writer lies simply in preserving a specific cultural difference that precedes the work. Rather, transculturulation, as a departure from theories of acculturation, describes a production of difference via a kind of repetition (the dynamics of transculturulation are in fact reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s description of translation as laying bare what was only latent in the original while re-marking a certain
finitude that always inhabits the original already). Rather than performing a conservative or redemptive function, transculturating writing thus harbors a strategic potential that cannot be separated from its assault upon its engagement and critique of the onto-theological conception of culture.

Rulfo couches this conception of writing in contrast to his early (and unpublished) literary efforts, which he describes as “a bit academic” and “more or less false.” As he puts it, the function of his mature work is to bear witness to and convey the oral character of local tradition and language: “Entonces el sistema aplicado finalmente, primero en los cuentos [see El llano en llamas], después en la novela, fue utilizar el lenguaje del pueblo, el lenguaje hablado que yo había oído de mis mayores, y que sigue vivo hasta hoy” (Sommers, 18; my emphasis). Speech here establishes a distinction between theories of culture: between an Enlightenment conception of Culture as a universal (and pedagogically transferrable) substance, and culture as a discrete and local phenomenon whose intelligibility to outsiders remains in question. Rulfo’s own attempt to clarify this difference, which is also that of an “academic” exercise versus an “authentic” testimony, can be seen to invite precisely the misconception that Rama warns us away from: i.e. that Rulfo conceives of cultural mediation in terms of a strictly platonic model, of the good vs. the more or less bad copy of an original. In order to see why classical mimesis is ultimately inadequate for what is at stake in Rulfo’s attempt to think cultural difference, we must pay close attention to a generic tension that arises between Rulfián self-criticism and the literary works.

Rama notes the critical tendency to conflate Rulfo’s allusions to an oral tradition specific to the region of Jalisco with a full-blown endorsement of ethnological essentialism (for example, the touristic fantasies of the indolent, melancholic peasant or of an authentic tradition not yet contaminated by the transitory and contingent character of modern life). By way of a counterpoint, Rama refers to Jean Meyer’s influential study of the oral traditions of Jalisco, which identifies a rich and contradictory relation to the literary (see Meyer, especially pp. 182-3). The apparent contradiction between Rulfo’s and Meyer’s accounts of a subaltern, regional ethos proper to Jalisco could be further elaborated through reference to some of the critiques of Rama’s study. In recent years, the theory of transculturation has come under critical fire due to its supposed inability to account for experiences of specific, cultural difference. The critiques of Rama seem to be in agreement concerning a fatal flaw in the “synthesis” offered by transculturating literary theory, which lies in its limited aspirations, its satisfaction with developing little more than a “step back” from the hegemonic processes of modernization and of integrating the subaltern. Thus, as Neil Larsen indicates with regard to Rulfo (see “Juan Rulfo: Modernism as Cultural Agency” in his Modernism and Hegemony), a transculturating text might serve to demythify the Western ideological construction of subaltern life, as Larsen demonstrates in a compelling reading of Rulfo’s short story “La cuesta de las comadres” (El llano en llamas). However, Larsen argues that Rulfo’s work stops short of a truly radical interruption of this neo-colonizing process: in declining to fill the ideological vacuum it has produced, in refusing to posit a “concrete” subaltern experience in place of the mythic and imaginary one it dismantles, Rulfo’s text has effectively (if perhaps unintentionally) replaced the State with the author as the purveyor and (with)holder of subaltern truth, as the cultural subject-supposed-to-know. And thus Rama’s theory, having identified Rulfo as an avatar of transculturation, constitutes a merely preparatory step in Larsen’s evolutionary view of post-colonialist, Latin Americanist discourse.

I would suggest, meanwhile, that Rulfo’s text can in fact be read before and after Larsen’s critique; and that, upon re-reading, it would pose difficult questions about precisely the point Larsen takes as a given: the primacy of the subject, the need for an agent, in post-colonial discourses of solidarity. “If the Rulfián-transcultural moment achieves the initial autonomy of mexicanidad from the rationalizing discourse that posits it in a gesture of colonizing contempt, the next step must be that in which the nation effect returns from its self-isolation to be reinvested with the discursivity of a post-colonial subject. Signifier and signified are to meet again on a ground that is not that of the cultural artifact but that of language itself as the very creative and fluid energy of the cultural” (Larsen, 77). I do not see, however, why the elaboration of this post-colonial subject must be carried out on precisely the ground that Rulfo can be seen to have left behind (and which Larsen attempts to recuperate by positing language in turn as a second ground)—and why, in other words, this experience of the destitution of the subject (not to say the elimination of the question of the subject and its truth: rather the opposite) must necessarily be reduced to a preparatory moment or a first step. Does this reduction not in fact beg the question concerning the end(s) of this post-colonial subject? The relinquishing of this question, which coincides with Larsen’s own identification of the experience of destitution with a purely negative (and thus, in the final analysis, epiphenomenal) moment, would
seem to have foreclosed altogether the question of desire when it comes to agency. It is precisely desire, as the index of finite relation, which must be confronted once again here, as it opens onto a historicity that exceeds both subject and nation and links each one fundamentally to what lies beyond in the form of the signifier.

The basis of a reply to Larsen’s critique of cultural agency is advanced by Alberto Moreiras in his essay “Transculturación y pérdida del sentido.” Referring to another of Rulfo’s short stories, “Nos han dado la tierra,” Moreiras proposes an interpretation of the negativity or emptiness which characterizes the Rulfian landscape (and, most immediately, regarding the government’s reparto program) as a transcultural signifier of what he terms “pure loss,” an absence which one must somehow reconcile—and not simply make up for—with subjective or cultural agency. The ambiguous status of the “loss of meaning” (like the English “sense,” sentido also bears an experiential and sensuous connotation, and is thus not necessarily reducible to the realm of logic and reason) in Moreiras’ essay suggests that loss and meaning are not simply and always opposed to one another in this scenario. It seems to me that this reading of Rulfian “detterritorialization” can and must be extended to a broad conception of language or linguistic relationality. While the question of land and property/propriety remain fundamental indices for understanding the conflictual and paradoxical nature of Mexican identity following the Revolution, Rulfo’s own attempts to think historical and socio-political context of Juan Preciado’s narrative act. The allegorical passage, descent or “death” through which Juan Preciado ostensibly gains access to the communal referent of Comala contains one such transitional allusion. In the narrator’s initial exchange with his first “guide,” the mule driver Abundio, we encounter a subtle yet sustained tension between conflicting idioms, narratives and socio-cultural frames. The dialogue is marked by an increasing dissymmetry and discontinuity, through which we glimpse the structure of a certain social antagonism, corresponding perhaps to the unequal relation of transition and modernization. This tension can be named, beginning with the process of industrialization, by diametrically opposed types—apretado and pelado—and between cosmopolitan elements (or apretados) and a nexus of rural, provincial interests which appear to resist being incorporated into modernity; and thus, for the discourse of modernization, the pelado or urbanized peasant serves as a reminder of Mexico’s improper origins and peripheral status, and as a scapegoat vis-à-vis the myriad failures of the modernization project. One of the central polemics that emerges from this abrasive encounter between poetic narrator and guide concerns a difference internal to knowledge, and specifically to the possibility of knowing the paternal birthright as “what is ours” (as expressed by the play between saber and conocer, or intellectual, learned and conjectural, experiential ways of knowing). See María Luisa Bastos, “Clichés Lingüísticos y Ambigüedad en Pedro Páramo” for a detailed discussion of the semantic composition of this exchange.


xii. In a July 8, 1930 Presidential address, Emilio Portes Gil renders a similar sentiment in a pseudo-Hegelian language, announcing the formation of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario as a sanctuary for national and revolutionary spirit: “If we imagine the party as the originator of the people’s social life; as the best agency where the primitive manifestations of the popular soul are perfected, then its existence will not be subject to the waxing and waning of militant politics, but will endure because it is founded upon the deep wellspring of the spirit” (as quoted in Joseph, 16).
The popularity of the testimonial mode in Latin America has multiple points of origin. For a discussion of the history of testimonio, see Elzbieta Sklodowska’s Testimonio hispano-american. For an excellent sample of contemporary debates concerning the status of testimonio, see Georg Gugelberger, ed. The Real Thing. The biographical narratives of Rigoberta Menchú (a Guatemalan) and Alicia Partnoy (an Argentine) are examples of the increasingly popular phenomenon in which survivors of counterinsurgency, dictatorship, and authoritarianism in Central and South America produce written (or dictated and later transcribed), pseudo-journalistic accounts of individual and collective traumatic experiences. The generic use of the term was first suggested by Miguel Barnet in 1968 when he published the Biografía de un cimarrón, an autobiographical chronicle narrated by a former Cuban slave.

The threat which burial represents to memory and testimony is clarified in the second half of the novella, when we encounter the melancholic narrative of Susana San Juan. There interment functions as a metaphor of abjection: not of her being subjugated by the will of another, but rather of and by herself: the crypt provides a figure for her own internalization of the Other (in the name of her dead husband Florencio) in an attempt to preserve or recover the loss of a primordial Thing and the image of a lost unity. (See, for instance, fragment 52, in which she ironically admonishes the Padre Rentería not to mourn for her, and rather to look after himself: “Se te está muriendo el corazón . . . . Ya sé que vienes a contarme que murió Florencio; pero eso ya lo sé. No te afligas por los demás; no te apures por mí. Yo tengo guardado mi dolor en un lugar seguro. No dejes que se te apague el corazón” [“Your heart is dying . . . . I know you’ve come to tell me that Florencio died; but I already knew that. Don’t trouble yourself about others; don’t worry about me. I guard my pain in a safe place. Don’t let the flame of your heart go out”].) In Freud’s terms, the internalization of what has been lost, as described by Susana in reference to a lugar seguro (a safe or certain place), signals a refusal at a certain level to register this object’s passing, or to come to terms with loss or death by delimiting loss and returning it to a place within one’s history.

Ortega Galindo claims to have provided a representative sampling of the occurrences of this sequence in Pedro Páramo. Be that as it may, the distinction he attempts to draw between the “descriptive” and “conjectural” uses and effects of this combination strikes me as misleading, in that the effect of this “paradigmatic” combination is frequently the very decline of signification. Likewise, his attempts—exemplary of a dominant tendency in Rulfo criticism—to link such a formal event to a surrealist ethos (i.e. of producing surprising developments through discordant combinations of images) runs the risk of effacing the historicity or historical contradictions that concern both Bretonian surrealism and Rulfian allegory, and of reinstating the symbolic and hierarchical positionality (between European and Latin American, cosmopolitan and subaltern) of which Rulfo’s work is precisely a destabilization. Comparativist approaches to Rulfo must acknowledge the crucial point that we have to do here with an understanding of history as paradox, as a condition of being suspended between epochs; and thus attempts to historicize Rulfo’s text by classifying it terms of artistic movements that are presumed to entail uncomplicated distinctions run the risk of reducing or effacing the tension between history and an ahistorical kernel in this text, and of ultimately domesticating the singular experience of historicity.

While I am thinking specifically of Julia Kristeva’s work on the affective dimension of discourse, one might also address the importance of affect in Rulfo in terms of Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the fetishization of affective value (see Outside in the Teaching Machine). Rulfo’s treatment of affect as a site calling for demythification can be glimpsed in a number of the short stories. Neil Larsen astutely identifies such a tendency in the short story “La Cuesta de Comadres,” in which a peasant narrator begins to recall the disastrous effects of post-revolutionary land reform in a rural community still dominated by a cacique family. While the description tends toward social realism rather than romanticization, Larsen notes that the effect of subaltern voice upon the reader (presumed to be an outsider, an inquisitive intellectual rather than a fellow peasant: and thus subaltern voice bears an implicit affective and anthropologistic value) is likely to foster a romanticized conception of the peasant narrator despite itself: it is as if we are unable to recognize this long-awaited testimony of the other in anything but a touristic mode, of seeking out or inventing difference—and subaltern authenticity—as the new basis of exchange. But there is also a catastrophic turning point in the narrative, which thus seems to have anticipated its own reading and to then begin to disrupt or subvert it, preventing the fetishistic exchange from being completed. Toward the end of the story,
the narrator confesses to having slain a member of the cacique family in cold blood, in a manner precisely linking him to the prototypical violence and ethos of vengeance made famous by the cacique. At this point, however, the trap has been sprung, the reader has already fatally identified him— or herself with the subaltern narrator— whose being, Larsen suggests, is shown to be a mere (negative) reflection of the cacique’s will to power. And thus we discover the story is not about the meaning of subaltern existence at all: rather, it is an allegory of the projection of this meaning from within the dominant discourse, and of the First World reader’s disquieting recognition of his or her own desire and its complicity in this process of encountering the Other.

The first sentence in this passage perhaps bears an allusion to another Jaliscan writer, Augustín Yáñez, whose Al filo del agua (At the Edge of the Storm) (1947) Rulfo has described as an important influence. Yáñez is one of the first post-revolutionary writers to attempt a departure from the naturalism that had governed the novela de la revolución through its first decades; his novel addresses the Revolution in terms of the socio-political conditions of agrarian society, in contrast to the pseudo-journalistic methodology, popularized by Azuela and others, of documenting political and military events. As a meditation on desire and prohibition in rural (and Catholic) Mexico, Yáñez’s text no doubt resonates yet again in the passage just cited, in which the narrator has just made love with Donis’ wife/sister. As I have already suggested, this remarkable passage also provides an exemplary basis for various critical comparisons to expressionism and surrealism, and to Rulfo as a precursor of magical realism.

The ambivalent character of Susana San Juan is sustained in the dual function of her affective value, as pretext and limit of the cumulative project of knowledge-consumption that is caciquismo. The gendered relation between Susana and the cacique could be elaborated by way of a reference to the discussion of gender and sexual difference in Labyrinth of Solitude: the differential reciprocity of the Pazian gender positions (chingón and chingada) is the dynamic upon which the “active” position passes itself off as being by way of negation, by reducing the other to the nothingness of a hole or gaping wound. In a similar manner, the propriative logic of caciquismo is revealed in part through its failures: on the basis of her abject inability to reflect the master’s discourse back to the master, Susana San Juan’s speech production reveals the crack in the dialectical edifice, the internal limit of the hermeneutic consumption of a totality. (See, for instance, fragment 52: “¿Pero cuál era el mundo de Susana San Juan? Esa fue una de las cosas que Pedro Páramo nunca llegó a saber.”) At the same time, however, melancholic discourse creates serious problems for a project that would claim to restore or lend voice to the silenced other. The melancholic position reveals a contradiction internal to the logic of prosopopeia: this “position,” if it is in fact one, is not merely that of a difference, or of what could be described simply as another perspective. Abjection is not on a par with the way in which post-colonial studies has often conceived of the autochthonous or indigenous Other, as that which has been historically excluded from (Western) representation while remaining at hand, ready to be restituted. Melancholic discourse, rather than subsisting as the marker of an “other perspective,” precisely signals a failure of perspective as such. Leaving the theoretical difficulties of melancholic discourse to one side here (though much could be said of how it illuminates an impossible task that must be confronted repeatedly in the testimonio project—beginning with the relation between expression and failure in melancholic speech, which must be understood as the paradoxical attempt to break out of its own conditions), a fundamental difficulty emerges from the conjunction of restitution and melancholia or abjection: to give or restore voice to the abject other would be precisely to miss or cover over the experience it is called upon to describe.

Let us also recall that Paz’s argument situates itself within a long and hallowed Western tradition of aesthetic theory, for which art has in one form or another been thought of as a mode of possible redemption: to name only two examples, art as it is thought of as the perfection of physis in Aristotle, and for we moderns as an autonomous domain in which the utopia which was formerly the dominion of religion comes to be preserved against the relentless onslaught of history, modernization and globalization—or, in other words, art is that mode whereby we hope to awake from the nightmare of history.

A bullion is the metallic, ornamental knob or boss that sometimes shows up on the cover of old books, appearing to hold it together and/or fasten it shut, to figuratively guard its threshold.
xxi. The Derridean thesis of iterability can thus be demonstrated to bear a thought of the tragic: the hermeneutic engagement of the other must be repeatable in order to be possible in the first place, and repetition here cannot secure itself against the possibility of errancy.

On a different note, however, it should be clear that what I have described as Rulfo’s ongoing citations of a tragic dynamic does not mean that tragedy itself assumes the empty place of the master discourse in his conception of Mexican modernity. The allegorical and testimonial modes which are likewise grafted into Rulfo’s text would mark the limit of the tragedy’s monumentalizing representation of catastrophe. Relevant here is Rama’s description of the transculturating text as that which “asume los desgarramientos y problemas de la colisión cultural” [“assumes the rending effects and problems of cultural collision”]. An attempt to adequately translate desgarramientos as a verbal noun deriving from the transitive verb desgarrar (“to rend”) encounters a surplus of meaning in the reflexive form of the same verb, which means: “to cough up.” Earlier we suggested that Rama’s theory of transculturation describes a production rather than preservation of difference. Here we see that this “production” is also an assumption of the very abrasive torsion it seeks to convey: the transculturating text takes upon itself the experience of an event which spells the dehiscence of the integrated and univocal truth of the Work in the production of an empathetic echo.

TEXTS CITED


