

“The Allegorical Machine: Politics, History, and Memory in Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *El sueño del retorno*”

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So kann ich nicht sagen, was ich nur meine.  
—Hegel, *Science of Logic*

For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.  
—Romans 7:19

Paul de Man proposes that of all literary modalities it is allegory that best illuminates the temporal nature of existence—and of thought and action in particular. Allegory as de Man understands it also sheds light on disjunction, on separation and finitude, as a constitutive moment or condition for history, politics, and all creative activity. If allegory discloses what de Man calls the “authentically temporal destiny” of existence, it also ruins the humanistic assumptions through which terms such as “existence,” “memory,” “language,” and even “the human” are understood in the modern philosophical tradition. Allegory brings to light an in-human dimension in what we call language, and this is a register that cannot be ignored when it comes to thinking about history, art, or politics.

I begin by discussing several of the key points about allegory and time raised by de Man in essays published from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s. I then turn to the Salvadoran writer Horacio Castellanos Moya’s 2013 novel *El sueño del retorno*, situated in the early 1990s and whose protagonist—not unlike the author himself at the time—resides in Mexico and dreams of returning to San Salvador in the wake of the 1993 Chapultepec Peace Accords that nominally put an end to the decades-long Salvadoran civil war. I consider Castellanos Moya’s novel in the context of Fredric Jameson’s notion of national allegory and propose that the

questions concerning temporality and technics brought forth in de Man's work can help us to see how *El sueño del retorno* problematizes some of the underlying assumptions of Jameson's text.

We misunderstand the nature of allegory, de Man contends, if we think of it as a sign pointing to a referent—typically an abstract idea—existing outside of language. The referent to which the allegorical sign points is nothing other than another sign. But it is not just any sign; it is a special sign posited as having existed in an irretrievable past.<sup>1</sup> Allegory, as de Man puts it in Heideggerian language, thus partakes in the “unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny” (de Man 1983, 206). He continues by proposing that allegorical reference be understood as a specific kind of repetition, one that he associates with the name of Kierkegaard:

This relation between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the repetition (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is the essence of the previous sign to be pure anteriority....Allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. (de Man 1983, 207)

In this account, allegorical disclosure of temporal destiny bears something akin to a tragic tone, marking both a debt and a non-negatable distance with respect to its own origin, an originary separation as the condition of possibility for allegorical remembrance. Allegorical reflection on the origin unfolds in view of a subject who precisely seeks refuge from fleetingness and

mortality—in other words, from time itself—in a natural realm. However, allegory also discovers that its subject is constitutively barred from this natural world in which it would seek refuge, a world in relation to which the subject “bears no resemblance.” This is separation disclosing itself as the secret origin of allegorical narrative. It is because the allegorical subject exists in time and in the domain of artifice or technics that it is barred from the purity of this anterior sphere in which it seeks refuge.

The point can be clarified by contrasting allegory to the symbol, the nature of which is atemporal. With the symbol, appearance and being, manifestation and idea, belong to the same totality, differing only in extension. The components that make up the symbol exist contemporaneously with one another, and their relationship is thus not temporal but spatial. In contrast to the atemporal unity of the symbol, time and heterogeneity are the constitutive elements for allegory. Not only does allegory introduce temporal distance in relation to its own origin, it establishes its language in what de Man terms “the void of [a] temporal difference.” In other words, allegorical separation constitutes a difference whose elements cannot be reconciled with one another because they are neither contemporaneous nor even part of a single chronological sequence. For allegory, present and archaic past prove to be something other than two points on the same (temporal) line. The anteriority to which allegory points was never present to begin with. Although de Man does not put things in quite this way, it seems to me that this thought of dissymmetry calls attention to a dimension within time that is not temporal in nature, a part of time that cannot properly speaking be temporalized. This is one of the conclusions of de Man’s investigation; but allegory as literary form always begins with the semblance of a linear chronological relationship that could be repeated in reverse.

As for the reference to repetition “in the Kierkegaardian sense,” although de Man does not explain what he has in mind, Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* essay offers some useful hints. The essay opposes its notion of repetition to two hallowed philosophical principles. The first is the Platonic concept of anamnesis as ordinary memory, an ontological premise that absolutizes being as what *has been* and thereby excludes any possibility of thinking truth as the new or as breaking with the past. The other principle is the Hegelian account of the dialectic as a mediation process capable of subsuming all difference under the logic of the same. Formally speaking, repetition and recollection are the same for Kierkegaard. Their vectors, however, are precisely inverted: “what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards” (Kierkegaard 2009, 3). The meaning of this distinction between “backwards” and “forwards” trajectories is illustrated when Kierkegaard’s character Constantin sets out to visit Berlin, a city he visited long ago and where he now hopes to relive old memories. But reliving the past (“repetition backwards”) proves to be impossible, because the postulated return necessarily forecloses the dimensions of chance and surprise that colored the first time. Memory and calculation precisely get in the way of the recovery they seek to bring about. But before we conclude that the distinction amounts to nothing more than a simple linear chronology of first time versus subsequent reiterations that may or may not be able to capture the essence of the first time, let us note that in this example the “first time” only becomes what it is through repetition, which determines it as the sign of a pure and irretrievable anteriority. What Kierkegaard calls “genuine” repetition (“recollection forwards”), in contradistinction to Platonic anamnesis and Hegelian reconciliation, is anything but linear and sequential. This distinction sheds important light on what de Man is up to in his discussion

of allegory. Repetition introduces a distance and a dissymmetry through which what is repeated, the “first time,” takes shape not as an ideal referent but as an anterior sign capable of temporalizing experience.

Arne Melberg emphasizes that Kierkegaardian repetition thematizes a break in sequentialized chronologizations of time (Melberg 1990). The “Now” of repetition, as we just saw in the Constantin example, is also an “after,” a second time that refers to a “then,” which is the sign of a prior time. By the same token, the “then” (what will have been the first time) of repetition bears the trace of the “after,” because irretrievable anteriority only emerges in and through repetition, or more precisely through the inability to return. Anteriority as origin is an effect of what comes after. The deictic chaining of “now,” “then,” and “after” sustains a non-linear circuit of reference that threatens to unravel the sequential structure of narrative time. Repetition, like deixis, is language referring to itself. It short circuits the temporal ordering of *before* and *after* through introduction of the *now*. The “Now” of repetition has no proper place of its own in any temporal sequence, because in a certain sense it has always already happened while in another sense it unavoidably comes too late. Repetition, in its “Kierkegaardian sense,” thereby opens a site from which the new might be thought and experienced. But it is also a kind of resistance within language; it exposes a disjunction or coming apart that makes it difficult for us to be confident that we know of what we are speaking when we refer to “language.”

The peculiar movement of temporalization that is proper to allegory can be detected in one of the classic gesture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American novel: literary returns to a primordial time or place that has been construed as the lost, buried, or forgotten origin of Latin American consciousness. Such literary returns often come charged with hopes of escaping the

ill effects of modernization for a form of life presumed to be more natural, authentic, and harmonious. What is typically uncovered or disclosed, however, is not a phenomenal reality but another sign or trope: the encrypted manuscript in García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*; baroque nature as writing in Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos*; primitive accumulation as theft and reinscription in Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*; and so on.

I now turn to Fredric Jameson's much-discussed claim about national allegory in his 1986 essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," which I look at in the context of de Man's discussion of temporalization. The controversial claim that all Third-World novels can be read as national allegories is grounded in Jameson's assessment that the divide between public and private spheres that goes without question in the developed world does not prevail in the same way in Latin America and other underdeveloped regions. First and Third worlds face each other as mirror images. First-World cultural production is over-coded by a bourgeois hegemony that has succeeded in establishing its own ideas and sensibility as a general truth that goes without saying. From that point on, collective spaces and struggles can only be grasped from the perspective of the modern individual: as its playground or as a jungle in which its security is threatened. For Third-World literature, meanwhile, the private/public distinction is neither clear-cut nor does it appear as a truth/falsehood dichotomy. Narratives of ostensibly private, interior experiences continue to offer insight into the shared struggles of the oppressed. Juan Preciado's return to Comala in search of paternal recognition and/or redress for the ordeals suffered by his mother turns into a poetic account of an historical wound and a deep-seated structure of domination and inequality that Mexico will need to come to terms with in order for the emancipatory promise of the revolution to be fulfilled. Third-World

literature not only affords greater awareness of ideological formations, according to Jameson it also retains memory traces of alternatives to the historical temporality of capitalism. The fragmented and scattered murmurs to which Preciado bears witness in Comala, to continue with the example, contain memory traces that attest to a shared right of rebellion against tyranny. Against the individuation, fragmentation, and alienation that prevail in developed societies, national allegory opposes “the principles of community interdependence” (Jameson 1986, 86) as what de Man would call the sign of anteriority. But for Jameson, writing in 1986, this anterior sign was clearly not meant to be seen as irretrievable.

Jameson patterns the formal inversion of First and Third World allegorical codes after the structure of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic. While much could be said about the relationship between allegory and consciousness, this is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* except to reference a recent critique of Jameson’s position in a paper by Alberto Moreiras on cynicism in the work of Castellanos Moya (Moreiras 2014). While Moreiras advances reservations about Jameson’s reading of the status of “situational consciousness” in Hegel’s account of how the slave begins to acquire consciousness through experiences of negativity, my own concern has to do with the under-theorized status of allegory in Jameson’s essay. The problem I am raising is not, as many readers have alleged, that Jameson overlooks the likely possibility that there are some (or many) non-allegorical texts out there. On the contrary, I believe that close attention to de Man’s work would similarly lead us to the conclusion that there is indeed no escaping the allegorical framework, and that even Jameson’s most vehement critics would have a difficult time freeing themselves completely from the allegorical model.<sup>2</sup> The more interesting blind spot in Jameson’s claim, it seems to me,

is that it is made in the absence of any sustained reflection on what is at stake in the allegorical structure of temporalization. Jameson's thesis bears a clear debt to Hegel, but it is not accompanied by any reflection on what sort of interest payments might come attached to such a loan. Jameson presumes that allegory can provide access to an anti-capitalist memory or imaginary, and that it can do so even in the dark times of late modernity. However, his assertions about situational consciousness and epistemic privilege turn out to depend on the very things they seem so eager to free themselves from: the tropological language of literature and what de Man calls the narrativization of history as ideology. Moreover, if we accept Jameson's universalization of the allegorical structure of literature, which I am proposing we do, it is difficult to see how this universalization could offer the critical awareness that he seeks—both because the subjective support provided by allegory is imaginary in nature and because allegory's temporalizing structure may be indistinguishable from the developmentalist teleology of capitalist modernity. If allegory provides the basic template for modern conceptualizations of history—a point I will now discuss—then it is not easy to envision how allegory could provide access to a sensibility or a way of life that is decisively other than capitalist modernity.

One of the key texts in de Man's consideration of allegorical language is the posthumously-published essay "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*" (de Man 1996), which takes stock of the curious place allotted to allegory in Hegel's discussions of art, philosophy and history. It is there that de Man proposes that all modern conceptualizations of history are allegorical through and through. Hegelian thought, he observes, is at one and the same time a history of philosophy and a philosophy of history. Hegel's system is a reckoning with the

reciprocal determination of thought and history by way of a poetics of allegory in which contingency and freedom are woven together. If philosophical inquiry is dependent on allegory, by implication the various ways of understanding history that we inherit from modern philosophy are also informed by allegory, and in a manner that may prove equally difficult to grasp or to denounce and leave behind once and for all. Finally, de Man demonstrates that it is also allegory that provides insight into how the Hegelian system remains unable to complete itself as such, remaining dependent on a difference that it cannot subsume as a difference *of* the system.

The mechanisms of allegorical narrativization are not those of a conscious, willful subject. Allegorical language seems to follow its own course, less like the expression of a self-conscious subject and more like an automated or ghostly machine. It provides evidence of a technics at the heart of what we ordinarily think of as the sovereign domain of the human subject: interiority, memory, expression. By the same token allegory stages the occurrence of language as it exceeds the concepts and models we have at our disposal for understanding language itself: as rhetoric, cognition, performative, and so on. Allegory is language becoming different from itself, and hence slipping away from of our cognitive grasp.

Although the discussion of allegory in Hegel's lectures on aesthetics is relegated to a marginal place, de Man demonstrates how this peripheral site provides foundational support for the Hegelian system while also threatening to undermine its structural stability from within. Allegory is the name for a constitutive limit on which the Hegelian system depends, although it remains unable to master it or fully bring it within its domain. De Man terms it the "defective cornerstone" of the speculative architectonic. If allegory is the weak point that threatens to

bring the entire edifice crashing down, it is also as the jointure that allows the structure to stand in the first place, the conduit between exterior and interior, sensible and supersensible realms.

The commanding metaphor that organizes [the Hegelian] system is that of interiorization, the understanding of aesthetic beauty as the external manifestation of an ideal content which is itself an interiorized experience, the recollected emotion of a bygone perception. The sensory manifestation (*sinnliches Scheinen*) of art and literature is the outside of an inner content which is itself an outer event or entity that has been internalized. (de Man 1996, 100)

Although few of his readers would consider Hegel a thinker inclined to put much philosophical weight on art, the stakes when it comes to aesthetics and allegory are indeed high. Hegel understands aesthetic activity in general as the sensible appearance or manifestation of the idea. Artistic creativity serves as a bridge between the phenomenal realm of the senses and the supersensible domain of the intellect. In the absence of such a conduit to the phenomenal world, the intellect would find itself condemned to the realm of abstraction. As a particular mode of aesthetic activity, meanwhile, allegory enjoys a privileged role in this mediation. Recall that many of Hegel's predecessors denigrated allegory as bereft of the innate aesthetic value of the symbol. Whereas the symbol was celebrated as displaying a unified, natural connection between form and content, allegory was seen as an artificial and conventional mode of signification that relies on signs rather than natural correspondences. Philosophy and aesthetic theory have tended to disparage it, equating its contingent arrangement of sensible and supersensible elements with ugliness. While Hegel accepts the

formal terms of the distinction he turns the tables on the tradition by asserting that it is precisely in this contingency of the sign that the intellect can assert its freedom from determination by the sensible world. If correspondence between phenomenal appearance and idea is conventional in allegory then, by implication, it is only through allegory that the intellect can assert its own sovereignty over the specific form it assumes.

In the above-quoted passage we also catch glimpse of an important disjunction that emerges in the allegorical relation. Unlike what happens with the symbol, the interior content to which allegory gives form is not an ideal meaning residing outside of time. The interior state that it discloses turns out to be the product of an earlier interiorization: for instance, an occurrence whose experience inscribed itself in the memory circuits of the subject. Thus the interior, non-sensible “origin” that allegory is charged with transporting into the sensible realm is in fact the product of a prior translation (external to internal). This translational loop, in which exteriorization is always already interiorization, effectively splits allegorical language from itself, overdetermining the sign as a sedimentary artifact possessing multiple temporal “layers.”

The paradigm for art is thought and not perception, allegorical sign and not the natural unity of the symbol, writing and not painting or music. For the same reason, de Man points out, art for Hegel is also linked to memorization (*Gedächtnis*) and not recollection (*Erinnerung*). Memorization denotes the exteriorization of internalized memory in the written sign, as opposed to the ideal internal process that is recollection. As we have seen, allegory partakes in a past whose recovery is out of the question. The object of memorization is of the past in a radical sense, and allegory “leaves the interiorization of experience forever behind. It is of the

past to the extent that it materially inscribes, and thus forever forgets, its ideal content” (de Man 1996, 103). The result is a conundrum whereby the allegorical manifestation of interiority through memorization effectively negates what it ought to preserve—not unlike the way in which Plato accuses writing, which is supposed to serve as an aide memoire, of in fact promoting forgetting. Memorization introduces a mechanicity that Hegel describes as an “empty link” [*das leere Band*] between interior experience and the phenomenal world. Once incarnated in the written word, memory can no longer be understood as the ideal unification of the subject with itself: past with present, passive with active, reflected with reflecting.

I now turn to an essay that de Man first published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1976 under the title “Political Allegory in Rousseau.” That article was reprinted three years later, with a few alterations, in *Allegories of Reading* under the heading “Promises (*Social Contract*).” The question I want to look at before moving on to Castellanos Moya involves the difference between those two titles. The substitution invites us to ask what happens when the promise and its temporality comes to take the place of political allegory. Are these two names for the same thing? Or, after further reflection, did de Man decide to replace an inadequate term with a more precise one?

One answer to this question can be found in de Man’s account of reading as confrontation with the aporetic nature of text. A text, he tells us, demands to be read simultaneously through heterogeneous locutionary registers: for instance, as figurative language and grammatical order, as constative and performative speech, and so on. The passage from one register to another, however, introduces a difference that cannot be reconciled by recourse to the tools proper to one register or the other. The passage itself has

no proper measure. As is the case with language, what we call text is therefore irreducibly heterogeneous, not One. Text necessitates a thinking of any present as always-already differing from itself. It threatens the ideal unity and homogeneity of time that serves as the foundation for philosophical, political and economic modernity. With de Man's essay I propose that the two titles in question inform one another in the following way: the promise clarifies what is at stake in political allegory (a strange temporality without which there could be no politics) while political allegory situates the odd temporality of the promise in the realm of power and decision. At the same time, the passage from political allegory to promise also marks a limit for the political. The demonstration of this point will have to wait until the final part of this essay.

De Man's elucidation of this disjunction internal language finds its political corollary in Rousseau's view of the modern State in its "static" and "active" roles. What we call the State coincides with distinct functions and responsibilities that may not be reconcilable under a single concept. On one hand the State designates a constituted entity (*Etat*) charged with legislating and applying the law. But it also points to a constitutive sovereign force (*Souverain*) whose nature is to assign itself the law, and which is necessary in principle if we hope to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power and force. In de Man's terms this is analogous to the distinction between constative (*Etat*) and performative (*Souverain*) modalities of language, or between grammar and rhetoric, or between cognition and action. A text, such as a constitution or a treatise on political theory, must take into account both of these modalities, and regardless of the possibility that they may prove to be incompatible with one another. "It seems," writes de Man, "that as soon as a text knows what it states, it can only act deceptively, like the thieving lawmaker in the *Social Contract*, and if a text does not act, it

cannot state what it knows" (de Man 1979, 270). Cognition and action, *Etat* and *Souverain*, must be brought together in order for there to be politics at all, i.e., something more than arbitrary, self-interested deployment of power and expropriation. In bringing these modalities together, however, the text produces a situation in which the terms of one must be subjugated to those of the other. The disjunction that splits cognition and action is not a shortcoming that Rousseau could have fixed, just as he could not resolve the difference between constative and performative speech. It is, as de Man writes in the 1979 version of the essay,

a fact of language over which Rousseau himself has no control. Just as any other reader, he is bound to misread his text as a promise of political change. The error is not with the reader; language itself dissociates the cognition from the act. *Die Sprache verspricht (sich)*; to the extent that it is necessarily misleading, language just as necessarily conveys the promise of its own truth. (277)

In the 1976 version of the essay de Man had written "*Die Sprache verspricht*": language promises. In the 1979 revised version he changes this to: *Die Sprache verspricht (sich)*. Both variations allude to Heidegger's *Die Sprache spricht*: language speaks. The difference between de Man's formulations and Heidegger's is marked only by the elusive verbal prefix *ver-*, which introduces an implicit distinction between an act that inaugurates a totality (language speaking, which in Heidegger's formulation is tantamount to saying "the world worlds" or "being discloses") and an act that introduces a gap between the time of speech and the time in which what is spoken will have been realized (language promising). The promise is divided from itself; its structure gives shape to a thought of time as heterogeneous and irreducible to any metaphysical conceptualization of time, i.e., to any inquiry that would determine the essence of

time as presence.<sup>3</sup> Every promise, every utterance of an action still to be realized in the form of an “I will do...,” finds itself divided between distinct times: the present moment of speaking; a past whose reality the promise vows will change; and a (specified or indeterminate) future present in which the promise will be fulfilled. This is the case whether the promise appeals to the speaker’s personal life (“I vow to quit smoking after exams are over”) or to history (“The communist revolution will put an end to class conflict and exploitation”). Language promises, and it is in language that the promissory structure of the political is to be found. One of the things Rousseau teaches us is that there can be no politics without language and without the odd temporality of the promise. In the absence of this differential temporality and the potentiality it harbors, politics would be indistinguishable from mere administration of social differences and calculative expropriation of time.

In the 1979 version of the essay de Man revises the 1976 sentence through the insertion of the reflexive pronoun, generating a new and somewhat idiosyncratic sentence: *Die Sprache verspricht (sich)*. Transitively or intransitively, language promises [*verspricht*]; reflexively, language misspeaks or stumbles over itself [*sich verspricht*]. Language introduces disjuncture and thereby ruins the identity between form and meaning, phenomenality and truth. We must not move too hastily in dismissing this focus on language and its aporias as a sophistic evasion of the real—i.e., practical—concerns of politics. As Jacques Derrida puts it in an essay written shortly after de Man’s death, it is precisely the aporetic structure of the promise that “gives or promises the thinking of the very possibility of what still remains unthinkable or unthought, indeed, impossible” (Derrida 1989a, 132). The structure of the promise is not that of a simple lag time separating the moment of pronunciation from the time of action and/or fulfillment of

whatever terms are set out in the promise. At an equally fundamental level the promise underscores a dimension of incalculability that underlies all speech and all action insofar as they presuppose the possibility of being read, heard and understood again in the future. Although the promise unquestionably involves a calculative appropriation of time insofar as it projects a determinate future that the speaker vows to help bring about, the very utterance of the promise also underscores a limit for all calculation: after all, if time could be fully subsumed within calculative reason then there would be no need to make promises in the first place.

Derrida too focuses on the promise as highlighting a dimension of allegorical language that exceeds calculation, albeit from within calculation itself. He calls this dimension a Faktum. The structure of facticity resembles the irretrievable anteriority that de Man associates with the allegorical referent:

[it is] a fact of language...over which we have no control. This “fact” is not natural, it is an artifact, but an artifact which for us...is already there, as *a past which has never been present*. We might say that it is historicity itself—a historicity which cannot be historical, an “ancientness” without history, without anteriority, but which produces history.

(Derrida 1989, 95)

Here the dichotomy of speech and act, saying and doing, begins to tremble. Linguistic facticity is not of nature but of technics, a technics that is at work in all creative activity (art, literature, politics). This Faktum has no history, and thus it can only be represented allegorically. Or it can only be represented allegorically and catachrestically, i.e., as irretrievable anteriority. But this facticity is also the condition of possibility for anything like history, and thus silently at work in any allegory. As past that has never been present, it is the originary cut that

will have severed all speaking beings from nature, a separation through which it becomes possible to conceive of “nature” and “culture.” Such a cut is not an origin in any essential sense; in other words, it could never have constituted an origin in its own time (if it had a time). It can only become origin a posteriori, once irretrievably lost, in the speech that drowns out the silence of the cut. This retroactive temporal structuring of facticity as temporal precisely inverts the promissory structure of which I have been speaking. Thus the promise brings to light the radical anteriority of “language” or linguistic facticity that turns out to possess the same odd temporal structure that governs allegory.

De Man’s discussion of allegorical anteriority, of a past that was never present, opens up possibilities for thinking time and history as something other than a progressive or teleologically guided sequence. Recall that for de Man a text demands to be read at one and the same time as describing and constituting what it describes. As we have seen, this “one and the same time” is anything but a single, homogeneous time. Like the radical anteriority described by Derrida, it has never been present and could not become present, and yet there could be no such thing as action or politics without it. It may be that allegorical anamnesis of an anteriority that was never present offers a site for thinking the non-oppositional difference that philosophy seems destined to avoid whenever it tries to conceptualize space or time—a site for thinking the *spacing of time* or the *becoming time of space*.

Horacio Castellanos Moya’s 2013 novel *El sueño del retorno* tells the story of a Salvadoran exile, Erasmo Aragón, who is employed as a journalist in Mexico City where he lives with his girlfriend and young daughter. In 1991, with UN-brokered negotiations for a cease-fire between the FMLN and the Salvadoran army underway, Aragón begins planning his return to

San Salvador. There he hopes to “participate in History” (Castellanos Moya 2013, 131), as he puts it, by collaborating in a new cultural journal intended to foster the development of a democratic culture in his war-torn country. The novel, based loosely on aspects of the author’s own experiences during that period, engages in an interesting way with the idea of national allegory. In one sense *El sueño del retorno* is a perfect fit with Jameson’s position: there is no personal and familial anecdote in this novel that could not easily be mapped onto the national history of El Salvador, no conflict that cannot be understood as echo or symptom of the history of oppression, exploitation, and violence in the region. In another sense, however, Castellanos Moya’s work precisely moves against Jameson’s account of national allegory: by questioning the Hegelian understanding of consciousness as truth of history and, by extension, refusing the idea of literature as a mirror in which memories of collective struggle against oppression can give birth to a new revolutionary consciousness.

*El sueño del retorno* can also be read productively alongside an earlier collection of essays published by Castellanos Moya’s at the time of his own return to El Salvador in the early 1990s. Entitled *Recuento de incertidumbres: cultura y transición en El Salvador*, the essays took stock of the uncertainties, fears, and hopes that accompanied the end of civil war. *Sueño del retorno*, meanwhile, revisits and rewrites the scene of return two decades later in order to narrativize its various *desencuentros*, its missed opportunities and disappointments. The *Recuento* essays similarly bear the mark of return: of a return to El Salvador that would coincide with the country’s rise from the ashes of self-destruction to reinsert itself onto the historical tracks of social transformation and progress. Writing in 1993, Castellanos Moya clearly foresaw the difficulties that El Salvador would face in its struggle not only with the destruction wrought

by civil war but also with a deeply engrained history of ideological polarization in which dissensus and difference are seen—by the Left as much as by the Right and the military regimes—as a pretext for the other’s annihilation.

*Primera plana* was the name of the journal that Castellanos Moya helped found and direct after his return to El Salvador in 1994. The journal promoted dialogue and debate as civil, democratic alternatives to that culture of enmity and destruction. *Primera plana* would oppose terror and annihilation with a space for thinking and exchange—a space which, while not itself political in any sense, is no doubt an indispensable condition for any desirable politics. The journal was short-lived, however, in large part because the editors were unable to secure sufficient financial support in the post-war environment. As Castellanos Moya would later observe, the journal’s lack of longevity was symptomatic of how the so-called transition proved unable to transform old structures, outlooks, and habits that had prevailed in Salvadoran society over much of the previous century (Castellanos Moya 2008).

One of the incisive points raised in *Recuento de incertidumbres* concerns what Castellanos Moya saw then as the singular status of Central America, in distinction not only from the developed world but from other regions in Latin America. Periphery of the periphery and isthmus between two oceans, Central America is not only more exposed than most other regions to the whims of nature and to the sway of the world’s imperial powers, it is also marked by seemingly endless string of massacres, uprooting and migration. As a geopolitical space it is forever undergoing displacement and disjunction, its human inhabitants and natural resources spilling relentlessly beyond its borders. Alongside the optimistic culturalism that informs Castellanos Moya’s plans for his return to El Salvador, *Recuento* also harbors deep-seated

misgivings about what he describes as a “militarism” underlying Salvadoran history. The roots of this violence can be traced back to the colonial period, he says, making it in a certain sense foundational for post-independent Central American societies. This violence would almost have to be understood as non-historical. It precedes distinctions between war and politics, disorder and order. It names a thought of strife at the very ground of Central American social, political and economic orders, and as generating what Castellanos Moya terms “national deformation” (Castellanos Moya 1993, 30-31).<sup>4</sup> The 1980-92 civil war would then be a symptom of a deeper underlying tendency, the transformation of which would entail far more than a UN-brokered *détente*.

The culture of war thematized by Castellanos Moya seems to return or flare up repeatedly over the course of the region’s post-independence history. This peculiar condition of dislocation, in which Central America is forever becoming different from itself, is what imparts particular urgency to the notion of *retorno* in the novel I am discussing. At the same time, Castellanos Moya’s reflections on El Salvador now appear uncannily prescient in view of more recent trends in our world today, in which global conflict presents problems for which the conceptual tools of political modernity may no longer be able to provide explanatory power.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, even the underlying doubts present in the *Recuento de incertidumbres* strike the reader as optimistic in the context of a global disorder over which the culture of democracy would appear to have little influence.

Ahora, 16 años después, compruebo perplejo que la violencia no sólo se recicló en El Salvador, sino que es el nuevo gran problema de otras naciones, que se ha convertido en la peste que, junto a la pobreza, mantiene en la postración a buena parte de

Latinoamérica. La realidad se volvió más grosera, sanguinaria; mi trabajo, como el de otros colegas escritores de ficción, consiste en tragarla, digerirla, para luego reinventarla de acuerdo con las leyes propias de la fabulación literaria. (Castellanos Moya 2008, np)

Let us now go back to *El sueño del retorno*. Aragón's plans to return to San Salvador are delayed when he suffers a severe case of abdominal pain, which he fears stems from his heavy drinking. He seeks the help of a homeopathic doctor and fellow Salvadoran exile, don Chente Alvarado. After examining him don Chente dismisses Aragón's fears of cirrhosis and informs him that he has a case of acute intestinal inflammation brought about by stress. Don Chente administers acupuncture to relieve the symptoms but warns Aragón that, sooner or later, the discomfort is bound to return. Aragón's guts are all knotted up for some reason or other, the doctor tells him, and the condition is unlikely to resolve itself so long as the underlying cause remains unaddressed.

The doctor appeals to human evolutionary history in order to illustrate to Aragón how his physical suffering is linked to an unknown psychic conflict. For many millennia, proto-humans behaved like all other mammals in relieving themselves wherever they happened to be. But when obliged to become sedentary and reside in caves during the Ice Age, Homo sapiens learned to control its bodily processes and to defecate in a dedicated site away from where it lived and slept. In the subsequent history of the human race, every small child has reenacted that cultural evolutionary process during its early years, confronting an anxiety-producing choice: follow the physiological impulses of the sphincter or heed the social imperatives laid down by the parents?

La angustia y el control de los esfínteres están estrechamente relacionados. Si a un niño se le educa con métodos estrictos y se le reprime en ese momento, a lo largo de su vida llevará su angustia al esfínter y por lo mismo al colon. Y cuando como adulto tenga que tomar una decisión entre dos opciones, sentirá angustia y esa angustia le hará apretar el esfínter y tensionar su colon. De ahí viene la colitis nerviosa, un mal que sufre la mayoría de seres humanos, aunque no se hayan percatado de ello. (Castellanos Moya 2013, 20)

Individual development repeats the evolutionary trajectory of the species; ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, as Ernst Haeckel once asserted. The human body according to Alvarado is a writing surface on which the cultural history of humanity inscribes itself as developmentalist allegory. The distress experienced by the adult member of the species marks the return of that anxiety-filled repression to which the toilet-training child once submitted, which in turn reenacts in a condensed timeline the archaic collective repression that gave birth to the latrine—and, by implication, to technics and civilization. By the same token, when we become anxious for one reason or another this emotional disturbance manifests symptomatically as a tightening of the colon.

Following a session of hypnosis the doctor informs Aragón that the root cause of his immediate discomfort is an unresolved conflict lurking in his familial history, and in particular concerning his relationship with his now-deceased father, one that don Chente characterizes as an “black hole” (97). The doctor does not, however, reveal anything about what Aragón might have said while under hypnosis. The mystery becomes a major source of preoccupation for the journalist, who begins to suspect that he may have committed some horrific crime in his past. In order to achieve a durable cure, the doctor advises, Aragón will need to work through the

knot of paternal conflict. As a therapeutic starting point he recommends that Aragón sit down and write out his life story in order to provide himself with material for reflection. This exchange between doctor and patient frames a question that Aragón repeatedly puts to himself and which perhaps has no proper answer: How to begin narrating one's own life? Where does one start recounting what one is and has been to oneself? What is the first memory in which a memoir would find its proper beginning? These questions convey one of the meanings of the novel's title: the return to one's own past, the attempt to decipher what remains mysterious in one's own history as a step in the direction of resolving the archaic conflicts and impasses that we reenact in our everyday lives without being aware of what it is that we are really doing (Freud 1950).

The homeopathic treatment is interrupted, however, when Don Chente must himself return to El Salvador to tend to the estate of his recently deceased mother. No sooner does he arrive, however, than the doctor mysteriously vanishes. The news of Alvarado's unexplained disappearance leaves Aragón shaken; his fear that don Chente has become the latest victim of the infamous Salvadoran death squads is intensified by the prospect that Aragón himself may soon be facing a similarly unhappy fate. In the aftermath of the hypnosis sessions, meanwhile, the patient begins to experience—in his dreams as well as in his encounters with fellow exiles—the return of long-buried childhood memories involving political violence: the bombing of the house of his nationalist grandfather by the liberal government in the 1940s, the assassination of his father during the turmoil that preceded the 1972 golpe de estado, the brutal slayings of his cousin and a close friend at the hands of the military during the civil war, but also the fratricidal purges enacted by the Salvadoran FMLN. This Proustian juxtaposition of conscious and

involuntary memories discloses another way of reading the novel's title: the long-forgotten memories that return without any bidding, as if they were moved by some kind of automaton.

In probing his distant past Aragón unearths a knot that will prove to be the core of the novel. In his childhood memories resides an enigma that finds its somatic corollary in the intestinal knot for which he sought treatment with don Chente. It also resonates in interesting ways with de Man's account of the allegorical referent as sign of pure anteriority. This mysterious knot becomes apparent in the context of Aragón's pursuit of the question of a first memory, an axis in relation to which the meaning of specific experiences and recollections would become clear. As it turns out, however, this knot cannot be cut and it renders forever dubious the idea of an excavation that could finally discern a first memory that would constitute the proper origin of the subject. The mysterious mnemonic image discloses a technics—a prosthesis and a mechanicity—at the heart of what we take to be most human: the memories of childhood.

Aragón's first memory is of an occurrence that happened when he was just three years old. Or at least so he had always believed, although subsequent reflection will cast doubt on whether or not the memory is properly speaking his own. One day a bomb detonated in the house of his maternal grandfather, a nationalist dissident conspiring to overthrow the dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. The blast destroyed much of the house and sends its inhabitants scurrying for safety. Aragón recalls watching as his grandmother swooped him up and whisked him out of the burning house. Significantly, Aragón recalls, it is this same grandmother who would subsequently dedicate herself to undermining the image of her son-in-law (Aragón's father) in the little boy's eyes. Thus this memory, whose enigmatic status I am

just beginning to describe, also plays an important role in the unresolved conflict with the name of the father to which I alluded earlier.

Que la memoria es cosa poco confiable lo descubrí cuando me puse a divagar cómo comenzaría la historia de mi vida si me sentara a escribirla tal como me aconsejó don Chente....Hasta entonces yo estaba seguro de que mi primer recuerdo de infancia, lo que más atrás podía remontarme en mi memoria, el punto desde el que tendría que comenzar a relatar mi vida, había sido el bombazo que destruyó el frontispicio de la casa de mis abuelos maternos en la primera avenida de Comayagüela, un bombazo de advertencia detonado en la madrugada por los coroneles que apoyaban al gobierno liberal contra el que conspiraban mi abuelo y sus correligionarios nacionalistas. Yo tendría entonces unos tres años de edad y mi recuerdo consistía en una imagen precisa: el momento en que mi abuela Lena me llevaba en brazos a través del patio penumbroso de la casa, entre el polvillo blanduzco que impregnaba el aire y que procedía de la pared destruida por la explosión. Esa imagen era a la que recurría hasta con cierto orgullo cuando me tocaba explicar cómo la violencia estaba enraizada en el primer momento de mi vida, aunque tendría que precisar “de mi vida consciente,” porque la violencia está enraizada en el primer momento de la vida de todos y cada uno, por algo se entra a este mundo llorando y haciendo gemir de dolor a la madre. (Castellanos Moya 2013, 70)

He confesses that he has always taken a perverse secret pride in recounting this experience to others. It illustrates an intensity of and intimacy with violence that, if more or less taken for granted by Salvadorans, may well strike outsiders as unimaginable. The anecdote allegorizes the exceptionality of the subject, the singular uniqueness of its native realm

together with what is universal in it, i.e., its unlimited capacity for reflection and perseverance. This confession is followed by an important caveat. This allegorical portrait is disingenuous to the degree that it equates a primordial and omnipresent violence with what Aragón calls his “conscious life.” Violence in this childhood anecdote is already something that happens to a subject. The originary violence that the anecdote seeks to convey, meanwhile, would necessarily precede the subject and consciousness; it is not properly speaking phenomenalizable. If we read this reflection alongside the discussion in *Recuento de incertidumbres* of an underlying “militarism” in Salvadoran society we can understand the reference to this other violence—the violence that precedes “conscious life,” the violence of natality—as another allegory, the figuration of a kind of violence to which representation does not have direct access. Such violence need not be limited to the chronological time of infancy, and perhaps it cannot be plotted on any timeline whatsoever. It is coterminous with the social and thus not historical.

As he is preparing to sit down and write out his life story Aragón detects something peculiar in what now strikes him as an overly-precise childhood memory of an experience charged with fear. The specific memory of being carried out of the burning house by his grandmother resembles a cinematic image: it is the image of the helpless child as seen by *someone else*.

Lo cierto es que de pronto, quizás a causa de ese peculiar estado de ánimo en el que permanecía, me encontré preguntándome cómo era que esa imagen casi cinematográfica se había instalado en mi memoria, habida cuenta de que si yo iba en los brazos de mi abuela Lena no era posible que me pudiera ver desde fuera...que si dudaba

de la veracidad de mi primer recuerdo no quería imaginar lo que sería bregar con cada uno de los eventos a los que me había tocado hacer frente en la vida. (70)

The first memory, which ought to be synonymous with the birth of the subject in its capacity for self-reflection and thus the cornerstone for self-consciousness, turns out to be of dubious origin. Hence in the terms just described it is defective: it fails to sustain a clear boundary between what belongs to the self and what does not. As a memory that appears to have been constructed and imprinted through some unknown process it precisely causes that distinction to become unstable, as a crumbling cornerstone would cause the exterior wall of a building to buckle. De Man notes that the process whereby allegory produces an external, visible sign to represent an internal state turns out to mask a prior exteriority: the inner state (e.g., memory) is itself the imprint or representation of an external occurrence. Against a humanism that tries desperately to sustain the idea of a human subject that is sovereign with respect to its own nature or essence, allegory discloses that there is no originary interiority prior to the advent of technics.

Pero mi mente ya estaba encaminada en la ruta equivocada: al hacer tambalear mi primer recuerdo en la vida provoqué que el péndulo me llevara a una enorme velocidad de la placidez anterior al desasosiego, porque la memoria del bombazo no estaba encapsulada fuera del tiempo, sino que apuntalaba importantes imágenes de mí mismo que ahora empezaban a trastabillar, como aquella en que yo era un niño que lloraba de miedo cada vez que oía una sirena, ya fuera de la policía o de los bomberos o de una ambulancia... (71-72)

This swing from the contentedness of self-reflection to unease is due not to the content of the memory but to the uncertainty surrounding the provenance of this first memory image, which might well have been implanted by the grandmother but which also bears the unmistakable imprint of the technologies of mass culture. This ordinary memory makes up just one frame in a larger reel or feed of mnemonic images, the velocity of which indicates that they are moved by something more machine-like than the will of a subject. This mnemonic mechanicity reproduces the disorienting effects of the recollected experience, and we are left with the image of a child who, at the mere sounding of a siren, finds himself transported back to the scene of the crime and responds by breaking into a howl. But if there is a traumatic site in *El sueño del retorno* this image of the shell-shocked child is not it. On the contrary, this image is part of a memory-scape that has been constructed by an adult. Perverse in its enjoyment of violence though it may be, this image is the very allegorical foundation of the subject. The image of the child's anguished crying have always been understood as signs referring back to an anterior sign. The connection between the primordial memory of the bombing and later memories of growing up in El Salvador resides in the formal, acoustic resemblance that the sirens bear to the sound of the child's wailing: the *aullido/llanto* couplet. The child hears in the siren an echo of its own long-extinguished cries.

Things get complicated and begin to come unraveled, however, when Aragón tries to reconstruct the connecting thread through which these memory images have been conjoined and rendered meaningful for him.

Entonces descubrí con sorpresa que yo no tenía ningún recuerdo de esas sirenas acercándose a la casa de mis abuelos inmediatamente después del bombazo y las cuales

me habían causado el trauma mencionado, por más que en la terraza de La Veiga cerraba los ojos para intentar recordar el aullido de esas sirenas que me produjeron espanto en la niñez, en mi memoria auditiva no había nada de nada, tan sólo el silencio, lo que me llevó a preguntarme de dónde había sacado yo la idea de que mi llanto de infancia procedía de ese bombazo, en caso de que fuera realmente mi idea, y si no se trataría más bien de otra de las cosas que mi abuela Lena me había metido en la cabeza y que yo había convertido en memoria.... (72-73)

In the archaic memory under examination here Aragón finds no acoustic image of sirens. Is this because the child's memory of those first sirens was somehow effaced or recoded as something else? Or did the three-year old in fact never hear any sirens, and thus a memory trace never imprinted to begin with? Of course one cannot know the answer to this question, and the important point here is that memory turns out to have been constructed on the basis of an empty link, a silence whose truth—forgotten, issued but not registered, or simply never present to begin with—cannot be filled in.

The dream of returning that forms the title of Castellanos Moya's novel is thwarted at the geopolitical level. Aragón, it seems, cannot go back to the country he left, not because the risk is too great but because that place no longer exists. He has become part of the relentless flow of displacement and migration that defines Salvadoran and Central American history.<sup>6</sup> Deferred indefinitely at the level of geopolitical space, the movement of return takes up again at the level of remembrance, both voluntary (Aragón sitting down to write out his life story) and involuntary (the myriad of memories that seem to be triggered not by conscious effort but by circumstance: serendipitous encounters with old friends, words that unexpectedly remind

him of something long forgotten, etc.). At the level of the subject, language, and history there is similarly an irreducible element of uncertainty, as the mnemonic foundation of self-consciousness turns out to be contaminated by a non-natural externality that ruins any possibility of determining what belongs properly to the autobiographical self and what does not. Akin to the *Faktum* discussed by Derrida in his commentary on Rousseau's *Contract*, remembrance in Castellanos Moya uncovers the traces of a non-natural, non-historical excess at the heart of the subject, a technological artifact over which self-consciousness and will have no control. The anecdote through which this *Faktum* surfaces supports at least two ways of understanding its import. On one hand it points to the thought of an originary violence—a “militarism” in the words of *Recuento de incertidumbres*—underlying the social, a violence over which politic concepts of hegemony and sovereignty hold no sway. Insofar as political discourse claims to contain violence, as it has always done from Hobbes through neoliberal Consensus, it necessarily constitutes itself as the repression of this strife, a containment whose failure Castellanos Moya's work seeks to record. On the other hand, this artifact also pertains to memory and language, and in that respect it calls attention to ineffaceable and unreadable traces of alterity at the heart of what we call the self or the subject. It marks the origin not as the purity of a proper space but as an opening to what will later become its outside, an opening to others prior to any possibility of distinguishing between self and other.

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<sup>1</sup> De Man makes this point in different ways in the essays on Rousseau (de Man 1979) and in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (de Man 1983).

<sup>2</sup> There are at least two ways of explaining what I am claiming is the unavoidableness of allegory, neither of which would necessarily confirm the diagnosis delivered by Jameson in its entirety. The first possible approach has already been mentioned: all modern conceptualizations of history, ranging from liberal to Marxian, are based—albeit not necessarily in self-aware manner—on allegory understood as the postulation of a sign of radical or pure anteriority. Thus, to the extent that literature is concerned with history it unavoidably gets its hands caught in the allegorical web. The second way appears to rely on empirical observation, although in the end it is the same rationale: there is no escaping national allegory because, as we see from Sarmiento through the present, every literary account of national history bases its understanding of the present on an anterior sign: civil wars and tyrannies as repetitions of colonial isolation; globalization as repetition of military dictatorship, and so on.

<sup>3</sup> On the metaphysical determination of the essence of time as presence, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division II, Chapter 6 (Heidegger 2010, 385-406). Jacques Derrida, meanwhile, offers in his early essay "*Ousia and Grammē*" (Derrida 1989b), an important clarification about the limits of any critique of what Heidegger terms "the vulgar conception of time," and in his later *Specters of Marx* (1994) provides, with the notion of "inheritance," one instance of what a non-metaphysical thinking of time might look like—inheritance as the name for a gift or sending that is always-already different from itself and, hence, as a limit-concept or a non-concept.

<sup>4</sup> "El militarismo no es una herencia de la guerra, sino un lastre histórico, un componente central de la deformación nacional, que podría explicar en buena medida nuestra inviabilidad política y económica. El desmontaje de este componente sería, entonces, más que un objetivo esencial de la transición: se perfila como un cambio fundamental en la historia de la nación, una condición *sine qua non* para poder enfrentar creativamente los retos del nuevo milenio" (Castellanos Moya 1993, 31).

<sup>5</sup> I discuss this point in detail in Dove 2016. See also Galli 2010.

<sup>6</sup> The story ends with Aragón purchasing his ticket to San Salvador, saying goodbye to his young daughter in the airport, but then catching sight of an attractive young woman whom he then begins to pursue, oblivious to (or not caring about) the fact that doing so will cause him to miss his flight.