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FEMINIZATION AS AN EXPERIENCE OF LIMITS: SHIFTING GENDER ROLES IN THE FANTASTIC NARRATIVE OF SILVINA OCAMPO AND CRISTINA PERI ROSSI

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In her study entitled, "Coming out of the Labyrinth: Women Writers in Contemporary Latin America," Susan Bassnett illustrates a turning point in women's literary production and its reception with the metaphor of Ariadne's thread: "The new Ariadnes use the thread themselves, go into the labyrinth, prepared to kill if necessary and come out independent" (266). It is characteristic of myth to rewrite itself endlessly, and upon retracing the steps of the mythological Ariadne, J. Hillis Miller finds her conflated with Arachne, the devouring spider in the mid-web (66-67). Feminist theorists and philosophers have spun the yarn further, associating the weaving/writing of the labyrinthine text with a female creativity that spins a circular, impenetrable web in which the thread, rather than a means, becomes its own end, the specificity of an "*écriture féminine*" which creates a space for feminine "*jouissance*" outside or in the interstices of phallogentric discourse.¹ Myth can provide powerful images both for the articulation and the suppression of feminist concerns, but it seems appropriate to raise the question to what degree the emphasis on feminine difference and a specificity of feminine writing does not also replicate myths of binary oppositions and hierarchical terminologies.² Returning to the mythological Ariadne who inhabits one of the two narratives examined here, and whose figurative thread functions as a principal of femininity in the other, it is safe to say that she arms the writer with a strategic narrative thread to trace her way out of the network of patriarchal power. In "Los juegos," Cristina Peri Rossi contests and subverts the by now stereotyped metaphor of the phallic pen writing in the space of an absent feminine subject or over the fetishized female

body, while Silvina Ocampo's story "Hombres Animales Enredaderas" plays on the same theme by adding a surprising twist to the strategic but problematic notion of a feminine writing of the body.

The controlling strategy for what could be called the feminist enterprise of the two texts is the use of a gender-coded discourse and its subversion, either through a fantastic gender reversal or metamorphosis, or as the consequence of an experience of limits in which gender difference takes on the full meaning of what it amounts to in patriarchy, namely the fantastic absence of the woman, and a masculine subject in crisis.³ As an additional narrative strategy, the use of the first-person male narrator effects in both stories, so to speak, a subversion of the system from within. The masculine point of view is the norm in the traditional fantastic narrative where it serves to deconstruct the habitual reader position of identification with the worldview of realism which, as Rosemary Jackson brings to attention, also happens to be defined by a "materialistic, masculine, patriarchal culture" (*What Did Miss Darrington See?*, xvii). The utilization of the male narrator by the female writer may imply an accommodation to the average reader as Peri Rossi suggests: "Cuando uno va a escribir un cuento y el tema del mismo son los problemas metafísicos, psicológicos o políticos de un personaje, inconscientemente elige un protagonista masculino, sabe que el lector está preparado para eso..." (*Deredita*, 137); however, more importantly, the use of the masculine point of view in Peri Rossi's work often performs a meta-critical function by foregrounding a host of interrelated problems dealing with woman's access to language and literary discourse. This becomes especially apparent when the male-centered text superficially seems to imply an adjustment to male dominated discourse, such as the traditional fantastic narrative but, on another level, denaturalizes and exposes the implied reader position as one constructed by ideological processes.

The following analysis of the two stories relies on the concept of gender difference as an effect of discursive practices which may be reproduced or undermined in literary production. In the literary texts under discussion, gender difference is deconstructed through strategies characteristic of the fantastic narrative. They interrogate gender difference through a structure of hesitation, that is, the interplay between a discourse of reason and presence, and the enunciation of an unresolved enigma or absence in the first-person narrative. In the analysis of the relationship between the language of the fantastic and the issue of gender, the figure of the thread serves as a point of departure for the study of narrative line which, as Miller points out, even in realistic fiction "subverts itself by becoming 'complex' — knotted, repetitive, doubled, broken, phantasmal" (69). In its metonymical association with the labyrinth, lure, and net, the figurative thread implies a strategic use in the creation of the fantastic effect and its function as a principal agent in the subversion of a masculine or gender coded discourse. The subversion is therefore one of structure, the destabilization of the binary set of masculine/feminine identification, and the

rewriting of the active and passive positions associated with gender identity. In "Hombres Animales Enredaderas" this process culminates in the seeming takeover of the masculine consciousness by a feminine agency. As its title suggests, Ocampo's story explores thematically the thin line separating human, animal, and plant life, and, as is characteristic for the fantastic, follows this theme to its limits with the liquidation of such difference. According to Todorov, themes dealing with mind/matter, subject/object polarities can be grouped together as pertaining to the "perception-consciousness system," a term he borrows from Freud to indicate the relation between these fantastic themes and certain psychological states linked to the decomposition of consciousness (120). While Ocampo's story addresses the subject of decomposition with the classic fantastic theme of metamorphosis, it is foremost concerned with the interrelatedness of language and identity, and the material aspect of language which allows the obliteration of the very mind/matter dialectic. As a result, hierarchical dualities such as culture and nature, gender and sex, are also deconstructed and shown to belong to those "strategies of domination" which support the naturalization of this ideological distinction (Butler, 37). Ironically, the male narrator seems to become the victim of his disregard for distinguishing between women, animals, and plants, a confusion dictated by language but no less dramatic in its effect which successfully liquidates gender per se as a denominator of difference. Throughout the story, the culture/nature duality functions as a framework for a male-coded discourse in which, as it is characteristic for discourses based on binary oppositions, nature figures as feminine, while culture associates with mind, reason, and the masculine.⁴ Simultaneously, the first person narrative which, in a continuous soliloquy, records the sense perceptions and rationalizations, memories and hopes of a completely isolated self, indicates the fragility of a subjectivity based on a linguistic sign system and its culturally constructed categories of difference. Thus, the narrative, in what turns out to be the description of the dramatic moments of a plane crash, begins with the "fall" into un-differentiation which compares with the pre-mirror stage existence of the newly born:

Al caer perdí sin duda el conocimiento. Sólo recuerdo dos ojos que me miraban y el último vaivén del avión, como si una enorme nodriza me acunara en sus brazos. Así agrada a un niño que lo acunen. Después un ruido ensordecedor y luego un golpe seco me devolvieron a la realidad: el encuentro duro de la tierra. (7)

The consequent "birth" into consciousness is accompanied by the realization of a two-fold loss: the narrator notes the absence of his fellow-passengers, the crashed plane, or any remnants of it, and, what will become an obsessively recurring theme of self-inquiry, the absence of the eyes that had been looking at him at the moment of losing consciousness. While patches of flashback memories allow him to conjecture the fate of the plane, "Después nada me

comunicaba con esa tierra, salvo la sensación de una hoguera que se apaga y deja la ceniza gris parecida al silencio" (7), the eyes turn into the signifiers of a lost object of separation as the narrative becomes coded as enigmatic with the quasi formulaic repetition of interrogations that disrupt a discourse aiming at coherence. Calculations about the amount of provisions and other possible food resources are interrupted with the disquieting memory traces of an absence: "Pero aquellos ojos, ¿dónde estarán?" "Pero aquellos ojos que me miraban, ¿qué beberán?" ¿De qué color eran aquellos ojos? Del color de las bolitas de vidrio que yo elegía cuando era chico en la juguetería" (8, 9).

In their function of introducing otherness into a self-directed monologue, the eyes, although registered as an absence, achieve a certain tangibility and take on the characteristics of the gaze which structures the narrative account into a dialectic of looking and being looked at. In Lacanian terminology, the gaze, like the voice, functions as a building block of the self, and, though introjected prior to the mirror stage, it is as a consequence of this event, that the gaze becomes attached as a part-object to the image of particular persons (Ragland-Sullivan, 44). Further, as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan explains:

In the mirror stage the gaze is the dialectical bridge to self-recognition; perceptually speaking, the prespecular objects of Desire become permanently enmeshed in a network of inner vision.... Because of its Ur-character, the specular gaze is separable from its unifying role in the moi [self] composite and, as such, reappears as a fragment in hallucinations, dreams, or memories. (94-95)

In the tropical jungle environment which encloses the narrator and single survivor, leaving him the only human to relate to, the gaze, as externalized symbol of a lost object, becomes the catalyst for the unraveling of the cultural construct of identity. The process, however, is a slow and barely noticeable one, since the narrator's attention is focused on his survival needs and the formulation of ground rules for the ordering of unknown surroundings:

De noche hay luciérnagos y grillos ensordecedores. Un perfume suave y penetrante me seduce, ¿de dónde proviene? Aún no lo sé. Creo que me hace bien. Se desprende de flores o de árboles o de hierbas o de raíces o de todo a la vez (¿no será de un fantasma?);.... Husmeando como un perro ¿me volveré perro? estrujo las hojas, las hierbas, las flores silvestres que encuentro.... Finalmente he descubierto lo que perfuma el aire con tanta vehemencia: es una enredadera, tal vez de flores insignificantes.... Mientras la miro me parece que crece. (10)

The problematization of sense perception is a predilict theme of fantastic stories dealing with the self and its subversion. The jungle seems to hold fantastic potential for the narrator who, nonetheless, has to rely on this alien environment for a minimum of orientation and reality testing. Once his watch has stopped,

the fantastic growth of the climbing vines indicates for him the time intervals of a sleep pattern which has become disconcertingly unbalanced:

¿Duermo más de lo que es habitual para un ser humano, o creo que duermo más?
 ¿Es el perfume que me da sueño?.... El progreso que hace la enredadera sobre
 el árbol fue durante unos días mi reloj. Como una tejedora iba tejiendo sus
 puntos alrededor de cada rama. Al despertar, por los nudos que había hecho yo
 podía calcular el tiempo de mi sueño, pero ahora, últimamente, se apresura.
 ¿Soy yo o el tiempo? (13)

A need for differentiation, for establishing firm boundaries between self and an encroaching landscape, dominates his waking hours, "Cuando me despierto, saco fotografías de los árboles, de mi mano, de mi pie, del follaje, pues ¿qué otras fotografías podría sacar?" (10), while sleep invariably brings nightmares of entrapment: "Ya van varias noches que sueño lo mismo: la madre selva me confunde con un árbol y comienza a tejer alrededor de mis piernas una red que me aprisiona" (12). The possible violation of the limits separating selfhood from otherness provokes the use of his voice and name to mark his presence: "En algunos momentos pronuncio mi nombre varias veces, dando a mi voz tonalidades diferentes. ¿Tendré miedo de olvidarlo?" (11). The voice however takes on a life of its own in an echo which, rather than confirming the narrator's status as a speaking subject, projects a dreaded alterity: "Nada me da tanto miedo" (11). The narrator's fear is not unfounded since survival seems to have become linked to the strict separation between a subjective and objective experience of reality, two realms whose boundaries collapse on the level of language once the authority of the speaking subject has been foregrounded as illusory: "Dentro de mi oreja un millón de voces discuten, se enemistan, se dedican a destruirme" (14). Language, however, remains the only recourse to maintain an illusive subjectivity, while, at the same time, admitting the surfacing of an unconscious discourse primarily concerned with the self's relation to the primordial other of the mirror stage as it appears in a dream recounted by the narrator:

Soné que decía: Dónde estarán aquellos ojos que tanto me miraban? ¿Qué beberán? Hay personas que son manos, otras bocas, otras cabellera, otras pecho donde uno se recuesta, otras cuello, otras ojos, nada más que ojos. Como ella. Trataba de explicárselo cuando íbamos en el avión, pero ella no entendía. Entendía sólo con los ojos y preguntaba: "¿Cómo? ¿Cómo dice?" (13)

Although the narrator never clarifies the identity of this mysterious, inaccessible female companion, her characterization as only eyes, associates her with other part-objects of desire which structure intersubjective relations as well as the subject's relation to its own unconscious. Part-objects, such as the gaze and the voice, according to Ragland-Sullivan, can reappear "as disembodied

fragments" and become "silent witnesses to a solipsistic discourse" (44).

As mentioned earlier, the internalization of the gaze as the founding moment of the split subject guarantees an identity grounded on specularity which marks all intersubjective relations with the search for a lost object. Discourse as a form of intersubjectivity thus also carries the signs of this search for reciprocity and, in the narrator's self-directed discourse, expresses a demand for confirmation from the enigmatic eyes as positive bearers of the gaze: "Dios mío, que me sea dado no olvidarme de aquellos ojos. Que el iris viva en mi corazón como si mi corazón fuese de tierra y el iris una planta" (14). While figurative language establishes a symbiotic relation between heart and earth, eye and plant, this linguistic play of wishful thinking opens up a literal dimension of language where plants can cross their natural boundaries and, as in the case of the climbing vine, return the gaze: "Nunca observé una enredadera tan de cerca.... Es como un forro, como una cascada, como una serpiente. Sediente de agua, busca mis ojos, se aproxima" (12). Far from cherishing this surprising digression of biological boundaries, the narrator dreads the plant's animation and, to a degree, the humanization which puts his own identity in question. Thus, increasingly stronger than his own will power, the vine infringes on his corporeal borders each time he falls asleep or lapses into a trancelike state induced by the strong perfume the plant emits:

Me dormí al atardecer, me desperté con una luz de atardecer. ¿Habría dormido cinco minutos? Pero tengo una prueba contundente de que no fue así: la enredadera tuvo tiempo de tejer su tranza alrededor de mi pierna izquierda y de llegar hasta el muslo;.... Esta vez la arranqué con mayor dificultad pero con menos urgencia que la vez anterior, diciéndole animal, como a una de mis amigas que siempre me embroma. (16-17)

Officially raised to the status of a cunning and female friend, the vine has come to impersonate a gender identity implied already in the grammatical gender of her species, one of femininity. It is an identity best suited to designate an ambiguous genus, as well as to neutralize its uncanny effect in the familiar gender opposition where otherness is but a position of contrast in relation to the norm. While it seems a natural outcome of continued isolation to direct one's speech at an externalized otherness which may be projected on any object, the narrator seems to have a propensity for disregarding gender and species distinctions in addressing females. Thus he recollects an incident when, after confusing the difference between "tipa," designating a type of tree, and its use as a derogatory term for a woman, his mother had warned him: "Ya no sabés ni hablar. Tendrías que irte a la selva para hablar con los monos" (16). The recurring memory of this episode as well as the remembrance of his mother trigger identity questions which are ostensibly linked to the gaze and its effect of being seen:

A veces me desvela ese recuerdo pero no puedo evitarlo. Miro en la oscuridad las tipas. Tenían flores amarillas: el vestido de mamá parecía más celeste. ¿Y yo tendré siempre mi cara gris de Buenos Aires? ¿Qué mirarán aquellos ojos? (16).

The recurring motif of the gaze as marker of a proposed enigma in the text also points at the specific structure of the human self which constitutes itself in the seeing/being seen opposition. It is therefore no coincidence that the narrator's preoccupation with the eyes as surveyors of his self-image lessens to the degree with which he succumbs to the progressive engulfment by the climbing vine: "Hay que preocuparse sólo por lo que tiene solución.... Ayer no más, se trepó a mi cuello. Me fastidió un poco. No es que me diera miedo, ni siquiera cuando se me enroscó alrededor de la lengua" (17). At this stage the narrator not only seems engrossed in a dialogue with the vine, he has also begun to imitate her in her astonishing weaving skills, "es un experimento bastante interesante, pero difícil" (17). In addition to this new focus of interests, he evaluates his situation with regard to its narrative value and the effect his story will have on his friends: "No me creerán. Tampoco creerán que no puedo estar ociosa.... Estoy tan ocupada que me olvido de aquellos ojos que me miraban; con mayor razón me olvido hasta de beber y de comer" (17). That the story is no longer his but bears the signature of a feminine speaking subject is indicated with the change of adjective endings, a barely noticeable transition, acknowledged with the remark "¡Variable género humano!" (17).

Although the change in grammatical form is accompanied by the blotting out of the former consciousness as controlling agent of a first-person masculine discourse, the alteration in grammatical gender does not eliminate subjectivity but rather shows it to be variable and its identity assumed, illustrating W. R. Irwin's point that "whatever the accompanying effects [of metamorphosis], the basic fact is total alteration in form, which gains its power from the widespread assumption that form is a determinant of identity, even being" (101). The concluding sentence of the story leaves no doubt that the transformation in form is complete; however, it creates uncertainty about the controlling agency in the writing/weaving of the story as a whole: "Envolví la lapicera en mis tallos verdes, como las lapiceras tejidas con seda y lana por los presos" (17). If the masculine activity of writing has been replaced by the feminine project of weaving, who has written the final sentence? Or, if "Envolví la lapicera en mis tallos verdes" indicates, in retrospect, that the vine is really responsible for the whole text, that she has been writing/weaving all along, and that weaving and writing designate the same activity but are superficially associated with differing gender and species identities, why does the final comparison "como las lapiceras tejidas con seda y lana por los presos" reintroduce the idea of entrapment? No doubt, renewed readings of the text will raise more questions without ever unraveling the knot where masculine and feminine positions have

become hopelessly intertwined. Thus, any assumption about a definite textual authority based on gender difference is proven to be guesswork and only anticipatory, mirroring the narrator's situation who at one point, early in the story, realizes that "Hay personas que tardan mucho en saber quiénes son" (10).

While the fantastic narrative as a language of the impossible excels in the subversion of the antithetical structures underlying Western thought such as mind/matter, language/essence, culture/nature polarities, Ocampo's use of the fantastic in "Hombres Animales Enredaderas" appropriates the fantastic for a self-conscious treatment of language as the site where these oppositions are created and, therefore, can be contested. By effacing the difference between grammatical and natural gender, thus foregrounding the fictive aspect of both categories, the fantastic narrative serves the ironic gesture of undermining the concept of a gendered agency as the source of the text, and in extension, addresses the problematic inherent in the concept of feminine writing as the expression of an essential difference. What the text does not undermine and what therefore also marks its enterprise as a feminine appropriation of the fantastic, is the activity of writing/weaving itself as the ground for the construction or subversion of gendered subjectivity. In agreement with Judith Butler's argument that "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (142), Ocampo's narrative, independently of female authorship and unrestrained by its initially masculine speaking subject, effects a form of feminization of language in the sense of a process of decentering the gendered subject as locus of truth and meaning.

In the following discussion of "Los juegos," the concept of femininity functions as a catalyst for the problematization of its own difficult position both in literary and theoretical discourse. The preceding analysis has established a parallel between the feminization of the narrative discourse and the fantastic take-over of a masculine gender identity by a feminine agency which is defined by activity rather than essence. The analysis of "Los juegos" further explores femininity and its relation to narrativity and relies on a concept of the text as "'feminine' symptom" as developed by Jerry Aline Flieger who traces a metonymic chain of textual phenomena in Lacan's writings on the narrative process, namely, the relation between equivalences such as "subjectivity as intersubjectivity; intersubjectivity as narrative/text; text as 'feminine' symptom; femininity as (form of) subjectivity" (942). The understanding of intersubjectivity as gendered results from the linguistic ground of gender difference in Lacanian theory which implies positionality rather than biology, and applied to a theory of narrative, introduces the notion of exchange, of "femininity as a transmissible stigma" in the desiring circuit of the narrative (956). While the stigma of femininity associates with passivity and a position of the negative pole of oppositions, Flieger traces in Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"⁵ a rewriting of the active and passive gender positions in a structure where they are not only "exchangeable" but "superimposed," with the consequence that

"the notions of 'active' and 'passive' lose their specificity, as do the corollary notions of 'male' and 'female' gender" (958). Flieger further explores the concept of the feminine as stigma or symptom in Freud's joking paradigm and his analysis of the play situation, two examples in which "to be it" is associated with the traditional feminine position of passivity. The idea of the game as a playing at gender roles serves as entry into Peri Rossi's narrative where gender identities become fluid and open to subversion. The feminization of the narrative results from the phantasmal contamination of the masculine point of view with the ambiguous characteristics of the feminine position, not so much through the replacement of one gender identity by the other but through the activity of writing as a dissolving of the binary positionalities and their respective defining properties.

"Los juegos" is one of four stories included in *Los museos abandonados* (1969), a book which, in the words of the author, features protagonists who live an experience of limits: "la destrucción del mundo, de una civilización, de un orden social, de una estructura, de un tipo especial de cultura, de una manera de concebir el amor, el arte, la sociedad" (Verani, 309).⁶ The game, or the games, as the title implies, takes place in the closed space of an abandoned museum where a man and a woman, as most likely only survivors of a cataclysm, pass a time without future. As the male first-person narrator explains, "El juego lo habíamos inventado Ariadna y yo en una noche de hastío" (81). In the dystopian context of this fictional background, the play activity becomes a manner of existing in and for the moment while its obsessive character reflects and anticipates the total extinction of a spent society. In its destructive aspect, the game also functions as a ritualized form of rebellion against the order and rules of a dead world, its dead languages, artifacts and myths. Finally, in its treatment of an experience of limits, the game explores the transgressive potential of sexual and narrative desire. Desire takes on superlative proportions in the fantastic narrative which, according to Todorov, "is concerned to describe desire in its excessive forms as well as its various transformations or... its perversions" (138). "Los juegos" does not qualify as a fantastic tale in the sense of describing forms of excessive desire that "surpass the limits of the possible" (139), rather, it uses the discursive strategies of the fantastic narrative in order to release the transgressive force of desire in language. The preoccupation with language is reflected in what the narrator describes as "nuestro primer juego" which "consistía en la delicada operación de transcribir las diversas leyendas de los muertos en los variados caracteres de las lenguas" (81). For a restricted time period the immersion in the cultural remnants of dead civilizations offers the couple an escape from the reality of their own situation as last living samples of an extinct race. The task of rewriting and thus of restoring evidence of a history of humankind however fails to hold lasting attraction:

Ariadna cesó de traducir leyendas y yo no hollé sinuosos catafalcos donde la muerte ya no sonaba más... ni hundí mis manos en rumorosos cajones, donde descubrir antiguas referencias, archivos de palabras y de formas que socorrieran la ardiente curiosidad de Ariadna, donde saciar su ávida frente. (83)

While the narrator refers to Ariadna's curious thirst for the linguistic sign and the secrets it holds to be deciphered, his own style suggests a cultivated taste for the sensuous aspect of the spoken word and its evocative power, reflecting the author's own awareness of sounds and their connotations during the creative process. Referring to *Los museos abandonados*, Peri Rossi notes that "en alguna de las historias del libro un personaje dice que conoce bien la seducción de las palabras (se refiere al tono, a la voz, a la cadencia, a la melodía de los significantes) y que eso puede ser más seductor que el significado en sí" (Deredita, 139).⁷ Thus, the narrator comes to inhabit the museum with the mythological Ariadna rather than a female stranger, as he explains:

(Quizás ese nombre estuviera escrito en uno de esos papeles frecuentes que se hallaban al costado de las momias, sujetos por hilos de seda o pequeños clavos de acero; Ariadna escrito en gótico o en persa en un triángulo de papel al costado de un maniquí de yeso, y yo hubiera recogido su secreta sonoridad en mi oído, para lanzársela a ella durante las noches del museo...). (81)

The product of a poetic sensibility, Ariadna appears in numerous manifestations, as "Ariadna sinuosa locamente enajenada," as "Ariadna reflejada en los espejos azogados de las vitrinas," as "Ariadna desnuda, céltica, transparente," and finally, also "delirante, abrazando una estatua: por los brazos blancos le corría una vena verde, alargada; Ariadna infeliz, recorriendo delirante las galerías de espejos y deteniéndose delante del azul, a mirarse los hilos de las venas" (82). In the confines of the textual web of an overtly modernist narrative, Ariadna's image seems on the verge of being absorbed by the world of artifice displayed in the museum. The fact that Ariadna's body is marbleized by veins and therefore differentiated from a statue, is neutralized with the description of an architecture endowed with the anatomical features of a live organism, such as "la filigrana de los palios adosados a las columnas al húmero saliente, un poco prominente, ceñido a su soporte por una tibia red de hilos musculares" (82). Although the text plays on and subverts the usual connotations of the signifiers and thus suggests a poetic or figurative reading,⁸ this process does not empty its language from the fantastic potential of a sudden assault on the limits set up by the textual space of the museum as foreshadowed in the narrator's retroactively ironic remark, that in the museum "los maniqués y las estatuas tenían la puntual inmovilidad de los muebles y de la cera: se podía perfectamente circular entre ellos, entre ellas, sin que nada se moviera, ninguna cosa nos sorprendiera con un rápido gesto o un grito desgarrador" (81).

While the sterile atmosphere of the museum seems to hold no danger that

its art objects might imitate life or encroach on it, the opposite process of life imitating art, is reflected in the enormous mirrors, "ellos nos contaban los pasos, las referencias físicas de nuestros gestos, nos reflejaban con lucidez y esmero, con dedicación y delicadeza, mezclados a veces con muslos de divinidades celtas o con tersos brazos de púberes efebos" (84). As the narrator readily admits this oscillation between live and artifice to his discourse and self-representation, he also submits to the surveillance by the mirrors which "a cada paso transcribían la peregrina historia de nuestros cuerpos blancos, tan blancos como su propio humor cristalino" (83). The text, too, comes to function as a mirror of an unwritten history of a human couple amidst the debris of a defunct order of language and culture. In its role of documenting an experiment with unknown denominators, the text becomes a play of possibilities, though limited by a preestablished symbolic order as origin of the speaking subject. It will have to be seen if the play of the text remains within the confines of the labyrinth, or if there is a way out of a system of conventions which are intrinsically linked to the positioning of the speaking subject.

In Lacan's narrative of subjectivity, visibility is "presented as being at the origin of the characteristics that establish human beings as speaking subjects, as sexual beings, and that determines the nature of their sexual relations..." (Mykyta, 49). Visibility, in its dual aspect of seeing and being seen, is foregrounded by the function of the mirrors in the narrator's account and introduces the element of intersubjectivity into his narrative with the acknowledgement of sexual difference between the couple. Thus, when he states, "Yo ya había mirado el cuerpo desnudo de Ariadna, reflejado en la galería de espejos, y ella había detenidamente contemplado el mío en el ala occidental del museo" (84), he marks a turning-point when visibility becomes the catalyst for the Oedipal experience which assigns gender characteristics to the so far unmarked bodies of the couple. It is a process which develops in the frame of a game, as the enacting of gender identities according to the rules set up by the two participants:

El juego consistía en que uno de los dos... Ariadna o yo mismo, cubriera su desnudez con vestiduras robadas al azar de los solemnes, vanos monumentos... se ocultara en un rincón del museo a oscuras, mientras el otro, desnudo y sin noticias, comenzara su búsqueda.... El juego tenía un desenlace: una vez descubierto el escondido, el perseguidor podría someter a su víctima a cualquier castigo, por infamante que éste fuera. (48-85).

With the symbolic enactment of desire through the play situation, the couple moves to the construction of a new narrative which, based on Foucault's hypothesis of the deployment of sexuality in discourse, describes the "implantation of pleasures in the body, which sustains the social network of power-relations" (De Lauretis, 82). Described by Paul Sosnowski as "un juego de escondidas: juego de niño en ribetes eróticos" (151), the game also contains the

elements with which child play dramatizes the positionalities of desire as intrinsically related to control, not only over reality, but also over the object of desire which is in the passive position.⁹ However, although the basic rule of the game implies an active/passive polarity, it does not reproduce the corresponding sexual masculine/feminine positions, at least not in the sense of being linked to respective biological configurations. Instead, any of the two players can assume femininity in its Oedipal positioning as passivity by assuming the role of hiding and masquerade. The game thus has all the potential to defamiliarize conventional gender traits and to problematize what is generally understood as "intelligible" genders which, in Butler's terms, "in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (17).

Role reversal characterizes the first round of the game. Ariadna chooses to be the pursuer while her male partner finds himself in the following position: "Protegido por un grotesco y enorme mármol de Sileno, cubiertas mis carnes con unos viejos trapos raptados a un endémico rey sajón, me escondí por vez primera en uno de los salones centrales del museo..." (85). The demise of the "strong sex" and its need for protection contrasts with the belligerent stance of Ariadna "que marchaba con el rostro en alto, oliendo en la atmósfera cenicienta del museo mi olor a vivo" (85). Turned warrior or animal of prey, Ariadna assaults and disembowels statues, water jugs, and armors: "Los terribles espejos de las paredes iluminaron una Ariadna febril, engarzada en la persecución con una tenacidad que le recorría el sólido cuerpo desnudo, los muslos azules y los senos delirantes..." (86). The game ends with the orgiastic celebration of Ariadna's victory, "arrancó mis viejas vestiduras con los filos de su boca, y, debajo de los trapos confundidos... nos amamos furiosamente, por primera vez desde que nos conocimos, ella y yo..." (87). Although the climax of tension is resolved through violence inflicted on the victim, it does not expel desire which is expressed and enacted the following night, this time with the narrator in pursuit of Ariadna: "No me importó, excitado por el vértigo y la ansiedad de la incógnita, curar las heridas que sus dientes, como vidrios, me habían abierto por el cuerpo, la noche anterior: habíamos recuperado la pasión de buscar y sólo anhelábamos el final" (87). A comparison between the two nights not only shows role reversal and the fact that the game does away with sexual differences as markers of gender positions, but it further reveals a problematization of the stigma of "to be it" and its function in the play situation. While the narrator's account of the first night associates "to be it" with the vulnerable party that is forced into hiding, covering up, and waiting, the description of the second night foregrounds the stigmas as attached to the position of the pursuer who is confronted with the absence of the desired object and, as described by Flieger in the joking-paradigm, is "galvanized into action by this stigma, compelled to act" while "the feminine 'object' is the holder of a certain power over the desiring subject" (957). The fact that the narrator in

both versions of the game ends up in a stigmatized position dissolves the very notion of femininity as linked to passivity, and instead foregrounds feminization as a stigma that is related to point of view and the undermining of the supposed authority of the seeing subject. The following episode should clarify what it means to be on the seeing and desiring pole of the seeing/being seen opposition.

The narrator describes his advance into the interior of the museum where he hopes to find Ariadna behind one of the statues impersonating the essence of feminine power:

El salón de las matronas romanas tenía luz artificial y yo la encendí... Primero les miré los pies, calzados con sandalias, después fui ascendiendo por las túnicas de leves tonos como un lento caracol que recorre una planta; el color amarillento de las moles me repugnaba un poco, pese a tener cierto matiz de la carne que no podía ignorarse; llegado al cuello de la primera, me asaltó el deseo: ella me miraba impasible, quizás con un poco de tristeza... un poco digna, un poco estática: brutalmente me lancé sobre ella, derrotándola sobre el suelo.... La dama apenas se agitó... pero debajo de su túnica plegada, mis manos la registraron hábilmente: desgarróse la tela como el cuerpo, y por los intersticios de los ojos nadie me miraba. (88-89)

As a replay of the Freudian castration complex and one of several examples which show the masculinity of the narrator questioned and undermined by the absence of, to use Luce Irigaray's pun, "Ce sexe que n'en est pas un" [This sex which is not one],¹⁰ the scene also parodically foregrounds the Lacanian paradox of "having" (the masculine subject) or "being" the Phallus (the feminine object) which, as a signifier of difference in language, is confounded with the physical presence or absence of the penis as the visible sign of this symbolic distinction. As Butler explains, "For women to "be" the Phallus means... to reflect the power of the Phallus... and to signify the Phallus through "being" its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity" (44). What is hidden behind the masquerade of the feminine object and consequently revealed, is not only the lack of the Phallus but also the effect of veiling as a play with false appearances which deconstructs the masculine authority associated with visibility and the phallic gaze.

The dismantling of phallic power in the narrator's discourse becomes apparent in the gradual contamination of his account with an atmosphere of paranoia and the lurking possibilities of what he had prematurely considered to be a dead but safe world of artifice and decay. What had appeared as strange yet fascinating in the eye of the beholder, now glares back at him with the threat of total annihilation: "Una serie de esqueletos incompletos desde la profundidad de su armazón parecían esconder el vacío..." (89). In the hall of dissected birds, the narrator hopes to discover Ariadna but "ojos centellantes me conducían de un pico a otro... era impulsado de un costado a otro, ora evitando un pico

desgarrador que avanzaba por el aire... ora agitado por un negro batimiento de alas profundas que oscurecía los ojos" (90). The dreaded attack on the eyes not only threatens masculine power in its relation to the desired feminine object but, as a theme of the fantastic, has a subversive function on "knowledge, comprehension, reason" which, as Jackson points out, "are established through the power of the **look**, through the 'eye' and the 'I' of the human subject whose relation to objects is structured through his field of vision" (*Fantasy*, 45). Thus, in contradiction to his faculties as a reasoning subject, the narrator can conceptualize the impossible event of Ariadna's definite disappearance, "pude pensar, en la noche terrible del museo abandonado, que ella misma había huido, transfigurada, a través de los vitrales, atravesándolos sin herirlos, hecha escarcha o hielo, a depositarse fríamente sobre la mansa superficie del parque quemado" (90). The imagined supernatural event clearly is a product of the narrator's poetic disposition which, in absence of the woman he calls Ariadna, returns her to the mythological realm where she is transformed into an aspect of nature similar to a Daphne or Aphrodite. But, as the reader will remember, it was Ariadna who had tired of transcribing old legends and myth. As a different kind of myth decipherer she now appears to be taking the lead in the narrative space of the labyrinth, not by adopting a subject position in the discourse but by circulating among active and passive positions. Surprised the narrator will find her when least expected, "pude ver a Ariadna, que disfrazada de vestal, se deslizaba por la balustrada" (92). Controlling her exits and entrances, Ariadna stages her appearances on a playground which has become a battlefield of misdirected desire:

Los diferentes salones del museo iban poblándose de las ruinas que dejábamos a nuestro paso, durante las prolongadas peregrinaciones nocturnales.... Tirados por el suelo, descansábamos, mirándonos los cuerpos cubiertos de heridas, flacos y sin embargo ardientes, los únicos completos entre el polvo y la desolación. (92-93).

As the labyrinthine space of the museum becomes littered with the dismembered parts of statues, "Rostros desfigurados de mujeres por el suelo inauguraban nuestra furia... las manos sueltas de alguna doncella desflorada, la pierna musculosa de algún guerrero sepultado ayer" (92-93), the narrator's discourse reflects what Deborah Harter identifies in the fantastic text as the fetishistic preoccupation with pre-mirror stage fantasies of the body in bits and pieces. However, while Harter maintains that, "this promotion of the part reflects a quest for unity in a world whose wholeness has been lost to view" (29), the textual universe of the abandoned museum radically subverts the concept of an intrinsic wholeness or the possible fusion of parts to create a whole. Instead, its language reproduces graphically the psychic division of the perceiving and speaking subject and, in this gesture, achieves the uncanny effect of defamiliarization which reaches its climax when the narrator, during a nightly pursuit of

Ariadna, becomes the object of his own gaze, reflected, distorted, and dismembered in a reversed passage through the mirror phase.

This specific night which is also the sixteenth after the invention of the game, brings a variation to its hide-and-seek routine: "Ariadna juró esconderse y no ser hallada: me desafió desde la escalinata con sus dulces movimientos de alga o de pez, y prometió una recompensa fabulosa y secreta a mi audacia, si yo, otra vez, conseguía vulnerarla..." (94). After strategically assuming a position of inactivity for most of the night, "Esperé, pues, paciente... desde mi improvisado mirador en la escalera, desnudo y tenaz, perro solitario y vigilante" (96), the narrator abandons this vantage point of control to begin his search, tempted by Ariadna's promise of yet unreachable heights of pleasure:

Hasta que al final, convencido de mi felicidad, decidí buscar otra vez a Ariadna, esta noche hallarla para siempre, hundir en la lujuria y en el placer, en el abandono y en sueño vedado hasta ese día, toda la ansiedad y el descontento, la oscura geometría del deseo y la satisfacción. (97)

The anticipated recuperation of a state of non-differentiation in the union with Ariadna marks the narrator's desire as caught up in a pre-mirror stage fantasy which directs his steps to the hall of mirrors, "el lugar elegido para los tormentos" (98). Aware of the specular lures of the continuous mirrors which reflect an objectified version of the perceiving subject, the narrator experiences the function of the internalized gaze as a means of surveillance:

En lo doble azul me temí: hombres cenicientos, sombríos, a mis espaldas, fabricaban mi sombra, mi otro....

Nunca tuve tantos testigos que, en una noche frenética y brutal, testimoniaran mi desnudez, mis escalofríos... ni animal alguno fue acechado tan estrechamente por tantos ojos voraces, dispuestos a devorarlo. (98-99)

Experiencing himself as other, supporting a gaze normally directed at an object of desire, the male figure takes a passive stance which, however, is immediately deflected and superimposed by the fantasy of Ariadna: "Tuve por un instante, la impresión de que Ariadna atravesaba vertiginosa.... Fue como si un velo delicado, traslúcido, sonrosara tibiamente la cornea iluminada del espejo" (99). The fleeting image leaves the trace of an absence, the "vanishing point" of the desiring subject's fiction of itself (De Lauretis, 5): "yo sólo abracé mi figura, mi ansiedad en los espejos, el pozo azul de un gesto estéril" (100).

What the mirrors anticipate metaphorically as the impossibility of traversing the space of division between self and other through the sexual relation, receives a literal interpretation in the text which opens in a rift created by the fact of Ariadna's disappearance acknowledged by the narrator at dawn, and confirmed by days of unsuccessful searching:

... triunfante navegaba, esta vez, por sus propios periplos elegidos, conduciendo su nave y su timón con independencia de mis deseos y mis mapas, circunnavegando solitaria y todopoderosa, por aguas que abiría, como abre un vestido la mano ardiente, rasgando la tela, rápida bisectriz lanzada hacia la carne. (102)

In a rewriting of the classical myth, as pointed out by Mavel Velasco, "Ariadna ya no es la mujer que lleva a cabo su papel pasivo ayudando a Teseo a salir del labirinto del museo y la que abandona un Teseo que quiere hacerla caer en sus trampas" (211). Velasco's reading of "Los juegos" concentrates on Peri Rossi's presentation of woman as capable of "la búsqueda metafísica" (211), however, an analysis of the role of femininity in the male-coded narrative requires the raising of different questions, such as "can 'she' assume subjectivity? Can the 'shifter' I shift genders? Can 'she' become the agent of desire, the active pole, the joker?" (Flieger, 960).

In the binary system of the text, the seeing/being seen opposition is radically subverted by invisibility and, from the narrator's point of view, by Ariadna's desire not to be seen. As turning point in the narrative project of playing at gender roles, Ariadna's absence subverts the rules of the game, the play within the limits of a closed space, and introduces an impossible escape from the textual universe: "Revisé puertas y cerraduras, ventanas y pasajes: nada había sido forzado. Ariadna no había podido huir por puertas intachables... allí estaban, invioladas, quietas" (105). While tormented by doubt about the nature of Ariadna's vanishing, the narrator oscillates between a rational and fantastic interpretation. Thus Ariadna becomes a scheming woman, "A veces las mujeres son así: y su castigo consiste precisamente en abusar del tiempo" (102), only to take on mythical qualities again after each new desperate effort to find her: "Había desaparecido, fugada, desvanecida, etilizada, entre los vidrios y las columnas, por las paredes y las puertas...; desvanecida detrás de múltiples espejos... deslizada de la cortina por el aire al espacio grávido de muertos" (101). But even in her supernatural shape, Ariadna withholds her magic attributes and capacity to reunite with her lover: "No cruzó, voladora, el aire y el espacio abiertos. No aherrojó los techos, para descender. No se deslizó por entre las cortinas brumas..." (103-104). In stark contrast to a supernatural explanation, the possibility of Ariadna's death is also suggested. Though not voiced explicitly, the starving rats that are populating the museum, may pose a threat to Ariadna's body: "La rata husmeando, siguiendo el olor a Ariadna por los zócalos y los pasillos. La rata lamiéndole los pies, como a una estatua" (103). Or, imitating the narrator's desire, one of the animals might find Ariadna for him, "oliendo a Ariadna, como solía yo, en las noches, mientras la amaba, oliendo su olor en el aire, siguiendo la pista de su matirio..." (103).

Among the different interpretations offered by the narrative space of the museum, only indecision is maintained and pursued as adequate response to

Ariadna's impossible absence and as a strategy to prevent the neutralization of its transgressive effect. The uncanny control of Ariadna's absence over the masculine gaze effects the symptomatic infiltration of the narrator's discourse with a paranoid obsession: the fear of being looked at, to become the object of a gaze which, as externalization of his own searching eye, attests to the split and alienation of the desiring subject from itself:

yo había visto el perfil equívoco de dos estatuas de mármol.... Alguien había cambiado de sitio a las estatuas, si la oscuridad y el ansia no me habían confundido....

En sombras... me dirigí, a tientas, hacia la estatua muda que resistía oscuramente mis intentos de identificación.... dos ojos luminosos me acechaban; una sonrisa equívoca, maligna, helada y fija en su inmovilidad me amenazaba, con su mensaje indescifrable;.... (105-106)

In the threat that its enigma poses, femininity seems finally arrested in the shape of the static while the narrator preserves his capacity of movement and persecution. The final scene, however reverses once more this opposition:

la estatua se me escapó de las manos... cayó pesadamente sobre mí, derrumbándose en el suelo.... Desde el suelo... creí ver los agudos rasgos de Ariadna brillando con luz maligna entre las telas del vestido y las gasas del rostro; la estatua se balanceó un momento... la sonrisa viborante cruzándole la boca, y con un largo larguísimo alarido, se desintegró en el suelo, sobre la confusa pirámide de cosas. (107)

"Los juegos" thus ends as what could be called a fragment in the tradition of the Gothic tale, suspending in distress, not the heroine but the male narrator, amidst the ruins of a textual artifice created for the pleasure of playing at gender identities. In its open-ended structure, the text fails to resolve the enigma of Ariadna's absence and, as such, the question of feminine subjectivity, if "she" can become the agent of desire. In its refusal to settle this problematic, the text negates the possibility of feminine subjectivity through simple role reversal. Instead, as a metaphor for the text's empty center, Ariadna's function in the textual labyrinth shows femininity to be "a symptom of the male system which her myth sustains" (Flieger, 960). The attack on the cultural signifiers that shape subjectivity and gender identity constitutes a self-conscious foregrounding of the text's signifying activity as a playing, not at the imaginary, but at the symbolic level and throws new light on the concept of the phallic pen writing the female body as absent. It is no longer an activity of mastery over a passive objectified other but a position described by the desire for, and of, the other, and describes a situation in which activity and passivity, unveiling and masquerade, seeing and being seen, are interchangeable positions which are not consistent with sexual difference. However, as Butler infers,

If gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex. Indeed, gender would be a kind of cultural/corporeal action that requires a new vocabulary that... resist both the binary and substantializing grammatical restrictions on gender. (112)

Butler's hypothesis finds ample ground for experimentation in the fantastic narratives examined in this study which reflect a preoccupation shared by feminist and psychoanalytic theories, and, more importantly, complicate their shared or often rivaling views of femininity. Both stories undermine the discourse of a fixed gender identity with the vocabulary of the fantastic as a language which creates identities that are no longer "intelligible" according to the binary oppositions underlying the language of reason and dominant hierarchical systems of signification. In "Hombres Animales Enredaderas," the restrictions of grammatical gender are dismantled through the fantastic encroachment of the narrative space by a feminine agency, while "Los juegos" inscribes femininity as transferable stigma, and as such intimately linked to the undermining of an authority of seeing. Both texts dramatize an experience of gender limits where gender exceeds the body and challenges the expectations and myths the reader brings to the text.

NOTES

1 In her introduction to Jacques Lacan's article "God and the Jouissance of Woman. A Love Letter," Jacqueline Rose describes the Lacanian concept of jouissance as "that moment in sexuality which is always in excess, something over and above the phallic term which is the mark of sexual identity." *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983), 137.

2 For an exposition and critique of New French Feminism and its return to the female body as source of the text, see Ann Rosalind Jones's "Writing the Body: l'Ecriture feminine," *Essays on Women Writers, Literature, Theory*, Ed. Elaine Showalter, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 361-377.

3 This concept is taken from Janet Todd's introduction to *Women and Film*, Ed. Janet Todd, (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 3-21. Referring to a "masculinity in crisis," Todd states: "It coincides with Western patriarchy's own troubled awakening, in the second part of the twentieth century, to the insolvency of its traditional ideologies. Historical feminism surveys the aetiology of that bankruptcy from the vantage point of the present, throwing into stark relief the historical instability of patriarchy at all levels of its institutionalization" (9).

4 Judith Butler analyzes sex/gender and nature/culture dualism and its implications on sexual politics in her book entitled *Gender Trouble*, pp. 37-38.

5 Translated in *Yale French Studies* 48 (1976), pp. 39-72. Also refer to Barbara Johnson's "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977), p. 457.

6 For a brief discussion of the themes linking the stories in this collection see pp. 155-66 in Gustavo San Román's "Fantastic Political Allegory in the Early Work of Cristina Peri Rossi," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 67.2 (April 1990), 151-164.

7 Kathleen Lignell refers to Peri Rossi's concept of language as echoing Lacan's and that of many structuralist theorists: "'Language' is not to inform but to evoke..." or, "Peri Rossi conceives of the universe... as a language, a script which is continually changing" (p. 26) in "The Mirror as Metaphor in Peri Rossi's Poem 'Applications of Lewis Carroll's Logic'," *Latin American Literary Review* 26.31 (January-June 1988), 24-33.

8 According to Todorov, the poetic reading of a text constitutes a danger for the fantastic since each phrase is only considered as a semantic combination and not as a description of an evoked world, while, in turn, the effect of the fantastic often relies on the literal reading of a figurative phrase. The distinction between fiction and poetry is necessary for a literal reading of a phrase to have its startling effect on the reader. The analysis of "Los juegos" focuses on the text's self-conscious foregrounding of narrative strategies, including those of the fantastic, which become instrumental in the unsettling of traditional reading habits and reader-positions.

9 See Flieger's "The Purloined Punchline" for a discussion of Freud's "Fort-Da" game and his hypothesis of the play situation ("boy meets girl anecdote") as paradigm for the joking triangle as a "master plot of human desire" (pp. 947-49).

10 Irigaray's essay "That Sex Which Is Not One," was reprinted in *Language, Sexuality and Subversion*, Eds. P. Foss and M. Morris, (Sydney: Feral, 1978).

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