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Helene C. Weldt-Basson

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STRUCTURALIST AND POST-STRUCTURALIST AMBIGUITIES
IN RUBÉN BAREIRO SAGUIER'S *EL SÉPTIMO PÉTALO
DEL VIENTO* AND *LA ROSA AZUL*

Helene C. Weldt-Basson
Wayne State University

The Paraguayan writer, Rubén Bareiro Saguier, born in Villeta de Guarnipitán in 1930, is an important figure within Paraguayan letters. Author of various poetry anthologies, Bareiro is most noted for his three collections of short stories: *Ojo por diente* (1972), *El séptimo pétalo de viento* (1984), and *La rosa azul* (2005). To date, most of the critical attention regarding his work has been focused on his first collection of stories, *Ojo por diente*, winner of the Casa de las Américas prize. Fifteen years ago, struck by the contradictory interpretations of *Ojo por diente* by various critics, I wrote an article exploring ambiguity in the collection.¹ When I recently sat down to read Bareiro's two subsequent anthologies, ambiguity once again appeared to be the fundamental operating principle of his fiction, and yet these last two collections also seemed to me essentially different from the first in their philosophical stance, as I hope to show below.

The term "ambiguity" has itself become ambiguous, lending itself to a variety of definitions and a series of literary debates. In my previous work on Bareiro, I used the definition of ambiguity provided by William Empson, who views ambiguity as "an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or the other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (Empson 5-6). However, other critics have attempted to delimit Empson's broad definition. Shlomith Rimmon, who has done extensive research on ambiguity in Henry James and other writers, suggests that ambiguity is limited to the "conjunction of exclusive disjuncts," in which she defines "disjuncts" as "finalized hypotheses" that the reader makes at the end of the reading process (Rimmon 8-9; Rimmon-Kenan, "Ambiguity and Narrative Levels" 21). In other words, Rimmon claims that in order for ambiguity to

exist, the two finalized hypotheses cannot be compatible, but rather, must be mutually exclusive. In contrast, what Empson describes is polysemy, or, in Rimmon's terms, the "conjunction of compatible readings" (Rimmon-Kenan, "Ambiguity and Narrative Levels" 21). Only if a text elicits two mutually exclusive disjuncts, which can be equally supported by narrative clue systems, can ambiguity occur.

In addition to distinguishing between "polysemy" and "ambiguity," Rimmon clarifies several other phenomena which have frequently been confused with ambiguity. Rimmon defines allegory and symbolism as terms that operate on the basis of the equivalence between a literal and figurative meaning. Although a symbolic construction can have various meanings, these distinct senses are not mutually exclusive, but rather can be conjoined and reconciled into a larger unit of meaning, hence constituting a form of polysemy instead of ambiguity (Rimmon 24).

Similarly, Rimmon also attempts to distinguish between the concept of ambiguity and that of "vagueness" or "indeterminacy." For Rimmon, a vague expression or narrative situation does not present two or more contradictory meanings with equally valid narrative clues to support them, (as in ambiguity), but rather suggests possible interpretations which are equally unprovable or unsupported based on textual cues. Rimmon, while recognizing the fact that all interpretation is based on the interaction between reader and text, suggests that ambiguity is more directly grounded in the text itself, while "indeterminacy" or "polysemy" tend to emphasize the reader's role in creation of meaning (what the individual reader brings to the text).

Timothy Bahti fundamentally agrees with Rimmon's last distinction between "ambiguity" as textually based and "indeterminacy" as focusing on the reader's role. In his article "Ambiguity and Indeterminacy: The Juncture," Bahti views "ambiguity" as a term used by the New Critics (such as Empson) in the earlier part of the twentieth century, to refer to multiple meanings of a word or phrase within a text that were ultimately reconcilable in some way (note that he does not delimit the term ambiguity to incompatible textual meanings, as does Rimmon). In contrast, more contemporary critics, employ the term "indeterminacy" to refer to multiple meanings, which, in addition to reflecting an essential polysemy in the text, are primarily viewed as problems of interpretation that point to the burden on the reader and the ultimate irresolution of the text. Bahti sees structuralist ambiguity theory as a precursor to literary deconstructionism and postmodernism (Bahti 209-210).

Perhaps this connection between ambiguity studies and contemporary postmodern theory explains to some degree the absence of recent literary criticism on the topic of ambiguity. Structuralist approaches to the literary text, such as Rimmon's (dating back to the 1980s), that see ambiguity as a specific characteristic of certain texts, have given way to post-structuralist discussions of the fundamental unreadability and lack of meaning of all texts.² By questioning the validity of literary [or any other type of] knowledge

and the relationship between language and its referents, the essential philosophy behind postmodernism is one of nihilism and incomprehensibility. Postmodernism turns to irony and parody as elements that help debunk authoritative discourses and dethrone pretensions to absolute truth (Gregson 3-4; Hutcheon 3-21, 50-51; Lyotard 34-37).

This having been said, in an ironic postmodern vein, I would like to employ Rimmon's ambiguity theory to illustrate how structuralist theory can illuminate the postmodern philosophy behind Bareiro Saguier's last two collections of short stories. Research on Bareiro Saguier's early short stories reveals that many of the types of ambiguity studied were clearly linguistic, rather than narrative, in nature, such as the use of contradictory declarations, oxymorons, and the word "perhaps" (Weltdt 41-56). Such linguistic ambiguities created problems of interpretation, but they did not ultimately posit a postmodern vision of the text because the reader was able to reconcile conflicting elements and the characters did not face irresolvable contradictions. Although such structures were referred to as "ambiguities," in retrospect, if we apply Rimmon's terminology, some of them did not create mutually exclusive disjuncts, and were indeed capable of being integrated into a larger unit of meaning, consequently, adhering more precisely to Rimmon's concept of "polysemy." Thus, in returning to the topic of ambiguity, I would like to now examine Bareiro's last two works in terms of Rimmon's categories, to show how *El séptimo pétalo de viento* and *La rosa azul*: 1) focus on narrative rather than linguistic ambiguity; 2) employ the delimited form of ambiguity defined by Rimmon, and 3) posit to a high degree, both polysemous and indeterminate textual readings, which, in addition to the use of textual ambiguity, suggest a postmodern mentality or sensibility to the reader.

There are several stories in the collections *El séptimo pétalo de viento* and *La rosa azul*, in which the reader is forced to choose between two mutually exclusive meanings, equally supported by textual cues. The first, "El sueño incompleto de Philibert," from *El séptimo pétalo de viento*, narrates the insomnia of Philibert, the narrator's associate in a court office. The first day, Philibert recounts how his night of insomnia was briefly interrupted by a short sleep period in which he dreamt that two men entered his room and ransacked his belongings. He is obsessed with knowing whether or not he ever completed the dream, or simply forgot its ending. After a second night of insomnia, Philibert believes that he sees the two robbers from his dream following him after dinner at a local restaurant. The third night, Philibert is robbed just as he imagined in his initial dream, but cannot determine whether he fell asleep and dreamt the robbery while it was happening, or, if he actually witnessed this robbery in a state of insomnia. This incertitude plagues him at the story's conclusion, and the doubt is never resolved for the reader. The narrative ambiguity is further complicated by Philibert's reading of a story in which two robbers commit a theft in front

of an impotent victim.

In “El sueño incompleto de Philibert,” the narrator receives his information from Philibert, and the reader, in turn, receives all his information from the narrator-character. There is no omniscient narration or vision which can tell us what really happened. There are two contradictory narrative clues for the reader and each resolves into a distinct interpretation. The first clue, which suggests that the narrator dreamt the robbery prior to its occurrence, is the fragmented dream of the first night. The fact that the narrator dreamt of the robbery once reinforces the possibility that the narrator was dreaming again on the third night, in a similar fashion. In contrast, the second narrative clue, Philibert’s reading of a story in which the victim was awake during the crime, reinforces the second possible interpretation, that the narrator witnessed the robbery. There is nothing else in the text to support or contradict either possibility. Consequently, the reader is left with two competing interpretations which cannot simultaneously coexist: either Philibert dreamt the robbery while it was occurring, or Philibert witnessed the robbery in an insomniac state. The ambiguity arises from these two “conjunctive disjuncts” and cannot be resolved without favoring one or the other of the possible textual interpretations. Philibert’s inability to resolve this dilemma becomes an obsession that reflects man’s postmodern condition. At the story’s end, Philibert fails to arrive at work for the first time in years because his is obsessively mulling over whether: “la tercera noche no pudo en realidad dormir, o si se trata de una pesadilla en la que soñó que no podía dormir” (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* n.p.). The protagonist is permanently handicapped by his incapacity to know the truth while the reader is equally impaired in his ability to arrive at a clear textual interpretation.

Two stories from *La rosa azul* which are good examples of Rimmon’s notion of ambiguity are “El saludo final de Boris,” and “La confesión.” In the first tale, the death of the enigmatic character, Boris, is initially presented as a suicide by the character Gustavo. However, the specific circumstances of his death and suicidal motives are never revealed through the narration. The narrator (Gustavo’s friend) presents a series of conflicting clues that simultaneously lead the reader to three mutually exclusive conclusions: 1) Boris committed suicide or was murdered because he was a spy; 2) Boris committed suicide because he was harassed by Gustavo and made to feel guilty for having had an affair with his wife; 3) Boris did not commit suicide, but was murdered by the narrator’s friend, Gustavo.

The first of these hypotheses is suggested by the initial description of Boris:

Hosco, misterioso y apuesto, su atlética figura, sus intensos ojos azules, sus cabellos rizados no habían pasado desapercibidos, sobre todo entre las mujeres. Unos decían que era espía soviético, lo que Antonio negaba categóricamente.

—En el partido nadie lo conoce, nadie sabe nada de él—afirmaba, y agregaba malicioso—Creo que más bien trabaja para la C.I.A. . . . (Bareiro, *La rosa* 35).

This passage suggests that Boris's mysterious identity must be relevant to the story, and consequently, this information implies to the reader another possible motive for Boris's death. The inclusion of this information opens up the possibility that Boris's supposed suicide was actually a political murder that was made to look like a suicide, or that Boris killed himself for political reasons.

The second possibility is suggested through the narration of Gustavo's constant harassment of Boris, witnessed by the narrator. The narrator informs us that "fui testigo obligado de los raros, de los delirantes encuentros entre Boris y Gustavo, provocados, buscados por éste" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 38). The narrator describes Gustavo's discussions with Boris as "un galleo de torero picado frente al robusto toro ruso" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 39). Despite Gustavo's attempts to inflame Boris, the narrator tells us that Boris respected Gustavo with "un oscuro aprecio" of his rival (Bareiro, *La rosa* 39). These descriptions suggest that Boris is driven by guilt to kill himself in the story. Moreover, the suicide theory is supported by the description of Boris's behavior prior to his death: "Doña Maruja descubrió el cadáver en la cama hoy temprano. Sospeché algo, pues desde ayer de tarde en que se encerró, no había escuchado ningún ruido en la habitación" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 34).

Finally, the third possibility is suggested by Gustavo's violent reaction to Boris's death. Although Gustavo's reaction may be attributed to guilt for provoking Boris's suicide, it is also plausible that he caused Boris's death more directly. After all, we only learn that Boris's death was a suicide because Gustavo initially reports it as such. Furthermore, Gustavo's subsequent actions cast a certain degree of suspicion upon him. He insists on trying to make contact with Boris through spiritism. When the group feels a fourth presence in the room and the table levitates, Gustavo abruptly terminates the session: "Estaba verde, la frente le sudaba . . . Me voy . . . dijo Gustavo, ya desde la puerta, sin volver el rostro" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 48). These actions conjure up the idea of a more direct involvement on Gustavo's part, and his sweaty, green face implies a stronger guilt than that intimated by Gustavo's mere harassment of Boris. Hence, a third and final conclusion, which is clearly at odds with the first two (that Boris's death was a suicide or political murder), is suggested to the reader, who is forced to choose between mutually exclusive disjuncts to make sense of the text.

A similar process of narrative construction is found in Bareiro's story "La confesión," in which the narrator reveals his sin of masturbation to his priest. Two contradictory scenarios for this masturbation are presented to the reader. At first, we are told that the narrator masturbated in the presence

of his cousin: “Cuando le propuse, ella me miró fijo a los ojos y con una sonrisa pícara, como sólo ella sabe desplegar, aceptó gustosa” (Bareiro, *La rosa* 90). Later the narrator adds that :

Sé que mi “pecado,” esa “caricia monomaníaca” . . . no era en mi caso una “actividad solitaria,” puesto que yo me sentía intensamente acompañado; yo la tenía a mi lado, dentro de mis entrañas, a través de las descripciones minuciosas. Ella compartía conmigo, sabiendo que se trataba de un rito que nos acercaba; ella participaba de manera continua, como me lo confirmaban sus gestos, sus medias palabras cálidas, y las leves caricias de sus manos delicadas en las partes sensibles de mi cuerpo, cuando hablábamos del avance feliz de nuestro proyecto amoroso. (Bareiro, *La rosa* 91).

Despite this detailed description of the participation of the narrator’s cousin while he masturbates, at the end of the story, he suggests that perhaps his cousin wasn’t there at all, but rather that what he thought were here encouraging sighs, were actually the sounds of a rat’s nest: “Ocurre que hace poco descubrí un nido de ratas en esa habitación, y ahora no sé si lo que oía era el aliento de su boca, el movimiento de su cuerpo, o los ruidos provocados por esas inmundas bestezuelas” (Bareiro, *La rosa* 93). These two conflicting hypotheses are never resolved for the protagonist or the reader, who is left with a final lack of textual meaning or closure.

“La ley” (*El séptimo pétalo de viento*) presents an instance of ambiguous characterization. In this story, a rich landowner, Don Marcial, exploits and eventually evicts Karái Rojas from the land that he has tilled for thirty years. The narrative begins with an enigmatic appearance of a leper, who is described as an individual who “no tenía cara; calzaba un sombrero negro de fieltro, que bamboleó en sus manos como un muñeco durante la corta entrevista” (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo*, n.p.). The leper, who is later thrown out of the town, informs Don Marcial that Karái Rojas died of tuberculosis the week before. Several pages later, we are told through the words of ña Pastora, that it was an epileptic who appeared in the town and who “echaba espuma como un animal rabioso” (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* n.p.). A page or so later, Damiana reports that the stranger was a leper: “le vi la cara carcomida y amortada” (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* n.p.). Subsequently, ña Clarita gives a different version of the appearance: “Se trataba de un individuo convulso, con los ojos en ascuas y desfigurado por las pústulas de la peste negra” (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo*, n.p.). Toward the end of the tale, this much discussed character becomes: “Un jorobado con las patitas de araña” by an unreported speaker (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo*, n.p.). The varied voices demonstrate the functioning of oral history in Paraguay. Each listener changes the story slightly as he/she communicates it to the next listener, or provides his or her own special twist to the event. Finally, on the last page of the tale, the narrator, Don Marcial’s son, tells us, upon visiting Karái Rojas’s ranch:

Sólo después entendí cabalmente lo que quiso significar esa mañana en el escritorio de don Marcial el misterioso arribeño con el rostro carcomido por la lepra, congestionado por la epilepsia, desfigurado por los furúnculos de la peste negra o contrahecho por la joroba. Lo comprendí cuando me contaron que los naranjos plantados por Karái Rojas se secaron todos, atacados por una enfermedad incurable que los fitopatólogos llaman ‘mal de la tristeza,’ eso dicen. (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* 40)

The narrator’s final “explanation” clarifies very little for the reader. The question of the true nature and identity of the town stranger is never answered by the text. Is he a leper, an epileptic, a hunchback, or all of the above? Why does he appear in the town to report Rojas’s death? How is the character related to Karái Rojas? The narrator suggests that his presence is connected to the discovery that the oranges on Rojas’s land have dried up, affected by a disease called “mal de tristeza” (the illness of sadness). Did this man eat the oranges and consequently become ill with different ailments (leprosy, epilepsy, etc.)? Or is he in fact Karái Rojas himself, who gets sick after his eviction and returns to instill guilt in Don Marcial? Although this second interpretation is contradicted by the fact that the stranger reports Rojas’s death, it is supported by the following description by one of the townspeople: “Cuando se repuso un poco del vómito sanguinolento que le sacudía de pies a cabeza, le expulsaron del pueblo” (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo*, n.p.). In other words, this individual describes the “leper” as a tubercular victim, which in turn identifies the stranger with Rojas, who supposedly died of tuberculosis. This creates two conflicting hypotheses: was the visitor a stranger, Rojas himself, or perhaps Rojas’s ghost? This last interpretation suggests the possible incorporation of Paraguayan popular mythic consciousness into the text, which is an important characteristic of Bareiro’s fiction that can be observed in other stories, such as “Mbyja” (*La rosa azul*) and “Licantropía” (*El séptimo pétalo del viento*). Although the narrator of the story believes that he has discovered the truth, the reader is led to a postmodern vision of reality through the varied descriptions of the stranger and the lack of establishment of his “true” identity.

The use of repetition in “La ley” is clearly important here, because as Todorov has shown, repetition signals symbolic value (Todorov 53-54). Moreover, Robert Rogers emphasizes the complementarity between redundancy and ambiguity (Rogers 591). In other words, constant repetition usually constitutes a narrative clue that aids the reader in resolving the ambiguity. If we look at the potential symbolic value of the town stranger, he would seem to encompass many of the possible deformities that a man could possibly suffer: leprosy, epilepsy, and a hunchback. The deformity may be a symbol of the social injustice perpetrated on Rojas, or might possibly indicate other symbolic interpretations. Chevalier and Gheerbrant note: “Deformity makes its victim the benign or malign intercessor between the

known and the unknown, the dark and the bright side of nature, this world and the beyond. This ambiguous role is given to the hunchback on so many occasions in folktales” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 282). This idea supports the notion that the stranger may be Rojas’s ghost, coming from the beyond.

To some degree, “La ley” is an example of both polysemy and ambiguity. In Rimmon’s terms, the story presents two mutually exclusive hypotheses: either the strange figure who appears in the town is or isn’t Karafí Rojas (or his ghost). On the other hand, the reader is also presented with two possibly conjoining hypotheses: the stranger need not be either a leper, or a hunchback, or an epileptic, but might possibly be all three. The distinct narrations of the stranger’s visit can in fact be subsumed into a larger unit of interpretation, as can the potential symbolic values of the stranger’s illness(es). Hence, on different levels, the story presents both multiple and contradictory meanings.

According to Rimmon’s terminology, only the four stories cited above are technically “ambiguous.” Nonetheless, numerous stories in Bareiro’s two collections subscribe to the various other categories related to ambiguity which have been established by Rimmon.

“Reunión de familia,” from *El séptimo pétalo de viento*, is an excellent example of the development of two conjunctive hypotheses that create polysemy, but whose meanings can be conjoined rather than presenting two contradictory, irresolvable hypotheses. The story, in a manner similar to “El sueño incompleto de Philisbert,” develops its themes through a fusion of dream and reality, although it ultimately resolves for the reader whether the events are real or imagined at the story’s end. The tale begins with the narrator, Candela, sitting at the dinner table, desirous of recounting her nightmare of the previous night to her mother and sister. Although nobody wants to listen to Candela, she tells the story to herself, in paragraphs that alternate with aunt Felisa’s narration of how Candela’s mother met her father, a Bolivian prisoner from the Chaco War. Candela’s narration of her nightmare recounts the relationship between Julita, Candela, and their father. Candela’s description of this relationship constitutes polysemous discourse, in which the reader cannot decipher whether the father is beating his daughter, engaging in sexual activity with her, or both:

Rueden lentamente, como dos osos de felpa, revoliciándose [sic]. La boca de Julita se abre y se cierra en parsimoniosos tiempos, las muecas de su cara siguen el mismo ritmo; los párpados tienen un reborde brillante. En la cara cetrina los ojos se estiran sobre los pómulos, que se vuelven más y más angulosos. Las manos apretando las manos, un hombro contra el otro, luego el derecho de ella contra el izquierdo de él. Sueño que yo también entro en el juego; inclinada sobre ellos muevo las manos, mis numerosas manos, arriba, abajo, al costado, entre los dos, tirando dulcemente de un brazo, de una pierna, de un hombro, de una nalga de una espalda, todo suavemente a un mismo tiempo. Un puño me roza la mejilla como una flor,

otro me acaricia el cuello, cerca de la oreja izquierda, casi puedo oler la tercera corola que me llega a la nariz. (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* n.p.).

Candela narrates as dream an unclear situation in which a struggle between Julita and the father ensues. The descriptive markers can be interpreted as either a sexual act or a violent beating: Julita grimaces, there are hands squeezing hands, a fist scrapes against Candela's cheek when she enters the scene, she tugs at a shoulder, buttocks and back, a fist both caresses Candela's neck and swipes against her cheek, finally arriving at her nose. Are the grimaces ones of sexual pleasure or pain? What does the final sentence, "casi puedo oler la tercera corola que me llega a la nariz" refer to? The narrator metaphorically terms a fist a flower, thus suggesting that the "tercera corola," is yet another fist, but if so, whose? The sensorial quality of the passage (touching, smelling) suggests the sexual act, while the final image of the fist at the narrator's nose evokes a beating. This doubt is never resolved for the reader, who is told at the story's end that the father, murdered by Candela for this act, surrounded her, Julita and the mother with a "cariño secreto y violento" (Bareiro, *El séptimo* 46). Here, the oxymoron "cariño violento" reinforces the idea of conjoining contradictory events or ideas and emphasizes the fact that the two competing interpretations are in no way mutually exclusive. Hence, this story presents a case of multiple meanings, rather than ambiguous discourse. Although the central event is narrated as a dream, its reality is in fact clarified for the reader at the novel's end, because we are told that the three women are faced with the "empty chair" which clearly belonged to the father, who was killed by Candela in the dream, but apparently, also in reality. At an earlier point in the story, Candela questions whether "el sueño le copia a la realidad, o a lo mejor es al revés" (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* n.p.). Nonetheless, although we know at the end that the father was killed and that Candela was subsequently dreaming of the event, the circumstances surrounding the murder remain unclear, and the reader is left to debate among the motives of sexual and physical abuse, or conjoin them in a single interpretation. The truth of the relationship between Candela, Julita, and their father is undiscoverable for the reader.

Now that we have examined examples that demonstrate the functioning of ambiguity and polysemy in Bareiro's texts, we can analyze two love stories in *La rosa azul* that illustrate how Rimmon's concept of "vagueness" or "indeterminacy" functions. In these stories, the reader is forced to create a series of interpretations that are all equally unprovable or unsupported by narrative cues. There is simply a lack of information rather than specific conflicting hypotheses. In "La mar se llama Charito," the narrator recounts his love affair with Charito. We are abruptly told, during one of the narrator's meetings with Charito, that the sea was "el símbolo de mi próxima partida" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 150). The reader is never informed of why the

narrator suddenly must leave, although the fact that he subsequently wrote Charito letters from Buenos Aires and Río de Janeiro, and that he was in Seville only for “two long weeks” (Bareiro, *La rosa azul* 148) suggest that he was simply in Spain on a short vacation. Similarly, we are informed that he and Charito had agreed to meet a year later in Seville: “Como convinimos, yo estuve de nuevo en Sevilla . . . coincidiendo con la fecha de nuestro encuentro” (Bareiro, *La rosa* 151). The narrator looks for Charito, but she doesn’t appear. The reason for her absence is never clarified in the text. The reader is left to wonder why, especially when the two had continued corresponding by mail. Did Charito forget about the promised encounter? Did she lose interest in the romance? Did she meet somebody else? Did some misfortune befall her? This indeterminacy is emphasized by a blurred, largely illegible letter from Charito on the last page, in which the reader can barely make out more than a few sentences, but can see the last line in which she promises “no te olvida nunca tu Chabarito” (Bareiro, *La rosa* 154). The story is impregnated by a sense of nostalgia for the past, and yet this lost love remains without closure, because no clues to an explanation for Charito’s failure to reunite with the narrator can be found in the text. Moreover, the blurred writing that appears on the last page of the story is the perfect metaphor for the postmodern disjunction between words and meanings or actions.

Similarly, “La rosa azul” also presents a past romance that ends for unclear reasons. The romance appears to have taken place in France, because we are told that the protagonist and his love “habían deambulado de Montmartre al cielo y cielo repetido” (Bareiro, *La rosa* 194). When the narrator recalls the couple’s last time together, we are only presented with a fragmented dialogue:

‘¿Porqué aquí y no en otro sitio?,’ le había preguntado ella en esa postrera mortecina atardecida. “Porque en este lugar se produce la conjunción de los vientos . . .” había inventado él. “Y porque ya no hay estrellas para guiarles en la noche; se apagaron con el último pétalo de tu palabra . . . agregó. O quizá sólo lo pensó. Y entonces, porqué no lo había dicho en voz alta? (Bareiro, *La rosa* 198)

It is difficult to understand, with no prior contextual information, what the two protagonists are discussing here, although the fact that it is their last afternoon together suggests that the man is offering some explanation to the woman regarding their separation. Nonetheless, the metaphorical discussion, based on wind and stars, doesn’t provide any real information to the reader.

A series of secondary allusions suggest the possibility of the woman’s subsequent death, but the allusions are so general that they do not preclude the possibility that they refer to a general context of war, which might also be the cause of the couple’s separation, if the protagonist is a soldier. For example, when the protagonist returns to what he refers to as the “foreign city,” the narrator exclaims “Qué lleno estaba ahora de muerte!” (Bareiro,

La rosa 196). Similarly, after describing the protagonist's sexual relationship with the woman, the narrator states "Qué lejos estaba entonces la muerte!" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 195). Prior and subsequent comments refer to both war and romance. For example, on the first page of the story we are told that the protagonist had been in jail. Given the twentieth century Paraguayan political context of dictatorship, censorship and revolution, this suggests that perhaps he had been a political prisoner.³ Similarly, toward the end of the tale, the waiter in the café tells the protagonist that another gentleman there belonged to the other faction and that the protagonist should be careful with him (Bareiro, *La rosa* 200). These facts suggest the possibility that both the protagonist and the other gentleman in the café are Paraguayan political exiles, since they are clearly in a foreign city. However, the mention of Montmartre, a neighborhood in Paris, might also evoke a context of death and destruction during World War I or II, when many foreign soldiers occupied France. At the end of the story, the untrustworthy gentleman tells the protagonist: "Bueno, yo estoy, ella . . . ella está yendo . . . Usted . . . Usted y yo estamos solos" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 202) suggesting the imminent death or departure of the woman and a possible love triangle. The tale ends with the protagonist's realization of the meaning of the unintelligible words spoken to him by his possible rival: "Recién entonces entendió lo que el hombre había susurrado repetidamente: "Imposible . . . la rosa azul es el símbolo de lo imposible . . ." (Bareiro, *La rosa* 202). The discourse points to the rose's association with the impossible, however, what remains unresolved is its referent: what is impossible? War? Peace? The relationship with the dying woman? The vagueness of the term "ella" with no prior referent (war, peace, death, the woman, are all feminine nouns in Spanish), is what linguists such as Georgia Green call "pragmatic underspecification" (Green 9). In such cases, the interlocutor (in this case, the reader) is forced to interpret the indeterminacy on the basis of the speaker's communicative intentions, of which there is no other obvious evidence in the story.

There are, however, certain metaphorical associations made between the woman and a flower, possibly suggesting a connection between the blue rose and the protagonist's former love. For example, when the narrator describes the couples' wanderings through Montmartre, he tells us that "él había sido arrebuñado por el temblor sedoso de sus pétalos" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 194), suggesting a possible equivalence between the woman's body and the rose petals. Similarly, when the suspect gentleman from the other faction shakes hands with the protagonist, we are told that his handshake "seguía hablando de la soledad, del dolor, de la flor encenizada" (Bareiro, *La rosa* 201). These allusions, prior to the mention of the blue rose, suggest a connection between the woman and the flower. Nonetheless, we never learn whether the relationship was rendered impossible through death or departure, and the textual meaning remains vague due to lack of support of textual cues.

In addition to stories that are constituted by narrative indeterminacies throughout, Bareiro Saguier presents a series of tales that although not particularly ambiguous in their development end on a note of unanswered questions that preclude narrative closure. At least three stories operate in this manner: “Circunstancia imprevista,” (from *La rosa azul*), as well as “De cómo el tío Emilio ganó la vida perdurable” and “Noches de Veracruz” (from *El séptimo pétalo del viento*). All three stories suggest a reflection on the unpredictability of human nature through their indeterminate endings. In “Circunstancia imprevista” a wife commits suicide, but no mention is made of her motives. The story vaguely implies an unhappy marriage, because the husband doesn’t seem to note his wife’s absence until after the police have arrived, announced her suicide, and he is about to read her suicide note. Her absence is the “circunstancia imprevista” of the title. The reader is left to imagine the woman’s motives, as the contents of the note found by the husband at the story’s conclusion are never revealed. Similarly, in “Como el tío Emilio ganó la vida perdurable,” Emilio’s niece is determined to make her uncle marry her aunt Justina, with whom he has lived with for some fifty years. The story presents Justina as a strong-willed woman who sees no need for such ceremonies after all this time. Nonetheless, in the last line of the story, in an inexplicable reversal, Justina decides to concede to the marriage. Finally, in “Noches de Veracruz,” the narrator and his girlfriend Lariza meet a strange man named Carlos in Veracruz. Carlos constantly befriends travelers, from whom he learns much about their cultures. When the narrator and his friend leave Veracruz, Carlos is sad and they promise to write to him. Nonetheless, at the story’s conclusion, the protagonists fail to receive responses from Carlos. The text never clarifies why Carlos doesn’t correspond with the narrator and Lariza, and it is left entirely to his/her imagination to determine the enigmatic character’s motives. These three stories are characterized by a total lack of narrative cues for the reader, consequently suggesting the applicability of a postmodern vision to the text.

My final example, “El ojo de la lechuza,” from *El séptimo pétalo de viento*, is a case of narrative ambiguity combined with the polysemy of symbolism. In this story, the narrator’s friend, Georges, dies of cancer. On several occasions, Georges had told his friends “El día que me muera aparecerá la lechuza, van a verla ustedes” (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* n.p.). The narrator goes out in search of the owl, but has difficulty finding it. Indeed, it remains unclear in the story whether he actually finds the owl that day or not. After having no initial luck, he searches for it among the laurel. Then we are ambiguously told:

Y mi linterna sigue subiendo como si hubiese adquirido vida propia. Cuando me doy cuenta, el haz de luz había sobrepasado la cima del laurel, y su movimiento automático había arrastrado consigo mi mirada hasta un

ángulo de casi noventa grados sobre mi cabeza, hacia el oriente. De golpe, un punto luminoso atrajo mi atención; se desplazaba lentamente en una órbita muy superior a la máxima de un avión. (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo*, n.p.)

In this brief description, the narrator spots something in the air whose identity is not verified. Could this be a fleeting glimpse of the owl? Possibly, although we are later told that the narrator continues his search, and that he still hears Georges's voice "evocando una lechuza que no está en ninguna parte" (Bareiro, *El séptimo*, n.p.). The evocation of the owl and the conflicting hypotheses as to whether the narrator can find it or not, create narrative ambiguity. Moreover, the story raises questions for the reader with regard to the owl's symbolic significance. In many cultures, the owl represents death, and this would explain why Georges claims that it will appear the day he dies (Cirlot 247; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 729). However, the story's title specifically refers to the eye of the owl, which also suggests possible symbolic connections for the word "eye." According to both Cirlot and Chevalier and Gheerbrant, the "eye" is associated with comprehension and insight (Cirlot 99-100; Chevalier and Gheerbrant 362-363), perhaps suggesting death as a spiritual revelation, and counterpoising the superstition of the owl and its relationship to the ineffable to Georges' stated rational and cynical personality. Elsewhere in the story we are told that Georges "Sólo creía en lo que era posible realizar o comprobar palpablemente. Esta actitud le había convertido en un racionalista, un poco cínico, descreído y siempre burlón" (Bareiro, *El séptimo pétalo* 2). This creates an unresolved conflict between the hypothesis that Georges was cynical and rational, versus the possibility that he was spiritual and superstitious, truly believing in the mysterious appearance of the owl upon his death. The juxtaposition of these two opposing personality traits or worldviews posits a contradictory, postmodern characterization of Georges for the reader.

In conclusion, a careful analysis of Rubén Bareiro Saguier's most recent story collections, *El séptimo pétalo de viento* (1984) and *La rosa azul* (2005) illustrates the confluence of three separate but interrelated literary phenomena: ambiguity, polysemy, and indeterminacy. This study has employed a structuralist approach to elucidate a postmodern philosophy behind Bareiro's texts. Although structuralism and post-structuralism are two approaches commonly presented as incompatible, some structuralist and deconstructionist critics have emphasized a possible overlap between the two. As Rimmon herself points out:

Thus a deconstructive reading need not supplant a structuralist reading, as it implicitly claims to do in Miller's article on "The Figure in the Carpet" (1980). Instead, the two approaches appear to imply each other in a constant see-saw movement. Within this movement, the deconstructionist notion of undecidability or unreadability introduces the uncanny into a

“rational” notion like ambiguity, but ambiguity, in turn, can subvert the paradoxical univocality of the supposedly “alogical” undecidability. In the realm of the uncanny, it is paradoxically the canny that becomes ‘the uncanniest of all guests’ (Nietzsche, 1968, 7, quoted by Miller, 1979: 227, 253). [Rimmon-Kenan, “Deconstructive Reflections 188]

After examining the multiple instances of ambiguity, polysemy and indeterminacy in Bareiro’s works, there can be little doubt about the operative philosophy behind Bareiro’s narrative. Indeed, in the words of Bareiro himself:

En efecto, cuando libro un texto literario al eventual desconocido lector, considero que, implícitamente, estoy haciéndole una propuesta, planteándole un enigma a través de múltiples indicios, desafiándole a descifrarlo . . . El máximo reto que lanza el escritor es el de que cuando su obra llegue al destinatario, ella se encarne en su imaginario, aunque el significado que el mismo le dé no coincida con el originario. Si se da esta situación, quiere decir que mi voz tiene un sentido polisémico, y que a partir de los míos, el lector puede des-entrañar sus propios sueños. (Bareiro, *La rosa* 27-28).

The reader of *El séptimo pétalo de viento* and *La rosa azul* is clearly left to “unearth his own dreams,” faced with the “enigma” of the text, the multiple gaps presented in Rubén Bareiro Saguier’s narrative. Although Rimmon’s distinctions between polysemy, ambiguity, and indeterminacy remain useful, in the end, they all point to the same result: the need for the reader to participate in the construction of meaning, to choose between various interpretations and competing hypotheses that are not limited to a single “truth” or ultimate interpretation, but rather illustrate a postmodern philosophical viewpoint of the text as a constant slippage of irresolvable meanings.

FOOTNOTES

1 See Helene Weldt, “Cases of Ambiguity in Rubén Bareiro Saguier’s *Ojo por diente*,” *Hispanófila* 36.1 (1992): pp. 41-57. The existing bibliography on Bareiro’s work is exclusively centered on his poetry or his first collection of short stories, *Ojo por diente*. Since this essay focuses on Bareiro’s narrative, I will mention the following noteworthy articles on his early stories: Fernando Ainsia, “Macro-estructuras, condicionantes del discurso y tratamiento literario en ‘Diente por diente,’” *Le récit et le monde: H. Quiroga- J. Rulfo- R. Bareiro Saguier* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1987): pp. 241-254; Jean Andreu, “L’île secrète de Rubén Bareiro Saguier,” *Co-textes* 14 (1987): pp. 67-78; Jean Andreu, “*Ojo por diente*, o la pasión paraguaya según Rubén Bareiro Saguier,” *Rubén Bareiro Saguier: Valoraciones y comentarios acerca de su obra*

(Asunción: Arte nuevo editores, 1986): pp. 97-108; Jean Andreu, "Les sens des sens dans *Ojo por diente* de Rubén Bareiro Saguier," *Le récit et le monde: H. Quiroga-J. Rulfo-R. Bareiro Saguier* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987): pp. 217-226; César Avalos, "Ojo por diente y la narrativa de exilio," *Rubén Bareiro Saguier: Valoraciones y comenatarios acerca de su obra* (Asunción: Arte nuevo editores, 1986); Jean-Paul Borel, "Apuntes para un análisis sociológico de la narrativa paraguaya: Augusto Roa Bastos y Rubén Bareiro Seguíer," *Cahiers du Monde Hispanique et Luso-Brésilien* 31 (1978): pp. 189-95; Julio Peñate, "Del argumento a la argumentación: El universo narrativo de *Ojo por diente*," *Le récit et le monde: H. Quiroga-J. Rulfo-R. Bareiro Saguier* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987): pp. 275-284; Michele Ramona, "Heme aquí, mi hijo," *Le récit et le monde: H. Quiroga-J. Rulfo-R. Bareiro Saguier* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987): pp. 205-216; Olga Caro, "Les aberrations mentales dans *Ojo por diente*." *Co-textes* 14 (1987): pp. 79-84; Victor-Jacinto Flecha, "Noción de la muerte en *Ojo por diente*," *Co-textes* 14 (1987): pp. 85-98; Felipe Navarro, "Tiempo histórico y tiempo mítico: el tiempo mestizo en *Ojo por diente* de Rubén Bareiro Saguier." *La Torre: Revista de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 5.20 (1991): pp. 429-41; Christiane Tarroux-Follin, "Discours dominant/discours dominé dans *Ojo por diente* de Rubén Bareiro Saguier," *Imprevue* 2 (1987): pp. 161-86. Christiane Tarroux-Follin, "Notes sur les modalités de transcription de la réalité linguistique paraguayenne dans *Ojo por diente*: L'émergence de la langue dominée." *Co-textes* 14 (1987): pp. 99-125; Raquel Thiercelin, "Justicia paraguaya: o, la ley del Talión: *Ojo por diente*," *Cahiers d'Etudes Romanes* 12 (1987): pp. 169-80; Helene C. Weldt-Basson, "The Legacy of Guaraní in the Fiction of Gabriel Casaccia, Rubén Bareiro Saguier and Augusto Roa Bastos," *Mester* 24.2 (1995): pp. 65-80; Marie-Claire Zimmermann, "Paisajes, nature, espace, dans le récit liminaire de *Ojo por diente*: 'Sólo un momentito,'" *Le récit et le monde: H. Quiroga-J. Rulfo-R. Bareiro Saguier* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987): pp. 227-240

2 J. Hillis Miller defines unreadability from a deconstructionist perspective as "something intrinsic to the words of a work, an effect of the rhetoric or of the play of figure, concept, and narrative in the work, an effect of the words of the work impose on the reader, not a result of 'reader response.' Moreover, instead of rich plurisignificance, the notion of 'unreadability' names the presence in a text of two or more incompatible or contradictory meanings which imply one another or are intertwined with one another, but which may by no means be felt or named as a unified totality. 'Unreadability' names the discomfort of this perpetual lack of closure, like a Mobious strip which has two sides, but only one side, yet two sides still, interminably" (Miller, "The Figure," p. 113).

3 Bareiro Saguier was himself incarcerated in Paraguay in 1972 and subsequently freed by international pressure brought to bear on Stroessner. The dictator exiled Bareiro who then lived in Paris until 1989 when Stroessner's government fell (Gómez p. 217).

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