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From Dispossession to the Grotesque: Deterritorializing Human Identity in Cobra, El obsceno pájaro de la noche and The Unnamable

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Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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Abstract

The following text engages the concepts of the grotesque, the self, and language through a reading of three novels: Severo Sarduy's *Cobra*, Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* and José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*. The novels introduced here find themselves in the position of contributing to the theory of the self, of language and the grotesque through their own experimentations with these concepts, and whose method and creativity align with particularly critical movements in theory, including but not limited to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Just as theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and René Descartes engage with problems like 'what is the self?', 'what is language?' and 'what is the grotesque?', so too do Beckett, Donoso and Sarduy; and the purpose of this text is broadly to frame these relations and contribute an analysis. The novels discussed throughout this thesis show that identity can be rethought and redefined. They deterritorialize human identity by evincing different ways of behaving and different ways of understanding the self, or even by showing that there is no necessity to hold subjects to such a construction.

Keywords

José Donoso, Severo Sarduy, Samuel Beckett, Grotesque, Language, Self, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, M.M. Bakhtin, René Descartes

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Abbreviations

Becket, <i>The Unnamable</i>	<i>The Unnamable</i>
Deleuze, <i>Essay Critical and Clinical</i>	ECC
Deleuze, <i>The Logic of Sense</i>	LOS
Deleuze and Guattari, <i>A Thousand Plateaus</i>	ATP
Deleuze and Guattari, <i>Anti-Oedipus</i>	AO
Deleuze and Guattari, <i>Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature</i>	<i>Kafka</i>
Donoso, <i>El obsceno pájaro de la noche</i>	<i>El obsceno</i>
Donoso, <i>The Obscene Bird of Night</i>	<i>The Obscene</i>

Introduction

The following text engages the concepts of the grotesque, the self, and language through a reading of three novels: Severo Sarduy's *Cobra*, Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* and José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*. This intersection between these novels and the conceptual theories marks a space for the contribution to each of the respective discourses. In other words, it maintains the questioning movement inherent to these discourses and offers an opportunity to re-think the self, to rethink language, to rethink the novel, to rethink Beckett, etc.

The novels introduced here contribute to the theory of the self, of language and the grotesque through their own experimentations with these concepts, and whose method and creativity align with particularly critical movements in theory, including but not limited to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Each chapter presents the imposition of competing discourses of these concepts and not only positions the related novels within those discussions, but the novels are also shown to put the limits of these concepts to the test. Thus, just as theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and René Descartes engage with problems like 'what is the self?', 'what is language?' and 'what is the grotesque?', so too do Beckett, Donoso and Sarduy; and the purpose of this text is broadly to frame these relations and contribute an analysis.

The Grotesque, Language and The Self

Chapter one engages with the problem 'what is the grotesque?' and reviews the contributions and differing stances from Mikhail Bakhtin, Wolfgang Kayser, and Geoffrey Harpham, among others, which is followed by three characteristics of this aesthetic category that were selected for further analysis and implementation: the coexistence of contraries, the irresolution of this tension and the deformed body. The inclusion of Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* evokes these characteristics in an instructive manner.

In the first discussion of the grotesque, Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* is reviewed for the presentation of the grotesque as on the one hand a collection of numerous clashes of opposites (violence/eroticism, comedy/tragedy, obscenity/decency) which are left as ambivalent elements and, on the other hand a protagonist whose body is restlessly morphed. The argument is then made that the body of the main character, Cobra, is grotesque because it can be fused with other entities, deformed to bizarre limits and removed from its regular functions. Sarduy's *Cobra*, therefore, by presenting distortions on both social and physical levels, challenges the normalcy and normativity which fathom society's core.

In the second case, the grotesque is presented in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* as the deformation of the body of the protagonist along with the 'deformation of his thoughts' (and his language). This interconnected deformity shows a grotesque entity that loses all human shape (physically and intellectually speaking), with a subsequently parallel discussion about the Cartesian definition of the human being. Beckett's grotesqueries in *The Unnamable* conjure the destabilization of our ideas about how we give meaning to concepts such as humanity.

Further, the bringing together of these two novels and the concept of the grotesque leads to the discussion that both Cobra's and the unnamable's bodies become a *Body without Organs* (BwO), a concept based in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* that Deleuze and Guattari published in the 1980's. This occurs as Cobra is in crisis, decentered, chaotic, open, multiple, and excessive, whereas the unnamable has reconfigured the organization of his organs placing himself at a limit of existence.

The second chapter approaches the question '*what is language?*' and links it with the paradox of introducing elements of novelty in a linguistic system. This link is constructed by relating the 'grammatically correct' to majoritarian discourses which aim to remain unchanged and impose their own rules by either ignoring or suppressing expressions that fall outside of the law. In this respect, this chapter relies on Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between minor and major literatures, along with other concepts such as line of

flight (or line of escape), molecular and molar assemblages, nomad, etc., which are found to situate effectively the uses of language in each of the three novels.

Based on Deleuze's idea of the unnamable's stationary voyage from *Essay Critical and Clinical*, it is argued that the unnamable's situation enables him to make his speech nomadic. It is further concluded that, through his presentation of the novel, Beckett makes a minoritarian use of language with his writing to the point of 'dissolving' it (pushing it to a *molecular* limit), so that it can be shown in its potential at the same time that it demonstrates how the construction of significance is an artificial and arbitrary process.

Meanwhile, Sarduy achieves a similar conclusion in *Cobra* as his uses of language are exaggerated and hedonistic (sensual), asking for an experience of *bliss* (as Barthes proposes) from the reader more than a rigid interpretation. Sarduy's exuberances are also evoked in the introduction of several narrative voices and several plots (that are inconsistent) as they overlap a variety of meanings for one event, showing that the linkage among them is a social construction. The conclusion is that Sarduy spreads meanings apart so much that they almost become nonsignifying and for that he resists the *tyrannical regime of the signifier*.

The section concludes by referring to how Donoso's *El obsceno* explores the language of some marginalized social groups and by showing that his minoritarian fights disrupt major uses of language. Attention is subsequently focused on the chaotic speech and behaviour of the old women since they become a *line of escape* from which major discourses in the novel start cracking.

The third chapter attends to the concept of the self and its limits as a separate problem and quality outside of the grotesque. In this respect, Descartes' categorization of a human being as "a thing that thinks" is problematized and considered as a narrow way to perceive reality, including space and time, that largely contributes to the construction of petrified identities within human beings, and which normalizes their behaviours.

The objective of this section is to contrast the Cartesian mono-characterized being to a human that explores ways of behaviour and expression outside of the law, called human-becomings. This idea is supported by *The Unnamable's* and *El obsceno's* proposal of a human that wants to open himself to desire by becoming something-else. The protagonists of these two novels, the unnamable and Mudito, share a common tendency to continually metamorphose into the *other*, a tendency that takes them to the limits of their humanness.

These human-becomings are not chained to an identity or a self and, therefore, their actions and thoughts indirectly show that social assemblages are vulnerable (no matter how stable and strong they appear to be), since they are attempts to systematize the flux of life, which cannot be constrained. For these human-becomings, thinking is a *rhizomatic* process that is not replicating the law (of reason) since they develop a type of *nomadic* thought. This section concludes with the consideration that thoughts are not 'The' way to perceive reality.

Besides the discourses of the philosophers, the aforementioned conceptions and problematizations of the self are supported by the analyses of Beckett and Donoso: in Beckett's *The Unnamable*, the protagonist cannot be defined by a sense of selfness, for two reasons: he does not trust his memory, and because of that he cannot be attached to an idea of himself. Therefore, he presumably becomes other characters (or nobody at all). Meanwhile, Mudito, in *El obsceno*, is a movable element that occupies other characters, in the sense that it gives him not a self-identical entity, but a multiple one. Every time he occupies a position (either a person or an object), he transforms the configurations of that entity as much as his own. Finally, these two characters, the unnamable and Mudito, have dissolved their 'selves' and, for that reason, they cannot be controlled and be subjected to major assemblages.

Why *Cobra*?

Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* (1972)¹ is an effective example of the (neo)baroque, as it exaggeratedly exaggerates the mechanisms of language. In the novel characters unfold and their identities disappear; the narrative voice does not narrate but rather mumbles and detaches from its functions; and the canonic elements of the novel (plot, space-time, causes-consequences, opening-climax-closing) are problematized. This text places meta-fiction on a different level: the book literally 'talks' to the readers, it quotes itself and it destroys itself.

For the purpose of introducing the reader to the notable parts of the novel, a short summary will follow: The first part, *Cobra I*, occurs in the "Lyrical Puppet Theater" or the "Lyrical Theatre of Dolls" where the protagonist, Cobra, seems to be the main performer –for which he is happy, except that he very much dislikes his enormous feet (which are inappropriate for his role as a Chinese woman in the Theater). In an attempt to shrink them, he and La Señora try different techniques until they finally find a way that not only shrinks their feet but also themselves into animal-like dwarfs (their miniature doubles). From this point on, the transformations and pilgrimages become constant, going from India to the United States of America and passing by Amsterdam, just to mention some places. This chapter ends with the death of both doubles and Cobra's sex-change surgery performed by Dr. Ktazob. In *Cobra II* there is a gang of pseudo-tantric motorcyclists who initiate Cobra with hilarious and horrifying rituals that end up with his death in very unclear circumstances. After the funeral, which is a mix of sad, comical and disgusting situations, the gang members learn Tantric Buddhist rituals from a group of

¹ Severo Sarduy (1937, Cuba – 1993, France) was a novelist, poet, critic, and essayist, and one of the most daring and brilliant writers of the 20th century. Disaffected with Castro's regime and fearful of its persecution of homosexuals and the censorship imposed on writers, Sarduy never went home. In Paris he came close to the group of critics and theoreticians who published the journal *Tel Quel*, which promoted structuralism and experimental writing. Sarduy wrote the novels: *Gestos* (1963; "Gestures"), *De donde son los cantantes* (1967; *From Cuba with a Song*), *Cobra* (1972; Eng. trans. *Cobra*), *Maitreya* (1978; Eng. trans. *Maitreya*), *Colibrí* (1982; "Hummingbird"), *El Cristo de la rue Jacob* (1987; *Christ on the Rue Jacob*); the posthumous *Pájaros de la playa* (1993; "Beach Fowl"); and the essay *Barroco* (1974; Eng. trans. *Barroco*). This biography, as most of the other biographies presented in this document, was taken from the online *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

exiled Tibetan monks who, in turn, learn to deal drugs. The novel ends with the “Indian Journal”, which “reflects its historical context in quite a direct fashion [through the] Chinese Revolution, the invasion of Tibet (...)” (González Echevarría, 451), in an evocation of the mountains and the valleys full of snow.

With respect to the role of the novel as a text which problematizes the canonic novel Sarduy’s *Cobra* does not have a unified message. Furthermore, the novel – instead of wanting to express an ideology – wishes to question concepts such as femininity, masculinity, profane, sacred, history, identity, language and meaning, religion, power, etc. *Cobra* is an exploration of the impure, the marginal, the peripheral (the Deleuzian n-1) and the grotesque offers the possibility of being creative and finding ways to re-think, re-define, and re-create conceptions of identity and of the body, as Harpham states: “To the artist, the grotesque represents a partial liberation from representationalism, a chance to create his own forms [...]” (Harpham, 463).

Cobra’s language is exuberant and uncontrollable: it says, it shouts, and it doesn’t say anything. The narrative voice may change suddenly from an omniscient third person to the first person: “They saw Cobra. People started to reunite around her. They follow me. They molested me. They cornered me against the wall.”² These sudden changes create confusion in the reader because it complicates knowing who is saying what. In *Cobra*, language is wasted in the sense that it does not intend to inform, resulting in the fact that it cannot be consumed and accumulated.

Furthermore, not only language is being transformed: there is a continuous condition of metamorphosis not only in the characters but also in the events and scenarios. *Cobra* is a hybrid and ambiguous being whose motivations to act remain absurd and obscured throughout all over the novel. *Cobra* can be a *she* inasmuch as a *he* or an *it*, i.e., a multiplicity of beings, which is a criticism of the way identities are built and how arbitrary social roles are.

² “Fueron ellos quienes vieron a Cobra. La gente se fue agolpando a su alrededor. Me siguieron. Me hostigaron. Me acosaron contra un muro” (Sarduy, 130). All the translations from this novel are my own.

It is worth noting that Sarduy wanted to evoke the metamorphosis of a man not only with regard to his genitals, but to his whole person. During the narration, the protagonist goes for a trip that becomes a multiplicity of spaces, languages, identities, times, etc., where no center can be drawn. He is in a constant movement, directing towards other *intensities*, letting his *lines of flight* be expressed, and achieving a “type of freedom that [...] cannot be captured.” (Parr, 118)

Finally, the novel compels wonder about problems such as ‘*what is a human?*’, ‘*what is freedom?*’, ‘*what is normal?*’, ‘*what are stereotypes?*’, ‘*what are the roles of a person?*’, etc. Is Cobra a transvestite because he is a man who wants to be a woman, or because she is a woman that people call a man? Is Pup (his midget double) a grotesque figure because of her huge puffed-up body, whose shape she cannot control³, or because others made her existence monstrous? Throughout the novel Sarduy questions to what extent one should let normalization take over conduct.

Among these questions, Sarduy also compels us to ask “what is knowledge?” Is our knowledge an accumulation of names: Brecht, Lacan, Lezama Lima, Descartes, Canova, Góngora, Derrida, Calderón de la Barca, Flaubert, Burroughs⁴, Rembrandt, Cervantes, Carreño, Albers, etc.? Or it is possibly an accumulation of quotations? Is the arbitrariness of truth based on arguments of authority? ‘*What is life?*’ Is it a play in a “Lyrical Puppet Theater”, or any Theater? Who is the puppet and who is the puppeteer? How is meaning constructed? How does one construct beliefs? Another question Sarduy raises is: in order to institutionalize truths, who is the best juggler of words? (Or who is the master?)

Nonetheless, Sarduy imparts the notion that things and phenomena do not mean anything per se, but rather that one sees them and then signifies them. *Cobra* shows that

³ Poor Pup was “born” among waste and animals, raised as a pet, blown up as a balloon filled with water, used as a fake baby to beg for money in the streets, hung like a piece of meat in the slaughterhouse, and finally sacrificed to prevent possible pain in *Cobra* (the character).

⁴ Do not confuse this Burroughs with the Burroughs who helps La Señora find Dr. Ktazob (Ref. Sarduy, pp. 96.)

transcendence⁵ can mean meditation for some and an orgasm for others; that desire can be a lack for some and productions for others; etc.

Why *The Unnamable*?

The Unnamable (1949) is the last novel of the well-known trilogy by Beckett which includes *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*. It is not sufficient to say that *The Unnamable* is a critique of religion, an argument against fascism, or a meta-critique of the novel as a literary genre, because it could be that, not-that or something else entirely. Nonetheless, this text takes up the novel's grotesque characteristics, its engagement with the concept of the Self and the manner in which it problematizes language.

Samuel Beckett⁶ presents human beings as entities who are alienated and lack identity. His characters (particularly, the unnamable) are a mix of tragic, infamous, comic, rare and disgusting elements, who live in situations where they have been inserted into ridiculous and cruel fictional universes, and whose logic frequently do not match the

⁵ Sarduy makes many references to mystical traditions in some Asian and Middle East countries (such as the references to Jainism, Islamism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.), as well as many to Christian religions, in a way that parodies rituals and symbolism, again, to show the arbitrariness of our beliefs. His direct allusions (to Shrenik, Sidi Abder Rahman, Ganesha, Mahavira, etc.) do not make as much fun of metaphysical beliefs as the indirect ones (as when he called Pup the "little crucified" or when he talks about a lunatic who is repeating the twenty four names – speaking of the Teaching Gods), but one can observe throughout the novel the heavy satiric tone.

⁶ Samuel Beckett (1906, Ireland –1989, France) was an author, critic, and playwright, and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. Beckett spent his youth in Ireland and in 1928 he moved to Paris, where he met James Joyce. During World War II, he was able to remain there even after the occupation. In 1945 he returned to Ireland but volunteered for the Irish Red Cross and went back to France as an interpreter in a military hospital in Saint-Lô, Normandy. Beckett's writing reveals his own immense learning. It is full of subtle allusions to a multitude of literary sources as well as to a number of philosophical and theological writers. The dominating influences on Beckett's thought were Dante, Descartes, Geulincx and Joyce. Beckett's productions include poems, novels, plays, screenplays, essays and a playlet: *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934), *Murphy* (1938), *Whoroscope* (1930), *Echo's Bones* (1935), *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (published in 1992), *Watt* (published in 1953), *Molloy* (1951), *Malone meurt* (1951; *Malone Dies*), *Eleutheria* (published in 1951), *Waiting for Godot* (published in 1951), *L'Innommable* (1953; *The Unnamable*), *Fin de partie* (1957; *Endgame*), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), *Play* (first performed in 1963), *All That Fall* (1957), *Eh Joe!* (1967), *Come and Go* (1967), *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (1967), *Acts Without Words*, *Rockaby*, *Not I*, *Mercier and Camier*, etc.

reader's expectations, compelling him to let go of his beliefs. His novels break the logic of common and banal sense by presenting scenarios where things do not have a function or beings do not have a purpose⁷: In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir and Estragon wait but they do not know why or what for; in *Not I* the protagonist talks even if she does not remember what she wants to say and asks for forgiveness despite not knowing why; in *Malone Dies* death is a forever delayed promise; etc. His personae do not believe in transcendent forces⁸, but neither in themselves, making their searches endless since hope has ceded to void. Beckett's books question what it means to be an individual (is he his achievements, his belongings, his functions?), what the *other* is (does otherness even exist? how does one relate to others? what is the Self?), what is reality (is it a projection/construction of human's subjectivity? are individuals a part of it?), what is memory (can memory be trusted? is it simple fiction?), what is language (can words represent reality, thoughts, emotions?), etc.

Furthermore, Beckett's texts show the processes behind the construction of truth: In his trilogy "the gradual reduction of contents now appears as a progressive process of demythologization" (Esslin, 105). The trilogy evokes characters who little by little start becoming a reduced version of a human being (which compels inquiry and wonder into what it means to be a person, especially after losing his *qualities* and when he cannot find support in what usually sustains a human being).

The trilogy begins with a man, Molloy, who is convalescent in his mother's house and who is writing for somebody that comes to pick up the pages and gives him money.

⁷ According to some theorists the grotesque is closely related to a *play with the absurd*. See Kayser, *The Grottesque*, pp. 185 and Harpham, pp. 467.

⁸ Most of the allusions to God are made mockingly or sardonically: "...brought up as she had been to believe...with the other waifs...in a merciful...(brief laugh)...God...(good laugh)" (Beckett, *Not I*) Similarly also in the following fragment, where it seems that for the unnamable God is a mere construction: "Inexistent. Invented to explain I forget what. Ah yes, all lies. God and man, nature and the light of day, the heart's outpourings and the means of understanding, all invented, basely, by me alone (with the help of no one, since there is no one), to put off the hour when I must speak of me." (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 22) Or in this following segment, in which Malone exposes God's magnificence in a sarcastic way: "For my arse for example, which can hardly be accused of being the end of anything, if my arse suddenly started to shit at the present moment, which God forbid, I firmly believe the lumps would fall out in Australia." (Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 26)

Meanwhile, he narrates everything that he had to go through to get to be with his mother, who, ironically, repulses him. In the second part of *Molloy*, the narrator is Moran, a “detective” hired to look for Molloy, and to write about his investigations. The trilogy continues with *Malone Dies*, whose protagonist hopes to die. He can hardly move and all he does is tell one story: the one of Sapo (Macmann), who is dying in a room (possibly in a hospital?) – which also resembles Malone’s situation. Finally, the series ends with *The Unnamable* which presents a man who does not have a name, who almost does not have a body and who states that he does not have thoughts: the protagonist “(...) is but the simulacrum of a man with his head held firm in an iron collar. His function is to act as a kind of signboard for a restaurant and his vision is limited to the establishment to which his frame draws attention. He knows nothing; he feels nothing. He does not know there is anything to know” (Esslin, 46).

In *The Unnamable* Beckett questions Cartesian logic by presenting a protagonist who exists in spite of his doubts about his capacities to think⁹ and to determine his situation in every sense: he does not know where he is, who he is, how he is, or even if he is at all. He “carries the Cartesian process backwards, beginning with a bodily *je suis* and ending with a bare *cogito*” (Esslin, 59). In this novel, the degradation of the physical body seems to be attached to the degradation of the mind, since both lack qualities that could define them. Furthermore, everything is a haze of doubts¹⁰, so there is no place to set oneself (because the self should not be fixed?).

If the novel is anything, it is a flux of words – words that are freed so that they can be blasphemy without *only* being blasphemy, mockery without *only* being mockery, misery without *only* being misery. In *The Unnamable* the sentences are long – way too long. It is very easy to lose track of the idea... The reader reads pages without finding a spot to rest

⁹ Or, in other words, as Sultan argues: “Indeed the Trilogy’s intellectual thrust is post-Cartesian in that it reflects the futility of reasoning and thinking.” (Sultan, 423)

¹⁰ Observe this passage of the novel, where the unnamable says: “where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 179)

the thoughts, so the reader starts feeling (and becoming) the madness that the unnamable talks about: that unstoppable stream of words that do not let one breathe! Thus, *The Unnamable* is a text whose anti-hero brings anarchy into language.

Finally, this text considers the fact that Beckett disrupts one's beliefs, making them into grotesque thoughts: "In such a state of doubt the grotesque may offer itself as a reflection of the higher truths" (Harpham, 466). Consequently, his personae cannot be more than beings without static qualities that question ideas like success, proud, love, truth, etc., because to care for them would not make any sense (it would mean to be stationary). And yet, is not the unnamable immobile inside a jar? Yes and no. For one he says "I have been here, ever since I began to be (...)" (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 7), but later on one can observe that he actually has been (apparently) in some other places, like somewhere by the Pacific¹¹, in his family house,¹² or just somewhere else.¹³

Why *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*?

José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970) is probably the most acclaimed of his novels, since for many of his critics it marks the end of the *Boom* and a point of inflexion for the writer, whose previous prose was known for being realistic and/or magical-realistic – González Echevarría finds himself in agreement with this sentiment when he says that Donoso's *El obsceno* is more daring than his earlier or later fiction.¹⁴

¹¹ See: "My state of decay lends colour to this view, perhaps I had left my leg behind in the Pacific, yes, no perhaps about it, I had, somewhere off the coast of Java and its jungles red with rafflesia stinking of carrion, no, that's the Indian ocean (...)" (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 41)

¹² "Perhaps after all I am simply in the basement", the unnamable declares. (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 42)

¹³ Observe that he says: "I merely doubt that I am in it [the jar]." (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 78)

¹⁴ González Echevarría, Roberto. "Latin American Literature" in the online *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Donoso¹⁵ began writing his novel in 1962, in Chile, and he only finished it in 1969, in Barcelona, after having suffered hallucinations caused by an allergic reaction to morphine, which was prescribed as part of the treatment to remedy the pain of his ulcer. Seemingly, he first planned to write a novel that was going to be called “El último Azcoitía,” whose plot recounted the story of an aristocratic Chilean family that had a deformed firstborn. In this family chronicle, the protagonist decides to seclude his son on one of his properties that also happens to be inhabited by a group of monstrous beings which were found and gathered up from all over the country in order to create a space where his son’s deformity could become a norm. However, another novel that he was also writing simultaneously started intruding on this ordered and clean narration, and the characters (street vagrants and decrepit elder women) began intervening in the plot; however, it was this second universe that was taking over, with its anarchy of vulgar beggars and disobedient old women, without ever really fusing together into a new order¹⁶. And yet, the disordered fusion which did occur was *El obsceno*, which became a decentered tale in every possible sense: the narrator jumps from one narrative voice to another, the characters intermittently *take* the form of others, and places break into other places. *El obsceno* evokes a hallucinatory and grotesque world and explores the theme of the self with profound insights (Mudito’s self is dissolved to the limit of molecular-existence).

¹⁵ José Donoso (1924 –1996, Chile) was a Chilean novelist and short-story writer who was important in the development of the Latin American new novel. He used dark surrealism, black comedy, and social satire to explore the lives of decaying aristocrats in a morally disintegrating society. He won the (Chilean) National Price of Literature in 1990. Donoso published: *Veraneo y otros cuentos* (1955; “Summer Vacation and Other Stories”), *Coronación* (1957; *Coronation*), *El charleston* (1960; *Charleston*), *Este domingo* (1966; *This Sunday*), *El lugar sin límites* (1966; “The Place Without Limits”; *Hell Has No Limits*), *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970; *The Obscene Bird of Night*), *Tres novelitas burguesas* (1973; *Three bourgeois novels*), *Casa de campo* (1978; *A House in the Country*), *La misteriosa desaparición de la marquesita de Loria* (1979; *The Mysterious Disappearance of the Little Marquise of Loria*), *El jardín de al lado* (1981; *The Garden Next Door*), *Cuatro para Delfina* (1982; *Four for Delfina*), *La desesperanza* (1986; “Hopelessness”; Eng. trans. *Curfew*), *Taratuta: naturaleza muerta con cachimba* (1990; *Taratuta, and Still Life with Pipe*), *Donde van a morir los elefantes* (1995; *Where Elephants Go to Die*), *El mocho* (1997; posthumous), and *Lagartija sin cola* (2007 *The Lizard’s Tale* –posthumous).

¹⁶ See Ricardo Gutiérrez-Mouat.

There are many fascinating topics in *El obsceno* that nevertheless could pass unperceived for those who are not familiar with the Chilean context, such as the widespread tradition of incorporating elements of myths and legends related to magic in Latin American literature; and the great symbolism of the *imbunche*¹⁷ who is constantly referred in the novel and who may be considered as a being whose individuality has been dissolved, which supports an argument being forwarded in this text: based on Mudio's process of deindividualization, which is expressed in his constant deterritorializations, it is argued that Mudio is in fact a force that occupies different positions, rather than an entity. The last chapter of the novel is thus the culmination of this implosion, from which he is modified, taking the form of a sewed sack (the *imbunche*) that is no longer able to interrelate with the outside world in spite of his pointless and painful attempts to do so.

El obsceno is not a realistic novel in the sense that one might expect the fiction to resemble reality or for it to make sense in the way that reality does. And yet the novel cannot belong to magic-realism simply because it introduces elements of magic. In other words, novels of the magic-realism genre are still coherent and clear, whereas Donoso's text presents events that cannot be set as part of a story or a structure. It presents contradictions and incompatible plots which make the novel ambiguous and multiple. There is a coexistence of different versions of a story, each of which is still meaningful and valid and frequently one version interacts with another, breaking the boundaries between them, and addressing the conflicting tales in which the event appears.

Donoso's novel is more of a puzzle with pieces that overlap than a group of stories that bifurcate. His prose remains fundamentally incomprehensible, making clarity, order and full comprehension impossible. Things are in perpetual transformation and because of this they can never be taken with a sense of completeness. Rather, the occurrences are

¹⁷ In Chilean folklore an *imbunche* is a hairy monster who protects the entrance to a warlock's cave. His head is supposed to be twisted backwards, as well as his arms, fingers, nose, mouth and ears. One of his legs is attached to the back of his neck and consequently he needs to walk on one leg and his two hands. He cannot talk and he communicates by guttural, rough and unpleasant sounds. The presence of the *imbunche* announces misfortune.

juxtaposed in a way that the novel morphs into a multitude of tales. *El obsceno* is provocative, obscure, perverse and even funny¹⁸.

All of these transformations prevent the stability of the features of the characters, as well as their uses of language. Furthermore, it is perpetually unclear who is narrating, not only because Mudito occupies several entities without giving the reader a hint, but also because other characters intrude on one another. And finally, it is worth noting that the places also mutate such that the reader does not know if he is reading about an event in a single place narrated by one narrative voice or if he is reading about an event in two (or more) places narrated by one or two or more narrative voices. But one thing is certain: there is no such thing as an identity, unless it can be called becoming-other.

¹⁸ One could read the novel either as a tale of total madness, as if Mudito was a mad person and he had constant hallucinations (which probably would not be much of a fun narrative), including the one of seeing Peta Ponce in Inés or seeing Inés in Iris; or as an allegory of the nomadic self or collective self; or etcetera. Nonetheless, in the second last chapter of the novel there is a scene in which Inés is embodying Iris (having chosen the second type of reading) and Mudito shadows her for hours, witnessing her metamorphosis (her snotty face mutates to a face with certain *nobility*) and describing it in a beautiful lyrical language – which contrasts with the dry and plain response that he gets from Iris/Inés when he talks to her in the ear. In any case, he is not discouraged and he determines to sate himself, now that nobody can come between his desire and her (nor Jerónimo neither Peta), but she resists the body that tries to hold her and that scares her so much that she cannot hide the terror in her eyes. The black humor in the fragment clarifies: “I force your fingers to feel my organ, you grab it, you squeeze it as only a piece of potent meat can be squeezed and your sink your nails into it and with a mad jerk you pull it out by its roots, nerves, arteries, veins, testicles, tissues, my body being drained of its blood, in torrents that splash you (...), you’ve taken my dangerous instrument, leaving an unhealable wound between my legs....” (Donoso, *The Obscene...*, 411).

To those who are no longer people.

Chapter 1

1 Variations of the grotesque in *Cobra* and *The Unnamable*

“And when you become-dog, don’t ask if the dog you are playing with is a dream or a reality, if it is “your goddam mother” or something else entirely”
Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Cuban writer Severo Sarduy’s *Cobra* came out in 1972. This is the third novel that he published and it maintains the tenor of experimentation that had already characterized the writer. The setting is a transvestite theatre; meanwhile some events take place in India, Amsterdam, and China. The novel tells us of the vicissitudes of Cobra, the protagonist, during his attempts to shrink his feet and become a woman. *Cobra*’s plot, nevertheless, is the least interesting part of the novel, almost as if it were only a fine excuse sustaining all the other elements.

In *Cobra*, Sarduy not only subsumes themes on meta-fiction, destroying the barrier between the narrator and the interlocutor and quoting the narration into the narration; but he also introduces perspectives on religion, exhibiting in a sardonic tone rituals of Christianity and Buddhism, ridiculing some of their fanatic practices; on language, making syntaxes tremble and semantics not-trustworthy; on logic, postulating paradoxes and showing false syllogisms; on the grotesque, showing social distortions, unresolved situations, ugly bodies, clashes of opposites (violence/eroticism, comedy/tragedy, obscenity/decency); etc. The focus here is on the latter, given that *Cobra* has a great capacity for contrasting *the ideal or the normative*¹⁹, which allows for the occurrence of an estranged reality.

The Unnamable (1949) by Samuel Beckett provides many possible meeting points between the two books. When the moment to say something about Beckett’s arrives, however, it paradoxically seems that words are insufficient because these discourses are

¹⁹ Bloom, 15.

excessive. Anything that may be said about his novel would be an imposture, as if any attempt to write about it since the very beginning was a betrayal, an abomination, a shame. But here I am, trying not only to expose something about *The Unnamable* but also attempting to relate it to the grotesque.

Beckett's narration in *The Unnamable* is schizoid, like Sarduy's – but in a different way: his language is broken and hurt. It is a molecule of an unstable gas that is moving here and there, randomly and rapidly; it is a writing that denies and destroys itself, re-creating itself in the same progress. Nonetheless, one knows that there is something there. One has the intuition to almost understand what is happening, and yet one doesn't. Reading the novel becomes an experience in which thoughts can hardly “condensate” and in which one has the sensation of dissolving oneself into the book or into the language. In this experience of becoming words, one finds oneself in a transformation that has no return; it is irreversible, as much as language itself is in this contradictory suicidal-birth flux. There are no objects, there is no time, there are no human beings, there are no substances, there are no essences, and there are no centers. There is only language in a deictic function: here, language is an object, time, people, substances, essences, center – but only for an ephemeral moment before it becomes something else. Much as in *Cobra*, it turns out to be unnecessary to understand what is being said (language is resisting to signify); rather, it is important to map the fluxes. Here one can observe an evident attempt to push words to a limit, where they can become a nude presentation without teleological claims. Beckett says what cannot be said; Beckett names the unnam(e)able.

In this section, it is argued that there is a close link between the unnamable's speech and the situation of his body, and it furthermore supposes that his speech can somehow express his capacity to think. Therefore, when it is mentioned that the unnamable's language is in a suicidal-birth flux, one could argue that his body goes through a similar process of disintegration that paradoxically creates new ways to function – maybe that is why he insists on the fact that he has not been born yet, since in this pre-birth state there still is not a very evident imposition of the law-of-the-other which would restrict one's experimentations. That is, while the unnamable's body sees a limit of dissolution transforming into a grotesque body, his thoughts experience something parallel as well:

in the novel he says that he has the shape of an egg and he suggests that he cannot think (and that his words are not 'his').

I have chosen Severo Sarduy's *Cobra* and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* because I find several points of intersection between them, such as the uses of language, the presentation of grotesque realities and the chronic desire of the writers to separate their novels from the canonical elements of the genre.

1.1 The grotesque

What is the grotesque? How does one define the grotesque: by describing its characteristics; by basing it on the type of relations that it builds or on the behaviours that it encompasses; or privileging the resistances to its categorization?

We all have an intuitive knowledge about what the grotesque is, and yet a clear and concise definition of it escapes us. If we wanted to decide if a painting is grotesque, most of us would probably not hesitate to declare that we see its presence in the art; it is almost an emotion, something that comes from very deep inside of us.

Perhaps because it is not recommendable to leave this to intuition alone, the theorists that have studied the notion have managed to agree (different agreements in different epochs) in linking certain movements to it²⁰. For instance, for some painters the grotesque would mean to brush a blue carnation with voluted branches onto the canvas whose leaves

²⁰ Harold Bloom eloquently and concisely summarizes the different conceptions of the grotesque: "(...) other discussions of the grotesque emphasize its typically incongruous mingling of the fantastic and the ideal, the sordid and the real, [and] the comic and the horrific' (Barash 562), while still other commentators have stressed its focus on suddenness, surprise, and estrangement (Kayser 185) and its often violent juxtapositions of laughter and disgust (...). Anthony Di Renzo (...) discusses the grotesque (...) by pointing to [the] 'violent slapstick' [the] penchant for distorting the human figure', the 'prevalence of caricature' (...), and [the] 'emphasis on the ugly' (...). He argues that (...) grotesque art '(...) expresses the repressed,' and that it 'crosses borders, ignores boundaries, and overflows margins' (...). He finds (...) a frequent focus on '(...) the stupid, the obscene, [and] the banal' as well as a repeated emphasis on 'marginal characters' (...). He [insists] 'on paradox, on double vision, [and] on the interpenetration of opposites' (...)." (Bloom, 76-77)

reminded them of children's arms, while for others it could mean to paint a man sitting on his massive pair of testicles or to sew to the canvas with red thread a corpse of a dressed-up rabbit instead of painting it in a scene of *Alice in Wonderland*.

It is in this respect that the definition of the grotesque presents difficulties, given that the notion has changed continuously since its documented emergence. People that have studied the concept emphasize the importance of considering the grotesque as something tightly linked to the context of production and the context of reception, so to speak. The grotesque, as an aesthetic category, is attached to the values of a certain society: "(...) the grotesque depends (...) on our conventions, our prejudices, our common-places, our banalities, our mediocrities" (Harpham, 463).

Nevertheless, there are some qualities that I have found in common among several authors: most of them agree to say that the grotesque can be related to a coexistence of contraries, to the irresolution of this ambivalence, and to the deformed body. For a work of art to be called grotesque, it is especially relevant to observe within it the presence of the first two attributes, i.e., the coexistence of contraries (comic and tragic, for instance) and the irresolution of the tension associated to the existence of opposites. In other words, a literary text that is comic and tragic is not necessarily grotesque (it can very well be a tragicomic novel), and one that is ambivalent (a novel about moral ambiguity) is also not necessarily grotesque: in this case, it would need to be comic and tragic *at the same time*, keeping the tension in tension. That is to say, the presence of the grotesque in a text produces a state of tension that one may not expect to resolve, finding it hard to qualify a work as only comic, tragic, monstrous, absurd, fantastic, etc. The important idea is that this *ambivalence* is kept as such, avoiding falling to one side or another, to the absurdity or the sensibleness, to the laughter or the crying, to the comic and the tragic, etc. Philip Thomson says that one should consider the grotesque "(...) as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites (...)" (Thomson, 11).

It is crucial to raise the ambiguity (ambivalence). For artists it is not enough to simply mix human and non-human beings, or give human attributes to objects. If they stopped there, they could easily be creating a fairy tale, like *Beauty and the Beast* where the pots,

the cups and the clocks talk, and the Beast becomes a prince. A grotesque work should embrace within it contrary forces; it has to break the harmony; it must disturb.

However, what does it mean to read within a text an episode that is both macabre and delightful at the same time? As one usually does not expect to encounter both of them in coexistence, it means that one is going to see it as something not-normal (abnormal, subnormal, paranormal). That is to say, it could be normal that one is used to seeing something that is delightful (a fluffy, smiley puppy eating a bone) and which in the next moment becomes macabre (the bone has flesh that is still bleeding); but one would not say the same about something that makes him amused while horrified (a fluffy smiley puppy eating his own bone – that is bleeding); that is not normal. As Kayser very well indicates, within the grotesque “the natural order of things has been subverted” (Kayser, *The Grottesque...*, 21). Therefore, one commonly comes across a union of two things not expected to be entwined.

There are some issues that attract my attention: on one hand, I mentioned that within the grotesque the co-occurrence of contraries is essential. However, what if a subject faces a situation where the sequence of events happens so fast that he can hardly appreciate the transition from one to another and he actually sees the separate moments as only one? To give an example, in Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*²¹ there is a series of scenes (an aggressive hit on a man’s genitals, a sexual stimulation of them, a genital that ejaculates as it bleeds) that occurs very quickly, making it difficult to decide where an action ends and the other begins (what if the series ‘hit–masturbation–ejaculation/bleeding’ should be better considered as one single event (hiturbaculading)?), so that one cannot decide if he is watching three different scenes or three parts of the same scene. How far apart can the clashes of opposites be to one another? One can be sure that the grotesque depends on how close these opposite effects (disgust and delight) are achieved, because if the effect of one situation comes very delayed from the other one may even forget their connection. And yet, how close is close? In the case of written works, one knows that linguistic signs

²¹ *Antichrist* (2009), directed by Lars von Trier, starring Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg, was dedicated to Andrei Tarkovsky.

are linear (we can only write/read one word at a time), therefore in a strict sense there is no simultaneous presentation (the situation is similarly analogous for movies because as one can only perceive 12 images per second when he watches 24 or more he starts noticing *movement* – variations of Achilles’ paradox). This is the danger and beauty of the grotesque: while elements of it can be found within a work of art, it becomes impossible to simply constrain the notion itself to them. What makes one artistic piece grotesque may not make another one grotesque. Or, what did not seem grotesque at first glance can be seen as such with a second view, as Geoffrey Harpham states:

“All of this implies that, in approaching a definition of the grotesque, we should not always take etymological consistency for conceptual accuracy; the definition of this concept, almost as fluid as that of beauty, is good for one era –even one man– at a time. When dealing with the grotesque, it seems, one must deal either with gross generalizations, arbitrariness, or specific statements about specific works.” (Harpham, 461)

Going back to the coexistence of contraries, when I talk about a “clash of opposites” that keeps the ambivalence buzzing, I am referring to an ongoing process, because if the text were to incline to one side of this opposition, the ambivalence would be resolved and the conflict would vanish. However, the tension, the battling of contraries and the irresolution are wished for. The grotesque is like an acrobat walking a tight rope – if she falls down the spectacle is over; nevertheless, if the acrobat stays still for too long, the spectacle is over as well, since one is going to start caring less and less for her and for the possibility of a fall. The grotesque, in an analogous way, has to keep the clash of opposites as such, trying to avoid the disappearance of the conflict.

Let us consider the next example of Beckett’s *The Unnamable*:

“When Mahood I once knew a doctor who held that scientifically speaking the latest breath [at the moment of dying] could only issue from the fundament and this therefore, rather than the mouth, the orifice to which the family should present the mirror, before opening the will.” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 77)

I observe in this brief fragment the narrator making a double movement, because while he is talking about a commonly sad and serious topic (death), he is also adding a pinch of black humour, which makes one laugh but not without feeling ashamed at the same time. I know that I am laughing about the idea of a mirror in a 'fundament', but I also know that I am not supposed to be laughing, since that 'fundament' belongs to a person that just passed away. That is the tension: a sadness and an intermittent laughter that one cannot help to avoid. If the fragment were only about death, there would not be a conflict, but it is grotesque for including both effects (laughter and grief).

One can take this idea of contrary forces clashing further: in general, the grotesque must have the ability to display the normal face of reality while showing an alienated side as well, almost like having one eye in the *estranged world*²² and the other in the ordinary world. The spectator/reader should be able to recognize his familiar world so that he can also perceive the estranged aspect of it that the work of art is presenting; no matter how bizarre the new universe becomes, it is important that it resembles, in one way or another, the one that is putting it in risk. Some may perceive this alienated world as something fundamentally scary, only for the fact that they are facing a reality whose logic is unfamiliar. But that does not necessarily mean that the world is actually scary. I am talking here about two different things: the creation of a new realm (that is for that very same reason mysterious), and the reaction that one can have in the presence of it. In a way it is typical to feel fear of the unknown, as Kayser asserts "The basic feeling (...) is one of surprise and horror, an agonizing fear in the presence of a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible" (Kayser, 31), however that emotion is not an exclusive response. The unknown could easily make someone feel excitement, anxiety, joy, or even anger. Maybe for Kayser's discourse it was convenient to focus on the fear that an estranged reality could engender, but I would prefer to unlink these two things, since I believe that one does not necessarily implicate the other. Be that as it may, there is a general agreement about the fact that the grotesque is related to its context while "Each

²² "The grotesque is a structure. Its nature could be summed up in a phrase that has repeatedly suggested itself to us: THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD" (Kayser, 184).

age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity” (Harpham, 463).

But besides that, the grotesque loses its effects of estrangement if it does not have a surprising effect— that is, if one can anticipate it... In this respect, it is vital to keep in mind the relations with the context. The above quotation from *The Unnamable* may not seem grotesque for a reader which is familiar with that practice, so for him it would be normal to put a mirror close to an anus to corroborate that someone has died. This makes one asks how to deal with the idea of normality. In one respect, one can be pretty sure by now that the grotesque is something that cannot be generalized a priori, without taking into consideration the specific work of art, its ways of managing extravagancies, bizarreness, the uncanny, fun, etc.; and furthermore its relations to the receiver, his own context, his expectations, his fears, etc. The grotesque is something that cannot be settled down, it is a line of flight.²³

One more thing to mention: for most of the theorists of the grotesque, it is necessarily related to the human body and its functions. For Mikhail Bakhtin the grotesque can present alternatives to the normal, the rules, and the restrictions. According to him, the grotesque opens paths for creativity, given that the grotesque body is a body in movement – it is different and it is strange. It is never finished; it is always to be built, created, re-created, destroyed... (Bakhtin, 256). In other words, for Bakhtin, in contrast to Kayser, the grotesque is a positive force in the sense that it is considered as a creative power. He concentrates on the impact of laughter and on abusive language, which altogether with the body can build a joyful manner to resist official culture. To give an example: while Kayser’s response to the presence of a distorted body could be related to the demonic and the misery of life, for Bakhtin that same distorted body would be a way to defeat terror, a comic manner to deal with the misery of reality, given that for Bakhtin reality holds a multitude of diverse bodies (massive ones, disfigured ones, smelly ones, ludicrous ones,

²³ “A ‘line of flight’ is a path of mutation precipitated through the actualization of connections among bodies that were previously only implicit (or ‘virtual’) that releases new powers in the capacities of those bodies to act and respond” (Parr, 147).

etc.), not only the ones that are “normal”. In other words, for him exaggerated bodies and their processes (which normally involve the presence of corporeal fluids) create a comic effect than can help reduce the negative side of life. Moreover, within the grotesque the focus on the body and its functions (especially in those that are less observed) helps to show the cosmic connections of the body with other bodies, instead of considering it as only inaccessible matter. For him, life manifests itself through these connections among bodies and their unceasing changes, including the transition from death to life and vice versa: life comes from death, as much as death comes from life. So the body provides a sense of hope given this forever ongoing move of nature:

“(…) the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-overabundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic ‘economic man,’ but to the collective ancestral body of all the people.”
(Bakhtin, 19)

Again, one should not take Bakhtin’s words as final, or Kayser’s or Harpham’s, for that matter. All the characterizations that I have mentioned are attempts to define something that may be better to leave a little undefined. There are indeed elements that are common in the grotesque, but for no reason one should reduce the concept to them. Nevertheless, even if I have concluded that there is no (one) way to define the grotesque, I can however indicate that there are forms that are typical or prevalent expressions of it, such as stream-of-consciousness techniques, the presence of multiple narrators within a text instead of one omniscient voice, an incoherent plot or simply lack of a plot, unlinked events, chapters that have no relation to other ones, etc. The grotesque aims to present a world

that is absurd and that overall does not keep unity and harmony – a fragmented reality that is *estranged*. On a different level, the grotesque usually talks about characters that are atypical: predominantly they would be considered ugly (deformed, mutilated, disgusting, etc.), even in a metaphorical mode (morally aberrant, with perverse taste, with evil and perturbed tendencies, etc.); about situations that are horrifying in a way but that are presented in a comic manner, or vice versa; and also about supernatural situations that can remind one of the reality, etc. One commonly finds within the grotesque an intricate mix of human and nonhuman attributes, an unusual destruction of symmetry (including sizes, shapes, etc.), and sinister presences, just to mention the most distinguished ones.

For a universe with the previously mentioned features to work, it is necessary for a new set of laws to govern it, so it is not a surprise to find within grotesque literary texts situations that show not only behaviours that one does not expect, but also precepts that one could find absurd. In a way, this is why it is not surprising to hear that the grotesque is related to the oneiric and fantastic world. Some theorists of the grotesque even mention that within the grotesque it seems that order and bonds are left to chance, but I believe that the disturbances are there on purpose, as part of the plan. So the grotesque introduces chaos, as Harpham states, but chaos does not mean total randomness.

If there is a global effect of the grotesque, it is that which makes readers (when referring to literary texts) feel alienated from their reality. Because of the deformed or twisted view that these texts present about reality, it becomes an unsafe and many times unpleasant place.

The grotesque is a way to resist authority's flat desire; at that, it is an expression of desire and a royal way to marginality. As it is always moving, it cannot be governed by any external law.²⁴ This is why one may encounter within its mischievous and irreverent movements a space for freedom.

²⁴ It is like what Complex Theory calls an emergent system – it creates its own rules, which only work for that specific system.

1.2 *Cobra cadabra, Cobra macabre*

Since Severo Sarduy's novel, *Cobra*, presents a very wide variety of topics, this paper cannot be considered an exhaustive study of it (perhaps this cannot be done at all). It is important to point out the presence of two attributes of the grotesque: Firstly, the ambiguous/ambivalent, which I will mostly relate to the human body and its characteristics, but not restricted to it. My analysis of the grotesque in *Cobra* can be summed up in the different elements mentioned in the quotation: "The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. (...) The other indispensable trait is ambivalence." (Bakhtin, 24) The other aspect is the strange/deformed body, since I believe that is one of the most important qualities of the grotesque. As Harpham says, "One of the most frequent ways for an artist to use the grotesque (...) is through the creation of grotesque characters. And one of the most obvious ways to effect this alienation is through physical deformity." (Harpham, 465)

In Sarduy's novel, the plot is overwhelming, the characters are constantly becoming something else and the grotesque is evoked through the excessive use of ornaments, the (baroque) uses of language, and the incisive revealing of the arbitrary construction of ideologies (sexual, patriotic, religion). He shows us the artifices behind the construction of meaning in a violent, very radical, transgressive way that has, nevertheless, elements of black humour.

The idea of the deformed body is regularly expressed in the novel. An example is the constant and painful transformations of the body of the protagonist. The idea is simple but complicated at the same time: Cobra believes that his feet are too big to be the feet of a woman, so he wants to shrink them, but the change breaks the logic of common sense when the process results in a duplication of his entire body and, simultaneously, in a disfigurement of it.

His body overcomes its limits and spreads out: Cobra becomes a double of himself in the figure of Pup, in a process that resembles mitosis, while he remains himself (although deteriorated). Up to this point one can still talk about Cobra and Pup, but the novel reaches a level where it is just as possible to call him *he* as it is to call him *she* or *they* or even *it*. In this sense, Cobra is a Body without Organs (BwO)²⁵, because he/she/it has no unity: it is in crisis, decentered, chaotic, open, multiple, excessive.

Cobra's body is a deformed body in a literal sense (he gets a vagina) and also in a non-literal way (he resembles an animal, and he dies several times). In other words, if deformed means a loss of 'form', then certainly one observes a deformation in Cobra: in a literal way, he becomes Pup, he becomes a monk, he becomes a woman, he becomes a "rat". On the other hand, when talking about a deformation in a non-literal way the reference is to the distortion of that which is the non-physical part of the human body (for instance, its functions). A human body should behave like a human body, not like a hybrid body (part animal, part object, part volatile entity); and also a human body should be treated like a human body, which is not always the case in the novel, where human bodies are treated like things, like depositories or like gods. And in a second instance, normally, a human body cannot be reborn, normally, but Cobra dies over and over again, immediately reappearing in that fictional world. This displacement of functions can be linked to a twist of moral behaviours, as can be observed in the following description:

On the ground, with one of the Indonesian women, you were rolling, intertwined. The priest was penetrating the other woman in front of a god with one hundred hands and in each hand one hundred pupils. With the smell of their braided greasy hair, the smell of burnt viscera reached you.²⁶

²⁵ "The Body without Organs (BwO) refers to a substrate that is also identified as the plane of consistency (as a non-formed, non-organised, non-stratified or destratified body or term)" (Parr, 37).

²⁶ "Por el suelo, con una de las indonesias entrelazado, rodabas. El oficiante penetraba la otra ante un dios de cien manos y en ellas cien pupilas desorbitadas. Con el olor de sus cabellos unidos en una trenza, untuosos, te llegaba el de las vísceras quemadas" (Sarduy, 225).

There is a subtle critique of religious rituals that is very ambiguous, erotic and disgusting. This tone of ambiguity can be heard in the text, for instance, in the absurdity of the events. Cobra's original purpose was to become a woman, so would have been satisfied with the sex-change surgery. Yet, all that is witnessed here is a sense of loss, a counter-climactic reaction: "*Cobra's instructor*: Now you, Cobra, are like the image that you had of yourself. *Cobra*: How?"²⁷

Going to the idea of the mutable body, one can perceive a similar process in other characters, as in *La Señora*, in *El Maestro* and, especially, in *Pup*. *Pup* emerges from an uncertain part of the body of *Cobra*, whereupon she is enlarged until she reaches the size of *Cobra*, at which point she becomes *Cobra*, and then further shrinks and becomes a tiny midget again, and finally dies when *Cobra* becomes a woman.

$$\text{Cobra} = \text{Pup}^2$$

$$\rightarrow \text{Pup} = \sqrt{\text{Cobra}}$$

Another estranged feature of human beings is sexuality. It could be said that *Cobra* divides himself by mitosis, but it is possible to say instead that *Cobra* gives birth to *Pup*, which means that he distorts the biological function of fertility in human beings and his body becomes an extensive (and excessive) body because, in reality, *Cobra* is giving birth to himself, creating an entity that is actually a multiplicity of entities, something uncategorized and contradictory: a travesty is two (man/woman); a travesty that gives birth to another travesty (because he is he but he is also she) is four or eight (an entity that is two times duplicated):

$$\text{Cobra} = \text{Pup}^2$$

$$\text{and } \text{Cobra} = \text{woman} \pm \text{man}$$

$$\rightarrow \text{Cobra} = (\text{woman} + \text{man})^2 = \text{woman}^2 \pm 2\text{womanman} + \text{man}^2 = \text{Pup}^2$$

²⁷ "*Instructor de Cobra* –Ya eres, *Cobra*, como la imagen que tenías de ti. *Cobra* –¿Cómo?" (Sarduy, 118).

That is to say, a body, which is an excess of bodies and an excess of sexualities (a molecular sexuality²⁸), emerges, which is, according to Harold Bloom, one of the characteristics of the grotesque: “The grotesque involves primarily an excessive or distorted experience of the body.” (Bloom, 97) In summary, a character that is herself and at the same time is someone else and/or nobody; this can only mean that their her/their existence is not subject to *a priori* definitions that determine its development, but rather it is free to be what-is-already-being; the mechanism is contrary to the Cartesian logic:²⁹ I am, therefore I (may) think.

Cobra displays many abnormal universes whose principles can— to a certain degree — be related to his reality, but only to a certain extent because, at the same time, the logic behind those principles is distorted and unfamiliar. For instance, in the following paragraph there is an uncomfortable mix of beauty and cruelty, given that Sarduy presents an unpleasant event in a poetic manner, using idealistic clichés, such as throwing somebody’s ashes to the wind in a romantic gesture:

They cut his skin into ribbons which they nailed to the rocks. They crushed the bones. They mixed that powder with barley flour. They dispersed it into the wind. They repeated the syllables for the last time. They abandoned everything. For the birds.³⁰

²⁸ “(...) everywhere a microscopic transsexuality, resulting in the woman containing as many men as the man, and the man as many women, all capable of entering —men with women, women with men— into relations of production of desire that overturn the statistical order of the sexes. Making love is not just becoming as one, or even two, but becoming as a hundred thousand” (AO, 295-296).

²⁹ I believe that, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari are proposing a type of thought that one can call “nomadic thought”. This would be a type of thinking that is not interested in reproducing any model (which would imply to fix a point of view). They are rather attracted to a thinking process that is movable, and that does not have an image to imitate: “One is obliged to follow when one is in search of the ‘singularities’ of a matter, or rather of a material, and not out to discover a form; when one escapes the force of gravity to enter a field of celerity; when one ceases to contemplate the course of a laminar flow in a determinate direction, to be carried away by a vortical flow; when one engages in a continuous variation of variables, instead of extracting constants from them, etc.” (ATP, 372).

³⁰ “Le cortaron la piel en bandas que clavaron a las piedras. Le machacaron los huesos. Mezclaron ese polvo con harina de cebada. Lo dispersaron al viento. Repitieron por última vez las sílabas. Lo abandonaron todo. Para los pájaros” (Sarduy, 197).

This quotation evokes a sense that “(...) the natural order of things has been subverted.” (Kaysner, *The Grotesque...*, 21) In this case, subverted means destabilized and challenged, so that it becomes impossible to foresee future events, which is one of the consequences of a destabilized system. And what is this implication? That there is no expected connection between two events and that the world stops being representation and starts being presentation: reality is whatever is presented right there, in other words it is immanence.

Here there is a paradox: if the grotesque is presentation, then it cannot be a distortion, given that a distortion derives from another that is not itself. Or, is it that this derivation should not be considered as iteration, and it should instead be seen as a point of contact, as a cathexis? If the grotesque is not a distortion, could it rather be rather the presence of the abnormal? In this sense, the grotesque would be a view of the less-viewed side, or sides, of reality, whatever is not the norm, the rule, the general; the grotesque would be a defense of the exception and Cobra would be the epitome of it. As mentioned before, Sarduy exhibits the myths behind binary constructions and classifications of reality. He does so by overlaying elements that one normally would not find together, creating new metonymical relations and making the old ones shake, as Thomson states: “This effect of the grotesque can best summed up as *alienation*. Something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing. Much of this has to do with the fundamental conflict-character of the grotesque, with the mixture of incompatible characteristics of it.” (Thomson, 59) He, like many writers of the grotesque, keeps the emphasis on the body (as a lower stratum) and its impure and dirty secretions.

To summarize, Cobra is a grotesque character for several reasons: 1) the most obvious example is the female/male hybrid body, the ambivalent being; 2) this body happens to be able to reincarnate³¹, death being, however, a way to degrade the body, that is, a way to fuse with the lower stratum of the body; 3) because of his/her attempts to become *other*

³¹ For instance, Tigre talks to Cobra at his funeral as if he were alive: “Eat whatever you want from what we have given you. But realize that you are dead and do not come to this house anymore”. “Come lo que quieras (...) de lo que te hemos dado. Pero date cuenta de que estás muerto y no vengas más a esta casa...” (Sarduy, 194). On reincarnation, see also pp. 207, 245 and 252.

(he/she is in constant metamorphosis - deformation); 4) he/she has exaggerated characteristics (his/her feet³²); 5) he/she is his/her own double³³ (ambiguous); and 6) also because his/her body is the space where a superposition of hilarious stereotypes develop. In *Cobra I*, he is always called a *she* even if he, biologically speaking, is still a man. In *Cobra II*, after Dr. Ktazob gives him the aspired “little gash”, a woman (presumable La Señora) that sees her behind a vitrine in Rembrandtsplein, exhibiting herself, says: “it is him”³⁴.

With regards to the theme of the double, it is important to recall that it refers to the ambiguity in the grotesque, since it can introduce confusion, absurdity, disorder, loss of perspective, social ruin, anxiety, etc., into the text, turning the world into an unsafe place whose rules are difficult to figure out. Cobra is a grotesque body because it is always becoming something, because the processes are hyperbolic and outlandish, and also because he sustains a very disturbing relationship with Pup (the double). One should always keep in mind that Pup emerged from a part of the body of Cobra, but the text also suggests that the double is Cobra himself in a reduced version – almost as if Pup were a version of him linked together by invisible strings, whose consequences, nevertheless, can be observed: when Eustaquio paints Cobra’s body. He paints the same things on Pup’s body; when Cobra has left for India, Pup occupies his place in the Theatre; when

³² It is really never clear if Cobra was able to shrink the feet or not. At the end of “Lyrical Puppet Theater II” one can read that the bones in his feet broke and that some flowers blossomed there, nothing else (Ref. Sarduy, 37). However, even if, at the beginning of “White Dwarf”, one sees that they finally found the shrinking juice, one can also read that all of Cobra’s efforts were for nothing (conf. Sarduy, 41-42). Furthermore, in “I Dedicate This Mambo to God” there is a brief description of Cobra: “In the right breast a ruby was hiding. He had big feet and had humped high heel. He was singing a mambo in Esperanto”, that shows that either he never had small feet or that they grew again. “En el seno derecho se ocultaba un rubí. Tenía grandes los pies y un tacón jorobado. Cantaba un mambo en esperanto” (Sarduy, 93).

³³ Let us consider Bakhtin’s argument: “(...) the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding, older one.” (Bakhtin, 318) In which he suggests that the grotesque body is part of a duplicity. He also states: “(...) grotesque imagery constructs what we might call a double body” (Bakhtin, 318).

³⁴ At the end of “How are you?” an eighty-year old woman recognized him in spite of his surgery and his custom: “Es él” (Sarduy, 130), she says.

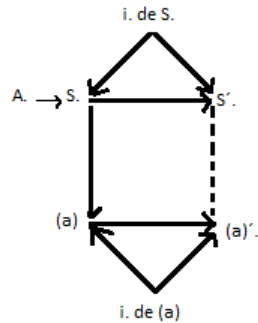
Dr. Ktazob is changing Cobra's sex, Pup feels all the pain. Pup is Cobra, but a malevolent and ugly version of him. Pup and Cobra together are a multiplicity³⁵.

Cobra's sex-change surgery is one of the most perturbing episodes of the novel: Cobra looses his penis and his double (in a manner that resembles voodoo) in the same mo(ve)ment. Prior to starting the procedure, Dr. Ktazob explains to Cobra that he does not use anaesthesia because it is very important for the patient to stay alert the whole time, so that when the change is done there is no risk of feeling disconnected from the restructured body. Consequently, they need another body (Pup's) to which to redirect the pain, so that the body that is going through the surgery (Cobra's) can handle the operation. The plan for the transference of pain goes outside:

An instructor *I* will train the subject *S*, so that *S* can learn to emit the caustic darts; another instructor will train the scapegoat so that he will not resist. In this way, the alterer *A* will be able to use his modeling force over the Subject in order to transform him into Subject derivative, a force whose hurting vector will suffer, in this case, the little altered that is there (a), transformed for the therapy that has taught a lesson, into the optimal (a) derivative (...) All of this is representable by the graph of mutation: Diamond.³⁶

³⁵ "A multiplicity is (...) a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity. Multiplicities are not parts of a greater whole that have been fragmented, and they cannot be considered manifold expressions of a single concept or transcendent unity. On these grounds, Deleuze opposes the dyad One/Many, in all of its forms, with multiplicity. Further, he insists that the crucial point is to consider multiplicity in its substantive form – a multiplicity – rather than as an adjective – as multiplicity of something. Everything for Deleuze is a multiplicity in this fashion." (Parr, 181). For Deleuze it is important to consider all the relations (the virtual, the intensive and the actual) that correspond to qualities and singularities, as De Landa states: "(...) multiplicities consist of a structure defined by differential relations and by the singularities which characterize its unfolding levels" (De Landa, 50).

³⁶ "Un Instructor *I* ejercitará al sujeto *S* para que aprenda a emitir dardos cáusticos; otro al chivo emisario para que no ofrezca resistencia. Así el alterador *A* podrá ejercer su fuerza modeladora sobre el Sujeto para convertirlo en Sujeto prima, fuerza cuyo vector lancinante padecerá, en este caso, la alteradita que está allá afuera (a), transformada por la terapia aleccionante, en receptora óptima (a) prima.... Todo es representable por el gráfico de la mutación: Diamante" (Sarduy, 107).



The descriptions of the surgery are very bloody and fresh, subtle but direct; and they show a body that is vulnerable, beautiful in its fragility. It seems that Dr. Ktazob and the instructors (who look like executioners – one of whom is La Señora) are enjoying giving pain to both bodies, and they also advise Cobra to be pitiless, i.e. not to feel badly for having to sacrifice Pup³⁷. After the surgery, it is also very disturbing to realize that Cobra has not only received female sexual organs, but also that she has become a cobra (*Naja naja*): She curls. She hisses. Her tongue breaks. Her fangs suppurate. (Ref. Sarduy, 118-121.)

Through the surgery Cobra is transferring to Pup all the negative elements (the maleness) that greatly repulsed her about her body: in a way, the surgery is taking away all her grotesqueries. And, at the same time, it is promising her the perfect image of a female. Nevertheless, even if it appears that the surgery effectively transferred the misfortunes to Pup, it did not succeed in transforming Cobra into a convincing woman. The other characters react in an unpleasant way when encountering this mix of female and male attributes, that is scared and mute, as can be seen when she is in the subway and people make fun of her: ‘the beggars laugh at her’³⁸ and ‘A filthy beggar, rags skewered with trinkets, gets close to her from behind, walking on her tip toes, a scream, she cuts Cobra’s

³⁷ “Equally destructive are the exercise of good and bad. You have eliminated compassion from you. With all your strength, now direct the pain to the midget: she is diabolic, underprivileged and ugly, who cares about what can happen to her? She is not more than your waste, your vulgar residue (...).” “Igualmente destructores son el ejercicio del bien y del mal. Has eliminado en ti la piedad. Con todas tus fuerzas dirige ahora el dolor hacia la enana: ella es diabólica, menesterosa y fea, ¿qué más da lo que pueda sucederle? No es más que tu desperdicio, tu residuo grosero....” (Sarduy, 115).

³⁸ “(...) se ríen de ella los mendigos...” (Sarduy, 126)

cape. They pull off her hat. The loud laughs resound in the vault³⁹. Since the beginning in the “Lyrical Puppet Theater”, she has been a spectacle; a transgressor: she/he contravenes the boundaries between male and female, and for that she has gone beyond the poor duality. Furthermore, the hybrid becomes even broader by extending the human body to an animal body:

She wears her make-up violently, the lipstick on her mouth like tree branches. The orbits are black and aluminum silver, thin between the eyebrows and then extended through other volutes, make-up and metal dust, to the temples, to the base of the nose, in wide ornamental borders and arabesques as those of swam eyes, but with richer and in finer colors; on the edges no eyebrows are hanging but lines of tiny precious stones. From the feet to her neck she is a woman; above, her body transformed into a type of heraldic animal with a baroque snout.⁴⁰

All the violence that Cobra’s body suffers (cuts, duplications, immolations, anthropophagy, reincarnations) shows that it cannot be destroyed. His body is a grotesque body because it can be a canvas, a corpse, a piece of skin, a sexual object, and even a chair:

With a chair and his/her clothes he started to build the image of the dead person [Cobra]. On the front legs of the chair he put on pants and boots; he dressed the back of the chair with a red sweater, and put an old and dirty antelope leather jacket: on the chest of the leather jacket you could still make out an open vertical arc, dripping, all wet in the felt, twisted like a

³⁹ “Una pordiosera mugrienta, harapos ensartados de baratijas, se acerca por detrás, en puntillas, un grito, le raja la capa. Le arrancan el sombrero. Las carcajadas retumban en la bóveda (...)” (Sarduy, 127).

⁴⁰ “Está maquillada con violencia, la boca de ramajes pintada. Las órbitas son negras y plateadas de alúmina, estrechas entre las cejas y luego prolongadas por otras volutas, pintura y metal pulverizados, hasta las sienas, hasta la base de la nariz, en anchas orlas y arabescos como de ojos de cisne, pero de colores más ricos y matizados; del borde penden no cejas sino franjas de ínfimas piedras preciosas. Desde los pies hasta el cuello es mujer; arriba su cuerpo se transforma en una especie de animal heráldico de hocico barroco” (Sarduy, 126).

cut serpent; then, as in the past, traced with a single gesture by a calligraphist in an angular style, the divination circle, twisted over itself and without borders, a perfect ring; imprinted by a stone stamp close to a circle with a square stamp: BR, lacerated close to the shoulder, an A.⁴¹

Cobra: the animal, the man, the woman, the dwarf, the resurrected, the thing: the grotesque.

1.3 *The Unnamable*: the human as a grotesque entity

As mentioned before, the grotesque can be found in many different ways, and it will always depend on the reader (in the case of literary texts) to decide (to feel) if the work of art can belong to this aesthetic category or not. In Beckett's *The Unnamable* the grotesqueries are related to the deformation of the physical body of the protagonist and, so to speak, also to the deformation of his mind. All of that leads to the question of what it means to have an identity and to be (a free) human.

The distortion of a human being in *The Unnamable* can be recognized on two levels: first, in the body, which for the grotesque is typically ruined, deformed or reduced, and second, in the spirit or intellect, where it shows perversity, cruelty, evil or madness. In *The Unnamable* it is very clear that both levels of deformation are entwined since the body of the protagonist is losing as much shape as his speech, which may be a projection of his thoughts. Throughout the novel, the unnamable's⁴² body is losing its shape: he resembles an egg; apparently he does not have any protuberances in his body (hands, legs, nose,

⁴¹ “Con una silla y su ropa empezó a armar la imagen del muerto. Le puso pantalones a las patas delanteras y un par de botas, vistió el espaldar con un suéter rojo, le abrochó un jacket de antílope, raído y sucio: en el dorso aún podía adivinarse un arco vertical abierto en la piel, chorreado, embebido en la felpa, retorcido como una serpiente macheteada; luego, como antaño, trazado de un solo gesto por un calígrafo de estilo anguloso, el círculo de la adivinación, torcido sobre sí mismo y sin bordes el aro perfecto; estampado por un cuño de piedra, junto a un círculo un sello cuadrado: BR, lacerada junto al hombro una A” (Sarduy, 193).

⁴² When I refer to ‘the unnamable’ spelled this way I am talking about the character in the novel.

penis, ears, etc.); he has lost his eyelids; and his brain is also deteriorating: “The tears stream down my cheeks from my unblinking eyes. (...) Perhaps it is liquefied brain.” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 6) Later, he also starts doubting his capabilities to think⁴³ and his competency to speak, and, furthermore, he becomes skeptical about every statement which he utters, including the veracity of his arguments. Very often, he makes the reader suspect that he is a madman, maybe even in a madhouse.

It seems that both his body and his mind are placed within the limit of their dissolution, on a threshold that is the circumstance for their disappearance and, simultaneously, for their liberation, as if the unnamable were a *Body without Organs* (BwO)⁴⁴, placed on the edge of the molar machines (which would demand his disappearance, since becoming part of them implies submitting to social assemblages) and molecular machines (which would free him, bringing him close to a schizo-existence, where desires can be unleashed).⁴⁵ This coincides with the description that the unnamable makes about himself:

“Perhaps that’s what I am: the thing that divides the world in two – on the one side the outside, on the other the inside. (That can be as thin as foil.) I’m neither one side nor the other, I’m in the middle. I’m the partition. I’ve two surfaces and no thickness. Perhaps that’s what I feel: myself vibrating. I’m the tympanum.” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 134)

He is a membrane that is part of both worlds (body/external and mind/internal) without needing to be one more than the other, or without being able to be one more than the

⁴³ “(...) all Beckett’s work paradoxically insists upon and rebels against the Cartesian definition of man as ‘a thing that thinks’” (Esslin, 170). For Cartesians the construction of the self depends on the human capacity to think. Beckett is skeptical about this skill, and I would add that he would not suggest that this characteristic constitutes the essence of humankind.

⁴⁴ “(...) the body without organs [is] a pivot, (...) a frontier between the molar and the molecular” (AO, 281).

⁴⁵ In *Anti Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between two possible destinies of the cathexis: *molar* and *molecular*. According to my understanding, the *molar* is related to the social structures and to the laws of the subjugated group, whereas the *molecular* has to do with the fluxes of life and the production of desire. See also the diagram on p. 282.

other. That is how the dichotomy mind/body is overcome in Beckett's *The Unnamable*, because it shows how the exclusion of one from another is a false separation: one cannot exist without the other and whatever affects one also affects the other, in both ways; that is to say, he shows the inaccuracy behind the dichotomy thoughts/existence by presenting a being whose existence is not only a consequence of his thoughts but whose thoughts cannot be detached from the material experience of his body.

In other words, body and mind are part of one human machine and their functions and perceptions are closely and necessarily related. Deleuze argues that matter can be productive without human intervention, and also that the *world* does not urge human's explanations to make sense by itself. But if Deleuze only had stayed there, explains De Landa, he would just have been flipping Cartesian *cogito*, and it would have been just as insufficient for explaining reality.⁴⁶ Deleuze clarifies that matter and human production (including interpretation) are in a constant mutual intervention, and that the connections that are involved in the construction of reality are countless.

However, Beckett does not let one keep going. Once again, he throws another set of doubts over this partial conclusion: how can thoughts and senses be trusted? Are the explanations formulated about the relation between the material world and the metaphysical world accurate and correct? How does one differentiate between a simulacrum and a presentation? To what extent are thoughts overlapping on *actual reality*⁴⁷, thereby impeding him to see it?

⁴⁶ "The Cartesian method (the search for the clear and distinct) is a method for solving supposedly given problems, not a method of invention appropriate to the constitution of problems or the understanding of questions" (De Landa, 231). As I see it, Deleuze and Guattari are trying to understand reality not by imposing a method, but by seeing what matter and its singularities (intensive and extensive) are showing through the relations that it produces. Their ideas imply that in the material world there is a connectivity full of complex relations and that events are continuously changing (and, for that reason, it is not possible to talk about essences).

⁴⁷ Consider that, as I just mentioned, *actual reality* is an incessant co-construction between beings and objects; not a fixed picture that is out there waiting to be seen/discovered. I call it *actual reality* in opposition to *simulated reality*, which is the result of imposing ideas and ideologies on different social assemblages over what-is-being-there, trying to block the movement and the emergence of novel ways to relate elements. See this fragment, where the unnamable questions the trustworthiness of social values: "They gave me courses on love, on intelligence, most precious, most precious. They also taught me to

To attempt to solve these questions, it is useful to return to the role of the body and its grotesqueries. One of the most common themes of the grotesque is that of the body, making special reference to those characteristics of the body related to the secretion of substances, to the presentation of the body in its exuberances, to its death/life cycle, and to its deformed cases, as Thomson says: “(...) the grotesque is essentially physical, referring always to the body and bodily excesses (...)” (Thomson, 56). Most of the writers of the grotesque allude to bodies that are not examples of the classic ideals of the perfect body, preferring to show individuals with huge, distorted, dirty, disabled, mutilated, or wretched bodies; and emphasizing those *malfunctions* of it that normally are hidden from canonic literature and/or actual life. And even if Bakhtin argues that the grotesque body commonly focuses on its protuberances⁴⁸, he also suggests that it is enough to present a body that is far from normal (whether a gigantic or a mutilated figure⁴⁹ one). In this respect, Thomson emphasizes the presence of *diseased and deformed*⁵⁰ bodies in most of the literary texts of the grotesque. The protagonist of *The Unnamable* has a distorted body that has totally lost the shape of a human body⁵¹, having lost most of the organs that would give him access to all his senses:

“Why should I have a sex, who have no longer a nose? All those things have fallen, all the things that stick out, with my eyes, my hair, without

count, and even to reason. Some of this rubbish has come in handy on occasions, I don't deny it, on occasions which would never have arisen if they had left me in peace. I use it still, to scratch my arse with. Low types they must have been, their pockets full of poison and antidote. (...) There were four or five of them at me, they called that presenting their report” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 13).

⁴⁸ “Of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body (...). It is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines” (Bakhtin, 316).

⁴⁹ “Grotesque images (...) present (...) members, organs and parts of the body (especially dismembered parts) (...)” (Bakhtin, 318).

⁵⁰ See Thomson, 8.

⁵¹ “I would gladly give myself the shape, if not the consistency, of an egg, with two holes no matter where to prevent it from bursting, for the consistency is more like that of mucilage” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 23).

leaving a trace, fallen so far so deep that I heard nothing, perhaps are falling still, my hair slowly like soot still, of the fall of my ears heard nothing.”

(Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 23)

He also states that he no longer has legs or arms. The funny thing about him is that somehow he has managed to keep breathing, talking, seeing, hearing and having erections:

“I who murmured, each time I breathed in, Here comes more oxygen, and each time I breathed out, There go the impurities, the blood is bright red again. The blue face! The obscene protrusion of the tongue! The tumefaction of the penis! The penis! Well now, that’s a nice surprise, I’d forgotten I had one. What a pity I have no arms, there might still be something to be wrung from it. No, ‘tis better thus. At my age, to start manstuprating again, it would be indecent. And fruitless. And yet one can never tell. With a yo heave ho, concentrating with all my might on a horse’s rump, at the moment when the tail rises: who knows, I might not go altogether empty-handed away. Heaven, I almost felt a flutter! Does that mean they did not geld me? I could have sworn they had gelt me. But perhaps I am getting mixed up with other scrota.” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 62–63)

This apparent contradiction is reminiscent of what Deleuze and Guattari say about the Body without Organs (BwO), namely that it does not want to get rid of its organs, but rather it wants to fight organisms⁵² (that are only a strata of the body), i.e. the BwO does not want to destroy its organs (it needs them to function), but it wants to open them to new behaviours and connections. Therefore, when the

⁵² “We come to the gradual realization that the BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism.” (ATP, 158) and “Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor” (ATP, 160).

unnamable states that he does not have eyes, he probably does not literally mean that he does not have eyes, but that he has learned to make them function in another way. What type of human is this human? Just another life-form. The unnamable has achieved becoming a human without identity and goals (useless purposes) and, as a consequence, he prevents external attempts to constrain him. He needed to dissolve his self, to transform it into various selves, a multitude of selves (Mahood, Murphy, Malone, Molloy, Moran, Mercier, etc.), in order to be able to build a type of power that no fascist machine could remove and, as a result, be free to experience this molecular joy that has no boundaries. But all of this is subject to one condition: to continue becoming something else, not to be permanent, to move. The unnamable (quasi human, subhuman, prohuman, hyperhuman?) exemplifies a grotesque figure for the reason that he lacks most of the characteristics that are typically associated with humanness, without stopping being human, by placing himself within a limit.

In grotesque literature, the deformed body is not always an extremely dismembered body as in the case of the unnamable. Grotesque literature can also refer, as previously mentioned, about the deformed body (as in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*), about the disabled body (as in *Moby-dick*) or about the monstrous body (as in the *Obscene Bird of the Night*). And even if this theme can very easily hurt some sensibilities, it is important to recall that, for the grotesque, the point of bringing up these bodies is not to mock the possible repulsiveness or ugliness, but rather almost precisely the opposite, to question who decides the standards of beauty and normality, and what the purposes behind these separations and useless dichotomies are (for instance, functional/dysfunctional – would it be more accurate to talk about necessary and sufficient functions of the body?). A monster is perfectly functional, but repulsive (or fascinating, depending on the norm⁵³); while if one talks about a disabled body, as in the captain of *Moby-dick*, in a strict sense one should not be talking about disability given that Ahab managed to travel the

⁵³ In *The Obscene*, monstrosity is the rule and a higher level of monstrosity provides more benefits.

seas and command a large crew. This leaves the third case: the deformed body that seems to lie between the other two categories, because it is not so ugly, but rare enough, and because it is almost perfectly functional, but not totally efficient. Nevertheless, all of these divisions sound foolish and perhaps Beckett was trying to show their idiocy by presenting a human whose body is totally dismembered and who, nevertheless, can perform the necessary and sufficient functions of the body: to eat⁵⁴, to expulse human residues⁵⁵, to think, etc.

Beckett's *The Unnamable* questions these truths and many others. When reading the novel, one must also enter into an 'inquiring mood' (see Bakhtin, 27) and believe that whatever the unnamable says might be a joke. In other words, he warns the reader from the very beginning of the book: "(...) what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? (...) I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means." (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 3-4) The narrator keeps doing so over and over throughout the text, because, as Robbe-Grillet remarks, he first states that he looks like an egg with the consistency of mucilage, "But this shape and consistency are themselves immediately contradicted by an absurd detail: the speaker supposes himself to be wearing puttees – singularly unlikely attire for an egg" (Esslin, 108). Let us add more contradictions to our list: he does not have a nose, but he smells the stable (does one need a nose to smell smells?); he has always been in the jar, but he went to his family's house⁵⁶; he sees Malone, Madeleine, Mahood, but he has always been alone⁵⁷. Is he perhaps imagining?

⁵⁴ "Did I say I catch flies? I snap them up, clack! Does this mean I still have my teeth? To have lost one's limbs and preserved one's dentition, what a mockery!" (*The Unnamable*, 62).

⁵⁵ "For the woman, displeased at seeing me sink lower and lower, has raised me up by filling the bottom of my jar with sawdust which she changes every week, when she makes my toilet" (id., 61).

⁵⁶ "Finally I found myself, without surprise, within the building, circular in form as already stated, its ground-floor consisting of a single room flush with the arena, and there completed my rounds, stamping under foot the unrecognizable remains of my family, here a face, there a stomach, as the case might be, and sinking into them with the ends of my crutches, both coming and going. To say I did so with satisfaction would be stretching the truth. For my feeling was rather one of annoyance at having to flounder in such muck just at the moment when my closing contortions called for a firm and level surface. I like to fancy,

Is he inventing the fact that he hears other voices? What if the voices that he hears are not other people's voices, but his own voice coming from an unfolded self? Is he schizoid⁵⁸? One should not forget another important element of grotesque literature: according to Bakhtin "the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by 'normal,' that is, by common place ideas and judgments" (Bakhtin, 38-9).

If the unnamable is a madman, how can craziness be read from the *outside*? How can one pretend to have interiorized something that is only seen from far away? (Distance is censorship.) How can one become the unnamable's words in the same way that he became 'his' words?

The Unnamable shows the paradox of calling somebody crazy: he who calls you crazy only does so because you are not (like) him. Craziness is a misinterpretation of otherness or a resistance to *really* seeing the other, instead of wanting to project ourselves in the other (as in a mirror). Beckett's text suggests that it does not matter on which side of this equation you are standing (on the side that calls the mad or the non-mad – mad, or on the side that has been called mad), either way you are unavoidably a part of it, as he states "Sometimes I say to myself, they say to me, Worm says to me, the subject matters little, that my purveyors are more than one, four or five. But it's more likely the same foul brute all the time, amusing himself pretending to be a many (...)" (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 89) He also insinuates that there is a way to reduce this distance and to stop being the analyst who puts tags on the other. To begin with, let me ask what does it mean 'to really see the other'? In order to (really) see the others one has to distance oneself

even if it is not true, that it was in mother's entrails I spent the last days of my long voyage, and set out on the next. No, I have no preference, Isolde's breast would have done just as well, or papa's private parts, or the heart of one of the little bastards" (id., 49-50)

⁵⁷ "(...) there was never anyone, anyone but me (...)" (id., 151).

⁵⁸ "They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they, speaking of God knows what, to make me think it is not I who am speaking" (id., 115).

from them so as to view them, as in the basic function of a camera: focusing the lens in accordance to the distance. But this is, again, to set up a distance. Maybe the question ‘how to see the other?’ is inherently contradictory, or perhaps it is the wrong question.

It seems that Beckett returning to the first inquiry (‘is madness different from reasonableness?’) from which he appears to suggest a solution, which will be mentioned later. In *The Unnamable*, the reader has to make a decision at the very beginning and agree, in a fictional pact, to believe in what he is reading in spite of all the absurdity and contradictions that may be encountered. As the reader, he is asked continuously to leave his expectations aside while welcoming the logic of the fictional universe that Beckett offers; in short, to become a nomadic reader⁵⁹: read, understand, keep going, forget, move, read, forget, move, misunderstand, be still, unread, forget, read, reread, realize, remember, let go, etc. The nomadic reader understands that the unnamable exposes the fiction of the dichotomy mad/not-mad: the protagonist says that he has lost a leg in the war; that he has also lost his family because Malone and Mahood probably killed them in a complot; he claims that he cannot stop crying and that they have captured him in a jar. But, as soon as the reader wants to be empathetic with the unnamable, there is a voice at the back of his mind that prevents him because he has also read that the protagonist lost both legs, that he has no eyes, that he is lying, that he (maybe) is Mahood or/and Malone, that he may be dreaming, or that he does not exist. Therefore, on the one hand, the unnamable presents a coherent, logical, and credible speech (the discourse of the not-mad); and, on the other, he makes fun of the reader in a macabre manner while he mumbles that one should not believe him (the discourse of the mad). What is even more incredible is that he presents both discourses at the very same time!

⁵⁹ Talking about the game of Go, Deleuze and Guattari explain that for the game “(...) it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival” (ATP, 353). When I talk about a *nomadic reader*, I am suggesting that the reader places himself in a “smooth” space, where he himself creates the connections and the provisional meanings.

Beckett uses tools of rationality to prove that rationality is not necessarily right about its conclusions and its methods. Given that mad/not-mad is a simulated dichotomy, Beckett suggests that there is no need to even utter it, and he perhaps is also proposing that to really *see* the other is not a matter of reducing distances but of *becoming* the other.⁶⁰

To *become* the other would imply to stop judging him/her/it and to cease imposing ways of reasoning (either in the form of a law or in the form of an aesthetic category) that do not come from himself; it would imply letting the other (=oneself) understand things as he/she/it pleases, because, as Beckett shows, the explanations of reality are not necessarily the reality itself and/or they are not always accurate. In a way, humans cannot do more than have a reduced point of view of things and for that we should expect that our elucidations are partial, just as even science cannot escape from retraction!

That is likely why Beckett presents the unnamable as a reduced being with a reduced body and a reduced ability to think⁶¹, which is also evident in his reduced point of view: he can hardly see the outside world, and that only occurs when good Madeleine lifts the cover of the jar and cleans him (in the case where he is in a jar in front of the slaughterhouse...), as one observes in this extract: “Perhaps I am still under the tarpaulin: perhaps she flung it over me again (for fear of more snow in the night) while I was meditating” (*The Unnamable*, 80). This reduced point of view is noticeable not only at

⁶⁰ Sight and the distancing effect that maintains the other as Other and self as self. Deleuze and Guattari (in *A Thousand Plateaus*) talk about two modes of seeing: “optic” seeing (which “striates” space and maintains such oppositions) and “haptic” seeing, which is using the eye to touch and bring closer.

⁶¹ “I add this, to be on the safe side. These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were, if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this. I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don’t know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere and to those places where I was, where I shall be. But I have never been elsewhere, however uncertain the future. And the simplest therefore is to say that what I say, what I shall say, if I can, relates to the place where I am, to me who am there, in spite of my inability to think of these, or to speak of them, because of the compulsion I am under to speak of them, and therefore perhaps think of them a little. Another thing. What I say, what I may say, on this subject, the subject of me and my abode, has already been said since, having always been here, I am here still. At last a piece of reasoning that pleases me, and worthy of my situation. So I have no cause for anxiety” (*The Unnamable*, 18).

the physical level (he cannot see much –or at all, as he also suggests) but also in the sense that he is *impersonal*, since he is repeating somebody else’s words, making his speech a mere citation of a voice behind him (the voice of the ventriloquists): “I have no language but theirs” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 52). Is there a more efficient way to show the partiality of an idea than attaching it to a body, a very specific type of body that cannot be linked to the norm and that questions (through its mere presence) official discourses? As Bloom argues, “The grotesque in art often reminds us that the body, with its smells, wastes, unruly appetites, and deformities, calls into question human idealisms and human pretensions” (Bloom, 11).

The unnamable is not shy about being whatever he is being, especially if it means showing his grotesqueries and to discomfort the reader: “(...) alone perhaps the state of my skull, covered with pustules and bluebottles, these latter naturally abounding in such a neighborhood, preserved me from being an object of envy for many, and a source of discontent” (*The Unnamable*, 56). For Beckett the presence of a body that openly shows its natural or unnatural functions seems to be important, which expresses an *unofficial speech*, given that the grotesque body aims to subvert the vertical hierarchies of culture, placing individuals in the lower stratum of existence (in the *material bodily stratum*, instead of the heavenly one), since it is there where life is more abundant, productive, free, real, genuine. Through the use of the grotesque, he encourages rethinking definitions, hierarchies, models – to give new significance to things and people. As Bakhtin states, “[In the downward movement of the forms in the grotesque,] Objects are reborn in the light of the use made of them.” (Bakhtin, 374) The grotesque body can represent a means to anarchy; it celebrates the differences and the movement that prevents the authoritarian aims of official culture:

“[The] grotesque form exercises [this] function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. [It] offers the chance to have a new

outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.” (Bakhtin, 34)

This also points out the absurdity of believing in metaphysical and religious forces. Hence, Beckett shows that reality is a multiplicity failed by laws, concepts, or faith, and that there are no essences of things, concepts or humans. Essences would need to exist on a metaphysical plane. Rather, there are relations and behaviours that can give some meaning within that very specific context, and even then only temporarily because one cannot expect the environment in its complexity to stay the same forever. For that reason, Beckett’s *The Unnamable* makes one wonder if people really are reasonable creatures, contradicting the sense of rightness and wrongness of one’s thoughts and presenting a character that is there in spite of his failure to rationalize the world: “Would it not be better if I were simply to keep on saying babababa, for example, while waiting to ascertain the true function of this venerable organ [the brain]?” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 28)

What happens when one’s assumptions of reality are threatened? One’s beliefs and values start losing certainty, and, even if they do not crumble, one begins to recognize the arbitrariness and trickery of power assemblages (hierarchies, morals, laws); even if one only seen in a blink of an eye, which is long enough to make them fissure,⁶² and to let creativity filter through the crack.

The grotesque aims to shake the world as one sees it, especially in times where stability reigns. The writers of the grotesque want to build an alternative reality, and they do so by creating arbitrary connections or, most commonly, by proposing perverse deformations of reality. The goal is to cause an effect of astonishment in the reader, to show that this world is not safe or trustable; to wonder about certainties, beliefs and thoughts. Perhaps by putting things that are incompatible together, the grotesque does not evoke the

⁶² “The crack-up ‘happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed’. This molecular line, more supple but no less disquieting, in fact, much more disquieting, is not simply internal or personal: it also brings everything into play, but on a different scale and in different forms, with segmentations of a different nature, rhizomatic instead of arborescent” (ATP, 199).

absurdity of putting them together, but it indeed shows that, given that they can be together, it is absurd to think that they are incompatible; that is, it shows the falsehood of naturalizing ideas in general, since ideas are simply and merely social (human) constructions, no matter how well organized and how solidified they appear to be.

In *The Unnamable* Beckett displaces concepts from their ossified context of significance to give them back the possibility of new meaning -meaning something else: reason seems foolish and maybe folly is more trustworthy. He joins elements that are normally not found together, such as cruelty and compassion, sadness and happiness, fullness and nothingness, etc. He makes one fear (or at least inquire about) one's own reality, breaking the logic of it and leaving clichés at the level of irresolution, which is “the logic of the grotesque” (Bakhtin, 107). Beckett plays with the limits of horror and delight, crosses the line that divides the allowed from the forbidden, making the reader laugh about horrific situations in a way that shocks expected reactions, thus giving new meaning to categories and showing the falsehood of any dichotomy. Beckett does not only confront prejudices and loathes that the readers take things for granted, but he also assures that the readers stop deceiving themselves by staggering elementary suppositions, so that they have to put into question their preconceptions about time, space, verisimilitude, rules, power, and identity.

Chapter 2

2 A note on language

“When I use a Word”, Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone,

“it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less”.

“The question is”, said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things”.

“The questions is”, said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that is all”.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*.

Language is *any* method of expression. *Any* system of signs used by humans in order to express themselves. Many things are involved in this simple definition: what is a sign? To what extent is expression related to communication? Is communication the replication of an ideology? Is the ‘grammatically correct’ use of language an expression of the ideology of the dominant class? Is one’s identity traceable through his idiolect or throughout the language of the socium to which one belongs? How many systems of communication should/can one consider when trying to give meaning to a message?

There are two facts to emphasize: language is not restricted to the linguistic sign (either written or verbalized), and not all the meanings of nonverbal communication⁶³ can be systematized (given that it is fundamentally phenomenal). However, if one cannot fix the meanings, how can he communicate? And another case: if one prioritizes the linguistic sign that can be fixed, how can its stagnation be avoided? There are many paradoxes inherent in the definition of language, among them its flexibility (its infinite creativity) and its rigor (its need to be fixed by rules); its arbitrariness and its consistency; its conventionality and its extraordinary production. It seems that no language can be restricted to its rules, in the same way that thinking cannot be oversimplified by defining

⁶³ Nonverbal communication includes: facial expressions; gestures; paralinguistics (accent, pitch, volume, rate, fluency, intonation, modulation, rhythm); kinesics (body language) and posture; proxemics (physical distance between communicators –shall one not forget the importance of *territories?*); oculusis (eye gaze); haptics (everything related to the sense of touch); appearance (color, clothing, jewelry); physiological changes (sweating, blinking, yawning); smells; chronemics (time); and silence. See De Vito, 134-157.

it as subvocal speech. That is to say, grammar will never be enough to explain the movement of *langue*⁶⁴, since forms, orders, functions, and structures, are incapable of showing the immense vastness of language. And yet, there is a tendency to try to give meaning to everything as if putting-into-words, as if naming, gives the users control or possession over reality.

In this chapter, I analyze how Beckett's minoritarian uses of the word in *The Unnamable* problematize the conceptualization of the linguistic sign. He asks questions such as: does expression have to carry a message?; can expression not carry a message?; and, since the relation of the word and its lexical meaning is totally arbitrary and conventional (even onomatopoeic change from language to language), how can one single person introduce newness to it?

Beckett has contraposed his text against majoritarian discourses and, because of that, he has managed to resist the tyranny of the stagnation of the word (which largely contributes to the production of social truths, meanings, and identities). I argue that Beckett engages in a creative process by which he dissolves 'language' and human identity.

Before proceeding, I would like to indicate that in *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between minoritarian and majoritarian literature, linking the former to a force of production, revolution, and deterritorialization through language. They argue that minor literature resists a priori conceptualizations, since it aims to break forms and petrified uses of language, making possible the manifestation of lines of escape that can free the word. It is in this sense that minoritarian uses of the linguistic sign not only *crack* major language, but also have repercussions in the social assemblages to which that language belongs, making established discourses destabilized. To summarize, they characterize minor literature as follows:

⁶⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, a French linguist, centers not on individual utterances but on the underlying rules and conventions that enable language to operate. He focuses on grammar rather than usage; rules rather than actual expressions, and *langue* (the system of language) rather than *parole* (actual speech). See Leitch, 20.

“The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.” (*Kafka...*, 18)

In turn, Sarduy's *Cobra* also challenges social norms and the meanings of signs by presenting universes that contradict institutionalized assemblages. Sarduy, however, does it in a different manner: whereas Beckett *empties*⁶⁵ language, Sarduy works by *saturation*. Sarduy's use of language is voluptuous, exaggerated, erotic: by expressing a single phenomenon in so many different ways he shows the vulnerability and malleability of meanings. He shows how there are numerous manners of expressing the same content, and how the relation expression-message-content is not univocal and necessary. Both writers question this relation: they present forms of expression that are lacking a message and, therefore, do not harbor content (signification)⁶⁶. They do so by creating novel forms of expression, by deterritorializing major uses of language, by *hating all languages of masters*.

On the other hand, I would say that Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* is a special case of resisting power, given that he does so in a more subtle fashion. His text is an expression of the less explored sides of social constructions, and for that Donoso problematizes concepts such as ideologies and stereotypes, building fictional universes that are open to those marginal states of human expression that are normally ignored: the deterritorialized behaviours. Whereas Sarduy focuses mainly on the figure of the transvestite, Donoso centers his novel on the elderly and the ugly (monstrous). He tells

⁶⁵ Deleuze says that “[Beckett] proceeds by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities” (*Kafka...*, 18).

⁶⁶ As Deleuze and Guattari tell: “[for] minor literature (...) it is expression that precedes contents, whether to prefigure the rigid forms into which contents will flow or to make them take flight along lines of escape or transformation” (*Kafka...*, 85).

the readers that there is a point where major culture blocks the forms of expression of minorities, transforming the social productions of these groups into symbols of threat, distrust and repulsion, given that they expose the arbitrariness of the official culture and its prejudices, beliefs, truths, and rules.

2.1 He wrote his did

Coming back to the statement that opened this chapter, let me ask again: what does one refer to when one says ‘language’? Language is *anything* that helps us, as users, to communicate; it has to be related to a context and it uses a system of signs. So, in reality one should better say ‘languages’, because there is never only **one**: body language, sign language, spoken language, braille, musical language, mathematical language, etc. I am talking about heterogeneous systems of communication that are connected in many ways. And the complexities do not stop there: many times users use them intentionally (consciously) and other times unintentionally (unconsciously).

Nevertheless, there is a tendency to simplify them in order to explain them and, as a consequence, with each systematization of a language comes a reduction of it. To try to explain a sentence only from its syntactical elements is to destroy it in a movement of abstraction that detaches it from the reality of production. As Deleuze and Guattari state:

“The linguistic tree on the Chomsky model still begins at a point S and proceeds by dichotomy. On the contrary, not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status. *Collective assemblages of enunciation* function directly within *machinic assemblages*; it is not impossible to make a radical break between regimes of signs and their objects.” (ATP, 28)

In this sense some scholars, Barthes and Chomsky, for instance, have criticized, on the one hand, the supposed arbitrariness of written language, and some others, such as Derrida for instance, on the other, have criticized the inclination to homogenize and prioritize certain meanings over others (*logocentrism*⁶⁷). To try to answer the question “what did she want to say?” is a question that goes beyond an elementary attempt to put together the meaning of every word and add it to the statement. An interpretation should include as many elements of the diverse and wide context (or contexts) as possible and must remain incomplete. Interpretations are, therefore, partial, unfixed, and provisional.

One should also consider all those extra-linguistic elements (“assemblages that are not principally linguistic” (ATP, 132)) that accompany every word that is uttered (what Saussure called *parole*), because they modify (in intensity?) its meanings and, let us not forget that we are human: words give us emotion.

It is not the same to tell somebody “Be careful” in a soft voice, with a smile on the face, and relaxed muscles; and to tell him “Be careful” holding a bloody knife, using a threatening voice, and running towards him. Smells, distance, volume, tone, yawns, prosody, blinks, a fake laughter (attitude –intentional), joy, a rictus of disgust (emotion – unintentional), and similar forms of non-linguistic expression are all important. In communication everything matters, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, “Hence the necessity of a return to pragmatics, in which language never has universality in itself, self-sufficient formalization, a general semiology, or a meta-language” (ATP, 132). The pragmatics of Deleuze and Guattari show how languages meet the rules (generative) and, at the same time, how they forget the rules (transformational) –or what Saussure called *mutability* and *immutability*. However, they add two other components to the regime of signs: the *diagrammatic* and the *machinic*, which are related to the map (diagram of the abstract machines) and the territory (program of agency).

⁶⁷ “Western philosophy after Plato was centered around the impossible but irresistible search for a fundamental *Truth* or *Logos*. Derrida calls this search ‘logocentrism’” (Leitch, 2037).

The uses of language come first and are followed by its systematizations (grammars and other assemblages of power), not the other way around, which implies that, when one uses a language in an ideal situation, ways must be found to represent what actual situations are presenting. That is why one intends to simulate these features using emoticons when texting someone on a cell phone: to try to ‘complete’ the meaning of what is being expressed. That is also why new words are added to the dictionary, and why literary genres see their borders disappearing.

Deleuze and Guattari are defending those modes of communication that have been marginalized in favor of the tyrannical regime of the signifier. However there is something that makes me struggle: how can one produce anything without having a referent, a starting point? It seems that they are criticizing the signifiers that are the interpretation of the interpretation of the interpretation... and so on; but there is no *denotative* meaning as such. Each use of a linguistic sign is indeed an interpretation of the sign, in a way that signs are constantly becoming signs of signs. And as they also admit, there is not a level zero of signification; the issue is not to pretend that one can start as a literal *tabula rasa*, but to experiment within language and create new forms of expression and new meanings.

In a way there is a need to fight the “universal abstraction” (the despotic and the authoritarian regimes of sign), but if all users go to the other extreme and become “the most deterritorialized line, the line of the scapegoat, (...) the line of our subjectivity” (ATP, 143), we would all be moving to Babel, or rather to somewhere else: to a place full of individualities and without collectivities.

What about literary language? I will continue this section with one quotation:

“We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge.” (ATP, 25)

One should not look for *a* meaning within a text; but one still does. We all are, in that sense, a little bit paranoid because we like to look for teleological meanings everywhere; we crave for despotic signs that allow us to take a break, to not be vulnerable, to be included in a conversation. Are Deleuze and Guattari suggesting, then, a passionate approach: a reading that interiorizes the book itself and its meanings? Not likely, because, even if passionate regimes eliminate interpretations, they do not produce *new* meanings (“[The interpretation] disappears entirely in favor of a pure and literal recitation forbidding the slightest change, addition, or commentary (...) Or else interpretation survives but becomes internal to the book itself, which loses its circulatory function for outside elements.” (ATP, 148)).

It appears that extra linguistic features cannot be incorporated in a literary text as easily as they can be included in another semiotic system, given that literature depends mainly on written words. Not exclusively, but mostly. Nevertheless, how can one make words, these linguistic signs, mean more than they do? How is it possible to build an empty-sign (full of potential), through the poetic function of language, beyond its referential function?

Barthes, in *The Pleasure of The Text*, argues that one can provide the linguistic sign with *new*, original, and creative meanings.⁶⁸ What one has to do is become a reader not in pleasure but in bliss⁶⁹, so as to hear the sound of silence, which is what remains in the

⁶⁸ “How can the text ‘get itself out’ of the war of fictions, of sociolects? –by a gradual labor of extenuation. First, the text liquidates all metalanguage (...). Next, the text destroys utterly, to the point of contradiction, its own discursive category, its sociolinguistic reference (its ‘genre’): it is ‘the comical that does not make us laugh,’ the irony which does not subjugate, the jubilation without soul, without mystique (Sarduy), quotation without quotation marks. Lastly, the text can, if it wants, attack the canonical structures of the language itself (Sollers): lexicon (exuberant neologisms, portmanteau words, transliterations), syntax (no more logical cell, no more sentence)” (Barthes, *The Pleasure...*, 30-31).

⁶⁹ “With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another text of bliss*: you cannot speak ‘on’ such a text, you can only speak ‘in’ it, *in its fashion*, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss (and no longer obsessively repeat the letter of pleasure)” (Barthes, *The Pleasure...*, 22). The writer and reader of bliss try to remove meanings from the ‘repetition of the letter’ by circulating the text with other texts of bliss (that are also escaping the law, for they are moving away from the regime of the signifier). The reader of bliss would therefore be a molecular reader.

sign after letting it go nude (empty). Emptiness and nothingness are used here in the sense of going back to the potential of the word, which allows creativity and novelty and opens ways for new connections; that is, dismantling the fixed significations that reinforce molar meanings.

For Barthes, the distinction between pleasure and bliss is very important: pleasure would still refer to what Deleuze and Guattari call molar assemblages, while joy would refer to molecular assemblages. According to Barthes, one should never apologize, one should not explain himself and one should embrace the paradoxes of creating meaning: in the first place, he should acknowledge himself as an individual who is part of social assemblages and, at the same time, an expression of what-is-not (nothingness). He suggests that one places his readings between the distancing and the approaching, on the border. Beckett's *The Unnamable* is an example of this type of text, which is a *text of bliss*, given that it "imposes a state of loss [and] discomfort" (Barthes, *The Pleasure...*, 14). Beckett's writing is neither personalized nor unified, because it does not emphasize a specific point of view more than any other, and because events unfold into their potentiality without needing to condense into an actual fact; it is rhizomatic given that it opens itself to simultaneous discourses without ceding priority to any of them, and since it lets itself be crossed by a multitude of intensities. His writing affirms A, its negation, and the sum of them (not the synthesis). He does not have to select between terms, since he has managed to include them all "passing through the entire set of possibilities" (ECC, 111). *The Unnamable*, an untenable and impossible text⁷⁰, resists interpretation and demands to be experienced.

This is how literature can re-signify the linguistic sign: by virtue of tracing the lines of flight of the words and recognizing that agencies territorialize their meanings and, simultaneously, reterritorialize them (preferably to a maximum of deterritorialization). Some literary texts show us "that every system is in variation and is defined not by its

⁷⁰ Deleuze says that Beckett "invent[s] a *minor use* of the major language within which [he] express[es] [himself] entirely; [he] *minorize[s]* this language, much as in music, where the minor mode refers to dynamic combinations in perpetual disequilibrium. (...) This exceeds the possibilities of speech and attains the power of the language, or even of language in its entirety" (ECC, 109).

constants and homogeneity but on the contrary by a variability whose characteristics are immanent, continuous, and regulated in a very specific mode (...)” (ATP, 114-115). That is, even if systems need to systematize and try to freeze the production of language, they should also include the variations because language is constantly morphing and, if they only considered the constants, they would be moving away from the language that they are taking as reference, perhaps to the point where they would not even have much to do with each other. However, sometimes variations are ignored for the sake of preserving the status of power in a system, and so much so that one can think that the movement of production is the other way around – from the system that dictates the rules to the users who apply them. It seems that ‘creativity’ has been captured and filtered through the grammatically correct⁷¹ law; consequently, the further away from the rule that a text becomes, the more censored it will be. Grammatically correct becomes a marker of power and, for that, it asks for submission. Therefore, one needs to forget revolutionary desires in order to belong to an institution that demands replication and obedience.

In spite of the canons and the power of major literature, some minor writers have managed to go beyond the impositions of the law, realizing that writing not only becomes an escape from major discourses, but also that writing is a machine that can fight for the inclusion of minor discourses, and, as a result, of minor assemblages. Agrammaticality can be a way out of the law, since agrammatical constructions within literature, through disturbance, perplexity, and confusion, rebuild written language and give it a meaningful spin in a way that makes it necessary to rethink words, their uses and their meanings.

2.2 Beckett’s literature of the unword

Some words are untranslatable, no matter how many tricks, accents, tones, extensions, connotations, and figures one wants to add to them. If anything, one only manages to make them obscure or pompous. Some ideas cannot be named, they are buttery, watery,

⁷¹ Even if in language “There are no preexisting rules, each move invents its own rules” (LOS, 59).

airy, ... The same thing can be said about some literary texts, especially those that purposely aim to free the word, making it light or empty. Beckett's *The Unnamable* is a notable example that shows how words can be repositioned in their original place (after fighting for the removal of all cohesive and accumulated immovable meanings): presence. I say "original place" not in the sense of a beginning, but in the sense of the fundamental value of the word, to express and communicate (not to repeat and mirror). That originality, in my opinion, can only be reached when words become presentation (as opposed to representation) and obtain the strength to be creative and novel.

Beckett is problematizing the concepts of signification, connotation, function, form, etc., of the word as linguistic sign not to show that communication is impossible, but to demonstrate that, in order to communicate, one has to disrupt major discourses and try to free the words, maybe even to become a flux with them, to evolve with them, die with them, and eventually let them leave (when they cross the subject). However, one may ask: how can paths for newness within a language be opened if one is unavoidably constrained by that language? Maybe by constantly moving on and by resisting the simulacrum of permanence; perhaps by destroying oldness; possibly by showing the insufficiency of reducing words to a representational function; maybe by introducing elements of disruption (for instance, agrammaticality) to the system; perhaps by putting language "into a state of *boom*, close to a *crash*?" (ECC, 109)

Beckett explains that he wanted to remove rhetorical resources from his texts, in an attempt to leave the words clear, nude, in their smallest (/biggest?) capacity for expression; to explore the process of construction of signification transforming language into an unreliable sign that can only mumble and annul itself⁷². This is why Beckett's writing restores language to its origin, to the nervous stuttering that precedes the certitude of the word. He purposely wants to have weak prose, to not be right and to embrace paradox, so that he could disintegrate the word (formed meanings) and emulate silence

⁷² In an interview with Georges Duthuit, Beckett's says: "[preferring] the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Esslin, 17).

(unformed meanings), as Deleuze explains: “*When a language is so strained that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer... then language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence.*” (ECC, 113). Beckett wanted to give expression to the impossible, and this is why he unnames⁷³.

2.2.1 Becoming nomadic

In *The Unnamable* the immobile voyage of the protagonist, the unnamable, places the importance of the trip within his own thoughts, whose best medium, and simultaneously only limit, are words. However, this immobility is, paradoxically, full of movement. Although the protagonist cannot physically move (because he is in a jar), nevertheless he does not stop draining his possibilities of becoming *something else*, by remaining as uncondensed form (i.e., by staying impossible). He is a constant wandering that crosses states, intensities, and forms, on the only condition of not interrupting his own flow.

His unceasing and directionless metamorphosis prevents the adherence of ideas such as progress, success, identity, etc., given that such concepts would call for the existence of certain coordinates (a starting point, a middle point, an end point; in short, a hierarchical order). This ongoing motion without purpose not only implies that one is never lost, wrong, far, better, close or in a detour; but also that one’s location cannot be traced (does not need to be traced?), because the importance is in the direction of the displacement, in the unceasing flowing more than in the formed objects. Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between these two types of space: they call the goal-orientated one, that is organized and homogeneous, *striated space*; and the ‘open’, that is amorphous and heterogeneous, *smooth space*. They add that “all progress is made by and in striated space, but all becoming occurs in smooth space” (ATP, 487), since in the former there are fixed points of reference and organized properties that channel the journey, helping to classify and

⁷³ “Language names the possible” (ECC, 156).

graduate progression; whereas the latter is formed by acentered intensities that vary in an erratic way, allowing the flux to flow.

I previously said that the unnamable's immobility is full of movement. His metamorphosis could not happen any other way for two reasons: he is exhausted⁷⁴, and his trip is not measureable and constrainable.⁷⁵

It seems that body, language and thoughts are linked in the unnamable since one can observe that inasmuch as his body does not condense, his thoughts remain nomadic and his language stutters more than it says; that is, everything wanders as part of the same flux, in a pre-significant expression. This is why he remains impossible, since he is away from the static regimes of the signifier.

2.2.2 Becoming unnamed

Beckett's language is becoming detached from the structure of social reality, in particular from the reality of capitalism and its forces that transform everything into commodities and try to insert all utterances into the labour machine. This distancing from majoritarian discourses does not deny the importance of pragmatics, rather it attempts to undo the processes of construction of meaning to put words back in a pre-signifying position. That is, the movement is going backwards to the construction of meanings to show that stagnated significances can be broken, as opposed to returning to isolate the word and propose that it can work magically without a context of production, without interrelating with other linguistic and extra-linguistic instances. Beckett pushes language to a *molecular* limit to show that signification is arbitrary, not a necessity in any case.

⁷⁴ "One can exhaust the joys, the movements, and the acrobatics of the life of the mind only if the body remains immobile, curled up, seated, somber, itself exhausted (...)" (ECC, 169).

⁷⁵ "Voyage in place: that is the name of all intensities (...)" (ATP, 482).

This is why one can say that his language attempts to break the bonds to the immediate association world-thing/language-thing, trying to reclaim its self-referential features. Beckett's language frees itself from any teleological expectation (anticipated meanings, anticipated functions, and anticipated destinies), becoming, in this way, a language that may actually *say* something: in more accurate words Beckett's language, due to its constant movement, is a *becoming* rather than a *being*, a presentation rather than a representation; it's a nomadic unconstrainable flux that cannot be fixed to a deictic "I" in a form that is more important than "you", "she", etc., thus eliminating the importance of the subject that expresses. In short, his language does not go towards any particular meaning and does not want to be the spokesman of an individual voice.

What is his language? Given that it is not a holder of messages, it becomes a limit⁷⁶ – an open space of possibilities and a flux that does not condensate (it does not have semantic density - it's a *molecular* language). As it does not pursue a final destination (meaning), it does not dry up: it is a movement without end and is always fresh. I face here a number of important implications: 1) I would not necessarily argue that the limits of Beckett's language do not exist, but rather they are constantly displaced; 2) an inexhaustible language suggests that it is not important to trace a beginning and an end. Am I talking about an "infinite language" that goes beyond spatial and temporal boundaries? Only in the sense that it is not constrained by the limits of signification, and that it would be the expression of intensities. Hence, one could say that Beckett's language goes beyond the construction of meaning and content, losing its thickness: it is both the subject of the utterance and the object of the utterance: "How, in such conditions, can I write (to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly)? I don't know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee" (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 11).

⁷⁶ This limit would be an abstract idea in the sense of the *absolute zero* on the Kelvin scale. Whereas scientists have never been able to measure it in a laboratory or in nature, they know that it theoretically exists even if it is impossible to reach that temperature. Why? In the first place, they would need to have a thermometer that was already in the absolute zero, so that it would not transmit heat to other objects.

The importance is, thus, placed in movements (verbs)⁷⁷ more than in destinations (nouns). It is because of this motion that the unnamable can evoke a nub from a lost hand, an anus, an egg, or a demon. What matters is the continuous flux of words; 3) this purposeless movement means that there is no time/place to build a body with its organs, or, in other words, that the subject dissolves. This is why Beckett's *The Unnamable* is alien to the world, to (human) beings and to language itself.

2.3 *Cobra*: Forked tongue, forked language

In Sarduy's *Cobra* one would need to talk about several narrators, since the narrative voice changes at various times and, as a result, also the focalization. I can recognize at least three narrators: one in the first person singular, which could be identified with the voice of the protagonist; one in the first person plural⁷⁸; and, one in the third person singular. The latter is a very peculiar narrator: he breaks the fictional pact, crossing the limits of fiction to go beyond them and talk to the reader:

Stupid reader: even if with these hints, brutal as posts, you have not understood that it is a metamorphosis of the previous chapter's painter – pay attention to the gestures of the occupation that remain within him–, drop this novel and become a salesman or read novels from the Boom, that are much clearer.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ “The Verb (...) expresses in language all events in one; [it] expresses the event of language –language being a unique event which merges now with that which renders it possible” (LOS, 185).

⁷⁸ In “Eat Flowers!” there is a sudden irruption of this narrator. Besides the fact that he narrates in the form ‘we’, his speech is more coherent and clear –less baroque– than the rest of the narration. Conf. Sarduy, 174-176.

⁷⁹ “Tarado lector: si aun con estas pistas, groseras como postes, no has comprendido que se trata de una metamorfosis del pintor del capítulo anterior –fíjate si no cómo le han quedado los gestos del oficio– abandona esta novela y dedícate al templete o a leer las del Boom, que son mucho más claras” (Sarduy, footnote in *Cobra*, 66).

By leaving the fictional universe where the narrator is supposed to stay, he challenges literary canons and reader's abilities to leave his comfort zone. He also confronts the reader by calling him 'stupid'. This narrator is assuming that the reader may not have recognized the metamorphosis to which he is alluding. He is also assuming that the reader knows what the Boom is. Lastly, he is setting up a difference between the novels of the Boom and the ones of the so-called Postboom, implying his opinion about the Boom (that it is clearer and easier than the Postboom). For these reasons, one should be aware that this narrator is subversive and cheeky.

On the other hand, this narrator offers the readers his version of what occurs in the novel – that the characters transform. Actually, the readers were most likely already aware of the metamorphoses undergone by the protagonist and by the Señora; however, he insinuates that there may be others that the readers are missing. What if the members of the motorcycle gang are indeed the actors of the “Lyrical Puppet Theater”? What if the monks that Cobra encounters are the members of the motorcycle gang? Should the readers expect the narrator to give them more hints? Overall, should one believe what he said in the first place?

Let us not believe him, because he thinks that we, the readers, are stupid and we want to prove him wrong. Therefore, by invalidating what he says, we remove from his quality of being able to know everything that is happening in the novel (omniscient narrator), which would imply either that he is incapable of giving a true account of the incidents or that he is so close to the occurrences that he loses perspective. The first case would explain why he keeps talking throughout the novel about Cobra as if she/he had not have died and why he constantly forgets that he is repeating himself throughout the chapters (unintentional quotation). It would also imply that the narration is partially filtered by his distortions, to the point that what he presents as absurd may only be his incompetence to see the congruence. Should one conclude that he is not trustworthy?

The second case, in turn, would insinuate that his sight is *blurry*. He is not having an 'optical perception' but rather a haptic one, that is to say, a type of perception that considers the connections between events more than the formation of things. Therefore,

the narration would be a map of intensities more than a sequence of facts; it would be a diagram of the connections rather than the organized account of a story. This would explain a few things: that Cobra keeps appearing throughout the novel because he/she is a flow that sometimes may look dead and in other times may look alive; and, that one reads the same fragment several times all over the novel because that specific fragment is the expression of a force (anger, sadness, bliss, etc.); last, that rational/irrational are pointless adjectives to describe the movements of reality, given that when one talks about intensities it is unnecessary to introduce social dichotomies such as true/false. In this instance, it would not be a matter of believing or not, but a matter of experiencing within the reading.

Going back to the original question, if one says that he is an omniscient narrator and that he knows for sure, like the back of his hand, the episodes in question, this would imply that his words can be trusted and that the narrator is deliberately being mischievous and perverse. Furthermore, this would suggest that he is an alchemist god, and that the readers are bearing witness to how he creates, destroys, and recreates his universes⁸⁰ whose inhabitants are mere puppets that go through his Machiavellian investigations. It would not be a coincidence, then, that they are in a *lyrical theater*: they are indeed on stage; they are acting, personifying a transvestite, a monk, a motorcyclist, etc. This is to say, the theater would be the space where experimentations take place: Cobra is sometimes playing a she, and sometimes a he; Cobra's role is, at times, to be a dead character, and at others to be a live persona; the narrator repeats certain fragments of the text because they are part of the scenario; the narration is not a sequence of events but a collection of individual episodes⁸¹. Here reliability is not brought into question, but our abilities to join the game.

⁸⁰ In "White Dwarf" the narrator is describing when La Señora and El Maestro (the body painter) were trying to enlarge Pup's body. His narration gives the impression that he is not there and that he is not participating in the episode; however, he complains about Pup's yells. (Ref. Sarduy, 70) He is, again, breaking the bounds of fiction, but this time going inside it.

⁸¹ One would not be encountering a novel formed by a series of actions a, b, c, d, e. One would be facing a compilation of different "takes" of the same scene a, a', a'', a''', a'''' –whose elements can vary leading to different results, since it is an experiment.

Finally, there is a last option: what if there is only one narrator that relentlessly metamorphoses his features? What if the narrator is nomadic and he builds different expressions for different types of speech? Probably this narrator is an expression of the narration itself, given that narrator, narration, characters, space, time, and plot are within the same flow. This narrator cracks language not by using agrammatical language, but by making language exuberant and voluptuous. With this narrator, the narration is excessive; it makes the words bubble; it is saturated with repetitions, quotes, intra-texts, hyper-texts; it is in a form of waste⁸².

In this novel, language does not deny anything, and the reader becomes ravenous; to quote Barthes: “*more, more, still more!* one more word, one more celebration.” (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 8) In *Cobra*, where one is given everything, where one does not need to choose⁸³, Sarduy is opening language to new connections, by presenting it altogether with all its possibilities. The process of building meaning is overwhelmed, so that one meaning also includes a multiplicity of meanings⁸⁴, which would imply, at the end of the day, that signification becomes almost nonsignifying.

Something similar occurs with the characters who lack stable identity, given that every one of them seems to be a multitude of characters; this is shown not only through their evident metamorphoses, but also through their numerous names, masks, customs, sexes, activities, likings, affiliations, etc. That is to say, it becomes complicated to systematize

⁸² As Sarduy mentions in an interview with Jean-Michel Fossey: “To waste, to squander, to throw away language only as a function of pleasure (...). [Within *Cobra*] language, in opposition to its domestic use, is not functioning to inform but to give pleasure; it is an attack on the good sense, moralistic and ‘natural’, in which the ideology of consumption and accumulation is based.” / “Malgastar, dilapidar, derrochar lenguaje únicamente en función del placer (...). [En *Cobra*] el lenguaje, contrariamente a su uso doméstico, no se encuentra en función de información sino en función de placer, es un atentado al buen sentido, moralista y ‘natural’ en que se basa toda la ideología del consumo y la acumulación” (Mora; Ortega; Barthes; et al., 16).

⁸³ Deleuze says that Beckett “(...) took this art of inclusive disjunction to its highest point, an art that no longer selects but affirms (...)” (ECC, 110 -111) I think that the same can be said about Sarduy.

⁸⁴ “The autonomy of writing, that is to say, of writing as a specific system with its own laws, is not circumscribed to any meaning, but open to a multiplicity of meanings”. / “La autonomía de la escritura, o sea la escritura como sistema específico sujeto a sus propias leyes, no circunscritas a ningún significado, sino abierta a una multiplicidad de significados” (Mora; Ortega; Barthes; et al., 39).

all the possibilities and to draw a center that would work as a reference to ground the options. On the other hand, the fact not a single subject exists but a multiplicity calls for a nomadic narrator that can give expression to all of them.

Additionally, the narrator(s) in *Cobra* introduces, along slips into the text, his ideas on the process of writing. He says: writing is the art of ellipsis; the art of digression; the art of delighting in reality; the art of restoring History; the art of breaking an order and creating a disorder; and, the art of patching-up.⁸⁵ I would add: writing is the art of presenting. Sarduy shows in his novel that writing is a process that should not be reduced to *representation*, since it has the capacity to express the immediacy, the novelty, and the original creation of life. For this to happen, the writer needs to catch up with the lines of flight of language –or he himself must create a fissure within language. Sarduy makes of *Cobra* a great book, because even if Spanish was his mother tongue, he wrote it in a *kind of foreign language*.

He did not make himself into a good writer by recounting his memories, giving his opinions or building a style, he went beyond:

“when it is a matter of digging under the stories, cracking open the opinions, and reaching regions without memories, when the self must be destroyed, it is certainly not enough to be a “great” writer, and the means must remain forever inadequate. Style becomes nonstyle, and one’s language lets an unknown foreign language escape from it, so that one can reach the limits of language itself and become something other than a writer, conquering fragmented visions that pass through the words of a poet, the colors of a painter, or the sounds of a musician.” (ECC, 113)

⁸⁵ “La escritura es el arte de la elipsis.”, “La escritura es el arte de la digresión.”, “La escritura es el arte de recrear la realidad.”, “La escritura es el arte de restituir la Historia.”, “La escritura es el arte de descomponer un orden y de componer un desorden.”, “La escritura es el arte del remiendo” (Sarduy, along *Cobra I*).

In *Cobra*, narration and narrator (as part of the same flow) are both slippery, leaving the reader with no other option but to become part of the ‘verbal joy’, leaving behind prejudices and embracing the jubilation –becoming a reader of *bliss*⁸⁶.

2.4 Muted speeches in *El Obsceno*

I would like to start this section by going back to the distinction between minoritarian and majoritarian literature. As I mentioned earlier, for Deleuze and Guattari minoritarian literature is related to a creative force that challenges and deterritorializes major uses of language, and because minoritarian uses of language are not constrained to the norms of major discourses, they consequently resist power assemblages (political, religious, economical, etc.). Donoso’s *El obsceno* is a book of resistance, on the one hand, for the writer himself, given that prior to this book he wrote in the style of (magic) realism, and, on the other hand, for the novel as genre, since it has challenged the canon without allowing a re-territorialization –that is to say, *El obsceno* does not propose a new norm for the novel, but rather it opens the potentiality of the novel as such. Furthermore, his novel is political in the sense that it explores marginalized discourses at least in the following instances, as Gutiérrez Mouat asserts: servant, feminine, poverty, magic, religion, monster, and old women’s discourses (Finnegan, xxi). Traditionally, these discourses have been, in the best of the cases, ignored, and recurrently attacked, censored or neutralized; they have been disregarded because they do not contribute to useful forces of production and because they are very fructiferous when it comes to eluding systematizations. Of all these marginalized discourses, there is one that is particularly productive in the aforementioned novel: the discourse of old women.

⁸⁶ The translator of *The Pleasure of the Text*, notes that “pleasure is a state [and] bliss (*jouissance*) an action” (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, vi), i.e. the reader of bliss has to work in order to overcome his petrified ideas and conceptualizations. Barthes describes the moment of bliss as follows: “Imagine someone (...) who abolishes within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter (...)” (Barthes, *The Pleasure... 3*).

2.4.1 Witch(like) old women

The relation that Donoso sets between witches and women has been studied previously; and Donoso was not the first who connect women to witchcraft. This connection has a deep-rooted tradition in western culture, and is a recurring trope even in contemporary cultural productions. For instance, in the film by Lars von Trier, *Antichrist*, the plot suggests this linkage and proposes that the female protagonist is being taken over by her inner-witch, who is causing the emergence of incomprehensible and obscure behaviours within her. The epilogue, as well, makes a tribute to the uncountable and nameless women who were killed under the premise of eradicating this horror –being a ‘witch’. Years before, the Mexican Carlos Fuentes wrote *Aura*, a novel that also used the motif of the witch; he started his text with this quotation by Jules Michelet: “Man hunts and struggles. Woman intrigues and dreams; she is the mother of fantasy, the mother of the gods. She has second sight, the wings that enable her to fly to the infinite of desire and the imagination...”, which indicates that traditionally men have been related to those discourses of rationality that can be proved, reproduced and organized, whereas women have been associated to mystical, mysterious, and chaotic means of expression.

Women are a minority and their discourses (because they are different) threaten the law. Their modes of expression differ from the ways of the majority and for that they are marginalized. The law (which, in the Western imaginary, is been related to rationality) tends to link women’s productions and perspectives with that which is not-rational: mystery, witchery, madness, mysticism, etc. I do not intend to analyze this stereotype or to study how it is constructed; rather I only refer to the link witchery/women to relate it with minoritarian discourses and to see how majoritarian instances try to suppress its ways of expression, but cannot –desire always comes first and works in complex manners, and neither science and philosophy nor magic are sufficient systems to grasp it all.

In *El obsceno*, Donoso portrays the elder women who live in La Casa not only as witchlike, but also as creatures who possess supernatural powers. Here I need to stop to make a brief note: it seems that within the novel, among the female characters the ways of existence are going to diverge into two main modes, the witch and the bitch –or a mix

of both. I am mainly interested in the literal sense of the word bitch⁸⁷, given that I believe that both protagonists (Mudito/Humberto and Peta/Inés) metamorphosize into dogs. Now, closing the digression, I would like to begin with the case of Peta/Inés, two female characters who are constantly transforming one into another: when Inés wanted to get pregnant, when Mudito sends Peta to a madhouse, when they both were knitting clothes for Boy, etc. Moreover, it is suggested that Peta, using magic, transforms herself into the yellow dog of La Rinconada and the yellow plastic dog of the Dog Track:

Inés = Peta = yellow (plastic) dog

This yellow female dog and Inés/Peta become the way out, a line of escape, from which major discourses of La Rinconada start cracking, because they are the forces against the patriarchal structures embodied in the figure of Don Jerónimo, the *cacique*; in the figures of the male black dogs, the guardians of order who keep unwelcome elements outside the territory of La Rinconada; in the figure of Don Clemente, the representative of the family with God; etc. The novel criticizes the way in which major discourses (in this example, patriarchy) aim to appropriate and control all ways of expression:

“(...) as soon as you bring something worthwhile out into the light men confiscate it... it’s mine, give it to me, you don’t understand anything, go and do your sewing, go play bridge, call your cousin on the phone... they keep what you find, they understand what it means and know how to explain it and explain things away till they lose their meaning...” (*The Obscene...*, 302)

⁸⁷ For the figurative sense, I can mention that Iris, the orphan, is expelled from La Casa accused of prostitution, even if the old women did not know anything about her actual habits to exhibit herself dancing for the young men of the neighbourhood or her naivety in believing that she was making love with Romualdo, who wore the cardboard head of El Gigante, when she was in reality being pimped by Mudito. I can also add the allusions to all the fat women of La Rinconada that who objectualized by Boy, who used them as sexual receptacles. In another meaning of bitch, I could bring up the case of Emperatriz who acted like the queen of a matriarchy, since the novel suggests that she is who that keeps order in La Rinconada and that she is the head of the relationship that she has with Dr. Azula.

In addition, it is implied that men (as part of the official systems of signification) by over-interpreting signs also destroy their own force of expression, becoming stagnated.

However, Inés and Peta find ways to build an alternative language that dissociates from the model and that makes Don Jerónimo state that he cannot understand what they say, as if they were speaking a different language; and when he does understand, he cannot believe what they say because their stories cannot be corroborated and are contradictory. Don Jerónimo does not understand them, even if they are using the same language, because he is trying to superimpose his contents onto the women's new forms of expression that are escaping signification and organization. He is in a "chain that is still all too signifying" (*Kafka...*, 5).

However, what really threatens Don Jerónimo's sense of power, to the point of making him shudder, is the realization that such a worthless being, Peta, was able to create "three white handkerchiefs of the finest batiste, with hand-stitched borders and initials so exquisitely embroidered". Peta, the representative of "the underside of life, the world of the left hand, of the reverse, of those things destined to perish in obscurity without ever knowing the light" (Donoso, *The Obscene...*, 148), does not have the right to create beauty. Peta, the insignificant old woman, the Third World zone, the oppressed, the witch, manages to join the game of the majoritarian culture to make its assemblage fissure from the inside. And, when the patriarchy of La Rinconada realizes, Peta has already gone somewhere else –in Inés or the yellow dog or etc. She gets ahead to meet a community that is expecting her: the collectivity of the old women of La Casa.

In one of the versions of the plot, Inés stops being the wife (symbol of purity and beauty) of that powerful man in order to become one of the elderly women in La Casa, making him lose control over her (including the maternal role that tradition assigns her) and over La Casa and its people (social waste, anarchical mess). Inés and Peta both end up going to La Casa, where chaos reigns allowing the building to mutate (hallways appear and disappear, as well as walls, windows, doors, and patios) and to offer shelter to any type of discourse (the women create their own monstrous-like saints, Iris pretended to be pregnant, Inés fakes to be Misiá Raquel, etc.).

One may want to ask: did I not say that Inés and Peta *are* the same person? There is no easy answer: they are the same person, they are themselves, and, even more, they are *any* other old woman in La Casa. In *El obsceno*, the old women do not have individual identities or individual voices –each voice is the voice of a collectivity. As a consequence, each of them is interchangeable, replaceable and unimportant as individual subjects, but not as members of the group, according to the argument of Deleuze and Guattari: “The most individual enunciation is a particular case of collective enunciation. [That is why it is useless to wonder who is X or Y or Z.] K will not be a subject but will be a general function that proliferates (...).” (*Kafka...*, 84). For this reason, one can observe that when they talk, the narrative voice shifts suddenly from one old woman to another:

“Iris is chaste. No man has any claim to what she carries in her womb. No one must find out. No one must see her. Here in the cellar Mudito prepared for us –he’s such a good person, what would we have done without him?– we’re reaching total fulfillment as we iron and fold diapers for the child, knit shawls –lots of shawls so that the infant won’t have to be wrapped in just any old rag when the weather’s cold, it’s dangerous for babies to catch cold, although I hear that here are suppositories now that stop a runny nose in a couple of days, we must buy some– and attach yellow lace with silk ribbons to the hangings suspended from the brass-knobbed canopy... here’s the rubber sheet to keep the mattress from rotting with the child’s urine, rotted mattresses stink something awful and hardly any air at all gets into cellar, we’ll have to make bibs with the silk, it’s so pretty, so fine, blue silk because it’s going to be a boy... no, silk bibs are no good because you can’t hand-laundry them, don’t you see, we’re not going to be sending them to the cleaner’s each time the baby messes, and babies mess a lot of bibs, several a day... but really, Amalia, silk’s washable, how can you be so stupid as not to even know that? Natural silk, the kind that’s really fine, has to be soaked well and aired out a little and then, afterwards, with an iron that’s not too hot...” (*The Obscene...*, 56).

In *El obsceno* not only all old women are the same, and for that reason they behave like a pack rather than a hierarchized society, but they are also witches and dogs which allows them to be erratic, to talk erratically, to be descentered, to talk descenteredly, to be contradictory, to talk contradictorily, to be asignificant, to talk asignificantly: “It doesn’t matter, Monsignor. At least grant me the privilege old women are entitled to, of saying things that don’t mean anything.” (Donoso, *The Obscene...*, 426). They are nomadic machines bringing out lines of escape from major discourses.

This movement impedes the fixation of the text, i.e. its meanings cannot be fixed and set as something rigid, eternal and clear. The inclusion of aporias, contradictions and paradoxes works toward a staggering of the language in the novel, which makes evident the impossibility of reducing words to a determined meaning. It is impossible to grasp the significance of *El obsceno* and, for that, no critical interpretation can declare itself to be the best and the most accurate one. It may sound evident nowadays, but there was a long tradition of believing (and some would still defend it) that one could decipher the underlying, singular truth of a text –that which the author, the author-god, had chosen to teach.

Donoso fights, as do Beckett and Sarduy, against the rigid constructions of reality that tend to reduce the expressivity of life, and that organize human knowledge, ranking the value of significance and setting a center that would give coherence to their structure. By building this hierarchized tree of meanings, all expression that is not included in the system sees itself automatically marginalized; all creativity and newness is blocked or reterritorialized within the system. In *El obsceno*, Donoso shows how social assemblages are inherently unnatural and, consequently, that they can be mutable, fissured, cracked, dismantled. He discloses the fiction behind the constructions of meaning.

Chapter 3

3 Dissolution of the self: the way of the becoming

“The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one. In that sense, dialectics too is a dream language, longing to resolve contradiction. Perhaps, ironically, we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos.”

Donna Haraway, “Cyborg Manifesto”.

“Where now? Who now? When now?” are the opening words of *The Unnamable*. They are probably the same questions humankind has asked over and over: ‘who am I? where am I? what is the purpose of my life?’ Three dimensions are suggested here: space, perception, and time. Although one could keep adding more elements: laws, ruptures, transitions, emergences, collapses, encounters, ... the list is endless, and humans do not have enough voice to utter all of them. As a result, to begin with, let us consider Beckett’s questions.

Time, perception and space can be interrelated to help create concepts such as identity. To propose that this latter notion is fundamentally a social construction and how it, rather than helping to construct a broader understanding of Life, has been blocking its *original flux*, thereby contributing as a consequence to a diminution of its expressivity. Two beautiful literary examples support my main argument, *The Unnamable* and *El obsceno*: both of them show in very peculiar ways how *any* concept that human beings construct to explain reality (especially social ideas –especially identity (the self)) which is, after all, a human production. They elucidate the vulnerability of social assemblages by experimenting with alternative, or even contradictory, behaviours that divert from mainstream culture, giving voice to minoritarian expressions: in *The Unnamable* the voice is the sub-human and in *El obsceno* it is product of a class. The characters share an unceasing force of transformation and a tendency to go to the limits of humanness (the alter-human) in a process that can be considered as the dissolution of the self.

These two novels are examples of a minoritarian resistance to the imposition of law (petrified social constructions) over the creativity of life. They demonstrate that the social predicaments of their characters destabilize their identities and, for that, they start to question what the self is and what identity is. Deleuze and Guattari say that minor literature creates ways of escape from [of?] major discourses, opening spaces for transformation and newness and *The Unnamable* and *El obsceno* transgress social assemblages in many ways.

The reader is infected and a trap is set up—that of using concepts to argue that concepts block production. The latter is a consequence of the former, since Beckett and Donoso are masters of playing with paradoxes and contradictions, as one can read in the closing words of *The Unnamable*: “It will be I? It will be the silence, where I am? I don’t know, I’ll never know: in the silence you don’t know. You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on.”

3.1 Fixed *I*: the form of the individual, the law and the self

Descartes’ famous proposition “I think, therefore I am” summarizes his central idea of human existence and reveals the fact that he directly related the self (the ‘ego’, for him) to a human capacity to think. That is to say, for Descartes the construction of the ego was essentially based on *Cogito* (I think). The question of who the *I* of his proposition is, arises right away.

First, let us ask: if his proposition is $T \rightarrow E$, then is $\neg T \rightarrow \neg E$ (I do not think, therefore I am not) also valid? The response to this question seems less intuitive, because one can ask if thinking has to be necessarily a conscious process (nowadays it is considered that thinking can occur at an unconscious level, as when one dreams). However, for Descartes it appears that the proposition “I think” is based on the ability to recognize self-consciousness and that the *I* of “I think” is the place where this recognition condenses, as he says: “it is impossible that he should think without existing” (Descartes, *Meditations...*, 68), or, in other words, Descartes is sustaining that he who thinks is necessarily existing.

Now, once one is conscious of himself he can assume that he is a person who exists somewhere. There is a group of inquires that follows: can one exist in a metaphysical world and, if so, can one think without a physical body? Possibly for Descartes there is One who can think without having to physically exist (God) (this would be $T \rightarrow \neg E$). Can humankind be ‘not thinking’ and still exist (this would be $\neg T \rightarrow E$)?

Meanwhile, in the following paragraph I believe that he is actually changing the order of the connector *therefore* in his proposition “I think, therefore I am”, given that he places the certitude in the fact that one exists:

“Thinking? At last I have discovered it - thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist-that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist. At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason (...). But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said –a thinking thing.” (Descartes, *Meditations...*, 18)

The use of the connector *therefore* seems unclear to me, especially because Descartes says that the second part of his proposition (“therefore I am”) cannot be taken as a logical inference⁸⁸. Is he basically identifying human existence with thinking, $T=E$? Would that not deny the existence of humans who somehow cannot think? In this case, it seems that ‘existence’ should be read as ‘consciousness of existence’ (rather than a physical existence as such), a faculty that he ascribes exclusively to humans⁸⁹.

⁸⁸ “When someone says ‘I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist’, he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind” (Descartes, *Meditations* 68).

⁸⁹ Given that the existence of nonhuman organisms does not need the inclusion of a faculty to think, he believes that those other entities can be merely seen as complicated machines (they do not act from knowledge) made by God.

To recapitulate, if “I think” is based on the ability to recognize self-consciousness and “therefore I am” is based on the consciousness of existence, could one reinterpret his proposition as ‘I am self-conscious, therefore I am conscious of my existence’?

The Cartesian human being would then be an entity who possesses two fundamental skills: reason and a way to express that reason (with words).

$$I = \text{reason} + \text{language},$$

and as language must give an account of that reason r ,

$$\text{language} = dr$$

$$\rightarrow I = r + dr$$

This definition is very restricted, since it presupposes an essence in human beings: the capacity to reason, from where all human behaviour can be explained. Such univocal characterization presents some issues: given that the state of the human body (the machine) is unimportant, how deteriorated can it be before its deterioration starts interfering with the expression of thoughts or the formulation of thoughts? Can words give a full account of thoughts? Does one have to express reason in a reasonable fashion?

Overall, the Cartesian proposition “I think, therefore I am” is a scheme that universalizes the identification of a human being with a machine that reasons.

Corollaries:

- Perception. To define a human being as a creature that can reason is basically going to restrict all perception through the glass of rational thinking, leaving aside any other type of human expression.

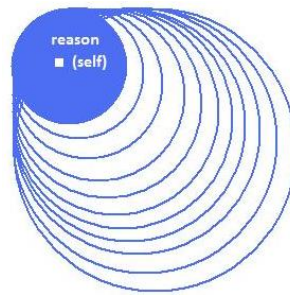
As a consequence, the law is going to take the form of reason.

- Time. It needs to be stationary, like a frozen scene in which thoughts organize and create the connections among matter and the succession of actions.

- Space. It is going to be concentric and hierarchized. Everything is going to move around reason (the self), and the importance of phenomena is going to be related to their ability to agree with the law.

Furthermore, it has to be homogeneous for the facts to be replicable.

- Identity. It would take the form of the reproduction of sameness, which is that that is produced by the law – the process of mirroring the similar.



Subsequently, a human being is an individual who only communicates on behalf of reason and whose only purpose of communication is reason. Any human behaviour that reason can explain is allowed and actions that cannot be domesticated through reason are marginalized or destroyed. Moreover, individuals do not have an ethical responsibility to those forms of life that do not benefit and serve their goals, or that simply do not affect them, and furthermore they can use those machines until exhaustion⁹⁰.

To summarize, humans are machines that think and reality matters as long as it can be passed through the filter of reason.

⁹⁰ I wonder what type of machine women are, since they ‘are not very reasonable’. And moreover, what type of machines the Mesoamericans were when the Spanish invaded their territory, since God had forgotten to give them a soul and *logos*? I believe that one of the most important points to discuss after the Cartesian definition of humans would be to know who decides what reason is and who are its representatives, who is invited to join them, how they can assure that the law is obeyed, et caetera.

3.2 Unfixed I: the form of the collectivity, the postulates and the becoming

Characterizing humans as machines that think is not sufficient to account for all forms of human expression –besides the fact that it completely disregards forms of non-human expression. Whereas a mono-faceted human, whose essence is based in his capacity to think and whose mind is disembodied, cannot trust his senses to give account of the ‘external world’, a multifaceted being would not only restrict his way to know the world through reason (representation) but would also include many other mechanisms that provide meaning through action (experience). The former is passive, contemplative, interpretative, and sees reality *optically*, striating space; the latter is active, engaged, able to *feel* events, and sees reality *haptically*, bringing events closer.

This multidimensional human resembles Deleuze and Guattari’s proposition to see human beings as ‘human becomings’. This simple characterization opens a complex realm of interconnecting forces that altogether would help the continuous construction of humans. They defend this type of existence based on the intention to free humans of social constructions that narrow human creativity and try to channel human (and non-human) expressivity. As opposed to the disembodied mind that, ironically, constitutes the essence of humans and that replicates its own law, they talk about humans who are formed by a mind (that is no longer considered the origin of all perceptions) and a body that is-there-to-experience. However, it is very important to note that they do not see humans as a dichotomical entity, since neither the body nor the mind can be defined as a *unity* and, more importantly, because what matters more is the large variety of relations that can be created between them and among other material entities (either organic or inorganic) in the universe that entail affects in multiple directions.

Yet, one could question: how is it possible to produce a “large variety of relations” within a finite number of entities, or even within one single entity? It is more intuitive to see the first scenario than the second one. Though, if one considers an entity as something mutable, it becomes an easier task. Supposing that there are five human senses and that there is one event to be experienced with these five senses, and that each of these five

senses has only one way to encounter it, there would be $a + b + c + d + e$ ways to experience this one event. If one wanted to consider the different ways in which each of these senses could appreciate an event, then there would be $a^z + b^y + c^w + d^v + e^u$ ways to experience it –assuming that one could tell in advance what these different ways z, y, w, v, v can be. And what if one added more than five senses and also experimented with new ways of experiencing with those senses (such as synesthesia)? Furthermore, one must think that, in a strict sense, no event can ever be repeated since all the actual conditions that create an incident cannot converge again and in the same way. Thoughts are framed through experience (but not restricted to it) and experience is altered through thoughts (but not restricted to it), nevertheless they are interconnected in order to produce a perception of reality.

For Deleuze and Guattari, as thinking is a rhizomatic process that “(...) has no image, either to constitute a model of or to copy” (ATP, 377), there is no necessary (re)production of the law, or of any law. Unlike Cartesian thought, this type of thinking does not see itself pursuing a point of orientation that is *a priori* set (it does not start a voyage that aims to find itself) to manifest whatever it was looking for since the beginning. Nomadic thought explores, makes new connections, and imagines impossible worlds. Brian Massumi writes: “‘Nomad thought’ does not immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference” (ATP, xii). However, as this is not a gratuitous process, one has to want to create this type of thought; one has to fight against the naturalization of tradition, habits, significations, in short, against all types of cultural assemblages that try hard to make the perception of reality an ossified interpretation, that wants to narrow the production of thought and that eventually can take the form of law.

Another implication would be that there is not a sufficient system of representation that can give a total account of an event, since human experience involves a group of unsystematic processes that work on many levels and that are related to other entities. Such systems of representation, as social constructions, are unnatural; though they are useful to code communication among humans, and they allow quick and efficient ways to preserve knowledge; nonetheless, the risks start when such systems ‘forget’ that they are

mere interpretations of reality, becoming harmful repetitions and gluttony machines that want to colonize whatever does not agree and fit with them. Thus, there is verticalization of humans, the creation of “rocklike identities”, the replication of rules, uncritical thought, and the impoverishment of life. Social assemblages are helpful and unavoidable and there is nothing which essentially defines them as rejectable. Yet there is nothing that makes them indispensable either, since they all are artificial schemes. For that reason, when one talks about nomadic thought one also talks about postulates (instead of laws), given that they do not set themselves as the end-word, but as an idea and a way to perceive reality. Postulates are provisional and work locally, avoiding the establishment of universal truths and preventing centralization.

Meanwhile, what is the body that perceives reality like? Before talking about a *formed* body, it is important to sketch its boundary: the Body without Organs (BwO). Deleuze and Guattari say that the BwO is a limit that “you are forever attaining” (ATP, 171). That is, one cannot become a BwO in reality but only try to approach it. It belongs to the virtual world and, for that, it does not contain formed matter or any forms of expression and content (that belong to the strata); it does not contain condensed matter and it encompasses all the probable actualizations of matter. A BwO still does not know about meanings, organizations, or structures. Rather, it is populated by flows of energy and forces (intensities). It is *potentia*.

And yet, the human physical body is a thickened form of a BwO – a stratum, given that it is part of the actual world. However, it “is not reducible to an organism” (ATP, 366). According to Deleuze and Guattari, humans should attempt to get closer to that limit (BwO), since this practice (or set of practices) can fissure the systems of representation that want to be the law and that want to organize the functions of the body, telling it how to experience, what to expect, and where to direct desire. By fighting the suppression one could discover different possibilities of perception, expression and behaviour, whereby basing existence in wise experimentation and knowing that there is no need to interpret all experience.

As a result, human perception of reality is scattered. That is, mind and thoughts are not the origin (or the end) of it, and humans cannot be defined as *essentially* something, given that they are becomings which are complexly interconnected to other becomings.

Corollaries:

- Perception. Meanings are constructed not only through ideas and words (concepts) but also through actions to a material experience of the body that has a capacity to affect reality and to be affected by it.⁹¹ Social constructions are unnatural and that human explanations of reality do not necessarily and sufficiently give a complete account of it.
- Time. It is not the one of ideality or metaphysics, but the one of events in the *plane of immanence*.
- Space. This is an open space where one can map intensities and flows, observing how they are indeed morphing space. Deleuze and Guattari call it “smooth space”. This nomad space is marked by trajectories, not by positions. It is amorphous, acentered, and directional (it cares about vectors of movement rather than coordinates of position). And, since it is open, it is the place for free action.
- Identity. Given that there is not an essence for humankind, there is then not a fixed construction of the subject. Identity, as a construction of a law, is full of forms, categories, unities, similarities, etc. However, these systematizations fail to

⁹¹ “The term ‘capacity’ is closely related to the term ‘affordance’ introduced by James Gibson within the context of a theory of ecological interactions. Gibson distinguishes between the intrinsic properties of things and their affordances. A piece of ground does have its own intrinsic properties determining, for example, how horizontal or slanted, how flat, concave or convex, and how rigid it is. But to be capable of affording support to a walking animal is not just another intrinsic property, it is a capacity which may not be exercised if there are no animals around. Given that capacities are relational in this sense, what an individual affords another may depend on factors like their relative spatial scales: the surface of a pond or lake may not afford a large animal a walking medium, but it does to a small insect which can walk on it because it is not heavy enough to break through the surface tension of the water. Affordances are also symmetric, that is, they involve both capacities to affect and be affected” (De Landa, 63).

grasp the wide range of productivity of life (which is, according to the law, the different).

Furthermore, since the *flow of life* is always in movement, nothing can ever be the same. The self is a becoming. The nomadic-self does not want to possess, to imprint, to stop, to catch, to kill.... It wants to become the flow or perhaps a channel where the flow crosses. And for that, there is no place for an identity.

In this case, the ethical responsibility of humans *is to contribute* to the production of life by resisting social constructions (identity, social systems, social institutions, etc.) that want to block and systematize desire⁹². Even if a “highly stratified semiotic is difficult to get away from”, one has to try to destroy the “dominant atmospheric semiotic” in order to attain freedom. Maybe the way to break the constraints of fixed self-images is *experimentation, the aim to not signify and interpret* (ATP, 138 – 139).

3.3 Dissolving the self: towards an unfixed *I* in *The Unnamable* and *El obscuro pájaro de la noche*

Considering the *self* as the expression of identity, unity and separation from others, the dissolution of the self is a process that aims to break the boundaries that isolate subjects. The confinement of the subject into a self leads to a restricted way of perceiving reality, communicating with others and escaping from the chains of social institutions – that actually want to reinforce the self since it is through it that they can control individuals. In order to configure an identity, one has to classify, organize and identify human

⁹² Desire is a force that should not be equaled to sexual desire; it is an energy that is not exclusive of humans but, instead, has to do with the impulse of *life* to create connections and produce multiplicities. For this reason, it does not come after the existence of a person. Desire is production, immanence and presentation. As a process of creation, it should not be understood as a search for something lacking; when desire is directed, one should instead talk about neurosis, “*a desire that is already submissive and searching to communicate its own submission*” (Deleuze, *Kafka* 10).

attributes, processes that imply a sense of separation and discrimination. Constructing a self is a narrowing of the subject; it is a process that gives the subject a mirrored image of itself, that is, it makes it static.

On the contrary, a dissolved-self works against the exclusion and classification of others who do not resemble one's identity, given that it is open to the different and for that it can reduce the separation from the other and build a collectivity that resists the imposition of the same. Institutions of power want to preserve the identical and identities help to reproduce power so that it is easier to impose the law and homogenize behaviour. They provide encouragements to "Always obey. The more you obey, the more you will be master, for you will only be obeying (...) yourself." (ATP, 376) Meanwhile, a dissolved-self not only creates connections with others and builds new ways to interrelate among other people, it also contributes to a broader perception of reality, since it does not necessitate unity and sameness. In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari defend the destruction of the self, given that it is a *being* (fixed), not a *becoming* (unfixed), and, for that, it blocks production, creativity, and desire. By dismantling the self, one "break[s] the holds of power" and a different

"form of politics becomes possible, where singularity and collectivity are no longer at odds with each other, and where collective expressions of desire are possible. Such a politics does not seek to regiment individuals according to a totalitarian system of norms, but to de-normalize and de-individualize through a multiplicity of new, collective arrangements against power." (AO, xxi)

By dissolving the self and considering it a becoming, one may access a reality that is not idealized through the fiction of the law (which attempts to ossify the creativity of life in order to preserve itself), and that does not *only* defend the interests of majoritarian assemblages.

In order to dissolve one's self, one must find ways to escape these majoritarian discourses which replace one's own power with their power, by becoming-something-else: becoming a molecular body, becoming a dog, becoming a woman, becoming a bug, etc.

In short, becoming other means to grasp the different and include diverse ways to perceive and experience reality; it means “to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial” (Haraway, 313); it means to fight centrality, purism, cleanness and defend illegitimate expressions of life; it means to always morph. However, one has to be very careful to not trap oneself in dead-ends, for that *becoming* “is a question of finding an escape (an escape, and not ‘liberty’)” (*Kafka* 13), since finding liberty means that one needs to stop within it; that is, liberty becomes the goal. The same way that becoming-a-dog does not mean to be a dog, escaping does not mean reaching an end point (whether it is liberty or not), for that would be the negation of the transformation. One last note on this subject: becoming not-human does not mean becoming inhuman. The former defends those expressions of life that are not-human as much that it defends the ones who are human (especially the minoritarian ones); it defends the creativity of life as a broad realm of production that is not restricted to humankind.

In becoming not-human, the role of literature is to open spaces for transformations and transgressions. Since literature works with fiction and fiction does not have to be restricted to human ways of perceiving life, it can imagine anything – ‘actualizing’ forms of matter that did not condense in the ‘actual’ world (what one would call “impossible forms of matter”): absurd⁹³ combinations, prohibited fusions, contaminated forms, aberrant coincidences, alogical events,⁹⁴ etc.

Literature fights majoritarian discourses by exploring (and revealing) ways of perceiving reality that are marginalized, blocked or censored. It can expose, for instance, that there is no need to overvalue the perception of reality through thinking, since believing that mind-perception is more accurate than other modes is merely a thought (an image). It can explore reality from the perspective of an animal, a machine, a rock, a cloud, a piece of food, a part of the body, etc., and for this reason it helps to avoid considering oneself as a

⁹³ “(...) that which is without signification or that which may be neither true nor false”. (LOS, 15)

⁹⁴ “Not following a logical order, but following alogical consistencies or compatibilities.” (ATP, 250). Alogical means what is neither illogical nor logical, but beyond it.

rigid, complete and perfect entity. In this respect, literature can disassemble petrified truths and crack systems of signification in order to produce sense.

3.3.1 Becoming-unnamable

In *The Unnamable* one cannot be sure of the certainty of the events because the protagonist, on the one hand, denies the reliability of his memory and, on the other hand, does not let the reader know if he has moved to the future (where he planned/wished to be) or if he is only talking about hypothetical scenarios:

“I add this, to be on the safe side: these things I say (and shall say, if I can) are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be - or (if they were, if they are, if they will be) were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I am here. So I am obliged to add this: I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak (and therefore perhaps think a little), cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am; but can a little, sufficiently (I don't know how, unimportant), in relation to me who was elsewhere (who shall be elsewhere) and to those places where I was (where I shall be). But I have never been elsewhere (however uncertain the future). And the simplest therefore is to say that what I say (what I shall say, if I can) relates to the place where I am, to me who am there (in spite of my inability to think of these, or to speak of them), because of the compulsion I am under to speak of them (and therefore perhaps think of them a little). Another thing: what I say (what I may say) on this subject (the subject of me and my abode) has already been said - since, having always been here, I am here still. (At last a piece of reasoning that pleases me, and worthy of my situation!) So I have no cause for anxiety.” (*The Unnamable*, 11-12)

It is especially the uncertainty of the past that brings up the problem of a ‘bad’ memory. There is a distinction between forgetting on purpose and forgetting accidentally, since the

former refers to an active process and the latter to a passive spectacle. And even if both result in oblivion, it matters how one arrived there: forgetting on purpose is active, a desire to undo memory and to unleash mementos in order to provide ourselves with a sense of newness and openness (*'I can not remember'*); in contrast, accidental forgetfulness is an accidental condition that leads to confusion (*'I cannot remember'*).

The unnamable says:

“I never understood a word of it in any case - not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with.” (Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 29-30)

His “genius for forgetting” gives him the ability to get out of subjectivization and individualization. He avoids getting caught in the organization of the law so that he can become an open self (a collectivity)⁹⁵. In summary, the unnamable can remember, but decides to forget – instead of not being able to remember – and, in this effort, to forget he also decants in the present moment, building a type of “short-term memory”.

This is why Beckett does not talk about identity. The protagonist in *The Unnamable*, as most of those in his trilogy, hardly knows who he is; he cannot build a self, given that he only has “short-term memory”, which keeps him in the motion of continuing to experience, to create new meanings and to keep being new. In other words, one cannot talk about a he/she/it/we/etc. because everything is part of the endless movement: one transverses the other, diluting the limit between this *or* that and becoming this *and* that (a multiplicity⁹⁶). The self loses its boundaries and, consequently, its beginning and its end.

⁹⁵ “[The dispersion of the organs] has nothing to do with a lack, and constitutes their mode of presence in the multiplicity they form without unification or totalization. With every structure dislodged, every memory abolished, every organism set aside, every link undone, they function as raw partial objects, dispersed working parts of a machine that is itself dispersed” (AO, 324).

⁹⁶ “(...) packs, or multiplicities, continually transform themselves into each other, cross over into each other. (...) becoming and multiplicity are the same thing. A multiplicity is defined not by its elements, nor

There is no way to establish a center. In Chapter 1 it was mentioned that the unnamable becomes a limit, a BwO, as in *The Unnamable*: “(...) I’m in the middle. I’m the partition. I’ve two surfaces and no thickness. Perhaps that’s what I feel: myself vibrating.” (134). One should also remember that Deleuze and Guattari say in *A Thousand Plateaus* that “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.” (249), which summarizes the idea of considering the self as *becoming* that does not belong either to the molar nor to the molecular assemblages. The self has to be in perpetual motion (vibrating?) and for that it goes “beyond any opposition between the one and the multiple.” (ATP, 154).

The unnamable is unnamable not because he does not have a name, but because it is not important to have one. Names are for pinning things down, for fixing them, for separating them; names identify things, they give identity. To be “the unnamable” provides him with the ability to detach himself from his relatives, from his origin, from his motherland, from his expectations, ... in short, from his identity.

In this line of thought, even if the narrator narrates in first person, his discourse is actually all in indirect style, since he seems to be saying constantly what somebody else tells him to say. The narrator does not disappear, but rather he becomes a multiplicity of voices. If one observes redundancy in the narrations it is only apparent since each instance of repetition is really a difference: one is hearing a different voice every time – a voice that is connected to many voices; a nomadic voice that talks for everybody. The unnamable becomes that voice: a voice that does not belong to anybody as much as it belongs to all, because it is going to a place of indetermination where language is a bustling force (molecular language) that avoids serfdom. In this sense, when one reads in the novel “I say” it can be read as “he says” or as “we say” (as the narrator sustains that

by a center of unification or comprehension. It is defined by the number of dimensions it has; it is not divisible, it cannot lose or gain a dimension *without changing its nature*” (ATP, 249).

he could be other(s): “I shall not say ‘I’ again, ever again, it’s too farcical. I shall put in its place, whenever I hear it, the third person (if I think of it)” (*The Unnamable*, 55).

Throughout *The Unnamable* the personal pronoun “I” is only used as a necessity of language to refer to a grammatical subject that *performs* the actions, but one must consider it as a gudgeon that momentarily gives a support-point to keep on going with the speech. One should almost forget that a personal pronoun was utilized and turn our attention to the verb, to the flow of the speech. That is why *I* is not *I*, necessarily (and it does not matter). What matters is action.

Words are loose their semantic value – they become light and inapprehensible, adding an evident fracture at the syntactic level of the phrases and sentences (which resembles schizophrenic speech). To recapitulate, one faces a type of discourse that diminishes the importance of the semantics and that disturbs syntaxes so that the referential function of language is lessened. That is also why the protagonist can become incoherent and outside moral judgments. This sense of detachment is a common characteristic in Beckett’s writings and it shows a feeling of general absurdity. Once again, he shows the incoherence of language to step further away from its “normal” functions, creating a fissure (a line of flight) that frees it.

There is close relation between the dissolution of language and the self of the protagonist in *The Unnamable*: both go towards a displacement of any possible center, hierarchy and hegemony, which implies that heterogeneities, differences, and horizontalization are going to be welcomed and celebrated. A self in constant deterritorialization is open to many becomings; it is open to believe in any ideology as much as any other (or in none); and it is open to prefer one name as much as any other (or none); etc. As long as this decentering continues, it is assured that these characteristics are provisional so that, among other consequences, the exterior/interior can be fused: this is the case for the unnamable, and this is exactly why one cannot talk about exile, expulsion, or a will for redemption.

The unnamable is voluntarily dissolving his *self* and this dissolution (as it appears too in the texts of the trilogy, and especially in *How it is*) conduces him to a fragile, slow, and

maybe painful dissolution of his ‘humanness’. One may want to ask: what happens after he dissolves his self? There is no *after the dissolution* since the becoming does not have an end, which means that he is always approaching the BwO because every time that the jar, his family, or his name want to pull him back to an identity, to a condensed self, he fights back by becoming Mahood, or Molloy, or a pole that holds the menu in front of a slaughterhouse. Above all, he becomes a type of language that, as water in the river, a hand cannot stop. Language would fail if it were pinned down to its functions or reduced to its uses. Beckett has managed to take it beyond signification.

Is Beckett showing how words fail when trying to communicate, or is he revealing that words can do more than *only* communicate? In his work, the narrative voice abandons the characters in order to indicate that words can say much more than they *say*: they say what they say, what they do not say, what they could have said, and/or what they will say. Paradoxically, this retreat becomes an approach. Beckett teaches that I/you/she/we will/would/should desire more/not much/less/always/together.

3.3.2 Becoming-Mudito

In *El obscuro pájaro* most of the characters do not have individuality, which is a self-identical configuration. They occupy one another: Inés/Peta, Inés/Iris, Jerónimo/Humberto, Humberto/Mudito, etc. This is most notable with the protagonist, since he seems to circulate through a great number of characters and objects: Humberto Peñaloza; Mudito, a caretaker in la Casa de Ejercicios Espirituales de la Encarnación de la Chimba; a monster in La Rinconada; an elderly woman; a street ‘dog’; a cardboard head; a baby; a homeless man; a stain on the wall; a sewed sack; etc. He is the “the Deterritorialized par excellence” (ATP, 381) since he is not reterritorialized after any of his moves, so much so that, indeed, at the end of the novel his existence becomes totally molecular.

The anticipated total dissolution or becoming molecular of Mudito is shown in the final lines of *El obsceno* when one of the elder women throws the contents of her sack, including him, into the fire:

“The old woman stands up, she grabs the sack and, opening it, shakes it out over the fire, emptying it into the flames: kindling wood, cardboard, stockings, rags, newspapers, writing paper, trash, it doesn’t matter what as long as the flame picks up a bit to fight off the cold, who cares about the smell of something being singed, of rags that don’t burn easily, of paper”.
(Donoso, *The Obscene...*, 438)

The implication is that Mudito did not exist anymore when ‘he’ was thrown into the fire, because, after the fire burned out, there was nothing left but a “black smudge”.⁹⁷ That is, it seems that Mudito became molecular either while the old woman was carrying him on her way to the park or while he was burning in the fire.

It is important to note that when nomadic-Mudito occupies a character or object, the occupations reveal a new approach to the form he takes, deterritorializing every taken position. For instance, when he is the scrivener, he apparently never writes; when he becomes a baby, he tries to rape Inés; when he makes love with the witch, he is disgusted, not in love; and when he is Mudito he is neither mute nor deaf, but he pretends to be both. He is like a virus that contaminates the entities which he encounters, mutating when moving to a new character or object; i.e. by coming into contact with them, Mudito contributes to the production of a sense (the Mudito effect⁹⁸).

⁹⁷ Furthermore, the very existence of Mudito/Humberto Peñaloza is called into question, maybe because he is not a formed thing but a force. Emperatriz says: “It is as if Humberto had never existed. Sometimes I think..., yes, I think that I invented him.” / “Es como si [Humberto] jamás hubiera existido. A veces pienso..., sí, pienso que yo lo inventé a él” (*El obsceno* 360). I translate this fragment, which was omitted in the English version.

⁹⁸ “The discovery of sense as an incorporeal effect, being always produced by the circulation of the element = x in the series of terms which it traverses, must be named the ‘Chryssipus effect’ or the ‘Carroll effect’” (LOS, 70).

Some of the two more remarkable positions of Mudio are the papier-mâché head and the seventh old woman, given that they are thresholds to a literal becoming-collective. The big cardboard head is one of the manners in which Mudio occupies the self of the men who use it, or, in other words, he becomes the head and, therefore, every man who has fornicated with Iris. Even further, by using the big head he assures the dissolution of all the other selves that he used to embody:

“You put it [the Giant’s head] over me, as if going through a ritual (...) eradicating with this investiture each of my previous existences, every one of them: Mudio; Don Jerónimo’s secretary; Iris’s dog; Humberto Peñaloza, the sensitive prose writer (...). All of us dissolved in the darkness inside the mask.” (*The Obscene*, 67)

This is a multiplication of Mudio’s self, given that this papier-mâché head does not have a name, a function in society, nor a sense of belonging to an institution (either family, friendship or any other for which one sees the need for possessive adjectives –and pronouns– and/or hierarchies within the group). This fact implies that whoever puts on the head transforms himself into an anonymous part of the nomadic-self assuring the disappearance of individualities and becoming part of the collective subject. That is why when the men in the magazine shop destroy the head, Mudio is very disturbed: they were not only destroying a mask, but also Mudio’s threshold to a multitude of selves:

“Iris throws herself on the floor and puts her arms around me. The dust on the floor makes my eyes itch. Andrés grabs me, starts beating me as if I were a drum, while the other three Aces and Tito improvise a dance... tum-tum-tum-tum... as if their pummeling palms didn’t hurt me... tum-tum-tum... they pick Iris off the floor... tum-tum...come on, come on, Gina, shake it, more, more, once more around... and Romualdo breaks up our group, charging at Andrés who drops me.” (*The Obscene*, 85)

It is important to note that, in this fragment, the narrator uses the first person singular voice because the cardboard head is narrating the occurrences, implying that Mudio has become the head.

Meanwhile, when Mudito embodies the seventh old woman⁹⁹, he accesses the collective subject of the old women who live in a pack. They are never alone, they are always in groups of two or more: “(...) we want to be as close to one another as possible (...) we’re together and toward evening can go to the chapel in groups (...), we can cling to one another’s rags (...)” (Donoso, *The Obscene...*, 14) That is to say, by becoming the seventh old woman¹⁰⁰ he becomes *any* of the old women because they do not have individuality – in many parts of the plot one can observe how the old women are interchangeable. Another characteristic of these women is that they personify a minoritarian resistance, since in *El obsceno* they are described as the group that threatens the consistency and power of the majoritarian discourses in the novel: Don Jerónimo and his order in La Rinconada; the bishop and his order in La Casa; the working class and their order in the streets; etc.

These pre-individual women have learned to undo themselves which “is proper to the war machine: the ‘not-doing’ of the warrior, the undoing of the subject.” (ATP, 400) Their resistance is based on their capacity to avoid being controlled: they are meaningless, useless and incoherent (as much as their speech, whose authority is based on the “they say” of the popular anonymous voice), which gives them the means to escape from the authority and power of the dominant class. The old women become a fissure – a line of flight – which fractures the force of the majoritarian assemblages in *El Obsceno* and that introduces elements of disorder to it, given that, as one of the old females say, “old women have powers and prerogatives (...) an anarchy in which everything’s allowed, no obligations to fulfill because nobody cares whether they fulfill them or not” (*The Obscene*, 322).

⁹⁹ “(...) the old women –the seven of us, now that they’ve stripped me of my sex and taken me into their number– are looking after *his* [Don Jerónimo’s] son in Iris’s womb” (*The Obscene* 50).

¹⁰⁰ Mudito did not choose to embody a woman that could be the representative of standards within the powerful class; rather, he decided to pass through the marginalized women, namely the ones in the periphery: “But there is another route (...) that does not pass through Woman (...). It passes through women and other (...) illegitimate [minorities]” (Haraway 313).

In the last chapter of the novel, for instance, in a very comic episode, the old woman and the orphans are picked up by Father Azócar and four elegant priests who want to turn the event into a memorable moment by giving a speech, reciting one by one the names of the woman, and convincing the women not to bring useless packages since they will be given all new things in the house that is awaiting them in the high part of town. However, the elderly women, a chaotic force, destroy their vain attempts by talking about unimportant and unrelated things and by continuing to collect unnecessary effects to bring with them, to the point that Father Azócar gives up and asks the priests to just take a bunch of them and put them in the buses. Father Azócar reflects:

“Incredible! No wonder Mother Benita’s been dying to get out of this hell. Better not explain anything to them. Let them go on believing whatever they wanted to believe, because reason and unreason, causes and effects, weren’t real for these anarchic creatures.” (*The Obscene*, 427)

Mudito, in order to dismantle his self and to separate from the white-Western-heterosexual-Man, becomes woman.¹⁰¹ He gains the power to detach from the organization of his body and from his social functions, since the old women of La Casa do not have sex, rank, or utility.

¹⁰¹ “Although all becomings are already molecular, including becoming-woman, it must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings” (ATP, 277).

Conclusion

“‘Why do men fight *for* their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?’ (...) after centuries of exploitation, why do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they *actually want* humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves?’”

Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

As part of the social imaginary, identity is a way to hold power over others since it is a mode of controlling and systematizing their characteristics, their actions and their expressions. Given that identity does not have any type of fundamental relation to the definition of humans, it is based on a sense of inclusion and exclusion, as well as on the intention of keeping things static. It is within this context that the construction of a self is crucial, as well as the reinforcement and repetition of the rules that naturalize their own existence and that justify the neutralization of the different.

The novels discussed throughout this thesis, *Cobra*, *The Unnamable* and *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, show that identity, as a simple social construction, can be rethought and redefined. They deterritorialize human identity by evincing different ways of behaving and different ways of understanding the self, or even by showing that there is no necessity to hold subjects to such a construction.

Sarduy’s *Cobra* challenges the idea of the normal and the normative – presenting grotesque situations that do not follow common logic (the logic of the ‘good sense’) and that crack the forced link made between subjects and social functions or behaviours. Meanwhile, Beckett’s *The Unnamable* adds that the boundaries of humanity and the functions of the human body can be broad, showing that there are insufficient characteristics to define a human, that is, demonstrating that there is nothing that essentially can define humankind. Lastly, Donoso’s *El obsceno* extends an invitation to imagine humans as something-else, as entities outside their human limits.

Whereas *Cobra*, *The Unnamable* and *El obsceno* fight the solidified and constraining idea of the ‘self’, showing that by, dissolving it, subjects can actually enhance their understanding of life and of the Other, they do not impose a new way to categorize it.

They present the artifices behind the construction of the self, but they do not reterritorialize it, which would contradict the very spirit of their questionings.

While identity (whose basis is found in a self-mirroring image) isolates, classifies and hierarchizes human beings, the process of dissolving the self does not lead to the conclusion of considering subjects as void and nihilistic entities. Rather, it opens the ways in which they can perceive reality and it helps to expand the inclusion of diverse ways to express those understandings, since the human without 'self' is not pushed to exclude the not-normal and not-same.

In this respect, literature can be a way to escape from the imposition of law, whether related to the construction of homogenized social behaviours or related to the obligation to follow grammatical rules, since literature does not necessitate replicating, copying or simulating social constructions. For this reason, literature can introduce novelty not only within language but also in ways of perceiving reality – fiction does not even need to be constrained to the *actual* world – and in ways of relating to reality. In contrast to a withered and institutionalized use of language, Beckett pushes it to a limit, Sarduy makes a sensual experience of it and Donoso decentralizes it, contributing to the opening of its creativity.

By doing so, they also fight a social battle: that of helping to disassemble social institutions that rarefy human creativity, human perceptions and human connections. They encourage readers to stop conceiving of human activities as static goal-directed-ends, as this would destroy desire, emergence, production, creativity, novelty, and reinforce the institution of major discourses.

Perhaps as a way to resist majoritarian discourses one should disobey the law of the 'grammatically correct' as these writers have, and disobey the law of the 'socially correct' as do their characters, exploring the margins of reality that are more heterogeneous. The dissolution of the self, therefore, becomes a way out of human domestication through generations of myths: "(...) like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in a cage and dead in a cage, born and then dead, born in a cage and then dead in a cage (...)" (*The Unnamable*, 139).

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