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A Language of Grief, Body, and Translation: María Negroni's *The Annunciation*

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The responsibility of the living to the dead is not simple.
Anne Carson

Disembodied Language

Marguerite Feitlowitz, in her seminal book *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, has characterized Argentina's 1976–1983 military dictatorship as a war on language. The military junta exerted control over the population by means of their rhetoric, which crafted an illusion of reality that set the desired political stage. The language of the dictatorship was marked by features that are consistent with authoritarian rhetoric as defined in a variety of contexts, such as "declamation, and sacralisation of the political" (Gronskaya, Zusman, Batishcheva 288). On the most basic level, it was a "discourse of the structure," in contrast to a "discourse of the words," as language was made to "carry a powerful message that is not expressed by the words themselves" (Goldschläger 11). Rather than function referentially, key words "function as signals" (Gronskaya, Zusman, Batishcheva 288). These coded signals—inciting fear, doubt, and ultimately compliance—constitute the "lexicon of terror" that Feitlowitz describes in her exhaustive analysis of the texts and subtexts that laid the groundwork for the Dirty War (Feitlowitz).

Argentinian writer María Negroni's lyric novel *The Annunciation* (2006) is set in the "intensely verbal" period just before the 1976 coup d'état. The novel satirizes the military junta's war on the "state of the language" (Feitlowitz 22) and depicts, in turn, the failure of language among left-wing activists. On both fronts of the conflict, then, the political crisis is a linguistic one. On the left, the activists struggle to unify their political message, but their movement becomes fragmented as their communication breaks down. A motley band of *nommes de guerre*, they even personify this linguistic disarray:

> [There were…] Brains claiming he never bought a word of Socialist Peronism, Mousie hunched over like a little Duke of Orsini, and with him, Penguin, Bashful, Cripple, Filly, and Chester, a veritable Sacred Forest of Monsters…and Evita, who dropped her literature major…because the meetings always devolved into a debate about whether the universe is a finite series of concentric spheres or a totality of worlds in eternal exile, and with all that nonsense, how the hell can anyone do anything that might affect the masses…" (Negroni 11)

I translated these Spanish nicknames (e.g., el Bocho, el Tonra [a syllabic inversion of *ra-tón*], el Pingüi, el Mudo, el Rengo, la Potra, y Chester) into rough English equivalents to highlight the comic heterogeny of this unlikely, zoomorphic list of characters, which includes allusions to the novel *Bomarzo* and its statue garden of "monsters." The failure of their movement stems from their inability to perceive, and agree on, the reality at hand due to their entanglement in the disconnected, disputed language of their politics.

> [A] blind man entered the café selling stickers with the phrase *Smile, the Warlock loves you.*
>
> The Word House clutched her head.
>
> "This country is driving me up a wall. Our Old Man is never going to die, the Warlock is never going to die, the military are never going to die. (…)"
>
> "Excuse me," she said, "but as far as I know the labor class organization…"
>
> "*Working* class, *working*," Nobody corrected. (117)

The nicknames "The Warlock" (El Brujo) and "Our Old Man" (El Viejo) refer to General José López Rega and Juan Perón, respectively. This passage alludes to the dark side of Peronism, with an eerie slogan about the Rasputin-like López Rega printed on stickers sold, ironically, by a blind man. Even as the Peronist activists bemoan the fate of their movement, they dispute fine distinctions in nomenclature. The novel paints their movement as fallen tower of Babel, littered with slogans, flyers, and even non-linguistic signs (e.g., green armbands signify membership in the Peronist Trade Union Youth Association, or JSP), in which they struggle, and ultimately fail, to agree on a common language.

Far worse than the disagreement and fragmentation on the left, the authoritarian language of the military dictatorship is the target of the novel's sharpest critique. Admiral Emilio Massera (whom Feitlowitz deems the Dirty War's "grand orator") often cautioned his listeners about words, which are "unfaithful" and liable to "betray the unsuspecting, destroy the innocent" (Feitlowitz 21). "The only safe words are our words," Massera would conclude (22). Negroni responds to the literary implications of these totalitarian claims on language by satirizing this rhetoric and reclaiming its tropes for poetic play. Crafting the spectacle of language, she highlights the power of words to stupefy instead of signify. *The Annunciation* is stylistically dizzying and explores effects of disorientation and disembodiment with labyrinthine constructions, recalling the dictators' style of "extremely long, solemn, and dirge-like" sentences (Feitlowitz 23). Also, it deploys "emotionally laden, hyperbolic adjectives like "exhausted," "impossible," and "defeated" [along with]… nouns like "dissolution," "anarchy," and "frustration"; "corruption," "contradiction," and "loss" (Feitlowitz 23). The novel draws, moreover, one of its main verbal tropes from the junta's way of personifying abstractions (for example, Massera's proclamation that "We will not allow Death to roam unconstrained in Argentina"; 28), as it builds its excessively large cast of speaking characters from figures of speech and abstract nouns (e.g., "My Private Life," "Longing," "The Soul," "Nobody"). Language becomes a theatrical spectacle, and words are the actors.

> On the screen, live and direct, were the Navy, Army, and Air Force. And behind them, various representatives from the Legitimate Military Wing, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including the Moderate Wing, the generals, cavalry arms, cabinet ministers, multinational executives, members of the Episcopate, unionists, ambassadors, all the chiefs of the garrisons, brigades, units, tactical commands, torture facilities, and other defenders of national disgrace, all in uniform and advancing like locomotives.
>
> "Make no mistake," said Prince Videla of the Little Mustaches, "the guerilla attacks are not targeted at entrepreneurs, or at labor leaders, or at the military, but at the Country as a Whole."
>
> The Country as a Whole gave a quick bow and greeted the camera: "I am not a Liberated Vietnam, nor do I wish to be, God saves and protects me, there is nothing quite like my Grand Ol' Blue and White." (Negroni 129)

This satirical television scene literally performs language-as-spectacle; abstract nouns arrange themselves before, and direct themselves to, the camera. It stresses the emptiness of the language of the dictatorship, for all its pomp and circumstance. "Prince Videla," with his attendant crowd of powerful entities, summons a figure of speech ("The Country as a Whole") as speaking character. I translate language-as-spectacle by honoring the weighty words, run-on sentences, and inflated structures. Readers in English, who might not readily identify the historical context, will still feel the empty weight of the bureaucracy's presence in the list that opens this passage.

In my translation, I added the proper name "Videla" to the cartoonish "El Príncipe de los Bigotitos" (Prince of the Little Mustaches), a questionable choice. In my rationale, his mustache would have been an identifying characteristic to the original audience of the book in Spanish, and without that added surname, "The Prince of the Little Mustaches" might have mapped as an exclusive allusion to Hitler. This instance is one of the very few when my translation risks clarifying historical reference, as the novel's relationship to history is intentionally and provocatively allusive. Both the coded language of the dictatorship, and the code-language of the activists, bring the reader into a mode of reading that involves interpretation and translation—a key part of the linguistic atmosphere that Negroni recreates. As Mother of the Plaza de Mayo Renee Epelbaum, whom Feitlowitz interviews, remarked of speeches by the dictators: "It made you *psychotic*. We could barely 'read' let alone 'translate' the world around us. And that was exactly what they wanted" (Feitlowitz 22). Negroni's satire performs this illegibility and untranslatability to make it more intelligible, as the basis for critique. Addressing this text to a broader readership, I usually avoid such clarification in order to privilege the maddening readerly experience of interpreting and translating allusive, deceptive language.

Not to participate in the same author/itarian narrative strategies that claimed to possess "Objective Reality" and "Truth," Negroni redefines her position as storyteller. To reject the

pretensions of realism, she disrupts the conventions of narrative time and place. The action unfolds in "two cities at once" (Negroni 2): in the past, as the narrator revisits the events that led to the "disappearance" of her boyfriend, who goes by the *nom de guerre* "Humboldt," on March 11, 1976, and in a ghostly "Rome" of the present. The drama is not situated in the catastrophic events of the past but in the narrator's frustrated efforts to narrate that past. The novel finds the narrator "at a loss" to understand let alone articulate events that the dictatorship concealed. The loss of the narrator's lover entangles with semantic losses: lost threads, losses of words, and missing information. The metanarrative paints her grief as distinctly readerly and writerly, a fruitless search for words amid the "national swamp" of language after the conflict.

> … no one would be able to deny, under any circumstances, our linguistic contribution, our worthy donation to the national language, in the form of a national swamp.
>
> The list was unreal, The Wasp said. They'd left scores of toxic, literally unpalatable words. A real shit heap, he said. Then he started enumerating what his memory, in an unprecedented effort, had retained, and all of that, amid the stench of the military and a broken conscience. (Negroni 157)

Here, the language of the dictatorship has not merely made facts unavailable, it has polluted the "national language." More than omissions, concealments are an adulterating substance, making language murky, even poisonous. In his book *Cruel Modernity*, Jean Franco comments on the cover-ups concocted by Latin American regimes as primarily a way of closing off communication abroad: "Killings had to be concealed to avoid international attention, and elaborate deceptions were staged" (Franco 194). A stagnant waste site—what the Wasp later deems a "dead zone [*zona muerta*] in story"—this language can no longer function to tell stories, at least not by traditional means (Negroni 157).

The language of the dictatorship is one that, above all, enacts disappearance. The junta's program of perpetuating "disappearances"—their euphemism for the state-directed murders of left-wing activists—had its root in mystifying, deceptive, and—as critic Edelberto Torres Rivas points out—"imaginative" language. Torres Rivas writes, "disappearance is even more cruel than public assassination, since it elevates the perception of danger by placing it in an imaginary world, unsure but probable, created by the possibility that the disappeared person is alive" (Franco 193). "Disappearance" is a "ghostly art," an act that happens as if magically, with no apparent perpetrator. Even the dictators disappeared from behind their speech, by appealing to divine authority, shifting responsibility from themselves (Schaar 44). The true orator, to whom the message belonged, was the cloaked figure of "Absolute Truth."

Euphemisms—like the word "disappeared" itself—are mainstays of this language, and they perform a disappearing act. The euphemistic "Proceso de Reorganización Nacional," or "Process of National Reorganization," the dictatorship's name for its regime, is another prominent example. The

name shifts responsibility away from the dictators and toward the "process"—a word that itself erases agency by appealing to time itself as an actor, guiding events toward a historical happy ending (Feitlowitz). "Re-organization" is embedded with a sinister irony, as "organization" traces to the same etymological root as "organ." "National Reorganization"—which was a program of kidnapping, torture, and killing—posits nation as a unified *body* restored to proper health.

Out of this verbal and narrative dysfunction, *The Annunciation* constructs a story about grief. Addressing the novel to a disappeared person, "telling the story of a death" that is not impossible to research let alone confirm, it takes up the "ghostly arts" armed with a critical attention to its constructs. "In the absence of the testimony of the disappeared," Jean Franco notes, "their photographs, films, and art instillations are ghostly hauntings. The silence of the disappeared is absolute" (Franco 195). Translation choices that expose the disappearing (but not the disappeared?)

When Realism Isn't Real

The Annunciation is autobiographical by the admission of the author (Negroni), and from the first sentence, the narrator chronicles her writing of the book. Though rooted in Negroni's personal experience of a historical trauma, the book deviates from autobiography in that it is neither an attempt to testify to political catastrophe nor to reconstruct her personal past. On the contrary, it is distinctly a work of fiction; concerned with invention, it elaborates scenes and characters, even as it relentlessly exposes and critiques its own illusion-building. Both memoir and novel, while not quite contained by either category, the book persistently questions, and never quite resolves, its relationship to reality.

The Annunciation resembles what poet Laynie Browne terms "the poet's novel," a hybrid lyric form distinguished from the traditional novel (Browne). In defining this form, Browne identifies a heightened attention to language, at the expense of the pull of narrative time: "This density and unabashed celebration of prosody is a refuge from the whirlwind of novels in which one is propelled by story to come to the end of things" (Browne). Stacking language to impede a reader's absorption in the illusion of scene, this form refuses to participate in realism's representation of reality. For Negroni, writing where the conventions of realism have been weaponized and reality has been concealed, this form is a way to unveil the illusion and to pinpoint "that moment where reality asserts itself as inaccessible" (Negroni). Browne writes, "When realism isn't real, where is a writer to go?…When realism isn't enough, isn't authenticated…poets turn to the body of the sentence…A sentence may break, with the force of bodily gesture…" (Browne). Negroni turns to "the body of the sentence," a radical "bodily gesture" against disappearance. When Negroni's boyfriend (and later murdered, or "disappeared") Humboldt recounts his first interrogation, for example, a single sentence, run together with commas, exceeds a page (Negroni 74). The drama and anxiety of that narrative "reconstruction" (in the absence of facts and of Humboldt's body) are achieved by bending the language beyond the natural angle, highlighting its physicality and constructedness. The mirage of

realism has dissipated into the toxic "dead zone of story," so it is language-as-event, rather than the unfolding of events in an illusion of reality, that moves toward truth.

The narrator writes not from reality but *toward* a real that cannot be accessed—not only for lack of answers, but because of the dysfunction of language after the dictatorship. In the following reflexive passage, the character "The Word House" addresses the problem of signification that she herself embodies:

> Maybe I'm not *myself*, said The Word, who also answered to the name House. I mean, the fact that I go by House in no way implies that I actually *am* a house. Because, without venturing into too much detail, a plain old house is obviously not the same thing as a staged house, a house under siege, a house named by a prisoner under torture, a pink house, or even worse, a white house. Basically I'm a natural dissident, pure and proud. (Negroni 53)

Her identity crisis is a tongue-in-cheek riff on semiotics, but one that alludes metonymically ("a house named…a pink house...a white house") to the Dirty War's clandestine politics and to the complicity of the United States in the junta's brutal human rights abuses. The identity crisis of The Word House invokes the authoritarian language of the dictatorship as it wedged a distance between signifier and signified. In this context, The Word positions herself, alongside the narrator and her fellow activists, on the political left: she is a "natural dissident," a rebel who refuses to conform to the rules—an image perhaps free, in the words of Foucault, "to gravitate about its own madness" (Foucault 18). The crisis of signification, in which the "the figure no longer speaks for itself," gives way to the many hypernyms that take life in the book. At this breaking point, language is: "free for the dream" (19). Negroni reclaims this crisis as a site of poetic freedom.

Negroni is by no means the first writer to emerge from a linguistic (identity) crisis with poetic possibilities. Anne Carson's study of poetic economy in *Economy of the Unlost* addresses the prominent example of poet Paul Celan's experience of estrangement from the German language after World War II. Carson's analysis of Celan offers a useful point of comparison for Negroni, as her insights into how Celan's poetics responded to the Nazi assault on language present striking commonalities. Carson quotes this famous passage from Celan's Bremen address: "It, the language, remained, not lost, yes in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting, pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech" (Celan 395). Carson argues for the interpretation of this "deathbringing speech" as a specific reference to the Nazi regime, versus a broader reference to the erosion of meaning in language over time (Carson 54). She cites Felstiner's (1995) description of Nazi violence to the German language, which aligns with Feitlowitz's analysis of the Dirty War's war/assault on language.

> [T]he Thousand-Year Reich organized its genocide of European Jewry by means of language: slogans, pseudo-scientific dogma, propaganda, euphemism, and the jargon that brought about

> every devastating "action" from the earliest racial "laws" through "special treatment" in the camps to the last "resettlement" of Jewish orphans. (Carson 53)

Like Celan's poetic economy, Negroni's novel holds the body of language "close and secure against loss" (Celan 395). Reclaiming language from violence—and like Celan, Negroni attends to language as to material relics that have "passed through loss"; Negroni's narrative resistance of realism resembles Celan's "language mesh" [Sprachgitter], as Carson describes it: "the action of the poem, as it pulls you deep in and then thrusts you out of the mesh…moves with the springy recoil of a bad conversation and cleanses us of the illusion that we could talk" (Carson 58). This poetics that amplifies the strangeness of speech by refusing fluency and transparency extends from both writers' estrangement from language (and position of exile). As Carson notes, "in order to write poetry at all, he had to develop an outside relationship with a language he had once been inside. He had to reinvent German on the screen of itself, by treating his native tongue as a foreign language to be translated…" (Carson 52). As such, Celan suggests further comparisons for Negroni's language as one of both grief and translation.

Writing Death

As Jean Franco observes of the Dirty War, there was "a triple deprivation—of a body, of mourning, and of a burial" (Franco 193). Faced with this triple lack, the narrator of *The Annunciation* struggles to come to terms with the indefinite death of the "disappeared" Humboldt, to whom her narrative is addressed. Her frustrated grief is the narrative's central, obsessive conflict. This conflict emerges repeatedly as her writing, an exercise in mourning, is haunted by the specters of its own dysfunction and futility.

In Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), which remains a prevalent model for evaluating literary representations of grief despite Freud's later revisions to it, normal "mourning," which does the recuperative "work" of freeing our desire to cling to the fantasy of the lost object, is distinguished from pathological "melancholy," in which we engage in a "prolonged hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (Freud 244). In normal mourning, one externalizes the absence as an "imagined presence," a place to transfer one's attachment, until it eventually dissolves. By contrast, melancholy internalizes loss, and thus, the sufferer never manages to become free of attachment to the lost object. The imagined presence is key to normal mourning; melancholy occurs precisely because "one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost" (Freud 246). Sacks (1985) adapted Freud's model to describe how elegy performs the work of mourning by supplying that imagined presence of the loss object. Elegy, in Sacks's adaptation, allows the mourner to displace, and ultimately dissolve, attachment to the dead. Sacks's model amounts to a compensatory economy of grief, in which the creative gain redeems the loss.

Scholars have questioned the relevance and adequacy of Sacks's model to modern art on grief, which tends to reject consolation to acknowledge the complex social politics and personal ethics entailed in loss (Clewell). *The Annunciation*, for one, defines a frustrated, if not adversarial, relationship with the happy ending of mourning's consolation. Instead, it corresponds to what Jahan Ramazani has described as the "anti-elegiac dimension" of modern writing on death, which is "anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic…anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-Literary" (Ramazani 2). Writings of grief might insist that language is no substitute for losses that are too profound or hard to define and simply refuse to be comforted. In the spirit of this refusal, *The Annunciation* exhibits what Ramazani terms "melancholic mourning," a grief process marked by uncertainty, hopelessness, and ongoingness (4). In this process, the narrator clings to a loss that she cannot name or define, an absence that she has internalized for lack of concrete understanding of what she has lost, or even whether she has lost it. "Who were you, anyway, Humboldt?": the narrator asks, and: "Where are you?" and "Did you die somewhere along the way?" "What if the Humboldt I'm inventing never actually existed?" Not only does he have no body, no grave, no funeral—even his name is only a *nom de guerre*. "Your Humboldt has many facets missing," the character Emma reminds her. The novel's melancholic mourning—unresolved, violent, and ambivalent—repeats that triple deprivation of "body, mourning, and funeral" by acknowledging its inability to represent, substitute, and detach from the one lost. The narrator's stated mission to "write the story of a death" convulses with her recognition of Humboldt as, fundamentally, unknowable, inaccessible, and impossible to represent. From the novel's opening sentence, the narrator proclaims her impotence: "I don't know how to tell the story of a death, Humboldt" (1).

To persist in uncertainty, Negroni's narrator must redefine her purpose. Ramazani draws the contrast between elegy and anti-elegy with Elizabeth Bishop's famous villanelle "One Art" (a poem that, coincidentally, Negroni translated into Spanish; moreover, she once presented a public talk about her frustration with the message of this poem when translating it; Negroni). Ramazani writes: "If the traditional elegy was the art of saving, the modern elegy is…an 'art of losing'… the 'one art' of the modern elegy is not transcendence or redemption of loss but immersion in it" (Ramazani 4). Not "freeing the ego" or "purging sorrow," mourning becomes, precisely, a delicious exercise in futility. Just so, the creative "work" of *The Annunciation* is not to heal but, rather, to open—and deepen—the wound: "it is as if someone opened a wound in me, and then another inside it, and caged a swallow inside. Oh, I'm slandering you—there are no swallows [*golondrinas*] in Rome" (Negroni 4). The English translation of the bird "swallow" introduces the secondary denotation of an internalization: the sense of swallowing a wound, eating your grief (even as it loses the secondary Argentinean-Spanish denotation of "migrant"). In this anti-elegy, the wound of loss is this Chinese box, a deescalating depth that, in the end, contains no body—only a lie, which triggers ambivalence. The lack of a body relegates the narrator to immersive, hopeless mourning, a process that strives not to see the disappeared but rather, to do the impossible: to see disappearance.

The narrator makes this distinction between traditional elegy and her own writing explicitly: "It's one thing to write on behalf of the dead, Humboldt. It's another thing *to write death*. You risk keeping it alive forever in the folds of what you say. Now, for example, I have the sensation of postponing something in order to linger endlessly in this cemetery of words" (228). Argentine scholar Hector Depino, addressing problems of artistic representation in proposals for a memorial to those killed in the Dirty War, advocates for something like Negroni's "writing death": "[a] creative process of lack," one that is capable of "transforming that hole in reality into a lack" (Depino 194). (Here, again, the trope for the endless writing death is physical, spatial depth: "the *folds* of what you say.") Death fundamentally defies representation and, thus, demands new forms. Thus, anti-elegy, strives to represent precisely that which defies representation, for a poetics that, as an oddly hopeful gesture, embraces failure. Unable to understand, redeem, and thereby free herself from what she has lost, her attempt, even as if fails to compensate, creates in its very failure something other than representation, something unprecedented.

With apostrophe, the poetic call to the absent, the narrator addresses herself to lack. Apostrophe is a familiar rhetorical gesture in traditional elegies, where they are often reserved for crests of emotional intensity, but the narrator's call is a running epistolary thread, cultivating an atmosphere of pending, unlikely response: "That's enough for now, Humboldt. Who knows if we'll see each other again, or when. Goodbye. I'll leave you to that bright blank that is and was (and ever shall be) what we might have been together" (Negroni 5). Here again, it is useful to reference the poetics of Paul Celan, in whose poems apostrophe hazards toward an uncertain "encounter." In his Bremen speech, Celan defines the poem as "encounter" and emphasizes the risk of its failure by comparing the poem to a note in a bottle thrown out to sea. The apostrophic gesture toward the absent other, as it exposes the poem to unknown destiny, forms the basis for what scholar Kalliopi Nikolopoulu terms Celan's "poetics of disappearance," which like Negroni's poetics, is deeply rooted in non-consolatory, melancholic grief. Nikolopoulu illustrates how, in Celan's earliest known poem "Mother's Day 1938"—which begins by addressing a silver-haired aspen tree while noting, by contrast, "my mother's hair was never white" and concluding "my gentle mother cannot return"—apostrophe attempts the work of mourning by performing Freud's "Fort/Da" –Gone! There!—game of appearance and disappearance (and repetition), in which the child throws an object away (in this case the mother) and retrieves it in order to stage its loss and return. Celan's mother does not return. The work of mourning in the poem fails to compensate for the loss; instead, it repeats the loss—and so the work will go on and on. In that endless repetition, absence is exposed. Nikolopoulu concludes that Celan stages his mother's disappearance in order "to expose the risk of representation," because "only when the poem arrests the logic of representation, in which words that mean absence end up representing what they are supposed to mark as absent…can such difficult presence as the presence of absence come forth" (Nikolopoulu 82, 83). Summoning her then—as Negroni's narrator says—is to expose the "risk of keeping [the dead] alive forever in the folds of what you say" (Negroni 228).

As with Celan's apostrophe, Negroni's apostrophe is not a call to Humboldt, but "the endless repetition of a hope that could be but is not fulfilled"—what Nikolopoulu's terms "the gap between possibility and missing" (Nikolopoulu 88). This compulsive enactment necessitates an "endless" form such as Laynie Browne identifies in her discussion of the "poet's novel." Browne uses poet Andrea Baker's doubly adjectival "open endless" as a nexus for multiple definitions and anti-definitions of the genre: "This deliberate stumbling and stopping is an 'open endless.' It takes you back, in the opposite direction of 'finishing'" (Browne). Negroni adopts the lyric novel's "open endless" to stand between "possibility and missing," in that desperate repetition of the hope as it is, maybe never, fulfilled. Meanwhile, the novel's meta-fictional reflections highlight endlessness, and even hopelessness, as revelatory: "And yet, I'm nowhere even close to finding that image that expresses nothing, and whose empty forms, endlessly multiplying, let us see" (Negroni 90). The narrator's "endless search" for Humboldt reflects the artist character Emma's "endless search" for a particular shade of blue, both of which parallel the Montoneros' search for their political ideal, and all of which are hauntingly paralleled, in turn, by the military's search for "subversives" to apprehend, torture, and kill. And so, the novel moves in the modality of multidirectional, endless searching, through desperate repetition, never realizing its hope or arriving at closure. Writing death is a melancholic, ongoing act of grief.

Annunciation, Enunciation

The Annunciation as "open endless" is, in fact, a radically anachronistic treatment of time and space to produce conditions of possibility through narrative impossibility. Here, there is no "Process," or progress toward a happy ending. Time is obsessive, repeatedly looping from an unidentified present back to March 11, 1976, the date of Humboldt's disappearance, two weeks before the military takeover of Argentina, which occurred on March 24, 1976, on the eve of the Catholic feast of the Annunciation. Effectively, the novel takes place simultaneously in the past and present: in the "fort" as well as the "da" of its obsessive game. As for space, the narrator lives "in two cities at once," Rome and Buenos Aires, and moreover, she has "died and resurrected," simultaneously alive and dead, like Schrodinger's famous cat of the Uncertainty Principle. Anachronistic, too, is the character of Athanasius Kircher, the seventeenth century German scholar whose appearance before the narrator resembles both divine visitation and meta-poetic absurdism. Kircher, able to freely traverse space and time, is an artist of the impossible and the founder of a "museum that contains, or duplicates, the world." As such, he foregrounds anxieties of representation. His museum's ability to "contain" and "duplicate" the world invokes the very tenets of realism, even as he defies them and proposes radical alternatives.

> "You'll see," he said, noticing my lack of enthusiasm, "the Annunciation is an exchange of *caritas*. An orator, ambassador, *starry messenger* arrives and proclaims: 'Virgin, my lady, hurry and respond, proclaim the Word. And she rises, rushes forward, opens. It's as if she said: 'Give me what I need, not what I want.' At that moment, eternity enters time, immensity enters measure, the Creator enters the created, the unrepresentable enters representation, the unspeakable enters speech, the inexplicable enters words, glory enters confusion." (Negroni 231)

Here, Athanasius presents the biblical scene of The Annunciation as a parable of representation that proclaims "impossibility" an alternative to realism. In the biblical story, which spans only twelve verses in the book of Luke (Lk: 26-38), the Virgin Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel, who delivers the news that she is to become pregnant with the son of God. Mary briefly reflects upon this message before she declares her acceptance. As Athanasius highlights, this scene suggests the process of creative representation, as it points to the very mystery of the incarnation, or "word-made-flesh"—and moreover, as Emma reminds us throughout the novel, it has been a rich site of visual and narrative re-imaginings dating back to the fourth century (LaVerdiere 29). But in his version, Athanasius notably impregnates traditional representation with impossibility, uncertainty: "the unrepresentable enters representation, the unspeakable enters speech, the inexplicable enters words….". As the story represents an encounter, a call that awaits response, it is marked by that risk, that openness to unknown destiny, which we find in Celan's, and Negroni's, apostrophic poetics.

For centuries, theological interpretations of these verses have highlighted the "pregnant pause" before Mary's response, her famous hesitation which amplifies that risk: "[she] was troubled at his saying and thought with herself." Athanasius's emphasizes the angel Gabriel's haste, underpinned by uncertainty, by some momentary possibility that she will not answer his call: "Virgin, my lady, hurry and respond, proclaim the Word." Just so, the following passage by French Cistercian Bernard de Clairvaux, makes a plea for her to answer, as if her answer were in no way assured: "Answer quickly, O Virgin. Reply in haste to the angel, or rather through the angel to the Lord. Answer with a word, receive the Word of God…. Why do you delay, why are you afraid?" (Clairvaux). The "troubled" pause is that place where the narrative opens to its radical form, its "open endless," and abandons representation. Mary is to abandon her prudence, as the poetic narrative must do, to "embrace" the impossible, unspeakable, unrepresentable.

The host of characters that populate Negroni's anti-realist, anti-elegiac narrative are, like Athanasius, ghostly figures. Characters like "The Word House," "My Private Life," and "The Soul" are, as I discussed earlier, satirical responses to one of the dictatorship's tropes, and they are also one of the most playful and dynamic narratives strategies creating spontaneity and resisting time. Figures of speech and thought, when invoked, materialize suddenly, as if of their own accord as speaking characters, a play that emphasizes the nonsensical, unexplained nature of dis/appearances in this historical context. Abstractions walk the streets ("We will not allow Death to roam free…"), as real people disappear. In another defiance of linear time, historical figures materialize as characters. The following passage, riffing on lines from the poem *Altazor*, summons the poet Vicente Huidobro, who remains as a speaking character for the rest of the novel:

In her corner, The Soul had returned to normal and was chanting:

> "The swallow wallows, for miles of hills, violoncello and swallow, in the gloaming the moon, at full gallop, swallowing, the swilling, swirling, swelling, squalling, squealing."
>
> "There are writers here who are infiltrators," shrieked a skinny kid with a green armband. "And proud of it!" said Huidobro, making his first appearance. (Negroni 183)

As Negroni exposes characterization as this sort of dis/appearing act, she again engages narrative impossibility to highlight im/possibility: anyone could appear, or disappear, at any moment. This possibility lends the narrative an element of lyric surprise and an attendant anxiety. It insists on redrawing the line at the site of the disaster, not between presence and absence, or between real and imagined, but between—again in Nikopolou's words—between "possibility and missing…" (Nikopolou 88). Whereas realist narrative is fundamentally predictable, this one is uncertain, capable of failing, liable not to arrive, or likely to arrive garbled: "By then I was used to the monk's abrupt appearances, and to his disappearances which, at times, lasted for months. He came on and off, like a nonsense signal…He *is* appearance and disappearance" (Negroni 87). Again, this uncertainty writes death, rather than write presumptively *on behalf of* the dead: it *is* appearance and disappearance. By extension, translation could be described in these same terms; insofar as it displaces a text in time and space, expresses itself as a possibility in light of "impossibility," and most of all, as—given that a translation is never finished and never definitive, as re-translations of texts over time and place are the norm in world literature—it embraces the ongoing here/gone dynamics of writing death.

A Language of Translation

I have discussed the connection between the anti-elegiac poetics and mourning, now I will argue that Emma bridges this poetics to the realm of translation. Emma, the narrator's best friend, is a painter whose ruminations on the function of art and possibility of representation embed a key theoretical framework into the novel. As painter, she is a "copyist," adamantly concerned with achieving equivalency to another work of art, and not to reality. What is more, she is devoted copying a single work: Filippo Lippi's Annunciation, a religious scene that is itself the site of numerous artistic renderings. Propounding her theory of art, Emma invokes key points in translation studies, such as equivalence and loss.

Emma's goal as a copyist is not to play into capitalistic production but, more idealistically, to transcend representation by exhausting it. "She copied them in a fury, ravenously, as if by not having to invent her own forms, she could directly enter the unseen" (Negroni 12). It is hard not to connect her method to what Walter Benjamin discusses in his famous essay "The Task of the Translator," in which he reframes translation as a liberation from the confines of one's own language and its distinct mode of intention. In translation, one's language might be freed toward an attainment of "pure language," that ideal of language that can only emerge in the harmony of all languages vitally linked (Benjamin 74). As languages coincide in the moment of a word-by-word translation, as in Emma's meticulous copies of the Annunciation, they reconfigure what Babel shattered to bits: the "pure

language" that exceeds the communicative power of individual languages, which contain the incomplete residues of its enigmas. Like Benjamin, Emma's interest is not in the production of the copy for the sake of a "viewer." Emma's view of art as an idealistic search, via literalism, for an inexpressible color reflects this mystic vision, which is an end in itself; as Athanasius consoles the narrator, "You might say that the very moment she set out in search of the color blue, paradise was already inside her" (Negroni 234). Also like Benjamin, Emma fundamentally rejects the notion that a good translation is a faithful representation of an original text. For Emma, all representations, as representations, are doomed to fail; her copying is merely a means of brushing with another painter's sense of intention ("Her favorite painter was Filippo Lippi, because Lippi, she claimed, painted with desire"; Negroni 12) to approach the inexpressible. Benjamin quotes Rudolf Pannwitz on this point:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. […] The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. (Benjamin 80)

The mark of a successful translation for Benjamin is not a faithful transfer or adequate substitution of meaning, but creation: to have sparked the transformation of the translation language. Through her method of copying, Emma transcends representation and expands the expressive possibilities of her medium: "Then suddenly, as if that color infested her, she becomes a wild conflagration, an intensity that ignores the limits of the seen and the visible" (Negroni 12).

When modeled as transfer, on the other hand, translation entails, like elegy, a compensatory economy. As representation of the lost original text, the translation is tasked with substituting for, and redeeming its loss, parallel to "normal mourning" work of elegy. Translators' Notes often trouble over the ethics of substitution. To be truly "faithful," how accurate must the representation be? Accurate in what way (word, form, intent)? Does the gain redeem the loss? The narrator of *The Annunciation* herself expresses these anxieties: Is her novel a fair/true/faithful representation of Humboldt? Emma, however, proposes an alternative model.

> I've always thought that art is never contemporary to anyone. Like it's standing, by definition, on the curb across the street, disoriented, brushing off everything that tries to pin it down, because pinning down is always the foundation for domination. And that's how it works, whether or not it's trying to, against authoritarianism.…Do I even need to add that art is its own reality, and that the real measure of truth is depth, not accuracy? A work lays images over places that lack reason. (Negroni 86)

Emma's notion of art as something that "lays images over places that lack reason" recalls Negroni's remark in an interview that she has tried to situate her work where "reality asserts itself as

inaccessible" (Negroni)—a paratextual source that provided a key rubric for my choice-making in this translation. It is the impossibility of pinning down Lippi's blue that inspires Emma to copy them relentlessly, and despite her method of literalism, her commitment is to "depth" not "accuracy." Lack, or loss, incites the copy, which rather than pretend to represent the loss, must instead enter it; depth is a spatial conception that suggests a hole. Emma makes the language of the novel—writing not from reality but *toward* a real that cannot be accessed—a language of translation.

The narrator engages in copying as well. Her role as activist is to print flyers; as writer, she limits herself to "borrowed bits of prose" ("the main thing is never to add my own words, everything has already been said"; 24). As writer of the novel, she drafts multiple "what-if" versions of Humboldt's story. No version pretends to be correct; they accrue as imaginative possibilities, toward truth-as-depth rather than as accuracy. "If he had been an architect, Humboldt would have drawn the plans for an Edenic house, enclosed by a palisade" (93) Throughout the novel, Humboldt's story is not the story of his life, but the story of his stories. Working from text to text, at a remove from reality, the writer is limited to a translator's role.

As translator of this novel, itself so infused with anxieties about representation and translation, I met obstacles to the traditional task of crafting an illusion of the original. Beyond the density, materiality, and syntactical idiosyncrasy of its language—which demanded an attention to verbal music as when translating poetry—the language is in many ways bound to its original cultural context. Pervasive references to popular and material culture (for example, popular songs and brand names, with their attendant associations to social class and political orientation) would be lost on an audience outside of Argentina. The greatest challenge to translation is its intricate, satirical portrayal of the linguistic atmosphere of its setting: the authoritarian rhetoric of the military dictatorship and the political-jargon-peppered slang of the left-wing activists. For the latter, I opted for language that, with a mixture of idioms and inventions, produced a distinctly "un-locatable" atmosphere in English. In the sprit of the novel's refusal of realism, I embraced anachronism and intentionally mixed contexts (e.g., the quoted passage in which the Country as a Whole refers to the Argentine flag as his "Grand ol' blue and white"). I avoided explanation (with a few exceptions, such as the clarified Videla reference that I discuss earlier in the article). Weighing the need to build the context necessary for the satire to hit its mark against the important experience of allusion, loss, and distance, I tended toward the latter. hoping to situate my writing of the translation, like the writing of the novel, "between possibility and missing." The language of my translation is anachronistic, loss-infused, ghostly, and—I hope—lyrically evocative. It upholds Negroni's central impulse to hold language closer in the face of loss and spin, within its illusion, a melancholic sense of its own illusion-spinning.

The novel ends with the narrator's apology that the book has not compensated for Humboldt's loss: "Unforgivable failure of this book" (Negroni 239). By refusing forgiveness, this ending curtails the elegiac economy. Moreover, it boldly punctuates the novel by absorbing blame, as well as embracing failure: "You gave your life, and I cut a deal. There is no right word for that" (239).

Countless versions of this admission can be found in translator's notes: she has "betrayed" Humboldt, and her language has failed. With this admission of not having achieved its purpose, moreover, the novel resists ending; it merely has reached a stopping point in its "open endless," where time is not linear or chronological but repetitive, obsessive. The work of mourning fails to compensate for loss, it repeats the loss—and so this ending opens the possibility of more writing. In that possibility of endless repetition, absence is exposed, and translation takes place.

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