

WRITING THE VISUAL IN *BARONI: UN VIAJE*
AND OTHER RECENT WORK BY SERGIO CHEJFEC

by

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Abstract

**WRITING THE VISUAL IN *BARONI: UN VIAJE*
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This dissertation has three parts. First, I explore the ways in which the word intersects with the image in several recent texts by the contemporary Argentine writer Sergio Chejfec, whose *oeuvre* is replete with verbal descriptions of visual artifacts. Second, as a complement to the critical essay, I present my English translation of Chejfec's *Baroni: un viaje* (2007), a novel featuring the Venezuelan artist Rafaela Baroni, whose extraordinary wood carvings of Virgins, saints and other figures are described in key passages. Third, as a bridge between these two parts, I reflect on the related critical discourses of ekphrasis and translation and on the task of translating *Baroni: un viaje*.

Chejfec's engagement with the visual as both an essayist and novelist has received little critical attention to date. In the first part of my study, I consider recent essays and blog postings in which he discusses the problematics of the word-image encounter, both in his own work and in that of others. I contend that Chejfec's privileging of the word and of the artifice of writing affirms W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of "ekphrastic hope." By examining ekphrastic passages in *Baroni: un viaje*, I study the effects of the ekphrastic encounter in the novel and move beyond the notion that ekphrasis represents a "spatial fix" or halt in the narrative.

In the second part, I offer my English translation of *Baroni: un viaje*. In the third part, I

discuss the affinities between the critical discourses surrounding ekphrasis and translation. I conclude with a Translator's Note that posits that the cleft that splits one of Baroni's wooden carvings, described at the novel's outset, can be understood as a powerful trope for the gap separating word from image, and the original Spanish of the novel from my English translation. I argue that although translation implies rupture, one hopes for engagement with the other in the space such a translation opens.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Tengo frente a mí el cuerpo de madera del
santo; la madera se ha rajado por la mitad de este
médico que mira hacia adelante sin ver nada en
particular.

Sergio Chejfec, *Baroni: un viaje*

In the opening sentence of Sergio Chejfec's 2007 novel, *Baroni: un viaje*, the first-person narrator gazes at a hand-carved wooden saint that has a distinctive and memorable crack down the center of its torso. In the paragraphs that follow, the reader, guided by the narrator's appreciative eye, will visualize the carved image of José Gregorio Hernández, a popular folk saint known as el santo médico, made by the title character, the Venezuelan artist Rafaela Baroni. In rendering the saintly doctor's most salient characteristics through words, the author fixes an image in the reader's eye by means of an artistic medium, writing, that stands in marked contrast to another artistic medium, wood carving, that is the focus of the narrator's attention. In these initial passages and in many others throughout the novel, the reader is repeatedly engaged by what the critic Murray Krieger, in his 1992 study *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*,

calls the “picture-making capacity of words” (1). Though this critical essay is limited to *Baroni* and other recent writings by Sergio Chejfec, the author’s *oeuvre* is replete with picture-making passages such as the one cited above. In fact one could say his work is saturated with verbal descriptions of all kinds of visual artifacts: photographs, wood carvings, bas-reliefs, paintings, graffiti, maps, films and videos and, most recently, web cartography.¹

Chejfec’s engagement with the visual, a facet of his work that has only recently begun to attract critical attention,² is the starting point for a dissertation that will comprise three parts. First, I will explore the ways in which the image intersects with the word in several instances of Chejfec’s post-2000 work (Chapters 2 and 3);³ second, and as a complement to the critical essay, I will present my English translation of *Baroni: A Journey* (Chapter 4); and third, as a bridge between these two parts, I will reflect on the striking similarities between the critical discourse on ekphrasis (and some of its contemporary critical iterations, as I will outline in this Introduction) and the discourse that surrounds literary translation. I will conclude with reflections on the dual task of the translating the novel as I write critically about it.

Because this dissertation has its roots in my critical and creative work in translating several works of fiction and essays by Sergio Chejfec, I approach this study with the advantage

¹ Two instances: In the opening scene of *La experiencia dramática* (2012), a priest delivers a sermon in which he warns the congregation that “Dios es como los mapas en línea (dijo textualmente ‘Google Maps’). Puede observar desde arriba y desde los costados, es capaz de abarcar con la Mirada un continente o enfocarse en una casa, hasta hacer zoom sobre el patio de una casa” (9). In *Sobre Giannuzzi* (210), a book-length essay on the Argentine poet Joaquín Giannuzzi, Chejfec compares his poetry to the act of taking a photograph: “Hay una medida entre temporal y emotiva que Giannuzzi tiende a obedecer; no encuentro mejor forma para describirla que llamarla *exposición*, una suerte de exposición fotográfica, como si el poema dependiera de una forma y un lapso de encuadramiento necesariamente calibrados” (30).

² See studies by Horne (2005, 2011, 2012) and Epplin (2012).

³ Specifically, the essays or blog postings “Breves opiniones sobre relatos con imágenes”; “Cuadros de una instalación”; “Sobre *Baroni: un viaje*”; “El escritor plástico”; “El caso de un título y un nombre,” and the novel, *Baroni: un viaje*.

of having essentially inventoried the author's tools—his words—one by one in each of the texts I have translated.⁴ In doing so, I have subjected these words to various levels of scrutiny—their picture-making capacity being only one of them. It is perhaps in the very rigorous process of translating this author's prose into English, which entails reimagining it in another linguistic medium, that I have been able to fully measure and appreciate the pictorial turn of Chejfec's writing.

In this introduction I will establish a conceptual framework within which to situate a reading of *Baroni* and other recent essays and blog postings, one focused on issues that arise when words become instruments to paint pictures, sculpt figures, flesh out photographs. As I do so I am mindful of the dangers of oversimplifying and compressing a tradition in Western literary history that for many begins with Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*.⁵ The sheer volume of texts that have lent themselves (or could potentially lend themselves) to a study of this nature stands as a formidable barrier to an investigator who wishes to take note of what has preceded her before attempting to open a new critical space for studies of visualities in Sergio Chejfec's work. Even Krieger, in his fundamental text on ekphrasis, declares at the outset that he can only consider “a small number of representative landmark texts across the centuries” (6).

An additional intellectual cloud is that the field gives signs of being in a state of flux and realignment. As an initiate in this field of scholarship, I have attempted to work my way through a maze of critical formulations and nomenclature, old and new, in order to situate my exploration of the visual in Sergio Chejfec's work. A critical discourse that was for centuries or even

⁴ Works by Sergio Chejfec that have been published in my English-language translation are: “On Baroni: A Journey,” (2009); *My Two Worlds* (2011); and “The Necessary Obstacle” (2013).

⁵ See “Homer, Virgil, Dante: A Genealogy of Ekphrasis” in Heffernan (1993) and “Ekphrasis and the Other,” in Mitchell (1994), for two such examples.

millennia organized around a seemingly unified concept, “ekphrasis,” has at least since the 1980s apparently splintered into different camps, if the proliferation of subject headings—such as “word/image” or “image/text” studies, “visualities,” “interarts poetics,” “intermedialities,” and others—is any indication.⁶ How can one interpret the multiplicity of critical tags, whose immediate effect is to make more explicit the intersection and/or juxtaposition of the word and the visual? Does it reflect a critical rejection of the age-old concept of ekphrasis, and if so, to what end? Is the close affiliation of ekphrasis with the most historically privileged artifacts of Western culture—painting and poetry, whose pre-eminence is today less certain—a significant factor? Would the key issue articulated by Krieger—the picture-making capacity of words—be seen as passé, unambitious, too redolent of a classical Eurocentric tradition that I would otherwise be inclined to challenge? In the face of this interdisciplinary flux, I have wondered if my interventions in this field might be somewhat late to the game, more in tune with a long-gone critical era when John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” was the unchallenged standard bearer for ekphrastic literature.

The shifts in the critical landscape over the past few decades have been drawn into sharp focus by Peter Wagner in his 1996 anthology *Texts, Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediality* (whose very title gives a sense of the range of terms that now coexist with ekphrasis). Wagner finds that “In the late 1980s...I began to realize that the fields of ekphrasis and intermediality...had apparently seen little growth or change” (1-2). His dissatisfaction stems in great part from critics’ ignorance or disregard of fundamental texts by French theorists such as Barthes, Kristeva, Derrida, Foucault. According to Wagner, the destabilizing effect of these texts had still not been felt in Anglo-American art history or literary criticism. Wagner asks, “If

⁶ Several examples of titles reflecting critical tendencies since the early 1980s are: Lagerroth, *Interart Poetics* (1997); Mitchell, *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology* (1986); Bal, *Visual Poetics* (1988).

poststructuralism has taught us anything it is the knowledge that making meaning depends on the fickle nature of the sign, which is subject to personal and social determinants. When, it may be asked, will this undeniable fact be recognized and considered by our more reluctant *confrères* who are writing on visual poetics and the relation of verbal and visual art?" (7). Wagner's embrace of French theory and poststructuralism is accompanied by a call to re-assess the status quo in image-text studies. Significantly, he does not abandon ekphrasis as a relic of the past; in fact he acknowledges its resilience even as the critical firmament experiences great upheaval.

My purpose in this essay, however, is not to offer a comprehensive survey of the state of ekphrasis in the twenty-first century, nor to advocate for its increased use as a critical tool, though I do wish to note that ekphrasis has continued vigor as a critical lens. Its self-reflectedness bespeaks its deeply philosophical nature, amply demonstrated by the literature, whose historical reach goes from Plato's *Cratylus* (if not earlier) to the present day.

I would like to turn my attention back to a more focused exploration of Sergio Chejfec's recent work—specifically, several essays and blog postings and the novel *Baroni: un viaje*—in light of their ekphrastic elements or engagement with visualities, and set forth ideas and concepts gleaned from my readings of several key theorists. And since another aim is to consider points of convergence between the discourses surrounding ekphrasis and literary translation, I will attempt to foreground the strands of thought that I believe will bear most directly on that discussion.

A central point of reference for scholars working in this field is the fundamental essay by Murray Krieger, "*Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited*," first published in 1967, and the book-length study mentioned above, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992), a broadening of Krieger's initial inquiries. The 1967 essay (which is included as an appendix in Krieger's later book) points to a signal influence on Krieger's

exploration of ekphrasis, the German philosopher and playwright G.E. Lessing, who in his 1776 work, *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, established critical paradigms that continue to influence theoretical writings on ekphrasis.⁷ For Krieger, following the lines of Lessing's argument, an inherent tension exists within what he calls the ekphrastic aspiration, in which two antithetical states, stasis and motion, coexist. As Krieger explains,

The ekphrastic aspiration in the poet and the reader must come to terms with two opposed impulses, two opposed feelings, about language: one is exhilarated by the notion of ekphrasis and one is exasperated by it. Ekphrasis arises out of the first, which craves the spatial fix, while the second yearns for the freedom of the temporal flow. The first asks for language—in spite of its arbitrary character and its temporality—to freeze itself into a spatial form. (*Ekphrasis* 10)

The key formulation of “temporal flow” versus “spatial fix” is a direct descendant of Lessing's famous distinction between the poet and the artist in *Laocoön*: “It remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter.” (Lessing 91; XVIII). Krieger, not wholly satisfied with the Lessing tradition, wrestles with this neat bifurcation over the course of his book, but accepts its basic proposition: “Every poem's problem as its own aesthete, and every critic's problem after it, is essentially the problem of Keats with his Grecian urn: how to make it hold still when the poem must move” (284).

Although Krieger is writing primarily about ekphrastic poetry, not prose, with Keats' Grecian urn the archetypal *objet d'art*, it is this interplay between stillness and motion that I find especially relevant to my study of *Baroni*. If we accept Krieger's updating of the dichotomy

⁷ The name of the Greek mythological figure who has become synonymous with Lessing's essay is spelled in a variety of ways, most likely due to different styles of transliteration from the original Greek. Krieger opts for “*Laokoön*”; the translation by Edward Allen McCormick that I cite is titled “*Laocoön*.” References to each source will reflect the different spellings.

originally articulated by Lessing, then the novel's static non-linearity, which I will describe in more detail in Chapter 3, can be seen as compatible with its ekphrastic aspiration. Moreover, to the degree that a turning away from plot and conventional artifice is a hallmark of Chejfec's style, an affinity for ekphrasis is not at all surprising.

Indeed, if one considers that Chejfec's narratives are full of digressions and tangents, almost to the exclusion of any plot-driven narrative,⁸ Krieger seems to offer a plausible rationale for the author's ekphrastic passages:

The advantages of having a work of art as an object of ekphrasis are, I think, obvious. If an author is seeking to suspend the discourse for an extended, visually appealing descriptive interlude, is he not better off—instead of describing the moving, changing, object in nature—to describe an object that has already interrupted the flow of existence with its spatial completeness, that has already been created as a fixed representation? (8)

Conflicting views on the question of the spatial and the temporal in literature have, however, followed on Krieger's re-visitation of Lessing's work in his influential 1967 essay. One such voice is James A.W. Heffernan, who takes issue with the categorical split. For Heffernan, the binary opposition "flattens the complexity of the terms opposed" ("Space and Time," 96). He adds that new forms of visual art and media, such as film and video, are a direct challenge to the notion that still images are atemporal. When these stills are projected in succession, Heffernan notes, they create the "illusion of movement or change" (96), thus defying the frozenness Krieger ascribed to images. Another exception Heffernan points to is twentieth-century concrete poetry, a

⁸ As Chejfec states in an interview with Antonio Jiménez Morato (2010), "Mis relatos no avanzan en términos de progreso de la acción, no hay desenlaces reveladores al final, no hay demasiada acumulación épica o dramática. Estos relatos progresan por expansión. Hay desvíos, digresiones, derivas e historias o escenas asociadas."

descendent of Renaissance pattern poems such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings," which subverts the notion that poetry is a temporal art by asserting its graphic and spatial syntax on the page.⁹ In this type of poetry, words are both "seen" as visual artifacts and "read" for their meaning (97).

Unlike Krieger, who, we recall, characterized ekphrasis as a kind of craving for a "spatial fix," Heffernan asserts that there is "a temporalizing impulse that permeates all ekphrasis: the tendency to convert the representation of one moment into the representation of successive moments, into a story with separable phases" (115). He, too, examines the ekphrastic-criticism-friendly poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and finds that while the figures on the urn do not enter "the world of movement and time," a view consistent with Krieger's, the reader is nevertheless reminded, in an extra-literary step, of the "time-bound world it transcends" (115). The ekphrastic aspiration is thus trumped by the reader's impulse to animate the images and "link them with the temporality of 'this generation,' even as [the images] are assured of outlasting it" (116). In his *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, Heffernan most emphatically rejects Krieger's model of ekphrasis, along with the New Criticism that informed it, and cites the critic Michael Davidson's observation that "Krieger's theory of ekphrasis would hermetically seal literature within the well-wrought urn of pure, self-enclosed spatiality, where the ashes of New Criticism (still glowing, as ashes will) now repose" (*Museum*, 2).

Perhaps the most important contemporary theorist writing on questions of visualities today is the literary scholar W.J.T. Mitchell, whose groundbreaking work in the field of

⁹ In this respect Heffernan alludes to the concrete poetry of Eugen Gomringer and Henri Chopin; I would add, in an attempt to combat the overwhelmingly Eurocentric nature of ekphrastic criticism, the Noigandres poetry of the Brazilians Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, and the poem-objects of Vicente Huidobro in *Horizonte cuadrado* (1917), *Poemas árticos* (1917-1918), and *Tour Eiffel* (1918).

iconology and visual culture has subjected the word and image, and all pictorial-verbal forms, to an intense scrutiny and reconceptualization. The ground covered in Mitchell's capacious and powerfully argued studies goes well beyond the scope of my essay, but areas touching on ekphrasis are by their nature wide-ranging, and one does not need to read a formal essay on "ekphrasis" to gather relevant ideas. Since a key aspect of my discussion of *Baroni* will turn on its unusual spatio-temporality, I have found it useful to trace Mitchell's thoughts over time on this subject. The major points of his critical framework are set out in an essay from 1980, "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory," in which he articulates his basic objection to the binary opposition of space versus time, an approach most closely associated with Lessing:

We must begin, however, by removing one of the major obstacles to any comprehension of the problem—the notion that spatial form is properly defined as an antithesis or alternative to temporal form and that literary works achieve "spatiality" only by denying temporality, usually defined as some form of sequence or continuity. The fact is that spatial form is the perceptual basis of our notion of time, that we literally cannot "tell time" without the mediation of space. All our temporal language is contaminated with spatial imagery: we speak of "long" and "short" times, of "intervals" (literally, "spaces between"), of "before" and "after"—all implicit metaphors which depend upon a mental picture of time as a linear continuum. (541-542)

and later:

The argument, then, that literature differs from the plastic arts by its "reading time" and by its presentation of narrative or fictive time crumbles on any close

inspection. The parallel claim that spatial forms are static, closed systems which can be completely apprehended in zero time is similarly fallacious....Instead of viewing space and time as antithetical modalities, we ought to treat their relationship as one of complex interaction, interdependence, and interpenetration. (544)

Mitchell does not engage directly with Krieger or even mention him by name in this essay, but his corrective to Krieger's influential revisitation of *Laocoön*, or to any other theorist following in Lessing's footsteps, is clear. Upon close inspection, Mitchell sees no validity in the notion that space and time in literature are mutually exclusive and conflicting entities; they are, in fact, highly permeable. Indeed, their permeability is such that Mitchell makes an even greater claim, which is to deny the boundaries between what he calls "modalities," i.e. literature and visual arts. Rather, he argues for their inseparability, their interconnectedness:

Instead of Lessing's strict opposition between literature and the visual arts as pure expressions of temporality and spatiality, we should regard literature and language as a meeting ground of these two modalities, the arena in which rhythm, shape, and articulacy convert babbling into song and speech, doodling into writing and drawing. ("Spatial" 565)

Mitchell's radical project, then, is to collapse the wall dividing the visual and verbal arts. His call, developed more fully in the chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other" in *Picture Theory* (1994), is nothing less than a paradigm shift, a definitive rebuttal to the critical tradition that has descended from Lessing's *Laocoön*. It is also a provocation. In the ancient *paragone* or contest between word and image, Mitchell falls down on the side of the image, and, I believe, is clearly biased in its favor, to the point of essentially dismissing ekphrasis as a critical tradition. Of the critics

examined so far who have written on ekphrasis, his views are the least congenial to its continued relevance as a critical construct. When he refers to the “commonsense perception that ekphrasis is impossible,” one assumes he is stating his view as well (*Picture* 152). Mitchell would even deny that ekphrasis has any critical value. Isn’t all language at the service of vision? he asks (*Picture* 153). “There is nothing to distinguish grammatically a description of a painting from a description of a kumquat or a baseball game” (*Picture* 159). Why then the special critical frame? Mitchell asks.

Despite Mitchell’s skeptical stance, he is engaged by the subject and its voluminous literature, and in fact proceeds to make his own original contribution to the critical corpus. Based on his reading of the literature, Mitchell isolates three key aspects or phases in the articulation of ekphrasis: “ekphrastic indifference,” “ekphrastic hope,” and “ekphrastic fear,” terms that will be useful in my approach to Chejfec’s work. In setting forth these concepts, Mitchell builds a quasi-psychological narrative around each that speaks of the fascination, desire and rejection that by turns adhere to them. The first stage, “ekphrastic indifference,” is a by-product of the general view that ekphrasis is impossible, or in Mitchell’s punning formulation, “words can ‘cite’ but never ‘sight’” (*Picture* 152). Verbal representations can never bring the object before us; its absence is a given. Despite this impossibility, however, language is put to the service of vision: this is “ekphrastic hope.” In this instance, Mitchell states, we speak of the mind’s eye, or of our imagination, or of the aestheticization of language, to conjure an image or Krieger’s “still moment” through words:

Once the desire to overcome the “impossibility” of ekphrasis is put into play, the possibilities and the hopes for verbal representation of visual representation become practically endless....The estrangement of the image/text division is

overcome, and a sutured, synthetic form, a verbal icon or imagetext, arises in its place. (*Picture* 154)

Yet it is a short-lived suturing between word and image: “ekphrastic fear” quickly arises. In Mitchell’s account, this is the moment when “the reciprocity” between the visual and the verbal is perceived as dangerous, when literature, in emulating the visual arts, risks emasculation, or in Lessing’s words, when a “higher being” is turned into a “puppet” (Lessing, *Laocoön* 60; X). The borders between the modalities now become regulated and monitored; “ekphrastic hope” turns into something “sinister and dangerous.”

Mitchell, we recall, is not writing to defend ekphrasis as a critical lens, but rather to question it. His fundamental point is that ekphrasis is a sort of red herring, and that “there is no essential difference between texts and images and thus no gap between the media to be overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies” (160). He wants to bridge that gap that has separated the visual from the verbal from Lessing forward, noting that “paintings can tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas; words can describe or embody static, spatial states of affairs, and achieve all of the effects of ekphrasis without any deformation of their ‘natural’ vocation (whatever that may be)” (160).

Mitchell posits that the illusory sequence he outlines of ekphrastic indifference, hope and fear is more interesting for what it says about readers; we are reluctant or resistant to make what we conceive of as an “impossible translation” (164) between the modalities of painting (or other visual arts) and writing, a translation Mitchell would argue is eminently possible.¹⁰ In Mitchell’s view, “ekphrasis” is a manifestation of our anxieties, a working through of a problematic

¹⁰ “Translation,” here used in a metaphoric sense (with its inevitable pair, “impossible”), often emerges as a key word in discussing the distinction, or lack of distinction, between word and image, a point I will take up further when I discuss the overlapping discourses of ekphrasis and translation.

encounter between the poet/writer and the audience/reader of the ekphrasis. The poet/writer has the mediating role between the object described and the audience/reader who “will be made to ‘see’ the object through the medium of the poet’s voice” (164). Mitchell describes this relationship as triangular, as a kind of *ménage à trois*, oddly reminiscent of the translation triangle in which the translator is the medium through which an original text is made legible or understandable to a new audience.

And it is not only in this respect that ekphrasis resembles the discourse around translation. Mitchell’s narrative also treats the subject of the “other” (most prominently in the chapter’s title, “Ekphrasis and the Other”), understood by the critic as follows:

The central goal of ekphrastic hope might be called “the overcoming of otherness.” Ekphrastic poetry is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic “others,” those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or “spatial” arts. The “scientific” terms of this otherness are the familiar oppositions of semiotics: symbolic and iconic representation; conventional and natural signs; temporal and spatial modes; visual and aural media.¹¹ (156)

In Mitchell’s view, ekphrastic poetry is a genre that has found its “other” within the realm of visual representation, in what he calls the rival “spatial” arts. Although Mitchell does not explicitly make any connections with Roman Jakobson, the encounter he posits between the visual and the verbal closely resembles the intersemiotic translations described by Jakobson in his foundational text, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (Jakobson 151), an essay I will return to in the last chapter.

¹¹ Mitchell’s use of scare quotes around conceptual words or phrases is disconcertingly frequent. Given his skeptical bent toward the literature surrounding ekphrasis, I assume that they are meant to reflect his ironical or questioning stance toward the words or phrases they enclose.

Although Mitchell may be overly intent on dismantling ekphrasis as a critical construct, I believe that he, like Heffernan, correctly points to the limitations of Lessing's dichotomy, which so neatly and categorically separates the verbal from the visual, the word from the image, time from space. However, the relationship between the ekphrastic passage and the overall narrative, more relevant in fictional works and in particular, *Baroni: un viaje*, remains an issue.

I return to Krieger's project, which, though nearly exclusively informed by poetry, considers the case of the narrative driven by temporal movement that nonetheless holds still for the ekphrastic moment. According to Krieger,

If the author is seeking to suspend the discourse for an extended, visually appealing descriptive interlude, is he not better off—instead of describing the moving, changing, object in nature—to describe an object that has already interrupted the flow of existence with its spatial completeness, that has already been created as a fixed representation? Surely so: if he would impose a brief sense of *being*, borrowed from the plastic arts, in the midst of his shifting world of verbal *becoming*, the already frozen pictorial representation would seem to be a preferred object. (8)

Here he anticipates a facet of Sergio Chejfec's work that bears examining: is *Baroni's* ekphrastic nature consistent with the author's marked tendency to interpolate digressive passages into the narrative? And in a larger sense, is Chejfec's narrative more about *being* than *becoming*?

Mitchell, in dealing with the question of narrativity, turns to the distinctions Gérard Genette makes in *Figures of Literary Discourse* between narrative and description. As Genette explains, "In principle, it is obviously possible to conceive of purely descriptive texts, the aim of which is to represent objects simply and solely in their spatial existence, outside any event and

even outside any temporal dimension” (133). Genette points to the all-important “decorative” role of description in epic poems such as the *Iliad*, and to its “explanatory and symbolic” role in nineteenth-century novels by authors such as Balzac and other realists (134-135). In Genette’s stark assessment, “[d]escription is quite naturally...the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave” (134). Genette’s binary of description/narration initially seems like a muted version of Krieger’s description of ekphrasis, cited earlier— the “spatial fix” of the description of artwork within the “temporal flow” of the narrative. Genette, however, has a broader purpose than to delineate the precise functions of description and narration—as the critic Marie-Rose Logan points out in her introduction, his project entails “a reassessment of the internal boundaries of narrative fiction” (Logan xii)—and his reflections on these two elements offer a parallel and worthy perspective that does not arise out of the Lessing-Krieger tradition. Genette ultimately discounts what he believes is the false antithesis in the academic tradition between description and narration:

It would appear then that description, as a mode of literary representation, does not distinguish itself sufficiently clearly from narration, either by the autonomy of its ends, or by the originality of its means, for it to be necessary to break the narrative-descriptive (chiefly narrative) unity that Plato and Aristotle have called narrative. If description marks one of the frontiers of narrative, it is certainly an internal frontier, and really a rather vague one: it will do no harm, therefore, if we embrace within the notion of narrative all forms of literary representation and consider description not as one of its modes (which would imply a specificity of language), but more modestly, as one of its aspects... (*Figures* 137)

It is a shift away from the strict dichotomy separating description and narrative. Genette refutes the assumption that a descriptive passage is a “time out” from the ongoing action, that is, purely decorative and detachable, with no narrative function. In Chapter 3 I will consider the complex relationship between description and narrative in *Baroni: un viaje*, a novel that abounds with expansive descriptive passages, ekphrastic and otherwise, to such a degree that these same descriptions generate narrative flow.

In Grant F. Scott’s “The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology” (1991), the author does not exactly equate ekphrasis with the abject state of a slave, or the original art work with the master, but he posits “the greater authority of the image” over the word. In his reading, ekphrasis is thus a “cunning attempt to transform and master the image by inscribing it” (302). In Scott’s envisioning, ekphrasis poses a danger or threat to the visual image: the writer controls the pageant described on the Grecian Urn through words, he or she “anaesthetizes it through language” (302). And worse, “the relationship between observer and artwork at times appears disturbingly parasitic. Instead of translating the art work, the observer frequently takes possession of it” (302). Scott cautions that the motivations of the ekphrastic writer are “much more divided than most critics have acknowledged, and far more ambivalent” (302). Is the ekphrastic writer, then, a sort of subversive agent, a slave in incipient rebellion? Can charges of subversion, appropriation, and/or parasitism be applied to ekphrastic writers (as they have, at times, been applied to literary translators)?

A more recent work is Gary Shapiro’s “The Absent Image: Ekphrasis and the ‘Infinite Relation’ of Translation” (2008).¹² Shapiro takes as his point of departure the Foucauldian

¹² The “translation” of Shapiro’s title is not the interlingual type, but rather the intersemiotic variety posited by Jakobson, that is, a nonverbal object represented by words. The title demonstrates the degree to which the idea of translation is implicit in the act of ekphrasis.

notion of the infinite relationship between word and image, a concept briefly posited by the French thinker in his ekphrastic essay on Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, and left largely unexplored by critics. In Shapiro's description, Foucault "interrupts himself" in *Las Meninas* "to comment on his own procedure, saying that 'the relation of language to painting is an infinite relationship...it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say'" (13). Shapiro continues, "[Foucault] is offering much more than a description of a painting; he proposes an analysis of the relationship between words and images, and so of the genre of ekphrasis itself. What is seeing? What is saying? What is the infinite relationship?" (13). Shapiro focuses primarily on texts, ancient to modern, from the *Iliad* to Diderot to Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* and *Memoirs of the Blind* and Lyotard's *Que peindre?*, that dwell on the absence of an object that they then describe ekphrastically. He argues that "the situation of the absent image is not simply a peculiarity, a marginal or eccentric case, with respect to normal descriptive practice. All ekphrasis must share this structure..." (14-15). The absent image that is fundamental to his discussion, and the gap between seeing and saying, is central to the study of Sergio Chejfec's densely visual texts, which eschew the use of photographs or illustrations.

Fully realizing the complexity of these issues, and limited by the lack of a synthesizing model, I return to the description of the crack, *la grieta frontal*, running down the center of the wooden carving of the *santo médico*, the starting point for both the novel and this essay. In this graphic image I have found a powerful motif for the often vexing problems raised by the word-image encounter. It is "the problematic gap, cleavage or rupture in representation" that Mitchell places at the center of his investigations (*Picture* 89), and the fissure across which languages travel—a subject I will return to in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2

“Una verdadera aventura visual”:

Essays, Blog Posts, Interviews

“—Hoy he tenido una verdadera aventura visual.”

Lorenzo García Vega, *Son gotas del autismo visual*

In addition to his acclaimed work as a fiction writer and poet, which since 1990 has included over eleven novels, a collection of short stories, and two highly regarded books of poetry, Sergio Chejfec has an impressive body of work as an essayist. *El punto vacilante* (2005), a collection of sixteen essays dating from 1995 to 2004, treats subjects such as Latin American Jewish writing (“Marcas en el laberinto”), Borges (“La literatura en el bolsillo), Juan José Saer (“La organización de las apariencias), and the author’s unusual surname (“Lengua simple, nombre”), among others. In 2010 Chejfec published *Sobre Giannuzzi*, a slim volume containing two essays, or meditations, on the life and work of the twentieth-century Argentine poet, Joaquín Giannuzzi. Since 2006 the author has also kept a WordPress blog, *Parábola anterior*, whose

intermittent posts include recent essays, texts of talks or lectures delivered at conferences or symposiums, and other miscellaneous writings.¹³

Given the wealth of ekphrastic passages in his fiction, it is not surprising to find that Chejfec's engagement with the visual extends to his essays and beyond. In this chapter I will discuss several essays and reviews in *El punto vacilante* and *Parábola anterior* in which Chejfec explores the subject of visualities in literature and considers the problematics of the word-image encounter, both in his own work and in that of others. I will also discuss comments he has made in interviews and emails that provide additional insight.

Chejfec's most extended treatment of the issues that arise when text and image are combined appears in his 2002 essay, "Breves opiniones sobre relatos con imágenes," delivered as a lecture that year at "The New Latin Americanism: Cultural Studies Beyond Borders" conference at the University of Manchester.¹⁴ In the essay he discusses illustrations in books in general, and more specifically, those in texts by the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García and the novelist W. G. Sebald that feature narrative in juxtaposition with images:

Sobre todo las propongo [the works by Torres-García and Sebald] como ejemplo de los modos que a veces adopta la literatura para señalar de manera elusiva aquello que la palabra escrita no puede poner en claro o, en caso extremo, cuando

¹³ While Chejfec's essays are often cited within critical articles focused on his fictional work, they have not received adequate attention on their own. An exception is Daniela Alcívar Bellolio's recent article, "Una mínima inclinación. Imagen de autor en los ensayos de Sergio Chejfec" (2012). In it, she explores how the figure of the author is constructed in Chejfec's essays and blog postings, in particular "La lectura lucha por imponerse—a un alto precio" (2003), "Caligrafía y argumento" (2001), "Pensar en otra cosa" (2004), "La venganza de lo idílico" (2007), "La dispersión" (2007), "Marcas en el laberinto. Literatura judía y territorios" (2005), "La organización de las apariencias" (2005), and "Introducción" (2010).

¹⁴ The translation by Jon Beasley-Murray, "Literature: Brief Notes on Stories with Images," published in *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 11.3 (2002), was one of the first texts of Chejfec's to appear in English.

el mismo texto parece evadirse porque no se reconoce en el registro escrito. Esas formas más o menos embozadas, que muchas veces exceden la intención manifiesta del autor, aportan sentidos y formulaciones ideológicas que a su vez, expandidos como procedimientos, dejan huellas poco a poco convertidas también en ideologías estéticas. (136)

In this passage Chejfec points to a possible reason why literature turns from the written word to adopt other measures: the word reaches its limits, it cannot render “aquello,” whatever that may be, which in any case seems beyond the written register. Language reveals itself as inadequate; or as W. J. T. Mitchell might say, it cannot be put to “the service of vision” (*Picture* 153). I read Chejfec’s tone as cautionary. “Esas formas más o menos embozadas,” i.e., the images, are like covert agents, transporting “sentidos o formulaciones ideológicas” in an operation that ultimately alters the text in a way that goes beyond “la intención manifiesta del autor” (136).

According to Chejfec, images are not easily assimilable into a given text. They should not be treated as “un recurso accesorio o casual, en especial cuando la literatura muestra desde hace tiempo tantos obstáculos para interpelar su propia parte de realidad y materializarse a la vez como discurso estético” (137). Thus, while not rejecting the use of images, Chejfec qualifies their inclusion with a reminder of the challenges faced by literature in rendering its own part of reality. If images are used in a literary work, then an explanation, a justification, is called for; images should not be seen as a natural complement to a text, or adopted without questioning. I believe Chejfec is taking a defensive stance that recalls the *paragone* of the poet and painter: the written word competes against the image, and demands that the image make a case for itself.

Chejfec then turns to the two authors in question. He considers Joaquín Torres-García’s autobiography, *Historia de mi vida*, published in 1939, “un libro que puede considerarse plano,

sin demasiadas tensiones ni costados problemáticos” (137). Despite Torres-García’s close contact with European vanguard movements, Chejfec writes, the story oddly fails to reflect any of the narrative innovations of the time. Chejfec’s critique of Torres-García’s traditional narrative, however, is tempered by an appreciation of the author’s illustrations, with which “el libro adquiere una complejidad de la que el texto escrito carece. Son dibujos del mismo Torres-García donde vemos un vaivén entre la alusión gráfica, la documentación y la simple ornamentación” (138).

The drawings that most engage Chejfec are those that are essentially symbols, such as a drawing of an anchor that is meant to reference a boat, or a lifesaver on which destinations are printed, both stand-ins for the ocean crossing narrated in the text. Chejfec sees a strong resemblance in these simple drawings to the icon-objects that characterize Torres-García’s innovative paintings. In another instance, the drawing of a pipe, prompted by the narration of Torres-García’s first trip to Madrid and the beginning of a lifelong habit of smoking pipes, establishes “una relación irónica con el relato, porque [el dibujo] es irrelevante como documento y a la vez inverificable como prueba” (140). Chejfec notes approvingly that there is no caption identifying it as the first pipe Torres-García ever bought; the artist thus subverts the naïve logic that binds an image to the text surrounding it. On the whole, then, Torres-García’s illustrations appear to rescue a narrative that is otherwise conventional: “No sé si podría haber hecho de otro modo, pero lo concreto es que con estas incrustaciones su relato adquiere una profundidad que el testimonio por sí solo no brinda” (139).

Sebald’s use of illustrations, however, is more problematic. Chejfec examines two instances. First, the teas-maid in *The Emigrants*, characterized as “un artefacto estrambótico, mezcla de tetera y reloj” (141). The photo serves as proof of its improbable existence, since the

appliance would otherwise be “difícilmente imaginable para quienes no lo conozcan.” For the writer, the image provides “una operación de economía descriptiva” (141), that is, it is an effective shorthand for a verbal description that might not succeed at rendering the object for the reader.

The second example, in Chejfec’s view, presents greater problems. The image of the herring in *The Rings of Saturn*, “extraído seguramente de una enciclopedia” (141) seems, in contrast to the teas-maid, unnecessary and redundant. While the teas-maid is *sui generis*, the herring is far from unusual; why then include an image? Chejfec writes:

...dado que nada nos haría dudar de la existencia verdadera de esta especie pensamos si este énfasis referencial no será un exceso retórico que apunta a desestabilizar, en un género de por sí particularmente difuso, los lazos de verdad supuestos entre escritura y realidad. (141)

He then considers another possible explanation. Sebald’s narrator, at the point in the narrative at which the engraving appears, is describing the methods used to catch shoals of herring in trawling nets, and the gruesome circumstances of their death:

The nets do not enclose the catch, but rather present a kind of wall in the water which the fish swim up against in desperation until at length their gills catch in the mesh; they are then throttled during the near-eight-hour process of hauling up and winding in the nets. (*The Rings of Saturn* 56)

The horrifying suffering of the fish (whether thrashing in the nets or, as later described, still alive on the deck of the fishing boat), leads to the narrator’s subsequent reflection “...the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels” (*The Rings* 57). Such an admission, Chejfec believes, points to the inherent obstacle or “dificultad para saber lo que sienten o perciben los otros, sean

animales, personas o cualquier otra cosa,” and it affirms “...el límite obvio de toda representación” (141-142). The engraving of the herring thus serves as “una validación externa...” (143) that increases the intensity of the passage.

In highlighting “el límite obvio,” Chejfec returns us to the “obstáculos” posited earlier, that is, to the challenges literature faces when representing reality on its own terms, within its own aesthetic discourse. “Breves opiniones,” however, is not intended to be a broad exploration of aesthetic theory or the problems of representation in literature; rather, it considers from the novelist’s perspective the implications of the word-image encounter on narrative artifice. Chejfec speculates about, but does not ultimately know, Sebald’s intent in including the two images. He notes:

...en el caso de Sebald suponemos que estas fotos a primera vista se dirigen a interrumpir la lectura, induciendo un efecto de realidad que trastorna el de las palabras, que por sí solas y como forma escrita se encuentran aparentemente en dificultades para crearlo. (143)

He suspects that for Sebald the images were a strategy “cuando los recursos parecen limitados por el adocenamiento novelístico” (143). For instance, the image of the teas-maid as a way of avoiding a long and cumbersome description, and the engraving of the herring as a prompt for the reader’s empathy.

Of key concern for Chejfec, I believe, is the reality-enhancing effect induced by the images, which disrupts the parallel effects traditionally called forth by words alone. At stake here is the autonomy of the word in telling stories. He again underscores “el tipo de dificultad que la narración enfrenta en un mundo donde proliferan los relatos imbuidos y portadores de realidad” (144). It is a note not of alarm or censure, but of moderate preoccupation over the destabilizing

effect of such non-literary interpolations as photographs and other types of images. While not going to the extreme of advocating that images be banished from literary texts, Chejfec problematizes the notion that word and image can blend seamlessly on the page.

Several years later, Chejfec revisits the question of the word-image encounter in “Cuadros de una instalación,” a review of Mario Bellatín’s novel *Perros héroes* upon its publication in Argentina.¹⁵ Chejfec’s review, which appeared in 2004 on www.bazaramericano.com, was also the first post on his blog, *Parábola anterior*, in November 2006. Chejfec notes that *Perros héroes* is divided into two parts: the first, a series of paragraph-long anecdotes or commentaries, each paragraph set out on its own page; and the second, called “Dossier Instalación,” in which the photos appear “puestas en hileras irregulares, según los espacios libres dejados por las imágenes que, se supone, debieron haberse desechado en alguna selección previa” (“Cuadros”).¹⁶

For Chejfec, the isolated paragraphs of the novel project a striking visuality of their own, with blank spaces predominating:

El relato se divide en párrafos aislados, que comienzan en cada nueva página; como en general nunca son demasiado largos, se producen grandes blancos sobre el papel. Por lo tanto uno tiende a considerar que cada párrafo consiste en un momento particular de la historia o una nueva escena aislada e independiente;

¹⁵ Buenos Aires: Interzona, 2003.

¹⁶ Each edition of this work includes a unique presentation of the Dossier Instalación, including the Argentine edition reviewed by Chejfec. As Magdalena Perkowska (2013) notes in comparing the two editions published in Mexico, “[el] folleto de la primera edición publicada en 2003 por Alfaguara difiere considerablemente del dossier fotográfico presentado al final de la narración en la edición de la novela incluida en la *Obra reunida* de Mario Bellatín, publicada en 2005 también por Alfaguara. Es una serie de trece fotografías en blanco y negro, de tamaño reducido. La diferencia más obvia es la presencia de siete fotografías de figuras humanas (un hombre en silla de ruedas en compañía de otras personas o perros), excluidas por completo del folleto fotográfico de la primera edición” (169).

pero esta impresión visual choca con la naturaleza del discurso, cuya reticencia narrativa, junto con su predilección por las situaciones genéricas, o más bien generales, aunque inevitablemente unidas por la escasez de elementos y la parquedad de las acciones, tiende a la concentración. El resultado es un vacío gráfico persistente y un enigma, digamos, conceptual. El conjunto da la impresión de ser una serie de comentarios ilustrativos, de acotaciones hilvanadas que buscan describir una situación inescrutable y particular. (“Cuadros”)

Nevertheless, as Chejfec explains, word and image interact:

Son fotos que tienden a mostrar de un modo parcial o impreciso algunos elementos descriptivos del relato. Pero mostrar quizá no sea la palabra más adecuada; en realidad buscan representar un clima de fragmento y de caricatura. Son fotos bizarras, como el ambiente del texto; espontáneas, apresuradas, trucas, accidentales, intervenidas, todas sobrecargadas de artificio con su parejo viraje al morado. A su modo, buscan equilibrar la discreción o la medida de los párrafos: ante la falta de elocuencia para representar la escena barroca a la que aluden las palabras, las fotos recurren al barroquismo de la composición. (“Cuadros de una instalación”)

In Chejfec’s view, the primary role of the photos in *Perros héroes* is to “equilibrar,” to provide a balance for the paragraphs of the book’s first part, not to enhance or to explicate or to serve as an external validation for the text. Bellatín’s photos do not document the narrative: they do not correspond perfectly with the paragraphs of the first part nor do they provide an easy one-to-one match with any narrative element. If anything, the photos in Bellatín are analogous to the anchor

or the pipe in Torres-García's autobiography, which have a more complicated relationship to their referent than does the herring in Sebald.

To provide some background for Bellatín's unusual narratives, Chejfec quotes in its entirety a prefatory note Bellatín included in an earlier novel, *Flores* (2001):

Existe una antigua técnica sumeria, que para muchos es el antecedente de las naturalezas muertas, que permite la construcción de complicadas estructuras narrativas basándose en la suma de determinados objetos que juntos conforman un todo. Es de este modo como he tratado de construir este relato, de alguna forma como se encuentra estructurado el poema de Gilgamesh. La intención inicial es que cada capítulo pueda leerse por separado, como si de la contemplación de una flor se tratara.

(Bellatín, *Flores* 9)

Bellatín's collage-like narrative structures, reminiscent of still lifes, are conceived as objects, like flowers, to be seen or contemplated as well as read. Significantly, Chejfec's attention is drawn to the visual elements in Bellatín's whimsical preface. He comments:

Esta nota precede a su novela *Flores*, de 2001. Puede servir de indicio acerca de la importancia que Bellatín otorga a los elementos aislados que traman una solidaridad de hecho, casi por fuerza de contigüidad, pero en especial muestra la idea de que *la literatura está soportada por lo visual*; el relato es algo que requiere ser visto y después leído; y en este sentido se propone como algo adicional, un suplemento. ("Cuadros" emphasis mine)

For Chejfec, then, the narrative accompanies the images, but as a kind of supplement. One sees, then reads. The narrative of *Perros héroes*, Chejfec suggests, is sustained by the visual elements,

and does not proceed in a conventional manner. It is the book's conceptual nature that allows Chejfec to "read" the word-image encounter with a greater latitude, making his tone much less cautious than in "Breves opiniones," where he speaks of "un efecto desestabilizador" (144) of images alongside texts. In a recent email Chejfec expanded on his point that "la literatura está soportada por lo visual." He commented:

En narraciones como esa de Bellatín el relato parece ser residuo narrativo de escenas que pertenecen a otro orden de representación. En este caso una organización visual de por sí enigmática (en el sentido de requerir la palabra escrita para darse a conocer), que sin embargo reverbera como enigma en la narración que pretende iluminarla.¹⁷

Here Chejfec stresses the prevailing sense of enigma, of images accompanied by blank spaces that fail to elucidate a narrative which is itself a residual fragment, "un vacío gráfico persistente" ("Cuadros"). Much like concrete poetry, *Perros héroes* projects a unique graphic and spatial syntax on the page, becoming a sort of visual object in its own right. Chejfec, engaged by its conceptual complexities and its break with narrative norms, does not attempt to integrate his critical views with those previously expressed in "Breves opiniones." However "Cuadros de una instalación" provides an interesting counterpoint to Chejfec's earlier essay: in Chejfec's view, *Perros héroes* works as both a literary text and a visual object, transcending what Mitchell calls the "whole image/text problematic" (*Picture* 87) as well as the age-old binary posited by Lessing in which the temporal flow of narrative is opposed to the spatial fix of the ekphrastic encounter.

Chejfec has also addressed the question of the word-image encounter in the context of his own work. Prior to the Alfaguara Argentina publication of *Baroni: un viaje* in 2007, Chejfec

¹⁷ E-mail to author, 2 April 2013.

gave a public talk accompanied by images. The text of his presentation has been posted on *Parábola Anterior*, along with the images shown (“Sobre Baroni: un viaje”). To most members of the audience, the images probably seemed a natural complement to the talk and unworthy of any special comment. In his brief opening remarks, however, Chejfec expresses reservations about the word-image encounter he has planned:

Y sobre todo quise mostrar a ustedes el sustento visual del relato, que tampoco va a aparecer publicado. Esto sería otra discusión, sólo menciono que admiro algunos relatos con fotografías, pero que no me siento capaz de incluirlas en mis textos sin correr el riesgo de desnaturalizarlos....

La novela se publicará en unos meses. Me atrajo la idea de poder hablar sobre ella como si no existiera, ofreciendo imágenes que me cuidaré de ocultar una vez que esté impresa. Puedo hablar y mostrar los referentes mientras no son tales. Es como un proyecto descriptivo, o como una excursión semántica de la que guardamos fotos. (“Sobre Baroni”)

“El sustento visual” that will be shown during the talk—photographs of Baroni, her carvings of the saintly doctor and other figures, along with several images showing scenes described in the narrative—will not, Chejfec emphasizes, appear in the book itself. Chejfec allows that it is possible for some authors to combine word and image, and in some instances to open new possibilities for fiction while doing so (as I suspect is his take on Bellatín), but with respect to his own works, he does not want to run the risk of denaturalizing the text. Denaturalizing in what sense? It is, in fact, the highly visual nature of Chejfec’s writing that brings the question to the fore, especially in an age when word and image have become more and more inseparable in print and digital cultures.

When *Baroni: un viaje* is published several years later in Spain, Chejfec revisits the subject in an interview with the Spanish critic and blogger Antonio Jiménez Morato. Questioned explicitly about the novel's lack of images, Chejfec responds that

Las imágenes plásticas planean sobre el relato. Obviamente me vi en la disyuntiva de incorporarlas o dejarlas fuera. Opté por excluirlas porque pensé que era hacerles una mayor justicia. De haberlas incluido, no habría dejado de escribir lo que escribí, y su presencia por lo tanto habría resultado ambivalente y sobre todo lateral. (Jiménez)

He echoes his discussion in “Breves opiniones” of other writers’ practices, including Sebald’s:

Hay escritores que incluyen imágenes en los relatos porque establecen un mecanismo oscilante de distintos grados y formas de ambigüedad (otros no efectúan bien esta inclusión, es verdad, y el resultado es sobre todo pobre). También hay otro motivo, relacionado con esa suerte de autosuficiencia a la que todo relato aspira. El uso de imágenes puede ser muy interesante y puede agregar una complejidad única, tenemos el caso más clamoroso de incertidumbre conceptual derivado de estas operaciones, que es el caso de la literatura de Sebald, quizás el autor contemporáneo más sorprendente y al mismo tiempo el más efímero.

Thus Chejfec does not categorically reject the idea of using images in texts, especially in the case of other writers; however, in his own practice, words and images do not combine easily:

Pero en mi opinión la incorporación de imágenes difícilmente deja de ser un préstamo; una intrusión capaz de desestabilizar lo escrito, en el mejor de los casos, pero siempre al precio de dejar demasiado fijada la escritura a la imagen –

de ahí quizá su carácter fatalmente transitorio. Me parece que el relato debe servirse de sus propias herramientas, que pasan por lo escrito.

Images, Chejfec seems to say, are not just another tool in the writer's toolbox. Writing has its own set of devices to render effects—words—and these should be sufficient unto themselves.

Interestingly, in the same interview, Chejfec introduces a new slant on the question of time in narrative that goes beyond the time and space binary that informs much of the theoretical writing on ekphrasis. The author raises another issue: to what extent is time registered or experienced differently by readers as they move from the written text to a visual image during the act of reading? He explains:

...el tiempo que demanda la lectura de la descripción de una imagen no es el mismo que el de su visualización. Por lo tanto tenemos este elemento adicional: leer una descripción visual incluye una dimensión durativa que la percepción visual jamás puede aportar. Y lo concreto es que, a mi entender, narración implica duración: es una suspensión de la sucesión a favor de los matices durativos de nuestra percepción del tiempo y del mundo. El mundo ideal, en este aspecto, está dado por lo tanto por la duración psicológica de la descripción narrativa de una imagen, combinado con esa suerte de dialéctica misteriosa que se crea cuando hacemos una imagen objeto de nuestra observación visual. Creo que este segundo momento propiamente visual puede ser recogido por la escritura, pero que nunca la percepción visual puede dar cuenta de la duración narrativa. (Jiménez)

For Chejfec, the experience of a reading is problematized when the text contains images: by implication, the images are “read” or visualized more quickly than the narrative description is experienced. And it is the narrative experience, shaped through the artifices of writing, that

Chejfec clearly privileges. There is a lack of symmetry as well: writing can capture a visual experience, but the visual experience cannot capture, or take account of, the narrative duration, the unique temporality of the reading experience.

In this context, the “dimensión durativa” or “duración narrativa” is not a reference to pace or tempo, but rather to a specific notion within philosophical traditions relating to the perception of time. A full discussion of this theme is outside the scope of this chapter, but in the course of translating “El obstáculo necesario,” a recent essay by Chejfec on Béla Tarr’s “The Man from London,” I queried the author on his use of the word “duración,” which I intuited had a special meaning in the context of his essay. Chejfec mentioned William James, whose classic study, *The Principles of Psychology*, discusses “duration” within a larger chapter regarding the perception of time. Although I do not know the full extent of Chejfec’s engagement with the ideas of William James, one can easily understand how a writer of fiction, charged with creating a sense of time in his or her narrative, could be drawn to James’s ideas:

The unit of composition of our perception of time is a *duration*, with a bow and a stern, as it were—a rearward- and forward-looking end. It is only as parts of this *duration-block* that the relation of *succession* of one end to the other is perceived. We do not first feel one end and then feel the other after it, and from the perception of the succession infer an interval of time between, but we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole, with its two ends embedded in it. (James 609-610; emphasis in original)

It is reasonable to think that the “dimensión durativa” or “duración narrativa” Chejfec speaks of in the interview is related to James’s discourse, as filtered through Chejfec’s practice as a novelist. The “we” of the passage is analogous to the reader, or to Chejfec’s ideal reader, who

does not feel narrative time in sequences but rather in intervals or duration-blocks of time. For Chejfec, then, it is the carefully crafted durational aspect of the ekphrastic passage that is undermined when the reader can simply look at an image of the object described. When Chejfec speaks above of “una intrusión capaz de desestabilizar lo escrito,” he is not only referring to the risk that words will be revealed as inadequate when juxtaposed with images, but also to the disruption the images will cause to the carefully crafted temporality of the narrative.

What is perhaps most important to note is that Chejfec’s reasoning is grounded in the effects he wishes to produce as a writer. It was not a casual decision to exclude images from *Baroni*, but one that was consistent with his creative project at the time of its writing. *Baroni: un viaje* is pure text. Even the cover image in the original Alfaguara Argentina edition (2007) fails to reference the wood carvings described within. Instead, it shows a wall full of ex-votos in the form of small metal plaques that contain tiny embossed words of thanks to the miracle-working saintly doctor, José Gregorio Hernández. These plaques are described ekphrastically in the novel:

En el edificio de las ofrendas predominaba el color negro; eran las placas metálicas que brillaban al sol del día como un mausoleo conmovedor, que parecía levantado para infundir miedo. Si uno se acercaba distinguía otros colores: placas celestes y coloradas. Al leerlas se verificaba en todas un texto casi siempre idéntico, que tenía una fórmula para el agradecimiento, en general la palabra “gracias”, las iniciales y el apellido de la persona, o la familia entera, la fecha, etc. (*Baroni: un viaje* 121)

The solid wall of metallic plaques with formulaic strings of words creates a quite striking cover image, one that almost seems like an abstract color composition. Its textual elements engage us visually—the “gracias” and other words of thanks, which owing to their diminutive size are first

seen as marks or graphs, become upon closer inspection words that can be read. Chejfec, who has a say in the cover design of the novels published by Alfaguara Argentina (sometimes contributing his own ideas or, as in this instance, his own photograph of the ex-votos),¹⁸ selected an image that may remind us of W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of an imagetext, in which "[w]riting, in its physical graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal" (*Picture* 95). Whether intentionally or not, the single image in the Alfaguara Argentina edition of *Baroni* could serve as a sort of emblem for the word-image encounter that W.J.T. Mitchell privileges, and that animates much of visual culture today.

The edition of *Baroni: un viaje* published by Editorial Candaya in Spain, in contrast, has an entirely different cover—a photo of Baroni's saintly doctor, in close-up, showing his torso, the Child Jesus in his arms, and the distinctive crack. In explaining to me the difference in book covers, Chejfec noted that the physical dimensions of Candaya's books are much smaller: 19.5 x 14 cm, compared to Alfaguara's 24 x 15 cm, enough of a reduction to have turned the patchwork image of metallic plaques into an indistinct blur. The author also added that he prefers not to repeat the cover images of the original Argentine publication on the editions subsequently published by Editorial Candaya in Spain.¹⁹ Regarding the image of the saintly doctor on Candaya's edition of *Baroni: un viaje*, the author reflects on the seeming divergence from past practices as follows:

En el primer caso, sencillamente recurrí a la imagen de la talla [del santo médico] para que coincidiera con la descripción de ella al comienzo del relato. Era como si fuera una foto interior. En la medida en que es una imagen "secundaria", dado que

¹⁸Email to author, 12 April 2013

¹⁹In the case of *Mis dos mundos*, the change was subtle: the swan boats face in different directions on the cover of the Alfaguara Argentina and Editorial Candaya editions.

la imagen principal es la de la mujer en la cruz, tenía la idea de que poner al santo en la portada no significaba "traicionar" esa relación difícil con las imágenes que plantea la novela, dado que también es una relación pacífica y rugosa a la vez. O sea, poner la figura del santo era hacer foco en algo secundario: eso permitía incluir la foto.²⁰

One could, however, argue that the image is an easy referent for the extended ekphrastic description of the saintly doctor on the novel's opening pages. Its effect on the reader may well be what Chejfec anticipated when he spoke about "[e]l precio de dejar demasiado fijada la escritura a la imagen" ("Una literatura"): a text that is mediated through a picture becomes inseparable from that image. In fact, the visual representation of the saintly doctor takes center stage, so to speak, as the all-important cover image, the first bit of content transmitted to the reader. The image of the saintly doctor troubles the notion that the writing must speak for itself.

A final instance of writing by Chejfec that speaks to his engagement with visualities is his essay, "El escritor plástico," an homage to the Cuban poet Lorenzo García Vega, posted to *Parábola anterior* in 2011 and expanded after the poet's death in 2012. The essay examines García Vega's *Son gotas de autismo visual* (2010), a book-length prose poem in which García Vega's writerly practices are on full display. As Chejfec notes, the unusual title gives us clues to García Vega's poetry, where there is privileged place for the visual:

...me refiero...a la promesa de visualización, en tanto una naturaleza o escena previas al texto que deben ser organizadas de un modo, antes que legible, visible. Porque el narrador de estas *Gotas* no tiene ningún problema en anunciar que estamos frente a construcciones plásticas, unidades visuales en las que se

²⁰ Email to author, 12 April 2013

combinan elementos heterogéneos de manera más o menos autónoma, o más bien, de manera tributaria de los roles simbólicos que han asumido, pero autónoma una vez que han pasado a formar parte del nuevo dispositivo visual. (“El escritor plástico”)

It is a poetry that visualizes, that mimics the gestures of the plastic artist who takes mixed elements and composes them into a unified whole. García Vega’s concept of “narración visual” (*Son gotas* 34) is strongly appealing to Chejfec, himself a crafter of visualities through words. He likens García Vega’s work to an “instalación verbal” created by passages that describe cutting, pasting, adding and arranging book covers, photographs, color samples and other diverse materials into “paisajes visuales” much like the box assemblages of Joseph Cornell. “En cierto modo, el libro vendría a ser la descripción del proyecto de un artista plástico, o de un escritor convertido en documentalista que no quiere renunciar a la palabra escrita pero valora más la elocuencia de lo físico y lo tangible” (“El escritor”).

The verbal constructions of García Vega, like many ekphrastic passages in Chejfec’s writing, compose “objetos con palabras” and “piezas textuales” that evoke material forms through words alone. Unlike the essays discussed earlier, “Breves opiniones sobre relatos con imágenes” and “Cuadros de una instalación,” in which Chejfec analyzed novels combining words with images, in García Vega there is only language. Chejfec recently reiterated his high regard for García Vega and his word assemblages: “Aparte de mi profunda admiración por su obra, el “método” García Vega me resultó sumamente revelador como metáfora conceptual de la composición.”²¹ Such admiration for García Vega’s method, I believe, bespeaks Chejfec’s

²¹ Email to author, 30 March 2013.

underlying affinity for writers who, like the Cuban poet, engage in “una verdadera aventura visual” (*Son gotas* 38) using literary artifices above all.

Chapter 3

“Ella y su obra prueban que la representación es posible”:

Visualities in *Baroni: un viaje*

“—Traducir, al lenguaje literario, lo que en la plástica hacía Motherwell: diluir pintura con aguarrás para crear un efecto de sombra. Pero ¿es posible hacer esto en un relato?”

Lorenzo García Vega, *Son gotas del autismo visual*

First published in Argentina in 2007,²² Sergio Chejfec’s *Baroni: un viaje* tells the story of the Venezuelan artist Rafaela Baroni, whose extraordinary wood carvings of Virgins, saints and other figures, both religious and lay, are famous throughout her native land and beyond. Rafaela Baroni is a real person, and to a certain degree the narrative, which distills several episodes from

²² *Baroni: un viaje* was published by Alfaguara Argentina in 2007. As mentioned in Chapter 2, it was also published in Spain in 2010 by Editorial Candaya, a small independent press whose list includes many recent Latin American titles.

her youth, early adulthood and present life, contains elements we would expect to find in a biography. Besides Baroni, there are several other real-life characters: the poets Juan Sánchez Peláez and Igor Barreto; the wood carvers, Tomás Barazarte and Juan Andrade, who, like Baroni, are famed for their wooden statues; Baroni's husband, Rogelio; her friend Olga; and other family members and friends. A ten-page interlude is devoted to the acclaimed Venezuelan artist Armando Reverón, an academy-trained painter whose eccentric life and eclectic, faux-naïf assemblages stand in interesting contrast to Baroni's life and art.

Despite its many elements from real life, however, the author describes the work as a novel.²³ Its biographical cast can perhaps be explained by its origin as an essay on the life of Rafaela Baroni. As Chejfec explains, "La idea primaria había sido escribir una especie de ensayo breve sobre su vida y su trabajo. Pero una vez que empezó a introducirse la dimensión viajera, se convirtió en otra cosa."²⁴ In light of the novel's first incarnation as a biographical essay, it is relevant to consider Chejfec's public statements on biography, especially given the strong presence of biographical and autobiographical elements in many of his fictional works. During a 1993 interview with Guillermo Saavedra, the author considers two early novels that exhibit such traits, *Lenta biografía* (1990) and *Moral* (1990):

¿Cuáles son [las] preocupaciones comunes a ambas novelas [*Lenta biografía* and *Moral*]?

En primer lugar, tienen que ver con la posibilidad de descifrar o narrar una vida de manera poco convencional, entre comillas. La posibilidad de narrar una vida no a partir de acontecimientos ligados en una secuencia causal, lineal, psicológica,

²³ See Quintero (2012) for a discussion of *Baroni* in light of its genre-blurring narrative and its portrayal of the figure of the artist as a woman, among other themes. Other critical studies that consider *Baroni* include Catalin (2012), Epplin (2012) and Laddaga (2012).

²⁴ E-mail to author, 27 February 2013.

como en una biografía tradicional, ni tampoco a partir de otro modelo de escritura que ya está también canonizado y es el que se desprende de las *Vidas imaginarias* de Marcel Schwob y, más tarde, de la *Historia universal de la infamia* de Borges.... Me parece que tanto *Moral* como *Lenta biografía* son textos que trabajan a partir de la idea de yuxtaposición y acumulación de los diversos órdenes que, hipotéticamente, conforman la escritura de una novela; desde la zona más evidente del registro de lengua hasta la adquisición de un tono y de un ritmo, pasando por la utilización de ciertos materiales y no de otros. (Saavedra 143)

Here Chejfec disavows the standard model for biographical writing in which the biographer traces the subject's life over time and imposes a lineal and explanatory narrative. He also distances himself from the more creative but now-canonized approaches of Marcel Schwob and Jorge Luis Borges, literary precursors whose influence he perhaps wishes to dispel. I would argue that Chejfec's expressed interest in "yuxtaposición y acumulación" in writing biographical or quasi-biographical texts such as *Lenta biografía* or *Moral* should be considered equally relevant to the more recent *Baroni*. Indeed, an abiding characteristic of Chejfec's fiction is its montage-like composition. As the author noted upon the publication of *My Two Worlds* (2011), "no confío mucho en los argumentos lineales. Mis novelas no avanzan por la resolución de una crisis o un enigma, ni por el desarrollo más o menos convencional de un drama o de una acción" ("Read This Next"). *Baroni*, with its relative absence of dramatic incident and its non-linear narrative, is consistent with Chejfec's novel-writing aesthetic.

Several questions relating to the ekphrastic encounter arise out of Chejfec's preference for a non-plot-driven, genre-blurring narrative, few of which are anticipated by the theoretical views presented in Chapter 1. Further questions have arisen because of the nature of my

intervention as the novel's English-language translator. From my privileged position, working in collaboration with the author, I am aware that there are real-life counterparts to the visual artifacts described in the novel's pages. I have seen photographs of almost all the wood carvings described in the book, and have in fact examined several of the original figures, including the two described in the novel's most extended ekphrastic moments, the saintly doctor and the woman on the cross. My familiarity undoubtedly assisted me as I was translating the passages in which these figures are described. Instead of relying solely on the ekphrastic passage in the original Spanish, I was able to see the original artworks as well.²⁵

Readers, though, will not see the actual objects or images of them; as noted in Chapter 2, Chejfec excluded illustrations from the novel, arguing that “[m]e parece que el relato debe servirse de sus propias herramientas, que pasan por lo escrito” (Jiménez). It is the narrator alone who mediates between the object described and the reader.²⁶ As James Heffernan comments about the ekphrastic encounter in poetry, “no sight represented in the poem can escape the mediation of language” (*Museum* 84). In a similar respect, W.J.T. Mitchell remarks, “The ekphrastic poet typically stands in a middle position between the object described or addressed and a listening subject who (if ekphrastic hope is fulfilled) will be made to “see” the object through the medium of the poet’s voice” (*Picture* 164). Indeed, in the novel itself there are no

²⁵ Note the double translation: first, Chejfec’s translation of the visual image to a verbal representation in Spanish, and second, my later translation of the ekphrastic passage from Spanish into English. My access to the original artworks introduces the further twist of intermediality, since my translation based on both verbal and visual representations.

²⁶ Of course, nothing prevents the reader from searching for images on the Internet. Such a search will turn up many photographs of Rafaela Baroni’s wood-carvings and youtube videos in which she is interviewed. Links will also appear to Chejfec’s blog posting, cited earlier, “Sobre Baroni: un viaje,” where there are several images of the wood carvings described in the book, photographs of Rafaela Baroni in her garden, and other illustrations that relate to passages in the novel. And as mentioned earlier, readers of the Candaya edition will see an image of the saintly doctor on the book’s cover.

“reality checks” or visual images to confirm or contest the narrator’s vision. We can say, then, that the objects have a double existence: on the one hand, they are verifiable objects beyond the frame of the novel; on the other, they are fictional entities within the novel itself. As such they are bound to the narrative and to the specifics of its unfolding. The fact that there are real-life counterparts to the artworks does not alter the fictional nature of the book or impede a creative reading of the ekphrastic descriptions.²⁷

Before turning to the ekphrastic passages in *Baroni*, I would like to point to limitations in the critical literature reviewed in Chapter 1, which is almost exclusively focused on works by Euro-American male poets.²⁸ It adds to my sense that ekphrastic studies is an exclusive club in which white male critics examine canonical works by white male poets. Regretfully, however, I must echo David Kennedy’s observation in his 2012 study, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere*, that “it has become something of a critical commonplace to identify the gendered nature of ekphrasis and ekphrastic poetry without following through the full implications of the observation”(89). In this essay I cannot attempt to redress what both Kennedy and I perceive as a critical shortcoming by foregrounding a female ekphrastic voice: the ekphrastic moments in *Baroni* originate with the first-person male narrator,

²⁷ Similarly, the fact that the first-person narrator seems interchangeable with the author Sergio Chejfec does not mean that Chejfec is the “yo” of this novel or of any other of his novels in which there is a first-person narrator—a point missed with surprising frequency by reviewers of his work.

²⁸ Krieger’s original article on ekphrasis, “*Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or, Laokoön Revisited*” (1967) includes an analysis of poetical passages from Coleridge, T.S. Eliot, Homer, Keats, Pope, and Shakespeare; his one foray into fiction is a brief discussion of passages from Faulkner’s *Light in August*. There are no women poets in Heffernan’s *Museum of Words* (1993): chapters are devoted to Homer, Virgil, Dante, Ovid, Shakespeare, Spenser, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Browning, Auden, William Carlos Williams, and Ashbery. In “Ekphrasis and the Other,” the chapter on ekphrasis in *Picture Theory* (1994), Mitchell overlaps with both Krieger and Heffernan in discussing Homer, Shelly, William Carlos Williams, Stevens and Ashbery.

and his eroticized longing for one of Baroni's wooden figures, the woman on the cross, adheres to one of the major conventions of the ekphrastic tradition, in which the male gaze lingers on a desired female subject.

There are, however, notable variations in *Baroni* from the literary works that often serve as primary texts in ekphrastic studies. One of the most striking differences is that the title character, Rafaela Baroni, is a female artist, an especially rare occurrence in Latin American literature,²⁹ and it is Baroni's creative work that is described in most of the ekphrastic passages in the novel. In *Baroni* we also encounter a profound break with the elitism of the typical ekphrastic encounter: instead of contemplating a consecrated painting by an Old Master, as do the poets in the ekphrastic poems cited by Heffernan in *Museum of Words*, the narrator of *Baroni* fixes his gaze on wood carvings of popular saints and Virgins made by a self-taught artist in rural Venezuela. It is only during the sequence devoted to the assemblages, sculptures and paintings of the celebrated artist Armando Reverón that a connection to the world of high art is made, though the simplistic and roughhewn nature of Reverón's art is curiously reminiscent of works by Baroni and other self-taught artists who enter the narrative.

Moreover, the fact that *Baroni: un viaje* is a novel, not a poetic work, sets it apart from the majority of the ekphrastic texts discussed by Krieger, Heffernan and Mitchell. Some concepts are equally applicable across genres—such as Mitchell's notion of ekphrastic hope, indifference and fear, or the spatial fix vs. temporal flow dichotomy of Krieger—but the sorts of questions that have arisen as I consider the ekphrastic passages of *Baroni* do not always find parallels in

²⁹ The novelist Elena Poniatowska has made an exceptional contribution in this regard. Several of her works are fictionalizations of the lives of women artists: *Querido Diego, te abraza Quiela* (1978), which features the Russian artist Angelina Beloff; *Tinísima* (1992), which is a novelized account of the life of photographer Tina Modotti; and more recently, *Leonora* (2011), whose protagonist is the British surrealist artist Leonora Carrington, a longtime resident of Mexico.

the critical readings given to ekphrastic poetry. Although the pictorial element may be present in both genres, an interpretation of an ekphrastic poem will not consider the overall structure and the narrative devices unique to novels, even in those such as *Baroni*, which, in keeping with Chejfec's aesthetic practices, avoids conventional plot and character development.

Given the limitations of existing models for the discussion of ekphrasis in the novel, what direction can such an inquiry take? In her study, *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, Mary Ann Caws provides an especially generative approach. Though not specifically formulated around the ekphrastic encounter, *Reading Frames* nevertheless calls attention to the scenes and passages in a novel that seem to "hold the essence of the work," and serve "as a metonymy for the larger picture" (xi), "often enabl[ing] the intrusion of another genre into the narrative text" (xi). Among her examples Caws includes "the description of, or reference to, actual or imagined art objects [that] insist on visual and spatial perception" (xi). She contends that these scenes

could be compared to a static arrest, within the normal flow of the text, for the presentation of a scene whose borders are so marked as to enhance and enclose its denser, or more "dramatic," more pictorial, or more musical, or sometimes more "poetic," consistency. The actions and gestures seem to participate in a space larger than ordinary narrative space, and yet a heavily bordered one; their importance seems heightened, the energy unaccustomed, the language more "meaningful." (1)

Interestingly, although Caws does not reference Krieger in her study, her remarks about the "static arrest" within "the normal flow of the text" are analogous to his previously quoted formulation of the "spatial fix" versus the "temporal flow" of the ekphrastic text (*Ekphrasis* 10).

Examining key ekphrastic passages in *Baroni* through the concept of framing has opened up the text in a way that is wholly consistent with the pictorial turn I have ascribed to Chejfec all along. The first-person narrator's gaze is a frame, and our eyes as readers are guided by this particular optic. We are also aware that the scenes thus framed are often set inside each other. There is the frame of the basic storyline, in which the narrator/connoisseur embarks on a journey—his quest—to and from Rafaela Baroni's home in the foothills of the Andes to obtain or, in his words, "apropiar," carved wooden figures from the renown artist and other wood carvers in the region. Within the outer frame of the journey are the inner frames of his various stops along the way (in Boconó for an overnight stay, in Isnotú, which as the birthplace of the saintly doctor is a popular pilgrimage site, or in the picturesque colonial town of Jajó). Interspersed throughout the novel are other frames representing sequences that diverge from the main storyline of the road trip: a narrative of the final days of the poet Juan Sánchez Peláez; episodes from the life of Baroni, from her girlhood to the present; the embedded précis of the life and art of Armando Reverón; an account of the life of the saintly doctor, José Gregorio Hernández; a vignette about the poet Igor Barreto and his passion for raising fighting cocks; the narrator's meditations on his collection of saintly doctors and other carved figures.

As a surround for *Baroni*'s ekphrastic passages, the frames center our attention on the visual object under consideration. The narrator's intense gaze is reminiscent of a camera lens that isolates and zooms in on the object in its viewfinder. Unlike the camera, however, the narrator articulates what he sees, and in so doing selects the features and details he will highlight while composing his verbal picture. This winnowing process is especially apparent in the opening pages of *Baroni*, where a tightly framed and intense visual sequence introduces the reader to the carved figures of the saintly doctor and the woman on the cross, inanimate objects that (as

Chejfec tells us in his blog entry, “Sobre *Baroni: un viaje*”) will figure as two of the main “personajes dramáticos” in the novel.³⁰ The extended presentation in these pages is, in fact, the longest ekphrastic passage in the novel,³¹ and worthy of our close examination for what it reveals about the narrator’s gaze as well as the degree to which Chejfec enacts Mitchell’s concept of “ekphrastic hope” —the sense that writerly language can be put to “the service of vision” (*Picture* 153).

When I asked the author why he began the book with an extended description of the two wooden figures, he stated once again that the novel’s origin as a biographical essay was a determining factor:

La idea de empezar por la descripción tuvo que ver con que al comienzo yo pensaba que escribiría un ensayo. No un ensayo "convencional", es cierto, pero yo pensaba que sería algo más breve y que sobre todo iba a ser una reflexión sobre la obra y la persona de Baroni. Entonces me pareció que lo más adecuado era comenzar de ese modo, porque de ese modo me presentaba desde un principio como observador, no como alguien "objetivo", sino como un sujeto que iba a tener opiniones más o menos subjetivas. Aparte estaba, claro, el otro desafío...la idea efrástica: la confianza en que el discurso verbal es autosuficiente cuando se trata de describir imágenes.³²

³⁰ Other ekphrastic passages in the novel include descriptions of a boy carved by Baroni from an unusually shaped piece of wood (70-71); Reverón’s paper masks (79-81); wood carvings by Juan Andrade of a mermaid and of Simón Bolívar (129-131); a version of the saintly doctor by Andrade (132-133); a fighting cock (161-162) and another version of the saintly doctor (156-157) by Tomás Barazarte.

³¹ As I will describe, it is not, however, a continuous presentation: the initial description of the saintly doctor and of the woman on the cross (pages 7-16) gives way to other scenes before the ekphrastic passage resumes on page 62.

³² Email to author, 4 May 2013.

In declaring the self-sufficiency of words to describe images within a literary work, Chejfec is affirming Mitchell's "ekphrastic hope." In what follows, I will do a close reading of these initial ekphrastic passages in *Baroni* and consider the encounter between the subjective narrator and the saintly doctor, and that of the narrator and the woman on the cross. What do these framed sequences tell us? To the extent that these ekphrastic encounters are representative of others in the novel, what is their relationship to the overall narrative? Is the ekphrastic description like an island in the midst of an ongoing flow of narrative, or, as Genette has argued, is it another aspect of the narrative?

The novel's first sentence, previously quoted in the epigraph to Chapter 1, sets the direction for the descriptions to come: "Tengo frente a mí el cuerpo de madera del santo; la madera se ha rajado por la mitad de este médico que mira hacia adelante sin ver nada en particular" (7). The seeing narrator, the unseeing subject: sight and sightlessness will be recurring themes in the novel, which includes several sequences describing Baroni's temporary blindness and the fable-like or miraculous events surrounding her restored vision. The seeing I/eye, a pun luckily available in the English translation, allows the first word at the opening of the novel to be especially apt: "I have before me the wooden body of the saint; the wood has cracked down the middle of this doctor who looks ahead of him without seeing anything in particular." The initial sentence, which stands alone as the first paragraph, places us in an indeterminate setting and time. Who is the narrator? Where is he? At what point in narrative time is he writing? The lack of details here and in the ekphrastic paragraphs that follow lend an uncertainty to the scene. It is only much later in the course of the novel that the narrator will refer to a table on which he keeps his collection of wooden figures: "Tengo a pocos metros estas figuras de madera que vengo mencionando desde el principio....Todas las figuras están puestas sobre una mesa..." (160-161),

thus allowing us to locate the carvings in the context of a room with furniture, possibly the narrator's living space. However, at the outset of the novel, the saintly doctor occupies the entire frame, as if in close-up. It is the exclusive focal point of the narrator's gaze.³³

What strikes the reader immediately is the Barthean *punctum*, the arresting detail, the “sting, speck, cut, little hole...that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27): the crack down the middle of the wooden doctor.³⁴ It is a feature that compels our notice.³⁵ As Mariana Catalin observes, “La rajadura de la madera, que no es sólo pero que a la vez también es detalle significativa, satura, busca saturar, la mirada del lector” (267). Craig Epplin directs our gaze to it as well: “pensemos en esa rajadura en la madera, la cual, lejos de representar un defecto, viene a funcionar como una casualidad feliz...” (241). One could argue that the crack serves as a vertical axis for the narrator, who runs his gaze up and down the corporeal areas through which it passes. We learn that the figure “tiene de altura unos ochenta centímetros” and that it is carrying in its arms “un niño que se pega fuertemente sobre la parte frontal izquierda del médico” (7), who is none other than the Christ Child, arguably another character in the tableau of wooden figures that populate the opening sequence of *Baroni*. We

³³ Jacques Rancière begins the first chapter of *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* with a long passage from Winckelmann's *The History of Ancient Art*, in which Winckelmann offers his description of the *Belvedere Torso*. The similarities between the passage quoted by Rancière and the opening passage in *Baroni* are striking: each features male speakers who gaze upon and describe a male statue (one headless and memberless, the other flawed by a crack). If such an ekphrastic encounter between a male speaker and a sculpture of a male subject constitutes a literary convention that dates to the Romantic era, then the analogous sequence in *Baroni* would be one more example of its referencing high art conventions while simultaneously subverting them.

³⁴ Margaret Olin distinguishes between the Barthean *studium* and the *punctum* as follows: “The *studium* denotes the field of [the photographs'] cultural or educational possibilities...This unitary 'field' is pierced by the second element, the *punctum*, which breaks out of the cultural field and into the personal....The *studium* is the 'field' and the *punctum* is that which pierces the field.”

³⁵ The crack also proves to be an especially productive trope for the act of literary translation, as I will discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation.

follow the crack as it passes alongside the doctor's necktie and the edge of his coat, which as the narrator tells us, "se confunde con la línea de botones de la levita" (7). A fortuitous crack, it seems, unlike the smaller one on the side of the doctor's head "que parte la oreja derecha en dos y asciende por el parietal hasta esconderse, o borrarse, bajo el sombrero también negro que cubre su cabeza" (8). The figure's black hat, along with its black suit, are iconic elements that make the figure immediately intelligible to those familiar with or belonging to the doctor's cult of worshippers.

The narrator's clinical, anatomizing gaze then descends to the saintly doctor's groin, where he notices that "[h]acia abajo, la grieta frontal deja atrás la levita y divide mal la ingle. En esta zona el cuerpo está olvidado, no hay volúmenes sugeridos, y ello induce a que la rotura parezca profunda, más íntima, aludiendo acaso a una latente desnudez, o mejor dicho, a una desnudez inocente" (8). The anatomically innocent doctor, ambiguously gendered, represents "gender trouble" for the narrator, who will later imagine the figure "sin sombrero y con el cabello largo" (14) and discover the face of Rafaela Baroni—a likeness he sees in the faces of nearly all her carvings, no matter whom they portray, whether virgins, saints or angels. At first he reacts with surprise at the resemblance, and then "después, hasta cierto punto, con inquietud" (14). Though he does not tell us why he is unsettled, it is likely that the powerful attraction of Baroni's carvings mitigates against their wooden sexlessness, as will become clear when his focal point shifts to the woman on the cross.

The gaze now takes in "la levisima torsión del hombro izquierdo" of the saintly doctor as he bears the Child in his arms, an unusual pose that sets this image apart from the frozen stance he displays in millions of mass-produced plastic figurines. Baroni's saintly doctor is more dynamic; perhaps he is rocking the infant? We note that the narrator comments on the

continuities with the traditions adhering to the saintly doctor (the black suit, the hat) along with certain discontinuities (the cracks, the Child Jesus in his arms, the slight twist to his left shoulder). It is these divergences from the norm (or mold, if we consider the plastic reproductions) that are foregrounded in the description. In the fourth paragraph, the description shifts to the Child, the other member of the compositional dyad, who has become the focus of the narrator's gaze. "El Niño aprieta al cuerpo del santo, por un momento parece absolutamente dedicado a escuchar el corazón de su protector" (9). Now animated, the Child adopts a dramatic pose. The narrator pays close attention to how its hands and its arms have compressed themselves to fit into a cramped space the reader can only imagine:

El brazo izquierdo abraza al médico, y el derecho, de tan preso que está entre ambos cuerpos, no tiene lugar sino para apuntar hacia arriba; luego el brazo se flexiona y el Niño apoya la mano sobre su cabeza, como si descansara, adoptando una forzada postura que expresa al mismo tiempo placidez e incomodidad. (9)

The restricted, confined space occupied by the Child intensifies the dramatic encounter. The narrator's gaze zooms in on its face:

Mira hacia el rostro del santo, y en sus labios pintados de rojo se distingue una sonrisa de satisfacción, más bien de alivio, como si junto al médico hubiese alcanzado el cobijo negado hasta ese momento por el resto de la geografía y su gente. Esto puede sonar a exageración, no hay modo de verificar si en efecto el Niño careció de amparo en cualquier otro lugar, sin embargo es una verdad que se desprende de la figura. Mientras tanto, la mirada incommovible del santo dice, según creo, "No importa, ya estás aquí" o algo por el estilo. (9)

In creating the affecting scenario of the saintly doctor and the Child, the narrator “reads” a readymade religious storyline into the figures, that of the personified divinity, the Child Jesus, being rescued and reassured by a saintly person, whose holiness is affirmed by the interaction. Clearly, the narrator tells us, the ever-comforting saintly doctor merits devotion, as evidenced by the trusting clasp, the cleaving of the Child to the doctor’s body. “Asoman los pies desnudos del niño, con los deditos y las uñas francamente microscópicas, pintadas de rojo, apenas una raya delgada. Estos pies también se adhieren al cuerpo del médico, incluso parecen aferrarlo, y acaso sea otra forma de mostrar el abandono, la necesidad de reparo que habita en cada centímetro de su piel” (9-10). The asymmetrical relationship—the divine god, the mortal human—underlying the narrative is paradoxical; the more helpless and needy the Child is, the more savior-like the doctor becomes. Indeed, Caws’s earlier observations seem to be borne out here; the pose and gestures of the saintly doctor and Child seem part of a larger-than-ordinary narrative space that is in keeping with the nature of the icon.

The detail of the parrot—an element, the narrator tells us, that Baroni includes in every work, which in this case after some initial difficulty was finally added “en relieve sobre el niño” (10)—adds a curious intermedial dimension to the description. Though the narrator does not refer to the parrot’s literary or artistic precursors, we may recall Flaubert’s *Un coeur simple*, in which Félicité mistakes her stuffed parrot Loulou for the Holy Ghost. Or we may remember the painting by Édouard Manet, *Young Lady in 1866 (Woman with a Parrot)*, or Gustave Courbet’s *Woman with a Parrot*, especially when we learn of the parrot that appears on the carving known as the woman on the cross, the second work described by the narrator in the opening pages. A lineage of literary and artistic parrots opens up for the reader with the descriptions of Baroni’s

parrots, thereby joining her art with the elite art and literature more traditionally linked to the ekphrastic endeavor.³⁶

The narrator then turns his attention to the woman on the cross— “[l]a otra pieza de Baroni que está en mi poder” (10). According to Chejfec, she is “la imagen principal” of the novel (next to whom the saintly doctor is “secundaria”).³⁷ The narrator’s initial presentation gives a brief overview of the entire piece:

muestra a una mujer apoyada contra el tronco de un supuesto árbol que solamente tiene dos ramas gruesas y cortas, en realidad un basto madero con forma de cruz irregular. La obra se llama, según recuerdo, la mujer en la cruz o la mujer crucificada....Esta pieza tiene su lorito: mira al frente desde una de las ramas mochas del árbol. La mujer hace otro tanto, tiende la mirada hacia adelante. (10)

Here we find another vertical axis, the tree trunk, whose two short stubby limbs give it a cruciform shape, bringing to mind another readymade narrative, that of Christ-like suffering.³⁸ Unlike the carving of the saintly doctor, however, here there are no clues to identify the figure, or to explain why she stands in front of a tree, gazing ahead vacantly. Nameless, she is a sort of Everywoman among the panoply of saints and Virgins in Baroni’s *oeuvre*: “[l]a mujer en la cruz es de la pocas figuras hechas por Baroni que tiene fuente anónima, o en todo caso indeterminada, y que carece de nombre propio” (11). No biographical details accrue to her figure; she is a blank upon which a life story must be projected.

For Chejfec, the woman on the cross captures the viewer’s attention precisely because of

³⁶ I thank Esther Allen for this insight.

³⁷ Email to author, 12 April 2013.

³⁸ One might also associate the carved tree with the tree of life, especially in the context of the narrator’s visit to the artist’s home. While there, he will tour Baroni’s bountiful garden and walk through an orchard of mango trees, whose abundant and aromatic fruit thoroughly justifies the narrator’s description of the tree as “[e]l árbol pródigo que no se negaba a nadie (84).

the drama latent in the scene and in her demeanor. He explains:

Es una talla impactante precisamente, desde mi punto de vista, porque es muy poco explícita, o explícita de una manera contradictoria. Es la figura de una mujer joven, adornada con un vestido de fiesta apenas audaz. La mujer está ceñida a un madero, que viene a ser una especie de árbol en forma de cruz. (Jiménez)

Thus she resists the sort of straightforward storytelling that was illustrated by the figure of the saintly doctor and the Child. As we recall, while describing that carving the narrator imagined a scenario in which the divinity, having been saved from danger by the saintly doctor, smiles up at his rescuer in satisfaction and relief “como si junto al médico hubiese alcanzado el cobijo negado hasta ese momento por el resto de la geografía y su gente” (9). Thus the melodrama ends sweetly. There may be other interpretations, but most will likely invoke the virtuous qualities already ascribed to the saintly doctor. The woman on the cross, on the other hand, stands alone and gazes ahead, as the narrator observes, “instalada en el tiempo y condenada a no cambiar, quiero decir, expuesta a su propia inmovilidad” (11), a description that echoes Murray Krieger’s notion of the “plastic object as a symbol of the frozen” (264).

But is the woman on the cross truly static and unmoveable? As we will learn, despite the figure’s unchanging demeanor, her effects on the narrator are anything but static. The narrator first sighted her during his visit to Baroni’s house; as he recalls “En el rincón derecho del cuarto de entrada había ese día dos grandes vírgenes, una verde y otra amarilla....[a] un costado de ellas estaba la mujer en la cruz, más pequeña y por supuesto mucho menos ostentosa, con la mirada perdida en el punto fijo de siempre” (24). An artwork briefly glimpsed by the narrator during his visit will within hours become an object of his fetishistic desire as he drives through the mountains on a dark, deserted highway. Engulfed by melancholic thoughts, he remembers the

wood carving he saw earlier that day:

En medio de los sombríos pensamientos del viaje, esa sencilla mujer de madera, adosada para siempre a su destino y a sus atributos, aparecía como el símbolo de la resistencia sabia y callada. No callada como mi silencio, tímido y negligente, sino callada como el entendimiento y la comprensión cuando no precisan inmutarse para advertir de qué se trata cada cosa. Yo, el individuo que no entiende y se regodea en su limitación, y ella, la imagen (persona, escena o representación) que lo comprende todo. Presentía su cuerpo inerte a mis espaldas, en realidad a una buena cantidad de kilómetros y más allá de varios obstáculos geográficos, y al contrario de cualquier presencia abstracta o estética, la sentía como una figura que absorbía experiencia, la sublimaba; sentía que ella, pasara lo que pasara, iba a entenderlo todo. (44)

Later that night, having stopped at a hotel in the town of Boconó, he dreams of the woman, who now extends her hand to rescue him from the bottom of a deep well, where he lies in a bed, unable to move. He grips her hand and rises; for the rest of the dream, he will not let go of her. Upon awakening he realizes that “el sueño significaba que la mujer en la cruz me rescataba para que yo me apropiara de ella; en lenguaje del entresueño, para recuperarla” (48). He resolves to call Baroni that morning to arrange to buy the piece, a transaction that will take place months later when they meet in Hoyo de la Puerta, a town on the outskirts of Caracas. It is at this point, when the figure is stripped of its protective bags and unveiled—roughly a third of the way into the novel—that we are taken back to the frame of the initial description, when the narrator introduced “[l]a otra pieza de Baroni que está en mi poder” (10). In the ekphrastic description that follows, he resumes and amplifies on the brief presentation begun earlier.

Here I will pause to consider the ever-shifting temporal frames in the pages that separate the first ekphrastic presentation of the woman on the cross from this second, more extended one that follows close on the figure's unveiling. Because the space and time bifurcation has been a dominant theme in ekphrastic studies (we recall Lessing's pronouncement: "It remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter." (Lessing 91; XVIII)), it is especially relevant to examine the novel's temporal discontinuity, and to consider the significance of the shift that occurs at the moment the ekphrastic description is resumed.

As I mentioned earlier, the novel contains several narrative strands. The main strand is the narrator's account of his journey from Caracas to western Venezuela to meet the artist in her hometown and visit her workshop and garden; over the course of the novel he will recount two more meetings with Baroni, during each of which he will pay for and receive wooden figures she has carved: first, the woman on the cross, and then, about a year later, the saintly doctor. The present tense of this opening passage ("Tengo frente a mí el cuerpo de madera del santo..." (7)) corresponds to an unspecified place and time; we do not know where the narrator is as he contemplates his collection of wood carvings, nor do we know how much time has elapsed between the events recounted in the novel and the "now" of the opening passage. It is from this vantage point that the narrator reflects back on the story of his meetings with Baroni and interpolates or inserts scenes that correspond to the other narrative strands. In the section that concerns me here (from the start of the novel to page 63), there are two seemingly unrelated stories: the narrator's first encounter with Baroni and the aftermath of their meeting; and the narrator's account of the last days of the poet Juan Sánchez Peláez and his wake.³⁹ The narratives

³⁹ These two strands are not completely unrelated. During his first meeting with Baroni, the narrator must lean close to the artist to hear what she is saying because of her laryngitis; he recalls making a similar adjustment on a visit to the poet, although in this instance it was for the

will switch back and forth several times, the transition typically occurring at the paragraph break.

A fragmented narrative with temporal discontinuities is hardly uncommon in today's literary landscape; in fact, a perfectly sequential story might seem somewhat old-fashioned. But what can be said when a fragmented ekphrastic description is added to the mix? I have already mentioned that the woman on the cross is described in two stages: first, in the initial sketch at the outset of the novel, and second, in a fuller description later on. Significantly, the later description follows on what might be called the culmination of the narrator's quest, when he meets Baroni in the Caracas suburb of Hoyo de la Puerta to take possession of the coveted wood carving. The narrator has already recounted his difficulties in finding the house, in parking his car, in being heard above an especially noisy floor polisher when he rings the doorbell. He finds Baroni in a rocking chair on the patio, with the woman on the cross sitting on a table, wrapped in protective layers of plastic bags held together by tape. Unwrapping the piece represents another small obstacle, but it is soon overcome. Up to this point, the episode, while not unduly eventful, has been one of forward motion.

At the moment, however, that Baroni positions the now-unveiled figure on a patio table, the scene on the patio is suspended. Moved by the sight of the woman on the cross, the narrator begins to ponder the striking effect it has had on him. His meditations now come to the fore. The narrator not only responds to the physical wood carving in front of him, but also remembers the apparition that came to him on the road and in his dream. As an absent image, it cast a powerful spell over the narrator, such that he now imagines it having acquired a sort of life, as inert or ineffable as it may be:

opposite reason, so as to enable the ailing poet to hear what the narrator was saying. The narrator will also think of Baroni's doll-like wood-carvings when he recalls seeing Sánchez Peláez's body lying in wake.

¿Qué tipo de vida? No sé. Probablemente una vida inerte, en la medida en que sería orgánica para quien quisiera comprobarla, y por lo tanto, a lo mejor, una vida prestada; el préstamo como último recurso. La vida prestada tendría un componente doble, pensé. Por un lado está quien ha creado o hecho la figura, en este caso Baroni, y por otro lado debe haber alguien que crea en algún componente espiritual, por mínimo que sea, de la pieza. Esa persona venía a ser yo. (61)

It is shortly after this point that the narrative shifts; we now suddenly return to the outer frame of the novel, that indeterminate place and time from which the narrator had earlier described the cracked saintly doctor and then turned to “la otra pieza de Baroni que está en mi poder” (10), the woman on the cross. The ekphrastic description is resumed at a particularly apt moment, since the woman on the cross is at the heart of the scene that has been unfolding between Baroni and the narrator in Hoyo de la Puerta. The scene on the patio is halted; the narrative “crosses the border,” as Caws would say, into the outer frame, signaled here by another paragraph break and a sentence that begins, “Como dije antes” (62). The “antes” alludes to the moment when the figure was initially presented (10-11); and now a second, more extended ekphrastic description follows, rendered in the present tense:

Como dije antes, la mujer en la cruz, pese a su nombre o su condena, es un ser laico, en todo caso también mundano. Es una aparición infrecuente en el trabajo mayormente religioso de Baroni. Apenas verla cualquiera pensaría en una jovencita de varias décadas atrás: parece estar lista para ir al baile, con su corto vestido color rosado que termina en un ruedo oblicuo, de danzante, dejando al desnudo más del muslo izquierdo que del derecho. Lleva puestas unas botas

pequeñas, hasta los tobillos, que señalan así unas piernas delgadas y bien formadas, unidas a la altura de las rodillas y flexionadas levemente hacia un costado. (62)

If there is a link between the narrator's description of the saintly doctor and of the woman on the cross, it is in the simple, unadorned language with which he depicts her outward appearance. First, the focus on her dress, which is especially designed for dancing and for displaying her attractive legs, which are set off by boots. The uneven hem of her short dress exposes her left thigh, giving her a slightly risqué look. Her legs bend slightly toward one side, comparable to the torsion of the saintly doctor's left shoulder, both subtle indications of Baroni's virtuosity as a wood carver.

If the young woman's show of flesh suggests carnality and desire, then a not so pleasurable side emerges when the figure is viewed against the backdrop of the cross:

Es en esta disposición de las piernas, la gran superficie desnuda del cuerpo, donde se concentra la ambigüedad de la figura, porque la postura remite tanto a las decorosas poses de las modelos como a la inmovilidad sufriente de los crucificados. Esa suerte de preparación para la alegría, o el disfrute, del conjunto, encuentra un primer contratiempo en el aire doloroso de la mujer; parece afligida y tiende los ojos hacia abajo, como si lanzara una mirada de pesadumbre como los santos. Aparte están las manos, ocultas tras la delgada cintura y presumiblemente amarradas al madero donde la muchacha ha sido fijada. (62)

Her condition is that of an afflicted and suffering woman, a young maiden seemingly tied or

fixed to the tree against which she stands. She is held in place, forcibly so.⁴⁰ The narrator's perspective now shifts back to the scene on the patio in Hoyo de la Puerta, where he observes her *in situ*, the mountains behind her. He speculates on her abject condition, linking her girlish sensuality with her oppressed state:

Viendo entonces a esta mujer absorta en sus padecimientos antes el paisaje majestuoso de Hoyo de la Puerta, para ella una escenografía seguramente inexpresiva, se me ocurrió que la sensualidad silvestre de su cuerpo, algo inocente en la medida en que también es un poco aniñada, es causa de la coerción a la que se encuentra sometida. (62-63)

We realize that the narrator's verbal description is hardly a static and frozen moment in the flow of the novel, as Lessing and Krieger would argue. In fact, the narrator's impulse to project stories and fantasies onto this figure generates narrative. It may not have the same episodic nature of other parts of the novel, for instance, those scenes in which the narrator is literally in motion as he drives on the highway or walks through towns he stops in along the way, but nonetheless a story is being told. The narrative he projects onto the woman on the cross is a prelude to his treatment of Baroni's young adulthood—her unhappy arranged marriage, spells of profound despair, the flight from her marriage and children, her temporary domicile in a cemetery—which will immediately follow in a passage of several pages. It is as if the description

⁴⁰ Here the description might remind us of the historical woman at the stake, whose transgressions of social norms led to charges of sorcery and a sentence of death in a public burning. As we will learn, Baroni's close relationship with the dead (she has had near-death experiences which she reenacts every Good Friday, and counts among her many skills the laying out of bodies), the miracle of her restored sight, and her claims of clairvoyancy mark her as a kind of Circean figure who inspires both respect and fear. Indeed, her fame at reading people's fortunes through the numbers on their national ID cards causes her to be denounced before the local bishop, a weak echo of the witch-hunts and burnings of earlier centuries, yet still a measure of the hostility her unsanctioned practices can engender.

of the woman on the cross were emblematic of the account of Baroni's life to come.

Once again, I must underscore that the ekphrastic description of this carved figure is a staggered one, occurring in two installments—the first, a brief description in the opening pages supplemented and expanded by the second, more detailed presentation when the novel is well underway. From the reader's perspective, the narrator's relation to the woman on the cross has deepened in the intervening pages. In the first presentation, we see the woman on the cross mostly in relation to the saintly doctor, both artworks carved by the same hand and given pride of place in the narrator's collection of wood figures. But by the point of the second ekphrastic description, the reader has learned of the narrator's initial sighting of the woman on the cross in Baroni's house and of his subsequent fixation on the piece. The figure is no longer simply a prized *objet d'art*; it has assumed a central role in the narrator's imagination, whether as a fetish object or as a stand-in for Rafaela Baroni, or both.

In analyzing the ekphrastic descriptions of the saintly doctor and of the woman on the cross, I have, up to this point, attempted to situate the descriptions within the context of the novel, without considering the theoretical concerns surrounding ekphrasis and narrativity that I introduced in Chapter 1. As I reflect back on these now, I find that the temporal-spatial binary of the Lessing tradition, a repeated theme in the Introduction, hardly addresses the complexities of *Baroni*. For example, there is no linear story that carries the narrative forward in a conventionally temporal manner; instead, there are expansive descriptive passages with several strands of narrative that pick up and leave off in between. Far from an isolated island of spatiality, these descriptive passages appear to be working in concert with the narrative, slowly but surely adding to the flow of the text and expanding the narrative field. As Genette points out, “to recount an event and to describe an object are two similar operations, which bring into play

the same resources of language” (*Figures* 136).

At one such moment, as the narrator and Baroni are walking round her garden, he observes the surrounding hills and elevations typical of the landscape in the western state of Trujillo. “Las formas suaves y en sucesión interminable, con variaciones de inclinación, sentido y proyección, produciendo un efecto de planos en permanente movilidad...” (86). This description of the gentle, endlessly overlapping forms calls to mind Chejfec’s words, cited earlier: “[Mis] relatos progresan por expansión” (Jiménez). Indeed, the cumulative effect of the descriptive passages is to advance the narrative at the same time that the descriptions create images, much as the natural elevations produce “un efecto de...movilidad.” If, as Genette writes, “[d]escription is quite naturally *ancilla narrationis*, the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never emancipated slave” (134), in *Baroni* we see, to the contrary, that the status of description has been exalted. Indeed, for Chejfec, description is king.

I return to Mary Ann Caws’s observation that certain passages in a novel are often “the bearers of meaning and intensity, the conveyors of revelation and insight....these parts standing for the whole.” (8). For the purpose of my analysis, I have used Caws’s framing concept to isolate the passages in the novel in which the narrator contemplates the saintly doctor and the woman on the cross and describes them ekphrastically. If these framed passages are taken to represent the whole, we see that a pattern is established in which description, rather than being inserted into a larger narrative frame, is itself the framing element. Thus we could say that in *Baroni* the striking fact is that it is description, not narrative, that dominates and forms the ongoing flow, with narrative events or actions like islands occurring now and then, but otherwise playing a minor role. It is the discourse of the descriptive, ekphrastic and otherwise, that ultimately frames our reading of the novel.

Chapter 4

Baroni: A Journey

By Sergio Chejfec

Translated by Margaret Carson

I have before me the wooden body of the saint; the wood has cracked down the middle of this doctor who looks ahead of him without seeing anything in particular.

During his physical life, the great man divided his time into three known parts (or his known time into three parts): the poor and sick; science; and God. Later, after he died and his fame as a protector, an effective guardian of health, and even a healer, slowly grew, he abandoned science and protected the not so needy as well with his spiritual gift. The wooden figure is some eighty centimeters tall and carries in its arms a child that clings to the doctor's left front side, as if seeking to flatten itself against his body. The child turns out to be the Child, no further introductions necessary. The black coat the doctor wore all during his physical life also accompanies him here; the coat sheathes his body, as is almost always the case with this doctor,

invariably calling to mind the urbane, cosmopolitan elegance he practiced with habitual discipline, to which end he had his suits tailored from patterns out of Paris. As I said, the wood has cracked. It seems, however, a benevolent wound, or at any rate an obliging one, because it gets muddled with the line of buttons on his coat. As the crack ascends, it runs alongside his black tie and proceeds less unnoticeably into his neck, where it dies out in a sudden cleft. There is another crack, disconcerting because it looks violent, that splits the right ear in two and rises toward the parietal bone until vanishing, or erasing itself, under the hat, also black, that covers his head. That hat is another of the characteristic elements; and in practice there is no scenario in which the great man fails to wear one. Lower down, the crack in the middle takes leave of the coat and partitions the groin badly. In this area the body has been forgotten, no bulk is suggested, and that makes the fissure look deep, more private, perhaps alluding to a latent nakedness, or rather, to an innocent nakedness.

It is curious to note the extremely slight twist in the doctor's left shoulder, a movement that bespeaks the act of holding up the child. When I've happened to observe how other people react to the figure, I've found in the eyes of each one, and in certain of their almost imperceptible gestures, first surprise, and then admiration at this fact. And I also found, among those who had perceived nothing of the kind, an active interest, a sort of curiosity they found hard either to satisfy or to ascribe to something in particular, and which was no doubt due to the nature of this artistic, or dramatic, inspiration assigned to the body of the doctor. A body liberated from the priestly mien that generally accompanies him in the millions of figures of every type in which he looks stiff, like a small tutelary deity. I have another divergent model of the saint's body; I could describe its uncommonly active pose—and I say uncommon because it's a bit dynamic: one leg

is poised to walk, and the back leans forward, as if climbing a hill—but I won't do so now, perhaps later on.

The Child clings to the body of the saint, for a moment he seems entirely devoted to listening to his protector's heart of his protector. His left arm embraces the doctor, and the right one, imprisoned between the two bodies as it is, has no choice but to aim upward; then the arm flexes and the Child puts his hand on his head, as if he were resting, adopting a forced posture that simultaneously expresses both calm and discomfort. He looks up at the face of the saint, and on his red-painted lips one discerns a smile of satisfaction, or rather of relief, as if beside the doctor he had found the refuge denied him until that moment by the rest of the land and its people. This might sound like an exaggeration, there's no way to prove the Child indeed lacked shelter, but still it is a truth that leaps from the figure itself. In the meantime, the saint's imperturbable gaze says, or so I believe, "Don't worry, now you're safe," or something like that.

Despite his monumental bearing and his striking attire, the doctor tends toward absence wherever he is placed. It's a dispassionate mien, not very forthcoming, and one doesn't know whether to attribute it to disorientation or rigidity. For this very reason, he could be a literary hero, one of those who are always submissive, contemplative, indifferent, absorbed by unceasing meditations. The child is dressed in a tunic that comes down to his ankles; I have no better way to describe it than to call it Biblical or pastoral; it is sky blue and at its waist one can scarcely detect the golden ribbon that girds it. The child's bare feet peek out, with their tiny toes and their frankly microscopic toenails painted red, barely a thin line. These feet, too, cleave to the doctor's body, they even seem to clutch it, and might be another way of showing the child's forlornness, the need for comfort that inhabits every inch of his skin. The saint, so citified, and the child, so

rural. There's a detail on the child's skirt of a tropical bird, wrought at the height of his shinbone. It's a small blue and red macaw, with some yellow as well.

Rafaela Baroni includes one of these birds on each piece she makes. She calls them "little parrots"; for her it's a matter of adding a parrot, which would always be more or less the same animal in a renewed presentation. When we spoke by phone once, she told me she'd had no room for the parrot on the now damaged saintly doctor, and so thought she'd have to content herself with painting one on. It would not be long before I finally saw the figure; moreover, as I'll probably explain later on, it was a piece of information she'd already given me; but I'm recalling the comment now because of the familiarity with which she spoke of these immovable personages. Baroni nevertheless succeeded in making a not merely superficial parrot, because she ended up carving it in relief on the child. Life is related to volume; superficiality is a subterfuge, a mere representation, or better yet, a coverup. The parrot becomes bodily real if it appears in three dimensions; if not, it serves as a simple euphemism.

The other piece by Baroni that is in my power, that is also "mine" (later perhaps I'll explain what I mean by the quotation marks), shows a woman leaning against the trunk of a putative tree that has only two short, thick limbs, actually, a roughhewn piece of wood in the form of an irregular cross. The work, as I remember, is called the woman on the cross or the crucified woman—Baroni, for her part, is not indifferent to the two names; she prefers the second; I, for a rather obvious reason, will take the first. This piece has its parrot: it looks ahead from one of the stubby limbs of the tree. The woman does just the same, she looks ahead of her. Like the saintly doctor, she gives the impression of being in a dispassionate ecstasy, the sort of absent mien that in fact, seems like a dramatic or actorly gesture, the pose the character has chosen in order to display herself. It's that, at a certain moment, Baroni's figures tend to come to

life. This is not reflected in any unlikely movement, of course, but instead above all in their equilibrium and restraint: they adopt a quiet, ambivalent life, similar in certain respects to that of stones or objects, but also to that of those beings who inhabit borderlands, lethargic, unmoving and paradoxically omniscient. The Brazilian Cabral spoke of stones, of their unemphatic presence. Baroni's pieces possess something of that irresolute expression, settled into time and condemned not to change, I mean, exposed to their own immobility.

The woman on the cross is one of the few figures made by Baroni that has an anonymous source, or in any event an undefined one, and lacks a proper name. The others, when they are women, are Virgins, and when they are men, they are saints (either recognized by the Church or popular ones, like the doctor). I'm acquainted with other pieces as well, but these don't exactly represent people, or at least, entire bodies; one of them is a shoe; the other, a cranium or bare head. And as always, the everlasting parrots, which I sometimes think are affixed to the bodies so as to defend their own changeless world, safe and sound and keeping a sharp eye on the evolution of saints and people. Baroni's wooden shoe stands out as a curious thing, maybe aberrant as well, because it isn't merely a shoe that she carved with lesser or greater commitment, but instead it accompanies, or rather contains, a foot (also of wood). A shoe, in name only, because actually it's a woman's sandal, high-heeled, with two or three leather or cloth straps. I imagine Baroni must have foreseen the challenge—or for her, the unclear sense—that lurked in the act of carving the sandal empty, and must have thus decided that it would contain a foot with its toes and toenails, chiseled broadly, which at the top exhibits a smoothness that at first looks cosmetic, something closer to wax. To me that shoe has often seemed the excuse for the foot, the subterfuge or pretext for making it, of course, but also so as not to show it undefended.

As far as I know, the cranium and the foot conceal no individual, there's no one behind those pieces of wood turned into an isolated physical presence and incomplete bodily form. That's why these works prove a bit unusual, because Baroni is not an artist in the habit of offering general arguments, I mean, abstract or conceptual propositions: at most, she indicates, describes, at the outside, enunciates—her main goal being the virtuous glorification issuing from the world of religion, beyond that never making any objection to or critique of anything that could be considered negative. The world of Baroni is large but circumscribed, conscious of its limits, and always populated by good and clear intentions. The shoe and the head also draw attention for another unexpected circumstance, the austerity of the composition: coloration is nearly absent, nor do the typical features of Baroni's costumery appear, there are no vivid colors, no added artifice or ornamental minutia, etc. I imagine that by her own creative logic—by that which took the lead as she made these two pieces, at least—whatever is not for some reason strongly determined, must be exaggeratedly indeterminate, with no gradations possible. At the same time I also think that for Baroni every human figure calls for a definition, the bestowing of a name, first of all, and secondly, the playing of a role: something that grants existence to that piece of wood. That being the case, the only way for her to avoid that injunction of totality was the partial representation of the body—abstraction as a loan of the parts. One can thereby see how artists gravitate toward indeterminacy naturally, it's a force that draws them beyond their expressive consciousness, even in those cases when their nature—as in Baroni's case, for instance—dictates the opposite.

That is why the woman on the cross seemed rather singular, and that thought occurred as soon as I saw her. And also owing to a further detail, which makes her kindred with the sizable entourage of Virgins made by Baroni, all highly stylized and in appearance far removed from the

blessedness or grace of virginity, their mouths in a rictus that is neither of compassion nor indulgence, but instead of indifference or even outright disinterest, as if they were constantly distracted, focused on their solitary condition, and therefore alien to any possibility of human or spiritual interchange. That other detail resides in the fact that each female figure carved by Baroni is a representation of herself. They are self-portraits with different designations (which, again, as I may describe later, are translated in turn into only a handful of names, I mean, the habitual characters of Baroni's iconography); not to mention that the male figures as well nearly always seem to have her face, as is the case of the saintly doctor that remains before me. The contoured hair and sparse mustache manage to adhere to the conventions of the figure, and if you disregard the devotional image as accepted by the faithful and imagine the saintly doctor hatless and with long hair, you'll discover Baroni, ready to be a Virgin, rapt with anticipation. On occasion I've placed the woman on the cross and the saintly doctor side by side, and I've always been astonished by the similarity of their faces, at first with surprise and then, to some degree, with uneasiness.

That hasn't happened only to me, but is the opinion of many other people on seeing the two pieces side by side. For instance, one morning when the sun was hiding every now and then behind medium-sized clouds in constant motion, which brought about moments of bright sunlight and of fainter brightness, it seemed to me that the figures had swapped their clothing and accoutrements and had each assumed the other's pose, and without further ado assumed the role of its partner. So similar did the faces become that the change in light made them more identical still; or rather, the variations showed that the difference was in the end insignificant, that the faces were right there, available, and that either could have been the face of the other. Children, of course, are the exception. The child in the saintly doctor's arms bears no

resemblance to Baroni, nor does any other representation of a child that I recall at the moment, generally speaking also in the arms or on the laps of Virgins or angels. During his physical lifetime, the doctor would pinch the cheeks of children so hard that they feared him, or would hide immediately when he entered their homes. That was one of the darker aspects of his incorruptible goodness, which was praised by everybody. The children couldn't understand why he pinched them so hard. But since faces generally lose their chubby cheeks after toddlerhood, these cruelties of the saintly doctor were an experience that left no physical trace among the contemporaries themselves, and so in most cases ended up watered down into an object of individual memory.

There could be a materialist explanation for that indistinguishability, or, rather, permanent likeness of the faces: Baroni refined her manual technique so as to resolve, almost always in the same way, the human countenance. The first time she did it, probably owing to a bout of discouragement that placed her at the limits of her powers, she perhaps opted to depict herself in the role of a pious person, suffering and stoic, as a type of release and expiation. Then the custom became ingrained, or rather, the conviction that her own image was the most natural and obvious one, for it was unquestionably the face that took shape with almost no deliberate intervention; it was skill alone at work, much like automatic speech. We can see that on this count the materialist explanation approaches the other, let's say, spiritual hypothesis, according to which moral inspiration reaches its highest degree of certainty at the moment of artistic execution, when it asserts itself as technical intuition. In this case it is most likely an unconscious replication: striving to represent an individual's most characteristic trait, which is to say the face, Baroni obeys an order over which she has no control, under whose guidance she keeps refining the features (foreseeable but each time original) of the new figure. One question would be the

following: when is a character more true to life, or best achieved—when it is given the materialist explanation, or the spiritual one? Many are going to regard this question, which springs from the belief that the two explanations prompt outcomes, as impertinent.

It is quite likely Baroni would show no interest in this kind of commentary. She might incline toward a third option, more or less free-floating, which would play different roles depending on the circumstance, and in which the artist, in the sense of creator, would emerge sometimes as a character and sometimes as a real person (understanding her to be someone capable of extracting herself from the constructed world, whether real or fictional). Baroni's creations thus derive from the changeable character she has created, one that coincides intermittently with her own persona. Something perhaps somewhat similar to those stones takes place; Baroni at times chooses an unemphatic presence, hidden behind the figures she has worked on for weeks, and at other times acts as an administrator of identities, distributing attributes and virtues among the creatures she's made. This ambiguity is latent in the inanimate, much as the poet Cabral noted; when he referred to unemphatic stone he underscored that what is inert in nature intrigues most, for it conceals a code whose value is the world's permanence. (In another poem he speaks of the hen's egg, and says among other things that at first sight it exhibits the autistic inadequacy of stones, with no inside or outside, or in any case with no relevant inside or outside; but, he adds, whoever hefts an egg is amazed by its complex condition as a finished form and living organism.)

I met Baroni when she was recovering from a respiratory ailment that had kept her in the hospital for two weeks and left her barely able to speak. When I introduced myself, she began, without preamble, to tell the story of her convalescence. She told me among other things that I'd found her at home by chance, for the doctors had predicted she'd be staying in the hospital for a

third week; but the day before, without explaining much of anything, they had authorized her discharge. So Rogelio packed up her hospital garb in the same sports bag they had arrived with, and shortly past noon they left the hospital, walking slowly under the sun, straight to the taxi stand. Baroni was hoarse, the irritation of her larynx had caused her to lose her voice, a state to which she had by now become sadly accustomed. To hear her one had to bend down and bring one's ear a few centimeters from her lips, which turned the conversation into an arduous chain of repetitive motions; not to mention the times Baroni had to repeat her words, which contributed to her fatigue, or the times one had to draw closer to her yet again, as if her mouth were a broken-down oracle that by a defect or from overuse was unable to do its job. It proved almost impossible for me to understand anything coherent; I missed a great deal of what she said, and that led me to respond with generalities or to agree in a vague fashion, all of which meant that the most arduous part of the conversation had to be carried on by the person least able to do so.

Months earlier I'd witnessed a similar episode, when the host's difficulty in hearing imposed specific rules of mobility. We had gathered one afternoon at the home of the poet Juan Sánchez Peláez; there were five of us. By then his illness was well advanced and kept him from going outside. As I was saying, he couldn't hear well, more so in one ear than in the other; and as happens in those cases, certain voices proved clearer and easier for him to distinguish. Sánchez was said to exaggerate his deafness at times so as to avoid conversations on subjects that bored him, and to recover his hearing after a few drinks roused him from the sleepiness to which his confinement had accustomed him. (Based on my experience that afternoon, I take no position on the matter.) On that occasion, after drinking a bit and taking part distractedly in the conversation, Sánchez began orchestrating a strange choreography: whenever someone wanted to speak, he or she had to sit to his left; and because there were no extra chairs, we had to change places all the

time to keep the conversation going. It was curious to see an almost diminutive being, like a child no older than ten, be the cause of a mechanism that resembled a children's game, much like musical chairs, but in a conversational variant. Noises and his sense of hearing were always decisive elements for Sánchez, at times problematic. Some years earlier, he decided to move from a house where he'd been living for many years in Caracas because of the nightly serenade of small frogs, which at times would create a quite a din.

Anyhow, what to me had perhaps seemed necessary at Sánchez's house (collective motion as a means to compensate for his difficulty), and a little eccentric, too, a sort of theatrical whimsy of the poet's, as if visitors were creatures who sought to be coordinated and organized inside the space—a whimsy which several of those in attendance entered into with enthusiasm, others with resignation—had now at Baroni's house achieved a much simpler resolution, perhaps owing to the vastness of the space and to the immediacy of nature. The plot of ground on which Baroni built her house triumphs at being a small-scale world. A unique imagination moves her to partition the terrain into sectors and to mark off the spaces for an array of purposes. Later on, I'll most likely refer to these divisions, a veritable geography. But for now I'll say that the so-called open air, the intense heat hovering above the greenery of the trees and bushes, and of course the noisy, now-indistinguishable song of the crickets, all that buzzing in the background, affected Baroni's weakened voice even more.

It would not be long before Sánchez Peláez's hour, as they say, had come. When I reached the funeral home, in the small hours of the morning, I was struck not so much by the solitude of the premises as by the living presence of the nocturnal song he'd fled from whenever possible, as if this animal farewell were being enacted as a show of irony. I saw him inside the coffin. As I would later find out, the poet had been spruced up for display in his final resting

place, wearing his favorite jacket. Jackets always accompanied him. You can rarely find a photo of Sánchez in which he's not wearing one, and it had been so ever since his youth, during the time he lived in Chile, about which, however, he had rather bitter memories, those being decisive years. But now at his wake he was wearing his best jacket, the most classic and impeccable, of a somewhat dark and natural color that, because of that business of mortuary cosmetics, quite resembled the color that had been acquired by the skin visible on his face and hands, which were crossed at the height of his abdomen. His complexion looked like wax; and though I wasn't inclined to prove it, despite being tempted, the almost artificial smoothness of that face could be divined, as if at times the funereal grooming was the first and most urgent thing dividing us from nature. The buttons on the jacket were made of shiny metal, and as another tribute to his bohemian elegance, a silk cravat was knotted around his neck, its ends tucked under the jacket. A few friends of the deceased drank whisky out of plastic cups, from a bottle someone had hidden in a small bag, in a sort of prolonged clandestine toast whose secrecy, I imagine, was more a tribute to the poet than a nod to a so-called propriety which none of those present, living or dead, believed in.

Recently my friend Victoria recounted to me the occasion on which Sánchez had bought that jacket. She accompanied him, along with Malena, his wife, to a shopping mall. Through the building's open roof a few clouds could be seen, and above that, the sky, almost blinding at that midday hour. The sky's color, and the beauty of being able to observe it from a kind of aperture, as if from an observation deck, took up a good deal of the conversation while they had a coffee. After that they stopped at a store and in no time Sánchez selected the jacket. The sleeves were too long, and his arms were measured. Some days later she went back for it, this time with only Malena. On that first visit, both Victoria and Malena had no idea what the fate of this garment

would be, they thought it would be one more of Sánchez's jackets. But because of later events, Victoria supposed that he already knew the future, to a certain degree imminent, and was making decisions. For her part, Malena needed only a few days to realize what was about to happen, and those coincided with the gap between the first and second visit to the shopping mall. So the two went to pick up the jacket, knowing it would have slight, but everlasting, use.

In repose, Sánchez's body looked even smaller than it had been in his final days; his shoes, moreover, were impeccable. I looked at him for a few moments, with no one else in the room to divert the communication, his entirety seemed like a fabricated being, some kind of body created in the image of the real Sánchez, hidden nonetheless inside that human cover. That new format had made him shrink, thus paying a physical tribute, in bodily mass, for having deigned to become a copy and a representation. I paused for a moment on the veranda of the funeral home, where the friends I just mentioned had gathered, and we made two toasts to the memory of Sánchez, obviously interspersing lines of his that were familiar, and even unfamiliar, into the conversation. I had two shots of the farewell liquor. From this vantage one could see the gigantic trees of the avenue, where every now and then, and almost exclusively, slow, large and dilapidated taxis would pass by with small plastic fixtures atop, weakly lit. Behind us Sánchez's body—or its cover—was sleeping or waiting.

Before going down the veranda steps and crossing in front of the sculptural fountain on the way to the street, I recalled the title of one of Sánchez's books, *Aire sobre el aire*, "Air Over Air," a title that defines his intangible vocation so well. And I realized that that was the feeling transmitted by his presence, an anxiety that could not be contained and so looked to escape. In a way, Sánchez's polished complexion reminded me of the surface of some of Baroni's images, and in this way I imagined for a time that her figures didn't really seek to imitate, shall we say,

living people, but instead displayed the skin of the dead, like lifeless beings made to stand upright. Now I'm looking again at that poem with the line that gives the above-mentioned book its title, where toward the bottom of page 29 it says:

we, amused, compulsive, tragic

we are pure crucible

word and understanding

—the heart of no one.

Sánchez's unusual emphasis—both underscoring and refuting at the same time—expresses that redundancy needed by some objects in order to be seen; for instance, not saying “air” alone, but instead “air over air.” Once those objects had been animated, Sánchez's intent, I thought, was to infuse them with nostalgia; not so much of happiness or of a lost occasion, but rather of an inevitably incomplete experience. Later on I'll probably describe the effects these strategies of emphasis had, so to speak, on the impact Sánchez hoped his work would have.

The overabundance of nature, as I said before, with its typical sounds, but with its fecundity as well, weakened Baroni's thin voice even further. No noise in particular—whether the crickets or the somewhat distant barks of other dogs, quite audible nonetheless, or the repeated revving of a distant motor—caused that effect; it was rather the entire surround, which depending on the exact weather conditions and time of day, including the presence of lesser sounds, not to mention the dominant fragrances at that moment, brought about a muffled crackling, a rather slow murmur, which tolerated our presence, but in return expressed itself as a threat, so to speak, latent, excessively on edge. Thus in Baroni's garden I could verify once again that the so-called equilibrium of the wild seems on the contrary like a countdown; nature installs fear in us. This despite its being a well-regulated nature, as I'll probably explain later on, though

diverse and numerous enough to display all the characteristics of the wild and, above all, to serve as a reminder or warning of its original strength.

Tracts of uncultivated growth surrounded the garden grounds, and at times Baroni would speak of future expansions, as if physical limits didn't exist, and would refer to a vast terrain that belonged to her, endless, on at least two of the three visible sides. She pointed toward something, her arm outstretched, and kept it raised while describing in her scarcely audible voice the flowering path she'd open up, or the plants intended for those corners; that's how she described the themes of future garden plots. In the region where Baroni lives the rear part of the houses are adjacent to open land; it's understood that the mountain ends there and the inhabitants can decide on their own how to establish the boundary, either by whim or according to their needs. On arrival, one immediately notices that Baroni's house is at the epicenter of an ever-expanding land, as I just said, where varying ideas for a garden, however, coexist. I might describe this later, but right now I'm interested in emphasizing that the idea of a profuse, even self-replicating, garden—one that nonetheless requires a human hand, in this instance Baroni's, to expand and realize its, let's say, purpose, whether soothing or shade-giving, as the case may be—is also at work inside the house, invading floors and walls, and at times transforming it into an ambiguous object, an anteroom to—or a longing for—what grows outside.

On entering the house, the first space one sees is devoted to exhibiting the figures Baroni carves. It's an austere room, like the rest of the house, and one can see painted on the sky blue walls numerous vines with occasional flowers, whose undulating stems are born or plant roots on the lower part of the wall, where they entwine; toward the top these garlands twist at times into single tendrils with an even more precious intent, I think. Baroni has painted those branches outside the house as well, both on the exterior walls and on the front columns of the veranda,

also on several medium-size or large garden stones, and even in corners that at first go unnoticed; branches that are identical to those that appear on the “tree” against which the woman on the cross leans, several steps from where I am now. In the right-hand corner of the room that day were two large Virgins, one green and the other yellow, keeping an eye on the opposite corner with the habitual silence of their kind. Beside them was the woman on the cross, smaller and of course much less ostentatious, her gaze lost in the same fixed point as always. Behind the carvings rose the wall with the vegetal and floral garlands, as I said, and at eye level, in the middle, a variety of pictures were hanging. Some were photos, the majority diplomas or citations, as well as several strictly decorative or commemorative prints of a landscape or a religious figure; besides that, on one or another small shelf, several objects, between decorative and private, almost always cute. There was another wall, toward the side, small and separated by a beam, with a greater number of pictures and diplomas. I began to study the diplomas, many of which had a decorative trim, vividly colored at times, that enhanced the written commendation, and I noticed that the organization of this entire wall was similar, with painted branches surrounding the space in the middle, to where the diplomas were.

The new arrival would feel the impact of this austere environment, which despite many signs of the outdoors, represented a space that was excessively empty and for stretches of time, one supposed, perhaps often forgotten. It nonetheless displayed more than what its denuded state promised, because in its economy (the few objects, but also the handful of decorative motifs that were, however, repetitive enough, the empty corners) Baroni’s delicate situation, situated between nature and art, on the one hand, and between permanence and fugacity on the other, was exposed. Even the little in the house that I later managed to see as well confirmed for me the impression of being before something brief or provisional, ready to be vacated in a few hours, in

that case however leaving behind well-defined traces of the last occupants, traces that were at the same time completely mute, or rather, suddenly silenced. Yet this wasn't a mere attribute of the house, I think, but rather a quality linked to the objects Baroni makes, which are both meaningful and at the same time mute, eloquent and inexpressive.

Perhaps due to that stripped-down atmosphere, in which everything was intended for contemplation and in some cases, depending on the object, for worship or celebration (the carved figures, the religious prints, the painted garlands), one immediately felt closed off, or out of place, despite being surrounded by a great deal of emptiness. The void became more obvious because of the decoration, which absorbed any attention, great or small, one might have. That attention reverted to each person—to me, in this case—as intrigue or befuddlement, because it dramatized a struggle between distinct ways of seeing. The visitor, then, would respond to signals he or she would encounter, some of them arising from the idea of a museum or gallery (the artworks on display) and others from the idea of scarcity, represented by that room without furniture.

I stood for some time in silence amid the works and the walls. On the smallest framed pictures were honorific mentions of the most diverse sort, all however with calligraphic inscriptions; Baroni would comment at times on one or another of them; she was proud of each. At one point I noticed that she had gone out, I hadn't realized it when it occurred, but after a short while I saw her entering with a book in hand, a few pages long. As far as I know, it's the only one she's written; it's called *Message of Love*. I began to page through it; on the cover was an angel garbed in yellow, with blue and white wings at its sides and two parrots perched on flowering branches. The book is now within my reach and every so often I read it again, as I might describe later on, though I'm not sure.

Thinking perhaps about resuming the tour, once she had finished talking about the book Baroni said, “Here’s my workshop,” or something like that, and headed toward the left-hand side of the room. She advanced with short steps, fatigued and hasty at once, her shoulders leaning forward as if she wanted to get there quickly, most likely pushed forward by some concern. Despite her convalescence, her movements seemed urgent; such that I wondered if that manner, or inclination, wouldn’t highlight a condition difficult to control, one that led her to move in a rather disjointed fashion—taking weary steps because of her illness, yet staying true to the involuntary habits of her body. Curious to me as well was a sort of eagerness or precipitousness to find in her interlocutor some confirmation of what she said or did. This became more evident when much later I saw, in the screening room of a museum, a documentary filmed at her house, in which she needed to confirm the good or bad tenor of her answers in the interviewer’s reactions. But it would be an exaggeration to put it like that, first of all, because Baroni isn’t an insecure person; on the contrary, I’ve known few people who have stronger and more lasting convictions. While observing her expressions in the film I re-experienced several things I’d noticed during my visit, and everything made me reflect that perhaps the friendliness or dependency that flowed toward the interlocutor arose from the dramatic circumstances of her past on the one hand and from her condition as a humble artist on the other.

Then, somewhat abruptly, Baroni opened the door that led to the workshop, and we entered a long and narrow room whose windows looked out onto the front of the house and one of its sides. I should say that she didn’t actually open any door, she merely let me pass through. But in doing so, hers was a gesture of such simple theatricality that I felt as if I were traversing a scene, as if in effect she had cleared the way with a studied protocol, or better yet, as if Baroni had revealed a hidden entrance to me, beyond which the true story would begin. In back of us we

had the rest of the audience, formed by the two Virgins and the woman on the cross. Yet it wasn't exactly like that. It seemed instead like a frozen tableaux. In the workshop I at once saw signs of manual labor, and physical, too, in the open; for instance, the tools and the tree roots or pieces of wood in various sizes. But I also noticed that work had been sporadic, at least in this recent and perhaps prolonged period.

I was like that, observing and making a mental note of my impressions, most likely mistaken, when Baroni seemed to read my thoughts. She opened her arms wide, wanting to take the full measure of the workshop, so as to explain to me in an inaudible voice that lately, because of her condition, she'd been unable to work on a regular basis. She didn't need to tell me, I could see it, but from that moment on and for the rest of the day I no longer tried to anticipate her words, nor her silent demeanor and gestures, which immediately imposed themselves without my knowing it. One could attribute the change in atmosphere to inactivity; it wasn't an air of abandonment, but rather of a sudden and unexpectedly prolonged desertion. A similar layer of dust covered objects and entered corners, making no distinction between what was closest to hand from what was far removed. There were the tools, waiting in the same haphazard spot in which the incomplete job had seen fit to leave them, etc. I imagined that without much effort an attentive gaze would be able to reconstruct the unrealized tasks. Though of course, not so much what was still to be done as what had been done already.

Pieces of wood were strewn in different corners; some of a considerable size, thick stumps or logs, as Baroni calls them, from old and, I presume, providential trees, and several gigantic, more or less twisted roots, gigantic, that is, relative to the size of the place, and there were also some thin sticks that looked like ornamental picture frames. Apart from that one could see a great number of items, now difficult for me to specify, and that I remember as occupied

spaces and fluctuating shadows, I'd almost say interchangeable. Boxes in different sizes or piles of things, objects stacked and hidden in the half-gloom of the place. Otherwise, and I'm also unaware of the reason, the tools seemed to me, at any rate the visible ones, scarcer than I would have imagined, and also rudimentary, hardly specialized or specific, and above all I was impressed, though I don't know why, maybe owing to the contrast with the small number of manual tools, I was impressed by the great quantity of paintbrushes and paint tubes, by the jars, cans, or containers—to mix colors, I presumed—and by the boards or surfaces made from a variety of material on which these could be tested. And lastly, as I said, I saw a fair quantity of half-finished figures; not only incomplete, but also discontinued, hardly blocked out and, one noticed, abandoned for a longer time than had been originally planned.

Sánchez was a nocturnal and taciturn creature, and there was a time when he would call at night to have a conversation. The phone would ring and I knew it would be him; so I'd have something at hand, a glass for instance and a drink, before answering. On the other end of the phone he'd be drinking as well. We might talk for quite a while, though it depended on the occasion. I would listen to the noises on my street—I couldn't close the windows because of the heat—and would notice that Sánchez, in contrast, was surrounded by a sepulchral silence; even the reverberations of his own voice were even perceptible, as if he were speaking from an empty room. He was no doubt ensconced on the sofa he used to rest and read, with the bottle, the glass, a notepad, a pile of books, and cigarettes too. Malena was most likely reading or working in another room on her translations. And meanwhile the entire city beyond those walls surrounded Sánchez with its nocturnal and verdant murmurs. He had a singular ease in going from detailed domestic matters to general and abstract issues, which on the whole he would use to conclude an argument and as a lead-in to other topics. He would also tend to talk about himself; not as an

exercise in vanity, something foreign to his nature (Sánchez was a nostalgic person as well, and therefore the only possible vanity in him was one that referred to the past, though in tones of thankfulness for what he'd experienced), but rather to voice concern about, and even to rail against, the passage of time and, in particular, solitude.

A constant reference were his papers, to which he gave little importance despite his friends' exhortations to publish them; that is, his papers with unpublished poems, which he had without exception memorized. Regarding his texts, contradictory dialogues were likely to ensue that ended in a decidedly melancholic way, for Sánchez was a writer uninterested in publication and even less so in the various rites of literary circulation; advancing age, however, made him face one's fleeting existence, as it were, and the inevitable brevity of his work compared to the expanse of the future. He feared publication; errors that might slip in at the printer's, he would say, and because it congealed the poem, too, despite his needing much more time before he could declare it finished. The ideal poetry was made up of mental poems, free of any physical concession. Thus I noticed he was subjected to a rather personal perplexity, one that arose from his discomfort on realizing that he expected recognition, something that had recently become a necessity for him, quite to the contrary of his literary and even ethical beliefs, which had led him to distrust literary institutions and their related vicissitudes: success, failure, publication, ostracism, etc. So I imagined him alone in his darkened room, surrounded by a tranquility that even he would consider excessive.

The truth is, we saw each other in person on very few occasions; strictly speaking, we had a telephone friendship, a bit irregular at that, you could say. He had bitter memories of his youth. He also felt a more or less habitual and blanket remorse that led him to acknowledge, in an apologetic tone, that he'd been much too irascible over the course of his life, and that

sometimes that temperament of his would reappear. An old regret, from his student days, was linked to his father, who had implored him over and over not to abandon his studies. The young Sánchez failed to obey him and left the university. From that point on, nonetheless, letters from his father would be sent to “Professor Juan Sánchez Peláez.” Sarcasm, invective or consolation: Sánchez would never know, but it didn’t matter to him anyway. At a certain moment in our conversation, his voice would reach a state of exaltation. That was my name for the point at which—because of the topic, the alcohol, or the intensity that had built up—Sánchez’s voice would reach such a pitch that it would at times verge on anger. In any case, calm would always return, quickly and instantaneously. Sánchez wrote in a poem:

Like radiance or foliage
 over the fountain of the murmuring garden
 I have died and live
 alive and dead at once
 without lamentation.
 With an almost absurd patience
 I live
 walled up or hidden
 free
 dead.

In another poem from his, as we can see, funerary cycle, uneven as it is, he wrote:

If it were up to me
 on completing my cycle and my
 time

I'd be alone
 calm
 the morning and the dawn
 would be awake
 Well
 on passing
 on moving through
 dead
 the light moved
 —by leaf and tree

I've put down these lines by Sánchez and I'm not sure why, other than natural admiration. In homage and recognition, obviously. No better way to take possession of certain lines occurs to me than to copy them, adding them to the more or less continuous flow of what, for better or worse, I have to say. It's almost the same weakness I have before Baroni's figures, which are especially suggestive while saying the minimum. On several occasions Sánchez was accused of being a surrealist or was counted among them; at other times his confessional style and subjectivity was praised. What I take from this is that he may be among the few, in his day, who did not weave an idyll from provincial nature, but rather from the natural motifs of the city. The garden, the fountain, the tree, the shade. One often thinks that Sánchez's nostalgia is a nostalgia for *modernismo*, to whose scenography he remained surprisingly faithful, like a permanent joke, dressed in other apparel.

I walked away from the place where the wake was being held and was now on the avenue lined with the enormous trees, actually a short distance from where Sánchez had lived in recent

years, when an impulse prompted me to go back. Several minutes had passed, everything remained the same. The poet's friends received me effusively, like the member who rejoins the group after realizing there's nothing better out there; I hadn't yet reached them before they were already offering me another plastic cup. I excused myself and walked by them to the chapel, empty except for Sánchez. Amid the silence, the muted laughter of the women in the group reached us; those laughs seemed a little nervous and a little defiant, as in Italian movies from the years when Sánchez was young, I think. Once I was alongside the body I didn't know what to do. Nothing had changed, at least nothing visible, and within that space each thing seemed to keep going on its own course, independent of what was happening outside. I was looking at Sánchez's jacket, I was impressed by its fit, as I said before, when one of his friends entered and began reciting the poet's verses. The tiger licks its jowls, or its flank, I recall him saying. It was the song of the soldier, a paying of last respects.

At that moment I began to think, no doubt prompted by this sequence of scenes, about several people I knew who despite being friends with Sánchez were not at the funeral home that night. I established as a condition that I would only consider the ones whose addresses I knew. Thus someone living hardly a hundred meters away came to mind; another who lived some eight hundred meters away; several other people at various distances. Then I tried to imagine what they would be doing; almost all of them would be sleeping, I supposed. And lastly, I mentally sketched a star above the street map represented by the territory. At the center was Sánchez, the funeral home, and each ray went toward the house, even up to the bed of each of these friends. The result was an exceedingly irregular diagram, though that wasn't what mattered. For a fraction of time, I told myself, the drawing showed Sánchez as the heart of the city. A self-abnegating heart, of course, because he was surrounded by silence and indifference. That's how,

in a brief span of time, I left the funeral home twice. The friend of Sánchez's who came up to recite verses had also entered to observe me, probably sent by the others owing to my unexpected return, I thought.

In the workshop there were practically no decorations, unlike the room by the entrance. Here Baroni had decided to distance herself from the vegetal landscapes on the walls and from the finished pieces, so that she could be alone with those that were embryonic, imagined, or incomplete. In contrast to this vacant backdrop, I was surprised that the entryway had had an immediate effect of turmoil, as if silence and motionlessness had been exchanged then and there, translated into a predisposition, a sort of friendliness of the objects toward her. I recalled those cartoons in which inanimate but always useful things—generally speaking, utensils and kitchenware (plates, spoons, pencils or pitchers)—came to life, acquired human behavior and began to sing and dance, ready to take on some task, showing their solidarity with human work. In this sense, I thought, Baroni also created intermediate beings, relatives of those dancing figures.

It was in that moment of confusion, while I was pondering ideas of abandonment and activity (for a moment I dreamed of discovering a secret in this situation, a sort of ideal attained, though in a natural way, an ideal I might have spent years searching for, unsuccessfully of course, and would now see accomplished—I'd be bitter over its belatedness, but it would be tangible at last); anyway, it was in that moment of confusion that Rogelio emerged, coming out of the far end of the workshop, most likely through a door hidden in the deep shadows. In Baroni's lifetime there have been various saviors, one of them being Rogelio, perhaps the only person who fits into that category—Baroni's savior—ever since he literally picked her up and offered to help her when she had fled her parents' home, after abandoning her young children

and hiding in the Boconó cemetery. As I'll most likely explain later, Baroni spent several days there, sleeping in between the graves. People began to notice her and gave her a name—she was a stranger to the area—in keeping with her new lair. They also accused her of desecrating graves, and she was picked up for that reason. In truth, Baroni had no place to live, but she'd established a more familiar bond with death than anyone in Boconó could have guessed. Some time after those days in the cemetery, Rogelio appeared. It's likely she found a tranquility in the cemetery that not only her family had denied her, but that for some time she herself had cast off from the past, present or future of her simple existence. Because as can be seen, Baroni's was a life that hardly made any demands; and yet the little she asked for was, in the end, denied her. According to what she tells anyone who will listen, and which I confirmed after seeing a documentary, Baroni decided to leave her children in the care of her mother and sister out of fear she would do them harm—nor had she ruled out killing them, so great were the attacks of desperation that made her weep with no end or consolation.

Rogelio stopped in front of us and Baroni spoke in her thin thread of a voice, nothing that I could understand, only what was predictable, perhaps the fact that she was introducing us. There was a ceremonial moment and Rogelio said some affable words, few in number, and in all likelihood rare, I thought, given the effort he made to overcome his reserve. In the environs of Baroni's house, and in that town and in neighboring cities and hamlets as well—I'd almost say in the entire rugged land of Trujillo and the other Andean states, Táchira and Mérida—everyone with whom I came in contact seemed withdrawn; or at least they seemed subject to a type of reserve that placed individuals within a language of measured gestures and half-spoken words, from which they seemed reluctant to leave. At most, someone would seek a more profound communication and another kind of dialogue would thus be obtained, but sooner or later things

would shift into reverse (a sort of call to reality) and the person who had been emboldened enough to say those not absolutely necessary words, would in the end be conquered by some secret qualm or an unpleasant association, I don't know, and then retreat, he or she would resume the customary pace, talk about essentials, a kind of verbal contraction, almost always looking at the ground, a gesture that also meant he or she had retracted what had hitherto been said with a fleeting loquacity. And when someone departed from that behavior, it was because they did not belong to that local world, to that area. They say it's the Andean temperament, the influence of the highlands, the barrenness of the plains, etc. Whatever the case, Baroni would thus be an exception, maybe the only one within that vast territory. At one point, during the brief exchange with Rogelio, Baroni stepped a few meters away and, with our backs turned to her, she began coughing over and over. I hadn't realized it before, it was only on hearing her cough once more and observing her body shake that I became aware of her weak constitution, a fragility much like the small sticks or staves that were strewn about or bundled in the corners of the workshop, precariously subject to the slightest movement or to any breeze, and which often decorate her figures in the form of cloaks or dresses that appear (and only appear) to have joints. In truth, this respiratory illness was a minor thing when compared to other episodes in the troubled history of her health.

I said good-bye to Baroni before it was mid-afternoon. At that hour the temperature still—or once again—seemed to make things quiver. Those episodes of intense heat lead one to trot out descriptions that include blurry contours, refractions of light, objects in slow motion, etc. Still, I was struck by the opposite—velocity—as if the temperature, exercising some form of awe, had a disintegrating effect, and reality itself, in its multiple articulations, took fright and desired to flee at once from this situation. One scarcely entered the garden, and without even

taking the first step or feeling the impact of the heat, would already notice, with apprehension, nature, free-flowing and crushed at the same time. One knew that beneath the stillness was a combustion in which all the elements took part, and that would reveal itself in isolated and spontaneous reactions. The smell of the mangos half-buried in the ground, sharper than before, saturated the air, rendering them inseparable from the presence of any object in particular. I walked the thirty meters to the front gate, traversing once more the distinct areas of the front garden, the oldest part of which had become rather naturalized by now and dominated their site—I mean, they proved less attention-grabbing, any novelty had become adapted to the site—and I made my exit to the street, where of course I was struck by the minimal difference between the inside and outside, an irrelevant nuance, one could take that section of the street as the preamble or coda to Baroni's garden. But of course, the same could perhaps be said of any space adjacent to this property. Some years ago, the municipality of Betijoque renamed that street after Baroni, thus paying homage to its most illustrious figure. Nonetheless, I remember little more about this almost deserted street, as if beyond its probable blurriness, only the house, first, and the street name, second, would absorb the entire curiosity of the visitor. The remaining streets in Betijoque were also deserted. It was the moment of my return trip, I could have taken the quickest route, but I preferred to go back to Boconó in a roundabout way, so as to acquaint myself with the western part of that territory.

At that hour Betijoque had lost the easygoing bustle of mid-day. No buses or cars could be seen, stores were closed. A solitary person might appear, walking slowly, disappearing immediately from view at the first corner. At that moment the avenue seemed overly wide, I thought the desolation emphasized a breadth that at first seemed unnecessary. I don't know how to put it, the avenue stood out as an artifact, obsolete and in disuse, a deserted esplanade that was

no more than the memory of the typically wide highway that lay beyond the town limits. The façades of houses, of the same concrete-grey as the sidewalks and street pavement, together with the gentle unpaved inclines, brightened the clear light of the highlands. Whatever the case, a few minutes later, after a three-block stretch, this principal street came to an end, near the end of town, to turn into highway once more, the route that traversed the outlying area. The contrast between city and country is always spoken of. The emptiness, the density, the drawn out and uncertain border. Yet on leaving Betijoque that afternoon I was struck by another sort of contrast, which at that moment I felt was more obvious and definitive because it lacked nuance. It was drastic, like a page turning; in a flash one was already surrounded by silence and nature. Thus, almost unawares, I once again found myself ringed in by the vast elevations, which revealed themselves in turns, whether one looked behind or ahead.

The route turned out to be unpaved for nearly its entire length; there were sections, now impassable, that had been paved a long time ago, and others that were in better condition, especially when approaching one's destination. While ascending or descending (for which purpose the road outlined a permanent zigzag on the slopes), or on advancing through the serpentine surface of the valleys (which followed the watercourses), one had the impression of being close to something which in truth was far beyond the immediate surroundings, at an insurmountable distance—the mountains, diverse and overlapping. What was distant had drawn nearer, perhaps because of a purely visual effect, owing to the clearness of the air or to the unevenness of the heights and the depth of the distinct elements in the landscape, whose relative positions always fluctuated. The afternoon had clouded over. At times I drove into areas with low-hanging clouds, where a luminous nebulosity concealed everything; a swath of more or less dense mist, in the midst of breaking up. Without any rain, or through a rain composed of dew-

saturated air, one discovered that each and every thing, even if protected, had been soaked and was dripping water.

Every now and then a clearing came into view, and through a breach in the mountaintops one could see the sun, which peeked out only to hide itself immediately behind another mountain or another cloud. I'd read somewhere about the condensation effect produced by the region's arbitrary orography, which traps hot air inside the perimeter of the mountains. I left behind dormant hamlets, places where everyone seemed to have gathered up their belongings or left. I came across no other vehicle, and since the path of the highway would hide itself or overlap with a rocky stream-way, or would turn into an almost invisible trace difficult to verify, from time to time I wondered if I was really following the route of if I wasn't advancing absent any roadway whatsoever. At those moments one could drive off in any direction, with nothing to follow. It was this thought about the road's haphazardness that led me to think about fortune in general, its ineffable combination of destiny and chance, and about the complicated fact of having met Baroni. Not the circumstances that had moved me to seek her out and meet her, but rather about the effects that encounter would have on me in the future, at that point unknown.

I passed no other vehicles on the road, as I said; in my lifetime I've been in these kinds of situations much too often: empty streets, inhospitable highways, an abandoned world, as if all machinery had declined to participate. To this day I have no idea what this recurrence means, perhaps the fact that very little is forthcoming, at first glance plenitude is a desert and lacks elements, and despite our efforts no amount of will can create what reality itself withholds. Nonetheless I came across a good number of people on foot, far from any visible town, who stopped with a curious and cautious look on their face. If the entire region seemed rural, as in fact it is, the drive that afternoon underscored the difficulty inherent to any label, because it was

a district that was leaving behind whatever it had been in the past, an overly available territory, whose only tangible essence was solitude, as if nature hesitated to make a definitive display and to adopt some alternative to random chance. On the gently inclining sides of the mountains one could occasionally see an isolated pair of cows alongside a small cultivated field. It is one of the things that draw my attention the most in this region: the sparsely inhabited landscape on the one hand, and the constant signs of human labor on the other. The houses and the outbuildings are hidden under tropical vegetation, behind the far reaches of the ravines, on hillsides or on top of plateaus or on barely accessible land, out of sight. And when one was able to glimpse some dwelling, I realized a short time later, one would be absorbed by the strange combination of beauty and obsolescence of the façades. The shades of green require a separate mention. The distinct gradations saturated the entire landscape, even the most distant heights, when the darkening green typical of an escarpment would emerge—blurred, near-grey or near-black—between the clouds.

So as I drove from Betijoque through that capricious landscape, I thought about Baroni's workshop, about the immovable figures in the gallery, and about several others, half-finished, in distinct stages of completion, but to which she had referred as if they were already alive and all that was needed was to dress them, to decorate them with a bright and colorful garb. When I arrived in Boconó it had already been dark for some time. As one approaches the city, after passing through some towns I might mention later on, the road becomes more drivable; and indeed in the final stages the road followed the river at a varying remove, crossing it several times over rudimentary bridges. This river, by the way, has the same name as the city. In that land of imposing mountains (not so much because of their size as to the crazy overlap they had achieved), traveling by night, as opposed to the day, is a trip through the darkness without any

reflected lights or gradations of depth. The little that can be made out in the sky, if by any luck it's faintly illuminated, is so directly overhead that one has the sense of traveling at the bottom of a well, at the insuperable depth of a depression. I could scarcely imagine the firmament, serrated whimsically by the mountains that surrounded me at that moment. One could intuit the masses of irregular bulks at a vague distance, which turned the drive into an escape by way of a single interminable shadow. This impression became stronger when I looked in the rearview mirror and saw that the machine I was traveling in was emitting pure darkness, nothing else, like an insatiable mouth that was pursuing me, from which I darted ahead, into another darkness, blacker than any previously known.

During those moments of nocturnal traveling, I thought too that I'd turned into a denizen of solitude. Put like that, it sounds somewhat affected or confessional, pretty lightweight, as well; whatever the case, I was referring to something practical. My conversations with others were becoming more and more infrequent, in rapid decline and apparently irreversible. I found nothing to say, hardly ever, and what I heard always seemed wanting. On the one hand, my experience was increasingly limited, I devoted longer and longer periods just to thinking, to scattered, free-floating lucubrations, remote from any object or sense of concentration; and on the other, I realized day by day that I was more indecisive in my affirmations, such that I made false, untenable or directly unconvincing comments, but in any case that didn't matter to me because I thought that the truth—whatever that was—that pertained to me would be found in the depths (not an inner depth, something I obviously couldn't believe in and that perhaps no longer existed, but rather, in the depth of things, that is, in the so-called ultimate meaning of my words). I was ruminating on these ideas in the midst of those dark roads, aware of how the silent darkened nature harmonized with my thoughts and provided them a backdrop. I imagined that

those valleys with its hidden populace was the only territory in the world I was fated to inhabit, that I spoke with the intention of making myself heard, but in a displaced language, neither incorrect nor foreign, only distorted by the atmospheric conditions, as if my voice issued forth at a supernatural frequency; thus, not only language separated me from everything else, but also spatial coordinates, the ever more restricted physical world, etc. At my age, I thought in the midst of the dark mountain, at my age I'm whining like a lonely boy, etc.

Coming to rescue me from these bitter impressions was first, the memory of Baroni and second, the image of her most dispassionate figure, the woman on the cross. Amid gloomy thoughts, that simple woman of wood, forever affixed to her destiny and her characteristics, appeared as the symbol of wise and silent resistance. Not quiet like my silence, timid and negligent, but quiet like understanding and comprehension when they don't fathom something but remain quite unperturbed. I, understanding nothing and wallowing in my limitations, and she—the image (person, scene or representation)—who understands everything. She presented her inert body behind me, indeed a good many kilometers ago and several geographic obstacles away, and far from any abstract or esthetic presence, I sensed her as a figure who soaked up experience, sublimated it; I sensed that, come what may, she would understand everything. In this manner the mystical predisposition revealed itself—most likely contrary to Baroni's intentions—like a profoundly practical attitude, capable of encompassing any aspect or turn of events, however unique the case may be, for instance, I myself, my things and meditations under those circumstances. I imagined the past life of the woman on the cross, an imagined childhood in the heart of the countryside, a brief, troubled youth, a disastrous and premature adulthood; it was me, to be exact, unable to describe myself with any guarantee of reliability under any circumstance.

Of course I couldn't draw any clear conclusions; an unconnected sequence of premises and episodes of a diverse nature complicated any approach. I could obviously invent something, assign a likely past to the woman on the cross, perhaps close enough to Baroni's real one. Nonetheless any description of the facts would only be partly comprehensible, and to a large degree, indecipherable. Fiction wasn't any good for certain things; I had always suspected this, but now I could see it for sure. And why wasn't it any good? Not because it falsified the truth—that would be commendable—but because it revealed itself as a useless device. I couldn't imagine anyone who'd be interested in the past of a wooden figure, even if I presented her as someone real. Interested wasn't the word, though: in whom would it inspire some feeling, an affinity at least, or afford some lesson, when we all know that life hides no secrets. Baroni had overcome obstacles and barriers to make a symbol capable of radiating life, so to speak, but inept at assuming it or preaching it.

At that hour, when I arrived, Boconó seemed an empty city. The last of the river crossings had led me directly to the hotel, where the few illuminated streetlights, but above all the solitary, regular song of a cricket, indicated the late hour. For some reason I'm not aware of, as soon as I entered the hotel room, the cricket could no longer be heard, as if it had kept vigil for my arrival while brandishing its song of waiting. I went to bed without managing to sleep; perhaps because of this, I was struck that the following morning emerged like any other while I, who had not ceased to think about the woman on the cross since my pessimistic meditations on the highway, had nonetheless picked up on what was different, the parallel, or rather, foreign time in which the figure had placed me. Fantasy, fatigue or suggestion, whatever the case, it was something that distanced me from this day in particular yet at the same time returned me to its essence, because I noticed the impact of what was fresh, the beginning, that is, of a distinct time

within the continuum of days. Something akin to what one feels before the death or birth of a loved one. One may have spent long hours in the funeral home, the entire night or day, whatever, and on going out to the street will be struck by the indifference with which reality bears the absence (Borges noticed this, too), it's something that throws us for a loop and points to—and thus encloses us within—reality, much to our surprise, and more thoroughly than before, when that other person still inhabited the earth.

I think Baroni would endorse these impressions, if one considers that during her cataleptic experiences she saw, or contemplated, the unfurling of reality before her death. For instance, in her first attack when she was eleven, which lasted twenty-four hours, she was cheered by her grandparents' arrival at the wake, but immediately disheartened when she realized she'd be buried and could not, therefore, stay with them. The double gaze (the normal, from the world of the living, and the constructed, from the region of the dead) fulfills the requirements of self-awareness. This childhood episode had lasting effects. When she was thirty-three she suffered the second attack, this time for seventy-two hours. It happened at a moment of desperation, when Baroni rolled down a ravine and lost consciousness. Since then, death no longer needed cataleptic ruses: Baroni began to portray her own death and with it made that double gaze ceremonial, seeing herself through the eyes of those who remain living, and offering the living the lesson of seeing her dead.

Otherwise, that morning in Boconó was nothing special. As always in this region of low mountains, the weather, a bit chilly, and at that time of year, fairly dense clouds, flying at low altitudes. The night before I had experienced the constant lull of the water, the flow of the river ten meters from my window, which arrived like an activity separate from the world, perhaps arising from some barely living organism that chose to reveal itself that way. The river was the

most obvious presence, at least until around three in the morning, when you began to hear, at first sporadically and a bit timidly, the birds. It may seem exaggerated to put it like this, but as the night advanced I could make out the most delicate sounds in that corner of the Earth. The city narrows the watercourse slightly, thus making the river a bit more compressed: I could hear the water splashing and its gentle turbulence on the banks and between the rocks. There were moments when I couldn't tell whether the water had lulled me to sleep, and I kept listening to it as if it were a dream, until I woke up, surprised that I could dream of something occurring at that moment, or that my attention, wide-awake, would complete the half-sketched noise until it was whole, with the help of other, similar memories—fountains, streams or waterfalls known in general in the past.

As I went off to sleep I thought the night would prove long; and indeed it did. I dozed intermittently, and upon rising my first thoughts were directed toward the woman on the cross. I saw her in an unfamiliar salon that belonged, however, to Baroni, accompanied by the green Virgin and by the yellow one, both of course more pious and elegant, and I thought that, unlike her companions, the woman on the cross had been sentenced to a banishment far beyond the austerity or abundance with which fate might have surrounded her; it was the image of a religion that had not yet been revealed, nor, most likely, would it exist. I had given up trying to put the woman on the cross out of my mind, that proved impossible; but I kept thinking of her in much the same way as children yearn for the dolls they love, with great need and devotion. Later, when I dozed off, I would dream that the woman had approached me with her hand outstretched, which I would hold onto for the rest of the dream; it was only thanks to this help that I could get out of bed, where for some unknown reason I lay paralyzed, but it wasn't actually the bed in the hotel room in Boconó, but rather a different one, set in the abyss, at the bottom of an especially deep

well. That tunnel, it occurred to me, was the nocturnal drive I'd made hours earlier from Betijoque; hence the dream meant that the woman on the cross had rescued me so that I could take possession of her; in the language of half-dreams, so that I could recover her.

A few hours later, when the sun began filtering through the curtains of the room, the woman on the cross was still the quiet and immovable character—almost without substance, I'd say—on which my thoughts were fixed. I got up and opened the door to the room. It was a bright day. It was like coming across a gigantic garden; I felt a slightly goofy astonishment—innocuous enough—before such a clean and seemingly calm nature. There were parking spaces, one for each room, and beyond them, the dense foliage of the trees, paths leading to the cabins, and high above the trees, at an undefinable distance, the overlapping foothills of the mountains, on one side, and the city itself on the other, rising on steep streets that were now empty of cars, much like narrow lanes paved with stone. I didn't take long to leave the room, and after crossing the river, immediately found myself on those very streets, at the center of town, where the shops were open despite the early hour. On the corners were old men of all different sorts, or old women, who seemed part of the daily landscape in Boconó, from places nearby probably hidden in the mountains. That's why I saw them getting out of jeeps, in many cases with difficulty; these jeeps served as public transport in steeply inclined areas. At one point on the walk, as I rounded a corner, I saw an old man take a spill as he got out of one; it happened at the other end of the street and no one was nearby to help him. I watched him get up slowly and then hobble on his way. I walked through the center like that for one or two hours, thus traversing it several times. People of all ages were now descending from the jeeps. A little bored by those fairly uniform streets, and moreover, anxious, thinking all the time about the woman on the cross, I returned to the hotel to try to speak to Baroni. I felt bad at having been insensitive to the piece, when it

would have been easy the day before to have asked about its price and, quite possibly, to have bought it and taken it with me. But the Woman's impact had been late, or rather, delayed and nocturnal, and revealed itself first in the form of nostalgia, I don't know how to put it, the memory of the figure as a simple and moving entity, on the one hand, but intricate and enigmatic as well. I regretted not being able to contemplate her at that very moment and was gripped by the fear, probably unfounded, but insistent, that a casual visitor, as I had been the day before, would lay eyes on the piece and keep her.

On my return to the hotel, I headed to the reception area, a room that had almost no furniture, and where the few things in sight looked recently installed, or, just the opposite, about to be moved out. A miniature ceramic in the shape of those Colombian buses called *chivas*, with suitcases and fruit on its top, drew my attention, doubtless because there was nothing else on the long shelf, and because it was missing part of the hood, as if on an actual trip it had fallen down a ravine. I now think another one of my recurring scenes is enacted here, at hotel reception desks where I have very little to say and where out of nothing, or because of my clumsiness, embarrassing situations arise. Anyway, I asked if I could use the phone and steeled myself to make a call in front of the employee who, not far from where I was standing, went right on looking at me. If having a conversation in person with Baroni the previous day had not been easy, having one by phone might now prove impossible. Apart from that, while I was looking for the telephone number in my pockets, I already felt undone by discouragement. My plans would always be deflated before they began to be realized, even when at the outset they had seemed fairly firm, more or less; what immediately ensued was a vague intentionality, in which I ended up adrift in a sort of indifference. This would plunge me into contradictory states; it's something on the whole that keeps happening to me. To recap: most likely, the decision to make the woman

on the cross mine, though firm, contained its own limitation: my tendency to call it quits at the first obstacle, however incidental it might be. Consequently, the little or great deal to do (depending on the specific circumstances) revealed themselves to me as more or less definitive. The simple material with which the piece was made, its expendable character, and in a sense its haphazard existence, all that seemed to call for my passivity—a sort of voice permanently lowered, including my yielding to the slightest setback—not my tenacity, much less a resolve that would always seem inappropriate to me. I would thus end up bowing to whatever would occur, with the least possible intervention on my part.

This vacillation made me—also given the delay in someone picking up the phone—almost hang up twice. I imagined the futile ringing in that deserted house and in the vast compound, and the sense of failure was heightened. Only the curiosity of the receptionist, who had noticed my urgency in placing the call, kept me from ending it. She had no work to do, that was clear, and so she followed my actions unreservedly, with a casual familiarity, as if she were doing the obvious. The day before, when she checked me in, I was struck by her attitude, that appearance of being on the verge of asking something and refraining at the last minute, or her protracted silences even though the conversation had not yet ended. I cannot say if it was she who absented herself, or if it was I. Eventually I was able to resolve the situation but not without some embarrassment, from my point of view; declaring finished a conversation that had ended some time before. Thus while I began thinking of the best way to free myself of this new, almost theatrical hitch, the receptionist being the sole audience, Rogelio's voice came on the line with his habitual discretion. He asked me no questions, scarcely returning my greeting with a few words to the effect that Baroni was working in the garden and that he would call her. She was outlining paths, moving plants, deciding on how to rearrange the earth and imagining new

thematic sections. I imagined some time would go by before Rogelio found her on that vast property, then a bit more before Baroni would stop working and go back to the house.

As time passed, I thought I should say something to the receptionist to make the wait more pleasant. I turned my eyes to her, ready to begin a conversation, and yet nothing occurred to me; I ended up smiling. Any possible remark seemed weak, affected, or forced, not to mention the answer she might give, which would no doubt be succinct but more likely improbable, because of the local circumspection. Anyway, the receptionist seemed so sheltered, spending a good part of the day in her office, apparently all alone, that I thought my comments would not only be directed to her but to the entire situation, they'd be like a theatrical addition that the scene required but at the same time rejected. And in the end I was discouraged once more, no way around it; my words could be interpreted as an action, and not as words intended to pass the time.

I was waiting a long time on the phone. The reason for the call was the woman on the cross, who had, however, slipped temporarily into the background; now what was paramount was to speak to Baroni, the owner, at any rate the creator and custodian of the piece. I began to think of the relationship she establishes with her figures, and it occurred to me that she understands them as independent manifestations of just a few individual existences. According to Baroni's idea, there might be individuals able to replicate themselves in endless materializations, at times even divergent. The number of versions depends, in this case, on her, Baroni; no one else. The silence at that hour of the morning wasn't complete, rather, it was rural (birds, their songs not as restrained as those at dawn, and cars, too, muffled, on the other side of the river) and the only thing I could hear on the phone was an occasional beat: the tick of the long distance meter. By now I'd ruled out speaking to the young woman, and yet at times she looked intrigued,

not excessively curious, but rather was waiting for me to say something, though it would be directed into the phone, displaying, in fact, her own theatrical proclivities.

I was still holding, now unnecessarily, the piece of paper with Baroni's number on it, and I recalled the confusion of the previous afternoon as I was writing it, because it was hard for me to make out what she was saying, and because several times she had confused the sequence of numbers, putting them in a different order, or mixing them up with other phone numbers she remembered. For instance, some time before she had lent someone her cell phone. She told me she had another one now, and that she would confuse the two numbers with the number for her home phone. Bills for the old cell phone kept arriving, always low but never minimal, but she decided not to ask for its return because the other person, she assumed, needed it. She missed having the other phone in the hospital, there were numbers saved on it that she needed, but in the end everything worked out fine. Baroni did not phrase it exactly like that, nor did she provide many details to me, but that's what I gathered from her explanation.

Several minutes passed like this until I heard some motion on the other end, and a moment later, which I ascribed to hesitation, the thread of the voice I was waiting for appeared. As might be imagined, it was difficult to talk; I tended to raise my voice for no reason, like an inverse reaction to her lack of one. First, I learned that the woman on the cross was still in her place; no one had taken her away. Then we reached an agreement about the rest. If I understood correctly, Baroni would bring her to Caracas, turning to good account a trip she'd already planned in the near future. It seemed the woman on the cross would be mine; I'd pulled it off. I glanced distractedly at the Colombian bus, certain it had overheard the entire conversation. Nonetheless—if you can put it like that—the truth is, I immediately felt insecure and above all frustrated. I considered the agreement too vague, to be concluded only after an uncertain interval

and under circumstances during which anything could happen: that Baroni wouldn't make the trip, that someone would arrive at her home, as I had done, and offer her more money, and that, having forgotten our understanding, or that faced by the dilemma of honoring an agreement or seizing the chance to sell that piece and make another one, she would understandably opt for the second alternative. For me, the ideal world at that moment would call for Baroni, despite her illness, to come immediately with her green-colored wood carving, a portable replica of herself, or the unlikely event—one which I could not, however, stop thinking about—that a providential traveler would appear, going nonstop between her house and Boconó, that same day or the following morning. Nonetheless, I had to reassure myself and accept that it was another of my baseless illusions; I would have to leave open to fate the consummation, as it were, of the deal.

Months later I met Baroni in the town of Hoyo de la Puerta, at the house of a friend named Olga, with whom she stays whenever she travels to Caracas. The previous day, while we were speaking, Baroni had handed the phone over to Olga so that her friend could give me the address and provide instructions on how to find the house. In Venezuelan municipalities, the names of streets tend to be repeated, at other times it's a matter of avenues and streets with the same name, or similar names referring to a different person or circumstance (or to the same person with a different attribute, as is the case with Bolivar, so that therefore variations would exist of the same name). There might also happen to be derivative streets, dead-end lanes tacked on, called "spurs"; these are, for the most part, numbered (but not always consecutively), or they're differentiated by the syllable "*bis*." The confusing nomenclature and the irregular topography call for some referential help: a tree, a certain stone painted for that reason, a restaurant, a white house, a billboard, etc. Olga thus provided me with a rather detailed route,

which did not keep me from only locating the place only after making several loops, though without her help these would have been longer.

I had the payment ready since the week before; there were a great deal of bills, at least that's how it seemed to me, above all when I hefted them. Baroni hadn't accepted a bank deposit, as I proposed when I called her from Boconó (it was also a way for me to guarantee the woman on the cross, to keep her from being sold to another person) and, as we had spoken of weeks earlier when we agreed to meet in Hoyo de la Puerta, neither did she want a check. I was unaware of her reasons for avoiding banks, though it wouldn't be difficult to imagine them. On that day, therefore, after circling the area several times, something I'll probably refer to later on, I reached Olga's house mid-afternoon. I carried a backpack with the wad of bills; thick not so much because of the price of the piece, though this was not insignificant (I suppose I'll eventually refer to it), but because of the small denomination of Venezuelan money. (Here again I was experiencing another recurring scene in my life: money converted into a great deal of paper, whose value, thus united, seemed unreal to me, or still more, wholly preposterous.) I rang the bell and waited. I felt as if I were carrying the equivalent material—and for that reason abstract—of the woman on the cross: her representation and at the same time a sort of replacement. The wad of bills came to represent the value agreed to for the transfer, it was simple and unprecedented at once.

In front of the house, some meters toward the end of the street, was a *cochinera*, the local name for a restaurant that serves pork. In her directions Olga had mentioned as a point of reference a sign over the highway for the restaurant, though because of some error or mishap it pointed the wrong way. Hoyo de la Puerta is to the south of Caracas and is well known, among other things, for its *cochineras* and its *conejas*—restaurants where rabbit is served. For the

most part, families or couples on an outing, or people who work in the area, visit these establishments, which in general are open-air terraces, with a wide view over the landscape, facing the breeze from the foothills comprising nearly all this locality. The backyard of the house where I would see Baroni gave way to a deep ravine, beyond which you could see a series of continuous slopes, rising and falling harmoniously, set out in distinct degrees of depth within the verdant landscape of the surround. In several respects Hoyo de la Puerta is a thematic region of Caracas, which recalls its small town roots, on the one hand, and the pre-existing wilderness in the valley where it was founded. Some of what this city was in the past, whether it inspires nostalgia or regret, wants to be recovered in Hoyo de la Puerta (or encountered again, discovered, or straightaway invented).

I now occupied a hazy point of that territory, within which this restaurant served as the local, or rather, limited epicenter, at any rate the nucleus of something in particular. I put myself in the customers' place and imagined that they'd taken their own routes to arrive, as I myself had done, and I thought those paths would remain marked on the surface for an indefinite time. But of course, I couldn't verify the marks. For that reason I made a mental representation of the area, similar to the diagram I imagined at Sánchez's wake, as if I had before me a zenithal photograph or a simple map: you could make out part of Hoyo de la Puerta, with its houses, hillsides, roads, ravines and small farms, but more than anything else, you'd see the physical organization in three dimensions from directly overhead. The itineraries taken by people to reach the *cochinera* would be colored—roads that would keep merging until they reached the highway mentioned by Olga, to later descend, all of them united, forming a rather thick stripe, down the secondary street where I now found myself. I also thought my trace would remain highlighted like an unexpected ending, because the observer would suppose my destination had been the restaurant, and that at

the last minute I went to an ordinary house, unmarked, I should say, located across the street and thirty to forty meters to the side.

Because it was a weekday and in the middle of the afternoon, I assumed the *cochinera* would have few customers. There were, however, a good number of cars parked on the sidewalk, and the music blasting from them invaded the block. The restaurant façade was white, with two half-arched windows protected by black wrought iron bars (this was another of the visual markers, which I could now verify). From the doorway a young man kept an eye on the customers' cars; when he saw me he thought I was headed toward him, and by way of greeting began to wave a white handkerchief at me. I said "no" with my hand and sketched a farewell, which consisted of keeping my arm raised for a moment. Then I walked, looking for Olga's house, until I found it. It was white, too, and apart from the restaurant music in the background, I could hear a noise coming out of the house that, I thought, might be deafening inside. Indeed, ringing the bell repeatedly was useless. It occurred to me to knock, but I had to do so with ever greater force. Meanwhile I sensed a motor that was apparently moving, I surmised its approach and then its immediate backing away from the door. I suppose at some point someone heard the knocking, because the machine stopped and the door was opened. Later I'd learn that the house was being renovated. I hadn't seen floor tiles being polished for a long time, and this machine seemed especially noisy to me. For some reason I'm unaware of, maybe because it would have been awkward, I made no comment about it.

At that moment I began thinking, it was a fraction of time, let's say a second, probably less, and really more than a thought, more like a random idea: what if those simple obstacles that appeared, slight delays, distractions or detours, weren't innocuous signs or proofs lacking importance, but were put there by chance or destiny in order to lure me with the promise of a

tortuous epic; so that I could later say “I experienced this,” “It wasn’t that easy,” “It couldn’t have been worse,” or things like that. In truth, it was already difficult to describe the time I’d spent immersed in permanent confusion; or I could be more specific, it was a feeling so firmly ensconced that it was a cadence, or an inclination, adopted as natural, much like a persistent ache. That night on the Trujillo highway, en route from Betijoque, this feeling had appeared for the first time. It was, however, the first time in a relative way, because I’d had the feeling from way back and only on that occasion had it displayed itself. “What to call it?”— that’s what I asked myself when I was shown into Olga’s house, what to call that feeling of distance and detachment, in which a state of latent shock, controlled and for that reason sporadic, and a situation of everyday confusion and discouragement were combined.

There were places in the house through which one could not pass. After negotiating several obstacles, I reached the terrace, at the rear of the house, from which one could see the verdant slopes of Hoyo de la Puerta, dotted with houses that looked like white or red particles of sand amid the greenery. I found Baroni settled into a rocking chair, wearing a multi-colored dress that made her smaller, I’d say miniscule. And a few meters away, on a cement table studded with brilliant stones, the bundle of paper and plastic bags was waiting: it was the woman on the cross, protected by her traveling suit. Baroni’s legs still ached from carrying it on her lap during the trip, since she hadn’t wanted to check it as baggage. I explained earlier that she preferred to call her crucified, the crucified woman. She spoke of the woman as if she were a living person, but at the same time granted her an obligatory passivity and a total indifference, just like an inorganic being. Like the rest of Baroni’s figures, the woman on the cross radiated presence, making her immediacy inescapable. For Baroni, I think, this immediacy translated into an aura of intangible but obvious life, one that could always be perceived, even in the most

profound darkness, and it translated as well into the special treatment she accorded each one of her figures, as if they were living dolls. The proof lies in my own verification of that immediate presence, which made itself apparent despite the paper and plastic that wrapped her like a protected and secret entity. In a few steps—which, however, took time and required Baroni's help—of pulling off tape and removing bags, we were able to unwrap her.

“Let's put her here so she can look out at the mountains,” Baroni said, placing her in the direction of the slopes that repeated over and over to the horizon. It might sound a bit naïve, but the meeting with Baroni and the woman on the cross moved me. In a simple and suggestive way, not in the least heart-rending. The woman on the cross not only consisted of the sculpted wood that now faced, I suppose, the open air, but was also the silent figure I'd seen months before, and that had acquired a certain type of added life during the wait and from a distance. What kind of life? I don't know. Most likely, an inert life, such that it could not be verified as organic if anyone wished to test it, and consequently, no doubt, a borrowed life; borrowing as the last resort. The borrowed life would have a double component, I thought. On the one hand, the person who created or made the figure, in this case Baroni, and on the other, someone who believes in a certain spiritual component, however minimal, in the piece. That person turned out to be me. In my opinion, this belief has no required religious connotation, although it can be inscribed in the series of religious experiences that modern life, so to speak, offers us.

As I said before, the woman on the cross, despite her name or her punishment, is, if anything, a layperson, mundane as well. She's a rare apparition in Baroni's mostly religious work. On seeing her, you'd think of a young girl from a few decades back: she looks ready to go dancing, wearing a short rose-colored dress that ends in a slanting hem, dancer-style, leaving more of the left thigh naked than the right. She wears small boots, ankle-high, thereby showing

off her slim, well-formed legs, which are joined at the knee and slightly bent to the side. It is precisely in this arrangement of the legs—the great uncovered surface of her body—where the figure’s ambiguity is concentrated, for the posture recalls both the decorous pose of the model and the suffering immobility of the crucified. This sort of preparation for happiness, or pleasure, of the figure, encounters an initial setback in the suffering demeanor of the woman; she seems afflicted and gazes downward, as if casting a look of sorrow, as saints do. Then there are her hands, hidden behind her slim waist and presumably tied to the piece of wood where the girl has been affixed. While I was looking, then, at this woman absorbed in her suffering before the majestic landscape of Hoyo de la Puerta, surely an inexpressive stage for her, it occurred to me that the wild sensuality of her body, somewhat innocent insofar as it’s a bit girlish, too, is the cause for the restraint to which she finds herself subjected. Yet at the same time the piece of wood that holds her finds its justification in the nature of the woman; without this contradiction, so to speak, between fabricated wood and natural will, there would be no figure and no martyrdom either. I have to say that right at that moment, and after half-formulating these ideas, I found in both of them, person and figure (creator and carving), an obvious resemblance. I’m not referring to their faces or hair, a likeness I’ve already mentioned that is practically a formal rule in Baroni’s art, but instead to the attitude, the feeling lodged in the expression. It sounds a bit abstract, but that’s what I mean.

I knew that at a young age, Baroni had been forced by her parents to adopt an adult life in a quite brutal manner, having been handed over to the man who would be her husband. That episode inaugurated a long and difficult period of suffering and damnation, which motherhood failed to change or make better, not even alleviating it, but rather making it worse. As Baroni tells it, as a young girl she was in love with a slightly older boy, with whom she exchanged brief

letters that were left under the stones of a path leading out of town. This boy was very poor; as Baroni says, using her own peculiar form of emphasis, “He was poorer than poor.” She imagined herself married to him, but at the same time she would suffer on thinking that, because of his poverty, they could only build a house with jambu branches, a wood that was nearly useless for this task. In any case her parents betrothed her to a man twenty-seven years her senior, whereupon her secret lover left town for good. When Baroni relates these episodes, it is as if she were reliving that confused moment of self-blame and defiance, almost childlike and for that reason quite long-lasting, with a surprising attention to detail. (Decades later she learned the fate of her young boyfriend and went to visit him in the cemetery; he had died in a nearby town.) I’ve seen a video in which Baroni evokes him precisely under that useless tree, a jambu, alongside a stream, at what resembles a natural altar in his memory.

She suffers the first attacks of desperation some time after her marriage; and when her emotional and psychological state becomes unbearable, she abandons her husband and returns to her parents’ home with her children. But this doesn’t help, her parents subject her to a more intense regime of control and punishment than before. What Baroni asks for is not much, only a normal life. Then the crisis intensifies, desperation leads her to weep all the time. One day she abandons the parental house with only what she has on, leaves her children, whom she feared she would kill in a state of madness, in the care of her mother and sister, and with no clear destination, braves the local roads. Seen in retrospect, her flight was the beginning of the solution. After traveling several days on state highways, she arrives in Boconó, attracted by the city’s name, which she considers auspicious, and ends up settling temporarily in the cemetery.

Thus it occurred to me to suppose that the woman on the cross carried traces from that sad period of the past: youth, stifled; femininity, imprisoned; and the body, bound. In the artistic

imagination of Baroni, the woman on the cross is present as a perpetual condition that hasn't ended. A part of the figure points to the past; rather, two pasts: Baroni's own past, as a captive woman, and the artificial past, to give it a name, belonging to the hypothetical history of the wooden figure, that is, the moment, perhaps impossible to pinpoint, when Baroni decides to create the image, when it "appears" in front of her, before its true existence, as if it were an action or a word to fulfill but as yet not consummated. And another part of the woman on the cross points to the future, in this sense it is like any artwork, because once it's finished, it's placed in the realm of the contingent: it belongs to the world and yields to the passage of time. The lines that interlace past and future have, of course, ties of continuity; but in that interweaving the woman on the cross is a complex point at which the flow of that relation becomes concentrated and slows down, because it recapitulates the past, of which it fixes an image, and orients the figure toward the future, though it is only a silent, even absent presence. A new start, or rather a new start for an already eventful life. Baroni's past is brought up to date, thanks to the figure; it likewise installs her more comfortably in the past, in what was left behind, as if someone (Baroni or the woman on the cross) had buried and dug it up in a single action.

Meanwhile, the floor polisher began to whirr once more; it may have been running all along but I only noticed it just then. A link with what had gone before and what was to come, seen from various angles, the woman on the cross also had the virtue of suspending the present moment, the "now," so to speak, and taking us to a level of vague presence, only half-obvious, as if it meant occupying an imperfect temporal plane, where two dissimilar elements were jumbled together, nostalgia and celebration. I took the money out from the backpack and handed it to Baroni. And as would happen a few months later when I received the saintly doctor from her, the sum seemed inadequate at this moment as well. By a lot or a little, I don't know; at any rate it

established a paradoxical relationship with the woman on the cross. The verb “to buy” was correct, nonetheless it named a brief civil or commercial rite; more incidental than real. On the one hand I knew there was no exact sum of money that would convey the value of the piece; nonetheless, the idea of changing hands, of ownership, was also revealed as faulty. I felt calmer thinking of it as a sort of loan, the right to possess, to hold (of custody, as Baroni had chosen to do with the first Virgin of the Mirror). At some moment in the future, the woman on the cross would be back in Baroni’s hands, or she would go to another casual owner, it didn’t matter to whom she belonged.

On that afternoon I began to describe earlier, in her house in Betijoque, I had asked Baroni if she wouldn’t like to make a saintly doctor for me. It concerns the doctor who spends his days in this room, a short distance from where I write, with the exemplary cleft down the middle. Rogelio took part in the conversation. I phrased the question carefully, to avoid sounding presumptuous, for I was aware that other artisans refused to make the saintly doctor—or to make him again if they had done so already—or had simply decided never to make him at all. It’s odd how the most frequently used verb by those artists was, and I assume continues to be, “to make”; not to carve, to prepare, to work or something similar: it is innocent and demiurgic, it is “to make” as if one said “to fabricate” or “to create.” To be exact, it is “to make” in the sense of adding to what exists, to add another individual to the series. The saintly doctor is anathema to several artists, perhaps because of superstitions, promises or the like, related to religion or to the personal story of each. I know of artists who won’t make the saintly doctor because they’re quite devoted to him and, as a consequence, fear him, they don’t consider that making him is a means of glorifying him, just the opposite; and I know of others who won’t make him because they’re not devoted enough, and thus fear they’ll offend one or another of the saint’s sensibilities.

Luckily, Baroni had no objections, to the contrary. It was difficult for me to make out her response in her muffled voice, but owing to her enthusiasm, I assumed that some time had passed since she'd carved a doctor, and that she would be pleased to make one again. Later on Rogelio politely confirmed, unemphatically, what Baroni had said.

In Rogelio one could easily find the Andean character I described earlier, I thought, as if he were a prototype. Both attentive and silent at once, he melded into situations without being obvious; and as a result, the things and the people accompanying him, which had soaked up his reserve, also projected an aerosol-like presence into the surrounding area, in many cases unawares. Thus not only Rogelio, but also the atmosphere around him tended toward weightlessness; not toward the unreal or the blurry, but rather toward the latent and devalued. In fact, on numerous occasions it would happen that one could be unaware of Rogelio's presence, when in truth he would be a few meters away, generally to the side, in the least notable corner, where no gaze would fall. And on discovering him, one would notice how his air of absence was the flip side of the compenetration with which he followed the events so as to draw, I suppose, his own conclusions or lessons. That state of being attentive without making himself obvious was, nonetheless, the extreme expression of an almost reverential courtesy that always opted for silence.

I'll give an example, or something close, of Rogelio's watchful presence: when you go to Baroni's house, after passing through an outer door at the street and walking a fair number of meters through the front garden, you'll find several trees whose trunks are decorated with drawings and paintings. Two of these trees present human silhouettes. One is Rogelio, the other Baroni. The bodies naturally adapt their form to the whims of the tree; Baroni has turned the first bifurcation to good account: both figures extend their arms upward. And in the crotches of the

trees, that is, between the shoulders, she's placed oval boards on which the two faces are painted, one representing herself and the other Rogelio. It is Rogelio, his tree-like representation and his mask—a figure between naïve painting and childish caricature—who occupies the first tree one sees as one enters on the path from the street. Baroni's image is on the left, several meters from Rogelio's, and leads to another lateral section of the grounds, which I might describe later on. In this way, I presume, Baroni, too, grants Rogelio a protective role. Ultimately, given his part in the rescue of someone who would later be his wife, it's not something that would call your attention: taking her in when she was living in the cemetery and no doubt one of those half-clandestine beings, eccentric and wretched, that make up the class of rural outcasts, for some reason marginalized, in towns, and who tend to live with their own tragedies in areas where dwellings are few and far between.

Since then, Rogelio's protective presence has been abiding, and has made itself apparent during numerous vicissitudes; nonetheless, the drawing on the tree shows him not as a simple, kindly authority, but as a childlike presence, a player in the game. Celebratory of coexistence and of nature, the painted trees seem like proxies for actual people. They offer a surface, the dark-colored bark, and before this texture (as if another artist placed herself before the attraction or the challenge of the canvas) Baroni populates them with the images of those dwelling in the house. It may seem a little innocent as a proposal or an artistic construction, but the way it seems may not have the slightest importance. I won't make the mistake of wondering whether Baroni seeks or does not seek an art that has a conceptual impact, or that is of a conventional type, nor if she regards her works as a means to defend the idea of beauty or as an aesthetic glorification.

I believe I referred earlier to the pleasure Baroni takes in decorating the stones in her garden, the interior and exterior walls of her house, I just mentioned the tree-people, etc. I don't

know if this obeys some idea or disposition in favor of a “total art,” rather, it seems to me that Baroni is subject to two forces. One leads her to believe in representation, the other pushes her to seek ornamentation. These things are not so distant, at times they even complement each other or become muddled, depending on the stance of the observer, on the intent of the creator, on the ideas in general about the work, etc. But in Baroni ornamentation is related to the aestheticizing touch, to beautification, to the encomium and to natural exuberance; it has one meaning, unmistakable and unswerving, it does not sidestep or make concessions. Beauty coincides with the material. Objects without decoration are mute, they say nothing, they’re unworthy of praise; and yet decorated objects do not necessarily say anything either. They have a global function, let’s say, they’re points on the general scenography, with a known libretto that forms part of the convention.

(And now an exception to this rule of Baroni’s occurs to me, which as will be seen is probably relative. I’m referring to the carving of a six- or seven-year-old boy, though because of his appearance he seems more like a young man. One might think it was a branch or rather, a modified root. He’s sitting on a low chair, his arms are open wide and flexed toward the floor, a consequence of the two branches issuing forth in symmetry from the principal wood, which serves as the figure’s torso. Lower down, the trunk suddenly narrows and the result is an overly swollen chest for such a surprisingly slim waist. The nervation can be discerned at the waist, and the wood bends at a right angle to become a more or less knotty branch, with protuberances and more knots on the side, such that the boy appears to have two shrunken legs, or one on top of the other. Thanks to the whimsical form of this root, the doll achieves a cartoon-like dynamism, as if it were a contortionist capable of controlling different masses of his body. This produces an effect of motion and play, of mischief and joy quite characteristic of Baroni. The boy wears a

painted yellow t-shirt with black letters at chest level saying: “*Viva el Conac*” (“Long live Conac”). Conac is the equivalent to the Ministry of Culture, which for decades has given assistance to artists through subsidies, commissions, support, etc. In this figure, the ornamental intent has gone astray, yet it is alluded to; it is, ultimately, a t-shirt with a slogan. The piece is a vote of gratitude or trust, or a nod, to an institution that has acted, I suppose, as a mainstay for Baroni. And here, too, one finds an available surface: the boy’s smooth torso and the chance to fill it.)

Ornamentation comes to be one of art’s possible declinations; but there are those who think it is the ultimate aim, or at least a necessary condition, of an artist’s work. Perhaps the painstaking dedication of Baroni to finding a resolution to even the smallest decorative and ancillary details stems from religious iconography; as I noted before, it’s a way of returning favors or special graces received. Because when Baroni begins to carve her first commissioned pieces, for the most part her colleagues in the trade, the carvers of old, would in those days make in equal measure religious and lay characters, generally rural types, austere and even lacking much color in their attire, though all were of a rustic, silent, and lasting beauty. Indeed, by applying glossy paint to the figures, Baroni introduced a new way to add color. With this paint she bestowed brilliance and sheen, she created the need to always keep contrast in mind; and on the whole the possibilities for combining colors now multiplied. She proposed, so to speak, the exaggeration of elegance and sacredness. Thus ornamentation could also be viewed as an add-on that uncovered a reality hidden until then in traditional wooden figures, be it religious exaltation or natural exuberance.

When one is inside Baroni’s workshop, or if circumstance allows one to contemplate various works of hers in a range of types, you won’t fail to associate her work with that of

another Venezuelan artist, probably the greatest across all mediums. Armando Reverón was a painter who turned his life into a *modus vivendi*, which itself became a setting for art. The three facets melded into something inseparable. He built his house, fabricated his tools, etc. He replaced objects he could not make with fanciful substitutes (goblets made of cellophane, irons and sewing machines made of wood, cardboard accordions and the like). For instance, his mirror—made from small pieces of tinfoil, used long ago as candy wrappers—is famous. His house looked like a stage set, but in a home theater, needing quotation marks for their comprehension: Reverón made “crowns,” “rifles,” “mandolins.” The quotation marks express the fringe nature of these objects; they’re useless as such, but at the same time are more emblematic than the real ones. Apart from that, the actors in his life were his own dolls, especially female dolls, which were also frequent models for his paintings, and which he used to stage humorous or dramatic scenes for friends or visitors and his wife (who was also a model for his paintings and moreover, Reverón’s assistant and caregiver).

Despite being surrounded by nature, living scarcely meters from the sea amid the dense vegetation of the central seaboard, he lived with artificial substitutes, such as the flat paper birds that he fastened inside substitute cages made of wooden sticks, or the flowers or clusters of plants also made of paper. An admixture of decadent spirit and tropical anchorite, Reverón appeared to say that ornamentation provides an alibi not only with regard to beauty but also with regard to utility as well. There is a use of the beautiful that is a product of affectation, which nonetheless must aim at stripping beauty from what was affected and vindicating the utilitarian—and at the same time illusory—value of the object. That explains the quotation marks. What’s real can be both false and truthful at once, as in playful worlds, or it can also be abolished for a while in favor of the world of fantasy. In time Reverón turned into—following

his death, of course—a cultural hero. An inspired Robinson Crusoe whose intuition in the face of nature proved wiser than any training he had abandoned midstream.

When I visited his house everything was already quite sacred, for it had been turned into a museum. It was the place where Reverón retreated to live, still at a very young age, after breaking with the academic world of painting and with his social circle. The region to which he moved has a curious name, “*Las quince letras*,” “The Fifteen Names,” and to this day I haven’t learned the reason why. Reverón called his house “*El castillete*,” “The Little Castle.” They say the compound had been preserved or rebuilt to be just as it had been during the life of the artist. It was the model of a bourgeois home, but in the “survival” mode and in keeping with make-believe and play. Not entirely theatrical but yes, thoroughly dramatizable, since it hadn’t been intended for any kind of audience, but rather, only for a world of actors. In fact, the ambivalence that is posited between a home made up of props and the mundane normality preached by the range of objects itself, brought about a scenario of self-sufficient austerity and self-fulfilled fantasy. The rustic quality of the materials and the finishings clashed with the simplicity of the forms and the economy of resources; this bestowed a great expressive eloquence on the ensemble. Beyond this house, the surrounding streets (the town had grown and the wilderness had been eradicated long before) and the trees and, in general, the constructed world, seemed to be frustrated attempts at life with no other choice than to continue their process of deterioration. (Years after this visit, a mudslide buried a good part of the coast in this region and with it, Reverón’s former house, changing the topography of the area in the bargain.)

The artistic ambiguity of some of Baroni’s objects, not to mention her penchant for decorating all available surfaces, thus reminded me of the painter Reverón, who established an equivocal relationship with empty spaces, seeking to fill them even though it might mean

opening up others. Both of them share a tendency to use their own faces. I already mentioned the Virgins and angels with Baroni's face. For his part, Reverón appears in the faces of the models and of his dolls, and even in the paper or canvas masks he made. There are paintings where a girl in the second or third plane looks out at us with an intensity that rescues her from the company of the two or three other girls she's with; it is Reverón's face, inserted into the disturbing austerity of the composition. Most likely the associations end here, since the two are difficult to compare on any other level. The artisanal turn, that's obvious, a playful disposition, etc.

There are several photos of Baroni where she's dressed in an animal costume. Baroni makes these suits, in which she occasionally makes public presentations. I've seen photos of her with her iguana or rabbit suit; and another as well in which she dresses up as a Christmas flower. All of them have been taken during her curious performances; Baroni moves, jumps or acts in the same manner as whatever it is she represents. In two of the photos she's surrounded by her own natural space, as is true in so many other photos in which she's not in costume, that is, her garden of diverse, seemingly wild plants, also one can make out a typical Andean landscape painted on a wall—where people who look like giants are walking through a sown field that's on a slight incline—and some large stones mark off the path, of course decorated with garlands of green leaves and red flowers. One could say the same thing about Baroni's costumes as about her figures; they're made with a similar care for detail; the difference, nonetheless, lies in the effort or in the finishing touches. The costumes have all the hallmarks of being homemade, stitched from durable rags transformed by the subtle skills of invention. One can imagine Baroni in her workshop sewing remnants of old clothes to make the Christmas flower suit, or adapting an old pair of pants or overalls for the iguana and the rabbit. It's obvious that the clothes have been “repurposed,” and it's through this detail that anyone looking at the photos can confirm Baroni's

simple dedication to plain objects, and in particular, her sense of artistic thriftiness in turning scarcity to good account.

The rabbit and iguana costume have nothing extra; I mean, nothing that an iguana and a rabbit don't have. For these costumes Baroni has held fast to real models. But the design of the Christmas flower costume is evidently free, and so Baroni turns to a good number of accessories and gewgaws. It's odd that despite the quantity of tassels, fringes, pleats, embroidery, seams, trimming, lapels, ribbons, bow-ties, and other fantasies, the costume possesses a simple and unobjectionable elegance, as do her most baroque wooden carvings, the immense angels decked out to impress the skeptical or to celebrate an event, or the women or Virgins who display their dresses adorned with flowers, fruits, and other flourishes, as if these were not only the best offerings, but also the newest, the most definitive, the utmost in exaltation and confection that can be attained. In each of those photos of costumes the surroundings appear to be silent and expectant. It's the propitious garden, the space Baroni has organized according to her wishes. And in this preferential area the iguana and the Christmas flower perform, turning pirouettes. The rabbit as well, but to me it doesn't appear to be in Baroni's garden, but instead it is climbing a wooded slope (this photo might be at a previous house, the one in Isnotú or in Boconó). In the three photos, Baroni looks at the camera, captured in a feat typical of the animal, and when she's a Christmas flower, in the middle of a harlequin's pirouette. There are other costumes I haven't seen clearly, such as the parrot of a thousand colors or the damsel, except perhaps in some defective film, where in any event more than by any single costume I was more impressed by the movements of Baroni, who was seeking to imitate the character in a natural manner, and who also turned the scene into a sort of indeterminate performance in which the audience was unsure of the true intent of the character, whether it was to inspire terror or happiness, especially owing

to the suggestiveness of several masks as well; at least that's what I thought I saw in people's faces.

Reverón also made his own tools for painting, and according to visitors' accounts, the brushes, for instance, were of the crudest quality, he made them with the wood of local trees, with bristles and plant fibers, the more worn-out the better, because he used them to scrape the surface of the canvas or to directly damage it before applying color, for which he generally availed himself of other things. I was once able to see some of those instruments and remained impressed by their coarse and apparently urgent preparation, as if they were a set of primitive, or to be more exact, savage weapons, whose coarseness demonstrated their aptness for both painting and attacking. It is quite rare to come across an account of Reverón's secluded life that fails to express surprise, or at least bewilderment or admiration. Everyone paid tribute to his virtuosity and his eccentricity, the two apparently united; indeed there are cases of entire families who would visit him in his house, and even the children would be surprised at his personality and his living conditions. Wealthy families would no doubt go because it was in Macuto, in those days a weekend retreat with luxurious estates and resort hotels. And since they were already there, I suppose, they would devote an afternoon to visiting the half-crazed painter, who for his part, with his trained monkey—a nimble artist's assistant—his other animals and his world of props, would offer a complete performance of his work habits and of his preliminary rituals, or would make his dolls perform, or would himself assume different roles.

It isn't hard for me to imagine the visitors' astonished gazes and their admiration before Reverón's performances; though in some cases, perhaps, accompanied by a feeling of condescension. It was with animals and children that Reverón would establish a more direct and lasting communication, one of greater emotional intensity. His contact with painter colleagues

became weaker and weaker as his isolation on the seacoast grew more protracted, but with time, curiously, it turned into a place that attracted writers, above all poets, and photographers too. Reverón's world was a universe to be uncovered because he presided, without realizing it, over its revelation. No detail in that universe proved irrelevant. Everything was contrast and excess.

Of all the roles Baroni has played, the performance of her own death has been the most notable, and as far as I know, the most frequent. I'll likely refer to her funerary sessions later on. In fact, that wooden boy with *Viva el Conac* painted on his chest—I've seen him at the side of Baroni's coffin, in one of the performances of her own death usually called "*La mortuoria*" as if he were a boy waiting for the rite to end, a few steps from an austere, blue-clad guardian with her hands clasped at chest level, an impressive life-size carving, placed there to represent vigil and consolation, one presumes. This figure is also named "*La mortuoria*," and replaces Baroni when she is not in the coffin.

Some time after visiting Baroni at her house, I looked once more at the photos of the costumes; as I did so, it was as if I'd recovered an important part of those fields that served as a garden, parts unknown to me or that I'd forgotten about. And now, when I look them over every so often, I pause over the ensemble, or in one detail in particular, and it is as though that space were brought up to date by an invisible link, not only the minutiae, or even the memory—which as time passes becomes less and less complete, or is distorted, not hard to imagine—but rather the space itself, in the most abstract or intangible sense of the word, the throb of the surround, the sensation of harmony, misfortune or threat, the tone of the ambience, who knows. In the end, I suppose we've become used to fragmentary perceptions, for that reason I shouldn't be surprised by a number of photos that despite Baroni's interest or the interest of the person taking them,

seek to refute those perceptions or posit them as a complement once absence is established and forgetfulness takes root.

Among Reverón's more curious objects are his paper masks. I say curious because they exemplify, in their lack of complexity, the manual skills of this artist, which he used, I believe, to realize the simplest operations in order to achieve the greatest possible eloquence. Several masks are made of kraft paper. Kraft paper is a material that in a paradoxical way is both rough and noble, hardly delicate of course. If the real world of paintings, the true world of life, and even the imaginary world of Reverón's illusions had an ideal substance with which to stage their real-life counterparts, it would most probably be kraft paper. Reverón would make the masks by shaping the paper, making perforations and attaching several elements, such as a colored dot or tinted papers, a hair bun, a false neck, or a skewed crown; but more than anything else, his way of altering the paper was by damaging it. These faces reflect, in the first place, manual labor, whose end product comes to be the representation, in turn, of the physical destruction of the individual. Indeed, as I noted earlier, many of those paper faces are self-portraits. I suppose that from the beginning they were called masks by pure convention, though it's clear he set out to make faces, in the same way that with his dolls he sought not only to make dolls, but also to fabricate women, half-phantalmasms or automatons with whom he could exchange fantasies.

By and by I'll probably mention my greatest discovery—I say this in all modesty—the revelational capacity of kraft paper. Those masks somehow share the aura of the mysterious that most of his objects possess, which Reverón brought into the world as a simple tribute to the material existence of their counterparts in real life (to call them by some name): a real and useful existence. Whoever leafs through a catalogue of his work will see not only solid wooden bottles but also piano pedals, apocryphal of course, the tinfoil mirror already mentioned, Bibles made

from sheets of newspapers, etc. The world of fantasy does not require complex substitutes. And one could argue that, for Reverón, the substitute turns into art if the material and the work are immediately reversible to their origin. An object not at the point of liquidation or at its end, but instead about to be reintegrated into its natural state.

For instance, one thing the photos fail to show, but which thanks to them I recapture each time I look at them, is the incredible quantity of fallen mangoes on the grounds of Baroni's house on the day of my visit. There were at least two or three trees, you could see half-decayed and half-buried mangoes, as well as the pits (as the stones or seeds are called), strewn all over and lodged in that sea of earth no doubt since the previous season. On walking through the impressive front garden, one became intoxicated by the strong odor of decomposing mangoes. It was of course a well-known scent, there being relatively few places in Venezuela where one cannot find these trees. Still, I had never before been among such a high concentration. Perhaps in a remote corner of some park, or on a lightly traversed mountain path, one at times begins to perceive the sweetened fragrance, slightly alcoholic, a non-animal putrefaction, and alerted to this presence one goes in search of the source of the smell, to find the mangoes squashed and scattered over the damp ground.

By means of those feeble signs, feeble because they depended on the presence of a breeze, on the temperature or on the time of day, at first you'd be bewildered, and then moments later, capable of establishing, so to speak, a chain—to determine the source, to assign a cause and to deduce the steps by which the mangoes had arrived at this stage of advanced decomposition—and finally, you'd spot them, there below, one might be under your own foot, yellow lumps that revealed their whitish heart, or hearts that had already been freed, in varying degrees, from their casing, some with a crown of filaments and others nearly picked clean. I hadn't ever been in the

midst of that pure scent before; it was like being immersed in single, undivided atmosphere, with no visible boundaries. I'm not exaggerating when I say that that part of the property was studded with mango pits; or more, that the hardest part was finding a space free of them. On one side there was a small brick edifice with a tin roof, which by no means could house a person. It might have been a doghouse, I don't know, it didn't seem like one to me; or a place to protect something, like an electrical meter or a water pump, etc. On the other side, where the mangoes came to an end, there was a large aviary holding several parrots and macaws, which of course were silent the entire time, no doubt overwhelmed by the heat and the suffocating atmosphere. The repetitive song of the cicadas and their stridency added to the atmosphere of suspended time, I don't know how better to describe it, of traversing an indefinite interval of that so-called eternity one supposes is never going to end. And that lethargy pervaded everything.

The rest of the plant life appeared to have succumbed to the violence of the mangoes, their leaves drooping and their flowers faded, the branches of trees and their silhouettes had taken on a somber, threatening air despite the strong daylight; and even Baroni's little dog, whose name I can't remember, behaved as though he'd lost his mind, and attempted to sleep on his legs, leaning his side against a large painted stone, without condescending to lie on the ground. On seeing such signals, I became worried and imagined the consequences that this undivided atmosphere, as I said earlier, might have on me; and more so because the things thus arrayed began to take shape as a literary or theatrical parody, those moments that cannot be read and yet are read, though the scene was in no way a parody—an effect of the situation, no doubt. I should say that despite its apparently insoluble problem, Baroni's dog—on dozing off and falling, and on waking up stunned then immediately standing up—was the only individual displaying any visible activity, and in that way helped, I think, to overcome these moments of

massive collapse, overall self-forgetfulness and complete standstill. But for reasons I'm unaware of, the animal had succumbed to the inertia and kept toppling over and standing up, which despite evoking a bit of compassion and appearing somewhat like a comic routine, lent an air of desolation to the scene, of suffering and natural baseness. In all likelihood the dog, because of his small size, was seriously intoxicated by the mangoes. As I said, it was as though the macaws didn't exist, they were entirely under the influence, and the afternoon threatened to last forever, without actions or changes, left to the dictates of some mysterious entity, local or external.

But as always happens, the moment arrived and the torpor broke as if the entire garden had awakened at the same moment; I believe it coincided with Baroni's appearance. The oppressive odor turned into perfumed air, the trees and plants recovered their habitual splendor and even the dog enjoyed the beneficial effects of the change in abandoning his sleep and walking over to his owner. As he did so I recalled scenes so often observed in Caracas, men underneath mango trees who were angling long wooden poles or hurling fallen mangoes upward so as to knock others off; the hurlers were generally students from nearby schools, or could also be the indigent, and the ones holding the poles lived in the neighborhood. The prodigious mango tree would deny no one. It was not even unheard of to walk along the street and be struck by a mature mango, something that also happened to cars, often dented if the mango fell from a great height.

Baroni's dog was small, almost completely white, restless and quiet. I regret not remembering his name, because I think it would be somewhat revealing. At first I was tempted to pick up the phone to ask Baroni, but I hesitated and later on lost interest in finding out. We walked through the vast garden and as Baroni stopped to explain the details about a plant, a new path, the future expansion to create a new thematic space—something that would claim several

months of her time or an entire year—while she was standing motionless in the hot sun and explaining these things in great detail, the little dog took advantage of the stop to hide in the nearest thicket, surely in search of something, or to investigate novelties in the terrain. He disappeared for varying amounts of time, but what immediately struck me was that it was the dog, and no one else, who seemed to dictate the length of the stops, because as soon as it returned, Baroni finished her explanation or commentary and we would resume the walk. It happened once, twice, and then it happened again. And in the end it seemed to me as well that Baroni's stops obeyed those of her dog, which always preceded hers, since he generally walked a few steps in front of his owner, as if clearing the path (or it may have happened that the dog was already familiar with the places she would stop). Thus, we were a group with independent but coinciding digressions. Perhaps due to the dangers that arose in that almost wild terrain, the dog had opted to plunge into the depths of the garden only when he could count on company; understandably, considering his size. In any case, the garden was where Baroni spent almost all her time, with her projects and plans for topographical innovations.

From one of the passable sides of the property you could see a high plateau in the distance. Earlier some elevated hills could be made out, at whose base one could spy broad and slightly flattened valleys, dotted by rounded and fairly sporadic hillocks. As I've perhaps already mentioned, in the state of Trujillo it's rare to find the rugged landscape typical of elevated mountain ranges, such as the Andes. You see another type of ruggedness. In fact, it impresses because of its captivating beauty, as it were, the simultaneity of mountains and abrupt folds, one might say messy or even crazed, that in the moment of their elevation, I suppose, with the constant modulation of the relief, a result of the time that had elapsed since that movement, on the one hand, and of the green blanket that covers almost the entire land, which in turn is a

product of the hot and humid climate of the low-lying and middle zones. The gentle, endlessly overlapping forms, which vary in steepness, direction, and projection, producing an effect of perpetually moving planes, do not however produce a dramatic effect, nor do they have monumental standing; rather, they're scenic contours, theatrical I'd say, insofar as the depth of any place one looks out toward will never be excessively vast. And when it is vast—because of the morphology of some mountain mass or some land formation in particular—the clouds and the misty areas are there to soften any possible abyssal perspective. For that reason you see distinct shades of green, ranging from yellow-green to black-green, and a rather wide spectrum of white, from the most absolute radiance to the darkest grey, the two colors—green and white—with different gradations of density.

Just as we arrived at that end of the garden, I stopped next to Baroni to listen as she explained projects for the immediate future. The flowery path would continue here, a stone garden, ivied arches, the garden of smiles, etc., she began telling me, nearly voiceless. The dog took advantage of the moment to ramble into the densest thicket of all, the least explored and the largest. We watched him disappear into the bushes and stood there, looking straight ahead. As I said, you could see a plateau several kilometers in the distance, one of those formations sometimes called tablelands, which looked like the flat platform for a mountain that rose behind it. There were narrow clouds in the shape of threads or filaments that encircled the plateau several dozen meters down its sides, thinning out or breaking up, I couldn't say, which at any rate melted into its verdant slope. From behind, the sun lit up the plain surrounding the plateau, the former dappled in turn with its own combination of green and whites, all of which produced a rather singular contrast because it seemed controlled, as if we were present when the stage lights were turned on, with its fine-tuning of temperature and intensity. We stayed for a time

contemplating the view. I cannot say that this shared contemplation brought about any sort of fellow feeling, but when for a brief moment a slight darkening occurred I intimated the sunset, though it was several hours away, and this made me think of the sunsets that repeated day after day, and I thought it would be difficult to find a natural beauty that would make amends for that repetition, a punishment, in fact. As can be seen, gloomy thoughts were knocking at my door. The garden kept producing the usual sounds of the afternoon, etc. The dog soon emerged from the thicket and with hardly a pause, passed Baroni and took to the path again, with Baroni following right behind (and I along with her).

We kept on walking; we were now at the midpoint of the circuit and would set out to return on the other side. It was odd that what we couldn't presently see because of our new location was nonetheless there. I'm referring to the wide-open view of the mountains, and also to the tangled greenery of the surrounding wilderness. I say odd, but there's another word; it is, in fact, what happens when the setting, both present and invisible at once, turns into the ambience. That part of the garden proved fairly similar to the preceding one, the only obvious difference being the wilder state of the plants and botanical combinations, as if it signaled an advanced condition, a future moment toward which the entire area, as Baroni's personal endeavor, was headed: the day when it looked most like the local nature, whose convergence with the garden, however, would be the basic premise of the artifice. Some corners looked well-tended; others, just the opposite; not abandoned but ancient. According to Baroni, it was the oldest section. Thus it made sense that the shrubs and thickets had on the whole mingled more with each other and with the surroundings, almost to the point of a fight erupting, one in which Baroni hoped to intervene as little as possible. Logically, this sector, which had been colonized some time ago, aroused less interest in Baroni's dog. He hardly sniffed, and the few stimuli that seemed on

occasion to excite him came from the other part, the one we'd left behind, in which direction he pointed his detector time after time.

Baroni's conversation turned exclusively on the garden; a subject I couldn't follow as I should have because of my lack of knowledge, and perhaps my lack of interest, but also because, as I said earlier, I was hardly in a position to understand what she was saying. Most difficult were the details, the names of plants or her gardening routines, technical decisions, natural priorities, etc. But far from putting forward a minute description of a specialized nature, Baroni wanted to pass on her expressive enthusiasm: she wanted a site organized around general principles, so that the result would be an hierarchy of plants, more or less controlled; those principles could mask a metaphorical intention, such as the garden of smiles, already mentioned, or they could also be thematic in a horticultural sense; for instance the same type of plant in one sector, that sort of thing. The garden was unquestionably a sentimental and playful externalization as well. Perhaps I was infected by the dog's mood—I too lost a bit of curiosity. The dog and I, united unexpectedly by a thought. Once again, I found myself in a situation, the sort that happens all too often to me, that relates to distinct universes of things—the moment when, as a rule, a slight disinterest announces the impending occupation of my senses, and I realize it's no longer possible to do anything to save myself, until I finally succumb to confusion, actually a disintegration of my senses.

The more or less repeating bushes, the flowers—the same but in different colors—and the decorated stones that marked off, unnecessarily at times, the edge of the path, sunk me as I said into a kind of torpor. I don't know if the temperature, at that moment at its height for the day, had an influence, too; whatever the case, I felt immobilized and absorbed, suspended in time, incapable of reacting, hardly able to reason. I kept going forward at Baroni's side, I was able to

move, I understood whatever words happened to reach me, but I felt I was still in the same spot I was a few meters back, when that sensation of absence or of emptiness, I don't know what to call it, came over me. And what's more, the thought occurred to me that despite my appearing to have a normal or abnormal life, like that of any other person, at no moment had I ceased to be this way, in a silent stupor, immobilized by circumstances and not knowing how to behave or think, and on top of that, without caring too much about it; I regarded it as part of nature, I thought that each of us is burdened with our own insensitivity or sorrow that shackles us to the floor, etc. I couldn't place the blame on Baroni for my state, I knew that neither the house nor that region bore any responsibility. Besides, it was clear that if the mangoes hadn't managed to affect me earlier, then much less would the wild garden do so now. My thing came from some other place, it was long-established and deep, or superficial and recent, who knows. I realized that when it had displayed itself before, I hadn't noticed this intensity; and then later it had stopped coming out into the open simply because my entire person was already subject to its control, and I found myself plunged into the most complete indifference. The cells of indifference with which we're born, much like the cells of identity we each have, had in my case grown in one of their possible ways, that is, they turned against me.

We were like that, moving at a slow pace through the garden. I knew that the visit was about to end, or rather that sooner or later at some moment that afternoon it would end, and it made no difference to me if it happened right then and there or in the hours to come. It was my will subjected to insensitivity itself, lulled even more by Baroni's inscrutable words. At one point the thought occurred to me that she was in truth appealing for help, and that the cause of that weakened voice lay in the practically infinite amount of time of not being heard since she had first raised her voice. As they say, years of bitterness and incomprehension. Much like those

crushed beings who only need someone to save them, but most likely find no one, such that their time and voice slowly run out. In this flight of fancy, I was one of Baroni's last possibilities, by now there was hardly anyone left to contact because she lived at a distance, in one of those dwellings hidden in the ravine, invisible from the highway, on which in any case very few people traveled. The effort to produce some audible string of words was beyond her limits, exposing her to the risk of a definitive depression, to a life condemned to pass by with neither rescue nor salvation. I thus viewed with astonishment how she stood on tiptoe to talk to me, craning her neck in a superhuman way to draw closer to my ear, which was of no use either. I felt guilty at being so deaf and at my inability to help. Anyway, I was dragging along my own problems, the drowsiness mentioned earlier was proof of them, that's why I didn't know if my difficulty in understanding her was due to her condition or to my state, nonetheless it became clear that there was no great mystery: what she required went well beyond what her words expressed, and thus my understanding didn't necessarily pass through them.

That is, we were facing a problem. I recalled the rescue in which Baroni had played the leading role, when she saved a man drowning in the waters of a ravine, as I will no doubt explain later. She hadn't hesitated in front of the danger, she had decided to act as her nature, or her down-to-earth conscience or whatever, dictated. And I, in contrast, thought of the signs and the steps to follow according to some rather slow and especially useless protocols. It's true that hers had been a dream; nonetheless, it was shaped as if it had been a real situation. That was our great difference, and perhaps it was why I couldn't ultimately help her. There was not always a true distance for Baroni between reality and fantasy; and I devoted my time, every day, to discriminating between what was true and what was false, with the additional problem of always staying on the side of the unresolved. Nothing had sufficient magnitude to be truthful; even the

crudest and the most material, the most definitive, presented itself as provisional, or at any rate circumstantial, or—more complicated still—weak and unformed: it might happen that reality was irreconcilable with fantasy, but even in that case, it would end up yielding to the succession, and with it, to forgetfulness, which is a form of illusion. Of what use is the truth if it doesn't endure? This was a question, given my feelings at that moment, that I could apply to all that was known, both general and private, the immediate and the closest to hand. I'd find the truth not only weak, but also malleable, timid and fragile: at this juncture it translated into fantasy. A part of the details of any one thing stopped being true, or was redundant or insufficient, and the equivalent was immediately produced, the translation, and with that the truth became watered down.

Meanwhile we walked along the final stretch of the path without saying anything. The dog walked a few meters ahead with a self-absorbed step, or at any rate fatigued, as if he were returning from a grueling adventure, or he may have guessed my meditations, and even he felt ashamed of them. Every so often he turned his head around, and I saw that rather than searching for Baroni's eyes he cast a glance at me, no doubt wishing to verify something. We were approaching a bend, where the path turned into a lush corridor. Our pace was fairly slow, and the shady tunnel awaiting us thus presented itself as a prepared culmination, something on the order of a finale. And indeed, once we had rounded the bend Baroni's house appeared, as seen from the rear. We were at the end of the path; and both of us must have looked as if we were returning from a long walk. I don't know why, but at the sight of the house my bad thoughts abated somewhat; I stopped thinking of myself—though only momentarily—as a person with no recourse, and I fashioned an illusion of a normal life, if it can be called that, certainly a life difficult to define. At the rear of the house and off to one side was a pile of stones, junk and

tools. The scent of the mangoes came back, and now and then you could hear the voice of Rogelio through a window, apparently talking on the phone. This too had some bearing on my change in mood; I was pleased to think I, too, was subject to the influence of the house, understood as an industry of illusions, of beings created from will and spirit. And I also entertained the thought that the place's general mechanism of bestowing life included me, I was a temporary piece in that cog-wheel.

Not much more time passed. Shortly after that final look at the junk and the tools for cultivating the soil, I took my leave from Baroni's house with the confused sense of having left something unfinished behind. Rogelio and Baroni stood side by side under a tree, watching me leave, and the two raised their hands together in a final wave before I lost them from view. That was the tree on which Rogelio was painted, the one containing his mask; believing there were two of them, I saw them nonetheless revealed as three. At that moment I was unaware I'd been touched by the woman on the cross; but her presence and simplicity had reached me, and I now think that my disheartened or sad mood when I parted from Baroni was already a sign of her impact. As I explained above, a few hours later, in Boconó, the memory of the woman kept me from sleeping, and on the whole everything I did would be experienced the following morning as an epiphenomenon of having contemplated her and becoming acquainted, shall we say, with her existence. Anyway, because I was in rather low spirits, when I left Baroni's house I decided to take the longer route and drive through the mountainous region a bit. The usual choice at the crossroads: instead of going to the right I headed to the left. Within minutes Betijoque had all but vanished and I found myself, once again, before a vast panorama of mountainsides, basins, and overlapping ranges. And after heading to the highest part of the foothills in a stretch of time I

cannot remember, I took the road from the highway toward Jajó, which like Betijoque was located on top of a plateau and at a considerable altitude.

A minuscule and white town, Jajó is concealed in the mountains. At that time it seemed empty, so much so that it wouldn't have surprised me to learn, for instance, that it had just been evacuated for some mysterious reason. One could barely intuit anyone's presence inside the houses, nor were there recent signs of human activity on its narrow steep cobblestone streets. I'm a little embarrassed because someone might think I do it on purpose, but I must say that once again I found myself in a habitual situation, all too frequent: wandering around as if I was lost, with no destination in particular, through silent towns, empty of people, whose meaning is hidden along with my sense of perseverance. At the town's highest point I came across the Plaza Bolivar, obligatory, and the cathedral; both empty. (In Venezuela the main plazas are always named after Bolivar, with the exception of a tiny place lost in the nether regions of the country. Any village, town or city has its Plaza Bolivar, and the characteristics of the Liberator's statue are also predictable, depending on the place's rank.) I took a seat at one end of the plaza, on a slate-colored bench next to some flowerbeds crisscrossed by paths of the same color. A short time passed, the murmur of the wind came from the depths surrounding the town, or perhaps it was only, as they say, the siren's song from the heights. To the point where I was about to succumb to stupefaction because of the relentless tranquility of the place. I felt my thoughts had been erased and a slight drowsiness transported me elsewhere. So I stood up and braved a long walk around town.

In Jajó, as in other Andean towns, one is immediately moved by the balanced proportions. I suppose there must be some rule about the scale of buildings, given the physical limits to expanding or renovating in places with a difficult access. Accordingly, the height of the

houses and the width of the streets, for example, combined with the all-white walls, along with the physical monumentality of the surround, give the image of a human scale which has been adapted to the natural sphere, with no desire to dominate. In contrast to other places, nothing here gave me the impression of imbalance or of neglect; on the contrary, even the most secondary details seemed to respond to a simple logic and to an everyday, I mean, a simple organization. Because of the altitude, things in general acquired a special brightness, which, considering the predominant emptiness and the lively colors of windows, doors and roofs against the white façades, gave the whole of the town a touch of deliberate elegance, or at least of composure, and at the same time not clashing with the impressive setting of peaks and uplands, with their similar colors and uniform desolation. And as it tends to happen, the moment came when so much harmony brought about an unavoidable feeling of bewilderment, and also distrust.

I covered a radius of two or three blocks in the vicinity of the plaza; after the second corner the uniformity dissolved: in certain parts one saw neglect, or certain façades didn't adhere to the general norm. But I was most surprised at discovering the limited range of Jajó, because after walking two of three streets further, I could see a cultivated field, not overly large, hardly more than a vegetable patch, beyond which towered all the immensity of the area. Not only did the town end there—town in the sense of houses that are gathered and arranged—but the plateau also came to an end, because on the far side of the field there was a rather steep drop down the side of the mountain. One would then descend and find cultivated terraces, but one couldn't take them into account while sizing up the town. Duration and fleetingness; the two ideas, it seemed to me, combined in this place, altering their normal roles; there was no apparent contrast or conflict, what was built yielded to the physical mandate of the territory.

I went back to the Plaza Bolivar by means of a circuitous walk up and down the streets. And at several corners I happened to observe practically the same thing, that the true space—the visual amplitude and the perspective, let's say, almost of the zenithal sort—essentially began a few meters from there, without the presence of the usual transitions or mediations of the outskirts of a town, underscoring the simplicity or the naïveté of the built space. I re-emerged into the plaza at a point different from where I had entered. The world remained as quiet as before. I don't find it easy to describe the odd combination of silence that inhabits this village; Baroni herself in talking about Jajó emphasizes the silence that reigned while she was living there, and it evidently persists. So I emerged into the plaza, and from this angle my curiosity was piqued by a bakery located on the sidewalk in front, to the right of the Cathedral, its name painted in rather large blue letters on the white walls of its exterior: "*Virgen de Talquito.*" I didn't realize it referred to the local Virgin. I was moved by the diminutive "*ito,*" of a simplicity I considered surprising, on the other hand similar to that of the town, accentuated in some way by a material—talc—I judged unlikely in a Virgin. (To me it seemed the presence of such a Virgin would be too precarious, even more so if she were made of "*Talquito.*")

I've kept a photo of the bakery, taken a few meters away, where one can see the name that takes up almost the entire width of the façade. The door is open, but because of the brightness of the day and the semi-darkness of the locale, the interior is shadowy and it's impossible to make anything out. My memory, though, compensates for the darkness; when I stopped to look, a man leaned out over the counter and turned his head to the street, attempting to see me. I can detect his face sticking out and he's almost recognizable, as if he were in the photo every time I look at it, but in fact he doesn't appear. And it's as though the photo could speak as well, because when I look at it I always clearly remember when the man said, most likely a

response to someone's question, "He's looking," doubtless referring to me. His face displayed a few partial reflections of the exterior light, above all in his eyes, hardly enough to notice, like the play of light in Japanese interiors, which becomes increasingly weaker and indirect.

Some time later, when I was back at home and the interlude in Jajó was another detour on my travels through the region, which is linked to the other places under different categories of things (photos, as I just said, a scrap of paper with notes, an object or a plain souvenir), I learned that the Virgin of Talquito became the patroness of that town in 1936, when around Christmastime she appeared before a young girl in a layer of talc the girl was using as she set up a Nativity scene. Very rarely have I been interested in religious motifs; as a result, I can't say if this apparition represents a common episode within the panorama of apparitions by the Virgin. I imagine, however, that she appeared at a moment and in a fashion that was quite compatible with the conditions of the place; that it was an obliging apparition, and that it was followed by an ostensible but discreet presence, without theatricality; indeed you could say she was right on the mark. I can imagine the townsfolk, all of them half-related and gathered around the Nativity, celebrating an apparition so risky it could have failed in an instant, with only a puff of wind. At that moment the girl with the layer of talc was wearing a flowery yellow apron, she was a visitor, she had come from another town, and she too was almost certainly related to her hosts, who I presume were tradespeople or transporters of goods. When the apparition occurred, Baroni was little more than a year old, and it was probably only a few years before she came to live in Jajó, where she would remain until she was betrothed, at age eighteen.

While I was sitting in the plaza after my long walk no one entered or left the bakery. Nor did I see people in the adjacent streets. And yet to say everything was deserted wouldn't be quite right, because one sensed life going on according to its own normality. The time to leave was

approaching, and my drowsiness also returned, such that I was on the point of resuming the trip. Just at that moment, when I was standing up, I heard the revving of a motor that seemed to be slowly approaching, changing gears because of the incline. Apart from its script devoid of actions, Jajó afforded me a novelty at the finale. Life in far-flung corners is nourished by sporadic trips; that was probably the only one of the day or afternoon. A school bus presently made its appearance and slowly came to a stop on one side of the plaza. By now I felt quite familiar with the place, but as soon as the noise stopped I noticed the cloud of silence surrounding the town; only now and then interrupted, at that point in the afternoon, by the wind that brought with it, depending on its force and direction, the murmuring, it seemed to me, of a ravine. The driver descended from the bus, took a few steps and was at first surprised when he saw me, but then raised his hand to greet me. I returned his greeting, as one would expect, and on doing so I noticed that the bus carried no passengers. The man must have been some fifty meters from where I was observing him, dressed in a white shirt that gleamed excessively under the sun. For a brief moment he seemed bewildered, the thought occurred because of my presence, but in the end he raised his eyes toward the sky, did a few stretching exercises and then returned to the bus to sit on the steps, where there was shade. A well-deserved rest, I thought. I believed I heard some barely perceptible music, as if he were listening to the radio, but this was something I could never verify. And even though it wasn't an interesting enigma, at times I surprise myself by remembering that thread of music, right now for instance, and I'd like to know whether it arose from a mistaken impression or if in fact he had the radio on.

Curiously, I felt like the sole inhabitant and the virtual owner of that place, a stranger who within the next half hour would leave Jajó, probably forever after having been there a minuscule amount of time, equivalent to a blink, or less than that, considering the normal span of

a lifetime. I'm not saying I felt like the true owner, but rather something like an imagined boss, abstract. I looked around and it seemed in its entirety like an available landscape, ready to be occupied at will. I thought, this lofty and hidden town, so immovable at the summit, already physically integrated into the mountains, is nonetheless bland and malleable, like the most uncertain particle of reality.

For a moment I feared I'd been contaminated by Baroni's spirit, when she invents versions of things or of real events as a way of having a dialogue with them, of sculpting them too so that they serve as a consolation, a lesson or an inspiration. Because if indeed I lacked that pedagogical intent, as I believe I lack one now, the simple link she establishes with her objects and models of reference inspired a sort of attraction in me. That innocence seemed to be a genetic code of art, and that if I wished to talk about Baroni I had to obey it, just as I would if I wished to speak of any other thing. And I could say more: at one point I felt a strange nostalgia, or a sense of deprivation, before her capacity to establish those simple unilateral relationships between material objects and products of the imagination.

In this way, I could define the contradictory attraction I felt toward the figure of Baroni: I'd suggest a suspension of my aptitudes, a certain promise of happiness or of instant communion, but overly ephemeral. I couldn't trust the binary world of suffering or of happiness, and as such I freed myself from belonging to it, which forced me in turn to frequent it as a visitor, because in its arbitrariness and in its opposite extremes I found a lost substance, in any case never attained, that functioned like a promise of well-being. I mean, in Baroni's art there was, is, a note of exaltation whose object is personal betterment, in the sense of deliverance from life. In this aspect it also coincides with religious preoccupation, although at times it may deal with figures that are, so to speak, secular. Thus, she represented the infancy of art to me. Not

only in the sense of naïveté—let's exclude that—but rather, childhood as eloquence, on the one hand, as vitality, but especially as a provider of life; life as something that is passed on. In Baroni's work, one doesn't find the aims of a waning art. There's no disenchantment or irony, nor are there uncertainties about the meaning. Disillusionment, so to speak, is what I imposed in my encounters with Baroni's self-portraits: Baroni as object and model, the resource and the material.

That afternoon in Baroni's house, then, we had agreed that she'd make a saintly doctor for me. We settled on the price, on the time it would take to make, a bit uncertain for sure, and on the general characteristics of the piece, especially the height. After this I'd had no news from her besides a quick report on her ailing health and the damage her lungs had suffered because of the paint she uses. In the same way, after a few months had already gone by, on the terrace in Hoyo de la Puerta I could hardly get any information from her about this piece. She told me only one thing, which filled me with doubts and which I took as a bad omen: she already knew there wouldn't be enough space to put the parrot—the constant companion of her figures—at the feet of the doctor or on his shoulders. The parrot is a good omen, and according to what people say, it protects against bad luck, too. We were, as I said earlier, sitting on the terrace, and the sloth had already disappeared in the heights of the yagrumo tree, as I will surely refer to further on. Baroni must have immediately sensed my disappointment, because she went on to explain that if she couldn't find a place, as she feared, she would in any case fix things so as to include one. (I now recall another parrot, that in the vast garden of a house and several meters away from the town cemetery, intoned the Venezuelan anthem early in the morning; I thought that if some next of kin were to visit a grave at that unlikely hour, they would hear the opening lines. But of course, in a small town that would be the matinal music of the cemetery.)

As I said, I unwrapped the woman on the cross with Baroni's help and as Olga looked on; I appeared to be receiving a gift, and in truth my feelings approached that, I believed she was entrusting me with a good, a gift or a stimulus; a sort of talisman as well. I worried about the great quantity of paper and plastic bags that covered the piece. The bags came from stores in different cities; shops in Valera, Boconó, Maracay and Caracas were represented, as well as Barquisimeto. A line could be traced between these places and a route imagined in segments, with comings and goings, partial detours and retreats. I should say that at that moment these bags moved me as much as the woman on the cross herself; they were the seasonings of her everyday life, of a simple life, the proof of Baroni's private and domestic world, doubtless made up of commissions, local trips, visits to friends or family, educational gatherings, comings and goings, artistic invitations, etc. And following each of those trips, I thought, a bag remained as well, or more than one, as a proof or an unbidden souvenir. Not only their utility, but also the good sense of keeping them was verified in cases such as this of the woman on the cross. And that was another proof of the immediacy of her presence. On the stone-topped round table, then, the components of the consignment were separated: the Woman, sheets of newspaper, and shopping bags. Papers and bags seemed to be the tools on which the woman on the cross depended for her transfer, and for a moment I thought too that her elegant boots and attractive dancing attire—even the scalloped-edge neck and shoulders, obviously added to enhance her attire—I thought, it had all been purchased in those places and the bags had arrived here as a certificate of authenticity. An existential proof, say, because Baroni had dressed the woman in these items, bought in those stores, and a constructive proof—the most valuable of all, concerning as it does a fabricated figure—because it demonstrated that Baroni had used those very clothes to realize the work.

So I was tempted to keep these bags as proofs, and days later didn't hesitate to make a decision in this regard. They would be the frame, the complement to reality, a cultural document, I don't know, and I thought too that they would be the Venezuelan mounting. The weave of life and geography that might have appeared tangible, because of its superficiality, in reality almost always eluded me, I am fairly ignorant why, or at any rate I tended habitually to place it in an unattainable point, only verifiable before a certain type of sign, like the bags or situations such as this one I'm describing, pretty hit or miss. The bags told an attendant story, a digression or a counterpart to Baroni's; and they also provided a side story to my own about my approach, or access to, the woman on the cross. Some time later, when I said good-bye, I would carry the bags with me with the excuse of protecting the figure, which however I didn't yet imagine surrounded by this plastic altar, at first glance wrinkled and misshapen. A worldly and sacrificial heroine, the woman on the cross exacted an offering of paper and nylon. In fact, the scenario of bags from the more or less traditional stores in Valera, Maracay, or even Barinas kept company with the woman on the cross a few meters from here, where I presently am, until very recently. It was like a territory subject to the demands of the figure, where a perpetual but frozen disorder reigned, since nothing could move in that space over which the woman stood on high, absorbed, as always, dominating everything from her severe height. The bags seemed randomly scattered, as if she had heedlessly pushed them to the side in order to get dressed and climb onto the simple pedestal from which she has never descended.

At the house in Hoyo de la Puerta I was offered some fruit juice. We spoke some about the weather and a little more about the townsfolk. In Venezuela, to speak of the weather means to speak of the rain or the lack of it. Around that time the chief topic of conversation was that each year it rained more than the previous one; the dry season was growing shorter and a larger

area was flooded and affected by heavy rains and mudslides. The other topic proved more unexpected; Olga said that for some time a good number of the people she saw in the neighborhood were unknown to her. At times she ran into acquaintances who were having a conversation with strangers, something that intrigued her even more. And of all the strangers, the most worrisome were the children, because otherwise she would have integrated them with the adults she knew. There were no young people. I inquired if she had met any of those who up to a short time ago had been grouped as strangers. She said yes, but that they were included with the group of new people, not with those whom she didn't know. That is, there had been bands, waves of newcomers. Some time earlier I had read reports in the newspapers about the growth in population in the area (they had used the word "sudden"); they said it was chaotic as well. Now that I think about it, it's astonishing how one needs newspapers to know a country, or at least to believe one knows it. Given the topography of the town, the changes couldn't be easily seen. You could be on a street or on the highway and would see numerous people coming from the ravine or from some other low-lying area, from their houses or farms to wait for transportation.

And once more I felt a leap backward, the strange sensation of *déjà vu*, the repetition of a familiar experience, in this case a newspaper article I was seeing confirmed, as though it had been written to be checked against the very situation it exposed. From time to time Baroni contributed to Olga's story with some diminutive or term of endearment, or more directly, compassion. In those regions, in those days less urban than now, strangers prompted wariness more than curiosity. Nonetheless, Baroni's friend was herself a stranger to the newcomers who arrived with their families, close friends or neighbors from another locale.

Olga was explaining this—as she acknowledged, it was hard to explain—when Baroni, who some moments earlier had absented herself from the conversation, stretched out her arm and

without a word pointed straight ahead of her: on the trunk of a nearby tree, which rose from the dense greenery, a sloth was ascending. We remained silent before this apparition. Though familiar, one couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by its slowness; and that's what happened to the three of us, as if the animal were teaching us a new way to move, or even more, as if it were performing for us and proposed a suspension in time. Once again we proved it's not easy to keep one's eyes on a sloth for an extended period, because its slowness inscribed a sort of weariness on its movements, and this made the event seem hardly important. For that reason one turned one's eyes somewhere else, or simply became distracted, and on looking back again the animal was still in the same spot, or at least that's how it seemed, as if the interlude hadn't existed. We kept on watching it in this way, adrift, exchanging assorted comments about anything.

Something unexpected was about to happen, though: the sloth was several meters above us, seemingly absorbed in its climb, when it decided to turn its head and rivet its eyes on us. As if we were a single reaction, we three remained surprised at such a human attitude: to turn around and look, I mean, to display something close to curiosity. We saw its face, similar to a clown's; or its whole body, like a doll's. At that moment we expected that it would stay motionless for a while, because each change in position represented an eternity, and yet before we realized it, the sloth had already embarked on its habitual climb. Every now and then it rotated its neck a hundred and eighty degrees and juttied its head out over its back to look below; and did so in such an efficient way that we seemed to be witnessing a form of contortionism, once again human.

(I'll now grant myself a revealing parenthesis, as in those old movies that take a brief detour to show aspects of the local life. The slowness of these animals, fairly harmonious when they move through trees, turns into a dangerous clumsiness when they happen to walk on the ground, where they're exposed to fatal dangers. On the outskirts of Caracas it is not uncommon

to see run-over sloths on roads or on their shoulders. At the same time, the person who wants to help one of them, to cross the highway for instance, and tries to carry it in order to do so risks being crushed by those claws suitable for climbing extremely tall tree trunks, in a clasp difficult to undo and capable of going down to the bone. Because of it, and because of the felling of trees, it was normal to see increasingly fewer sloths.)

Then the animal resumed the climb, before which our conversation would always seem minor, a superfluous preoccupation and an extravagant use of time. Yet minutes later it repeated the operation of looking down. Then I remembered another occasion on which I was observing, as I was now, the movement of a sloth, when the skies opened up with rain and heavy winds. It wasn't an excessively heavy rain, nonetheless the gusts of wind were enough to drench the animal in a few minutes, and motionless and clinging to the yagrumo tree with all its might, it displayed, so to speak, the true shape of its angular body, like a small and scrawny cat. That tree, which generally serves as protection against the rain, and in this way provides shelter for a sloth as well as food, did not have enough leaves. Thus I could see that the volume of this animal is almost exclusively made up of fur; that its true body, if one can put it that way, seemed subject, in this case at least, to a regimen of exhaustion, and I noticed that its cranium was the size of a tangerine, otherwise not excessively large.

As time passed, the backdrop of bags around the woman on the cross turned into a devastated landscape; the plastic had aged, acquired a shadowy patina, lost color and pliability. The figure of the woman on the cross seemed more exalted as days went by, and the bags, in contrast, changed their character to become a sad and shabby presence. One morning it seemed to me that with their mixture of grease and grubbiness they absorbed the energy or spirit of the woman, which was probably very limited (they were her audience and setting, I thought, and as

such they consumed her), so I decided to remove them; they had more than fulfilled their role as witnesses, the woman was able to continue alone with her pensive look, no need for a Nativity scene or any diorama.

Then the moment arrived when we forgot about the sloth; it must have continued with its gradual ascent. We said something about that land, about other countries, among them, mine, about the people from each of them, etc., and it was obvious how during this entire conversation Baroni always tended to talk about herself and about three basic themes, which could be summed up with the words health, feelings and creation. When I first met her at her house, this personality trait proved natural and worth noting, especially given her fragile state and the fact it was a first encounter; now however it seemed like a customary limit. “Artists are like that, always in their own world,” Olga said at one point when Baroni left to talk on the phone, wanting perhaps to justify her, understand her, or most likely to establish some complicity between us; according to Olga’s way of seeing things, I think, both of us, she and I, were two people belonging to the world of practical things. It was obviously a mistaken vision, though I didn’t say so. No one could say that Baroni didn’t belong to the same world as Olga, or to the same world as me. On the contrary, she’s quite attentive on the whole to crucial aspects of her affairs, which she seldom neglects. On one occasion, she protested to the organizers of an art show because her work had been included under the category of “popular art.” Baroni demanded a place within the general space of art, without pre-established categories. The organizers did not accept her protest, though in any event they acknowledged it. This happened around the time she delivered the saintly doctor to me, about a year after the meeting in Hoyo de la Puerta.

Baroni had to travel to Maracay, where the arts biennial was taking place, to receive a prize in the aforementioned category of “popular art.” Once there she would lodge her complaint,

even when she still didn't know whether she would accept the prize or not (in the end she did). We agreed by phone that she would bring the saint to Maracay, where I would pick it up. Maracay is about a hundred kilometers from Caracas, westward, as they say in Venezuela. It is a sweltering hot city, the home of one of the various long-lasting dictators who have governed the country, Juan Vicente Gómez. On entering Maracay from any point one sees enormous military bases, seemingly without end. Once again I met with Baroni at the home of a friend. Because of several details, it seemed a copy of the scene in Hoyo de la Puerta: the house on the outskirts of town, in Taca-Taca, adjacent to Maracay, the garden or patio, which in this case afforded an especially dense greenery, from whose indistinct depth came the sound of a stream or waterfall, the stone-topped table in the middle of the patio where the saintly doctor was waiting, etc. This time, Baroni hadn't wrapped it in plastic bags. It was protected with blankets or simple pieces of cloth, no doubt rags made from old clothes. I'm not exaggerating when I say that on taking off his raiments and uncovering him, the saintly doctor briefly upset the balance around him, that is, the surrounding natural setting and us. I knew from Baroni that the doctor would be holding up a child; she had also told me of her difficulties with the parrot.

I should say I immediately felt confused, and that should be explanation enough. My confusion responded to the entire presence that can only be attained by beauty, that might not be the word, rather, let's say elegance, it's more neutral, an illumination, who knows, the aesthetic emphasis. The green tones of the foliage became even more pronounced, and the few objects present (the table, already mentioned, some wooden chairs and two rocking chairs) seemed to find a more reliable meaning than their foreseeable practical use, which was, once again, to frame the visiting doctor. Baroni's figures rely on that capacity, to subject the surroundings to their presence. Otherwise, the work shown in the Biennale Salon was a fairly tall Virgin of the

Mirror, super-baroque and of nearly life-size proportions. It belonged to the group of well-adorned and colorful works that had small wooden pieces or accessories representing lacework, pleats or hems on the garment, body ornaments, etc.

From what I could learn, since colonial times the Virgin of the Mirror has commanded a rather minor position within the ranks of Virgins on call for the faithful in Venezuela. She appeared in Mérida, a bucolic city in the Andes, as a reflection in a small, inexpensive hand mirror. Yet perhaps because of this impoverished state, she was the Virgin who restored Baroni's sight after three dreams that brought two years of blindness—probably caused by nerves—to an end. Once her vision was restored, Baroni made her first woodcarving, dedicated in gratitude to the Virgin of the Mirror. A figure twenty-five centimeters tall, which she put on a wooden block in lieu of a pedestal, and is kept on view, as she says, for all who enter her home. In truth, the recovery of her sight was a more gradual process, involving two apparitions of the Virgin. In the first dream, Baroni finds herself crying and a girl with very long hair, about nine years old, asks her what's wrong. Baroni replies that her eyes are ruined, that's why she's crying. Then the girl promises to heal her. When Baroni wants to know who she is, the girl replies that she is the Virgin of the Mirror. That is, she was the announcement. The second dream was more eventful. In it Baroni goes to bathe in a ravine in Mesa de Esnujaque, the town where she was born; it is the Ravine of the Virgin. There she sees a man drowning and there's no one around who can save him. So she throws herself into the water and lifts him onto her shoulders to bring him to safety.

We can imagine the man's bewilderment, it must have seemed beyond belief that a weak not to mention blind woman could have lifted him. Moments later, Baroni senses that her face is bathed in blood. Still carrying the man, she immerses herself in the water to flush out her eyes

and little by little she realizes that the pain is subsiding, and her eyes, sunken until that moment in blindness, move forward, recover their former pressure and return to their place. She splashes water on her face several times and when she touches her eyes they no longer hurt; a moment later she has recovered her sight. With these two dreams Baroni can see again. In gratitude, she picks up a small tree trunk and carves the figure of the Virgin, as I said, about twenty-five centimeters tall, which she decides to keep on view in her house. To this end she installs her on a tree trunk of considerable dimensions. Nonetheless, the Virgin will appear in another dream, a third time, to ask a favor: she needs a greater presence and because of it Baroni must make her larger. She tells Baroni to use the tree trunk on which she, the Virgin, is standing. It was the second step in the diffusion of the Virgin of the Mirror under the aegis of Baroni. Later, this large image will be the one that heads religious processions in Boconó.

Bracelets, ribbons, jewelry, crowns, flowers, the colorful accessories of Baroni's Virgins saturate the figures and their garments, they come to compensate for the simple outline of bodily representation, but they also affirm or underscore the simplicity of that same frontal view, sculptural, so to speak, perhaps a little antiquated, but of palpable eloquence. Though the Virgins wear a great deal of accoutrements and ornaments, they remain simple, modest and discreet. Religiosity lies in the expression, variously called hieratic; for its part, humility derives from the corporal stance, inclined; and the abundant adornments tend to express the spirituality, the nuances, of Baroni's personal devotion.

Meanwhile, miracles commence as soon as Baroni finishes the first Virgin, twenty-five centimeters tall. The first miracle has as its protagonist a fighting cock, close to death, which is placed at her feet. It spends the night alongside the Virgin, and the following morning the animal has recovered, hungry but ready to brave the fortunes of any fighting cock. This new miracle was

the beginning of a renewed era for the Virgin of the Mirror, who found in Baroni a virtuous intermediary, in many senses of the word. As is well known, a fatally wounded cock is, as a rule, doomed because of its physical condition, though it may still claim our attention. No one rules out the seemingly vanquished cock, because everyone believes it can overcome its pain. It's even possible for the vanquished cock to attract new wagers; as in the so-called "Bolivar" bet, in which the odds are 5-1 against the presumably defeated cock. The fight isn't over yet, but the end seems ordained; but at times the cock draws strength from who knows where, mounts the opponent, the presumptive victor, and finishes it off. I once wanted to clear up my confusion and asked Barreto, a friend of mine, about the "Bolivar." I recalled a somewhat baroque mechanism: I thought the bet was for the amount of time the apparently defeated cock kept alive the fighting instincts of the other cock, the winner. The idea made no sense and was impractical. From my infrequent visits to cockpits, and from my conversations with Barreto, I could surmise, among other things, that the sport of cockfighting is one of those secret societies that transcend borders, and, if possible, any other human limitation. I'll probably look at several complex facets of my friend Barreto later on.

I'm unaware of the reasons for this miracle, whether it was a coincidence or if there was a concrete reason why a cock was the protagonist of the first episode of healing, if some link existed with Baroni's then-recent cure, etc. I never asked her; I'd like to have known, though it may have related to a more accidental sequence of events, but I didn't do so, and now regret it. On the whole I regret having asked her only a very few things, perhaps I was overly inhibited before her somewhat confined and self-sufficient world, one that, as I said, impelled her to nearly always speak of herself, be it her dreams, her sufferings, her joys or ideas for the future. One could only briefly establish a relation between Baroni and the mortally wounded cock. The only

point of convergence would be the struggle for life and the obvious proximity of death. But the usual attributes of a fighting cock—the instinct of supremacy and especially its formidable aggressiveness—are as far as I know, absent, and it is not hard to assume that this is also the case for Baroni. Most likely there is an arbitrary relationship; in the end the same reality often establishes and hides the links in a fairly surprising manner. The mortally wounded fighting cock manages to survive, the victim nonetheless of its own nature, which leads it to be killed or to kill, and apart from that, it probably doesn't find a reason, so to speak, for its existence.

Consequently, its lust for life, if such a thing can be verified, bespeaks a desire to fight once again. Yet there's always a moment that devotees, and of course the fighting cocks themselves, seem to know well; it's when the cock receives a unique wound, the decisive one that dooms it and sends it packing, after which it withdraws and stays motionless, fatigued in some instances, and in others, lacking obvious interest in its survival. Or it can happen all the same that a cock will rise up and come back fighting. All those in attendance will jump to their feet, passions high, cheering the animal on with a roar, or railing against it; whatever. In those cases, one would say the wounded cock bounced back, though it only lasts for a brief moment. It's that the only thing that matters to the fighting cock—though nearly dead and hardly breathing—is to kill.

The compassion of the Virgin of the Mirror, incarnated in this initial figure of Baroni's, flowed then toward a creature of those characteristics (both despised and innocent at once), the Virgin, perhaps condolent, before the weakness and suffering of the victim. During her period of blindness, Baroni learned how to knit with her hands, an art in which she achieved a noteworthy skill, garnering praise from those who knew her then. It was during her confinement because of her psychiatric condition. She asked if she could knit, and they wouldn't give her any needles; the director of the place told her they only had thread. Another thing I failed to ask her was

whether she kept on knitting after she was healed; I imagine she didn't, that knitting was a temporary labor and a little autistic, as it were, intended to sustain her through the darkness and her psychological prostration. I've seen, however, an interview with Baroni in which she knits for some moments. Of course I noticed the surprising agility of her fingers, but what impressed me most was her vacant gaze, in whose emptiness her eyes appeared to recover their blindness.

After the second piece, Baroni kept on making Virgins of the Mirror. As well as new figures and different religious scenes, in which, from the start, she tended to combine elements of doctrine, popular beliefs or wisdom, local customs, nature, etc. Ever since her early ups and downs in Boconó, when she lived in the cemetery, or later on, when after some studies she devoted herself to taking care of the sick and "fixing the dead," as she puts it, Baroni's name, or her figure, achieved local fame with relative ease. From the time she was eleven, when she suffered her first cataleptic fit, she became known for having special powers. People from the surrounding area wanted the young saint to cure their illnesses, or simply that she see what others knew nothing about; the future, for instance, or disquiet in its broadest sense. Baroni recounts that in the solitude of the town, in this case Escuque, where she spent part of her childhood and later years, at night she generally covered herself with whatever was available and let forth a howl, as the spirits were supposed to do. During her childhood, her mother taught her how to carve wood, an activity she abandoned until the miracle of the Virgin.

With the carvings of the Virgin of the Mirror, something similar occurred as did to her fame as a healer and seer. At first, she became a local success through enthusiastic commentaries, which kept spreading and whose result translated into commissions. Since then Baroni has been making her figures almost without interruption; and as a counterpart, she undertook a series of artistic, or, more generally, cultural initiatives, focused on the one hand on

her objects of veneration, that is, the Virgin and death, and on the other, on the local community, on neighbors and nearby towns. In the city of Isnotú, where she lived for several years, she created a museum at her house, called, not surprisingly, the Museum of the Mirror. It was the place devoted to exhibiting her work, the non-religious as well, and to extolling the Virgin. Even today, on leaving Isnotú in the direction of Betijoque, one finds on the right side of the road the former Museum of the Mirror, where one of Baroni's sons now lives, named Marco Tulio, also a wood carver. Once I stopped at that house—as imposing as a castle and at whose base is a fairly spacious parking lot, as if it were a tourist attraction—and after ringing the bell for a long time, a skinny boy appeared. He said the house was closed and that it would open a few days later, though he didn't know when. I've seen a movie in which the son carries Baroni in his arms. He's a well-built man, and one can see that lifting his mother would require no effort on his part, for him it must have been like pushing a slick along a piece of wood. And Baroni can be seen, her expression insecure, which is how she always appears on camera, anxiously awaiting the reaction of the interviewer. I don't know why Baroni moved from Isnotú to Betijoque, nor do I know the reasons of her previous moves, for example, when she left Boconó, where she and Rogelio had built a house, whose backyard, according to Baroni, had no limits, it reached a small river, and she dreamed of extending it further. There, in Boconó, they had a small store in the front of the house, where they sold food and fresh produce.

Isnotú is located where the ground begins to rise, after the town of Valera, and in the midst, of course, of a mountainous landscape heading toward the cordillera. It is the town where the saintly doctor was born, and today practically the entire place has been converted into a shrine of veneration; or at any rate, the entire town that's visible, because the part not devoted to the Venerable—as he's called in keeping with his title on the road to sainthood—has become

invisible to visitors. Whole blocks dedicated to the sale of religious trinkets, and across from them facilities devoted the cult itself: chapels, monuments, altars, convents, walls of prayers and offerings, etc. In Isnotú one can see the concentrated efforts of the Church and local merchants to regulate a fairly irregular devotion. Spirituality is dispersed and yields space to the creation and satisfaction of religious needs. Thus the saintly doctor assumes all portable formats, and when the veneration mandates a display in the shrine, whether as gratitude, a debt, or a favor requested, it is translated into a metallic plaque surrounded by thousands of others, fairly similar on the whole, that populate the walls of a nearly monumental enclosure. I stood for a short while before the most crowded wall and didn't know very well what to think, for each plaque seemed to dissolve into the others, and they all formed an odd anonymous writing.

I don't know if a prohibition has been issued against painted or homemade ex-votos, which are always unique in their expressiveness, but if there isn't one, the barrier in place, at any rate, seems absolutely effective. As far as I know, unlike other popular cults, that of the saintly doctor is not used to transmit experiences. By coincidence, I arrived at Isnotú two days after the doctor's birthday. (Because he was born there, his birth is also celebrated. In the rest of the country, the day of his death is commemorated.) Evidence of the festivities was still visible; nonetheless the townspeople seemed all at once adapted to the normality of the small town, receiving occasional visitors like us during the week, as if the customs of the celebrations were as follows: a flock of worshippers every so often, on the weekends, or for two or three days the entire year, and then normal life returns to the emptied shrine.

Across from the house of the ex-votos—to give it a name—I entered the bread shop for a coffee to revive me after the time I spent driving through Valera's center, a feverish concentration of buses, cars, street vendors and pedestrians in the midst of a diaphanous heat; in

that bakery I noticed the remnants of the banquet in honor of the saint's birthday: a great number of dishes on tables, stacks of utensils that had no divivable use, though it was obviously recent, piles of boxes from emptied cartons, plastic disposable bags, etc. And as a counterpoint to these hints of activity—most likely feverish at a certain point—were the two or three habitual customers, almost invisible, and to whom no one paid attention. And especially, the atmosphere, which conveyed a climate not of unremitting kitsch, but rather of virtual abandonment, a kind of life without its own life, I don't know, like those bus terminals in small towns that apart from movement and predictable occurrences remain sunk in shadows and indifference. From the town's prospect, the shrine and the entire main street of Isnotú composed an excessive scenario, of an abandonment that was rather well achieved. In the house of the votives the predominant color was black; it was the metallic plaques that gleamed in the daylight sun like a deeply affecting mausoleum, seemingly installed to instill fear. If you drew near you could make out other colors: plaques that were sky blue and red. On reading them one could see on each a nearly identical text with a formula for expressing gratitude, in general, the words "thank you," the initials and the surname of the individual, or of the entire family, the date, etc.

We stayed, then, for a good while at that house on the outskirts of Maracay, contemplating the saintly doctor. There wasn't much conversation other than our mentioning, each of us in turn and with exclamations or scattered remarks, the way in which the doctor exuded his presence in that plant-filled setting and over us. At a certain point we listened to an ambulance siren. A few hundred meters away was the highway connecting Maracay to the sea—a road that traverses the mountain and the majestic rain forest covering it. Baroni remained deep in thought: her gaze cast down at the floor in a gesture that in a certain way was already familiar to me because of the woman on the cross. A moment later—roused from her musings, it seemed

to me, by the siren of another ambulance passing by—she recounted that she'd had to buy a separate ticket for the doctor's journey, because otherwise they wouldn't have allowed her to place it at her side, on the adjacent seat. And having rejected the idea of checking it as baggage, for fear he would be damaged, she couldn't carry him on her lap for the entire trip, either, because of his weight. As a result, she told me, the doctor had to have his own ticket. The saintly doctor thus repeated the trip he must have made so often during his life, from Trujillo to Caracas, though of course under other conditions and on different roads. Now he was stopping in Maracay, where he would change traveling partners. For that purpose, I'd brought with me, in the same backpack I'd used in Hoyo de la Puerta, the large quantity of small-denomination bills that were required. And then we repeated the operation, I took out the payment and handed it to Baroni. Obviously I had to pay for the saint's ticket, too, and once again I experienced some mixed feelings about this purchase, so to speak, in this case extending to the trip as well.

The money proved insufficient, unable to represent what I was buying, but at the same time was of a sufficient magnitude to signal the change in hands. I felt I was procuring not only the piece that's now, as I said earlier, a few meters away from me, fractured and cracked, but was also acquiring its recent nighttime trajectory as a traveler, was acquiring that type of related ups and downs that were, to a certain degree, so symbolic; but above all, I believed I was acquiring the time and the effort (the inclination and the attitude) Baroni had put into the making of the piece. I'm not saying that the saintly doctor was secondary; on the contrary, he was at the center of the question. But through him—who is now mine—I could say: a minimal part of Baroni's limited strength, a bit of her immense or as yet unknown talent, including a fraction of her physical deterioration, a consequence of working with her arms and, in particular, of her contact with paints, I'd purchased all that, and it's true, it belongs to me in an ambiguous way, or better

still, in a vague, but absolute certain, way. Consequently, the idea of being the owner of immaterial things has been with me ever since, but as if they were actually material; and in particular, something that had not occurred to me when I bought the woman on the cross, I felt that through these operations I'd appropriated part of Baroni's life, that not only had I bought an object that was fairly mute and considerably eloquent—no doubt that would be controversial—but I'd also assigned myself part of whatever that object had had as motivation. And in this way, I thought while Baroni was counting the money in her lap and placing small stacks of bills on the table, an endless chain might follow. My appropriation even approached the saintly doctor, or even more, some of the events in his mysterious life and particularly his imposing legend.

Daylight slipped between the moist branches in the garden and lit up the wooden body of the doctor. He gleamed like a recently finished piece, not surprisingly, and at his feet the darkened rags—parts of old pieces of cloth or threadbare blankets—were the vestiges of his long journey, not the recent one undertaken at Baroni's side, these were the proof of his fairly long and rugged trajectory, both civil as well as religious and immaterial, under the guise of a veneration. After a long time, he had found a resting place in this garden and on this table, etc. Everything could be adapted to a more or less idyllic version of the saint; to me it didn't matter whether I had forced or manipulated the story or anyone's motives, I wanted to understand it as a real version, as the manifestation, let's say, of that blandness of life to which I referred earlier. In this sense, my illusion simply followed Baroni's instructions. The instructions were neither defined nor were they explicit; I could summarize this by saying they were her attempts to come up with a story, a context and a theatrical space for her works. Hence the true or imaginary episodes with which she surrounded the figures, and her work on each of these (of adornment, of scenographic commentary, but also of theatrical digression). Anyway the truth is, those rags and

cloths around the saintly doctor on the stone-topped table seemed like an independent part of him; such as it was, the assemblage was another of Baroni's combined pieces, something similar to installations, or inanimate performances. As I said earlier, she had made of her life, in its different depths and lines of continuity, a work of art, fairly dispersed, obviously, and both uniform and multifaceted at the same time. And in that sense, one always could find "something more" available, a real stage direction or some element arising from the context of the situation or from the weight of the past. For Baroni, the stamp of the artistic was open, and as a consequence everything, many things, could be appended to modify each element.

I'm not sure what thoughts the doctor would have today about his birthplace, even though he's been embraced as its hero and acts as its breadwinner. When it was his lot to work here, shortly after his graduation, he deplored the townspeople; in his letters he expressed outrage at those who still believed in "*el daño*," that is, evil spirits, potions and superstitions in general; chickens and black cows. The feeling was reciprocal; being a native and having family in town failed to increase his esteem among the people, just the opposite, many hated him or at least scorned him. Those letters are from 1888. Almost every day he would make the journey to Betijoque to attend to the sick and to check if he had received any mail from Caracas or any new magazines. He was anxious to leave Isnotú, a place he grew to hate, and he tried his luck in Valera, Boconó and even in Andean villages where he must have stepped around ice and snow to arrive. But each place already had a doctor, or a resistance to one. At a certain point they began calling him "*el godo*," the Goth, behind his back, so he decided to write some of his letters using Gothic script, to which end he carried a calligraphy manual; he feared he would be exiled to Caracas, or worse, that he would be sent to jail. In this way he justified his use of the Gothic

alphabet, as it was called, so that his correspondence could not be read. Yet there may have been other reasons; for instance, romantic relationships whose tenor he needed to conceal.

As had occurred with the woman on the cross, for some time the saintly doctor was accompanied by the former wrappings. The cloths and rags, all of them of dark colors, cast a somewhat gloomy atmosphere that was, however, quite authentic, because one immediately thought of episodes and parables of a Biblical, prophetic or sacrificial nature, and of a pastoral nature, in their bucolic or rugged variety. For instance, there's a famous photograph of the doctor riding his mule, on what seems to be a mountain path near Isnotú, surely taken on one of his daily trips to Betijoque. In that photo he's dressed with his habitual modern elegance. More than one person, on contemplating the figure of the saintly doctor at my house, believed those rags had belonged to him, or at any rate that he could have worn them, and that they were now resting at his feet as proof of his ever-increasing selflessness, on the one hand, or as documents in themselves, I mean, similar to a sudary cloth, a proof of his labors. Many of those inclined to think this way had never heard of the great man nor had they an inkling of his permanent religious inspiration; yet they managed to perceive it thanks to the arrangement of the assemblage. In truth, up to now I've referred several times to the people who display some reaction, in general, one that's active and enthusiastic, in some cases even exhibiting an amazing credulity—which can be seen—before the saintly doctor and the woman on the cross. I should say however that there is also another group of friends to whom these two characters say almost nothing, people who pass right by and leave them behind as if the two were invisible beings or at most, members of a secret society that does nothing but arouse distrust.

The day after my phone call to Baroni to ask about the woman on the cross and to arrange for her to keep it, I left Boconó. It was at a reasonable hour in the morning, the earliest and

coolest moments had passed and the sun was becoming warmer. A long-distance bus coming in the other direction passed by, and for a split second I thought I recognized someone leaning out the window to look at me, someone about whom I'd had no news for a very long time. I believe our eyes met, but before there was any confirmation, the road led to a parting, as they say, of our ways. Then I encountered a caravan of vehicles advancing rather slowly on the highway, in the same direction we were headed in. The curves on the road kept the cars behind from passing, moreover they traveled fairly bumper to bumper with such an even space between them that it seemed like a sort of convoy being towed from the front. A small and fairly battered truck was in the lead, but the two pickups toward the rear and the last car seemed worse, which made one believe they were indeed being towed. I assumed the pickups and the truck were for fieldwork, or something related; now they were carrying families, five or six people in each one. Several passengers were standing in the back, leaning on the sides and looking out, others were sitting backwards in the cab, in which case their eyes were fixed on the vehicles behind them, that is, on the section of the road, the part of the world you could say, they had just left behind, in a sort of constant verification.

At the police checkpoint they made a short stop before continuing; the same later on, when they were also seemingly pulled over at the military checkpoint. Each time on resuming the road they took a while to build up to their regular slow speed. The mountains rose to the left, to the right was a wide sinuous valley, its floor hidden most of the time in the depths. As might be easily imagined, behind the caravan there was a considerable line of cars; and whenever some managed to pass, the line would be replenished. When we passed the short cut to Valera—a narrow and sporadically paved ribbon up the mountain, invaded on both flanks by surrounding vegetation—we darted ahead of the rural convoy. And later, at the crest of a dirt road parallel to

the highway that descends at a steep drop, an impracticable chute for many vehicles, the convoy had already been mostly forgotten.

I do not know the name of that precipitous slope, but if one wants to go to Juan Andrade's house one must climb it. Andrade is another prize-winning woodcarver, he lives in a village in the mountains, whose name I also failed to take down, inhabited by families devoted to farming. Several of the houses are quite old, with a solidity and proportions of another era; others belong to a more recent age, and one can see that on the whole they were built using the minimum, or even the indispensable, so that from the outset they look half-built. Among the many differences between Andrade and Baroni is the fact that he is extremely quiet, almost mute, he speaks the least possible. His figures can be religious or not, he can make characters who are rural or patriotic. Andrade's religious carvings are at times predetermined by the official iconography, because people will often ask him for saints similar to those appearing on church altars or on prayer cards, which they bring as models when they commission the piece. According to what Andrade told me, he has no preferences as to making one type of image or another, although the holy ones, to give them some name, take him longer, and for that reason he charges more. Nonetheless, I think, he must make them like a strict copyist, excluding possible dictates of creativity.

His own figures, the imaginative ones, let's say, are sullen enough, they always seem angry, or at least on the defensive. On the afternoon I saw him he took me to his workshop, built some meters away from his simple house. Two of his sons were there, at work or playing with some tools. On a high shelf at the far end of the workshop, close to the ceiling, I saw a mermaid standing upright that appeared to have been forgotten for some time. Despite what might have been considered shortcomings—the accumulated dust, the already faded colors, the darkness of

age, the flawed resolution of the piece and even an important part of her lacking a finish—this mermaid had such a decisive beauty that from up high she seemed like one of those divinities to whom no one pays notice but whose influence reaches everyone. Andrade's youngest son had made this piece, and I can say that the mermaid is now on top of a piece of furniture, a few meters away from a wide window from which I can see another mountain and a good part of another valley that serves as a backdrop.

A few moments ago I looked once more at a photo I've kept of the mermaid, and am still struck by her prepubescent air and, above all, the definitive authenticity of her face. Her breasts have scarcely grown, and her body sketches a curious arc, imitating a waning moon, or a scythe, twisting to the left as if she hadn't understood something and needed to adjust her body to see or hear better. That inclination also recalled Baroni's Virgins, which invariably tilt to one side, especially their head, whose effort to lean to the left reaches dramatic levels at times and makes one think of the arduousness of that position, in the case, of course, it was real. Indeed, the demeanor of the Virgins has such a symbolic power that this tilt has been interpreted as a sign of humility. Here lies one of the most eloquent contrasts of many of her religious figures, which on the one hand are adorned as if they were exotic princesses, and on the other have a defenseless corporal stance, insecure, as if their will were about to be subdued.

Another son of Andrade's, several years older and named Carlos Luis, had an image of Simon Bolivar. It's common to make a Bolivar, since he belongs as much to patriotic devotion as to popular religion. This Bolivar has a turquoise uniform and golden ornaments; his boots are black, the same as his hair, which is furrowed in waves. His arms hang down, affixed to his sides, but his hands have been resolved in different ways, because while the left extends downward and follows the line of the body, the right shows a hollowed-out fist, barely open,

which is where he should be holding the saber. When I saw the figure, I noticed the empty hand. So I pointed out the absence to Andrade and asked him if he'd lost the saber in battle, or if it was an overzealous fidelity to history (the whereabouts of Bolivar's saber has for many years been unknown). Andrade laughed a little, it seemed to me that he preferred to skip over the joke, out of shyness perhaps, I don't know, and he replied that his son wasn't around, but that if I wanted, he could make the saber himself at that moment; "in a little bit," I believe he said. Then he took the first piece of wood he found on the floor and began to cut. Because of the rush, I suppose, or to my staring at him, the outcome looked more like a knife, even a dagger. The fact is, it was ready in less than five minutes, and he gave it to his youngest son so that he could paint it gold, like the epaulettes and other regalia of his outfit. This Bolivar is some fifty centimeters tall, and impresses one because of his features, well-defined, and because of his body, of generous proportions and physique. One looks at him and he seems to suffer from a migraine or to have a special nervous sensibility, because of his extremely prominent brow, which recalls the physical characteristics of social realism.

Now, at this very moment, a few meters from where I sit, the sky blue Bolivar brandishes his knife, and his expression of anger endures, and along with his Lombrosian cranium—of course imperturbable—he is more and more removed from his faraway Andean origin. Sometimes visitors who gaze at him are surprised by his concave face, which gives him an expression of watchfulness and—for brief moments, depending on the light—of a feverish and terror-infused mind, of a Romantic type, which makes one think of his body, whether in contrast or opposition, a body of heroic proportions. At my request, Andrade made another saintly doctor months later. In those days, my veneration was at its peak, and each figure I acquired implied an ever-perfecting commitment to the saint, at any rate a more consummated one. Part of the

doctor's success consists in people requiring neither the Church nor its intermediaries to establish a relationship with him; and in this sense I consider myself lucky, because it afforded me the possibility of maintaining a changeable belief, regulated only by me, with its own arcs of intensity and indifference. A mushy belief, it's possible, but the only one that allows me to glimpse the experience of a true religion. This religion might be overly elementary, it's true, it might not even be considered a religion, but rather a mere syndrome, an attitude—if one wished to draw some feeble meaning—because of course it failed to achieve being a system of beliefs and spiritual norms; that, however, didn't matter to me, it was my portable religion, or rather the religious icon I had decided to adopt. In truth, not because I sincerely believed in the healing power of the doctor, or in his being a bulwark against sickness and pain in general, but rather because joining the devotion was the only way of being attentive, so to speak, to his manifestations; but at the same time, because of my devotional shortfalls, those concrete expressions became the center of my curiosity, even more, of my belief, such that, when it came to the saintly doctor, I was interested in his ubiquity and in his versatility, the different forms he could assume within the typical repertoire of his figure, and, indeed, the way people looked at themselves through him.

Several months passed until one day I received Andrade's package. And to my delighted surprise, the saintly doctor was pretty near outrageous. I was working at that time at an office downtown, and my work colleagues stood gaping at the figure, above all because of the bewilderment he provokes. He is some sixty centimeters tall. One's attention is not so much drawn by the strange proportions of his body—legs that are excessively short and a non-existent neck—as it is by his carrying a violin. In other representations of the doctor he carries a medical bag, or wears a stethoscope around his neck; I've seen some doctors with umbrellas, there's one

holding a syringe in his hand, and several with books or even with a suitcase, not to mention the one carrying the Child, made by Baroni. There's another woodcarving that shows him at the fatal moment of being run over; the doctor's arms are raised high, half-trapped under the car. I had never, however, experienced a saintly doctor carrying a violin. As I told my colleagues—with an unintentional priestly tone, I think—when facing such situations it's best to be quiet and not ask too many questions. To a certain degree, the decision of an artist is unfathomable, and whatever explanation he or she offers us will prove scarcely believable, useless or deceptive, even if it in fact sheds light on the work. The doctor with the violin is also a few meters away, his frozen life passing by. On one occasion, one of the many visitors who come to look at the pieces asked me how the doctor managed to play the violin if he lacked a space between his head and shoulder. Sometimes practical questions are not relevant, I think, though at the same time, the nature of life makes them unavoidable.

The deceptive capacity to confer existence is another thing that both attracts me and at the same time frightens me about these figures, especially given the multiple incarnations of the same personage. These doctors of a silent life—frankly idle, inasmuch as I don't ask them to practice their profession as devotional images, and who banter among themselves a few meters away—would not exist as manifestations of themselves had I not commissioned them and, to put the operation in material terms, had I not had the will to hand over money in exchange for them. I'm not speaking about the serial doctors, the plaster figures or the little statues in a range of sizes that are mostly imported from China in the tens of thousands, which at any rate are produced independently of my will, but whose manufacture and existence, on the other hand, attract me as well, and I would never do away with them, even if I could. Thanks to their multiple proliferation (from artisanal pieces to artistic stylization, passing through assembly-line

super-production), the individuality of the doctor, in my view, is accentuated and acquires a distinct identity depending on each case. His real life, now receding, becomes more abstract, but his existence, as an individual circumstance, reveals itself as tangible, even within the illusion that he is all “this,” thanks in great measure to his representation.

Andrade told me that his two daughters were living in Caracas, where they worked; and that it was his three sons, all younger, who were with him. On seeing the workshop one immediately notices that his work as a woodcarver was occasional, it depended on commissions, and since he lived at a distance and in the midst of the mountains they were always sporadic. For that reason, he depended above all else on competitions. He would make some piece for the occasion, and given his extraordinary talent, would always win one of the top prizes; he'd then go down to Boconó, to Valera, rarely to Caracas, wherever it was, to collect his prize money, and if possible, get the newspaper clipping where he was praised, and then go back home. Before I left, I saw on the right-hand wall of his workshop, above a shelf that runs from one end of the room to the other, a plastic saintly doctor, small and isolated. One of those figures made in China, just mentioned, that reproduce the most famous photograph of the doctor, most likely taken on Fifty-Seventh Street in New York during a brief residence, in which he strikes a serious pose, almost rigid, with his hands behind his back. Leaning against the wall behind the doctor were a pair of religious prints forming a sort of court or altar protecting his sides. Almost all those doctors originating in China have slanted eyes, which appears to obey a terrible flaw in the original mold used for its manufacture. Yet that does not make them any less in demand, since in one respect, as is logical, belief responds to the generalities of form and the details fall by the wayside. Not so long ago, in front of the church where the saintly doctor is venerated, in Caracas, at one of the stands with religious articles, I saw a new Chinese version of the doctor,

the eyes not as slanted and the hat somewhat different from usual. The figure was wrapped in transparent plastic, that so-called shrink-wrap used to preserve foodstuffs. To me it seemed the most appropriate wrapping, and he remains just like that a few meters from where I am right now. That shrink-wrap has become—as I think during my fictitious spiritual or religious exercises—a tangible radiance, an aura revealed. The representation of a force field that obviously goes beyond the mere cellophane, and that shows itself in an almost tangible way, thanks to the blurriness of the wrapping, similar to a translucent spider web.

We left the workshop and I walked with Andrade some thirty meters. It was the highest part of the mountain, rounded into a dome with scattered trees, and divided into parcels. Further on, Andrade's youngest son was running from one side to the other; and the dog, which had been dozing as if recovering from a hearty meal, ran in circles eagerly, hanging on to what the boy would do. The temperature at those heights was several degrees lower than in Boconó, which could be verified by Andrade's dark, close-fitting clothes, and those of his children as well. So as I was saying, we passed by the steep road that goes from the highway to Andrade's house, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that the four-vehicle convoy was at that moment absent from our immediate thoughts. In all likelihood it kept moving forward at slow speed, who knows; several of the passengers in the back of the pickup might still be standing, just like the children, the two or three of them, who sought to fill their lungs with the hard fresh wind. When I had overtaken the lead truck, I'd managed to see someone sleeping in the back of the pickup, at its center, lying on his stomach with his head to the side, one arm like a pillow and his free hand covering his eyes.

We continued along the highway toward the lowlands, where the mountain range comes to an end; all the while, obviously, the road making a gradual descent. I thought of those

mountains to the rear, and find it hard to understand, as it is now to explain—perhaps I'll attempt it later on—the sense that I was leaving a unique, extraordinary place. Unlike the many or few places I've known, this region had immediately endeared itself to me. To this day I don't know if it was Baroni's influence or the erased and reconstructed traces of the saintly doctor; or if it was in truth the physical condition of the land. Perhaps because of its prodigiousness—despite my not having left it completely behind—that place became accessible to me only as an abstraction. I didn't feel I was leaving a region of defined dimensions and characteristics, a *paese* as the Italians would say, but rather I was, above all, taking my leave of a representation, a stage setting. I imagined a map or small-scale model on which my movements would appear. The geographic irregularities would be identified by name, with an indistinct point almost at the edge of the page, the point being none other than me, ever-receding into the distance. That drawing would contain everything. I was aware it was a map, and one of the most arbitrary or artificial imaginable, which nonetheless made this point of the journey more true.

Shortly afterward the road made a sharp bend, where a sign on the right pointed to the road to San Miguel de Boconó. We headed that way, onto a curving road that descended to the floor of the valley, where the town and the river are located. In San Miguel de Boconó, colonial buildings alternate with other less aged ones belonging to different eras. The layout of the streets has remained the same in the center of town; but further on, in the areas where in Jajó one would find a void and enormity, as I said earlier, here and there were different types of edifices and open fields that break with the typical street grid, at times because of the purpose assigned to the land and at other times owing to the characteristics of the sector, which was surrounded by ravines. What seems most historic is the church and some houses that took up an entire block. One of these was fairly dilapidated, the same as many others, but I remember it because there

was a sign for the local committee of the official party, in those days the MVR, in spite of which it seemed abandoned. At any rate, it was morning, and as it happens in small towns, it was not easy to tell if this solitude was due to some temporary or permanent absence, to a respite or to some routine of the place.

When they expose themselves in this way, as emptied-out places, proof of an improbable but feasible abandonment, etc., whose life displays itself at intervals—otherwise unknown to the visitor—towns like San Miguel de Boconó have always induced in me a feeling of melancholy. But of course, it depends on the observer; and on the whole the stranger observes the surface. Several small shops and a bread store were open. The other businesses appeared closed, though in fact you needed to knock on the door or ring the bell to be served. The plaza, modernized at some point in recent decades, was nearly deserted and two or three people had gathered, silently, on the corner opposite the church. Due to the slope of the terrain, the plaza has two or more levels, and on the one that's the highest and furthest away from the hollow of the ravine, one can see the church as if it were a sunken building, or disproportionately dwarfed. This church is one of the oldest in the region, and according to what I've been told, on its walls it has preserved painted *ex-votos* that express the devotion and gratitude of parishioners for miracles or favors granted. I'd hoped to find what does not exist in Isnotú, but as will soon be seen, it was impossible here as well.

The church was closed. I asked the men in the plaza about and they told me it had to open because an *angelito*, a dead child, would be arriving, but they didn't know when. They also pointed me to the house of a neighbor who had the key, a block away, so that I could ask her to open it. I went there, rang the bell, waited a moment, and a woman finally came out from the house across the way. She told me the church was closed, and that it only opened for special

cases or on Sundays. I replied that I'd been told an *angelito* would be arriving. This caught her interest, or curiosity, and she wanted to know when; but I obviously couldn't answer her. I went back to the church without knowing what to do; it was odd how any visitor, me for example, recently arrived and with the idea of a casual visit, picked up on the rhythm of the place and within a few minutes had become something like an inert presence, as if one lacked a shadow, integrated into the mechanism of the place, at the mercy of its trivial or obscure forces, but at the same time, because of its condition, had turned into an unwitting accelerant of local information. Fairly resigned at that moment to my visit coming to an end, I paused on the porch to look out at the plaza and the rest of the town. The plaza had sparse vegetation. The renovation had consisted of smoothing the terrain according to the levels of natural irregularities, thus steps and pathways were abundant, marking off the mounds of dirt. Two of the men crossed the street to find out what the neighbor had told me; I said she knew nothing and that she'd told me she didn't have a key. Then they pointed to a second place where I could ask for it, because if this neighbor said she knew nothing about the *angelito*, then he wouldn't be coming.

The other house was downhill, several meters from the ravine. The irregular terrain made it a bit difficult to reach, and as you descended you could hear the increasingly strepitous water. Two children were playing in an open patio, behind an iron fence. Behind the gate, which was open, two women were cooking. One of them came out and at my question said she didn't have the key, but she recommended I go to the pharmacy, which was on the plaza, opposite the church. This was a seemingly small establishment, though one couldn't really tell, because on the other side of the window and the doorway a pair of white curtains concealed the interior. I rang the bell, as instructed, and waited in vain. I stopped someone walking by; he said if I rang the bell and no one answered, that meant it was closed. Everyone with whom I spoke ended the

conversation in a cordial and distant manner, almost ceremoniously. Even the neighbors in front of the church, with whom I had spoken more than once, renewed and ended each conversation as though it were the first, and most likely the last, we would ever have. I returned to the church and sought protection from the sun on one side of the porch, while wondering what the next step would be. I could see the gentle slope of the streets, and in the distance, a stretch of the winding road that led to the highway to Boconó, surrounded by dense greenery. The clouds, as I assume occurs every day over the course of several months, hadn't decided to let the mountains go free, in a sort of symbolic embrace, so often celebrated in the descriptions of many regions of this country.

I began to think and I noticed that in this place I felt, shall we say, as if I were in the middle of the scrunched-up piece of paper. I was in a hollow, surrounded by several ravines, close to a rock-filled river, and had before me a view in the distance of chains of overlapping mountains, and closer to me a series of hills or rounded hillsides, of an irregular height, and arranged in a random way. It was just as a friend had explained the geography of the state of Trujillo to me: "You grab a piece of paper, somewhat thick, crumple it and try to make a ball, then you flatten it only halfway. That's a fairly close reproduction of what happened in Trujillo." Despite guano cones, alluvial plains, fluvial terraces, millennial erosions and, in general, all acts of nature aimed at leveling the relief, the landscape kept on showing a majestic craziness; not because of its heights, still jagged enough, but rather because of the visual arrangement of the ensemble, an outcome, they say, of the continuous opposition of folds and faults. Even today movements press against that land, its adjustments never-ending, sometimes more than once a day. And as to the severity of the weather, the panorama has always been, of course, the same. No witness or chronicler has failed to underscore the capriciousness of the temperature, which

goes from cold to hot, and the reverse, in the shortest of distances, often independent of the change in altitude. That series of formidable geological movements had compressed masses in all directions, producing that effect of disorder and disorientation. The disorder, on the one hand, gave the impression of a provisional landscape, of undecided and even hazardous geography, and disorientation was merely the most unruly epiphenomenon of the difficulty in communication and access. So I imagined that I was looking at a crumpled piece of paper, and that at a confluence of furrows and folds, there I was, gazing into the distance. One could not escape from that piece of paper.

At the same time, I began debating as well whether to resume the trip or stay a while longer, doing mostly nothing, with the hope that one of the neighbors or someone in the pharmacy, whoever, would take pity on me and open the church. I was immersed in these vacillations when a man from the plaza, who had just hurried across, interrupted me: after greeting me again, he said, "Here he comes." I wanted to know what he was talking about, and with his head he gestured to the entrance to the town; "*El angelito*," he added. The caravan on the highway was driving up the main street. Now they were advancing more slowly. Those who were standing had to brace themselves even more, because of the unevenness of the paving stones; and it was apparent as well how each of them, before the new scenario, surrounded by houses and intersections, showed a renewed attention to what was happening. Somehow, in a way I still cannot explain, the neighbor from the other block was now opening the church in advance of the caravan's arrival in the plaza.

Since I was a few steps away, I immediately entered. It took some time for me to become accustomed to the darkness of the church. The windows were few and of dark glass, such that hardly any light filtered through. As seen from the inside, the ceiling proved of less height than

one would have expected. I went to the celebrated wall on the left side, about which many had enthusiastically spoken to me, but the ex-votos were no longer hanging there. I assumed there would be no one to ask about it; the neighbor had vanished into the background—from which she did not return for the whole time I stayed in the church—to open some curtains, I believe, because an oblique, almost horizontal light immediately entered from the rear. I headed to the door again. The convoy had stopped in front of the porch and people began to get out. Moments later, out of the back seat of the car, with no great effort but with more than sufficient care, they took out a small coffin, some sixty centimeters long.

I realized I would never have noticed it was a funeral cortège on the road, nor could I have done so in the town. On the one hand, that inspired in me a feeling of disillusionment: once again I'd proved that, as a rule, it's quite difficult to be aware of everything; and on the other hand, I felt bitter at being present at a drama—or rather, one of its scenes—that is so firmly woven into everyday life without any intimation. The two points, disillusionment and bitterness, two sides of the same event. Among the mourners were older men and women, some teenagers and several children. The man I had seen sleeping en route woke up at this moment, when the others were waiting already on the porch, which was probably a signal. He stood up, took a few steps in the back of the truck, and then stumbled, falling to the street. At first no one went to help him. I thought he'd be out cold, only later realizing he was drunk. He lay stretched out in the street without moving. The thought occurred to me that perhaps that might be the signal; then they went to help him. But the man began to throw punches and to kick as if defending himself, while shouting something I couldn't understand, evidently offensive and repressed at the same time, that was my impression. Then as the others looked on, he stood up, made the motions of straightening his clothes, without success by any measure, and took a few not very straight steps.

At some point, the church had been important, its central nave was deep, but perhaps because of the prolonged decline of the town it had now become fairly austere. In the corners of the side aisles there were modest cornices with carved wooden saints. I was looking at one of those saints, so simple and at the same time artistic, when the cortège passed behind me carrying the child's coffin. They placed it at the end, in the half-darkness of the altar. The women arranged themselves at a certain distance, surrounding it, the men withdrew and remained outside the church, and for their part, the children, close to their mothers, walked around the coffin, leaning over it and immediately jumping back, covering their nose with their hands. Outside or inside, no one spoke. They had dressed in their finest for an event that despite their journey and wanderings would not be resolved. As I learned, they had hoped to find a priest who would officiate at the mass and help them bury the child. They were traveling from town to town, and were turned away at each because they had no death certificate. The child had become ill and died, apparently without anyone's intervention. At this point I began to think, not knowing very well how to continue. I—who pondered things pretty much all the time, I believed—ran into an unforeseen obstacle that interrupted the flow, however turbulent, of thought. Was this, once again, a signal or some type of warning? I don't know. I imagined Baroni's reaction, she was probably used to rural vicissitudes of this nature, and would pour forth phrases of sincere compassion on learning the news, and would invoke some saint or protector, who knows, or call on some similar event in the past.

Baroni's opinion is that death is a routine occurrence, in the general meaning of the word, toward which we are not only irrevocably headed; one can also traverse that threshold several times, so to speak, and come back, to everyone's surprise (except hers, obviously). In her experience, it was following the attacks or episodes of catalepsy in her childhood; a fact that,

seen retrospectively, may have shaped some of her personality traits. As I said earlier, ever since that early experience, her fame as a healer and spiritual clairvoyant began to grow. She herself acknowledges having no fear of death, having lived through it, so to speak, on several occasions. The second experience, as an adult, lasted three days: the first one, as I described, twenty-four hours. Baroni recounts that in both cases people wept over her inconsolably; until the moment arrived when she stood up, striking terror in her next-of-kin. She thinks, too, that we should co-exist with the possibility of death, and be always prepared, as she says in her case, for the hour when it arrives. For that purpose she has built, in a section of the garden next to a mango tree, her own funerary altar, which is a sort of chapel. The coffin, made with her own hands, rests there, and inside it lies *La mortuoria*, a carved figure, as I described earlier, her approximate replica, which only leaves the coffin when it gives up its place to Baroni. Various objects that allude to or are in keeping with these rituals are there as well.

From time to time Baroni performs her own funeral: she dresses in the appropriate attire, a blue dress, which she made for that purpose, and lies down in the coffin, also made by her, where she stays immobile for a very long time. Why is the dress blue? Because that's the color in which she was dressed the first time she died. As she tells it, she gets into the coffin every Good Friday; and while inside, she's capable of sensing a number of important things that will happen in the next twelve months. She performs her death on other dates or places as well, or it may also happen that in deference to an urgent inner need, she'll don her blue dress and lie down in the coffin, where she'll stay for varying amounts of time. In repose, Baroni finds peace and is immersed in transcendental thoughts. Friends or curiosity seekers come by her house to see her. At other times school groups arrive from the surrounding area, with whom she speaks after the funerary performance on related subjects under the mango tree, on half-buried rocks painted with

multicolored motifs that have been placed in a circle for this type of dialogue. This circular space serves as the anteroom to the funeral chapel.

Baroni has performed her death in other places, too, museums, for instance. These are performance cycles that can last several days, and that sometimes conclude in a cemetery, at the moment she's about to be buried, after the funeral procession. During these performances, when Baroni is not in the coffin *La mortuoria* takes her place. Audience members take part as if they were attending a wake; and of course, if Baroni takes a break, that is, when she's outside the coffin, she almost always speaks to the audience and recounts her experiences. These performances, as I said earlier, are called "*La mortuoria*," after the figure that serves as her stand-in, and when it is not replacing her, it represents someone undefined, a sort of character who stands guard over the coffin, a pensive, or rather, pious being, always present too at the Nativity scenes Baroni prepares at Christmas time. Baroni's familiarity with death thus displays itself in several known ways.

As a consequence, she does not long for the days spent in the cemetery. When she arrived in Boconó, she couldn't find a job, and the money she brought with her wouldn't pay for a night in the simplest *pensión*; so while making inquiries she headed to the cemetery. That was the most suitable place to live, doubtless because of the trust and security it afforded her at that moment. And in the period that followed as well, dedicated to attending to the sick and in particular the laying out of the dead, carried on into her later years, all of which could serve as proof of a fervently necrophilic life starting at a young age. On several occasions Baroni has said that she's healed the sick and laid out the dead all along. Her childhood dream was to be a nurse when she grew up; for that purpose she had a black doll she would care for and give injections to. She knows about medicinal herbs because of her mother, an expert on the subject. And from the time

she was eleven, as I said before, she began to heal with her hands and to provide comfort. From a young age she also dressed the dead, especially, as she says, the laying out of *los angelitos*. Even as time passed, and Baroni was already a prize-winning artist, she was still, as of a few years ago, laying out the dead, including those who had been crippled for a long time, in which case she had no problem in lying on top and working on them until they were in a more convenient position.

When you ask Baroni about the deaths she's had, she says there were two, four, or sometimes she declares another number. This variable quantity not only obeys, I believe, a symbolic intentionality, to which each person has a right, or to a lax definition of the verb "to die," as when it's said after some event, "it was to die for"; the response, though legitimate, is above all trivializing. Rather, it seems to me to obey her multiple experiences regarding death: events happened of a different type, with varying degrees of profundity and diverse resonances, for which nonetheless there is always the same verb, "to die." In fact, I believe that, generally speaking, reminiscences pose this problem, obviously to varying degrees. Because, for instance, memories of different events—even those of a distinct nature, held by one person, by the same family, by the same consciousness—lack an inventory of words and phrases broad enough to allow them to stand apart from other memories and past events. And when there is no inventory of words or phrases available, two alternatives arise: silence and the uniformity imposed when there's no speech; or bodily acts as a way of expressing memories in their variety. What I mean to say in this roundabout way is that it is through the staging of her death that Baroni describes or evokes her own vague experiences, whose nuances are impossible to express in any other way.

Although Baroni maintains that to her death does not inspire terror, at a certain point I wanted to know if dying for real during a performance of *La mortuoria* would be the same or

different for her; and in case it would be different, how and why. Somehow, I thought, she would need to get up and end her performance, to return to the world of the living with all her attributes unharmed; and if that did not happen, it would be an unfinished representation, or a true representation, without acting. In this sense, she faces the hazard of any theatrical representation, the risk of an interruption. She told me that when she lay down in the coffin, after having checked the placement of each element of the scene and, in general, her own attire, her intention is to render homage to death and to pay it a visit, and that the rest would happen when it had to. It was a preparatory exercise for herself, and a lesson for everyone else. This was the only thing she said to me on the matter, though in different words.

I've seen several photos of *La mortuoria*, and the audience, regrettably, has their back to the camera, or they're looking down, in any event, I cannot see their reactions; I imagine those expressions are always revealing. At first one sees Baroni lying in the coffin, and around it there's a half-moon of people, looking down at her. I've also seen, not long ago, several videos of the funeral performances. I didn't expect to find anything in particular, but I was struck by the exaggerated theatricality of the first video I saw, much like a school play. The defined roles for Baroni's assistants, the scolding priest, the pair of lovers who kiss in that scene of misfortune, the wailing women, etc., and how they all played their roles according to fairly strict protocols. The children were separate, but I do not believe they were acting; and just as I had seen in San Miguel de Boconó, in this case they, too, leaned over the coffin. In this performance—let's call it museological—Baroni awakens while others are mourning her. She gets on her feet and begins reciting an exaltation of death; a microphone is handed to her a few moments later, which is why the first part is lost. The audience reacts with surprise, as if witnessing a miracle.

The other recording does not take place in a museum and seems domestic, though in it more people are gathered because the whole town takes part in the performance. Hence the actors are “real,” they semi-act, they do what is strictly indicated within the limits of their natural way of behaving. At one moment, when everyone is ready to depart for the cemetery, the priest appears and says in a far from ecclesiastical tone, “Brothers and sisters, let’s give a Christian burial to *señora* Rafaela.” Several men then step forward, lift the coffin as if it were a piece of furniture and head toward the street. I was struck by one of the last scenes as well. The funeral cortège has already traveled through the narrow streets. I estimate that over two hundred people followed Baroni in her coffin, in what seemed, according to the look on their faces, to be a religious procession. They arrive at the cemetery, where there are a few nuns who look very sad. And when they rest the box next to the grave, and are just about to bury her, Baroni wakes up, is revived, and sits up and embraces the person at her side. Standing in the coffin, she begins to recite the poem exalting death. She speaks of the “simple chamber” where her wake will be held and describes different details and stages of the ceremony.

At times Baroni prepares other numbers. She convinces people to act and distributes the roles. Later on I might refer to the wedding, a less frequent performance. For the moment, I’d like to reiterate my surprise at this representation, which put me in touch again with that sort of childhood or simplicity of art that I referred to earlier, which doubtless links it more to religious festivals and traditions in Andean towns than to sophisticated theatrical forms. But of course, some might appreciate the complexity of what’s simple, a sort of forbidden fruit for others. In truth, I’ve taken no position on this matter, nor have I on practically any other. Further on I might refer to certain problems of representation, I don’t know a better term for it, a sort of

curiosity, or lack thereof, that I feel at times when I realize that what is dark and arduous for me, is visible and accessible for others.

There's a story of a sick person, in the last moments of his strength. He spends his days in his bedroom, lying down, almost completely unconscious. When he happens to wake up, he opens his eyes and looks around; it's the only thing he does. He sweeps his gaze over everything, but he devotes the same amount of attention to people and to things. One day his caretaker notices that he becomes weaker when he has a greater number of visitors. It happens in the evening, after people have left work and are able to see the sick man. The bedroom then fills up and—the caretaker thinks—each visitor absorbs a speck of the diminished energy the terminally ill man still has. It's not that they divide whatever there is that day among them—a sort of standard ration that puts some logic into the senseless advance of the illness—on the contrary, the visitors are savages, each one unconsciously claims his or her share. For that reason an increased flow of visitors, so to speak, reduces the sick man's life.

I realize now that the descriptions of these vigils, with the half-moon of people around the bed, are quite similar to Baroni's *mises-en-scène*, including those before audiences of schoolchildren. If memory serves, in the story it's understood that the gazes are the paths on which the streams of energy circulate; not the gaze of the infirm man, whose vision is lost and inscrutable almost all the time, but rather the gazes of the nightly visitors, who nonetheless betray their most explicit desires, obviously related to their good wishes and hopes for his recovery. Otherwise, it would be erroneous to suppose that the energy lost by the sick man is transferred to the visitors; my impression is that it's a matter of energy dissipated in the circulation of gazes. It's the price, or rather the waste produced by the tension of the scene. What are the visitors seeking? If their gazes could be intercepted, one could discover what they were

looking at, like living mirrors. It's what I couldn't manage to do in the vigils I was able to watch of *La mortuoria*; in some cases because of the awkward placement—for me—of those attending, or in others because of my own lack of inclination. As I said earlier, Baroni has built a crypt beneath that mango tree where she lies down for a short while, sometimes for an audience of students interested in this experience, which would later, I suppose, be funneled into class assignments or group presentations, or even into commentaries at home.

I'm unaware of Baroni's plans regarding her body; whether it will rest definitively in this tomb when, as she says, her hour arrives. It must be a special temptation for someone who conceives of her house as a museum. Whatever the case, the performance of her funeral rite becomes feasible in dramatic terms only if the protagonist, stands up every now and then and does "something," as the inhabitant of two abodes; a binary creature able to come and go at will, considering that from a theatrical standpoint, an excessively prolonged immobility could be a drawback. Baroni as the protagonist must therefore walk, talk, reason. Nor can she leave the coffin and stand at a distance, in silence and avoiding any communication, because that might be interpreted as a continuance of the performance by other means; the metaphorization of death, not its exhibition. Besides, after playing dead it would be scarcely believable to beg off because of tiredness. Thus, communication with the audience arises in the intervals, without hierarchies; and the intervals define amphibious beings, personages who come and go between different worlds. I never asked Baroni if she followed any schedule in organizing these funerary scenes. *La mortuoria* binds together remote worlds. Not only life and death, but also the present and the past of the community, the private world and the public sphere, etc. It creates a gap as well in the perception of those attending, because it offers details about something that has not yet occurred. Between that actual evening or night when they attend Baroni's performance, and the true

moment of her death, is a still undetermined period of time that, as a consequence of the representation, emerges as a negative ellipsis.

The members of the audience probably sense, as it were, Baroni's eternal rest and their own, too. Even looking at the photos of *La mortuoria*, whether it is on the occasion of its performance in museums, in popular festivals, or in the domestic space of her garden, one cannot fail to apprehend death as an inevitably social event, in the first place, as well as utterly theatrical (beyond the real theatricality the event will assume in each case). Another aspect is that, for its part, *La mortuoria* presents a tangible, real version of legends from the countryside (that catalogue of beliefs that the saintly doctor condemned as faith in "el daño"), with its cast of apparitions, magical places, fantastic animals, etc. Not because she attempts to reproduce them or modify them (on the contrary, Baroni at times sets out to disseminate and preserve them), but rather because she reaffirms the toing-and-froing between the shadows and the light, one's belonging to two worlds. The repeated performance of an inevitably unique death exhibits in its theatrical confidence the same logic on which the replication of carved figures is based, and presents, as these do, an initial pretext of adoration. Thus, the death of Baroni can also be seen as an ideological event, one which consists of the enactment of a funerary rite; and the fact that it possesses a definite counterpart (even though the opposite is true: the actual event, though belonging to the future, has its ideological counterpart) does not mean that Baroni's death, when it truly happens, will refute it.

My thoughts turn once again to the poet Sánchez, and in particular, to the same funerary rite in which he happened to be featured, so real and decisive in his case that he probably wasn't even aware of it, next to which Baroni's performances seem a simple commemorative aspiration driven by a spirit of imitation. Death, religion, nature. The innocent art of Baroni revolves and

spins on these surfaces, it seems to me, not only because they coincide with her central preoccupations as an artist, but also because these are the spheres in which her aesthetic sensibility found clear and natural models of representation that offered no resistance; they were sufficiently voluble and at the same time recognizable, universal. In this sense, Baroni has a narrowly conceived utilitarian or charitable notion of her activity: inspire, teach, show, circumscribe; words with somewhat similar meanings. But as happens with many artists, there is an uncontrollable area of their art, which is that of their own incidence. And at times this incidence distorts, maybe also disrupts, the apparent or true simplicity of her actions.

That's why to me it seemed that the body of the poet Sánchez, lying in the coffin and dressed in his best jacket, shared some traits with Baroni's figures. Her work in laying out the dead and in worshipping saints most likely impelled her to resolve her carvings that way, as if she were offering up wooden bodies to a versatile god of death, capable of accommodating almost any image. When I left Sánchez's wake in those early morning hours, the avenue, lined with gigantic trees, seemed like a sylvan tunnel that resonated with the litany of diminutive frogs, on the whole unseen but numberless. Accustomed to insomnia, Sánchez had for years been tortured by their strident song; and now it proved to be the music that the terrain, or his native land, so to speak, had chosen to bid him farewell. So when I left the funeral home and encountered the cool night, in the midst of that downward sloping avenue that came from the mountains, I remembered that the saintly doctor, when he lived in Boconó, used to say that the setting of that city was quite similar to that of Caracas. In a letter, he relates that the trip to a nearby town, Niquitao, took him three hours. For my part, when I covered this stretch it took me less than fifteen minutes. Keeping his letter in mind, I was not surprised by his remarks; the territories shared place names, the most pronounced irregularities, perhaps climate conditions,

etc., but they were essentially others, different within what was the same. The doctor underscored the mist, the low-hanging clouds and the scant temperature; he said the climate was so intensely cold that fresh meat could last three or four days without being salted. Anyway. He was amazed by the uplands, by the pale color of the mountains covered by the only plant able to grow in those places, the celebrated frailejón.

I made mention earlier, almost at the beginning, of a wooden figure in which the saintly doctor appears to be walking. In truth, he strikes one as getting ready to climb a hill, because his back leans forward slightly. It's an average-sized figure, some thirty centimeters tall, and in a peculiar touch he's dressed in a turquoise suit. He holds out his left hand, almost open as if he were about to ask for something, perhaps some coins, but the arm is stuck to his body, just like the right arm. Consequently, one thinks that in this respect, too, mountain people are reserved, when it comes to alms and the appeal for charity. His right hand, the one not begging, is carrying a doctor's bag, rather small given the scale, and it actually seems like a plaything, or a school bag that holds the few medical instruments needed for his now very limited practice. In truth the bag is an attribute that lacks any use and endures as proof of his charitable and scientific behavior in his time, so to speak, of physical existence; and it has those dimensions, I suppose, because it has turned into a sort of amulet or countersign, a symbol of a real situation that is nonetheless fictitious, like the small, almost empty toy pocketbooks carried by little girls in a hurry to grow up.

This turquoise saintly doctor comes from Niquitao; as soon as I saw him I imagined him climbing the precipitous hill that rises from the highway next to the river. The doctor used these same words—"precipitous hill"—during his, shall we say, human life, to refer to some of those densely vegetated hillsides, in all likelihood the one where the old man who made the piece lives.

Despite his advanced age, Tomás Barazarte has not resigned himself to giving up his long walks when he needs to go on errands in Boconó. That was how I first saw him, without knowing it was him: from a distance, a stocky, unsteady presence walking along the shoulder of the highway, on the gravel strip a few steps from its green flanks. After meeting him and, as time passed, having seen him walk more than once, on first seeing the sky blue saintly doctor Barazarte graciously made for me, I noticed that he, too—like Baroni with her Virgins and images in general, and like Reverón's habit with many of his figures—had made this doctor in his image. The similarity of their features is obvious, as is the bodily stance. Short steps, the head somewhat bent toward the ground; the arms, in particular, prove revealing because of their similarity to the executor, as it were, when they hardly seem to sway and are on the verge of rigidity, beyond which walking would most likely be a forced or artificial operation.

The last time I saw Barazarte was in Boconó, and my final memory consists precisely of observing him as he walked away, receding more and more as he headed toward the highway on his way home. He said good-bye in his plain fashion, which bordered on shyness; then he simply turned around and began walking. The sky was overcast and his impression was that he'd probably encounter rain on the way. He said nothing else before leaving. Now I approach the sky blue saintly doctor every so often and I recall this affable but silent man. For some reason I'm unaware of, he has chosen to speak almost exclusively through his figures, which are not very forthcoming either, but are rather hermetic, of an austerity that renders them anonymous, even hidden; this bestows them with a more immediate presence or warmth, they are of a simplicity that eschews preaching and belong to the wide universe of the undifferentiated.

At times, that sort of secondary plane Barazarte has chosen tempts me to ponder a world of reversed roles, or at any rate unlinked. The figures, less inanimate than one supposes, and their

creators, most illustriously represented by Baroni, Andrade or Barazarte, interchange life. The passivity of the pieces is misleading; at night or in the solitude of the afternoon they move and have conversations, disagree and voice opinions, etc., one of them even raises his voice; and not only do they represent whomever their attire or physiognomy suggests, for instance, the saintly doctor, Bolivar or some Virgin in particular, but they also behave as if they were relations with divergent whims, individual weaknesses, much like biological families made up of similar members with distinct characteristics. When I think this way, I don't in truth find any lesson and scarcely arrive at any momentary conclusion. I imagine the artist as an accomplice of his or her work, returned to the condition of hypothetical beings; not creations of their own creations, but rather, materialized at some point in their own imagination, when they must have conceived of themselves as observers vis-à-vis what they had made or would make.

One arrives at Barazarte's house by climbing a steep hill. At a certain point one must turn left. The secondary road one encounters is even more narrow and indistinct than the one before; a sort of verdant channel, the overgrowth spilling over on the pavement. I realize these facts might be somewhat generic and for that same reason irrelevant, but by mentioning them I am seeking to convey a recurring perplexity, that of having been in a place that was both unique and indistinguishable at once. From one angle, it's the daily impact the geography of this country has on us, perhaps because of the constant pre-eminence of nature, which seems installed with excessive force, but above all because of the tireless rate with which it unfolds. The days hardly change, the sun heats up as always, the rains are continuous or absent, etc. Not to mention the brightness and the excessive noise. This has various consequences, the most important, according to my criterion, is that the country is unrepresentable. I don't know about others, in the past many have attempted it, but for some time now I've resigned myself to it. And not only do I

refer to this particular country, but to some others as well. The more precise one wants to be, the more detailed and scrupulous with nuances and contrasts; the more one hopes that the flood of sensations will prove inspirational—such that an honest fidelity to a nature that displays itself in all its excess, can be achieved—the more one desires to be a mere instrument, searching for the propitious verbal display and a means of transmission suited to the event; the more of all this, the more incomplete and above all, incoherent the result. I have, therefore, no illusions.

In a natural way, people like Baroni recognize their own limit and a benign instinct almost always advises them not to go beyond it. She makes small statues that fall into two camps, art and religion; these works in no sense propose to translate a totality, what's more, they don't search for any particular argument or assertion, nor are there any meanings that aren't mystical or overly conventional. To me this simplicity seems revealing. On the one hand, as I explained before, it shows the validity of simple aesthetic styles, belonging to an older time, a sort of initiation of art, and on the other it projects, at least that's how I see it, a profound melancholy. This melancholy, it seems to me, is supplied by the viewer and relates to Baroni's sketching out an argument about the world, not a refutation; she and her work prove that representation is possible, that in this case the country offers to some its well-differentiated colors.

I have a few meters away these wooden figures I've been mentioning from the start, there are several others besides that I haven't referred to, and that for the most part also represent the saintly doctor, Virgins or various patron saints, Simon Bolivar, even President Hugo Chávez, of a prolonged term of office, is included dressed in a Magallanes uniform, the baseball team he follows zealously. All the figures are squeezed together on the top of a table; some at times fall off the edges because of the lack of space and floor vibrations. They comprise an army of

members, at once eloquent and silent, they only convey their mere presence, imperturbable before the company of the rest. I begin to look at them and feel tired... Each with its own individuality, I think. And I'm presently surprised not by the image that characterizes each, which I've pretty much internalized by now, but by the silence they transmit, unfathomable but trivial, materialized despite being intangible. I see them as mute figures that only display their simple presence. It's a kind of simple melancholy, I don't know how to put it. The sadness of being observable. The object that was introduced for contemplation at first produces nostalgia and then, owing to its isolation in the midst of the multiple gazes, portrays helplessness.

In his home Barazarte had a wooden cock flapping its wings and turning its neck to the side. The movement was conveyed through the knot in the wood, whose twist Barazarte turned to good effect to produce an effect of agitation, of emergency, or of alert, as if the animal had been surprised or attacked without warning. This cock was a dissonant presence in that harmonious room, which was filled with simple, no doubt comfortable furniture, and at first glance, already well furnished with objects in drawers and on shelves, due to the passage of years and to an abiding home life, and adorned as well—that same room—with images of saints and family memorabilia. Other pieces by Barazarte were there, among them a saintly doctor that was part of the home, over one and a half meters tall and also sky blue. Since the cock's beak was too long for its breed, I asked what animal it was supposed to be. Everyone smiled, surely out of courtesy, first Barazarte and then his wife, some of their children who were present with their families, and lastly, a nephew. The answer was that it was a cock, though long-beaked. One other thing that struck me about that animal was the way it was painted. On practically the entire surface of its body there was a color between red and brown, evidently a mixture of the two with an uneven predominance, depending on the section. Barazarte had avoided applying too much

paint where the veins were prominent, he wanted them to have a corporeal tone. On the sides and on the prodigious plumage—allowing that it was of wood—were also small multi-colored specks, yellow, blue, white or red, diminutive freckles that perhaps tried to give the idea of vibration or luminosity, I thought. From its head, actually from its crest, striations of slightly more defined colors ran down its neck, which on the body proper and on the wings merged and then ended, as I said. That heightened definition of the neck tended to glorify it, I suppose, to the detriment of the diffusely colored sections.

It was not until some time later, when I witnessed a cockfight at a ring in Paracotos, to the south of Caracas toward Maracay, a few dozen kilometers via Hoya de la Puerta, that I could clear up the puzzle about its coloration and its upright stance. To this day I'm not sure, but it occurred to me that that red-brown plaster, with more or less visible lines deliberately incised, along with the small specks just mentioned, like freckles, were intended to reflect the movement of the cock during the fight, having the effect of a blurred image when these bodies thrash each other at great speed and are photographed. Movement and confusion, because the leaping of the cocks as they seek to thrust their spurs and attack make them hesitate in a kind of volatile position, in which the lightness of the feathers, the clouds of raised dust, and the trace itself of their movements, are mixed. One saw them from above, in a sort of toy coliseum where the basic principles of perspective could be explained. Instinct leads them to always be on top of each other and to strike a quick hard blow—after a mutual sizing up that can last a few moments, I suppose, without time to elaborate a conscious strategy—it's a blind desire to kill and survive where technique is a natural virtue, if it exists at all.

Like so many places in the interior, there are two ways to arrive in Paracotos: by the expressway or by the old highway. From the arena, if one goes to the most remote part of the

building, where a kind of roofed-in patio dominates the green backdrop of the terrain, one can see, between the trees and some abandoned concrete columns, a stretch of the highway below, some two hundred meters, with cars driving by, surely unaware that they are being observed. The old highway, for its part, has now fallen almost entirely into disuse, and the strip of asphalt has been slowly disintegrating at its edges, letting nature take over; to that add the overhanging growth of the plants and bushes, which tended to block the road. At the end of the day, or at least after I had attended a good number of fights, I took that old highway toward Caracas, and after driving through several mountain passes and serpentine stretches, I reached Hoyo de la Puerta. In a relatively brief period of time night had fallen and with it the temperatures; from the road one could see in the distance the isolated lights of houses, a random string of light bulbs, etc., and surrounding each one of these illuminated homes the immense blackness formed by rugged hillsides or voids. I pulled over to a clearing that was especially dark and began to observe the sky, relatively empty of stars, at least those one is used to seeing in the southern hemisphere. Just to mention something radically different, the inversion of the seasons never surprised me as much as the changed landscape of the firmament; each time I'd look up at the sky, as I did at this moment, I'd be immediately frightened: what I expected to find wasn't there, and I seemed to be inhabiting an unforeseen world, until after few moments—in truth it was something automatic—I'd recover and would then begin to contemplate with a bit of indifference that dull, sparse immensity, just as ineffable, however, as the other.

While we were in the arena, during one of the interludes, I mentioned to my friend Barreto the story of the first miracle performed by the Virgin of the Mirror made by Baroni, when in the early morning hours she cured the mortally wounded fighting cock. We were drinking beers in the establishment's cantina; in Venezuela beer is the social conduit through

which a good many conversations flow. He told me that while a miracle was not impossible, experience showed that many more nights than one would be needed to cure a wounded cock; but if it were mortally wounded, then only a miracle could save it. At times one wants to save a fighting cock because one loves it, though one might realize it will no longer serve for fighting and will remain sickly; but the cock that is unable to fight no longer wants to live. Down the length of a wall one could see the row of cages, and off to the side, the scale where the animals were weighed, and the blackboard where names were written and matches agreed to. Barreto also lives in Hoyo de la Puerta and raises fighting cocks. Up until a short time ago he used to watch them fight, but at a certain point watching the ones he knew die stopped being a tolerable position, and for that reason before the fight of one of his cocks begins, he gets up and waits in the cantina for the fight to end. Another option he's found is to sell the cocks before the first combat. At his house he has set the cages off the ground, in fairly regular rows over narrow parallel platforms, since the slope of ground was quite pronounced. The name he's given to his house is partly revealing: The Chicken Coop. Sometimes a hen escapes and he has to climb a tree to retrieve it, or sometimes the chicks escape as well. The young cocks no longer escape because they are securely enclosed in their cages.

Barreto's books of poetry always include photographs. In one from his youth he's sitting in barbershop being shaved. In another, from a few years ago, only his shadow appears, projected onto the path of a river bridge, next to the shadow of the photographer taking the picture. This book, titled *Carama*, is a tribute to shadows, and attempts to consider their irregular existence, like ghosts abolished from the past. In it he proposed, as it were, to sing of his native village, San Fernando de Apure, surrounded by water and savannas, a land where stones are nonexistent. Barreto publishes his books with a press for which he's the only author, *Sociedad de*

Amigos del Santo Sepulcro—the Society of Friends of the Holy Sepulcher. All the members of this club, Masonic in its origins, are Barreto's relatives, now deceased; one can see a list of their names on the book flaps. As the only living member, Barreto is the spokesperson for the Society. When this book appeared, he took some copies to San Fernando for sale. He knew a large number wouldn't be necessary, besides it was a small edition of two hundred fifty copies. But when he returned several months later, almost a year, he saw that not a single one had been sold; among his friends and acquaintances he found an equal indifference. *Carama's* thesis is both simple and eloquent: events in the past and in the natural world are practically the same thing. These events, now legendary, were caused by man, but they're infused by nature; indeed, they represent a nature to be confronted and resisted. Now that nature is in retreat, its place has been usurped by these same events, and to the extent that these survive in written documents quoted by the poems, they have an unknown presence, both underground and obvious at the same time. Poetry, as set forth in *Carama*, is the song that traces the contours of those hidden and contradictory shadows. Poetry would be the discourse that delineated the contours of those hidden and contradictory shadows. It reveals without desiring to recover or praise, and of all the sentiments it only admits melancholy and nostalgia.

I mention Barreto not only because of his admirable poetical qualities. On a certain occasion he took part in one of Baroni's performances. It was a wedding that took place in a museum in Caracas where Barreto works and where carvings by Baroni were being exhibited. One day she began to organize a wedding. She went out to the street to find participants and rounded up a group of young people to serve as the retinue, then located wedding attire, campesino-style, those ordinary cotton suits, etc. But when the wedding day arrived, she still hadn't found anyone to play the groom. And Barreto, of course, graciously offered himself when

he learned of it. Much later Barreto would continue to speak admiringly of Baroni's naturalness in uniting herself with the action, as if it were a theatrical game; but at the same time he observed her as the ceremony advanced and saw a real commitment in her expression, as if something true were being done. Baroni was punctiliously dressed for that occasion, of course not in a conventional bridal gown. Later on she recited some of her compositions and the performance immediately ended. Barreto told me that the next day he asked Baroni for the price of two pieces he admired, to see if he could buy them. Baroni asked for a high price, one beyond his reach. He then asked for a discount. First he argued that it was a matter of two pieces; when that had little effect, he reasoned that she should give him a special "groom's" rate, since she couldn't charge him the same as she would the others. Apparently it was a good argument, because both carvings are now at Barreto's house, the Chicken Coop. One of them is a retable in which the religious scene springs from the natural surroundings, exemplified in this case by birds, trees and mountains.

When you speak to Barreto, the first response you'll always hear is "yes." For him a scenario of dissent is hardly imaginable; communication is related to agreement, and to attention and deference as well. I've spoken to him many times, and another thing that strikes me is his unique form of argumentation, which gathers the reasons and sets them out, always leaving a possible definition open to question, as though being assertive showed a lack of consideration toward the other. This must be especially difficult for him at times, because he possesses a varied and always thorough knowledge, expressed in almost implausible details. Perhaps that's why in his poems, which are descriptive and well reasoned without being cerebral, one recovers the physical voice of the author, even when he tries to be ironic. In *Carama* he describes an odd game I had never heard of:

a nimble-fingered man with a sharp knife
 playing “fly”: the players
 left a bit of meat
 on a table and didn’t move
 the first one for whom an insect alighted
 that guy was the winner.

It’s a competition that repudiates the bravura incised on the sharp knife. Whether or not it’s true that Barreto extracted these goings on from old San Fernando newspapers, I always felt a sort of admiration for this game, which leaves the decision of the animal to chance, as if it were a question of patience or Eastern wisdom. There are two other lines worth quoting, for they, too, represent Barreto:

In their cages, the birds scratch with human
 curiosity into each minute detail.

Here, it seems to me, is one of his reasons for raising cocks, for Barreto a pretext for observation.

So in the vast openness I found on my return from Paracotos I had another of my moments of mystical or natural exaltation. I was looking up at the dark and transparent nocturnal sky, a mixture of fragrances were coming from some nearby orchards or breeding farms, several dogs were barking at a distance, etc. I was not that far from the *cochinera* facing Olga’s house, where I imagined local people had gathered and in some cases were celebrating, etc. On nights like this, I thought, the so-called world seems divided; there is the more or less harmonious navigation of stars through the universe, and there are the temporal epicenters, who knows what to call them, for instance this *cochinera*, the shrine to the saintly doctor, or any other place that functions as a nucleus of people. As monumental as a epicenter may be, it is dwarfed by the

other world, the galactic sky; obviously not only because of the difference in their size but also, as everyone knows, because of the duration of the night sky, which is of a completely different order. Yet its duration is not a fact we can accept as true, since that long spread of time does not belong to our field of experience.

The universe could explode the day after tomorrow and us along with it, but nonetheless, if on the night before I had set out to observe the sky once again in Hoyo de la Puerta, I would have the same sensation of smallness and provisionality: human epicenters, on the one hand, not made to last, and the starry landscape on the other, seemingly unscathed. And the opposite, too, if someone survived a stellar explosion, the following night he would have a similar perception: the everlasting up above, and the provisional here below. For that reason, I told myself, the difference lies in the impact of the immensity. The immense seems more permanent, like the sea, for instance, or that series of undulating hillsides, at that moment sunken in the densest of thickets, but whose continuation over a hundred kilometers can be intuited with no difficulty. As can be seen, in that place in the middle of the night I had one of my usual metaphysical collapses, I don't know what else to call it, and I wanted to stop there forever, to live like a half-being, something plant-like or automatic, immobile, all the time observing without seeing, immutable, the same, obviously, as those figures made by Baroni.

I've passed by a good number of statues of the saintly doctor along the country's highways and byways; in the bend of a road, on natural or built promontories, on improvised pedestals, or on panoramic hilltops where they guard over or protect the well-being of travelers and the populace in general or simply the silent landscape. And at that moment, I dreamed of being one of them, it occurred to me to borrow the scant life they had; a weak life, in any case physically unverifiable, but at least real enough to remain in the place forever, in a sort of

perpetual contemplation, something like a spatial communion. It is relatively easy for an inanimate doll to acquire life and begin to move, to loosen up never-used joints, to start practicing its thin thread of a voice, etc.; I wanted the opposite, for a real person (and as far as I know, that was me) to adopt an existence of a non-autonomous doll and with it, I'd see myself exposed to a permanent, involuntary immobility. Always in the same spot, facing the mountainsides and feeling the breath of the fresh, verdant breeze. It's true, at these times one lets one's self be carried away by daydreams, and this one impelled me to not feel distant from the saintly doctor; not because a bond of devotion united me, at least not in the classic sense, but rather because the life that upheld him attracted me.

The life provided by the gaze of others—a material made of nothing, yet real. I didn't think it would be the best remedy for the despondency that for months had governed me, and that showed itself in so many unforeseen ways—typically when I was alone, amid nature and darkness—and on the whole through long mental soliloquies and abstract considerations that failed to offer me any clarity; nonetheless, these reactions were all I had, they served as proof of a remnant of strength, probably the dregs. As they say, “That's all there is.” That's all there was, and what's more, I had nothing else at hand. So I arrived at the conclusion that a good part of my warm regard for the saintly doctor derived from an outward appearance; to his always seeming pensive. The same way that Baroni's figures appeared to meditate in a particular way, and that's why I was attracted to them as well from the beginning. Later on what Baroni didn't make, or what she made without realizing it, etc., interested me. A perfect abyss, that's what those figures were, because they didn't reflect concentration but rather absence, or even distraction and a certain type of disdain; nothing of suffering or tenderness; compassion, I think, would be an excessively affected virtue. And at times I could even perceive a certain obfuscation. The saintly

doctor practiced a banal dominion, he was the idol who didn't worry about hiding his feet of clay, and he thus showed himself throughout the land as multifaceted.

I stopped on the shoulder of the road for a good while, and then resumed my journey. As one approached the city, the vast transverse valley of Caracas gradually appeared, sprawling and twinkling, with the luminous stripe of the main expressway like a festoon at the foot of the mountain. The following morning I sorted through photos that had been scattered about for a long time. Some were of Baroni, and showed her in different situations. I've already referred to those in which she's dressed up as a rabbit and iguana, also as a Christmas flower. I found another one in which she personifies the Virgin, dressed in a modestly embroidered white dress and holding up a real child. She's next to some bushes and behind her, by way of background, you see a typical Trujillo landscape. Though Baroni is looking at the camera, you get the impression she's interested in something located further beyond, somewhat higher, but surely in the distance. And as in each photo of Baroni, what stands out is the preparation, the prior effort expended on the details of the homemade dress, on the make-up or on ancillary elements or on the assistants, in this case, for instance, the toddler who plays the role of the Child.

Later I separated out other photos in which Baroni presides over a session, at first glance public, with a line of people waiting to talk to her. The setting appears to be a museum or a cultural center, and Baroni is standing next to one of the walls, practically leaning against it, to attend to them. There is a general category for these images; on the envelope where I store them I wrote, some time ago, "Baroni. Readings of ID Cards." The person fifth on line in one photo is, in another one, being helped; and so on for the rest of the people. People arrive, move ahead—slowly, I imagine—and then, after Baroni has read their ID, are no longer there. This means that the sequence of photos belongs to the same day, surely a related activity during some exhibit,

because off to the side of the photos you can seem shapes that look like Baroni's usual figures. At one point I began to wonder if the reading hadn't been so negative as to lead each of them to do something crazy afterward, so ominous was the effect of not finding in the photos the people I'd seen advance one by one from the beginning. Those whose IDs have been read by Baroni must be numerous and spread out across the land, nevertheless, I have only been able to locate one of them. At one point I asked her about the session and she refused to provide any details, nor did she want to say what Baroni had read or foreseen. She moved her head to the side, a show of hesitation, and immediately responded with generalities: "We'll see if it comes true one day" and the like. That led me to think, in turn, that several of those I'd asked had simply lied to me: Baroni had indeed read their ID but for some reason they preferred to deny it. In any case, it was an idea I had no opportunity to confirm.

In the sessions, Baroni holds the identity card in her two hands and reads it carefully, rather, she examines it and focuses, I presume, on each detail. The photo, the line with one's name, the number, the dates, nationality, expiration date, basically, everything: the national colors, the coat of arms, the watermarks, the lamination. Each ID is a complex nerve, or rather a ganglion, and thus exudes its own unique meaning which Baroni endeavors to translate. It's not about reading the future, but about analyzing the temperament of the bearer, as it were, of the ID, the weaknesses and strengths, the dangers faced, and the reasons to be optimistic or cautious. Baroni opens the palms of her hands in front of her, as if holding a book, and in the middle of the two she holds the ID. She wears the pair of large glasses she uses to read or work, and in several photos you can see her talking, that is, reading the document she has in front of her. It's said that she began reading identity cards a long time ago, even before she began to carve wood. She already had the ability to see an individual's interior, as well as to heal. That developed with her

initial return from the dead, and since then she has practiced it in a fairly constant manner, her own health permitting.

Though it seems contradictory, the ID readings go back to the time of her blindness. Baroni was confined to a psychiatric hospital in Caracas, some 650 kilometers from Boconó, when she suffered a complete retinal detachment. I imagine it must have been a consequence of her nervous attacks, to call them by some name, especially the tremendous head jerking and shaking when her desperation became unbearable. Then she lost her sight and wanted to knit in order to earn a little money, having no one to help her. As I said earlier, she asked for needles and thread and they only gave her thread; so she began to knit with her hands. Baroni's dexterity did not pass unnoticed, and her neediness came to the attention of the then-First Lady, who in a charitable gesture decided to intervene, arranging for her transport by car back to Boconó.

Despite having lost her sight, after Baroni returned home people came to her as much or more than they had before. It's reasonable to think of an increase in fame, because most likely blindness made her faculties all the more remarkable. People arrived and pronounced the number on their ID, with which Baroni carried out her diagnostics: "They would keep telling me the numbers and I would keep telling them things." As one can see, the name was not enough; though it is likely that the information was completed with some hand contact. Later on, she was reported to the local bishop, but I have not been able to learn the reasons; I suppose the ID card was seen as a more dangerous challenge to the Church's authority than the science of medicine.

In Venezuela, the ID is not merely proof of one's civil existence; it is also the document around which a particular type of subjectivity is created. Any transaction must begin by presenting one's ID; and often one must also leave behind, by way of proof, a copy of it. The phrase "photocopy of ID" is quite common, and is a usual requirement in offices of all types,

though there is no certainty about why it is requested: whether to emphasize the willingness of the person—a sort of act of confirmation—or simply to prove that the document exists. One begins to imagine all the photocopies there must be in records and files, in household furniture and in all types of offices; surely hundreds of millions. Given the frequency with which they're required, it makes sense that people would treat IDs and their copies as items consubstantial to their being, just like a portable DNA or an amulet warding off repeated failures. There is no commercial, civil, private or public transaction that does not require a photocopy of one's ID; one's existence and will are there combined. Before any process begins, each individual looks at him or herself in the mirror of an ID, which operates as a safe conduct in smoothing the path. Another factor that adds to the proliferation of originals and copies is its expiration, at times rather frequent. One makes several copies to have and thereby carry on one's person, apart from that, one keeps a few just in case, as a precautionary measure, or because the copy came out remarkably well, etc., but the time comes when the ID expires, and as a result the photocopies can no longer be used. So people keep storing up old documents and their copies, in some cases forever.

Two years later, Baroni recovered her sight thanks to the Virgin of the Mirror, as I explained before. And she went on making use of IDs in consultations, now reading them directly. I find it admirable that she adopted a method that was so civil, let's say, and thus hardly religious, and at the same time, because of this use, so constituent and intimate. I consider this another example of her enigmatic talent and of her surprising sensibility. When we were walking round her garden, moments before reaching the uncultivated part, I remembered these reading sessions, which Barreto had once told me were always infallible. But even though he tied the knot with her, as far as I know, Baroni never read his ID.

I wanted to know what she saw in the IDs; if she focused, as I supposed, on the vicissitudes of the object, not only on the photo itself. Some amount of handiwork is involved in the manufacture of IDs, and the details of each one can therefore be unique. In my case, for instance, one time the clerk completed my ID with another name. He should have copied the information from a form I had filled out. When he gave me the card to check, still unlaminated, I noticed the error. He told me, using other words and making a weak attempt at a joke, that it was an important error. He then took out an eraser from his pocket and began to rub it out; then promptly fed the paper back into the typewriter and with his index finger tapped out the correct name. The line came out crooked, with my surname some millimeters higher than my first name, which was itself askew. So I wondered, as I accompanied Baroni through her garden, whether that detail could influence the reading she would make of my ID, and whether my character or future would be revealed in another way. But I think something distracted me, maybe the dog, which was constantly wheeling around, and this point became another of the things I have yet to ask her.

As I pore over the photos of the readings, the thought occurs to me of an agnostic seer, one who abandons some pagan sect and establishes a new one. People line up and proffer their IDs as if a business transaction were about to take place. Baroni's mediation is similar to that of the clerk behind the counter. Not long ago I read a paragraph by the Uruguayan Levrero where he speaks about his ID. He wrote in his diary: "ID photos have something that's unique, I'm not sure what, something that can't be found in other types of photos. They always reveal features or details that, for better or worse, generally worse, aren't revealed by any other means." It's typical of Levrero to throw off comments like these, both assertive and lightweight at once, with which it's hard not to agree. Nonetheless, he also discovered an ever-present element in the background

of our civil IDs, though we may abandon them. So much so, that he ends the adventures of his ID renewal with this paragraph: because he thought the government office would retain his expired ID, he scanned it before the exchange, looking to preserve the mystery that was only revealed there. Among the photos we habitually see, ID-style photos are the oldest genre, or in any case the most traditional, no doubt because they show a neutral facial expression. They contain an indirect invocation to the past, along with the direct one, which is literal because it is chronological, and if they don't prove to be more revealing it's because of our lack of flexibility in examining them. Levrero was most likely alluding to the aura; the aura of the past, the aura of one's youth in that photo from years ago, etc. One can imagine him before the screen, in the silence of his home, during lengthy sessions at the computer—feverish at times and boring at others—engrossed by the former ID. At that moment time is suspended, Levrero connects with the past, which rescues him and saves him, it lends him the truth of that time, reflected in the scanned image.

I arrived that night in Caracas, then, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that I felt as if something had been extinguished. A cycle was beginning to close, or rather an arbitrary band of the past and, along with it, a corresponding part of reality had been withdrawn. To inhabit the world suggests melancholy—a lot or a little, profound or superficial, I don't know, nor if it's authentic or affected—and when we see that our place, the one we occupy, is imprecise and even more, undecided, we unhesitatingly succumb to it. During the dry season wildfires would tend to break out on the mountainsides. The smell of burning grass would spread throughout the city, and in some areas you could see ashes of an undefined color, containing tiny pieces of carbonized material. At that hour of the night the streets were as deserted as in the early morning: only a few people walking and a smaller and smaller number of cars. I inhaled the smell of

smoke, and thought that the next day I'd find ashes all around. At one point I raised my hand to my face and found something strange, an ember. It may seem odd, but this verification in the sensorial sequence—though incomplete, first smell, then contact—struck me as so obvious that it erased any other thought I had at that moment. It put me in a lacuna, one of those wide-awake dreams of which I can hardly recall anything.

Later, in my building's narrow elevator, which fits only two people, I saw a brown paper bag, the kind that bakeries typically use to hand over bread or a prepared snack. The paper had been crushed on the floor, but before that someone had crumpled it into a ball. My first thought was to relate it to the signals. I thought a hungry or impatient neighbor couldn't wait until getting home, and that the best way to hasten the snack had been to take it out of the bag. Or it may also have been carelessness. Whatever happened, that paper would be a signal but, depending on the case, of a different nature. So I picked it up from the floor with the idea of throwing it out later, but while the elevator ascended to the upper floors I began to study it. It was obvious—I felt I was peeking into other people's stories, thanks to chance. But chance, as I'd realized a long time before, was organized according to increasingly predictable guidelines. I mean, life in its totality was stocked with details that contained an ulterior meaning, such that the simplest doings or most unreasonable digressions yielded to the chain of events and especially to their logics and foundations.

May this lengthy preamble help to make clear why I therefore felt no surprise when, on getting off the elevator with the crumpled piece of paper in hand, I recalled the painter Reverón's so-called masks and, a little later, the example provided by a friend of the capricious orography of Trujillo, which I referred to earlier. So I decided not to get rid of the paper immediately, I left it the first place I found and allowed myself to expand a bit more: the idea occurred to me to

exaggerate and suppose that the geography of the entire country, in the end, could be represented by a crumpled piece of paper, with its hollows, faults, and irregularities. Paper that was balled up and then immediately—but not completely, as I put it several pages ago—smoothed out. As I opened the window and the deafening clamor of the avenue entered like a gust of air, I arrived, then, at a predictable conclusion—but of course difficult to prove—that with his self-portraits of paper, cardboard or canvas, the painter Reverón had also made maps of the country. This, most certainly, in a metaphorical sense. I closed the window and went to the kitchen to retrieve the paper and put it somewhere else, who knows for how long. I succumbed, once again, to another recurring act: my habit of holding onto everything, because each thing is a sort of signal; an anchor, even an oar, an IOU from the past. At that moment the woman on the cross was looking out from her corner, next to the front door. And I had a fleeting thought about her before I put the damaged ball in its precarious place: as I passed by her side I felt she narrowed her eyes to follow me with her gaze. I should say it was another of the things that, at least until now, I have been unable to prove.

Chapter 5

From Literary Criticism to Translation

a. Ekphrasis and Translation: Provisional Discourse Analysis

At the outset of this dissertation project nothing could have been further from my mind than to encounter affinities between literary translation and ekphrastic writing. It's true that my fascination with Sergio Chejfec's work began with my reading of the ekphrastic passages in his novel *Mis dos mundos*. I was especially drawn to the remarkably visualized sequences describing the animated films of William Kentridge, the South African artist whose work I discovered in the early 1990s and have followed ever since. Chejfec's descriptions of Kentridge's animations—"dibujos animados compuestos con grafito, que cuentan historias de adultos a la manera de los pioneros de la animación—and of the "miradas visibles"—"el trazo del recorrido de la mirada, como si se tratara de un haz de luz o de un fluido luminoso" (107)—brought to mind Kentridge's bluish-grey sequences in which dotted lines travel like arrows from the eyes of a character to the object or person being contemplated. Other passages in the novel re-created the scenes featuring Kentridge's alter-ego, Felix, "ese ser errabundo, alguien versátil a la deriva de la historia y el curso de la economía" (108), whom the somewhat adrift narrator adopts as his alter-ego as well.

As I translated these passages in *Mis dos mundos*, however, I made no special connection between Chejfec's act of representing Kentridge's images in words and my own act of rendering those same words in English.

It was only after reading and reflecting on the critical literature that treats ekphrasis, or the "picture-making capacity of words" (Krieger 1), that I realized I was traveling through a familiar landscape. As a longtime literary translator who follows the literature in the field, I was occasionally struck by the resemblances between the discourses of ekphrasis and literary translation. Such key words as "faithfulness," "fidelity," "derivation," "inferiority," "imitation" and the all-too-common "impossible," seemed borrowed from the storehouse of critical terms that frequently appear when translation is the subject. Indeed, I experienced a shock of recognition, a sense of *déjà vu*. At times, with only a slight change in words or phrases, passages would morph into a description I could have easily found in an essay on translation or in a book review of a newly published Scandinavian mystery.

Take, for instance, W.J.T. Mitchell's comment (previously quoted in Chapter 3) regarding the mediating role of the ekphrastic poet. With the replacement of only a few essential words, we have a working definition of what a translator does:

The ekphrastic poet typically stands in a middle position between the object described or addressed and a listening subject who (if ekphrastic hope is fulfilled) will be made to "see" the object through the medium of the poet's voice" (*Picture* 164).

The ~~ekphrastic poet~~ [translator] typically stands in a middle position between the ~~object described or addressed~~ [source text] and a listening subject who (if

~~ekphrastic hope is fulfilled~~ [the translation is good]) will be made to “see”
 [“understand”] the object through the medium of the poet’s [translator’s] voice.

Several examples can also be found in Murray Krieger. With minor revisions, a passage in *Ekphrasis* discussing Plato’s *Cratylus* could easily be understood as a critique of translation:

Krieger: “.... as Plato’s followers were to make clear for centuries, words could do their mimetic best, but they could not avoid their inferiority as an instrument of faithful representation” (14)

My slightly revised version: “.... *translated words* could do their mimetic best, but they could not avoid their inferiority as an instrument of faithful representation.”

The critical language that appears in key texts to describe the relationship between a verbal representation and the original art object is thus analogous to that often used to describe the relationship between a translation and the original text: both the ekphrastic description and the translated text are placed in the same inferior relationship to the more privileged original.

W.J.T. Mitchell writes about ekphrasis that “...the utopian figures of the image and its textual rendering as *transparent windows* onto reality are supplanted by the notion of the image as a *deceitful illusion*, a magical technique that threatens to fixate the poet and the listener” (italics mine *Picture* 156). In a similar way, a frequently voiced ideal for a translation is that it be like a windowpane, unobtrusive and transparent, a clear glass through which the original text can be revealed in a seemingly undistorted, unmediated form. As Walter Benjamin states in “The Task of a Translator”: “A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light...” (*Illuminations* 79). Translation is notably burdened with the paradoxical task of mediating while simultaneously being imperceptible. Unable in practice to reconcile such

disparate ends, translations are often unfairly maligned for blocking or obscuring the power of the original text, like a window covered by a film of dust that reduces the sun's radiance.

I have also noticed in the critical literature on ekphrasis that the word “translate” is used on a regular basis to describe the passage or the carrying over of images from the visual to the verbal realm. Krieger, for instance, speaks of “[t]he visual object that the ekphrasis seeks to *translate* into words...” (italics mine 16). Is Krieger’s phrasing merely one more example of a flexible and loose understanding of this word? Indeed, in current everyday usage, “translation” and “translate” can be vague, all-purpose words whose shifting meaning depends on the intent of the speaker.⁴¹

Or, I wondered, are translation and ekphrasis indeed related? Do the two realms of image and word in fact converge or overlap? Is there a deeper underlying connection, a kinship, a way to assimilate the two? My questions, which initially seemed farfetched and somewhat forced, turn out to be well grounded. A connecting link is articulated by Roman Jakobson in his fundamental essay, previously mentioned in Chapter 1, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation.” In it Jakobson states:

We distinguish three ways of interpreting a verbal sign: it may be translated into other signs of the same language, into another language, or into another, nonverbal system of symbols. These three kinds of translation are to be differently labeled:

1. Intralingual translation or *rewording* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language.

⁴¹ As poet and translator Linh Dinh jokes, “[T]ranslate’ as a verb is already problematic since it can be a substitute for any other. This morning, I translated a croissant and a cup of watery, overly-sweet coffee. Suddenly I translated from my job, my wife and I will have to translate ourselves to another exurb” (“On Translation”).

2. Interlingual translation or *translation proper* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.
3. Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. (145)

According to Jakobson's classification, "intralingual translation" is what we might call a paraphrase, a reworking or reformulation of words and phrases already in a shared language. "Interlingual translation," or what Jakobson calls "*translation proper*," is, of course, the category into which the Spanish to English translation of *Baroni: un viaje* falls. Ekphrasis is in the third category of "intersemiotic translation," but in an opposite direction to the one posited by Jakobson; that is, ekphrasis is the interpretation of a nonverbal sign system by verbal signs, i.e., the visual object comes first, and is the source that provokes or prompts the ekphrastic encounter. The verbal description follows thereafter, and the intersemiotic translation occurs.

If we agree with Jakobson's basic categorizations, we can then regard ekphrasis as a type of translation, in this case between a visual sign and language. Thus the parallels I noted earlier between the critical commonplaces of ekphrasis and those of literary translation may not be so strange after all; in fact, the elements of critical discourse shared by each might even be somewhat predictable, since both ekphrasis and literary translation are analogous operations within the broader conception of translation as theorized by Jakobson.

Regrettably, Jakobson tends toward brevity in his discussion. He does not elaborate on the category of intersemiotic translation, outline its problematics, or provide any specific examples. However at the essay's conclusion he lists, in truncated form, a few possible manifestations: "intersemiotic transposition—from one system of sign into another, e.g., from

verbal art into music, dance, cinema or painting” (151).⁴² By mentioning cinema and painting, both visual media, he reiterates the translatability between language and image (though again, in a direction *out* of language, not *into* it—i.e., reverse ekphrasis). Nonetheless, he leaves unexplored the consequences of such a translation: what happens in the transfer?

In what follows, I will consider ekphrasis and translation across four different measures, pointing to some of the congruities or incongruities I unexpectedly found when reading the critical literature that has framed my discussion of ekphrasis. Of the many articles I have read on ekphrasis, visual poetics, and word and image studies, none have directly commented on the overlaps in the critical discourse surrounding ekphrasis and translation, even in passing. I offer these observations not to argue for or against a position, nor to endorse stereotypical views, but as a starting point.

Ekphrasis and translation have been variously described as a mode, a genre, a device.

“Translation,” Walter Benjamin famously writes, “is a mode” (70). In *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman notes that “It has been suggested to me by an academic friend who is not a translator but is an indefatigable critic, editor, and reader, that translation may well be an entirely separate genre, independent of poetry, fiction or drama, and that the next great push in literary studies should probably be to conceptualize and formulate the missing vocabulary.” (47).

In “Ekphrasis and Representation” James A.W. Heffernan states: “ekphrasis designates a literary mode” (298). For Murray Krieger, ekphrasis is “the name of a literary genre, or at least a *topos*, that attempts to imitate in words an object of the plastic arts” (6). Grant F. Scott defines ekphrasis as “both a poetic device and a literary genre” (301), while Gary Shapiro refers to “the

⁴² Also Jakobson does not explain the shift in terminology from his earlier “intersemiotic *translation*” to the “intersemiotic *transposition*” of this paragraph. Presumably the words are interchangeable.

genre of ekphrasis” (13). W.J.T. Mitchell asks, “How can ekphrasis be the name of a minor poetic genre and a universal principle of poetics?” (156).

Genre, mode, device, *topos*. The writers do not stop to explain their choice of words. What is a “mode” for Benjamin? For Heffernan? How do Krieger, Scott, Shapiro and Mitchell understand “genre” in terms of ekphrasis? How does Grossman understand it in terms of translation? In Walter Benjamin’s case, I’m curious about the German word that was rendered in English as “mode”—is it distinct from the German word for “genre”? Do they share a semantic field?

Each of the authors quoted above may in fact have a distinct understanding of the term he or she employs; as David Duff declares in his introduction to *Modern Genre Theory*, “few concepts have proved more problematic and unstable than that of genre” (1). Out of the classical tradition that divided literature into three types, lyric, epic and dramatic, has come a proliferation of forms and varieties of writing that have led to new groupings (for instance, Gothic novels, detective stories, Harlequin romances, manga, among many others). Tzvetan Todorov, who along with Gérard Genette has made significant contributions to the field of genre studies, states in *Genres in Discourse* that “the choice a society makes among all the possible codifications of discourse determines what is called its *system of genres*” (10). A prescriptive approach to literature with circumscribed norms has yielded to a descriptive approach that characterizes genre based on current writing practices and on the consensus that arises around certain commonalities in given texts. In Todorov’s formulation, “A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties” (18).

Ekphrasis seems more assimilable as a genre: when a painting, sculpture, or finely wrought metal shield is rendered in words, when it is imitated in literature, there are identifiable

elements. Description is predominant. There is an artwork, or a visual artifact that is the subject of the passage. I had no trouble identifying the ekphrastic passages in *Baroni: un viaje* in order to find examples that would lend themselves to the critical approach I have adopted in writing about the novel's visualities.

Translation and genre, on the other hand, is a different matter. The idea that translation itself can constitute a genre is intriguing. In what way? Would translation be more respected if it were treated as a genre? However, doesn't translation cut across all genres? My sense is that translation would be the Proteus of genres, whose defining characteristic would be its shape-shifting ability. But if that were the case, how would it distinguish itself as a genre from others?

The literary scholar Anne Humpherys, to whom Edith Grossman alludes in the quote above, has provided me with additional insight. In her view, the commonality all translations share is that "[at] a minimum...in every translated text, there are two texts, the first text in one language and the second in another, and the first text is virtual in the second text. The virtual presence makes it a different genre."⁴³ We could also say that virtuality is a characteristic of ekphrastic writing. As Gary Shapiro writes in "The Absent Image": "The practice of verbal description of the visual came into being because the objects were not visible to the reader or listener." Similarly, translated texts come into being when the language of the source text is not comprehensible to the reader. Both the ekphrastic description and the translated text retain the trace of the absent predecessor.

2. A Process or Outcome or Both?

Is ekphrasis a process? Can we speak of "an ekphrasis" in progress? Does an ekphrasis happen? Is ekphrasis *the act* of describing a visual representation in words? If so, what is the

⁴³ Email to the author, 17 July 2013.

implied starting point? Is it the moment of composition, when the ekphrastic description appears on the page or on the screen? Or does ekphrasis precede the actual act of writing? I wonder, for example, if Kentridge's visible gazes can be understood as a materialization of the ekphrastic encounter: one sees and then thinks about one sees, as a prelude to the writing. When considered through a performative lens, does one enact an ekphrasis or perform an ekphrasis by visualizing an art object in words? Can ekphrasis be theorized from the perspective of the writer (i.e. "as I write this description, I'm performing/doing an ekphrasis")?⁴⁴ Is it a praxis?

Or is "ekphrasis proper" the outcome, the descriptive passage that appears on the page or on the computer screen, the words that Heffernan would call "the verbal representation of graphic representation"? ("Ekphrasis" 299). Is it the effect it produces, rather than the process?

I'm more intrigued by my first set of reflections. I find the almost complete lack of human agency in the critical literature on ekphrasis surprising. There is a hint of process in Mitchell's conception of ekphrastic indifference, hope and fear, but my overall sense is that the critical discourse is primarily oriented toward addressing and interpreting what appears on the page. Shouldn't the coming-into-being of an ekphrastic description be theorized along with what the writing captures?

Translation, on the other hand, is readily understood and imagined as both process and outcome. The act of translation is enshrined in a corollary verb, "to translate" (ekphrasis, on the other hand, has no such verb form; "to ekphrasize"?). The process of translation has been widely treated in theoretical writings, and translators have written about specific translation projects or

⁴⁴ Because my topic is written ekphrasis, I assume that the performer or enacter is engaged in the act of writing, but it should be recalled that ekphrasis can be oral and even non-spoken, if gestures or sign language is used.

have reflected on the task of translation.⁴⁵ In recent years translation itself has been theorized as a kind of performance or performative act.⁴⁶ Unlike ekphrasis, “translation” implies both the act itself along with the outcome. One does a translation, but there is no analogous space within which to “do an ekphrasis.”

3. The relationship of an ekphrastic passage to the original is necessarily reductive, whereas translations are often held to the standard of equivalence.

The ekphrastic writer does not set out to render each feature of a visual image in words. Furthermore, no critic would take issue with an ekphrastic writer’s compression of a vast amount of visual stimulus into a much reduced description. One wonders if a perfectly equivalent ekphrastic description of an artwork would even be possible.⁴⁷ To be sure, the ekphrastic writer will be judged by certain standards, but he or she will never be reproached for failing to reflect every element in the original. Loss is a given.

Translations, however, are often held to an improbable standard of reflecting a one-to-one correspondence with the original. As the critic Claus Clüver notes, “[t]o be considered successful, the target text is expected to offer equivalents for all aspects and features of the source text” (59). If equivalence is not measured word for word, then it is semantic unit by semantic unit. In fact, it is an unfortunate convention for critics of translation to point out that the translator has come up short, and then to assess the degree of damage. The stock question “What gets lost in translation?” provides a handy starting point for many reviews.

⁴⁵ See Allen and Bernofsky *In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means* (2013), Bellos *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* (2011), Grossman *Why Translation Matters* (2010), Levine *The Subversive Scribe* (2009) Waldrop *Lavish Absence* (2002) and *Dissonance* (2005).

⁴⁶ See Primavesi (1999).

⁴⁷ Perhaps it would be analogous to the absurdly perfect map described in Borges’s “Del rigor en la ciencia”: “...En aquel Imperio, el Arte de la Cartografía logró tal Perfección que el mapa de una sola Provincia ocupaba toda una Ciudad, el mapa del Imperio, toda una Provincia” (137).

4. Both stand at one or more removes from the original.

W.J.T. Mitchell calls ekphrasis “a second-order representation that stands free of its first-order target” (*Picture* 93). Similarly, translation can be regarded as a representation that stands at a certain distance or remove from the original source.

Much of the critical discourse surrounding ekphrasis and translation concerns the gap between the original and the second- (or third-or fourth-) order representation. For many critics it is a problematic gap in which deficiencies, limitations, discrepancies and inadequacies are posited. In the case of ekphrasis, language itself is called into question: can words “see”? Some critics, such as Mitchell, believe “there is, *semantically* speaking (that is, in the pragmatics of communication, symbolic behaviour, expression, signification) no *essential* difference between texts and images” (*Picture* 161; Mitchell’s emphasis). On the other hand, in *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, James Elkins argues that there is an inherent limit to what words can convey about visual images, and that they do indeed fail pictures by “overlooking painted strangeness” (5). Similarly, in “Intersemiotic Transposition” Claus Clüver notes that

When it comes to transposing a visual text into a verbal text, even the primary systems involved appear to be quite incommensurate.... Even if it were possible to establish a semantic equivalence between colors and phonemes, for example, the articulate system of verbal language could not match the infinite possibilities of the dense color system. (59-60)

Both ekphrastic writing and translation have been termed “bad copies,” though it is a more frequent critical commonplace with respect to translation, most likely because it can be seen as a derivative form of writing (and in fact under U.S. copyright law, translations are regarded as derivative works). Ekphrasis, on the other hand, implies a transfer between two

semiotic systems, the plastic arts and writing, and as Clüver points out, these two media are different enough to make it unlikely that critics would fault the ekphrastic description for being a “bad copy” of the original. (Also, as noted above, it is taken for granted that the transfer is reductive.) It might be an unsuccessful piece of writing, but it probably won’t be maligned for its failure to reproduce the original in its entirety.

Thus the critical discourses surrounding ekphrasis and translation appear to converge in certain respects, despite their seemingly disparate literary purposes. I cannot determine whether this is conditioned by practice or, keeping in mind Jakobson’s categorizations, is intrinsic to their nature. Their improbable encounter in this dissertation has prompted me to look into the question and outline areas of overlap, as a preliminary step toward a fuller interrogation of their critical taxonomies.

b. Translator’s Note

If we are to approach [*aborder*] a text, for example, it must have a *bord*, an edge.

Jacques Derrida, *Living On : Border Lines*,

trans. James Hulbert

In the final paragraph of the Introduction to this essay I suggested that the distinctive cleft running down the middle of the saintly doctor’s wooden torso could be understood as a powerful trope for the gap separating different representational or semiotic systems. I related it to W.J.T. Mitchell’s project to suture the word to the image, or to join the visual to the verbal, so as

to achieve a composite form, a merged “imagetext” (*Picture 9*). I also maintained that the gap suggests the fissures between languages, in this instance between the original Spanish of Sergio Chejfec’s *Baroni: un viaje* and my English translation. It is a motif I will continue to explore as I reflect on literary translation and on my work as the translator of this novel.

We recall that the narrator of *Baroni* depicted the crack as “una herida bondadosa, o en todo caso indulgente, porque se confunde con la línea de botones de la levita que lleva puesta” (7). The narrator likens the crack to a wound that is integral to the piece, almost at one with the line of buttons on the doctor’s coat. There is also another crack, “desconcertante porque parece violenta,” that climbs up the right side of the doctor’s neck, where it “parte la oreja derecha en dos y asciende por el parietal hasta esconderse, o borrarse, bajo el sombrero” (8). The body of the saintly doctor, delineated through its interstices, crevices, and fissures, becomes the site for the narrator’s multiple readings, as well as our own.

Because the cracks on which these descriptions are based began to appear on the real-life wooden figure after Chejfec’s move from Caracas, Venezuela to New York City, they are, in effect, the product of a translation in its literal sense: a “transference; removal or conveyance from one person, place, or condition to another” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, henceforth *OED*).⁴⁸ In the case of the saintly doctor, we could say that a border crossing and a change in climate played a crucial role in the cleaving of its body—which, despite its seemingly inanimate state, shares the porous cellular structure of the tree from which it was carved. The gaping crevice in

⁴⁸ Chejfec writes about the cracks that appeared in the wooden figure: “Es complejo y sorprendente el tema de las reacciones de las maderas cuando cambian de país. Conozco casos de maderas viejas que se deforman cuando las trasladan, y hasta entonces siempre estuvieron perfectas. En el caso de la talla de Rafaela [Baroni], creo que puede haber habido dos causas para que se produzcan las rajaduras: 1) que Rafaela haya usado maderas sin estacionar, o sea verdes; 2) que la madera haya sufrido debido a la calefacción neoyorquina.” Email to author, 3 August 2012.

the wood gives evidence of the figure's organic origins, and like an anatomical incision reveals the wooden flesh beneath its smooth and brightly colored surface. It is an alarming cut that nearly splits the figure in two, exposing the saintly doctor even further to the whims of the atmosphere and the relentless steam heat of a New York City apartment.

The religiosity of the figure and its sacred overtones are intensified by the wound-like crack. As it passes through the tunic of the Christ Child there is nothing to suggest the specific wounds of the Passion, but the deep fissure in the wood is ominous, dividing one part of the Child's lower body from the other and cutting through the heel of its left foot. The dramatic wounds suffered by martyrs and saints come to mind, especially those of Saint Sebastian, whose torso, like Baroni's saintly doctor, is characterized by its wounds. We may also ponder the irony of a miracle-working doctor who is himself in need of a cure to keep his chest from splitting apart.

In contemplating the gaps, ridges, and furrows of the saintly doctor, and in ruminating on my own work as the English-language translator of *Baroni*, I recall a fundamental essay on translation by Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines." He begins the essay with the epigraph cited above, "If we are to approach [*aborder*] a text, it must have a *bord*, an edge" (257). Indeed, on the essay's printed page, an edge or borderline runs across its bottom quarter, separating the upper essay from a strip of text beneath. It is in this lower band that Derrida poses questions and posits ideas about translation, even addressing his hypothetical translators at times: "Note to the translators: How are you going to translate that...?" referring to the supposedly untranslatable anagrammatic "*écrit, récit, série*," which the English-language translator, James Hulbert, obligingly leaves in the original (259).

As readers of Hulbert's English-language version, we are drawn into the extended meta-narrative regarding the essay's translation. For instance:

A question to the translators, a translator's note that I sign in advance: What is translation? ...My desire to take charge of the Translator's Note myself. Let them also read this band as a telegram or a film for developing (a film "to be processed," in English?): a procession underneath the other one, and going past it in silence, as if it did not see it, as if it had nothing to do with it, a double band, a "double bind," and a blindly jealous double....Double proceedings, double cortège, double triumph. (77-78)

or

...if my participation is possible only with supplementary interpretation by the translators (active, interested, inscribed in a politico-institutional field of drives, and so forth), if we are not to pass over all these stakes and interests (...How is one to step in? What is the key here for decoding? What am I doing here? What are they making me do? How are the boundaries of all these fields, titles, corpora, and so forth, laid out? Here I can only locate the necessity of all these questions), then we must pause to consider [*on devra s'arrêter sur*] translation. It brings the *arrêt* of everything, decides, suspends, and sets in motion.... (98-100)

In a playful way, Derrida draws back the curtain that often conceals the act of translation and the translator. While interrogating himself, he also interrogates the mediating role of the translator—how he or she steps in, decodes, figures out the boundaries.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I ponder the dilemma of the Author who wants to take charge of the translator's note. I also note that in this meta-narrative, no space has been allotted to translator James Hulbert to speak back or answer Derrida's questions.

Throughout the essay Derrida continuously meditates on translation, speaking to the essay from the strip below. What about the difficulty of the text? Its untranslatability? In addition to “*écrit, récit, série*” above, the multiple meanings of *arrêter* and its variants do not carry over into the English; hence the brackets, a visual frame for the untranslatable play on words.

The upper text, he says,

[i]s not untranslatable, but, without being opaque, it presents at every turn, I know, something to stop [*arrêter*] the translation: it forces the translator to transform the language into which he is translating or the “receiver medium,” to deform the initial contract, itself in constant deformation, in the language of the other. (88-89)

Here Derrida refers to translation as the “deformation” of the original or target language or both, a rupturing of the smooth surface of language. In a similar way, I would argue that the cracks on the saintly doctor’s polished torso and neck, which create an edge exposing the raw wood beneath, are a deformation, one richly suggestive of what poet and translator Rosmarie Waldrop in her essay “Silence, the Devil and Jabès” calls “the very curious space between two languages” (*Dissonance* 150). What does it mean, then, to work in this curious space? Is it a space of ruptures and breaks? In what way can we speak, as Derrida does, of deformation?

Other writers on translation have invoked images analogous in their disjunctiveness to those of Derrida and Waldrop. In his essay “Translation Wounds,” for instance, Johannes Göransson rethinks translation as the rupture in the skin of a textual body:

I would like to think of translation as a wound through which media enters into a textual body. The wound of translation makes impossible connections between languages, unsettling stable ideas of language, productive ideas of literature. It is

these wounds—wounds that foreground the media of language and image—that I am interested in thinking about here. (n.p.)

Göransson's views on translation are echoed and even intensified by Waldrop:

The destruction is serious. Sound, sense, form and reference will never again stand in the same relation to one another. You have to break apart this seemingly natural fusion of elements, this seemingly natural presence. You have to break it apart no matter what your theory is.... (*Dissonance* 146).

In *Baroni* I've found a powerful motif in the crack that splits the doctor in two. It is an eloquent flaw that speaks of the wooden figure's origins, its nomadic state, and the ultimate destruction that will befall it. Since the beginning of this essay I have paid close attention to the crack. And now, as I reach its conclusion with a translator's note, the cleft speaks to me about the act of translation itself. Using Waldrop's almost seismic imagery, it is at the level of sentence, syntax and word that the original is broken apart and torn asunder, in order to be carried over into another language. At first, the violence of the image may seem excessive. Shouldn't there be some gradations, depending on the nature of the work? Does the translation of a prose work such as *Baroni* call for a similar pulling apart and suturing in the new language? Do the nuances in sound, sense and rhythm matter as much when the text being translated is a novel? Yes, I would argue. In that case, do Chejfec's sentences have any unique characteristics, and if so, what are they?

A few critics and writers have singled out the author's sentences for comment. For instance, in "Anomalías: Sobre *Cinco* y otras obras tempranas," the critic Beatriz Sarlo notes:

La marca de un escritor es su sintaxis. Para decirlo de modo menos absoluto: la marca de un tipo de escritor es la forma de su frase. En el caso de

Chejfec, la frase es muchas veces tentativa; toma para varios lados al mismo tiempo; admite incidentales y se interrumpe para desviarse, en una adversativa, corrigiendo lo que ya ha sido dicho para retomarlo enseguida desde otro ángulo. De modo sorprendente, pese a su disposición sinuosa e incluso traicionera, la frase de Chejfec es sólida desde el punto de vista constructivo, y dubitativa desde el punto de vista semántico.... (394-395)

Sarlo's choice of adjectives ("tentativa," "dubitativa") echoes what I have experienced in reading and translating Chejfec's prose. His sentences are full of pauses, stutters, changes in direction, sudden digressions. The tone often hesitates; the first-person narrator in *Baroni* (and in *Mis dos mundos*) frequently doubles back and casts doubt on what he has just said. Sentences are sinuous; they are pushed to excess, stretching, expanding, and nesting—sometimes even doubly and triply, like a Chinese box of dependent clauses.

The Spanish novelist Enrique Vila Matas has also written about the particular cast of Chejfec's sentences:

En parte, todo esto es algo que el autor ha explicado en algún lugar refiriéndose a su gusto por ver cuánto puede resistir una frase, no en términos solamente técnicos, sino en una especie de tono las frases estarían siendo empujadas hacia la expansión, porque existiría un mensaje, pero estaría constreñido por la fórmula, por la ecuación de la frase. A Chejfec le gustaría bordear ese límite, tratar de hacer elástica la frase, no hasta el punto de que ésta fuera incomprendible, pero sí trabajar con ese límite para que se viera que existía en cuanto tal. Por eso seguramente le gusta poner frases sin terminar, y recomenzar con otra oración

para evidenciar que la arbitrariedad del narrador también juega un papel en el campo más estrictamente lingüístico. (TS)

I translated Vila Matas's description as part of the preface I translated for *My Two World*, but reading it again for this essay, on the heels of considering Derrida's "Living On: Border Lines," I am delighted to see that Vila Matas imagines Chejfec specifically attempting to [*abordar los bordes*], to approach the edge of the sentence in Spanish. For me in turn, testing the tensile strength of Chejfec's sentences in translation has made me stretch the sort English sentence I typically write. Waldrop, the English-language translator of Edmond Jabès, borrows a phrase from the poet when she speaks of the "pre-dialogue" she has with the authors she translates (*Dissonance* 151). In a similar fashion, for the translation of both *Mis dos mundos* and *Baroni*, I have held a pre-dialogue with Chejfec by reading English-language authors known for their long, expansive sentences: Henry James, especially his later works, and contemporary writers such as Janet Malcolm, William Gaddis and David Foster Wallace, among others—all practitioners of the long literary sentence in English.

In the context of a larger essay centered on Borgean traces in Chejfec's work, "La confesión de la pobreza. Un cierto Borges en *Baroni: un viaje y otras obras de Chejfec*," the critic Reinaldo Laddaga takes note as well of Chejfec's peculiar language and sentence structure:

...basta deternernos, observar con atención las formaciones del lenguaje (porque las frases de las que el libro está hecho son, invariablemente, formaciones, en el sentido en que usamos la palabra para referirnos a las formaciones geológicas) para que el sentido se vuelva gradualmente menos claro hasta ser, digamos, algo así como un pulso que resta en el borde de la desaparición. Lo que no es un problema: abandonadas las frases casi enteramente por el sentido que parecían

estar a punto de adquirir, emergen con mayor nitidez las torsiones de una prosa que no se parece a ninguna otra... (284-285)

Here Laddaga compares the author's sentences to geological formations, calling to mind the typical layering of clauses and parentheticals in the longer sentences I have translated. Laddaga suggests as well that as Chejfec's sentences advance, they become increasingly less clear. It is true that Chejfec's sentences do not always resolve meaningfully, as one might expect in an author whose main themes are indeterminacy and uncertainty. Laddaga's observation also brings up an important issue from the translator's perspective. How does one translate ambiguity and confusion? It is a question I will consider in a moment.

In what follows, I will look at and comment on passages from two sections of *Baroni*, in the original Spanish and in my English translation. Given this essay's exploration of the picture-making capacity of Chejfec's writing in Chapter 3, the first passage will be highly visual. It is taken from the novel's opening paragraphs, which present the description of the saintly doctor that prompted my Derrida-inflected reading of edges, gaps, and deformations. The second passage comes from the paragraph that inspired Reinaldo Laddaga's comments regarding "las formaciones del lenguaje" that characterize Chejfec's prose at its most meandering and syntactically complex.

But first, a few thoughts on the translator's note as a literary convention. Can it be historicized as a formal writing practice? As a translator am I contributing to a tradition? Can it be seen as a unique narrative that developed to frame or introduce translations? Is it worthy of scholarly attention? Does it in fact constitute a genre of its own? If so, it seems to operate in the margins, untracked by literary or translation scholars, still waiting to be theorized and presented as a formal tradition with a unified corpus. In fact, if one wanted to do so, it would be difficult to

trace the translator's note as a textual form, since bibliographic entries for works in translation do not necessarily include information on prefaces, afterwords or notes by the translator, in the instances where one is present.⁵⁰

My interest in this question also speaks to the issue of translation as scholarship, since a body of writings across time by translators about their work serves to place such texts within a continuous historical tradition. Besides renowned commentators such as Chapman or Pope on their translations of the Iliad, and Dryden on his translation of Ovid, or the lesser known but accessible commentary by Quevedo on his translations of Anacreon, one suspects that there are countless other commentaries written by unknown translators that would constitute a historical record, though I suspect a good portion of these have been lost to the vicissitudes of bibliographic and archival practices.

I would argue that the translator's note is as much a liminal device as other textual forms examined by Gérard Genette in his foundational study *Paratexts*.⁵¹ As such, it shares traits with the preface, described by Genette as "every type of introductory (preludial or postludial) text, authorial or allographic, consisting of a discourse produced on the subject of the text that follows or precedes it" (161). Similarly, a translator's note will often include an introduction to the author and the work. It may also incorporate commentary on the translation itself, and call the reader's attention to challenges faced and approaches adopted. A translator's note can sometimes be quite minimalist and spare (the note by translator Jane E. Lewin in *Paratexts*, for

⁵⁰ By no means is it a given that a translator's note will appear in a translated work of literature.

⁵¹ Genette's exhaustive study of liminal devices does not include a separate treatment of the "Translator's Note," an aporia that is all the more evident in the English-language translation, where there is indeed such a paratext in the front of the book by its translator, Jane E. Lewin. Genette does not entirely ignore translation, however; he expresses regret that he could not treat it in his study. It is a textual practice, he writes, whose "paratextual relevance seems to me undeniable" (405) but whose investigation, he admits, would have entailed more work than that required to produce *Paratexts* itself.

instance, is just one page long). At the other end of the spectrum, it can be expansive and discursive, and treat the translation as if it were a story in itself, often narrativizing the process.⁵²

My approach to the present translator's note is indebted to several outstanding translators whose commentaries on the task of translating have served as a touchstone for my own work. These commentaries differ widely, but each zooms in on specific translation problems and describes his or her painstaking attention to textual details, from the mundane to the wholly unique. As novelist and translator Tim Parks points out, there is a paradox "at the heart of translation: the text we take as inspiration is also the greatest obstacle to expression. Our own language prompts us in one direction, but the text we are trying to respect says something else, or says the same thing in a way that feels very different" ("Translating in the Dark"). Overcoming these obstacles, noting the moves taken, and articulating these in a compelling way in writing—to make the act of translation interesting, even suspenseful—is as much a literary intervention as the translation itself.⁵³

Rather than presenting the original and different stages of drafts, I am presenting the original and my final translation—"final" in the sense that it is included as Chapter 4 of this dissertation, though further revisions will most likely be made before the translation is published as a book. I will not present an exhaustive inventory of translation problems that arose but will

⁵² In the interest of establishing a record of precedents or precursors, I should also mention the tradition of longer, free-standing essays, articles and papers by translators on their work. When collected in anthologies focused on the practice of translation, these writings stand a greater chance of enduring over time. Notable anthologies in this category include *On Translation*, edited by Reuben A. Brower (1959), *The Craft and Context of Translation*, edited by William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck (1964); *The Craft of Translation*, edited by John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte (1989), and most recently, *In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means*, edited by Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky (2013).

⁵³ I include these translator's notes in my list of exemplary specimens: Bernofsky (2013), Craig (2011), Davis (2007, 2011), Grossman (2010), Prieto (2013), Parks (1998), Waldrop (2002) and Weaver (1989).

rather highlight a few of the questions and problems I faced. Here are some considerations of Chejfec's word choices and my translation:

Tengo frente a mí el cuerpo de madera del santo; la madera se ha rajado por la mitad de este médico que mira hacia adelante sin ver nada en particular. (7)

I have before me the wooden body of the saint; the wood has cracked down the middle of this doctor who looks ahead of him without seeing anything in particular.

This first sentence, which stands alone as the novel's initial paragraph, establishes, in a few strokes, some of the major themes of the novel. Here is the first-person narrator, the principal observer and beholder of the artworks, with one of the two wooden figures whose acquisitions will be described over the course of the narration.⁵⁴ The simple language with which the author renders his encounter with this artwork is characteristic of other ekphrastic passages appearing in the book. With each new sentence, details about the historical person and the peculiar features of the carved representation are added, composing a visual image by cumulative effect, a narratological feature I examined in Chapter 3. The entire description unfolds over five paragraphs; I will focus on the first two.

As noted earlier, a bit of translator's luck allowed me to begin the English translation of this visually charged passage with the homophonic word "I," suggestive of the "eye," a fitting

⁵⁴ These wood-carvings play such an important role in the novel that Chejfec regards them as characters. In the blog posting "Sobre *Baroni: un viaje*," Chejfec writes: "...diría que la novela tiene...tres personajes dramáticos principales. De estos tres personajes, uno equivale a una persona real y existente (la misma Rafaela Baroni); otro es la representación plástica de un médico milagrero de comienzos del siglo xx (José Gregorio Hernández), y el tercer personaje es una figura de madera, sin referente humano explícito." The wooden figure that serves as the third character is the woman on the cross.

image with which to open this visual novel. The semi-colon that marks a caesura in the sentence presents no problem in translation.⁵⁵ Here it serves as a kind of hinge that links the narrator's initial presentation of the wooden doctor, simple and spare, with the second part in which the narrator begins to depict the carving's unique features.

The repetition of *madera* calls for a similar repetition in the translation. The best equivalent in English is not a perfect match, but “wooden” and “wood,” are close enough. However, the string of alliterative “m” sounds that follow *madera*— *mitad*, *médico* and *mira*—is lost, although an alliterative echo is present in “seeing” and “anything.”

Se ha rajado, from *rajarse*, a reflexive verb in Spanish, introduces the all-important motif, the “crack.” There are seven allusions to this singular feature in these two paragraphs, with various synonyms used in the Spanish. Questions about the translation of *rajarse* and about the variety of nouns relating to the split (*la raja*, *la hendidura*, *la grieta*, *la rotura*) continue to engage me. I will give further consideration below to the word choices made by Chejfec regarding this unique feature of the saintly doctor.

Durante su vida física, el personaje dividió el tiempo en tres partes conocidas (o su tiempo conocido en tres partes): los enfermos pobres, la ciencia y Dios. Luego, cuando murió y de a poco fue creciendo su fama de protector, de guardián efectivo de la salud e incluso de sanador, abandonó la ciencia y amparó bajo su don espiritual también a los no pobres. La figura de madera tiene de altura unos ochenta centímetros, y carga en los brazos un niño que se pega fuertemente sobre la parte frontal

⁵⁵ As befits a writer of sentences “empujadas hacia la expansión” (Vila Matas), Chejfec employs the semi-colon quite frequently, in some instances two or more times in a sentence.

izquierda del médico, como si quisiera verse aplastado contra su cuerpo.

El niño viene a ser el Niño, sin requerir mayor presentación. (7)

During his physical life, the great man divided his time into three known parts (or his known time into three parts): the poor and sick; science; and God. Later, after he died and his fame as a protector, an effective guardian of health, and even a healer, slowly grew, he abandoned science and protected the not so needy as well with his spiritual gift. The wooden figure is some eighty centimeters tall and carries in its arms a child that clings to the doctor's left front side, as if seeking to flatten itself against his body. The child turns out to be the Child, no further introductions necessary.

The second paragraph opens with the problem of *personaje*. To avoid the infrequent cognate "personage," I substitute "great man"; I do, however, use "personage" later on in the novel, as a variant, once José Gregorio's historical stature has been established.

Los enfermos pobres is literally, "the poor sick"; "poor and sick" sounds more natural in English, with no significant change in meaning. *Los no pobres* is more troublesome. Although Spanish is usually more verbose than English, here is a shortcut English cannot take: the clumsy "those who are not poor" would be the equivalent. "Not so needy" is the concise approximation I use, though it has overtones of "rich," not necessarily implied by the original.

In early drafts, a confusing sequence of pronouns arose in the sentence *La figura de madera...carga en los brazos un niño que se pega fuertemente sobre la parte frontal izquierda del médico, como si quisiera verse aplastado contra su cuerpo*. Several factors conspired to cause this translation problem. To begin with, possessive pronouns are not typically used for

body parts in Spanish, whereas they almost always are in English. Thus *carga en los brazos un niño* becomes “carries in its arms a child,” the “its” required because the corresponding subject is *figura de madera*, obviously a thing. However, in the subordinate clause that follows, the *figura de madera* is now personified as *el médico*, to whom the child clings, making the pronoun “its” no longer available as a choice. In the next clause, the construction *como si quisiera verse aplastado* calls for a reflexive pronoun in English; the child is male, hence, “as if seeking to flatten himself” seems the obvious solution. But I cannot use “himself.” The now-personified wooden figure, the doctor, also calls for a pronoun, because the child is *aplastado contra su cuerpo*— “his body,” obviously the doctor’s body. If one follows the rule of antecedents, the clause reads “as if seeking to flatten himself against his body,” an unacceptable translation. The way out of this snag was to fall back on the convention in English that a child, especially a very young one, can be referred to as “it,” allowing me to sidestep the problem: “The wooden figure...carries in its arms a child that clings to the doctor’s left front side, as if seeking to flatten itself against his body.” The sentence seems to bend the rules of continuity regarding pronouns, with the “its” and the “itself” alluding to different antecedents, but in the end the meaning seems clear.

La levita negra que el doctor usó a lo largo de su vida física lo acompaña también en este caso; el traje ciñe el cuerpo, como ocurre casi siempre cuando se trata de este médico, recordando de modo invariable la urbana elegancia cosmopolita que observó con habitual disciplina, para lo cual se cortaba sus propios trajes según figurines llegados de París. (7)

The black coat the doctor wore all during his physical life also accompanies him here; the coat sheathes his body, as is almost always the

case with this doctor, invariably calling to mind the urbane, cosmopolitan elegance he practiced with habitual discipline, to which end he had his suits tailored from patterns out of Paris.

One long sentence devoted to the saintly doctor's fashionable appearance. *Levita* means "frock coat" in English, but images on the Internet show that these are almost knee-length, considerably longer than the garment worn by Baroni's saintly doctor (and in countless other representations), so I leave it at "black coat." How it hangs on his body is another question: according to my bilingual dictionary, *ciñe*, from *ceñir*, implies tightness, but the photo of the wood carving on *Parábola anterior*, Chejfec's blog, reveals that the coat "skims" his body, or "sheathes" it. I chose the more unusual "sheathes" to describe its fit. I puzzled over *según figurines llegados de París* before realizing that just as one has "fashions out of Paris" one could also have "patterns out of Paris," whose "p's" produces an alliterative echo.

Como dije, la madera está rajada. Parece sin embargo un herida bondadosa, o en todo caso indulgente, porque se confunde con la línea de botones de la levita que lleva puesta. Cuando sube, la raja va por el costado de la corbata negra y pasa menos desapercibida en el cuello, donde sin embargo muere en una repentina hendidura. Hay otra, desconcertante porque parece violenta, que parte la oreja derecha en dos y asciende por el parietal hasta esconderse, o borrarse, bajo el sombrero también negro que cubre su cabeza. Ese sombrero es otro de los elementos típicos; y en la práctica no hay escena del personaje donde no lo lleve puesto. Hacia abajo, la grieta frontal deja atrás la levita y divide mal la ingle. En esta zona el cuerpo está olvidado, no hay volúmenes

sugeridos, y ello induce a que la rotura parezca profunda, más íntima, aludiendo acaso a una latente desnudez, o mejor dicho, a una desnudez inocente. (7-8)

As I said, the wood has cracked. It seems, however, a benevolent wound, or at any rate an obliging one, because it gets muddled with the line of buttons on his coat. As the crack ascends, it runs alongside his black tie and proceeds less unnoticeably into his neck, where it dies out in a sudden cleft. There is another crack, disconcerting because it looks violent, that splits the right ear in two and rises toward the parietal bone until vanishing, or erasing itself, under the hat, also black, that covers his head. That hat is another of the characteristic elements; and in practice there is no scenario in which the great man fails to wear one. Lower down, the crack in the middle takes leave of the coat and partitions his groin badly. In this area the body has been forgotten, no bulk is suggested, and that makes the fissure look deep, more private, perhaps alluding to a latent nakedness, or rather, to an innocent nakedness.

Como dije, la madera está rajada. After a series of long sentences, all of a sudden a short one, a pattern typical in Chejfec, drawing the reader's attention once more to *la raja*, the Barthean *punctum* mentioned in Chapter 3.

In this passage, Chejfec uses of a range of words to depict this striking feature (*la raja*, *la hendidura*, *la grieta*, *la rotura*, underlined in the passage). I will now pay close attention to these word choices in order to understand the nuances in the original and weigh alternatives in the English.

In her essay, “La traducción entre forma y fantasma: el escritor-crítico-traductor en el cruce de horizontes culturales,” the Argentine poet and translator Delfina Muschietti argues in favor of an investigative approach to translation:

...en tanto el traductor mantenga la decisión de no neutralizar el texto de partida, respetar ambigüedades e impactos, llegará al objetivo deseado: mantener abierta la más abierta de las formas (...). Igualmente, la traducción en tanto implica una lectura del original, forma parte de su crítica y es una expansión de la obra (...) y de algún modo, la cierra. El desafío del traductor es que ese cierre sea apenas como un temblor: esa levedad está sustentada, sin embargo, por intensas investigaciones de las formas de la lengua, trabajo con diccionarios múltiples, despliegue de posibilidades. (112-113)

Similarly, Lydia Davis, the novelist and translator from the French of Flaubert, Proust and Blanchot, writes of her Proust translation: “I tended to consider and reconsider even the smallest questions, to the extent of looking for enlightenment in the etymologies of the original French words, something I had never done before.” (*Proust* 7). The dictionary work that both Muschietti and Davis advocate reminds me that translators are, among other things, word connoisseurs. The etymological histories of the words used by Chejfec to describe the gap on the saintly doctor’s torso begin to intrigue me, although I have already translated the passage above in a way I find satisfying (relying when necessary on a bilingual dictionary and Roget’s thesaurus). When I revisit the translation in the future, however, I will take the following histories, gleaned from an array of physical dictionaries, into consideration.

In describing the doctor, the verb *rajar* generates the most forms: the noun *la raja* and the participle forms *rajado/a* (and later on in the novel there is another variant, *la exemplar*

rajadura (Baroni 66)). It is a word that seems more demotic than the others, more idiomatic in the Spanish-speaking world (for instance, *No te rajes*, Mexican slang for “Don’t give up”), and it lends itself to more vulgar uses as well.⁵⁶ I look up *raja* in the 1990 *Diccionario de la lengua española* (henceforth *DRAE*) and see that its first definition is “Una de las partes de un leño que resultan de abrirlo al hilo con un hacha, una cuña u otro instrumento.” Thus *raja* not only means “crack,” but also has a strong association with wood—a fact I had not known until now—which confirms it as an excellent word choice in Spanish.

From Corominas’s *Diccionario crítico etimológico de la lengua castellana* (1954) I learn that *rajar* is “de origen incierto,” and that it prospered upon the “*decadencia*” of *hender* (Latin *findĕre*), the source verb for *hendidura*, which Corominas affirms has a more literary use nowadays. Going back to the oldest source I can consult, Covarrubias’s *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (1611), I learn that a *hendedura* is “la apertura en la pared, en la tierra, en el vaso, en barro, en piedra, o en otra qualquiera materia que se aparta en parte y pasa el aire por medio, dexando de ser continua.”

Grieta, according to *DRAE*, is a “quiebra o abertura longitudinal que se hace naturalmente en la tierra o en cualquier cuerpo sólido,” or an “[h]endedura poco profunda que se forma en la piel de diversas partes del cuerpo...” whereas a *rotura* is a “raja o quiebra de un cuerpo sólido.”

The story of these words tells me that there is a significant semantic overlap between them; indeed, both *grieta* and *rotura* refer to *raja* and *hendedura* in their definitions. I turn back to the passage I translated into English and see that I have consistently rendered *rajado/raja*,

⁵⁶ For example, *la raja* can also refer to the female vulva. “Que se te ve la raja del culo” is the equivalent in Spanish to saying “your crack shows” to someone wearing pants. (These examples are from an informant in Spain.)

which is the word Chejfec uses most frequently, as “cracked/crack.” But given the strong association of *rajarse* with wood, shouldn’t I consider using an analogous verb in English, “to cleave,” which is associated with cutting wood, and its variant, “cleft” whenever *rajarse/raja* appears in Spanish? But the words “cleave/cleft” are not as common in English as “crack.” So although it might be rewarding to make this etymologically-sensitive match between original and translation, I discard the idea. I will stay with “crack,” with its sharp “c” and “k” sounds.

I do use “cleft,” but to render *una repentina hendidura* into English as “a sudden cleft.” If *hendidura* is a more literary word in Spanish, “fissure” might be an analogous choice in English, and it is also derived from the same Latin word, *fīndere*. “Fissure,” however, seems too unusual, although its definition in the OED seems perfect: “A cleft or opening (usually rather long and narrow) made by splitting, cleaving, or separation of parts.” I am not, however, convinced that “a sudden cleft” will be improved on by “a sudden fissure.” I do use “fissure” later on for *rotura*, and here it seems ideal: the narrator’s gaze has now descended to the groin, and a “crack” in this part of the body would add unnecessarily to the genital confusion. In comparison, “fissure” seems more in keeping with the delicate tone adopted to describe the figure’s sexlessness.

The long sentence that prompted Reinaldo Laddaga’s earlier comments appears as the narrator is driving on a highway at night after his visit to Rafaela Baroni’s house.

Por un lado, mi experiencia era cada vez más reducida, lapsos paulatinamente más largos los dedicaba solamente a pensar, lucubraciones dispersas, flotantes, alejadas de cualquier destino y concentración; y por el otro, advertía que día a día era más irresuelto en mis afirmaciones, tanto que hacía comentarios falseados, insostenibles o directamente inconvincentes, y de todos modos eso no

me importaba, porque pensaba que la verdad —sea esto lo que fuese— relacionada conmigo estaba preservada en la profundidad (no una profundidad interior, en la que obviamente no podía creer y acaso ya no existía, sino en la profundidad de las cosas, o sea, el supuesto sentido último asignado a mis palabras). (43)

On the one hand, my experience was increasingly limited, I devoted longer and longer periods just to thinking, to scattered, free-floating lucubrations, remote from any object or sense of concentration; and on the other, I realized day by day that I was more indecisive in my affirmations, such that I made false, untenable or directly unconvincing comments, but in any case that didn't matter to me because I thought that the truth—whatever that was—that pertained to me would be found in the depths (not an inner depth, something I obviously couldn't believe in and that perhaps no longer existed, but rather, in the depth of things, that is, in the so-called ultimate meaning of my words).

On the whole I attempted to stay quite close to the original, not only in my choice of words in English, which tend to be cognate forms, but also in keeping the specific punctuation that helps order the sentence for the reader.⁵⁷ In addition to Chejfec's frequent commas, sprinkled liberally throughout this passage, and the ever-present semi-colon, here there is an infrequent em-dash as well as parentheses. When I translate Chejfec and see these latter two forms of punctuation in a long sentence, I am relieved; I will have fewer problems in keeping the units of the sentence clearly set off in English.

Regarding the use of cognate forms in English, I'm aware of the delicate balance that needs

⁵⁷ My rule is to never break up a long sentence in the original Spanish into shorter sentences in the English translation.

to be struck between Latinate abstractions such as “lucubrations” and the quasi-conversational and often self-mocking modulations of the narrator’s voice (“whatever that was,” “so-called ultimate meaning of my words”). As I’ve become more experienced in translating Chejfec, however, I’ve been won over by words that on other projects I would have probably rejected as too obscure. For instance, *lucubraciones* could be translated more commonly as “meditations” or “reflections”; but Chejfec had those options open to him in Spanish as well. I have worked with a sufficient number of texts by the author to know that *lucubraciones* is a word Chejfec uses frequently. In this context, I am satisfied with “lucubrations” as the best equivalent in English. It adds a strange third element to the sequence, “scattered, free-floating lucubrations.”⁵⁸

How, as I asked earlier, does one translate ambiguity and confusion? In my case, I can fortunately turn to the author for an answer. During the course of a translator-author colloquy, I ask about the sentence cited above:

MC: ¿Puedes parafrasear este fragmento?

SC: La verdad es que no puedo parafrasear esto porque es una frase que más que comunicar algo en particular, busca representar un estado de ánimo o intelectual. Sugiero que la traduzcas del mejor modo posible, dándole un registro filosófico-abstracto. Es una pregunta por la verdad. Habitualmente se dice que la verdad está en la profundidad subjetiva, digamos, a veces, por ejemplo, la profundidad psicológica, la profundidad del individuo; pero en este caso el narrador siente que la verdad no reside en la propia profundidad de su subjetividad, sino en la

⁵⁸ Similarly, while translating *Mis dos mundos*, I twice encountered the adjective “lacustre,” which gave me pause; should I use the unusual “lacustrine”—“of or pertaining to a lake or lakes”—or should I use something more familiar, such as “lake-like”? In the end I decided to keep the stranger word, “lacustrine,” completely justifiable, I thought, since Chejfec confirmed that “lacustre” is not all that common in Spanish.

profundidad de las cosas materiales, *que no es otra cosa que el sentido de sus palabras*. (italics mine, “Baroni Questions”)

The exchange gives rise to several reflections. It doesn’t seem unreasonable for a translator to ask the author “can you paraphrase this?” while referring to a somewhat dense and syntactically complex sentence (and as Laddaga argues, one that becomes vaguer as it goes along). But because I’m now looking back on this exchange after having parsed and analyzed passages in Chapters 2 and 3 as a literary critic, I’m slightly chagrined. The literary critic in me wants to have a different, more exalted set of questions for the author, not requests for Cliff’s-Notes-like explanations. However, when one is “unfusing” a text as a translator the questions to the author can be fairly basic and specific.⁵⁹

In his response, Chejfec doesn’t summarize or restate the passage, but instead points to his intent: to depict the narrator’s reflections, preoccupations, and fantasies while driving to the town where he will stop overnight after his meeting with Baroni. Indeed, as is common throughout his work, almost nothing happens in this passage, so there would be little to summarize in any case. (Genette would say that there is “no element of narration” (*Figures* 134) in this densely meditative paragraph.) However, Chejfec troubles matters with his observation to

⁵⁹ As an example of the sort of basic translator-author queries that occurred while I translated *Baroni*, what follows is an excerpt of a colloquy regarding the passage describing the landscape surrounding Baroni’s property, cited at the end of Chapter 3. My queries are in parenthesis and italicized. Chejfec’s answers are in bold.

“Las formas suaves y en sucesión interminable, con variaciones de inclinación, sentido y proyección, (*¿qué es? ¿el sobresalir como de un peñasco?*) **sí, la forma como se proyectan (o sea la orientación o la inclinación)** esas formas produciendo el efecto de planos en permanente movilidad, no derivan (*¿quiere decir “convertirse en”?*) **no producen, no resultan en** sin embargo en un efecto dramático ni tienen estatuto monumental; son más bien contornos escénicos, diría teatrales, ya que la profundidad hacia cualquier lugar donde se mire nunca llega a ser demasiado vasta. Y cuando debería serlo (*¿demasiado vasta?*) **sí** por la morfología de algún desarrollo (*¿qué es? ¿me das un ejemplo?*) **algún sitio o escenario particular** o de algún territorio en particular, están las nubes y las zonas neblinosas para amortiguar cualquier posible perspectiva abisal. (*es decir, ¿sin fondo?*) **sí.**”

me: “*No es otra cosa que el sentido de las palabras.*” If all the weight of this passage lies in the words and their meanings, then the stakes are even higher for me as its translator: the focal point is precisely the language and stylistic elements, not the plot elements.

It’s true that in his response to my query Chejfec suggested that I find a “registro filosófico-abstracto,” but from other exchanges I know that he doesn’t want the meditative interludes of the first-person narrator to become too ponderous. In an interview I did with Chejfec when *My Two Worlds* was published, for instance, he spoke about the discursive level, neither formal nor casual, that he tries to achieve in his novels: “Mi lengua no es coloquial, pero quiere ser conversacional; o sea, busca una especie de tono “socrático” eludiendo el costumbrismo habitual cuando se representan diálogos o pensamientos. Los matices son por lo tanto muy importantes, por lo menos es lo que creo.” (“Read This Next”). His observation especially interests me because it establishes some parameters for the ever-elusive “voice” one wishes to capture in a translation. This is not something achieved with one or two inspired translation choices; it must be worked out and sustained over the course of the entire novel.

Chejfec himself takes up the question of translation in the blog posting “El caso de un título y un nombre,” where he reflects on translation issues relating to the Argentine novelist, Juan José Saer. In response to the English-language publication of Saer’s *Glosa* with the radically changed title *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington*, Chejfec comments on the intrinsic link between a book’s title and its reception by readers. When the title is changed, as occurred with the English translation of *Glosa*, what are the consequences? As Chejfec points out, *Glosa* draws on a tradition of exegesis, of textual commentary:

Entre los títulos de Saer, *Glosa*, en tanto tal, es de los que más explícitamente apunta tanto al principio compositivo de una novela en la que nada puede quedar

sin explicación, como a la operación de desarrollar, ampliar, variar, explicar una serie de nudos existenciales y dramáticos de los protagonistas. Como el título “El limonero real”, el título *Glosa* representa y denota distintos aspectos y jerarquías de la novela que nombra. Pero si por un momento imaginamos el título *Los sesenta y cinco años de Washington* para esta novela, sentimos que se disuelve ese curioso igualitarismo entre los elementos y aspectos de la narración, desde los mundanos a los políticos, que la neutralidad aparente de la operación retórica incluida en la palabra “glosa” estipulaba. (“El caso”).

Without the link between title and narrative—one established by the work’s author—an intended effect is lost, in this case, “el efecto elegíaco que una palabra como glosa brinda en la circunstancia del texto.” Chejfec explains that the publisher of the translation, Open Letter Books (Chejfec’s own publisher in the United States), believed that a book called *Gloss*, the most direct translation into English, would lead potential buyers and readers to think of “el brillo o lustre sobre una superficie,” and not of the additional meaning in English (which is the primary meaning in Spanish) of a comment on or interpretation of a text. Thus the irony is that the closest translation would most likely, in the view of the US publisher, lead to an initial misreading of the book, one as far from the intent of the author as could be imagined. Though he remains doubtful about the new title, Chejfec does not fault the publisher; the allusion to Washington in the title simply places the novel within another web of associations, to be sure “en las antípodas literarias de Saer,” but not necessarily to be deplored. Chejfec continues: “la mera alusión bastará para ubicar la novela en la red de combinaciones letradas e históricas, apócrifas o reales, en la que a veces las novelas contemporáneas se apoyan para tramar sus historias.” The novel, as a result, undergoes a kind of “actualización cultural a través del nuevo título.” Chejfec continues his

meditation:

Pero sobre todo me interesa ver el tipo de trances al que se pliega un objeto cuando es traducido, como si quedara huérfano y como reparación debiera volver a nacer. Es como si, a veces, las traducciones de los títulos sometieran al título original—y con ello, en parte, a la obra en su conjunto—a una suerte de refutación pasiva—al tratarse de otra lengua—pero al mismo tiempo enconada—ya que se exhibe como definitiva.

While Chejfec is ostensibly concerned with the effects on the reader of a title transformed in translation, one gathers that by implication he is also speaking of the effects of translation as a whole when expressing curiosity about “el tipo de trances al que se pliega un objeto cuando es traducido....” In a larger sense, then, what happens when one language yields to another? Chejfec offers another instance in which Saer has been mistranslated, this time on the plaque identifying his niche in the columbarium at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Chejfec relates what may seem a minor detail (a hyphen is added to Saer’s name so that it reads, in accordance with the French practice, “Juan-José Saer”) to the larger question of “[e]l comercio incierto con lo extranjero.” In the same way that *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington* is read differently from *Glosa*, he asks, does Saer’s name read differently when his two given names are joined in what is, in effect, another instance of translation? Chejfec’s uncertainty leads to his final point that “[u]no sabe, se supone, cómo llega a una lengua. Pero no sabe cómo se quedará en ella.”

That is, Chejfec exhibits apprehension about this curious space between languages that is so literally signaled by the hyphen that joins Saer’s two given name on the memorial plaque. Indeed, the hyphen marks a space of otherness—once more, the interstice, the crevice, the crack—that translation inevitably reveals. As Rosmarie Waldrop writes, “Translation’s ultimate

task may be to bear witness to the essentially irreducible strangeness and distance between languages—but its immediate task is exactly to explore this space” (*Dissonance* 159). Thus, just as the hyphen is a visible bridge over a space of otherness, translation is an inextricable and manifest part of the encounter with the other. In “Tradición, traducción, transculturación: historiografía y ex-centricidad” Haroldo de Campos writes: “Enfrentarse con la alteridad es, ante todo, un necesario ejercicio de autocrítica, así como una vertiginosa experiencia de ruptura de límites” (53). Confronting the other through the formidably complex act of translation implies rupture, but one hopes for ultimate engagement in the space such a translation opens.

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