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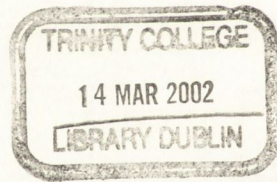
KAFKA, BECKETT, ONETTI - A POETICS OF  
EXISTENTIAL ESTRANGEMENT

*Notes towards the definition of a sub-genre.*

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Doctoral Thesis, 2001

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## Summary

The following thesis was researched and written during the period October 1998 to September 2001 at Trinity College, Dublin. It originated as an investigation into the adequacy of the term 'existentialist' as applied to the writing of Juan Carlos Onetti. Two field bursaries made it possible to visit Universities and National Libraries in Madrid, Montevideo and Buenos Aires so as to ensure the originality of the work.

The thesis compares the ontology underlying characterisation in Onetti's work with that of both Kafka and Beckett. A main finding is that while all three are phenomenologically informed, all radically defamiliarise, and indeed distort, the main dimensions of such an ontology. Four chief parameters or dimensions of this estranged ontology are identified: temporality; spatiality; language and embodiment. Each is given a full chapter in which an aesthetic of 'existential estrangement' common to Kafka, Beckett and Onetti is posited. Several concepts of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, notably the chronotope, eventness and reduced laughter, are found to be useful in suggesting that the work of the above authors constitutes a sub-genre.

A major finding of the study is that the estranged ontological parameters which govern the fictional universes of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti so undermine the possibility of meaningful choice that to categorise any of them as 'existential' is entirely misleading. Each chapter is designed to be a self-standing unit, and chapter 2 (on temporality) is to be published in the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* (Glasgow) in 2002.



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(i) I declare that the present thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university.

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# KAFKA, BECKETT, ONETTI - A POETICS OF EXISTENTIAL ESTRANGEMENT

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Introduction

Notwithstanding the growth in interest in relation to his anticipation of many innovatory techniques later developed by the writers of the *Nueva novela*, the comparative literature on Juan Carlos Onetti has tended to be dominated by the influences of a handful of authors, notably Arlt, Borges, Hamsun, Céline, Sartre and, perhaps most obviously, Faulkner. There are good reasons for this, not least the Uruguayan author's own statements on styles, models and influences.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as the present thesis contends, the nature of these influences has been largely misunderstood, particularly in the case of the last named. With regard to Faulkner, superficial similarities between the fictional worlds of Yoknapatawpha County and Santa María have tended to becloud the more important spatio-temporal circumscription that underpins the presentation of character throughout each cycle, while simultaneously ignoring deep differences in regard, for instance, to the contiguous historical reality of the 'factual' world. Thus Saul Yurkievich considers Santa María to be an 'espacio textual y no geográfico'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, at least, García Márquez' Macondo is closer than Santa María in conception to Faulkner's invented world.<sup>3</sup>

Because of the naturalist disenchantment with which Onetti continues to paint his explicitly fantastic back-water, he tends to be viewed as a predominantly realist artist, albeit one who occasionally nods towards those metafictional devices so characteristic of the *Boom* aesthetic. This view is not merely inadequate; it

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<sup>1</sup> See especially *Réquiem por Faulkner y otros artículos* (Montevideo: Arca, 1975)

<sup>2</sup> Saúl Yurkievich 'En el hueco voraz de Onetti' collected in Verani ed. *Juan Carlos Onetti: El escritor y la crítica*, Madrid: Taurus 1987, 341.

<sup>3</sup>Faulkner's characters, obsessed by the failure of the South in the American Civil War, share to an extent in the historico-political determinism that paralyses the inhabitants of Macondo and the nameless town which neighbours it. The characters of Santa María, devoid not only of genealogy but of reliable personal histories, are by contrast aware of their fictional status.



misunderstands the nature of the Onettian project. People Yoknapatawpha County with characters out of Hamsun, Arlt or Beckett, have their movements circumscribed by Kafka and narrated by Céline, and you come closer to the paralytic universe dreamed into being by Juan María Brausen in *La vida breve*.

A Spanish proverb relates '*Díme con quien andas y te diré quien eres*'. It is no doubt in part due to the company of writers that Onetti himself alludes to in his critical essays, taken in addition to a pervasive pessimism and a fixation on entropy and failure, which has led to Onetti's near universal classification as an 'existential' writer. The epithet has been applied with equal frequency and, as will be shown, inadequacy to the two other authors who are central to this study and to whom Onetti's work bears strong generic similarities: Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Important convergences in the conception of character, as defined by spatio-temporal parameters and their distortions, by the vicissitudes of language and by the threatening presence of the Other in regard to the body have largely escaped critical attention. It is hoped that, once developed, these similarities will not only throw considerable light on the latter's work in particular, but provide a framework that might be useful in a reading of such diverse works as *Pedro Páramo* and *El obscuro pájaro de la noche*, hermetic novels for which the category '*lo real maravilloso*' is patently inadequate.

The central thesis being advanced in the present study is that there are what might be referred to, in Kantian terms, as categorical affinities between the presentation of character and universe in the three core authors of the present study. The nineteenth century realist and, later, naturalist schools highlighted the importance of childhood, of heredity, and of socio-economic determinants in the understanding of character, an aesthetic that was refined and extended by such modernist advances as interior monologue and subconscious association. In the absence of biographical or psychological referents, much as one finds in Kafka, Beckett and Onetti, character tends instead to be defined phenomenologically, that is, in terms of a number of existential parameters which are predicated upon the interdependence of world and



consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Following the phenomenological ontology that underpins Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, four key parameters are here identified: temporality; space; interpersonal relationships; and embodiment. The present study devotes an extended chapter to each of these dimensions of Being in order to demonstrate their centrality to the fictional universes of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti. More importantly, it aims to highlight the degree to which all four parameters have been distorted or defamiliarised by these authors. For a more detailed account of what is here understood by a specifically phenomenological ontology, see Appendix I below.

Since Sartre and Heidegger, despite the latter's protestations, are considered to be the central figures in European Existentialism, there has been a concomitant and, I would argue, deeply erroneous tendency to misclassify all three authors as existential, an epithet that not only lacks rigour in general, but is, in the case of these authors, specifically misleading. Where conventional existentialist literature and philosophy, built largely upon the same four existential parameters, invoke metanarratives of authenticity and freedom based upon essential choice in good (or bad) faith, Kafka, Beckett and Onetti subvert the very idea of meaningful choice and engage parodically in the existentialist game by introducing profound uncertainty and distortion in respect of all four parameters. At times they come closer to an absurdist view of the world, and indeed there is a certain degree of overlap between them and the anti-rational universe of absurdist theatre. Indeed, it is argued in chapter 6 and in the conclusion that a similar 'carnival logic', transient and unpredictable, governs these worlds. The consequent existential uncertainty, which for the present study I have termed 'estrangement', lends the three related fictional universes their quality of strangeness, of nightmare, and radically undermines and circumscribes any idea of meaningful choice. This systematic estrangement would seem to be of such central importance that, notwithstanding the manifold differences in tone and in *mise en scène*, the three authors might be posited as core exponents of a sub-genre. Chapter 4 draws on Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to justify such a classification, useful

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<sup>4</sup> 'World' here should be thought of as phenomenal, the lived world or *Lebenswelt* which one senses in Muldoon's lines from his early poem 'Wind and Tree' (*New Selected Poems*, 6): 'In the way that

to the extent that the conception of man and of his possibilities is intimately related to the 'categorical' dimensions of the universe in which he is portrayed.

The representation of character in terms of a 'dominant' of spatio-temporal, semantic and corporeal uncertainty and distortion has certain affinities with the fantastic literature of nineteenth century Russia and Germany (Gogol and Hoffman, for instance), and was considerably developed and refined in certain works of Dostoevsky, Hamsun, Barbusse and Rilke, authors who might be considered 'first generation' exponents of the sub-genre of phenomenological estrangement. The influence of both Dostoevsky and Hamsun on Kafka and Onetti is well known, if not well understood in the case of the latter, so that the present study takes the time to point out certain important affinities with these earlier exponents such as they relate to the four parameters of existential estrangement.

It might be asked why the label 'existential' rather than 'phenomenological' estrangement is being advanced. The period in which the above authors were writing coincides not only with a radical and related reorientation of visual art - the spatio-temporal fragmentation of Cubism and Futurism, the corporeal and inter-personal distortions of Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* - but also with the rise of a metaphysics of phenomenology which sought to re-examine the Cartesian world view. Closely related to pioneering studies on cognitive psychology, the phenomenological methodology expounded by Brentano and Husserl became the basis of the subsequent philosophies of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, who are of course usually considered the most important exponents of the contentious term 'existentialism'. The common origin of their concerns and the degree to which Beckett and Onetti in particular have appropriated the language of the existentialists is no doubt the key to their mis-classification as 'existential' artists. However, as this thesis argues, all three present a universe almost directly antithetical to that of existentialism proper in that the possibilities of choice at once meaningful and authentic are severely circumscribed. Caught in a circular world defined by stasis and repetition, activity, such as it is, tends to consist in a generation of essentially meaningless narratives;

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the most of the wind/ Happens where there are trees,/ Most of the world is centred/ About ourselves'



interaction, in the playing out of farces interpolated by physical violence. Since the myth of absolute existential freedom is being exploded in narratives that often seem parodic, the label 'existential estrangement' seems to capture the essence of what the three core authors are about.

A phenomenologist orientation also underpins the critical, and earlier metaphysical, analysis of Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975), an almost exact contemporary of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Indeed, as will be seen below, the writings of the middle 1920's (dating is notoriously problematic) collected in *'Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays'* set out a poetics the very language of which anticipates the language of 'phenomenological ontology' developed by Heidegger and, later, Sartre. This is particularly the case in 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity', which, as has been convincingly demonstrated by Brian Poole, may be read as a response to Husserl's positing of a 'transcendental ego' (a doctrine that borders on idealism).<sup>5</sup> Poole shows how the early Bakhtin was deeply influenced by the contemporary German phenomenologist, Max Scheler, particularly in the latter's analyses of the problem of empathy (*Einfühlung*). For Bakhtin, the Other is formative in the 'authoring' of the Self, a position to some extent anticipatory of Sartre's 'pour-autrui' and Lacan's distinction of imaginary versus symbolic. Furthermore, the representation of 'time-space', or the chronotope, is generically defining in the development of the novel, a contention that is central to the attempt within this study to develop a sub-genre of estrangement. Part I of the present study therefore examines the presentations and distortions of time and space which together preclude the possibility of what Bakhtin terms 'eventful events', and as such, the possibility of meaningful choice. The fictional world of Onetti, no less than those of Kafka and Beckett, is devoid of anything remotely approaching the existentialist paradigm of freedom.

Nevertheless, the view of the Self presented in all three authors is predicated, as is existentialism, on a phenomenological ontology in which the problematic role of the Other is paramount. Part II of the study turns upon the key modes of interaction by

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Poole, "From phenomenology to dialogue" in Hirschkop and Shepherd eds, *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, Manchester University Press, (2001), especially 110-120



which the Other, a Bakhtinian 'author' of the subject, serves to define the Self, the 'surplus of vision' lending the fragmented subject a fictional unity which tends inevitably towards 'objectivity' (Sartre's 'en-soi'). The modes of interaction, all of which are defining parameters within the phenomenological ontology, are language, the look and the problem of embodiment. All of these modes of interaction are, as will be shown, prone, in Onetti as in Kafka and Beckett, to techniques of estrangement analogous and complementary to those which obtain to their treatment of space-time. Indeed, the idea of the unity of Self becomes problematic in a manner which is often taken to distinguish a post-modern world view. While entering into such a debate is beyond the scope of the present work, it is once again a central tenet of Sartrean existentialism that the Self be not only unified, but aware of, and ultimately responsible for, the impulses of the Id. Such a conception of character is once again incompatible with that developed by the authors of existential estrangement.

Before the four phenomenological parameters, and their distortions, are examined in detail, a preliminary chapter will look briefly at *Das Schloss*, *Watt*, and *El astillero*. The intention here is to provide a basis point of departure at which the artistic universe of the three authors most obviously converges. It should also serve to give an overview of the 'textual' rather than 'hermeneutic' approach that is adopted throughout the study.

Note: A word on translations used. For the present study, all Spanish quotes are in the original. Secondly, as Onetti was a fluent reader of French, every effort has been made to include citations from those texts *with which he would have been familiar* in the original French (Barbusse's *L'enfer*, Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, Sartre's *La nausée* and *L'être et le néant*, Camus' *L'Étranger* and *Le mythe de Sisyphe*). The aim here is to facilitate lexical and stylistic comparisons with Onetti. Quotation from all other French texts, together with those novelists and philosophers whom Onetti would have read in translation (Dostoevsky, Hamsun, Heidegger, Kafka etc.) is in translation.

CH1 *Das Schloss, Watt, El astillero, a preliminary comparison.*

As an illustration of the general approach to the authors adopted throughout the present study, it might be useful to briefly compare three demonstrably connected texts: *Das Schloss* (1926), *Watt* (1944), *El astillero* (1961).<sup>6</sup> Evidently, all three are built around upon what a formalist might identify as a common 'deep structure', an initial 'narrative breach' that consists in the arrival of a lone male outsider - K., Watt, Larsen, - who seeks (but fails to secure on a permanent or unequivocal basis) a place within the arcane and topographically stratified dominion of a largely absent 'demiurge'. There is a further structural parallel in that each protagonist, while aspiring to gain entry into an 'upper' space associated with this demiurge, but while still in a 'lower' space, succeeds in gaining the sexual favours of a menial. Thus K., as an opening gambit in his projected campaign to gain entry to the Castle on the hill, spends his first night on the floor of an inn with Frieda, one of Klamm's mistresses; Watt, while serving out his term in the ground-floor of Knott's house, fills in time by exchanging physical intimacies with Mrs. Gorman, the milkmaid; Larsen, who has long aspired to gain entry into house on stilts built by Petrus, in an act of renunciation seduces the maid Josefina, again in her ground-floor bedroom.

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<sup>6</sup> There have, of course, been a number of critical studies based around, or alluding to, the supposed influence of Kafka on Beckett. Maurice Nadeau, writing in *Temps Modernes* (January 1952) was perhaps the first to contrast the image of man in the two authors. In particular the influence of *Das Schloss* on *Watt* has been noted by a number of critics, not least, one suspects, because Beckett himself identifies the former as the only novel he had read in the original German (in an interview with *The New York Times*, May 6, 1956). Ruby Cohn's article *Watt in the Light of The Castle* (*Comparative Literature*, Spring 1961) is one of the earliest and most convincing of these studies, though it not only omits any reference to a common spatio-temporal conception, but incorrectly views Kafka's presentation of temporality as unproblematic: '*Individual actions may be incongruous, interpretations preposterous and self-contradictory; yet all are linked into coherence by Kafka's impersonal narrator, partly by means of temporal sequence.*' While the chronology is, admittedly, sequential, both time and space in fact contain their own non-Euclidean logic throughout the Castle (see chapters 2 and 3 below).

By contrast with the literature connecting Kafka to Beckett, I have failed to locate a single comparative essay on Beckett and Onetti, a remarkable lack which I hope this study will go some way towards addressing.



The fact that there are strong and repeated spatial parallels between Kafka and Onetti (and indeed between Kafka and Beckett) has not gone unnoticed critically, though its centrality to the artistic conception of each has been largely underestimated. Jack Murray, for instance, in his useful study *The Landscapes of Alienation* (1991), notes considerable parallels in the use of spatial representation between Kafka's *Der Verschollene* (1927), Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) and Onetti's *El astillero*. Interestingly, his initial approach to each author is as, in Deleuze and Guattari classification, 'minority writers', a category in which in the French theorists' study extends to cover Beckett (not so much as an Irish author writing in French or as an Irish Protestant, but as '[proceeding] by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such an extreme that nothing remains but intensities').<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Murray's emphasis is entirely different to that of the present study insofar as it is principally *ideological*, a concern shared by many of the neo-Marxist theorists upon whom he draws: Lukacs; Althusser; Adorno. In this reading, a patriarchal 'Imperium' is identified in each work whose dominant (bourgeois-capitalist and patriarchal) ideology is subverted, principally by an inversion of the 'success story' paradigm. The 'alienation' to which his title refers is therefore consonant with Marxist usage of the term, with little of the 'existential' character of 'estrangement' as understood in this thesis.

It is undeniable that the *oeuvres* of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti also offer a number of similarities when approached *hermeneutically*. This indeed has been arguably the most consistently employed strategy for coming to terms with their recondite and hermetically enclosed fictional worlds, particularly if one includes psychological and metaphysical attempts at interpretation under the umbrella term *hermeneutic*. Kafka in particular has invited a number of Zionist, Judeo-Christian and/or Kaballistic readings (see for instance Grözinger or Seymour Smith), some of which reduce his texts to little more than religious allegory. Without wishing to cast doubt on the validity or usefulness of such approaches *per se*, in the case of Beckett and Onetti there is something overtly parodic in their quasi-religious language. Petrus,

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<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press 2000, 19



for instance, is described as '*el hombre que hizo a sí mismo*.' (A. 76), and forms but one term in a series of demiurges who, each giving birth to the next, form something of a Kafkaesque hierarchy. Thus Brausen dreams up Díaz Grey, who in turn feels he has dreamed not only Petrus, but a whole host of the inhabitants of Santa María into being and successive authors in Beckett - Molloy, Malone - seem to incorporate or subsume previous characters into their texts. Beckett's largely absent 'deities', Knott/Godot/Youdi, also appear to overtly parody 'unavailable' personages, and indeed specific passages, in Kafka. This is the case, for instance, in a famous caveat with regard to the intrinsic 'variability' of Klamm, whose

'... appearance is well known in the village, some people have even seen him, everybody has heard of him, and out of glimpses and rumours and through various distorting factors an image of Klamm has been constructed which is certainly true in fundamentals. But only in fundamentals. In detail it fluctuates, and yet perhaps not so much as Klamm's real appearance [...] And even within the village there are considerable differences in the accounts given of him, differences as to his height, his bearing, his size, and the cut of his beard; fortunately there's one thing in which all the accounts agree, he always wears the same clothes, a black morning coat with long tails. Now of course all these differences aren't the result of magic, but can be easily explained; they depend on the mood of the observer, on the degree of his excitement, on the countless gradations of hope or despair which are possible for him when he sees Klamm...' (*The Complete Novels*, 374)

In Beckett's hands, the commensurate variability of Knott's appearance is comically and absurdly extended (*Watt*, 209):

'With regard to the so important matter of Mr. Knott's physical appearance, Watt had unfortunately little or nothing to say. For one day Mr. Knott would be tall, fat, pale and dark, and the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middle-sized, yellow and ginger, and the next small,

fat, pale and fair, and the next middle-sized, flushed, thin and ginger, and the next...'

and so on exhaustively covering the various permutations of the four defining characteristics for some two pages (and giving the lie to 'little or nothing to say'). Perhaps it was with hermeneutic critics in particular that Beckett, famously recondite about the 'meaning' of his work, entered as his final addendum to the novel: '*No symbols where none intended*'. Onetti is equally dismissive of what Lyotard might term the metanarratives (*grands recits*) underlying any hermeneutic reading, whether Marxist, Freudian, existential or religious in orientation. In a 1969 interview with his friend Ernesto Rodríguez Monegal, he warns against any attempt to read *El astillero*, and by implication any of his novels, as an allegory.<sup>8</sup> The texts themselves are equally dismissive of any totalising viewpoint, as for instance expressed by the complex figure of Medina:

'Desde muchos años atrás yo había sabido que era necesario meter en la misma bolsa a los católicos, los freudianos, los marxistas y los patriotas. Quiero decir, a cualquiera que tuviese fe, no importa en qué cosa; a cualquiera que opine, sepa o actúe repitiendo pensamientos aprendidos o heredados. Un hombre con fe es más peligroso que una bestia con hambre. La fe los obliga a la acción, a la injusticia, al mal...' (D., 18-19)

The present study argues that the above texts are deeply carnivalesque, and as such intrinsically hostile to any finalising approach which would push ambivalence towards a single, definitive reading (see especially section (iii) of Concluding Remarks).

It is quite possible, however, to develop the considerable parallels between the three authors and three novels listed above without falling into the trap of an excessively allegorical, ideological or hermeneutic reading. The topographical

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<sup>8</sup> *Conversación con Onetti* in the folletín 'Juan C. Onetti', Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, Uruguay 1985. When asked what message one of his plays contained, Samuel Beckett famously replied 'I'm a playwright, not a postman.' Curiously, a variation on the story reappears during the course of this conversation: '*Conoces el chiste viejo del tipo que le preguntaron qué mensaje tenía su novela? Les contestó: Si necesita un mensaje use la Western Union. Es decir: yo no puedo concebir a un individuo que se sienta a escribir para transmitir un mensaje en una novela.*' (ibid. 27).



similarities have already been briefly alluded to above, but not the extent to which all three novels are spatial in conception, *El astillero* overtly so in that each chapter is headed with its scenic location qualified by a number. In this, however, it no more than formalises the arrangement inherent in *Das Schloss*, in which chapters are also conceived in terms of their defining interiors, whether the Bridge Inn, the Herrenhoff Inn, the Schoolroom, or Amalia's House. It is noteworthy not only how many chapters begin or end with an entrance into or exit from a locale, but also how all-encompassing and desirable these interiors seem to become:

'But only think, they don't want to go away ... I think their tears as we said goodbye were mostly because they were sad about my having to leave our common room, going out into the cold - to us there everything seems cold that is outside the room - and having to make way in the big strange rooms with big strange people...' (op.cit., 452),

or, more succinctly, 'To be driven out from here again seemed to him to be a misfortune surpassing all that had happened to him hitherto.' (op.cit., 437)

Larsen, clinging to the desperate farce of his fictional job in the decaying shipyard is motivated by a similar fear: 'Fuera de la farsa que había aceptado literalmente como un empleo, no había más que el invierno, la vejez, el no tener dónde ir, la misma posibilidad de la muerte.' (A., 123) And in his poverty, he allows the dilapidated building to assume the proportions of a universe:

'No había nada más, desde siempre y para la eternidad, que el ángulo altísimo del techo, las costras de orín, toneladas de hierro, la ceguera de los yuyos creciendo y enredándose. Tolerado, pasajero, ajeno, también estaba él en el centro del galpón, impotente y absurdamente móvil, como un insecto oscuro que agitara patas y antenas en el aire de leyenda, de peripecias marítimas, de labores desvanecidas, de invierno.' (A., 84)

If we now return to the idea of the variability of appearance mentioned above, the central significance of space as a determinant of identity is at once apparent:

'Add to this that the figure of which Watt sometimes caught a glimpse, in the vestibule, in the garden, was seldom the same figure, from one glance to



the next, but so various, so far as Watt could make out, in its corpulence, complexion, height and even hair, and of course in its way of moving, that Watt could never have supposed it was the same, if he had not known that it was Mr. Knott.' and 'But it was in his room [...] that Mr. Knott seemed least a stranger, and appeared to best advantage.' (*Watt* 146, 203)

These passages are far less parodic, far closer in intent to the corresponding idea in Kafka:

'For he's reported as having one appearance when he comes into the village and another on leaving it; after having his beer he looks different from what he does before it, when he's awake he's different from when he's asleep, when he's alone he's different from when he's talking to people, and - what is incomprehensible after all that - he's almost another person up in the Castle.' (op.cit., 374)

and

'Barnabas often says, somewhat like a child and yet in a child's mood of trustfulness: "The official is really very like Klamm, and if he were sitting in his own office at his own desk with his name on the door I would have no more doubt at all."' (op.cit., 377)

That interior spaces should be intimately connected with identity is also prevalent throughout Onetti. Once in the presence of the bed-bound Petrus, the 'local deity' of *El astillero*, Larsen identifies the room's interior with the mad game he is engaged in (note the mention of the old man's skull in this regard, a topos more generally associated with Beckett):

'La noche estaba afuera, enmudecida, y la vastedad del mundo podía ser puesto en duda. Aquí no había más que el cuerpo raquíptico bajo las mantas, la cabeza de cadáver amarillenta y sonriendo sobre las gruesas almohadas verticales, el viejo y su juego.' (A, 143)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Future Onetti references are to the following editions: (A.) *El astillero* (Madrid, Cátedra, 1998); (C.) *Cuando ya no importe* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997); (D.) *Dejemos hablar al viento* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1980); (J.) *Juntacadáveres* (Madrid, Alianza Ed., 1995); (N.) *La muerte y la niña*,

If space is foregrounded and structurally central to the three novels in question, there is an equivalent downgrading in relation to time and its possibilities (see also below, chapter 4). Indeed for the majority of critics, Larsen's interminable wait for the judgment which supposedly might resolve the bankruptcy order in favour of *Petrus*, *Sociedad Anónima* is an implicitly Kafkaesque situation, particularly in that, as with K., the death of the protagonist antecedes any resolution. In fact the worlds, not only of these three novels, but throughout the three novelists are defined temporally by an overpowering stasis, a cosmological inertia against which the pitiful and ultimately futile motion of the individual is contrasted. We have already seen Larsen, centred in the huge cathedral of the old shipyard, 'impotente y absurdamente móvil, como un insecto oscuro que agitara patas y antenas en el aire de leyenda.' This 'aire de leyenda' points to a common usage of 'epic' or 'parable' time in all three authors which will be examined at length in Chapter 2 below. For the present suffice to point to the lack of optimism or genuine faith with which movement is undertaken: '...la superstición de que un ciego movimiento perpetuo puede fatigar a la desgracia' (*A.*, 125).

The contrast between the static, arcane hierarchy in power and the frenetic activity of the individual is yet more pronounced throughout Kafka. In this regard, Borges is misguided when he states that 'Only one character appears in all his work: the *Homo domesticus*, so Jewish and so German, so eager to keep his place, however humble and in whatever order...' <sup>10</sup> Contrary to this widespread misreading, the heroes of all three of Kafka's novels are irreverent in the face of authority, challengers, breachers of norms. All have scant regard for established etiquette, and their behaviour, verging on the scandalous, is consistently placed in contrast to the open-eyed servility of the populace at large. Far from being the Land surveyor he claims to be, K. is in fact a fraud - compare Carr in Onetti's final work, who arrives in East Santamaría, 'con mi falso título de ingeniero...' (*Cuando ya no importe*, 26). This point is

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(Buenos Aires: Pontalti, 1973). All remaining quotations are from *Obras Completas* (O.C.), (México, Aguilar, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Introduction to *Franz Kafka: Stories 1904-1924* (Underwood trans.), 8



an important one, and needs to be stressed.<sup>11</sup> John Fletcher, for instance, is typical of a whole line of criticism when he asserts that 'We are not told why Watt undertakes his baleful journey to Mr. Knott's house, whether he had been sent for, *as K. was in The Castle ...*' (*The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, 80, emphasis mine), while Albert Camus is rather surprisingly wide of the mark when he suggests '..(K.) never gets angry, and with disconcerting good-will tries to assume the duties entrusted to him.' (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 118). These representations miscast K. as a passive, even innocent, recipient of a summons, rather than seeing him for the charlatan he is (a comparable misreading sees Joseph K. as the *guiltless* victim of the Law, a position scarcely compatible with a nuanced reading of the text itself, e.g.: '(Joseph K.'s) mind played in retrospect with the saying of the warder Willem that an attraction existed between the Law and guilt, from which it should really follow that the Interrogation Chamber must lie in the particular flight of stairs which K. happened to choose.' (*The Trial*, 30). In fact, we know as little about K., his past, or his motivation as we do about the Castle and its workings<sup>12</sup>, merely that the latter (rather than K.) 'was taking up the challenge with a smile.' (*The Complete Novels*, 279).

Larsen acts with much the same activity, and an equal degree of 'bad faith' as K. in trying to push himself into the mad game of *Petrus S.A.*. This very quality suggests a reading of the *macro* as 'carnival king', threatened with immanent decrowning, an insight examined at greater length in chapter 6 above. Larsen is here exposed, both in *Juntacadáveres* and *El astillero*, to be a carnivalised Napoleon, his apogee a brief reign over a brothel of 'corpses', and under the constant menace of exposure and expulsion. A carnival logic is precisely what is at work in most of Beckett and Kafka, and figures such as K. and Joseph K., Watt, Vladimir and Estragon, no less than Larsen, Medina and Díaz Grey, are ambivalently presented as both charlatan and naively credulous. In this regard it is worth dwelling briefly on the manner in which these authors 'deflect' a reaction compatible with naive faith onto secondary characters, Onetti presumably

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Sokel acknowledges this misreading and goes some way towards redressing it in 'K. as Impostor: His Quest for Meaning' (from 'Franz Kafka', 1966 Columbia University Press)

<sup>12</sup> Watt, and his position with respect to Knott's establishment, is equally an enigma: 'I tell you nothing is known', cries Mr. Nixon, (when asked about Watt), 'Nothing'.. (W. 20)



'borrowing' the motif of the appearance of a real-life letter from Kafka. In the first scene, the 'messenger' Barnabas' sister explains to K. the effect that a letter, comprising his first commission and indeed recognition after months of waiting, had on his morale:

'But next evening Barnabas...came home earlier than usual, saw Amalia in the sitting room, drew me out into the street, laid his head upon my shoulder, and cried for several minutes. He was again the little boy he used to be. Something had happened to him that he hadn't been prepared for. It was as if a whole new world had suddenly opened to him, and he could not bear the joy and the anxieties of all this newness. And yet the only thing that had happened was that he had been given a letter for delivery to you. But it was actually the first letter, the first commission, that he had ever been given.'  
(op.cit., 403)

For Kunz, the more faithful of the two employees that help Larsen on his arrival,<sup>13</sup> as for a whole history of former employees, Petrus' original offer of employment had the character of a religious covenant: '...las frases lentas, bien pronunciadas, la oferta variable y fascinante, corroboraban la existencia de Dios...' (A., 76). Years of waiting have eaten away at his faith, until one day a letter arrives at the defunct shipyard:

'Así, arrastrado por el escepticismo universal, Kunz fue perdiendo la fe primera, y el gran edificio carcomido se transformó en el templo desertado de una religión extinta....Ahora ahí estaba, después de tantos años, indudable y en su mano, una carta que el mundo exterior enviaba al astillero, como una prueba irrefutable que pusiera fin a una disputa teológica. Un milagro que anunciaba la presencia y la verdad de un Dios del que él, Kunz, había blasfemado.' (A., 199).

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<sup>13</sup> These are surely a reworking of the comic-grotesque pairs that accompany the hero in all three of Kafka's novels, and who are frequently encountered in Beckett's universe.

Neither K. nor Larsen partake of such innocent faith, yet by a subtle slight of hand, the pathos engendered by facing a would-be believer with an absurd universe transfers onto them.<sup>14</sup> Overlooking the bad faith of his initial claim, the reader contrasts the activity of the questor with the supreme indifference of the universe he faces. He bestows on him the dignity of what Camus terms 'the absurd hero', shares with him his disappointments.<sup>15</sup> But this pathos notwithstanding, the restless motion of the individual serves merely in the end to wear him down, to reduce him by attrition to the condition of passive waiting which was given arguably its most famous expression in the theatre of Beckett. The following, said of the messenger Barnabas, could apply to all the great waiters of 20th century literature: K. and Joseph K.; Díaz Grey and Larsen; Vladimir and Estragon; or indeed to the Colonel of García Márquez' *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*.

Of course all that useless standing about and waiting all day, and day after day, and going on without any prospect of change, must break a man down and make him unsure of himself and in the end actually incapable of anything else but this hopeless standing about.' (op.cit., 402)

And if Watt never seems to experience the same sense of *angst* in regard to waiting as Larsen or K., he is nevertheless a preoccupied hostage of unknown temporal laws in regard to the term of his service and (spatially defined) advancement:

'But what preoccupied Watt most of all, towards the end of his stay on the ground-floor, was the question as to how long he would remain, on the ground-floor, and in his then bedroom, before being transferred to the first-floor, and to Erskine's bedroom, and then how long he would remain, on the first-floor, and in Erskine's bedroom, before leaving the place forever.'  
(*Watt*, 130)

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<sup>14</sup> Larsen's 'article of faith', repeated without conviction, rests, no less than that of any number of Kafka's and Beckett's heroes, upon a perpetually postponed judgement: '*lo importante es que el momento de la justicia definitiva está próximo; cuestión de días..*' (A., 209)

<sup>15</sup> The same cannot be said for the eponymous hero of *Watt*, making it in many ways the least satisfactory of the three.



and later, 'As it turned out, Watt was never to know how long he spent in Mr. Knott's house, how long on the ground-floor, how long on the first-floor, how long altogether. All he could say was that it seemed a long time.' (*Watt*, 134)

Ruby Cohn's article of 1961 convincingly points to an important similarity in the mode of narration of *Watt* and *The Castle* which again can be extended with facility to cover *El astillero*:

'...uncertainty of witness is of course a basic theme in *Watt* and *The Castle*, but it is conveyed differently in each. Beckett's narrator, who becomes the character Sam, is his prime instrument for sowing doubt in everything we read. Kafka's narrator, invisible by the convention of the form, establishes a seemingly objective, credible view of events, which is gradually vitiated as these events are reviewed by the various characters....But if K. and Watt, Sam and Kafka, are all victims of the uncertainty of witness, the first two at least never know when they are defeated; in their different idiosyncratic ways, they continue to ruminate their plight, right up to their separate, bitter ends.'

Epistemological doubt is at the very heart of Onetti narrative technique both in *El astillero* and in *Juntacadáveres*, the novel he interrupted so as to write it.<sup>16</sup> Doubts, or multiple versions, surround almost every movement that Larsen makes while in Santa María, indeed the narrator has frequent recourse to the device of referring to the testimony of various 'witnesses'. Thus, on the second page of the account, 'Algunos insisten en su actitud de resucitado...' is immediately put in doubt by 'Otros, al revés, siguen viéndole apático y procaz...' (*A.*, 60), while accounts of his return to Santa María are less certain still: 'La hora en que Hagen tuvo su dudosa visión de Larsen...' (*A.*, 129, emphasis added). If the inconsistencies alluded to in these various versions seem quite trivial, the pivotal scene in which Angélica Petrus runs from the shipyard with her blouse in disarray is related in a systematically relativist fashion which, in highlighting its textuality, calls Borges to mind: 'Esta parte de la historia se escribe por lealtad a un

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<sup>16</sup> The technique seems to have greatly influenced García Márquez, notably in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*.



fantasma. No hay pruebas de que sea cierta y todo lo que podemos pensar indica que es improbable.' (A., 169). More disquietingly, we are presented with two versions of the last journey and demise of Larsen, neither of which is therefore definitive.

Narrational or epistemological doubt is merely one of a whole complex of doubts which surround each text, and this is the basis for treating them as *generically* related. We must now turn our attention to the treatment by Onetti of the four phenomenological parameters (time; space; language; embodiment) in turn, but with reference to comparable textual strategies in Beckett and Kafka. Only after an examination of the strategies of estrangement employed by all three will we be in a position to develop a conceptual framework for the sub-genre posited by the present study.

PART I

Time & Space





## Chapter 2: A Metaphysics of Time

*'...intuí que no les falta razón a los que dictaminan la inexistencia del tiempo.'*

*Cuando ya no importe*

It has become a commonplace in much of the criticism written on Juan Carlos Onetti to attach the label 'existential' to his writings, with little explication of the sense in which this problematic epithet is being used.<sup>17</sup> This tendency would be little more than unsatisfactory if it were merely a matter of a lack of critical rigour in the use of the term. It does, however, tend to overlook the fact that in his own non-fictional writing Onetti is frequently disparaging not only of the French existential 'school', but indeed of the range of ethical and political meta-narratives which tend to be invoked by contemporary exponents of the philosophy in writing what often amount to *romans à thèse*.<sup>18</sup> More detrimental to a correct understanding of Onetti's artistic purpose is the fact that, once the label has entered common currency, there is an obvious temptation to try to explain the structure of the Onettian narrative through all the associated paraphernalia of what one might term an 'existentialist aesthetic', but with little attempt to justify or even locate the vocabulary that this invokes. Thus

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<sup>17</sup> Such examinations as exist tend to start by assuming that Onetti is indeed an existentialist, and then go on to explore links with specific philosophers. Thus Katalin Kulin (*Modern Latin American Fiction: A Return to Didacticism*, [Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988], 36) suggests that 'the roots of Onetti's *Weltanschauung* originate in and are nourished by the works of (Kierkegaard)', supporting her contention by showing how certain passages of *La vida breve* derive almost verbatim from the Danish existentialist's writing. The possibility that these passages are parodic in intent is overlooked. Marilyn Frankenthaler (*Juan Carlos Onetti: La salvación por la forma* [New York: Ediciones Abra, 1977]) has extensively examined the parallels between Onetti and both Sartre and Jaspers, but again from the premise that the former has accepted the basic tenets of existential ontology. In such a reading, entry into the domain of 'sueños' as a palliative to 'sucesos' is bound to be interpreted as evasion (rather than, say, a metaphor for artistic creation). The present study is in part aimed at correcting this type of assumption.

<sup>18</sup> See for instance his informative essay *Nada mas importante que el existencialismo*, collected in *Requiem por Faulkner y otros artículos* (Montevideo: ARCA Editorial 1975). The article is scornful not so much of Sartre himself, 'escritor poco brillante, dotado de un talento asombroso' as of 'sus abundantes, tediosos discípulos'. These, he suggests, have a vocation to 'insinuar, en derivaciones éticas que no tienen base de ninguna especie para quien haya leído[...]El Ser y la Nada, la manera en que la gente se haga mejor' (148).

Peter Turton, in his introduction to *Esbjerg en la costa y otros cuentos*,<sup>19</sup> characterises every gamble or impulse of the Onettian protagonist as an 'existential leap', though in none of the four stories of this collection is there the remotest attempt by anybody to leap between aesthetic, ethical or religious modes of being. The extent to which the choice facing the hero is existential rather than merely ethical or expedient is nowhere explained.<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of the present study is not, however, to point out the shortcomings of a term that has been applied rather too loosely to be useful. It is rather to point to the degree to which Onetti is setting out an aesthetic which, while certainly in dialogue with existentialism, is highly suspicious of the 'optimism' with which the existentialist postulates a human ontology based upon absolute freedom. Now while it is quite possible for a novelist to be both existential and deeply pessimistic about human nature and the psychological capacity for free choice - one thinks here of Graham Greene or François Mauriac - Onetti's attack upon the existentialist position is more fundamental. Despite a remarkable variety of technique and style which, in the course of fifty years, has done much to define the directions open to the Latin American 'new novel', Onetti's narrative strategies have been consistently directed at the very basis of the existential calculus: time. After briefly justifying the contention that existentialism is intricately based upon a metaphysics of time, the present chapter will suggest that Onetti's treatment of temporality approximates quite closely to that of Kafka and Beckett. The main body of the section will then provide evidence of the degree to which the Onettian hero is engaged with the problematic of time. This will

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<sup>19</sup> Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994

<sup>20</sup> In his otherwise insightful introduction, Turton returns with a disheartening frequency to the term 'existential leap', particularly in relation to Montes' disastrous decision to personally take on a number of telephone bets so as to pay for his wife's visit to Denmark in the title story. Even if one ignores the usual Kierkegaardian meaning which relates to a fundamental jump from the aesthetic mode of being, one might reasonably expect an existential leap to reflect some sort of a move away from a preoccupation with (or flight into) the normative and towards a more authentic state, this being made possible through facing into the chasm of absolute freedom with its concomitant anxiety. No Onettian hero, metaphorically or otherwise, is tempted in this direction. Yvonne Perier Jones, though apparently offering a more rigorous examination of Onetti's supposed 'existential outlook' (*The formal Expression of Meaning in Juan Carlos Onetti's Narrative Art*, Ch.4, [México: CIDOC, 1971]), appears to equate the term with a strong sense of alienation coupled with a subjective or



be followed by an analysis of the various strategies used by Onetti in order to undermine temporality, and an exploration of the possibilities open to the Onettian protagonist for meaningful choice, for 'authentic' behaviour.<sup>21</sup>

(i) Temporality, ontology and choice.

Existentialism is frequently said to derive from two of the great maverick thinkers of nineteenth century philosophy: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche,<sup>22</sup> the one an impassioned advocate of personal religious belief, the other a prophet of an equally uncompromising, fervid atheism. This very heterogeneity might serve as a caution that existentialism is something of a catch-all term which has made unhappy bed-fellows of philosophers of the most diverse views and agendas, many of whom are quite hostile to the idea that such a school exists at all. Nevertheless, one might readily identify certain core concerns which came to preoccupy a number of continental philosophers who were contemporaries of Onetti, and which achieved their most systematic and original articulation in Martin Heidegger's 1927 study *Sein und Zeit*: Existentialism is concerned with the problem of Being ('Dasein'); Existence is here understood as pertaining to members of humanity, for whom the problem of Being is an issue; Being, as 'da'-Sein, is already 'in the world', a situation or, more accurately, relationship characterised by conflicting feelings of contingency or thrownness (*Gerworfenheit*), by facticity or givenness (*Faktizität*), by an awareness of or orientation towards mortality (*Freiheit zum Tode*), and by concern or care (*Sorge*); the

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relativist epistemology. While perhaps necessary, these are scarcely sufficient conditions to classify a writer as existential.

<sup>21</sup> Sabine Giersberg, in an essay entitled 'Onetti and Ecclesiastes' (San Román ed., *Onetti and Others*) usefully suggests that 'Onetti postulates the certainty of failure, from which he develops his own existential philosophy [...] from a distinctive fusion of the existential and the aesthetic [...] His continual effort to break from the linearity of narration, by means of multiple versions and recurrent characters, is crystallized in Santa María' (166-7). Yvonne Perier Jones, while apparently offering a rigorous examination of Onetti's supposed 'existential outlook' (*The formal Expression of Meaning in Juan Carlos Onetti's Narrative Art*, Ch.4, [México: CIDOC, 1971]), also seems to show a good awareness of this central pre-occupation with time in Onetti. However, a more methodical analysis of the problematic of time *qua* ontology is beyond the scope of either essay.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance H.J. Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (London: Routledge 1952) and Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1970).

feelings of angst, of dread and of responsibility which are the corollary of this complex relationship to the lived world (*Lebenswelt*) frequently lead to a flight into inauthentic modes of Being.<sup>23</sup> Heidegger's most original and far-reaching postulate is that Being is, as the title of his study suggests, saturated with temporality, in fact is to an extent coterminous with time. Furthermore, if there is a critical temporal dimension which defines Being, it is that of future projection. Possibility, choice and a sense of incompleteness are at the very heart of Being, and authentic behaviour, while taking full account of facticity, is always future-oriented.

Inauthentic behaviour, behaviour that is driven by what Sartre was to call '*mauvaise foi*', arises when one tries to flee from the vertiginous insecurity of future possibility. The most common symptom of such behaviour is an exaggerated concern with facticity, with what was or is, the most common pretext being an exaggerated respect for the normative within society. One begins to allow essence to have priority over existence. One becomes the willing victim of social and biological determinism. One is a conformist, even if, as in Genet's case, one conforms to a rather eccentric template (the label of 'homosexual thief'). An existential hero such as Julien Sorel (*Le rouge et le noir*) or Meursault (*L'Étranger*) will so far disdain the etiquette of conformity as to become witness for the prosecution at his own capital trial, while positive existential characters such as Brunet in Sartre's *La mort dans l'âme* or Dr. Castel in Camus' *La peste* are able to meet the demands of the present crisis and act authentically precisely to the degree that they liberate themselves from the constraints of facticity and fallenness. Caught up with the more determinist idea that 'essence' determines 'existence', Daniel, the homosexual of Sartre's *Chemin de la liberté* trilogy, and Dr. Richard of *La peste* are clear foils to the existential hero.

It seems fair, given the central role of Sartre in popularising the term, to allow the foregoing works to be classed as existential literature, since their chief concern centres upon the paired issues of authenticity and choice. One might go further. In order for the term 'existential' to be critically useful, it should describe works in which themes of freedom, the authentic self, individuality, and significant choice in

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<sup>23</sup> For a more extended examination of Heidegger's terminology, see Appendix I below.



some way take precedence over other concerns. Walter Kaufmann considers the first section of *Notes from Underground* 'the best overture for existentialism ever written' precisely to the extent that it sounds out such themes.<sup>24</sup> One might therefore include under the rubric of existential literature a wide range of texts, from Stendhal and Ibsen through to Hesse, Carpentier and Camus without allowing the term to lose its rigour. But if any of the parameters that define the phenomenological self - temporality, extension, embodiment, being-with-others (Mitsein) - are so distorted or foreshortened as to negate the possibility of significant choice, the epithet 'existential', unless significantly modified, becomes not merely inadequate but misleading.

As will be demonstrated, Santa María is a self-contained fictional universe whose time is governed by principles of stasis and entropy, much as are the universes of Kafka and Beckett, authors with whom Onetti has considerable affinities. But to place K., Díaz Grey or Molloy in the same aesthetic category as Julien Sorel, Meursault or Cristóbal Jarra is to do excessive violence to both types of hero and to misunderstand the intentions of their authors. It is therefore one of the supreme ironies of literary criticism that Kafka and Beckett, no less than Onetti, all of whose narratives consistently problematise and subvert the very temporality upon which an existential calculus is necessarily founded, are frequently branded as existential. In the case of the European authors, however, especially since the incisive studies of the German critic Günther Anders who specifically examines their presentation of time, there has been considerable debate as to the appropriateness of the term existential. Anders sees Kafka as a pioneer in developing a temporally circumscribed fictional world in which development, and significant choice, is precluded. Anders' analysis of Kafkaesque time is worth repeating at some length, since it has considerable affinities to the presentation of time in Onetti (one thinks, for instance, of the tableau of Larsen's expulsion, repeated in *La vida breve* and *Juntacadáveres*, or of the suspended bankruptcy order that hangs over Jeremiah Petrus S.A.):

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<sup>24</sup> Kaufmann ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York, Meridian, 1975), 14.

Where there is only repetition there is no progression in time. Thus all of the situations in Kafka's novels are frozen images. The second hand on the clock of despair runs relentlessly, madly on, but the minute-hand is broken, and the hour-hand does not move[...]Kafka's stories are the first examples of a new technique which dispenses with traditional concepts of development and progression; for obviously no representation of a futile existence can have a happy ending or depict any change of character in the hero....Condemned to a life of repeated failures from which he cannot escape, Kafka's hero is in a sense imprisoned.<sup>25</sup>

In light of such temporal stasis, one begins to understand the enigmatic statements of Díaz Grey, for instance: 'que el tiempo no existe por sí mismo es demostrable; es hijo del movimiento y si éste dejara de moverse no tendríamos tiempos ni desgaste ni principios ni finales' - (N., 31). The philosophy of a character such as Larsen, 'impotente y absurdamente móvil, como un insecto oscuro que agitara patas y antenas en el aire de leyenda.' (A., 84) bears an obvious correlation not only to Gregor Samsa, but to the quintessential Kafkaesque hero, whose futile activity is increasingly driven only by 'la superstición de que un ciego movimiento perpetuo puede fatigar a la desgracia' (A.,125). Finally, faced with the supreme indifference of the cosmos, for Larsen, no less than for the hapless applicants to the Law and to the Castle : 'all that useless standing about and waiting all day, and day after day, and going on without any prospect of change, must break a man down and make him unsure of himself and in the end actually incapable of anything else but this hopeless standing about.'<sup>26</sup>

This vision of the circularity of all activity in the face of temporal paralysis receives its dramatic representation most perfectly in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, and Anders implicitly and emphatically rejects the existentialist epithet which had almost immediately attached itself to the play by entitling his 1956 study '*Sein ohne Zeit*' or 'Being without Time':

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<sup>25</sup> Günther Anders *Franz Kafka* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1965), 38.

<sup>26</sup> *The Castle* in Willa & Edwin Muir translation, *The Complete Novels* (London: Minerva 1997), 402.



in Estragon's and Vladimir's lives, objectives no longer exist. For this reason in the play time does not exist either, life is 'treading water', so to speak; and it is for this reason, and quite legitimately, that events and conversations are going in circles...Beckett carries this concept through with such complete consistency that he presents...a second act which is but a slightly varied version of the first act, thus offering to our startled eyes nothing new or startling.<sup>27</sup>

This presentation of life as treading water in order to facilitate the passage of (eventless) time applies equally to the various games with permutations and pointless narration that constitute the complete oeuvre of Beckett's fiction. Molloy, Malone, Watt and Murphy all fill out a paralysed, purgatorial time by engaging in circular, repetitive activity, and the second major contention of the present study is that characters such as Linacero, Brausen and, above all, Díaz Grey are best understood by noting the close affinity these bear to the aforementioned. If, as has frequently been suggested, Onetti's Santa María is a Rio Plata counterpart to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, then it is a Yoknapatawpha peopled by characters out of Beckett and subject to the temporal stasis of Kafka.

Given the deep preoccupation with time and freedom that he shares with Martin Heidegger, it is scarcely surprising that when Jean Paul Sartre engages in literary criticism, particularly in the period immediately prior to the war (and to *L'Être et le néant*), his analyses are principally in terms of these two intimately related aspects of his, and Heidegger's, temporal existentialism. In a revealing 1939 essay, *On "The Sound and the Fury"* (subtitled, 'Time in the Work of Faulkner'), Sartre is quite explicit in identifying the central place of such a slant in his criticism: 'A fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics. The critic's task is to define the latter before evaluating the former. Now it is immediately obvious that Faulkner's metaphysics is a metaphysics of time[...]Man's misfortune lies in his being time-

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted from Martin Esslin ed. *Samuel Beckett, 20th Century Views* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 146.

bound.<sup>28</sup> In considering the narratives of Quentin, which opens with the famous gesture of his pulling the hands from a watchface on the day of his suicide, and of Benjy, the idiot, Sartre notes that

Faulkner's present is essentially catastrophic. It is the event which creeps up on us like a thief, huge, unthinkable - which creeps up on us and then disappears. Beyond the present time there is nothing, since the future does not exist...In Faulkner's work, there is never any progression, never anything which comes from the future. The present has not first been a future possibility.<sup>29</sup>

There is in this 'metaphysics', he notes, a good deal in common with *A la recherche de temps perdu*, since both 'Proust and Faulkner have decapitated [time]. They have deprived it of its future, that is, its dimension of deeds and freedom.'

Temporality in the poetics of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti is more radically curtailed yet. In addition to the decapitation of the future which is the 'dimension of deeds and freedom' in Sartre's existentialist ethic, access to the past, at best elliptical, is frequently undermined with systematic unreliability.<sup>30</sup> This unreliability is not merely epistemological, relating to the relativism or partiality of narrative viewpoint, as happens for instance in Faulkner and the early Vargas Llosa, but is frequently ontological in nature. Thus we find that Díaz Grey, the central consciousness of Santa María with which he was co-created, is beset with doubts about whether he existed at all before Brausen summoned him, already middle-aged, to his fictional city.<sup>31</sup> Before going on to examine the generic atemporality of the doctor in

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<sup>28</sup> Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), 79.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>30</sup> One would have to take issue with Brotherston who, placing the Uruguayan in the tradition of Faulkner, asserts that 'like Gabriel García Márquez and Eduardo Mallea, he is markedly fond of genealogy and saga' (*The Emergence of the Latin American Novel* [Cambridge: C.U.P., 1977], 64). In fact, genealogy, along with all dependable forms of history, ancestry and childhood, are conspicuously absent in the Onettian oeuvre. Such parentage as is allowed (e.g. in *Dejemos hablar al viento*, *La muerte y la niña*, and *Cuando ya no importe*) tends to be beset with unreliability. With the single, tenuous exception of the Malabia-Bergner set, Santa María has nothing remotely comparable to the history-laden Compson, Sartoris or Buendía dynasties.

<sup>31</sup> The same is essentially true of the Medina of *Dejemos hablar al viento*. See below, footnote 58.



some detail, it is worth pointing out the degree to which every significant Onettian protagonist may in fact be defined by the nature of his engagement with time.

### (ii) Onetti's early protagonists

Onetti's first heroes tend to be engaged in a struggle to halt or to move beyond time, usually by inhabiting a space which is somehow free of temporal flow. It is clear, for instance, that both Eladio Linacero of *El pozo* and Diego Aránzuru of *Tierra de nadie* are attempting to arrest (private) time within the space of the room: 'Me hubiera gustado clavar la noche en el papel como a una gran mariposa nocturna,' explains Linacero (O.C., 76), but of course the night, moving relentlessly on outside the window, escapes him.<sup>32</sup> The entire odyssey of Aránzuru, meanwhile, seems to be a search for a space beyond time. He is initially attracted by the stories of *Faruru*, a fictional island, told him by his neighbour Pablo Num, the elderly taxidermist whose room is filled with animals and birds that have been placed 'beyond time' by the taxidermist's art. Having abandoned his lawyer's life (typically, in the form of the office whose window bears his name), Aránzuru wanders in pursuit of an *atemporal* space, or at least a space free from the rigour of quantifiable time. He is accompanied in the course of his quest by

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<sup>32</sup> Indeed, I would suggest that the room is usefully considered as a chronotope in the sense that Bakhtin developed the term (see especially below, chapter 4). In his influential essay *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel* (1937) Bakhtin sets out an 'historical poetics' based upon the interconnectedness of 'space-time' in the evolution of the novel. The critical point here is that, for Bakhtin, neither space nor time should be considered in isolation: 'We will give the name chronotope (literally "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature....In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole' (M. Holquist ed., *The Dialogic Imagination* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998], 84) Furthermore, the representation of this category of 'space-time' is crucial to understanding artistic purpose, since: '...it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions ...(because) the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.' (*ibid.* 85) The use of the room as a private space, characterised by Bergson's *temps duré* and cut off from the geometrical time of the 'real world' is a chronotope which I would suggest is common to a number of 'writers of alienation': Dostoevski (*Notes from Underground*), Hamsun (*Hunger*), Barbusse (*L'enfer*), Rilke (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*), Pessoa (*Livro do Desassossego*), Faulkner (*Absalom!, Absalom!*), Sartre (*La Nausée*), Fante (*Ask the Dust*) as well as both Onetti (*El pozo*, *La vida breve*, *Para una tumba sin nombre*, *Dejemos hablar al viento*, *Cuando ya no importe*) and Beckett (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*).

the usual Onettian female menagerie of unsatisfactory partners familiar from *El pozo*, and the following exchange is typical (he has just entered the ageing Violeta's room):

Dejó (Aránzuru) el librito en la mesa, junto al reloj y el vaso con un jazmín muerto. Alzó el reloj, haciendo correr las agujas hacia atrás, dos o tres vueltas, hacia adelante, sin mirar.

- Pero no, Diego...No tenemos hora. Mi pulsera anda como quiere.....Diego...quería saber qué pensabas cuando hiciste eso con el reloj.

- En nada...Debe ser una superstición. ¿Cómo sentiría uno el tiempo sin relojes, sin el sol, teniendo solo el cuerpo para medirlo?

- La isla. Allí sí que va a ser el tiempo sin relojes, ¿eh? (O.C., 227)

Like Linacero, however - and this point will be expanded upon in the next section - he finishes by accepting that time moves inexorably on in a gesture that links him not only back to Linacero, but also anticipates the demise of Onetti's great anti-hero, *Junta Larsen*: he descends to a river.

If we further pursue the idea that the main preoccupation of Eladio Linacero is with the problematics of time,<sup>33</sup> and we note the explicit nexus time(night)-water(river) in this and other works, then it becomes clear that *The Pit* (eg Quartet Books, 1991) is a far from adequate translation of the title, and *The Well* is to be preferred, since it implies a capacity to arrest or contain the flow of water.<sup>34</sup> Thus:

ahora siento que mi vida no es más que el paso de fracciones de tiempo, una y otra, como el ruido de un reloj, el agua que corre, moneda que se cuenta. Estoy tirado y el tiempo pasa[...]toda la noche está, inapresable, tensa, alargando su alma fina y misteriosa en el chorro de la canilla mal cerrada, en la pileta de portland del patio...Hay momentos, apenas, en que los golpes de mi sangre en las sienas se acompañan con el latido de la noche. (O.C., 75)

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<sup>33</sup> Ciaran Cosgrove in 'El pozo: An Activity of Hesitation' (Latin American Literary Review, University of Pittsburg, Jan.-June 1989) views the frequent interruptions and hesitations of the text as a sort of temporal counterpart to the fragmentation and synecdoche that characterise Linacero's vision and mark the text as 'herald(ing) the arrival of the modern Latin American novel'.

<sup>34</sup> Returning to the metaphor of time and the river, Onetti has Carr, the narrator of his final work *Cuando ya no importa*, engaged in the construction of a giant dam.



The Proustian attempt - to arrest time within the 'well'; to recapture and manipulate the past (as for instance when he asks his ex-wife Celia to re-enact a scenario of walking<sup>35</sup>); to 'clavar la noche en el papel' and finally to use the alchemy of fantasy to transform certain *sucesos* into *aventuras-sueños* placed beyond time - would thus appear to be synonymous with the act of artistic creation,<sup>36</sup> an idea given fuller rein by Onetti in his pivotal work *La vida breve*. A similar purpose animates the story-teller in Beckett. Thus Doll notes: 'That the old man character of Beckett must tell stories, continuously, is an indication of his need not to live in chronology but to abandon time frames altogether.'<sup>37</sup> But if the creative act of *El pozo* is an attempt to halt or pin down time, then the attempt is defeated in an image that metaphorically reinforces the link between time and the flow of water: 'Pero, en cambio, fue ella (la noche) la que me alzó entre sus aguas como el cuerpo lívido de un muerto y me arrastra, inexorable, entre fríos y vagas espumas, noche abajo.' (O.C., 76)

The metaphor is more literal and explicit in Onetti's next novel, *Tierra de nadie*. As mentioned above, Aránzuru's odyssey is primarily a flight from the tyranny of clock time :

- "El reloj picotea sin descanso y esto es el tiempo." Aránzuru vacilaba entre imaginar el minuto en todo mundo y el minuto en él, cuerpo y alma. Lo tentaba una poesía fácil de nombres geográficos y científicos. Después, se le ocurrió buscar una sola palabra que lo encerrara todo. Recordaba ahora cuántas veces el viejo Num había cambiado el nombre de la isla. (O.C., 108)

The island's atemporality is reiterated later: '- La isla. Allí sí que va a ser el tiempo sin relojes' (O.C., 227) By the end of the book, Aránzuru's acceptance of the relentless passage of time is indicated by his descent to the quayside to watch the river 'como si acabara, por fin, de llegar a alguna parte[...]tenía la ciudad a sus espaldas; estaba

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<sup>35</sup> This episode counterpoints the 'aventura' of Ana María in the log-cabin, since it reverses the usual movement from 'suceso' to 'sueño' (see also the short story 'Un sueño realizado'). However, the purpose of the re-enactment is analogous to that of writing: 'Había una esperanza, una posibilidad de tender redes y atrapar el pasado y la Ceci de entonces.' (O.C., 65).

<sup>36</sup> Note for instance the importance that Linacero attaches to Ana María having died at eighteen so that she may remain frozen at this age in his *aventuras*.

<sup>37</sup> M. Doll, *Beckett and Myth*, Syracuse University Press 1988, 41

inmóvil frente al río, solo en el centro del enorme círculo que encerraba el horizonte.' (O.C., 259) Then, as if to emphasise that time has moved on regardless, this image of Aránzuru's symbolic acceptance is repeated two chapters later in the closing lines of the book (it is now evening rather than afternoon) :

Fin de jornada. Invisible, a sus espaldas, estaba la ciudad con su aire sucio y las altas casas, con el ir y venir de las gentes, saludos, muertes, manos y rostros, juegos. Ya era la noche y la ciudad zumbaba bajo las luces, con sus hombres, sus sombreros, niños, pañuelos, escaparates, pasos, pasos como la sangre, como granizo, pasos como una corriente sin destino.

Aquí estaba él sentado en la piedra, con la última mancha de la gaviota en el aire y la mancha de grasa en el río sucio, quieto, endurecido. (O.C., 261)

There is, of course, a comparable feeling of double-take at the close of *El astillero*, with its alternative accounts of *Junta Larsen's* final descent to the river, though the artistic intent is distinct.

*El astillero*, and to a lesser extent *Juntacadáveres*, are very often taken to encapsulate most consummately Onetti's presumed existential view of mankind, his most characteristic literary creation being viewed as the failed *macro* Larsen (rather than, as this essay contends, Díaz Grey). One reason for such an existentialist reading is undoubtedly the quasi-religious tone of the text,<sup>38</sup> with its concomitant proliferation of words such as *infierno*, *condenado*, *(mala) fe*, but also *juego*, *farsa*, *mentira*, *máscara*, *absurdo*, *ilusión*, *elegir*, *disimular* and so forth, a choice of lexis that, if the parodic intent is overlooked, makes it at times read almost like a primer in Sartrean philosophy. The text itself resists such a reading, however, and includes a number of strategies which, by imbuing the narrative with an aura of resigned determinism, to a certain extent anticipates García Márquez overtly fatalistic novella *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*.

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<sup>38</sup> Thus *El astillero* is 'un particular infierno creado con ignorancia por el viejo Petrus' (A., 136), while its creator is described, with clear scholastic overtones as 'El hombre que se hizo a si mismo' (A., 76). The quasi-theological overtones link him clearly to Klamm and Godot, largely absent divinities whose religion is founded upon infinite deferral. Other managers before Larsen have found themselves 'en una soledad absoluta y engañosamente poblada por símbolos: la ambición, la seguridad, el tiempo, el poder' (A., 136).



First and foremost, both Onetti's diptych and García Márquez's novella are presented retrospectively, putative reconstructions of the movements and motives that lead up to the ignominious demise of their respective protagonists. Each is related 'muchos años después', pieced together from the varied, partial testimonies of less than reliable witnesses, filled out with conjecture and qualified hypotheses. Frequently the narratives jump forward, with subsequent speculation on what might have occurred in the intervening period.<sup>39</sup> One effect of this disruption in chronology is that the plot is invested with an air of inevitability or fatalism, with choice or freedom relegated to speculation about the past. Thus the imperfect subjunctive figures largely in the various narratives which go to constitute each text, typically in 'third' conditional constructions of the *si (no) hubiera ido / de (no) haber hecho* type,<sup>40</sup> as for instance when Larsen ostensibly allows himself to walk into the trap of Petrus S.A.: 'Si hubiera recorrido el edificio[...]es seguro que habría entrado a almorzar en lo de Belgrano. Y entonces hubiera ocurrido -ahora, antes de que aceptara perderse- lo que sucedió veinticuatro horas después[...]cuando él ya había hecho, ignorándolo, la elección irrevocable.' (A., 79). At first sight this is no more than an exemplar of the intrinsic epistemological uncertainty, reminiscent of Faulkner, which characterises much of the *nueva novela*, and as such might be compared to Márquez's usage of the subjunctive "De haberlo sabido, me lo hubiera llevado para la casa aunque fuera amarrado", declaró (Margot) al instructor. Era extraño que no lo supiera, pero lo era mucho más que tampoco lo supiera mi madre'<sup>41</sup> But Onetti's inclusion of the term 'elección' should put us on our guard.

In the preceding quotation, the illusory nature of choice is underscored by the oxymoronic juxtaposition of 'ignorándolo' and 'la elección'. How is it possible to talk of making a choice, if one is ignorant of the fact that a choice is on offer. Larsen himself seems aware of this type of irony, later commenting: "[...]pero nunca dejan elegir, sólo

<sup>39</sup> The uncertain narration of Emma Zunz's movements 'en aquel tiempo fuera del tiempo' is a clear template here. Note also the occasional inclusion of a Borgesian motif of proliferation 'salones de peluquerías que series de espejos hacían infinitos' (A., 145).

<sup>40</sup> Third, or 'closed', conditionals are, of course, pseudo-conditionals *par excellence*, providing no more than the illusion of an alternative.

<sup>41</sup> *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1981), 30.

después se entera uno de que podía haber elegido" (A., 119). In fact, the systematic debasing of the verb 'elegir' is something of a motif throughout the novel: '-Entre- dijo con fastidio de burla-. No puedo invitarlo a elegir, hoy estamos muy pobres' (A., 220), or, more germane yet, 'Uno hace cosas, pero no puede hacer más que lo que hace. O, distinto, no siempre se elige' (A., 138). In what is probably an oblique reference to Heidegger's liberating notion of 'freedom towards death' (*Freiheit zum Tode*) Larsen notes laconically that 'Lo único que puede hacerse es elegir que se acabe de una manera o de otra' (A., 202). The authenticity of his own chosen death is, of course, undermined by being related in two distinct versions. Hardly surprising, then, that by the final chapter, worn down like K. or the hapless applicant in the parable of the Law, he has abandoned even the desire for choice: '[...]tranqueaba, lento, sin voluntad y sin apuro, *sin posibilidad ni deseo de elección*, por un territorio cuyo mapa se iba encogiendo hora tras hora' (A., 222, emphasis added).

Viewed retrospectively, the trajectory of a sequence of events tends to appear as causally structured, or, given Onetti's predilection for the term 'farsa', plotted.<sup>42</sup> Again, the text contains a number of meta-narrative clues which reinforce this implied determinism. In *Juntacadáveres*, Díaz Grey, who is constantly aware of his fictional status, had noted that : 'sólo nos diferenciamos por el tipo de autonegación que hemos elegido o nos fue impuesto.' (J., 27), 'impuesto' presumably referring to the demiurge Brausen who originally wrote him into being. In *El astillero*, we find the doctor 'jugando con la idea de que la entrevista (con Larsen) era un sueño o por lo menos una comedia organizada por alguien inimaginable' (A., 139).<sup>43</sup> Of course, the form of the book itself sets out to substantiate this notion of an all embracing game or play ('farsa'). There is a self-conscious theatricality about the organisation of chapters into stage-sets and scenes, underlined by the manner in which they are entitled (Santa María, Astillero,

<sup>42</sup> 'Todos sabiendo que nuestra manera de vivir es una farsa, capaces de admitirlo, pero no haciéndolo porque cada uno necesita, además, proteger una farsa personal.' (A.,138)

<sup>43</sup> Compare this to 'El doctor Díaz Grey[...]era el único con aire de divertirse sinceramente. Hablaba poco y sonreía como si la historia del prostíbulo y el último capítulo que contemplaba fuera obra suya' (J., 248). It should be remembered that in *La vida breve*, Díaz Grey is an identity assumed by Brausen



Glorieta, Casilla, Casa, each location suitably numbered)<sup>44</sup>. The theatricality is indeed alluded to directly by Larsen, who 'pensó que la casilla formaba parte del juego, que la había construido y habilitado con el solo propósito de albergar escenas que no podían ser representadas en el astillero' (A., 123). And of course a play, for all that it is a farce, would imply a design, a script : '[Larsen] estuvo conteniendo como semillas los actos que ahora podía prever y estaba condenado a cumplir. Como si fuera cierto todo acto humano nace antes de ser cometido, preexiste a su encuentro con un ejecutor variable' (A., 200). There is little doubt, then, that Larsen, far from an existentialist, is more likely to embrace the philosophy of Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, for whom 'tout ce qui nous arrive de bien et de mal ici-bas était écrit là-haut',<sup>45</sup> and his actions conform to this weary determinism : 'Se puso el sombrero y caminó hacia la mujer, como si cumpliera una orden' (A., 122). Such statements notwithstanding, it is in Díaz Grey that Onetti sets out most clearly and explicitly his attack upon Heidegger's (and Sartre's) future-oriented temporality.

### (iii) Díaz Grey

*La vida breve*, with its creation of Díaz Grey, is undoubtedly Onetti's most rigorous and nuanced examination of the problematics of time and its implications for existential being<sup>46</sup>. This is perhaps not immediately apparent, but a closer textual

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<sup>44</sup> The care with which Onetti identifies the spatial arrangement of rooms in his works contrasts with an increasingly cavalier attitude towards chronology. Thus we find a rather meaningless series of dates dividing up Carr's journal in *Cuando ya no importe* : 'acaso por la alegría de no haber exiliado a la noche oscura de la nada, aflojé los dedos y los apuntes se desparramaron por el suelo. Cuando los recogí y traté de organizarlos sobre la mesa intuí que no les falta razón a los que dictaminan la inexistencia del tiempo' (C. 150).

<sup>45</sup> Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1970), 17.

<sup>46</sup> Although there is no rigorous examination of Heidegger's 'temporality' in Frankenthaler's analysis, she is certainly aware of the importance of this dimension for the Onettian hero: 'El desarrollo anticronológico del tiempo en la narrativa de Onetti es el resultado de un drama en que sus personajes desean instalarse en un tiempo anterior, mental, y una fatalidad de existencia real en el presente. La vuelta a una juventud que no es propiamente la suya representa por parte del personaje de Onetti un deseo de solucionar de una forma no temporal los problemas que surgen por el transcurrir del tiempo[...]El personaje se encuentra inmóvil en el presente. No vislumbra en el camino hacia el futuro nada más que un desemboque en un ocaso final a causa de la irreversibilidad del tiempo. De ahí es que busca volver siempre atrás como un modo de no resignarse a la condena

examination reveals that the three significant alternative locations - Montevideo, the neighbouring room, Santa María - and the three identities - Brausen, Arce, Díaz Grey - correlate reasonably closely to Heidegger's equation of Being with Time in *Sein und Zeit*. Robert Solomon outlines the link between the chief parameters of Being (*Dasein*) and Temporality (the horizon of Being) as follows:

We have already seen that the unity of *Dasein* has been defined in terms of care (*Sorge*). Thus we may suppose that care will also be redefined in terms of temporality. Care is projection into the future, and it is defined now in terms of the unity of time. Care unifies past, present, and future. We have learned that care is the unity of *Existenz*, facticity and fallenness, and so we find that these three existential structures of *Dasein* are each equated with a temporal (*ek-static*) structure. *Existenz* corresponds to the future; *Existenz* is possibilities projected into the future. Facticity corresponds to the past; facticity is *Dasein's* 'already being-in-the-world.' Fallenness corresponds to the present; fallenness is the preoccupation with the everyday concerns of the 'now'. Accordingly, authenticity and inauthenticity must also be reoriented to this temporal mode of thinking. Inauthenticity, like fallenness, will be characterised by its preoccupation with the present.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, the correlation is at best imperfect, and the alternatives dreamed up by Brausen more obviously constitute a direct evolution of the *suceso-sueño* dialect that animated Eladio Linacero. But this imperfect correlation, leaning at times towards parody, is in itself of the utmost significance. Brausen, an archetypal Onettian 'vice-exister',<sup>48</sup> is above all attempting to find a means to escape the *facticity* of his world-scope, the given parameters (his wife's mastectomy, his job as advertising agent, in short, Buenos Aires) which circumscribe or define his life.<sup>49</sup> Journeys to Montevideo,

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actual. Pero este esfuerzo no implica que no salga igualmente derrotado' (Frankenthaler, *op.cit.*, 113-4).

<sup>47</sup> *From Rationalism to Existentialism* (New York, Harper & Row, 1972), 224.

<sup>48</sup> See below, p45

<sup>49</sup> To this extent he is comparable to the hero of *Los adioses*, who is 'consciente de su estatura, de su cansancio, de que la existencia del pasado depende de la cantidad del presente que le demos, y que es



that is, to the *past* (he first met Gertrudis in Montevideo, and might hope to relive this through her sister Raquel) provide no way out (Raquel is pregnant, an unforgivable female debasement in Onetti). His present existence is thus characterised precisely by 'fallenness', and an abortive continuation of his present teleology extended into the near future leads to a dead end: in Part II, Ch V, during 'el tiempo de la espera, la infecundidad y el desconcierto[...]inventé la 'Brausen Publicidad' (O.C., 606). In this inauthentic existence, as he explains to Gertrudis, 'puedo entrar en muchos juegos, casi convencerme, jugar para los demás la farsa de Brausen con fe. Cualquier pasión o fe sirven a la felicidad en la medida en que son capaces de distraernos, en la medida de la inconsciencia que puedan darnos' (O.C., 594).

Two alternatives, however, are available to Brausen, and the key to each is that they are liberated from the past and from the facticity of his past-oriented existence. 'Lo importante es terminar,' - he confides to Stein, - 'con este pasado, con el anterior' (O.C., 658). The severance from the past is first and foremost indicated in the break with the name 'Brausen'. Identity number one, 'Arce', becomes a present without a past, but a present that is lived in the actual world of Buenos Aires - more specifically in the adjacent room of *la Queca*. This room is to a significant extent 'beyond time': 'recordé mi primera visita al departamento, la fisonomía del desorden, de la acumulada experiencia. Pero algún desconocido elemento continuaba imponiéndose[...]la sensación de una vida fuera del tiempo' (O.C., 500). The contrast between these two modes of being, and the importance of timelessness in the latter, is made even more explicit several chapters later:

- comprendí que había estado sabiendo durante semanas que yo, Juan María Brausen y mi vida no eran otra cosa que moldes vacíos, meras representaciones de un viejo significado mantenido con indolencia, de un ser arrastrado sin fe entre personas, calles y horas de la ciudad, actos de rutina.

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posible darle poca, darle ninguna' ( O.C., 754). His illness of course curtails the dimension of his future possibilities (or *Existenz*).

Yo había desaparecido el día impreciso en que se concluyó mi amor por Gertrudis; subsistía en la doble vida secreta de Arce y del médico de provincias. Resucitaba diariamente al penetrar en el departamento de la Queca[...]para girar con lentitud y comprobar la permanencia de los muebles y los objetos, del aire en eterno tiempo presente, incapaz de alimentar la memoria, de ofrecer puntos de apoyo al remordimiento. (O.C., 551)

What Onetti seems to be offering here is a direct refutation of Heidegger's ideas, most notably that Care is projection into the future, and it is defined now in terms of the unity of time. Care unifies past, present, and future [...] Authenticity will be characterised by its unified view of past, and future, the present being the "offspring of future and past" (*op.cit.* 224), and as if to emphasise this, Onetti overtly parodies Heidegger's formulation in the diatribe of the bishop (Part II Ch.7), a character straight out of Dostoevsky or Kafka.<sup>50</sup>

- No fueron antes, no serán después - decía el obispo con énfasis prematuro-. Pasados o aún no venidos, es como si no hubieran sido nunca, como si nunca llegaran a ser...Cada uno es, apenas, un momento eventual; y la envilecida conciencia que les permite tenerse en pie sobre la caprichosa, desembrada y complaciente sensación que llaman pasado, que les permite tirar líneas para la esperanza, y la enmienda sobre lo que llaman tiempo y futuro, solo es, aun admitiéndola, una conciencia personal. (O.C., 617)<sup>51</sup>

Moving to what might be termed the realm of imaginative possibility, an elaboration of the exotic atemporal spaces of Linacero's *aventura* or *compensación*, Brausen creates a doctor who is even more radically liberated from memory. Indeed,

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<sup>50</sup> The chapter in which the extended discourse occurs is something of an anomaly in Onetti. As Katalin Kulin's aforementioned analysis points out, the discourse overtly paraphrases much of Kierkegaard's existentialism (eg, the different types of despair). The reader is of course free to decide whether or not to take these borrowings at face value.

<sup>51</sup> The view of time in this passage is remarkably close to that expressed by Pessoa's Bernardo Soares in the near contemporary *Livro do Desassossego* (translated by Richard Zenith as *The Book of Disquietude* [Manchester: Carcanet, 1991]): 'I always live in the present. I don't know the future and no longer have the past. The former oppresses me as the possibility of everything, the latter as the reality of nothing' (64).



throughout the entire Santa María Cycle we are rarely allowed to lose sight of this fact. Initially, in the chapter in which he dreams up the doctor, Brausen merely suggests that 'no me interesaba el pasado del médico, su vida anterior a su llegada, el año anterior, a la ciudad de provincias' (O.C., 443). In the story of the previous year which in fact marks his first fictional appearance (*La casa en la arena*, 1949, originally intended as a chapter of *La vida breve*), Díaz Grey is allowed at least one memory, a memory which then comes to *define* identity, much in the manner that Linacero's *aventuras* constitute his true *Historia*. The memory is characteristically mutable, fictitious and thereby outside time:

Cuando Díaz Grey aceptó con indiferencia haber quedado solo, inició el juego de reconocerse en el único recuerdo que quiso permanecer en él, cambiante, ya sin fecha. Veía las imágenes del recuerdo y se veía a sí mismo al transportarlo y corregirlo para evitar que muriera, reparando los desgastes de cada despertar...Su vida, él mismo, no era ya más que aquel recuerdo, el único digno de evocación y de correcciones, de que fuera falsificado, una y otra vez, su sentido. (O.C., 1237)

Even such memories as relate to the town and its co-inhabitants rather than the doctor's past per se are to be doubted. In *El astillero*, we find him doubting the veracity of an old memory of having treated Angélica Inés for a second time:

La segunda vez[...]no era ahora precisamente un recuerdo. O era que el momento vivido estaba olvidado, irrecuperable, y lo sustituía - inmóvil, puntual, caprichosamente coloreado - el recuerdo de una lámina que el médico no había visto nunca y que nadie nunca había pintado. La inverosimilitud, la sensación de que la escena había ocurrido, o fue registrada, cien años atrás, provenía, inseguramente, de la suavidad y los ocres de la luz que la alumbraba. (A., 161)

It is as though the memory were a sepia-tinged photograph rather than the residue of personal experience.

In her thorough and much quoted analysis of the structure underlying *La vida breve*, Josefina Ludmer remarks on a number of patterns of 'congruence' which

underlie the text, one of the most important being that of contiguous empty space or absence: thus the empty apartment which has recently been occupied by the prostitute Queca is congruent to (and becomes a compensation for) the absence left by the mastectomy of *Gertudris*.<sup>52</sup> Now it is immediately obvious that just such a contiguous absence is implicit in the very title of the novel, a clear invocation of 'Ars longa, vita brevis'.<sup>53</sup> We have already noted above that the impulse which drives Linacero away from the world of *sucesos* and into the imaginative realm of *sueños* is precisely an impulse to escape from time (Ana María remains forever eighteen in the *aventura* of the log-cabin). A similar impulse leads Brausen into the fantasy of Díaz Grey and Elena Sala, fictional counterparts of himself and his wife, whose body is now whole again.

Martin Seymour-Smith notes, though without developing the point, that Díaz Grey's name suggests that of Dorian Grey, the eponymous hero of Wilde's Gothic fantasy on youth.<sup>54</sup> The dialectic between ageing reality and timeless pictures is in fact a central motif in Onetti's oeuvre from *La vida breve* on, extending beyond the doctor. The room of the prostitute Queca is first described as though it were a painting in a chapter suitably entitled 'Naturaleza muerta' or 'Still life'. A broken picture frame on the wall from which hang shards of glass suggest that Brausen, under his assumed identity Arce (homophonically suggesting 'Ars [longa]?'), has stepped out of the frame, while a detail in the 'still life' of a tiny clock with only one hand suggests not only Quentin Compson's famous gesture, but also Günter Anders' image ('the minute-hand is broken, and the hour-hand does not move') quoted at length above. Earlier in the novel, when Brausen first dreams up Elena Sala in a chapter entitled *La salvación*, she is continually imagined as literally descending from a picture of the younger (intact) Gertrudis (the detail of the rib in the first quote perhaps referring to the creation of Eve):

tal vez la salvación bajaría del retrato que se había hecho Gertrudis en  
Montevideo, tantos años antes, colgado ahora en la pared sombría de la

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<sup>52</sup> Josefina Ludmer, *Onetti, Los procesos de construcción del relato* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1977).

<sup>53</sup> On the title, see for instance A. Mac Adam, *Modern Latin American Narratives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 106.



derecha, más allá del plato con la costilla roída[...]Recostado en el respaldo de la silla estuve mirando el retrato, esperé confiado las imágenes y las frases imprescindibles para salvarme. En algún momento de la noche, Gertrudis tendría que saltar del marco plateado del retrato para aguardar su turno en la antesala de Díaz Grey[...]Un momento más, un diminuto suceso cualquiera y la misma Gertrudis bajaría del retrato para salvarme del desánimo, del clima del amor emporcado, de la Gertrudis gruesa y mutilada; vendría a guiarme la mano para escribir un nuevo principio, otro encuentro... (O.C., 456-459)

Fourteen years later a reverse movement is invoked, in another photograph filled room that is placed outside time, when the mad Julita wishes to have her brother-in-law Jorge Malabia re-enact the 'game' of her late husband Federico: 'Retrocedo hasta tocar la pared, hasta empujar con la nuca el vidrio de la fotografía, hasta saber que estoy sustituyendo con las mías las cejas, la sonrisa, la tristeza de mi hermano' (O.C. 802). Notice also the overtly Dorian Grey aspect of the following 'Desde casi una docena de retratos [...] Federico Malabia sonreía o miraba con tristeza a las escritoras de anónimos; las muchachas comprobaban que las fotografías iban envejeciendo velozmente [...] y el hombre se mostraba más muerto, menos creíble.' (J., 120).<sup>55</sup> However it is the doctor who remains most consistently outside of time and at war with it. In *La muerte y la niña* he tells Jorge Malabia of his desire to destroy all of the photos of his daughter in which she is more than three years of age, in order to arrest the problem of her growing up. The doctor's sudden, Gothic ageing towards the end of Onetti's final novel, highly evocative of the demise of Dorian Grey, once again points to the ineluctable forces of entropy and decay which seem to mock at such Onettian attempts to arrest time.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *Guide to Modern World Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 932.

<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Díaz Grey attempts to negate the ageing of his daughter in *La muerte y la niña* by destroying those photos in which she is more than three years old.

<sup>56</sup> A fascinating passage from Luis Harss' *Los nuestros*, its detail amplified significantly from the original English text *Into the mainstream*, supports the view that Díaz Grey derives in part from Wilde's creation. With regard to the 'Naturaleza muerta' of La Queca's room, Harss tells us that: 'El centro del remolino - el foco de la tormenta - es un cuadro estático, un decorado fijo en el que Bransen (sic.), en suspenso, representa el drama: su cuarto. La escenografía inmutable, dice Onetti,

As the Santa María saga develops and Díaz Grey becomes its central consciousness,<sup>57</sup> we find not merely an *absence* of a past, noted not only by the doctor but increasingly by his interlocutors (Jorge Malabia, Juan Carr),<sup>58</sup> but a redefinition of the possibilities that are withheld by the cyclical passage of calendar time. Much of the discourse of the curious novella *La muerte y la niña* is a meditation upon these twin aspects:

Por el movimiento del sol, Díaz Grey podría haberse supuesto más de una hora atrapado en la meditación que le llegó en lugar de la siesta perdida y la dispepsia habitual...Dudaba, desinteresado, de sus años. Brausen puede haberme hecho nacer en Santa María con treinta o cuarenta años de pasado inexplicable, ignorado para siempre. (N., 23)

This meditation soon takes on an almost purgatorial overtone, with a characteristic use of the term 'condena':

Pero también yo me sentía cambiado. No sólo envejecido por los años que me había impuesto Brausen y que no pueden contarse por el paso de trescientos sesenta y cinco días. Comprendí desde hace tiempo que una de las formas de su condena incomprensible era haberme traído a su mundo con una edad invariable entre la ambición con tiempo limitado y la desesperanza. (N., 56)

This sense of purgatorial stasis in turn seems to lead up to the tired affirmation:

No nos estaba permitido envejecer, deformarnos apenas, pero nadie impedía que los años pasaran, señalados con festejos, con el escándalo alegre y

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fue "robada" de una naturaleza de Albright - una acuarela para una edición de lujo de *El retrato de Dorian Grey* (título sugestivo) - que muestra objetos dispuestos sobre una mesa, entre ellos, un guante vacío que conserva la forma de la mano que hace poco estuvo en él.' L. Harss, *Los nuestros*, Buenos Aires: Ed. Sudamericana (1975), 229-30. The fetishism of absence, of the Lacanian 'phallus', is also central to *La vida breve*.

<sup>57</sup> Díaz Grey is not so much a character as a homonym. For the view of Díaz Grey and Larsen as carival figures, see the concluding remarks below.

<sup>58</sup> There are a number of remarkable parallels here with the presentation of Medina in *Dejemos hablar al viento*. In the second chapter he comments: 'No debe olvidarse que Brausen me puso en Santa María con unos cuarenta años de edad y ya Comisario' (D., 34), while his putative son Seoane seems equally aware of this atemporality: 'Para entenderlo se necesita tener un pasado. Y vos no lo tenés, a pesar de tu edad' (D., 178). With regard to time and memory, Medina is as sceptical as the



repugnante de la inmensa mayoría ruidosa de los que ignoraban[...]que los burócratas de Brausen los habían hecho nacer con una condena a muerte unida a cada partida de nacimiento. De manera que arrancar hojas fechadas de las agendas que repartían generosos los laboratorios médicos no pasaba de una costumbre, más o menos simbólica que la de cortar fragmentos de los rollos de papel higiénico. (N., 91)

Just what Díaz Grey is, in fact, 'condemned to' will be examined at length below. To return briefly to *La vida breve*, the gulf between Díaz Grey (finally become a first person narrator in the last chapter) and clock-time is vividly expressed in the near instantaneous transition from noon to evening, viewed appropriately enough from the workroom of a watchmaker:

Escuchando el batallón de tictacs que ataca la claridad del mediodía, la empuja, la desgasta; escuchando los puntuales carillones y campanas que van celebrando victorias parciales. Sin pensamientos, sin intervenir, ajeno al tiempo y a la luz, presencio la lucha hasta que termina, hasta que los metales y los vidrios de las esferas comienzan a reproducir y repartirse el reflejo de la primera lámpara que se enciende en la calle. (O.C., 705)

#### (iv) Narration and circularity

If Díaz Grey, the central figure of Santa María is thus '*ajeno al tiempo y a la luz*', how are we to understand time and the passage of time in the provincial backwater that he is condemned to? Here a number of Onettian *leitmotifs* intimately related to a cyclical view of time come into play: macroscopically, the passing of hours, of days and nights, of talks of prices and harvests set against the slower cycle of seasons; microscopically, the recounting of stories and their variants, the vicarious involvement in the (non)-events of others, the reconstitution and manipulation of memories, the playing of records, of cards or chess and, perhaps most typical of all, the smoking of

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doctor: 'Como el tiempo carece de importancia, como la simultaneidad es un detalle que depende de los caprichos de la memoria, me era fácil evocar noches' (D., 66)

cigarettes and of pipes.<sup>59</sup> Each activity is nothing but a repetition, an act single and complete in itself and yet comprising no more than variation upon a theme, a means of filling up or enduring linear time in a manner that recalls the archetypal Beckett anti-hero.<sup>60</sup> A very clear parallel exists between the eponymous heroes of Beckett's Trilogy who, isolated in their respective rooms write into being a number of 'vice-existers' (MacMann, Mahood, Worm etc.) and Onetti's series of writers (Linacero, Brausen, Díaz Grey, Medina) for whom the written, repeatable 'sueño' is also a means of existing vicariously, atemporally. Beckett's various narrators display a concomitant predilection for Sisyphus-like repetition and permutation. The degree to which the various repetitive motifs in Onetti are integrally bound together is worth examining in some detail since, as this study suggests, this is the principal means by which the infinite stasis of the Onettian universe is made tolerable.

Like so many Onettian characters, Díaz Grey both smokes and narrates and/or listens to stories. With characteristically laconic irony, he seems aware of his functional placing within the narratives: 'Ahora fumamos y usted habla y yo escucho, que ése es mi destino.'<sup>61</sup> Indeed, in the course of the saga of Santa María, Díaz Grey serves variously as the 'confessor' to Jorge Malabia (*Para una tumba sin nombre*), Larsen (*El astillero*), Goerdel (*La muerte y la niña*), and Carr (*Cuando ya no importe*) in addition to embodying an important narrative perspective in *La casa en la arena*, *Historia del Caballero de la Rosa*, *Juntacadáveres*, *Jacob y el otro*, *La novia robada*, and *Dejemos hablar al viento*. The doctor is plagued by insomnia<sup>62</sup>, a detail that recalls many comparable protagonists in Borges, and unable to sleep, he engages in a number of repetitive activities: solitaire, solitary chess-games, record-playing, story telling,

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<sup>59</sup> These activities, intimately related to artistic creation (Linacero constantly relives his 'sueños'), would also characterise divine creation: In *Juntacadáveres*, Díaz Grey plans to 'Volver a casa[.]escuchar música[...].suponer que soy Dios' (46).

<sup>60</sup> Onetti playfully alludes to the associated view of time and repetition in the absurdist tradition in French literature when, in *Cuando ya no importe*, Díaz Grey presents Carr, the narrator, with a copy of *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

<sup>61</sup> *Cuando ya no importe*, 46.

<sup>62</sup> Thus the impulse to write, to vicariously co-narrate: 'Unas pocas páginas - dije, al acercárselas-. El insomnio, el aburrimiento y la incapacidad de participar en otra forma' (O.C., 1026).



smoking. The last of these is a key temporal motif in Onetti, and merits the closest attention.

'No tengo tabaco, no tengo tabaco', laments Eladio Linacero at the start of *El pozo* as he gropes for a subject to write about, and later, when his night's writings are finished, 'He fumado mi cigarrillo hasta el fin, sin moverme'. At another point, having recounted how he tried (and failed) to communicate one of his 'sueños' to the prostitute Ester, he breaks off from writing with the comment 'No tengo idea de la hora. He fumado tanto que me repugna el tabaco' (O.C., 68). At first sight, the link between tobacco and writing might seem unusual, perhaps related to the solitude of the narrator: 'Yo soy un hombre solitario que fuma en un sitio cualquiera de la ciudad'. It would therefore seem to complement the earlier rhetorical question '¿Por qué no hubo nunca ningún sueño de algún muchacho fumando solo de noche, así, en una ventana?', since Linacero has declared he is giving us the 'historia de una alma' which relates the 'sueños' of the solitary smoker. The image itself, incidentally, would seem to have its origin in T.S.Eliot's *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*, particularly when one has noted the comparable usage of synecdoche prevalent in both texts:<sup>63</sup>

I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
Of solitary men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows.

One might even tenuously identify the hero of *Tierra de nadie* as a successor to Linacero by the early recurrence of this exact motif: 'Aránzuru se había levantado, y se apoyó en la ventana. Se puso a fumar mirando hacia el río' (O.C., 98).<sup>64</sup>

The link between smoking and memory/fantasy<sup>65</sup> is again suggested in Onetti's third novel, *Para esta noche*, to the end of chapter 4. Morasán, the police chief, is

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<sup>63</sup> Compare Prufrock's synecdoche 'And I have known the arms already, known them all- / Arms that are braceleted and white and bare' with Linacero's 'los brazos, gruesos y blancos, se dilataban lechosos en la luz del cafetín[...]brazos de muchacha despegados del cuerpo largo nervioso, que ya no existía' (O.C., 61).

<sup>64</sup> It is well known that Onetti championed the use of innovative styles developed by contemporary European and North American writers; Hemingway, Celine, Faulkner etc. Given the link between tobacco and narration outlined above, it is interesting then to note that Onetti's second novel covertly acknowledges his debt (to Dos Pasos' *Manhattan Transfer*) by including an advertising poster 'Bristol. Cigarrillos importados.'

reliving his earlier rivalry with Barcala and his passion for the boy, Esteban, who was later executed. When the daydream becomes especially painful, it is interrupted by the following detail: 'Morasán[...]hizo sonar los dedos para separar el cigarillo que los quemaba' (O.C., 302). There is a good deal of formal symmetry in the novel which counterpoints the movements of the police chief Morasán and the revolutionary Ossorio, so that whereas the burning cigarette at the end of chapter 4 suggests both the bitterness and solitude of the former's relationship to the memory of past desire, a corresponding memory-detail to the end of the following chapter situates Ossorio among the living: 'a la mujer de la que recordaba la morena y fina mano ofreciendo con seguridad los restos del cigarillo' (O.C., 316).

The explicit linkage of pipe-smoking and the narration of chapters of a constructed story is sustained throughout *Para una tumba sin nombre* in a manner which recalls quite explicitly Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* Josefina Ludmer has plausibly argued that *La novia robada* is a story for which Onetti deliberately and openly borrowed a number of motifs from Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*, and *Para una tumba sin nombre* adapts and modifies the basic structure of *Absalom! Absalom!* in comparable fashion: two narrators in a room combine to reconstruct a fragmented *historia*, 'the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all'.<sup>66</sup> In each case the listener, despite a lack of direct access to the 'original', appropriates the story and becomes its co-narrator. In Onetti's novella, this movement towards co-narration is already hinted at in the following, early detail (the Doctor is looking at Jorge Malabia, shortly after becoming interested in the latter's relation to the woman and goat of the 'story'): 'A través del vidrio de la ventanilla subido a medias nos miramos fumando, los dos con el cigarrillo colgado de la boca' (O.C., 997).

As will be elaborated upon in chapter 4 below, the writer's room is a significant chronotope in Onetti, its *temps duré* differing from the geometrically even flow of the

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<sup>65</sup> There is also a constant link with 'voicing': 'Ya no tenía [Macleod] voz o solo tenía una vocecita de niño envejecido en la crápula, un susurro que no llegaba nunca a la confidencia....Meneó la cabeza sosteniendo, horizontal, la pipa vacía entre los dientes' (O.C., 569). It is noteworthy that the Onettian female, unable to creatively narrate, tends to obscure her face behind a veil of cigarette smoke.



outside world. Within this chronotope, the problematic of narrative time is foregrounded, and it is interesting that both Faulkner and Onetti use the smoking motif to achieve this. Thus the flow of actual rather than narrational time in Chapters 6 and 7 of *Absalom! Absalom!*, taking place in the New England bedroom shared by Shreve and Quentin, is suggested by details such as 'and now the moment, the thought, was an hour past and the pipe lay smoked out and overturned and cold, with a light sprinkling of ashes about it' (217) or again, 'Opposite him Shreve had filled the pipe and smoked it out again. It lay again overturned, a scattering of white ashes fanning out from the bowl' (255). Interestingly, when Shreve begins to co-narrate the story of Thomas Sutpen, we are told that 'he sat again and took up the cold pipe, though without filling it anew or lighting it as it was' (265). Josefina Ludmer suggests that Onetti frequently inverts the motifs he borrows from Faulkner, and if Shreve's pipe remains empty so that he may narrate, Jorge Malabia refills his pipe each time he is to begin a new section of the story, so that as Díaz Grey notes: 'Se puso a limpiar la pipa para darme a entender que había concluido un capítulo' (O.C., 1012).<sup>67</sup>

The filling and smoking of the pipe can be used, then, to suggest both the process of narration and the difference between exterior time and perceived time. In fact, throughout the entire oeuvre, the temporal quality of cigarette smoking would appear to be of great attraction to Onetti. A chapter entitled 'El almuerzo' of *Dejemos hablar al viento* contains the following suggestion: 'Dejó pasar un tiempo, un cigarillo entero.'<sup>68</sup> Importantly in this regard, smoking/narrating is often associated with a secondary, overtly repetitive activity such as the playing of cards or records (Chapter 9 of *Tierra de Nadie* juxtaposes cigarette smoking with the repetitive playing of the Kreutzer Sonata, and *La muerte y la niña* with a repeated playing of an andante of Bach). The central confessional section of *El astillero* sees Larsen arrive for his dialogue with Díaz Grey in the hours of his insomnia, the hours 'en que cargaba de discos sacros el fonógrafo y se ponía a combinar solitarios con los naipes, concediendo a

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<sup>66</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom! Absalom!* (London: Vintage, 1995), 303.

<sup>67</sup> Other temporal indicators are less reliable: 'El reloj de la intendencia dio una campanada; pero no podía saberse qué hora era porque el carrillón no funcionaba desde hacía unos meses' (O.C., 1013).

<sup>68</sup> *Dejemos hablar al viento* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1979), 100.

la música, invariable ya hasta en su orden, sabida de memoria, no más de la cuarta parte de un oído' (A., 129). The following opening comment by Larsen is best understood if one remembers that he, like so many others, has come to narrate to a figure cast perpetually in the role of listener: ' - ¿ Fuma? Es cierto, casi nunca fumaba - encendió el cigarillo, en un principio de rabia' (A., 131).<sup>69</sup>

But why should Onetti so consistently link narration with cigarette smoking and with the playing of records and cards? If we return to Linacero, who is in many ways the ancestral consciousness governing Onetti's fiction, we find that the 'sueños', far from completed fictions which have been fixed on the page by the act of writing, are instead 'aventuras' which may be modified and revisited as compensations for the drab world of 'sucesos'. Thus the repetitive activity of narration/creation, while it may help to pass the time never appears to achieve the timelessness of the aesthetic realm (that of the maxim *Ars longa, vita brevis*).<sup>70</sup> As with all adult activity in Onetti, there is something rather dirty about it. In *El pozo*, the prostitute Ester mistakes the recourse to 'sueños' as a flight into masturbatory fantasies, and to a certain extent, *pace* Linacero, they are.<sup>71</sup>

Narration, the creation of fantasies, is, then, but one more repetitive activity among many. With its affinities to playing cards, to smoking, to masturbation<sup>72</sup>, it is a

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<sup>69</sup> Larsen, although ostensibly a 'man of action', is in fact no different to Linacero or Brausen in his generation of fictions. It should be remembered that it is the reanimated corpse of Larsen who presents Medina with the means to escape through fictional invention in *Dejemos hablar al viento*.

<sup>70</sup> Characteristically in Onetti, this artistic aspersion appears in a somewhat 'degraded' form: Linacero, Brausen and Díaz Grey are all eager to fix time so that a girl will remain forever a girl, and not have to pass into womanhood.

<sup>71</sup> Reference to masturbation as one more solitary activity aimed at passing the time is far more explicit in Onetti's final work, *Cuando ya no importe*, in which in addition to onanism the appropriately named Juan Carr engages in the usual Onettian gamut of smoking, reading, drinking, fantasising and writing, while years move relentlessly on. There is also a relationship between smoking, an adult (and therefore disreputable) activity, and the 'suciedad' of the adult world. Thus we find that the degeneration of Roberto, who in his youth had been known as the eponymous Bob, is neatly captured in the detail of nicotine stained fingers, the narrator deriving sadistic pleasure from sitting 'frente al hombre de dedos sucios de tabaco llamado Roberto' (O.C., 1227). c.f. *El infierno tan temido*, in which Risso looks with disgust at the aged 'Sociales', 'los dedos viejos y sucios de tabaco' (O.C., 1294)

<sup>72</sup> Often merely hinted, as in the following: '...el hombre que ocupaba unas horas la cama para turbar la noche con una historia anhelante y conocida' (O.C., 1023).



Sisyphus activity, a means of filling out purgatorial time.<sup>73</sup> To be precise, Díaz Grey's vicarious, circular life, like that of his predecessors Linacero and Brausen,<sup>74</sup> is characterised by a lack of events, by a lack of what Bakhtin, a critic whose own ontological views coincide closely with (and often appear to anticipate) those of Heidegger and Sartre, would call 'eventness'. It is worth recalling that Eladio Linacero, the archetypal Onettian narrator, had proposed writing 'la historia de un alma, de ella sola, sin los sucesos en que tuvo que mezclarse' (O.C., 50. Emphasis added). The term 'eventness' is of particular interest in the present study in that no text can justifiably be termed 'existential' in its absence. Etymologically, as 'so-' (with) 'bytie' (to be) it appears to bear a close resemblance to Heidegger's *mit- Sein*. Michael Holquist, after noting that Bakhtin emphasises this etymology by juxtaposition, referring to existence as the 'event of being' (*sobytie bytija*), points both to the temporal and communal nature of being:

Since Bakhtin sees the world as activity, it will come as no surprise that he defines existence as an event [...However] in order that the event of existence be more than a random happening, it must have meaning, and to do that it must be perceptible as a stable figure against the ground of the flux and indeterminacy of everything else[...I] perform this transformation by imposing time/space categories appropriate to the other on what is happening.<sup>75</sup>

As with Hegel's 'master-slave' dialectic, the role of the other is critical in the constitution of the self, so that "Being", for Bakhtin, is not just an event, but an event that is shared. Being is a simultaneity; it is always co-being' (24-25). The '*sobytie bitija*' concept, already quite developed in Bakhtin's earliest writings and clearly

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<sup>73</sup> Compare the following from Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego*: 'While it's true that we ascribe no value to the (creative) work we produce and that we produce it to pass the time, we're not like the prisoner who weaves straw to keep his mind off Destiny; we're like the girl who embroiders cushions for no other reason than to pass the time' (trans. R.Zenith, *op.cit.*, 8).

<sup>74</sup> And indeed extending back to the Walter Mitty figures of Onetti's earliest fictions, *Avenida de Mayo - Diagonal - Avenida de Mayo, El posible Baldi* etc.

<sup>75</sup> Chapter 2 of *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London: Routledge, 1990).

phenomenological in orientation, anticipates much that was to follow in Heidegger and Sartre.

Gary Saul Morson, emphasising the temporal nature of the concept in Bakhtin, relates 'eventness' to future possibility, to the idea that time may 'ramify', and here again we are in the domain of Heideggerian metaphysics, with its emphasis on the dimension of 'future projection' as constitutive of *Dasein*.

For there to be eventness, there must be alternatives. Eventful events are performed in a world in which there are multiple possibilities, in which some things which could happen do not. In such a world time ramifies and its possibilities multiply; each realized possibility opens new choices while precluding others that once could have been made. The eventful event must also be unrepeatable, that is, its meaning and weight are inextricably linked to the moment in which it is performed. Choice is momentous. It involves presentness.<sup>76</sup>

This is an important assertion. In a world characterised by existential estrangement, where time has been shorn not only of future projection, but of reliable past, such events as there are are scarcely eventful in the sense that Morson and Bakhtin suggest.

Eventful events, for Bakhtin, preclude other possibilities. They are the temporally-bound crises at which existence continually chooses its essence. Imaginative events, by contrast, are neither unrepeatable nor exclusive. In fact, they serve to negate the requirement for choice. In the imaginative realm, the illusory ramification of time multiplies rather than precludes possible outcomes. Díaz Grey, imagining a number of parallel Díaz Greys towards the middle of *Juntacadáveres*,<sup>77</sup> calls to mind the book-labyrinth designed by T'sui Pên in Borges' *El jardín de los*

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<sup>76</sup> Morson, G., *Narrative and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 22.

<sup>77</sup> 'Voy afirmando a cabezadas mi convicción de que entre todos los Díaz Grey que hubieran sido posible(...)el menos acuciado por sensaciones de fracaso, renuncia y mutilación, es aquel desconocido Díaz Grey capaz de conquistar otro aire(...)El más Díaz Grey de los Díaz Grey está sentado a una mesa, solo, sin esperar a nadie. No es un café familiar(...)voy subiendo cauteloso la escalera en sombras con una floja envidia por el supuesto Díaz Grey(...)tratando de reunir y respirar los distintos olores que forman el olor que le conviene' (J., 98-99).



*senderos que se bifurcan*, a story which posits an infinity of parallel universes that would exhaust all possible alternatives. This is in fact a form of determinism, which effectively negates the idea of free will. In light of what has been suggested concerning retrospective reconstruction (see above, page 11), it is scarcely surprising that Onetti's use of historical conjecture in *Juntacadáveres* also contains a deliberate echo of the same Borges story: 'Si persistimos en la explicación y queremos intentarla lealmente, será necesario aceptar que en este punto se bifurca. Uno de los ramales nos hace conocer a un padre Bergner que presintió[...] El otro ramal de la explicación confusa nos lleva a un padre Bergner que quiso' (*J.*, 122-123). The past is no less definitive than any other temporal dimension.

In conclusion, if Onetti's protagonists are engaged with a single problematic, it is that of how to deal with the passage of time in a singularly eventless universe. Onetti's is above all a metaphysics of undependable, capricious temporality.<sup>78</sup> The characters age, or at least are suddenly older, they imagine other lives, but time never ramifies in an existentially meaningful way. The universe remains mute, judgement remains suspended, while changes in the dilapidated back-water of Santa María mirror their slow disintegration. They are born already old, with little reliable memory and, in their retrospectively reconstructed narratives, with little belief in choice, little latitude for projection into the future. Theirs is a time shorn of possibilities, the time of Dante's *Purgatorio*, the time of Beckett or of Kafka. To call this world 'existential' is to misrepresent both the term and the Onettian vision, for this form of Being, to borrow from Günter Anders, is an exemplary *Sein ohne Zeit*.

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<sup>78</sup> This is particularly apparent in his most recent fiction: *La muerte y la niña*; *Cuando entonces* and *Cuando ya no importe*. See for instance Mark Millington's discussion of confused chronology in *An Analysis of the Short Stories of J.C. Onetti* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).

### Onetti Ch 3: A Metaphysics of Space

*'Man does not relate to the world as subject to object, as eye to painting; not even as actor to stage set. Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is part of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence (in-der-Welt-sein) changes as well.'* (Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 35)

The interdependence of Space and Being advanced in the metaphysics of Husserl and Heidegger at the start of the century, together with the consequent bracketing of questions that relate to the ontological status of *noumena* (the 'real' world that is, or may be, beyond perception), was to be of central importance in the depiction of man in almost all existential literature to follow, not least in that it allows the presentation of the hero in terms of his phenomenological rather than psychological or biographical make-up.<sup>79</sup> Being (*Dasein*) is an intentional *relationship* with the world, that is, with the context in which the subject perceives itself, a context whose 'absolute' ontological status is, moreover, irrelevant. Existence (from *ex-sistere*, to 'stand out from') is something that happens *between* the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, and is a matter of concern for that which exists - the implication being that existence in the sense that Heidegger uses it is confined to reflective being. Sartre makes an analogous distinction when he characterises human ontology as *pour-soi*. Livio Dobrez gives a succinct outline of the importance of this new orientation for artistic presentation of character in his useful study *'The Existential and its Exits; Literary perspectives on the works of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter* (London, 1986):

'Heidegger's philosophy does not begin with man but with Existence, that is, with a unity of man and his world, with man involved in his world and not suspended in the speculative regions of the cogito or the Idealist

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<sup>79</sup> 'Phenomenal' consciousness, and hence 'being', is here understood as an interaction *between* the ego (the Cartesian *res cogitans*) and its spatial context (the *res extensa* as it manifests itself to consciousness). To a certain extent the focus is moved from Kant's conception of mental categories



Mind...This position follows - as does Sartre's with somewhat different results - from Husserl's description of consciousness as inevitably consciousness of something other than itself...Dasein is man, but man so viewed as to necessitate a new name for him and one which will not see him apart from his milieu but place him in it; thus it may be translated as being-there or da-sein. 'There', of course, is the world. Dasein is not distinct from its surroundings. It is not such as to first be and then be somewhere, its being is a placing: it is 'there', in the world, and it cannot, even theoretically, be separated from its 'there' without which it would perhaps subsist but not exist.' (Dobrez, 86)

The 'revolutionary' artistic implications of this new metaphysics are outlined in a later chapter entitled *Phenomenology: the subjective-objective synthesis*, when Dobrez goes on to analyse the presentation of the character 'Len' in Harold Pinter's *The Dwarfs*. This analysis is quoted at length, since it throws a good deal of light on Onetti's conception of both Brausen and, more critically, Díaz Grey:

'Pinter's approach to the question of human identity in *The Dwarfs* is existential...I am not an Ego, something one may name or reify and set against the outside world. What I am reaches out to the outside world and at a certain point blends with it...Pinter depicts Len's identity as a continuum of Len and his world. More precisely, he suggests that Len is a relationship, that he is his world about him....(This depiction) of necessity breaks with the Freudian tradition...Either I am an Ego, a creature largely determined by my past and a possible object of the science of psychology, or I am a being-there...an ontological phenomenon rather than a psychological one...For Pinter, Len is defined first in terms of place, then in terms of his relationships...Len is indissolubly or organically linked to his room, his room is actually an extension of himself. The room is Len's area of operations, in short, his 'there'. (318)

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(time, space, causation) as constitutive of perceived phenomenal reality. The ego is equally constituted by the 'external' world.

As an introductory comment before going on to examine the close textual evidence that relates being to space throughout Kafka, Beckett and Onetti, one might note that while we know next to nothing about the biographical profiles of K. or Joseph K., Malone, or the narrator(s) of Beckett's *nouvelles*, Linacero, Brausen, Petrus or Díaz Grey, we know a great deal about the space in which they are conceived. Indeed, like the anonymous narrators of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Barbuse's *L'enfer* and Hamsun's *Hunger*, each is introduced both in tandem with and up to a point in terms of the principal space that they occupy.

As a second key ontological parameter characteristic of much twentieth century literature, space may be considered to varying degrees commensurate with the dimension of 'thereness' of Dasein. This is an important point, because frequently, and erroneously, the idea of *in-der Welt-sein* is used as a 'catch-all' for the political, social or economic circumstance of the protagonist. If this usage were valid, there would be scarcely be anything radical in Heidegger's conception of being. It is more specifically the domicile, the room, the habitable space, that in the authors examined relates intimately with the sense of identity of the protagonist, with the concomitant sense of threat when this space is encroached upon. Such a relationship is quite often explicitly stated, and when it isn't, there is a long tradition from Dostoevsky through Hamsun and Kafka and on to Beckett and Onetti of presenting angst and instability specifically in terms of the vulnerability, transience or unavailability of a private interior space. With regard to Onetti's fiction, Frankenthaler, for instance, notes that '...la preponderancia de lugares cerrados, sucios y carentes de emoción humana a lo largo de la narrativa onettiana es evidente. Semejantes lugares reflejan la situación de encierro de los personajes, tanto en el orden físico como en el espiritual.' (Frankenthaler, 36). One might also mention at this early stage the transient nature, in common with Beckett, of many of these spaces: Linacero's rented apartment, Aránzuru's unsatisfactory and Ossario's urgent searches for a room, the hotel and rented chalet of *Los adioses*, Larsen and Medina's trajectories through various temporary residences, and so forth.



There is, more importantly, a quite explicit prioritisation of the spatial over the temporal: whereas, as we have seen, the categories of duration and chronology are unstable or relative, space, drawing on a tradition running from Menippean satire through Dante and on to Naturalist drama, is frequently hierarchically determinate in its presentation. This is left in little doubt by the detailed analyses of spatial distribution in several chapters of Millington's study *Reading Onetti* with the concomitant importance of upward or downward movement. As will be demonstrated, this hierarchically conceived spatialisation in no way precludes its manipulation in order to deepen the sense of existential estrangement, however, and here again it will be argued that such manipulations as occur tend to undermine the notion of meaningful choice or freewill. In order to establish a 'poetics' of space for Onetti, it is important to re-examine briefly those authors who are widely acknowledged as key influences on the Uruguayan, specifically from a 'spatio-temporal' perspective. This is especially important because the coincidence in characterisation in this regard has been largely overlooked in the comparative criticism on Onetti.

'Hace un rato me estaba paseando por el cuarto y se me ocurrió de golpe que lo veía por primera vez.' (O.C., 49). Thus begins Onetti's *El pozo* of 1939, a novella which might usefully be considered as an artistic manifesto or keynote for the entire body of work which is to follow. It shares with Sartre's *La nausée* of 1938 the idea that the protagonist's impulse to write derives in large part from a new mode of perception.<sup>80</sup> In Sartre's diary-novel, the alienated Antoine Roquentin, after giving us a preliminary list of remarkably Onettian items which he feels have changed ('Il faut dire comment je vois cette table, la rue, les gens, mon paquet de tabac, puisque c'est cela qui a changé.' [N., 11]),<sup>81</sup> goes on to list a number of exterior experiences (the feel of a stone on a

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<sup>80</sup> Any question of direct influence can be dismissed when it is taken into account that the original draft for *El pozo* was written, and lost, in 1933 (see Ramon Chao, op.cit.83-84, in which Onetti comments '[...]yo no podía haber leído *La náusea* ni *El extranjero*. Lo siento - añade con inmensurable ironía - porque me hubieron ayudado a mejorar *El pozo*. Las leí años después') The 'inmensurable ironía', if Chao is to be trusted, would support the thesis being advanced in the present study that Onetti's body of work calls into doubt the validity of the 'existential' world view.

<sup>81</sup> It is worth noting, however, that early in the work the Frenchman qualifies this 'defamiliarisation' with the world's objects by posing a question which is typical also of the epistemological

beach, the celebrated encounter with the roots of a chestnut tree or with the seat of a tram) which, taken together, have essentially brought him to a point of crisis in his interface with the brute existence of objects: with their contingency, their viscosity, their ineluctable 'thereness'.

Sartre, of course, famously went on to examine such inert and objective existence under the denomination *en-soi* several years later in *L'Être et le néant*, contrasting *en-soi* with the *pour-soi* which defines human possibility or undecidedness. But by contrast with Antoine Roquentin, Eladio Linacero limits the encounter with the new to his perception of his immediate habitation: a poorly furnished room that he is forced to share with the politically active Lázaro, its decrepit furniture, its window which, in place of glass, has old, yellowed newspapers. This difference with Sartre is instructive: although Sartre's representation of space frequently tends towards an aesthetic of spatialisation not unlike that which is being proposed in the present chapter (c.f., the importance of Anny's room as indicative of her changed character in the *Samedi* section of *La nausée* [N., 191-216]), his spatial focalisation is by no means as acute or consistent. Linacero's room, taken in conjunction with the other critical spaces of the short novella (the brothel's room, the shed which becomes transmuted into the log-cabin) in fact presents us with a key to Onetti's spatialised presentation of character throughout his *oeuvre*. While this aspect has certainly received a degree of attention in Onettian criticism, notably in Josefina Ludmer's influential *Onetti: Los procesos de construcción del relato* (1977), Hugo Verani's *Onetti: el ritual de la impostura* (1981) and Mark Millington's *Reading Onetti* (1985), the degree to which space, time and human ontology are intimately interlinked requires a reading which takes into account not only the spatio-temporal dimension of Onetti's self-declared influences (Dostoevsky, Hamsun, Kafka, Arlt, Faulkner, Céline), but also the degree to which space is a deterministic or limiting constraint on human consciousness.<sup>82</sup> Space in

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uncertainty of the Onettian narrator : 'Est-ce moi qui ai changé? Si ce n'est pas moi, c'est cette chambre, cette ville, cette nature ; il faut choisir.' (N. 16).

<sup>82</sup> Jaime Concha's investigation 'Conciencia y subjetividad en "El pozo"', an article which takes the strong Dostoevskian influence into account, brings out the spatio-psychic aspect of Linacero's characterisation, which is in direct contrast to that of his flat-mate: 'Se nos suministran ya, a esta altura del relato, dos datos fundamentales acerca de Lázaro: su condición de obrero y de militante



Onetti is intimately bound up with the metaphysics of time discussed in the previous chapter. Bakhtin's critically useful concept of the chronotope, (see chapter 4 below) will therefore be employed so as to develop the idea that Onetti's presentation of the human condition here approximates quite closely to that of both Kafka and Beckett. The following chapter therefore sets out a poetics of space and space-time in these authors before going on to examine the spatial nuances of Onetti's universe.

As suggested above, in its concern with adventures, masks, games, traps and incommunicability no less than in its foregrounding of the inadequacies of memoir writing, *El pozo* reads remarkably like a variation on (or parody of) *La nausée*. The reason for this is undoubtedly the common parentage that both texts have with Dostoevsky's revolutionary *Notes from Underground* (1864). Indeed, Onetti's novella overtly alludes to such a parentage both in the spatial nature of its title and within the text itself. Thus Linacero, on the eve of his fortieth birthday and with a characteristically cavalier attitude to accuracy, writes that 'un hombre debe escribir la historia de su vida al llegar a los cuarenta años, sobre todo si le sucedieron cosas interesantes. Lo leí no sé dónde.' (O.C., 50). Now already within the first five paragraphs of Dostoevsky's sustained monologue, the Underground Man has dwelt on the fact that he is forty: 'Such is my forty-year-old conviction. I am forty now, and forty years is a lifetime; it is extreme old age. To go on living after forty is unseemly, disgusting, immoral.'(NU, 16) A capricious and provocative whim impels him both to write his memoir and indeed to go on living past this reprehensible age. Furthermore, the Underground Man, much like Linacero, is also concerned in the opening section to describe, with perverse pride, the poverty of his living quarters (the existential importance of which is already implicit in the title of the piece): 'I retired immediately and settled down in my little corner. I lived in this same corner even before that, but now I've settled down in it. My room is mean and shabby, on the outskirts of town.'(NU, 17)

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político. Por eso, debe retenerse como hecho sintomático que se lo relacione con el principio de la exterioridad, en contraste con el encerramiento subjetivo del cuarto...' (113). It will be noted that Lázaro, although expected home, never returns to the flat.

A chief concern in the remaining body of each text, which will be examined at greater length in chapter 5, is the crisis brought about by a failed attempt to communicate, and again one can detect a deliberate echo in *El pozo* of the choice of significant locations in the Russian novel. In the *Underground Man's* case an initial attempt to win the confidence of a prostitute he encounters in a brothel turns to crisis when she later gains access to his room, the implication presumably being that she thereby gains an insight into the shabbiness of his soul. In Onetti's 'memorias de una alma', this failure to communicate is duplicated with 'las únicas dos clases de gente que podrían comprender. Cordes es un poeta; la mujer, Ester, una prostituta'(O.C., 58), though it is worth stressing that the second failure (with the poet, Cordes) is again all the more traumatic or significant for taking place within Linacero's living space. So whereas the less than satisfactory experience with both Ester and Ana María may be transformed, in the realm of sueños, into consummations partly signified by an idealisation of the location in which they take place, no such resource is available with regard to Cordes. One might also note that as a prelude to the intimacy of the brothel scene in Dostoevsky, there is a complete failure to communicate with several companions in a more public cafe-bar. The low-life cafe-bar in which Linacero has various liaisons with Ester prior to their bedroom exchange is again characterised by incomprehensibility, since the prostitutes: 'se ríen de los hombres que no entienden el idioma.' (O.C., 61). Significantly, the 'aventura' which Linacero attempts to confide to Ester finishes with the detail 'estoy en un país que no conozco, donde siempre está lloviendo y no puedo hablar con nadie.' (O.C., 67)

(i) Antecedents: Dostoevsky; Kafka; Arlt.

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which authors such as Dostoevsky, Hamsun, Kafka and Arlt, precisely those authors whose direct influence on Onetti is not merely well catalogued but explicitly acknowledged by the Uruguayan, revolutionised the representation of character in terms of space. While an extended exegesis would of course be beyond the scope of the present study, it is worth pausing



to outline their development of a spatial correlative for character, an aesthetic which is essentially phenomenological in conception, though preceding the publication of the major texts on phenomenology by several decades.

*Notes from Underground* (1864) is really the first in a series of works by Dostoevsky in which space is explored as a determinant of character. Indeed it might be plausibly suggested that this sustained, misanthropic monologue bears a similar, manifesto-like relation to the major novels that were to follow as Onetti's *El pozo* to his subsequent work. This is particularly evident in *Crime and Punishment* (1866). While the former novella seems to have given birth to a whole tribe of estranged writers isolated in a room, from the unnamed narrator of Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890) through Rilke's *Malte Laurends Brigge* (1906), the *voyeur* of Barbusse's *L'enfer* (1908), Herman Hesse's Harry Haller of *Der Steppenwolf* (1927), Bernardo Soares of Pessoa's *Livro do dessassogo*. (1930s) and on through Sartre's Antoine Roquentin (1938), Onetti's Eladio Linacero (1939) to Beckett's Molloy and Malone (1951), the later novel is equally revolutionary and influential in its foregrounding of topography and, in particular, of distorted interior space, implying its formative (and deformative) pressures in the psychological makeup of the protagonist. By contrast, time and duration are far less determinate, except insofar as they continually seem to escape from the delirious Raskolnikov. Philip Rahv is not entirely correct when he asserts that, in *Crime and Punishment*, time is 'purely psychological, a function of human consciousness.'(see Chapter 2 above) but it is certainly distorted and relative in its representation, and is an integral element of the carnivalisation apparent in the novel. Bakhtin has the following to say of Dostoevsky's work taken as a whole:

'The fundamental category in Dostoevsky's mode of artistic visualising was not evolution, but coexistence and interaction. He saw and conceived his world primarily in terms of space, not time....This stubborn urge to see everything as coexisting, to perceive and show all things side by side and simultaneous, as if they existed in space and not time, leads Dostoevsky to dramatize, in space, even internal contradictions and internal stages of development of a single person...' (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 28)

Indeed, as we have seen in the discussion of the chronotope (above, Ch2), the use of threshold space in particular is specifically used in Dostoevsky to wrench characterisation and plot outside of conventional, biographical time. The even, diachronic trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* is entirely replaced by intense moments of crisis, usually open to or provoked by the gaze of the Other, and this temporal disjointedness finds its spatial correlative in the openness or lack of privacy of the interior space that the hero, temporarily, inhabits.

'Dostoevsky "leaps over" all that is comfortably habitable, well-arranged and stable, all that is far from the threshold, because the life that he portrays does not take place in that sort of space...In comfortably habitable interior space, far from the threshold, people live a biographical life in biographical time: they are born, they pass through childhood and youth, they marry, give birth to children, die. This biographical time Dostoevsky also "leaps over". On the threshold and on the square the only time possible is crisis time, in which a moment is equal to years, decades...' (Bakhtin, op.cit., 169)

The interaction between the uncertainty of threshold space and psychological instability is nowhere more apparent than in *Crime and Punishment*. Spatial insecurity and distortion are in fact among a number of uncertainties experienced by Raskolnikov which combine to produce the nightmare-like quality of the book. As is discussed by turn in the chapters of the present study, there is an entire complex of doubts in regard to dreams and wakefulness, to temporality, to language and to the body, a complex which, isolated as a group first by Hamsun, was then elaborated by the three core authors of this study to produce the paralysing condition termed existential estrangement in the present work.

To begin with, Raskolnikov's tiny misshapen room is specifically associated by Dostoevsky with the crime itself, and with the brooding introspection which made the crime thinkable. One of several exchanges between Raskolnikov and his mother draws our attention unequivocally to this:



'What a horrible room you've got, Rodya - it's like a coffin,' Pulkheria Aleksandrovna said suddenly, breaking her painful silence. 'I'm convinced it's half because of this room that you've become such a melancholic.'

'This room?...' he replied, absent-mindedly. 'Yes, this room is responsible for quite a lot of things...I've also thought that...Oh, but if you only knew what a strange thing you said just now, mother.' (Crime & Punishment, 282)

The room, remains a focus of his anxiety, particularly in that in his fevered return from the crime he leaves a good deal of evidence about. Awakening at the start of Part II from the torpor that immediately follows the crime, Raskolnikov is seized with an instant sense of dread: 'in amazement he examined first himself, and then every aspect of the room, unable to comprehend how he could possibly have come in the evening before and not have set the door on the hook...' (op.cit., 129) An abrupt summons to the police station in the same chapter is followed by a desperate rush back to his quarters. The next chapter begins with the question: ' "And what if there's already been a search? What if I actually find them in my room?" But here was his room. There was nothing; no one had called to visit him.' (op.cit., 148).

The prostitute Sonya's room, scene of a number of encounters between the two (and here one is reminded of the first encounter with the prostitute Lisa of *Notes from Underground*), is to an extent analogous with Raskolnikov's own bedroom: 'possessing the form of a highly irregular rectangle, and this giving it a misshapen appearance.' (op.cit., 373). More to the point, each space is significantly open to the gaze of the Other (or in the latter case the hearing of Svidrigailov). This same status of 'uncloseability' is even more pronounced in the room of the Marmeladov's proper, which serves also as a passageway, as though underlining the transient hold they have even on this impoverished interior. But Raskolnikov's room in particular, and the frequency with which people enter and leave while he lies delirious on his couch, heightens to the intensity of nightmare the dreadful sense of vulnerability that accompanies his fever. It will be remembered that two of his actual nightmares revolve specifically about just such spatial openness - the first, in which he hears the police clerk Ilya Petrovich dealing out a dreadful beating to his landlady on the very

stairs of his lodging; the second more dreadful yet, in which he hopelessly re-enacts the murder of the silently laughing pawnbroker under the full gaze of the public.

Bakhtin, of course, picks up on this sense of openness, but its psycho-ontological importance for the characterisation of the hero is outside the ambit of his study. He is, rather, concerned with the chronotopic importance of the arrangement:

'Raskolnikov lives, in essence, on a threshold: His narrow room, a "coffin" (a carnival symbol here) opens directly onto the landing of the staircase, and he never locks his door, even when he goes out (that is, his room is unenclosed interior space). In this "coffin" it is impossible to live a biographical life - here one can experience only crisis....' (Bakhtin, op.cit., 170)

In point of fact, not only do a large number of 'interviews' take place with the entry of the uninvited - Svidrigailov, Pyotr Petrovich - into the unlocked room while Raskolnikov is unable to rise from the bedding on the couch, but indeed what is arguably the most unbearably tense moment of the novel occurs when Raskolnikov runs from the murdered pawn-broker's bedroom to her door and helplessly watches the latch bounce up and down. The motif is reversed in the private quarters of Porfiry Petrovich, the chief inspector, when the unexpected intrusion of Nikolai, the crime-confessing house-painter, temporarily provides Raskolnikov with a reprieve.

The vulnerability of private space to the actual intrusion or to the intrusive gaze of the Other is of course a profound source of anxiety in dreams, and is central to the art of Kafka. This is particularly so in *Der Prozess* (1915), the topographical degradations and distortions of which closely resemble those in *Crime and Punishment*. They also account, to a considerable extent, for its deeply disturbing oneiric quality. To begin with, although Joseph K. does have a reasonably secure privately rented room in the house of Frau Grubach, in the space of the opening five sentences he encounters, immediately upon waking, the inquisitive stare of the old lady living opposite and then unwittingly invites one of the warders charged with arresting him into his bedroom. In the course of all three of Kafka's novels, an uncannily large number of interviews take place in bedrooms, with one of the interlocutors bed-bound,



but this is nowhere more apparent than in *Der Prozess*. Joseph K. is initially placed under arrest within the sanctity of his own bedroom, then subsequently interviewed in the bedroom of his neighbour Fräulein Bürstner, again under the gaze of a growing party of intrusive voyeurs. The ante-room to the grand interrogation chamber reverts to a bedroom when there is no sitting, K.'s interview with his advocate in the company of his uncle takes place with the former bed-bound, and his interview with the court artist Titorelli takes place in the latter's tiny bedroom-studio. One is immediately put in mind not only of Larsen's night-time interviews with both Díaz Grey and Petrus that form the critical centre of *El astillero*, but indeed of the key interactive spaces in which *Juntacadáveres*, *La muerte y la niña* and *Dejemos hablar al viento* take place, and which will be examined at length below. Titorelli's space sounds a number of important motifs in Kafka's conception of the interior. In the first place, its walls are no more than ill-fitting planks to the cracks of which the precocious following of girls press their eyes. Despite this, the room is unbearably stuffy, and a skylight which might have allowed air into the room is in fact nailed shut. Thirdly, and most unsettling of all, as K. steps over Titorelli's bed to exit the room, he finds that it somehow leads directly back into the law offices - a topographic loop straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

The airlessness of the law courts, the unbearable stuffiness of the labyrinthine attic corridors and cramped office spaces seems curiously at odds with their supposed standing, and contribute greatly to the disorientating effect on both K. and the reader. On several occasions, K. is so overcome with the lack of air that he comes close to fainting and must be helped to the door, and here again we note the important precedent of Raskolnikov's first approach to the law: What could be more 'Kafkesque' than the yardkeepers, the scribes and the awed muzhiks who crowd the degraded, airless upper floors of tenement in which the police prefecture is housed.

'...he began to climb the staircase on the off-chance that this was the right one. He did not want to have to ask anyone the way.

The staircase was small, narrow, steep and awash with dirty water. All the doors of all the kitchens of all the apartments on all four floors were open onto this staircase and remained so all day. This produced a terrible, airless heat. Coming up and down the stairs were yardkeepers with house-books under their arms, police clerks and various tradespeople of both sexes - the callers. The door into the bureau itself was also wide open. He went in and halted in the vestibule. Some muzhiks were standing around there, waiting. Here too the airless heat was extreme and, in addition, from the newly decorated rooms there was a nauseating stink of paint that had not yet dried, and had been ground in rotten drying-oil. Having waited for a bit, he decided to move on, into the next room. All the rooms were tiny and low-ceilinged. A terrible impatience kept drawing him further and further. No one paid any attention to him. In the second room some scribes sat copying, dressed only slightly better than himself, a strange-looking bunch. He turned to one of them.' (*Crime and Punishment*, 135)

Notice also the close resemblance between the force that draws Raskolnikov up the correct stairway at the start of the quote above and Joseph K., who: 'climbed the first stairs, and his mind played in retrospect with the saying of the warder Willem that an attraction existed between the Law and guilt, from which it should really follow that the Interrogation Chamber must lie in the particular flight of stairs which K. happened to choose.' (*The Trial*. 30)

Once again, a key motif that is to recur in Onetti's fiction, and particularly *La vida breve*, is sounded, though already in *El pozo* Linacero's fantasies take him away from his room, where he has been 'soplando el maldito calor que junta el techo y que ahora, siempre, en las tardes, derrama adentro de la pieza' (*O.C.*, 49) to a cool and airy location 'en todo caso, en un lugar con nieve' (*O.C.*, 55). The air is, importantly, the factor that compels Brausen to enter for the first time into the contiguous room of la Queca, a liberating space. 'Aspiré el aire hasta que sentí que se me cerraba la garganta y que mi cuerpo entero quería abandonarse a los sollozos que había estado postergando en las últimas semanas. Esperé hasta serenarme y entonces el aire del departamento



vacío me dio una sensación de calma, me llenó con un particular, amistoso cansancio, me indujo a recostar un hombro en la puerta y a entrar, lento y en silencio" (O.C., 478). In regard to the 'aire' motif in *La vida breve*, Josefina Ludmer (op.cit, 22-23) notes that:

[...] otra metáfora sustitutiva transforma el aire en uno de los elementos fundamentales de *La vida breve*: el aire del departamento vecino [...] en ese espacio habita un aire "bueno", benigno, que alimenta la ficción; el aire está saturado de personajes fantásticos [...] el "buen aire" de ese espacio, el aire de "la vida breve", es, a su vez, el sintagma amputado - lo que falta - en el nombre de Santa María, el lugar que inventa Brausen para su ficción: Santa María del Buen Ayre.

An important point to make here, since it directly links Onetti to Kafka, is the bizarre and yet altogether cotidian nature of the interiors described, an aspect that serves to heighten the oneiric aspect of the protagonists' various odysseys. The theatre of action of all three of Kafka's novels confines itself for the most part to a series of haphazard boudoirs connected principally by labyrinthine corridors, while the action of his most accomplished novella is structured as three increasingly hopeless attempts by Gregor Samsa to exit his bedroom. In fact, the omnipresence of the bed and of the bed-ridden mentioned above is an important clue as to Kafka's view of bureaucratic modernity as essentially defined by paralysis. Of course, one does not expect the advocate of the Law to be bed-ridden, nor the interviews with a Castle official to take place after midnight in a chaotic bedroom, and yet it is precisely the associated sense of estrangement which so radically disorients the reader.

It is well known that the Onettian protagonist-creator, whether Linacero, Brausen, Díaz Grey, Jorge Malabia or Medina is not only room bound, but frequently prostrate, a condition common to many of Beckett's counterparts, and yet what is frequently overlooked is what one might term the 'strange space' - the appearance of an unexpected interior space which lends the narrative a disorienting, 'kafkaesque' air. One might mention in this regard the prison room at the end of 'un nuevo labertino de líneas rectas' in which Larsen encounters Petrus, an interview which complements his earlier visit to the bedbound, grotesque employer: 'No estaba en una celda; la

habitación era una oficina con muebles arrumbados, escaleras y tarros de pintura' (*A.*, 206), this last detail of the paint tins recalling Raskolnikov's visit to the police station. Indeed, the very oppressiveness of the air is suggested when Larsen 'se aplicó a decir que sí con la cabeza, a ganar tiempo, mientras acostumbraba sus pulmones al aire de extravagancia y destierro en que había sumergido todo el invierno y que ahora, bruscamente, se le hacía insoportable y discernible.' (*A.*, 210). One might also instance the necessity for Díaz Grey to carry out a clumsy post-mortem of Frieda in the canteen of a school in the later novel *Dejemos hablar al viento*, and Medina's police station in the same novel, 'donde la celda es una pieza apolillada que un día fue dormitorio' (*D.*, 148) and of which 'lo que llamaban el despacho del comisario [...] grande y sucio, con las paredes húmedas y sus girones de empapelado, contaba su historia de ex sala de recibo de familia rica.' (*D.*, 193)

Returning to *Der Prozess*, and it is important in this regard to recall that for Onetti 'este libro es el símbolo perfecto de la vida humana',<sup>83</sup> the omnipresence of the law is represented primarily in spatial terms, so much so that it is less than surprising in the penultimate chapter to find that the huge, ill-lit cathedral is implicated in the process of the Law. Not only do the arrest and detention take place in the bedroom of Joseph K., with the initial interrogation in the neighbouring bedroom, but the legal machinery significantly impinges on Joseph K.'s second significant private space, the large office with a window at his bank which is commensurate with his position there. It is significant in this regard not only that two of the warders are bank employees, but that his loss of status consequent on the preoccupation with his defence is represented graphically by the intrusion of the Deputy Manager, a professional rival into his office space. The curious incident of the whipping in the lumber room also takes place in the bank.

The Law, and the gaze of the Other, penetrates even into the private interior space inhabited by the individual. A corollary of this throughout Kafka is the tendency for the hero, the disrespectful challenger, to engage in physical intimacy in spaces that are explicitly open and vulnerable. The bizarre arrangements with the grotesque



Brunelda are of course open to the gaze, and in *Der Prozess*, Joseph K. continually seduces, or is seduced by, Leni, the employee of his advocate in the office and living-room of the latter. The topos, a frequent source of dream angst, achieves its most comprehensive treatment in *Das Schloss*, in the course of which K. first couples with Klamm's mistress Frieda on the floor of an Inn. Upon waking, K. finds that they are lying under the gaze of his two assistants. But even when they are established as a couple they never acquire a private interior space. The room which the landlady reluctantly offers them is frequently invaded by the servants, and after losing their right to this, they next inhabit the room of a school which is invaded each morning by the class.

The inability to acquire a secure space, finding close parallels in Beckett and Onetti, is of fundamental importance principally to the extent that interior space is equated with identity. In one of Kafka's more haunting parables, *Der Bau* (*The Burrow*, 1931), not only is the equanimity of the burrow's architect destroyed by an unidentified scratching which may represent the approach of another burrowing animal, but more importantly, the equation of burrow/identity is implicit in several key utterances:

'I seek out a good hiding-place and keep watch on the entrance of my house - this time from outside - for whole days and nights. Call it foolish if you like; it gives me infinite pleasure and reassures me. At such times it is as if I were not so much looking at my house as at myself sleeping, and had the joy of being in a profound slumber and simultaneously of keeping vigilant guard over myself.' (*Metamorphosis & other stories*, 139)

'The joy of possessing it has spoilt me, the vulnerability of the burrow has made me vulnerable; any wound to it hurts me as if I myself were hit' (op.cit, 161)

The implicit association of space with self is taken up by Aránzuru in Onetti's *Tierra de nadie* in, for instance, the following exchange: '-Hablás de la isla como... ¿La conocés? - Como a mi mismo.' (O.C., 244). There is also an implicit equation of Santa María with

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<sup>83</sup> Ramon Chao, *Un posible Onetti*, Barcelona: Rousel (1994), 178

the (ageing) body when Díaz Grey comments to Medina 'Todo en esta ciudad [...] sufrimos de dermatitis, cada día se nos cae un pedazo de piel, o un recuerdo.' (*D.*, 196)

Such a symbiotic relationship of room-identity is also apparent throughout what is arguably Kafka's most haunting and disturbing work of all, *Die Verwandlung*, which was first published in 1916.<sup>84</sup> Of note to begin with is that Gregor Samsa is by occupation a travelling salesman, though he is transformed while in his own room and is almost entirely room-bound from this time on. His initial reaction here is bizarre in the extreme, but characteristic - he registers little shock or surprise at the change, but rather a profound disquiet that anyone should enter his room.<sup>85</sup> Of this space itself, we are told:

'Nothing should be taken out of his room; everything must stay as it was; he could not dispense with the good influence of the furniture on his state of mind; and even if the furniture did hamper him in his senseless crawling round and round, that was no drawback but a great advantage.' (op.cit, 38)

'Now, Gregor could do without the chest, if need be, but the writing-desk he must retain.' (op.cit, 39)

In a recent comparative essay entitled 'Otherwise, or Reading Onetti with Borges', Mark Millington draws a comparison between the defining use of space in Onetti's *Jacob y el otro* and Borges' *La casa de Asterión*, in which he draws particular attention to the polarity of inside-outside in establishing a spatio-ontological 'other' by which the subject defines itself. In each case, much as in Kafka's *Der Bau*, the chosen space is ultimately limiting:

'what interests me is the way in which space(s) can be read (allegorically) as articulating the structure of subjectivity [...] The unique character encloses itself in its unique labyrinthine space, rejecting others and creating a tensely defensive and brittle, manichean structure of identity [...] the imaginary spatial division into inside and outside is crucial: both Asterión

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<sup>84</sup> The German title, usually translated either as 'Metamorphosis' or 'The Transformation', has a specifically spatial connotation that is absent from this rendering - the change of scene in a theatre (also sometimes termed *Verwandlungs Szene*)

<sup>85</sup> Coupled, of course, with anxiety based upon the alarm-clock!



and Jacob are trapped in structures of identity that leave them no way to adapt or change. (Millington in *Onetti and Others*, 52-54)

Millington's argument is essentially correct, though it is curious that he begins the essay with a disclaimer when he says of Borges and Onetti that 'although they did both live in the Plate region between the 1900s and 1970s, they do not as writers apparently share very much' (ibid., 51). I would argue that both writers are enormously in debt to Kafka, and that the two stories examined in Millington's study could be greatly multiplied to show the deep spatio-temporal affinities between all three writers.

Onetti is quite explicit about the authors who influenced the development of his literary output, paying especial tribute to Hamsun, Faulkner, Céline, and from his own continent, Roberto Arlt. If García Márquez claims to have been able to recite entire passages of Rulfo by heart, a similar claim is made by Onetti, in an interview with Monegal, regarding the author now widely acknowledged as the first urban novelist of Latin America. Such honesty notwithstanding, the influence of Arlt has been somewhat understated, most commentators noting only the affinities between 'character types' - the *macro* Haffner with his project of the perfect brothel being a clear prototype for E. Larsen. Less obvious, perhaps, is the Argentinean writer's use of space - city-scape chronotopes derived ultimately from Dostoevsky.

In a metamorphosis as strange and hallucinatory as anything in Kafka, Roberto Arlt's anti-hero Remo Erdosain, every bit as prone to fantasy as Eladio Linacero, conceptualises memory as a spatial reorganisation of the self:

'¡Cuántas senderos había en su cerebro! Pero ahora iba hacia el que conducía a la fonda, la fonda enorme que hundía su cubo taciturno como una carnicería hasta los últimos repliegues de su cerebelo, y aunque el declive de ese cubo que nacía en su frente y terminaba en la nuca era de veinte grados, las minúsculas mesitas con los ladroncitos adultos no resbalaban por el piso como hubiera sido lógico, sino que el cubo se enderezaba bajo el contrapeso de una costumbre instantánea, la de pensar en él...y ahora que el recuerdo había vencido la inercia de todas las células, aparecía ante sus ojos la fonda, como un cuadrilátero exactamente recortado.

El cual parecía que ahondaba sus rectas al interior de su pecho, de modo que casi podía admitir que si se miraba a un espejo, el frente de su cuerpo presentaría un salón estrecho, ahondado hacia la perspectiva del espejo. Y él caminaba, en el interior de sí mismo, sobre un pavimento enfangado de salvazos y aserrín, y cuyo marco perfecto se biselaba hacia lo infinito de las sensaciones adyacentes.' (*Los siete locos*, 253-4)

The chapter in which this occurs, entitled 'En la caverna' and thereby immediately suggesting the famous Platonic parable of forms, is not the only instance in the novel of this equation of consciousness with imagined spaces. An earlier section localises erotic fantasy in an interior 'dark house', a black space in which an Onettian manipulation of memory constructs the 'ideal form' of a girl who, like Linacero's Ana María, has the capacity to remain both precocious and innocent:

'Cerraba los ojos y entraba en la ardiente oscuridad, olvidado de todo[...]Era esta oscuridad una casa familiar[...]Y] aunque esta casa negra estaba en Erdosain, entraba en ella haciendo singulares rodeos, tortuosos maniobras, y una vez traspuesto el umbral sabía que era inútil retroceder, porque por los corredores de la casa negra, por un exclusivo corredor siempre enfardado de sombras, avanzaba a su encuentro, con pies ligeros, la mujer que un día en la vereda, en un tranvía o en una casa lo había envarado de deseo[...]Erdosian sacaba de las alcobas de la casa negra una mujer fragmentaria y completa, una mujer compuesta por cien mujeres despedazadas por los cien deseos siempre iguales, renovados ante la presencia de semejantes mujeres...Esta mujer arbitraria, amasada con la carnadura de todas las mujeres que no había podido poseer, tenía con él esas complacencias que tienen las novias prudentes que ya han dejado las manos en las entrepiernas de sus novios sin dejar por ello de ser honestas...Luego caía en los abismos de la casa negra.'

(*ibid.* 183)



The identification of interior space specifically with the skull is most famously associated with Beckett, and recurs throughout his novelistic and dramatic work. We have already briefly examined the importance of the office in 'fixing' Knott's identity, an idea adapted from *Das Schloss*, and the various interiors that Murphy inhabits, taken in conjunction with his rocking-chair, seem to anchor his sense of identity. If the most obvious dramatic representation of the 'skull-scape' consists in the bizarre interior inhabited by Hamm and Co. in *Endgame*, the spatio-ontological identity<sup>86</sup> also underpins the entirety of the Trilogy. Thus, in *Malone Dies*, the narrator notes:

'And softly my little space begins to throb again. You may say it is all in my head, and indeed sometimes it seems to me I am in a head and that these eight, no six, these six planes that enclose me are of solid bone. But thence to conclude that the head is mine, no, never.' (*Malone Dies*, 59)

This last comment, introducing the Borgesian idea that the narrator may be a creation inside another head, ties in very closely to a similar conception in Onetti. The most consistent spatial equivalent of the private space in Onetti is of course the room, just as it is the unique domain in which interior time pertains. Brausen's room, located beside a symmetrical (alternative) space, and seeming to encapsulate the mode of being from which he wishes to escape, is to a certain extent *equivalent* to Brausen himself

'...a mi derecha alguien arrastró los pies en el corredor, se detuvo acaso ante la puerta de la Queca, desapareció; casi contra los huesos de mi cráneo, la habitación de donde me habían sacado a golpes...; cerca de mi sien izquierda convergían y se intimidaban los ruidos del principio de la noche, una antigua tristeza inofensiva...' (O.C. 522)

The head of the mad Petrus assumes similar, room-like proportions in an interview with Larsen which furthermore locates the latter within the game-room, more real than the outside space :

'La noche estaba afuera, enmudecida, y la vastedad del mundo podía ser puesto en duda.

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<sup>86</sup> A related identity in Beckett centres around the womb : 'I am swelling. What if I should burst? The ceiling rises and falls, rises and falls, rhythmically, as when I was a foetus.' *Malone Dies*, 138

Aquí no había más que el cuerpo raquítico bajo las mantas, la cabeza de cadáver amarillenta y sonriendo sobre las gruesas almohadas verticales, el viejo y su juego.' (A., 143)

The outside world is once more cast into doubt in the room of the mad Julita in *Juntacadáveres*, another room which is defined predominantly by a game and which, as we will later see, is beyond time:

- Yo sé que basta con el cuarto y la soledad - digo - Quisiera saber si te bastó siempre.

- No hubo Federico, no está el mundo, no hay Santa María. Todo lo que veas fuera de aquí es mentira, todo lo que toques. (J., 180)

In much the same spirit, the Berkeleyn 'genesis' of Díaz Grey in the second chapter of *La vida breve* conjures up the doctor and his room simultaneously, symbiotically, and, only after equating the twin windows of the office with his *anteojos gruesos*, conjures first the square that they overlook and then the entire city into being.<sup>87</sup> We are left with the image of Díaz Grey looking out at the river 'a través de los vidrios de la ventana y de sus anteojos' (O.C., 446), while by Chapter XIX it is Brausen himself who vicariously 'atravesaba con los ojos los vidrios de las gafas y de la ventana del consultorio en Santa María.'

Several of Onetti's protagonists are specifically presented in terms of a lack of fixed abode, but before examining this motif, it is worth dwelling a little on the topos of the window alluded to in the preceding paragraph. Onetti. Millington for instance notes that '(v)irtually all the scenes (in *Tierra de nadie*) are set within four walls[...] (and) the windows' transparency or opacity (due to dirtiness or covering by curtains) can be read as suggesting states of mind: taking the room as a metaphor of the mind, transparency represents contact with the world, opacity represents introversion.' (Millington, 86-87) I would suggest that this analysis, though useful, falls significantly short of Onetti's purpose: both room and window, though they undoubtedly do carry a

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<sup>87</sup> Note in this regard the following meditation on space and time from Beckett's *Unnamable*: 'It would help me, since to me too I must attribute a beginning, if I could relate it to that of my abode. Did I wait somewhere for this place to be ready to receive me? Or did it wait for me to come to



metaphorical load, are also intrinsically bound up with the *in-der-Welt-sein* inseparable from Being and its portrayal, and I would further contend that this is the most significant basis for comparing Onetti to other 'phenomenological' authors such as Kafka or Beckett. André Brink, in his impressive if uneven study *The Novel, Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino*, notes that for Kafka:

An oppressive awareness of being confined in space characterises *The Trial* from beginning to end, and in this...the novel produces its most persistent metaphor for its understanding of the prison-house of language....These spaces are invariably gloomy, oppressive, cramped...(and) windows do not so much provide access to an open space beyond as confirm the closeness of the interior.

The closely argued section that follows this fairly conventional affirmation equates the 'falsely open' quality of the windows to the obfuscations of language itself:

Once the link between windows and language has been established, the reading of this trope is significantly expanded: windows open up the space of private experience to invasion by the language of Others, which remains forever incomprehensible. Through the presence of windows an outside is acknowledged, but it provides as little illumination or understanding as any amount of exposure to the esoteric workings of the closed system in operation in the court.

For Onetti, while the link between language and windows is yet more pronounced (note for instance the following comment from *Tierra de nadie*: 'Ni abro las ventanas ni permito que se diga nada lógico' [O.C., 225]), the 'direction' in which language moves is reversed. Bearing in mind the equation between looking through glasses and looking through the windows of Díaz Grey alluded to earlier, the window (and therefore language) becomes the interface through which the fictional world is brought into being. One notes first of all that in the room of Eladio Linacero<sup>88</sup> there are 'diarios

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people it? ...Both (hypotheses) are distasteful. I shall say therefore that our beginnings coincide, that this place was made for me, and I for it, at the same instant.' The Unnamable, 271

<sup>88</sup> Compare this to the opening of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*, in which the writer-narrator begins his journal in a room that is fully papered over with old newspapers.

tostados de sol, viejos de meses, clavados en la ventana en el lugar de vidrios.' Then, in apparent contradiction, 'me puse a mirar por la ventana, distraído, buscando descubrir cómo era la cara de la prostituta.' It is as though Linacero, who like Onetti himself used to work on the newspaper, is trawling through 'el mundo de hechos reales' in order to find grist for his imaginative mill.

Significantly, the metaphorical equation - *window-text-creation* - is largely repeated in Brausen's 'physical' approach to Santa María in the penultimate chapter of *La vida breve*:

Junto a la ciudad y fuera de ella me era posible estirar las piernas bajo la mesa de la fonda, hojear números viejos de El Liberal, de Santa María....Periódicos viejos y tostados se estiraban en la ventana de la fonda y me defendían del sol; yo podía desgarrarlos y mirar hacia Santa María, volver a pensar que todos los hombres que la habitaban habían nacido de mí... (O.C., 681)

Santa María becomes visible, comes into being in the metaphysics of Berkeley, by moving through or beyond the text that is spread across the window. When, in an earlier chapter significantly entitled *El fin del mundo*, Brausen contemplates putting an end to his fictional creation, the window is again pivotal:

Volví a la cama, sin sueño, resuelto a suprimir a Díaz Grey, aunque fuera necesario anegar la ciudad de provincia, quebrar con el puño el vidrio de aquella ventana donde él se había apoyado, en el dócil y esperanzado principio de su historia, para contemplar sin interés la distancia que separaba la plaza de las barrancas. (O.C., 623)

And so, finally, in the incendiary attack perpetrated against Santa María at the end of *Dejemos hablar al viento* which was initially intended to bring the entire cycle to an end, Medina, at the climax, 'oyó el estallido de una ventano en un lugar del departamento que llamaban cocina.' (D., 254).



(ii) The search paradigm.

'Mientras fumaba un cigarillo al sol [Larsen] pensó distraídamente que en todas las ciudades, en todas las casas, en él mismo, existía una zona de sosiego y penumbra, un sumidero, donde se refugiaban para tratar de sobrevivir los sucesos que la vida iba imponiendo. Una zona de exclusión y ceguera, de insectos tardos y chatos, de emplazamientos a largo plazo, de desquites sorprendentes y nunca bien comprendidos, nunca oportunos.' *El astillero*

The room - the private interior space - is to an extent commensurate with identity in the phenomenological novel, and from a Structuralist perspective tends to operate, moreover, in a number of paradigms. Three of Beckett's 1946 '*nouvelles*' - *Premier amour*, *L'Expulsé*, *La Fin* - are structured around the paradigm of the (comic-grotesque) quest of the unnamed narrator<sup>89</sup> for a replacement dwelling following an initial expulsion from a 'secure' room, a sequence that bears strong formal affinities to Hamsun's *Hunger*<sup>90</sup> (see below). Thus the narrator's plight in *Premier Amour* begins with his expulsion from a room in his late father's house and follows his odyssey through a canal bench and deserted cowshed to temporary and unsatisfactory refuge with the prostitute Anna (Lulu). He leaves this abode when the latter gives birth in a scene that is remarkably similar to Larsen's decision to leave the *casilla* at the end of *El astillero* (see below).<sup>91</sup> The ejection in *L'Expulsé* is both more physical and abrupt - the third paragraph elliptically announces it - and, following a number of run-ins with policemen owing to the peculiarity of his gait<sup>92</sup> - the narrator hits upon the expedient

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<sup>89</sup> There is a degree of textual evidence in the novellas to suggest that the 'unnamed narrator' is the same throughout all four - see for instance John Fletcher, *Novels of Samuel Beckett*, 102-103

<sup>90</sup> The story related in the fourth *nouvelle*, *Le Calmant*, begins with the question 'What possessed me to stir when I wasn't with anybody? Was I being thrown out?'

<sup>91</sup> All the more remarkable in that there can be no question of influence. Although written in 1946, *Premier Amour* was not published until the 1970's, some ten years after the appearance of *El astillero*.

<sup>92</sup> Surely an intertextual reworking of comparable scenes in *Hunger*.

of hiring a horse-drawn cab for the day, ostensibly to look at accommodation but more accurately to act as a surrogate room. Indeed, he spends the night in the very carriage, parked in the cabby's barn, before setting out at daybreak 'towards the rising sun'. *La Fin*, in many ways the most sombre of the three pieces, begins with the narrator's expulsion from a 'charitable institution' and sees him expelled a second time from a basement flat after he has been cozened by the 'landlady'. He moves to a seaside cave and then a cowshed - a motif from *Premier Amour* reappears here with the love sign engraved on the cowpat - before returning to beg on the streets of the city. He finally finds refuge in the shed of an abandoned estate, where he lies in a coffin-like boat over which he pulls a lid.

The expulsion from and subsequent quest for a private space/room in Beckett is frequently interpreted psychoanalytically in terms of the trauma of birth, and indeed the prose itself encourages such a hermeneutic approach. There are a number of references in the first two novels of the Trilogy which 'equate' the room with the maternal womb: the sequence is introduced by: 'I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now.', which strikes an overtly 'Freudian' note, particularly when we see how the motif is subsequently developed: 'The ceiling rises and falls, rises and falls, rhythmically, as when I was a foetus.' (*Malone Dies*, 138) Given the ease with which such textual evidence is elicited in order to support a psychoanalytic reading, it is perhaps less than surprising that this approach has tended to dominate the interpretation of spatiality in Beckett. As I hope to show, however, the Oedipal dimension is but one of many, and Beckett's conception of space has a great deal in common with a number of phenomenological writers, and Onetti in particular.

Given Onetti's declared early fascination with the Norwegian writer, a brief discussion of the use of the room in Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* is apposite to this first paradigmatic usage of the room. As was noted above, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which clearly influenced Hamsun, depicts the odyssey of the student-hero through a number of spaces (rooms, taverns, the Haymarket) while simultaneously 'degrading' the temporal dimension by having him drift in and out of morbid fever. There is, nonetheless, a clear plot, stemming from the murder of the pawn-broker, a



'moral' progression, a biographical, physical and psychological sketch of the named hero and his family, much of the paraphernalia indeed of the conventional realist novel of the nineteenth century. In his conception of the hero in *Hunger* (1890), however, Hamsun seems to have taken the 'topography' of *Crime and Punishment* and placed within it the misanthropic, anti-rational 'voice' of Dostoevsky's earlier *Notes from Underground*. The result is one of the most unique, influential and astonishingly 'modern' texts of the late nineteenth century.

There is no murder in Hamsun's *Hunger*. Indeed, there is scarcely a coherent plot to speak of. What we have instead are the reminiscences of an unnamed narrator 'in those days when I wandered hungry in Kristiania, that strange city which no one leaves before it has set its mark upon him...' The novel opens, much as *Crime and Punishment*, with the hero sneaking out of his room ('like a horrible, broken-down coffin'), so as to avoid the landlady and wondering if there is anything left that he might bring to 'Uncle' (the pawnbroker). The room, however, is papered with yellowed sheets from a newspaper (a motif which significantly recurs in the windows of Linacero's room in *El pozo*), and indeed the entire feverish odyssey of the hero revolves around securing niches where he might write articles for publication, so as to win a starvation wage (again we might remember that Raskolnikov had published an article theorising on the psychological effects of crime, and was driven by poverty to consider translating articles from the German).

We will return in the concluding remarks to the 'relativist' treatment of both language and time in *Hunger*. Considered spatially, the novel foreshadows much that was to be of concern to phenomenologist writers such as Barbusse and Sartre, and also provides the template for the 'quest' paradigm in Beckett and, as we shall see, Onetti. Expelled from his room due to his poverty (he is several months in arrears), the narrator first takes shelter in the abandoned smithy of a stable; much later, upon receiving several kroner, in the room of a woman's lodging house. Intermittently we find him in a number of locations which taken together call *Molloy* immediately to mind—a police cell, the room of an 'easy' woman, in the woods not far from the town. When his few kroner run out he is begrudgingly allowed to stay in the crowded living-space of

the family who own the lodging-house, but he pretty soon runs foul of them and is again expelled. This time he has no more recourse than to make his way to the port to enlist on a ship bound for America. It is interesting to note that Hamsun's next novel, *Mysterier* (1892) also ends with a descent to the dock, this time with the death by drowning of the hero, Nagel. Returning to Onetti's assertion that 'a los catorce años tuve un ataque de Hamsun', it is worth noting that a number of the Uruguayan's novels end in an equivalent descent, most notably *El pozo* (metaphorically), *Tierra de nadie* and *El astillero*.

Hugo Verani, in a section of his important study of 1981 entitled 'La espacialización del yo', argues that in *El astillero*, Onetti refines a spatialising technique that he had already developed as a concept in earlier novels. Thus the character of Larsen, imperfectly recalled in each of the distinct locations in which he moves, is closely identified with the ambit in which he is visualised:

Con *El astillero* Onetti logra una modificación original del concepto de espacialización literaria. El procedimiento usual consiste en asociar acontecimientos y personajes diversos, historias en planos espaciales distintos que se yuxtaponen y complementan para dar la ilusión de simultaneidad vivencial. Esto es lo que hace Onetti, por ejemplo, en *Tierra de nadie*. En *El astillero*, sin embargo, el lector está expuesto a una serie de visiones simultáneas de un mismo personaje [...] En cada secuencia Larsen cumple una función específica, asume un rol diverso. Su yo se diluye en nuevas experiencias a base del recuerdo de distintas épocas de su vida, como si el tiempo se hubiera detenido y Larsen viviera, simultáneamente, existencias situadas en épocas distintas. En cada uno de los espacios de la novela Larsen expande su identidad y proyecta en la presencia de otros una imagen renovada [...] Cada desplazamiento de Larsen en los cuatro ámbitos donde se sitúa el suceder descubre una figura siempre distinta, una nueva apertura transitoria. En cada espacio diferente Larsen afecta una



personalidad distinta que se revela, principalmente, en gestos, ademanes y actitudes estudiadas.' (196-7)<sup>93</sup>

The spatialising intent is, of course, already implicit in the manner in which Onetti divides up and designates his chapters in this novel, and as we have seen, Larsen himself at times seems to be aware that such a schema is in place: 'pensó que la casilla formaba parte del juego, que la había construído y habilitado con el sol propósito de albergar escenas que no podían ser representadas en el astillero.' (A, 123)

Verani to an extent underestimates this dimension in the earlier novels, however. As will be demonstrated, Onetti's poetics of spatialisation was already quite advanced when, in 1941, he first introduced the character of the *macró* Larsen in *Tierra de nadie*.<sup>94</sup> Indeed it is quite possible and fruitful to contrast directly the spatial trajectories of the would-be pimp, always seeking a space, but one from which he is perpetually being expelled, with that of the lawyer of Aránzuru, who continually flees from the spaces he finds.<sup>95</sup> Thus Larsen is first glimpsed, metonymically, as a hand seeking to gain entry into a room. The paragraph, significantly, starts with the word *afuera*: 'Afuera, en la luz amarilla del corredor, otra mano avanzó, doblándose en el pestillo. Llave. El hombre gordo dobló los dedos fastidiado y esperó [...] Golpeó con los nudillos.' (O.C., 82) In the section that immediately follows this, we encounter a phone ringing menacingly in the abandoned office of the lawyer, a space designated by 'la leyenda Diego E. Aránzuru en letras negras sobre el vidrio de la puerta.' (O.C., 85). The link between text and window has already been pointed out above, and will be returned to with regard to Larsen. The office itself is a space, and a concomitant identity, to which Aránzuru declines to return.

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<sup>93</sup> Onetti: *el ritual de la impostura* (1981), 196-203

<sup>94</sup> Jaime Concha, in an insightful article entitled 'Conciencia y subjetividad en "El pozo"', traces the spatio-psychic presentation of character right back to the opening lines of the early novel: 'La fundación subjetiva del habitat permite que la deficiencia de los objetos se haga fuertemente significativa. Prefijos y preposiciones indicadores de privación (*despatarradas, sin...*), significaciones negativas y estados de sustitución expresan estilísticamente la índole de las objetividades que, de esta manera, nos dan una dimensión tangencial del individuo que entre ellas habita.' (78)

<sup>95</sup> It is fascinating in this regard to note that while Larsen finds only decline and death in *El astillero*, Aránzuru makes the briefest of re-appearances in this novel when it is suggested that he has finally reached his idealised island space on the island of Latorre. (*El astillero*, 158)

Throughout the course of *Tierra de nadie*, the title of which itself alludes to the depersonalisation of the city space, Aránzuru is variously seen in unsatisfactory and temporary relations with a number of women, each relationship being associated with a specific space which, as we shall see, has a distinct temporal quality. Thus after abandoning his lawyer's office (a metonym for the appropriately polysemic term 'occupation'), Aránzuru is next seen with the 'child' Nora, to whom he had given his office key, in a specifically atemporal space, the room of Pablo Num, an embalmer of birds who is related to Nora and who is the instigator of the myth of the island of Faruru. He is next seen in bed with Nené, whom he has made pregnant, talking of the island, and once again a spatio-temporal motif is introduced, the chapter beginning with a specifically Bergsonian idea:

"El reloj picotea sin descanso y esto es el tiempo." Aránzuru vacilaba entre imaginar el minuto en todo el mundo y el minuto en él, cuerpo y alma. Lo tentaba una poesía fácil de nombres geográficos y científicos. Después, se le ocurrió buscar una sola palabra que lo encerrara todo. Recordaba ahora cuántas veces el viejo Num había cambiado el nombre de la isla. (O.C., 108)

His next liaison is with the ageing prostitute Catalina, a clear development of the prostitute Ester in *El pozo* since, a vulgar woman, there is little chance of her understanding him. The relationship is again viewed spatially: thus for instance chapter 29 consists of Aránzuru's waiting in a cafe at two o'clock a.m. watching the window across the street where she is with a customer.<sup>96</sup> Another repeated motif, the extinguished cigarette, links the sexual indifference which has led him to abandon both Nené and Catalina, but also suggests, in light of the discussion of the importance of tobacco in the previous chapter, his inability to communicate the fundamental idea of the island with them. In both of the earlier scenes, the woman is mildly bothered by the unlit cigarette:

(Nené) -¿ No vas a encender el cigarrillo? (O.C., 109);

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<sup>96</sup> One might detect here a parallel equivalence between the prostitute and her room in Beckett's *Premier amour*. Thus the following comment by Aránzuru: 'No te quiero a vos, solo a vos. A tus vestidos y a las cosas que cantás, *este cuarto*,...' (O.C., 201, emphasis added).



Soltó la cabeza haciendo caer el cigarrillo. Volvió a colgarlo en la boca del hombre y le acercó la luz dorado del hombre. (O.C., 110);

(Catalina) - Se te apagó el cigarrillo. ¿Quieres los fósforos?

-No, si ya me voy (O.C., 195);

Él negó moviendo la cabeza donde colgaba el cigarrillo apagado. (O.C., 196)

In the scene where first Aránzuru encounters Catalina, soon after abandoning Nené, we have the following detail which recalls Linacero's 'No tengo tabaco, no tengo tabaco.': 'Aránzuru seguía recostado a la baranda, con el cigarrillo apagado en la boca. "No tengo fósforos. Cuando venga la primavera..." (O.C., 124), and in answer to the prostitute's question '¿Qué hace aquí?', he replies (twice) 'La esperaba. Bajé a comprar fósforos y vine en seguida.' (O.C., 125) They then smoke together.

Aránzuru next tries to confide the secret of the imagined island to the petite-bourgeoise Violeta, and here its atemporal and ontological dimensions become more explicit. The liaison begins in a space which sounds a number of Onettian motifs, some already familiar from *El pozo* (and with a gesture that alludes directly back to the extinguished cigarette of the previous, failed relationships when he asks Violeta for a cigarette). The scene takes place in the German Girl's Mill, a property 'al fin del mundo' which Aránzuru owns and which is as run down as was Linacero's room.<sup>97</sup> Like Linacero, Aránzuru 'tenía el pecho y los pies desnudos' (O.C., 215), and is unshaven. Again, much as with Linacero's habitation, we are told that 'el cuarto olía a sudor, un tabaco fuerte y desconocido' and in oblique reference to the link developed between tobacco, writing and escape in the earlier novella, Violeta invites him: '-Tome. Vamos a fumar con ganas, para no sentir el olor del cuarto.' (O.C., 216).<sup>98</sup> Aránzuru begins to play with the hands of a watch in a manner that perhaps recalls Quentin Compson, but which more importantly provides a key piece of information regarding the idealised

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<sup>97</sup> Thus: ' "Aránzuru está viviendo en un lugar más hediondo que éste. Es en el fin del mundo, por el nueve mil de Rivadavia. Tengo ahí la dirección. Como él quería estar solo, me dediqué a transmitirle las señas a todo el mundo." (O.C., 224)

<sup>98</sup> The metaphorical value of this exchange is underlined by a similar exchange between the squalid Mauricio and unstable Semitern (Violeta's husband) in the chapter immediately previous to this. Once again they are in a stuffy room, the window closed: '- Si abriéramos un poquito...Con este día... - El cuarto lo pago yo. Si no le gusta, se va. [...] - Decía, nomás. Si tuviera un cigarrito...' (O.C., 221)

island - it is 'beyond time'. The issue of temporality is unequivocally foregrounded in the exchange Aránzuru now has with Violeta:

Dejó (Aránzuru) el librito en la mesa, junto al reloj y el vaso con un jazmín muerto. Alzó el reloj, haciendo correr las agujas hacia atrás, dos o tres vueltas, hacia adelante, sin mirar.

- Pero no, Diego...No tenemos hora. Mi pulsera anda como quiere.....Diego...quería saber qué pensabas cuando hiciste eso con el reloj.

- En nada...Debe ser una superstición. ¿Cómo sentiría uno el tiempo sin relojes, sin el sol, teniendo solo el cuerpo para medirlo?

- La isla. Allí sí que va a ser el tiempo sin relojes, ¿eh? (O.C., 227)

Indeed, as will be argued, all space in Onetti is charged with a chronotopic value which needs to be examined closely if the fundamental ontology underlying his protagonists is to be understood. But to return to the idea of the quest for a space, it is worth noting the transcendence that all of the characters and not merely Aránzuru attach to the interior. Nené's comprehends her relationship with the disillusioned diarist Llarvi in terms of the space in which their brief liaison has taken place: 'Nené recordó que no había preguntado nada (a Llarvi) con los ojos. Los paseó por la penumbra del cuarto. Era el mismo de las tres veces, impasible, irreal, como un rostro durmiendo, poblado de ensueños que ellos nunca habrían de conocer [...] Repentinamente tuvo lástima por él, por ella y una intensa piedad por la habitación fea y grotesca.' (O.C., 168). Meanwhile he, impotent through his inability to escape an obsessive memory of the prostitute Labuk, recalls the notion of airlessness mentioned in reference to Kafkaesque interior space: ' "Le robé tres tardes y las hice morir encerradas en este cuarto. Sin aire, podridas.' (O.C., 170). In fact, there is an extent to which Llarvi's suicide and that of Mabel Madern are prefigured by the ugly spaces they inhabit. In her case, we are told, her companion views: 'los pocos muebles, la mesa y la cama, la ventana entreabierta, todo feo y triste' (O.C., 182), and later, when she is alone, 'se sintió rodeada por la tristeza del cuarto. Goteaba de los flecos de la colcha en la cama, se acurrucaba en el brillo del espejo y en la punta de sus dedos con frío.' (O.C., 201).



If *Tierra de nadie* is built partly upon the paradigm of the search for a satisfactory space, Onetti's next novel, *Para esta noche*, embodies the paradigm yet more openly. We have seen that Larsen's inception is as a synecdochic hand trying to gain entry to a hotel room, and Ossorio too begins life out on the street, with the possibility of a safe berth or 'pasaje' on offer if he can successfully rendezvous with an acquaintance in a bar with the English name 'First and Last'. The bar is described in a disconcerting manner which recalls the use of synecdoche and atomisation throughout Onetti (see below, chapter 6): 'el letrero de la puerta del bar decía The First and Last y la puerta era doble, de resorte, inquieta, yendo y viniendo con los empujones, mostrando el movimiento de cabezas aisladas y piernas sin cuerpo para llevar' (O.C., 266). The accumulation of essentially equivalent qualifiers with which the movement of the door is described - 'doble, de resorte, inquieta, yendo y viniendo' - at once suggests that Ossorio has by no means found a permanent refuge on this most dangerous night. This sensation is reinforced when, within the bar itself, he finds himself outside one of a number of desirable 'reservados' or 'private rooms', a point that is elaborated upon in Appendix II below.

In the preface to the first edition of the novel, Onetti confesses that the impulse to write the novel derived from a vicarious need to share in 'angustias y heroísmos ajenos', exemplified by Ossorio's quest for a safe space in which to pass the night: 'Este libro se escribió por la necesidad - satisfecha en forma mezquina y no comprometedora - de participar en dolores, angustias y heroísmos ajenos. Es pues un cínico intento de liberación.' Such an idea of vicarious participation by writing is of course central to the conception of Díaz Grey, who it will be remembered participates in Jorge Malabia's story of the woman and goat by writing apocryphal chapters: '- Unas pocas páginas -dije, al acercárselas-. El insomnio, el aburrimiento y la incapacidad de participar en otra forma.' (O.C., 1026). It is therefore, perhaps, unsurprising that several of the interior scenes described within the novel overtly betray their literariness by alluding to related uses of space in authors such as Kafka and Faulkner. Barcala, who boards himself up in a room so as to shut out the civil war raging outside would thus appear to derive from Faulkner's Goodhue Coldfield of *Absalom! Absalom!*,

particularly when the role of the surviving daughter is taken into account. Notice also the detail that: 'En la pared, sobre la cama, había un retrato de una mujer muy vieja vestida de negro' (O.C., 323), which perhaps alludes to the key role played by the elderly Miss Rosa Coldfield in generating the Faulkner narrative.

More significantly, Ossorio's private quarters bear an uncanny resemblance to those of Joseph K, the respectable landlady a clear descendant of Frau Grubach. Thus the neighbouring room is occupied by a single woman who, like Fraulein Büstner, is in the habit of returning late at night (O.C., 373),<sup>99</sup> and the room of the *pensión* itself is open both to the eyes and to the physical penetration of the combined forces of legality and morality, represented respectively by two 'warders' and the landlady's disapproving gaze. Allowing for the change in narrative viewpoint, which is here related from Victoria Barcala's point of view, the incident might be taken directly from *Der Prozess*. Victoria is described as:

sacando luego la cabeza del calor para oír las voces que ya estaban adentro del cuarto y ver cómo el hombre, Santana [Ossorio], caminaba retrocediendo de espaldas y dos hombres con impermeable y sombrero entraban al cuarto y, atrás de todos, apenas un paso hacia adentro de la habitación, estaba mirándola la mujer que se sentaba en el taburete atrás del mostrador, mirándola con la misma fría curiosidad de antes en el *hall*, con una sonrisa de contenida desconfianza, con un malévolo triunfo en los ojos ardientes. (O.C., 371-2)

The book's ending consists of Ossorio's violent death, far from the relative safety of the room and fixed as though deliberately in the glare of a single headlight: 'un camión tumbado abrió un solo ojo de luz amarilla y colocó su chorro con cuidado en el hombre inmóvil en el suelo' (O.C., 427). His demise is every bit as bleak and public as that of Joseph K.

If *La vida breve* of 1950 is rightly considered to be the key transitional work that separates two phases of Onetti's oeuvre (see for instance Monegal's influential



introduction to the 1970 *Obras Completas*), it also marks a critical development in the usage of spatiality. An important predecessor here is undoubtedly Henri Barbusse's *L'enfer* of 1908, as suggested by Ramon Chao (op.cit., 68). Whereas in *El pozo* the author is essentially isolated in a single interior and given to the task of writing, *La vida breve* introduces for the first time the possibilities inherent in the contiguous space; the neighbouring room. However, unlike the *voyeur* of Barbusse's hotel room, Brausen develops the possibility of entering actively into this contiguous space, with its corollary of assuming a new identity. But here we are already moving away from the search paradigm in its pure form. Nevertheless, in order to understand the spatial quests of more nuanced figures such as Larsen and Medina, it will be necessary to first explore a second paradigmatic usage of space in Onetti: that which relates the room, no longer the domain of a single individual, to both timelessness and role-playing.

### (iii) The room as self-contained universe

Of *Tierra de nadie*, Millington notes that 'this indistinct urban presence creates a minimal impression of perspective in a novel dominated by scenes set within four walls', and that the rapid sequence of diverse interior spaces means that 'no settings establish themselves firmly in the novel, and this reduces physical surroundings and the idea of the city to a succession of drab, uniform interiors.' (Millington, 78, 80) He also correctly identifies Aránzuru's odyssey as a dialectic between interior and exterior spaces, which explains the taxidermist Num's question: ' "Afuera o adentro, ¿eh? Me gustaría saber qué piensa hacer"' (O.C., 98). However the key point, here and elsewhere in Onetti, is the spatio-temporal status of a given space. An idealised space, the *cabaña de troncos* of Linacero or Aránzuru's island of Faruru, is one which is placed beyond time; one in which Ana María, for instance, will forever be an adolescent. Thus it is only in the room of the taxidermist, filled with stuffed animals that embody just

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<sup>99</sup> Kafka's landlady opens up Fraulein Büstner's room in her absence so that a preliminary investigation may take place. Thus in Onetti, the landlady's offer: 'Pero ahora no está, siempre

such a temporal stasis, that Aránzuru can reconcile the afuera vs. adentro dichotomy. As Num points out to him: '-Usted se sienta en la ventana. Así está con las cosas afuera, y también está adentro. Los vaporcitos y los pájaros. Tiene las dos cosas.' And the lawyer agrees with him emphatically: 'Sí. Debo ser eso, exactamente.' (O.C., 97) Indeed, just as the self is to an extent commensurate with inhabited and/or idealised space (thus for instance 'el viejo tenía la isla y se murieron juntos' [O.C., 258]), the dialectic between interior and exterior in Onetti is, as will be demonstrated, intimately related to the Bergsonian distinction between subjective *temps duré* and geometrically conceived 'clock' time, with the window a key point of interaction between the two.

In addition to preserving dead birds, Num is, like Linacero, a weaver of fictions, as is instanced not only by the island (with its uncertainty of name) but indeed by his dealings with an old woman upstairs: 'yo había inventado la herencia por ella, para que la nena estuviera contenta. Y va ella y la inventa, para que yo esté contento, y yo hago que lo creo....' (O.C., 99) Here, in microcosm, we have the 'juego de Federico' that takes place between Julita and Jorge Malabia in *Juntacadáveres*. Fiction is, as has been noted in the previous chapter, a means of entering into the sphere of *Ars longa*, and it is always, in Onetti, effected in an interior space in which atemporal symbols abound: the picture or photo that is related to the Dorian Grey motif, the record player with its unvarying sequence of discs (perhaps an oblique allusion to Roquentin's fetishising of the negress' record 'One of these days' in *La nausée*). Again, Julita Bergner-Malabia's room itself is clearly derived from that of the taxidermist, as is the room of La Queca, adjacent to Brausen's (and, less critically perhaps, that of Morasán's wife Beatriz in *Para esta noche*). Of course, the Onettian would-be creator is dogged by relentless propensity for failure, and by the end of all of these novels, the woman, still within the space of her room, has been killed, Beatriz and La Queca violently, Julita by her own hand.

A critical factor links all of these spaces with that of Num: each is associated with the madness of the occupant. An extremely important and revealing juxtaposition of three items, verbless, occurs in Aránzuru's mind when the taxidermist begins to

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vuelve muy tarde, pero si quieren entrar puedo abrirles.' (O.C., 373)



speak to him in his room: 'Nora, la locura del viejo, el plumaje de los animales muertos.' (O.C., 97). Translated, one might read this as 'the adolescent girl, the madness of a creator, the transformation into timelessness', and the relation to Linacero is at once apparent. For the Onettian hero, it is as though madness were essential to the task of fictionalising. 'Mundo loco', the opening words and indeed motif of *La vida breve*, heard by Brausen through the wall and spoken by a prostitute, are an invitation to invent alternative worlds and to enter into her space of 'naturaleza muerta'. As has frequently been noted, 'una loca' is River Plate slang for a prostitute,<sup>100</sup> so that one begins to see not only the importance of the prostitute for the writer (Linacero-Ester, Aránzuru-Catalina, Brausen-Queca), but one also begins to see the transcendent value of Larsen's quest for 'dos perfecciones: una mujer perfecta, un prostíbulo perfecto' (J., 166). Once again the juxtaposition, punctuated by a comma rather than a conjunction, is all important. The brothel is, to an extent, equivalent to the prostitute, to the 'loca', and Larsen's vocation is more than the mere variation on that of Roberto Arlt's *macró*, Haffner. One might instead read it as a metaphor for Onetti's own vocation, the novel being a textual space placed beyond time (Saúl Yurkievich, in *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, considers Santa María to be an 'espacio textual y no geográfico'). It is appropriate, then, that while himself in exile from Uruguay, Onetti should have the exiled Medina dream up and reconstruct Santa María from within an upstairs room of the deceased Larsen's 'perfect' brothel.

In fact, the central spaces of all novels and novella's relating to the Santa María cycle can now be identified as those which, associated with madness, games and circularity, are to an extent placed beyond time. The sequence of interior rooms, (as Millington notes, all of which are associated with 'upstairs'), tend to take on the totalising, Berkleyan qualities that one finds in Kafka and Borges. Once within the room, once within the game, the rest of the universe may be placed in doubt. Thus the

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<sup>100</sup> Although the adjective 'loco/a' is, according to the *Real Academia*, of uncertain etymology, I would suggest that, given the interdependence of space and Being set out in phenomenological ontology and at the heart of Onetti's art, he is playing here with the latin 'locus'. The room of the loco/loca is precisely the 'locus' which appears to be suspended from temporality.

equivalent speculations with regard to the spaces of the mad 'play-makers' in both *Juntacadáveres* and *El astillero*. In the first quote, Jorge is questioning his sister-in-law Julita as to the adequacy of her room-universe, a space which as we have seen is defined by the 'Dorian Grey' quality of the photos of her dead husband:

- Yo sé que basta con el cuarto y la soledad - digo - Quisiera saber si te bastó siempre.

- No hubo Federico, no está el mundo, no hay Santa María. Todo lo que veas fuera de aquí es mentira, todo lo que toques. Y hasta lo que pienses fuera de aquí y lo que pienses estando aquí y que no tenga relación conmigo.

Con esto. Contigo y conmigo. Con este cuarto. (J. 180)<sup>101</sup>

The world is placed in doubt, but so too is temporal sequence: 'Ya no hay diferencia entre noche, madrugada y mañana. Todo es lo mismo, un eterno tiempo presente que me fue impuesto por la locura de Julita.' (J. 193). It is worth noting that for Lacan, the schizophrenic condition is coterminous with this inability to deal with temporal sequence, a condition in which language also becomes impossible.

Larsen is, of course, both more desperate and more complacent than the adolescent Jorge Malabia in his espousal of the mad game of Jeremiah Petrus' shipyard, and as we shall see, the room in which he has an interview with the latter is but one instance of a space being loaded with temporal and ontological import for the protagonist within this novel. Nevertheless, the following comment immediately recalls the conversation of *Juntacadáveres*, the companion novel:

La noche estaba afuera, enmudecida, y la vastedad del mundo podía ser puesto en duda. Aquí no había más que el cuerpo raquítico bajo las mantas, la cabeza de cadáver amarillenta y sonriendo sobre las gruesas almohadas verticales, el viejo y su juego. (A., 143)

But the atemporal space, the space within which the protagonist experiences or shares in a 'locura', for all that it would appear to be self contained, is never adequate. The

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<sup>101</sup> It is instructive to compare Julita's mistaken assumption of the adequacy of the room-universe with that of Gracia César in 'El infierno tan temido': 'Creyó que fuera de ellos, fuera de la habitación, se extendía un mundo desprovisto de sentido, habitado por seres que no importaban,



short story 'El infierno tan temido', which again ends in suicide, prepares us for this. Thus while Risso, thinking of the crazy sexual games that his young wife plays with him, 'creyó que fuera de ellos, fuera de la habitación, se extendía un mundo desprovisto de sentido, habitado por seres que no importaban, poblado por hechos sin valor' (O.C., 1301), is also keenly aware that 'la locura que compartían tenía, por lo menos, la grandeza de carecer de futuro' (O.C., 1300)

Another detail demonstrates the equivalence between a number of idealised spaces which constitute Larsen's unending quest, the room of the mad Julita, and indeed the desirable space in general throughout Onetti: his use of colour. However, since this linkage has so far escaped the attention of Onettian criticism, an in depth exegesis is offered in Appendix II. The critical point for the present chapter is that blue, and in particular 'azul celeste', is coterminous throughout Onetti's oeuvre with the desirable and transcendental, and is continuously threatened with green, suggesting decay. The use of a quite literally 'celestial' shade thus not only reinforces the topographical equivalence of certain spaces, but suggests their transcendental nature. It is widely known, for instance, that all three novels of what Emir Monegal has termed 'un tríptico barroco' (O.C., 20) - *Para una tumba sin nombre*, *El astillero*, *Juntacadáveres* - have a very clearly value-laden topography, upper stories relating to the 'celestial' and basements to the 'infernal' (see for instance the relevant chapters of Mark Millington, *Reading Onetti*, especially 206-224, 239-249, 295-296). Thus while the brothel itself, Larsen's hotel room and the room of the mad Julita are all upstairs, the basement of Barthé in which the dubious political deal is struck to allow the brothel to go ahead is definitively downstairs. Díaz Grey, as intermediary, is seen quite literally climbing up and down stairs between the relevant parties. One finds a parallel topography governing *El astillero*: the rooms of Díaz Grey and the house of Petrus are both upstairs, and if the novel lacks a basement, it is worth noting that while the 'casilla' is positioned up three stairs, the *Chamamé* bar, as noted by Carr in

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poblado por hechos sin valor.' (O.C., 1301) One of the 'hachos sin valor', her sexual infidelity in a hotel room, provokes both the separation from Risso and her subsequent revenge act.

*Cuando ya no importe*, is likewise three steps below ground level ('La primera vez que bajé por los tres escalones que llevaban a la sala del *Chamamé*...' [C.I., 79]).

With regard to colour, however, what is immediately noteworthy of the house that Larsen hires for his brothel is the unusual frequency with which the qualifier 'celeste' is attached to it. It is initially introduced in *Juntacadáveres* as 'la casa de las persianas celestes' (J., 71) and we are later told that it has 'la puerta celeste' (J., 75) before it finally becomes simply 'la casita celeste' (O.C., 950). Even the redoubtable Padre Bergner imagines 'un automóvil rojo en una callejuela perdida, con disimulo, frente al resplandor celeste de una casita pobre' (J., 200). The 'persianas' become 'ventanas' during Jorge Malabia's lament 'no me animo todavía a caminar cuesta abajo desde la plaza hasta las ventanas celestes del prostíbulo, y golpear dos veces en la puerta, también celeste' (J., 101), his perception of the role of the curtains once inside the brothel implying a disjunction with 'clock' time. In *El astillero*, one of the first streets upon which Larsen wanders is described as 'la descuidada calle en cuyo final está la casita con balcones celestes' (A., 61)

The essay in the appendix sets out a dialectic between the desirable/atemporal (blue) and the decadent/dangerous (green), seen for instance in the interior spaces of the 'First and Last' that are defined respectively by 'la mujer de celeste' and 'la mujer de verde'. However, taking into account, inter alia, the attempt by the painter Casal to fix his wife in a sky-blue portrait *in order to place her beyond time*, we begin to see that a purpose far from squalid is motivating the *macró* Larsen to realize his dream of the perfect brothel. Certainly, Onetti conceives of Larsen as motivated by a higher goal than money. In conversation with Rodríguez Monegal, Onetti notes that 'me preguntabas por la diferencia entre el Larsen del principio y el Larsen (*Juntacadáveres*) de ahora. Está ahí: un día sentí, porque lo sentí, que el individuo, el tipo, el coso, como quieras, tiene su porcentaje de fe, y su porcentaje de desinterés, o por lo menos un desinterés inmediato. El individuo ese, Larsen, Junta Larsen, es un artista.'<sup>102</sup> Now when it is remembered that other Onettian artists such as Linacero and Brausen create within an interior space which is significantly atemporal, one sees why it is



precisely within the brothel of the defunct Larsen that Medina, too, is invited to emulate the latter and conjure up his own Santa María.

Thus Jorge Malabia, once he finally leaves the room of Julita to gain entry into the brothel, has the explicit sensation of timelessness, or at least of having moved beyond the exigencies of routine time:

Así empezamos a vivir los seis. No quiero saber cuánto tiempo duramos juntos; estoy resuelto a olvidar, y cumplo, los sucesos de rutina y las situaciones absurdas. Puedo pensar que fuimos felices hasta el final (*J.*, 202)

In order to see how timelessness is associated with the brothel space, it is necessary to return to the colour of the curtains, and to note that from Onetti's earliest stories the hero-dreamer, (Jason, Suaid, Baldi), is frequently viewed as oppressed by the overcast sky, the natural colour of which is occluded.<sup>103</sup> In Larsen's brothel, however, we find 'el cielo invariable y celeste de las cortinas, en la mañana de domingo nublada e indecisa' (*J.*, 200), and a page later, as noted by Brotherston,<sup>104</sup> an inappropriate light floods the scene when the curtain is drawn: 'se desplazó perezosa para descorrer una cortina. Sentí que la luz de la mañana no convenía a la escena' (*J.*, 201). If the window is the point of interaction which allows intercourse between the exterior and interior worlds, then the curtain is a means of excluding the latter. There is perhaps a related impulse in Linacero's 'diarios tostados de sol, viejos de meses, clavados en la ventana en el lugar de los vidrios' (*O.C.*, 49), since they would suggest that text is in some way able to shield one from the exterior.

The second critical space in *Juntacadáveres* in which an attempt is made to freeze or move beyond time, the space which Jorge Malabia has recently renounced, is

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<sup>102</sup> Rodríguez Monegal, *Conversación con Onetti*, 24

<sup>103</sup> It might be noted that when Larsen takes up the challenge of founding the brothel, he buys a new suit. Jorge recalls that previously 'siempre había estado vestido de gris en la administración de *El Liberal*.' (*O.C.*, 780). Grey is occasionally used in Onetti to suggest that which occludes sky-blue. Since smoking is something of a metaphor for writing throughout Onetti, it has the power to transform these colours. Thus: 'El humo de los cigarrillos cambiaba sin apuro del gris al celeste, casi uniforme en el calor de la habitación cegada' (*D.*, 30) Artistic creation almost always takes place in an isolated 'habitación cegada'.

<sup>104</sup> Gordon Brotherston *The emergence of the Latin American novel* Cambridge: C.U.P. 1977, 65

of course the room of the mad Julita. Unsurprisingly, there are several clues as to the correlation of the two spaces, and indeed the equivalence is postulated structurally in the intercalation of chapters. Thus chapters XXI and XXVI, dealing with Julita's room, are followed immediately by brothel scenes. Both spaces are, moreover, upstairs, both are inhabited by 'locas', the Rio Plata slang for 'prostitute'. A play upon this word had already been made by Onetti in *La vida breve* when Brausen enters the timeless room, the 'mundo loco', of the prostitute Queca, and it is perhaps worth pointing out that immediately prior to introducing himself to her for the first time, Brausen is seen sitting in a cafe opposite, from where 'desde la mesa, junto a la ventana, podía vigilar la cuadra, la puerta de mi casa, ver el saco blanco del portero en la sombra celeste' (O.C., 498). All these spaces are to an extent beyond time, and the equivalence between the two spaces to which Jorge Malabia has access is specifically presented in terms of the colour 'celeste'. Thus, speaking of Julita on what is their first important move beyond her game of Federico, Jorge relates that 'ella tiene un vestido de noche celeste' (J., 159). He continues 'solo quiero enterarme del hombro estrecho, redondo y celeste.' (J., 160), later talking of 'el cuerpo celeste retrocede' (J., 161). Importantly, the colour is implicitly linked to Julita's madness. The scene concludes with the following detail:

'Preñada o no - cada una de las mentiras puede dar un paso adelante esta noche, ocupar un lugar en el mundo -, el vestido celeste hace una curva en el vientre, se adhiere entre las piernas. Enternecido, reconozco su locura...'  
(J., 164)

She remains neurotic and, her own resolution notwithstanding, remains confined in her room right up to her suicide. She hangs herself dressed as a school-girl 'con un gran moño de corbata azul' (J., 236).

If Larsen's first attempt to achieve an atemporal space was already 'como casarse *in artículo mortis*, como creer en fantasmas', what then of his second? In the first place, one might note that his search is even more immediately spatial than in *Juntacadáveres*, as is borne out both by the title *El astillero* and by the section



headings themselves. Yurkievich concurs with Verani in noting a certain 'spatialisation of the self' at work in this novel: 'El espacio de *El astillero* presupone tres mundos: un afuera incierto, Santa María y Puerto Astillero (que a su vez incluye tres ámbitos que determinan tres máscaras y tres juegos escénicos: astillero, glorieta, casilla).<sup>105</sup> Larsen's key ambition is to gain access to the house of Jeremiah Petrus, an upper-story structure built upon fourteen pillars, and upon seeing it we are told that 'Larsen veía la casa como la forma vacía de un cielo ambicionado, prometido' (notice the choice of 'cielo' rather than 'paraiso' here - the house is another 'casa celeste'). In order to achieve this end he has a number of interviews with Petrus' daughter, the mad Angélica Inés, in the 'glorieta' outside the house, and the description here is important : 'junto al estanque, después del estanque, una glorieta, también circular, hecha con listones de madera, pintados de un azul marino y desteñado' (*A.*, 70). In this passage indeed may be seen a conflation of several Onettian motifs which suggest the desired atemporality of the 'sueño': the circular geometry; the estanque with its trapped water; the colour blue, all three of which merit a more detailed examination.

#### (iv) Circularity and Stagnation

Given the general air of entropy which reigns over *El astillero*, it is of course of significance that the blue paint should be 'desteñado', and on the same page we find the related detail of: 'tablones mal pulidos, groseramente pintados de azul' The house itself is a Gothic ruin not unlike the mansion of Dicken's Miss Havisham, the garden filled with crumbling statues and 'árboles [que] tenían manchas blancas y verdes' (*A.*, 70) However, as though still living in the era of the idealised brothel, Larsen first enters into the glorieta with a present which is tied with a 'lazo de cinta celeste' (*A.*, 69). The idea that 'celeste' is no longer anything more than a refuge is underscored by the detail that Kunz, once he discovers the true origin of the letter which briefly revived his faith, 'regresó paso a paso a la sala, a la vitela celeste donde había estado dibujando' (*A.*, 200) But blue also typifies, and thereby links, the remaining two spaces

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<sup>105</sup> Saúl Yurkievich, *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, 349, footnote 8

in which in which Larsen seeks temporary refuge, and in each case the colour is again connected to the longed-for but irretrievable past. The shipyard itself is littered with 'el insistente, increíble azul de los planos en ferroprusiato' (A., 76), blue-prints which hark back to a time when the yard was functional. It is worth pointing out the disdainful oblivion of the mad ('atemporal') Angélica Inés in their regard when she is seen: 'taconeando insegura sobre un parquet podrido, sobre manchas, planos azules, cartas comerciales, manchas de lluvia y tiempo.' (A., 171). As with the glorieta, the present state of decay is implicit in the juxtaposition of 'manchas' and 'agua', the last being a frequent Onettian motif for time ('manchas de lluvia y tiempo'). The 'casilla' itself might come directly out of one of these blue-prints, now of course degraded into a wreck. Thus in the section entitled 'La casilla - I', Larsen is significantly reading about repairs made to a ship named the 'Tiba', of which he imagines 'tal vez el *Tiba* se hubiera hundido en marzo, siete años atrás, al salir de El Rosario' (A., 92). Upon leaving the yard, he stumbles for the first time across the hut, which is described as 'con rastros de haber estado pintada de azul, con una mal adherida timonera de barco fluvial, extraída del cadáver de algún *Tiba*' (A., 94). This is almost the perfect symbol for the state of Larsen's final, desperate attempt to salvage something from his older aspiration to the perfect space, the 'casita celeste'.

It should be apparent from the above cites that a second motif linking the three spaces is that of water, and although the relationship between time and water was touched upon in the preceding chapter, it is worth re-examining for the light it throws upon Larsen as an archetypal Onettian creator. If the title of *El pozo* alludes to the attempt to arrest the temporal flow in terms of a time-water metaphor, then, as we have seen, the attempt is doomed to failure and the artist instead finds that 'me alzó entre sus aguas como el cuerpo lívido de un muerto y me arrastra, inexorable, entre fríos y vagas espumas, noche abajo.' (O.C., 76). This image has already been prepared for in the problematic accommodation of the passing of interior time to the dripping away of seconds:

'ahora siento que mi vida no es más que el paso de fracciones de tiempo, una y otra, como el ruido de un reloj, el agua que corre, moneda que se cuenta.



Estoy tirado y el tiempo pasa[...]toda la noche está, inapresable, tensa, alargando su alma fina y misteriosa en el chorro de la canilla mal cerrada, en la pileta de portland del patio [...] Hay momentos, apenas, en que los golpes de mi sangre en las sienes se acompañan con el latido de la noche.' (O.C., 76)

The metaphor is more explicit in Onetti's next novel, *Tierra de nadie*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Aránzuru's odyssey is primarily a flight from the tyranny of clock time:

- "El reloj picotea sin descanso y esto es el tiempo." Aránzuru vacilaba entre imaginar el minuto en todo mundo y el minuto en él, cuerpo y alma. Lo tentaba una poesía fácil de nombres geográficos y científicos. Después, se le ocurrió buscar una sola palabra que lo encerrara todo. Recordaba ahora cuántas veces el viejo Num había cambiado el nombre de la isla. (O.C., 108)

That the atemporal space, (- La isla. Allí sí que va a ser el tiempo sin relojes, ¿eh? [O.C., 227]), should specifically be an island suggests, sui generis, that it is removed from the flow of water, and by the end of the book, Aránzuru's acceptance of the relentless passage of time is indicated by his descent to the quayside 'como si acabara, por fin, de llegar a alguna parte[...]tenía la ciudad a sus espaldas; estaba inmóvil frente al río, solo en el centro del enorme círculo que encerraba el horizonte.' (O.C., 259) This gesture will, of course, be repeated by Larsen, who in the course of his descent significantly offers the three launchmen his watch (A., 233). Galvez' decision to leave the game of Petrus S.A. is equally marked by his descent to the river, where he drowns himself. As if to emphasise that time has moved on regardless, this image of Aránzuru's symbolic acceptance in *Tierra de nadie* is repeated two chapters later in the closing lines of the book (it is now evening rather than afternoon) :

Fin de jornada. Invisible, a sus espaldas, estaba la ciudad con su aire sucio y las altas casas, con el ir y venir de las gentes, saludos, muertes, manos y rostros, juegos. Ya era la noche y la ciudad zumbaba bajo las luces, con sus hombres, sus sombreros, niños, pañuelos, escaparates, pasos, pasos como la sangre, como granizo, pasos como una corriente sin destino.

Aquí estaba él sentado en la piedra, con la última mancha de la gaviota en el aire y la mancha de grasa en el río sucio, quieto, endurecido. (O.C., 261)

There is a comparable feeling of double-take at the close of *El astillero*, with its alternative accounts of *Junta* Larsen's final descent to the river, though the artistic intent is distinct. One might also note Onetti's extended use of the master-metaphor in Medina's artistic search to paint an 'existentialist' frozen wave (*Dejemos hablar al viento*), and Juan Carr's supposed occupation as a dam builder in Onetti's final novel, *Cuando ya no importe*.

The island of Faruru is, of course, the invention not of Aranzúru, but of the mad Num. Indeed there is a sense in which it is the spatial equivalent both of the taxidermist and of his office, replete with stuffed birds. This is certainly Aranzuru's final insight before he chooses the river: 'El viejo tenía la isla y se murieron juntos.' (O.C., 258). For it is not the unique privilege of women, (Beatriz, La Queca, Julita) to create the atemporal space, but rather the preserve of madness. This is apparent when the water-time metaphor is applied to the house of the crazy Petrus: 'Más allá de la glorieta estaba la casa de cemento [...] alzada sin gracia por los pilares, excesivamente, sobre el nivel de las probables crecidas del río' (A., 70). Indeed, not only is the entire house raised on fourteen unlikely pillars so as to escape the hazards of the fluvial tide, but one might indeed read into the enterprise of the shipyard itself a specific and heavily ironised concern with the ravages of time. Again, one finds frequent textual evidence throughout the oeuvre to support such a contention, since the shipwreck is a frequent metaphor in Onetti for the loss of youthful ideals. In the short story whose theme is most directly that of ageing, 'Bienvenido, Bob'(1944), the young Bob dismisses the older suitor of his sister Inés in the following terms:

'No sé si usted tiene treinta o cuarenta años, no importa. Pero usted es un hombre hecho, es decir desecho[...]Claro que usted tiene motivos para creer[...] que *ha salvado muchas cosas del naufragio*. Pero no es cierto.' (O.C., 1224, emphasis added)

Eladio Linacero in the seminal *El pozo* makes use of a similar metaphor in which 'el agua' presumably must equate to the stuff of 'la vida': 'Hubo un mensaje que lanzara mi



juventud a la vida; estaba hecho con palabras de desafío y confianza. Se lo debe haber tragado el agua como a las botellas de los naufragos.' (O.C., 75). Furthermore, Larsen himself considers that 'este sentido de naufragio, - esta condenación biológica al desengaño, hermanaba él a todas las mujeres.' (J., 169).

But place, as has been argued, is to an extent commensurate with being. Importantly, his brothel, the high achievement of his 'hundred days', shares in the metaphor of the shipwreck: 'La realidad de las mujeres a diez pesos, la memoria de la casa pintada de celeste que se alzaba sobre el suave declive de la costa, naufragaron en la intensidad blanca del perfume' (J., 76). One feels therefore the keen irony of Larsen's illusory position in *El astillero* being specifically within a defunct shipyard. Indeed Jeremiah Petrus, architect of the grotesque, himself makes use of a related image: 'Un capitán se hunde con su barco; pero nosotros, señores, no nos vamos a hundir. Estamos escorados y a la deriva, pero todavía no es naufragio.' (A., 75) Furthermore, the space that Larsen might finally achieve but for the fear instilled in him by the sight of the woman giving birth, the 'casilla', has the form of the wheelhouse of a shipwreck 'con una mal adherida timonera de barco fluvial, extraída del cadáver de algún *Tiba*' (A., 94). If one can feel the inadequacy of Larsen's supposed position in the inclemencies of the weather from which the dilapidated shipyard offers such scant protection, the sense of despair can only be heightened once a temporal equivalence is advanced: 'Era una luz gris y desanimada, una luz que llegaba vencida después de atravesar nubes gigantescas de agua y frío; el tiempo se había descompuesto, un viento indiferente entraba silbando por todos los agujeros del edificio' (A., 108). Larsen's world is by now puddle-strewn, his season a permanent winter, and his overcoat is invariably described as 'empapado'. This is true even in the Santa María sections: of interest is Díaz Grey's 'absurda lástima por el hombre que chorreaba lluvia en silencio sobre el linóleo' (A., 131). He places a sympathetic hand on 'el hombro empapado y frío' (ibid.)

But to return to the other major spaces of *El astillero*, (the glorieta; the 'casa'); David Musselwhite (*Nuevos Aires* No. 11, 1973) correctly identifies the use made of underlying geometric form, relating the circular and prismatic respectively

with the possibilities offered to Díaz Grey by his nocturnal sequences of records and cards. Referring to the central interview between Larsen and the doctor, Musselwhite identifies the circular with order, with the habitual, and the rectilinear with chance, with caprice. The observation is astute, particularly given the continued usage of these motifs in *La muerte y la niña* (see concluding remarks below), but for the present chapter one would like to focus more specifically on the spatio-temporal implication of shape. The description of the glorieta and house, first given in 'La glorieta - I', is in this regard worth quoting in full:

'había un estanque, redondo, defendido por un muro de un metro, musgoso, con grietas ocupadas por tallos secos. Junto al estanque, después del estanque, una glorieta, también circular, hecha con listones de madera, pintados de un azul marino y desteñido, que imponían formas de rombo al aire. Más allá de la glorieta estaba la casa de cemento, blanca y gris, sucia, cúbica, numerosa de ventanas,alzada sin gracia por los pilares, excesivamente, sobre el nivel de las probables crecidas del río'(A., 70)

Just as the record sequence is predetermined, unaltering, so too a circular geometry would seem to imply a trope of repetition. If one recalls the idea that the well of *El pozo* implies a trapping of temporal flow, it is clear that the presence of the 'estanque redondo' is intended not only to recall the metaphor, but to extend it to the space of the 'glorieta', : 'junto al estanque, después del estanque [...] también circular.' Onetti may indeed be making an intertextual reference to the 'estanque' of María Luisa Bombal's poetic novella *La última niebla* (1935), with which he was intimately familiar (see also chapter 6 below)<sup>106</sup>:

'De costumbre permanezco allí largas horas, el cuerpo y el pensamiento a la deriva. A menudo no queda de mí, en la superficie, más que un vago remolino; yo me he hundido en un mundo misterioso donde el tiempo parece detenerse bruscamente, donde la luz pesa como una sustancia fosforescente...' (Bombal, *La última niebla*, 25, emphasis added)

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<sup>106</sup> Throughout the 1930's, Bombal was living in Buenos Aires and was much involved with the *Sur* group of writers.



In any case, the motif of circular time, the Borgesian time of eternal recurrence, has been sounded, and this is to characterise the sequence of identical encounters that Larsen has in the space of the glorieta with the mad Angélica Inés: 'una serie de encuentros, casi idénticos y tan semejantes que podrían haber sido recordados como tediosas repeticiones de una misma escena fallida' (*A.*, 68). It is worth noting that in order to visit Petrus, not in his house but in the equally rectilinear prison, Larsen first passes 'la plaza circular de verdes oscuros y húmedos, pavimentada con gastados ladrillos envueltos en musgo' (*A.*, 204). The forged certificate with which Gálvez threatens the enterprise and thus the immediate cause of Petrus' imprisonment is also intimately linked with circularity: 'aquel papel verdoso, con dibujos circulares en los márgenes' (*A.*, 146)<sup>107</sup>

The point is that circular time, the time of invariable recurrence, far from acquiring the transcendental realm of *Ars longa*, is rather the very essence of the infernal. As Yurkievich points out:

En estos espacios diferenciados se entra a un tiempo circular sin avance; no al tiempo del eterno retorno natural, aquel que posibilita la comunión, la conciliación plenaria, recuperar la completud primordial, sino a una circulación vacía, degradante y reificadora.<sup>108</sup>

This is precisely the empty repetition of Díaz Grey's nocturnal records, so different to the transcendental record of the jazz negress which is admired by Sartre's Roquentin in the epiphany which closes *La nausée*.

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<sup>107</sup> Returning to Musselwhite's opposition of circular record to rectilinear card, one might posit a complementary notion that the play of cards is necessarily limited to the exposition of permutations much as one finds in Beckett (one thinks here of the proliferation of permutations in Murphy's biscuits, Molloy's sucking stones and throughout the novel Watt). Díaz Grey, setting out photographs face down as though they were a deck of cards in *La muerte y la niña*, would seem to signify the full extent of human freedom, possibilities as readily exhausted in Onetti as in Borges. Indeed, one might go further. The 'variations upon a theme' which is made possible by the rearrangement of the (rectilinear) cards is analogous, in Onetti, with the appropriation and variation of narrative. Díaz Grey, whether working through the permutations of Jorge Malabia's story in *Para una tumba sin nombre* or distributing the photos of his daughter as though they were cards, is exercising to the full the limited freedom available to the Onettian creator. See also concluding remarks below.

<sup>108</sup> Saúl Yurkievich, 'En el hueco voraz de Onetti', 349

Hell, for the Onettian protagonist, is the (geographically specific) infinite prolongation of unsatisfactory repetitions so characteristic of 'inauthentic' human life and so characteristic of Beckett. Ossorio is one of the first to articulate such a view in the novel *Para esta noche*: "Toda esta noche de puertas y escaleras, abriré puertas. El infierno, prolongación sin fin, indefinida, infinita, del último, los últimos momentos del tipo en la tierra" (O.C., 377). A related view of hell, commensurate to a certain extent with Sartre's *Huis clos*, is the sanatorium to which the narrator of *Los adioses* is indefinitely confined: '(Y)o estaba descubriendo la invariada desdicha de mis quince años en el pueblo, el arrepentimiento de haber pagado como precio la soledad, el almacén, esta manera de no ser nada. Yo era minúsculo, sin significado, muerto.' (O.C., 749). It is worth noting that this is very different to the transcendental if fleeting timelessness, intimately related to the pulse, which the sick man and lover of the same novella seem briefly to achieve: 'y ellos estaban mudos y mirándose, a través del tiempo que no puede ser medido ni separado, del que sentimos correr junto con nuestra sangre' (O.C., 744)

For the Larsen of the quasi-religious *El astillero*, hell is best summed up by an infinite night with no progression within the confines of the low-life *Chamamé* bar: 'Y acaso pensó que un Chamamé siempre en medianoche de sábado, sin pausa, sin músicos mortales que callaban en la madrugada para reclamar el bife a caballo, era el infierno que le tenían destinado desde el principio del tiempo, o que él se había ido ganando, según se mire' (A., 183, emphases added). There is, of course, an important ambiguity in the closing 'según se mire': is this hell earned, or is it rather predestined? The implication would appear to be that any difference here consists merely in the point of view, so that freedom, far from being a Sartrean absolute, is little more than a comforting illusion.

Luis Harss would certainly subscribe to such an interpretation, based on his extended interview with the author:

'Onetti es partidario de lo circular y lo estático, recursos perfectamente legítimos en un mundo de destinos fijos de antemano, en el que cada vida es



una condena retroactiva, predestinada y, por lo tanto, en cierto modo tautológica.' Luis Harss, *Los nuestros*, 237.

Yurkievich, meanwhile, spells out the implications of such a view of time in a language whose debt to Sartre's *L'être et le néant* is scarcely in doubt (thus 'Ante la nada que anonada...', *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, 355):

'No es purgatorio, sino infierno, desagrega, desabriga, desdibuja, desnubre, descoloca, sume en la inanición. Implica condena definitiva, descendimiento hacia lo indiferenciado, hacia el mundo nocturno. Es pozo, sepulcro en vida, y sus moradores, cadáveres vivientes.' Saúl Yurkievich, *ibid.*, 341

The protagonist escapes, finally, from this circular hell of inactivity only because there is a parallel law of entropic decline.

One is now in a position to fully appreciate the profound similarity of vision, if not of style, that Onetti shares with both Kafka and Beckett. The stasis that confronts the seeker of the Law in *Der Prozess* and the spurious land-surveyor K. in *Das Schloss* endures while the supplicant runs rapidly through his span of years. The repetitions and permutations of habit, mitigated by inconclusive narrative invention, are the unique recourse of the increasingly decrepit Beckett hero, faced with the circular monotony of days. Within either fictional universe, Díaz Grey and Larsen would readily recognise the totalising parameters which set such dreary limits on human endeavour, though they would doubtless blame the author-demiurge 'Brausen' for their plight.

#### Ch.4 The chronotope: the generic significance of space-time.

Having examined the similarities in treatment of both time and space individually in Onetti, Kafka and Beckett, we are now in a position to posit a synthesis in which space-time, or the dominant 'chronotope', is seen as a critical determinant of the horizon of choice available to the hero. As such, as the Russian critic Bakhtin succinctly argues, the chronotope, or, more correctly, the hierarchy of chronotopes presented, can be usefully examined as the generically defining parameter within the novel. It is worth pausing at length at this stage to consider the three authors in Bakhtinian terms, before we go on to examine their related presentations of language and the Other in the remaining chapters.

Following the publication in English of Mikhail Bakhtin's work (which began as late as 1968 with *Rabelais and his World*), there has been a growing interest, at times bordering on reverence, for the ideas of the profoundly original Russian thinker. In fields as diverse as linguistics, cultural studies, and literary criticism, this interest has until recently centred principally on two related concepts which Bakhtin developed and refined over the course of his intellectual life: carnivalisation and, above all, dialogism. The enthusiasm with which these two concepts have been embraced and developed is no doubt in part due to the implied pluralism (a sort of perceived post-modern humanism intrinsically hostile to dogma) that is at the heart of each, in part to the excellence of some secondary literature on Bakhtin - one might single out for mention Julia Kristeva's 1967 essay 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', Tzvetan Todorov's *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* (1984) and Michael Holquist's comprehensive *Dialogism* (1991) in this regard.

Until relatively recently, however, the intense intellectual activity generated by the idea of the dialogic nature of truth has tended to eclipse the enormous generic importance that Bakhtin attaches to the conception of time in literature generally, and to the inter-connectedness of space-time in novelistic representation. Selden, for instance, in his *Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, devotes the entire



entry on Bakhtin and his School to their insights into the dialogic or polyphonic novel and to carnivalisation, with no mention of time-space as a generically defining category. René Wellek's article "Bakhtin's view of Dostoevsky: Polyphony and Carnavalesque" in *Russian Formalism, A Retrospective Glance* is again typical of this twin emphasis, which tends to underestimate the importance for Bakhtin of the spatio-temporal dimension of characterisation, and the same is essentially true in the proliferation of more recent studies, such as David Lodge's *After Bakhtin* (1990) and Caryl Emerson's *First 100 Years of Bakhtin* (1997). Sue Vice's uneven *Introducing Bakhtin*, despite devoting an entire chapter to the 'chronotope', contains no more than a superficial account of space-time, and no mention at all of the related concept of 'eventness' (see below). Only in the last decade has this imbalance, at least in English interpretations of Bakhtin, begun to be addressed somewhat by *inter alia* Gary Saul Morson, whose study *Narrative and Freedom* (1994), building upon *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990), a collaboration with Caryl Emerson, examines a number of useful temporal concepts that underlie Bakhtin's approach both to the novel and to aesthetics in general. Of paramount importance for the present study are 'eventness', and the 'chronotope'. Chapter 6 below will also consider the figure of Larsen as a Bakhtinian 'carnival king' who is to be decrowned.

### (i) Bakhtin and genre

As has been noted in chapter 2 above, this first term, 'event', is of particular interest in that, etymologically, it bears a close resemblance to Heidegger's *mitSein*. A footnote to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, includes the following brief discussion:

'Sobytie (event) and its adjective sobytiinyi (full of event potential) are crucial terms in Bakhtin. At their root lies the Russian word for "existence" or "being" (bytie), and - although the etymology here can be disputed - so-bytie can be read both in its ordinary meaning of "event", and in a more literal rendering as "co-existing, co-being, shared existence or being with

another". An event can occur only among interacting consciousnesses; there can be no isolated or solipsistic events. (Caryl Emerson ed., 6)

Michael Holquist makes a similar point in Chapter 2 of *Dialogism, Bakhtin and his World*, noting that Bakhtin emphasises this etymology by juxtaposition, referring to existence as the 'event of being' (*sobytie bytija*). The point he develops, with its echoes of Kant's spatio-temporal 'categories' and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, points both to the temporal and communal nature of being: 'Since Bakhtin sees the world as activity, it will come as no surprise that he defines existence as an event'<sup>109</sup> The '*sobytie bitija*' concept, already quite developed in Bakhtin's earliest writings and clearly phenomenological in orientation, anticipates much that was to follow in Heidegger and Sartre.

Gary Saul Morson specifically emphasises the temporal nature of the concept in Bakhtin, relating 'eventness' primarily to future possibility, to the idea that time may 'ramify'. Here again we are in the domain of Heideggerian metaphysics, with its understanding of *Dasein* as fundamentally a 'project of possibility' (*Entwurf der Möglichkeit*):

'For there to be eventness, there must be alternatives. Eventful events are performed in a world in which there are multiple possibilities, in which some things which could happen do not. In such a world time ramifies and its possibilities multiply; each realized possibility opens new choices while precluding others that once could have been made. The eventful event must also be unrepeatably, that is, its meaning and weight are inextricably linked to the moment in which it is performed. Choice is momentous. It involves presentness.' (*Narrative and Freedom*, 22)<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Holquist, *Dialogism, Bakhtin and his World*, 24

<sup>110</sup> A perception of time infinitely ramifying gets perhaps its clearest fictional exegesis in Borges' *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (1941). There is, however, an important and fundamental distinction between the temporal labyrinth envisaged by T'Sui Pên and the idea of 'eventness' in Bakhtin: In the bifurcating paths of the short story, time infinitely ramifies in such a way as to include all possibilities, whereas the whole point about Bakhtinian eventness is that it excludes all possibilities except that which has been chosen.



In a world characterised by 'existential estrangement', such events as there are are scarcely 'eventful' in the sense that Morson and Bakhtin suggest.

However, the extent to which significant (or 'eventful') choice is precluded in the works of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti is intimately related to the presentation not merely of the temporal, but of space-time. It is therefore worth pausing at length to examine the degree to which Bakhtin understands the depiction of space and time to be not only closely interrelated but generically defining insofar as they together circumscribe the 'horizon of choice' which is open to the hero. In his essay *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel* (1937)<sup>111</sup>, Bakhtin sets out an 'historical poetics' based entirely upon the inter-connectedness of 'space-time' in the evolution of the novel. The critical point here is that, for Bakhtin, neither space nor time should be considered in isolation :

'We will give the name chronotope (literally "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature....In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole' (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 84)<sup>112</sup>

Furthermore, the representation of this category of 'space-time' is crucial to understanding artistic purpose, since : 'The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature' (ibid. 85). One is of course immediately tempted to add that the image of the Self in all phenomenological ontology is equally chronotopic : *Dasein's* etymology points to this aspect of the 'thereness' and 'thenness' of Being.

It is also important for the purposes of the present study that Bakhtin estimates the chronotope, viewed diachronically, to be of paramount generic importance *within* the novel. Indeed, the thrust of his essay is that one best understands how the works of a period relate generically to one another by an

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<sup>111</sup> All quotes are taken from *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), M. Holquist ed.

<sup>112</sup> It is tempting to think, though scarcely possible, that Beckett had this essay in mind when he wrote the following: 'And even should the notion of time dawn on his darkness, at this punctual image of

examination of the evolution of the spatio-temporal horizon that presents itself to the hero : '...it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions ...(because) the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.' (ibid. 85). Bakhtin's historical survey moves from the classical world to the late nineteenth century, but for the purposes of the present study it is sufficient to limit this survey to four of the more recent representations of space-time that Bakhtin identifies in his essay - the *road*, the *castle*, the *salon or parlour*, the *parochial town*.. Mention is also made of the Dostoevskian chronotope of the *threshold*, important in that it marks a departure from the 'biographical' space-time typical of the 19th century realist novel, before suggestions as to how the model might be usefully expanded so as to understand the 'view of man' offered in works of 'existential estrangement'.

For Bakhtin, the picaresque novel from Quevedo through to Fielding is characterised first and foremost by a chronotope of random encounter, while the Gothic tale becomes possible by a generically distinct representation of 'historical' space-time :

'(O)n the chronotope of the road, associated with encounter,...the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people - representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages - intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another....Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows into it (forming the road); this is the source of the rich metaphorical expansion on the image of the road as a course....The road is especially appropriate for portraying events governed by chance...Don Quijote sets out on the road in order that he might encounter all of Spain on that road - from galley-slaves to dukes.' (ibid. 243)

However:

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*the countenance everlasting, who could blame him? Involving very naturally that of space, they have been taken to going hand in hand, in certain quarters, it's safer.'* The Unnamable, 333



'...Towards the end of the seventeenth century in England, a new territory for novelistic events is constituted and reinforced in the so-called 'Gothic' or 'black' novel- the castle. The castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past...the traces of centuries and generations are arranged in it in visible form as various parts of its architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery...' (ibid. 246)

Thus far there has been no real room for 'dialogic' or 'ideological' interaction, neither in the chance meetings 'on the road' nor in the historically oriented investigations and reenactments of the Gothic castle. A new chronotope was required if the novel was not to exhaust its own possibilities, and Bakhtin suggests that:

'In the novels of Stendhal and Balzac a fundamentally new space appears in which novelistic events may unfold - the space of parlors and salons. Of course this is not the first appearance of such space, but only in these texts does it achieve its full significance as the place where major spatial and temporal sequences of the novel intersect....In salons and parlors the webs of intrigue are spun, denouements occur and finally - this is where dialogues happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, 'ideas' and 'passions' of the heroes' (ibid. 246)

The salon and its variants remain the dominant chronotope throughout most of the nineteenth century, and is clearly central to the artistic philosophy of Austen, Galdos or Tolstoy. The close interrelation of time with artistic space is perhaps most obvious, however, when Bakhtin turns to examine the fourth of the chronotopes listed above:

'(As) one more example of the intersection of spatial and temporal sequences...(w)e will deal with (the Flaubertian category of) the petty-bourgeois provincial town with its stagnant life....Such towns are the locus for cyclical everyday time. Here there are no events, only 'doings' that constantly repeat themselves. Time here has no advancing historical

movement; it moves rather in narrow circles: the circle of the day, of the week, of the month, of a person's entire life.' (ibid. 248)

Not only are the choices facing Emma Bovary severely circumscribed by the chronotope of the provincial town, but so to is the relentless teleology that edges her through infidelity and debt towards a death by her own hand as inevitable as it is horrible.

Bakhtin was, of course, the critic of Dostoevsky *par excellence*, and he includes considerations of the chronotope in the fundamental distinction between the dialogic Dostoevsky and the monologic Tolstoy which, as will be shown, are germane to the examination of Onetti's dominant chronotopes:

'In Dostoevsky, the threshold and related chronotopes - those of the staircase, the front hall and corridor, as well as the chronotopes of the street and square that extend those spaces into the open air - are the main places of action in his works, places where crisis events occur...in this chronotope, time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time.....In Tolstoy as distinct from Dostoevsky the fundamental chronotope is biographical time, which flows smoothly in the spaces - the interior spaces - of townhouses and estates of the nobility. In Tolstoy there are, of course, also crises, falls, spiritual renewals and resurrections, but they are not instantaneous and are not cast out of the course of biographical time; in fact they are welded firmly to it' (ibid. 249)

As we have seen in the chapters on Time and Space above, Onetti, no less than Kafka or Beckett, should be considered more properly a spatial rather than a temporal novelist, by which is meant that both time and indeed narrative, never smooth or biographical, tend to be subordinated to and conceived in terms of spatial arrangement. Again, this emphasis has enormous importance for Onetti's conception of man and his 'event-horizon', to borrow a term from the physics of space-time. Thus we have noted a strong affinity here with Dostoevsky and with Kafka. We recall Philip Rahv's



comments that in *Crime and Punishment* '...there is no real lapse of time in the story because we are virtually unaware of it apart from the tension of the rendered experience[...]Least of all is it a chronological frame that time provides in this novel[...][I]ts time is purely psychological, a function of the human consciousness.' The sense of space, of the physicality of Raskolnikov's and Sonya's rooms, of the Marmeladov household, of the degraded cityscape of St. Petersburg and its interaction with the soul, its low taverns and the square of the Haymarket, is by contrast extraordinarily pronounced. Much the same might be said of *The Trial*, in which the continual invasions of private space, the airlessness of the rooms, the absurd topography that juxtaposes the courtroom with Titorelli's attic and locates a lumber-room 'beyond time' in Joseph K.'s bank, all give a hallucinatory intensity to the distortions of space, while the ostensible chronology - the passage of a year - seems by contrast incidental or arbitrary. Thus: '...in *Der Prozess* and *Das Schloss* the time experience is almost entirely on the level of the parable, the symbol, and the dream in which experience exists without relation to time or to simultaneity.'

If we now extend Bakhtin's model to incorporate the predominantly 'urban' novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, at least two major new chronotopes emerge - the *montage* and, most importantly, the *room*. On the one hand there are the radically polyphonic novels sometimes referred to as peripatetic - Bely's *Petersburg*; Joyce's *Ulysses*; Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*; Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. In order to construct these voice mosaics in which the city itself is foregrounded, the principal components of space-time are reduced to simultaneity and juxtaposition. In the context of the Latin American novel, Onetti's *Tierra de Nadie* (1941) is a pioneering example of this use of space-time, and his influence in this regard on later novelists, notably Vargas Llosa and Fuentes, has been widely recognised, not least by the authors themselves. It is worth noting that part of the sense of dislocation or fragmentation that is often associated with these texts arises due to the predominance of a different chronotope in the act of reading itself insofar as time is here, by necessity, sequential and continuous, diachronic rather than

synchronic: 'before us are two events - the event that is narrated in the work and the event of narration itself (we ourselves participate in the latter, as listeners or readers); these events take place in different times (which are marked by different durations) and in different places..' (*The Dialogic Imagination* 255).

In at least one form of the second dominant chronotope, that of the *room*, there is frequently, by contrast, a tacit recognition of this metatextual time-space of narration. One thinks again here of works such as Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Rilke's *The Notebooks of Laurends Mathilde Brigge*, Sartre's *La nausée*, Onetti's *El Pozo* and Beckett's *Malone meurt*, in which the materiality of writing and the problem of the implied reader-listener are brought to the fore. However, as a more general category, the *room* as chronotope is widely used to suggest the separation of private space from the external world, a space moreover where the Bergsonian category of interior time replaces the clock time which governs the exterior world. The room thus also becomes synonymous with identity. Clearly, if the *salon* or *parlour* was the nineteenth century chronotope *par excellence*, critical in the evolution of the novel in that it allowed discourse to develop dialogically, then the *room* represents an equally important conjunction of space-time for the twentieth century novel, with its shift towards interior monologue, solipsism, *anomie*, *inaction*, and the problems of existential separation and boredom.

As a final comment before looking in closer detail at the dominant chronotopes of Onetti's novels, it is worth pointing out that Bakhtin's model is in no way reductive or limiting:

Each (major) chronotope can include within it an unlimited number of minor chronotopes; in fact, as we have already said, any motif may have a special chronotope of its own. Within the limits of a single work and within the total literary output of a single author we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them, specific to the given work or author; it is common moreover for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate the others.' (ibid. 252)



## (ii) The chronotope in Onetti

It is with particular reference to this 'complex interaction' between the various chronotopes both within an individual novel and within the oeuvre taken as a whole that the remainder of this chapter will outline the use of space-time in Onetti. Let us begin with what one might term a 'standard' critical view of the author's aesthetic, which hints at why the label 'existential' is not merely inadequate, but misleading:

'En definitiva, el hombre existe en un vacío creado por la soledad, el aislamiento y la indiferencia, cualidades que nos recuerdan el angustiado de la novela existencialista. Pero si bien estas novelas plantean una situación similar, en ellas el personaje tiene la posibilidad de asumir su condición libremente y luchar por forjarse una existencia auténtica. En cambio al personaje onettiano no se le permite elegir una vida auténtica a partir de la toma de la conciencia del absurdo que surge del choque entre el hombre y el mundo. El ser que vaga por estas novelas está condenado, por una filosofía determinista y fatalista, al fracaso en cuanto se esfuerza por superar su condición. Como resultado lo vemos en un estado de paralización y de abstracción del mundo exterior que culmina en la búsqueda de un refugio en un tiempo pasado y en sueños que sustituyen la realidad insoportable.'<sup>113</sup>

In fine, the sense of determinism that governs the Onettian world, so at odds with Sartrean freedom, causes the protagonist to withdraw and take refuge in memory and reverie.

Now while such a perspective might serve to suggest a psychologically plausible basis to the pessimism of characters such as Brausen, Medina and Linacero, it does scant justice to the radically disorienting world that Onetti actually portrays. There is nothing here to suggest the ageless, childhoodless doctor, nor the circular geometry of the glorieta in which Larsen is condemned to play out 'una serie de encuentros, casi idénticos y tan semejantes que podrían haber sido recordados como tediosas

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<sup>113</sup> Mónica Flori, *El tema de la creación literaria en la narrativa de Juan Carlos Onetti*, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1981, 181.

repeticiones de una misma escena fallida' (A., 68). There is no hint of the relativist visions of Santa María's decline as described by Lanza, Medina and Carr, nor of the illusory stasis of 'naturaleza muerta' which obtains within the rooms of Beatriz, la Queca, Julita and Magda, all of these 'locas' who meet with a violent death. In fact, Onetti manipulates time so that, as Guido Castillo suggests, his creatures exist 'absortos en un tiempo que sólo es presente, de algún modo invulnerables a lo pretérito y a lo porvenir. un presente que no es el tránsito entre lo ya vivido y lo porvenir, sino el espacio en donde el pasado y el futuro confluyen, se aquietan y se amortiguan."<sup>114</sup>

The differences between Santa María and both Faulkner's Yopotnatawpha and García Márquez' earlier Macondo region as *chronotope* is here illustrative. To begin, one might be tempted to group the three together, since each is a fictional space contiguous with the geographically and socio-historically identifiable. More importantly, each partakes largely of the space-time of the Bakhtinian provincial backwater, where it will be recalled:

'such towns are the locus for cyclical everyday time. Here there are no events, only 'doings' that constantly repeat themselves. Time here has no advancing historical movement; it moves rather in narrow circles: the circle of the day, of the week, of the month, of a person's entire life [...] time here is without event and almost seems to stand still. Here there are no "meetings", no "partings". It is a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space' ( *The Dialogic Imagination* 247-8)

However, while the last two regions also share, albeit to a lesser extent, in the Gothic chronotope, which 'is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past...' (ibid., 246), such allusions as point to a past for Santa María are threadbare and notoriously unreliable. One thinks here perhaps of the varying descriptions of Santa María as a provincial non-entity, a regional capital, even a country with its own flag and currency,<sup>115</sup> of the inconsistencies with regard both to Moncha Insaurrealde's flight

<sup>114</sup> Guido Castillo, "Muerte y salvación en Santa María", *El País* (Montevideo), 28/01/1962, 6

<sup>115</sup> The flag has 'los colores rojo y negro de Brausen', the currency 'brausens' (D., 240/1)



from the phalanstary and to Fr. Bergner's death,<sup>116</sup> of the sundry histories of La Torre island, or more overtly still, since it occurs within the short text of *La muerte y la niña*, of the mutability of the statue of 'Brausen: Fundador' noted both by Fr. Bergner and Díaz Grey.

I would contend that, rather than being merely cavalier with regard to earlier texts, Onetti is deliberately falsifying what went before. Each fiction is a self-referential variation upon a theme, a rearrangement of character types and situations analogous to the shuffling of a deck of cards. Each, as Díaz Grey has it, is a possible 'historia que podría ser contada de manera distinta otras mil veces.' (O.C., 1044). To this end, the fictionality of Santa María is, from its very inception in *La vida breve*, consistently foregrounded in a manner that, for all its narrational relativism, has no part in Faulkner's Yopotnatawpha County, and which only begins to occur in García Márquez' final Macondo text, *Cien años de soledad* (1967). This is an important distinction. For many commentators, the role of fantasy in Onetti is escapist in intent, and here they perhaps rely too heavily on Linacero's fantasies with regard to Ana María and Ester, both of which act to an extent as a corrective for failed episodes in the 'mundo de hechos'. If Brausen initially dreams up a younger, intact Elena Sala to compensate for his wife's mastectomy, the stasis and mediocrity with which he subsequently imbues his created world is compensatory only to the extent that the act of creation itself is in some way compensatory.

Santa María, chronotopically akin to the Bakhtinian provincial backwater where 'there are no events, only 'doings' that constantly repeat themselves' and in which 'time here has no advancing historical movement' has been invented by Brausen, lying on his bed in a loveless room, and will be reinvented thirty years later in explicitly parallel manner by Brausen's invention, Medina.<sup>117</sup> The invented worlds, moreover, are shot

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<sup>116</sup> Though we are told in *Juntacadáveres* that the flight takes place long before the protests against Larsen's brothel, this chronology is inconsistent with the short story 'La novia robada'. Similarly, although Fr. Bergner is alive after Díaz Grey is married to Angélica Inés (*La muerte y la niña*), he had died before Larsen's fabled return from exile in *El astillero*. Nor is the account of Petrus' servant Josefina as related in 'El perro tendrá su día' consistent with the maid either of *El astillero* or *Cuando entonces*.

<sup>117</sup> It will be recalled that Medina attempts to arraign Brausen in the penultimate chapter of *La vida breve*, having identified him with the loaded phrase 'Usted es el otro [...] Entonces, usted es

through with identical rooms in which some form of literary invention takes place - one thinks paradigmatically not only of the atemporal bedrooms/locations of the 'locas', but of the consulting room of Díaz Grey, of such singular importance in *La vida breve*, *Para una tumba sin nombre*, *El astillero* and *La muerte y la niña*. Time is to an extent subordinate to space within these rooms,<sup>118</sup> although there are no events beyond those of literary and libidinal invention - there are no 'eventful' events in any real sense. Furthermore, the room is at all times subject to intrusion from without, and as such is the locus of discontinuity between the internal and external experiences of time. This would certainly appear to be the thrust of Linacero's weary epiphany.

The conception of the room here, specifically in terms of the interaction of space and time which, as Bakhtin suggests, is a determinant of the artist's view of humanity, converges with that of Kafka and Beckett. It does not necessarily suggest that the room, as chronotope, has primacy over the provincial, however. Let us review the framework posited by Bakhtin:

'Within the limits of a single work and within the total literary output of a single author we may notice a number of different chronotopes and complex interactions among them, specific to the given work or author, it is common moreover for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate the others.'

(op.cit. 252, emphasis added)

I would suggest that what is most characteristic of Onetti's output is the consistency with which he presents us with two limiting chronotopes, each of which envelopes the other in infinite regression. The arrangement is archetypally set out in *La vida breve*. Brausen, within a room in a city of cyclical, 'provincial' non-events,<sup>119</sup> dreams up simultaneously the room and vice-exister of a provincial doctor, through the windows of whose office one sees coming into being another provincial town. The inhabitants

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Brausen.' (O.C., 694). The prone position is also central to Jorge Malabia's narrative of Rita and the goat in *Para una tumba sin nombre*.

<sup>118</sup> What Onetti's topography of rooms presents to us, though never moving away from a dogged naturalism, hints at the bizarre episode of the lumber-room in Kafka's *Der Prozess* in which time is clearly relative and subordinate to the enclosed space. One is reminded perhaps of the room of Melquíades in García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad*.

<sup>119</sup> It is clear from both *El pozo* and *Tierra de nadie* that Onetti considers the capital cities of the River Plate to be, precisely, provincial backwaters.



who are variously drawn to this town, Malabia, Medina, Larsen, Carr, all play out their cycle of non-eventful events in the interstices between the isolated room and the decaying backwater of Santa María.

'Eventful events', those events which might be said to define human (or 'existential') freedom, are notoriously absent from the above schema, just as they are in the worlds of Beckett and Kafka. Phenomenological ontology is not uniquely centred upon the importance of space-time, however. As Holquist notes,

'In order that the event of existence be more than a random happening, it must have meaning, and to do that it must be perceptible as a stable figure against the ground of the flux and indeterminacy of everything else [...] I perform this transformation by imposing time/space categories appropriate to the other on what is happening..' (*Dialogism, Bakhtin and his World*, 24)

As with Hegel's 'master-slave' dialectic, the role of the 'other' is critical in the constitution of the self, so that: "'Being", for Bakhtin, is not just an event, but an event that is shared. Being is a simultaneity; it is always co-being.' (*ibid.*, 25) It is to the problematic but central place of 'the Other' in the definition of Self that the remainder of the study must now turn its attention.

PART II

THE OTHER





## Ch 5 Language and the Other

'Autant pas se faire d'illusions, les gens n'ont rien à se dire' (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*, 292)

Phenomenological ontology is by no means unique in considering the importance of the 'Other' in the examination the self. From the earliest times the problematic of the other has received close attention not only in the metaphysics of, *inter alia*, Plato and Aristotle, but features as a key concern in all of the humanist sciences and major world religions. Indeed, the possibility of a calculus of ethical judgement is predicated upon the 'supposed equality' of the other, at the least in terms of his ontological status. Thus Richard Kearney, in his insightful study *Poetics of Modernity, toward a Hermeneutic Imagination* traces the categorisation of an ethical dimension to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which: '...human selves discover an ethos binding them to others in a community, tradition or polis. Ethos is the "dwelling" alongside others in which the self finds itself as it cultivates value.' Nevertheless, it seems fair to say that, consequent upon the publication of G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807, with its celebrated 'master-slave' discourse, the defining role of the self-other dialectic in the actual *constitution* of the self began to be acknowledged. This is certainly the forerunner not only of Sartre's *regard*, but of the early Bakhtinian concept of the Other as having the role of author of the subject, partly due to the 'surplus of vision' that he enjoys with respect to the subject/hero (see especially his extended essay 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity'<sup>120</sup>). However, where Hegel and Sartre would view interaction as antagonist, Bakhtin would view it as more correctly dialogic in nature). It is certainly seductive to read the words of Medina in this light, as he attempts to arrest his 'creator' Brausen at the close of the penultimate chapter of *La vida breve*: 'Usted es el otro [...] Entonces, usted es Brausen.' (O.C., 694)

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<sup>120</sup> Collected in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin Holquist and Liapunov ed., Austin, Texas 1990.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the nascent science of cognitive psychology lent not only an empirical basis, but an important diagnostic tool, to this approach, and it is no accident that both Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, the founders of phenomenology, were also pioneers in the field of 'psychognosy'<sup>121</sup>. All psychologists, whether following the tenets of Freud, Jung, Adler, Frankl, Lacan or Kristeva, would coincide in viewing "personality" as essentially an ongoing dialectic between the 'ego' and some aspect of a world of pre-defined relationships in which it finds itself. This may in part explain a perception that there has been something of a convergence between psycho-analytic case studies and certain works of Continental philosophy such as Sartre's *L'être et le néant* and Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la Perception*.<sup>122</sup> If, as we have seen, the spatio-temporal World of phenomenal objects is one *sine qua non* of Being, the existence and interactive presence of other Beings, implicit in Heidegger's *Mitsein* or Sartre's *pour-autrui* is of equal importance. Though the philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre, much as those of Onetti and Beckett, flirt at the edge of solipsism, phenomenological ontology discounts this possibility.

A second important impetus to the new appreciation of the constitutive function of the Other for the self came with the posthumous publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*. By providing linguistics with a new, structuralist paradigm, and by widening the field to embrace a more complete semantics or 'science of signs', Saussure provided a groundwork upon which the study of signification might be founded. The impact was immediate and profound. One of the most characteristic features of both literature and philosophy in the twentieth century is a radical questioning of the nature, indeed the possibility, of language. Much as the process of painting began to be foregrounded in the first decades of the century with the move away from mimetic art, so the early modernist authors began to foreground the mechanics, inadequacies and interstices inherent in language, both as representation and as a means of communication. This move was more or less

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<sup>121</sup> 'A logical geography of mental concepts which will serve as an indispensable preliminary to an empirical psychology.' The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers, 54. It was Brentano himself who coined the neologism.



coterminous with the new focus on semantics in philosophy typified by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose influential *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) famously finishes with the declaration: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'<sup>123</sup> For the writer of alienation, all this was grist to the mill.

(i) Language and the male-female relationship.

*'El aire [sin compromiso y sin futuro] me llegaba del recuerdo de las frases miserables, de la simple y sórdida relación de macho y hembra que las frases habían bosquejado, acentuando con torpeza la dependencia, el mutuo egoísmo, el mezquino sacrificio...'*  
(O.C., 538)

It is a commonplace of criticism that the Onettian hero, the isolated middle-aged male of unsteady or insecure profession, is beset by a sequence of unsatisfactory relationships. Linacero, Aránzuru, Brausen, Medina and Carr all run through a number of failed liaisons at the heart of which lie the inability to communicate. Yet just as, for Camus, the reticence of the Universe would not be absurd but for the human requirement for meaning, so the situation of the above protagonists would be of little moment but for their one defining obsession: each is driven by an urge to write, to communicate. One is perhaps reminded of Beckett's much-quoted 'expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.'<sup>124</sup> Conversely, one might apply the following opinion to any number of Beckett's works: 'Paradójicamente, *El astillero* es una comunicación sobre la

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<sup>122</sup> It may also of course explain the relative disdain with which philosophers working in the analytic tradition have received these works.

<sup>123</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, C.K. Ogden trans., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1988), 189. The original German reads: 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.' (ibid, 188) A later translation follows the German more closely, though arguably at the cost of a certain resonance: 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.' L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness trans., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1961), 151.

incomunicación. Pero, si un mensaje sobre la incomunicación es comunicado, implica una merma de esa incomunicación.<sup>125</sup> Note also a comparable view of the problematics of narration in Kafka: 'Our implied author emerges, behind the parodic mask of the scrupulously neutral and objective experimenter, as a supremely ironic observer of the characters' dilemmas as well as of his own. His central preoccupation is the self-undermining construction of the double-bind, the impasse, the aporia. *He knows it is useless to go on talking, and yet, a masochistic Scheherazade, he also knows that going on talking is the only way of postponing the admission of that uselessness.*<sup>126</sup> Without wishing to speculate on biographical parallels, the series of unsatisfactory relationships, beset by incommunication, which define the sexual interaction of the Kafkan and Beckett hero may usefully be considered a correlative, or perhaps corollary, of this ontological paradox of communication set out above.

Onetti's heroes, no less than K. and Joseph K., Murphy, Molloy and Malone, play out such a correlative. Poised between *ennui* and restlessness, the archetypal male protagonist/artist in Onetti will typically essay the full spectrum of female partners, from wife/girlfriend to adolescent to ageing prostitute. Linacero here serves merely as the prototype, the first in a series. He is also the first to articulate the central dialectic of *suceso-sueño* which is to subsequently animate the poetics of the entire *oeuvre*, and for which as we have seen the dialogue between photograph (absence) and person (presence) is a significant sub-set. The failed relationships, successively with Ana María, Cecilia, Ester and Hanka, all occur in the realm of the *suceso*. The *sueño*, which is more autonomous than a fantasy and hence qualified by the term *aventura*, to an extent acts as a corrective for these failures: 'Pero aquella noche no vino ninguna aventura para recompensarme el día', the narrator at one point laments (*O.C.*, 65). Ana María, who died in her teens, is transformed into the complaisant, naked girl who enters the snow-bound hut, the idealised space. By contrast, it is the attempt to move in the opposite direction, from idealised *recuerdo* to re-enaction, that provokes the

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<sup>124</sup> S. Beckett, *Proust & Three Dialogues with Georges Duthoit*, London: John Calder Ltd. (1999), 103.

<sup>125</sup> Saúl Yurkievich, *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, 356



crisis which leads Linacero's wife Cecilia to sue for divorce (notice the fine irony attached to her surname 'Huerta de Linacero'). However, Linacero's one concerted attempt to communicate the nature of the aventura to a female is, importantly, made possible because the latter is a prostitute. One is immediately reminded of the Underground Man's crisis consequent upon his failed attempt to communicate with the prostitute Lisa.

It is important here to note that there is a certain equivalence posited in Linacero's mind between the prostitute and the poet: 'sin proponérmelo, acudí a las únicas dos clases de gente que podrían comprender. Cordes es un poeta; la mujer, Ester, una prostituta.' (O.C., 58)<sup>127</sup> Similarly, the occasion of his attempted confidence in each case is brought about by a bizarre notion of payment in kind. He is steadfast in his refusal to consider paying for the favours of Ester, and yet, on the occasion in which she finally agrees to go to bed with him and in which he tries to elaborate his imaginative experiences to her, he explains 'tengo, vagamente, la sensación de que, al decir aquello, le pagaba en cierta manera.' (O.C., 66) Again, following Cordes' reading of his poem *El pescadito rojo*, Linacero notes 'me mortificaba la idea de que era forzoso retribuir a Cordes sus versos.' (O.C., 73) The two *aventuras* which he offers in payment are, of course, misunderstood, but it is worth noting in light of the metaphorical equivalence advanced in an earlier chapter that Ester's immediate assumption (the elliptical inference is surely to masturbation) is, in fact, very close to the mark. She has even intuited the central occurrence of Linacero's most important *sueño*, the arrival of the 'mujer desnuda'. It also merits attention that although there is no direct indication as such that language may be problematic in this failed communication, there are circumstantial inferences. Thus Linacero's meetings with Ester take place in a bar in which the prostitutes 'se ríen de los hombres que no entienden el idioma' (O.C., 61),<sup>128</sup> while for the *mise en scène* of the 'aventura' he

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<sup>126</sup> Patrick O'Neill, 'The Comedy of Stasis' from Struc and Yardley ed., *Franz Kafka: His Craft and Thought*, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986, 66, emphasis added.

<sup>127</sup> This equivalence is one of a number of instances of Onetti's notorious misogyny which, frequently explored in recent criticism of Onetti, is beyond the ambit of the present study.

<sup>128</sup> One is perhaps reminded here of the waterfront bar in Borges' *Emma Zunz*, although clearly Onetti's novella of 1939 precedes this.

describes to her: 'estoy en un país que no conozco, donde siempre está lloviendo y no puedo hablar con nadie' (O.C., 67, emphasis added). After their misunderstanding, Linacero's compensatory *sueño* is that he and Ester can meaningfully talk of their fantasies to one another. Interestingly, the trope is repeated in *Para esta noche*: 'Si yo buscaba entenderlo por ese camino me resultaba como estar en el puerto, tomando con marineros y que cada uno cantara una canción en lengua distinta, una lengua para cada canto.' (O.C., 309) One might note in passing that, for Deleuze and Guattari, an author pertains to a 'minor literature' once he feels himself 'to be a sort of stranger *within* his own language; this is the situation of Kafka's *Great Swimmer*', to which the following footnote is added: "'The Great Swimmer'" is undoubtedly one of the most Beckett-like of Kafka's texts: "I have to well admit that I am in my own country and that, in spite of all my efforts, I don't understand a word of the language that you are speaking."<sup>129</sup> As is shown throughout the present chapter, Onetti constantly subverts his native language *from within*, though the idea of the Minority Writer advanced by Deleuze and Guattari is beyond the ambit of the present study.<sup>130</sup>

Aránzuru's trajectory through the fragmented structure of *Tierra de nadie* again involves the panoply of archetypal females: Nené, his original girlfriend, who has committed the one unpardonable sin of becoming pregnant; Nora, the adolescent, who winds up in the charge of Larsen once she too becomes pregnant; Catalina, the ageing prostitute whom Aránzuru naturally doesn't pay (instead, she keeps him); the bourgeoisie Violeta and finally Rolanda, all of whom misinterpret the meaning of the mythical island of Faruru. There is even an abortive attempt on the part of Aránzuru to convince Larsen to accompany him to the island. Thus he at one point confides wryly to Rolanda that 'me parece que a cada uno que conozco le estoy estafando la isla, que se la escondo. Ya la ofrecí a media ciudad; pero no la quieren.' (O.C., 244). The end of the novel finds him seated alone at the bank of the great river Plata listening to the

<sup>129</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 26 & 94

<sup>130</sup> For a discussion of Onetti as minority writer, see Jack Murray, *Kafka, Céline, Onetti: The Landscapes of Alienation*, Stanford U.P., 1991



distant city-scape: 'como si acabara, por fin, de llegar a alguna parte[...]tenía la ciudad a sus espaldas; estaba inmóvil frente al río, solo en el centro del enorme círculo que encerraba el horizonte.'(O.C., 259).

In fact one might divine here the clear parentage of Bardamu, hero of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*.<sup>131</sup> He too moves restlessly through location and relationship, coming closest to stability while being kept by the American prostitute Molly (much as Catalina does, she buys her 'man' a tan coloured suit). Like Aránzuru, he finishes in meditative resignation by the banks of a busy river (the Seine).<sup>132</sup> Indeed, Bardamu leaves Molly for much the same vague impulse (*l'inquiétude*) that drives the Onettian or Beckett anti-hero (one here thinks not only of Murphy or Molloy, but specifically of the narrator of *First Love*, a 'kept man' who, like Aránzuru and Larsen, has an ineluctable horror of progeny). The following passage, which is worth reproducing at length, could have been written by any number of Onetti's narrators as they "choose", or more correctly are compelled, to flee from commitment:

'On devient rapidement vieux et de façon irrémédiable encore. On s'en aperçoit à la manière qu'on a prise d'aimer son malheur malgré soi [...] Moi j'étais parti dans une direction d'inquiétude. On prend doucement son rôle et son destin au sérieux sans s'en rendre bien compte et puis quand on se retourne il est bien trop tard pour en changer. On est devenu tout inquiet et c'est entendu comme ça pour toujours [...] Je l'aimais bien, sûrement, mais j'aimais encore mieux mon vice, cette envie de m'enfuir de partout, à la recherche de je ne sais quoi, par un sot orgueil sans doute, par conviction d'une espèce de supériorité.' (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*, 229)

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<sup>131</sup> That Céline was an important influence on Onetti is well known, not least through his many articles on the Frenchman in *Marcha* magazine. However, while most critics are happy to cite Céline as a key model, there are few studies which examine the literary relationship in any real detail. For this reason the present chapter will take the time to highlight several points of convergence between the two writers.

It is also worth noting the influence of Céline's early work on Sartre, whose novel *La nausée* cites Céline's *L'Eglise* in its epigraph, and Beckett (see for instance "Samuel Beckett, Spoiled Hermit" in John Montague's *The Figure in the Cave*, 105)

<sup>132</sup> Again, it is worth pointing out that in Onetti's final novel, *Cuando ya no importe*, the narrator Carr who is encamped by the river he is contracted to dam passes the time by reading Céline's novel: 'estaba leyendo un viaje que hizo mi amigo Bardamu' (C., 68).

However, it is in the closing paragraphs of each novel that the similarity between the locus, and possible epiphany, of Aránzuru and Bardamu becomes most apparent:

'Fin de jornada. Invisible, a sus espaldas, estaba la ciudad con su aire sucio y las altas casas, con el ir y venir de las gentes, saludos, muertes, manos y rostros, juegos. Ya era la noche y la ciudad zumbaba bajo las luces, con sus hombres, sus sombreros, niños, pañuelos, escaparatés, pasos, pasos como la sangre, como granizo, pasos como una corriente sin destino.

Aquí estaba él sentado en la piedra, con la última mancha de la gaviota en el aire y la mancha de grasa en el río sucio, quieto, endurecido.' (O.C., 261);

'De loin, le remorqueur a sifflé; son appel a passé le pont, encore une arche, une autre, l'écluse, une autre pont, loin, plus loin... Il appelait vers lui toutes les péniches du fleuve toutes, et la ville entière, et le ciel et la campagne, et nous, tout qu'il emmenait, la Seine aussi, tout, qu'on n'en parle plus.' (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*, 504-5)<sup>133</sup>

The pattern of mis-communication and fracture set out in *El pozo* and *Tierra de nadie* repeats in *La vida breve*, with Brausen moving from the impossible relationship with his wife Gertrudis to a violent relationship with the prostitute Queca and a brief liaison with Gertrudis' younger sister, Raquel (who once again falls into the unpardonable failing of pregnancy). But *La vida breve* is far more obviously an expansion of the thesis set out in *El pozo* than was either of the intervening novels. Faced with a number of deeply unsatisfactory relationships, including, it must be said, with the illusive self, Brausen dreams his vice-exister Díaz Grey into being and through him enacts a vicarious relationship with the desirable Elena Sala. More importantly, it is in this novel that the ambivalence of the term *loca*, regional slang for prostitute, is posited rather as an equivalence. If Linacero chose to confide in Ester for the reason that she was a 'loca', subsequent narrators will try to establish some form of

<sup>133</sup> It is interesting to note that both of Knut Hamsun's most influential novels, *Hunger* and *Mysteries*, also finish with the relentless movement of the anti-hero down to a quay (as of course does Larsen in *El astillero*). Onetti cites both Hamsun and Céline as early European influences on his poetics.



communication with mad or feeble minded women: Rita, Julita Malabia, Angélica Inés. However, before moving on to examine the relationship with the *loca* in detail, it is important establish the tenuous relationship that the artist-writer in Onetti has with both the problematics of language and, as a part-corollary, with what Sartre terms the reef of solipsism (*l'écueil du solipsisme*).<sup>134</sup>

## (ii) Language and obfuscation

*'Usted no sabe lo que puede ser para mí encontrar de pronto a una persona con la que se siente que es posible hablar. Aunque resulte, casi siempre, que no tengo nada para decir ni un gran interés por escuchar.'* (O.C., 464)

During one of the many fragmentary dialogues that together form the body of *Tierra de nadie*, the disillusioned artist Casal complains to the assembled group of Nené, Sam, Mauricio and Violeta: 'Todo está en que yo sea yo y no otro. Yo que me llamo así y de ninguna otra manera. *Casi todo queda encerrado en uno y no hay comunicación.*' (O.C., 207, emphasis added). The last sentence might serve for an epigraph for the novel in its entirety, as indeed for both *El pozo* and *La vida breve*. Not surprisingly, the sentiment is later taken up by the disaffected Aránzuru, who is on the point of leaving Rolanda: 'Me voy a dedicar a inventarte. ¿Me entendés? Imaginar quién sos. Pensá un poco. Todos estos días juntos, piel con piel. *Pero cada uno está preso en sí mismo y ... Todo el resto es ilusión.*' (O.C., 254, emphasis added). We have moved on, from the figure of Linacero, 'un hombre solitario que fuma en un sitio cualquiera de la ciudad' (O.C., 75), towards a more explicitly solipsistic formulation of the problem, and it is but a short step from here to Larsen's famous epiphany in *El astillero*:

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<sup>134</sup> The relationship of Kafka's heroes to women is scarcely more felicitous, and here again one notices the archetype of the mistress or 'shared' woman to which each is instinctively drawn: Karl Rossman to the grotesque Grunelda; Joseph K. first to Fraulein Bürstner and then to Leni; K. to Frieda. Symptomatic of the unease at the heart of each liaison is the public space, open both to the gaze and to physical intrusion, in which each sexual encounter takes place.

'Sospeché, de golpe, lo que todos llegan a comprender, más tarde o más temprano: que era el único hombre vivo en un mundo ocupado por fantasmas, que la comunicación era imposible y ni siquiera deseable, que tanto daba la lástima como el odio, que un tolerante hastío, una participación dividida entre el respeto y la sensualidad eran lo único que podía ser exigido y convenía dar.' (A., 145-6)<sup>135</sup>

It is clear, then, that the problem is not merely one of circumstantial isolation nor of urban *anomie*. The problematics of language, of the word, are not merely symptomatic of this 'condición desarraigada', they actively contribute to it. While Frankenthaler, speaking of *Los adioses*, notes that 'Las palabras se revelan como un medio de incomunicación en la acumulación de hechos desmentidos y de conclusiones falsas' (op.cit, 106), her emphasis focuses on the word's epistemological rather than ontological inadequacies. As will be seen, language, insofar as it is constitutive of identity, is equally brought into question.

Much of Onetti's *oeuvre* is centred upon a poetics of absence, and the inadequacies of language are both symptomatic of and contributive to the impossibility not only of communication, but of what Sartre might term co-incidence with the Self. Language is to be understood here as in an important sense constitutive of the self.<sup>136</sup> It is in the regard that the later Heidegger talks of language as the 'house of Being'

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<sup>135</sup> Notice also the Idealism, and therefore solipsism, that underlies Marcos Bergner's sensation in the following: 'a pesar del recuerdo, los veía ahora por primera vez, los veía como si sus ojos los fueran creando, como si su muerte o su negativa a mirar significaran el aniquilamiento de la orilla cubierta de yuyos, del sol de verano, de la galería sostenida por vigas oblicuas...' (J.145). The same position, half glanced, never afforded any faith, is evident in Marcos' young brother-in-law as presented in the earlier novel *Para una tumba sin nombre*, although without the emphasis on the creative rôle of sight 'Me llamo Jorge Malabia. No sucedió nada antes del día de mi nacimiento; y, si yo fuera mortal, nada podría suceder después de mí.' (O.C., 1026)

<sup>136</sup> In his essay *El laberinto de la soledad* Octavio Paz noted the intrinsic link between language and morality: '(L)as raíces de las palabras se confunden con las de la moral [...] Todo estilo (del lenguaje) es algo más que una manera de hablar: es una manera de pensar y, por lo tanto, un juicio implícito o explícito sobre la realidad que nos circunda.' But language is also an inherited system, operating specifically on the plane of the symbolic. For Lacan, drawing on Heidegger in addition to Sartre, speech, like Saussurian *parole*, is the act by which the self tries to locate itself within the nexus of language (*langue*). It is inherently relational, and depends upon the Other. In both Beckett and Onetti, and indeed in Joseph K.'s 'defence', the role of expression, of locating the Self (by virtue of differences) within the pre-existing symbolic order, takes precedence over any idea of communication *per se*.



and Lacan emphasises its role in the repositioning of the self within the significative order of the Other.<sup>137</sup> Sartre's *L'être et le néant*, following Heidegger, also espouses such a view of language: 'Le langage n'est pas un phénomène surajouté à L'être-pour-autrui : il est originellement L'être-pour-autrui, c'est-à-dire le fait qu'une subjectivité s'éprouve comme objet pour l'autre.' (*op.cit.* 412) Language is therefore one system of signification by which the Other has intercourse with the *cogito*, though as we shall see in all three authors of estrangement both physical and ocular intrusion are ever-present possibilities for more immediately effecting such intercourse. Neither can language act as guarantor to the integrity of the Self, and here Onetti's questioning converges with that of late Beckett (*Stirrings still* particularly appears to put in doubt the continuity of the self). For Zunilda Gertel, Onetti's use of textual fragmentation and discontinuity is predicated upon just such doubt: 'Su escritura manifiesta esta discontinuidad del signo lingüístico como un yo que se reencarna y dispersa en su búsqueda de proyectarse *al otro* o a *lo otro*.[...] La proyección al otro, sin embargo, no implica unidad de la identidad sino sólo encuentro fragmentario.' Zunilda Gertel, *El yo y el mundo de lo otro en el espacio narrativo de La vida breve*, 252/255.

Language may also prove problematic in the opposite direction, in the *res cogitans*' understanding of the *res extensa*, the outer world, and here one is always in danger of falling into the nominalist trap. For the eponymous adolescent of the early short story *Bienvenido, Bob*, the nominalist fallacy of creating global concepts through

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<sup>137</sup> Lacan's various explorations of the *stade du miroir*, the earliest of which dates from the Marienbad Congress of the International Psychoanalytical association (1936), have of course been hugely influential in literary criticism. Of particular relevance to both Beckett and Onetti are the following ideas largely taken from *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage*: (i) Much as in Heidegger, the relations of self to world are predicated upon (semiotic) meaning. These relations are either imaginary or symbolic in nature, never 'realist' (undifferentiated by phenomenological intention) (ii) The *imago*, the spectral self encountered in the mirror or in the relationship to the Other, is a means by which the hitherto fragmented body is allowed to coalesce into an objectified Gestalt. (iii) The objectified self attempts to become a subject by inscribing itself within the symbolic (linguistic) order, but this subject does not coincide with the ego/cogito. (Within the symbolic order, the signifier, which is by nature associative, takes precedence over the signified). (iv) There is a consequent schism between the ego, which is imaginary, and the subject, which is symbolic. The 'unified self' suggested by the pronoun 'I' is a fiction through which one tries to paper over this schism. (v) The unconscious, structured itself as a language, inscribes its meanings on the body. If Heidegger tried to encapsulate his view of the self in the term *Da-sein*, Lacan's neologism '*parlêtre*', combining 'parler' and 'être', highlights the interdependence of being and language. (See also Appendix I)

the word is characteristic of the loss of innocence that characterises ageing. Bob is particularly critical of the narrator's presumed view of the young Inés:

'Estuvo diciendo que en aquello que él llamaba vejez, lo más repugnante, lo que determinaba la descomposición, o acaso lo que era símbolo de descomposición, era pensar por conceptos, englobar a las mujeres en la palabra mujer, empujarlas sin cuidado para que pudieran amoldarse al concepto hecho por una pobre experiencia. Pero - decía también - tampoco la palabra experiencia era exacta. No había ya experiencias, nada más que costumbres y repeticiones, nombres marchitos para ir poniendo a las cosas y un poco crearlas.' (O.C., 1225)

One might also detect a nominalist or even idealist tendency in a number of 'innocent' comments, such as the following from *Juntacadáveres*: 'la esperanza de que las palabras pudieran imponer la vestidura de los hechos a lo que había sentido mientras se bañaba.' (J.146). It would be difficult, however, to judge whether or not Onetti is at these times foregrounding the textuality, since, as is well known, the writing act is postulated as a valid means for escaping the mundane. With regard to the act of articulation *per se*, however, it is worth noting that on occasion Onetti's epistemology approaches that of Borges. This is particularly true in the notion of the ineffable. Thus, as Yurkievich notes with regard to Larsen's understanding of the 'trap' inherent in Petrus' shipyard: 'La trampa que atrapa a Larsen es innominable (<Ahora estaba en la trampa y era incapaz de nombrarla...>). El astillero divorcia al signo de la cosa significada, las palabras no relacionan con el mundo.' (Saúl Yurkievich, *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, 346 footnote 7)<sup>138</sup>

However, language, insofar as it is communicative, also presupposes a certain minimal faith. Borges states in the title story of *El Aleph*, in what he terms (with characteristic tendency towards oxymoron) the 'inefable centro de mi relato', that

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<sup>138</sup> The inability of language to mesh adequately with experience is equally foregrounded in "El infierno tan temido", when, on receiving the second photograph, 'Risso temió, sobre todo, no ser capaz de soportar un sentimiento desconocido que no era ni odio ni dolor, *que moriría con él sin nombre...*' (O.C., 1295, emphasis added).



'todo lenguaje es un alfabeto de símbolos cuyo ejercicio presupone un pasado que los interlocutores comparten'.<sup>139</sup> Doubts as to such faith, such shared experience, frequently undermine the validity of the entire enterprise, and in this regard Díaz Grey closely approximates the unreliable Borgesian narrator. This Borgesian turn is particularly explicit in the following, which forms the denouement of *Para una tumba sin nombre*: 'Y cuando pasaron bastantes días de reflexión para que yo dudara también de la existencia del chivo, escribí, en pocas noches, esta historia. *La hice con algunas deliberadas mentiras...*' (O.C., 1045, emphasis added). If the ludic character of this story is somewhat exceptional, the solipsism underlying the writing act is not. Rejecting recourse to his own past, it is scarcely surprising that Díaz Grey's forerunner, Linacero, finds language inadequate for his purposes. He continually points out the shortcomings of his writing.

But to return to the idea of faith, Linacero is characteristic of all Onettian heroes in that he can say of himself 'es cierto que nunca tuve fe' (O.C., 70). Of his much maligned flatmate, the activist Lázaro, who initially seems to be posited as a foil to the poet Cordes, he finally admits 'es él el poeta y el soñador [...] Lázaro es un cretino pero tiene fe, cree en algo [...] ama a la vida y solo así es posible ser un poeta' (O.C., 74). But what would it profit Linacero if he too were a 'poeta'? The answer would seem to reside in the possibility of in some way articulating the ineffable. Beckett's Molloy talks of a time when, his sense of identity failing him, 'there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names.' (Molloy 41); Watt is bothered that he 'now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance.' (Watt, 78) Against all the odds, the poet Cordes is able to transcend such an abjectly isolated condition: 'Cosas sin nombre, cosas que andaban por el mundo buscando un nombre, saltaban sin descanso de su boca, o iban brotando porque sí, en cualquier parte remota y palpable.' (O.C., 72-3). Onetti's writers, although they may aspire to write 'la historia de un alma', lack the faith to

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<sup>139</sup> Borges, *El Aleph*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial (1997), 191

achieve such transcendence. It is a rare event indeed that they show their writings to anybody.<sup>140</sup>

There is what might be termed an ontic chasm separating the male from the female throughout Onetti's work. Linacero articulates this in no uncertain terms: 'cuando pienso en las mujeres ... Aparte de la carne, que nunca es posible hacer de uno por completo, ¿qué cosa de común tienen con nosotros?' (O.C., 60), or again in a somewhat infamous passage 'No sé nada de la inteligencia de las mujeres y tampoco me interesa [...] terminan siendo todas iguales, con un sentido práctico hediondo, con sus necesidades materiales y un deseo ciego y oscuro de parir un hijo.' (O.C., 63) This is not the place to examine the misogyny inherent in Onetti, and in fact the attempts to establish a meaningful relationship between men is scarcely more felicitous.<sup>141</sup> However, what is important is that, much as occurs in Beckett, the speech act by which one tries to locate one's self within the symbolic order becomes replaced on the level of the imaginary-real by the physical act. The displaced site of interaction is the body.<sup>142</sup>

Although a more complete examination of the role of the body in Onetti is to be attempted in chapter 6 below, several points merit our immediate attention. The first of these is that carnal interaction in all three key authors seldom if ever relates to carnal desire. Linacero is quite clear on this: 'Pero entonces yo no la miraba con deseo,' he writes of Ana María regarding the build up to the assault, and again 'No tuve nunca,

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<sup>140</sup> Notice again the following view of the narrator of *Der Prozess*: 'He knows it is useless to go on talking, and yet, a masochistic Scheherazade, he also knows that going on talking is the only way of postponing the admission of that uselessness. His self-consciously self-directed texts are ironically angled mirrors in which he may, voyeur-like, observe himself [...] To a degree the texts may thus be viewed as potentially (fictively) therapeutic, but in a more insistent sense they are essentially parodic, ironic, inauthentic...' P. O'Neill, 'the Comedy of Stasis', from Struc and Yardley ed. *Franz Kafka,; His Craft and Thought* Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986, 66.

<sup>141</sup> Larsen is typical here, when he laments to his favorite prostitute María Bonita 'Me gustaría estar con un hombre para hablar.' (J.132) However, he soon tempers this rather vague desire with the admission that even with Díaz Grey, communication would remain elusive: 'Pero era inútil hablar y sobre todo con ella; y si había imaginado tener allí a Díaz Grey, si había imaginado una violenta necesidad de compadecer y contradecir al pequeño pusilánime doctor era, debía haber sido, por el placer, la irritación, la consciente desesperanza que le prometía el abandono a la inutilidad de hablar.' (J.138, emphasis added)

<sup>142</sup> One might think here of the system of knocks on the skull which Molloy develops in order to communicate his needs to his decrepit mother. See also Chapter 6 below.



en ningún momento, la intención de violarla; no tenía ningún deseo por ella.' (O.C., 53). The same is essentially true in regard to his purpose of going to bed with the prostitute Ester: 'Yo no tenía ningún interés' (O.C., 66); it is rather that earlier, 'me propuse tenerla gratis.' (O.C., 62). It is clear then that these physical encounters derive ultimately from a will to power, from a wish to assert a certain disdain, rather than from desire *per se*. A similar calculus seems to be at the heart of the relationship between Brausen/Arce and la Queca which moves first towards physical violence - he strikes her on a number of occasions - and culminates in her violent death. Although Brausen/Arce is not the direct agent of this last act, he assumes authorship of it much in the manner whereby Ivan assumes authorship of the parricide in *The Brothers Karamazov*.<sup>143</sup>

For the physically powerful and moralistic Marcos Bergner, the problem that with respect of the flesh 'que nunca es posible hacer de uno por completo' seems to be a source of disgust. In the following passage, he is in bed with the Malabia maid, Rita, and is being spied on by the young Jorge:

'-No hables - dijo Marcos, separando la cantimplora [...] - No hables. Una sola carne. Tiene que ser así, debe ser así porque si no todo el mundo se habría suicidado. Nadie podría aguantarlo. Todos somos inmundos y la inmundicia que traemos desde el nacimiento, hombres y mujeres, se multiplica por la inmundicia del otro' (J., 185).

It must be said, of course, that his relationships are characterised more by the repeated 'no hables' than by the lament which follows this, and he is notoriously violent. However, the desire to strike even animates the young Jorge Malabia. In the chapter that immediately precedes the one above, in a scene moreover in which the inefficacy of words is a central theme of conversation, his liaison with his sister-in-law Julita has finally led to physical intimacy. She has already told him that: 'no quiero explicarte nada, las cosas tienen que ser sin palabras' (J., 179), and it would appear they have been

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<sup>143</sup> This Dostoevskian motif of transferred guilt would also appear to animate the narrator of Onetti's short story 'La cara de la desgracia', when he allows himself to be arrested for the deaf girl's murder for which (one assumes) he is innocent. It is unclear whether he feels impelled to do this because he has deflowered her, because of his brother's suicide or because of some deeper, ontic sense of guilt.

talking at cross-purposes for some time. When she finally allows her young charge to bed her, he responds by substituting physical dominance for their hitherto verbal games:

'la hago caer de espaldas y le pego en la cara, una sola vez, sin violencia. La sujeta y la beso, le hago doblar una rodilla y casi riéndome, agradecido, libre de ella, feliz ahora de haber atravesado paciente el larguísimo prólogo, el juego y la espera que ella supo imponer, entro en el tembor del cuerpo, amo la crueldad y la alegría.' (J., 181)

With all of the above considerations in mind, hitherto innocent remarks which allude vaguely to the constitutive function of language take on a more transcendental significance. The following, for instance, is from early in *Tierra de nadie*: 'La diferencia está en que Friné era una cortesana. Oh, las palabras! Y esta pobre infeliz, como ustedes saben...*Le mot fait la chose*.' (O.C., 165). Now the extent to which *le mot fait la chose*, to which language may fill the void left by the inadequacies of the real world, is of course central to Onetti's *poesis* and merits close analysis. However, there is little optimism surrounding the possibilities either of articulating or of understanding the world through language, and here Onetti's essentially nominalist view of the language approximates to Beckett's. The following, from the early short story *Bienvenido Bob*, might have been spoken by any number of Beckett's soliloquists: 'No había ya experiencias, nada más que costumbres y repeticiones, nombres marchitos para ir poniendo a las cosas y un poco crearlas.' (O.C., 1225)

The present study, therefore, intends to effect this not, as has frequently been done, in respect to the macrocosm of the *sueño*, whether the *Bahía de Arrak*, the text of *Para esta noche*, or indeed Santa María's various incarnations, but rather in terms of the language tropes employed in the various texts. If language were both transparent and truly a shared space, then perhaps one might be in a position to overcome radical isolation. But here again, as will be illustrated, one encounters a site of estrangement. Thus the solipsistic Aránzuru, for whom language would serve as an ideal metaphor for the world precisely to the extent that it is fragmented and inadequate, wonders with somewhat less than innocent irony: '¿Qué tenía de común con



nada de lo que integra la vida, con los mil cosas que la van haciendo y son ella misma, como las palabras hacen la frase?' (O.C., 88, emphasis added).

### (iii) Language as constitutive of Self

As Josefina Ludmer has convincingly shown in her study *Onetti: Los procesos de construcción del relato*, Brausen's impulse to write relates directly to the absent space left by his wife's mastectomy:

'(el pecho cortado) ha dejado sin objeto la mano derecha del que anuncia; la falta le ocurre en el otro - la mujer -, en el aire común y en éste, la primera persona: "Habría llegado entonces el momento de *mi mano derecha*, la hora de la farsa de apretar *en el aire*, exactamente, una forma y una resistencia que no estaban y que no habían sido olvidadas aún por mis dedos" [...] Más adelante la mano derecha sostiene "la pluma fuente" de la escritura.'

(Ludmer *op cit*, 22)

However, it is not merely for the creator, Brausen, that the possibility of filling the void left by the breast through the medium of the word suggests itself. As we are about to see, words are frequently presented as tangible objects in Onetti, and therefore it is scarcely surprising that the distraught Gertrudis should also engage in the game of filling out a new breast through the verbal medium, this despite the fact that the woman in Onetti is usually excluded from the realm of the imaginary-creative:

'Ella (Gertrudis) en la cama, sin sollozar todavía; la madre subiendo y bajando la escalera para atenderla y retirle las dos o tres frases que aconsejaban la resignación y prometían el júbilo, las frases que había logrado armar entre caricias y miedo, que barajaría como naipes y depositaría incansablemente en Gertrudis. Y ella, a pesar del llanto en el alba, acabaría por dormirse, para descubrir, por la mañana, mientras se le desprendían precipitados los sueños, que las palabras de consuelo no habían estado desbordando en su pecho durante la noche; que no habían brotado en su

pecho, que no se habían amontonado, sólidas, elásticas y victoriosas, para formar la mama que faltaba.' (O.C., 457)

The word 'mama' is, here as elsewhere, ambivalent. Gertrudis' locus in *La vida breve* is towards the lost world of her childhood.

Brausen, the first-person narrator of *La vida breve*, is equally able to imagine how his own image might be constructed from the sounds, words and silences that surround him:

' Si alguien escuchara con atención al otro lado de la pared, terminaría por saber con quien está ella; el sonido de su risa y las palabras que dice irían delimitando mi silencio y mi quietud, harían, finalmente, el vaciado de mi cuerpo, mi cara y mis manos en el sillón.' (O.C., 516)

In fact, as will be shown below, Brausen lacks any solid definition of himself which is not predicated upon the characteristics and negations which define him by virtue of the Other.

From the earliest works, sounds and vibrations can take on a solid and somewhat menacing substantiality in Onetti, so that a precedent is already in place for words themselves to acquire mass. *El pozo* for instance includes the curious 'Estoy seguro de poder descubrir una arruga justamente en el sitio donde ha gritado una golondrina' (O.C., 75). In Onetti's next novel, the adolescent girl Nora is menaced by the trilling of a telephone in a disturbing metaphor that perhaps recalls the paintings of Malevich or Ernst:

'Espiaba el zumbido del campanilleo en la sombra como a un insecto alado y peligroso que revolteara buscándola.

Los golpes en erre salieron del teléfono, tomando altura. Chocaron en la caja de hierro, el 23 del almanaque, resbalaron por la arpillera de las paredes, la cabeza torturada del cuadro, la mancha blanca del diploma enmarcado. De regreso, cruzaron, rozando la máquina enfundada, los gruesos libros, y el último runrún dio, desde el borde de la mesa, un rápido salto para esconderse nuevamente en el aparato.' (O.C., 85)



The trill of a telephone is by no means a neutral sound; for Nora, it indicates the threat of allowing a voice to violate the sanctuary of the office. Words themselves occasionally assume a tangibility in this novel, a trope which serves to augment rather than diminish the isolation of the individual and his sense of existential nausea: 'Mañana iría a ver a Nora y le diría algo, palabras que andaban por los espejos y las paredes relumbrantes y que se pondría a juntar en seguido del vómito...' (O.C., 163). Nora is, of course, pregnant. There is an important precedent in *El pozo* for this physicality of the verbal which seems to have escaped critical attention. The pejorative '¡Fraa...casado!' with which Lázaro taunts Linacero, voiced in 'un acento extranero que me hace comprender cabalmente lo que puede ser el odio racial' (O.C., 69), is introduced in an image which metaphorically identifies it with Ana María's gesture of spitting: 'sabe también defenderse. Sabe llenarse la boca con una palabra y la hace sonar como si escupiera.' (*ibid.*)

By the time Onetti comes to write *Juntacadáveres* some twenty years later, it is quite definitely the word itself which acquires such hallucinatory and disquieting metamorphoses. This is particularly apparent in the following scenes in which Jorge Malabia is present both as narrator and focaliser:

'Julita abre la puerta y las palabras quejosas, previstas, se escapan como animales hacia el barro, hacia el ruido de las gotas que bajan de los árboles.'  
(J., 33)

'...quiero decir alguna palabra afirmativa con un tono indudable de seguridad, de desdén por toda imaginable suposición contraria. Pero la palabra, como un insecto en un papel cazamoscas, se me queda forcejeando, muda en las mucosidades de la garganta.' (J., 37)

'La última frase, gangosa como un insecto, se detuvo sobre los ojos cerrados de Marcos.' (J.146)

For Julita, the word itself is to an extent more repulsive than the state that it describes. Thus, talking of her dead husband Federico, she explains to Jorge: '-Ahora está muerto. Muerto. Hay que repetir la palabra. Antes era obscena, recuerdas, mil veces peor que la palabra más sucia. Ahora no; solo él está muerto, está, es un

muerto...En cuanto a la palabra, nunca sonó tan sucia como ahora, tan hedionda, marchita y miserable.' (J., 34).

A word presented in such a defamiliarising manner serves significantly to highlight the isolation of the individual, since communication is predicated upon shared meaning. For Morasán, the very name of his estranged wife Beatriz, 'una sola palabra perdida que yo pueda recoger', can become a symbol of the gulf of incomprehension that separates them:

'Pero había oído claramente la palabra, la voz, los sonidos que había hecho, los pequeños sonidos escondidos en ellos, los bordes duros de algunos, la blandura informe y pastosa de otros y se extrañaba recordando la palabra porque ya no era un nombre, no era un llamado, nada había después ni antes de la palabra, podía evocarla como una voz incomprensible, como un largo gruñido de la perra, como el crujido de un mueble. Y hasta la idea de que la palabra podía haber tenido sentido alguna vez se alejaba...' (O.C., 399-400)

Beatriz is an early instance of the mad woman isolated in her timeless bedroom, and it is noteworthy that once again the Onettian theme of violence is linked to communication. In the interior monologue in which he begs to 'no estar solo esta noche', he goes on to explain his curious requirement for recognition from her: 'necesito comprender que ella sabe que estoy aquí, que puedo golpearla y no la golpeo, que la estoy mirando y que no es amor' (O.C., 400). In the end, anticipating Brausen/Arce's homicidal impulse, he becomes her executioner.

Another novel which foregrounds the role of language both in ideation and the considerable gulf that separates linguistic/imaginative from perceptual experience is the short masterpiece *Los adioses*, written after *La vida breve* but before the central 'baroque trilogy' of the Santa María project. As is well known, the entire plot is founded upon a fundamental misconception with regard to the triangular relationship at the heart of the story. It is important however to point out that, as Wolfgang Luchting notes in his seminal study *'El lector como protagonista de la novela Onetti: Los*



adioses',<sup>144</sup> the entire work is constructed upon 'el lenguaje de la ambigüedad' and that therefore the narrator's epiphanous encounter with what he subsequently believes to be the truth of the situation may conceal a more profound or disturbing triangle. Onetti himself, in response to Luchting's interpretation, remarks that '(Luchting) aventura una media vuelta de tuerca que nos aproxima a la verdad, a la interpretación definitiva. Pero sigue faltando una media vuelta de tuerca...' (Ad., 30).

Both the woman and the girl are, characteristically, presented as partly concealed, the former wearing sunglasses and the latter gloves, but with regard to language, it is noteworthy that while the woman writes 'con las anchas letras sinceras', the girl writes 'con una máquina de cinta gastada' (Ad., 53). Moreover, it is with the unexpected arrival of the young girl during the narrator's New Year's party that attention is drawn directly to the inadequacies and multivalencies of language. For the narrator: 'Pensaba que ella era demasiado joven, que no estaba enferma, que *había tres o cuatro adjetivos para definirla y que eran contradictorios*.' (Ad., 65, emphasis added). In the same scene, the young Levy feels that, while in brief conversation with the girl, he can detect 'lo que la muchacha decía y lo que estaba debajo de las palabras, con su pasado y su futuro.' (ibid.). Given the novel's central concern with the human tendency to extrapolate from meagre evidence so as to support a prejudice, the confidence that Levy *chico* here expounds is certain to be misguided. The narrator, too, for all that he displays an aloof contempt for popular morality, is scarcely less a stranger to ill-founded conjecture. When the girl and woman meet at the health resort, he confidently asserts not only that they had never seen each other prior to this meeting, but furthermore that the woman had little idea, through the man's reticence, of how her rival might look. Notice again the implication of the constitutive role of the adjective: 'Nunca había visto una foto suya, nunca logró arrancar al hombre adjetivos suficientes para construirse una imagen de lo que debía temer y odiar.' (Ad., 93)

The human tendency to form a *Gestalt* from isolated and partial evidence is also suggested in the following description of the invalid:

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<sup>144</sup> The essay, which acts as a preface to the present edition of *Los adioses*, also appears in Giacomani ed., *Homenaje a Onetti*, New York: L.A. Publishing (1974), 191-205.

'no era más que pómulos, la dureza de la sonrisa, el brillo de los ojos, activo e infantil. Me costaba creer que pudiera hacerse una cara con tan poca cosa: le agregué una frente ensanchada y amarilla, ojeras, líneas azules a los lados de la nariz, cejas unidas, retintas.' (Ad. 113).

Practices of extrapolation and interpolation, of filling in blanks and of taking conjecture as fact are also implicit in the various conversations which the narrator has with the enfermero, and indeed from the opening sentences of the novel: 'Quisiera no haber visto del hombre, la primera vez que entró en el almacén, nada más que las manos [...] para saber que no iba a curarse, que no conocía nada de donde sacar voluntad para curarse' (Ad., 33). But Onetti's texts never confine themselves to the shortcomings of our cognitive faculties, to epistemological inadequacy. The problem is far more profound than this since, as we are about see, the Other, together not only with his linguistic system but with what Sartre famously termed 'le regard', are essential to the definition of Self.

#### (iv) Authenticity and The Other.

José María Brausen, the demiurge who writes or, more correctly, thinks Santa María into being, is acutely aware of the role of the Other in the tenuous hold he has on his Self. This absence of definition, what Sartre might classify as the lack of coincidence or identity with self which is characteristic of the *pour-soi*, in fact serves, paradoxically, to define Brausen. He is somewhat in the position of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who is haunted by just such a lack of definition: 'I tell you solemnly that I have wanted to make an insect of myself many times. But I couldn't succeed even in that.' (*Notes from Underground*, 17). The idea, taken up by Onetti, that a word may convey on him a defining feature is indeed explicitly articulated by the Underground Man:

'Oh, if only it was out of laziness that I do nothing! Lord, how much I should respect myself then! I should respect myself because I had something inside me, even if it was only laziness; I should have at any rate one positive



quality of which I could be sure. Question: what is he? Answer: a lazy man; and it really would be very pleasant to hear that said of me. It would mean being positively defined, it would mean that there was something that could be said of me.' (*ibid.*, 28)

And indeed the various misguided attempts to impose his presence on other people, to force them to define him (most notably with the prostitute Lisa whom he mentally tortures) find their counterpart in both the Linacero/Ester and the Queca/Arce relationships. However, much as Robert Musil's Ulrich, he remains obstinately a *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*.

Brausen seems *ab initio* to be aware of the degree to which he is defined by the expectations and perceptions of others, his contempt for them notwithstanding: 'cada uno acepta lo que va descubriendo de sí mismo en las miradas de los demás, se va formando en la convivencia, se confunde con el que suponen los otros y actúa de acuerdo con lo que se espera de ese supuesto inexistente.' (*O.C.*, 656). Identity, such as it exists, is therefore dependent upon conformity to the perceived expectations of others, a motif familiar to all existential theories of the self. The non-specificity of the 'los demás' relates it to the Heideggerian notion of 'das Man', a neuter form:

'Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in subjection [Botmässigkeit] to Others. It itself *is* not; its Being has been taken away by the Others. Dasein's everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please. These Others, moreover, are not *definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them. What is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others which has already taken over unawares from Dasein as Being-with. One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. 'The Others' whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one's belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part '*are there*' in everyday Being-with-one-another. The 'who' is not this one, not that one, not oneself

{man selbst], not some people [einige], and not the sum of them all. The 'who' is the neuter, *the 'they' [das Man]*.<sup>145</sup>

More often than not, such expectations as are perceived by Brausen are in the form of negations. An important passage some two hundred pages before the earlier quote thus gives an idea of the void that is at the heart of Brausen's conformity (comparable to the more succinct ontology expressed several novels later by Díaz Grey: '... sólo nos diferenciamos por el tipo de autonegación que hemos elegido o nos fue impuesto.' [J., 26]):

'Éste, yo en el taxímetro, inexistente, mera encarnación de la idea Juan María Brausen, símbolo bípedo de un puritanismo barato hecho de negativas - no al alcohol, no al tabaco, un no equivalente para las mujeres -, nadie, en realidad; un nombre, tres palabras, una diminuta idea construida mecánicamente por mi padre, sin oposiciones, para que sus también heredadas negativas continuaran sacudiendo las engréidas cabecitas aun después de su muerte.' (O.C., 476-7)

Several important concepts that are associated with the existentialist *Weltanschauung* are here articulated, most obviously the ideas of fallenness into inauthenticity and related to this the place of 'the they'. For the existentialist, it is identification with the latter which is critical in establishing a normative flight from self (so as to obviate existential anguish or dread), though it should be borne in mind that not all existentialist thinkers are writing within the same agenda. The idea of 'the herd' in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and, to an extent, of 'das Man' in Heidegger is by no means identical with the ontological necessities of *Mitsein* and *pour-autrui*. It would be mistaken in the extreme to assume that the flight of Linacero, Brausen or Medina into writing/imagining would constitute for the moral existentialist a flight into the authentic. The latter, for Onetti, would rather imply the perfect silence that so eludes the Beckett consciousness: 'Aunque uno esté más allá, por encima, separado de

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<sup>145</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Macquarrie and Robinson trans., London: Blackwell (1998), 164 (italics in original).



todo esto, sólo puede actuar y decir como si estuviera en esto y ligado. La verdad sería el silencio, la quietud completa.' (J. 83).

Interaction, however, is a necessary part of Being's thrownness, no more a choice than is the experience of the *Lebenswelt*:

'Heidegger's view is [...] that Dasein's Being is Being-with; in other words, just as with Dasein's worldliness, its inherently social forms are not a limitation upon it but a limit - a further condition of the human way of being. So authentic Being-oneself could not involve detachment from Others; it must rather require a different form of relationship with them - a distinctive form of Being-with.' S. Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time*, London: Routledge (1996), 70

Moreover, it is of singular importance to bear in mind that unlike Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre, once the description of the inauthentic life of conformity is evoked in Onetti, he certainly proposes no leap into faith, authenticity, social commitment or praxis which might allow one to live in good faith. In fact, the whole Onettian project might even be seen as a further flight from anxiety, since one flees not only from the void of the self but also from the ontological necessity of Being-with-others. Thus Brausen describes the conditions which are conducive to the birth of his contiguous identity as Arce::

*'Libre de la ansiedad, renunciando a toda búsqueda, abandonado a mí mismo y al azar, iba preservando de un indefinido envilecimiento al Brausen de toda la vida, lo dejaba concluir para salvarlo, me disolvía para permitiiir el nacimiento de Arce, Sudando en ambas camas, me despedía del hombre prudente, responsable, empeñado en construirse un rostro por medio de las limitaciones que le arrimaban los demás, los que lo habían precedido, los que aún no estaban, él mismo.'* (O.C., 605-6, emphasis added)

Of course, Arce in no way renounces the ontological need for recognition, the need for the Other, and his physical bullying of la Queca is in essence a variation on the master-slave dialectic of Hegel's 'Phenomenology of the Mind' which so influenced Sartre (see

especially *L'Être et le néant*, 274-283). The point is, as is noted by Mulhall (op.cit., 67-8):

'...talk of Dasein's Being-with Others as solicitude is an ontological claim: it does not deny that Dasein can be and often is indifferent or hostile to the well-being of others, but rather brings out the ontological underpinning of all specific ontic relations to one's fellow human beings, whether they be caring or aggressive [...] Our usual sense of who we are, Heidegger claims, is purely a function of how we differ from others. We understand those differences as something to be eliminated at all costs, thus taking conformity as our aim; or (perhaps less commonly) as something that at all costs must be emphasized and developed - a strategy which only appears to avoid conformity, since our goal is then to distinguish ourselves from others rather than to distinguish ourselves in some particular, independently valuable way, and so amounts to allowing others to determine (by negation) the way we live.'

Such an approach typifies the adolescent posturing of Jorge Malabia in his struggle to construct his present persona. Note the importance of the other's perception of difference in the following:

'Yo solo quiero cosas, novedades concretas, absurdos *que me hagan distinto; quiero que me miren, quiero ser el escándalo, quiero que les sea imposible confundirme con ellos mismos, tenerme y pensarme como un igual. No me interesa un pasado, el mañana es siempre territorio ajeno.*' (J. 96, emphasis added).

However if the Other, the non-specific Other of 'los demás' (*das Man*) is of perceived importance to the Onettian hero's consciousness, it is interesting that a common motif is the inadequacy with which collective opinion envisages or constructs identity. This is, indeed, the central concern not only of *Los adioses*, but of a number of short stories, most notably *Historia del Caballero de la Rosa y de la Virgen encinta que vino de Liliput*. In like manner, the collective imagination misconstrues a prudish spinster as the author of the moralising letters in *Juntacadáveres*: 'Quizá todos hayan



supuesto la misma mujer, hayan coincidido al reunir huesos, ojos, estatura, calidad de piel, largo de las falanges, forma de las uñas, el relieve de los nudillos en el acto de escribir.' (J.117), whereas the truth is more interesting: the letters are composed by virginal schoolgirls in the room of the mad Julita. Santa María also collectively colludes in the madness of the returned Moncha Insaurralde in *La novia robada*, an episode extrapolated from this novel, so that the Doctor's autopsy report concludes: 'Estado o enfermedad causante directo de la muerte: Brausen, Santa María, todos ustedes, yo mismo.' (O.C., 1422)

(v) The Gaze and the *stade du miroir*.

One of the key attributes of the Other of importance to the existential being is the ability to perceive, as it were, from outside, that is, to see one both as object and to an extent as complete unto oneself. This is in essence what, according to Lacan, the infant attempts to do during the *stade du miroir*, subsequently (re)acquiring a limited subjectivity within the pre-existing symbolic order of language. Thus the status of en-soi, of completeness and coincidence with self as object, is precisely what is conferred on the pour-soi when he or she finds him/herself within what Sartre memorably calls *le regard*. It comes as no surprise, then, that the look, and above all the voyeuristic look, is of enormous importance throughout the literature of estrangement. One thinks here not only of the curious scene in Hamsun's *Hunger* in which the landlady's husband excitedly summons the narrator to spy on the infidelities of his wife, but of the entire *mise en scène* of Barbusse's 1908 novel *L'enfer*, the contiguous rooms of which form a clear template for *La vida breve*. The look is also an essential element of all of Kafka's novels, much as it is for the eyelidless damned of Sartre's *Huis clos*, and constitutes a central focus of anxiety for Vladimir when he repeatedly asks Godot's messenger-boy if indeed he has seen him.

We have already alluded to the curious situation of *Juntacadáveres* in which Jorge, while visiting the room of Julita, spies on her brother Marcos making love to the Malabia maid Rita. The episode is of importance, and appears again in the novel *Para*

*una tumba sin nombre*, a work which, although written several years previous to *Juntacadáveres*, deals with events that occur several years later on. This recycling of episodes, characters and chronologies is one of the hallmarks both of Onetti and of his master, William Faulkner, and suggests the remarkably complete vision that each must have held of their respective sagas even at the moment of committing to paper their first chronicles. Thus the entire denouement of Larsen's expulsion from Santa María which closes the 1964 novel has already been *witnessed* by Brausen in all its essential details in the 1950 novel *La vida breve*.

To return to *Para una tumba sin nombre*, it is clear that, for the adolescent Jorge, the look is an act of possession:

'(Rita era mía), porque unos años atrás, cuando no sabía que el lenguaje universal para entenderse con las mujeres es el de los sordomudos, yo la deseé y ella supo que yo la deseaba. También mía, y mucho más por esto - y no se escandalice, no saque conclusiones baratas -, porque yo la había espiado por la ventana hacer el amor con Marcos. La había visto, ¿entiende? Era mía.' (O.C., 1010)

Moreover, this novel as a whole, to the extent that it deals with Jorge Malabia's rite of passage into adulthood, may also be seen as a play upon the subject-object dichotomy. Here, the role of Díaz Grey is critical. For the doctor, 'Era (Jorge) a la vez sujeto y objeto, se miraba vivir dispuesto a la sorpresa, incapaz de determinar qué actos eran suyos, cuáles prestados o cumplidos por capricho.' (O.C., 1024). Larsen, too, is intimately tied to the perception that others have of him. To an extent his comrade Vázquez, in *Juntacadáveres*, has little other function than to act as a witness: thus the following two details describe him as: '...a solas o apoyado con naturalidad en la admiración de Vázquez, en el mostrador de la Berna.' (J.,61), and '...en el mostrador del Berna, solo o perfilado contra la admiración silenciosa de Vázquez...' (J.,77) It is noteworthy, however, that by the time of Larsen's fateful return to Santa María in *El astillero*, the absence of a consistent or unequivocal witness, regardless of how Larsen might view him, is frequently underlined.



The Onettian self is thus acutely caught in the dilemma of one for whom the Other, though treated with disdain, is a necessary witness so that some sort of definition will be made possible. Linacero, for instance, seems to have such need of his much deprecated flatmate Lázaro. And for all that the communicative possibilities of language remain in doubt, its component words defamiliarised and reified, language remains a fundamental medium by which the encounter with the other serves to constitute the self. This is implicit even in those quite innocent remarks that one finds throughout Onetti which, taken together, form a philosophy of the Other: 'Era la hora en que se llamaban querida, se fingían respeto y atención, iba cada una construyendo con las frases y las sonrisas dirigidas a la otra su propia imagen ideal.' (J.143) To return to Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*: 'Le langage n'est pas un phénomène surajouté à L'Être-pour-autrui : il est originellement L'Être-pour-autrui, c'est-à-dire le fait qu'une subjectivité s'éprouve comme objet por l'autre [...] Le surgissement de l'autre en face de moi comme regard fait surgir le langage comme condition de mon être.' 412-3

In a Lacanian study of language in Beckett's *Watt*, Cousineau notes that 'The adventure of the self begins in the *stade du miroir* with the discovery of an objectified and alienating image; it reaches an impasse with the acquisition of a language that confirms the subject's captivity within this image.'<sup>146</sup> As was shown in the introductory chapter, the entire issue of the mutability of the image of Mr. Knott places him, as it did with K.'s Klamm, significantly beyond the objectifying faculty of *le regard*. But one of Beckett's more interesting and revolutionary dramatic projects was the bifurcation of Self into variations upon the speaker/auditor and object/eye in such works as *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Film*, *Company*, *Ohio impromptu* and *Not I*. The Onettian hero will also occasionally effect this type of dual role, usually to highlight a discrepancy between the idealised and actual self.<sup>147</sup> In the tense, central scene of the short story *Bienvenido Bob* in which the narrator is monotonously depressing the

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<sup>146</sup> T. Cousineau, 'Watt: Language as Interdiction and Consolation', in S.E. Gontarski ed., *The Beckett Studies Reader*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida (1993), 73.

key of the piano, he clings to the vain hope that: 'la profunda nota que tenazmente hacía renacer mi dedo en el borde de cada última vibración era, al fin encontrada, la única palabra pordiosera con que se podía pedir tolerancia y comprensión a su juventud implacable.' However, he can also see the situation and thereby the ridiculousness of his act:

'[...] y seguí hundiendo la tecla, clavándola con una cobarde ferocidad en el silencio de la casa, hasta que repentinamente quedé situado afuera, observando la escena como si estuviera en lo alto de la escalera o en la puerta, viéndolo y sintiéndolo a él, Bob, silencioso y ausente junto al hilo de humo de su cigarrillo que subía temblando; sintiéndome a mí, alto y rígido, un poco patético, un poco ridículo en la penumbra, golpeando cada tres exactos segundos la tecla grave con mi índice.' (O.C., 1222-3)

If the unnamed narrator of this accomplished story of homo-erotically charged degradation à la *Oscar Wilde* is impelled to visualise his own inadequacy during the above confrontation with the youthful Bob, the plight of Larsen, in *El astillero*, is more desperate yet. In fact, as will be demonstrated, the entire novel is a masterful portrayal of *mauvaise foi*. The critical point here is that Larsen's refuge in the 'game' of *Petrus*, *Sociedad Anónima* fails to afford him the least scrap of conviction. A central image of this hopeless play-acting pictures him in the ruined office, but again the bifurcation into observer and observed undermines the integrity of the role that he has assumed:

'Era como estarse espiando, como verse lejos y desde muchos años antes, gordo, obsesionado, metido en horas de la mañana en una oficina arruinada e inverosímil, jugando a leer historias críticas de naufragios evitados, de millones a ganar. Se vio como si treinta años antes se imaginara, por broma y en voz alta, frente a mujeres y amigos, desde un mundo que sabían (él y los mozos de cara empolvada, él y las mujeres de risa dispuesta) invariable, detenido para siempre en una culminación de promesas, de riqueza, de

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<sup>147</sup> Hugo Verani suggests a view of the discontinuous 'post-modern' self consistent with Beckett: 'es indudable que para Onetti la discontinuidad del ser y la sensación siempre presente de que la vida es



perfecciones; como si estuviera inventando un imposible Larsen, como si pudiera señalarlo con el dedo y censurar la aberración.' (A., 100, emphases added)

In fact, as will be shown in the section to follow, this sort of lack of conviction, of bad faith, extends not only to all social activities but to all relations in Onetti. The key motif by which he tries to present this truth is the 'game'.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the bifurcation of self into observer and observed is also necessitated by the inadequacy of the Other, particularly when this Other is a female 'loca'. Typical here is the statement of the young Jorge Malabia: - 'Cierro los ojos y me veo, como si mirara desde el techo y desde más arriba, inmóvil en la cama, apoyado en la mejilla, cubierta por ella y su locura, cubierto por mi edad, por mis culpas, por los muros y el aire de la habitación, por la distancia que me separa de la muerte.'(J. 181) The protagonist, beginning with Arce, enters into the space of the 'loca' principally as an alternative 'location' in which he may visualise himself. Her gaze, if it exists at all, lacks any vigour.

#### (vi) The Onettian Game and *mauvaise foi*

If there were intimations of the game in the various relationships which form the foundation of *La vida breve* (Brausen/Queca, Díaz Grey/Elena Sala, Stein/Mami), it is in the three novels at the heart of the Santa María saga that the word takes on its full metaphorical weight. All significant relationships, indeed all forms of human intercourse in these inter-related texts are essentially and explicitly ludic in character, and although presented as a somewhat vicarious witness to the events which unfold, there is an important sense in which Díaz Grey has come to replace Brausen as the *magister ludi*, the somewhat passive consciousness for whom the dramatic farce is being played out. Thus in *El astillero* we find him 'jugando con la idea de que la entrevista (con Larsen) era un sueño o por lo menos una comedia organizada por alguien inimaginable para hacerlo feliz durante unas horas de una noche.' (A., 139). There is

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muerte incesante, es la causa del drama ontológico del hombre.' (op. cit., 111)

even, in *Juntacadáveres*, the somewhat Idealist intimation that he is in some respects a 'co-autor' of the events that he witnesses: 'Hablaba poco y sonreía como si la historia del prostíbulo y el último capítulo que contemplaba fuera obra suya' (J., 230). That said, it is clear from the discourse of the later novella *La muerte y la niña* that the doctor in fact occupies the position of one more stage in a chain of capricious demiurges that puts one in mind of the Borges poems 'Ajedrez' and 'El golem' even more than his frequently cited story 'Las ruinas circulares', published in the 1941 collection *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*. It will be remembered that in *La vida breve*, Brausen not only spies upon his creation Díaz Grey, but earlier shares an office with a taciturn Onetti.

All of the key characters of the Santa María cycle are, in fact, caught up in games in which they have long since ceased to believe. The game, alternately referred to as 'juego' and 'farsa', is in fact the central metaphor of Onetti's view of the human condition. Furthermore, its implicit lack of faith (or more precisely, as will be explored, *mauvaise foi*) equally circumscribes interpersonal and intra-personal activity. Hugo Verani, in an exploration of *Dejemos hablar al viento*, locates these two words within the nexus of dissimulation/ illusion (to which one feels compelled to add 'máscara'): 'Se persiste en un lenguaje relacionado con la impostura (mentir, fingir, imaginar, inventar, juego, farsa), en consonancia con la construcción de mundos ilusorios.' (Hugo Verani, *Dejemos hablar al viento el palimpsesto de la memoria*. 218) While this is certainly a valid approach, it fails to differentiate sufficiently between the first four terms of Verani's list, all to an extent active and outwards, and the last two, which together consist in the protagonists' various encounters with the world (or to adapt Heidegger's terminology, his *Gerworfenheit* or 'thrownness').

'Juego' and 'farsa' constitute the life-world, the set of available experiences and possibilities that presents itself to the inhabitants of Onetti's universe, with the Borgesian intimation both that there is an arcane design and that it equally precludes understanding and escape. A play, for all that it is a farce, would imply a design, a script of kinds, and the deterministic implication of this underlies much of the Santa María cycle. Much as Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*, : '(Larsen) estuvo conteniendo



como semillas los actos que ahora podía prever y estaba condenado a cumplir. Como si fuera cierto que todo acto humano nace antes de ser cometido, preexiste a su encuentro con un ejecutor variable.' (A., 200) If there is a degree of freedom available, it consists chiefly in the possibility of resigning the game. Two further keywords haunt the Onettian consciousness, and the hero goes to supreme lengths, even to suicide, so as to avoid falling into their inevitable clutches: 'trampa' and 'desgracia'. If the game is about deceit, it is only to the extent that *mauvaise foi* is by its nature deceit. The target of this deceit is the self, not the other.

In Onetti, games are played, masks are worn and histories invented not so much in order to fool others that one is successful or virtuous as to convince oneself that one is living. The game, though occasionally it involves a certain minimal collaboration, is essentially a private activity by which the simulacrum of identity and personal history is constructed. Alone, María Bonita, Larsen's favorite whore (who appeared as the adolescent Nora in *Tierra de nadie*), 'se entregaba al juego de simularse preocupaciones y recuerdos' (J., 76), and for Larsen, alone in his 'oficina arruinada e inverosímil' (a particularly suggestive qualifier): 'era como estarse espiando, jugando a leer historias críticas de naufragios evitados ... se vio como si treinta años antes se imaginara, por broma ... como si estuviera inventando un imposible Larsen...' (A., 100). Of course, there was nothing particularly authentic about the Larsen of 'treinta años antes'; he was merely a younger man. This is clear from the elaborate explorations of his previous character set out in *Juntacadáveres*: 'aún durante años, Junta recorría las salas de baile, lento, contoneándose, construyendo con destreza el simulacro de seguridad y calma correspondientes al hombre que había imaginado ser' (J., 184)

One of the fascinating developments in the Santa María triptych is the convergence of otherwise solipsistic characters to engage in a collective game. The important distinction is neatly summarised by Larsen's: 'Una cosa es la enfermedad y otra la peste.' (A., 118), but Onetti was already elaborating a poetics based around participation in the illusionary in the first novel of the triptych. To an extent, one might read the entire elaboration around Rita and the goat that forms the heart of *Para una tumba sin nombre* as just such a game. Jorge Malabia, Tito Perotti and Díaz

Grey are all drawn in to the game of reconstruction and conjecture, much as are Quentin Compson and his room-mate Shreve in Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* To classify either novel, as has occasionally occurred, as a cubist exposition on epistemological uncertainty (multiple partial perspectives, unreliable witnesses, fragmentary narrative accounts in a variety of media etc.) would be to miss the point. The generically ludic basis of the enterprise becomes explicit to the end of Onetti's novel when Jorge Malabia explains to Díaz Grey, who at this juncture has become co-narrator, that:

'Toda la historia de Constitución, el chivo, Rita, el encuentro con el comisionista Godoy, mi oferta de casamiento, la prima Higenia, todo es mentira. Tito y yo inventamos el cuento por la simple curiosidad de saber qué era posible construir con lo poco que teníamos [...] Usted estaba casualmente en el cementerio y por eso traté de probar en usted si la historia sostenía. Nada más.' (O.C., 1044)

But far from being upset by this revelation, which to any event is undermined somewhat by a letter that he receives from Tito Perotti, Díaz Grey appears not only to have expected just such a turn of events, but indeed to have risen to the challenge presented by the game. The novel finishes with the following affirmation (notice the ambivalence of the Spanish 'contar'): 'Lo único que cuenta es que al terminar de escribirla me sentí en paz, seguro de haber logrado lo más importante que puede esperarse de esta clase de tarea: había aceptado un desafío, había convertido en victoria por lo menos una de las derrotas cotidianas.' (O.C., 1046)<sup>148</sup>

In *Juntacadáveres* the notion of game is more explicit, particularly in regard to the strange relationship that unfolds between Jorge Malabia and his sister-in-law Julita.<sup>149</sup> In their bizarre encounters, always within the room/location of the 'loca', the

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<sup>148</sup> Indeed, this idea of the game as fabrication has already been articulated by Brausen in *La vida breve*: '-se me ocurrió que me sería imposible dejar de mentir durante toda la noche y que así transformaba el mundo, desinteresado, por el solo placer del juego.' (O.C., 653). He goes on to point out the transformative power of the word within the game: '-La palabra -asentí -; la palabra todo lo puede. La palabra no huele. Transforma el querido cadáver en una palabra discreta y poética.' (*ibid.*).

<sup>149</sup> Of course, other characters act in equally inauthentic modes. Thus Díaz Grey astutely comments of Marcos Bergner: 'en el fondo, se aburría. Ahora cree estar seguro, piensa que la guerra santa contra el prostíbulo puede justificarlo, puede hacerle sentir que está completamente vivo.' (J., 89).



notion of faith becomes important, though one would be at pains to say with any confidence the degree to which either one of the two actually believes in the 'game' of Federico. Indeed, there is an extent to which the idea of the unacknowledged lie at the heart of the game is foreshadowed in *Tierra de nadie*. We have already noted the peculiar reciprocal awareness at the heart of Num's interaction with the girl in regard to the 'Danish inheritance': 'Porque yo había inventado la herencia por ella, para que la nena estuviera contenta. Y va ella y la inventa, para que yo hago que lo creo...' (O.C. 99) The same arrangement, however, would seem to apply to the island, for on the next page we are told: 'Aránzuru tuvo la seguridad de que todo aquello era mentira, la isla, el viaje, una mentira que se iba extendiendo, falseando la tarde. La isla fabulosa la había inventado el viejo, muerto y embalsamado.' (O.C., 100).

In *Juntacadáveres*, if the exchanges which take place immediately prior to their carnal consummation would seem to expose the nature of the illusion ('No hubo Federico...' etc., [J., 180]), they have to an extent been prepared for on the occasion of their previous meeting:

- Y también todo eso después se hizo mentira; pero antes de que fuera mentira tú lo supiste exactamente como lo sabía yo. No me digas que no lo sabías, no me digas que no lo estabas creyendo.

- No -digo -. Era cierto. No me importa que hoy sea mentira. No era mentira para mí.' (J., 162)

This rather rational analysis of past beliefs is soon followed by:

- ¿No es absurdo? -insiste; la oigo repetir <Dios mío> y echarse en la cama.

Hablo porque tengo que hablar, despreocupado de que me escuche:

'Es absurdo, todo es absurdo. ¿ Y qué ? ... Venía y te escuchaba, éramos dos jugando a tu juego, al juego Federico. Pero yo tengo otros juegos, otras desgracias.' (J., 163)

The last phrase of Jorge Malabia's is particularly revealing. The game in Onetti is a corollary of living, somewhat commensurate with Fate. The game is really an all-embracing farce which has been written by a malignant demiurge. It is not a game which can be won.

It is well known that Onetti broke off writing *Juntacadáveres* when he was seized by an image of the demise of his finest creation, Larsen. I would suggest that the author also broke off writing the novel because, in the decrepit shipyard of Petrus S.A., he had his most perfect vision of the true nature of the game/farce. For Saúl Yurkievich,

'La farsa presupone una dicotomía, implica una oposición entre realidad e ilusión, o sea, la antítesis ser/parecer, rostro/máscara, autenticidad/inautenticidad, ser profundo/ser superficial. Optar por la farsa significa desechar las evidencias tangibles (fracaso, humillación, decadencia, pobreza, hambre) y asumir los símbolos ilusorios'<sup>150</sup>

The last line is important. A dichotomy between mask and face or between illusion and reality might simply be motivated by a desire to deceive the other. The target of the Onettian dichotomy is, rather, the self. To an extent, it is a variation upon the 'aventuras' or 'vidas breves' by which the earlier protagonists tried to evade a miserable reality. However, unlike the 'aventura' which characterised the interior life of Linacero and which, to an extent, was a means for escaping the exigencies and disappointments of the other, the game would appear to require a minimal presence of two. That said, it is worth emphasising not only Linacero's attempts to communicate the 'sueño', explicit in the case of Ester and Cordés, implicit in the act of writing, but also the subsequent development of the realm of the imaginary in Onetti. Thus Faruru, initially a project between Num and Aránzuru, is an island he aims to attain with the minimal company of one other person, even if it be the *macro* Larsen, the pattern repeating with Brausen, who can actually enter into Santa María only in the company of the ruffian, Ernesto; Medina, who at Larsen's instigation can return imaginatively to Santa María in the company of Gurisa/Olga; and, perhaps most apparently, Jorge Malabia, who requires the duplicitous complicity of the private investigator in the narrative fantasy of 'Presencia'. To this extent, the imaginative fantasy may be seen to be a sub-set of the game.



The game is not, as has been said, played against the other participant(s) but rather in the fear that at some juncture the other may decide to stop lending credence to the game, thus undermining its efficacy. The series of 'trampas' which continually preoccupy Onetti's protagonists, most notably Larsen, tend to be the hazards of a malicious and perhaps ineluctable destiny, the game itself is perhaps better described as a wilful suspension of disbelief on the part of a minimum of two people.<sup>151</sup> With regard to the 'trampa' and the hostility of the absurd cosmos, the following passage, quoted at length, is among the most beautiful and portentous in the entire oeuvre:

'Si Larsen hubiera atendido su propia hambre aquel mediodía, si no hubiera preferido ayunar entre símbolos, en un aire de epílogo que él fortalecía y amaba, sin saberlo -y ya con la intensidad de amor, reencuentro y reposo con que se aspira el aire de la tierra natal-, tal vez hubiera logrado salvarse o, por lo menos, continuar perdiéndose sin tener que aceptarlo, sin que su perdición se hiciera inocultable, pública, gozosa.

Varias veces, a contar desde la tarde en que desembarcó impensadamente en Puerto Astillero, detrás de una mujer gorda con una canasta y una niña dormida, había presentido el hueco voraz de una trampa indefinible. Ahora estaba en la trampa y era incapaz de nombrarla, incapaz de conocer que había viajado, había hecho planes, sonrisas, actos de astucia y paciencia sólo para meterse en ella, para aquietarse en un refugio desesperanzado y absurdo.' (A., 78)

The oxymoronic tendency of the final phrase is particularly ominous. Notice also the presence of the fat woman with child. Larsen's last real act, presaging that of the narrator in Beckett's 'First Love', is to flee a woman who is giving birth because: 'pudo imaginar la trampa.' (A., 232)

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<sup>150</sup> Saúl Yurkievich, *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, 350

<sup>151</sup> Díaz Grey may now have assumed the mantle of *magister ludi*, but is increasingly aware as the Santa María cycle goes on of the capriciousness of the demiurge Brausen. As early as *La vida breve*, however, we have a picture of 'el médico sonriendo, interesado, amable, despectivo. Sin dejar de abrir la nariz para olfatear la trampa...' (O.C., 514)

*El astillero* offers the reader a number of quasi-existential statements which purport to explain the motives of Larsen's acceptance of a game in which he has no real faith. The following are typical examples: '...frente a la indiferencia del Gerente Administrativo, Larsen sintió el espanto de la lucidez. Fuera de la farsa [...] no había más que el invierno, la vejez, el no tener dónde ir, la misma posibilidad de la muerte.' (A., 123) The lack of any real alternative means that it is scarcely surprising that he should 'entregarse sin reservas a todo aquello con el único propósito de darle un sentido y atribuir este sentido a los años que le quedaban por vivir y, en consecuencia, a la totalidad de su vida.' (A., 85). However, what makes the novel a masterpiece of poignancy is that, to begin, Larsen enters into the 'trampa' in full expectation that the position is *bona fide*, that salary he is to receive will materialise.

In fact, for all that he was first envisaged in *Tierra de nadie* as a low-life ruffian with a propensity towards violence, Larsen is in many ways the most naive of all of Onetti's creations. As early as the penultimate chapter of *La vida breve*, during a scene which envisages his expulsion from Santa María for setting up the brothel, Larsen is seen making a plea based around the legality of the enterprise: '- Yo solo pregunto -dijo el hombre pequeño y gordo [...] -, solo quiero preguntar si era legal o no. Si trabajábamos o no con una ordenanza municipal.' (O.C., 690). The exiled and worldly-wise Spaniard Lanza, who later predicts his return to Santa María, picks up on this very aspect in a comment in which hyperbolic irony is, one feels, grounded upon genuine respect: '¿Lo ve usted, doctor? -preguntó el viejo-. No solo *Junta* ha luchado por la libertad de vientres, por la civilización y por el honrado comercio [...] También se preocupó por el respeto a los preceptos constitucionales (O.C., 691). He had earlier on the same page opined that 'Quizá, como habrá vislumbado el doctor, todo esto no sea más que una etapa de la lucha secular entre el oscurantismo y las luces representadas por el amigo *Junta*.' The scene, and the individual positions taken, are essentially



repeated in the penultimate chapter of *Juntacadáveres*, though with slight variations in a manner that again recalls the uncertain epistemologies of Borges.<sup>152</sup>

It is this somewhat credulous aspect of Junta Larsen's character that Onetti builds upon in his masterpiece, *El astillero*. With regard to the ambivalent presentation of desperate faith, the character here approximates surprisingly closely to that of other Holy Fools in the line of Don Quijote, Dostoevsky's 'Idiot', Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon and García Márquez' eponymous 'Coronel'. In *L'être et le néant* Sartre makes a critical distinction between 'mauvaise foi' and 'mensonge' in a section significantly entitled "*La 'foi' de la mauvaise foi*" for as he goes on to say: 'Le véritable problème de la mauvaise foi vient évidemment de ce que la mauvaise foi est *foi*.' (*L'être et le néant*, 103). In order to resolve this seeming paradox, Sartre goes on to postulate a mechanism by which one deliberately elicits a minimal amount of what is undeniably the most dubious evidence consistent with some form of credence. The section is worth quoting at length:

'En conséquence, un type d'évidence singulier apparaît : l'évidence *non persuasive*. La mauvaise foi saisit des évidences, mais elle est d'avance résignée à ne pas être persuadée et transformée en bonne foi.[...] Ainsi, la mauvaise foi dans son projet primitif, et dès son surgissement, décide de la nature exacte de ses exigences, elle se dessine tout entière dans la résolution qu'elle prend de *ne pas trop demander*, de se tenir pour satisfaite quand elle sera mal persuadée, de forcer par décision ses adhésions à des vérités incertaines.' (*L'être et le néant*, 103)

Larsen's entire activity is best understood in light of the above 'se tenir pour satisfaite quand elle sera mal persuadée'. Indeed, the written guarantee which he finally elicits from Petrus is a finely realised instance of 'l'évidence *non persuasive*', and his destroying it marks his resignation from the game. But it is also worth pointing out that he, no less than the tramps who are waiting for Godot, would seem to further require the minimal presence of another believer, and in this he is a more tragic figure

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<sup>152</sup> 'Bueno, una etapa más de la viejísima lucha entre el oscurantismo y las luces. Las luces, claro, las representa aquí el amigo Larsen.' and 'Larsen luchó por la libertad, la civilización y el honrado

than Linacero, Brausen or Díaz Grey. This requirement is to be both a source of anxiety and, ultimately, his Achilles heel.

Larsen's involvement in the project of the shipyard is both less 'authentic' and more desperate than the earlier attempt to set up a brothel during his 'hundred days', although ironically, Junta Larsen himself recognises that Barthé's project for the brothel is, for its instigator, 'una obsesión hecho costumbre, destino.' (J., 62). Typically, the lost self-belief that characterises his return to the city which had banished him is succinctly mirrored in his failing propensity to strike a convincing pose : 'exageradamente, casi en caricatura, intentó reproducir la pereza, la ironía, el atenuado desdén de las posturas y las expresiones de cinco años antes.' (A., 60). Far from the prophesied 'prolongación del reinado de cien días', Larsen's return is characterised by a defeatism, an ineluctible *timor mortis*, which is explained explicitly in terms of a loss of faith : 'Después sería el fin, la renuncia a la fe en las corazonadas, la aceptación definitiva de la incredulidad y de la vejez.' (A., 64), while the necessary 'credulity' with which he invests his involvement with Petrus S.A. lacks any real conviction beyond that outlined in the Sartre quote above: 'Hubiera preferido, para lo que estaba por pasar, una fecha antigua, joven ; hubiera preferido otra clase de fe para hacerlo.' (A., 119). Díaz Grey, in the central interview with Larsen, affirms exactly this distinction 'que creyó de una manera y ahora sigue creyendo de otra' (A., 134) But faith, or rather wilful credulity, such as the term is used in *El astillero*, has nothing whatsoever to do with the faith in metanarrative that Lyotard suggests delimits the era of modernism, and which is disdained by, among other Onettian spokesmen, Medina in *Dejemos hablar al viento*:

'Desde muchos años atrás yo había sabido que era necesario meter en la misma bolsa a los católicos, los freudianos, los marxistas y los patriotas. Quiero decir, a cualquiera que tuviese fe, no importa en qué cosa; a cualquiera que opine, sepa o actúe repitiendo pensamientos aprendidos o heredados. Un hombre con fe es más peligroso que una bestia con hambre. La fe los obliga a la acción, a la injusticia, al mal...' (D., 18-19)

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comercio. Y ahora se preocupa por el debido respeto a las instituciones.' (J., 230)



However, all of the above 'astillero' cites occur after Larsen's realisation of the true nature of the 'trampa'. At first, it would seem he takes Petrus' offer at face value, and when later he throws himself into the role of manager, the shipyard's dilapidation seems merely at first to mirror his own unsuitability for the position. If *El astillero* can be said to have an epiphany, then it is surely the moment in which Larsen (and indeed the reader) becomes aware that he is not alone in playing the 'game' of Petrus' shipyard, and is therefore in a situation of exposure:

'...sienten (Kunz y Gálvez) que el juego es más verdadero que las arañas, las goteras, las ratas, la esponja de las maderas podridas. Y si ellos están locos, es forzoso que yo esté loco. Porque yo podía jugar a mi juego porque lo estaba haciendo en soledad; pero si ellos, otros, me acompañan, el juego es lo serio, se transforma en lo real. Aceptarlo así -yo, que lo jugaba porque era juego-, es aceptar la locura.' (A., 101)

It would be disingenuous to take the word 'locura' at face value, however. As we have seen, there is always something sacred about 'locura' in Onetti, something innocent and beyond the ravages of time. 'Locura' is to an extent a virtue: indeed it is precisely the virtue which allowed a penniless hidalgo of La Mancha to become the first hero of the modern novel, a hero moreover whose conception has haunted the Spanish and Latin American imagination in writers as diverse as Unamuno, Borges and García Márquez.

As frequently occurs in Onetti, Díaz Grey voices a quasi-authorial position on the activities of the other protagonists, and his central interview with Larsen leaves little doubt as to the awareness of the player-actors: 'Petrus es un farsante cuando le ofrece la gerencia general, y usted otro cuando acepta. Es un juego, y usted y él saben que el otro está jugando. Pero se callan y disimulan.' (A., 138). In fact, as Larsen silently articulates, Petrus is the grand-master of the game, the man for whom the game has finally become all-embracing:

'Nació para este juego y lo practica desde el día en que nací yo, unos veinte años de ventaja [...] El doctor estaba un poquito loco, como siempre, pero tenía razón; somos unos cuantos los que jugamos al mismo juego. Ahora, todo está en la manera de jugar [...] Pero él juega distinto y no sólo por el tamaño

y el montón de las fichas [...] sinceramente, lo único que le importa es el juego y no lo que pueda ganar. También yo; es mi hermano mayor, mi padre, y lo saludo.' (A., 144/5)

But the shipyard is not the only farce that Larsen engages in, here or elsewhere. Thus we find in *El astillero* 'Todos sabiendo que nuestra manera de vivir es una farsa, capaces de admitirlo, pero no haciéndolo porque cada uno necesita, además, proteger una farsa personal.' (A., 138). Yurkievich makes a related distinction with regard to the nature of the farces being played out in *El astillero*; 'Hay una farsa generalizada que es inherente al vivir y hay una doble farsa particularizada por esta novela: la farsa laboral y la farsa amorosa'<sup>153</sup> It is worth noting, however, that it is precisely this 'doble farsa particularizada', amorous and professional, that underlies the successive activities of Aránzuru, of Brausen and his creation, Díaz Grey, of Medina, of Juan Carr. The Onettian world is every bit as totalitarian as that of Kafka and Beckett.

For John Deredita in his insightful article *El lenguaje de la desintegración: notas sobre 'El astillero'*, 'El absurdo es más absurdo ya que los personajes lo perciben como tal [...] El juego compensa de modo equívoco e ineficaz el vacío vital, posterga el momento en que el individuo tenga que encarar seriamente su descomposición.' (229). However, this to an extent misses the point. The 'juego' of Petrus S.A. is not really a choice. It is more akin to an all-embracing metaphor of human activity, somewhat along the lines of Camus' image of Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill. Larsen finally renounces the game when he burns the written guarantee that he had demanded from Petrus, 'd'avance résignée à ne pas être persuadée'. Gálvez renounces the game when he decides to hand in the false bond signed by Petrus. But in each case, this decision is somewhere between a presage and a symbol of their immanent death. Perhaps this is the only means by which they are able to address Camus' 'fundamental philosophical question' of suicide: 'Juger que la vie vaut ou ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue'.<sup>154</sup> The decision is also a moment of affirmation, a moment that neither Joseph K. nor K.

<sup>153</sup> Saúl Yurkievich, *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, 348.

<sup>154</sup> Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe, essai sur l'absurde*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard (1942), 15



aspires to in their life-consuming and equally farcical games with the Law and the Castle.

However, if activity is imagined as a game in which the player has minimal faith based upon non-persuasive evidence, what implications does this have for the possibility of communion? Once again, Derredita is pessimistic in the extreme: 'La manía del juego requiere que la mentira sea el vehículo de las relaciones humanas. La intersubjetividad no pasa de ser otro momento más de la farsa.' (*op. cit.*, 229) Goerdel, in *La muerte y la niña*, articulates such a position to Díaz Grey: 'Todos mentimos, aún antes de la palabra. Por ejemplo: yo le digo mentiras y usted miente escuchándolas.' (*N.*, 124) Miscommunication within a game that suggests communication is, indeed, the fundamental theme of a large number of Onetti's short stories from the time of 'El posible Baldí'. One thinks for instance of the game of exotic locations played out in the hotel room between Jorge Malabia and the woman in 'El álbum' which, despite the twist towards veracity at the denouement, is a forerunner of Julita's game of Federico: 'Está mintiendo otra vez, y ahora cree en su mentira' (*J.*, 163). One thinks of 'El infierno tan temido', in which 'el juego se formalizaba y ya era imposible distraerse y mirarlo de afuera' (*O.C.*, 1300) but in which an ineluctable tragedy is set in motion by a misunderstanding of Risso's '-Todo puede suceder, y vamos a estar siempre felices y queriéndonos.' (*ibid.*) Perhaps most accomplished of all is the short story 'La cara de la desgracia' in which a misunderstanding in relation to the fraud and suicide of the narrator's brother finds a curious parallel in a sexual tryst with a young girl, brutally strangled, who, it turns out, was deaf.

The game, based upon the *mentira/máscara*, is founded *ab initio* upon deception, but a deception that is peculiarly aimed, without any expectation of success, both inwards and outwards. Only in death is Gálvez' mask finally eschewed, and Larsen's interior monologue suggests not only that the mask-wearing is an intrinsic part of the game of Petrus S.A., but that none has faith in the good-faith of any other player: 'Lo que siempre dije: ahora está sin sonrisa, él tuvo siempre esta cara debajo de la otra,

todo el tiempo, mientras intentaba hacernos creer que vivía, mientras se morría aburrido entre [...] la sombra del astillero y la grosería de la esperanza.' (A., 221).

But if one doubts the efficacy both of language and of role in defining the Self and establishing communication, there remains another mode of interaction between people: the corporeal. It is to this mode which we must now turn our attention. Indeed, as will be seen in the chapter to follow, the idea of embodiment is not only of fundamental significance to phenomenological ontology, it to an extent encapsulates the problematics of time, space and the Other set out above. It is, furthermore, as site of ageing and of punishment, a key trope of convergence between the artistic visions of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti.



## Ch 6, Embodiment

Thus far we have seen how, for Onetti as for Beckett and Kafka, character is presented not in terms of socio-economic position, psychological profile or personal history, but rather in terms of the phenomenological determinates of time (subjectivised as temporality), space (the *Lebenswelt* or lived-world) and, critically, the Other (with particular reference to language as a determinate of this relationship). To reiterate the phenomenological position:

(i) The self (as *pour-soi*) is of necessity temporal, [thus Sartre: 'notre étude phénoménologique du Passé, du Présent et de l'Avenir nous permet de montrer que le *pour-soi* ne peut être, sinon sous la forme temporelle.' (*L'être et le néant*, 172, emphasis added)]. The critical dimension here is future, since it is in terms of future projects that existence may be said to have possibilities and thus to precede essence.

(ii) The self (extending beyond *res cogitans* to immediately incorporate the body) exists simultaneously and symbiotically with the world (the classical *res extensa*) in a series of intentional relations. Space and time are intimately bound, and together are the parameters (or for Kant, 'categories') by which the self realises perceptions and thereby its possibilities.

(iii) The self only becomes a subjective 'Self' through interaction with, and differentiation from, the Other. This interaction occurs through such media as the look (*le regard*) and, critically, language.

However, as we have seen, for the writer of phenomenological estrangement, all three parameters are continually distorted or, to adopt Schlovsky's terminology, 'made strange'. Temporality is undermined by casting doubt on both past (memory) and future (possibility), and also by playing games with duration and sequence. Space, viewed as a correlative of self, is degraded, fragmented. Topographically loaded, it has the capacity to imprison or arrest time. Just as with temporal sequence, spatial contiguity may be undermined. Space is also subject to the intrusion of the other.

Language is inadequate, not only for the purpose of communication, but equally critically of forming an idea of the subjective self. The mask, the pretence, the fantasy are thus not aimed at deceiving the other, but of tricking an identity into being. We now turn our attention to embodiment.

Phenomenological investigation is sometimes presented as a palliative for the radical dichotomy between mind and world which has dogged philosophy since Descartes. Indeed, the notion of intentionality foregrounded by Husserl is an attempt to surmount this very dichotomy. As such, and in particular with later French thinkers such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, the body (or, more generally, 'embodiment') has become the focus of considerable interest, since the body is the locus of immediate interaction between the *cogito* and the world. For Merleau-Ponty, for instance, as Richard Kearney notes:

'phenomenology made possible the recognition that the body is not an object among objects, to be measured in purely scientific or geometric terms, but a mysterious and expressive mode of belonging to the world through our perceptions, gestures, sexuality and speech. It is through our bodies as living creatures of intentionality, he consistently argued, that we choose our world and that our world chooses us.'<sup>155</sup>

The following chapter is an exploration of how the body is foregrounded, but once again fragmented and estranged in the works of Onetti, Beckett and Kafka, the paradigmatic text here being Kafka's hugely influential *Die Verwandlung* (1916). Although one might examine embodiment as a separate existential parameter to those previously examined, it is more specifically viewed here in terms of its areas of overlap with the three categories of time, space and Other.

### (i) The body and the text

One might begin the present examination by drawing attention not only to the unusual number of grotesques and incidences of decrepitude that characterise the



worlds of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti, but also to the degree to which character is existentially predicated upon corporeality. In the case of the first mentioned, while obvious distortions such as the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa into an insect in *Die Verwandlung*, the mole-like presentation of the individual in *Der Bau*, the grotesquely obese Brunelda of *Der Verschollene* or the disturbing webbed hand of Leni in *Der Prozess* have drawn a considerable body of critical commentary, the degree to which the Kafkan hero is always ontologically embodied has frequently been overlooked. Shame, lust, fatigue, hunger and physical humiliation are as characteristic of the Kafkaesque as are the labyrinthine hierarchies with their arcane protocols.

Corporeality, always leaning towards revulsion, is a particularly important component of the phenomenological presentation of character, since it is chiefly this which differentiates the work of Beckett and Onetti from such 'Kafkaesque' writers as Borges or Nabokov. Since interaction with the Other frequently occurs on the level of the body -indeed, one might consider the gaze a subset of this - a considerable degree of sado-masochistic interplay characterises all three authors of the present study. Once again, a common fountainhead would seem to be the Underground Man of Dostoevsky's revolutionary story (perhaps viewed through the lens of Hamsun's *Hunger*, which we know was greatly admired by both Kafka and Onetti). One thinks here not only of the Underground Man's diseased liver and the toothache of the opening part, but of his humiliation with respect to the officer of superior build in the longer second part and of the indulgent cruelty with which the anti-hero torments the 'innocent' prostitute Lisa with images of disease. Dostoevskian bodily disgust is, of course, at the heart not only of Roberto Arlt's poetic, but also that of Ferdinand Céline, whose 1932 novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit* deeply influenced Sartre and Beckett in addition to Onetti.

In his extended study of Onettian poetics, 'Conciencia y subjetividad en "El pozo"', Jaime Concha, taking full account of the Dostoevskian element in Linacero's presentation, highlights the accumulation of spatio-sensory detail by which we are introduced to the narrator. That the subject and the lived-world are symbiotically

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<sup>155</sup> Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, 73-74

interdependent is, as has been discussed in Chapter 3 above, axiomatic for the phenomenologist. For the writer in this tradition, the immediate environment, most frequently the room, is never innocently described, indeed there is a sense in which the habitat is a correlative of the body. Sartre makes this link quite explicit in the 'corps-pour-autrui' section of *L'être et le néant*:

'Certes, le corps d'autrui est partout présent dans l'indication même qu'en donnent les choses-utensiles en tant qu'elles se révèlent comme utilisées par lui et comme connues par lui. Ce salon où j'attends le maître de maison me révèle, dans sa totalité, le corps de son propriétaire: ce fauteuil est fauteuil-où-il-s'assied, ce bureau est bureau-sur-lequel-il-écrit, cette fenêtre est fenêtre par où entre la lumière-qui-éclaire-les-objets-qu'il-voit. (L'être et le néant, 381)

It might be illustrative of such usage to note at this stage the enormous difference between this kind of object presentation and that of the French *nouveau roman*, particularly insofar as a phenomenological sensibility is frequently said to underlie the latter (see for instance Sturrock, *The French New Novel*, 23-35). Robbe-Grillet in particular has often been attacked as '*chosiste*' since his novels (or 'anti-novels') frequently contain detailed geographies of objects from which all anthropomorphism has been stripped away. For the phenomenologist writer drawing on Heidegger, however, the subject-object division is *a priori* unsustainable. Relations to objects are not only intentional but instrumental, loaded with meaning (or with the absurdist projection of meaning). For this reason, key works are often imbued with a quasi-religious character (one thinks principally of *Das Schloss*, *El astillero*, *En attendant Godot*). However, the sustained emphasis on physicality, on the body and its deterioration, belies the simplistic but prevalent view that a reading of such works as religious allegory is in any way adequate in itself.

Within a phenomenological framework, the embodied self (or to adopt Merleau-Ponty's terminology, the 'body-subject') is, moreover, *immediately* sensory (a position at



odds with the Cartesian notion of a separate *cogito* which interacts through the senses with the material or extensive world). Thus Jaime Concha writes of *El pozo* that:

La fundación subjetiva del habitat permite que la deficiencia de los objetos se haga fuertemente significativa. Prefijos y preposiciones indicadores de privación (*despatarradas, sin...*), significaciones negativas y estados de sustitución expresan estilísticamente la índole de las objetividades que, de esta manera, nos dan una tangencial del individuo que entre ellas habita.

Esta conciencia constituyente se ensancha aun más en el segundo párrafo. La zona de percepción no es ahora los objetos cercanos, sino la exterioridad inmediata del cuerpo. Las vías sensoriales llevan todas a ese fin único: *oyendo, oliéndome, yo lo sentía, me rozaba*. En virtud de esta concentrada atención en sí mismo, el sujeto se va construyendo en su múltiple corporalidad. En la medida en que existe una línea de dirrección espacial que oriente la descripción, podemos decir que el sujeto nace y se yergue en ese mismo momento ante nosotros. Se constituye para sí mismo, desde las zapatillas que oye hasta el propio rostro que adivina. Esta conciencia progresiva del cuerpo culmina en la forma más directa e inmediata de aprehensión: en el sentido de tacto (*me rozaba*), que suministra al personaje la natural experiencia del cuerpo como carne.<sup>156</sup>

In the somewhat repulsive image of the narrator smelling his armpits and inadvertently scratching his shoulder with his stubble, Linacero is *immediately* present to himself, as to the reader, as interaction between sense and body.<sup>157</sup>

Our introduction to Juan María Brausen, the next and arguably the most accomplished of Onetti's first-person narrators, presents a similar spatio-sensory

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<sup>156</sup> 'Conciencia y subjetividad en "El pozo"', from *Juan Carlos Onetti, El escritor y la crítica*, Verani ed. 171 (italics in the original).

<sup>157</sup> The corporeal self-disgust in cites such as 'Estoy muy cansado y con el estómago vacío. No tengo idea de la hora. He fumado tanto que me repugna el tabaco...' (O.C., 68) illustrates the parentage of Linacero (the same would be true of his contemporary Roquentin): not only is he descended from Dostoevsky's Underground Man, but the line includes the narrator of Hamsun's *Hunger* and, of course, Céline's Bardamu.

panoply of impressions, a number of them characteristically conjectural. Thus by the second page of *La vida breve* we are given the following:

El hombre debía estar en mangas de camisa, corpulento y jetudo; ella muequeaba nerviosa, desconsolándose por el sudor que le corría en el labio y en el pecho. Y yo, al otro lado de la delgada pared, estaba desnudo, de pie, cubierto de gotas de agua, sintiéndolas evaporarse, sin resolverme a agarrar la toalla, mirando, más allá de la puerta, la habitación sombría donde el calor acumulado rodeaba la sábana limpia de la cama. Pensé, deliberadamente ahora, en Gertrudis; querida Gertrudis de largas piernas; Gertrudis con una cicatriz vieja y blancuzca en el vientre... (O.C., 436)

In developing the imaginary alter-ego of Díaz Grey, Brausen (and by extension Onetti) is cognisant of his own body and its limitations (or 'facticité'): 'debía usar anteojos gruesos, tener un cuerpo pequeño como el mío, el pelo escaso...' (O.C., 442). He may imagine a younger, integral Gertrudis in the figure of Elena Sala, but the physical ontology of his own self is insurmountable as an existential parameter.

The body is above all the site of interaction with the other, as is made clear from one of Larsen's many interior monologues in the novel that charts his relentless decline:

'Este cuerpo; las piernas, los brazos, el sexo, las tripas, lo que me permite la amistad con la gente y las cosas; la cabeza que soy yo y por eso no existe para mí; pero está el hueco del tórax, que ya no es un hueco, relleno con restos, virutas, limaduras, polvo, el desecho de todo lo que me importó...>' (A., 154).

It is a revealing exposition. The body, a collection of parts, is first and foremost 'lo que me permite la amistad con la gente y las cosas'. As such one might project a certain analogy with language (see below). But in the phenomenological ontology, one's own body can never be an object among objects. In Sartre's loaded terminology (he uses 'exister' transitively), 'J'existe mon corps : telle est sa première dimension d'être. Mon corps est utilisé et connu par autrui : telle est sa seconde dimension.' (*L'être et le néant* 392) This view is succinctly suggested in Larsen's continuation 'la cabeza que soy



yo y por eso no existe para mí'; the other is necessary (as is language) so that the self may come to exist *corporally* as self. Sartre indeed goes on to highlight this parallel between the problem of the body and that of language: '(J)e ne connais pas plus mon langage que mon corps pour l'autre. Je ne puis m'entendre parler ni me voir sourire. Le problème du langage est exactement parallèle au problème des corps et les descriptions qui ont valu dans un cas valent dans l'autre' (*L'être et le néant*, 414). The analogy is worth elaborating on briefly before going on to examine the strategies of estrangement adopted by the three authors.

The physicality of writing, of the privations needed to write authentically, underlie several of Kafka's texts. This is certainly the most common interpretative approach both to *Ein Hungerkünstler* (*The Hunger Artist*) and to *Der Bau*, in which the labyrinthine tunnel is fashioned physically and at great pain by the creature's butting forehead. A paradigmatic story published in Kafka's lifetime is *In der Strafkolonie* of 1919 (translated as *In the Penal settlement*, 1933), a text in which physicality is not merely highlighted, but may be viewed as thematic (a quasi-religious reading is again possible). Language is from the first also foregrounded, since the explorer, a German speaker, is attending to the discourse of the officer, in French, a language incomprehensible both to the condemned man and to his guard. There is, revealingly, a correlative climatic dislocation. The sweating officer is wearing a uniform far too heavy for the tropics because, as he explains: 'they mean home to us; we don't want to forget about home.' The mode of interaction, of punishment, between officer corps and native is excruciatingly physical, a literal inscription on the body which will take twelve hours for the 'infernal machine' to accomplish (with an epiphany of kinds at the sixth hour). Thus to the explorer's troubled inquiry with regard to the prisoner 'Does he know his sentence?' and again 'He doesn't know the sentence that has been passed on him?', the peremptory reply: 'No -' said the officer [...] 'There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it *corporally, on his person.*' (*Metamorphosis and other stories*, 174, emphasis added). The explorer, and per force the reader, is furnished in hallucinatory detail with the mechanism by which the body is to be inscribed with the sentence which furnishes this epiphany (one wonders churlishly what language the

words will be written in, and by what means the native has come to understand the written word). The trope of discourse being enacted or inscribed on the body (again with a strongly sadistic overtone) is, of course, repeated by Beckett in *Comment c'est*, a nightmare vision in which 'communication' is limited to not only to blows, as with Lucky/Pozzo or Molloy's mother, but directly to carving words on the body with a tin-opener.

Once Jacques Lacan's exposition of the linguistic structure of the Unconscious and of psychosomatic 'signifiers' gained common currency (classic 'symptoms' being a key instance of the use of 'metaphor'), there has arisen something of a literature revolving around the inscribed body (Alison Fell's much discussed *The Pillowtalk of Lady Onegaro* being one of the more recent examples). Onetti's approach is never as overt as this. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling Josefina Ludmer's sustained analysis of the equivalence of Brausen's literary invention of Santa María with the mutilation of Gertrudis (the 'absent' breast): '(el pecho cortado) ha dejado aire libre, desocupado, y ha dejado sin objeto la mano derecha del que enuncia [...] La mano derecha, que ya no puede apresar el pecho izquierdo {...} se ocupará, primero - en el capítulo 2 - con la ampolla de morfina que debe aliviar el dolor de Gertrudis: mientras juega con esa ampolla Brausen imagina la escena inicial de su relato. Más adelante la mano derecha sostiene "la pluma fuente" de la escritura...' and so forth, (Ludmer, *op.cit.* 22). That the word is a failed attempt to substitute for the amputated breast is borne out later when Gertrudis is playing with the consoling phrases of her mother:

'las frases que había logrado armar entre caricias y miedo, que barajaría como naipes y depositaría incansablemente en Gertrudis. Y ella, a pesar del llanto en el alba, acabaría por dormirse, para descubrir, por la mañana, mientras se le desprendían precipitados los sueños, que las palabras de consuelo no habían estado desbordando en su pecho durante la noche; que no habían brotado en su pecho, que no se habían amontonado, sólidas, elásticas y victoriosas, para formar la mama que faltaba.' (O.C., 457)



The main point in Onetti, however, would seem to be that if, as Sartre notes, 'le problème du langage est exactement parallèle au problème des corps', neither the one nor the other being adequate to surmount the radical solipsism of the individual. Moreover, the body is *sui naturis* subject to the vicissitudes of time. As is well known, physical decrepitude, no less than in Beckett, is something of an obsession in Onetti, so much so that it merits a sustained investigation in itself. Before effecting this, however, it is worth examining the remaining strategies by which Onetti defamiliarises the body, so that it becomes a fourth ontological parameter in the poetics of existential estrangement proposed by the present study.

#### (ii) Synecdoche versus Atomisation

We have already examined at some length how both time and space are radically fragmented in Onetti. Indeed, it is principally this aspect of the 1939 text *El pozo* which has led Vargas Llosa among others to view the novella as marking a definitive departure in Latin American poetics from the regionalist novel in the realist tradition which had largely preceded it. Two years later, *Tierra de nadie*, which as is well documented draws heavily on the example of Dos Passos, is a less accomplished attempt to extend the poetic of estrangement to a full length novel. Again as discussed above in Chapter 5, linguistically, Onetti shows a preference here for ellipses and metonymic tropes which mirror the spatio-temporal fragmentation. It is in his concomitant treatment of the body, however, that Onetti is perhaps most successful in disorienting the reader. As is now to be examined, the atomisation of the body is a defamiliarising strategy which helps locate Onetti in a tradition of 'existential' (or, as this study suggests, 'phenomenological') estrangement current in continental Europe for several decades before the war not only in literature, but more famously perhaps in Expressionist painting. In particular in the former there is a fixation upon the disembodied hand, the hand being the point of contact *par excellence* between Self and the extended world, since it can both observe and be observed, both touch and be touched.

Before examining such imagery in detail, however, it is important to draw attention to a misnomer that is widespread in recent criticism on Onetti: the characterisation of the fragmentation of the body as 'synecdoche'. Thus for instance Zunilda Gertel notes: 'La narrativa de Onetti opera por figuras fragmentadas, especialmente la sinécdoque - preferentemente la parte, para significar el todo - que implica una fijación definida, elíptica, pero que apunta a una connotación más amplia.'<sup>158</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, Josefina Ludmer,<sup>159</sup> despite pointing to the defamiliarising effect of Onetti's fragmented imagery, occasionally misclassifies bodily atomisation as synecdoche (see especially chapter 3 above). While it is entirely adequate to describe substitutions based upon contiguity as metonymical - thus the fountain-pen in *La vida breve* has a metonymical equivalence to the missing breast, both being situated in the right hand, but having no further relation based upon resemblance<sup>160</sup> - the trope of synecdoche relies fundamentally upon the part *implying* the whole. By contrast, what the present study terms bodily atomisation is a presentation of a part of the body disturbingly *divorced from* the whole. The effect on the reader is radically distinct.

Consider the following (widely cited) image from *El pozo*: 'los brazos, gruesos y blancos, se dilataban lechosos en la luz del cafetín, sanos y graciosos, como si al hundirse en la vida hubiera alzado las manos en un gesto desesperado de auxilio, manoteando como los ahogados y los brazos hubieran quedado atrás, lejos en el tiempo, brazos de muchacha despegados del cuerpo largo, nervioso, que ya no existía.' (O.C., 61, emphasis added). Now it is at once apparent that, far from the part implying in any way the whole, the point of Onetti's trope is to separate the arms from the body so that they are quite literally 'despegados del cuerpo largo'. The image is, significantly, repeated on the following page, again with reference to the prostitute Ester: '-estaba borracha entonces con frecuencia, cada vez más gastada, ordinaria, mientras los brazos y sobre todo los hombros redondos y empolvados pasaban como chorros de leche entre las mesas, resbalando en la luz pobre del salón.' (O.C., 62). An immediate strategy when

<sup>158</sup> Z.Gertel 'El Yo y el Mundo de lo Otro en el espacio narrativo de "La vida breve"', in Hugo Verani ed., *Juan Carlos Onetti*, Madrid: Taurus ediciones (1987), 253

<sup>159</sup> Ludmer, *Onetti: Los procesos de construcción del relato*, Buenos Aires: Sudamericana 1977



faced with such a disquieting image is to try to locate it in its textual context, and the alert reader will immediately connect these hallucinatory images with the novel's opening, when Linacero's scratching his shoulder with his stubble brings the memory of a prostitute to mind: 'No puedo acordarme de la cara;' he writes, 'veo nada más que el hombro irritado por las barbas que se le habían estaco frotando, siempre en ese hombro, nunca en el derecho, la piel colorada y la mano de dedos finos señalándola.' (O.C., 49).

In fact, the female shoulder is a particular instance of fragmentation which is consistently the locus of desire, while the faceless or headless woman is part of an extended trope to be discussed at length below. Onetti's first full length novel, *Tierra de nadie*, extends the range and vividness of corporeal atomisation, just as it extends the spatio-temporal fragmentation by vastly increasing the number of characters and locales. Entire scenes are now presented eccentrically, expressionistically, focusing on disembodied parts of the body in hallucinatory detail:

'Las ocho manos estaban dentro del cono que recortaba en la sombra la pantalla verde. Las manos velludas barajaban los naipes rápidamente, haciendo un suave chaschás. Las manos blancas dormían su sueño agitado encima de la carpeta. Una, redonda e hinchada, rascaba la punta del cigarillo en el cenicero, mientras la otra se perdía fuera de la luz, sosteniendo el peso de la cabeza triste y desgredada. Las manos que eran como de mujer acariciaban la columnita de las fichas, torciéndola y enderezándola.' (O.C., 86)

An early image from Onetti's next novel, *Para esta noche*, is again characteristic of the sense of dislocation or *anomie* that atomisation induces, particularly insofar as the 'First and Last' bar is ostensibly a place of refuge for the hunted Ossorio: 'el letrado de la puerta del bar decía The First and Last y la puerta era doble, de resorte, inquieta, yendo y viniendo con los empujones, mostrando el movimiento de cabezas aisladas y piernas sin cuerpo para llevar' (O.C., 266). A single cite from a later novel,

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<sup>160</sup> It certainly seems relevant here to point out that for Lacan, while the symptom is a metaphor, desire is a metonymy (see for instance R. Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, 278)

*Juntacadáveres*, should suffice to indicate the continued usage of this kind of atomisation throughout Onetti's oeuvre, in this instance to indicate the hostility which is directed towards the prostitutes Irene and Nelly: 'El miedo les había recorrer Santa María sin mirar a sus habitantes; *solo habían visto manos y pedazos de piernas, una humanidad sin ojos* que podía ser olvidada en seguida.' (J., 75, emphasis added).

It is fair to ask at this stage why such a fixation on the atomised body should be so disquieting for the reader. It is of considerable relevance to the present thesis that Sartre should provide just such an exposition in the 'body' section of *L'être et le néant*: 'L'être du corps d'autrui est une totalité synthétique pour moi. Cela signifie: (1) que je ne saurais jamais saisir le corps d'autrui sinon à partir d'une situation totale qui l'indique; (2) que je ne saurais percevoir isolément un organe quelconque du corps d'autrui, et que je me fais toujours indiquer chaque organe singulier à partir de la totalité...' (*L'être et le néant* 385). This statement, notably the second part, might at first glance seem surprising, particularly when certain passages from *La nausée* are examined (see below). One page later, Sartre expands on this statement as follows:

'Je ne perçois jamais un bras qui se lève le long d'un corps immobile: je perçois Pierre-qui-lève-la-main. Et il ne faut pas entendre par là que je rapporte par jugement le mouvement de la main à une <conscience> qui le provoquerait; mais je ne puis saisir le mouvement de la main ou du bras que comme une structure temporelle du corps entier. C'est le tout ici qui détermine l'ordre et les mouvements des parties. Pour se convaincre de ce qu'il s'agit bien ici d'une perception originelle du corps d'autrui, il suffit de se rappeler l'horreur que peut susciter la vue d'un bras cassé qui <n'a pas l'air d'appartenir au corps> ou quelque'une de ces perceptions rapides où nous voyons par exemple une main (dont le bras est caché) grimper comme une araignée le long du battant d'une porte. Dans ces différents cas, il y a désintégration du corps; et cette désintégration est saisie comme extraordinaire. On connaît, d'autre part, les preuves positives dont ont souvent argué les gestaltistes. Il est frappant, en effet, que la



photographie enregistre un grossissement énorme des mains de Pierre lorsqu'il les tend en avant. (*L'être et le néant* 386)

But if this is the case, and this is surely a view of the body based upon synecdoche (or the related psychology of *Gestalt*), what are we to make of the disembodied hands and arms, legs, eyes and teeth of the authors of estrangement?

If, according to Sartre, the Other is intuitively viewed as integral, then a presentation of the body as sundered or incomplete necessarily challenges this integrity, a trope which, as is discussed in the next section below, is also true of the presentation of the Subject. It is worth remembering that the first shoulder which Linacero's stubble encounters is his own, and that his own face remains as unavailable to him as that of the prostitute. Mark Millington, in his study *Reading Onetti*, briefly advances the illuminating idea that Linacero's 'sueños' might usefully be read in terms of the Lacanian 'Imaginary': for Lacan, the pre-linguistic infant first overcomes the anguish of its '*corps morcelé*' by identifying with an integral, specular counterpart or 'imago'. Language marks the later 'subjection' into a pre-ordained Symbolic order, characterised by a series of 'méconnaissances'. For Millington, the 'sueños' are above all an attempt by Linacero to conjure 'idealized identifications or mirrorings of the self, [...] images of unity and plenitude.' (Millington, 27). One might advance a similar reading of the fantasies of both Brausen and Medina, although in this regard, the first actual 'sighting' that Brausen has of his 'vice-exister', Díaz Grey, points to the futility of the exercise: 'Más hacia mí, exactamente debajo de mi silla, se movían un par de manos flacas, unos hombros débiles cubiertos por una tela azul oscuro; la cabeza de este hombre era pequeña y el pelo estaba húmedo y en orden' (*O.C.*, 690), scarcely an integral body in the manner of a specular imago.

But that a lack of integrity should be implied by an atomised view of the body seems an even stronger hypothesis to advance in Onetti's presentation of the woman. These are characteristically portrayed with the head out of view - as in the photographs with which Gracia César taunts the unfortunate Risso in *El infierno tan temido* and Eufrosia's placing a bag over her head in *Cuando ya no importe* - or indeed missing entirely, whether literally - as in the suicide of Magda in *Cuando entonces*, or

by the choice of verb - as for instance: '(Rita) se puso a reír, encogida, decapitada por la sábana...' (J., 184).<sup>161</sup> Perhaps the paradigmatic denial of a personal identity occurs some time earlier in the same novel when Larsen is remembering an associate appropriately named Blanca ('o Quita, Bianca, Blan, Blanche, Blancette, según fuera la noche...un nombre que podía aplicarse a cualquier otra mujer sin modificarla'). Note the specific separation from body, face and voice, achieved through viewing each as a Cartesian 'object among objects' (the syntax is a little unclear):

'Tampoco la representaban su cuerpo, el cansancio, y la renuncia [...] Por eso, sin cara, sin una voz distinguible, intentaba ser, colocar en el mundo, separadas de ellas, casi como objetos que pudiera contemplar con curiosidad, sus singularidades.' (J., 112)

While an examination of gender presentation in Onetti is far beyond the scope of the present thesis and, moreover, the explicit focus of a number of extant studies on the author, it is worth briefly examining the denial of female corporeal integrity insofar as it throws light on Onetti's usage in general of what Lacan has termed '*le corps morcelé*' (the 'sundered' or, to employ a Lacanian-style pun, 'disarticulated' body).

Failed attempts at exposition notwithstanding, neither the unnamed prostitute at the opening of *El pozo* nor the prostitute Ester has any subjectivity of interest to Linacero. That he is able to call to mind or to highlight their faceless bodies serves to underlie the point,<sup>162</sup> but Linacero by no means confines this perspective to the prostitute, with whom the relation is *a priori* mercantile. Of his present girlfriend he writes 'Hanka me aburre; cuando pienso en las mujeres...*Aparte de la carne, que nunca es posible hacer de uno por completo, ¿qué cosa de común tienen con nosotros?*' (O.C.,

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<sup>161</sup> When the face is in view, it frequently approximates towards a mask (see especially the short story actually entitled 'Mascarada'. with regard to Onetti's presentation of the face, Jaime Concha observes that: 'En la inspección casi acusadora a que se somete el rostro, éste pierde su impassibilidad, cobra conciencia de insospechadas posibilidades de culpa y deviene un aquellarre donde ojos, labios, mejillas, la frente y los actos fisonómicos se deforman hasta el límite. Nos parece éste uno de los terrenos en que con más originalidad ha explorado Onetti, un aporte suyo de primera importancia que, al par que lo vincula con la mejor tradición literaria (desde Dostoiewski a Sartre), le hace dar pasos inéditos...' (J. Concha, "Conciencia y subjetividad en 'El pozo'", 101)

<sup>162</sup> There is, in fact, a third prostitute, heard rather than seen, of whom he again says 'No podíamos verle la cara.' (O.C., 58)



60, emphasis added).<sup>163</sup> Central to the story as a whole, the disturbing scene in which the adolescent Linacero humiliates Ana María might be described as a symbolic disarticulation of her body, a dismemberment which systematically denies her subjectivity:

'...reconocí a Ana María - por la manera de *llevar un brazo separado del cuerpo* [...] Retrocedió un poco cuando la tomé del brazo [...] A ratos se olvidaba y me iba golpeando con el hombro al caminar, dos o tres veces seguidas [...] Podía mirarle los brazos desnudos y la nuca [...] Ella *entró la cabeza; y el cuerpo, solo, tomó por un momento algo de la bondad y la inocencia de un animal...*casi le tocaba la oreja [...] La agarré del cuello [...] fui haciendo girar las piernas, cubriéndola, hasta que no pudo moverse. Solamente el pecho, los grandes senos, se le movían desesperados de rabia y cansancio. Los tomé, uno en cada mano, retorciéndolos.' (O.C., 52/3)

Undeniably an acute commodification is at work, a reification of the female, but the form that this takes is equally of interest. In the 'Characteristics of Genre' section of his study 'Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics', Bakhtin identifies the decrowning process taken from his story "Uncle's Dream" specifically with bodily fragmentation: 'The scene of the scandal and decrowning [...] - is consistently portrayed as a *tearing to pieces*, as a typical carnivalistic "sacrificial" dismemberment into parts.' Bakhtin here gives an extended quote in which the prince is 'linguistically or imaginatively' dismembered by two female observers, much as is Ana María by Linacero. Bakhtin goes on: 'We have here a typical "carnival anatomy" - an enumeration of the parts of the dismembered body.' (Bakhtin, op.cit., 161/2). Ana María is thus denied corporeal integrity, and identity as subject, not only by the assault *per se*, but by the fragmenting imagery in which it is described by the narrator/assailant. Her body is reintegrated, though without a description of the face, only when she returns repeatedly as the idealised and complacent naked girl.

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<sup>163</sup> Although the female is particularly disempowered, cross gender comprehension in general is, in Onetti, *mutually* impossible. Thus the motif of the occult face in, for instance: 'Nunca miré de frente tu cara, nunca te mostré la mía.' ("Tan triste como ella", O.C., 1307)

Another Ana María, the companion of Marcos Bergner, is encountered by Díaz Grey in her reflection in a mirror in the important Plaza Hotel scene in Chapter XI of *Juntacadáveres*.<sup>164</sup> On this occasion, a repeated detail appears to gain considerable significance: 'Ana María fumaba frente al espejo, soplabá el humo para cubrirse o enturbiar la cara reflejada...' (J., 80); 'Ana María había encendido otro cigarrillo y se miraba humear en el espejo' (J., 81); 'Con el cigarrillo colgado de la boca, Ana María se miraba en el espejo la cara cortada, interrumpida por un línea de humo' (J., 81); 'Encendió un cigarrillo en la boca de la cara en el espejo...' (J., 85); and, as Díaz Grey comments to her, '-Me gustaba su cara en el espejo; el humo que le hacía irreconocible...' (J., 83).

Two points seem central to the above tableau. If Lacan sees the mirror stage as critical in overcoming the anguish of what he terms '*le corps morcelé*' (the chopped-up body) by identification with '*l'ímagó du corps propre*', the woman not only makes no attempt to integrate the fragments, but actively prevents their coalescence ('-Souvenir d'Amour - contestó Ana María mirándose la boca en el espejo'). Furthermore, as has been earlier suggested, smoking is frequently associated in Onetti with the (male) urge to construct stories, but for the female it is a source of obfuscation. This would certainly seem to be the implication of Ana María's statement: 'fumo demasiado. A veces me quedo ronca que no puedo decir una palabra.' (J., 84). In fact, she is little but a faceless body between the two men, as when: '(Marcos) se volvió hacia el hombro de Ana María y por delante del cuerpo de la mujer [...] mostró al médico una sonrisa...' (J., 86).

### (iii) Strategies of estrangement: the Hand.

*'My hand, over which the lace cuff fell and fell again, was in no way my ordinary hand; it moved like an actor; I might even say that it watched itself move...'* Texts for Nothing

<sup>164</sup> It is not merely the name that connects them. Linacero comments of the earlier Ana María 'No sé a qué olía el perfume que se había puesto.' (O.C., 52), and the detail is 'picked up' by the Doctor who asks the later Ana María to name her perfume: '- Souvenir d'Amour - contestó Ana María mirándose la boca en el espejo [...] 'No. No creo conocerlo', he replies. (J., 83/4)



But the relation of the male (narrative) subject<sup>165</sup> to his own body is scarcely less problematic. Indeed, as is argued below, the alienating effects of atomisation and grotesque description with regard to the body of the Other may in part be understood as a response to discomfort at one's own ageing and disarticulated corporeality. For Cosgrove, in a study of fragmentation in general in *El pozo*, :

'...perhaps the most telling indicator of a collapsed world in which Eladio moves as robotic cipher is the way in which Eladio's own bodily parts seem disjunctively 'other' to himself. The smelling of the armpits, the movement of the head and the unwilling growth of the grimace of disgust on his face evoke a scenario wherein autonomy and control have somehow been yielded. The bodily functions appear to be operated from an off-centre control point.'<sup>166</sup>

The above suggests not merely a decentring of the Self as typified by the trauma of the Lacanian *corps morcelé*,<sup>167</sup> but indeed a high degree of 'unconscious' bodily autonomy which would certainly be at odds with the absolute, sovereign Ego proposed by Sartre's ethic of 'existence preceding essence' (see especially his refutation of the Freudian model of the 'Id', *L'être et le néant*, 84-89). The implied attack on the existentialist position of 'absolute freedom' is nowhere more apparent than in Onetti's presentation of the hand.

Since our principal focus of the concern with the integrity and autonomy of the Self is to be the hand, it may be useful at this stage to review the presentation of the hand in a number of related writers of the early 20th century, all of whom write within the proposed poetics of phenomenological estrangement. One of the earliest examples

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<sup>165</sup> Regardless of whether the male subject is acting as 'narrator' and 'focaliser', a useful distinction developed in Gérard Genette's '*Discours du récit*' See for instance Millington, *Reading Onetti*, 58.

<sup>166</sup> Ciarán Cosgrove, "Juan Carlos Onetti's *El pozo*: an Activity of Hesitation", *Latin American Literary Review* Jan.-Jun. 1989 University of Pittsburg, 9-10

<sup>167</sup> Thus for instance 'The fragmented body [...] usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy...' Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection*, 5.

comes from Rilke<sup>168</sup> in his haunting 1906 'journal', *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, a clear template both for *El pozo* and Sartre's *La nausée*. The narrator is describing an eerie childhood experience:

'Above all I recognised my own outspread hand moving down there all alone, like some strange crab, exploring the ground. I watched it, I remember, almost with curiosity; it seemed to know things I had never taught it, as it groped down there so completely on its own, with movements I had never noticed in it before. I followed it as it crept forward; it interested me; I was ready for all kinds of adventures...' (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* 94)

This presentation of the hand as disembodied, reified, a source of horrified fascination, remains something of *leitmotif* in German/Austro-Hungarian literature and cinema all the way through to Günter Grass, but seems to have particularly characterised the inter-war years. The following is from Elias Canetti's *Auto da fé* (*Die Blendung* 1935), a bizarre novel which furthermore elevates the correlation of person-inhabited space, suggested in Chapter 3 above, and which is heavily indebted to Kafka. Here the focus has been displaced to an encounter with the hand of some other, but the effect is comparable, particularly when contextualised with the presentation of Kien through the latter stages of the novel:

'A thick hand pushed a large coffee in front of him. He thanked it politely. Surprised, the hand paused a moment, then pressed itself flat against the marble and stretched out all five fingers. What can it be grinning for? Kien asked himself, his suspicions aroused.' (*Auto da fé* 159)

The presentations in the above fall in, in general, with the concept of 'defamiliarisation' developed by Schlovsky. We are not literally to believe that a severed hand has appeared before the young Malte Laurids Brigge or has approached Kien, offering him

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<sup>168</sup> One might also point to Hamsun's 1890 novel, *Hunger*, which, even more than Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, is thematically concerned with bodily self-disgust and alienation. Thus, for instance: 'I am disgusted with myself, even my hands appear loathsome to me. This flabby, shameless expression on the backs of my hands pains me, makes me uneasy. I feel rudely affected by the sight of my bony fingers, and I hate my own slack body and shudder at having to carry it...' (*Hunger*, 120)



coffee and grinning, no more than we are expected to conceive of the prostitute Ester's arms as literally floating from her body in free space. Hands, literally severed yet animated by a will of their own, are a motif more fully developed in the Gothic novel, and to entirely different ends. Rather, we have here a strategy for estrangement which is aimed at disorienting the reader and suggesting the *anomie* or dislocation of the protagonist.

The disembodied hand also begins to appear in French writers of the period,<sup>169</sup> notably in Céline, whose elliptical, jagged prose equally serves to disorient:

'<Au revoir, mes enfants!> eut-il juste le temps de nous dire et sa main s'est détachée, enlevée aux nôtre...Elle remuait là-bas dans la fumée, sa main, élançée dans le bruit, déjà sur la nuit, à travers les rails, toujours loin, blanche...( *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, 441)

For a phenomenologist writer like the early Sartre, an admirer of Céline, the hand is the organ *par excellence* for an examination of the interaction between the self, the *res cogitans*, and the spatial, the *res extensa*. Not only is the hand the unique sensory organ that may be the object of its own perception, it is *qua* body-subject coterminous with selfhood, this in spite of its propensity to appear to the eye as a strange animal:

'Je vois ma main, qui s'épanouit sur la table. *Elle vit - c'est moi*. Elle s'ouvre, les doigts se déploient et pointent. Elle est sur le dos. Elle me montre son ventre gras. Elle a l'air d'une bête à la renverse. Les doigts, ce sont les pattes d'un crab qui est tombé sur le dos. Le crabe est mort : les pattes se recroquevillent, se ramènent sur le ventre de ma main. Je vois les ongles - la seule chose de moi qui ne vit pas. Et encore. Ma main se retourne, s'étale

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<sup>169</sup> For Beckett, whose Trilogy has frequently been read in terms of successive states of bodily debilitation, the contemplation of one's hand becomes a source of acute estrangement in the texts that immediately follow, as is clear from the following cites: '...it mustn't be that far a bare yard but it feels far it will go some day by itself on its four fingers thumb included for one is missing not the thumb and it will leave me I can see how it throws its four fingers forward like grapnells the ends sink pull and so with little horizontal hoists it moves away...' ("The Image" 1956); and 'Out of the corner of my eye I observe the writing hand, all dimmed and blurred by the - by the reverse of distance...Yes, I see the scene, I see the hand, it comes creeping out of the shadow, the shadow of my

à plat ventre, elle m'offre à present son dos. Un dos argenté, un peu brillant - on dirait un poisson, s'il n'y avait pas les poils roux à la naissance des phalanges. *Je sens ma main. C'est moi, ces deux bêtes qui s'agitent au bout de mes bras. Ma main gratte une de ses pattes, avec l'ongle d'une autre patte ; je sens son poids sur la table qui n'est pas moi.* *La nausée* 141

Such fascination with the visual aspect of one's hand likewise leads Aránzuru to view his own as a creature in *Tierra de nadie*, but unlike Sartre above, there is no attempt to 'think through' the visual strangeness so as to *sense* the unity of self. The strange tableau of the card-game between four pairs of hands together with the initial appearance of Larsen as a disembodied hand seeking to knock on a hotel door will already have highlighted the centrality of this particular metonymy to this novel, thus drawing attention to the trope.<sup>170</sup>

'[Aránzuru] contempló la mano que sostenía el cigarrillo. Estaba sucia, con los nudillos hinchados y las uñas rotas y negras. Bostezó, mirando siempre la mano, como si no fuera suya, oscura y encogida, frente a sus ojos como un animal enfermo.' (O.C., 203, emphasis added).

The section to follow (section [iv] below) will examine this form of estrangement in detail with regard to the presentation of Larsen.

Later works are equally fascinated with the hand, not merely from an 'epistemological' perspective, as for instance in the opening of *Los adioses*, but in terms of expressionist distortion. Thus there would appear to be a covert reference to the bizarre scene in Kafka's *Der Prozess* in which Joseph K. kisses Leni's webbed fingers in the following cite, from *La vida breve*: 'Y yo pensé en la humedad que la transforma en palmípedo y que tendré que besar al fin de la noche [...] Voy a besarle la punta de todos los dedos' (O.C., 652/4. The chapter had begun with the hallucinatory detail of 'las manos tintas en clorofila'). The following paragraph, from *El astillero*, is also

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head, then scurries back, no connexion with me. Like a little creepy crawly it ventures out an instant, then goes back in again...' (Texts for Nothing 5)

<sup>170</sup> A more detailed examination of the hand in the presentation of Larsen is undertaken in the section following the present one.



characteristic of the manner in which Onetti divorces the hand from its immediate context to make it the unique focus of attention (Larsen has just been shown the forged bond by Gálvez): 'El dedo tocando la firma tenía el color del queso demasiado viejo. La mano recogió la cartulina de encima de la mesa.' (A., 109)

In *Para esta noche*, the novel that separates chronologically these two texts, the hand is to an extent equated with the degree to which the individual is involucrated in the broader political struggle. Thus, while the reactionary Morasán is seen by Ossorio 'de manos enjoyadas' (O.C., 276), of his revolutionary colleague Martins we are almost immediately informed that: 'Ossorio miró la mano: "Le sigue faltando un dedo", pensó...' (O.C., 277). It appears that at some point Martins lost the finger during the struggle.<sup>171</sup> Later, Ossorio contemplates his own inadequacy as an activist specifically in terms of his hands:

'Ossorio apartó los ojos de la chiquilina y alzó las manos, cerrando y abriendo los dedos. "Tengo que llegar al puerto. No se puede entender del todo esto; los años aprendiendo a alargar las manos, dinero, vasos, mujeres, las manos de los amigos; todo era posible para las manos, uno creía. Pero cuando se quiere atrapar algo más, una ciudad entera entre las manos, ya no sirven.' (O.C., 419)

Morasán too seems aware that hands convey meaning and seems surprised to catch sight of his own, moving as though expressing a request. One might note the confluence of a number of Onettian motifs - tobacco smoke, the partly hidden face, records, cards and, of course, hands - in the following cite:

'Morasán oyó el choque de la palanca del fonógrafo, y, con la cara cortada por la oblicua cinta de humo que subía, sorprendió la equívoca, la retenida sensación que daban los dedos de Villar moviéndose con las tarjetas y se distrajo mirando y pensando en aquello, analizando los dibujos reiterados de los dedos en el aire como si estudiara un mensaje que los dedos le estaban transmitiendo [...] Entretanto él, Morasán, había levantado sin saberlo una

mano hacia Villar para detenerlo, para que no atendiera el llamado del teléfono y vio aquella mano, suya, frente a su cara, los dedos abiertos y un poco torcidos hacia afuera y endureció los músculos para tomar conciencia de la mano. La hizo ir hasta la mesa...' (O.C., 397-8)

It is in the final scene of the novel, however, that the hand assumes the hallucinatory, independent quality that runs through the literature of estrangement. One assumes that by the time he wrote *Para esta noche*, Onetti had come into contact with *La nausée* (indeed, the boat towards which Ossorio is making is named the *Bouver*). In the infamous scene in Sartre's work in which Roquentin witnesses the auto-didact's pedarest impulse, the hands of the two protagonists are charged with an erotic load, that of the aggressor being overtly phallic:

'En tournant légèrement la tête, je parvins à attraper du coin de l'oeil quelque chose : c'était une main, la petite main blanche qui s'était tout à l'heure glissée le long de la table. A présent elle reposait sur le dos, détendue, douce et sensuelle, elle avait l'indolente nudité d'une baigneuse qui se chauffe au soleil. Un objet brun et velu s'en approcha, hésitant. C'était un gros doigt jauni par le tabac ; il avait, près de cette main, toute la disgrâce d'un sexe mâle. Il s'arrêta un instant, rigide, pointant vers la paume fragile, puis, tout d'un coup, timidement, il se mit à la caresser...' *La nausée*, 230

Now while the corresponding scene in Onetti certainly lacks any comparable aggression, the impulse is perhaps equally equivocal. It must be remembered that the dead Victoria Barcala, at this point a denuded 'niña sin cara', is not yet an adolescent:

'Luego (Ossorio) movió el brazo, y su mano, en un dilatado viaje en el que acumulaba recuerdos cada frágil hueso, cada blando pedazo de carne, fue trepando con torpe tenacidad, milímetro a milímetro, hasta aflojarse sobre el cuerpo de la muchachita; y luego de descansar, lentamente, se fue

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<sup>171</sup> Comparable is Jorge Malabia's consideration of the hands of the old Spanish revolutionary, Lanza, in *Juntacadáveres*: 'Las manos (de Lanza) son hinchadas, peludas, pecosas, casi sin uñas, con las venas salientes en el dorso; hicieron cosas, se movieron entre ellas y se gastaron.' (*J.*, 54)



extendiendo en la blandura desnuda como un labio, y un dedo quedó cruzando el misterio.' (O.C., 426).

The novel finishes with the words 'muerta su mano endurecida en el misterio.'<sup>172</sup>

#### (iv) Larsen, the 'Carnival King'

'Afuera, en la luz amarilla del corredor, otra mano avanzó, doblándose en el pestillo.' (O.C., 81) In this disquieting image from the opening page of the 1941 novel *Tierra de nadie*, Larsen, 'Juntacadáveres', makes his entry into the fictional world of Onetti. His entrance is the very incarnation of Sartre's 'main (dont le bras est caché) grimper comme une araignée le long du battant d'une porte', with all its associated sense of 'horreur' at the uncanny. Within two pages we find, again captured in an image of the hand, the first tenuous identification of guns with the phallic which will continue to characterise the later Larsen of the brothel and the shipyard: 'Un momento estuvo inmóvil, hipnotizado en el brillo de sus uñas que golpeaban la mesa. De pronto enderezó el índice y la cara redonda en dirección a la cama.' (O.C. 83/4, emphasis added). Two cites from consecutive chapters of *Juntacadáveres* should give a fair indication of the continued importance of the *macró's* hand, strangely independent, in his own self-awareness (and that of the 'Other', in this case Barthé). Notice once again the phallic overtone of the 'obscenely' raised finger:

'(Larsen) puso sobre el pupitre un puño flojo, lo *estuvo mirando con simpatía y curiosidad* [...] También Barthé estuvo mirando el puño en abandono que Junta había colocado sobre el pupitre *como una cosa cualquiera separada de él: los pliegues bajo el pulgar, el inconsciente gesto obsceno que alzaba uno de los dedos.*' (J., 59, emphasis added);

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<sup>172</sup> Curiously, Victoria Barcala herself has earlier been associated with the (phallic, in the Lacanian sense) image of missing finger. Thus, when she disappears unexpectedly from Farla's apartment, the following exchange: '(Ossorio) - ¿Por qué te parece que se habrá ido? (Farla) - Uno ama todos sus dedos, el dedo sano, el dedo diestro, el dedo emponzoñado...' (O.C., 391)

'Dio un paso y fue mirando curioso la mano que adelantó para tocar el cabello rojizo, quemado, seco y aún perfumado del cadáver sentado sin gracia en la cama.' (*J.*, 68, emphasis added)

It should come as no real surprise when, in one of the pair of alternative departure scenes which close *El astillero*, Larsen gauges his state of decline and immanent death by returning to contemplate the hand: 'Cuando pudo ver se miró las manos; contemplaba la formación de las arrugas, la rapidez con que se iban hinchando las venas.' (*A.*, 232). Almost forty years after the disembodied hand sought the door, the final impression that Medina has of Larsen's departing corpse, at the end of part one of *Dejemos hablar al viento*, is the dead hand's coldness (it has been crushing worms between index and thumb).<sup>173</sup>

To a certain extent, that Larsen is frequently found 'mirando curioso la mano que adelantó' clearly places him in the line of alienated Onettian heroes who are equally struck by their lack of coincidence with their disembodied, independent hands<sup>174</sup>: Brausen, who 'intentaré descubrirme mirándome con disimulo en el espejo del cuarto de baño, sorprendiendo y fijando los movimientos de mis manos...' (*O.C.*, 624); Morasán, who 'había levantado sin saberlo una mano hacia Villar para detenerlo [...] y vio aquella mano, suya, frente a su cara, los dedos abiertos y un poco torcidos hacia afuera y endureció los músculos para tomar conciencia de la mano' (*O.C.*, 397-8); Aránzuru, 'mirando siempre la mano, como si no fuera suya, oscura y encogida, frente a sus ojos como un animal enfermo' (*O.C.*, 203). If we place such cites in the context of lack of choice expounded upon at length in Chapters 2 and 4 above, particularly in light of the fact that the hand is also presented as the point of interaction with the world, then

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<sup>173</sup> Notice also the emphasis on hands in Hagen's testimony: 'reconocía sobre todo [...] algo que no puede explicarse en el braceo y la cuarta de puños que le sobraba de las mangas. Pensando después [...] me convencí casi porque cualquier otro, lloviendo y con frío, andaría con las manos metidas en los bolsillos. Él no; si era 'el.' (*A.*, 129). The hands exposed to the rain are quite a powerful metaphor for Larsen's plight at this time.

<sup>174</sup> This kind of disturbing feeling of lack of coincidence with an atomised or visually dismembered body is a common motif in Vallejo's revolutionary 1922 book, *Trilce*. Thus for instance XXXVI, in which the poet, after considering the absent arms of the Venus de Milo, looks at his little finger: 'Tal



clearly the trope that it should be *como una cosa cualquiera separada de él* and again *como si no fuera suya* contributes to the radical undermining of any sort of 'absolute freedom' on the scale proposed by Sartre. Contemplation of the hand and what it has executed *ex post facto* is scarcely an image consistent with existence preceding or choosing its own essence. Indeed, the contrary view is articulated by Díaz Grey in *La muerte y la niña*, in a scene in which he is conversing with Goerdel: '...nos dimos la mano y nadie piensa en detalle qué hizo en las últimas horas la mano que estrecha [...] Las manos actuaron siempre antes y en secreto' (N., 118/9). The position is essentially consistent with Larsen's commentary on choice in the earlier novel, as for instance: 'sólo después se entera uno de que podía haber elegido.'" (A., 119)

But the specific focus on hands in the case of Larsen also give us a secondary insight into Onetti's conception of the figure of the *macró*, particularly when taken in conjunction with ancillary physical details. Consider the following descriptions, from *La vida breve* and *Juntacadáveres* respectively: 'el mechón solitario aplastado contra la ceja [...] tenía una nariz delgada y curva y era como si su juventud se hubiera conservado en ella, en su audacia, en la expresión imperiosa que la nariz agregaba a la cara; enganchaba el pulgar de una mano en el chaleco.' (O.C., 690), or in the later book: 'el pelo escaso y bien peinado, el mechón brillante que se aproxima a la ceja [...] se frotaba las manos cortas, muy blancas.' (J., 42, emphasis added). Larsen, 'el héroe local, el que juntó más cadáveres que Napoleón' (J., 98) is quite clearly envisaged as something of a parody of the French Emperor, even before the continued and somewhat intrusive references of Lanza to the reign of the 'Hundred Days' and the exile to St. Helena. The detail of the white hands rubbing together immediately recalls the figure of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the 'historical label' who is the pawn of history rather than its architect, as he might like to imagine.

But the pastiche goes farther. A number of commentators have proposed that, in the character of Larsen, Onetti is essentially parodying, or inverting the trajectory

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siento ahora al meñique/ demás en la siniestra. Lo veo y creo/ no debe serme, o por lo menos que está/ en sitio donde no debe.'

of, the traditional nineteenth century *Bildungsroman* hero. Thus Deredita of *El astillero*:

'...la novela de Onetti será una metamorfosis tardía de ciertas novelas del siglo XIX y de éste, en que el ascenso del joven está visto bajo un aspecto problemático (*La educación sentimental* de Flaubert). En estas obras, la ironía de las situaciones tiende a nacer del desajuste entre la realidad y las apariencias exigidas por las relaciones sociales enajenadas, con sus posturas, tretas y restricciones. En *El astillero*, los términos de la realidad están distorsionados a tal punto que el anti-héroe es un viejo esencialmente acabado y la atrofia se extiende a todos los personajes y al microcosmos capitalista engendrado por Petrus, paródico "hombre que se hizo a sí mismo" y que ahora está deshecho.<sup>175</sup>

Now the haunting presence *par excellence* of the *Bildungsroman*, notably those such as *Le rouge et le noir* or *Crime and Punishment* which ironise the aspirations of the youthful hero, is, of course, Napoleon Bonaparte. Neither Julien Sorel nor Raskolnikov is of adequate stature, however, to assume such a Romantic mantle in an age of bourgeois-capitalist social relations. But by contrast, the Napoleon figure glimpsed at in the figure of Larsen, 'pequeño y gordo', has already returned in defeat from the burning of Moscow. Indeed, the ironic allusion to the Hundred Days only occurs on the eve of his expulsion, and the historic analogy of a second exile to St. Helena mitigates against the possibility of 'su retorno, la prolongación del reinado de cien días' (A., 59) which opens *El astillero*.

In fact, Larsen is a carnival figure, dressed by Lanza *et al.* in the garb of the corpulent, middle-aged Emperor (there is an extended discussion on the carnivalesque in section [iv] of the 'concluding remarks below). If his ambition to gain access to Petrus' house through the conquest of his daughter is allowed a military simile - 'Larsen veía la casa como la forma vacía de un cielo ambicionado, prometido; como las puertas de una ciudad en la que deseaba entrar...' (A., 71) - the actual result of his campaign leads him only to another carnival figure, a maid who bears the ironic name of



Josefina (she is allowed more fully, if inconsistent, French credentials in the short story *El perro tendrá su día*). The carnival figure is, of course, an imposter *sui generis*, and as such plagued by 'existential' uncertainty as to his status, - one thinks paradigmatically of K., the false land surveyor, who enters into an bizarre game of recognition with the Castle. At times, it is even difficult to know if the figure has come to believe in his disguise. On Larsen's arrival into Santa María at the start of *Juntacadáveres*, we are told that: 'empujaba, dominado, el gesto perdonador de quien regresa al país natal autorizado por el triunfo' (*J.*, 13), an image readily associated with the escape from Elba (we later learn that Larsen, in an earlier episode, had been exiled to the interior [*J.*, 166]). In fact, Larsen has never been anything other than a player of roles, though by the time of *El astillero* he lacks all conviction in them. Thus, for instance 'aún durante años, Junta recorría las salas de baile, lento, contoneándose, construyendo con destreza el simulacro de seguridad y calma correspondientes al hombre que había imaginado ser' (*J.*, 167)

But in his returns to Santa María that open both *Juntacadáveres* and *El astillero*, this parody of Napoleon is more overtly a usurper, a Bakhtinian 'carnival king' who lives in the anxious knowledge that he will be inevitably and publicly decrowned (or as we will see, dismembered). The expulsion from Santa María, first envisaged in *La vida breve*, occurs on the eve of the carnival which sees Díaz Grey's company adopt various costumes, and this positioning is repeated in *Juntacadáveres*.<sup>176</sup> More critically, the trope of inversion which Bakhtin identifies closely with the carnivalesque exists, for instance, in the irony that it is the *macró* who continually appeals naively to legality while Marcos Bergner resorts to underworld violence so as to uncrown the usurper (as reported in the expulsion dialogue both of *La vida breve* (O.C., 690-692) and of *Juntacadáveres* (*J.*, 230-232). Carnivalisation in the Bakhtinian sense, with a consequent inversion of values and foregrounding of disguise, occurs indeed in a number of Onetti's works. Thus Sergio Alvarez notes of the encounter between the

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<sup>175</sup> John Deredita, "El lenguaje de la desintegración: Notas sobre "El astillero"", 227

<sup>176</sup> Thus Chapter XXXII begins 'En vísperas de carnaval, Santa María ya era una ciudad...' (*J.*, 229).

'prostitute' María Esperanza and the fat man in the short story "Mascarada": 'es el encuentro de dos seres totalmente degradados, en medio de un contexto carnavalizado. Los espectáculos que se desarrollan durante esa noche de verano en el parque, crean una inversión de valores.'<sup>177</sup> One might note in passing that inversion is also a characteristic of Brausen's assuming the alternative identity of Arce; thus Monegal notes of La Queca's room 'Este es un mundo, como el de Lewis Carroll en *Through the Looking Glass*, en que las imágenes (los valores) están invertidos.' (Prólogo, *O.C.*, 22)

Larsen is not merely a carnivalesque Napoleon, however. Like Leopold Bloom, he is loaded with a number of parodic disguises. A pregnant scene in which Bergner spits on Larsen's face is rightly identified by Brotherston with the parodic crowning of Christ by the Roman soldiers (he calls him 'judío').<sup>178</sup> One also finds a strong quasi-biblical echo in the equivocal accounts of his flight from the shipyard which close *El astillero*: 'Alguno (de los lancheros) después tuvo lástima y lo levantaron del barro; le dieron un trago de caña, risas y palmadas, fingieron limpiarle la ropa [...] Eran tres, los lancheros, y sus nombres constan..' (*A.*, 233) But the spitting also, more importantly, places the underworld pimp into the line of imaginative vice-existers which began with Linacero, spat upon by Ana María after his assault on her in the hut (it is interesting that immediately prior to the later spitting incident, Bergner muses: 'Pagaría por saber dónde se habrá metido Ana María. En una de esas la encontramos en la casita de la costa. Recuerdo que una noche le pedí o le aconsejé que se fuera a vivir allí' (*J.*, 200)). In each case, the victim allows the spit to dry off in silence, the result narrated without comment: 'Tenía la cara seca' (*O.C.*, 54) and "No vi restos de saliva en la cara de Larsen.' (*J.*, 201). But for the observer Jorge Malabia, this second spit appears to allow Larsen to connect with a previous self: 'Juntacadáveres comenzó a sonreír, a rejuvenecer. Parecía separado de nosotros, del momento, por una larga distancia de años.' (*J.*, 201). If one bears in mind that from as early as *Tierra de nadie* Larsen is

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<sup>177</sup> Alvarez, "Espacio y personajes en la cuentística de Onetti entre los años 1933 y 1953", from *Actos de las jornadas de homenaje a Juan Carlos Onetti*, Montevideo: Universidad de la República (1997), 54



worried that the new pseudonym, Emilio Landoni, too closely resembles his true name in that the initials are identical, that later in *El astllero* he congratulates Petrus on remembering these very initials and that this same novel ends on the enigmatic words 'en los libros del hospital figura completo su nombre verdadero.' (A, 233), it is perhaps not too outlandish to suggest that Larsen may in fact be a 'vice-exister' of Eladio Linacero, perhaps the very hero of the sueño entitled 'El regreso de Napoleón' (O.C., 58).<sup>179</sup> One should remember that it is at the unlikely instigation of Larsen, a resuscitated corpse, that Medina writes the second half of *Dejemos hablar al viento*, and that in *La muerte y la niña*, Díaz Grey considers 'la luz de todos los días que nos repetía Brausen, Juan María, casi Junta para los ateos.' (N., 121, emphasis added).

But it is, furthermore, in the fragmented presentation of the body, with its tendency towards the grotesque, that we get a better approximation of the implications of the carnivalesque on the conception of Larsen. As we have mentioned above with relation to Linacero's assault on Ana María, Bakhtin identifies the decrowning process specifically with bodily fragmentation:

'The scene of the scandal and decrowning of the prince [Mordasov, in Dostoevsky's story "Uncle's Dream"] - the carnival king, or more accurately the carnival bridegroom - is consistently portrayed as a *tearing to pieces*, as a typical carnivalistic "sacrificial" dismemberment into parts:

"...If I'm a tub, then you are a *one-legged cripple!*"

"Me - one-legged -"

"Yes, yes, one-legged and *toothless* into the bargain, that's what you are!"

"And one-eyed, too" shouted Marya Alexandrovna.

"You have a corset instead of ribs," added Natalya Dmitriyevna.

"Your *face* is on springs!"

"You have no *hair* of your own!"

"And the fool's *moustache* is artificial, too," screeched Marya Alexandrovna.

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<sup>178</sup> He is 'a spat-upon martyr who bears the initials of Jesus Christ in his sordid nickname (Junta-cadáveres)' Brotherston, *The emergence of the Latin American novel*, 63

<sup>179</sup> The possibility becomes less outlandish when one bears in mind that as early as the 1950 novel *La vida breve*, Onetti was in a position to include the tableau of the expulsion of Larsen from Santa María, viewed explicitly in Napoleonic terms by Lanza. Furthermore, in a number of interviews, it is clear that Onetti conceives of Larsen primarily as an 'artist' (see for instance *La literatura, ida y vuelta*).

"At least leave me my *nose*, Marya Alexandrovna!" cried the Prince, flabbergasted by such unexpected *revelations*...

"Good God," said the unfortunate Prince, "...take me away, my good fellow, take me away, or they'll *tear me to pieces*..." [SS II, 398-99]

We have here a typical "carnival anatomy" - an enumeration of the parts of the dismembered body.' (Bakhtin, op.cit., 161/2, emphasis in the original).

But in Onetti, there is scarcely the need for the caustic commentary of two 'enemies' to uncrown a carnival king whose very nickname, 'Juntacadáveres', might suggest the Lacanian *corps morcelé*, if not quite ripe for linguistic dismemberment, then certainly lacking the capacity to cohere into a unitary specular imago.<sup>180</sup>

'Este cuerpo; las piernas, los brazos, el sexo, las tripas, lo que me permite la amistad con la gente y las cosas; la cabeza que soy yo y por eso no existe para mí; pero está el hueco del tórax, que ya no es un hueco, relleno con restos, virutas, limaduras, polvo, el desecho de todo lo que me importó...>' (A., 154).

One might also note, in passing, that the individual body part, no less than the supposed whole, is equally ambivalent in what it tells the observer. Thus, while for Brausen, Larsen 'tenía una nariz delgada y curva y era como si su juventud se hubiera conservado en ella, en su audacia, en la expresión imperiosa que la nariz agregaba a la cara.' (O.C., 690), Barthé views the collection of parts that form his face in the following terms: 'Junta, con la calvicie escondida por el sombrero, los ojos salientes, *la nariz vencida profetizando la derrota*, con la periódica, casi imperceptible contracción de la boca hacia la mejilla derecha.' (J. 59, emphasis added). Of course, in Onetti, no witness is ever reliable or impartial. The quote continues 'Entonces el boticario adivinó o supuso

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<sup>180</sup> The opposite impulse, that of corporeal reconstitution, seems to motivate the narrator-witness of *Los adioses*, who feels sympathy for an (actual) sportsman who is in terminal bodily decline (unlike the carnival usurper who must be publically uncrowned, the sportsman 'chooses' a private suicide): 'Tocaba el mostrador con la punta de los dedos, para mantenerse recto, dentro del sobretodo negro, oloroso, anacrónico; exhibía los huesos velludos de las muñecas e inclinaba la cabeza para mirarlos, alternativamente, compasivo, y con cariño; aparte de esto, no era nada más que pómulos, la dureza de la sonrisa, el brillo de los ojos, activo e infantil. Me costaba creer que pudiera hacerse una cara con tan poca cosa: le agregué una frente ensanchada y amarilla, ojeras, líneas azules a los lados de la nariz, cejas unidas, retintas.' (O.C., 763)



en el otro una forma de la hermandad, una vocación o manía, la necesidad de luchar por un propósito sin tener verdadera fe en él y sin considerarlo un fin.' (*J.*, 59)

A carnival character, the very embodiment of an anguished Lacanian *corps morcelé*, lacks the corporeal integrity of '*l'imagen du corps propre*', an aspect which one might easily otherwise overlook in such details as 'el vientre avanzaba redondo, independiente del resto del cuerpo.' (*J.*, 42) and the allusions to autonomous hands mentioned above. Bakhtin continues his exegesis in a language reminiscent of Sartre's analysis of the 'pour-soi': 'Especialmente profundamente carnavalizado es el carácter de Foma Fomich [of *The village of Stepanchikovo*]: he does not coincide with himself, he is not equal to himself, he cannot be given a monosemantic finalizing definition...' (Bakhtin, *op.cit.*, 163). Larsen, more deeply carnivalized than either Linacero and Brausen, is unable either to 'coincide with himself' or to escape, as Millington suggested with reference to Linacero's *sueños*, into the realm of the Imaginary, where an integral, specular self might provide a temporary source of identity. On the few occasions when he contemplates his reflection, he sees it 'en el espejo infiel del ropero, sucesivamente, como a un desconocido, como a la cara no emocionante de un amigo muerto, como a una simple probabilidad humana' (*A.*, 202). A hundred pages earlier, he had contemplated '<Este señor que me mira en el espejo>' <sup>181</sup> Larsen, as the resuscitated corpse in *Dejemos hablar al viento*, explicitly states to Medina that the imaginary resource of 'writing Santa María into being' would be unavailable to him.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> More frequently for Larsen, mirrors tend to assume a Borgesian rather than Lacanian function. Thus we have the memories of 'salones de peluquerías que series de espejos hacían infinitos' (*A.*, 145) and again 'salones prolongados por espejos que parecían reproducir también las discusiones deportivas, el ajeteo de los clientes y de la calle' (*J.*, 110)

<sup>182</sup> Revealingly, however, he imagines in the idyll of accession to Petrus' house 'el ejercicio [...] de un dominio narcisista y desatento' (*A.*, 71, emphasis added).

## (v) Ageing and the Grotesque Body

*'Comme on devient de plus en plus laid et répugnant à ce jeu-là en vieillissant, on ne peut pas même plus la dissimuler sa peine, sa faillite, on finit par en avoir plein la figure de cette sale grimace qui met des vingt ans, des trente ans et davantage à vous remonter enfin du ventre sur la face. C'est à cela que ça seulement, un homme, une grimace, qu'il met toute une vie à se confectionner, et encore qu'il arrive même pas toujours à la terminer tellement qu'elle est lourde et compliquée la grimace qu'il faudrait faire pour exprimer toute sa vraie âme sans rien en perdre. (Céline, Voyage au bout de la nuit)*

It is perhaps in the grotesque presentation of the decrepit, atrophied body that Onetti's presentation most closely approximates to those of Beckett and Kafka. In the case of the Czech author, one need merely think of the number of bed-bound judges, advocates and officials to whom both K. and Joseph K. must appeal, always in the degraded context of their semi-private and chaotic chambers, to locate Petrus in a correct literary context. Larsen, every bit as fraudulent as Kafka's Land-surveyor, in the first of two desperate meetings subsequent to his assuming the position of General Manager, 'se introdujo en la luz del dormitorio y vio al viejo Petrus boca arriba, acurrucado en la cuarta parte de una cama matrimonial [...] Aquí no había más que el cuerpo raquítico bajo las mantas, la cabeza de cadáver amarillenta y sonriendo sobre las gruesas almohadas verticales, el viejo y su juego.' (A., 142-3) His head, uniquely appearing above the sheets, is 'la cabeza de momia de mono que se apoyaba sin peso en las almohadas.' (A., 144)

The second meeting is portrayed in equally grotesque terms. Although Petrus has been arraigned for fraud and is in jail, 'no estaba en una celda; la habitación era una oficina con muebles arrumbados, escaleras y tarros de pintura' (A., 206), a recognisably Kafkaesque location. Indeed it is 'como si (Petrus) lo hubiera estado acechando, como si hubiera planeado la distribución de los muebles para sorprenderlo' (*ibid.*). But by now, the minimal faith which had tied Larsen to the game has all but disappeared. The old man, fending off Larsen's anxiety with a worthless contract, 'recogió su cabeza como una tortuga, volvió a mostrar los dientes amarillos' (A., 209), but by this time,



Larsen reads nothing but hopelessness in Petrus' decrepitude: '«Está preso, concluido, y la calavera blanca y amarilla me está diciendo con cada arruga que ya no hay pretextos para engañarse, para vivir, para ninguna forma de pasión o bravata»' (A., 208). The atrophying old man, a bodily correlate of the decrepit shipyard and decaying city, is perhaps the final 'cadaver' gathered by Junta in an attempt to stave off ruin.

Larsen's women themselves are, of course, cruel parodies of the 'mujer perfecta' that, together with the perfect space, constitutes his self-styled mission. But their presentation, particularly throughout chapter IX of *Juntacadáveres*, goes far beyond the standard Onettian vision of decline and degradation familiar from earlier works (the older male figures of "Bienvenido, Bob" and "Jacob y el otro", the fifty year old woman of "Un sueño realizado", Mami in *La vida breve* etc). For these stories, there is a sense in which the present state of decline is inseparable from a memory of lost youth, so that the degraded body serves to illustrate how far one has fallen away from earlier aspirations or possibilities. This, however, does not imply an unproblematic presentation of memory and temporal-ontological continuity, but merely that, as Deredita points out, 'el pasado confirma el deterioro del individuo.'<sup>183</sup>

The prostitutes in *Juntacadáveres*, with the single exception of María Bonita/Nora whom Larsen had been with in *Tierra de nadie*, are without a past of any interest, and even in her case, we are told that: 'Junta pensó que el recuerdo de María Bonita no tenía ningún significado, que evocando a la mujer y al tiempo que la rodeaba en la añoranza, no podía superar la conciencia de fracaso que empezaba a angustiarlo' (J., 62). She herself sounds the motif of the faceless woman when examining in a mirror: 'la cara de María Bonita, las sutiles arrugas sin historia [...] comprobaba que no tenía en realidad una cara' (J., 72, emphases added). In regard to Nelly and Irene, there is a hallucinatory, expressionist intensity in the descriptions that obtain within the 'casita celeste' (and for the earlier 'cuatro cadáveres con vestidos de baile' which formed his entourage in the brothel of El Rosario) which effectively removes their humanity<sup>184</sup> (Mami, by contrast, arouses a certain sympathy in *La vida Breve*, as for instance when

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<sup>183</sup> John Deredita, 'El lenguaje de la desintegración', 231.

<sup>184</sup> '-Pero hay sueños que significan -murmuró la cosa' (J., 68, emphasis added)

Stein describes his pain at seeing her desperate attempt to win a single admiring glance, dressed in a swimsuit):

'Me da por comer huevos fritos, querido -dijo el esqueleto, sentado ahora en la cama, haciendo sonar codos y rodillas con las falanges y el vaso entre los fémures abiertos, segregando los años, la insensatez y el acabamiento.'  
(*J.*, 68)

But the point is that it is as impossible to separate these macabre descriptions from the 'existential project' of Larsen as it is to separate the dilapidated, exposed shipyard and senile owner from his own immanent demise in *El astillero*. The chapter which contains the above quote finishes with Larsen's realisation that 'fundar el prostíbulo era ahora, esencialmente, como casarse *in articulo mortis*...' (*J.*, 69)

An important point in Lacan's conception of the *stade du miroir* is that a mirror is not necessary. In fact, the key experience is one of identity with object-figures that are perceived to form Gestalt's, an identification which provokes a rift between 'scattered' subject and unified object that leads to an alienation at the heart of the Imaginary (much of Lacan is concerned with the various attempts of the 'falsifying Ego' to paper over such rifts). In Onetti, as we have seen, the Other is seldom perceived as a Gestalt, but rather in terms of metonymic, atomised parts, often betraying mortality or decline, which one may try to read. Thus the sportsman's death in the novella *Los adioses* is already legible in the detail of his hands, repeated in the two paragraphs which open the novella:

'Quisiera no haber visto del hombre, la primera vez que entró en el almacén, nada más que las manos; lentas, intimidadas y torpes, moviéndose sin fe, largas y todavía sin tostar, disculpándose por su actuación, desinteresada ...  
Quisiera no haberle visto más que las manos, me hubiera bastado verlas [...] para saber que no iba a curarse, que no conocía nada de donde sacar voluntad para curarse.'  
(*O.C.*, 717)

It is worth examining this opening with considerable care, since at first sight the second paragraph seems merely to reiterate the first. However, a grammatical detail, a quirk of the Spanish, separates the two. The opening paragraph gives no indication as



to whether it is a first or third person narrative. We begin with a view of a pair of 'disembodied' hands, and a grammatically ambivalent verb form 'quisiera no haber'. The imperfect subjunctive only yields up a narrative first person when, having essentially repeated the opening phrase, there is a person specific 'me hubiera bastado verlas'. The narrative subject seems to condense only after an encounter with the pair of hands. (Perhaps it comes as no surprise that this narrator should also be a tubercular invalid).

But if the narrative focaliser is understood to be in physical decline through identification with the atrophied bodies that surround him, what 'existential' implications does this state imply? The degree to which physical decrepitude may be seen to curtail choice is well illustrated by the following consideration, from the anonymous heroine of María Luisa Bombal's 1935 novel *La última niebla*, with which Onetti was familiar;

Me asalta la visión de mi cuerpo desnudo, y extendido sobre una mesa de la Morgue. Carnes mustias y pegadas a un estrecho esqueleto, un vientre sumido entre las caderas...El suicidio de una mujer casi vieja, Qué cosa repugnante e inútil. ¿Mi vida no es acaso ya el comienzo de la muerte? Morir para rehuir, ¿qué nuevas decepciones? ¿Qué nuevos dolores? Hace algunos años hubiera sido, tal vez, razonable destruir, en un solo impulso de rebeldía, todas las fuerzas en mí acumuladas, para no verlas consumirse, inactivas. Pero un destino implacable me ha robado hasta el derecho de buscar la muerte, me ha ido acorralando lentamente, insensiblemente, a una vejez sin fervores, sin recuerdos...sin pasado. (*La última niebla*, 44)

The 'existential' implications are taken to their extreme by Beckett, who adds increasing immobility to bodily fragmentation, not only in the course of the Trilogy and the later prose (*Comment c'est*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*), but dramatically in pieces such as *Endgame*, *Play* and *Rough for Theatre I*.

Onetti's anti-heroes may never achieve the limbless stasis of a Beckett 'voice', but there does appear to be a growing tendency towards the expressionist grotesque - thus for instance the appearance of Larsen as resuscitated corpse in *Dejemos hablar al*

*viento*. The figure of 'La Tora', the El Rosario brothel madame of *Juntacadáveres*, has, by the time of *Cuando entonces* declined (if the narrator correctly has identified her) into 'madame Safó', a figure every bit as decrepit as Petrus: 'con ademanes y voces de presidente de directorio de un banco en quiebra' (*C.E.*, 66). She serves mainly to make the narrator feel the passage of time since his equivocal memory of the former woman, and after his encounter with her, he goes on: 'En los espejos vi correr los días crueles y monótonos que, con prisa cretina, me iban envejeciendo.' (*C.E.*, 70).

Yet the narrative doubt as to her identity posits a more profound question: the problem of the continuity of the self. Regarding the old exile Lanza, Jorge Malabia has the following to say: 'un viejo no es uno que fue joven, es alguien distinto, sin unión con su adolescencia, es otro.' (*J.*, 92) One might also point to the same doubt in the overhasty decline of Díaz Grey in Onetti's final novel *Cuando ya no importe*, (a Gothic ageing which recalls, appropriately enough given the stasis which has thus far defined the ageless doctor, the end of Wilde's Dorian Grey):

'Así como unos minutos atrás el rostro de Angélica Inés había retrocedido hasta un año de su infancia, la cara del médico, el cuerpo mismo y hasta su camisa suelta avanzaban hasta ese momento en que la vejez sólo ofrece desagrado.

*Aquello ya no era Díaz Grey*. Era un viejo borracho, impúdico, que alzaba la calvicie y los ojos aceptando resignado no comprender. La cara, también ésta oscilante, parecía dominada por la piel que se apoyaba inclemente y antigua en la calavera [...] la piel, razonablemente fatigada de su larga tarea, se aflojaba en descanso, se iba plegando para repetir las arrugas que sus hermanas habían impuesto durante siglos antes de dejar desnudas calaveras, cuencas vacías y buscar el total reposo de la gusanera y el polvo.

Pensé que aquello, todavía persona, se estaba momificando, era casi momia.'

(*C.I.*, 191, emphasis added)

If the mummifying body, shrunk to the dimensions of a skull, remind one of the descriptions of Jeremius Petrus, it might be remembered that Díaz Grey has by this time married the crazy Angélica to become her surrogate father and is living in the



house on fourteen pillars. Furthermore he is being described by a narrator who is located, like Larsen, 'durante el exilio en mi santa helena personal' (*C.I.*, 162)<sup>185</sup>

But it is worth briefly returning to the issue of continuity in identity, frequently taken as a distinguishing feature between the modern and post-modern worldview. Thus of Onetti's *Juntacadáveres* and Donoso's *El lugar sin límites*, published in 1964 and 1966 respectively, Philip Swanson writes that:

'in their parallel "break with tradition", Onetti tends to display a fundamentally modernist consciousness while Donoso tends to display a postmodernist consciousness. In other words, though both explore a sense of disintegrating order and the loss of clear-cut values, Onetti's concern may seem to be the disorientation of the individual in the face of an increasingly absurd and meaningless world or environment, while Donoso's is more to do with the nature of identity itself as inherently unstable and arbitrarily constructed.' (*Onetti and Others*, 36).

While Swanson goes on to qualify this to a certain extent by highlighting some of the doubts and complexities underlying the construction Onettian identity, the choice of Donoso's as a contrastive ontology tends to eclipse the degree that the former problematises any conception of the Self as unitary or self-consistent. Certainly, in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, Donoso so radically undermines all significant binarisms such as young/old, mute/vocal, male/female, beautiful/grotesque, inside/outside, sacred/profane etc. that the identity of the narrator, Jerónimo becomes as problematic as, say, that of Beckett's *Unnamable*.

But notwithstanding Onetti's closer approximation to 'realism', when one considers the radical fragmentation of body and its spatial correlates, the proliferation of simulacra and 'vice-existers', the undermining of temporal continuity exemplified both by the treacherous nature of memory and the impossibility of future projection, and the contingency and violence that characterises intercourse with 'the Other', one might precisely characterise Onetti's ontology as a concern with 'the nature of identity itself as inherently unstable and arbitrarily constructed.'

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<sup>185</sup> The narrator's name, Juan Carr, is of course a fragment of the Uruguayan author's name.

Moreover, it converges to a considerable degree with that of Beckett (and a number of Absurdist writers), for whose characters boredom and repetition provide only the illusion of continuity.<sup>186</sup> Thus: '(Díaz Grey) aceptó demostrar que cada uno *es la sensación y el instante, que la continuidad aparente está vigilada por presiones, por rutinas, por inercias...que nos hacen indignos de la libertad*' (*J.*, 88, emphasis added).

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<sup>186</sup> See especially Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett, Repetition, Theory and Text*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988



## Concluding Remarks

### (i) The inadequacy of traditional character determinants.

The concern of the present study has been to show the extent to which, by limiting characterisation to the unique referents of distorted phenomenological parameters, Onetti sets out a vision of mankind whose horizon of choice is as severely curtailed as that of both Kafka and Beckett. To begin with, figures such as Linacero, Aránzuru, Larsen, Medina, Juan Carr and Díaz Grey, no less than K., Joseph K., Watt Molloy or Malone, are presented to us not merely in the absence of a childhood, but with no access to a dependable past or familial/professional present which might in some way allow us to determine their status.<sup>187</sup> Kafka's two 'K.'s' are here archetypally important. The lack of a surname is symptomatic of an entire nexus of undecideability which accumulates around each figure in the course of the text. What is Joseph K. accused of and to what extent is he guilty? Has K. ever worked as a land surveyor and why does he maintain a fraudulent relationship with the Castle based upon a supposed summons there? The condition of Karl Rossmann, Georg, and Gregor Samsa is scarcely less problematic. Indeed, the minimal presence of a patriarchal family sketched out in *Der Verschollene*, *Das Urteil* and *Die Verwandlung* by no means papers over the absurd conditions that the Kafkaian protagonist is abruptly thrown into. But since each character is presented *uniquely in terms of* this absurd situation, there is no apparatus by which the reader may gain a privileged or extratextual viewpoint so as to 'decide' questions as to their innocence or culpability.<sup>188</sup> One is in a similarly helpless position with regard to the entire cast of Beckett's oeuvre.

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<sup>187</sup> There is, as a corollary, an almost complete absence of paternity among the protagonists in all three writers.

<sup>188</sup> Though beyond the scope of the present study, it is worth pointing out the extent to which 'undecideability' forms an integral part of the Onettian narrative. One thinks for instance of the validity of the various narratives which accrue around the maid Rita in *Para una tumba sin nombre*; of the possible guilt of the narrator of 'La cara de la desgracia' and of Goerdel in *la muerte y la niña*; of the exact nature of the triangular relationship that forms the basis of *Los adioses*; of the circumstances surrounding the brutal death of Magda in *Cuando entonces*; of the trick by which

In the absence of biographical or genetic evidence, a second point of entry might be the nexus of relationships inside which the protagonist is located. Again, what is immediately apparent, in Beckett as in Kafka, is the absence of any significant or durable relationship (beyond that of patriarchal trauma in the case of the earlier Kafkan hero). Such liaisons as occur between male and female tend to be transient, marred by miscommunication, open to intrusion, and with a tendency towards violence. As such, male-female intercourse forms merely a subset of all human transaction, characterised by power relations within a context of the accumulation of meaningless jabber. Language itself tends to obfuscate rather than facilitate understanding. This is, of course, precisely the society in which Linacero, Aránzuru, Brausen, Marcos Bergner, Larsen, Jorge Malabia and Díaz Grey move. Rather than defining character, the social and romantic interactions that each engage in serve instead to delineate the absolute extent to which they are inadequate to the task of defining the Self. To this extent, one might talk of Onetti as a minor writer in the sense that Deleuze and Guatarri employ the term.

Again, taking the equivocal position of Kafka's apocryphal land surveyor as paradigmatic, one might look at the notion of profession, so central to the idea of an identity in both the bourgeois and socialist mentality. Indeed, socio-economic determinants of character are on a par with genetic throughout the evolution of the realist and naturalist canon. A fixed profession is, of course, what is conspicuously lacking in those narrators to which Linacero bears such a close affinity: those of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Hamsun's *Hunger*, Barbusse's *L'enfer*, Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Pessoa's *Livro do Desassossego*, Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, Sartre's *La nausée*, and so forth. Linacero, Aránzuru and Brausen implicitly articulate the inadequacy of profession as a means to identity, all three renouncing or supplementing an established position. But the inadequacy is far more eloquently argued by the absurd posturing of later protagonists, all of whom are to various degrees fraudulent in their professional activities: Díaz Grey, who is complicit

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Jacob van Oppen overcomes his younger rival in 'Jacob y el otro'; of the demise of Larsen in El astillero and the equivocal scene in which Angélica Inés runs from his office; of the paternity of



from the start in a morphine racket initiated by the mysterious Quinteros; Goerdel, the novice priest who lacks all faith; Medina, who seems to parody Céline's Bardamu in the gamut of roles that Frieda selects for him; Juan Carr, who arrives in Santamaría Este armed with 'mi falso título de ingeniero' (C.I., 26); and, above all, Larsen, whose very name is as equivocal as his various positions.

As a final approximation to the understanding of character in traditional poetics, one might look at plot. In the classical canon, there is little differentiation between the hero and his acts, and as the Russian Formalist school have argued, the mythical tradition is prevalent, as deep structure, even in the majority of modernist experiments. But the anatomy of the characteristic Onetti text tends to be highly fragmented, elliptical and heterogenous (*El pozo; Tierra de nadie; Para una tumba sin nombre; Jacob y el otro; Juntacadáveres; La muerte y la niña; Dejemos hablar al viento; Cuando entonces; Cuando ya no importe*). Plot, such as it exists, tends to be inconclusive, information partial or contradictory (one thinks of the niño/niña that is responsible for the death of Goerdel's wife), and any denouement so equivocal as to subvert a definitive reading (*La vida breve; Para una tumba sin nombre; Cuando entonces*). Here again one sees the basis for comparing Onetti's poetics to those of Beckett, but it is also worth remembering the absolute lack of progress that characterises the Kafka text.

Given the inadequacy of the traditional parameters or contexts of characterisation, it has been argued throughout this study that Onetti requires us to approach character in terms of what have been termed phenomenological determinants (time, space, language, embodiment). More importantly, he has, in the manner of both Kafka and Beckett, distorted these parameters in such a way as to obviate the possibility of significant or meaningful choice. Let us briefly review the findings of the main sections of the study.

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Seoane, who may be Medina's son; and so forth.

(i) Part I, space-time

The first part of the thesis examined the extent to which the presentation and manipulation of space-time undermines the possibility of free and meaningful choice in all three authors. Space, in all three, is elevated so that the issue of 'housedness' may be considered a correlative of being. In Kafka, one thinks not only of the anxious monologue of the creature of *Der Bau* but of the odyssey of both Rossman and K. through a number of temporary and patently inadequate dwellings; in Beckett, of the trope of expulsion which characterises not only Watt, but the narrators of the four novellas and of the *Tryptich*. In Onetti there is a similar focus, beginning in the shared flat in which Linacero writes of an idealised *cabaña*, and developing in the transience of the rented and run-down rooms through which Aránzuru, Ossorio, the tubercular sportsman of *Los adioses*, Larsen, Medina and Juan Carr variously move. The proliferation of spaces temporarily occupied by Larsen in *El astillero* all combine to illustrate his indeterminacy, his essential condition (like K.) of Carnival usurper: the Santa María pensión; the room in the Belgrano hotel (accentuated by his lack of financial resources); the exposed shipyard; the casilla that resembles a shipwreck; the eternal repetitions of the glorieta and *Chamamé*; the raised house on fourteen pillars, access to the upper floor of which is forbidden.

The issue of housedness in all the above is, much as with the archetypal narrator of Hamsun's *Hunger*, a direct source of anxiety, and here we must remember that a state of anxiety is precisely what typifies authentic being. Kearney summarises the notion in Heidegger as follows: 'By thus retrieving the authentic self from the inauthentic crowd, *Dasein* confronts its ontological condition of homelessness (*Unheimlichkeit*).'<sup>189</sup> It is interesting to note that, in order to designate this authentic condition, Heidegger selects the same word that Freud uses for 'uncanniness': the condition of authenticity is entirely incompatible with 'ordinary-everydayness'. To this extent, the decision of Aránzuru, Brausen and the Larsen of *Juntacadáveres* to

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<sup>189</sup> Kearney, *op cit*, 37



abandon their room (and job) in search of the idealised space (Faruru, Santa María/Queca's room, the brothel) is a move away from the inauthentic.

The fictional universe of Onetti is conceived in spatial terms much as is that of Kafka, and as was argued in chapter 3 above, is equally as prone to spatio-temporal distortion. Furthermore, insofar as the physical act of writing is constantly being foregrounded by Onetti, there is a certain equivalence between the extensive world and the project of writing. Thus both Brausen and Medina are able to enter into and locate themselves within their imagined Santa Marías. Deleuze and Guattari, in their study '*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*', observe that:

'This work is a rhizome, a burrow. The castle has multiple entrances whose rules of usage and whose locations aren't very well known. The hotel in *Amerika* has innumerable main doors and side doors that innumerable guards watch over; it even has entrances and exits without doors. Yet it might seem that the burrow in the story of that name has only one entrance [...]  
but this is a trap arranged by the animal and by Kafka himself.'<sup>190</sup>

Santa María, a space written and rewritten, shares this rhizomatic topography. There are many points of entry,<sup>191</sup> many retellings of the same narrative, or of different narratives written with the same elements in different permutation. The rhizomatic nature of is occasionally explicit: 'A lo mejor trotaste por las veredas con sombre, la lengua afuera, buscando como un perro una pared rota, una puerta entornada, una grieta cualquiera para dar el gran salto y volver a esa Santa María que te inventaste con la ayuda de los otros vagos' (D., 110). But there is never any advancement, never any approximation towards decideability.

But it would be incorrect to isolate the topographic, loaded as it is with value, and to ignore how intimately space and time are interwoven. The interaction of spatio-temporal categories is critical since, as Bakhtin point out: '[w]hat counts for us is that [the term chronotope] expresses the inseparability of space and time [and] it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions [because] the

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<sup>190</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, '*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*', University of Minnesota Press 2000, 3

<sup>191</sup> As for instance the exiled Medina finds while in a brothel-room run by the deceased Larsen.

image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.' (B, 84-85) But if space is rhizomatic, and the time that unfolds within it is, as has been shown in chapter 2 above, inherently malleable, what projects are possible for man? This malleability is paradigmatically apparent in the scene of the lumber-room in *Der Prozess*, in which Joseph K. is confronted with the identical punishment scene, as it were in frozen animation, on two consecutive days, and again in the untrustworthy passage of time in K's attempt to approach the castle in *Das Schloss* or in his several interviews in the bedrooms of the officials. In Onetti, as we have seen, circularity and idle repetition seem to obtain in the spaces of the *Chamamé*, the glorieta, the consulting room of Díaz Grey, while in the bedrooms of innumerable 'locas', from Beatriz and la Queca through to Julita and Angélica Inés, an illusiary temporal refuge governed by the stasis of the 'naturaleza muerta' is momentarily proffered.

Circularity, repetition, stasis, and yet all the time the protagonist is ageing. The bureaucratic mechanisms described by Titorelli in *Der Prozess* and Barnabas in *Das Schloss* seem to offer only indefinite postponement, seem to require a cosmic time incommensurate with the mortal span of the seeker. The indefinite appointment to meet Godot and the judgment hanging over Petrus' shipyard pertain to just such an incommensurability. Of the chronotope of the parochial backwater, Bakhtin writes:

'time here is without event and almost seems to stand still. Here there are no "meetings", no "partings". It is a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space. *And therefore it cannot serve as the primary time of the novel. Novelists use it as an ancillary time, one that may be interwoven with other noncyclical temporal sequences or used merely to intersperse such sequences. It often serves as a contrasting background for temporal sequences that are more charged with energy and event.*' (*The Dialogic Imagination* 247-8, emphasis added).

The viscosity of time dragging itself relentlessly through space is precisely the 'primary time' of *El pozo*, however, as it is for the entire Santa María saga: 'Yo estoy tirado y el tiempo se arrastra, indiferente, a mi derecha y a mi izquierda', and again: 'fue (la noche) que me alzó entre sus aguas como el cuerpo lívido de un muerto y me



arrastra, inexorable, entre fríos y vagas espumas, noche abajo' (O.C., 75-6). In Kafka, Beckett and Onetti, it is uneventful time which takes its course while the K.'s, the Vladimirs and Estragons play out their repetitious parodies of activity. All are in the ludicrous position of Larsen, 'impotente y absurdamente móvil, como un insecto oscuro que agitara patas y antenas en el aire de leyenda' (A., 84).

Time splinters, races, bifurcates. A cosmic time slips past, driven perhaps by a demiurge (Brausen, Medina, Díaz Grey), but spatio-temporal dislocation makes it impossible to unify past and future as possibility, as Heidegger would propose. 'El tiempo se desmembra en presentes insulares sin prospección. El aislamiento imposibilita el futuro y reifica el pasado, sume en un presente soñoliento, sonámbulo, en una suspensión onírica.'<sup>192</sup> Indeed, the unique possibility of moving beyond this turgid and relentless slide of time, as suggested in *El pozo*, is through the act of writing. This is essentially true also of the room-bound Beckett consciousness: 'That the old man character of Beckett must tell stories, continuously, is an indication of his need not to live in chronology but to abandon time frames altogether.'<sup>193</sup> That such escapes are illusory is self-evident.

The difference between the above authors and Faulkner, rarely emphasised in comparative critical accounts, is here instructive. Yoknapatawpha County is undoubtedly a backwater in the Bakhtinian sense, but two overriding factors differentiate this world from that of Santa María. In the first place, Faulkner's protagonists are not only imbued with an historical past, they are obsessed by it. Díaz Grey and Medina, by contrast, are, like Estragon and K., explicitly deprived access to a dependable past on which to found 'existential projects'. Secondly, such relativism as characterises the narratives of Faulkner are epistemological, arising from the partial accounts of a variety of witnesses and consciousnesses (a montage of incomplete perspectives is at the heart of *Light in August*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom! Absalom!*). The relativism of Onetti is frequently metatextual, in a manner that more obviously recalls Borges or *Malone Dies*. Thus Díaz Grey: 'Y cuando

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<sup>192</sup> Saúl Yurkievich, *En el hueco voraz de Onetti*, 342

<sup>193</sup> M. Doll, *Beckett and Myth*, Syracuse University Press 1988, 41

pasaron bastantes días de reflexión *como para que yo dudara también de la existencia del chivo*, escribí, en pocas noches, esta historia. *La hice con algunas deliberadas mentiras*. (O.C., 1045 emphases added), or again Juan Carr: 'Ahora copio, infiel, la historia que me contó el médico' (C.I., 139). It is the validity, the 'truth content', of all narrative that is being here undermined.

### (iii) Part II

In fact, such narratives as dominate the works of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti belong more correctly to what Heidegger terms *Gerede* or 'prattle' than to *Rede* or authentic discourse. How are we to understand the various interpretations and constructions which accrue about the woman and her goat in *Para una tumba sin nombre*, or the convictionless exchanges that characterise the games of Faruru in *Tierra de nadie*, of Federico in *Juntacadáveres* and of the shipyard in *El astillero*? Solomon, in his commentary on Heidegger, notes the following:

'Prattle is speech, but it is speech which says nothing, that is, it says nothing about the fundamental issues of 'who' we are [...] Prattle, everyday talk, is an effective block to true discourse and understanding, for prattle catches us up and preoccupies us with trivia in such a way that we cannot employ our understanding.'<sup>194</sup>

Harold Pinter, who might usefully be considered a playwright whose spatio-temporal ontology is exactly in the tradition of 'existential estrangement', is particularly good at capturing this form of empty exchange, but it is no less apparent in the various fragmentary dialogues which constitute *Tierra de nadie* and *Juntacadáveres*.

In Onetti, the master metaphor for human activity based upon intercourse (Heidegger's dimension of *Mitsein*) is the game or 'juego'. But immediately that this word is given, the question of sincerity arises. As an illustration, the following tiny vignette from *Tierra de nadie* is illustrative for the mutual awareness that it exposes in Num's interaction regard to the fictional inheritance: 'Porque yo había inventado la



herencia por ella, para que la nena estuviera contenta. Y va ella y la inventa, para que yo hago que lo creo...' (O.C. 99) A similar proliferation of affirmation and role playing would appear to be necessary to sustain the games of Petrus' shipyard and, to an extent, of Federico and the baby, though once again the question arises as to the intended direction of these deceits. One is reminded of the waiter in Sartre's *L'Être et le néant*, who plays the waiter with a little too much dexterity. But rather than a deception aimed at the clientele, this is a paradigmatic example of inauthentic being, the dupe of which is the anxiety-ridden 'pour-soi' itself.

*Gerede*, 'prattle' or 'idle talk', is symptomatic of a deeper problem in Kafka, Beckett and Onetti. If it were merely a case of obviating the capacity for true communication, one could envisage the protagonist in the role of romantic outsider, sufficient unto himself. Thus Linacero muses, like Murphy or Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man*: 'Hace un par de años que creí haber encontrado la felicidad. Pensaba haber llegado a un escepticismo casi absoluto y estaba seguro de que me bastaría comer todos los días, no andar desnudo, fumar y leer algún libro de vez en cuando para ser feliz.' (O.C., 75). Similarly, Brausen's trajectory may appear to describe a flight from the essence of 'fallenness' defined by the vague 'das Man' in which: 'cada uno acepta lo que va descubriendo de sí mismo en las miradas de los demás, se va formando en la convivencia, se confunde con el que suponen los otros y actúa de acuerdo con lo que se espera de ese supuesto inexistente.' (O.C., 656) However, much as the *Underground Man* is drawn back into games of domination and humiliation with the officer and the prostitute, so Linacero, Brausen (and his vice-exister Díaz Grey), and Murphy are drawn into infelicitous and violent contact with a range of people and types.

The problem is that a phenomenological ontology is explicitly incompatible with any form of solipsism. Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty are equally adamant on this point, and it is central to Lacan. Again, we find in Onetti a number of sentences which make reference to the role of other in constructing the image of the self, such as the following from *Juntacadáveres*: 'iba cada una construyendo con las frases y las sonrisas dirigidas a la otra su propia imagen ideal.' (J., 143. 'Frases' and 'sonrisas' are

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<sup>194</sup> Robert Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, 220

precisely the examples equating language and embodiment in Sartre. See the next paragraph below) The Other, and language as a sub-set of the Other, is as essential to the constitution of the Self as is the extensive and temporal world, this despite the gulf of incommunication articulated, inter alia, by Casal: 'Casi todo queda encerrado en uno y no hay comunicación.' (O.C., 207) Apart from spatio-temporal circumscription and distortion, a considerable part of the poetics of existential estrangement is thus aimed at language. We have seen in Chapter 5 above how, in Onetti, words can acquire a hallucinatory solidity and how they are implicitly implicated in our conceptual apparatus; in fine, how '*le mot fait la chose*'. Certain forces, intuitively felt, are beyond understanding precisely to the extent that they remain ineffable (the nature of the 'trampa' into which Larsen is falling, or of the relationship which destroys Rizzo). Contrariwise, a single word may give rise to an abundance of meaning or interpretation: 'Porque 'Ya' podía ser español o alemán; y de aquí surgían caminos impensados, caminos donde la incomprensible figura de Owen se partía en mil formas distintas, muchas de ellas antagónicas'<sup>195</sup>

To a considerable extent, the fundamental problem of language in Onetti, that it is an inadequate vehicle by which intercourse with the Other might otherwise allow us to symbolically re-subjectivise a solid, unified 'imago', is expressed in terms of embodiment. Thus Sartre: '(J)e ne connais pas plus mon langage que mon corps pour l'autre. Je ne puis m'entendre parler ni me voir sourire. *Le problème du langage est exactement parallèle au problème des corps et les descriptions qui ont valu dans un cas valent dans l'autre*'<sup>196</sup> Indeed, embodiment is an important node where the three parameters of spatiality, temporality and the Other converge. To reiterate the phenomenological position: 'J'existe mon corps : telle est sa première dimension d'être. Mon corps est utilisé et connu par autrui : telle est sa seconde dimension.' (*L'être et le néant* 392)<sup>197</sup> The perspective of the Other is necessary (as is his language) so that Dasein may come to exist *corporally* as a unified self. In Bakhtinian terms, the other,

<sup>195</sup> 'Avenida de Mayo', in *Tan triste como ella y otros cuentos*, 26

<sup>196</sup> Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, 414, emphasis added

<sup>197</sup> Thus Larsen's 'la cabeza que soy yo y por eso no existe para mí' cited in chapter 6 above.



due to his surplus of vision (in seeing both field and content) acts as the 'author' of the subject 'hero'.

Now one of the key tropes in Onetti, apparent from the very first pages of *El pozo*, is the fragmentation of the body (often misclassified as 'synecdoche'). There is something immediately disquieting about a card game being played by four pairs of disembodied hands, or 'el movimiento de cabezas aisladas y piernas sin cuerpo para llevar' seen through the door of the *First and Last* (O.C., 266). But this is more than an estrangement strategy on the part of Onetti. The ontological import is apparent when it is noted that fragmentation of the body, right from the very opening of *El pozo*, is principally associated with the narrating self and with the female.

The denial of corporeal unity in relation to the female, surely a denial of subjectivity, is epitomised by Linacero's partial memory of the unnamed prostitute, and his symbolic dismemberment both of Ana María and Ester: 'los brazos, gruesos y blancos, se dilataban lechosos en la luz del cafetín [...] brazos de muchacha despegados del cuerpo largo nervioso, que ya no existía.' (O.C., 61) Beyond *El pozo*, the trope of the faceless or headless female body has such currency throughout the oeuvre (Rita in *Para una tumba sin nombre*, Ana María and Julita in *Juntacadáveres*, Gracia Cesar in *El infierno tan temido*; Magda in *Cuando entonces*; Eufrasia in *Cuando ya no importe*) as to have attracted a number of critical studies, most of which place the imagery within the context of a more general misogyny.

However, the atomisation of the female body, the denial of integrity, sounds an echo in the relation of the narrating consciousness to his own body, very often in the italicised monologues which interrupt an otherwise heterogenous narrative. This was pursued with reference to Linacero, Aránzuru, Brausen and Larsen in chapter 6 above. If there is nothing quite as radically challenging to identity as finding oneself transformed into a giant bug, or progressively losing the mobility of one's limbs, the Onettian consciousness is very often portrayed in the traumatic, pre-subjective relationship to his embodiment defined by Lacan as 'le corps morcelé':

'The fragmented body [...] usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of *aggressive*

*disintegration of the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy...*' (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection*, 5, emphasis added).

Throughout the literature of existential estrangement, this is nowhere more apparent than in the hallucinatory fixation on the disembodied hand. The hand, as point of interaction between cogitans and cogitatio, as both perceiver and perceived, is of fundamental importance to phenomenological ontology, and its defamiliarised status is symptomatic of a deep-seated sense of dislocation.

The relationship with the other is beset with misunderstanding and denial, whether this be in terms of language or of physical and metaphorical violence, yet in Onetti, such interaction is ontologically defining. We have already noted from the opening chapter the prevalence of the fraudulent outsider in all three authors. In the case of Onetti, these run from the eponymous 'Baldi' through Ossorio/Santana, Brausen/Arce, Jacob van Oppen, Junta Larsen, Goerdel and Medina through to Juan Carr. To a greater or lesser extent, these are all carnival figures, beset by the immanent threat of decrowning. We have already noted in chapter 6 above the symbolic dismemberment of Larsen, an archetypally carnivalised 'Napoleon', whose apogee sees him ruling over a brothel of grotesque 'corpses', though his expulsion tableau, at the time of the Santa María carnival, has already been written in *La vida breve*. For Bakhtin, the carnivalised world is characterised not only by temporary inversions and by ambivalent laughter, but by the atomised body. Ann Jefferson explains the distinction as follows :

'One index of the difference between representation and carnival is the thoroughgoing difference in construction of the body that is involved. The represented body is roughly what Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* calls the « classical body » : a completed entity sealed off both from the world which is its context and from other bodies [...] The carnival body - or what Bakhtin calls the body of grotesque realism - is quite different [...] these differences may be summarised in an opposition between the finished and the unfinished : the body of Bakhtin's hero, like the body of Sartre's



subject, in short, the body of representation is a *finished* construction, whereas the body of carnival and the grotesque is by definition *unfinished*.<sup>198</sup>

(iii) Santa María as Carnival

The Bakhtinian notion of carnival and the world of 'existential estrangement' have a number of important affinities which become particularly apparent when one sees how Bakhtin understands the aesthetics of carnivalisation in Dostoevsky. Now it is at once apparent that the presentation of figures such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is broadly 'realistic'. Such distortions and uncertainties as characterise the text appear to relate causally to the paranoia of the focaliser, indeed such a thesis is set out in Dostoevsky's notes. One could make a similar case so as to 'explain' the paranoid distortions of Hamsun's narrator in *Hunger* and Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Nevertheless, it is precisely the phenomenological dimensions identified in the above study which, prone to extreme uncertainty, are the source of so much of these novels' angsts. Thus Raskolnikov's distorted interior spaces are subject to the continued intrusion of the other, time races or extends feverishly, discourse is ambivalent or unintelligible and the body itself is entirely undependable. In the case of *Hunger*, much admired by Kafka and Onetti, while the emaciated body is foregrounded as the source of uncertainty, it is again space, with the trope of expulsion and the intrusion of the gaze; temporality, with the bizarre exchanges with figures representing the law concerning the correct time; and language, with dislocations between signifier and signified, which are radically defamiliarised.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Ann Jefferson, 'Body matters: self and Other in Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes' in Hirschkop and Shepherd eds., *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, Manchester University Press 2001, 215-217

<sup>199</sup> The spatiality of *Hunger* has been examined in chapter 3 above, while the following episodes should highlight temporal and semantic preoccupations in Hamsun – indeed, the degree to which the narrator is feverishly battling against norms of time and language:

(i) With regard to time, a pair of bizarre yet symmetrical exchanges suggest that the narrator's eccentric attempt to escape from external chronology is, by the novel's end, defeated (a precedent for Linacero):

Bakhtin's examination of carnivalisation in Dostoevsky's poetics highlights a number of aspects which are of direct relevance to Onetti's world. Firstly, to understand Dostoevsky's purpose, Bakhtin writes:

Carnivalisation is not an external and immobile schema which is imposed upon ready-made content; it is, rather, an extraordinarily flexible form of artistic visualization, a peculiar sort of heuristic principle making possible the discovery of new and as yet unseen things. By *relativizing* all that was externally stable, set and ready-made, carnivalisation with its pathos of change and renewal permitted Dostoevsky to penetrate into the deepest layers of man and human relationships. (Bakhtin, op.cit., 166)

In short, a principle of radically unstable relativism is to subvert assumptions of external permanence or monologic authority. Concerning the determining *mise en scène* of *Crime and Punishment*, Bakhtin notes that:

It is characteristic that the very setting for the action of the novel - Petersburg (its role in the novel is enormous) - is on the borderline between existence and non-existence, reality and phantasmagoria, always on the verge of dissipating like the fog and vanishing. Petersburg too is devoid, as it were, of any internal grounds for justifiable stabilisation (ibid., 167)

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Seeing a police officer up the street, I quickened my pace, went right up to him and said, without a shadow of a pretext, 'It's ten o'clock.' 'No, it's two,' he answered surprised. 'No, it's ten,' I said. 'It's ten o'clock.' And, groaning with anger, I took another couple of steps forward, clenched my fist and said 'Listen, you know what - it's ten o'clock.' (*Hunger*, 56-7)

A few steps away a policeman is observing me [...] I pick up my hat, put it on, and walk over to the man. 'Do you know what time it is?' I ask. He waits awhile before pulling out his watch, not taking his eyes off me for a moment 'A little past four,' he says. 'Exactly!' I say. 'A little past four, perfectly correct! You know your stuff, I see, and I'll be thinking about you.' (ibid., 176)

(ii) Signifiers, too, have a habit of floating free from signified. A late episode contains the following eccentric scene:

A cart rolled slowly by. I see there are potatoes in the cart, but out of rage, from sheer obstinacy, I take it into my head to say they weren't potatoes at all, they were cabbages, and I swore horribly that they were cabbages. I heard quite well what I said, and I swore willfully time after time... (ibid., 174).

An earlier scene, in which the narrator is locked up in a dark cell, has him take refuge in the newly coined 'signifier' *Kubooa* to which there is no corresponding signified: 'With the oddest jumps in my line of thought, I try to ascertain the meaning of my new word. It didn't have to mean either God or amusement park, and who had said it should mean cattle show? I clench my fist angrily and repeat once more, Who said that it shall mean cattle show? (ibid., 61) Uncertainty of identity and meaning



Now it is at once evident that the above describes exactly the condition of Santa María and its inhabitants, its condition as phantasmagoria highlighted in a number of texts. Furthermore, topography is symbolically charged, so that 'space assumes additional significance in the overall symbol-system of carnival. *Up, down, the stairway, the threshold, the foyer, the landing* take on the meaning of a "point" where *crisis, radical change, an unexpected turn of fate takes place*' (ibid., 169) As we have seen in chapter 4 above, the carnival spaces here are temporally thrown outside of biographical time and charged with the threat of public scandal and decrowning. Larsen's expulsion from Santa María is first and foremost witnessed as a spectacle by Brausen, at carnival time, in the foyer of the Belgrano hotel.

Secondly, as examined in chapter 5 above, the characteristic interpersonal activity in Onetti takes the form of 'juego'. With regard to the novella *The Gambler*, Bakhtin writes that 'the center of the life portrayed in the tale is the *game of roulette*. This [...] aspect is a decisive one and determines the special nuance of carnivalisation in the work' (ibid., 171). Now while the 'special nuance' which attaches itself to roulette is uncertainty with relation to the 'stake', it should be apparent that the game of Petrus S.A., relying as it does on a 'willful suspension of disbelief' on the part of all participants, is an equivalent source of instability and anxiety in the novel. It is, furthermore, a game characterised by 'ambivalent carnival laughter, in which mockery and triumph, praise and abuse are inseparably fused' (ibid., 164) The idea of laughter will be returned to below.

But the specific game in Onetti (Federico, Rita/chivo, Petrus S.A.) is really a microcosm for interpersonal relationships (or *Mitsein*) in general, and these are again characterised by carnival ambivalence. Looking at relationships in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Bakhtin notes that:

the carnivalistically ambivalent figure of the "Idiot" Prince Myshkin [...] does not occupy any *position* in life that might define his behaviour [...] One might say that Myshkin is not able to enter life completely, cannot become

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also attaches to the proper names he is in the habit of inventing, as in the episodes of Ylajali (ibid. 135) and Happolati (ibid. 21)

completely embodied, cannot accept any definitiveness in life that would limit a personality. He remains, as it were, on a tangent to life's circle.

(Bakhtin, op.cit., 173)

The archetypal Onettian protagonist (running the full gamut through Linacero, Aránzuru, Brausen, Díaz Grey, Larsen, Malabia, Medina and Juan Carr) is in just such a tangential relationship to life. What is more, Prince Myshkin is, like many of the above, drawn irresistibly to a 'mad woman' - in his case Nastasya Filippovna, whose violent death ends the action. 'And around these two central figures of the novel - the "idiot" and the "madwoman" - all life is carnivalised' (*ibid*).

But the essence of carnival is above all ambivalence, undecidability. A carnival figure simultaneously embodies 'both members of an antithesis: birth-death, youth-old age, top-bottom, face-backside, praise-abuse, affirmation-repudiation, tragic-comic, and so forth, while the upper pole of a two-in-one image is reflected in the lower, after the manner of the figures in playing cards' (*ibid*, 176). We began by examining certain affinities between the portrayals of K., Watt and Larsen. The three are, as has been argued, simultaneously con-man and dupe, charlatan and victim, plaintiff and accused, sceptic and naïf. It is with a characteristically double-voiced utterance that Lanza describes the struggle over the brothel as 'una etapa de la lucha secular entre el oscurantismo y las luces representadas por el amigo *Junta*', and says of Larsen: 'no solo *Junta* ha luchado por la libertad de vientres, por la civilización y por el honrado comercio [...] se preocupó constantemente por el respeto a los preceptos constitucionales' (*O.C.*, 691). The last image we have of Larsen in *La vida breve* is the carnivalesque 'la nariz curvada avanzaba como una proa, triunfante de la grasa y la decrepitud de la cara' (*O.C.*, 692), a dismemberment ambivalently encompassing both triumph and defeat, energy and decrepitude.

Figures such as Lanza and Díaz Grey, detached and ironic, are an important source of what Bakhtin calls 'reduced laughter', another defining element of carnival. So too are the comic-grotesque pair of Gálvez and Kunz, whose every utterance is double-voiced. However, of particular relevance to the entire Onettian oeuvre, and no less to those of Kafka and Beckett, is the following point:



But the most important - one could say the decisive - expression of reduced laughter is to be found in the ultimate position of the author. This excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single polar extreme of life or of thought, to be absolutized. All one-sided seriousness (of life and thought), all one sided pathos is handed over to the heroes, but the author, who causes them all to collide in the "great dialogue" of the novel, leaves that dialogue open and leaves no finalizing period at the end.

It should be pointed out that the carnival sense of the world also knows no period, and is, in fact, hostile to any sort of *conclusive conclusion*: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again (op.cit., 165)

The scene of Larsen's decrowning/expulsion, witnessed in *La vida breve* (the figure is pulled from the earlier *Tierra de nadie*), contains in spawn the novel *Juntacadáveres*. The return from exile, parodic reign and decrowning are repeated in *El astillero*. The figure is next revived as a corpse in *Dejmos hablar al viento* so as to encourage the police-chief pulled from the same three novels to re-enter another Santa María. He brandishes a page, written by Brausen in *La vida breve*, in which the original city is conjured into being. All endings are merely new beginnings.

We have arrived again at the image of the writer as card-player, mentioned to the end of chapters 2 and 3 above. In *La muerte y la niña*, Díaz Grey, a carnivalised stand-in for Onetti (Brausen) who combines the duality 'author-fictional creation', makes explicit the equivalence between arranging permutations of playing cards and photographs. Earlier, in *Para esta noche*, the equivalence was established between identity cards and playing cards. The author, solitary, plays out inconclusive and intentionally randomised arrangements with a finite number of carnival figures, while pre-chosen sequences of circular records endlessly and ineluctably repeat. Thus for instance in the novella *La muerte y la niña* itself, the particular fall of cards has Díaz Grey married by Fr. Bergner to Angélica Inés and living in Petrus' house, although the priest was deceased at the time of Larsen's courtship to the daughter. Furthermore,

the theme of life-threatening pregnancy which had surfaced in *El astillero* in relation to Angélica Inés has been displaced onto Helga Goerdel. The doctor, Brausen's 'Dorian Grey', has also been dealt a daughter whose age he would like to fix at three by keeping only those photos which show her at that age. As suggested by Musselwhite, the trope of solitaire is a Borgesian 'interpolación del azar en el orden'<sup>200</sup> -, animated, according to Díaz Grey in an earlier story, by 'el insomnio, el aburrimiento y la incapacidad de participar en otra forma.' (O.C., 1026). The number of competing narratives that accumulate around Rita and the goat in *Para una tumba sin nombre*, all of them 'hostile to any sort of conclusive conclusion', is a perfect image of the project of writing in Onetti.

This returns us to our initial point of departure. The universes of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti are disturbing, ambivalent stage sets, lacking stability even in regard to the phenomenological parameters of being. Such worlds are governed by a carnival logic, so that any calculus based upon existential projection is not merely vitiated, but entirely out of place. They are worlds, moreover, that are characterised by 'reduced laughter' on the part of the authors, all three of whom are implicitly hostile to any finalising interpretation or unifying metanarrative. This is why hermeneutic approaches to their texts, plausible though they may appear, are necessarily over-reductive. More importantly, in positing a single, unifying interpretive framework, they push multivalence in the direction of a single definitive reading, fitting polysemic symbol and inconclusive event into one overarching hermeneutic legend. Such approaches misunderstand the nature of the carnivalesque. They take, as it were, a single set of costumes as more important than the all-encompassing pageant.

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<sup>200</sup>Borges, "La lotería en Babilonia" from *Ficciones*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial. 1999, 72



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## Appendices





## Appendix I

### Phenomenological ontology and the presentation of character

#### (i) Character in terms of their perceived 'existential problem'

In a revealing interview with the critic Christian Salmon for *The Paris Review* (1983), the Czech novelist-in-exile Milan Kundera, asked to review his own conception of character, provides a thumb-nail sketch of key developments in the evolution of the novel's central concern 'with the enigma of self', from the picaresque through the epistolary and on to the psychological and existential. In terms of his own work, Kundera identifies Kafka as the key predecessor, insofar as the latter eschewed the dictates of a psychological realism based upon the accumulation of environmental, biographical, interpersonal and emotional detail which, having been refined through Richardson, Stendhal and Tolstoy and on through later naturalists such as Zola and Dreiser, had arguably reached its apotheosis in the monumental studies of Marcel Proust and James Joyce. Kundera's comments at this juncture are particularly germane to the present study, and worth quoting at length:

'(A)fter reaching the depth involved in the detailed exploration of the self's interior life, the great novelists began, consciously or unconsciously, to seek a new orientation. We often hear of the holy trinity of the modern novel: Proust, Joyce, Kafka. In my view, that trinity does not exist. In my own personal history of the novel, it is Kafka who provided this new orientation. His way of conceiving the self is totally unexpected. What is it that defines K. as a unique being? Neither his physical appearance (we know nothing about that), nor his biography (we don't know it), nor his name (he has none), nor his memories, his predilections, his complexes. His behaviour? His field of action is lamentably limited. His thoughts? Yes, Kafka unceasingly traces K.'s reflections, but these are bent exclusively on the current situation: What should be done then and there, in the immediate

circumstances? Go to the interrogation or evade it? Obey the priest's summons or not? All of K.'s interior life is absorbed by the situation he finds himself trapped in, and nothing that might refer beyond that situation (K.'s memories, his metaphysical reflections, his notions about other people) is revealed to us. For Proust, a man's interior life comprises a miracle, an infinity that never ceases to amaze us. But that is not what amazes Kaka. He does not ask what internal motivations determine man's behaviour. He asks a question that is radically different: what possibilities remain for man in a world where the external determinants have become so overpowering that internal impulses no longer carry weight?'<sup>201</sup>

For Kundera, the central point is that character is no longer defined in biographical or psychological terms, but as a function of the 'existential situation' that confronts him. With regard to Tomas, the hero of his own *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he goes on to explain:

'...I tell nothing about his childhood, nothing about his father, his mother, his family. And his body, as well as his face, remains completely unknown to us because the essence of his existential problem is rooted in other themes. That lack of information does not make him the less "living". Because making a character "alive" means: getting to the bottom of his existential problem. Which in turn means: getting to the bottom of some situations, some motifs, even some words that shape him. Nothing more.'

Certainly, such a conception of self marks a radical departure both from the Naturalistic school which, building upon nineteenth century positivistic trends (from Marx and Comte through Darwin and Spencer), had seen heredity and environment as the central determinants of character, and from the Realist impulse through Flaubert

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<sup>201</sup> Milan Kundera *Dialogue on the Art of the Novel* in The Art of the Novel Faber&Faber 1988 pp26/27



and Tolstoy on to Proust and Joyce to record ever more minutely the inner mechanisms and voices of the self. One might take issue with Kundera, however, over the assertion that this 'new orientation [is]...totally unexpected', which would seem to imply that Kafka was working *ex nihilo*. Perhaps the most astonishing of all literary voices, that of the unnamed narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, had made his appearance in 1864, some fifty years before Kafka began to write his three unfinished novels. What is more, the quirky, capricious voice, defining a narrator who is neither named, physically described, nor with a biographically distinct or determining past, 'reappears' in Hamsun's remarkable *Hunger* of 1890, and we have it on no lesser authority than Max Brod that Hamsun was among Kafka's favourite authors (he also deeply influenced the young Onetti).<sup>202</sup> Another unnamed anti-hero who, pre-dating Kafka, can claim direct descent from Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* - the narrator of Henri Barbusse's *L'enfer* of 1908 - appears to have been an important predecessor of both Onetti's *Linacero* and Sartre's *Roquentin*.

What is it precisely that 'defines' Dostoevsky's 'Underground Man', or, as Kundera would have it, what is his 'existential problem'? The impulse to write the novella was ostensibly the publication of Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What is to be Done?*, a positivist tract which suggests that utopian goals are entirely consistent with enlightened self-interest.<sup>203</sup> Dostoevsky's reply is, in the first instance, a celebration of the anti-rational, the perverse, the masochistic as supreme affirmations of man's freedom, and to an extent this remains the keynote of his aesthetic project throughout the series of major novels that were to follow. Walter Kaufmann singles out Part One of *Notes from Underground* as 'the drama of the mind that is sufficient to itself, yet conscious of its every weakness and determined to exploit it[...]'an

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<sup>202</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer makes a rather more extravagant claim for Hamsun in his introduction to Bly's translation of *Hunger* (1967): '...European writers know that he (Hamsun) is the father of the modern school of literature in every aspect - his subjectiveness, his fragmentariness, his use of flashbacks, his lyricism. The whole school of fiction in the twentieth century stems from Hamsun, just as Russian literature in the nineteenth century 'came out of Gogol's greatcoat'.' Revealingly, though, Singer compares and contrasts the narrator of *Hunger* with Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, rather than returning to the truly revolutionary voice of *Notes from Underground*.

unheard of song of songs on individuality [and as such...] the best overture for existentialism ever written.<sup>204</sup> In terms of the primary target of the diatribe, Kaufmann is certainly correct, and yet there is far more to Dostoevsky's room-bound 'anti-hero' (Dostoevsky's own epithet for him)<sup>205</sup> than an ideological perspective which was already apparent in the earliest counter-Enlightenment writings- one might, for instance, apply his above quoted evaluation to Pascal's deliberately fragmented *Pensées* of 1670. What is particularly compelling and 'contemporary' about Dostoevsky's anti-hero is a misanthropic tone balancing spleen and ennui, unique in the 1860's outside the poetry of Baudelaire, his inception as an isolated voice within a squalid room - a room, moreover, that is stranded within an 'abstract and intentional city'<sup>206</sup> - , and the deep ambivalence or 'double-voicedness' which characterises the invective taken as a whole.

If, following Kaufmann, we separate the first part from the remainder of the novella, and take the thrust of its polemic *at face value*, then we do indeed have something of an 'overture to existentialism' which articulates a view of 'the highest good' of freedom (caprice) entirely consistent with Sartre's famous 'existence precedes essence' lemma. However, as Gary Saul Morson points out, Dostoevsky himself has already cut the very ground from under the feet of their supposed author in two frequently overlooked 'editorial notes':

'In his role as "editor" of the underground man's text, Dostoevsky appends an "explanation" to the title of part I, "Underground". The underground man claims full freedom to define himself or to leave himself altogether undefined, but he does not have the first word. Before we hear the

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<sup>203</sup> See *inter alia* Dostoevsky: An Introduction to the Major Novels, pp7-11, R.Pearce 1992

<sup>204</sup> Introduction to Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, pp12,14, W. Kaufmann ed. 1956

<sup>205</sup> The quote, from the closing paragraph of the novella, could characterise an entire nineteenth century narrators who '...tell a long story about how I missed life through decaying morally in a corner, not having sufficient means, losing the habit of living, and carefully cultivating my anger underground - really is not interesting; a novel needs a hero, but here all the features of an anti-hero have purposely been collected.'

<sup>206</sup> Compare Hamsun's opening remarks on Christiania in *Hunger*: '...that strange city that no one escapes from until it has left its mark on them' or Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge's opening entry in his *Notebooks*: 'So this (Paris) is where people come to live, I would have thought it is a city to die in.'



underground man's self-characterisation, we hear him characterised by another, who is inaccessible to him: "The author of these notes and the 'Notes' themselves are, of course, imaginary. Nevertheless, such persons as the writer of these notes, not only may, but positively must, exist in our society, considering those circumstances under which our society was in general formed"(emphasis added). Ironically enough, it would seem that the underground man's very polemic on behalf of freedom was inevitable.'

In light of the above, it would appear that the thrust both of the various episodes of 'A propos of the falling sleet', the second part of the novella (which is usually disregarded in existentialist readings), and the supposed 'Nietzschean' statement implicit in Raskolnikov's crime in the novel that immediately followed *Notes from Underground*, are expositions of the lack of freedom with which the 'perfidious individualist' (Kaufmann, *op.cit.*) in fact acts. Thus Philip Rahv memorably characterises the hero of *Crime and Punishment* as 'a criminal in search of his own motive.'<sup>207</sup>

One paradoxical impulse that we know drives the Underground Man and his many descendents is the need to write, coupled with the most abject disbelief in the possibility of communication:

'And here is the problem that puzzles me: why, in fact, do I address you as 'gentlemen' and speak to you as if I was genuinely speaking to readers?...I am writing for myself alone, and once and for all I declare that if I write as though I were addressing readers, it is solely for the look of the thing, because it is easier for me to write like that. It is a question of form, mere empty form. I shall never have any readers.' (Part I, ch.11)

Again, given the underground man's insistence on the primacy of freedom, the text's "edited" closure is ironic and important, striking a note that anticipates Beckett:

'We are born dead, and moreover we have long ceased to be the sons of living fathers; and we become more and more contented with our condition. We are acquiring a taste for it. Soon we shall invent a method of being born

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<sup>207</sup> Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* in Twentieth Century Views: Dostoevsky, R. Wellek ed. 1962, p20

from an idea. But that's enough; I shall write no more from the underground...

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This is not the end, however, of the 'Notes' of this paradoxical writer. He could not help going on. But to us it seems it will be a good place to stop.'

Furthermore, the whole episode which impels the hero to speak to the prostitute Liza in Part II may be read as a failure to communicate, and as an important template for a number of related scenes in the literature to follow, recurring in various permutations in Dostoevsky's own *Crime and Punishment*, in Hamsun's *Hunger*, Barbusse's *L'enfer*, Beckett's *First Love*, Sartre's *La nausée* and Onetti's *El pozo*.<sup>208</sup> Since the attempt to communicate fails, the narrator falls back on the device of writing 'for himself'. It is precisely here that we begin to see a degree of convergence between the heroes of Beckett and Onetti, and indeed, as is clear from diaries and interviews, between Kafka, Beckett and Onetti themselves as writers who are 'impelled to write' notwithstanding the impossibility of communication. The 'existential problem' of Brausen and Linacero, no less than Molloy, Malone and a host of other solipsistic narrators would seem to consist in a perverse compulsion to articulate '...(t)he expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.' (Beckett, *Three Dialogues*, 17)

At another level, which one might term meta-literary, there is a further parallel, and a further commentary on the limits to freedom.

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<sup>208</sup> There are a number of indications in Onetti's text that he had *Notes from Underground* in mind when he wrote *El pozo*. Thus, as we find in the second paragraph, Dostoevsky's narrator is at the time of writing forty: 'I am forty now, and forty years is a lifetime; it is extreme old age. To go on living after forty is unseemly, disgusting, immoral!' Linacero decides to compile his notes on the eve of his fortieth birthday '...porque un hombre debe escribir la historia de su vida al llegar a los cuarenta años...Lo leí no sé dónde.' More astonishing yet are the 'Onettian' claims of the underground man in part I ch 5: 'I invented adventures for myself and made up a life, so as at least to live in some way.' and later 'Another time, twice, in fact, I tried hard to be in love. I suffered, too, gentlemen, I assure you. In the depth of my heart there was no faith in my suffering, only a faint stir of mockery, but yet I did suffer, and in the real, orthodox way; I was jealous, beside myself...and it was all from ennui, gentlemen, all from ennui; inertia overcame me.'



'For all of his struggles to be free, the underground man is doubly determined, not only from within the narrative but also from without; not only by the iron logic of spite governing his actions but also by the fact that he is the creation of someone who has plotted all his actions in advance[...]The text's final words remind us that it is the author, not the character, who determines when the work concludes...'<sup>209</sup>

If the underground man is never quite aware that he is a fiction, this very Borgesian doubt, with its consequent circumscription of freedom, plagues almost the entire populations of Beckett's and Onetti's fictional universes.

But to return to Kundera, and to the 'radical re-orientation' in characterisation which he attributes to Kafka, it is noteworthy that he balks at using the term 'phenomenological', which has been proposed by Christian Salmon, his interviewer:

'The adjective isn't bad, but I make it a rule not to use it. I'm too fearful of the professors for whom art is only a derivative of philosophical and theoretical trends. The novel dealt with the unconscious before Freud, the class struggle before Marx, it practised phenomenology (the investigation of the essence of human situations) before the phenomenologists...'

Following this caveat, Salmon summarizes the main points made by Kundera to date: '...There are several means of grasping the self. First, through action. Next, through interior life. As for yourself, you declare: The self is determined by the essence of its existential problem...' Yet in the present study it is precisely the term 'phenomenological' rather than 'existential' that is being proposed as a useful critical term in understanding the artistic *Weltaanschauung* of Kafka, Beckett and Onetti as core authors, Hamsun, Barbusse, Rilke and, perhaps, Sartre as 'second generation' writers. As such, some account of what is meant by 'phenomenological ontology' is necessary at this point.

#### (ii) Towards a 'phenomenological ontology'

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<sup>209</sup> Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 1994, 37

(a) Husserl

Although a phenomenological bent - a concern with 'phenomenon' or that which appears to consciousness - is already evident in much of the German Idealist tradition (Kant, Hegel, Brentano), it is with the publication of Husserl's seminal *Logical Investigations* in 1900 that phenomenology proper may be said to begin. The impetus is a dissatisfaction with dualisms arising from classical Cartesianism, most notably that which views the indubitable *res cogitans* as essentially different to its *cogitata*, and ultimately then to the *res extensa* of the exterior world, the existence of which is vouchsafed for Descartes by a Perfect Being. Such a dualism, which drives an insurmountable wedge between subject and object, readily radicalises into the mutually exclusive poles of idealism and materialism. According to Richard Kearney:

'The most decisive manoeuvre of phenomenology was [...] to relocate that primary point of contact between man and world [...] The *phenomenon* upon which Husserl strives to redirect our philosophical attention is precisely this experiential interface or midpoint where subject is primordially related to object and object is primordially related to subject. In this manner, the traditional category of 'substance' is replaced by the category of 'relation'. Relation, insists Husserl, is not something which occurs between two distinct substances - e.g. man and world - as if they formally existed independently of each other. Man and world are first and foremost in relation; it is only subsequently, at the reflective level of logic, that we divide them into separate entities.'<sup>210</sup>

By 'world', it is important to point out that Husserl has in mind the *Lebenswelt*, or human life-world, and it is to this that a symbiotic relationship exists *ab initio*.

Husserl's chief concern was to investigate the 'deep structure' of the immediate relationships that the *cogito* has with the *cogitata* of the phenomenal world. As a first gambit, all presuppositions as to existence are to be set aside (a process he terms *epoché* or 'bracketing'). To this extent, one might think of Husserl as being concerned

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<sup>210</sup> Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, Manchester University Press 1996, 13



with establishing a phenomenological epistemology rather than ontology. He next borrows the scholastic notion of 'intentionality' from Brentano to illustrate the extent to which the *cogito* is necessarily involucrated in the *Lebenswelt*: 'Everything, although not in the same way, contains something as object in itself. In the idea something is ideated, in judgement something is acknowledged or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, etc.'<sup>211</sup> The single aspect of the intended thing that is apparent at a given moment Husserl terms '*noema*', the aspect by which the intending consciousness is relating to it, '*noesis*'. However, it is important to bear in mind that Husserl draws attention to the interdependence of the *cogito* and the various *noemata* (or *cogitata*) while emphasising the irrelevance of questions as to the 'ontological status' of the object one 'naturally' assumes gives rise to these *noemata*. As Solomon points out: 'From the phenomenological standpoint, there is no immediate difference between perceiving a tree and hallucinating a tree. In phenomenology, we are concerned with this tree only as an object of consciousness, not as an object in the world.'<sup>212</sup> The status of the '*sueño*' is no different to that of the '*suceso*'.

But how does phenomenological epistemology proceed from here? One assembles or tries to correlate various aspects or *noemata*, following which, according to Kearney:

'there occurs what Husserl terms *free variation* [in which] meaning is no longer confined to empirical actualities but unfolds in a free play of pure possibilities. So that in the unfettered horizon of our imagination, we can now liberally vary or modify any given thing - a table, tree, person, etc. - until an invariant structure is revealed, common to all the possible appearances of the thing in our consciousness. This invariant structure is what Husserl terms the essence or *eidos* of the thing intended.'<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Franz Brentano *Psychology from the empirical Standpoint*, quoted in Solomon, *From rationalism to Existentialism* Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992, 166

<sup>212</sup> Robert Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism* Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992, 168

<sup>213</sup> Kearney, *op cit*, 21

As an illustration of the 'free variation' or *Abschattungen* method,<sup>214</sup> one might take the following from Onetti's novel *Para esta noche*, in which Morasán is looking at Ossorio:

"Al hombre ese yo lo vi en alguna parte", volvió a pensar obstinado. Se empeñaba en alterar las facciones del hombre recostado en la pared, tratando de desviar un poco la forma de la gran nariz de punta redonda, la boca gruesa, el pequeño mentón partido, los ojos claros y oblicuos, la frente donde crecía la calvicie. Imaginó ponerle bigotes y anteojos, vestirle de uniforme, darle una piel más clara, hacerlo sonreír, hablar, dormir, caminar, meterse las manos en los bolsillos, torcer la cabeza hasta que mostrara nítido el perfil, sobre la madera barnizada de la pared, sobre un cielo brumoso, sobre la capota de un automóvil, sobre una multitud mal vestida, sobre una fila de árboles corriéndose rápidamente. Pero la cabeza ensombreada del borracho que se recostaba con pereza en el tabique de los reservados no encajaba en ninguna de las caras y situaciones. Dejó de ver al hombre...' (O.C., 297)

The scene in Onetti is, interestingly, repeated from the point of view of hunter and hunted, as though to draw attention to the variable relation between percept and perceiver. But if Husserl was central in locating the *cogito* inseparably in relation to its *Lebenswelt*, it was his pupil Heidegger who developed the epistemology into a radically new ontology of Being.

#### (b) Heidegger

In his ground-breaking *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Heidegger limits the problem of ontic being (the 'general' being of entities or *Seiendes*) to that of 'ontological' Being, that is, to that form of being for which the issue of 'being' arises. In order to distinguish the latter, Heidegger uses the term *Sein*, and since he identifies with the

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<sup>214</sup> A glossary of *Being and Nothingness* explains *Abschattungen* as 'the successive appearances of the object "in profile", Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, London: Routledge 1998, 629



phenomenological position of his mentor Husserl in locating Being already in relation to its *Lebenswelt*, he variously modifies the term as *In-der-Welt-Sein* or, more economically, *Da-Sein*. The phenomenological position is thus one in which an absolute, Cartesian doubt based upon the distinction between *cogitans* and the *extensa* as a whole may not sensibly be raised. Solomon distinguishes as follows:

'The world is an essential structure of Dasein, but particular entities in the world to which Dasein relates are not essential structures or existentialia of Dasein. [...] Consequently, there are necessary connections between Dasein and the world, but not between Dasein and entities in the world. The entities we confront might be different (there might not be any entities). We can talk about the absence of particular entities, but not intelligibly talk about the absence of the world.'<sup>215</sup>

There are, of course, a number of well-known problems raised by Heidegger's axiomatic foundation of Being as *In-der-Welt-Sein*, but the concern of the present chapter is restricted to outlining the foundations of a phenomenological ontology, not in offering a critique. With this caveat in mind, Heidegger's next concern is with the fundamental relationship that Dasein has with the *Seiendes* with which it is in contact. The relationship is more properly one of utility or pragmatism than contingency: 'The Greeks had an appropriate term for Things : pragmata - that is to say, that which one has to do with in one's concerned dealings (praxis) [...] We shall call those entities which we encounter in concern "equipment" [*das Zeug*].' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 97). Dasein's dealings with the world are characterised by concern (*Sorge*), and it is through concerned Being that 'meaning' comes into the world. In his gnomic fashion, Heidegger talks of *Dasein* as the 'shepherd of being', and as the medium through which being (in general) makes itself manifest.

But the principle gambit of *Sein und Zeit*, already apparent in its title, is to identify Dasein with temporality: *Der Sinn des Daseins ist die Zeitlichkeit*.<sup>216</sup> The foundations for this insight were already laid by Husserl in his *Phenomenology of*

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<sup>215</sup> Robert Solomon, *op. cit.*, 203

<sup>216</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 331, cited in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge 1999, 410

*Internal Time-Consciousness* (1905-10) and indeed by Henri Bergson's revolutionary *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889), but once again it was Heidegger who investigated the ontological rather than epistemological centrality of time. The terminology employed in 'Dasein und Zeitlichkeit', the second part of *Sein und Zeit*, is notoriously hermetic, but the key insight would appear to be that Dasein is in a relation of concern with the world principally because it projects possibilities. These possibilities are drawn from the experience of the 'no longer', and projected into the temporal dimension of the 'not yet'. Dasein is thus a mode of being which is essentially indeterminate, since its being is best described as a 'project of possibility' (*Entwurf der Möglichkeit*). George Steiner gives the following:

'Dasein's self-projection towards fulfilment, that motion-towards implicit in caring-for, postulates futurity. 'The primary meaning of existentiality is the future.' [...] In seeking to be, Dasein is constantly ahead of itself and anticipatory. There is, therefore, a literal sense in which futurity is the most immediate, the most present, of the dimensions of temporality.'<sup>217</sup>

This is, of course, the point of departure for Sartre's analysis of being as 'pour-soi', the essence of which is yet to be determined.

Once again, Heidegger is able to draw on the whole tradition of German Idealist thought in order to set out how the temporal dimensions of past, present and future interact. Now Heidegger at once concedes that there are a set of historical, social and biological circumstances over which we have no direct control, and these he terms our '*facticity*'. It was well established, even before Marx and Dilthey, that such circumstances were central to our orientation towards the future. Thus Coleridge, who was deeply influenced by contemporary German metaphysics, wrote the following in 1823 to his friend Charles Aders: 'Without Memory there can be no hope - the Present is a phantom known only by its pining, if it do not breathe the vital air of the Future: and what is the Future, but the Image of the Past projected on the mist of the Unknown, and seen with glory round its head.'<sup>218</sup> But Heidegger's genius was to set this

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<sup>217</sup> George Steiner, *Heidegger*, London: Fontana 1979, 106

<sup>218</sup> Cited in George Steiner, *Heidegger*, London: Fontana 1978, 10



on its head, to effect a Copernican revolution which led directly to Sartre's doctrine of absolute freedom: paradoxically, an openness towards the future is the means by which Being understands or reinterprets both its present and its past. Dasein should be more correctly understood as 'a temporal being who *reinterprets his past or present in the light of his future*, as one who perpetually projects his meaning into an horizon of possibilities'<sup>219</sup> In other words, the meaning of our facticity is by no means fixed, and we may continually modify it by virtue of future possibility. Only with death, which is an absolute limit upon possibility, does the absolute meaning of any act or state become finalised.

Already in Heidegger's ontology one is beginning to see the outline of an elementary ethics, an aspect of his thinking that is more apparent by his use of the value-laden terms 'authentic/inauthentic' (*eigentlich/uneigentlich*) to characterise the relationship that one has with one's possibilities. Critical here is the concept of the Other which, according to Heidegger, leads us to 'certain structures of Dasein which are equiprimordial with Being-in-the-world: *Being-with* and *Dasein-with* [*Mitsein* and *Mitdasein*]. In this kind of Being is grounded the mode of everyday Being-one's-Self [*Selbstein*]' (*Being and Time*, 149). Phenomenological ontology has us already in relation to the Other, primordially '*Mitsein*', just as we are already positioned within the world and in relation to it. However, drawing upon Kierkegaard, Heidegger distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic relationships with the Other. In order to do this, he coins a neuter form, the 'they' [*das Man*] so as to indicate the abstract notion of others/society which we allow circumscribe our behaviour in everyday living:

'The 'they' is there alongside everywhere [ist überall dabei], but in such a manner that it has always stolen away whenever Dasein presses for a decision. Yet because the 'they' presents every judgment and decision as its own, it deprives the particular Dasein of its answerability [...] Thus the

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<sup>219</sup> Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, Manchester University Press, 1994, 34, emphasis added.

particular Dasein in its everydayness is *disburdened* by the 'they.' (*Being and Time*, 165).

Again, as in Kierkegaard's critique of 'the herd', one accepts the normative and anonymous judgment of the 'they' so as not to be confronted by existential anguish, that is, the dread brought on by knowledge of our mortal and essentially indeterminate nature. Kearney sums up the position as follows:

'I exist inauthentically to the extent that I flee from my awareness of freedom, responsibility and death, seeking refuge in the security of the anonymous 'They' (*Das Man*) which tells me what to think and what to be.

The 'They' defines me as a fixed actuality rather than a free possibility.'<sup>220</sup>

One is reminded perhaps of Brausen's view of himself as '[el] hombre prudente, responsable, empeñado en construirse un rostro por medio de las limitaciones que le arrimaban los demás' (*O.C.*, 606). Once again, we are at the point of departure for Sartre's distinction, and tension, between the subjective experience of 'pour-soi' and the objective 'en-soi'.

A final element which is suggested by Heidegger as an essential parameter of Being, particularly after his so-called '*Kehre*' or turning, is language. Of course, language is a paradigmatic mode of *Mitsein* and is, moreover, a *sine qua non* of any concerned dealing with the world (e.g., thought). But as Solomon notes, the position of language, qua discourse or '*Rede*', is more fundamental:

'Heidegger's claim for language is a remarkably strong one [...] whatever can be understood can be articulated in speech [...] It is speech which discloses to us the nature of Being. Ontology thus consists of the study of language in order to understand the structures disclosed by language.'<sup>221</sup>

But while genuine discourse, *Rede*, is authentic, a second mode of speech is far more common: *Gerede*:

'What replaces discourse in inauthenticity is *prattle* or *chatter* (*Gerede*).

Prattle is speech, but it is speech which says nothing, that is, it says nothing

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<sup>220</sup> Kearney, *op cit*, 36-7

<sup>221</sup> Solomon, *op cit*, 221



about the fundamental issues of 'who' we are [...] Prattle, everyday talk, is an effective block to true discourse and understanding, for prattle catches us up and preoccupies us with trivia in such a way that we cannot employ our understanding.'

Though one might think paradigmatically of the 'explanations' of sundry officials to K. or the exchanges of Vladimir, Estragon, Luck and Pozzo, *Gerede* is not confined to interpersonal exchange. One might characterise the proliferation of word or voice that is present in the Beckett consciousness ('Company', 'Not I') as just such prattle. Likewise, the proliferation of narrative by which Molloy, Malone, Brausen, Malabia, Carr and Díaz Grey entertain themselves.

### (iii) Sartre

The chief additions that Sartre, in his 1942 study *L'Être et le néant*, made to Heidegger's phenomenological ontology were to emphasise the nature of human freedom as 'pour-soi', and to refine his idea of authenticity by exploring the notion of 'mauvaise foi'. If Heidegger had posited an understanding of the existentialia of Being (Sein) as identical with those of Temporality (Zeit), Sartre introduces the polarity of being (être) and non-being (néant) as alternative and mutually exclusive forms of Sein. In order to underline the nature of human being as existentialist rather than essentialist, Sartre makes use of a set of neologisms based around the idea of 'nihilation' (Sartre coins the verb 'néantir'), the idea being that it is through 'dasein' that nothingness enters into the world of entities which have a perfect correspondence with themselves. The useful glossary at the end of Hazel Barnes' translation notes that '[nothingness] comes into the world by the For-itself and is the recoil from fullness of self-contained Being which allows consciousness to exist as such' (*Being and Nothingness*, 633). Nothingness is thereby the *sine qua non* of freedom.

Many of Sartre's pronouncements appear as semantic riddles not unlike those convolutions which caused Alonso Quijada such anguish: 'De toutes les negations internes, celle qui pénètre le plus profondément dans l'être, celle qui constitue dans

son être l'être don't elle nie avec l'être qu'elle nie, c'est le manque.' (*L'être et le néant*, 122), while 'pour-soi' is continually defined as 'ce qui est ce qu'il n'est pas, et qui n'est pas ce qu'il est.' Nevertheless, Sartre's purpose tends to come through, if nothing else, through a process of accumulation. Thus the first quote above continues:

'Ce manque n'appartient pas à la nature de l'en-soi, qui est tout positivité. Il ne paraît dans le monde qu'avec le surgissement de la réalité-humaine. C'est seulement dans le monde humain qu'il peut y avoir des manques [...] La réalité-humaine, par quoi le manque apparaît dans le monde, doit être elle-même un manque.' (*L'être et le néant*, 122-3)

What this 'manque' is in fact characteristic of is 'pour-soi', which is a total lack of determinacy or coincidence with self. 'En-soi', by contrast, is entirely self-identical. The distinction might be more obvious if we apply Sartrean categories to the dimensions of 'Sein' in its temporal being as 'Zeit': 'A la différence du passé qui est en-soi, le présent est pour-soi' and later: 'tout ce que le pour-soi est par delà l'être est le futur.' (*L'être et le néant*, 156, 162) He goes on:

'Le futur s'oppose rigoureusement au passé. Le passé est bien en effet l'être que je suis hors de moi, mais c'est l'être que je suis sans possibilité de ne l'être pas. [...] Le futur que j'ai à être, au contraire, est tel dans son être que je peux [...] Cela signifie que le futur constitue le sens de mon pour-soi présent, comme le projet de sa possibilité' (*L'être et le néant*, 163-4)

It is thus temporality, and critically the dimension of future projection, which gives 'pour-soi' its unique ontology of 'existence preceding essence'. Kearney summarises the distinction: 'the *for itself* expresses our subjective freedom, the *in-itself* designates the counter-position of objective necessity.' (op.cit., 62) Much of the remainder of *L'être et le néant* is concerned with the intrinsic struggle in all human interaction by which the Self tries to maintain its status as 'pour-soi' through the subjugation of the Other as 'en-soi'.

A second notion that is famously explored in *L'être et le néant* and which has a particular resonance for the inhabitants of Onetti's universe is that of 'mauvaise foi'. The origin of the idea is to be found in Heidegger's notion of 'fallenness', which, it will



be recalled, is 'a retreat to the anonymous safety of *das Man* or the public [in] busy concern with present "average everyday" tasks and chores.'<sup>222</sup> (Compare Brausen: 'cada uno acepta lo que va descubriendo de sí mismo en las miradas de los demás, se va formando en la convivencia, se confunde con el que suponen los otros y actúa de acuerdo con lo que se espera de ese supuesto inexistente.' (O.C., 656). Sartre illustrates more acutely the 'double-think' that makes fallenness acceptable to Being in his well-known anecdotes of the waiter and of the girl on a first date. As Sartre makes explicit: 'le véritable problème de la mauvaise foi vient évidemment de ce que la mauvaise foi est *foi*.' (*L'être et le néant*, 103) However, he goes on to postulate a mechanism by which 'bad faith' is possible. Thus one deliberately elicits a minimal amount of what is undeniably the most dubious evidence consistent with some form of credence:

'En conséquence, un type d'évidences singulier apparaît : l'évidence *non persuasive*. La mauvaise foi saisit des évidences, mais elle est d'avance résignée à ne pas être persuadée et transformée en bonne foi [...] elle se dessine tout entière dans la résolution qu'elle prend de *ne pas trop demander*, de se tenir pour satisfaite quand elle sera mal persuadée' (*L'être et le néant*, 103)

Here we have an exact analysis of the type of activity that makes the game of Petrus' shipyard both possible and poignant.

#### (v) Merleau-Ponty and Lacan

For the purposes of the present study, the main contribution of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to phenomenological ontology was to focus explicitly on embodiment as an immediate and necessary fact of existence. In developing his ontology of the 'body-subject', he reiterated and interpreted the previous parameters in terms of the body. Thus there are specific examinations in his key work, 'Phénoménologie de la Perception' (1945), of spatiality [I,3 and II,2]; the Other [I,5&6 and II,4] and temporality [III,2]. Kearney sums up the import of this focus as follows:

<sup>222</sup> Solomon, *op. cit.*, 288

'The chief virtue of a phenomenology of the body-subject is to steer through the Scylla of scientific empiricism and the Charybdis of metaphysical idealism, overcoming both extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism with its notion of consciousness as irrevocably "incarnate" in the world. As such, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology finds its true vocation in a philosophy of *ambiguity* [...] The "phenomenon" of our embodied consciousness is precisely that "in-between" realm - *l'entredeux* - which pre-exists the division into subject and object.'<sup>223</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's thus contrasts the immediate experience of incarnation, ambiguous insofar as it is unable to disengage perceiver from perceived, with the 'reflective attitude' that he associates with the Cartesian tradition:

the reflective attitude simultaneously purifies the common notions of body and soul by defining the body as the sum of its parts with no interior, and the soul as a being wholly present to itself without distance [...] There are two senses, and two only, of the word 'exist': one exists as a thing or one exists as a consciousness. The experience of our own body, on the other hand, reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existing. If I try to think of it as a cluster of third person processes - 'sight', 'motility', 'sexuality' - I observe that these functions cannot be interrelated, and related to the external world, by causal connections, they are all obscurely drawn together and mutually implied in a unique drama. Therefore the body is not an object. For the same reason, my awareness of it is not a thought, that is to say, I cannot take it to pieces and reform it to make a clear idea. Its unity is always implicit and vague. It is always something other than what it is...<sup>224</sup>

This sort of carnality, immediate and ambiguously intentional, seems to describe precisely the first experience that the reader is given of Linacero and Brausen.

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<sup>223</sup> Kearney, *op cit*, 75

<sup>224</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 198



Although Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that various stances or activities may serve to emphasise one organ over another,<sup>225</sup> the subject is integrated in an immediately present 'body image' defined not by a prepositional 'spatiality of position', but rather a 'spatiality of situation'. An example may help to illustrate the distinction:

If I stand holding my pipe in my closed hand, the position of my hand is not determined discursively by the angle which it makes with my forearm, and my forearm with my upper arm, and my upper arm with my trunk, and my trunk with the ground. I know indubitably where my pipe is, and thereby I know where my hand and my body are [...] The word 'here' applied to my body does not apply to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, *but the laying down of first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object*, the situation of a body in face of its tasks. (*ibid.*, 100, emphasis added)

He thus makes a *prima facie* distinction between bodily space and external space, in some ways analogous to Bergson's distinction between external, geometrical time and subjective *temps duré*. Again, the slightest examination of the opening pages of *El pozo* and *La vida breve* demonstrate just such an 'anchoring of the active body in an object' by the narrator.

Around the time that Merleau-Ponty was working on the series of psychological case studies that allowed him to develop this phenomenological ontology of the body-subject, Jacques Lacan was refining his thesis of '*Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je*', an outline of which was first delivered at the 14<sup>th</sup> international Psychoanalytical Congress held in Marienbad, 1936. The earliest extant version of the proposal, dating from 1949, underlines the need to 'understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image - whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic

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<sup>225</sup> As for instance 'if I stand in front of my desk and lean on it with both hands, only my hands are stressed and my whole body trails behind them like the tail of a comet.' (*ibid.*, 100)

theory, of the ancient term *imago*.' (*Écrits: a selection*, 2). The identification by the infant with an integral, specular image is necessary so as 'to establish a relation between the organism and its reality - [...] between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*.' (*ibid.*, 4)

Particularly germane to the poetics of existential estrangement is Lacan's subsequent distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The former possibility comes into being, however vitiated by *méconnaissance* and characterised by narcissism and aggression, conterminously with the specular *Gestalt* of the mirror-stage; that is, with the unified fiction of the 'imago' that helps the infant overcome the trauma of the *corps morcelé* which had hitherto defined it. The latter, meanwhile, is identified by Lacan with the patriarchal language, the *nom / non du père*, a pre-established system of meaning and value ("Law") into which the 'imaginary' self is inscribed so as to become a 'Subject' (with the Althusserian connotation of 'subject to'). However:

The true task of psychoanalysis [...] is to dismantle the reified *imago* of the ego, to free the subject from his fixation with himself in order that it may acknowledge its more fundamental relation to the other. This relation with the other is what Lacan calls 'language'; it is 'symbolic' rather than 'imaginary'. Psychoanalysis, in other words, must aim to release the patient from the 'imaginary' order of self-obsession into the 'symbolic' order of language as an open dialectic between the subject and the other.<sup>226</sup>

The self, more comfortable with the fictional unity of the specular *imago*, will tend to resist the symbolic, particularly insofar as it is haunted by the memory of the *corps morcelé* that precedes the mirror-stage:

'The fragmented body [...] usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs represented in exoscopy...' (*Écrits: a selection*, 5)

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<sup>226</sup> Kearney, *op.cit.*, 274



Here we seem to have arrived squarely in the disturbing universe of *Der Verwandlung*, of *Fin de partie* and *The Unnamable*, of the atomised body that pervades Onetti's writing.



Appendix II  
Colour and Desire in Onetti

Right from the opening paragraphs of Onetti's first full length novel, *Tierra de nadie* (1941), a palette reduced to three or four primary colours appears to predominate.<sup>227</sup> The novel begins as follows:

El taxi frenó en la esquina de la diagonal, empujando hacia el chófer el cuerpo de la mujer de pelo amarillo. La cabeza, doblada, quedó mirando la carta azul que le separaba los muslos. "Nos devolveremos el uno al otro como una pelota, un reflejo..."

Mientras suspiraba, "nos devolveremos el uno al otro", sorprendió el nacimiento del gran letrero rojizo.

Una mancha de sangre: *Bristol*. En seguida el cielo azuloso y otro golpe de luz: *Cigarrillos importados*. Nuevamente el cielo. (O.C., 81)<sup>228</sup>

On a first reading, the usage here seems to contribute to other techniques of disorientation familiar from German Expressionist painting, and the novel is in fact constructed on a poetics which has much in common with the expressionist impulse - the recourse to fragmentation and ellipsis, to synecdoche or atomisation; the radical distortions of space and body; the sense of claustrophobic enclosure and so forth.

What is noticeable immediately is the struggle being played out between the blue of both the note and the sky and the flashing red letters of the advertisement. The violence of the latter, 'una mancha de sangre', imposes itself on the 'carta azul', a fragment perhaps of a love letter. In fact, as the present study aims to make clear, blue, and in particular 'azul celeste', is almost always associated with the desirable in Onetti. However, while red frequently implies the intrusion of the violent or foreign - one thinks here of the red sports car (an Alfa) which Marcos Bergner drives around

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<sup>227</sup> The three primary colours in painting are blue, red and yellow; those of physics, and indeed the eye, blue, red and green.

<sup>228</sup> For the remainder of the present study, all Onetti quotes are from *Obras completas*, Mexico: Aguilar 1970 (O.C.); *Dejemos hablar al viento*, Barcelona: Bruguera 1979 (D.); *La muerte y la niña*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidores 1973 and *Cuando ya no importe* Madrid: Alfaguara 1997 (C.I.)



Santa María and of the pyromaniac outsider named Colorado who sets the city ablaze - Onetti more usually sets up a dialectic between blue and green. Once appreciation is taken of the nuances of this polarity, an entire nexus of relations, equivalences and valuations is facilitated.

An incident from an early chapter of Onetti's next book, *Para esta noche* (1943), should help to establish the polarity. Ossorio, who is desperate to find a safe room for the night, has entered a bar named the First and Last. He finds himself next to a 'reservado', a private room, and enters. Here he has a brief conversation with a woman who is upset that her 'charge' has committed suicide. This woman is described several times as 'con hermosos hombros entre los pliegues del vestido celeste.' (O.C., 271) , 'la mujer de los hermosos hombros' (O.C., 275) or more simply 'la mujer de celeste' (O.C., 272, 274). The motif of the female shoulder as a focus of desire is already familiar from *El pozo*. Once outside in the main bar, a vulnerable space, he is almost captured while at the table of a second woman. She is 'la mujer de verde' (O.C., 279, 280, 288) who, by contrast to 'la mujer de celeste', is immensely disdainful when her client is killed in an ensuing gunfight:

'justamente en el pedazo iluminado del piso donde goteaba su sangre, y la mujer de verde, despeinado, con un extraño cansancio en la cara, encendió un cigarillo mirando la cabeza del hombre gordo.

- Ahora andá a tocar a tu madrina - dijo la mujer. (O.C., 288)

Further into the book, the colour-coding is repeated. Later that night, when Ossorio breaks temporarily into a room beside the office of the Youth Committee, a possible temporary refuge, he finds a woman who 'tenía un largo batón celeste'; some time later again, when an acquaintance named Farla refuses him his apartment, the interview takes place beside a bath which contains water 'verdosa como la de los océanos.' (O.C., 361, 387). A dialectic has thus been established: blue is characteristic of the desirable, the interior, the sympathetic, green of the mundane, the exterior, the heartless. The adolescent girl Victoria Barcala thus enters into Ossorio's pensión 'con un abrigo desabrochado azul oscuro' (O.C., 366). The novel's apocalyptic end occurs, not surprisingly, in a 'mundo sombrío y rojo' (O.C., 426).

Returning to *Tierra de nadie*, the same sort of colour-coding would seem to obtain, and on the numerous occasions that red appears in the text, there is an association with the violent political crisis dividing Europe between Communism and National Socialism. Thus Bidart and Tausky, two agitators, imagine the tram-company building: '- y arriba la bandera roja. Aquí, vos, comisario de transporte.' (O.C., 185). The idea that such an arrangement is somehow foreign to the Southern Cone is perhaps already implicit in the flashing red sign 'BRISTOL - CIGARRILLOS IMPORTADOS' which frames the narrative, appearing both in the opening and penultimate chapter. Several headlines or slogans which more directly recall the neon advertisement are equally colour-coded: 'Sobre el mostrador, sujeto por un cenicero de vidrio rojo con un aviso esmaltado, un diario de la tarde mostraba un gran letrero: 'HITLER DECLARA QUE INVADIRÁ EL SÁBADO.' (O.C., 124), suggests both the violence and foreignness of the European struggle, whereas an approval for the specifically regionalist agenda of the contemporary Peruvian populist Haya de la Torre would seem to be implicit in 'las paredes repetían: HOMENAJE A DE LA TORRE. Eran grandes letras azules' (O.C., 189)<sup>229</sup>

Returning to the blue-green polarity, the rapid series of relationships which Aránzuru has in an attempt to communicate his idea of the island to a number of women can be characterised by the colour of their clothing. Thus at the moment that he breaks definitively with Nené, we are told that he is 'separada de la cara de dicha (Nené) por el rápido telón verde de la tricota' (O.C., 110), and green clothes also characterise his unsatisfactory relationship with the prostitute Catalina: 'No sabía qué decirle, y sonrió. Catalina estaba vestida con un traje de saco, verdoso.' (O.C., 133). By contrast, Violeta,<sup>230</sup> who seems to offer a real possibility of communication and who agrees to leave for the island with him is 'vestida con un largo saco azul' (O.C., 235).

<sup>229</sup> With this in mind, there is perhaps a covert implication that Cordes is an 'engagé' writer on the European model, his 'pescadito rojo [...] persiguiendo el corazón verde de las aguas' (O.C., 73) Linacero, by contrast, in trying to communicate one of his 'sueños' to the prostitute Ester, mentions that within the fantasy, 'si todo va bien, yo dejo una luz azul como ésta en los balcones' (O.C., 67)

<sup>230</sup> Her name is, of course, itself a shade of blue. Interestingly, it is 'con un diminuto ramo de violetas' (O.C., 1051) that Larsen tries to woo Angélica Inés in *El astillero*, while the sad anecdote of humiliation which



A similar polarity applies to Llarvi, whose fruitless search for the prostitute Labuk leads him to a brothel. Here, the absence of a blue dress among the women on offer is critical: 'Eran cuatro, de rojo, de verde, de blanco y de negro.', and in the absence of blue, it is the woman in green who attracts his attention:

'La muchacha de verde, bajo la luz, le recordó de pronto a alguien, imperiosamente, no a Labuk, pero sí a alguna mujer, relacionada con Labuk. Acaso fuera solamente la actitud, el aire de estar ausente, sin interés, la indiferencia que surgía del mismo verde vegetal de la ropa.' (O.C., 190)

The last phrase is of central importance. Green is of course associated with nature, but as we will see, nature in Onetti is characterised by just such 'indiferencia que surgía del mismo verde vegetal.' In passing, however, it is germane that when Medina, the central protagonist of *Dejemos hablar al viento* (1979), is similarly drawn to the prostitute Maruja, who again bears a faint resemblance to a lost woman of his past, he dismisses her as 'una puta rubia y flaca, metiendo una lengua lenta e impúdica, oficiosa, en la bebida verde y espesa.' (D., 205)

The presence in *Tierra de nadie* of the painter Casal whose work, moreover, observes a fauvist idiom of colour, allows Onetti to hint at the value that primary colours will attain throughout his own oeuvre. *El pozo*, with the curious juxtaposition 'No tengo tabaco, no tengo tabaco. Esto que escribo son mis memorias' and its fixation on 'algún muchacho fumando solo de noche, así, en una ventana' had already established a metaphorical equivalence between smoking and writing which was to continue throughout Onetti (thus Díaz Grey of Jorge Malabia in *Para una tumba sin nombre*: 'ya sé que cada limpieza de pipa señala el final de un capítulo' [O.C., 1013]). With this in mind, Casal's painting - 'un hombre verde, contra una mesa ocre, fumaba una pipa larga y azul' (O.C., 118) - sets up a dialogue in colour equivalent to Linacero's dialectic of *suceso-sueño* by a window glazed with 'diaros tostados del sol'. Both of Onetti's

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ne relates to the bell-boy in the *Belgrano* also revolves around a seller of violets.

painters, Casal of *Tierra de nadie* and Medina of *Dejemos hablar al viento* are pipe-smokers.

Much as Linacero had attempted to 'tender redes y atrapar el pasado y la Ceci de entonces' (O.C., 65), so too Casal attempts to fix his wife Balbina in atemporal frame through the action of painting her. The colour he chooses for this action is, emphatically, celestial blue: 'Había allí una Balbina celeste de perfil [...] Acaso el cuadro tolerara o pidiera que el pedazo azul de vestido fuera llevado casi al negro [...] Ella se le plantó enfrente, Balbina sobre Balbina celeste.' (O.C., 148) The last comment is a variation upon the familiar Onettian motif of the unageing picture/photo juxtaposed with the real. Medina, too, appears to favour blue for his portrait of Juanina (D., 93), while the more vulgar and worldly Freida spends her time knitting a useless poncho out of green wool.

In order to highlight the transience of worldly vanity, we are introduced to Casal's portrait of Balbina immediately after a charcoal sketch of a grotesque banquet scene which Casal is working on, a scene for which 'pondría rojo en el manto de los reyes [...] Detenerse en verdes podridos para las costillas del primer leproso. Dudaba: un azul de cielo del trópico, cielo de crepúsculo rápido, para el perro cornudo' (O.C., 148) One might translate Casal's usage here as 'red = vain worldly power, green = decay and corruption, sky-blue = the fleeting attempt to achieve the transcendental and timeless'. There is also something of an allegory, since at the time the *German Girl's Mill* is being shared by the socialist, Bidart, the disillusioned artist, Casal and the ageing wife, Balbina, who he will later cuckold. His attempt to place her beyond time, by painting her in sky blue, is doomed to failure. Casal returns to the comparison of the real Balbina and his idealised picture in chapter 55, the last time in the novel that we see the couple.

Such a reading of the paintings is made possible because by this time in *Tierra de nadie* the colour blue has already become associated with the fictional and timeless island of Faruru and with the taxidermist, Num, who has invented it. Thus the following two details: '(Num) trotaba rengueando, haciendo golpear el delantal azul contra las piernas [...] La risa brillaba, azul, detrás de los anteojos.' (O.C., 97) and



Aránzuru's calling to mind of a poster 'con arbolitos y el agua azul marino, claro.' (O.C., 99). Num's room is characteristically filled with birds and animals which, through his art, have been placed beyond time. One already begins to see the transcendental significance attached to the fact that Díaz Grey - timeless, ageless, eternally vicarious - is wearing a new blue suit in the scene of Larsen's expulsion, the tableau and the detail emphatically repeated in both *La vida breve* (O.C., 690, 691) and *Juntacadáveres* (O.C., 786, 861, 974).

If blue represents the transcendental, the atemporal, the desirable, then green is characteristic of 'los sucesos en que (la alma) tuvo que mezclarse, queriendo o no' (O.C., 50-1).<sup>231</sup> This is already apparent in the negotiations surrounding Bidart's tram strike in *Tierra de nadie*. When first he receives an offer from the company which he hopes will vindicate the action, we are informed that it is 'escrita a máquina con un hermoso azul' (O.C., 127). As though in direct contrast, in a later scene when Bidart is compromised and at the company's mercy, the representative tells him ' -Ésta es la nota de la empresa. Volvió a sentarse y cruzó las largas manos sobre la carpeta verde.' The moment of crisis passes, however, when the latter 'alzó los ojos, azules, mansos como cielo de estampa.' (O.C., 187). The colour-coding is repeated in the short story *Jacob y el otro* (1961): the ageing giant Jacob van Oppen, harking back to the time when he was truly world-champion, is paraded through Santa María 'con el enorme torso cubierto de lana con la gran letra azul en el pecho, la C que significaba, para toda idioma y alfabeto concebible: Campeon Mundial de Lucha de Todos los Pesos.' (O.C., 1371). When his trainer, Orsini, however, tries to buy off the opponent Mario, he is seen 'apoyado en el mostrador, con el caluroso sombrero verde echado hacia la nuca' (O.C., 1375). It is in the course of this key story, written while Onetti was engaged in elaborating the central dyptich of the Larsen saga, that Santa María becomes explicitly linked to a particularly connotative shade of blue: 'Allí estaba Jacob; con el *slip* celeste, color

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<sup>231</sup> Where money is involved, Onetti usually chooses a denomination which will make the relevant note green. Thus the banknote that Larsen borrows off Barrientos is 'el billete verde [de cincuenta]' (O.C., 1108)

dedicado a Santa María' (O.C., 1394). Celestial blue is, of course, traditionally associated with the cult of the Virgin, Mary.

Before going on to examine the specific use of 'celeste', it is worth returning briefly to the idea that green in Onetti relates to an extent to nature. We have already commented briefly on the 'indiferencia que surgía del mismo verde vegetal', applied to the dress of the prostitute who was *not* wearing blue (ie, the desired Labuk). The association of 'verde' with 'vegetal', with the blind indifference of nature, is therefore metonymically an allusion to the transient, to that which decays within time. Not surprisingly, it is this transient world which Brausen is keen to escape from when he begins to dream up Santa María, and which seems to underlie an important scene with his friend Julio Stein just prior to Brausen's physical departure for the mythical city. Stein, who is in the company of a woman, is welcoming Brausen back to the 'real world' ('voy a celebrar tu regreso al mundo de los vivos' (O.C., 652) in a chapter suggestively entitled 'Macbeth'. The chapter begins:

- Esta Macbeth de las manos tintas de clorofila... - dijo Stein de pronto. [...]

Él estaba junto a mi mesa, de pie, con la mujer de los guantes verdes [...]

- Lady Macbeth empapada en clorofila...-repitió al sentarse.

(O.C., 651)

A clear parallel has been established between the spilled blood that one would normally associate with Shakespeare's murderess and the 'verde vegetal' of chlorophyll. The hallucinatory detail of the green gloves is returned to, and we learn of Brausen's aversion to the colour. '[La mujer] alzó la boquilla con una mano verde para que Stein le encendiera el cigarrillo. - [...] ¿Qué le pasa con mis guantes?' she asks, and later Stein remarks: ' - La fui a buscar una noche, me enamoré de ella cuando descubrí los guantes verdes rodeando un vaso en la otra punta del salón. Pero algo hay que no es tu estilo; algo agresivo, algo seguro, algo definitivamente antibrausen.' (O.C., 652). It is worth remembering that prior to leaving his job, his wife and his commitments, Brausen consigns to a safety deposit box some screws and scraps, and also a small fragment of green glass.



'Celeste', as has been noted in reference to *Jacob y el otro*, is the colour of Santa María, the city dreamed into being by Brausen. It is, as will be shown, the key shade of blue in the novel *Juntacadáveres*, so that one would have to point out the inadequacy of Alfred MacAdam's rendering of 'celeste' merely as 'blue' with regard to the brothel that Larsen sets up on the coast (*Body Snatcher* London: Quartet Books, 1991). All three novels of what Emir Monegal has termed 'un tríptico barroco' (O.C., 20) - *Para una tumba sin nombre*, *El astillero*, *Juntacadáveres* - have a very clearly value-laden topography, upper stories relating to the 'celestial' and basements to the 'infernal' (see for instance the relevant chapters of Mark Millington, *Reading Onetti* Liverpool: Francis Cairns 1985, especially 206-224, 239-249, 295-296). Indeed as will be seen, the colour connotes both the 'cielo' of heaven and that of cloudless skies, both of which are upwards. While the brothel itself, Larsen's hotel room and the room of the mad Julita are all upstairs, the basement of Barthé in which the shady political deal is struck to allow the brothel to go ahead is definitively downstairs. Díaz Grey, as intermediary, is seen quite literally climbing up and down stairs between the relevant parties. Here, as Millington notes, there is an eruption of (green) lime-leaves at the moment when the deal has been concluded: 'la bolsa de tilo cayó con un golpe seco y liviano; quedo torcida y abierta, dejó escapar un grueso chorro verde.' (O.C., 788) Millington (op. cit., 297) interprets this 'as if pent up drives were being released' and notes the coincidence of the brothel with the sensual odour of jazmins throughout the city during the single summer (Lanza dubs this season Larsen's 'cien días que conmovieron al mundo' [O.C., 976], a season diametrically opposed to the winter of *El astillero*). Taking into account the negative value of green throughout Onetti, one would rather suggest that the implication of the 'chorro verde' is an allusion to the transience of nature and to the corrupt graft that has made the project possible.<sup>232</sup>

<sup>232</sup> The opposition between Marcos Bergner, who is acting in 'bad faith' in directing his hostility towards the brothel, and Díaz Grey is neatly encapsulated in terms of colour in the following description, related by the young Jorge Malabia: '[...] vestido con un traje azul nuevo, el doctor Díaz Grey sonríe, alza el bastón y le toca la espalda. Recostado en mi silla, sin soltar el billette de cien pesos, veo venir a Marcos, gigantesco, borracho, lleno de sudor en la cara y en el pecho que muestra una camisa verde abierta hasta la cintura.' (O.C., 861) In a later scene when Jorge Malabia confronts his brother in law Marcos, the former is seen

Now what is immediately noteworthy of the house that Larsen hires for his brothel somewhere along the coast of Santa María is the unusual frequency with which the qualifier 'celeste' is attached to it (interestingly, in Larsen's hotel room there is 'la estampa de una Virgen' (O.C., 803). It is initially introduced in *Juntacadáveres* as 'la casa de las persianas celestes' (O.C., 831) and we are later told that it has 'la puerta celeste' (O.C., 836) before it finally becomes simply 'la casita celeste' (O.C., 950), and even Padre Bergner imagines 'un automóvil rojo en una callejuela perdida, con disimulo, frente al resplandor celeste de una casita pobre' (O.C., 957). The 'persianas' become 'ventanas' during Jorge Malabia's lament 'no me animo todavía a caminar cuesta abajo desde la plaza hasta las ventanas celestes del prostíbulo, y golpear dos veces en la puerta, también celeste' (O.C., 863), and as we will see, his perception of the windows once inside the brothel is important. Upon the *macrós* return in *El astillero*, the epithet seems to have once again undergone a slight shift. Here, one of the first streets upon which Larsen wanders is described as 'la descuidada calle en cuyo final está la casita con balcones celestes' (O.C., 1050)

Once we recall the dialectic between the desirable and the dangerous interior spaces of the 'First and Last', defined respectively by 'la mujer de celeste' and 'la mujer de verde', and also the attempt by the painter Casal to fix his wife in a portrait of the same colour, then we begin to see that a purpose far from squalid is motivating the *macró* Larsen to realize his dream of the perfect brothel. Indeed, once he finally gains entry in the company of his brother-in-law, Marcos, Jorge Malabia has the curious sensation of timelessness, or at least of having moved beyond the exigencies of routine time:

Así empezamos a vivir los seis. No quiero saber cuánto tiempo duramos juntos; estoy resuelto a olvidar, y cumplo, los sucesos de rutina y las situaciones absurdas. Puedo pensar que fuimos felices hasta el final (O.C., 952)

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'con los brazos flacos ciñiendo las rodillas del pantalón azul.' (O.C., 906).



But how is this ideal of timelessness achieved? Here it is necessary to return to the colour of the curtains, and to note that in Onetti's earliest stories the hero-dreamer, Suaid, Baldi, appear to be oppressed by the overcast sky, the natural colour of which is occluded.<sup>233</sup> In Larsen's brothel, however, we find 'el cielo invariable y celeste de las cortinas, en la mañana de domingo nublada e indecisa' (950), and a page later, as noted by Brotherston,<sup>234</sup> an inappropriate light floods the scene when the curtain is drawn: 'se desplazó perezosa para descorrer una cortina. Sentí que la luz de la mañana no convenía a la escena' (O.C., 951)

The second critical space in which an attempt is made to freeze or move beyond time is, of course, the room of the mad Julita, and there are several clues as to the correlation of the two spaces. Both are upstairs, both are inhabited by 'locas', the Rio Plata slang for 'prostitute'. A play upon this word had already been made by Onetti in *La vida breve* when Brausen enters the timeless room, the 'mundo loco', of the prostitute Queca. Interestingly, immediately prior to introducing himself to her for the first time, Brausen is seen sitting in a cafe opposite (suggestively named the Petit Electra): 'Desde la mesa, junto a la ventana, podía vigilar la cuadra, la puerta de mi casa, ver el saco blanco del portero en la sombra celeste' (O.C., 498). All these spaces are to an extent beyond time. But the equivalence between the two spaces to which Jorge Malabia has access is also presented in terms of colour. Thus, speaking of Julita on what is their first important move beyond her game of Federico, Jorge relates that 'ella tiene un vestido de noche celeste' (O.C., 914). One is next reminded of the beautiful shoulders of the 'mujer de celeste' in the 'First and Last' when he goes on 'solo quiero enterarme del hombro estrecho, redondo y celeste.' (ibid), later talking of 'el cuerpo celeste retrocede' (O.C., 915). However, despite the fact that she seems to

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<sup>233</sup> It might be noted that when Larsen takes up the challenge of founding the brothel, he buys a new suit. Jorge recalls that previously 'siempre había estado vestido de gris en la administración de *El Liberal*.' (O.C., 780). Grey is occasionally used in Onetti to suggest that which occludes sky-blue. Since smoking is something of a metaphor for writing throughout Onetti, it has the power to transform these colours. Thus: 'El humo de los cigarrillos cambiaba sin apuro del gris al celeste, casi uniforme en el calor de la habitación cegada' (D., 30). Artistic creation almost always takes place in an isolated 'habitación cegada'.

<sup>234</sup> Gordon Brotherston *The emergence of the Latin American novel* Cambridge: C.U.P. 1977, 65

be moving away from the first game, the fact is that the colour is implicitly linked to her madness. The scene concludes with the following detail:

'Preñada o no - cada una de las mentiras puede dar un paso adelante esta noche, ocupar un lugar en el mundo -, el vestido celeste hace una curva en el vientre, se adhiere entre las piernas.' (O.C., 919)

She remains neurotic and, her own resolution notwithstanding, remains confined in her room right up to her suicide. She hangs herself dressed as a school-girl 'con un gran moño de corbata azul' (O.C., 980).

Why does Larsen's brothel fail? Why is his later project to marry Angélica Inés equally predestined to misfire? The key to answering both of these questions is already implicit in Onetti's usage of colour. The important point about the opportunity which presents itself to Larsen to realise his dream is that it occurs too late: 'Estaba viejo, incrédulo, sentimental; fundar el prostíbulo era ahora, esencialmente, como casarse *in artículo mortis*, como creer en fantasmas, como actuar para Dios.' (O.C., 831) The three women that he brings to Santa María are already spent, indeed he earns his nickname due to their cadaverous appearance. In terms of colour, we might note that in addition to the eruption of green at the moment of the deal's being struck, Jorge and Tito initially witness Larsen leading the three women from the station into Santa María, the 'ciudad cerrada' (O.C., 779), by passing through 'la puertita pintada de verde' (O.C., 781) Larsen's hotel room, meanwhile, contains not only a 'carpeta verde de la mesa, manchada de tinta, quemada por cigarrillos' (O.C., 806) but a tub of water with 'hojas verdes y alargadas que se movían en el perezoso remolino' (O.C., 805) in which he is soaking his feet and even more to the point a 'fonógrafo, muy viejo, deliberadamente antiguo, con una gran bocina en forma de flor' (O.C., 804). This last is of the utmost importance since record playing is associated directly with the movement away from linear time in Onetti. In Larsen's case, however, the narrator draws attention not only to its shape ('bocina en forma de flor') but then to the 'polverienta campánula verde de la bocina' (O.C., 806), the colour repeated on the following page. Greenness is thus associated with Larsen's illness (he has a flu which has coincided exactly with his taking a holiday from *El Liberal*), with nature, which as we have seen is invariably



indifferent or hostile, and with circularity, though in this case the gramophone is little more than an antique. Larsen himself introduces the gramophone into the brothel, the detail being picked up on in one of the most hallucinatory and disturbing passages in the novel, the scene perhaps recalling Casal's banquet fantasy with its 'verdes podridos para las costillas del primer leproso' :

-Me da por comer huevos fritos, querido -dijo el esqueleto, sentado ahora en la cama, haciendo sonar codos y rodillas con las falanges y el vaso entre los fémures abiertos, segregando los años, la insensatez y el acabamiento.

-Pedimos -respondió Junta, magnánimo, tocando la bocina verde del fonógrafo que había resuelto no vender. Sospechaba que ya nada tenía que ver el cadáver gordísimo, apenas verdoso, maloliento, con esta presencia.

(O.C., 829)

It is as though, by clinging to the antique green phonograph, he were introducing the possibility of decay into the realm of the 'sueño'. But the brothel only lasts a single summer. As a reminder that nature is against him, in a scene in which Larsen is failing to communicate with Maria Bonita, the prostitute he knew once in her youth, we have the following small detail: 'metió un dedo en el vaso para sacar un bicho verde y duro' (O.C., 888).

If Larsen's first attempt to achieve an atemporal space was already 'como casarse *in artículo mortis*, como creer en fantasmas', what then of his second? The return that Lanza predicts for him occurs some five years after his exile began, and he is now truly *in artículo mortis*. In the first place, one might note that his search is even more immediately spatial than in *Juntacadáveres*, as is borne out both by the title *El astillero* and by the section headings themselves. Larsen's key ambition is to gain access to the house of Jeremiah Petrus, an upper-story structure built upon fourteen pillars, and upon seeing it we are told that 'Larsen veía la casa como la forma vacía de un cielo ambicionado, prometido' (notice the choice of 'cielo' rather than 'paraiso' here - the house is another 'casa celeste'). In order to achieve this end he has a number of interviews with Petrus' daughter, the mad Angélica Inés, in the 'glorieta' outside the house, and the description here is important : 'junto al estanque, después del estanque,

una glorieta, también circular, hecha con listones de madera, pintados de un azul marino y desteñado (O.C., 1059). In this passage indeed may be seen a conflation of several Onettian motifs which suggest the desired atemporality of the 'sueño': The circular geometry; the estanque with its trapped water; the colour blue. It is of course of the utmost significance that the blue paint should be 'desteñado', and on the same page we find the related detail of: 'tablones mal pulidos, groseramente pintados de azul' The house itself is a Gothic ruin not unlike the mansion of Dicken's Miss Havesham, the garden filled with crumbling statues and 'árboles [que] tenían manchas blancas y verdes' (O.C., 1058) Nature, green, is once more the indifferent force coterminous with decay. However, as though still living in the era of the idealised brothel, Larsen first enters into the glorieta with a present which is tied with a 'lazo de cinta celeste' (O.C., 1058). The idea that 'celeste' is no longer anything more than a refuge is underscored by the detail that Kunz, once he discovers the true origin of the letter which briefly revived his faith, 'regresó paso a paso a la sala, a la vitela celeste donde había estado dibujando' (1172)

Blue also typifies the remaining two spaces in which in which Larsen seeks temporary refuge, and in each case the colour is again connected to the longed-for but irretrievable past. The shipyard itself is littered with 'el insistente, increíble azul de los planos en ferroprusiato' (O.C., 1063), blue-prints which hark back to a time when the yard was functional. It is worth pointing out the disdainful oblivion of Angélica Inés in their regard when she is seen: 'taconeando insegura sobre un parquet podrido, sobre manchas, planos azules, cartas comerciales, manchas de lluvia y tiempo.' (O.C., 1147). As with the glorieta, the present state of decay is implicit in the juxtaposition of 'manchas' and 'agua', the last being a frequent Onettian motif for time ('manchas de lluvia y tiempo'). The 'casilla' itself might come directly out of one of these blue-prints, now of course degraded into a wreck. Thus in the section entitled 'La casilla - I', Larsen is significantly reading about repairs made to a ship named the 'Tiba', of which he imagines 'tal vez el *Tiba* se hubiera hundido en marzo, siete años atrás, al salir de El Rosario' (O.C., 1077). Upon leaving the yard, he stumbles for the first time across the hut, which is described as 'con rastros de haber estado pintada de azul, con una mal



adherida timonera de barco fluvial, extraída del cadáver de algún *Tiba* ' (O.C., 1079). This is almost the perfect symbol for the state of Larsen's final, desperate attempt to salvage something from his older aspiration to the perfect space, the 'casita celeste'.

The hut itself is not atemporal, however, and one immediately finds a tell-tale juxtaposition on the table inside it: 'un reloj, un vaso con largas guías verdes' (O.C., 1098). Green, in fact, taints and threatens all of these spaces. After Gálvez has left and it is scarcely possible to continue in the mad game of the shipyard, Larsen visits Petrus, who is in jail. To visit him, Larsen first passes 'la plaza circular de verdes oscuros y húmedos, pavimentada con gastados ladrillos envueltos en musgo' (O.C., 1176). His first concern is then to ask the guard, dressed in blue, ' Cuánto tiempo puedo estar?' (O.C., 1177). But as though to underscore the point that Petrus has nothing to offer him but a by now meaningless contract, we are told that in the cell Petrus 'apoyaba las manos sobre el cuero de un cartapacio cerrado; no había otra cosa encima del cuadrilátero de raída felpa verdosa del escritorio' (O.C., 1178) Larsen concurs with this entirely hopeless stage of the game when he 'dejó el sombrero en una esquina de la mesa verde' (O.C., 1179).

But if this colouring of the table seems perhaps contingent or accidental, it has already been prepared for by a critically important detail. The forged certificate which, we are told, Gálvez sleeps with 'con la prueba legal entre la piel y la camiseta, como una criatura con una pistola celosa cargada' (O.C., 1094) and which is the immediate cause of Petrus' detention is 'una cartulina ajada, impresa en verde' (O.C., 1092). The colour is not only stressed - we again find 'aquella cartulina verde ajada'(O.C., 1125) and 'esa cartulina verde'(O.C., 1154) - but is also intimately linked with circularity: 'aquel papel verdoso, con dibujos circulares en los márgenes' (O.C., 1125). Much as the gramophone with the green horn entailed a corruption of the transcendent through contamination with the real/natural in *Juntacadáveres*, so too here the introduction of a green object threatens to explode the game of the 'astillero'. With this in mind, the last gesture of Larsen before leaving Josefina's room gains enormously in significance. It will be remembered that his final desperate act on his return to Santa María was transmuted from an impulse to find Gálvez, who had

absconded with the forged bond signed by Petrus, to a demand for a new paper guarantee from the old man. The language in which the transcendental value of the two items is described is indeed comparable, the former 'como un perdonavidas aquella cartulina verde ajada' (O.C., 1125), the latter 'el salvoconducto a la felicidad que le había firmado el viejo Petrus' (O.C., 1199). However, on his return to Puerto Astillero Larsen finds he had been summoned to the mansion, and finally gains access to Josefina's room. Here, he once again encounters an ineluctable reminder of the real, the natural, in 'la palangana y su jarra, de loza verde, hinchando el relieve de las anchas hojas acuáticas' (O.C., 1198) and it is in this very container, 'de loza verde', that he finally and irrevocably makes the gesture which implies renouncing the game: 'apartó cuidadoso la jarra con hojas y flores para quemar en la palangana el salvoconducto a la felicidad que le había firmado el viejo Petrus' (O.C., 1199). There is nothing left for him to do but to descend, like Gálvez, to the river, a symbol of the relentless passage of time, and to seek his death.

This leads us to the second main contention of the present study, intimately related to the above. We have seen that blue, and in particular celestial blue, is commensurate with the Onettian search for transcendental spaces that are beyond time. Green, meanwhile, is commensurate with the 'sucesos' - nature, political dealings, entropy - which mitigate against the realm of 'sueños'. However, since, in Onetti, the former is largely identified with the process of imaginative writing and the latter with 'los sucesos en que tuvo que mezclarse', attention is frequently drawn to this metafictional aspect by the choice of colours associated with writing. It might be remembered, for instance, that the letter which the pharmacist Barthé writes to Díaz Grey in order to accept the proposal which will allow the brothel to go ahead had been 'escrita con una tinta azul muy clara' (O.C., 789). Again, one might think of the attention drawn to the blue writing of the woman's letters in *Los Adioses*.<sup>235</sup> But ever

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<sup>235</sup> At first sight it might seem curious that the anonymous letters written against Larsen's brothel should also be emphatically 'azules, con grafías parejas y lentas' (O.C., 875). However, an important distinction has earlier been made between two distinct series of 'anónimos': 'Los hubo impresos [...] éstos eran semejantes a los que se reparten en los mítines



since Linacero's 'historia de una alma', the necessity for a 'prologue' of some kind pertaining to the world of the 'suceso' has been underscored. In terms of Onetti's colour-coding, it is therefore natural that in Larsen's hotel room we should find a 'carpeta verde de la mesa, manchada de tinta, quemada por cigarrillos' (O.C., 806), that on Díaz Grey's desk there should be a 'lapicera verde' (N., 9), that Juan Carr's pens should be kept in a 'vaso verde' (C.I., 161). One might also point out the collected items on Larsen's shipyard desk: 'el insistente, increíble azul de los planos en ferropirusiato' next to 'secantes verdes, gastados y vírgenes' (O.C., 1063). The near oxymoron of 'gastados y vírgenes' might extend itself to Larsen's own fruitless aspirations.

Returning to the colour blue, Lanza, the old journalist refugee who is something of a Num figure towards Jorge Malabia in *Juntacadáveres* is not only one of the most sympathetically drawn characters in all of Onetti's work, but is inextricably bound up with the task of writing. It is he, for instance, who not only takes a direct interest in the poetry of the adolescent, but also seems to provide the impulse to chronicle both 'the hundred days of Larsen' and reconstruct a true history of the phalanstery. Jorge Malabia, who is fond of him, notes that 'Lanza me muestra los ojos, celestes' (O.C., 861), but the transcendence of this colour for the old Spaniard is not made explicit until Onetti's final work, *Cuando ya no importe* (1993). This is also the first novel since *El pozo* to specifically lay claim to its status as a written journal. The following exchange between the narrator, Juan Carr, and Lanza, who runs a small store filled with writing materials, is illuminating:

Mientras elegía colores de bolígrafos en el negocio del viejo Lanza, hombre inmortal que en realidad se llamaba España Peregrina, le oí comentar dulcemente burlón : "Este azul le puede servir para todo. Fue del cielo, después lo robaron los cabrones, después volvió al cielo. Cartas de amor ? -

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políticos o durante las huelgas, hechos en papel ordinario [...] Los otros, los más numerosos, los más eficaces y desconcertantes, estaban escritos con tinta azul, por distintas manos...' (O.C., 864). In fact, the latter have been written by adolescent girls while in the room of the mad Julita, and acquire an artistic life of their own within the novel.

empujaba las lapiceras con un índice que tenía más nicotina que piel (C.I., 138)<sup>236</sup>

The nicotine stained fingers might act as a second hint that Lanza is in the realm of 'sueños'. Of course, Lanza is one of the few European exiles in all of Onetti's work, so that for him taking the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War would have been an authentic choice, thus the above continues: 'No desprecie este rojo como la muleta de un torero [...] Nadie sabe si en el mundo hay más sangre que hambre.' (ibid.)

Perhaps what is most remarkable in the above schema is not so much that Onetti should attach a metaphorical value to colour, but that the usage should remain so consistent throughout his entire oeuvre. Thus, when in *Dejemos hablar al viento*, Medina succeeds in elaborating a Linacero-like 'aventura' for an Englishman appropriately named Wright revolving around his supposed flight from Santa María, the exchange takes place in a bar-restaurant named the 'Gruta Azul'. Moreover, although Onetti was well into his eighties when he wrote his last novel, *Cuando ya no importe*, the irascible author returns with evident delight to the theme of the nubile adolescent girl, colour coding her obvious charms for the narrator: 'llevaba pantalones azules [...] yo detrás de ella, amando su culito inmaduro, rabiosamente apretado por el pantalón' (C.I., 169-170) and later, when the girl is wearing a light dress 'No había sostén, creí ver el triángulo oscuro de la ropa interior [...] Perniabierta y sonriente de espaldas al sol que hacía translúcida su falda y denunciaba el breve triángulo celeste...' (C.I., 178). The moment in which Juan Carr sexually touches the mad Angélica Inés, the latter first puts on 'un impermeable azul' (C.I., 55) For blue is reserved for those things which Onetti holds sacred, which are as yet unspoiled by the ravages of time: the child-woman touched by madness, the nymphet, the act of writing.

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<sup>236</sup> Peter Bush, in his 1995 translation *Past Caring ?* (London: Quartet Books) chooses to 'interpret' this passage by adding an extra detail: 'It



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belonged to heaven, then the bastards stole it *for their shirts'* (127, emphasis added).

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