

## TEXTUAL EXPOSURES: PHOTOGRAPHY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPANISH AMERICAN NARRATIVE FICTION

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### **FAMILY PORTRAITS: HORACIO QUIROGA, JUAN RULFO, SILVINA OCAMPO, AND VIRGILIO PINERA**

Portraits, family pictures, and photo albums highlight, better than any other use, photography's personal dimension. As visual signs that trigger individual recall and repositories of collective memory, their formal features, social history, and the cultural conventions that underpin them have galvanized the interest of cultural and literary critics as well as art historians.<sup>1</sup> In texts by Horacio Quiroga ("La cámara oscura," 1920), Juan Rulfo (*Pedro Páramo*, 1955), Silvina Ocampo ("Las fotografías," 1959, and "La revelación," 1961) and Virgilio Piñera ("El álbum," 1944), I explore the literary potential of these cultural artifacts. Working within the conventions of family photography, these authors write about the preservation of the dead in the memories of survivors, the visual representation of ideals and aspirations, and the social ceremonies enabled by the act of taking and viewing pictures. The texts I study run the gamut of representational possibilities: while Quiroga writes in technical detail about the moment of taking a photograph and the photochemical process of its becoming, Rulfo, in a telling passage from *Pedro Páramo*, stresses the materiality of the worn-out picture and lets the reader unearth the significance of this symbolic object. Ocampo, in the first of her short stories I analyze, refers to a celebration as the setting for a photographic session gone awry, making use of

the trademark cruelty of many of her texts; in the second, she exploits the fantastic dimension of the medium. Finally, Piñera focuses on one of photography's prime moments of reception (the viewing of an album), elaborating an absurdist tale of imprisonment and impotence. In the same way that each family photograph potentially tells a story, these texts point toward the untold narrative hidden behind the images, thus deploying a narrative fold, a latent story within the one in which they are embedded. In their own way, the textual images, rendered mute as all photographs are, invite the reader to fill in the gaps and the critic to engage in an interpretative task. In the texts examined here, photography is used to proclaim the reality of death in a variety of guises. Even if photography seems to channel a strategy for transcending death, ultimately the photographic act seems to collude with, rather than overcome, the drive to annihilation.

## Horacio Quiroga

It is fitting to begin this chapter with Horacio Quiroga's short story "La cámara oscura," included in *Los desterrados* (1926), given his pioneering engagement with modern visual technologies. Though not as well known as Quiroga's other short stories, "La cámara oscura" features some of the main concerns of his best known writings: life in the borderlands and the irruption of horror and death in the subtropical landscape of northern Argentina. In "La cámara oscura" Quiroga makes an explicit reference to photography, a technique with which he was well acquainted, in order to deploy the effect of dread he long pursued in his writing. As I will show, the use of the photographic medium can be read as a master metaphor that articulates Quiroga's central literary effect.

Before seriously considering a literary career, Quiroga was drawn to practical pursuits and showed a keen sense of curiosity regarding technology. Beatriz Sarlo sums up Quiroga's inclination for manual labor, experimentation, and modern machines by employing the term "pionerismo técnico," which she identifies as an important sociocultural trend in Argentina and Uruguay at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In her essay "Horacio Quiroga y la hipótesis técnico-científica," Sarlo traces the impact of a host of technical inventions on the middle and lower-middle classes and the

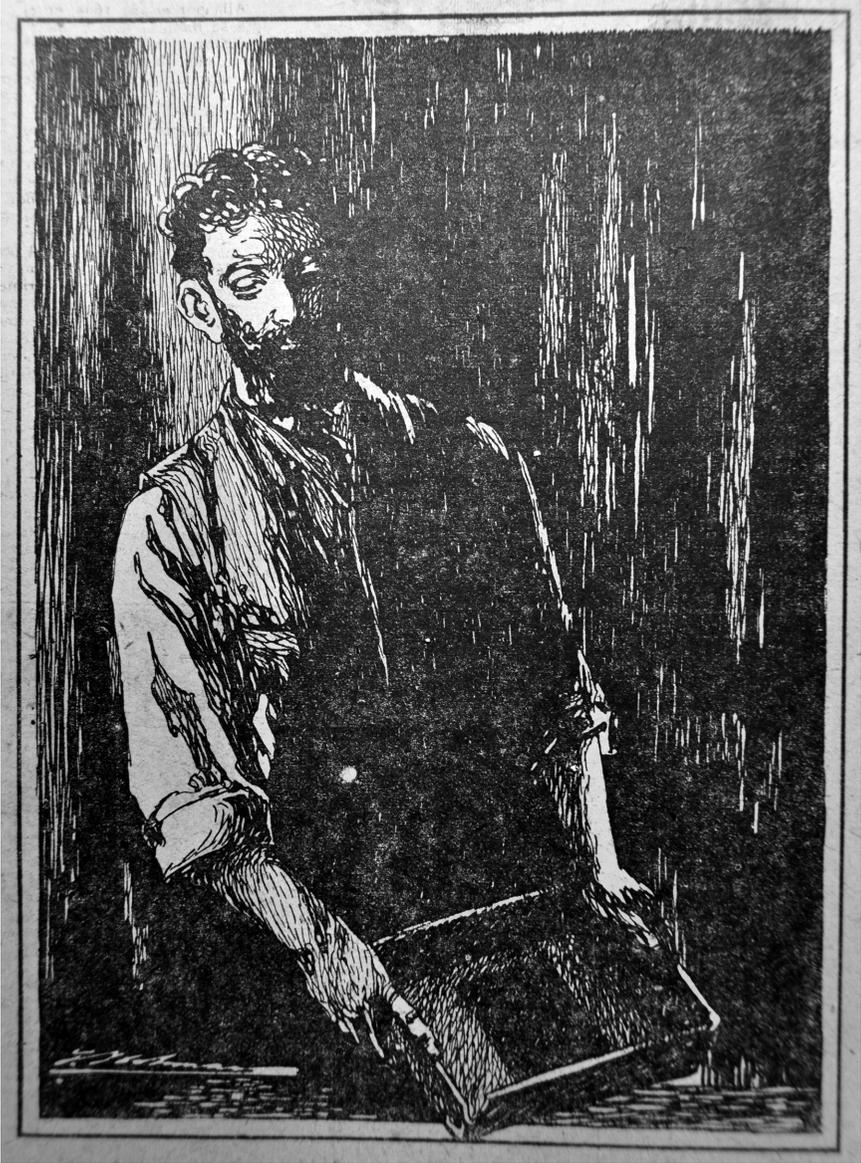
ensuing literary adoption of “lo maravilloso técnico,” of which photography and cinema were foremost exemplars.<sup>3</sup> Quiroga began practising photography in his late teens.<sup>4</sup> By the 1890s, when new portable cameras and commercial concerns made it easier to market photographic equipment and chemical compounds, a new class of photographer appeared on the social scene.<sup>5</sup> The young Quiroga, like many amateurs around the world, enthusiastically adopted photography chiefly as a practical means of producing and collecting images, without any explicit artistic pretensions (photography had yet to be established as a fine art in its own right). According to his biographers, the subject of Quiroga’s first photographs, now lost, consisted of picturesque scenes of the countryside.<sup>6</sup>

Quiroga had a darkroom in his family home, and his biographers explicitly mention the “kodacs” [sic] he owned.<sup>7</sup> The reference to this revolutionary invention proves that Quiroga, coming from a well-off family, was up-to-date on the photographic products and techniques available in Uruguay at the time. He even brought a camera with him on the unfortunate trip to Paris he made when he was twenty-one years old.<sup>8</sup> On his return to South America, his photographic hobby would serve him well. He would owe to this practice, albeit unexpectedly, his encounter with the subtropical forest of Misiones that would become inextricably linked to his literature and authorial image, and where he would settle from 1910 to 1916. Quiroga owed that trip to his closeness to Leopoldo Lugones, the leading *modernista* poet whom he first met in Buenos Aires in 1898. Lugones had been commissioned by the Minister of the Interior to inspect the state of the seventeenth-century buildings erected by the Jesuits in the borderlands of what are today Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. In June 1903 he undertook the trip with a small entourage, and after six months, Lugones wrote the administrative report that he would turn into a book—*El imperio jesuítico*—published in 1905. Foreseeing the possible criticism that his text could be read as a picturesque travel guide, Lugones points out in the introduction that he decided to add to the text a few drawings and maps. Only two photographs are included. Rather than featuring the Jesuit ruins or the natural landscape, they are of two wooden statues of saints, examples of the region’s arts and crafts. The quality of the glossy, grainy black-and-white images, shown against a neutral background, is poor, and no credit is given to Quiroga for the pictures, in either the prologue or the text itself.

Quiroga was twenty-four years old in 1903 and his literary calling was beginning to emerge. Immersed in French symbolism, he published a novel in 1901, *Los arrecifes de coral*, but his signature themes and style were still to come. He was living with his sister in Buenos Aires, working as a teacher and school inspector. Significant among the reasons that took him to Argentina's capital was his attempt to put behind him the tragic episode of the death of his best friend, Federico Ferrando, whom Quiroga accidentally killed while they were examining a gun. He again met Lugones, with whom he had a close relationship. When he learned about the trip to the ruins, he convinced the poet to include him in the project, since there would be no photographer to document the expedition.<sup>9</sup> The young Quiroga competently performed his task as photographer, though it seems that he was no easy company. Despite his bouts of immaturity, the experience opened up a new horizon, an exciting world of natural beauty, exploration, and risk that would make him buy a plot of land and move to Misiones in 1910.<sup>10</sup>

Photography appears in a short story by Quiroga entitled "El retrato," published in 1910. The text clearly alludes to Poe's "The Oval Portrait," though its subject and development are almost diametrically opposed. Following the conventions of the Gothic novel, Poe's text involves an artist who sucks the life out of his model in order to create an enduring work of art. Quiroga's story relies on the codes of science fiction and decadent *modernismo* to elaborate on the ancient theory of extramission, the projection of rays from the eyes,<sup>11</sup> in order to summon the image of a dead woman and thus produce a photographic portrait. In Poe's short story, life must wither in order to become representation, while in Quiroga's text, the gaze strives to redeem a life already extinguished by magically projecting an image on photosensitized paper.

"La cámara oscura" belongs to a more mature stage of Quiroga's career. The story takes place in San Ignacio Miní, in Misiones, and is told by a first-person narrator-protagonist. It is about Malaquías Sotelo, the justice of the peace who has just returned, quite ill, from a long trip to Buenos Aires. The narrator then elaborates on the "asunto fotográfico" [the photographic affair] around which the story revolves. He decides to pay a visit to Sotelo, but at the very moment he enters Sotelo's hut he realizes that the judge is in the throes of death; the judge then passes away in his presence. Given his photographic expertise, the narrator is asked to take a portrait



02 FIG 1: ILLUSTRATION OF THE PROTAGONIST OF “LA CÁMARA OSCURA,” RESEMBLING QUIROGA, IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING A NEGATIVE.

of Sotelo for the sake of his widow.<sup>12</sup> He complies, and after the burial he locks himself in the darkroom to develop the plate he has exposed. Full of apprehension, he manages to overcome his fears and “resurrects” the man out of the exposed negative. Once the lugubrious photographic scene is over, the narrator leaves the darkroom to wait for morning to break, beholding the lush scenery that surrounds him.

Although “La cámara oscura” lacks the tight structure of other texts by Quiroga, and its blend of technology and horror is not entirely effective, the story makes novel use of the photographic medium. Indeed, it is perhaps the first fictional text in modern Latin American literature that refers to the photochemical development process of a picture, a fact highlighted by an illustration that accompanied the text when it was first published in the magazine *El Hogar* in 1920.

The close links between Quiroga’s life and his writing are well known, and the autobiographical elements in “La cámara oscura” are evident, from the natural setting to the social scene referenced in the text.<sup>13</sup> Quiroga’s acquaintance with the photographic medium is transposed onto the actions of the unnamed narrator, lending credibility to the plot. “La cámara oscura” articulates the central theme of Quiroga’s storytelling: unexpected death in its many guises.<sup>14</sup> However, it adds a metanarrative level absent from other stories: death is also rendered as representation. The protagonist-narrator has to face death three times, and twice the production of a graphic sign is involved: first, he witnesses the actual death of Sotelo; second, he makes a portrait of the judge before the burial; and third, he develops the plate in the darkroom. From the outset, the narrator confronts with ambivalence the task in which he is involved. He bitterly complains that Sotelo has died in his presence, yet he seems fascinated by the spectacle he has just witnessed. A perverse impulse lies at the root of his attitude toward death, an impulse that makes him gravitate towards horror, instead of fleeing or rejecting it.<sup>15</sup> Oftentimes, as a number of Poe’s short stories attest, the perverse stands to harm not only the other but oneself, as if self-punishment is stronger than self-preservation. This same force is at play in “La cámara oscura.” The perverse drive that left the narrator transfixed in the shack where Sotelo died is the same that lies at the centre of his photographic impulse. The way he articulates his impression of witnessing Sotelo’s death manages to fuse and confuse the fictional plane with actual lived events, in typical Quiroguian fashion. The narrator, trying to verbalize

his morbid experience, says that a dead body is “una materia horriblemente inerte, amarilla y helada, que recuerda horriblemente a alguien que hemos conocido” (678) [a matter horribly inert, yellow and stone cold, that horribly reminds of someone we have known], thus literally channeling the author’s well-known uncanny encounters with death.<sup>16</sup>

Despite his avowed resistance, the narrator finally agrees to produce a picture of Sotelo. This practice is one of the most established social uses since the invention of photography: the production of portraits of recently deceased loved ones.<sup>17</sup> However, this last token of remembrance for the sake of Sotelo’s family, while constituting the central motive of the plot, will be somewhat forgotten. Instead, the harrowing effect that the photographic act has upon the protagonist is highlighted, shifting the focus from the visual sign as family token to the psychological effect of the photographic technique on the producer of the picture. With the memory of Sotelo still fresh in his mind, the narrator laments that he will have to “verlo de nuevo, enfocararlo y revelarlo en su cámara oscura” (679) [see him again, focus him and develop (or reveal) him in his camera obscura]. Then he goes on to describe in detailed fashion the inert countenance of the man as reflected through the lens of the camera in the very moment of the photographic act:

bajo el velo negro tuve que empapar mis nervios sobreexcitados en aquella boca entreabierta más negra hacia el fondo más que la muerte misma; en la mandíbula retraída hasta dejar el espacio de un dedo entre ambas dentaduras; en los ojos de vidrio opaco bajo las pestañas como glutinosas e hinchadas; en toda la crispación de aquella brutal caricatura de hombre. (679)

[under the black cloth I had to soak my overexcited nerves in that half-opened mouth blacker towards the back more than death itself; in the retracted jaw that left the space of a finger between the set of teeth; in the eyes of opaque glass under the eyelashes that looked glutinous and swollen; in all the exasperation of that brutal caricature of man.]

This ekphrastic moment takes place in a spatial and visual threshold: the in-between photographic space that both separates and joins the sitter and his final photographic representation. The action of looking through the viewfinder can be read allegorically, emblemizing the general perspective through which Quiroga articulates the pre-eminent topic of horror. The camera provides the author with a metaphor through which death in all its gruesome, material details is brought into sharper view. The encounter is enhanced by the mention of the black cloth employed by the photographer, an *effet du réel* that further enhances the sense of existential isolation and darkness. The realist elements of the description slip into the morbid as the inert bloatedness of the mouth, jaws, and eyes is emphasized, ending with an overall view of a face that has become a “brutal caricatura,” a figure that points to a visual representation of a coarser, degraded order. While there is something forced and unnatural in Quiroga’s description with its reference to glassy eyes and swollen eyelashes, it nonetheless effectively conveys the sheer uneasiness the photographer feels while preparing his shot.<sup>18</sup>

The third moment in which the narrator faces death happens following the burial. After some procrastination, he finally gathers the strength to develop the negative. The latent image of Sotelo’s face then emerges from the glass plate where it was lodged:

Lo hice por fin, tal vez a medianoche. No había nada de extraordinario para una situación normal de nervios en calma. Solamente que yo debía revivir al individuo ya enterrado que veía en todas partes; debía enterrarme con él, solos los dos en una apretadísima tiniebla; lo sentí surgir poco a poco ante mis ojos y entreabrir la negra boca bajo mis dedos mojados; tuve que balancearlo en la cubeta para que despertara de bajo tierra y se grabara ante mí en la otra placa sensible de mi horror. (680)

[I finally did it, perhaps at midnight. There was nothing unusual for a normal situation under calm nerves. But the fact is that I had to revive the person already buried that I saw everywhere; I had to bury me with him, just the two of us in a very tight darkness; I felt him rise slowly before my

eyes and slowly open the black mouth under my wet fingers;  
I had to balance him on the tray for him to wake up from  
underground, and to fix him in the other sensitive plate of my  
horror.]

The narrative situation fits the conventions of the horror story inherited from Poe: it is midnight, the protagonist is alone, and he nervously confronts what he perceives as a looming danger. The scene is ambivalent and, as before, the imp of the perverse makes itself felt. Obsessed by Sotelo's death, or by the persistence of the man's image in his mind, the narrator forces himself to face him yet again. His fear is accompanied by an attraction not devoid of dark erotic undertones ("solos los dos en una apretadísima tiniebla") ["both alone closely pressed together in darkness"] as if an intimate link has been established between them.<sup>19</sup> What follows is the protagonist's description of the technical process that brings to light (and to life) the image of Sotelo, who seems magically resurrected on the glass plate. By gently rocking the negative in the chemical bath, a sense of vulnerability is suggested, as if the image itself were a frail creature, despite the lugubrious circumstance.<sup>20</sup> The slow emergence of the image leaves an impression of dread in the protagonist, as if the plate were a haunted mirror.

The magical properties that theorists of photography often attribute to the medium find in this passage a triple verification; first, when the latent image of Sotelo appears on the glass in slow, awe-inspiring fashion; second, on account of the vicarious coming to life of a dead person; and third, as a magical power that transforms the mind itself into a sensitive plate that registers a traumatic experience, recalling the rhetoric of spirit photography at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> While the photographic process remains unfinished (no paper print is produced, no delivery of a picture of her late husband takes place) the description of the development process is fraught with meaning. The face of Sotelo emerges on the plate beneath the wet fingers, and the first thing revealed by the image is a half-open mouth, as if something speaks, or strives to speak, through the hollow space. This reference stands for the voice, forever lost, of the dead. Mute by its very nature, the photograph of Sotelo (its ekphrastic construction) features this fateful condition by highlighting the mouth's void as the central focus of attention. By picturing the source of silence, it points to

an absence on the plate itself and, metaphorically, of meaning. Unable to utter a word from either the realm of the dead or the frozen negative, the mouth reproduces the silence with which the narrator was greeted when he first encountered Sotelo in the shack moments before he passed away. Then, no conversation took place, no exchange, not even a word of comfort or an expression of surprise. The unbridgeable gap between the living and the dead, between the mute image of a body and the speaking soul of the living, finds its graphic representation in the black space of the half-open mouth. In the contest between verbal and visual representations, the image of that gap overpowers any wish or hope to speak to, or with, the departed.<sup>22</sup>

It is worth pointing out the ekphrastic fear that underpins the scene. This fear is triggered by the power of the photographic image to enhance whatever it depicts, to the point that photographic illusionism can create a more powerful impression than the raw experience of the “real” itself. As in Elizondo, the photograph points to a kind of hyperreality, a visual sign that fixes an essence. In Quiroga’s story, the hyperreal portrait enhances the demonic or phantasmatic aspect of the medium. In this sense, a photograph may succeed in fixing (as well as triggering) a traumatic experience in a way that may elude the actual perception of purported “facts.” In the demonic space that photography conjures, Malaquías Sotelo comes to life and dies again even more poignantly in the image that captures him and that is offered to the fascinated gaze of the protagonist (and by extension, the reader).

Carlos Alonso has identified a recurring structure in many of Quiroga’s short stories, namely, a gap between Quiroga’s avowed theoretical approach to the short story and his literary praxis. In Alonso’s words, “the rhetorical economy that supposedly should be centred on the conclusion is adulterated by the addition of a supplement, a kind of coda that is appended at the end before the closing of the narrative.”<sup>23</sup> “La cámara oscura” fits neatly into this pattern. The text ends not at the high point in which horror makes its appearance in the darkroom, but with the protagonist leaving that haunted space and waiting for a new beginning. The ending can also be read allegorically, as if the narrator has found, on the brink of the abyss, a redemptive light. Redemption is a key element of Quiroga’s ideological outlook. Understood as an existential rather than a religious notion, it is something his characters tragically strive for, though they fall prey to the

implacable force of fate or nature. There is no redemption for Malaquías Sotelo, not even in the virtual space of photographic representation where his effigy would live on. The protagonist, however, finds a way out of the dark hall of mirrors of the darkroom where he has found himself trapped. There is, it seems, a light at the end of the darkroom. Having developed the negative, the protagonist emerges to contemplate the forest, waiting for morning to break:

Al salir afuera, la noche libre me dio la impresión de un amanecer cargado de motivos de vida y de esperanzas que había olvidado. A dos pasos de mí, los bananos cargados de flores dejaban caer sobre la tierra las gotas de sus grandes hojas pesadas de humedad. Más lejos, tras el puente, la mandioca ardida se erguía por fin erectil, perlada de rocío. Más allá aún, por el valle que descendía hasta el río, una vaga niebla envolvía la plantación de yerba, se alzaba sobre el bosque, para confundirse allá abajo con los espesos vapores que ascendían del Paraná tibio.

Todo esto me era bien conocido, pues era mi vida real. Y caminando de un lado a otro, esperé tranquilo el día para recomenzarla. (680)

[When I went outside, the open night gave me the impression of a sunrise full of motives of life and hopes that I had forgotten. Two steps away, the banana trees loaded with flowers dropped on the earth drops from their big leaves, heavy with moisture. Further, behind the bridge, the burnt mandioca tree finally stood still, beaded with dew. Further still, by the valley leading down to the river, a hazy fog enveloped the *yerba* plantation, towered over the forest and it blended down there with thick vapors that rose from the warm Paraná.

All this was well known to me, as it was my real life. And walking from one side to another, I waited calmly for the day to break to start it anew.]

The conclusion posits nature as a redemptive space, but not in terms of a transcendent, mystical, or utopian space of universal harmony.<sup>24</sup> The

recurring motif of water in the passage not only describes the tropical environment, but connotes in its sheer materiality the dynamic that underpins nature's works, as if the natural world were suffused in sweat—both a visible and tangible testimony to its labours. The same applies to man. For Quiroga, who was not only a writer but also a pioneer and manual worker, redemption comes from hard labour in a constant struggle against a harsh environment. In the 1920 short story “Tacuara Mansión,” Quiroga refers to the “epopeyas de trabajo o de carácter, si no de sangre” (646) [the heroic deeds of labour or temperament] of his fellow *desterrados* in the jungle of Misiones. That is the “real” life alluded to at the end of “La cámara oscura,” where nature becomes not only the stage for survival and physical effort, but also the site where the haunted space of representation itself can be overcome. It is no coincidence that the protagonist not only possesses a photographic camera, but also carries at the beginning of the text “[una] azada al hombro” (677) [a hoe on his shoulder], in reference to his agricultural tasks. In the funereal context of the story, photography is a procedure that strives to overcome death by fixing the remains of life. Against the grain of the literary effect of horror it is supposed to produce, the story's ending outlines the hope of redemption beyond the fixation of the photographic act.

## Juan Rulfo

Like Quiroga, Juan Rulfo was drawn not only to death in his writing, but to photography as a hobby. This aspect of his career has come to the fore since 1980, with the exhibition and publication of his pictures as part of a national homage to his life and work. His visual production has gained widespread attention. On a par with their aesthetic quality, his photographs have elicited an interest well suited to the austere and elusive nature of Rulfo's literary work and authorial image.<sup>25</sup>

Much like the protagonist of “La cámara oscura,” Juan Preciado, a central character of *Pedro Páramo*, is in search of a sort of personal redemption. In Preciado's case, it concerns his mother, who has left behind a portrait of herself as a portable token of survival that will throw an unexpected light onto his quest. In this section, I show how this ekphrastically

constructed image can be read as a central emblem of Rulfo's novel, one that revolves around the idea of emptiness. I argue that the passage describing the portrait offers a productive example of the intersections between narrative and visual imagery: while photography is rendered in literary terms, the literary description introduces as a central issue the representational power and materiality of the photographic image. I also argue that a close reading of this "textual photograph" offers new insights into the cultural context and the contested regimes of representation it masks or takes for granted. Thus understood, photography plays a privileged role in literature as an interpretive tool that reveals practices specific to a given visual culture.<sup>26</sup>

In what follows, I provide a close reading and contextual interpretation of this passage and show its emblematic nature and overall significance in Rulfo's work. Related by Juan Preciado, it reads as follows:

Sentí el retrato de mi madre guardado en la bolsa de la camisa, calentándose el corazón, como si ella también sudara. Era un retrato viejo, carcomido en los bordes; pero fue el único que conocí de ella. Me lo había encontrado en el armario de la cocina, dentro de una cazuela llena de hierbas; hojas de toronjil, flores de castilla, ramas de ruda. Desde entonces lo guardé. Era el único. Mi madre siempre fue enemiga de retratarse. Decía que los retratos eran cosa de brujería. Y así parecía ser; porque el suyo estaba lleno de agujeros como de aguja, y en dirección del corazón tenía uno muy grande donde bien podía caber el dedo del corazón. (68)

[The picture of my mother I was carrying in my pocket felt hot against my heart, as if she herself were sweating. It was an old photograph, worn around the edges, but it was the only one I had ever seen of her. I had found it in the kitchen safe, inside a clay pot filled with herbs: dried lemon balm, castilla blossoms, sprigs of rue. I had kept it with me ever since. It was all I had. My mother always hated having her picture taken. She said photographs were a tool of witchcraft. And that may have been so, because hers was riddled with pinpricks, and at

the location of the heart there was a hole you could stick to your middle finger through. (16)]<sup>27</sup>

Juan Preciado recalls the photograph on his way to Comala while walking alongside Abundio, the muleteer. The encounter with Abundio represents a critical moment, a threshold between the point of departure for Juan Preciado, which remains unknown to the reader, and the upcoming events at Comala, a town deserted yet teeming with the voices and whispers of departed souls. If one of the clearest remnants of the *regionalista* novel in *Pedro Páramo* is its willful shunning of the signs of modernization and urbanization sweeping countries like Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century, the photograph of the mother is a token that signifies urban progress and technological modernity. By carrying a photograph to Comala, Juan Preciado brings with him a distinct specimen of a visual culture that is foreign to the town. The picture introduces a new economy of representations in a place where not even “traditional” visual media like painting or engraving seem to have any role.

The portrait functions as a reminder of the reason for Juan Preciado’s pilgrimage. After all, it is his mother, Dolores Preciado, who lured him, through her memories as well as her bitterness, back to his hometown to claim what Pedro Páramo owed them. The photograph, as a material sign in Juan’s possession, can also be interpreted as his inheritance from his mother. It is a gift fraught with irony, insofar as it is the only (visible) property that Dolores endows her son. As Juan Preciado explains in the next paragraph, the photograph is meant to be used as a link between himself, his mother, and his father—the portrait “es el mismo que traigo aquí, pensando que podría dar buen resultado para que mi padre me reconociera” (68) [I had brought the photograph with me, thinking it might help my father recognize who I was (16)]—as if the mimetic power of the image (the resemblance between mother and son) signalled a deeper familial bond that should also link him with Pedro Páramo.<sup>28</sup> The portrait as symbolic property substitutes metonymically for the mother herself. As Colina has put forward, in his fateful return to Comala Juan Preciado is looking for his mother as much as his father:

La obsesión del hijo parece ser, más que ese hombre tan lejano que resulta casi abstracto, la misma madre, y se diría

que el viaje a Comala, después de la muerte de ésta, responde al deseo de encontrar la imagen viva de ella y de reunirse con su pasado. Del mismo modo que otros llevan al pecho la imagen de la Virgen o la de la mujer amada, Juan Preciado lleva el retrato de su madre. . . . Este amor de Juan Preciado por su madre, toma la forma de una identificación. (55–56) <sup>29</sup>

[The son's obsession seems directed, more to that distant man that becomes almost abstract, to the mother. It could be said that the trip to Comala, after her death, is motivated by the desire to find her living image and join her past. Similarly as others wear on their chest the image of the Virgin or a beloved woman, Juan Preciado carries the portrait of her mother. This love of Juan Preciado for his mother takes the shape of identification.]

The photograph is a prophetic sign, or to borrow the title of Elena Garro's novel, "un recuerdo del porvenir" [a memory from the future], a fatalistic emblem of things to come. It foreshadows the realm of the dead that Juan Preciado is about to enter. It shows, in the words of Barthes, "that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead."<sup>30</sup> This is one of the central concerns of the novel.

The photograph of the mother, nestled in Juan's shirt pocket, is also a guiding spiritual light that he, echoing his mother's apprehension of witchcraft, places close to his heart. The mother's portrait makes itself felt immediately after Juan asks Abundio who Pedro Páramo is. In one of the key moments of the novel, Abundio answers in lapidary fashion that Páramo is "un rencor vivo" [living bile (literally: a living rancour)]. In this context, Juan Preciado's act of recalling the presence of the photograph in his pocket functions as an amulet, a symbolic shield or protective device against the destructive force of hate and resentment.<sup>31</sup>

However, the photograph will soon prove ineffectual. This is particularly clear in the way the regimes of perception are deployed in the novel. *Pedro Páramo* features a clash between visual and auditory perceptions, in which the former overpower the latter. At the beginning of the novel, before arriving in Comala, Juan Preciado points out that "Yo imaginaba ver aquello a través de los recuerdos de mi madre; de su nostalgia, entre

retazos de suspiros. Siempre vivió ella suspirando por Comala, por el retorno; pero jamás volvió. Ahora yo vengo en su lugar. Traigo los ojos con que ella miró esas cosas, porque me dio sus ojos para ver.” (66) [I had expected to see the town of my mother’s memories, of her nostalgia—nostalgia laced with sighs. She had lived her lifetime sighing about Comala, about going back. But she never had. Now I had come in her place. I was seeing things through her eyes, as she had seen them. She had given me her eyes to see. (12–15)] Even if Juan Preciado returns to his native land ready to perceive it through the melancholic gaze of his mother, it is soon evident that there is little to see in town. The novel makes abundantly clear, as many critics have pointed out, that the phantasmagoric universe of Comala is populated by sounds, rumors, echoes, and silences.<sup>32</sup> Sounds prevail over sights. As Juan Preciado declares from beyond the grave, he himself has fallen prey to the power of sound: “Me mataron los murmullos” [The murmuring killed me]. The abstract, mysterious atmosphere that envelops the sense of hearing—typical of oral cultures, according to media critic Walter Ong<sup>33</sup>—overwhelms the concrete precision afforded by the dissecting eye. In this sense, the photograph becomes a useless token in a realm where visual perception is relegated to a secondary role.

The photograph as amulet, at the same time magical and sentimental, is related to religious imagery.<sup>34</sup> Carlos Monsiváis refers to the cultural weight of religious images on the collective imagination of the Mexican people in these terms: “el mínimo utensilio del culto, la estampita piadosa, termina por ser el compendio de la instrucción y la comprensión religiosas. Muros, láminas, maderas y papeles hacen las veces de paños de la Verónica” (124) [the minimal tool of worship, the pious holy card, ends up as the compendium of religious instruction and understanding. Walls, prints, wooden boards, and papers pass as Veronica’s cloths]. Monsiváis also links one of the features of modernity (the mechanical reproduction of images) to the context of religious practice: “A las obras candorosas y de carácter único, las substituye la producción industrial de objetos de culto. . . . Son los cromos baratos y engeguedores, las medallas que se acuñan por millones, las pequeñas esculturas.” (126) [Naive and unique works are substituted by the industrial production of ritual objects. . . . They are the cheap, bright cards, the medals coined by the millions, the small sculptures.] In this sense, the photograph of Dolores, read as a protective shield,

achieves a seemingly unlikely conflation, that of the religious icon and the mass-produced image.

It is worth noting that we neither see nor read of any of the features of the mother's face depicted in the photograph. Ellipsis, the central strategy in Rulfo's rhetoric, leaves its mark in this most minimal of ekphrasis, as in many other descriptions in the novel. As the author himself has pointed out, "las gentes de *Pedro Páramo* no tienen cara y sólo por sus palabras se adivina lo que fueron" [people in *Pedro Páramo* are faceless and only through their words do we guess who they were].<sup>35</sup> However, even if this is clearly the case with the features of Dolores elided in her portrait, perhaps on a symbolic level the photograph is indeed a truthful picture of the mother, as if the effaced image captures more faithfully her inner being after years of eroding abandonment and resentment. While no features of the sitter are mentioned, we learn plenty about the accidents that affect the picture's material support. The little holes that pierce the portrait could be read as a representation of the mother's pain, and a clear enough sign that the mother's fear of black magic was not entirely unfounded. The photograph not only wounds, but is itself wounded, as if it represented in its own skin the *punctum* that Barthes elaborates in *Camera Lucida*.<sup>36</sup> It is not only for this reason that the photograph of the mother brings to mind this most cited text of modern photographic theory. *Camera Lucida* is a text explicitly written around photographic images of the author's mother. In both Rulfo and Barthes, the text grows out of a melancholic moment. In the case of the French critic, the most important photograph of the mother, the one that captures her truth, a picture of his mother-as-child, is purposefully excluded from the illustrated volume as a sign of respect for the utter privacy of remembrance, his intensely personal *punctum*.<sup>37</sup> In Rulfo's textually constructed photograph, the features of the mother are also purposefully omitted. After its brief appearance in the diegesis, the photograph itself will disappear from sight in the whirlwind of events that will befall Juan Preciado.<sup>38</sup>

Not only is the portrait punctured with needle holes but, most significantly, there is a hole in the place of the heart, an ominous harbinger of the desolation Juan Preciado is about to experience first-hand. It would seem that the portrait warms Juan Preciado's heart on his way to Comala, as if the symbolic temperature of the picture has increased the heat of an already hot day. But the heart, or its absence, becomes a symbol

of deprivation. The missing heart can be seen as the negative image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a symbol of Christ's enduring love. There are a couple of references in the novel to this particular Catholic devotion.<sup>39</sup> The Sacred Heart reflects the underlying popular religiosity in *Pedro Páramo* as well as an actual devotional practice that is quite extensive in Central Mexico. As is well known, Rulfo, essentially a non-religious man, was raised in southern Jalisco, a breeding ground for militant Catholicism during the Cristero rebellion in the late 1920s. With this in mind, critics such as Monsiváis and Villoro consider the dysfunctional religiosity of the Catholic Church as the background to the misery that afflicts Comala. For Villoro in particular, "Rulfo se adentra en el totalitarismo de la religión y registra los numerosos remedios de la Iglesia católica como renovadas formas del sufrimiento" [Rulfo delves into the totalitarianism of religion and records the many remedies of the Catholic Church as renewed forms of suffering] (413). Rulfo himself thought that the characters of *Pedro Páramo* have been emptied of their faith: "aunque siguen siendo creyentes, en realidad su fe está deshabitada" [though they are still believers, in truth their faith has been emptied].<sup>40</sup> In this respect, the hole in the mother's portrait summarizes in a fitting image the relentlessly heartless world that the characters of the novel inhabit, from Pedro Páramo's impossible love for Susana San Juan to Susana herself, who lost her mind after her hope of fulfilling her love for Florencio was dashed. Father Rentería, Miguel Páramo, and the crazy Dorotea, each suffering his or her own peculiar drama, live their lives with a central emotional lack.

An important reference to the symbolic weight of the heart in Rulfo's writing can be found in his letters to Clara Aparicio, his fiancée and, later, wife, written between 1944 and 1950, published under the title *Aire de las colinas*. They belong to a crucial period in Rulfo's personal and artistic development, when his first literary endeavors were bearing fruit and just before the publication of his two major works. The letters expose Rulfo under a raw light, producing a picture of a man that is far from the mythic image of detachment he will later embody. They show a young adult musing, with an extreme sense of propriety, over his daily travails, sentimental needs, and existential anguish. The correspondence displays an imaginary plenitude of feeling for which Rulfo constantly yearns, a state of being that *Pedro Páramo* will relentlessly negate. It is not a matter here of uncritically bridging the gap between life and work, biographical event and literary

text, but rather to suggest a common thread that links Rulfo's textual production in his personal letters with his canonical novel. Beyond the circumstantial situations conveyed in the letters, a signifier is repeated time and again (as many critics have pointed out, repetition is a discursive trait central to Rulfo's textual strategies). This signifier is the heart, a reference that throws an indirect but revealing light upon the missing heart in the portrait of Juan Preciado's mother.

In his letters, Rulfo's peculiar, sometimes unsophisticated style transfigures the object of his love. A common device is the use of the third person instead of the second when he refers to Clara. Rulfo often addresses her as "ella," as if even the use of the polite "usted" does not convey enough distance. Sometimes in the same paragraph, Clara is both herself and another person. Writing melancholically from the capital city, Rulfo makes explicit the figure he projects onto Clara, namely, his own mother. In letter 4, dated 10 January 1945, we read:

Clara, mi madre murió hace 15 años; desde entonces, el único parecido que le he encontrado con ella es Clara Aparicio, alguien a quien tu conoces, por lo cual vuelvo a suplicarte le digas me perdone si la quiero como la quiero y lo difícil que es para mí vivir sin ese cariño que tiene ella guardado en su corazón.

Mi madre se llamaba María Vizcaino y estaba llena de bondad, tanta, que su corazón no resistió aquella carga y reventó.

No, no es fácil querer mucho.<sup>41</sup>

[Clara, my mother died 15 years ago. Since then, the only person in whom I find a resemblance to her is Clara Aparicio, someone who you know. That's why I again beg you to tell her to forgive me if I love her the way I love her, and how hard it is for me to live without that affection she harbours in her heart.

My mother was called María Vizcaino and she was full of kindness, so much of it, that her heart did not resist that burden and burst.

No, it is not easy to love a lot.]

As the letters show, the memory of the absent mother and the image of the heart as a yearning for love converge in the figure of Clara.<sup>42</sup> A close reading reveals the heart as a motif that is often evident in Rulfo's emotions and attitudes. It is more than a conventional symbol of affection: the heart acquires a life of its own, becoming an idiosyncratic discursive formation, a cluster of personal signification around which many letters revolve. A passage in letter 72 (21 August 1949) sums up the deep emotions and unconscious resonance that Rulfo attributes to the heart. Addressing Clara as "muy querida madrecita" [very dear little mother], he writes: "Mi mejor apoyo es tu corazón; solamente allí me siento hombre vivo" (284) [My best support is your heart: only there I feel a living man].

The remark is telling, because in the passage about the mother's photograph, in *Pedro Páramo*, Rulfo produces a complete reversal of that statement: rather than the existential comfort the heart provides, Juan Preciado will experience a complete lack of emotional support. As though the image of the mother cannot fulfill any fortifying role, the life of the son will give way, plunging him into the realm of the dead.

The mother's photograph is not only a visual sign but a tactile one. By stressing the wear and tear on its surface, Rulfo highlights the materiality of the picture as well as its power, stemming from the popular belief around magical resemblance. Perhaps there is something obscene in Juan Preciado's remark that his middle finger—literally, "el dedo del corazón"—would fit in the large orifice of the photograph of his mother.<sup>43</sup> As with the little holes that pierce the picture, the reference stresses the materiality of the sign, but this time in order to overcome the gap between visual and tactile perceptions. The act of touching a photograph as if one wanted to get closer to someone always implies a paradoxical situation. Both a sign of desire and its defeat, touching a picture is an attempt to achieve an encounter with the other that is hindered by its very performance.

The perforated photograph belongs to the broader topic of the void in Rulfo's literary universe. The notional ekphrasis employed by the author makes the material support of the photograph an explicitly virtual or empty reality. In general, holes, as well as ruins, connote destruction, emptiness, and deprivation. *Pedro Páramo* offers many examples of these figures of negativity. To begin with, Comala is situated "en la mera boca del infierno" (67) [on the coals of the earth (16)]. As Bradu points out, this void has an ambiguous character, at the same time deadly and teeming

with activity.<sup>44</sup> The same could be said of Comala's own physical reality as described by Damiana Cisneros, who speaks to Juan from beyond the grave: "Este pueblo está lleno de ecos . . . tal parece que estuvieran encerrados en el hueco de las paredes o debajo de las piedras." (101) [This town is filled with echoes. It's like they were trapped behind the walls, or beneath the cobblestones.] Comala is a void in itself: it has been emptied of living beings and, like so many Mexican towns, ravaged by the upheavals of social violence and migration. Sometimes holes are nesting grounds, such as the graves from which the characters in the novel carry out their disembodied conversations. Sometimes they are nested one inside the other, as when Susana San Juan's traumatic descent into the mine shaft yields only a crumbling skull in her hands. Similarly, the broken relation between Donis and her sister is punctuated by the half-open roof of their miserable hut. Rulfo's narrative technique constructs a story full of empty spaces, and the lives of the main protagonists revolve around a central void that becomes impossible to repair. The crevice, the gap, and the hollow space are images with which critics describe the dominant structures of Rulfo's world. For Villoro, who considers that the desert is the location of Rulfo's literary dramas, the Mexican author "trabaja en una zona vacía" [works in an empty zone].<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, Franco and Ortega have found in the void a useful image that ultimately explains the dysfunctional interactions among the moral, social, and spiritual contexts of the novel.<sup>46</sup> The empty spaces that fragment the story are central elements of its narrative structure. Their effects on the reader work by omission. Rulfo himself signalled that he expected the reader to fill those spaces (literally: "llenar esos vacíos").<sup>47</sup> Bradu writes that "Los blancos que separan los fragmentos son esto: puertas abiertas, rellenos de nada: marcan la transición por su negación" [the blanks that divide the fragments are this: open doors, filled with nothing: they mark the transition by its negation].<sup>48</sup>

From a biographical perspective, Rulfo's life and public persona also contain a number of holes. One example is his reluctance to acknowledge that, after his stay at the orphanage "Luis Silva," he had gone to a seminary in Guadalajara, where he stayed between 1933 and 1936.<sup>49</sup> According to Munguía Cárdenas, the reason for Rulfo's silence is that his uncle, David Pérez Rulfo, then a captain in the army and aware that the government was hostile to anything Catholic, made clear to his nephew the need to avoid any reference to his years in the seminary. This silence lasted all

of Rulfo's life. As Antonio Alatorre points out, "Juan se las ingenió para convertir dos años de su vida en un vacío perfecto, en un cero" (48) [Juan managed to turn two years of his life into a perfect void, a zero]. Habra acknowledges the importance of empty spaces in the existential quest of Juan Preciado. At the end of her essay, she interprets that quest in national terms, in a move that has become typical in the critical literature on Rulfo: "A partir de este acercamiento fragmentado a sus orígenes y al autoconocimiento, se puede extrapolar que el texto constituye un comentario existencial sobre la búsqueda continua de la identidad del mexicano." [From this fragmented approach to his origins and self-knowledge, it is possible to extrapolate that the text becomes an existential commentary about the constant search for the Mexican's identity.]<sup>50</sup> While this interpretation is certainly valid, it could be argued that in Rulfo's world, the concept of the void is so fundamental that it ultimately trumps any socio-cultural interpretive frame, as if constructs such as the idea of national identity also fall prey to the all-encompassing emptiness.

To conclude, a significant anecdote shows how Rulfo was drawn to emptiness at an early age. The episode links the condition of being an orphan to the writing of the void.<sup>51</sup> Quoted by Elena Poniatowska, Rulfo mentions that "Mi padre murió cuando tenía yo seis años, mi madre cuando tenía ocho. Cuando mis padres murieron yo sólo hacía puros ceros, puras bolitas en el cuaderno escolar, puros ceros escribía." (51) [My father died when I was six years old, my mother when I was eight. When my parents died I only drew zeroes, only little circles in the school notebook, I wrote only zeroes.] In terms of textual evidence, Rulfo's act multiplies the anxiogenic emptiness that it is meant to overcome. It traces the figure of an unspeakable anguish with a poignant poetry that is at the core of his imaginary world. In this sense, the photograph of the mother—in its stillness, its wounded condition, its empty heart—becomes the emblem *par excellence* that encapsulates Rulfo's most meaningful writing.

## Silvina Ocampo

While it is tempting to interpret the fictional writings of Silvina Ocampo from the perspective of the fantastic, a literary rubric that has proven so

productive in Argentine letters,<sup>52</sup> her work does not easily fit into conventional categories. Even if her prose lacks the metaphysical architecture of Borges, the elliptical constructions of Bioy Casares, or the sinister symmetries of Cortázar, it nonetheless explores in original ways the play of female narrative voices, the shades of uncertainty and ambivalence, and the presence of disquieting objects and events in the everyday. Visual arts and media are recurring topics in her work. Besides her narrative fiction and poetry, Ocampo devoted herself from a young age to drawing and painting, and even studying briefly in Europe under the avant-garde artists Giorgio de Chirico and Fernand Léger.<sup>53</sup>

In this section I analyze Silvina Ocampo's engagement with photography. The two short stories I examine belong to a fruitful period in her career: "Las fotografías," from *La furia y otros cuentos* (1959), and "La revelación," from *Las invitadas* (1961).<sup>54</sup> As with Elizondo, Quiroga, and Rulfo, links between photographic representation and death are paramount in her work. Resorting to ambiguity, as well as to an undercurrent of cruelty and pain that has been recognized as a hallmark of her writing, Ocampo aims to transgress both the social conventions and the representational codes of photography.<sup>55</sup> While Quiroga and Rulfo use the portrait as an emblem, a sign of identification loaded with meaning, Ocampo introduces a different register: the ritualized scene in which a series of family photographs are taken as the preliminary step to assembling that domestic token of collective identity, the photographic album. Disregarding photography as a realist document, she explores some of its dark facets.

For Ocampo, to take a picture is to hinder and interrupt: it is a disquieting event, even an act of violent intervention. In this context it is not purely anecdotal to mention that Ocampo, known for her reserve and shyness, did not like to be photographed. Her personal resistance to photography can be seen in full display in the book *Retratos y autorretratos*, published in 1973 by Argentine photographers Sara Facio and Alicia D'Amico. The volume is an album of the major Latin American writers of the day, from established masters such as Borges, Paz, and Neruda to the emerging writers of the literary "Boom" and others. It features, alongside each portrait, a brief text penned by that author. Silvina's portrait is certainly unusual: dressed in black, she is seated on the floor in a tense posture, her right arm extended toward the camera in a way that her palm covers the visual field of her face, making it unrecognizable.<sup>56</sup> By capturing

what appears to be a sudden gesture, the picture has the feel of a snapshot, a spontaneous statement of rejection, in stark opposition to a carefully posed scene. It is taken from a slightly downward angle, suggesting the power of the photographer over the sitter, who in turn defends herself by blocking the view. As presented to the reader, this portrait of sorts is ambiguous, as if the photographer (and the editor) has colluded in taking, selecting, and publishing an image that does not adhere to the conventions of standard portraiture.

The text that accompanies the picture is a long poem entitled “La cara,” in which Ocampo meditates on the condition (and the awareness) of having a face, an exteriority both essentially hers and nonetheless alien.<sup>57</sup> Subjected to the equivocal images of mirrors and other surfaces, the face both recognizes and misrecognizes itself in its reflections and photographic portraits, to which the poem devotes a series of detailed descriptions. The poetic composition becomes thus a textual album that gathers, in its chain of brief ekphrases, the vicissitudes of a face during a lifetime. At the end of the poem, the face, protagonist of so many reflections, is the site of an antagonism where the self does not quite find itself.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to compare the distance and reticence that both portrait and poem express, with the testimony contained in another book by Sara Facio, in which this photographer continued and updated her project of taking pictures of the Latin American literary establishment. In *Foto de escritor 1963/1973*, Facio acknowledges Ocampo’s interest in matters of photographic technique but reiterates her resistance to being photographed, an attitude that Facio specifically calls “fotofobia” [photophobia].<sup>59</sup>

In “Las fotografías,” photophobia becomes something close to photocide. Ocampo reinterprets the social ritual of the family party and its photographic commemoration in an ironic and even sarcastic light.<sup>60</sup> The plot of “Las fotografías” deals with a double celebration around Adriana, a disabled girl whose fourteenth birthday coincides with her recent release from the hospital after a long stay (the narrator alludes to an accident, while it is also mentioned that the girl has become paralyzed). The day is hot, and after a chaotic photographic session around the young girl, fatality strikes: a guest finds Adriana dead in her basket chair.

“Las fotografías” is a paradigmatic story within the body of Ocampo’s work. It articulates one of her preferred subjects: cruelty in childhood (and by children). Also recurring is the use of a female narrator whose point



**02 FIG 2:** PORTRAIT OF SILVINA OCAMPO BY ALICIA D'AMICO (1963). COURTESY OF ALICIA SANGUINETTI AND THE ESTATE OF ALICIA D'AMICO.

of view is conspicuously biased. This figure (which Matamoro, analyzing Ocampo's work in terms of social class, deems "la nena terrible" [the terrible little girl]) exposes and most often embodies furtive sadism as an undercurrent of the plot. Stories like "Las fotografías," Klingenberg argues, "set up a disjuncture between the 'voice' and the pathos of the events narrated, implying . . . that the narrators are somehow unable to understand fully either the tragic proportions of events or their own complicity in them."<sup>61</sup> The unnamed narrator constantly trashes a party's attendee—"la desgraciada de Humberta"—and jealously craves an introduction to a certain blond young man. Her selfish narrow-mindedness and indifference to the unfolding events perhaps point to a collective state that may explain the tragedy, because Adriana dies in the midst of the party's din, as she is carried from here to there in order to pose for the pictures. No one seems to notice her predicament.

The dominant trope of the story is irony, by which things become their opposite: joy is transformed into sadness, the party turns out to be a funeral. The photographer—whose name is Spirito—is in fact not a life-giving spirit, but an agent that brings about misfortune. The solemn moment that is supposed to commemorate a personal landmark (a birthday, the release from hospital) becomes an oppressive imposition that leads to suffering. Ambiguity is at play, too, because the ultimate cause of Adriana's death is not apparent.

If parties are the occasion of *carpe diem*, photographs have been read as *memento mori*.<sup>62</sup> In Ocampo's version, they become something more than reminders of death, more than registers of that which will never be again while projecting the shadow of its disappearance over the present: photographs actually bring about death. From the outset, photography is seen as a tool that hinders action, since the guests have to wait for the arrival of the photographer before eating from the buffet. Photography is thus a restraint, an impediment to the fulfillment of desire. It stands in the way of the party itself. The photographic session includes nine sittings, and its description accounts for the bulk of the narration. Reiterating the idea of photography as a medium that fragments and interrupts, the taking of photographs is tinged with the idea (and the threat) of cutting and slicing.<sup>63</sup> Spirito is a sort of modern-day Procrustes, as we read in the following dialogue in which everybody gives an opinion as to how best to place Adriana in front of the camera:

– Tendría que ponerse de pie – dijeron los invitados.

La tía objetó:

– Y si los pies salen mal.

– No se aflija – respondió el amable Spirito – , si quedan mal, después se los corto. (220)

[“She should stand up,” the guests said.

An aunt objected: “And if her feet come out wrong?”

“Don’t worry,” responded the friendly Spirito. “If her feet come out wrong I’ll cut them off later.”]<sup>64</sup>

The supreme act of interruption will be, of course, Adriana’s death. The story anticipates the tragic outcome through a number of seemingly trivial references.<sup>65</sup> At the beginning of the party, the narrator mentions that “aquella vocación por la desdicha que yo había descubierto en ella [Adriana] mucho antes del accidente, no se notaba en su rostro” (219) [That vocation for misfortune which I had discovered in her long before the accident was not evident in her face (25)]. The observation colours the profile of the unfortunate Adriana and announces her imminent demise. Even more important, the birds that appear repeatedly in the story function as premonitory signs. As traditional symbols of lightness, flight, and liberty, they serve as a foil to the immobile Adriana, as well as to the fixing power of photography, not unlike what happens in “Las babas del diablo.” Further, the act of photographing the paralyzed girl functions as a rivet, as the fixing of something already fixed. There are three references to birds, and each represents and prefigures the upcoming disaster. In the first one, the children, hungry and impatient for the photographer to arrive, begin a game: “Para hacernos reir, Albina Renato bailó *La muerte del Cisne*. Estudia bailes clásicos, pero bailaba en broma.” (219) [To make us laugh, Albina Renato danced “The Dying Swan.” She studies classical ballet, but danced in a spirit of fun. (26)] The reference to ballet, a highbrow art,

places the story within the context of the upper social class familiar to Ocampo. The piece, whose image “is possibly the most ubiquitous in the history of ballet,” after Camille Saint-Saens’s *Le Carnaval des Animaux*, was made famous by Anna Pavlova at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> The kids, inadvertently but no less poignantly, make fun of a lofty cultural icon.<sup>67</sup> Their joke foreshadows Adriana’s death and perfectly encapsulate that blend of innocence, dark humour, suffering, and intuition of (some) children that constantly surfaces in Ocampo’s literary universe.

The second reference to birds involves Spirito. Amid the noisy and asphyxiating environment, he prepares the sitters for the imminent photographic shot:

Con santa paciencia, Spirito repitió la consabida amenaza:

– Ahora va a salir un pajarito.

Encendió las lámparas y sacó la quinta fotografía, que terminó en un trueno de aplausos. (220–21)

[Patiently, Spirito repeated the well-known command: “Watch the birdie.”

He turned on the lamps and took the fifth photograph, which ended in a thunder of applause. (27)]

The word “amenaza” (literally “threat”) does not quite describe what photographers actually say before pressing the shutter (it is rather a notice or warning). The word “amenaza” adds danger to an act that imposes a degree of control, but which is ultimately harmless. This choice of word again colours the scene with a tone of anticipated pain. The “pajarito que va a salir,” as index of the imminent shot, is, like Spirito himself, a precursor of death. It is possible to read this commonplace as yet again an ironic gesture. The fake bird, trapped in its precarious mechanism, mimics the sitters in their future representation. The bird, typically an animal that is hunted, in this case helps to enable a vicarious hunting.<sup>68</sup> Finally, the third bird appears in a surreptitious but no less meaningful way. The narrator,

bent on speaking evil of her rival Humberta, blames her for Adriana's death. In the last photographic shot, Humberta has made her way to the front row. That makes the narrator lash out at her, making this over-the-top remark: "Si no hubiera sido por esa desgraciada la catástrofe no habría sucedido" (221) [If it had not been for that wretch the catastrophe wouldn't have happened (28)]. Seething with jealousy and rancour, the narrator does not forgive Humberta the fact that it was she who announced to the guests that Adriana—cold, motionless—was dead:

La desgraciada de Humberta, esa aguafiestas, la zarandéo de un brazo y le gritó:

– Estás helada.

Ese pájaro de mal agüero, dijo:

– Está muerta. (222)

[That wretch Humberta, that party-pooper, jostled her by the arm and cried out to her: "You're frozen."

Then that bird of ill omen said: "She's dead." (28)]

From the irrational logic of the narrator, the messenger is not merely a relay, but is directly responsible for the effects of the news she conveys. If Humberta discovers and announces that Adriana is dead, therefore Humberta is the cause of the girl's demise.

This same logic reinforces the magical conception that photographs, in their funereal fixity, are also the cause of the sitter's death, and not only visual signs through which she may live vicariously. Thus, it is understandable that Humberta becomes a "pájaro de mal agüero," similar in kind to the swan's death and the threat issued by Spirito, all harbingers of things to come.<sup>69</sup>

Photography is employed as a magical tool in the story "La revelación." Events are conveyed again by an unreliable narrator, presumably a cousin of the main protagonist (a child called Valentín Brumana). From

the outset, this child is introduced as if he were mentally retarded (again a child is presented as disabled and from the point of view of another child, who shows no mercy, respect, or consideration). The narrator points out how she and other kids found pleasure in teasing poor Valentín, though she also tells of her amazement when she discovered that Valentín “era una suerte de mago” (330) [was a sort of magician (13)], due to his quick intuition, a fact that made her respect him and even fear him.<sup>70</sup>

As many kids do, Valentín fancies himself a talent in several trades, photography among them. The narrator then lends him her camera (though without film). One day, Valentín falls fatally ill. As was the case with Adriana, Valentín lives in a familial environment where he is misunderstood. Both children are essentially orphans: no father or mother or authority figure seems to protect them. From his deathbed, Valentín welcomes a presence in the room that no one else can see. The family deems the child’s attitude somewhat weird but understandable, given his dire situation. Valentín believes to such a degree that someone is in the room that he asks the narrator to photograph him with the invisible being:

Con gran esfuerzo Valentín puso en mis manos la cámara fotográfica que había quedado en su mesa de luz y me pidió que los fotografiara. Indicaba posturas a quien estaba a su lado.

– No, no te sientes así – le decía. . . .

Temblando, enfoqué a Valentín que señalaba con la mano el lugar, más importante que él mismo, un poco a su izquierda, que debía abarcar la fotografía: un lugar vacío. Obedecí. (331–32)

[With a great deal of effort Valentin gave me the camera that had been lying on his night table and asked me to take a picture of them. He showed his companion how to pose.

“No, don’t sit like that,” he said to her. . . .

Trembling, I focused on Valentín, who pointed to the place, more important than he, a little to the left, which should also be in the picture: an empty space. I obeyed. (15)]

After the narrator gets the film developed and receives the prints from the photolab, she discovers among the familiar scenes a blurred picture that she does not remember taking. After clarifying the matter with the lab, she points out:

No fue sino después de un tiempo y de un detallado estudio cuando distinguí, en la famosa fotografía, el cuarto, los muebles, la borrosa cara de Valentín. La figura central, nítida, terriblemente nítida, era la de una mujer cubierta de velos y escapularios, un poco vieja ya y con grandes ojos hambrientos, que resultó ser Pola Negri. (332)

[It was only somewhat later and after careful study that I was able to make out the room, the furniture, and Valentín's blurry face in the famous photograph. The central figure—clear, terribly clear—was that of a woman covered with veils and scapularies, a bit old already and with big hungry eyes, who turned out to be Pola Negri. (16)]

The ending points back to the first sentence of the story, when the narrator says that “hablara o no hablara, la gente advertía en [la mirada de Valentín] la inapelable verdad: era idiota. Solía decir:—Voy a casarme con una estrella.” (330) [Whether he opened his mouth or not, people guessed the inevitable truth from the way he looked: Valentín Bumana was an idiot. He used to say: “I’m going to marry a star.” (13)] Little by little, Valentín’s powers of anticipation are revealed. Here Ocampo plays with the photographic and spiritual connotations of the verb “revelar,” which means both to develop and to reveal. The alleged invisible presence that Valentín managed to see was indeed a ghost. Once the film is developed and a print produced, it shows a figure that could be associated with death itself. The mysterious photograph that Valentín instructed the narrator to

take recalls the famous ghost photographs in fashion in Spiritist circles in the United States and Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup>

The picture of Valentín plays one of the essential roles attributed to photography: to certify an alliance, as if his were a wedding photograph. Even more, the picture can be seen as the virtual marriage to a star that Valentín had desired. The fantastic premise of the story asserts the supernatural projection of desire that the photographic medium, considered a sort of modern magic, makes possible. The name of Pola Negri, an actress famous for her roles as *femme fatale* during the silent movie period in Europe and the United States, and who worked under Ernst Lubitsch,<sup>72</sup> seems too specific given the opaqueness of the story's spatial, temporal, and overall cultural frames of reference. However, the naming of Negri points to an interesting fact about the narrator, the one who looks at and interprets the fuzzy image. From her particular point of view, she is able to identify the figure because of her own knowledge of cinema. It may be the case that this unreliable narrator projects her own desires and fantasies onto the picture, imposing on the blurred image a face drawn from the visual archive of the times. An element of uncertainty is thus added to the topic of pattern recognition and visual analogy that Ocampo explored in other writings.<sup>73</sup>

To conclude, it is worth comparing "La revelación" with Cortázar's "Apocalipsis de Solentiname." While very different in historical and political terms, both texts play with analogous themes and strategies, most notably a supernatural revelation mediated by a photographic technique. Photographs become the fantastic medium by which the bounds of space and time are breached. In both texts, the allegedly indisputable standard material process—shot, exposure, development, enlargement, and printing—is called into question. In both cases, the narrators check with the photo labs to determine whether a (human) mistake is responsible for the sudden appearance of unexpected images. Both stories postulate a realm of existence that surpasses in power and extension the bounds of realism that the photographic medium is supposed to confirm.

## Virgilio Piñera

Quiroga, Rulfo, and Ocampo use the conventions of the family picture to explore the underlying uncanny, fantastic, or supernatural aspects of the medium. For his part, Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera (1912–1979) employs photography to reflect on aspects of human relations that parody and challenge social mores. In the short story “El álbum,” originally published in *Poesía y prosa* (1944) and later included in *Cuentos fríos* (1956), Piñera makes use of the absurdist, parodic, and grotesque perspective that is a hallmark of his work, focusing on the narrative and visual experience of sharing a family album.<sup>74</sup>

The story features a man living in a boarding house who is coaxed by the janitor to buy a ticket to an event later in the afternoon: the public showing of a photographic album, organized by the owner of the house (a broad and imposing woman). It is his first day at the house, and also his first day at his job. Between the insistence of the janitor and the bothersome visits to his room by some of his fellow guests, the man will end up missing an appointment at his place of work. Without much enthusiasm, but hardly showing any resistance, he stays for the show. The photographic exhibition takes place in a dining room arranged as a small amphitheater, where the rich tenants are seated beside the landlady or occupy the first rows, while the poor boarders are seated at the back of the room, hardly able to see the pictures. These shows are famous for their unpredictable length, sometimes extending for weeks and even months. The tenants camp in the amphitheater, where they eat, sleep, and even defecate, while the woman, with her small husband at her side, digresses endlessly about the events featured in the album.<sup>75</sup>

The story showcases the dark humor and masochistic fantasies present in other texts by Piñera. The issue of the body submitted to harsh discipline, and especially physical immobility as a condition of attention and learning, prominent topics of his 1952 novel *La carne de René*, are all present at the main event described in “El álbum.” The spectators are prisoners at the whim of the landlady, who is completely indifferent to her listeners and even to her own husband. The grande dame who organizes the event not only steals the show, but also stills it. One of the guests of the house, who had previously introduced herself to the protagonist,

literally embodies the utterly static condition that the participants of the show endure. She is a nameless character who is known as the “mujer de piedra” [stone woman], a disabled person who uses a cart to move about the boarding house and whose flesh is progressively hardening. The stone woman attests to Piñera’s obsession with flesh considered not as a site of life, feeling, or desire, but as a field of physical resistance and anesthesia.<sup>76</sup>

The stone woman, who sits beside the landlady, will eventually die five months into the performance, foreshadowing the fate of the rest of the audience. Contrary to the stories and critical insights that place the murdering power of the photographic act at the centre of attention, Piñera builds a setting in which photography kills, or at least brackets life, through the collective act of sharing it with others. As with Ocampo, whose texts display a mismatch between the gravity of events and the way they are narrated, in Piñera’s stories “un acontecimiento horrendo es relatado en un tono enteramente inconveniente a ese horror” [a horrible event is narrated in a tone entirely inconvenient to that horror].<sup>77</sup> Literary exploration of the moment of reception where a character shows a photo album to another is, if not unique, rare in the corpus of Latin American letters. There are few cases in which the encounter of a collection of photographs mediates between storyteller and diegetic listener.<sup>78</sup>

In “El álbum,” the well-documented uses of the family album are turned inside out by Piñera.<sup>79</sup> While family albums serve, in the words of Sobchack, as “‘memory banks’ that authenticate self, other, and experience as empirically ‘real’ by virtue of the photograph’s material existence,” in Piñera’s story the album is at the centre of an experience of individual alienation and collective disjunction.<sup>80</sup> The viewing of the family album, with its attending values of peaceful domesticity and attentive recollection of shared moments, is transformed into a public performance where spectators are required to listen to stories in which they have no stake at all. The sentimental connotations of a private collection are turned into a show from which the janitor tries surreptitiously to profit. More than an emotional bond between the audience and the host, who shows some crowning moments of her life, an air of Kafkaesque fatality keeps them bonded. The captive audience grudgingly agrees to be part of the performance. The show is arranged in such a way that not everybody can look at the pictures, as if the community who lives in the boarding house, neatly stratified into classes, reflects society at large.<sup>81</sup> The fact that the poor

souls at the outer edge of the amphitheatre cannot see the photographs corresponds to the role of the actual reader of the text, who cannot see the pictures either, and has to rely on the ekphrastic versions and unreliable memories that the matron deigns to offer.

Hirsch points out that “photography’s social functions are integrally tied to the ideology of the modern family. The family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of those rituals.”<sup>82</sup> In Piñera, the family album as a token of familiarity becomes upset. To begin with, the husband’s more conspicuous role in the story is to carry, in a mockingly ceremonious way, the heavy album into the hall and assent to his wife’s statements. He behaves more as a servant than a partner, and he hardly utters a word during the show. Moreover, no mention of this odd couple’s children or relatives is made in the text. As if to emphasize the dysfunctional nature of family ties, there is no character (not even the married couple) who clearly indicates a stable family structure. The main protagonist and principal narrator lives alone. Minerva, one of the guests with whom the protagonist has exchanged some words, bears in her arms a crying baby and tells the man the story of her husband, who committed suicide in front of her. Later, the landlady will tell a couple of stories that underscore how family life can go awry. Both digressions are triggered by a photograph she is describing. (The first story is about a young woman who is forced by her father to marry a wealthy man so that he may escape bankruptcy. The landlady had advised the young woman not to marry the man. At the end, the father kills himself after learning that his daughter refused to marry. The second story involves the kidnapping, rape, and murder of the seamstress who embroidered the dress of a guest who attended the woman’s wedding). The lurid details triggered by the pictures contradict the standard practice, noted by historians of photography, of assembling and editing family albums according to rules of propriety and ideals of social harmony that affirm above all the preservation of the family unit.<sup>83</sup> As Bourdieu points out, the family album is associated with the act of “solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life.”<sup>84</sup> As a fitting touch of irony, the main photograph described by the woman features her as a bride cutting the cake during her wedding, a moment that she considers “el clímax de aquella inolvidable velada” (78) [the climax of that unforgettable evening]. The photograph of the woman

as a bride, conveniently chosen at random during her performance, is meaningful because it points to a new phase in her life. However, there is a sharp contrast between that momentous rite of passage from her younger years to her present married existence. While the photograph itself seems to glow in the same pure whiteness of her dress, the wedding cake, and the puffs of smoke released by the photographer's magnesium flash, her current life, in a crowded boarding house, with an ineffectual husband and her own overbearing photographic show, conveys a sense of a grey and stale existence. Piñera endows the wedding photograph, a visual sign in which social values and personal achievements coalesce, with an iconic status, but he also questions the traditions of family representation. In the words of Hirsch, who has studied the family album and questioned its ideological underpinnings, Piñera mocks this domestic practice since the album no longer "displays the cohesion of the family [itself]" nor is it "an instrument of its togetherness."<sup>85</sup> The photo session is an egocentric and theatrical affair. The haphazard community that gathers in the dining room is subservient to the will of the owner, whose monologic address embodies her undisputed authority. Her husband and the guests play only subaltern roles.

The Barthesian "adherence of the referent," the indexical status of photographic representation, acquires, in the description elaborated by the woman, an exaggerated importance.<sup>86</sup> Every detail in the picture is an occasion for an extended digression. The landlady cannot stop telling story after story, day after day, about the pictures. Ekphrasis, conveyed to the reader through the voice of a character, acquires here its fullest narrative potential, to the point of parody.

The woman's performance (as well as the text at large) displays the problematic interactions between verbal and visual representations. At the beginning of the story, we learn that the protagonist is getting ready to attend his first day of work. It turns out that his job has some resemblance to the performance of the woman herself. He works as a reader for a blind man, that is, he mediates between the signs on a page and someone else's imagination: his words are intended to make the other see with his or her mind's eye. His job foreshadows the situation of most of the audience (the poorer ones at least) during the performance: they can hear the stories but are unable to see the pictures. In this respect, the protagonist and the

landlady, as well as the author himself, perform a similar operation: rendering in verbal terms something that their audiences cannot see.

Both the spectators of the performance and the readers of the story share an ekphrastic hope according to which the images described will eventually incarnate and show themselves in their full presence. But Piñera, keen on frustrating the reader's expectations, includes a passage that points toward the limitations of signs in general. While describing her wedding photograph, the matron tells a comic story about one of the guests, who walked into a recently painted false door in the hall. The painted door represents a physical limit that is impossible to overcome. This metafictional fold points to the illusion of escaping the bounds of time and space. The woman who bumped her head on the wall found herself in the same situation as those who look at images in search of an entrance, albeit imaginary, to another realm. In its utter verisimilitude, the false door, as Balderston notes, represents art itself and, more generally, representation in general.<sup>87</sup> As any effective *trompe l'œil*, it stands for a limit that cannot be bridged physically while powerfully suggesting the existence of tridimensional space. That is not the only metafictional moment in the story. The matron comments on another element that appears in the wedding picture: a stuffed dog that was a gift from one Miss Dalmau. Whereas the stuffed animal is still around, Miss Dalmau has died a long time ago. The woman then reflects on the strange condition that makes things last longer than their owners. Of course, the album that triggers this reflection is also an object that will outlive its owner, as the text we are reading will outlive its author.

Piñera inverts an assumption common in our current visual culture. The photographic show does not perform “a profusion of images and a withholding of words,”<sup>88</sup> that is, an abundance of pictures paired by a lack of interpretation, but rather the opposite: a sole image, selected at random from a limited archive, triggers a verbal discourse with no end in sight. In this respect, “El álbum” shows parallels with Cortázar’s “Las babas del diablo” not only in its references to entrapment, the nesting of representations, and existential pathos, but especially as it posits the photograph as an anxiogenic device that words cannot assail or exhaust.

At the beginning of her book about family albums, Hirsch asks, “Can words reveal, can they empower us to imagine what’s behind the surface

of the image?"<sup>89</sup> In his fictional account, Piñera seems to answer in the affirmative, but given the absurdist slant of the plot, the assertion is not so straightforward. The story implies a hyperbolic structure in which spectators and readers find themselves trapped. Piñera suggests that penetration of the surface of an image, or retrieval of memories triggered by a picture, comes at a cost: namely, an extended narrative beyond the standard parameters that make a reading or a scene of contemplation tolerable. As in many of his texts, Piñera makes free use of hyperbole, but in a different sense than the one used by magical realists such as García Márquez. There is no magic in Piñera, but rather a cold realism, a willingness not only to shun verisimilitude, but also to twist it and to challenge the good manners and conventions of both social behaviour and literary expression.