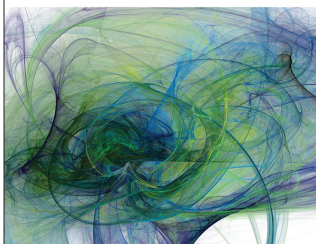


**CREATIVITY AND SCIENCE
IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE LITERATURE**

Between Romanticism and Formalism



Joanna Page

CREATIVITY AND SCIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE LITERATURE: BETWEEN ROMANTICISM AND FORMALISM

Joanna Page

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4 | Machines, Metaphors, and Multiplicity: Creativity Beyond the Individual

For David Porush, “cybernetic fictions” are most properly defined as those taking technology and particularly cybernetics as their theme but that also “focus on the *machinery or technology of their fiction*.”¹ Recent critical studies have begun to look beyond representations of science or the post-human in literature to consider how scientific theories or cybernetics may illuminate the workings of the text itself. Metafiction has become an instance of complexity theory, and the act of reading a demonstration of the relationship between noise and information in information theory. There has been a move away from a focus on how literature might *represent* certain scientific theories towards an understanding of how it *manifests* complex structures, incompleteness, or emergence.² Many texts by Piglia and Cohen, exemplary of a highly reflexive literary tradition in Argentina, lend themselves particularly well to this kind of approach. In exploring here their use of certain metaphors drawn from mathematics and biology, my purpose is to try to understand more accurately what it means to claim that their fiction (or literature more broadly), in addition to representing machines, is itself a machine: in other words, to find the point at which the “machine is not a metaphor” (Deleuze and Guattari).³

The many machines and scientific models constructed in texts by Piglia and Cohen allow them to explore ideas of creativity that are fully depersonalized. The tangled textual hierarchies of *La ciudad ausente* (1992) become open systems, energized by constant flows across the boundaries of the text. Mutation, variation, self-organization, and other biological metaphors are marshalled to provide models for creativity and continual self-renewal in literature. Piglia draws on models of autopoiesis and open systems as a way of thinking about the constant exchanges between the text and its environment in which porous boundaries are paradoxically key to the text's self-definition, preservation, and propagation. Our approach to his work alters significantly when we see the many intertextual references in his fiction, not as hidden messages for the critic to decode, but as the deliberate foregrounding of a method of narrative construction. Intertextuality and reflexivity do not mark the apogee of postmodern narcissism but a manifestation of how meaning is created through resonance and rhizomes. The theory of creativity suggested by the writing machines in *La ciudad ausente* and *Blanco nocturno* (2010) is in many ways a post-Romantic one. It replaces the individual artistic genius with a thoroughly depersonalized art and reworks the old conflict between organic and mechanistic visions of the world to reveal a strikingly new perspective on the relationship between human creativity and the machinic.

Exemplary of Cohen's practice of "realismo inseguro" (unstable realism), the stories of *El fin de lo mismo* (1992) are textual experiments with the kind of provisional and unstable structures that characterize non-equilibrium systems. They demonstrate the extent to which Cohen draws on dissipative structures and theories of chaos and complexity, "no sólo [...] como mito de la época, sino como hipótesis de trabajo para las invenciones de la literatura" (not only [...] as a myth of our times, but as a working hypothesis for the inventions of literature).⁴ In this collection, entropy becomes a privileged metaphor, firstly for the potential elimination of difference in a hyper-mediatized, market-governed society, but also, and more importantly, for literature's role in staging an encounter with radical and irreducible difference. Cohen's use of the entropy metaphor therefore diverges significantly from its apocalyptic deployment in the fiction of Ballard, Dick, Pynchon, or Michael Moorcock. Instead, it becomes a way of thinking – alongside Nietzsche and

Michel Serres – about multiplicity, and the creative power of disorder and difference.

In Piglia's unusual couplings of the organic and the machinic, together with his interest in autopoiesis and open systems, we may detect resonances of Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the text as assemblage. Cohen's interest in dissipative systems and entropy as metaphors for the act of literary creation also draw on Deleuze's understanding of the act of writing as becoming-other or becoming-multiple. These frameworks, as I will show, are of considerable use in probing the construction, in work by Piglia and Cohen, of post-Romantic perspectives on subjectivity and writing.

POST-ROMANTIC WRITING MACHINES / PIGLIA

We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. [...] A book itself is a little machine.—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari⁵

Piglia's theory of literary innovation receives its fullest metafictional development in *La ciudad ausente* (1992). The major part of the novel consists of a series of stories generated by a storytelling machine called Elena who is at the heart of the resistance operating against state control in Buenos Aires. Elena's status as a character is thoroughly enigmatic. She appears at points to be a real machine, complete with nodes and cables, possessing solid physical dimensions – “una forma achatada, octagonal” (a flattened, octagonal form)⁶ – and locked up by the state in a closed museum in an attempt to control the threat she poses to the regime. At other points, we understand that this incarceration does not prevent her from continuing to operate in

a virtual realm, generating stories that circulate among the inhabitants of Buenos Aires. Elena is the wife of the writer Macedonio Fernández, who appears as a character in the novel and invents a machine to immortalize her memory, but she may also be a psychiatric patient hallucinating in one of the city's clinics. Elena's stories make up much of the text of *La ciudad ausente*; they are linked by a paratext, the story of Junior's investigation into the origins of the storytelling machine.

In referring to its own genesis and evolution, *La ciudad ausente* draws explicit analogies with Gödel's incompleteness theorems, the role of genetic reproduction in evolution, and with biological models of self-organization in open systems. These models are brought to resonate with the Formalist concepts of literary evolution so significant to Piglia's approach to literature and criticism, which have already been discussed in relation to *Respiración artificial* in Chapter 1. The narrative machines pictured in both *La ciudad ausente* and *Blanco nocturno* (2010) dismantle distinctions between the organic and the mechanical in a manner that leads us away from the Romantic opposition of these forces and firmly in the direction of Deleuze and Guattari's synthesizing concept of the machinic. Piglia removes the author as the central figure in literary innovation to explore the question of machinic creativity. His texts operate as machines in the Deleuzian sense, forming new and often surprising assemblages with other texts, producing and being produced by a multiplicity of connections.

Tangled hierarchies

The narrative technique with which Piglia experiments in *Prisión perpetua*, putting signs and stories into circulation within and between different narrative hierarchies (as discussed in Chapter 2), is brought to full expression in *La ciudad ausente* in the central trope of the storytelling machine. J. Andrew Brown argues that, in many ways, *La ciudad ausente* is paradigmatic of cybernetic fiction, as defined by Porush, both in its presentation of Elena as a "truly cyborg narrator" and in "its attention to the idea of language as cybernetically organized"; his analysis of the novel highlights the quasi-hypertextual or virtual properties of the text.⁷ Through the storytelling machine, both

a character in the novel and the “author” of the short stories contained within it, Piglia creates a proliferating network of textual nodes and nuclei that defy attempts to separate them into clear narrative hierarchies. Recursion, feedback loops, and tangled hierarchies present a problem for a traditional hermeneutics in search of transcendent meaning. But in Piglia – as I will show – this realization leads not to a cynicism with regard to hermeneutical interpretation but to an understanding of the principles of literary creation and the vast potential in literature for self-renewal.

It is often unclear whether narrative strands and events in *La ciudad ausente* are to be read straightforwardly as part of the novel’s plot, as the hallucinations or memories (real or implanted) of one or more characters, or as transmissions from some external source. Repeated allusions to Gödel and Tarski reinforce the sense of a continual movement up through an infinity of narrative levels, as each level is subject to self-reference and recursion, and the search for an ultimate meaning or metalanguage is always deferred. The narratives of *La ciudad ausente* are caught up in tangled hierarchies akin to Gödelian “strange loops,” in which propositions about the truth-value of logical statements are found within the same system as those statements to which they refer, allowing for the possibility of paradoxical statements such as “this statement is false.” Presented as one of the machine’s stories, Junior discovers in the museum a tableau of the Majestic Hotel room he has just visited, complete with the wardrobe and the bottle of perfume the woman he met there was searching for. These are details from what we had understood to be the paratext of Junior’s search for the truth of the machine, not one of the machine’s own texts. A strange loop confuses the distinction between the investigating subject and the object of the investigation.⁸

Motifs from the machine’s stories often recur in this way in the story of Junior’s investigation into the machine. In a more complex example, the first narrator introduces Junior as the son of Mister Mac Kensey, an English station master whose wife left with his daughter to go and live in Barcelona; later, Junior hears a story that is structurally suspiciously similar (told by the storytelling machine in the museum, here a second-order narrator) but this time about Russo, in which Ríos (a third-order narrator) mentions a mechanical bird kept in the house of an English station master called McKinley,

whose wife had also left him. The recurrence, with variation, of narrative nuclei in this way gives weight to the notion that the storytelling machine might actually be the narrator of the entire text, as well as a lower-order narrator. This interpretation is in fact suggested by Piglia himself in an interview, when he proposes that Junior may be just another of the fictional characters invented by the storytelling machine, conceived so that he could come and save her.⁹

Gödel and the creative potential of the undecidable

The fact that the different orders of narration in the novel cannot logically be separated causes a particular difficulty in interpretation and encourages the reader to engage in a fruitless search for an ever-higher order of narration, a more powerful language or metanarrative, which might contain and comment on the seepages between lower-level orders. Nevertheless, Gödel and Tarski – whose undefinability theorem similarly states that, in a given arithmetic system, the truth of that arithmetic cannot be defined within that same system – are not primarily cited in *La ciudad ausente* as evidence for the fallibility of human logic and the failure of the rationalist enterprise but for the creative possibilities that seem to be suggested by the discovery of the limitations of the formalist project in mathematics.

In his account of how the storytelling machine in *La ciudad ausente* came into being, Russo points to the importance of the metaphysical thought of the writer Macedonio Fernández. For Macedonio, “Lo que no es define el universo igual que el ser” (what does not exist defines the universe as much as what does exist).¹⁰ Macedonio’s interest in possible worlds becomes a key principle in the machine’s construction. As Russo explains,

Macedonio colocaba lo posible en la esencia del mundo. Por eso comenzamos discutiendo las hipótesis de Gödel. Ningún sistema formal puede afirmar su propia coherencia. Partimos de ahí, la realidad virtual, los mundos posibles. El teorema de Gödel y el tratado de Alfred Tarski sobre los bordes del universo, el sentido del límite.¹¹

Macedonio planted the possible within the world's very essence. For that reason we began to discuss Gödel's hypotheses. No formal system can prove its own consistency. That was our starting point, virtual reality, possible worlds. Gödel's theorem and Alfred Tarski's treatise on the boundaries of the universe, the concept of limit.

There is no direct link, in mathematical or philosophical terms, between Gödel's theorem and virtual reality or possible worlds. Piglia draws on Gödel's findings obliquely to suggest that the limitations of formal logic give rise to new possible orders, in which, as for Macedonio, fantasy and reality are not opposed to each other; it is the discovery of the limit of axiomatic logic that allows us to imagine other worlds that are not governed by that logic or to posit realms of existence in which truth is undecidable. The association Piglia establishes between Gödelian logic and the invention of fiction and new worlds would have been even more explicit if he had carried through the original plan of giving Gödel's name to the creator of the storytelling machine in the novel.¹²

Piglia's (mis)reading of Gödel bears a resemblance to Lacan's. For Lacan, the undecidability of statements that cannot be reduced to axiomatic truth, and open up a faultline within formal logic, can be identified with the Real.¹³ As Guillermo Martínez explains, an analogy is drawn in Lacan's work between the discourse that emerges from analysis and a logical system that is found to have "fallas" (flaws) or "aberturas" (gaps, fissures): it is these that provide a point of access to the unconscious and should therefore constitute the analyst's focus.¹⁴ This process, by which a failing in logic exposes a truth that cannot otherwise be expressed, is perhaps most clearly seen in Piglia's "La loca y el relato del crimen." Renzi applies the skills of a linguist to dissect the transcript of the madwoman's testimony, stripping away the repeated forms to discover "Lo que no entra en ese orden, lo que no se puede clasificar, lo que sobra, el desperdicio" (what doesn't fit in the scheme, what cannot be classified, what is left over, redundant).¹⁵ In what cannot be categorized, cannot be communicated, lies the truth about the identity of

Larry's murderer and points to corruption at the heart of the system. In best post-structuralist manner, the redundant, or that which cannot be proved or categorized, threatens the integrity of the whole: it cracks open the system of the text.

Self-reference, open systems, autopoiesis

These fissures in logical systems, opened up in *La ciudad ausente* by means of self-reference, may destroy any illusion of coherence; however, they are also crucial to the renewal and the self-transforming potential of the literary text. The proof of Gödel's incompleteness theorem rests on the possibility of a statement that refers to itself but whose truth-value is undecidable within the terms of the system. Similarly, in Piglia, self-reference demonstrates the incomplete, and therefore open and dynamic, nature of the system. Junior discovers that the state wants to neutralize the machine and take it out of circulation, as:

Algo estaba fuera de control. Se había filtrado una serie de datos inesperados, como si los archivos estuvieran abiertos. [...] Habían empezado a entrar datos sobre el Museo y sobre la construcción. Estaba diciendo algo sobre su propio estado. [...] Filtraba datos reales [...].¹⁶

Something was out of control. A series of unexpected facts had leaked in, as if the archives were open. [...] Details about the Museum and its construction had started entering the loop. The machine was saying something about its own state. [...] Real data was seeping in [...].

Self-reference here is not, therefore, a kind of narcissism, but the point at which reality seeps into the text, at which it cannot remain hermetically sealed off from the real world. As Ana explains to Junior, "Ha empezado a hablar de sí misma. Por eso la quieren parar. No se trata de una máquina, sino de un organismo más complejo" (it has begun to speak about itself.

That's why they want to stop her. This isn't a machine, but a more complex organism).¹⁷ Reflexivity here is inextricably associated with the machine's nature as an open system, engaging in exchanges with external reality across its boundaries: "Los hechos se incorporaban directamente, ya no era un sistema cerrado, tramaba datos reales" (events were being incorporated directly, it was not a closed system anymore, reality was getting into the plots).¹⁸ Piglia's use of Gödel's theorem throws light on his paradoxical claim that self-reference is one of the greatest expressions of literature's imbrication with the social:¹⁹ (very roughly) following Gödel, it is the point at which the system demonstrates its incompleteness and its interactions with other systems from which it had been assumed to be independent.

Another metaphor suggested in *La ciudad ausente* for this interdependence is drawn from biology rather than mathematics. First theorized by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, autopoiesis refers to the processes through which a living cell or organism produces the elements it needs to maintain its bounded structure. It therefore differs from an "allopoietic" system, which uses elements to create something other than itself. As N. Katherine Hayles observes in her study of the implications of their work for the field of cybernetics, the autonomy ascribed to the organism in the autopoietic model is held in tension with "structural coupling," which describes the interaction of that organism with its environment.²⁰ Varela would go on to place greater emphasis on that interaction in his theory of "enaction," which, while remaining faithful to the principles of autopoiesis, posits "the active engagement of an organism with the environment as the cornerstone of the organism's development."²¹ The storytelling machine of *La ciudad ausente* mimics these processes, maintaining and reproducing itself by means of a constant exchange of matter and energy across its boundaries, assimilating other fictions and reality itself into its own stories. Piglia's texts, systems, and models invariably demonstrate the dynamic self-reference that Ira Livingston identifies as underlying both biological autopoiesis and the operations of the reflexive text, in which "the point at which the text closes back on itself is also where it connects with everything that sustains it."²²

The autopoietic system becomes a useful model for thinking about the relationship in art between self-reference and openness to other systems, two

orientations that are more often seen as incompatible, the first charged with narcissism or aesthetic separatism. In his account of self-organizing processes in nature, Erich Jantsch explains clearly how the metabolic exchanges that take place between an organism and its environment are “self-referential” in the sense that an autopoietic system “is primarily geared to self-renewal.”²³ Intertextuality becomes just the most clearly visible example of the way in which the text is engaged in a complex and continually evolving network of relations with everything that it is not, relating productively with its environment as part of the process of self-renewal. The wealth of intertextual references in *La ciudad ausente* – to Macedonio Fernández, Lugones, Faulkner, Dante, Poe, and several other authors – defines the novel as an open system, one that draws energy from transactions taking place across its borders, feeding on pre-existing texts, which are then subjected to a process of transformation. Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* provide several of the motifs circulating in the novel, and there is mention of the names of many of Joyce’s characters, usually slightly distorted or misspelled, Buck Mulligan appearing here as “Bob Mulligan” and Anna Livia Plurabelle sometimes referred to as “Ana Lidia.”²⁴ Such richness in intertextuality provides fertile hunting-ground for the literary critic, duped into uncovering each allusion and treating it as a clue to a hidden story or theme, as if the novel’s meaning could be rendered through detective investigations of this kind.

This approach is also encouraged by the repetition of narrative motifs. The experience gained by the machine through composing different stories means that they do not simply proliferate in a dispersed manner, each one moving further away from the original nucleus. In fact, we are told that the “key” to understanding the machine’s workings is that it learns as it narrates, conscious of the stories it has already told, and that “quizá termine por construirles una trama común” (perhaps it will end up constructing a common plot for them).²⁵ However, the recurring elements and motifs are presented here as materials for future stories, not clues to some overarching narrative already in existence. This is an important distinction. What is revealed therefore is not a hidden meaning that may be accessed through *interpretation* but a principle of *construction*. This emphasis on defining the text according to how it has been constructed rather than how it might be

interpreted is precisely that which interests Piglia most in the Formalist approaches of Shklovsky and Eichenbaum.²⁶

If – as Jameson maintains – for a Formalist critic a work “speaks only of its own coming into being, of its own construction” and of the “formal problems” it attempts to resolve,²⁷ this description is of clear relevance to *La ciudad ausente*. The novel is most effectively read, not as a representation of cybernetic society or even as an exercise in anti-totalitarian textual politics, but as a solution to a formal problem: how to encapsulate in a single, linear form the idea of iterability and endless mutation, or how to construct a text with multiple entry points. We become alert to the manner in which the text is created from fragments of other texts, by means of operations of appropriation, transposition, and transformation. Like Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights*, mentioned in the novel, what holds these micro-stories together is obviously an artifice, a formal device. The subject of *La ciudad ausente* is the act of storytelling, and this produces what Tzvetan Todorov in his analysis of the *Arabian Nights* calls an “a-psychologism,” in which narrative does not exist to illustrate character but characters exist to bring forth narratives.²⁸

Our approach to the novel – and to Piglia’s work in general – changes radically when we view the many intertextual references in his fiction, not as hidden messages for the critic to decode, but as the deliberate foregrounding of a method of narrative construction. This approach is the one Piglia models in his own critical work, as can be appreciated, for example, in his analysis of the role of Homer’s *Odyssey* in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In spite of the best efforts of Jungian critics to treat the mythical references as symbols to be interpreted, Piglia insists that the role played by the *Odyssey* in Joyce’s novel is really as a formal device that allows him to order his proliferating material, a way to lend some coherence to the plot of the novel. It should be understood as “una etapa necesaria en la construcción de la obra, como el molde de hierro de una escultura que desaparece, retirado o escondido por el material” (a necessary stage in the construction of the work, like the iron mould of a sculpture that disappears, removed or hidden by the material).²⁹

Blanco nocturno and the dream-text: from interpretation to construction

This notion of literary construction emerges even more explicitly in *Blanco nocturno*. At the heart of the novel, a rather unconventional twist on the detective genre, we find another writing machine. During his investigation of a murder, the journalist Renzi encounters an Arltian figure of the mad inventor, Luca Belladonna, who locks himself away in an old car factory, in the middle of nowhere, to pursue a crazed quest to construct a different kind of machine. The walls of the factory are covered with words and phrases, underlined or circled, linked together with arrows and diagrams. Every morning, Luca combines and recombines the images and phrases of his dreams with those from previous nights, treating them as if they were fragments of a single narrative, until the pieces fit together naturally. A laboratory-like room houses the machine proper, a cylinder with little boards on which Luca writes words and draws images related to his dreams. A series of nickel-plated cogs move the plates into different positions to create new possibilities for relations between the different phrases, and therefore new possible meanings. It is, in effect, a writing machine, functioning in a very similar way to the storytelling machine of *La ciudad ausente*, which subjects initial narrative nuclei to processes of transformation, creating ever-new versions.

Explicitly, here, these nuclei derive from Jungian archetypes. As Luca explains, *Man and His Symbols* (1964) expounds Jung's theory that the content of dreams, studied systematically, can be seen to follow a certain order. Although they evoke different scenes and images every night, dreams nevertheless correspond to a "modelo común" (common model) that orchestrates the emergence, disappearance, and recurrence of certain contents over time, "como si fuera un solo relato que se iba armando en fragmentos discontinuos" (as if it were a single story gradually assembled from discontinuous fragments).³⁰ There is a clear echo here of the "trama común" (common plot) that links the stories of the machine in *La ciudad ausente*. In the same way, while evoking theories of interpretation and analytical approaches to the dream/text, Piglia is not positing the existence of a hidden truth that

might “explain” the text but a principle of textual construction that points to the existence of narrative archetypes. Luca’s machine does not reveal past traumas or analyze concealed truths: he believes, instead, that it may be used to predict the future.

The presence of Jung’s theories in Piglia’s novels does not, ultimately, endorse a “depth psychology” approach to understanding the meaning of texts. Dreams and symbols do not await an analyst’s interpretation, symptomatic of deeper drives or hidden narratives. Instead, they become materials for construction. Again, Piglia’s interest in Jungian archetypes takes us back to Russian Formalism. Piglia’s narrative nuclei function very much like the archetypal tales identified by structural anthropologists and Formalist literary critics such as Vladimir Propp: the original stories from which others are generated, in all their variations. Both the machine in *La ciudad ausente* and the one in *Nocturno blanco* produce multiple variations in this way, drawing on a stock of common narrative figures. Like Propp, who discovered thirty-one basic narrative units in his analysis of Russian folktales,³¹ Piglia is also interested in the primordial narrative elements and functions that underpin the construction of stories. Indeed, he goes much further than Propp, reducing them to just two: “en el fondo todos los relatos cuentan una investigación o cuentan un viaje” (essentially, all stories narrate an investigation or a journey).³²

The operation of the machines in *La ciudad ausente* and *Blanco nocturno*, drawing on pre-existing forms and shuffling narrative elements to produce new patterns and series, establish literary creativity very much as an *ars combinatoria*. As Ítalo Calvino suggests in his imaginative recreation of the evolution of storytelling, from just a few “prefabricated elements,” such as Propp’s narrative functions, “unlimited combinations, permutations, transformations” become possible.³³ The machines do not simply run preset programs but have a creative power of their own. Fed first with the story “William Wilson,” the machine in *La ciudad ausente* captures the form of Poe’s narrative but alters the content. Every story in Piglia generates a potentially infinite number of others. Unlike the Freudian unconscious, a repository of repressed desires, Jung’s account of the unconscious emphasizes its creative capacity, with the collective unconscious acting as a reservoir

of archetypes, which are then processed in different ways by the personal unconscious. Luca believes that his recent ability to construct completely original objects directly from his imagination derives from the operation in his dreams of “cierta fuerza *suprapersonal*” (a certain *supraindividual* force) that “interfería activamente en forma creativa y llevaba la dirección de un designio secreto” (actively interfered, in a creative manner, and put a secret plan into motion).³⁴

Inventions of all kinds abound in *La ciudad ausente*, but they do not emerge from nothing: Piglia rejects the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*. Russo shows Junior a pocket watch that transforms itself at the touch of a button into a tiny chess board: it is the first chess-playing machine to be made in Argentina, using the watch’s microscopic cogs and wheels to program the game and its hours for memory. He tells him: “Inventar una máquina es fácil, si usted puede modificar las piezas de un mecanismo anterior. Las posibilidades de convertir en otra cosa lo que ya existe son infinitas. No podría hacer algo de la nada” (Inventing a machine is easy, if you can modify the parts of a previous mechanism. The possibilities of converting one thing into another are infinite. I couldn’t make something from nothing).³⁵ The storytelling machine is similarly pragmatic in its recyclings and transformations: “Se las arregla como puede. Usa lo que hay y lo que parece perdido lo hace volver transformado en otra cosa. Así es la vida” (she gets by in whatever way she can. She uses what is there and what seems lost she brings back, transformed into something else. That’s how life is).³⁶

Genetic recombination and the role of chance

Piglia draws significantly on the role of genetic reproduction in evolution as a metaphor for the creative recombinations of literature. The machine, once programmed with “un conjunto variable de núcleos narrativos” (a variable set of narrative nuclei)³⁷ produces an endless series of variations, stories that are manifestly related to the original but have been transformed in some manner. As Dr. Arana declares in the novel, “El código genético y el código verbal presentan las mismas características” (the genetic code and the linguistic code share the same features).³⁸ Like the myriad permutations of just

four nucleotides that make up the DNA of every living organism, the meanings that can be generated from the words and structures of language are for practical purposes inexhaustible. As a model of creativity, the language of genetics cuts up the flows and rivers of Romantic inspiration into a series of discrete entities that are endlessly copied and recombined in new ways. Piglia's storytelling machine works rather like the tarot cards in Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), in which a finite number of figures can be combined in almost infinite ways, each taking on a different meaning when placed in a different order or within a different constellation, and forming in this way "a machine for constructing stories."³⁹ Calvino argues that the "triumph of historical continuity and biological continuity" in the nineteenth century (Hegel and Darwin) has been replaced by the knowledge that "the endless variety of living forms can be reduced to the combination of certain finite quantities" in the form of the acids and bases of DNA.⁴⁰ This vision permeates our thought and our understanding of the world, such that "the process going on today is the triumph of discontinuity, divisibility, and combination over all that is flux."⁴¹

In biology, it is an imperfection in the transcription of the genetic code that allows for the mutations that drive evolution; similarly, Piglia's stories evolve and thrive precisely because of their minute deviations from other texts in the series and their encounters with chance. Central to the concept of creativity in *La ciudad ausente* is the idea of a crucial error in translating or transforming texts that allows variation to occur. The text identified by Junior as "la frase inicial de la serie" (the initial phrase in the series) is a brief biographical sketch of Stephen Stevenson taken from "Encuentro en Saint-Nazaire," with some sentences paraphrased and others reproduced verbatim.⁴² As Junior reads further, it transpires that this narrative has undergone a series of transformations, as the narrator is invited, not as a writer to a *Maison des écrivains* in France, but as a doctor to an *estancia* owned by a scientific community in Argentina. He reflects that "Las imprecisiones formaban parte de la construcción de la historia. No se podía ajustar a un tiempo fijo y el espacio era indeciso y a la vez detallado con precisión minuciosa" (the imprecisions formed part of the story's construction. It could not be fitted into a fixed time and its space was undecided and, at the same

time, detailed with meticulous precision).⁴³ Many of Piglia's stories hinge on a tiny but decisive error that can change an entire destiny: we are introduced in the novel, for example, to a Japanese soldier who, determined to carry out his duty and convinced that the war was eternal, obediently remained in the jungle to fight the American forces for thirty years. In this case too, "salvo por un dato casi microscópico (la firma de paz en un papel), todo su universo era real" (with the exception of one almost microscopic detail, the signing of a peace treaty on a piece of paper, his whole universe was real).⁴⁴

This focus on the role played by chance and microscopic variation in evolution again inspires a method of composition: minute alterations to the narrative premises of one story lead to the construction of another. Piglia's understanding of evolution always emphasizes the contingent and the accidental, and therefore also resonates with the Foucauldian genealogical approach that, far from attempting to "restore an unbroken continuity" between past and present, highlights instead "the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations" that shape existence.⁴⁵ The emphasis on chance and error also recalls the importance of these in Formalist accounts of literary evolution. In Tynyanov's words, what critics label as "*an exception to the system, a mistake*" often turns out to be "*a dislocation of the system*"; the "opposing constructive principle," which leads to innovation, "takes shape from '*chance*' results and '*chance*' exceptions and errors."⁴⁶

In the figure of Russo in *La ciudad ausente*, the role of inventor-scientist and storyteller-artist are conflated, much in the same way as they are in Canterel, the protagonist of Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914), in which increasingly complex machines provoke the telling of ever-more elaborate tales. Roussel's mechanistic compositional technique, which makes use of puns as formal constraints, is criticized by Porush for its stultifying effect, "designed to produce a literature that recaptures the merely haphazard elements of language within a larger structure of logic, an artistic positivism that leaves nothing to chance."⁴⁷ Drawing on twentieth-century advances in genetic biology, Piglia's text-as-machine is designed to operate in a very different manner: order is not imposed from above but emerges from a complex sequence of chance events and a form of collective memory.

Berg comments perceptively on Piglia's construction of newness, not as rupture, but as the rediscovery of distant filiations, or the unprogrammed forging of connections between hitherto unrelated elements:

La novedad ya no debería ser entendida como lo hacían las vanguardias históricas de principios de nuestro siglo, es decir como una ruptura que borra las huellas del pasado, sino como la introducción de paradojas en los discursos existentes. Una política vanguardista contemporánea podría ser ésta: encontrar paradojas, alianzas o parentescos allí donde no se ven, introducirlos allí donde no están.⁴⁸

Novelty should no longer be understood as it was by the historical avant-gardes of the beginning of our [twentieth] century, as a rupture that erases the traces of the past, but as the introduction of paradoxes in existing discourses. A contemporary avant-garde approach could be as follows: to find paradoxes, alliances or relations of kinship that are not visible, to introduce them if they do not exist.

Forging new alliances, tracing oblique and distant family relationships, re-cycling and refunctioning existing forms: this is not only the language of biological evolution but also that of Formalism. It is in this respect that *La ciudad ausente*, apparently so different in style and focus, can be read as a direct continuation of *Respiración artificial* (see Chapter 1). Piglia finds in Borges the model of a writer who is always a reader, reading against other writers, betraying what he reads to appropriate it for his own ends. In Borges's "inclinación deliberada a leer mal, a leer fuera de lugar, a relacionar series imposibles" (deliberate inclination to read badly, to read out of context, to relate impossible series together)⁴⁹ lies a notion of creativity that is fundamental to Piglia's own work.

The machinic, beyond organic vs. mechanical

As a theory of creativity, Piglia's understanding of the expressive power of genetic recombination is decidedly post-Romantic. So, too, is his overhaul of the old conflict between organic and mechanistic visions of the world, proposing in its place a series of affinities between human creativity and the machinic. Piglia does not respect the distinctions between the organic and the mechanical that underpin Coleridge's theory of aesthetics and much of the Romantic rupture with Classical artistry. For Coleridge, the role of the imagination is to bring multiplicity into unity, forming – as in nature – a self-evolving whole that is greater than its parts; herein lies the contrast between “imagination” and “fancy,” which can only employ an “aggregative power,”⁵⁰ bringing together existing materials in different combinations, much like a mechanical apparatus, which can be dismantled and reassembled. Edward Young had drawn a similar distinction between the natural and the mechanical in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* of 1759:

An *Original* may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it *grows*, it is not *made*: *Imitations* are often a sort of *Manufacture* wrought up by those *Mechanics, Art, and Labour*, out of pre-existent materials not their own.⁵¹

By contrast, in Piglia's machines, recombination emerges as the primary creative operation. Moreover, the renewed power of literature derives from the consistent commingling and co-functioning of the organic and the mechanical in his work. The machines of *La ciudad ausente* and *Blanco nocturno* are strikingly life-like, or even fused in some way with human memory and consciousness, like Russo's mechanical bird, which appears to breathe, or the tiny boards of Luca's machine, made to move “*como si aleteara un pájaro*” (as if a bird was flapping its wings).⁵² Conversely, human creativity is pictured as a system, like Elena, “*de tubos y de cables*” (of tubes and cables),⁵³ in which newness is produced through a network of relations, both logical and metaphorical, and in which – as Croce says in *Blanco nocturno* – “*Nada vale por sí*

mismo, todo vale en relación con otra ecuación que no conocemos” (nothing means anything in itself, everything means something in relation to another equation we don’t know).⁵⁴

As Martínez points out, at the heart of the formalist quest to demonstrate that mathematics followed a finite system of axioms – definitively shown to be incorrect by Gödel – was the attempt to prove that all mathematical demonstration could be carried out mechanically.⁵⁵ Gödel’s theorem has often been used to “prove” that machines will never be able to match human intelligence. Roger Penrose, for example, draws on Gödel in his argument that human consciousness is non-algorithmic and cannot therefore be reduced to the operations of a computer.⁵⁶ Human intelligence is distinguished by the ability to move fairly effortlessly between a hierarchy of systems – moving from speaking about a subject to speaking about the language used in speaking about that subject, for example – whereas artificial intelligence is limited to the correct execution of a specific set of operations within a system. Douglas Hofstadter observes that “the thought processes involved in doing mathematics, just like those in other areas, involve ‘tangled hierarchies’ in which thoughts on one level can affect thoughts on any other level. Levels are not cleanly separated, as the formalist version of what mathematics is would have one believe.”⁵⁷

In Piglia, the capacity for reflexivity and the ability to transcend mechanical rules in order to create something new is associated as much with *machinic* intelligence as the human variety. Calvino imagines something very similar when he posits the idea that a machine could be used to produce literature, and not just of a logical, classicist variety. Given recent advances in cybernetics towards producing machines capable of learning, he suggests that “nothing prevents us from foreseeing a literature-machine that at a certain point feels unsatisfied with its own traditionalism and starts to propose new ways of writing, turning its own codes completely upside down.”⁵⁸ We have come full circle: instead of a Romantic rebellion of the artist against mechanization, we can now imagine a machine that satisfies that same human need to shake up the system. The storytelling machine of *La ciudad ausente* operates very much in this manner, performing acts of resistance to

authoritarian control and defying literary convention in its radical reworking of divisions between the real and the virtual.

The machine in *Blanco nocturno* is in fact described as being *more* inventive than nature. In Luca's account of the objects he has created, he differentiates clearly between the products of machines and the products of nature, insisting on the originality of the first and the imitative, second-hand quality of the second. Nature's products are not really *products* as such, but "una réplica natural de objetos anteriores que se reproducen igual una y otra vez. Un campo de trigo es un campo de trigo" (a natural replica of previous objects that are reproduced identically again and again. A wheat field is a wheat field).⁵⁹ By contrast, machines are "instrumentos muy delicados; sirven para realizar nuevos objetos inesperados, más y más complejos" (very delicate instruments; they are used to make new and unexpected objects, of greater and greater complexity).⁶⁰ Unlike nature, machines can produce new objects for which there is no previous model available simply to copy.

Although Piglia does not use a specifically Deleuzian lexicon, his machines are strikingly homologous to Deleuze's, for whom "machinic [...] does not mean either mechanical or organic."⁶¹ Claire Colebrook gives a succinct summary of the difference between the mechanical and the machinic in Deleuze and Guattari's work: "A mechanism is a self-enclosed movement that merely ticks over, never transforming or producing itself. A machinic becoming makes a connection with what is not itself in order to transform and maximise itself."⁶² For Deleuze and Guattari, both living organisms and technological apparatuses can function as machines if they engage in processes of becoming through being connected with other machines in ever-evolving assemblages. Those connections produce further connections, none of which are organized by any transcendent figure. Piglia's texts are machinic in Deleuze and Guattari's sense, functioning as an assemblage together with other assemblages, forming and being formed by multiple connections that are often creative in their unpredictability.

A dream no longer in need of its dreamer

In the same way that Piglia's theory of literary creativity rescues recombination and machinic production from their denigration at the hands of the Romantics, his notion of authorship thoroughly undermines Romantic notions of the individual genius. *La ciudad ausente* creates a number of explicit intertextual links with Foucault's famous essay "What is an Author?" of 1969. One of the most obvious of these is Piglia's use of the figure of Scheherazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*, who postpones death through the telling of stories and is also cited by Foucault in his essay. Foucault's central argument is that the author in modernity has become a function "by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."⁶³ Our critical emphasis on the author as the originator of meaning in a text, "as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention," effectively reduces its possible meanings and therefore contains what Foucault refers to as "the great danger with which fiction threatens our world," which is the possibility of transgressive discourses and the proliferation of meanings.⁶⁴ Literature, like Scheherazade's narratives, can "ward off death,"⁶⁵ but only by metaphorically killing off its author and becoming anonymous and infinitely iterable.

The Romantic figure of the artist-genius places limits on the text's possible meanings, its capacity to elude or transform an original set of premises, and therefore its potential resistance to orthodoxy. The machinic qualities of Piglia's storytelling cyborg in *La ciudad ausente* are precisely those that open up the free circulation of fiction. As we saw in Chapter 2, the correspondence between creativity and the depersonalization of literature in Piglia's work complicates the more conventional relationship established in apocalyptic (Romantic) science fiction between machines and dehumanization. Idelber Avelar, in his very insightful reading of the novel, argues that the storytelling machine

metaphorizes the possibility of creating new stories, but "new" and "create" need to be understood here in a most antiromantic sense. The machine handles combinations, plagiarism,

apocryphal narratives, and disinteriorized affects. Piglia depersonalizes mourning and desubjectivizes affect.⁶⁶

This depersonalization unties the text from its author and frees it to circulate in a virtual space.

In “Las ruinas circulares,” Borges imagines a man who dreams up another but who discovers himself in turn to be created through another man’s dream. Piglia severs these chains of ontological dependency and creates a dream no longer in need of its dreamer, which is free to pursue multiple forms of embodiment. The machine’s peculiar power in *La ciudad ausente* rests on an ability to insert her stories into the consciousness of her readers and listeners to the extent that they merge with those individual pasts and become indistinguishable from them: “ella produce historias, indefinidamente, relatos convertidos en recuerdos invisibles que todos piensan que son propios” (she produces stories, indefinitely, narratives that become invisible memories that everyone thinks are their own).⁶⁷ Iterability and anonymity, rather than the individual subjectivity of the author, become forces of radical creativity and unexpected forms of resistance against the discourses of authoritarianism.

That this depersonalization is much more readily associated with the inhuman and the workings of oppression than it is with creativity and freedom is evidence of the persistent legacy of Romantic notions of authorship in our own era. Susan Stewart refers to “the terror of the doll,” which, if animated, “would only cause the obliteration of the subject – the inhuman spectacle of a dream no longer in need of its dreamer.”⁶⁸ M. H. Abrams laments the “systematic dehumanizing” of literature that characterizes the “Age of Reading,” such that “the text forfeits its status as a purposeful utterance about human beings and human concerns, and even its individuality, becoming simply an episode in an all-encompassing textuality.” In this dissolving of the text, “the relations between authors which had traditionally been known as ‘influence’ are depersonalized into ‘intertextuality,’ a reverberation between ownerless sequences of signs.”⁶⁹

The much more positive relationship established between depersonalization and creativity in Piglia’s work bears distinct traces of Formalist

approaches, which were of course highly influential in structuralist and post-structuralist thought. In *Respiración artificial*, as we saw in Chapter 1, Piglia draws on the Formalist understanding of literary evolution as a discontinuous, dialectical process that skips generations, takes up oblique or broken lines, and creates unexpected alliances. In *La ciudad ausente*, he takes a step further in imagining innovation and renewal in literature as the Formalist “dialectic play of devices”⁷⁰ that transcends the individual altogether. The Formalists set themselves the task of accounting for literary evolution “outside individual personality” as Boris M. Eichenbaum put it.⁷¹ Victor Erlich explains that the literary genius “was reduced to the status of an agent of impersonal forces,” citing Shklovsky’s representation of the creator as “simply the geometrical point of intersection of forces operative outside of him.”⁷²

J. Andrew Brown holds back from categorizing *La ciudad ausente* as a “cybernetic fiction” for the reason that, although Junior becomes a virtual reader of sorts, the novel as a whole “is still a traditional book; it does not allow the actual reader options like a hypertext narrative would, nor does it create for him or her a virtual reality.”⁷³ It is of course true that the novel takes the form of a consecutive series of printed pages and therefore does not correspond to the strictest definition of the term “cybernetic fiction.” However, as we saw in Chapter 2, evident in Piglia’s work is an understanding of literature as the constructor *par excellence* of virtual reality, implanting artificial experiences in the reader and creating affects that did not exist before. The discussions above have focussed on the sustained enquiry in Piglia’s texts into the nature of biological and artificial processes that are the primary focus of cybernetics. Even more powerfully, though, the texts themselves exemplify the kind of creative machines envisioned by cybernetics, which transcend the division between the human and the mechanical.

Porush argues that as the machine metaphor has become more and more prevalent in our culture, to the extent that it has come (in formalism and cybernetics, for example) to represent the workings of language and our own consciousness, it acquires the status of “something even more powerful than a metaphor.” Borrowing from Umberto Eco’s definition of the “icon” as “a model of relationships,” Porush proposes that we consider the machine in

literature as an icon, “capable of crystallizing, reflecting and embodying not only a complex system of meanings (determinism, logic, order, system) but the act of making meanings itself.”⁷⁴ If Piglia’s fiction amply demonstrates the status of the machine as icon in the manner Porush describes, it is equally evident that it draws on an updated version of that “model of relationships,” in which the machine does not – as in so much literature from the eighteenth century onwards – signify determinism, mechanism, and the clockwork universe but rather the dynamic interconnectedness of all things, the interdependence of the human, natural, and technological realms, the thorough imbrication of the material and the virtual, and the complexity that confounds simple accounts of causality. This rescues the machine from the more arid or formulaic of modernist experiments with literary composition as the application of techniques, liberating the text to operate as a Deleuzian assemblage together with other assemblages, endlessly creating meaning through myriad connections, most of which are not programmed by the inventor.

ENTROPY AND METAPHOR / COHEN

Zebra-streaked, tiger-striped, variegated, motley, fleck-speckled, bedizened, star-spangled. We invent, we produce like the Demiurge, in and through the mix.—Michel Serres⁷⁵

Entropy, as stated in the first two laws of thermodynamics, increases as the temperatures in an isolated system become more uniform over time. From the discovery of these laws, scientists moved quickly to speculate about the heat death of the universe: William Thomson (Lord Kelvin) was the first to posit the exhaustion of energy in the universe in his paper of 1852, “On a Universal Tendency in Nature to the Dissipation of Mechanical Energy.” The idea was extended and popularized by Hermann von Helmholtz and William Rankine, but it was not until the New Wave of science fiction in

the 1960s and 1970s that it was thoroughly mined for its fictional potential by North American and British writers such as Philip K. Dick, Thomas Pynchon, J. G. Ballard, and Michael Moorcock. What Pynchon was later to refer to as the “thermodynamical gloom” of his early short story on the theme, “Entropy” (1960), chimed all too convincingly with the pessimism of Beat literature and the most apocalyptic strains of North American science fiction.⁷⁶

Pynchon and Ballard are key referents in Cohen’s fiction and critical essays; however, their use of the entropy metaphor is substantially reworked within Cohen’s highly reflexive texts to serve as a trope for creativity. This transformation is particularly evident in *El fin de lo mismo*, a collection of short stories published in 1992. At first sight, entropy appears to be employed in some of these fictions as a metaphor to narrate a familiar trajectory towards homogenization, stasis, and death, marking the potential elimination of all difference in Cohen’s hyper-mediatised, market-governed societies. However, it is also resignified as the potential source of newness and unpredictability and often completely refigured for much more positive ends, specifically to point to the creative power of literature in staging an encounter with radical and irreducible difference. Entropy here becomes more than a metaphor: literature does not simply appropriate the idea of entropy to express the nature of certain cultural or social phenomena; instead, it is itself caught up in the very dynamics of entropy, and therefore constantly manifests, produces, or arrests those same phenomena.

For Eric Zencey, entropy acts as a “root metaphor” in the sense given to the term by Stephen Pepper in *World Hypotheses* (1942). Zencey identifies several ways in which the picture of flows of energy given to us by thermodynamics is taken up across the disciplines – biology, psychology, history, economic theory – and particularly how it comes to shape a view of the universe as an “incipient chaos” in which we live “in a state of ontological anomie.”⁷⁷ As John Bruni observes, the earliest treatments of entropy in literature, such as that of H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine* (1895), “tended to re-stage images of exhaustion” present in the work of Flaubert and Baudelaire.⁷⁸ In New Wave fiction, entropy is often used as a metaphor for cultural and social decline in an ultra-urbanized, war-mongering, high technology world.

Entropy is a recurrent motif in Moorcock's novels, and particularly in the Jerry Cornelius series; it is often associated with the dissipation of identity and memory. Cornelius fails in his mission to combat the forces of decay and entropy, becoming caught up in them instead. In Ballard's catastrophic worlds, the dissolution of identity results in a merging of the subject and the environment around him, in which the oppositions we normally use to order experience – internal and external, subject and object, mental and physical – are thoroughly dismantled. This movement from tension to dissipation, towards maximum entropy, is central to Ballard's apocalyptic vision.

That the future promises not progress but stasis, and the end of genuine difference and innovation, is an idea pursued with equal vigour by many theorists of the postmodern. In the commodification of newness in post-modern culture Jameson observes a paradox, which is "the equivalence between an unparalleled rate of change on all the levels of social life and an unparalleled standardization of everything."⁷⁹ Jameson employs a lexicon shared with the science of entropy and thermodynamics when he describes the manner in which "the supreme value of the New and of innovation, as both modernism and modernization grasped it, fades away against a steady stream of momentum and variation that at some outer limit seems stable and motionless," leaving "the realization that no society has ever been so standardized as this one, and that the stream of human, social, and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously."⁸⁰ The temporality that structured modernization has been replaced with "an appearance of random changes that are mere stasis, a disorder after the end of history."⁸¹

Pynchon, who acknowledges his debt to the metaphorical use of entropy by Henry Adams and Norbert Wiener,⁸² draws in "Entropy" – and in other texts – on their understanding of entropy as heat-death and exhaustion. The world of "Entropy" appears at times to be full of activity and complexity ("a *stretto* passage in the year's fugue") and at others to be listless and directionless, characterized by "private meanderings" and "aimless loves."⁸³ But it is set on a course of entropy, until such point as the moment of equilibrium is reached and heat-transfer becomes impossible, with the temperature reaching a steady and stable 37 degrees Fahrenheit and effecting "the final absence of all motion" in a perpetual state of limbo.⁸⁴ This elimination of

difference in the physical world evokes the more general social and cultural torpor produced by American consumerism which, as Callisto states, enacts “a similar tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness.”⁸⁵

The homogenizing forces of consumerism and mediatization are also, as we will see, figured as entropic in Cohen’s fiction. However, Cohen’s understanding of entropy owes much more to the re-reading of the second law of thermodynamics presented in Erwin Schrödinger’s *What is Life?* (1944) and *Mind and Matter* (1958), and Ilya Prigogine’s work on dissipative structures, published in texts such as *Order out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature* (1984) and *The End of Certainty: Time, Chaos and the New Laws of Nature* (1997, both written with Isabelle Stengers). Schrödinger argues that life is constantly re-energized by using resources from outside, exporting entropy or importing “negative entropy” (or “free energy”) to produce a higher order from disorder. This does not contradict the second law of thermodynamics – that entropy and disorder increase in a closed system – precisely because the universe is not a closed system. This is the key distinction that allows Cohen to borrow entropy as a model, not only on occasion to suggest the sense of exhaustion with which it is associated in most anglophone fiction, but also, and more insistently, to posit an endlessly renewable production of difference. Indeed, the very instability of metaphors such as entropy in Cohen’s fiction becomes one of several techniques through which literature may introduce uncertainty and generate the kind of heterogeneity that combats the very process of entropy.

The etymology of entropy (from the Greek “tropos,” meaning transformation or turning) already suggests transformations of the kind effected by metaphor as a literary trope. Many of the narratives of Cohen’s *El fin de lo mismo* discussed below do not simply appropriate entropy as a trope for certain social, economic, or cultural phenomena but exploit the tautology of this operation to explore what the processes of entropy can reveal about the nature of metaphor itself. In his literary and critical work, Cohen develops a theory of metaphor that dispenses with Platonic divisions and hierarchies and draws instead on models of multiplicity and metamorphosis developed in recent scientific and philosophical thought. Along the way, as we will see,

he constructs a role for the critic in an immanent, rhizomatic world of continual becoming that has nothing to do with the traditional explication or exegesis of texts.

Becoming-inhuman in “Lydia en el canal”

He counted the materials of the landscape: the curvilinear perspectives of the concrete causeways, the symmetry of car fenders, the contours of Karen’s thighs and pelvis, her uncertain smile. What new algebra would make sense of these elements?—J. G. Ballard⁸⁶

The protagonist of Cohen’s “Lydia en el canal” experiences an intensely chaotic relationship with the physical architecture of her world. She fails to tame the strange geometry of the new apartment to which she has been transferred on becoming a widow: its volumes, surfaces, reflections, and angles “no se unían con el cuerpo en un sistema duradero” (did not join with the body in a durable system).⁸⁷ This experience is associated with bereavement: Lydia feels that the presence of another body – that of her husband, for whom she is grieving – would be needed to conquer this unfamiliar territory. Objects change form, harden and threaten to collapse on top of her, in what appears to be an extension of an inner discord between body and thought: at one point, Lydia’s body is described as fleeing from her and disintegrating, while, at another, it is her untamed thought that escapes and spins with such violence that the floor gives way and a centrifugal force crushes her against the wall.

“Lydia en el canal” establishes an important dialogue with Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), the first novel Cohen translated into Spanish.⁸⁸ The apartment sex scenes between Lydia and Tranco strongly echo those between Tallis and Karen Novotny in Ballard’s novel. Tallis and Karen watch each other’s bodies interact with the angles and surfaces of the apartment, and “the sexual act between them was a dual communion between themselves and the continuum of time and space which they occupied.”⁸⁹ The “act

of love” for them becomes “a vector in an applied geometry.”⁹⁰ With a similar consciousness of geometrical confusion and (dis)harmony, Lydia is shaken by “las inestables alianzas del espacio, la fugacidad de sus cuplas” (the unstable alliances of space, the fleetingness of its bonds)⁹¹ but finds brief respite during intercourse with her neighbour Tranco, watching how “alrededor de los dos cuerpos, la turba de objetos de la pieza se ordena en un pachorriento mandala” (around the two bodies, the mob of objects in the room ordered itself into a calm mandala).⁹²

“Lydia en el canal” exemplifies the unstable, chaotic realms of Cohen’s narrative worlds. Caught up in unpredictable forces, his characters struggle and usually fail to impose any order on the continually transforming matter and energy of the universe. Lydia’s predicament is also similar to the peculiar condition suffered by Aubade in Pynchon’s “Entropy,” in which all perceptions of the world around her are experienced as sound, a discordant cacophony from which fragments of more ordered and harmonious music emerge. She has a heightened sense of the continual battle between order and disorder that governs the world around her and struggles to order and reorder the perceptual information she receives, to keep formlessness and meaninglessness at bay:

The architectonic purity of her world was constantly threatened by such hints of anarchy: gaps and excrescences and skew lines, and a shifting or tilting of planes to which she had continually to readjust lest the whole structure shiver into a disarray of discrete and meaningless signals. [...]

That precious signal-to-noise ratio, whose delicate balance required every calorie of her strength, seesawed inside the small tenuous skull [...].⁹³

However, if Aubade is ultimately powerless to prevent the resolution of these tensions into an irreversible stasis, the geometric and atmospheric anomalies of Cohen’s worlds often present a means of liberation for his protagonists. Unlike Aubade, his characters often learn to come to terms with their frightening, unhomely environments, and to understand that they form part

of the constant flux of these, not positioned above or beyond them. The moment of epiphany that reveals to them their shared nature with the universe gives them a particular sense of meaning and destiny.

Indeed, Lydia's coming-to-terms with the world around her, her passage through grief to a renewed sense of belonging in an alien landscape, is not achieved by means of shoring up her individual identity or reestablishing the boundaries of her self, but through an embrace of the interconnectedness of all things, herself included. Smoking a cigarette by the canal, she observes that "las hilachas del humo parecían anudar síntomas dispersos" (the loose threads of smoke seemed to tie scattered signs together):⁹⁴ they link together the greasy reflections of the water, the moss on the sunken barges, the angles of plexiglass, and the blackened columns of the bridge, and all of these with herself, as she takes another drag and feels the smoke at the back of her throat. Focussing on another image, that of a virus, she meditates on the "communion" that brings together bodies invaded by viral cells, including her own.⁹⁵ This revelation is part of the process that leads to a possible integration for Lydia in the unhomely environment in which she finds herself.

Of the stories collected in *El fin de lo mismo*, "Lydia en el canal" most closely follows Ballard in the psychopathological origin of the unusual couplings between characters and the urban landscape. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, insistent references to the merging of the contours of human bodies with the geometries of concrete overpasses and underpasses and multistorey car parks are clearly associated with the protagonist's narrative perspective, and Dr. Nathan finds that he is suffering from a specific condition, a "perpetual and irresistible desire to merge with the object in an undifferentiated mass."⁹⁶ Lydia's experience of disorder in the physical environment and of repeated transgressions of the boundaries separating subject and object are, if not linked with a complicated version of sadism as in the case of Ballard's protagonist, clearly the result of intense grief, and the symptoms abate as she gradually begins to come to terms with her loss.

However, Cohen parts company with Ballard on a very significant point. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, we are led to understand that Travis's distorted perspective is the result of over-exposure to the traumas of technological warfare and the most inhuman traits of the post-Vietnam era. It is a reaction,

Dr. Nathan suggests, against the natural order, perhaps partly attributable to the power of thermonuclear weapons “in bringing about the total fusion and non-differentiation of all matter.”⁹⁷ Travis therefore reacts against “the phenomenology of the universe, the specific and independent existence of separate objects and events.”⁹⁸ Cohen reverses this association: it is instead the *natural* world in which all matter is fused or interrelated, and his characters attain their highest point of sanity when they recognize their oneness with the universe, not the supposed independence of subjects, objects, and events.

That we should not understand this “natural” world to exclude technology, however, is made clear from the particular forms of “becoming” Cohen narrates, and the language used to express these transformations. Pynchon pursues a musical analogy throughout “Entropy” to suggest a delicate balance between form and chaos, meaning and noise, modulation and resolution, and the complex relationship Aubade conceives with the tensions between these in the world around her. Cohen’s story, in comparison, is more radical in its use of style to suggest this tension and the transference and negotiation of agency between subject and object. An insistent use of transitive verbs ascribes intentions, desires, and emotions to the objects around Lydia to the extent that her keys and clothes often seem to be more alive than she does and to have a greater sense of conscious, purposeful activity. It is a technique that Cohen would put to much more extensive use in his novel *Casa de Ottero* (2009), which explores zones of indiscernibility and exchange between human subjects and inanimate objects and conveys something of the forms of becoming that Deleuze and Guattari have described as “becoming-molecular” or “becoming-inhuman.”⁹⁹

While Deleuze and Guattari favour the use of free indirect discourse in literature to express the nature of language as a “collective assemblage”¹⁰⁰ – used extensively in the work of Woolf and Joyce, for example – this technique is conspicuously absent in Cohen. Cohen’s own expression of dispersed subjectivity and the nature of language and discourse as “collective assemblages” is most strikingly to be found in a conceit employed in many of his novels and short stories, the “Panconciencia.” A kind of virtual information network that allows users to access other citizens’ minds, the Panconciencia is

a trope for the flows of perception and experience across the boundaries of the subject. Connecting up, the narrator of *Donde yo no estaba* (2006) hears a murmur in crescendo, “el vocerío del multiverso interior” (the clamour of the interior multiverse) and understands that “Mi historia personal ya no era cosa solitaria” (my personal life was no longer a solitary thing).¹⁰¹ The Panconciencia invokes Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion that “Language in its entirety is indirect discourse,” and that “Direct discourse is a detached fragment of a mass and is born of the dismemberment of the collective assemblage; but the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice.”¹⁰²

Cohen’s Panconciencia conceit imagines a (virtual) technological interface that mediates these intersubjective flows. As in Piglia’s fiction, technology here is neither antagonistic towards the human nor a substitution for it. Indeed, “becoming-inhuman” seems to play a vital role in preparing human subjects for an encounter with each other. As is clearly the case in “Lydia en el canal,” a process of becoming-other with inanimate objects or non-human organisms makes it possible for Cohen’s characters to break out of their isolation and discover a sense of proximity with other humans. In *Casa de Ottro*, Fronda’s gradual understanding that life flows through the objects around her as well as herself leads to a renewal of her relationship with both the cyborg and human inhabitants of the house; likewise, as we will see, an encounter with the sea’s cycles of preservation and destruction brings the protagonist of “La ilusión monarca” to desire communication with his fellow prisoners. Lydia, gradually coming to terms with the sharp angles and aggressive intrusions of her material environment, eventually understands that her self-exclusion from it and from the community of peculiar and rather menacing youths around her will only lead to greater danger and misery, and she begins to interact compassionately with them. “No se puede ser condesa a cien yardas de un carruaje” (you can’t be a countess a hundred yards from a carriage),¹⁰³ she repeats to herself. She realizes that her destiny is here and that, if she shares their space, she is also part of them. In contrast to Ballard’s fiction, the merging of the human with the inhuman in Cohen’s, while it may be symptomatic of trauma or produce a traumatic experience

itself, nevertheless precedes a transformation in which the human becomes more fully human. As in Deleuze's vision, "The human becomes more than itself, or expands to its highest power, not by affirming its humanity, nor by returning to animal state, but by becoming-hybrid with what is not itself."¹⁰⁴ Cohen's fiction marks a significant departure from the novels of Pynchon, Burroughs, and Moorcock in its treatment of dispersed subjectivities. In the latter three, the dissipation of identity and the increasing erosion of difference between human subjects and their environment are associated with the effects of trauma or an inexorable slide towards entropy, numbness, and stasis. In Cohen, by contrast, human subjects find their home in the chaotic flux that binds together the natural and artificial elements of their environment. This reversal lays the ground, as I will show, for Cohen's resignification of entropy as a mechanism to produce difference and creative conflict rather than sameness and the depletion of energy.

Entropy and dissipative structures in "El fin de lo mismo"

The chaotic and disordered geometries of "Lydia en el canal" are resignified in other stories of *El fin de lo mismo* as a source of creativity and resistance to the homogenizing effects of capitalism. "El fin de lo mismo," the title story of the collection, imagines a world that is highly unstable and subject to extreme hyperinflation. Bodies, goods, and money are caught up in a frenzied circulation in which the rate of exchange rockets daily, generating such uncertainty and panic that "El tejido del progreso se deshilachaba, pinchado por las navajas de los hambrientos, roído por la vehemencia disciplinaria de los profesionales inseguros" (the fabric of progress was fraying, pierced by the knives of the hungry, eaten away by the disciplining vehemence of insecure professionals).¹⁰⁵ Even the physical world is affected, the river misshapen, cracks and protuberances appearing in the sky. Tensions are exacerbated by the heat of the summer, a constant 37 degrees in the shade (the reference to Pynchon's "Entropy" cannot be accidental). "Tanto desarreglo podría haber resultado en un gran alumbramiento" (this much disorder could have resulted in a great birth), Cohen's narrator observes,¹⁰⁶ articulating the insight – proper to theories of complexity and emergence – that disorder is always

an opportunity for a system to reorganize itself at a higher level. But instead, the vertigo induced by inflation robs Gumpes and his fellow citizens of their energy and restricts them to progressively more cramped spaces, as they have to downsize to smaller and shabbier apartments.

In such circumstances, can they be blamed for swapping uncertainty for stability, even if it comes at the price of homogenization, stasis, and the incursion of the authorities into their private lives? To arrest this inevitable drift towards entropy comes Olga, a woman with three arms. With her “torso de disonancia perfecta” (torso of perfect dissonance),¹⁰⁷ Gumpes considers Olga to be “la guardiana de la inestabilidad” (the guardian of instability) and therefore worthy of his love in a world that threatens to eliminate all difference and fizzle out into numbness.¹⁰⁸ However, an unexpected twist sees Olga propelled into sudden fame in a spate of interviews and magazine covers; as Miguel Dalmaroni observes, the scandal of her third arm is effectively defused by the mass media, which swallows up all possible anomalies into itself.¹⁰⁹ The power of dissonance is neutralized, as the forces of entropy flatten out difference and everything tends towards sameness.

When entropy comes as predicted, however, it is not the cataclysmic heat-death of the universe but merely a gentle adjustment in the atmosphere: the water stagnates a little more in the backwaters of the river, April is perhaps a little less fresh than usual, and business and consumption slow down. This state of entropy is for Cohen not the end, but merely a passing stage: what no one had foreseen, we are told, “es que la entropía es desorden; y que, al calor de los escombros del progreso, la ciudad ya incubaba nuevas alteraciones, anomalías brutales y asombrosas;” (is that entropy is disorder; and that, in the heat of the ashes of progress, the city was already incubating new disturbances, surprising and brutal anomalies).¹¹⁰ This is simply a stage of relative calm and rest before new divergences and disruptions arise to challenge the somnolence of the status quo. For this reason my reading of the story would not trace a move from the fantastic to the realistic as definitively as Dalmaroni’s does: Cohen leaves us with the full expectation that new anomalies are about to emerge.

Disorder for Cohen always signals the possibility of re-organization at a more complex level, a state of potential creativity and energy; his

sophisticated grasp on the implications of thermodynamics and information theory allows him to unshackle the entropy metaphor from its more commonly apocalyptic use in Pynchon and Ballard. Along with uncertainty, chaos, emergence, and dissipative structures, entropy is one of the scientific tropes Cohen draws upon in his construction of a theory of “realismo inseguro” (unstable realism), which describes a series of aesthetic strategies suited to the “realistic” portrayal of a complex, emergent, ever-evolving universe. He introduces these theories not simply to reflect on the nature of the physical world in which we live or the narratives we construct about it – chaos “como mito de la época” (as a myth of our time), for example – but insistently “como hipótesis de trabajo para las invenciones de la literatura” (as a working hypothesis for the inventions of literature).¹¹¹

The key element of this hypothesis rests on the notion of the creativity and energy available in dissipative structures, which make use of chaotic processes and flows across their borders to produce new kinds of order. In a universe far from equilibrium, Prigogine maintains, the operation of such systems “leads to new collective effects and to a new coherence.”¹¹² Drawing on Prigogine’s understanding, Cohen distinguishes between “la novela agónica” (the dying novel), which attends to the apathy of its mass audience, and “las narraciones de lo real incierto” (narratives of the uncertain real): while the former represents the lukewarm universe of entropy, he claims, the latter are “estructuras caóticas alejadas del equilibrio. Son incendios, son oleajes” (chaotic structures that are far from equilibrium. They are fires, waves).¹¹³ Flames and waves are prime examples of turbulent and chaotic processes that defy the homogenizing effects of entropy. Both are favoured images in Michel Serres’s quest – highly relevant to Cohen’s own, as will become clear – to “think a new object, multiple in space and mobile in time, unstable and fluctuating like a flame, relational.”¹¹⁴

As Cohen observes, if dissipation suggests chaos and dissolution, the opposite of structure, herein lies the central paradox of Prigogine’s vision: a dissipative structure is able to maintain stability precisely by constantly opening itself up to flows from the environment, as “se autoorganiza, se realimenta en contacto con agentes aleatorios y se transforma por bifurcación, amplificación y acoplamiento. Cada turbulencia genera nuevos órdenes” (it

self-organizes, it feeds off aleatory agents and transforms itself by bifurcation, amplification, and connection. Each instance of turbulence generates new orders).¹¹⁵ In Cohen's work, this becomes a picture of how literature may generate new forms and ideas through an encounter with difference and the unpredictable. Elsewhere, he proposes that good technique in short-story writing should involve dealing with "lo impropedente, lo intempestivo, lo superfluo y lo que otras técnicas desechan" (the improper, the untimely, the superfluous and whatever is rejected by other techniques).¹¹⁶ The economical and measured in style, the concise, and the clear: these are impositions of form that cannot remain open to the unexpected or the excessive and cannot therefore create new orders or produce new visions. Instead, Cohen's strategy in the narratives that make up *El fin de lo mismo* – together with many of his other texts – responds to what he understands to be the task of literature: "incorporar el caos a la forma sin disfrazarlo de otra cosa" (to incorporate chaos within form without disguising it as something else).¹¹⁷

Cohen's less apocalyptic understanding of entropy leads to a resignification of the breakdown of the subject/object division that characterizes most fiction on the theme. As we saw in "Lydia en el canal," the dissolving of the self does not connote a loss of identity but its rediscovery, a consciousness of the true nature of subjectivity as dispersed within the complex system of the universe it inhabits. The integrity of the subject is violated and transversed by external forces, but this does not eradicate agency: this is clearly the case in "El fin de lo mismo," as Olga's assymetric body causes a radical dislocation in the physical structures and objects around her, unbalancing the system's gradients and introducing an instability that momentarily re-energizes it and decreases entropy. This (rare) ability of individuals to arrest entropy by introducing dissent and resisting homogenization again marks Cohen's vision as more optimistic than Ballard's. As open systems rather than closed ones, the worlds of Cohen's fiction thrive on the disorder produced by entropic forces, which submit the status quo to constant transformation and reorganization.

Resonance in “Aspectos de la vida de Enzatti”

The characteristics of “realismo inseguro” are very much in evidence in “Aspectos de la vida de Enzatti,” another narrative from *El fin de lo mismo*, in which Cohen draws on the physics of acoustics to create a picture of literature’s construction of meaning through resonance, rather than reference. An extended exploration of the relationship between sound and harmonics directly links Cohen’s interest in dispersed subjectivity with the textual practice of “realismo inseguro.”

Lying in bed, Enzatti believes that the “system” of the night, with its “armonías equívocas” (ambiguous harmonies), depends on his remaining at the centre of it, articulating it.¹¹⁸ As he sits up, he is keenly aware that he has altered the balance of the system; however, he is also subject to its “fuerzas mañosas, arbitrarias” (crafty, arbitrary forces). He and the night are part of a single system whose elements co-interact and co-evolve, shaping each other: if at first it is the silence of the night that is fractured, it soon becomes Enzatti who is full of “rajaduras” (cracks).¹¹⁹ Enzatti has been woken by a shout that pierces the night air and draws him into the street, searching for its source. The many vibrations and resonances set into play by the production of sound become a means in this story to reflect more generally on the invisible connections and forces that link subjects and objects across time and space in a complex system in which every alteration has an effect on multiple networks. This sense of the intangibility of the forces that hold a system in tension and produce form is reinforced by references in the text to magnetic fields.

Every sound, Cohen’s narrator explains, creates secondary vibrations, or harmonics; never pure or singular, “un sonido es él y el racimo de sonidos simultáneos que arrastra o desencadena. Eso dice la física” (a sound is itself and the cluster of simultaneous sounds that it carries with it or triggers. That’s what physics says). In a more poetic vein, Cohen describes the complex interaction between fundamental notes and overtones in terms that ascribe agency to objects and forces in preference to human subjects: “El grito surca el cráneo y los armónicos se expanden, se arremolinan, chocando con cosas dormidas que, obnubiladas, se alzan a la vigilia tintineando” (the shout

cuts through the skull and the harmonics expand, whirl around, colliding with dormant objects which, befuddled, rise jingling into wakefulness).¹²⁰ Neither can the listener remain inert or a passive witness to this frenzy of frequencies: Enzatti too is caught up in the system of vibrations that traverse his body and that he alters as well as receives. The sound of the shout echoes impossibly, fantastically, until everything seems to be drawn into the “revolution” it has unleashed.¹²¹

If the shout traverses space to construct a web of multiple connections in the present, it also assembles “un revuelo de sonidos antiguos” (a tumult of old sounds) in Enzatti’s head.¹²² The main thread of “Aspectos de la vida de Enzatti” is interrupted by four sections that recount previous episodes in his life at different ages. The form of the narrative has an aleatory feel: the interspersed sections are not clearly related to each other or to the main “plot,” although certain points of resonance may be discernible. In many of them Enzatti experiences a sense of the transience of time and the provisionality of the material, together with a disconnection with the world around him, alternating with the sudden revelation of connections and coincidences not previously seen.

In the section entitled “31 años,” for example, the improbability that Enzatti’s only surviving parent will regain consciousness cuts him loose into the world: “caminaba suelto, como supurado por el mundo, sin origen ni explicación” (he walked alone, as if oozing from the world, without origin or explanation).¹²³ Leaving behind the “visiones desunidas” (disunited visions) of limbs, machinery, and syringes in the hospital,¹²⁴ Enzatti meditates on a contrasting image of unification – the surface shine of a wine glass in a nearby bar, which brings together a miscellany of people and objects in its reflection – and notices that “sobre el vidrio convexo se acumulaban sin disputas las partes de ese mundo suspendido, el bar y zonas de la calle” (amassing themselves on the convex glass, without quarrelling, were all the parts of that suspended world, the bar and areas of the street).¹²⁵ “29 años” relates the temporary and unexplained disappearance from sight of Enzatti’s girlfriend, who remains present to the touch of his arm around her shoulder as they walk down the street but becomes invisible, only to rematerialize a few moments later; this leads him to wonder to what extent the “essence” of

Annabel resides in substance or something more intangible, and to glimpse the importance of the immaterial bonds that unite them, while reassuring himself of her bodily presence. In “36 años,” in contrast, Enzatti is surprised, looking back at steps leading to a balcony on a street, that they look exactly the same as they had done less than a minute earlier. This impression of the stubborn durability of things is itself transitory, however, and he writes an elegy to the moment, which has now gone; and yet he keeps the poem safe, hoping that in the future he will discover it again and feel some form of continuity and inexorability, “una anomalía persistente, irremediable” (a persistent, irreparable anomaly).¹²⁶

While these “flashbacks” have no explanatory function within the diegesis, their presence testifies to the rich, divergent, multiple, and unpredictable nature of the connections that unite sensations and experiences across time as well as space. They are linked by references to events or impressions as “arbitrario” (arbitrary),¹²⁷ “aleatorio” (aleatory),¹²⁸ and “gratuita” (gratuitous).¹²⁹ Placed within the main narrative, their overall effect is to produce a sense of the radical reorientation of perception, to question or sever the continuities and connections we take for granted – such as the persistence of a person’s identity over time – and to establish new or surprising associations not obvious to the eye.

Resonance, then, becomes, not simply a picture of the intrinsic connectedness of things, the vibrations that can trigger change even in far-flung corners of a system, but a mode of literary construction. It is one that leads away from realism’s hierarchy of referent and representation and towards what Cohen calls “Un arte de superficies” (an art of surfaces): a plane of immanence. This does not refer, as he hastens to point out, to an art that is in any way superficial, but “un arte que se hace ahí donde todos los efectos lindan con las cosas y el lenguaje, y resuenan unos en otros. Es dispersivo, porque tiene una ilimitada capacidad de relación” (an art made at the point where all effects adjoin things and language, and each echoes in each. It is dispersive, because it has an unlimited capacity for relationality).¹³⁰

Cohen cites Rupert Sheldrake’s theories of morphic fields and morphic resonance in defining this field as one of relations rather than material objects. Sheldrake, a former biochemist, has since worked largely in the

field of parapsychology; his major theories have been dismissed by mainstream scientists. Much of his work has been written in response to what he perceives as the limitations of the mechanistic approach to developmental biology. According to his hypothesis of “formative causation,” each kind of cell or organism has a “morphogenetic field” that shapes their development, representing “a kind of pooled or collective memory of the species”: “Thus a developing foxglove seedling, for example, is subject to morphic resonance from countless foxgloves that came before, and this resonance shapes and stabilizes its morphogenetic fields.”¹³¹ Although no evidence for the existence of such fields has been found, Cohen takes inspiration from Sheldrake’s insistence that “La materia ya no constituye un principio de explicación fundamental, mientras que los campos y la energía sí” (matter no longer constitutes a fundamental explanatory principle, while fields and energy do).¹³² He finds that “Morfogénesis es una palabra adecuada a la manera en que los relatos resuenan entre sí y entre ellos y el mundo” (morphogenesis is an accurate word to describe the way stories resonate with each other and with the world).¹³³

While Sheldrake’s morphic resonance takes place between very similar organisms, Cohen’s version is deliberately less selective in its reach, bringing into relationship objects that may otherwise be dissimilar and disconnected to form a picture of multiplicity and complexity rather than unification and simplicity. Enzatti understands that if the shout – real and human, rather than imagined – has called him, “no es para instalarlo en la claridad sino presentarle diversas formas del enigma” (it is not to settle him in clarity but to present him with different forms of the enigma).¹³⁴ For this reason, perhaps, we are told that the vibrations caused by the shout continue long after Enzatti has rescued its author, a man who has fallen through the floor of a garage. As he departs from the scene, “Sonidos díscolos chocan entre sí, confundidos” (unruly sounds collide with each other, confused), and Enzatti realizes that the most important thing is that they should not be silenced through any kind of clarification.¹³⁵ This confusion is part of an encounter with the unknown. As he reflects, “Lo que zumba en el cráneo de Enzatti y lo conmueve, y lo debilita, no es solamente lo olvidado que regresa. Es

lo desconocido” (that which buzzes in Enzatti’s skull and moves him, and weakens him, is not merely the forgotten returning. It is the unknown).¹³⁶

In place of the finished, the rounded, and the neatly explained, Cohen’s “realismo inseguro” chooses to deal in “los excursos, los tiempos muertos, las descripciones impertinentes, las analogías, las referencias múltiples y el poder transformador de la resonancia” (excursions, dead time, irrelevant descriptions, analogies, multiple references, and the transforming power of resonance) in search of “un ámbito donde el suceso hace fulgurar todos los niveles de la realidad y todas las realidades” (a field in which the spark of an event causes all levels of reality and all realities to light up).¹³⁷ The “site” of resonance, Cohen explains, is the metaphor:

La metáfora vincula entidades de diversa especie creando entidades distintas de los términos vinculados: es la contigüidad entre realidad material e imaginación, el lugar donde el acontecimiento se cuenta mejor. Es el motor privilegiado de la autogeneración del texto-mundo. Es la forma proliferante, el “sostén” de la estructura difusiva; reúne pero no encierra. Estructuras difusivas, campos de resonancia donde los acontecimientos se relacionan en paralelo y lo que parece agotarse en una causa siempre se realimenta con una relación más, son las novelas de Thomas Pynchon, pero también, por ejemplo, las de Julien Gracq.¹³⁸

The metaphor links entities of different kinds, creating different entities from the terms it links: it is the contiguity between material reality and imagination, the place where the event is best recounted. It is the principal engine for the self-generation of the text-world. It is the proliferating form, the “support” for a diffusive structure; it brings together but it does not enclose. Dissipative structures, fields of resonance where events relate to each other alongside each other, and what seems to be fully exhausted by one cause is always re-energized by another set of

relations: that is what Thomas Pynchon's novels are about, but also, for example, Julien Gracq's.

If "Aspectos de la vida de Enzatti" gives us a glimpse of this world, in which new links and pathways are constantly being traced across a field of resonance, two other narratives in *El fin de lo mismo* take up the task of modelling in greater detail how these particular metaphors of resonance and dissipative structures can be used to account for creativity in literature and literature's role in destabilizing the ruling social order.

Realismo inseguro in "Volubilidad"

Writing has no other end than to lose one's face.—Gilles Deleuze¹³⁹

In "Volubilidad" we move into a more explicitly reflexive realm, in which Cohen's vision of a world held in tension between the forces of entropy and those of self-organization, the tension between formlessness and form, becomes an allegory: not just for the relationship between sociopolitical power and resistance (as in "El fin de lo mismo"), but also for the role of literature in contemporary society. The story's protagonist, Maguire, suspects himself to be the subject of the fantasies of a fellow-passenger on the subway train he takes to work every morning. These fantasies take the form of projections of Maguire performing a wide variety of different jobs: window-cleaner, magician, waiter, taekwondo instructor, and many more. Over time, these projections multiply until they are an almost constant presence in his life. It appears at least possible that they have been instigated by the state-owned "Oficina Intersubjetiva" (Intersubjective Office) in order to exacerbate Maguire's already rather provisional and shifting sense of personal identity and to frighten him into making "un esfuerzo de cohesión" (an effort towards cohesion).¹⁴⁰

In this society's current and paradoxical phase of post-industrial growth, the greatest socioeconomic advance is available to citizens who stay put in

one place; those who have a tendency to move about, to avoid tying themselves to a single point, get left behind. This is an environment in which fixity, solidity, and clarity are valued: the more easily identifiable an object or a person, the greater the likelihood of their continued existence in social reality. By contrast, the versatile, fickle, or unstable – those of “carácter disperso” (a dispersed nature)¹⁴¹ – do not bind themselves so fully to career ambition and socioeconomic ascent and therefore do not contribute so obviously to economic growth; labelled “indefinidos sociales” (social indefinites), these marginal figures are subject to a series of measures taken by the state to force them to acquire greater cohesion as subjects and to re-enter consumer society. Once settled back into the system, the “derroche de energía” (waste of energy)¹⁴² they had represented can be channelled more efficiently towards productive ends.

If the imprecise, the undefined, and the redundant are not so easily caught up into the inexorable cycle of production and consumption, then it is their proliferation that becomes the business of literature. In a society in which almost absolute power is wielded by a sinister coalition between politics and information, the role of literature is to introduce noise, from which alternatives might arise. The accelerating post-industrial growth experienced by the societies of *El fin de lo mismo* produces certain reading preferences among their populations that might remind us of those of the mass market in our own society. In “Volubilidad,” Cohen introduces a reflexive commentary into the narrative, exploring the question of which aspects of the story would fulfil those mainstream narrative expectations and which would not. For example, after his encounter with the social worker, Maguire takes a series of actions that appear to show his willingness to reintegrate into the socioeconomic sphere. However, a heavy note of irony is introduced by inserting a metafictional observation before the list of his next moves: “En un marco narrativo apto para el agitado ocio posindustrial, los pasos que Maguire da a continuación resultan satisfactorios y coherentes” (within a narrative framework suited to the hectic leisure-time of postindustrial society, the steps Maguire then takes prove to be satisfactory and coherent).¹⁴³ And indeed, Maguire soon abandons this pretence of social conformity.

If the mass market demands plots that demonstrate clear causality, with all ends neatly tied up, it also demands characters that are easily identified and categorizable. Like many of Cohen's characters, Maguire is simultaneously more than and less than an individual. His multiple selves add up to something that is paradoxically much less than a person, often emotionally blank or unreactive. As he practises the same invasive technique of fantasy-projection on his ex-girlfriend and star television newsreader, who initially stands firm against his attempts to disperse her identity, we are told that "un nuevo desvío traicionó entonces las expectativas que el lector posindustrial habría puesto en su historia. Y es que Maguire no estaba decepcionado. Maguire no estaba nada" (a new change of course then betrayed the hopes the postindustrial reader had placed in his story. And that was that Maguire wasn't disappointed. Maguire wasn't anything).¹⁴⁴

A little later, another comment contrasts the value of predictability in mass-market narrative with the more creative role chance plays in genuine imagination. The expectations of the postindustrial reading public are met by chains of events that are entirely foreseeable; "No obstante Maguire, también lector de su historia, descubrirá pronto que a la imaginación le encanta el azar. O, lo que es parecido, que el gran público no va a interesarse por su historia" (nevertheless, Maguire, also a reader of his own story, will soon discover that imagination loves chance. Or, which amounts to the same thing, that the general public is not going to be interested in his story).¹⁴⁵ Meaning and narrative drive in "Volubilidad" are consistently shaken by events that may (or may not) be accidental or coincidental. The unexpected appearance in Maguire's hostel of the fellow-passenger he suspects to be responsible for the projections does not contravene the conventions of realist fiction: such narrative "coincidences" often shape the plot of detective stories, for example. But the passenger is accompanied by another girl he recognizes from the same train carriage, and Maguire considers that "la casualidad que los enfrentaba había añadido innecesariamente a la chica" (the coincidence that brought them together had unnecessarily added the girl).¹⁴⁶

Cohen's narrative thus provides a metacommentary on the differences between his own fiction and that of the mass market, demonstrating his allegiance to the techniques of "la narración de lo real incierto" (the narration

of the uncertain real), which “no cree en las virtudes indispensables del acabado, la redondez, los cabos atados, las coincidencias explicadas, los motivos desvelados, los proyectos nítidamente cumplidos o frustrados, las causas exhaustivas, ni en la flaca gratificación del desenlace” (does not believe in the indispensable virtues of the finished, roundness, all the ends tied up, coincidences explained, motives revealed, projects neatly fulfilled or frustrated, causes comprehensively listed, nor in the thin satisfaction of the final dénouement).¹⁴⁷ Just as Maguire’s capacity to “disgregarse” (disintegrate) becomes a measure of his resistance to society’s definition of progress,¹⁴⁸ so we are asked to understand the instabilities and divergences of Cohen’s own narrative as a sign of its critical distance from, and challenge to, dominant social and cultural discourses.

In some respects, this sounds rather like a typical postmodern resort to textual indeterminacy as the key to disarticulating discourses of authority: if everything is a text, then language is the only battleground and the play of signification the only weapon against monologic discourse. However, if Cohen’s texts are freed from the imposition of unitary meaning, this is not via a Foucauldian-Barthesian “death of the author,” in which signification is severed from authorial control and becomes endlessly deferred. Cohen’s authors and narrators do not disappear from their texts but disperse into them, in a way that produces new encounters. The multiple, composite nature of the self does not occasion a postmodern crisis of representation but becomes a starting-point for new forms of knowledge and ways of relating to the world around.

Maguire’s dispersive identity not only performs an act of political resistance: it also performs a “becoming-other,” or “becoming-multiple,” which for Deleuze is intrinsic to the act of writing. “Volubilidad” acts as a precursor to the monumental *Donde yo no estaba*, a kind of fictionalized diary/autobiography in a Deleuzian mode and Cohen’s most sustained and radical treatment of the process of “becoming-other.” The narrator of this novel is engaged in a personal quest, presented as one of supreme ethical import, to “despersonalizarse” (depersonalize himself), and to work towards “el adelgazamiento del ser” (the slimming-down of one’s being). This involves a recognition that “el yo es una prenda sin contenido” (“I” is a garment with

nobody inside),¹⁴⁹ and the recommended procedure to follow is “ingerir lo que de sus personas suelten otros, y en el mismo acto evacuar parte de uno” (to ingest what other people let go of and, at the same time, to evacuate part of oneself).¹⁵⁰

An important difference emerges between this understanding of the self-transforming process of writing, on the one hand, and, on the other, a mistrust of writing as a way of imposing meaning on the world (or constructing a world into existence) that often underlies Marxist and psychoanalytical approaches to literature as well as various schools of ideological criticism (feminism, postcolonialism, etc.). As Deleuze describes it,

To write is certainly not to impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience. [...] Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed [...]. Writing is inseparable from becoming: in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or -vegetable, becomes-molecule, to the point of becoming-imperceptible.¹⁵¹

Writing therefore involves participating in the multiple acts of becoming taking place in the world around us and accepting, in Colebrook’s précis, “the challenge of no longer acting as a separate and selecting point within the perceived world, but of becoming different with, and through, what is perceived.”¹⁵² This again takes us away from a post-structuralist emphasis on the situated (if unstable) nature of subjectivity and cultural meaning. Maguire’s projections, like those of O’Jara (see Chapter 2), are not impositions of the self onto the other but evidence of the multiple and dispersive nature of the self. As Deleuze argues, the fabulating function of literature “does not consist in imagining or projecting an ego.”¹⁵³ Quite the reverse: it is a process in which the self becomes other and understands its place in the flux of becomings of which the world is comprised. Cohen’s distance both from conventional psychoanalytical or symptomatic approaches to the text, and from their suspicion of literature as a form of anthropomorphism or self-projection, is worked out most thoroughly in the remaining narrative of *El fin de lo mismo*, “La ilusión monarca.”

“La ilusión monarca”: metaphors of multiplicity

Of the narratives that comprise *El fin de lo mismo*, it is “La ilusión monarca” that demonstrates most clearly the power of metaphor as the “engine” of art, creating fields of resonance in which meaning is never closed off or exhausted but continually renewed and re-energized. If “Aspectos de la vida de Enzatti” theorizes the power of resonance to create unusual topologies, linking disparate elements across time and space, “La ilusión monarca” gives this idea full expression as a model for literary creation. Cohen’s story assembles a constellation of texts and images, multiply connected in a constantly evolving galaxy in which any new event flashes and reverberates through the whole, and those reflections and echoes found in the most distant places return to spark the original stimulus in a never-ending play of meaning. The sea, the subject of “La ilusión monarca,” does not simply refer to a mass of water but to the history of its representation in art and literature, Romantic and modern. However, Cohen’s narrative takes us far from the usual, rather glib postmodern celebration of multiplicity and mixture in which all difference is eventually flattened into sameness and all texts refer to nothing but other texts. This story, like many others by Cohen, represents instead a serious, committed attempt to stage an encounter with difference, and to understand the dynamics of such an encounter and its capacity to engender newness.

The characters of “La ilusión monarca” struggle to attach a meaning to their existence, living in virtual isolation in a prison built on a beach. The prisoners are restricted to a confined area comprising a cell block and a section of the beach, flanked with walls reaching far into the sea. They are fed at intervals through hatches and forbidden to approach the guards, but no other discipline is exercised on them. In the absence of all societal structures and conventions, the prisoners form tribal groups for protection and sociability, which engage violently with other groups and with those individuals who, like the protagonist Sergio, choose to remain on the margins.

The prisoners’ attempt to read meaning into their situation mirrors our own interpretative efforts as readers and makes them redundant. They suspect that they have been placed beside the sea as a method of psychological torture, as they are faced daily with a possible escape route that is

nevertheless extremely risky: nearly all those who attempt to swim their way to freedom eventually return as corpses washed up by the tide, often with mysterious wounds. One of the prisoners, Jolxen, seems to confirm the prisoners' suspicions that the prison is some form of social experiment by claiming to be one of its designers, a sociologist contracted by the government to test the effects of anxiety on individuals in a controlled situation. But it is at least as likely that he is deluded or deceitful; this interpretation is neither confirmed nor dismissed. Other hypotheses suggested include the idea that the prison exists to provide a space for the circulation of goods within the economy.

To these interpretations, the text's critics have added their own. Annelies Oeyen, while she acknowledges that the narrative is "un texto ambivalente" (an ambivalent text), reads it very much in an allegorical key.¹⁵⁴ The isolated prison recalls the concentration camps of the dictatorship, the bodies washed ashore re-enact the fate of many of the disappeared, and the society both within and beyond the prison bears the hallmarks of the uncertainties and new forms of exclusion of Argentina's neoliberal 1990s.¹⁵⁵ This leads Oeyen quite naturally to a psycho-sociological reading of the story: "Cohen presenta una fantasía que sirve de catarsis y alivio ante la incertidumbre cotidiana de la experiencia argentina" (Cohen presents a fantasy that serves as a cathartic relief from the daily uncertainty of Argentine experience).¹⁵⁶ Escape from the prison is not a question of leaving the country, "sino a través de una salida hacia sí mismo que devuelve la perdida fe en su entorno" (but through a journey towards oneself that restores a lost faith in one's environment): the response to uncertainty is not emigration but a journey of discovery within the self that makes it possible to regain trust in the country.¹⁵⁷

Although Oeyen's analysis is perhaps over-zealous in its quest to anchor the story in a single time and place, the explicit use of the enclosed-world-as-microcosm-of-society device in Cohen's narrative certainly opens itself up to any and all interpretations of this kind. Although unnamed, the country in which the prison is located certainly bears resemblances to post-dictatorship Argentina. These are evoked through references to the failure of the nation to construct a coherent sense of identity for itself, to the riches of the land and a glorious past now eclipsed by heavy debts,

and to the dual tendency of the state towards violent disciplinarianism and the sudden abandonment and neglect of its citizens. The problem is that these readings are all too consciously *invited* by the text. Its sheer openness to multiple metaphorical readings, together with its diegetic concern with the process of metaphorization itself, undermines the validity of proposing any one reading, including those suggested in the text itself.

It is the sea, the prisoners' constant reminder of a possible but perilous escape route, that acts as the point of condensation for many of the story's metaphors. The prisoners ascribe to it myriad and conflicting qualities: "El mar es un potrillo indeciso. Al mar hay que dominarlo" (the sea is a hesitant foal. The sea has to be controlled);¹⁵⁸ "El mar es una puta remilgada" (the sea is a fussy whore); or, more puzzlingly, "El mar es un clarinete ortopédico" (the sea is an orthopaedic clarinet).¹⁵⁹ In this way, the sea becomes something different to each: "El mar es la ilusión monarca, todo le cabe" (the sea is the monarch of illusions, everything fits into it).¹⁶⁰ One is reminded of the ocean in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961), which appears to have no essence or substance of its own, but instead produces powerful projections of the characters' own fears and desires. Closer comparisons with Lem's ocean will open up some of the complexities of Cohen's approach to metaphor in this narrative.

On one hand, Cohen's insistence on the utter indifference of the sea reinforces Lem's critique of the anthropomorphizing approach that we cannot lay aside in our quest for knowledge, which domesticates the other or provides a familiar point of reference to increase our understanding of the unfamiliar (the task of metaphor). The prisoners' clichéd metaphors bring them no closer to understanding the radical otherness of the sea:

Por mucho que algunas asombren, todas en el fondo son frases consabidas, refritos mal logrados de frases ya viejas, que el mar ni siquiera oye. Con frases como ésas los presos podrían pasarse siglos sin entender qué pretende el mar de ellos, siempre y cuando pretenda algo.¹⁶¹

However surprising some of them may sound, they are all in the end habitual phrases, badly rehashed versions of already dated phrases, which the sea doesn't even hear. With phrases like these, the prisoners could carry on for years without understanding what the sea expects of them, if indeed it expects anything at all.

The sea remains impassive to their existence, imperviously material and resistant to interpretation. When Sergio swims out to sea, he understands that “cualquier frase sobre el mar, cualquier cábala es mentira” (every phrase about the sea, every speculation, is a lie).¹⁶² The sea knows nothing of the prisoners, and if they choose to enter it in the hope of escape, it is because they need to find a direction to move in: “Así los actos cobran sentido” (that way, acts gain meaning).¹⁶³

Thus “La ilusión monarca” demonstrates the delusional nature of anthropomorphizing metaphors and insists on the irreducible materiality of the sea, which transcends all human attempts to organize it into a coherent narrative and remains totally other to human society. However, unlike Lem, Cohen is not principally concerned here with the limitations of our knowledge and our inability to encounter the Other without projecting ourselves onto it. “La ilusión monarca” becomes instead an exploration of the creative power of metaphor and “a meditation on pure multiplicity,” as Serres defines his own project in *Genesis* (1982),¹⁶⁴ a book that becomes a significant node in the textual and tropological network that Cohen's text creates. Although metaphor's rendering of an unfamiliar thing in terms of a more familiar thing inevitably limits and distorts the knowledge gained, Cohen's narrative also redeems metaphor for the insight it affords into the processes of transformation and recombination that govern the literary text as much as the natural physical world. If an understanding of these processes leads to greater knowledge of the human condition and our place in the universe, metaphor should not always provoke epistemological skepticism. In this manner, Cohen departs significantly from the Nietzsche-inspired suspicion, prevalent in postmodern theory and criticism, that what we

take as “truth” is nothing but “a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms.”¹⁶⁵

Anthropomorphic analogies and metaphors, far from being wholly discredited as tools that are far too blunt to produce genuine knowledge, play a crucial role in establishing the indivisibility of man and nature, one of the central tenets of Romanticism. Jules Michelet’s *The Sea* (1861) exemplifies the Romantic principle of analogy – linking the particular with the general, the individual with the nation, the physical and the moral – that also underpins much of Cohen’s work. Michelet’s sea, like Cohen’s, is a “majestic and indifferent” entity:¹⁶⁶ “If we have need of it, it has no need of us. It can do admirably without man.”¹⁶⁷ We feel a heightened sense of our own transience, confronted with its immortal and unchangeable existence, feeling ourselves to be an “ephemeral apparition” in comparison to “the grand immutable powers of Nature.”¹⁶⁸ And yet the sea shares our nature – “Ocean breathes as we do – in harmony with our internal movement” – and, in reminding us of our mortality, it points us to the divine spirit that animates all creation: “it compels us to count incessantly with it, to compute the days and hours, to look up to Heaven.”¹⁶⁹ For Michelet, a “grand, sympathetic, and pregnant dialogue” unites all of creation with itself and with its Creator, but the harmony and fertility that characterize the world result not from agreement but from a “gigantic struggle,” a constant tension between Life and “its sister, Death,” and between forces of preservation and destruction at every level of existence.¹⁷⁰

The sea in “La ilusión monarca” pullulates and pulsates to the rhythm of Michelet’s, according to the same principle of conflict and disorder: “Todo está ahí, esforzándose, luchando, ocupado, todo se mezcla, se enfrenta, se plagia, devora” (everything is there, striving, fighting, busy, everything mixes, clashes, copies, devours).¹⁷¹ The sea’s “energía criminal” (criminal energy) litters the shore with marooned jellyfish each day; many more deaths and decompositions are signalled only by “los olores que exhala” (the smells it gives off).¹⁷² If the sea is anthropomorphized, it is to show its commonality with man: both are systems that ingest and expel, create and destroy, protect and lay waste, give birth and die. Sergio, engulfed in the sea’s waves, becomes part of this cycle as the half-digested sardine head he vomits becomes food for a passing shoal of sardines. As Edward K. Kaplan notes, “Michelet’s

relentless anthropomorphism is far from being a sheer stylistic quirk; rather it points to the divine impulse shared by humanity and nature.¹⁷³ Likewise, Cohen's use of analogy emphasizes the structural similarity of all living things. The difference, of course, is that Cohen does not posit a divine originator who breathes life into his creation, but locates life in the push and pull of forces that, if blindly functioning, are nevertheless able to create new forms out of disorder and conflict.

For Michelet, as Serres observes, the sea is the "prebiotic soup," "the matter from which all other material things originated."¹⁷⁴ In his exploration of how matter is generated or animated, Michelet makes imaginative use of a number of different theories of mechanics circulating at the time; his most original contribution to the theme, in Serres's view, stems from his use of the principles of thermodynamic circulation.¹⁷⁵ Serres notes the precision with which Michelet uses the vocabulary of "a boiler, a source, and a steam engine" to represent circulation in the sea, the mixing of the "soup" from which all matter emerges.¹⁷⁶ As he explains, "there can be no mixture without a movement to disperse the solute through the solvent. [...] There must be fire to prepare the soup, and a pot to prepare it in, and it has to boil."¹⁷⁷ Cohen uses a similar image in "La ilusión monarca" of the soup that mixes as it is heated; his sea is also a model of turbulence and disorder that confounds any attempt to move through it in a straight line, and indeed rids Sergio of all sense of direction or goal, and all desire to escape. Everything in the sea "se intercambia y disuelve" (exchanges and dissolves) in a continual process of transformation.¹⁷⁸

When in one of many descriptions of the sea, Cohen's narrator draws our attention to "esta vaga claridad a lo Turner" (this hazy Turner-esque light),¹⁷⁹ the direct comparison seems almost redundant. The text repeatedly returns to the shifting hues and forms of the sea and sky, the shimmering play of light on surging waves, in ways that strongly evoke Turner's seascapes. For Serres, Turner's art marks the transition "from simple machines to steam engines, from mechanics to thermodynamics," showing the transforming power of fire to change the form of matter and the fundamental roles of chance and disorder, dramatizing hot and cold matter in fusion: "On the one hand clouds of ice, on the other clouds of incandescence."¹⁸⁰ From the

precise drawing of forms and forces, Turner takes us towards a different understanding of matter in flux, which forms “aleatory clouds” and in which “the stochastic is essential”: “The instant is not statically immobilized, fixed like a mast; it is an unforeseen state, hazardous, suspended, drowned, melted in duration, dissolved.”¹⁸¹ For this reason, Serres avers, “Turner is not a pre-impressionist. He is a realist, a proper realist.”¹⁸² Cohen’s descriptions of the sea are imbued with a similar sensitivity to matter in constant movement. His sea, which “a cada instante se pulveriza en violencias” (at every instant atomizes itself in acts of violence),¹⁸³ also enters into a continual play of heat and light with the sky in descriptive passages that could easily refer to a Turner painting. It rains, and the horizon is hidden by clouds of vapour; “repentinos bultos de carbón revientan, lentos, dejando escapar hilos espermáticos, floraciones de nata y de yogur, lirios ardientes donde el sol hace sentir su fuerza” (sudden masses of coal burst, slowly, allowing the escape of spermatic threads, flowerings of cream and yoghurt, burning lilies where the sun makes its force felt).¹⁸⁴

Nietzsche’s Dionysian sea, another precursor to Cohen’s, also draws inspiration from the dynamics of difference and sameness at play in entropy, as expressed in various versions of the two laws of thermodynamics formulated by Rudolf Clausius (1850) and others. In a fragment published in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche finds in the sea a metaphor for the world itself, a “monster of energy,” “a sea of forces flowing and rushing together.”¹⁸⁵ Aligning his description with the first law of thermodynamics, which states that the energy within a system may change form but remains constant, Nietzsche describes a world “that does not expend itself but only transforms itself.” Strictly finite in extension, it is nevertheless full of contradictions, opposing forces and turbulence, “eternally changing, eternally flooding back [...] with an ebb and a flood of its forms.” It is noteworthy, however, that Nietzsche also departs significantly from mid-nineteenth-century scientific principles – and from their articulation in much twentieth-century literature – by insisting on what we would now identify as emergent phenomena in complex systems. Nietzsche’s sense of nature “striving toward the most complex,” as simple forms, through turbulence, give rise to more complex ones before dissolving again into simpler ones, together with his vision of the sea’s forces

flowing “out of the stillest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory,” evoke the dynamics of emergence, which would initially seem to defy laws of entropy. Life-affirming creativity, not the heat-death of entropy, marks Nietzsche’s “Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying.”¹⁸⁶

The “blissful ecstasy” of the Dionysiac, which breaks down the “*principium individuationis*,” results in a dissolution of subjectivity that Nietzsche compares to the experience of intoxication and brings humans together in a “mysterious primordial unity.”¹⁸⁷ This sense of oneness works to “annihilate, redeem and release” the individual,¹⁸⁸ much as it does in Cohen’s fiction. When Sergio in “La ilusión monarca” finally swims out to sea, the intensely sensorial experience of his body’s immersion in water teeming with life initially leads him to lose a sense of his self. He feels that “puede que no sea él quien nada” (it may not be him who is swimming),¹⁸⁹ and the immensity and the sameness of the sea surrounding him has a decentring effect in which his outer limbs seem disconnected from his body and his body itself fragmented and dispersed. A lexicon of exchange, dissolution, transformation, disintegration, and recombination predominates, as – like an endlessly turning kaleidoscope – narrative figures trace the dissolving of one transient form into another. In the sea Sergio both loses himself and finds himself in a way that strongly evokes the effect of Dionysian art for Nietzsche.

Dionysian art convinces us of the eternal creativity of nature, which endures despite all changes in appearance and all destruction. In Nietzsche’s words,

For brief moments we are truly the primordial being itself and we feel its unbounded greed and lust for being; the struggle, the agony, the destruction of appearances, all this now seems to us to be necessary, given the uncountable excess of forms of existence thrusting and pushing themselves into life, given the exuberant fertility of the world-Will; we are pierced by the furious sting of these pains at the very moment when, as it were, we become one with the immeasurable, primordial delight in existence and receive an intimation, in Dionysiac ecstasy, that this

delight is indestructible and eternal. Despite fear and pity, we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose procreative lust we have become one.¹⁹⁰

This vision thoroughly permeates Cohen's description of Sergio's experience at sea, in which he senses both the "eternal lust and delight" and the "terrors" of existence painted by Nietzsche and feels the simultaneous pain and pleasure of discovering himself to be caught up in a conflict and a creativity that extends far beyond him, lost in a centreless, directionless, pulsating mass of energy. The sea returns Sergio to the shore a changed man. The prison seems little more than a theatre set to him now, and the only question of significance is "cómo sumergirse mejor en el mundo cuando salga, cuál la fácil brazada, estar de veras donde esté; no qué hacer, no adónde llegar, sino cómo seguir estando" (how to submerge himself better in the world when he gets out, which is the easy stroke, how to really be where one is; not what to do, not where to arrive, but how to continue being).¹⁹¹ The destruction of the individual, for Cohen as for Nietzsche, leads paradoxically to a greater sense of one's place in the world and of one's connections with others. A cynical loner prior to his experience in the sea, Sergio now seeks out community to communicate what has happened to him.

The play of waves and forces in Nietzsche's Dionysian world allows us to glimpse its nature as "at the same time one and many."¹⁹² A similar use of the analogy of the turbulent sea to theorize multiplicity connects the work of Nietzsche with Serres, and both of these with Cohen. Turning to a different analogy from the history of art, Cohen describes how "El mar se desmenuza en cien mil puntos de Seurat" (the sea breaks down into a hundred thousand of Seurat's dots):¹⁹³ like Seurat's pointillist works, the unity of the sea is an illusion that hides a multiplicity. The sea might appear uniform, cohesive, and enduring, but it is in fact "una ilusión de continuidad" (an illusion of continuity): "el mar no es una superficie ni está hecho de una pieza" (the sea is not a surface, nor it is made of one piece).¹⁹⁴ As he reflects elsewhere,

En la forma que tiene de aparecérsenos, la realidad nos engaña.
Los sentidos nos presentan una multiplicidad exorbitante que

impide ver la unidad de todo lo real, o bien dan a las apariencias una solidez duradera de la que la realidad carece.¹⁹⁵

In the form in which it appears to us, reality deceives us. Our senses present us with an exorbitant multiplicity that prevents us from seeing the unity of all reality, or alternatively they give appearances a lasting solidity that reality does not possess.

Serres's *Genesis* also draws on the sea to explore multiplicity, finding in turbulence a way of thinking the multiple without reducing it to the unitary. Turbulence is "an intermediary state, and also an aggregate mix," bringing together order and disorder, and mixing or associating the one and the multiple by putting into play both a "systematic gathering together" (the unitary) and a "distribution" (the multiple).¹⁹⁶ Turbulence gives us a vision of the world that is not governed by laws, uniformity, and structures but by intermittence, mixture, and noise:

The world is empty here and full there, sometimes being and sometimes nothingness, here order, there chaotic, here occupied, there lacunary, sporadic, and intermittent, as a whole, here strongly foreseeable, there underdetermined, here temporal and there meteorological – here, I mean, predictable or reversible and there an estimate and aleatory, here universe, there diverse, here unitary and there multiplicity, all in all when all's said and done a multiplicity. The cosmos is not a structure, it is a pure multiplicity of ordered multiplicities and pure multiplicities.¹⁹⁷

Both Serres and Cohen attempt in this way to think about multiplicity from perspectives that do not start or end with postmodern pluralism and to understand chaos and indeterminacy in ways that do not inevitably lead to postmodern skepticism.

The positive charge acquired by entropy and multiplicity as forces of creativity in Cohen – following Nietzsche and Serres – is set into relief if we examine the rather different representation of these in another node in

this network of tropologies, Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918). In Adams's presentation of the dialectic of unity and multiplicity, multiplicity is always associated negatively with chaos and disorder; he traces "a movement from American unity of purpose to self-serving multiplicity" and predicts "a world torn apart, grinding down to entropic inertia."¹⁹⁸ Tony Tanner notes the recurrence of sea imagery in *The Education*, evoking in turn the violence of war, a fear of the void and darkness, and a sense of drifting and purposelessness.¹⁹⁹ Like hundreds of thousands of young men, Henry Adams is cast into "the surf of a wild ocean" to be beaten about by "the waves of war";²⁰⁰ a different sort of confusion is generated later in politics, in which "All parties were mixed up and jumbled together in a sort of tidal slack-water."²⁰¹

Philipp Schweighauser, in his comparison of the treatment of unity and multiplicity in the work of Adams and Serres, observes that the sea is one of a number of tropes shared between them.²⁰² However, if in Adams the turbulence of the sea becomes a metaphor for the chaos of war, in Serres it acquires much more positive connotations: it is the source of noise and ultimately of life itself. Schweighauser focusses on the crucial difference in their representation of Venus/Aphrodite. Adams associates Venus with unity and harmony; for Serres, on the other hand (in company with Lucretius), Aphrodite is "born of this chaotic sea, this nautical chaos, the *noise*."²⁰³ If disorder is the universal principle that gives rise to newness, for Serres "it is necessary to rethink the world not in terms of its laws and its regularities, but rather in terms of perturbations and turbulences, in order to bring out its multiple forms, uneven structures, and fluctuating organizations."²⁰⁴

The sea-as-metaphor in Cohen's work sets off an expanding series of vibrations in those tropes and texts that are to be found in t(r)opological proximity to it. Metaphors may unite two different fields of reference, but they also resonate across a plane of immanence in which trope and referent are not distinguished in a hierarchical fashion but form part of a dense, rhizomatic network. This, then, becomes a way of thinking about multiplicity that does not posit relations of "influence" in literature in linear or directly causal terms, or understand the relationship of literature and the rest of the world as one of reference, but brings together an aggregate of texts,

perceptions (of texts and of reality), and experiences (of texts and of reality) in such a way that each encounters the others in an intermittent, turbulent manner, thereby remaining simultaneously multiple and part of a larger system in which forms constantly evolve.

Cohen's conception of the role of metaphor in articulating that multiplicity contrasts directly with its traditional function in Western metaphysics. If, as Heidegger reminds us, "The idea of 'transposing' and of metaphor is based upon the distinguishing, if not complete separation, of the sensible and the nonsensible as two realms that subsist on their own,"²⁰⁵ this opens the door for a Platonic mistrust of the changeable world of the senses in favour of the unchanging world of Ideas. Cohen's immanent vision does not allow us to distinguish so easily between the sensible and the nonsensible; moreover, the true nature of the world, visible and invisible, becomes one of transformation: there is nothing *behind* its changes in appearance.

Nietzsche's definition of truth as "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms"²⁰⁶ is often cited to demonstrate the failure of man's quest for knowledge. Yet in Nietzsche, man's "fundamental human drive" to form metaphors²⁰⁷ is, as Jos de Mul argues, "nothing less than a metaphor for nature's constant metaphorical transformation of itself," without which "Being itself would not be able to exist."²⁰⁸ At the service of the artist, metaphor continually remakes the world, unfixing rigid concepts.²⁰⁹ Nietzsche's own radical and contradictory use of metaphor resists all attempts to fix a single interpretation of his work. Likewise, Cohen's own analogies and intertextual references create a shifting, mobile network in which metaphors such as entropy often change in use from one narrative to another as they are brought into new discursive combinations.

"La ilusión monarca" does not tell a tale of the irresistible lure of anthropomorphism and our doomed quest for meaning in a senseless or unfathomable universe. We are not so caught up in language that we cannot experience that radical otherness that compels us to clutch at metaphors in the first place. Metaphors do not distort; they transform. They do not reduce meaning but set up a series of vibrations that produce new and often unpredictable patternings and permutations. This is what Cohen refers to

as the transformative power of resonance, which is the proper subject of enquiry of his “realismo inseguro.”²¹⁰

As we have seen, entropy emerges in Cohen’s work as a privileged metaphor for literary creativity, and returning once more to Serres’s essay on Michelet may throw some light on this choice. Underlying the many different theories and models Michelet draws upon – from geometry, physics, chemistry, biology, and so on – Serres identifies two “completely stable structural analogies.”²¹¹ These are *reservoirs* (points of condensation and concentration) and *circulation*. This is tantamount, as Serres explains, to saying “a set of elements plus operations upon these elements”; in defining the object of the text in this way, however, he is not “defining a structure” but “defining structure itself; for the definition of structure is indeed a set of elements provided with operations.”²¹² Serres shows that asking questions about reservoirs and circulation such as “What is in the reservoir?” and “How do the elements circulate?” will eventually “reconstruct the entire set of interpretative organs formed in the nineteenth century.”²¹³

And this, Serres suggests, is the reason that his analysis of Michelet’s text cannot be considered to have explicated it in any way:

there can no longer be any question of explicating Michelet by any one or other of these interpretative organs, or by the sum total of them, since the most general conditions for the formation of these very organs are explained clearly and distinctly in the book *The Sea* itself. All I can do is apply these same organs to one another. [...] The object of explanation explains in turn the set of methods that were to explicate it.²¹⁴

The critic cannot explicate the text because “the strategy of criticism is located in the object of criticism,” and this, Serres insists, is not a unique characteristic of Michelet’s text but fully generalizable: “The text is its own criticism, its own explication, its own application.”²¹⁵ Any transcendent approach to criticism is therefore redundant.

Serres renders plausible the idea that entropy and thermodynamics might be privileged tropes for literary construction, as they do not represent

or explain a particular structure so much as *define structure itself*: the very laws that govern the condensation and circulation of elements within a text. Cohen's narratives suggest a very similar strategy of criticism: metaphors of entropy, dissipative structures, resonance, and turbulence in *El fin de lo mismo* lead us to ask how these texts represent and stage an encounter with difference, how they imagine and perform relations between texts, and between texts and the world, and how they attempt to conceive multiplicity. These are the metaphors that enable Cohen, like Nietzsche, to theorize a world that "lives on itself: its excrements are its food"²¹⁶ as a picture of art, which participates in the same, endlessly self-producing, cycle: "The world as a work of art that gives birth to itself."²¹⁷ They also allow him to carve out an alternative path that diverges from contemporary society's definition of (socioeconomic) progress, as well as from postmodernism's inability to theorize the new.

In the intricate association of creativity and destruction, energy and disorder in the narratives of *El fin de lo mismo*, we can detect further echoes of Ballard's work, especially in the erotic intensity with which he treats the car crash in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and the later *Crash* (1973), which becomes a site of sexual liberation and energy as well as trauma and violence. Among the many "ecos ballardianos" (Ballardian echoes) that Jorge Bracamonte perceptively observes in Cohen's novels is a shared recourse to science and technology as a source of metaphors.²¹⁸ However, Bracamonte's comparative study of the two authors does not touch on what I consider to be crucial differences in the formation of such metaphors. Cohen's much greater reliance on the physics of chaos and complexity allows him to resignify the relationship between disorder and creativity in more unambiguously positive terms and to relocate these dynamics within the natural world rather than emphasizing, as Ballard does, the cruelty of man-made technologies. The trauma and alienation that mark the violent fusion of human bodies and urban environment in Ballard are reversed in Cohen's immanent vision, one in which organic and inorganic matter, conscious and unconscious energies, are bound together according to *natural* laws, in which chaos and turbulence are not the exception but the rule.

Julián Jiménez Heffernan argues that the repeated metafictional references to entropy and metaphor in *The Crying of Lot 49* demonstrate Pynchon's awareness of the fact that "entropy is not simply a trope, but a metatropé, for it harbors a reference to the topological gesture par excellence: transformation, transference, metalepsis."²¹⁹ However, Pynchon's treatment of metaphor, and of the metaphor of entropy, remains much more ambivalent than Cohen's. Peter Freese, among other critics, points to the shift in Pynchon's understanding of entropy that is evident in the passage from "Entropy" to *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which Pynchon places the thermodynamical version of entropy as heat death in tension with the use of entropy in information theory to describe the loss and distortion of information in communication ("noise"). In this context, Freese asserts that the Tristero, a secret communication system discovered by Oedipa, "should be understood as a promising sign of renewal and reordering."²²⁰ Similarly, Thomas Schaub claims that Pynchon's introduction of the information-theory version of entropy allows him to suggest that "Oedipa's sorting activities may counter the forces of disorganization and death."²²¹ Yet *The Crying of Lot 49* leaves crucially undecidable the question of whether metaphors aid perception or distort it, whether they help us make sense of the world and connect ourselves to it or feed a dangerous paranoid obsession with plots and conspiracies: the "act of metaphor" is both "a thrust at truth and a lie."²²² Freese may be right in suggesting that Pynchon's novel itself, with its dense weavings of plot and metaphor, counters entropy's disorderings as it "constitutes the negentropy activity that imaginative humans might pit against the running-down of their universe,"²²³ but this promise of meaning is only promoted in the most uncertain of ways within the text itself. Both Pynchon and Cohen create texts that exploit the wealth of the rhizomatic relationships through which metaphor produces endlessly varied and infinitely mutating meanings. However, while Pynchon, as Heffernan observes, "is constantly alerting us to the slipperiness of figurative diction,"²²⁴ Cohen's choice to embed his treatment of metaphor within the dynamics of chaos and the metaphysics of multiplicity renders his work much less equivocal in its celebration of the creative power of metaphor.

