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ESTUDIOS

Rolando Pérez
SARDUY AND [THE GIFT OF]
THE POEM-OBJECT. WITH A
PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED ESSAY
BY SEVERO SARDUY, «LA ESCRITURA
COMO REGALO JAPONÉS»

POESÍA

Ko Un
POEMAS
Traducción de Alí Calderón

ENTREVISTA

Federico Díaz-Granados
y Fernando Valverde
ENTREVISTA
CON CHARLES SIMIC
«DESARMANDO EL SILENCIO»

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[ESTUDIOS]



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—
SARDUY Y [EL REGALO DE] EL POEMA-OBJETO
CON UN ENSAYO INÉDITO DE SEVERO SARDUY,
«LA ESCRITURA COMO REGALO JAPONÉS»
—

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R E S U M E N

PALABRAS CLAVE { Severo Sarduy, Poética, Poéticas materialistas, Poema-objeto, Estética }

En gran medida el concepto sarduyano de la literatura y de la estética puede trazarse al interés del autor por la forma de pensar de la escuela estructuralista de Levi-Strauss y Saussure, que concibe la lengua como un sistema de signos lingüísticos dentro de una estructura diádica de significantes y significados. Visto de esta manera, la lengua es despojada de una perspectiva heideggeriana ontológicamente tribal y es tratada materialmente. Es más, a raíz de su interés personal por las artes plásticas, Sarduy a menudo expresa la materialidad del signo lingüístico a través del signo visual, uniendo el uno con el otro. Como ya veremos en las siguientes páginas, Sarduy convirtió el discurso científico en literatura (p. ej., el Big Bang); la poesía en prosa; la prosa en poesía. Para Sarduy el texto era como un cuerpo, y la página como un lienzo. *Qua* lienzo el poema se convierte en un objeto y, como objeto, un regalo en potencia. Este artículo también incluye «La escritura como regalo

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japonés», un ensayo inédito de Sarduy, sobre la novela de Donoso, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*.

A B S T R A C T

KEYWORDS { Severo Sarduy, Poetics, Materialist poetics, Poem-object, Aesthetics }

Much of Severo Sarduy's view of literature and aesthetics can be traced to his attraction to the Levi-Strausseau/Saussurean school of thought, which views language as a system of linguistic signs within the dyadic structure of signifiers and signifieds. Viewed this way, language is stripped of its ontological Heideggerian *völkisch* perspective, and treated synchronically and materially. Moreover, due to his own personal interests in the plastic arts, Sarduy often expressed the materiality of the linguistic sign through the visual sign, collapsing the one unto the other. As we will see in the pages that follow, Sarduy turned scientific discourse into literature (e.g. Big Bang); poetry into prose; prose into poetry. He conceived of the text as a body, and the page as a canvas. *Qua* canvas the poem becomes an object, and as an object a potential gift. This article also includes "La escritura como regalo japonés," an unpublished essay by Sarduy, on Donoso's novel, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*.

Para Mercedes Sarduy & Ramón Alejandro

What we call modernity is *marked* by the immanence of materiality and the absence of faith in the transcendental. Today we know, like the care-taking nephew in Nicanor Parra's poem, "El túnel" (1972 96-98), that if we look through a keyhole the truth that we have been duped will be revealed to us, but even worse that such a truth may itself be a falsehood. Once Descartes introduced the evil genius into his *Meditations*, what began as a dream became a nightmare, after which no one, no matter how hard he or she tried, could put the evil genius back into the bottle again. And so by the eighteenth century, the Marquis de Sade, had come around to side with Descartes' seductive evil genius: in a metaphysical revolt against the "Spirit," that championed the materiality of the body. Consequent of this histori-

cal moment, the word indeed became flesh: the truths of literature became relative truths, or possible falsehoods, and the word became unmoored from a referent that guaranteed its eternal meaning.

The after-shocks of this great seismic event, however, would only be felt after WW II (post Holocaust and Hiroshima), when it became impossible for many to continue to believe in God, meaning with a capital M, or the idea that one could trust what was either said or written by anyone. Our author, Severo Sarduy, was a young man living in Paris at the time—or what was then the intellectual center of the competing philosophies of existentialism (of which there were many stripes) and structuralism. Sarduy was attracted to the latter, and specifically to the Levi-Strausseau/Saussurean school of thought, which viewed words as linguistic signs within the dyadic structure of signifiers and signifieds. Viewed this way, language was stripped of its ontological Heideggerean *völkisch* perspective, and treated synchronically and materially. Moreover, due to his own personal interests in the plastic arts, Sarduy often expressed the materiality of the linguistic sign through the visual sign, collapsing the one unto the other. As we will see in the pages that follow, Sarduy turned scientific discourse into literature (e.g. *Big Bang*); poetry into prose; prose into poetry. He conceived of the text as a body, and the page as a canvas. *Qua* canvas the poem became an object, and as an object a potential gift.

WHITE: RED AND BLACK, THE COLORS OF MATTER

White, the color of sperm, is also the color of the inter-stellar ejaculate we call the Milky Way, best appreciated against the black (background) of the firmament, on which the second most prominent color is red.¹ As such, Sarduy intentionally entitled his first collection of poems, *Big Bang*, to playfully suggest an analogical relation between

1. Also important to remember in relation to these three colors is Octavio Paz's 1966 poem, *Blanco*. Inspired by Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, *Blanco* (1967) is written on a white page with black and red letters.

Lemaître’s cosmological theory and the sex act. More recently these bodily fluids recall the life/sex/death chromatism of Andrés Serrano. And here I’m thinking of Serrano’s *Untitled XIV* (Ejaculate in Trajectory).² This large photograph (40 x 60 inches) depicts an “ejaculate in trajectory” from left to right against a black background that resembles in its frozen movement our own galaxy in the night sky. Murat Aydemir writes in *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, Masculinity, Meaning*:

With respect to scale, *Untitled XIV* invokes the vast expanse of the cosmos; its black background connotes outer space, in which human beings can only be of little consequence. The stream of semen appears as a galaxy, the Milky Way. At the same time, the knowledge that this huge phenomenon consists of spermatozoa... akin to...Serrano’s cellular photography of semen and blood, cannot but prompt the awareness of the very small, the microscopic. Thus the viewer’s look is effectively sandwiched, bracketed between two perspectives, both working to qualify the human eye: the infinitely large and the infinitely small. (2007 16-17)

And yet it was Sarduy who nearly thirty years earlier called our attention to the bodily fluidity of color—the “colorito” disparaged by Renaissance perspective painters but embraced by Mannerist and Baroque artists like Titian and Rubens. For if perspective led to the numerous studies of anatomy with their emphasis on line, the attention now devoted to color by the Mannerists served as a reminder of pulsating life, and not just cadavers. What Sarduy says of Rubens’ “furia del penello,” he imputes to the color red produced by the fury of the brush in *Un testigo perenne y delatado*.³

El rojo se volcó sobre el morado
y sobre el rojo un garabato oscuro,

2. See Andres Serrano, *Body and Soul* (1995). This image is also available through either the database ARTstor or through a search in Google’s Image bank.

3. Unless otherwise noted all texts by Sarduy are from the Gustavo Guerrero and François Wahl two volume *Obra completa* edition (1999). From here on the *Obra completa* will be cited as either *OC-I* or *OC-II*.

quemada geometría sobre el muro:
ventana de otra luz y otro lado.

La furia del brochazo⁴ enemistado:
madre del vino, púrpura clausura,
sangre rupestre sobre el agua dura,
umbral incandescente sepultado.
(OCI 221)

No longer geometry but color is what the paintbrush produces. Thus in his poem, “Rothko” from *Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado*, Sarduy aptly writes:

Las líneas no, ni sombra ni textura,
ni la breve ilusión del movimiento;
nada más que el silencio: el sentimiento
de estar en su presencia. La pintura. (I 209)

And this is precisely what allows Sarduy to place Rubens alongside Mark Rothko and “action painters,” Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. For instance, in “Páginas en Blanco (Cuadros de Franz Kline)” where Sarduy dedicates six poems to Kline, each bearing the title of a Kline painting, red becomes the color that the wall (body) bleeds—made sharper in contrast to the whiteness of the page/canvas. Note, for instance, poem IV (“Harley Red”) of this collection:

El sueño no:
la pérdida.
El blanco roedor,
que ciega.
Pierdo pie. Todo es compuerta.
Mira:
el muro sangra. (OCI/Otros poemas 192)

4. “[E]l flujo de la sangre es un ascenso a vocales y consonantes, átomos rojos, letras incandescentes; la palabra por otra parte, es cuerpo. La mano traza un brochazo que es la furia de las imágenes, la fuerza de la escritura como energía nerviosa, la irrupción seminal,” said Sarduy in an interview with Danubio Torres Fierro (OCHI 1816).

As Josef Albers points out in his book, *Interaction of Color*, red appears lighter against a white background than against a black background (2006 104-105). And while white blinds us, red transport us to the intense whiteness of non-being. “Cada rojo, una vez posado sobre la tela, intenta desviarse, convocar otro similar o distante, volver atrás, al *blanco* inicial, al estado puntual o a la nada,” says Sarduy in “Cromoterapia” (*OCI* 35, my italics). “El rojo de la sangre derramada / selló su exploración. También su vida,” ends the poetic tribute⁵ to Rothko (Ibid. 209), recalling Rothko’s favorite color and the artist’s suicide. And in one of the earliest poetic tributes to Kline, Sarduy writes:

Quise escribir un artículo y no pude,
un poema y me salió cojo.
Franz Kline:
bailaste un mambo y era La Pelona con quien bailabas,
pintaste un muro y te llamaron del otro lado,
atravesaste un canal veneciano y era el RÍO FIJO el que atravesabas:
Tocaron tu Puerta de Zinc:
era la orquestica fría.
Ahora bailas con El Rubio.

Adiós. Qué blanca está el agua.
Si este no me sale te escribiré otro poema.
(*OCI* / “Poemas bizantinos” 119)

Obviously written after Sarduy’s visit to the 1962 Venice Biennale where Kline’s work was first exhibited, and after Kline’s death shortly thereafter, this poem is a eulogy in color. Where once the wall bled red now the white water of death ushers Kline from the other side. If this poem does not succeed, says Sarduy, he will attempt another one; for writing, like painting, is among other things a way of dealing with sex, life, and death—it is the human

5. According to the Oxford English Dictionaries online, one modern definition of the noun “tribute” is “an act, statement, or *gift* that is intended to show gratitude, respect, or admiration” (my emphasis). <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tribute>

struggle against fixity: “el RÍO FIJO” which is both writing’s destination and what all writing aims to avoid. This is the reason for the interplay of the black and white of the page. And as per Sarduy’s own admission in his interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the colors of Franz Kline’s action paintings were also the driving force behind his novel, *Gestos*: published at around the same time that Kline’s paintings were exhibited in Venice (*OC-II* / “Severo Sarduy” 1798). In *Gestos*, for instance Sarduy describes a wedding party with the bride in white emerging out of a black car in what is a cross between life and death (*OCI* 277). It is not, says Sarduy, that black is superimposed on the white page/canvas, but rather that these “colors” play off each other in a non-exclusive double articulation. “En los cuadros de Kline la precisión y el equilibrio del gesto son tales que no se sabe si las barras negras están trazadas sobre el fondo blanco o al revés” (*OC-II* 1816).

This, however, was not the case for Mallarmé, whose seminal influence in twentieth century poetics impacted the work of many of the writers (e.g., Haroldo de Campos and Paz,) either mentioned or alluded to in *Big Bang* (1974); and obviously, by extension, *Big Bang* itself. For Mallarmé the whiteness of the page offset the blackness of the letters, and this was intended—perhaps precisely because it was poetry and not painting—to underscore the materiality and plasticity of the linguistic sign. The black/white page of *Un coup de dés* is generative and disseminating as in a textual “constellation” (Mallarmé 1945 477) of “milky” signs (*étoiles*) that are in part pictorial signifiers. “The emission here is not that of a message...[T]he quasi-‘meaning’ of dissemination is the impossible return to the rejoined, readjusted unity of meaning...” says Derrida in “The Double Session” (*Dissemination* 1981 268). It is reflective of a poetics of expenditure without reserve, of a *plutonismo* without a *telos*. And as Jean-Pierre Richard suggests in *L’univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* “there exists perhaps in Mallarmé, the temptation, entirely on the mental level, of what elsewhere would be called homosexuality” (qtd. in *Dissemination* 271). Mallarmé writes:

Falls

the feather

rhythmic foreboding suspense

to bury itself

in the original spume

(2005 10)

This “feather” or “plume solitaire” of *Un coup de dés*, is both a pen and a feather (a quill) that buries itself in the foam of its own ejaculation. It is the pen that writes “las plumas” with which Auxilio and Socorro cross-dress (1993 91, 101), the pen and the feathers that turn them into the characters (*signs*) they are on the white/black pages of *De donde son los cantantes*, and it is *la plume* qua penis (*pincel/pennello*)⁶ that is the originator of “SPERM, the burning lava, milk, spume, or dribble of the seminal liquor” (*Dissemination* 1981 266). And here sperm, blood, ink, and paint come together to make what is the base of Sarduy’s poetics.

If much of the inspiration of *Big Bang* is Mallarmé that is because the French poet revolutionized poetry by making it ideographic, and revolutionized painting by making the latter textual. Andrés Sánchez Robayna writes:

Puede decirse que Sarduy veía en esta clase de libros el espacio ideal de ‘mostración’ de lo poético: la pagina blanca es en ellos una suerte de ‘escena’ en la que se opera el diálogo de la imagen y de la palabra, el ámbito propicio para un superior intercambio entre la imagen
]poética
y la imagen plástica; un ámbito que es, al mismo tiempo, lugar de celebración del *graphos* y de completa simbiosis de poesía y pintura.
(*OG-II*/“El ideograma y el deseo (La poesía de Severo Sarduy)”
]1555-1556)

6. The phrase “furia del pennello” is the complimentary term Giovan Pietro Bellori used to describe Peter Paul Rubens’ style. But Sarduy eroticizes the term when he writes: “...el pincel se erige...salpicando, chorreando...rapidez del gozo, *furia del pennello* que apenas metaforiza la furia del pene...esa erección del pincel, la tumescencia del trazo...” (*OCHII/La simulación* 1306)

Indeed, the influence of Mallarmé on Sarduy was the result of the kind of typo (*graphic*) experimentation that was to equally influence Eugen Gomringer, and the Brazilian Noigandres Group. Thus it was that Mallarmé’s “blancheur rigide” against which the text was written became Sarduy’s “río congelado...con tapices de espesos signos oscuros” (*OCH* 124). Constitutive of the “text” was the whiteness between signs—the ontological space of absence and of difference (Cf. Steiner 1981 537). But what interested Sarduy, as did the “concrete” poets, was Mallarmé’s notion of poetry as a material artifact, a *res poetica*:⁷ first carried out by Nicanor Parra and still *practiced* today by poets like Ramon Dachs (1998, 2006) and Pedro López Adorno (1999).⁸

7. César Vallejo’s “Trilce I” can also be considered a *res poetica*, as are some of the other poems in *Trilce* (1922).

8. Among the books by the Catalan writer, Ramon Dachs, are *Blanc* (1998)—a poetic/visual tribute to Mallarmé—and *Tarot de Marsella: poema eleatorio* (2006). The latter work shares with Puerto Rican poet, Pedro López Adorno’s *Rapto continuo: poesía Tarot* (1999) the material fact that as poem-objects they both put into play the Mallarméan notion of chance (*hassard*). Dach’s book, which comes in a web-based format entitled, *InterTarot de Marsella* (www.hermeneia.net/intertarot/) allows the reader to deal the Tarot cards in such a way that each hand dealt yields a different combination of poems. [See my forthcoming article, “Entre literatura, artes visuales y ciencia: la imagen de pensamiento de Severo Sarduy y Ramon Dachs” in *Cámara de eco. Homenaje a Severo Sarduy* (FCE: 2018/2019)]. Similarly, López Adorno’s *Rapto continuo* is composed of 78 beautifully designed Tarot cards, each containing a different poem that may be combined in an infinite number of ways. If the “container” of *InterTarot de Marsella* is the coded web ‘page,’ the container of López Adorno’s *Rapto continuo* is a hand-crafted oak box. See below:



CONCRETE POETRY

Sarduy's *Flamenco* (1969), *Mood indigo* (1970), and *Corona de las frutas* (1990; below)⁹ were book-objects, published in limited editions, and their physicality was as important as the printed/painted words in them.



Corona de las frutas, 1990. Poems by Severo Sarduy. Lithographs by Ramón Alejandro.

Such “works” bespoke of the idea that words are images, and the white or “blank” page their canvas. “Escribir es pintar,” said Sarduy.

Lo último que queda, una vez terminada la página laboriosa,
ajustados los sucesivos párrafos, las frases rápidas, las palabras
corriendo como en la cresta de su propio oleaje, es una imagen.
(*OCI* / “Cromoterapia” 34)

In the 1897 preface to *Un coup de dés*, Mallarmé reluctantly explained the poetics underpinning his “experimental” poem. The “blancs” (or white spaces), he said, assumed an important role in the totality of the poem: they accentuated, as it were, the silence surrounding the words, which comprised one third of the space of the paper.

9. Inspired by an essay of the same title by Lezama Lima, in 1990 Sarduy collaborated with the Cuban painter, Ramón Alejandro, to produce this limited, book-object edition, composed of ten décimas dedicated to Cuba’s tropical fruits, and four signed lithographs by Alejandro.

“The paper,” said Mallarmé, “intervened each time as an image of itself” (1945 455, my translation). And now consider *Flamenco*, wherein Sarduy pays tribute to both Mallarmé and Apollinaire. Here “Sevillanas” reads: “EN EL ESPACIO DE LO BLANCO, donde las sombras se anulan/ la luz va royendo los bordes, plegando los colores, destruyendo las formas” (*OCI* 138); and a poem which begins with the words “COMO UNA PIEDRA NEGRA” (135) is shaped (in Apollinaire fashion)¹⁰ like a “spiral” rock: “SOBRE UNA PIEDRA BLANCA” (*ibíd.*). Below:

	COMO UNA PIEDRA NEGRA	
	sobre la cal la sombra	
		SOBRE UNA PIEDRA BLANCA
añil de los jardines		COMO FIBRA DE VIDRIO
en los sonoros patios		TAPANDO UNA VENTANA
las letras se repiten		HERRERÍA BARROCA
formando una cenefa		SOBRE LA CAL LA SOMBRA
(las palabras son muros)		COLORES DILATADOS
la espiral de la frase		HIERROS ENTRELAZÁNDOSE
al fijarse, una cúpula		ARABESCOS HERÁLDICOS
la página, una sala		DOBLE QUE EL SOL DESPLAZA
(el palacio es un libro)		SOBRE CAMPO DE CAL
a la vez piedra y letra		ESCRIBIENDO LAS ARMAS
pensamiento y soporte		ENTRE CUERDAS LAS LETRAS
armazón y sentido		SOBRE LOS MUROS BLANCOS
la escritura va armando		SI LOS DIBUJOS CAMBIAN
edificios de signos		REVERSO DE LA LUZ
las letras se repiten		PARA MEDIR EL DÍA
el palacio es un libro		
la exactitud del agua		

Sánchez Robayna rightly locates Sarduy’s mixed genre poetics in an ongoing tradition that goes back to Mallarmé’s collaboration with Monet, and other writer/painter pairs:

El diálogo entre la poesía y las artes visuales hunde sus raíces en el siglo XIX...es una historia ya larga que va desde la colaboración de Mallarmé y Monet en torno a *El cuervo* de E. A. Poe hasta...los libros realizados conjuntamente por el pintor Antoni Tàpies y el poeta Joan Brossa [*l’Escarnidor de diademes* 1967]. *OCI* II/“El ideograma y el deseo,” etc 1555)

10. See “Apollinaire’s Paysage/Landscape” 1980 30—31.

This Mallarméan emphasis on the typography of poetry, regardless of its Platonic undertones, served as the major inspiration of the concrete poetry movement of the Noigandres Group. For significantly, Mallarmé, wittingly or unwittingly turned the word into an object of perception: to be looked at rather than to be read. And in their 1958 *Noigandres* manifesto, “Pilot Plan For Concrete Poetry,” Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos defined “poesía concreta” as the “tension of things in space-time” (Solt 1970 72). Like an ideogram that appealed “to nonverbal communication...[a] concrete poem,” they wrote, “is an object in and by itself, not an interpreter of exterior objects and/or more or less subjective feelings. Its material: word (sound, visual, semantical charge). Its problem: a problem of functions-relations of this material” (Ibid). By this account, the object-oriented poetics of concrete poetry seems to have had its spiraling beginnings in Mallarmé’s “constellation” of “actual entities” and “eternal objects,” to borrow these ontological terms from Whitehead (1978 158).

One of the first things to take place after the initial explosion of the “Big Bang” was the dispersal of all kinds of objects (+, -). Like some intergalactic dust, or nebulae, Haroldo de Campos’ 1963 book, *Galáxias*, elliptically spreads out, free of punctuation (historical time) across the page with the words “e começo aqui e meço aqui este começo e recomeço” or “and here I begin and I spin here this that I begin and re-begin...” (1984 18.11.63). He goes on: “todo livro é um livro de ensaio de ensaios,” “this whole book is an essay of essays...” without beginning and without end (Ibid). *Galáxias*, declared Haroldo de Campos,

was conceived as an experiment in doing away with the limits between poetry and prose, and projecting the larger more suitable concept of *text* (as a *corpus* of words with their atextual potentials.)...The text is defined as a ‘flux of signs’ without punctuation marks or capital letters, flowing uninterruptedly across the page, as a *galactic* expansion. Each page, by itself, makes a ‘concretion,’ or autonomously

coalescing *body*, interchangeable with any other page for reading purposes. (1977 58, my italics)¹¹

Compare the above passage with the opening lines of “*Big Bang*”: “Las galaxias parecen alejarse unas de otras a velocidades considerables...Asistimos al resultado de una gigantesca explosión” (*OCHI* 165), and what follows is a series of sections (made up of scientific prose mixed with poetry) that may be read either in isolation or in connection with the others. And what Sarduy has called the “microscopic image” of *Galaxias*’s text: isomorphically juxtaposed to its “macroscopic perception,” that is to say, its “biography” (1986 66), or *bio/graphos*, may be equally applicable to his own “galactic” object, “*Big Bang*”—a text, which by its own composition affirms the vectoring of analogy and resists teleological linearity.

CONCLUSION: THE GIFT OF THE POEM-OBJECT

“Al principio—...que no hay principio—era el blanco: lenta espiral láctea, nudo de enanos nevados, hélice de semen”, writes Sarduy in “La noche escribe.” He continues: “Al principio era la página: la veteaba la noche del tintero” (*OCHI* 19). Thus, for Sarduy, “al principio,” was the simultaneous advent of the page (space) and the body (time)¹²: primordial objects of inscription. And in *Flamenco* Sarduy repeatedly refers to the body—a machine made of words—as being inside a white cube:

11. Interestingly, for philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, a “concrecence” is the coming together of distinct entities to create “a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction” (1978 21). It is what leads to creativity, as “‘creativity’ is the principle of *novelty*” (*Ibid*).

12. One can think of biological organisms as entities inscribed by the genome (DNA and RNA) that narrates the stories of a cosmological ancestral past, and of present day cellular structures.

DENTRO DE UN CUBO BLANCO

aristas superpuestas

anamorfosis del espacio

EL CUERPO... (Ibid. 144)

Are we then to wonder that *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* begins with a discussion of Sade, the first author of modernity to write on the body, and one of the first to be sacrificed for it? In Part IV of *De donde son los cantantes* (1967), “La entrada de Cristo en La Habana,” a Christ *figure* enters the city to the great adulation of the crowds: “las mujeres...se tiraban al suelo, querían tocarlo, besaban la tierra por donde había pasado...[y] los niños estaban disfrazado de él, con coronitas de espinas (blancos de cascarilla) y florecitas de sangre” (1994 224). ¡Todo era tan bonito!” says the narrator, echoing the enthusiasm of the crowd; but by the end of the procession “Christ” has *literally* and *figuratively* been consumed to death by the masses, and Christ’s entry has become “la entrada de Cristo en la muerte” (Ibid.232). Christ, in other words is a sign, a text, an artifact, a fetish, a body of consumption, and his death *is a crucifix*, a cross that hangs on a wall. And just as Christ’s sacrifice is *re/presented* in the Christian Mass by the object-offering of the Eucharist: “so that sins may be forgiven,” the Marquis de Sade’s sacrifice in the Bastille is *re-presented* in the form of *Justine* and *Juliette* so that humanity be allowed to think the “unthinkable”: the contingency of life and death.

One particular writer who understood our symbolic and ontological relation to non-human objects was, Bruno Schulz (1892-1942). His characters (in both stories and drawings), constantly interact with books, candles, and manikins as ontological equals.¹³ Today the most lasting impression that anyone who has

13. The mythical/spiritual dimension of foot fetishism, as an aspect of the life of matter, is found throughout Schulz’s writings and drawings (in the stories that make up *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, and in his book of drawings and etchings, *The Book of Idolatry*). Though Sarduy did not directly write on Schulz, he was familiar with his work through Tadeusz Kantor’s theatrical production of Schulz’s short story, «A Treatise on Tailors’ Dummies Or The Second

ever visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. walks away with is that of “all those shoes,” as if the shoes were inhabited by spirits who did not want us to forget them—as if the shoes were subjects instead of objects. This is what Graham Harman’s *object oriented ontology* (2005) asks us to consider; that is to say, the ontological depth of non-human objects, or as Ortega y Gasset, put it in “Ensayo de estética a Manera de prólogo”: “el yo” de las cosas or the “I-ness” of all objects.¹⁴

Sarduy dedicated most of his poems either to his close friends or to people he admired. And what is a dedication if not the turning of what otherwise seems an abstract thing (an “eternal object”), like a poem, into an artifact—an actual entity (at once concrete and “intentional”)—that having been made (*poiesis*) one can now give? One of Sarduy’s unpublished texts is a short essay on the Japanese art of gift wrapping (via Barthes’s *L’Empire des signes*) and its connection to José Donoso’s novel, *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (See the Appendix). This makes sense because in the Neo-Mannerist/Asian aesthetics that Sarduy often wrote about, a surface, an artifact has the immanent depth of a *thing* one gives to another *not* because it means anything in particular or because it serves some utilitarian function, but rather because its beauty resides in its inaccessibility, in its ontological depth, in its mystery. As a thing of beauty, then, a poem-object may be such a gift. And in the wrapping and the unwrapping of the aesthetic gift—as he says in “La escritura como regalo japonés” (below)—“está el placer.”

Book of Genesis» from *The Street of Crocodiles* (e.g. 1977 59-63). Sarduy quotes Kantor in *La simulación*: «En mi teatro un maniquí debe de convertirse en un MODELO que encarne y transmita un profundo sentimiento de la muerte y de la condición de los muertos: un modelo para el ACTOR VIVO» (OCH 1291).

14. «La misma diferencia que hay entre un dolor de que se me habla y un dolor que yo siento hay entre el rojo visto por mí y el estar siendo roja esta piel de la caja. Para ella el ser roja es como para mí el dolerme. Como hay un yo Fulano Tal, hay un yo-rojo, un yo-agua, y un yo-estrella. Todo, mirado desde dentro de sí mismo, es yo» (Ortega y Gasset 1964 252).

APPENDIX

La escritura como regalo japonés

Severo Sarduy¹⁵

«Envoltorio tras envoltorio. No ve,
Madre Benita, que lo importante es
envolver, que el objeto envuelto no
tiene importancia.»

El obsceno pájaro de la noche

[José Donoso 1970 92]

0. *Geométrico, rigurosamente dibujado y sin embargo marcado siempre, en algún sitio, por un pliegue, por un nudo, asimétrico gracias a cuidado, a la técnica misma de su confección, al juego del cartón, de la madera, del papel, lo envolvente no es un accesorio pasajero del objeto transportado, sino que se convierte en u objeto en sí mismo. (...) Se diría, en suma, que el regalo es la caja y no lo que contiene: de regreso de una excursión, los escolares traen a sus padres un paquete que no se sabe bien qué contiene, como si se hubieran ido muy lejos y que ésta fuera una oportunidad para entregarse juntos a la voluptuosidad de envolver. La caja funciona como signo: como envolvente, como pantalla y máscara, vale por lo que oculta, protege y sin embargo designa: da el cambio, a condición de tomar esta expresión en su doble sentido monetario y psicológico; lo que la caja encierra y significa, durante largo tiempo se va dejando para más tarde, como si la función del paquete no fuera proteger en el espacio sino posponer en el*

15. This essay is in the Emir Rodríguez Monegal archives at Princeton University. I estimate that it was written and sent to Professor Monegal (Yale University) sometime in the early Spring to late Fall of 1970. In a letter to Monegal of February 6, 1970, Sarduy writes: «acabo de leer lo que considero ya *la otra* novela —*Paradiso* siendo en este caso La Novela— de América: *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*. Ante el despliegue de esas 800 páginas creo que tendré que rehacer mi lectura de Donoso, así es que será para la próxima.» José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* was published by Seix Barral (Barcelona) in 1970. Especial thanks to Princeton University Archives for allowing me access to Professor Monegal's papers and letters, and to Mercedes Sarduy for giving me the permission to publish this gem of an essay written by her brother almost fifty years ago.

*tiempo; en el sobre parece estar implícito todo el trabajo de la confección (del hacer), precisamente por eso el objeto pierde algo de su existencia, se convierte en un espejismo: de sobre en sobre, el significado huye, y cuando al fin lo poseemos (siempre hay alguna cosita en el paquete) aparece insignificante, irrisorio, vil: el placer del significante se ha consumido: el paquete no está vacío sino vaciado: encontrar el objeto que hay en el paquete, o el significado que hay en el signo, es echarlo a perder; lo que los japoneses transportan, con una energía de hormigas, son signos vacíos. Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des signes* (1970).¹⁶*

1. No será de extrañar si los «buscadores de algún significado» desechan con precipitación la caja geométrica, rigurosamente dibujada, de *El obscuro pájaro de la noche*, quedan decepcionados por el contenido de un envolvente que, no vacío sino vaciado, han echado a perder. La novela habrá decepcionado a ese lector de *fondo* —otra expresión psicológica y bancaria— que consideró como algo secundario la confección, la sabia disposición de pliegues y nudos, la factura cuidada: engranaje sutil de personajes y funciones transformándose unos en otros, duplicándose —el envolvente, objeto en sí mismo. Quien desdeñó el trabajo siempre visible, siempre señalado como tal— nudos aparentes, desenlaces explícitamente novelescos— en aras del objeto que éste pudo proteger, ocultar, dejar siempre para más tarde, perdió el placer de la lectura cuyo único soporte es el *despliegue*, el *desenvolvimiento* en un tiempo que invierte el de la escritura, de minuciosidad con que el texto armó su andamiaje.

Las «trampas», los artificios de Donoso, son asimétricos gracias al cuidado, a la técnica misma de la confección: su función de diferir el encuentro de la imagen secundaria y final. El juego del relato, de sus funciones y actores constituyen un engranaje aceitado y esplendente que, al dejarse ver, al no ocultarse (como sucede en la novela naturalista: es decir en la que esconde el artificio disfrazándolo de naturaleza, de “cosa normal») *vale por* la novela.

16. The original can be found in *L'Empire des signes* in Vol. III of *Oeuvres Complètes*, pp. 386-387. This is Sarduy's translation of the text.

Donoso, en suma, no nos da a leer una novela, sino el arte de narrar: no ha ocultado las “construcciones intermedias» sino que ha hecho de ellas la materia del relato.

«La novela es un problema cuyas reglas son diversas, problemas que resolvemos mediante ecuaciones de varias incógnitas, siendo las construcciones *intermedias* más importantes que la respuesta final.» Bernard Eickhenbaum, *Teoría de la prosa*.¹⁷

2. La actividad obsesiva, la compulsión que tiraniza a los personajes emblemáticos de la novela, como un instinto que los precede, un saber de abejas que, patrimonio de especie, automatiza y perfecciona sus más mínimos gestos, no puede ser más significativa: las viejas de la Casa empaquetan, envuelven sin cesar, protegen, atan. Objetos trizados que se rompen al desenvolverlos, el asa de porcelana de una tacita de té, galones dorados de una cinta de Primera Comunión, un corcho, una perilla de bronce, botones guardados dentro de una caja de té, una plantilla para zapato, la tapa de una lapicera: lo único importante es el acto de envolver, no lo envuelto, A la muerte de una vieja otra recoge sus residuos. Los empaqueta cuidadosamente. Envolver es sobrevivir.

El primer lugar simbólico que nos conduce a la narración —la habitación de Brígida, a quien acaban de enterrar— aparece totalmente tapizado de paquetes: «Más y más paquetes debajo de la cama, y mire, Madre Benita, también debajo del peinador, entre el peinador y el tabique y detrás de la cortina del rincón, todo agazapado justo debajo, detrás de la línea hasta donde alcanza la mirada» [Donoso 91]. Esa apoteosis cuantitativa del «envoltorio», ha sido esquizada¹⁸ por ciertos índices:

17. The exact quote reads:» la novela es un problema complejo que se resuelve mediante un sistema de ecuaciones con muchas incógnitas cuyas construcciones intermediarias son más importantes que la respuesta final.» Its source is the essay, “Sobre la teoría de la prosa,» written by Boris Eichenbaum (and not by Bernard Eickhenbaum), anthologized by Tzvetan Todorov in *Teoría de la literatura de los formalistas rusos* (México, D.F.: Siglo XXI Editores, 1970), p. 152.

18. “adj. Dícese del mármol salpicado de pintas. Origen de la palabra: (ital. *schizzato*, de *schizzo*, y éste del latín *schedium*, del gr., esbozo, mancha.)» Definición de esquizado. Actualizado: 12/04/2014. www.definiciones-de.com/Definicion/de/esquizado.php.

Lo primero que piensa Misia Raquel Ruiz al enterarse de la muerte de la Brígida es en pedir que le hagan un paquete con la camisa de raso color crema —vejestorio ya sin valor— que la difunta le estaba zurciendo; luego se trata de “encerrar esa miscelánea de huesos en una cajita que ocupara poco espacio» [82]; el chal de la toilette final es «ése que la Brígida guardaba envuelto en papel de seda y se ponía los domingos» [Ibidem], etc.

3. En un teatro simétrico al de la Casa —en la Rinconada—, alguien envuelve, metafóricamente, contenidos —a otro nivel— irrisorios: Jerónimo rodea a Boy [221] —residuo, degradación genealógica de los Azcoitia— de un séquitoteratológico, meninas girando alrededor de la infanta prognática. Un aro más vasto envuelve éste cuyos monstruos han sido cuidadosamente estratificados: las casas aledañas al patio de Boy están comprendidas en un «cinturón aislante» [353] de seres residuales, «preocupación estupenda» de Emperatriz [Ibidem]. Finalmente, otra red limita las zonas concéntricas precedentes: encerrando lo degradado, lo inútil, proliferan los objetos lujosos, mundo filtrante de «*couvertures*», muralla exterior, dispersa, que aísla el carnaval de la Rinconada y lo salva del mundo anormal, de seres planos, idénticos, de proporciones monótonas.

4. Cronista obligadamente goyesco de la Rinconada, Humberto Peñalosa se declara excedido, sobrepasado, comprendido en su libro [205]; un autor que los circunscribe, José Donoso, vive igualmente la escritura como algo que lo envuelve y limita. Construcción *regresiva*, lengua como espacio *materno*: el que escribe (se) encierra: «Dicho de otra manera, creo que por fin se hizo forma estética el hecho vital de que mis temas se «agarraron» a mí, y sometiéndome, me impusieron una forma (...) Yo no sé qué significado tiene *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, para qué escribí sus casi seiscientas páginas durante ocho años. (...) Fueron ocho años de *encarcelamiento dentro de Pájaro*» [Donoso 1971 73].

Last accessed 3/8/18. The use of this unusual word with its reference to “mármol” or “spotted marble,” from the Italian *schizatto*, is in keeping with Sarduy’s interest in Italian Renaissance art and architecture (Pérez 2012 11-58).

5. Envolver es circunscribir y a la vez ofrecer una superficie más vasta a la mirada, el envolvente convertido en objeto ante un nuevo envolvente. Envolvente paradigmático, la literatura al dejar visibles sus mecanismos, las asimetrías que el trabajo impone a la producción del texto, explicita lo importante —el acto de envolver—, su constitución misma: la del meta-lenguaje. Estratos, vetas, capas, continentes que abarcan otros, que viene a limitar un nuevo encierro. *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* es el teatro de este proceso infinito: la escritura como *lugar sin límites*.¹⁹

6. En el desenvolvimiento del texto está el placer.

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19. The phrase "la escritura como *lugar sin límites*" is clearly an allusion to José Donoso's 1966 novel, *El lugar sin límites*; a novel about another kind of "envoltorio tras envoltorio": the onto-aesthetic transvestism, which Sarduy had written about in *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* in 1969 (OG-II/ "Escritura/Travestismo" 1147-1151).

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