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# The Motel's Trompe l'oeil: Repetition and Exile in Lorenzo García Vega's Bicocha a pique

**Keywords / Palabras clave**

García Vega, Bicocha a pique, Exilio

# DISSIDENCES

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## *The Motel's Trompe l'oeil: Repetition and Exile in Lorenzo García Vega's Bicocha a pique*

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The poet Lorenzo García Vega (1926-) is a profoundly heterodox Cuban exile. While a common mode of operations for the Cuban exile is to live enslaved “to a hopelessly idealized addiction to the redemptive promise of return,” as Ricardo Ortiz puts it (63), García Vega’s poetic production since he left Cuba in 1968 is remarkable for its lack of any recognizable kind of exile nostalgia. Exile develops into a mode of being in which the

illusions of a potentially recoverable Home are seen for what they truly are—simulacra that hide the deeper truth that Home, in its role as embodiment of the concept of the Origin, is a place that never existed. As I hope to demonstrate, repetition is the means by which García Vega generates for the reader, not just an understanding, but also a vivid experience of the uprootedness of his kind of exile. The focus of this study is the 1989 collection of prose poems entitled Bicoca a pique, where García Vega's use of repetition as a vehicle for conceptual and experiential expression develops a unique intensity. In this collection, repetition dismantles the illusion of Home in the space of exile by operating precisely in the mode that Gilles Deleuze describes in Difference and Repetition. Repetition, for both García Vega and Deleuze, is an instrument that can be used to bring to light the predominance of the simulacrum. By returning to the image of the Miami Beach Motel throughout the collection, García Vega undermines the impression of any kind of solid and stable meaning to be attached to that image. The promise of home is the product of a process of simulation that the poet's repetitiveness brings to light. Repetition's role in generating difference rather than identity dissolves the deceptive surfaces of what García Vega sees as a collective exilic fantasy that Home is a possession that can be recovered or kept. This process occurs as the destabilizing force of repetition is aimed at a particularly apt image for the experience of exile—the "Motel."

### **From Nostalgia to Exile**

García Vega is best known for his role as José Lezama Lima's young protégé and for the brilliant vanguardismo-influenced work he published in the Cuban literary journal Orígenes (1944-56). His first poems were published in that magazine in 1948, when he was just 22

years old. Projects of personal recollection are the foundational motivation of the poet's work throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s. When Lezama first met García Vega, his recommendation to the aspiring poet was that he read Proust. In Espirales del cuje (winner in 1952 of the Premio Nacional de Literatura), the influence of Proust is evident in the author's finely crafted reminiscence of his youth in Jagüey Grande, Matanzas. As Enrique Saíenz points out, the true impulse of García Vega's early work is not to be found in its surrealist or cubist techniques, but in exploring the degree to which our sense of reality is derived from memory (34). Deeply infused into the exuberance of García Vega's early poetic language is a passion for remembrance. His style is marked by an energetic persistence that strives to perfect the recreation of past subjective experiences.

"Variaciones," the first poem of Suite para la espera, exhibits this quality in its minute and vivid recollection of raindrops falling on a deserted street: "Breve mueca que hace la lluvia al tocar la acera. Desgestos y vieja mueca. Mueca de parroquia al insinuar sus campanas" (Poemas 9). A germ of the kind of persistent repetitiveness García Vega employs in his later work can be seen in these lines, but the thrust of the repetitiveness in "Variaciones" is essentially optimistic and nostalgic. The speaker returns to the image of the "mueca" in order to refine the experience of remembrance. Repetition here is positive; it builds up in the reader's mind an increasingly nuanced impression of a remembered experience.

Repetitiveness is a constant throughout García Vega's work, but the motivation behind it shifts radically in the 1970s. Repetition in García Vega's exilic work is destructive of the very notion that the recovery of a lost past is even possible. As we will see, in Bicocha a pique, García Vega states this idea most forcefully.

Despite his impressive record of literary work with the Orígenes group, García Vega asserts that after 1959 there was no place for him within the Revolution's state-sponsored cultural apparatus. He was able to edit Antología de la novela cubana (1960) and publish a novel, Cetrería del títere (1960). Nonetheless, as he explains in an interview:

Cuando llega la revolución, soy un don nadie. Como he escrito varias veces, consigo un puestecito a partir de un amigo mío que es el yerno de una figura política en Cuba. A mí no se me menciona para nada. Incluso, el puesto que consigo no me alcanza ni para vivir porque se congelan los salarios en esa época. En un momento determinado, pues ser profesor era uno de los sueños que tenía y por eso había estudiado la carrera de Filosofía y Letras, me llaman para que sea profesor de literatura cubana en la Facultad de Educación. A los dos o tres días soy vetado de este nuevo puesto sin explicación alguna. Y lo que es peor, a partir de ahí me doy cuenta de que en Cuba nunca podré trabajar de esta manera. Me consideraban un personaje de segunda clase, y los personajes de segunda clase apenas tenían oportunidad en Cuba. (“Devastación 57-8)

He left Cuba in 1968, settling in Miami after living in New York, Madrid, and Caracas. Just as the state-sponsored cultural apparatus in Cuba was hostile to García Vega, the university-sponsored literary establishment in the United States was similarly resistant. Carlos Luis describes two factions that were equally opposed to García Vega: anti-Castro Cuban exile professors and pro-Castro, American-born leftist academics (Crónicas 53). García Vega has since scratched out a living in such jobs as doorman at a Gucci boutique and grocery bagger in Miami.

García Vega admits that failure has been the essential formative experience of his life. Since his writing is so self-reflexive, failure becomes a central theme in his work as well. García Vega explores failure in its various conceptual possibilities such that it becomes the basis for

productive intellectual insights. The experience of failure and the experience of repetition are linked, and together, they illustrate the emptiness of the illusions that false ideologies feed on.

Repetition in his work of the 1970s and 1980s is bound up with an agenda of problematizing, deconstruction, and self-deconstruction. Carlos Aguilera describes García Vega as “[el] escritor que sólo puede devenir problema” (28). The aporias, blockages and failures that form the thematic focus of his work put him at odds with many fellow members of the Orígenes group, like Cintio Vitier (1921-) and Fina García Marruz (1923-), who tend to celebrate their own and the Orígenes group’s literary achievements and believe there is an untroubled trajectory of cultural development that links them to the work of José Martí. Vitier’s Para llegar a Orígenes and García Marruz’s La familia de Orígenes theorize models of fulfillment—artistic, nationalistic, and ethical, while García Vega, the embittered exile, refuses to fall prey to the temptations of self-promotion. In Los años de Orígenes he impugns the triumphalism of many of his fellow origenistas and carries out a project of self-examination aimed at achieving a ruthless honesty about his own personal struggles. Jorge Luis Arcos has asserted that there coexist, “un Orígenes y un anti-Orígenes, o lo que también se ha denominado, un poco esquemática y metafísicamente, como dos tradiciones: la del sí y la del no” (9), and that García Vega clearly operates in the latter tradition. As we will see, García Vega’s negativity, a posture not just of opposition, but also of intellectual rigor, is vividly embodied in the device of poetic repetition.

### **Repetition and Exile**

In his 1978 memoir-novel Los años de Orígenes, García Vega suggests that repetition is the essence of the Cuban exile experience: “Se está volviendo viejo, y está en las mismas. Volver y volver, porque el collage del exilio cubano es volver, volver y revolver. —No revuelvan la mierda, se decía en Cuba —siempre sobre lo mismo” (19) [1]. Repetition is bound up not only with the nostalgic impulse to return (“volver”) but also with the psychological impetus to disturb the quiescence of memory (“revolver la mierda”). No Cuban exile writer embraces the expressive potential of repetition like García Vega. Both his prose and his poetry are cratered with logical and expressive blockages. In response to these, the narrative or poetic voice tirelessly loops back and starts again, attempting a new formulation of a difficult idea or a new evocation of an impossibly subtle experience. This kind of repetitiveness is a natural outgrowth of García Vega’s self-assigned role as a “non-writer,” which he describes as “el oficio de perder” [2]. His repetition is deconstructive rather than emphatic, staging the failure to achieve states of intellectual and emotional culmination rather than building up false structures of certainty. García Vega proves inveterately incapable of producing writing that proceeds confidently without questioning the validity of its own simplifications.

The concepts of repetition in Gilles Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition are useful for understanding the function of repetition as a manifestation of García Vega’s “oficio de perder.” Deleuze asserts that repetition perpetuates the generation of simulacra and the masking of the original term in a series, such that the act of repeating, contrary to our standard understanding, proliferates difference. Freud’s concept of the compulsion to repeat is also useful, but as a counterpoint to Deleuze and García Vega’s approach to the issue of repetition. Freud asserts that to repeat is to attempt to gain control of something



emotionally troubling, whereas for García Vega, to repeat is to intentionally stage the drama of the failure to achieve exactly this kind of control. At times, it appears that García Vega, a writer who explores notions of madness in his work, is toying with Freudian concepts and intentionally subverting them.

Employing Deleuze's concepts leads us to a better understanding of how repetition is an aspect of García Vega's "oficio de perder" by helping us to see how the poet empties the content of the repeated image so that what is left behind is a glimpse into the process that produces the illusion of a stable meaning. The poet uses repetition to illustrate the predominance of the simulacrum, such that the failure that repetition dramatizes is a failure to achieve a presence and fixity of meaning.

### **Repetition, Compulsion and Masking**

Bicoca a pique is a collection of poems that links the concepts of repetition and failure and explores their importance to the experience of exile. Labeling his own work a "bicoca a pique," García Vega plays the game of the "oficio de perder"; the title suggests that his work is both cheaply made (bicoca: something of little value) and inevitably bound to fall apart (irse a pique: to sink, to fail, to fall apart). The poet announces failure as the essential facet of his work, though close reading reveals that the particular kind of failure that the work stages and restages through repetition is a means toward positive philosophical and poetic ends. The intimately linked phenomena of repetition and failure suggest the possibility of an exilic experience cleansed of the delusions of nostalgia.

The setting of Bicoca a pique is a spectral Miami Beach. García Vega refers to Miami Beach as “la Playa Albina” throughout his writing; the whiteness in this context is not only the comical whiteness of its sunbathers and the insipidness of their cultural milieu. It also suggests ghostliness, and the specter that haunts Playa Albina most insistently is the “Motel.” The Motel is emblematic of the exile experience; it is an apparition and a disappearance, an absence-in-presence that symbolizes an exterior and interior alienation from Home, Origin and Center. Like the Motel, the image of the albino symbolizes a tension of presence and absence; whiteness of this kind paradoxically suggests the absence of color while it is also the presence of the full spectrum of colors. The Motel plays on absence and presence in its function as a seductive simulacrum of Home, a temporary illusion whose simulation of the concepts of belonging, happiness, health and repose falls apart upon closer inspection. García Vega describes the quality of the simulacrum as characteristic of Miami Beach in general; in his 2004 memoir El oficio de perder, he muses: “No hay duda, está muy nublada esta mañana. Muy nublada, estoy en octubre. Es un simulacro. En donde vivo, en Playa Albina, ni hay octubre ni hay estaciones. No hay nada. Hay sólo simulacros” (25). In his uprootedness and his nostalgia, the exile lives in a tenuous territory where temporal progress seems to dissolve. Nothing is as it should be, and progress is impeded. In the image of the Motel, García Vega fleshes out this common idea by introducing a particular dynamic: the simulacra of exile make glowing promises that turn out to be false. Miami Beach is plagued by a profusion of false versions of Home. As a result, the exile quickly learns that he is never truly at Home. García Vega’s repetition of the image of the Motel is bound up with an impulse to look past the deceptive surfaces of the simulacrum, in spite of the distractions of its neon glow.

Though it is astoundingly original in its poetic execution, García Vega's treatment of Miami Beach as the space of the simulacrum is firmly rooted in history. As Louis Pérez illustrates, much of Miami was designed in the 1920s as the simulacrum of an exoticized Havana; in one notable case, a developer "hired dark-eyed women to stroll about with shawls and fans" along the newly built "Española Way" in South Beach (432). During its first decades, Miami not only became a tourist destination, but also the permanent home of exiled opponents of Gerardo Machado (and, after Machado's fall from power in 1933, of Machado himself and his supporters). It became a kind of virtual Cuban space, with little autochthonous history of its own, where distinct and conflicting national imaginaries could coexist. Since its inception, Miami has been a place of both simulation and exile, and García Vega's Bicoca a pique fuses these two identifying characteristics in the image of the Motel. The Miami Beach Motel is not only a tawdry simulation of domesticity for the tourist, but also for the exile resident, who looks upon it as a disturbing materialization of his own psychological and emotional circumstances. The exile views the simulacrum from a doubly alienated distance; he knows not only that his milieu is illusory, but also that the nostalgic illusions were designed for the tourist and not for him.

An initial analysis of the unusual frequency with which García Vega's speakers return to the Miami Beach Motel would suggest that the poet, through the artifice of a speaker who closely mirrors himself, attempts to symbolically master the emotional threats of exile by staging a ritual of repetition that conjures an illusion of control. Central to the compulsion to repeat, as Freud describes it, is a longing for mastery. Typically what must be mastered are the emotional aftershocks of a past trauma. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud describes a child whose repetitive game allows him to become "master of the situation" of

being abandoned by the mother (16). According to a Freudian mode of analysis, it might very well appear that the poems of Bicoca a pique represent the effort of a neurotic compulsive to gain mastery over the trauma of exile, and the Motel would be a symbolic repetition of the loss of Home and the rupturing of the integrity of the family. By recasting the trauma in a symbolic guise, García Vega's speakers could find a way of circumscribing and controlling the emotional threat that the trauma poses.

It is indeed clear in the poems of Bicoca a pique that the Motel encloses a darkness that leaves the speaker uneasy. It is a deceptive apparition that adorns itself in images of tropical vibrancy and kitsch-baroque abundance while hiding its true significations—death, loss, emptiness, abandonment and isolation. The title of the poem “Lo que oculta un Motel” clearly signals this function. Its speaker remarks: “He visto en el Tromp l’oeil, entre apagado medallón de hojas de plátano lo absurdo de una escurridiza conversación que ya, definitivamente, el Tiempo desfiguró” (274). The Motel is adorned with kitschy imagery of verdant tropical vegetation. When the imaginative gaze of the speaker pierces this surface, it enters a space of loss where time disfigures memory. It is interesting to note that time erodes the memory of a conversation; in this way what seems to be lost is not only Home but the possibility of human relationship. Throughout Bicoca a pique the speaker seems to be deeply “autistic,” to use García Vega's own term, in the sense of denying the possibility of social interaction and dialogue [3]. Nonetheless, shadows of human interaction can be found in many of the cluttered corners of the poems' imagistic spaces. Home, as a central magnetizing force in the poems, links to a notion of family and relationship.

In spite of so many gestures in Freud's direction, the poems toy with the Freudian concepts of repetition and mastery in order to invert them. The image of the Motel is not meant to illustrate a striving toward symbolic mastery over the threats of death, loss, abandonment and isolation, but rather to stage the failure of the compulsion to repeat as Freud describes it (as a force that seeks mastery) and illustrate the predominance of the simulacrum.

Understanding the simulacrum, not as the imperfect copy of the Original, but as itself the Original, the reader comes to the central realization that García Vega hopes to spur: that the exile's searches for Home (for the origin, for relationship, for meaning) inevitably fail because Home does not exist. As he states in an interview with Carlos Espinosa,

Me dirijo a un lector que todavía no existe, y al cual yo tengo que contribuir a crear, en lo que pueda: el lector albino. O sea, algo así como un lector que ya vive en un paisaje extraño y que, por saberse como tal, no busca ya ninguna imposible raíz, ni ninguna imposible vuelta a una Ítaca inexistente, sino que acepta su desarraigo como rizoma al que hay que recorrer y recorrer. Y esto aunque la cosa sólo consista en dar vueltas y vueltas alrededor de un solar yermo donde está tirada una colchoneta vieja. Y es que, frente a ese miedo del que efectivamente hablo, quizá la única divisa que puedo encontrar es aquella expresión de Vallejo: "Absurdo, sólo tú eres puro." (27)

García Vega poses as his ideal reader the "lector albino," the reader who inhabits a space where there is no such thing as Home. This reader fully appreciates the play of appearance and disappearance, and knows both the temptations and the deceptions of *tromp l'oeil* images of Home. He understands this play of tensions because he is an albino; he possesses a body from which either color has vanished or whiteness is present. Neither Ithaca nor Havana can be returned to; the "lector albino" does not seek epic fictions where the lost homeland can finally be regained. Thus, the "lector albino" accepts and inhabits his uprootedness as "rizoma al que hay que recorrer y recorrer"; exile is emptied of its nostalgic

content and opens itself to the possibility of a new mode of being. The rhizome, for Deleuze and Guattari, contrasts with the root system; it is evident that García Vega's allusion to the concept of the rhizome is meant to question the notions of rootedness that sustain the passions of exile [4]. Exile for García Vega does not generate roots that yearn downward into an imagined past, but rather a system that expands in a nonlinear fashion and ignores the illusion of a stable origin.

García Vega stages the compulsion to gain dominance over the disorder of existence and subsequently achieve the quiescent fulfillment of Home as a force that is perpetually thwarted by the persistence of appearances that prove to be false. Imagistic approximations of Home are masks that, when removed, always reveal another mask. García Vega thus illustrates what Deleuze means when he asserts that “[t]here are no ultimate or original responses or solutions, there are only problem-questions, in the guise of a mask behind every mask and a displacement behind every place” (107). From a Freudian perspective, there may be some central, if purely subjective, presence called “Home” to which the analysand is striving to return. For García Vega, there is no belief that Home, even if it could be returned to, was ever anything more than a simulacrum.

García Vega's form of repetition is in a sense destructive. What Foucault says of the work of Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), a writer with similar propensities, could also be applied to García Vega's poetry: his repetition produces a “...language ravaged by death” (45) [5]. García Vega's repetition does not seek to reinforce, underline, or amplify some stable meaning found in a first or original term. This kind of repetition would be what Deleuze calls “a bare, brute repetition (repetition of the Same)” (16). Instead, his work seems to

apply Deleuze's assertion that a true understanding of repetition leads the thinker to discard the notion of a stable first term preceding successive restatements. Deleuze refutes Freud's assertion that there is a primary impulse before and behind the compulsion to repeat. The primal scene in which the crucial trauma takes place is for Freud the origin of the repetition; Deleuze's reading of Freud posits that this primal scene is "like an ultimate or original term which would remain in place and exercise a power of attraction: it would be the one which provides the thing that is to be repeated, the one which conditions the whole process of repetition, and in this sense would remain independent of it" (103). This origin is unchanging while the repetition successively and variously masks it; the original term of the series of repetitions "is in fact perturbed and covered over with all kinds of disguises, with a thousand and one forms of disguise and displacement" and these deviations from the model provided by the original term in the series are "added or superimposed" in ways explainable through concepts like repression (103). In place of this system, where there is a fixed primal origin and a series of repetitions in which masking is exterior to the bare repetition, Deleuze suggests a radically different model, one in which disguising is inherent in every act of repetition.

For Deleuze, a "virtual object" that "constantly circulates and is displaced" in every repetition determines the relationship between an inaccessible source or origin and the act of repeating (104-5). Deleuze offers as illustration the figure of the mother; the mother is not the original force operating from a past primal scene and determining the nature of future, disguised repetitions: "our loves do not refer back to the mother; it is simply that the mother occupies a certain place in relation to the virtual object in the series which constitutes our present" (105). Just as the Freudian notion of the source of trauma and thus of repetition

cannot be returned to, the virtual object itself cannot be named or placed; it is not the ultimate origin or source behind other illusory sources like “mother” or “home” (105). Thus Deleuze declares that “there is no ultimate return” (105).

### **Slippage, Disintegration, Emptiness**

The poem “Revisando la visión” is illustrative of García Vega’s use of the Motel to stage the impossibility of the return to Origin. Through images of irreversible time, disintegration and death, García Vega produces a powerful tension with the notion of the recuperation of the lost Home. These images are built into a progression that unfolds according to a logic of slippage, displacement and distancing.

Por blanca cal de ese muro del Motel. Del Motel la sonrisa sin gato de la luz neón. Con, bajo ese tubo, la evocación del quirófano en la sombrilla playera. Por lo que como suerte—muerte—bastante escaso el rastrilleo de la piscina sin agua, a la vera de la sombrilla. Pasar, repasar. Soñar, soñar. Ese momento—a veces en el crepúsculo—petimetre donde para broma de la fotografía del Motel, ritualmente es como si se quemara la mismísima esquina de un [sic] sucia tarjeta postal, supuestamente en blanco. (309)

The whiteness of the Motel is apparitional, and it dissolves into the whiteness of the operating room, which is jarringly transposed onto the image of a white beach umbrella. What should be an image of leisure and contentment metamorphoses into an image of illness and death. Situated in a metonymic relationship to the umbrella is the “piscina sin agua,” an image of barrenness. This chain of associations “Motel”-“quirófano”-“piscina sin agua” occurs in one more or less coherent imagistic space, whereas the appearance of the photograph marks a leap of perspective, a kind of zooming out from the scene to reveal another, previously invisible, frame. The Motel becomes a photograph of a Motel, moving



away from the concrete reality of the scene and towards the erosion of that reality both through the flattening out of the detail of the scene and through the introduction of the concept of passing time. The photograph gives way to an old postcard, introducing another frame and a further disintegration. This disintegration is emphasized with the added element of the grime on the surface of the postcard, which further obscures the physical reality of the scene to which we are originally introduced. The postcard finally stumbles over the seeming illogic of the adverb “supuestamente” into blankness.

If in the first chain of images Motel-umbrella-swimming pool, the relationships are associative, metaphorical and metonymic, this second chain of images Motel-photograph-postcard is linked through repetition, representation and distortion. This form of repetition is destructive, moving ever further from the presence of the original term. When we return to this original term, the Motel, we find that it is in itself a corrupted, distorted simulacrum of Home. The trajectory of repetition throughout the poem begins at a distance from the origin and ends at a point of immeasurably greater distance.

This process of distancing from an imagistic center (the Motel) illustrates that the center is itself immeasurably distant from the unnamed, magnetic origin (Home). This illustration produces a kind of emptying-out that inverts the value of the concept of emptiness from negative to positive. This inversion hinges on the image of the “piscina sin agua.” In its immediate context the empty swimming pool is clearly negative, as we have already established. Resonating metonymically with the image of the operating room, it plays on the traditional association of water with life and suggests the idea of a womb emptied of life. The barren scene leaves behind few traces or trails that one might follow back to the life

origin. Yet, if one follows the scant traces back to an image of fullness in the guise of a swimming pool full of water, one finds not a stable signifier of the idea of life but rather another simulacrum. The swimming pool participates in the *tromp l'oeil* agenda of the Motel; the swimming pool located near a beach reveals itself to be a superfluous simulacrum of the ocean. The empty swimming pool is simply an eroded simulacrum, not the symbol of a lost origin. The reader experiences in this sense a single, vivid instance of the perpetual displacement and disguising inherent in repetition. The ocean, rather than the swimming pool, would bear a closer relationship to the idea of life, though the ocean is conspicuously absent in the poem, as it is throughout Bicoca a pique. In this sense, it silently evokes the inaccessibility of the lost origin. The presence of the ocean as metaphor would create the illusion of an accessible origin, a final term that, when unmasked, would reveal an origin rather than another mask.

Through distancing and displacement, the image of the empty swimming pool also signals an epistemologically positive act—the recognition of the simulacrum as such. The empty swimming pool stands in a playful relationship to the image of the Cheshire cat. Through his humorous reference to the smile of the Cheshire cat in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, García Vega fashions the Motel into an apparition and a disappearance. The curvature of a neon sign against the whiteness of a Motel wall represents what is left behind after a bizarre and baffling disappearance, just as the body of the Cheshire cat disappears, leaving behind only a disembodied grin. Faced with this bodiless smile, Alice exclaims: “Well! I’ve seen a cat without a grin . . . but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!” (59). The Motel as Cheshire cat playfully evokes the notion of madness (the Cat informs Alice “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad” [57]) though

madness is not in itself all García Vega is interested in. Like the Motel, the Cheshire cat appears and disappears repeatedly, prompting Alice to complain: “I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!” (59). The reference to the cat’s grin cleverly underlines the connection between repetition and disappearance.

Further, García Vega’s reference to Carroll evokes the idea of a Zen-like contemplation. In the chapter entitled “The Queen’s Croquet-Ground,” the Queen calls for the Cheshire cat to be beheaded, but is faced with the dilemma that his body has disappeared. The argument that ensues reminds the reader of Zen riddles: “The executioner’s argument was, that you couldn’t cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it from. . . . The King’s argument was that anything that had a head could be beheaded” (76). García Vega, a writer interested throughout his career in Zen, clearly wishes to lead the attentive reader, through an allusive device, to a state of contemplation of the impossible, of the patently absurd, with the aim of reaching a deeper understanding [6]. The humor of his references does not negate the fact that a notion of nothingness is evoked in the allusions to the Cheshire cat’s disappearances. In “Lilith no volverá a suceder,” a poem that explores the speaker’s heart condition and the subsequent possibility of death, the connection between the image of the smile and a Zen-like contemplation of the void is reinforced: “la Nada con sonrisa bastante extraña se sonríe como si todo, camino y geométrica arritmia, se contrataran para una lejana, y disparatada, lección de vacío” (273). This smile evokes the bliss of one sunk deeply into meditation, a smile that seems strange to the outside observer, but which can be understood when one begins to apprehend the liberation that contemplation makes possible. In all of these textual connections, it is possible to see the positive potential inside the darkness of the image of the Motel; its neon grin can be read as the smile of one released from illusion and freed by

knowledge. In relation to the reference to Carroll, the empty swimming pool takes on shades of a playful evocation of the liberation achieved when the simulacrum is emptied out of its deceptive power and the deeper mechanisms of repetition and masking can be seen.

The image of the wind in the poem “Un mandala,” the final poem of the collection, serves as a kind of imagistic arrival at what the Motel suggests through its slippages and displacements. In fact, “Un mandala” organizes the whole collection’s central images and themes into a simple logical and temporal progression, linking the idea of the lost origin to the concept of the “oficio de perder” and to the possibility of an understanding that has been freed from the thrall of the simulacrum.

Como que se encendió en un circo, pues tiene el esplendor falso de una luz neón. Me muerdo las uñas para ello, situado en la misma diagonal donde el pasado, por el lado de una madrugada, fracasó. Así que, también, me limpiaré de cualquier conjuro, pues sólo el viento, ya híbrido, deberá recorrerse. (325)

The image of the circus is a vivid one, suggesting notions of spectacle and artifice. The circus is also an image of nostalgia for García Vega; in *Espirales del cuje*, the narrator describes the memory of leaving a circus and entering a night filled with “despedidas, de los caballos del circo por los caminos—que a mí se me antojaban desiertos—, de los payasos, de la nostalgia en los carburos de la luz del circo” (18). The poet returns again to the space of the circus, and converts the nostalgia of the gaslights into a fire that destroys the notion of the beautiful, longed-for Origin (in childhood, in the idealized rural homeland) and produces the false glow of the simulacrum. If the spectacle of the circus is magical for the nostalgic narrator of *Espirales*, the speaker of “Un mandala” sees it as the locus of simulation. What is destroyed in the process of simulation is unnamed in the poem because it stands for the

unnamable origin, for what is lost but still magnetizes by virtue of its absence. Radiating a “false” neon glow, this unnamed presence has been transformed into a presence like that of the Motel, whose neon glow persists while the rest of the Motel, like the body of Carroll’s Cheshire cat, disappears.

The speaker further illustrates the destruction of the nostalgic illusion by situating himself at a site where the past is seen as failure (“el pasado, por el lado de una madrugada, fracasó”). The speaker bites his nails, anxious in the face of such a vivid dramatization of the inaccessibility of the past and the falseness of the remnants the origin leaves behind. This anxiety illustrates the persistence of an emotional investment in the idea of the perfect Home that can still be returned to, though the speaker also expresses the intention to disenthral himself of this illusion (“me limpiaré de cualquier conjuro”). He recognizes this need because he has intuited, if perhaps incompletely, how simulation functions. Whereas the speaker has in an imagined past been deceived by the spectacle and the artifice of nostalgia, he is prepared to perceive its constitutive mechanisms. When the simulacrum is seen for what it is, it disappears, and what is left behind is the wind that sweeps the empty scene. The image of the wind suggests an invisible yet fundamental process, one that cannot be directly perceived, but whose work can be observed indirectly. The image, in this sense, is a compelling evocation of repetition itself, with its concomitant processes of masking and dispersion.

The poem’s dramatization of the destruction of an illusion is carried out in a verbal translation of the visual form of the Buddhist mandala. In Sanskrit, mandala means “circle” or “circumference”; it often suggests “wholeness” or “completeness.” As Rebecca McClen

Novick explains, “Mandalas are used as a meditation tool to align the microcosm with the macrocosm—the conventional mind with the mind of Enlightenment” (158). In their different manifestations in Hindu, Buddhist and secular contexts, they represent an individual vision of the completeness of the cosmos. Jung famously applied the methodology of the mandala to assist in the therapeutic process, as individuals find the design of symbolic microcosms helpful in

the creation of a central point to which everything is related . . . a concentric arrangement of the disordered multiplicity and of contradictory and irreconcilable elements. This is evidently an attempt at self-healing on the part of Nature, which does not spring from conscious reflection but from an instinctive impulse. (4)

In García Vega’s poem we see the impulse toward the kind of psychic reconciliation Yung describes in the speaker’s placement of the self within a circle that organizes the disparate elements of the unnamed, the simulacrum, memory, “el oficio de perder,” and the void. The poem dramatizes a kind of inner resolution in the transition from the anxiety provoked by the simulacrum (“Me muerdo las uñas”) to the processes of emptying, cleansing and disenchantment (“me limpiaré de cualquier conjuro”) that are facilitated by insight.

### **Conclusion: Repetition and Insight**

García Vega’s Bicoca a pique is an innovative exploration of the experience of exile. In the poems, exile is pushed far past its conventional limits and becomes a mode of being in which illusion is dissolved through repetition. The poet’s use of the destructive power of repetition is not limited to a critique of exile nostalgia. Instead, the repetition of the image of the Motel offers the reader an experience of the collapse of the illusion of the Origin.

García Vega dramatizes, within the particularity of the Cuban exile experience, Deleuze's suspicion that "All identities are only simulated, produced as an optical 'effect' by the more profound game of difference and repetition" (xix). After contemplating the full implications of repetition in Bicocha a pique, the notion that the poet repeats the image of the Motel comes to seem inaccurate. Rather, the Motel functions as a particular crystallization of the "profound game" of repetition itself, a game in which the first term is perpetually dispersed throughout repetition's infinite series. The insight that García Vega helps his reader achieve is that the search for the Origin can never break free of the primacy of repetition.

## Notes

[1] César Salgado's "The Novels of Orígenes" offers a useful introduction to the role of Los años de Orígenes in the dispute among origenistas over the moral and artistic value of their great literary project. Carlos Espinosa describes García Vega's novel as "un texto agresivo y desgarrado, apasionado y controversial, en el que se transparenta la lucha entre el amor y el odio de un hombre de cincuenta años que se debate con los fantasmas de su juventud, y que tiene la valentía de sacar a la luz un reverso que a casi nadie le gusta ver aireado" (14).

[2] García Vega candidly and comically admits that that he stole the phrase "oficio de perder" from the Argentine writer Dardo Cúneo: "supe que le iba a robar, a Dardo Cúneo el título de sus posibles memorias. Pues un literato es aquel que siempre está a la caza de robarle algo a otro literato. Y aunque yo soy un no-escritor (ya lo he dicho muchas veces), también soy un no-escritor escritor, por lo que no puedo dejar de ser aficionado a los robos" (Oficio 39). García Vega dedicates El oficio de perder to Cúneo and to the Cuban American

writer Carlos Victoria. The above remarks are typical of García Vega's self-deflating and playful humor; central to the "oficio de perder" are the refusal to engage in projects of self-aggrandizement and a form of candor that is concomitant with that refusal.

[3] In El oficio de perder, García Vega describes one of his literary alter-egos as "autistic," and laments the incapacity of this alter-ego to accurately express what he desires for it to express. He calls his literary alter-egos "heterónimos," in reference to the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa (42).

[4] Deleuze and Guattari's description of the rhizome and its opposition to concepts of rootedness, hierarchy, and linearity can be found in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, pp. 7-21.

[5] Deleuze cites Foucault's description of Raymond Roussel's work in an endnote to the introduction to *Difference and Repetition*. In this context Deleuze uses Roussel's language as an example of repetition deployed to fully realize its own difference-making potential: "He . . . overcomes homonymy on its own ground and inscribes the maximum difference within repetition, where this is the space opened up in the heart of a word" (22). It would be fruitful to study García Vega's poetic language alongside Roussel's to illustrate different modalities of repetition's destructive energies. Roussel often deploys a "flat" language that often seems already-spoken: "Roussel's language takes in what has already been said, which it embraces with the most haphazard element of chance, not to express in a better way what's already been said but to have the form undergo the second random fragmentation, and, from the scattered pieces, inert and shapeless, create the most incredible meanings by



leaving them in place” (Foucault 45). García Vega’s repetitiveness presents itself as more self-contained, as emerging from within a mind that responds as much to its own responses as to reality itself.

[6] García Vega opens *Los años de Orígenes* with an “Introducción Zen,” in which the author explores the possibility of a Zen form of writing:

Pues los ejercicios Zen dejan sin palabra al narrador. Se corre sobre una sombra. Nos deslizamos por el recoveco que el espacio de una noche deja, pero nada se puede tocar, pero nada se puede agarrar. Es una experiencia que lucha por no ser experiencia. Es un relato que lucha por no ser relato. (11)

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