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Puig, Maldición eterna a quien lea estas páginas, Hospitality

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The Theme of Hospitality in Manuel Puig's Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages

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Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages is Manuel Puig's first and only novel written in English [1]. This deliberate use of the English language functions in the novel as an allegory of the simultaneously violent and fascinating encounter between a foreigner and a native. While the theme of the subject in exile has been extensively discussed, my intention is to see the experience of exile from another perspective: as a mutual promise of hospitality between an "I" and an "Other" [2]. This approach will take the notion of hospitality as an anticipation of the new and as a possibility of a rebirth.

A central theme of Eternal Curse is that of encounters. There are encounters between a foreigner and a native; between an immigrant and a host state; between a city and an individual; between readers and texts. Manuel Puig explores the hospitable relationship born out of the moment of encounter, examining not only the restrictions, but also the redemptive and therapeutic functions of this moment. To immigrate, i.e. to enter the other's house, results in a marginal condition for not

only the person seeking refuge, but for the host as well. Hospitality points towards exteriorization and displacement implied in the process of retrieval and intrusion. Puig questions the negativity of this state, recognizing the vulnerability of the proper space as an opening for new opportunities. His question is: How do the demands and rules of hospitality change if “speaking to [the] other” for an exiled person, as well as for the native, is mutually indispensable?

Given the author’s portrayal of the vulnerability of a foreigner--his minimal rights and the attendant powerlessness--as a challenging and even positive condition, one of the protagonists affirms “power is detestable” (161). From the very first sentence the novel confronts the problem of power and mastery, testing it against the powerlessness and dispossession of those who are nomads. Inquiring as to the identity of Washington, curious about the tradition upon which his name rests, the foreigner and the “impostor” Mr. Ramirez defies the “master” (George Washington, Washington Square) and the native (Larry). The foreigner, a man dispossessed of his own home, simultaneously experiences a sense of fascination and rebellion when wishing to enter the house of the native. “I have never been in a real home in this country [...] Why don’t you invite me to your place for a while? [...] I’d like to see the interior of an American house [...] Won’t you invite me?” (13) This protracted plea points toward the foreigner’s dependence upon the native’s hospitality, which is challenged by the latter’s fear of a loss of mastery and sovereignty. Thus, the novel puts forward questions about the status of sovereignty straightway, establishing hospitality as a potential space where the hierarchy--the accepted order of our mastery over certain territorial or cultural identities--can be dismantled.

It is important to note the autobiographical circumstances in which Manuel Puig wrote Eternal Curse. His exile from Argentina began in the 1970’s, when the publication of his novel Heartbreak

Tango placed him among authors persecuted and prohibited by Juan Domingo Peron's Regime [3]. After spending various years in Mexico, Puig moved to New York. In one of his interviews he makes the following comment about his arrival to the U.S. and his writing of the novel:

Lo que me impuso para la nueva novela fueron los años pasados en Nueva York, o sea, 1976-1977, que fueron en realidad una experiencia desagradable. Llegué a Estados Unidos--donde había vivido en el sesenta-- en enero de 1976, sin papeles, sin departamento, con unos años más y una Nueva York menos acogedora que antes (Corbatta 619).

Puig left Buenos Aires because of his estrangement from a society that was host to an increasingly unacceptable socio-political life [4]. Eternal Curse is based on the author's personal encounter with Mark, a young North American man from whom he took about two-hundred pages of notes during their conversations. Puig recalls his encounter with Mark as at once "fascinating" and "violent" (Corbatta 620). Puig's emblematic words point toward the duality of exile: as violence accompanied by the sentiment of fascination, born from the convergence marked with positive vitality. It is a powerless position, one that does not guarantee the same set of "rights" that the citizen enjoys; it accentuates a foreigner's vulnerability. However, it is precisely for this reason that it can be seen as an alternative space.

Puig takes testimonial notes from a North American man in order to write a novel in which he experiments with the language of his host country. This reflects his desire to be inscribed literally as well as figuratively within the "foreign" cultural space. The fact that the novel is written in English shows the author's disposition to take a leap towards the new; to transcend his own self; and to defy the "foreign" culture, questioning and critiquing society's dependence and upholding of national and

linguistic boundaries. These movements toward the “other” are parts of apprenticeship and rebellion that carry certain attractions and anxiety. It is the “foreigner” who, devoid of any possession, destabilizes the private space of the “native.”

Puig’s use of English also underscores the author’s status in the U.S. as a foreigner. It is as if he were a guest of the foreign tongue, asking for its hospitality. When using “el idioma del que no [tiene] las claves” (Corbatta 620), the author pursues the experience of disempowerment and, apparently and prophetically confronts his hosts about their lack of hospitality. As Ronald De Feo observes, after publishing the book in English Puig was criticized for not being entirely convincing in his use of the colloquial tongue [5].

Following the story of two men in New York, Eternal Curse presents an entire text (with the exception of several letters at the end of the book) that is constructed from their dialogues with each other. One of these men is Juan Jose Ramirez, an Argentinean who, after spending several years imprisoned in his country, is left paralyzed and amnesiac. Under the protection of “Human Rights International,” Mr. Ramirez is transferred to “The Home,” a nursing facility that offered him shelter. The counterpart of the Argentinean is Larry, a young North American man. A historian by profession, Larry is hired as Mr. Ramirez’s personal assistant, whose duty is to take the paralyzed patient for walks around the city [6]. The text presents several meaningful changes in the novelistic trajectory of the author. Notably, his “mother tongue” is completely absent, as are the feminine voice and references to popular and mass culture that are so characteristic of Puig’s earlier works. Nonetheless, as Graciela Speranza notes, these themes appear in this novel as “repressed aesthetics” (Speranza).

Puig considers it necessary to speak otherwise and repress certain topics and techniques in this novel. In order to explain why, it is important to frame the novel within the postdictatorial context. For our purposes, Idelber Avelar's thesis on postdictatorial Latin American novels is most revealing. As Avelar points out, the necessity to allegorize (allos-agoreuein: speaking otherwise, speak to the other) is related to the postdictatorial mourning, which itself implies the mourning for the literary. Fictional genre is marginalized in the (post)dictatorship, because it doesn't have the "social and experiential relevance" and it is substituted by more "documental" genres, among them that of the testimony [7]. "Speaking otherwise" according to Avelar:

[S]hould not only be understood as a mere search for alternative forms of speech but also as speaking of the other (in double sense of the genitive) and, first and foremost, as speaking to the other, of answering the call of the other. Postdictatorial literature speaks (the) other(wise) (232-233).

Contextualization of (post) dictatorship is needed to clarify what partly causes Puig to wish to liberate himself from his historical and cultural identity, imposed by the accident of birth, and immerse himself in a foreign one. For Puig, "speaking other(wise)" is an opportunity to start over, to recuperate.

This imperative to "speak to the other" is also reflected on the narrative level of the novel. Mr. Ramirez feels the need to encounter his 'notes' in order to recuperate: "All I have...", he says to Larry, "all I cherish is the hope of finding my notes" (75). The Human Rights Committee sends Mr. Ramirez several books that he possessed while in prison. They are French novels of the XVIII Century, which according to Larry have numbers on the top of the words. As he starts to decipher the message in the books, Larry concludes that they are Mr. Ramirez's testimonies. However, when Mr. Ramirez hears of this he insists that they are false: he refuses to accept them as his own,

voluntarily erasing his past. As a refugee he feels the need to be liberated from his own self, desiring instead his integration into the world of the other. Hence, he steadfastly refuses to accept his past identity. His pain subsides when he is given a chance to lose himself in the other's life story: "Please, Larry," he pleads, "say something, show me something in the street or here in the park, anything... To make the pain go away... I can't stand it..." (6). Their dialogues frequently turn into dramatized performances of Larry's past, in which the two men exchange their roles. It is in these moments that Mr. Ramirez is given an opportunity to "invade" the autonomy of the other, serving as therapy sessions that improve his physical condition [8].

Larry, for his part, is a marginal and alienated character inside his own country. A young man of leftist convictions, with neither secure employment nor family, he cannot manage to find his place in the society in which he lives. According to Larry, his house is not worth seeing. Larry is a "native" who is uncomfortable with his own identity, hoping to rid himself of certain malignant moments of his past, moments that cause him physical pain. Larry explains:

[Y]ou want to vomit the knot, discharge it. And I think there's good reason for this feeling. The masochistic part has to do with old identifications that have been internalized. Internalization is like swallowing something, eating something, incorporating something. Vomiting or spitting is the reverse process (40).

Larry's symbolic exile offers him the possibility to liberate himself--to "spit out and vomit" the residues of his past (dysfunctional parents, a failed marriage, disillusionment in his profession). Larry repeats the same idea later when he tells Mr. Ramirez that he wishes to find "[a] way out of me, out of that zone where everything rots" (203). In this sense, both characters of the novel are displaced in order to experience re-birth in another.

Jacques Derrida's essay Of Hospitality, furnishes a theoretical base for interrogating the norms, potentiality and limitations of hospitality as implied in Puig's novel, aiding our consideration of the different manifestations of power exercised on public or private scales that hinder the enactment of hospitality. Several observations made by Derrida can be relevant in this case. For Derrida, the ethics of hospitality requires that the door, as a symbolic entrance to the physical space of one's home or the private world of the other, be open. By inviting the foreigner home, by asking him to come in, the host turns into a guest on his or her own territory. An act of substitution takes place--the owner turns into a guest, while the guest appropriates the host's dwelling place. For Derrida, this process of retrieval makes possible the emancipation of the master in the moment of his or her return: "It is as if [...] the stranger could save the master and liberate the power of his host; it's as if the master, qua master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage)" (123). The encounter, according to Derrida, is a mutually indispensable moment: it is a moment of vital substitution, of the displacement that enables a return to the self, creating the space for hospitality by which the host and the guest could be saved and restituted. This mutual dependence should establish a balance between them and liberate them from a sense of indebtedness.

It is from the inability to acknowledge such interdependency of the participants in the act of hospitality that the problem of debt emerges, often demanded by a host or a host country. For example, Mr. Ramirez often reproaches Larry and the country that offered him hospitality for their insistence on reciprocity and their expectation that the debt will be paid: "Don't you realize," he says, "I'm a foreigner, and I'm supposed to be grateful for the hospitality?" (Puig 41-42). For Derrida, this insistence on reciprocity and indebtedness [be it a monetary payment or verbal gratitude] is a major ambivalence of hospitality. These contradictions make Derrida introduce a term

“hos/pitality,” focusing on the Latin origin of the word: *hostis*, meaning both enemy and host. The Derridian notion of hos/pitality is conditioned by the coexistence of protection and control on the part of the state apparatus, demanding from the guest the sentiment of indebtedness, of reciprocity and gratitude, if not the need to pay. As Mireille Rosello correctly points out, “avoiding the vocabulary of exchange may be a cynical deception when the constant reference to state hospitality tends to hide the profoundly economic and financial logic of state-organized migrations” (35). State initiated “invitations” for Rosello are often disguised and hypocritical equivalents of “recruitment.”

In his novel, Puig questions and criticizes the role that the Nation-State, as the upholder of the fixed identity of its citizens, plays in hospitality. Puig’s text vacillates between the two roles of the State: that of protector and controller. Because it is impossible for the State to function without exercising vigilance over a “foreigner,” its hospitality becomes cursed. In Eternal Curse the State and the Committee are the powers that truncate the promise of the encounter between the foreigner and the native, suppressing the promising potential of the immigration/exile. The representatives of Human Rights Committee frequently invade the place where Mr. Ramirez lives. It is called The Home, an ironic name for a facility for the elderly, which is supervised at all times. It is also a metaphor frequently used to denote the Nation-State: in accordance with the politics of hospitality imposed by the State, every host “must visualize the threshold of the house as the equivalent of a national frontier” (Rosello 38). The Home, in State’s view, should be the focal point of its subjects’ identities.

In addition to its role as vigilante and police, the State must also undo the immigrant’s anonymity, imposing on him an identity for cataloguing purposes. Larry’s ancestors had to submit to this demand and become recognizable and manageable entities. Larry comments to Mr. Ramirez: “I have an Italian grandfather, my father’s father. His name was Giovanangelo... When my grandfather

disembarked, Immigration mangled his name” (22). In the case of Larry’s grandfather the State had to adapt the foreign last name (translate, homogenize and catalogue it), so that later it could manage him as a citizen. The imposition of a manageable identity not only reveals how the State exercises its control, but also offers individuals certain privileges. By being a “manageable identity,” and having the status of a political refugee, Mr. Ramirez receives protection from The Organization of Human Rights International.

Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that The Organization’s as well as Larry’s motives for protecting or taking care of the refugee are questionable. A letter to the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Committee makes it explicit that The Human Rights International is extremely interested in Mr. Ramirez’s memoirs, which could give the organization more authority and consolidate its prestige: “There is no doubt that steps will be taken for the publication of the works,” writes a representative of the Committee, “Our organization is deeply interested in the study of such subjects” (230). At the same time, Larry’s interest in the memoirs of Ramirez and their possible testimonial value is guided by the impulse to take advantage of the trauma and the tragedy of the other in order to find a good academic position at a respectable university. The universities of various nations get involved in the intent to use Ramirez’s documents to their advantage. Larry says:

The Institute for Latin American Studies at the university there [Montreal]. There’s a project going on concerning political repression in Latin America... My friend at Columbia didn’t want to let the cat out of the bag, but, in Montreal, they’re studying political repression from the time of Spanish colonialism to today... and they need contemporary material; it’s perfect (146).

Here, Puig points to another significant aspect of immigration politics: the differentiation between the “desirable” and “undesirable” legal or illegal immigrant, to use Rosello’s terminology. An

educated, experienced man, persecuted by a dictatorial government, can prove to be of use. He is more “recruited” by the State or academic institution than offered unconditional hospitality. Puig relentlessly criticizes here not only governmental but also academic structures that profit from the “desirable” foreigner. Here as well, the limits of hospitality are challenged by the contract based on debt and gratitude.

The only space for absolute hospitality is in Mr. Ramirez’s hallucinations. This emphasizes the incommensurability between the real and the ideal of the encounter. In the hallucinations, Larry enters his room from the window, without invitation. At the same time, it is precisely during these unauthorized visits, in which Larry arrives without expecting any monetary compensation from Mr. Ramirez, when the two characters engage in a dialogue that permits their repressed inner selves to surface. In these hallucinated conversations the two men occupy and cohabit each other’s spaces, enacting absolute hospitality. For Mr. Ramirez, the invitation presupposes identification between the host and the guest. These encounters postulate hospitality as a sentiment that transcends the delineations of sovereign space; it requires one to share, cohabit, include, negotiate, collaborate, dialogue, and reciprocate. It is interesting that Manuel Puig chose to speak about hospitality in terms of invasion of the other’s territory, considering that such activity was common to the military regime of Argentina at that time. It gives the author a chance to reflect upon the fragility of hospitality and the fine line that separates it from a violent and abusive act of intrusion. Puig cautiously distinguishes between the two acts of “invasion” by viewing one as a therapeutic motion, dependent upon mutual cohabitation and reciprocity, the dismantlement of hierarchies and the establishment of a dialogue, while the other rests upon the premises of differentiation, silencing, and exclusion.

Mr. Ramirez's death marks the end of the novel, the final note of which indicates that Larry still cannot find a job, as Mr. Ramirez's memoirs fall into the hands of Human Rights International. Puig points out in his interview with Nora Catelli that he wanted to finish the novel on an optimistic note. The optimism, regardless of the novel's seemingly tragic ending, is reflected in the sacrifice of the Argentinean man. Thanks to Mr. Ramirez, Larry is left outside the circle where the calculative game of power is carried out. If hospitality is unrealizable in a space possessed by the need for sovereignty, by the calculative minds of those whose actions are determined by a pragmatic hope for future compensations, Mr. Ramirez saves Larry from entering this space. Although Manuel Puig might have thought of this ending as optimistic, given its suspension of the character's incorporation into a system that rests upon the measure of interests, Larry's subsequent misery and Mr. Ramirez's death definitely point at hospitality as unrealizable in the society described or imagined by the author. Puig's optimism rests only upon the future as an undetermined and potential space for hospitality.

Notes

[1] The novel was first published in Spanish translation done by the author. For the history of publishing of the two versions of this novel and also for a discussion about Manuel Puig's works written in foreign languages, see Kerr, Lucille. Suspended Fictions: Reading the Novels by Manuel Puig. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

[2] For an elucidating discussion of a political and psychological exile of a postmodern subject and the rupture in his/her unity, see Chamberlain, Lori. "The Subject in Exile: Puig's Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages". Novel-A Forum on Fiction. 20.3 (1987): 260-275.

[3] Suzanne Jill Levine discusses in great detail the years of Puig's exile in her recent biography of the author titled Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman: His Life and Fictions. As Levine notes:

“Symptomatic of the ‘erasure’ of Puig in the Argentine cultural sphere of the seventies after his initial runaway success with Heartbreak Tango was the absence of his name in Crisis, the most important intellectual and political journal from May 1973 to August 1976, which cited new and established writers of all political and aesthetic persuasions from Borges and Bioy Casares to David Viñas, Sábato, Cortázar, Ricardo Piglia, Osvaldo Soriano, and Jorge Asís. In 1980, César Aira, a young novelist who admired Manuel Puig's work enormously, commented that at this time Puig provoked ‘a tremendous anxiety, rejection, repulsion’”(214).

[4] During his interview with Nora Catelli talking about the political situation in Argentina that forced him to leave the country, Puig says the following: “Cuando hicieron salir a Cámpora y propusieron la fórmula Perón-Perón y fue aceptada, yo dije: yo no tolero esto, no puede ser... yo me sentí tan ajeno (23).

[5] Ronald De Feo mentions Gregory Rabassa's comment in his review of the novel. He writes: “In his Newsday review of the book, Gregory Rabassa raised questions (noting, particularly, the way Larry often unconvincingly avoids using contractions) and hoped that in Puig's next English venture he would pay more attention to ‘medium and milieu’” (17).

[6] For a discussion on the importance of the repetition of the protagonists' names (John, Larry's last name and Juan, Mr. Ramirez's first name) see Tittler, Jonathan. Manuel Puig. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993: 80.

[7] One could look at Puig's notes taken from the young North American man as testimonies. Although the text itself reflects upon the testimonial genre, exploring its limits and the boundaries between the testimonial and fictional narrative, I am not arguing that it can be viewed as Mark's or Puig's testimonies. As Lucille Kerr points out, in contrast to the (co)authors of testimonial texts, Puig appears here as the sole author of his novel. Kerr views the problem of authorship as central to this novel ("Reading between the Lines, Reading between the Lies" 617-24). Ricardo Piglia also underscores the importance of testimonial genre in this novel suggesting that Puig "ficcionaliza lo testimonial y borra sus huellas"(Piglia).

[8] Lucille Kerr underscores the therapeutic function of the conversations between the two characters. Kerr writes: "Larry's role could be read as that of a psychoanalyst, whose exchange with the analysand would lead to the lifting of repression. However, given the identification of the one subject with the other and the attention paid to Larry's life story throughout the dialogues, it could be argued that the roles are reversed; indeed, Larry's final optimism might even be read as indicative of a "cure," effected by their sessions together" ("Reading between the Lines, Reading between the Lies" 623).

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