Literature and politics in early twentieth-century Argentina: The anarchist modernism of Roberto Arlt

GLEN S. CLOSE

Department of Spanish and Portuguese
University of Wisconsin-Madison
1130 Van Hise Hall
1220 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706
U.S.A.

SUMMARY

This article uses recent theories regarding the impact of anarchism on modernist literary culture to analyse the novels of Argentine Roberto Arlt (1900-1942), who is now recognised as one of the pivotal Latin American writers of the twentieth century. My examination of Arlt's work highlights his vital awareness of Argentina's prominent anarchist movement and his textual engagement with anarchist ideas. I focus on Arlt's literary treatment of criminal and revolutionary conspiracy in order to situate his texts in a transnational modernist corpus, positing the impact of Arlt's 'fictitious revolutionary body' in current Argentine literary discourse and its relevance to our understanding of a transatlantic anarchist modernism.

In a recent study of the literary and cultural history of Argentina over the last century, Argentine critic Josefina Ludmer remarks on what seems to be a tacit law of the international literary canon: that peripheral cultures, such as those of Latin America, are allotted a quota of two or three 'masterpieces' per country and per century (1999, pp.90-1). In the case of Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century, Jorge Luis Borges's *Ficciones* (1944) is perhaps that one text definitively promoted from the category of the national and the regional to the rarefied status of the 'universal'. Yet to take Borges as the sole representative of Argentine literature in his period is to privilege the ideology of an elite liberal culture to which he belonged. In recent decades, the Argentine literary left has succeeded in recuperating the contemporary figure of Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) as a sort of anti-Borges and as a founder of what Ludmer terms the progressive and modernising line of Argentine culture. Arlt was well known as a journalist during his lifetime, but his novels, short stories and plays received only limited attention until they were revived in the 1950s by the Buenos Aires literary group *Contorno*. Arlt's works, and especially his novels, have been read widely in Argentina ever since and seem to generate more critical interest with each passing year, although they remain largely unknown and only partially available to English-language readers.[1]

In the 1980 novel *Artificial Respiration*, one of the most important books

published in Argentina during the last military dictatorship, Ricardo Piglia summarised the legacy of critical reflections on Arlt in an analysis offered by one of his characters (also a novelist). In his view, Borges represents the closure of the nineteenth century traditions, while 'Arlt begins over again: he is the only truly modern writer that Argentine literature has produced in the twentieth century' (1994, p.130). According to his theory, 'nothing is so transgressive as the style of Roberto Arlt' (1994, p.136) because it exemplifies what has been repressed in Argentine literature, namely 'the impact of immigration on language' (1994, p.133) in an era in which liberal élites were struggling to defend the purity of a creole nationalist identity against the threat of 'mixture, intermingling and disintegration' (Balderston's translation, 1994, p.133). To appreciate the force of Arlt's fiction, and to understand why later novelists such as Piglia, David Viñas, Julio Cortázar and Juan Carlos Onetti have praised Arlt so highly, one must situate him with regard to various struggles being waged in the metropolitan arena of 1920s Buenos Aires: struggles between languages, between identities, between ideologies, and between competing social factions including a land-owning creole oligarchy, a rising urban middle class, and a burgeoning, restive population of disenfranchised workers.

Arlt's Argentina is a nation transformed by the rapid growth of its primary export economy during the two decades preceding the First World War, when stable access to its European markets was disturbed. The unprecedented influx of foreign capital and of foreign workers during this same period placed new strains on a political system dominated by land-owning elites. In 1914, unnaturalised foreigners made up nearly one third of a total Argentine population of 7.9 million, but the percentage was much higher in the capital city, where approximately three quarters of workers were foreign (Rock 1987, pp.175, 191). Between 1857, when records were first kept, and 1930, Argentina sustained an influx of some three and a half million immigrants (the balance of immigrants minus emigrants during this period), the majority of them being of Italian (46 percent) or of Spanish (32 percent) origin (Skidmore and Smith 1984, p.74).

In the wake of a series of anarchist-incited general strikes in the first decade of the century, sweeping legislative measures such as the 1902 Law of Residence and the 1910 Law of Social Defense provided for the deportation or imprisonment of troublesome workers, especially foreigners and anarchists. The political system was only partially democratised in 1912 with the passage of the Sáenz Peña Law, which introduced universal suffrage for male citizens, effectively enfranchising petty bourgeois groups, urban professionals and bureaucrats while continuing to exclude the unnaturalised majority of foreign-born workers. Electoral reforms allowed fourteen years of government, between 1916 and 1930, by the Unión Cívica Radical, a party founded by dissident factions of the land-owning elite and later attracting a large middle-class following. Despite an initial inclination to favour workers' demands in order to win their support, Radical administrations used the mechanisms of the liberal State alternately to co-opt and to repress working-class

political initiatives. During the first of his two presidential terms (from 1916 to 1922), Hipólito Yrigoyen was faced with an escalating wave of Syndicalist strikes. He ceded to conservative pressure and allowed marauding police, soldiers and vigilante gangs from killing hundreds of workers in the 'Tragic Week' of 1919. By 1921 to 1922, when the Army was again unleashed to massacre insurgent wool workers in the remote southern region of Patagonia, fierce intolerance of working-class agitation was confirmed as a tacit condition for conservative tolerance of Radical rule. During the second Yrigoyen administration (from 1928 to 1930), the 1929 crash in world markets undermined the Radicals' ability to appease middle-class supporters through generous state spending, and the Army, allied with the oligarchical interests, removed him from office in September of 1930, thus inaugurating what is known to Argentines as 'the Infamous Decade'.[2]

As Ludmer and other leftist critics have established, Arlt's narrative reads like a literary documentation of a period of Argentine cultural life that was defined by the passage from anarchism to Peronism. What interests me here is the conjunction in Arlt's narrative of a certain international literary modernism (see appendix) and the local culture of anarchism fostered in Argentina by Italian and Spanish immigrants as early as the 1870s. Since beginning my investigation of Arlt's engagement with anarchism some years ago, I have found encouragement in the repeated discovery of new critical work exploring the idea of a significant bond between modernism and anarchism, and defining a substantial corpus of European and U.S. modernist fictions dealing with anarchist themes. Beginning with Carol Vanderveer Hamilton's 1995 essay 'Anarchy as Modernist Aesthetic' and her 2000 essay 'American Writers, Modernism and the Representations of the Sacco-Vanzetti Case', and continuing through David Weir's *Anarchy & Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism* (1997) and Arthur Redding's *Raids on Human Consciousness: Writing, Anarchism, and Violence* (1998), it is now possible to map an itinerary of anarchist sites in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, G.K. Chesterton, and a host of less celebrated figures. What I propose is to extend that itinerary to include the Argentine immigrant metropolis.

The notion that modernist writers somehow transposed or assimilated anarchist tactics of spectacular violence into their aesthetic practices is supported by a corpus which includes Dostoevsky's *Demons* (1871), James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), and Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), all of which testify to an artistic fascination with the conspiratorial terrorism associated with Michael Bakunin. Even as these texts operate ostensibly to contain the chaotic and destructive social energies encoded by the term 'anarchy' in the late nineteenth century, they struggle against an attractive void in signification, a space beyond the ethical and representational limits of realist narrative discipline which Hamilton designates 'the anarchist sublime'. Further confirmation of a significant resonance is provided by the various theorists of modernism who have emphasised the movement's fundamentally critical orientation toward bourgeois

capitalist culture and the persistent engagement of modernist and especially avant-garde writers with anarchist ideas. Matei Calinescu speaks of modernism's 'consuming negative passion, its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity' through 'the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile' (Calinescu 1987, p.42). Such 'radical antibourgeois attitudes' were of course simultaneously elicited and negated by the dictates of a rational culture which consigned artists to an ever more paradoxical or, in Herbert Marcuse's term, 'affirmative' autonomy. Andreas Huyssen, much cited by Redding, locates the peak of the impact of anarchism on European writers and artists at the turn of the century, when the historical avant-garde was first devising its radical strategies of confrontation. Huyssen echoes Calinescu in his explanation of this *rapprochement*.

> The attraction of artists and intellectuals to anarchism at the time can be attributed to two major factors: artists and anarchists alike rejected bourgeois society and its stagnating cultural conservatism, and both anarchists and left-leaning bohemians fought the economic and technological determinism and scientism of Second International Marxism, which they saw as the theoretical and practical mirror image of the bourgeois world. (Huyssen 1986, p.5).

Despite what Huyssen perceives as the historical failure of the modernist 'vision of the redemption of modern life through culture' (p.210), he insists that we must look beyond any ultimate capitulation to the mandates of social and industrial modernization and beyond modernism's largely depoliticised, canonical status in order to recover it as a genuine, although historically limited, 'adversary culture'.

I am interested in the concept of literary anarchism not only as a largely unexamined commonplace in Arlt criticism, but also as a manifestation of certain problematic and essentially modern presumptions regarding the very role of the artist, and particularly of the writer. These presumptions are well articulated by, for example, Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist whose ideological career includes a well-publicised conversion from Marxism to neoliberalism and a subsequent run for the presidency of Peru. In a statement which he has reformulated many times since, Vargas Llosa declared in 1967 that 'literature is fire, […] it means nonconformity and rebellion, […] the *raison d'être* of a writer is protest, disagreement and criticism […] Literature is a form of permanent insurrection' (Vargas Llosa 1996, p.72). While no one would mistake the ex-presidential candidate for an anarchist, I find it suggestive that he characterises writers by vocation as 'the conscious or unconscious subversives of society' and 'the irredeemable insurgents of the world'. These statements must be considered not only in the context of the familiar Marxist-inspired debates of the 1960s regarding the political role of the artist, but also of the Romantic tradition which differentiated the artist as a genius, as the anti-bourgeois, as a satanic rebel.

Although famously flexible, the chronology of high European modernism

coincides closely, as Hamilton and others have noted, with the period of greatest public controversy over the anarchist movement in Europe and the Americas. Whether or not we consider Rubén Darío's *Modernismo* as a precocious American correlate to European modernism, as does Calinescu, it seems clear that American prose fiction was slightly later in producing works akin to those of Kafka, Proust or Woolf. Without ignoring obvious differences in the periodisation of national literary histories, I find it productive to approach Arlt, a notoriously anti-nationalist writer, as a modernist in an international context, and as a novelist subject to many of the same anxieties and dissatisfactions voiced by the Russian, French, English, or Spanish modernists. Roberto Mariani, one of Arlt's companions on the literary left in Buenos Aires, summarised these complaints when he spoke in 1929 of the 'repugnance of liberalism' in the following terms: 'Injustice endures on the face of the earth, and liberal politics, liberal capitalism, the liberal bourgeoisie, liberal democracy, and liberal friendship not only have failed in their mission of bringing about justice and love, but depend for their very existence precisely on injustice, robbery, lies, and cynicism'. (quoted in Zas 1988, p.24). This is a familiar perception among modernists, and one that prompted many of the most prominent ultimately to endorse fascist or Stalinist political programs in this period.

Regardless of the famously chequered political careers of individual modernists, the theorists I have cited propose that anarchism remained the ideological option most consistently compatible with aggravated modernist individualism. Clearly, even novelists as orderly as Dostoevsky, James and Conrad were fascinated by violent anarchists and seem to have been compelled to confront in their representations of them personal demons of destruction and chaos. In peripherally modern Buenos Aires, Roberto Arlt published *Los siete locos* (The Seven Madmen), his most successful work, in 1929, on the very eve of the first decisive disruption of the Argentine liberal democratic order (the Uriburu coup of 1930); and it is this novel, together with its 1931 sequel, *Los lanzallamas* (The Flamethrowers), which contains his most urgent and provocative fiction. I restrict my comments to these and to one additional text, *El juguete rabioso* (The Rabid Toy) from 1926. This sequence of novels, linked by the representation of criminal and revolutionary conspiracies, enacts anarchy on a textual level by radically disabling narrative authority and subjecting the reader to an effect of indeterminacy in narrative development. While retaining tropes of traditional and popular novelistic genres such as the picaresque and the criminal *folletín* or serial novel, these texts break with prevailing modes of narrative fiction in their fracturing of monologic narrative coherence and their insistence on the discursive construction of ideological reality. Ultimately, I understand these texts to partake of a dynamic by which the novel, as the previously dominant commodified narrative form of bourgeois society, ceaselessly evokes and entertains deviance only to recontain it in the interests of psychological and social integrity.

By speaking of these novels in relation to an anarchist aesthetics of modernism, I do not intend to suggest that Roberto Arlt was an anarchist in any coherent

political sense. The consensus with regard to his politics is that he was an independent leftist, an anti-fascist, whose approach to Marxism was belated and problematic. According to one journalist acquaintance,[3] his political ideals were spectacularly chaotic, as indicated by the irreconcilable diversity of publications in which he collaborated, ranging from the nationalist weekly *Patria* (Fatherland) of the Liga Patriótica Argentina, to *Ultra Izquierda* (Ultra Left) and *Bandera Roja* (Red Flag), organ of the Argentine Communist Party. Significantly, however, Arlt's biographer Raul Larra informs us that, as a primary school dropout, Arlt gained his first serious contact with literature in an anarchist library in the working-class Buenos Aires barrio of Flores (Larra 1973, p.24). The Argentine anarchist movement which in the first decade of this century had ranked, according to historian David Rock, as 'among the largest and most influential in the world' (1975, p78), was in decline in the 1920s, following the intensification of police and army repression. However, as Arlt's daughter, Mirta, suggests in a study co-authored with Omar Borré, it was the immediate impact of anarchist *atentados* in retaliation for the 1927 execution of Sacco and Vanzetti which particularly dazzled Arlt and inspired the characters of *Los siete locos* (Arlt and Borré 1984, p.27). Also, I would point out that one of Arlt's most gravely serious newspaper columns in the *Aguafuertes porteñas* series is that in which he describes the judicial execution of anarchist hero Severino Di Giovanni by the Argentine military government in 1931 ('He visto morir', February 2, 1931).[4]

In criticism of Arlt's writing, allusions to his anarchistic sensibilities are not unusual. A sampling of articles and books devoted to his work turns up references to 'a pre-existentialist anarchism in Arlt' (Giordano 1985, p.61), 'his anarchic individualism' (Gostautas 1977, p.48) and 'his discursive anarchism' (Lindstrom 1980, p.49). In Arlt's novels I read not only the abolition of the regime of alienated labour and the forthright denunciation of a range of bourgeois liberal institutions including marriage, corporations, the military, and the state, but also, on a textual level, the dispersion of centralised narrative authority and the defiance of standards of literary and linguistic propriety. What I find perhaps most remarkable, however, are the ways in which these texts dramatise their own production of both subversive energy and commercial value. Noé Jitrik, undoubtedly one of Arlt's most insightful commentators, has placed great emphasis on the economics of *El juguete rabioso*, in which he sees money as the 'engine of writing'. Jitrik identifies the conjunction of money with sex as 'the principal constructive code' of the novel, one that alludes to its function as the true, unacknowledged 'eros' of capitalist society. It is my contention that especially in Arlt's third novel, *Los lanzallamas*, just as the value of printed money is problematised by its origin in anarchist acts of falsification, the truth value of the narrative, in the commodified form of the printed book, is similarly compromised.

For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with Arlt's plots, I'll review them briefly. In *El juguete rabioso*, which was composed between 1920 and 1924 and re-edited before its eventual publication in 1926, Arlt presents the adventures of Silvio

Drodman Astier, an adolescent of humble means and grand ambitions. The novel is composed of four relatively independent chapters. Chapter one relates fourteen-year-old Silvio's founding of a juvenile gang to live out fantasies of criminal glory imbibed from *folletines* of banditry, but chapter two relegates him to humiliating employment by rapacious booksellers, whose shop he eventually attempts to burn down. Chapter three brings further discouragement when Silvio's inventive initiatives backfire and result in his dismissal from a mechanical apprenticeship at the Escuela Militar de Aviación, precipitating a futile suicide attempt. Only in the concluding chapter does Silvio accomplish a classically picaresque change of fortune when he is released from his toils as an itinerant paper vendor by a reward for betraying a friend's criminal scheme. Many of Silvio's experiences are recognisable as Arlt's own: the family's destitution, the corrupting love of popular fiction, the lack of formal education contrasted with an autodidactic passion for invention, contempt for the petty merchants who exploit his labour, etc. The novel reads generally as a parable of perverted social mobility, in that the rewards unattainable by legitimate labour or ingenuity, through commercial or military channels, are finally granted to the protagonist by a member of the upper class (the engineer Vitri) in exchange for the betrayal of a member of his own class.

Although Silvio's rebelliousness does not attain an explicitly political dimension, his impulses mark him as a destructive non-conformist and a budding threat to the social order. In the novel's first paragraphs, Silvio obtains his literary initiation by renting instalments of adventure novels from an Andalusian shoemaker who subscribes to them and whose regional origin and trade fit the classic profile of the anarchist immigrant to Argentina. A recurrent, even dominant, issue in the novel turns out to be that of access not only to monetary but also to cultural capital, symbolically concentrated in the space of the library. Silvio's gang perpetrates its greatest crime when it breaks into a school library (a repository of State assets) to plunder the books, selecting or discarding them on the basis of their ready resale value. In this clearly Cervantean scene, Silvio also evaluates several volumes as worthy of his own attention, notably, scientific texts containing technical information adaptable to antisocial ends, and poetry of Baudelaire. This is Arlt's clearest dramatisation of *illegitimate access* to cultural capital, which is accompanied by a constant awareness of the monetary value associated with the book as exchangeable commodity. As a thief, a bookstore clerk, an idler, and, all too briefly, a cadet, Silvio is shown to stake his desires on books, whether stealing them, selling them, coveting them, or consuming them. All his ambitions are conditioned by access to these tokens of cultural capital.

Without dallying too long on Silvio's travails, I should cite the moment at which his reading habits come under scrutiny by officers at the military academy. In a previous scene at home, Silvio has been shown deliberating between a truculent romance novel, an electrotechnical manual, and Nietzsche's *Antichrist*. At the academy, he attempts to impress the officers with his readings in everything from cinematics to explosives, yet when he brings up literature, his proprietary boasts

backfire. Describing his library, he offers, 'I have the best authors: Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Baroja', and the officer's suspicions are immediately aroused: 'Che, what have we got here, an anarchist?' (Arlt 1991 II, p.69). Silvio denies the charge, but his military apprenticeship is soon aborted, and the same suspicion is voiced elsewhere in the novel by other figures of authority. In the pact which closes the novel, the engineer Vitri receives Silvio in his library (the cultural reservoir) to thank him for denouncing a plan to burgle his safe (the monetary reservoir), and Silvio's reward seems to consist almost as much in this access as in the passage to Neuquén which Vitri grants as recompense. By betraying the grotesque *El Rengo*, a lumpen figure associated with the indignities of the popular market, Silvio wins not only material advantage, but also a euphoric sense of moral autonomy (predicated, ironically, on the defence of a law which he does not respect) and of disassociation from his own miserable class. As critic Oscar Masotta first noted, Arlt's notion of liberation through betrayal and transgression offers clear parallels with the work of Jean Genet, and I would add that this denouement also points to a crucial aspect of the anarchism assimilated by modernists.

While the mainstream of the anarchist movement gravitated toward strategies of solidarity as advocated by the collectivist Peter Kropotkin, and toward anarcho-syndicalist tactics which posed the general strike as the ultimate weapon in the struggle against capitalism, novelists such as Arlt remained transfixed by anarchism's most extremely individualistic and terrorist tendencies. Clara E. Lida, a historian of Spanish anarchist culture, has clearly distinguished between the staunch optimism of popular fiction by committed militants and the consistent negativism of those writers whom she classifies as *anarquizantes* and who, in her view, 'think almost exclusively in nihilist terms: they emphasise the destructive potential of the proletariat, but they ignore the premises of socialism, which are oriented toward the creation of a new world' (Lida 1970, p.379). The tortured individualism of Arlt's fiction was in keeping not only with the Romantic tradition, but also with the extreme egotism pioneered by Max Stirner in the anarchist classic *The Ego and its Own* (1845) and later taken up by Nietzsche. (Arlt had been raised, incidentally, in a house well stocked with Nietzsche's writings, since his mother is reported to have met the philosopher once and to have remained infatuated with him all her life, convinced that they shared a spiritual bond.) Whatever the exact provenance of Arlt's complaints against God, State, and Capital, it is clear that they persist and intensify as the juvenile delinquency of *El juguete rabioso* graduates into the mature political conspiracy of the two subsequent novels.

In *Los siete locos*, Augusto Remo Erdosain, a bill collector, finds himself anonymously denounced for embezzlement and faced by his employers' demand for restitution of the pilfered profits. Since he has squandered the money, Erdosain appeals for help to Ergueta, a gambler-turned-religious-prophet, and then to the Astrologer, who seeks Erdosain's collaboration in the organisation of a secret revolutionary society. Erdosain is saved when another of the Astrologer's associates, nicknamed the Melancholy Pimp, offers to pay off the debt. The same evening

Erdosain returns home to find his wife absconding in the company of an air force captain, and pleads pitifully to retain her, to no avail. Shortly thereafter, his wife's dreaded cousin, Barsut, arrives and slaps Erdosain for submitting to cuckoldry. This added affront goads Erdosain to conceive of abducting Barsut and extorting his inheritance to fund the Astrologer's secret society. Once undertaken, Barsut's detention at the Astrologer's villa in Temperley provides the novel's principal dramatic situation. Following numerous and lengthy discussions of the revolutionary scheme, including a congress of conspirators, and also of Erdosain's personal invention schemes, the novel ends with a simulated murder: the Astrologer, having won Barsut's confidence in secret, stages his execution to appease Erdosain's morbid criminal curiosity.

What *Los siete locos* rehearses, *Los lanzallamas* tragically enacts. Here again, discussions and interior monologues predominate over action, but the major events are memorable. The Melancholy Pimp is shot by rival gangsters, Erdosain and the Astrologer visit a family of anarchist counterfeiters, Erdosain uses his new wealth to procure his landlady's daughter, and the Astrologer strikes an alliance with Hipólita, a cunning ex-prostitute. In a catastrophic final sequence, Barsut kills Bromberg, the Astrologer's assistant, provoking the immolation of the Temperley villa and the flight of its residents. Disinclined to accompany the prophet of destruction into exile, Erdosain remains in Buenos Aires and succumbs to his anguish, murdering his mistress and taking refuge in the house of an anonymous acquaintance, to whom he confesses his history of infamy before taking his own life on a train travelling from Flores to Moreno. This scene of confession, evoked repeatedly throughout both *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, provides the foundation of a narrative edifice as unstable as the characters that inhabit it. In a column published just after the release of *Los siete locos*, Arlt specified the historical reason of this instability, explaining the madness of his characters as 'the disorientation which, following the great war, has revolutionised the consciousness of men, leaving them empty of ideals and hopes' (Arlt 1991, II, p.597).

In keeping with this disorientation, the structure of Arlt's novels reflects an erosion of confidence in the progressive, positivist premises of the dominant realist and naturalist modes of fiction. Sprawling, skewed, and at times labyrinthine, these texts fracture narrative authority with their relentless qualification, superimposition, contradiction, and inconsistency. Lurching from scene to scene, Arlt's reader is eventually permitted to identify the narrator as the unnamed acquaintance to whom Erdosain finally confesses. Yet the relation between this narrator character and the occasionally intervening *cronista* (chronicler) and *comentador* (commentator) is never clarified, and further confusion results from the introduction of the author's own voice in the 'Author's Words' which precede *Los lanzallamas* and in footnotes which relate the timing of plot developments to real historical events. And despite the internal narrator's accounting of his sources of information, which include Erdosain's confession, his diary, an interview with his wife Elsa, and police reports and press accounts of Erdosain's suicide, he provides other information which

could not possibly have been derived from those sources. Twice, moreover, he pauses to clarify that rather than transcribing the accounts of his witness directly, he has taken the liberty of reconfiguring them as dialogue in order to convey 'the direct sensation of the events' (Arlt 1991 II, p.401), and the elaborate, if erratic, framework of pseudo-documentation is entirely undermined by a commentator's note which reminds us that what we are in reading is, in fact, a novel and not a chronicle of real events (Arlt 1991 II, p.454). The para-textual presence of the footnote, a largely academic and documentary device, also of course draws our attention to the problematic boundaries of this fiction.

Besides failing to account for the source of much of what he relays, Arlt's ambiguously defined narrator also falters when he promises us material he never delivers (an extract from Barsut's diary), and when he speculates in the third chapter of *Los lanzallamas* about the nature of Erdosain's terrible secret, as if unaware that Erdosain confessed it to Hipólita toward the end of *Los siete locos*. Thus, there are discrepancies within the narrator's own account, as well as between the statements of characters, who are shown to lie and deceive each other in order to gain advantage. In this mishmash of fictions, we are insistently reminded that what we are reading is somebody's retelling of what somebody else thought, said, or did. In one particularly layered passage, the narrator recounts what Elsa told him that she confessed to the mother superior about what Erdosain told her that he read in the diary of another character.

Just as the novels are cobbled together in some less than reliable fashion out of heterogeneous remnants of discourse, so too are the characters shown to fashion themselves after diverse textual models. In *El juguete rabioso*, Silvio lives out fantasies derived from the adventure novels of the Andalusian shoemaker, and Arlt's later characters are likewise the products of their readings. Scriptural precedent inspires Ergueta to marry Hipólita, who herself chose prostitution as a preferable alternative to domestic servitude after reading about it in books. The Astrologer boasts of an extensive library, a broad familiarity with European literature, and a rhetorical genius rivalled only by Hipólita's own. Hipólita relates that her dissatisfaction with men stems from her childhood fixation on the adventurous heroes of the novels of Carolina Invernizzio, yet when she escapes with the Astrologer at the end of *Los lanzallamas*, the reader understands that he has fulfilled precisely that role. The suspicion that the reality of these characters is somehow scripted by forces greater than them is most clearly voiced by Erdosain and his perceived double and tormentor, Barsut, both of whose perceptions are profoundly shaped by movies. In these characters, exposure to the simulated marvels of the cinema has produced an ontological dissatisfaction, and both yearn for magical Hollywood transformation of their unbearably mundane lives. Erdosain fantasises that a lonely millionairess will spot him from her limousine and whisk him off on a yacht to Brazil; Barsut confesses to having lived his entire adult life with the sensation of acting for an invisible camera, and passes the time planning his conquest of Greta Garbo.

Arlt's characters construct literary and cinematic realities for themselves in part in resistance to the ugly urban, industrial landscape in which the narrative situates them and from which nature has been virtually abolished. In these novels, descriptions of environments are expressionist, cubist, and futurist, relying on geometric imagery to connote an incessant delimitation and administration of space with cement and metal. In truth, however, the habitat of these characters is as much the emerging modern mediascape as it is the landscape or topography of Buenos Aires. One of the most provocative turns in the plot is the catastrophic dissolution of the conspiracy and its transformation into first a sensational series of newspaper articles and then a Hollywood movie in which Barsut will re-enact events at Temperley and fulfil his fantasy of stardom by doing what he's been doing all along: playing himself. Simulation, I would contend, is a primary function of the Temperley conspiracy. Madmen such as Barsut (labelled a 'simulator of truths') and Bromberg ('a type of simulating delinquent') are drawn to the Astrologer because he boldly voices their contempt for rationally and legally constructed reality. *Los siete locos* concludes with the simulation of Barsut's murder by Bromberg, and *Los lanzallamas* with actual murders which are to be re-enacted immediately as cinematic entertainment. Throughout the novels, the erratically omniscient narrator frequently alerts us to the simulations being perpetrated by certain characters upon others, most strikingly in the chapter of *Los siete locos* entitled 'The Farce', in which the Astrologer introduces an army officer to the other conspirators as a major, then reveals him to be a sergeant as a demonstration of the potential power of deception as a political tool. A footnote attributed to the commentator subsequently contradicts this, stating the officer to be not a pseudo-major, but rather a pseudo-sergeant and actual major, alerting the reader to the fundamental unreliability of the Astrologer's claims.

In these novels truth founders in an unresolved competition of fictions. Erdosain's murder of his lover and his subsequent suicide convert him into a media celebrity, but not even these acts, which he understands as his ultimate existential affirmations ('being through crime'), are unscripted. At the end of *Los siete locos*, in a somewhat oneiric episode in a cafe, Erdosain witnesses the suicide of a fugitive who the police identify as an embezzler wanted for killing his mistress with a pistol shot in the ear. Erdosain recognises this story from newspaper accounts, and it becomes, at the end of *Los lanzallamas*, his own. Arlt's narrative descends into the very site of the textual production, the basement where the daily paper is printed, to show the transformation of Erdosain's crimes, prefigured by news, back into news, which is to say into a narrative consumable by a newly consolidated mass reading public. Having worked as a crime writer for the pioneering tabloid *Crítica*, Arlt was quite familiar with the mechanics of commerce in sensational violence, and this also relates to his constant preoccupation with the economic status of the printed text. This visit to the newspaper press also recalls, however, the previous visit to the press of the anarchists, which is underground not only in the literal

sense (concealed beneath a trap door hidden by furniture) but also in the metaphoric, political sense.

As the organising conspirator in Arlt's plot, the Astrologer is well known for advocating a fusion of the successful elements of all major contemporary revolutionary movements, and for serving up an ideological 'Russian salad' designed to appeal to malcontents of all stripes, 'Bolshevik, catholic, fascist, atheist, militarist', etc. He emulates Mussolini as well as Lenin and proposes to adapt the industrial and military technology developed by capitalism (particularly chemical and biological weapons) to ends more ruthless and tyrannical than those of the capitalists themselves. He speculates on the application of cinematic technology to the elaboration of propaganda and revolutionary myth, directly anticipating Nazi innovations in that field. Like the fascists and the Bolsheviks, he has learned important lessons from that current of anarchism, flowing from Bakunin, which embraced destruction and terror and which trusted in the revolutionary initiative of a conspiratorial elite and in the explosive potential not of the proletariat, but of the lumpenproletariat, including criminals. The Astrologer recruits not workers but crackpots, delinquents and idlers, or as Ergueta puts it, 'wretches, murderers, swindlers, all those low-life types shoved down to the bottom with no way out' (Lindstrom's translation, Arlt 1984, p.16). Understanding verbal deception to be the essence of his power, the Astrologer 'manages' the madmen by representing his political program as the mirror of their own treacherous desires. His written instructions for the organisation of revolutionary cells reveal the direct source of his vision of the 'supermodern' secret society to be the *Revolutionary Catechism* published in 1869 under Bakunin's name but known to have been composed by his remarkable disciple, the murderous nihilist and revolutionary con artist Sergei Nechaev (the model, apparently, for the character of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky in Dostoevsy's *Demons*).

The Astrologer seems to believe in nothing but power, not even astrology ('it's all lies', he admits), but the pre-fascist tendency of his conspiracy is confirmed by his final murder of the Jew Bromberg.[5] He thus dramatises the ultimate assimilation of anarchist tactics of spectacular violence, including both the conspiratorial terrorism of Bakunin and the revolutionary syndicalism of Georges Sorel, by authoritarian political movements. In keeping with the narrative insistence on simulation, almost nothing is ultimately generated by the Temperley conspiracy other than a few documents: the Melancholy Pimp's budget for a brothel proposed to finance revolutionary activities, the Astrologer's organisational instructions, Erdosain's plans for a nerve gas factory, and, indirectly, newspaper accounts of the conspiracy's aftermath, all of which are introduced into narrative evidence by the compiler. The only revolutionary crime in which they actively collaborate is the circulation of counterfeit currency, which is printed by the actual anarchists. Elaborating on Jitrik's economic reading of *El juguete rabioso*, Piglia has concentrated on the circulation of falsified money

as the primary figure of symbolic exchange in these later novels, and I find his comments suggestive.

> Money - Arlt could say - is the best novelist in the world: it legislates an economy of passions and organises - in the mystery of its origin - the interest of a story in which the arbitrariness of exchanges, debts, and transferrals is the only enigma to decipher. In this sense, for Arlt money is a machine for producing fictions, or better yet, it is fiction itself because it always de-realises the world: first because in order to have it one must invent, falsify, swindle, 'make fiction' and at the same time because becoming rich is always the illusion […] which is constructed on the basis of all that which can be had *in* money (Jitrik 1982, p.25).

In my reading, Arlt's nuanced equation of fiction and falsified money hinges on the anarchists' involvement. If counterfeit bills are the tokens of fiction, the entire system of intratextual circulation betrays clandestine, anarchic origins.

Despite the brevity of their appearance in *Los lanzallamas*, the anarchists of Dock Sur preside in some significant sense over the operation of conspiracy. They provide the forged letter (ascribed to the Ministry of War) which lures Barsut to Temperley. They provide the ten thousand counterfeit pesos with which the Astrologer repays Barsut his extorted capital and which, when detected, result in his detention by the police. Finally, they print pamphlets, which link Temperley to an invisible international revolutionary network. In sharp contrast to the middle-class 'madmen', who are portrayed largely as frustrated monsters, the working-class anarchists are represented as *productive* in their subversive activities. After much narrative attention to Erdosain's sterile and perverse middle-class marriage, the anarchists appear as a cohesive family with a child, and the connotation of fertility is reinforced by a sign on their door which reads *'Se benden güebos y gayinas de raza'* ('Egs and purebred chikens solt here'). This flagrant misspelling might remind us of Arlt's own orthographic ineptitude or, more generally, of his reputation as a technically 'bad' writer whose Spanish was learned not at home or in school but in the street and from cheap translations of foreign novels. One additional distinction of the anarchists is the fact that their spokesman is retrospectively identified by Erdosain as none other than Di Giovanni, whose real-life execution Arlt witnessed while working on *Los lanzallamas*. Di Giovanni is the only identifiable historical character in the novels.

Like that of the anarchists, Arlt's literary activities are carried out under the sign of illegitimacy, outside of the elevated humanist sanctum of letters traditionally governed in Argentina by a class of writers he ridiculed as 'white glove authors'. In the preface to *Los lanzallamas*, Arlt declared his independence from their critical standards, staking his reputation directly on his productive capacity and his popular readership. As the son of poor non-Hispanic immigrants (a Tyrolese mother and a Prussian father) and a professional journalist, he represents a break with the model

of the writer associated with the Argentine generation of 1880: that of the university-educated professional or bureaucrat who wrote in his spare time.[6] In the wake of the Soviet revolution, questions of the propagandistic and commercial value of literature were quite current in Arlt's leftist literary milieu, and in my view, his novels inscribe both propagandistic and commercial operations in the space of the two presses, figuring the subterranean drives of his at once subversive and mercenary narrative. Ultimately cynical as to the prospects of meaningful social revolution and unswayed by the utopian determinism of his leftist companions, Arlt ventured along with Pío Baroja and Louis-Ferdinand Céline into a neighbouring zone of intellectual and cultural modernity, the one dubbed 'Nihilism' by Bakunin's friend Ivan Turgenev in his 1861 novel *Fathers and Sons*.

In view of all this, it is understandable that in our purportedly post-ideological age, the fantasies of Arlt's madmen should continue to attract readers when the strident social realism of his contemporaries has long since lost its bloom. I perceive Arlt as a pivotal Latin American modernist and as an engineer of an ever-expanding international network of conspiratorial texts. As Hamilton, Weir, and Redding have documented, the set of major modern novels dealing with anarchist conspiracies is substantial, and I would link these texts, including Arlt's, to what Frederic Jameson has identified as the conspiratorial ideologeme of advanced capitalist culture. By his account, globalisation of economic relations and consequent diffusion of political power lends conspiratorial narrative a renewed currency in postmodernity, as an epistemological figure of concealed and 'potentially infinite' world system dynamics (Jameson 1992, p.9). Remarkably precocious in their representational strategies, Arlt's novels, like those of Baroja and Céline, display a number of the aesthetic features Jameson associates with this ideologeme: syntactic indirection, teleological failure, the interpenetration of high art and mass cultural conventions, and the double coding of political agents.

Confronted with Arlt, traditional national literary histories also suffer a failure of narrative continuity. Fernando Alegría, for example, states simply that as a 'disciple of Russian anarchism, Arlt never fitted into either the old Argentine literature nor the new (that of the Vanguard)' (Alegría 1986, pp.173-4). Broader-minded cultural critics, such as Beatriz Sarlo, have interpreted Arlt's 'foreignness' in the context of mass immigration and of Argentina's definitive incorporation into the global economy, which produced a radical modernization of cultural styles in the metropolitan Buenos Aires of the 1920s and 1930s. In a 1995 study, Domingo-Luis Hernández adopted a transnational perspective to suggest that Arlt's representation of modernity ('errant, asymmetrical, mediated, multi-faceted, alienating') links him to novelists as contemporary and foreign as Anthony Burgess, Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, and Antonio Tabucci. I cite these remarks because they reinforce my own notion of Arlt as a writer who demands to be read not only alongside Onetti, Cortázar, Viñas, etc, but also as a practitioner of the modern conspiracy novel arguably founded by Dostoevsky.

In novels plotted around conspiracies, it is scarcely surprising that historical

developments in the structure of the novel form should be vividly evident. Theories expounded by Peter Brooks, for example, cast considerable light on the mechanics of the texts I have discussed. For Brooks, the classic nineteenth-century novel, with its origins in Romanticism, prospered as a model of coherent and meaningful individual subjectivity in the era of disabled master narratives. Even when modernists challenged the capacity of narrative for the retention of true coherence or the conveyance of total meaning, they retained full faith in the intellectual and aesthetic necessity of emplotment. Linking novelistic narration to deviance, Brooks points up a dialectical weaving between the conjuring of chaos and the binding of desires which animated even the tidiest nineteenth century 'Balzacian' adventure. As novelists like Balzac, Hugo, Sue, Dickens, and Dostoevsky gravitate toward the criminal underworld of the metropolis, '[t]he novel tends to maintain its plots between exploration of the maximal, most daring social deviance on the one hand, and the counter-discipline of the police on the other' (Brooks 1984, p.158). In the scheme of modernism, in the texts of Arlt and others, anarchism imposes itself as a prime instance of maximal political deviance.

Brooks acknowledges the historical affinity between novelistic and criminal plotting in the following passage:

> I would suggest that in modern literature this sense of plot [that of a 'secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose', a 'scheme or conspiracy'] nearly always attaches itself to the others: the organising line of plot is more often than not some scheme or machination, a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose which goes against the ostensible and dominant legalities of the fictional world, the realisation of a blocked and resisted desire. (Brooks 1984, p.12).

Brooks touches on the example of Balzac's Vautrin, master-conspirator of *La Comédie humaine*, yet the function he ascribes to the character ('explicitly to theorise desire and the logical consequences of its full enactment') obviously persists throughout the conspiratorial corpus. Projecting Brooks' insights into the modernist period, I would reiterate the unique fascination of conspiratorial and terrorist anarchism for novelists such as Conrad, whose breach of integral narrative totalisation in *The Secret Agent* centres on the figure of the Professor, his 'Perfect Anarchist', who is as 'lawless' as André Gide once proclaimed the novel to be. Clearly, Arlt is seduced by lawlessness, and it is significant that despite the intervention of the police and the media at the conclusion of *Los lanzallamas*, Hipólita and the Astrologer escape abroad, where they continue to thrive, presumably, in their asexual union, as purveyors of fiction and conjurers of desire.

From another perspective, Arlt's position with respect to the conspiratorial corpus is also liminal. The intuition of a new epistemological order in his texts, detectable in their unusual emphasis on simulation, marks the waning of the high modern conspiratorial novel whose features I have described elsewhere (Close

2000, pp.141-3). Henceforth, the conspiratorial subject introduced by Dostoevsky and Turgenev mutates into something less stable and more ideologically diffuse, in keeping with the encroachment of post-modernity. Historically speaking, nowhere did anarchism survive the anti-democratic convulsions of the early twentieth century intact. Militant anarchist dissidence was virtually extinguished by 1922 in the Soviet Union, and succumbed shortly thereafter to fascism in its Western European strongholds. Even earlier, measures toward the exclusion and deportation of anarchists were undertaken in the United States (in 1903 and 1919) and in Argentina (in 1902 and 1910), then the two most popular destinations of European immigrants to the Americas. As the Spanish Civil War proved, even a mass movement predicated on anti-authoritarianism and individual sovereignty is ill able to resist a modern, totalitarian military-industrial complex, whether Soviet or Nazi. Conversely, it is precisely the massification and the corporatisation of twentieth-century political life that ensures the continued relevance of anarchist critique.

Theorists from Theodor Adorno to Jean Baudrillard have perceived a global shift in the operation of ideology around the time of the Second World War, and an accompanying shift in the order of representation is suggested by changes in the conception of conspiratorial fictions in the post-war era. Profound transformations in the conception of political power take place in societies whose ideological management depends increasingly on the transmission of images through electronic media, on irresistible techno-military might, and on the invisibility of dissent. As Jameson observed in 1994 with respect to the aesthetic debates of WWII-era German Marxists,

> the fundamental difference between our own situation and that of the thirties is the emergence in full-blown and definitive form of that ultimate transformation of late monopoly capitalism variously known as the *société de consommation* or as post-industrial society. […] [Remaining] relevant in the present context, however, is the Frankfurt School's premise of a 'total system', which expressed Adorno's and Horkheimer's sense of the increasingly closed organisation of the world into a seamless web of media technology, multinational corporations, and international bureaucratic control. Whatever the theoretical merits of the idea of the 'total system' - and it would seem to me that where it does not lead out of politics altogether, it encourages the revival of an anarchist opposition to Marxism itself, and can also be used as a justification for terrorism - we may now at least agree with Adorno that in the cultural realm, the all-pervasiveness of the system, with its 'culture-' or (Enzensberger's variant) its 'consciousness-industry', makes for an unpropitious climate for any of the older, simpler forms of oppositional art […] The system has a power to co-opt and defuse even the most potentially dangerous forms of political art by transforming them into cultural commodities (Jameson 1994, p.208).

This totalisation and global integration of power, whose economic and technological features Gilles Deleuze has summarised in his 'Postdata on Societies of Control', does of course continue to provoke ever more spectacular feats of terrorism and a revival of anarchist culture which heralds the eclipse of more organised modes of resistance. Meanwhile Arlt, once rebuked by a representative of the Communist Party for his attention to 'mythological procedures', continues to attract readers as the conspiratorial ideologeme becomes ever more compelling in a culture of paranoia.

Although their profile is not what it once was, one can still detect anarchists marauding on the margins of the postmodern novel, for example in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), with its references to the activities of the Flores Magón brothers and the Mexican CIA *(Conjuración de Insurgentes Anarquistas*). In Argentina, two texts which seem to owe a particular debt to *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas* are Piglia's 1992 *La ciudad ausente* (The Absent City) and Marcelo Cohen's 1995 *El testamento de O'Jaral* (O'Jaral's Testament). Piglia conjures an end-of-the-millennium Buenos Aires and centres his paranoid tale on 'the machine', a device supposedly conceived by the eccentric Macedonio Fernández (a real writer much admired by Borges) in collaboration with a pseudo-Hungarian inventor christened, suggestively enough, Emil Russo. Macedonio's machine, which somehow contains the mind of his dead wife, Elena, functions as a generator of narratives whose clandestine circulation has aroused the suspicion of officials determined to control 'the principle of reality'. Piglia inscribes the technological conditions of the present (surveillance, electronic simulacra) while tending a firm political opposition between a hyper-technological state and a diffuse but resolutely anarchist (and even modernist) community of resistance. Shifting between various, unprioritised levels of narration, *La ciudad ausente* follows an investigation of the machine by a detective/reporter, but this inquiry is repeatedly interrupted by the possibly paranoid discourse of other characters and by the possibly apocryphal narratives of the machine. When the novel closes with a monologue by the machine, in Elena's voice, intratextual subjectivity is left in thorough disarray, in compliance with Russo's mandate to resist centralised narrative authority (the police).

Piglia honours Macedonio, a political and aesthetic anarchist, not only as the inventor of his machine, but also by likening him to the historical anarchist Rajzanov, a would-be assassin killed by his bomb and lauded by Camus in *The Rebel*. Piglia's rebels enjoy convenient subway access from their refuge in the sub-basements of the Mercado del Plata. Genuine and fraudulent copies of the machine's narratives, originating here, in other subway stations, and in clandestine suburban workshops, proliferate in downtown bookstores and bars, telling tales increasingly troublesome to Piglia's projected (or perhaps remembered) Argentine police state: the story of the first Argentine anarchist, flashbacks to the execution of Indians and dissidents, alternative histories of the Falklands war (officially, Argentina prevailed). Even when interred by censors in the basement of a museum

in the final section of the novel, Macedonio's machine continues to remember and narrate, and it seems clear that so too will the clandestine counter-information groups, whether in urban enclaves or in the isolation of the pampa. As the title suggests, *La ciudad ausente* constructs utopian spaces, most outstanding among them being Finnegan's island, a settlement of Irish, English, Russian and other anarchist refugees in the Paraná. A document headed 'The Island' describes a society in radical linguistic flux, where a three-century-old edition of *Finnegan's Wake* is revered as sacred scripture. Alongside Joyce and Fernández, Piglia also enshrines Arlt not only by exhibiting artefacts of Erdosain in his literary museum, but also by identifying his narrator as an employee of *El Mundo*, Arlt's newspaper.

Cohen's *El testamento de O'Jaral* follows in the line of *La ciudad ausente* by re-imagining the possibility of extra-legal and anti-capitalist printing within a virtual 'total system' of the indeterminate but near future. Like Pynchon or William Burroughs in their own 'paranoid melodramas',[7] Cohen envisions a post-state society wherein the mechanisms of 'concentrationary democracy' cloak the real operation of power by capitalist consortiums and the division of humanity into groups defined by economic function (technomagnates, consumers, and 'social indefinites'). In a territory resembling Argentina but never named as such, an environment of 'virtuality' prevails: ubiquitous public video screens broadcast the political messages of the government and the official opposition as they debate an agenda set by the consortiums or perhaps directly by an even greater and more ineffable authority referred to as '*Them*, the Ones who are Above Everything'. On the eve of a referendum to decide whether the country will annex itself to the so-called Panatlantic Group (a decision which has already been made at a higher level), the crisis which threatens the ritual exercise of 'concentrationary democracy' is not revolutionary violence, long since eradicated, but massive indifference of the consumer-voters and the perplexingly playful virtual interference of a group of stubbornly unresistant subversives.

Cohen's protagonist, like Arlt's and those of the majority of the conspiracy novels that I have studied, qualifies as a fringe intellectual. In his refuge in an abandoned train station in the remote pampa, O'Jaral translates the globally triumphant mass-media melodramas of an English-language writer named Mulligany for a clandestine pirate publisher who dreams of administering aesthetic shocks to his slavish mass audience in order to goad at least a handful of consumers into renouncing the satisfaction of predictable narrative itineraries and submitting to 'lack of direction'. In his spare time, O'Jaral toils to absorb and synthesise the most essential knowledge accumulated by humanity in order to prepare himself to receive an 'illumination' or 'discovery' of a way of thinking outside of the paradigms which sustain the total system. He is distracted from this mission when agents of the consortiums oblige him to collaborate in their pursuit of Ravinkel, O'Jaral's half-brother, veteran conspirator, and suspected leader of the gangs of young 'anarchoid' dissidents who entertain themselves by blemishing the complexion of 'mass-media reality' with creatively falsified images and random

transmissions of their own riotous fantasies. Ironically, it is not resistance but the dissolute nature of *this* resistance which worries the technomagnates, who understand the need for tension to sustain both market growth and the credibility of the democratic simulacrum. Further Arltian complications in Cohen's text include the location of Ravinkel's lair in a building disguised as a printing plant. Another dissident, less successful than Ravinkel, proposes to combat 'Those Who Have the Word' and who impose the 'One Dominant Story' of the total cultural system, by assembling an archive of all non-commercial writing, thus articulating a network of alternative human possibilities.

Writing in collaboration with Félix Guattari, Deleuze has championed the writings of Antonin Artaud and William Burroughs as among the most potent antidotes to totalising or, in their terms, paranoiac and fascistising culture. In fully commodified societies, they argue, 'Every writer is a sell-out. The only literature is that which places an explosive device in its package, fabricating a counterfeit currency, causing the superego and its form of expression to explode, as well as the market value of its form of content' (Deleuze and Guattari 1990, p.134). What I have attempted to locate in the Argentine novel of the first decades of this century is precisely this smouldering explosive charge, this counterfeiting of currency in the basement of modernity. Although all market-sensitive novelistic production must comply to some extent with the conservative, indeed self-policing, mandate of the bourgeois genre, I believe that in their picaresque/conspiratorial agitation and their displacements of urban subjects, Arlt's texts enact genuine resistance to the ideological regime of bourgeois capitalism. Rather than aborting the subversive project, Erdosain's suicide advances it as effectively as Barsut's Hollywood career or the escape of Hipólita and the Astrologer.[8]

The Hispanic novel adopts the modern conspiratorial device in a period defined by irreversible transformations not only of the economics and politics of literature, but also of the entire ideological system of the nineteenth century. The best novelistic treatments of anarchism play out the dangers inherent in the liberation imagined by philosophers such as Stirner and Nietzsche, exploring the nihilistic outlands first mapped by Nechaev and later colonised by the likes of Lenin, Mussolini, and Hitler. Despite their continued dominance in the capitalist literary market and their status as official Socialist cultural policy, realistic and naturalistic modes of representation no longer satisfied writers who experienced the treacherous transparency of the 'truth effect' in political as well as literary discourse. Even as it ceded ideological precedence to the emerging discourses of the mass media, literature was obliged by them to regard the yawning 'dearth of reality' of which André Breton spoke and which literature itself imposed. The critiques of Arlt and his collaborators preserve a measure of freshness and anarchistic force in so far as they reject the ideal assurances of liberal culture. Like the chimerical dawn of anarchist utopia, the Astrologer's hoax foretells that in twentieth-century politics, as in twentieth-century fiction, language will slip its mooring in truthful signification to drift on murderous tides of desire.

I am thinking, finally, of a 1929 essay in which Walter Benjamin praised the Surrealists (before their conversion to Communism) as the first agitators since Bakunin to provide Europe with a 'radical concept of freedom' and 'to liquidate the sclerotic liberal-moral-humanistic idea of freedom' (Benjamin 1996, p.78). His account of the origins of this concept is equally germane here.

> Between 1865 and 1875 a number of great anarchists, without knowing one another, worked on their infernal machines. And the astonishing thing is that independently of one another they set its clock at exactly the same hour, and forty years later in Western Europe the writings of Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lautrémont exploded at the same time. One might, to be more exact, select from Dostoevsky's entire work the one episode that was actually not published until about 1915, 'Stavrogin's Confession' from *The Possessed* (Benjamin 1996, p.76).

Arlt rewrites Stavrogin's confession as Erdosain's, just as he rewrites Verkhovensky's phantom conspiracy as the Astrologer's 'fictitious revolutionary body', and in the process he writes Latin America into modernity. Benjamin celebrates the Surrealists' adoption of 'the cult of evil as a political device' and as the antidote to the sentimentalism of bourgeois culture, and in this sense the objectives of the Surrealists were quite close to Arlt's own. Inevitably, the metaphysical question of evil haunts all anarchist discourse as well as all modern discourse concerning anarchy. In a rational humanist philosophical universe, the antagonism of anarchy and order codifies the anxieties and exhilaration of free individual will, political and otherwise, and these are the terms over which the novelists of conspiracy wrangle. Like Benjamin's cultivators of evil, but with quite different aesthetic strategies, Arlt redeems the share accursed (in George Bataille's terminology) by bourgeois law and order and enacts the signification of the unsignified: lumpenreality. Dostoevsky, Arlt, Breton, *et al* toil as disruptive auditors of unbalanced bourgeois moral budgets, interdicting production while they pore over secret loss ledgers labelled 'vice', 'crime' and 'revolution'.

APPENDIX: MODERNISM IN LATIN AMERICA

In its usage in Anglo-American critical discourse, 'modernism' refers broadly to a multitude of aesthetic initiatives which challenged the realist and naturalist practices prevailing in late nineteenth-century European and U.S. literature. The amorphous nature of this category has produced endless scholarly polemics, and its relevance to Hispanic culture is particularly uncertain, especially since the term *Modernismo*, in Spanish, was claimed by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío in the 1880s as the name for his own very influential aesthetic program. In *Modernism and Its Margins*, a recent collection of essays addressing the problematic place of Spanish and Latin American writing in a modernist canon, Álvaro Salvador offers 1860 and 1910 as

rough limits for literary modernity, but adds the following:

> We could also cite as symbolic beginning dates 1868 or 1870, culminating in 1905 or 1914. Be that as it may, it is of greater concern […] to trace the boundaries of a period that begins with the first great crisis of values emanating from the binary of reason and industrialisation, with its questioning of a world centred on the capabilities of the subject, which reaches its climax towards the beginning of the World War I with the setting in motion, from the ideology of the bourgeoisie, of avant-garde subjectivity and the idea of political and cultural empire as a conception of the world. The period preferred in Anglo-American historiography differs from this periodisation. In that usage the term *modernism* includes the avant-garde and extends historically at least until the 1940s'. (Salvador 1999, p.96 n.2)

Regardless of its chronology, the geographical co-ordinates of modernism tend, as I have indicated, to remain rather fixed by Anglo-American scholars in Paris, Berlin, London and New York, but readers interested in modernist juxtapositions of centres and peripheries may wish to consult Carlos Blanco Aguinaga's essay, 'On Modernism from the Periphery', included in the same volume. As Blanco Aguinaga indicates, the periphery has been always already present at the imaginary centre of modernism (in such provincial migrants as Joyce, Kafka, Apollinaire, Tzara, Conrad, etc.), and the fictions which I study here are, par excellence, fantasies of decentralisation and mobility. The novel of conspiratorial anarchism, the primary object of my study, originates in Tsarist Russia, takes refuge in imperial England and France, and prospers in Spain before crossing to Latin America in an era when, as Octavio Paz once put it, 'the modern was outside and had to be imported' (1990, p.19).

My thanks to Sharif Gemie, John Moore, and Raimund Schäffer, whose comments guided me in the revision of this article.

NOTES

1. Of the three novels I shall discuss here, only one is currently available in English: *The Seven Madmen*, translated by Nick Caistor, was published in London by Serpent's Tail/UNESCO in 1998. A previous translation by Naomi Lindstrom is out of print. All translations from Spanish in this article are mine unless otherwise indicated.
2. My account of this period draws heavily on David Rock's histories (1975, 1987).
3. Edmundo Guibourg of *Crítica*, cited in Borré 1996, p20.
4. Di Giovanni, an Italian anti-fascist and violent anarchist, was Argentina's most celebrated outlaw in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He was not only the mastermind of a spectacular series of bombings and robberies, but also a publisher of newspapers and editor of the complete works of Élisée Reclus. Osvaldo Bayer's 1970 biography of Di Giovanni is available in English translation as *Anarchism and Violence: Severino di Giovanni in Argentina 1923-1931*. Elephant Editions, 1985.

5. Ludmer's *The Corpus Delicti* contains a fascinating proposal for double readings of Argentine tales involving murdered Jews (2004, pp141-158)

6. For an account of the cultural and literary coalition of 1880 and its relations with the liberal state, see Ludmer 2004, pp23-139.

7. Paul Fussel's term.

8. Deleuze and Guattari's criteria for 'schizorevolutionary' expression recall the Astrologer's own discursive adventure: 'the value of art is no longer measured except in terms of the decoded and deterritorialised flows that it causes to circulate beneath a signifier reduced to silence, beneath the conditions of identity of the parameters, across a structure reduced to impotence; a writing with pneumatic, electronic, or gaseous indifferent supports, and that appears all the more difficult and intellectual to intellectuals as it is accessible to the infirm, the illiterate, and the schizos, embracing all that flows and counterflows, the gushings of mercy and pity knowing nothing of meanings and aims (the Artaud experiment, the Burroughs experiment)'. (Deleuze and Guattari 1990, p370)

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