Kristevian Semiotic Disruption of Physical and Textual Bodies in *El orden alfabético* by Juan José Millás

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Abstract: Using a theoretical framework offered by Kristeva, this study explores the erosion of physical and textual bodies in Millás's 1998 novel *El orden alfabético*. I analyze the processes of constructing text and of manipulating his physical body that the protagonist carries out as he seeks to find his self. Both attempts to create text—written and physical—fail, which reminds us that our system of language and our physical bodies, even though they are our main modes of perceiving the world around us, are often unreliable.

Keywords: Julia Kristeva – Juan José Millás – *El orden alfabético* – Physical bodies – Text

The human body in and through literature is a precarious and perpetually present process that many authors have tried to capture in their texts. Corresponding to our physical bodies, our system of language constitutes one of the ways through which we understand experiences and our selves, and yet language exposes epistemological unsteadiness. Not only do we employ our physical bodies as one of our foremost mechanisms for awareness, but when we attempt to create written texts, language is the filter with which we negotiate perception onto the page. In a 1998 interview with Pilar Cabañas, contemporary Spanish author Juan José Millás states that

> la literatura consiste, precisamente, en escribir lo que uno no sabe. Y con herramientas que no le pertenecen porque el lenguaje es muy artificial y nunca llegas a dominarlo. . . . [E]l texto literario es el resultado de la tensión entre lo que quieres decir tú y lo que quiere decir el lenguaje, entre lo que quieres decir y lo que eres capaz de decir, entre la tradición en la que te has incluido y la subjetividad que tú eres capaz de aportar a esa tradición. Y, en definitiva, son siempre materiales muy gaseosos todos. (104)

Language strives to assign meaning to what we perceive; however, the act of conveying what is perceived exposes the inadequacies of our linguistic system. The representation

of both physical and textual bodies in literature, then, uncovers a double uncertainty. First, language is concurrently a reliable and an unpredictable way to transmit experience, even though we repeatedly use it to attempt to record meaning, and even though it can never fully reveal that which we wish it to express. Second, physical bodies and textual bodies are processes in continuous negotiation with language and with those who write and read. Literature is a discipline that is supported by the subjective framework of language. We repeatedly have experiences in the world, but the ways in which writers and fictional characters perceive and record experiences—whether via physical or textual bodies—designate the self as deeply subjective.

One of the most important figures of contemporary Spanish literature, in many of his fictional works, Millás encourages us to question conventional modes of reality and perception when his characters attempt to write texts and when they manipulate their physical bodies. The process of writing and reading textual and physical bodies are frequent means by which characters seek to define their subjectivities, and the discursive ontological gap of the sign is frequently reflected in the human body in Millás's works. Like our texts, our bodies try to make sense of perception and to arrive at meaning, yet neither body nor text express concrete and stable signification because both are systems in continuous process.

Using the theories of Julia Kristeva as my main analytical framework, in this current study, I examine the erosion of both human bodies and the textual bodies in Millás's novel, *El orden alfabético* (1998). In the novel, the protagonist Julio seeks to create meaning by modifying his body and by attempting to construct text, and the processes of these acts emphasize that subjectivity is in continuous formation. In this sense, through our two best yet inherently insufficient perceptive channels, language and the human body, Millás seems to comment on the process of human life as a continuum of failed revolutions and erosions.

Kristeva and her Theories of Text and Bodies

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva examines text and the human body as interweaving media and outlines her primary ideas about them, ideas that will become the basis for her subsequent scholarship.[1] In the book, she argues that a drastic transformation took place in the nineteenth century when the critical analysis of texts became a way to explore the human system of language, and thus, one way of perceiving the world around us. Intrigued by the works of linguist Emile Benveniste and influenced by her mentor Roland Barthes, Kristeva challenges the structuralist concept that language is a static, disembodied object. Rather, she posits that language is a process always in production, and it is embodied in the text and in the materiality of the

[1] Leon S. Roudiez writes that *Revolution* is "is the most wide-ranging metalinguistic elaboration of Kristeva's theories" (ix).

body. Leon S. Roudiez writes of her ideas that "text cannot be thought of as a finished, permanent piece of cloth; it is in a perpetual state of flux as different readers intervene, as their knowledge deepens, and as history moves on" (5). Text is inherently always in process because of the nature of language: meaning fluctuates from the very moment it is uttered.

Following Barthes's ideas in his essay "From Work to Text," Kristeva defines text as a process in constant motion in her brief prologue to *Revolution* titled "Prolegomenon." Much like the shift from the term "work" to the term "text" that Barthes advocates, Kristeva supports the move from "literature" to the broader term of "text." Here, her use of "text" attempts to erase the boundaries enforced by the traditional literary canon. That is to say, "literature" for Kristeva is too restrictive a term whereas "text" refers to anything that allows us to analyze the elusive sign. Both Barthes and Kristeva "emphasize not what literature 'is,' but rather what it *does*; they regard it not as a product, but instead as a production" (Becker-Leckrone 11). For Barthes and Kristeva literature becomes both the object and the subject of study when it is defined as text. Text, in this sense, is both constructed and constructive.

Kristeva's poststructuralist approach to discursive analysis not only marks a key conceptual shift in how to think about text, it also encourages us to reexamine how we conceptualize the human body. She contends that language and the human body are inseparable from one another and that language is inscribed in the materiality of the body:

> Caught up in this dynamic [of text], the human body is also a process. It is not a unity but a plural totality with separate members that have no identity but constitute the place where drives are applied. This dismembered body cannot fit together again, set itself in motion, or function biologically and physiologically, unless it is included within a practice that encompasses the signifying process. Without such a practice, the body in process/on trial is disarticulated. . . . Within the process, on the other hand, by confronting it, displacing its boundaries and laws, the subject in process/on trial discovers those boundaries and laws and makes them manifest in his practice of them. (*Revolution* 101)

According to Kristeva, neither text nor the human body carries innate meaning; they both are continuously assigned and begetting meaning. Just like text, the body is constantly in production as it continuously negotiates with that which surrounds it.[2] Furthermore, following Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory of the separation from the mother, Kristeva stresses that the body is a vessel of desire and that corporeal drives repeatedly push us to try to fulfill that which it is inherently lacking. Unlike Lacan,

[2] In Katarzyna Olga Beilin's interview with Millás, the author echoes Kristeva when he states, "[Y]o siempre he pensado que el cuerpo es una medida de todo" (68).

however, who marks the mirror stage as the beginning of one's lack, Kristeva believes that the body is always inherently incomplete even before birth. Yet for both philosophers, the object of desire—be it the mother, the body, or the text—is always unattainable. Bryan S. Turner puts it well when he states in *The Body and Society* that "desire cannot be finally satisfied since desire is its own object" (11).

Kristeva's Theories of the Semiotic, the Symbolic, and Bodies in *El orden alfabético*

Kristeva utilizes two key terms, the semiotic and the symbolic, to showcase the dialectical back-and-forth between bodily drives and language's attempt at the construction of discursive signification.[3] The semiotic is prelinguistic; it occurs when the physical body is the only medium through which we can perceive and attempt to understand the world. Kristeva defines the symbolic and the semiotic in the following lines:

> [T]he *symbolic*. . .is a social effect of the relation to the other, established through the objective constraints of biological (including sexual) differences and concrete, historical family structures. Genetic programmings are necessarily semiotic: they include the primary processes such as displacement and condensation, absorption and repulsion, rejection and stasis, all of which function as innate preconditions. (*Revolution* 29)

The struggle between the symbolic and the semiotic, according to Kristeva, simultaneously connects and distances the body from the mother's body, and the semiotic orients the body to already established family structures. This orientation houses what Kristeva refers to as "chora," which she defines as "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated. . . . The *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a *position* that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not yet a signifier either)" (*Revolution* 25–26). As the speaking subject enters into the symbolic position, such as when a child utters her first sounds or in *El orden alfabético* when Julio obsessively repeats phrases, one enters into the space between the signified

[3] Kelly Oliver describes the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic well when she writes:

> Without the symbolic we have only delirium or nature, while without the semiotic, language would be completely empty, if not impossible. We would have no reason to speak if it were not for the semiotic drive force. So this oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic is productive and necessary. It is the oscillation between rejection and stasis, found already within the material body, that produces the speaking subject. (n. p.)

and signifier, or in Kristeva's terms, the thetic phase. This phase attempts to expose the break between the symbolic and the semiotic.

It is often within the space between the symbolic and semiotic that Millás's characters attempt to redefine their selves, but where they frequently become stuck in the act of searching for points of reference to define their subjectivities. As they try over and over again to traverse this gap by repeating phrases, their physical bodies and their texts erode more. What is most pertinent to *El orden alfabético* is Kristeva's interest in the space between the semiotic and the symbolic, between movement and stasis, where signification constantly attempts to coalesce, yet where it continuously disperses.

Millás's characters often question the possibility of textual understanding by writing, reading, and destroying language, and they challenge corporeal understanding by distorting their physical bodies. Characters often undergo bouts of sickness (headaches, nausea, and so forth) at the beginning of the process of renegotiating their identities, and the protagonists, Elena and Julio, from *La soledad era esto* (1990) and *Laura y Julio* (2006), respectively, are other examples (among others). These illnesses may be described in terms of Kristeva's rebirth, the return to the origin, the attempt to begin anew the process of the creation of identity. The bodies of Millás's characters erode as a way to escape the static space of insufficient discursive meaning, yet just as repeating phrases does, modifying their physical bodies locks them within that position. In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva discusses the physical symptoms that the incomplete self undergoes:

> "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it. "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spot myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself. . . . During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. . . . There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (3)

Physical illness on and from the human body is frequently bracketed within the confines of written text in Millás's works. His characters get sick and/or modify their bodies at the same moment as they write, as they commission someone to write for them, or as they distort verbal and written language. In this sense, the body in Millás's narrative becomes text and the text becomes embodied; each functions symbiotically with the other and both express meaning via repeated actions. In addition, characters often become obsessed with parts of the human body and with parts of texts. No matter what is repeated (human bodies or texts), the act of repetition highlights the erosion of the possibility of pinpointing fixed meaning.

Kristeva's ideas about text, the physical body, desire, and repetition work well as a cohesive theoretical concept for analyzing *El orden alfabético*. Text and body are processes in constant production. Desire (or in Kristeva's term, drives) and repetition

encourage Millás's characters to attempt to uncover meaning, a task that they carry out both on text and on their physical bodies.

Physical and Textual Bodies Eroded in *El orden alfabético*

Millás's 1998 novel *El orden alfabético* is divided into two parts, each of which tells the story about Julio as a child and as an adult.[4] When he is a child, Julio spends days lying sick in bed where he drifts in and out of an imagined, alternate reality, conjuring up a fantastical world where the alphabet is disappearing and where adolescent desires overtake his child's body. In the second part of the novel, Julio's obsession with language and physical bodies locks him in a static position. He is unable to create significant relationships and he cannot construct meaningful text. The novel ultimately reveals that no matter how hard Julio tries to construct text—written, verbal, or corporeal—he continuously fails. The human body and the text in the novel are the means through which traditional channels of perception are questioned, which ultimately unveils that complete ontological knowledge is not attainable.

As is the case in *La soledad era esto*, Millás divides *El orden alfabético* into two almost symmetrical sections. In the first part, we meet Julio, the protagonist and first-person narrator, just before his fourteenth birthday.[5] In the second section a third-person narrator recounts Julio's life as an adult. Julio's physical body, sickened during the first part and consequently mired in repetition in the second part, is the medium through which the protagonist experiences the world that surrounds him.

In the first part of *El orden alfabético*, Julio is a young adolescent boy who undergoes physical transformation as his child's body begins to change into an adult's body. As these physical changes are taking place, Julio simultaneously dreams up an alternate reality in which language gradually disappears. The disappearance of language points towards what Kristeva describes as a return to the pre-symbolic stage, which in Julio's case is both linguistic and corporeal. Julio is metaphorically reborn, but in the second part of the novel he is an adult and readers realize that his transformation is not successfully completed. Julio literally loses his voice: he is the narrator of the first part of the novel but in the second part of the novel a third-person narrator takes over the

[4] The novel has gone virtually unstudied except for an article by Pepa Anastasio, which analyzes the loss of language in the novel, and a chapter of Dale Knickerbocker's book, which examines the main character's alienation and his creation of alternate realities.

[5] Millás often names his male characters Julio. Even though we cannot suppose that all Julios are the same Julio, Millás's insistence on reusing names is a technique that forces those who read more than one of his works into a pact with him. We cannot escape his need to repeat since the abundance of repetitions (e.g., names, telling time, plot, characters, and so forth) is too obvious to ignore. To use E.K. Brown's term, the symbols continue expanding within particular works by Millás and across his entire *oeuvre*.

story.[6] He also does not fulfill the biological mandate set forth by his grandfather and father to have children. With the deaths of his grandfather and father, Julio is the last living male in his family, yet he can produce neither written text nor children. Therefore, in the novel, written text masks the possibility of knowledge and forces the represented physical body into a repetitive cycle of stagnancy.

Let us first examine the ways that Millás erodes text in this novel. Words disappear and books and newspapers fly away as if they were birds until "no quedaba en casa nada con letra impresa" (36), all of which complicates the processes of perception and cognition. As an adolescent boy, Julio is obsessed with his father's collection of some one hundred encyclopedic volumes. Narrating in the first-person, the young Julio tells us:

> En casa había una enciclopedia de la que mi padre hablaba como de un país remoto, por cuyas páginas te podías perder igual que por entre las calles de una ciudad desconocida. . . . Yo mismo, por aburrimiento, abría a veces uno de aquellos libros desmesurados, de tapas negras, y leía lo primero que me salía al paso con la esperanza de encontrar un callejón oscuro. (11)

The encyclopedias function as the portal to the imagined alternate reality that he conjures up when he is lying sick in bed. Julio's father also uses the encyclopedic entries to transport himself to an alternate reality.[7] Unlike Julio's adventures in alternate realities, however, readers do not learn much about his father's other spaces perhaps because Julio is both the narrator and the character of focalization of the first section. It is clear, though, that for both son and father, the encyclopedia opens up the possibility for the creation of other worlds: Julio imagines a world devoid of the alphabet and his father often escapes from his own reality by reading the encyclopedic entries or by listening to cassette tapes to learn English.

The cycle of repetition in the novel may originate in language since the set of encyclopedias (which in themselves are archives of language) was a gift from Julio's grandfather to his father (38). Pepa Anastasio tells us that the encyclopedia

[6] Interestingly, the narrative structures of *La soledad era esto* and *El orden alfabético* are inverted. In the former, Elena usurps the narrative voice in the second part of the novel and essentially "finds her voice" as she writes in her diaries. In the latter, however, Julio loses his narrative voice in the second section of the novel. This inversion points towards Millás insistence on repeating themes and structures throughout the corpus of his literary works, but always with a slight twist. I maintain that Elena does transform by the end of the novel (she literally "finds her voice"), yet Julio destructs and he is never able to regain his voice. All that is left by the end of the second novel is the repetition of several phrases that obsess him.

[7] Julio tells us that, before his father becomes ill, he "continuaba utilizando la enciclopedia como un medio de transporte con el que llegaba a lugares que nosotros no podíamos ni imaginar" (14).

> pasa del abuelo al padre, hasta llegar al protagonista, como legado cultural, como símbolo de la transmisión de un mundo lingüístico, de una realidad de símbolos. . . . Es a través de su relación con la enciclopedia como Julio intenta mantener su confianza básica en esa herencia; en su instrumento más preciado—el lenguaje. (195–96)

The cycle of three generations who read and are obsessed with the encyclopedia highlights the transmission of language as a biological and hereditary system. Anastasio comments that for Millás "el lenguaje no se entiende como una función natural y biológica sino como la principal creación cultural que heredamos y aprendamos de los demás" (197). The encyclopedia as a family heirloom represents language as a social and familial construct that in itself is a complex system of representations. Furthermore, Kristeva echoes this idea that social learning occurs as the subject is still in the process of defining his or her identity, which is precisely what Julio experiences as he is physically ill in bed and undergoing pubertal changes. Kristeva writes, "Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body—always already involved in a semiotic process—by family and social structures" (*Revolution* 25). Linking behavior and the physical body in these lines, Kristeva describes social systems and boundaries like written language (the main system of communication) and social norms (e.g., desire for that which should not be desired according to social norms) that Julio questions as he is sick in bed.

If language is inherited, Julio's father's loss of language is also intriguing because it parallels the repeated loss of language that Julio imagines as a fourteen-year-old child. When Julio is an adult, his father, who suffers from dementia and aphasia, is admitted to the hospital, and slowly but steadily Julio's father loses the ability to use and understand language. Here, Millás links the loss of language and the deterioration of the body since his father suffers from aphasia due to a brain hemorrhage. Aphasia, which is defined as the "[l]oss of speech, partial or total, or loss of power to understand written or spoken language, as a result of disorder of the cerebral speech centres" (*OED*), occurs due to trauma in the physical body (specifically the brain), yet it also affects the ability to participate in the social system of language. With the deterioration of both his body and his speech, Julio's father experiences a loss of subjectivity as he loses the ability to participate in the hereditary system of language that he learned from his father and passed on to his son. Furthermore, his father's pending death, in fact, parallels Julio's grandfather's death, which occurs in the first part of the novel, and it also highlights the cycle of life in general that Millás constructs in this novel.

For Julio the encyclopedia is described as both the map of reality and the ultimate alphabetic order (Millás *El orden* 127). Hannah Westley observes, "As the knowledge of language is incorporated into the body, text is the very tool by which we

express this knowledge and thereby transform the impersonal abstract potential of language into personal expression" (122–23). Undergoing pubertal changes to his body in the first part of the novel, Julio fantasizes about the erosion of language. As a teenager, logic suggests that his reality and the objects in his world(s) must be governed by the alphabet and he is confused as to why objects in the world are not organized in alphabetical order:

> [N]o entendía bien por qué, siendo la enciclopedia un modelo de organización, la realidad no se ajustaba siempre al orden alfabético. . . . Esta falta de acuerdo permanente entre el mundo enciclopédico y la existencia real constituyó una de las preocupaciones más fuertes de mi infancia. (14–15)

Essentially, when Julio questions the relationship between language and reality, he exposes the gap that exists between the signifier and signified. Kristeva's concept of the thetic functions well in relation to Julio's obsession with the encyclopedia because it emphasizes the innate problem of language: we can use words to attempt to describe something, yet those words will never achieve full meaning because they can never be the thing they strive to represent. The encyclopedic entries, essentially a group of words (the definition) that describe a word or phrase (the defined), stress the inevitable gap of the sign.

When more letters, words, books, and even street signs begin to disappear, Julio has a tough time making sense of the world, but one way that he is able to attribute meaning to the empty signifiers is by relating language to the human body. He describes the experience of losing language by comparing it to the human body, and specifically to teeth, in the following line: "Daba la impresión de haberse desprendido de nuestro vocabulario dejando en su lugar un vacío incomprensible, como cuando perdemos una muela por cuyo hueco pasamos la punta de la lengua una y otra vez" (65). The absence of language in his alternate reality, expressed here in bodily terms, parallels the physical transformation that Julio is undergoing as a fourteen-year-old boy.

The loss of language permits Julio to revert to the primacy of his physical body. The disappearance of the linguistic sign forces the human body into a pre-symbolic state, one where corporeal sensation and the lack of oral enunciation dictate perception. Kristeva employs the Platonic term *chora* to describe this semiotic state that is corporeally nourishing and prior to the conception of signs. She defines *chora* as "a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic" (*Revolution* 26). In this sense, Kristeva's *chora* is the space to which Julio returns once language begins to erode in his dreams, once the only system that helps him to make sense of the world begins to erode.

As Julio fantasizes that language disappears, he wonders about the connection between his grandfather and the encyclopedia: "Quizá morirían al mismo tiempo su

enciclopedia y él" (50). Similarly, in the second section, as his father moves closer to death, he loses his ability to participate in the world via language. His father first begins to forget the English phrases that he learned by listening to cassette tapes. He tells Julio, "No recuerdo cómo se dice: *El periódico está debajo de la mesa*, ni *Ayer olvidé los cigarrillos en la repisa de la chimenea*," to which Julio replies, "¿Y qué más da, papá?" (170). Julio's flippant response upsets his father who tells him:

> ¿Cómo que qué más da? He invertido media vida en aprender esas frases. ¿Te imaginas que el dinero ahorrado para la vejez durante toda tu existencia se evaporara de repente? Yo no he guardado dinero, porque me parecían más valiosas las oraciones gramaticales inglesas, así que no me digas que da lo mismo perderlas que no. (170–71)

Not being able to use language upsets Julio's father just as the disappearance of language concerns the adolescent Julio in the first part of the novel. Language is one of the most treasured objects that these men possess.

Both characters exist in liminal phases of their life in that the fourteen-year-old Julio is not a child and not yet a man and Julio's father straddles the line between life and death. They experience the loss of language via their physical bodies, Julio via his changing pubescent body and his father via his dying body. When he realizes that he cannot repeat the phrases that he learned from his English language tapes, Julio's father "se puso a llorar con el ojo derecho y Julio le tomó el hombro muerto con cierta aprensión, como si temiera contagiarse de aquel viaje hacia lo opaco iniciado por el cuerpo hemipléjico" (171). The fragmented body of Julio's father illustrates that he is close to dying, and, moreover, that he is literally dying in halves. He relies on one eye to see and the hemorrhage affects one half of his brain:

> Su padre puso media cara de no comprender la palabra *adúltero*, o quizá de que no era el momento de considerarla. Estaba lúcido con la mitad del cuerpo hábil, aunque se trataba de una lucidez extravagante que se manifestaba en la intensidad de su mirada impar y en la posición reflexiva de la comisura derecha de los labios. Producía el efecto de que toda su personalidad se hubiera acumulado en una de las mitades de su cuerpo. (193)

Halving is an intriguing technique in Millás's works. The author divides Elena's legs in half in *La soledad era esto*; in the novel at hand, Julio's father dies off in halves; in *Dos mujeres en Praga* (2002), one of the characters modifies her face and body by halves; and, in *El desorden de tu nombre* the narrator refers to the short story "La mitad de todo" written by the fictional author Azcárate. Yvette Sánchez notes that "en esta variante de simetría y asimetría, en vez de desdoblamiento de una figura en dos, se produce la reducción o condensación a su mitad" (82). The halving of the human body serves a

unique function by highlighting that the search for subjectivity is frequently fragmented. Dividing the physical body, however, is more than just a reflection of the internal state of identity. The physical body and the inner self share a semiotic relationship; both influence each other and both are influenced by the other.

Fever and hallucinations as physical manifestations of Julio's struggle to redefine his self on the human body rule his world(s) in the first half of the novel. As the young Julio suffers from a high fever, he hallucinates about being in two places at once (16–17). Being sick heightens Julio's concept of how his physical body functions. Pairing together disparate body parts, he tells us, "Yo era consciente de todo mi cuerpo a la vez, de los dedos de los pies y de las orejas, de la lengua y de las pestañas, de la nariz y los párpados: vivía, en fin, en un mundo en el que las cosas se definían por su intensidad" (17–18). As he lies in bed, his fever comes and goes, and when it returns, Julio perceives it primarily through his body: "[L]o notaba en la debilidad de las rodillas y en la tristeza que, procedente de las ingles y los codos, se anudaba en la garganta, confundiéndose con las anginas" (42). Illness allows his body a new land of perception.[8]

The phase of a teenager who is undergoing puberty is itself a transitory phase. Not a child but not yet an adult, the teenager occupies an ambiguous position similar to that of the gap between signifier and signified, or in Kristeva's terms, the space of the *chora*. Changes to the physical body that occur during puberty reinforce the stagnancy of this sort of nowhere position. Furthermore, corporeal senses become heightened as the young person attempts to figure out how to manage his or her changing body. Beta Copley contends:

> Early adolescence starts with the emotional responses to the bodily changes of puberty. It brings psychic energy to the surface in sexual content, and ushers in the mental tasks and changes of the whole process. Major preoccupations at this time are likely to be around these bodily changes and concomitant confusions as to who one is in relation to this child-into-adult body. (83)

[8] We are reminded of the many illnesses that Saint Teresa of Ávila experiences as she transitions to becoming a nun. In *Libro de su vida* (1535), she writes:

> La mudanza de la vida y de los manjares me hizo daño a la salud, que aunque el contento era mucho, no bastó. Comenzáronme a crecer los desmayos, y diome un mal de corazón tan grandísimo, que ponía espanto a quien lo vía, y otros muchos males juntos; y ansí pasé el primer año con harto mala salud. (125)

Just as Saint Teresa experiences the transition from laywoman to nun via her body, so too does Julio experience the liminal phase from child to adult in his physical body. The first time that he leaves home after being sick in bed for days he feels weak, just as Saint Teresa feels when she leaves the walls of the convent. Julio tells us, "Al salir de la casa, tuve la impresión de que utilizaba mi cuerpo por primera vez para desplazarme. . . . Sentía en todos los miembros una debilidad extrema" (83).

During the first half of the novel, Julio mentally charts his changing body as he lies sick in bed. Even though his mother takes him to visit the doctor, they never find out the reason for his illness.[9] It is logical to assume, then, that Julio gets sick because he is in a transition phase; he is neither a child nor an adult, and his concept of language reflects this condition. In fact, during the days that he lies sick in bed, his body physically transforms: he grows a moustache and he gets taller. He describes his physical changes when he tells the reader that "[m]i madre afirmaba que me hacía mayor, que crecía después de las enfermedades, pero era más: creo que me convertía en otro" (42). He feels like he is becoming someone new. His transformation reminds readers of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and Julio himself makes an explicit allusion to Gregor Samsa several pages later when he states, "Yo era escarabajo solitario" (54).

Julio's hallucinations often manifest in the form of dreams when he is lying sick in bed with a high fever, and fantasy and reality become indistinguishable from one another. According to Kristeva, fantasy may occur as the connection between the signifier and signified is questioned, manipulated, and ultimately eroded. She describes fantasy in the following lines:

> Not only is symbolic, thetic unity divided (into signifier and signified), but this division is itself the result of a break that put a heterogeneous functioning in the position of signifier. This functioning is the instinctual semiotic, preceding meaning and signification, mobile, amorphous, but already regulated. . . . In the speaking subject, fantasies articulate this irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier; they disrupt the signifier and shift the metonymy of desire. (*Revolution* 49)

Julio's alternate reality highlights his bodily drives, distorting his sexual desires as his fantasies continuously attempt to replace his reality.

In the alternate reality of dreams which course through the first half of the novel, Julio fantasizes about Laura, one of his classmates from school. Desire overtakes his body and his language as he becomes obsessed with her physical body. He fixates on Laura's body, noticing her teeth first. He tells us that

> aunque había visto miles de dientes en mi vida me parecieron un instrumento nuevo, de enorme precisión, pero no sólo servían para cortar el pan y masticarlo, sino para gustar. A mí me gustaba una chica de un curso superior al

[9] Readers are again reminded of Saint Teresa and her mysterious illness which remains undiagnosed. At one point, she writes that "algunas veces. . .era grande la diligencia que traía mi padre para buscar remedio; y como no le dieron los médicos de aquí" (125).

> mío, Laura, que al reírse enseñaba también un poco las encías, como quien muestra sin darse cuenta un borde de la ropa interior. (23)

As an adolescent boy, Julio experiences desire *vis-à-vis* moments of fleeting presence, or in the Barthesian sense, he participates in moments of appearance-as-disappearance as he catches glimpses of the synechdoque of his desire: Laura's teeth. Desire here, however, is phobic; it is obsessive and repetitive. Just as Kristeva suggests, desire erodes the possibility of text as it is continuously replaced by the teeth, a specific fragmented body part, and meaning becomes elusive as Julio's desire becomes more pronounced through the repetition of such manifestations of desire.

When Julio kisses Laura in his dream world for the first time, the act is clumsy and almost violent even though he tries to be tender. Julio describes the scene: "[L]a empujé al interior de un portal oscuro, intentando practicar una delicadeza que quizá no me salió bien, y una vez dentro comencé a besarla mientras nuestros cuerpos, como un desmañado animal de cuatro piernas, buscaban una pared donde apoyarse" (57–58). Employing Kristeva's interpretation of Lacan's theory of the Oedipal drive, Julio's aggressiveness with Laura may be read here as a manifestation of this *chora*. In this sense, the scene may represent the break from the mother together with his eternally present desire to return to her. Kristeva notes that "[t]hrough the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now more than ever I elaborate the want, and the aggresivity that accompanies it, by *saying*" (*Powers* 41). Julio attempts to fill the lack of his mother with text, or in other terms, by trying to make sense of his lack via language. It is, however, an impossible task since the system of language itself is inherently composed of gaps and absences.

Julio is obsessed with Laura's body in the first section of the novel and he tries in various ways to recover it in the second section. His obsession is a drive over which he has little control. He himself notes, "Mi curiosidad por su cuerpo, en vez de disminuir, iba creciendo a medida que lo conquistaba, como una forma de deseo fuera de mi control" (69). As Julio discovers Laura's body, she becomes more entangled in his fantasies. He explains, "Laura y yo nos convertimos en una burbuja de experiencia flotando en el ámbito de aquella realidad muda" (58). Even though Julio's alternate reality and his actual reality are two distinct worlds (where he is sick in bed and where language disappears and he fantasizes about his classmate), it is the physical body that functions as the medium between them. Julio emphasizes this connection when he tells us, "Los dos lados, siendo tan diferentes, estaban próximos, pegados el uno al otro" (58).

Another part of the body that fascinates Julio is the feet. Located at the far end of the human body, these extremities frequently function as a portal to Julio's imagined

alternate reality.[10] He comments that "percibí sobre la planta de mis pies la presión de otras plantas de dimensiones idénticas, como si hubiera otro cuerpo también echado boca arriba al otro lado de un espejo invisible . . . imanes que corren paralelos por las dos caras de una superficie" (62). With this description, readers are reminded of the connections between Mercedes and her antipode (or her opposite and mirrored image) in *La soledad era esto*, which are associated through Mercedes's imagined construction and represented in her written diaries, yet here the two dimensions are linked by a specific body part. Millás seems to expand the definition of the antipode when, in *El orden alfabético*, he refers to the parallel bodies as two magnets that have opposite forces, yet are irresistibly attracted to each other. Even more interesting is the linguistic correlation between the English word "antipode" and the term "antipoder," or "antipower" in English. The construction of an imagined alternate reality may not be the key to understanding reality; conversely, it may obfuscate the possibility due to its inherent dichotomies. In Julio's two realities, power and powerlessness or productivity and impotence create a gap that divides his two worlds into a space where binaries are questioned and meaning is not tangible. Just as Millás destroys binaries such as desire/pain and want/phobia, he also plays in the gap between power and powerlessness in his representations of the human body.

In sum, teeth and feet are objects of fetishism for Julio. Kristeva describes fetishism in the following lines in which she once again associates the physical (here, the fetishized object) and text:

> It is perhaps unavoidable that, when a subject confronts the factitiousness of object relation, when he stands at the place of the want that founds it, the fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable. But is not exactly language our ultimate and inseparable fetish? And language, precisely, is based on fetishist denial ("I know that, but just the same," "the sign is not the thing, but just the same," etc.) and defines us in our essence as speaking beings. (*Powers* 37)

Julio focuses on fragments of the human body, yet he also is obsessed with language. In this sense, he feels a push of desire towards both specific body parts and the parts of the linguistic sign. Furthermore, because fetishism denotes desire, it obviously carries with it a strong connotation of eroticism. In *En brazos de la mujer fetiche*, Lucía Etxebarria and Sonia Núñez Puente associate the foot fetish with eroticism:

[10] When Julio reads the encyclopedia, readers presume that he holds the book in his hands, which are, in one sense, the opposite of the feet, yet they are similar in structure. Both hands and feet function as corporeal pathways for Julio to his alternate reality.

> Una explicación sexológica moderna relaciona el fenómeno del fetichismo de pies con el hecho de que existen en los pies ciertas zonas sensoriales directamente asociadas con las regiones genitales. En realidad, un mapa del pie puede asociar el punto desde el apéndice con prácticamente cada parte del cuerpo, como cualquier acupuntor podría explicar: la reflexología podal diseña mapas del pie en conexión con el resto de los órganos humanos. (102)

Julio's puberty emphasizes a new discovery of sexuality and, more specifically, reveals the fragmented nature of his body parts, of Laura's body, and of the bodies of his parents.

In *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence*, Stephen Burt also defines the connection of modern adolescence to sexuality and erotic behavior. He writes that puberty is "characterized by special psychological phenomena, among them heightened sexuality . . . [and] a focus on the inner life or authentic self" (4). Julio feels strong reactions towards feet, which represents the desire for that which is prohibited, when he lays sick in his parents' bed. He desires and fears his fetish at the same time when he tells us:

> Luego estaba la zona de los pies, en el extremo más meridional de la cama. . . . Ésa era la región de las tinieblas perpetuas. Durante todas las estaciones del año reinaba en aquel ámbito la más completa oscuridad, de ahí que sólo estuviera habitado por pies, pies ciegos, naturalmente, igual que los cangrejos sin ojos que viven en las profundidades tenebrosas de grutas marinas. Cuando me aventuraba a bucear por aquellas simas donde la ropa de la cama daba la vuelta para introducirse debajo del colchón, siempre llevaba el corazón en la garganta al imaginar que podía tropezar con una pareja de pies callosos, llenos de uñas retorcidas. (61)

He feels compelled to explore spaces and body parts that have been prohibited for him in the past. Even when the body part is as grotesque as his description of his father's feet, he is still attracted to them. He exclaims, "Una vez le vi los pies a mi padre y no me gustaron nada: me parecieron seres de otro mundo, tan pálidos, tan absurdos" (61), yet he still desires to explore the spaces that they inhabit precisely because they are prohibited objects of desire.[11]

[11] Another object of fetishism is the shoe of Julio's miscarried younger brother, which echoes Millás's repeated insistence of utilizing body parts to express meaning and expands on Julio's obsession with feet. Language takes on a role here as well since Julio speaks to his deceased brother by means of the encyclopedia. Not surprisingly, Millás employs the human body to attempt to understand the gap between the signifier and the signified, or in this case, the encyclopedic entry about "abortion" and the cadaver of the deceased fetus.

In the second part of the novel Julio "continuaba igual de abandonado que entonces" (157). Even as a lonely adult he still attempts to understand the world around him, he still unsuccessfully attempts to use text and his body as the principal means of interaction with the outside world, and he continues to perceive that reality is split in two. The omniscient narrator states, "[H]ay un lugar idéntico a éste en el que todo eso está sucediendo ahora mismo, del mismo modo que hay un sitio" (214). Julio makes up an imaginary family as he attempts to take on the paternal role that his father and his grandfather both assumed, but, following the logic set forth in the novel, he is unable to become the patriarch because he does not have biological children nor is he able to construct any text other than the several phrases that he repeatedly recites. Kristeva highlights the connection between authorship and paternity when she writes, "The *matrix of enunciation* in narrative tends to center on an axial position that is explicitly or implicitly called 'I' or 'author'—a projection of the paternal role in the family" (*Revolution* 91). Granted, although in the second part of the novel the narrative voice shifts to the third-person, the focalization still rests with Julio. Even though he no longer narrates his story, he still struggles with the possibility of authorship in the broadest sense, which inevitably leads him to a repetitive cycle of what Bruce F. Kawin refers to as "enervating habits" from which he cannot escape (6).

In one particular example, Julio tries to take on the role of father and/or author by continuously repeating a phrase about his imagined family. Throughout the second part he frequently repeats to himself, to his family, and even to strangers, "Mi familia no está en casa porque en esta época del año viaja al sur para visitar a mi suegra, que es viuda" (190). Yet he is never able to fully take on the paternal role described by Kristeva; he gets stuck in the repetition of the text and the signifier (the words in the phrase) is never able to correlate to the signified (the wife and child that Julio does not have). Another phrase that Julio continuously repeats is linked to his fetish of teeth—"Están haciéndole la ortodoncia al crío y tenemos que ir todos los miércoles al dentista" (164)—, which emphasizes Julio's inability to have a family, and consequently, to pass language to his son. His imagined son (who, fittingly, is the same age as Julio was in the first part of the novel) and his son's imagined orthodontic work are merely constructions of Julio's obsessive mind. Even though the repetition of phrases in terms of the creation of fiction or the construction of an alternate reality permits Julio to once again escape reality, it also brings him joy. Kawin states it well when he writes that "[r]epetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure" (19). Millás explores the lines between pain and pleasure, between truth and fiction, and between desire and phobia, yet lodged between all of these dichotomies we find continuously unfulfilled drives, which, in Julio's adult world, become unsatisfied enunciations that manifest themselves as repeated phrases. In this sense, Julio's concept of text from childhood to adulthood becomes more and more eroded. The system of language is no longer a means by which he is able to experience his different worlds as in the first section; rather, as an adult the attempted creation of text locks him in a

compulsive cycle of repetition from which he cannot escape. Kristeva supports this view when she writes that in adulthood "language has then become a counterphobic object; it no longer plays the role of an element of miscarried introjection, capable, in the child's phobia, of revealing the anguish of original want" (*Powers* 41). Our linguistic system, and consequently text, *becomes* the unattainable object of desire.

The phrases that Julio repeats throughout the second part of the novel lead him nowhere; they are empty signifiers that do not point to any true object. Kristeva emphasizes this when she states that "[t]he arbitrary sequence perceived by depressive persons as absurd is coextensive with a loss of reference. The depressed speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of: glued to the Thing . . . they are without objects. The total and unsignifiable Thing is insignificant—it is mere Nothing, their Nothing, Death" (*Black Sun* 51). As an adult, Julio is alone; once his father dies, he is the last male character without an heir. The novel and his life end in this continuous cycle of repetition. By the end, neither his body nor the texts have permitted him the means by which he is able to transform. Routine and habit overtake him and he is locked in a repeated sequence of stagnancy. His body and the possibility of text completely disintegrate by the end of the novel.

In *El orden alfabético*, we find that bodies and texts are the repositories of static meaning where identity is eroded via illness, distortion, and substitution. In the novel, points of reference for the self are lost time and time again as Julio attempts to uncover his authentic self via the distortion of his body and text. Amago comments, "Among the principal themes of his [Millás's] fiction are the individual's alienation by contemporary society and his or her search for a more authentic existence; the exploration of the processes of constructing and representing personal identity; and the examination of the writer's attempt to represent reality through writing" (65). Such searches in this novel end up going nowhere, which may lead readers to discover a social commentary by Millás. The attempt to produce text and to modify the body seems to reflect a perpetually postponed revolution, which Kristeva might describe as a dialectical vacillation between repression and renewal (see *Revolution* 208); no matter how much we try and no matter by which means we try, we can never arrive a fixed meaning, and thus, we can never rely completely on our perception as a true replica of reality.

Julio is obsessed with writing (or with the possibility of creating written and oral text) and he modifies his physical body both consciously and unconsciously as points of references to the authentic self. In this sense, he is a narcissist, locked in the repetitive systems of his body and texts. Kristeva argues that text and the body are interwoven media that humans use to perceive the world, yet even though they are continuously modified both remain inherently incomplete cognitive systems. In Millás's novel, both human bodies and textual bodies are the means by which perception and reality are examined, yet both are insufficient channels of investigation yielding empty meaning;

searching on the body and in texts only uncovers an endless cycle of repetition, which emphasizes the continuous process of being.

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