Creation in Distraction: Felisberto Hernández's "Explicación falsa de mis cuentos"

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Abstract: Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of "reception in distraction," I describe a similar phenomenon called "creation in distraction," which signals a profound change in modern perception but also presents a new form for its expression. While reception in distraction questions individual bourgeois subjects as receivers of art, creation in distraction troubles Romantic notions of individual genius, making way for non-individualized—even posthuman—creation. I analyze Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández's "Explicación falsa de mis cuentos" as an example of this phenomenon.

Keywords: Latin American Literature, Modernity, Authorship, Subjectivity, Posthuman

Introduction

In his second version of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1935-1939), Walter Benjamin establishes an opposition between two kinds of attention, concentrated and distracted, in which "[c]ontemplative immersion" appears as a bourgeois mode while distraction emerges as a new "variant of social behavior" characteristic of the masses (39). He illustrates this "antithesis" with the following example: "A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work, just as, according to legend, a Chinese painter entered his complete painting while beholding it. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide" (40).

This passage has been read as the establishment of a positive value for the kind of distraction that characterized the cinema-watching masses of Western Europe in the 1920s and '30s; the kind of distracted state that Siegfried Kracauer had earlier lamented in his 1926 essay "The Cult of Distraction." Seeing in the masses "a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is today emerging newborn," Benjamin seeks to redeem their distracted attention and uncover in it a political potential not detected by Kracauer (Benjamin 39). It represents what Benjamin calls "*[r]eception in distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception*" (40-41, emphasis in original). The locus of the new form

of perception is the masses, and its "training ground" is the cinema; it is thus the mass as cinema audience that embodies the promise of the new (collective) reception in distraction, opposed to the now-outdated bourgeois individual reception in contemplation.

However, if we reread the example that Benjamin uses to illustrate this antithesis between contemplative immersion and reception in distraction, one striking element appears in the foreground. When describing the concentrated subject who becomes lost in the work of art, he does not use an example of a bourgeois museum-goer or some other expected image. Rather, he invokes the figure of a Chinese painter who, "according to legend," enters into the world of the painting he himself has created. Upon first glance, the status of this figure is doubly unstable: not only is he a Chinese painter, a far-off "other," but his story is also told "according to legend" and thus forms part of the realm of myth. His ambiguity goes further, however. The Chinese painter's relationship to the work of art is not the one we expect to see, as he is not simply the individual contemplating a work of art; he is both the creator and the receiver of the artwork, both artist and audience.

Why is the mass audience, whose distracted reception heralds for Benjamin the promise of a new form of perception in modernity, contrasted with an "exotic," semi-mythical figure who occupies a liminal space between creator and receiver of the artwork? Benjamin's example reveals a significant element that has characterized discussions of attention and distraction: an opposition has often been established between work of art and audience, and the creator of that work of art is scarcely mentioned. Moreover, the attentive state of the audience is of central importance while that of the creator of the work of art merits little consideration. By mentioning the painter, engrossed in his own work once he has created it, Benjamin hints at a little-explored aspect of attention: the role of attention in creativity and the consequent possibility of a certain "creation in distraction" similar in nature to his notion of "reception in distraction." What is the painter's attentive state in this anecdote? Is it only by "beholding" the painting that he becomes lost in it? What was his state earlier, while he was creating the painting? This cryptic reference to a legendary Chinese painter, who is both a creator of a work of art and a contemplator who is absorbed into it, opens up the possibility of new dimensions of attention and distraction as states that characterize not just one who *looks* but also one who *produces*.

I wish to initiate an exploration of the phenomenon that I have called "creation in distraction" above. A preliminary definition would envision creation in distraction as a possible constitutive part of the process of reception in distraction as well as a result of it. Like reception in distraction, creation in distraction would signal a profound change in perception in modernity, and a new way of expressing that perception creatively. Just as reception in distraction calls into question the individual bourgeois subject as receiver of art, creation in distraction would trouble Romantic notions of individual genius, inspiration, and originality, calling forth the possibilities of non-

individualized—even posthuman—creation, or creation that emerges from an attentive state in which the individual subject has been decentered. And I would like to propose the Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández, specifically in his 1955 text "Explicación falsa de mis cuentos," along with several short stories composed both before and after it, as compelling examples of this phenomenon.

"Explicación falsa" is a manifesto of sorts in which Hernández states that he intends to respond to all of the people who have asked him how he writes his stories. However, instead of providing anything resembling a conventional answer, he flatly states that he neither knows nor does not know how his stories come to be. He "explains":

> En un momento dado pienso que en un rincón de mí nacerá una planta. La empiezo a acechar creyendo que en ese rincón se ha producido algo raro, pero que podría tener porvenir artístico. Sería feliz si esta idea no fracasara del todo. Sin embargo, debo esperar un tiempo ignorado: no sé cómo hacer germinar la planta, ni cómo favorecer, ni cuidar su crecimiento. ("Explicación" 216)

This is a double disavowal: not only is it a self-proclaimed "false explanation," and thus suspect from the outset; the "explanation" itself is a non-explanation, providing no clear information about how Hernández's stories come into being. Instead, we are offered this "false explanation," which troubles the notion of a clear origin for writing, converting it into the metaphor of a plant over whose growth the writer has little to no control. Origin, then, is something that is doubly denied, doubly deferred.

Hernández develops the metaphor of the plant-as-origin: "Ella misma no conocerá sus leyes, aunque profundamente las tenga y la conciencia no las alcance. No sabrá el grado y la manera en que la conciencia intervendrá, pero en última instancia impondrá su voluntad. Y enseñará a la conciencia a ser desinteresada" (216). The double disavowal now becomes a triple denial: not only is the explanation false and the plant-origin not controllable by Hernández, but now the plant itself does not even "know its own laws," at least not at a conscious level. His stories, he insists, are neither intentional nor unintentional: "No son completamente naturales, en el sentido de no intervenir la conciencia. Eso me sería antipático. No son dominados por una teoría de la conciencia. Eso me sería extremadamente antipático" (216). Consciousness seems to work in these statements as a sort of willed perception that a human subject would wield over the material world; as such, it represents a human intentionality that Hernández evades. At the same time, consciousness is also something that belongs to the plant-origin, something that both writer and plant must distract or defer in order for writing to emerge.

The *mise-en-abyme* structure that characterizes this process of creation with no clear origin is useful for understanding the principle of deferral at work in much of

Hernández's writing. By not providing a real explanation of anything, but rather deferring the agency of creation from writer to plant and beyond, this "false explanation" thematizes two of the main ideas that recur in most of Hernández's works: human unintentionality and the subjectivity of objects. Here, the human subject is the writer himself, represented in his own *apologia* as a bumbling figure, perceiving the presence of something but not knowing how to react to it, and thus remaining passive. The object is his story, defined here as a plant with a life of its own who will not benefit from the human subject's attention. The message, it seems, is that Hernández does not write his stories but rather they write themselves through him. Both the human subject and the plant-origin have a consciousness, but it is unclear whether it is a shared one.

The most striking aspect of Hernández's piece is its meditation on the connection between perception and creation. The writer and his plant encounter one another not through a process of concentrated attention but through distraction, a "disinterested consciousness" that both writer and plant possess. Why is consciousness such a central term in this eccentric explanation of the creative process? How does this "disinterested consciousness," which I understand as a state of distraction, lead both the writer and the plant-origin to the creation of literature? I argue that Hernández's preoccupation with consciousness here is part of an overall project (one whose intentionality the writer himself would surely deny) to chart the ways in which literary creation interacts with different attentional states, and to trace the contours of what can emerge from a distracted writing subject. Many readers of Hernández have emphasized the importance of distraction in his work but have based this observation on distracted characters in his stories or on biographical information gleaned from people who knew Hernández personally. It is my contention, however, that distraction is not just part of the author's personality or a theme for his stories; rather, it is actually constitutive of the very texts themselves—distraction is not a *theme* for writing but a *means* of writing. As I hope to demonstrate, this "false explanation" shows us the way in which Hernández's writing is itself a theorization of a certain mode of attention or inattention, which I call "creation in distraction." And as part of this, Hernández is inviting us to meditate on the creative process itself, purposely distancing his biographical (already fictionalized) "self" from the writing that comes out of him, in a distracting move that leads the reader's attention away from the search for a clear origin for his writing.

The "Mobile Glancing Eye"

Distraction has aroused interest among many critics and artists, who have assigned to it a variety of meanings, from seeing in it the perplexing evidence of modernization's hold on the psyche, to heralding it as the promise of a new mode of perception more attuned to industrialized urban experiences. Paul North has argued that distraction prompts serious ontological and epistemological questioning, because the Cartesian tradition in Western philosophy does not allow for the possibility of "not-

thinking"—such a concept is something that literally "cannot be thought" (North 42). Yet, in the phenomenon of distraction, this philosophically impossible act of "non-thinking" becomes possible: distraction is a state in which "non-thinking," or something akin to it, takes place (42). Distraction is "the disintegration or misdirection of a unified, stable, directional mental force for possession of sanctioned objects"; in other words, if "paying attention" is considered the "unified, stable, directional" exertion of energy toward something, then distraction is the point at which this unity, stability, and directionality break down (5). Consciousness loses the focus that it had trained on something specific, and is left directionless—without a clear target for its energies, it just floats aimlessly. But more importantly, the will to "possession" that characterizes attentional focus disappears and the mind just lets go. It is a state defined by incompleteness and partiality, with paradoxically "receding-approaching" mental horizons along which the mind remains half-open (13). Sylvia Molloy has used similar terms when discussing Felisberto Hernández's work, calling his writing entreabierta ("Tierras" 71-72).

Jonathan Crary has argued for "an idea of perception that can be both an absorption *and* an absence or deferral" (9, emphasis in the original). For him, attention contains within it "its own undoing," as it is not opposed with but rather "continuous with states of distraction, reverie, dissociation, and trance" (46). The gesture of locating attention and distraction on the same continuum rather than as polar opposites is a stance against arguments such as those put forth by Benjamin. For Crary, inattention can be viewed as a productive force, and asks "how and whether creative modes of trance, inattention, daydream, and fixation can flourish" (78). These "creative modes" that Crary mentions can be linked to Benjamin's Chinese painter: what happens to attention in this in-between state, in this space between artist and audience? He finds some possible answers in the later work of Paul Cézanne, where the painter works out issues of attention as they relate to the creative subject; he seems to leave behind what Meyer Schapiro called the "art of grave attention" in favor of an exploration of the "uncertain status of an attentive observer" (Crary 281, 282). One of Cézanne's major discoveries in this later period, Crary maintains, is the idea that "perception can take no other form than the process of its formation" and thus his work does not seek to represent or record experience but rather it is "confronting and inhabiting the instability of perception itself" (287-88).

Crary also recalls Paul Valéry's declaration that fixed concentration makes things come alive but also makes them take on a life of their own, and in order to regain control over those things, we need to undergo a process of forgetting (299). The creative subject claims no status as a stable source for creativity, but rather acts as a vehicle through which this creativity takes place. For Valéry, the artist actually loses control by concentrating his or her attention, and it is only by letting the mind wander, by forgetting, that control is reestablished. There is a troubled sense of agency at work in these ideas, aligned with Benjamin's Chinese artist who is drawn into it his own

painting. For Hernández, like Cézanne, the artist is thus somewhat passive, allowing something to wash over him while he averts his or her attention.

Center and periphery also gain the same status: as Crary notes, Cézanne attempts to "grasp peripheral retinal sensation simultaneously and with the same immediacy and intensity as the central or foveal region of the eye" (297). There is no normative perspective offered: both the perspective of the panorama (all periphery, no center) and the stereoscope (all center, no periphery) are incorporated into the scene (297). This encourages the observer's eye to move continuously between multiple centers and peripheries, which themselves change their status depending on where the eye is at any given moment. This goes against the notion that concentration leads to greater sharpness of vision: "Once the eye stops moving," Crary reminds us, "the immobile eye triggers a ferment of activity—it is the doorway to both trance and to perceptual disintegration" (300). While the fixed eye produces movement but also disintegration, another kind of gaze, involving a "mobile glancing eye," allows the viewer to engage the object not as a "premade integrity" but "as a process of becoming" (301). The new vision, ushered in by Cézanne's pictorial technique of combining center and periphery, is mobile and changeable, involved in a constant process of glancing and averting its glance, learning and forgetting.

This same "mobile glancing eye" is present in the perceptual experience related by Hernández in his "false explanation" of the origins of his writing. When Hernández protests that he cannot claim full or certain knowledge about the process by which his literary creation comes into being, he speaks as a spectator in that process with an eye that is continually moving and changing, never fixed on an object for too long, lest this attention cause it to fail to develop its own life. It is not fixed concentration that leads to writing, but rather partial attention, and a gaze out of the corner of the eye. A fitting image for this might be that of a distracted spectator at the cinema; perhaps a Surrealist looking at the screen in the manner of Man Ray, "blinking his eyes rapidly, ... moving his fingers in front of his eyes, making grills of them, or placing a semi-transparent cloth over his face" (Kyrou 139). It is a refusal to pay full attention, a retreat from the petrifying power of the fixed gaze, withdrawing back to a partial spectatorship, one made up of half-viewed images and partly-grasped scenes.

It is well known that, beginning around 1917 and decades prior to turning his full attention to writing, Hernández worked for many years as a traveling pianist, hired to provide sound accompaniment to silent films in small movie-houses in the provincial towns of the Uruguayan and Argentine interior. Many critics have explored references to cinema in Hernández's work, most often as part of an autobiographically-oriented reading of his many quasi-autobiographical stories. In addition, the importance of music as a theme in Hernández's literary creation has been explored at length by critics, as well as the way in which music appears also as a formal influence on his writing style. For example, in one noted study of Hernández's relationship with film, Enriqueta Morrillas argues that Hernández's early employment as film accompanist gave his writing a

particularly spontaneous character, given that the pianist seated at the foot of the screen, tasked with providing music to entertain the film audience, experiences a certain freedom to be spontaneous and even to improvise (Morrillas 84). Indeed, an element of incompleteness characterizes Hernández's stories; a somewhat haphazard element that suggests the influence of musical improvisation.

What critics have not yet explored is the relationship between the specific attentional investments that Hernández's work as a film accompanist involved, and the writing that he would go on to produce. To put it differently, an attention-oriented reading of Hernández could ask: what are the attentional characteristics of the subject who is positioned between audience, screen, and piano? His attention must be divided at least between the goings-on on the screen and the piano in front of him, if not also further divided by the need to gauge audience reactions. It is intriguing to approach Hernández from the perspective of attention, not only in light of the ways in which attention figures in his literary work and occupies a central place in his "false explanation" of his creative process, but also in light of the attentional orientation that could have been produced by his experience working in movie-houses. Imagining Hernández positioned between screen, audience and piano, it is not difficult to envision his attention as something akin to "studiously distracted," with an eye that moves continually between the foci that require attention, in order to continue producing the spectacle that the audience requires. Far from being an eye that is fixed in concentration on one thing or another, Hernández's eye is Cézanne's "mobile glancing eye" (Crary 300).

This "mobile glancing eye" can be found all throughout Hernández's body of work, both before and after his "explicación falsa" and even as far back as his earliest fictions. Early texts such as "Prólogo de un libro que nunca pude empezar" (1925), as well as later works such as "Las dos historias" (1943) and "La casa nueva" (1959), present us again and again with a writing subject who is unable or unwilling to focus on the task of communication. "Prólogo," a text that is one paragraph long, is not a story or even notes toward a story, but rather a statement by a writer-narrator explaining why a story cannot be written. He begins: "Pienso decir algo de alguien. Sé desde ya que todo esto será como darme dos inyecciones de distinto dolor: el dolor de no haber podido decir cuanto me propuse y el dolor de haber podido decir algo de lo que me propuse" ("Prólogo" 44). The narrator skips between different temporal perspectives, beginning with the verb "pienso" which communicates both a current activity (thinking) and a future-oriented perspective (planning). He is thinking about saying something about someone, while also planning to say something about someone. From thinking and planning he jumps to a later point in time, at which he already knows that this thinking and planning have not resulted in anything. He knows how the failed result will feel: the pain of *not having been able to* ("no haber podido") say as much as he wanted to say, as well as the pain of *having been able to* ("haber podido") say some of what he had wanted to say (44). By writing from the position of already having given up on the idea

of being able to write—"Yo emprendí esta tarea sin esperanza"—the present is avoided, the act of writing elided (44).

However, the prologue remains, and it is given the title of what it is—a prologue to a book that the writer-narrator was not able to begin. This nonexistent book is a text that the writer's intentions have not been able to produce; he knows that by "proponerse" to write it, he has doomed himself to failure. The text exists, then, as a record of the way in which thinking and writing have shown themselves to be incompatible, because thinking has led to an attempt to use language to represent something (in this case, a woman). The "pensar" and the "proponerse" are the problem: their intentionality has prevented the book from being written. The text we do have, the only result of the attempt to write the book, stands as both the before and after of failed writing, in which attention made representation impossible.

After this early hint of what will become a lifelong preoccupation with the fraught relationship between attention and writing, these issues are explored again and again in later writings such as "Las dos historias" and "La casa nueva." "Las dos historias" can be read as a chronicle of the impossibility of writing. Composed of fragments that are never quite able to be made into the shape of a story, the narrator affirms this impossibility, and thus the story is also somehow constituted by that failure to become complete. Part of this failure is due to the writing subject's inability to concentrate. The text opens on a scene of preparation and planning for writing: "El 16 de junio, y cuando era de noche, un joven se sentó ante una mesita donde había útiles de escribir. Pretendía atrapar una historia y encerrarla en un cuaderno" ("Las dos historias" 160). The narrator is relating, in the third person, what happened to an individual who had decided to try and write a story. Almost immediately, however, he is drawn away from this thread of the tale, and into a digression, as he goes back to a prior moment: "Hacía días que pensaba en la emoción del momento en que escribiera. Se había prometido escribir la historia muy lentamente, poniendo en ella los mejores recursos de su espíritu" (160). Just as we saw earlier in "Prólogo," the act of proposing or planning to write is its undoing: here, the writer "pretendía atrapar una historia," and that intention has led to an almost immediate digression—not only on the part of the writing character but also on the part of the narrator.

An employee in a toy shop, the young man had been at work when, gazing into space, he suddenly realized he was ready to begin to write his story: "Ese día iba a empezar: estaba empleado en una juguetería; había estado mirando una pizarrita que en una de las caras tenía alambres con cuentas azules y rojas, cuando se le ocurrió que esa tarde empezaría a escribir la historia" (160). The act of beginning to write has been passed over in favor of an earlier moment in which it was the object of anticipation. Having sat down and gathered his materials, the young man that the narrator is telling us about is cut off from the act of writing just as he is prepared to begin; denied the actual moment of writing, we are diverted to an earlier time. The scene of writing is deferred, and will be deferred yet again when we are told, almost immediately after, that

the memory of this moment in the toy shop—where the young man realized he was ready to begin—has called forth yet another, almost identical memory: "También recordaba que otra tarde que pensaba en un detalle de su historia, el gerente de la casa le había echado en cara la distracción con que trabajaba" (160). Once again the writing subject is at work, prior to writing his story; he is thinking about writing and his manager comments on his absentmindedness.

In both memories, the young man cannot focus on the task at hand, at the toy shop, as his attention wanders to the story that he wants to write. And yet, in this moment of beginning to write, he is similarly unable to focus; as the previous object of his attention comes to occupy his reality, memories of prior moments of anticipation, in another time and space, flood in. Finally we return to the moment in which writing is about to happen, but right away the writer is distracted by his surroundings. It occurs to him to tidy up a bit before sitting down: "Cuando estuvo en su pieza le pareció que si la acomodaba un poco antes de sentarse a escribir estaría más tranquilo; pero al mismo tiempo tuvo la impresión de que sus ojos, su frente y su nariz tropezarían con las cosas y las puertas y las paredes" (160). Finally, he just sits down. This does not last long, however, and he gets up again: "Después de sentarse, aun se tuvo que levantar para buscar una libretita donde tenía apuntada la fecha en que empezó la historia" (160).

The writing subject simply cannot get started. And yet this failure to begin is communicated to us by the narrator; this deferral of beginnings is, in part, the story. "Las dos historias" is a record of writing gestures that fail to come together to produce anything; stories that "se niegan a hacerse historias" (Pollmann 358). This writing both affirms and negates its possibilities of coming into being, finally emerging almost despite itself. And in addition to providing an account of a stalled writing process, this story chronicles the loss of focused consciousness. The narrator describes the process by which the young man, who is trying to write a story, attempts to manipulate his own thoughts: "Así como su espíritu le borró el feo recuerdo de que el gerente de la juguetería lo apartó bruscamente de sus más queridos pensamientos, así también su espíritu le escondió el motivo más hondo e implacable que entrañaba el deseo de realizar la historia" ("Las dos historias" 161). Here, writing fails not because of the interference of intentionality, as in "Prólogo de un libro que nunca pude empezar," but rather because of the writing subject's inability to connect with the motivation for writing, the "el motivo más hondo e implacable." Instead of a prologue without a story, we have two stories: one that can never come to fruition, and another which is the account of this failed story. In these texts, writing cannot quite take shape: either it disappears, leaving only its prologue as proof of its intended existence, or it disintegrates into multiple partially-formed narratives.

In "La casa nueva," failed writing comes in yet another form: writing that is produced in code, and which is intended to be read by no one other than the author. Writing drifts away from its ostensible purpose of communication, and any recording that it does carry out remains undecipherable. "La casa nueva" opens with an act of

writing in progress: in the first line, the narrator tells us that "[d]esde hace un rato estoy haciendo signos taquigráficos frente a un amigo que está del otro lado de la mesa del café" ("La casa nueva" 108-9). The reader is dropped into a situation where the narrator has been writing shorthand symbols on a page while seated across from his friend in a café. What is the relationship between the narrator's act of writing and the text that we are reading? It is unclear whether the story we read is to be understood as the end product of his café scribbling. Are we reading the shorthand symbols, later translated into full words and sentences? Or is his stenography merely a secondary activity that the narrator carries out while also narrating the story to us?

We find out that the narrator is a piano player who has come to town to play a concert, and we quickly learn that the friend is breaking the news to him that there is no way for the concert to proceed, as there are no funds for it. The narrator has traveled here and is staying in a hotel, but he will now not receive the money he needs to pay for it. He is left a performer without a stage, having arrived at a venue with no audience to play for. Shorthand becomes, in this situation, not an activity but rather a way to rest: "Lo que yo quiero, verdaderamente, es descansar los ojos –escribiendo me los canso menos–, la cara y el alma" (109). The act of writing is not an active undertaking but rather one of resting; he is not producing actual words but rather stenographic symbols. This activity allows the narrator to withdraw from his face-to-face interaction. He confesses: "Si yo no estuviera escribiendo tendría que mostrarle a mi amigo, una sonrisa, un gesto y unas palabras..."; he continues, "prefiero meter los ojos y la cara en este papel y despistar a mi amigo con esta fuga de signos" (109). With shorthand the narrator can actively write while not worrying about his writing being understood by his interlocutor; he can withdraw into a private code of signs.

The ostensible intent of stenography is to record the spoken word quickly and efficiently for later translation into a common language. Shorthand, along with typewriters, belongs to the realm of modernity where speed and efficiency are key. However, here shorthand is a tool for avoiding communication. As one observer has noted, the narrator is not even writing shorthand but just scribbling the symbols, which could indicate that he is not actually writing anything with content but rather just doing practice exercises with no other purpose (Rosell). This observation is compelling, as it suggests that the narrator's writing production is all form and no content, leading the reader to further speculate about the relationship between this act of seemingly empty scribbling and the text that we are reading. As Hernández uses it, stenography ceases to be utilitarian, a code that will be decoded. The narrator of "La casa nueva," scribbling his symbols at the café table for no purpose other than to rest his eyes and face, and thus to withdraw from having to "perform" himself for his friend, is engaging in a kind of writing that is perhaps not even intended to be read at all. Just as he is a pianist who might not be able to play for an audience, he is also a writer whose text might never be read. Here, stenography stands as a symbol for an intentional non-communication in writing; a writing that is accessible in its true form only to the writing subject. Rather

than being used to send a message, shorthand is used to evoke, to suggest, to confuse, to distract, and to mislead—"despistar [...] con esta fuga de signos" (109). Writing cannot be used intentionally for its ostensible purpose: to communicate, to represent; it is a slippery tool that seems to work of its own volition.

The Writer as Distracted Accompanist

Reading Hernández's early activities as a piano accompanist alongside some of his writings, such as those examined above, allows us to draw some parallels in terms of the process by which creation—musical or literary—emerges. Seated at the piano, Hernández must take his cue from the source, which is the film; but since this source is silent, he must physically move his gaze to the screen in order to apprehend its meaning. But he cannot look at it too long, as the action on the screen is ever-changing and he needs to provide a musical interpretation of what he has just seen before the action moves on. With eyes variously on the screen, the piano, and the audience, Hernández is a conduit between the visual meaning on the screen and its audible expression in the piano. Eyes and fingers are the physical channels through which meaning travels from its visual source to its audible representation—literally a "re-presentation" of what is being seen by the audience. Decades later, in his "false explanation," Hernández seems to return to this moment of reception-creation, similar to what Sylvia Molloy (in another context and following Freud and Lacan) has called a "textual primal scene" (*At Face Value* 17). When he claims that his stories "no son completamente naturales, en el sentido de no intervenir la conciencia," it is clear that his stated intention is not to link his practice to a Surrealist-type experiment with automatic writing ("Explicación" 216). His writing it not totally unintentional, and does not seem to come from any specific place such as the unconscious, which is the source of automatic writing for the Surrealists. And yet, at the same time, his writing is not a fully conscious process, either. While moving away from Surrealist automatic writing, Hernández's in-between state does recall the place that André Breton was able to inhabit when he lost himself in a film: thanks to cinema's "*power to disorient*," Breton gives himself over to the film and thus "passes through a critical point as captivating and imperceptible as that uniting waking and sleeping" (81-2, emphasis in original). Hernández's cryptic account of his creative process shares something with Breton's disoriented spectatorship.

In Hernández's "false explanation," consciousness and the lack thereof (he specifically does not use the term "unconscious") interact to produce attentional states conducive to literary creation. Hernández uses the term "intervention" to describe the work that consciousness does on the production of his writing. Yet this intervention is unclear, and he seems to prefer that it remain "mysterious" ("Explicación" 216). The work of consciousness, however, changes a few sentences later: "A pesar de la vigilancia constante y rigurosa de la conciencia, ésta también me es desconocida" (216). Here, consciousness goes from carrying out mysterious interventions to performing

"vigilancia constante y rigurosa" (216). Surveillance over what? Who is watching whom, or what? It almost seems as though consciousness is double, intervening in a "mysterious" way while also performing surveillance. And despite this double presence, consciousness is "unknown" to the human writing subject.

Suddenly the narrative changes, although within the same paragraph: "En un momento dado pienso que en un rincón de mí nacerá una planta" (216). Two references to temporality appear: "[e]n un momento dado" and "nacerá." The first temporal reference refers to randomness, a time that is not specific and yet could happen at any moment. The second temporal reference, "nacerá," also conjures the sense of something being on the cusp of happening. Divided attention, attention that is constantly in a state of shuttling back and forth between objects, is also attention that is always "about to" happen, and also unpredictable and indiscriminate. The plant, which is on the cusp of being born at some point in time, occupies a corner of the subject—perhaps his consciousness, perhaps his internal field of vision. It is on the periphery and yet also central. The subject lies in wait for the plant, as he believes that something creative could result from it. But he knows, somehow, that he should not approach it too directly. He does not know "cómo hacer germinar la planta, ni cómo favorecer, ni cuidar su crecimiento," but he does know that the plant should not listen to observers who would suggest to it "demasiadas intenciones o grandezas" (216). Here, the intentionality involved in a purposeful search for meaning is eschewed.

Hernández writes that this plant will grow in accordance with an observer, and yet he has also suggested that he will not fix his attention on the plant. The plant, for its part, will not pay much attention to its observer, while also growing in accordance with it. The plant will know that it is being observed, and will act in relation to that knowledge; yet, at the same time, the plant will not fix its attention on its observer. The eye watching the plant ("an observer"—the writing subject?) will come upon a plant that seems unaware it is being watched. This unawareness is picked up in the next sentence: "Si es una planta dueña de sí misma tendrá una poesía natural, desconocida por ella misma" (216). This plant, representing the origin of writing, cannot come from a place of fixed attention and intentionality, but rather from a place of coincidental events, averted glances, and an unawareness that is somehow both real and feigned. Hernández states that this plant, in order to grow properly, needs to be like a person whose life will last an indeterminate period of time; here, we return to non-specific temporalities, the constant possibility of something happening by chance, and the unknown duration of events. The plant's "necesidades propias" and "orgullo discreto" will be carried in a way that is "un poco torpe" so as to "parezca improvisado" (216). Here, we have another sort of disavowal: the plant will not only seem unaware, it will also carry itself in a way that is not necessarily improvised, but which *seems* improvised. This layer of meaning returns us to the double disavowal of the title of the piece, "Explicación falsa de mis cuentos"—explaining by way of not explaining.

As observed earlier, this reticence, or inability, to pinpoint the origin of creativity extends to the consciousness ascribed to the plant itself: "Ella misma no conocerá sus leyes, aunque profundamente las tenga y la conciencia no las alcance. No sabrá el grado y la manera en que la conciencia intervendrá, pero en última instancia impondrá su voluntad" (216). It is not only the writer but also the plant-origin within him that must remain purposely inattentive. The plant's role is extended further, as an influence on consciousness itself: "Y enseñará a la conciencia a ser desinteresada" (216). "Desinteresada" is a key descriptor for this tactic of calculated unintentionality: it is through the sidelong glance that the origin of writing can be transformed into writing on the page; it is a distracted pose that will allow creativity to emerge as if unwatched. This is a Cézannian "mobile glancing eye," whose roving, ever-partial attention unleashes heretofore unknown creative possibilities. But while, for Valéry, "forgetting" is a means to regain control over objects, Hernández speaks of no such control. The plant, itself partially unaware, instructs consciousness to be disinterested, as its vigilance would only foreclose the plant's full growth. Yet the writer, the human subject, can do nothing more than wait "indefinitely" for these "variable elements that act and react on each other" to produce writing (Crary 340).

In his non-explanation of the seemingly unknown origins of his work, Felisberto Hernández presents us with a poetics that seems to spring from the configuration of attention that emerged during his early employment as a piano accompanist to silent films. After exploring the concept of distraction in fictional works where he presents us with protagonists who struggle to write and fail in their attempts, in his "false explanation" Hernández returns to the position of the cinema accompanist. Caught between receiving stimuli in the form of a film, and providing it in the form of music, he has his eyes on the film, the piano, and the audience at the same time, and only partially on any one thing at any given moment. As an accompanist, Hernández is an instrument for something, a performer of a creation that has not originated with him. When he attempts to "explain" his writing process, he returns to this same mode of creation, only now the plant has replaced the movie screen. Now, as then, he cannot fix his gaze on the object, or it will wither under his stare. In this non-explanation, Hernández defers his own attention and that of the reader towards a meditation on the nature of attention itself, and the possibilities that can result from seemingly unintentional, yet necessary, lapses of attention. In this "creation in distraction," the continual deferral of attention, both on the part of the writer and on the part of the "plant" inside him, is the only means by which writing can emerge. Writing, then, is not the product of a Romantic notion of "inspiration" or a Realist project to "represent," but rather a spontaneous, almost random occurrence emerging in conditions in which eyes are averted, attention is divided, and intentionality is disavowed—and perhaps, as Benjamin suggested, it could lead to radically new forms of expression as well as perception.

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