

UNWRITING THE AUTHOR: AFFECT AND AUTHORSHIP IN
MACEDONIO FERNÁNDEZ, FELISBERTO HERNÁNDEZ, AND CLARICE LISPECTOR

By

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For David, Owen, and Avery, the loves of my life

and

In loving memory of my father, Louis Bernard (Sandy) Sutton (1948-2006)

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation draws on recent scholarship emerging from the “affective turn”¹ in literary and cultural criticism to develop new ways of approaching the writings of Macedonio Fernández (Argentina, 1874-1952), Felisberto Hernández (Uruguay, 1902-1964), and Clarice Lispector (Brazil, 1920-1977). I argue that an affect-oriented perspective allows us to see that these authors’ works represent a specific, subtly critical reaction to the Latin American avant-gardes of the early 20th century. This reaction is found in the realm of affect, and is manifested in the ways they represent the figure of the artist in their work. Against an avant-garde artist who tends to possess an almost superhuman capacity of perception, allowing him or her to experience highly intense sensations and emotions, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector present an artist who is unable to feel or perceive anything in a clear or direct manner. There is an artistic subject mired in ambivalence and unable to focus his or her attention on the creative act; ultimately, this results in a creative subject who finds him- or herself radically decentered during the process by which his or her art emerges. I call the resulting creative process, which is characterized by fragmentation and indeterminacy, a “poetics of inattention.” This decentered, inattentive artist marks a turning point in the development of the figure of the artist in Latin American literature, anticipating the “death of the author” prevalent in the Latin American Boom and beyond during which time the figure of the author seemed to be under constant threat of disappearance, as well as in structuralist and poststructuralist critical discourse (Kerr 25).² These writers do not seek a

¹ Affect is understood as “a substrate of potential bodily responses, often autonomic responses, in excess of consciousness” (Clough 2). In the “affective turn,” critical theory has moved away from psychoanalysis and linguistics as ways to understand subjectivity and representation, in order to focus on “affective discourse [...] as a nonlinguistic alternative mode of signification” (Reber 64).

² I discuss Kerr’s study in relation to my own argument about Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector later on in this chapter.

“death of the author,” however, but rather a demystification of the figure of the artist, the work of art, and the creative process—which would later be re-mystified by the Latin American Boom despite, or perhaps in tandem with, their gestures of authorial demise. What takes place in many of the fictions by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector can be understood, in my view, as a radical decentering of a certain image of the artist which had prevailed in Latin American literary circles since Spanish American *modernismo* and which was later recuperated in the Boom under a different guise. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and others, I contend that Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, in both their writings and in their lives as literary figures, worked to dismantle the “aura” surrounding not just a work of art but the artist figure as well.

In the works I analyze by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, I observe a different figure of the artist, shown as a non-privileged individual who displays none of the virtuosity prized by the 19th century Spanish American *modernistas*, which continued to influence avant-garde groups such as Argentina’s *Martín Fierro* group (Rama, “Prólogo” XVI). Quite conversely, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector present creative subjects who are fraught with ambivalence about their task, and are ultimately unsure of their ability to carry it out. However, these characters are not paralyzed by a fear of writing, nor are they isolated figures too sensitive to interact with the outside world; in fact, those types of artists would be more akin to the avant-garde’s view (going back to Spanish American *modernismo* and even romanticism), in which the artist is somehow set apart from the rest of the world, ill-suited for the trivialities of everyday life.

By moving away from the vivid emotions associated with the avant-garde and its debt to Spanish American *modernismo* and romanticism in terms of figuring the artist as a poetically misunderstood outsider, and instead cultivating feelings and mental states that are rather more

quotidian, pedestrian, an even anticlimactic, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector are not only offering a radically new definition of the artist but also critiquing what is in a sense a profoundly elitist and even formulaic idea of what it means to be an artist. Where the avant-garde plays with aggressive laughter and violent joy (Brazilian *modernismo*), the “electrified nerves” of the artist (Mexican *estridentismo*) and unencumbered perception free of the “cobwebs” of the past (the Argentine *martinferristas*), to name but a few of the most important avant-garde movements of early 20th century Latin America, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector express weak affects through the filter of an inattentive artistic consciousness. I read this anti-dramatic stance as a comment and critique on the aesthetic values promoted by the avant-garde, which, despite their claim of rejecting the past, indeed subscribes to a well-established notion of the artist that dates back to romanticism. Further, I propose that this cultivation of weak affects and inattentive states is also a critique of the avant-garde’s attempt to conquer and take over the institution of literature.

One of the many elements that Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector have in common is their troubled relationship with the literary communities and institutions surrounding them, and the deep ambivalence about writing and authorship that they expressed both in their lives and in their literary works. What critics have not fully explored, however, are the specific ways in which this ambivalence manifests itself in their literary creations and authorial personas, which are imbued with affect at every turn. Locating my investigation at the crossroads of 20th century Latin American avant-garde narrative and the burgeoning field of affect studies, I explore how these three writers channel ambivalent affects into inattentive modes such as evasiveness, forgetfulness, distraction, indifference, and renunciation, allowing them to both participate in, and remain apart from, literary institutions in

general and avant-garde collectivities in particular. In the face of deep ambivalence about the writing process, the status of the artist, and even their own interest in participating in the literary world, these three writers privilege attentional absence as a way of processing and expressing these ambivalent affects. And it is precisely in the space of this attentional absence that creativity seems to emerge, and affect “unwrites” them as authors.

The “Affective Turn”

Over the past few decades, scholars of the humanities have become increasingly interested in analyzing culture from the perspective of feeling and perception, a development that has come to be known as “the affective turn” (Clough 2).³ Interest in affect stems from an effort to incorporate material realities of sense experiences into our understanding of cultural expression, supplementing the poststructuralist notion of language as the principal force shaping the individual subject (a view that enjoyed predominance throughout the second half of the twentieth century). Thus, the affective turn is partly an attempt to bring the indeterminacy of lived experience into poststructuralist criticism.

Philosopher Brian Massumi, most notably in his book *Parables for the Virtual:*

Movement, Affect, Sensation (2002), has presented a definition of affect that has been especially

³ Books and articles such as Charles Altieri’s *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Patricia Ticineto Clough’s “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine and Bodies” (2008), and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth’s *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), as well as studies by Rei Terada (2001), Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 2012), Sianne Ngai (2004), Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), Lauren Berlant (2004, 2008, 2011), and Dierdra Reber (2012) have all contributed to affect’s growing importance for literary and cultural studies, chiefly in the Anglo-American sphere. Works such as Sara Castro-Klarén’s “‘Like a pig, when he’s thinkin’’: Arguedas on Affect and on Becoming an Animal” (2000), Jon Beasley-Murray and Alberto Moreiras’s “Subaltern Affect” (2001), Jon Beasley-Murray’s “Arguedasmachine: Modernity and Affect in the Andes” (2008), Beasley-Murray’s *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America* (2010), Laura Podalsky’s *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico* (2011), and Mabel Moraña and Ignacio Sánchez Prado’s edited volume *El lenguaje de las emociones. Afecto y cultura en América Latina* [*The Language of Emotions: Affect and Culture in Latin America*] (2012) show a nascent interest in addressing questions of affect specifically in the field of Latin American studies, a developing trend to which the present study seeks to contribute.

influential. Distinguishing it from what we call “emotion,” Massumi defines affect as pre-intentional and pre-subjective sensations or what Deleuze and Guattari call intensities. Working within a poststructuralist framework, but in a way that “part[s] company with the linguistic model,” in his work Massumi explores “how movement, sensation and qualities of experience couched in matter in its most literal sense (and sensing) might be culturally-theoretically thinkable” (4). The key distinction for Massumi is between affect and emotion: “Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that *capture*—and of the fact that something has always and again escaped. Something remains unactualizable, inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, fully anchored perspective” (35, emphasis in original). While emotion presupposes a self, a narrative, a semanticized reality, affect is what comes before it and moves around and beyond it; it is that which cannot be integrated into a more coherent account.

Affect is akin to what Raymond Williams has called “structures of feeling,” which are different from more theoretically established concepts such as “world view” and “ideology” (132). The term “structures of feeling” (and what Williams proposes as its possible alternate, “structures of experience”) expresses “the undeniable experience of the present,” which is as yet unformed; it is “not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products” (128). In its non-fixed nature, present experience has yet to be subjected to what Massumi calls the “capture and closure” that would turn it into a conventionally established concept.

Many of the literary scholars working with affect share two main concerns: on one hand, the need to bring the body into the purview of poststructuralist criticism; and on the other hand, the need to return to the text. First, the material realities of body and sense experiences should be incorporated into accounts of selfhood and its cultural expressions, in order to gain a more complete understanding of them. There is a growing interest in moving beyond, or at least supplementing, the poststructuralist notion that language is the principal force shaping the individual subject in society, a view that characterizes the “linguistic turn” in cultural criticism that has enjoyed predominance since the 1960s. Massumi has observed that, while poststructuralist thought does not wholly discount the body, it has tended to conceptualize it as “thoroughly mediated” and capable only of acting “as a discursive body, one with signifying gestures” (Massumi 2). Affect studies is, in part, an attempt to bring material, bodily experience back into poststructuralist criticism. Second, many affect scholars also call for a return to the text as the central object of study. Charles Altieri, for example, notes how much poststructuralist criticism has in fact bracketed out the text itself, tending to “produce abstract substitutes for the text” and “overread for ‘meaning’ while underreading the specific modes of affective engagement presented by works of art” (2).

While the “affective turn” has become widespread in Anglo-American literary and cultural studies, it has yet to become as prevalent among Latin Americanists, although interest is growing. Some explorations of this theme include the 2001 special issue of *Angelaki* on “Subaltern Affect,” as well as Sara Castro-Klarén’s (2000) and Jon Beasley-Murray’s (2008) articles on affect in the work of 20th-century Peruvian author José María Arguedas. The most recent treatment of affect in the context of Latin American literature is Mabel Moraña and Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado’s edited volume *El lenguaje de las emociones. Afecto y cultura en*

América Latina [The Language of Emotions: Affect and Culture in Latin America] (2012), which includes essays linking affect to topics such as globalization, politics, and gender.

In the specific field of Latin American film studies, Laura Podalsky's *The Politics of Affect and Emotion in Contemporary Latin American Cinema* (2011) is an exploration of a selection of films that have emerged from Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico since the 1990s, examined from the perspective of affect. Podalsky analyzes the intersection of aesthetics and politics in cinema, manifested in "recent cinema's preoccupation with reaching audiences through sensation" (3). The book offers a panorama of contemporary Latin American cinema that "inventories its emergent sensorial dynamics" and "interrogates their significance in the political field" (7). Her focus is on the ways in which films make audiences feel, how they "solicit particular emotional responses" (7).

In another recent study, *Posthegemony: Political Theory and Latin America* (2010), Jon Beasley-Murray contributes to fostering the affective turn among Latin Americanists by incorporating it among the major themes of his book. Drawing on Massumi's definition of affect as separate from, and prior to, emotion, Beasley-Murray explains that, as he understands it, "[a]ffect is not what happens to a body, but part of a process by which a body becomes other to itself" (132). This definition of affect—an embodied process of becoming other to oneself—is precisely the one that guides my study: my readings of Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector are a search for the ways in which this "becoming other" manifests itself in the form of affective states.

Beasley-Murray asserts that Latin America is a geographical, political, historical and cultural space that is especially conducive to affect-oriented approaches, due in part to its geopolitical relationships: "Just as Latin America has long supplied raw material to feed the

global economy, so the region has also been exploited for its affective potential” (129). Alongside the material economy of “mood enhancers” like rum, cigarettes and cocaine, and commodity “deliria” such as gold fevers and rubber booms, an “affective economy” has always been at work in Latin America, beginning with “the circulation of fearful travelers’ tales describing cannibals and savages” after the Conquest and continuing into the 20th and 21st centuries with “the dissemination of ‘magic realism’ and salsa” (129). Beasley-Murray’s observation points out two essential features of affect in Latin America: first, the circulation of affect in Latin America has always been inextricable from historical and material conditions; and second, Latin American affect—understood here as the affect produced by contact with Latin America—tends to be extreme, providing a vital “shot in the arm” to other cultures (130).

What is the specific character of the affects experienced in Latin America proper and by Latin Americans themselves? The above comments focus on the affective value that primarily European and American outsiders have found in Latin America, be they explorers, traders, or simply fans of “exotic” literature and music. From this perspective, affect is extracted and used for purposes perhaps unrelated to its original context, and “Western reason” appropriates “Latin affect” as a mode of reinvigoration (130). While I follow Beasley-Murray’s assessment of Latin America as a space imbued with affect, especially what we could call the “affective encounters” that conquerors, traders, and consumers have had with this often exoticized region, I wish to take these ideas in another direction. I view the early 20th century avant-garde movements in Latin America as an inversion of this “affective encounter” with the other, in which the one experiencing the affective intensity is in fact the Latin American subject, specifically the artist. Where colonizers once came upon strange lands and peoples that overwhelmed them with fear and apprehension, in the capital cities of Latin America during the early 20th century, artists were

experiencing a greater exposure to outside influences than ever before, and their reaction to that exposure had a profoundly affective component. The process of modernization, urbanization, and technological advancement in cities such as Buenos Aires and São Paulo, coupled with the influence of European avant-garde movements such as Futurism, resulted in a jumble of artistic responses that trouble binary notions such as “Western reason” versus “Latin affect.”

Affect and the Latin American Avant-Garde: “Contentious Encounters”

The early 20th century saw reevaluations of national identity in many Latin American countries as they celebrated their centenaries of independence, such as Argentina in 1910, Brazil in 1922, and Uruguay in 1930. The 1910 Mexican Revolution and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution also had major impacts all over the region. It was a period of social upheaval all over Latin America, with rapid industrialization, massive urbanization, and entry into the global marketplace, especially during the World Wars. The city of Buenos Aires, for example, doubled in size between 1911 and 1936, due in large part to European immigration. The region later felt the shock of the 1929 crash, and dictatorships formed in many countries in the 1930s; some examples include José Félix Uriburu’s regime which is known as Argentina’s “*década infame*” or infamous decade (1930-1940), the dictatorship of Gabriel Terra in Uruguay (1933-1938), and the 1930 coup in Brazil that brought Getúlio Vargas to power, which would result in the later creation of the authoritarian “*Estado novo*” or New State, which would last until 1945.

During this period, new paradigms were emerging for writers and intellectuals. No longer the domain of the elite, educated classes as it had been for so long, writing became a pastime that individuals could choose to simply pick up with no prior training. As Ángel Rama has noted, this kind of self-taught intellectual began to appear on the scene around 1900 in cities such as

Montevideo; writers were engaging in the literary act without having the university pedigree considered so essential in earlier periods (*Ciudad* 120). These new kinds of writers, Rama continues, tended not to be “bohemian” but rather to view their literary activity as a profession like any other. One example of this new type of writer is the Uruguayan-Argentine short story author Horacio Quiroga, who focused very much on the commercial success of his work, responding to a growing market of readers bolstered by educational reforms at the end of the 19th century (120). Avant-garde writers such as those associated with the journal *Martín Fierro*, dubbed the Florida group, rejected such figures as Quiroga and strove to place art above all other concerns. In this respect, they went against the grain of the developing phenomenon of the self-taught writer, seeking to preserve art for an elite few. This was a position decried by the opposing avant-garde group, known as Boedo, and the so-called Florida-Boedo feud took shape along elite vs. anti-elite aesthetic allegiances.

The Latin American avant-garde movements of the early 20th century provide especially fertile ground for inquiry into affect-related matters, not least because they (like their European counterparts) relied on confrontational stances. These movements were, in large part, concerned with defining what it meant to be an artist, and this definition was constructed within the parameters of feeling, perception, and expression. Avant-garde manifestos and narratives often endowed the creative subject with special cognitive abilities, making the artist uniquely able to access the new feelings and perceptions available in modern life. As Hugo Verani has observed, although avant-garde work was often “a group manifestation,” with proclamations “written in the first person plural,” at the same time it also “exalted individualism and the uniqueness of the writers’ doctrines and craft” (117).

In her seminal study *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters* (1994), Vicky Unruh argues that the writers of the Latin American avant-gardes cultivated the connection between experience and art, in an attempt to “rehumanize” art by actively reengaging it with experience. Phenomenological concerns took center stage as experimental writers sought new ways to express modern experience, especially the new feelings and perceptions produced in the context of increasingly-industrialized cities, technological advancements, and a faster pace of life. Beginning with Spanish American *modernismo* at the end of the 19th century, and intensifying in avant-garde movements such as the Spanish American *vanguardias* and Brazilian *modernismo*, writers represented 20th century modernity as a fully felt, embodied phenomenon. Within it, the artist was a privileged figure, with a special ability to perceive the realities and feel the sensations of the new century, and to express them in art.

Though critics such as Unruh agree that a preoccupation with the figure of the artist is central to the Latin American avant-garde, no one has yet traced the ways in which these writers used feeling and perception to make their aesthetic statements. Their notion of what it means to be an artist is imbued with feeling and perception, and yet no one has yet asked what particular feelings and perceptions are used in figuring the unique capabilities of the artist, and what their specific effects are. What kinds of feelings characterize the “felt” and “embodied” nature of the 20th century experience? Hugo Verani has called the avant-gardes’ work “combative, irreverent, and iconoclastic” (115). He explains the mission of the avant-gardes in terms of extreme mental and emotional states: “Behind the various labels there was a unifying experience, namely, self-promotion in an unmistakable language (belligerent, dissident, and dogmatic), predisposed to hyperbole and categorical defiance, aimed at persuading the reader to join the movement” (117). Indeed, the affects present in and around the works of the avant-garde are,

in large part, dramatic, outsized feelings that seem to inspire action, and include euphoria, exhilaration, aggressiveness, outrage, desire, and playfulness. These affects are present most often in the manifestos published by the various avant-garde groups and movements, in which they rail against established aesthetics and call on their contemporaries to reject the past and seek out the new. Whatever the affects involved, they are most often an impetus for action; strong and decisive, they lead to a writing that is similarly vehement.

A clear example of this strong affective component in the avant-garde can be observed in Mexico's *estridentismo* movement, founded by poet Manuel Maples Arce and active from 1921 to 1927. The word "*estridente*" or strident, contained in *estridentismo*, connotes a sort of noisy aggressiveness which is associated with the machinery pervading the ever-more modern life of the cities. And indeed, the main concern of the movement was the modernization of intellectual life in Mexico in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1910, a conflict that had seen the use of much modern technology, including new weaponry such as the machine gun. *Estridentismo* was highly influenced by Italian Futurism, which was constructed on the basis of its own set of dramatic feelings and perceptions. In the 1909 "Manifesto of Futurism," Filippo Tommaso Marinetti affirmed: "The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity and revolt" (15). Against what he saw as the immobility of contemporary literary institutions, which had "magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber," Marinetti proclaimed the Futurists' desire to "exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist" (15). For Marinetti, the role of art was to *act*, and this action must be aggressive: "There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man" (15). There was an emphasis on agitated physical and mental states, as seen in terms such as "courage,"

“audacity,” and “feverish sleeplessness” contrasted with the maligned states of “pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber.”

A similar tone was struck by Maples Arce in the First and Second *estridentista* Manifestos (1921 and 1923 respectively). In the second Manifesto, for example, the *estridentistas* proclaimed a rejection of established art, affirming themselves as “no contaminados de reaccionarismo letárgico” [“uncontaminated by reactionary lethargy”]; at the same time, and also analogous to the Futurists, they described a new artist who longed to commit violence on the past, “encendidos pugnazmente en un odio caníbal” [“pugnaciously fired up in a cannibal hatred”] (“Manifiesto estridentista número 2,” 125). At the same time, however, they showed a keen interest in emotions as a conduit for the expression of modern experience, describing themselves as opening up the possibility for making art that was “juvenil, entusiasta y palpitante” [“vibrantly and enthusiastically youthful”] and seeking to “[v]ivir emocionalmente” [“live emotionally”] (125).

However, the First *estridentista* Manifesto was a much more comprehensive statement of avant-garde affect. Beginning with a statement of clarity—“I imperatively and categorically affirm”—the Manifesto claimed that “[l]a verdad estética, es tan sólo un estado de emoción incoercible desenrollado” [“aesthetic truth is only a state of an unrolled incoercible emotion”] (“Manifiesto estridentista número 1,” 101). Exalting “emociones personales electrolizadas” [“electrolyzed personal emotions”] (106). Maples Arce closed the First Manifesto with this statement, which is emblematic of the way in which the avant-garde deployed affect in their construction of the artist figure: “mientras que todo el mundo, que sigue fuera del eje, se contempla esféricamente atónito, con las manos retorcidas, yo, gloriosamente aislado, me ilumino en la maravillosa incandescencia de mis nervios eléctricos” [“while the whole world,

which continues off its axis, contemplates itself, spherically astonished, wringing its hands, I, gloriously isolated, illuminate myself in the marvelous incandescence of my electric nerves”] (104; Rashkin 29-30).

In Argentina, meanwhile, the *Martín Fierro* group was also involved in writing manifestos that expressed not only the group’s rejection of the past and of established aesthetics, but also expressed a new way of feeling and perceiving the world—ushered in, of course, by artists. Critiquing “la funeraria solemnidad del historiador y del catedrático que momifica todo cuanto toca” [“the funereal solemnity of the historian and the professor, who mummify all that they touch”], the Manifesto focused on affective characteristics of the institutions they wished to invade; indeed, the new aesthetics brought with it new affects: “*Martín Fierro* siente la necesidad imprescindible de definirse y de llamar a cuantos son capaces de percibir que nos hallamos en presencia de una NUEVA SENSIBILIDAD y de una NUEVA COMPRENSIÓN, que, al ponernos de acuerdo con nosotros mismos, nos descubre panoramas insospechados y nuevos medios y formas de expresión” [“*Martín Fierro* feels the urgent need to define itself, calling out to whoever is able to see that we find ourselves in the presence of a NEW SENSIBILITY and a NEW UNDERSTANDING which, if we align ourselves with it, can lead us to unexpected horizons, new media, and new forms of expression”] (Girondo, “Manifiesto” 142; “Manifiesto” 12, translation modified). Even more important than affective concerns, however, were questions of perception: whereas institutionalized culture mummified, the *Martinfierristas* would invigorate: “*Martín Fierro* artista, se refriega los ojos a cada instante para arrancar las telarañas que tejen, de continuo, el hábito y la costumbre” [“*Martín Fierro* as artist rubs its eyes every moment in order to wipe away the cobwebs constantly tangling around them: habit and custom”] (143; 13). Perception was to be unencumbered by imposed structures, and

left to roam free: “¡Entregar a cada nuevo amor una nueva virginidad, y que los excesos cada día sean distintos a los excesos de ayer y de mañana!” [“Let us give to each new love a new virginity, and let today’s excesses be different from those of yesterday or tomorrow!”] (143; 13). Against mummification, they wanted invigoration; against obscuring cobwebs, they sought clarity. Eschewing restraint, theirs was a gesture of excess.

While the *vanguardias* were spreading throughout Spanish America, Brazil’s own version of the avant-garde, *modernismo*, was under way, having begun during São Paulo’s *Semana de Arte Moderna* in 1922. Seeking a new form of Brazilian expression, the *modernistas* put out two combative manifestos, the “Manifesto Pau-Brasil” [“Brazilwood Manifesto”] (1924) and the “Manifesto Antropófago” [“Cannibalist Manifesto”] (1928), the latter an aggressive call for the violent incorporation of foreign influences into Brazilian culture through metaphorical cannibalism, a practice that the Portuguese invaders had attributed to the indigenous Tupí tribes of Brazil. The Cannibalist Manifesto communicated a specific kind of avant-garde affect: an agitated, even manic, joy. Instead of ideas, which they viewed as immobile, the *modernistas* proposed action: “Somos concretistas. As idéias tomam conta, reagem, queimam gente nas praças públicas. Suprimamos as idéias e as outras paralisias” [“We are concretists. Ideas take hold, react, burn people in public squares. We must suppress ideas and other paralyses”] (Andrade, “Manifesto” 231; “Anthropophagite” 99). Against contemplation, they urged movement and escape from all forms of immobility: “As migrações. A fuga dos estados tediosos. Contra as escleroses urbanas. Contra os Conservatórios e o tédio especulativo” [“The migrations. The flight from tedious states. Down with urban sclerosis. Down with Conservatories and tedious speculation”] (230; 98, translation modified). In addition to this mobility, there was also a concern with happiness, as they proclaimed: “Antes dos portugueses descobrirem o Brasil, o

Brasil tinha descoberto a felicidade” [“Before the Portuguese discovered Brazil, Brazil had discovered happiness”] and “[a] alegria é a prova dos nove” [“[h]appiness is the proof of the pudding”] (231; 98, 99). This happiness is a distinctly aggressive one.

In this small selection of avant-garde manifestos, common themes emerge with respect to feeling and perception. For example, there is a violent rejection of the past, which is characterized as dead or inert, and a proclamation of the need to act. Being active is associated with being modern and new. In addition, the affect of the avant-garde is a peculiar blend of joy and frenzy. Solemnity is rejected as part of the past; art is now the province of those who are physically and emotionally electrified by modern experience and engaged in destructive bliss.

Ambivalence: An Alternative to Avant-Garde Affect

Whatever avant-garde feelings were, they could scarcely be called ambivalent. Ambivalence actually seems to be antithetical to the avant-garde project of fervent denunciations of the past and declarations of the new. In the new urban sensorium traversed by the artist, a figure uniquely equipped to experience new realities and communicate them through art, feelings are vivid, rendered in exalted terms. For the avant-garde, affect is transformative; it leads to new ways of perceiving the world, and new forms of artistic expression. The works of Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector, writing largely in the wake of these avant-garde movements, echo this concern with affect. However, the kinds of affects that permeate their works are far from the dramatic, outsized feelings expressed by the avant-garde; rather, they are flat, pale affects that cannot easily be defined as positive or negative. More ambivalent than anything else, these affects are akin to what Sianne Ngai has called “ugly feelings” (3). Unlike strong feelings such as love or hatred, these “minor,” “dysphoric affects”

are “explicitly *amoral* and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfaction of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release” (3, 6, emphasis in original).

While major feelings can certainly overwhelm the subject, they can also be useful for prompting “forceful or unambiguous action” and thus they have some measure of certainty about them. Meanwhile, minor affects are “weakly intentional feelings” unlikely to solidify into action; they simply linger (27). Charles Altieri has defended the idea that affects do not necessarily need to *do* anything concrete such as lead to action in the world (something that, from his perspective, Ngai is expecting them to do) (“Ugly” 145). While this is a valid assessment, there is no denying that minor affects act differently than more intense ones, perhaps because they are more diffuse and less centered on an object, and thus more resistant to the “capture and closure” that would convert them into semanticized emotion (Massumi 35). Minor affects do not lead to decisive actions or even to relief; weak, diffuse, seeming to come from nowhere, and lingering amorously, these feelings are difficult to shape into what Davide Panagia calls “narratocracy,” the organizing force “rendering things readable” (13). The “minor affect” that I detect most often in the work of the authors I study here is ambivalence. Defined as “the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone” and whose synonyms include confusion, doubt, hesitancy, indecision, uncertainty, precariousness, and bewilderment, among others, I consider ambivalence a prime example of Ngai’s notion of ugly feelings, as ambivalence does not allow for any kind of clear resolution (*Webster’s* 36; *Bartlett’s* 366).

This lack of a clear path to resolution flies in the face of the categorical pronouncements of the avant-garde, so interested in establishing a radical difference between the old and the new, the institutional and the innovative. As the avant-garde cultivates such vibrant sensations as euphoria, shock, excitement, and mania, writing that shies away from these extremes, preferring

to explore the less-dramatic register of feeling, can be read in part as a critique of this outsized emotional repertoire.

Exploring the types of affects that permeate the literatures of the avant-garde allows us to grasp the differences between those works and other types of writing that remained outside the avant-garde, although they emerged at the same time or in a similar experimental vein.

Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector produced narratives in which feeling and perception also took center stage, but were deployed in a way that can be read as a critique of the creative subject so prevalent in the avant-garde. While the avant-garde posited the artist as a privileged individual able to feel and perceive on a higher level, these three authors assigned to the artist quite different attributes: in their narratives, the artist-narrators are often bumbling, half-aware characters haunted by feelings of ambivalence about how to express their experiences and unable to focus their attention for any length of time. Far from being the virtuoso artist prized throughout the period, for Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector the creative subject is wracked with ambivalence and nearly paralyzed by hesitation, and the results are texts that appear to be almost unintentional, the products of an only semi-present consciousness.

In his essay “Structures of Feeling” (1977), Raymond Williams attempts to describe feelings that lie outside our ability to fully comprehend them and incorporate them into some kind of narrative. These sensations are inextricably linked to temporality, occurring in the present tense and thus difficult to pin down due to their fleeting nature. As he explains, “the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed,” and as a result, there is a need for “other terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical” (128). Structures of feeling are, then, “all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to

escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known”; they represent “this, here, now, alive, active, ‘subjective’” (128). The creative act is one moment where we can observe structures of feeling in action, because “the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present” (129).

Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector have all created literary works that invite us to read for this present tense of art, uniquely able to express “all that escapes” (128). Their writing is, I argue, the textual residue of these fleeting sensations. However, I do not simply claim that their writings express feelings—all art does to some extent—but rather that their writings perform the “experience of the present” that constitutes affect and, furthermore, express the writing subject’s struggle with it (128). Williams’s concept does not just refer to “feelings” as we know them, and in fact he suggests that this word can be replaced by the term “experience,” which connotes not just bodily but also mental sensations: “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132).

Thus, I suggest that these three authors turn to strategies of inattention as a way to cope with and express ambivalence, which would turn the subject away from the present and allow him or her to drift into the past or future, and thus achieve a more stabilizing distance. These strategies, however, are only partially successful, due to the fact that affect and attention are not separate entities corresponding respectively to the body and mind, but rather are intertwined in “a dynamic and interactive relationship between reason and emotion” (Felski and Fraiman vi). Ultimately, then, my claim is this: the writings of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector come into being precisely through a struggle between attention and affect. Affect destabilizes the subject, who risks getting swept up in the intensity of a perpetual present; attention attempts to

assert itself over affect to wrest control away from it, but because neither affect nor attention can assert enduring primacy, this attempt ultimately fails. This failure becomes their art.

In the literary works I study here, ambivalence is manifested in the form of inattention, specifically a lack of ability of the subject to focus his or her attention on the creative task. The narrators and fictional writers who populate these narratives profess an inability to write properly, hesitate and demur before writing and seem to want to erase or rewrite their statements almost immediately, and generally cast themselves as inept and marginal participants in the process of communicating through language. Using claims of ignorance, forgetfulness, or obliviousness, they use evasive tactics to escape a position that would require them to wield authorial agency. In the writing that emerges, uncertainty and indeterminacy are the most prevalent elements; they constitute the literary performance of a two-fold ambivalence: ambivalence shown by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector themselves, as they often explore autobiographical details in their (semi)fictional narratives, and ambivalence demonstrated by their often thinly-veiled proxies, the bumbling narrators and writers who struggle to tell their stories.

Affect, Attention, and Artistic Creation

Inattention—specifically the state of distraction—has aroused interest among many 20th century 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.⁴ Most discussions of

⁴ As Jonathan Crary argues in *Suspensions of Perception* (2000), attention and perception are far from being fixed concepts; rather, they are notions whose definitions have been historically determined and have changed

distraction have centered on the distracted subject as a receiver of stimuli, such as an advertisement, a film, or a painting, to analyze the meaning behind the subject's attention or inattention. This often leads to laments about a lost purity of perception, now degraded by modernity's fragmentation of experience.⁵ Walter Benjamin is one critic who has attempted to establish a nuanced view of distraction, allowing for the possibility that distraction may not be an entirely negative phenomenon. In his second version of "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1935-1939), 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

significantly over time. Crary shows that they are highly contested notions that are much more historically embedded and embodied than has been previously thought, and whose importance has increased dramatically since the mid-19th century (2). In the 20th century, observers including Frankfurt school theorists Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin have often viewed distraction as a result of what Crary calls "modernity as a process of fragmentation and destruction in which pre-modern forms of wholeness and integrity were irretrievably broken up or degraded through technological, urban, and economic reorganizations" (48). Such a stance evokes nostalgia for a lost purity or "simpler" time, when modes of perception were viewed as stable and universal, in sharp contrast to the more individualized, subjective, and changeable modes of perception that emerged with the advent of modernity. Against this notion of distraction emerging as a result of modernity's erosion of universal norms of perception, Crary argues that distraction as a concept actually emerged in tandem with a larger set of norms intended to regulate attention. Rather than signifying the decline of a lost, better civilization, distraction is in fact "an *effect*, and in many cases a constituent element, of the many attempts to produce attentiveness in human subjects" in modernity (49, emphasis in original). In other words, distraction took shape as part of the construction of attention; without distraction cast as its opposite, attention could not be fully constituted as a concept.

⁵ In "Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," his 1926 study of mass culture and cinema in Weimar Germany, cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer argues that distraction has the potential to be meaningful, but any meaning it may have is preemptively cut off by the programs that are shown to the masses at the movie theaters (327). A subject's capacity for distraction is not in itself negative, but the way in which this capacity is manipulated by what would later be called the culture industry is negative. Indeed, for him distraction is "meaningful only as improvisation, as a reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world" (327). Kracauer sees promise in distraction but only so long as it is not distraction "as an end in itself," akin to aimless entertainment (326). For him, the programs shown to the urban masses at Berlin's movie theaters cut off the promising distraction, the distraction that might cut through the illusion and reveal harsh truths about society, and replace it with distraction for distraction's sake. Kracauer understands distraction as the state of a *receiving* subject—the audience—who is either paying the appropriate amount of attention to a stimulus or not.

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. 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 other critics. 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. Distraction as a mode of receiving stimuli carries revolutionary promise.

Paul North’s study *The Problem of Distraction* (2012) explores representations of distraction in Western literature and philosophy from Aristotle to Kafka. He traces how the concept of distraction, after its “[b]anishment” from Ancient Greek philosophy, went on to resurface in seventeenth-century French moralism and later in the work of twentieth-century German-speaking intellectuals such as Kafka, Heidegger, and Benjamin (7). As North argues, distraction forces us to face fundamental ontological and epistemological questions, because it entails “not thinking”—something that is anathema to the Cartesian tradition in Western philosophy because not-thinking literally “cannot be thought” (42). Yet, in the phenomenon of distraction, this philosophically impossible act of “non-thinking” becomes possible. North insists that distraction is a distinct attentive phenomenon with the ability to shake the foundations of traditional Western ontology, with implications reaching far beyond a mere “lack” of attention.

North explains that for Aristotle, distraction as “not-always-thinking” is a “disturbance” in *noēsis*; after recognizing it as a problem, however, Aristotle proceeds to ignore it rather than explore it as part of his theory of the soul (19). Grounding distraction in thinking leads Aristotle to a dead end. Later thinkers such as Kafka, Heidegger, and Benjamin offer us a way to think about distraction “outside the dialectic with attention,” a radical departure from previous ways of approaching the subject (7).

Distraction can be defined as “the disintegration or misdirection of a unified, stable, directional mental force for possession of sanctioned objects” (5). 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. 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.” What we see, then, in this picture of attention and distraction is the requirement of an object that is to be focused on and, through that focus, possessed somehow. The attentive subject is thus constituted by an outside object on which it projects its focus. What distraction does, more than just losing this focus, is disregard the role of the object in the attentive state. Distraction has no object, is constituted by no object—or at least no “sanctioned” object, as North specifies. Distraction is mental concentration on nothing, or on something that is not sanctioned as a suitable object of attention. In this view, distraction is characterized less by a “lack” of attention than by a refocusing, different way of attending.

North describes distraction as a liminal mental space: “the receding-approaching limit of thinking,” it is a state where conscious thoughts can appear or disappear (13). What happens in

distraction, then, is neither an opening nor a closing off of attention, and thus distraction cannot be thought of as the opposite or lack of attention. Rather, distraction is a mental state defined by incompleteness and partiality, with paradoxically “receding-approaching” mental horizons along which the mind remains half-open. This kind of openness and lack of attentive directionality represents a source of concern for a philosophy that is grounded in the idea of the individual who is constituted by thought, and thus distraction “haunts the history of thought” (13). As a state of deviated or even deviant attention, distraction calls into question the value of attention itself, leaving open the possibility of other, alternative forms of consciousness that do not require the intent focus of “possession.” As North puts it aptly, it is not distraction itself that presents a problem for philosophy, but rather the implications that come along with it: “although it haunts, it is not itself spectral; it is closer to a capacity to receive specters” (13). Distraction haunts Cartesian notions of the individual subject’s capacity to think, precisely because its diffuse nature presents not a clear alternative to thought, but rather a series of vague possibilities regarding what the mind can do when not monitored by directionality.

At least since Descartes, thinking is associated with being: *cogito ergo sum*. If thinking is equated with being, then does “non-thinking” open up the prospect of “non-being,” as North puts it (11)? What is perhaps most perplexing about distraction is precisely this: the way in which it “disturbs the binding of thought to being” (14). In other words, if the subject is not engaged in intentional thought, and his or her mind wanders, then there is a possibility that selfhood will wander away as well (14). Conceptualizing distraction allows us to begin to think about such ontological states as “not-quite-being, more-than-being, not-yet-being, no-longer-being”—states which are in-between, provisional, and ever-changing (13).

How might thinking about such states affect our understanding of the definition of an artist, or what it means to create art? If we separate the individual from the act, denying the link of intentionality between them, then how can we assign authorship? The in-between states of being that are elicited by distraction erode the concepts of individual subjectivity that ground definitions of artistic creation since romanticism. Key to this process is the act of renunciation, a letting go of control over the directionality of attention, as distraction “either does not appropriate or impedes appropriation” of an object or idea, in contrast to the “will to possession” at work in focused attention (3). The distracted writing subject claims little or no ownership over the text that flows from his or her pen.

If approached from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari’s “becoming” as an alternative to “being,” the “non-thinking” associated with inattention does not have to equal the dissolution of the subject, although it does mean a total reconfiguration of the apparently stable Cartesian one. As the authors state in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 275). “Becoming,” then, provides us with a way of thinking about in-betweenness; it opens up possibilities for an alternative subjectivity in which the subject not always being “itself” or “present” does not mean it is necessarily dissolving or disappearing. Whereas the Cartesian paradigm is based on a view of the subject as a stable entity that engages in thought about the outside world through a mental filter, Deleuze and Guattari privilege immanence—being immersed in this world as it unfolds (Due 6). With the boundaries between self and other made permeable by this immersion, the Deleuzian subject becomes mobile and mutable, in a continual process of becoming (10). This does not mean the transformation from one identity to another, but rather coexistence of “multiplicities” (Sotirin 99-100).

As a quintessential “in-between” state, distraction is so closely associated with immanence that it does not even respect its own “marginal” margins. As North notes, “[a]llied with figures such as presentiment, sublimity, clairvoyance, and recollection, as the advent of a mental nothing or a principle of disappearance [...], [distraction] tests the limits of even those marginal mental phenomena” (13). It is not only in-between, but it is also unstable; distraction is ever-changing, ever drifting in and out of different objects of focus. This has led thinkers to associate it less with “phenomenology and ontology” and more with “fantasy, literature, and art” (13). Unstable subjectivity is perhaps best expressed in non-mimetic forms of art, where “becoming” translates into a creativity that is based not on direct representation but rather on the production of multiple possibilities. As Deleuze and Guattari state at the beginning of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with” (4). The interest is not in meaning revealed by a text but rather the possible connections that may be produced by reading it. Thus, the author is not the central figure, not the generator of meaning; rather, the author is a participant in a process that goes beyond him or her and over which he or she does not necessarily exert control.

It is notable that interest in the concept of distraction emerged during the height of avant-garde activity. As North notes, “some aspects of primal distraction” were “conceptualized for the first time in literature, philosophy and art criticism” during the 1920s and 30s, precisely during the period of experimental literary and artistic activity that informs the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector (14). As North outlines, Kafka “emphasizes the thoughtless-one’s ability to shake itself loose from the means-end logic of willing”; Heidegger explores “the freedom that the dispersing one—*Dasein*—enjoys with respect to its own ground”; and Benjamin

“imagines in internal dissipation that, brought about through new media, will lead to an uncommon politicization” (14). In the field of literary production, distracted attentional states provide fertile ground for exploration by avant-garde writers—at least those in the European avant-garde—since part of their creative impetus is the dismantling of the institution of literature. The most prominent example of this, of course, can be found in the Surrealists’ experiments with automatic writing. In their exploration of spaces in between conscious and unconscious states, the Surrealists eschewed intentionality while privileging “creative modes of trance, inattention, daydream, and fixation” (Crary 78). The First Surrealist Manifesto (1924) offers some possibilities for thinking about the connection between (in)attention and creation:

SURREALISM, noun, masc., Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.

ENCYCL. Philos. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. It leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to its substitution for them in the solution of the principal problems of life. (Breton, “Manifesto” 72)

The “true function of thought” is expressed by purposely *not* thinking in an intentional manner, allowing for the “disinterested play of thought” to take over. This passage of the Manifesto constitutes a recipe for Surrealist creativity, a creativity that occurs without a reason-based direction of thought, but rather in “disinterested play.” The Surrealist subject takes in stimuli and forms associations with them to produce something new, and thus acts both as an audience member and as an artist.

In “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), Benjamin explores the way in which the Surrealists decenter the individual subject: “In the world’s structure, dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication” (208). Surrealism, in its “loosening” of the individual subject, experiences intoxication but also retains the ability to “step outside” it and perhaps avoid the passivity of audiences lamented by Kracauer; the decentered Surrealist subject is “carried away” but does not relinquish the potential for agency and action. Benjamin sees revolutionary potential in the “ecstatic” element of Surrealist intoxication through experience, which works against the bourgeois mode of individualized contemplation: “To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution—this is the project about which Surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises. [...] For them it is not enough that, as we know, an ecstatic component lives in every revolutionary act” (215). For Benjamin, contemplation is no longer the appropriate mode of receiving the stimuli offered by the modern world. Surrealists understand this: “If it is the double task of the revolutionary intelligentsia to overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses, the intelligentsia has failed almost entirely in the second part of this task because it can no longer be performed contemplatively” (217). Contemplation is an outmoded approach to the artwork, associated with standards of individual subjectivity that are no longer relevant to the modern environment according to Benjamin. Surrealism represents for him, then, “the transformation of a highly contemplative attitude into revolutionary opposition” (213). Surrealist attention is thus inherently political, and can be connected to the new forms of perception now seen in the masses.

Surrealism, for its part, also troubles Benjamin's differentiation between "mere" and "productive" distraction. As Howard Eiland reminds us, the Surrealist Louis Aragon, in his novel *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), "blithely transcend[s] our duality of positive and negative distractions" to form a subjectivity for which "there is no opposition between entertainment as an end in itself and the education of apperception, or indeed between intoxication and education" (61). For Surrealism, all states of inattention are potentially productive, because the Surrealist subject is an actively distracted and entertained subject. Surrealist attention wanes quickly and often jumps from one thing to another, taking what it wants from an experience and moving on. In this way, it is akin to Benjamin's formulation of reception in distraction, in which the mass absorbs the artwork into itself. And yet the Surrealist also gets "carried away" by intoxication. The "loosening" of the subject that Benjamin detects in Surrealism is thus both active and passive, both taking stimuli in and being carried away by them; abandoning the self to being carried away but then abruptly stepping out of this passivity. Thus, the heart of Surrealist attention lies in the interstices between circuits described by Jonathan Crary; its potential is found in the uncertain space between the subject's reception of a stimulus and production of something new out of that stimulus. This allows new modes of creativity to emerge, modes which may be individual, collective, or partially one or the other; whatever form they take, they reaffirm that Surrealist practice is just that, a practice—the Surrealists *make* things out of their experiences.

Breton's "As in a Wood" (1951) illustrates the intoxication of a subject who is receiving an artwork in distraction. He recalls how, when he was at the "cinema age," he attended films in a purposely unintentional manner, "dropping into the cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom—of surfeit—to rush

off to another cinema” to repeat the game over again (81). Here, the Surrealist spectator approaches a film with a calculated unintentionality, watching it only as long as it holds his attention and leaving as soon as attention has been exhausted through boredom or overstimulation. Attention to the film is always provisional, and contingent on signs detected in the spectator himself. At some point while watching the film, however, the spectator “passes through a critical point as captivating and imperceptible as that uniting waking and sleeping,” a middle ground that upsets clear definitions of attention and inattention (82). Here, the artwork itself is of little importance except inasmuch as it is a vehicle for the receiving subject’s entertainment or transport into the gray area between sleep and wakefulness. This is a sort of intoxication, “loosening” the subject and priming him or her for new modes of perception. The Surrealist subject remains suspended somewhere on what Crary calls the continuum between attention and distraction, where the two are not opposites but “ceaselessly flow into one another” (Crary 51).

Fellow Surrealist Ado Kyrrou further collapses the division between the artwork, the artist and the audience in “The Film and I” (1952), in which he presents a mode of Surrealist spectatorship located somewhere between critical reception and creation, both in distraction. When a film is not pleasing to him, he—unlike Breton, who leaves the theater in search of another film—adds his own content through the use of memory: “it has often occurred to me during the showing of a displeasing film to call recollections of another film or novel to the rescue and to willfully mix characters and intrigues together” (139). During this process, he is a spectator in a theater watching a film, and yet the dynamic is not simply one of audience-receiver and art-transmitter. At a given moment, having decided that the film is lacking, Kyrrou splits his attention between what he is seeing on the screen and memories of another film he has seen or

book he has read in the past, which he then adds to the present film. The weight of art is no longer in the artwork itself but now resides in the manipulation that the Surrealist spectator can put it through. The results of such interventions are “ready-mades,” new products that are the non-original creations of the spectator who nonetheless possesses them: “When watching a film I inevitably perform an act of will on it, hence I transform it, and from its given elements make it *my thing*” (138, emphasis in original). In these Surrealist writings on film, dispersed attention is productive; something creative results from an act of connecting two planes of attention, such as the present film and the past films and novels of memory. The act of writing that Kyrrou undertakes after leaving the cinema is a model of automatic writing as creativity but also as spectatorship: “I sit down at the first café table I come to and write down, automatically, my impressions. Without searching for ideas or a logical sequence I fill page after page” (140). The product of this encounter between the subject and the work of art results in the creation of something new, which has come about through a double process of distraction: during the film, he has not given the events on the screen his full attention, rather inserting his own contributions from other experiences; later, when he sits down to write, it is also in a distracted manner, automatically, without the intentionality of “searching for ideas or a logical sequence” (140).

Surrealist distraction represents both a mode of reception and a mode of creation; through the experience of intoxication, which “loosens” individual subjectivity, the Surrealist can be “carried away” into the artwork but can also intervene at any time to take hold of the artwork and make it into something new. Far from the bourgeois image of the individual contemplating the artwork, the Surrealists enact a “loosened” subjectivity in which the individual subject is decentered, both artist and audience. In this state, the artist-audience performs Benjamin’s reception in distraction, but also a specifically non-individualized creation in distraction which

emerges from this reception. The distracted Surrealist subject receives stimuli from the artwork and contributes to this experience via memory and non-intentional associations; the result is a creativity that works against the notion of inspiration and even originality. The products are “ready-mades,” reminiscent of a Dadaist ant-art ethos but also preserving the ecstatic element of experience noted by Benjamin. The result is an art object that constitutes, and is constituted by, both reception and creation in distraction.

Another perspective on creation in distraction is offered by Brian Massumi, who has reflected on the uses of inattention for philosophical writing. In the introduction to his seminal work *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), he reflects on what he calls “inattention as a writing tool” (18). When explaining what connects the essays in his book, he points to the use of examples as a way of writing that allows him to express his ideas; examples, however, require such a level of focus on detail, and the singularities of each detail, that the writer can run the risk of becoming lost in digressions. What he affirms, however, is that the digression is something that the writer should “[t]ake joy” in, because “that is where the unexpected arises” (18). He affirms: “You have to be willing to surprise yourself writing things you didn’t know you thought. [...] You have to let yourself get so caught up in the flow of your writing that it ceases at moments to be recognizable as your own” (18). This involves running the risk of failure, but this risk is necessary: “For with inattention comes risk: of silliness or even outbreaks of stupidity. But perhaps in order to write experimentally, you have to be willing to ‘affirm’ even your own stupidity” (18).

While Massumi is referring to academic writing, his meditations on the essential role of inattention in forging new ground for thought are helpful in understanding the ways in which inattention may function in the production of discourse as well as its reception. In Massumi’s

model, allowing attention to wander during the writing process allows for the unknown and unexpected to present itself—not from outside the subject, as we see in Benjamin, and not from the unconscious, as the Surrealists would have it, but rather from a nonspecific affective state that is both cognitive and physical. What Massumi’s concept of inattentive writing shares with Benjamin and the Surrealists, however, is the notion that inattentive writing requires openness and receptiveness in order to be truly experimental and result in something new. And, most importantly, what Massumi’s account demonstrates is the way in which the writing subject becomes decentered from his or her writing process. Allowing inattention to take hold, the self drifts away temporarily; when it returns, it does not quite recognize the discourse it has produced, as the writing “ceases at moments to be recognizable as [its] own” (18).

In the case of the Latin American avant-gardes, who were trying to build something “new” while destroying something “old,” focused attention may be preferable to distraction, which fosters dissolution rather than solidification. The avant-gardes were less willing to risk the non-being associated with distraction, because their project involved the establishment of a new way of being, requiring active consolidation, a prescriptive gesture. As North reminds us “[w]here philosophy, criticism, and art theory are traditionally concerned with principles for the formation of things, distraction is concerned with their deformation, disintegration, and ceasing to be” (15). Giving in to inattentive states such as distraction means allowing for the possibility that no art will be made, or at least nothing recognizable as a finished “product.” This means a willful renunciation of ownership over what emerges from the creative process, since distraction can lead to something valuable, akin to what the Surrealists produced with their automatic writing and drawing experiments (discussed later in this chapter), but it can also lead to nothing. This involves, thus, the possibility of not only the work of art not coming into existence, but also,

and perhaps most importantly, the risk of the artist revealing his or her “stupidity” (as Massumi terms it) and failing to “become” an artist through the production of a complete work of art.

This failure is precisely what, I argue, is explored in the works of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector. In the texts I study here, we are presented with a variety of characters engaged in the act of writing, and the link between distraction and a loss of being is palpable. I find that distraction, in fact, emerges as an attentional manifestation of the creative subject’s profound ambivalence about becoming or being a writer. What distraction offers these writing subjects is a way to avoid commitment, to avoid defining themselves, and indeed a way to avoid the teleological push towards being and remain in the in-between state of Deleuzian “becoming,” maintaining Benjamin’s “loosening” of the subject. Creation in distraction—which, I argue, manifests itself as a “poetics of inattention” in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector—is a way of writing in immanence. Distraction, described by North as “the receding-approaching limit of thinking,” allows the creative subject to remain receptive to the influence of other forces in the production of art (13). This renunciation of agency over the production of art entails an abandonment of Cartesian notions of the individual self, and with it a rejection of the romanticist definition of the artist as an isolated individual genius—a definition that the Latin American avant-garde continued, consciously or not, to uphold.

One feature that pervades avant-garde narrative is the fact that the figure of the artist is not just in a privileged position to experience the feelings and perceptions of modernity, but in fact he or she is alert and highly attuned to them. Avant-garde affect is intense, and its intensity is heightened by the fact that the creative subject attends to it keenly. The avant-garde holds up the artist as the representative of modern spectatorship, the arbiter of the modes of perception of the time. By contrast, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector often perform the interplay of affect

and attention in the process of literary creation, employing what appear to be evasive attentional strategies. By deferring the encounter with an affect, the writer attempts to hold it at a distance and close off its entry into the writing process. But this evasion cannot be maintained indefinitely, and affect finds a way to flood into the work, and when it does it inflects attention with a palpable affective register. Deferral is an evasion, a reaction to ambivalence, and also becomes the way in which this ambivalence writes itself. Similarly, distraction is another attentional strategy that presents itself as a lack of strategy; rather than the intentional act of deferral, it appears as the passive release of control. Yet it is just as much a strategy of attention as deferral, and just as much an attempt at evasion that cannot be maintained in perpetuity.

Strategies of inattention such as evasiveness, distraction, or indifference are ways to cope with the destabilizing force of ambivalent feelings, which make the subject ill at ease and uncomfortable in his or her skin. Evasiveness represents an attempt to avoid confrontation with the object of attention, postponing and deferring their encounter as long as possible. Distraction is a passive refusal to engage in attention's "will to possession" of an object or idea (North 3). And indifference suggests such a total lack of interest in an object, that even if attention were elicited, it would not remain focused. Attention seems to act as an attempt to overcome ambivalence, but cannot: the "ongoingness" of ambivalence makes attentional strategies ultimately unsuccessful in handling it and in fact seems to make attention itself ambivalent (Ngai 7). Thus, while attention is not itself an affect, it does become affectively inflected in its struggle with affect. The result is a writing that is constituted by, and also expresses, this struggle—a writing that suggests not the triumph of attentive strategies over affects, but rather their perhaps irremediable entanglements.

The inattentive writing subject represents a type of consciousness that Sylvia Molloy (in reference to Hernández's work) has called *entreabierto* or ajar, is neither totally open nor closed to external stimuli; it is like a door that has been left open unintentionally (71-72).⁶ It is a "loosening" of the subject, a state of receptivity that refuses attention's "will to possession" (Benjamin, "Surrealism" 208; North 3). And letting go of attentional attachment, giving up power over the text, is also a letting-go of the self, to be carried away by the creative experience which itself is driven by such ambivalence. These authors' texts, then, perform Williams's destabilizing "present tense" of artistic creation, with the ambivalence that stems from being caught up in this immediacy.

Ambivalent Authorship and a "Poetics of Inattention"

As discussed above, Vicky Unruh has observed that the Latin American avant-gardes were concerned with phenomenological issues as they explored the links between art and experience. As part of this interest in the feelings involved in artistic creation, these movements developed a "self-aware artist hero (or often antihero)" who would come to be "a fairly recently established literary presence" in Latin American literature, to the point where "there are few significant works that do not construct an artistic persona of some kind" (73, 72). And as Francine Masiello has noted, the artist in the work of the Latin American avant-gardes is a new kind of hero, differing from the artist-heroes of romanticism and Spanish American *modernismo*: "Menos preocupado por salvar la sociedad que por establecer un modo de auto-control, el nuevo artista se apropia del espacio discursivo poniendo a prueba su originalidad y su discernimiento" ["Less concerned with saving society than with establishing a mode of self-control, the new artist

⁶ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

appropriates the discursive space, testing out his or her originality and discernment”] (194). In this way, Masiello continues, the artist “invoca poderes especiales como los alquimistas o los hacedores de mitos, tratando de reclamar un lugar para sí mismo en cuanto productor de signos en el discurso” [“invokes special powers like alchemists or mythmakers, trying to lay claim to a place for him- or herself as a producer of signs in discourse”] (195).

Thus, the concern with authorship that I find in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector is not new, and in fact forms part of an established Latin American tradition of interest in what it means to be an artist, and inquiry into the artist’s role in society. What we can see in their work, however, is a new concept of the artist which marks a radical departure from the romantic-influenced artist figure seen in Latin American literature through Spanish American *modernismo* and the avant-garde. This is manifested in these authors’ use of affect in their depictions of fictional creative subjects: these subjects experience marginal, non-extreme feelings that do not move or inspire them to action, but rather linger in their consciousness, almost paralyzing them. The result is a certain listlessness in the creative subject, and the texts that result from this fictionalized creative process are characterized by fragmentation and indeterminacy—characteristics that are born not of an attempt to explode traditional forms of literary discourse but rather of a lack of agency over the production of the narrative. The fictional creative subjects found in these texts by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector can be described as decentered authors, whose appearance anticipates the “death of the author” that would become so prevalent in the Latin American Boom and in the critical theory of the 1960s and ’70s, while offering a vision of the author that is aligned with neither the avant-gardes nor the Boom.

Lucille Kerr’s *Reclaiming the Author: Figures and Fictions from Spanish America* (1992) analyzes the manifestations of the author figure in the literature of the Boom and post-

Boom. She proposes that Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*] (1963), Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* [*Here's to You, Jesusa!*] (1969), Carlos Fuentes' *Terra nostra* (1975), Manuel Puig's *Pubis angelical* (1979), José Donoso's *El jardín de al lado* [*The Garden Next Door*] (1981), and Mario Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* [*The Storyteller*] (1987), as well as many other contemporary texts, "seem either to presuppose or to produce [...] an authorial demise" (25). At the same time, however, this "authorial demise" seems to be more of a performance than a reality, as "even in texts that foster its disappearance or death, the figure of the author may also be reclaimed" (25). Finally, she concludes that "Spanish American fiction seems to divert one's gaze from this figure while (much like some of the texts of critical theory one might read around them) persistently drawing one's attention to it" (25). Thus, the question of the author's status "may well linger as an unanswered question" (11).

Indeed, as Seán Burke argues in *The Death and Return of the Author* (2008), proclaiming the death of the author is, paradoxically, a way to solidify the author's centrality. The idea of the author's death is especially promising for poststructuralist critics, since "the break with the author effects a severance of the text from its putative referential obligations, and allows language to become the primary point of departure and return for textual apprehension and analysis" (43). Indeed, however, "[a]nti-authorialism has always found itself in complicity with anti-representational poetics" (42). Not only the Russian Formalists but also the New Critics remove the biographical author from the equation in order to gain a text that is "disemburdened [...] of any dependence on extratextual contexts"; structuralism and poststructuralism take it further by "seeing language as constitutive of both the 'reality' the text feigns to represent and the authorial subject who purports to be its source" (41). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1973), Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin observes a decentered authorial voice in what he terms

the “polyphonic” novel, when other textual voices take over the narrative; here, the author has no authority, and is simply one voice among many (5). Similarly, in “The Death of the Author” (1967), Roland Barthes suggests that the voice that comes to us through writing is not a univocal, transparent communication between the individual who produces the text and the individual who reads it. Rather, the voice that touches the reader through the text is not one, but multiple: it contains many different voices within it, and the origins of these voices cannot be determined (42). Thus, the figure of the author dissipates, leaving the reader with the text’s multiple voices, which have come from everywhere and nowhere. While Barthes proclaims the author’s death, thus freeing the text and its reader, Michel Foucault in “What is an Author?” (1969) stresses the importance of separating the historical individual who physically wrote the words on the page from the persona of the author. Foucault argues that the space between writer and text is one of fragmentation and indeterminacy, and the “author function” can create multiple selves and subjects (113). Barthes’s and Foucault’s attempts to tease out the specificities of the relations between writer, text, and reader can be viewed as a continuation of the Formalists’ and the New Critics’ insistence on keeping the text itself at the forefront. Barthes replaces the term “author” with that of “scriptor,” as the writer becomes a textualized figure, while, for Foucault, the author becomes no more than a discursive function or product of ideologies circulating in society.

Jorge Luis Borges, onetime member of the *Martín Fierro* group and lifelong friend of Macedonio Fernández, is considered to have pioneered much of the critical discourse concerning the “death of the author” with his 1957 essay “Borges y yo” [“Borges and I”]. Much of his reflection on authorship, however, was anticipated in his early work, such as “La nadería de la personalidad” [“The Nothingness of Personality”], first published in the avant-garde magazine

Proa in 1922 and later appearing in his collection *Inquisiciones* in 1925.⁷ Written in the wake of one of the long philosophical discussions shared by Borges and Fernández, “Nadería” rails against the 19th century concept of self and authorship, asserting that authors then were interested only in “patentizar su personalidad” [“showing off their personalities”] (38). Borges’s move away from the romantic cult of the author would continue with his first book of poems, *Fervor de Buenos Aires* *Fervor of Buenos Aires* (1923), whose introductory note, “A quien leyere” [“To the Reader”] offers the following apology to readers: “Si las páginas de este libro consienten algún verso feliz, perdóneme el lector la descortesía de haberlo usurpado yo, previamente. Nuestras nada poco difieren; es trivial y fortuita la circunstancia de que seas tú el lector de estos ejercicios y yo su redactor” [“If the pages of this book contain some successful verse, the reader should pardon me the discourtesy of having usurped first. Our nothingnesses differ little; it is a trivial and fortuitous circumstance that you should be the reader of these exercises and I should be their editor”] (18). As David Viñas Piquer has noted, Borges’s use of the term “redactor” [“editor”] instead of “author” or “poet” is no coincidence (Viñas Piquer 25). It serves to cast in bold relief his intent to move away from romantic notions of the author and towards a problematization of the concept of authorship; as Viñas Piquer affirms, “[I]os versos felices no se inventan; se usurpan. ¿De dónde?: de la tradición literaria, donde estaban ya en potencia, previstos de algún modo” [“[s]uccessful verses are not invented; they are usurped. From where? From literary tradition, where they already, potentially existed, somehow foretold”] (25).

By the time Borges wrote “Borges y yo,” however, his meditation on authorship had become more aligned with what we would later see in the Boom authors, constituting a

⁷ In *Lenguaje e ideología: las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia* (1986), Francine Masiello notes a significant difference between the 1922 and 1925 versions. In the 1922 version, Borges states categorically, “[e]l yo no existe” [“the I does not exist”] while in the 1925 version he softens his stance, affirming instead, “[n]o hay tal yo de conjunto” [“there is no self as a totality”].

simultaneous erasure and reaffirmation of the authorial persona. As Kerr notes, by closing his text with the reflection, “No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página” [“I don’t know which of the two is writing this page”], Borges makes a “final statement of undecidability about the source of the text, and about its authorship,” which both “effects a disappearance of the author as a univocal and stable authority or origin” while simultaneously “confer(ring) upon each of the figures in ‘Borges y yo’ something of an authorial position” (Kerr 2). In other words, if “the author cannot be found in any single site,” then he or she is potentially “everywhere” (2).

Returning to Burke’s affirmation that the proclamation of the death of the author is in fact a way of reinforcing, somehow, the author’s central position, I argue that Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector present us a radically different artist—neither the 19th century genius, inherited by the avant-gardes, nor the “dead” but also re-mystified author of the Boom and post-Boom. Indeed, as we have seen, these two concepts of authorship are fundamentally quite similar. As Burke tells us, “the repudiation of the prosaic, biographical self” that we see in formalism, structuralism and poststructuralism “hearken[s] back to a romantic view of the author as a solitary, sage-like, Olympian figure—as far elevated above the cares of everyday life as the visionary Nietzsche” (202). Dead or alive, the author and his or her status remain the central points of interest and, in one way or another, continue to dominate the text’s interpretive possibilities.

In this study, I examine works by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector that demonstrate what I call a “poetics of inattention”: this is a dynamic in which the fictional creative subjects being depicted in these texts show themselves to be unable to concentrate fully on the creative process. They claim not to know something, or to have forgotten; they avoid clear beginnings or endings; they profess authorial or narratorial incompetence; they write with “bad,”

ungrammatical or inelegant prose; and they become distracted, losing themselves in digressions to the point where any “story” they wished to tell is lost in confusion. All of these acts show artistic subjects to be profoundly ambivalent about the act of creation, and fundamentally uncertain whether or not it is something that they want to carry out. With this “poetics of inattention,” the phenomenon of “the death of the author” comes to the fore, either because the text anticipates it (in Fernández and Hernández) or participates in it (in Lispector). However, the presence of the concept of authorial demise in these texts has a very particular character, which departs from what came before and differs from what would come after. While rejecting the author-as-virtuoso genius originating in romanticism and continuing in Spanish American *modernismo* and the avant-garde, these three writers also refuse to allow the author to “die,” because that would actually become a way of cementing the author’s centrality, paradoxical thought this may seem.

Instead, in a contradictory tension, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector zero in on the affective states experienced by the fictional writing subject while also denying this subject full agency over the writing that emerges. It is an obsession with the ambivalence of the writing process, in which one has intentions but they do not come out right, or thoughts and feelings invade the subject and make themselves known in the text despite his or her desires. Between the earlier “artist as genius” (romanticism, Spanish American *modernismo*, and the avant-gardes) and the later dissolution of the artist’s persona into discourse and textuality (Barthes and Foucault), Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector present us with a transitional figure: an artist who is mired in ambivalence and who, though occupying a central position in their texts, is also radically decentered from the writing process. The chapters that follow in this study examine this phenomenon from several different angles, examining the following elements found in these

authors' works: the fraught beginnings of their texts; the particular process of artistic creation that takes place in their texts, which I characterize as a "poetics of inattention"; the specific resonance of their unfinished texts; and finally a meditation on the possible political implications of this authorial figure, whose ambivalence and resulting inattention to the creative task may be read as a statement of radical egalitarianism regarding the creation and definition of art.

In Chapter 1, "Deferred Beginnings," I draw on Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975) to establish a critical framework for understanding texts in which affect and attention combine in such a way that the literary work does not seem to ever be able to begin. For Said, literary beginnings are intimately connected to questions of authority and the boundaries of the sayable and the representable. While following Said, I also add that the beginnings of the texts I analyze are, more than anything, constituted by ambivalence. I begin by discussing Macedonio Fernández's collection of fragments *Papeles de reciénvenido* [*The Newcomer Papers*] (1929), in which the fictional authorial voice casts himself as a perennial newcomer to the literary scene, never fully committing to being an established figure. I view this as a manifestation of profound ambivalence about participating, both in literature and in life, in collective endeavors such as literary movements and institutions—an ambivalence that is not only expressed by the fictional authorial voice, but also demonstrated in Fernández's real-life actions. I then analyze Felisberto Hernández's short pieces "Prólogo de un libro que nunca pude empezar" ["Prologue to a Book that I Could Never Begin"] (1925) and "Las dos historias" ["The Two Stories"] (1943), both of which chronicle failed attempts to write a story and which end where they began, stuck in the note-taking phase, a seemingly proto-creative state. Due to their fictional authors' inability to concentrate or inability to express themselves properly in writing, these texts never get off the ground, remaining tethered by indecision and indeterminacy. The

texts we are left with, ostensibly written by these authorial figures, linger as false starts; at the same time, however, they are false starts that Hernández chose to leave as such, thus opening up questions about his own ambivalence towards writing.

I close Chapter 1 with a reading of Clarice Lispector's novel *A hora da estrela* [*The Hour of the Star*] (1977), which opens with a list of the thirteen alternate titles for the novel, all laid out and separated by the word "or," as if the reader should be the one to choose how the novel will begin. Here, the author—who could be Lispector herself or the fictional author within the novel—lays out the options and relinquishes the agency of choosing a direction in which to go. This sets the stage for a text that chronicles the difficulties encountered by a fictional author when he attempts to invent the story of a woman he has glimpsed in the street. In all of these narratives, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector blur the lines between biographical writer and fictional author, to the point where the reader is never sure whose ambivalence we are witnessing—their own or that of their fictional characters, who struggle to express themselves. The texts that I study in this chapter are all characterized by their halting beginnings, which use various strategies to defer the start of the story—a beginning which the authors, both real and fictional, seem to want to forestall indefinitely.

In Chapter 2, "A Poetics of Inattention," I use Paul North's *The Problem of Distraction* (2012) to frame my discussion of the inattentive narrative voice that runs through many of the works of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector. I find that states of inattention appear in these texts as a way to communicate profound ambivalence in the fictional creative subject, who does not possess control over what he or she is creating. These artist figures, unable to exert this control over their creative process, find themselves drifting: their minds wander, and the texts write themselves around, over, and through them. This is a particularly compelling dynamic

because, as we know from biographical information, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector were anything but inattentive when composing their works; in fact, they often spent years—decades, even—in painstaking revisions of their works before allowing them to be published. This is a compelling contradiction that prompts us to think about what statement they may have wanted to make regarding the construction of authorship.

I first discuss how, in Fernández's *El museo de la novela de la Eterna (primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna's Novel (The First Good Novel)*] (1967), the narrator story longs to create a new kind of storytelling, but hesitates, and remains reluctant to shoulder narrative authority. In a strategy of evasion, he cedes narrative control to his story's characters, professing that he suffers from mental "blankness" which allows him to evade authorial responsibility. Disavowing authority in the texts allows the ambivalent artist to remain on the sidelines, separate from his or her own creative process, and thus not responsible for any reactions it may garner. Then, I move on to an analysis of Hernández's essay-manifesto "Explicación falsa de mis cuentos" ["False Explanation of My Stories"] (1955) to demonstrate that, again and again, the narrative voice exists in a state of "creation in distraction," oscillating between obsessive focus and wandering attention. Interestingly, this text is not a fictional narrative but rather an "explanation" somewhat akin to an artistic manifesto, and thus the narrative voice here is purportedly Hernández himself, rather than the fictional-yet-quasi-autobiographical narrative voices populating the majority of the texts studied here, by Hernández as well as by Fernández and Lispector. Here, we see Hernández himself deny any authority over what emerges from his pen: he confesses that not only does he not control what is written, but in fact it cannot be written unless he averts his attention, allowing the writing to create itself while he remains on the

margin. I argue that it is in this nonfictional text that Hernández use of inattention shows itself to be, at heart, a performance, and a means of establishing an ambiguous authorial persona.

Finally, I examine Lispector's *Água viva* [*The Stream of Life*] (1973), which depicts the tension between competing impulses: on one hand, striving to seize meaning through what North calls the "will to possession" of focused attention; and on the other hand, renouncing this gesture of possession, retreating into a state of distraction that "either does not appropriate or impedes appropriation" (3). Hesitation born of creative uncertainty dominates this text, in which a fictional author attempts to find a way to express herself, barely taking a step forward before she is mired in indecision, which causes her to lose her thread and become lost in digressions. Indeed, all of the texts analyzed in this chapter depict authorial figures in varying states of inattention, who employ tactics such as evasiveness, distraction, and renunciation as a means to both express and cope with underlying ambivalent feelings about writing and performing the role of author. Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector create authorial figures who are decentered from the creative process while, paradoxically, retaining the central role in the narrative: they occupy center stage, but remain somewhat passive, at the mercy of ambivalent affects that render them incapable of gaining control over their attentive faculties. This decentered author, I argue, stands as a counter-figure to the avant-garde's exalted image of the artist who strides through the modern world of sensations with the ability to process and express these sensations with clarity and virtuosity.

In Chapter 3, "Unfinished Narratives," I discuss works by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector that remained unfinished at the time of their deaths. I begin my analysis with Saverio Tomaiuolo's *Victorian Unfinished Novels: The Imperfect Page* (2012) where he states that unfinished novels, as "literary empty spaces," often "resemble and (unintentionally) imitate life

more than finished novels aspire to do,” as they cannot help but be bound by the open-ended, unfinished nature of life itself (17, 19). Following Tomaiuolo, I argue that these works are perhaps the most complex of all the texts produced by these three authors, who engaged so extensively in blurring the boundaries between biographical author and the fictional authorial figures populating their stories. Because of the intrusion of death on the biographical authors’ writing process, their fictional authors also find themselves silenced, in a moment of true, direct connection of art with life. In the works I study in this chapter, I argue that unfinished works by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector become the space in which they stage a struggle to avoid facing death and the need to decide what kind of legacy to leave behind. It seems that the idea of a legacy, both in literature and life, requires too definitive a statement to make about themselves, and thus these unfinished texts evince a contradictory dynamic in which the authors seem to be wrestling for control over their literary and life narratives, while also knowing that such control is impossible and remaining uncertain about what exactly they wish to leave as their last statements.

I begin with Fernández’s major life project, the “twin novels” *El museo de la novela de la Eterna (primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna’s Novel (First Good Novel)*] and *Adriana Buenos Aires (última novela mala)* [*Adriana Buenos Aires (Last Bad Novel)*], which he began writing in the 1920s and which he spent the rest of his life revising and reworking, but which were never published during his life, appearing posthumously in 1967 and 1974 respectively. I read these texts as the ruins of an unending process of revision, which we can understand as an attempt to gain control over the definition of these works, which he knew were his most ambitious and career-defining, but an attempt that is also deeply ambivalent about its looming finality. Fernández cannot stop himself from this endless revision, which is doomed to remain

incomplete, inching ever closer to—or ever farther from—the definitive version of the works and the author himself. I then analyze Hernández’s novella-memoir “Tierras de la memoria,” [“Lands of Memory”] (1965) which he began in 1944 but abandoned, unfinished, twenty years before his death and never wished to publish in any completed form. I trace the ambivalence of this highly autobiographical fiction, which reveals the author’s struggle to confront two versions of himself which struggle to coexist: the written subject and the writing subject. I find in the abandoned fragments of this text a resistance to the closure that would be entailed by the uniting of these two personas, who remain ever separated in their respective metaphorical notebooks, their oneness never to be admitted and defined.

I close the chapter with a study of Lispector’s final novel, *Um sopro de vida (pulsações)* [*A Breath of Life (Pulsations)*] (1978), which remained unfinished at the time of her death, and whose final form was shaped by a friend. In the fragments that make up the text Lispector penned, ambivalence abounds in reference to the connection between writing and life, and writing and death. In *Um sopro*, a fictional male author attempts to bring a female character to literary life, and yet she remains on the verge of death while also, paradoxically, becoming more real and more alive than her creator himself. Suspended between life and death, between reality and fiction, the fictional author and his fictional character engage in a dialogue made up of scattered fragments. In all of the texts analyzed in Chapter 3, the “poetics of inattention” that I detect in Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector comes to its ultimate conclusion, as the biographical authors literally disappear before their fictional narratives emerge (in “final,” published form), finally ending to the oscillation between autobiographical reality and fictional invention that characterized their writing lives. Whether unfinished because of obsessive, decades-long, never-completed revisions (Fernández), or abandoned in the middle of life due to

an apparent lack of interest in continuing (Hernández), or written while dying (Lispector), these are texts imbued with ambivalence about closure, both within literature, in terms of aesthetics, and outside literature, in terms of their place in cultural institutions such as the literary canon.

The concluding chapter, “Towards A Politics of Inattention,” takes the questions raised by the interplay of affect and attention in my authors’ texts and extends them to the broader social arena. In this section, I probe the possible political significance of a “minor” feeling such as ambivalence, and the states of inattention that accompany it in the texts by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector. I ask if these stances are necessarily politically apathetic ones, implying a turning inward away from the social sphere, or if the marginal, unclear status of ambivalence and inattention may give them a subversive potential. I draw on Jonathan Flatley’s *Affective Mapping* (2008) to think about how seemingly non-productive emotional states can have their own social engagement, following his notion that an apparently anti-social feeling such as melancholia can actually be read as “a way to be interested in the world” (2). Specifically, I ask if there is a potentially politically radical statement in the critique that Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector make of the avant-garde notion of the artist as a privileged individual capable of feeling things that regular people cannot experience.

Jacques Rancière’s ideas on aesthetics and politics inform much of my analysis. I argue that the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector carries a particular political weight in the Rancierian sense, where “politics” is understood as an act of making visible or sayable what has been obfuscated by the “distribution of the sensible”; specifically, as a reaction to the avant-garde’s exalted image of the artist, they present artist figures who are anything but adept, and who are unable to feel or perceive anything in a clear way. Their cultivation of something almost resembling mediocrity in their artist figures is a way of bringing to the fore a critique of the

mystification involved in avant-garde images of the artist, inherited from Spanish American *modernismo* and romanticism.

My analysis also follows some of Davide Panagia's work on the politics of affect. I contend that Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector explore the experience of "disarticulation," defined by Panagia as moments in which sensory perception is temporarily detached from the structure of "narratocracy" that renders life visible, readable, and sayable in standard terms. This disarticulation is an interruption in the given field of perception (or distribution of the sensible, to use Rancière's term), and as such it is inherently political: it reconfigures the conditions of possibility for the perception of previously invisible or imperceptible realities. In short, I argue that, in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, feeling and perception become "democratized": no longer the preserve of the aesthetically privileged, the explosive drama of major affects is defused and turned into the small currency of an "everyday" life in which the creative subject is no more capable of experiencing and deploying affect than anyone else. This chapter opens the door to future work, resisting the temptation to connect ambivalence and inattention with political apathy or indifference. I propose, instead, that by revealing an alternative artistic figure, mired in ambivalence and unable to feel or perceive anything clearly, is in fact a radically egalitarian statement about who can create art and what art can be.

CHAPTER 1

DEFERRED BEGINNINGS

Introduction

In *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), Edward Said meditates on the importance of beginnings for the novel in the Western world, and the ways in which a work's beginning is connected to questions of authority and the boundaries of the sayable and the representable. Rather than Frank Kermode's "sense of an ending," Said maintains, the primary element in a text is its beginning, because "nothing can really be done, much less ended" without a beginning (Said 49-50). Our understanding of literature, then, is largely based on how it begins, how we are invited to enter into the author's fictional world, because the beginning of a text "immediately establishes relationships with works," in relation to which the text places itself in a position of "either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both" (3). This perspective on beginnings is especially significant when examining the avant-garde, because, due to its obsession with the new and original, the beginning of an avant-garde text is what I will call "the beginning of a beginning."

Rejecting the outdated aesthetics of the past, and the poets who represented the old guard, the Latin American avant-garde sought to sweep away the old and remake art anew. This was an art of beginnings, which sought to create origins for a new world to come; its foundation was the concept of originality, understood as "a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth" (Krauss 157, cited in Unruh 142). At the same time, the avant-garde was also obsessed with the old, even while rejecting it, constituting a "paradoxical fascination with the originary" (Unruh 141). The new world of art created by the avant-garde required "inaugural events," as seen in

Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*, in which the eponymous hero is born "in the virgin forest" (143). This avant-garde attempt to both create and parody an origin story for Brazil, represents this event as something that "had happened once and could therefore, paradoxically, happen again and again, always for the very first time" (143). Although, as Said maintains, beginnings might often be simply a "necessary fiction," in the context of the avant-garde they were paramount to establishing an identity separate from what had come before (50). Writing (or rewriting) the past meant writing the conditions of possibility for the present and the future.

Beginnings need their history; something must always come before a beginning, to make that beginning possible. As the Latin American avant-garde viewed itself as a new beginning, origins and beginnings were paramount to the project of establishing a new aesthetic universe and, with it, a new vision of the artist. The notion of beginnings has special resonance in the so-called "New World," as artists in Latin America have always been conscious of occupying what has been conceived as wild, unexplored spaces. Vicky Unruh, Roberto González Echevarría and many other critics have discussed at length the role of geographical space in Latin American writers' understanding of their place in the literary world. What is of interest to me is the purposeful nature of this quest for the new, and the self-awareness of the avant-garde's attempt to both escape and replace their forebears.

For Said, a literary beginning is a statement of intention, however oblique; the beginning of a text is "*the first step in the intentional production of meaning*" (5, emphasis in original). And indeed, for the avant-garde, beginnings are most often represented by manifestos or other kinds of statements, communicated with a vehemence whose intentionality is undeniable. Said classifies different kinds of beginnings in writing and their meaning: "The polar extremes of writing's cosmology are writing-as-mere-writing [...] and writing-as-permitting, writing-as-

making-possible, writing-as-beginning other forms of human perception and behavior” (20). In the avant-garde, writing means writing a beginning; it means the intentional establishment of conditions of possibility for a certain kind of expression.

At the same time, avant-garde beginnings exist in a perpetual present tense. They are *present* in every sense of the word, intellectually, emotionally, and even physically. In “Structures of Feeling” (1977), Raymond Williams states that “the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present” (129). It takes place in the immediacy of the present tense, involving “not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical” (128). This experience of the present immerses us in “all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known,” representing “this, here, now, alive, active, ‘subjective’” (128). It is this present tense of art that the avant-garde seeks to represent in its full physical and intellectual intensity.

In their 1924 manifesto, the Argentine *Martín Fierro* group (known also as *martinfierristas*) proclaimed, “*Martín Fierro* sabe que ‘todo es nuevo bajo el sol’ si todo se mira con unas pupilas actuales y se expresa con un acento contemporáneo” [“*Martín Fierro* knows that ‘everything is new under the sun,’ if seen with up-to-date eyes and expressed with a contemporary accent”] (Girondo 142; 12, translation modified). Blessed with “current” or “updated” eyes through which to perceive the world, the avant-garde subject is positioned as, literally, a seer. The maxim “nothing is new under the sun” is reversed: “everything” can be “new under the sun” if it is filtered through avant-garde perception (“up-to-date eyes”) and cast back into the world through avant-garde expression (“contemporary accent”). The avant-garde recreates the world, recycles it, makes it pure again, giving it back its newness.

Seeing the world from a new perspective and making it new to others through artistic expression is a task that involves the establishment of new beginnings. The avant-garde artist is positioned at the very dawn of a new day, and it is through his or her art that the day will be perceived as new and full of promise. Thus, the notion of beginnings is one that governs the entire avant-garde project; even the term “avant-garde” means to be ahead of things. (Being at the head of things means charting new territories and necessarily being responsible for establishing a narrative of beginnings.) And while the position of spearhead is one that is fraught with uncertainty about the unknown possibilities or dangers that may lie ahead, Latin American avant-garde statements do not communicate a sense of uncertainty or tentativeness; indeed, quite to the contrary, they are replete with bravado and overconfidence. For example, in the “Prefácio Interessantíssimo” [“Extremely Interesting Preface”] that opens his poetry collection *Paulicéia desvairada* [*The Hallucinated City*] (1922), Brazilian *modernista* Mário de Andrade proclaims: “Por muitos anos procurei-me a mim mesmo. Achei. Agora não me digam que ando à procura de originalidade, porque já descobri onde ela estava, pertence-me, é minha” [“For many years I sought myself. I have found myself. Do not tell me now that I seek originality because I have already discovered where it was: it belongs to me, it is mine”] (Andrade, *Paulicéia desvairada* 75; *The Hallucinated City* 17). This almost arrogant self-regard could perhaps be interpreted as compensation for a true underlying uncertainty, but which is still there nonetheless and characterizes the avant-garde’s approach to its own project and its relationship with what has come before.

When we read texts by Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector alongside avant-garde statements such as those outlined above, it becomes clear that they represent highly divergent notions of artistic intentionality. The uncertainty of newness is

not something that the avant-garde is interested in exploring in its quest for novelty; the fact that beginnings are fraught with danger and potential for failure at every turn is not brought starkly into focus until we read Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector against the backdrop of the avant-garde. These authors deliberately focus on the unaccounted-for uncertainties in the project of the new, mining the expressive and artistic possibilities of ambivalence.

Every new beginning is a narrative, which must start with a first page. And what can be more fraught with possibilities—and possible failures—than a blank page about to be written on? For the avant-garde, this blank page means endless room to move, to stretch, and to innovate; it is space to be filled up, assigned meaning, by the avant-garde artist's privileged modes of feeling and perception. For Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, however, this open space is also an abyss into which the creative subject is perpetually on the verge of falling. In their work, the writing subject never exerts full mastery over the world, and is never quite able to assign signification with total self-assurance. The abyss is both a threat and a promise; the void of the blank page, the empty and yet heavy burden of beginning something, is something about which the writing subject can only feel deep ambivalence. And he or she exhibits this ambivalence by attempting to flee the encounter with this abyss of the blank page, and to avoid having to take up the mantle of intentionality that is associated with deciding to begin.

In the following pages, the works I study by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector show writing subjects who exemplify Said's observation that the intentionality of beginnings is only ever provisional (16-17). As we will see, the writing subjects represented by these authors appear to be distancing themselves from the notion of intentionality, perhaps as a comment on, or reaction to, the vehemence of the avant-garde project. What we see instead is a creative process in which intentionality is either denied or made so unstable as to become practically

meaningless. What replaces it is often a deferral to another point in time or an anxious proliferation, which function not only to stall the progress of the narrative, but in fact to cast doubt on the possibility for narrative to even take place under such conditions.

One of Said's main arguments is that there is a clear distinction between two types of novelistic beginnings: on one hand, the "solemn-dedicated, the impressive and noble" beginning, and on the other, the "hysterically deliberate" beginning (44). The first type of beginning, which we see in works such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is characteristic of the epic, whose subject matter is serious and which must, therefore, begin with purpose. Indeed, in these types of texts, the solemnity of the opening leads to a situation in which "what was initially intended to be the beginning became the work itself" (44). The second kind of beginning, which can be found in books such as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Jonathan Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, is one in which the actual story is "postponed with a kind of encyclopedic, meaningful playfulness" by the narrator, who "delays one sort of action for the sake of undertaking another" (44). According to Said, these "hysterically deliberate" beginnings "cannot seem to get started," as they are "postponed, with a kind of encyclopedic, meaningful playfulness" (44). This act of postponing the beginning of a work may be attributed to various motives, but what is clear is that there is a certain anxiety at the heart of this deferral. Perhaps we can interpret this anxiety as a reluctance to enter the world of writing.

Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector all participate, to varying degrees, in what Said calls the "hysterically deliberate" beginning, in the sense that their texts are narrated by, or are concerned with, individuals who are attempting to write. While, for Said, this type of beginning is "funnier" than the more serious one he contrasts it with, in the case of the writers I study here, deferred beginnings are rather less lighthearted (44). As I hope to show, deferred beginnings in

these texts can be read as part of the struggle of attention to cope with ambivalent affects, such as unease about writing itself. And although they participate in the “hysterical” category of beginnings, some of the texts included in this chapter also follow the “solemn” model provided by Said, in the sense that the beginning comes to occupy the text as a whole. In those cases, the account of the attempt to write, and the varying degrees of failure in this endeavor, actually becomes the story itself. In other cases, a troubled beginning is followed by a text that progresses in different ways, for which the beginning has set the stage but not claimed the entire textual territory. In all of the texts I study in this chapter, the narrator or protagonist is a writer or is engaged to some extent in the activity of writing. In all of these texts, the beginning is a central point of concern and even anxiety. Whereas the avant-garde seeks to make a statement through art, the works of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector shy away from such endeavors, shying away from the possibility of manifesting deliberation or intention. This evasion often takes the form of temporal shifting, allowing them to get away from Raymond Williams’s “present tense” of art: whether an escape into the past or the future, it is always a turn away from immediacy—the same immediacy so prized by the avant-garde.

Macedonio Fernández’s Deferred Authorship

Macedonio Fernández is known for his ambivalence about integrating himself fully into the literary world, reflected in the persona that he created for himself, the *recienvenido* [newcomer]. This persona allowed Fernández to present himself as someone who had just arrived in the “lettered city,” without bearings, bereft of knowledge of the past or points of reference. Adopting the persona of the *recienvenido* allowed him to distance himself strategically, and often nomadically, from the philosophical and aesthetic avant-garde of his time

(Wells 368). Presenting himself as a newcomer also allowed Fernández to avoid certain public encounters or choose absence as a curious form of literary presence. For example, although he was known by many to be a great thinker and creator, it was often more in terms of oral than written discourse, since he wrote prolifically yet chose to publish little. What he did publish tended to be short articles on philosophical topics or collections of speeches or *brindis* to be given at literary events, even though he spent most of his literary career working on his two novels, which he would never see published in his lifetime. As part of this game of presence-absence, Fernández often wrote speeches but then refused to actually recite them, instead assigning the task to a friend, who would read it aloud. Most curiously, though, Fernández would be in attendance in the audience, watching someone else give his speech. As one critic has noted, while he is often celebrated as a great verbal artist, Fernández actually “had a legendary aversion to public speaking” (Garth, *Self* 37). The *recienvenido* persona allowed Fernández to suspend himself in time, between the past and the future, in a present for which he was not entirely present. Having “just arrived,” he had no past, and yet because he refused to move beyond newcomer status, he foreclosed any specific future commitments as well. Forever suspended between temporalities and literary groups, Fernández cultivated for himself a space of ambivalence in which to work, avoiding the necessity of actually becoming anything specific.

For Fernández, writing is something that the subject is compelled to do, and yet can never fully begin to face and undertake, much less admit to. Writing is a creative act that remains always at the threshold of expressing itself, on the verge of becoming something called art. And the texts that result bear witness to this singular moment, which Fernández attempts to stretch into infinity—the moment before literature is committed to paper. This is the manifestation of a profound ambivalence about writing, in which the author struggles with the conflicting feelings

of wanting to write and yet not wanting to manifest this desire. This seems to spring from an almost paralyzing feeling of uncertainty. The writing that Fernández does produce consists of endless rehearsals, preliminary notes, half-finished projects, prologues, and promised novels. Many of these writings have taken their final shape only because of the death of the writer himself in 1952: in the case of his most ambitious project, the “twin novels” *Adriana Buenos Aires (Última novela mala)* [*Adriana Buenos Aires (The Last Bad Novel)*] and *El museo de la novela de la Eterna (primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna’s Novel (The First Good Novel)*], the final form of these novels, which had been in process since 1925, was shaped by Fernández’s son and literary executor, Adolfo Fernández de Obieta. Were it not for death, these texts would have likely been deferred indefinitely, continually being written, edited, revised, and rewritten.

Museo is a novel that “does not want to begin,” and perhaps “does not want to be a novel at all” (Thirlwell v). Right from the beginning, the book “postpones itself,” opening with either 57 or 60 prologues, “depending on whether you count the dedications, the post-prologue, and the blank page dedicated to the reader’s indecision” (Schwartz xv). Indeed, between Fernández’s first version of *Museo* and the final version that was published after his death, the number of prologues doubled (Vecchio 147). Among the prologues, there are “prologues of salutation, prologues introducing the author and the characters, prologue-letters to the critics, prologues about characters who were rejected, a prologue of authorial despair and, of course, prologues about prologuing” (Schwartz xv). The multiple prologues or introductory notes take up almost half of the total number of pages in the book, and all seem to be about the details of its production. These preliminary maneuvers are a way to stall for time before the actual novel must reveal itself, which, as the author himself states, could possibly never happen at all: “Célebre

novela en prensa, tantas veces prometida que la vez que sale, el autor no le ha jugado el boleto” [“This is a celebrated novel in press, so often promised that the author himself isn’t willing to bet on when it will come out”] (Fernández, *Museo* 13; *Museum* 11). Later, in a rare moment of frankness, the author confesses that he feels “intimidado” [“intimidated”] by the idea of actually writing the novel (105; 103). This writing, in deferring its completion, performs its own struggle with ambivalence.

Reading *Adriana* and *Museo* alone could give the impression that these works are manifestations of Fernández’s anxiety over his literary legacy, knowing somehow that these novels would never attain completion in his lifetime, and working and reworking them endlessly in order to ensure that they take a form that was acceptable before his death—or even perhaps to stave off death.⁸ However, a full picture of Fernández’s relationship with literary beginnings can only be obtained by including a reading of his earlier works, most importantly the collection *Papeles de reciénvenido* [*The Newcomer Papers*], first published in 1929 at the insistence of Fernández’s friends and then later republished in an expanded format in 1944. *Papeles*, one of only three book-length works that Fernández published during his lifetime,⁹ is a collection of short pieces that appeared in various literary journals, including avant-garde periodicals like *Proa* and *Martín Fierro* (Garth, *Self* 36). In this early collection of fragments, we see how Fernández has cast himself, from this early point, as a perennial newcomer to the literary scene.

Fernández did not begin as a writer, and perhaps he himself would argue that he never became one. At any rate, he did not begin to publish any work at all until he was 50 years old. Following the sudden death of his wife, Fernández left his children with relatives and abandoned

⁸ This topic is discussed in detail in Chapter 3, “Unfinished Narratives.”

⁹ The other books are a treatise on metaphysics titled *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos* [*Open Eyes Are Not All Wakefulness*] (1928) and a novel *Una novela que comienza* [*A Novel that Begins*] (1941). The former is the only book that Fernández published on his own initiative, while the latter’s publication was insisted upon and arranged by friends (Engelbert 387).

his law practice to live a nomadic life in Buenos Aires rooming houses (Garth, *Self* 13). Though he was active in literary circles, he did not publish any literary works until 1923, and even then he preferred short pieces to books. Contrary to the popular mythology that surrounds him, however, Fernández was not against publishing *per se*, and in fact published 70 articles throughout his career (Vecchio 162). Paradoxically, Fernández is known as a writer who did not want to be published, and yet he did publish, just not book-length works (159). Thus, he did not shy away from publishing as a whole, but rather just from publishing books; something in the authority conferred by a long work did not appeal to him. And yet he spent almost his entire career crafting, revising, and perfecting the two novels *Adriana Buenos Aires* and *El museo de la novela de la Eterna*—works intended to revolutionize the novel form, but which would never see print during his lifetime. The only book-length work he published of his own volition was a philosophical treatise titled *No toda es vigilia la de los ojos abiertos* [*Open Eyes Are Not All Wakefulness*], which appeared in 1928 (Engelbert 387).

During the 1920s, Fernández had close contact with the members of Argentina’s avant-garde Martín Fierro group, whose members included Jorge Luis Borges.¹⁰ A generation older than these avant-garde artists and writers, Fernández found himself adopted by them as a mentor and a father-figure (Garth, *Self* 13). He occupied the paradoxical position of someone who was a representative—in age, if not in aesthetics—of the older generation which the avant-garde wished to repudiate. However, due to the fact that he did not share *modernista* aesthetics, the avant-garde embraced him, although he never allowed himself to become fully one of their own, nor did they allow this to happen. He remained something of an “autor de ultratumba” [“author

¹⁰ Macedonio Fernández was a friend of Borges’s father; they attended law school together (Garth, *Self* 13).

writing from beyond the grave”]¹¹ or “muerto viviente” [“living dead man”] in relation to the young avant-garde (Prieto, *Desencuadernados* 110). In other words, despite the fact that his aesthetics were in line with their own—and, in fact, took vanguardism to an extreme that even the *martinfierristas* did not reach, and was more aligned with the spirit of Europe’s anti-art avant-garde—he was never a full participant in the avant-garde, but rather coexisted with the *martinfierristas* in a “distante cercanía” [“distant closeness”] (25, 47). He remained simultaneously integral to and apart from the avant-garde, neither belonging nor *not* belonging to it (Garth, *Self* 106).

Fernández was, above all, a literary nomad (Vecchio 163). This nomadism has a highly affective aspect, as I understand it to be a result of the highly destabilizing feeling of ambivalence about occupying a firm position in the literary world. Fernández’s literary nomadism can be read as a reluctance to fully commit to anything; ambivalence, as we know, is a state of conflicted feelings about something or someone. This ambivalence is apparent in his conflicted approach to publishing and participating in literary life, existing as both a “source of inspiration for the avant-garde” and differing “considerably from our typical image of the avant-gardist writer: quiet, reserved, thoughtful, alien to oratorical disputes” (Avelar 102). While the Buenos Aires’s *martinfierristas* were experimenting in chiefly poetic form, he concentrated on prose; and while they sought to attain lofty literary heights such as the perfection of pure metaphor (as in *ultraísmo*),¹² Fernández did not attempt to write “well.” Indeed, while the *martinfierristas* followed the Spanish-American *modernistas*’ tradition what Ángel Rama has

¹¹ This description, of course, evokes the Brazilian author Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis and his experimental, highly anti-realist novel, *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas* [*Epitaph of a Small Winner*] (1881) in which a dead man, Brás Cubas, tells the story of his life from beyond the grave.

¹² *Ultraísmo* was an avant-garde movement in Spain that Borges introduced into the Buenos Aires literary scene when he returned from Europe in 1921. This new poetic approach, which strove to strip poetry of excessive adornments and cultivate pure metaphor, quickly developed into a broader avant-garde in Argentina.

called virtuosity, seeking elegance and beauty in their written expression, Fernández's writing appears to be no more than a series of drafts—or at least texts that cultivate the appearance of drafts, in that they seem to be nothing more than trial runs, practices, rehearsals, but never complete performances (Rama, "Prólogo" xvi; Prieto, *Sombrología* 17).

This so-called "bad writing" posed a challenge to the aestheticist avant-garde concept of originality, which was bound up with notions of creative genius inherited from romanticism (Garth, *Self* 70, 86). And it is precisely the construction of the creative self that Fernández seemed to avoid most: his works "eliminate[d] the autonomous individual altogether" to establish a literature that did not present itself as the result of poetic genius but rather as an almost random incident (86). In so doing, he established what has been described as a "literature of absence," where the authorial self retreats into the background and practically ceases to exist (Lindstrom, "Co-Visionaries" 151). This "absence" is, I argue, part of an attempt to flee Williams's "present tense" of art, so enthusiastically inhabited by the avant-garde. In fact, Fernández's work displays evasive tactics designed to avoid direct confrontations with the literary world, stemming from what I interpret as a profound ambivalence about what such confrontations could entail.

One of Fernández's chief evasive tactics concerns the use of alternate temporalities. Much older than the avant-garde artists with whom he interacted, Fernández often joked that he subscribed to a *pasatista* [passé] aesthetic (Gómez de la Serna 158; Prieto, *Desencuadernados* 57). To be *pasatista* meant setting himself apart from the avant-garde writers who were preoccupied with the new and the now. Any interest in the past, as in Borges's pursuit of the old city in the *Fervor de Buenos Aires* poems, had the ultimate aim of shoring up the present and the *vanguardistas'* centrality in it. The adoption of Fernández by Borges and the other young

martinferristas was part of the attempt to carry out this task; “Borges cared not for newcomers, he needed ghosts, and Macedonio Fernández was the ideal candidate” (Garth, *Self* 44). In response to a lack of interest in either the avant-garde’s eternal present or their attempt to relegate him to the past, Fernández employed contradictory temporalities, drawing on this *pasatista* aesthetic while cultivating the literary persona of the “*recienvenido*.” Between past and future, but not quite of the present, Fernández’s is an inattentive temporality that resides only partially in any moment, and is developed in part through the technique of deferral. His literature of absence was carried out, thus, through the continual postponement of what might be thought of in Deleuzian terms as “becoming-author,”¹³ perched precariously in “the interval between a promise and its realization” (Avelar 104). In this space, the author never takes on a complete form, but rather exists in a perpetual state of preliminary drafts and fragments. Indeed, postponement, an “apprenticeship of waiting” consisting of “announcing, delaying, and prefacing failed hopes of a fulfilled teleology,” allowed for the “true nonexistence” of the authorial persona (104).

Although he was the older mentor figure to the avant-garde, Fernández positioned himself not as someone who was established, but rather as someone who resided in a perpetual state of arriving. In his second publication, *Papeles de recienvenido*, he presents himself semi-autobiographically, semi-fictionally, as a newcomer to the literary world. Over fifty years old, he appears here as a young naïf. This is a strategic distancing mechanism that allows Fernández to remain nomadic in relation to established literary institutions (Wells 368). Indeed, just as *modernismo* had become entrenched in the literary canon, the *vanguardias*, despite protests to

¹³ In Deleuzian terms, “becoming” is not to be understood as a transformation from one identity to another, but rather the transformation of an individual into “multiplicities” and as such it is non-representational. (See Sotirin 99-100.) As Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities” (275).

the contrary, sought to vanquish *modernismo* in order to occupy its authoritative cultural position (Prieto, *Desencuadrados* 13). The “*recienvenido*” is an authorial persona that Fernández adopted. Thus, his entry into the literary world was not even direct but rather under the guise of a fictional character; paradoxically, it is a fictional character who writes autobiographically. Thus, we have a combination of fiction and autobiography which calls to mind a question that would preoccupy him for the rest of his writing life: What does it mean when someone writes? What is involved in the process of becoming an author?

The first piece in the collection, “El reciénvenido (fragmento)” [“The Newcomer (Fragment)”], was originally published in the avant-garde journal *Proa* in 1923. The piece begins with a description of some kind of extreme physical incident, which for the moment remains unclear: “¡Fue tan fortísimo el golpe que no hay memoria en la localidad de que en los últimos cuarenta años se haya registrado temperatura tan elevada en la región golpeada!” [“The hit was so extremely hard that there is no memory in the place that such a high temperature has been recorded in the affected region in the past forty years!”] (Fernández, *Papeles* 39). Who or what was hit? Why the reference to the temperature in the “region” hit? No explanation is forthcoming. Immediately following this sentence is a parenthesis, containing a digression that lasts for over two pages, consisting of a series of musings on the elders “del país” [“of the country”]—a country that we assume to be Argentina—and what they can and cannot remember. In this section, the narrator promises to tell us things later on, saying that it is not pertinent right now. He tells us that he is “de un temperamento tan instructivo” [“of such an instructive temperament”] that he needs to give us information; and yet his writing wanders to a point that the information provided is nearly incomprehensible (40). The digression ends with a self-

reflexive comment on his own communicative practice: “Voy a cerrar aquí el paréntesis; es fácil volver a abrirlo” [“Here I will close my parenthesis; it’s easy to open it again”] (41).

The closure of the parenthetical section is followed by a jarring statement: “Un instante, querido lector: por ahora no escribo nada” [“One second, dear reader: I am not writing anything for now”] (41). The Spanish is ambiguous here, as the present tense “no escribo nada” can be understood as “I am not writing anything” (an activity that is not taking place) and also as “I will not write anything” (an activity that I plan not to do). Whatever the case, the narrator seems to be telling the reader that he is not actually writing at this moment, and what we have before us is thus not the “real” writing that he plans to undertake. He continues that he is remaining silent because he is meditating on a telegram that he is reading in *La Prensa*, which is informing him that the explosion—presumably the source of the hard hit and high temperature referred to earlier—did not destroy “la ciudad próspera y antigua de Muchagente—Vielemenschen—” [“the prosperous and ancient city of Manypeople—Vielemenschen—”] (41). Here, he presents us with a highly absurd account of how this city, which he calls the German word for “many people,” was not only not destroyed by the explosion, but is actually better off in the wake of the blast; indeed those who died in the explosion once again have somewhere to live, and there are even two new houses (41). The narrator speculates that the two new houses must be for himself and the telegram-writer, respectively (41). We are witnessing the creation of a world that exists only in relation to the two people who have written or read about it: the narrator, who is the reader of the telegram in *La Prensa*, and the writer of the telegram. The narrator writes that he is not writing, writes that he is remaining silent while he reads; refusing to allow us to take the position of readers in relation to him. Instead, he claims the position of reader in relation to the telegram, and we are left to follow his understanding of events.

Suddenly, we are informed that the narrator has not been writing all this time: “Mas recuerdo que he suspendido el escribir hace ya mucho rato” [“But I recall that I suspended my writing quite a while ago”]; the narrator now decides to take up where he left off, promising readers that, if we have paid attention, we will learn what happened with “aquel golpe” [“that hit”] mentioned at the beginning of the text (42). There has been no demarcation between writing and not writing; it has all looked like writing to the reader. And yet we only are informed about these invisible divisions, these moments when the narrator has stopped writing and when he has resumed writing, after the fact. These extradiegetic remarks force the readers to absent themselves from the “present” of reading the text and to go back to search for signs that writing had stopped at some point; of course, no sign is there, as the text has continued. The effect of this tactic is to evade the forward march of the narrative and to trip up any possibility of linear development, a strategy that is in keeping with Fernández’s deliberately unstable status as an author in the perpetual process of becoming.

We are yanked abruptly from the distant world event, described earlier, to the immediacy of the narrator’s own body. He reminds us: “Recordará el lector que al empezar este libro me di un golpe” [“The reader will recall that, when beginning this book, I hit myself”], and informs us that “tomé la pluma para detallar” [“I took up the pen to detail”] the effects of having hit himself (42). Now it appears that the original “golpe” was not a distant explosion at all but an accident suffered by the narrator. The physical strike comes at the moment of beginning the book, and is quickly diverted to a reference to a different time and place, the “región golpeada” going from the physical person of the writer to a remote geographical location.¹⁴ Closing the piece, however,

¹⁴ In the 1953 story “El sur” Borges uses a similar device to take the narrator to a remote geographical location. The effect is one of displacement and distancing, closing the reader off from any illusion of immediacy of “experience.”

the narrator “returns” us to his current physical location, Buenos Aires, an act which he encloses in parentheses:

(Escrito en una aldea donde la reciénvenidez, de sólo una vez, no se le saca uno nunca. En Buenos Aires, que estima inverosímil haber vivido hasta los treinta o cuarenta sin conocerla, por lo que hay que sacarse pronto la reciénvenidez tardía, todo el primera vez llegado, que conoce en los semblantes el mal gusto del no haber nacido en ella, se apresura a dar una instruídísima conferencia sobre ‘La Argentina y los argentinos’ tres días después de desembarcado. Esto da resultado; se comprende que conferencia tan pronta y con tal tema no es la colosal fatuidad y entrometimiento ignorante que suele sospecharse, sino la ansiedad por quitarse cuanto antes la pátina de reciénvenidez. Ser ‘reciénvenido’ en Buenos Aires ni por un momento se perdona; es como insolencia.) (43-44)

(Written in a village where one can never rid himself of his newcomerness once and for all. In Buenos Aires, which thinks it unbelievable to live to be twenty or thirty without experiencing it, for which reason one has to quickly rid himself of late newcomerness as soon as he arrives, and which can read in one’s face the bad taste of not having been born there, and rushes to give an extremely erudite presentation on ‘Argentina and the Argentines’ three days after one’s arrival. This works; it is understood that a presentation so quick and on such a topic is not the colossal fatuousness and ignorant imposition that tends to be suspected, but rather comes from an anxiousness to get rid of the patina of newcomerness as quickly as possible. To be a ‘newcomer’ in Buenos Aires is not forgiven even for a moment; it is like insolence.) (43-44)

Fernández, having been born in Buenos Aires and lived there all his life, takes on the persona of an individual who is not only a newcomer to the literary scene, but also to the city; the two are fused. In this final parenthetical paragraph of the text, this “illogical and absurd” story begins to make its meaning clearer (Kane 49). The newcomer persona allows Fernández to approach the Buenos Aires literary world as an outsider and comment on it from that vantage point, reveling in the ability to explore this “insolence.” This and subsequent instances of Fernández’s cultivation of the newcomer position show how he distances himself from the milieu in which he is working and with which he has a troubled relationship. Neither inside nor outside this literary

world, Fernández's *recienvenido* is poised on the precipice, and from that perspective, is able to avoid committing to full "insider" or "outsider" status.

Another piece, "El 'capítulo siguiente' de la autobiografía del Recienvenido" ["The 'Next Chapter' in the Newcomer's Autobiography"], appeared in *Proa* in 1924. The subtitle says that the text is by an "autor ignorado y que no se sabe si escribe bien" ["author who is unknown and it is not known if he writes well"] (Fernández, *Papeles* 57). This highly absurd text is narrated by a person calling himself the Editor, who speaks about the author in the third person, describing his obscurity: "Como desconocido es el más completo que haya sido encontrado con vida en la historia" ["He is the most complete example in history of an unknown that has been found alive"] (57). Unlike the previous piece, in which the narrator spoke in the first person about himself, here the narrator-editor speaks in the first person but separates himself from the person he calls the author, who, he informs us, has written an autobiography (58). Confusing the roles of editor and author, the narrator proceeds to give us details about the life of this author, almost providing the aforementioned autobiography for us, but in the form of a biography. The narrator clarifies that "[n]uestro autor es verdaderamente incógnito" ["our author is truly unknown"] and that "[l]a lectura de sus obras no nos procura base para juzgar sus talentos de escritor" ["we cannot judge his talent as a writer based on reading his works"] (58). Here, the separation between writer, narrator, and written product is stretched to the limit of ridiculousness, made even more so by the presence of this so-called editor who provides us with elements of the author's autobiography. He calls the author variously a "famoso desconocido" ["famous unknown man"] and "nuestro íntimo desconocido" ["our unknown intimate"], constructing a paradoxical image of the author and calling into question the notion of authorial personality (59, 60).

The editor signs off, and before the author begins to speak, there is a brief paragraph in which it is not clear who is speaking. Then the author character himself takes up the narrative reins, stating, “Heme aquí, por fin” [“Here I am, finally”], as if he has arrived late on the scene (62). His reputation—or lack thereof—precedes him both literally and figuratively. Even while proclaiming his presence, however, he effaces it, as he informs us, “Soy sólo el autor de un manuscrito encontrado” [“I am only the author of a found manuscript”], continuing the connection between anonymity and authorship (62). Self-deprecating to the point of nearly erasing himself from the scene, all that he can say about his own work is that “se dijo de mi libro que nunca había sido escrito antes” [“about my book, they said that it had never been written before”] and “tampoco nunca fue leído después” [“it was not read afterward either”] (65). What we note here, above all, is the insistence in talking endlessly about literary work, but that literary work itself is absent; though often referred to, described, critiqued, it never actually appears. Just as the author character presents himself as the writer of a book with no writer, this supposed book does not seem to even exist. And perhaps it does not need to exist: the voices of the editor and author character are emptying the literary institution of its content—the book—while keeping its shell of names, titles, reader reactions, and critiques.

Another piece in the “Recienvenido” series, “Sobreviene dicho capítulo” [“Suddenly The Aforementioned Chapter Appears”], appeared in *Proa* in 1925 with the subtitle “Aniversario de recienvenido” [“Newcomer’s Anniversary”], pointing to the passage of time during which the Newcomer still retains that status. Here, we begin to see a more conventional autobiographical discourse forming, as the narrator tells us “Nací el 1º de octubre de 1875” [“I was born on October 1, 1875”] (70).¹⁵ Just as we are learning what appear to be facts about this character, we

¹⁵ This is not Macedonio Fernández’s birthday; he was born on June 1, 1874.

are stopped short: “No lea tan ligero, mi lector, que no alcanzo con mi escritura adonde está usted leyendo. Va a suceder si seguimos así que nos van a multar la velocidad” [“Do not be so swift, dear reader, my writing cannot catch up to where you are reading. We are going to get a ticket for speeding”] (70). No narrative can flow; there is always something tripping it up—it is the narrator himself, and he is doing it deliberately. As he affirms, showing his power over the narrative’s progress, “[p]or ahora no escribo nada; acostúmbrese. Cuando recomience, se notará. Tengo aquí que ordenar estrictamente mi narrativa, porque si pongo el tranvía delante de mí, no sucederá lo que sucedió” [“I am not writing anything for now; get used to it. When I start up again, you will be able to tell”] (70). He can put an end to what we are reading at any moment, and often does, just to show his ability. Some time later, he informs us, “Ahora continúo. [...] ¿Nota usted que continúo?” [“Now I am continuing. [...] Do you notice that I am continuing?”] (70-71).

This metafictional literary performance, this practice of writing while making a show of that writing, seems to be purposely directed at no aim other than itself. The reader is continually reminded of his or her distance from the narrator and the narrative. And the narrator, in turn, distances himself from the narrative he himself is creating. By calling the reader’s attention back to the ongoing writing process, the narrator breaks any spell that the narrative could have cast over his reader’s attention; thus he creates a distracted reader whose attention jumps continually from the writing process to the written product and back again. This kind of literary beginning trips the reader up, causing him or her to “resbalar al cruzar el umbral” [“slip while crossing the threshold”] of the text (Vecchio 147). He refuses to let the reader be fully drawn into the narrative by constantly jerking his or her attention back to the start, back to the moment where the pen hits the paper. Because of his ambivalence about beginnings, the newcomer refuses to be

turned into a longtime resident; because he wants to remain forever at the entrance to the literary world, he will not allow his narrative, or his reader, to progress in time and coalesce into something solid and thus established.

As we have seen, whereas Fernández's contemporaries and sometime-collaborators in the *Martín Fierro* group follow much of the avant-garde in a vehement proclamation of their ability to make the world appear new again, Fernández himself avoids such an involvement in the creation of new beginnings. In stark contrast to the self-assured affirmations of many of the writers with whom he was surrounded, many of Fernández's writings, such as those examined above, evince a profound ambivalence about the literary project and the idea of definitively becoming an author. Beginning something means to create something that will then have a life of its own, for which the creator will have to take responsibility. As we have seen in his repeated attempts to stall the reader at the beginning of his texts, Fernández is interested in exploring not the certainties of the avant-garde but rather the darker, more confusing and less assured underside of what it means to create something new. This ambivalence is equally evident in his *recienvenido* persona: much older and more experienced than his avant-garde contemporaries, Fernández casts himself not as an embodiment of history (although they often tried to mold him into such a figure) but rather as someone with no history, who has just arrived and never becomes established.¹⁶ Straining against the pull of time, Fernández refuses to be cemented into a place in the literary world, preferring to linger in the entryway of the "lettered city," in his prologues, preliminary notes, and nearly-endless digressions. This skittishness becomes almost a paralysis, as the writer hesitates about making a definitive *début*, mired in ambivalence about

¹⁶ The *martinfierristas* wanted to take Fernández, this older, fiercely original person in their midst, and make him into a sort of founding father or mythological father for their movement. His insistence on wanting to be a *recienvenido* has been interpreted as his attempt to evade the avant-garde's attempt to make him into a sort of living historical figure (Garth, *Self* 43).

writing words that cannot be taken back or disavowed later. This refusal to fully commit to the creation of something new sets Fernández apart from his avant-garde peers, allowing him the distance to absorb the bravado of the avant-garde and turn it inside out, demonstrating the indeterminacy that it contains but that avant-garde writers did not explicitly explore.

False Starts in Felisberto Hernández

Unlike Fernández, Felisberto Hernández did not have intimate contact with avant-garde movements, not even in order to distance himself from them as the Argentine did. The Uruguayan was, however, deeply influenced by the experimental trends taking place in the River Plate region and in other countries, although he was never more than a distant spectator of the action taking place in centers such as Buenos Aires. Hernández tends to be classified as a post-*vanguardia* writer, even though he was active in the creation of literature throughout the 1920s, when the *vanguardias* were at their peak of prominence. An informally-trained pianist, in 1917 he began to work as a piano accompanist in silent film cinemas. He was chiefly a traveling pianist who made a meager living by giving concerts in cafés and small theaters in the small towns of the Uruguayan and Argentine interior. He did begin to experiment with writing in the 1920s, although he did not begin to devote himself to this activity on a full-time basis until the early 1940s, especially after the publication of his novella *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling* [*Around the Time of Clemente Colling*] in 1942. *Clemente Colling* would represent a new phase in Hernández's activity, in which he moved from the small literary experiments and brief narrative games that characterized his early published fragments, such as those found in the modest collections *Fulano de Tal* [*Whatshisname*] (1925, 1929), *Libro sin tapas* [*Book Without*

Covers] (1929), *La cara de Ana* [*Ana's Face*] (1930) and *La envenenada* [*The Poisoned Woman*] (1931).

While *Fulano de Tal* was first published in the capital of Montevideo, its reprint and his next two works were published in the sparsely-populated rural capitals of Rocha, Mercedes, and Florida, while he was passing through those towns on piano tours.¹⁷ Far from the avant-garde activities of the metropolis of Buenos Aires in nearby Argentina, and even the less-frenetic but still reasonably active scene in the Uruguayan capital, Hernández spent the 1920s experimenting with literature but isolated from defined literary movements. By the time he began to devote himself to writing on a more full-time basis, these movements had dissipated, although their influence remained strong in literary circles. He did, however, publish a few select pieces in Uruguayan and Argentine avant-garde journals: for example, his early text “Genealogía” [“Genealogy”] appeared in *La Cruz del Sur* in 1926 before being published as part of *Libro sin tapas* in 1929, and later in his career, “Las dos historias” [“The Two Stories”] (1943) and “Menos Julia” [“Except Julia”] (1946) appeared in the Buenos Aires literary journal *Sur*. While an heir to the *Martín Fierro* avant-garde group (not least due to its contributors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Oliverio Girondo, Leopoldo Marechal and other members of the avant-garde), *Sur* appeared in 1931, arriving on the scene at the tail end of the avant-garde effervescence and in a radically transformed political context, and thus its aesthetic aims are less extreme and more sober than those of *martinfierrismo* (Pasternac 133). Hernández had a more robust relationship with minor periodicals such as *La palabra*, based in the tiny town of Rocha with an equally small circulation, where he published a dozen pieces in 1929 (Rocca, “El campo” 25).

¹⁷ This information comes from the official website of the Fundación Felisberto Hernández: www.felisberto.org.uy.

While not belonging to any avant-garde movement and even offering an oblique critique of the avant-garde's obsession with metaphor, Hernández's work does employ many of the techniques found in vanguardist literature (Prieto, *Desencuadrados* 269, 275). Some examples include collage—incongruous juxtaposition—which is found in works such as “La cara de Ana,” which demonstrate that Hernández's relationship with the avant-garde was a “conflicted” encounter that involved both “osmosis” and “discord” according to Prieto (264, 269). One particularly interesting example is the similarity of the title of Hernández's “Cosas para leer en el tranvía” [“Things to Read on the Trolley”] (published in *Fulano de Tal*, 1925) to prominent avant-garde Argentine poet Oliverio Girondo's celebrated 1922 collection *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía* [*Twenty Poems to be Read on the Trolley*] (269). When the texts are compared, it becomes clear that Hernández is making a statement about the vision expressed by Girondo, one that is obliquely critical, and has even been called “una negación y una burla” [“a negation and a mockery”] of the earlier collection (Scholz 113). For Girondo, the trolley is a space in which the poet can witness brief vignettes of the city as they pass through his view. The lyric voice expresses a “voyeuristic perspective” which gazes upon “the often sordid scenes viewed from the streetcar” (Willis 22). He remains removed from the outside world, but he is fully engaged in observing it and commenting on it. Hernández, by contrast, offers not poems but *cosas* [things] to read on the trolley, consisting of silly philosophical reflections and theories and barely referring at all to the outside world through which the trolley is moving. In Hernández, the trolley journey is an internal one, and one with no profound answers awaiting at the destination. Even in this early work, we can detect a critique of the avant-garde's confidence in the artist's ability to perceive the world in a special way, as he denies the trolley passenger the chance to be a privileged spectator, rather assigning him or her seemingly-trivial thought experiments.

Much of Hernández's work is also characterized by profound ambivalence about what it means to be an artist, and what—if anything—it means to have artistic vision. Creative expression and the process of writing are especially troubled endeavors in his texts. And like Fernández, Hernández has several texts that do not seem to want to begin, and as such can also be read as a reaction to, and even critique of, the avant-garde's obsession with new beginnings. Far from representing a creative subject who boldly forges new paths, his works often depict individuals who struggle with the task of expressing themselves in writing, due most often to forgetfulness or a lack of ability to concentrate. In this kind of distracted and seemingly unproductive writing subject, I detect an underlying ambivalence about the writing endeavor as a whole, to which inattentiveness is both a reaction and coping mechanism. Significantly, the struggling writing subject often has the most trouble at the beginning; the moment of sitting down, facing a blank page, and producing writing is the moment at which the subject loses focus and the narrative strays from the writing task to other concerns. Affect, in the form of ambivalence, almost overwhelms the writer and the only way that he or she seems to be able to cope with this ambivalence is through a displacement of attention; thus, the subject is changed, and the narrative interrupted.

Los libros sin tapas [*The Books Without Covers*] is the 2010 republication of Hernández's earliest writings from 1925-1934, edited and with a critical introduction by the Argentine critic Jorge Monteleone. Notably, to open this collection that purports to be an archive of literary beginnings, Monteleone titles his introduction "Felisberto Hernández: Dilación de un comienzo" ["Felisberto Hernández: Delay of a Beginning"], hinting that the "beginning" that these texts represent is not as clear-cut as we might expect. To begin his first section, "¿Qué es un comienzo?" ["What is a Beginning?"], he affirms: "Hay dos momentos que teme el obsesivo,

que disocia y posterga: el comienzo y el fin” [“There are two moments that the obsessive individual fears, and that he or she dissociates from and postpones: the beginning and the end”]

(7). He continues:

El primero porque sabe que una vez que algo se inicia comenzará también su gozosa, intolerable tortura: lo que haga será una nueva obsesión y, una vez realizado, un seguro fracaso. El fin, porque acabar con todo es un infinito anticipo de un desgarramiento: la separación y la muerte, garantes de la incompletitud. Por ello el modo mejor de comenzar y de finalizar es vaciar esos actos de su propio contenido, de sus contundentes marcas de principio y fin. Los preliminares, las dilaciones, los disimulos suplantarán los comienzos, o serán como una irrupción, algo que ocurre de pronto pero podría no haber ocurrido, o carece de importancia, o puede interrumpirse, o comenzar de nuevo, una y otra vez. (7)

The former because he knows that, once something begins, so does its pleasurable, intolerable torture: whatever is done will be a new obsession and, once completed, a certain failure. The latter because finishing everything is an infinite anticipation of something being ripped away: separation and death, guarantors of incompleteness. That is why the best way to begin and end is to empty these acts of their own content, of their blunt marks of beginning and ending. Preliminaries, delays, dissimulations will replace beginnings, or will be like a burst, something that happens suddenly but that could just as well not have happened, or that has no importance, or that can be interrupted, or start over, again and again. (7)

Emptying of their content the acts of beginning and ending—this is an apt description of what I detect in the works of Hernández. And Monteleone finds that troubled beginnings specifically are a leitmotif that reappears continually throughout Hernández’s writings, both published and unpublished. Citing a letter from the novelist Juan Carlos Onetti to the art historian and critic Julio Peyró, which begins in what Monteleone calls a “Felisbertan” way, commenting on the difficulty of beginning to write a letter and extending it to the difficulty of sitting down to write literature, Monteleone contends that Hernández’s way of starting his texts is actually representative of the culture of the River Plate region as a whole (9). After all, he continues, these writers do come from “ciudades de la demora y de la espera emplazadas sobre un río inmóvil: Buenos Aires fue fundada dos veces y la ciudadela que protegería Montevideo tardaría

cuarenta años en construirse” [“cities of delays and waiting, located on an immobile river: Buenos Aires was founded two times and the citadel intended to protect Montevideo took forty years to be built”] (9-10). As we have seen, however, Hernández’s writing is actually markedly different, from the *ethos* of the avant-garde in the River Plate region, which rushed to create new beginnings, wishing to speed up the meandering pace that had characterized the region’s history. Whereas the avant-garde wants to be present in the moment of creation and active in propelling art forward at a frantic pace, Hernández’s writings prefer to linger, extending their beginnings as long as possible and never seeming to expect them to reach any clear conclusion.

The intention of the collection which Monteleone has edited for publication is precisely to present Hernández from the perspective of his beginnings, and to encourage readers to ask the question, “¿Y si leemos a Felisberto Hernández en sus comienzos, pero como si todavía no hubiese escrito toda su obra? ¿Y si leemos *qué es un comienzo* para Felisberto?” [“What if we read Felisberto Hernández at his beginnings, but as if he still hadn’t written his complete works? And what if we read *what a beginning is* for Felisberto?”] (10). What Monteleone is calling for is the temporary suspension of what we know about the author, for us to look at his work as if it were still a beginning still without a definite end: “Sostener la ilusión de no saber, no aludir, no recordar toda la obra de Felisberto: leer sólo su comienzo, como comenzó, qué hay en el modo de comenzar” [“To sustain the illusion of not knowing, not alluding to or remembering Felisberto’s complete works: to read only his beginning, how it began, and what we can find in this way of beginning”] (10). Monteleone finds in this early writing an *ethos* of the “libro sin tapas” or book without covers, which Hernández explains in the eponymous piece as follows: “Este libro es sin tapas porque es abierto y libre: se puede escribir antes y después de él” [“This book is without covers because it is open and free: one can write before and after it”]

(Hernández, “Libro” 45). For Monteleone, this open-endedness characterizes all of Hernández’s writings, and he believes that readers should adopt the same open-endedness when approaching the writer’s work.

This writing is open-ended, but it is also—and perhaps more notably—open at the beginning. It is writing that denies it is beginning, that appears on the page while disavowing its creator’s ability to produce it. As Monteleone points out, Hernández’s work often explores the impossibility of beginning to write; as we will see, his writing often depicts an individual who is struggling to write something. What results is a writing that depicts the failure of writing, consisting of nothing but false starts, restarts, and almost endless digressions. My claim is that this resistance to beginning confirms a profound ambivalence about the literary endeavor as a whole.

Two texts in particular, “Prólogo de un libro que nunca pude empezar” [“Prologue to a Book that I Could Never Begin”] (1925) and “Las dos historias” [“The Two Stories”] (1943), represent some of the most compelling examples of this ambivalence towards beginnings, each chronicling a failed attempt to write a story. Both texts begin and end in the same spot, stuck in a seemingly proto-creative state. The former is a text whose title denies its own existence: it is a prologue to a book that the author “could never begin” and thus as a beginning it exists only *sous rature* or under erasure.¹⁸ First, it calls itself a prologue, which assumes that there is something that comes after; and second, it clarifies that it was written for a book that does not exist. Since prologues function as the opening to a text, if the text is absent then the prologue is left hanging,

¹⁸ I use this term to mean a statement that affirms and denies itself at the same time. A technique developed by Heidegger, writing under erasure means “to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, cross it out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)” (Spivak xiv). This device was adopted by Jacques Derrida to mark the void that really exists at the origin of language, the absence that is denied by the “metaphysics of presence” he critiques. See Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

a door that opens to reveal nothing behind it. This on its own is interesting, but Hernández's title pushes the suspension further: he does not say that it is the prologue to a book that was never finished, or a book that never made it to press; rather, he clarifies that it is the prologue (or a prologue—the title does not make this clear) to a book that he was never *able* to start writing. A prologue represents the start, and thus the text is a double failure: it is the prologue to nothing (nothing comes after it), and it constitutes an unfinished beginning (it is the beginning of something that could not be begun). By contrast, the title of “Las dos historias” at least admits that a story has been created—two of them, in fact—and thus we might expect there to be a progression between the earlier “Prólogo” and the later “Las dos historias,” perhaps some kind of growth in the ability to create texts. However, as we shall see, such a narrative of evolution or improvement is not to be found in these examples of Hernández's *oeuvre*.

“Prólogo de un libro que nunca pude empezar” appeared as part of Hernández's 46-page leaflet *Fulano de Tal* [*Whatshisname*] which was published in 1925.¹⁹ It is included as the last piece in the collection, after the texts “Fulano de Tal” [“Whatshisname”], “Cosas para leer en el tranvía” [“Things to Read on the Trolley”] and “Diario” [“Diary”]. It is by far the shortest piece in the book, taking up a single paragraph and consisting of a mere four sentences. Its placement is also ironic, as prologues conventionally come at the beginning of books, and this one is the last piece in the collection. At the same time, however, the fact that this so-called prologue is at the end does not matter to the narrator since, as he affirms, it does not really exist as a prologue, and the book it was intended to introduce not only never came to fruition—it was never even begun. It is a partially-executed introduction to a nonexistent book.

¹⁹ Hernández's friend in Montevideo, José Rodríguez Riet, undertook the printing of the text.

The body of this one-paragraph text is flanked by a secondary title, “PRÓLOGO” [“PROLOGUE”], which appears at the beginning, and “FIN” [“END”] which closes the text, both of which are written in capital letters (“Prólogo” 44). Again, there is some irony here, as the text presents itself as an unfinished beginning to an un-begun book, and thus is understood to be a fragment. The fact that it is so securely framed by “PRÓLOGO” and “FIN” prompts us to question its professed non-existence—if it is such a failure of a prologue, then why it is even being published? As we will see, this text that claims the status of disposable fragment—a failed prologue to a nonexistent book—is actually a full piece on its own, which presents a complex meditation on the notion of literary beginnings.

“Prólogo,” narrated by an individual who wishes to say something through writing, begins rather bluntly with a plain statement of purpose: “Pienso decir algo de alguien” [“I plan to say something about someone”] (44). This purposeful, almost curt proclamation is quickly undercut by the following sentence, in which we observe the narrator going from resolute to conflicted, almost shying away from what he was planning to say. Instead of saying something about someone, he begins to tell us about the problems that will arise if he tries to carry out this writing mission. It will, as he affirms, be a painful process: “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” [“I know from the start that all this will be like giving myself two injections with different kinds of pain: the pain of not having been able to say as much as I planned, and the pain of having been able to say part of what I planned”] (44). Before he can move from the planning stage to the writing stage, the narrator is sabotaging the effort with a prediction of how poor the final results will be. What is notable here is that the narrator has moved from planning for a future undertaking, to mentally jumping ahead past that

future, and evaluating what has been achieved. Moving the future to the past, he reaches his conclusion in the future anterior: if he writes, it *will have* caused him pain. Indeed, in the space of two sentences, the hypothetical writing process has been described first as a determined future plan and then as a failed project with negative emotional effects. Before his writing has even begun, the narrator is “reading” his own potential finished product.

This self-reading narrator anticipates that the act of writing will be akin to two drug injections that will have two specifically negative affective impacts—they will both be painful. These two instances of pain will result from two facts: on one hand, the fact of not having been able to say as much as he wanted; and on the other hand, the fact of having been able to say something of what he wanted. Thus, one instance of pain comes from the lack of ability to say everything, while the other originates in the successful communication of at least a part of what he wants to say. These are two different perspectives on the same thing—the fact of having said something partially—in which one perspective sees it as a failure to say everything and the other perspective sees it as the fact of having been able to say something. And yet both perspectives cause pain—the pain of recognition of the fact that writing cannot communicate the entirety of the “something” that the narrator wants to express about “someone.”

The third sentence moves from the hypothetical to a more concrete level, finally revealing who this “someone” is: a woman the narrator loves. He affirms that it is admirable to undertake a project that one knows will not be successful: “Pero el que se propone decir algo que sabe que no podrá decir, es noble, y el que se propone decir cómo es María Isabel hasta dar la medida de la inteligencia, sabe que no podrá decir no [*sic*]²⁰ más que un poco de cómo es ella” [“But he who plans to say something that he knows he will not be able to say is noble, and he

²⁰ This is a printing error that appears only in the version found in *Los libros sin tapas*, and does not represent a choice made by Hernández.

who plans to say what María Isabel is like, to the full measure of his intelligence, knows that he will not be able to say more than a little bit about what she is like”] (44). This sentence is composed of two similar clauses, a double structure that echoes the two types of pain he alluded to earlier. Both clauses begin with “he who plans to say” and then go into different, although somewhat parallel directions. The first clause remains vague, speaking of a generalized “something” that the would-be writer wishes to express; the second takes us to an extremely intimate, autobiographical plane, with a reference to María Isabel, the name of the woman who became Hernández’s first wife in 1925. Yet in both cases, the vaguely general and the extremely specific, Hernández keeps the identity of the writing subject anonymous.

In the final sentence, the narrator switches abruptly to the past tense and then moves to the present tense; he also inserts himself once again squarely into the text. He concludes: “Yo emprendí esta tarea sin esperanza, por ser María Isabel lo que desproporcionadamente admiro sobre todas las casualidades maravillosas de la naturaleza” [“I undertook this task without hope, as María Isabel is what I admire disproportionately above all marvelous coincidences of nature”] (44). The discourse is once again highly personal and individualized, referring to the real woman María Isabel, to whom the entire *Fulano de Tal* collection is dedicated. Revealing the true motivation for wanting to write—to say something about someone he loves—the narrator both can and cannot reach his goal. He has said “something about someone” but it is more about himself than the purported subject of his writing. Despite himself, the narrator-author has succeeded in writing something, though not a novel. What he has done is trace the connection between the desire to write (“I plan to say something”) and the source of that desire (María Isabel), exploring the feelings that will arise from acting on this desire to write. The result is a microfiction version of the book that was never written or even begun.

In “Prólogo,” then, the anticipation of the pain that will be felt during writing is so detailed and vivid that it almost makes us forget that it is merely hypothetical. The writing subject is pointedly not writing, because he wishes to avoid such pain. Yet, he must document this refusal to write; he must make clear that the desire to write existed and he must name the inspiration for this writing. The pain is avoided, then, not by *not* writing, but rather by writing *about* not writing. The pain that results from the ambivalent situation of both knowing he cannot say everything, and also knowing he has said something, is perhaps so destabilizing that the only reaction is to “write” it away. Writing here becomes almost an act of exorcism or a strategy of self-protection—when writing about not writing, the author can both sense hints of the pain he would feel if he were to commit fully, and keep that pain’s full impact at bay. Thus, the book that could never be begun remains, as in the case of Fernández, a deferred and endless possibility, a promise that never has to be kept.

Hernández’s later text, “Las dos historias” [“The Two Stories”] was first published in the Argentine literary journal *Sur* in 1943, and was later included in the collection *Nadie encendía las lámparas* [*No One Had Lit the Lamps*] in 1947. Though appearing almost twenty years after “Prólogo,” it contains many of the same elements as that early work, which could almost be read as a kernel of the later story, as “Prólogo” is one paragraph long and “Las dos historias” occupies several pages. Composed of fragments that are never quite able to be made into the shape of a story (or two, for that matter), the narrator of “Las dos historias” affirms this impossibility, and thus the story is also somehow constituted by that failure to become complete. The text opens as follows:

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. 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. 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. (“Las dos historias” 207)

On the 16th of June, and when it was nighttime, a young man sat down at a small table where there were some writing materials. He was intending to capture a story and confine it to a notebook. For days he had been thinking about the thrill of the moment in which he would write. He had promised himself to write the story very slowly, putting the best resources of his spirit into it. That day he was going to begin: he worked in a toy shop; he had been gazing at a slate board that had red and blue beads strung across one side of it on wires, when he realized that he would begin writing the story that afternoon. (“The Two Stories” 161; translation modified)

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: an employee in a toy shop, the young man had been at work when, gazing into space, suddenly “se le ocurrió que esa tarde empezaría a escribir la historia” [“he realized that he would begin writing the story that afternoon”]; his daydreaming angered his manager, who called him to attention (207; 161). 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” [“He also remembered that on another afternoon when he had been pondering a detail of the story, the manager of the shop had called him to account for working distractedly”] (207; 161, translation modified). 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: “Cuando estuvo en su pieza le pareció que si la acomodaba un poco antes de sentarse a escribir estaría más tranquilo [...] Después de sentarse, aun se tuvo que levantar para buscar una libretita donde tenía apuntada la fecha en que empezó la historia” [“In his room, it seemed to him that tidying up a bit before he sat down to write might help him relax [...] After sitting down, he still had to get up once more to fetch a notebook in which he had written the date when the story began”] (207; 162, translation modified). The writing subject simply cannot get started. And yet this failure to begin is being communicated to us by the narrator; this deferral of beginnings *is* the story—at least in part. “Las dos historias” is, then, not so much a story as an account of attempts that “refuse to become stories” (Pollmann 358). This writing both affirms and negates its possibilities of coming into being, finally emerging almost despite itself. In these fraught beginnings, we can observe an expression of an underlying ambivalence about the very act of writing.

What is the meaning of this ambivalence? The stakes do not appear to be so high as to merit such a lack of ability to make a decisive move. And yet it is the affective environment of these low stakes, the lingering haze of grey that communicates a vague unease, that makes the

writing subject unable to fully engage in his or her endeavor. Who can claim the mantle of writer, and yoke language for his or her purposes, speaking to people and speaking on behalf of people? This artistic subject recoils from such a prospect, withdrawing into the self. What we get, then, are texts whose status is undetermined: a prologue that remains no more than a fragment to be included almost as an afterthought in a collection of pieces; two ostensible stories, one within the other, neither of which manage to establish themselves due to continual, almost obsessive jumps back and forth in time, avoiding the very moment of literary creation. Such texts can be read as statements that the artist is not in control of the process of creation, and in fact is wracked with doubt and uncertainty about the endeavor, forever finding ways and reasons to avoid “being there” mentally or physically for the story’s anticipated, but never realized, progress from beginning to actual narrative.

As we have seen, while Macedonio Fernández was actively engaged in the avant-garde activities in Buenos Aires, he set himself apart from the *Martín Fierro* group by producing texts in which writing subjects struggle to say that they want to say, and cannot commit to what they write, always professing ignorance or forgetfulness about their own literary endeavors, often taking the form of the *recienvenido* persona, the newcomer who is stranded in a new literary space with no history and no references. Felisberto Hernández, by contrast, was relatively isolated in time and space from major avant-garde activity, and has in fact been referred to as a “vanguardia de un hombre solo” or one-man avant-garde (Martínez Moreno 138). Whereas Fernández’s self-isolation seems to come from a too-intimate knowledge of the avant-garde, Hernández’s isolation is simply a product of his time and place. And yet Hernández’s work shows a keen awareness of the dominant ideas of the Latin American avant-gardes, and reacts to them, especially in terms of ideas about creativity and authorship. While the avant-garde

represents the artist as a privileged individual who can perceive things that others cannot, Hernández presents us with individuals who engage in artistic endeavors and yet who are so detached from the here and now that they can barely manage to live in the world. And when it comes to producing art, such as writing, they are unable to tap into inspiration and find themselves sitting in front of a blank page, wondering what they were going to write about. Rather than exalting the artist, Fernández and Hernández seem more interested in exploring the possibilities of artistic failure, notably when it comes to beginnings. Where the avant-garde artist steps boldly and purposefully into the future, blazing the trail of a new artistic beginning, Fernández's and Hernández's artists linger in the doorway, unsure of how to begin, and ambivalent about whether they even wish to begin at all. As we will now see, the artistic subject envisioned in the work of Clarice Lispector is also prone to the same paralysis of ambivalence.

Clarice Lispector and the Endless Possibilities of Beginnings

Just as Fernández delays entry into the literary world through the persona of the *recienvenido*, the narrative voice who is always in the midst of arriving, and Hernández chronicles two instances in which the progression between “planning to say something” and finally “saying something” in writing is so fraught with uncertainty that it cannot seem to begin, beginnings have a special place in the work of Lispector as well. As we shall see, however, beginnings in Lispector are different from Fernández's insistence on returning again and again to a beginning that is represented by a perpetual “newcomer” status; they also diverge from Hernández's writers who are unable to focus their attention long enough to actually write. Instead, the troubled narrative beginnings we see in Lispector have to do with a situation in which the writing subject freezes up in the face of so many options; the act of writing, in

Lispector, is so generative that it can go anywhere, and this near-infinite scope for writing can leave the writer momentarily paralyzed.

Lispector, as part of what has been termed the third wave of Brazilian *modernismo*, is both associated with and differentiated from the avant-garde movements that came before her, especially the formal experimentation that took place during the first wave of *modernismo*. This first wave, the original Brazilian *modernismo*, emerged during the 1922 Modern Art Week exhibition in São Paulo, where the avant-garde stormed Brazilian literary and artistic culture, changing it irrevocably. The first *modernismo* represented such a radical aesthetic shift that, many decades later, reactions to *modernismo* and its aftereffects would be considered not separate movements but simply subsequent iterations of *modernismo*. The *modernismos* are conventionally classified into three groups: the first *modernismo* of Oswald and Mário de Andrade (lasting between about 1922 and 1930) was concerned with finding an authentically Brazilian form of cultural expression. Fiercely nationalistic, the first *modernistas* proclaimed that Brazilian culture should be understood as cannibalistic: ingesting all of the foreign influences that it chose but turning them into something uniquely Brazilian. Declaring Brazilian culture as something totally new and distinctive, the first *modernistas* saw themselves as pioneers in uncharted territory who had the mission of bringing autochthonous culture to the country. The second *modernismo* (1930-1945) departed from this nationalistic focus to center more attentively on regional identities and concerns, also demonstrating a keen interest in the plight of the poor and downtrodden. Lispector, who published her first novel in 1944-45, is grouped with the third wave of *modernismo* (1945 to 1980), which sees a turning away from overt collective concerns to focus inward on individual psychological states and an inquiry into the intricacies of language.

Lispector's classification in a literary "generation" is, however, more of a convenience than a true affinity, as she has, in fact, been considered most often to be a singular artist unlike almost any other figure in Brazilian literary history. This status allows readers and critics the freedom of exploring connections that Lispector has with other traditions and movements. For example, the representation of the figure of creative subject in Lispector's work can be read as a reaction to, and critique of, the vision of the artist that was promoted in the work of the first *modernistas*, the avant-garde of 1922. As we shall see, in Lispector the optimistic frenzy of the first *modernismo* has been transformed into the dull ache of ambivalence, where the creative subject is no longer sure of his or her place in society, and is not even totally convinced of his or her ability (or interest) to carry out the artistic endeavor.

One prime example of this dynamic can be seen in Lispector's posthumously-published novel *Um sopro de vida (pulsações)* [*A Breath of Life (Pulsations)*] (1978), a book about writing and the writer's hesitation. The first-person account of a man, called "The Author," who decides to create a character named Ângela Pralini, who becomes something of an alter-ego for him. The text becomes a series of dialogues between them, which are actually more like monologues, some written by "The Author" and others written by Ângela. As "The Author" states at one point, "[e]u escrevo um livro e Ângela outro" ["I write one book and Ângela writes another"] (Lispector, *Um sopro* 31; *A Breath* 24). However, he retains editorial control, affirming "tirei de ambos o supérfluo" ["I've removed the superfluous from both"] (31; 24).

By writing Ângela, the Author gives her the "breath of life," and yet we also learn that she is dying.²¹ Indeed, *Um sopro* can clearly be read as a meditation on the relationship between

²¹ Lispector was dying of cancer while she was writing this, her last novel, which she would not live to see published. The autobiographical component of the novel is undeniable and of vital importance, and although it is not the specific focus of the present essay, the related question of whether Lispector evidences unease in this text

writing and death—writing against death, but also writing as a kind of death. It has been noted that the tone of the novel oscillates, “wildly at times,” between detachment and intensity (Fitz, *Um Sopro* 261). I suggest that this fluctuating tone may be attributed to a profound ambivalence regarding the permanence of the word once it is written. “The Author” asks himself, or the reader, “Escrevo ou não escrevo?” [“Do I write or not?”] (12; 5). Soon after, he confesses, “[t]enho medo de escrever” [“I’m afraid to write”] (13; 5). And yet he writes, while also feeling as though he is not: “Sinto que não estou escrevendo ainda” [“I feel as though I’m still not writing”] (15; 7). As long as he can affirm that “nada se começa” [“nothing begins”], then he has not committed to the finality of writing (28; 21). If the act of writing is forever suspended, then closure—death—may also be foreclosed indefinitely.

Similar concerns with writing are found in Lispector’s preceding novel *A hora da estrela* [*The Hour of the Star*] (1977). Also a book about the creation of literature, in which a male author tells a story involving a woman, it is, perhaps even more than *Um sopro*, the most compelling example in all of Lispector’s work of a text that evades clear beginnings, and looks to what Said calls “hysterically deliberate” ways of starting to tell the story. Whereas *Um sopro* was published posthumously as the result of the organization of its existing fragments by Lispector’s literary executor, *A hora* was the last novel that Lispector saw actually completed and published before her death, and therefore the last novel over whose final published form she still had control.

The book opens with a dedication titled “Dedicatória do autor (Na verdade Clarice Lispector)” [“Dedication by the Author (actually Clarice Lispector)”] (Lispector, *A hora* x; *The Hour* xiii). The Portuguese original uses the male form of the word for author (“autor”), which

regarding her literary legacy is one that calls for further exploration—exploration which is undertaken in Chapter 3 of this study, “Unfinished Narratives.”

makes clear that Lispector is presenting herself in the persona of a fictional male author (as the parenthetical comment notes) who remains as-yet unnamed. Throughout the dedication, however, it is frequently unclear who is speaking, Lispector as the writer of *The Hour of the Star* or Lispector as the fictional male author that she has created. The use of autobiographical markers blurs the boundaries between the fictional and the real, denying our ability to jump right into the fictional world that a novel promises. Right from the start, then, Lispector has used an evasion technique—splitting herself into two “authors,” one real and one fictional—which results in a confused and confusing introduction to the novel. Is this confessional discourse being narrated by Lispector? Or is it meant to be the confession of the writer-protagonist, about whom we know nothing yet, not even his name? The text that opens the novel is an extended bit of “direct but self-effacing authorial commentary” that both confuses and distracts (Fitz, “Point of View” 197). Who is speaking, and what bearing does this have on the story to come? We are given little in the way of guidance, and must simply wait for the “story” to begin in the hopes of receiving some clarification then.

The author (either Lispector or her fictional creation, or both) dedicates the novel to a wide variety of things and people, both living and dead, and both real and imaginary. Included in the dedication are the “rubra e escarlata” [“the very crimson color scarlet”] of the author’s own blood, the composer Schumann and his creation Clara, and, “sobretudo” [“above all”], “gnomos, anões, sílfides e ninfas” [“gnomes, dwarves, sylphs, and nymphs”] (x; xiii). Further on, the narrative states that, again “sobretudo” [“above all”],²² the book is dedicated “às vésperas de hoje e a hoje” [“the yesterdays of today and to today”] (Lispector, *A hora X*; *The Hour* xiii, translation modified). More than one thing receives the dedication “sobretudo” or above all,

²² The Moser translation renders this second instance of “sobretudo” as “most of all” (xiii).

because of this abundance; nothing can be singled out. The author's tone oscillates between rapturous references to mythical beings to a flat, almost flippant reference to the novel which he/she is dedicating, calling it "esta coisa aí" ["this thing here"] (x; xiii). This attitude makes it seem almost as if the recipients of the dedication are more important than the actual text that the author has written.

The self of the author—fictional and real—is essential in this dedication, which is highly self-referential, confessional, autobiographical, and even narcissistic. For example, the author says that Strauss, in *Death and Transfiguration*, "me revela um destino" ["reveals to me a destiny"], as if Strauss had composed his music just for him/her (x; xiii). The author includes a dedication to "todos esses profetas do presente e que a mim me vaticinaram a mim mesmo a ponto de eu neste instante explodir em: eu" ["all those prophets of the present and who have foretold me to myself until in that instant I exploded into: I"] (x; xiii). These prophets are important precisely because they told the narrator about him- or herself. The dedication continues, however, with an admission that the self is not enough: "Esse eu que é vós pois não ser apenas mim, preciso dos outros para me manter de pé, tão tonto que sou, eu enviesado, enfim que é que se há de fazer senão meditar para cair naquele vazio pleno que só se atinge com a meditação" ["This I that is all of you, since I can't stand being just me, I need others in order to get by, fool that I am, I all askew, anyway what can you do besides meditate to fall into that full void you can only reach through meditation"] (x; xiii-xiv). Oscillating between self-obsession and an expansive need to connect with others, in "Esse eu que é vós" ["This I that is all of you"], the writing subject is both isolated from the world and intimately bound up with it, and, above all, comfortable in neither position.

The author admits, “[o] que me atrapalha a vida é escrever” [“what trips up my life is writing”] (x; xvi). It is interesting that the verb “atrapalhar” [“to trip up”] is used here, as one of its meanings is to obstruct something. And it is exactly what is happening here at the beginning of this novel: its opening is being obstructed by its multiple dedications, which are leading to a meditation on the process of writing the book. As the speaker says, writing is obstructing his/her life, but as we see, life is also obstructing writing—or at least it is obstructing the forward progression of a certain kind of writing. The notion of obstructing the progress of narrative is also noteworthy because of its stark contrast with the *ethos* of the first wave of Brazilian *modernistas*, for whom anything that slowed down or hampered expression was anathema. One prime example of this *modernista* view is found in Mário de Andrade’s preface to *Paulicéia desvairada* [*The Hallucinated City*], in which he talks about his artistic vision. At one point, he meditates on the creative process, stating: “A inspiração é fugaz, violenta. Qualquer impecilho a perturba e mesmo emudece” [“Inspiration is short-lived, violent. Any obstacle whatever upsets it and even silences it”] (Andrade, *Policéia* 63; *City* 8). For Andrade, writing should not be tripped up by anything, lest the inspiration be lost; obstacles are damaging and should be avoided.

For Lispector’s fictional author, however, obstacles *are* what writing is, or ends up being. His is not a lightning-bolt of inspiration to be emblazoned on the page, but rather a circuitous path that he must tread slowly and deliberately. Because, as has become clear by now, these preliminaries that seem to be hampering the progress of Lispector’s author’s narrative *are* the narrative itself, in the sense that they are not preliminary at all. As the author affirms, “[t]rata-se de livro inacabado porque lhe falta resposta. Resposta esta que alguém no mundo me dê. Vós?” [“it’s an unfinished book because it’s still waiting for an answer. An answer I hope someone in the world can give me. You?”] (Lispector, *A hora* x; *The Hour* xiv). The book cannot have

meaning without the reader, whom the author addresses directly. As part of this appeal to the reader, the dedication is followed by a list of the thirteen possible alternate titles for the novel, all laid out and separated by the word “or,” as if the reader should be the one to choose how the novel will begin:

A HORA DA ESTRELA

A culpa é minha
ou
A hora da estrela
ou
Ela que se arranje
ou
O direito ao grito
ou
Quanto ao futuro
ou
Lamento de um blues
ou
Ela não sabe gritar
ou
Uma sensação de perda
ou
Assovio no vento escuro
ou
Eu não posso fazer nada
ou
Registro dos fatos antecedentes
ou
História lacrimogênica de cordel
ou
Saída discreta pela porta dos fundos

(A hora 1)

THE HOUR OF THE STAR

It's All My Fault
or
The Hour of the Star
or
Let Her Deal With It
or
The Right to Scream
or
.As for the Future.
or
Singing the Blues
or
She Doesn't Know How to Scream
or
A Sense of Loss
or
Whistling in the Dark Wind
or
I Can't Do Anything
or
Account of the Preceding Facts
or
Cheap Tearjerker
or
Discreet Exit Through the Back Door

(The Hour 1)

In the middle of this seemingly random list of possible novel titles, Lispector's signature appears. Not only are we given a choice between a long list of potential names for the book we hold in our hands; we are also being told that the name Clarice Lispector, as signed on the same page amid the titles, is perhaps one possible literary identity among many others.

While clearly not a linear, singular beginning, *A hora*'s opening does not seem to result from a sense of not wanting to begin, not wanting to enter with both feet into the literary world (as was shown in Fernández); neither does it suggest a difficulty with how to begin to take on the task of writing, not knowing how to express something (as we have seen in Hernández). Instead, these multiple beginnings seem to emerge from a situation in which there is such an abundance of possible ways to open the text, that writing has trouble getting started. Not coming from a reluctance to fully become a writer (Fernández), nor from a professed inability to write (Hernández), the beginning of *A hora* seems to be the result of too many options. Rather than shying away from expression, or evading it through digression, the opening of *A hora* is a profusion of variations on a theme, seeming to offer every single possible title that the author thought of, documenting the entire creative process instead of simply presenting the final version. Perhaps this is because there is no final, "complete" version. This list of titles seems at once random and also somehow interconnected; note, for example, the repeated references to an "I" and a "her," and the recurring negativity of "fault," "scream," "blues," "loss," "can't," and "cheap."

The proliferation of words and possible titles at the start of *A hora* delay our entrance into the story proper, and have correspondingly delayed entry into its analysis. Moving from the preliminaries into the "body" of the text, we read these first words: "Tudo no mundo começou com um sim" ["All the world began with a yes"] (3; 3). This "yes" not only contrasts with the

multiple negativities of the alternate titles mentioned above, but also echoes the sense of almost overwhelming abundance—of possible titles, of possible directions—that opens the book. However, the acceptance communicated with this “yes,” that characterized the beginning of the world also allows for the almost immediate overcrowding of its emergence with alternate possibilities. As the first paragraph affirms, everything began with a “yes,” but it is precisely this “yes” that actually prevents anything from truly getting started in any conventional way: “Tudo no mundo começou com um sim. Uma molécula disse sim a outra molécula e nasceu a vida. Mas antes da pré-história havia a pré-história da pré-história e havia o nunca e havia o sim. Sempre houve. Não sei o quê, mas sei que o universo jamais começou” [“All the world began with a yes. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born. But before pre-history there was the prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes. It was ever so. I don’t know why, but I do know that the universe never began”] (3; 3). What we see here is the impossibility of beginnings, and the continued appeal to an ever-earlier history and prehistory, preventing the beginning from even taking up its status as such. As the narrator asks, “Como começar pelo início, se as coisas acontecem antes de acontecer? Se antes da pré-pré-história já havia os monstros apocalípticos?” [“How do you start at the beginning, if things happen before they happen? If before the pre-prehistory there were already the apocalyptic monsters?”] (3; 3). If we are governed by “yes” and all is accepted, and if no choice is made, then the possibilities linger and crowd out any ability to move forward. Thus, the traditional notion of linear progression from title to story is once again stalled. This is a beginning that negates the possibility of beginnings: the start of the story is not the beginning, because it is just a continuation of its prehistory: the dedication and the multiple potential titles.

We learn that the author-narrator is a man named Rodrigo S.M., thus establishing a distance between what had earlier seemed to be a fusion of Lispector with the book's narrative voice, an impression that was encouraged by the appearance of Lispector's own signature on page containing the multiple potential titles and chiefly by the title of the dedication section, "Dedicatória do autor (Na verdade Clarice Lispector)" ["Dedication by the Author (actually Clarice Lispector)"], which states directly that the male author is "na verdade"—actually—Lispector herself. Rodrigo tells us about the protagonist of his story, and his feelings about her: "Bem, é verdade que também eu não tenho piedade do meu personagem principal, a nordestina: é um relato que desejo frio. Mas tenho o direito de ser dolorosamente frio, e não vós. Por tudo isto é que não vos dou a vez. Não se trata apenas de narrativa, é antes de tudo vida primária que respira, respira, respira" ["Anyway, it's true that I too have no pity for my main character, the northeastern girl: it's a story I want to be cold. But I have the right to be sadly cold, and you don't. So that's why I won't let you. This isn't just a narrative, it's above all primary life that breathes, breathes, breathes"] (5; 5). He wants to remain indifferent to his protagonist, in order to leave room for the reader to empathize with her. He is protecting himself, keeping her at arm's length; his retreat from affect, he seems to believe, will result in a more powerful affective resonance with the reader. He wants his telling of the girl's story to be "cold," something he insists he has the right to do. But he qualifies this chilliness as "sadly cold": even as he distances himself from affect's power over him, it catches up with him. He wants to pass on the weight of emotion to the reader, so that he may be free from it, but it appears again, describing his own coldness.

Rodrigo S.M.'s attempt to distance himself from his subject by transferring the affective weight to the reader is unsuccessful. Not only is his coldness immediately qualified as sad; when

he states that his protagonist is a nobody, he has to immediately admit that he too is a nobody: “não faz falta a ninguém. Aliás—descubro eu agora—eu também não faço a menor falta, e até o que escrevo um outro escreveria” [“nobody would miss her. Moreover—I realize now—nobody would miss me either. And even what I’m writing somebody else could write”] (5; 6). This moment, at which he writes “descubro eu agora,” is the moment in which we see one of the narrator-author’s repeated attempts to remain one step ahead of the emotional freight of his narrative, and failing to do so. Just as Fernández’s *recienvenido* continually interrupts himself to tell the reader that he is not *really* writing at this very moment, and that writing will take place later, Rodrigo S.M. discusses at length how he is preparing to write the story that he insists he is not yet writing. As he reminds us, these are just the preliminaries, and he is merely warming up: “Estou esquentando o corpo para iniciar, esfregando as mãos uma na outra para ter coragem” [“I am warming up my body to get started, rubbing my hands together to work up the nerve”] (6; 6). Beginning is not an easy task: one must work up to it, get the courage to undertake the task. As we are seeing in these opening pages of *A hora da estrela*, Lispector’s author-narrator does not approach writing directly, but rather seems to need to maintain an air of indifference, almost letting the text get going in an unintentional way. As he affirms, “[u]m meio de obter é não procurar, um meio de ter é o de não pedir” [“one way of getting is not seeking, one way of having is not asking”] (6; 6, translation modified). This statement summarizes the poetics that are evident not only in this beginning, but in all of the beginnings discussed in this chapter, demonstrating the tension between the desire to write and a reluctance to manifest the intensity of that desire. Flight from this intensity, from the force of this powerful affective mode, finds the narrator-authors in a state of professed indifference, as in the case of Rodrigo S.M., in the playful evasions of Fernández’s *recienvenido*, or in the *mise-en-abyme* digressions of Hernández’s

would-be writers, in which one distraction leads to another, and the incomplete beginning of the unbegun book is the only writing that appears on the page.

Conclusion

The texts studied above are but three examples of the ways in which the works of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector perform the affective state of ambivalence regarding the process of literary creation, by complicating the process by which their texts begin. In stark contrast to the avant-garde's creative subject, a confident pioneer engaged in bold explorations as he or she creates new beginnings for the world of art, the creative subjects in the works of these three authors are fraught with ambivalence about their task, which often manifests itself in an inability to write affirmative, assertive literary beginnings. Instead, they hesitate, they doubt themselves, they question their project endlessly, they lose their concentration or nerve—there is nothing virtuoso-like about them. And one of the moments at which this characteristic becomes clearly evident is at the beginnings of texts. Fernández presents us with a literary newcomer whose fictional “autobiography” provides little to no information about him, and whose appearance in disjointed fragments is not an entrance but a tiptoeing into the literary world—never quite in, always keeping one foot out the door. Hernández moves from an early first-person story in which autobiographical details take center stage, to a later one in which the use of the third-person in addition to ever more remote points in time allows him to establish a distance that was not there before, and play out the failure of writing in an even more indirect manner. And finally Lispector creates an autobiographically-inflected narrator-writer who wants to write a fictional story about a stranger he has seen on the street, but cannot begin until all possible alternate titles have been enumerated and all influential persons and objects have been named in

the dedication. In all these cases, by deferring the beginning of a text, the writer attempts to evade a full commitment to engagement in the act of writing, which would thereby classify him or her as a writer and entail an entrance into the literary world. Evasion, stalling, deferral, and digression are all strategies that these writing subjects use to avoid writing; at the same time, however, these tactics then become the very writing that the subject is attempting to avoid. They become the way in which affect—ambivalence manifested in inattentiveness—writes itself.

CHAPTER 2

A POETICS OF INATTENTION

Introduction

As I have been attempting to demonstrate, in the key works that I study, Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector follow the avant-garde's fascination with monumental feelings and perceptions, which can also be called modes of affect and attention, but in a way that sets them apart quite radically from the avant-garde. They take on the avant-garde's preoccupation with "major" forms of these modes, and tune them down to a "minor" key; put another way, they take the "primary colors" of the avant-garde's expressive palette and blend them into something less clear, more ambivalent and indeed more nuanced—muddied secondary colors, pallid tones, dulled shades. And thus the affective register of their works is "toned down" from its grandiose heights and cavernous valleys, converted into something more measured, a kind of continuous unease, neither joyful nor sad, neither utterly focused nor totally absent. Attentive and affective states such as boredom, anxiety, indifference, or distraction reign over the tone and content of the works, especially when it comes to their narrators or protagonists who are engaged in the act of artistic creation or performance.

While the avant-garde works within a poetics of confrontation, or what Vicky Unruh has called "contentious encounters," these three authors evade any kind of head-on clash (6). "Contentious encounters" call to mind focused attacks on specific targets and, in terms of feelings and perceptions, are associated with strong, distinct emotions and a clear-minded purpose. Within such a project, modes of feeling and perception that might be called "minor," to use Ngai's term—such as ambivalence and inattentiveness—hold a somewhat paradoxically

subversive potential (8). A deferred or evaded encounter, in this context, can become its own mode of critique. This engagement with the kinds of “ugly feelings,” as Ngai has termed them, has a distinct purpose: to demonstrate a firm skepticism about the avant-garde idea of what it means to be an artist (3). While the avant-garde artist’s vision pulsates with the electrified currents of modern life, the artist as represented by these three authors has a much more subdued, and much more ambiguous, consciousness. Instead of active, this artistic vision is so passive as to become almost inert. And instead of seeking to conquer old norms and establish new ones, it lingers between different artistic possibilities, never quite able to commit to one in particular with any conviction. This allows these three artists to engage with ambivalence in a way that avant-garde conviction plows past on its way to “the new.” Ugly feelings such as ambivalence are especially compelling when compared to the extremes of the avant-garde, thanks to their indeterminacy: occupying a “deeply equivocal status,” these feelings can connote negativity and open the possibilities for critique, and yet they do not *do* anything specific, and provoke no particular action (3). They simply “diagnose” situations; their function is observational, and what they observe more than anything are situations of “obstructed agency” (3). The very power of feelings such as ambivalence is in their in-betweenness and their ongoing, lingering status; they seem to have no beginning and no end, and as such resist any teleologically-oriented projects. As Ngai clarifies, the indeterminacy inherent in all ugly feelings “enable[s] them to resist, on the one hand, their reduction to mere expressions of class *ressentiment*, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic ‘solutions’ to the problems they highlight and condense” (3). In other words, thanks to their uncertain status, minor affects such as ambivalence are able to avoid being enlisted for any specific cause: they are too slippery to be used as symbols or solutions.

I propose that there is a vital link to be explored between the affect of ambivalence and states of inattention. The concept of mood, for example, has been cited as a force that troubles any notion of a clear boundary between affect and cognition. Charles Altieri observes that moods “alter our sense of agency” in the sense that they affect our outlook on the world and our ability or willingness to engage with it (“Affect” 879). Moods “set affective atmospheres and color all that the atmosphere contains” and put us in a situation that is “strange combination of passive and active” (879). Mood appears to affect the mind and body equally, attesting to the idea that they are not divided but rather extremely interdependent.²³ Indeed, mood “circumvents the clunky categories often imposed on experience: subjective versus objective, feeling versus thinking, latent versus manifest,” which is useful for cultural critics, since they have been criticized “for reinforcing such dichotomies, creating a picture of affect as a zone of ineffable and primordial experience that is subsequently squeezed into the rationalist straitjacket of language” (Felski and Fraiman vi). Mood represents a possible solution to this impasse, as its definitions “often emphasize its role in modulating thought, acknowledging a dynamic and interactive relationship between reason and emotion” (vi).

In light of the above, there is a discernible relationship between an affective state or mood and a subject’s attentional state, given mood’s “role in modulating thought” (vi). Mood “filters the world,” shaping both attention and affect. But does mood create feelings that prompt our attention to focus on something in particular? Or does our mood make us focus attention on something that then makes us feel a certain way? It seems both are possible. Indeed, when Altieri

²³ In their article “In the Mood for Thought: Feeling and Thinking in Philosophy” (*New Literary History* 43 (2012): 395-417), René Rosfort and Giovanni Stanghellini trouble received wisdom about Descartes’s mind-body dualism, citing his concept of wonder. They suggest that, “in the light of his metaphysical commitment to disembodied reason,” the philosopher’s “treatment of the passions makes his distinction between body and soul more complex than commonly assumed,” and “his analysis of wonder brings out the inescapable ambivalence of physiology and cognition at the heart of emotional life” (396).

affirms that affects are “immediate modes of sensual responsiveness to the world characterized by an accompanying imaginative dimension,” I understand the word “accompanying” to mean a simultaneity of the sensual and the imaginative, not a chronological or hierarchical ordering (*Particulars 2*). I maintain that while affect initially prompts attention, the two go on to coexist in a symbiotic relationship, where one or the other could predominate at a given moment, but never in a permanent way. As I argue in this project and particularly in this chapter, what I observe in Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector is a specific phenomenon in which the affective state—or mood—of ambivalence finds its expression in states of mental or physical inattention. In their works, a subject feels ambivalent about something, most often the act of writing about something, and as part of this ambivalence, the subject finds that he or she is unable to focus on the task at hand. The subject’s ability to concentrate or remain interested is not constant, but rather ebbs and flows, in an ambivalent inability or unwillingness to commit fully to the endeavor.

The ideas of Walter Benjamin are particularly useful for analyzing the significance of inattentive states. In both his early study of Surrealism and his later “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin pinpoints moments of cognitive drift, in which the Cartesian individual subject (understood as a bourgeois subject) begins to dissolve, and finds in these moments the promise of a revolution in modern perception, opening up possibilities for symbolic and real social action on the part of the masses. In “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), Benjamin finds in this avant-garde movement an example of how attentive states can transform subjectivity. Specifically, he looks to Surrealism’s interest in dream-states as a way of opening up the strictures of the bourgeois individual subject: “In the world’s structure, dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth (208). The decentered Surrealist subject is carried away by

the intoxication of experience, while still retaining the potential for agency and action. It is, at bottom, an ambivalent subject, and inattention is its corresponding cognitive state—neither fully present nor fully absent, neither totally whole nor totally fragmented, this is a *loosened* subject. In this in-between, indeterminate state allowed by the concept of loosening, Benjamin finds both the ability to drift outside Cartesian subjectivity and the capacity for avoiding a total capture by intoxication (208). In other words, the loosened subject is not given over to the unconscious; it is precisely its indeterminacy that prevents it from being fully appropriated by dreaming or wakefulness, by intoxication or reason.

For Benjamin, bourgeois contemplation is no longer sufficient for processing the stimuli of the modern urban setting. In order for a project to be relevant in the contemporary world, it cannot be a contemplative one; for him, Surrealism is the most promising project, because it represents “the transformation of a highly contemplative attitude into revolutionary opposition” (213). His valorization of an anti-contemplative consciousness is developed later on in the second version his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1935-1939). There, he makes a distinction between two modes of receiving stimuli, specifically a work of art: concentration and distraction. He describes the former as bourgeois “[c]ontemplative immersion” while the latter emerges as a new “variant of social behavior” characteristic of the masses (39). He describes these two different modes of approaching a work of art: “A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work [...]. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide” (40). Paradoxically, then, concentration is shown as passive while distraction is shown as active, and the latter, called “[r]eception in distraction” is held up as a “*symptom of profound changes in apperception*” (40-41, emphasis in original). Not

only is distraction an active state, but it is also a revolutionary one, changing the ways in which subjects receive stimuli.

I propose that, in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, the creative subject is somewhat similar to the one Benjamin detects in Surrealism, albeit without the belief in the unconscious as the ultimate source of meaning. Ambivalence, which is a state of uncertainty and indeterminacy, and which would thus be understood one in which agency has been lost, is combined with a Benjaminian distracted consciousness, a mode of inattention that still has the ability to act—it acts in distraction. The works I analyze by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector are meditations on the relationship between ambivalence and the act of writing, and express the ways in which inattentive states make creation happen while at the same time placing the writer in a decentered, ambiguous position. Despite their similarities with Surrealism and their use of the “loosened” writing subject, these works do not follow the Surrealists. While much of the writing that takes place in these texts looks like instances of automatic writing, the key difference is one of meaning. For all of their rejection of bourgeois values, the Surrealists did seek meaning: while rejecting reason as the source of meaning, they looked to the unconscious as the place from which meaning springs. The automatism explored by Surrealism, while turning away from notions of creative control, was ultimately “predicated on the suppression of rational consciousness” in the hopes that automatic expression would prompt the unconscious to reveal truths that the conscious mind was unable to articulate (Hopkins 68). Thus, the Surrealists simply replaced one source of meaning with another, but did not dismantle the notion of univocal or readable meaning altogether. The automatic expression that had originated with Dada as a way of making a statement about the role of chance in the creation of art (and, for Dadaists, anti-art), the Surrealists formalized the practice and theorized it in explicitly Freudian psychoanalytic

terms (69). The texts I analyze here are more akin to a Dadaist view of art than a Surrealist one, in the sense of calling into question the status of art and artists altogether, and eschewing any type of teleological search for origins of meaning.

What I do detect in these works is a phenomenon similar to the “reception in distraction” of Benjamin’s masses. However, here it takes place in individual, isolated subjects, and it is not a phenomenon of reception so much as creation; I call it a “poetics of inattention.” This poetics of inattention is possibly a constitutive part of the process of reception in distraction as well as a result of it. Like reception in distraction, a poetics of inattention signals 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, a poetics of inattention troubles Romantic notions of individual genius, inspiration, and originality, calling forth the possibilities of non-individualized creation, or creation that emerges from an attentive state in which the individual subject has been decentered.

In the pages that follow I first analyze Macedonio Fernández’s *Museo de la novela de la Eterna (Primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna’s Novel (First Good Novel)*] (1967), in which the narrator longs to create a new kind of narrative, but hesitates, and remains reluctant to shoulder narrative authority. In a strategy of evasion, he cedes narrative control to the story’s characters, professing that he suffers from mental “blankness” which allows him to surrender narrative authority. I then read Felisberto Hernández essay-manifesto “Explicación falsa de mis cuentos” [“False Explanation of My Stories”] (1955) as a particular instance of “creation in distraction,” in which the art object comes into being through the creative subject’s purposeful cultivation of an inattentive state. As Hernández explains, it consists of an attention that is purposely decentered, trained on the artistic product only through a sidelong glance. Finally, I

examine Clarice Lispector's *Água viva* [*The Stream of Life*] (1973), which depicts the tension between competing impulses: on one hand, striving to seize meaning through what North calls the "will to possession" of focused attention; and on the other hand, renouncing this gesture of possession, retreating into a state of distraction that "either does not appropriate or impedes appropriation" (3). In these three different ways, these authors dramatize the process of literary creation as something that occurs without the intentionality of the creative subject. In their works, the creative subject is an ambivalent one whose actions are undertaken distractedly. These are writing subjects who have been, as Benjamin would put it, "loosened."

In all of these works, strategies of inattention such as evasiveness, distraction, and renunciation are ways to dramatize a more nuanced portrait of the artist, in which he or she wrestles with ambivalent feelings about writing and performing the role of author. The dynamic of inattention at work in these writings can be understood as a way for Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector to engage with the avant-garde movements that influenced them (either concurrent with or preceding their own entry into the literary world), an engagement that calls into question the very definitions and presuppositions on which avant-garde literature rests. The artist figures in these works are paradoxical, expressing both the passivity and inertness brought on by an almost paralyzing ambivalence, as well as the creative, active, and ultimately highly critical act of creation in a state of distraction, through what I have called a poetics of inattention. The writer is decentered, mired in ambivalence, withdrawing into an inattentive state which, ultimately, becomes the source of the writing that emerges—a writing that does not fully belong to the writer. Neither totally whole nor totally fragmented, this loosened, decentered writer is neither fully the bourgeois individual genius of contemplation, nor fully the distracted masses of

modernity. This is a writer forever in-between, throwing all definitions, both traditional and “revolutionary,” off-kilter.

As Vicky Unruh has shown, the avant-garde project is one of “contentious encounters,” a something purposeful, deliberate activity that champions extreme emotional states and sharply drawn convictions. The poetics of inattention, then, becomes an artistic method through which Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector perform authorship while troubling the ground that its definition stands on, introducing an element of irremediable ambivalence that disavows the idea of the artist as a genius with privileged access to feeling and perception. Thought at different times, all three of these authors take the avant-garde’s concern with affect and turn it inside out, to show an underside of profound ambivalence. Inattention appears in their work not as a way to explore the unconscious of the artist, which is its role for Surrealism; rather, it emerges as a way to express the almost-paralyzing ambivalence that the creative subject feels towards his or her endeavor. Out of their distinct relationships with the avant-garde fervor of the 1920s and ’30s—Fernández as an uneasy contemporary, Hernández as a later observer from the margin, and Lispector as part of a much later echo of vanguardism—these authors all write in a kind of oblique opposition to the avant-garde’s vision of the extreme states experienced by the artist and the exalted status of the creative subject.

Mental “Blankness” in Macedonio Fernández

Macedonio Fernández’s lifelong project, the “twin novels” *Museo de la novela de la Eterna (Primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna’s Novel (First Good Novel)*] and *Adriana Buenos Aires (Última novela mala)* [*Adriana Buenos Aires (Last Bad Novel)*], was never completed, though he spent his life writing and rewriting them. The drafts and notes for

each novel were assembled in 1967 and 1974 respectively by Fernández's son and literary executor, Adolfo Fernández de Obieta. This perpetually unfinished project—which Fernández perhaps never intended to “finish” in any conventional sense of the word—has come to define his literary legacy, functioning as bookends for his literary project of reinventing the novel.

Part joke, part aesthetic manifesto, *Adriana* is a parody of the 19th century sentimental realist novel, particularly the kind of novel that was published in weekly installments as a *folletín* or popular newspapers, often aimed at a female readership. The narrator is a single middle-aged man named Eduardo de Alto, who tells the story of how he fell in love with a beautiful but impoverished young girl named Adriana, who feels platonic affection for him but is in love with another man, Adolfo, who has also made her pregnant. Theirs is an impossible love, however: Adolfo is from a wealthy family and must marry a woman of the same social standing, and Adriana is poor. Eduardo, out of love for Adriana, works to rescue her relationship with Adolfo so that she can be happy. The action of the novel takes place largely in a boardinghouse in a Buenos Aires slum, which is populated by a “cast of outcasts” (Wells 405). For Eduardo, Adriana “stands apart, transcending her squalid circumstances” and she teaches him about love, although she offers him nothing more than platonic love for him (411). The novel's exaggerations of the tropes of the sentimental romance genre are intended to make its ridiculousness painfully apparent, making its artifices so heavy as to overwhelm it, causing it to buckle under its own conventions. Once deconstructed, the ground would be cleared for the appearance of *Museo*, to chronicle how the novel is rebuilt from the ground up.

What is clear in *Adriana* is that, despite Fernández's crusade against “bad” novels, he is not immune to their sentimentality—so much that, as he admits in a prologue, “Note to the Bad Novel,” he has been moved to spare his characters the “bloody ending” that he had planned for

them (Fernández, *Adriana* 13). He seems to have gotten somewhat caught up in the affective charms of the sentimental genre, including the romantic love that the protagonist feels for Adriana, with whom he can never have a relationship, as well as the *agape* love that the novel's characters, living together in the slums of early 20th century Buenos Aires, show for one another.

He also complains of how tiring it is to write badly on purpose, resisting the “incessant temptation to correct the many instances of artistic naiveté of this story” (13). What we see here is an uneasy combination of humor and something approaching wistfulness; to write badly, to feel the novel's sentiments, is to be innocent—something that he may be longing for despite his mockery. Especially noteworthy is the way in which Fernández seems to be overpowered by ambivalent feelings about his artistic project, which lead him away from the parody he intends and more toward confusion about what his intentions actually are. He actively decenters himself from the artistic process, avoiding an active stake in the text's creation, intentions, and meaning. This troubling of the notion of intentionality is something that will emerge even more forcefully in the second of Fernández's “twin” novels, *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*.

In *Museo*, a book that claims to be the “first good novel,” the project is not destruction but construction. Once the prologues end and the novel begins, it tells the story of a group of people living on a country estate called La Novela. Having been assembled there by a man named El Presidente, who is in love with a mysterious woman named Eterna. The group is instructed to undertake a campaign to conquer the city of Buenos Aires in the name of beauty. The bulk of the novel is dedicated to interactions between characters and their meditations on love, friendship, and happiness; it ends just as curiously as it begins, with digressions, tacked-on notes, a list of major plot points, and a final prologue.

As we shall see, just as Fernández becomes caught up in the lives of the characters he has created in *Adriana* and finds himself and his writing project changed by them, the narrator-author of *Museo* is unable to wield control over the book that is being written. Thus, these two bookends of Fernández's literary project actually bear witness, in different ways, to an overarching attitude of uncertainty regarding the production of literature and participation in the literary world. Much of the ambivalence characterizing *Museo* is epistemological: the author-narrator refuses to claim the authority of a writer whose literary creation stems from knowledge. Over and over, he specifies that he does not know something or is unable to understand it.

The narrator's professed ignorance is especially present with regard to his own writing: he renounces any authority even over the power to read and understand his own work. In one of the novel's 57 or 60 prologues, he claims that, while he has experimented with writing both a "bad" novel and a "good" one, he is actually unable to distinguish between the two.²⁴ He recalls his fraught writing process: "A veces me encontré perplejo, cuando el viento hizo volar los manuscritos, porque sabréis que escribía por día una página de cada, y no sabía tal página a cuál correspondía" ["Sometimes I found myself perplexed, especially when the wind blew the manuscript pages around the room, because, as you know, I wrote one page of each per day, and I didn't know which page belonged in which novel"] (*Museo* 267-68; *Museum* 5, translation modified). The narrator is, ostensibly, the writer of the book that we are reading, and yet he disavows knowledge about what he has written, professing an inability to classify it as "good" or "bad"; to him, these supposed opposites are interchangeable.

Indeed, when he looks at the manuscripts, he is helpless to categorize the "good" and "bad" writing, because, to him, they are identical: "nada me auxiliaba porque la numeración era

²⁴ See Chapter 1, "Deferred Beginnings," for an explanation on the inexact number of prologues in the novel.

la misma, la calidad de papel y tinta, igual la calidad de ideas, ya que me había esforzado en ser igualmente inteligente en una y otra para que mis mellizas no animaran querella. ¡Lo que sufrí cuando no sabía si una página brillante pertenecía a la última novela mala o a la primera novela buena!” [“nothing could help me, because the pagination was the same, the quality of ideas, paper, and ink were all equal, since I had made an effort to be equally intelligent in each, to keep my twin novels from quarreling. How I suffered, not knowing if the brilliant page before me belonged to the last bad novel or the first good one!”] (268; 5).²⁵ The books have the same technical features such as pagination, paper, and ink, as well as identical quality of ideas. They are also being produced at the same time, at a rate of one page each per day. Thus, they might as well be the same book, since the notion of “quality” seems to have lost all meaning for the author.

During his decades of literary activity, Fernández was active in Buenos Aires literary circles and published more than 70 articles, often proposing new literary innovations (Vecchio 162). He was especially interested in dismantling notions of authorship that assigned the writer the status of a demigod, as seen, for example, in the concluding verse of Chilean *vanguardista* Vicente Huidobro’s 1916 poem “Arte poética” [“Poetic Art”]: “El Poeta es un pequeño Dios” [“The Poet is a little God”] (17). While Fernández appeared to “eschew the status of author,” avoiding joining the ranks of any specific literary movement or institution, his writing was also “saturated with discussions on the nature of authorship, the process of writing, the fate of his own texts” (Garth, *Self* 25). His ideas about literature and authorship presented him with a dilemma: “how to repudiate the static, autonomous category of author and liberate texts without

²⁵ There is often a notable discrepancy, between the Spanish version and the English translation, in the placement of certain sections of the book. This is due to the fact that the novel was published posthumously and different editors of the novel have organized it slightly differently. Here, I am using the critical edition prepared by Ana María Camblong and Adolfo Fernández de Obieta (Fernández’s son), published by UNESCO in 2007, and the only existing English translation, that of Margaret Schwartz published by Open Letter Press in 2010.

sacrificing the individual's *investment* in text" (31). His answer to this question, though "perpetually and forcibly provisional," is to present "an individual" who has a "slippery relationship to text" which is "proof of authorship without selfhood" (31).

Museo, a novel based on his aesthetic ideas, is shown to be a text that "oppresses" its narrator, because, as he claims, "aun no tengo ni comprensión verdadera de la teoría de la novela, ni estética ni plan de la mía" ["I don't even have any true comprehension of the theory of the novel, let alone an aesthetic or plan for my own"] (Fernández, *Museo* 26; *Museum* 23, translation modified). Aware of the difficulty of making artistic ideas into a literary reality, especially when he is unable to distinguish between ideas that are "bad" or "good," the author-narrator warns, "[E]ste será un libro de eminente frangollo" ["[T]his book will be eminently sloppy"] (9; 8). Sloppiness does not seem to be a deterrent, however, or even necessarily a negative quality.

The concept of "bad" literature is invoked, but it does not seem to be much of a concern to the author. Instead, he implies that the reader is the one who may have a problem with it, when he tells readers to take their complaints to the characters. Thus, the authority of the book resides not with the author but with what are ostensibly his fictional creations: "He confiado, con cuidadosa selección y sabiendo cómo se habían conducido en otras novelas, a los siguientes personajes el desempeño de la mía. [...] ¿Qué queréis decirme si la novela sale mal?" ["I have entrusted the execution of my novel to the following characters, having selected them carefully based upon their conduct in other novels. [...] If the novel turns out badly, don't blame me"] (39; 35). Withdrawing from the pressures of authority, the narrator-author lets his characters take over, and though he is the author of the book, he presents himself as incapable of actually producing it on his own. His characters, he says, "me saben competente para concluir prólogos y me creen poco para acabar novela" ["know I'm competent to finish prologues, but they believe

me less than competent to finish novels”] but because they are eager to get out of the prologue stage and into the world of the novel, they insist that it begin, and he agrees that “me han rodeado sin salida todos unidos” [“they have banded together to corner me”] (98; 98, translation modified). Thus, the digressions of the multiple prologues can only be put to a stop by the characters themselves. Without them, the narrator-author would probably continue prologuing indefinitely, safe in the comfort of the preliminary space located just at the threshold of the literary world.

Right before the opening of the novel proper, there is one final prologue titled “1^o Nota de posprólogo; y 2^o Observaciones de ante-libro” [“First: Postprologuery Note; And Second: Prenovelistic Observations”]. At this point, we are 124 pages into a 254-page text, and the narrator-author is finally ready to move from this extended threshold into the world of literature. Here, he talks at length about convention of having blank pages appear at the beginning of a book. Acknowledging their presence in the book that we hold in our hands, he comments on them and invests them with a meaning that they would perhaps not have otherwise had. Instead of just allowing readers to flip past the blank pages at the beginning of a book, he calls attention to them in order to make a more overarching statement about authorship. He declares:

Repudio como fraguadas todas las páginas blancas que se publiquen aquí, como originales de mi firma; en redondo las desconozco auténticas, aunque parcialmente contuvieran algún ingenio o pensamiento, y aun a veces alguna de ellas fuera hija de mi pluma en correlación con ciertos momentos de ‘en blanco’ de mi mente. (124)

I repudiate as forgeries all the blank pages published here as originals bearing my signature; actually, I don’t know if they are authentic, although they could partially contain some wit or thought, and some of these pages could have sprung from my own pen in correlation with certain moments of mental “blankness.” (122)

The notion of artistic originality, so often prized by literary movements since romanticism, and especially since *modernismo* and into the *vanguardias*, is parodied and critiqued here, as the author-narrator insists that certain blank pages are forgeries while others are authentically his own. Further, he attributes his original blank pages to his own state of “mental ‘blankness,’” creating an image of an author who is not a genius becoming inspired to write, but rather a subject who must “empty” his consciousness in order for literary creation to emerge—in this case, a blank page, meaning both the lack of literature and the endless possibility for imaginable literature. This “blankness” is a fitting image for the position that the narrator-author has taken throughout, renouncing any responsibility for the final form of a text that he has so ardently avoided committing to paper.

The author-narrator goes on to enumerate all of the blank pages in the book, which are not in fact limited to the beginning pages but are also scattered throughout. He even includes the white space that is created by the page margins, which he seizes upon as instances of almost trickery or deceit to the reader who has purchased the novel that is being created:

Considérese que son: cuatro o cinco al comienzo del libro—el Editor comienza con lo suyo –; cuatro o cinco más después del Fin, como si fuera necesario que por lo menos en blanco la Novela continuara; varias entre capítulos; otra con el título de la obra; otra de repetición de la tapa; y todo abusando de márgenes—una veintena, pues, de páginas en que el autor no está publicando nada y el continuo lector nada ha comprado en la librería. (125)

Consider then that these are: four or five pages at the beginning of the book—the Editor starts with his own—four or five more after the End, as if the Novel had to continue if only in the form of blank pages; various pages between chapters; another page bearing the title of the book; another that is a repetition of the cover; and all sorts of abuses of margins—thus, about twenty pages where the author is not publishing anything and the continuous reader has purchased nothing at the bookstore. (122, translation modified)

Earlier, blank pages were characterized as either original or copies, and thus viewed as having their own value and meaning. Now, blank pages and blank spaces represent a lack, an emptiness, moments in which “the author is not publishing anything” and readers have not gotten anything for their money. These blank spaces in the text are moments in which literature has ceased to exist; any possible communication between author and reader is suspended, and during these moments both are idle—the author produces nothing and the reader receives nothing. Further, as we have already seen, the “author” mentioned here is also a contradictory figure who continually disclaims any authority that he may have over this text.

A new figure mentioned in this second statement on the blank pages is the Editor, who it seems is being blamed or credited with the presence of these blank pages. Standing outside the dynamic between author-narrator and his characters, the Editor makes a statement in a footnote to the page on which he is mentioned, almost as an explanation intended to defend his choice of including blank pages. In this footnote, called “Editor’s Observation,” we read:

Observación del Editor: Se me permitirá el aserto respetuoso de que, en efecto, el gran novelista que estoy aquí editando y cuyas dotes de ingenio y fácil extensión de párrafos todo el público conoce desde lejos (con nuestra propaganda se acercará más) ha necesitado (no hablemos de dineros) a veces, cuando ya no podía más con su literatura, enviarnos entre sus manuscritos algunas páginas en blanco, foliadas seguidamente, de algún relato trunco, y hemos comprendido que nos tocaba hacer algo fuera de contrato. (125)

Editor’s Observation: Permit me to respectfully assert that, in effect, the great novelist that I am editing here, and whose talents of genius and easy extension of paragraphs the public can notice a mile away (with our marketing, it will get closer), has made it necessary (let’s not speak of money) at times, when I was fed up with his literature, for me to insert into his manuscripts a few blank pages, numbered in sequence, from some incomplete story, and I understand that I had to do something outside the bounds of our contract. (122, translation modified)

Along with exaggerated compliments on this “great novelist”’s literary prowess, the Editor makes it clear that he has become frustrated with the author-narrator’s writing, and it is in fact the author-narrator’s fault that these blank pages had to be included. These blank pages—which the author-narrator first infused with meaning, and then emptied of significance except as a dishonest way to bulk up a book and somehow swindle the reader—are here again given meaning, as the blank pages that the Editor had to insert into the manuscript are specifically drawn from another text written by the same author-narrator, an “incomplete story” whose blank pages are “numbered in sequence.” An almost anti-literary intertextuality, the “incomplete story” has blank pages that are unique to that story, and which apparently change the meaning of the novel into which they are so carefully inserted in order. If blank pages have meaning (or not), then the author-narrator’s “blankness” can also have meaning (or not); in other words, Fernández uses “blankness” as a way to engage in continuous evasions and denials—creating while claiming not to create.

In the passages analyzed above, the mental “blankness” professed by the narrator-author of *Museo* is not only a statement about this specific novel, but in fact can be interpreted as a key to Fernández’s entire artistic project, in which deferral and evasion are strategies of critique. This self-described mental state is an integral part of the authorial persona that Macedonio has constructed—the recent arrival, the near-miss, the never-will, the almost famous author who is unable to just sit down and produce something whole. In this “literature of absence,” authorship in Fernández is continually associated with the role of hapless bystander, only partially and provisionally involved in the production of anything resembling a story. Fernández’s creative subject is not a producer of anything specific but rather a conduit through which other forces can express themselves. Authorial mental “blankness” is the ideal image for such a process: it takes

place in his own mind, and yet he does not have control over it. This mental space is blank because it is empty, and also because it is the blank page of literary possibility, ever-available to be written on, never filled or completed. Thus “loosened,” the writing subject is but a semi-active participant in the creation of the literary work.

Wandering Attention in Felisberto Hernández

Starting in his earliest phase, Felisberto Hernández’s writings display a preoccupation with inattentive states experienced by individuals, often engaged in creative endeavors such as writing or playing the piano, two activities that came to define the persona of Hernández himself. The inattentive states in Hernández’s work, as we shall see, are often shown to be, in fact, a result of excessive concentration: the narrator is so preoccupied with a person, object, or idea that his attention goes from laser-focused to diffuse without his realizing it. The subject’s consciousness, in Hernández’s stories, is susceptible to being carried away by outside forces, and this susceptibility is only increased by the subject’s attempts to focus his attention and keep it under control.

As discussed above, part of Benjamin’s argument about the new form of perception found in the modern urban masses is related to the ways in which cinema functions as the training ground for spectatorship, one founded on mass distraction instead of individual contemplation. And there may well be a cinematic foundation for the distracted subject we see in Hernández: beginning around 1917 and decades prior to becoming a writer, 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" (300). This is the eye of the Benjaminian "loosened" subject who creates in a mode of distraction.

Reading Hernández's early employment as a piano accompanist alongside his later writings, we can establish a clear parallel in terms of the process by which the final product—the musical or literary creation—emerges in each case. 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. Fixed attention would break the spell, would break down the Cézannian "recording machine" that Hernández embodies in this scene. 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. When he claims that his stories "are not completely natural in the sense of having no intervention by consciousness," it is clear that his stated intention is not to link his practice to a Surrealist-type experiment with automatic writing (Hernández, "False Explanation" 3). His writing is 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 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" (81-82, emphasis in original). Hernández's cryptic account of his creative process shares something with Breton's disoriented spectatorship.

In 1955, Hernández published a short piece titled "False Explanation of My Stories," a manifesto of sorts that appeared in the French, Uruguayan (?) literary magazine *La Licorne*. In it, Felisberto states that he intends to respond to all of the people who have asked him how he writes his stories; yet, instead of providing what might be a conventional answer (such as "I draw on my own life" or "I am influenced by this or that writer"), he flatly states that he neither knows nor does not know how his stories come to be. He "explains": "At a given moment I think that, in some corner of me, a plant is about to be born. I start to lie in wait for it, believing that in this corner something strange has appeared, something that could have artistic promise. I would be happy if this idea weren't a complete failure. But I have to wait indefinitely: I don't know how to nurture the plant or make it grow" (Hernández, "False Explanation" 3). 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: "The plant itself will not know its own laws, although it may have them, deep down, out of the reach of consciousness. It will not know how or to what degree consciousness will intervene, but will prevail over it in the end.

And it will teach consciousness to be disinterested” (3-4). The double disavowal—a “false explanation” stating that Hernández does not know how his writing originates—now becomes a triple disavowal: 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: “They are not completely natural in the sense of having no intervention by consciousness. That would be unpleasant to me. They are not dominated by a theory of consciousness. That would be extremely unpleasant to me” (3). 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, seemingly infinitely, this “false explanation” thematizes two of the main ideas that recur in Hernández’s work: human unintentionality and the subjectivity of objects. Here, the human subject is the writer himself, represented in his own *apologia* as somewhat bumbling, perceiving the presence of something but not knowing how to react to it, and thus remaining passive. The object is his story, figured 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; they appear to him and he can only try not to impede their development. Further, both the human subject and

the plant-origin have a consciousness, and it is unclear whether it is a shared one. What is clear, however, is that Benjamin's notion of individual contemplation as being inadequate to modernity is exemplified in this plant-writer relationship.

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 contend 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. This project is one we also see in the work of Fernández and Lispector, and all three can be understood as contending with, and reacting critically to, the literary movements that most influenced them, primarily the avant-gardes.

Some readers of Hernández have posited him as a writer of distraction, based on the content of certain stories containing distracted characters, or biographical information gleaned from people who knew him personally. However, it is my contention that, for Hernández, distraction is not just part of his personality or a theme for his stories; rather, it is actually an attentional state that is constitutive of the very stories that we read—distraction not as a theme for writing but as a *means* of writing. As I hope to argue, 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 we might call "creation in distraction." And as part of this, Hernández seems

to be inviting us to meditate on the creative process in itself, purposely distancing his biographical self from the writing that comes out of him, in a “distracting” move that leads the reader’s attention away from its intent focus on the search for a clear origin for his writing.

In his “genealogy of attention,” *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Crary argues that attention and perception are far from being fixed concepts; rather, they are highly contested notions that are much more historically embedded and embodied than has been previously thought, and whose importance has increased dramatically since the mid-19th century (2). Part of Crary’s exploration includes the later work of Cézanne, which shows a fundamental preoccupation with issues of attention as they relate to the creative subject. For Crary, Cézanne’s later work seem to leave behind what Meyer Shapiro has called his “art of grave attention” in favor of an exploration of the “uncertain status of an attentive observer” (282).

One of the elements of later Cézanne that is of most interest for the present study is his interest in forgetting, or what could be understood as a kind of distracted memory. In a 1905 letter, Cézanne explains that he seeks “to produce the image of what we see while forgetting everything that has appeared before our day” (quoted in Crary 282). Cézanne’s concern with the experience of the observing subject has made several observers read this statement in connection with phenomenology, and many have focused specifically on the notion that Cézanne is seeking a mode of perception that is untainted by any prior experience. However, Crary rejects the idea that Cézanne’s concept of “forgetfulness” is similar to Husserl’s “pure” consciousness (282). While many critics have read in Cézanne’s statement an intent to pursue purified access to essences, for Crary, Cézanne’s project is somewhat different, and the application of Husserl’s ideas of “intuition” and “purified” perception to Cézanne’s later work is a reduction of the artist

to a “mythology of the ‘innocent’ or infantine eye” (287). 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).

In his exploration of the complexities of perception, Crary recalls Paul Valéry’s statement 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). Indeed, this can be linked to Cézanne’s “venture of ‘forgetfulness’” or interest in representing what is seen when previous sightings are absent (282). It seems we can make a connection between forgetting in Valéry and Cézanne, and the distracted and disinterested consciousness evoked in Hernández’s piece, since Hernández expresses a reticence about approaching the plant-story; it appears that, by almost “forgetting” it, he can make sure that it flourishes. The creative subject claims no status as a stable source for creativity, but rather acts as a vehicle through which this creativity takes place. However, for Valéry, the artist actually loses control by concentrating his attention, and it is only by letting the mind wander, by forgetting, that control is reestablished. Hernández, like Cézanne, seems less invested in the pursuit of control. There is, indeed, a troubled sense of agency at work in these ideas, recalling Walter Benjamin’s Chinese artist who, after completing a painting and standing back to contemplate it, was drawn into it, entering “his complete painting while beholding it” (Benjamin 40). For Hernández, the artist is thus somewhat passive, allowing something to wash over him while he averts his attention (distraction) or memory (forgetfulness).

What Cézanne does in his later period, and specifically in *Pines and Rocks* (1900), is compose his work in such a way that both center and periphery are represented. This, Crary

notes, is “an attempt to grasp peripheral retinal sensation simultaneously and with the same immediacy and intensity as the central or foveal region of the eye” (Crary 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. As Crary notes, this goes against the notion that concentration leads to greater sharpness of vision: “Once the eye stops moving,” he 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.” Consciousness is not under the control of this “loosened,” decentered subject.

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 way that Man Ray does, “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.

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” (Hernández, “False Explanation” 3). The work of consciousness, however, changes a few sentences later: “Despite the constant and rigorous surveillance that is carried out by consciousness, consciousness is also unknown to me” (3). Here, consciousness goes from carrying out mysterious interventions to performing “constant and rigorous surveillance” (3). 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: “At a given moment I think that, in some corner of me, a plant is about to be born” (3). Two references to temporality appear: “at a given moment” and “about to be.” The first temporal reference refers to randomness, a time that is not specific and yet could happen at any moment. The second temporal reference, “about to be,” 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 somewhat random and unpredictable. The plant, which is on the cusp of being born at some random 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 “how to nurture the plant or make it grow,” but he does know that the plant should not listen to observers who would suggest to it “too many grand meanings or intentions” (3). 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: “If the plant is true to itself, it will possess a natural poetry of which it is unaware” (3). This plant, representing the origin of writing, cannot come from a place of fixed attention and intentionality, but rather from a place of coincidental or random events, averted glances and an unawareness that is somehow both feigned and unfeigned. Hernández states that this plant, in order to grow properly, needs to be like a person whose life will last an undetermined period of time; here, we return to non-specific temporalities, the constant possibility of something happening randomly, and the unknown duration of events. The plant’s “needs and modest pride” will be carried “awkwardly so as to seem improvised” (3). 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, “False Explanation of my Stories”—explaining through a non-explanation.

As observed earlier, this reticence, or inability, to pinpoint the origin of creativity extends to the consciousness ascribed to the plant itself: “The plant itself will not know its own laws, although it may have them, deep down, out of the reach of consciousness. It will not know how or to what degree consciousness will intervene, but will prevail over it in the end” (3-4). 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: “And it will teach consciousness to be disinterested” (4). “Disinterested” 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, Hernández presents us with a poetics that seems to spring from the configuration of attention that was required of him during his early employment as a piano accompanist to silent films. The player, caught between receiving stimuli in the form of a film and providing it in the form of music, has his eyes on the film, on the piano, and on the audience—perhaps only partially on anything 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 turns to writing, it will be in the same mode, only now the plant has replaced the movie screen. Now, as then, he somehow knows that he cannot fix his gaze on the object lest it wither under his stare. In his manifesto of non-explanation of his creative sources, Hernández defers his own attention and that of the reader towards a meditation on the nature of attention itself, and the ways in which seemingly unintentional, yet necessary, lapses of attention can affect the development of the creative object that finally emerges. We see here an example of “creation in distraction”—a poetics of inattention—as the continual deferral of attention, both on the part of the writer and on the part of the plant inside him, is the means by which writing emerges. Writing, for Hernández’s creative subject, is not the product of a Romantic notion of “inspiration” or a Realist project to “represent” anything, but rather a spontaneous, random occurrence out of the control of both the writer and the plant-origin within him, and can only emerge in conditions in which eyes are averted, attention is divided, and intentionality is disavowed. The figure of the writer becomes the figure of the piano accompanist in the cinema, and Benjamin’s new form of perception which abandons contemplation is now seen not only in terms of reception of a work of art, but also in terms of its very creation.

Attentive Capture and Release in Clarice Lispector

Lispector’s work often explores worlds that are tinged with ambivalent feelings towards persons and objects, with narrators or protagonists who are conflicted about whether or not to try and capture something or someone, in order to turn them into material for artistic representation. This dynamic is quite different from that which is found in Fernández and Hernández; for them,

the problem lies in a sense that the writing subjects do not believe themselves capable of writing. In Fernández, the “mental blankness” professed by the writing subject is a way to retreat from responsibility for any possible criticisms; if the writer openly states that he is inept at writing, then he cannot be blamed for its quality. The author is almost a hapless bystander in the process of literary creation. In Hernández, the writing subject disavows responsibility for the literary product that emerges as well: as he sees it, his role is to be a conduit through which writing emerges, but plays no part in controlling any aspect of the final product. All that he can do is get out of the way and make sure not to impede the development of the literature that will flow from his pen. In both of these cases, the writing subject adopts a stance that echoes the Surrealists’ experiments with automatic writing; however, what sets them apart from the Surrealist project is that they, unlike the Surrealists, do not expect automatic writing to provide authentic access to the unconscious unimpeded by the constraints of reason. While the Surrealists’ automatic writing gains its meaning from its ability to provide a glimpse into the subject’s unfettered unconscious, in Fernández and Hernández, this automatic-style writing (while never referenced as such) does not involve any ostensible interest in the inner life of the writing subject. These authors are so decentered that not even their unconscious are a part of the process of writing. This kind of decentering calls into question the idea of meaning: where is the meaning coming from? Or is meaning even a goal being pursued? Such questions are raised but left unanswered.

In Lispector’s work, there is a similar decentering of the writing subject, but the manner and the possibilities of her form of decentering, are rather different. Whereas in Fernández and Hernández, the problem seems to be one of competence, in Lispector the writing subject struggles to commit fully to the written product, not because of a sense of not being “good enough” but rather because of a profound ambivalence towards the creator/product dynamic.

There is a sense that the writing subject *could* take full control of the narrative, but chooses to remain in a blurred, non-committal space between passive and active participation. Where Fernández and Hernández adopt Surrealism’s automatic writing subject but revoke his or her centrality to the writing process, Lispector suggests that the entire writing process—the whole endeavor of attempting to represent something through language—may best be dispensed with altogether. Neither totally central nor totally displaced, Lispector’s writing subject hesitates, alternately capturing and releasing control and the will to create meaning. One compelling case of this dynamic is found in Lispector’s posthumously-published novel *Um sopro de vida* [*A Breath of Life*] (1978). Not only is *Um sopro* ambivalent about how to begin (or if to even begin at all), as we have seen earlier in this study,²⁶ but it also chronicles a writer’s struggle with language. Sometimes the writer takes over language and uses it for representation. Sometimes language takes over the writer and expresses itself without his control. Whereas Fernández and Hernández show writing subjects who have already renounced control over their writing, Lispector dramatizes a confrontation between writing subject and language, where the writer cannot decide whether or not to fully surrender creative agency. What we see in the novel, then, is a process by which an artist becomes his art, is overcome by his art, and is caught in a push-pull encounter with attention, oscillating between focus and drift.

As we saw earlier, *Um sopro* tells the tale of a man, who calls himself the “Author,” who is engaged in the process of writing a character, a woman named Ângela Pralini. The “Author” spends much of the book talking about his writing method, and thus the book ends up being the chronicle of his writing process more than any product that could result from it. The “Author” states that he is not in control of the words that appear on the page, and does not want to be:

²⁶ See Chapter 1, “Deferred Beginnings.”

“Faço o possível para escrever por acaso” [“I do everything possible to write by chance”], he says; “[E]u quero que a frase aconteça” [“I want the phrase to happen”] (Lispector, *Um sopra* 31; *A Breath* 24). He wants to allow the written product to be governed, as much as possible, by chance, recalling the Dadaists’ experiments with automatic writing (Hopkins 69). Being surprised by what flows from the pen is the central purpose of his writing: “O principal a que eu quero chegar é surpreender-me a mim mesmo com o que escrevo” [“The main thing I want to reach is to surprise myself with what I write”], he insists (Lispector, *Um sopra* 71; *A Breath* 64).

Later, the “Author” repeats this same idea, even suggesting that the act of writing holds no interest for him unless he can be surprised by its results: “Só me interessa escrever quando eu me surpreendo com o que escrevo” [“I’m only interested in writing when I surprise myself with what I write”] (90; 85). Importantly, the Author desires to be surprised by himself—he does not want to be surprised by something outside himself, necessarily, but rather by something that emerges from within him, a part of his own self that is unknown to him. In order to surprise himself, he creates an alter ego, Ângela. By creating her, he is externalizing the internal, creating a reflection of his own subjectivity in order to contemplate it—or be contemplated by it. And just as Ângela is the alter ego of the “Author,” in a *mise-en-abyme* sequence, the “Author” can be read as the alter ego of Lispector. However, in her case, she was never able to contemplate her creation in its final form, as *Um sopra* was published after her death. Thus, her own externalization of her internal experience is forever suspended, the subject never arriving at the encounter with its alter ego.

When the “Author”’s creation, Ângela, also expresses the desire to write, he advises her: “comece sem ligar para nada” [“start without paying too much attention”] (32; 25). A state of focused attention, then, blocks the creative act. As the “Author” goes on to clarify,

Eu também não sei não-pensar. Acontece sem esforço. Só é difícil quando procuro obter essa escuridão silenciosa. Quando estou distraído, caio na sombra e no oco e no doce e no macio nada-de-mim. [...] Concentro-me sem visar nenhum objeto—e sinto-me tomado por uma luz. [...] Quando eu penso, estrago tudo. É por isso que evito pensar: só vou mesmo é indo. [...] Se eu penso, uma coisa não se faz, não acontece. Uma coisa que na certa é livre de ir enquanto não for aprisionada pelo pensamento. (35)

Neither do I know how to not-think. It happens without effort. It's only hard when I try to obtain that silent darkness. When I'm distracted, I fall into shadow and into the hollow and into the sweet and into the smooth nothing-of-me. [...] I concentrate without any object in mind—and I feel myself taken by a light. [...] When I think, I ruin everything. That's why I avoid thinking: all I really do is go on going on. [...] If I think, a thing doesn't turn up, I don't happen. A thing that certainly is free to go as long as it's not imprisoned by thought. (28)

Here, we see the clear connection between distraction (“to not think”) and the “nothing-of-me.”

As North observes, distraction also means letting go of the self. Also, we see that thought “imprisons” creativity and stalls the flow of writing. Literature, then, is not the product of knowledge, but actually the result of not knowing; it comes about simply by “escrevendo às apalpadelas” [“writing by groping along”] without a clear intention, in distraction, letting go of the self (30; 23). It is also significant that the “Author” describes his writing using the term “às apalpadelas,” which means to grope or fumble, but in a way that is hesitant and cautious.

This notion of hesitation and caution is explored in even greater depth in an earlier novel *Água viva* [*The Stream of Life*]²⁷ (1973), which was the only manuscript Lispector hesitated to publish (Moser 318). It is a novel that reads as if it were totally improvised, and yet Lispector rewrote it several times and even had her friend, Olga Borelli, help her structure it (317). While the title connotes water and life, the term “água viva” also means “jellyfish” in Portuguese; the image of the jellyfish in the novel's title hints at the back-and-forth movements that will

²⁷ The novel has been translated as *The Stream of Life*, but the translation used in this study is the most recent one (translated by Stephen Tobler and published in 2012), which leaves the title in Portuguese.

characterize the text. Soft, slippery, and seemingly “spineless,” this jellyfish text is fragmentary and non-linear; as Moser describes it, the book “can be opened at any page, just as a painting can be viewed from any angle” (320). It has no external borders, though many internal ones (Cixous 15). The tension between hardness and softness, between control and renunciation, and between a present subjectivity and an absent one, are illustrated in how the novel came into being; though it appears to be simply a series of improvised fragments which bear little relation to one another, in fact the text is not random at all, and was subjected to “relentless revision” by Lispector (Moser 320).

Água viva chronicles the affective ambivalence of a subject balanced between desire and renunciation. The novel is somewhat similar to *Um sopro* in that it tells the story of an individual who is engaged in the process of writing a text; in *Água viva*, however, the writer is an unnamed woman who is engaged in writing a single, extended monologue addressing a second-person “you.” This monologue is made up of hundreds of short fragments which contain meditations on many different topics, among them the relationship between sensation and artistic expression, and especially the tension between the “appropriation” of meaning involved in focusing attention and the renunciation of meaning associated with inattentiveness. As we will see, the narrator seeks meaning, and when she thinks she has found it, she releases it, allowing herself to dissolve into it and awaiting the next process of capture and release. This allows her to exist on the edge of writing, poised between actively capturing meaning in language and letting go of all control while the text writes itself through her. But unlike the writing subjects we see in Fernández and Hernández, who have given up control, Lispector’s writer stays in this grey area, capturing and releasing, oscillating between active and passive involvement in the writing process.

On the first page, the narrator introduces her project to the reader. As she tells us, it is an artistic project intended to capture what is either not capturable or only temporarily so: “Eu te digo: estou tentando captar a quarta dimensão do instante-já que de tão fugido não é mais porque agora tornou-se um novo instante-já que também não é mais. Cada coisa tem um instante em que ela é. Quero apossar-me do *é* da coisa” [“Let me tell you: I’m trying to seize the fourth dimension of the instant-now so fleeting that it’s already gone because it’s already become a new instant-now that’s also already gone. Everything has an instant in which it is. I want to grab hold of the *is* of the thing”] (Lispector, *Água Viva* 9-10; *Água Viva* 3). In a stream-of-consciousness style, she proceeds to chronicle the struggle of capturing in language the fleeting present-tense of experience, which can never be entirely successful, as it cannot be pinned down in language. From the very beginning, then, she is clear in her intention to devote herself to an impossible task: capturing the uncapturable. The fact that this is an impossible endeavor does not prevent her from trying; indeed, it is perhaps the task’s impossibility that makes her want to do it, since it will be guaranteed not to be successful. It is a project that is doomed from the start, yet she insists, and persists.

Why pursue an impossible endeavor such as this? The writing subject has assigned herself a task that she will never successfully complete. It is a result of her desire, which she states repeatedly; it is an active choice on her part. And, I contend, this choice represents a profound ambivalence about literary creation: on one hand, she wants to use language to capture meaning, but on the other hand she also shrinks from her own possessive impulse. By showing that writing cannot ever fully capture “the *is*” of an object, the protagonist strips writing of its authority, of its power to represent ideas and objects. Once writing has lost this power, she is free to do with it as she pleases.

Revoking writing's authority also means letting go of the self: if writing is impossible, then the writing subject must be as well. This allows the subject the freedom to be unencumbered by the responsibility of representing experience through language. The protagonist seems to almost enjoy her withdrawal from active subjectivity, as it provides a kind of protection: "E eu vivo de lado—lugar onde a luz central não me cresta" ["I live to the side—a place where the central light doesn't burn me"] (84; 63). Occupying the center, the position of control, would also mean being exposed to this light that "burns"; it seems preferable to remain in the shadows. She has sought to de-center herself this way; it is something that she has carried out with purpose: "Descolei-me de mim" ["I unglued myself from me"], she tells us, insisting that "quero a desarticulação, só assim sou eu no mundo. Só assim me sinto bem" ["I want disarticulation, only then am I in the world. Only then do I feel right"] (99, 100; 75). Feeling good is associated with a renunciation of wholeness and stability of self. Non-being is a kind of freedom.

Like the author-narrator in Fernández's *Museo*, the narrator of *Água viva* professes an inability to write, calling her writing the work of someone who is incapable: "Este é a palavra de quem não pode" ["This is the word of someone who cannot"] (40; 27). And someone who cannot write, but writes anyway, produces a pseudo-book: "Escrevo-te este facsímile de livro, o livro de quem não sabe escrever; mas é que no domínio mais leve da fala quase não sei falar" ["I'm writing you this facsimile of a book, a book by someone who doesn't know how to write; but that's because in the lightest realm of speaking I almost don't know how to speak"] (65; 48, translation modified). She claims no control over language, in written or spoken form; any words she produces—which she is producing as we read it—can only be a "facsimile," never authentic. And just as Fernández's narrator states that his book is going to be "eminently sloppy," Lispector's states that her writing is muddled. Notably, while Fernández's narrator speaks of his

narrative always in the future tense, as something that will have certain qualities, Lispector's speaks in the present and the present progressive. This creates the feeling that she is in the middle of writing as we are reading her.

The narrator is almost apologetic to her reader about the messiness of her writing: “Escrevo-te em desordem, bem sei. [...] Mas escrever para mim é frustrador: ao escrever lido com o impossível” [“I write to you in disorder, I well know. [...] But writing for me is frustrating; when I'm writing I'm dealing with the impossible”] (87; 65). Clearly, writing is a struggle for the protagonist—not just the act itself, but the acceptance that she is engaging in it. The frustration she demonstrates may stem from her inability, or refusal, to claim ownership over the words she is producing. She cannot decide if she is responsible for the poor writing, and thus sorry about it, or if the writing has come out of her without her conscious participation. As she affirms, her writing belongs to no one, and the liberation inherent in that fact can be positive or negative: “Sim, o que te escrevo não é de ninguém. E essa liberdade de ninguém é muito perigosa. É como o infinito que tem cor de ar” [“Yes, what I'm writing you is nobody's. And this nobody's freedom is very dangerous. It is like the infinite that has the color of air”] (100; 76). The impossible, the infinite: for Lispector's protagonist, engaging in writing means engaging extremes and absolutes—something from which she continually shies away.

Forever describing her writing process and assessing her writing abilities, the narrator never gets around to telling a real “story” in any traditional sense. Lingered in the frustration caused by the imposing absolutes of the impossible and the infinite, the narrator stalls for as long as she can, avoiding confrontation with these extremes. Along with ambivalence, it is frustration—a weak and perhaps seemingly unproductive affect—that lies behind the writing in *Água viva*. The book is not about overcoming this frustration but rather dwelling in it.

The writing that flows from Lispector's narrator is improvised, and its meaning is unclear even to her. "[E]stou improvisando" ["I'm improvising"], she insists; she is simply letting the words come out as they will (26; 16). She admits that she does not even know what she is writing about, and this lack of knowledge about her writing is echoed in a lack of knowledge about herself: "Não sei sobre o que estou escrevendo: sou obscura para mim mesma" ["I don't know what I'm writing about: I am obscure to myself"] (27; 17). By stating that she is "obscure" to herself, she is associating her own subjectivity with the production of the writing that is emerging; indeed, though she seems to be seeking an authorless writing, her selfhood cannot help but reveal its presence. And this self is, as she describes it, "implicit" instead of "explicit": "Sou implícita. E quando vou me explicitar perco a úmida intimidade" ["I am implicit. And when I start to make myself explicit I lose the humid intimacy"] (29; 18, translation modified). Focusing directly on the self ruins the writing process; the self must not make its presence so clearly known but rather remain "obscure" and "implicit."

With the appearance of the term "implicit," we begin to see a method to this writing: the narrator has a choice of whether to take center stage or remain on the sidelines, whether to make herself "explicit" or remain "implicit." In order to write, she remains "implicit"; in a process similar to the interaction of Hernández's writer and plant, here the conscious I absents itself for a period of time, and in that interval the writing takes place. When the conscious self returns or becomes "present" once more, it is incapable of fully understanding or explaining the writing that has been produced. The narrator describes her role in the process as passive, even though the words are technically her own: "Não dirijo nada. Nem as minhas próprias palavras" ["I direct nothing. Not even my own words"] (40; 27). The words simply emerge, and then she reads them and, although she claims them as her own, she is not really their author. This role she has

assigned herself, as passive channel through which words flow, is one that she seems to view in a positive light: “Mas não é triste: é humildemente alegre. Eu, que vivo de lado, sou à esquerda de quem entra. E estremece em mim o mundo” [“But it’s not sad: it’s humbly happy. I, who live off to the side, am to the left of whoever enters. And within me trembles the world”] (40; 27, translation modified). She takes a certain pleasure in this authorial absence, this living “off to the side.” And as this passage suggests, hers is, paradoxically, a position of power, as the world is contained within her. This is a curious combination of self-effacing humbleness (“humbly happy”) and an almost megalomaniacal sense of importance (“within me trembles the world”). Once again, the writing subject is poised between the will to possession and renunciation, between attention and inattention, between passive and active postures.

At one point, the narrator makes an almost direct reference to Surrealist automatic writing, an undeniable avant-garde influence that Lispector transforms and deploys in a different way. The narrator tells us: “Agora vou escrever ao correr da mão: não mexo no que ela escrever. Esse é um modo de não haver defasagem entre o instante e eu: ajo no âmago do próprio instante. Mas de qualquer modo há alguma defasagem. [...] Confio na minha incompreensão que tem me dado vida liberta do entendimento” [“Now I’m going to write wherever my hand leads: I won’t fiddle with whatever it writes. This is a way to have no lag between the instant and I: I act in the core of the instant. But there’s still some lag. [...] I trust in my own incomprehension that gives me life free of understanding”] (63-64; 46-47). There are two key elements to this statement: the emphasis on the “lag” between herself and the “instant” to be expressed through writing, and the value placed on incomprehension. In terms of the “lag,” it is noteworthy that she is not attempting to eradicate it, as a Surrealist would, in order to ensure that conscious reason has as little influence over the written product as possible. Unlike the Surrealists, Lispector does not

want unimpeded access to the unconscious. Lispector's narrator is not just letting her hand write what it will; she is also giving up the "authenticity" that this writing may communicate. She rejects what Benjamin describes as bourgeois individual contemplation, which could be translated into a Romantic-influenced artist creating through sustained contemplation; at the same time, she withdraws from the Surrealists' use of distracted attention as a way to access some kind of psychological truth. She commits to neither.

At the same time, Lispector's narrator prizes her own incomprehension. She is, pointedly, uninterested in trying to interpret her writing process or the product that emerges. Not only is she an absentminded writer—she is also a disinterested reader. Unlike the Surrealists, she is not looking for any meaning in the writing that comes out of her. As Cixous has commented, in *Água viva* there are no codes; there is no key to be found, no message to be deciphered (15). The written product does not stand for something else; it is simply itself. This noncommittal, detached stance is a source of liberation for her: she is "free of understanding," free from having to attempt to account for the writing that she produces. Thus, not only is the writer's attention averted during the process of creation; she chooses not to participate in a hermeneutic activity, preferring instead to remain ignorant. This ignorance, this detachment from any interest in understanding what she has written, somehow also allows her to keep writing.

Instead of attempting to understand what she is writing, the narrator focuses her energies on contemplating what is happening to her own selfhood while she writes:

O que sou neste instante? Sou uma máquina de escrever fazendo ecoar as teclas secas na úmida e escura madrugada. Há muito que não sou gente. Quiseram que eu fosse um objeto. Sou um objeto. Objeto sujo de sangue. Sou um objeto que cria outros objetos e a máquina cria a nós todos. Ela exige. O mecanicismo exige e exige a minha vida. Mas eu não obedeço totalmente: se tenho que ser um objeto, que seja um objeto que grita. Há uma coisa dentro de mim que dói. Ah como dói e como grita pedindo socorro. Mas faltam lágrimas na máquina que sou. Sou um objeto sem destino. Sou um objeto nas mãos de quem? tal é meu destino humano. O que me salva é grito. Eu protesto em nome do que está dentro do objeto atrás do atrás do pensamento-sentimento. Sou um objeto urgente. (104)

What am I in this instant? I am a typewriter making the dry keys echo in the dark and humid early hours. For a long time I haven't been people. They wanted me to be an object. I'm an object. An object dirty with blood. That creates other objects and the typewriter creates all of us. It demands. The mechanism demands and demands my life. But I don't obey totally: if I must be an object let it be an object that screams. There's a thing inside me that hurts. Ah how it hurts and how it screams for help. But tears are missing in the typewriter that I am. I'm an object without destiny. I am an object in whose hands? such is my human destiny. What saves me is the scream. I protest in the name of whatever is inside the object beyond the beyond the thought-feeling. I am an urgent object. (78-79, translation modified)

This key passage combines a number of ideas about writing and subjectivity. First of all, the writer states that she is not a person but rather a typewriter—an object. She reveals that she has not been a person for a long time. Someone or something wanted her to become an object, and she did. Suddenly, however, she removes herself from the typewriter's will, characterizing it as something that “creates all of us”; having said that she is a typewriter, she then refers to it as something outside her, imposing demands on her. Again, the protagonist lingers in that in-between space, now between subject and object. She combines the human element of blood with a machine-like “mechanicism”; the struggle here is now between the human and the non-human. Rather than choose a side, the narrator wants to remain in the middle, casting herself as an object, but one that has human attributes, “that screams.”

Notably, this situation is described as taking place in the early morning hours, a liminal period where the boundaries between things are not as clear. There are forces that wanted her to

be an object, though she does not specify who or what they are. And now she asserts that she has become an object, specifically one with the power to create, though perhaps not the power to decide what is created or how. She is part of a series of associations beyond herself, as the object that she is “creates other objects” and she is both human and non-human, both an object in someone’s hands and someone with a “human destiny.” Thus, while she is turning away from a humanized subjectivity and drifting into the position of an object who is both created and a source of further creation, she is not entirely passive, and has not arrived at an entirely nonhuman subjectivity. Rather, following the dynamic at work throughout the novel, she oscillates between positions of assertiveness and passiveness, between presence and absence, and between capture and release of human consciousness. As she makes clear, “I don’t obey totally.” While accepting her position as object, her acceptance comes with a “scream” and a “protest.”

Once again, however, she abruptly contradicts herself: having wanted to avoid choosing, she finally does, describing her experience as “my human destiny,” thus seeming to identify herself with the human side. However, she both expresses and negates her own human affect, stating that she is a typewriter with no tears to shed, although there is something inside her that “hurts” and “screams for help.” But at the same time, it is this “scream,” this extreme display of affect, that “saves” her. The narrator of *Água viva* oscillates between wanting to assert control and wanting to let go and float in an object state, while writing takes place through her. The notion of the active object, variously powerless and in control, is an apt description of the creative subjectivity involved in the “poetics of inattention” I have been describing. Committing neither to full capture nor to full release, it is a subjectivity that claims only partial responsibility for the writing that emerges.

Ambivalence about writing both constitutes the creative act and disavows its power to represent experience. The resulting text emerges through the renunciation of creative agency; it is a text that affirms and denies itself at the same time. The governing principles of the text are the competing impulses of “capture” and “appropriation,” leading to a literary expression whose capture of experience is partial and fleeting, with no possibility of stable appropriation (Cixous 16). The book’s fragments appear, by turns, connected and disparate; passages seem to be organized either at random or as part of an overarching logic. It is, in fact, a writing method that “proceeds by distraction and association” (42). Its purpose, I argue, is to perform the ambivalence felt by a writing subject who wants to exert mastery over the representation of experience, while also feeling pulled towards renunciation, the temptation to withdraw into the self while affect speaks. While Fernández’s writer has accepted his mental “blankness” and Hernández’s narrator has cast himself as a sidelong observer of the emergence of his own art, Lispector’s writing subject remains poised in the blurry space between active and passive, subject and object, human passion and machine-like indifference; the writing that emerges is particularly conflicted, hesitant, halting, and ambivalent.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the texts analyzed above, this technique that I call a “poetics of inattention” is an approach to writing that cultivates unintentionality and distracted states, putting the writing subject in the back seat and letting all of the ambivalence and contradictions of affect emerge through language. In this scenario, the artist seems to vacate the position of mastery over the process of literary expression, purposely leaving that position empty. Decentered, his or her subjectivity “loosened” as Benjamin would call it, the writer observes with detachment the

process through which writing materializes, not quite able to comprehend its full meaning and not even necessarily particularly interested in understanding it. Here, literary “meaning” ceases to be a goal, just as linguistic “representation” is avoided and the idea of the author as wielding control over intentionality disappears. What occurs, instead, is a production of possibilities for meaning or non-meaning, and a refusal to attempt to solidify signification. By allowing the subject to drift in and out of self-presence—even cultivating doubt about the mere possibility of self-presence—inattention results in texts with porous borders between self and other, writer and text, meaning and nonsense. Within these porous spaces, new possibilities for perception are free to develop, outside the constraints of what is considered to be a legitimate creative act. Here, the avant-garde’s artist is decentered, his or her centrality left just out of reach. Creation becomes an ambivalent process in which the decentered artist is semi-passive, semi-active, and not always physically and mentally “present.” With this decentering, the concept of authority in authorship is disavowed, as writing begins to emerge around, above, through, and over the author.

CHAPTER 3

UNFINISHED NARRATIVES

Introduction

Up until now, we have seen how Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector demonstrate the processes by which writing subjects negotiate the beginnings and middles of their literary creations. In the works I have examined so far, we have seen their author-characters defer and avoid, for as long as possible, the actual beginning of their entry into the world of literary discourse. It seems, from this dynamic of deferral, that these author-characters are wrestling with deep ambivalence about what it means to become an author, to make that entrance into the literary world, which once done cannot be taken back. What has been published cannot be un-published, no matter how much an author may try to cover up its existence.²⁸ Similarly, once writing has begun, its beginning no longer postponed, the author-characters created by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector try to avoid taking responsibility for the words that appear on the page, favoring states of distraction or attitudes of renunciation, ceding the “presence” of authorship to other forces, be they other characters or simply whatever comes out of their unattended pens. The author-characters who populate these works always have their attention elsewhere. If it is at the beginning, then they focus on the moment just prior to the beginning, stretching these seconds and minutes as far as possible so as to remain ever on the brink of writing something. And when the work has finally begun, when writing has begun to take place despite all attempts to delay it, then these author-characters do all they can to close off its progress, often through deliberate inaction. In all of these instances, the author-character’s

²⁸ One example that springs to mind is Jorge Luis Borges’s total disavowal, later in life, of his 1925 book *Inquisiciones*.

consciousness is never fully present in the temporal, physical, emotional, or intellectual moment of creation. Creation happens elsewhere, at another time, in another space, through the will of something other than the character who is writing. Such writing, by its very nature, tends to be fragmented; not only does it have no clear beginning, but it also lacks a clear ending. In many instances, the writing simply stops, the narrating voice suddenly disappears, and the reader is left without any sense of resolution.

In his article “Felisberto Hernández: La dilación de un comienzo” [“Felisberto Hernández: The Delay of a Beginning”], Argentine critic Jorge Monteleone meditates not only on the importance of beginnings for Hernández’s work, but also on the essential role played by literary endings and on the author’s evasion of them. Monteleone’s analysis could apply just as well to the work of Fernández and Lispector, who also work to avoid closure in their narratives. This evasion stems from a desire to avoid totality and finality, as certainties that do not appeal to a writer who is more comfortable exploring the murkier territories of ambivalence. Indeed, as he notes, one of the reasons why beginnings are so fraught in Hernández’s work is precisely the fact that a beginning presupposes an eventual end. How to begin without having the specter of the end looming throughout the entire narrative? And how to end in a way that does not mean loss, death, oblivion? Monteleone describes Hernández’s “ideal ending”:

El fin ideal es aquel que no se espera, el que surge como si fuera otra cosa, no el temido ni el deseado sino lo que de hecho no parece un fin, sino una mera interrupción, un hecho suspendido, apenas un hiato: hasta la agonía es preferible al final. Como algo que se inicia no puede ser finalizado hasta que se cumpla por completo y como esa totalidad es una condena, el mejor modo de enfrentar la estructura es la digresión o el fragmento. La digresión, el desvío asegura que el objetivo no sea alcanzado nunca; lo fragmentario, lo inacabado es la promesa o la entrevisión de una totalidad, por anhelada, siempre diferida. (Monteleone 7)

The ideal ending is that which is not expected, that which surfaces as if were something else, not the feared nor the desired but rather that which in fact does not seem to be an ending but instead a mere interruption, a suspended event, merely a hiatus: even agony is preferable to the ending. Just as something that begins cannot be ended until it has been totally completed and since that totality spells doom, the best way to confront structure is through digression or fragment. Digression, the sidetrack, ensures that the objective is never attained; what is fragmented, what is unfinished, is the promise or the glimpse of a totality that, being longed for, is forever deferred. (Monteleone 7)

The best kind of literary ending, then, is one that masquerades as something else. Rather than ending, Monteleone observes, Hernández prefers to just interrupt, to merely suspend—thus leaving open the possibility that the narrative could be picked up again at any moment, assuring reader and author alike that the story is not *really* over.

In this chapter, we move on from beginnings and middles to focus on literary endings—a progression whose linearity Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector themselves would perhaps seek to scramble. Certain key works by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector remained unfinished at the time of their deaths; more often than not, these works remained unfinished not by accident but for some other reason originating with their authors.²⁹ As we will see, the attitude towards literary endings that Monteleone observes in the work of Hernández is also present in Fernández and Lispector. With Monteleone’s perspective in mind, I discuss Macedonio Fernández’s major life project, the “twin novels” *El museo de la novela de la Eterna (primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna’s Novel (First Good Novel)*], and *Adriana Buenos Aires (última novela mala)* [*Adriana Buenos Aires (Last Bad Novel)*] which he began writing in the 1920s and which he spent the rest of his life revising and reworking, but which were never published during his life, appearing posthumously in 1967 and 1974 respectively. I also analyze

²⁹ Well-known unfinished texts include Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, Honoré de Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine* series, and Gustave Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. It is notable that these canonical authors’ unfinished works do not tend to be studied in terms of their unfinished status, but rather are treated as wholes.

Felisberto Hernández's novella-memoir "Tierras de la memoria" ["Lands of Memory"] (1965) which he began in 1944 but abandoned twenty years before his death and never wished to publish in any completed form. Finally, I examine Clarice Lispector's final novel, *Um sopro de vida (pulsações)* [*A Breath of Life (Pulsations)*] (1978), which was unfinished at the time of her death, and whose final form was shaped by a friend. In these texts, the authors' "poetics of inattention" comes to its logical conclusion: they literally disappear before the narrative emerges, in a culmination of the distancing mechanisms that have characterized their writing lives—and afterlives.

I read this act of distancing as a deliberate one, used as a way of attempting to exert control over life and art. Artists who are not altogether certain that they want to be artists, or that they want their art to be seen by anyone, wrestle with competing urges to both act and recoil from action. We have seen this dynamic in action in the fraught literary beginnings of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, where their author-characters could not decide whether or not to really begin, always remaining on the cusp of a full entrance into the literary world. As we will see in this chapter, this ambivalence about whether or not to write, whether or not to embark on the journey of becoming an artist, becomes even more arduous when faced with the prospect of concluding a work. Just as beginning a text represents entry into a kind of inescapable contract with the literary world, in which one becomes an author and speaks to potential readers, ending one means silencing that literary voice, deciding when to be silent. The looming possibility of literary endings reveals the profoundly autobiographical nature of the literary ambivalence we have observed running through the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector. When we analyze works that had been left unfinished at the time of these authors' deaths, no longer are we simply observing the ambivalence of their writer-characters; we can now note a clear

relationship between the ambivalence shown by author-characters who contemplate ending a literary work and the real-life circumstances that led to these works remaining unfinished.

This chapter explores the place of the affect of ambivalence in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, a place that now goes beyond their reluctance to participate in the literary world, now including a more generalized uncertainty towards the indeterminacy of life itself and the relationship between life and art. As we will see, this ambivalence, both about participation in the literary world and about larger questions of life, death, and art, is highly productive, leading not only to literary creation but also to a profound critique of the status of life and art, the apparent permanence of the former and the fleeting nature of the latter. In the pages that follow, I argue that certain unfinished works by these three authors provide unique insight into a view of authorship that is demonstrated to be not only an aesthetic stance but also a highly personal and autobiographical statement. While it can surely be argued that everything these authors wrote was autobiographical to some degree, it is undeniable that these texts unite an autobiographical sensibility with an unfinished form, and these two elements, read together, have a very specific meaning in terms of these writers' perspectives on authorship and the concept of literary legacy. These unfinished texts constitute acts of what Lynette Felber calls "self-memorialization" (49).³⁰

Abandoned early texts, texts revised ceaselessly until death stops the revision process, and texts written in fragmented form while knowingly in the process of dying—in these three distinct manifestations, we see a single dynamic in which these writers wrestle with ambivalence about making definitive statements, closing off a text's potential to continue indefinitely, and in

³⁰ Writing about the English author Rebecca West and her unfinished ("aborted") last novel, *Mild Silver, Furious Gold*, Felber comments that the writer "resembles Robert Browning's bishop who orders his tomb: she wanted to control her own life and her image after death" through her unfinished novel and personal papers (49). Through these fragmented texts, West attempts to "shape the story herself" (49).

so doing, leaving something both permanent and, in some way, dead. In all three cases, a resistance to closure is a manifestation of ambivalence about what it means to leave a literary legacy, and at the same time it is an attempt to exert some measure of control over such a legacy, which the writers realize is inevitable, whether they participate actively in its creation or not. Thus, once again, we observe the ambivalent dynamic of push-pull, with the authors and their author-characters (now even more clearly their autobiographical representatives), oscillating between wanting to control the narrative and wanting to let the narrative write itself through them. In these self-reflexive, autobiographically-inflected texts, the authors dramatize the struggle between their poetics of inattention and their desire for control over their work. Once again, their profound ambivalence about authorship comes to the fore, now in their oscillation between wanting to take their poetics of inattention to its logical conclusion—the unfinished work—and wanting to control how their work will live on after them.

Literature and Life

In his book *Victorian Unfinished Novels: The Imperfect Page* (2012), Saverio Tomaiuolo explores the relationship between literary endings and life. In his exploration of a series of Victorian novels that remained unfinished at the time of their authors' deaths, Tomaiuolo finds that the idea of something left unfinished is especially compelling in the Victorian context, as it is a time period when the novel is based on "self-conscious structural organization," part of a "specific worldview that offered a surrogate idea of order against the social, cultural, religious and ideological disorder menacing Victorian certainties" (11). Thus the idea of closure in novels was a way of remedying the perceived instability of real life. This same desire for closure is not as dominant in the avant-garde and post-avant-garde literary world; indeed, instability in a text is

in fact a way of reflecting the instability of the individual subject and the world he/she inhabits. The relationship between literature and life remains constant, however: literary representation is used to make a particular statement about real life. Tomaiuolo conceives of unfinished novels as “literary empty spaces,” which often “resemble and (unintentionally) imitate life more than finished novels aspire to do,” as they cannot help but be bound by the open-ended, unfinished nature of life itself (17, 19). While this was perhaps undesirable in the Victorian era, it is attractive and compelling to avant-garde and post-avant-garde writers—open-endedness is transformed from threat to promise, as artists seek to break free from the constraints of traditional artistic forms, embracing forms such as the fragment as legitimate artistic expressions.

Tomaiuolo specifies two particular issues that affect the unfinished text. First, the fact that it is unfinished means that it has a beginning but not an end, and thus it is so open that it can invite a limitless amount of interpretations, which can devolve into interpretive anarchy. Second, the fact that it is unfinished also means that it was most likely not revised, and thus the fragments or components of the narrative that we do have do not represent finished products but rather drafts in various stages of development and revision (18). Both of these issues, which would pose problems for Victorian-era readers and writers alike, find themselves included as part of the literary agendas of writers like Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector. Fragmented literary forms and open, permeable beginnings and endings are just two instances where indeterminacy is made into part of a literary project by these avant-garde and post-avant-garde writers.

The aspect of Tomaiuolo’s analysis that is the most relevant for the present study is the autobiographical connection that he makes, between an unfinished text and real life. For him, unfinished works offer special material for “reading life through what literature offers us” (19). A text that remains unfinished, lacking the author’s final signature and approval, has a

particularly not-quite-authorized status; like real life, its end seems haphazard and unplanned, leaving open questions about what might have been. For Tomaiuolo, unfinished texts have a special relationship with real life because they do not end like narratives but like lives themselves—unfinished: “The actual experience of reading unfinished novels may thus be compared with that of facing death, because all of us are destined to become, someday and somehow, ‘unfinished’ subjects” (19).

This complex relationship between life and art is not only apparent in unfinished works and autobiographical texts, but also informs the process by which a writer turns his or her own life into art. The very process of self-representation complicates the relationship between life and its artistic form. In *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993), Jacques Derrida observes that the gesture of self-portraiture combines self-contemplation and self-representation, two acts that cannot be carried out simultaneously. The subject creating a self-portrait finds him- or herself in a momentary state of blindness, forced to rely on memory to draw the self-portrait. In this moment, the self withdraws into the realm of memory: “There is [...] a sort of *re-drawing*, a *with-drawing*, or *retreat* [*re-trait*], at once the interposition of a mirror, an impossible reappropriation or mourning, the intervention of a paradoxical Narcissus, sometimes lost *en abyme*, in short, a specular *folding* or *falling back* [*repli*] —and a supplementary *trait*” (*Memoirs* 3). This “folding or falling back” calls into question the very possibility of self-representation, suggesting that the attempt is carried out in a blind spot between seeing oneself and reconstructing oneself—an attempt that can never be fully achieved because of this original blind spot.

Thus, Derrida tells us, we must approach self-portraiture from a position of uncertainty and with some suspicion. If self-representation is a gesture carried out in blindness, then we

must question its possibility or the notion that it may have a clear origin; as he explains, “one must always say of the self-portrait: ‘if there were such a thing...,’ ‘if there remained anything of it.’ It is like a ruin that does not come after the work but remains produced, already from the origin [...]. In the beginning, at the origin, there was ruin” (65).³¹ What is problematized here is the possibility of an experience that comes before its representation. We tend to understand ruins as material manifestations of something that has passed; a trace of a memory or “what is left.” For Derrida, however, the ruin is itself the origin, or at least represents, in its fragmented form, the impossibility of clearly-determined origins.

In both self-portraiture and autobiography, there is an encounter between the pencil and the paper which produces an image, be it visual or linguistic; autobiography is a kind of linguistic self-portrait. And as in Derrida’s notion of self-portraiture, autobiography can also be seen as the product of this moment of blindness or glimpsing, fruit of an encounter with the “ruin” of the past that inhabits memory. Elsewhere, Derrida explores the space between perception and writing to propose that writing is a supplement to perception that occurs even before writing becomes visible to itself: “Writing supplements perception before perception even appears to itself [is conscious of itself]. ‘Memory’ or writing is the opening of that process of appearance itself. The perceived may be read only in the past, beneath perception and after it” (Derrida, “Freud” 224). This observation recalls Paul de Man’s comments on autobiography, where he suggests that autobiographical writing should be viewed not as a result of life experiences but rather as a living gesture that actively conditions and determines the life that it purports to represent (920). Autobiography conditions life, leading the

³¹ It is interesting to note that Rebecca West’s biographer, Carl Rollyson, refers to the author’s unfinished final novel as “her own Mayan ruin” (214; cited in Felber 39). Rollyson does not mention the connection that Derrida makes between self-representation and the concept of the ruin.

individual to live in the anticipation of his or her life experiences one day being represented in a text.

Few texts are as autobiographically meaningful—albeit often unintentionally so—as the unfinished work. This unfinished status lays bare the existence of a physically real author behind every text; a living body, a life being lived. A work may remain incomplete simply because the author died before finishing it; in other cases, a work may be abandoned, as the author moves on to some other project. Why would a writer want to leave a work unfinished? Simply a lack of interest? To communicate the vital link between art and life? Or to avoid the abyss that must follow the end of a work and the inevitable entry into literary silence? In other words, is leaving a work unfinished a way to avoid death? Or is it, perhaps, a way to attempt to exert some kind of control over this inevitable event? In every case, an unfinished work carries with it a message—intentional or unintentional—about its author. In the texts discussed in this chapter, the ambivalence that the fictional writing subject has displayed in other works takes on a new dimension; now, this ambivalence is a double one, manifested not only by the author-character who struggles to write, but also by the real author who, for one reason or another, never finished the text. What we observe is a dogged resistance to literary closure on both the real and fictional levels, or a blurring of the line between such distinctions as “real” and “fictional.”

Unfinished works have both literary and extra-literary resonances. They represent ambivalence about literary closure, as they do not “end” in any clear way; at the same time, they also express ambivalence about life itself, specifically the inevitability of the end of life. Whereas literary endings can be avoided, death cannot, and it is through death that even an unfinished text becomes “finished” even in its fragmented form: absent the author, no matter

how decentered, the text cannot grow or change beyond the death of the writing subject without the intervention of others. In this way, the affect of ambivalence brings together the act of writing and the act of living. Reading from the perspective of ambivalence reveals the indeterminacy and intricacy of the connections between life and art—connections that the works of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector allow us to probe.

For Fernández, resistance to literary closure is an attempt to extend life indefinitely through literature, as if the act of revising a text over and over again and never finishing it or publishing it could stave off real death of loved ones and even the self. In Fernández's *Museo de la novela de la Eterna (Primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna's Novel (First Good Novel)*] (1967), the "ruin" depicted by Derrida is the author-narrator himself, who admits that he holds little control over the ultimate outcome of the text that he is writing, but who nonetheless asks future readers and writers who may intervene in his texts to do as they please with it as long as some small part of his work remains. And what we read in the novel is actually quite close to the real outcome with the novel's publication: Fernández's text was not published as-is, but was given its final form by his son and literary executor, Adolfo Fernández de Obieta.³² Indeed, as the author character stated himself in the text, he did not have control over the final form of the novel, although clearly "something" has remained.

In the case of Hernández, the circumstances surrounding the unfinished status of the text are quite different. While Fernández's *Museo* was unfinished at the time of his death due to repeated revisions and rewriting, Hernández's "Tierras de la memoria" ["Lands of Memory"] (1965) remained unfinished due to the author's purported lack of interest in finishing it and

³² Indeed, as Todd S. Garth notes in *The Self of the City: Macedonio Fernández, the Argentine Avant-Garde, and Modernity in Buenos Aires* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2005), it was thanks to Adolfo Fernández de Obieta's "tireless efforts" that *Museo* was finally published in 1967, and its final form was "determined partly by Adolfo's editorial decisions" (Garth, *Self* 14).

publishing it as a completed work. It is highly autobiographical, but its autobiographical nature does not seem to be the reason for Hernández's lack of interest in publishing it in full form, as almost all of his *oeuvre* is tinged with autobiographical elements and references. Instead, what appears to be occurring in Hernández's unfinished text is an encounter between several versions of the author's self. The text provides several fragments that are told in the first person by the narrator-protagonist at different ages, but always in the past tense; thus, we see the protagonist at many different stages of life, but always through the filter of memory, which distances him (from himself or from the reader or both?). As the piece concludes, the dynamic of distancing that has been at play throughout the text comes to a head when we witness a near-miss encounter between two versions of the protagonist, and we understand that what is taking place is an avoidance and deferral of the meeting of two selves—the self as written and the self as writer.

Unlike the cases of Fernández and Hernández, Lispector's unfinished novel, *Um sopro de vida (pulsações)* [*A Breath of Life (Pulsations)*] (1978), was never completed because Lispector died before she could assemble it into a final form. Thus, unlike Fernández, who seemed to want to postpone the appearance of the text in print for as long as possible through decades of revisions, and Hernández, who was not even interested in finishing his unfinished text, which he abandoned untouched twenty years before his death, Lispector wanted very much to finish her narrative, and yet while she was writing it she was also aware that she was in the process of dying of cancer. The book was written "during Clarice's final, pain-wracked days" during which she was succumbing to her illness (Fitz, "Confession" 260). Thus, the text was written from a position that is totally different from those of the other two – while they also postpone their endings to the point that the texts are never "completed," Lispector's case

is the only one in which the physical death of the author was the only reason why the text was not published before her death. Not writing as a way to attempt immortality, nor writing to avoid an encounter with her authorial self, Lispector in *Um sopro* seems to be writing herself into the process of life and death, inscribing her own bodily disintegration into a text that ends up being itself fragmented, trailing off into an unfinished limbo.

While differing circumstances surround these individual unfinished works, in all three of these cases the avoidance of literary endings is yet another statement of profound ambivalence about authorship. In the pages that follow, I read their works' unfinished status as an ambivalent reaction to the connection between literature and life: on one hand, there is a desire to forestall the inevitability of death as represented by a work's closure; but on the other hand, there is also an impulse to abandon such control and let the work end as it will, or simply not end at all. At bottom, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector seem to be shying away from making any statement that could be considered "final": do not seem to know what kind of literary legacy they want to leave, if one must be left at all.

"Let something remain": Macedonio Fernández's Flight from Closure

While not known as an especially autobiographically-oriented writer, the very fact that Fernández entered the literary world was due to a traumatic life event, the sudden death of his wife, Elena de Obieta, in 1920. It was only after her death that Fernández abandoned his career as a lawyer, left his children with relatives, and embarked on a bohemian sort of life, "living in a succession of economical [...] boardinghouses in Buenos Aires, moving intermittently from place to place, abandoning pages and pages of writing he had been working on (Garth, *Self* 13). In 1921, with the return to Argentina of Jorge Luis Borges,

whose father had been a law school friend of Fernández's, his career of experimental literary activities began in earnest, in contact with, though also at a fair distance from, the *vanguardia* projects of Borges and his colleagues, all of whom were significantly younger than Fernández and who looked to him as something of a father figure and mentor (13).

In 1952, standing by the tomb at Fernández's funeral, Borges gave a speech in tribute to his friend. He stated: "Fue novelista, porque sintió que cada yo es único, como lo es cada rostro, aunque razones metafísicas lo indujeron a negar el yo. Metafísicas o de índole emocional, porque he sospechado que negó el yo para ocultarlo de la muerte, para que, no existiendo, fuera inaccesible a la muerte" ["He was a novelist, because he felt that each 'I' is unique, as every face is, even though metaphysical reasons led him to deny the self. For metaphysical or emotional reasons, because I suspect that he denied the self in order to hide it from death so that, not existing, he would be untouchable by death"] ("Despedida" 274). What Borges sensed in Fernández's work was a deep ambivalence about the self, manifested in denials of selfhood and springing from an effort to avoid death. This connection between denying the self and avoiding death is clear in his aversion to all forms of certainty, linearity, and closure. In his literary practice, Fernández wrestled with death as the force able to take away not only the self but also—and perhaps more importantly—loved ones. One way of dealing with the undeniable reality of death was to engage in strategies of evasion, and in the realm of narrative, this meant avoiding full commitment to anything, clinging instead to ambivalence in order to maintain a safe distance from the absolutes of death.

Starting from his earliest writings, Fernández's work demonstrates anxiety about certainties, and this anxiety seems to be dealt with through the use of self-deprecating and even self-effacing gestures, which can be understood as a strategy of evasion. Some of the

most problematic certainties for Fernández include literary beginnings and endings, due to their finality and the impossibility of going back to change them once they have been established. An aversion to endings, especially, colored his approach to writing: he was known for eschewing publication, and, when pressed to publish, he preferred short articles rather than book-length works, Fernández spent the bulk of his career not only writing but *rewriting*. Almost all of the books that he did write during his lifetime were revised multiple times over the course of many decades—some of them would remain in progress for the rest of his life.

In the early collection of fragments *Papeles de reciénvenido* [*The Newcomer Papers*] (1929), Fernández's protagonist, the would-be author known as the *reciénvenido*, affirms: “huyo de asistir al final de mis escritos, por lo que antes de ello los termino” [“I flee from attending the end of my writings, and for that reason I end them beforehand”] (*Papeles* 72). Already in this absurd, humorous line from an early text by Fernández we see an anxiety about endings that will saturate his entire *oeuvre*. Not only is his author-character anxious about beginning his literary career; once it has finally started, once he has irrevocably involved himself in the world of literary discourse, the idea of losing this connection to literature sends the author-character into an almost panicked state which he affirms with the choice of the word “huyo” (“I flee”). Not only does he avoid endings; he runs away from them. At the same time, however, he seems to acknowledge that endings are not altogether avoidable, and thus he adopts a certain strategy for dealing with them: namely, he will choose when the endings happen, by ending his texts before their end. Leaving before the party ends, dying before a loved one dies—with this kind of strategy the author-character attempts to exert at least a modicum of control over his literary life. Leaving before being left,

Fernández's author-narrator negates the idea of the ending as a culmination or a resolution; instead, it is something to be cut short, to be avoided with another sort of ending.

What kind of ending replaces the one that Fernández's author-narrator wishes to avoid? From what we see in many of Fernández's writings, not least *Museo de la novela de la Eterna (Primera novela buena)* [*The Museum of Eterna's Novel (First Good Novel)*] (1967), the ending that he imposes on the text is often open-ended, offering no resolution or progress from where it began, and in fact denying its own existence as an ending. As we will recall, *Museo* consists of dozens of prologues, which take up half the book; what follows these prologues is a "novel" consisting of fragments describing the interactions between a cast of characters living on a country estate called La Novela. The book ends with a beginning of sorts: a final note addressed to "Al que quiera escribir esta novela" ["To Whoever Wants to Write this Novel"], with the oxymoronic subtitle "Prólogo final" ["Final Prologue"]. This reference to a person who wants to write the novel implies that it has not yet been written, or at least not completely; its role seems to be that of a prologue to a future novel which does not appear in the text. Thus *Museo* does not really end, but simply drifts into a new beginning.

Museo is the centerpiece of Fernández's lifelong project of creating something entirely original, what Noé Jitrik has called "la novela futura" or the novel of the future (480). And the title Jitrik has assigned it is apt—it is so much a novel of the future that it never reaches the present tense, but instead remains always up ahead, always about to come to fruition. This is the state that the novel (and its "twin" *Adriana Buenos Aires*) was in when Fernández died, and he would most likely have revised it indefinitely if death were not there to stop him.³³ The only reason that *Museo* has taken a final form is because the materiality of the author's

³³ There are many other cases of literary works that remain unpublished at the author's death due to an extensive revision process that never produces a final version. One example is Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, which the author spent two decades revising and which was never completed.

death—the literal “death of the author”—intruded and could not be overcome. This novel, which works to stall the process of its own beginning, works also to resist being finished. Literary “death” is avoided, and yet its specter is ever-present. This is, of course, paradoxical, since writing is conventionally considered a form of permanence, a way for an individual to become immortal. Just as it strives to avoid beginning to exist, and once it has begun to exist, it works to continue existing indefinitely; it is obsessed with its own inevitable disappearance.

This anxiety about closure is perhaps most apparent in the final pages of the novel, titled “Al que quiera escribir esta novela (Prólogo final)” [“To Whoever Wants to Write this Novel (Final Prologue)”], which is addressed to future readers who may want to collaborate in “completing” the novel (*Museo* 253; *Museum* 237). The author character continually refers to the fact that the text he is writing is a literary experiment, an attempt to convert novelistic theory into novelistic practice. This refers to Fernández’s theory of the novel, which he espoused and developed throughout his life; for him, literature should be anti-mimetic, anti-realist, and avoid manipulating readers’ emotions—all sins committed by “bad” literature, of which *Adriana Buenos Aires* was to be the final (finalizing) example. Fernández’s preferred literary technique, which he called “Belarte,” “continually deterritorializes, doubts, undoes, and calls Art itself into question” (Wells 380).

One way in which Fernández attempts to unwrite conventional narrative in *Museo* is by blurring the distinction between fictional characters and real people. The author character continually insists that he is writing a double novel, in which one can be both a fictional character and a real person. Earlier, the author-narrator describes literary characters as individuals who dream of being real: “Ser personaje es soñar ser real” [“To be a character is to dream of being real”] (*Museo* 39; *Museum* 35). Now, he establishes a differentiation between

real readers, characters who read, and characters who are read, in a move that flattens out the real and the fictional into a continuum of competing fictionalities. Commenting on the dynamic at play when they encounter each other, he affirms:

Nótese que hay un verdadero éxito mío en el adosamiento de la doble trama, por el que obtendría mediante una alquimia concienical una asunción de vida para el personaje-lector, con vigorización de la nada existencial del personaje-leído, que es mucho más personaje por ello, que acentúa su franco no ser con un énfasis de inexistencia que lo purifica y enaltece lejos de toda promiscuidad con lo real; y al propio tiempo repercute la asunción de existencia del personaje leyente en el lector real, que por contrafigura con el personaje se desdibuja de existencia él mismo. (254)

Note my true success in mounting the double plot, by means of which I would, through an alchemy of consciousness, give an assumption of life to the character-reader, with a revitalization of the existential nothingness of the read-character, who becomes much more of a character because of this, as it accentuates his frank non-being with an emphasis on nonexistence, which purifies him and carries him far from any promiscuity with reality; and in due course the reading character's assumption of existence will resonate for the real reader who, as a counter-figure to the character, becomes blurred out of existence. (327, translation modified)

In this tongue-twister of a sentence plagued with digressions, we can piece out how the narrator-author plays with the real and the fictional in a way that makes them destabilize each other's supposed certainties. He begins with a sarcastic affirmation of his "true success" in crafting the double novel that he claims to be writing, but almost immediately he undermines this by stating that the double plot is something that "would" allow him to give life to character-readers, thus setting off a chain of effects on the "read-character" and the "real reader." He has gone from a proclamation of his success in carrying out the double plot (insinuating that it is something that he has completed, and is now past tense) to an explanation of how it *would* work, in the conditional future tense. In other words, this "success" is nothing of the sort; if anything, it is a promise of success, just as his "plan" for the execution of the novel is perfect while the execution itself is far from it. This claim of "success" is, of course, linked to his relativization of the

concepts of “good” and “bad” writing that he played with earlier in one of the novel’s first prologues.³⁴

Predicated on the uncertainty of “would,” the author-narrator then explains that, by assuming the life of a character who reads, the author-narrator would be able to remind the read-character that he does not really exist. In other words, the only one who “exists” is the one who reads; the other is simply a text to be read. This “non-being” is, however, an advantage: paradoxically, the active one, the one who reads, is caught in life, while the read-character’s “non-being” is something that “purifies” him. Not existing is preferable to existing—those who have the privilege of being characters, of only existing when someone reads them, are able to avoid the traps of reality, such as death and loss.

What is left, then? Existence does not matter here, only the dream of it. Or, put differently, dreaming of being real is the only real existence. By turning himself into the author-character, by definition a character who writes (and reads), Fernández himself is turning away from the idea of “real” existence in favor of the “dream” of being real that only a fictional character can have. As a character, Fernández can allow himself to assume the passive position of being read, and with it gain access to this “non-being.” In this dream of being, since it is not real, death will not exist. And here is part of the autobiographical thrust of *Museo*: the author has fictionalized himself and become a character who writes other characters into and out of existence. Resisting the closure of death, by abandoning his reality as a real, living author and becoming an author-character, Fernández can claim non-being as the only way to stave off death. As he affirms, “[n]o hay más que un no-ser: el del personaje, el de la fantasía, de lo imaginado. El imaginador no conocerá nunca el no ser” [“[t]here is no more than one non-being; the

³⁴ For commentary on the notion of “good” and “bad” writing in *Museo*, see Chapter 2, “A Poetics of Inattention.”

characters' non-being, the non-being of fantasy, or of what's imagined. He who imagines will never know non-being"] (254; 238). Imagination is the key to eternal life, the escape from the confines of a mortal body. He who imagines will not die, and will avoid losing loved ones to death.

What *Museo* amounts to, the author-narrator tells us, is not a finished work but a blueprint that future writers can choose to follow or not. He tells us: "Dejo, así, dados la teoría perfecta de la novela, una imperfecta pieza de ejecución de ella y un perfecto plan de su ejecución" ["I thus leave the perfect theory of the novel, an imperfect execution thereof, and a perfect plan for its execution"] (254; 237). Theory is the only element that can be "perfect" as it exists only in the realm of ideas and thus has no material life or death, while the execution of this theory in practice can only ever be partial, "imperfect"; theories and plans can attain completion while reality must always remain incomplete. A tension between these material and abstract elements is at the heart of *Museo*, which is both an assemblage of ideas and a material object. By never completing the book during his lifetime, Fernández was perhaps attempting to expand the book's abstractness (and thus immortality) while staving off its capture into material form and thus entry into mortality.

Near the end of the novel, still in this closing "Prologue," the author-narrator continues to relinquish control over the narrative, stating that he refuses to write an ending for the book. He affirms: "La dejo libro abierto: será el primer 'libro abierto' de la historia literaria" ["I leave it an open book: it will be the first 'open book' in literary history"] (253; 237, translation modified). While we will recall that Felisberto Hernández's "books without covers" emphasize the possibility of writing "before and after" them, here Fernández seems to be giving permission for

others to write not only before and after but also *during* his own writing—effectively allowing them to “overwrite” or even “unwrite” him (Hernández, *Los libros sin tapas* 45).³⁵ He explains:

...es decir que el autor, deseando que fuera mejor o siquiera bueno y convencido de que por su destrozada estructura es una temeraria torpeza con el lector, pero también de que es rico en sugerencias, deja autorizado a todo escritor futuro de buen gusto e impulso y circunstancias que favorezcan un intenso trabajo, para corregirlo lo más acertadamente que pueda y editarlo libremente, con o sin mención de mi obra y nombre. No será poco el trabajo. Suprima, corrija, pero en lo posible que quede algo. (*Museo* 253)

Which is to say that the author, wishing it were better or even good, and convinced that its demented structure makes it a reckless blunder for readers, but also convinced that it is rich with suggestion, authorizes any future writer with good taste and the willingness and circumstances to undertake intense labor, to correct it as well as he can and edit it liberally, with or without mention of my work and name. It will be no small task. Delete, correct, but if possible, let something remain. (*Museum* 237, translation modified)

The first thing we notice is that, as he has done throughout the novel, the author-narrator refuses to choose a clear subject-position for himself, and instead makes references to himself in the third person and the first person almost at random. First, he is “the author” who can authorize future modifications to his text by “any future writer,” and then, in the same sentence, he switches to the first person, giving permission to future individuals to delete references to “my work and name” if they wish. This wavering between third- and first-person positions that the author-narrator assigns to himself illustrates the uncertainty that has plagued the entire project of *Museo* in terms of the notion of selfhood and authorship.

The most compelling element of this passage, however, is the author character’s entreaty to future writers to try and leave something of himself intact even as they rework his writing entirely and even delete his name. He only asks that, “if possible,” they “let something remain” (237). While he is willing to forego the promise of immortality that comes along with having his

³⁵ For a discussion of Hernández’s “books without covers,” see Chapter 1, “Deferred Beginnings.”

name in print, he does want some part of him to remain in the text. Asking that a part of him—any part—be spared, he wants some element of himself to retain a presence. It is thus in that sense that the book, called a “museum” of the novel rather than a novel, becomes in part a museum housing parts of the author, which become artifacts. These artifacts, however, do not necessarily bear his name (as it may be erased by future reader-writers); just as he is immortalized, he is rendered anonymous. The idea of the immortality of writing is not the subject of questioning here, but rather the notion of the possibility of immortality of the self. Both resisting the encounter with death and showing a resigned acceptance of its inevitability, Fernández’s author-narrator hopes that at least some of his work will remain. Representing himself and his loved ones in his final unfinished novel, Fernández establishes the author subject as a ruin.

While condemned to die in real life—and having been condemned to experience the death of loved ones—the author sees in literature the possibility for some sort of immortality, even if it means remaining as nothing more than a relic from the past, stripped of his name and authorial credit. What matters, then, is not authorship but writing itself; it is in the writing that some part of Fernández’s being can remain. Having practically been constructed as a ruin by the much younger avant-garde circles which surrounded him, Fernández in *Museo* strives to determine his own ending, his own conversion into a ruin. In this unfinished novel of “Eterna”—used here as a proper name but also meaning “eternal,” Fernández attempts to construct himself as existing outside time, safe in that eternity that literature allows. In his plea to “let something remain,” we can see Fernández’s desire to withdraw completely into his author-character: he wants to escape to the timeless realm of the literary, leaving only a shell behind as a ruin. And yet the ruin is what constitutes him: it is the symbol of his confrontation with the devastation of

physical life and loss. He wants to abandon all agency and let his writing be taken over, but at the same time he wants some part of himself to be saved from obliteration. He wants to withdraw and yet remain as a mute witness, a ruin suspended between fleeting physical existence and the immortality made possible through literature.

Evasive Encounters with the Authorial Self in Felisberto Hernández

In his prologue to Felisberto Hernández's collection of stories *La casa inundada y otros cuentos* [*The Flooded House and Other Stories*] (1960), the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar makes reference to the often-noted fact that Hernández's writings often contain autobiographical elements. It would seem that the author, while not identifying himself directly, "appears" in his stories to represent, through a first-person voice, scenes that can only be taken from his own life. For Cortázar, "it is no coincidence" that almost all of Hernández's stories are written in the first person, and "we need only to start reading any of his stories and Felisberto appears," the individual that we perceive as "a sad, poor man who makes a living giving piano concerts in the provincial tour circuit, just as he always lived, just as he tells us right from the first paragraph" (Cortázar 6). The presence of "Felisberto" (as his devoted readers call him by his first name) in his own stories becomes a mark of his writing, and recognizing the author in his texts becomes almost part of the ritual of reading them, repeated with each reading. It becomes part of our "horizon of expectations" as Hans Robert Jauss called it, part of the paradigm of "how to read Felisberto."

However, Cortázar also notes, the minute we recognize Hernández in his text, something happens to destabilize this "searcher/found" dynamic. Not simply an author-character, Hernández uses the autobiographical orientation of his works to continually trouble the boundary

between author and character, lived reality and fiction. As Cortázar explains, “we have barely recognized him again—hello, Felisberto, how are things going for you now? Do you have a bit more money? Are the hotel rooms less horrible? Have you received applause in the theaters and cafes this time? Does this woman you’ve been looking at love you?—” when an unforeseen force appears. We are plunged into confusion: “in this recognition that has only taken a few paragraphs, *something other* appears, the stunning leap to the only thing that holds value for him: distancing, the unsayable contact with the immediate; in other words, with everything that we continually ignore or keep at a distance in the name of this thing called living” (6, emphasis mine). Immediately after the brief encounter with what we think is a fictionalized version of the author, and the reader’s satisfaction at having found him in the text, a distancing effect prevents a fully-realized “reunion” between reader and author. We are pushed back by this “something other,” this unknown force that appears in the work, making the man we have encountered both Felisberto and not Felisberto.

Having “inscribed” themselves into the text or constituted themselves as the author’s interlocutors, fulfilling the role of looking for the author and finding him in his fictional world, now readers find themselves abandoned, without a compass. If this protagonist is not Hernández, then who is it? And by extension, who are we readers? Whatever imagined agreement between author and reader has been no more than a literary trick or game. If the reader has wanted to “write” the staging of an encounter with the author in his own fiction, it is now revealed that this has been no more than a desire on the part of the reader, the reader’s own fictionalization. The reunion is interrupted—or, at least, deferred. This estrangement has distanced us from the comfort of identifying the author’s presence as a character in his own text and the act of occupying, as readers, the position of recognizing him and feeling a certain fondness and even

pity for him. The sudden appearance of this “something other”—“lo otro” as Cortázar calls it in the original Spanish—is disconcerting; we no longer know if we are witnessing the fictionalization of a life, or a fiction transformed into reality, or a life lived as if it were fiction. Something is standing in the way of the connection between art and life. The representation that we think we see is not transparent, and when this non-transparency is revealed to us, we are forced to question everything that we think we know about reading, writing, and literary representation.

By luring readers in with familiarity and then jolting them back to a jarring distance, Hernández transforms the commonplaces of “life inspires art” and “art imitates life.” Inserting himself into his fictional world, to perform a role that is both his own and not his own, he plays with the strong presence of autobiographical elements to trouble our notions about literary origins, or the idea that experience precedes its representation. As Jorge Panesi notes, Hernández makes “a gesture or posture that changes the reading conventions” of the genre of autobiography, in the sense that, in his world, what is considered autobiographical is “literaturized and fictionalized” and thus “it is not the subject who legitimates the story but rather it is literature, *après coup* [...]. The autobiographical material is already literature” (86). When reading Hernández and exploring these autobiographical elements, it is useful to recall de Man’s meditation on autobiography and its relationship with experience and literature: “We assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but [...] the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and [...] whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?” (920). For de Man, we must entertain the possibility that the life of autobiographer has been determined by the very form of the

autobiographical genre, and perhaps even before the act of writing.

“Tierras de la memoria” [“Lands of Memory”] (1965) is an “interrupted posthumous text” that Hernández wrote during a relatively early period in his career but which was never published as a “complete” text until after his death, and even then it was published as a long unfinished fragment (Vitale 7). No one seems to know what to do with “Tierras”: difficult to classify, it has been described both as a “quasi-autobiographical” story and an “unfinished novel” (Graziano 25; Centro Virtual Cervantes). Where critics do agree, however, is on calling it “unfinished” or “interrupted,” referring to its fragmented form and apparent lack of any *telos*. In other words, it appears to be a series of anecdotes without much overarching meaning. However, when read closely, we can glimpse in “Tierras” a possible process by which Hernández constitutes himself as *written* and, later, as a *writer*. And it is a process fraught with ambivalence, and which Hernández alternately seeks and evades.

As we saw earlier, Macedonio Fernández uses the persona of the fictional author as a means of escaping into the timelessness of fiction, safe from the pain and loss of real life. This doubling dynamic, where the real author—or a version of him—seems to appear in the text as a fictionalized author, is also at work in much of Felisberto Hernández’s work, not least “Tierras.” In Hernández, however, the dynamic plays out quite differently: it is a quasi-autobiographical quest to both uncover *and* escape from the moment at which the self begins to live fictionally; in other words, it is an ambivalent search for the narratability of his own life and literary endeavors, because, while searching for this moment, Hernández is also attempting to flee from it. As I will suggest, in “Tierras,” writing is a means to both facilitate and avoid an encounter between Hernández and himself as a writer, an encounter that is always deferred or displaced, treated in a manner that could be called “intentionally distracted” or that deauthorizes any notion of

intentionality. Thus, in the writing of Hernández—both in the act of writing and in the written product—estrangement is imposed, not only so that the author can distance himself from the reader but also, now, to distance himself from this writing stranger who claims to be him.

“Tierras” occupies a unique place in Hernández’s corpus. A transitional work, it was written in 1944, a relatively early moment in his literary career, though not his literary activity, which began in the early 1920s. For decades, he was a traveling pianist who did some writing on the side, mostly in the form of small fragments collected in cheaply-published leaflets. Then, in 1942, Hernández was able to publish the novella *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling* [*Around the Time of Clemente Colling*], a text saturated with autobiographical elements, followed by another autobiographically-inflected novella the next year, *El caballo perdido* [*The Stray Horse*]. So began a transition for his career, in which he would slowly give up music and devote himself more and more totally to writing, finally becoming a “writer” instead of a “pianist.” However, while some fragments of “Tierras” appeared in literary magazines in Montevideo and Buenos Aires in 1944, Hernández never “finished” this text and never expressed interest in publishing it.³⁶ It was not until his death in 1964 that “Tierras” was assembled for publication the following year.

Hernández’s disinterest in publishing “Tierras” as a complete work is curious, and not likely attributable to desires for privacy since *Clemente Colling* is also highly autobiographical, as are almost all of Hernández’s works. Could it be an attempt to avoid repetition? That also seems unlikely, as many of his works explore the same themes over and over again, and in fact *Clemente Colling* and “Tierras” are quite different. What, then, could be present in “Tierras” that

³⁶ In his book *Felisberto Hernández: El espectáculo imaginario*, José Pedro Díaz notes that Hernández “was not concerned” about publishing “Tierras” and “does not even mention it in any of his letters” written during that time (147, cited by Centro Virtual Cervantes).

is not found in Hernández's other similarly autobiographical stories? What was Hernández not interested in "completing" in "Tierras"?

"Tierras" consists of fragments and traces of memories, placed in a *mise-en-abyme* structure, one inside the other. However, the different memories from different time periods do not respect this structure totally, and thus there is a continual movement between memory and meta-memory, between remembering and analyzing what is remembered. More than an "autobiography," it is a series of scenes from different periods in the childhood and adolescence of a nameless narrator, scenes that feature earlier versions of himself. Critic Horacio Xaubet helps to clarify the different versions of the narrator who appear in "Tierras"; to start, "we find an I who expresses himself *now*—in the moment of writing" (Xaubet 127). This is the version of the narrator who opens the story with this statement: "Tengo ganas de creer que empecé a conocer la vida a las nueve de la mañana en un vagón de ferrocarril" ["I feel like believing that I began to be acquainted with life at nine o'clock one morning on a train"] (Hernández, "Tierras" 9; "Lands" 129, translation modified). Several earlier versions of himself live within this "I" of the present: first, "an I who is on the train—easily identifiable as Uruguayan, married, twenty-three years old, professional musician, although nameless—"; second, "a child/adult I who is twelve years old"; third, "another child/adult, fourteen years old, also traveling, and a member of the *Vanguardias de la Patria* [Vanguards of the Homeland] group"; and finally "the I corresponding to the eight-year-old child, who is the most audacious of the transgressors" in the story (Xaubet 127). Thus, the narrator's identity is multiplied, allowing him, through memories, to occupy simultaneously several different moments and spaces in his own life, as both protagonist and spectator.

However, in the final paragraphs of “Tierras” there is a revelation that changes the perspective from which we “remember” the earlier scenes of this story which we have almost finished reading. The narrative closes by returning to the beginning, to the scene of the first memory of the train trip. This original memory, which has been the point of departure for the narrator’s journey through the different scenes of his past, is also its destination. From the liminal space of a moving train, the narrator has been traveling forward in time and space; now, at the end of the story, he has returned to himself, to the “present tense” of the past. Thus, the first memory is established as the framework memory: we recall that the narrator of “now” has said the following words, which are now revealed as possible keys to reading the text: “Tengo ganas de creer” [“I feel like believing”], “empecé a conocer la vida” [“I began to be acquainted with life”], “en un vagón de ferrocarril” [“on a train”] (Hernández, “Tierras” 9; “Lands” 129, translation modified). The present version of the narrator “feels like believing” that he experienced a decisive moment in his life during that train trip; it is a moment of transition from one perspective to another, an encounter with something new, or perhaps a reencounter with something older. In her reading of this statement, Sylvia Molloy notes a particular gesture of “entreapertura” or “ajar-ness”: “La frase no abre nítidamente el texto, sino que—si cabe un término que orienta la composición de todo “Tierras” —lo *entreabre*. [...] En el vano practicado por esta frase, puerta entreabierto al texto, comienza a perfilarse ese ‘yo/que/aspira a crearse a sí mismo’ a fuerza de ganas y desengaño” [“The sentence does not open the text neatly, but rather—if there is a term that guides the composition of all of “Lands”—it leaves the text *ajar*. [...] In the opening provided by this sentence, the door to the text left ajar, this ‘self/who/aspires to create himself’ through feelings and disillusionment”] (71-72). From this very first moment, a

formative experience is treated with neither interest nor indifference—rather, it is treated almost distractedly.

It is with this air of unconcern that the narrator provides us with a piece of information that will be fundamental for the present reading of “Tierras.” At the end of the story, the 23-year-old narrator on the train “returns” to the “lands” of his childhood and teenage memories (from which he has returned periodically throughout the narrative). We see how “[d]e pronto yo dejé de recordar lo que ocurrió dentro de aquella casa y volví a sentir con algo de primera vez, la sorpresa de las calles y del aire y del cielo de Mendoza sobre los árboles y las casas” [“[s]uddenly I stopped remembering what had happened inside that house and instead went back to feeling, with some of the sensations of the first time, the surprise of the streets and the air and the sky of Mendoza above the trees and the houses”] (Hernández, “Tierras” 74; “Lands” 188). He is “returning” from one remembered moment to another, but still without arriving at his “present.” Half-awake, and “antes de volver a dormirme en el recuerdo, como quien se despierta un instante mientras el cuerpo se da vuelta” [“before I went back to sleep in my memories, like someone who wakes up for a moment while his body is turning over”], the narrator realizes that the “Mandolión”—the man-instrument who has been his interlocutor during his periodic returns to the “lands” of his memories—is no longer there with him. The narrator tells us: “vi—en el viaje que hacía un ferrocarril diez años después—que el asiento de enfrente estaba vacío, y, consultando la memoria de los ojos, deduje que el Mandolión faltaba desde hacía rato y que por eso yo había tenido un recuerdo tan largo” [“I saw—during the journey a train was making ten years later—that the seat opposite me was empty and, consulting my eyes’ memory, I deduced that the Mandolión had been gone for a while, which was how I’d had such a long stretch of remembering”] (74; 188). The Mandolión, whose presence has been constant all throughout the

process of remembering or thinking about memories, is now absent. To make the most of his solitude, the narrator gets up and it is in this physical “waking up” that the narrator mentions, seemingly almost in passing, a surprising piece of information: he reveals the existence of two notebooks—a *written* version of the memories he has just explored.

The introduction of the notebooks into the narrative appears almost accidental. The narrator recounts: “Me levanté para sacar de mi valija unos cuadernos que había escrito cuando hacía el viaje a Chile, pues no recordaba si algunas cosas habían ocurrido en Mendoza, a la ida o la vuelta. Mientras revisaba mi valija alguien abrió la puerta y entonces vi al Mandolión tomando mate en el coche de segunda” [“I got up to take some notebooks I had written on that trip to Chile out of my bag, since I didn’t remember if certain things in Mendoza had happened on the outward or the return journey. As I was rummaging through my bag, someone opened the door of the car and I saw the Mandolión sipping *mate* in the second-class coach”] (74; 188-89). The act of looking for the notebooks seems just as inconsequential as catching sight of the Mandolión in another car drinking *mate* and the mention of their presence seems like a “totally unimportant anecdote” (Xaubet 132). The written version of the memories seems secondary, treated almost as if it were of no great importance; simply a point of reference for when a doubt might arise in a specific memory. As readers, can we detect here an indirect hint about how to read this text? Indeed, we can “read” this treatment of the notebooks as a way of “distracting” attention away from their importance or a way of “deferring” a possible encounter—ours and the narrator’s—with them.

Upon encountering this mention of the notebooks at the end of the fragment that is “Tierras,” we are obligated to go back, seeking “some trace of the mentioned notebooks” but “there is none” (Xaubet 132). However, as of this moment, they will be the central focus of the

rest of the narrative, made up of three concluding paragraphs. This final section is divided as follows: first there is a reflection on what to do with the notebooks; then, there is a brief description of their appearance and contents; and finally there is a recounting of a final memory, a scene that the narrator had recorded in one of the notebooks.

Notably, the narrator on the train has not yet read the notebooks; he has taken them with him with the intention of looking at them later. If the narrator has not yet looked at them, and we can see that the narrative is close to ending, why are they in the suitcase, and why are they mentioned? The narrator offers what almost seems like an explanation: “Decidí sumergirme en mis cuadernos; los revisaría con el escrúpulo con que un médico examinaría a un hombre que se va a casar. La noche anterior, cuando pensé que al salir de Montevideo tendría que cambiar de vida había decidido investigar mi vida anterior; y por eso cargué toda mi historia escrita en un rincón de la valija” [“I decided to submerge myself in my notebooks; I would review them with all the painstaking care a doctor would employ in examining a man about to get married. The night before, thinking that when I left Montevideo I would have to change my life, I had decided to first investigate my earlier life, which was why I was carrying my whole written history in a corner of my suitcase”] (Hernández, “Tierras” 74; “Lands” 189, translation modified). Though there are only two of them, they represent the narrator’s “whole written history” that he is carrying with him on this trip, and despite their apparent importance (representing his entire written history) they have been placed in a marginal position, “in a corner” of his suitcase. Any centrality that they may have is displaced.

The narrator continues, offering a description of the notebooks’ appearance and contents. They are two different notebooks that can be viewed almost as opposites, although they address the same topic: the narrator’s trip to Chile during his adolescence. The parallel between the trip

that the 23-year-old narrator takes (during which he remembers his childhood and adolescence), and the trip that occupies the pages of his two notebooks (which are now present with him on the train) seems intentional. The first notebook “era chico y contenía el relato escueto y en forma de diario—así lo había ordenado nuestro jefe—; después del viaje alguien, en nuestra institución, lo había encuadernado con tapas de ‘un color serio’, creo que sepia” [“was small and contained a concise daily account of events, just as our leader had ordained; after the journey, someone in our organization had had it bound in a cover of ‘a serious color,’ I believe it was sepia”] (74; 189). It is an official notebook with a “serious color” in which the narrator has written a “concise” text under institutional orders. The second notebook, however, “era grande, íntimo, escrito en días saltados, y lleno de inexplicables tonterías. Tenía tapas color tabaco muy grasientas” [“was large, intimate, written at random intervals and full of inexplicable stupidities. Its binding was the color of tobacco, and very greasy”] (74; 189). This is a physically large, almost clumsy object that does not look “serious” like the other with its “very greasy” cover. It is an unofficial document, written in a disorganized manner in “random intervals” and whose contents—“inexplicable stupidities”—are at once superficial and incomprehensible. The two notebook covers are sepia and tobacco, two shades of the same color; thus we can understand the notebooks almost as two sides of the same coin, containing different versions of the same experiences.

“Tierras” ends with a metatextual passage, staging the writing of one of the experiences in one of the notebooks. The narrator recalls: “En mi primera mañana en Mendoza muchas cosas se atrevían a ser distintas a las de mi país; pero la inocencia con que lo hacían me encantaba y yo iba corriendo a apuntarlas en el cuaderno íntimo. En él aparecía un camarada levantando una mano hasta casi la altura del hombro y diciendo: ‘Este invierno nevó de este porte’” [“On my

first morning in Mendoza, many things had the audacity to be different from the things in my country, but so innocently that I was enchanted and went running to note them down in the intimate notebook. A companion of ours appeared in it, raising one hand almost to the level of his shoulder and saying, ‘Last winter the snow came up to here’”] (74-75; 189). The end contains references to the notebook, to the practice of writing in the notebook, and to a description of what is written in the notebook, along with a quote from that event. The use of the word “intimate” suggests that this notebook is the unofficial, “unserious” one. However, it is this same unofficial writing that is evoked and even quoted in the final paragraph of the fragment that makes up “Tierras.” The paragraph is the memory of a scene in which the narrator carries out the act of writing, and when his friend speaks to him he makes an effort to imagine what is being said: “Yo tuve que imaginarme apresuradamente un invierno con nieve” [“I had to quickly imagine a winter with snow”] but “este muchachito que había vivido un invierno con nieve, se había quedado muy alegre y muy parecido a un chiquilín que no hubiera visto nevar” [“this young boy who had lived through a snowy winter remained very cheerful, much like someone who had never seen snow”] (75; 189-90). We see here the representation of something that is known and unknown at the same time, like the friend who is familiar with snow but appears to be seeing it for the first time. The narrator reads his own words, written years before, which are actually a quote from someone else, a quote that he cannot connect to any of his own experience. “Tierras” ends on this note of indeterminacy.

I want to linger on these final moments of “Tierras” because it is there that we can understand the thrust of the story. Those few final paragraphs reveal how the narrator (and with him, Hernández) has journeyed through a space of transition between identities, a space in which he has encountered himself as *other*. As we know, “Tierras” was written in a transitional moment

in Hernández's life, between his past as a traveling pianist and his future as a writer. In a parallel manner, the narrator who is traveling on the train is experiencing the transition from one life to another, as he recalls having thought that "al salir de Montevideo tendría que cambiar de vida" ["when I left Montevideo I would have to change my life"] and in order to do that he would have to "investigar mi vida anterior" ["investigate my earlier life"]; in order to go through this transition, the narrator must look at all of his "historia escrita" ["written history"] (74; 189). To do this, he must "read himself," literally and metaphorically. And yet he does not understand what he reads at the time of writing, and neither does he understand it later.

"Tierras" occupies the "blind" space in which the recalled experience is transformed into a representation of itself. By so doing, "Tierras" also demonstrates the paradox that an experience can be seen as coming after its material representation. In "Tierras," the experience is written down before it is perceived by the narrator: the writing in the notebooks comes before his reviving of scenes from his childhood and adolescence. The very gesture of "introspection—autobiography—takes place in a fissure that is barely perceptible," in a space of transition (Xaubet 143). The narrator revives and "re-writes" his past through the bodily senses of sight and touch, carrying out an incessant movement of unfolding and folding of the self, a double gesture that reveals an alienated doubling of the observing I and the represented I; a self that occupies a "non-space" (Molloy, "La entreapertura" 69).

Hernández adopted the form of autobiography, a discourse that comes after the events lived, reflecting on a road traveled, in his first writings and he would return to it time and again throughout his literary career. "Tierras" is the scene in which the narrator revives and "re-draws" his past, not just "someone who remembers" but "someone who watches himself remember" in a sort of "internal spectacle" (Panesi 67). The narrator, as "both a performer and part of the

audience, is a double voyeur—of his own body and the bodies of others” (Xaubet 141). He experiences a distracted transition between his past self and his future self, a deferred encounter with his present self that is inscribing itself as a writing subject. He dissimulates the transition that he is experiencing, from one identity to another, and throughout this transition he displaces the inevitable encounter with himself as a writer—with his own self-portrait, in which he seems not to recognize himself.

The narrator’s two notebooks are the Derridian ruins of Hernández the writer, which form, like “Tierras de la memoria,” the *ur*-text that constitutes him as a literary subject. They represent an origin that negates origins, the text that generates the subject that is Felisberto Hernández the writer, who is constituted *from* the ruin of self-writing. The ruin represents the impossibility of any direct contact with origins, as well as the impossibility of fully avoiding them. Negating both origins and intentions, Hernández inscribes himself as “distracted,” constituted by a literature that he does not write but rather which writes him, as a figure in transition who is facing the possibility of an encounter with himself as a writer—an encounter that the act of writing both stages and escapes, always deferring it. The almost-forgotten notebooks in hand, the narrator of “Tierras” the dissimulated, distracted encounter of Hernández with himself as a subject in transition, moving from a *written* subject to a *writing* one—from one who is represented, to one who wields the means of representation. Such an encounter would entail an acceptance of agency, the abandonment of a passive position and a commitment to an active one. And thus it is an encounter which Hernández seems to want to leave forever suspended in potentiality, never “completed” as a full published work.

“I cannot finish”: Writing to Live and Writing to Die in Clarice Lispector

As we have seen, unfinished texts lay bare the connection between literature and life, because the abandonment of a text before its completion, whether intentional or unintentional, points to circumstances outside the narrative. Does a text’s unfinished status make it ambivalent, or is it ambivalence that leaves the text unfinished? Both seem to be true. It is difficult to accept any unfinished text as fully “fictional,” conditioned as it is by real life of the author, and as a result, unfinished texts have an inescapably autobiographical resonance. Such a resonance is even more pronounced when examining the life of the author in relation to the unfinished work, and the reasons for its unfinished status. Further, the autobiographical component moves to the foreground of any interpretive endeavor when it appears that the real author is appearing in the text in a fictionalized or semi-fictionalized manner, through the persona of a writer attempting to write the text that we are reading.

Such is the case of the unfinished texts we have examined so far, Fernández’s *Museo de la novela de la Eterna* and Hernández’s “Tierras de la memoria.” As an unfinished text, *Museo* is the product of obsessive writing and rewriting, never completed; whatever statement the novel is intended to make is never allowed to become definitive. It is forever suspended *in medias res*, any meaning only partial and contingent. When Fernández died, *Museo* existed as just another iteration of itself; the author’s physical death and his son’s arrangement of the text are the only reasons that we have the version of *Museo* that we have today. What we are reading when we read *Museo*, then, is not necessarily what Fernández would have wanted: rather than a literary product, it is the record of an ongoing, ambivalent literary process. The case of Hernández is quite different: “Tierras” was an early text that the author was never interested in completing; when he died in 1964, he had long since moved on from that 1944 text. “Tierras,” then, is a text

that the author never really intended anyone to read as a complete work. He did not hide the text—in fact, parts of it were published in 1944—but he was indifferent to finishing it. Thus, what we read when we read “Tierras” is a text that was abandoned due to a lack of interest. This is also a reason why it is so fascinating, because a close reading reveals that the text actually contains quite an interesting dynamic between the different Felisbertos in different stages of life, and it seems that the text stages an evasion of Hernández from his transformation from written subject to writing subject. For some reason, this is not something he wanted to explore to completeness and decided to abandon and leave as fragments. “Tierras,” ignored by its creator, has a lot to say about his ambivalence towards authorship.

As I have shown, Fernández’s text is simply one version in a potentially endless series of revisions carried out over the course of the author’s career; Hernández’s is an early work that was left in fragment form and never revisited during the author’s life. Another text that remained unfinished at the time of its author’s death, but whose circumstances and internal dynamics are quite different, is Clarice Lispector’s *Um sopro de vida (pulsações)* [*A Breath of Life (Pulsations)*] (1978). Unlike the unfinished texts by Fernández and Hernández, *Um sopro* was written when Lispector was suffering from terminal cancer, fully aware that she was writing her last novel and conscious that she could die at any time while writing it. As I will propose in this section, autobiography’s intervention in fiction takes on quite a different aspect in the case of Lispector’s unfinished last novel: here, death is ever-present, affecting not only the book’s eventual unfinished status (its fragments were shaped after Lispector’s death) but also every step of its composition. Like Fernández’s *Museo* and Hernández’s “Tierras,” *Um sopro* is narrated by a semi-fictionalized version of Lispector herself, manifested as a male writer attempting to write about a woman who is his fictional invention, but who is also dying—suspended between art and

life. However, whereas Fernández seems to want to escape into his fictional author's literary world, and Hernández avoids confronting his literary self even in semi-fictionalized form, in Lispector what we see is an attempt by an author to write her own death, fictionally and literally, both in the novel and through the novel as it takes the form of her "last word" as an author. Although the three authors studied here express these issues in different ways, what they retain in common is a profound ambivalence about the prospect of their literary works surviving them, and the finality of not being able to intervene in these texts after death. This results in a simultaneous attempt to control and yet also withdraw from the creative act, resulting in writing that is characterized by its unfinished form.

An author who spent her life in a state of ambivalence about her literary fame and persona, Clarice Lispector showed no less ambivalence when facing death, knowing that in death she would leave her most lasting impression, a permanent literary legacy. As we will see, her last literary word was imbued with the same sense of ambivalence that characterized Lispector's literary voice throughout her career. After rising to prominence at a young age with her first novel *Perto do coração selvagem* [*Near to the Wild Heart*] (1944), she was an active writer for the rest of her life, although she remained extremely private about her personal details, reluctant to speak to reporters and evasive about her exact name, age, origin, native language, politics, or religion (Moser 3). This lack of specific detail left a vacuum to be filled by rumor and legend; due to her exotic appearance and experimental writing voice, so different from anything seen before in Brazil, Lispector was a target of interest.

Lispector was somewhat complicit in the making of her own public image. She seemed to remain purposely aloof, cultivating an air of mystery that invited speculation and invention. Her public persona was a "tangle of contradictions" and while her life was documented extensively,

there are “few great modern artists” who remain “quite as fundamentally unfamiliar” as Lispector does, even more than thirty years after her death (Moser 3). While certainly partially responsible for creating her literary persona or allowing it to be created for her, Lispector was also wracked with ambivalence about it. Often protesting “against her own mythology,” Lispector found that the legend was stronger than she was, and often represented something that she did not feel was authentically her (4). This conflict between wanting to be known and wanting to be left alone was one that would characterize her entire literary career, struggling “between a need to belong and a dogged insistence on maintaining her apartness” (8).

Um sopro was the only literary work that Lispector did not live to see completed and published. She was dying of cancer while she wrote it, and the illness overtook her before it could be completed. Described variously as a final confession and a “last will and testament,” *Um sopro* has a particularly ambiguous status: it is a highly autobiographical text, and yet it is also the text over which Lispector had the least amount of control, since the final published version was shaped by a friend, Olga Borelli, who had to wade through “a mountain of fragments” that Lispector left “to be ‘structured’” by Borelli (Fitz, “Confession” 260; Moser 355). Thus, Lispector’s final statement to the literary world and the world at large is one that is fraught with complex issues of authorial control and intent. Authorship in this instance is partial and nebulous, as Lispector wrote the words but left them to be organized into their final sequence at a later time.

Although it is the incomplete last statement from the author, *Um sopro* is actually very similar to many of Lispector’s other works that she herself finished; most notably, it is marked by Lispector’s trademark ambivalence about the nature of life, death, and the possibilities of artistic representation. The novel is about a character who himself creates another character, and

the dialogue between them forms the body of the novel. It cannot really be said to have a plot, since nothing really takes place in the novel; it is rather a series of fragments in which the characters take turns ruminating on various topics, most notably death. The characters are never quite sure how they feel about the things they are discussing, and contradict themselves often throughout the book. The novel ends abruptly, with no resolution or promise of closure; in fact, the novel's final words are "Eu acho que..." ["I think that..."] (Lispector, *Um sopro* 162; *A Breath* 164). This ellipsis suspends the narrative, which can neither go forward nor end. Like its author's life—and any individual's life—it must remain forever unfinished.

Borelli commented that Lispector once affirmed that "everyone chooses the way they die" (*A Breath* 166). Indeed, the ambivalence that dominates the text could spring from Lispector's conflicted feelings about death and the prospect that this was her final chance to make a literary statement. And because she died before it was published in its definitive form, this final statement is one that is actually quite fitting for her—a novel in which Lispector's intentionality (if she would even acknowledge it) is always in doubt, as we are never sure whether certain choices or structures were Lispector's or Borelli's. Thus, echoing the two voices in the novel—a nameless man (called simply "the Author") who wants to write a story about a woman, and Ângela, the woman he has invented who then tells her own story—are the twin presences of Lispector and Borelli behind the textual scenes. Indeed, as Earl Fitz has noted, the Author and Ângela "as the fictional beings through whom Clarice labored to sort out, one last time, the meaning of the vital link between life and art," and indeed the reader detects Lispector's voice in both the Author and Ângela (Fitz, "Confession 262).³⁷ In *Um sopro*, Lispector's aesthetic of unintentionality, in which feelings and perceptions are allowed

³⁷ As Fitz observes, several biographical details about Ângela seem to have been drawn directly from Lispector's life. For example, the mention of her dog, Ulises, and references to her literary works *A cidade sitiada* [*The Besieged City*] and "O ovo e a galinha" ["The Egg and the Chicken"] ("Confession" 266 n4).

to take over while the authorial figure hangs back, functioning more as a conduit than an active creator, now finds itself competing with Lispector's own desire to assert some measure of control over how she will "die" in both literature and life.

Peter Brooks has noted the connection between literary endings and death: "The sense of beginning [...] is determined by the sense of an ending. And if we inquire further into the nature of the ending, we no doubt find that it eventually has to do with the human end, with death" (283-84). He does assert the fact that ending a story is essential: "The beginning in fact presupposes the end. The very possibility of meaning plotted through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be the meaningless" (283). Meaning, then, can only take shape when there is an ending; a text that goes on and on falls outside this structure and loses its "structuring force."

How does one choose an ending to a life other than suicide? And how does one, knowing that death is approaching, make sure that there is a clear ending to the text being written? Clearly, even unfinished texts have endings; it is just that their endings are not intentional, and if the author had continued to work on them they would have ended at a different point. What would Brooks say about the arbitrary ending that results from fragments written by the author, which are assembled by a friend after the author's death? Does the "structuring force" of the ending still hold? I contend that an arbitrary ending to a text is a perfect echo to the arbitrary endings of human lives, which most often take place despite the desires and plans of individuals.

Brooks looks to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for "a theory of the very narratability of life" (Brooks 285). For Brooks, *Beyond* shows how life becomes narrative, how it "enters into a state of deviance and *détour* (ambition, quest, the pose of a mask) in

which it is maintained for a certain time, through an at least minimally complex extravagance, before returning to the quiescence of the non-narratable” (296). In other words, narrative is a fleeting instance of narratability, always on the cusp of falling back into impossibility. The content of a narrative, then, is a flight from the inorganic state that preceded life and that follows it, and while it is able to continue, life itself can continue as well. But neither literature nor life can evade death forever.

Freud’s very book *Beyond* translates “theory into autobiography” since Freud’s “late return to philosophy is evidence of a drive to end things on his own terms, to be done with the “*détour*” called life (and its psychoanalysis), and to finally become the inorganic nothing from whence he came” (Dufrenes 22). Indeed, as Freud conceptualizes it, life is a *détour* on the road towards a single goal: to return to the inorganic state from whence we came. For Brooks, this *détour* is the very stuff of narrative, and cannot help but be conditioned by the looming presence of the end, which is inescapable. But as we know, Freud’s theory is not just that death determines life, but in fact that there are different ways of dying, and “the organism is resolved to die only in its own way” (Freud 48). There is a right way for each organism to die, and it is conscious of that and pursues it during its life. The instinct for self-preservation takes over when the organism wishes to avoid what it considers the “wrong” kind of death, and thus this self-preservation instinct works, paradoxically, at the service of death and the pursuit of control over its occurrence. Indeed, “[t]he theoretic significance of the instincts of self-preservation, power and self-assertion,” Freud notes, “shrinks to nothing, seen in this light; they are part-instincts designed to secure the path to death peculiar to the organism and to ward off possibilities of return to the inorganic other than the immanent ones” (48).

In the realm of narrative, we can understand this dynamic as the operation of the drive to avoid ending a text at the wrong time or in the wrong way. Thus, the avoidance of narrative closure can be viewed as operating in ways that are akin to the self-preservation instinct: keeping the life of the narrative going while seeking the proper “death.” In his article, Brooks draws also on Sartre and Benjamin to echo their statements that “narrative must tend toward its end, seek illumination in its own death” (Brooks 292). And yet not just any ending will do: “this must be the right death, the correct end. The complication of the *détour* is related to the danger of short-circuit: the danger of reaching the end too quickly, or achieving the improper death. The improper end indeed lurks throughout narrative, frequently as the wrong choice: choice of the wrong casket, misapprehension of the magical agent, false erotic object-choice” (292). Thus every narrative is fraught with the uncertainty of the *détour*, which has the potential to lead us astray, away from the correct ending and thus the right death. An unfinished text might be an ideal example of this phenomenon: as it is all *détour*, no end, does it manage to escape death by not ending? Or is refusing to finish a narrative an organism’s strategy of choosing to die “in its own way,” preferring the indeterminacy of the *détour* to the closure and finality of a clear end?

As discussed earlier, Lispector’s *Um sopro* is a book about writing and the writer’s hesitation.³⁸ The writer in this case is a man called simply “The Author,” who invents a character named Ângela Pralini. She takes on a life of her own and they enter into a sort of dialogue, their twin voices comprising the majority of the text in a call-and-response structure. Both inventor and invented have the same degree of literary agency; as the Author informs us, “[e]u escrevo um livro e Ângela outro” [“I write one book and Ângela writes another”] (Lispector, *Um sopro*

³⁸ See Chapter 1, “Deferred Beginnings.”

31; *A Breath* 24). The Author does wield control over the final product, however, as he states that he “tirei [...] o supérfluo” [“I’ve removed the superfluous”] from the text while shaping the final version which we are reading (31; 24). Thus, while they appear practically as equals, the way they appear to us has been manipulated by the Author himself. Thus we cannot know just how much agency Ângela has had in her dialogue with her creator.

Although Ângela is dying and there are many mentions of death throughout the novel, it is in the final section that death becomes an obsession for both of the characters, who speak of it almost incessantly. They meditate on the meaning of death, the fear of death, and most often, they speculate on when it will happen. They feel that they are getting close to the end of their lives, and, in a parallel fashion, the novel is approaching its end—at least the end that took shape after Lispector’s death.

For the Author character, death is inextricably linked to the practice of writing. He questions what he is writing about, and compares himself to a dying insect: “Eu sou como as cigarras que explodem de tanto cantar. Quando é que explodirei? Que canto eu? Canto o esplendor de morrer?” [“I am like the cicadas that explode from so much singing. When shall I explode? What do I sing? Do I sing the splendor of dying?”] (143; 144). Here the connection between completing the writing of a piece of literature is shown as being akin to traveling forward in time towards death. The end of the text is unknown, as is the moment of death. As he asks when it will happen—“When shall I explode?”—he is also attempting to understand what he is writing. Thus we see how death conditions the meaning of narrative, the *détour* that is our journey to the end of life.

The Author fears death, but fears even more the uncertainty of when and how it will happen, and his creation of a literary character has not helped him to stave it off; in fact it has

made it worse. Ângela herself questions her own existence in this creation of the Author's: "Estou no presente? Ou estou no passado? E se eu estivesse no futuro? Que glória. Ou sou um estilhaço de coisa, portanto sem tempo. Falta enredo e suspense e mistério e ponto culminante o sentido de tempo decorrendo" ["Am I in the present? Or am I in the past? And what if I were in the future? How glorious. Or I am the fragment of a thing, therefore without time. The meaning of time elapsing is missing plot and suspense and mystery and climax"] (146; 146). Here, Brooks's "narratability of life" is dramatized as Ângela speculates about which point in time her life is occupying. The notion of "time elapsing" in real life must be accompanied by narrative elements in order to be felt as such; since they are lacking for Ângela, she is not convinced that she even exists. (And, let us recall, she exists only insofar as the Author has created her, and Lispector has created both of them.) Ângela senses that the "*détour*" that is the narrative of life, according to Brooks, is not moving forward for her; "plot and suspense and mystery and climax" are missing, and thus the "*détour*" that separates life from death is thin and ineffective, doing little to mask the inevitability of her imminent return to the inorganic state.

For his part, the Author is frightened of death's inevitability. Although he does acknowledge that some people kill themselves in order to put an end to the torture of waiting for the moment when death will surprise them, he himself does not want to kill himself: "Assusta-me minha potência que no entanto é limpada: eu poderia me matar de tanto desespero pelo desespero? Não. Eu recuso matar-me" ["I'm frightened by my own power which however is limboed: could I kill myself in my desperation for despair? No. I refuse to kill myself"] (144; 144). Instead, he wishes for a very long life, wishes to live so long that he no longer possesses a consciousness but simply exists in an almost comatose state: "Quero viver até me tornar um ser velho, meditativo, comatoso de lucidez mais profunda até indizível e inalcançável do semicoma

senil” [“I want to live until I become an old and meditative being, comatose from a deep even indescribable and unreachable lucidity of the senile semi-coma”] (144; 144). What the Author longs for, then, is neither life nor death, but a mere existence on the edge of death; he wants to be almost immobile and just conscious enough to do the minimum required actions to get through daily life. He knows this is possible, as he has seen elderly people in this situation: “Este semicoma senil se assemelha a um quase sono dormente das supercamadas da consciência. Nesse estado—adivinho eu baseada em olhares que vi em velhos imóveis e cinzentos—nesse estado se consegue responder perguntas e mesmo conversas” [“This senile semi-coma resembles a numb almost-sleep of the upper layers of consciousness. In that state—I imagine based on the gazes I have seen in the gray, immobile old—in that state one can respond to questions and even conversations”] (144; 144).

While the Freudian individual wants to choose its own death, a death that, for Sartre and Benjamin, must be the right one, here the Author wants to renounce this choice, and renounce the need to even die. He would rather simply exist in this “semi-coma” state of consciousness, neither fully alive nor dead. Akin to this is the unfinished literary fragment, which is not totally incomprehensible, but does not have a true, stable structure either. Any ending that a fragment has is an arbitrary one, which does not function as an ending but rather as a truncated middle, a *détour* that has gone nowhere.

This choice of “semi-coma” consciousness in the face of the inevitability of death is a means of escape. One component of this absent/present consciousness is forgetting, something that supposedly cannot be done on purpose, and yet the Author uses as a means of exerting some measure of control over the end that awaits him and his creation, Ângela. He meditates on the uses of forgetting: “O esquecimento das coisas é minha válvula de escape. Esqueço muito por

necessidade. Inclusive estou tentando e conseguindo esquecer-me de mim mesmo, de mim minutos antes, de mim esqueço o meu futuro. Sou nu” [“Forgetting things is my escape valve. I forget a lot out of necessity. I’m even trying and succeeding in forgetting myself, forgetting how I was a few minutes ago, I forget my future. I’m naked”] (145; 145, translation modified). Ângela, however, uses the opposite strategy: while the Author forgets his future, she affirms, “[e]u me lembro do futuro” [“I remember the future”] (146; 146). She does not live in the moment, but rather assigns all of her experiences to the past, where they become part of her memories. She can only experience life when remembering it: “Na hora do acontecimento não aproveito nada. E depois vem uma ilógica saudade. Mas é que o tempo presente, como a luz de uma estrela, só depois é que me atingirá em anos-luz. Na hora não chego a perceber do que se trata. Parece-me que só sou sensível e alerta na recordação” [“When something happens I don’t make the most of it. And then an illogical longing comes. But that’s because the present time, like the light of a star, only later does it reach me in light years. While it’s happening I can’t make out what’s going on. It seems to me that I am only sensitive and alert when remembering”] (145; 145). Not only is she only “sensitive and alert” when recalling the past, but she is unable to focus on experiences in the present, as she “can’t make out what’s going on” while the event is taking place. Her consciousness is always absent, like that of the Author’s: while he lives in a “semi-coma” state, she lives in the past: “Quase que vivo, pois, no passado por não reconhecer a espécie de riqueza do momento atual” [“I almost live, therefore, in the past because I can’t recognize the type of richness of the present moment”] (145; 145). Both are strategies for avoiding confrontation with the end.

Ângela's inability to live in the present is directly connected to a fear of death. She explains that she will not know life until she has lived it and has gone to the other side. What this entails, though, is a sort of immortality, an ability to see herself after death:

Depois que vivo é que sei que vivi. Na hora o viver me escapa. Sou uma lembrança de mim mesma. Só depois de “morrer” é que vejo que vivi. Eu me escapo de mim mesma. Às vezes eu me apresso em acabar um episódio íntimo de vida, para poder captá-lo em recordações, e para, mais do que ter vivido, viver. Um viver que já foi. Deglutido por mim e fazendo agora parte de meu sangue. (152-53)

After I've lived I'll know I've lived. When it's happening living escapes me. I am a memory of myself. Only after “dying” do I see that I lived. I flee from myself. Sometimes I hurry to finish some intimate episode of life, in order to capture it in memories, and, more than having lived, to live. A living that already was. Swallowed by me and now part of my blood. (153)

Interestingly, Ângela puts the word “dying” in quotation marks, but not the word “living,” though if she is living she will die, and if she is not living she cannot die. Ângela appears here as neither literary nor real, but a combination of both.

Presumably, the Author is alive, and Ângela is not; she is simply his fictional creation, no matter how much agency she seems to have over the narrative. And yet the distinction between real author and fictional character is continually blurred, just as the reader seems to find traces of Lispector's autobiographical voice in both the Author and Ângela. The fact that Ângela is not alive is presented as the result of her own desire to shun the prospect of living: “Tenho medo de estar viva porque quem tem vida um dia morre” [“I'm afraid to be alive because whoever has life shall one day die”] (150; 150-51). The Author attributes her non-existence to her own decision, not his: “Para nunca morrer, Ângela prefere não existir. Estou criando o que só morre por esquecimento” [“In order not to die, Ângela prefers not to exist. I'm creating something that can only die by being forgotten”] (150; 150). While the Author is at the mercy of his mortality, he is

able to find in Ângela immortality, and the power to refuse to exist and thus refuse death. This act of creating something that “can only die by being forgotten” is, of course, an allegory of literature itself as a means for an individual to live forever by being read throughout successive generations. Thus, what we see here is not only an anxiety over Lispector’s literary legacy, but specifically a conscious statement that publication and entrance into some kind of literary canon or institution will, finally, be her only means of averting total obliteration.

Ângela, at another point, meditates almost coldly and distantly on how the world will look once she is gone. She can picture it quite clearly: “Eu quase que já sei como será depois de minha morte. A sala vazia o cachorro a ponto de morrer de saudade. Os vitrais de minha casa. Tudo vazio e calmo” [“I almost already know what it will be like after my death. The empty living room the dog about to die of longing. The stained-glass windows of my house. Everything empty and calm”] (159; 159). She paints a picture of her house, her life, without her in it. Aside from the grieving dog, the picture is not an overly dramatic one; it simply evokes stillness and emptiness, with no humans involved in mourning, and with her quotidian surroundings simply standing there, “empty and calm.” With this clear-eyed vision, Ângela confronts death. The Author, impressed, states that Ângela is much better equipped than he is to face the end. In fact, he says, she will outlive him: “Ângela é mais forte do que eu. Eu morro antes dela” [“Ângela is stronger than I. I die before she does”] (161; 162). Indeed, literary creations outlive their creators.

Um sopro ends abruptly, which is not surprising given its unfinished status. We read in parentheses that the Author’s gaze is turning away from Ângela as she leaves the novel, or which causes her to vanish from the novel: “o olhar dele vai se distanciando de Ângela e ela fica pequena e desaparece” [“his eyes withdraw from Ângela and she gets smaller and disappears”]

(162; 163). This literary creation who was supposed to outlive her creator is in fact at the mercy of his attention: the minute his gaze leaves her, it seems she ceases to exist. The Author says, “Recuo meu olhar minha câmera e Ângela vai ficando pequena, pequena, menor—até que a perco de vista” [“I pull back my gaze my camera and Ângela starts getting small, small, smaller—until I lose sight of her”] (162;163). The word “camera” here is surprising, as it injects a reference to a filmic perspective that has not heretofore been present in this writing-oriented novel. The Author must abandon writing in order to abandon Ângela; by putting a camera between himself and his creation, he is able to allow her to fade away—something that he has stated earlier that he would not be able to do, insisting that he would die before she did.

This unfinished novel does not end but rather its fragments simply stop appearing, and the book runs out of pages, and this is how the story comes to a close. The final three lines of the novel are the last fragments we read, but cannot be understood as a conventional novelistic ending by any means. Indeed, they are perhaps the most ambiguous lines in the entire text. The three lines appear as separate fragments, and unlike the rest of the novel, which makes clear which character—the Author or Ângela—is speaking at any given moment, here the speakers are not identified:

Quanto a mim, estou. Sim.
“Eu...eu...não. Não posso acabar.”
Eu acho que...
(162)

As for me, I am here. Yes.
“I...I...no. I cannot finish.”
I think that...
(164, translation modified)

It does not seem possible that Ângela is speaking here, as the Author has just watched her disappear from the novel. As Fitz has argued, it is possible that we are reading the voice of Lispector herself here, “abruptly and without benefit of any clear-cut explanation or introduction, interrupt[ing] the final words of her own narrator to tell us plainly that she cannot, that she will not come to an end, that she will not cease to exist” (Fitz, “Confession 266). It is interesting to note the double meaning of the phrase “Não posso acabar” in Portuguese, as the verb “acabar” as used here allows for two interpretations: it may be transitive (I cannot finish, as in I cannot finish writing) or intransitive (I cannot finish, as in I myself cannot come to an end). This uncertainty underscores the ambivalence that characterizes not only all of *Um sopro* but indeed Lispector’s entire *oeuvre*: the fraught relationship between Lispector as a creative subject and her role as an author sees itself come to an equally fraught end here, where the writing must stop—the novel indeed ends—and yet the writing does not want to stop, just as Lispector herself does not want to die. Fighting to choose her literary death, Lispector is finally unable to do so, just as she is unable to choose her physical death; they come together, and they catch her *in medias res*, in the middle of writing, in the middle of living.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, literary endings are just as fraught as literary beginnings, and perhaps even more so, since every literary end is like a death. Unfinished texts put into sharp relief the connection between literature and life, because they end like most lives do—unexpectedly—making us into what Tomaiuolo calls “‘unfinished’ subjects” (19). Indeed, it is often death that causes texts to remain unfinished, when authors postpone finishing their works for so long that they die before completing them. The specific role of death in the final fate of

texts can play vital role in their interpretive possibilities. As I have discussed, Macedonio Fernández spent decades attempting to perfect *Museo de la novela de la Eterna* but he was not specifically in the process of dying while writing it; in other words, what ended up being the final version of his novel was simply one in a series of drafts. Meanwhile, Felisberto Hernández abandoned “Tierras de la memoria” twenty years before his death, never interested in returning to this unfinished piece. Thus, although for Fernández death was a major source of anxiety with regard to questions of literary immortality, death did not directly govern the outcome of his novel. He was working on it when he died, but he was not writing in a state of dying like Lispector was when composing the fragments that would later be assembled into *Um sopro de vida*. Hernández’s relationship with the unfinished “Tierras,” on the other hand, had nothing to do with death; instead it had to do with a deliberate posture of indifference and a concerted effort to forget this particular text, in which he grapples with the experience of coming face to face with himself in the process of becoming a writer. But for Lispector, who was aware that she was dying of cancer and feeling the agony of this process during the time that she was writing, *Um sopro* is both the acceptance of death and the affirmation of life—a novel that blows “a breath of life,” perhaps the last breath, as its creator succumbs to death. Remaining unfinished only because Lispector herself remained unfinished, *Um sopro* is “completed and perfected precisely by its incompleteness and imperfection” (Moser 355). A reflection of the unfinished nature of life, *Um sopro* documents both Lispector’s struggle to choose her literary death and the inevitability that her own physical death would make such control impossible.

Returning to the “poetics of inattention” that I have been tracing throughout this study, we can see its manifestation here in the form of evasions of literary closure. This evasion is the product of profound ambivalence towards the prospect of facing finality and with that, making

statements that are necessarily definitive. In this paradoxical dynamic demonstrated by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, as well as by their author-characters, the writing subject avoids concluding the text—an avoidance that gives the impression that he or she is simply not interested in bringing it to a conclusion. I contend that this disinterest is deliberate, and the “poetics of inattention” is a feigned inattention that is actually a mechanism of control—specifically, control over prospective endings, which represent a kind of literary death. In other words, these writers and their author-characters manifest deep ambivalence about literary closure through a strategy of evasion. This evasion comes in the form of inattention, a feigned lack of interest in or focus on the task of completing a text. It is a means of attempting to deny death its power, while, paradoxically, trying to steer their lives and narratives towards their own chosen ends—ends which represent no end at all, but rather more fragments, or returns to the beginning, or interruptions *in medias res*.

All of this is related to a fundamental anxiety about authorship and literary legacy. As we have been witnessing throughout this study, Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector manifested in their work a deep ambivalence about their place in the literary world—both wanting to belong and wanting to remain apart; both wanting to be well-known as authors and wanting to hide from public view; both wanting to publish and wanting to stall publication of certain pieces or after a certain number of revisions. This conflicted attitude about authorship exists in the context of the influence of the avant-gardes, which put the artist at the center of their concerns and built the artist figure up to almost godlike status. Faced with such representations of the artist, these three authors react equivocally, hesitating between embracing this vision and recoiling from it. This ambivalence about what it means to be an author leads them to this “poetics of inattention” I have been exploring, in which they return again and again to representing the writing process in

their work, but always in an extremely problematic manner. It is the product of an inattentive subject, a subject who is so ambivalent about the process that he or she cannot or will not pay full attention to it. The creative subject is separated from his or her product, made distant by this lack of attentional focus; this distance, however, is also a critical distance, allowing for these authors' works to bring with them a subtle critique of the prevailing notions of creativity and art. Their gesture of "self-memorialization" as authors consists of leaving legacies as "unfinished" literary subjects—subjects who leave no definitive, conclusive statements, and about whom no clear positions can be taken. Like their open, fragmented texts, they leave their own personas open to endless, never-conclusive interpretations.

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS A POLITICS OF INATTENTION

Introduction

Is there a political element in the dynamics I have been exploring in the preceding chapters, or does a poetics of inattention necessarily translate into an apolitical stance—a sort of politics of apathy? Trying to think about Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector from the perspective of political engagement may appear to be a contradictory and even futile endeavor. When trying to link their work to conventional ideas about political engagement in art, several questions spring forth with regard to questions of ambivalence and attention. Does the ambivalence that pervades the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector necessarily correlate with political ambivalence? And is political ambivalence to be understood as a lack of political convictions? Does attention that appears to be absent, or at least only intermittently present, correlate with a lack of sustained interest in the social sphere? Does political engagement necessitate one's full attention? Does an aesthetic stance that disavows itself as such, and which dramatizes the wanderings of the creative subject's attention and often tortuous and futile attempts at producing literature, mean that the same spirit of futility or impotence or clumsiness pervades their political outlook?

Answers to these kinds of questions require establishing, first, a clear idea of what is meant by politics and political engagement. The role of literature and writers in society has been a central concern in Latin America for centuries, and the literature that has shaped Latin American canons has often been written by figures who were not only engaged in writing, but were also political figures, soldiers, explorers, educators, legal authorities, or activists. Their

literary activities were not separate from their other responsibilities; in fact, they were an integral part of who they were and what they represented. Concern with and participation in the social sphere has always been practically inextricable from literary activity in Latin America. Over the centuries, writers such as Andrés Bello, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Rómulo Gallegos, and Carlos Fuentes, to name but a few, have been deeply involved in various aspects of the official life of their countries, and viewed their literary efforts as part of their roles as public servants. As Pedro Henríquez Ureña has noted, “men of letters” in Latin America have often been “also men of action”: many of them “became presidents of republics. Many were cabinet ministers. Most were, at one time or another, members of congresses. Often they suffered exile” (116). The role of the writer has been, by and large, viewed as a public one. Nowhere has this marriage of writing and public action been more evident than in the phenomenon of nineteenth-century “national novels” explored by Doris Sommer in her landmark study *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991). Such novels presented heterosexual romance in an allegorical fashion, with the union of a man and woman offered for interpretation as the union of the national “family.” This was part of the mission that these authors carried out through their literary activity, and demonstrated “the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building” (5-6).

It has often been observed that a transition took place, in the period between the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, from an aestheticist stance to a more real-world orientation (Unruh 74-75). However, social engagement by the literary establishment actually seems to have been more the norm rather than the exception in Latin American literary history. Indeed, even *modernismo*, despite its reputation for purely aesthetic concerns, nonetheless displayed a deep concern with political and social issues in addition to aesthetic

ones. As Cathy Jurade has noted, *modernismo* was an heir to European romanticism: “Just as romanticism challenged the hegemony of the scientific and economic in modern life, Spanish American *modernismo* protested the technological, materialistic, and ideological impact of positivism that swept Spanish America as it entered the world economy during the nineteenth century” (3-4). The writings of José Martí, for example, “offer some of the earliest examples of the *modernista* tendency to envision literary and political concerns as one and the same” (40). The *modernistas* were, in short, equally concerned with developing a new form of expression that was “both spiritual and political” (4).

The avant-gardes of the 1920s and '30s inherited the legacy of *modernismo* while also striving to critique and rid themselves of that legacy. Similarly to *modernismo*, however, the avant-gardes displayed an often palpable concern with social issues, specifically as regards questions of national and regional identity, in addition to a program of aesthetic renovation. As Ana Pizarro has noted, the avant-gardes in Latin America, although impacted by World War I and the effects that it had in Europe and on European cultural movements, were deeply interested in questions of a national and continental scope (86). Pizarro points out that the avant-gardes of the 1920s and '30s emerged in a “momento de crisis de la dominación oligárquico-liberal” [“moment of crisis for oligarchical-liberal domination”] and US hegemonic influence, and during this time, the “oposición democrática intenta levantar una alternativa progresista” [“democratic opposition was trying to mount a progressive alternative”] (86). Even the reception of the European influence of “isms,” which itself is part of a dynamic of cultural, economic, and political dependency, was mediated and redefined in accordance with national realities (87). Pizarro notes the case of Mexican *estridentismo*, which combined the influence of Italian futurism and other European avant-garde movements and, when inserting them into the post-

Revolution Mexican reality, transformed them totally. In other countries, such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Peru, avant-garde aesthetic activity went hand-in-hand with agitation against dictatorial regimes (87). Overall, Pizarro affirms, in Latin America the literary avant-garde grew in tandem with the political avant-gardes of the moment (87).

As Fernando Rosenberg has observed, the avant-gardes' quest for ways to represent a national subject was not only a result of nationalism, but also part of an effort to establish or re-establish an identity for their nations within an increasingly globalized world, especially after the crash of 1929 (4). Rosenberg writes that, in the 1930s after the crisis and the loss of the economic prosperity of the 1920s, the Latin American avant-gardes were still striving to entrench themselves into nationally-defined "loci of enunciation" within "the circulation of goods, discourses, and peoples" that was occurring worldwide—a defensive measure by which they "posit[ed] places of resistance to anchor their identities in the midst of historical flows" (6, 5). Therefore, even though the notion of national identities was coming into question, the avant-gardes in Latin America remained concerned with their countries' and the Latin American region's place in an increasingly global world context.

Ángel Rama has argued for a particularly nuanced view of the Latin American avant-gardes, affirming that we can distinguish between two avant-gardes, or two major branches of vanguardism in Latin America. They form what he calls two superimposed debates ("Dos vanguardias" 62). The first establishes an opposition between the "old" and the "new" in terms of aesthetic expression, while the second involves a dispute between those who espouse a European-influenced vanguardism and those who argue for a regionally-oriented, socially-committed one (62). Many of these oppositions were to be found in the works of single authors. This is to say that aesthetic and social concerns were competing and coexisting in much of the

avant-garde expression of the time. Vanguardism was, therefore, not just aesthetic and not just social—it was in fact the site of a struggle between, and often a combination of, the two.

Much of the social engagement of the Latin American avant-gardes had to do with their attack on official, codified forms of expression. Indeed, a major difference between the Latin American avant-gardes and the European avant-gardes can be found in their relationship with and attitude toward the artistic establishment. As Peter Bürger has argued in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), the European avant-gardes represented a continuation of the tradition of rupture initiated by romanticism, but they took this rupture to such an extreme that they came to reject the very institution of art (60). While the avant-gardes in Latin America were also involved in a project of rupture, instead of rejecting the institution of art, they sought to conquer it and redefine it in their own image. The Latin American avant-gardes also carried a strong component of cultural nationalism: revolutionizing artistic expression went hand in hand with revolutionizing national expression, and thereby forging a new, modern identity for their respective countries.

This nationalistic bent was particularly evident in Argentina. Argentine avant-gardes such as the *Martín Fierro* group were concerned with defining what it meant to be Argentine, and establishing Argentina's place in Western culture (Garth, *Self* 54). This project was to be carried out through a renovation of literary expression, seeking a more “authentically” Argentine voice. For example, as Beatriz Sarlo has observed, much of Argentina's avant-garde literature combines the avant-garde aesthetics of *ultraísmo* with a thematic focus on *criollismo*, or local identity; one prominent example is Jorge Luis Borges's 1923 poetry collection *Fervor de Buenos Aires* [*Fervor of Buenos Aires*] (*Modernidad* 47). The *martinfierrista* project can be understood as part aesthetic renewal and part redefinition of Argentine identity, the latter manifested in a chauvinistic manner, prizing the *criollo* or local (the “real” Argentine) in opposition to the figure

of the immigrant (understood as not really Argentine) within a context of radical demographic shifts. Renovation of poetic language was part of a project to determine the “authentic” language of the Argentine. Sarlo notes that the nationalistic bent of the *martinfierristas* was in fact rather conservative, posing no challenge to social structures or institutions. Their “affirmation of nationality” was “disciplined,” and they never attacked such institutions as “the family, the homeland, religion, or authority” (“Vanguardia y criollismo” 49). Within the project of avant-garde aesthetic rupture, the *martinfierristas* wanted to found a national mythology, an Argentine “type” (Garth, *Self* 24).

Although writers and artists in Uruguay were heavily influenced by avant-garde activity in Argentina and Europe, there were no specifically Uruguayan avant-garde movements—only instances of vanguardist expression influenced by movements going on elsewhere (Espina 429). And the vanguardism that did appear in Uruguay was somewhat watered-down as compared to iterations in other countries, such as Argentina, where there were hard-fought battles against the literary establishment represented by figures such as Leopoldo Lugones. This same urgency was not found in Uruguay, whose cultural scene was a “paisaje suave y blando” [“soft, smooth landscape”] lacking any roughness or edge, resulting in avant-garde activity that was “liviana” [“lightweight”] (Martínez Moreno 125). This could be partly due to Uruguay’s marginal position between cultural, political, and economic giants Argentina and Brazil: caught between two hugely influential nations, the country is “more likely to generate individuals who are unhappy with marginality than groups of action with shared aesthetic programs” because of Uruguay’s profile as “a country of individualities that have not always been able to break away from the prejudices and pressures of the context” (Espina 429). The Argentine avant-garde’s *criollismo* appeared in Uruguay in the form of *nativismo*, or “nativism” (which, despite its name, had

nothing to do with indigenous peoples) (Martínez Moreno 127). Much like *criollismo*, *nativismo* sought a particularly local form of expression; it did not, however, develop beyond a minor cultural trend. Rather than being occupied with what was particularly “Uruguayan” about their form of expression, proponents of *nativismo* were concerned with a more regional representation, focusing on themes connected to the experience of the Río de la Plata region.

In Brazil, with its waves of *modernismo* following the 1922 Week of Modern Art, the avant-garde was deeply concerned with questions of the nation and national culture. Coinciding with the 100th anniversary of Brazil’s independence from Portugal, the first *modernismo* “denounced the acritical imitation” of European cultural models; its project was to explore new forms of artistic expression that could be considered “authentically” Brazilian (Dunn 13). Even when the *modernismo* of the 1920s morphed into its second phase, which lasted from the 1930s to the 1950s, and concern shifted from the aesthetic expression of an essential Brazilianness to a focus on regional realities and identities, the movement was nonetheless concerned with finding a way to express a collective local reality. Literary experimentation, whether anti-realist in the first phase, or tending to more social-realist style in the second phase, was in the service of finding a way to express some form of Brazilianness. Even the third *modernismo* (1945-1980), known for its less empirical and more metaphysical focus, often still maintained a stake in the project of “representing” Brazil, even if the paradigm of representation began to be questioned as linguistically-oriented poststructuralism began to wield considerable influence. For example, one of the most prominent texts of the third *modernismo*, João Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande Sertão: Veredas* [*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*] (1956), is a highly experimental novel narrated in a stream-of-consciousness style, which evokes, rather than representing in a traditionally realist manner, the essence of the Brazilian *jagunço* or rural bandit. Even when the representational

paradigm of realism is shattered, the view of literature as able to represent a collective subject persists.

The examples discussed above show avant-garde artists who are engaged with society in different ways, but consistently relate to society in a way that involves some form of collective representation. Even their obsession with “the new” has to do with a belief in the artist’s ability to forge paths on behalf of the local, regional, or national community; what’s more, as Beatriz Sarlo has noted, the insistence on the new is a gesture of exclusion (*Modernidad* 98). Therefore, the avant-gardes establish themselves as the arbiters of the new, and in so doing, they are engaged in laying down new rules as much as they are breaking old ones. Their projects are gestures of establishing boundaries, determining what is in and what is out, what is permitted and what is forbidden. Although these gestures are clearly connected to aesthetics, at bottom aesthetic renovation is being used as part of a cultural project that is in the service of national identity formation or re-formation. This speaks to a profound engagement with society, even if it is often an elitist or exclusionary one which casts the artist in a privileged representational role.

This kind of political engagement is not something we associate with Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, or Clarice Lispector. These authors did not, for the most part, display the sort of political engagement that involves activism in the public sphere. All three of them tended to produce work that was much more internally- than externally-oriented, at odds with the more programmatic efforts of avant-garde movements such as Argentine *martinferrismo* or the first Brazilian *modernismo*. As outlined above, such movements strove to write and create in the name of a collective, or at least for the benefit of that collective; while their professed desire was one of rupture and renewal, their project was at bottom a foundational (or refoundational) one. They wanted to take over official national and regional culture and

remake it according to their values. In this context, the inward orientation found in Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector can be interpreted as a lack of interest in the social, as they seem more invested in exploring the inner workings of the individual's subjectivity than in the effort to define a collective subject or an individual subject's position in, and relation with, the surrounding social sphere.

To make such a reading, however, would mean presupposing that political or social interest or involvement by a writer can only be manifested in certain ways in their literary works, such as through an effort to "represent" social struggles or marginalized groups in literary form or an act of "giving voice" to certain individuals or groups who have been understood as "silenced." However, these types of activities are not the only ways to be interested in or engaged with the social sphere; other ways, which may not be as apparent at first glance, can be just as compelling to examine in terms of political significance.

Over the course of this study, I have examined works by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector which seem to display an attitude of indifference or at least reticence with regard to engagement with the literary community. It would be tempting to read this as a turning-away from the social aspect of literature, a romanticized alienation of the individual creative subject from any belonging to a collective, literary or otherwise. However, I propose that the "poetics of inattention" I have been tracing throughout this study can be read as a particular means of engaging with the world, and carries within it a decidedly political element, which when analyzed closely is actually bound up in an ethical position of radical egalitarianism. Indeed, as I hope to argue, the political stance we can detect in this "poetics of inattention" is potentially much more groundbreaking than any socially-committed project professed by the Latin American avant-gardes, as it represents a harsh critique of the very notion of the artist's

engagement with society in any traditional way, revealing it to be a paternalistic and conservative notion that is anything but revolutionary. Regardless of their concern for defining a new collective subject through the quest for an “authentic” means of expression, the Latin American avant-gardes never go as far as to destabilize the central and dominant position of the artist in his or her relationship with society, and never truly depart from the representational paradigm for literature and the belief in at least some measure of authorial intentionality. These three authors’ radical departure from the Latin American vanguardists can be found, precisely, in the realm of affect and the attentional states that are used to express this affect—that is, their exploration of ambivalence through various states of inattention, which communicates not only a failure of representation but also, and perhaps more importantly, a profound questioning of the notion of authorial intentionality. This poetics can be read as a means of engagement with the world, although one that is quite at odds with the ways in which the avant-gardes engaged with society. This engagement is inherently political, and bound up with an ethical position of egalitarianism that is radical when compared to the avant-gardes.

In this chapter, I want to probe the political significance of “minor” feelings and inattentive states, and the questions raised by the interplay of affect and attention in my authors’ texts. It seems that they can easily be viewed as politically apathetic stances, implying a turning inward away from the social sphere. At the same time, however, their marginal status may give them a subversive potential that could be politically productive. In his book *Affective Mapping* (2008), Jonathan Flatley asks us to think about how seemingly non-productive emotional states can involve their own kind of social engagement. He proposes, for example, that an apparently anti-social feeling such as melancholia can actually be read as “a way to be interested in the world” (2). I would like to extend this idea to another apparently anti-social feeling,

ambivalence, and its particular manifestation in Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector in the form of inattention. These three authors use ambivalent affect, and its expression through states of inattention, as a way to critique not only the larger-than-life emotions expressed in avant-garde writing, but also to undermine any prevailing illusions that the artist has a specific, special role to play in society and can affect change through literature in an intentional, causal manner. When we read the “inept” artistic subjects in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, we are witnessing a radical reversal of the avant-garde’s notion of the artist in his or her relationship to society. For the avant-garde, the artist can speak for the collective, because his or her voice is considered a competent one; the artist feels, experiences, and perceives the world on behalf of, and for the benefit of, the collective he or she represents through art. In the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, however, feeling and perception become “democratized”: no longer the preserve of the aesthetically privileged, the explosive drama of major affects is defused and turned into the small currency of an “everyday” life in which the creative subject is no more capable of experiencing and deploying affect than anyone else.

What seems to be taking place in these texts is a dismantling of the figure of the individual artist, whose consciousness is dissolving as he or she attempts to engage in the creative act. Although Unruh has pointed out that, in avant-garde “manifestos and poetic discourse, the exaggerated, romantic self becomes so superinflated that it eventually self-destructs,” this self is still shown as a visionary, uniquely able to process the stimuli of modern urban life (78). Although speaking in a collective “we” in manifestos, the avant-garde’s concept of the artist is actually much more implicated in an isolated genius figure inherited from romanticism and Spanish American *modernismo*. The avant-garde’s artist is still a figure who stands out from the crowd. In the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, however, we

can detect a more profound shift in the concept of the singular author who has an intention, to a more democratic creative subject whose ambivalence makes them more democratic. Affect is profoundly social, and the ambivalence that I see in their work has a deep social orientation: this ambivalence is a way of critiquing the idea that the individual artist figure has the ability to speak for others or to be listened to as a source of important new knowledge or wisdom. At bottom, it signals a profound crisis of the idea of authorship as authority.

My discussion of the connections between ambivalent affects, inattentive states, and political engagement will begin with an outline of the use of the term “politics” by French philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose ideas on aesthetics and politics are the ones that guide my analysis of the political resonances in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector. I will then move on to describe the ways in which inattentive states such as distraction have been viewed by philosophers since Antiquity, often in a negative light due to the perceived threat that “not-always-thinking” (as distraction was termed by Aristotle) was thought to pose to the integrity of the thinking subject. I will continue by drawing on Walter Benjamin’s ideas about distraction and the possible political promise that he found in groups of inattentive citizens. Finally, I will bring Rancierian politics and Benjaminian inattention together in readings of works by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector where I find that the “poetics of inattention” has a particularly political resonance.

Politics and Aesthetics

The “poetics of inattention” in Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector is characterized by an egalitarianism that can be connected to some of the ideas about aesthetics and politics introduced by Jacques Rancière, specifically his notions of “dissensus” and “the distribution of

the sensible.” For Rancière, “aesthetics is not the theory of the beautiful or of art; nor is it the theory of sensibility”; rather, he insists, aesthetics is “an historically determined concept which designates a specific regime of visibility and intelligibility of art, which is inscribed in a reconfiguration of the categories of sensible experience and its interpretation” (“Thinking” 1). Aesthetics determines what we can see, hear, and understand; this is governed by what he calls the “distribution of the sensible” or the partitioning of the perceptible.³⁹ Rancière defines the “distribution of the sensible” thus: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (*Politics* 12). In other words, it is the field of perception (what can be taken in by the senses such as sight and hearing), which establishes what can be perceived and who can perceive what, thereby assigning specific roles to different people and things. The distribution of the sensible governs the categories and limits of what we are able to perceive. As everyone is assigned a role, it appears so natural that it seems impossible to think or perceive in a different way; indeed, there is no vocabulary for thinking otherwise, no tools for representing something other than that which has been given. The roles we are given in the distribution of the sensible come from social practices that surround us and shape our subjectivity throughout our lives.

The link between aesthetics and politics, for Rancière, is found in the fact that “[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (13). In other words, politics is an activity that acts upon the distribution of the sensible: both the distribution of the sensible and politics are phenomena that take place on the level of sense perception. Thus,

³⁹ In its French original, the term is “partage du sensible,” which means the partitioning or parceling-out of that which can be apprehended by the senses.

principles such as visibility and audibility are central to this notion of politics, because politics is the act of making visible something that has previously been made invisible, or making sayable and audible something that has heretofore been silenced. This makes politics an act of representation that uncovers the hidden, making perceptible that which has been left out of the field of possible perception that he calls the distribution of the sensible. This is an aesthetic as well as ethical act, as it involves a transformation of the field of perception in terms of what can be perceived through sight, hearing, and other senses.

To strengthen his concept of politics, Rancière establishes a crucial distinction between “politics” and “the police,” the former corresponding to his notion of politics as active engagement by emancipated subjects who become subjects through political action, and the latter corresponding to the current status quo of political life in Western democracies, which appears to be democratic but really suppresses truly democratic participation by individuals. As he explains, “the police is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the police lies neither in repression nor even in control over the living. Its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible” (*Dissensus* 36). This is above all an implicit division, one that takes place without our noticing it as a construct.⁴⁰ As he clarifies,

⁴⁰ The “police” should not be interpreted as a version of Althusser’s notion of “ideological state apparatuses.” As Rancière clarifies, “I do not [...] identify the police with what is termed the ‘state apparatus.’ The notion of a state apparatus is in fact bound up with the presupposition of an opposition between State and society in which the state is portrayed as a machine, a ‘cold monster’ imposing its rigid order on the life of society. This representation already presupposes a certain ‘political philosophy,’ that is, a certain confusion of politics and the police. *The distribution of places and roles that defines a police regime stems as much from the assumed spontaneity of social relations as from the rigidity of state functions.*” (*Disagreement* 29, emphasis mine)

The police is, essentially, the law, generally implicit, that defines a party's share or lack of it. But to define this, you must first define the configuration of the perceptible in which one or the other is inscribed. The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees those bodies are assigned by the name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. (*Disagreement* 29)

The concept of the police represents the way in which public life is presented to us, as a situation in which everyone has their function and there are no breaches or voids in the social fabric. Such a void would allow for real politics to occur, meaning a departure from the way the world has been presented and an active attempt by individuals or groups to conceptualize it differently. As Rancière insists, politics, “before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable” (*Dissensus* 37). What politics does is take the assigned spaces and roles that people have been given, and strives to break outside those structures, “re-figuring space, what is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it” (37). At bottom, politics is not a battle for power over others, but for the power of representation through the field of perception, in terms of what can be said and thought. And for him, politics is synonymous with democracy—real democracy, not the version practiced in contemporary Western societies.

The kernel of the political act is something Rancière calls “dissensus,” which Rancière establishes as opposed to consensus (38). “Dissensus” is not simply a conflict of opinions, but indeed much more: it is “a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we sense something is given” (69). In other words, it is not a debate about political views or positions but about the conditions of possibility that govern the existence of some and not others. Consensus is the coercive imposition of a structure with no acknowledged “voids” or doubts; it is the mode of the police. It is based on the notion that smoothness, agreement, and consistency are what are desirable in the social sphere. Dissensus seeks to shatter this false smoothness of consensus, and

it battles consensus on the level of aesthetics, the ways in which reality is perceived. As he explains, “aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (*Politics* 13). As he reminds us, politics “revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” (13). Dissensus confronts consensus in the realm of aesthetics, which is where it operates, acting to disrupt the smooth flow of the forms of sensory experience that consensus has established.

In sum, Rancière views society as a set of relations between individuals, relations that are determined in advance by an assumed, implicit structure that determines the limits of what can be perceived through the senses. The police is the ordering of these individuals, and consensus is the method. The police is not a person or group of people but rather a structuring of relations that is taken for granted as given, and consensus is the picture of the world that this structuring of relations has created. Consensus makes the field of perception appear natural, inevitable, and free of conflict, disagreement, or voids. What politics does, through dissensus, is pierce holes in the smoothness of this field of perception, allowing other modes of perception to flow in and disrupt the harmony of what the police has maintained through consensus. A political act, then, is an aesthetic act that first disrupts radically the distribution of the sensible and then intervenes to change it or add to it, making other ways of perceiving appear to be possible.

Davide Panagia has linked Rancierian notions of politics and aesthetics to ethics and attentive practices. While Rancière focuses on delineating the forms and systems that shape the “reality” of the world we perceive around us, Panagia uses these concepts to explore aesthetic

experience as “an ethical practice of attending to the world,” revealing a vital connection between attention and ethics in aesthetics (11). Panagia argues that our sensory perception is organized by something called “narratocracy,” which he defines as the conditions of possibility for life to be understood as a kind of narrative that we can follow (12). Closely related to Rancière’s notion of the “distribution of the sensible,” narratocracy is the structural form that governs our ability to “read” politics, political events, and the social sphere at large. Like the Rancierian police maintaining the limits of what can be seen and said, narratocracy is “the rule of narrative,” a “regime of perception” that organizes “the perceptual field according to the imperative of rendering things readable” (12). In short, narratocracy governs the relationship between affect, attention, and politics: our senses (affect) and ability to attend to some things and not others (attention) manifest themselves in a political arena whose structures are built by narratocracy. In order for us to “sense” something, and “pay attention” to it, within narratocracy, it must be understandable, “narratable.” It must “make sense” in terms of the logic by which our “common sense” is governed. The form that privileges meaning is the form that is able to draw our attention to what is meaningful, and thus there is an implicit value judgment determining what is worth attending to and what is not.

Because attention is governed by what is understood as meaningful—which has been understood as such thanks to its ability to conform to the forms of experience that govern our perception—the question arises: what is the meaning of inattention in this environment? If our attention is drawn to what is “narratable” and “readable,” then it follows that anything outside these forms of perception is unable to capture our attention, as it has been so shaped by the given possibilities for perception. Inattention, however, holds a particularly radical potential in this situation, if it is turned from something indicating an absence of attention (due to the inability of

something to conform to the structures that command our perception) into something deliberate, indicating a willful redirection of attentive faculties. Inattention, in this sense, would constitute a refusal to participate in narratocracy's predetermined forms of experience. Panagia finds these instances of radical inattentiveness in what he calls moments of "disarticulation" (3). These are instances in which "an interruption of previous forms of relating occurs" and "there is a disarticulation of our organoleptic correspondences" (3). The result is Rancierian politics: an intervention on the distribution of the sensible, the "disfiguration and reconfiguration" of both "what makes sense" and "what can be sensed" (3). These are moments of "breakdown" in narratocracy, moments in which there is an excess that surpasses "the limits that structure our daily living" (3).

These moments have profound ethical meaning, because "they compel us to relinquish our attachments and acknowledge that our subjectivities are inconsistent and open to repetitions of articulation" (4). Paraphrasing Rancière, Panagia argues that politics happens "when a relation of attachment or detachment is formed between heterological elements: it is a part-taking in the activities of representation that renders perceptible what had previously been insensible" (3). Panagia is interested in the activities of disfiguration and reconfiguration of the imposed structure defined as the "distribution of the sensible" (3). He is interested in how narratocracy is challenged by events or actions that are not "readable" within its strictures, which thus "challenge the hermeneutic assumption that things must be meaningful in order to count as valuable (as if meaning were a property of the object described)" (4). Despite narratocracy's attempt to impose a form on experience, something escapes this form, something that is unrepresentable by the established system of signification: this is what Panagia calls sensation,

and I understand as affect. It is something that cannot be included in narratocracy, and is thus made invisible in the daily course of our perception.

One example of artistic expression that Panagia uses to make his argument is the later work of Paul Cézanne. According to Panagia, Cézanne did not paint pure impression but rather “the experience of sensation” as it was happening (9). This is seen in the fact that Cézanne moved away from using single outlines for shapes, preferring instead several outlines and the blurring and overlapping of tones which created a sensation of movement (9). This pictorial approach to the expression of “the experience of sensation” communicates an idea of “the moment of sensation” as “an unexpected moment of dampened attention, when one loses recourse to the networks, practices, and relays of attachment that sustain representation” (10). In Cézanne, Panagia sees the expression of how attention is unmoored from the structures that customarily govern it, and experiences a “dampening” that allows attention to open itself up to new forms of perception or to attend to new objects or realities. This is a prime example of the “disarticulation” that Panagia says occurs at certain moments, in which sensory perception is temporarily detached from “narratocracy” and the “distribution of the sensible.”

Such a disarticulation is inherently political, in the Rancierian sense, as it necessarily means a reconfiguration of the conditions of possibility for the perception of certain realities that have perhaps not been available for our attention previously, or have not been considered something of value meriting attention. As Panagia clarifies, “[d]isinterest, disfiguration, and dissensus” are all terms that describe “the experience of sensation that is the result of an interruption of the networks of distribution that grant us a common ground” (44). Panagia’s emphasis on “disarticulation” and his mention of the word “disinterest” in connection with politics and aesthetics underscores the radical potential of inattention, and recalls the ideas

developed by Walter Benjamin regarding the phenomenon of distraction in the 20th century.⁴¹ We will recall that, for Benjamin, the new technology of cinema worked to train people in a new kind of spectatorship, which departed from what he considered a bourgeois individual contemplation and moved toward a more scattered, distracted form of reception of stimuli, which took place in the individual as part of a collective audience. Distraction, in its shifting of audiences from individual to collective, held a particular political promise for Benjamin, forging the path for new forms of perception that would fly in the face of traditional forms. Of course, inattentive states such as distraction have not always been viewed in such a positive light; indeed, as we shall see, more often than not, inattention has been considered an ethically and politically problematic state of mind.

Interpreting Inattention

In Western thought, inattention has often been viewed as a threat to morality and good social relations. It has been conventionally understood that paying attention to something indicates a subject's interest, focus, and thought; conversely, not paying attention to something denotes a lack of interest, an unfocused mental state, and a lack of thought. This is due to the assumption that attention is something that is intentionally given or withheld, and this intentionality at the heart of our ideas about attention is what determines a subject's interest or lack of interest in something. One of the most common forms of inattention (or partial attention) is distraction. And as Paul North explains in *The Problem of Distraction* (2012), Western thought since Aristotle has viewed distraction as a problem. It has always provoked profound anxieties, being viewed as a "furtive and destructive force, [...] not only equal to but possibly stronger than

⁴¹ Benjamin's ideas about distraction are outlined in detail in the Introduction and in Chapter 2, "A Poetics of Inattention."

attention” (2). For Aristotle, distraction was a sort of antithesis to focused thinking, yet not concrete enough to be considered a total lack of thought; as distraction manifested itself in ebbs and flows of attention, he deemed it “not-always-thinking” (19). Such an unstable mental state “haunted Aristotle in his attempt to theorize the soul”: “For Aristotle, not-always-thinking is a threat that allows him, by excluding it, to build an ontology, a politics, and an ethical theory on the basis of idealized, continuous intellection” (6, 176). Distraction, an “intermittent interruption of cognition,” was excluded (North uses the term “banished”) from Ancient Greek thought (6).

Later thinkers such as the French philosopher and moralist Jean de la Bruyère viewed distraction as a moral failing. North explains that, for La Bruyère, “a mere phenomenon with the shallowest roots, a fashion or manner of the moderns that never afflicted the ancients, something like pure manner,” the phenomenon of distraction became “the basis for all other moral foibles,” turning into “something like the universal source for immorality, since it names the opposite of what is moral: moral is intellection. Moral slips were made, as it were, in distraction from the truth of the soul” (176).

The biggest threat perceived in distraction is that it seems unable to decide just what it is. It can mean a total lack of attention, but it can also simply mean a waning of attention in which focus becomes fuzzy. This unclear status undermines the unifying effect of focused attention, opening up the possibility for the mind to scatter, and either return to focus or never return at all. As North explains, almost all definitions of distraction view it as “tension between two poles”: between the “absolute and causeless suspension of intellection” and the “movement of disunification, a scattering, spreading, dividing, or diverting” (177, 176-77). This instability is particularly troublesome in politics. North points specifically to the treatment of distraction by English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651). As North explains, for

Hobbes distraction is “the most destructive enemy of the state” because “it challenges the theomorphism of man that underlies the anthropomorphism of the state” (181). The result of distraction is “a multiplication of covenants, a general disorderliness of principles. All potential principles of order, natural, historical, intellectual, and so forth—including appetite, sovereignty, thought, non-thought, interest, will, whim—for a time have equal claims to priority” (182).

It is this openness and indeterminacy characteristic of distraction that is so troubling for philosophers, especially in terms of political and moral thought. As North affirms, distraction “suggests not just the possibility but the existence of an infinitely inclusive collective without the need to count out its members or represent itself,” a kind of social order that is “neither revolutionary nor utopian” (183). As it is a collective based on dispersal instead of concentration, and interruption instead of “the fiction of a historical continuum,” it is by definition unstable, mobile, and ever-changing (183).

However, these very indeterminate attributes are also the basis for a radically different political reading of this state. Walter Benjamin, in his second version of “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1935-1939), writes against these traditional views of distraction to rethink the concept for the 20th century, finding in it the promise of a new political agency for the masses. Benjamin places distraction in opposition to concentration, which he describes as “[c]ontemplative immersion” and as the reigning bourgeois mode of attention; distraction, on the other hand, appears as a new “variant of social behavior” by the masses, specifically those attending the new attraction of the cinema (39). Specifically, cinema, as a new art form, functions as a training tool for the development of new modes of perception, taking the bourgeois individualism of concentration and dissolving it into a sort of massified, dispersed consciousness. For Benjamin, it is a question of agency: while concentration makes the

individual passive, as he or she becomes “absorbed” by the object of focus, distraction is an active state of reception of stimuli. As he affirms, “the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide” (40). Distraction disrupts Panagian narratocracy’s hierarchical structure of passive receiver and active stimuli, turning the receiver into a creator of meaning. The inattentiveness of “disinterest,” which Panagia ties to sensation or affect, the distracted subject resists the forms generated by narratocracy by interrupting them (Panagia 44). Thus is the act of “reception in distraction,” which Benjamin presents as a radical new way of viewing art and the world.

Taking Benjamin’s view of distraction as an active state with revolutionary promise, we can see it and other forms of inattention as challenges to both Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” and Panagia’s “narratocracy.” The new way of perceiving, which Benjamin’s distraction provides us, is at bottom a refusal of established structures of perception. And as we have seen throughout this study, in the work of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector this state of distraction is transferred from receiver to creator, from “reception in distraction” to what can be termed creation in distraction, creating literary works using what I have called a “poetics of inattention.” In the work of these three authors, we see the dynamic of Benjamin’s distracted mass cinema-going subject, but now transferred to an individual subject struggling to create something through words. As I hope to show, the political promise of Benjamin’s distracted mass audience can also be found in these authors’ ambivalent and inattentive solitary writer.

Inattentive Political Engagement in Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector

The works that I examine by Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector engage in making visible the “voids” in the social order, in a reconfiguration of the

distribution of the sensible that makes visible the tedium, labor, and ambivalence that go into the production of a work of art. In addition, they demonstrate examples of creative figures who are far from the gifted virtuosos privileged in the literary world since romanticism, thus giving visibility and creating the conditions of possibility for a rather more democratized sense of who can be an artist and what art can be. As Panagia has noted, “the first political act is also an aesthetic one, a partitioning of sensation that divides the body and its organs of sense perception and assigns to them corresponding capacities for the making of sense” (9). And indeed, as we shall see, the “poetics of inattention” that characterizes the works of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector can be understood as a poetics of the amateur, of the scribbler, of the individual who wants to express his or her creative voice but is wracked with ambivalence and lacking any expertise regarding how best to go about it. By giving such visibility to the inattentive subject, who we might call the “mediocre” artist, these three writers are contributing to a new distribution of the sensible when it comes to the concept of the artist in the 20th century.

As Vicky Unruh has observed, as the avant-garde movements developed, “the self-aware artist hero (or often antihero) was a fairly recently established literary presence” in Latin American literature (73). Stories about artists “are so common in vanguardist expression that there are few significant works that do not construct an artistic persona of some kind” (72). Thus, the narrator-protagonists found in the works of Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector that I have discussed in this study are not a new invention or a departure from the prevailing aesthetics of their times. The departure from the avant-garde that I detect in these authors’ works is not the fact that they talk about the process of creating art or about the subjectivity of the artist, but rather the way in which they do so.

Citing such critics as Saúl Yurkevich and Antônio Cândido, Unruh outlines about how, at the turn of the 20th century, there was a change from the “aestheticist stance and social disaffection” associated with Spanish American *modernismo* and Brazilian Symbolism (73). During this period, the artist struggled, caught between isolation from society and engagement with it. With the advent of the avant-gardes in the early decades of the 20th century, “a more complicated, even contradictory, vanguardist artist” emerged, particularly in prose fiction (74). For Unruh, although we can trace a progression from more isolation in *modernismo* to more engagement in the avant-gardes, vanguardism in fact shows “both an intensification of the detached, superior stance” and “a simultaneous critique of that position” (74). It is indeed a struggle to determine the scope of activity corresponding to the avant-garde artist persona, during which contact with the outside world becomes more and more inevitable. In Unruh’s summation, the vanguardist artist is “acutely self-aware” and “obsessed by both the power and limitations” of the creative acts that he or she is engaged in (74). Ultimately, this is a time of uncertainty about what it means to be an artist.

The work of Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector is inevitably a part of that shift, during the avant-garde heyday in the case of Fernández, in the post-*vanguardia* period for Hernández, and in the case of Lispector, in the decades following Brazil’s 1922 *modernismo* and throughout the various *modernista* iterations and variations that were to follow. But above all, their work consists of reactions—often critical ones—to the avant-gardes; such critique can be seen in their representation of the affective and attentional states experienced by the would-be writers who populate their stories. The avant-gardes, as Vicky Unruh has noted, were involved in a particular project to take over the institution of art, through what she calls “contentious encounters” with their artistic adversaries as well as their own

audiences (6). While vanguardists were conflicted about what the artist's specific role(s) in society should be, there is little doubt that they believed such role(s) did exist, and there was an underlying confidence in the ability of the artist to act in a meaningful way. Thus, the artist as a privileged figure, seen since romanticism, remains intact even as the avant-gardes ostensibly sought to dismantle existing artistic institutions.

For Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, however, the image of the artist is radically different. Although they also show interest in artists' participation in society and how engaged artists should be with social issues, their ways of dealing with these questions are quite different. They do not ask how best the artist's unique capabilities can benefit society—they are, instead, making an incisive critique, deconstructing the artist's very persona. The artist's virtuosity, which the avant-garde does not relinquish despite its iconoclasm, is called into question by Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, and the artist is ultimately decentered from the creative process. These three authors inject an almost crippling uncertainty into the act of writing and cast the creative subject on rocky terrain, never sure of him- or herself, and never even certain of his or her ability to carry out the work or even his or her commitment to or interest in it. Thus, what their "poetics of inattention" does, more than anything, is make ambivalence the centerpiece not just of the artist's role in society (which is already happening, as we have seen above) but, more importantly, the core of a profound questioning of who can be an artist and what the artistic process is really like. They perform this uncertainty through inattentive states: attentional absence, withdrawal, or wandering. This way they present an artistic subject not at all sure of what he or she is doing, and not even sure he or she cares about it. This avoidance of all semblance of confrontation is a radical critique of prevailing figures of the artist, which, even in vanguardist times of conflicting roles for artists, probes much deeper and much more critically

into the foundations of the artistic persona. The effect of this gesture is to open up the creative process, discarding notions such as genius and inspiration, and making room for unstable, unquantifiable, and almost ungraspable forces such as ambivalence and its expression through inattentiveness.

Writing Against Consensus: Macedonio Fernández

Macedonio Fernández's interest in avoidance, in deferral and lingering, rather than results and finished products, may invite a Rancierian political reading. Fernández writes against the pre-existing "distribution of the sensible" in terms of what it means to write and read, and in so doing his writing becomes a form of dissensus, as it renounces any need for writer, written work, and reader to come together in a kind of harmony or understanding. Such harmony or understanding would be, to Fernández, too predetermined, too controlled. Rather than seeking consensus between writer, written work, and reader, which would create an intelligible wholeness, he withdraws into the indeterminacy of dissensus. What is at stake in this withdrawal is the very ontological status of writing, reading, knowing, and understanding—the very possibility of communicating. The radical egalitarianism in Fernández's work is just this, the refusal to grant the writer any stable authority over the writing outcome or the meaning gleaned by the reader. This calls attention to, makes visible, sayable, and perceptible, the fiction that has created the "distribution of the sensible" in which the author and reader occupy their assigned roles.

However radical the Rancierian element of his literary practice, Fernández's relationship with politics was not restricted to the aesthetic realm. However, the political stances that we associate with him thanks to bibliographic information can be contradictory and somewhat

misleading. For example, Fernández ran for the presidency of Argentina at one point, though largely as a joke; however, his concern with public life and engagement with the idea of bettering society were constants throughout his life (Garth, *Self* 33). However, it has often been claimed that Fernández was something of an elitist; indeed, while he was content to do away with selfhood and subjectivity in metaphysical discussions, he was very much interested in reminding people that he was of Spanish descent, a “real” Argentine as compared to the hordes of European immigrants (largely from Italy) that crowded Argentina in the late 19th and early 20th century, doubling the country’s population between 1880 and World War I (Zanetta 226).⁴² At the same time, however, Fernández showed little interest in following the *martinfierristas*’ attempts to forge a new quintessential Argentine archetype. The avant-gardes such as the *Martín Fierro* group are quite distant from the politics of the European avant-garde: “esta postura los distancia totalmente de la vanguardia europea que era antiburguesa, antiaristocrática, antinacionalista y con aspiraciones democráticas y revolucionarias” [“this stance distances them totally from the European avant-garde, which was anti-bourgeois, anti-aristocratic, anti-nationalist, with democratic and revolutionary aspirations”] (Pasternac 130). As we have seen, this the case with the avant-garde movements surrounding all three of the author studied here, in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil; the newness that they were seeking in literary expression was intended to be one that was “authentically” national or regional—this authenticity determined, of course, by the writers themselves.

And indeed, there is reason to think that this distance, even coldness, informs Fernández’s poetics, since it has been noted that, although his work often calls attention to itself as the drafts in progress being composed by a bumbling and confused individual, there is not a

⁴² As Zanetta notes, “Buenos Aires absorbed much of the population growth during this period, with its population increasing from 664 thousand in 1879 to almost 1.6 million in 1914” (226).

lot of complicity between writer and reader, as we would see later in the work of Julio Cortázar (Vecchio 138). Although Fernández's work is like an "open book," Cortázar and Eco assume the collaboration between author and reader while Macedonio does not: it is an "amable invitación" ["friendly invitation"] that "supone un perpetuo desencuentro" ["presupposes a perpetual missed encounter"] (Vecchio 138). Indeed, "Entre lector y autor, hay disimetría" ["between reader and author, there is an asymmetry"] (138). This is because "el lector que acepta el reto lanzado en el *Museo*, es el lector que deja de ser lector para transformarse en autor. De ahí que el prólogo final, tal como su título lo indica, no se dirige a un lector sino 'Al que quiera escribir esta novela'. Es decir, un autor" ["the reader who accepts the challenge of *Museum* is the reader who stops being a reader and becomes an author. Thus the final prologue, as its title indicates, is not addressed to the reader but 'To Whoever Wants to Write This Novel.' In other words, an author"] (138). Fernández's work is playful but in the final analysis it is an "[o]bra-zancadilla" ["trap-text"]; it is not a bridge or tunnel for unification or understanding between reader and author but rather a space of "liquidación, expulsión, eliminación" ["liquidation, expulsion, elimination"], because "la literatura es un lugar para dos, pero donde sólo cabe uno" ["literature is a space for two, but where only one fits"] (138). Fernández's work is not about reconciliation: "Ninguna experiencia en común es posible: la lectura es lo impensable de la escritura y la escritura es lo impensable de la lectura" ["No common experience is possible: reading is the unthinkable of writing and writing is the unthinkable of reading"] (139). There seems to be an anti-solidarity stance in this poetics, in which any connection between reader and writer is avoided as much as possible.

And yet this prickly poetics does not necessarily translate into some kind of anti-social political stance. There is a strong sense of ethics at work in the writings of Fernández, although perhaps not overtly stated as such. Fernández's "recienvenido" persona demonstrates an effort, at

least in artistic terms, to embody an individual who is on the outside looking in, who has no history in the area and has to make it up as he goes along. In this sense, we can read a possible expression of empathy with the immigrant experience. This empathy with the life of the Buenos Aires immigrant is also seen in one of the novels that Fernández spent most of his life writing and revising. Todd S. Garth has offered an almost biopolitical reading of Fernández's work, especially his supposedly-reactionary *Adriana Buenos Aires*, the novel that was intended to do away with the 19th century realist-sentimental novel once and for all. As Garth observes, the novel is not ultimately about characters but about bodies: "The centerpiece of *Adriana Buenos Aires* is the status and function of the body in society, intimate relations and emotional life" (Garth, *Self* 119). In *Adriana*, Fernández engages in an aesthetic practice that has the political effect of making visible another realm of experience that is worthy of our attention, which is the physical experience of the urban slum-dwelling immigrant populations of Buenos Aires. Yet it announces itself as a parodic exaggeration and exhaustion of the 19th century sentimental realist novel. And while doing so, it makes visible other, unstated realities which had not before been part of the "distribution of the sensible" or the "narratocracy" of *porteño* life. *Adriana*, in its exploration of bodily experiences, is an intimately political expression of how the 20th century Buenos Aires population was formed. It is precisely the sentimentality, the focus on the senses, that makes *Adriana* such a political novel, existing as an aesthetic practice that makes visible and sayable the body politic of the Buenos Aires immigrant.

And yet, the truest political aspect of Fernández's work does not even lie in *Adriana* specifically but rather in his entire poetics, which is ultimately one that strives to avoid confrontation (the confrontation that the avant-garde so ardently seeks out) but also strives to work against consensus. And herein lies the Rancierian reading of Fernández's work (as well as

that of Hernández and Lispector): the way in which it works against the given “distribution of the sensible” of what authorship is, what reading is, and what the experience of reading and writing a book should be. Because “distributions of the sensible” are not universal but rather local, with specificities tied to particular times and places, the particular dissensus of these authors stands in critical opposition to the prevailing distributions found in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, as well as in Western culture overall, at the time of Latin American avant-garde activity. As we recall, the early 20th century was a period of social upheaval all over Latin America, with massive industrialization and urbanization taking place as the region entered the global marketplace. In this new situation, writers and intellectuals questioned what their roles would be in this rapidly-changing society, and this questioning often had a nationalistic—or at least nationalizing—bent. The reaction of the avant-gardes to this situation was to offer solutions to social and cultural problems they considered pressing: while certainly critical of dominant cultural models, they did not depart from them as radically as they appeared to, because ultimately their project was not only one of critiquing the status quo but also one of prescribing and assigning roles. In short, the avant-garde’s project was, as Beatriz Sarlo has observed, an exclusionary one (*Modernidad* 98).

The dissensus of Fernández’s writing specifically is found in its refusal to be a paternalistic controller of any narrative, unlike, say, the approach of Cortázar that appears to humbly invite the participation of the reader while having all outcomes predetermined. In his renunciation of any authorial control, and in his expression of authorship that relies on dissensus rather than consensus, Fernández conducts a real experiment which very likely can result in the self-destruction of the novel form, the abandonment of the text by the reader, or the breakdown of concepts such as story, plot, character, and narrator—even author. His is a poetics that is so

radically egalitarian that he does nothing to preserve his own perch as author; in fact, he does all he can to destabilize that position, question it, undermine it, and call attention to the voids that the prevailing “distribution of the sensible” attempts to gloss over.

An “Other” Writing: Felisberto Hernández

A similar dynamic is at play in the work of Felisberto Hernández, and in the case of the Uruguayan author, it is connected to the concept of knowledge and the notion of not knowing or not understanding. In his article “Toward an Ethics of Close Reading in the Age of Neo-Liberalism” (2007), Santiago Colás uses the work of Felisberto Hernández as a jumping-off point to talk about reading, politics, and ethics, and how the very discipline of Latin American literary and cultural studies has been constructed in the US over the past few decades. Hernández is not the first author that springs to mind when thinking about such questions; indeed, given the *testimonio* and Subaltern Studies trends that were so prominent in US Latin Americanism, Hernández, with his often conservative political stances, seems the least likely to appear in a politically-oriented study (Colás 174). And yet, as Colás argues, the very approach to writing that we observe in Hernández contains within it a compelling politics and ethics of writing and reading.

Colás begins by quoting from Hernández’s 1942 novella *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling* [*Around the Time of Clemente Colling*]. The story opens with the narrator musing on his attempt to think about and represent the story of his piano teacher, Clemente Colling. He expresses confusion that the memories that most strongly appear in his mind when he thinks about his experiences with Colling are not strong or significant memories. They are not important enough to justify their inclusion, and yet they keep appearing to the narrator. Thus, he

accepts that he must talk about these memories that are making themselves available for representation: “Y como insisten, he preferido atenderlos” [“And since they persist, I prefer to give them my attention”] (*Tiempos 9; Time 3*, translation modified). The author is not the one who chooses what to write about; the story begins to write itself through him, insisting on making itself visible through his writing. He continues: “Además tendré que escribir muchas cosas sobre las cuales sé poco; y hasta me parece que la impenetrabilidad es una cualidad intrínseca de ellas; tal vez cuando creemos saberlas, dejamos de saber que las ignoramos; porque la existencia de ellas es, fatalmente oscura: y esa debe ser una de sus cualidades” [“I’ll also have to write many things I know very little about; it even strikes me that impenetrability is intrinsic to them. Perhaps when we think we know them we stop knowing that we don’t know them, because their existence is inevitably obscure, and that must be one of their qualities”] (9; 3).

Quite the opposite of “representing” something, writing here is a manifestation of realities, experiences, or truths that the author himself does not understand. This non-understanding can be read in a Panagian sense: what the author is having thrust on him, which he cannot understand, is precisely the non-narratable, that which does not fit into the structure of narratocracy.⁴³ And yet he is accepting of their “impenetrability” and of his own relative powerlessness in the creative act. Indeed, he finds it necessary, and describes it almost in terms of an ethical duty: “Pero no creo que solamente deba escribir lo que sé, sino también lo otro” [“But I don’t believe I must write only what I know, but also the other”] (9; 3, translation modified). He is not speaking of having the choice or the interest to write about certain things; it is something he says he “must” do.

⁴³ It is important to note, once again, that not all narratocracies are the same. Narratocracy takes specific forms depending on the context of language, culture, geography, history, and other factors.

As Colás points out, this controlling presence of “the other” in the writing process tells us something about reading and writing, and even about the notion of knowledge as a whole. For Colás, this passage in Hernández’s novella “carefully insists that our relationship with things exceeds the relationship available to us through ‘knowing’” (172). And these things clearly have an agency of their own, and enter into an active relationship with the writing subject. This is a relationship in which the writing subject must be willing to abandon the structures that govern our perception about value and what merits our attention, in Panagia’s terms. Memories, objects, and facts call attention to themselves without any regard for the structures that govern the “distribution of the sensible” for the writing subject. What Hernández is dramatizing here, then, is a renunciation of control similar to Fernández’s, and specifically what Colás terms a cultivation of “unknowing relating” (173). In other words, a relating that is without any guarantee of ever coming to a consensus or understanding.

Colás argues that Hernández is not trying to “represent the other” in writing because he does not say he wishes to write “about” or “on” the other, but simply “write the other” (173, 174). In other words, the paradigm of representation is being abandoned for something else, a paradigm of “unknowing relating” where the subject seems to write almost blindly and not ever fully understand the product that results (173). Colás sees this relation as a model for approaching academic research in the discipline of literary studies, which is valid for all inquiries into the realm of knowledge. But he insists, “I am certainly not calling for ignorance. But perhaps rather for modesty and at the same time for invention” (205). Key in this statement is the notion of modesty, which I connect to the propensity of all three authors studied here—Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector—to explore situations in which their writer-protagonists cannot fully control the writing of what they are producing, and

are not entirely capable of understanding it. Colás calls for scholars to embrace the very real possibility that we cannot know everything, but we can allow it to guide, influence, and move us all the same. The inability to know everything when it comes to artistic expression, as shown in the work of Hernández, Fernández, and Lispector, also stands in marked contrast to the avant-garde's vision of the artist as a privileged seer.

In his writing, Hernández disavows the idea of knowledge being something that can be possessed and dominated. He continually shows how other powers are at work and the narrative voice is a confused witness. At the same time, this is not presented in a negative manner; quite the contrary, as the narrating subject becomes something of an object among objects which are themselves subjectivized through their own actions or appearance of potential for action, the prevailing "distribution of the sensible" in which an author apprehends the world around him and represents it through language is turned upside down, with the stories writing themselves and writing the narrator as one character among the others. The result is narrative with no certainty, no telos, and nothing to teach us but rather an endless series of questions raised and left lingering in the atmosphere. And the resulting strangeness is not something that Hernández seems to want to fit into the mold of narratocracy: his work appears to be unreadable or imperceptible, in terms of the pre-ordained structures of narratocracy or the distribution of the sensible, but in fact that is the essence of its political resonance. The writer does not need to understand what he or she is writing, and the reader or critic does not either, if by understanding we mean making available for inclusion in pre-existing structures of knowledge. As Hernández shows, it is perhaps a question of exploring new ways of reading or new understandings of what it means to read and understand.

The “Creaturely” Writer: Clarice Lispector

The strangeness found in Hernández’s work, as mentioned above, is also a central element in the work of Clarice Lispector. Lispector’s writings can be understood as a lifetime of exploration of Panagia’s “moments of disarticulation” that temporarily—yet also somehow irrevocably—dissolve the screen onto which the given structure of perception is projected. Lispector is another writer who appears at first, or in conventional terms, to be relatively apolitical. For example, writing in the decades following the original 1922 *modernismo*, a vehemently nationalist movement looking for an authentic Brazilian aesthetic, Lispector’s context is one of successive explorations of what it means to write as a Brazilian, for example the turn to regionalism in the 1930s and again in the 1950s. In all of these iterations of *modernismo*, the question of Brazil and Brazilianness is of central importance. And like Fernández and Hernández, Lispector distances herself from these tendencies while, in her own way, making a statement about foreignness and the unknown and unknowable through her writing and literary persona.

Like Fernández and Hernández, Lispector’s focus is more internal than external, and conventional notions of political and aesthetic representation are difficult to apply to her writing. This difficulty comes from the fact that, if readers look for “Brazil” or “the Brazilian experience” or “Brazilian expression” in her work, they will often find themselves frustrated. And yet, as Lispector herself insisted in interviews, she felt Brazilian and like she belonged to Brazil, despite her family’s Ukrainian heritage.⁴⁴ At the same time, she cultivated this image of foreignness by writing in a deliberately clumsy Portuguese, with grammatical errors that editors often strove to “fix” before publication and translators often “corrected” in their versions—much to Lispector’s

⁴⁴ When she was just over one year old, Lispector and her family came to Brazil as refugees from the pogroms in Ukraine.

irritation. Lispector's approach to literature and her literary persona was to be both Brazilian and non-Brazilian, writing ungrammatically on purpose and speaking with a strong accent that made people wonder where she was from, a phenomenon that was aided by her exotic looks.

Brazil does appear, to a greater or lesser extent, in the novels *A paixão segundo G.H.* [*The Passion According to G.H.*] (1964) and *A hora da estrela* [*The Hour of the Star*] (1977). *A hora da estrela* tells the story of a male author who writes about Macabéa, a young woman from the impoverished Northeastern region of Brazil who comes to live in Rio de Janeiro and leads a painfully short and pitiful life, cut short when she is struck by a car. The presence of her abject state and the way in which the author in the novel expresses it can be understood as at least partly approaching a conventional notion of representation. For its part, *A paixão segundo G.H.* clearly has a possible class-oriented reading, as the narrator, a rich woman in Rio de Janeiro, tells of how she entered the bedroom of the black maid, Janair, who had recently left her job there. Feeling overwhelmed by the foreignness and hostility that she senses in the bedroom, she comes upon a cockroach in the armoire; horrified and repulsed by it, she shuts the insect in the armoire door, severing its body, which begins to ooze white matter. She is so disoriented by the room and her confrontation with this creature, that she finds herself putting the cockroach's oozing innards into her mouth. This "communion" with the half-dead insect leads to a profound existential experience for G.H., which she spends the novel struggling to express in words to her second person singular interlocutor, "you."

A paixão segundo G.H. and *A hora da estrela* can be (and often are) read as the precious few instances in which Lispector turns her attention to social questions, specifically the structures of race and class in Brazil, as well as the country's massive income disparities and endemic poverty. However, these two novels, while containing characters and events that can be

read, in a narratocratic sense, as “socially-oriented,” do not even find their most compelling political components from these matters of plot and character. Indeed, in these novels, especially *Paixão*, the ethical and political thrust of the work lies in the writing itself and notions of knowability and unknowability that permeate it. Lispector is not interested in the idea of “representation” of a certain element or face of Brazil through literature; in fact, she eschews the representational model for literature altogether. And what she does do is make visible, indirectly, a kind of authorship, and a kind of subjectivity, far from the institutionalized *modernismos* that were prevailing at the time and which were not so different from their predecessors. Her radicalism resides in her exploration of tedium, difficulty of expression through language, and quotidian details that are of no apparent interest whatsoever. In addition, she writes in a deliberately “unfinished”-seeming fashion, using vocabulary and sentence structures that sound off to Brazilian ears. But she does not do this as a manifesto; she simply does it, and lets the reader decide what to do with it. Very much unlike the first *modernistas*, who experimented and then explained what they were doing, in order to make sure that their experiments were being duly noted and understood. Lispector never seems to try to find understanding, be understood. She simply writes, and then lets readers and critics take away what they will.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Paixão* is its interest not in national or collective identity or even individual human identity, but rather in tracing what could be understood as the “creaturely” element found in the ethics of human relations with each other and the world. In his book *On Creaturely Life* (2006), Eric L. Santner draws on the work of Walter Benjamin and others to define what he calls “creaturely life,” which he defines as “the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference” which is not only a product of “man’s thrownness into the (enigmatic) ‘openness of Being’ but of his exposure to a traumatic

dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity” (12).

The “creaturely” has to do specifically with human boredom and the sense of a loss of meaning or quest for new meaning. Santner notes that Benjamin often associated creaturely life “with a mood closely linked to that of boredom, namely melancholia” (Santner 16). He also finds a similar idea in Heidegger, who suggests that “the phenomenology of profound boredom [...] provides a crucial site for the elaboration of the proximity of animal and human forms of exposure to alterity” (11). Interestingly, the events of Lispector’s novel, which I read as an example of “creaturely life,” come about as a result of the protagonist’s boredom: “G.H., the novel’s protagonist and narrator, is an unmarried, childless woman of the Brazilian upper class. One morning, finding herself bored, between lovers and maids, she sets out to clean the maid’s room at the back of her apartment” (Frizzi 25).

G.H.’s encounter with the cockroach in her maid’s empty room causes her to lose all points of reference from her former, perhaps “human” life, and enter into contact with the most elemental side of existence. Trying to remember who she was before this experience, she describes the monumentality of what was about to happen to her: “Minha luta mais primária pela vida mais primária ia-se abrir com a tranqüila ferocidade devoradora dos animais do deserto. Eu ia me defrontar em mim com um grau de vida tão primeiro que estava próximo do inanimado” [“My more primary struggle for more primary life was about to open with the calm, voracious ferocity of desert animals. I was about to confront within myself a degree of living so originary that it bordered on the inanimate”] (*Paixão* 14; *Passion* 15). This confrontation with an almost “inanimate” life causes G.H. to lose her points of reference, including her name and what she had thought was her subjectivity. She describes the process as “depersonalization” and

“deheroization”: “A despersonalização como a destituição do individual inútil—a perda de tudo o que se possa perder e, ainda assim, ser. Pouco a pouco tirar de si, com um esforço tão atento que não se sente a dor, tirar de si, como quem se livra da própria pele, as características” [“Depersonalization like the deposing of useless individuality—the loss of everything that can be lost, while still being. To take away from yourself little by little, with an effort so attentive that no pain is felt, to take away from yourself like one who gets free of her own skin, her own characteristics”] (118; 168). The narrator-protagonist is actively attempting to shed the trappings of her former subjectivity, to attain something she envisions as freedom. She sees herself and the cockroach as inhabiting the same plane of existence, sharing the same freedom:

A barata e eu somos infernalmente livres porque a nossa matéria viva é maior que nós, somos infernalmente livres porque minha própria vida é tão pouco cabível dentro de meu corpo que não consigo usá-la. Minha vida é mais usada pela terra do que por mim, sou tão maior do que aquilo que eu chamava de “eu” que, somente tendo a vida do mundo, eu me teria. Seria necessário uma horda de baratas para fazer um ponto ligeiramente sensível no mundo—no entanto uma única barata, apenas pela sua atenção-vida, essa única barata é o mundo. (84)

The cockroach and I are Hellishly free because our living matter is greater than we are, we are Hellishly free because my own life is so barely containable within my body that I can't even use it. My life is used more by the earth than it is by me, I am so much greater than whatever I used to call “me” that, just by having a life of the world, I would have myself. It would take a horde of cockroaches to make a minimally perceivable point in the world—however, one lone cockroach, merely because of its life-attention, that lone cockroach *is* the world. (115-16, translation modified)

Allowing herself to inhabit the plane of existence of the cockroach whose insides she has consumed, she seeks “a despersonalização como a grande objetivação de si mesmo” [“[d]epersonalization as the great objectification of oneself”] (118; 168). She allows an unknown force to undermine her position as the “hero” and center of her own life story: “A deseroização de mim mesma está minando subterraneamente o meu edifício, cumprindo-se à minha revelia

como uma vocação ignorada. Até que me seja enfim revelado que a vida em mim não tem o meu nome” [“The deheroization of myself is undermining the ground beneath my edifice, doing so despite me like an unknown calling. Until it is finally revealed to me that life in me does not bear my name”] (118-19; 169). Like the “unknowing relating” that Colás finds in Felisberto Hernández, the narrator is not the center of the narrative, and she is willing to occupy a displaced role. She even loses her name, which is reduced to the G.H. engraved on her luggage: “E eu também não tenho nome, e este é o meu nome. E porque me despersonalizo a ponto de não ter o meu nome, respondo cada vez que alguém disser: eu” [“And I too have no name, and that is my name. And because I depersonalize to the point of not having a name, I shall answer each time that someone says: me”] (119; 169). She becomes everyone and no one; the limits between herself as an individual and the universe she inhabits are dissolving.

This dissolution results in an intermingling with other forms of life, and with it the opening-up of spaces for new meaning. As Santner reminds us, creaturely life is associated with “natural historical fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning,” which become “sites where the struggle for new meaning—in Nietzsche’s terms, the existence of will to power—is at its most intense” (XV). The struggle that will result in a new way of understanding and making meaning is seen in the chaotic structure of Lispector’s narrative: “G.H.’s all-encompassing experience of chaos and loss of self is reflected in the loss or rejection of ‘organization’ in writing” (Frizzi 25). In fact, G.H.’s position as protagonist and narrator who is trying to convey the story means that “her conscious choice to write about her experience, to ‘give it to someone,’ entails a constant meditation on the problems of creation arising as the text advances” (25). Finally, in a “supreme act of renunciation,” the narrator retreats into silence, her ability to adhere to any form of narratocracy finally having reached its limits (30). In this silence, G.H. retreats into the “mute

‘thingness’ of nature” (Santner XV). This act of renunciation, a willingness to let go of her name and points of reference, makes the writer-protagonist G.H. another example of a writing subject who is willing to let go of control and allow her attention to wander while other forces take over the creative process, thereby allowing new truths to become visible and sayable. Here, the writer is willing to abandon her previous structures and allow the creaturely to overtake her, while also attempting to “write the creaturely,” an endeavor that results in a nearly-incoherent text. At the heart of such a gesture is an inattentive politics, one that relinquishes ties to predetermined conditions of possibility for expression and allows for the Rancierian visibility or perceptibility of something radically other.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the political element of a work does not only lie in its act of representation of something social (in which a writer writes “about” social issues). Its political charge can also be found in the ways in which it establishes visibility for certain things that have remained invisible in Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible,” or makes sayable and readable what has heretofore been considered unsayable and unreadable within the confines of Panagia’s “narratocracy.” A work of art is political when it explores the “void” that the “police” covers up and disavows, as it strives to gloss over cracks in the social structure and ensure that everyone has their assigned place and space. It is this concept of visibility, sayability, and readability that informs my proposal for a politically-inflected reading of the works of these three authors who, on the surface, seem not at all “political” but rather apathetic, disinterested, imbued with a “poetics of inattention.”

And yet, this “poetics of inattention” is, I propose, an alternate aesthetic stance regarding the process by which art is made, in addition to a critical position regarding larger questions about what art is and what it means to be an artist. As I have attempted to argue, the inattentive aesthetic at work in the writings of Macedonio Fernández, Felisberto Hernández, and Clarice Lispector can be read not only as a compelling aesthetic statement, but also a political one. Their aesthetic is in itself inherently political due to the way in which it reshapes ideas about what it means to be an artist. Their “poetics of inattention” works against what Vicky Unruh has called the avant-garde’s “totalizing impulse” (119). All three writers, while exploring new ways of expressing themselves through literature just like the avant-garde, refuse to cast themselves in a normative role that the avant-garde relished as it embraced some artists and rejected others, in what Beatriz Sarlo has called a gesture of exclusion (*Modernidad* 98).

The poetics of inattention at work in the writings of Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector serves to question the avant-garde’s notions of who is and is not capable of experiencing and expressing artistic visions, in order to resignify the concepts of “art” and “artist” by peopling their stories with individuals who are a far cry from the avant-garde’s virtuoso visionaries. Scenes such as that of an artist being unable to express something properly, or a writer finding difficulty carrying out the work of literary creation, serve as an alternative to the avant-garde’s ways of seeing and doing, proposing a radically democratic view of art, presenting art not as something that results from a flash of inspiration or genius, but rather bringing art down from such lofty heights to represent it as difficult, tedious, disconcerting, often confusing and unreadable, and above all to characterize it as rather unglamorous labor. This is a labor undertaken without knowledge or understanding by the writing subject, a labor over which he or she has little control. And it is a task that is represented as, above all, ambivalent: the central role

of ambivalence stands as a critique of the notion of artistic intentionality or agency: instead of taking a position on what the artist's role should be, these authors abandon the possibility altogether. In their works, the artist is deprived of a clear sense of agency over his or her creative act, and thus the figure of the artist is radically decentered and becomes almost an empty vessel through which the text writes itself.

In this almost mediocritizing gesture, art is brought firmly into the quotidian, into the domestic; it is robbed of much of the glamor and mystery bestowed on it by artists as far back as romanticism, and placed into the realm of the everyday, the unremarkable. Here, mediocrity is not something to be avoided but rather to be cultivated—it represents the average, the untalented, the non-virtuoso. This radically democratic act serves to make visible the process of writing, the lack of inspiration, the waxing and waning of attention, and the frustration and tedium often found behind the idea of artistic creation. The result is an expansion of the conditions of possibility for what can be considered literature worthy of attention and examination, and of those who is allowed to claim the title of “artist.” In their work, ambivalence reigns over the creative process and as such it leads to a highly ambivalent literature that is often fragmented, full of digressions, and difficult to fit into models of meaning or coherence. It is a writing that steps outside the narratocracies of both the 19th century romantic and *modernista* notions of art and that which was promoted by the Latin American avant-gardes, which, despite its experimental qualities, never departed entirely from the pursuit of meaning-making and some measure of readability.⁴⁵ In Fernández, Hernández, and Lispector, however, art and the artist are

⁴⁵ The predominance of ambivalent affect in their works could be interpreted as an anticipation of the importance that will be given to the relationship between the body and writing in post-dictatorial and post-boom writing. This will become a central aspect of work by writers such as Damiela Eltit, Jacobo Timerman, Tununa Mercado, Reinaldo Arenas, and Severo Sarduy, among others, as they explore bodily experiences and sensations that are understood as practically unrepresentable.

truly demystified, finding themselves unraveled and left in fragments which may never be pieced together; they have been “unwritten” by ambivalence.

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