

**Figurations of Islandness in Argentine Culture and Literature:
Macedonio Fernández, Leopoldo Marechal, and César Aira**

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Abstract: This article explores islandness in the River Plate imaginary. Two modern foundational “island texts” – Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* – have exerted a formative influence on the Spanish-American colonial imagination, an influence inflected by the particular historical experience of the River Plate region and its dominant city, Buenos Aires. The figuration of islandness is examined in three twentieth-century Argentine novels by Macedonio Fernández, Leopoldo Marechal, and César Aira. The article finds both continuity and evolution in the images of islandness in these novels.

Keywords: Argentina, Buenos Aires, Derrida, islandness, Jesuit missions, literature, Robinson Crusoe, utopia.

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Introduction

This paper’s working hypothesis is that figures of islandness turn up in Argentine culture and literature for specific historico-cultural reasons. “Islandness” connotes two related formal qualities: isolation (separateness) and insularity (self-containment). These two qualities may be associated with two parallel colonial enterprises that have informed the historical experience of the River Plate area of the Southern Cone, as well as its cultural memory and literary imaginary. Isolation characterizes the area’s political and commercial history, and more particularly the city that came to dominate it, Buenos Aires. This is because Río de Plata, in the colonial period, was a zone of secondary interest to the Spanish Empire, whose main interest lay in the mineral wealth of the Andes and of Mexico. Buenos Aires, outside the official trade circuit (Lima to Spain via the Caribbean) was long a remote outpost of the Empire, almost as distant, in practical terms, from the vice-regal capital Lima as it was from Spain. Indeed, its existence was almost an accident, for it was founded at the mouth of the continental river system that early explorers hoped might be a shortcut to the mines of Peru. To this day, the city of Buenos Aires has a sense of separateness from the rest of the continent, and even from the country of which it is the capital.

Insularity, on the other hand, is a salient quality of the grand utopian experiment of the Jesuit missions in Paraguay from 1607 to 1767. The Jesuit missionary enterprise, with its

reducciones (as the missions were also known), was a parallel colonial project,¹ albeit with means and ends at variance with those of the political-economic colonization. In the words of their most eloquent defender, R.B. Cunningham Graham, “the Jesuits, strange as it may appear, did not conduct the missions after the fashion of a business concern, but rather as the rulers of some Utopia – those foolish beings who think happiness is preferable to wealth” (1924: 204). The missions were a refuge for the gentle Guarani people, virtually self-sufficient islands of peace and harmony within the chaotic violence and rapacity of colonial life.

Utopia, indeed: Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) was a foundational text in the “invention of America,” the apt phrase that Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman coined to replace the “discovery of America.” More’s book profoundly influenced the Western imagination and helped inaugurate modernity. Indirectly at least, it inspired not only the Jesuits in Río de la Plata, but innumerable utopian enterprises undertaken in the Americas.² One of them, the libertarian commune of the 19th-century geographer Élisée Reclus, in its turn impressed the imagination of Macedonio Fernández, whose eccentric novel we will examine below.

More’s *Utopia* is one of two fundamental island texts that has informed so much of American (in the original, inclusive sense of this term) culture and literature. The second is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for it effectively forges a model of the modern Western individual subject, whose ideal is perfect autonomy. Robinson Crusoe, ex-plantation owner in Brazil and mercantile capitalist,³ pursues “the American dream” of achieving wealth as a means to individual sovereignty. Shipwrecked, he fashions himself as “King Robinson,” self-sufficient master of his own private world, author of his own destiny within his island ascesis.⁴ The two texts are complementary: if *Utopia* imagines the ideal community, *Robinson Crusoe* gives us the ideal of individuation. One island figures collective subjectivity; the other, individual subjectivity.

Two qualities of islandness, two images of islandness derived from two parallel historico-cultural experiences, informed by two *Ur*-texts of modern islandness, which in turn figure complementary forms of subjectivity: these themes can be traced through River Plate cultural history and will show up in representative texts of 20th-century literature by three

¹ “The Jesuit missions constituted a whole new and complete system of colonization, applied with the rigour and meticulousness characteristic of the Ignatian Order” (Rubio, 1942: 581).

² The earliest experiment directly inspired by More’s book was conducted by More’s contemporary, Vasco de Quiroga, first Bishop of Michoacán in New Spain, revered to this day in Mexico as el Tata Vasco. See Serrano Gassent’s edition (1992) of Quiroga’s writings, collected under the title *La utopía en América*. Two excellent works on the utopian theme in America are those of Fernando Aínsa (1999), and Angel Rama and R. Gutiérrez Girardot, eds. (1978). On utopia in Spanish American literature, see Carlos Fuentes (1990).

³ Robinson Crusoe, like Don Quixote before him, very quickly became a universal cultural myth, the novel immediately undergoing several adaptations and translations throughout Europe. As Carmen Toledano Buendia (2002: 299) observes, Robinson in a sense “lost his nationality.” Not surprisingly, Latin Americans have claimed Robinson as their own; the Robinson Crusoe tourist industry currently thrives on the Archipelago of Juan Fernández, Chile.

⁴ Robinson reflects: “my Island, as I now call it” (Defoe, 1719: 174; emphasis in original); “and it was very merry Reflection which I frequently made, How like a King I look’d. First of all, the whole country was my Property; so that I had an undoubted Right of Dominion... I alone was absolute Lord and Lawgiver” (*ibid.*, 188).

significant *porteño*⁵ novelists: Macedonio Fernández (1874-1952), Leopoldo Marechal (1900-1970), and César Aira (b. 1949).⁶ First, however, it will be helpful to consider briefly the island *topos* (literally, a ‘place’; in rhetoric and literature, a *commonplace* or conventional figure) as it has evolved in the Western rhetorical tradition. Jacques Derrida’s text *Faith and Knowledge* (originally a talk given at an island conference) is particularly rich and suggestive in this regard.

The Aporetical Trinity: Desert, Promised Land, Island

If the island is defined by its formal perfection or finitude, achieved through separation from what surrounds it, then this same quality, as Jacques Derrida has remarked, is literally “aporetic” (from the Greek ‘aporia’) in the etymological sense of ‘impassable’ – not permitting either ingress or egress. In reality, the island is, in an absolute sense, both a logical and a practical impossibility. The truth of John Donne’s plaintive verse “no man is an island” – as though objecting in advance to Defoe – is echoed and radicalized by Carlo Ginzburg’s anti-tautological (and anti-aporetical) title *No Island is an Island*.⁷ Derrida will link the aporia of the island to *abstraction*, the act of withdrawal, separation, or removal. As such, it is also the move that founds any literary fiction: an arbitrary framing and separating-out of a space in the sea of the human discourse, a willful abstraction of a space from the human discursive universe. No wonder, then, that writers of fiction are drawn again and again to the metaphor of the island.

Derrida himself cannot resist the metaphysics of islandness. When he tackles the problem of faith and knowledge, he resorts to two symbolic figures – the desert and the island – and then a third, the Promised Land. What is the relationship between these apparently heterogeneous figures?

Religion concerns itself with salvation, redemption from evil. In our time, the evil that religion combats, Derrida proposes, is that of “radical abstraction”: the machine, technics, technoscience; in other words, what Adorno called instrumental reason. Religion is locked in battle with its evil other, both through its reactive antagonism and its “*surenchère réaffirmatrice*”; in other words, by continually bidding to outdo its opponent (abstract knowledge), religion only succeeds in reaffirming it. Hence, says Derrida, the *aporia* of religion, consists in “a certain absence of way, path, issue, salvation” (2001:10; 2002: 43).⁸

⁵ *Porteño* < *puerto* ‘port’. In Argentina, *porteño* refers to things or people from the city of Buenos Aires.

⁶ All quotations from their novels and all other Spanish-language texts will be in my English translation.

⁷ In his essay ‘Tutisala and his Polish reader’, for example, Ginzburg suggests that Malinowski’s concept of the kula, the trading system practised throughout the vast Polynesian archipelago, was inspired by his reading of Robert Louis Stevenson’s short story “The Bottle Imp” in which a “magical object had to be exchanged along a monetary – although anti-profit – circuit – stretched along an enormous sea distance: from San Francisco, to the Hawaii Islands, to Tahiti” (Ginzburg, 2000: 78). Malinowski elaborated his theory in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Neither insular England, nor the far-flung islands of Polynesia, can be kept totally separate.

⁸ In the parenthetical references to Derrida’s (2001) text, the first numeral refers to the original French text; the second, to Gil Anidjar’s translation (Derrida, 2002). Where necessary, I have altered Anidjar’s translation and have so indicated.

That which religion desires, salvation, is frustrated by religion's inextricable entanglement with the evil of alienated abstraction.

This being the case, then perhaps by precisely identifying this evil, Derrida suggests, one may "accede to what might be the figure or promise of salvation of our time" (2001: 10; 2002: 43). The way forward, he continues, is not to flee abstraction but to "play the card of abstraction"; perhaps "one must first withdraw to a desert, or even isolate oneself on an island," there to tell a story of the once-upon-a-time genre: "just imagine: in order to 'talk religion,' several men, philosophers, professors, hermeneuticians, hermits or anchorites, took time out to mimic a small, esoteric and egalitarian, friendly and fraternal community... Place: an island, the isle of Capri" (2001: 11; 2002: 43, translation altered). In the typology of apocalyptic, these men correspond to the chosen ones, the Elect.

The discursive/rhetorical moves that Derrida makes in these very dense initial paragraphs are both philosophical and poetic. He metaphorically links salvation and abstraction to the symbolic places or *topoi* of the desert and the island, then sets up a *mise-en-abyme* by narrating the concrete actuality of the encounter: the island becomes not only an abstract figure but a concrete place, Capri. In order to think about humanity's problems, one retires to an island and there "mimics" an esoteric, fraternal community, i.e., one symbolically stages the necessary conditions for the redemption of the troubled human community. But then that concrete place is narratively rendered fabulous ("just imagine," Derrida exhorts us); it is not enough to stage the redemption; one must go a step further and resume that staging of redemption by giving it narrative form. One must "historicize" it, albeit in a peculiar way, making of it a story or tale by incorporating anachronic elements ("hermits and anchorites") that acquire metaphorical value. Derrida's discursive performance shows us how we might abstract ourselves from historicity, the domain of knowledge and science, not by treacherously fleeing the "nightmare of history," as Joyce's Stephen Daedalus yearned to do, but by performing (staging, narrativizing) an imaginary example, a possible instantiation, of the redemptive outcome of history. The desert, or better, the *island*, is the ideal place for such an exercise. Capri, for example.

Derrida will soon name another Mediterranean island, Patmos, where the anchorite John, "received" (imagined) and wrote (fabulously) the Apocalypse, the Revelation of the end of history, its final resolution and redemption in the New Jerusalem, the original Garden of Eden regained but converted into the ideal *polis*. The bible's first eschatological figure of salvation or redemption is the Promised Land (the lost paradise of Eden restored). The story of the chosen people's long journey through space and time to arrive there is what Frank Kermode (1967: 6) called the apocalyptic paradigm of narrative. The end (the *telos* or goal) and the ending of the story coincide. Thus Derrida proclaims:

"[L]et us this day name *three places*: the island, the Promised Land, the desert. Three aporetical places: with no way out or any sure path, no road there or point of arrival, with no exterior of *forseeable* map and of *calculable* program" (2001: 16; 2002: 47, translation altered; Derrida's emphasis).

Island, Promised Land, desert: the order in which Derrida lists his elective trinity of *topoi* is surely not arbitrary. “Before the island – and Capri will never be Patmos – there will have been the Promised Land” (2001: 18; 2002: 48). Likewise, then, before the Promised Land there will have been the desert. Desert, Promised Land, and island thus stand in a meta-figurative series.

And yet, the three terms stand in a three-way dialectical relationship as well. In order to elucidate this point, it must first be remarked that the term ‘desert’ should be understood in its primary, pre-modern sense: “An uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country; a wilderness” (*OED*); “un lieu sans habitants” (*Le Petit Robert*); “un lugar despoblado” (*DRAE*).⁹ The desert is the absence of humanity, of human culture and laws. The desert is ground zero; it figures the space where the mystical marriage of faith and reason may take place, “what Montaigne and Pascal call an unimpeachable [*irréécusable*] ‘mystical foundation of authority’” (2001: 32; 2002: 57, translation altered). Before it becomes the place to be fled, from which deliverance is sought, the desert will have been the place where the Promise of deliverance may be properly made, the dialectical *a priori* of the covenant of the Promised Land. If the desert is the condition of possibility of the Promise, the *fulfilment* of the Promise is the dialectical response to the desert’s emptiness. Finally, the island is the *form* of the place of the Promise, the microcosmic figure announcing its fulfilment in the fullness of time; the finitude of the island, its formal perfection, is the dialectical counterpart of the desert’s formlessness.

Lest this seem excessively abstruse, consider the cliché of the “desert island,” which conforms to essentially the same rhetorical logic. The desert island holds out the promise of wish-fulfillment thanks precisely to its dual qualities as desert (there is no one there) and island (a self-contained and far-away space). Its “desertness” is the condition of possibility of an untrammelled bodying-forth of the fantasy; its island form gives the fantasy its place, removed from everyday reality. This basically pre-modern rhetorical construct¹⁰ survives in popular culture to this day, an embarrassment to modern (instrumental) reason. “Wish-fulfillment”: the wish may be an idle hedonistic fantasy, a Robinsonian bid for personal sovereignty, or a collective dream of Platonic *eudaimonia* like the one crafted by Thomas More.

In Western modernity, the first two *topoi*, the island and the Promised Land, seem to have combined to produce a new *topos*, a new kind of aporetical place: Utopia, the *topos* that is nowhere. Harnessed to modern imperial projects, Thomas More’s island *Utopia* desacralizes the Promised Land, which originally was a promise made by God to his chosen people. No longer is it a divine promise of deliverance and redemption, a

⁹ *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*. Online at <http://www.rae.es/rae.html>.

¹⁰ The medieval chivalric novels, forerunners of today’s pulp fiction genres (the adventure novel, the Western, the spy novel, etc.) were full of fantastic *insulas* (the Latin word rendering the island all the more exotic), a literary convention that Cervantes hilariously sends up in *Don Quixote*. The mad knight strings along his squire Sancho Panza with the promise of an *insula* as recompense for his travails. And, eventually, Sancho gets his *insula*, in a chapter of the novel that might be considered the prototypical sitcom (*Don Quixote*, Book 2, Chapter XLV).

recompense to be dispensed after the people's trials and tribulations at some endlessly deferred end of history, but rather a product of human reason and labour in the here and now.¹¹ Likewise, the meaning of the word 'desert' undergoes a shift. Once an empty and sacred place, it becomes now an inhospitable wilderness to be overcome and converted into a garden; and not the Garden of Eden, not Arcadia, but a built garden. From More's foundational Renaissance text, the imperial project of modernity gains its watchword: to populate the desert, transform it, render it humanly fruitful.

Buenos Aires: Islandness in the Stream

If, as Derrida maintains, the island is such because it has no point of egress or arrival, then its opposite must be the maritime port, the place whose very function and *raison d'être* is to serve as a point of entry and exit. The port is, above all, a place of flux, of various kinds of *flow*, especially Buenos Aires, the *ciudad porteña* (port city) par excellence, located at the mouth of the vast river system that led the 16th-century Spanish explorers and colonizers deep into the interior of the continent to Paraguay. In 1810, Buenos Aires was the first Spanish-colonial city to declare and effectively win independence from the empire; from there, General José de San Martín set out to liberate a large portion of the rest of the continent. It is through Buenos Aires that the economic modernity of English mercantile capitalism enters, stimulating great flows of agricultural produce (beef and cereals), of capital, of waves of human immigration. Commerce, traffic, flow: under these signs Buenos Aires continues to bustle to this day.

At first glance, then, it may seem paradoxical to speak of islandness in relation to this city. Nevertheless, Buenos Aires did start out as an isolated place. From its origins, it was pegged as an island. The city's (second) founder, Juan de Garay, noted in his journal:

“The Indians call the land of Buenos Aires an island. It is a very fair coast and... it is good land for planting crops... They [the Indians] say that along the coast there are few people and that inland, toward the Cordillera, there are lots of people”
(quoted in Abós, 2000b: 43).

Why did the natives call it an island? Surely it is a stretch to construe this land formation, partially bracketed on one side by the Río de la Plata and by the Riachuelo on its southern flank, even as an isthmus, much less as an island. Perhaps it had to do with indigenous geography and cosmology, the way the natives lived and saw their world. The coast didn't interest them; the usefully habitable world was, for them, the great fluvial zone that feeds into the Río de la Plata – the vast continental interior whose lungs are the twin river

¹¹ Fernando Aínsa neatly sums up the move from what he calls the “classical utopia,” dating from Plato, to the utopian genre inaugurated by More: with its “renaissance vocation” it is “centered” on man as the agent of proposals for change, unlike the religious eschatology that preceded it, which offered only a sole possibility for the future, that parabola of human existence traced beforehand and already written, from Genesis to the Apocalypse” (Aínsa, 1999: 82). For Aínsa, the utopian genre has five constants: insularity, autarchy (autonomy), acronia (“absence of a historical dimension”), urban planning and total regulation (1999: 22-25).

systems of the Paraguay-Paraná (to the west) and the Uruguay (to the east), including their respective tributaries. These rivers are all full of islands. The particular land formation, on the margins of the aborigines' known world and where the Spaniards would build Buenos Aires, was partially surrounded by water, the big water where the Río de la Plata widens into the sea. All that water must have been enough to make it island.¹²

In any case, the aborigines saw an island, and their view impressed Juan de Garay. He, too, saw islandness, but through the lens of his Western imagination, the promise of fruitfulness and plenty. Perhaps he was influenced by their view because he, too, arrived there not from the sea but from up-river. A Spaniard who had lived since he was a teenager in America, he set out from Asunción, the 16th-century capital of the *gobernación* (province) of Río de la Plata.¹³ Travelling down the Paraguay River, then the Paraná, he first founded Santa Fe (1573) on the shores of the Paraná River, then Buenos Aires in 1580. The vast majority of the new town's 64 inhabitants were "mancebos de la tierra," home-boys from Asunción (Rubio, 1942: 385). Thus, even within the early colonial world, Buenos Aires was a late settlement, a distant outpost of Río de la Plata's real centre, Asunción.

Juan de Garay also initiated trade in the port city. An earlier abortive founding of Buenos Aires in 1536 was the work of the unlucky (and, according to some, inept) Pedro de Mendoza, whose sole legacy took the form of a few horses left behind, which then thrived and multiplied in the fair conditions of the "island" of Buenos Aires. When Juan de Garay came along, he secured from the King the exclusive privilege for the new town's inhabitants to use and exploit the horses. Horse-hair was the first item of trade at the "very modest beginnings" of Buenos Aires's future as a city of trade and commerce (Rubio, 1942: 405). In 1585, a more important trade began. A boatload of silver was shipped from distant Tucumán down the Rivers Paraguay and Paraná to Buenos Aires, and thence to Brazil. The boat was to return with supplies needed in Tucumán, but was intercepted by English pirates. Very slowly, other trade developed between the river towns of Río de la Plata and Brazil. All traded goods passed through Buenos Aires, where tariffs had to be paid to the port city's treasury. This trade, however, was irregular, being conducted outside the regime of commerce under the strict monopoly of the Spanish Crown that was pursued in the rest of the colonies (the trade route passed through the Caribbean and thence across the isthmus of Panama and along the Pacific coast). Buenos Aires was thus quite out of the loop, isolated by the length and breadth of the Atlantic from Spain, and by the South American continent from the vice-regal capital Nueva Castilla (Lima). Eventually, it was granted limited licence to practise *comercio de permisión* with its colonial neighbours (Rubio, 1942: 406).¹⁴ The local governor was charged with regulating this trade, and so the port city, using its very isolation to its advantage, precociously achieved a quasi-

¹² As an anonymous ISJ reviewer has kindly pointed out, the Argentine pampa is often called a sea that begins where Buenos Aires ends. To extend the metaphor, then, Buenos Aires would be an island between the Atlantic Ocean and the 'sea' of the pampa.

¹³ The adelantados and capitanes, the movers and shakers of the Conquest, were eager to establish a route to the Sierra de la Plata, the Andes with their rich mines. Hence, the decision to found Asunción deep in the interior; it was to serve as the taking-off point for further expeditions toward the Andes.

¹⁴ Outside the *comercio de permisión*, of course, contraband trade also flourished. The need to resort to contraband also contributed to Buenos Aires's sense of alienation from the Spanish imperial regime.

independence in its commercial life, by comparison with the rest of the colonies, which chafed under the jealous Spanish Crown's rigid monopoly on trade.

Buenos Aires would spend the first couple of centuries of its colonial existence as a distant and isolated outpost of the Vice-Royalty of Nueva Castilla, whose capital was several weeks' journey away in Lima. When Ascarate de Biscay passes through in 1657, he finds a sleepy, quasi-Arcadian little town of four hundred houses with no need of protection by fences or walls or moats (Abós, 2000b: 45). The climate is excellent, similar to that of Andalucía but not as hot. The horses, now tamed, are thriving; the governor has about twelve hundred of them at his disposal. Food is abundant, including all sorts of meat and garden produce. Ascarate enjoys the spacious patios with their fruit trees, and remarks that the men are decidedly disinclined to aggression and combat, devoting themselves rather to love, "for the women are extremely beautiful" (*ibid.*: 47).

This sleepy, semi-paradisiacal existence grows more turbulent as Buenos Aires grows in size and wealth. After independence is declared in 1810, the country is riven by decades of civil war between *federales* (conservatives) and *unitarios* (liberals). In reaction to the influx of modernity, the *Restaurador* [Restorer] Juan Manuel de Rozas takes over in 1835 and rules until 1852. When the new Constitution is proclaimed in 1863, the modernization of the country, fuelled by British capital, really takes off. The *Campaña del Desierto*, a war now considered genocidal, virtually extinguishes the remaining indigenous population by 1876; the formerly free-ranging gauchos (Argentine cowboys) are brought to heel and reduced to day-labourers for large ranches. Large waves of European immigration pour into Buenos Aires between 1880 and 1920. In the 1930s, from the opposite direction, masses of internal immigrants, the rural poor, descend on the port city. History, "the terrible and ever restless wind of History," is blowing at gale-force (Marechal, 1994: 380). The city of "fair winds" (*buenos aires*) will become the city of *aires turbulentos*. And yet, even in the late-nineteenth century, something remains of the old Arcadian peace and plenty, if only in the form of nostalgia. The title of Lucio V. López's classic *costumbrista* novel says it all: he paints Buenos Aires as the *gran aldea*, the grand village.¹⁵

In the 20th century, however, the Gran Aldea is definitely only a fond memory. The port city has become a conduit of unruly, turbulent flows: commercial, demographic, ideological. Violence erupts in such events as the *Semana Trágica* of 1919, when the anarchist workers' strike was brutally repressed. The perception of chaos and panic generates a new line of literary fiction characterized by apocalyptic hysteria, running from Robert Arlt's *The Seven Madmen* (1929) and its sequel *The Flame-Throwers* (1931) to Ernesto Sábato's *Abaddon, the Exterminator* (1973). Hysteria, however, will produce its own antidote in a new modality of subjectivity, a theme to which we shall return presently.

¹⁵ *La gran aldea*, by Lucio Vicente López (1884). César Aira comments that, its moderate charm aside, what really made the novel a classic is "its very felicitous title" (Aira, 2001a: 321).

From Utopian Missions to the Myth of Macedonio

Meanwhile, another sort of utopian island had developed up-river from Buenos Aires in the heartland of the continent, in the network of Jesuit *reducciones* or missions that the Society of Jesus maintained in Paraguay. The “Provincia jesuítica del Paraguay” was not merely the territory of the nation-state that now goes by that name; in 1607, it included the entire Southern Cone – present-day Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and part of Bolivia and Brazil (Rubio, 1942: 586), though in 1625 they lost Chile. That the Jesuits chose to designate so vast a zone with the name of the river, taken from the Guarani language, that gives modern Paraguay its name, is a good indication of the Jesuits’ geographical conception of the region. They concentrated their efforts in the inter-riverine zone between the Paraná-Paraguay and the Uruguay, part of which now forms the northern Argentina province of *Misiones*, after the Jesuit missions.

The most poignant account of those missions, which harboured the gentle Guarani people, is R.B. Cunningham Graham’s *A Vanished Arcadia, Being Some Account of the Jesuits in Paraguay, 1607-1767*. Visiting in the early 1870s the abandoned mission sites in Paraguay, Cunningham Graham “met old men who spoke regretfully of Jesuit times, who cherished all the customs left by the Company [of Jesus]”; repeating the stories they had heard in youth, “they kept alive the illusion that the missions in the Jesuits’ time had been a paradise” (Cunningham Graham, 1924: x). Arcadia, Paradise, Utopia: thus does the intrepid Scottish traveller continually characterize the defunct missions that in 1767 were snuffed out by the brutality of geopolitics. In his reading, the world could not tolerate missions’ “semi-communism” (*ibid.*: xii; and throughout the essay); “it seems the Jesuits anticipated Socialism – at least, so far as they bought and sold for use, and not for gain” (*ibid.*: 193). He refers repeatedly to the Jesuits’ kindly paternalism.¹⁶ Insular self-sufficiency is another theme; the Guaránis in their missions “reached to just so much of what the world calls civilization as they could profit by and use with pleasure to themselves” (*ibid.*: xiii). “I hope to show that there was no great wealth at any time in the mission territory, and that the income [generated by the missions’ production] was expended in the territory itself” (*ibid.*: 204). And he especially insists on the Jesuits’ policy of isolation (bolding added):

“The policy of the Jesuits, however, was based on the **isolation** of their missions” (*ibid.*: 10).

“As a means of securing the confidence of the Indians, the Jesuits found themselves obliged to communicate as rarely as possible with the Spanish settlements. Thus, from the first the **policy of isolation**, which was one of the chief charges brought against the Order in later years, was of necessity begun” (*ibid.*: 51).

¹⁶ “For a brief period those Guaránis gathered together in the missions, ruled over by their priests, treated like grown-up children, yet with a kindness which attached them to their rulers, enjoyed a half-Arcadian, half-monastic life” (Cunningham Graham, 1924: xiii).

“Following their system of **perfect isolation** from the world to its logical sequence, the Jesuits surrounded all the territories of their different towns with walls and ditches, and at the gates planted a guard to **prevent egress or ingress** between the missions and the outer world” (*ibid.*: 203).

In Derridean terms, the Jesuits created a near aporia, abstracting from the violence of the world an island of peace, harmony, and plenty in the image of the Promised Land, whose Enlightenment version is evoked in Voltaire’s famous encomium:

“When in 1768 the missions of Paraguay left the hands of the Jesuits, they had arrived at perhaps the highest degree of civilization to which it is possible to conduct a young people, and certainly at a far superior state than that which existed in the rest of the new hemisphere. The laws were respected there, mores were pure, a happy brotherhood united every heart, all the useful arts were in a flourishing state, and even some of the more agreeable sciences; plenty was universal” (*quoted in Cunningham Graham, 1924: 51-52; original: Histoire Politique des Indes, Vol. 1, Geneva, 1780: 289*).

Macedonio Fernández’s writing is moved by a similarly utopian impulse to abstraction, but an abstraction of a discursive, “metaphysical” order. Whether or not he was directly acquainted with Cunningham Graham’s essay,¹⁷ he would certainly have been aware of the cultural memory of the Jesuit missions. Indeed, the first thing he did upon finishing law school was to make a sort of pilgrimage upriver to the “red land” of Paraguay, evoked eloquently by his biographer Álvaro Abós as “the mysterious island of the inland interior” and “the seat of earthly paradise in the New World” (Abós, 2002: 39). In the course of the long trip on the river boat, the idealistic Macedonio and his companions decided to write to their admired Élisée Reclus (1830-1905), the geographer and *ex-communard* who fled Paris in 1871 to found a libertarian commune in the Sierra Nevada of Colombia (*ibid.*: 40).

This river boat trip, apparently, is the grain of truth at the heart of an apocryphal legend that formed part of the larger myth around Macedonio’s life. According to the story, Macedonio and his companions founded an anarchist commune in the jungles of Paraguay.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, variations of the legend evolved over time; in 1976, César Fernández Moreno could write that Macedonio, at the age of 20, “retreated to an island in the Paraguay River” (*quoted in Abós, 2002: 45*). The truth of Macedonio’s alleged “island retreat,” associated with the utopian projects of the Paraguayan missions and Reclus’s libertarian commune, is in fact literary, as we shall see shortly. But, as I hope that by now

¹⁷ The book has only recently been translated as *La Arcadia perdida: Una historia de las misiones jesuíticas* (2000). But Macedonio’s young friend Borges, fluent in English, knew the works of the *viajeros ingleses* Hudson and Cunningham Graham. Moreover, Macedonio famously corresponded by mail with the Anglo-American philosopher William James. His son, Adolfo de Obieta (1968: 21), recalls that Macedonio both read and wrote in English and in French.

¹⁸ Borges, in Madrid in 1921, is already writing about Macedonio’s “anarchist community” in Paraguay. By 1961, Borges recalls it dismissively: “Around 1897 [Macedonio] founded in Paraguay, with Julio Molina y Vedia and Arturo Múscari, an anarchist colony that lasted as long as utopias of that sort usually do” (*quoted in Abós, 2002: 43*).

the reader will agree, it is surely no accident that the legend came to be associated with islandness.

Virtual Islandness in “La Novela”

Macedonio Fernández’s *Museo de la Novela de la Eterna* [Museum of the Novel of the Eternal One] – hereafter abbreviated to the *Novel of the Eternal One* – was begun as early as the 1920s.¹⁹ Its late, posthumous publication in 1967 is appropriate, in the sense that Macedonio’s figure casts a shadow over much of twentieth-century literature. Jorge Luis Borges (whose father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, was a friend of Macedonio) chose Macedonio as his generation’s precursor and did more than anyone else to create the Macedonian myth. Borges’s contemporary, Leopoldo Marechal, along with many others, lionized Macedonio, his wit, his eccentric genius. Macedonio’s ludic spirit lives on, as we shall see, in the late-twentieth century work of César Aira. Eloquent testimony to Macedonio’s importance is the fact that, in Noé Jitrik’s twelve-volume series *Historia Crítica de la Literatura Argentina*, an entire volume (the eighth) is devoted to *Macedonio*.

It was mentioned above that the chaotic turbulence of the early 20th century produced a certain hysteria. A parallel rhetorical development, not only in literature but in common discourse, was an increasing use of the trope of irony. Irony notoriously deflates pathos and forestalls its affective power; thus it can serve as a prophylactic against the negative affect of fear and rage. *Porteños* are famous for their irony, which runs a tonal gamut from the sardonic and bitter to the gentle and smiling. Literary examples of the former will be the writings of Tomás Abraham; of the latter, Macedonio Fernández and César Aira. Borges’s entire work is informed by dry, understated irony; Marechal’s, by a strategy of ironic hyperbole (Cheadle, 2000).

Macedonio’s irony is never sarcastic or biting, but rather gentle and non-violent. Nevertheless, it is profoundly subversive of the symbolic order embodied in language. He takes delight in turning linguistic logic against itself. The poet Francisco Luis Bernárdez (contemporary of Borges and Marechal) recalls that his puns were not merely verbal, but conceptual; thus, for example, “someone asks him if he has languages and he says he knows how to be quiet in German, Russian, English, and French” (Bernárdez, 1968: 91). Another example is recalled by Marechal: “So many had failed to show up at the banquet that, had one more missed, they wouldn’t have all fit in the room” (Marechal, 1968: 73). As these examples show, Macedonio’s ironic inversions often involve turning a *lack* into a virtual *positive* (not knowing a language enables one to be quiet in it) or an *absence* into a virtual *presence* (a crowd of absent people filling a room to overflowing). The mild absurdity and quirky humour of these examples notwithstanding, the dialectical relationship embodied in the counterpoint of lack-versus-positivity or absence-versus-presence is formally analogous to the one we saw implicitly theorized by Derrida in the relation between *desert* and *Promised Land*.

¹⁹ Carlos García (50) reports that Macedonio was working on the novel without title as early as 1927, which could have been an early version of the *Novel of the Eternal One*.

Ultimately, such ironic inversions will subvert, from within, the entire symbolic order, along with its political articulation of the social space: Macedonio once made a mock run at the presidency of Argentina on the platform that he would change the laws of physics (Marechal, 1968: 70). On the purely verbal level, the joke exploits the polysemy of the word ‘law’; a President decrees the laws governing social conduct, whereas a ‘law’ of physics is what Northrop Frye (1982: 119) once called a “grotesque pun.” More importantly, however, the verbal prank indirectly calls into question the potency of a president’s power and, indeed, of the solidity of the political and social order over which he presides. A similar “prank” will be staged and narrated in the *Novel of the Eternal One*.

The book’s most important characters are the couple formed by the masculine *el Presidente* and the feminine *la Eterna* [the Eternal One]; the latter is an ideal being who does not suffer time. The book’s characters are all allegorical, having names such as *Quizagenio* [Maybe-a-Genius], *Dulce-Persona* [Sweet-Person], *Deunamor* [Of-One-Love]. It is not at all clear that these characters have any physical existence, even within the novelistic fiction. No detail of any character’s face or body is ever adduced to produce the realistic illusion of living beings. But they *do* talk – incessantly. They come into being only through, and as, discourse – the flow of language. Bodiless beings that hover outside the reach of the laws of physics, Macedonio’s characters may be said to consist in pure subjectivity.

The President is the owner of an *estancia* or ranch, where he welcomes anyone who so wishes to reside in fraternal harmony, isolated from the noisy, ugly world outside, just as in a Jesuit mission or a libertarian commune. The setting of this community is particularly significant: it is located on the margins of Buenos Aires and on the bank of the Río de la Plata. Thus it stands as an island in two formal senses: both as a space abstracted from the real city of Buenos Aires, and as a self-enclosed place standing against the onstreaming flow of the River Plate. Figuratively, this metaphysical *estancia* or “stay”²⁰ is an island untouched by the turbulent flow of history, just as the President’s beloved *la Eterna* stands outside time itself.

Just as significant is the *estancia*’s name: “La Novela” [The Novel]. The President, then, is a “novelist,” and his community of virtual subjects is literally fabulous, a narrative fiction. Anticipating Derrida’s instructions for “playing the card of abstraction,” Macedonio has organized a double abstraction, a withdrawal at two removes, the first being geographical (its setting outside the city and against the stream), and the second, narratively self-reflexive (the abstracted space becomes narrative).

What story is told? The only narrative action takes place in two short chapters (VIII & IX) in the middle of the novel (Fernández, 1975: 196-205). All of the *communards* of “La Novela,” under the leadership of the President and in collaboration with the Eternal One, invade the real city of Buenos Aires in order to redeem it:

²⁰ The noun *estancia* comes from the verb *estar* ‘to be’ in a place. Thus the most basic meaning of *estancia* is “permanencia durante cierto tiempo en un lugar determinado” (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*); [a stay for a certain time in a given place].

“It’s true; an old theme of the President was to rescue the great city whose destiny he powerfully felt. Save it. He had observed like no one else the sense of its history, the truth of its greatness. But it was necessary to cleanse it of certain enervations of conduct and some bits of silliness” (*ibid.*: 196).

They call this redemptionist venture “the conquest of Buenos Aires for Beauty” (*ibid.*: 196), to be achieved through “the suppression of ugliness” (*ibid.*: 198). Thus historical and aesthetic redemption are joined in one and the same project. The utopian redeemers rename the streets with quirkily allegorical names such as “[He or She] Lives-without-Never”; “You’ll-Come-Back”; “Lives-in-Fantasy”; “Laughter”; and “the great Avenue of Afterwards-Dreams-of-Today” is crossed by the “Avenue of the Non-Identical-Man” (*ibid.*: 197). And they “deport all the statues that cast a pall over the plazas” (*ibid.*: 204), in particular, those of captains, generals, lawyers, governors (*ibid.*: 203). Thus, “the beauty of not-History came true” (*ibid.*: 203), thanks to the “miracle of the novel” (*ibid.*: 201), the “magic of the novel” (*ibid.*: 203). History and time are conquered: “That’s why the city’s almanac has 365 days with one single name: ‘Today’, and the main avenue is also called ‘Today’” (*ibid.*: 204).²¹ Mission accomplished, they all go back to their insular refuge “La Novela” and continue as though nothing had happened.

In a humorous vein, Macedonio’s characters, after their inventor, play with conceptual and philosophical aporias. The redemption of Buenos Aires takes the form of a prank, an invasion of reality and history by subjective desire, the caper duly narrated as the fable of an island of non-history that stands as a simulacrum of eternity, islandness staying the flow of time.

The Banquet of Severo Arcángelo (1965), by Leopoldo Marechal

Like Macedonio, Marechal gives his novel an insular setting, an estate belonging to the eponymous character and located in a suburb of Buenos Aires. But this island estate is quite different from the *estancia* “La Novela”. If Macedonio’s kind and indulgent President gathered meek and mild characters, the authoritarian and choleric Severo Arcángelo [literally: Severe Archangel] has brought together in his estate a group of maniacs who, at the moment of their interpellation and recruitment, were on the verge of suicide. Severo’s estate is not a refuge but a sort of laboratory where he is undertaking a mysterious apocalyptic experiment, a sort of psychic pressure-cooker designed to explode. The landscape of the estate is Arcadian, but developing tensions among the characters and factions will enact a foreshortened version of the Christian-eschatological narrative of human history, from the garden of Eden to the apocalyptic end of the world. This culminating event is to be the Banquet, at once catastrophic and cathartic, which, like the

²¹ The “conquest” aims at *acronia*, one of the constants of the utopian genre identified by Fernando Aínsa: “The eternal present, the static time common to all paradisal visions, reigns forever once it is established” (Aínsa, 1999: 23).

plagues of Revelation, will be the necessary prelude to redemption.²² The locus of redemption and salvation for the chosen few will be a mythical place enigmatically named the *Cuesta del Agua* [literally: Water's Slope]. The novel's text does not recount the actual events of the Banquet nor the ascension to the *Cuesta del Agua*, but we do learn that this place of redemption is probably located in northern Argentina.²³ This location is surely not accidental: the Catholic Marechal would have been very aware of the historical memory of the Jesuit missions.

It is worth pointing out that Marechal wrote this novel during a period of proscription (1955-1965) from the literary establishment. Having participated in the Peronist regime, he was shunned after Juan Domingo Perón's removal by the military coup in 1955, so called the "Revolución Libertadora." In part, however, his isolation was voluntary, as Marechal avows. He shut himself up with his wife in his apartment for years, taking refuge in what he called his "metaphysical Robinsonism" (Abós, 2000a: 47). But his apartment served also as a personal Patmos, for it was there that he imagined a novelistic apocalypse, albeit an ironic one. Ensconced within his island, sheltered from a decade of cultural and political history, he undertakes a fugue; in his own words, he becomes "a retrograde" who attempts to "swim against the current, that is, initiate '*un retroceso*' [a backward movement or withdrawal] in relation to the march of the river [of secular time]" (Marechal, 1966: 22). Both in his life and in this novel, then, Marechal rehearses the Macedonian theme of withdrawal into virtual or "metaphysical" islandness.

The "chosen ones," the parodic Elect who will participate in the Banquet, are three. Two of them interest us here: Bermúdez, an ex-professor of philosophy; and Frobenius, an astrophysicist who has abandoned science in despair. Both of them suffer mental disorders that seem to have been produced by Western culture and knowledge. Bermúdez, after a nervous crisis, has been pressured into early retirement. Frequenting the Buenos Aires nightclubs, he falls in with a group of revellers who, impressed by his philosophical knowledge, invite him to set up a school of yogic philosophy on an island in the Tigre River. "Walking around the island, whose rough impenetrability seemed ideal to me, he recounts, I got enthusiastic about the dream of practising there a philosophical 'Robinsonism' made new" (Marechal, 1985: 40). But the project is also messianic: he will teach his revellers to be "new men." The adventure comes to nothing. The revellers immediately forget about him, continue their party for a day, then abandon him there. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, Bermúdez does not find opportunity in his sudden solitude; he seeks redemption in the community of his fellows. The episode, ending in defeat, ridicule, and depression, clearly parodies the legend of Macedonio's "island retreat."

Frobenius, too, is a drop-out in the grip of a messianic, redemptive urge. Severo Arcangelo's outriders had found him living in a *villa miseria* or shantytown, where he had run a "school of his invention" (1985: 62) for the underprivileged children. The school was

²² For a discussion of the novel's intertextuality with the New Testament book of Revelation, see Cheadle (2000: 122-146).

²³ The first-person narrator says at the very end of the novel: "One question still remains: the whereabouts of the *Cuesta del Agua*. It exists, I have no doubt about it, in a province in northern Argentina" (Marechal, 1985: 292).

short-lived; after three days Frobenius closed it, alleging that he was overcome by a “remnant of cultural poison” (*ibid.*: 62). Frobenius is (mock-)pathetically caught on the horns of the same dilemma that occupies Derrida – the aporetic antagonism between religion (redemption) and science, between faith and knowledge. Frobenius laments: “a science that starts from doubt and heads toward doubt in the midst of doubt is hell, and a cheap one. A truth that is not ‘indubitable’ is not a truth... We [scientists] are something like tourists in the realm of doubt” (*ibid.*: 64). Among the characters, he is the one who experiences the most severe mental imbalance. We are led to suspect that Frobenius may be the single commensal, mentioned by the narrator at the outset of his tale, who has been unable to withstand the test of the apocalyptic Banquet and commits suicide. The narrator, however, deliberately withholds the suicide’s name, just as he never recounts what actually “happened” at the Banquet. The way out of the aporia set up by Severo Arcángelo is never revealed. The trajectory from his island laboratory to the Promised Land is left as a legend shrouded in a fog of mystery.

***La Villa* (2001), by César Aira**

Frobenius’s *villa miseria* had been ironically named by its inhabitants as *Ciudad Jardín* [Garden City]. The urban slum as an Arcadian *locus amoenus*, as a utopian rather than dystopian place, is an ironic inversion that César Aira seems to have picked up from Marechal and redeployed as the premise of his novel, *La villa*.²⁴ The shantytown at the heart of this novel is neither utopian nor dystopian, but it is nevertheless a privileged, mysterious place, the centre of a sort of gravitational field. Its perimeter is strange and uncanny; it is difficult physically to site it with precision; and it is impenetrable for the municipal officials of Buenos Aires, the guardians of the political-economic order of the city.

The novel’s protagonist is Maxi, a good-natured lad who in his healthy simplicity stands almost as the polar opposite of the tormented egghead-scientist Frobenius. His hobby is weight-lifting, and so, unlike Macedonio’s metaphysical characters, Maxi “is an eminently physical being” (Aira, 2001b: 25). He spontaneously begins to help the *cartoneros*²⁵ by applying his physical strength to the chore of pushing their home-made carts and wagons²⁶ piled high with junk. But unlike both Macedonio’s and Marechal’s characters, we learn on the first page of the novel that “it never occurred to him to see it as task of charity, or solidarity, or Christianity, or piety, or whatever; he just did it, and that was that” (*ibid.*: 9). Maxi has no redemptive agenda, no calling, no religious or mystical neurosis to feed with good works. Maxi’s “voluntary occupation” is spontaneous and, in his view, “natural”: “It started out as something as natural as helping a child, or a pregnant woman, to carry a burden that seemed too heavy for them (even though in reality it wasn’t)” (*ibid.*: 9). Maxi

²⁴ The abbreviation *villa* (for *villa miseria*) is now common usage in Buenos Aires.

²⁵ Street people and slum-dwellers, the *cartoneros* of Buenos Aires are so called because they survive by collecting discarded cardboard boxes and other recyclable materials. Also known by the more pejorative term *cirujas*.

²⁶ Frobenius arrives in his *villa miseria* pushing a *carretilla* (wheelbarrow). Maxi pushes (or pulls, according to a given vehicle’s idiosyncratic construction) a *carrito* (cart, wagon; in supermarkets: a shopping cart).

is something like a postmodern, urban version of Rousseau's "noble savage" minus the pathos and heroism – Maxi literally sleeps through the mock-apocalyptic showdown that ends the novel.

The *villa* fascinates Maxi, and through his eyes we see it take on the contours of islandness. It is separated from its urban setting by a short stretch at the end of Bonorino Avenue that "was so wide and so short that it looked less like a street than big, square *beach*" (*ibid.*: 28; my emphasis). Beyond the "beach" the *villa*'s perimeter arcs gently into the distance. The geometrical layout of the *villa* is distinct from the grid pattern of Buenos Aires. It is round and centreless, spiralling away from the circumference at a 45-degree angle to the perimeter. Like the Jesuit mission or libertarian commune, the *villa* enjoys a certain autonomy: "This city of poverty within the city could obey its own laws" (*ibid.*: 33). But within poverty, the *villa* enjoys a "fluid" wealth in the form of electricity pirated from the city's power grid:

"The general resplendence was explained by the large number of light-bulbs hanging in the narrow streets. The *fluid* for them was free, so why would they scrimp? ... It looked like the lighting at a fair" (*ibid.*: 30; my emphasis).

The *villa* is wealthy, moreover, in human resources:

"At the heart of poverty, in the radical suppression of money, other forms of wealth emerged – in skills, for example. The manipulation of electricity already pointed in that direction. And no one knew what creative skills people might come up with – people who came from very distant parts of the world and who most often had no steady work and lots of free time" (*ibid.*: 35).

Isolated from the capitalist flow of money, the *villa* nevertheless pools wealth in the form of creativity drawn from human resources on a planetary scale.

The *villeros'* artistic manipulation of the fluid of electricity points to implicit redemption of the nature-culture divide. The lighting in the *villa* "seemed like a natural growth, as though at this social level, the lowest, technology was reabsorbed into nature" (*ibid.*: 31). Thus, in the privileged space of the *villa*, the "evil" of technoscience, the product of alienated rationality, will not be suppressed but will be defeated and reintegrated into the "good," the common weal.

The climactic episode at the end of the novel takes place in a rainstorm of biblical proportions. A television from a helicopter transmits an aerial view of the *villa* and we get the verbal description of the *villa*'s shape: "It was a ring of light, with very pronounced radial spokes inclined at a 45-degree angle in relation to the perimeter, none of which pointed toward the centre, and the centre was dark, like a void" (*ibid.*: 148). In effect, the *villa* has the shape of a spiral contained within a circle. Textually juxtaposed to this description is another, similar image, but on a micro-scale. The helicopter's "blades were spinning round in a mass of water that was almost solid" (*ibid.*: 148). Aira, then, has composed a fractal, that figure whereby a single organizing principle is repeated in

progressively smaller scales, the whole repeating itself in the parts. Aira thus represents urban space in terms of chaos theory, or complex systems theory, which has found fruitful application to the mechanics of fluids.²⁷ In spite of its apparent insularity, the *villa* in Aira's novel seems to be less a solid island than an eddy or vortex in the flow of a river or any other turbulent fluidity. Moreover, in the moment of novelistic "revelation," the distinction between solid and fluid is blurred. If water has become almost solid, then, conversely, the solid world of the *villa* has a quasi-fluid quality.

This fractal imagery is the occasion for what Tomás Abraham (2004: 143ff) has called Aira's genius for the spontaneous "mini-theory," in this case a mini-theory of human history:

"But then could the *Villa* spin? Was it possible? Maybe that's all it had been doing since time immemorial. Maybe its entire existence had been consummated in an endless rotation. Maybe that was the famous 'wheel of Fortune', except that it did not stand upright as everyone imagined, but rather lay humbly on its side on the earth. And so it wasn't a matter of some coming out 'on top' and others 'as underlings'; instead, everyone had always been an underling, and they were limited to changing places at ground-level. No one ever escaped poverty, and life went on in tiny displacements that fundamentally meant nothing. And even so, those minuscule fractions of revolution were extremely rare, they happened once in a blue moon, due to a chain of circumstances so complex that no one could work it out" (Aira, 2001b: 168-9).

Aira – spontaneously, playfully – splices the scientific theory of complex systems to the model of the teleological narrative, whether it be the grand narrative of apocalypse (the story of the world from beginning to end) or the small narrative of a simple story. The result subverts the linearity of narrative. In a history that turns in an endless revolution, where is the beginning? where the ending? toward what end, what *telos*, are we moving?

The mechanism of narrative is fueled by tensions: between protagonist and antagonist, between good and evil, between exile in the desert and arrival at the Promised Land, all of which depend on a cathexis, an emotional investment in a protagonist to make them meaningful. In this case, the reader is led by Maxi's example to invest emotionally in the collective subject of the *cirujas*, those whom Marx called the proletarians, those who are excluded and, as Slavoj Žižek describes them, "are condemned to lead a spectral life outside the global order, blurred in the background, unmentionable, submerged in the formless mass of 'population', without even a proper place of their own." Žižek continues:

"this shadowy existence is the very site of political universality: in politics, universality is asserted when such an agent with no proper place, 'out of joint', posits itself as the direct embodiment of universality against all those who do have a place in the global order. And this gesture is at the same time that of subjectivization, since 'subject' designates by definition an entity that is *not*

²⁷ For a concise definition of the fractal and its application to fluid mechanics, see *Encyclopedia Britannica* <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9035083> and <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-9110311>.

‘substance’: a dislocated entity, an entity which lacks its own place within the Whole” (Žižek, 2000: 313; emphasis in original).

The collective subject “without a place” is, literally, a utopian subjectivity. Its place will be found within the very fabric of the *polis* that excludes it. But what Aira’s fictional *aperçu* adds is that both subjectivity and its place are a formation in motion, a precarious figure within the fluidity of historical flux, without the apparent solidity of an island in the stream. The *villa* in the form of a horizontally circumscribed spiral, being the dark heart and empty centre of the social subject, is an eddy that grows larger or smaller, moves, and is transformed, always randomly, that is, according to an ever-changing aggregation of tiny turbulences in the flow of history that the symbolic order can never definitively fix.

Conclusion

There is both a commonality and an evolution in the figures of islandness produced in the three novels we’ve examined. In all three cases, the “island” – the President’s *estancia*, Severo Arcángelo’s suburban estate, the *villa* in Aira’s novel – are spaces that have been abstracted from the ambient urban space of Buenos Aires, whose conformation is produced by modern liberal (or, in Aira’s case, postmodern neoliberal) political-cultural regimes. All these figurations of islandness are informed by utopian and Robinsonian themes and motifs, as these have evolved in the cultural imaginary of the Río de la Plata region. And all of them refer back, directly or indirectly, to the typology and imagery of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic, whose definitive text is the Revelation to John of Patmos.

The differences in these island-like counterfigures to (neo)liberal hegemony are equally significant. Macedonio’s avant-garde text operates as a subjectivity-machine,²⁸ producing dreamy excesses that escape from the grid of the alienating symbolic order. His kindly President, a fictional vicar of Macedonio himself, acts as a replacement for the merciful God of religion. Marechal, from his personal Patmos, imagines a wrathful authoritarian stand-in for God, Severo Arcángelo, who like the angel in Revelation stages the defeat of the anti-Christ. But Marechal has narrated his story in the key of parody, using humour in an attempt to slip out of the aporia of redemptive faith versus alienated science. Unlike both those authors, but who are nevertheless clearly his precursors, César Aira dispenses with the authoritarian figure altogether, along with vertical hierarchy. He is also unique in managing to suggest a figure of islandness that is literally more fluid, in which islandness does not stand in stark opposition to flow but rather exists as an effect of flow. As a result, autonomy, whether of the individual or collective subject, is no longer dependent on mastery – neither the self-sufficient mastery of Robinson Crusoe nor the paternalistic mastery of missionaries or presidents – but is instead reimagined as a creative flow. Islandness and flow, the two figures informing the imaginary of Buenos Aires, are not locked in an aporetic, antagonistic battle, but in a creative dynamic.

²⁸ Inspired by Macedonio’s *Novel of the Eternal One*, Ricardo Piglia, in his novel *La ciudad ausente* [The Absent City], invents a “máquina transformadora de historias” – a story-transforming machine (Piglia: 2004, 43).

This last development is particularly significant for the enigma of islandness. In both Macedonio and Marechal, the perfected unity that islandness connotes is guaranteed by an absolute principle, which in turn is personified in a God-like figure. (And, formally speaking, not much changes if one substitutes the sovereign individual ego for the God of the collective identity.) It is this principle, or its personification, that delineates the island's identitary perfection against the ambient flux. But what happens if the antagonistic principle of flow with its attendant turbulence wins out, or at least appears to, as has happened in the historical development of Buenos Aires? Islandness re-emerges within turbulence itself, and Aira succeeds in fictionally figuring that emergence.

In his article on “islands in between” – those instances of islands that get caught up in liminality and whose islandness is thus troubled – Godfrey Baldacchino observes that:

“[I]slands seem to suggest a natural indivisibility” and that the finitude of the island’s geographical form nurtures “a sense of identity that is contiguous with territory” (2008: 214).

It goes deeply against the grain that the island’s closed and finite form should be implicated in the blurry, hybrid zone of “in-betweenity.” And worse still that islands should be partitioned: “international relations abhor divided islands” (Baldacchino, 2008: 218). Geopolitical turbulence is anathema to islandness, and the flux that produces turbulence is the principle that erodes ensiled finitude: flow is the natural antagonist of islandness. But it is not only at the level of international relations that divided islands are abhorred, for there seem to be deep social and cultural reasons for the human drive to cling to islandness and, in its absence, to reproduce it. (And possibly even biological reasons, for what is the human body if not a three-dimensional island defying entropy, just as islandness resists the stream?) Thus, Baldacchino’s astute observation may be generalized: something within us, perhaps life itself, abhors divided islands and defends the integrity of islandness against all odds. As Aira shows, just when the “evil” of neoliberal capitalist turbulence seems to have overcome all, and the invasion of the instrumental reason of Derrida’s “techno-science” appears to have washed away all cultural solidity and all social solidarity, islandness reappears and stubbornly reasserts itself, even if only in the utopian space of the human imagination.

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