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Sanctifying the Scatological and Debasing the Divine: Postmodernist Allegory and Gómez-Arcos's *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas*

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SANCTIFYING THE SCATOLOGICAL AND DEBASING
THE DIVINE: POSTMODERNIST ALLEGORY
AND GÓMEZ-ARCOS'S
INTERVIEW DE MRS. MUERTA SMITH
POR SUS FANTASMAS

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«The theater restores us all our dormant conflicts and all their powers, and gives these powers names.»

Anthony Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*

«Y a-t-il rien de plus métaphorique que l'existence de Dieu?»

Agustín Gómez-Arcos, *Pré-papa*.

In February 1991, when Agustín Gómez-Arcos's *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas* premiered at Madrid's Sala Olimpia, the voice of one of Europe's most distinguished living writers triumphantly returned to the Spanish stage after an absence that had endured nearly twenty-six years. Born in Almería at the outset of the Spanish Civil War, Gómez-Arcos began his career in Madrid as an award-winning playwright¹. Eventually his

¹ During the 1960's, Gómez-Arcos won national prizes for three of his plays: Premio I Festival Nacional de Teatro Nuevo (1960) for *Elecciones generales*, Premio Nacional Lope de Vega (1962) for *Diálogos de la herejía* (subsequently annulled by the Franco government), and Premio Nacional Lope de Vega (1966) for *Queri-*

ongoing struggle against Francoist censorship prompted his voluntary exile from Spain in 1966, and following a two-year sojourn in London, he arrived in Paris amid the clamor of 1968. Since that time he has lived mainly in France, where his early success at the Parisian *café-théâtres* and his subsequent publication of thirteen novels (written in French, and translated into several languages) have earned him international acclaim. He has been twice a finalist for the Prix Goncourt, and in 1985, he became one of only four Spaniards (along with Picasso) ever to be decorated by the French Legion of Honor as «Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts ès Lettres». Presently, his theater is undergoing a renaissance on the stages of his native country, where seemingly overnight —with the success of *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith* and the recent staging of *Los gatos*— he has succeeded in reestablishing his prestige as a Spanish dramatist². Ironically, his life appears finally to have come full circle in that the Spanish Ministry of Culture that once denigrated his work, with the advent of democracy is finally promoting it.

Above all, Gómez-Arcos's literature is about freedom. His theater (as well as his narrative fiction) is «committed» in the sense that it is never oblivious to history and socio-cultural circumstance; yet, at the same time, it resists identification with any particular political-ideological designation. Propelled by an underlying discourse of transgression, his plays, like much of the work of other dramatists of his post-civil-war generation, employ an allegorical language of the stage as a tropological weapon in the irreverent violation of taboos and other emblems of societal order. In *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith* (written in 1972), allegory functions as a postmodernist artistic strategy, which metaphorically decenters the power and meaning of authoritative socio-cultural structures through a self-referential interrogation of the notion of representation. Hence, in this play, allegory comes to play the roles of both form and content: not only is it the dominant mode of expression; but also, at times it is brought into the foreground

dos míos, es preciso contaros ciertas cosas. I wish to express my appreciation to Agustín Gómez-Arcos for sharing with me the biographical data included in this study.

² Both plays were directed by Carmen Portaceli. *Los gatos* premiered at Madrid's Teatro María Guerrero (Centro Dramático Nacional) in November 1992.

and parodied through the creation of a meta-allegorical *mise en abyme*.

In recent decades, it has become increasingly apparent that critical views of allegory gradually have been shifting away from an attitude of indifference, and even scorn, to a renewed interest and reevaluation of what, since the advent of romanticism, has been widely regarded as an inferior mode of artistic representation. The cause—and perhaps also, the effect—of this revisionist stance is the prominent resurgence of allegorical expression among various branches of postmodern culture—literature, painting, theater, performance art, photography, etc. Correspondingly, recent discussions of allegory include references to contemporary artists such as Laurie Anderson, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cindy Sherman³. In a two-part study, originally published in 1980, Craig Owens describes the emergence of an «unmistakably allegorical impulse», which he perceives as one of the salient features of postmodern art (1: 68). In his treatment of allegory—largely influenced by the work of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida—Owens launches an attack against modern aesthetics' subordination of allegory to symbol, and underscores the presence of allegorical representation in contemporary and even modernist art.

The allegorical mode of representation is an analogizing device, a discourse of *doubles entendres*, which engenders a concrete image/transcription of a larger transcendental picture of chimeras, passions, powers, and desires. The presence of this textual dualism is the principal structuring element of the allegorical work of art; it is disclosed to the spectator/reader either implicitly or explicitly, and sustained throughout the entire spatio-temporal extension of the work. It is therefore possible to contemplate an allegorical text as though its entire constitution were one expansive metaphor. In allegory, Owens explains, «one text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be; the paradigm for the allegorical work

³ Cf., for example, Deborah L. Madsen, Brian McHale, and Maureen Quilligan on Pynchon; Owens on Anderson, Levine, Longo, Rauschenberg and Sherman; Gregory L. Ulmer on Levine; Joan Simon on allegorical strategies in contemporary painting and photography; and Stephen Melville, Mihai Spariosu and Paul Smith for general discussions of the relationship between allegory and postmodernism.

is thus the palimpsest» (1: 68). In his deconstructive consideration of allegory, Paul de Man accounts for the presence of this (meta)textual dualism when he notes that allegory forges its discourse within the temporal signifier infinitely defers to its corresponding immaterial signified, forever canceling the possibility that they will ever collide (207). Viewed in this manner, allegories portray the pursuit of an illusive disembodied text whose true image, situated at a previous moment in time, will never be captured or revealed, but will instead remain a phantasmagoric abstraction. Deborah L. Madsen thus envisions the basic allegorical configuration —of signifier in search of signified— as a hermeneutic quest for knowledge (4-5).

In his seminal treatise on German baroque (tragic) drama, first published in 1928, Walter Benjamin acknowledges allegory's religious underpinnings, observing the process by which it conveys a dialectical relationship between the realm of the sacred and that of the profane: allegorical expression conveys the existence of a sacred (transcendental) text, which is systematically doubled and supplemented by a profane (material) text. According to this dialectic, the allegorist typically projects a melancholic gaze, a mournful vision upon the world as s/he discloses the empty void that exists between the eternal and the ephemeral. Nowhere is this attitude of mourning more apparent than in what Benjamin calls the allegorical «cult of the ruin». Originally derived from the baroque opposition to classicism, the image of the ruin emerges as a direct corollary to allegory's endeavor to dramatize the passage of (sacred) history as it is transformed by nature into a decaying emblem. Placed within the scope of the allegorical gaze, monuments to a heroic past, as well as sacred institutions intended to withstand the passage of time, collapse into relics of mortal demise. «Allegory», affirms Benjamin, «thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things» (178).

Thus, on the one hand, the allegorical process imparts a devaluative gesture of demystification as the ineffable celestial signified dissolves into an accumulation of earthly fragments. However, situated on the other side of this dialectic is the inclination toward exaltation, for as Benjamin also points out, allegory continually attempts to seize hold of that which is transient, and rescue it for eternity (223). The identity of the material signifier hin-

ges upon the fact that it is, in essence, pointing to something else— to a signified that is located on a «higher» immortal plane. By virtue of this association, the realm of the profane is converted into a place where any regard for detail becomes virtually inconsequential and immaterial. A glow of transcendent radiance envelops the terrestrial world, suggesting the possibility that through allegory, profane objects can, in effect, transcend the limits of apotheosis (175). The allegorical perspective, therefore, embraces a double-sided transformative process; it is endowed with the ability to secularize that which is considered sacred, and also, to sanctify the profane⁴.

Within this dialectical scheme, Benjamin locates an implicit confrontation between sacred (spoken) script and profane (written) script (175). The transcendent spoken word engages in a ceaseless endeavor to maintain an authoritative hold over the ephemeral written text. At the same time, the contestatory nature of the allegorical dialectic in masks the semiotic chasm separating profane signifier and sacred signified; it endows the allegorist with the potential to undermine the authority of this dictatorial hold, to free writing from its subordination to the sovereignty of the divine *Logos*: «The division between signifying written and intoxicating spoken language opens up a gulf in the solid mass of verbal meaning and forces the gaze into the depths of language» (Benjamin 201). As a result, allegory can be understood as an inherently self-reflective tropological construct, which invokes an interrogation of the nature of representation, and metaphorically discloses the attempts by hegemonic cultural discourses to govern the way in which an image is presented and received. Viewed in this manner, the Benjaminian conception of allegory seems to anticipate the deconstructive «thrust» that Owens aligns with postmodernism:

Decentered, allegorical, schizophrenic... —however we choose to diagnose its symptoms, postmodernism is usually treated, by its protagonists and antagonists alike, as a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions... Not only does the postmodernist work claim no such authority, it also actively seeks to undermine all such claims; hence, its ge-

⁴ The title of a recent allegorical installation by Longo epitomizes the workings of this dialectic: *When heaven and hell change places*.

nerally deconstructive thrust. («The Discourse of Others» 57-58).

Herein lies the main reason for postmodern art's affinity for the allegorical. The potentially subversive structure of allegory, as conceived by Benjamin, echoes postmodernism's concern with exposing the authoritative nature —the politics— of representation. Owens accordingly emphasizes the allegorist's role as interpreter and critic of culture; one who appropriates imagery that holds a particular cultural significance, and then lends new meaning to this imagery by re-contextualizing it and transforming it into «something other» (1: 69). Postmodern art —such as that of Gómez-Arcos— sequesters allegory's capacity to problematize the dialectical relationships between signified and signifier, the sacred and the profane, speech and writing, and —by metaphoric extension— author and reader, playwright and spectator, text and performance, etc. The postmodernist allegory spotlights the workings of totalizing cultural discourses —*les grans récits*, as Jean-François Lyotard would have it— that masquerade beneath an ethereal façade of sanctity, and it implicates the spectator in this revelatory procedure; it jars the spectator into recognizing the way in which *s/he* is habitually manipulated by the images that these discourses project. Frequently, the postmodern allegorist will add an additional metatextual frame to this tropological scheme, thus creating a parody of allegory, an allegorical *mise en abyme*, which shifts the principal focus from the work of art itself to its margins — that is, to its representational frame— and thereby exposes the totalizing systems of power that dictate which representations are permitted and which are prohibited.

Likewise, for Gómez-Arcos, allegory is not merely a transparent formulatic technique of Manichaeic oppositions; rather, his theater confiscates and cultivates allegory's potential as an illuminative and critical process. In their unyielding defiance of socio-cultural supremacy, his postmodernist allegories do not propose any sort of fixed ideological substitute, for to do so merely would imply the tyrannical triumph of one system of oppression over another. Instead, in the spirit of postmodernism, they function as decentering machines which, through verbal and visual imagery, aim directly at the semiotic core of oppression in order to implore the structure of authoritative meaning from within. Hence

their allegorical attitude of melancholia can be traced to the mournful loss of an ontological center⁵.

In Gómez-Arcos's theatrical universe, this ontological destabilization gives way to a subversion of the hierarchical dualisms that serve as the fundamental structuring principals of Western European cultures. These include: sanctity/profanity, taboo/transgression, male/female, and purity/defilement. In the blinding light of allegorization, the frontiers separating these diametrically opposed notions become obscured and entangled, invoking metaphorically a rejection of binary thought—a rejection that is commonly attributed to the postmodern condition⁶. What emerges, in the aftermath of this cultural denial and destruction, is an ambiguous portrait of one of the essential and most cherished ingredients of any culture (and any allegory): the idea of *the sacred*. While modern (Western) cultures tend to designate a clear barrier of separation between the notions of sanctity and profanity, it was, nevertheless, not until the advent of Christianity that these two notions were placed at opposite poles in the belief that holy beings, objects, and places were to be shielded from contact with any form of contamination or impurity⁷. This primordial notion of the sacred—embracing both the pure and the impure—is the key to Gómez-Arcos's allegorical interrogations of cultural authority. In his theater, these two concepts are not always placed at opposite poles; rather, quite often, they are ambiguously intermingled in a definitive act of transgression: objects traditionally held as sacred are defiled and stained, while objects of repulsion and disgust are elevated to a sacred plane. In contrast with the modern/Western notion of sanctity, Gómez-Arcos's sacred territory is a place of fallen idols, a ruinous allegorical landscape that embraces a seemingly incongruous inventory of profane elements, such as eroticism, violence, disease, bodily secretions, and even Communism. The metaphoric inversions, hyperbolic depictions, and dark humor of Gómez-Arcos's allegorical domains are tendencies that situate his theater (and his novels) within the European/Spanish traditions of the absurd, the carnivalesque, the *esperpento*, the grotesque, and the surreal—epitomized in twentieth-century

⁵ Cf. McHale 141.

⁶ Cf. Owens («The Discourse of Others») and Lyotard.

⁷ On the sacred, see Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Mary Douglas, and René Girard.

Spain by the work of artists, such as Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, Fernando Arrabal, and Pedro Almodóvar.

In *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith*, Gómez-Arcos establishes his critique of cultural supremacy through a series of parodic gestures with respect to religious icons and rituals that, over the course of centuries, have become allegorically coded within the context of Catholic sanctity. During the course of this single act, he interrogates the meaning of these allegories by deconstructing and rewriting them within the context of a theatrical piece, which is itself allegorically coded. The scenic space of *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith* is a futuristic universe of surreal invention and guignolesque caricature, in which elements drawn from popular culture and science fiction intermingle with parodic evocations of religious ritual. Accordingly, the opening stage directions describe this space as a «*Cabina de hibernación del vehículo espacial de Mrs. Muerta Smith. Impresión de templo dedicado a un culto especial, único en su género*» (18). In this dream world of phantoms, absurd logic, and nonsensical language, Mrs. Muerta Smith, a resuscitated cadaver («una joven vieja dama» [35]), traverses the barriers of space and time as part of her own (hermeneutic) quest for the ultimate sacred signified: God. She is accompanied by two faithful companions: Bobby, her talking dog (a well-bred animal of refined speech and sophisticated tastes, who adores wearing her chinchilla coat) and «Doble Nick, blanco y negro», her gigolo (whose only words are «Thank you, baby»).

As the play unfolds, Bobby seamlessly inhabits the roles of a surgeon, a journalist, God (disguised as Catherine the Great), and Satan (disguised as Mao-Tse-Tung). However, his theatrical metamorphoses do not represent a succession of fixed absolute transformations. On the contrary, as indicated by the written text, each of the dog's roles contains a vestige (or «ghosting») from one or more of his former personae. For example, the text reads: «PERRO, en Dios»; «PERRO, en Satán»; «El Perro-Satán-Mao»; etc. This polymorphic process of characterization presents the actor (as well as the spectator) with an endless series of performative/interpretative possibilities for, in allegorical terms, Bobby is a chameleon-like multi-layered signifier whose concrete image is infinitely indeterminate. He is an ambiguous accumulation of sacred and profane elements; in sum: a-man-playing-a-dog-playing-a-surgeon-

playing-a-journalist-playing-God-playing-Catherine-the-Great-playing-Satan-playing-Mao. A parallel system of *palimpsestic* accumulation occurs in the characterization of Doble Nick. He is portrayed by two actors who simultaneously depict a double-sided image of multicultural ambiguity (Aryan and African), thereby evoking an interrogation of the cultural dualism «black/white». Doble Nick is a literal representation of a man and his ethno-racial Other, frozen in a block of ice that is defrosted at opportune moments—that is, whenever he is called upon for his erotic services. His name, a linguistic pun on the vulgar expresión «Noble Dick», is a parodic reference to his sexual prowess.

During the initial scenes of the play, the decomposing—yet garrulous—remains of Mrs. Muerta lie upon an operating table. As Bobby performs his mistress' resuscitative surgery, they discuss her cause of death, attempting to agree upon an official explanation to be issued to the press. In this conversation, it is revealed that earlier, Mrs. Muerta had been speeding through the Utah desert in her red Cadillac—in a manner reminiscent of Cruella de Ville, chasing after the «hundred and one Dalmatians»—when suddenly, her mind began to wander and (in her words): «me escoñé en el desierto de Utah contra un cactus que no estaba previsto en el itinerario. Iba pensando en otra cosa» (23). The comparison with Cruella de Ville, the Walt Disney character, enhances the cartoon-like quality of Gómez-Arcos's imagery. Like her two (three?, or more?) companions, Mrs. Muerta is a multi-layered indeterminate signifier. She is characterized as a former American diplomat, who is also a whore and a saint («Santa Puta Constante y Americana»), and although she is dead, she often behaves, contrarily, as though she were immortal. In allegorical terms, she is a simultaneous embodiment of the sacred and the profane, the personification of a divine imperialistic ideal whose downfall and decadence have finally arrived. Gómez-Arcos associates this abstract concept of plenipotentiary authority with the image of the United States. He comments, with regard to his play: «En el fondo, lo que yo creo de Estados Unidos es que es un país profundamente castrado, pero no en el sentido sexual sino en el sentido visceral, en un sentido infinitamente más complejo y más amplio... Entonces, veo el país como un cadáver sanguinolento» (Entrevista con Feldman).

The topological correlation that Gómez-Arcos proposes (in his

personal declarations and in the play itself) between bodily space and topographical space is echoed in Mary Douglas's anthropological formulations and in Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the Rabelaisian grotesque (and carnivalesque). For Bakhtin, as for Douglas, the human body can be construed as a metaphoric map of the cosmos, the world, or of any socio-cultural system⁸. The body's margins and orifices —such as Mrs. Muerta's vaginal area— thus signify the powerful, vulnerable, and precarious areas of society. The grotesque tradition, like the allegorical cult of the ruin, is informed by an anti-classical impulse: it carries out a metaphoric inversion/subversion of the hierarchical ordering principles of the Aristotelian cosmos by turning it inside-out and plotting a new bodily-cosmic topography. According to this perspective, immaterial concepts from exalted levels of the classically-designed cosmos (sacred ideas, abstract notions associated with the heavens) are, in a manner reminiscent of allegory's mournful gaze, reduced to a material level and represented in earthly terms. The grotesque portrayal of Mrs. Muerta's body, grounded in this «material bodily principle» of debasement (to use Bakhtin's terminology), can be contemplated, therefore, as a metaphor for the transgression and inversion of societal structures. Mrs. Muerta, accordingly, is both castrated woman and castrated socio-cultural system, whose lower bodily stratum has been fatally ruptured as the result of a collision with a phallic cactus. In the allegorist's hands, her saintly monolithic image has collapsed into a profane heap of ruins, thus evoking a metaphoric debasement of oppressive institutions. Her vaginal area, an allegorical zone of socio-cultural vulnerability, is also a powerful center of reproductivite activity. Consequently, her physiological debilitation has hampered, at least momentarily, her ability to engender any new authoritative systems.

The delicate surgery that Boby performs entails the complete extraction of his mistress' viscera, and the substitution of her old clitoris «universalmente conocido» (32) with a new model, made of plastic, and of Japanese design. He then fills his mistress' hollowed/hallowed body with gold, the substance most pleasing to her extravagant tastes, and gives her the face of a Hollywood starlet so that she can look in the mirror each morning and say, «Darling! You look marvelous today!» (38) Finally, he lifts the

⁸ Cf. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White.

mortuary sheet and the new and improved Mrs. Muerta (likewise, a new and improved System) makes her debut: «espléndida mujer de oro sin vida, estatua, símbolo, mecano o autómatas, el seno izquierdo rojo escarlata» (40). To her absolute horror, she discovers that even in death, as in life, her left breast remains a deep scarlet red color, indelibly tainted by the left-wing ideology of her son. (She explains to the audience that her son, born a Communist in the supposedly left-wing state of Utah, developed while nursing an irresistible Œdipal affinity for his mother's left breast.) Mrs. Muerta is thus characterized in terms of a bodily politic that allegorizes the image of the United States, and in broader terms, the entire cosmos. Her golden body, a map of allegorical double-talk has been equipped with a new and improved (plastic, Japanese) lower stratum, with which she is able to resume the secretion and propagation of her oppressive imperialist ideology. Yet at the same time, one of her most cherished attributes, her breast, blatantly displays evidence of sinful contamination by left-wing propaganda. (Her breasts are themselves doubly coded: one left [-wing], one right [-wing]).

As Mrs. Muerta recounts the story of her son's Communist legacy (he now languishes in a Utah state prison), Bobby sets a table that resembles a church altar, and prepares his mistress' sacred breakfast-communion. At intermittent moments, he interrupts her dialogue with the audience in order to remind her that the sacred hosts are becoming cold, soon they will become indigestible, «her God» will be spoiled, etc. (47-51). Finally, she is ready to eat:

Lentamente se acerca a la mesa-altar que el perro ha preparado, paño blanco bordado de liturgia, recipiente de oro para las hostias sagradas, cáliz de oro para el vino sagrado. Ella misma sacerdote, consagra el alimento divino, oración interior, exterior frío y ceremonioso. Ausencia de la música. Luz hiriente (51).

In performing her breakfast-communion, Mrs. Muerta plays the roles of both priest and communicant, receiving communion from herself. In this scene, as in subsequent episodes, her performance constitutes a parody or religious allegory. In the same way that allegory both secularizes and sanctifies, parody—according to Linda Hutcheon—is, in the postmodern sense, a

doubly coded device that both inscribes and undermines. In Hutcheon's view, the postmodern practice of parodic reprise is fueled by an ironic and critical regard for history and the politics of representation (98-99)⁹. Here, the sacramental rite of communion, an allegorical sacrifice of the body of Christ, inscribed over the course of centuries within the allegorical framework of the Catholic mass, represents a sacrosanct monument to the historical past, which is appropriated and placed within the context of a mundane breakfast ritual. This strategy of parodic reprise establishes a chain of metaphoric linkages between the Catholic mass (a sacred text) and an ordinary daily meal (a profane text); for example: table = altar, tablecloth = liturgical cloth, bowl of breakfast cereal = ciborium with hosts, breakfast beverage = chalice of wine. The parody of the communion—its reconstruction and deconstruction within the context of breakfast—is therefore a secularizing gesture implying a semiotic transgression that mitigates the signifying power of religious ritual. Yet, in a reciprocal manner, Mrs. Muerta's communion also can be viewed as an appropriation of profane elements (table, breakfast cereal, etc.), which are then placed within the context of sacred ritual. In this manner, the allegorical dialectic can be perceived as exercising its sacralizing power. The spectator who contemplates Mrs. Muerta's allegorical performance occupies the privileged (distanced) position of being able to perceive an ambivalent oscillation of the two texts (breakfast and communion), an implicitly flickering image that, in theory, renders indistinguishable the limits of the sacred and the profane.

Additionally, Mrs. Muerta's performance adds an overtly metatheatrical, meta-allegorical, and meta-representational dimension to the play. The breakfast-communion is an allegory, framed within the allegorical theater piece, framed within the representational realm of the spectator, and so on. It is a sub-system of an infinitely larger semiotizing machine, of an allegorical *mise en abyme*, whose structure suggests an analogous internal (re)duplication of the representational structure that contains it, while naturally implicating the spectator in this process. This

⁹ Hutcheon distinguishes between modernist parody (an apolitical mode which assumes closure and artistic autonomy), and postmodernist parody (which, on the contrary, endeavors to deconstruct the idea of artistic independence by exposing the politicized nature of representation).

parergonal structure diverts the spectator's gaze away from the gestures themselves, to the exterior representational frames that embrace them; that is, to the metaphoric systems and hierarchical structures that govern the representational process. It is a structure that foregrounds for the spectator the arbitrariness of the sign (host = body of Christ, wine = blood of Christ, etc.), undermining the sovereign power of these religious signifiers, and plunging the spectator's gaze into the semiotic abyss separating signifier and signified, ephemeral and eternal.

While Mrs. Muerta takes communion, Bobby covers her with her chinchilla coat (so that she will not appear nude before the press) and announces that a reporter has already arrived for her interview. At this point, the dog undergoes a theatrical metamorphosis whereby he is converted into a journalist. He dons a trench coat, takes out a pad, and explains to his spectators that Mrs. Muerta is about to embark upon the most fabulous cosmic mission ever to be carried out. (He is supposedly addressing a group of imaginary television spectators, whose identity is inevitably confused with that of the «real» theater spectators—a gesture which, moreover, implicates these «real» spectators in the dramatic action.) According to the dog-reporter, Mrs. Muerta's transparent gold space ship—constructed under the auspices of IBM (emblem of technological supremacy), with the sacrifice of several million inhabitants of «third-world» countries—will launch her into outer space, where she is scheduled for an interview with God. The new century will commence with a new colonization of the heavens:

PERRO, *en Periodista, sacando su bloc de notas.*—Misión cósmica de Mrs. Muerta Smith. La conocida embajadora plenipotenciaria de los Estados Unidos de América ... embajadora del Hombre, se prepara física y espiritualmente, para tener una entrevista con Dios. Ha llegado la hora de que el ser humano, ansioso de poseer otros horizontes, conozca al fin a su Creador y se explique con Él. La Tierra no tiene arreglo. ¡Arreglemos el Cielo!

Mrs. Muerta Smith, sencilla mujer de oro y chinchillas, toma su desayuno, simple y frugal. Hostias consagradas y vitaminadas (52-53).

Mrs. Muerta's encounter with the dog-reporter is the first in a series of three absurd interviews that she will have with her

«phantoms». When he inquires about Mrs. Muerta's breakfast of consecrated hosts, she explains that, in her opinion, the single aspect of human civilization most worthy of perpetuation in their conquest of a new realm is Catholicism: «Los Estados Unidos de América, a pesar de determinadas falsas apariencias, son profundamente católicos» (53) When he asks why the hosts are «vitamin-fortified», she reveals that they are part of a brilliant initiative launched by her own foundation («La Fundación Mrs. Muerta Smith por la Extensión de los Valores Universales» [54]), whose intent is to demonstrate that Catholicism, despite certain false claims, can be nutritious: «Nuestros químicos inventaron las hostias vitaminadas. Una composición equilibrada de todas las vitaminas» (54). Nevertheless, there were some problems at the beginning of this enterprising initiative: the vitamins so enhanced the Pope's sexual appetite that he began to take part in clandestine love affairs with various officials from the Vatican, as well as a heterogeneous parade of outcasts and outsiders (i.e., Communists, Arabs, and Jews). As a solution to the Pope's «problem», Mrs. Muerta's foundation decided to remove the specially formulated «erection vitamin» from the vitamin-enriched hosts. Presently, the new formulation has inundated the American market, and eventual world-wide sales are projected: «Mis compatriotas, ahora, son menos cachondos, pero más religiosos» (55). The left-over hosts from the original formula have been reserved for Doble Nick's use.

During Mrs. Muerta's interview with the dog-reporter, Gómez-Arcos continues his allegorical subversion of the sacred image of the Eucharist, epitomized by the semantically dissonant term «hostia consagrada y vitaminada». In referring to this hallowed symbol, he employs a discourse normally reserved for breakfast cereal advertisements (i.e., «vitamin-enriched», «fortified with nutrients», etc.), once again intermingling the concepts of sanctity and profanity. Additionally, a farcical cause-and-effect linkage is established between the hosts, the erotic adventures of a Pope, and the sexual excitement of a gigolo. If the Catholic principle of transubstantiation is considered in conjunction with these semantically violent juxtapositions, then the implications of this transgressive imagery continue to multiply. Transubstantiation, essentially an allegorical process of semiosis, transforms the immaterial body of Christ into a series of material signifiers, or

sacraments (bread, wine, the Eucharist, etc.)¹⁰. During the Catholic mass, these sacraments function as surrogates, which take the place of the primordial sacrificial victim. The ritual consumption of the Eucharist thus enables the (mortal) communicant to become one with, and to identify with, the (immortal) victim, and to cathartically benefit from this sacrificial process¹¹. When the communicant ingests the Eucharist, s/he metaphorically «receives» the body of Christ, and Christ correspondingly «receives» the body of the communicant. This allegorical system of reciprocity invokes a simultaneous secularization and sacralization: it is a ritual transgression exercised within the context of taboo, which characteristically blurs the distinctions between the sacred (Christ) and the profane (the communicant). But, in *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith*, the image of the Eucharist appears tarnished through metonymic association with the breakfast cereal and sexual activity, a situation that problematizes and destabilizes, in a figurative sense, the entire sacrificial structure of the mass. What was once a process of identification between the worldly being and divine entity is transformed into a process of defamiliarization.

Mrs. Muerta eventually departs with Bobby and Doble Nick on her whirlwind voyage to the heavens. As part of her allegorical quest to colonize and concretize the transcendent cosmos, her second interview will be an encounter with the ultimate sacred signified. As she journeys through outer space, she anxiously wonders about the material form that God will take: «¿Cómo será?... ¿Será un soplo? ¿Una ameba? ¿Un grito de luz? ¿Será nada?» (60). When they arrive at their destination, Bobby steps outside the spaceship. Only his head is momentarily visible through an open hatchway as he undergoes another metamorphosis: this time, he is transformed into God. When the Dog-God finally makes his/her entrance, s/he is the anthropomorphic image of a woman, dressed in an immaculate white gown, res-

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton comments on the liturgy of the Eucharist and its relationship to discourse: «The bread and wine of the liturgy operate as a discursive language, like any other human product used as sign: they are shared out, handled, exchanged, passed around, in a visible, concrete, durational interchange of symbols. But the eating of the bread is a participation in the body of Christ; a communion of being established through a discursive communication of sign» (29).

¹¹ Here, I am drawing upon Girard's concept of sacrificial ritual.

embling a portrait of Catherine the Great. She is accompanied by a white angel who plays the sitar. Hence the abstract notion of God materializes on stage as an ambiguous signifier: a man-playing-a-dog-playing-a-woman clad in a Catherine the Great costume. (The fact that God is a female, portrayed by a male dog, only further complicates her characterization.) At first, they exchange a series of commonplace pleasantries: Mrs. Muerta compliments God's dress (they seem to have similar tastes in wardrobe), and God insists that Mrs. Muerta call Her «Señora.» She also apologizes to Mrs. Muerta for having interrupted her meal:

PERRO, *en Dios*.—Huele bien...

MRS. MUERTA SMITH.—¡Naturalmente, Señora! Es usted misma que yo como.

PERRO, *en Dios*, lanza un grito.—¿Yo misma? ¡Caníbal! (*Al Ángel*.) ¡A ella!

El Ángel ladra, amenazador.

MRS. MUERTA SMITH.—Pero, cálmese, Señora. Es sólo en metáfora que yo como a la Señora. (64-75).

Once again, Gómez-Arcos subverts the divine authority of the Eucharist. God is offended when She learns that the metaphor that signifies Her image is known as a «host»: «¡Pero yo tengo un nombre, Yo!» (65). Her reaction indicates a dissatisfaction with idea that a seemingly arbitrary mixture composed of minuscule quantities of flour, water, and vitamins (all secular ingredients) could be used to signify Her divine Self, and She also suggests, in the sinful spirit of consumerism, that a price be charged for the receipt of communion. In Her opinion, if a monetary value were placed upon the hosts, more people would appreciate Her, and at the same time, She would be able to collect a small commission.

In the next part of their interview, God offers to tell Mrs. Muerta about Her life, but Mrs. Muerta replies that she is already familiar with the life of God for she has studied the catechism (a sacred text). God, nevertheless, insists on recounting the details of Her daily routine, which include rising at noon, skipping breakfast because She is concerned about Her weight, and taking a stroll around the cosmos:

PERRO, *en Dios*.—Salgo a dar mi paseo. Yo le llamo «paseo cenital»: bonito, ¿no?

MRS. MUERTA SMITH.—Charming!

PERRO, *en Dios*.—Y cago.

MRS. MUERTA SMITH.—¿Perdón?

PERRO, *en Dios*.—¡Cago! A derechas y a izquierdas, cuando encuentro un sitio que me gusta. Es un placer modesto. (67)

In this conversation, the catechism is converted into a comical series of questions and answers regarding the activities of the lower bodily stratum, and God is characterized in terms of Bakhtin's material bodily principle. Her body is a grotesque scatological image and Her role as the holy Creator of the universe is secularized and allegorized as series of mundane activities and moral necessities from the realm of pedestrian reality: sleeping, eating, walking and the discharge of biological waste.

The heavenly cosmos is also allegorized in terms of bodily secretions, portrayed as a defiled accumulation of solid excrement. According to God, the purgation of Her sacred bodily debris is the basis for the formation of the entire universe. God spends Her afternoons ridding Her body of solid waste, which eventually crystallizes in the form of galaxies, nebulas, etc. «Cagando cosmos» is the graphic term that She employs to describe this process: «Y todo eso estando a régimen. Imagina si comiera todo lo que me apetece. ¡Jesús, Jesús!» (68). Not surprisingly, Mrs. Muerta appears dazed at the revelation that, what she had always referred to as «Theology», is actually a lowly process of defecation. The scatological has been sanctified, elevated to a transcendental plane, and Mrs. Muerta becomes increasingly disquieted by the image of God that has materialized before her. God knows nothing of the illustrious Smith family of Utah, nor is she even slightly familiar with the Catholic Church¹². God also remarks that She has absolutely no idea what Catholicism is, adding that it must be an invention of the people on Earth—a planet that She has never bothered to visit. Mrs. Muerta's God is, in effect, her own allegorical invention, a phantasmagoric projection of an idea, fabricated by her own imagination and

¹² Although this reference to the «Smith's» of Utah seems to recall the Smith family that founded the Mormon Church, Gómez-Arcos recently confessed, in a personal conversation, that he was entirely unaware of this coincidence when he wrote *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith*.

her own dreams. Gómez-Arcos has thus inverted the process of divine creation as recounted in the Bible. In a statement that resonates with Nietzschean nihilism, he summarizes: «hasta ahora lo único que se ha creado es un Dios a la imagen y semejanza del hombre; no un hombre a la imagen y semejanza de Dios» (Entrevista con Feldman). The heaven is no longer for sale, because the Soviets have been the first to arrive and God has made a business deal with a group of left-wing atheists. It was they who provided Her with the vodka and the Catherine the Great costume as tokens of their appreciation. Mrs. Muerta, betrayed and disappointed, banishes God from her spaceship. (The sexual prowess of «Saint Perpetual American Whore» ironically has been outshined by that of Catherine the Great.) Feeling deceived by her own phantoms, and her own mirror image, Mrs. Muerta laments: «Arranqué de mi vida todos los sueños, para que sólo quedara Él como sueño de mi vida. Y Él es sólo un fantasma» (80). Nevertheless, she declares that it is still not time for her to awake from her sleep. She, like don Quijote, would rather continue dreaming, and she refuses to return to earth empty-handed.

As an alternative to heaven, she decides to reverse the direction of her spaceship —and her ideology— and plunge downward into the infernal underworld in the hope that Satan will open his doors to her. The phantasmagoric image of God vanishes and Bobby rematerializes, eager to help in the preparations for their new mission: a descent into the world of transgression. Bobby provides his mistress with a red dress, drapes her in decadent jewels, and they begin their rituals of sin. The dog removes his clothes and Mrs. Muerta lifts the sacred chalice used in the earlier communion scene, bathing her breasts with red wine: «¡Teta izquierda y roja, crece, cerce conviértete en algo más rojo y más grande que el Universo entero, que todo lo creado! ¡Desborda, envenena, oh sagrado símbolo de la revolución, avanza como la gangrena!» (82). Mrs. Muerta's red left breast is converted into a supreme metaphor of cosmic subversion. Bobby defrosts Doble Nick, and together, the three perform an erotic dance of sacrilege in which the sacred objects of the table-alter are, this time, appropriated and allegorized as sexual icons. The chalice is transformed into a phallus and the host is stabbed with a dagger in an allegory of copulation:

Mrs. Muerta Smith comienza su danza de pecado, lúbrica, bíblica, cáliz sagrado en las manos, cáliz fálico que acaricia las más secretas partes de su cuerpo sin vida... Mrs. Muerta Smith ofrece un puñal a Doble Nick blanco, coge, una hostia, hace el gesto eucarístico de la elevación y Doble Nick blanco apuñala la hostia. (82)

Hell is portrayed as an absurd antithetical double of the previously depicted image of heaven, and it is here that Mrs. Muerta will encounter her third and final phantom. The great gates open and the dog appears as the character of Satan, personification of evil, dressed in a black Catherine-the-Great-style dress, and accompanied by a large fire-spitting black angel. At precise moments, Satan erupts with diabolic laughter, covering his face with a Venetian carnival mask resembling the face of Mao-Tse-Tung. Mrs. Muerta informs Satan that she is prepared to sell her soul at a very good price. But Satan is not interested; he is already immersed in the construction of a left-wing government. Hell, it seems, has been sold to the Chinese:

PERRO, en Satán.—Actualmente yo me ocupo en construir el socialismo. Me apasiona. Un mundo sin pecados tradicionales. La posibilidad de la sorpresa. De pecados completamente originales, quizá. ¡Y otra vez la mierda del hombre en todo su apogeo! (86)

The entire cosmos already has been conquered, and Mrs. Muerta, concrete signifier in search of transcendental signified, has failed in her attempt to gain a tyrannical hold over the immaterial world. Her desire to colonize the cosmos, and to superimpose upon it a new imperialistic order, has been «perpetually frustrated», «perpetually deferred» (Owens 2: 80). Neither heaven nor hell is a sacred place—in the modern/Western sense. Instead, both the celestial world and the underworld have been sold as material commodities to left-wing governments whose systems appear to be just as absurdly contaminated as that of Mrs. Muerta herself. Even her own «phantom» fabrications of her imagination have deceived her, and in the end, she has no other choice but to return to her home planet empty-handed. The spaceship-temple touches down upon earth, the walls explode open, and an «apocalyptic rain» showers the stage with an accumulation of earthly fragments: pieces of forest,

land, sea, mountains, human and animal limbs, and even the head of Mrs. Muerta's (her sinful legacy) appears out of nowhere and bites her red left breast. Mrs. Muerta, as much a ruin as her terrestrial landscape, moves about like an automaton, portraying the sterile mechanization of a totalizing discourse that has failed to exert its authority. The stage is inundated with cataclysmic anarchy, and Bobby shoots himself with a pistol. Mrs. Muerta's final lament is that she is unable to emit tears of frustration for she is an empty body without viscera and without memory. Paradoxically, she cannot subject herself to the same fate as her dog because she is already dead, condemned to live in a perpetual state of decay as an eternal ruin, void of viscera and void of meaning, a sign without referent. In portraying Mrs. Muerta's frustrated endeavors, not only has Gómez-Arcos questioned the authoritative structure of representation; but also, he has revealed the profane underside of divine monolithic structures of meaning. Mrs. Muerta, her spaceship, and her oppressive system have been plunged into ontological oblivion.

When Gómez-Arcos wrote *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith* in 1972, he was already living in exile. It was the period of the Cold War, and a moment in history in which Spain had yet to witness the demise of Franco's totalitarian regime. At that time, Gómez-Arcos could only have dreamed that nearly twenty years later, his play would finally première in Spain to an audience already living in democracy. Ironically, on the evening of the 1991 première, two additional allegorical spectacles were being staged, televised live from the contemporary earthly landscape: first, there were scenes from the fall of the Berlin Wall, a sacred emblem of authority (and of the Cold War), crumbling into an allegorical stockpile of rubble; and second, there was a science fictive allegory of oppression, portrayed as a hightech war between the United States and an Ubuësque Middle Eastern dictator. Today, when talk of a «new world order» has become a commonplace ingredient of contemporary international discourse, *Interview de Mrs. Muerta Smith por sus fantasmas* is a play whose allegorical rendition of the cosmos is as timely as ever.

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