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# Agustín Gómez-Arcos, Eyes Open

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## Introduction

“Agustín Gómez-Arcos, Eyes Open”

SHARON G. FELDMAN

The last time I saw Agustín Gómez-Arcos was July of 1997. He was in the midst of an extended summer sojourn at the home of his friends Miguel and Pilar in Tarragona. I remember wandering with him through the streets of this Catalan coastal city, accompanied by Miguel and Pilar's young sons. With Agustín as our guide we toured the city's Roman ruins, and he showed us his favorite mosaics at the local archeological museum. Agustín, as I remember him, was filled with vitality, delighting in the everyday activities of summer, buying fresh strawberries and tomatoes at an outdoor market and contemplating the spectacular views of the Mediterranean. He was also deeply immersed in the preparation of a new novel. On that summer's day in Tarragona, he shared with me a recurring dream that he was having. He was trapped in a large house, pursued throughout its many rooms and corridors by a rather disquieting and unyielding presence, which was attempting to bring to an end his exile in Paris and compel him to return definitively to Spain and to a life in the theater. On the surface, the dream suggested an unlikely, and even preposterous, scenario, for his long established career as a novelist in France, where he had lived for nearly twenty years, showed no signs of relenting. Jokingly, he blamed the dream on me, suggesting that, perhaps, in the recesses of his subconscious, he might have been ruminating about my upcoming visit to Tarragona. Aware of my interest in his work as

a dramatist, he might have anticipated that I would somehow try to encourage him to write a new play. The dream, in effect, may well have held a smattering of prophetic truth or was, at the very least, a reflection of a small degree of inner torment with regard to his work in the theater and his conflicting, ambivalent relationship to Spain, in that despite the international acclaim and success attributed to his narrative work in French, Agustín always regarded himself, first and foremost, as a Spanish playwright. It was as a playwright that he waged his greatest battles with Francoist censorship, an experience that would shape much of his narrative work, and it was in the theater in Spain that his career as a writer began. It is also in his work in the theater, as I shall explain, that one can locate the origins of what is arguably his most original and significant work as a novelist, *The Carnivorous Lamb* (1975).

Agustín Gómez-Arcos was born in Spain in 1933 in the village of Enix, a small white-washed hamlet perched high above the sea in the Andalusian province of Almería. The horrors of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) rapidly brought an end to the optimistic innocence of his childhood, which he spent in Enix and later in the city of Almería, the provincial capital that appears under varying guises in many of his novels. Sympathizing with the vanquished left-wing Republicans, his family endured significant hardship and misfortune during the war and the years of dictatorship that followed. As for many writers of his Spanish post-war generation, the experience of having lived through this somber, tragic period undoubtedly left a lasting imprint on his literature and his life. Although in the future Gómez-Arcos would leave behind both homeland and first language, the dark clouds of oppression that lingered over the Spanish landscape during the Franco years would continue to serve in a myriad of incarnations as the backdrop for his literary expressions of dissent. Throughout three decades of exile in France, and despite having distanced himself spatially, temporally, and linguistically from the realities of totalitarian Spain, Gómez-Arcos would never completely forgo his memories of

the past, never turn his back on history, and never abandon his vision of literature as a place where one must strive to open one's eyes to the truth.

In essence, Gómez-Arcos' work is about freedom, and throughout his literary trajectory, the themes of censorship and exile combine with bilingualism to produce a sense of rupture with previously established paradigms. His flight from Spain and his employment of the French language would afford him the opportunity to speak his mind *en revanche*, to wage his own literary form of retaliation against censorship and oppression, interrogating and violating all limits, including the limits of language itself.

Gómez-Arcos' literary career began in Madrid, where he arrived during the late 1950s, after having abandoned his legal studies at the University of Barcelona. He found work in the Spanish capital as an actor, director, translator, and playwright, writing a total of twenty plays in Spanish. These were, by and large, politically engaged, allegorical (and, sometimes, superbly hallucinatory) expressions of his denunciatory attitude *vis à vis* the Franco dictatorship. He also translated and adapted a series of French pieces for the Spanish stage; most notably, Jean Giraudoux's *La folle de Chaillot* ("The Madwoman of Chaillot"), which premiered at Madrid's Teatro María Guerrero in 1962. In addition, Gómez-Arcos was the recipient of several national drama awards, including the 1962 Lope de Vega Prize for his historical drama *Diálogos de la herejía* ("Dialogues of Heresy"). Set amid the sacrificial flames of the Inquisition, *Diálogos* is an allegory of twentieth-century Spanish fascism that portrays the turmoil, hysteria, and religious fervor that rock a sixteenth-century village when its inhabitants are seduced by a bizarre outbreak of Illuminism (in this case, a feigned sort of mysticism that is intensely erotic). Almost immediately following conferral of the Lope de Vega, the prize was swept from Gómez-Arcos' hands in a wave of controversy, annulled in a blatant gesture of censorship that represented the Franco regime's official response to his unorthodox choice of thematic material. The

play was subsequently banned from the stages of the state-supported national theaters, although a censored version of the text did finally première in 1964 to conflicting reviews at Madrid's Teatro Reina Victoria. The retraction of the prize and the subsequent debate aroused by Gómez-Arcos' heretical dialogues did not represent an isolated episode in his career; rather, the struggle for freedom of expression is an issue that would unceasingly prevail as a central theme in both his literature and his life. Indeed, the controversy surrounding *Diálogos* was merely a prelude to a series of combative encounters with Francoist censorship that eventually would prompt his voluntary exile from Spain in 1966.

Following a brief period in London, Gómez-Arcos arrived in Paris in June 1968, just one month after the May upheaval that shook the French universities and the Gaullist government. The Parisian cultural climate, radiating with the scent of innovation and an electrified air of social protest, provided him with fertile ground in which to search for new directions for his writing. He was finally able to express himself freely, without apprehension, and without the burden of censorship. He would not return to his homeland until the summer of 1977, when Spain was already veering in the direction of democracy.

Soon after his arrival in France, Gómez-Arcos found work amid the *café-théâtre* scene of the Parisian Latin Quarter. There he met another Spanish exile, Miguel Arocena, who was manager of the *Café-Théâtre de l'Odéon*. Arocena commissioned him to write two one-act plays, thus providing him with his first opportunity to stage his theater for a French audience. In February 1969, French spectators witnessed the dual première of *Pré-papa* and *Et si on aboyait?* ("If One Were to Bark?"), two absurdist pieces that were originally conceived by Gómez-Arcos in Spanish, translated into French by a friend, and then staged in French under his direction at the *Odéon*. Their successful run of seventy-one performances led to the publication of *Pré-papa* (a futuristic farce about a pregnant father-to-be) in the

bimonthly theater revue *L'Avant Scène*.<sup>1</sup> *Et si on aboyait?*—originally titled *Adorado Alberto* (“Adored Alberto”) in Spanish—would become the seed from which Gómez-Arcos would create his first novel, *The Carnivorous Lamb*.

With *Et si on aboyait?*, a one-act experimental *esperpento*, Gómez-Arcos explores the indeterminate nature of reality, illusion, and (sexual) identity. Here, the human body functions as an allegorical site of transference upon which the aspiration to freedom of expression is engraved. The “adored Alberto” is a gay cross-dressing cabaret performer from Spain who has been living in exile in Paris, where he has found freedom in both his art and his life. While vacationing in Spain, having returned to his homeland for the first time in six years, he finds himself at the center of a tug-of-war between his dead mother (“Mamá”), his mother’s sister (doña Julia), and Julia’s godchildren (Romualda and José-Mari)—all of whom engage in a battle of wills with regard to his destiny. Alberto’s mother (appearing on stage in a series of glamorous poses, evocative of several snapshots from the past) expresses only adoration for her son and, even in death, continues to offer him the same unconditional love and devotion that she gave him during her lifetime. She vigorously endorses his ambivalent sexuality, confronting the oppressive patriarchal norms of society, the Church, and the regime with an air of defiance. Indifferent to the opinions of others, she is quick to scoff at the disapproving comments of her sister Julia, a devout Catholic with ardent fascist inclinations. At the end of the play, Alberto reveals his desire to marry his cousin José Mari, along with their plans to live together in exile in Paris.

Alberto is exuberant in his flamboyant expression of a hybrid gender identity in which masculine and feminine codes converge, eluding any fixed categorization. In effect, Gómez-Arcos’ literary treatment of gender and sexuality in this play, as well as in *The Carnivorous Lamb*, coincides with—and even anticipates—Hélène Cixous’ view of an “other bisexuality,” one that remains in a perpetual state of flux

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1. *Pré-papa*, trans. Rachel Salik, *L'Avant-Scène Théâtre* 434 (1969): 37-44.

and transition.<sup>2</sup> Gómez-Arcos' literary personages transcend all limits of sexual comportment, creating an infinite spectrum of possibilities and situations. As in the work of the eminent Andalusian writer Federico García Lorca, a diverse gallery of erotic imagery emerges continually as a metaphor for all aspects of individual creativity and self-expression. Gómez-Arcos' erotic imagery, metaphoric transgressions, and hyperbolic characterizations are tendencies that situate his work within the Spanish traditions of the carnivalesque, the *esperpento*, the grotesque, and the surreal—epitomized in the work of painters Francisco de Goya and Salvador Dalí, writers Ramón María del Valle-Inclán and Camilo José Cela, or filmmakers Luis Buñuel and Pedro Almodóvar.

In November 1972, Gómez-Arcos accepted an invitation to present *Pré-papa* and *Et si on aboyait?* at the Sorbonne, and in 1973, they enjoyed still another successful run at the Odéon. One evening at the *café-théâtre* in 1973, an editor from Éditions Stock who happened to be in the audience asked his waiter if the playwright was in the house. “C'est moi,” was the waiter's reply, and with this fortuitous encounter, Gómez-Arcos soon found himself with a generous advance and a contract to write a novel in French. Although at first it seemed to him a farfetched proposition, his career as a novelist would soon be launched. He flew off to Athens to write in seclusion, returning to Paris months later with a full-length manuscript under his arm bearing the title *L'agneau carnivore* (*The Carnivorous Lamb*). It won the Prix Hermès for the best first novel of 1975—ironically, the year of Franco's death.

Beginning with *The Carnivorous Lamb*, Gómez-Arcos would publish a total of fifteen novels, written directly in French. They earned him a succession of accolades and international acclaim (with translation into at least fourteen languages). He was twice a finalist for the

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2. Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Summer 1976): 875-93. (Trans. of “Le rire de la Méduse,” *L'Arc* (1975): 39-54.)

Prix Goncourt (in 1978 for *Scène de chasse [furtive]* and in 1984 for *Un oiseau brûlé vif*), and in 1985, he was decorated by the French *Légion d'Honneur*. In addition to the aforementioned works, his novel *Ana Non* (1977) is one of his most celebrated and prize-winning works, considered by some to be his overall masterpiece.<sup>3</sup> Situated during the post-civil war period, it recounts with bare simplicity the story of an Andalusian widow's picaresque journey to the north of Spain in search of her son, a political prisoner who has been incarcerated by the Francoists. The novel that Agustín was preparing in Tarragona—which would have been his sixteenth—has never appeared in print, as his career was cut short with his death in Paris in March 1998. At the time, his theater was beginning to experience a revival on the stages of Madrid and other Spanish cities.<sup>4</sup>

As Gómez-Arcos' work evolves in exile, his gradual employment of the French language allegorizes his quest for freedom of expression in that it signifies more than a mere linguistic shift; it also implies a liberation and rebellion with regard to the past, a discursive disengagement from the artistic constraints attributed to his life in Spain and his existence within a totalitarian system. In France, a new attitude of openness animates his writing, invading it with fresh air from beyond the Spanish border, injecting it with candor, authenticity, and sometimes even a dose of optimism. No longer encumbered nor conditioned by the overbearing presence of Francoist censorship, his discourse acquires a more radically defiant, audacious tone, as he appears to savor with passion and fury every newly garnered increment of freedom of expression. Exile emerges as both principal

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3. Cf., for example, Ann Duncan, "Agustín Gómez-Arcos," *Beyond the Nouveau Roman: Essays on the Contemporary French Novel*, ed. Michael Tilby (New York: Berg, 1990), 151-76. *Ana Non* was awarded the Prix de Livre Inter 1977, the Prix Roland Dorgelès 1978, and the Prix Thyde-Monnier de la Société des Gens de Lettres 1978. During the early 1980s, it was converted into a film for French television.

4. On Gómez-Arcos' theater, see Sharon G. Feldman, *Allegories of Dissent: The Theater of Agustín Gómez-Arcos* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1998).



theme and process of artistic creation, for while Gómez-Arcos does find emancipation from the oppressive gaze of the Spanish censors, any desire to divorce himself from the past and from the historical reality of Spain is, at least in literary terms, never fulfilled. He and his characters carry with them on their exilic journeys their memories of Spain and oppressive orders. Paradoxically, the many voices of his imagination seem to speak to the very impossibility of leaving behind his cultural and historical baggage, in that to do so would imply a complete renunciation of identity and historical memory. His works written in exile, such as *The Carnivorous Lamb*, consequently appear to be caught up in a dual aspiration: on the one hand, to renounce all ties to the past, and at the same time to remember, resuscitate, and recount at all costs the tragic history of authoritarian Spain. His writings are thus situated in a state of flux and suspension, an ambiguous cultural *carrefour* between past and present, and between two worlds, two cultures, two histories, and two linguistic codes—not to mention two artistic genres. Gómez-Arcos, in a sense, led a double life.

As a direct consequence of his exile and the censorship that he experienced in Spain, bilingualism would become for him an act of pure rebellion, intricately intertwined with the notion of freedom of expression, emerging as both a thematic and structural element in his work. In a seminal essay titled “Extraterritorial,” George Steiner observes how the exile writer—who has become “linguistically unhoused,” who has chosen to express his or herself in a language that does not belong to the territory of birth—naturally brings a sense of displacement to his or her writing.<sup>5</sup> For Steiner, binary values surfacing, for example, in the form of mirrors, doublings, incest, and/or sexual dualities, inevitably characterize the life and work of the bilingual exile writer. They are linked metaphorically to the linguistic infidelities and “constant meshing of languages” that likewise characterize his or her literature. This bilingual attitude of double-sided

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5. See George Steiner, “Extraterritorial,” *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1971): 3-11.

values is very much a part of Gómez-Arcos' literature, affirmed and reaffirmed in the dualisms of gender and the sexually ambiguous bodies that populate his novels. In *The Carnivorous Lamb* and in *Et si on aboyait?*, these dualisms create a kind of "extraterritorial" region of the flesh, far removed from the authoritative hold of the dominant cultural or political system.

*The Carnivorous Lamb*, as the title suggests, is a novel about transgression. The incongruous image of a lamb who dares to consume meat—when lambs are normally herbivorous animals—is, ostensibly, a metaphor for the violation of the universal taboo of incest. Within the context of contemporary Spanish history, the notion of incest, understood here in a figurative sense as a crisis of distinctions in which brothers *devour* each other, is a powerful metaphor that is evocative of the circumstances of betrayal associated with civil war. Not surprisingly, it is a trope that is often discernible in the literature and cinema of Spain's post-civil war period. The title of Gómez-Arcos' novel, nevertheless, also implies a metaphoric return to a primordial, animalistic state of unrestrained drives and urges, to an unlimited, excessive existence situated in an "extraterritorial" space, beyond the imposition of taboos, prohibitions, and societal institutions. The semantic dissonance of the title is a shocking gesture that audaciously probes the limits of linguistic paradigms, and, on a symbolic level, signifies the overturning of all established systems.

In *The Carnivorous Lamb*, an anonymous city on the coast of Spain (reminiscent of the Almería of Gómez-Arcos' childhood) serves as the backdrop for a dramatization of a dialectic of taboo and transgression. In Gómez-Arcos' novel, the incest, doubling, and discursive meshing that is characteristic of his exilic writing is played out within the context of an intense love affair and sexual relationship between two young brothers, Ignacio and Antonio. Gómez-Arcos presents this irreverent, defiant thematic material as an incongruous blend of subversive violence and intense lyricism; an indication, perhaps, of his desire to give free rein to the imagination in the creation

of the literary text by refusing to be inhibited by the limits of censorship. In the aftermath of civil war, the Spanish landscape is portrayed as a world draped in hypocrisy, symbolized by the ubiquitous “red-yellow-red” flags that throughout the novel serve as emblems of the new Fascist order:

And then, the red-yellow-red flags.

They were everywhere. On the roofs of public buildings, atop tall flagpoles at street corners, and—what was more surprising—on the balconies of private homes, sometimes hiding handsome grillwork or flowerpots, and also high up on church steeples, tangled with the crosses, or draped from round convent windows like rugs hung out in the sun.... If I were a bird, I would have long since flown away in search of a natural landscape. But no, the birds were there, shitting on the flagpoles (a symbol).

The official image of post-civil war Spain, as fabricated by the fascist forces of taboo, is based on the construction of a victorious facade, intent on erasing the presence of the so-called “reds” (left-wing transgressors) and silencing any memories of the past. The narrator here—and, in large part, throughout the novel—is Ignacio, the younger of the two brothers, although his name is not revealed until the final page of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

It is 1974, the year in which *The Carnivorous Lamb* was written (and just one year prior to Franco’s death). Ignacio nervously awaits a forthcoming reunion with his brother/lover, Antonio, who like Alberto in *Et si on aboyait?*, has just returned to his childhood home

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6. At times the narrative deviates from this basic situation, such as the moments in which Gómez-Arcos inserts an epistolary style into his text, in the form of letters from Matilde (Ignacio’s mother). And near the end of the novel, in a section in chapters 18 and 19 labeled “Clara’s Time,” the thoughts of Clara, the maid, are expressed in the form of an interior monologue.

in Spain after seven years of self-imposed exile—in this case, in the United States. Exile will, in effect, become a thematic and structural frame for the entire novel. As Ignacio waits, he closes his eyes and mentally recreates his memories of the past thirty-five years, which emerge as a continuous string of images and dialogues. His narrative resurrection of the past within the interior regions of his consciousness represents a clandestine expression of defiance with regard to the censoring forces of taboo that attempted (and still attempt, even today) to suppress all such remembrances.

Ignacio's memories begin in 1949, the year of his birth. Despite the fact that his parents are Republicans who have lost the war, he is raised in an atmosphere of opulence and luxury. His mother, Matilde, possesses a large sum of inherited wealth, and she uses her affluence as a means of constructing an artificial reality within her home; a sort of *tableau vivant* that will safeguard her family from contact with the established order of Fascism that is in full bloom outside. Matilde's home resembles a dark, hermetically sealed sarcophagus, and within it, Carlos, the father, a lawyer and avid defender of the Republic, retreats into the world of inner exile that is his study. As Matilde explains to Clara, her faithful servant and confidant: "The war was outside. The world doesn't have anything else to teach us. From now on, Clara, I want you to keep that door shut." Behind her carefully cultivated facade of pristine virtue and purity—what one French critic aptly called "*un universe clos*"<sup>7</sup>—Matilde secretly yearns to exercise her personal freedom in the form of definitive acts of transgression. Both Matilde and Clara, in effect, appear to have inherited from the mother in *Et si on aboyait?* a rebellious (and eccentric) spirit of independence and individualism.

Matilde furtively dedicates her life to the pursuit of an anarchistic "cataclysm" that will serve as an ultimate act of defiance of the conventions of Francoist Spain, one that will shake the foundations

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7. Bruno de LaTour, "Un univers clos: *L'agneau carnivore* d'Agustín Gómez-Arcos," *Quotidien de Paris* (28 October 1975).

of the system of order that is gradually devouring her sense of individuality. Her marriage to Carlos was her first attempt to generate this cataclysm, but with the victory of the Nationalist front, her hopes were suppressed and converted into despair. On the occasion of Ignacio's birth, she resumes her cataclysmic crusade. Her infant son refuses to open his eyes during the first fifteen days of his life (perhaps a gesture of denial with regard to the dictatorial regime), and so, convinced that she has given birth to a sort of blind freak, Matilde carefully orchestrates a sacred pilgrimage to Lourdes in anticipation of a miracle: the gift of sight for her new-born infant, to be witnessed as a public spectacle. As an added dramatic effect, she even hires a tailor to prepare, with meticulous care, the costumes that she and her son/freak will wear. Her unremitting love for her son and, later, her validation of his ambiguous sexual identity, are attributes that are, once again, reminiscent of Alberto's mother in *Et si on aboyait?*. On the sixteenth day after his birth, Ignacio foils her plans by opening his eyes. Immediately, he focuses upon his brother's gaze.

Years later, when her sons Ignacio and Antonio engage in an incestuous love affair, Matilde realizes that, in engendering them, she has, in effect, already planted the seeds of the monumental explosion of defiance that she so desires. From a very young age, the boys find themselves instinctively seduced by each other's presence. They begin to share the same bed and mutually explore all aspects of their sensuality. For the sake of appearances, Matilde denounces her sons' actions. Upon entering their room, an oasis transgression, she sniffs the air and bellows at her maid, "Clara! . . . Take those sheets off right away and put on clean ones! It smells of sulfur in here!" Yet, beneath her superficial condemnations, she secretly applauds her sons' erotic transgressions, for she knows that they represent a supreme gesture of cataclysmic anarchy. In Chapter 14, in a candid conversation with her husband, Matilde discusses the implications of the boys' illicit affair:

Now I understand, even if it seems pretentious to you, that in giving birth to them, I was bringing into the world a hunger for life beyond the margins of normalcy. And you were the one who engendered that fury for life in me. We weren't able to change the world, and the war you fought only plunged us forever into the absence of hope, which is worse than despair.... But you and I, we made something different: two unnatural sons, as my friends would say. That's beautiful. A real achievement, and I'm proud of it. Are you sorry you won't have a grandson to rock in your arms?

Ignacio and Antonio defy all limits with their sexual conduct: at once incestuous and homoerotic. Their incest suggests a crisis of distinctions with regard to family structures and implies, by extension, a rupture of the foundations of society as a whole. Their transgression of kinship codes denotes a traversal of semantic structures, as well: Ignacio and Antonio's relationship equates the terms "brother" and "lover," producing a metonymically violent combination. The recurring images throughout the novel of anal eroticism further accentuate the significance of the boys' transgressive behavior in that it represents a completely non-(re)productive expression of sexuality (what George Bataille called *la dépense*), which propels their relationship beyond the boundaries of the dominant system.<sup>8</sup>

The cataclysmic effects of the affair between the two brothers are moreover revealed—in a manner that recalls *Diálogos de la herejía*—through the blending of erotic and religious imagery. Typically, the Catholic priests in the novel are characterized by a repulsive stench that emanates from beneath their heavy black cassocks: a mixture of

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8. George Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, Trans. A. Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr., *Theory and History of Literature* 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, 116-29).

perspiration, incense, and sexual secretions. Hence the divine figure of the priest and all forms of religious ritual become eroticized images, splashed with both sexual discharge and sexual discourse. Ignacio is already well beyond school-age when Matilde finally decides to have him baptized, and she invites her personal confessor, Don Gonzalo, to the house to perform the ceremony in private. As the priest performs the baptism, Antonio holds Ignacio in his arms and surreptitiously arouses him to a point of sexual frenzy. His resultant state of ecstasy signifies an ironic intersection between sexual orgasm and mystical rapture. Religious-mystical discourse becomes continuous with erotic discourse:

While all these rites were being performed, Antonio was gently stroking my behind, one of his fingers carefully probing my asshole. I was burning with pleasure, and a kind of ecstasy must have shone from my face, because the priest said, "My son, I can see you are beginning to believe in God. You are becoming His creature."

The subversive nature of the brothers' relationship becomes all the more intensified when they finally free themselves from the closed doors of the bedroom and venture outside into the atmosphere of religious and political taboo that envelops the city. Ignacio, for example, begins frequenting church confessionals where he spares no details of his conduct and, in turn, receives plenty of advice, threats, and propositions from the Catholic priests that he encounters:

Each priest wanted me in his booth, and they all enjoined me to be more diligent in my confessions; not to save me from the Devil's temptations, but so that I wouldn't stop talking.

I got to be an expert at confessions, and wouldn't stint with the details I know priests were especially interested in. I was able to give almost all of them hard-ons, and if one didn't succumb the first time, he would see me two or three days in a row, ever more perfumed, ever more a victim of circumstances, and ever more addicted to my unspeakable sin.

In keeping with the rapport between sex and language, and language and power, that Michel Foucault describes in his *History of Sexuality*, the mechanisms of prohibition and censorship depicted in the novel which are designed to curtail sexual discourse actually have the opposite effect: they incite it, each time generating more explicit articulation.<sup>9</sup> The subversive nature of Ignacio's ritual confessions consequently can be interpreted as a metaliterary commentary on censorship. While the Catholic confessional was essentially invented for the purpose of inhibiting transgression and sexual desire, in practice it functions as an apparatus for stimulating and engendering sexual discourse through a dual process of power and pleasure. Ignacio ignites the sexual desires of his confessors, who, in turn, encourage him to recount his experiences with Antonio in increasing detail. Don Gonzalo, his confessor, declares: "Everything, my son. When you make a general confession, you have to tell everything." Hence, taboo—as personified by the figure of the priest—does not succeed in repressing (or oppressing) eroticism; rather, it invites transgression to probe the limits of prohibited regions. Likewise, the implementation of censorship—whether openly articulated or subtly implied—incites the writer consciously to defy linguistic restrictions and to pursue subversive methods of discourse.

As the narrative progresses, a play of mirrors and doubling gradually establishes a complex network of parallels among the characterizations of Ignacio, Antonio, Matilde, and Carlos. When Ignacio

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9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).



looks in the mirror, he sees the face of his mother. After her death, he begins to sense how her presence invades his body, and he perceives the world through her eyes. Also, in the same way that Antonio sodomizes Ignacio, Matilde, correspondingly, reminisces about the way in which Carlos used to sodomize her (transgressively *expressing* himself within her) during their period of engagement in order to avoid having her become pregnant. Ignacio, in describing his father, furthermore, paints a split image of two separate beings: “Father” and “Carlos.” When Ignacio looks at Carlos, he sees Antonio’s face, and he feels the same incestuous desire that his brother inspires. On one occasion, Ignacio even plants a wet kiss on Carlos’s lips. Throughout the narrative, the images of Carlos, Father, Antonio, Ignacio, and Matilde become intermingled and transposed. In the final chapter, Ignacio summarizes this incestuous system of reincarnation and doubling. Within the household, all traditional notions of familial order have been effaced:

Mother-me is named Matilde. Alive.

Father-Carlos is named my brother. Alive.

At the end of *The Carnivorous Lamb*, Ignacio opens his eyes to greet his brother—an image that frames the novel and evokes the parallel situation of his infancy. Antonio has finally returned to Spain, accompanied by Evelyn, his blonde, straight-laced wife from the state of Texas. Evelyn’s presence in the frenzied household is short-lived, and following her departure, Clara, performing her own anarchistic version of a sacred wedding ceremony, marries the two brothers. The wedding of Ignacio and Antonio (yet another echo of *Et si on aboyait?*) not only represents a marriage between the two brothers; but also, through the play of mirrors, this transgressive coupling denotes a repetition of the marriage of Matilde and Carlos, along with two other incestuous marriages: Antonio with Matilde, and Ignacio with Carlos. If, in effect, the institutions of marriage and the family

are defined by the so-called “universal” taboo of incest, then this network of incestuous marriages implies a thorough demolition of societal order.

When Ignacio visits the country house that his mother has inherited from her family, he discovers that his family’s second home is an exact mirror image of the house in the city. Wherever he travels, he finds that it is impossible to leave and free himself from an eternal system of oppression, which infinitely repeats itself through successive generations. He comments:

I felt I was looking at the negative of a familiar photograph, and my chest tightened with despair. Wouldn’t there ever be any real change in my life? Why was I forever encountering the clumsy copy of an eternal original? Or the faded original of a series of reproductions scattered at random? Was it a sickness of the family? The town? The whole country? I never found answers to all those questions, but ever since I was very young, I’ve suspected that Spain and life itself were nothing but the work of a copy machine that never broke down.

Ignacio’s house (or houses) is an allegorical representation of Fascist Spain; isolated from the rest of the world, cloaked in a veil of taboo, decomposing from the inside out. It is, furthermore, the image of all oppressive governmental systems.

Perhaps Matilde and her sons have found a way to alter the pattern of this infinite grid. And, through his literary inventions, perhaps Gómez-Arcos has also found a way of defying systems of order, of subverting oppressive powers and traversing the limit to an extra-territorial space of freedom. The urge to bear witness, to recreate, to recall, and to give written testimony regarding past events—a past that has been left behind—is a frequent tendency among writers who

have experienced exilic displacement.<sup>10</sup> In *The Carnivorous Lamb*, the act of remembrance—the memories of both Ignacio and Agustín Gómez-Arcos—becomes a form of insurgency, an act of rebellion, and a way of opening one's eyes to the truth.

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10. Cf., for example, Michael Ugarte, *Shifting Ground: Spanish Civil War Exile Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 4.