

LITR 142

Professor: Barry McCrea

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Catherine Reilly

A-Foot and Under-Foot: Peripheries and the Footnote

by Catherine Reilly

If Freud's contention that "first stage [of human development] is an oral one," then Marcel Puig's, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* might be said to complicate orality to the extent that it resists any classic reading aloud. The issue stems largely from the presence of the footnotes. Yet since the work seems to be premised on an initial antagonism of homo- and heterosexuality, followed by their subsequent reconciliation, than the gradual acceptance of hetero-*textuality* should be paid particular attention to. The footnotes are not merely pedantic interjections designed to throw us back into the "real world." Rather, their seemingly incongruous presences highlights the "main" story's dealings with peripherality, imprisonment, and the polymorphous. To the extent that they exist only at the bottom of the page, that they struggle against fiction-oriented narrative, and that they undermine syntactical tradition, so too do they ironically draw us closer to a vision of a unified work.

Can hetero-textuality be understood, however, outside of the context of cutesy word play? I would suggest that, insofar as, Puig's work stitches together song lyrics, movie scenes, government documents and psychoanalysis it reflects a distinct fascination with heteronomy. This stands in sharp contrast to the traditional perception of homosexuality as an obsession with sameness- insofar as it is characterized by attraction to the same [biological] gender.

Yet, at least in Puig's work, there remains something to be said for Freud's much-attacked notion that "the object of [a homosexual's] desire is his own image" (139). Certainly it would be

inappropriate to use this to claim Valentin as the image of Molina. It would not, however, be inappropriate to recognize the similarity between the protagonists' respective social roles and the footnote's relation to the text. Valentin and Molina are essentially social peripherals- unseen elements existing at a tangent to the normal functioning of the world. As a leftist activist and "fag in the barrio" respectively, both belong to a kind of underground. Thus, the fact that the footnotes appear strangely subsidiary to the work as a whole is precisely the point. Their superfluous nature, and tendency to make the reader want to "skip over them" is a direct reflection of Molina and Valentin's own minority status.

Indeed, the position of the footnotes is necessarily *under* that of the main text. This becomes, in a certain sense, a visual representation of the underground. Valentin and Molina's barring from normal social interaction lands them behind bars. Likewise, the footnote's predetermined position is always beneath the necessary separating bar. D.J West's exposition of "segregation theory, according to which adolescents raised among males alone...would tend to initiate sexual practices among themselves" (99) is ironically confirmed here not as a creator of homosexual impulse but of literary heterogeneity. In Puig's work, physical segregation (via the prison) makes possible a kind of successful Promethean whole- one assembled from radically different narrative parts.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to recognize the extent to which the footnotes are objects of imprisonment. None of the authors mentioned are permitted a context of their own. Rather, they are relegated to the tight quarters at the bottom of the page and broken down into their most basic theories. Their "reality factor" seems dangerous- a reminder of the world outside the confines of the text. Furthermore, in order to read them at all it is necessary to break the continuity of the main story. The difficulty arises regarding whether reading the entire footnote

at once before reading the main text, reading each in sequential fragments, or reading the footnote after completion of the plotline, is most appropriate. In effect, how will we choose to imprison the footnote.

We again find a reflection West's theory of segregation: perverted here into a question of how it will be carried out on a hermeneutical level. Nonetheless, its must also be acknowledged that an implicit result of any segregation is a doubling, or the production of a multiplicity. Homogeneity gives birth to heterogeneity. Insofar as *Kiss of the Spider Woman* engages in a return to "the undifferentiated capacity of babies to derive pleasure from all parts of their bodies" (151) in addition to "the essentially bisexual nature of our original sexual impulse" (151), Puig uses footnotes as an unlikely source of pleasure. His care in their construction and their own varied nature make them narrative representations of the "polymorphous perverse." Whereas traditional stylistics guides us toward a view of footnotes as dry digressions, Puig engages in their transformation into alternative (pleasurable) narrative entities.

On the other hand, the argument might validly be raised, that issues of peripherality, imprisonment and new-found pleasure could be found in *any* text that adequately explained its footnotes, and thus is not specific to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. A closer look at the relation between specific footnotes and their corresponding narrative moments, however, proves this patently false.

As pertains to issues of peripherality and role reversal, there is a strong correspondence between Chapter 7's footnote and the scene of the very sick Valentin being taken care of by Molina. The footnotes witnesses Puig's ironic inclusion of the Freudian theory that "the boy who [adopts] a maternal figure as a model...will be socially ostracized because of his feminine traits" (138). Though Molina is ostracized in the general context of Argentinean culture, imprisonment

makes his role "useful." Valentin is immensely glad for Molina's help in cleaning him up and performing the "feminized" task of taking care of the ill.

Yet he is also (understandably) embarrassed at the prospect of using Molina's sheet to keep the cell clean and collect his defecation. A continuation of Puig's footnote several pages late includes reference to "the same Freud" (141) questioning whether it is possible for homosexuality to be a derivation of arrested development in the "anal phase." This is significant not because of any correlation between the defecation, homosexuality, and Molina's willingness to take care of Valentin, but rather due to the lack of it. A reading that presupposed agreement with Freud in this respect would ignore what actually links the text and the footnote: the degree in which rationalist ideology and "common sense" now become the peripheral bodies.

Furthermore, it is through the invented (and notably *female*) Dr. Anneli Taub, that parallels dealing with imprisonment can be drawn between the text and footnote. In this, the longest of the footnotes, Taub remarks that a highly sensitive boy, "could not suspect...that Western Civilization, apart from the world of the father, will not provide him with a [method of conduct] alternate [to the use of weapons]" (207). The boy is trapped. "Feminine" conduct will make him an object of derision. "Masculine" conduct will make him an object of violence. He becomes like the Zombies in Molina's story.

That is not to say, however, that he is stripped of free will and made to literally toil long hours in order to excise his own desires. Instead, denied the waiter, Molina lives a kind of half-life, existing in a past the ties to which he cannot quite sever. Similar to the actions of the witch-doctor, Argentinean social culture is based on a "slow brainwashing in which heterosexual bourgeois models for conduct participate [in virtually] adopting homosexuality and [establishing] 'bourgeois models for homosexual conduct'" (213). Molina is quick to recognize the similarity

of the plight between himself and the Haitian living dead as one rooted in the idea of entrapment and only escapable through self-destruction. Like the blonde first wife he must "burn to ashes" (213) in order to avoid a worse fate: manipulation.

Finally, the concept of the "polymorphous perverse" in footnotes and main text is perhaps best illuminated by Molina's telling of the story of Leni Laimaison, heroine of the Nazi propaganda film, *Her Real Glory*. What makes this section of the book so crucial is the near perfect overlap between Molina's recount and a press release from Tobis-Berlin studios. They tell the story virtually on top of one another. What is found at the top of the page can after be discovered several pages later at the bottom.

This however, is in direction contradiction to the expected function of the footnote. It is not *supposed* to be narrative, let alone pleurably so. It is required, again like the Haitian zombies, to dutifully perform its function but keep, so to speak, to the farthest part of the plantation. In the traditional conception it is present specifically to repress its own narrative desires, in favor of the continuity of the "primary" text. Nonetheless the footnote that extends from page 82 through 95, and eventually overtakes (and obliterates altogether) the primary text, simply refuses to engage in repression. The footnote engages in a fundamental transgression. In so doing, blurs the line between primary and secondary, between dynamism and continuity, and between homo- and heterosexuality.

Bearing this in mind, it is perhaps now easier to approach the lingering issue of *why* Dr. Taub is included in a footnote, if she is in fact a fictional character. Up until her addition, the footnote had been the domain of non-fiction. Even the retelling and elaboration of *Her Real Glory* is taken from an actual press release. Answering the question requires several essential observations. First, one must be careful to note that it is the book's last footnote, second that the

fundamental physical transgression will be committed directly afterward and third that there has been a noticeable absence of narrator through both footnotes and plotline.

The question of this being the last footnote is significant insofar as it marks an end of doubling. After this point the text does include "scraps" of various different types of materials but never again do we find the careful psychoanalytic intervention and parallel commentary that characterized all previous footnotes. While it is not a question of monism- of Valentin and Molina merging into a seamless whole- there is an end of fragmentation. Indeed, the conclusion of the fictional Zombie movie almost directly coincides with the end of the footnote. Thus, Dr. Taub can be read as the ultimate symbolic cross over between previously distinct realms. The fictive leaks into, and become the generator of, the non-fictive.

This idea is supported by the fact that Valentin and Molina are about to make love, and both physically and metaphorically bridge the socio-cultural gap that separated them during the book's initial phases. There is no need for footnotes precisely because the need for explanation has disappeared. Accepting that statement, however, means simultaneously coming to terms with the lack of narrator. Dr. Taub is not explicitly distinguished as fictional because it is essential that her truth value be separated from what she says. No narrator means (at least nominally) no bias, no contextuality, no personal impulse, no identity. If Manuel Puig appears here, he does so as Dr. Manuel Puig and not as textual progenitor. The work is far to wrapped up in a dialectic of concurrent love for and revolt against the father, for him to viably do so.

Despite the fact that *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* is an essentially patchwork text, it is not so at the expense of its own totality. The seemingly incongruous footnotes are less pedantic attachments than they are calculated inlets into peripherality, imprisonment and polymorphism. Relegated to the bottom of the page, damned by their own truths but virtually reveling in

continued existence, the footnotes are the mirrors by which Molina and Valentin ultimately develop a love of self.

Works Cited

Puig, Manuel. *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Trans. Thomas Colchie. New York: Vintage International: 1991.