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THE NOVELS OF JORGE VOLPI AND THE POSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE

¿Cómo comprenderán los hombres su propia identidad en un mundo sin las viejas polaridades subjetivas y objetivas?

How will people understand their own identity in a world without the old subjective and objective polarities?

—Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*

On June 24, 1999, novelist and essayist Jorge Volpi, during a round-table discussion about the situation of the contemporary novel, stated that the genre is not in danger of disappearing but of becoming banal. The novels that matter today are those that offer, together with a certain pleasure for readers, the possibility of knowledge rather than the search for absolute truths (Jiménez). Since 1992, Volpi has published six novels that explore the possibility of knowledge and exemplify how to avoid banality: *A pesar del oscuro silencio* (1992), the *nouvelle* "Días de ira" in the volume *Tres bosquejos del mal* (1994), *La paz de los sepulcros* (1995), *El temperamento melancólico* (1996), *Sanar tu piel amarga* (1997), and *En busca de Klingsor* (1999).¹ The last of these received the Premio Biblioteca Breve, a distinction the Spanish publishing house Seix Barral began to award again in 1999 after a lapse of twenty-seven years.

Volpi's novels interrogate the possibilities of knowledge in various ways. They address knowledge in genres and discursive styles—often employing the conventions of the thriller—and they all stress research and detection. The range of discourses varies: *A pesar del oscuro silencio* relies on literary criticism, *La paz de los sepulcros* on the *nota roja*, and *En busca de Klingsor* on quantum mechanics and game theory. Along with a group of writers who published "novelas del crack" in 1996 and 1997, Volpi seeks to "devolverle a la narrativa esa capacidad de encontrar la poesía no en el lenguaje sino en las acciones de los personajes" ("return to narrative that capacity for finding poetry not in language but in the characters' actions"; Castro 55). Through accents placed on characters and actions, Volpi's novels construct complex systems of interrelations as did the *novelas totalizantes* of the 1960s. Volpi's novels alternately challenge and captivate as they instruct readers in specific ways of imagining the world. For this reason, Volpi and the other "novelistas del crack" eschew the early 1990s vogue for literary entertainment known in Mexico as *literatura light*, a literary practice that, from Volpi's point of view, trivializes the relation between literature and knowledge.²

Volpi's novels do not represent knowledge attained. Rather, they portray a search: knowledge is a possibility, a journey never completed. Moreover, the paths on such a journey cross a common terrain: the enigmas of identity and human behavior. Volpi's novels, with their focus on the poetry of actions, explore what was once called "human nature." Literary theory today more comfortably approaches this topic in terms of subjectivity and agency. Volpi usually writes about identity in terms of *carácter*, *temperamento*, and *voluntad* (character, temperament, and will). Although his novels point toward a philosophy of uncertainty, they nevertheless enact a search for an underlying arithmetic of identity and behavior. This arithmetic of character develops from a simple relationship between subject and object into a complex view of situated actors in a social field of interacting forces.

SUBJECT AND OBJECT: RESEARCH AND IDENTITY

The Cartesian dualism of subject and object—*res cogitans* and *res extensa*—has sustained rational discourse since the seventeenth century. Replicated throughout Western culture in oppositional pairs—mind and body, spirit and matter, observer and observed—such a dualism views the world as an object to be known and the subject as a human observer capable of knowing. Although twentieth-century mathematics, physics, and, more recently, poststructural literary theory and contemporary anthropology problematize this dualism, the sedimented history of a knowledge-seeking-subject with a knowledge-bearing-object weighs heavily upon "rational" thinking in Western discourse.³ Volpi's first two novels explore the interaction between subject and object, pressing at the limitations of Cartesian dualism.

A pesar del oscuro silencio is a novel of literary biography. A first-person narrator named Jorge researches the life of Jorge Cuesta, a poet and essayist associated with the Mexican vanguard of the 1920s and '30s. Cuesta (1903-1942) was a member of the short-lived intellectual group that published the journal *Contemporáneos* (1928-1931). He is an enigmatic and tragic figure. Trained as a chemist, he was obsessed with a search for enzymes that would effect the transformations sought by alchemists. He was married briefly to Guadalupe Marín, the ex-wife of muralist Diego Rivera. In the last years of his life, Cuesta experienced major emotional crises, including a dramatic suicide attempt by emasculation. Shortly after finishing his poetic masterpiece, "Canto a un Dios mineral," he was placed in a psychiatric hospital where he ended his life on August 13, 1942.⁴ Volpi's novel problematizes the dualism of subject and object by turning the emphasis away from Cuesta, the proposed object of research, and placing it instead on the researcher. Intrigued by Cuesta's death and complex poetry, the narrator decides to examine Cuesta's point of view and to write an essay inter-

preting his works as autobiographical documents (49-52). This decision sets into play identifications that function on two levels.

First, on the level of plot, the narrator seeks to transcend the traditional division between subject and object; he strives literally to embody Cuesta's experience. The narrator's personal life and circumstances emulate Cuesta's emotional and intellectual problems. The goal of this repetition is knowledge: to recover Cuesta's point of view in order to read the autobiographical meaning of "Canto a un Dios mineral." In his own mind, the narrator fails to answer to his questions in this repetition: "Cuesta era la imagen que yo asía con la mirada, las sombras, mi mente, la inteligencia devastada que nos unía. Cuesta era, acaso, mi propio dolor" ("Cuesta was the image that I grasped with my stare, the shadows, my mind, the devastated intelligence that united us. Cuesta was, perhaps, my own pain"; 99). Cuesta's identity is an image grasped by the narrator's perception or, possibly, a mere projection of the narrator's own pain. Accepting his failure to embody Cuesta's point of view, the narrator recognizes his own subjection to a specific position in the search for knowledge: "Soy un observador, un espía de sombras" ("I am an observer, a spy of shadows"; 108). Although he has learned a great deal about Cuesta and his writing, the narrator's position as subject who conducts research inescapably binds him to Cuesta's identity.

On a second level, such repetitions evoke another range of meaning. Although the first-person narrator Jorge dominates the novel, the text articulates other voices in order to (con)fuse the identities of the narrator and Jorge Cuesta. In each of the novel's three parts, a *yo* (*I*) directly addresses a *tú* (*you*) identified as "Amada" (45-49, 73-76, 102-106). These three anguished, poetic, and philosophical love letters, signed by "Jorge," are ambiguous, allowing readers to question if these are letters Cuesta would have written to Guadalupe Marín (maybe to his own sister?); perhaps they are letters that the narrator writes to his own lover, Alma; or, like Pierre Menard's cervantine fragments, they perhaps represent the narrator's maximum success in capturing Cuesta's point of view. Additionally, in the second and third parts of the novel, a female voice emerges, explaining to a *tú* the problems in her relationship with Jorge (64-66, 84-86, 100-101) and leaving readers to wonder whether Alma is speaking to her former lover, Barrientos, or if Guadalupe Marín is speaking to her former husband, Diego Rivera. Further emphasizing the fusion between himself and Cuesta, the narrator quotes abundantly (without quotation marks) from Cuesta's poetry, essays, and letters, producing a hybrid narrative voice.

In other words, although the narrator believes that he has failed to embody Cuesta's point of view, the repetitions are compelling from the reader's perspective. His personal life devolves into the patterns of Cuesta's life. Like Cuesta, he incarnates a lived history of frustrations; paradoxically, he resembles Cuesta in the very act of failing to embody Cuesta's point of view. Even while recognizing the inevitable impossibility of experiencing Cuesta's life, he enigmatically

affirms: "Mi vida ya no tiene otro sentido que probar este camino. No sé adónde me lleve, ni siquiera me importa, pero es el mío. Es lo único que queda para salvarme" ("My life has no other meaning now than trying this path. I don't know where it will take me, I don't even care, but it's mine. It's the only thing left that can save me"; 95). The novel closes with the narrator tying his sheets to the headboard of his bed in preparation for suicide.

For readers familiar with Mexican literature, the publication of *A pesar del oscuro silencio* creates another curious repetition. The novel searches for the autobiographical in Jorge Cuesta's writings and dramatizes the motivations for the narrator's compulsion to write about Cuesta. In addition to the repetition of the name Jorge (for Cuesta, the narrator, and Volpi), other aspects of the novel playfully invite readers to entertain links between author and character. First, the book has cover art based on a photograph of Cuesta; on the back, in the author's photograph, Volpi imitates Cuesta's pose. Second, in March of 1989, Volpi, like the narrator, published a prize-winning essay in the magazine *Plural*; he interpreted the autobiographical aspects of Cuesta's writing in "Canto a un Dios mineral." Third, at the end of the first and second parts of the novel, the narrator consults with his friend, a character named Eloy Urroz, a novelist and critic associated with the writer Jorge Volpi in extratextual reality. In the end, readers are left with a series of repetitions that gesture toward both the impossibility of transcending the division between subject and object and the multiple ways in which the (con)fusion of Jorge Cuesta, Jorge the narrator, and Jorge Volpi cannot be easily disentangled. Moreover, in the antepenultimate chapter of the novel, when the narrator reflects on his project, he intimates that he has been writing a novel all along:

Visité a Lupe Marín y a Natalia Cuesta, el cementerio y el manicomio; leí cuanto se ha escrito sobre el poeta y revisé su obra: un camino que desentrañaba las razones de la locura y la inteligencia, los significados alquímicos y biográficos no explorados antes. Un plan diáfano, absoluto. Una obra de arte lista para repetirse: la estructura de una novela perfecta. (108)
I visited Lupe Marín and Natalia Cuesta, the cemetery and the madhouse; I read everything written about the poet and studied his work: a path that unravels the reasons for madness and intelligence, the alchemic and biographical meanings never before explored. A diaphanous plan, absolute. A work of art ready to be repeated: the structure of a perfect novel.

While the narrator, Jorge, accepts his perceived failure to use repetition to overcome the division between subject and object in order to attain knowledge, for readers, *A pesar del oscuro silencio* pretends to undermine the usual separation between life and art, between truth and lies.⁵

Two years after the publication of *A pesar del oscuro silencio*, Jorge Volpi contributed the *nouvelle* "Días de ira" to *Tres bosquejos del mal*. "Días de ira" also foregrounds the relation between a subject and an object. In this case, a novelist and a physician engage in a struggle over knowledge about each other's identity. From the writer's point of view, the physician is the ideal reader: he fully recognizes himself in the text and, losing his ability to resist the narrated plot, ultimately commits a murder foretold by the narrator. From the physician's point of view, the novelist invades his privacy and writes a text about his affair with a blues singer; the physician experiences the text as a form of blackmail or psychological terrorism, ultimately murdering the singer in order to free himself. Because of the closed circle of self-referentiality, readers have no ground for deciding between these two points of view. Both actors are subjects in a struggle designed to objectify his opponent with a preconceived identity.

SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS:

PUBLIC SCANDAL, PRIVATE PASSIONS, AND PARALLEL LIVES

Compared to the focus on a single subject and a single object in the first two novels, the next three titles, all published in the mid-1990s, develop a more complex view of multiple, interacting subjects and objects. For example, in *La paz de los sepulcros*, a journalist for a crime sheet, *Tribuna del escándalo*, engages in biographical research, much like the narrator in *A pesar del oscuro silencio*. However, the journalist has a double object: to discover who is responsible for the violent murder of two men, the Minister of Justice and an insignificant individual who happens to have been an acquaintance of the narrator, and knowledge of the private passions that brought the two men together in their death. Although the narrator learns a great deal, he never discovers the answers to his questions. Even after a face-to-face encounter with the only known eye-witness, a woman who is the prime suspect and the lover the two men shared, he cannot clarify matters because the eye-witness has amnesia.

Sanar tu piel amarga (1997), a short *divertimento*, portrays jealous couples who form connected love triangles. This minimal love story refers to a larger conceptualization of society—a representation of numerous individuals to be known and characterized. With a tone of ironic whimsy, a first-person narrator—the owner of "Las Afinidades Electivas," a computerized match-making service—delivers his sales pitch to an audience of potential clients. The hard-sell advertising recounts a success story: the romance of Laura Espejo and Jacobo Espíritu. In the end, however, audience and readers alike realize that we instead have heard the love story of Laura and Beatriz Luna. Most important in terms of knowledge about human behavior, the narrator suggests that the vast number of individuals in a society is finitely knowable. With the help of a programmer and

a computer, he has created “una amplia base de datos a partir de entrevistas personales con cada uno de nuestros clientes. Estábamos convencidos de que, manejando adecuadamente un programa de prioridades, podríamos crear parejas estables y felices” (“a large database from personal interviews with every one of our clients. We were convinced that, by correctly managing a program of priorities, we could create stable and happy couples”; 32). The narrator has access to a database for human character, a spreadsheet of souls guaranteed to turn up *almas gemelas* (twin souls). Although radically different from Volpi’s other novels, *Sanar tu piel amarga* emphasizes the relationship between individual subject and object as a couple seeking the knowledge that will precipitate love. In social terms, temperaments are complex variables, and the novel imagines formulas that will balance equations and guarantee a bottom line: the end to “la plaga del desamor” (“the plague of hatred”; 32).

El temperamento melancólico is the most ambitious of Volpi’s novels from the mid-1990s. It explicitly engages in the psychological analysis of character and motivation or, as the title suggests, the understanding of human temperament. The novel explores group dynamics and the unpredictable effects of individual actions. In the novel, Carl Gustav Gruber, a German film director who has withdrawn from the public eye since the 1970s, has decided to make his last film in Mexico. With only months left to live, Gruber believes the family drama, “El Juicio,” will be his masterpiece. The text focuses on ten Mexican actors: how they are selected for their roles; their travel to a remote estate in Hidalgo for rehearsing and filming; and their acceptance of Gruber’s theories about acting. By getting to know the actors’ psychological make-ups, Gruber plans to film situations based on their real sentiments. Because they were selected on the basis of psychological profiles, Gruber uses his knowledge of their temperaments to interject emotions that the actors cannot separate from the reality of their own lives. Gruber explains: “Yo pienso que no debe haber una separación entre el arte y la vida” (“I think that there should be no separation between art and life”; 137). Moreover, the plot of the movie duplicates Gruber’s own circumstances and the strained relationships that have emerged among the actors during their two months of rehearsal. In “El Juicio,” an artist is about to die of cancer and calls together his family to help him create his masterpiece, a painting that will recover Andrea Mantegna’s lost “Melancolia.” The reactions of the family toward their father—as well as that of the actors toward Gruber—are explosive, and finally turn murderous. Although several actors survive, two of their number and one employee die, Gruber and his technical crew flee, and the film stock is destroyed in a fire.

Through the various levels of plot duplication—the painting, the film, and the novel—*El temperamento melancólico* explores knowledge about human behavior and the power that can be exercised by using such knowledge. The relationship between the director and actors problematizes the relationship between sub-

ject and object, revealing a network of subjects who compete and sometimes collaborate in their struggle to assert their wills and shape others into knowable, usable performers acting out roles in a secret script. Although all characters are important for enacting the roles of artificial family members gathered around Gruber, the director himself and the young actress Renata Guillén stand out as the main characters. Their relationship exemplifies the complex antagonism between subject and object.

Gruber embodies the subject of knowledge in its most authoritarian form. He possesses a superiority of vision and maintains a cold detachment from his actors' lives and emotions. According to his theory of film-making, the actors should cede their *voluntad* over to him and his idea of art (66-67). Judging his films with this criterion, he esteems one in which "el equipo [de actores y técnicos] estaba unido y cohesionado, ellos confiaban absolutamente en mí y se rendían a la voluntad del arte. Era como si mis pensamientos reencarnaran en sus cuerpos, como si me pertenecieran" ("the team [of actors and technicians] was united and cohesive; they trusted me entirely and surrendered to the will of the art. It was as if my thoughts were reincarnated in their bodies, as if they belonged to me"; 79). In terms of practice, Gruber invests energy in understanding the psychological temperaments of his actors, introducing fictional elements into their lives that become a part of their emotional responses so that they no longer can "distinguir lo que eran de lo que han pasado a ser" ("distinguish what they had been from what they had become"; 151). In brief, Gruber prepares his work as one would an experiment; he simply films the reactions:

Diez individuos aislados y obligados a convivir. La idea no es nueva, pero el sistema hace posible que las emociones se conviertan en una especie de caldo de cultivo. Muy concentrado, además. Se puede experimentar con ellos, enfrentarlos, obligarlos a amarse y odiarse casi sin que se den cuenta y sin que tengan posibilidad de escapar. Una versión reducida de como Dios nos mantiene en el mundo. (151)

Ten individuals isolated and forced to live together. The idea is not new, but the system makes it possible for emotions to become a kind of broth of cultivation. Very concentrated, at that. One can experiment with them, face them, force them to love each other and hate each other almost without their noticing and without any possibility of escaping. A smaller version of how God keeps us in the world.

The director is a creator, a figure of authority, almost a God, located outside of the world he is creating in his film (123, 137, 190).

Renata's point of view provides a counterpoint to Gruber's. As a retrospective narrator—the main voice among a chorus of narrators—she dominates the novel. She reveals the actors' experiences as the objects of Gruber's design. They are

the individuals about whom Gruber seeks psychological knowledge to make his directorial efforts more effective; they are simply a material substance he will shape to embody his thoughts in the form of characters in a film. Throughout the novel, Renata refers to the feeling that she is losing her *voluntad* (42-43, 60-61, 141, 157, 162, 171), but she eventually accepts her role as “eje fundamental de la filmación” (“the fundamental axis of the film”; 114). Renata and Gruber become lovers, and she feels that she has become a creating subject:

Colaboraba con Gruber sin el menor remordimiento. En el fondo me divertía su forma de crearles características nuevas en esos actores de segunda. Era como si introdujese verdaderos personajes en ellos, como si al llenarlos con emociones inexistentes los enriqueciera y los volviese de carne y hueso... De alguna manera me convertía en coautora del guión que nos disponíamos a rodar y ello sucedía con la mayor facilidad, sin conflictos. (155)

I collaborated with Gruber without the least remorse. In my heart I enjoyed his way of creating new characteristics in those secondary actors. It was as if he introduced true characters into them, as if by filling them up with nonexistent emotions he enriched them and turned them into flesh and bone... In some way I became the co-author of the script that we were filming, and that happened with the greatest ease, without any conflicts.

Renata, however, never fully realizes that this creative role is one that Gruber has scripted for her to perform. Their relationship, while based on authentic emotions, amounts to what Gruber at one point calls “intensas terapias” (“intense therapies”; 151); like the other actors, Gruber has set Renata up for the unleashing of passions that will occur during filming. With her anger, she is to be the “bad girl” of the fictional family, the daughter who will struggle to assert her will against her father’s.

At the same time, Renata adumbrates the actors’ positions as subjects. They all seek to understand Gruber and their roles in his film, they want to make sense of their colleagues and the dynamics of working as a group, and they struggle to recognize themselves when surprised by the sudden violence of their actions. By the time of the filming, the transformation is so complete, the fusion of art and reality so extreme, that the cast has great difficulty returning to reality between scenes (206). When their own violence startles them, the actors protest ineffectively. Renata demands to know what Gruber is doing to them, and he responds: “Lo que tú quieres que haga contigo.... Lo que en el fondo todos ustedes quieren que yo haga con sus vidas” (“What you want me to do with you.... What you all really want me to do with your lives”; 231). Only when Zacarías—the fictional father, god figure, and stand-in for Gruber—murders Ana, his fictional daughter-in-law, do the actors try to step out of character; Gruber and his technical crew

simply continue to film the violent events. After the apocalyptic end to the endeavor, Renata believes that Gruber has merely pushed the actors to behave in ways consistent with their temperaments; he only removed their limitations (62, 232). She closes the novel with a meditation on guilt: "¿qué sucedió desde que llegamos a la infausta hacienda, qué ocurrió con nosotros, cómo fue que perdimos la conciencia y la voluntad, cómo preferimos pelear entre nosotros hasta consumirnos en vez de enfrentarnos al verdadero culpable de la catástrofe?" ("what has happened since we arrived at the unlucky farmstead, what has happened to us, how have we lost our conscience and will, how did we opt for fighting each other to the point of consuming ourselves instead of facing what was really responsible for the catastrophe?"; 276). Renata later answers herself:

Podemos decir que fuimos manipulados, que no sabíamos lo que hacíamos, pero no sería exacto... Taimadamente quizá, pero sin ninguna violencia tangible de su parte, adoptamos nuestros personajes por nuestro propio deseo, y los llevamos a su culminación conociendo las implicaciones de nuestros odios y de nuestros amores gratuitos. (281)

We could say that we were manipulated, that we did not know what we were doing, but that would not be true... Slyly perhaps, but with no tangible violence on his part, we adopted our characters for our own wishes, and we carried them out to their culminations knowing the implications of our hatreds and free loves.

Renata reveals that someone among the actors knocked Zacarías unconscious and left him to die in the fire he had set. They all knew there was time to save him, but no one tried.

With all his grandiloquent notions of himself as semi-divine subject, in the end, Gruber is much more limited than he believes. He is a part of the world he films, and the actors are not merely passive objects. During the turbulent moments of filming, Renata asks Gruber how far he has foreseen what is happening in the drama and to what extent he has control. He responds:

Uno jamás puede tener planeado todo. Se perdería el interés, lo impactante es jugar con las probabilidades... Tomas ciertos elementos de base y los combinas, esperando obtener ciertas reacciones. No siempre resulta lo que quiero, pero intento que los márgenes de error sean mínimos. Aunque tengo que reconocer que ha habido muchas sorpresas..." (245, last ellipsis in original)

One cannot have everything planned. One would lose interest; the striking thing is to play with probabilities... You take certain base elements and combine them, hoping to achieve certain reactions. The results are not

always the ones I want, but I try to make the margin for error minimal. I have to admit, though, that there have been many surprises...

Collectively, in a complex system of actions, reactions, and struggles to assume the position of subject among a group of objectified colleagues, Gruber and his actors have unleashed a horrifying display of freedom: "la maldad y la destrucción que están presentes en todos los corazones pero que muy pocas veces salen a la luz" ("wickedness and destruction that are present in all hearts but that seldom come to light"; 232). Together, they share the guilt of tacitly agreeing to this experiment in temperaments.

Volpi's second group of novels, written and published in the mid-1990s, appeared during the period of uncertainty that marked President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration in 1994—the crack in the Mexican social and economic system.⁶ *La paz de los sepulcros*, set in a fictional Mexico City of the early twenty-first century, describes the uncertainty and hypocrisy of a corrupt political system. *El temperamento melancólico* and *Sanar tu piel amarga* were published alongside a group of novels publicized as an expression of the uncertainty created by the Salinas scandals and the end of the millennium: "las novelas del crack." On August 7, 1996, Jorge Volpi appeared in the Centro Cultural San Angel together with Eloy Urroz, Ignacio Padilla, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, and Pedro Angel Palou to read the "Manifiesto Crack" and promote five novels: Volpi's *El temperamento melancólico*; Urroz's *Las rémoras*; Padilla's *Si volviesen sus majestades*; Palou's *Memoria de los días*; and Chávez Castañeda's manuscript, "La conspiración idiota," which had received the Premio Nacional de Novela "José Rubén Romero" in 1994. These "novelas del crack" express socio-political frustration and delve into apocalyptic themes self-consciously associated with the end of the millennium. But the novels and novelists do not constitute a generation; rather, they indicate a moment of intentional convergence. Viewed more broadly, the "novelas del crack"—especially the darker ones, such as Volpi's *La paz de los sepulcros* and *El temperamento melancólico*—indicate a larger social phenomenon of disenchantment with the unpredictable circumstances of collective life in Mexico. These concerns are not unique to the "novelas del crack." Ignacio Solares's *El sitio* (1998) and David Toscana's *Santa María del Circo* (1998) are fundamental novels about collective conflict and failed community. Solares, Toscana, and Volpi alike write novels that explore identity as a complex effect that emerges not individually but collectively; these authors seek to understand the relation between identities and the fate of life in community.⁷

**SUBJECTS, OBJECTS, AND THE SOCIAL FIELD:
THE SOCIOLOGY OF EVIL AND AN ARITHMETIC OF THE SOUL**

Volpi's interest in the mechanisms of social interaction achieves its most complex expression in his prize-winning novel, *En busca de Klingsor* (1999). Here, the narrative focus moves beyond individuals and small groups to dramatize each actor's identity as both subject and object in a complex social field. *En busca de Klingsor* recounts the story of a military intelligence operation. In 1940, a young American physicist—ironically named Francis Bacon—has lost his good standing with the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. His downfall comes when his fiancée, incensed to discover his affair, scandalously interrupts a lecture by Kurt Gödel to upbraid Bacon for his infidelity. To resolve this situation, Bacon's mentor, John von Neumann, who recognizes his protégé's "carácter ... demasiado inquieto" ("too anxious character"; 101), recommends him for a military position. Bacon goes into the Second World War and takes part in the Alsos Mission, which apprehended Nazi atomic research scientists.

In 1946, during the Nuremberg trials, Bacon is assigned to discover the identity of Hitler's chief scientific consultant, a prominent German scientist who supposedly made all funding decisions for Nazi research—for everything from biological experimentation to atomic research. His code name was Klingsor, and his identity was secret. In a letter to von Neumann, Bacon describes himself as "un detective encargado de perseguir hombres en lugar de ser un físico que persigue abstracciones" ("a detective in charge of following men instead of being a physicist following abstractions"; 154). Von Neumann puts Bacon in touch with Gustav Links, a German mathematician who had mentioned Klingsor when he was taken into custody by Allied forces at the end of the war. Bacon and Links become a team and interview the Nobel Prize winners of science in the early twentieth century: Max Planck, Max von Laue, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, and Niels Bohr. At the same time, Bacon falls in love with a young German woman, Irene, and she becomes an unofficial member of the investigative team. The trio Bacon-Links-Irene begins to disintegrate. Links and Irene jealously distrust each other; Irene believes Links is Klingsor; Links discovers that Irene is an operative for Russian intelligence. Bacon must choose either to denounce Links as Klingsor in order to free Irene from her Russian entanglements or to abandon Irene in order to protect Links from a possibly false accusation. Bacon sacrifices Links to the Russians, who abduct him. Unable to prove that Links is Klingsor, the State institutionalizes Links in Leipzig for his so-called paranoia about Klingsor. Over forty years later, in early November, 1989, the week the Berlin Wall falls, Links narrates the novel.

This novel is a thriller based on the search for identity, an identity that remains undiscoverable. Although all scientists are suspect, there is no proof against any

one of them. Links, as an unreliable narrator, is suspect, but neither a trial nor the novel's readers can confirm his identity as Klingsor. More importantly, however, the novel dramatizes the passing away of a notion of an autonomous, individual identity associated with subject-object dualism; in its place emerges the concept of a situated, relational identity responding to multiple forces in society. As Volpi has described his intention, the novel portrays "el paso del sistema de conocimiento clásico, newtoniano, hacia el cuántico o regido por la incertidumbre" ("the passage of the classic, Newtonian knowledge-system toward one that is quantitative or ruled by uncertainty"; Posadas 7).

Bacon initially formulates his mission in terms of the relation between subject and object and the revelation of truth: Bacon as subject searches for the true identity of Klingsor as object. At the same time, his research method requires a radically new view of identity and social forces. To gain interviews and set the scientists at ease, he performs a farce he later understands as a reality: he poses as a scholar preparing to write a "monografía sobre la ciencia alemana de los últimos años" ("monograph about recent German science"; 191), a study of the "medio científico alemán" ("German scientific method"; 212). But he soon discovers a new metaphor for his research taken from his own discipline: "Lo que tenemos que hacer es diseñar un mapa en cuyo centro estará Klingsor. Como en el modelo atómico de Rutherford, sí. Ahora lo comprendo.... Muy bien. Pensemos, ¿cuáles son las partículas que nosotros debemos estudiar? ¿Cuáles, las rutas que debemos seguir para llegar a esa elusiva meta que se llama Klingsor?" ("What we need to do is design a map with Klingsor at its center. As in the atomic model by Rutherford, yes. I see now.... Very well. Let's think, which are the particles that we must study? What are the paths that we must follow to reach that elusive goal called Klingsor?"; 201). His partner, Links, immediately answers: "Los físicos y matemáticos alemanes y sus trabajos. Habrá que trazar un esquema que los interrelacione, que muestre su actividad, que esclarezca sus lazos comunes, que desvele sus relaciones con el poder nazi" ("The German physicists and mathematicians and their work. We will have to draw a diagram interrelating them, showing their activity, explaining their common ties, revealing their relations to Nazi power"; 201). Thus, in his search to discover Klingsor's place in German science, Bacon begins to think sociologically, in a manner akin to the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his models of overlapping social fields in which actors take positions and struggle to assert dominance.⁸ Because Klingsor could have been any one of many prominent German scientists, Bacon ceases to ask "who was Klingsor?" and instead maps out the scientific field with its distribution of positions, lines of attraction-repulsion, and, of course, contests for dominance.⁹

Although the search for Klingsor's identity becomes Bacon, Links, and Irene's conscious motivation, their thinking leads not to the revelation of his individuality but to a sociological view of the German and international scientific commu-

nities. They confront the lessons scientists were learning about the ethics of research, and they observe the operant forces of vanity, pride, and competition. The novel clearly condemns Nazi war crimes as a rupture in human history. Klingsor personifies the abominable intellectual goals of Nazi science; as such, Bacon embarks upon an exploration of the sociology of modern evil. Yet the novel also questions the meaning of an Allied victory associated with the atomic bomb. Erwin Schrödinger tells Bacon that vanity more than morality motivated physicists in the United States and in Germany: “Las consecuencias de la explosión eran lo de menos: lo importante era dejar a los otros en ridículo” (“The consequences of the explosion did not matter: the important thing was to ridicule the others”; 280). Werner Heisenberg—Links’s principal suspect as Klingsor—adopts a self-righteous stance when interrogated by Bacon. Heisenberg avers that, unlike the Allied scientists, he participated in the Nazi scientific project in order to prevent the construction of a German bomb: “... tampoco hubiera permitido que millones de personas inocentes muriesen por mi culpa. En cambio, ustedes, en Hiroshima y Nagasaki ...” (“... neither would I have permitted that millions of people die because of me. You, on the other hand, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki ...”; 296). Klingsor, more than an individual, represents a force at work in the field of scientific research, the potentially evil shadow cast by every choice to be made.

Alongside the suspense plot organized around a search to identify Klingsor, the narrative situation of *En busca de Klingsor* underlines the enigmas of human behavior. In his interview with Max Planck, Bacon proposes a connection between his work as a physicist and his historical research on German science: “Quizás no se trate de teorías físicas sino, ¿cómo decirlo?, de teorías sobre las personas, de teorías sobre la verdad de ciertos hechos que no por ello dejan de lado las reglas de la investigación científica” (“It may not be about theories of physics but—how should I put it?—about theories of people, about the truth of certain facts that do not, however, put aside the rules of scientific research”; 191, ellipsis in original). Although Bacon stands out as the protagonist in the search for Klingsor, as narrator, Gustav Links develops the “teorías sobre personas.” The exploration into German scientific research establishes a series of theories about identity, behavior, and motivation among physicists and mathematicians. At the same time, Links recounts to his readers a parallel drama of motivations, probably unknown to Bacon and Irene. Links creates suspense in the telling of Bacon’s investigation by slowly interweaving the story of an affair, a *ménage à trois* in which he, his wife, and his best friend’s wife were involved. The friend participated in the unsuccessful July 20, 1944, Stauffenberg conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, and both he and his wife are executed in the mass purge following the failed attempt. Distracted over her personal losses, Links’s own wife commits suicide. Eventually, Links is arrested for his role in the conspiracy, but he is saved when a bomb destroys the courtroom where a Nazi judge will convict him.

Through a series of chance happenings and surprising choices, Links alone survives the losses of his wife, lover, and best friend; the conspiracy trials; the war; and, with the betrayal of Bacon, the loss of his only remaining friend. Links's narration is an attempt to understand these losses, as well as his own guilt. All of this is complicated and compounded by his earlier betrayal of Heinrich von Lütz.

Just as Bacon develops a view of behavior in the German scientific field, Links elaborates a relational understanding of identity, behavior, motivations, and betrayal among intimates. Following his training as a mathematician, Links articulates an arithmetic of the soul. He begins each of the three "libros" of the text with a treatise, the formulation of laws, and a series of corollaries: "Leyes del movimiento narrativo" ("Rules of narrative movement"; 23-26), "Leyes del movimiento crimina^l" ("Rules of criminal movement"; 177-181), and "Leyes del movimiento traidor" ("Rules of the traitor's movement"; 351-353). At the beginning of the third and final book, after the multiple tales of betrayal have been told, Links formulates his most eloquent and paradoxical equations of conduct, which reduce all human behavior to two common denominators: a struggle for power and a capacity for treachery. Making explicit the sociological thinking about identity associated with Bacon's project, Links paraphrases Max Weber: "como señaló Max Weber, el poder no es más que la capacidad de predecir, con la mayor exactitud posible, la conducta ajena" ("as Max Weber has pointed out, power is just the capability of foreseeing, with the greatest precision possible, the behavior of others"; 352).¹⁰ Links believes that all humans are weak, unfaithful liars. Power is merely the struggle to assert dominance among the dominated. Knowledge of human behavior and insight for predicting actions are simply strategies of domination.

At the same time, the novel emphasizes the impossibility of such exact knowledge of future behavior. On the one hand, and echoing Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the observer seeking to predict behavior modifies that behavior, and, at best, predictions can only suggest probabilities (334-35). On the other hand, as explained by Gödel's theorem of incompleteness, Links, Bacon, and Irene form part of the very systems they are trying to discern, a position from which they discover that there will always be indecipherable propositions. Or, as paraphrased by Max Planck, "La ciencia es incapaz de resolver por sí sola el misterio último de la naturaleza. Y ello se debe a que nosotros mismos formamos parte de esa naturaleza, y por tanto del misterio que estamos intentando resolver" ("Science is incapable of solving by itself the ultimate mystery of nature. This is because we belong to nature ourselves and, therefore, to the mystery we are trying to solve"; 192). *En busca de Klingsor* dramatizes the frustrated human search for knowledge about identity and behavior with the recognition that such knowledge will always include the unpredictable, the uncertain, and the indecipherable.

READERS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE

All of Jorge Volpi's novels portray the possibility of knowledge. Months after winning the Premio Biblioteca Breve, Volpi explained: "Las novelas que me gusta leer y las que intento escribir son aquellas que consideran la ficción como un vehículo de conocimiento" ("The novels I like to read and the ones I try to write are those that consider fiction as a vehicle of knowledge"; Posadas 7). More specifically, for Volpi, the novel is a vehicle for knowledge about identity in action, and he places readers in the position of observing the laws of human behavior at work. From his earliest attention to subject and object in *A pesar del oscuro silencio* and "Días de ira," through his more complex view of multiple subjects and objects in *La paz de los sepulcros*, *El temperamento melancólico*, and *Sanar tu piel amarga*, and finally up to his view of situated identities in the complex social fields of *En busca de Klingsor*, Volpi has elaborated an arithmetic of character to explain human identity as realized through behavior. In 1871, Emile Zola invoked the science of his day to describe the "laws" of heredity and "the thread which leads mathematically from one man to another" in order to describe the actors of a "social group" (160-61). In the 1990s, Volpi uses a radically different science to examine the threads that connect identities in a social field where knowledge is incomplete and uncertain. Humans perform on a stage where chance and choice interact in the unfolding relationality of identity.

At the same time, Volpi's novels give readers an uncomfortable understanding of some of the most perverse identities they enact. In general, these novels are not unlike Gruber's design for a film in *El temperamento melancólico*: they are experiments that place human temperaments together in order to analyze reactions. Like Gruber, readers are observers; we perversely watch the passions unleashed among a group of characters in a novel. Or, in a slightly different sense, readers resemble Gustav Links as voyeur. In a chapter entitled "Los peligros de la observación," Links describes how he created the situations where he could spy upon his wife and his best friend's wife in their early sexual explorations: "Quería crear las condiciones ideales para mi experimento" ("I wanted to create the ideal conditions for my experiment"; *En busca de Klingsor* 257). Ultimately, Links, like Gruber and other similar characters in Volpi's novels, is drawn into his own experiment and suffers unforeseen consequences. Obviously, Volpi's readers differ from Gruber and Links. The fate of other humans does not depend on the effects of our reading. However, Volpi's novels do pose interesting ethical questions, exploring the larger consequences of seemingly insignificant actions and the potential confusions of art with life when novels become vehicles for knowledge about the world. His novels also raise the question of whether or not there are effects, perhaps effective kinds of knowledge, created by the way we imagine identity during the act of reading.

NOTES

¹ Jorge Volpi was born in Mexico City in 1968. He has a *licenciatura* in Law from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. For almost three years, he worked as the secretary for Diego Valadés, who was first the Procurador General de Justicia del Distrito Federal and later the Procurador General de la República. At the Centro de Escritores Mexicanos, Volpi worked with writers Carlos Montemayor and Alí Chumacero. In 1996, he moved to Salamanca, Spain (Güemes; Valdez and Cluff 447). In addition to novels, Volpi has written a volume of short stories, *Pieza en forma de sonata* (1990), and numerous book reviews and essays for the Mexican cultural press. In 1998, he published *La imaginación y el poder: Una historia intelectual de 1968*.

To date, the only critical appraisals of Volpi's works are the numerous reviews that accompanied the publication of his novels. Eloy Urroz published one detailed, fifteen-part study of *En busca de Kling-sor* and has announced a forthcoming book that I have not been able to consult, *La silenciosa herejía: forma y contrautopía en las novelas de Jorge Volpi*. I thank Urroz for sharing with me the published version of the "Manifiesto Crack" in *Descriutura*.

² In the "Manifiesto Crack" and in various interviews (especially Castro), Volpi and the "novelistas del crack" disavow *literatura light* and claim the legacy of innovation associated with the vanguard of the 1920s and the Spanish-American boom novels of the 1960s. I analyze the phenomenon of *literatura light* in "Aesthetic Criteria and the Literary Market in Mexico: The Changing Shape of Quality, 1982-1994."

³ Craige's *Reconnection: Dualism to Holism in Literary Studies* elegantly reviews Cartesian dualism. Three publications by Hayles—*The Cosmic Web*, *Chaos Bound*, and "Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science"—account for the ways in which twentieth-century mathematics and physics question Cartesian dualism. Rosaldo's *The Remaking of Social Analysis* identifies the shift in recent anthropology, and Smith's *Discerning the Subject* brings together writings about subjectivity and agency in literary theory.

⁴ The narrator in Volpi's novel is not unique in wanting to explain the enigmas of Cuesta's life and writings. He has been the subject of major biographical and literary studies (Panabriere; Grant Sylvester; León Caicedo; Katz; and Domínguez Michael's *Jorge Cuesta y el demonio de la política*, which appears reworked and reprinted as chapter five, "Jorge Cuesta y la crítica del demonio" in *Tiros en el concierto: Literatura mexicana del siglo V*). In the wake of these studies appearing throughout the 1980s, Volpi published "El magisterio de Jorge Cuesta" (1989) and began writing the novel.

⁵ Reviews of *A pesar del oscuro silencio* picked up on these multiple levels of duplication. Padilla, Sicilia, Ortega, Urroz, Trueba Lara, and Valdés Medellín acknowledge the playfulness of Volpi's "travestimiento síquico" (Valdés Medellín 15) and read the novel as a "metáfora del saber" (Trueba Lara 13). Domínguez Michael and Paredes object to the novel; the former protests that "la tragedia de Jorge Cuesta no gana nada nuevo en documentación histórica o densidad novelesca" (40), and the latter views the text as lacking an argument that would make it persuasive as either a novel or an essay (59). The positive reviews attend to the researcher's role; the negative ones accentuate the failure to portray the researched object.

⁶ The last year of Carlos Salinas de Gortari's presidential administration (1988-1994) was turbulent. On January 1, 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) initiated a process of trade liberalization; the same day, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) emerged to protest economic inequities. On March 23, 1994, the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, presidential candidate for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), cast a shadow of political instability. In 1995, during Ernesto Zedillo's first year as president, accusations implicated Salinas de Gortari and his family in assassinations, drug trafficking, and money laundering. Monetary devaluation shook the economy. Many in Mexico began to speak of the "crack" that had shattered dreams of prosperity.

⁷ The "novelas del crack" brought immediate notoriety to Volpi and four other writers: Ricardo Chávez Castañeda (b. 1961, Mexico City), Eloy Urroz (b. 1967, New York), Pedro Angel Palou (b.

1966, Puebla), and Ignacio Padilla (b. 1968, Mexico City). Volpi, Padilla, and Urroz had already collaborated on the collection of *nouvelles* entitled *Tres bosquejos del mal* (1994). All had previously published novels or collections of short stories. In 1995 and 1996, they planned the near-simultaneous publication of five titles that would share apocalyptic themes, a tone of disillusionment, a protest against *literatura light*, and a defense of creativity. Palou's novel appeared in *Editorial Joaquín Mortiz* in 1995, and titles by Volpi, Padilla, and Urroz appeared in *Nueva Imagen* in 1996. Chávez Castañeda's prize-winning manuscript "La conspiración idiota" was not published, but the next year *Nueva Imagen* released his novel *El día del hurón* alongside additional titles by Volpi and Urroz—all sharing the bright red marketing label that announced them as "novelas del crack." Skirius provides the first sustained analysis of a "novela del crack," Urroz's *Las Rémoras*. Cohen and Chávez Castañeda each refer to the publishing experience that gave rise to the "novelas del crack." In response to the 1996 "Manifiesto Crack" and the launching of several "novelas del crack," the cultural press began to review the phenomenon with little consensus. José Alberto Castro proposed a division between the "rupturistas"—including the "novelistas del crack"—and the "individualistas," who engage in a "búsqueda personal" through their writing. Domínguez Michael, Medina, Palacios Goya, Sánchez Nettel, Urroz, and Velázquez Yebra provide the first comments on this phenomenon.

⁸ Wacquant (37-41) and Jenkins (66-102) review the concept of *field* in Bourdieu's work. Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* and the essays compiled in *The Field of Cultural Production* demonstrate the concept of field at work in sociological analysis.

⁹ A double exchange of metaphors operates here. First, Bacon refers to Ernest Rutherford's observation of the "scattering" of particles around an atom, which led to the discovery of the nucleus. The attention to an observable dispersion pattern used to identify a center is a metaphor for Bacon's detective work. Second, the sociological notion of a "field" also evokes physics, which identifies vectors of attraction and repulsion associated with forces in a magnetic field. The other aspect of "fields" evoked in Bourdieu's models—and also relevant to *En busca de Klingsor* but beyond the scope of this study—is the playing field for a game. Bourdieu analyzes strategies and Bacon discusses human choices in terms of game theory.

¹⁰ Most reviewers have emphasized the importance of characters and their choices to call attention to the nature of evil (Castillero, García Jambrina, Mora, Munguía Espitia, Navarro Arisa, Ortega, and Urroz). In contrast, Federico Patán identifies a singular trait: "Los personajes no tienen (ni necesitan) una psicología definida minuciosamente a fondo. Me dieron la impresión de comparsas entregadas de cumplir ciertas funciones anecdóticas.... [Q]uedo con la idea de que Jorge [Volpi] utilizó cartabones pertenecientes a la *novela de espías*, lo cual en parte da su explicación a la naturaleza que los personajes ofrecen" (11). Eloy Urroz's fifteen-part analysis of the novel in *Sábado* partly explains the disparities among my emphasis on "laws," reviewers' attention to characters, and Patán's sense that characterization is sketchy. Working with the unpublished manuscript, Urroz's analysis reveals some telling changes. Notably, Links's best friend, Heinrich von Lütz, was initially a Freudian psychoanalyst, not a philosopher. In the manuscript, when Heinrich decides to become a Nazi, he renounces psychoanalysis and states an idea implicit throughout Volpi's novels:

Al principio, yo pensé que el psicoanálisis servía para denunciar la rigidez de nuestra concepción del mundo, a protegernos contra esa abyecta causalidad que busca explicarlo todo. ¿Y qué es lo que descubrí más tarde, Gustav? Que la cura es peor que la enfermedad... Lo siento. ¡El hombre es caótico, un amasijo de contradicciones, un infierno! Ni el psicoanálisis ni nadie lograrán domesticarlo, Gustav. No somos maquinitas que puedan desensamblarse gracias al doctor Freud. (cited in Urroz, "En busca de Klingsor (Un nuevo Coloso)/III" *Sábado* 15 May 1999: 4).

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