



THE POLITICS OF FORM: THREE TWENTIETH-  
CENTURY SPANISH AMERICAN POETS AND  
THE SONNET

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**ABSTRACT** This article engages the idea of poetic form to create a dialogue among three very different twentieth-century Spanish American poets: Argentine Alfonsina Storni, Chilean Enrique Lihn, and Cuban Reinaldo Arenas. Each of them uses the sonnet's privileged position in Western aesthetic tradition to manifest shifting relations to this tradition and to modernity. In this, they open a dialogue with the lettered elite and use part of their cultural inheritance as *letrados* to confront the old order through an established aesthetic form, to reconfigure or question the opposition between high and low cultural forms to varying degrees and to different ends. These poets resignify their cultural legacy and in the process demonstrate its malleability—the sonnet is not monolithic, but mutable. An invitation to reinvent, the sonnet as employed by these poets embodies a range of intercultural experiences of both continuity and transformation. These readings, which engage with a range of poetic traditions (such as North American New Formalism), reveal how the choice of poetic form both shapes and depends upon the author's and his or her readers' experience and how a particular aesthetic form is both charged and changed by circumstance.

In these days, when prose and visual images are the dominant forms of communication, thinking about the sonnet reminds us of how poetry works differently, of just what this particular genre can do. Poets who return to this deep-rooted literary form open a dialogue with tradition; they enter a conversation with other poets and readers through form. The fourteen lines

with varied meter and rhyme schemes of the classical Petrarchan model offer them a challenge, a possible map or blueprint that can function in different ways. The form presents a set of possibilities that controls what might happen in the poem, an opportunity for renovation or experimentation within boundaries with which a poet might demonstrate his or her skill and highlight both tradition and innovation. A sonnet can also work as a kind of straitjacket, an emblem of authority or rigidity that may constrict both personal and political struggles. Working within convention can have a conservative connotation, for formal poetry can be seen as sustaining normative cultural values. Yet aesthetic formalism can also serve as a “*talisman against disintegration,*” as poet Rita Dove has observed, or as a beautiful structure for unsettling our assumptions (qtd. in Gwynn 174).<sup>1</sup> It is this aspect of the sonnet that interests me here, for the strength of its structure demonstrates how resistance to myriad social restraints can be manifested through form. The following examples from three distinct poets who use the sonnet in different contexts in twentieth-century Latin America will stimulate dialogue about how to connect literary and intellectual histories to social and political issues through a particular poetic structure. This attention to form gives us another angle on the dialogue between Latin American writers and aesthetic and cultural tradition (European and transcultural), which is, after all, one of the ways individual voices enter into collective conversations.

Allowing the poet to innovate within tradition was one aspect that made the sonnet central to Spanish American modernism.<sup>2</sup> Rubén Darío notably expanded the form, changing the versification from the traditional Spanish hendecasyllable to French-influenced alexandrines, using line endings with assonant as well as consonant rhyme (Bernardo Gicovate calls this one of Darío’s “*audaces invenciones*” [265]). Gicovate also notes how modernism shifted emphasis in the sonnet from a spatial or architectural form to an aural or musical one (185). These changes do not seem radical today because they have become part of literary tradition; it is difficult, for example, to convince a group of students who are not familiar with poetic convention

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1. This idea is inspired by Mary Jo Salter’s words about North American New Formalism: “Nothing unsettles us so much—in poetry or people—as a beautiful surface” (qtd. in Gwynn 187).

2. Modernism in Spanish American cultural contexts extends from roughly 1888 to 1910, and precedes the *avant-garde*. Aesthetic preoccupations are central to this movement, inspired by French *parnasianism* and *symbolism*, which revamped classical forms to innovate and recreate literary tradition, especially poetry.

that Darío is really doing something new in his sonnets. The modernists' sonnets now form the conventions within or against which we read later Spanish American poets.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, poets with increasing distance from the modernist tradition, such as Argentine Alfonsina Storni, Chilean Enrique Lihn, and Cuban Reinaldo Arenas, return to the sonnet's confined space to express their own struggles to break out of a range of social limitations. Theirs is a kind of formal politics that plays on our preconceived ideas of what sonnets can do. Each of them uses the sonnet's privileged position in Western aesthetic tradition to manifest shifting relations to this tradition and to modernity. In this, they open a dialogue with the lettered elite, Angel Rama's term for the creole intellectuals who have held power and controlled who had the ability to signify in Latin America since colonial times. In *The Lettered City*, Rama chronicles the control of the lettered elite from colonial times to the early twentieth century, noting few openings that might represent liberating transgressions; the oral circulation of poetry may be one of these, but not the sonnet, which may serve instead as a synecdoche for written formal poetry. The influence of *los letrados* has both authorized and confined the circulation of ideas in the region, and in this way their influence may be analogous to that of the sonnet. Thus when Storni, Lihn, and Arenas use the sonnet tradition, part of their cultural inheritance as *letrados*, they confront the old order through an established aesthetic form to reconfigure or question the opposition between high and low cultural forms to varying degrees and to different ends. In their own ways, these three poets represent unexpected occupants of the sonnet's architecture who remodel and transform the space.

Thinking about the use of the sonnet after modernism as a break with the past poses some inevitable problems: how can a return to formalism represent a divergence in the mid-to-late twentieth century when the avant-garde embraced free verse or even more radical ruptures with tradition? The use of the sonnet may provide another perspective on free verse, however, reminding us that it is not the end of innovation in a teleological view of poetic progression. Of course all poetry, fixed and open forms alike, works within a generic memory in ways that simultaneously disrupt and continue literary

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3. Darío's use of the alexandrine is not apparent in many poets' work much beyond modernism; this may be due to the Spanish Generation of '27, who turned more toward the Golden Age, or it may be that the form became too closely associated with modernism by later writers who wanted to move away from Darío's influence.

tradition. Some questions depend on who is writing the sonnet: when one uses this form, does one necessarily enter the plot of the Petrarchan love lyric, in which “masculine, heterosexual desire” frames “a silent, beautiful, distant female object” or are there possibilities for the expression of alternative speaking subjects (Homans 570)? Sonnets may concern subjects other than love, of course, and even when love is the focus, the dialogue with tradition stimulated by the form may not mimic standards, but can make us see the “artificialities of received convention” (Keller 264). In her essay on the poetry of North American lesbian poet Marilyn Hacker, Lynn Keller uses this phrase to describe how this author employs the sonnet to demonstrate a “performative formalism”; like that of Judith Butler’s concept of gender performance, Hacker’s use of the sonnet makes us recognize how the form constitutes, rather than reflects, our realities (264). Keller’s ideas will resonate in different ways in the detailed analysis of the sonnets that follows, but in every case, the very conventionality of the form is a central element in the creation of meaning.

Reflections on form also bring to the fore broader tensions between accounts of literary tradition as a history of ruptures or of continuities. The poets I consider here will allow us to complicate the terms of this opposition and see the sonnet as a story of “possible alternative histories which were ‘repressed’ and, from time to time, break in as ‘returns of the repressed’” (Žižek 123).<sup>4</sup> “Translating” Žižek’s remark about film from Freudian terms to broader cultural and historical associations linked to poetry, the following analysis suggests that these sonnets may also mark the change and continuity that characterizes the uneven development and consequent hybrid poetic traditions exemplary of Latin America’s postcolonial situation. Storni uses the inherited form to challenge gender and other cultural expectations; Lihn uses it as an analogy to dictatorship; and Arenas uses it to traverse a marginal sexual identity. As we will see, their selective renegotiations of the sonnet form vary according to the social challenges they confront. For each, the sonnet might work as a talisman, a fetish, an artifact, or a ritual; this last term recalls Renato Rosaldo’s description of ritual, not as static or conventional, but as a “busy intersection” where “cultural transmission may be detoured, deflected or replaced” (qtd. in Roach 29). Linking the sonnet to ritual—in which, as Joseph Roach reminds us, repetition *is* change (xi)—

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4. I am grateful to Juan Egea for bringing this quote to my attention.

reminds us that the sonnet itself is not a closed or conservative form, just as poetry is not a genre that remains isolated from history or events. In the case of these poets from Argentina, Chile, and Cuba, the reiteration of form may be a passkey for speakers from the periphery to engage in dialogue with the center.

Alfonsina Storni's most marked incursion into the realm of the sonnet is her 1938 book, *Mascarilla y trébol*.<sup>5</sup> This collection of *antisonetos* depends upon the sonnet and, as Rachel Phillips notes, applies the "anti" more as a defensive measure than as a revolt. The book was described by Storni in these terms: "Poesías breves, dispuestas en forma de soneto: una cuarteta inicial de exposición; la segunda, nudo: los tercetos, el desenlace. Pero de rima disonante" (qtd. in Phillips 105). Following Storni's own laconic lead, many critics condense the meaning of "antisonnets" to the poems' lack of rhyme, but this observation alone oversimplifies the working of form in this collection. Through a close reading of the prologue (Storni's "Breve explicación"), and attention to experimental and writerly aspects of some of the poems in *Mascarilla*, Matthew Marr has recently observed traits that connect this collection to the avant-garde; he finds others, however (metaphor, internal logic, and unified structures), that situate it more in postmodernism.<sup>6</sup> Like the form she chooses to remodel, the book is a combination of tradition and innovation, and her introductory statements demonstrate the author's awareness of its divergence from her previous collections (*Ocre* from 1925 features forty-three sonnets with consonant rhyme and thirteen poems with diverse meter).

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5. Storni is a well-known Argentine poet (1892–1938). Her work is often included in anthologies, and the poems selected are usually those that demonstrate the poet's feminist consciousness, her anger with prescribed social roles, and that confront limited possibilities for women. Her early work has stylistic links with modernism while she moves toward the avant-garde in her later collections; until recently, however, not as much critical attention was paid to her last book, and she remains somewhat marginalized from many accounts of the avant-garde. Among important critical reappraisals of Storni's life and work not directly cited here are Josefina Delgado's biography, works by Gwen Kirkpatrick (*Dissonant Legacy of Modernismo* and various articles), and Vicky Unruh's *Performing Women*.

6. This "postmodernism" is the movement that encompasses late modernism and precedes the avant-garde in Spanish American letters (ca. 1905–1930). It is often used to denote the expansion or shifting of modernist characteristics in nonvanguard poetry, which is markedly more intimate, often situated in local, rural, rather than urban cosmopolitan settings, and includes the group of now-canonical female writers: Gabriela Mistral, Juana de Ibarbourou, and Storni, who often treat atypical modernist themes such as the body, desire, and specifically gendered relations. There is still some critical discussion about whether *posmodernismo* exists as a separate movement or not (see, for example, José Emilio Pacheco's introduction to *Antología del modernismo*).

The almost apologetic tone of the affirmation that this book is different seems incredible considering its date of publication follows that of Neruda's *Residencias en la tierra* and Vallejo's *Trilce*, books considered far more difficult to decipher. About her book Storni says, "Preveo que va a ser tildado de oscuro. . . . Yo pediría al dialogante amigo una lectura detenida de él, todo tiene aquí un sentido, una lógica, aunque por momentos se apoye en conocimientos, ideas, símbolos, que, se supone, están en la alacena mental del lector" (383). She assures us that there is meaning here, though it may not be as accessible as her earlier work. Read against the background of other more avant-garde poets (who happen to be male), her words call attention to the fact that a female poet may be held to a different standard, for the explication implies that her lyric production is supposed to be more personal, more manageable. Simply calling her poems antisonnets may be part of her attempt to manage the possible accusation of obscurity, then, for with the term she follows the architecture of the sonnet, yet demonstrates her talent, her mastery of the form, while introducing possibilities for change, for flexibility. In this way she inserts herself into tradition, but alters it, maintaining her marginality in a move analogous to her general situation as woman writer within a patriarchal social structure. There also may be resonances with her personal situation as a writer confronting death; Phillips reads many of the poems in the book, as well as its shift in style, as part of Storni's change in attitude as she confronted the end of her battle with cancer. In these circumstances the sonnet may also provide a sense of control, authority, and structure as she confronted what at that point was a terminal illness (analogous to certain late twentieth-century authors' return to formal poetry when faced with HIV).<sup>7</sup> Within all of these circumstances, the sonnet offers her a dialectical form that emphasizes process; more than a simple "exposición-nudo-desenlace," as Storni put it, the form, rhymed or not, frames the interior dialogues of the poetic speaker both with convention and with herself.

In his book, *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness and the Invention of the Sonnet*, Paul Oppenheimer offers intriguing insights into the origins of the form that will help us to flesh out the ways in which Storni (and the other poets considered here) both conform to and break with tradi-

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7. The collection *POESÍA* edited by Rodríguez Matos offers a sampling of poetry about AIDS written in Latin America, Spain, and the United States. Kuhnheim's "El mal del siglo veinte" discusses HIV in the context of Spanish American poetry.

tion. Oppenheimer presents the idea that the sonnet is the first “modern” poetic form, not intended for music, and that it concerns the self-consciousness of an individual in conflict with him or herself. Although the form itself may originate in the thirteenth century, the sonnet, in contrast to the troubadours’ songs, was meant to be read rather than performed (179–82). As Oppenheimer points out, one sign of the sonnet’s interiority is that it is not directed to an interlocutor, but rather to the form itself. It is the logic of the form that will resolve the problem proposed in the octave when the speaker arrives at the sestet (183–84).

Storni’s *Mascarilla y trébol* begins defiantly with the poem “A Eros.” The poetic voice addresses him or herself to love in an apostrophe that appears to undermine Oppenheimer’s observation that the sonnet is not intended for a listener. But Eros is an idea more than a person here; while the address breaks somewhat with a meditative quality and gives the piece more performative possibilities, it is a solo flight, more a monologue or a soliloquy that pays scant heed to audience. The speaker confronts the tradition of romantic love with an almost scientific eye and dissects it in the guise of a rag doll:

He aquí que te cacé por el pesquezo  
a la orilla del mar, mientras movías  
las flechas de tu aljaba para herirme  
y vi en el suelo tu floreal corona.

Como a un muñeco, destripé tu vientre  
y examiné sus ruedas engañosas  
y muy envuelta en sus poleas de oro  
hallé una trampa que decía: sexo. (385)

The poetic speaker, at the edge of the sea, is a truth-seeking hero in a liminal space.<sup>8</sup> His or her actions gain strength through the use of preterit tense verbs that emphasizes the finality of individual activity. The problem proposed in the octave is the trap of love, and the culprit, uncovered in the eighth line, is sex; the first two stanzas reveal that the speaker has, in effect, trapped the

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8. In a complementary reading with another focus, Francine Masiello proposes that the speaker in this poem is also a reader who refuses to become a subjected “other” when she takes on this active role (192).

trap. In the sestet the dissected doll is revealed to the implied audience in the poem—the sun, the moon, and the frightened chorus of sirens (natural and mythological accomplices to Eros)—and in the closing line the God of love is tossed into the sea:

Sobre la playa, ya un guiñapo triste,  
Te mostré al sol, buscón de tus hazañas,  
Ante un coro asustado de sirenas.

Iba subiendo por la cuesta albina  
Tu madrina de engaños, Doña Luna,  
Y te arrojé a la boca de las olas. (385)

Is this a resolution to love's dilemma? Possibly, but since the tone throughout is one of frustration and angry passion unabated, the end, which does not staunch the speaker's rage, begs the question whether logic and revelation can triumph over emotion. In many ways the struggle is not completed. Examining the poem relative to traditional concepts of the sonnet demonstrates that it is an antisonnet not simply due to its lack of rhyme, but also to its subject matter, its tone, its performative aspects, and its questionable resolution. Contradicting Oppenheimer's idea that the traditional sestet resolves issues raised in the first verses of the poem, Storni uses the sonnet in a manner that questions its formal ability to settle the speakers' accusations. While hers is not a radical avant-garde scrutiny of rationality and logic, she questions these nonetheless.

"El hijo" offers another provocative example of Storni's use of the antisonnet to dialogue with convention at several levels. This poem centers on pregnancy and childbirth, unusual topics for a sonnet. The poet does not offer us a commonplace romanticized vision of maternity, but one that takes into account the paradoxes of parenting: uncertainty about the future of this being, separation and conjunction of self and other, how children make us conscious of our own mortality. Again we find that the sestets do not resolve the challenges presented; they simply push us into the future and offer us another possible image of the child's shadowy entrance into the world, language, and society:

Sombra en tu vientre apenas te estremece  
y sientes ya que morirás un día  
por aquel sin piedad que te deforma.



Una frase brutal te corta el paso  
 y aún rezas y no sabes si el que empuja  
 te arrolla sierpe o ángel se despliega. (395)

Pregnancy is a mysterious experience that deforms the mother's body in much the same way that the irresolvable enigma of a child's future struggles here against the containment of the sonnet form. Form cannot control content. Thus Storni structures the poem to make us see the limits of logic and convention. Her technique recalls Keller's idea of "performative formalism," for more than rhyme escapes rationality and structure here: the sonnet cannot bring to a decisive conclusion the uncertainties of particular life experiences or of poetry.

My last examples from *Mascarilla y trébol* are the poems "Mar de pantalla, I" and "Dibujos animados, II," which are linked through their placement and numbering and through the topic of filmic representation. Both of these poems deal with the aura of technology; Storni's view of the filmic image reminds us of Plato's Allegory of the Cave in which reality is lost to representation. In the first poem, the sea is projected onto the screen and, in spite of the realistic images of nature that follow, the observing "tú" is left with a "mystical, cold, technical flower" (413). This same image begins the next antisonnet:

Una mística flor, técnica y fría,  
 que el pomo de colores, semillero  
 de seres planos que el dibujo alienta,  
 si bien terrestre, de un trasmundo viene.

Hace millares de años que la garra  
 audaz del hombre, por desentrañarlo,  
 pintó paredes y mordió las piedras  
 hasta lograr un árbol que camina.

Mira el pequeño ser en blanco y negro  
 que te calca, tú eres otro calco  
 de un modelo mayor e indefinido:

Un alma tiene que es la tuya misma,  
 la pobre tuya misma persiguiendo  
 trenes de viento y puerto de papeles. (414)

The presence of these elements of modern culture have often been ignored in Storni's work, in favor of gender-specific topics, but they situate her thinking relative to prominent early twentieth-century issues, echoing concerns voiced by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility" and, more recently in a specifically Argentinian context by Beatriz Sarlo in *La imaginación técnica*, who observes the impact of technological change on early twentieth-century culture. While modernization is not as personal an issue as parenthood, it is portrayed as another irresolvable social situation. We see its long-standing nature through its associations with Plato, yet it is modern because of the particular means of representation here—film. The image slides through our fingers at the end of the first poem and in the second we're left to chase paper ports and trains of wind. In some ways, Storni's vision may anticipate Baudrillard and the late twentieth-century society of the spectacle, for the images in this poem are simulacrum of simulacrum. The poems are meditations on modernity, which is in constant flux, while at the same time they confront dilemmas about image and representation that are inexorable issues in language.

With the antisonnet Storni is not simply reviving a formal shell, for her poems depend on the form's very old origins and on concerns associated with the past as they are refracted by contemporary circumstances. Oppenheimer's analysis of the origins of the form makes it apparent that "Dibujos animados" juxtaposes modern and ancient in yet another way. When discussing the sonnet's harmonic proportions, Oppenheimer returns to Plato's *Timaeus* and its discussion of the cosmic order and harmony of certain numbers to reveal that the relationships between the numbers 6:8:12, upon which the structure of the sonnet depends, are not arbitrary: "The ratios between these numbers contain not only all the musical consonances, but also the inaudible music of the heavens and the structure of the human soul" (189). Reading these ideas relative to Storni's concern with the soul in the last verse above produces an eerie echo; Oppenheimer's ideas augment the sense that the sonnet's harmonic structure is not enough to hold together body and spirit in the contemporary world. Once more, Storni's antisonnet demonstrates both the ideal (harmony, resolution, order) and our distance from it (uncertainty and an at-times unrepresentable reality). Storni uses the structure to emphasize discontinuity and in the process questions Western modernity's narrative of continuous progress, thereby calling indirect attention to her position on the periphery as both woman and Argentine.

The use of the sonnet opens an intergenerational conversation, and Stor-

ni's antisonnet ties her to both modernism and to the avant-garde. Thirty-seven years later, Enrique Lihn's use of the form in collections from 1975 (*Por fuerza mayor*) and 1977 (*París, situación irregular*) may appear anachronistic.<sup>9</sup> And it is. But the poet steps out of his own and his contemporaries' emphasis on free verse for a reason: Lihn revives the form to comment on how an undemocratic Chile is anachronistic, how the turn to dictatorship caused by the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973 created a set of circumstances that mirror the sonnet in its rigidity and its authority as a poetic form. The political references are apparent when one considers Lihn's change in style in light of the dates of publication of these collections, but Lihn also made his ideas explicit, for while Storni did not write much about her process, Lihn has discussed the political underpinnings of his return to the sonnet quite openly. In a chapter of *Conversaciones con Enrique Lihn* entitled "A propósito de soneto," Lihn and Pedro Lastra discuss how the rules of the sonnet can provide the same challenge as a game of chess, and how its conventions can allow us to see both language and form as a "cosa hechiza, artificial, prefabricada" (74). This self-consciousness of language's construction is necessary in order to avoid its fossilization, and the sonnet's format highlights this, but there are also other reasons Lihn used the sonnet in these books: "yo empleé el soneto también para hablar desde el terror, en la represión: no para denunciarla ni documentarla sino para encarnarla. . . . La forma misma de expresión debía hacer sentir lo que entonces no tenía que aparecer como el tema de los sonetos" (75). He describes the octaves and sestets as "prisons" which require their inhabitants to make unexpected moves. While the Chilean models his sonnets on the Spanish Baroque tradition, mentioning Quevedo in particular, he also says that "en lugar de imitar la tradición y rendirle culto al opresor representado lingüísticamente por la rigidez de la forma, el oprimido la degrada aparentando rendirle pleitesía" (76). Of the three poets I consider here, Lihn dialogues most directly with the Spanish tradition; choosing seventeenth-century models, he builds on this moment's awareness of a discontinuity between "words and things," as

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9. Lihn (1929–1988) is a Chilean poet whose work can be called "situational," for he confronted reality in a variety of styles: conversational, dramatic, satiric, descriptive. He also wrote quite long and very brief poems in an assortment of registers: colloquial and oral, eloquent and tinged with high culture. He is a very well-known poet in Chile, and there are many critics of his work; among these are Rodrigo Cánovas, Carmen Foxley, Oscar Sarmiento, and George Yúdice, as well as those cited in the course of my argument.

Foucault might have it. The historical Baroque textualizes otherness, and as Catherine Connor has explained, displays “a vigorous alternative discursive system paralleling, sustaining, and yet undermining the more powerful system” (382). In evoking the Baroque, Lihn’s sonnets create an analogy between the colonial situation and contemporary circumstances, and his ironic use of the structure presents us with examples of his simulated compliance with an inherited model.

In *Por fuerza mayor*, Lihn uses the book’s title to refer to the impetus for his poetic process, an individual’s position relative to the larger political situation, and, perhaps, to the exigencies of the sonnet that dominate this collection.<sup>10</sup> The title refers to forces beyond human control, to actions compelled by superior powers, while the expression also reminds us of *camisa de fuerza*, another kind of constraint.<sup>11</sup> The book does not begin with the sonnets, however, but with three free verse poems that set up some of the themes that will recur throughout: nostalgia, loss, absence, the passing of time, and the impossibility of representation or the distance between word and thing. These poems are followed by four sections: “Sonetos del energúmeno,” “Sonetos mortales,” “Sonetos de sociedad,” and “Sonetos de todo amor.” The final two poems return to free verse. Thus the sonnets are framed by more flexible verse forms, marking their difference but also their similarities, for the collection uses different speakers and a range of themes to tie all these poems together. The closing poem reiterates the book’s title and reflects metapoetically on what may or may not have been achieved:

Pude haber fracasado, pero no me perdonaría  
 si lo hubiera hecho más allá de los límites  
 de una cierta sinceridad que incluso le está permitida a las palabras;  
 y pocas veces creí que pudiera reescribir una tan vieja expresión  
 así, de una manera natural.

. . . . .  
 Luego todos los artificios del lenguaje  
 —y el lenguaje mismo es el primero de ellos—  
 quisieron ponerse aquí al servicio de la poesía

10. I will focus on this collection here both because it precedes *París, situación irregular* and because the later volume includes poems from the earlier one.

11. In the translation of Kamenszain’s article, the title is rendered as “By coercion,” an interpretative rather than literal version of its possible meanings.

que no es ni artificial ni natural;  
 Tierra de nadie a lo mejor pero un lugar común en que esos polos se tocan  
 y en el mejor de los casos por fuerza mayor. (79–80)

In the course of the book, Lihn reflects on the sonnet from within the form, but here he returns to the rhythms of everyday speech to demonstrate poetry's paradoxes: artificial and natural, it is a gathering place and a no-man's-land ruled by a superior force, a force which may or may not be beneficent.<sup>12</sup> Lihn's use of both free verse and the more obvious compulsion of the sonnet ultimately demonstrates the similarities among poetic forms and reminds his readers that poets work *with* the difficulty of language and structure in all poetic forms (Paul Valéry, qtd. in Dale 95).

The first group of sonnets is dominated by the voice of an “energúmeno”—a crazy or possessed speaker. In one of these sonnets, “Cuando el marqués de Ripamontti en flor,” he reveals himself to be part of a “raza inmortal: la del verdugo” (24); he is a tyrant, torturer, or sadist, reminiscent of a more famous French Marquis. The poem “Nombre de pila” names him as “el Terrible Tetas Negras,” but not before dragging us through a range of possible aliases:

Nombre de pila: el Buitre, alias el Vaca.  
 Apellido paterno: ¿Por el padre?  
 Apellido materno: ¿Por la madre?  
 Hijo de puto y puta, Caco y Caca;  
  
 y qué estado civil ni qué cosiaça:  
 viudo de nacimiento de su padre  
 e intrauterinamente con su madre  
 casado y con maracos y maracas. (22)

His attitude is defiant, yet ludic; the speaker plays with form, with language, with life, and with other human beings. There is a certain irony in giving voice to a “monster” in a time-honored high cultural form like the sonnet. The heavy end-rhyme here heightens the irony of the content and increases the constrictive effect by emphasizing line breaks. The rhyme points out and

12. Two obvious examples of other poems that reflect on the process of their production in this collection are “El soneto de forma recoleta” and “Yo le dije al autor de estos sonetos” (30, 53).

binds together different concepts: *Vaca/caca*, *madre/padre* (in “Nombre de pila”), *suegras/negras*, *flor/peor*, *horizonte/descoronte* (the latter term a Chilenism meaning uproar or mess), *apariencia/decadencia*, *yugo/verdugo* (in “Cuando el marqués . . .”). While rhyme is often used to create a musical, comical, or pleasurable effect in poetry, here sound often contradicts sense. In another apparent contradiction, the mechanicality of the structure allows for surprise: rhyming *horizonte* with *descoronte*, for example, a spatial term indicating limits with a very local adjective referring to an uproar or lack of limits.

In the next section, “Sonetos mortales,” the speaker is not identified so clearly as an outsider, but the subject of many of these poems is social separation: exile, confinement, death, disappearances, ghosts. “Por un miedo a la muerte sobrehumano . . .,” for example, appears to talk about the *energúmeno* from a third-person perspective:

Por un miedo a la muerte, sobrehumano  
 un animal de especie mal habida  
 se hizo hombre: una bestia archiobsedida  
 que pretendió meterle al sol, la mano.

Para huir de su cueva, del gusano  
 construyó una insondable galería  
 corte y palacio, circo y gradería  
 y asesinó al hermano de su hermano. (35)

He is an animal-made-man who moves from cave to palace, “desviviéndose en aras del Progreso” (35). His destructive mission again undermines both the concept of modernity or progress and the continuity of the sonnet form. The order of the sonnet is analogous to the tomblike environs, and in the sestet the speaker proclaims:

Estas, Favio, oh dolor, que ves ahora  
 no ruinas sino tumbas en colmena  
 frutos podridos son de un árbol preso.

Aquí el sujeto tal vive a deshora  
 por no morir, pudriéndose en cadena,  
 desviviéndose en aras del Progreso. (35)

The speaker observes his subject dying in the sonnetlike prison of his own construct. In this case formal limits appear to isolate and control the hubris of both speaker and the person he observes (his reflection? his double?). The invocation of Favio recalls another Golden Age poet, Rodrigo Caro and his “Canción a las ruinas de Itálica.” Although not a sonnet, in this neoclassical poem Favio represents the knowledgeable stoic who does not follow popular opinion and situates Lihn’s poet within Baroque moral tradition (Pascual Barea 137). The intertextuality with Caro also highlights the theme of ruins, a characteristic of Renaissance poetry, which reflects on contemporary Chile and, perhaps, the “ruins” of the civilized sonnet here.

The mirror image is elaborated in the “Sonetos de sociedad” that continue the idea of the mad or bestialized speaker. In her perceptive analysis of this section of the book, Tamara Kamenszain focuses on the figure of the parrot as speaker who appears explicitly in several of these poems: “Half-human because it talks, doubly human because it imitates speech, a deformed mirror of mankind because it repeats, the parrot takes its place in Lihn’s poems in order to effect a multitude of references which it incarnates” (33). Kamenszain points out the parrotlike complicity that is signaled through the mechanical mimicry of this speaker; she notes the association between madness and the parrot (through content and also the echo *loro-loco*). She also notes that Lihn may avoid censorship of his critical stance through this animal mask and sees how the parrot may parody the conventional relationship between author and speaker (34). Read in relation to other sections, “Sonetos de sociedad” continues to examine the limits of humanity. Many of these poems include a kind of fablelike morality expressed through animals. We see a typically ironic moral in “Cuando el leon limpiándose las uñas . . . ,” a poem in which two animals economically dispatch their prey—all of their parts are utilized—and offer, finally, “un buen ejemplo a ti que con Campari / brindas por la masacre de una huelga” (48). There are lessons to be gleaned from other species. The control of language, rhyme, and meter, like the formality of a toast, do not an enlightened person make. This poem ironizes upper-class decorum and political projects clothed in traditional poetry’s association with “civilization” to reveal the paradoxical violence behind the clinking of glasses.

“Sonetos de todo amor,” the final grouping, returns to the more classical theme of love, but read relative to the rest of the collection, prior themes such as isolation, separation, and unattainable communication continue to resonate in this last section. This is love poetry that laments distance and

impossibility, but that also inscribes the inability to overcome these problems through form.<sup>13</sup> The final sestet of “Que sería de mi sin mis palabras” exemplifies this metapoetic quality:

voy llenando este hueco que me haces  
 en carne propia con la tuya, el cuerpo  
 de una escritura que te parece

y no se te parece, escrita yaces  
 hecha de nada en un cuaderno muerto  
 en el que mi palabra desfallece. (65)

These are process poems and, like the enjambment that undermines what writing can do (“te parece / y no te parece”), the sonnet’s conclusion does not end the process, but leaves us instead with the unsatisfying resolution of the poet’s failure to evoke or reach his beloved. Again the strong end-rhyme both reinforces meaning and empties it out: *haces/yaces, cuerpo/muerto, te parece/desfallece*. Lihn’s poems do not just concern his loved one, but also deal with his desire for language and with its limits: with what a sonnet can and cannot do. In his essay about form and closure in poetry, Christian Wiman’s observations are pertinent to Lihn:

If one’s experience of life is truly confusing and chaotic, and if one’s feeling for the inadequacy of language is something more than an academic idea, perhaps the proper response is either silence or coherence. Not the kind of coherence that eliminates uncertainty, not the kind of closure that congratulates itself, but something sharper, some only momentary peace which, because it comes with a consciousness of its loss, is also pain. (215)

Lihn affirms his yearning to push genre beyond its limits, to work in unexpected ways, when he reflects on contemporary poetry: “la poesía debe ingeniársela para reivindicar como suyos algunos terrenos ocupados por otros discursos” (Lastra 80). By extension, sonnets are not just for love and meditation, but can provoke or embody social dissent and confront uneasy

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13. Luis Correa-Díaz writes that Lihn’s love poetry suffers from “el secreto que atraviesa toda la poesía amorosa—su carácter literario, su condición de escritura y como tal de lengua muerta, lengua incapaz de dar vida al deseo de amor que le da origen” (93).



philosophical dilemmas, but they do so indirectly: by disarticulating language, offering us only “momentary” and therefore painful formal serenity that ultimately reminds us of what language cannot accomplish. Perhaps it is because of this urge to push poetry out of its accustomed spheres of action (and his readers out of their complacency) that Lihn’s sonnets in *Por fuerza mayor* also draw attention to factors that are beyond the poet’s control: language’s multiple meanings and silence’s role in communication; the changing contexts of readers and writer; and the many ways in which poetic form can and cannot embody both social and literary circumstances.

Unlike Storni and Lihn, Cuban Reinaldo Arenas is not primarily recognized as a poet.<sup>14</sup> His narrative work—novels, short stories, autobiography—has been more widely circulated and commented upon than his two books of poetry: *Leprosorio*, a series of long poems written between 1974 and 1976, and *Inferno (poesía completa)*, published in 2001. Yet in interviews, Arenas has stated that poetry is central to him and to his vision of literature: “Y no debe hacerse de la poesía un género, sino sencillamente una necesidad literaria” (Soto 60). His prose may be considered poetic at times, as it often incorporates lyrical moments that do not move the narrative forward. Because of his sometimes oblique prose style, readers may be surprised to discover the formalism embodied in the series of thirty-seven sonnets that comprise the second part of *Inferno*.<sup>15</sup> Entitled “Sonetos desde el infierno,” the section reiterates the book’s title, which Arenas elaborates in his own brief introductory remarks: “He contemplado el infierno, la única porción de realidad que me ha tocado vivir, con ojos familiares: no sin satisfacción lo he vivido y cantado” (177). In his prologue to *Inferno*, Juan Abreu affirms that Arenas considered this earth a hell (9), but it is a tormented place that produces beauty, exemplified by these sonnets, as we will see in the readings that follow.<sup>16</sup>

There are common themes in these poems: the world as a tomb, and the associated dialogue between death and life, often manifested by the contem-

14. Arenas is a Cuban author (1943–1990), who repatriated himself to the U.S. in the 1980 Mariel boatlift.

15. There are a few other sonnets in the collection, but this section highlights the form. I am grateful to Ramón Urzúa Navas for bringing Arenas’s poetry to my attention.

16. Abreu also notes that the title of this collection pays homage to José Lezama Lima, another Cuban poet often associated with the neobaroque, author of *Paradise* and an incomplete collection called *Inferno* (20).

plation of a body in decline; love (most often obstructed or forbidden); time and place, the latter of which is indirectly Cuba—not evoked by name in the poems, but regularly appearing in the parenthetical date and place of each poem’s composition. Frequently intertwined, these topics resonate among the poems and also return us to the tradition of sonnet cycles. “Entre tú y yo siempre se opone” offers us a place to begin, for it plays with a classical topic: impossible love.

Entre tú y yo siempre se opone,  
por mucho que intentemos ignorarlo,  
la antigua costumbre que dispone:  
“todo extraño escozar hay que acallar.”

Entre tú y yo siempre se impone  
la consigna: “¡Aquél, aniquilarlo!”  
Así nuestro amor ya presupone  
la hoguera que vendrá para borrarlo. (198)

But this is not just any unattainable love, of course, it is the love that “dare not speak its name,” or homosexual desire (as affirmed by the sestet: “las innombrables escalas de la injuria . . . eso es amarte”). Arenas was widely known as a gay writer; he wrote about the consequences of his sexual orientation in his autobiography and was exiled from Cuba for his “improper conduct.”<sup>17</sup> Many of these poems have autobiographical themes that ally the speaker with Arenas. Thus, in the following love poem, “Tú y yo estamos condenados,” when the speaker describes the lovers as “sentenced” or as “prisoners,” the terms work both figuratively and literally. The poem begins:

Tú y yo estamos condenados  
por la ira de un señor que no da el rostro  
a danzar sobre un paraje calcinado  
o a escondernos en el culo de algún monstruo.

It concludes: “Caminamos soñando un gran palacio / y el sol su imagen rota nos devuelve / transformada en prisión que nos guarece” (199). It is signifi-

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17. *Improper Conduct* is the title of a 1984 film about homosexuality in Cuba. His biography may be what recent audiences know best about Reinaldo Arenas, as his memoirs were made into the film *Before Night Falls* (2000).

cant that the unseen power who controls the lover's fate is "un señor," a man (quite likely a political reference to Castro), and not "el señor," a reference to God. Yet the image of the sun as a sheltering prison which ends the poem makes us see nature as taking part in this imprisonment, forming a counterpoint to the idea that these are historically specific circumstances. Captivity is a general metaphor for forbidden love, for lovers without a place; however, the parenthetical reference at the end significantly locates the poem in a particular place: 1971 Havana. Readers familiar with Cuban history may remember that 1965 was the year that the Military Units to Assist Production (UMAPs) were formed, that is, labor camps meant to make a set of "undesirables," including homosexual men, productive within Cuban society. Though these were later disbanded, there continued to be a heightened atmosphere of repression surrounding homosexuality in 1971 Havana. The poem reverberates with history, then, and also may serve as a premonition of Arenas's actual incarceration, made clear in other poems that are situated in 1975 *Prisión el Morro*. Literary tropes bump up against a rocky reality, reminding us that the poetic persona both is and is not Reinaldo Arenas.

With his homosexual persona, Arenas uses the sonnet in a way that is similar to that of Marilyn Hacker, playing within the tradition, in effect parodying "both the limits of the sonnet form and the limits of gender coherence" (Keller 264). He inscribes a radically different subject (in the sense of both topic and speaker) within a fixed form, bringing the construction of both to the forefront. But is this speaker imprisoned within the sonnet's walls, as he is isolated in society; is he liberated by speaking of his constraints; or is there another way to understand the sonnet's role here?

Reading these poems within the context of Arenas's work as a whole reveals that limitations are what the author both flees and desires. For this poet, the sonnets' restrictions may unleash the "poetic potential of [both] paradox" and pleasure—Brad Epps's phrase to describe Arenas's contradictory narrative and autobiographical desire for "a real man, who is not also and at the same time a homosexual" (271). Epps's convincing reading of two novels (*The Assault* [1991] and *Arturo, the Brightest Star* [1984]) relative to Freudian and queer theories, incorporates Arenas's autobiographical writings with Cuban history to uncover "the beauty that Arenas sees in the encounter with one's opposite" (272). "Opposite" is not the conventional female, but rather "men who have wives and girlfriends but enjoy penetrating other men" (Smith 264). In Cuba, a man who assumes a dominant role is not implicated in homosexuality; when Arenas came to the United States in the

mid-1980s, he found an uninspiring lack of oppositionality in gay sexual relations (Epps 270; Smith 264). In these novels, homosexual desire for Arenas is contradictory for it is based on resistance and reciprocity; Epps characterizes it as “destructive and tender in the same stroke, shattering and soothing” (282). The sonnet’s restrictions, like well-bounded sexual identities, open the door to passion and permit untenable emotions to be unleashed within its perimeters. Arenas celebrates sexual and ideological transgression through his poetic creation, harnessing these elements in a pleasurably confining form.<sup>18</sup>

For Arenas, the sonnet is also a paradoxical place of expression and silence, where the speaker both “exists” and asserts his presence, and is under erasure, as in the following, written in La Habana in 1976:

Nadie se habrá de alarmar si en esta tarde  
 en que arde el cielo como mi alma arde,  
 me pierdo entre las hoscas arboledas  
 me engulle un dragón envuelto en sedas.

En plena calle y con muy buen sentido  
 el monstruo cumplirá su cometido.  
 Y ustedes seguirán con paso lerdo  
 lo mismo si me quedo o si me pierdo.

Lo mismo si me quedo o si perezco,  
 lo mismo si perezco aunque me quede,  
 lo mismo si perezco y no me quedo.

Tal es la sentencia que merezco  
 por habitar un sitio donde *jamás se puede*  
 y no importarme el mismo sitio un bledo. (202)

His is a phantasmal presence wandering the streets, condemned to the invisibility and impossibility of his situation, yet liberated by it—he doesn’t give a damn. The speaker makes a game of his indifference to society, posterity, and literature through the *conceptismo* and linguistic play of penultimate verse. Once again he is sentenced, here by society as a whole, which passes him by, not allowing him a place as a social subject. He directly implicates

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18. In this, Arenas recalls Walt Whitman, who uses the trope of sexual union and poetic creation in much of his poetry.

his readers in this by addressing us (“Y ustedes seguirán . . .”); if the implied reader here is Cuban, this may be read as an indictment of the contradictions of the Cuban stance on homosexuality within the revolution, or it may refer to the speaker’s dislocation in any society. In his commentary on Reinaldo Arenas and the film *Improper Conduct*, Paul Julian Smith discusses the “trial of visibility” that takes place in the movie and within Cuba itself, and his ideas also resonate with this poem (256–59). This critic notes that Cuba in the 1980s was a spectatorial regime which sought to both uncover homosexuality and to hide it. Arenas went against the tide when he made his homosexuality visible in the film, in his life, and in his writing. In a similar fashion, he does not hide within the sonnet, but uses it as another means of self-revelation. “Look,” he says, “I am even here!”

I selected these three poets among many other possibilities to demonstrate how poetic form can register a “productive and contradictory relation to the social” (Rooney 38). Paying attention to form, among other elements, makes it impossible to ignore the cultural and historical contexts in which these writers worked: a single mother who was a writer, teacher, and journalist, struggling to maintain her status in the Buenos Aires literary establishment; a leftist confronting the limits of expression within language and a dictatorship; an openly gay man who combined forbidden passion and political ideas—each using a poetic form that is particularly emblematic of a cultural inheritance that has structured their marginal social positions. The consequent tension between form and content is central to the creation of meaning. In each case, the sonnet form designates certain limits on what can be said—the constraints of the sonnet are also the constraints of language, of thought, of ideology, and of society. How each writer approaches issues such as gender, sexuality, modernity, and dictatorship through the sonnet exemplifies how we can speak within and against restraints all at the same time. It also exemplifies how poetry as a genre works—through a thickening of the medium, in Jerome McGann’s words, by “exhibiting the processes of self-reflection and self-generation which set texts in motion, which they *are*” (14). Reading these sonnets as an interaction between aesthetic tradition and the moment, place, and person who produced them brings form and its interaction with history and meaning to the forefront.<sup>19</sup>

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19. There are many other poets who write intriguing sonnets in twentieth-century Latin America and who could be included in a longer study. Argentine Juan Gelman, particularly in his book *Incompletamente*, offers an obvious comparison to Lihn in his response to dictatorship and in his intertextuality with Quevedo; Brazilian Glauco Mattoso offers a provocative contrast to Arenas’s

In some of my remarks about possible functions of closed forms in the twentieth century, New Formalism in North American poetry has been a subtext. This movement, which started in the 1980s, involved a group of younger poets who “broke the domination that free verse had exercised over American poetry for twenty years” and returned to rhyme and meter in a variety of forms (Maillard 52). While some of these poets’ and critics’ ideas have informed my thinking about the formal character of the sonnet, their assertive pose around the return to form has highlighted the fact that there is not a similar movement in Latin America.<sup>20</sup> In their prologue to *Las ínsulas extrañas*, a recent anthology of poetry in Spanish from the last half of the century, the book’s editors note that poets from the “New Continent” are more committed to critically processing inherited literary tradition and an almost systematic questioning of language which they link, quite accurately, to Nicanor Parra (Milán et al. 25, 28). They also remark on a “new aesthetic conservatism” in Spain that isn’t seen in Spanish America (34). While there are commonalities in the goal of dismantling inherited models, apparently there has not been a need to band together and present a platform in the region; instead, many poets move fluidly among forms, traditional and open. Rather than a movement, return to a particular form may be seen as a “tactic” for opposition, in keeping with Certeau’s use of the term which he sees as an improvisational art of the weak that seizes possibilities of the moment and operates from the space of the other (37–38). The fact that there has not been a regional movement also calls attention to the construction of Latin America as an object of knowledge, which frequently happens from the outside, assuming a unity and transcontinental communication which often does not exist.

Yet the region does share certain postcolonial circumstances, and the collective social and cultural hybridity of the region may be what allows its poets to draw on a tradition of postcolonial appropriation of the tools of the dominator and to depart more readily from a teleological view of poetic development to use older and more contemporary forms as the subject and

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insertion of marginal sexual identity within conventional structures in his transgressive sonnets of the late 1990s.

20. In the introduction to his collection of sonnets in Spanish, Jesús Munárriz uses an epigraph from the North American New Formalists, “El poema más radical que un poeta puede escribir hoy es un soneto,” indicating that there is transnational dialogue among poets about what a twentieth-century sonnet tradition may mean.

circumstances demand. Storni, Lihn, and Arenas, with their different personal, national, or transnational identities, writing at distinct times and places in the twentieth century, renegotiate the sonnet's terms to proffer creative rereadings of and responses to European tradition. In this they create a double discursive stance, situating themselves within convention and outside of it. These writers create a situation of "productive cultural confrontation," between historical inheritance and innovation, control and chaos, creating a slippage between terms that is highlighted here by a particular poetic form (Bhabha 198). Discussing another inherited tradition—the joke—Homi Bhabha notes that conventional forms can work as acts of "cultural survival and historical renewal" (198). One can renovate Western tradition by inserting something new within it, showing what it can take, how it has evolved, and, perhaps, one's distance from it. The three poets studied here demonstrate how the sonnet can be opened to alternatives while it maintains its resistance to change, for the form itself is paradoxical: "both finished and painfully insufficient, locked but volatile" (Wiman 212). These poets resignify their cultural legacy and in the process demonstrate its malleability—the sonnet is not monolithic, but mutable. An invitation to reinvent, the sonnet as employed by these three very different poets embodies a range of intercultural experiences of both continuity and transformation. These readings reveal how the choice of poetic form both shapes and depends upon the author's and his or her readers' experience and how a particular aesthetic form is both charged and changed by circumstance.

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