Art from a Fractured Past

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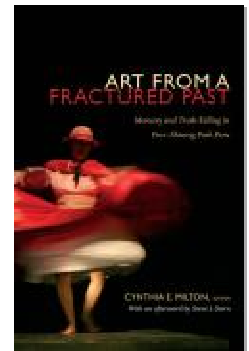

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PART TWO / TELLING STORIES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

CHAPTER FOUR / VÍCTOR VICH

VIOLENCE, GUILT, AND REPETITION / ALONSO CUETO'S NOVEL *LA HORA AZUL*

In recent years, Peruvian literature has worked intensely to represent the political violence of the last decades of the twentieth century. Some novels have known great success: in 2006, *The Blue Hour* (*La hora azul*), by Alonso Cueto, and *Red April* (*Abril rojo*), by Santiago Roncagliolo, both won the prestigious Spanish-language awards Anagrama and Alfaguara. At the same time, the Peruvian-American bilingual author Daniel Alarcón published the award-winning *War by Candlelight* (2006) and *Lost City Radio* (2007). In 2010, Peru's most fêted and well-known author, Mario Vargas Llosa, some of whose writing has addressed the theme of political violence, won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his life's work.[1] These authors have placed Peruvian literature, and the theme of Peru's internal war, in the forefront of the international literary scene.

Peruvian literature is playing a fundamental role in the ways that Peruvian culture is attending to the past political violence in the present day. Beyond the international recognition of the literary merit of these novels, these works have had an impact on Peruvian memory debates by making conceivable what happened, often taking as their point of departure some of the findings of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Final Report*. Indeed, the commission may have greater impact in cultural domains than in any other social or political sphere, and its conclusions are entering into the national imaginary via artistic texts. The focus in this chapter is on the novel *The Blue Hour* by Alonso Cueto, a novel that goes beyond just criticizing the role of the armed forces in the internal conflict to show us how the ongoing effects of the political violence are imagined within contemporary memory questions, in particular with the

role played by middle- and upper-class Limeño society in the conflict and their subsequent responsibility.

With an epigraph from Javier Cercas ("at best, one is not only responsible for what one does, but also for what one sees or reads or hears"), *La hora azul* places before the reader several questions that invite response: Is guilt something that is socially inherited? Are new generations in some way also participants in atrocities committed in the past? What responsibility does the present generation have toward history? In postwar Germany, Hannah Arendt reflected on the subject of inherited guilt and proposed the need for subsequent generations to acknowledge what had taken place without the future citizenry necessarily identifying itself as "guilty." In her opinion, indignation was an emotion more likely than guilt to render justice.[2]

In recent years, a sector of the Peruvian middle and upper classes has been building an exculpatory narrative of political violence. "We did not know, we did not want to know" have become commonplace phrases and can be extended to the behavior of the state itself, which has come to treat the violence as an exclusively military problem. "Not knowing" and "not hearing" are thus phrases that reveal what has come to be called the "differential impact" of political violence. In fact, the most devastating finding of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not that more than 69,000 people had died but the assertion that "no one" had known of more than half of these deaths.[3] Neither the state nor the most respected human rights organizations nor civil society itself had estimated that the final figure would come to double previous official statistics: "these are people who suffered a tragedy, and the country—not only in its official dimensions but also in its social—simply did not notice that they had died or disappeared. This is more or less to say that these Peruvians were nonexistent for the nation long before they had, in reality, ceased to exist."[4] This invisibility is in keeping with the way the Peruvian nation has historically been constructed and imagined. Successive governments did not engage this population and thus did not know what happened within the nation's boundaries.

In this chapter I argue that Alonso Cueto's *La hora azul* aims to reveal the least well-known dimension of the political violence: the guilt of Peruvian citizens, and how this guilt might be constructive in building a different national

consciousness, one such that Peruvians, regardless of class, know and want to know about their fellow citizens and territory.

> I don't carry the guilt of my father.
> Of course you do, or maybe you have part of the guilt, see?
> But why?
> We all carry the guilt of our parents, and of our children too.
> I don't see why.
> Just because.[5]

The novel recounts the story of Adrián Ormache, a prominent lawyer in Lima who, after his mother's death, begins to discover an undeniably shameful family history. The novel narrates how the protagonist goes about confronting a truth that is more awful at every turn but that he, far from evading or denying, decides to face through to is ultimate consequences. By means of this narrative structure of revelations of a family past that resonate into the present day, the author asserts that knowledge of the truth (or here revelations) can transform subjectivities and in this way initiate a process of national reconciliation. In a first instance, the "truth" Ormache discovers has to do with the fact that his father, a high-ranking soldier in the zone of violence, was a torturer and a rapist of peasant women. In a second instance, he discovers that one of these women is alive and that he likely has a half-brother.

La hora azul follows the format of a detective story: the novel is, in effect, an allegory intended to name the country's need to uncover a hidden truth. For this reason, from its first pages *La hora azul* is eager to give an account of the nation's fractures and emphasizes the frivolity of the Peruvian upper class. The story begins with Ormache describing his appearance as if in a magazine for the "jet set." Smiling, triumphant, sure of himself, Ormache is presented as a person who is confident that he has no personal problems. He feels proud to count among his friends Fernando Belaúnde, Lourdes Flores, and other politicians of the Peruvian right. "I liked having a well-located house, a wife who was agreeable and affectionate and a good hostess, daughters who were well behaved and accomplished at school. I liked, I am not ashamed to say, to be well-dressed."[6] The protagonist is portrayed as knowledgeable about Peruvian reality—a knowledge that is never

questioned and does not pose any destabilizing elements, and that the character handles comfortably alone within his social circle. It is precisely at this kind of "knowledge" that the novelist directs his critical gaze in order to question the official versions of the internal armed conflict: "and so for many years I lived with the certainty that my father would have been in Ayacucho, fighting Shining Path terrorists, and that he had done something to defend our nation."[7]

Nevertheless, this knowledge—a heroic narrative of defending the nation—is challenged by the discovery that the military committed human rights abuses. In particular, Ormache discovers his own father's involvement in these abuses: "the women, he fucked, and sometimes afterwards he gave them to the troops for them to fuck, and then after they shot them; those things he did."[8]

In this way, the novel places before its readers two conflicting discourses that claim to account for political violence in Peru. The first discourse, a nationalistic one, advances the argument that the state and the armed forces acted to "defend" the population and in the process might have committed "excesses." The second discourse presents soldiers and Senderistas as both responsible for the terror and illegal acts of violence.

The subject of rape is central to this novel: it is presented as a strategy of war, as a generalized practice that demonstrates the way the state interacted with its population during the armed conflict.[9] In effect, by making rape visible, *La hora azul* narrates one of the most hidden subjects of the political violence; not the story of the actions of Shining Path (which are largely known by all Peruvians) but rather that of the armed forces (less well known among the Peruvian middle and upper classes).

> The officials tossed the bodies of the dead in a dump so that the pigs would eat them and their families could not recognize them. One time, three soldiers killed a baby in front of his mother and then raped her next to her child's body. Don't go on telling me this, he said. Fine, but actually all of this was in response to what had been done by Shining Path who burned their prisoners alive and hung notices on the charred corpses. One very widespread Senderista practice was to execute the mayors of villages in front of their wives and children. They killed them in front of them and then forced

them to celebrate. They hung the corpses of babies in trees. All this they told me.[10]

La hora azul portrays soldiers as trained to commit criminal acts and depicts the military as depraved. The torturers who appear in this novel (Charo Osorio and Guayo Martínez) are pathetic figures, with no understanding of the complexities of what was happening in their country. The soldiers' brutal actions reproduce the vices of this poorly constituted nation-state, where racialized geography feeds human rights abuses committed by coastal Peruvians (mestizo) against highland (largely of indigenous descent) Peruvians.

Clearly, if *La hora azul* foregrounds the subject of the ethical deprivations of "the forces of order," it does so in order to engage contemporary debates over endemic human rights violations by the armed forces. The novel presents human rights abuses not simply as acts of individuals (and thus "excesses") but as the result of a generalized practice within a calculated strategy of war. Thus, while this novel is written against the society as a whole that allowed the violations, it specifically targets the military institution as responsible for harming Peruvians rather than defending them and for attempting to hide this violence.

At the heart of the novel is the relationship between the lawyer Adrián Ormache and Miriam, a woman his father raped, who was able to escape one night from the barracks where she was being held prisoner. The author tells us very little about Miriam: we know that she was originally from Luricocha, in Ayacucho, that Shining Path killed her older brother, and that shortly thereafter the rest of her family also died in a confrontation between soldiers and Senderistas. Terrorized by what had happened—the deaths of her family, rape, assaults against her community—Miriam managed to migrate to Lima, where with the help of an uncle she gave birth to Miguel and began working in a hair salon. We never learn her last name.

The novel narrates how Adrián Ormache meets Miriam and enters into an intense relationship with her. He becomes acquainted with Miriam after he has learned the truth about his father's actions in the highlands. In meeting Miriam, Adrián confronts an often-denied dimension of his country: that of social hierarchies, inequality, and racism. Throughout the novel, Adrián grapples with

his class prejudices and his tastes. For example, he discovers the northern zone of the city where internal refugees have migrated to escape the war ("for me, all this was a lunar landscape; I never would have thought I'd be there").[11] Though he cannot stop aestheticizing the migrant neighborhoods, he nevertheless snobbishly mocks *criollo* or popular culture.

Similarly, Adrián's relationship with Miriam is one filled with attraction and repulsion. It seems that the more involved with her he becomes—to the point of obsession—the greater his guilt and torment, leading to his ultimate rejection of her. Yet, on her death, his obsession suddenly dissipates. He returns quickly to earlier social hierarchies and prejudices. Initially, Miriam seems to him "the most beautiful woman in the world,"[12] but once she dies he changes his mind: "But, aside from her eyes, I now think that she wasn't a pretty woman. She was rather somewhat unpleasant."[13]

Why this change in perception of her beauty? It seems that Adrián's sense of guilt is what makes him initially attracted to Miriam. His guilt temporarily suspends his normal tastes, thus altering his vision so as to see her as attractive. This guilt draws him closer to her. Yet the Miriam he sees is his imagined vision of her—someone who serves as a foil to his machinations rather than a real person. This is a crucial point to note, since the novel's end draws a parallel between Adrián's imaginings and those of the nation-state.

Yet guilt for his father's actions does not fully explain Adrián's attraction to Miriam. Both men fell in love with Miriam. In the case of Adrián's father, according to Adrian's version of events, he detained Miriam in order to prevent her being raped by other soldiers. Even though Adrián seems to reject his father's actions, the author nevertheless draws a paternalistic parallel between father and son. By falling in love with Miriam, the son *repeats* something of the father's act: he sexually dominates Miriam while legitimating such domination as protective love. While it is Adrián's brother, Rubén (a lascivious *criollo*), who looks physically most like their father, it is Adrián who *reproduces* his paternal inheritance by placing himself in the same position of power as his father. After the death of the father the position of power is empty, and so the novel narrates how a new subject prepares himself to occupy it. What does not change is a certain masculine movement: the father abducts Miriam, then Adrián harasses

her. In both cases, Miriam always appears as an object on which the desire of the other is imposed.

The relationship that is established in the novel between *voice* and *power* is also noteworthy. In fact, the whole novel is told from a first person point of view, with the protagonist finally declaring his fantasy of being a writer. In effect, the lawyer Adrián Ormache not only speaks all the time but also seizes on literary writing, which he begins to idealize almost vulgarly. In other words, the narrator becomes very conscious that his power is also a linguistic one. The vehement sense of the necessity of "knowing" that spurs nearly all of his actions presupposes that truth can be discerned objectively and, from there, that the aesthetic form is, in itself and for itself, a site of "truth." Ultimately, his identification with language takes on such magnitude that he does not understand Miriam's silence: "If you're not going to speak to me, I don't know why you came—I said to her. It would have been better for you to have stayed at home. Next time, send me another girl who'll at least talk to me, not a mute like you."[14]

Adrián does not ask himself why Miriam has remained mute or about her choice to keep silent. Is Adrián simply just a new torturer, replacing the previous generation, who attempts to access the voice of his victim? This explanation might seem excessive, but it is consistent with the fact that the novel deals with the character's constant effort to handle his paternal inheritance: "I could not free myself from him," Adrián says, aware that his destiny is still possessed by an inheritance that is very difficult to manage.[15] In effect, the father goes on living as a ghost who makes his presence felt throughout the novel.

The novel places Miriam and her son, Miguel, in a very different position relative to language: they do not speak, or they speak little, and they are represented to readers with a buffer of silence around them. To a certain extent, the silence of both is their answer, or their testimony, regarding everything that has happened. Miriam herself says this at one point: "Because when Miguel grows, his silence will grow with him. That's what I always think."[16]

Thus the issue is not only that the subaltern does not speak in this novel but additionally that "its not-speaking accumulates" and becomes the signifier of a still-active past and of a present full of unresolved wounds.[17] The representation of power goes hand in hand with that of the subaltern world, which is defined

as one that has interiorized its own colonization and that has been deprived of all voice. When the subaltern does speak, the words seem all the more powerful:

> I hated your father so much, I tell you. I could have killed your father if I had had the chance because he deceived me so much and abused me, in that room. I hated him so much: because of them, because of the soldiers, because of the *morocos*, I lost my family. I could not see my family, I could not reach them; they died; they died without me. And I hated your father so much; but now I no longer hate him; now I almost love him.[18]
>
> I hated him but then I loved him; I loved him very much; and, I had to leave him but I love him still. Your father was the worst man, but also the best man to me. He kept me locked up but he also made it so that they would not kill me.[19]

The simultaneous emotions of hate and love are not solely an instance of "Stockholm syndrome" but are an attempt by the author to create a representation in which wounds can heal themselves and to produce the site on which society can build national reconciliation. The novel strives anxiously for that result—possible national reconciliation—but ultimately does not fully reach it. In this sense, the author of *La hora azul* seems to propose that the condition under which reconciliation might occur is when both abuser and abused end up falling in love with each other. This dynamic is projected through to the end of the novel, when the subaltern (in this case her son, Miguel) is finally able to say something. Curiously, Miguel renders thanks to Adrián. In the final dialogue between Adrián and Miguel, a kind of conciliation takes place. Adrián says:

> The other day I went to an academy near your house—I told him. They have some preparatory classes there for the University of Engineering. They teach you math and prepare you for the exam. Now, when we go back we'll pass by there to see if you can start.
>
> I don't believe he answered me. But when I turned, Miguel was looking at me. He looked straight at me for the first time, like I think he had never done before. So I saw the brown reflection of the eyes, the eyes [of his mother] that I had seen in the bed of that hospital. But unlike that day, when I had turned away and had left her there to die, [this time] I stayed sitting next to him, a long while, in silence.

I wanted to tell you something—he [Miguel] said.

What?

He looked at the horizon. The winter was stretching itself over the sea and was lost in the long arm of La Punta.

I wanted to thank you—he said. Thank you, that's all.[20]

Commenting on these paragraphs, Juan Carlos Ubilluz argues that this ending sets up charity—a reciprocal pact whereby the recipient (Miguel) thanks the benefactor (Adrián) for his generosity—as the beginning of national reconciliation.[21] Yet the pact is uneven: the fact that the victim "thanks" a representative of power reinforces the vertical communication between one social sector and another. It could be further argued that such charitable acts promote complacency toward inherited guilt. After all, Adrián begins to feel better about everything that he has done in the past (and perhaps even his father's acts) because he will have helped Miguel go to university. This act of "charity" allows Adrián to return to his home and to his life as it was before he knew the "truth," a little more content.

Whether this charity promotes reconciliation is not clear. First, we do not know whether or not Miguel accepts Adrián's offer to help with his education. Miguel seems hesitant, and we do not know his life plans. With this narrative trick of an unresolved conclusion, the author leaves the reader not knowing how the relationship will continue or what will happen to Miguel in the future. Importantly, we never find out if Miguel is indeed Adrián's half-brother.

The very possibility of charity as leading to absolution, or at least to a less guilty conscience, also remains unresolved in this novel. Much of the novel illustrates the way Adrián attempts to become more aware of and sensitive to social inequalities. Yet ultimately he remains stuck in his racial stereotypes and social hierarchy. Charity, in Adrián's view, allows him to envision himself as having changed, without undergoing any radical transformation that would alter his dominant position. "In front of the red light [at the intersection] was gathered the typical group of beggars. Usually, I barely turned around. But that night I fixed on a girl with braids. I gave her a coin."[22]

Charity might only serve to exorcise his guilt. Ultimately, it just reinforces social hierarchies. Charity is a gesture that strengthens only the holder of power and never that of the recipient, who remains dependent on the benefactor. In

this novel, charity is the pathetic gesture of a character who does not know what else he can do in a society as degraded as Peru's.

The author presents no alternative and no path by which Adrían could do something better, could change. In effect, while Adrián has done much to arrive at the truth, and he has not been afraid to confront this truth, he falls short of moving beyond it. He is willing to give a coin to a beggar girl but does nothing to address the roots of poverty. While his attitude about beggars (or this specific beggar) might have changed, he does not question the social inequalities that allow for him to be a well-dressed man, with well-mannered daughters and well-placed friends, yet leave Miguel, his possible mestizo half-brother, dependent on him for his education.

In this, the novel concludes by illustrating the lack of individual or societal transformation. Despite his seemingly good intentions, Adrián is portrayed as someone who cannot stop exercising power over others. Only his means of exercising power have changed: formerly a rapist's son, he has become a lover; formerly an indifferent passerby, he is now a charitable patron. Thus, *La hora azul* projects the continued domination of white male power: it is not coincidental that the novel ends with two men conversing (an adult man, Adrían, and a boy, Miguel) and almost negotiating between them a possible national reconciliation, one that retains a strong tutelary structure.

> Why are you helping me so much? [asks Miguel]
>
> I added something like how in Peru there were many social and economic differences and that those of us who were more fortunate had a duty toward those who do not have so much. It seemed to me that someone was dictating to me what I ought to say.[23]

The novel ends with an image in which the restoration of the linkages between Peruvians comes about through an option with very little social weight or will: charity. Power in contemporary Peru may display more "solidarity" and be more "humane," yet charity as a solution to inequalities or a means toward reconciliation remains unconvincing. Adrián repeats something he thinks he "ought to say," not necessarily something he believes. The author thus draws a parallel between the social obligation to charity and national reconciliation.

> Obviously I'm not going to do anything to remedy the injustice so threaded through reality, I can do nothing, I'm not going to help them, nor, perhaps, does it interest me. And yet to have known about so many deaths and tortures and rapes now saddens me so much, and also shames me a little. I don't know why. I won't forget them. Even though I only tell it to myself, and to her.[24]

Does the character free himself from guilt at the end of the novel? We do not know. But what is clear is that the text evades the possibility of a more just society and destroys any impulse that might lead to it. In this sense, Miriam's suicide ends up being an expedient and effective way to evade the possibility of union between two personages of such gaping social differences. It is clear that the novel cannot imagine this possibility. That is, had she not died, the relationship with Miriam would have confronted the narrator with aesthetic and symbolic challenges of greater scope: how to make readers believe possible a loving relationship between these distant social classes, let alone between victim and perpetrator. Peruvian society faces a similar challenge: how to imagine a national community without classist or racist hierarchies of vertical and tutelary relationships. Adrián chooses individual resignation—he cannot transform society, so he does not try; similarly, national reconciliation does not involve comprehensive social transformation but remains an abstraction,[25] as charity does in this novel. Rather than a sign of national reconciliation, charity here remains a means to keep others in subaltern positions. If at any moment the utopian possibility was offered in the relationship between Adrián and Miriam, that of equality and without domination, the novel's end destroys this possibility: in the final conversation between Adrián and Miguel, they both become aware of the intractability of their predetermined positions in society.

In the end, *La hora azul* portrays a breach—immense and insurmountable—that still cannot be overcome in Peru. Why does the lawyer Adrián Ormache continuously despair before the muteness of the two subaltern characters? In a society like Peru's and in a literature in permanent crisis such as ours (I refer to its excessively Lima-centric character), continuing to explore this relationship between subaltern and elite voices, guilt, and responsibility for the past is of crucial importance.

Notes

I am grateful to the Intercambio Cultural Alemán-Latinoamericano for their support in the writing of this chapter. Thanks also to Alejandro Grimson for a long conversation in Buenos Aires. An earlier version of this chapter appears in Ubilluz, Vich, and Hibbett, *Contra el sueño de los justos*. This text and all citations were translated by Kate Saunders-Hastings and Cynthia E. Milton.

1. For instance, *La historia de Mayta* (*The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, 1984), and *Lituma en los Andes* (*Death in the Andes*, 1993).
2. Schapp, "Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility."
3. Lerner, *La rebelión de la memoria*, 147.
4. Mirko Lauer, "La desaparición de la desaparición," *La República*, June 19, 2003.
5. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 149.
6. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 17.
7. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 26.
8. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 37.
9. The matter of the rape of women by soldiers is the most striking example of institutional policies systematically situated outside the law. This practice was so common that it has been affirmed that "where there were soldiers there were rapes" and that there was essentially never any punishment. It has been found that the majority of rapes took place within at least forty military bases. See Theidon, *Entre prójimos*, 120, and "Gender in Transition," 471. On this subject, see CVR, *Informe Final*, vol. 8. In the literary tradition, rape is also a metaphor for postcolonial identity, that of colonial power over indigenous America.
10. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 88.
11. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 152.
12. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 218
13. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 239.
14. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 248.
15. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 25.
16. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 251.
17. The topic has been widely debated since Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"
18. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 219.
19. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 254.
20. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 303.
21. Personal communication with Juan Carlos Ubilluz, October 2008.
22. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 258.
23. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 287.
24. Cueto, *La hora azul*, 274.
25. See Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia."