The CONTRADICTORY (non)identity of the literary prostitute can illuminate areas of contention in economic thought. Is the prostitute a commodity? A good or a service? A capitalist? A worker? Labor? Exchange-value or exchange itself? To the extent that the prostitute doesn’t fit easily into economic definitions, she suggests ways in which these categories themselves can be elusive. By examining how Marx used literature to exemplify the quasi-metaphysical nature of capital, it becomes clear that the literary is present in the very basic building blocks of economics: key concepts are defined allusively, relying on literary references—which is to say, interpretation—in order to be described. Thinking about the literary prostitute in economic terms illuminates an area of economic thought where rules exist only intertextually, and models are describing fictional worlds.

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Living Coin
Literary Prostitution and Economic Theory

I ne’er knew any of their Trade rich two yeeres together; Sives can hold no water, nor Harlots hoord up money; they have many vents, too many sluces to let it out; Tavernes, Taylors, Bawds, Panders, Fiddlers, Swaggerers, Fooles and Knaves, doe all waite upon a common Harlots trenches: She is the Gally-pot to which these Drones flye: not for love to the pot, but for the sweet sucket within it, her money, her money.

—Thomas Dekker

Mais avant même de considérer l’objet vivant comme un bien échangeable, il faut l’examiner en tant que monnaie.

—Pierre Klossowski
Three novels of prostitution—and, more precisely, two protagonists—lead us through complicated dramas that plot the outer limits of such contested theories of value. First, Mexican writer Federico Gamboa’s 1902 Naturalist novel, *Santa*—probably the most successful and enduring Naturalist novel of prostitution—proves to be both apogee and aporia of the genre. Its cycles of degeneration and regeneration begin to seem analogous to the ups and downs of market values, as the novel’s stubborn, high-spirited, “indomitable” (yet doomed) protagonist circulates as a kind of living coin that is coveted, hoarded, treasured and spent by characters who attempt to “save” her—using investment strategies.

We shall see that where Gamboa leaves off at the outer limits of Naturalism in the development of the prostitute as “living coin,” Argentine writer Roberto Arlt picks up in his classic novels, *Los siete locos* (1929) and *Los lanzallamas* (1931). Whereas Santa paid the ultimate price for the contradictions of economic thought—dying when her corporal coin was devalued to the point of worthlessness—Arlt’s “frigid” prostitute, Hipólita, not only survives but flourishes, profiting off of the same contradictions.

Imbecile and mastermind, cashed out and cashing in, fifty-cent trick and high roller, the literary prostitute holds sway by incarnating paradoxical attributes of money, value, time and exchange under capitalism—all the while, of course, attributing the source of the contradictions to her own unfathomable nature.

**Prostitution, Fiction and Economics**

The prostitute “sells herself.” Such a statement is both outlandishly polysemic—thus its enduring literary potentiality—and logically meaningless. Every story (not to say every bone) in our corpus tells us that to become a prostitute is to become “another,” to no longer be what one “was.” And yet the problem with what “every story” tells us is that it rests on the assumption that a human being (such as a prostitute) has an identity the way that a commodity has a value—and that this identity can be exchanged for another or even lost.

What one is one does not possess, and therefore cannot sell. If commodity exchange is taken as the transformation of one object (say cotton) into another (say iron) via the general equivalent, then we might begin to understand why the prostitute cannot sell herself. Whereas the commodity is perfectly exchangeable, we could say that being is perfectly inexchangeable. However, another way to look at this is to say that it would take a special commodity
indeed to embody all the traits of exchangeability yet maintain the ability to be endlessly transformed into other commodities.

Literature thrives on these contradictions, compulsively tallying what is lost (and what is gained) in becoming a prostitute; but this accounting never adds up to a definition of what has changed. At the same time, there are so many *a priori* meanings, innumerable signifying layers accumulated and solidified, that it requires a brutal excavation to get beneath them; and even this archeological approach is illusory, because the transformation is, at bottom, still a matter of language. We can assert that the prostitute “sells her body”; but then it could be argued that she hasn’t sold it at all, because it belongs to her afterwards (to sell again). We can say that she “rents” her body, or the “use” of her body, as though it were a car or a DVD, but this doesn’t account for the change in its “owner’s” “identity.”

In a slightly more sophisticated version, we could pretend, as Marx and Engels did, that prostitution is analogous to the sale of any other form of labor-power in its “self-alienated” condition under capitalism. However, to say that the prostitute sells her “sexual labor-power” merely displaces meaning once more: labor-power produces capital and is absorbed by it; and we cannot locate all of the capital produced by sexual labor-power. Of course, this is true of all labor, but the metaphysical sensation is enhanced by the close relation of “being” and “selling” in prostitution.

It seems that we cannot progress any further in our economic definition of prostitution without “missing the point”—which always remits us to a different field of inquiry (ethics, sociology, politics, law). There is even the sense that to persist in seeking such a “purely economic” definition is itself slightly unethical: for Kathleen Barry, the very terms “sex work” and “sexual labor” imply that sex *should* be labor; and, on the other hand, proponents of the decriminalization of prostitution are equally hesitant to provide an economic definition of “sex work,” since the way they reappropriate it is by restoring to it an inherent specificity which makes it impossible to condemn *de jure*. Both of these factions avoid an economic definition in favor of a political-legal one, rooted in a language of the subject of rights.

We intuit that prostitution must “exploit” the prostitute as coarsely as factory-work expresses living labor from its workers; and that, as Marx wrote in *Grundrisse*, the appropriation of her labor by capital must confront her in “a coarsely sensuous form” (703). In other words, we know that the prostitute works. We know that prostitution is an example of exchange. And yet, the “special service that the capitalist expects from labor-power”—the appropriation of surplus-value—is singularly difficult to pin down.
Or, in other words, it is not at all obvious that what is bought is the same as what is sold. The sexual transaction leaves a residue, a sort of surplus of meaning, glistening unappealingly over its participants. As Walter Benjamin suggested, in any definition of prostitution something will be missing and something left over. He joins the chorus attributing the origin of such contradictions to the prostitute. Somewhat frustrated, he reasons:

No girl would choose to become a prostitute if she counted solely on the stipulated payoff from her partner. Even his gratitude, which perhaps results in a small percentage more, would hardly seem to her a sufficient basis. How then, in her unconscious understanding of men, does she calculate? This we cannot comprehend, so long as money is thought of here as only a means of payment or a gift. Certainly the whore’s love is for sale. But not her client’s shame. The latter seeks some hiding place during this quarter-hour, and finds the most genial: in money. (Benjamin, The Arcades Project 492)

The answer to this apparently straightforward economic question (where is the advantage in prostitution?) must be hidden in something Benjamin cannot perceive: he cannot comprehend the prostitute’s “calculation” because it must be based on an “unconscious understanding of men.” As we shall see, it is not only this latest incarnation of feminine enigma—the incomprehensible financial-psychic calculation of the prostitute—which Benjamin’s Marxism is, in this particular instance, too dogmatic to explain, but money itself: “so long as [it] is thought of as only a means of payment or a gift.”

For this very reason, it would be entirely wrong to say that the prostitute “eludes” economics. On the contrary, by incarnating its mysteries, the prostitute points to ways in which economic thought itself is elusive.

**Coarse Sensuousness**

Marx himself resorted to literary analogy in order to illustrate what he could not explain in the appropriation of labor-power by capital. It is absorbed “coarsely”: als hätt’ es Lieb im Leibe, he says, referring to the fifth scene of Part I of Goethe’s Faust, in which “coarse” laborers shout out, tutti, a refrain from a song about a poisoned rat who writhes in agony—literally “as though it had love in its breast/body” (Grundrisse 704). Goethe’s refrain is itself a pun, playing on the similar sound of Lieb(e) and Leib(e), love and body/breast, to suggest that the contortions of agony simulate sexual ecstasy.
Marx’s choice of the reference undoubtedly has to do with the way in which its polysemy captures a paradox of capital: capital absorbs labor into itself in a “coarsely sensuous form,” as though labor were corporeal and objective (Leib). However, the “dead” or “ex” labor-power that capital assimilates is simultaneously Geist: it is Geist both in the sense that it is “dead” (it no longer has an existence as labor-power, it has been cashed in), but also more specifically because for surplus-value to be produced capital must necessarily incorporate unpaid labor. Thus capital contains more than what it is; and labor haunts capital even as it nourishes it.6

The uncertainty principle of surplus-value, a part of which always “goes missing” even though it is mathematically defined in relation to capital, runs as a fault line through economic thought. Economists can be defined by their take on surplus-value, even as surplus-value destabilizes economics by dividing those who would otherwise be in agreement. Marx himself refined his model in Capital to the idea that it is labor-power that is absorbed by capital, of which labor is its use-value, but there remains the Geist in the machine, that part of labor-power that is not fully assimilated by capital. In 1916, economist Silvio Gesell also used literature to demonstrate his own take on surplus-value in El orden económico natural, arguing that it is not produced by labor, as Marx had asserted, but rather inheres in money itself. In the “Robinsonade”—an exemplary dialogue between Robinson Crusoe and a stranger who is unfamiliar with capitalism—Gesell proposes that money ought to be “freed” from interest through planned devaluation, i.e., by making money itself perishable, like any other good or service (Gesell 163–69).7

Whether interest is considered in Marxian terms as a subset of surplus-value or surplus-value is made a subset of interest (as Gesell and others would have it), the relationship of labor and money in the production of capital presents itself as a riddle of origin. Attempts to “solve” the riddle by choosing either labor or money as the starting point are necessarily sectarian in nature; however, we can dissolve the paradox by showing that one of its preconditions fails to hold (as Gesell’s stranger does when he confronts Robinson Crusoe’s Marxist assumption about surplus-value, or as Marx himself does when discussing the contradictory functions of money in the Grundrisse [211–13]). Any reappraisal of surplus-value today is based on the understanding that the “preconditions” of economics are, on the contrary, always contingent; and for the theoretical socioeconomic benefits of “free markets” to obtain, there must necessarily be a sociopolitical apparatus to support them.8

Literature, on the other hand, as we have seen in both Marx and Gesell, creates worlds in which contradictory positions are both the case. And
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perhaps this is what is meant by the phantasmatic character of capital: having a part that can never be exchanged even as its very identity is predicated on exchangeability.⁹

Specifically, to return to Marx’s Faustian view of labor, the “coarseness” of capital's sensuous absorption of labor should be understood in both senses as unrefined—rough, imprecise and consisting of large particles—but also vulgar and indecent. Thus capital's mechanism is both approximate (and therefore imperfect as a means or receptacle for digesting and assimilating labor) and also somehow morally base. The relationship between these two characteristics of capital's absorption of labor is implicit at the end of Scene 5 of Faust, as Mephistopheles catalyzes a fluid comparison of becoming-capital and becoming-capitalist, using the laborers’ own coarseness against them. This coarseness, understood as both moral and intellectual baseness and, like that of capital, imperfect absorption, aggravates Mephistopheles precisely because it slows down his lesson plan for Faust, which is to demonstrate, by contrast, “how smooth [the laborers’] life runs away.” Luring them with a “cunning-laid poison” Mephistopheles offers the workers any wine they can imagine, warning them only not to spill. They enjoy their wine, but as Mephistopheles had foreseen (“their bestiality will make a brilliant demonstration”), once they are drunk they spill their wine and hellfire erupts spontaneously at the first drop, and their drunken carousing merges seamlessly into cries of pain and shock.¹⁰

The Devil pretends, as a good capitalist, that it is the workers’ clumsiness that causes the hellfire to spring up and burn them to death; in fact, of course, he has been able to orchestrate the entire lesson because he understands it to be the catalytic escape of surplus-value that powers the conversion of labor into capital.

In the ideal world of theoretical capitalism, not a drop of wine would be spilled, and capital would absorb every unit of labor-power; however, there is always that which is lost (or escapes) during exchange, production or consumption: pouring or drinking or toasting, there is always spilled wine, and regardless of where a given economic theory lays the blame for the disappearance of surplus-value—at which specific point it decides to regulate the system: pouring, drinking or toasting—this in itself is never enough to prevent some surplus-value from disappearing, any more than it would be possible to prevent surplus-value from occurring in the first place.

The useful thing about the Devil in illuminating how surplus-value works is that he is a capitalist ab initio, or the first capitalist, because he produces something out of nothing.¹¹ At the same time, the Devil's superhuman abilities to conjure do not require work and in fact what he produces is not itself “real” (it does not endure in its original form) yet it causes real results.¹² The Devil's
behavior is therefore something like an infallible formula for the production of surplus-value, as it produces something for nothing, and in the Devil’s case it doesn’t matter whether the surplus-value comes from unpaid labor-power or from already-accumulated capital, because he is sitting on mountains of both and can always make more. What is the Devil if not the prototype of the exploiter of unpaid dead labor-power and, simultaneously, the hoarder of money? He is the apotheosis (or the apodiabolis) of the body and the spirit of capital. *Faust’s* coarse laborers, unlike Gesell’s stranger, are immediately determined to take advantage of their unexpected visitors, claiming that they will easily be able to “screw [their secret] out of them” over a glass of wine, and it is their very intention to take something for nothing—to exploit surplus-value—that makes them fall for the Devil’s illusions. He counts on their coarseness not only to spill their wine but to assume that they can get the better of him. Both types of coarseness—that of capital’s absorbency and its baseness, embodied by Devil and laborers—are necessary to the unhindered flow of capital.

In fact, as the workers become the rats they ridicule, their coarseness becomes equivalent to their identification with capitalism. This coarseness was initially a kind of resistance to the smooth operation of the Devil, since it is their coarse singing that keeps them from paying attention to him. However, when they actually accept his wine—thinking to get the better of him, by getting something for nothing—they are simultaneously identifying with the Devil’s capitalism and being captured by it.

Furthermore, the Devil’s annoyance can also be seen as that of the capitalist confronted with “wasted time.” As Santiago Colás suggests, Marx’s obsession with the “theft of time” implied in surplus-value is taken to its *reductio* by Antonio Negri as capital’s desire to eliminate time entirely:

Time, as every American knows, is money. That is to say, time *wasted* is money lost. And from the point of view of capital’s desire for perfectly smooth circulation *all* time is wasted. Of course, for capital to eliminate time entirely would be also to eliminate labor, which is the basis of its own functioning. The solution for capital, Negri argues, is a single, abstract time as measure. With this, Negri completes his rendering of Marx’s “use-value subsumed into surplus-value” as the “living temporalities of labor subsumed into the abstract measured temporality of capital.” (Colás 5–6)

To eliminate time from capital would also eliminate labor; but wouldn’t eliminating time from money also take us to a state of hoarding? Money out of time cannot circulate, does not earn interest, and can neither produce surplus-
value (if we believe, like Gesell, that surplus-value inheres in money) nor even embody the surplus-value accumulated in capital from unpaid labor.

The Devil is in one sense a mirage of capital out of time: he is atemporal (eternal), yet he circulates and accrues surplus-value. To take money out of circulation is to commit the error of Marx’s speculator who buries his gold in times in which the social *nervus rerum* is itself buried, out of time: “the speculative burying of treasure,” Derrida wrote, “inters only a useless metal, deprived of its monetary soul.” To truly attempt to separate money from the present time is to bet on the soul of money (Marx’s *Geldseele*) as though it could endure entirely separated from its material conditions or body (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 43–48).

This brings us full circle, for whether “coarseness” is attributed to labor or capital, labor-power or money, worker or capitalist, the relation between the two terms is seen in economic thought as immanent, but only immanent to a given something (such as a given dialectic or temporality). And paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari, we can be sure that this *something* introduces the transcendent. The transcendent may be moral, ethical, legal or political but always implies an outside to the economic, rearing up like a tectonic plate (or, perhaps, in the fictions of prostitution, more like a plateau).

As Marx's sexually charged metaphors for surplus-value might suggest, the literary prostitute incarnates the tense relationship of labor and capital. In literature, she is present when commonsense notions of circulation, liquidity and value fall apart at moments of crisis, pointing out the exceptions to the rule and the risks inherent in any solution (by embodying crisis, exception and risk). She is *Leib/Lieb*, money/labor-power, “free money”/hoarded *Geld*, surplus-value/interest. Counterfeiting, robbery, hoarding, black and grey markets, shadow economies, slavery, trafficking, poverty and stagnant markets are not merely thematized around her; as paradox, the origin of contradictions is attributed to her; and thus all of these are absorbed (“coarsely”) into her paradoxical nature.

**Magni Nominis Umbra: Federico Gamboa’s Santa**

As we have seen, the prostitute often adopts a *nom de guerre* (or more than one) that replaces her given name. In this way, she is abstracted from the particularities of her life up until this point, taking on both a new particular identity (symbolized by the new name) and also a new general identity: in the exchange of her given name and the erasure of her family identity, the prostitute is now “entitled” to every epithet ever accorded to any prostitute, and
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becomes symbolically exchangeable—which is also to say objectively valuable—within the market of prostitution.

Santa brings a new clarity to this analysis of the prostitute’s name by reducing the terms to their lowest common denominator: she does not change her given name (“because your name alone will make you money,” the Madam says [Gamboa 78]).

We can read this zero-degree name change—like the very strength of will with which Santa tries to resist change throughout the novel—as a reductio of the inexorability of exchange itself. While up until now the name change has had moral and even sacrificial overtones, when there is no “new” name in relation to which the original name can be plotted in a two-dimensional line of degeneration—when there is not, in other words, a one-time transformation from one term to another—we can actually trace the prostitute’s “duplicity” more deeply to the paradoxical duality of labor and capital themselves.

The first line of the prologue of Federico Gamboa’s Santa is: “No vayas a creerme santa, porque así me llamé [Don’t go thinking I’m a saint, because [Santa] was my name]” (Gamboa 11). Santa is one of the few prostitutes in the corpus who does not change her name when she becomes a prostitute, and yet her name is central to how she becomes a prostitute. When she enters the brothel for the first time, doña Pepa receives her in still in bed with her last client:

Hasta la cama se acercó Santa, sin ver apenas, guiada por las palabras que oía y no avanzando sino con muchos miramientos y pausas. Chocábale oír, a la vez que las palabras de aquella mujer que aún no conocía, unos ronquidos tenaces de hombre corpulento, que no cesaron ni cuando con las rodillas topó contra el borde de la cama. [. . .]—¿y cómo te llamas? [. . .]

—Me llamo Santa—replicó ésta con la misma mortificación con que poco antes lo había declarado al cochero.

—Eso, eso es, Santa—repitió Pepa, riendo—, ¡mira que tiene gracia! . . . ¡Santa! . . . Sólo tu nombre te dará dinero, ya lo creo; es mucho nombre ese . . . [. . .]

Espontánea la risa de Pepa, no ofendió a Santa, antes sonrió en la sombra que la amparaba, habituada de tiempo atrás a que su nombre produjese—a lo menos en los primeros momentos—resultado semejante [. . .]

—Pero, niña—exclamó Pepa, que había comenzado a palparla como al descuido—, ¡qué durezas te traes! . . . ¡Si pareces de piedra! . . . ¡Vaya una Santita!

Y sus manos expertas, sus manos de meretriz envejecidas en el oficio, posabanse y detenían con complacencias inteligentes en las mórbidas curvas
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de la recién llegada, quien se puso en cobro de un salto, con la cara que le ardía y ganas de llorar o de arremeter contra la que se permitía examen tan liviano.

[Hardly able to see anything, Santa approached the bed guided by the words she was hearing and not advancing without a lot of scruples and pauses. She was dismayed to hear along with the words of the still unknown woman the tenacious snoring of a corpulent man, which didn't cease even when her knees hit the edge of the bed [. . .]

“What is your name? [. . .]”

“My name is Santa,” she replied with the same mortification with which she had just told her name to the coachman.

“Great, that’s it, Santa,” repeated Pepa, laughing, “Wow that’s funny! . . . Santa! . . . Your name alone will bring you money, I can see it now; that’s a great name. . . .”

Pepa’s laughter was so spontaneous that it didn’t offend Santa, but rather she smiled in the shadow that protected her, used to how her name produced similar results, at least at first [. . .]

“Girl,” Pepa exclaimed, having begun to feel her up as though by accident, “what firmness! Like stone! Like a real little Saint [effigy]!”

And her expert hands, her madam’s hands grown old in the work, landed and stopped with intelligent pleasure in the morbid curves of the newcomer, who jerked away, face burning and wanting to cry or attack this lady who thought she had the right to inspect her so casually.] (78)

Santa is not offended by Pepa’s laughter, because she is used to such responses; she doesn’t understand, yet, that the meaning of her name has changed now: it has now become her trademark, the brand whose integrity she will have to protect by maintaining her resemblance to what it denotes—her durezas, her mórbidas curvas—a living statue, impossibly preserved, impervious to time.

The name memorializes the impossibility of the task. Her anger and sadness arise by being touched casually, which prefigures the moment when Santa does recognize herself as having changed: when she realizes that the word puta—written always as an ellipsis, “. . .”—now applies to her; and this blankness substitutes for her identity as a woman: “No era mujer, no; ¡era una . . .!” (80)

Savoring its Catholic resonances, we repeat that Santa is “saved” from the mala vida three times; and three times her name is replaced with “la palabra de las cuatro letras implacables [the word with four implacable letters],” designated with an ellipsis. This ellipsis is not only a prurient avoidance of the
written word *puta*; it also indicates yet another erasure: she is not even a bad word, but a nonword, a censored word.\(^{14}\)

Each “rescue” restores to Santa the correspondence between her name and herself; each time she is “reborn” in love, her name is given back to her, without irony, by her lover. And for each time love turns to betrayal, her “resurrection” is undone; not because she falls again, but because in love she “betrays” her nature as a prostitute, in the double sense of the word: she reveals that she is “really” a prostitute, at the same time that she acts against her own best interests as a prostitute.\(^{15}\)

The repeated traumatic “loss” of her name and its replacement with the “palabra horrible,” “la maldición [curse, damnation]” of the vocative ellipsis “de las cuatro letras implacables” endures through Santa’s cycles of degeneration and regeneration. We already know, from the novel’s prologue, that in some sense Santa’s name will only belong to her forever when engraved on her tombstone. In life, as she herself says, “siempre seré una . . . .” (Gamboa 304, 150).

And yet the second time Santa is “saved” (and the last time she is “damned”) bears further scrutiny. We remember “El Rubio” from better days when Santa had dismissed his offers to rent her an apartment away from his wife, preferring to wait it out in the brothel and see if she might hit the jackpot. However, after breaking up with El Jarameño—a toreador legión in the brothels for both his generosity and his character—Santa’s name is tarnished and her health deteriorates. She is given an inferior room back at Doña Elvira’s; and long gone are the nights when she was made to feel like an empress presiding over the city. She has begun her final descent toward death, and, “convirtiéndose de la noche a la mañana en dueña y señora de una casita [converted overnight into the mistress and lady of a house], Santa’s “renacimiento inefable a una existencia buena, nueva, insoñada [ineffable renaissance into a good, new, undreamed existence]” (301) barely lasts a month.

Rubio soon tires of his newest possession, and “cada vez que las alas entumecidas y torpes de su alma convaleciente pero en vía de alivio, [sic] intentaban volar a la altura, Rubio encargábase de desengañarla en términos rudos [each time that the stiffened and clumsy wings of her slowly recovering soul tried to fly up, Rubio took it upon himself to disillusion her in rude terms]”: “Las meretrices no arriban a las tierras de promisión,” Rubio asserts authoritatively, “¡no faltaría más!; las almas de las mujeres perdidas no vuelan porque no poseen alas, son almas ápteras [Courtesans don’t ascend to the promised land, what a ridiculous idea!; the souls of lost women don’t rise because they have no wings, they are wingless]” (302).

Rubio’s disillusionment with Santa is not predicated on any obvious betrayal; Santa is (for now) faithful to him, and it is, rather, the reality of his
possession of her as his faithful lover—contrasted with his counterfactual desire to possess exclusively that which “belongs to everyone and no one”—which spoils the fantasy:

En tanto se familiarizaba con la idea de que Santa únicamente a él pertenecía; en tanto apresurábase a raspar con sus besos los vestigios indelebles de los miles y miles que a modo de pedrisca habían flagelado sin agotarla la planta deliciosa de su cuerpo trigueño, voluptuoso, y duro, el amasiato fue llevadero, hasta con cierto picor, que en más apetitoso convertíalo, de besos de otros, de muchos; de caricias ajenas que persistían y le daban a la carne comprada y dócil, [sic] perfecta semejanza con esas monedas que han rodado por mercados y ferias y lucen la huella del sinnúmero de dedos toscos que las oprimieron y para siempre opacaron su brillo original y su limpieza prístina. Pero se percató de que los remedios que vende el burdel son ineficaces, y de que a Santa ni con labios de bronce que en toda una vida se cansaran, le rasparía las entalladuras acumuladas y hondas de las ajenas caricias y de los besos de otros.

[As he got used to the idea that Santa belonged to him alone; and as he hurried to sand down with his kisses the indelible imprints of the thousands and thousands of kisses that had flagellated the delicious plant of her wheat-colored, firm, and voluptuous body like hail, the affair was bearable, even somewhat stimulating, the kisses of others, many others, making him more excited; the foreign caresses that persisted and gave the bought and docile flesh a perfect resemblance to those coins that have rolled through markets and fairs and show the fingerprints of numberless rough fingers that squeezed them and permanently dulled their original shine and their pristine cleanness. But he realized that the medicine sold in the brothel doesn't work, and that even with lips of bronze an entire lifetime wouldn't be enough time to kiss away the deep impressions of the distant caresses and kisses of the others.] (304)

Rubio is both attracted and repulsed by Santa qua coin. With his “hipócrita y falsa moral burguesa” (303), he had fetishized her as a fusion of commodity and coin, value and price; and by taking her out of circulation, he committed the economic error of hoarding. Rubio, like Marx’s speculator, is left holding “inert metal”—the body of money—stripped of its Geldseele.

Gamboa’s narrator is loquacious in his condemnation of Rubio’s “bourgeois” values: he repeats that Rubio never loved Santa, and that his disillusion is not “porque ella era lo que era, sino por haber sido él ligero, indiscreto,
débil [not because she was what she was, but rather because he had been frivolous, indiscreet and weak]’ (304); and, the narrator explains, it was because he saw himself as ‘degraded,’ ‘delinquent,’ that Rubio ‘took pains to denigrate Santa, ‘en disminuir su propia degradación y delincuencia maltratando y envileciendo a la confidente [diminishing his own degradation and delinquency by mistreating and debasing his confidant]’ (304). But Rubio only was able to see his own ‘degradation and delinquency’ when the ‘codiciada cortesana’ ‘resultó mujer asimismo [the coveted courtesan turned out to be a woman after all]’ (304). It is in the mirror of still currency that the capitalist sees himself as a miser, and in getting what he thought he wanted Rubio is forced to confront the fact that he never loved either Santa or his wife, who now appear identical to him (303–5).

Rubio had wanted an impossible exchange: to purchase not the woman who happens to be a prostitute, but her value and her liquidity at once, the (phantasmatic) transference itself by which the prostitute substitutes both for money and for the function of money itself. This is the sense in which Pierre Klossowski proposed that the prostitute (l’esclave industrielle) was simultaneously ‘the equivalent of wealth and wealth itself.’ Echoing Marx on the inseparability of labor and capital, he wrote in La Monnaie Vivante:

[C]’est un cercle vicieux: car l’intégrité de la personne n’existe absolument pas ailleurs du point de vue industriel que dans et par le rendement évaluatable en tant que monnaie. [ . . . ] sa physionomie étant inséparable de son travail [ . . . ] c’est une distinction spécieuse que celle de la personne et de son activité. La présence corporelle est déjà marchandise, indépendamment et en plus de la marchandise que cette présence contribue à produire.

[It is a vicious circle: because the integrity of the person doesn’t exist at all beyond the industrial point of view as that which renders her evaluable as money. Her physiognomy being inseparable from her work . . . it is a specious distinction between the person and her activity. The corporal presence is already merchandise, independently and beyond the merchandise that this presence contributes to producing.] (Klossowski 74–75; my translation)16

In other words, Santa already “is” a commodity, her corporal presence is merchandise “independently and beyond” the value her body can generate, marked indelibly so that “not even lips of bronze” could kiss it away. Being a particular kind of commodity that substitutes for the function of money itself, the very property that seduced Rubio and even continued to excite him for a
while after his purchase ("que en más apetitoso convertíalo" [Gamboa 304]) is also the characteristic by which the “integrity of [Santa’s] person” does not exist at all beyond the market. “C’ est un cercle vicieux”: Santa does not generate (exchange-)value outside of prostitution, and therefore is not evaluable; Santa qua living coin is not “evaluable” outside of prostitution, and therefore has no value. Money as use-value is a contradiction in terms; Rubio blames Santa. Planting his fortune in the chimeric possession of living coin, he can only contemplate its slow devaluation, and his own tarnished reflection in its manhandled sheen.

Rubio is ashamed of having made Santa his confidante, “[p]orque se lo había dicho todo, según es de rigor en cualquiera [sic] junta sexual, a la que se recetan una fidelidad ideal, un interés noble y sin limites, una duración perpetua [because he had told her everything, as is de rigueur in any sexual coupling, to which is prescribed an ideal fidelity, a noble and limitless interest, a perpetual duration]” (306). Each of these characteristics of ideal sexual love is also a condition of ideal capitalistic investment. But neither economy can be maintained except through exchange. And thus the paradox. Rubio is ashamed to have as his “confessor” an ex-prostitute whom he does not love, whom he has seen devalued from the ideal of living coin to a moribund, genetically inferior mettle/metal that nonetheless harbors his darkest secrets. And so he seeks to obliterate her:

—No te envanezcas por los secretos que te he confiado, porque te he dicho lo que a nadie debe decirse; no creas que armada de ellos podrías causarme daño . . . tú no eres peligrosa, ¿quién ha de hacerte caso siendo una . . .?

La palabra horrible, la afrenta, revoloteaba por los aires. En los muebles, en las paredes, en las lámparas, en la comida, en todas partes Santa veíala escrita y sin tartamudeos la leía: la maldición, las cuatro letras implacables.

[“Don’t get conceited about the secrets I’ve told you, because I’ve told you things you shouldn’t say to anybody; don’t think that you could ever use them to harm me . . . you aren’t dangerous, who would believe you being a . . .?”

The horrible word, the insult, fluttering through the air. On the furniture, on the walls, on the lamps, on the food, everywhere Santa saw it written and without hesitation she read it: the curse, the four implacable letters.] (304)

While the body of money was, for Marx, magni nominis umbra—the shadow
of a great name—Santa’s name is revoked from her, leaving only an inert body, the mere shadow of living coin.

Emblematically, Santa has also lost both advantages of money over goods: liquidity and lack of carrying costs. She no longer experiences herself as liquid, having been the exclusive property of Rubio: she “now couldn’t bear returning to Elvira’s, where they couldn’t stand her anymore, or to another [brothel] equal or inferior to it, where her fame as a queen was known and would open the door to her, only to be undone once they had her at their mercy” [305]. Similarly, she has lost the illusory “freedom” as money, or what is called the store of value function: “Igual a lo que se pudre o apolilla y que, en un momento dado, nadie puede impedirlo ni nada evitarlo, así fue el des-censo de Santa rápido, devastador, tremendo [Just like all that rots or is moth-eaten and after a certain time no one and nothing can prevent it, thus was the descent of Santa quick, devastating, tremendous]” (307).

Santa’s body—the “delicious plant of her wheat-colored body” that had endured the “hail” of clients—is now “una ruina” that ends up in “un femen-tido burdel de a cincuenta centavos [a sketchy fifty-cent brothel].” The gro-tesque proprietess, whose decrepit body has already been exposed in lurid detail, spoke “imperiously and laconically”:

—¿Cómo te llamas?—preguntó a Santa.
—Santa—repuso ésta.
—Pues desde hoy te llamas Loreto, ¡qué Santa ni qué tales! . . .
Y hasta el nombre encantador se ahogó en la ciénaga.

[“What is your name?” she asked Santa.
“Santa,” the latter answered.
“Well from now on your name is Loreto. What kind of a Santa would you make!”
And the enchanting name itself drowned in the morass. (328)]

The enchanting name does not disappear permanently: Hipólito will “res-cue” Santa a third time from the brothel, and bring her home with him; and he calls out her name as she dies. Of course, the name also endures as the title of the book. And yet, while the last pages of the book speak of not only a nurturing mutual love between the “reina” of México and the blind, pock-marked pianist, but even of their “resucitación.” Yet in the book’s prologue Santa had begged of the reader: “Acógeme tú y resucítame, ¿qué te cuesta? [ . . . ] En pago—morí muy desvalida y nada legué—, te confesaré mi historia. [Take me in and resuscitate me, what does it cost you? [ . . . ] In payment—as
I died destitute and left nothing—I’ll confess to you my story” (65–66). She is clearly asking to be resuscitated by the reader, demanding to be read in exchange for her confession.

In a way, this is a trick: how can reading Santa’s confession be both what is “purchased” and the means of payment? In what sense is the confession both a form of payment and also a service rendered? How does “the” reader—by extension an infinite number of readers over an unbounded future time period—serve as both confessor and savior, but also perhaps as an ideal client for a prostitute finally unbound by the limits of time, (under)world without end?

There is something about the structure of Gamboa’s novel—framed by a pretend posthumous prologue containing the “confession” of its main character—that bears further scrutiny. It seems that the novel as a whole lies close to the heart of literature’s fascination with prostitution not just as a topic but as an economic modus operandi. To appreciate the complexity of this maneuver as it impacts the reading of labor and capital, it’s necessary to revisit the last time Santa is “saved” in the novel by the blind brothel pianist, Hipólito.

Without being “gratuitously” cruel to Hipólito, it’s evident that he knew how to hold out for a bargain. He had listened without comment to Santa fantasizing that Rubio truly loved her, despite the fact that in his near omniscience he knew it was a lie. More importantly, he never told Santa that during most of her convalescence from pneumonia the toreador Jarameño had “heroically” sat beside her, demonstrating a kind of love she did not imagine she deserved (291–96, 298–300). Hipólito insists that he had to make a tremendous effort not to “explode and tell Santa everything she didn’t know,” but he rationalizes it:

Contúvose, sin embargo. Que no supiera lo malo, y así no se le amargaría su existencia próxima; que no supiese lo bueno, y así acabaría por no recordar al torero, quien, al fin y a la postre, si aún no se marchaba para su tierra, marcharíase en breve, y con los años, la distancia y la ausencia, también se le borrarían de la memoria sus aventureros amoríos con una mexicana.

[He contained himself, however. She shouldn’t know the bad things, so they wouldn’t embitter her future; she shouldn’t know the good things, so that in the end she wouldn’t even remember the toreador who eventually would return to his country [Spain] and, with the years, distance and absence would erase his memory of his amorous adventures with a Mexican girl.] (298)
Hipólito’s fatalism was self-serving. If Santa had known that el Jarameño had saved her life—that he had vetoed the intimidating Doña Elvira when she had decided it was time to write Santa off and send her to the hospital to die, that he had paid off the Madam for her trouble, that he had tended to Santa throughout her illness by himself—her “fate” might have been considerably different.

Furthermore, after Santa was already mortally ill, devastated by her failing relationship with Rubio, who now despised her, the usually all-knowing Hipólito was suddenly “en absoluto desconocimiento de las infelicidades de Santa, a pesar de que menudeaba sus visitas [in absolute ignorance of Santa’s travails, despite his frequent visits]”; and when Santa refused to see a doctor, Hipólito “prescribed” her the moderate use of alcohol—resulting, within one sentence, in raging alcoholism that led to the “excesos” for which Rubio finally kicked her out. The narrator pitilessly informs us that “cuando la expulsó despiadada y brutalmente, Santa estaba borracha [when he expelled her brutally and without pity, Santa was drunk]” (304–5).

Hipólito had long believed that Santa was not capable of loving him, and yet he had waited and hoped for nothing else. Long before, Hipólito had alluded to a “big surprise” that awaited her one day, “[c]uando al fin nos cansemos de aquello [when one day we get tired of all this],” and assuring her that he (unlike Rubio) would give Santa what she was worth, “créame que se lo daré [believe you me]” (281); but he also says he would rather have his throat cut than reveal the secret to her (282). Of course, the big surprise is that Hipólito is a “capitalist,” and he has a small fortune squirreled away. He has kept this a secret, sparing himself of the possibility that Santa would either use him for his money or reject him regardless of it. Having been repeatedly rejected even as Santa approached her lowest point, ailing in the fifty-cent brothel, Hipólito descends to more and more persistent sexual advances, finally trying to rape her and, when the attempt is thwarted, announcing coldly that he won’t come to see her ever again. It is she who calls for him when she is dying, and he takes her home for the price of the balance owed on her room at the fifty-cent brothel.

Santa gives Hipólito the “prueba definitiva” of her love with such a humbled disposition of total self-sacrifice that not only does she swear that she loves him, and the narrator explains that, as a woman who loves, she is “unaware of his deformities”; but we are even subjected to an attempt at love-making during which Santa screams, “dispuesta a sacrificarse [disposed to sacrifice herself],” that she can’t go on—“No puedo, Hipo, no puedo . . . ¡mejor mátame! [I can’t, Hipo, I can’t. . . . It would be better to kill me]” (346).
Hipólito reveals his secret only as they lie together locked in an embrace of “mutual resignation”:

Hipólito confesó a Santa un grandísimo secreto: no estaba tan tirado a la calle, era poseedor de más de cuatrocientos pesos economizados.

—¿Qué te creías?—dijo yendo a sacar un envoltorio del colchón de la cama,—¿que yo soy un pordiosero? . . . Te chasqueaste, mi Santa, te chasqueaste, porque soy un capitalista. ¡Cuenta, cuenta el tesoro!

[Hipólito told Santa a huge secret: he wasn’t so hard-up, he had saved up more than four hundred pesos.

“What did you think?” he said, getting an envelope out of the mattress. “That I’m a beggar? You were deceived, my Santa, you were deceived, because I’m a capitalist. Count it, count the treasure!”] (358)

We can read Hipólito’s “capitalism” as the flipside of Rubio’s commodity fetishism: by refusing to “buy” Santa as Rubio did at the height of her continually adjusted value in the market (thus losing on his investment and blaming the depreciating asset herself), Hipólito gets her rather at her nadir, and thus he is “miraculously” able to restrain his formerly animalistic drives (346) and love her “forever” (at least for the few days that remain of her life).

While Rubio and Hipólito are moved by opposite emotions, beliefs and even ethics in their behavior, their actions are part of the same narrative economics, wherein Santa’s value depends not only on her bodily worth but on an understanding of her inherently monetary soul—ascending morally when her body has been degraded, and degrading itself when her body is universally celebrated. Just as Leib without Seele was for Marx inert metal, a corroded body, Santa’s cycles of physical degeneration and regeneration can be read as hazards of inflation, and her fitful spiritual desires to alternately rise, “volar [fly]” and “acaba[r] de ahogarse [finally hit bottom]” (304, 127) not only as an alternation of contradictory drives but also as her desire to become pure value, not only living coin—at once money and the sign of money—but exchange itself, obliterating in this way not only her dubiously static “self” but even her spectral figure as coin, which summons circulation, “el infinito desfile de clientes, la lluvia de monedas y caricias [the infinite parade of clients, the rain of coins and caresses]” (127).

The desire for Santa to escape from circulation-time is in its most basic version a collective fantasy, which she (as living coin) shares with her “rescuers” (as capitalists). This harks back to Negri’s analysis of capital, in which
he asserted that it was always capital's wish to eliminate time (Colás 5–6), whereas it is the capitalist's fantasy that by taking capital out of time we will be in a different world, one in which "surplus-value no longer requires doing any work" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 492). The difference between Santa's desire and that of her clients might be seen as that of an immanent vs. a transcendent fantasy of escape: capital out of time vs. the "promised land" of capitalism—which at one level is as simple as whether Santa would be allowed in (since, as Rubio told her, prostitutes aren't allowed into the *tierras de promisión* [302]).

The same gesture of stopping the time of circulation allowed both Rubio's extravagant purchase and Hipólito's bargain, the failed investment and the fleeting love affair. By stingily withholding his secret hoard until he could proudly spread it upon Santa's deathbed with the certainty that she wasn't there for his money (it doesn't seem to bother him that she arrived there only having exhausted every other possibility), Hipólito is able to give himself an instantaneous happiness: in stopping the clock on Santa's circulation, in taking capital out of time, he and she enjoy a dreamy "resuscitation": "una existencia de ensueño, no vivían, no, ni el uno ni el otro, resucitaban! [a daydream existence, they didn't live, either of them: they were resuscitating!]" (349).

Hipólito and Santa "come back to life" with the foregone conclusion of imminent death, and this instantaneity persists metatextually in the prologue in which a spectral Santa speaks to the readers in the first person from "beyond"—although, true to her fears, it doesn't sound like paradise. Even after death, she says, "ni en la muerte hallé descanso; unos señores médicos despedazaron mi cuerpo, sin aliviarlo, mi pobre cuerpo magullado y marchito por la concupiscencia bestial de toda una metrópoli viciosa [not even in death did I find any peace; some medical gentlemen tore apart my body, without curing it, my poor body beaten and withered by the bestial lust of a whole vicious metropolis]" (66). On the one hand, this is an ultimate form of being "spoken for;" the autopsy rending body from soul in the coin outside of time: the body is taken away to participate in a totalizing scientific knowledge of the body of prostitution, and the soul cannot rest, wandering in search of one more reader to read her story.

However, as the fruit of the only oath fulfilled in the novel—Hipólito's promise to her that she will rest decently in the cemetery under a proper headstone—Santa does at least have her name that she had sold for 50¢ restored to her permanently. It is, paradoxically, in its definitive separation from the body, in its split into the absent, dissected and long decomposed body and the determined, loquacious ghost, that the name of money is restored to the body
which is now not only *magni nominis umbra* but also literally shadow, the shadow cast by the headstone where the body had been before the grave was robbed, and the longer metaphorical shadow of the name itself.

It is significant that Hipólito revealed his secret capitalism in the sentence immediately following Santa’s revelation of how she got her name in the first place: she was born on November 1, All Saints Day (358). A small portion of Hipólito’s capital will be used to buy the headstone where the name—though not the body—will remain. At the same time, the origin of the name shifts the interpretation of the name “Santa” to more properly that of a dead spirit than a saint. In this way, it is quite possible to read *Santa* as a ghost story about money.¹⁷

Santa’s posthumous resuscitation is the ghost of money out of time, pure exchange, the purchased prostitute, and even the client who will carry her away from all of this—and it is conjured only for the duration of the reading. And then the next reader must come along, and the next, in a “desfile” or “lluvia” of readings which are simultaneously payment and service, client and courtesan, in a mirroring, recursive transaction generated by the paradox of living coin.

**Metastable Madmen**

Whereas *Santa* had begun to deconstruct its own Naturalism in the metatexual prologue, ordering readers to pay up front for a service that they themselves are simultaneously performing, Ricardo Piglia noted that Roberto Arlt used his prologue to *Los lanzallamas* to bemoan the difficulty of writing something *now* as a kind of debt on which an imaginary future reader will have pay interest (“Roberto Arlt: Una crítica” 54–55).¹⁸ “I proudly affirm that writing, for me, is a luxury,” Arlt writes in the prologue:

*I don’t have, like other writers, rent income, time or a sedative government job. [...] They say I write badly. It’s possible. In any case, I have no trouble citing numerous people who write well and are only read by polite members of their families. To do style one needs comforts, rents, idle life. [...] Style takes time, and if I listened to the advice of my peers I would do what they do: write a book every ten years and then take a ten year vacation for having taken ten years to write a hundred reasonable pages.

On another subject, other people are scandalized by the brutality with which I express certain situations that are perfectly natural to the relationship between the sexes. Then these same pillars of society talked to me of
James Joyce, nearly fainting. That was from the spiritual delight they felt
about a certain character from *Ulysses*, a gentleman who happens to have
breakfast aromatically basically by breathing through his nose in the bath-
room the smell of the excrement he has defecated a minute earlier. [ . . . ]

Really, one doesn’t know what to think about people. If they are idiots
for real, or if they take to heart the coarse comedy they play at all hours of
their days and nights. (285–86)

Interest—and specifically interest as a special case of surplus-value—is the
central axis of *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*. It links together the senses
in which Arlt did not have time to “do style” because he was under the gun,
unable to get too concerned about the future readers of such “bad” writing.
What kind of interest are we paying on Arlt’s debt today as we read *Los siete
locos* and *Los lanzallamas*?

Criticism has tended to read Arlt through corrective lenses of intertextual-
ity and allegory. The main characters, after all, are *locos*: they psychosomatize
their neuroses or act out of their outright psychotic delusions; and their ideas,
feelings and behaviors are symptoms to be analyzed. The critic of Arlt is also a
translator, a curator, a selector of passages, of a way through.

However, without minimizing the insanity of Arlt’s characters or deny-
ing that his expressionist Buenos Aires maps social commentaries and con-
demnations, I also believe that the novels need to be read as a textual and
metatextual world bound together and even unified by a particular fantasy
of surplus-value as interest. Linking together the novels’ plot with its various
metanarratives, its characters with the narrator and “Commentator,” is the
forcefield of prostitution.

Prostitution is not only a central theme of the two novels, but rather traver-
ses (or, in a more Arltian metaphor, bores through) the textual and the
metatextual to link them up into a larger machine: from the vantage point of
prostitution, the two novels can be read as functioning in tandem to manu-
facture meaning. While Piglia had written in 1973 that money was the prime
motivator of the textual and the metatextual in Arlt—“financing the adven-
ture” (“Roberto Arlt: Una crítica” 58)—prostitution can show us how the
unexplored dimensions of money work together to define the relationship
of labor and capital at every level in the novels: it pays for the “Revolution” at
the center of the plot (brothels are its patron industry); it provides the secret
fantasy of the protagonist, Remo Erdosain; it is only the possible “freedom”
postulated for women in the novels as well as the liberation of the select few,
who will live by the “exploitation of usury,” escaping permanently from labor
as a form of incarceration of people in time.
One of the most striking aspects of Arlt's characterization—as well as a legitimate problem for the reader's "interest" in every sense of the word—is how his various protagonists are difficult to separate from the flow of narrative itself: they only fleetingly solidify into individuals before reentering the fluidity of the general medium ("anguish" in the narrator's vocabulary); and such changing states are not separated from reality by the conventions of inner monologues but rather emerge through regular free indirect discourse ("If they had sent him through the rollers of a laminator," the narrator says of Erdoesain, "his life could be no flatter" [70]).

Yet Arlt's expressionism doesn't limit itself to free indirect speech—which occasionally confuses narrator and character, subjective and objective time and perception—but actually creates standardized units of meaning—repeated images, recognizable phrases that break apart from their original context and appear in new permutations—whereby people are experiencing the same things as buildings; bits of scrap metal have the precise hue of a thought, or an eye, and pipes contain in x-ray vision gases of the same color as people's faces.

The repetition of strange locutions in radically different contexts also links these disparate events together via a spiderweb of almost-invisible, nearly unconscious causality which traces the circulation within the novels at the level of language. I believe that the standardized strangeness of Arlt's language, the way that adjectives and adjectival clauses reappear autonomous from their original objects, can illuminate the deeper economic structure of the novels as a crystalline metastability wherein the general medium of anguish is at once a kind of alchemical melting pot for characters, relationships, money and manufacturing, but also for the language with which it is all narrated. The migrations of words and phrases from ideas to people to machines to gases reflects a kind of dynamic equilibrium of states without hierarchy within which there is an obsessive preciseness that rather than getting marred by contradiction seems to transcend it entirely, as though phrases and words came together and separated through obscure chemical affinities, which then manifest writ large at the level of the plot: "Copper," for example, is variously a red, golden, rose or green color; a gas (copper sulfate); a metal; a metal heated to a liquid to be used to electroplate roses (and eventually the cuffs and collars of dress shirts [210]); but which is vulnerable to cyanide, produced in the reaction of heating copper and leaving yellow striations in it [211]); which then forms a new compound (copper cyanate) which in turn will attack liquid nickel (211). Strange synaesthesias result from the recombinations of copper: a "fog of copper" describes of Barsut's three-day beard (154); Erdoesain has the "taste of copper sulfate" in his mouth when he murders La Bizca; the mass production of the rosa de cobre (copper-plated rose)
Living Coin

will finance the cúpulas de cobre rosa (rose-copper cupulas) of the Revolution's new city for Kings (273).

It is not only significant that copper is both raw material and product, but almost as though atoms of copper are themselves circulating and recombining throughout the narrative, part and parcel of the general medium of anguish: “a cloud of poison gas moved itself heavily from one point to another, penetrating walls and crossing through the buildings, without losing its flat and horizontal form; anguish of two dimensions that guillotined the throats and left in them an aftertaste of tears” (11). Characters, objects, relationships, buildings, plans, and ideologies can transmute anywhere they can recombine with other elements. These clouds of metastable compounds both “rain” and “condense” metonymic associations of compounds with the processes by which they are achieved, characters with relationships and the scattershot free-associations of a writer working against the clock.

Similarly, the voice of the Commentator himself changes over the course of the novels, from a fairly confident-sounding third-person omniscient narrator to, abruptly, a first-person narrator halfway through the anteppenultimate chapter of Los lanzallamas. The liberation of Arlt's writing, its ability to exist as a “luxury” without the time it would have taken to “do style,” is in fact a style defined by running out of time. This narrative metastability that is made possible by the unifying force of prostitution as defining surplus value and, therefore, freedom for its practitioners—to say nothing of gases, metals, and liquids and other substances—is akin to the liberation of money proposed by Gesell, which required a time stamp to limit money’s circulation, thus freeing it from inflation and deflation. The narrative as a priori out of time allows for a radical freedom of its constituent elements. Because of this, rather than bringing an economic analysis to bear on prostitution in Arlt, it’s necessary to bring a prostitution-analysis to Arlt’s economics.

Money for Nothing: The Astrologer’s Revolution

The two novels follow the adventures of a motley crew who come together through a shared dislike of labor as well as other more obscure pathological affinities to plan world domination in a suburb of Buenos Aires. The inventor of the conspiracy, The Astrologer, masterminds a vacuous “Revolution” with which to attract just such disaffected locos—“políticos de café [café politicians]” and “filósofos de centros recreativos [rec center philosophers]” (152)—who have a nervous enthusiasm that “well utilized could be the base of a new and powerful movement” (151). Using a small (stolen) investment as
bait to attract new locos, the Revolution will then be a viable business model because instead of paying workers it will enslave locos “as they do in El Gran Chaco,” ringing the grounds with electric fences and beating compliance out of the surly (146).

The main form of income will be brothels, located in “el Campo Chileno,” but there will also be metal refineries, and industrial manufacturing of poison gas and Erdosain’s copper-plated rose. However, he omits any idea of productivity. Nowhere is there an image of labor producing something other than submission in workers. The extraction of metals will be done “by electricity”; “gold processors”; “a five-hundred horsepower turbine”; “The nitric acid will come out of the nitrogen in the atmosphere via a voltaic arc . . . ” (147, 151). Manufacturing bypasses workers (with the exception of prostitutes): their labor will existly mainly as a form of imprisonment, and within its “electrified fences” they will be forced to witness atrocities: “terrorizing the weak and inflaming the strong” (151). Workers, then, will function more literally as the base of the Revolution—not just in the occasional Marxist-Leninist spin the Astrologer puts on the discourse, but in a more literal metallurgical sense. The Revolution will be an “amalgam” and the underutilized locos who will be the workers of the Revolution are “like tin geniuses”—“but tin is an energy that properly utilized could be the base of a new and powerful movement” (151).

The Astrologer’s economics is entirely about money: it is a kind of transubstantiation, whereby money is either extracted or refined from raw materials. Because he considers people not as laborers but as stages in the metamorphosis of things and money, his emphasis is—much like Marx’s Mephistopheles—on getting something for nothing—bypassing the category of labor entirely in order to focus on “exploit[ing] usury” (147). To exploit exploitation, the Astrologer focuses on only surplus-value to the exclusion of value, and only surplus-labor to the exclusion of labor. He blurs the orders of quantity and measure, labor and money, money and value, demonstrating a fetish which is also of a different order from those we saw in Santa: rather than fetishizing the commodity (like Rubio) or money abstracted from time (like Hipólito), the Astrologer has a doubly abstract passion for money, not just living coin but autonomous money. The sense of people as literally monetary implies that the Astrologer’s desire to own men’s souls is really also an economic matter: he will marshal armies of coin not to invest them in order to optimize his wealth but because he can, because to dictate the path of money in circulation, to take away its autonomy, is to be a God on earth (141).

We can see ways in which the Astrologer’s economics as a practice is analogous to that of the narrator’s storytelling: in his Revolutionary conspiracy, ideas and individuals become separated from their initial context and recom-
bine with apparent freedom, yet in their very mobility they end up reiterating the central obsessions of the novels by proving that the more things appear to change, the more they stay the same.

The clearest example of this is the novels’ extended subplot involving Remo Erdosain and Gregorio Barsut. Erdosain appears on the first page of the novel as a classic Arlt protagonist faced with a dilemma. He has been accused of stealing money at his low-level job at the sugar company; he is denied his paycheck and given the impossible order to document his innocence by tomorrow at three. Shortly thereafter, he meets the Astrologer, who offers him a kind of freedom: if he will simply join the Astrologer’s total social revolution by participating in the murder of Gregorio Barsut—a hateful man who hoards an undeserved inheritance—then he will have the money to pay back his employers. Erdosain is thus doubly trapped by the illusion of freedom offered by the Astrologer: he is bound to him because the Astrologer knows about his crime at the sugar company and about the crime he will commit; with each move toward freedom, with each helpful nudge from the Astrologer toward autonomy, Erdosain becomes more tightly entwined. This is, after all, the Astrologer’s game: to reveal the monetary soul gleaming within men, the “metaphysical illness” (142) that makes them desire their own enslavement and blindly circulate to accomplish this unconscious goal. By offering “freedom” and encouraging autonomy, seemingly random movements associated only metonymically, tangentially, all lead to Erdosain’s tragic destiny within the Revolution.

The narrator obsessively reiterates the fetishistic qualities of money, particularly its goldenness: “as a consequence of industry” (145) and its ability to dazzle men who are otherwise only moved by “carnage” (93); the “redness” of gold in association with bloodshed but also circulating blood and unity (145, 154, 176–77). These characteristics of gold, though, are also characteristics of copper. The narrator eludes overt symbolism by expressing the money fetishism in an alchemical metonymic chain wherein almost anything can enter the process. At the same time, this almost fractal quality whereby the raw materials of the story are equally everywhere reinforces the idea that we are in a kind of crystalline web without escape, where everything “is” metonymically everything else.

Even Erdosain’s copper rose—the invention he offers to the Revolution—functions as this type of metonymic avatar of Erdosain and any other character: the living rose is converted into a metal one, making “each red petal nearly transparent, and under the metallic coat the nerved form of the natural petal could barely be distinguished” (211). Compare the electroplated flower to Erdosain’s face, wherein “the nerves under the skin of his forehead
are the painful continuation of his thoughts” (332); but his face will eventually become blurred into “an old mustard twilight” at the end of *Los lanzallamas*, just before he commits the “pointless” murder of La Bizca. In contrast, in the Astrologer we see that “thought works under all the nerves of his rhomboid face” (366).

Gregorio Barsut, in contrast to both Erdosain and the Astrologer, has been defined from the very beginning as coppery-haired money to be rescued from waste: rather than capitalizing on his inheritance, “he spends it little by little” (97). When the conspirators kidnap him, he undergoes a physical transformation making his identification with coin more obvious: his greenish eyes become “discolored” and there is a “fog of copper” on his face (154).

Similarly, when Erdosain asks how they will dispose of Barsut’s body, the Astrologer replies: “Disolviéndolo en ácido nítrico. Tengo tres damajuanas. Pero, hablando de todo un poco, ¿tiene noticias de la rosa de cobre? [Dissolving him in nitric acid. I have three demijohns. But, since we’re chatting, have you heard anything further about the copper rose?]” (279). The Astrologer is recommending the elementary school science experiment by which a copper alloy penny is dissolved in nitric acid, and his association with the copper rose makes it all the more clear that he is viewing Barsut as already coin, a copper alloy to be disposed of in ions and oxide.20

The use of nitric acid is the same that the Astrologer had earlier mentioned as, first of all, *free* (getting the nitrogen from the air with the aid of an electric arc) and second of all the process by which the Revolution will acquire copper, iron and aluminum (147). This begs the question of how exactly the Astrologer planned to “get” these metals from nitric acid without first starting with their amalgam (such as in the form of a coin).21 In other words, the Astrologer’s economics is really based on turning money into money, and once again he is juggling different orders, not only conflating money and value but also money and gold. He repeats that gold will be both the result of their Industry and also the bait that lures in clients and workers, madmen and prostitutes: and in this he reminds us that labor does not differentiate people in his mind, because consumers and producers are only stages in a form of becoming that is not about the conversion of people into either labor or commodities, but rather what we might call an immanent money-becoming (to emphasize that money is not the fixed result of the process, which has no result). At particularly rhapsodic moments, this is gold-becoming.

Historically, between 1927 and 1929 convertibility between the Peso Moneda Nacional and gold was reestablished in Argentina for the first and last time since 1914.22 This convertibility suggests the proper sense in which the characters in *Los siete locos* are coin-becoming, a becoming that has no endpoint but rather ranges over money and gold for a brief opportunistic period
of identity between money and gold and does not preclude—as we shall see—other simultaneous becomings. The convertibility of money and gold is a brief interstice in a long period in which economic crises and devaluations eventually led to the replacement of the Peso Moneda Nacional with the peso Ley 18.188, and thus while Los lanzallamas has the same view of becoming-coin as Los siete locos, its view of coin is less expansive, more medium of exchange and less value in itself.

In this way, the passage from Los siete locos to Los lanzallamas echoes a procedural transition between the Grundrisse and Capital. Money remains the “universal material into which commodities must be dipped, in which they become gilded and silver-plated” but the Marxist order of operations—already short-circuited in Los siete locos—is further confused by its practice. Marx had said in Grundrisse that the particularity of any exchange-value is based on the amount of labor time contained in it, that the specific quantity (labor) was what translated it to a specific amount of money (price). In this way, labor could be read in the commodity and its sign in price. At the same time, Marx acknowledges the contradictory functions of money, and by the end of Notebook II has stated that “Money in its final, completed character now appears in all directions as a contradiction, a contradiction which dissolves itself, drives towards its own dissolution” (Grundrisse 233).

However, in the second chapter of Capital, the focus shifts to how socio-economic reality actually functions in the form of money-mediated exchange and how this action is seen to lie beyond the scope of human consciousness. In other words, people make and spend money without understanding what money is; and the focus of Capital is therefore scientific rather than historical. In the words of Dieter Wolf,

After having generated money in an unconscious way by a real action, [people] refer to money consciously, knowing that money is immediately exchangeable, that commodities must have a price expressed in the form of money. While aware of all this as the condition for carrying out exchange, they are not aware of what money and price really are, i.e., that price and money are developed forms of value appearing on the surface in forms which are the results of an invisible disguised mediation process. Prices of commodities, and money, are given to the human beings as somewhat different from what they are as the results of the mediation process. (Wolf, paras 5–6)

In both Los siete locos and Los lanzallamas we see the consequences of the generation of money without understanding the process by which money and value are related. (Thus we have the idea of dissolving coin in nitric oxide
to make money, as well as the sense that gold is a transcendent value. However, it is in *Los siete locos* that the theory of money is developed in all its contradictions; in *Los lanzallamas* the creation of money is suspended and there remains only the process of spending and circulating it. The metaphysical origin of the Revolution’s money in the coin-becoming of Barsut is not repeated, even as the other members of the conspiracy themselves remain engaged in an ongoing process of coin-becoming/capitalist-becoming. In Arlt, there is no distinction between surface and depth, there is no disguised mediation process at work but rather all processes of becoming occur in an economy in which everything is surface.

### Prostitution as Surplus-Value, Surplus-Labor

On the one hand, prostitution is the obvious motor of the Astrologer’s Revolution: prostitution colonies will finance the other industries of the Revolution, managed by Haffner, the so-called Rufián melancólico (Melancholy Pimp), who has been designated as the Gran patriarca prostibulario (Great Patriarch of Prostitution). Yet the implicit ideas about prostitution that give it this central role in both the Revolution and the novels as a whole are worth a closer look. In particular, Hipólita—Arlt’s famous prostitute—has a radically different view of both prostitution and surplus-value. Together, Hipólita and the Melancholy Pimp provide a counterpoint to the Astrologer’s views. The definition of metastable storytelling techniques in the previous sections allows us to see how the novels easily incorporate the contrasting economic views into their own metonymic free market.

Hipólita, while one of the novels’ main conspirators, is not given a title in the Revolution nor a realm over which to rule. In fact, unlike some of the other characters, Hipólita does no work at all over the course of the novel except in scenes which, as we shall see, can be explicated as surplus-labor generating surplus-value on its own behalf. Where the Naturalist prostitute was held apart—idolized and pilloried, queen and slave—Hipólita has observed the anguished reality of life and thus arms herself with a composite kind of expressionist-futurist *Our Bodies, Ourselves* with which she decides to become a prostitute and “thus” free herself from her body and, by extension, labor, forever (223).

While previously employed as a servant, Hipólita had once overheard on the streetcar a conversation in which a man insisted that an intelligent woman, even an ugly one, if she set about selling her favors right would get rich:
“and if she didn’t fall in love with anyone she could be queen of a city. If I had a sister, I’d advise her to do it” (221). Hipólita, thrilled with the idea of becoming a prostitute, spends her whole month’s salary on books about prostitution (a waste, since they turn out to be “stupid, pornographic books” [221]). None of her friends can explain to her exactly how prostitution works, either. Finally, she goes to a lawyer for a proper definition of prostitution, who tells her it is when a woman “performs sexual acts without love and to gain money.” Hipólita reformulates the revelation as follows: “That is, [ . . . ] she liberates herself from her body . . . and she is free” (223). She continues:

“I was happy, never happier than that day. The ‘life’ [prostitution], Erdosain, was that, liberating oneself from one’s body, having the free will to achieve all the things one desired. [ . . . ] Did you ever see a thief in a room full of gold? In that moment I, the servant, was the thief in the room full of gold. And I understood that the world was mine.” (223)

Whereas the Astrologer stands aloof in a society full of men who can by force of mind be easily turned into money, Hipólita feels like a thief in a room already full of gold. Whereas the Astrologer plans to standardize prostitution as an industry (announcing that Erdosain has designed a machine to pinpoint how many clients each prostitute shall service per day for maximum efficiency), Hipólita invokes the potentiality of prostitution as something inherently personal, eluding mass-production and unstandardizable in homogenous blocks of labor. “I had realized,” she says, “from reading novels that men attributed extraordinary amorous facilities to educated women. . . . I mean to say that being cultured was a disguise that increased the value of the merchandise” (223).

It is possible to read Hipólita and the Astrologer as a kind of zero-signifying odd couple: they initially mean to exploit each other, but end up in an alliance in which their differences echo Marx and Gesell on the subject of surplus-value. It is Hipólita’s view of surplus-value inhering in surplus-labor that is actually demonstrated to be true at the level of events in the plot; yet it is true because the Astrologer is able to manipulate all of the other characters so successfully. However, a closer look at the equality of the Astrologer and Hipólita involves a more complicated dynamic passing through the other characters. More precisely, it is because Hipólita is a prostitute that she is privy to (and at the same included within) the real fantasies of men—the same illusions that the Astrologer has decided to invent and mass-produce in order to control men’s souls—that she ends up as the Astrologer’s equal at the
conclusion of *Los lanzallamas*. As we shall see, the economics of the novels is not defined by any one discourse within the novels, but rather inheres in the metastable associativity of the all of the elements within them.

It is in just such a seemingly free-associative scene that Hipólita ends up discovering that Erdosain, as one of her co-conspirators, has a lifelong fantasy of being pitied by a prostitute (215), which then leads to his confessing to her a part of the Astrologer’s conspiracy to which she has not yet been privy: the plan to murder Gregorio Barsut (241). Of course, Erdosain has only told Hipólita this because she has been the sympathetic prostitute of his fantasies, listening to his reports of his unhappiness and finally his confession, and rewards him with an outburst of pity, falling to her feet and announcing: “Sos el hombre más desgraciado de la tierra. ¡Cuánto sufriste, Dios mío! ¡Qué grande es tu alma! [You’re the unluckiest man on earth. How you have suffered, my God! How great is your soul!]” (241). The novels’ Commentator inserts a proleptic footnote here to tell us that this was precisely the moment when Hipólita had conceived of blackmailing the Astrologer with the information Erdosain has just given her—as she would later tell the Astrologer herself (241).

The footnote is a moment out of the time of the main narrative—it occurs near the end of *Los siete locos*, and yet at the start of *Los lanzallamas* the Astrologer “already knew” that Hipólita planned to blackmail him, but counters her by revealing the secret information that Barsut was not really dead, thus cementing an alliance between them that will last until the end. At the narrative level, Arlt stops the clock, and in the time of the footnote, Hipólita would tell the Astrologer later that she had planned to blackmail him; yet by the time the conversation takes place with Hipólita, he already knew.

On the one hand, this is definitely the kind of thing that made Arlt angry in the prologue to *Los lanzallamas*—he didn’t have time to “do style,” or to go over the writing with the fine-tooth comb that readers would be wielding in the future—paying the author’s debts with interest (and to whom?) But from the point of view of Hipólita and the Astrologer’s differing views on capital and surplus value, the accident of the commentator’s version contrasting with the narrator’s is as important as the “accident” by which Hipólita heard the confession in the first place: there is a consistent type of drive, in both places, that leads to an unplanned result, revealing something partially excavated in the deep structure of the novels: Hipólita will circulate learning fantasies and hearing confessions; the Astrologer will know that she will exploit her self-exploitation to the maximum. Arlt’s “commentator” knows already that Hipólita will not checkmate the Astrologer; but neither will he checkmate her. Whether Arlt knew “then” that Barsut wouldn’t be killed or that Hipólita and
the Astrologer would make off with everybody’s money is irrelevant: within
the metatextual combination of main body of the text and footnote on page
241, the Astrologer is instantaneously put into and released from jeopardy.
She would tell him. The note both binds the Astrologer and Erdosain to Hipó-
lita by her momentary intention to blackmail one using the other’s secret—
and releases them all.

It is the juxtaposition of two times—the time of the main narrative,
and the time of the commentator—which permits a meta-confession: the
Commentator’s confession of Hipólita’s confession to the Astrologer of her
intent to use Erdosain’s confession to blackmail the Astrologer. The meta-
confession thus triangulates the relationship of Hipólita and the Astrologer
via the Commentator: according to the Commentator, Hipólita does not tell
the Commentator directly of either her feelings in the moment of Erdosain’s
confession or of her change of heart and alliance with the Astrologer; so the
implication is that either the Astrologer told the Commentator what hap-
pened—which the Commentator does not report—or else the Commentator
is omniscient, and therefore is frequently “lying” about his pedestrian ways
of obtaining information through “sources” (such as Erdosain’s “diary” and
his interviews with various characters). The Commentator has gone some-
what out of bounds here into reporting unattributed hearsay of the coun-
terfactual: he informs us that while outwardly sympathizing with Erdosain,
Hipólita was also planning to use his confession against the Astrologer, but
would ultimately decide not to. With this page of the novel, the Commenta-
tor effectively brackets all actions in the novel as radically uncertain: they
are all potentially known to him yet unreported, yet they are also potentially
reported to him by one, or some, or all of the characters (who thus may be
betraying each other), yet if this is true the reports are being withheld by the
Commentator.\footnote{The Commentator betrays the reader in either case.}

In this way, the confessional loop running through the novel and its foot-
notes begins to look something like a metatextual Möbius strip. This radical
uncertainty is similar to and also created by the movements of the metastable
narrative elements: as the red or yellow cubes of whorehouses lead Erdosain
to his own house where (associatively) copper-haired Hipólita appears gazing
at him through red eyelashes to in the very same scene fulfill his greatest
desire and plot to use it against him, so the Commentator uses the same
scene as a generator of infinite readings, by invoking the possibility of his own
infinite variety of deceptiveness and truthfulness. At the same time, the meta-
confession does not become recursive just because of the Commentator’s
ambiguous truthfulness, but rather because of the way that it brackets
an already recursive episode of prostitution. The uncertainty generated by
the Commentator here functions at the metatextual level as the analog of surplus-value.

The meta-confession, then, reframes the novels as self-similar in their metastability: at the smallest and the largest scale, the narrative modus operandi is surplus-value seeking free association. Characters, metonyms, Commentator and narrator are and *are made of* interchangeable parts: and the narrative follows an associative assembly line extending the Revolution beyond the plot and into the level of language where everything is subtly mass-produced over time as instantiations of a composite, hybrid, rendered whole. Prostitution is the mode of manufacturing something out of nothing, and converting people into something useful, surpassing the categories of labor-power and work themselves. We can see this clearly in the superficially opposite ideas the Astrologer and Hipólita have about surplus value.

Whereas the only form of labor the Astrologer seems to recognize as such is prostitution—viewing every other human labor as primarily a form of imprisonment and ideological indoctrination—he is obsessed with “extracting” surplus-value as he believes it lies unexploited all around them like veins of gold ore in the ground: other people’s need for illusions—which the Astrologer can speak to *gratis* (perhaps he has the “time” Arlt bemoans the lack of in his prologue)—illusions for which they will exchange their own freedom. The Astrologer does not view people as living coin in either an instantaneous transubstantiation or a metaphor but rather as the maximum possible exploitation of a person in his or her potentiality:

> I want to take over the soul of all these wretches, give them as an objective for their activities a lie that will make them happy inflating their vanity... and these poor devils who abandoned to themselves wouldn’t have stopped being misunderstood, will be the precious material with which we will produce power [*potencia*]. (155)

The soul of a person is that which can be turned into surplus value—after all, labor can be beaten out of anyone; but to know someone’s unconscious desires is to own their future surplus value. The Revolution will run on souls as manufacturing plants run on electricity.

Yet Hipólita inclines to a more Deleuzian view of surplus-value as inhering in labor rather than in money. Whereas the Astrologer has a categorical blindness or perhaps allergy to the category of labor, Hipólita and the Melancholy Pimp—perhaps because of their choice of profession—seem to concur with Deleuze and Guattari in an ideological insistence of labor as identical to surplus-labor:
Labor and surplus-labor are strictly the same thing; the first term is applied to the quantitative comparison of activities, the second to the monopolistic appropriation of labor by the entrepreneur [. . .]. As we have seen, even when they are distinct and separate, there is no labor that is not predicated on surplus labor. Surplus labor is not what which exceeds labor; on the contrary, labor is that which is subtracted from surplus labor and presupposes it. It is only in this context that one may speak of labor value, and of an evaluation bearing on the quantity of activity in continuous variation. Since it depends on surplus labor and surplus value, entrepreneurial profit is just as much an apparatus of capture as proprietary rent: not only does surplus labor capture labor, and landownership the earth, but labor and surplus labor are the apparatus of capture of activity. (A Thousand Plateaus 442; my emphasis)

Hipólita is privy to Erdosain’s confession, and therefore mobilizes her alliance with the Astrologer as well as the metaconfession of the Commentator because she is capable of surplus-labor without labor. Sneaking into Erdosain’s room in the middle of the night, she exemplifies how the surplus-value that the Astrologer believes to be hidden in men’s monetary souls is not just “extractable” via prostitution, as an ideal industry with which to finance the ideological production of illusions—but rather in prostitution, labor is not only predicated on its exploitation as surplus-labor by the entrepreneur, but takes the entrepreneur automatically to a higher order, making him or her the exploiter not of people, but of exploitation itself.

To exploit exploitation was, we remember, the Astrologer’s ambition for the Revolution: “all the members of the logic/lodge [lógica/logia] will have interest in the businesses. . . . We will exploit usury . . . women, children, workers, the fields and the mad” (147). Perhaps this is why the Astrologer holds the Melancholy Pimp in such high esteem, praising his “beautiful soul” for beating women more cruelly than anyone, and believing “not in courage [but . . .] in betrayal” (440). As much as the Astrologer believes firmly in the machine extraction of surplus-labor without labor, he is entranced by the human exploiter of exploitation and intuits that prostitution is not only the ideal industry with which to finance the other industries of the Revolution but is also emblematic of surplus-value without labor.

And yet it is not the great exploiter—the pimp—who demonstrates the maximum abilities of prostitution to exploit exploitation, to harvest surplus-value without labor in the novels, but rather Hipólita herself. Tellingly, the novels invert the Naturalist paradigm, killing off the Melancholy Pimp in a death seen as the inevitable consequence of “the life”: “el que mal anda mal
acaba” [he who lives badly ends badly],” the Astrologer observes, as Erdosain
snickers. Hipólita, far from dying as a result of her body’s abuse and victim-
ization, never suffers any physical harm whatsoever in a novel full of mur-
der and abuse, but survives and thrives. This role-reversal demonstrates how
prostitution functions in the novels as the closest thing to pure convertibility,
pure metonymic freedom, in both the story and its telling.

In fact, the extremity of Haffner’s situation—as idealized exploiter and also
ill-starred victim of his own exploits, killed by an unspecified one of many
men who want revenge—exemplifies how all the characters in Los siete locos
are engaged in multiple and contradictory processes of exploitation: at any
given time, all members of the conspiracy are both being fooled and fooling
others, they are designing the new society and being designed by it, capital-
izing on others’ weaknesses and getting something for nothing while being
made into coin and spent.

In that sense, Hipólita stands alone in her ability to derive surplus-value
autonomously, as an entrepreneur without employees, thereby escaping not
only from labor but also from the consequences of exploitation of others—
revenge, physical harm, jail, death—in which the other characters except the
Astrologer are gradually entangled and, eventually, spent. Whereas hers can
be seen as a self-interested calculation, Erdosain and the pimp are both driven
unconsciously by the very same metastable terms that pushed them to join
up with the Astrologer in the first place. Even the Astrologer himself is beset
by endless associations narrated in free indirect discourse by which his ideas
emerge and define him metonymically. Only Hipólita’s thought is not nar-
rated except by herself, in dialogue. In this sense, the prostitute is the one nar-
rative rogue element in the general pattern.

We can see how the exposed thought of Erdosain leads him on a circuit
that passes through Hipólita, and ultimately will lead him to homicide and
suicide. The same angustia with golden and red colors mixes with his initial
guilt: ruminating on the crime he has agreed to commit, he thinks fixedly, “Es
inútil, soy un asesino [it’s useless, I’m a murderer].”27 The narrator continues in
an ambiguous free indirect discourse:

Mas, de pronto, al aparecer el cubo rojo o amarillo de un lenocinio, se dete-
nía, vacilaba un instante bañado por la neblina rojiza o amarillenta [. . .].
Mas su angustia se hacía a cada instante más pesada, como si fuera una
masa de agua, fatigando con una marea la verticalidad de sus miembros. A
pesar de esto, Erdosain se imaginaba que por beneficio de su providencia,
había entrado a un prostíbulo singular. [D]eteniéndose asombrada de un
motivo que sólo él y ella conocían, la ramera exclama:
¡Ah! ¿sos vos? . . . ¡vos! ¡por fin viniste!
Erdosain le respondía:
—Sí . . . soy yo . . . ¡Ah, si supieras cuánto te he buscado!
Mas como esto era imposible que aconteciera, su tristeza rebotaba como pelota de plomo en una muralla de goma. Y bien sabía que siempre sus anhelos de ser súbitamente compadecido, por una ramera desconocida, serían durante el desenvolverse de los días, ineficaces como esa pelota, para horadar la vida espesa.

[But, suddenly, on seeing the red or yellow cube of a brothel, he stopped, vacilating for a moment bathed in the reddish or yellowish fog [. . .]. But his anguish became heavier every second, as if it were a mass of water, tiring the verticality of his body parts with seasickness. Despite this, Erdosain imagined that by great luck he had entered a unique brothel. [S]topping short, marveling for a reason that only he and she knew, the whore exclaimed:
“Ah, it's you? You?! You're here at last!”
Erdosain answered her:
“Yes . . . it's me . . . If you only knew how I've looked for you!”
But as it was impossible for this to happen, his sadness bounced like a ball of lead against a rubber wall. And he knew well that his desires of being suddenly pitied by an unknown whore would always be as useless as that ball at boring a hole through his thick life. (215)

However, at that very moment, in despair, Erdosain goes home and curls up quietly in the dark, full of a “childish fear,” and lights a cigarette only to see none other than Hipólita by the light of the match, contemplating him with her “cold and poisonous look” from the room divider (216).

The amazing fact of Hipólita's appearance in Erdosain's room seems to have been conjured out of the raw materials of the preceding pages: Erdosain's anguish had summoned up a fantasy of a red or a yellow cube in which to meet the unknown prostitute who would pity him; returning to the dark, Hipólita appears with uncanny timing to hear Erdosain's troubles. It is almost as though the language itself of his ruminations has recombined to generate the scene: not only does Hipólita hear his confession, but she gazes at him through her red eyelashes (224) as she shares with him the story of her life. Erdosain is so overwhelmed with guilt about the impending murder and relief at finding himself talking with Hipólita that the only way he can express his gratitude is to say to her, “Mirá, si vos . . . si usted me pidiera ahora que me matara, lo haría encantado [Look, if you . . . ma’am . . . asked me to kill myself right now, I would do it happily]” (224).
Of course, Hipólita doesn’t want him to kill himself. Later on, however, Erdosain’s repetitive fantasies of being pitied lead him metonymically onward into horrifying sexual relations with first Luciana Espila and finally the girl known only as “la Bizca” [cross-eyed]. Remembering the murder of a nobody, as the Commentator refers us to “p. 209 [269] of Los siete locos” [583]), he dissociates into “Erdosain” and “the assassin.” He kills “la Bizca,” for no apparent reason:

Cuatro espaciados toques de bronce se dilatan en la noche concéntricamente, desde la torre de la iglesia de la Piedad. [. . .] Entra al cuarto de baño y enciende la luz. Frente al lavatorio hay un espejo. El asesino, cerrando los ojos, lo descuelga del clavo. No quiere verse en ningún espejo. Tiene horror de sí mismo. (588)

[Four slow strokes of bronze dilate concentrically in the night, from the tower of the Church of La Piedad. [. . .] He enters the bathroom and turns on the light. In front of the sink is a mirror. The assassin, closing his eyes, takes it off of the nail. He doesn’t want to see himself in any mirror. He is horrified by himself. (599)

Erdosain’s final crime prefigures his imminent suicide. He starts calling the narrator with the formal Usted, and pale and out of sorts he finally buys a train ticket to Moreno, shooting himself in a car with two other people. When his cadaver is apprehended, that of the “fierce assassin Erdosain,” it has in its pocket “only a card with his name on it and a trivial amount of money.” (597)

Like the pimp Haffner, Erdosain was entirely used up within the huge gestures of the Revolution. Like the commodity expelled from circulation, when the Revolution moves on, its members no longer exist in a moment of self-perpetuating value, but rather as use-value, which is rapidly exhausted in one or two final gestures, which can almost be interpreted as estertores or posthumous twitches after the theft of Erdosain’s Geldseele and before the body realizes that it’s dead.28

While the pairing of Hipólita and Astrologer tends to provoke dialectical interpretations (the frigid prostitute and the eunuch, living coin and capitalist, prostitute and revolutionary), within the fractal metastability of the novels they are more like two series intertwining. When they make off with everyone’s money at the end of Los lanzallamas, the Revolution is transubstantiated into capital, packed up and taken away, deterritorialized along with everybody who had participated in it, just as the Astrologer’s wishful eco-
nomics based entirely on money believed in the ultimate ability of money to “coarsely” absorb life itself.

At the same time, it is Hipólita as prostitute who embodies both the sign of wealth and the irrationality of surplus-value as an expected result of correct choices. First, she embodies the contradiction at the heart of the Astrologer’s plan for the colony of brothels that will be pure surplus-value: by being the (non)object he plans to exploit, she is the hidden human cost of his projected profits, and her engagement with him changes the decisions he makes even as he becomes more and more rigid in his view of himself, splitting off unacceptable, weaker drives from what Nietzsche would call the preponderance (Übergewicht) of stronger ones (or what he himself, in Freudian terms, defines as his ego): in the end, his flight with her—their joint escape, abandoning the Astrologer’s plan and running off together with the money—is nothing if not the recognition that the Astrologer did not know his own desire, but rather was led to it as blindly as any other character in the novels, by the hand of a knowledgeable prostitute.

Second, Hipólita is mapping, qua prostitute, the very social delirium that is not limited to Arlt’s “locos” but on the contrary forms the world around them and continuous with them, and which delirium they attempt to exploit in order to achieve anything but disappointment, disintegration and death. Through Hipólita, we see that it is not irrationality that makes the characters in the novels crazy, but something like an excess of faith in reason, a search for the promised transcendent despite the apparent irrationality and continual disappointment of the world that surrounds them. In this way, it is her role as the prostitute to demonstrate how the desires of the “locos” are congruent with the insanity lying at the heart of political economy, showing that their drives are entirely social, compatible with and inherently part of the political and economic infrastructure.

In other words, by embodying the fantasy of pure surplus-value, Hipólita points out its impossibility. It isn’t that the Astrologer’s calculations that are wrong, but that the axioms he has to work with and his insistence on following them through rationally serves as a reductio ad absurdum of both his fantasy and of economic “rationality” itself. And more importantly, Hipólita reveals that the mechanisms of political economy are libidinal, that any premise of rationality is carved out of the irrational, which surrounds us. She demonstrates the sense in which Deleuze says that everything is rational about capitalism, except capital (Desert Islands 157).