Fictions of the Bad Life

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While much contemporary fiction about prostitution in Argentina has reiterated a consensus around Jewish white slavery by which minority and state mutually legitimize each other’s transhistorical identity, there is also contemporary fiction that addresses the same historical phenomena yet finds in them a perpetual crisis of meaning. Several recent novels dramatize elements of the *blanca* narrative in ways that resonate with the economic crises of the first decade of the twenty-first century, emphasizing an affinity between the two eras based on rupture rather than continuity.¹

Edgardo Cozarinsky’s 2004 novel, *El rufián moldavo* [*The Moldavian Pimp*] goes a step further, breaking paradigmatically with the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery by creating a mode of writing about the same historical events by which the search for an identity puts into crisis the very notion of identity—yet the stories within the novel’s framework also contravene and exceed the narrator’s own ideas about truth, writing and history.² Cozarinsky’s metafictional novel presents history as a centrifugal movement away from destiny: to study history is to turn away from the idea of identity as continuity over time, even though the study of history is motivated by the longing to understand oneself as part of such an identity. In this way, while his novel is driven by a shared desire for roots in the national past (in fact, the protagonist is a half-Jewish student trying to find himself amid his

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**Blanca Metafiction**

Denarrativizing Jewish White Slavery

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Part II. Chapter 4

research on Argentine Yiddish theater), at every turn satisfaction is deferred; paradoxically, the further the protagonist advances in his investigation of Yiddish theater, the less possible it seems to identify with a shared Argentine-Jewish past. As one source comments disparagingly to him, “Sólo un muchacho que no es judío puede interesarse en esas viejerías [only a boy who isn't Jewish can be interested in those old things]” (40).

Part of the problem is that the Yiddish theater was dominated by the pimps of the Zwi Migdal, such that his investigation is quickly transformed into a study of prostitution. The blanca narrative is presented as a reductio in an eponymous play within the first part of the novel. The powerful tropes and tacit assumptions of the blanca narrative will come to filter the narrator’s historical perspective and serve as the novel’s metafictional motor. While he ironizes the play’s heavy-handed representations, it seems to seep into his mind and create mechanisms by which he judges reality according to the literary and moral standards set by its version of the blanca narrative. The blanca narrative therefore seems to function almost unconsciously in the back of the narrator’s mind, automatically generating “plausible” interpretations of disparate historical facts in keeping with its master tropes; other times, it makes the narrator doubt stories that deviate from them. By the end of the novel, however, the metafictional treatment of the blanca narrative triggers an aporia, whereby the putative truth or falsity of any historical narrative cannot be resolved but can only generate yet another story.

It is worth clarifying, then, that while Cozarinsky’s novel shares with historical fiction a longing to discern the meaning of the present in relation to the past, and specifically to “see” the historic origin point of the still-tentative hybrid “Jewish-Argentine,” he is not writing historical fiction as it has been defined up to this point, either as Menton’s “new historical fiction” or the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery explored in the previous chapter. Cozarinsky’s first-person narrative present remains firmly in the decade of the 2000s: though free indirect discourse allows the historical characters discovered by the narrator’s research to think and speak fluidly, their subjectivity is not created in accordance with the (Naturalist) “feel” of their era, nor is their era recreated through the use of period details. On the contrary, it stands in stark contrast to both the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery and the Naturalist novels of prostitution on which the former drew, in which metafiction had been limited to a prologue framing the fiction to follow. Concretely, the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery had arrogated to itself a putative continuity with the “true spirit” of the period in question, based on the transhistorical Jewish identity that was supposed to have originated during the period and which origin the fiction represents;
and the author’s imagination was then free to fill in the blanks in the historical record—or even change the facts in the record—because of this affinity. In this way, the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery proposed a way of understanding history by which the author connected to the past via a shared identity, and with which the author’s imagination was essentially continuous, itself a “part of” the same history.

In Cozarinsky, on the other hand, the connection with the past is maintained not through identity but rather exclusively through stories. In fact, whereas the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery arrogated to itself the role of inventing the story of the *blanca* who couldn’t speak for herself, the first line of *El rufián moldavo* is spoken by an old man who insists that “Los cuentos no se inventan, se heredan [Stories aren’t invented—they’re inherited]”: “Es peligroso inventar cuentos. Si resultan buenos terminan por hacerse realidad, después de un tiempo se trasmiten, y entonces ya no importa si fueron inventados, porque siempre habrá alguien que después los haya vivido [It’s dangerous to invent stories. If they turn out good, they end up becoming reality. After a while they get passed around, and then it doesn’t matter anymore if a story was invented, because there will always be someone who has lived it]” (Cozarinsky 11). Stories are the only connection with the past, and so to invent a story about the past alters the connection between past and present. The speaker is not the protagonist’s real grandfather, the Jewish maternal grandfather who had died when he was eight—“el único, débil lazo, con la tradición judía dentro de una familia totalmente asimilada [the only weak link with Jewish tradition in a totally assimilated family]” (133)—but rather Sami Warschauer, one-time Yiddish theater actor and impresario, but now an old man to whom the nursing home staff refer as just “el abuelo [grandfather].” “I’ll be back to visit him next Sunday,” the narrator tells the nurse, leaving. “Pero murió tres días más tarde y me quedé sin saber tantas cosas [But he died three days later and I was left without knowing so many things]” (12).

From the beginning of the novel, there is thus established an indirect genealogy of the transmission of literature, in an echo of what Ricardo Piglia’s *Respiración artificial* (1980) had made famous as the notion (put forward by “someone, a Russian critic, the Russian critic Yuri Tynianov”) that “literature evolves from uncle to nephew (and not from parents to children)” (Piglia, *Respiración artificial* 19). The “abuelo” dies alone in the nursing home, without family; and though the narrator has only visited him on “three or four Sundays,” he agrees to search for the man’s only son, reputed to be in Paris, and inform him of his father’s death and deliver to him the shoebox containing Sami’s few possessions.
Yet the narrator’s desire to connect to the past complicates this simple task. Instead of looking for the man’s real son, the narrator takes on the role himself, going through the man’s possessions, and sublimating his desire for continuity into an aesthetic problem: “me costó asociar al hombre de la fotografía [. . .] con el anciano que había visitado tres o cuatro domingos en el Hogar Doctor Mauricio Frenkel gracias al bibliotecario del Instituto que me había orientado [it was hard for me to associate the man in the photograph [. . .] with the old man I had visited three or four Sundays in the Doctor Mauricio Frenkel Home thanks to the librarian at the Institute who had given me the tip]” (18). The run-on sentence connects this lonely old man who has just died with his photograph from 1945 via the narrator’s association—and it provides a snapshot of how the narrator’s research functions primarily as a mode of connection. To reunite the son with his father’s photograph—as well as the rest of the shoe box full of old theater programs Sami has left behind—would somehow allow the narrator to vicariously integrate his own Jewish-Argentine history, of which his research has found only indigestible fragments. This quest will take him to the marrow of the matter, the indivisible being without remainder, the bare bones of it, whatever “it” is.

In this sense, Cozarinsky’s protagonist is gripped by a desire similar to that of the narrators of the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery: he wants to get to the bottom of history and find there an image of himself that gives his life meaning. To find Sami Warschauer’s son and return to him the box of faded programs is thus the pretext with which the narrator follows the wandering trail of clues in a research project that becomes a search for himself. Yet in stark contrast to the many iterations of Raquel Liberman and Julio Alsogaray in contemporary historical fiction, the protagonist of Cozarinsky’s quest is a nameless, first-person narrator, a student researching a half-hearted interest in the Yiddish theater who tells us only that he bears a last name “inobjetablemente italiano [unobjectably Italian],” while his mother’s last name was Finkelstein (22). By Argentine convention, the narrator bears publicly only his father’s last name; the loss of the maternal name and family connections define a sense of loss that is the deeper motivation for the narrator’s search. Yet in some sense the search is doomed from the start: he already feels that this loss is irretrievable qua identity: to recover the name as an explanation for his investigation, says the narrator, “would be to appeal to a determinism that I don’t agree with” (22).

Most importantly, however, from his present-day vantage point, Cozarinsky’s protagonist first attempts to author a contemporary historical fiction of white slavery. Upon discovering the facts of the Raquel Liberman case, he says:
[E]stas siluetas y anécdotas sólo me daban un sustento real para otras siluetas y anécdotas, las de esa provincia del show business que me había llevado hasta ellas. En el fondo, me temo, aún era el adolescente que seguía en la calle a desconocidos que le parecían portadores de ficción, para ver adónde iban, con quién se encontraban, dónde vivían [...]. No, no era demasiado diferente la imaginación con que, a partir de los retazos que la realidad me entregaba, empezaba a novelar la existencia de personajes sin más base que algunos nombres y fechas, a inventar sus historias a partir de situaciones apenas vislumbradas. . . .

However, rather than a scrapbook upon which he could draw to substantiate a narrative of how he and his culture got to the present, Cozarinsky’s narrator kept finding sources of fiction in history, giving him the raw material only for narratives that put the order and the meaning of the present into crisis. Rather than contributing to an incomplete historical record, his findings seem to invalidate existing historical narratives.

In its relentless metafiction and its resolute refusal to recreate the “feeling” of the past, *El rufián moldavo* exemplifies certain traits Seymour Menton ascribed to the New Historical Novel; yet the novel itself is told entirely from the vantage point of the present day, an abstract present without the warmth of details, a protagonist without even a name.5 Present and past alike become “denarrativized”: people, places, events and objects that by convention exist and have meaning indissociable from a narrative structure are suddenly stripped of that structure.

The narrator conflates the loss of narrative with the loss of identity: he seems to believe that the ability to narrate was lost collectively sometime in the past. Thus, the channel of historical fiction is blocked to him. Instead, he must try to get back in time before the denarrativizing event, to recover the possibility of narrating. The novel is, in this sense, a meta-narrative of denar-
rativization, and thus a meta-answer to the question Alberto Moreiras had posed in his essay “Infrapolitics and the Thriller”:

If there is a history of literature, is there also a history of denarrativization? If there is a history of ethics, can there be a history of the suspension of ethics? Or are denarrativization and the suspension of ethics theoretico-practical moments equivalent to the conceptual moment of the subaltern in Gayatri Spivak’s phrase “the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized as logic”? (Moreiras, “Infrapolitics and the Thriller” 36)

Moreiras is asking whether a phenomenon such as denarrativization can be the subject of a narrative. The narrator of El rufián moldavo begins the novel believing that the answer is yes, and that his identity depends on it. However, despite himself, the narrative he produces undermines not only the idea of a transhistorical Jewish-Argentine identity but, in Moreiras’s words, breaks with “all narratives of identity, and with all narratives of difference” (Moreiras, The Exhaustion of Difference 51), producing story after story each of which exceeds and undermines the narrative’s overarching structure.

The narrator cannot narrate what happened to the Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires, or to the kind of people involved with it, or even what role it played in people’s lives—“Qué fue el teatro para quienes vivieron antes que yo? [What was the theater for those who lived before me?]” (Cozarinsky 23), and this desire to know is thwarted by a generalized disinterest in the very categories that define his investigation. There is not only by an absence of organized information—his research doesn’t correspond to a recognized field of inquiry, because it isn’t part of any successful master narrative of identity—but there is also, therefore, a surplus of miscataloged and forgotten papers, whose very material survival seems to be an error. The script of the eponymous play within the novel appears incorrectly archived under the wrong title, its author as anonymous as the novel’s protagonist, who then traces the text through a city of impossible archives whose rubrics hide what they classify. The Instituto de Historia del Teatro [Institute of Theater History] “se me confirmaba como una cripta peligrosa antes que una cueva de imprevisibles tesoros [confirmed itself as more of a dangerous crypt than an unexpected treasure trove]”: “Seguido por sus fantasmas, que rehusaban esfumarse, pasé junto a la sinagoga custodiada por agentes de policía que no disimulaban sus bostezos [. . .] ¿A quién pertenecía ese libreto extraviado, acaso escondido, en una carpeta ajena? [Followed by its ghosts, who refused to dissolve, I passed by the synagogue guarded by police officers who didn’t hide their
yawns [. . .] To whom did this wild libretto belong, possibly hidden in the wrong folder?)” (Cozarinsky 31).

The miscataloged and unattributed script of “El rufián moldavo” is one of many unidentified, nameless remainders or “remnants” of the past (the narrator often uses this tailoring metaphor) which intrude on the present, revealing its disorder. The eruptions—invisible to the yawning police and indifferent archivists—bring details that do not fit with the a priori notions that guide the narrator’s search, and here it is that the very same story of Jewish white slavery—and concretely the blanca narrative—brings an insurrectionary force against the very possibility of discovering “the untold story” which would give meaning to contemporary Argentine-Jewishness. Every character, every anecdote is resolutely irreducible to any meaning, cannot be flattened into a bigger story, into that form of scholarship that—in fiction, at any rate—is about discovering a beautiful story that explains everything truthfully. At the same time, each of the narrator’s fictionalized historical characters—invented personalities based on putatively real names but only the scantiest details—is absolutely alienated from contemporary views of the past.⁶

Our nameless hero’s research provides a source of perpetual motion for the plot. As his investigation progresses, the narrator develops a complicated relationship to the historical characters he uncovers: he is looking for himself in history, but he’s not finding himself, nor is he getting closer to the truth of history. Rather, as he interviews people, hoping to learn from them the missing pieces of this past, he turns them into literary characters, imagining their motives and rewriting their stories. At bottom, he is also playing a literary role, as “un detective, a private eye, y como la realidad no me encarga investigaciones peligrosas las busco entre papeles y recuerdos ajenos [a detective, a private eye, and since reality doesn’t send me on any dangerous missions I seek them among papers and distant memories]” (22).⁷

Among these papers bequeathed indirectly by Sami Warschauer, the “abuelo” of the novel’s opening scene, is a letter from the playwright Theo Auer, né Theófilo Auerbach. Auer, the narrator realizes, is the author of the hitherto anonymous play, “El rufián moldavo,” the controversial story of a Moldavian pimp with a heart of gold. Sami Warschauer had pleaded with the playwright to send him the script, to allow him to revive the “great work of Jewish theater” in the lagging postwar theater milieu, but Auer had refused, insisting that while his famous play about prostitution had exposed the dirty secret of Jewish white slavery as revenge against his community’s participation in prostitution, he now disavowed it, as it had constituted another betrayal by reifying—and perhaps even reactivating—the anti-Semitic stereotype of
what Julio Alsogaray had called “the Jew white slaver” (Alsogaray 149). The outwardly spiraling tension between revenge and betrayal becomes the novel’s centrifugal force: the withheld play within the novel also comes to define an intergenerational relationship to history as a series of inherited crimes which are—largely unconsciously—reenacted, avenged and repressed.

In piecing together the fragments of the past, the narrator begins arranging personal anecdotes of discomfort, sacrifice, oppression, strife into a fictional narrative of his own encounter with them, coming up against the limits of narrating the denarrativized. Violence erupts parenthetically, but it has been severed from the master narratives within which it might signify historically. For example, Sami’s father, we are told in parentheses, had ruptured his own right eardrum with a mattress-maker’s needle to avoid conscription in the emperor’s army (58); and this micro vignette is the only trace of the father, like a fossilized footprint in mid-stride that suggests direction and a type of movement but resolves nothing.

Whereas the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery delighted in minutiae—choosing details that expedited the plot and recreated the “flavor” of the era in a way indissociable from its interpretation of history, in El rufián moldavo, these details distract, disrupt and continually disconnect the main plot. They erupt parenthetically at every turn, turning the novel into a tangent-driven antihistory, committed to the specificity of details and therefore to their insolubility within narrative. In fact, the blurring out of these insoluble pieces of history is the prime mover of the novel, that which initiates and sustains the perpetuum mobile of the journalistic investigation, even as it seems to take narrator and reader farther away from any clear understanding of history in a supersaturated novel overflowing with the past.

This Is Not Raquel Liberman: Blanca Metafiction

In the context of this denarrativizing assemblage of details, the same “story” of Jewish white slavery brings an insurrectionary force against the very conditions of its own narration, and each of the narrator’s fictionalized characters—whether one, two, three or four generations older than he—is equally alienated from any unifying narrative of the past. In this way, their refusal to fit into a unitary narrative can be seen as a potential within denarrativization to not only critique the revisionism of the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery which forcibly “restored” an anachronistically defined Jewish-Argentine identity to the national imaginary, but also to affirm a different affective relationship to history, by which the same unbelonging, nonassimi-
lation of cultural phenomena into national culture by which the narrator’s search stalls at the archives and libraries of the nation thus preserves something that has escaped denarrativization. In being passed over by a modernizing, total narrative, in being left out, these remainders already embody an alternative history from which to think what would otherwise be impossible.

The metafiction of the *blanca* arises in two distinct areas of the novel: in the narrator’s own running piecemeal narrative of his research—particularly in the intertwining stories of Natalia Auerbach and Maxi Warschauer—and in the eponymous play within the novel by Auerbach’s father, the playwright Theo Auer, which is summarized by the narrator as he reads it for the first time in the basement of the Teatro Cervantes, the reading room of the Instituto de Historia del Teatro. In fact, the two areas are linked by Auer’s play, “El rufián moldavo”: the *blanca* narrative unfolds wholesale in the play, and the novel’s narrator, after reading it, internalizes and begins to deploy aspects of its narrative logic. At the same time, all of the novel’s characters act out elements of its various stock roles throughout the novel. As it appears in Cozarinsky’s imaginary play, the story line hits all of the major plot points of the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery; however, the narrator’s report of the play intersperses bits of presentist perspectival irony, and the many fragmentary repetitions and permutations of the play’s contents combine to create the impression of a massive metafictional hologram of the *blanca* which at moments constitutes an apogee of the *blanca* narrative and at others its deconstruction.

The play “El rufián moldavo” supposedly premiered at the Teatro Ombú in 1927 to great acclaim. Act one opens on the shores of the Prut River, in Moldova, where a group of girls laughs and dances while older women set out “las inevitables tortas de amapola y de queso [the inevitable poppyseed cakes and cheesecakes]” (25). A tall, handsome, sad-eyed youth holding a violin declares that he is leaving for America, “pero no es él quien interpreta el solo de violín que desplaza a la orquesta para acompañarlo mientras canta ‘Adiós, amigos, adiós, me voy a América’ [but it isn’t he who interprets the violin solo that takes over from the orchestra to accompany him as he sings, ‘Farewell, friends, farewell, I’m going to America’]” (25). The young girls beg to accompany him, and despite the best attempts of the older women to dissuade them follow him admiringly, “Como un flautista de Hamelin [like the Pied Piper of Hamelin]” (25).

The irony is deepened in the second scene, which echoes the prototypical image of arrival by ship in America, the girls clustered on the deck, scanning the horizon, “hasta que una grita ‘¿Dónde está la estatua de la libertad?’ [until one cries, ‘Where is the Statue of Liberty?’]:

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Un número musical expresa su inquietud, música de ritmo entrecortado y estribillos que se superponen ("¿Dónde estamos? ¿Qué puerto es ése que se asoma a lo lejos?") hasta que el galán sombrío de la primera escena reaparece, ahora sonriente, entusiasta; ya no tiene en la mano un violín sino un bandoneón, y canta con toda su voz de barítono: "Es otra América, la del Sur, la que vamos a descubrir, y ésta es su música."

[A musical number expresses her worry, music with an unsteady rhythm and refrains superimposed on each other ("Where are we? What port is that appearing in the distance?")], until the somber heartthrob of the first scene reappears, now smiling, enthusiastic; he no longer has a violin in his hand but a bandoneón, and he sings with all his baritone voice: "It is another America, South America, which we will discover, and this is its music."] (26)

The script then indicates that he should face away from the public with the bandoneón, "para que no resulte demasiado flagrante la impostura [so that the farce shouldn't be too flagrant]" as he pretends to play "Re Fa Si," which is amplified from the orchestra pit (26). Little by little the girls begin to sway to the tango, and the scene ends as they are being taught the first steps "by unknown dancers" (26–27), who return immediately in the next scene where the heartthrob has become the authoritarian pimp he has "really" been all along; one of the young girls is presented "sólo vestida con una camisa transparente [only dressed in a transparent shirt]" before the men, who have changed into pimps at an auction. The young girl's despair is related in the form of the tango "De mi barrio [From my neighborhood]," to which she changes the words with "lo que el libreto llama 'oportunas modificaciones': en lugar de 'en un convento de monjas me eduqué' se canta 'en casa siempre se observó el shabat' [what the script called 'opportune modifications': instead of 'I was educated by nuns in a convent,' she sings, 'in my house we always observed Shabbat']" (27).

The multilayered farce begins with the pimp who appears as a heartthrob in the shtetl: decontextualized from its usual trappings of poverty and desperation, the archetypal scene of the trafficker who fools the young blanca into believing his promises of marriage becomes a parody in which swooning girls beg to follow him to America. The phantasmic origin of Jewish-Argentina—the arrival by ship, and the concomitant symbolic hybridization (Raquel Liberman cooking ſņoquis; her children singing the national anthem [Schalom 37, 222]) becomes a satirical encounter with the "wrong" America: the first sighting of land is of the absence of the Statue of Liberty. The
“music of South America,” the tango, is rewritten to accommodate in the most forced manner the iconic blanca narrative.

This parody of hybridization, which Cozarinsky’s narrator initially seemed to find moderately funny, has disturbed him. “Estaba asombrado. No era la primera vez que comprobaba, sin agrado, que se había adherido a mi sensibilidad cierto sentido de lo que es decoroso y lo que no lo es, por más que siempre hubiese procurado mantenerme ajeno a lo que hoy suele llamarse ‘políticamente correcto’ [I was shocked. It wasn’t the first time that I had proved, unhappily, that a sense of decorum had adhered itself to my sensibility, as much as I had always tried to remain unaffected by what today is called ‘political correctness’]” (28). He forces himself to continue reading the play, hoping that “algo debíadecirme este libreto sobre aquel público, sobre la época en que la obra pudo ser aceptada sin embarazo [it should tell me something about that audience, about the time in which the work could have been accepted without embarrassment]” (28).

The play’s second act consists of a tour through the Naturalist cycles of degeneration of one prostitute, the same “desvalida muchacha [helpless girl]” from the pimps’ auction in act one. She is known as “Taube [Paloma]”:

y su carácter rebelde la hace ser expulsada muy pronto de un establecimiento lujoso de Rosario (¿inspirado en el de Madame Sapho?), donde la han rebautizado Yvette de Montmartre, y recalar en otro de Buenos Aires, en Lavalle y Junín; de allí irá a parar por un tiempo al reducto de las castigadas, en el sur desolado de Tres Arroyos, para volver a la capital e intentar matar a la sordida madame que regentea la nueva casa adonde ha sido asignada, en la calle Viamonte.

[and her rebellious character gets her expelled very quickly from a luxury establishment in Rosario (inspired by Madame Sapho?), where they have rebaptized her Yvette de Montmartre, and to descend to a lesser one in Buenos Aires, at Lavalle and Junín; from there she will end up for a while at the refuge of the punished, in the desolate south of Tres Arroyos, to return to the capital and attempt to kill the sordid madam who rules the new house to which she’s been assigned, on Viamonte Street.] (28)

Taube’s appearance in the play is inextricable from the narrator’s knowledge of the tropes of prostitution: he speculates that the luxury brothel in Rosario is based on Daudet’s Sapho (1884); even the polysemic name-change, exemplifying both extremes of social mobility and namelessness, is intertextual, Yvette being one of the cabaret dancers repeatedly painted by Toulouse-
Lautrec, himself an exemplary Montmartre artist, and Montmartre itself a metonym for prostitution in the arts. The recreation of a typical Naturalist rise and descent in the play is thus mediated by the narrator’s erudite reading, suggesting a potentially infinite intertextual web with one parenthetical reference.

In the final act, we understand that Taube’s pimp heartthrob, now known as Méndele, has confessed to Taube’s crime—her failed attempt to murder the madam—and now languishes in jail. A song begins playing, and Taube sings the words “Escucha al corazón / si te sientes perdido, / su voz dirá el camino / hacia la redención [Listen to your heart / if you feel lost, / its voice will tell the path / to salvation]” (29). The rhythm changes to that of a tango, and the bars of Méndele’s jail cell fall down “as if by magic” (29). They dance the tango together, accompanied from a respectful distance by the whole cast, until the curtain falls. A note written in pencil at the end of the script suggests that if an encore is demanded, the cast not repeat this final number, but rather dance “El amanecer [Dawn]” by Firpo.

In all, the nonexistent period piece pulls together all the tropes of white slavery, yet also subverts them in one aporetic plot point: the abject _blanca_ kills the madam. The narrator’s reading of the play complicates it further, interleaving the irony brought by his anachronistic perspective and his knowledge of literature with the anonymous stage directions of a director in 1927—perhaps Theo Auer himself—all of which coexists with the narrator’s unexpectedly old-fashioned prejudices, of which he is a bit ashamed.

The aftershocks of the _blanca_ narrative as rendered in the play will shape the narrator’s judgment of what sounds plausible and what doesn’t in the stories of the people he interviews. As the play was mediated by his own “presentist” perspective, so the _blanca_ narrative in all its contradictions will intertwine itself with the narrator’s research agenda—influencing his thinking even as he rewrites it, almost like a Möbius strip. This can be analyzed as occurring in three interrelated modes of interpretation and expression, which freely permute among themselves.

First, there are moments in the novel when the _blanca_ narrative seems to work transparently, as an automatic narrating machine, stringing together disparate facts almost without the narrator’s explicit engagement; yet even within this mode, the familiar-seeming “_blancas_” of the novel—Zsuzsa and, briefly, Raquel Liberman—will deviate, much as Taube did in the play, from the master narrative of white slavery, embodying an aporia within the _blanca_ narrative logic: they, like the great Naturalist prostitutes, appear contradictory; yet unlike their predecessors, they point out the _cultural_ source of this paradox.
Second, in reaction to the first, easy mode of narrating the blanca story, a paranoid mode of reading is triggered, by which the narrator begins to question the truthfulness of history that reads either too much like fiction or not enough like the blanca narrative. In particular, he rereads and reinterprets the testimony of Natalia Auerbach—Theo Auer’s daughter—and Maxi Warschauer—Sami’s son. At these moments, it seems that he has come to view both the play and the characters’ memories through the lens of a strict realist-Naturalist regime of representation, whereby stories are judged as “confessions” that either approach or deviate from the truth.

Finally—and especially in the novel’s epilogue—the first two modes are deconstructed on the basis of the original aporia in the blanca narrative, cancelled out by a metafictional perspective that makes the truth or falsity of any historical narrative unknowable and lays waste to the realist-Naturalist representational scheme from within its maximal expression in the blanca. The novel concludes by allying itself intertextually with a potentially infinite library of stories.

The First Mode: Blanca 2.0

The first component of the multifaceted workings of the blanca narrative within the narrator’s mind takes the form of what appears at first to simply be a retelling of the blanca narrative in the novel; yet it’s necessary to clarify how this narrative—apparently generated automatically with total naturalness—sets the stage for the complication and ultimate deconstruction of the blanca narrative. First, consider—by way of comparison—the following two descriptions of the young blanca seeing Buenos Aires for the first time. The former is from Myrtha Schalom’s La Polaca, a passage indicative of the view of history permeating the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery as it paints a picture of the exhilarating freedom Raquel Liberman feels stepping out of the brothel and onto the streets of Buenos Aires:

Before her eyes the dazzling lights of the bright signs invited her to try Atkinson perfume and Le Sancy loose powder, to drink Cinzano vermouth and smoke Ideales. . . . In front of the Excelsior Theater, the billboard with the face of Theda Bara starring in A Woman There Was brings to mind her own image as a femme fatale. (Schalom 185)

By contrast, here is Cozarinsky’s young blanca, Zsuzsa:
[The madam] had taken the girls out for a ride through Palermo in an open car; there they had seen orderly gardens, an artificial lake and children dressed in white: visions with which [Zsuzsa] could not establish any sort of relationship, mere moving illustrations, like those in [the magazines] Caras y Caretas or El Hogar. (Cozarinsky 59)

While Schalom’s Liberman is counterfactually “restored” to the imaginary, as though the absence of poor Jewish prostitutes on the streets of Palermo could be corrected by Photoshopping stock images into the national consciousness, Cozarinsky’s character is not only excluded from the dominant imaginary of 1920s Buenos Aires, but is even excluded from recognizing that she exists in the same reality.

However, the contrasts don’t end there. Cozarinsky’s Zsuzsa quickly dies of tuberculosis, without even knowing “el nombre del mal que pocas semanas después acabará con su vida [the name of the affliction that a few weeks later would end her life]” (62). Her early and unceremonious death is literarily unconventional, breaking with the drawn-out suffering that the Naturalist prostitutes perfected, but also—at a more literal level—stopping all actions driven overtly by the blanca narrative. But there is also a more radical difference at work: Zsuzsa had already practiced prostitution in the alte medine [old country]; she was knowingly prostituted by her parents and so she thus emigrated from a life of prostitution and poverty to a life of prostitution and poverty. With this simple stroke of unspeakable reality, the motor of the blanca myth seems to have stalled. Her historically realistic, literarily unconventional death is expressed in a sentence that makes Argentina and the alte medine analogous in Jewish experience: Zsuzsa dies “en un país que ha cambiado de nombre entre fronteras que han cambiado de lugar [in a country that has changed names between frontiers that have moved]” (70). The bleak vision is instantiated by the appearance of Zsuzsa’s ghost: “En la niebla fría de junio, que las luces pálidas del alumbrado público vuelven amarillenta, veo aparecer la figura vacilante de una mujer [In the cold mist of June, yellow under the pale electric street lights, I see the flickering figure of a woman]” (66).

Raquel Liberman herself proves disruptive in Cozarinsky, in one long sentence in which the narrator reads:

Sobre Raquel Liberman, a quien pretendieron hacerle creer que sus ahorros se habrían volatilizado en el crash bursátil del ’29 en Wall Street, y ante su incredulidad amenazaron con marcarle la cara, en un primer momento, y con algo peor si insistía, y sobre el juez Rodríguez Ocampo, que la escuchó,
la protegió y llevó ante la Justicia a ciento ocho responsables de la Zwi Migdal que no habían huido inmediatamente del país con los pasaportes que les había vendido el comisario Eduardo Santiago.

[About Raquel Liberman, whom they tried to convince that all her savings had been lost in the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and when she wouldn't believe them they threatened to slash her face, and something worse if she insisted), and about Judge Rodríguez Ocampo, who heard her and protected her and brought before the Justice 108 leaders of the Zwi Migdal who hadn’t fled immediately from the country with the passports sold to them by Police Commissioner Eduardo Santiago.] (Cozarinsky 47)

Santiago had been the last federal police commissioner under Irigoyen, immediately before Alsogaray was promoted at the time of the coup. In one sentence, Cozarinsky points out matter-of-factly the complicity of the political machine and the police force in organized prostitution at the highest levels which, while it is amply documented in scholarly histories (Trochon, Las rutas 301, 304–7; Guy, Sex and Danger 51; 132) is generally limited to low-level functionaries or elided entirely in the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery.

In this way, Zsuzsa’s early death, Raquel Liberman’s brief cameo and the structural presence of police corruption don’t merely disrupt the Photoshopped vision of historical Jewish-Argentine Buenos Aires through the intrusion of unwelcome historical facts; they also participate in altering the blanca narrative by redirecting the contradictions that Naturalism had attributed to the prostitute’s paradoxical nature back onto the cultures—both in Europe and America—in which prostitution thrived.

The Second Mode: The Paranoid Reading

The narrator spends much of the novel in a “paranoid” mode, in which he is prevented from narrating not only by the unassimilability of stories from the past but also because he doubts these stories for evincing either too much or not enough verisimilitude. Most of his paranoia is directed at Maxi Warschauer—son of Sami—and Natalia Auerbach—daughter of Theo Auer. As the blood descendants of the men he has chosen as his surrogate forbears in Jewish-Argentine identity, he is highly skeptical about their ability to provide anything of value, and projects onto them his own desire to write a good fiction.
Our introduction to Maxi occurs sixty pages after the narrator had examined a program from May 1945 for *Revista de la Victoria* [Victory Revue] in which Sami appeared with his wife, Perla (originally Perl), with the “bleached hair and eyebrows plucked into perfect arches of any actress of indefinable age” (19). We learn that the Warschauer’s son had been onstage in his mother’s arms during the revue, which itself was part of the attempt by government, businesses and individuals to jump on the bandwagon of Allied victory to participate in a collective erasure of the reality of Argentine fascism, now that the “desenlace de la guerra resultó evidente aun para quienes menos lo deseaba en el seno del gobierno de facto [outcome of the war had become evident even to those who least desired it in the bosom of the de facto government]” (83–84).

Yet the links from *Revista de la Victoria* go farther: Maxi’s birth, which predated the Allied victory in Europe by only two months, was itself Perla’s attempt to erase the memory of her husband’s former girlfriend, Zsuzsa. Convinced that Zsuzsa’s ghost was preventing him from loving her, she decides that the only way to “win” is to have a child (81). The cover-up both of Argentine fascism and of Zsuzsa’s death come together in 1945, when Perla hopes her child has been born into a world where Jews will not be afraid (82). Yet the attempt to erase the past is satirized when the Victory Review itself reveals both a tune composed by a Nazi and a final act copied from a German operetta whose composer had been gassed at Auschwitz only weeks earlier (86). “La ignorancia,” the narrator writes laconically, “Puede ser un refugio benévolo [Ignorance can be a benevolent refuge]” (86).

Yet for Maxi Warschauer, the desire to escape from his origins was redoubled, rather than eliminated, by his parents’ enthusiastic embrace of Argentine identity. “Añoraba esa minúscula parcela de ignorancia treinta y cinco años más tarde [He was nostalgic for that miniscule piece of ignorance thirty-five years later],” when in 1980 he had married a French woman and had a child “que no hablaba ni una palabra de castellano [who didn’t speak a word of Spanish]”: “Satisfecho, Maxi pensaba que después del idisch había logrado borrar un segundo origen; en los viajes profesionales prefería hablar inglés: temía que, de hablar alemán, que conocía mejor, surgiera imperiosa la sombra del idisch, pesadilla de su infancia entre camarines [Satisfied, Maxi thought that after Yiddish he had succeeded in erasing a second origin; on professional trips he preferred to speak English: he feared that, by speaking German, which he knew better, the shadow of Yiddish would rise up imperiously, a nightmare of his childhood spent in dressing rooms]” (91).

What had initially appeared as a one-off, a document that couldn’t be indexed because it belonged to no category, the play “El rufián moldavo” now
becomes the lens through which the narrator reads—and doubts—Maxi’s story. In particular, the narrator is troubled by the way Maxi’s stories provide seemingly endless, intergenerational *mises en abyme*: the shadow of Yiddish over Maxi’s life echoes too neatly the way that the ghost of Zsuzsa shadowed his parents’ lives (“echa[ndo] una sombra sobre el lecho donde Sami y [Perla] ahora dormían sin tocarse [throwing a shadow over the bed where Sami and [Perla] now slept without touching each other]” [79]).

While the *mises en abyme* seem too pat, too literary “in the worst sense of the word” (145), the narrator is also troubled by how Maxi’s story jumbles historical references freely, juxtaposing them in suggestive analogies with no regard for scale or causality, thus preventing a coherent chronological or causal narrative. Thus, for example, the death in Auschwitz of the composer Löhner, the ghost Zsuzsa, the birth of Maxi, the choice of songs for the Victory Review, the pretense of “unanimous” support for the Allied forces in Argentina months before the end of the war, all are presented as indissociable from each other. This continuous net of details in which every element is related tangentially to every other element is the flipside of the pat narratives—a different way of forgetting the big picture, *un*writing rather than *rewriting* history.

In this way, the narrator sees his characters as engaged in forgetting both by omission and commission: at the end of his life, Sami Warschauer “había olvidado sus tiempos de bandoneonista y las casas ‘malas’; sólo recordaba su segunda vida, la que Perl le había confeccionado [had forgotten his times as a bandoneón player and the brothels; he only remembered his second life, the one Perl had made up for him]” (92); and, at the end of her life, his own mother “abandonaba mentalmente la identidad de Perl Rust para refugiarse en la de Perla Ritz, *nom de théâtre* que a Maxi le parecía ridículo [mentally abandoned the identity of Perl Rust to take refuge in that of Perla Ritz, the *nom de théâtre* that seemed ridiculous to Maxi]” (88)—though, he acknowledges, it caught on better than his own attempt to adopt a *nom de théâtre*—Andrés Machado—which he supposed conferred on him an evocative “porteña presence” for Parisian audiences (87).

Firmly a Parisian expatriate Argentine, Maxi is afraid to return to Buenos Aires when his company wants to send him there to research a tango compilation, as though his old identity will descend upon him immediately. When a car accident detains him on his way to the airport, he is relieved to postpone the “inevitable decision” to see his father or avoid him:

elegir convertirse durante unos días en un fantasma más entre tantos otros que inevitablemente vendrían a su encuentro, o enfrentar al anciano des-
conocido [. . . ] [un] interlocutor que le devolvería sin duda la identidad que él se había aplicado durante años a cancelar.

[to choose to become for a few days one more ghost among so many others that he would inevitably meet, or to face the unknown old man [. . . ] [an] interlocutor who would doubtless give him back the identity that for years he had applied himself to cancelling out.] (97)

While Maxi is stalled on the highway by an accident, waiting for something to happen, a young girl appears in the rain and, without thinking, Maxi opens the door for her. Seamlessly, she offers herself to him for thirty euros; seamlessly, he accepts, “excited” by “ímagenes de miseria y esclavitud contemporáneas [images of misery and contemporary slavery]” (99). Afterwards, he feels ashamed, telling himself that the girl must at most be sixteen, his own daughter’s age (the girl had told him she was thirteen, but he conveniently rules this out). Unthinking, he hits redial on his cell phone, and is reassured that the emergency vehicles will be there imminently. His “real” life, incompatible with highway-side oral sex with teenagers, seemed suddenly “poca cosa al lado de esa suspensión del tiempo, del lugar, de su identidad penosamente fabricada: un limbo del que había tenido un atisbo, agua en las manos, irrecuperable [no big deal next to that suspension of time, of place, of his arduously fabricated identity: a limbo of which he had had a glimpse, water in his hands, irrecoverable]” (101).

In this limbo, the narrator has glimpsed “esos signos discretos del destino [que] sólo pueden leerse cuando los ilumina el paso del tiempo y ya es tarde para escuchar su advertencia [those discreet signs of destiny that can only be read when the passage of time illuminates them and it is too late to hear their warning].” Maxi finds and murders the girl’s pimp, ends up in jail, and thereby short-circuits both his impending trip to Buenos Aires and his return to an identity he has rejected in favor of the one in Europe he has “arduously fabricated.” Instead, he becomes something else entirely: a murderer, a convict and a prisoner. In acting, he reenacts not only the identity he knew he had rejected, but other layers of an inherited story of which he was not aware. Leaping out of the literary and into the literal, Maxi’s flight from Jewish identity ends up making the symbols, the tropes and the characters of that rejected Jewish culture into reality: he reifies them. By killing the pimp, Maxi unconsciously reenacts Auer’s literary revenge, but he also acts out his father’s unfulfilled fantasy of putting on “El rufián moldavo”—itself a desire to deliver to poetic justice the long-dead pimps responsible for Zsu-zsa’s death.
Yet such displacement is not limited, as we have seen, to any one character. The narrator has been pursuing Maxi in order to return to him the prime mover of his investigation, as though he could also displace his consuming desire to understand, along with the shoebox, onto its legal heir. When the narrator learns that Maxi is in prison for confessing to the murder of a pimp of dubious provenance (one of his passports is Moldavian), he can’t believe it:

La historia me pareció fantasiosa, si no llanamente inventada, literatura en el peor sentido de la palabra, pero si algo he aprendido en estos meses de investigación es a aceptarle a la realidad su tendencia a ignorar esas mismas nociones de verosimilitud que exigimos de la ficción. Creí, sin embargo, reconocer en ese argumento una oscura noción de destino.

[The story seemed imaginative to me, if not simply invented, literature in the worst sense of the word, but if I’ve learned something in these months of investigation it’s to accept from reality its tendency to ignore these same notions of verisimilitude that we demand from fiction. I believed, however, that I had recognized in the plot an obscure notion of destiny.] (145)

Though the narrator believes that Maxi’s confession is literature in the “worst” sense, and completely implausible, at the same time it is this very confession that defines Maxi’s “destiny.”

When he “implausibly” murders the pimp, echoing the action in the play his father had wanted—and failed—to produce, Maxi links himself unconsciously with his parents’ lives even as he is postponing the moment of encounter with his father:

Maxi no podía saber, cómo hubiese podido saber, que al embarcarse en esa historia se estaba reuniendo con otra, la que sus padres le habían callado, que en otro continente y en otro siglo estaba encontrado, adornada por la falaz seducción de lo novelesco, la misma miseria y el mismo comercio que, muy lejos, habían marcado sus propios orígenes . . .

[Maxi couldn’t have known—How could he have known?—that by embarking on this story he was joining another one, one that his parents had kept from him, that was finding in another continent and another century, adorned with the fallacious seduction of the novelesque, the same misery and the same commerce that, far away, had marked his own origins . . . ] (146)
While Maxi’s “honor crime” redeems the young prostitute from a life bound to a pimp (after she has serviced him), it exposes his family history in crime by unconsciously repeating it. In trying to erase both his Jewishness and his Argentineity, Maxi ends up fulfilling them better than if he had attempted to do so.

Not only does Maxi thus repeat the plot of Auer’s play, but in doing so he plays all the parts. Like Auer’s Moldavian pimp, Maxi goes to prison to protect a prostitute based only on his confession; yet he also plays the spunky prostitute, murdering the exploiter for trafficking in minors. Yet Maxi is convicted not only of murder, but also of the pimp’s crime: trafficking in minors (144); and thus he also unwittingly takes the fall for the pimp he has murdered. Perhaps it is inevitable that Maxi’s narration of his one-man show should seem implausible to the novel’s narrator; it also is doubted by the police psychiatrist assigned to the case: the dreamlike redux of the plot of “El rufián moldavo” in which Maxi murders a Moldavian pimp is at once too literary and not literary enough. It is an unreadable antinarrative in which Maxi “is” everything he has tried to escape, every role in the allegorical drama of Jewish white slavery.

The implausible confession and the narrator’s doubt form the center of the narrator’s investigation, and Maxi’s unlikely story is mirrored and complemented by the shocking tale of Natalia Auerbach, a difficult old woman initially disinclined to cooperate with the narrator’s investigation. The daughter of the playwright Auer, Natalia has restored her Jewish family name (whereas Maxi fled his), yet it seems to the narrator that she is equally untrustworthy. Suspecting secrets, he has tried to interview Natalia to find out the real deal about “El rufián moldavo.” However, after he has had no success cajoling her, the narrator is even more nonplussed when she unexpectedly gives him a recording of her whole life story. The narrator immediately believes that it—like Maxi’s story—must be a lie:

El relato de Natalia Auerbach, tan conmovedor mientras lo escuchaba, me dejó un regusto ambiguo, como si fuera posible desconfiar de la propia emoción [. . . ]. Me pareció innoble desconfiar de su relato y sin embargo no podía evitar la sensación de asistir a una representación [. . . ]. También me pareció reconocer resabios cinematográficos en las circunstancias del encuentro entre sus padres, tan románticas en medio de un contexto sórdido. (123–24)

[The story of Natalia Auerbach, so moving as I listened to it, left an ambiguous aftertaste, as if it were possible to mistrust one’s own emotion [. . . ]. It
seemed ignoble to distrust her tale, and yet I couldn't avoid the sensation of attending a performance [. . .]. I also seemed to recognize cinemato- graphic aftertastes in the circumstances of her parents' meeting, so romantic in the midst of a sordid context.] (123–24)

The narrator immediately suspects that the true story of Natalia's family must be that of the prototypical blanca—which later turns out to be the very plot of her father's most famous play. What the narrator finds implausible is the too “literary”-sounding truth Auerbach tells him, which is that her mother, Rebeca Durán—like Zsuzsa, like many young European prostitutes throughout the Americas—had already been registered as a prostitute in the Pale of Settlement. The narrator finds more “credible” the familiar story of the blanca: Durán's playwright “husband” must have really been a pimp who abducted Durán against her will.

What Auerbach tells us is not only remarkable because it questions the “believability” of the blanca narrative, nor even because it disables the bipolar narrative of Argentine-Jewishness by disrupting the gender binary. In fact, she suggests that the landless condition of the Jews in Eastern Europe meant that registering with the authorities as a prostitute was a popular form of resistance to anti-Semitic restrictions. The yellow passes which were handed out to registered prostitutes allowed them to travel from city to city, without which most Jews—bereft of passports and, therefore, mobility—were relatively unable to move around. This “artifice”—“ardid” is the word Auerbach uses to describe registering as a prostitute—was how young Jewish women were able to escape from their quarantine under the czars. In this way, Natalia's story is disruptive on many levels: not only does she assert that there was Jewish popular resistance to anti-Semitism other than fleeing to the New World—thus decen- tering the mythic draw of the Americas for Europe's hungry and persecuted masses—but also makes registering as prostitutes a form of seizing power, by which young Jewish women were able to travel and become relatively more educated, more cosmopolitan.10

Thinking back on the descriptions of Zsuzsa's exclusion from cosmopolitan Buenos Aires and Schalom's Liberman exulting in it, a third way is opened up by Rebeca Durán in St. Petersburg:

Al salir se pasea por la Nevsky Prospekt y observa atisbos de una vida que no es la suya, sin que le inspire envidia ni resentimiento; le basta mirar el curso rápido de las aguas del Molka en tiempo de deshielo para sentir que a los veinte años ya ha vivido más de lo que, dos años atrás, podía esperar en el stetl.
[On leaving, she walks around Nevsky Prospekt and observes the signs of a life that isn’t hers, that inspires neither envy nor resentment; it’s enough to look at the rapid course of the waters of the thawing Molka to feel at twenty years of age that she has already lived more than she could have hoped two years ago in the shtetl.] (117)

Durán is neither assimilated nor abject in her relative marginality: she is irreducible to the concepts of identity discussed so far. Her liberation from the shtetl comes not in America, but in Russia; her husband, the playwright, is a young anarchist rabble-rouser, with whom she discusses socialism and Zionism and whether these two utopias might not be irreconcilable. They are arrested; Rebeca, rather than being imprisoned, is raped; as the soldiers say, referring to her yellow passport, “no whore could want revolution!”

Eventually, having emigrated to Argentina, Durán becomes infuriated with a rabbi who refuses to grant her a divorce, and commits what for the narrator sounds like a highly implausible murder:

[U]n buen día, con el pretexto falso de obtener una anulación religiosa, mi madre fue a visitar al rabino que la había casado. . . . Éste le explicó que dentro de la ley judía no había iniciativa alguna que la esposa pudiese tomar: el trámite para obtener el get sólo podía iniciarla el marido, y si éste abandonaba a su mujer o moría, ella se convertía en agunah, sin posibilidad de volverse a casar. Mi madre lo escuchó con fingida resignación durante un buen rato; después, en algún punto de la explicación, lo mató.

[One fine day, with the pretext of obtaining a religious annulment, my mother went to visit the rabbi who had married her. . . . He explained to her that in Jewish law there was no provision for the wife to take the initiative: only the husband could initiate the get [divorce], and if he abandoned his wife or he died, she would become an agunah [a woman who is “chained” to her marriage], without the possibility of remarriage. My mother listened to him with feigned resignation for a good while; then, at some point during the explanation, she killed him.] (120)

Reasoning like the soldiers of the old country, the narrator speculates that a prostitute (unlike a pimp) would have no need of such an “audacious gesture” (126); as Natalia recounts the story, it is too literary—just like Maxi’s—and the narrator inevitably begins to imagine that what “really happened” might have been the basis for Auer’s play “El rufián moldavo”: 
¿Hasta qué punto, bajo un trasparente seudónimo como Theo Auer, el padre de Natalia no se había retratado, idealizado, en ese “rufián moldavo” que termina enamorado de su pupila, hasta el punto de asumir el crimen de ésta, y cuyas víctimas hacen cola ante la cárcel para manifestarle su fidelidad?

[ Couldn't it be that Natalia’s father had used the transparent pseudonym Theo Auer to portray himself, idealized, as that “Moldavian pimp” who ends up so in love with his prostitute that he takes responsibility for her crime, and whose victims line up outside the jail to demonstrate their faithfulness to him] (125)

What is missing in Rebeca’s murder of the rabbi is “a motive” for this “crime of honor,” which the narrator quickly projects onto Theo:

Al contar en su comedia musical la usurpación de un crimen ¿no estaría Theo Auer dejando una clave oculta de sus deseos? ¿Sería su hija Natalia la encargada de realizar esa ilusión? El crimen de honor con que Natalia procuraba rendir homenaje a la memoria de sus padres ¿había tenido motivos tan nobles como los declarados? También al preguntarme por las razones posibles de esta adopción de un delito ajeno surgía inmediatamente una respuesta: una prostituta, en cuanto víctima, no necesita de un gesto audaz para merecer simpatía; un rufián, en cambio, es un verdugo, y ese gesto podría redimirlo.

[By telling in his musical comedy the usurpation of a crime, wouldn't Theo Auer be leaving hidden key to his desires? Would his daughter Natalia be the one charged with realizing this dream? Did the honor crime with which Natalia meant to pay homage to the memory of her parents really have such noble motives? And also when I asked myself for the possible reasons for taking on someone else's crime an answer immediately came up: a prostitute, implicitly a victim, doesn't need an audacious gesture to deserve sympathy; a pimp, on the other hand, is an executioner, and that gesture could redeem him.] (126)

In other words, the narrator finds more plausible the plot of “El rufián moldavo” than the confession of Natalia Auerbach. He prefers her father’s play over her testimony as the more likely historical scenario, since (ironically enough) her version of events is “too literary.”
It would make sense, the narrator reasons, for a pimp to murder another criminal in order to redeem himself; he is already an “executioner,” is already *tmeim*, already cast out from the Jewish community. He is spiritually dead and can fulfill the social need of eliminating an evil without risking his own soul. A prostitute, on the other hand, doesn’t need any kind of audacious gesture to deserve sympathy. However, it is the lack of verisimilitude in Natalia’s story that brings the narrator to propose that Auer, the ex-playwright and aging *shadkhes* [matchmaker] described in Sami Warschauer’s letter, with his faded formal suit and carnation boutonniere, was a pimp: “Con lápiz y papel en mano intenté redistribuir anécdota y personajes, observaciones y motivos en un esquema diferente, posible, acaso verosímil [With pencil and paper I tried to redistribute anecdote and characters, observations and motives, in a way that seemed possible, perhaps credible]” (123–24). Both the problem and the solution, Natalia’s “fiction” and the alternative fiction the narrator invents to explain it, are measured in terms of literary realism.

Like Maxi’s story, Natalia’s is of a “crime of honor”; yet she frames the story of this honor crime itself as the inverse of Maxi’s: as an attempt to expose the “truth” of her parents, rather than to cover it up:

Quiero depositar en usted la verdad: que sepa que fue un delito de honor, que con ese crimen se intentó vengar a innumerables víctimas, liquidar simbólicamente a quienes ensuciaban la reputación de una comunidad que necesitaba, que siempre va a necesitar que sus hijos respeten un sentido de la justicia más exigente que el de los demás. Dentro de unos días me voy a Israel. Quiero terminar allí mi vida de librepensadora, laica, socialista y feminista, peleando contra esos racistas de mierda que hoy usurpan el poder. Puedo adivinar su sonrisa. No se preocupe: estaré vieja y enferma pero no estoy acabada. Si llega a leer en el diario que una vieja loca le pegó un tiro a Sharon, dedíqueme un pensamiento.

[I want to deposit the truth in you: for you to know that it was a crime of honor, that with that crime they attempted to avenge innumerable victims, to symbolically destroy those who sullied the reputation of a community that needed, that always will need its children to respect a sense of justice stricter than that of others. In a few days I’m going to Israel. I want to end there my life as a freethinker, secularist, socialist and feminist, fighting against those fucking racists who have usurped power today. You can imagine my smile. Don’t worry: I may be old and sick but I’m not done. If you happen to read in the newspaper of a crazy old woman who shot Sharon, spare a thought for me.] (121)
With this final statement, Natalia first globalizes her family history to represent that of the Jewish people and then turns it on its head. With their crime, Natalia insists, her parents “attempted to avenge innumerable victims, to symbolically destroy those who sullied the reputation of a community that needed, that always will need its children to respect a sense of justice stricter than that of others” (121). But just as her earlier story of her mother had undermined the _blanca_ narrative, in her next breath she now ruptures the tacitly metonymic relationship of Jews to Israel—the mythic narrative of both Jewish transhistorical continuity and of identity with the land of Israel. She creates an analogy in which Czarist Russia ghettoized Jews as Likudnik Israel ghettoizes Palestinians; and this equates to a political stand _contra_ not Zionism as such but the triumph of Zionism as ideology: its implicitness, its invisibility, its “postideological” ideological status, its invisibility _qua_ ideology and therefore the unconscious acceptance of it as reality.\footnote{1}

The Auer family story thus becomes a counter-myth of resistance and a new model for the narrator of literature: rather than legality or illegality, truth or fiction, the only value against which his narrative can now gain any traction is through discovery of characters’ motives. Unable to reconcile the _remnant_ with history—to fit the unwieldy pieces into a smooth narrative—what the narrator proposes instead is a motive. Far from revealing a repressed historical content, a family secret, Natalia Auer’s confession is a family history, that is, a fiction:

¿Tenía algún sentido mentir cuando alguien se siente en vísperas de abandonar la vida, y desea confiar a un casi desconocido un secreto de familia? Al mismo tiempo que me hacía esta pregunta se me imponía una respuesta evidente: era el momento, el último posible y sin duda el definitivo, para intentar modificar el pasado, para erigir una estatua, ya lejos de toda verdad bajamente documental, de los padres ausentes. El secreto de familia anunciado, lejos de ser tal, sería sólo una leyenda urdida para permanecer, aunque sólo fuera durante el frágil lapso de mi existencia individual, unos años más de los que ella podía darle; sobre todo con la autoridad que podía prestarle un transmisor al que ningún lazo de sangre unía al personaje cuyo pasado se deseaba honrar o simplemente blanquear, de quien se procuraba legar un monumento verbal. Si, de pronto sentía disiparse mis últimas dudas: la confesión in extremis de Natalia Auerbach era una ficción que procuraba encubrir el verdadero secreto de familia.

[Did it make any sense to lie when one was about to die and desires to entrust a family secret to a virtual stranger? At the same time that I asked
myself this question, an obvious answer imposed itself on me: it was the 
moment, the last possible and doubtless the definitive one, to try to modify 
the past, to erect a statue, already far from all basely documentary truth, of 
the absent parents. The promised family secret, far from being that, would 
be only a legend woven to last, although it were only during the fragile span 
of my individual existence, some years more than those she could give to 
it; above all with the authority that it would borrow from a transmitter to 
whom no blood tie united the character whose past was being honored or 
simply whitened, of whom she attempted to leave a verbal monument. Yes, 
suddenly I felt my last doubts dissipate: the deathbed confession of Natalia 
Auerbach was a fiction that attempted to cover up the real family secret.]

(124–25)

Natalia’s confession retells the story of the Moldavian pimp as family history; 
but the narrator rereads it as a false confession—as a fiction. However, the 
narrator’s realization that Natalia has constructed a monument to the fictional 
version of her parents to cover up the truth does not equate with the positive 
knowledge of the true family history. Rather, it permits yet another fiction— 
the one the narrator has just provided.

The intertwined generations of the Warschauers and the Auers seem to 
embody a Benjaminian apprehension of history not only in spirit but in tech-
nique. We jump from Natalia’s narrative to the narrator’s investigation of the 
Warschauers and back again, trying to figure out where we stand, and this 
movement from place to place is simultaneously what weaves the novel and 
what prevents it from revealing the answer to Natalia’s secret, even as the nar-
rator proclaims that he is convinced of it. As Beatriz Sarlo describes it:

[In the fragmentarism of Benjamin, in his aesthetic and epistemological 
reindication of collage and quotation, there isn’t just a relieved or celebra-
tory rupture with totality, but rather a crisis of totality that, at the same time, 
is maintained as the horizon of historical and critical operations. [. . . ]
I would say that in Benjamin there is a nostalgia for totality at the same 
time that this is being eroded in the aesthetic dimension and in the world
of experience. Benjamin is a writer of crisis, but not its apologist.] (Sarlo, “Olvidar a Benjamin” 85–86; emphasis in original)

The fragmentarism of Cozarinsky’s novel is not only a necessary response to history’s exclusions (by reclaiming them, it must renounce a smoothly total history by admitting that which does not fit), but also an aesthetic project in response to that exclusion, by which a totality—even an artistic one—would be tantamount to an *apology of crisis*, the ontologization of history by which the new historical fiction secures its place in the market and by which model minorities are rewarded by being allowed to choose from among the stereotypes that once defined them.

The narrator struggles to make Rebeca Durán’s story fit into his view of history, only to come to see his own view of history as the problem, his desire to identify with the past, to unleash something within it—an identity, an affinity—that would make sense of the present. Rebeca Durán’s story defies pat categories: it repoliticizes anti-Semitism in its historical context, and brings a certain degree of resistance back into the norm rather than the exception of Jewish life in both old country and new, among men and women—thus blurring the dichotomies at work. Recontextualized, Jewish criminality and prostitution can be understood as part of larger struggles without arrogating to themselves a transhistorical continuity.

The true and implausible story of Rebeca Durán is thus the reverse of Raquel Liberman’s false but believable testimony, and in this way it is an emblem of the work that the novel does with history more generally. At first, the narrator found only things that “didn’t fit” into his project; but eventually it is this misfit evidence that frees him, disrupting the certainties that have held him in place. Similarly, all of the novel’s characters are most imprisoned not in suffering or in struggle but, by contrast, when what they believe themselves to be is so overdetermined that it prevents them from becoming themselves, from expanding in space and time. Cozarinsky, in a Nietzschean vein, makes his protagonist come to see the desire to control the past as that which imprisons him; and, conversely, it is the appreciation that history does not signify in the service of the present order which allows him to become most fully himself.

**The Third Mode: The Deconstructive Blanca**

While Cozarinsky’s novel has been read together with the contemporary historical fiction of white slavery as retelling what I have called the *blanca* narrative (Nuriel 106), it should now be clear that this retelling generates a
very different effect. Before demonstrating the full deconstructive potential of the metafictional blanca, it’s worth emphasizing that the novel emerges from and dialogues with forms of postmodern cultural production which deliberately undo “every narrative point of reference which could allow for reconstruction of the plot” (Pavis 57). The metafictional motor of the novel, the satirical yet still potent blanca narrative of the play within the novel, functions as a mise en abyme of a hopelessly old-fashioned mimetic regime which is itself historical both in content and in staging. This play is a standard against which the novel’s rejection of mimesis can be measured, even as it is simultaneously an interpretive matrix by which the narrator and reader assess fragmentary historical information.

The deconstructive force of the blanca narrative as aporia was able to emerge in El rufián moldavo because each of its repetitions is linked conscientiously to that which it excludes: each version of the blanca myth is compelling—both to teller and listener—yet also inevitably leaves an indivisible remainder, which the narrator meticulously notes. The more iterations of the story, the more leftovers with which to contend. Furthermore, in every process by which a character attempts to become the author of his or her history, there lies a Borgesian “crime of truth.” Natalia Auerbach’s honor crime created a story of an honor crime to avenge an honor crime, and Maxi Warschauer’s honor crime avenged his own crime which he committed in unconscious reenactment of his repressed origins in crime; both of these are also crimes of truth, because they bear an iterative function and trigger an impasse from which truth cannot again be established, yet interpellates its readers and—in the novel—further generations in perpetuating itself as both story and lie. The narrator, then, is himself committing a kind of meta-truth crime, in narrating the denarrativized, fragmentary histories of truth criminals.

The novel’s Benjaminian fragmentarism can (perhaps fittingly) also be understood by inverting one of the philosopher’s more famous aphorisms from Theses on the Philosophy of History. In the fifth thesis, Benjamin wrote that “any image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear indefinitely” (Benjamin, Illuminations 255). The contemporary historical fiction of white slavery had already displaced the threat from the historical realm into the symbolic by reiterating the mytheme Liberman/Alsogaray as a way of “remembering”; and we can see this taken to a postmodern reductio in El rufián moldavo, where “every image of the past” that is recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to reappear indefinitely. It is the endlessness rather than the end of memory that threatens the narrator’s ability to continue with his project; and he can neither continue writing it—not even a “crónica de la imposibilidad de
conocer la historia [chronicle of the impossibility of knowing the history],” which chronicle might be one way to characterize Piglia’s *Respiracion artificial*—nor can he detach himself from its characters (151).

In the previous chapter, history became *destiny* in the double movement Adorno had critiqued as the “ontologization of history,” which “permits one without a glance to attribute the power of Being to historical powers, and thus to justify submission to historical situations as though it were commanded by Being itself” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 130). Here, by contrast, there is a double movement *away*, a double negation or betrayal of destiny which correlates to denarrativizing the story—erasing any putative certainty that has accumulated up until that point. Every crime is also a “crime of truth,” and the full deconstructive force of the novel built on crimes of truth is only potentiated in its epilogue, when the narrator has already abandoned any attempt to write about any of the characters who have filled the novel. Having already turned away from “history” as coextensive with an antiquatedly mimetic mode of representation, the narrator has also rejected the possibility of writing a novel (142); and now he rejects any possibility of writing about the past—in effect, disavowing the text of *El rufián moldavo* we have just read, just as the fictional playwright Theo Auer had disavowed his eponymous play.

Yet Auer’s disavowal of his play could not erase its meaning or minimize its impact in the past—on the contrary, as we have seen, the honor crime it represented continued to play out into the future; and, similarly, the narrator’s negation of what we have read approaches asymptotically a limit on expression—a negation of a negation—such that he rebounds in each moment of renunciation toward narrative again. In this sense, the novel which had progressively unwritten its historical investigation, turning each clue into a one-off, breaking the rhythm of the story and denarrativizing the possible history of Jewish Argentina to the point that the novel’s narrator gives up on writing anything at all, in the moment of declaring any knowledge of the history of these characters impossible, immediately rebounds into narrative:

A pesar de mi decisión de no escribir la historia, ni siquiera una crónica de la imposibilidad de conocer la historia de los personajes cuya existencia, sentía, había estado espionando, me resultaba difícil desprenderme de ellos. Pensaba que en el Hogar podía haber quedado algún efecto personal de Sami que no interesase a la dirección y yo pudiera hacerle llegar a Maxi.

[In spite of my decision to not write the history, not even a chronicle of the impossibility of knowing the history of the characters on whose existence, I felt, I had been spying, it was difficult for me to detach myself from them. I thought that in the Home some personal effect of Sami’s might have been
Having already given up his investigation, it is now in the refusal to write that the narrator is moved to see if Sami might have left something more behind. Sami was the first speaker in the novel, and the attempt to restore Sami’s shoe box of faded papers as sole patrimony to Maxi was the initial plot device that initiated the whole quest: searching for the play for which Sami and Perla had appeared photographed in one of these old programs, the narrator was given instead the mislabeled play “El rufián moldavo.”

The narrator is searching for nothing other than a *deus ex machina*, a quintessential return to narrative order by which all will be resolved with the introduction of some new element—yet this element echoes the very first “find” with which the novel’s plot began. The rejection of narrative flips over on itself, and the story starts again. Perhaps it is in this sense that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari marked the gesture of “double turning-away” as a definition of “post-signifying Jewish subjectivity”:

> It is this double turning-away that draws the positive line of flight. The prophet is the main figure in this assemblage; he needs a sign to guarantee the word of God, he is *himself marked by a sign indicating the special regime to which he belongs*. [. . . ] Even the prophet [. . . ] is fundamentally a traitor and thus fulfills God’s order better than anyone who remained faithful could. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 122–23)

To betray the letter of the law fulfills its intention; to demand a special sign where none is, and to refuse to move forward when necessary is what unleashes destiny: first by disavowing it, and then by inadvertently fulfilling it. Cozarinsky’s postmodern narrator must betray the narrative in order to proceed. Thus, the main body of the novel ends with the narrator’s doubt of Maxi’s confession and simultaneous hopeful and fearful recognition of it as destiny: “La historia me pareció fantasiosa, si no llanamente inventada, literatura en el peor sentido de la palabra [. . . ] [The story seemed imaginative to me, if not simply invented, literature in the worst sense of the word]” (145); yet at the same time “Creí, sin embargo, reconocer en ese argumento una oscura noción de destino [I believed, however, that I recognized in that plot an obscure notion of destiny]” (145):

> De pronto, tuve miedo: me vi, en mis aún lejanos y apenas imaginables cincuenta años, arrojándome con ojos bien abiertos a lo que dicte el deseo,
Blanca

The epilogue—the afterword—picks up with this hope of finding, again, the narrative starting point: returning to the retirement home where Sami Warschauer had died. Yet the facility has been closed, and even the bar next door which he had once visited with Sami has “decaído [declined]” (152); and the owner asserts that he too is closing up shop. Even the vacant lot out front has been sold—“Hasta el baldío de enfrente se vendió. Lo compraron los judíos del cementerio, necesitaban ampliarse y lo pagaron bien [The Jews of the cemetery bought it, they needed to expand and they paid well]” (152).

In the epilogue, the Jewish cemetery which has appeared frequently in the novel up until this point assumes greater importance, spilling over into the land it had once proscribed itself as designated for the “impure” pimps and prostitutes. The novel had begun with an epigraph from Alberto Tabbi: “Para hablar con los vivos necesito palabras que los muertos me enseñaron [To speak with the living I need words that the dead taught me]”; and in its first chapter Don Samuel had insisted that the dead can communicate with us in dreams (12). Up until the epilogue, gravestones had seemed to provide the only permanent proof amid conjecture and myth. When Zsuzsa died, her tombstone was inscribed phonetically “Yuya,” without her birthdate or last name—because these were unknown—and the phrase “Dejó a Samuel el 4 de septiembre de 1934 [She left Samuel on September 4, 1934].” The only certainty was the date of death and the location of the grave (72). (And the date of death was, in this case, the birth of the revenant: the beginning of Zsuzsa’s life as a ghost, haunting Sami and Perla and, eventually, the narrator.) Similarly, toward the end of his investigation, the narrator had confirmed his suspicion that Rebeca Durán had been a “real” prostitute by locating her grave in the cementerio de rufianes [pimps’ cemetery] in Granadero Baigorria, with the epitaph “from Constantinople” (132). Yet of Durán, too, the narrator remarks, “no one will ever know her real name” (141).

At the moment of locating Rebeca Durán’s tomb, the narrator had experienced an instantaneous flashback to his Jewish grandfather’s funeral: “En ese
momento recuperé un episodio de mi infancia que hubiese creído olvidado. Tenía ocho años cuando murió mi abuelo materno, el único, débil lazo, con la tradición judía dentro de una familia totalmente asimilada [In that moment I recovered an episode from my childhood that I would have thought forgotten. I was eight years old when my maternal grandfather died, the only—albeit weak link with the Jewish tradition in a completely assimilated family]” (133). As the young narrator wanders off to look at a row of tombstones facing away from the others, he is yanked back by his mother. When he asked, much later, why some of the tombstones had faced away from the rest of the cemetery, he had been told that they belonged to “people who don’t deserve to be remembered by us” (134). However, the memory of being dragged, “con un violento empujón [with a violent shove]” back to the funeral ceremony—having forgotten himself—brought him face to face with the collective forgetting in the cemetery: “Hoy sé que, en una fecha posterior al entierro de esos desdichados, la colectividad se separaría definitivamente de sus reprobos: para ellos, ni siquiera tumbas de cara a un paredón; cementerios separados, aislados, olvidados [Today I know that, after those unfortunates had been buried, the community would separate itself definitively from its reprobates: for them, not even tombs facing a wall; separate cemeteries, isolated, forgotten]” (134).

The return to the place where the investigation and the novel began triggers another flashback for the narrator: he remembers the unusual marble tabletops from his first visit with Sami Warschauer, “Pero con ese recuerdo reciente llegó también el de un episodio de una novela española leída mucho antes. Me sacudió un brevísimo espasmo, mezcla de miedo e intuición; lo siguió, inmediatamente, otro recuerdo: el rechazo del viejo Warschauer a sentarse ante una mesa, su preferencia por quedarse de pie ante la barra [But with that recent memory came that of an episode read long before in a Spanish novel. The briefest spasm shook me, a mix of fear and intuition; immediately, another memory followed it: the way old Warschauer had refused to sit at a table, his preference to stand at the bar]” (153). The instantaneous associative chain of memory makes the narrator act without thinking, wordlessly lifting up the nearest tabletop, with a strength “of which he wouldn’t have thought himself capable”; and, stupefied, he and the bar’s owner contemplate the Hebrew inscriptions on what are clearly tombstones from the Jewish cemetery.

The sequence of memory that allows the narrator to discover what has been hidden all along in plain sight, the flip side of the visible, is worth pausing over: he first remembers his impression of the bar when he had visited with Sami, how he was left with a “resabio de otra época [“aftertaste of another era”], which memory in turn triggers the memory of “an episode in a Spanish novel” read long before; he then is shaken by a “brevísimo” spasm of fear and
intuition, and then immediately he remembers Warschauer’s refusal to sit at a marble table. The cognitive-emotional process by which the narrator reveals the underside of the mundane is a microcosm of the wandering he has done throughout the novel—and which other characters in the novel had done before him, provoking his skepticism. The novel began with a fleeting impression of another time—a residue, an aftertaste was what started the narrator on his journey from the very same space of encounter with Sami Warschauer; he then went out on an intertextual tangent, reading the play “El rufián moldavo” accidentally—because it was in the wrong folder at the Institute of Theater History—and that contingent, metonymic reading led him to perceive the “other era” metatextually, in the terms of the play’s representational regime. This was followed with the denarrativization of the characters’ stories and the conclusion of the main text with the fear “and hope” with which the narrator determines to stop writing, yet desires to find something else remaining of Sami—the very desire which has led him back to the retirement home, and eventually the bar: back to the beginning.

The investigation followed this wandering path, defined obscurely by the mythic structure of the play “El rufián moldavo” and the narrator’s different modes of reading it. Yet the epilogue condenses this narrative still further, distilling from it a nutshell summary of the novel’s relational components: intertextuality, denarrativization and action link up with each other via metonymic associations. At the same time that this brings closure to one interpretation of the novel’s structure, the reference to “a Spanish novel” explodes outward, inviting infinite associations. We can thus reread the novel not as having woven together disparate stories into a synthetic narrative, but rather as a perpetually denarrativizing framework within which synthetic, autonomous stories wind around each other: where they are combed out, rather than woven together. The perception of moving closer to or farther from some resolution that applies to all of them is a matter of perspective; the narrator’s decision at the end of the novel not to write indicates an ending; yet the epilogue shows that the stories will circulate indefinitely.

At the end of the epilogue, the narrator is awakened from a vivid dream of a young girl in a faraway country, undoubtedly one of the dead spirits “who communicate with us in dreams” (12). She murmurs to him in “un idioma desconocido, palabras cuyo sentido, no sé cómo, entendí [in an unknown language, words whose meaning, I don’t know how, I understood]” (156). He awakens to a violent rainstorm and thinks of the dead in the cemetery of Avellaneda, in a fantastical reunion of the “forbidden” section to which the pimps and prostitutes had been quarantined with the “decent” section of sacred ground in the cemetery of Avellaneda:
Pensé que esa lluvia anegaría también la sección abandonada del cementerio de Avellaneda, su tierra ya removida cuando se arrancaron las lápidas para permitir enterrar allí a nuevos muertos, muertos decentes cuyos nombres podrían ser exhibidos sin vergüenza en flamantes lápidas costosas, muertos que no sabrían que en esa tierra fresca y renovada se reunirían con los restos sin nombre de quienes lo tenían escondido bajo las mesas de un bar, sus rostros lacerados en fotografías de esmalte, si es que éstas no habían sido llanamente arrancadas del mármol reciclado. Estos muertos respetables llegarían sin duda ignorantes de la felicidad que había podido procurar un crimen impune, crimen de puro orgullo, con el que más de setenta años antes una judía anónima y olvidada había soñado lavar el honor de una comunidad que no iba a escapar al común destino argentino de corrupción y silencio, cuyos representantes hallarían nuevas ocasiones de escarnio al preferir los cálculos prudentes de la política a la memoria de sus víctimas.

[156–57]

The dream of the dead girl murmuring words in a foreign language equates with a dead body stripped of a headstone, and by extension to broader practices of disavowal and, eventually, forgetting. In the cemetery, the “unclean” were first segregated from the rest—their memory effaced by stripping away their lacquered photographs, with knives or fire—and then “they” were removed: their bodily remains already gone, their headstones were taken away to make room for new bodies of the “respectable dead.” The unquiet spirits are nameless and faceless, and not even their names can be verified. And yet the literary—“the Spanish novel read long ago”—can erupt in a modest bar
to find by a chain of intertextual free association the very names that have been effaced from narrative. The headstones have been moved, the portraits defaced, but there is writing in stone to disrupt, and thereby denaturalize, the narrative of forgetting.

Even the gravestone robbers are thus incorporated into the novel’s movement, which in turn feeds like a tributary into deeper intertextualities. The episode from the “Spanish novel” can trigger any number of associations, not limited to but clearly evocative of the scene in Camilo José Cela’s *La colmena* (1951) in which the narrator reveals that at Doña Rosa’s café, “where the customers are people who believe that things happen just because, that it isn’t worthwhile to try to change anything,” the marble table tops are old tombstones, on some of which, the narrator remarks, “que todavía guardan las letras, un ciego podría leer, pasando las yemas de los dedos por debajo de la mesa: Aquí yacen los restos mortales de la Señorita Esperanza Redondo, muerta en la flor de la juventud [that still conserve the letters, a blind man could read, moving the pads of his fingertips along the underside of the table: Here lie the mortal remains of Miss Esperanza Redondo, dead in the flower of her youth]” (Cela 23). And yet what is still more evocative of the episode Cozarinsky’s narrator remembers from the “Spanish novel” is actually the scene as rewritten by José Luis Dibildos for Mario Camus’s film version of *La colmena* (Spain, 1982). Whereas in Cela’s novel the narrator had matter-of-factly told readers where the tables came from, in the film it is discovered by don Ricardo Sorbedo, played by the famous Spanish actor Francisco (“Paco”) Rabal.

The affinity of *El rufián moldavo* with *La colmena* goes deeper than the borrowed device of tombstone tables, and inheres in what made the trope so effective in the first place: the removed headstone simultaneously disinters the past and reburies it, symbolizing a limit on the ability to articulate loss, or what philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called a *différend*. The persistence of engraved names whose headstones have not only been stolen but are then resignified as coextensive with the smooth and pleasant surface of the everyday—not only erasing the particular names from public view but literally covering them up with their own flipside. They of course symbolize the hidden workings of repressive state power in Francoist Spain, yet Cela’s marble tabletops simultaneously *make literal* the way power had long been *symbolized* in dialectical thought as concealing its “hidden underbelly” under false dualities, alternating its polar faces of war/politics; tradition/crisis; civilization/barbarism to prevent glimpsing the whole. The tabletops thus evoke the *différend*, giving us an instantaneous glimpse of what Wendy Brown called the “wounded attachments” that define collective identity in the
wake of repression, the perpetual lack of closure both symbolized and literalized by the grave that is forever open, marked and unmarked, vulnerable, desecrated.\textsuperscript{19}

At the same time, however, the trope is borrowed: the intertextual transmission of the tombstone tabletops from \textit{La colmena} to \textit{El rufián moldavo} means that this symbol of unspeakability was communicated: it was read in a novel “long ago,” and it was remembered, flashing up as a profoundly historical analogy in the midst of denarrativization. Thus something ideologically impossible under Franco was nonetheless written in stone—albeit in a novel rather than a public monument, and published in Buenos Aires to avoid censorship. Moreover, when it is cited in yet another novel, the symbol becomes more objective, weightier still. In citation, the trope becomes strangely more solid than if it hadn’t been borrowed—because it has been communicated, and is now part of not only an infinitely associative literary memory but also a shared jargon potentiating historical thought among a collective of readers.

Denarrativization is thus not the emptying out of historical meaning but, on the contrary, the cultivation of irreducible singularities. None of the novels’ characters are liberated through the explicit articulation of an historically recognizable truth; yet they are dreamed in ways that free up associations among different fictions, creating a relational, intertextual basis for historical thought, and a roaming metafictional prostitute whose proliferating tales enact all the contradictions attributed to the literary prostitute. Like Cela’s tombstone tables, the “implausible” story of the rebel prostitute and the “plausible” tale of the golden-hearted pimp alike will be retold, and in the retelling acquire the gravity and the force of memory, and begin to spin out a new intertextual world.

At the end of the novel’s epilogue, the narrator no longer dreams of understanding how it was for the past; and in his imagination there is no longer a wall dividing past and present, pure and impure, as he visualizes the Jewish cemetery flooded with a rain that will mix together the remains without any reverence for such distinctions. He asks himself, in the last words of the novel, “cuánta lluvia, cuánta tierra removida, cuántos gusanos serán necesarios para que de su descomposición surja algo rico y extraño, algo libre de afectos y agravios impagos, que ninguna culpa enturbie, que ningún memorial celebre [how much rain, how much dug-up earth, how many worms will be necessary to make something rich and strange crop up, something free of affections and unpaid offenses, that no guilt mars, that no memorial celebrates]” (158). He recognizes that history will never provide either the identity, or the idealized reflection of himself he has been seeking as an author—and this recognition allows him to write.\textsuperscript{20} The fragmentary novel thus allows the his-
torical to emerge and scandalize, confuse and provoke, and yet to remain, in its specificity, unassimilable as an explanation of the present: it both contains and is driven by a metafictional, intertextual prostitute whose multiplicitous, self-contradictory stories exceed the premises of the novel’s own framework, suggesting infinite readings, infinite interpretations.