CHAPTER VI

The Pain of Becoming Modern

Suffering and Redemption in the Medical Histories of La Castañeda

Since universal world time is gearing up to outstrip the time of erstwhile localities in historical importance, it is now a matter of urgency that we reform the “whole” dimension of general history so as to make way for the “fractal” history of the limited but precisely located event.

—Paul Virilio, “Calling Card” in A Landscape of Events

The Text

File Number 600

October 25, 1919


The person who came with him says that this morning in Amecameca, Mr. García punched General Tejada in the face. He does not believe he is insane. He says that he speaks with the King of the Heavens and that he only takes orders from Him (which is why he has not allowed any examination to take place). He states that he needs to be released immediately. When he talks with God, he kneels. Delusions of grandeur, absurd, paradoxical, and incoherent. His memory is normal; his affect appears diminished. It is not possible to examine him due to his irascible temper. When he speaks, his lips and eyelids tremble. General progressive paralysis.
At the General Insane Asylum, at 10:00 a.m. on the 10th day of November 1931, gathered in the Administration building are Rogelio Garmendia, chief administrator; Simón López Muñoz, superintendent; Fidencio Rodríguez, head of nurses; and Ricardo Reyes, neurosyphilis ward nurse.

Garmendia states that he learned that in the previously mentioned ward, a patient named Marino García possessed, in the room where he slept, several boxes with steel tools, which presented a risk to the inmate himself and other patients in the ward. For this reason, he ordered the superintendent and the head of nurses, along with the nurse assigned to the patient, to collect any items the previously named patient had in his possession and inform him promptly of the findings resulting from this search.

After carrying out this mission, we proceeded to inspect Marino García’s room. We collected four boxes of various sizes containing, among other things, two large razor blades, around fifty pages used for a “Guillet”-style typewriter, a pair of tin snips, a hammer, and a large quantity of steel tools of different sizes. We questioned the nurse, Mr. Reyes, about why the patient had been allowed to have all these objects on hand and why he had been able to have a room all to himself, to which the nurse replied that because he had only been working in the ward for a few days, and because he was only replacing Mr. Santillán, who was removed from his position, he had not had time to check the room.

He also said that to his knowledge, the patient in question had received no treatment whatsoever in the last four years. Hearing this, we called the patient, who confirmed what Mr. Reyes had said, adding that he had been in the psychiatric hospital for the last twelve years, that he was brought to this institution because he was a beggar, and that although he clearly was not insane, he was placed in the neurosyphilis ward. He also said that since he never felt ill, he had not allowed anyone to administer any treatment to him in the last four years, and that he had collected the steel tools himself, little by little.

Since the director believed that Mr. García’s statement was quite out of the ordinary, he asked medical resident Luis Vargas to conduct a brief examination, just to find out whether or not he was affected by mental disturbances. Dr. Vargas stated in writing that “the patient was ready to return to his family and society, and for this reason, he authorized his discharge.” According to this report, it is obvious that this individual has been unduly confined in this hospital for a long period of time. This concludes the present report. Signatures in the margin.

***
October 15, 1941

Male, 74 years old. Single. Polotitlán, Jalisco. Peasant. With a memorandum from the tenth police precinct. It is not known what brought him here. A police officer is with him.

An elderly man, ascetic in appearance, who had already been confined in this establishment years ago. He remembers it all very well, even names. He says that he was a guard (?) at the time, and that he is not crazy. He opposes his admission but agrees to stay as a gardener. He recounts that recently people have bothered him at the movie theaters. He says that people there shoot bullets and many of them have hit him. He tries to show the place, uncovering his back and showing his bald head. “But he has not died because his Father has told him that he is Eternal God.” He says that in this moment his father is telling him, “that if I inject him, He will send a lightning bolt upon the person who dares to inject him.” That he has not touched a woman, and he will not do so until the appropriate moment, without giving further details in this regard. That in the place where he works, there was a war, and both Villistas and Carrancistas chased him, without cause, which he refers to as recent. They could just be the pseudomemories of a senile man, or confabulations.

In summary, there are elements of paranoid psychosis. There are discrepant diagnoses in this file. Dr. Miranda diagnosed him with progressive general paralysis, and Dr. Salazar diagnosed him with cataphrenia, terminology of Magnan. We should probably revise this with a diagnosis of paranoid psychosis, now with discrete senile elements.

His mental state, on the other hand, is relatively good, and his reasoning is clear. Physically, there is nothing of interest. Diagnosis: paranoid psychosis.

Dr. M. Fuentes

Clinical History of Inmate Marino García Martínez

File Number 6002

Observation Ward

History

This is a readmission. The first time he was in the Psychiatric Hospital was October 19 to November 31. Diagnoses of GPP (General Progressive Paralysis) by Dr. Miranda and a positive reaction on laboratory tests performed by Dr. Andrés Martínez Solís, who also diagnosed him with GPP. Another by Dr.
Samuel Ramírez Moreno, personally signed. Dr. Leopoldo Salazar Viniegra did not concur with the previous diagnoses and describes episodes of delirium, at times with the manic excitement of a cataphrenic. Dr. Vargas discharged the patient because he was capable of living in society. Now, sent by the tenth police precinct, he is received by Dr. Mario Fuentes, who in addition to noting his symptoms (hallucinations, interpretations, confabulations) diagnoses him with paranoid psychosis.

**Current State**

We transcribe his discourse:

I was wandering the streets, and bullets from the Indians who play outside out there in outer space fell upon me, but they did not shoot me on purpose. I began to notice this since we attended the cinematographer [sic], but my Father God is the only one who talks to me. He has been speaking to me for a long time. This is the reason why I came here for the first time; that is precisely my story, during the last fifteen years. From here (from the Earth), I have nothing; from up above, I have the sun, the Earth, the air, I have it all because He gave it all to me. You do not believe me. Among those who play and shoot bullets there are Christians and Mexicans.

Yesterday I saw an Arab in the air, up in the sky, where the bombs explode. I have not died from the bullets because my Father, who is Eternal, told me that I would be eternal too. I am 98 years old now and my Father tells me that for now, I have been reincarnated in my body for the last fifteen years.

My Father has told me that, in one year, I will be ready to take the body of a woman, body to body; now I console myself just as Saint Joseph did. There is an air that is like an injection, that cleanses all, not just the body of the woman. Here you have me (he rolls his shoulders and says that this is “the air that cleanses”).

We have no knowledge of his evolution over the last ten years outside this psychiatric hospital. It would seem that the stages of hypomanic agitation have diminished, or even disappeared. But his delirious state itself does not seem to have evolved in the way of the episodes because the patient himself states that he has remained continuously in that state.

Judging from all this information, we consider this a case of paraphrenia. Laboratory tests of the spinal fluid show only a mild reaction from the meninges, but not sufficient from the point of view of syphilis infection.
A Citable Past

I took the preceding text from a file that I found in the Historical Archive of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, one of the seventy-five thousand files that comprise the documentary legacy of La Castañeda General Insane Asylum, the largest state mental health institution for men, women, and children, founded in 1910, only a couple of months after the beginning of the Mexican Revolution.

When I came to Marino García’s case, I had read about one hundred files, and afterwards, I read about two hundred more. For reasons I hope to explain in this chapter, this text remained in my memory, haunting and hunting me as I wrote my dissertation; even later, in the process of writing a novel about the medical institution, in a manner I imagine similar to the determined informants who, by virtue of tenacity or cleverness, choose their own anthropologists as recipients, recorders, and translators of their stories. Very much like fiction writers, we historians tend to believe, but rarely admit in public, that both the topic and the documents with which we substantiate it choose us. We imbue the process with an otherworldliness that our profession has long disavowed, if not discarded altogether.

Those who are open to the human, political, and even redemptive aspects of the writing of histories (with a lowercase h at the beginning and a plural s at the end) are often referred to as storytellers—an absorbing but not necessarily “professional” crowd—or militants. Aspiring to the status of the former, though unfortunately lacking the stamina of the latter, but always a historian, I now present the text through which Marino García transformed his life—as lowly as the lowercase h at the beginning of “history” in the previous sentence, peripheral if you will, marginal certainly—into a citable past by inserting himself, consciously or not, into the early twentieth-century historical record of Mexico City, a tumultuous era that witnessed the fall of the Porfirián regime and the rise of the postrevolutionary regimes that strove to modernize the nation.

I insist: if Walter Benjamin was right to believe that only a redeemed humanity has a past that is citable at every moment, then Mr. García’s reluctant narrative of his story with illness, his history within and around the General Insane Asylum, was hardly trivial. Developed in the most ominous shadows of progress and modernity and punctuated by suffering and destruction, this life history constitutes one of those ruins so dear to the German thinker’s theoretical imagination—a ruin that contains, whether cut short or undeveloped, an alternative past and, consequently, an alternative present.

In this chapter I quote extensively from the text authored by Marino García, his doctors and nurses, as well as General Insane Asylum authorities, first and
foreground to make the text present or, in other words, to help it to complete its own trajectory and find its rightful addressees. However, I also quote from them in order to counteract the derealization of the Other, the violent process by which some lives become unreal and even unrealizable, with which they remain “neither alive nor dead but interminably spectral”, and for that reason, beyond intelligibility. Beyond humanity.

In many ways, then, this chapter is a long overdue obituary for what Butler terms a grievable life. A life lived. A life that counts in its own right. Finally, I quote from Marino García’s text because the tragic elements of his life—the emphasis on suffering and the limits of human experience, the stress on the encounter of antagonistic forces able to disturb the hierarchies that hold them in place—might contribute to a revision of our contemporary notions of social agency, frequently invoked in terms of heroism, achievement, or victory. Marino García’s sense of agency and our sense of what is victorious could be a paradox, an underlying pairing that is seldom examined, in our contemporary notions of what is history and who makes it.

Pure Illumination

It is not so uncommon for historians to concern ourselves with placing the text (the document, the story, the event, the facts, the narrative) within the context we are striving to illuminate. Playing the role of the ventriloquist’s dummy, the text is expected to speak for something greater than itself—family, city, gender, society, nation—in a voice made faint, almost inaudible, by the passage of time and the noise of contemporary life. It is the task of the historian, then, as a sort of ventriloquist, to train the ears to sense the most resonant notes, and especially the faintest ones, emitted by the long absent voice to identify (or more precisely, to produce) the significant, discarding the trivial in the process.

Some, the empiricists among the ventriloquists, salvage pieces of information, elements of history, in which they believe the link between text and context is most apparent. Others, those drawn to the linguistic turn and fascinated by the intricate details of human meaning, attempt to rescue storylines, narrative strategies through which the long-absent voice interpreted, and therefore lived and produced, that context.

In both cases, no matter how distant they may be from one another, the emphasis falls on the illuminated context, the supposedly natural outcome of historical research and argumentation. Knowledge. I am writing this chapter to present what I see as an alternative (but not completely opposite) view of this
process, a view deeply influenced by my activities as a fiction writer (as they call *escritores* in the United States) and poet. Simply put, I am siding with the aspect of history we call the text, the sentences and paragraphs, the anecdote and characters, the one-word lines, the atmosphere, the descriptions, the sense or lack thereof, the format and its constraints, the syntax, the blank spaces, the opening sentence and the chosen ending that form, among and with other elements, the text that we read as though it were a voice.

I believe, with experimental writer Gertrude Stein, that a contemporary text, dense with its own sense of presentness, is one that embodies its own context in its grammar and syntax.\(^8\) From this perspective, the text is not a reflection, metaphor, or repository of the real, but one of its incarnations. The text does not represent the real; the text is (at least a version of the) real. The text *is*. The text does not illuminate its context: the text is pure illumination.

I am convinced that it is there, in the plenitude of the “*is*” that characterizes the text, that the mutable, ephemeral historical “I” is located: the “I” that historians, at least those affected by meaning, aspire to grasp and by which they hope to be inspired. I am not referring, of course, to the mythical Author who, after Roland Barthes and more emphatically after Michel Foucault, lies dead in our hands but to the polysemic and heteroglot convention that attributes a sense of intimacy and personal uniqueness to the “I” that lies in the core and corners of the system of production of discursive meaning involved in and by the text.\(^9\)

Neither buried nor on the surface of the text, but within it like marrow, the plural and often contested experience contained and expressed by the historical subjects that we study is thus able to confer this trace of humanity that imbues a sense of the personal that lies both within and beyond the subject, in the stories we write.

This is a reading of the text through which and in which there is a slippage of Marino García’s experiences, views, and the alternative yet undeveloped notion of the history of modernization. It is a reading that will explore in fundamental terms how the text embodies its context, which is only a slightly different way of saying that I will search for the ways the context lives in and gives meaning to its text (because it belongs to it, if we are willing to recognize that all human experience is plural) in the here and now of its happening, and produces meaning in the place of knowledge. This process of translation (from the language of one time to that of another) is, in my opinion, the fundamental task that modern societies have entrusted to historians. As keepers of the convention we call “the anecdote,” I believe that historians belong to those places around the bonfire where the community finds its most meaningful core.
A Punch to the Face

For us, it all began on October 5, 1919, the day Marino García, sporting a straw hat and a large moustache, entered the General Insane Asylum for the first time as a free and indigent inmate diagnosed with progressive general paralysis by a medical resident whose illegible signature marks the end of the official questionnaire through which his story, the story of his life with illness, remains accessible to us.

For Marino García, who claimed to be ninety-eight years old in 1941, the story began much earlier, in Polotitlán, a town in the state of Jalisco. Yet he said very little, or rather, the resident wrote very little, about the years of his life spent beyond the asylum grounds. He stated that he had siblings, but he said he did not remember any of them. He said that he had a daughter and refused to mention her again. He said he had suffered from an ulcer, only adding that it had developed in his scrotum. He said that he did not drink alcohol or smoke. And, before moving on to the section describing his current state, the resident noted that Marino García stated that he was not insane.

We know this information only because Marino García or his anonymous companion in 1919 answered the set questions included in the institution’s medical questionnaire, a document that included his photograph on the left side of the page as well as the heading “General Insane Asylum” and the subheading “Interview” in bold print.

The questionnaire displayed information about his personal history to the right of his image and, in six different sections, gathered data about his own health and that of his family, from the distant past to the present, ending with the doctor’s diagnosis. The terminology of each section, which included titles such as “direct, atavistic, or collateral family history” and questions like “Are there or have there ever been in your family any nervous, epileptic, mad, hysterical, syphilitic, suicidal, or depraved individuals?” clearly betrayed the pervasive influence of nineteenth-century psychiatry on the medical and social views of the state insane asylum.

So when Marino García met the unnamed medical resident in the institution’s observation ward, he did not tell his life story, but rather, constrained by the general interview format and the unwritten yet established ritual of the initial examination, he adapted that story to the interests and concerns of psychiatric hospital doctors, nurses, and authorities. Thus, he narrated the story of his life with illness; more precisely, he narrated the story of his life within and around the walls of the General Insane Asylum.
In many ways, too, Marino García translated himself, first for himself (if we accept that remembering is a process that involves situating the past in the context of the present) and, still more fundamentally, for the medical resident, upon whose expert judgement his future depended.

After not recording Mr. García’s speech but only referring to it indirectly through the use of the phrase “he said,” it was this unnamed doctor who first noted that the potential inmate spoke with the King of the Heavens and only took orders from Him; almost to the word, this phrase was used by the followers of Saint Teresita de Cabora, who had rebelled against the forces of the government of Chihuahua about twenty-five years earlier.\footnote{11}

Referring to the information offered by the anonymous companion, the medical resident briefly acknowledged that Mr. García had punched General Tejada in the face in Amecameca, the town in the state of Mexico where he lived. After describing what he had witnessed, the resident noted that Marino García kneeled when speaking with God.

Writing as an expert, the physician noted his delusions of grandeur, which he described as absurd, contradictory, and incoherent. Despite acknowledging that he had not been able to examine the patient due to his irascible temper, he nonetheless diagnosed him with progressive general paralysis, a conclusion sometimes disputed, and other times confirmed, by the various doctors who examined Marino García in later years.

From this exchange of information and especially from the very structure through which this exchange took place, we learn that the General Insane Asylum, as we might expect, was organized according to an internal hierarchy that placed greater importance on and gave more power to the words and conclusions of doctors. As in all state mental health institutions, for example, it was irrelevant that the patient might have claimed or even demonstrated that he or she was not ill. Nevertheless, we also learn that this existing hierarchy required the inclusion of inmates’ views, preferably in their own words. Doctors’ references to Mr. García’s words, despite being what was expected of a medical resident at the institution, alert me, for example, to the real need and the potential complicity between a doctor seeking to become a professional psychiatrist and a patient vehemently insisting on demonstrating his mental health or the reasons explaining the onset of illness.\footnote{12}

Unequal yet dynamic, the relationship between the unnamed medical resident and Marino García was also based on a crucial but partial void: the silence surrounding the incident in Amecameca, the alleged punch to the face of one
General Tejada, after which Marino García was escorted to the General Insane Asylum on the outskirts of Mexico City.

This elision of the context, noted quite clearly in the text, signals the irruption of the presentness of Marino García and the unnamed doctor. Invisible because it was everywhere, not identified because it was ever-present, the reality of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, whose armed phase remained unfinished in 1919, entered the text as surreptitiously and inadvertently as an unwelcome guest.

Marino García’s file, which contained a medical version of his life, was all about this unspoken detail. His illness, whether real or attributed, embodied the abnormality of a punch connecting to the face of one General Tejada since, without that gesture, Marino García would not have been taken by an anonymous companion to the very doors of the asylum. His confinement thus constitutes the “in which” as we often refer to the larger place or larger narrative that we suppose contains the event or story we are recounting.

As things stood, then, Marino García suffered from progressive general paralysis, a condition more commonly associated with men than women and one of the most common diagnostic classifications in the institution. Accordingly, Mr. García was placed in the ward for neurosyphilis patients, one of the six wards that made up the institution.\(^\text{15}\)

Unduly Confined

Perhaps we would not have heard of Marino García again had it not been for the concern of the General Insane Asylum’s chief administrator, Mr. Rogelio Garmendia, who became alarmed when he learned that one of the inmates seemed to have a great deal of metal tools in his room. Then, thanks to the investigation team promptly assembled by Simón López Muñoz, institution superintendent, we gained access to Marino García’s life with illness and as an inmate at La Castañeda twelve years later, when the postrevolutionary regimes of the northern generals Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles had come to an end, and the country found itself in the midst of the so-called Maximato, a period dominated by the behind-the-scenes maneuvering of General Calles.\(^\text{14}\)

In a rapidly growing metropolis receiving renewed welfare system attention, now keen to offer revolutionary regimes the material and ideological means to reform Mexican citizens in order to contribute to the creation of the “New Man,” the General Insane Asylum experienced an unexpected and brief period of prosperity.\(^\text{15}\)
After years of total neglect, a group of doctors vigorously led by psychiatrists Samuel Ramírez Moreno and Manuel Guevara Oropeza had initiated the first administrative and medical reform of La Castañeda in 1929, implementing more scientific nomenclature in the wards, paying greater attention to the medical objectives of the state institution, and above all, privileging work therapy as the primary treatment offered by the establishment. Rogelio Garmendia’s alarm and López’s prompt reply would have been impossible prior to these transformations.

Based on answers from the nurse, Mr. Ricardo Reyes, who had direct contact with Marino García, Mr. Garmendia learned not only that the patient had the privilege of sleeping in a room of his own (a rare case in a very crowded institution, especially for a patient admitted with free and indigent status) but also that Mr. García had indeed collected a large quantity of objects, some of which were steel tools, and that he kept them in his room, jeopardizing his safety and that of other patients. According again to Mr. Reyes, Marino García had not received medical treatment in his previous four years of confinement.

When questioned, Marino García briefly confirmed Reyes’s version of events. He had been in the institution for twelve years, specifically in the neurosyphilis ward, despite not being insane. He had personally collected the steel tools little by little and had not allowed medical staff to examine him because he did not feel sick. Interestingly enough, at this point, the once invisible blow that brought him from Amecameca to the insane asylum disappeared once more. Marino García came to the institution because he was a beggar, a term duly underlined by an investigation team that was surely aware of the ongoing efforts of the public welfare system to differentiate clearly between the deserving and the undeserving poor in its social assistance programs.

Structured as an official report and, for the first time, typewritten, information about Marino García’s life in 1931 was not the result of the direct exchange between doctor and patient. Rather, it originated in a long and increasingly hierarchical line of asylum players, starting, in descending order, with the alarmed general director, followed by the diligent superintendent, the attentive head of nurses, and the succinct nurse—only to end, once again, with the patient himself.

In this more bureaucratic milieu, the participation of Mr. García, who was interviewed last, became less important. The report did not include direct quotations of his discourse, allotting him only five or six lines in a text of forty—and this was only to confirm what had been said by someone else and already recorded in the report. It did not mention the delirious ideas that the unnamed medical resident had found so absurd, incoherent, and paradoxical in 1919.
Nor did it include any mention of his life in the psychiatric hospital. How was he able to get a room of his own? Did he find the objects he collected inside or outside the asylum? Did he use the steel tools that he had in his possession? Neither the general director nor the superintendent attempted to address, much less answer these questions, at least not in the report. Marino García’s situation, however, was so unusual at La Castañeda that the general director did not hesitate to describe it as abnormal and almost immediately to solicit the expert advice of one of the doctors.

Written, like all official correspondence, in third person singular, the report refers indirectly (“he said”) to all the information generated by the implicated actors, with the exception of the lines written by Dr. Luis Vargas, who briefly examined the patient and found him to be in good health without turning to laboratory tests, and thus authorized his release.

In the words of the quoted doctor, Mr. García was ready to return to a family he lacked and a society he had not seen or participated in for twelve years. In a laconic, objective tone, the report then indicated that the preceding findings revealed that “this individual was unduly confined for a long period of time.”

Marino García’s file does not include information about his release. We do not know whether he felt relief or apprehension about such a radical change so late in his life. We do not know if he interpreted such an abrupt change in his situation as a miracle worked by the “King of the Heavens,” with whom he sometimes spoke, or as the punishment of the very earthbound institutional authorities. All we know is that he left the psychiatric hospital in 1931, only to return ten years later.

This Is Precisely My Story

In a more simplified record format, including the heading “Federal District Public Welfare” followed by the phrase “General Asylum” and an even smaller, centered subheading “Record Form,” Dr. Mario Fuentes typed updated information on Marino García, who in 1941 was an elderly man with a white beard and bulging cheeks who, nevertheless, stared intently into the camera lens that photographed him.

The passing of time became evident not only in Marino García’s face but also in the structure and language of the new, modernized record form. The official format no longer included questions related to the “atavistic” family history of the patient, nor did it ask, explicitly at least, about sexual or drinking habits. Instead, it divided the new information into four different sections with neutral
titles: Previous confinement; History prior to admission (referring party, certificate presented, accompanying parties); Condition of the incoming patient (appearance, attitude, expressions, clothing, etc.); Evolution of the affliction (according to informants). If elusive modernity had once meant the triumph of science over popular belief, the victory of the vanguard over obsolete tradition, these apparently value-free headings showed that even the most peripheral of public welfare system institutions had left behind, or was finally ready to leave behind, its dark and rather infamous past.18

When Marino García returned to the asylum, just a year after General Lázaro Cárdenas left the presidency, and land, work, and educational reforms were supposedly implemented, just when the nation was heading toward an era of less difficult relations with international capital, the record format was not all that had changed.19 Mr. García was no longer married, but single; he no longer was a tinsmith, but a peasant. Moreover, he arrived this time escorted by a police officer. Despite the referral by the Mexico City tenth police precinct, Dr. Mario Fuentes attested that there was no information on why the returning inmate had ended up there again.

It is clear, however, that Dr. Fuentes took his job as a psychiatrist in the mental health institution very seriously, since he described the patient’s condition in great detail and allowed his discourse to enter, quite freely, into his own narration through the use of quotation marks. The fact that Dr. Edmundo Buentello did the same shortly thereafter affirmed his status as one of the most prolific and well-regarded psychiatrists in mid-twentieth century Mexico City.20

It is thus thanks to the growing professionalism of psychiatry, implicit in the record form and manifested in the doctors’ careful rendering of the facts, that we now have access to Marino García’s own version of his past and present as a state insane asylum inmate. It is due to and not in spite of, in avoidance of, or in contrary to this professionalism that Marino García’s words could finally occupy a relevant space on the page, now called simply the “Record Form,” and in the semiotic interaction at the core of all medical diagnoses.21

As he had done ten years before, Mr. García stated once again that he was not crazy and added that he had indeed been at the institution before, for twelve years, although not as an inmate, but as a guard at the establishment.24 This time, he agreed to remain at the institution as a gardener. Once this was decided, Marino García proceeded to talk and Dr. Mario Fuentes, and later Dr. Edmundo Buentello, began to transcribe his discourse, apparently a long, convoluted speech about aspects of life that we usually divide under such rubrics as religion, history, nature, medicine, and sex. We do not know how long the session lasted or if the
doctors gathered all this information in one interview or several. What we know is that Marino García took full advantage of the attentive listeners before him.

We know that he spoke.

On religion: My Father, God, is the only one who talks to me. Since long ago. He talks with me. That is the reason why I came here the first time, that is precisely my story. . . . I have not died because my Father is eternal, and He told me that I would be too. I am ninety-eight years old and my Father tells me that I have been reincarnated in my body during the last fifteen years.

On nature: From here [Earth] I have nothing; from above, I have the sun, the Earth, the air. I own everything, He has given it all to me. . . . There is a kind of air that is like an injection; it cleanses everything. . . . The air is what cleanses.

On history: I was wandering the streets, and bullets shot by the Indians playing out there up in space were falling on me. They talk to me, sometimes. They call me by my name but they do not shoot me on purpose. . . . Among those who play up there are Christians and Mexicans. I saw an Arab yesterday, up in the air, up in the sky, where the bombs explode. I have not died from the shooting because my Father has told me that I am eternal. Where I used to work there was war and the Villistas and the Carrancistas would chase me for no reason.

On medicine: In this very moment, my Father is telling me that if you inject me, he will send lightning bolts upon the person who injects me.

On sex: My Father has told me that, in one year, I will be ready to take the body of a woman, body to body. For now I console myself just as Saint Joseph did.

This, then, is what we have of Marino García some fifty years later: a collection of quotations from his citable past; a set of fragmented maxims of his life; a sample of intimate fractals: letters from an alphabet unknown to us. Marino García, in other words, did not prepare a narrative of his life: the unfolding of meaning over time, the mechanism that “resolves a fundamental antagonism by reorganizing its terms in a temporal succession.” Perhaps, if given the opportunity, he would have done it, but at least in the psychiatric hospital and in the presence of psychiatrists, he did not do it. He was not required to. Or he did not want to. Or he did not know how. Perhaps this was not the way he naturally organized the story of his life.

However, he gave the psychiatrists the pieces of information they so needed in order to arrive at a scientific diagnosis. He also gave them the limited but precisely located interpretive events that opened windows on themselves, on the meanings of his life. And that is how, later in time and farther in space, we come to know about Marino García’s life.
Through these alephs of sorts we know that Marino García was a deeply religious, physically strong man who was able to endure for twelve years in an institution famous for neglect and overcrowding.24

We know that his faith also kept him alive outside the asylum during the next ten years, of which the only certain fact is that he was fond of frequenting movie theatres. We know that his Catholicism was rather flexible and heterodox and included direct contact with a masculine and paternal God, acceptance of the saints, and the concept of reincarnation.25

We know that, despite being poor, since he clearly stated he had nothing on earth, he felt proud of his natural, God-given possessions (the air, the sky, the fields, and the landscape). We know that he associated the female body with spiritual pollution and that, although he felt he was nearly ready for it, he had not had sexual contact with women, instead remaining celibate.26

We know that he recognized and clearly differentiated between Indians, Mexicans, Christians, and Arabs in his social milieu, a classification recalling Borges’s mappings of the world.27 He was also familiar with the violence of bullets and the existence of armies of Villistas and Carrancistas, who had chased him without cause on one occasion.

He had survived all this not with the aid of Western medicine, which he rejected, but with the supernatural support of his masculine, paternal deity: the God who made him in his image and had transformed him into an eternal being.

As an astute social observer and a resourceful man who invariably viewed his world through the lens of his deeply held religious beliefs, Marino García captured the attention of concerned doctors at the state asylum. In turn, he offered them fragments of his life. More than pieces of information, they were pieces of interpretation. Pieces of a life lived.

Limited and precisely located, these interpretive events did not unfold, did not develop in the temporal sequence we associate with narrative.28 They do not explain. They do not stand for or in place of modernity, that slippery concept that was then as it is now the elusive goal, the unreachable end of the rainbow of twentieth-century Mexican political and government imagination. That reality constructed, lived, and suffered by the likes of Marino García is modernity.

Plagued by voids, interrupted by silence, both chosen and imposed, broken into fragments, Marino García’s story seems traversed by syntactical and historical violence. This is what we know for certain. In a modern way, I would like to keep this just as it is: open, broken, interrupted. Only more violence, the type of violence inherent in the reordering of linear narrative, could smooth its surface and fashion fragments into the unfolding narrative of academic discourse.
As San Francisco experimental narrative writer Kathy Acker once said: “The writer is playing—when structuring narrative or when narrative is structuring itself—with life and death.”

This, such as it is, is the life of Marino García. His death.

A Sense of the Tragic in Life

Much in the manner of postmodern novels, which often include multiple points of view in fluid structures with open endings, Marino García’s file provokes awe, in the best of cases, and confusion, in the worst. Uncertainty. There is no one truth that develops linearly through time, toward health or death.

No one in the psychiatric hospital, not even the increasingly professional doctors, was in a position to decide which of the various versions of Marino García’s suffering was the most significant, not to mention the most true. Each document included in the file completely contradicted or radically revised the previous version once assumed to be factual, true, commonsense, credible . . . “the One.” Each document indeed superimposed a new meaning, not necessarily related in logical terms, over the past, and transformed the so-called original text in itself, again and again. I am convinced that if we cannot find the unique and authentic version of this life, it is because that version does not exist. What exists is this paradoxical material that resists linear narrative by its very paradoxical nature.

An interpretation of Marino García’s life should, by necessity, preserve that disposition: the paradoxes, ruptures, silences, voids, revisions, and versions—both on the page and in the interpretation of the page. It is, in the end, and from the very beginning, a matter of life and death. Of life over death.

From time to time, so-called subaltern subjects manage to enter the halls of academia cloaked in the narrative attire of the negated cultural hero, saved from anonymity by the grace of our words. Based on what I call a positivist interpretation of agency, historians, for the most part, pay attention to the social actors who did, or contributed to doing, something significant, something that will speak, in turn, of something greater than itself. This state of affairs requires a broader comprehension of the concept of agency, capable of perceiving alternative narratives or, better put, alternative non-narratives—broken, stuttering, uncertain—that embody the experience of those of us who cannot or do not wish to conform to the orderly linearity of vanished capitalism or academic discourse. I have referred to this broader concept of agency as “tragic.”

As a term that necessarily points back to Aristotle’s Poetics and often represents the fatalism of common discourse (for in tragedy the hero is destroyed),
tragedy stages “the relationship between suffering and joy in a universe which
is often perceived as at best inimical or at worst radical in its hostility to human
life.” Celebrated as a Dionysiac delight (after Nietzsche) or mourned as a world
fighting against human will, tragedy includes the important element of pur-
gation “by pity and by fear,” in Aristotle’s terms: the process by which human
limitations are recognized and accepted. Yet, as Karl Jaspers has argued, tragedy
works when it reveals “some particular truth in every agent and at the same
time the limitations of this truth, so [as] to reveal the injustice in everything.”
This revelatory power led Raymond Williams, with Bertolt Brecht in mind, to
perceive tragedy through the lenses of suffering and affirmation.

We have to see not only that suffering is avoidable, but that it is not avoided.
And not only that suffering breaks us, but that it need not break us. . . .
Against the fear of a general death, and against the loss of connection, a
sense of life is affirmed, learned as closely in suffering as ever in joy, once
the connections are made.

These tragic elements—emphasis on suffering, the limits of human experi-
ence, the encounter of antagonistic forces able to disturb the hierarchies that
hold them in place—have proven particularly useful for social analysis of rev-
olutions. These definitions themselves would become the needed recurrent
concept of tragedy within the theme of revolution.

Paying serious attention to the suffering of the majority, a task still waiting
to be taken up by scholars of Mexican society and culture, is a way to identify
the tragic origins and tragic subjects that have comprised Mexican modernity.
The pained narratives of the men and women inmates of the General Insane
Asylum show, just as in tragedy, the way that “the detail of suffering is insistent,
whether as silence or as the reshaping of lives by a new power in the state.”
Thus, in stutters and slashes, suffering comes to life as a social and cultural expe-
rience involving the most ominous aspects of the modernization and globaliza-
ion processes. Far from appearing as maladjusted victims or, worse, passive,
fatalistic beings in the world where it was their lot to live, this view emphasizes
“the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience” and,
above all, the various ways in which sufferers identify, endure, and unmask the
sources of their misfortune. In this sense, my notion of the tragic agent, more an
intimation than a concept, attempts to grasp what appears to be common sense
in so many narratives from the asylum: suffering destroys, but it also confers
dignity, a higher moral status, on the sufferer. Recognized in its complex origin
and its little jabs at life, suffering confers a sense of humanity.