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Chapter Twelve

Aiding the Adversary

Casey’s short story, “La ejecución,” begins with an epigraph from Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* translated into Spanish: “¿Y el proceso comienza de nuevo? —preguntó K. casi incrédulo—. Evidentemente —respondió el pintor” (“Ejecución” 193). At the cited moment in Kafka’s novel, the painter explains the intricate details and possibilities of the legal system that has ensnared K. In particular, what can begin all over again is the process of ostensible acquittal; if K. is acquitted in this scenario, he would be free temporarily, only to be arrested and put on trial again. The artist states that this is an unending process: “The second acquittal is followed by the third arrest, the third acquittal by the fourth arrest, and so on. That is implied in the very conception of ostensible acquittal” (*Trial* 160). This option appears to be the most likely scenario in which K. could be acquitted of the crimes of which he knows nothing, but it is also the option that never leads to a final and permanent verdict. In the end, K. is not granted an ostensible acquittal but is killed upon being found guilty of an unnamed, unproven crime.

Casey’s short story rewrites Kafka’s novel by returning to this infinite cycle of arrests and verdicts that can only come to an end—as the title announces—with an execution. In this story, Mayer is framed for committing fraud and a murder; he is arrested in his home one evening, taken to a police station to declare his guilt, thrown in jail, put on trial, and executed in the final paragraph. However, “La ejecución” is not a simple copy of *The Trial*, nor is it a farcical repetition of what was at first a tragedy. Casey’s text is not a radical departure from or an ironic undermining of Kafka’s novel in the way that Filloy and Somers rewrite Plato. Rather, I read Casey’s Mayer as someone who learned from Kafka’s K. that it is futile to participate in a legal apparatus built to take
away the accused’s potentiality. Instead, Mayer enacts a departure from this process altogether while, paradoxically, being trapped in the middle of it. From his dimly lit cell, the most radical aspect of the ethics of being perceived takes place in the very different decisions made by Casey’s protagonist to aid even his enemies in the time leading up to his own execution.

**A System of Unknown Dimensions**

A final version of “La ejecución” was included as the last short story in the 1967 edition of *El regreso y otros relatos*, published by Seix Barral in Barcelona. This collection is an expanded edition of *El regreso*, which Casey had published in 1962 with Ediciones R in Havana. Casey returns to the short stories of *El regreso*, and to them he adds an edited version of a story that returns to Kafka’s *The Trial*.¹ In a brief review of Kafka’s *The Castle*, Casey declares from within the Revolution that there is “una literatura antes de Kafka y otra después de él” (“Kafka” 77). Thus, Kafka is at first defended as a revolutionary to be read in Cuba. Nevertheless, I analyze the 1967 version Casey circulated from exile as a critique of the hegemonic logic that by this point in Cuba had placed moralizing demands on both his writing and his sexuality. For those trapped within a regime in which the state of exception has become the rule, whether it calls itself a revolution or a democracy or something else, Casey imagines an option that restores the potential to refuse to participate in this seemingly unending cycle of power struggles from which there is no true escape.

As if the title and the epigraph were not enough to determine the unfortunate fate of Mayer, the first sentence of “La ejecución” also announces his impending arrest: “Una hora antes de que se produjera la detención, el teléfono sonó” (193). When Mayer answers the phone, no one responds; he only hears silence coming through the telephone line, until he notices that “colgaban suavemente” (194). The scene repeats itself a few minutes later, and Mayer assumes this is some sort of prank phone call. Upon hearing them hang up again, Mayer goes back to his solitary evening that the narrator describes as his “veladas a oscuras” (195). Like many of Casey’s protagonists, Mayer prefers to be left alone in the dim light where no one can easily see or bother him: “Para aprovechar estas horas había cubierto con papeles opacos los cristales por
donde podía filtrarse la luz de la calle” (195). In the softly lit room, Mayer goes back to his nightly routine.

The phone rings for a third time. He answers, but he does not say anything. He listens for any sound, “tratando de penetrar el silencio”: “Pero el más absoluto silencio reinaba en el lugar desde donde llamaban” (196). Across the telephone lines, only absolute silence is being transmitted between an unknown entity and a seemingly unimportant protagonist who has suddenly become the focus of the fictional State. “Decidido a quitarles esa pequeña ventaja,” Mayer unsuccessfully attempts to block all noises from his end, but he realizes that “los ruidos de la calle” still can be heard (197). His unknown caller creates this absolute silence from an unknown location having prepared for an unknown amount of time, whereas Mayer must improvise a response to this unexpected intrusion, establishing an asymmetry between them. Eventually, Mayer will learn the lesson that Kafka’s K. does not: it is impossible to resist a system of unknown dimensions and silent, invisible agents by playing within the few rules that are barely visible to the one trapped within its all-pervading gaze. An escape may not be possible, but a line of flight along an unnoticed itinerary still is.

**Clean and Modern**

The silence becomes an ominous presence, signaling a sudden shift in Mayer’s life. “Sin que pudiera precisar qué exactamente, creyó notar que algo había cambiado de modo imperceptible en los objetos que le rodeaban” (196). The silence penetrates and fills Mayer’s home like the filtered street light. However, he does not panic: “No pudo evitar una sonrisa al comprobar que caminaba de puntillas” (196). Something about this whole situation seems ridiculous to him. Soon after noticing this imperceptible change while peering into the darkness, three police officers knock at his door, arrest him, and take him to the police station. The silent telephone calls were the harbinger of what was already underway—Mayer’s arrest and prosecution after being framed.

In Casey’s narrative, the legal institutions are not tucked into attics that appear to be moving always away from the protagonist; the police precinct is an imposing building filled with bright lights that blind those within it. Further foreshadowing Mayer’s execution, a uniformed man walks around “con un brillante recogedor
de basura—Mayer nunca había visto un recogedor tan brillante, posiblemente era de cobre muy pulido— […] y con un movimiento casi imperceptible de la escobilla hacia desaparecer […] todo lo que pudiera disminuir la limpieza del lugar” (200). All refuse is quickly collected and eliminated from the precinct, which “olía a desinfectante,” leaving even the tools used to purify this space as shiny as possible (200). Here there is no room for anything or anyone labeled “filth,” a visible warning written on every shiny surface of this building about the precinct’s primary goal: the violent annihilation of all those considered to be operating against the sovereign.

Unlike Somers’s protagonists who find something in common and then choose to expose fragments of their most intimate ideas to one another, Mayer is forcibly revealed under the blinding lights of the police precinct. Skylights and wall sconces illuminate the long corridors, and the interrogation room where he is put on trial by a panel of three civil servants and two uniformed men is located behind a glass door: “El lugar estaba tan escrupulosamente limpio como el resto del edificio; lo iluminaban altas ventanas. Todo era moderno y confortable, incluso de buen gusto” (205). This well-lit space decorated with clean, modern lines and glass gives the impression of trying desperately to insist on the transparency of the fraudulent legal proceedings taking place within it. However, no real evidence is brought to light in this place, and his accusers on the other side of the room talk in hushed tones he cannot hear as the lights begin to blind him: “El resplandor del salón le había producido un vivo ardor en los ojos” (207). As the evidence used to frame Mayer is presented, from his perspective the modern design only produces the damaging effects of being revealed under the sovereign’s totalizing, yet unlocatable sources of light and absolute silence.²

**Rewriting Kafka**

Casey’s narrative does not rewrite the ending of Kafka’s novel; both K. and Mayer die in the end. Rather, I contend that Casey’s avant-garde text returns to *The Trial* at the point at which K. failed to realize his lack of potentiality within the legal apparatus that had already decided to convict and kill him. The narrator in Kafka’s novel explains K.’s attempt to remain alert while preparing his
defense: “He accepted it as a fundamental principle for an accused man to be always forarmed, never to let himself be caught napping, never to let his eyes stray unthinkingly to the right when his judge was looming up on the left—and against that very principle he kept offending again and again” (Trial 164). K. thinks he knows what he must do to succeed: remain alert at all times in order to prepare a legitimate defense and prove his innocence. In retrospect, for the reader who learns that in the end K. will fail to perceive this institution in its totality and will be executed, K.’s heightened vigilance only marks his own delusions or misguided optimism. K.’s major failure was not that he kept offending against that principle; no degree of alertness would ever have been sufficient. Rather, K.’s failure was his inability to comprehend that his potentiality—the ability to do and to refuse to do, the capacity to make a decision—had been irrevocably blocked well before the guards knocked at his door. Despite his many clever attempts and important contacts, K. is radically prohibited from doing or refusing to do anything to save himself from the all-pervasive legal apparatus of which he only ever manages to catch a fleeting glimpse.

In reality, the sovereign, his decrees, and the logic underlying both of these trials never appear in plain sight; only their threat of violence shines bright. The difference is that Mayer recognizes that it is impossible to challenge this institution directly. Instead of repeating K.’s frantic itinerary through that maze of alleys and attics, Mayer creates brief moments of pleasure for himself that constantly disrupt the linear narrative leading to his execution. As he is being charged and arrested, the narrator describes “el placer familiar que la oscuridad le causaba” (“Ejecución” 200). Mayer even finds the silence and darkness of his jail cell to be comforting; in order to recreate his nightly routine, he covers the small window with a blanket “hasta obtener una oscuridad casi completa” (201). This allows him to fall into a deep sleep, and he enjoys the brief moments he is allowed into the empty, interior courtyard surrounded on all sides by ten-story walls. No light reaches the ground floor where he walks, but he arrives at the conclusion that “al dar los rayos sobre la inmensa superficie de los muros, pintada de blanco, producirían un resplandor molesto” (204–05). It is as if Mayer knows all too well how futile K.’s efforts were and how vulnerable K. had become under the harsh lights of the
imperceptible legal apparatus that had ensnared him. Mayer seems to know he is living a repetition of those events in another time and place and that there will be no way out of this cycle. Since fighting the system by playing within its rules is futile, Mayer’s only potential political gesture, a highly imperfect solution, is to reclaim his potentiality by refusing to participate earnestly in the legal process that has already banned him to a jail cell and abandoned him there. He signs any papers they give him and makes no attempt to challenge their accusations or their verdict.

From Enemies to Adversaries

This refusal by which he recuperates his potentiality is his political gesture, but if it ended here, there would be no ethics of this politics. In what I have described so far, Mayer only secures a bit of tranquility for himself by turning his dark jail cell into a temporary refuge that remains almost completely isolated from everyone else. Nevertheless, he does have frequent contact with an old man who works as his guard. The most radical aspect of the ethics of being perceived takes place when Mayer engages his guard in dialogue not as his enemy but rather as an adversary still worthy of being treated as another human being despite the institutions that very literally separate them into opposing spaces and mark them as one another’s enemies.

Mouffe argues for a radical democratic politics that transforms antagonism into agonism by reframing enemies as adversaries. Instead of creating an exclusive, moral community for democracy or a naïve vision of a society without power relations, Mouffe seeks a democracy without the will to totality: “The democratic character of a society can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself or himself the representation of the totality and claim to have the ‘mastery’ of the foundation” (Democratic Paradox 100). Instead, a democracy must be founded on the ineradicable and irreducible antagonism brought out by the pluralism of values. Mouffe does not attempt to eliminate different social identities nor to relegate their differences to an idealized private space; instead, she contends for the need to allow people with radically different values to engage openly in political power struggles. For this reason she calls for antagonistic struggles to be reconfigured as agonistic ones: “Antagonism is the struggle
Aiding the Adversary

between enemies, while *agonism* is a struggle between adversaries” (102–03). Mouffe argues that radical democracy can only take place if the hegemonic power structures that constantly organize bodies into friends opposed to enemies is completely reconfigured: “the aim of democratic politics is to construct the ‘them’ in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an ‘adversary,’ that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (102). For my purposes, the final aspect of the ethics of being perceived takes place when one person attempts to dialogue with those who had been cast as evil enemies that must be vanquished, thus turning against the current and reframing them as an adversary worthy of being engaged in dialogue. Otherwise, the dialogues I have been analyzing would be limited to those between people who already exist within the same limited community or identity group.

Casey imagines a character who achieves this dialogue with one of his guards. Long before they meet, the police state in this short story structures their relationship as that between mutual enemies. This guard is much older than the other officers, and as he takes Mayer to his cell, they have to walk slowly:

_Era evidente que el esfuerzo de andar agitaba al guardián. Al principio agarró a Mayer por un brazo; luego, cuando se hizo más fatigosa su respiración, la presión de su mano sobre el brazo de Mayer aumentó. A medida que avanzaban por el largo corredor, el prisionero sintió que el hombre se apoyaba cada vez más en él y su respiración se hacía más penosa._

—¿Quiere que nos detengamos un momento? — preguntó Mayer.  
—Sí, por favor — repuso el guardián.  
—Apóyese en mí — sugirió Mayer cuando reanudaron la marcha.  
(“Ejecución” 201–02)

At first, it may be argued that Mayer simply follows the lead and pace of his guard, hesitant to do anything that would further harm his case. However, when the guard leans on Mayer, the interaction is narrated with the verb “apoyar,” which means “to help, assist, support” in addition to “to lean on.” Mayer supports his own guard. First, he offers to let the guard take a break, an offer he was in no position to actually make, and so he frames it as a request. Then Mayer tells the guard to brace himself on him,
politely commanding the guard to allow his prisoner to aid him. Mayer wholly disregards the pre-established rules of their relationship. He aids his guard in a gesture that recasts his enemy as his adversary and, as a result, he recovers a bit of his own potentiality. In this unnoticed interaction, he makes the decision to slow down and commands his guard to lean on his shoulder as they hobble toward Mayer’s cell locked arm in arm.

Mayer’s unnoticed potentiality is only recovered during brief moments when he and his guard have the opportunity to speak in dialogues that go unnoticed by the other guards. One day, Mayer decides to ask the guard about his health when he brings him his food: “Hablaron un rato y el hombre prometió comprar ciertos medicamentos que Mayer le había sugerido” (209). Mayer advises the guard on how to improve his health. He receives no special treatment for this. In fact, the guard frequently forgets to take Mayer to the patio, and he will not intervene as the execution approaches. Nevertheless, Mayer overhears the guard say his health has improved, “gracias quizás a las indicaciones del prisionero, aunque esto no podía afirmarse con completa exactitud” (211). The guard even notes Mayer’s improvement in health; here the narrator intervenes to ensure this is not interpreted as the guard’s own self-congratulating gesture: “En realidad había mejorado visiblemente” (211). As a result, perhaps, of the way Mayer reconfigured their relationship, both Mayer and the guard have seen their health improve within the precinct. Casey’s text only imagines this ethical gesture between the two of them, but if this type of interaction were to sweep across an entire political landscape, I like to think its effects could provoke monumental change toward the creation of a radically democratic community.

Through Casey’s ethical gesture, I have returned from Filloy’s massive pandemonium to the everyday scale of Somers’s novel. As I approach the end of my analysis of the politics of going unnoticed, I am not convinced that a global opening in which anyone and everyone can participate in democratic institutions without being cast as the enemy is just around the corner. Such institutions and politics have not come into existence. Rather, new strategies to further partition humanity into opposing moral and political categories appear and reappear every day, and they return with ever-greater force from both above and below. It will take continual efforts like those of Somers’s and Casey’s protagonists
to begin to pry open the space in which Filloy’s pandemonium might one day take place. From my perspective, Mouffe’s agonistic democracy allows for a potential merger or overlapping to take place between Somers’s ethics in which one self engages another in fragmented dialogues and Filloy’s pandemonium of competing people who cannot claim moral superiority over one another. This is a tall order, but one that Casey’s fiction also imagines by reconfiguring the relationship between friend and enemy, good and evil, into a tense, uneven, and incomplete dialogue among adversaries. Such reconfigurations are a continual process that will break down as dialogues end, as someone chooses to close pandemonium, and as actual people choosing to engage in this form of dialogue die or are killed by others. Without these types of small gestures, another political, aesthetic, and ethical organization of the world cannot even become possible. But with them, you or I or someone else might step briefly out into the open and begin a reconfiguration of the institutional and everyday demands that constantly seek to divide us from one another in the service of political and economic inequality.