Arteletra

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In a rare moment in Filloy’s *Vil & Vil: La gata parida* (1975), the General becomes giddy with nostalgia for a game he used to play: *la gata parida*. He claims that children from the provinces like himself *inventan sus juegos*, unlike their less virile counterparts who grow up in the capital, which is ironically the national seat of power he now conspires to take through a military coup (41). Here he explains how to play *la gata parida*:

En un banco […] nos sentábamos tantos muchachos como cabíamos. Los que no cabían estaban alertas, esperando turno para sentarse. Porque el juego consiste en hacer caer a los de la punta, a fuerza de empujar con el cuerpo, los hombros y las caderas. Lo principal es mantenerse sentado en el banco, resistiendo los empellones para no ser desplazado y caer. Es un juego de machos que excita el amor propio. Porque cuando cae alguno, los que esperan, o el mismo caído, ocupan ese lugar libre en la otra punta del banco y prosigue la pechada hasta voltear al del extremo. De izquierda o derecha, lo mismo da. Lo importante es ubicarse y conservar enérgicamente el puesto. ¡Es de lo más divertido! (42)

The game, which literally translates as “the birthed cat,” is a struggle for hegemony via brute force similar to “king of the hill.” The verb *parir,* or “to give birth,” also means “to come up with, to create (an idea).” Its usage in the phrase *la puta que te parió* and other vulgar phrases is evoked in the name as well. Furthermore, the game links masculinity with violence and the ability to stand one’s ground, all the while encouraging a heightened individualism that respects only the self’s will to power. Such thoughts bring tremendous pleasure to the General who makes use of these strategies to secure power at the center of the
bench; once achieved, he will stand his ground by any means available to him, knocking down political opponents from the left and from the right without hesitation or concern for their well-being. There is no ideology worthy of his commitment other than self-preservation and self-love. In this sense, la gata parida is the children’s game that teaches the politics of yomismo, the ideology committed only to its sole member’s self-interest, closing any and all ethical gestures.

_Vil & Vil_ was published originally by the Macció Hnos. Editores in Río Cuarto, Argentina. According to Mónica Ambort’s interview, Filloy had already attempted to publish it in 1968, but did not find a publisher until 1975 (163). This was one year before the military coup that established the dictatorship that called itself the “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional”—a blatantly obvious euphemism that cloaks a violent regime in moralizing robes. After the coup in 1976, Filloy was arrested and interrogated about this novel’s contents. He was eventually released after convincing the military officers that the ideas expressed in the novel were only those of his fictional characters, not his own, which he has since said was not true (163–65). In the novel’s “Nota previa,” the narrator claims this novel is “de anticipación”:

_Cronológicamente, sin embargo, está situada en una época tan cercana a nuestra actualidad que parecen confundirse. Quien quiera confundirse que se confunda. […] Por el curso que llevan las cosas en los países latinoamericanos, esta novela acontece a menudo y, forzosamente, variando detalles y circunstancias, acontecerá._ (Vil/6)

The events to which he refers appear on the previous page under the title, “Historia reciente,” in which he lists thirteen coups that took place in Latin America, ranging from the one that removed Juan Domingo Perón from power in 1955 to the one against Arnulfo Arias in Panamá in 1968 (5).

In retrospect, it might be tempting to read this novel as one that foretells the coming of the terrorist state in Argentina from 1976–83. Nevertheless, _Vil & Vil_ is much more than a vague premonition about future events. In my reading, this novel takes account of the generalized state of exception operating throughout Argentina and Latin America in the era, and in the face of an impending, evident threat, it imagines a seemingly unimportant
military conscript who manages to open a line of flight away from the General’s power struggles. Whereas Somers restrains the scope of her novel within the tedious, everyday dialogues of just two strangers, Filloy represents this opening toward dialogue at the largest scales, this opening toward a community. He calls this grandiose and terrifying dialogue that takes place across space and time “pandemonium.” In this pandemonium—full of vile beings who shout and disagree—the ethical implications of the politics of going unnoticed are briefly exposed (182).

Monodialogues among Antagonists

Told from the perspective of a conscript, *Vil & Vil* narrates the antagonism between the narrator and the General. The narrator interrupted his studies at law school to fulfill his mandatory military service and now works as secretary and chauffeur to the General. The narrator glimpses the General’s strategies as he plots and executes a military coup against the government. Each of the ninety-eight chapters is divided into three sections. The first is always composed of a brief dialogue with the General. The second is told in the first person from the conscript’s perspective, allowing him to provide context for the dialogues and advance the plot. Many of the third sections read like excerpts from the conscript’s journal, although this is not confirmed in the text; over the course of the novel, these sections pry open the antagonism between the General and the conscript and, similar to the errant palindrome that erupts from its crystalline form in the third reading, these sections open toward a free-form space for experimental narrative structures wherein the pandemonium will arise.

The first section of chapter one establishes the antagonism between the General and the conscript:

—A ver, ese melenudo piojoso, que se apure.
—Grrmgrr …
—¡Cómo! ¿Qué dijiste? A ver, repetí lo que gruñiste, si sos macho.
—Znnsmmx …
—¿Pensás sobrarme, entonces? Desgraciado de mierda, te voy a romper el culo a patadas. (7)

In their public interactions, the General exemplifies the universal ambitions of an individual point of view; he only interacts with
others by ordering them to do as he pleases. In Levinasian terms, it can be said that the General’s “universal thought is an ‘I think’” (Totality and Infinity 36). He is the authoritarian figure whose will may not be challenged, and he is only interested in conversing with others insofar as they help him achieve his own goals.

These brief dialogues are better described as “monodiálogos,” Filloy’s neologism from the subtitle of Yo, yo y yo (Monodiálogos paranoicos) originally published in 1971. “Monodiálogo” combines “monólogo” and “diálogo,” and I have translated it as “monodialogue.” Unlike the monologue of a lone character who speaks out loud, the monodialogue always involves multiple speaking characters. For example, Maximiliano Konsideransky in “Yo y los intrusos” is interrupted during his solitary walks up and down his spiraling cave-tower; the entire short story takes place while the reporter and his mule are present, even though they exercise little to no influence over the stream of thought spoken out loud by the male speaker.

In the monodialogue, the dominant male speaker rambles on, often for long paragraphs, while his interlocutors—of varying numbers and identities—say little more than a few sentences. In other short stories in Yo, yo y yo, when someone requests to speak, if they are not blatantly ignored, they are often silenced:

—Pido la palabra.
—La tengo todavía. No me interrumpa. (“Yo y la madre patria” 32)

And if they assert themselves, they are often insulted:

—Si usted se empeña, iré. Que decidan mis compañeros. A mí la fiesta me gusta. La frivolidad es la espuma de lo profundo. Lo afirma un pensador local.
—Cretino. ¿Qué sabe ese cretino? A lo mejor es un tipo de esos que confunden trivialidad con superficialidad.
—Yo también la confundo. Ergo …
—Ergo, usted también es un cretino. Lo superficial es siempre algo muy serio. (“Yo y el mundo subterráneo” 109)

In other instances, the interlocutor’s bewildered reactions are transcribed in the text as nothing more than ellipses, at times with exclamation points:

—… (“Yo y los anónimos” 77)
—¡…! (“Yo y el arquitecto” 16)
As a rule, the interlocutors are only allowed to participate within the monodialogue when they ask questions that allow the dominant speaker to expand upon his thoughts; only those who appease the dominant speaker are respected within the monodialogue’s asymmetrical power relations. If the interlocutors do not concede to the dominant speaker’s authority, they are demoralized as improper and inauthentic agents of a lesser or evil will. This degradation becomes the dominant speaker’s justification for using violence against dissenting voices in order to triumph over them.

In this sense, monodialogues structure the first section of each chapter of *Vil & Vil*. The General is particularly aggressive and has little patience for his interlocutors. The monodialogue is his preferred rhetorical strategy for developing the moral framework wherein every other is defined *a priori* as an enemy who must be coerced into a consensus or otherwise eradicated. However, in contrast to the monodialogues in *Yo, yo y yo*, the subordinate conscript is the narrator of this novel; his is the privileged perspective, while the General’s monodialogues are always the shortest of the three sections in each chapter. The conscript, who otherwise would be of so little historical importance within this plot to overthrow the government, always has two sections after the monodialogues in which he resists the General’s attempts to flatten out his will and reduce it to his own.

Though he has a lot of contact with the General, the conscript is well aware of the limits of his position: “El diálogo es imposible en la escala militar. El diálogo implica paridad natural entre dos personas. […] En la escala militar siempre hay un superior y un subalterno. El superior, por su propio status, no descende ni condesciende a conversar amistosamente con inferiores” (*Vil & Vil* 24). The conscript would contest the General’s monodialogic authority, but given his circumstances, he has to reign in his antagonism. Early on, he says, “Deseo que ni siquiera se sospeche de mí” (18). This attempt to not become the target of suspicion is part of the survival tactics that he has adopted, since he cannot desert his post nor does he know how to behave properly in the military. He describes these tactics as a “capacidad teatral” and recommends the following to his fellow conscripts: “Lo principal que hay que hacer en el ejército es simular corrección. Cuanto más fiel la simulación del cumplimiento del deber, mejor” (27).

Loyalty, an empty signifier *par excellence*, is not to be given to an
officer. One must be loyal only to the performance of complicity and consensus. There is no doubt in the conscript’s mind that “correctness” is simply the term the military’s high command uses to signify unreflective obedience; as such, he does not actually aim to be correct or proper, but only pretends to be so. Appearances, not truth, are all that matter when the monodialogue constitutes power.

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The narrator opposes the General from the very beginning; he was drafted into the armed forces while preparing for a civilian life. This opposition is firmly cemented when the conscript accidentally overhears that the General is planning a coup against the democratically elected government: “Sin querer, capté ese fragmento de conversación telefónica” (33). Filloy’s conscript also knows what one of Casey’s narrators suggests, that “fragmentos de la conversación […] pueden darnos espléndidas claves” (“Notas” 51–52). By attending to these fragments and recording what he hears in his narrative, this otherwise unimportant conscript can begin to register his dissent that had been blocked by the monodialogue.

What he hears is the following: “Sí, claro. Preparamos la revolución porque la fuerza armada sin el poder no sirve para un corno. Le falta acción coercitiva. Carece de acción y dominio. No corta ni aprieta. Es como una tenaza a la cual le faltara uno de sus brazos” (Vil 33). Since the narrator cannot do much about this plan that he accidentally overhears, he is limited to registering his dissent through writing. He challenges the General’s use of the term “revolución” to name his military coup by showing that it functions as an empty signifier by which the General rallies the other interest groups around his particular will to total power. The conscript writes: “Alterar la costumbre de la esclavitud, por meras mudanzas de amos y patrones, de carteles y monopolios, es cipayismo cien por ciento. Fuera de la francesa, la norteamericana, la rusa y la china, no ha habido otras revoluciones en el mundo” (220). The Mexican and the Cuban Revolutions are also curiously excluded from this list of true revolutions, since the conscript has no sympathies with the PRI’s institutionalization of their solitary will to power by the Sixties nor with Castro’s increasingly
authoritarian state. Instead, he argues that the General operates within the same neocolonial structures of dependence against which a true revolution would fight. At play in his critique is the implication that the General, despite his virility and claims to moral authority, would only at best become the puppet of foreign interests.

Regardless of whether the conscript is correct or not in his critique, I do not locate an ethics in his analysis. An ethics cannot take place by simply inverting the power relationship between two asymmetrically opposed poles, the General and the conscript, and showing the latter’s fictional agency. This would only amount to turning the conscript’s written text into an inverted monodialogue wherein the subaltern conscript acquires power to speak—a power that is rather limited, if not meaningless, in the face of a rising dictatorship. The conscript can write his rebuttal to the General, but the General still has the upper hand—the men with guns—within their world. For this reason, in my reading, the conscript’s relationship with the General cannot be reduced to a story of the revolutionary hero versus the authoritarian villain. This would be to rely on the same form that the *barbudos* of the Cuban Revolution used to mythologize their opposition to Batista and U.S. foreign interests, thus claiming moral superiority and demanding subservience even as Castro turned toward the Soviet Union and ruled through authoritarianism.

Rather, I locate an ethics in the repetition of the adjective in the title, *Vil & Vil*. In *Paratexts*, Gérard Genette has studied how paratextual elements, including titles, constitute a “threshold” that “operate between text and off-text,” framing a text for its readers and potentially influencing their reception of it (2). Filloy, as the author, pre-judges these two characters in moral terms by calling them both “vil.” He morally condemns all of the characters and situations in his own novel. Both the General’s and the conscript’s claims to goodness, propriety, and authenticity are denied in the title that literally announces the repulsive qualities of both. Neither may claim moral superiority over the other. The General is a cruel, power-hungry man who does not hesitate to use force and violence to achieve his goals. Despite my own sympathies with the conscript’s opposition to the General, he is not exactly the shining image of a philanthropic hero. Each is labeled with an equivalent descriptor, “vile,” thus avoiding false universals.
like “good” and “evil,” while also balancing out the asymmetrical power relationship that their military ranks create. Ultimately, the title displaces the question of who is right and who is wrong, and instead it announces the conjunction and collision of two mutually repulsive, antagonistic interests.

It may seem counterintuitive to cultivate an ethics from a text in which vile characters abound. Of course, I do not mean that such amoral individuals are the only ethical ones, nor does this mean I have ignored the asymmetrical power relation that exists between the General and the conscript. Such a proposition would be ridiculous, even reckless. What I propose is to reject and refuse the monodialogic strategy and the moral judgments of the title, while maintaining the ampersand that links the conscript and the General without forming a binary opposition between them. In The Coming Community, Agamben argues that moralizing value distinctions always block a community from forming. He elaborates a definition of the ethical opening: “Ethics begins only when the good is revealed to consist in nothing other than a grasping of evil and when the authentic and the proper have no other content than the inauthentic and the improper” (13).

Agamben expands upon Nietzsche’s analysis in which these terms are simply the particular, moralizing categories by which an identity-based group defines itself and casts aside its others. Ethics, for Agamben, takes place when and where a space opens up for both “the light” and “the darkness,” for what is called “true” and what is called “false,” for what is valued as “proper” and what is valued as “improper;” therefore, a space opens up for “us” and for “them.” A place must be guaranteed for both, because “the darkness,” “false,” “improper,” or “them” are not universals, but only particular labels like “filth” used by one group to cast another group as a threatening enemy and secure an internal consensus.

The ethical opening must guarantee a radically inclusive space with no a priori moral value judgments or ideological ends so that no one, neither the conscript nor the General, can be banned or abandoned, jailed or executed. Only then can the General and the conscript enter into the type of arduous dialogues had by the man and the woman in Somers’s De miedo en miedo. In order for it to be possible to engage one another across that infinite distance, to expose in brief, unexpected flashes, their thoughts and desires, each must approach the other as if the other is not the Other,
as if the other is simply another person, another plural singular being who cannot be reduced to moral absolutes. These are the conditions of possibility for the ethics of being perceived. Without this, no ethical dialogues can ever take place and no equality can be established.

Pandemonium

Within the last third of the novel, the General triumphs and legitimizes his military coup over the radio by invoking the state of exception “en defensa de la salud de nuestra democracia” (Vil 258). However, the General is not committed to a democratic politics. He is only committed to the two main strategies—the monodialogue and la gata parida—by which he successfully realizes his will to total power over the military and all other national institutions. Facing the reality that he has no means of counteracting the General, the conscript desires to retreat as far away as possible from him; in the days just before the military coup, he even considers desertion, only to find himself confronted with the chaos of fear and a loss of moral certainty:

Nunca había estado metido en un laberinto. Sabía lo que es la línea recta y lo que es la rectitud. Ya no. Me cruzan y entre-cruzan mil senderos endemoniados. No soy dueño de mis designios. He perdido mi capacidad de optar. Pero esa luz de la deserción me está alumbrando. (Vil 237)

The conscript is not faced with a decision between the high road and the low road, a moral decision he claims to have been able to make successfully in the past; for the first time he finds himself confronted only with thousands of vile options in the midst of this cursed labyrinth. In this sense, there is no good choice to be made among the winding paths laid out in front of him, not even the one shining in the light. The only option he can hope for is to flee this labyrinth entirely, but as he says, he is not capable of choosing, because every choice is equally vile. He has lost, to use Agamben’s terms, his potentiality; he has lost his ability to make a choice and to refuse to participate in the General’s hegemonic game.¹ Further distancing himself from the role of the hero, he continues to serve the General and to carry on his romantic affair with the General’s wife.
Given the state in which the conscript finds himself trapped and his impossible desire to thwart the General’s struggle for power, it is not surprising that his reaction is to dismiss all political action in a sweeping generalization about Latin America: “Todavía no existe vida democrática en las naciones latinoamericanas. La democracia recaba continuidad en el proceso de su perfeccionamiento. […] Al desplazamiento por la fuerza, sigue una transición azarosa … hasta otra nueva conjura o asonada lo desplaza” (Vil 228). The democratic process requires time and stability in which the potential for dissensus is continually guaranteed; here he decries the constant interruption of that process, the generalized state of exception, that never allows for the democratic process to take hold. Moreover, I want to consider the claim that politics in Latin America, or anywhere in fact, is nothing more than a grotesquely violent version of la gata parida wherever the state of exception and absolutist, authoritarian forms of hegemonic rule run rampant. The conscript makes an appeal for a more radical form of democracy to come into existence, and this imagined democracy would operate otherwise than in the form of the General’s monodialogues and disturbing childhood games.

Within the experimental third section of his unnoticed text, the conscript opposes the General’s violent strategies. His writing becomes the only possibility for producing a line of flight within that demonic labyrinth. As he searches for an alternative space in which an ethics can take place, he necessarily errs from the General’s course of military action: “Mi desesperación es casi un pandémonium. Creo ya estar en él:” (Vil 182). He cements his opposition while introducing an ethical opening—the pandemonium, the hellscape populated by all sorts of demons and lesser gods—that will take place within the already occupied space of the wicked paths that cross back and forth over the conscript within the vile labyrinth of dictatorial morality.

The definition of this pandemonium follows the colon I quoted above; it is an eleven-page dialogue in which the voices of historical and fictional leaders from antiquity to the twentieth century shout, insult, joke, quibble, and demand to be heard. Among those names who speak in this pandemonium are: from Latin America, San Martín, Rosas, Liniers, Martín Fierro, Doctor Francia, Iturbide, Benito Juárez, Porfirio Díaz, Pancho Villa, Victoriano Huerta, Bolívar, Solano López, García Moreno, Sandino, Martí,
From Monodialogues to Pandemonium

Guevara, Castro, Vicuña Mackenna, Neruda, Allende, Pinochet, Batlle y Ordóñez, Baltasar Brun, Getulio Vargas; from Spain, Torquemada, Fernando VII, Unamuno, Primo de Rivera, Millán Astray; and so many others, including Attila the Hun, Ghengis Khan, Julius Cesar, María de Medicis, Alexander the Great, Robespierre, Napoleon, Pepe Botella (Joseph Bonaparte), Ivan the Terrible, Woodrow Wilson, Stalin, Mussolini, Himmler, Clausewitz, Einstein, Mao, Trotsky, Ho Chi Minh, Sartre, Goethe, Freud, Bernard Shaw, T.S. Eliot (183–93).

Such a pandemonium is a historical impossibility, but it opens up along ArteletrA’s errant path in the experimental section of the conscript’s writings. This fictional dialogue wanders about al verser and al verse, rearranging the historical record so that these figures may face one another across the spatial and temporal distances that always separated them. Those who take part in this dialogue do so as demons or lesser gods; they are all just as vile as the General and the conscript who also speak in this pandemonium. When everyone is labeled as “vile,” then the word loses its meaning; no one can be banned or abandoned or else everyone would have to suffer the same fate. This pandemonic dialogue ends with the following open-ended words of El Viejo Pancho (the nickname for the gauchesca poet José Alonso y Trelles) and Martín Fierro:

El Viejo Pancho: —Todo puede suceder
’tando la tormenta armada.
Martín Fierro: Yo he visto rejucilar
y dispúes no pasar nada … (Vil 193)

No one voice can dominate this space; no one person can be removed from it either. Throughout, the friendships and enmities between these actors are not erased, but rather they are given the space in which their dissensus can play out. Similar to the discourses and ideologies that many of them generated, they are not restricted to dialoguing with the others from their own historical era or geographic region. Martí responds to Guevara; Marx, to Einstein; and Bolívar, to Primo de Rivera, for example. What tool is better than language, in Levinas’s words, “to break the continuity of being or of history?” (Otherwise than Being 195). In the face of this powerful rupture through discourse, even the General who is typically so skilled at turning conversations into monodialogues
and at standing his ground in *la gata parida* loses his hegemonic grip within this radically open, rhizomatic dialogue that ends with the equal possibility of both a future storm and a future tranquility in which every desire or nothing at all might come to pass.

The conscript’s pandemonium imagines the ethical form that, in my reading, takes place in the space—characterized as the state of exception—where both the vile General and the vile conscript can face one another outside of the monodialogic structure and without a universal, paratextual judge determining who is good and who is evil. Pandemonium becomes a model for a radically democratic dialogue as it generates the conditions of possibility for dissent and disagreement among people who do not even believe they have anything in common. The struggle for power is not removed as in an unrealizable dream in which everyone holds hands and gets along, but it also ends without any particular individual rising above the rest to secure his hegemonic will to totality over the others. It is in this sense that going unnoticed—with its aesthetics and its ethics—imagines a path toward a radical democratic politics.