Arteletra

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Published by Purdue University Press

Bartles, Jason A.
Arteletra: The Sixties in Latin America and the Politics of Going Unnoticed.
Purdue University Press, 2021.
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Chapter Three

On Unattended Details

The first reviewers of Somers’s *La mujer desnuda* (1950) presented her as a hermetic, unapproachable, even bad writer. Emir Rodríguez Monegal dismissed her for demonstrating an “obsesión erótica” and for creating “una prosa no muy transparente” (14). According to Mario Benedetti, she might one day become a good writer, but she “obstinadamente insiste en ocultarlo” (“Derrumbamiento” 102). It is not until a decade later that he recants his first judgment of her works, finally presenting her as a worthwhile Uruguayan writer. Only Ángel Rama publicly defended her as a part of what he calls the Critical Generation within Uruguayan literature, whose most well-known writer is Juan Carlos Onetti. Rama praised the originality of her work, thus bringing credibility to it: “Todo es insólito, ajeno, desconcertante, repulsivo y a la vez increíblemente fascinante en la obra narrativa más inusual que ha conocido la historia de nuestra literatura: la de Armonía Somers” (“Insólita” 30). Nevertheless, his defense still marginalizes her works in relation to the national literary tradition of the 1950s and 1960s, calling her “un bicho tan fuera de serie que es imposible ubicarla con respecto a las restantes criaturas femeninas” (“Mujeres” 51). Rama’s interventions simultaneously praise Somers’s works for their uniqueness, but stop one step short of elevating her as the leader of a national vanguard, preferring instead to relegate her to the margins along with the other “feminine creatures” who were writing in the era.

Perhaps these male critics feared the disordering effects that such a strange, fascinating literature would have on their national traditions. In conversation with Miguel Ángel Campodónico—one of the few interviews Armonía Somers gave during her life—he asks her opinion about this debate: “¿Su literatura es
hermética o abierta? ¿Qué hay de cierto en esta controversia?” (239). To which she responds:

Sí, concedo eso también, que mi literatura pueda juzgarse a veces como poco iluminada, y para algunos de difícil acceso. Confieso que a veces no comprendo que lo parezca, ya que por haber salido de mí tengo confianza de mano a mano con ella. Pero si alguna vez yo misma quedo atrapada en el cuarto oscuro de lo que he creado, un personaje, una situación, un desenlace, me doy a pensar que lo hice para salvar, para rescatar, para no inmolar a alguien o a algo en la excesiva luz del signo, y en la espantosa claridad que encierran todas las convenciones. (239)

Despite the varying value judgments made for and against Somers’s narratives, she engages in an enigmatic aesthetic as a means of eschewing conventions. She actively avoids that which too quickly reveals its intentions, preferring instead to protect these characters and situations from being excessively illuminated. For Casey and Filloy as well, some things are best left amongst the swirling shadows and pale lights of an era in order not to be sacrificed to plain language or reined in by established social codes.  A common thread uniting many of Somers’s narratives—one that also allows me to bring her into dialogue with Casey and Filloy—is this search for those seemingly unimportant, forever unattended details that are unlikely to be found. In this chapter, I analyze two metallic metaphors, one in De miedo en miedo (Los manuscritos del río) (1965) and the other in “Muerte por alacrán” (1963), about unattended details that have the potential to throw a perfectly ordered narrative or family home into complete disarray. Though attending to these details will be a dangerous task, they can become the catalyst for rewriting the historical record and challenging a social order achieved through deception and violence.

**Amid Heaps of Scrap Metal**

In Somers’s least studied novel, De miedo en miedo (Los manuscritos del río), which I analyze in more detail in the final chapter, there is metaphor linking an avant-garde aesthetic and those who go unnoticed. The male protagonist works in a bookstore, and he has frequent conversations with a female customer. Both remain
anonymous to the reader. They continue to meet and engage in long, meandering dialogues that range from the boredom of their lives to escapist fantasies and memories of the past. Their conversation turns briefly to a discussion of a non-existent novel. He says it would be a novel written by anyone at all, and it would be composed of bad drawings, used objects, trash, and photographs of people “en el momento de perder el orgullo, con la boca, las uñas y los ojos agarreados del aire al errar un pasamanos” (66). He continues to describe this novel:

Quién sabe si con largos períodos en blanco, en los que se oyera como a las ranas de un pantano cada pequeño ser sin importancia en la explosión acompasada de su vida que nadie ha tomado en cuenta, pero que es suya y está llena de sus historias. Y que algunos solamente supiésemos traducir con el auricular bien ajustado. (66)

When read alongside the interview with Campodónico, the novel begins to delineate its own aesthetic, one built from random, worthless objects, images of people at their most embarrassing moments, and large, blank spaces. This novel would narrate the lives of seemingly unimportant individuals without building them into national myths, role models, or triumphant heroes. Instead, the rhythm of this coming novel would keep time with their trivial, banal lives. It would trace their everyday itineraries that otherwise go unnoticed. It would be the novel that, through trial and error, struggles to adjust the receiver to the settings that could tend to the unnoticed bits and pieces of their lives.

However, finding that setting, hearing those dialogues, and writing those narratives will not be a simple task. When the woman asks him how such a piecemeal, errant narrative could be read, he replies: “Pues con sacrificio, como quien buscase una pequeña tuerca entre montones de chatarra” (66). When read alongside Filloy’s fluvial metaphor of reading and walking against the current, Somers’s metallic metaphor points to the incredible difficulty, and also danger, of attending to that which goes unnoticed. For comparison, the English idiom, “Like finding a needle in a haystack,” describes the futility of a particular undertaking, yet the needle is quite different from the surrounding hay, and with a magnet, one’s chances of finding it drastically improve. In contrast, Somers’s metaphor exponentially
increases the difficulty of locating one specific screw among heaps of indistinguishable scrap metal, not to mention the inevitable cuts and scratches that would result from digging through the rusty, jagged heap of discarded scraps. When Somers’s shards of scrap metal are dumped into the current of Filloy’s palindromes, turning against that churning stream will also expose one’s body to continual scrapes, lacerations, and even dismemberment.

**A Weaponized Scorpion**

The challenge of reading Somers’s fiction lies in approaching her hermetic prose by engaging in the quite dangerous task of attending to the tiniest, most superficial details that store the potential for rendering inoperative the political machines of one’s era with no guarantees about exactly where that process will lead. In my analysis, the scorpion that no one can find in Somers’s terrifying short story, “Muerte por alacrán,” represents this task. The story opens with the banal account of two delivery men driving a truckload of firewood to a provincial manor on a sweltering summer day—the thermometer reads 49°C. They sit in silence, interrupted by the occasional curse word, and out of pure boredom, the driver decides:

> desviar un poco las ruedas hasta aplastar la víbora atravesada en el camino alegrándose luego de ese mismo modo con cualquier contravención a los ingenuos carteles ruteros, como si hubiese que dictar al revés todas aquellas advertencias a fin de que, por el placer de contradecirlas, ellos se condujeran alguna vez rectamente. (109–10)

These men carry out their assigned task—delivering firewood to a wealthy family—while taking every opportunity to challenge even the simplest of rules and regulations along the route. They drive drunk and swerve across the lanes, but they are not motivated by an ideological or ethical position. They would break any rule for the pure joy of being disobedient, even those rules designed to get them to carry out a specific task by prohibiting said task. Though they strive to create their own itinerary, they settle for empty gestures. In this terrifying, suspenseful narrative in which the smallest, unattended detail will disorder hierarchies, uncover evidence of corruption, and result in death, these two men will not
become folk heroes or proto-revolutionaries. Everyone subjected to the economic interests of the wealthy family in “Muerte por alacrán” loses in the end.

Even as the loyal butler incidentally upends the country manor, the construction of a new political community will not take place just yet. What matters for my analysis at this point will not be a moral at the end of the story, but the inordinate power stored in and released from a seemingly unimportant detail over the course of the narrative. As Susana Zanetti has demonstrated, within Somers’s short stories it is “el detalle muchas veces anodino que cobra una importancia inusitada” (“Arte de narrar” 6). Despite their stoicism and childish bravado, as the delivery men approach the mansion with its guard dogs, butlers, and maids in this suffocating heat, they are haunted by “algo de la dimensión de un dedo pulgar, pero tan poderoso como una carga de dinamita o la bomba atómica” (“Muerte” 110). This is how the narrator first introduces the image of the scorpion hiding among the firewood. Without a doubt, this small creature poses the greatest threat to every character living within this stifling environment.

As the men unload the firewood—a moment described as “la descarga del terror”—they move: “Del clima solar del jardín al ambiente de cofre de ébano de adentro” (111). The harsh, exposed gardens wither under the sun in contrast to the luxurious, protected rooms inside the mansion. The men unload the wood and, they believe, the unseen scorpion, meanwhile traversing the threshold that separates outside from inside, nature from culture, servant from master. Quickly returning to the truck in fear of the scorpion, they honk and shout a warning to the butler, as if in passing, about the threat hiding among the firewood. Their bodies, to borrow Jon Beasley-Murray’s important differentiation between good and bad multitudes, do not “resonate and expand” forming a liberating challenge to hegemony, but rather become “dissonant bodies or bodies whose resonance hits a peak that leads to collapse” (247). These men drive off with a false sense of relief. In a surprise twist in the final sentences of the story, the scorpion appears inside the truck’s cabin and prepares to sting one of them. Instead of working with the others, they try to unload this burden on them and flee. Perhaps they hoped it would wreak havoc on the wealthy owners, who only appear at the very end of this narrative, but they completely disregarded the threat it poses to the lives and
well-being of all those other people like themselves who work on the estate. Their actions can only be interpreted as selfish.

At the very end of the story, the scorpion finally appears: “un bicho de cola puntiaguda iba trepando lentamente por el respaldo del asiento de un camión fletero, a varios kilómetros de Villa Therese y sus habitantes” (“Muerte” 122). As the scorpion crawls toward the “dos cuellos de distinto temperamento” of the delivery men, the narrator transforms the scorpion, through metaphor, into a sentient piece of military technology as it prepares its assault: “Nunca se sabe qué puede pensar un pequeño monstruo de esos antes de virar en redondo y poner en función su batería de popa” (122). The scorpion becomes metallic upon materializing, turning into a weapon of war, and this unattended detail threatens to destroy the lives of the two men who felt most at ease. This event is not morally justified within the narrative, and the politics and ethics that interests me here will not work toward justifying the men’s actions or their death. What matters is that they never attended to this dangerous detail; they simply attempted to pass the burden onto others with whom they could have collaborated to ensure that everyone escaped this very real threat.

After the delivery men leave, the narrative shifts attention to the butler, and most of the story relates his frantic reaction to hearing the word “scorpion”:

Aquello, que desde que se pronuncia el nombre es un conjunto de pinzas, patas, cola, estilete ponzoñoso, era lo que le habían arrojado cobardemente las malas bestias, como el vaticinio distraído de una bruja, sin contar con los temblores del pobre diablo que lo está recibiendo en pleno estómago. (112–13)

Simply pronouncing this little word, “scorpion,” with no empirical proof of its actual existence, is enough not only to send the fear-stricken butler on a frenzied search of the entire mansion but also to transform the supposedly protective interior of the house into “el desafío de todos lados, y de ninguno” (113). This hierarchized house of an absent, elite family with its caste of servants who are subjected to a mandatory moral code is rattled by the possible presence of the scorpion. The butler imagines “Un millar de escorpiones” jumping from every piece of wood in the fireplace (118). Different objects in the manor even take on a new hue, “color
alacrán” (115, 117). This tiny detail has turned into a full-fledged threat of violence and death that is ubiquitous yet undetectable.

Operating from a sense of duty, the butler commits to combing through every inch of the manor until he finds and eliminates this threat, even at risk of losing his own life. However, as he haphazardly sets out on this indoors hunting expedition, he upends the stately order of this provincial manor and ends up uncovering the secrets of all three members of the family. In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari’s warning about the unpredictability of the line of flight holds true: “No one can say where the line of flight will pass” (250). Seemingly unimportant details, as in the case of this absent scorpion, store the potential “to rearrange the overall assemblage” (259). The butler rifles through the teenage Therese’s bedroom, pulling out her intimates and reading through her diary as his own sexual fantasies play out in his mind. Later, he finds a secret hole in the wall with documents that prove that Günter, the master, built his fortunes through corruption; the father embezzled company funds by cooking the books, hid his assets from auditors, and manipulated the stock markets (“Muerte” 118). The butler also discovers the truth—“siempre sin relatar”—behind Günter’s complicity in driving a man to bankruptcy and suicide, because this man had an affair with his wife (119). Finally, the butler goes into the wife’s bedroom and spreads all of Günter’s documents on her bed like “la carga microbiana de un estornudo” (121). His impromptu disruption of the family home contaminates this perfectly ordered space in which every person and thing is supposed to fall neatly into their assigned place. By attending to this detail, as does the otherwise unimportant butler who becomes the protagonist of Somers’s narrative, he destroys the filial relationship of the country manor and rearranges the overall assemblage, fragmenting and fracturing the order that had been imposed on all of these people even when the patron, the sovereign, or the state is not present.

In trying to protect his masters’ lives and the disciplinary order of this house, the butler reveals their secrets, all because of one little word shouted by a stranger: “scorpion.” While still in the wife’s bedroom, the butler mutters to himself: “En realidad, eso de deshacer y no volver nada a su antiguo orden era mantener las cosas en su verdadero estado” (120). Margaret L. Snook interprets
the butler’s disruptions as primarily an attack on the institution of patriarchy: “his disruption of the mansion’s order by playing master or dog challenge the patriarchal system from all sides” (n.p.). Furthermore, I contend that the butler’s futile search for an unseen scorpion that never left the delivery truck sets in motion the broader process of deactivating the rigid, corrupt hierarchies of the biopolitical order that violently controls the lives of all those connected to the manor, even those of the free-wheeling delivery men.

“Muerte por alacrán” ends with the scorpion’s stinger poised to attack the drivers and the wealthy family walking into their upended manor. The aftermath of these events is excluded from the narrative frame, as in those horror films where the killer or malignant spirit is revived in the final shot, opening up the possibility for a sequel. Yet, there is no sequel to Somers’s short story. As a reader, I am left spinning in this ambiguous space in which no one stands out as the hero and no justice triumphs over those corrupt individuals who might hide their secrets again and go on with their lives as if nothing happened. In the end, no utopian order is guaranteed in the wake of all this death and destruction. A politics and an ethics cannot be built from these selfish gestures and limited revelations. At this stage in my analysis, Somers’s short story only begins to unfold the complexities and dangers of the unattended details that provoke drastic, errant itineraries through otherwise ordered spaces. There remains something enigmatic in Somers’s gesture, because her narrative never reveals any underlying, potential ideology. For this reason, I insist that her works not be too hastily clarified and condensed into a visible political position, at least not yet. In the following chapters, those who go unnoticed will be able to take advantage of these seemingly unimportant, enigmatic, and unattended details that they encounter along their errant itineraries through the Sixties in Latin America as they use them to reclaim their ability to disagree with the political organization of their society and transform the aesthetic representation of their communities.