Chapter One

On Errant Palindromes

All history is written backwards, writes Tony, writing backwards. [...] Yet history is not a true palindrome, thinks Tony. We can’t really run it backwards and end up at a clean start. Too many of the pieces have gone missing; also we know too much, we know the outcome.

Margaret Atwood, The Robber Bride (121)

Writing palindromes is not an easy task. It requires an obsessive, mathematical precision to construct intelligible words and phrases that read exactly the same from left to right as they do in reverse. In Margaret Atwood’s The Robber Bride, Tony, a history professor, revels in writing and speaking words and phrases in reverse, as quoted in the epigraph. However, she also underscores the shortcomings of reading history, art, or literature too literally like a palindrome, favoring instead a plurality of vantage points in constant motion across archives and memories that are littered with debris, distorted beyond recognition, and punctuated with gaps and silences. As a framework for re-reading the Sixties in Latin America along these lines, I begin with Filloy’s essays on palindromes and the art of writing them. In Karcino: Tratado de palindromia, Filloy’s palindromes paradoxically relate to the writing of history as a collection of linear events that can be read not only forwards and backwards, but also alvesre and alverse in order to mobilize the avant-garde sensibilities that exceed and rupture those unidirectional narratives from within. As such, these errant palindromes will serve as a metaphorical heuristic for locating and analyzing the itineraries of those who go unnoticed within the cultural maps of the Sixties.
Crystalline Palindromes

*Karcino* is a collection of Filloy’s palindromes, ranging from two to seventeen words long, that he wrote throughout his life. In the final section, titled “ARTELETRA,” Filloy even composes poems from his palindromes. He offers the following examples in different languages: “NEVER even”; “ROBA sabor”; “AMOR :broma:”; “MADAM adAM”; “Bon sNOB”; “LUZ azUL”; and “AMO idiOMA,” among many others (74–75). Filloy prefers to write them in capital letters to draw attention to them, since in some cases, a seemingly simple, yet unimportant, phrase might go unnoticed as a palindrome, such as “ACASO HUBO BÚHOS acÁ” (81). Some can be read as poetic aphorisms, as in the case of a seventeenth-century palindrome by John Taylor that Filloy references: “LEWD DI: I LIVE & EVIL I DID DWEL” (49). Others may appear to be nothing more than quotidian language: “DENNIS AND EDNA SINNED”; or “NEVER ODD OR EVEN” (49). Or as in one of Filloy’s Spanish-language palindromes: “EUFEMIA, JAIME FUE … ¡EUFEMIA, JAIME FUE!” (101).

Yet, others tend to catch one’s attention, begging to be noticed as the ingenious constructions they are. I have selected just three examples:

Es re-mal eros en eso: relamersE (105).
Aca, carolo adonis, amo la paloma … si no da olor a cacA (183).
Ada, gorda drogada, di los nocivos a corola clay.
y, al calor ocaso, vi consolidada gorda drogadA (195).

A single reading will always leave the palindrome unnoticed as such, but the capitalized letters or the comedic strangeness of these expressions is capable of provoking a reader into giving them a second or third glance. By reorienting my reading practices and moving in reverse, from a different threshold of perception, the palindrome can be perceived as such.

The Sator Square is a well-known enigma of Western cultures. Filloy describes it as “uno de los *jeux d’esprit* más intrgantes de todos los idiomas” (*Karcino* 59). The following is the Sator Square as reproduced in Filloy’s treatise:
The Sator Square is composed of four Latin words, *sator*, *tenet*, *opera*, and *rotas*, and the unknown word *arepo*, which is assumed to be a proper name but has no known, fixed meaning. As a multidimensional palindrome, the letters in this arrangement form a crystalline, closed structure when read from top to bottom and from left to right and then in reverse. Its earliest inscriptions have been dated to the first century C.E., and it has been found among Roman ruins and in Pompeii before the arrival there of Christianity. The Sator Square has been an object of historical and theological speculation for centuries, since it also forms an anagram for the phrase *Pater noster* that can be spelled twice crossing at the letter “n”; this formation leaves as its remainder two As and two Os, which are often interpreted as the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. However, its appearance in Pompeii challenges this possible Christian solution, and other partial interpretations attribute it alternately to pre-Christian, gnostic, Jewish, stoic, and even Satanic traditions. Of course, not all of them can be correct.

Magical, miraculous, and metaphysical qualities aside, what is certain about this and other palindromes is that they challenge the reader’s hermeneutical skills. As Rose Mary Sheldon demonstrates, there have been innumerable attempts at deciphering this potential cryptogram since the late nineteenth century by mathematicians, philologists, and theologians, but no one has yet to propose a widely accepted solution to the hidden meaning they all assume it must contain (233–87). What I find curious is how different intellectuals can be so skeptical regarding scholarly interpretations of the Sator Square made by others, yet these same scholars uphold the generalized belief that this is a puzzle with a hidden solution that has yet to be deciphered, despite all of the contradictions present in each of these “solutions.” In the end, this may be nothing more than a clever linguistic game centered on a meaningless word, *arepo*. It may be an incidental enigma with no hidden meaning, from which so many interpreters extract only what they wanted it to contain *a priori*.
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It is not my intention to pretend to have arrived at the definitive meaning hidden in the Sator Square or other palindromes. Instead, it is the process by which these enigmas and games go unnoticed as well as the process of noticing that which is inscribed on the surface of the palindrome that interests me as a method for analyzing the errant itineraries of the protagonists in the works of Casey, Filloy, and Somers. My contention is that Filloy’s palindromes need some tending in order to be recognized in all their complexity and in their relation to the writing and reading of literary and cultural history. Otherwise, they remain unnoticed only to be dismissed as trivialities unworthy of further attention that remain locked within these linear arrangements.

Reading ARTELETRA Against the Current

_Karcino_ includes two elegant and playful essays on the art of constructing palindromes. In addition to being a seven-letter word—all of Filloy’s fifty-odd novels have seven-letter titles—the Greek word _karcino_ has a particular relevance to palindromes. Filloy elaborates on his choice for the title in an interview with Mónica Ambort: “En griego, Karcino quiere decir cangrejo, animal que camina al sesgo formando zig zags, casi en la forma en que se leen los palíndromos” (Juan Filloy 27). The Greeks were quite fond of palindromes and had various words or phrases to name them; Filloy extracts the symbol of the crab, as he explains, from one of these phrases: _karkinike epigrafe_, or “the inscription of the crab.” Another word used for “palindrome,” Filloy explains, is the Greek _hysteroproteron_, which is the same as saying “lo posterior y lo anterior,” and the word “palindrome” is a derivative of _palindromos_, which suggests that these are words and phrases that “corren de nuevo” (Karcino 16).

Regarding this movement that flows in multiple directions, Filloy argues that palindromes exceed the strict linearity that is assigned to them:

> las letras son jánicas: presentan dos caras, una a la izquierda y otra a la derecha, manteniendo gestos, rictus y matices diferentes. Vale decir: una cara visible, orgullosa de expresar lo que ostenta; y otra cara secreta, exclusiva para iniciados en el culto esotérico de la palindromía. (13)
Filloy states that reading only in one direction unnecessarily limits what can be perceived. A narrowly logical, rational approach from a head-on perspective will always be confining and proscriptive; it will always limit one’s perception to that which can be seen from only one place, to that which makes itself visible, whereas palindromes require a change in perspective in order to be noticed. For Filloy, to read only from left to right is to read only that which flaunts itself to that single point of view, while other subjects and objects remain out of focus or go unnoticed nearby. However, it should be noted that Casey’s, Filloy’s, and Somers’s errant itineraries will not necessarily bring clarity to an obscure object or concept—revelation is not always possible or desired.

Filloy starts writing backwards, concocting strange phrases that can be read from different directions. The first reading, from left to right, is the common and visible reading, what Filloy’s admirer Cortázar in *Rayuela* would call “la forma corriente” in the table of instructions, the reading that follows a sequential order (7). The second, from right to left, is that which occurs when one arrives at an end, limit, or blockage and turns around, finding exactly the same letters in reverse. Nevertheless, this is not the same reading as the first; this reading is the one that confronts the “cara secreta,” which is not an invisible face, but rather the one already inscribed on the surface of the other that goes unnoticed at first glance (*Karcino* 13). What goes unnoticed is neither visible nor invisible, but rather in an indeterminate state located at the threshold of perception between those extreme categories.

By reading *ArteletrA* from the letter “L” toward the left and toward the right, the two-part, Janus-faced reading (from left to right and then from right to left) would appear to be stabilized and closed:

La palindromía, por lo mismo que es jánica, es bifida, bifronte. Partida en dos, la frase se come en ser UNA, sin embargo; porque, si una parte orienta, no es que la otra desoriente. Su condición bifronte asume entonces la de su logos unitivo; pues, al orientar con idéntico sentido lógico desde atrás, no implica que lo que orientó al principio se desoriente, ya que se cierra así la lectura doble de la misma locución. (19)

At this point, Filloy affirms that the palindrome does not unravel itself when read in reverse, nor is its core fractured when read from
the center toward the ends. Yet, I am not interested in palindromes for the ontological and epistemological stability that Filloy at first locates in these little, closed words that play autonomous games.

Still another approach to the palindrome goes unnoticed, one in which it exceeds and ruptures its supposed linearity. Filloy’s palindromes are linear and precise. However, “art” and “letter,” or “the art of writing, literature,” the words inscribed in “ARTELETRA,” rarely conform to geometrical conceptions of perfection. At least since the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, they tend toward that which infinitely opens and unfolds as opposed to that which closes in on itself. Cultivating this paradox, Filloy asserts that “[el] hábito de leer de izquierda a derecha” of Western culture has rooted itself into our ways of seeing the world:

Vale decir que el lector se deja llevar por el rumbo de la mirada. De tal suerte, no va mentalmente contra la corriente escritural, no se empaca en ella ni se opone zurdamente al raciocinio. Esa propensión explica que pocas veces se detuvo a escrutar o auscultar el misterio implícito en las palabras del texto. (Karcino 25)

Filloy develops his theory of the palindrome into a metaphorical heuristic for reading any text by stubbornly, even haphazardly, refusing the effortless rationality and imposed limitations inherent in any unidirectional practice. By digging in his heels, turning around, and moving against the scriptural current, he immediately reorganizes his habitual thresholds of perception making it possible to catch a glimpse of that which has been going unnoticed within the current.

Without a doubt, this metaphor of turning against the current has an affinity with Benjamin’s assertion that the task of the historian is “to brush history against the grain” (“Theses” 257). Unlike the easy back and forth reading of a palindrome, Filloy’s now fluvial metaphor suggests the difficulty of wading upstream through moving waters. Reading against this current in order to attend to that which goes unnoticed in a given era becomes as difficult as the task of writing palindromes; however, it also involves a certain level of imprecision and unpredictability, of chance and guesswork. One’s perspective changes drastically while moving in the opposite direction within the same space, and the
force of any current is bound to prevent the one wading against it from retracing any original path with precision. In turning around, the original itinerary, if even known, will prove to be impossible to retrace, and a new, errant path can therefore be charted.

For my purposes, this space in which one can create itineraries comparable to those of Filloy’s palindromes will be the Sixties in Latin America. The literatures and politics of this era can be approached from so many different perspectives. Though a true outside of these rhizomatic maps is unreachable and their general contours remain intact, the itineraries running across them can be continuously edited as the details found along the way move in and out of focus. Deleuze and Guattari define rhizomatic maps in the following manner:

> The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. Perhaps the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways. (12)

In this manner, I propose to keep reading the complex dimensions of the Sixties as a rhizome that can be mapped, reworked, torn, or expanded, and entered from multiple points. The era can be studied from its periodicals and cultural markets; the Boom; the conjunction of politics and aesthetics; definitions of “internationalism”; Cold War foreign policy, dependency, and imperialism; constructions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity; its protests, demonstrations, and violence; or its failures and the subsequent disillusionment of its social actors. Of course, these are only some the most visible landmarks of the Sixties in Latin America today. Joining these attempts to read the Sixties, I have chosen different entry points from which a series of seemingly unimportant and discontinuous lines of inquiry can come into dialogue, if only for the briefest moment.

Filloy’s treatise begins with the rigid perfection of the palindrome. As these perfect structures burst apart, they produce new itineraries through that same space. In this sense, they are comparable to Deleuze and Guattari’s lines of flight: “There is a
rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome” (9). The line of flight is never an escape, but rather an unexpected path that moves in another direction. Similarly, the palindrome follows an errant itinerary as it flows again along an uncertain path that cannot be reduced to a linear, rigid movement between a fixed origin and a predetermined end, between the alpha and the omega. It is not an ex nihilo invention or a unique innovation, but rather a shift, an awry glance, and a subtle change of perspective. To read “Arteletra,” to read art, literature, or any form of cultural production against the current as if one were reading a palindrome, is to wander off course, to become errant, and to propose a reading from the perspective of that which had gone unnoticed despite being written in plain sight on its surface. Even when those who go unnoticed become perceived, this end should not be interpreted as a failure, but rather as having the line of flight cut off by another obstacle or blockage. As a result, new errant itineraries will have to be created, even if by someone else.