

Patriarchy and Apocalypse in *Cerca del fuego*, by José Agustín

Cynthia Steele
University of Washington

During the past decade Mexican novelists have increasingly focused on Mexico City as a metaphor for the nation in ruins. The so-called "novel of the city" exemplified by Carlos Fuentes' *La región más transparente* (*Where the Air Is Clear*, 1958) gave way by the 1980s to a dark vision of the consequences of misguided modernization and corruption in his *Agua quemada* (*Burnt Water*, 1981) and, especially, *Cristóbal Nonato* (*Christopher Unborn*, 1987). In the latter, dystopian novel, by 1992 the City of Palaces has become Makesicko City, the heart of a diseased, "skeletal and decapitated nation" (27). Another, relatively early example of this apocalyptic view is present in *Si muero lejos de ti* (*If I Die Far from You*, 1979) by Jorge Aguilar Mora. The second of two alternative endings of this novel describes an expatriate's return to the nightmarish debris of a capital that has sunk into the subterranean lake and is then rocked by an earthquake. For portraying the destruction of a city located in a major seismic zone, the earthquake was a logical metaphor, prior to the tremors that devastated large areas of Mexico City on September 19, 1985, taking an estimated 20,000 lives.

In the literature that has been published during the ensuing three years, the pessimistic vision of Mexico's present and near future represented in the novels cited above has begun to compete with more hopeful interpretations, stressing the popular capacity for organization, solidarity and heroism that was apparent in the rescue efforts that sprang up all over the city following the earthquakes, to fill the vacuum created by government inefficiency and corruption. Two exceptional examples of this literature are *Entrada libre: Crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* (*Free Admission: Chronicles of the Society that Is Getting Organized*, 1987), by Carlos Monsiváis, and *Nada, nadie: Las voces del temblor* (*Nothing, No One: The Voices of*

the Earthquake, 1988), by Elena Poniatowska. Even José Emilio Pacheco's long poem about the earthquake, "The Ruins of Mexico (Elegy of the Return)," in *Miro la tierra (I Watch the Earth)*, 1986), ends on a more optimistic note than most of the writer's previous work: "But instead of weeping let us act: / With stones from the ruins we must forge / another city, another country, another life" (41). It remains to be seen whether this more hopeful vision of Mexico's future will prevail in the coming years, amid the economic catastrophe that began in 1982 and the political crisis that peaked in the Presidential elections of 1988. In any case, until the rescue effort and the organizations it spawned (leading to the formation of the popular front headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas) provided concrete proof of the viability of a broad-based opposition movement, the outlook for Mexican society had been bleak, to say the least. The extremity of Mexico's situation accounts for the apocalyptic vision that novelists of the previous decade had been moved to capture in their works, if only to struggle against it. José Agustín's *Cerca del fuego* (1986) is one outstanding example of this narrative that attempts to transcend the limits of the crisis even as it textualizes it.¹

Agustín's sixth novel also attacks U.S. imperialism and the inefficacy and corruption of the party that has monopolized Mexican politics for the past sixty years, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). On both the psychological and political levels Agustín's novel shows the problem to be a crisis in patriarchy, occasioned by the physical or psycho-social absence of the father. In symbolic terms, the U.S. economic empire is portrayed in terms that parallel the presentation of the female principle in the novel. On the one hand, it is tyrannical and invasive, absorbing Mexico's resources and identity; on the other, it is remote and diffuse, leaving an ineffectual Mexican puppet President ("father") as its figurehead. On a psychological level, the problem is posed as one of masculine maturation and acceptance of family responsibility; i.e., of stepping into a power vacuum and assuming the paternal role. The solution posed by the novel, in both the public and the private spheres, therefore involves a restoration of the patriarchal family unit.²

A quarter of a century ago, with the publication of his first novel, *La tumba (The Tomb)*, 1964), José Agustín founded a literary movement known as La Onda, the "Current" or "Trend." As Carlos Monsiváis has noted, La Onda was essentially apolitical; its rebellion

was not fundamentally against political or social institutions as such, but rather against the dominant middle-class morality, characterized at once by an exacerbated sense of nationalism and a hunger for modernity along the lines established by the United States. In rejecting their elders' false patriotism, parochialism and repression, middle-class Mexican teenagers of the 1960s embraced their U.S. counterparts' experimentation with sex, mind-altering drugs, Eastern religions, and rock music. According to Monsiváis, the only significant legacy of the *hipitecas* (a conflation of *hippies* and *aztecas*) was certain "generational conquests," such as giving women access to sexually explicit language and—if only partially—revising sexual conduct and norms.³

Fredric Jameson sees more positive aspects in the countercultural movement. The problem with the countercultural aesthetic, as he sees it, arose because it did not surpass the individual dimension and did not "invent ways of uniting the here-and-now of the immediate situation with the totalizing logic of the global or Utopian one. . . . [T]he right to a specific pleasure, to a specific enjoyment of the potentialities of the material body . . . must always in one way or another also be able to stand as a figure for the transformation of social relations as a whole."⁴ This is the challenge that Agustín attempts to meet, with mixed results, in *Cerca del fuego*.

Agustín's most significant works prior to *Cerca del fuego* include *La tumba*, "Cuál es la onda" ("What's Happening?"), his self-described "map of La Onda" published in 1971, and *Se está hacienda tarde (final en laguna)*, (*It's Getting Late [Ending in a Lagoon]*), from 1973. In all his works Agustín has appropriated lumpen slang and English rock lyrics to fashion what Ruffinelli has termed "intranscendental discourse."⁵ The warp and woof of their everyday lives is portrayed as banal, narcissistic and insensitive in the extreme. As Margo Glantz has noted, by the mid-seventies the *Onderos'* parody of the middle-class social milieu had become a parody of a parody, since "one is aware of its banality, but one continues immersed in it."⁶

The dialect that Agustín has so skillfully captured, in what Ruffinelli calls "a camouflaged act of parricide," is characterized by irreverence.⁷ Yet, in both *Cerca del fuego* and *No hay censura* (*There Is No Censorship*, 1988), a lack of respect for the government, the Church, and dominant Mexican literary culture (the social-

realist aesthetic, the nationalism and solemnity associated with the Novel of the Mexican Revolution) is combined with an unquestioning reverence for two other sources of authority: the psychology of Jung, and the European literary canon. Along with these contradictory facets of the novel is the fact that he appropriates lumpen or subproletarian *caló* (slang) peppered with *albures*, which Octavio Paz has defined as “the verbal combat made of obscene allusions and *double-entendres*.” He incorporates into the novel not only the irony and inventiveness of inner-city and border culture, but also its *machismo*. In keeping with this ideology, Agustín’s texts portray love and sex as male combat and conquest; they partake of the *albur*’s “eternal delight in defeating the adversary and forcing him into the role of passive homosexual, or of perennially putting down women.”⁸ Also, they linger on the female body as the object of male desire and the extremely perilous map over which the protagonist must move in the masculine journey toward transcendence (Jungian individuation). The male sexual organs are portrayed as the center of all perception, the essential tool for aesthetic creativity. As we shall see, perhaps more than any other contemporary Mexican author, José Agustín has constructed what might be termed a testicular (texticular) narrative.

While his earlier books contained scant reference to social and political problems, *Cerca del fuego* is situated squarely within the economic catastrophe and the crisis of hegemony of the 1980s, five years after an imagined invasion of Mexico by the U.S. Marines. As a character explains:

The gringos invaded us, according to them, very decently, very democratically. They came to help us to install a true democracy after the thousands of centuries of the PRI, which by then was considered by the gringos and by the national oligarchy as The Most Abominable Communist Monster, when actually six years ago the goddamned PRI was a greasy, stinking worm, covered with patches.⁹

Following a period of widespread torture and massacres, the U.S. oversaw national elections, resulting, ironically but not unpredictably, in the election of yet another President from the ranks of the PRI. After installing this “new” government, the Marines withdrew, but not without leaving behind

. . . millions of advisers, and industries by the hundreds, with practically free labor. They have us by the balls, and it looks like we're condemned to work for them until who knows when. They achieved what they always wanted: having us as suppliers of raw materials at laughable prices and consumers of all their low-fat shit, calory-free, at gold-plated prices. (41)

As the novel begins, the protagonist, Lucio, has had amnesia for six years or a *sexenio*, the period of a Presidential administration; his last memory therefore antedates the invasion. Among his first experiences in his journey back to the present, and then home, is an encounter with a President described, in characteristic Onda style, as “. . . [e]l mismísimo Gran Tlatu Lento, el Galán de Traje Oscuro, el de Camisa Estratégicamente Grisperla y Vigoroso, Patriótico, Nudo de Corbata. Una raya en la boca, casi rictus, lo parapetaba del ruidero” . . . “the Great Slow Tlatu [Flatu Lent] himself, the Gent in the Dark Suit, the man with the Strategically Pearl-Gray Shirt and Vigorous, Patriotic Necktie Knot. A line of the mouth, almost a rictus, barricaded him against the noise” (18). The society that this empty-eyed puppet oversees is plagued by gross economic inequality resulting in abject poverty, as well as systematic corruption and police brutality. Moreover, these problems have accelerated a process of widespread moral degeneration. In other words, the urban landscape portrayed in the novel is not unlike that of the Mexican capital during the crisis of the 1980s.

The influence of the PRI depends not only on the upper class, but also on the middle classes, specifically the middle-middle class of petty bureaucrats and professionals that inhabit neighborhoods like the Colonia Narvarte, where Agustín and the other *Onderos* were raised.¹⁰ In Agustín's devastating satire of social types, this class is characterized by *machismo*, racism, jingoism, and *cursilería* or pretentious bad taste.

The novel consists of three major sections, labelled White, Black, and Red, the three colors of alchemy, as described by Jung in *Psychology and Alchemy*. For Jung the stages of alchemy were comparable to the psychological process of individuation, in which the individual undertakes a spiritual journey culminating in wholeness or the integration of the self as a result of encountering and coming to terms with various archetypes of the collective unconscious. Black-

ness, then, is associated with immersion in the subconscious and contact with the archetype of the shadow, while white represents the beginning of self-knowledge and encounter with the anima or animus, and red suggests wholeness or the self, the purifying fire that completes the transformation of the personality. Agustín has explained the color symbolism of his novel in the following terms: the first major section, entitled “Blanco,” corresponds to the external, political and social reality of imperialism and state violence; the second, “Negro,” to internal, psychological issues as known through dreams, and the final section, entitled “Rojo,” is the confrontation of those dreams with immediate reality.¹¹ The three major sections of the book are, in turn, divided into sixty-four fragments, the number of hexagrams in the *I Ching* and four times the square of the number four, which Jungian theory considers to be the perfect number. According to Jung, the self expresses itself in quaternity symbols or mandalas, which help the individual psyche to heal and become “whole” or integrated by imposing an ordered structure. Thus, Agustín’s novel returns obsessively to the number four.

But what is the significance of a Mexican writing a Jungian novel in the late 1970s and early 1980s? For one thing, it indicates a continuing rejection by Agustín and at least some of his readers of the capacity of traditional ideologies to explain reality and invest it with meaning. Neither Catholicism, the ideology of the PRI, nor Marxism holds the solutions for Lucio, nor for Agustín. Yet the answers offered by Jungian archetypes are essentialist and aggressively ahistorical, and therefore have the effect of pulling the narrative away from the historical specificity in which Agustín initially anchors his narrative problems. Moreover, these archetypes tend to coincide with class, racial and, especially, gender stereotypes. While it might be argued that these character types are presented comically, their humor, like that of the *albur*, derives from *machismo* and sometimes has a cruel edge.

Lucio’s Virgil, his initial guide through the city under siege, into the inferno of Mexico City’s slums, is Juan José Salazar Saldaña, an alcoholic and cocaine dealer who lives in a filthy, book-lined shack near the Merced market and, ironically, works as a doorman at the Supreme Court.¹² It becomes clear early on that this derelict is a variant on the archetype of the “Wise Old Man” or guru, and that he is evoked unconsciously by Lucio in a moment of profound spiritual disorientation, which is symbolized by the amnesia. During a lengthy

conversation in a cantina, Salazar Saldaña calls for “the true Marxist-Leninist-Hegelian-Gramscian-Kunderian revolution.” Immediately afterward he ironically cites the Marxist writer and activist José Revueltas regarding “the earthly paradise” (34–36). Revueltas served as the intellectual guide to the student movement of 1968, and, in the wake of the massacre at Tlatelolco, he spent two and a half years in prison after assuming sole responsibility for the movement. For succeeding generations of Mexican writers, Revueltas has come to be the prototype of the committed intellectual. More pointedly, he was one of José Agustín’s mentors from the time that they met as inmates in Lecumberri Prison. Also, Revueltas, like Malcolm Lowry, another literary model that Agustín alludes to repeatedly, was an alcoholic who frequented lower-class cantinas and led a rather dissolute life. He was also the first Mexican novelist to populate his novels with lumpen characters. Salazar Saldaña’s self-immolation in the name of humanity, which brings the second chapter of the novel to a dramatic conclusion, recalls the self-sacrifice represented by Revueltas’ political imprisonment and his entire life. The character’s first family name alludes to Rubén Salazar Mallén, contemporary Mexico’s quintessential social realist writer. Agustín has said that his intention in naming his character after Revueltas and Salazar Mallén was to show that a relatively orthodox Marxist position is insufficient—it leads to the old man’s pointless self-destruction; although he believes that if Revueltas were still alive he would be a Kunderian.¹³ The names Juan José bring to mind Agustín’s first literary mentor, Juan José Arreola, in whose writing workshop he participated for several years, and perhaps Juan Rulfo, to whom the novel alludes in other ways, often irreverently. Thus, the character’s death may also be seen as an instance of literary patricide.

The old man’s second last name, as well as his act of self-destruction, also recall Parménides García Saldaña, the third founding member of “La Onda” (along with Agustín and Gustavo Sainz) and the most outrageous of the three. This writer’s excessive, anarchistic and neurotic life (among other things, he twice attempted to murder his wife) ended prematurely, apparently as the result of a drug overdose. At least one other “Onda” writer met a similar fate.¹⁴ Agustín is apparently suggesting that these talented peers, like Lucio’s guru and like the author himself during an earlier period of his life, consumed themselves in a blaze of intense living (“made a funeral pyre of their lives,” as Poniatowska writes), rather than passing

through the purifying flame of disciplined introspection and creation.

According to Jung, the archetype of the Wise Old Man may also take the form of a child. After Salazar Saldaña's death, Lucio encounters Homero Baldomero or "don Pimpirulando," a child street vendor who has learned to be a con man from his thoroughly corrupt father, a stereotype of the lower-class Mexican male that José Emilio Pacheco has dubbed Pancho Transa ("Pancho the Con Artist," a Mexican variant of Sancho Panza).¹⁵ As Monsiváis has noted regarding the *nacos*, a derogatory term for the lower-class youths of Mexico City, "their apprenticeship in petty corruption . . . [is a] defense against Corruption."¹⁶ In his haste to get away from Homero's violent anti-father, Lucio apparently runs over the boy and kills him; in Jungian terms, he has destroyed an earlier, less mature form of himself.¹⁷

Lucio's spiritual journey differs from those of Agustín's early protagonists in that the falsely "liberating," collective car trips of the early 1970s have been replaced by aimlessly purposeful, mostly individual forays into the land of the Other, in this case the lumpen neighborhoods of Mexico City. Thus, the claustrophobic, middle-class homogeneity of the Colonia Narvarte and tourists' Acapulco has been opened inward. As we have seen, the automobile, the favored vehicle of the middle-class adolescent "trip," is now portrayed as alienating and destructive. On the other hand, car travel is implicitly contrasted with public transportation, buses and subways, in which the excessive quality of the collectivity is the source of extreme discomfort, but also of survival and revitalization, understood in both individual and social terms. For instance, the narrator describes Lucio's perception of his fellow passengers on the subway as follows:

I saw fragments of faces, of shoulders, which inevitably became confused when I tried to isolate them, the victory of uniformity, exact pencil strokes of the anonymous masses, the whale swallowed me and I found a crowd of beautiful poor people. Blessed anonymous masses, I thought: they supported me, right there, they kept me on my feet. I realized also that my body was used to all this. . . . I was surprised that people could absorb so many discomforts. They could read, sleep, sing, someone had even shit on himself, advertise, sell and chat right in the frozen beard of Satan. (117–18)

In his travels through the subterranean underbelly of the city, Lucio encounters his negative anima, Consuelo or “The Queen of the Subway.”¹⁸ Margo Glantz has noted La Onda’s predilection for portraying women as vehicles for the protagonists’ sexual journeys.¹⁹ Consuelo is the subway: lower-class, sublime in her abjection, eternally ingesting and ejecting men/passengers. She personifies exotic Otherness: what is portrayed in the novel as the female principle or what Julia Kristeva has termed “. . . the phallic Mother who gathers us all into orality and anality, into the pleasure of fusion and rejection.”²⁰ Before encountering her on a subway platform, Lucio has seen T-shirts that read, among other things, “If You Can’t Shit, Don’t Eat” and “Eat Caca.” He has overheard a passenger on a train say, “hombre vamos a bajar hasta el fondo de la mierda” “. . . man we’re going down to the bottom of hell [literally, of shit].” Now he finds himself gazing into “the face of Coatlicue, infested with worms, and of Kali,” a woman who personifies “the nearly sacred horror . . . the beauty of caca” (117–24):

What a portentous image! It was a chick with a horrifying face, . . . scarred by years of pimples . . . poor thing: big nose, big mouth, crooked teeth, little eyes, sparse eyelashes, goblin’s ears and hair standing straight up like double question marks. The marvelous thing was that that horror . . . didn’t try to cover up her ugliness; in fact, she showed it off; if her face pulled her down, her sexiness held her up. The chick’s tall body was . . . sublime . . . sexy as hell . . . the cutting perfection of her body gave her an unsuspected dignity, a natural haughtiness, the fineness of the aristocracy of sensuality . . . that was capable of occasioning catastrophes and of bringing grave dangers. . . . (121)

Lucio, the “peasant poet,” “rescues” the lumpen Queen from a gang of would-be rapists of her own class, *nacos*, in order to seduce her himself. He takes her to the Hotel Gran Cosmos, where they engage in oral sex and she tells him her life story, corroborating his intuition of the danger that she represents for men. Consuelo’s life has been marked by her father’s premature death, her initiation into sex through incest with her brother—who was run over and killed shortly thereafter—and a gang rape by sons of the bourgeoisie. Her self-defense, biting the buttocks of one of her rapists, reiterates her connection with both aspects of “female” pregenitality.

When Lucio next meets her, she has been transformed into the positive anima, into pleasure without danger. Perhaps not coincidentally, she is now employed and married; thus, she has also undergone the transition from lumpen whore to plump proletarian wife, complete with an apron and a maternal air. However, her husband's name, Mephisto, perpetuates her association with evil. Consuelo offers Lucio a shell/eye/anus/breast to eat: "Inside the pink shell that opens like a wink, the white meat of the seafood appears, firm and trembling." Later a vision of her firm, white breasts, which invite him to suckle "the perfect death," prevents Lucio from killing a manifestation of his shadow (241–43).

After the death of his two spiritual guides, Juan José Salazar Saldaña and Homero Baldomero, and the sexual encounter with the negative anima, representing his passage through two stages of individuation, Lucio encounters additional archetypes, the shadow and the Terrible Mother. According to Jung,

[t]he shadow coincides with the "personal" unconscious. . . . that hidden, repressed, for the most part inferior and guilt-laden personality. The shadow tends to manifest itself through uncontrolled emotions and lack of moral judgment, as projected unconsciously onto others.²¹

The chapter entitled "Yautepec," which opens the middle, "black" section of the novel, recounts Lucio's dream in which he and his wife Aurora set out to escape the "esperpento esmagangoso que se ha vuelto el Detrito Defecal" ("the smoggified *esperpento* [a grotesque deformation of social reality] that the Defecal Detritus [Federal District or Mexico City] has become") (213), by spending the weekend at their friend Victoria's family home in the village of Yautepec. Lucio's driving becomes increasingly aggressive and his speech becomes more and more hostile. At one point he suggests that, if Aurora doesn't stop nagging him to slow down, he will "slice off one of her tetiux," making her physically resemble the Amazons or castrating females whose behavior she is presumably emulating. Aurora counters by telling Lucio a story. Like Scheherazade, she offers her husband the pleasure of narrative in an attempt to calm his reckless driving and thus, perhaps, save her life.²² The tale she chooses is apparently designed to flatter his ego by corroborating his fears of female insatiability and evil.

In this ghost story, which is associated with the house where they are to spend the weekend, her great-aunt became a merry widow—more specifically, a “Devoradora Dhombres” “Man-Devourer,” whose nymphomania drove her first to adopt disguises, preferably as an Amazon, then to practice sadism, and finally to seduce her own son. The boy, Tachito, filled with remorse, kills his mother in a drunken rage by hitting her over the head with a fireplace poker. He then becomes a serial killer, so a cousin purges the family of yet another “crazy” by killing Tachito. However, the cousin, in turn, is murdered by a lynch mob, composed of townspeople who are fed up with the family’s escapades.

During the course of Aurora’s narration, the issue of narrative authority is foregrounded, first by the third-person narrator’s repeated doubts regarding certain names, and then by Lucio’s scoffing at the truthfulness of various details in Victoria’s story, as related by Aurora. Thus, the question of female vs. male narrative authority becomes intertwined with conflicting interpretations of Lucio’s *machismo*, i.e., whether he is in control of the automobile, and thus of their lives. At one point a truck from the Aurrerá (suggesting “Aurora”) supermarket chain almost crashes into them, providing another indication that Lucio is projecting his fear of women onto his wife.

Later he projects his dread of the Devouring or Terrible Mother (which, according to Jung, is a projection of incestuous impulses and the fear they create) even more clearly onto Aurora, when he imagines that she is going to attack him with a poker, the very weapon with which Tachito allegedly murdered the Devoradora Dhombres. Lucio says to himself, “That woman is the living image of evil” (224).²³

This is not the first time that Agustín’s narrative has evoked a male protagonist’s fear of having his identity obliterated by women, of being ingested through the female mouth/vagina/anus. It is personified by Lucrecia Borges, a witch-like older servant who terrifies the young protagonist of *De perfil* by standing on the toilet and showing him her enormous, horrible vagina. In *Se está haciendo tarde*, it is embodied by the castrating sadist Cornelia, who savagely whips Virgilio’s penis and whose vagina is as “heavily travelled” as the Pan American Highway, recalling the metaphor of the female body as sexual map. This metaphor of the terrible earth-mother recurs in the story that concludes *No hay censura*, in which a character compares the devastating earthquake of 1985 to a maternal orgasm.

In *Cerca del fuego*, Lucio links orality, anality and maternity when he complains that the soup at a restaurant in Yautepec must have been cooked in a septic tank (like the rudimentary one in the *Devoradora Dhombres'* mansion). Earlier, when the protagonist had been attempting to leave Homero Baldomero's home, Homero's mother chased after Lucio with an "enormous onion knife" from her kitchen. Since Homero was a projection of himself, this image suggests the connection between maternal castration, orality and retention (annihilating the son's identity in order to keep him with her).

As for the adult Lucio's mother, she, like almost all mothers in the novel, is described as a domineering figure, a tyrannical earth-mother:

Her personality had a surprising magnetism; she was allied with the earth, sister of the roots, the worms and the spirits of the wood. . . . My brother Julián . . . loved her up to the final paroxysm . . . though he was married, with children, Julián would have abandoned everything and even would have enslaved himself to her, because my sacred little mother [boss-lady] . . . also enslaved. . . . She could be tyrannical. . . . (72)

Interestingly, in spite of the considerable control that she exerts over his brother and sisters, Lucio denies that she has similar power over him. After their mother's death, his sister Mary, like her house (which was their mother's house), has "curative properties" (161). Like her mother, she is married to a mild man. Francisco Madero, like his namesake, the father of the Mexican Revolution, is "the martyr" of the household."²⁴ Moreover, Aurora's parents fit the same mold of weak father (whose sole passion is dominoes) and domineering mother (who worships Femininity and socializes with the upper echelons of the PRI and the military).

In the early stages of Lucio and Aurora's courtship, which is portrayed as a male conquest, he suffers considerable physical and psychological pain over several months, while she teases him sexually and goes out with an older man. Even after their marriage, the event that brings on Lucio's amnesia is a brutal mugging that takes place in the basement of a shopping center where he has gone to pick up Aurora's boots. Boots are often a symbol of sadism. Moreover, the description of the Medusa-like subterranean monster that he finds

there just prior to the assault on his money and his testicles (83) reinforces the notion of female sadism, since the Medusa's head has traditionally been associated with the *vagina dentada*.²⁵ Yet, in looking back on their early relationship after they are married, Lucio describes their roles in terms of characters from the Mexican cinema that embody male sadism and female masochism (Pedro Armendáriz and the long-suffering Mexican mother, 194). Tania Modleski situates male masochism "at the heart of man's relation to his mother and to subsequent love objects," but warns that, unlike female masochism, it may easily be rejected by the subject, with possibly dire consequences for the woman in question.²⁶ Thus, Aurora's sexual teasing almost leads Lucio to rape her, but her screams save her by attracting a "lynch mob" (196)—like the one that intervened against Tachito's executioner in the ghost story and like the one that will nearly execute Lucio in Yautepec after he kills his shadow/father, Dr. Elisetas.

Women are constantly associated with filth or pollutants.²⁷ Just before Lucio's mother dies, her face resembles that of someone "recently arrived from the Apocalypse," and she and his sisters vomit "long, viscous fibers of something black and very sticky . . . [an] oily, black, stinking mass." Lucio attempts to burn this filth but finds that it will only catch fire when mixed with his own blood; it can only be purified when tempered with the masculine element. Then it is reduced to the manageable and inoffensive form of a black marble (174). A similar case of female purification by vomiting occurs at the end of *Se está haciendo tarde*. This insistence on women's oral expulsion of pollutants underlines the aforementioned fear of female voracity. Similarly, after Lucio's reconciliation with his family, he resists the temptation of becoming sexually involved with a young woman by eating a dying rat that he finds in a bathroom, causing him to vomit and thus purify himself. Although he becomes aroused, he provokes a horrified reaction to his vagina-like "mouth . . . full of dark blood, with shreds of raw flesh and hairs on the lips" (283). In Agustín's latest book, *No hay censura*, the image of female danger and filth will explicitly become a *vagina dentada*, then an "unbearably desirable" female corpse. This instance of necrophilia may be read as an attempt to possess, and therefore control, the most extreme form of female pollution, the cadaver, even as Lucio carries his mother's vomit, condensed and purified by the flames of his blood, safely ensconced in his pocket.

When Lucio and Aurora arrive in the fateful Yautepec, he proceeds to alienate both relatives and neighbors, and he and Aurora entertain themselves by sitting in the village kiosk and making fun of the local *campesinos*. If, on a psychological level, Lucio's aggressiveness is an acting out of repressed aspects of his personality, on a social level his sexism, racism and false nationalism are a critique of middle-class *machista* behavior, specifically of the arrogance of *chilangos* (capital-dwellers) in the provinces.

Lucio displays particular hostility toward Dr. Salvador Elisetas, a neighbor and retired psychiatrist who keeps an eye on Victoria's house. This character, an even more dissolute version of Salazar Saldaña, immediately sets himself up as a tyrannical and unreliable authority figure, admonishing Lucio that he should see a psychiatrist, since his behavior isn't normal, and offering him "tranquilizers," which actually turn out to be amphetamines. Subsequently Elisetas attacks Lucio, who kills the old man in self-defense. Agustín has suggested that the novel be read as a process of individuation.²⁸ If we read it this way, then Elisetas represents the archetype of the shadow, and when Lucio kills him, he is coming to terms with the most negative aspects of his own personality.

At the same time, with the character of Salvador Elisetas, Agustín is poking fun at a fellow writer, Salvador Elizondo. (The character's name plays with the synonyms for mushrooms, *hongos* and *setas*.) Elizondo is a well-known novelist and the leading practitioner of *La Escritura*, a self-reflexive, nonreferential style. Agustín has repeatedly described him as one of Mexico's leading proponents of literary and political conservatism, and he has noted Elizondo's impatience with his style of writing: ". . . every time Elizondo sees me . . . he says to me, 'Hey, enough already, enter the Academy,' because I know that what I write drives him crazy with irritation."²⁹ According to Agustín, he made Elisetas a retired psychiatrist because Elizondo's first two novels explored "certain very truculent aspects of the human soul; furthermore, Elizondo's language is really cool, it's a cold, doctor's jargon."³⁰ Elisetas' insistence that Lucio, a novelist like Agustín, take "tranquilizers," may be read as a reiteration of Elizondo's literary criticism of *La Onda*, but the fact that the pills are actually amphetamines suggests that Elizondo's literary authority is unreliable. Moreover, his death at Lucio's hands constitutes a repetition of the motif of literary patricide that we encountered in the case of Juan José Salazar Saldaña.

In a more general sense, the novel is filled with allusions to patriicide. Nearly all the fathers of the story are either dead, like Lucio's and Consuelo's fathers, or ineffectual, like Aurora's father, Pancho Madero, and the puppet President of Mexico, the father of the nation (which the narrator refers to as the "matria," the "motherland"). In the course of the narrative, three of Lucio's father-figures will die, two of them at his hands. When he has been restored as head of his household, he will complete the series of patricides by symbolically sacrificing himself for his family's (and his nation's) survival.

In Agustín's recent prose, eroticism generally is placed in the context of love, commitment, and domestic tranquility. Sex, then, serves as a vehicle for communication and bonding with the loved one, as well as a gateway to the spiritual experiences that hallucinogens had provided during the 1960s and 1970s. While this conception of love is quite conventional, the incorporation of a polymorphic sexuality, including non-genital sex and male homosexuality, indicates a departure from canonical Mexican gender stereotyping. Nevertheless, Lucio's return home coincides with the shift from polymorphous sexuality to a more conventional view of sex within marriage.

Many Latin American women writers have focused on the female body during the seventies and eighties. In contrast, Agustín obsessively describes the male body, creating a sort of testicular narrative, in which the male sexual organs serve as the central metaphor for literary creativity and spiritual transcendence, both of which are portrayed as eminently male endeavors. This is especially pronounced in *Cerca del fuego* and in *No hay censura*, in which he seems to test the validity of his title with frequent, detailed descriptions of erections, testicular pain, and various forms of sexual intercourse focusing on the phallus, and in which he uses rape and necrophilia as figures for spiritual disintegration and transcendence.

Jean Franco has noted in Latin American male narrative of the so-called Boom the recurrence of the ideologeme or collective fantasy of monstrous birth and births of monstrosities, which "was intended to resolve the problem of 'feminizing values' and criticizing machismo, while at the same time reserving true creativity for the male author."³¹ In *Cerca del fuego*, the birth of Aurora and Lucio's first child, told from the point of view of Aurora, is counterposed with the completion of the book manuscript, as narrated by Lucio. Child-birth is portrayed as painless, indeed pleasurable: ". . . taking

everything into account, it was a true pleasure to be there, that birth was enjoyable" (253). The writing of the novel, however, is nightmarish and painful, its completion signalling the culmination of the process of literary individuation. If male genital pain, which is associated in the novel with insomnia and writer's block, is a necessary element in the male creative process, so is female sexuality. Aurora is the reservoir of liquid light into which Lucio dips his pen(is): "A golden substance emanates from my wife's vagina: she leaves drops with each step. . . . Drops of light spill onto my white notebook, like liquid diamonds that wet the paper" (307-09).

Their sex life had begun, after many false starts, with Lucio's newly completed second novel serving as an aphrodisiac (197). Similarly, their reunion following Lucio's amnesia leads to love-making and pillow talk in which Aurora the muse provides inspiration for his third novel, the one we have been reading: ". . . there was nothing to say, . . . just . . . to fly together in a fuck which, if it wasn't a record, it was a good average, as the Cubans say. Afterward, we would talk and talk without tiring, and she would tell me everything I needed to know, especially things related to my novel" (209).

Agustín has acknowledged that a weakness of the novel is its failure to develop Aurora's character.³² His female sexual partner is an assistant or facilitator for his writing, a sort of sexual and metaphysical bat-boy, as is suggested by the baseball metaphor. At the same time, this metaphor foreshadows the baseball game that will form the climax of the novel, during which Lucio will wield his bat/pen/phallus to hit a home run (another "vuelta a casa"), thus claiming his place among his opponents, the all-stars of world literature. (The line-up is conceived in terms of the Western European and U.S. canon; it excludes not only women, but also Latin American writers of either gender.) Lucio appropriates the other players for his discourse (and Agustín attempts to downplay the reverence in which he holds them) by christianizing them with Hispanized versions (or, in the case of one Spanish author, a scatological version) of their last names, the names that mark patriarchal lineage: Bodeler, Rambó, Guete, Yits, Juxlei, Paund, Yinsber, el Calderón de la Mierda ("the Kettle of Shit"), and the manager, Shespir (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Goethe, Yeats, Huxley, Pound, Ginsberg, Calderón de la Barca, and Shakespeare).

However, the process of social, personal and literary individua-

tion is not yet complete. The automobile, symbol and nemesis of contemporary urban civilization, will follow Lucio home to Tepoztlán and disrupt his domestic bliss, his “portion of normalcy,” by taking his daughter’s life. At the same time, the political crisis in Mexico will worsen, leading to a state of siege and curfew that will trap the protagonist at the house of María and Pancho Madero. Here Lucio realizes that his only true friends, the only people he can trust implicitly, are the members of his extended family.³³ The one way to save his loved ones from the political repression, Lucio concludes, is to follow the example posed by Isaac and sacrifice himself for them. In spite of the superficial resemblance to Salazar Saldaña’s self-immolation, we are meant to understand Lucio’s suicide (by slashing his wrists) as a valid act of purification, leading to his subsequent immersion in flames and phoenix-like rebirth, which is simultaneous with finishing his novel. Individuation has allowed his blood/fire/ semen/ink to fix reality on the pages of the text that we read, where it will “burn eternally” (312).

This concluding section is preceded by a visit that Lucio, finally reunited with his wife and children, makes to Chapultepec Castle, to watch a phallic “volcano” of fireworks: “a volcano . . . is forming; it is clustering together an ebullition of lights in the upper entrance [literally, mouth]; it explodes now in an eruption; it is an infinity of lights . . .” (311). The castle is at once a redeemed version of the perversely haunted “palace” of “Yautepec,” and a metaphor for the restoration of the national family. Chapultepec, after all, had been the site of Moctezuma’s summer palace and became the residence of Mexico’s first two invaders, a Spanish Viceroy and the French Emperor, Maximilian, as well as housing Porfirio Díaz and, subsequently, the Revolutionary fathers—including “Pancho Madero”—who ousted Díaz. In view of the centrality of the family to the symbolism of *Cerca del fuego*, it is significant that the setting is an executive residence converted into a national monument, rather than the more public seat of government, the National Palace, with which the story opened; the “homecoming” is thus complete. The novel ends, then, with the reconstitution of the *patria*, in the dual sense of the “fatherland” and the patriarchal family. The Devouring Mother has ceded to the Angel of the House/Muse, and a series of absent and weak Fathers has been replaced by the male novelist as hero, savior, and patriarch.

NOTES

1. On March 9, 1989, in the presentation ceremony for Agustín's short-story collection *No hay censura*, the distinguished Mexican critic Emilio Carballido said of the writer's work: "Although until now it hasn't been given the value that it deserves, certainly within a number of years it will be the object of study. A work of great importance for political conscience. . . ." (Ana María González, "José Agustín tiene el don del anarquismo: Carballido" *La Jornada* [11 March 1989], p. 19). On the jacket of *Cerca del fuego*, José Emilio Pacheco refers to Agustín as "one of our most serious novelists" and to this book as "the most ambitious and successful of his novels."
2. This motif parallels events in the author's life during the 1970s, involving his reconciliation with his second wife, his seven-month prison term on false charges of drug trafficking, two years of living as an expatriate, and the subsequent homecoming, involving his installation with his wife and three children in the arcadian town of Cuautla, Morelos.
3. Carlos Monsiváis, "La naturaleza de la Onda," *Amor perdido* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1977), p. 256.
4. Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Literary Theory: Essays. 2: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 73-74.
5. Jorge Ruffinelli, "Código y lenguaje en José Agustín," *La Palabra y el Hombre* 13 (1975), p. 157.
6. Margo Glantz, "La onda diez años después: ¿epitafio o revalorización?" *Repeticiones: Ensayos sobre literatura mexicana* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1979), p. 118.
7. Ruffinelli, p. 157.
8. Carlos Monsiváis, *Escenas de pudor y liviandad* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1988), pp. 304-06. In opposition to standard wisdom that the *albur* is an invention of lower-class Mexican male culture, of the so-called "lépero," "pelado," or "caifán," the terms that different historical periods have used to denote the street-wise lumpenproletarian (see Glantz, p. 125), Monsiváis has recently proposed that Mexicans owe these sexual puns to ". . . the free time of lascivious priests, of lawyers fed up with the Code of Procedures, of failed writers, of provincial doctors anxious to disguise their literary pursuits, of journalists forged in the lightning-fast exchanges of *cantinas* . . ." (*Escenas*, p. 305).
9. José Agustín, *Cerca del fuego* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés, 1986), p. 40. Subsequent references to this novel will be given parenthetically in the text.
10. An examination of 1988 Presidential votes by Francisco Báez Rodríguez showed that the middle-class neighborhoods like the Colonia Narvarte were evenly divided in their support of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (of the PRI), Manuel Clouthier (of the

right-wing PAN) and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas ("DF: Una radiografía electoral," *Cuadernos de Nexos* 5 [December 1988], p. IX).

11. Personal interview with José Agustín, Cuautla, Morelos, September 1988.

12. From the beginning Agustín has demonstrated a predilection for archetypal names. In *La tumba* the protagonist is named Gabriel Guía ("Gabriel Guide"). A drug dealer in *Se está haciendo tarde* is named Virgilio, and the final scene of the novel occurs in a boat. The name Lucio is taken from Lucio Puleyo in *The Golden Ass*.

13. Personal interview.

14. Elena Poniatowska, "La literatura de la Onda: ¡Así como te has portado yo no me retrato contigo, vida!," *¡Ay vida, no me mereces!* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1985), pp. 190–91.

15. José Emilio Pacheco, "México y Hollywood: Tonto Bandito loves Zorra Gomorra" *Proceso* 6 March 1989, p. 53.

16. Monsiváis, *Escenas*, p. 238.

17. Agustín has noted that this accident is also a representation of his own literary maturation: "to kill don Pimpirulando was also to kill the little boy Juan José Agustín, who tells things in a language that's very fresh, very colloquial, very clever, but who is a child, after all" (Personal interview).

18. The "Reina del Metro," according to Agustín, ". . . is the anima but given in its most material mode, what Jung would call the negative anima, the one that's still very involved in all the human, material and carnal processes" (Personal interview).

19. Glantz, p. 123.

20. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 191.

21. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p. 284; *Aion*, pp. 266 and 9; in *Collected Works* 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

22. The parallel with Scheherazade was suggested to me by Donally Kennedy. *La tumba* features another instance of *machista* driving by a male protagonist, this one with fatal consequences for the other driver (p. 14).

23. In her analysis of Hitchcock's films, Tania Modleski associates the director's "fear and loathing of women" with "the threat of the devouring mother . . . the continual threat of annihilation, of swallowing up, the mother poses to the personality of the protagonists" (*The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* [New York: Methuen, 1987], pp. 106–07).

24. Personal interview.

25. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 310.

26. Modleski, p. 70.

27. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).
28. José Agustín, "Forty Archetypes Draw their Swords," *José Agustín: Onda and Beyond*, ed. June C. D. Carter and Donald L. Schmidt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 27.
29. José Agustín, "Forty Archetypes," p. 31; and "Entrevista" (with Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, M. Paley Francescato and Inma Minoves-Myers), *Hispanamérica* 8.22 (1979), p. 37.
30. Personal interview.
31. Jean Franco, "Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power, and the Third-World Intelligentsia," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 510.
32. Personal interview.
33. Regarding this scene, Agustín recently explained, ". . . what I wanted to show there . . . is warmth and human solidarity, which occur most naturally in the family . . . the return to the family is an attempt to rescue the essential elements in human beings. I don't think people can begin with a dissolution of the family; if the family breaks up, it leads to the maximum dehumanization. I think that in the United States this phenomenon has already occurred. . . . And I believe that much of what has conserved the mental health and common sense of the Mexican popular classes, which still haven't been entirely corrupted, is precisely family love. What we have to remove from the family are the old vices . . . classism, authoritarianism, sexism, racism, the assignment of roles that are absolutely false; we need a new organization of the family, but without dispensing with it . . ." (Personal interview).