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Impossible Transit: Seduction of the Abject in Albert Sánchez Piñol's *Cold Skin*

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Abstract: This essay engages in a cultural discourse based on abject desire in the narrative layers of Albert Sánchez Piñol's *Cold Skin*. A deeply involved critical analysis of occidental intertextualities imbedded in the text is taken up for understanding the areas of perception and reception in western elitist human psyche, moving into areas of posthuman scholarship and readership.

Keywords: *supracultural, abject, posthuman, horror*

"Look, on the horizon. Your island," the captain said to me.

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (Julia Kristeva 1).

Thus, begins Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*. It is also the beginning of a chapter ambiguously titled "Approaching Abjection." That title is ambiguous, like abjection itself, in that it suspends, or questions, the dichotomy of subject and object. Is the analyst,

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Kristeva, the one who engages abjection through the interpretative operation that academics call an "approach"? Or is it abjection itself that looms on the horizon, drawing ever nearer as a quality of the dread that is becoming central to contemporary experience? Kristeva herself introduces her essay with an epigraph from Victor Hugo's *La Légende des siècles* (1859): "No Beast is there without glimmer of infinity, /No eye so vile nor abject that brushes not/Against lightning from on high, now tender, now fierce." These verses, written in a time of revolutionary optimism, announce a reversal of abjection through the incorporation of the excluded into an elevated meaning that arrives like a flash of lightning with a disquieting emotional ambivalence. Full of zeal, Hugo's age expanded the boundaries of the Western urban upper class, simultaneously offering those who lay outside civilization the possibility of transcending their own exclusion through the harsh discipline of work.

That optimism came to grief in the twentieth century, when the colonial super-ego appeared, increasingly, as the sublimated instinct of the class and racial other. To take a case in point, early readers of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) were confronted by a self-image in the fractured mirror of imperialism. To be sure, Marlow's initial suggestion that darkness had once enveloped the Isle of Britain relies on the imperial doxa that links enlightenment to colonial expansion. But after this conventional beginning, the narrative soon breaks the layer of idealism to reveal the envoys of the light in the grip of the "weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (17). In Conrad's masterpiece Hugo's romantic promise of redemption for the excluded and downtrodden falls pitifully short of its mark in the image of the black woman who comes out of the jungle to watch Kurz taken aboard the steamer. When she lifts her arms, "as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky" (62), not only lightning fails to appear, but Kurz vanishes from her life like a cooling star leaving nothing but dread and cupidity in its

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wake. At once master and abject idol, this "envoy of the light" had flared up or fallen into one of those dark revolts of being that, according to Kristeva, place the subject, literally, beside itself.

Hot imperialism transvalued myriad brutalities and incalculable renunciations into the allure of infinite progress. The idea of a hard-purchased refinement still permeates *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), where Freud uneasily defends the social organization of unhappiness in the name of the superior achievements of culture. Infinity had sunk below the horizon of human aspiration, but, introjected, it lurked in the desire that raided the ego. An ambivalent thing, this desire. Although it powered every ambition, it also threatened every self-conquest. Against the risks of stagnation and regression, modernity developed technologies of desire. The most influential among them, psychoanalysis, assumed the educability of the ego through standardized narratives about the economy of desire.

Matching the psychoanalytical effort to free desire from early fixations, hot imperialism dismantled the microspaces of proximity and face-to-face communication, replacing them with abstract, normative powers. It rerouted desire from immediate, organic venues of fulfillment to ever more remote goals, articulating new and more conceptual identities in the process. The bulk of modern culture was invested in this deracination of desire. In contrast, the era of cold imperialism liquefies identity and consumes the objects of desire until only a narcissistic desire remains trapped in performativity. Shorn of the great romantic passions but still caught in the train of a permanently goaded desire, the world is daily reduced to ashes. Massive amounts of social energy fuel the cold flames that melt everything into the relentless fluctuation of exchange value. We are increasingly the citizens of a negative universality, driven not by the "ought" but by the "no longer is."

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Identity by subtraction, the identity of the non-subject, is now the lot of a growing majority, who in their assorted "post"- retain the memory of an amputated humanity.

While the masses strive to retain a sense of belonging and minimal orientation in a dizzying world, the elite jubilates in the destruction of all pre-existing anchors of identity. Social constructionism is the nihilism of the present time; its logic, attuned to the needs of global penetration and swift behavioral reconditioning, decrees that since nothing is, nothing need abide. The lingering of traditional roles should fool no one. The identity wars unleashed by this negative ontology are less feuds for cultural supremacy than a death struggle between an extreme individualism that exhausts the world in the name of experience, and reactive eco-cultural formations attempting to draw stability from the past. This struggle leads to a new hierarchy, not between cultures but between "transcultural globalizers" who thrive on the unfixing of identity and "communitarians" who stake their identity on continuity: of a sense of origin, a recognizable milieu, and time-honored patterns of behavior.

Hot, assimilative imperialism was popularized by the likes of Rudyard Kipling and Jules Verne in romances about the mastery of space and the measuring up of civilized man against the forces of nature. Verne's success owed much to his ability to indulge his readers' appetite for imaginary voyages, but also to the connection, noted by Michel Butor, between exploration and the compiling of natural differences (50)—in a world, let us not forget it, where the range and variety of natural experiences was shrinking. Although the world has shriveled even further since then, cold imperialism cannot yet do without the illusion of distance or the thrill of the exotic, anymore than it can redeem the promise of transcendence from the prosaic culture of work. And as long as the promise remains outstanding and the vigor of those time-tested sources of illusion undiminished,

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the hold of the adventure novel on the imagination will be guaranteed. Proven narrative formulas still work for a world that has transformed distance into estrangement, even if their postmodern adaptations recreate the ethnographic dialectic of self and other as a categorical gap between the global elite and the anthropomorphic masses.

Cold Skin, by Albert Sánchez Piñol, is such a pastiche of the adventure novel, but it is also more than a postmodern remake, and that is the reason why its enormous success calls for some reflection on the deeper themes it sets in motion. Surface references to Conrad and Verne, as well as Stevenson, should not distract from its critique of the dualism on which the genre hinges, or from its pessimistic conclusion that the attempt to surmount the dualism is bound to fail. Therefore, the *New York Times* reviewer of *Cold Skin* missed the point when he compared the novel with B-movies and video games. Had he mentioned Francis Ford Coppola's controversial appropriation of Conrad, Marcel Theroux would have struck closer to home. Visual memory of *Apocalypse Now* looms large among Sánchez Piñol's expressive tools. But Theroux ignores that the pastiche is in the service of a serious reflection on the contemporary world in transit, perhaps because the American translation has expurgated the more thoughtful passages as so much verbal fat.

If Verne was a raconteur of tales about scientific explorations of the external world, and Conrad transformed the quest into the search for self-knowledge (Todorov 163), Sánchez Piñol is the explorer of limits—the limits of humanity in the first place, but also of its capacity to abject its atavisms. For millennia, human life was grounded in a culture, a well-defined group, and a body biologically adapted to its medium. But now, cultural fluidity, exacerbated mobility, and the mutation of the organic body into a support for countless prostheses strengthen the hypothesis that humanity is in transit to a posthuman

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condition from whose vantage the abjected atavisms take on the monstrous aspect of a lower form of life.

Sánchez Piñol leaves no room for doubt that the voyage of his unnamed narrator is an allegory of extreme individuation. But unlike his nineteenth century precursors, who scout the world full of pride and nostalgia for the national grounds of their existence, this latter-day Crusoe has willed his isolation in the wake of what we might call postnational alienation. Disappointed with the new Irish state for which he fought, the novel's hero finds himself estranged from his compatriots. "I could not hate them. It was worse than that: quite simply, I could not understand them. It was as if I were speaking with creatures from the moon" (44).[i] Incomprehension severs the ego from its collective moorings, setting it adrift in the frail hull of an individual persona. But leaving behind interpersonal commitments does not just mean losing nomothetic existence but also dropping out of humanity, that messy affair of lofty dreams drenched in blood. "Did I want to remain in a world in which spiraling violence perpetuated the unhappiness of everyone? My reply was no, never again, nowhere, and thus I chose to flee to a world without people" (44-45).

Sánchez Piñol has replaced Conrad's river into scorching Africa with the icy expanse of the Antarctic Ocean, which takes us right back to Verne's *An Antarctic Mystery* (1897) and, especially, *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* (1905). To be sure, he subtly alludes to these precedents. Conrad's natives make a swift appearance in the first chapter, as Senegalese sailors who shed tears during the voyage into the cold and resort to bizarre schemes to protect their faces from the inhuman chill. These sailors, who strive to preserve their identities in these eerie latitudes, are as obviously displaced as the reader who tries to advance in this novel without relinquishing the cultural expectations

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inherited from hot imperialism. A long reference to the Irish civil war of 1921-1923 suggests the decay of the modern myth of freedom and brotherhood sought through a political dispensation. It also functions as a historical marker for the beginning of decolonization and therewith for the birth of the new global hegemony. No longer based on the export of the cultural stock of the colonizers, the new domination relies on cultural grazing. Its pattern is set by a transnational elite whose economic power allows it to profit from the cultural circumscriptions tended to by the less mobile rest of humanity. This "supracultural" elite escapes the condition of the natives, whose obligatory homesteading—like serfs in the new feudalism—ensures the provision of services required by the roving elites. If the latter venture into the oceanic expanses of the universal, it is the "locals," with their atavistic attachment to place, who in the outer confines of concrete geography furnish "transnationals" with the "content" which their omnivorous "freedom of choice" incessantly depletes.

Sánchez Piñol imagines a situation in which the Midas touch of global culture awakes monsters from the deep and finds itself mired in terror and sensuality. The postmodern irony, if irony there is, lies in the replacement of Verne's social dichotomy between the upright and the outlaw with the ontological distinction between enlightened humanity and subhuman waste. Waste takes the form of local monsters keen on feeding off the Europeans. Sounding the theme of cannibalism, the author formulates the paradigmatic conflict triggered by advanced globalization in classic ethnographic terms. On one side, the disillusioned postnationalist with his useless baggage of high-brow European culture; on the other, dangerous locals who appear to him as the manifestation of raw instinct, much like the natives of Tierra del Fuego (the closest geographic reference in Verne's *Lighthouse*) appeared to Charles Darwin, who saw them as "men who do not possess the

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instinct of [domesticated] animals, nor yet appear to boast of human reason, or at least of arts consequent upon that reason" (*Voyage of the Beagle* 501).

Cold Skin begins where *Heart of Darkness* ends. We are spared the search for Kurz, because Sánchez Piñol makes horror his opening gambit. It is from the suddenness of this experience, rather than its gradual build-up, that his character draws self-knowledge. The journey is forgotten in favor of the arrival; thus, it is not space that counts but the behavioral changes resulting from the annihilation of the cultural alibis that ordinarily shield us from raw existence. And these changes start to precipitate as soon as the narrator reaches his remote island. By the time they come into full view he has been under extreme duress and his emotions resolve into cold objectivity—"What are our feelings" News of ourselves to ourselves" (300). Such degree of self-detachment is the obverse of his total disengagement from mankind. When a ship finally arrives on the island and the crew turns up at the lighthouse, the narrator muses: "To have seen a ghost is not an uncommon thing, but I was under the impression of having been the first to witness an entire crowd. Or perhaps it was I who was the ghost" (177). Pushed to the limit, the utopian quest for universality spectralizes concrete, embodied life. Or conversely, the narrator is dead and only his body remains, suspended in a prolonged organic vitality from which the spirit has leaked.

The voyage to the end of the world is an allegory of the furthest recesses of the social. On the horizon, where one's island comes into sight, lies the virtual line where identity, pushed to extreme individuation, turns into confinement before veering into the anonymous repetition of an archaic fate. Identity can only be grasped in the mirror that others hold up to the self. Grown used to the absence of others and thunderstruck by the presence of visitors on his island, the lighthouse keeper can only utter the enigmatic

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words, "Batís Caffó," when asked for his name.[ii] A year later the narrator will relive this scene from the position of the lighthouse keeper, whom he supplants in a virtually exact recurrence of the same event. Instead of the linear progress and the resolution of conflict typical of the age of scientific optimism, the novel presents an endless recycling of roles and the disappearance of individuality into the black hole of violence.

Sánchez Piñol amends Conrad's conclusion to *Heart of Darkness*. If there Kurz's homecoming as a corpse raised the hope of locking up the colonial demons in pious lies and self-deluded idealism, here idealism does not hold up even for a night. The first brush with the monsters convinces the narrator that his library of European masterpieces is useless, except as flammable material to keep the fiends at bay. He will be safe as long as it takes for "universal" culture to go up in smoke. There and then, culture with global pretensions reveals itself as a flimsy defense against violence, a veil whose exorcising power is voided the moment violence steps in. Universality cannot withstand the will to exist of one single particularity. By the end of the novel, after the narrator has run through the full cycle of abjection, he scorns the pedantry of his naive replacement: "He was hopelessly smug. If only there had been a scale in front of us, I would have challenged him to pile all his books on one side and Aneris on the other" (298-299). Aneris, the anagram of *Sirena*, is the lighthouse keeper's sexual "mascot." She is Kurz's African woman, Ulysses' Calypso and Paris' Helen rolled into one. She is above all a desublimating energy that annuls the hero's will, making him "leap [...] toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned," in Kristeva's words. This amphibian lover, whose cold skin transmits the animal intensity that humans can barely intuit, is the absolute temptress. Her sleek body summons desire while its morphological difference provokes revulsion. The abject "lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated," says Kristeva. It is an elsewhere within reach, a hazy frontier of the admissible and the

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thinkable that blurs at dusk, when reason dims and the ego's defenses wane. "The sun was beginning to set" are the last words of the novel (182). They echo the ending of Verne's *The Lighthouse at the End of the World*: "The sun was setting as he moved out of the bay" (248), but also Conrad's metaphor of the inner darkness. But the dimming of reason at the end of *Cold Skin* blurs more than the limit of the thinkable, which appears to retrench behind a darkened moral imagination.

Always on the brink of that elsewhere that blurs the boundary of the possible and the thinkable, the narrator is entangled in the fear and desire that emanate from the lighthouse keeper, to whom he is bound through mutually inflicted violence which they succeed in temporarily redirecting toward an external enemy. Gradually, the narrator adopts his companion's crazed survival strategies, his zoophilia, his lighthouse, and even his name, until the two become indistinguishable from each other. As owner of the lighthouse and of the identity that goes with it, one day he will see the indelible trace of the journey in the tousled aspect of a newly arrived atmospheric officer. Gazing on this distraught figure, who has survived the first encounter with the monsters and unknowingly is already his mortal enemy, the narrator muses: "He had gone from being a petit bourgeois to an expatriated pariah overnight" (179). An expatriated pariah is of course the cosmopolite's substandard other. Marx once urged internationalism to the working class; now capital imposes it the better to overcome all obstruction to its unhindered ebb and flow.

Expatriated and on the brink of succumbing to the abject masses, that is, to the abjection of becoming mass-like—for this is the meaning of the monsters on the yonder side of global society's horizon—, this landless pariah, this wasted citizen of the world, is fast losing his concretion. "The man had been reduced to a walking phantasm" (179)—"he

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was only a ghost made of flesh," says the original text (303). A fleshy ghost is an aporia, but it may also be a fate. A living carcass inhabited by a voice was Marlow's description of Kurz. But if Kurz could still make legend out of his insubstantiality, for the world citizen the encounter with the monsters of the abyss is the last station on the journey to the end of identity.

The god of the lighthouse

One single book remains on the island after the narrator consumes his library in a single night of defensive fires. It turns up at the lighthouse, gathering dust where a previous tenant left it. This book is *The Golden Bough*, a relic from the age of heroic exploration and conquest. Sir James Frazer's text is the sole intellectual link between the successive lighthouse keepers, and thus it is the nearest we come to a tradition on the island. Frazer's famous account of the ritual murder of the man-god and the appropriation of his soul by his successor (344) makes of the book something like an unholy scripture, a revelation of the spirit of the place. And not only of the place but also of the space of flows surrounding it.

> "Have you read nothing else in all this time? I must tell you that the world of letters has moved forward. Intellectuals today must appeal to higher principles."
>
> No. He was mistaken. Nothing had changed. He would have done well to consider those filthy men who had invaded the lighthouse like clients piling into a brothel. While he spoke of summits of learning, they debased all they touched (176).

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The multinational crew that raids the lighthouse summons up the memory of Verne's pirates, a criminal pack whose captain of unknown nationality prefigures today's cosmopolitan drifter. Nothing substantial has changed, except for the higher principles invoked. Frazer's account of the royal murder was an attempt to ground social Darwinism in primitive ritual. To come out victorious from the ultimate contest was the highest form of adaptation. To vanquish the incumbent was to rise to a position of supreme power and danger. From this time forth the champion was forced to lead a vigilant life confined to a narrow area of safety. A similar order governs Sánchez Piñol's island, suggesting that the far-reaching dismantling of sociality leads to a Hobbesian scenario of individual sovereignty and universal violence. On his first approach to the lighthouse, the narrator discovers an inscription:

> Batís Caffó lives here
> Batís Caffó made this fountain
> Batís Caffó wrote this
> Batís Caffó knows how to defend himself
> Batís Caffó rules the waves
> Batís Caffó has what he wants and wants only what he has
> Batís Caffó is Batís Caffó and Batís Caffó is Batís Caffó
> Dixit et fecit (20)

The anaphoric character and crudeness of this text recalls the language found on ancient tablets and thus suggesting the presence of an archaic deity. What is remarkable about this identity is that, besides claiming originating powers, it asserts freedom from determination and, like the biblical "I am that I am," slips back to a tautology. Batís

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Caffó, like Captain Nemo in another Verne novel, rejects objective restraints and claims ascendance over the space of flows. His is also an identity born of self-effacement, an identity in flight. Behind his nominal mask the anonymous forces of technology act. Batís Caffó, bathyscaphe, is a Neptune of sorts. He asserts his power over the expanse of "liquid life," Zygmunt, Bauman's term for the global society of consumers. This world is liquid because it forbids the sedimentation of experience. Everything in it is subject to the rule of universal disposability. Liquid modern life is a society of emulsified individuals with a single common identity as *homo eligens*, the only identity that endures constant change (Bauman 33). *Homo eligens* is *homo eligens* and *homo eligens* is *homo eligens*. There is nothing as empowering as tautological choice. It cannot be compromised by its attachment to any objects, nor measured by its position in a relative value scale. But absolute choice means absolute power of revocation, and although it may free from the liability of contracts and obligations, tautology ultimately means redundancy. And fear of redundancy rouses the worst nightmares of the liquid subject, who intuits that to consume globally implies the potential to be globally consumed. From the observation cabin in his bathyscaphe, this caricature of freedom inspects the depths of the abyss from which archaic creatures ascend to rehearse a primal scene of infinite regression. The allegory is straightforward. In the novel, Batís Caffó is often seen barricaded in his lighthouse, scrutinizing the fluid expanse with an eye to staving off the multitudes of redundant monsters that threaten to engulf and cannibalize him. Deadly afraid of slipping from his vantage point to the level where he will be overtaken and disposed of, he is caught in a permanent potlatch on which he squanders all his resources in a merciless struggle to stay afloat. Illustrating the orgy of destruction and self-destruction in which consumers engage in a wild-goose chase of identity, a frenzied Batís uses ammunition at an ever-increasing rate, with the result that every shooting spree raises the ante, the enemy growing in

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inverse proportion to Batís' dwindling firepower. It is as if nature opposed its inexhaustible reproductive power to the destructive concupiscence of the individual.

The Toads

Liquid life conceives itself as the final stage of evolution. Having reached the last horizon of planetary expansion, it dismisses history and decrees the end of the social. From this time forth there is only the partnership of man and technology, the daunting armature that he wears strapped to his senses exposing his increasing maladaptation. Fluidity presents itself as a creative force and the harbinger of the posthuman, but systemic randomness and heightened anomie remind us uncannily of lower forms of organization. The hangover from the festival of hybridity brings categorical uncertainty. The result is a conceptual inversion, whereby the monstrous—traditionally a code word for identities in excess of normative delimitation—is reassigned to the cultures that protect their familiar determinations. If the monstrous is dangerous because it "threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 6), hard and fast distinctions will themselves appear monstrous to a cultural economy that thrives by deconstructing every hermeneutic redoubt. Our age has replaced the barbarian—the one who inhabits a different discourse—with the fanatic, who affirms the unique value of a code. In either case, categorical differences seem intolerable because they resist the systemic reduction of complexity and interrupt the circulation of signs. Hard and fast distinctions exclude even as they define, and by positing an outside of the system of communication they defy appropriation and flout the ethics of cultural leveling. Monsters police the borders of the possible, as Jeffrey Cohen asserts (12), but they do so not from any ontological outside but from the depths of a past that appears as

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deceivingly remote as another continent. Thus, more than "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (Cohen 6), they are vestiges of an abjected self surviving in archaic bodies. If as René Girard says, "Difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its mortality" (21), then this difference will be perceived as monstrous and as potentially lethal.

"The monster's body is a cultural body" (Cohen 4) means, in effect, that the Ur-category of the monstrous is always in flux. It exists at the uncertain crossroads between ascent into the light and descent into the cradle of organized matter, marking the threshold between what counts as human and what defines humanity from outside. The monster is undecidable. Always in a state of suspension, it signals an aspiration toward humanity but also humanity's unspeakable nostalgia for a distant community at the bifurcation of myth and history. The Cicauta—Sánchez Piñol's tribal sounding name for his monsters— are amphibians, a transitional form of life. Batís calls them toads, ostensibly to remove even the semblance of commonality, despite their anthropomorphism.

Early evolutionary doctrine translated cultural into biological distinctions. In the conclusion to *The Descent of Man*, Darwin affirms the distinct nature of savages: "He who has seen a savage in his native land will not feel much shame, if forced to acknowledge that the blood of some more humble creature flows in his veins" (Brantlinger 643). As an intermediate stage between the animal and the human, savages were for Darwin clinching proof of the evolution of life forms. Once culture was somatized, a difference of degree, however slight, could easily slip into a categorical distinction. About Aneris the narrator asserts: "She never could grow accustomed to our atmosphere, infinitely lighter in density than her own" (167). Yet she does breathe in the

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air and moves about the island and in the lighthouse without apparent difficulty. The narrator's remark refers less to Aneris's biological constitution than to the habituated responses of her under-sublimated organism. Her instinctual high-density, evident not just in her guiltless eroticism but also in her subliminal communication with her kin, baffle those who lead a rarefied existence in an oceanic space of flows.

Ultimately, the monsters are less mysterious than the "technical" officials who are dispatched to the island as the outermost agents of civilization. As always, humans are the real enigma; accordingly, the relevant question is not who the monsters are but what the two men stand for. Patently both of them, as weatherman and lighthouse keeper, are symbol-manipulators on the outer reaches of global expansion. As such, they are members of the "transnational knowledge elite" that forms the avant-garde of globalization (Bauman 145). Members of this global class have loosened their bonds with a territorial community and live, so to speak, on the edge of political geography. The monsters are merely a foil to this free-floating condition of abstract withdrawal. These humanoids covered with repulsive skin and speaking incomprehensible languages are the quintessential natives. Their fate is to be colonized. But theirs is no longer the classic colonization of conquest but rather the colonization of exclusion that emerges when imperialism runs out of geographic space and technology makes populations redundant. Then colonialism takes a vertical turn, unfolding interior spaces of domination. Taking advantage of income differentials, a new kind of settlers appears in the midst of service-oriented societies. The new colonists, equipped with satellite disks, optical cable, and low-fare flights, isolate themselves in what sometimes look like fortified extensions of their original cultures, while demanding services and even legislation tailored to their preferences.

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Outside the privileged space of flows there is only the monstrous. Monsters are not an effect of distance or remoteness but of mobility; they are made visible by the speed with which global elites circulate and recompose their identities. In *Cold Skin* the island is less a place than a time warp. Like space travelers, the two people on the island have escaped the gravitational force of humanity, and feel a moral lightness that manifests itself in the alacrity with which they set aside primary taboos. Sánchez Piñol suggests that a difference in historical pressure generates violence. In wars, the narrator realizes, the struggle is between the forces of the present and those of the past (41). Temporal foreignness elicits aggression as readily as foreignness in a geographic or national sense. War is an abjecting strategy, by which one society attributes to another, those traits that it can no longer or not yet countenance in its elf. The collective ego spins an ideal screen around itself to shut off the return of the repressed, which from then on appears only in the guise of the enemy. But it only takes one monster pushing his arm through a crack in the door and catching the narrator by the ankle, for the latter to regress to a stage of primitive ferocity: “In the blink of an eye, I fell from the loftiest spirituality to the basest animal instincts” (37).

From this moment, the scientific mission is forgotten, and the narrator’s presence on the island quickly degenerates into unbounded carnage, with the monsters supplying the cannon fodder. All at once, the link between epistemology and violence is exposed. Even before Darwin predicted the elimination of countless races by the higher ones, “science” had concluded that the dynamics between civilized and primitive peoples justified the extinction of the latter. The new “science” of anthropology asserted that savagery was a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Thus, “for natural historians, economists, and ethnologists alike, savagery itself was often, by definition, a sufficient explanation for the extinction of some, if not all, savage races” (Brantlinger 18). Progress, a doctrinal offshoot of the

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Enlightenment, became a tautological rationale for the elimination of weaker competitors. In this enterprise "science" did not merely supply the power to annihilate, but also the "ethics."

Two centuries later the fatalism has shifted from the inevitability of extermination to its futility. After suffering staggering casualties, the monsters spring back in ever-larger numbers. Killing does not eradicate them, and progressive thinking does not help either. The narrator's enlightened discourse fails to solve the conflict between the local and global spaces, and science miscarries. The ostensible purpose of the human presence on the island was, after all, to keep track of atmospheric conditions and send luminous signals into the ocean. Yet the beams of light are not used to emit signals but to strafe the monsters so they can be shot more efficiently. The irony of this situation is that possession of symbolic knowledge blinds to certain truths; the truth, for instance, that the enemy's recourse to violence does not prove its irrationality any more than the rationality of ends is proof of being outside the cycle of violence. "She had made me see what the shafts from the lighthouse hid from view. She had made me see that the enemy could be anything at all except a beast; that he can never be a beast, and on the island less so than anywhere else" (289). On the island less than anywhere else, because the enemy's inhumanity is nothing but the desperate defense of its habitat seen by an aggressive *homo eligens*. Incapable of grasping the gradation between himself and the species he despises, Batís strikes out of fear "that his toads might somehow resemble us, and was terrified of their making reasonable demands" (164). Ultimately, what elicits his brutality is the fear of being like the worthless masses and having to balance his privilege against their nakedness. But negation is another form of identification. Batís "had gone so far in his attempts to distance himself from the beasts that he had turned into the worst toad imaginable: a monster with whom it was impossible to converse" (276). Could this

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ecstatic identification with the abject, this identity in excess of the self, be the reason for Batís's mystifying cry, "Love, love," just before he is devoured by the Cicauta (164)? What is the meaning of this expletive, proffered in obvious one-upmanship against Kurz's mysterious last words, "The horror! The horror!" (71)?

These words are all the more perplexing in that Batís kills until the last moment and his self-sacrifice does not end the violence. The identification of love with death, achieved by the emotional pitch to which Batís has worked himself up on finding out the narrator's sexual "affair" with Aneris, brings home the relation between violence and desire. If Batís ends up proclaiming love as the other side of violence, it is because he has become a witness to the exuberance that Bataille perceived as the common source of death and sexuality. Both drives "are experienced, first as a negation of our selves, and then, in a sudden reversal, as the profound truth of the movement of which life is the manifestation" (*La part* 75). There is nothing mysterious, then, if the ultimate truth of the natural world is revealed precisely at the moment when the self resolves its discontinuity and merges into the current of life in an ecstasy of pain. The cultural taboos, already damaged by zoophilia, founder completely when Batís enters the cannibalistic compact as its willing victim. Bataille's definition of eroticism helps us to understand the inevitable progress from erotic excess to self-extinction. "Eroticism is assenting to life even in death" (*Death* 5). Life that is conscious of its ultimate purpose of extinction gives rise to eroticism, or sexuality drawn away from its natural goal of reproduction. In contrast with Aneris's sexual freedom, Batís's (and eventually the narrator's) gratification is shot through with a desire that draws its power from the strength of the prohibition. The urge of escaping from humanity in search of the unbounded self-sufficiency of a god, amounts to the psychological desire for transgressing the most basic taboos and regressing to animalism. Bataille quotes the Marquis de Sade saying, "There is nothing that can set

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bounds to licentiousness" and comments: "Nothing can set bounds to licentiousness … or rather, generally speaking, there is nothing that can conquer violence" (*Death* 42).

Desire increases when it is thwarted. Thus, Bataille can affirm that taboos engender desire. But taboos are nothing but impediments to a desire that must be present for the taboo to have any significance, and thus we must turn to a different theory of its origin. René Girard sees desire as originating from a competitive dynamic based on imitation. Desire is learned, he says, through an attitude of mimeticism. The most basic situation is the competitive dyad in front of a single object of desire, mimetic desire turning into jealousy and its derivatives, all the way through violence and murder. In this light, we can make sense of Sánchez Piñol's reduction of human presence on the island to the antagonistic dyad Batís-narrator, as well as the displacement of the murder that should resolve the crisis of mutually thwarted desire, to the scapegoat that is saddled with the responsibility for the conflict. As Girard explains, "Physical and moral monstrosity go together in mythology" (34).

The monsters are not monsters on account of their appearance, but in a mythical reversal, their appearance signifies their radical perversity. Their skin, language or even accent, in brief their foreignness or difference, give away their mischievousness and alerts about their power to destroy the human community. Such signs are themselves violence exerted against the community, which is then roused to self-defense. It is no ordinary violence that is at stake, but the insatiable violence of the ogres and the Minotaur, violence that bounds over the primary cultural laws and threatens with a return of chaos. In mythology, such violence often appears as the eating of human flesh. The presence of this feature in *Cold Skin* refers us unmistakably to the ethnographic fears and prejudices of the hot imperialist era, even if, properly speaking, cannibalism only exists as a function of the

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taboo raised against it at the dawn of humanity, and consequently takes on the aura of a transgression. And transgression implies culture. The question then is the nature of the monster's violence. But the Cicauta, though not human, are not neatly animal either. They are the in-between, a transitional state embodying, from the viewpoint of the beleaguered humans, the fear of losing their self-contained character and regressing to an undifferentiated state, which the novel represents with the amphibian masses that emerge inexhaustibly from the ocean. Whatever else it may mean, the violence of the Cicauta signifies the power to effect the transition from individuality to a state of flux, that of the monster. And this state happens to be not only an adequate image for the transition from discontinuity to continuity, which according to Bataille "we cannot visualize … without doing violence to our imagination (*Death* 11), but also an allegory for the eventual destination of exacerbated individuality in modern fluid life. Ultimately, Batís's self-sacrifice in a vortex of violence ensures his desire by abolishing the thin partition set up between him and the toads by the taboo, in the process making good his self-mythification—if, as Girard asserts, myth always refers us to victimization disguised as a cultural feat (24-44).

Cohen suggests that cannibalism stands for incorporation into the wrong cultural body (14). Monsters, he claims, patrol the borders of the official geography, restricting the mobility of private bodies. To go over the limit results in being destroyed by monsters or in becoming monstrous oneself (12). This was indeed the classic alternative. But what happens when the official geography recognizes no limits, when there are no longer right and wrong cultural bodies, and right and wrong represent degrees of fluidity and resistance? Under those conditions the abject no longer traces the curve of the ultimate horizon but reappears inside the compass of the familiar, in one's island so to speak. It is significant that Batís is not just destroyed by the monsters but also incorporated into the

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monstrous. His obsessive hatred of the monsters flips into desire, as if the monstrous mass were only an enlarged extension of Aneris's body, which he routinely violates seeking a pleasurable self-dissolution. It is not by chance that he immolates himself precisely at the point where Aneris is taken away from him, and when abjection is so extreme that it switches into identification. By erecting an exorbitant outside, Batís hollows out an equally excessive inside, and reaches the point where the thinning partition gives out. At that moment he translates Kurz's "Exterminate all the brutes!" (51) into an equally unrestrained communion with the abject. Like an ancient divinity, he seems to have grasped that ingestion is the ultimate purpose of combat.

The reversal by which Batís switches from being hunted down by the throng to becoming an indistinct part of the monstrous comes as a surprise, but along the way clues have pointed to the dissolution of the ego. Early on, the undecidability of the foamy line between the sea and the earth suggests the disappearing boundary between subject and object, the essential categories of European rationalism (4). Sánchez Piñol turns Verne's naturalistic description of the landscape at the beginning of *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* to psychological account. Observing the low intensity of the sun in those latitudes, he remarks: "But the landscape we see beyond our eyes tends to be a reflection of what we hide within us" (25). As the nightly skirmishes deteriorate into the nightmare of total war, the narrator realizes that the desolation of the world is a reflection of the self's depletion.

No Nietzschean "high noon" awaits global humanity; the only lucidity achieved is the certainty of self-delusion. Hugo's verses come to mind: "No eye so vile nor abject that brushes not/Against lightning from on high, now tender, now fierce." Only, the poem's optimism, a counterpoint to Darwinian fatalism, is voided by *homo eligens*'s tautological

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choice: "If I had lifted a finger at that moment, lightning would have fallen on us from every corner of the universe. I did not lift a finger, of course; I turned back" (289). Paradoxically, the premium placed by postmodern man on individual freedom of choice coexists with an acute feeling of the futility of exercising that very freedom. The narrator wonders what it would take to transfigure the combat zone into civic space, and concludes that for such a space to emerge fear must be dislodged and replaced with curiosity. But by not lifting a finger and missing the "lightning from on high," he discovers the futility of philosophy. "I was miserable on discovering that knowing the truth does not change one's life" (170).

The Lighthouse

What becomes of abstract systems when institutions cannot be relied upon to ameliorate the life of the masses? Anthony Giddens considers that such systems contributed to the "ontological security" of modernity (92). They supplied the necessary confidence in the continuity of self-identity and in the reliability of the social and material environments of action. Late modernity, however, puts ontological security in jeopardy when the abstract systems underpinning social trust start to dislocate the expectations of constancy in persons and things.

In *Cold Skin* the emergence of monsters threatens ontological security at the edge of global modernity's time-space distantiation. The Cicauta stand for place-bound life that revolts against the abstract systems spearheaded by the transnational cultural elite. Their "tribal" behavior is nothing short of a survival strategy. In fact, the term "tribal" ought to alert us to the ultimate significance of a social science whose epistemological categories reflect a typology of power. Like all proximate social formations, tribes distort the

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mediations of power that is exerted at a distance. Place-bound and territorial, these insoluble clumps of power warp the fluidity that lies at the basis of empire's total socialization. At the dawn of the postmodern culture of consumer identities, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno located in the myth of the world adventurer the origin of the instrumental use of "enlightenment." Our foundational cultural heroes were the forerunners of today's frequent flyer intellectuals, the new world citizens whose lifestyle, even more than their discourse, advances the obliteration of genuine cultural communities wherever they may exist.

> Hence universal socialization, as outlined in the narratives of the world traveler Odysseus and the solo manufacturer Crusoe, from the start included the absolute solitude which emerged so clearly at the end of the bourgeois era. Radical socialization means radical alienation. Odysseus and Crusoe are both concerned with totality: the former measures whereas the latter produces it. Both realize totality only in complete alienation from all other men, who meet the two protagonists only in an alienated form—as enemies or as points of support, but always as tools, as things. (Adorno and Horkheimer 62)

Sánchez Piñol updates the story of the lone adventurer. His world citizen is neither a producer like Crusoe nor a plunderer like Kurz, nor yet a geographer like Odysseus or a land surveyor like K. He is closest to the latter in that he is also an anonymous functionary who comes face to face with the alienation at the heart of the fortress, which in his case is less the emblem of a decaying feudal state than of a totalizing system of communications. In this system, the ego grows and tends to become absolute at the expense of its ontological security. Unlike the tropical island that provides the hot-imperialist Crusoe with a Calvinist paradise, Sánchez Piñol's island is a posthuman scenery, the kind of place to which advanced globalization is reducing the planet. "The island was practically devoid of life. There were no birds or insects. The wind and waves

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were the only sounds to accompany our own" (153). To be sure, the reference to the stillness echoes Conrad's "A great silence around and above" (20), but the glacial island lacks the latency of life at the heart of the Dark Continent.

There is nothing as deceptively safe as a desolate area. The isolated towers and slabs of postwar construction, the "hard squares" decked out with steel "sculptures" that became the logo of downtown renewal schemes everywhere, not only destroyed much of the urban heritage but turned established communities into transit areas where dangerous creatures prowl at night. The consequence is an intensified individualism that raises the specter of war of all against all. The transformation of the enlightenment project into a security utopia is visible in the proliferation of gated communities around the world. Some of these security settlements resemble fortresses. Desert Island, situated east of Palm Desert, California, is a development of high-rise condominiums surrounded by a 25-acre moat. Pirates easily raided Verne's lighthouse at the end of the world. Sánchez Piñol's version of the same building looks more like the ongoing development of an "architecture of fear," as Nan Ellin calls the new residential designs (Ellin 1997). The steady transformation of the tower into a bastion recalls the new houses of the wealthy, boasting sophisticated security systems, the posting of signs to intimidate trespassers, and "security gardens" meant to impede access to intruders. Such houses may also contain "safe rooms" accessed by sliding panels and secret doors, the equivalent of the trap that divides the lighthouse into a first and second line of fortification.

With the metaphor of the island, and even more clearly, with the increasingly fortified and ever more vulnerable lighthouse, Sánchez Piñol insinuates the tottering balance between security and alienation in a world that has shifted from subduing by penetration and acculturation to managing the masses through their consignment to the waste heap.

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Postmodern Darwinism turns alienation into a value for surviving. Under these conditions the ability to exclude breeds an ephemeral sense of strength. "You are weak, friend, a very weak man. Not everyone is capable of withstanding the lighthouse" (136), says Batís. The radical solitude in which he luxuriates turns everyone outside the lighthouse into a mortal enemy, while inside life is inexorably depleted. And the scarcest of all is the very thing that global communication was supposed to provide in abundance. Meaning becomes volatile, ironically, in the lives of the professional symbol manipulators. "Our life in the lighthouse is the most absurd of epics. It lacks meanings" (143), muses the narrator. No less than Kurz, who is bound to the interior station through his darker self—"He hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away" (57)—Batís is confined to the island by his own hatred.

Ours may be a risk society, to use the concept developed by Ulrich Beck, but not in the sense that it gives rise to temporally and spatially delimited hazards that can be managed through an ever more refined rationality, but because it is marked by "the growing insight that we live in an interconnected world that is getting out of control" (99). The general intertwining of fates means that the distinction between inside and outside is evaporating, and the emergence of monsters is inextricable from the arrival of the colonists. Colonialism, as Bruno Latour observed, involves the flow of colonial flotsam and jetsam in response to the imperial ebb. It infuses colonial people, places, and events into the colonizer's space (qtd. Allen 131). Colonial processes dissolve the existence of "others" and globalize risk. As the narrator remarks, "That lighthouse is a mirage. There is no refuge to be found within its walls" (181). To which we could add that in order to survive in the fluid world every creature develops a cold skin.

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Without a clear-cut distinction between inside and outside, the capacity to abject and, in the same proportion, the capacity to cultivate an identity, are compromised. The Cicauta, the narrator realizes, are not monsters but competitors; they share with him the same object of desire. Like the Achaeans besieging the Trojans, the Cicauta do not fight for possession of the barren battleground around the lighthouse but for a next of kin whose presence in the opposite camp violates an interdiction. "What if they were fighting for something besides the island? After all, what would they want with such a desolate land, with its absurd vegetation and jagged rocks? Perhaps, just perhaps, they sought something far more precious: exactly that which I desired" (169-170). At the height of the war, the narrator has an inkling that the monstrous may arise from mimetic desire, and that the violence with which it is credited may be an effect of the violence projected against it. What the narrator has started to suspect is, in fact, that the monsters may be the consequence of a prodigious occultation of an earlier, fundamental harm of which they were the victims rather than the perpetrators. But this inkling will not go very far because of the renunciation and retreat that a full revelation would impose.

Every attempt at an approximation fails. The monsters are thoroughly and irremissibly monstrous because they have been designated as victims. They are victimized, without the persecutors admitting it, because they hinder the possession of an object of desire, which supposes the transgression of a social imperative endowed with sacred or solemn force. No wonder that this transgressive object is at the heart of the violence unleashed, if, as Bataille speculates, "taboos appeared in response to the necessity of banishing violence from the course of everyday life" (*Death* 49). This is of course the most plausible explanation for the terrific force and universality of taboos. But this explanation refers us again to the combination of desire and violence that must be exorcized from everyday life through the severe penalty imposed on transgressor s, whether real or

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imagined. Mythically, the flow of desire is always reversed, so that it appears to come from the victim, whose sacrifice appeases the outburst of hatred in which the collectivity is immersed. Thus Batís and the narrator are *Kollegen* so long as they exterminate monsters, but revert to their mimetic jealousy as soon as the massacre subsides. In other words, it is violence *already* directed against the purported transgressor that confirms his guilt by reversing the direction of desire and establishing an unspoken, because unspeakable, bond between subject and object.

Following the Cicautas' gaze, the narrator turns around to discover Aneris perched on the balcony of the lighthouse, like Hellen looking down at Hector from the wall of Troy. In this gaze, which is bursting with mimetic desire, the narrator believes that he is looking at Aneris through the eager eyes of the Cicauta, whose monstrosity, far from attenuated, increases to the degree that it shares the narrator's craving for something "far more precious" than mere territoriality, something so priceless in fact that it can only be the object of a monstrous desire. His inkling that Aneris is the reason for the Cicautas' ferocity brings home the meaning of Hugo's already quoted verses: "No Beast is there without glimmer of infinity,/No eye so vile nor abject that brushes not/Against lightning from on high, now tender, now fierce." Infinity and the abject are polar aspects of the same notion. Strung to its desire, the ego can only break out of its self-imprisonment by compromising its survival as a subject. This is possibly the gist of Batís's mystifying testimonial, "Love, love" (164), but also the reason for the narrator's melancholy realization that, without the courage to ignore the mirage of social utopias, the subject's transit from the island will not come to pass. He will be trapped in the density of his mirages, and as a result violence will recommence.

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The only way out from the impasse of mimetic desire that leads to death is an intriguing feat of mimeticism that voids the effect of desire and unmakes the abyss opened between the subject and the rest of humanity. When the atmospheric officer's replacement utters his refusal to die on the island, the narrator cynically advises him to go home. "Leave? How do you expect me to go anywhere?" the new officer replies, "Look around you! Do you see a single ship? We are at the end of the world." "Do not trust the lighthouse— answers the narrator—. Only those who have lost their faith arrive on these shores. Faithless men cling to delusions. [...] If you had faith you should be able to walk on water and go back from whence you came" (181).

These words do not reveal the narrator's lucidity or his cynicism. By his own admission, they come from elsewhere, and his own passion, disguised as critical reason, prevents him from taking them seriously: "I had been a mere ventriloquist. The chains that bound me kept me from believing what I had just said" (181). There is no reason to call foul and accuse Sánchez Piñol to bring in the supernatural into his story, anymore than he does with the intrusion of the monsters. Those words come from a textual distance which the burning of the universal library in the panic of mimetic violence has not quite obliterated. They issue from a text that is still capable of acting from the depths of the cultural memory through a mind that has been seasoned by lethal struggles. But if they collide with skepticism, their effect on a naive, - or childish person is literally disarming:

> The rifle fell from my hands. I could not believe it. He was actually walking on water. He took on step, and then another. The ocean supported his weight like a liquid bridge. He was leaving, abolishing the lighthouse and the evils that kept the fires of war burning. He had realized that delusions are not to be argued with; they must be ignored. He had eradicated all the passions and perversions by renouncing them right from the start. That boy was the eyelids of the world. A few more steps and we would wake from our nightmare. (182)

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For the first time in the novel, the island gives way under the strength of interpretive lucidity that melts illusion by refusing its false security and, therewith, the violence associated with it. But of course, this narrative already has its own text, and mimetic repetition would only look like a parody. Already on his way to crossing the ocean, the new atmospheric officer turns around and says, outraged: "'What the devil am I doing?' he cried, with his arms flung wide open. 'Do you think I am Jesus Christ?'" (182).

The imitation is patently absurd, and so the man goes back to the absurd of the island. "He turned back. By the time the youth had reached land, he had the spirit of a warrior" (182). The situation is fascinating in that as the refusal of a wonder of faith ensures the perpetual reappearance of the monsters. The young man feels himself mocked, and certainly, his walking on water is a mock-miracle. Right after he retraces his steps, the narrator makes out the flat reefs under the water. No positive law has been breached; no trick of levitation has been sprung on the unsuspecting reader. But the failure of transit does not cancel the transit itself. The event remains unimpeachable as cultural memory. "There is between the Father and the world an abyss that comes from the world itself and from its violence. Jesus' return to the father signifies victory over violence and the crossing of the abyss", writes Girard (206). The problem, narratively speaking, is that this story cannot be appropriated and reworked like those of the classic adventure novel, because, as Girard makes abundantly clear, this story alone revealed what was fictional in myth and thus brought an end to its dominion. Fiction still goes on, because, as Girard explains, at first no one perceived its cancellation. And this means that, even if the abyss was crossed, and the realm of myth left behind, "the process [by which the mirage comes to be recognized] will take place constantly in the style of the ancient gods, in the perpetual circle of violence and the sacred" (206). This is still Batís's island. In the

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narrator's final reflection, "Definitively, the world was a predictable place, lacking in novelty" (182).

Notes

[i] I follow the English translation whenever possible. The translation of abridged passages is mine. On those occasions the pagination refers to the original Catalan edition.
[ii] Unaccountably, the American translator has substituted "Gruner" for the original name of the lighthouse keeper, which I retain throughout.

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