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Discovery of the Self and Authorial 'Outing' of the Protagonist
in Manuel Mujica Lainez's *El retrato amarillo*

The literary production of Manuel Mujica Lainez is plentiful and varied, and although existing criticism has examined his novels *Bomarzo* and *El unicornio*, to seeming near exhaustion, his short fiction has been unfairly undertreated. Just as scarce is discussion regarding the homosexual character in Mujica Lainez's work. 'To out someone'— or to reveal that someone is gay— has become the cultural as well as the critical term for what Mujica Lainez eventually does to "El retrato amarillo's" protagonist, Miguel. I shall attempt to show that although Mujica Lainez's process of "outing" Miguel and his father is typically subtle for the social milieu in which Mujica Lainez wrote, it is exactly this subtlety— with its textual innuendo and encoding— that makes the 'outing' of Miguel so effective, and at the same time, so easy to overlook.

Perhaps the chronologically atypical, neo-realist style of his stories, many of which were written amidst the Boom and its experimental tendencies, left Mujica Lainez occupying the position of the outsider, but his having hailed Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac as two great influences in his life, his neo-realist predisposition should be understandable (Cruz 54). In addition to a realist approach, his short stories are at the same time rich in imagery and metaphorical language.

"El retrato amarillo" is no exception to the hybridized realist/modernista approach so typical of Mujica Lainez's work, and it predictably maintains a strained relationship with 'lower', bodily functions—namely, in this case, sex. As if this tension weren't enough, if we consider that modernists cultivate an aesthetic of 'el buen gusto', we must realize that, on the whole, the theme of homosexuality would have languished in secrecy. Mujica Lainez felt compelled, however, to include gay characters in his narrative (e.g., *El unicornio*, *Sergio*).

In any event, any significant, specific articulation of sensuality or sexuality in "Retrato" is, generally speaking, lacking. The one notable exception is the encounter between the young Maximina and Absalón. The torrid scene is described in the following way:

El gemido renació y fue repitiéndose, como una breve canción angustiada. Miguel [...] distinguió [...] unas formas blancas, entrelazadas, desnudas [...] no comprendió qué hacían, y fue apoderándose de él un terror de esos que sobrecogían y lo dejaban helado, tieso [...] Sus desnudeces relampagueaban en la gran sombra trémula, como si no fueran un hombre y una mujer sino un ser fabuloso, de nácar fulgente, con tentáculos que sin cesar se retorcían. (153)

This scene is of pivotal importance to the novella on several levels: its function is that it reminds the reader that Miguel is still young enough to be ignorant of sex, since 'he did not understand what they were doing'. Coupling this innocence with the description of the setting reinforces the narration's taboo on sex ("canción angustiada"; "terror"; "en la gran sombra trémula")¹. Furthermore, the appearance of this scene so early in the narration (only the sixth page of an 83-page novella) prefigures a theme of sexuality. In addition, we must note that Miguel's reaction to such overt eroticism is shock. Miguel's imagination distorts the scene into a series of disturbing mental images, but this can be easily attributed to his generalized mental

confusion. This mental state, which we shall explore in detail immediately, is a leit motiv in the narration, and comes to be representative of Miguel's discomfort with his own sexuality and yearning for his father's presence.

In an effort to provide insight into Miguel's psyche, therefore, let us examine a series of descriptions contained in the text. The novella opens with a third-person, limited omniscient narrator, who states in the first sentence of the story that, "Esa extraña sensación de separarse de sí mismo, desdoblándose, y de que una parte suya, aérea, flotaba blandamente entre los árboles oscuros, se aguzaba al regresar por la calle de la ribera [...]" (147 emphasis added). From the beginning of the story, then, the reader is familiarized with the ethereal, almost estranged relationship young Miguel maintains with his own reality. Miguel's troubled emotional/ mental state is especially emphasized throughout the first (and second) of the four parts of the novella. In addition to this passage, Miguel's crying in class for no apparent reason (148-149), and the various occasions on which he is asked 'what is wrong' (155, 157, 166) all signal to the reader an instability of unknown origin in Miguel's subconscious. As a further and final example of Miguel's agitation, one observes the first section's final exchange which occurs between Miguel and his mother, Mariana. To the narrator's haunting question, "¿Qué le pasa?", Miguel thinks in response:

¿Qué le pasa? ¿Qué le pasa? Era la eterna interrogación. Todos la formulaban ante él, en cualquier instante, como si al hacerlo levantaran un candelabro cuyas llamas bailaban sobre su frente esquivada. (166)

Here Miguel's description of his own expression as "esquiva" seems to imply that he fears that someone will discover his difference, a difference which he himself does not yet recognize. Earlier in the narration when the other children at school ask him why he was crying, Miguel thinks himself crazy, and wonders if "por eso era tan distinto" (149). Although we have as yet to connect this feeling of difference to Miguel's sexuality, it can probably be linked to the phenomenon known in Queer Theory as 'queer childhood', wherein the child questions his/her 'normalcy' in terms of a perceived deviation from heterosexuality.² This theme will manifest itself more fully with the introduction of the photograph of his father in chapter three.

We may be able to infer that the root of Miguel's mental restlessness is somehow connected to his father—or at least to his absence. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that the father is never alluded to by name in the story. As further confirmation of the onset of Mujica Lainez's obsession with the notion of the father, I quote a shortened form of a lengthy but telling passage in this first chapter, "Su padre, a quien no se nombraba nunca [...] ¿Cómo olvidarlo [...]? Mariana [Miguel's mother] esquivaba su recuerdo [...], pero— Miguel lo comprendía ahora— era imposible, absolutamente imposible que lo descartara como si no hubiera existido (156). Shortly after this passage, Miguel recalls the erotic imagery from the earlier scene that occurs between Maximina and Absalón. Miguel comes to realize, therefore, that he is the fruit of similar intimacies between his mother, Mariana, and his father, and that he is the inheritor of a mysterious "padre de quien nada sabía y de quien todo se callaba" (157).

Mujica Lainez's persistence on the theme of paternity can be further observed in a reference to the Greek warrior, Patroclus, made by don Bonifacio, Miguel's grandfather (163). The situation is the following: Miguel has been given the *Iliad* by his deeply admired friend, Marcos. Don Bonifacio, in reference to the book, exclaims nostalgically to Miguel, "¡Admirable Patroclo!" (163). In a single utterance, then, Mujica Lainez ascribes dual importance to a

classical reference: the etymological meaning of the name Patroclus, “glory of the father” (Room 231), seems to foreshadow chapter three’s later insistence on the relationship between Miguel (who is his father’s ‘glory’) and his father. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the alert reader will remember that Patroclus, in the post-Homeric tradition, is the lover of Achilles.³ In the mere mention of a name, Mujica Lainez invokes the idea of homosexuality through the Patroclus-Achilles dyad, as well as the possibility of its manifestation in Miguel. In addition, we should note that the *Iliad* comes from his friend, Marcos, and, although at this point perhaps only tentatively, we may infer that Miguel and Marcos share a psycho-sexual bond at some level. Indeed, this assertion will bear itself out in a climactic moment toward the end of the novella.

The presence of a series of bizarre images and experiences lends to chapter two an enigmatic quality, and marks a significant delay in the reader’s arrival at the moment of Miguel’s anagnorisis. Instead of a heightening in the reader’s anticipation of the story’s climax, Mujica Lainez takes chapter two as an opportunity to more deeply define Miguel’s character. He has been left alone by his mother, Mariana, so that she can attend a social function with her suitor, Francisco. Francisco seems to present Miguel with the fear that his mother will abandon him once she re-marries, and here, this fear manifests itself in the myriad surrealist images, that assault Miguel when left alone in the house. These images in themselves are probably not the primary importance of this chapter; rather, the images serve to symbolize a personality trait in Miguel that, although somewhat stereotypically, lends credence to an emerging same-sex oriented sexuality. The sensitivity that now permits Miguel’s mind to distort reality, in essence torturing him, is candidly pondered by our narrator: “La [sic] lágrimas surcaron sus mejillas. Lloraba por él, por el pobre Miguel exiliado como un leproso, porque tenía una sensibilidad intolerable [....]” (180). The theme of queer childhood alluded to earlier, wherein Miguel feels painfully different from other (read, heterosexual) people, again arises in the phrase, “exiliado como un leproso”. More importantly, however, he is finally able to ascribe a source to this feeling of ostracism: an ‘intolerable sensitivity’. Traditionally, and certainly in other works of Mujica Lainez, sensitivity has been associated with both artistic attention to detail and a gay sensibility. Since artistic attention to detail is lacking as a theme in “El retrato”, we can safely conclude that here, sensitivity is a codification for homosexuality.

Perhaps we can postulate that the complete absence of the father, so insisted upon in the previous chapter, is the source of Miguel’s discontent. Indeed, if we see chapter two’s focus on Francisco as a representation of the father figure in “Retrato”, the situation takes on an ironic hue: the fact that Francisco does not perceive Miguel’s inner turmoil exacerbates the opinion that Miguel requires the discovery of his biological father.

The revelation of Miguel’s father, the novella’s first climax, finally occurs in chapter three, when Miguel breaks the taboo surrounding his father, inquiring of his tutor specific details about him. She admits having known him, though very little, and presents Miguel with a “borrado” photograph—the photograph so anticipated since the story’s title. The presentation of the only intact photograph of the father produces in Miguel “una emoción profunda”, which, “lo estremecía” (192). The reader palpably experiences along with Miguel his longing to discover the identity of this man whose mere acquaintance he yearns to make. Indeed, having delayed the actual introduction of the father (even if only pictorially) until almost the exact center of the story privileges the event and finally satisfies the reader’s curiosity, piqued since the beginning of the novella. Hereafter in the narration, the photograph’s faded quality is insisted upon,

thereby surrounding it with mystery and intrigue. It deeply affects Miguel, and the reader begins to notice parallels between him and the photograph, the most notable being the haziness of the picture, which seems to mirror the delusional, mental fugue-like state in which Miguel has languished since the start of the tale.

Probably the most unique feature of this photograph is that Miguel's father appears in it with an unknown, handsome male stranger of an "aire romántico" (194), who is soon identified by Miguel's tutor as Max van Arenbergh. Van Arenbergh is described simply as "un amigo de [su] padre" (196), and later on in chapter four as even "muy amigos" (223). The complex nature of the word 'amigo' obliges us to make an interesting connection with previous textual information. Miguel and his playmate, Isidro, talk about childhood memories, which include Maximina and Absalón. At the mere mention of these names, however, Miguel becomes uncomfortable—understandable given the shocking sexual scene Miguel is privy to back in chapter one. Isidro comments, ironically, for the reader, that, "Maximina y el Absalón siempre fueron amigos" (200 emphasis added). Soon after, while contemplating his newly-acquired photograph, Miguel wonders aloud, "¿Cómo habrán sido?... digo... mi padre y este van Arenbergh... ¿Serían amigos como vos y yo...?" (201). The purposeful semantic confusion created by Mujica Lainez here is obvious: the tutor's initial description of van Arenbergh as the 'friend' of Miguel's father, and Isidro's ironic description of Maximina and Absalón merely as 'friends', when the reader fully knows that it is highly sexual, must force Miguel to subconsciously wonder about the extent of the friendship between van Arenbergh and his father.

Van Arenbergh, although acutally absent in the narration, now assumes an active role in the story. Somewhat fantastically, van Arenbergh's image accompanies Miguel on his way home. Upon arriving, it occurs to Miguel to playfully deceive his mother and Francisco, saying that he has actually seen van Arenbergh at the train station. This causes both Francisco and Mariana to recoil in shock, but the effect Miguel relishes most about this lie is that it forces Francisco to admit he was never a friend of van Arenbergh. Miguel feels vindicated by this since van Arenbergh now remains "salvado, intacto, para su padre y para él. Era algo suyo, puesto que había sido de su padre" (208). The ambiguity of this phrase is not lost on the intelligent reader: Miguel has not only provisionally identified with his father, but he has also metaphorically replaced him in his relationship with van Arenbergh.

Until now, we have been obliged to rely on innuendo and semantics for ascribing a sexual element to the relationship between Miguel's father and van Arenbergh. However, considering the foregoing analyses and the observation that both figures seem to Miguel "románticos" (194), it is probably a safe assumption that the "secreto del papel amarillo" (198) is that Miguel's father had been intimately involved with the man in the photograph. The prevarication contained in these textual footprints at the same time reinforces the general sexual taboo present in the story and the taboo on discussions about Miguel's own (and his father's) supposed 'homosexual lineage'.

Chapter four opens with a renewed insistence by Mujica Lainez on Miguel's difference: "la diferencia que lo aislaba de los demás alumnos de su clase"; "¿qué me pasa? ¿Por qué soy distinto? ¿soy yo el distinto, o lo son ellos?" (211-212).⁴ Continued attempts by Miguel to discover "lo que se oculta detrás de las figuras" (213) while at the museum with his class on a field trip prompt him to think about his father and van Arenbergh. The suggestive force behind

these thoughts makes Miguel notice a couple, and a hazy image of a couple at that: “entre el follaje, a lo lejos, se esfumaban dos figuras vestidas de blanco, dos hombres delgados que marchaban del brazo sin apresurarse” (215 emphasis added). This is a decisive moment in the narration, for although the figures he sees in the distance may actually be a man and woman, Miguel’s mind’s eye envisions two men arm-in-arm. Miguel, we are now able to conclude, is capable of envisioning a same-sex coupling as a valid form of sexual expression. Although Miguel’s reason for excitement is the chance to actually meet his father, ours stems from the fact that Miguel is coming into a full knowledge of himself. Indeed, Miguel’s ability to identify himself with his father, whom he envisions as being in love with another man, is testament to Miguel’s own emerging sexuality.

The second, more understated, but certainly most effective, climax of the story occurs at the end of this last chapter, when Miguel and Marcos become definitively united. Miguel returns home, and the maid, Cándida, recounts to him how Max and Miguel’s father used to read poems to each other in English. It occurs to Miguel that he had seen a volume of poetry by Keats in the study. Upon examining the volume more closely, Miguel discovers the initials “V.A.” (van Arenbergh) inscribed inside the cover. The verses underlined by the couple concern the biblical figure, Ruth “amid the alien corn” and “sick for home”. This longing for a sense of belonging is one that has haunted the entire narration. Just as Max and Miguel’s father belonged together and found a bond “amid the alien corn” (here a metaphor for heterosexuality), Miguel, upon reading a touching letter from his friend Marcos, feels he belongs with him in the same way his father and Max did. This letter profoundly laments Marcos’s inability to say farewell before departing for Europe: [...] no podré abrazarte antes de partir. Siento en el alma, en el alma, no encontrarte. Te escribiré desde allá y espero que tú también me escribas [...] Tu amigo, Marcos. (228)

We need not unduly insist upon the meaning that ‘amigo’ has acquired in this story, but it bears repeating that in this highly euphemistic atmosphere, the possibility exists of misprisoning the letter’s closing, “tu amigo” as something akin to ‘lover’. Hereafter, images and thoughts of Marcos continually intrude upon Miguel’s conscious, and he repeats his name: “Marcos... Marcos...” (228). Mujica Lainez refrains throughout most of the narration, however, from uniting Marcos and Miguel too closely. But it is significant that the friend who so many pages ago loaned to Miguel his copy of the *Iliad*— including its homoerotic undertones— resurfaces at the end of the novella as a point of contact and place of refuge for Miguel. Now, even in spite of Marcos’ departure, Miguel feels emotionally connected to another individual.

At this important moment of the narration, the photograph acquires a new significance. Whereas before Miguel envisioned himself as merely transposed over the figure of his father while being accompanied by Max van Arenbergh, Miguel now fully supplants the image of his father:

[...] divisó una vez más a su padre y a Max van Arenbergh, alejándose con los trajes blancos por la vaguedad de una fotografía; pero ahora sus formas fantasmales se confundían con la suya y la de Marcos, de suerte que eran Marcos y él quienes iban por el parque misterioso [...] (229)

At this point, it appears that, if even tactily, Miguel has finally self-identified as gay, and he at least figuratively begins a life-journey with Marcos.

In conclusion, we can posit that the ending, therefore, is largely a happy one in that it represents connection, communication, and understanding of oneself and others. Indeed, the kind of emphasis on the love ideal we see here is widely considered a Post-Boom characteristic. Moreover, that the subject of homosexuality, largely a social taboo during the Boom years, is even treated at all could be considered a direct result of a Post-Boom 'de-marginalizing' impetus. We are significantly prevented from drawing the conclusion that "El retrato amarillo" is at all a Post-Boom text, however, for three reasons: first, and most obviously, the early date of original publication, 1956, makes impossible characterizing "El retrato amarillo" as Post-Boom. Second, with regard to theme, Miguel does remain separated from the one person with whom he has forged an eloquent physical and spiritual union. Tentatively, therefore, we could say that since love as a means of mutual human understanding remains frustrated in the text, it is, in fact, typically Boom in nature.⁵ Finally, Miguel elaborates his identity through the past. In ever tightening concentric circles beginning in the past with his father and his possible lover, Max, Miguel is able to define himself. This (mildly) perverse tampering with the concept of time also seems to place the novella squarely within a Boom tradition. In light of these arguments, the mere suggestion that "El retrato amarillo" could be considered Post-Boom seems ludicrous; however, given its largely positive message of self-discovery and tentative de-marginalizing initiative, we must consider "El retrato amarillo", perhaps to our surprise, a transitional piece worthy of further investigation.

Notes

¹ Emphasis mine.

² For further explanation of this concept, see: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now", *Tendencias*. Duke UP: Durham, NC, 1993. 1-20.

³ This fact is mentioned by E. J. Kenney in the Melville translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (p. 448).

⁴ Remember our mention of 'queer childhood' on pp. 5-6.

⁵ It should be remembered, however, that this is an unfinished text (Puente Guerra 271), and we cannot be sure whether Marcos and Miguel will remain apart.

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