

Messianicity beyond Militant Messianism

Apostrophe and Survival in Juan Gelman's Poetry

Following Gelman's death in Mexico at the age of eighty-three in January 2014, commemorations of his life and work were prodigious. Though Gelman had not resided in Argentina since before the military coup in 1976, Argentina's president ordered that national flags be flown at half-mast for three days in Gelman's honor following his death. In her presidential communiqué, Cristina Fernández described Gelman as a writer who "conjugated prose with the vocation of revolution and the search for justice."¹ Eduardo Jozami, director of the Argentine Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti, affirmed that "it is possible to see in Gelman's work the history of the (past) century." And the renowned Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón declared that Gelman "did more for justice than millions of judges . . . [He] is a point of reference for all Latin Americans, for the Spanish people, and for all defenders of human rights in the world." Gelman's death also reactivated controversy related to his participation in armed revolutionary groups in the 1960s and '70s. This controversy was instigated by critics on both sides of the political spectrum, and concerned the question of whether Gelman was guilty of hypocrisy due to his lifelong agitation for recognition and redress for the victims of state-sponsored terrorism during the dictatorship, without acknowledging that his involvement in armed insurgency also produced victims and perhaps constituted a certain injustice.

The different perspectives articulated in the wake of Gelman's death reiterated a problem that recurred throughout his life: how to understand the relationship between his commitment to political action (including armed insurgency, civic activism, and journalism) and his poetry. As is

evident from some of the comments above in observation of his death, his writing is often viewed as continuing his politics, the quintessential embodiment of politically committed literature—so much so that one commemorative statement issued by a Peronist group suggested that it was unnecessary to read Gelman’s poetry in order to appreciate his greatness.² Conversely, his poetry has also been regarded as a space apart from his political engagements, a sphere dedicated to personal experience. In addition to biographically motivated interpretations of his experiences of exile, Judaism, or love, for instance, this latter perspective is also shared by the critics who accused him of avoiding the ethical implications of his armed past. The philosopher and poet Oscar del Barco, for instance, calls him a “poet-martyr,” implying that his poetry serves as a space of redemption from his active role in the Dirty War, specifically due to his depictions of the experience of personal loss, including, notably, his son and pregnant daughter-in-law, and therefore his future grandchild (del Barco n.p.). Ceferino Reato, a conservative journalist with a history of antagonizing the recent Peronist rule (namely the governments of Presidents Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández), reiterated del Barco’s critique after Gelman’s death, arguing that Gelman used his poetry as a neutral space of refuge in which to hide from the obligation to re-examine the past, and therefore the very structure of Peronism (Reato, n.p.).

Gelman’s poetry is neither continuous with his political involvements nor is it a space fully disengaged from them. Most of his complex and challenging poems do not conform to the conventions of political or committed literature, which is why it is perhaps tempting to simply fold them into his political activities without reading them. And although much of his poetry addresses issues that appear to be about personal experience, such as love and mourning, these poems do not privilege personal experience over political engagement, but rather function as spaces in which to rethink the basic notions of subjectivity, relation, and history that structure both politics and intimacy. This poetic rethinking constitutes an implicit challenge to some of the basic elements of existing forms of political practice, including those fundamental to the ideology and organization of the Montoneros. Far from constituting a space of refuge for personal redemption, as del Barco and Reato suggest, his poetry interrogates the immunological notion of salvation in all its forms, and explores the possibility of a different thinking of life, community, and history, and therefore a different possibility for politics.

In his reflections on the Montoneros in his letter of resignation from the group and in the interviews with Roberto Mero collected in the 1988 volume *Contraerrotta: Montoneros y la revolución perdida*, Gelman indicates some of the key elements for such a rethinking. In these texts he characterizes the Montoneros as authoritarian, idealist (rather than materialist), and Messianic. He describes how the organization increasingly stifled internal differences and distanced itself from its populist base, including differences of perspective and the uncertainties of popular struggle, in favor of a vertical-militaristic and ultimately elitist structure.³ This top-down approach culminated when the group went clandestine in 1974, effectively renouncing the potential of popular organization in favor of militaristic command, and leaving its populist supporters vulnerable to the death squads in what amounted to “political suicide” (*Contraerrotta* 112). Such political suicide was repeated internally in the organization with the controversial distribution of cyanide pills and the order to take them following capture, to avoid the danger of breaking under torture.

Gelman interprets this relation to suicide as part of a theological dimension of the Montonero philosophy, which he and Mero specify as associated with the Thomistic tradition in Christianity. Gelman explains that Thomas of Aquinas distinguished the Old and New Testaments as pertaining to the “reign of nature” and the “reign of spirit,” respectively.⁴ He then extends this distinction to the nature of human life, considering that the physical body corresponds to that which is obsolete and can be superseded, and the human spirit to what will be redeemed. Mero and Gelman suggest that the notion of the superfluity of the physical informed the “mysticism” of much revolutionary thought, including that of the Montoneros, which perhaps more than any other organization believed in the *spirit* of revolution, and its redemptive resolution at the sacrificial expense of its material bearers. Gelman decries how the Montonero leadership sought to instill not only a Thomistic promise of the endurance of spirit over matter, but also one based on a notion of “individual salvation,” albeit in the name of collective change. He gives the example of a military leader saying such things as, “If you die it doesn’t matter, because tomorrow, when we achieve victory, there will be a school named after you” (*Contraerrotta* 118). Gelman contrasts this ideal of individual martyrdom with the objective of collective action, as well as other ways of relating to life, including alternate mystical approaches that do not appeal to a sense of spiritual

or anthropo-theological “life” based on the sacrifice of the material-physical (117–18).

In keeping with his critique of the immunological and teleological tenets of Montonero ideology, Gelman’s poetry insists on the alter-immunological vulnerability and interrelatedness of life, death, self, other, and past, present, and future. His approach to these figures is clearly influenced by the generalized experience of loss after the coup d’etat in 1976, which included the loss of country (due both to the repression and restructuring of Argentina, and his own experience of exile, which officially lasted until 1989, although he never re-established residence in Argentina), the project of revolution, and the disappearance and death of his son, pregnant daughter-in-law, and numerous friends and colleagues at the hands of the Argentine paramilitaries. Exiled in Europe during this time, he wrote a great deal of poetry, much of which reflects the experience of mourning, at times more explicitly than others. Critics have tended to view these poems as forms of elegiac lamentation, a kind of poetic burial of what cannot strictly be buried.⁵ At a different extreme, Ben Bollig, building on del Barco’s critique, suggests that they provide a melancholic means of keeping the past alive, resisting the passage of time and the need for historical re-evaluation.

Nevertheless Gelman’s poetry articulates a considerably different approach to the experience of loss:

Narrative is a form of delaying death. Poetry is freer: it starts from consciousness of death and goes backward and forward in spite of it. It lives with (*convive con*) death without rejecting it, it tells it that it’s okay that it exists—death exists and that is an oxymoron—but it allows life full of its final silence, that which gives it its word(s) (*ése que le da palabra*). The consciousness of death makes us human and inhuman (*humanos y deshumanos*). (Gelman, “Notas al pie” 13; qtd. in Fabry, *Las formas del vacío: La escritura del duelo en la poesía de Juan Gelman* 19)

Gelman attributes to narrative an attempt to ward off death, and to poetry a mode of accepting our inevitable exposure to it. He suggests that poetry represents our relationship to limits through the silences and gaps that are paradoxically intrinsic to language. He also considers that its relationship to death and rupture grants it a special freedom with regard to time, in which it is not restricted to linearity or a homogenous present that excludes other times. In this way it

corresponds to life, our own life as humans, but also life—or survival, what he later terms *másvida*—as something that exceeds and disrupts any sense whereby human life is understood to be fully present to itself. It therefore “dehumanizes” us, or shows our humanity in the process of being undone, confronted by limits that are nevertheless intrinsic to (human) life.

Derrida considers the relation between the human figure or anthropomorphism and death in his discussion of mourning in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, where he suggests that mourning is a fundamental element of life that concerns not only our memories of the dead, but also our relationships with the living, who, like us, are fundamentally mortal (“Mnemosyne” 28–29). He describes two different tendencies of mourning, one of which could be called prosopopoeic, coming from de Man’s consideration of prosopopoeia as a master figure used to situate self and others within knowledge and representation. Prosopopoeia comes from the Greek (*prosopon poiein*), meaning to give or make a face, and is a process whereby the other “is made as intelligible and memorable as a face” (qtd. in Derrida, “Mnemosyne” 27; from de Man, “Autobiography as De-facement” 76). Prosopopoeic mourning seeks to confer a knowable, determinate self to the other, threatened by dissolution and death.

Derrida describes this kind of mourning as a form of interiorization: we bring the other into ourselves and our memory for safekeeping. He characterizes such interiorization as something both violent and tender: both as a kind of devouring of the other, and a carrying of the other as if it were an unborn child (“Mnemosyne” 34–35). He concedes that it can be tempting to hold a loved one near even though he is gone forever—to keep him in one’s heart, to preserve his memory through images of his face and imagined conversations based on what he might have said or wanted (Borges’s mourning of Beatriz Viterbo in “El Aleph” is a well-known parody of this tendency). Nevertheless, Derrida stresses, in keeping with de Man, that such attempts at preservation ultimately serve to mask the other’s loss, and, perhaps even more importantly, the fact that the other *is* another, and can never be fully interiorized. The other’s death obliges us to confront the fact, perhaps more obvious during life, that the other “is greater than . . . what . . . we can bear, carry, or comprehend” (“Mnemosyne” 33).

This leads Derrida to seek a different form of mourning, one that would acknowledge the “aporia of mourning and of prosopopoeia”

("Mnemosyne" 35). That is, he seeks a mourning that would include "respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us." Rather than a form of prosopopoeia, this mourning would constitute a kind of apostrophe in the sense invoked by Ross Chambers, as informed by the Greek roots *apo* and *strophe*, indicating a turning-away (*Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* 149).⁶ This other kind of mourning involves a turning-to that is also a turning-away, a turning that recognizes the other's turning—taken to an extreme in the form of death, even though it occurs in life as well. This sense of apostrophe testifies to the other as inappropriable and ultimately unknowable, responding to the law of iterability mentioned in the introduction: it involves a "should," a responsibility to the other, and yet it is also ultimately inevitable.

This turning has two especially important effects on the survivor and survival itself, including the survivor's relationship to time and the world. Mourning presupposes a connection to something past, and the prosopopoeic form of mourning tries to bring that past into the present, whereby the lost other continues to live in the mind of the survivor—often in a timeless fashion, since the other's persona consists of memories that are for the most part unchanging. Apostrophic memory and mourning address the past and the past life of another, but they do not try to contain them in the present. On the contrary, they open the present to the temporality of the other, which includes the past but also "lives on" spectrally in multiple temporalities, including the future.

Related to this opening to the temporality of the other is Derrida's description of mourning in relation to an alternate notion of pregnancy: not as the carriage of an integral other within an integral self, as in prosopopoeic mourning, but as an experience that disrupts self-presence and shows us that "we are never *ourselves*" ("Mnemosyne" 28).⁷ The aporia of mourning involves a kind of taking-in of something that cannot be taken in, and which leads to an engendering of possibility (insemination as dissemination, if you will). Like pregnancy, mourning "can only take . . . form through the trace of the other in us, the other's irreducible precedence; in other words, simply the trace, which is always the trace of the other, the finitude of memory, and thus the approach or remembrance of the future" ("Mnemosyne" 29).

Derrida develops the analogy of pregnancy and mourning further in “Rams” in relation to a line from a poem by Paul Celan: “The world is gone, I must carry you” (*Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen*). Derrida reads Celan’s verse as appealing to an experience of mourning that does not seek to “include, to comprehend within the self, but rather to carry oneself or bear oneself toward [*se porter vers*] the infinite inappropriability of the other” (“Rams” 160–61). He compares this aporetic carriage to Celan’s abstruse poetics, and by extension to the very nature of poetry. Like the survivor who carries the other in mourning, or the mother who carries an unborn child, so the poem does not bear within it a single, integral meaning. Rather, it “appeals to the other without condition, in the language of a hospitality that can no longer be subject to a decision,” exceeding the calculations of both intention and interpretation (“Rams” 153). In this sense it is also like translation, which transports an inscription from one language to another, carrying with it its very untranslatability (“Rams” 162).

In Celan’s poem, the injunction to carry the other coincides with the world’s departure or obliteration: *Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen*. This verse appears at the end of the poem, as if “sending off” or giving a farewell (*salut*) to the world (“Rams” 157, 140). It marks a leave-taking of the world understood as foundation, presence, framework, totality: “Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world . . . the end of the totality of what is or can be.” Nevertheless, Derrida observes that the survivor, along with the poem, the translation, and the mother, “alone in the distancing of the world,” gather the other to themselves, as a way, ultimately, of delivering it into the world (“Rams” 153). The transportation of the other is a missive that cannot detach itself from the world, but is rather sent toward it: “I bear myself toward the infinite inappropriability of the other,” which is in turn bearing itself toward the infinite, or “differently finite and infinite,” inappropriability of the world (“Rams” 161, 153). This sending is also necessarily a sending toward the future, toward future life or survival. Even in moments of deep grief, the world is always “beyond [and] before” us, temporally as well as spatially (“Rams” 140).

In a way that resonates strongly with Derrida’s description of Celan, Gelman’s poetry performs an insistent apostrophe of life and death beyond prosopopoeia, in which the singularity of address opens onto a radical sense of history and world. In his poems, the address of the other touches on the limits of the alter-immunological, limits that hover

between life and survival, the frontal and the frontier, the singular and the multiple, and past, present, and future. The encounter with the other is never immediate and present, but extends out into search and passage. A sense of exposure to the unknown occurs whether the other is familiar or a stranger, dead or alive, or an individual or a collective. It also inevitably occurs in time, in which the traces of the past and the future expose the present to multiple, unknowable possibilities—radically distinct from the structural narrative of redemption that he associates with Montonero philosophy, in which past and future are foregone conclusions, and the materiality of life or *másvida* is sacrificed in favor of an ideal end. Eschewing such a linear teleology, Gelman's work appeals to an alternate form of Messianism, analogous to what Derrida calls messianicity, in which an openness to the alterity of time and the temporality of the other forms the condition of possibility of real change, including a radical sense of justice.⁸

Gelman's idiosyncratic style is central to his apostrophic poetics, which engages the materiality of language to disrupt familiarity and coherence. The most characteristic of these techniques is his excessive use of the virgule, normally used to indicate poetic line breaks in prose quotations, but which is used throughout much of his work as an indication of rupture and discontinuity.⁹ In addition to his peculiar punctuation, Gelman makes minor innovations in his use of language, using feminine articles for masculine nouns and vice versa, making verbs out of nouns, and other similar shifts. These strategies introduce elements of strangeness into the familiar space of language, requiring us to question the reliability of linguistic convention, and stressing the fact that meaning is not something to be taken for granted. Together with a frequent use of diminutives, these alterations also suggest the idea that language is unfamiliar to the poet, as well, as if he were a child learning to use language (this is implied especially with "errors," such as using *escribidos* for *escritos*). Indeed, poetry may be one form of communicating how much we need to learn in and of language. Such learning is also always an unlearning, in that it does not result in a wiser, more complete poetic subject, analogous to his remark about how the awareness of death makes us human and inhuman.¹⁰ He indicates this through a recurrence of pseudonyms, pseudo-translation, quotation, and intertextuality, among other techniques. This emphasis on mediation disrupts any sense of self-possession through language, and performs the inevitable disruption and incompleteness of humanist autonomy. His

unconventional use of language and reference can be seen as responding to what Lyotard describes as the differend, “the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be put into phrases cannot yet be” (*Differend* 13). Pushing language toward this unstable state, his poetry constitutes an apostrophic address of an inappropriable alterity that conditions any thinking of the political.

**The Errancy of Life, Language, and Lamentation:
*The Poems of Sidney West***

Gelman’s apostrophic poetics can be traced back to his earliest publications, but their first predominant appearance is in *The Poems of Sidney West: Translations III, 1968–1969* (*Los poemas de Sidney West: Traducciones III*).¹¹ This volume is the first in which Gelman plays with translation and pseudonyms, a theme that he returns to repeatedly over the next several decades. It also anticipates the theme of mourning that would occupy his poetry in the years following the coup. Although I want to avoid any deterministic reading of the relation between his poetry and political involvement, it is hard to overlook the fact that these poems were written during the first years of his active participation in revolutionary politics (he joined the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, or FAR, in 1967; the FAR merged with Montoneros in 1973, and Gelman maintained his involvement with them until his rupture with the group in 1979). The poems are far from indicating political action or even the ideals of radical social and political change in any direct sense. However, their appeal to linguistic permutability, and a permeability between individuals and others, life and death, human and not-human, suggests an intrinsic relationship between a non-humanist, alter-immunological understanding of life and an open-ended inquiry into “the enigma of the political” (Derrida, *Rogues* 4).

Los poemas de Sidney West: Traducciones III is structured as a series of eulogies for a collection of dead characters and miscellaneous elements that made up their lives and worlds. The characters, ostensibly inhabitants of a North American town, are presented not strictly as individuals, but as swarming worlds populated and traversed by any number of different objects and forces. In this sense, they cannot be eulogized or witnessed in any straightforward sense, since the limits of their lives and deaths are difficult to pin down. This challenge

is intimately linked to the fictional attribution of these poems as translations. Like translation, epitaphic commemoration implies a carrying-across (*trans-latio*) of life into representation, whereby the remembered person becomes prosopopeically commemorated in language or memory. The pseudo-translated eulogies of Sidney West disturb this sense of transfer, calling into question the opposition between origin and derivation. Rather than transferring an original meaning to a second language or the entirety of a life into language, the poems appear to respond to something outside of themselves, something for which they cannot fully account. The book's epigraph—"Translation, is it treason? // Poetry, is it translation?" (*La traducción, ¿es traición? // La poesía, ¿es traducción?*)—links translation to treason, stressing the way the notion of translation understood as a seamless transfer of meaning is always also betrayed or interrupted, and implies that poetry consists of such an incomplete transfer.¹²

The final poem, "fe de erratas" (Gelman, *Los poemas de Sidney West: Traducciones III*, 79–80) serves as a kind of *ars poetica*. Rather than a setting straight of errors, which is the customary meaning of the title's term, the poem suggests a faith in errors and the wandering nature of language. This faith in poetic errancy is evident in the first stanza: "where it says 'he left himself as if from a prison cell' (page x verse x) // one could say 'the little tree grew and grew' or any other equivocation // as long as it has rhythm // is certain or true // that's what sidney west wrote" (*donde dice 'salió de sí como de un calabozo' [página tal verso cual] // podría decir 'el arbolito creció creció' o alguna otra equivocación // a condición de tener ritmo // ser cierta o verdadera // así escribió sidney west.*) Far from turning the translation back to a more faithful transcription of the original, "fe de erratas" introduces more possibilities, which seem to have little to do with one another. Like the idea of a translation that betrays its fidelity to the origin, this *fe* unsettles any sense of stable and unequivocal meaning and opens the very notions of truth and certainty to the equivocations and errata of language: "or any other equivocation // as long as it has rhythm // is certain or true."

The sense of truth as shifting possibilities underscores the instability of figures that are generally understood to impose unequivocal distinctions. "fe de erratas" addresses several such figures, including the human, self, and life. In this poem and throughout the book, these figures are errant and equivocal and do not exclude their opposites. That is, the distinctions between human and inhuman, self and other,

life and death, history and the present are not mutually exclusive, but are permeable and interdependent. Sidney West himself is said to be both human and animal, alive and dead, and—in a particularly intriguing image—he is described as split and turning around himself like a waterwheel donkey (*sidney . . . // giró con west como burro de noria*).¹³ Like the equivocal truths that structure the poem, he, or his (apocryphal) authorial name, is not unified and distinguished from what he is not, but is internally divided and rotating. Such a rotation suggests an errancy intrinsic to both subjectivity and writing, and, as the poems attributed to West attest, is also related to the way we relate to ourselves and others.

The first poem of the book, “lament for the death of parsifal hoolig” (11–12), introduces the relations among poetic errancy, mortality, and community.¹⁴ The poem describes a man who was found dead during a time of unspecified national crisis, and whose life and death go almost entirely unnoticed, even by forces that view themselves as revolutionary. In the midst of the national upheaval, parsifal’s dead body is found in different times and places (*lo encontraron muerto varias veces*), suggesting a recurrent encounter with the nearly invisible lives and deaths of the underclass. His death receives no formal notice—there is no obituary, and his body is unceremoniously picked up by a trash collector—but nevertheless a trace remains that years of rain cannot erase: “that rain rained for years and years on the pavement of Hereby Street // without erasing the least trace of what happened!” (*jesa lluvia llovió años y años sobre el pavimento de Hereby Street // sin borrar la más mínima huella de lo acontecido!*). With mock certitude, the poem urges the reader to accept this as truth—“know that this is exactly what happened // that nothing else happened but this // beneath this blue sky or vault” (*sepa que esto es exactamente lo que pasó // que ninguna otra cosa pasó sino esto // bajo este cielo o bóveda celeste*). However the sound of “o,” as both interjection and the sense of “or,” resounds throughout the final lines, disrupting such a sense of closure and certainty. The final image of the sky, as metaphor for clarity and truth, is divided and rendered equivocal by the comparative “o,” which reinforces the dual sense of *bóveda*, shared by the English “vault,” as both the curved expanse of sky and burial chamber, stressing an indeterminate relation between revelation and concealment, knowledge and not-knowing, regarding parsifal’s death.

The poem “lament for the uterus (*uteró*) of mecha vaugham” (29–30) extends this sense of indeterminacy to the nature of life. The poem

describes a woman who lived most of her life in her uterus, far from the noises of the outer world. The word “uterus” is written as if it were a preterit verb, suggesting that her reproductive potential has ended. Nevertheless, things grow and thrive inside her—she has, in effect, an entire world inside, a world unfamiliar to her (“she came to know strange landscapes full of nervous birds” [*conoció paisajes raros llenos de pájaros nerviosos*]). She realizes that she cannot move as freely as the creatures inside her, but their movement inspires her to ask why this is:

“what is this that makes me stick to the floor? . . .
feet that feet instead of flying or how /
would the world the ox that which child be /
if we didn’t devour ourselves /
if we loved a lot” said mecha vaughan

“if we were or were / like human faces /
starting from two /
complete in the rest” said mecha vaughan collapsing
finally on the ground¹⁵

“¿qué es esto que me pega al piso? . . .
pies que piesan en vez de alar o cómo /
sería el mundo el buey lo que se hija /
si no nos devoráramos /
si amorésemos mucho” decía mecha vaughan

“si fuéremos o fuésemos / como rostros humanos /
empezando de a dos /
completos en el resto” decía mecha derrumbándose
finalmente en el suelo

In these stanzas we find that mecha’s isolation and her discovery of an internal world are not unrelated to the state of the external world. Immobility is associated with alienation and hostility, and mobility with a freedom and capacity for love. With her feet weighted down, unable to fly (*alar*, a neologism that suggests flight, as well as movement toward something—*a la*), she is left only to think (implied by the neologism *piesan*, which seems to combine *pies*, *piensa*, and *pesa*) of how the world might be under better circumstances. The

asyndeton “the world the ox that which child” seems to indicate that the three elements share a common condition, and may even be considered different aspects of the same thing, that is, the experience of being in the world. The inclusion of “ox” after “world” implies that a kind of animality is central to the world. Gelman’s animal motifs, especially the ox (a castrated bull), tend to indicate a sense of life that can be repressed or domesticated, and even castrated, but never fully, the final sound of “y” in *buey* suggesting the possibility of something else emerging from it, as mecha’s poem indicates with the odd expression “that which child.”¹⁶ Mecha asks how this self-differential, procreative world would be “if we didn’t devour ourselves / if we loved a lot . . . // if we were or were / like human faces /.” Devouring is the opposite of giving birth: it is a violent form of ingestion, a subsumption of the other into the self, and *amarar*, a neologism that contains the words for love (*amor*) and dwelling (*morar*), appears to contrast with such internalization.¹⁷ The formulation “human faces” associates such living through and with others as a specifically human attribute. At first glance it might appear that such humanness is characterized by a completion through domestic coupling (*amarar, de a dos, completos*). However, the resonance between *rostros* and *resto* suggests that the figure of the human, subject to tropic errancy (as simile), equivocation (another conjunctive *o*), and strictly hypothetical (*si fuéremos o fuésemos*), does not constitute a teleological figure of totality, but rather exists as supplement of something that can never be complete, *el resto*, understood as both indeterminate others and that which remains.

The final lament of the book, “lament for the little spoon of sammy mccooy” (74–75), describes the permeable and shifting limits of life and death. The figure of the spoon evokes two texts that similarly concern life beyond life: Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* and César Vallejo’s “Pedro Rojas.”¹⁸ In both cases, death represents not finality, but a continuation of life and representation. In Masters’s book—undoubtedly a source of inspiration for *Los poemas de Sidney West*—dead characters present epitaphs of their fellow townspeople; while in Vallejo’s poem, a spoon described as “dead alive” (*muerta viva*) is found on the dead body of Pedro Rojas before he rises to continue writing in the air his affirmation of life and collectivity (*Viban los compañeros*). In “lament for the little spoon of sammy mccooy” the little spoon (*cucharita*), a utensil that symbolically replaces the maternal

breast as a source of nourishment and comfort, is mentioned only as something that is lost in an abusive world.¹⁹ In the midst of his suffering, something, possibly another spoon, emerges from sammy that is likened to children: “thus // from his chest one emerged . . . like two children” (*así // del pecho le fue una saliendo . . . como dos niños*). These child-like figures come to function as a peculiar form of sustenance or support, linking the child he was to a child that might be, a sense of loss to a sense of possibility: “sammy mccooy standing on his two children // the one that was the one that would be” (*sammy mccooy parado en sus dos niños // el que fue el que sería*).

This engendering of past and future leads sammy to contemplate the nature of death, whereby he formulates a question that he repeats like a refrain throughout the poem: “what does the game of life consist of” (*en qué consiste el juego de la muerte*). The word *juego* in this context is not intended to make light of death, but rather to suggest the idea that death is not one solid thing, but like a game it has pieces and parts.²⁰ This is underscored when sammy dies:

when sammy mccooy died
 his two children detached from him
 the one that was rotted and the one that was going to be also
 and in that way they went together

that which the rain the sun or the great planet or the system of
 life separates
 death brings back together
 but sammy mccooy still spoke
 “what does the game of life consist of” he asked

*cuando murió sammy mccooy
 los dos niños se le despegaron
 el que fue se le pudo el que iba a ser también
 y de ese modo fueron juntos*

*lo que la lluvia el sol o el gran planeta o la sistema de vivir separan
 la muerte lo junta otra vez
 pero sammy mccooy habló todavía
 “en qué consiste el juego de la muerte” preguntó*

The system (or *juego*) of life is said to separate things, implying a perpetuation of difference and movement, while death is said to bring things together, subsuming difference into the same. The mention of rain and sun may be a gesture to temporal difference, reinforced by the fact that the word for weather in Spanish is the same as the word for time (*el tiempo*). sammy's question, repeated even after his death, resists the idea that death is an atemporal and unified state. His "children," whose temporal differences are ostensibly brought together in death (*fueron juntos*), mock a shadow that tries to unite them, shouting *güeya güeya*, which can mean something like "fool," but is also homophonic with the word *huella*, meaning track or trace. Both repetition and traces involve time and difference even after death. The final line of the poem reinforces this idea with a play on words: "sammy the one who walks // sammy mccooy stepped on the sun and departed" (sammy el que camina // sammy mccooy pisó el sol y partió).²¹ sammy's death is described not as a cessation of movement and difference, but as a "de-parture," a scattering into parts that will continue to move and change in time, even as his traces—like those of parsifal hoolig—persist beneath the elements.

The Open Address of Mourning: *Open Letter (Carta abierta)*

Carta abierta was written in 1980, four years after the military coup in Argentina and the "disappearance"—illicit imprisonment, and often torture and murder—of tens of thousands of people.²² It is poignantly dedicated to his son (*a mi hijo*), who, together with his pregnant wife, was disappeared in the first months of the dictatorship. The couple, active members of Montoneros, like Gelman himself at that time, were taken from his house. At the time of the coup, Gelman was in Europe on a "public relations" assignment for the Montoneros, denouncing state terrorism. He returned briefly to Argentina, but otherwise remained in exile, continuing his involvement in the Montonero leadership for several years, until he publicly broke with the group in 1979, for which it condemned him to death for treason.

The volume is an intensely personal representation of mourning, a mourning that is necessarily incomplete due to the nature of disappearance, in which the circumstances and even the fact of death are not fully known. Yet in spite of its personal nature and direct address

“to my son,” it is also described as an open letter and published as a book. The openness of this poetic letter functions on several different levels. In the most explicit sense it is a public declaration of his intimate grief for his son coupled with a demand for justice. On another level the book’s title invokes an apostrophic address of the lost son, which, like Derrida’s reading of Celan’s association of world and loss, opens toward—engendering and sending itself toward—a different sense of world. Appealing to alter-immunological notions of life and singularity, justice and world, this sense of openness contrasts starkly with the dictatorship’s flagrant disregard for life and instrumentalization of disappearance and death. Coming on the heels of Gelman’s break with the Montoneros and subsequent death sentence, it can also be seen as a critique of their sacrificial ideology in which deaths such as this were easily justified by the ideal of revolution (“If you die it doesn’t matter, because tomorrow, when we achieve victory, there will be a school named after you,” *Contraerrota* 118). It is also fundamentally distinct from the prosopopoeic nature of most memory politics, including what Bollig, following Christian Gundermann, calls a melancholic embrace of the past.

Carta abierta consists of twenty-five poems, followed by an afterword that explains the circumstances of his son’s loss:

on August 25, 1976
 my son marcelo ariel and
 his pregnant wife claudia
 were kidnapped in
 buenos aires by a
 military commando. their child
 was born [and died] in
 the concentration camp.
 as in tens of thousands
 of other cases, the military
 dictatorship never officially
 recognized these
 “disappeared.” it spoke of
 “those absent forever.”
 until i see their bodies
 or their killers, i’ll never
 give them up for death. (*Carta abierta* 157)²³

*el 24 de agosto de 1976
 mi hijo marcelo ariel y
 su mujer claudia, encinta,
 fueron secuestrados en
 buenos aires por un
 comando militar. el hijo
 de ambos nació [y murió] en
 el campo de concentración.
 como en decenas de miles
 de otros casos, la dictadura
 militar nunca reconoció
 oficialmente a estos
 ‘desaparecidos.’ habló de
 ‘los ausentes para siempre.’
 hasta que no vea sus cadáveres
 o a sus asesinos, nunca los
 daré por muertos.*

Bollig regards this afterword as evidence of a militant melancholy that resists new approaches to progressive politics that emerged in the decades following the end of the dictatorship, including the question of ethics solicited by del Barco (Bollig, *Modern Argentine Poetry* 89). He interprets the line “those absent forever” as indicating a persistence presence of disappearance (70), and links this description to Gelman’s refusal to let go of either his son or the Montoneros (69–70).²⁴

However Bollig’s interpretation ignores the context of the phrase “those absent forever,” and the tension between it and the poet’s vow that he will never give them up for dead (*nunca los/daré por muertos*). This vow announces not a refusal to accept the son’s death, but a commitment to resist the totalizing discourse of the dictatorship, which claimed to be able to erase its subjects definitively, declaring them as “*ausentes para siempre*.” The poet’s pledge never to give them up for dead indicates a search for recognition that opposes the dictatorship’s claim of total absence: “the military/ dictatorship never officially/ recognized these ‘disappeared.’” The force of the poet’s *nunca* echoes the popular protest refrains “Nunca más” and “Aparición con vida” (“never again” and “safe return,” associated primarily with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo), and pushes this recognition beyond the finite objectives to “see their bodies/

or their killers” to a kind of apparitional haunting of this world, and especially the capacities of state power.²⁵ The epilogue is conditioned by this final promise, which breaks from the constative language of the first section, and sends the book off toward the world with an open commitment to memory and justice.

The poems themselves are hard to read, in more ways than one. The terrible topic of the son’s death is approached in a fragmented and halting way, marked by numerous virgules and convoluted syntax. The book opens with the urgent and unresolvable question of address, that is, what kind of relationship the poet can have with his absent son: “speak or unspeak to you/ my pain/ // way of having you/ unhaving you/” (*hablarte o deshablarte/ dolor mío/ //manera de tenerte/ destenerte/*). Initially, the two pairs of verbs appear to be positive and negative terms, corresponding roughly to having or unhaving, speaking or unspeaking.²⁶ However, the prefix *des-*, which echoes the son’s status of disappeared (*desaparecido*), indicates not so much a strict negative as the need to find another way of mourning beyond the prosopopoeic presence implied by the verbs speaking and having. Any memory or address to the son must acknowledge the fact that he cannot be held, either in life or in memory. The poems repeatedly observe how there is no integral sense of self to sustain his memory. One poem describes the son’s disappearance as a stroke that pushes the poet out of himself (*toque sacándome de mí*), and which renders useless and odious static categories of memory (“the was/ the let’s remember” [*el sido/ el recordemos*] Poem XIII). Rather than holding integral memories and images of his son, the poet is left to gather fragments that will never add up to be a whole: “what am I going to do with me/ my piece? // what little pieces can I collect now?” (*¿qué voy a hacer con mí/ pedazo mío? // ¿qué pedacitos puedo ya juntar?/* Poem III). Not only is there not a whole image or memory of his son to have or speak to, but any address of the son is also an address of himself. This is the sense of the accent in *mí*, which introduces an ambiguity between possessive adjective (“what am I going to do with my piece?”), and reflexive object and epithet (“what am I going to do with myself, my piece?”). This “equivocation” is also evident in the first line of poem I, in which the formulation “dolor mío” is both a tender epithet applied to the son and a reference to the poet’s own pain.

To unhave and unspeak—returning to the first poem’s opening questions—appears to correspond to an apostrophic form of mourning

that turns toward the other and also recognizes the distance and disaggregation of both self and other. Following the questions of how to speak and hold the other, the poem describes a dynamic that moves beyond having and holding: “passion that worlds its punishment like // son that flies through quietness through // raptures/” (*pasión que munda su castigo como // hijo que vuela por quietudes por // arrobamientos/*). This form of passion is impersonal, belonging not to the poet, but moving through him like the memories of his son move through different states and spaces. The association of passion and movement invokes the etymological link between passion and passage, that is, between suffering and movement.²⁷ The emphasis on movement recalls the idea presented in “lamento por sammy mccooy” that death is a state of completion and sameness, whereas life involves movement and difference. The poet cannot have his son or hold on to him in memory, but he can continue to follow the movements of his absence, both in himself and in the world.

This passionate movement—even of disappearance and death—in some sense constitutes the world, indicated by the neologism *mundar*. The sense of world and worlding is mentioned at other points in the book and throughout Gelman’s work (a notable instance is his 2008 book of poems, *Mundar*). In *Carta abierta*, it appears together with the neologism *terror* (earthing) as an opening to the movements of life, in the sense of a survival that includes the past as well as the future. This is indicated in the rest of poem I, where the poet’s grief pushes out of the imagined embrace with the son to a series of discontinuous images that “haunt” (*penar*) the poet’s present, and ends with the open sky of the future.²⁸ The restlessness of his pain and the not-quite-deadness of the son (two kinds of *pena*) lead the poet to say that he would never “tire of unwaiting [unhoping, despairing] you/” (*cansaría de desesperarte/*), invoking a peculiar kind of hope and waiting. This unhoping for the disappeared is not a theological anticipation of the resurrection of his spirit, nor only a literal waiting for the return of his body, but an apostrophic openness to his spectral traces and a commitment to what may come—including, but not limited to, the return of his son’s remains. The poet describes his son as “face or night // where you shine most starrily of you” (*rostro o noche // donde brillás astrísimo de vos*), suggesting that in spite of the poet’s professed sense of blindness (*ciegüísimo*), he perceives glimmers of light through the dark sky, like the light of distant and possibly dead stars that continues to shine through time and space.

In an echo of the previous *ors*—“hablarte o deshablarte,” “tenerte o destenerte,” “rostro o noche”—the poem concludes with a final *or* that similarly indicates an alternative between prosopopoeic proximity and an openness that exceeds knowledge but is connected to hope: “kissing with kisses of the mouth/ or // sky that you open childing your death-dwelling” (*besar con besos de la boca/ o // cielo que abrís hijando tu morida*).²⁹ Just as the poet understandably yearns to hold and speak to his son, and see his face, he also longs to kiss his mouth, but the poem interrupts that longing, in part by performing the interruption of disappearance—the *o* dangles at the end of the line, as if pursed to kiss but finding only air—but also by turning from the imagined closeness of prosopopoeia to a space of *des-esperanza* and possibility. The son’s disappearance stretches open the already yawning darkness of the unknown, but it is in that open expanse that the poet is able to imagine his son creating a sense of dwelling in death (the neologism *morida* appears to invoke *morada* and *morir*). The neologism *hijando* suggests that this sense of dwelling is an ongoing process with a spectral legacy that extends indefinitely into the open sky of the future, that is, to the open horizons of the world.³⁰

The word *hijar* (childing), as well as the form *deshijar*, appears throughout the poems. As in “lament for mecha vaughan,” it appears to indicate not a form of biological filiation, but as the opposite of a devouring internalization, an opening-up of self to others and a mode of dwelling in the world. It thus also resonates with the analogy between mourning and pregnancy evoked by Derrida and Celan, in which a non-prosopopoeic form of mourning is performed by allowing the singular worlds of others to interrupt any sense of self-presence.³¹ In *Carta abierta*, *hijar* seems to present an alternative to traditional terms of kinship such as father and child, as well as their political counterpart in the figure of the homeland or *patria*, both traditionally linked to a hierarchical structure and a shared sense of identity. Throughout the poems the term *padre* (father) appears alternatively on its own, linked to impotence and loss, and in association with *país* (country), linked to the infliction of pain. One poem describes father and country as if they were torturer and torture chamber: “country so somber where you shout // against the father hurter of so much?” (*¿país gravísimo donde gritás // contra la padre doledor de tanto?*, Poem III).³² They are described as suffering parts of the son’s tortured body—“father that hurt you,” “what country do you bleed”