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## **Superpowers in the Bedroom: The Brothel Image in 1960s Latin America**

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In the mid-1960s three novels published within a year of one another in different Spanish American countries all had the brothel as their central image. An ambiguous image, the brothel owes its prominence at this moment to a polysemous quality allowing it to “contain” contradictory meanings.- The house of prostitution has a paradoxical status; marginal to the dominant order, it is attractive, repellant, Other. The *prostíbulo* openly associates sexual, symbolic, and economic practices. Existing on the margins of society, it is a pseudo-forbidden territory for men that has become institutionalized as a consequence of its very prohibition. For women, the brothel might represent one of the few semi-sanctioned sites for the expression of female sexuality outside of marriage; it offers poor women an opportunity to participate in the service labor market but its social illegitimacy leaves these workers especially vulnerable to exploitation.

Although its meaning is clearly influenced by gender, there is no uniform gendered perspective on the bordello. The three male authors I will examine here offer us a spectrum of discursive constructions of the image.- Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde* (1965) gives us a mythologized,

romanticized version of the place, while the brothel in *El lugar sin límites* (1965), by Jose Donoso, proves to be an inverse reflection of official society. In *Juntacadáveres* (1964), by Juan Carlos Onetti, the brothel is the locus for desires excluded from dominant society; it marks the limits of the town of Santa María and therefore is the site where relations of power and control become more sharply apparent. In each case the *prostíbulo* both legitimates society and turns some elements of that society against itself. The position of the brothel in these texts, I will argue, is in many ways analogous to the global historical situation of Peru, Chile, and Uruguay in the mid-1960s.

Literary and cultural critics have read these now canonical Boom novels in different ways: Ben Sifuentes Járegui illuminated transvestism and sexuality in *El lugar sin límites*, while Linda Craig studied gender and marginal identities in representations of the prostitute in *Juntacadáveres*. Others read these narratives relative to realism and formal innovation (Angvik, Swanson) or with approaches that combine psychoanalytic, formalist, and semiotic theories. This latter combination occurs in Rodrigo Cánovas' work, which resulted in an insightful 2002 book on the subject of the brothel. Cánovas includes the three novels I will consider here as well as others published a bit later in the Boom and several earlier twentieth century precursors and some late twentieth-century examples specific to Chile. Covering broader temporal territory, Cánovas reads the brothel as a reverse mirroring of the nation that often eclipses modern myths of civilization and progress (6), themes we will also see in the readings that follow. He sees the *prostíbulo* as an allegory, as I do, but with a different set of references; for an intriguing theme of his study is how this image functions as an allegory of writing or the creative process. In the reading that follows I take a distinct approach, adding to the work of all of these readers by focusing on the particular social and historical circumstances of the decade of the 1960s in order to demonstrate how these three authors in different Latin American countries do not reflect the reality of the moment in which they write, but respond to and reconfigure this through the institution of the brothel.

South America was in a contradictory position in the 1960s.

Economically marginalized, outside of the prevailing power system, the continent was grappling with post WW II strategies of import substitution which, rather than increase overall prosperity, had distributed its benefits unevenly and augmented an already existing dependent capitalism. This economic situation, in which central nations regulated certain phases of the import-export system, making them a condition for loans, as MJ Fenwick has described (24-5), allied the interests of the national bourgeoisie with those of international capitalists, reinforcing ties to the U.S. as Latin America sought a larger role in the international economic order. In the 1960s Latin American economists increasingly questioned the success of import substitution, which appeared to have isolated local markets from international competition, excessively diversified national industries, and had not resulted in the creation of jobs for an increasingly urban population (Corbo and Meller 11). At the same time the success of the Cuban revolution and increasing pressures stemming from Cold War rhetoric combined to produce an ideological reaction against dependency and increase anti-imperialist sentiment. We find a struggle between opposing elements: the desire for revolution, for freedom, is textualized in these novels as a “subversive” sexuality controlled through the *prostíbulo*, a site of exchange which manages these desires. The projected brothel in each narrative produces a different result, but none is able to truly subvert dominant society; just as in the three cases examined here attempts at political reform in the sixties all led to a militarization of governments at the close of the decade or the beginning of the next. We will find that the brothel is an institution representing degrees of challenge to the dominance of the bourgeoisie. Unable to escape bourgeois law or dominance the bordello exists within it and, at some times, may struggle against it. The brothel is a space of contention within which Vargas Llosa, Donoso, and Onetti textualize their experiences of *una realidad prostibularia*.

The title of Jose Donoso’s novel, *El lugar sin límites* [The place without limits], elaborated by an epigraph from *Dr. Faustus*, is an ironic reference to life as hell. It also signals the importance of both space and boundaries in the narrative calling attention to the dimensions of the setting: a *prostíbulo* in the rural town of El Olivo, by-passed by modern

industrial development, in decay and singularly marginal. Donoso chooses a strictly rural setting for his brothel, while Vargas Llosa alternates between urban and rural sites, and Onetti places his *burdel* in a small city. Donoso both physically and temporally distances his version of the brothel by employing an agrarian setting. The effect is to slow down history, to study a sector of Chile that is more resistant to change. The characters are important figures in the town, the most important being don Alejo Cruz, wealthy landowner, patriarch, and senator. Although the power of don Alejo's position is clear, he is not the novel's protagonist.

Removed from his hacienda, the majority of the action takes place in the town's brothel whose co-proprietors are la Japonesa and her homosexual father, la Manuela. We learn in the course of the narration how Don Alejo, the brothel's former owner, lost his property in a bet that la Japonesa Grande could seduce la Manuela. This productive coupling, stimulated by material rather than libidinal desires, highlights the sexual-economic relations central to *Lugar sin límites*. There is a pervasive confusion between public and private spheres in the brothel. Don Alejo's past love for la Japonesa is an example of this boundary crossing for it is an affective relationship that has been transformed into a business alliance. In this shift of personal relations to the business of the *burdel* we see the same passage, refuting cultural myths that suppose a separation between love and money, personal and public realms. In the brothel terms supposedly opposed are united. Even the primary institutional opponent to prostitution, the family, is discursively associated with the *prostíbulo* in Donoso's narrative.

Although Don Alejo leaves his family to go to the brothel, he finds an inversion of a matrimonial relation awaiting him at la Japonesa's through his "mujer especial" [special woman], his private property within the "casa pública" [public house]. Intra-familial male-bonding also occurs as both fathers and sons go to the brothel for entertainment and to affirm a sense of community. But, as the brothel is an unsanctioned community family, members who go there must hide from one another. Such practices reinforce a different family ritual, for these good sons show respect for their elders while emulating their behavior. Institutions are juxtaposed in *Lugar*

*sin límites*; as the borders between them begin to fade and relationships are reversed, the brothel looks increasingly like a reflection of the family rather than an enemy to it. Thus, the vision Donoso constructs of La Japonesa's establishment neither opposes the family nor voids the family, but rather, proves to be an incorporation of it. The two institutions are shown to be mutually dependent economic units fundamental to capitalism.

The women of El Olivo, traditional guardians of family values, accept the *prostíbulo*, tacitly acknowledging and tolerating activities at la Japonesa's. Her house is not disorderly nor indecent but totally the opposite and supportive of the traditional political party as well. La Japonesa is a property owner and head of her own family for she, Manuela, and la Japonesita comprise a family within the brothel; a family not based on affection or romantic conventions but on economic relations. It is a family dominated by women in a reversal of conventional gender roles that becomes even more apparent with time as la Japonesita, the daughter, comes to dominate her father Manuela. Like the narrative perspective, which plays with our traditional assumptions about gender at first by refusing to identify Manuela as male or female, Donoso's work constantly inverts conventional categories. Not only does this attention to gender not undo the fixity of masculine and feminine roles, however, it indirectly reinforces them.

Just as Donoso creates an inflection of the conventional notion of family by using the *prostíbulo* as its locus, emphasizing its economic rather than affective elements, his portrait ultimately does not question the institution itself. The *prostíbulo* is not a true alternative but simply another institution perpetuating the same value system, offering an apparent, false resistance. We find only formal, superficial possibilities for change that do not affect the underlying system. This shallow reform is echoed in la Japonesita's transformation to property owner—a shift that seems to give her a certain freedom, but that simply disguises her continuing dependence on don Alejo's broader economic power.

This institutionalization of the *prostíbulo*, its move from a seemingly oppositional image to one that takes its place within the bourgeois system, is an example of the more extensive process of

incorporation in the novel. Pancho Vega's rebellion against don Alejo (his economic and symbolic papa), for instance, consists of generating his own family. The only apparent alternative we see to this situation is his friend Octavio's—to become a small, independent property owner—hardly a departure from the capitalist system. Through a close consideration of the brothel's function the reader begins to recognize that all the discursive processes of the novel finally produce a tautology that results in a resignation to the status quo. A resignation like that of la Japonesa, who decides to stay on in El Olivo at the end of the narrative, without the hope for electricity, expecting her father to return from his nocturnal adventure as he always has, while the reader has a strong suspicion that la Manuela may be dead. Dependent on a dying don Alejo who is losing his power, we are left with a bleak lack of alternatives.

The image of the *prostíbulo* in *El lugar sin límites* demonstrates an invasion of the public into the private; we have already observed the privatization of this house of “mujeres públicas” [public women] and the brothel's “public” family. Thus, although the novel contains few concrete textual references to the historical reality of 1960s Chile, the tangling of the public-private opposition suggests the possibility of reading the private in more social terms—an allegorical reading. The resignation at the end of the novel, then, read in terms of its historical referent, makes the transition from a *latifundista*, resource extraction economy to the next stage of capitalism—import substitution that transferred resources to industry abandoning the countryside in Chile (Corbo and Meller 9)—appear inevitable. In another reading, la Japonesa's submission to the results of “progress” may demonstrate that in Chile at this moment developing capitalism does not represent improvement, but passivity; it may mean becoming the property of a very northerly located *latifundista*—a change of master but not of position.

Unlike Donoso's brothel, that reflects the power of the dominant group in society, Vargas Llosa's maintains more of its ambiguity, its components of resistance. Conflicting connotations of the image of the *prostíbulo* are in the forefront of *La casa verde*. We see the house both as an accepted institution in Latin America and its inverse, a breach of

morality to be struggled against. It is linked through its color and characteristics (natural, untamed, instinctual) to the jungle, the alternative to the town of Piura, yet at the same time it represents civilization and the possibility for mythic creation. It is a paradoxical image that both attracts and repels. In this long, complex narrative the Green House is a unifying, if sometimes contradictory, feature; it is the place where different moments, characters, and settings converge. In this way its function mirrors that of one of the central characters, Bonifacia, and highlights the “feminine” qualities of the place.-

A nameless Indian and native of the Amazon when a child, Bonifacia receives her Christian name from the mission nuns. She escapes the nuns’ civilizing influence first through employment (as a servant), then through marriage, until her husband’s imprisonment leads her to work at the Casa Verde as a prostitute, renamed “La Selvática” [the wild one]. We learn Bonifacia’s history in a far from chronological narrative that juxtaposes past, present, and future and is interwoven with plots and characters from both jungle and desert origins. As the disordering of time works to unite separate historical moments into the eternal present of the narrative, so are the two major settings spatially condensed into the “eternal” space of the green house. Unlike Donoso, who distances his *prostíbulo* from the accelerated time of modern, urban Chile through its rural setting, the Casa Verde exists outside of linear time, in mythic time. It is destroyed, rebuilt, and survives the death of its creator, don Anselmo.

The ahistorical, mythic discourse used to describe don Anselmo’s project distinguishes the originary myth of the Green House from other descriptions in the text, setting it apart as a collective ideal:

Se ha hablado tanto en Piura sobre la primitiva Casa Verde, esa vivienda matriz, que ya nadie sabe con exactitud cómo era realmente, ni los auténticos pormenores de su historia. Los supervivientes de la época, muy pocos, se embrollan y contradicen, han acabado por confundir lo que vieron y oyeron con sus propios embustes [...] En todo caso, la originaria Casa Verde ya no existe. (*La casa verde* 96)

[In Piura they’ve talked about the old Green House, that womb-like dwelling, so much that no one knows with any certainty how it was or the authentic details of its history. The survivors of the epoch, very few, twist up and contradict each other so that they have ended

up confusing what they saw and heard with their own fictions (...) in any case, the originary Green House doesn't exist anymore.]-

Its construction is a kind of heroic venture, presenting a more general possibility for adventure through an erotic freedom not allowed in a provincial Catholic society that has dis-integrated the sexual. Anselmo, an outsider arriving in town with his mysterious wealth, is a capitalist opportunist; his project and position in many ways perpetuate imperialist ideology. His entrepreneurial attempt, however, does not end as a free enterprise fairytale. The first House is destroyed by the town's moral outrage ignited by Padre García, and Anselmo becomes his daughter's employee in a continuation of the business he initiated. La Chunga is not a dreamer, like her father, but a more realistic proprietor of the brothel. A curious reflection of la Japonesita, she is both asexual and objectified (both women take on a definite article) implying, perhaps, that in order to be an efficient and prosperous purveyor of sex, one must deny feeling. Don Anselmo's fall affirms this interpretation, for it is a direct result of his libidinal cupidity: he crosses too many moral boundaries. The *casa*, as the locus of passion, is in many ways a celebration of freedom, but we are continually reminded that it must be a confined, and therefore contradictory freedom, produced and defined by its very limitation.

Contradiction is reinforced by the *casa's* association with Bonifacia. Critics have commented on the chain of green images in *La casa verde* and linked them to Bonifacia with her jungle origins and often mentioned green eyes. Emanating an inner verdure, she is the "selva pura" [pure jungle] (Martín 126). José Luis Martín extends this observation in his theory of the "reptil verde" [green reptile]: "Siendo la Selvática símbolo de esa selva corrompida, la casa verde viene a ser Bonifacia misma envenenada, la colectividad latinoamericana empozonada, la selva pura destruída por el reptil verde que es la sociedad impostora coma victimario" (126) [With La Selvática being the symbol of this corrupted jungle, the green house becomes Bonifacia herself poisoned, the Latin American collectivity poisoned, the jungle destroyed by the green reptile that is the false society as victimizer]. While Martín's theory is plausible, in order to make this assertion he must ignore some problematic contradictions essential to the



meaning of the house. As la Selvática, Bonifacia is not, as Martín claims, “una nauseabunda y repulsiva personalidad” (126) [a sickening and repulsive personality]; rather, she maintains her dignity, honesty, and sympathy to the point of appearing incorruptible. When the charitable Father curses her friends, her dead patron, and her profession until he makes himself ill, it is la Selvática who wipes his mouth and comforts him. Soon after, the men she financially supports ridicule her and she responds by openly accepting her role: “—No soy tu prima—dice la Selvática. —Soy una puta y una recogida” (*La casa verde*, 412) [I’m not your cousin—says la Selvática—I’m a whore and an inmate]. Affirming her position, she gains power in the argument and demonstrates that her basic character has survived her life experiences intact. Not a facile moral case of good vs. evil, Bonifacia's state, like that of the brothel, is ambiguous.

Vargas Llosa maintains ambiguity throughout *La casa verde*, joining moral and economic anxieties in the *prostíbulo* once more. The force of this ambiguity, ever present in the text, might be read in terms of the contradictory combination of oppositional ideological stances in Peru, which, in 1965, was only three years away from its transition to a seemingly oxymoronic Gobierno Revolucionario de las Fuerzas Armadas [Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces]. Often considered to be a result of the left-leaning education provided to the military, the underpinnings for this change were surely in place when Vargas Llosa wrote his novel. Throughout the decade of the 1960s Peru experienced a struggle between populism, via the mass-based political party, APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionara Americana or American Popular Revolutionary Party), and resistance to this party’s increasing dominance. In 1962, when APRA won elections, but did not have the constitutionally mandated third of the votes, instead of letting APRA form alliances with other groups to assume power, the military stepped in to run the country for a year before the election of their candidate, Fernando Belaúnde Terry to the presidency in 1963 (Palmer 265). While Belaúnde Terry instituted important reforms, he was unable to sustain these. As David Scott Palmer observes, “What was so surprising,” is that “given Peru’s history of military intervention on behalf of the elites” the 1968 military coup “occurred in

large part because the civilian government had failed in its plans to carry out reforms, not because it had succeeded” (266). In *La casa verde* we find a narrative of contradictions that helps to situate the paradox of a revolutionary military government. We also see the continual juxtaposition of myth or image with reality, which may be read as a textualization of a broader social conflict between appearance and reality. The contraposition can perhaps be generalized as between the idea of Peru: independent, “developing,” autonomous, and the reality of Peru: “underdeveloped,” increasingly dependent, poor, and suffering from internal divisions. Vargas Llosa stages this conflict between myth and reality on many levels and in each case, leaves us with a standoff, a lack of closure, for complicated problems are left unresolved.

Both Donoso and Vargas Llosa use the alterity of the *prostíbulo* to emphasize its relation to dominant society. In *El lugar sin límites*, the brothel proves to be a reduced reflection of society, and its oppositional aspects urge us to the inevitable conclusion that all sectors of Chilean society are destined to be incorporated into a remodeled bourgeoisie. Vargas Llosa amplifies differences in his brothel image by fracturing its otherness into geographic, racial, gendered, and class elements. The brothel contains the distinct categories of the Peruvian underclass. The incorporation of the brothel in *La casa verde* differs from that of *El lugar sin límites*, for Vargas Llosa combines, but does not erase, specific differences in his house of prostitution, creating a unity that may lead to an oppositional sense of national identity.

Uruguayan Juan Carlos Onetti is both more provocative and more explicit than either of these authors in his use of the *burdel* as an alternative social form. His 1964 novel, *Juntacadáveres*, is the story of the founding of a brothel. As such, his brothel takes on a different developmental tenor than Donoso’s, which is in decline, or Vargas Llosa’s, which is eternal, existing in memory and outside of time. Its existence shapes the narrative; its inception opens the book and the brothel closes at the end of the novel, joining its creation to that of the literary endeavor. The brothel is a dream of one of the protagonists, Larsen, also known as Junta or Juntacadáveres. This alias that is the novel’s title describes Larsen’s

project as a kind of post-mortem creation, doomed from the start. The cadavers he unites are those of the decrepit prostitutes he describes in strictly material terms: they are the tools of his trade. Junta generates profit through the sexual union of bodies, but there is also another contra-familial unity of the prostitutes and Larsen within the brothel. Larsen's group, described as a "family," is adversarial: situated across the river on the coast as opposed to the town, it is a dark, female family set against the blond, male colony of Santa María. "Y así como las demás familias, ésta había sido creada y mantenida por una casualidad que puede ser absurda, que puede ser sentida coma deliberadamente injuriosa" (*Juntacadaveres* 137) [And so like other families, this one had been created and maintained by an accident that could be absurd, that could be felt as deliberately insulting]. The *prostíbulo* is continually associated with the unorthodox, oppositional, the repudiated.

"Cadavers" recall, of course, death and decay; Junta is often referred to as a "judío" [Jew] in racist expletives against avarice and the non-Christian, and the prostitutes are "mujeres inverosímiles" [unlikely women], approximations of the real thing. Onetti's brothel has a parodic function; employing the discourse of capitalism, Larsen's negotiations to establish the *burdel* parody the licit transactions conducted by the Swiss colonists of Santa María. Yet Junta's enterprise also has the support of the town fathers. It is a legal brothel, approved by the patriarchal powers and supported by the town doctor, Díaz Grey, who considers it a social necessity as well as good business. He posits its existence as an historical inevitability, the expected outcome of industrialization. Junta is "despreciable" and "asqueroso" [contemptible and disgusting] but necessary. His return to Santa María, like the project of the *prostíbulo* he will complete, is paradoxical. Needed but scorned, the industry and its proprietor step into the town's already contradictory attitudes toward change and modernization. The brothel embodies a variety of the town's anxieties; it is "un objetivo concreto de odio" [a concrete objective for hatred] a physical manifestation of corruption, yet it is an alternative to the repression of Santa María: "Larsen luchó para la libertad, la civilización y el honrado comercio. Y ahora se preocupa por el debido respeto a las

instituciones” (*Juntacadáveres* 231) [Larsen fought for liberty, civilization, and the honored market. And now his concern is the respect due to institutions]. Here the bordello is described as a progressive institution among others. Like Donoso’s and Vargas Llosa’s brothels, this one creates another community, a new choice.

The *prostíbulo* is tied to other attempts at alternative communities instigated by different characters in the novel. One of the key crusaders against the brothel in Santa María, Marcos Bergner, participated in his own idealistic, socialist utopian community in the past, the *falansterio*. Flawed from its inception, the *falansterio*’s rhetoric of cooperation was undermined by a continuing hierarchy, a separation between *peones* and *hombres*; it finally succumbed to a fatal promiscuity when its members abandoned monogamy and crossed the barriers of relations ruled by private property. The *falansterio*, like the brothel, ultimately fails because it is unable to isolate itself successfully from dominant social and economic values. These infiltrate, construct, and finally contain its oppositional possibilities. We get an individual example of the same dilemma in Jorge Malabia, a character who struggles with eroticism and oppositional values but is unable to break away from his class affiliations. Jorge experiments with art, writing poetry, has a socially unsanctioned relationship with his sister-in-law, and is a patron of the *burdel*, but when he is faced with a decision that involves rejecting the duty and conformity that Santa María represents, his social position as the son of an influential family wins out. Larsen is the sole protagonist who successfully takes on a subterranean lifestyle, proposing that “la realización de los ideales depende del grado de renunciamiento de que seamos capaces” (*Juntacadáveres* 113) [the realization of ideals depends upon the degree of renunciation we might be capable of]. Larsen’s breaking point with society came when he witnessed an idealistic labor organizer gunned down by more powerful bosses; his experiences in the “normal” world compel him to see it as amoral, and if he cannot fight it, he can choose to live on its other side.

Delinquency, with all its attendant deviant values, is the only option at this moment in Santa María and in this sense, it also represents an absence. The *prostíbulo* houses the limited range of possibilities available:

that of rejection, of negation, or of disidentification (Pecheux's term). In this way the text manifests the climate of economic stagnation in which Onetti writes. Santa María is a large rural town in transition. The tavern patrons talk of crops and transport, indicating that agriculture is the region's major industry; an industry with a long allegiance to tradition, hierarchy, and order, against development and social change in Uruguay since the inception of Batllismo at the beginning of the century (Weinstein xv). The town's reaction against the *prostíbulo* is emblematic of the pervasive conservatism in Uruguay of the 1960s—an atmosphere that would produce repression rather than reform or revolution—a reaction similar to that of the Santa Marians confronted with the challenge of the *prostíbulo*.

By suggesting that an opposition will always take some form, Onetti does not urge resignation but instead posits a continual resurfacing of desires antithetical to Santa María's social structure: sexual, creative, political. Junta's exodus from Santa María can be read as both a failure and a victory. The brothel was defined as the present manifestation of a larger evil (in both religious and socio-economic terms) and as an inevitability. Junta survives, will go elsewhere, leaving Santa María open to the next invasion (whatever form it may take) and certainly not resolving the contradictions his project provoked. We are left with the fact of his subversion. The *burdel* in *Juntacadáveres* offers a very limited possibility for change, but it maintains its force as a sign of difference, a transgression in an order striving for the appearance of uniformity.

Each one of these authors plays on the associations of the brothel with the seamy side of life to demonstrate the "seams" in the fabric of their different yet closely related national experiences. All of them are pessimistic, reflecting a broader regional desperation present in the 1960s. This attitude can be connected to the force of dependency theories which Tulio Halperin Donghi, in *Más allá del boom*, described as presenting "una imagen tan fatalista y monolítica de la dependencia, que la alternativa revolucionaria que propuso apareció, consecuentemente, más necesaria que posible" (316) [such a fatalistic and monolithic image of dependency that the revolutionary alternative appeared, consequently, more necessary

than possible]. The post-59 exuberance at the possibilities for change and escape from the force of imperialism had begun to wane by the middle of the succeeding decade. Foreign debts in Latin America as a whole had reached such proportions that they presented no way out. Capitalism, industrialization, and dependency intensified contradictions within countries (a situation well illustrated in *El lugar...* and *Juntacadáveres*) as the individualistic ideology of social mobility proved even more infeasible in dependent nations than in their first world neighbors. In all three novels we have observed the resulting “crisis of dominance” of the bourgeoisie foreshadowing a regional crisis that took the form of the militarization of individual governments.

Amid these regional (and intra-regional) similarities there are differences in the individual configurations of events within each country and corresponding differences in the texts each situation produces. In Chile, Donoso gives us a fatalistic vision of the future. La Japonesa, a figure for Chile itself, participates in the free enterprise system, which, in turn is developing and passing her by. Donoso’s *prostíbulo* signifies exclusion; it is an inverted subterranean order, but an order subsumed by the larger system. Vargas Llosa’s brothel unifies the “underclass” and so creates an alternative space. In *La casa verde* he gives voice to an often voiceless Other (Indian, Amazonian, female, proletariat) but this does not lead to any action. Instead, the brothel in this novel stands for institutionalized contradiction, just as its characters are individual examples of conflict, positions which are left unresolved. The author is caught in this same contradiction, for the brothel is also a metaphor for the creative process. In his essay “Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones,” Vargas Llosa makes this “subversive function of literature” explicit :

Las sociedades socialistas (como las capitalistas) durante mucho tiempo serán todavía la sede de contradicciones, amarguras y rebeliones individuales que plasmarán en ficciones, que, a su vez, servirán a los demás hombres para tomar conciencia y formular racionalmente sus propias contradicciones, amarguras y rebeliones. Esto es lo que entiendo por la función ‘subversiva’ de la literatura. (87)

[For much time to come socialist societies (like capitalist ones) will be the seat of contradictions, bitterness, and individual rebellions that will be shaped into fictions, that, in turn, will raise the

consciousness of other men and make them rationally articulate their own contradictions, bitterness and rebellions. This is what I understand as the 'subversive' function of literature.]

The brothel, like literature itself, produces a rupture in the system.

Onetti takes the liberties open to him when he adopts the socially "exotic," a maneuver which at the same time demonstrates the limitations to which he is subject. The image of the *burdel* created in *Juntacadáveres* is the most resistant to incorporation, but it also reveals the confines of this oppositional space. Onetti's brothel is an exercise in the power of resistance—a necessarily "small movement" that jostles the status quo and does not "render back completely" what the subject's conditioning has given him, revealing social contradiction. In all three novels the brothel is a figure of inversion. It is an institution that both challenges and functions within societal structures. In this, its operation is analogous to that of the rogue, clown, or fool observed by Bakhtin. These characters participate in the private life of high society, yet they are outside of it; they have a right to be Other and so can more freely reflect on private life, making it public (Bakhtin 161). Combining elements of sexuality, desire, the lower classes, women, and a variety of races, the brothel holds all that is repressed in official society.

The embodiment of Bakhtin's figural Other in these works has shifted from an individual to an institution. The brothel as an establishment is juxtaposed to other industries (rubber, for example, in *La casa verde*), communities (the family, Santa María) and on a larger scale, the major institutions of Latin America: church, state, and military. Through their reflection in the brothel, these institutions can be demythologized, shown to be less completely powerful and brought down to a lower level. Or they can cynically remain in place, as we have seen in the case of *Lugar...*, where an inverted reality reflects the dominant vision back to itself. While Bakhtin's characters make the private public, the use of the brothel image may also signify the extent of the invasion of the public into the private sphere. It can be read as the region's commentary on its own position. In the 1960s Latin Americans had a new awareness of their on-going dependency, of their limited options for self-definition; a

recognition that the superpowers were, metaphorically, in the bedroom.

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