

Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* and the Labyrinth of Postwar  
Guatemala: On Ethics, Truth, and Justice

Nanci Buiza

Swarthmore College

The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make  
up one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a  
thoroughfare for all thoughts, not a select party.  
—John Keats, 24 September 1819

Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* (2009) explores what might have once been called, in a less skeptical age, "the human predicament." Such a notion might nowadays seem quaint or pompously existential, but in a novel that grapples with the consequences of Guatemala's violent past, it takes on a stark actuality. Rey Rosa's novel problematizes the ethical implications of probing into a once-secret police archive that brings into the present the sufferings of the past. Through the first-person perspective of the protagonist, a writer named Rodrigo, the novel unsettles our easy assumptions regarding the relation between documentary truth and the notions of justice and reconciliation. *El material humano* can be read as an itinerary of Rodrigo's encounters with the many conflicting ways in which individuals deal with the painful truths of the past. This itinerary leads him into an intellectual and

emotional crisis in which his assumptions about history, politics, and morality are revealed to be facile and glib.

In this essay I argue that Rodrigo's crisis ultimately serves a homeopathic function that makes possible a special mode of ethical engagement, one which brings into fruitful tension two distinct modes of cognition—thought and affect—and is thus able to register the contradictions and nuances of the human reality of postwar Guatemala. By implication, the novel shows that an ethics based solely on documentary truths and simplistic conceptions of justice and reconciliation is insufficient, for it loses sight of the fact that such truths are always embedded in an ever-changing matrix of traumas, regrets, compassions, and enmities. *El material humano*, then, posits an ethics based not on historical truth but on the larger, more redemptive truth of the human predicament.

*El material humano* centers on the archive of the former Guatemalan National Police that was found at “La Isla,” a police compound that had once served as a torture and detention center. This discovery is factual and occurred in 2005, in Guatemala City, when a group of human rights officials inspecting La Isla stumbled upon a vast collection of old and musty papers that turned out to be the official archive of the National Police, which had been disbanded by the 1996 Peace Accords for its use of kidnapping, torture, and murder during Guatemala's 36-year civil war (1960-1996). Prior to the discovery, the government had always denied that such an archive existed. It maintained this denial even in defiance of the UN-sponsored Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) that in 1997 began investigating the human rights violations committed during the armed conflict. At about eighty million pages of documents dating from 1882 to 1997, this collection is now known as the Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional (AHPN), and its discovery is nothing less than a watershed for the efforts to cast light on Guatemala's history of state repression and assign accountability for human rights violations in a country where impunity and denial have always reigned.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to its historical and forensic significance, the AHPN also represents a boon for writers in search of a project. This is the case for Rodrigo, who

---

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the discovery and contents of the National Police Archive, see *From Silence to Memory: Revelations of the AHPN*, as well as Kristen Weld's outstanding *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*. For an account closer in time to the archive's discovery, see Kate Doyle's “The Atrocity Files: Deciphering the Archives of Guatemala's Dirty War.” The archive has also been the subject of a documentary film entitled *La Isla: Archives of a Tragedy* (2009) by German director Uli Stelzner, who, incidentally, appears as a character in *El material humano*.

gains access to La Isla to research the cases of intellectuals and artists who either had been investigated by the police or had collaborated with them as informants. His project is purely literary, with no investment in the humanitarian and activist efforts of the archivists working there, but it is also a nonstarter due to the archive's state of disarray. All that Rodrigo can do is pore through a cache of file cards that have recently been catalogued and had survived intact by sheer miracle. These file cards belonged to the investigative unit known as the Gabinete de Identificación and contain details of every individual that was detained or investigated by the National Police. Each card is meticulously recorded and bears the notarial signature of a certain Benedicto Tun. Rodrigo reads through these cards and becomes fascinated with this obscure functionary and with the horror and irrationality of the police's *modus operandi*, so much so that he records some of the bizarre and absurd charges for which people were arrested: "por ejercer la vagancia;" "por complicidad en robo de gallinas;" "por portar una honda de hule, un garrote y un cortaplumas;" "porque quiere dejar la prostitución y someterse a la vida honrada" (25, 27, 30, 33). As Rodrigo gets going with his research at La Isla, it dawns on him that the circumstances of the archive itself—its murky politics, its chaotic condition, and its very existence—are themselves "novelescos, y acaso aun novelables" (14). He follows this unforeseen direction and rejiggers his project into something that has all the makings of a "thriller" (122).

*El material humano* is more accurately described as a collection of notes for a novel than as a novel per se. It is made up of the notebooks and papers in which Rodrigo documents his visits to the archive and his subsequent entanglement with its politics. These notebooks function as chapters, with "hojas adjuntas" attached to some of them, and each is described by its physical and design features, such as "forro verde con motivos indios" (39); "franjas rojas y azules sobre fondo blanco" (79); "cubierta de cuero sin marca ni nombre" (119); "pasta española" (141)—all of which give Rodrigo's text the imprimatur of authenticity. *El material humano* jettisons standard novelistic protocol and presents a fragmentary text that is made up of Rodrigo's research notes, personal reflections, accounts of daily life and emotional turmoil, snippets of newspaper articles, and literary quotations by authors such as Miguel Angel Asturias, Voltaire, Sartre, Borges, and Bioy Casares. Along with the fictive authenticity of the notebooks, this haphazard commingling of the historical, the personal, the political, and the literary has the effect of blurring the line between

reality and fiction.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, the fact that these domains are kept diffuse and juxtaposed, rather than integrated into a coherent narrative, enables *El material humano* to give truthful expression to the complex human reality of the archive. Thus, it is through formal, aesthetic means that Rey Rosa's novel will ultimately enact its subtle but profoundly ethical gesture.

*At the Threshold of the Labyrinth: Literature and History*

For its engagement with the archive and the implications of preserving historical memory, *El material humano* can be read as an example of what Fernando J. Rosenberg calls "narrativas de verdad y reconciliación," which are narratives that do not necessarily seek truth or promote reconciliation, but rather engage—whether critically, approvingly, or for lucre—with the global human rights discourse that imagines itself "como superación de la política" (94).<sup>3</sup> For Ricardo Gutiérrez-Mouat, novels such as *El material humano* present a post-ideological discourse that is infused with ethical concerns. He notes that these kinds of novels "proponen a la crítica cuestiones éticas vinculadas a la apropiación de los testimonios sufrientes de los informes de verdad y a la representación de la violencia, tanto como su localización, como dice Rosenberg, en el filo de una posmodernidad transnacional y en el seno de una industria editorial global" (47). *El material humano* certainly fits within the tendency outlined by these critics, and even though it may not deal directly with the reports of Guatemala's truth commissions—*Guatemala: Nunca Más. Informe del Proyecto Interdiocesano Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (REMHI) and *Guatemala: Memoria del silencio* (CEH)—they are nevertheless present as a fixture of the human rights culture that envelops the archive project.<sup>4</sup>

Freed from the revolutionary fervor of previous decades, much of postwar Central American literature (published from the 1990s to the present) now questions the legitimacy of what had once been considered to be literature's ethical duty: to

---

<sup>2</sup> For a study of the play between reality and fiction, or "autoficción," in *El material humano*, see Jossa.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg does not include *El material humano* in his analysis of "narrativas de verdad y reconciliación" (his article and the novel were published in the same year, 2009). He does, however, include Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004), Carlos Franz's *El desierto* (2005), Santiago Roncagliolo's *Abril Rojo* (2006), and Alonso Cueto's *La hora azul* (2005). For an analysis of *Insensatez*'s treatment of the testimonies of the human rights report *Guatemala: Nunca Más* and their relation to trauma and affect, see Buiza. On the relation between *El material humano*, "los relatos de crímenes," and law, see Pérez.

<sup>4</sup> Both commissions identify the state as the principal culprit for the deaths and forced disappearances of some 200,000 people, most of whom were Mayas and victims of the genocide perpetrated by the military.

speak for and represent the subaltern other. As Arturo Arias explains, postwar Central American literature can be understood, to some extent, as a rupture with the previous revolutionary decades during which intellectuals had failed to recognize their inability to represent the other. He notes that the acknowledgment of this inability constitutes “un gesto vital para los encuentros éticos con la otredad” (129). Consequently, with the shift from an ideological to a post-ideological conception of literature, new possibilities for engaging with the ethical have been able to emerge. This shift has also enabled writers to experiment with literary form and venture into a wider range of themes. On this point, Werner Mackenbach and Alexandra Ortiz Wallner insist that we must not underestimate or disregard the social and ethical dimension of postwar literature, for it is still present, though in more aesthetically inflected ways (93).

*El material humano* is a product of this postwar creative freedom and has as its central figure the cosmopolitan, self-involved intellectual who does not pretend to speak for others or claim moral superiority. We see in this novel that the ethical is no longer the exclusive domain of the intellectual: it has now been democratized, so to speak, and is manifested in the efforts to recover historical memory so that its stories may speak for themselves. Still, by centering on the archive—on the stories it contains and the politics of bringing them to light—*El material humano* remains grounded in ethical questions of how the past is remembered and constructed, and to what ends. Rodrigo may exemplify the post-ideological intellectual and may feel ambivalence toward the “archival activism” at work in La Isla, but he is not entirely out of touch with the ethical import of the archive project.<sup>5</sup> He understands that the purpose of preserving historical memory is to keep history in its most tragic forms from repeating itself, which is a fundamental tenet of the ever-present human rights discourse, as the title *Guatemala: Nunca Más* makes abundantly clear. But Rodrigo’s understanding of this, at least initially, is largely analytical and rarified. For him, the ethical import of historical memory is more of an intellectual truism than a reflective and deeply felt value.

His notes on Borges and Voltaire, then, are not the mere trappings of a literary dilettante but are the means through which he grapples with the meaning and purpose of the archive. He is intrigued by Borges’s idea that “El poder...actúa

---

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the term “archival activism” from Carlos Aguirre, who explains that such activism is based on the idea that “records ought to be considered not inert pieces of evidence but actual carriers of powerful symbolism and weapons in the multifaceted effort to create a more just society, empower hitherto marginalized and silenced individuals and social agents, and promote a culture of transparency and human rights” (xiii).

siempre siguiendo su propia lógica. La única crítica posible de este poder es quizá la Historia; pero como la Historia se escribe desde el presente, y así *lo incluye*, no es probable que pueda hacerse una crítica imparcial” (55). In other words, the critique of power might be possible through the scrutinizing of history, but since history is always tainted by ideology and power, it is ultimately ineffective as an instrument of critique. The quotations from Voltaire likewise dwell on the precarious and hazardous nature of history. Prompted by some of Voltaire’s comments on criminology, Rodrigo notes that the exploitation and criminalization of Guatemala’s peasant population resembles that of the feudal vassals who were condemned and dispossessed of their lands by their rapacious overlords (36). Rodrigo reproduces three passages from Voltaire that bring together a cluster of ideas about history:

*Las debilidades sacadas a la luz agradan sólo a la malicia, a menos que instruyan por las desgracias que las han seguido o por las virtudes que las han reparado.*

*¿Qué podemos pensar de estos errores y de otros muchos? ¿Nos contentaremos solamente con gemir sobre la naturaleza humana? Casos hubo en que fue necesario vengarla.*

*No a todo el mundo le está permitido cometer las mismas faltas. (37)*

These quotes suggest several things. First, that history, full as it is of human failings, can serve either as fodder for grudge-holding, or as a source from which to learn from whatever goodness came as a response to those failings. Second, that history may either be reduced to a sociology that attributes past wrongdoings to a natural condition of man, or be understood as a moral imperative for avenging past offenses. And third, that history works by an insidious cycle of repetition in which some always have the right to commit errors under the aegis of impunity, while others—who also commit errors but don’t enjoy that nefarious privilege—always suffer the consequences. This logic, repeated throughout history, assumes special significance in the context of Guatemala, where simple misdeeds by the disenfranchised tend to result in arbitrary arrests. It is clear that these ideas, though still somewhat abstract, speak to Rodrigo’s intellectual interest in the archive; but as he becomes more enmeshed in its moral, social, and political dynamics, these ideas take on a very worldly and human texture, one that will ultimately make itself felt by Rodrigo at a deeply affective and emotional level.

*Lost in the Labyrinth: Reckoning with the Past*

Rodrigo's notes reveal how the archive's promise of truth, justice, and reconciliation is threatened by ideological factors that tarnish the efforts to preserve it. He alleges that some of the archivists are

revolucionarios frustrados que trabajan ahí por el sueldo pero también, con una especie de sordo ahínco, porque quieren hacer hablar a los muertos. Porque casi podría asegurar que, como en mi caso, nadie está ahí (salvo tal vez la gente de la limpieza y los contadores) de modo completamente desinteresado o inocente. Todos, en cierta manera, archivan y registran documentos *por o contra* su propio interés. Con anticipación, y quizás a veces con temor también. Nadie sabe, como dicen, para quién trabaja—ni menos aún para quién trabajó. (85-86)

These “revolucionarios frustrados” are caught in a bind: what they find in the archive might help them seek retributive justice, but it might also implicate them in some of the misdeeds committed during the war. Not surprisingly, such dubious and self-serving motives render impossible any consensus regarding the purpose and meaning of historical memory. On this score, Mónica Albizúrez Gil describes the archive in *El material humano* as “un lugar de caos y peligro que dificulta diálogos entre clases sociales e ideologías distintas alrededor de la elaboración de una memoria histórica del conflicto armado” (19). What is disturbing about such ideological entrenchment is that it replicates the pattern of opposition that had driven the conflict between the revolutionary militants and the dictatorships they fought against. Of course, the terms and the context may have changed, but the logic remains the same. Teresa Fallas makes the same point when she states that “Rey Rosa delata la negligencia de los dirigentes guerrilleros quienes optaron por ‘olvidar’ sus decisiones, actuando de manera similar a los regímenes dictatoriales” (75). It seems, then, that within this labyrinthine archive, the erstwhile opposition between revolutionary militants and dictatorships has found its chiasmic avatar, for it is now the “revolucionarios frustrados” who assume the dictatorial stance by suppressing inconvenient truths so that they may construct historical memory to suit their interests.

Consequently, any critique of the archive project becomes an affront to moral and political righteousness. This becomes patently clear to Rodrigo when he attends the seminar on “Violencia, Poder y Política” organized for the workers at the archive. The seminar is led by “el doctor Novales,” a specialist on the sociology of violence, who has in his eyes “como un brillo de dogmatismo domesticado” (43). Rodrigo takes

dutiful notes on the definitions and statistics through which Novales understands political violence, but the neatness and surety of his “axiomas” seems all too suspicious. During the question and answer session, Rodrigo asks Novales whether or not the guerrilla leadership, when it decided to change its “escenario de combate” from the city to the hinterlands, took into account the willingness of the peasants to participate in a conflict in which they, the peasants, would be vulnerable to a counterinsurgency tactic known as “quitar el agua al pez,” that would have likely led to their extermination. Displeased by Rodrigo’s question, Novales answers “no” and immediately dismisses the question as “sumamente antipática” (47). Evidently, his lecture on “Violencia, Poder y Política”—with its respectable veneer of social science—is immune to critique.

But not everyone in the archive project has fallen for such dogmatism. One exception, and a surprising one, is the director of the project. For some, he is a sinister figure—“un personaje muy oscuro,” “un asesino” (159)—who now has free rein to pry into the archive of his former enemies. But as it happens, he is disarmingly honest and open to the kind of self-critique that is lacking in those “revolucionarios frustrados” and their intellectual allies. He is faithful to the project’s noble purpose, but also wary of its ideological corruption. Of vital importance to him is the idea of self-scrutiny, which for him means confronting and owning up to his involvement in some of the guerrilla’s wartime excesses. He explains, in a tone of deep regret, that “Esas ejecuciones dentro de nuestras filas, reconozco que fueron errores, o exageraciones, excesos de severidad, cuando no fueron atrocidades” (173). Not everyone, however, welcomes such frankness. The director’s honesty and remorse may be genuine, but for many of his ex-comrades, they are impolitic and inconvenient.

Rodrigo’s notes reveal to us, however opaquely, that something about the legitimacy of the human rights enterprise has been undermined by those who seek to use it as an expedient for ideological victory, whether it be through judicial retribution over former enemies or through manipulation of historical memory. Rodrigo is privy to the fact that the momentum of the armed conflict has been carried over into the present workings of the archive. This predicament shares much in common with one that had troubled Theodor W. Adorno, who feared that the killing of millions of Jews might prompt the institutionalization of vengeance through legal means:

As long as blow is followed by counter-blow, catastrophe is perpetuated. One need only think of revenge for the murdered. If as many of the others are

killed, horror will be institutionalized and the pre-capitalist patterns of vendettas, confined from time immemorial to remote mountainous regions, will be re-introduced in extended form... (*Minima*, 55-56)

Although Adorno avoids using the word “justice,” his comments point to a problem that plagues any society seeking to address and heal from its record of violence, namely, how to distinguish between justice and vengefulness. *El material humano*, however, pushes this problem further by showing how these two categories fail to recognize alternative forms of healing. It shows, in other words, how the impatience to settle grudges and redress grievances flattens out the various ways in which people cope with trauma and find reconciliation.

One such way is mercy. And we see this in Rodrigo’s mother, whose presence in the novel may be minor but is not insignificant. What little we read of her suggests that mercy can indeed be a viable path toward healing, even when it is shown to one’s victimizers. Rodrigo explains that his mother was kidnapped for six months in 1981, and that upon her release, she and the family decided not to investigate the crime. Instead, she chose to forgive her kidnappers and enshrined her forgiveness in a religious mass in which she expressed, publicly, her “deseo de que sus captores fueran perdonados por los poderes de este mundo ‘y los del otro’” (91). Although Rodrigo had preferred to investigate, he does admit that there was a saving grace to his mother’s ordeal, which was that “esta experiencia fue en cierta manera enriquecedora para mi madre, a sus sesenta y cuatro años, y la puso en contacto con reservas inesperadas de fortaleza interior. Adquirió una conciencia social más plena, y se convirtió, después del secuestro, en una mujer más dulce” (91).

The mother’s transformation subverts the deep-seated assumption that every victim is in need of justice. The mercy she showed to her victimizers stands as an alternative to the logic of debt on which vindictiveness and punitive justice operate. While some might consider mercy to be a sign of weakness and defeat, the mother shows that it can be a salutary way of coping with trauma and of rising above the incivility of the time. Her willingness to forgive is a gesture of humanity in a context plagued by inhumanity. And the fact that she gained a stronger sense of social compassion from her ordeal suggests that her show of mercy is not just a generous overlooking of wrongdoing but is rather a broadening of her vision from the specific wrong she suffered to the fact that the larger circumstance itself is wrong. Her largeness of spirit reflects this largeness of view and has enabled her to bear, patiently and without rancor, the misdeeds of her kidnappers. Thus, her story posits a form of

conciliation that differs radically from what those “revolucionarios frustrados” are seeking. And it shows, moreover, that the claims of humanity—of compassion and mercy—are not always commensurable with the claims of justice.

But not all would agree. It doesn't take much to imagine how one might be troubled by the idea that forgiveness might end up trivializing evil and corruption. One can easily argue that the humanity gained through mercy and forgiveness has as its flip side the loss of justice's power to assign accountability and express society's revulsion toward certain offenses. Such is the dilemma that Adorno, to pick up again on his musings, encountered when he stated that “If, however, the dead are not avenged and mercy is exercised, Fascism will despite everything get away with its victory scot-free, and, having once again been shown so easy, will be continued elsewhere” (*Minima*, 56). Although Adorno refers to fascism, his statement applies just as well to a postwar Guatemala that continues to reckon with its legacy of genocide and state-sanctioned violence.

Such reckoning, however, comes to an impasse when the demands of the past intersect with the rights of the writer. There is something off-putting about a self-declared dilettante wanting to use such a historically fraught archive for a mere thriller novel. Rodrigo's ambition as a writer certainly seems opportunistic and frivolous next to the earnest efforts of the activists working in the name of justice and historical memory. And it seems even more so when considering that his original focus was on artists and intellectuals rather than the indigenous subalterns who made up the majority of victims of the state's repressive apparatus. In essence, this repulsion toward Rodrigo's thriller project arises from the suspicion that human suffering has been reduced to simple research data that satisfies a casual historical interest and serves as a point of departure for a dilettante's literary escapade. Indeed, Rodrigo's blithe approach to the archive suggests a kind of cold, anaesthetized outlook that turns stories of suffering into something remote and abstract. Hence his interest in “casos” and their accounts of facts, dates, and motives. The shallowness of his initial enterprise assumes that human suffering—and the politics of restoring its place in historical memory—can be given narrative coherence or can be reduced to literary fodder without any emotional involvement. As a result, there is a sharp dissonance that rings between the human value of historical memory and the creative liberty of the writer.

But as troubling as this dissonance may be, it must be admitted that the rights of literary imagination are not the rights of history. Cynthia Ozick reminds us that the

novelist, who is neither a sociologist nor a journalist, is not beholden to any demographic datum (114-16). What may seem like a breach of decorum in Rodrigo's novelistic enterprise actually aligns with the aims of imagination. Unlike the work of memory, which strives for historical accuracy, the work of the novelist regards history as a source of inspiration. But of course things of this sort are never that simple. As Ozick explains, "The conflict between the freedom to invent and an honest confrontation with the constraints of the historical record remains muddled—and, often enough, muddied" (111). When the novelist takes creative liberties with remote historical events, such as the Homeric or Napoleonic Wars, the results are benign and often delightful; but this permissiveness becomes murky when an author touches on horrors of unimaginable magnitude. Here Ozick is referring to the Holocaust, but the same could be said when writing about Guatemala's murderous and genocidal history, whose ramifications have not waned in the least. Of central concern here is the thorny problem of the author's intention, of whether his novel seeks "to put human flesh on historical notation"—a task that yields to the demands of history—or whether his novel derives from "literature's elastic license" (Ozick 116, 112). Though it is unclear which of these factors drives Rodrigo's shifting interests, one thing is certain: he cannot escape the murk.

In a country beset by violence, impunity, and moral despair, where "milagros aparte, no hay nada bueno que esperar" (131), not even Rodrigo's nonchalance toward the archive can keep him from confronting the claims of the past. He expects to merely dabble in the archive for literary inspiration—"como una especie de entretenimiento" (14)—but soon enough realizes that he, too, is entangled in sufferings that have yet to be redeemed. There are no risk-free positions when dealing with Guatemala's traumatic past. Adorno famously noted that "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" (*Negative* 362). Respecting this right is incumbent upon everyone, especially those who burrow into a history as dark as that of Guatemala. If Guatemala's legacy of suffering is ever to be redeemed, it must have a say in those projects into which it has been enrolled by the novelist or the activist. Any literary or documentary project that would deny its right to expression risks becoming morally suspect. And this, to be sure, is the predicament that imposes itself upon Rodrigo and takes a psychological toll on him.

Throughout his notebook we see that the traumas of the past return to haunt him. His obsession with the archive's stories and the memory of his mother's kidnapping trigger a series of deeply unsettling nightmares in which the climate of

political and social insecurity infiltrates the intimacy of his family life. He dreams of suspicious men intruding into his family's home; of his mother in her last agony, looking as emaciated as when she was released from her kidnapping; of Roberto Lemus, one of the archive workers who may have been involved in the mother's kidnapping; of his feeling threatened by two armed soldiers for a traffic violation; and of being pursued by the police who are under Tun's command. So vivid are these nightmares that they even elicit somatic responses when Rodrigo wakes up sweating and sobbing from anguish and fear. It is evident that the past holds Rodrigo in its grip and refuses to loosen its claim on him.

These nightmares are evidence that, for Rodrigo, trauma has assumed a temporal deferral that subverts his initial dispassion toward the archive. Cathy Caruth, following Freud's lead, explains that "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time." She adds that "trauma is not a simple or single experience of events but that events, insofar as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay" (9). This intimate link between history and trauma's delayed temporality is of great consequence in the context of Guatemala, for it undermines any sort of "Ley de Reconciliación Nacional" that pretends to overcome the past through peace by fiat. The resurgence of Rodrigo's trauma gives the lie to the notion that social reconciliation can be achieved within a chronological conception of history that emphatically dissociates the violence of the past from the peace of the present. Through Rodrigo's nightmares we see that the past cannot be so easily severed from the present, since it always resides within and alongside the now. It festers within Rodrigo as unresolved trauma, and persists uncomfortably close to him in the threats that accost him and the violence that fills the newspapers he reads. The archive thus represents an unexpected and forceful entry of the past into the present. It is no longer a mere interest or source for literary inspiration, but has instead become the nexus of a restless past that is freighted with ominous demands on the present. The trauma-ridden history of Guatemala reveals itself to be erratic and circuitous: it springs forward and backward, intrudes uninvitedly, reverses its motion, and drags the unsuspecting individual toward its unredeemed suffering. And out of this devious, labyrinthine course of history there is no easy escape.

This use of "labyrinthine" as an adjective is hardly gratuitous, for it is a motif that recurs throughout *El material humano* and is the controlling image through which the novel develops into its full meaning. Although Rodrigo uses it to describe the

archive, we eventually realize that the real labyrinth in which he finds himself is made up not so much of papers and files as it is of moral dilemmas, divergent viewpoints, and ideological confusion. His notebooks register the winding complexity of a postwar society where the search for historical truth doubles back as self-serving vindictiveness, where the ideal of justice bypasses the notion of forgiveness, where the virtue of mercy strays from the demands of the past, and where the rights of history cut into the rights of literary imagination. This, to be sure, is a distinctively ethical labyrinth—much less tangible than paper, but a labyrinth nonetheless.

We are made privy to this in the last scene of Rodrigo's notes, which has him on vacation with his daughter at a hotel on the Pacific coast. As he is putting his notes in order—the very notes we read—his daughter asks him if the story he is working on is for children or adults. He answers:

Le digo que no sé, que tal vez es sólo para mí.  
 —¿Sabés cómo podría terminar? —me dice.  
 Niego con la cabeza.  
 —Conmigo llorando, porque no encuentro en ninguna parte a mi papá —  
 responde. (179)

Rodrigo is lost. He has become captive in the labyrinth he has been chronicling, a labyrinth in which all certitudes have become two-edged, and all dyadic paradigms intricate and winding. If labyrinths are where appearances confuse and bafflement prevails, then no values or truths can be absolutely binding. Anything viewed from different corridors inevitably assumes a variety of contours, which effectively renders all points of view arbitrary. Whatever clear-cut moral and political principles had oriented Rodrigo suddenly reveal themselves to be absolutist illusions. In the labyrinthine world he inhabits, direction is no longer a given: it must be constructed out of the arbitrary and the chaotic. Hence his interest in the quote by poet Adam Zagajewski: “*Describir nuevas variedades del mal y del bien—be aquí la magna tarea del escritor*” (84). Reflecting on this passage, Rodrigo considers that the notions of good and evil can never be stable between competing subjectivities, since each individual is situated in “*circunstancias—de tiempo y lugar*” that have a “*tendencia al infinito*” (84). Despite their philosophical tenor, these observations essentially describe how rival rhetorics and colliding values sprawl into a labyrinth.

*Escaping the Labyrinth: Ariadne's Thread*

Although labyrinths are spaces of entrapment and captivity, there usually is a way out, however difficult it may be. For Rodrigo, such a way is revealed by an unlikely figure: Benedicto Tun, the Maya man who was the principle architect of the National Police's Gabinete de Identificación. The Gabinete is the police unit whose file cards Rodrigo has been digging through for his book project, and it is also the institutional antecedent of the División de Investigaciones Criminológicas, whose agents have been committing the extrajudicial killings that Rodrigo has been reading about in the press. One would expect that a figure like Tun, with his ties to such a notorious institution, would be the antipode of freedom—but freedom is precisely what he offers to Rodrigo. In essence, the stories of Tun's humanity and professional integrity free Rodrigo from the mental captivity of moral abstractions and easy simplifications. These stories shake up Rodrigo's moralistic platitudes and leftist villainology, and reveal that in a labyrinth of mediations and contradictions, where one's certitudes always involve contradictory and bitter implications, the only possible means of escape is through liberation from the illusion that one's scheme of values is righteous and blameless.

The way that Rodrigo first came across Tun's name during his initial visit to La Isla has all the trappings of a Borgesian conceit. The scene is as follows: amid the labyrinthine archive, Rodrigo meets an archivist named Ariadna Sandoval, who shows him the cache of files of the Gabinete and explains to him that all the files bear the seal and signature of Benedicto Tun. Ariadna then suggests to Rodrigo: "Tal vez podría servirte de hilo conductor para tu...*investigación?*" (13-14). The coincidences are portentous: Ariadna—or Ariadne—is the name of the female figure in Greek mythology who helps Theseus escape from the Minotaur's labyrinth by giving him a ball of thread that he can use to find his way out after killing the Minotaur. Although the coincidence is not lost on Rodrigo, its full significance is not yet clear to him, at least not at the beginning. What he seeks is indeed an "hilo conductor," but one that he understands as a common or main narrative thread—and the story of Benedicto Tun certainly seems a promising fit. But as it turns out, the truer sense of "hilo conductor" is closer to its original, mythological meaning, that is, as a guiding thread that leads to escape from the unfreedom of the labyrinth.

Rodrigo's fascination with Tun and his work morphs into a question of ethics, of whether one can be "un hombre decente, o más aún: un hombre *ejemplar*" while laboring under the pall of violence and corruption (74). To answer this, he

tracks down Tun's son and meets with him to learn about those aspects of Tun's life that are not registered in the archive. Through the stories that the son tells about his father, Rodrigo is able to glimpse Tun's humanity and realizes that this police official is not the dark and sinister tyrant of his nightmares, but is instead a man with a conscience, whose primary commitment was not to the politics of the National Police but to the dutiful fulfillment of his forensic science. Moreover, these stories reveal that Tun's diligence as a functionary did not answer to any kind of self-deceived obedience to an apparatus of state repression, but was instead rooted in a principled humanity that refused to succumb to the weight of corruption.

Tun's son tells, for example, of how his father had once refused to identify the body of an escaped prisoner who had been shot by the police but was still alive, and was in fact not a prisoner but a laborer. He also tells of how government or military agents had once tried to force Tun to alter his report on the death of a former police chief who had killed himself during his campaign for the presidency. But Tun did not capitulate. He refused to change his declaration of suicide to political murder, a change that would only have served certain political interests. In this way, he demonstrated his refusal to accommodate to the regime.

Inevitably, the harrowing circumstances of Tun's work—the coercion perpetrated against him and the wickedness he witnessed—all weighed upon him. And yet despite the stigmas and dangers that came with his job, his sense of humanity never wavered. “A veces, en casa, ya anciano, lloraba en silencio,” the son explains (157). In an atmosphere where corruption is the norm, his professional rectitude was a gesture of freedom and subversion. It was also a gesture that had an important long-term consequence: the preservation of historical memory. Indeed, without Tun's sense of integrity, the Gabinete would never have left a truthful record of the past. Needless to say, this is an image of Tun that hardly squares with Rodrigo's conception of the “fuerzas del orden” that he had always found revolting (148).

The power of Tun's story stems from the fact that it not only disrupts Rodrigo's moral clarity, but also reveals the inadequacy of the adversary impulse that had informed his politics and morality. This is the impulse that divides the world into two opposing and mutually exclusive camps—the good and the evil—and saves one the trouble of thinking about how good can come from evil, and how evil can come from good. With Tun, this way of thinking has misfired, which now leaves Rodrigo with the faint realization that his judgments and intuitions are little more than

intellectual reflex and moral posturing. The thoughts that he jots down after meeting with Tun's son are in this sense quite suggestive:

A mediodía, un mediodía nublado, con olor a lluvia, en la Lexus color azogue, entre semáforo y semáforo, pienso en mis debilidades. Un remordimiento ligero, y como resultado, la reflexión de que tal vez hay que ser un poco inmoral para ser una persona moral al menos en ciertos aspectos, para comprender 'el mecanismo' de la moral. (176)

The dialectical finesse of this reflection can be attributed to the ambiguities and contradictions of Tun's story—where professional integrity constitutes an act of subversion, where working within a system of corruption and perfidy makes possible the preservation of historical memory, and where the tyrant of one's nightmares is in fact deeply human. This dialectical mode of thinking delivers Rodrigo from the habit of seeing the social world in black and white, a habit that had informed his initial research project and had ridden roughshod over the labyrinthine complexity of Guatemala's postwar society. By revealing the shifting and relational nature of moral truths, Tun emerges as the mythological "hilo conductor" that offers the way out of the perspectival and coercive constraints of the labyrinth.

It is also significant that Rodrigo's reflections should take place during "un mediodía nublado." This seemingly unassuming detail encapsulates much of what isn't stated explicitly: that moral clarity has become "nublado," and that moral thought has taken on the ambivalence of the midday threshold, which has the capacity to look, from the same vantage point, in two opposite directions: the ascent and descent of the sun.

Humming dimly in the background of Rodrigo's midday reflection is the "free spirit" of Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*. As Nietzsche explains in his 1886 preface, the free spirit is that figure who, having realized the foolishness of applying abstract moral schemas to an ever-shifting human reality, "permits access to many and contradictory modes of thought" (8). Achieving such a capacity, however, has its cost. The moment that the spirit is liberated from the security of his inherited and unexamined assumptions, he experiences a sudden sense of disorientation and regret for having once bowed to values that have now become suspect. The newly freed spirit realizes that every "For and Against" involves "necessary injustice," and that life itself is "*conditioned* by the sense of perspective and its injustice" (9). It is only until the middle of the day, when shadows are minimized and clarity of vision is expanded, that this free spirit realizes the problem he now faces: of constructing a morality on his

own and living with the awareness that no right choice is ever possible. On precisely this point Nietzsche writes what may very well serve as a summary for *El material humano*:

it is only now, at the midday of our life, that we understand what preparations, bypaths, experiments, temptations, disguises the problem had need of before it was *allowed* to rise up before us, and how we first had to experience the most manifold and contradictory states of joy and distress in soul and body, as adventurers and circumnavigators of that inner world called 'human being'...until at last we had the right to say, we free spirits: 'Here—a *new* problem!... Here—*our* problem!' (10; translation modified)

Thus liberation means awareness of the human predicament in all its shiftiness and contradictions. It is the breaking free from the illusion that morality merely involves choosing between presumed contraries, where one side is pure in its innocence, and the other absolute in its wrongness. In Nietzsche, this revelation—this new mode of thinking—is affirmational and celebratory, but on the cloudy day of Rodrigo's reflections, it can only be partial and groping.

The "hilo conductor," then, heralds a freedom that is achieved not by the making of right choices from within one's perspective—since there are none—but by the overcoming of perspective itself. This is precisely what makes possible empathy, the ability to enter into and inhabit the view and the feelings of another individual. We see this reflected in Rodrigo's emotional development. Initially, Rodrigo comes off as something of a jerk who is too self-involved to be concerned with his girlfriend's emotional needs. She complains about his "horrible orgullo" (145) and his inability to understand or imagine how she feels. Rodrigo writes, "Se queja de mi falta de empatía, mi problema con los 'sentimientos que no puedo manejar'. Es claro, pienso: lo inmanejable suele ser problemático" (114). Indeed, better to remain aloof than to deal with the complications of empathy. But this attitude falters when after hearing Tun's story the stirrings of empathy begin to take hold of him.

This comes as a bitter irony for Rodrigo because the empathy he feels turns out to be for the person he least expected: his mother's kidnapper, Roberto Lemus. After being notified by Tun's son that Lemus, who now works at the archive, is in all likelihood one of the kidnappers, Rodrigo writes: "Pienso en Lemus: patético, sombrío. Éste era entonces el Minotauro que me esperaba en el fondo del laberinto del Archivo. De tal laberinto, tal Minotauro. Probablemente me tiene tanto miedo como yo a él. ¿Si lo atacara—me pregunto—se defendería?" (177). This is not the ferocious Minotaur of Greek mythology, but is instead the pitiful and pathetic one of

Borges's "La casa de Asterión." Rodrigo's question harkens back to the last line of Borges's story, where, after killing the Minotaur, Theseus asks: "¿Lo crearás, Ariadna? ... El minotauro apenas se defendió" (81). More than just serving as a literary artifice, the allusion attests to the fact that something has changed in Rodrigo's moral experience. His fitful venture to imagine how Lemus might feel is essentially an effort to transcend his own subjectivity, and to think and imagine otherness. As a metaphor of plight and suffering, Borges's Minotaur disturbs Rodrigo's comfortable reliance on ethical abstractions and forces him to confront what he had called "lo inmanejable."

After being taken aback by the revelations of Tun's story, and bearing in mind both the director's deep remorse for his past wrongdoings and the mother's willingness to forgive her kidnappers, it suddenly seems possible that within this all-too-human world there might be something redemptive about Lemus—and if there is, then perhaps it ought to count for something in matters of justice and reconciliation. With this possibility in mind, Rodrigo's rigidified view of kidnapping as being "un crimen imprescriptible" (161)—a formal legal principle—now seems insufficient and remote from experience. The human labyrinth that he has been navigating has made him realize, at a visceral level, the poverty of such legal formalism. And in a broader sense, it has revealed the limits of Guatemala's civil law tradition, which, unlike its common law counterpart, prioritizes abstract legal principles and foists them onto the human domain as if such a domain were immutable and coherent. Thus, it is through the experience of empathy, however inchoate it may be, that Rodrigo's penchant for facile abstractions opens up to a more humble conception of justice that is sensitive to the complexity of human experience.<sup>6</sup>

This is not to say that Rodrigo's cool, intellectual understanding of the ethical has been displaced by empathy. It simply means that these two modes of thinking—the analytical and the affective—have come together into a productive tension. Rodrigo's venture to imagine otherness through empathy has made him aware of aspects of human reality that were previously occluded by his ideological conformism. And although these aspects might come as unwelcome truths to him, he must keep them in view, lest he remain beholden to what Lionel Trilling once called "the political awareness that is not aware, the social consciousness which hates full consciousness, the moral earnestness which is moral luxury" (92). Reckoning of this

---

<sup>6</sup> One might also argue that the hybrid nature of the Minotaur, as part human and part beast, undermines any effort to reduce an individual—in this case, Lemus, as Rodrigo imagines him—to a species or type that fits neatly into rigid categories of good and evil, and of justice and injustice.

sort cannot come easy, for it involves squaring the coherence of objective and conceptual knowledge—the knowledge that there is, for instance, something definite called “justice”—with the cognitive flexibility and provisionality demanded by the antinomies of human reality. If there are any answers to this, they cannot be solid or straightforward, but only vaporous and elusive. Such uncertainty may be defeating—“es como si el germen del final ya hubiera contaminado el organismo,” says Rodrigo (177)—but ultimately it is liberatory and redemptive, for it bears a truth quotient higher than any dilettantish politics or ethics. Thus, the meaning of Rodrigo’s final literary quotation bears its full meaning: “*The most precious thing in life is uncertainty. Kenko*” (178).

### *Conclusion*

Behind *El material humano*’s unedited and haphazard veneer lies a subtle and carefully wrought novel that brings the mythic tradition to postwar Guatemala. When distilled to its most basic elements, *El material humano* depicts a hubristic quest for historical truth that leads to a social and archival labyrinth in a place called La Isla, which evokes the island of Crete, home of the mythical labyrinth, where the protagonist finds a minotaur and is liberated by Ariadna’s “hilo conductor.” One might say that this novel employs the technique that T. S. Eliot once called “the mythical method,” which he defined as “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). But *El material humano* shows that what Eliot calls the “immense panorama of futility and anarchy”—that is, the flux of human reality—cannot be given any final coherence: it cannot be controlled, ordered, or given shape as Eliot would like. Hence, the unsystematic and fickle nature of *El material humano*’s notebook form ultimately does more justice to society’s complexity than the forced coherence of the narrative form.

Rather than offer the easy answers of a mythic adventure tale, *El material humano* leaves the reader with thorny and unanswerable questions. Its poignancy owes to the fact that it brings our comfortable conceptions of truth and justice into the fray of human experience and leaves them in a state of unresolved tension. And although this might be disconcerting, it ultimately has generative and salutary implications for postconflict Guatemala, where the archive at La Isla has become the locus of truth from which it is believed that justice can be obtained and human dignity restored. Because by taking the rhetoric of truth and justice down from its plinth, and placing it

at the ground level of human motivations and desires, *El material humano* expands the basis by which the truth is legitimized. If the purpose of the archival project at La Isla is to restore human worth, then any effort to reduce the archive's inner truths to mere empirical data—whether for historical or forensic purposes—undercuts a more fundamental truth about human experience: that it is always fluid and mediated by the dynamic interplay of various moral, political, and historical forces. In other words, the documentary truths of La Isla are only moments of a larger, more complete truth: they are not the be-all and end-all of how social wounds and traumas can be redeemed. Thus, *El material humano* gestures toward a more expansive and holistic conception of truth, one which is made possible by the incongruous but fruitful coming together of thought and affect. The results of this may grate against some of our humanist pieties, but such grating must ultimately be reckoned with, for it is only by shifting our habitual reflex judgments to more reflective forms of judgment that it becomes possible to envision and achieve truer forms of justice and reconciliation in postwar Guatemala.

### Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2005. Print.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury Press, 1973. Print.
- Aguirre, Carlos. Foreword. *From Silence to Memory: Revelations of the AHPN*. Eugene: U of Oregon Libraries, 2013. xiii-xv. Print.
- Albizúrez Gil, Mónica. "El material humano de Rodrigo Rey Rosa: el archivo como disputa." *Centroamericana* 23.2 (2013): 5-30. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Arias, Arturo. "Post-identidades post-nacionales: duelo, trauma y melancolía en la constitución de las subjetividades centroamericanas de posguerra." *(Per)Versiones de la modernidad. Literaturas, identidades y desplazamientos*. Eds. Beatriz Cortez, Alexandra Ortiz Wallner, and Verónica Ríos Quesada. Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2012. 121-39. Print.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "La casa de Asterión." *El Aleph*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1997. 77-81. Print.

- Buiza, Nanci. "Trauma and the Poetics of Affect in Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 47.1 (2013): 151-72. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy. Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Caruth. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 3-12. Print.
- Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH). *Guatemala: Memoria del silencio. Mandato y procedimiento de trabajo. Causas y orígenes del enfrentamiento armado interno*. Vol.1. Guatemala: CEH, 1999. Print.
- Doyle, Kate. "The Atrocity Files: Deciphering the Archives of Guatemala's Dirty War." *Harper's Magazine* Dec. 2007: 52-64. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Prose*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt, 1975. Print.
- Fallas Arias, Teresa. "La persistencia de la memoria guatemalteca en las novelas *Insensatez* y *El material humano*." *Centroamericana* 20 (2011): 69-84. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- From Silence to Memory: Revelations of the AHPN*. Eugene: U of Oregon Libraries, 2013. Print.
- Gutiérrez-Mouat, Ricardo. "El lenguaje de los derechos humanos en tres obras de ficción: *La muerte y la doncella*, *Insensatez* y *El material humano*." *A Contracorriente* 11.1 (2013): 39-62. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- La Isla: Archives of a Tragedy*. Dir. Uli Stelzner. ISKA, 2009. Film.
- Jossa, Emanuela. "Transparencia y opacidad: escritura y memoria en *Insensatez* de H. Castellanos Moya y *El material humano* de R. Rey Rosa." *Centroamericana* 23.2 (2013): 31-58. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Keats, John. *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*. Vol. 2. Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958. Print.
- Mackenbach, Werner, and Alexandra Ortiz Wallner. "(De)formaciones: violencia y narrativa en Centroamérica." *Iberoamericana* 8.32 (2008): 81-97. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Human, All Too Human*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala. *Guatemala: Nunca Más. Informe Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*. Guatemala: ODHAG, 1998. Print.
- Ozick, Cynthia. *Quarrel & Quandary*. New York: Knopf, 2000. Print.

- Pérez, Yansi. "Crónica de una muerte anunciada: el crimen y el trauma en *El material humano*, de Rodrigo Rey Rosa." *Revista Casa de las Américas* 274 (2014): 18-31. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Rey Rosa, Rodrigo. *El material humano*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2009. Print.
- Rosenberg, Fernando J. "Derechos humanos, comisiones de la verdad, y nuevas ficciones globales." *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 69 (2009): 91-114. JSTOR. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2008. Print.
- Weld, Kirsten. *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014. Print.