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Estrangement and "Right-Wing Life" in the Neoliberal Nineties: Matilde Sánchez's *El desperdicio*

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Matilde Sánchez's *El desperdicio* (2007) tells the story of a scholar and literary critic named Elena Arteche. It follows her from the city of Buenos Aires, where she lived, studied, and worked during the 1980s, to her hometown of Pirovano, a small community located in Buenos Aires province where she spends the years leading up to her death from cancer in 2001. As it tells Elena's story, the novel simultaneously registers the profound transformations in rural life that occurred over the course of the 1990s. In a series of extended studies of life in Pirovano, it shows how, as a result of the neoliberal economic program of then-president Carlos Menem, global capital reaches into the deepest corners of life in the countryside, decomposing and recomposing social bonds, and the bonds between human beings and the environment, to better serve the needs of the market. Fields submerged by historic floods are repurposed as fisheries; teams of hunters utilize trucks, rifles, and spotlights to hunt rabbits at night that will later be processed for sale on the European market; and abandoned shipping containers bearing the names of multinational corporations like Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd litter the landscape. They are eventually repurposed by local politicians as dwelling spaces for community members experiencing homelessness. When we read *El desperdicio*, we accompany the novel's protagonist as she returns to this

strange rural world, which this essay will occasionally refer to, in a play on the novel's title, as a neoliberal wasteland.

Elena is admired by her friends, including the novel's unnamed narrator, for her sophisticated knowledge of modern literary theory. Her teaching and scholarship draw principally on formalist literary criticism, and especially on foundational texts by Yury Tynynanov and Viktor Shklovsky, from whom she derives the expansive understanding of aesthetic estrangement (*ostranenie* in the original Russian) that forms the foundation of her critical perspective. As a young scholar, Elena teaches her readers, students, friends, and colleagues how techniques of estrangement renew our perception of the world by making the familiar seem strange. After she returns to Pirovano in the early nineties, Elena partially shifts her critical gaze away from literature and toward her surroundings. While she ceases to publish scholarship and never completes her long-awaited first book, Elena continues using estrangement in her everyday life (in letters, conversations, emails, and phone calls) as a conceptual key for perceiving diverse aspects of life in her transforming rural community. The narrator, a city-dweller who periodically visits her friend in the countryside, draws on these techniques as she tells the story of the last years of Elena's life and the world that her friend inhabited. In the novel, she admits that, during Elena's life, "me había apropiado de la oscuridad de sus textos y la había imitado hasta en los errores—hasta el amoroso plagio . . ." (Sánchez 2007, 213). She continues this process of loving imitation in a biography that, in its evocation of the strangeness of life in Pirovano, channels the same broad understanding of estrangement that Elena used in her work.

Each of *El desperdicio*'s readers carries out an additional iteration of this procedure. We learn from, and draw on, Elena's way of reading literature and life in the key of estrangement as we strive to make sense of her final years. We also strive to make sense of the narrator's perspective on Elena's life and its setting. The narrator composes the book in the years immediately following Elena's death and the economic crisis of 2001. Readers, in an open-ended series, look back to the nineties, but also to the narrator's post-crisis vision of the nineties as the novel's publication recedes into the past. Thus, as *El desperdicio* tells the story of Elena Arteche and the world she inhabited, it simultaneously foregrounds questions of interpretation. From what perspective, and using what conceptual tools, does the novel encourage readers to view the final years of a woman's life in the rural Argentina of the neoliberal nineties? And how does that perspective resonate with us, as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century?

Of special importance is the way that all of us (Elena, the narrator, and the readers) relate to the novel's title. "Desperdicio" translates simply as waste. The dictionary definition refers to the misuse or squandering of one's wealth or means of production, or to the discarded byproducts or residues of the production process.[1] Straightforwardly, the title seems to reference Elena's wasted promise. She never publishes her first book and struggles with alcoholism during her final years in Pirovano. In a parallel register, it also seems to reference the wasted promise of the return to democracy as Argentina lurches toward the economic crisis of 2001. Yet the novel's readers, while unanimously agreeing that the novel depicts the nineties as a wasted decade, have resisted reading Elena's life as a waste, pursuing means of at least partially recuperating her legacy from the neoliberal wasteland.[2] In general, these recuperations defend her pedagogical work, broadly speaking. Her life was not a waste because she taught the people around her (students, friends, and neighbors) how to read literature and how to see the world, through the formalist critic's estranged gaze.[3] These defenses, in turn, are grounded, in a positive valorization of the basic theoretical underpinnings of Elena's teachings. The way that she taught them to read literature and life through the conceptual lens of estrangement was, and continues to be, a productive way of viewing the world. Elena's dedication to teaching everyone around her how to see their world with an estranged gaze proves to be far from wasteful.

The first part of this essay synthesizes this perspective, drawing on Svetlana Boym's study of estrangement *from* and *for* the world to illustrate how *El desperdicio* recuperates and builds on Elena's teachings. Boym (2005) explains that Shklovsky's

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[1] The dictionary of the Real Academia Española gives the following two definitions: "Derroche de la hacienda u otra cosa" and "Residuo de lo que no se puede o no es fácil aprovechar o se deja de utilizar por descuido" ("Desperdicio").

[2] The positive appreciations struck by readers such as Sylvia Molloy (2010) and Fermín Rodríguez (2014) are discussed in detail below. Logie (2016) strikes a more ambivalent balance. In general, she privileges the negative interpretation by emphasizing how the title "hace referencia al veredicto de la narradora sobre el despilfarro de talento y de inteligencia de Elena," and simultaneously references "un desperdicio más generalizado: el incipiente debacle económico-social de un país entero" (402-3). But she also emphasizes, citing an anonymous reader who commented on Daniel Link's blog post on the novel, that "es posible interpretar la obra de Elena en términos diferentes, menos tangibles pero quizás más duraderos, como un legado no oficial que ha dejado huellas en las personas" (403). Logie's essay is of particular interest because, in assessing the novel's successes and relative shortcomings, it broaches a question that most other readings leave unasked (or implicitly answer in the negative), but which is imposed on us by the novel's title: is this book, *El desperdicio*, also a waste (of energy, or our time, so to speak)?

[3] This reading is sanctioned by the narrator herself: when she explains that perhaps she undertook her biography of her friend "por la voluntad de seguir aprendiendo de ella" (Sánchez 2007, 23), she also implies that readers will learn from Elena as well.

notion of estrangement has often been understood in terms of estrangement *from* worldly affairs: the formalist critic, in seeking to link the autonomy of art to questions of technique, stoically distances herself from the worldly content of literary texts. Yet she encounters a different understanding of estrangement *for* the world in Shklovsky and in Hannah Arendt's writings on politics, in which the renewal of perception produced by techniques of estrangement perpetually engages with the world, enacting "a new beginning that is fundamental for aesthetic experience, critical judgment, and political action" (602). The following pages situate this distinction at the center of the narrator's perspective. If she at first saw her friend's retreat from publication and from the literary life of the city as a process of estrangement from the world, the renewed perception of Elena's life and legacy she obtains by writing *El desperdicio* reveals that Elena practiced estrangement for the world, opening new possibilities for critique and political action through her scholarship and teaching. This allows for a certain future-oriented hopefulness—or what the narrator describes as "un tímido alivio de haber dejado atrás lo peor" (21)—to permeate the dual processes of mourning a deceased friend and making sense of a wasted decade in Argentine life.

The second part of this essay charts an alternate path through *El desperdicio* by amplifying the sentiments of pessimism, impotence, and renunciation that permeate the final years of Elena's life, and by asking how they reverberate back onto the concept of estrangement that guides her critical perspective. It follows a series of cues late in the novel in which Elena herself seems to resist privileging, and to even reject, her own critical perspective. She insists that "*no quiero hablar desde las alturas, al contrario, quiero bajar y bajar*" (207), and she goes so far as to briefly question the foundational concept of her career, asserting in a conversation with the novel's narrator that "*yo … he renunciado a la* ostranenie" (256).[4] In the narrator's biography of her friend, and in much of the secondary literature, these sentiments are ultimately incorporated into a more hopeful vision of her life and legacy. This essay, by lingering with Elena's pessimism, reads the novel as an extended reflection on how the quintessential modernist concept of estrangement works, and perhaps doesn't work, in the wake of the radical transformation of Argentine society enacted in the neoliberal reforms of the military

[4] All italics in quotes from *El desperdicio* are in the original. The novel makes extensive use of italicized text, a formal feature will be discussed at various points in this essay.

dictatorship and their subsequent expansion during the first two decades of democratic rule.[5]

Drawing on Fredric Jameson's early study of estrangement in Russian formalism and in Bertolt Brecht, and on Silvia Schwarzböck's 2016 study of aesthetics and *vida de derecha* or "right-wing life" in postdictatorship Argentina, this essay proposes that the transition from dictatorship to neoliberal democracy in Argentina can be understood to mark a generalized breakdown of modern(ist) understandings of the relationship between estrangement, critique, and political action. If, following Schwarzböck, the postdictatorship is accompanied by the emergence of a hyper-visual aesthetics of explicitness in which everything is already laid bare from the conspiracies of modern politics to the moments of renewed perception that are now fully expected of literary technique, then *El desperdicio* becomes legible as a novel in which a generally optimistic faith in the perennial power of the estranged gaze is haunted by a lingering sentiment that perhaps—in the temporal gap separating theorists of estrangement like Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht from Elena Arteche—things have fallen apart and the concept can no longer be assumed to work as it did in the past.

Part I: Estrangement in El desperdicio

El desperdicio has a synecdochic structure in which, as the narrator underlines in the novel's opening pages, Elena Arteche's adult life "participa en . . . un relato mayor" (16), standing in for Argentina's national history in the final decades of the twentieth century. Elena's talent as a literary critic and her charisma as a young professor in the 1980s correspond to the hopes and promises of the end of the dictatorship and the return to democracy. The decadence of her final years, characterized by her increasing dependence on alcohol and her failure to publish her long-awaited first book, stands in for the decadence of a nation that, over the course of the 1990s, is transformed by the neoliberal economic program of the Menem government.[6] Ultimately, her death

[5] See Eagleton (1983) for an influential perspective on modern literary theory in which estrangement occupies a central place. As Eagleton puts it, citing the essay where Shklovsky coins the concept of *ostranenie*: "[i]f one wanted to put a date on the beginnings of the transformation which has overtaken literary theory in this century, one could do worse than settle on 1917, the year in which the young Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky published his pioneering essay 'Art as Device'" (ix).

[6] For a panorama of this transformation, see "La gran transformación: 1989-99" (pp. 305-338) in Luis Alberto Romero's *Breve historia contemporánea de la Argentina: 1916-2010* (2012). At a regional level, William I. Robinson's *Latin America and Global Capitalism* (2008) provides an overview of how the new transnational order that emerged from the crises of the 1970s utilized globalization to restructure the national economies of Latin America during the final two

precedes the 2001 crisis by a matter of months, allowing the narrator to situate both events in parallel as she contemplates the image of Elena's body in the Pirovano cathedral: "es una imagen que arrastra una época, forma un todo con su tiempo y progresa hacia un año negro, el año negro" (14). Elena's adult life unfolds in the passage from the return to democracy to the eve of the crisis, and the narrator's recollection of her friend's life is inseparable from the history of Argentina as it hurtles toward 2001.

This synecdochic structure is also articulated along a spatial axis, in which Elena's hometown of Pirovano stands in for the national territory as a whole. The novel's study of the socioeconomic transformations of the 1990s focuses almost exclusively on Pirovano and its surrounding communities. Throughout, the countryside functions, as Adriana Kanzepolsky (2013) emphasizes, "como sinécdoque de la historia, la política y la economía argentinas" (188). This relationship also operates on a smaller scale, with the family landholdings and the country house that Elena begins renovating when she returns to Pirovano functioning as a project that, in miniature, parallels the national project to reconstruct democratic institutions in years when neoliberal policies were progressively transforming the relationship between the capitalist economy and the state. Elena returns to her family's property to "*[c]onvertir la ruina en la casa nueva*" (116), as one might metaphorically describe the project of reconstructing democracy. Yet she does so with a clear understanding that it is ultimately economic forces that may pose the greatest threat to small rural producers: as the narrator explains, Elena returns home with the understanding that "[a]lguien debía volver a ocupar la naturaleza antes de que el capital la comprase" (112). In this way, the agrarian landscape of Pirovano comes to stand in for and exemplify a broader set of historical processes linking rural communities, national politics, and neoliberalism.

This use of synecdoche has been amply recognized by the novel's readers. For Kanzepolsky (2013), it allows the biographical reconstruction of Elena's life to emerge out of "el limo histórico que arrastra consigo" (186). Carolina Grenoville (2013) studies how the synecdochic structure dialogues with Sarmiento's *Facundo* in its ciphering of the nation's destiny in the figure of an exceptional individual. And Ilse Logie situates it alongside works by César Aira, Florencia Abbate, and Sergio Chejfec (among others) as *novelas del derrumbe* published in the years surrounding the crisis, highlighting the use of new social actors, such as *piqueteros*, *cartoneros*, and the rural homeless, to narrate the

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decades of the twentieth century. See pp. 84-94 for a study of the neoliberal remaking of the Argentine agricultural sector during the nineties.

recent history of Argentina, as well as a collective endeavor to "denunciar los efectos de exclusión de las políticas neoliberales" (Logie 2016, 391). Yet readers have not generally investigated the implications of how, in the novel's pages, this synecdochic structure encompasses a third register: throughout the novel, the concept of estrangement, or *ostranenie*, functions as a synecdoche for Elena's critical perspective, and for the critical discourse of her generation more broadly speaking.[7] The word *ostranenie* appears nearly twenty times over the course of the novel, and marks a point of confluence among the texts, conversations, essays, classes, and debates concerning literature and life that take place over the course of Elena's adult life. *El desperdicio* utilizes synecdoche to tell the stories and arrange the fates of a person (Elena) and a place (Pirovano), but also of a concept (*ostranenie*), against the backdrop of late-twentieth-century Argentine history. It is to this third, conceptual register that the following pages turn, in order to illustrate how the novel weaves the story of Elena's life into a reflection on the power, and limits, of the estranged gaze.

In Viktor Shklovsky's canonical essay "Art, as Device," first published in 1917, *ostranenie* references the capacity of literature to make things strange, to "make a stone stony," to remove us from what is habitual and familiar and allow us to experience life as we perceive it in the moment, rather than as we already know it to be ([1917] 2015, 162). Elena, whose entrance into literary studies takes place at a time when Russian formalist criticism circulated in translation in Buenos Aires, appropriates the concept for her own critical perspective.[8] Inspired by "sus amados Tynianov y Viktor Sklovski" (38), she works from what the narrator describes as "una aplicación amplia del concepto de *ostranenie*" (44). The narrator, recollecting her friend's definition of the term, explains that during those years, for Elena, "[l]a *ostranenie* aludía a la manera en que lo habitual o

[7] Logie (2016) has the most extensive analysis of the term. She indicates that, in a sociological register, the word *ostranenie* serves as a mark of distinction among Elena's group of friends, relating to the symbolic value that the group grants literature and literary theory, and she also notes its importance in the novel's extended reflection on literary autonomy and the relationship between the literary work and postmodern society (394-402). In its focus on how the novel engages with an epochal shift in aesthetic paradigms (roughly, the shift from autonomy to postautonomy), Logie's article shares important affinities with the current essay, which sees estrangement less as an index of literary autonomy, and more as a key concept articulating literature, critique, and political action in the left-wing theoretical discourse of the 1970s and early 80s. Where Logie reads the novel from the standpoint of the changing status of *literature* in Argentine society, this essay reads from the changing status of *estrangement*.

[8] Russian formalism was introduced to Argentine readers during the 1970s through the translation and publication of primary works by Shklovsky, Tynyanov, and others; anthologies such as the Tzvetan Todorov-edited *Teoría de la literatura de los formalistas rusos* (translated to Spanish in 1970); and book-length studies of Russian formalism such as Victor Erlich's *El formalismo ruso, historia y doctrina* (translated to Spanish in 1974).

corriente podía ser presentado bajo la ley inédita del creador, que lo revelaba. No afectaba las nacionalidades literarias—había *ostranenie* en cualquier disciplina, época y lugar—y era quizá la mayor atribución del arte" (44).

Elena spends the 1980s disseminating this expansive understanding of *ostranenie* as a transhistorical and transnational constant in which the literary text reveals the hidden workings of everyday life. The novel does progressively flesh out her knowledge of literary and cultural theory, with mentions of key figures such as Marx, Freud, Lévi-Strauss, and Walter Benjamin. Yet, via the incessant repetition of the term *ostranenie*, these proper names and their key concepts are made to perpetually orbit around estrangement. *Ostranenie* stands in for Elena's theoretical expertise, becoming, as Kanzepolsky (2013) puts it, "una obsesión del personaje casi hasta la caricatura" (190). This expertise, in turn, exerts a formative influence on her friends, colleagues, and students. The narrator explains that "durante años todos fuimos ventrílocuos de Helen y, por ende, de los formalistas rusos. Predicadores indirectos de la *ostranenie*" (46). She also remembers how Elena's young students in Mar del Plata, where Elena worked as a professor, "se graduaban en *ostranenie*" (63). Elena teaches her friends and students to read literary texts from the standpoint of estrangement, but she also teaches them to extend the estranged gaze beyond literature: as the narrator notes, "practicábamos la *ostranenie* en la sociabilidad diaria" (68). In this way, estrangement comes to occupy a position at the heart of her academic labor, but also of her social persona. She becomes known as a brilliant and charismatic professor who is able to detect estrangement in both literary texts and everyday social interactions.

In the wake of her sister's death from cancer in 1993, Elena leaves her faculty position and returns to Pirovano with her young son, Toni. Yet, while she abandons city life and her academic career, she does not abandon estrangement. Rather, she uses it as a tool for making sense of a rural world that bears little resemblance to the countryside of her youth. As Logie (2016) puts it, "le toca descifrar una pampa cargada de signos incomprensibles" (391), and this incomprehensibility lends itself to interpretation through the lens of *ostranenie*. Elena's friends note this new focus when she becomes interested in the nocturnal rabbit-hunting industry in which some of her adult students work, wondering if "[a] lo remanido ella le había encontrado un giro de *ostranenie*" (157)—although they also wonder if maybe her interest stems from a romantic relationship with one of the hunters. Later, as Pirovano faces a sudden rise in rural homelessness, the word *ostranenie* appears multiple times in an extended portrait of the social, political, and natural conditions of life in Pirovano. The community

members experiencing homelessness find themselves in "el agujero de la *ostranenie*" (190), they leave their families and fade into "el paisaje de *ostranenie*" (203), and, as the narrator sums up the situation, "los sin techo se quedan sin nada, son la distancia con patas, la *ostranenie* ambulante" (192). This series of uses of the word is particularly significant because it seems to confirm the appropriateness of the concept for understanding rural life in the nineties: it seems natural that it appears multiple times in this report on the experiences of the rural poor. This appropriateness is further underlined by the narrator's use of free indirect discourse to establish a continuum between Elena's critical perspective and her own. The narrator's partial appropriation of her friend's way of seeing things further reinforces the power and validity of the estranged gaze when it is turned toward a transforming rural world.

This passage of *ostranenie* from literature to rural life resonates with Svetlana Boym's influential discussion of estrangement as a lifestyle in the modernist autobiographies of Shklovsky and Joseph Brodsky. In her study of Shklovsky's writings during his exile in Berlin, Boym (1996) notes how, in the years following the Russian Revolution, "defamiliarization turned into a fact of life" as the basic habits and structures of everyday life were transformed in the early years of Soviet rule; at the same time, however, the aesthetic practices of estrangement studied by early formalist critics were increasingly seen as politically suspect, and scholars such as Shklovsky were forced into exile (519). When Boym reads Shklovsky's autobiographical writings, she notes how estrangement becomes "both an artistic device and a way of life," forming part of Shklovsky's "exilic self-fashioning and arts of survival" as he resists adapting his personality and habits to everyday existence in western Europe (519). While Elena's biography demonstrates notable differences from that of Shklovsky, after her return to her hometown (which her friends conceive as an exile from the literary life of the city) she demonstrates the same sort of reliance on estrangement as a means of survival and self-fashioning. Elena, like Shklovsky, comes to rely on the estranged gaze as a "dissident art of survival" (511) that allows her to resist adapting to the rural Argentine society of the nineties.

Beyond *El desperdicio*'s thematization of *ostranenie* and its place in Elena's life, notions of estrangement can also be understood to permeate the novel at the levels of form and genre. Throughout *El desperdicio*, hundreds of words and phrases are set in italics, with italicized passages replacing direct quotations to capture the speech of Elena and the people who appeared in her life. These passages capture moments in which the language employed by the novel's characters fleetingly captures the strangeness of life.

They include felicitous metaphors and turns of phrase, such as when the old Mercedes-Benz owned by the Arteche family is described as "*la vaca albina*" (88), or when a liquor bottle is returned to the shelf by Elena at the end of the night "*como vampiro devuelto al ataúd*" (153). They also include characters' perceptions of the strangeness of the social reality of Argentina in the 1990s, such as when Elena, commenting on the nocturnal rabbit hunting industry, notes that "*[a]hora se habla . . . de la cosecha de la liebre, como si se tratara de un recurso renovable . . . Los lepóridos son el nuevo ganado argentino*" (159). As Kanzepolsky (2013) notes, this technique is intimately tied to the novel's treatment of memory because it allows the narrator to incorporate Elena herself into the text, "incorporando aquí y allá restos de su habla" (191). It simultaneously allows estrangement to function at a sort of micrological scale, permeating the voices of Elena and her friends, acquaintances, and family members as they reverberate through the pages of the novel.[9]

On a macrological scale, the notion of *ostranenie* underwrites the novel's treatment of the biographical genre. *El desperdicio* can be read as a fictional work that appropriates the non-fiction genre of biography, but some readers have noted that this reading is complicated by the possibility of reading it as a roman-à-clef in which Elena Arteche stands in for a real person, the Argentine literary critic Mónica Tamborenea. The biographical bleeds into the novelistic, according to what Graciela Speranza (2008) calls "un impulso doble de pudorosa intimidad" in which "los nombres y muchas de las incidencias son ficticios pero la elegía de la amiga muerta es real" (9). As Daniel Link (2007) notes, this makes it difficult for those who knew Tamborenea to read the novel "con la necesaria distancia que la literatura quiere imponer a sus feligreses," because the story of Elena activates a steady stream of memories of "la amiga querida cuya risa todavía extrañamos" (n. pag.).[10] Neither simply a novel or a biography, in *El desperdicio*

[9] At the beginning of the novel, the narrator recalls a series of comments by Elena concerning how memories tend to fall into two distinct categories. The first is composed of "el grueso de los recuerdos, que se despersonaliza," and the second of "otros recuerdos únicos, capaces de preservar su densidad pese a la erosión de los años" (15). With respect to this second category, the narrator notes: "[a] esa materia más bien se le teme, tan vivos siguen. *Son una herida en una parte del cuerpo expuesta al roce*" (15). In this light, the italicized passages might be read to mark moments when these fearfully living memories resurface, functioning as a formal means of linking the teachings of Elena and the strange ways in which she lives on in the narrator's memory.

[10] In the comments to Link's blog post, this sentiment is echoed among those who knew Tamborenea. One commenter, for example, wrote: "fui alumno de Mónica en la Universidad de Mar del Plata y no puede dejar de leer la novela desde una perspectiva obsena [*sic*] . . . No puedo dejar de pensar en el libro en términos de constatación de la realidad y me pregunta cuanto de verdadero hay en este relato que sólo leo como una carta de noticias" (Link 2007; orthographic errors in the original). As Diego Peller notes, however, the procedure of

the biographical haunts the fictional, and in this sense the novel might be read to estrange the system of genre norms that allow readers to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction.

By thematizing and appropriating Elena's broad application of *ostranenie*, the narrator positions the concept as a key for understanding her friend's life and legacy. To rephrase the question opened by the novel's title: can the life of a woman who built her social, pedagogical, and professional persona around *ostranenie* but then stopped writing and never published her first book be considered a *desperdicio*, a wasted life? Elena, in her final years, flirts with affirmative responses to this question, questioning her lifelong obsession with the concept (and with literary theory in general), and going so far as to momentarily claim that she has renounced estrangement. Yet the narrator and the novel's readers have generally gone in the other direction, acknowledging her moments of pessimism, but fitting them into an argument that, by teaching others how to view the world through the estranged gaze, Elena did not pass her final years (and her life in general) in vain.

The two readers who most compellingly outline this perspective are Silvia Molloy and Fermín Rodríguez. In a 2010 conference paper, Molloy draws on Elena's productive use of estrangement to build a feminist reading of Elena's impact on rural life. If the countryside has typically been coded as a masculine space in the Argentine literary tradition (Sarmiento, Lugones, Güiraldes, Borges), Elena is able to estrange the rural world from her feminine, outsider's standpoint: "Solo desde la otredad del género puede Elena desfamiliarizar ese espacio, volverlo extraño y provocador, hacer *otra cosa* con él" (6, italics in original). In the final years of her life, estrangement becomes "no ya sólo principio teórico sino práctica fecunda" (6), allowing Elena to elaborate a general critique of the normative structures of rural society, and imparting her personal interactions and pedagogical work with a political, transformative quality. Rodríguez (2014), for his part, positions Elena on the frontier of neoliberal biopolitics. When Elena returns to Pirovano, she becomes "una suerte de Alicia en el País del Extrañamiento" (198), registering how, in a countryside transformed by neoliberalism, "[l]a realidad de lo rural se tambalea, se desfamiliariza a lo largo de fisuras que recorren la superficie lisa y llana de lo visible" (199). Her commentaries on rural life lay bare

inferring the real history of Tamborenea in the fictional story of Elena is far from obligatory: "lo cierto es que no hay ningún elemento *en el texto de la novela* que nos permita hacer esa inferencia con algún fundamento" (2008).

these transformations, but they also map out forces and intensities that presage future transformations *beyond* neoliberalism. As Rodríguez puts it, "con la mirada extrañada, Elena lee en la realidad . . . en encadenamientos insólitos de acontecimientos humanos y geográficos, algo nuevo para lo que todavía no hay nombre preciso" (199). Elena's estranged gaze outpaces the biopolitical transformations it witnesses, in a process that Rodríguez ultimately links to literature's perennial ability to map, as he puts it, "vida más allá de las palabras y las formas normativas de lo humano: un rumor en busca de expresión que va abriéndose paso a través del umbral de lo reconocible y lo nombrable" (201). For both Molloy and Rodríguez, Elena stands out against the neoliberal wasteland she inhabits due to her capacity to see things in that wasteland that others do not. It does not matter so much, one might say, that she never published her long-awaited book. What is important is how she taught people to see the transforming rural world of the neoliberal nineties.

In this sense, and returning once again to the work of Svetlana Boym, estrangement in *El desperdicio* might ultimately be understood via the distinction that Boym marks between estrangement *from* the world and estrangement *for* the world. Formalist approaches such as that of Shklovsky have often been conceived in terms of the former, due to their focus on how techniques of estrangement distance art from everyday life. Boym (2005) notes that this fits into a broader understanding of estrangement as a "distancing from political and worldly affairs," and relates it to Stoic, Christian, and Romantic pursuits of freedom via introspection (602). In a first instance, this understanding of estrangement might be extended to Elena's rural sojourn. From the point of view of her friends and colleagues in the city, her return to Pirovano and her lack of publication seemed to indicate her estrangement from the cultural life of the city. Yet Boym also highlights a second understanding of estrangement that emerges in the writings of Shklovsky and Hannah Arendt, in which the estranged gaze of the artist and scholar, by momentarily renewing our perception of the world, enacts a new beginning, "a form of imaginative recovery that is also an experiment in thinking, acting, and judging" (602). To practice estrangement *for* the world, as Elena is ultimately shown to have done in her life and work in Pirovano, is to acknowledge that "seeing the world anew" (602) is a necessary first step toward the sort of collective action that might allow for a collective remaking of our shared world.

This understanding of Elena's legacy shines through in one of the novel's final scenes, where her body is displayed in the Pirovano cathedral and family, friends, and community members come together to mourn her passing. The narrator is captivated

by the entrance of a small group of rabbit hunters who, upon entering the cathedral, explain, "*Venimos a despedir a la profesora*" (284). The arrival of Elena's former students underlines her broader impact on a rural community. She has taught the rabbit hunters, and many other community members, to exercise the estranged gaze in order to better grasp their transforming rural world. Their arrival, in turn, catalyzes a paragraph-long reflection in which the narrator produces a sort of ekphrasis of the aesthetic qualities of a scene that, as she explains, evokes old paintings of anatomy lessons and a Thomas Bernhard novel that she recently read. She concludes that she is tempted to link her interpretation of the scene's literariness to Elena's belief in the "vibraciones secretas de los libros, su *teoría de la relatividad literaria*" (286). By nesting the hunters' visit to the wake into this final tribute to her friend's way of detecting the vibrations that connect literature to life, the narrator underlines the expansive impact of Elena's teachings. She has touched the lives of a broad range of individuals, from the rabbit hunters of rural Buenos Aires to urban intellectuals such as the narrator herself, converting them all, as the narrator puts it early in the novel, into "[p]redicadores indirectos de la *ostranenie*" (46). The novel, in turn, converts us, its readers, into a perpetually expanding cohort of indirect preachers and practitioners of estrangement. And it teaches us to conceive estrangement as a fecund, fruitful practice. A life devoted to practicing and preaching *ostranenie*, we might conclude, is far from a wasted life.

This hopeful rendering of Elena's impact emerges out of a darker, more pessimistic mood that permeates her final years, and out of the generally desolate landscape of Pirovano during the neoliberal nineties. At times, Elena's vision of rural life does hopefully point to a future beyond neoliberalism, such as when the novel positions the small producers, nocturnal rabbit hunters, and newly homeless populations of provincial Buenos Aires at the vanguard of a tide of change that Elena often links to a sort of Freudian return of the repressed. She notes how the rabbit hunters seem to represent "*el flujo de energías fascistoides. Lo reprimido, los impulsos inhibidos que surgen incontenibles como un géiser,*" and the narrator goes on to explain that for Elena these energies and impulses "están llamados a liderar una transformación" (173). But at many other times her outlook is much gloomier. Such is the case when she observes, in conversation with the narrator and her husband Bill, that the murky water in her swimming pool keeps rising, even though there are cracks in its foundation, because the water company has not followed through on its commitment to resolve the issues with the water supply that have led to a steadily rising water table. The narrator notes that in the end their discussion "[no] dejaba de ser un ejercicio de impotencia" because,

as she explains, "[a]unque las denuncias no dejaran de arreciar y todos supiéramos lo que ocurría . . . no se podía hacer nada, no había forma de actuar, reinaba el estupor. Habían pasado diez años de lamentos pero no se avanzaba, con cada palabra se iba más atrás en el pasado. Parecía hechizo, la reproducción de lo idéntico" (180). Their conversation empties into a shared conviction that, despite the fact that everybody knows what is going on and the (in)actions of the water company are publicly denounced, nothing will change, nothing can be done, and in the past decade they have witnessed nothing more than the constant reproduction of the same processes that they are protesting. Elena's perception of the strangeness of the situation ("*es una sangría al revés, no para nunca*" [180]) here marks not a new beginning or a fecund pathway to political action, but rather a shout into the void.

The second section of this essay takes moments such as this, where the estranged gaze seems to break down, as the starting point for a reading of *El desperdicio* from within the bleak landscape of Elena's final years. In the narrator's discourse, to do justice to Elena's memory and to find some degree of hope in the neoliberal wasteland, it becomes necessary to look beyond her desolate last years so that her teachings can be shown to point toward the possibility of a brighter future. Yet how might the last years of her life be understood without recourse to that future that Elena never comes to witness?

Part II: Estrangement and Right-Wing Life

Elena's brief renunciation of *ostranenie* takes place during a weekend visit by the narrator to Pirovano shortly before Elena's cancer diagnosis. Due to heavy rains, the two women spend extended periods of the weekend drinking and conversing at Elena's country home. Toward the end of one night's conversation, the narrator looks up at the night sky and remarks how strange it is that the light they see is nothing more than a projection of the past activity of the stars. "*El cielo es un cine del pasado*" (256), as she puts it, using a felicitous metaphor. Elena detects in the narrator's words a quote from Joseph Brodsky about the possibilities opened up when one distances (or estranges) oneself from an object—"*lo que la distancia ofrece*"—, but she refuses to endorse her friend's comment on the stars because "*yo, en cambio, he renunciado a la* ostranenie" (256). The narrator then quickly turns the table on her friend. She points out that Elena has continued to seek out the same effect of distance in the nineteenth-century travel narratives she has recently taken to reading. To underline her point, she relates these temporal voyages in literature to the strange way that Elena's deceased sister lives on in

their memory, as a sort of projection of the past. Then, as the narrator proudly notes, Elena acknowledges that she's right, and then goes on an extended riff on the "incursiones del pasado en el presente" through which her sister's memory continues to visit her (259). They continue discussing the topic of temporal returns and Elena slowly gains enthusiasm, "[c]omo en los años jóvenes," as she reflects on the state of things in present-day Argentina, presaging a future in which the capitalist economy will impose a regime of absolute austerity in which, in a "*mundo sin lujos*," the members of her generation "*tendremos que enterrar el recuerdo de los años opulentos y hacer acopio de optimismo, grandes dosis de resistencia*" (263).

This scene marks the climax of the story of *ostranenie* in *El desperdicio*. The master (Elena) pessimistically renounces her teachings, but then the protégée (the narrator), demonstrating her own mastery of the concept, walks her back from the ledge. To further underline this movement from pessimism back to optimism, the narrator recalls a moment back in the eighties, when the two women sat on Elena's balcony in Buenos Aires and listened to a political march slowly unwind in the street below. At that moment, Elena "se había mostrado muy pesimista," voicing the opinion that "*[e]stamos haciendo el ridículo con toda esta teoría*" (266). A quarter century later, their conversation prompts Elena to revisit her harsh judgment: "esa noche de 2001 Elena creía que nuestras pretensiones nos volvían poderosos" (267). In this way, the pessimism and doubt that cloud Elena's final years are shown to have always lurked beneath her theoretical investigations, but at the same time, accompanied by her friend, Elena overcomes this pessimism in the name of the perennial power of *ostranenie* and its capacity to renew our perception of the world.

While Elena does not explain why she renounces *ostranenie*, her renunciation might be approached in the following way. Even at these low moments, she would probably still agree that art's general capacity to renew perception can be taken as a transnational and transhistorical constant. Techniques of estrangement will always make it possible to momentarily see things in a new light, revealing what habit and routine have obscured. Rather, her disappointment with the concept that has become synonymous with her personal and professional identities may have to do with the way in which, at different historical moments, the renewal of perception enacted by the estranged gaze relates, or does not relate, to processes of political and social change. As Fredric Jameson (1972) emphasizes in a book published nearly a half-century ago, the connection between *ostranenie*, social critique, and political action "is contemporary with the dawn of historical consciousness in general" (57). The question that will be

addressed in the following pages, in dialogue with Jameson and Silvia Schwarzböck, has to do with the fate of estrangement if, in light of the massive political and socioeconomic transformations of Elena's lifetime, the theoretical edifice supporting that historical consciousness has broken down.[11]

As Jameson explains in *The Prison-House of Language*, for the modern historical consciousness that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, techniques of estrangement cut across two registers, metaphysical and political. They "[direct] our attention to the natural and metaphysical conditions of human life," but they can *also* serve to lay bare an "unjustifiable social structure, which we have come to take for granted as something natural and eternal, and which therefore cries out for defamiliarization" (57). He notes that in Shklovsky's original conceptualization of *ostranenie*, the use of estrangement for social critique is ultimately subordinated to the metaphysical end of "[renewing] vision in any way possible" (57). Yet, for later theorists of estrangement such as Bertolt Brecht, these priorities are reversed, and the purpose of estrangement becomes "a political one in the most thoroughgoing sense of the word" (58). Brecht's innovation is to shift emphasis from the relationship between things and human reality (the stone and our perception of its "stoniness") to the relationship between the elements of human reality that we perceive as static and those that we perceive as dynamic. If habit leads us to privilege the static in our day-to-day lives, for Brecht the purpose of estrangement is to privilege the dynamic, "mak[ing] you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable" (58). This articulation of estrangement and critique can be understood to animate successive waves of political revolution, from the liberal revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the communist revolutions of the twentieth. It also animates modernist and avant-garde conceptualizations of art's capacity to produce political change. From Brecht to the present, techniques of estrangement in modern art have often felt most compelling when paired with theoretical and political programs

[11] In *Political Spaces and Global War*, Carlo Galli (2010) takes a similar approach to the recent past, arguing that the deregulation of capital, the fall of communism, and the electronic boom together mark the breakdown of the politico-spatial categories that supported modern political thought (102-3). In *Literature and "Interregnum",* Patrick Dove (2016) investigates the implications of Galli's work for Latin American literature, proposing that, when the aesthetic and political conceptual vocabularies of modernity are set in dialogue with recent literary texts, "their continued usefulness . . . now rests on their ability to illustrate *what does not work*" (2).

that aspire to open the door for new ways of life beyond existing social relations and institutions.

In Elena's moments of pessimism, it is this connection that seems to have faltered. Throughout the novel, the dominant note is on how, over the course of the nineties, global capital estranges the basic structures of rural society. And, while Elena's teachings and her endeavor to keep the family farm afloat are positioned as acts of resistance, when she looks out over the rural landscape in the final years of her life, she is often struck by the overwhelmingly negative balance of the changes in her community. Over the course of her adult life, Elena witnesses (and participates in) a sort of epochal short-circuit in which the renewed perception of the changeability of institutions experienced by her generation in their youthful "años épicos en que todo estaba por hacerse" is eclipsed by what the narrator, alluding to a poem whose author she cannot recall, describes as "un telón de realidad cursi y gris" (20). The novel depicts the slow descent of this "curtain of reality." It profiles an Argentine society that is transformed *not* by the collective action of a generation whose entrance into adult life coincided with the hopeful new beginning of the return to democracy, but rather by a neoliberal economic program, introduced by the dictatorship and expanded by the Menem government, that progressively refashions rural life according to the exigencies of the global market.

This period of transformation forms the primary focus of Silvia Schwarzböck's *Los espantos: Estética y postdictadura* (2016), which studies life and aesthetics in Argentina during the initial decades of the postdictatorship. Her approach to this period privileges not what changes in 1983, but rather what remains the same: the neoliberal economic program introduced by the authoritarian regime. She insists that while the return to democracy marks the political defeat of the military government, it also, and more importantly, seals the triumph of its economic program. This triumph, in turn, consummates the total defeat of the left-wing revolutionary movements that had opposed the military government. In the postdictatorship, the left-wing dreams of the revolutionaries of the sixties and seventies are eclipsed by a triumphant neoliberalism. Life is lived "sin el fantasma del comunismo o, más precisamente … sin la expectativa de la vida de izquierda, sin la espera de la patria socialista" (27). The torture and repression of revolutionaries in Argentina, and the collapse of the Soviet Union at the turn of the nineties, produce a historical landscape that is defined by the absence of the

specter of communism that haunted twentieth-century life. Postdictatorship life is *vida de derecha*, or "right-wing life," conceived as "la única vida posible" (23).[12]

Schwarzböck presents this vision of postdictatorship life by way of a contrast. Óscar Terán once proposed that, to understand Argentina in the 1960s, it was necessary to occupy the standpoint of philosophy (or more precisely, as Schwarzböck suggests, *political* philosophy). The influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and the proscription of Peronism motivated a generational endeavor to grasp Argentine history through philosophical concepts such as *revolution*, *the people*, and *the class struggle*. When left-wing intellectuals utilized these concepts, which promised to lay bare the true workings of modern society, they enshrined a notion of truth (the *vida verdadera* of the future *patria socialista*) as a general theoretical horizon. The final two decades of the twentieth century, in contrast, are marked by the return of democracy, which is understood in *Los espantos* as a generalized regime of non-truth made up of "opinión, discurso, disenso, perspectivismo, producción de lo nuevo como transmutación de un valor vigente, no creencia en la originalidad, retorno en lugar de comienzo" (2016, 22). Schwarzböck proposes to study the right-wing life of the postdictatorship from the standpoint of aesthetics, which, following Theodor Adorno, functions as "la parte de la filosofía que . . . se dedica a pensar rigurosamente, con tanto rigor como la política, en términos de no verdad" (21). Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* offers her a point of entry into the postdictatorship regime of non-truth, and it also offers a means of investigating how, in societies defined by falsehood, works of art might fleetingly express the truth in a negative, non-conceptual language that needs to be interpreted by philosophical aesthetics.[13]

From this Adornian perspective, Schwarzböck offers a renewed understanding of the revolutionary movements of the seventies, their defeat, and its implications for

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[12] Willy Thayer (2001) takes a similar approach in his study of Chile's transition from dictatorship to neoliberal democracy, describing the final decades of the twentieth century in terms of the consolidation of "la globalización post-estatal, post-representacional, post-imperial-colonialista y como única chance" (253).

[13] Schwarzböck's updating of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* parallels other similar endeavors. Writing at the close of the eighties, Jameson ([1990] 2007) notes that "Here at length, in this decade which has just ended but is still ours, Adorno's prophecies of the 'total system' finally came true, in wholly unexpected forms" (5). More recently, art historians such as Peter Osborne and John Roberts have used *Aesthetic Theory* to study contemporary art with the understanding that, as Roberts (2015) puts it, "if we are not completely done with Adorno, this is largely because in *Aesthetic Theory*, at various points, his post-romantic conceptualization of art overcomes his broadly normative modernism" (93). See Osborne and Alliez (2007) for Osborne's sustained defense of what he describes as his "project . . . to mediate *Aesthetic Theory* with the history of contemporary art since the 1960s" (38). Roberts (2015) surveys recent work on Adorno in the field of art history in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 92-122.

aesthetics and life in the postdictatorship. As she explains, the revolutionaries' vision of left-wing life hinged on a relationship to the people that was grounded in an aesthetic judgment. The people, *el Pueblo*, are the sublime bearers of the *vida verdadera* (true life), which exists in them as a potentiality that is promised by the people to the revolutionaries (2016, 22). The left-wing revolutionary is guided by the conviction that it will become possible for the people to live the true life after the triumph of the revolutionary movement. With the collapse of the revolutionary movements (from Argentina to the Soviet Union), the sublime, un-representable *pueblo* disappears, leaving in its place only the *un*-sublime *pueblo* that participates in elections—the democratically represented *pueblo* that votes for Menem, and indeed votes for his reelection in 1995 in the wake of the neoliberal policies introduced during his first term.

Yet, in contrast to Adorno's focus on modernist poetics of negativity (Picasso, Schoenberg, Beckett, etc.), Schwarzböck approaches the 1990s from the standpoint of a general eclipse of negativity that, for her, characterizes the aesthetics of postdictatorship Argentina. Representations of life during the eighties and nineties rely on an "estética protoexplícita" (2016, 124) in which everything is said and exhibited, nothing is hidden, and the superabundance of discourse encouraged by the return to democracy, on the political left and the right, functions within a "régimen de la representación absoluta, de la apariencia como esencia" (24).[14] This aesthetics of explicitness permeates political representations of postdictatorship life. Schwarzböck cites the public revelation of scenes of torture in photographs of Abu Ghraib, as well as the general logic of a Menem regime in which "los tres poderes del Estado . . . hacen explícita, en lugar de pública, la dimensión secreta de la política" (124). It also permeates artistic representations in which the paranoid aesthetics of authors such as Rodolfo Walsh gives way to an "estética postparanoica" in which literary texts must confront the collectively held sentiment that nothing is secret anymore:

> ni hay conjurados, ni dobles agentes, ni arrepentidos, ni ex servicios (porque nadie deja de serlo), ni infiltración, ni inteligencia de la inteligencia. El menemismo, ficcionalizado y leído a posteriori, parece explícito a priori, como

[14] Brett Levinson (2001) notes this dynamic of exposure in his study of Latin American literature in the neoliberal marketplace: "If the unconcealment of information is so strongly stipulated by current public and private initiatives, both of the Left and Right, this is because it no longer informs truth but reproduces consensus." Or, to put it another way, "[t]he discovery of the 'items' suppressed by the state provides goods for the market" (126). Erin Graff Zivin (2020), for her part, proposes an "anarchaeological" practice of reading that, by perpetually exposing literary and theoretical texts to extraneous frames and discourses, would unconceal the errors, gaps, blind spots, and misunderstandings that are constitutive of literature and politics (11-13).

> si una especie de post-respiración artificial, de postparanoia, de postarltismo, fuera la clave de su todo. (Schwarzböck 2016, 125)

The problem, for Schwarzböck, is not that there is an "entramado mafioso" (125) secretly pulling the strings on postdictatorship life and politics, but rather that everyone already knows about it. The renewed perception of social life that may have taken place when readers read twentieth-century classics by Roberto Arlt or Ricardo Piglia—novels that expose secret conspiracies behind the appearances of modern life—has ceased to function as it did before. During the nineties, this sort of critical perception becomes a simple confirmation of what the reader already sees coming.[15]

When read alongside *El desperdicio*, Schwarzböck's gloomy (or overly illuminated) perspective provides a means of sinking downward, with Elena, into the right-wing life of the nineties. Elena Arteche forms part of a generation that is slightly too young to have participated in the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In her childhood, which receives very little attention in the novel, she might have been what Schwarzböck, drawing on the work of illustrator Lux Lidner, calls a *niño mierda*: a child whose family history, as the daughter of a rural landowner whose economic ascendancy is encoded in the white Mercedes-Benz her father purchases in her childhood, is intertwined with the historical ascendancy of right-wing life in Argentina. When she grows up, Elena will, like everyone, only know the right-wing life of the dictatorship that continues on into the postdictatorship. She will know the represented *pueblo* of the return to democracy, but she will be barred from accessing the left-wing life lived by the militants of past generations. The sublime, un-representable *pueblo* and the true life it promised to the militants of the past will only be accessible to her as an adult "por la vía negativa y a posteriori: es lo que se aniquilaba en los campos de concentración a la hora del *Nesquick*" (2016, 51).[16]

As an adult, the *niño mierda* is faced with very few options if they endeavor to become a published writer. Their perspective is deauthorized by what Schwarzböck

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[15] While in *Los espantos* this postdictatorship aesthetics emerges in the recent transition to neoliberal democracy, it might also be related what Catherine Malabou (2005), in her study of Hegel, calls the *voir venir*. For Malabou, Hegel understands the subject to emerge from an anticipatory structure in which subjectivity "projects itself in advance of itself, and thereby participates in the processes of its own determination" (18). The subject is defined by this *voir venir*, by its perpetual anticipation of what is to come.

[16] This barred relationship to a past epoch is similar to the one described by art historian T.J. Clark (1999) in reference to modernism: "Modernism is unintelligible now because it had truck with a modernity not fully in place. Post-modernism mistakes the ruins of those previous representations, or the fact that from where we stand, they seem ruinous, for the ruin of modernity itself—not seeing that what we are living through is modernity's triumph" (3).

refers to as the "salón literario" (2016, 51) of the postdictatorship because, as she puts it, "[l]a maldición del Niño Mierda es su desconocimiento absoluto de la vida de izquierda" (51). In this context, the *niño mierda* may choose to deauthorize their own voice by not speaking of what they do not know, remaining silent about the experiences of the left-wing militants who fought against the dictatorship because these experiences are beyond their purview. They also may authorize their voice by writing in the name of the post-dictatorial (democratic) society, at which point they promptly cease to be a *niño mierda*. The third path, rarely taken, is to ignore the authority of those who would deauthorize their voice, and to speak of what the *niño mierda* should not. In *Los espantos*, this path is exemplified by Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill, an author who is of strategic importance to Schwarzböck because his narrative fiction infiltrates the world of the economic allies of the dictatorship—the allies who would prefer to stay silent after the transition to democracy. Elena Arteche's departure from the city and from the literary scene (or *salón literario*) might be positioned against these three options. We might take her silence (in editorial terms) and her retreat into the rural world of Pirovano as a sort of exemplary tale of the fate of one of the *niñas mierdas* of right-wing life in Argentina.

At the same time, *Los espantos* also opens an important question regarding the concept at the heart of Elena's critical perspective. What is the place of *ostranenie* in an aesthetics of explicitness where the laying bare of the devices that remained obscure in modern life does not renew one's perception of social reality but rather confirms sentiments that already exist? When read together, Jameson and Schwarzböck chart the genesis and breakdown of the links between renewal of perception, critique, and political action that were underwritten by the modern historical consciousness. In the right-wing, neoliberal life of the nineties, there is a collective sentiment that everything is already out in the open, and that the renewal of perception enacted by techniques of estrangement no longer holds the same weight it did before. As Schwarzböck puts it, "cada vez que la clandestinidad menemista se manifiesta como apariencia concreta . . . el lector encuentra un objeto que parece coincidir, punto por punto, con el que su sentimiento ha creado" (2016, 125). If this is the case, then *ostranenie*, as Elena encountered the concept in her youthful years, may have ceased to fulfill the function that it did in her teaching and scholarship. The italicized snippets of past conversations that reproduce characters' perceptions of the strangeness of life during the Menemato might be read to participate in the generalized making-explicit of the concealed aspects of life that characterizes postdictatorship aesthetics, from the official discourse of the Menem government to the everyday discourse of Elena and her friends. Estrangement

has become the common currency of neoliberal society. It is perhaps this sentiment that leads Elena to momentarily renounce *ostranenie* in her late-novel conversation with the narrator.

Yet Schwarzböck is ultimately interested in detecting moments when something that doesn't seem to belong, something that *is* strange, fleetingly pierces the postdictatorship aesthetics of explicitness. The title of her book, *Los espantos*, gestures toward this something else. As the years pass and the economic program introduced by the dictatorship transforms Argentine life, she proposes that *espantos,* roughly translatable as "ghosts," or "specters," begin to appear in certain works that are produced on the interior of the right-wing life of the postdictatorship. Schwarzböck, who privileges the horror genre (*género de terror*) in her analysis, calls particular attention to Lucrecia Martel's *La mujer sin cabeza*, where a woman from a prominent Salta family hits something (she is unable to discern if it is a dog or a child) with her car. In later scenes in the film, more apparitions proliferate, in old video cassettes viewed by characters and at the margins of the camera's field of vision. Schwarzböck, who devotes the entire epilogue of her book to a reading of *La mujer sin cabeza*, uses the film to illustrate that, in effect, the regime of pure visibility of right-wing life is never quite pure—right-wing life must also be understood as "La vida con los espantos" (135), as the title of her epilogue reads.[17]

Ghosts are a common presence in the pages of *El desperdicio*. In letters and emails to friends, Elena writes about being visited by her deceased sister during her early years in the countryside, and the narrator returns to the theme of ghosts in the novel's final paragraphs, when she highlights Elena's spectral presence in her memory. She even fantasizes, during nights of insomnia, that perhaps Elena died in childbirth, or in a car crash prior to her sister's death, and that all of the pages of *El desperdicio* "no son más que un invento" (294). And when, in the novel's opening pages, the narrator establishes some theoretical parameters for her treatment of memory, she recalls how Elena would speak of certain haunting memories, "otros recuerdos únicos," that seem to remain intact despite the passage of time: "A esa materia más bien se le teme, tan vivos siguen. *Son una herida en una parte del cuerpo expuesta al roce*" (15). These fearfully alive memories might be related to the *espantos* that Schwarzböck describes in the final paragraph of her epilogue: "Los espantos podrían ser—si se los lee con Marx—los

[17] While a dialogue with Jacques Derrida falls outside of the scope of Schwarzböck's project (and of this essay), this approach to life in the 1990s bears notable similarities to that of Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993).

muertos que pesan *como una pesadilla* sobre la conciencia de los vivos. No obstante, existen en tiempo presente. Son los niños a los que la cámara muestra en lenguaje negativo, fuera de foco, como figuras estructuralmente espectrales . . ." (2016, 140). Schwarzböck's allusion to the camera (in reference to Martel's film) fits into a book-long privileging of the visual media: she describes the aesthetics of explicitness as an "estética de la cámara" that requires one to "detenerse en la apariencia, como haría una cámara, para ver qué hay cuando nadie mira" (28). Following this lead, it may be fitting to turn once more to the pages of *El desperdicio*, lingering a bit longer with the novel in search of *espantos* that lurk in the text where nobody (not even the narrator) is looking.

At the end of the night of drinking and conversing during which Elena renounces *ostranenie*, the narrator asks her friend why she never got her act together and finished, as she puts it, "*un puto libro*" (267). Elena, zipping up her pullover as if chilled by the question, responds: "*Será que no se dieron las condiciones materiales*" (268). It may be risky to make too much of this line. It is a knee-jerk reaction to a particularly sharp question, dripping (perhaps) with sarcasm, asked at the end of a long night of drinking. Yet what is striking about this phrase is the way that, in its precise formulation, it seems to fleetingly reactivate the discourse of the revolutionary left—the left that fought for the *vida verdadera* that was foreclosed by the dictatorship. And indeed, if one searches in Google for the exact phrase "no se dieron las condiciones materiales," Elena's words coexist in the less than thirty results with passages from left-wing intellectual Rodolfo Puiggrós's 1965 book *Pueblo y oligarquía*, a book titled *Contribución para una historia del trotskismo chileno*, and a history of the Bolivian Revolutionary Workers' Party published in 1978. Kanzepolsky (2013), commenting on the effect generated by the use of the proper name of Elena in *El desperdicio*, explains that it is as if "los nombres y ciertos giros de la lengua, ciertas expresiones que dicen la época y la geografía, funcionaran como un conjuro para que la memoria no se desvanezca" (191). This is the effect of Elena's words: they work as a spell or incantation that—in the historical register or *relato mayor* that encompasses the lives of Elena and the narrator—briefly suspends the right-wing life of the nineties, as the left-wing life of the past becomes legible as what Schwarzböck describes as a structurally spectral figure.

The expansive category of right-wing life that Schwarzböck introduces in *Los espantos* historicizes Elena's disillusioned renunciation of *ostranenie*, and at the same time provides the means for detecting the *espantos* that inhere in her gloomy vision of a decade in which it feels like everything is already exposed. But *El desperdicio*, for its part, might also be read to lay bare a certain dynamic inherent to the relationship between

right-wing life and its *espantos*. For the process to work, "para que los espantos espanten con seriedad" (26), these sorts of momentary presences must be experienced as something alien, something unseen yet *there*. When Elena writes about Carmen's apparitions in the country house in Pirovano, comparing her sister's ghost to specters found in gothic novels, *The Night of the Living Dead*, and César Aira's *Los fantasmas* (among other texts), she notes a basic technique: "*El poder del fantasma es de índole exhibicionista, reside en la capacidad de sobresaltar*" (122). She also, however, notes that there is always the risk that this power of exhibition might neutralize itself via repetition, such that the trick wears off: "*Quizá la falta de sobresalto de los vivos los neutraliza, los extingue*" (126). Elena's description of her interactions with her sister's ghost, and her final years in Pirovano, offer a glimpse into this possibility: that her sister will stop visiting; that techniques of estrangement will no longer estrange; that *espantos*, if their structurally spectral presence becomes too familiar, will cease to *espantar*.

Conclusion: Estrangement, Today

Well into the twenty-first century, estrangement occupies a contradictory place in literature and criticism. It is a quintessential modern concept forged in the particular conjunction of avant-garde aesthetics and revolutionary politics of the early twentieth century. Via the writings of Brecht, it continued to provide a foundation for left-wing aesthetics well into the later decades of the century. Yet, as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, estrangement remains ineludible and relatively unquestioned in contemporary studies that might otherwise seek to demonstrate how the historical events of the past half-century have undermined modern conceptualizations of the relationship between artistic practice, critique, and political action. At present, the estranged gaze often persists as a sort of Archimedean point that guarantees the success of the artistic or critical project, even as the theoretical edifices of which it formed a part crumble and come undone.

Yet, one might say that in contemporary literature and criticism, as in the pages of *El desperdicio*, the proliferation of investigations into art's perennial capacity to renew perception is haunted by the sorts of questions raised in the second part of this essay. By recuperating the moments of pessimism that characterize Elena's final years, this essay has illustrated how the "aplicación amplia del concepto de *ostranenie*" (44) that characterizes her critical perspective (and *El desperdicio* itself) is affected by the triumph of neoliberalism and the eclipse of the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century. In the narrator's portrait of her friend, a defense of the ongoing fecundity of

estrangement underwrites her recuperation of Elena's legacy. And, one could say, triumph it must: in literary and academic worlds where the dictum "publish or perish" imposes itself with increasing universality, artists, writers, critics, and scholars necessarily participate in a sort of perpetual flight forward in which each novel, essay, film, poem, or monograph (one hopes) sets the machinations of estrangement at work, and by revealing what was virtually present yet unperceived in the objects and institutions of our shared world, marks the sorts of new beginnings that might open space for critique and political action.[18] By writing a book titled *El desperdicio* about a woman for whom this flight forward comes to a crashing halt against the backdrop of the neoliberal transformation of Argentine society, Matilde Sánchez illustrates how literary uses of estrangement are traversed by processes of historical change in which the estranged gaze and its success, or failure, is always implicated.

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[18] As Logie (2016) notes, the story of Elena inverts a typical biographical framework in which the biographical subject, by encountering their vocation or way in life, becomes a productive member of society and attains personal realization (393). In its study of the life of a literary critic who ceases to publish, then perishes, *El desperdicio* could be read to lay bare the way in which this narrative structure continues to underpin literary and academic careers in the present.

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