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**Epic, Novel, and Subjectivity in Sergio Chejfec's
*Lenta biografía***

Jonathan Dettman

University of California—Davis

*Me interesa la literatura que no quiere hablar
necesariamente del mundo social, sino del significado del
mundo social, a través de una conciencia particular.*

—Sergio Chejfec

Sergio Chejfec (Buenos Aires, 1956) began his literary career in association with *Babel*, a journal formed by avant-garde writers and critics associated with “Tiempo Cultura,” a cultural supplement to the Buenos Aires newspaper *Tiempo Argentino* (1982-1986). This was a publication, according to Edgardo Berg, that dedicated space to writers excluded from the major newspapers and magazines during the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). Before and during the dictatorship, Chejfec had been associated with Jewish leftist political circles, although he was never an active militant. His early literary formation was marked by the influence of

two of the most important figures in Argentine literature and criticism in the latter part of the 20th century: Juan José Saer and Beatriz Sarlo. Chejfec credits Saer with awakening him from his “sueno inocente” (Siskind 35), by disabusing him of his naïve notions about the relationship between literature and reality. Sarlo was equally influential. During the dictatorship, Chejfec attended one of Sarlo’s private seminars on literature and literary theory, which he describes as having broadened his concept of literature and having inspired him, indirectly, to “escribir de otra manera” (Siskind 37).

Describing Chejfec’s unique style has become an obligatory task for critics. Sarlo herself, who profiles Chejfec anonymously in her *Scenes from Postmodern Life*, describes a “continuous but attenuated insecurity” in his writing (119), whose “interlocutors are permanently suspended in a state of indecision, not so much over any given meaning in particular, but rather more generally over the meaning of everything said” (120). Berg uses the term “poetics of indetermination” to refer to Chejfec’s art, describing it as an excentric realism that, instead of asking how to narrate history or real events, inquires into possible modes of representing the indeterminate and insubstantial. At a moment (the dictatorial thaw of the early 80s) in which writers and their texts were beginning to appear in the public space of Argentina by intervening in “real” life, Chejfec began to write as a kind of contestatory gesture, precisely by refusing to step fully into the public space and by assuming a block, or gap, between reality and direct aesthetic representation. This is not, however, a denial of the connection between life and art, either generally or in the author’s own case. Referring to his first novel, *Lenta biografía* (1990), Chejfec says “Asumí la novela de un modo más orgánico en ese momento, cuando pude tener un simulacro de vida privada como reverso de una incipiente vida pública” (Siskind 38). This novel, and its negative relationship to its historical context, is the subject of the present study.

In *Lenta biografía* (1990), Chejfec’s Jewish-Argentine narrator begins to tell what is ostensibly his life story, which turns out to be a sort of oblique *bildungsroman*, the initiation of whose writing depends on “procesos o ‘maduraciones’” (9). Unlike Borges, who famously refused to

write his father's biography, Chejfec's narrator discovers that he cannot write his own autobiography without first reconstructing his father's life, plumbing the depths of a secret European past. Because his father hides the details of his persecution at the hands of the Nazis and the loss of his family beneath a layer of obstinate silence, his past is revealed more by absences and gaps than by concrete, factual details. Despite its indistinctness, or perhaps because of it, his father's past has played a key role in the formation of the narrator's identity. Chejfec's novel circles around the narrator's attempt to recall his own attempts to piece together his father's past. The text thus treats, rather explicitly, themes like the representability of events or experience, the boundaries of memory, and the possibility of truth. *Lenta biografía* is a circular novel whose constant reflection on the same set of themes and incessant retelling of the same episode create a kind of palimpsest in the reader's mind, reproducing the drama of memory in which one can never quite recall how the "original" story went, in which imperfect, incomplete "originals," or prior versions, are recalled by the retelling. I wish to explore the idea that Chejfec's novel—conspicuously postmodern—functions as a kind of "crypto-epic" whose formal properties, *qua* novel, disguise the latent presence of a more archaic narrative form. The coexistence of these two narrative modes (novel and epic) in a single text is, I argue, a key thematical aspect of the book. My reading thus implies, to borrow a phrase from Adorno, "the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content" (*Aesthetic Theory* 5).

Edna Aizenberg, in an early commentary on *Lenta biografía*, describes how the novel's "territorial voids, historical insecurities, human acts of violence, linguistic distances, and textual breaches are transformed into the very substance of the narration" (51; my translation). In her reading of Chejfec's text, Aizenberg focuses on the presence of the *Chad Gadya*, a didactic Passover song. She sees the song's relationship to the novel as paradigmatic: its lack of explicitness and its circularity reflect that of *Lenta biografía*, whose "rejection of content" is a nontotalizing strategy consonant with a Borgesean avoidance of *costumbrismo* (53). According to Aizenberg, this allows the novel to present "a definition of Argentineness that undermines simplifying absolutisms and encourages enriching

discordances" (53; my translation). Although Aizenberg's reading may be legitimate, it leads, in the face of an almost total lack of references to Argentina in Chejfec's text, to a definition of "Argentineness" that is effectively contentless. And, while this lack of definitional content is consonant with a political strategy (postcoloniality) that relies on ambiguity to avoid becoming instrumentalized or exoticized as the metropole's other, it may be more fruitful to treat the novel's apparent lack of content as its explicit content, without attempting to make the analogical leap from this "content" to extrinsic attempts to define national or personal identity. Thus, rather than read *Lenta biografía*, as Aizenberg does, from a postmodern position that emphasizes discord and rupture as emancipatory agencies,¹ I prefer to focus on problems immanent to Chejfec's text and to do so in a manner that treats postmodernity as a mode of subjectivity grounded in determinate transformations of capitalist modernity. For that reason, my analysis avoids treating postmodernity as an epistemic rupture with modernity. Rather, it implies a postmodernity seen, not as qualitatively different from modernity, but as its "natural" evolution—its radicalization, as it were. This is consonant with Jameson's approach in his landmark study, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, in which he states that "postmodernism is not the cultural dominant of a wholly new social order [...], but only the reflex and the concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself" (xii). The initial essays that comprise Jameson's book were published in 1984; in retrospect, and in light of recent events, we can perhaps see postmodernism more clearly as the cultural logic of neoliberal economies whose growth, since the late sixties, has been due to the expansion of financial capital in the form of credit bubbles, which has enabled, in turn, the expansion of so-called free trade and free markets. One way to describe these developments would be

¹ Mónica Szurmuk outlines a similar reading in her article "Voces y susurros en la literatura de la postdictadura argentina: Reina Roffé y Sergio Chejfec." Szurmuk emphasizes postdictatorial literature as a reaction against the oppressive cultural politics of the dictatorship. "La literatura de la posdictadura en la Argentina ha rescatado la multiplicidad de historias, de experiencias que han nutrido la cultura nacional, creando una sociedad plural, que en momentos claves de su historia se quiso imaginar monolítico y uniforme" (81). Szurmuk, like Aizenberg, sees indeterminacy as a strategic deployment against definitions of culture and nation imposed by the dominant power.

the shift of growth from the production sector (concrete goods) to the financial sector (credit, or virtual capital). In Argentina, the onset of the neoliberal era, or what we might call, with Matthias Nilges, the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism,² was marked by the radical instability of hyper-inflationary cycles from roughly 1975-1989, a period that ended with the election of Carlos Menem and Peronism's rapprochement with both the military and neoliberalism. One might say that Argentina's nightmare of volatile currency was apparently banished through the institutionalization of fictional capital. It is within this context, and with the notion of virtuality in mind, that I would like to begin to approach Chejfec's novel. But first it is necessary to outline a theory of subjectivity with which to gauge *Lenta biografía*.

In "The Storyteller" Walter Benjamin describes humankind's increasing inability to tell a story. "One meets with fewer and fewer people who know how to tell a tale properly. More and more often, there is an embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if a capability that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences" (143). Beatriz Sarlo's long essay, *Tiempo pasado*, contains commentary on Benjamin's piece. Since Sarlo's text, like Benjamin's and like *Lenta biografía*, deals with the possibility of sharing experience and of bearing witness, working through parts of her critique will help to understand what Benjamin means by the loss of experience.

Benjamin says that "[b]eginning with the First World War, a process [that of the loss of experience] became *apparent*" (143; my emphasis). Sarlo treats Benjamin's example, WWI, as somehow marking a radical shift in the experiential. As many have done with Adorno's famous dictum about the barbarity of poetry after Auschwitz, she takes the paradigmatic *example* and turns it into an historical marker, itself the cause of experience's fatal recession. Benjamin, however, attributes this loss to modernity, not to a single event, however terrible. Although at times Sarlo seems to grasp this,

² Nilges, in a recent article, "The Anti-Anti-Oedipus," defines post-Fordism as "an umbrella term [...] uniting terms such as globalization, deregulation, flexible accumulation, neoliberalism, and multicultural capitalism, which are all facets of the larger structure of post-Fordism" (29-30).

calling the war “hija y producto de la modernidad técnica” (31), she continually reverts to an interpretation in which war is treated as a sufficient condition for the dearth of experience, e.g. “La guerra anuló la experiencia” (31), or as a “quiebre epocal” (62). However, it is important that the retreat of experience be understood as symptomatic of modernity, and not only as a result of the Great War, Auschwitz, or the Argentine military dictatorship. These events, because of their inexpressible horror, only make the lack of experience *more apparent*.

To understand why Benjamin makes modernity itself the cause of the fading of experience, it may be useful to examine another of Sarlo's statements.

Hay una huella utópica retrospectiva en estas ideas benjaminianas, porque dependen de la creencia de una época de plenitud de sentido, cuando el narrador sabe exactamente lo que dice, y quienes lo escuchan lo entienden con asombro pero sin distancia, fascinados pero nunca desconfiados o irónicos. En ese momento utópico lo que se vive es lo que se relata, y lo que se relata es lo que se vive. (33)

Leaving aside the question of whether Benjamin really believes in a lost golden age in which the “fullness of meaning” was readily apparent, what he seems to be getting at is a fundamental difference between the thought-form of capitalist modernity and that of pre-capitalist societies. When he describes ancient narrative forms as capable of the direct transmission of experience, he may be presenting this experience as it appeared to the ancients themselves, *as if* it were pure and immediate. Ancient, precapitalist societies had no conception of a radical difference between reality and its mental representations; things seemed to present themselves to consciousness just as they existed in reality, in an unmediated relationship. This idea seems hopelessly naïve to us, but the fact remains: Aristotle was not a phenomenologist. Neil Larsen, apropos of “The Storyteller,” explains:

In this exquisitely resonant and suggestive essay, Benjamin reduces narratology to what are perhaps its most elemental and yet most human, social terms: “story telling” (*Erzählung*) as the direct social exchange of “experience” (*Erfahrung*) and a kind of “post”-*Erzählung* that Benjamin does not name *per se* but which at degree-zero is the non-story of an “experience”-purged “information” and, in its sublimated, perhaps ironic form in that minimalized story

telling that “carries” the “incommensurability” of modern experience “to extremes in the representation of human life.” (177)

When Benjamin writes of a poverty of experience, then, he may not be referring to the “*escasez de testimonios*” that Sarlo refutes (29). While he certainly alludes to a hiatus or decline in testimonial production immediately following the war, at no point does he claim a quantitative scarcity of testimonial *documents*. Rather, one might consider Benjamin’s “experience” as a kind of directly social storytelling praxis undermined by a series of technological changes brought about by capitalist modernity. War, in Benjamin’s vision, is not the cause of the absence of experience, but is itself caught up in these changes. Benjamin alludes to these transformations in what is perhaps the most moving passage of his fine essay, writing, literally, about the fighting along the Western Front (where artillery barrages radically changed the lay of the land) and, quasi-metaphorically, about life in modernity.

For never has experience been more thoroughly belied than strategic experience was belied by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body (144).

Benjamin grounds the increasing impossibility of experience in the technological changes engendered by capitalist modernity. Consequently, he associates this loss, on the narrative level, with the disappearance of older, artisanal forms of literature like epic, and with the concomitant rise of the novel. This fundamental distinction between epic and novel is not limited to the genres’ formal properties; it reflects a radical difference between historical thought-forms, one that rests not on an abrupt shift marked by WWI or Auschwitz, but on an epochal distinction between antiquity and modernity. In his essay, Benjamin references Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel*, a text that also provides clues to the nature of this distinction. Referring to Kant’s oft-quoted conclusion to the *Critique of Practical Reason*—whose sublime, star-filled heavens provide a stark contrast to

Benjamin's static, oppressive, and cloudy sky—Lukács offers the following commentary:

Kant's starry firmament now shines only in the dark night of pure cognition, it no longer lights any solitary wanderer's path (for to be a man in the new world is to be solitary). And the inner light affords evidence of security, or its illusion, only to the wanderer's next step. [...] And who can tell whether the fitness of the action to the essential nature of the subject—the only guide that still remains—really touches upon the essence, when the subject has become a phenomenon, an object unto itself [...]. Art, the visionary reality of the world made to our measure, has thus become independent: [...] it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever (36-37).

This, for Lukács, is the world that gave birth to the novel (as opposed to antiquity in which metaphysical forms and human consciousness were still conceived as inseparable from the world), and whose inner/outer duality can be seen reflected in the novel itself; a consciousness in (and of) this world creates art forms that “carry the fragmentary nature of the world's structure into the world of forms” (39). “Philosophy,” says Lukács, quoting Novalis, “is really homesickness” (29) since the modern subject, lacking immediate knowledge of the world of things, and failing to formulate an adequate notion of mediation, is no longer conscious of itself as part of the world. It is with a consideration of these twin notions of homesickness and the diremption of self and world that this digression circles back on Chejfec's novel.

Chejfec's narrator (or metanarrator, since there are many narrators subsumed under this voice), relates his dismay at being ignored on Sundays, excluded from the table conversation, feeling himself to be a stranger in his own home (185). The narrator's father, likewise, fails to feel at home in the present, since he is tied to the memories of his European past, memories which cause a “cotidiano reconocimiento de separación y de cesura individual” (123). Even the father's gestures and silences testify of this rupture and self-alienation. There is a double rupture involved here. The first break is that which exists between subject and world. In *Lenta biografía* this divide is expressed in almost Kantian terms when the fugitive (the subject of the debate and reminiscences at the table), hides in a basement and reflects on the notion of time: “Y el tiempo es una

dimensión de la conciencia—una distensión del espíritu—, no de la naturaleza” (130). Time and again, the novel insists on this virtuality, not limited to the temporal.

[C]on el pensamiento nos distanciamos de la realidad aunque por medio de él al mismo tiempo la constituimos: la realidad, el mundo, la naturaleza; [sinónimos despliegues mentales]. (131)

Todo bien puede ser nada más que palabras; un inventario desmesurado de palabras con innumerables posibilidades de interrelación. (132)

The second rupture is that of the subject itself. Here, *Lenta biografía* explores terrain barely glimpsed by Benjamin: that of postmodern subjectivity. The postmodern subject takes the split between subject and the objective world as its point of departure, denying the possibility of true knowledge of any object and, hence, of self-knowledge (the subject taken as its own object). An a priori fragmentation thus characterizes the subject itself and anything it cognizes. This fragmentation, frequently reiterated in Chejfec’s novel, is reinforced by disjointed, subjective reflections, themselves broken up by parentheses and parataxis. “A pesar de serlo [...], desde un principio, nunca me di cuenta [...] de que bien podía yo encarnar únicamente —toda mi persona— un reducido espectro de fragmentos: toda esa cantidad excesiva e incompleta de episodios truncos, volátiles, ambiguos y virtuales” (127). Reality, thoughts, dreams, memories: they all intermingle in the mind of the fugitive who hides in the basement, separated, like Segismundo, from the world of light and truth (which is no such thing); likewise, the narrator (in this case, the metanarrator) cannot distinguish between the histories he has overheard and those he has invented, and suspects that he may be merely the collection point of these incomplete histories, as virtual as they are.

This overtly postmodern, radical doubt—“¿Hay algo menos irreal que lo que nos imaginamos?”—problematizes the novel’s stated purpose, to write the narrator’s “life story” (9), which is somehow also the story of his father’s life (“Como antes puse, mi pasado era el suyo” [145]). In this claim to continuity, epic makes its appearance. Benjamin, quoting Lukács, tells us that “the novel is [...] the only art form which includes time among its constitutive principles” (155). *Lenta biografía*, of course, is no exception;

the novel turns on two parallel temporal oppositions: that between the father's European past and his Argentine present, and that between the narrator's childhood and adulthood. The bridge between present and past is memory. "Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the muse of the epic art among the Greeks" (Benjamin 154). Memory, however fallible and fragmented, plays a central role in *Lenta biografía*. The subtle leitmotif of the chandelier (sometimes expressed by proxy through the crystal glasses and clear liquids on the table) exemplifies both this fragmentation and a kind of crystalization of memory. The chandelier presides over the group's reminiscences and their reconstruction of history, itself a "cronología cristalizada" (119), attributed to the subject's internalization of time. This reduction of history to a single, subjective moment serves to flatten out time, and reduces its importance. "[L]os relatos escuchados por mí en el comedor de mi casa eran 'desapercibidas contemporizaciones entre el presente' y el pasado" (119). On one hand, as the embedding of the quotation in the cited passage indicates, there is an epic continuity created here, a "chain of tradition which transmits an event from generation to generation" (Benjamin 154). On the other hand, *qua* novel, this continuity is a subjective moment and is therefore only "the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist [...] dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, or *one* battle" (Ibid.). In this sense, the looming shadow of the father (and his untold history), outlined against the light of the chandelier (21), could just as well be a projection of the narrator, a kind of *Brockengespenst* that denies objectivity to that history.

There is a tension between novel and epic that appears in other moments in Chejfec's novel. The storytelling itself, as narrated by the male and female narrators at the table, and re-narrated by Chejfec's metanarrator, remits to a chain of experience that extends from the table's occupants into the past, to the "original" witness, and also into the present, onto these pages. And, although the reliability of these narrations is constantly questioned, their polyvocality points to a possible collectivity. But this epic quality remains caged within the novel form, since the multiplicity of voices can easily be attributed to the fragmentary nature of

the narrator's subjectivity. The moments in which the novel seemingly affirms this collectivity are invariably ambiguous.

En esos momentos, cuando nos encontrábamos con que las cosas dichas —las historias referidas como verdaderas en aquella reuniones— podían no ser del todo verídicas como aseguraba cada uno de los eventuales narradores, percibíamos que no solamente estas contradicciones no nos incomodaban ni nos vaciaban de interés por ellas, sino que afirmaban nuestra disposición de ánimo —secreta, silenciosa e insignificante para el conjunto de personas allí convocadas— a creer—no únicamente a creer, sino a estar plenamente convencidos— que todas ellas confirmaban con su diversidad, diferencias y variaciones que había existido una serie de situaciones básicas que generaron en un alto número de personas cierto sentimiento unánime de absoluta incomodidad dentro de la geografía europea a partir de que sus íntimos elementos estaban hechos de —para decirlo con pocas palabras— dolor y miedo. (79)

This “affirmation” lacks the immediacy of first-person accounts of, for instance, the horrifying journeys on Nazi railway transports identified by Primo Levi as an inevitable feature of diaries and stories of the extermination camps (Levi 108), but it is precisely this “immediacy” that is being questioned here. The testimonial “authority” of this text resides, precisely, in what Derrida, quoting Krieger, has called the “truth of the mask” (77), namely, its unveiling *as* mask. In the Derridean formulation, however, it is unclear how this “truth of the mask”—which is none other than the affirmation of the failure or impossibility of bearing witness—is any different vis-à-vis the experience of Auschwitz than with regards to any number of quotidian experiences. The “power of the ellipsis” (Derrida 87) is said to be at work in the representation of any experience and, hence, the objective facts in question recede before the inevitability of their own unrepresentability, which itself stands in for the “truth.” The cited fragment of Chejfec’s novel likewise seeks to ground “truth” in the radical undecidability of the events in question, claiming that the inevitable diversity of retellings, combined with a “certain disposition of spirit,” generates the certainty of a “unanimous feeling” in a “large number of people.” This “unanimity,” far from an expression of collectivity, is in fact a manifestation of a kind of tragic loneliness, in which no transmission of experience is possible. This “unanimity” is based, not on shared experience, but on the presumption of sameness. Each member of this “collective”

(which is no such thing but rather a “conjunto de personas,” that is, a collection of individuals) must simply assume her own subject-form to be identical to the others, whose existence, for her, remains unequivocally virtual. Thus, for Lukács, the essence of tragic drama (in its modern form, capable of novelization) is no longer life, but loneliness. “Such loneliness is not simply the intoxication of a soul gripped by destiny and so made song; it is also the torment of a creature condemned to solitude and devoured by a longing for community” (Lukács 45). This is the drama enacted by *Lenta biografía*, that of a child excluded from the *conversación de sobremesa*, which is also the drama of the postmodern subject—at home neither in himself nor in the world.

This “absolute discomfort” (of the Jews in Europe, of the subject in the world, and in itself) is thematized time after time in Chejfec’s novel. This, along with other postmodern tropes like virtuality and non-identity, are constantly made explicit. The insistence on these themes and their redundancy make *Lenta biografía* repetitive, almost formulaic. The use of formulas is a well-known feature of epic. One recalls “swift-footed Achilles,” the “wine-dark sea,” and “mío Cid, el que en buena hora ciñó espada,” among others. “Todo bien puede ser nada más que palabras” (132); “Las criaturas que nacen todo el tiempo [...] son por sobre todo una pura virtualidad” (172): these are the formulaic invocations of the postmodern subject, the singular hero of this novel. One begins to see that, in the case of *Lenta biografía*, “the unsolved antagonisms of reality return [...] as immanent problems of form” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 6). Formulaic invocations were intrinsic to epic, in which they served not only as mnemonic aids for the storyteller, but also generated a feeling of companionship, of shared experience with the listener, who expected these formulas and knew them as well as the storyteller. Thus, a given instance of storytelling was situated within an epic tradition that presupposed a chain of countless retellings, from person to person and generation to generation. In the modern reader who lacks such a tradition, these reiterations fail to generate anything other than boredom, which turns out to be a significant aspect of Chejfec’s novel.

“Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” (Benjamin 149). Chejfec’s narrator himself describes this boredom as the key to a certain kind of knowledge. The indifference he felt toward the singing of the *Chad Gadya* speaks not just to a collective experience, but also to a kind of learning, related to his father’s “pedagogía secreta.” “Jamás la lectura fue constante en mí; tuve grandes épocas de un extenso desprecio y otras de una indiferencia sincera hacia ella. [...E]n realidad me impresionó su capacidad reveladora, de descubrir una realidad simultánea y distinta al mismo tiempo” (189). The *Chad Gadya* stands in for Chejfec’s novel itself, whose circularity and cumulative effect mimic the story of the little goat and, in the end, may reveal something more than its informational content, whose “meaning” can never be determined absolutely. The *Chad Gadya* is also a kind of oral history, linking generations of Jews to a common historical experience. As such, it functions as epic. Chejfec’s novel provides this linkage as well, connecting the father’s crossing of the Atlantic with the Jews’ flight from Egypt across the Red Sea (74, et alii loci). The narrator of *Lenta biografía* later connects this epic crossing with that of the novel’s true protagonist: the postmodern subject. “[E]l vadeo del océano que realizó mi padre fue una anticipación — oculta y desesperada— de los permanentes saltos que habríamos de realizar nosotros intentando en el seno de nuestra conciencia completar los puntos vacíos de su historia fragmentaria —y más aún: desarticulada— que cotidianamente se encarnaba en su figura austera” (74). There is a certain diglossia here: the fragment can also be read on a literal level on which the attempts to bridge these gaps are, quite simply, the narrator’s attempts to reconstruct the father’s past. However, “knowing” his father’s history would, by the narrator’s own standards, be impossible, even if his father were to tell him the story in all its details, because of the *fragmentary nature of knowledge and consciousness themselves*, whose features, presumably, are shared by other members of the *conjunto de personas* we call humanity.

The narrator suspects that there might be something that transcends the apparently autobiographical content of the story he is writing and escapes its virtual and solipsistic subjective frame. “No hice

otra cosa a lo largo de estas páginas que hablar sobre mí, y sin embargo todas esas palabras dejaron de referirme, dejaron de estar superpuestas en mi conciencia para refractar algo que no soy exactamente” (186). Chejfec's novel, after all, is essentially contentless, since it is really “about” its own lack of content. All it can do is repeat the same paradoxes, through different voices, with “leves variaciones” of events, faces, and sayings, in an epic chain of retellings. Like the narrator's father, it bears silent witness, refusing to express an experience that would inevitably devolve (in the modern era described by Benjamin) into mere information. It transfers no experience but the experience of this same lack of transfer.

Chejfec's narrator, then, does recount a certain experience, not in the sense of events witnessed or felt, but of a mode of subjectivity in which “a great chasm yawns between inner and outer [...], the chasm of the alienation of human beings from one another, and the alienation of human beings from the world of things” (Adorno, *Kant's* 174). Adorno describes this chasm as the Kantian block, a sort of “unmediated Kantian dualism” (174). Likewise, Adorno characterizes Kant's philosophical project as “a form of stammering, [...] the attempt to say what actually cannot be said” (178). Chejfec's novel, too, resorts to a stuttering, fragmented narrative that fails to express anything but its own failure, finally resorting to a resigned affirmation of virtuality and solipsism: “El pasado perduraba, sucesivo, como aspirando y previendo llegar hasta un lugar —virtual e inexistente— que habría de ser el de su consunción y que había sido su seno” (190).

Despite *Lenta biografía's* insistence on virtuality, there is a moment in the novel in which a peculiar vision of materiality emerges. Upon describing the thoughts of fugitive hiding from the Nazis in a cellar, one of the narrators at the table states, in almost the same breath as she relates the fugitive's supposed assertion that people are “pura virtualidad” ‘sheer virtuality’ (172), describes the world's “monotonía sustancial” ‘monotony of substance’ (173). The textual proximity of these two seemingly disparate affirmations—of sheer virtuality and monotony of substance—invites one to consider whether they might, in fact, share some sort of affinity. The notion, advanced previously, of a radical difference between ancient and

modern modes of subjectivity and in which Lukács grounds his theory of the novel as a modern aesthetic form, allows one to assert that the virtual (solipsistic and self-contained) subject is a modern phenomenon. Likewise, in Aristotle one finds that the philosophical concept of substance is radically different. Adorno explains: “[Aristotle] says that, in contrast to the universal, only the particular is substantial, that only the single, concrete, apparent phenomenon is real” (*Metaphysics* 26). What this means is that the thing itself, which Aristotle calls τὸδε τι, or facticity, only manifests itself in particular noumenal forms. Unlike in Plato, these forms do not exist independently in some metaphysical realm. Aristotle, in fact, sharply criticized this *duplicatio mundi*. Most importantly, Adorno points out that, in Aristotle, substance is not universal (25). Robert Kurz elaborates: “the many significations or planes of meaning found in the majority of premodern philosophical notions of substance have in common the fact that they don’t necessarily postulate a generality or an abstract, substantial Absolute, at least in the known physical and social world” (§ 18; my translation).³ It seems that, in order to postulate a universal substance underlying all materiality, one must abstract a virtual substance from heterogeneous particulars. For Aristotle this would have been absurd; for him there were as many substantive forms as there were *kinds* of things. Hence the importance of classification in his philosophy.

Turning once again to Chejfec’s novel, we can presume that the collocation of “sheer virtuality” and “monotony of substance” is not fortuitous. Instead, it reflects a particular form of subjectivity, one that corresponds to the modern and postmodern social formations. While this analysis is far from conclusive and, indeed, highly speculative, it points to a relationship between social form and literature that goes deeper than mere contextualization and content analysis. Let us consider a final passage from *Lenta biografía*. “[L]o que se ve como paradójico consuela, y los que quieren ver paradojas son individuos atentos a maquinari y recibir consolaciones, *consuelos que se acercarían en mucho a la idea de intercambio comercial* entre las conductas y a *la relación con la*

³ I have worked with the Portuguese translation of Kurz’s essay, cited in the bibliography. The original essay, published in German, can be found in the journal *EXIT! Krise und Kritik der Warengesellschaft* 1 (2004).

naturaleza en su totalidad" (Chejfec 169; my emphases). The novel's primary paradox, that experience and truth are affirmed only through a radical virtuality, a detachment from the concrete world of "facts" and "events," is revealed here as a false solace, analogous to a commercial form of exchange. If modern epistemology is grounded, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel suggests, in what he calls the "exchange abstraction,"⁴ the epistemological subject becomes increasingly fragmented and virtualized in a postmodern world in which the production of value has become detached from "real" production and ever more dependent on credit, or fictional capital. Likewise, capitalist labor, or "the relationship with nature in its totality," is, in fact, a "real" abstraction that, as Marx showed, constitutes the "substance" of capital, the common denominator that permits labor and commodities to be exchanged as equivalencies.⁵ Sohn-Rethel succinctly describes the real value abstraction: "the economic concept of value is a real one. It exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it. Rather it is purely social in character, arising in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations" (20). Pure virtuality and universal substance are simply two aspects of a valorization process that is losing its connection to material production but that still forms the unconscious core of social life as we know it, and can manifest itself as a latent or negative presence in aesthetic production. In an interview, Sergio Chejfec once made the following suggestive statement: "Lo que me interesa es esa dimensión metafísica inaprensible, invisible, pero que funciona como el motor del mundo social, es enteramente producida por el hombre, y es esa artificiosidad lo que me interesa subrayar en la literatura" (Siskind 41). In conclusion, I suggest that the appearance, in 1990, of a novel that insists on the inevitability of a virtual, postmodern subjectivity perhaps has less to do with a postcolonial or multicultural Argentine identity construct than with

⁴ For a noteworthy attempt to demonstrate the reciprocal mediation of thought-form and social-form (an idea in which my essay is grounded), see Alfred Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labour*. Sohn-Rethel attempts to ground modern epistemology in the exchange abstraction, which he sees as the foundation of social relations in capitalist modernity and, hence, of its form of subjectivity.

⁵ Marx points this out in the first chapter of *Capital, vol. I*, when he states: "The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of those things" (164-65).

the consolidation and intensification of the neoliberal free-trade and credit models that were introduced during the military junta. However, rather than adopting what Jameson has called an “aesthetic of novelty” that seeks to keep pace with reality by constantly “renew[ing] itself by ever more rapid rotations of its own axis” (“Reflections” 211), Chejfec rewrites the modernist, plotless novel from a fragmented—yet seemingly immutable—subjective standpoint that asserts the universal impossibility of experience or its representation. This apparently timeless form of subjectivity, I have argued, is grounded in the unchanging core features of capitalism. Chejfec’s aesthetic point of departure, the a priori assumption of the indeterminacy of representation, forces him to eschew, in *Lenta biografía*, the direct representation of reality in favor of a subjective reflection that nevertheless dramatizes that reality from an internal standpoint, contraposing that society’s essence, the ceaseless valorization of value, against its appearance, the constant renovation of commodities and images whose accelerating rate of production stands in for time and progress. To paraphrase Kafka, Chejfec’s world vibrates within him.⁶

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⁶ “A story-teller cannot talk about story-telling. He tells stories or is silent. That is all. His world begins to vibrate within him, or it sinks into silence.” In Gustav Janovich, *Conversations with Kafka*, New York, New Directions, 1971, 152.

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