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Review of Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning.*

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Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999. 293 pp. ISBN 0822324156.

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The recent release of documents on “Operación Condor” reporting the CIA’s active role in Latin American dictatorships during the second half of the twentieth century gives Idelber Avelar’s critical intervention a particular timeliness. *The Untimely Present* convincingly argues that the distinctive feature of South American fiction in the aftermath of military regimes, a horizon marked by a sense of defeat, loss, and the impossibility of writing itself, lies in its efforts to insert the untimely, “that which has failed in history but without which no history can be constituted” (157). All the texts considered individually by Avelar in chapters two to eight raise the question of how to retrieve or provoke “the eruption of untimely memory” at a time when the market rules unchallenged, the atrophy of memory prevails, and “the enterprise of modern literature” has met “its epochal limit” (232). Each in its own way manifests a profound sense of discord with its present (refuses what is), addresses the unresolved task of mourning left by dictatorships, and resists the neutralization of the past at work in narratives written before and during dictatorship that take on a recuperative or compensatory function.

What I find most compelling about Avelar’s book is its own “refus[al] to accommodate to the limits of the possible” (105) that he sees as characteristic of postdictatorial fiction. *The Untimely Present*, in other words, participates in the insertion of the untimely, the mode in which, Avelar argues, resistance still manages to manifest itself under present neoliberal conditions where notions of resistance active before and during dictatorship have been eroded. This participation—the reluctance to adjust to the present conditions but also to accept “a nostalgic reactive defense of the [lost] auratic quality of the literary” (231)—is carried out by paying sustained attention to a body of dense, allegorical works by some of the most innovative contemporary writers from Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. The body of literary works under scrutiny, marked by a heightened self-reflective awareness of its conditions of production and by a resistance to easy appropriation, falls between the cracks of magical realism, a narrative mode with which Latin American fiction is often reductively associated, and, in general, between the cracks of one of the most commercially successful moments in the history of Latin American literature often referred to as the “Boom,” a period from the sixties throughout the seventies when modern fiction in particular enjoyed unprecedented reception and distribution both within and outside the continent. Confronted by the ruins left by dictatorship and by the dilemmas of mourning and restitution posed by these ruins, the texts by Ricardo Piglia, Tununa Mercado, Silviano Santiago, Joao Gilberto Noll, and Diamela Eltit included in Avelar’s study speak of trauma, failure, and the waning of literature’s “experiential and social relevance” (230). Such themes are undoubtedly less attractive than rains of yellow butterflies, mad inventors, endless battles, and family genealogies. They do not satisfy fantasies of the exotic often projected onto Latin American literature. The rhetorical strategies favored in postdictatorial writing: pastiche and repetition, “allegorical encryption” and “overcodification of the margins” are also less seductive than those at work in magical realism. Furthermore, the mutual contamination of theory and fiction or fiction and critical theory at work in writing by Piglia, Eltit, Noll, and Santiago not only demands attentive, critical readers; it does not trigger the cathartic effect on the

reader common to accounts of suffering given in the confessional narratives that proliferated under dictatorship.

The Untimely Present addresses the most pressing “tasks, paradoxes, and possibilities” (1) confronting Latin American fiction in the last two decades. Among them, Avelar foregrounds the need to situate itself in relation to a neoliberal present, the double imperative to mourn a recent catastrophic past and at the same time resist passive forgetting or accepted modes of memory, and the critique of modern narrative modes and literary legacies such as magical realism and testimonial narratives that ultimately assume a compensatory or reconciliatory role in relation to the contradictory experiences of modernity in Latin American countries. Allegory, Avelar proposes, is the preferred mode through which postdictatorial writing engages with a very recent past threatened with erasure under late capitalism and attempts to assure its survival in the present. To advance his view on the “epochal primacy of allegory in postdictatorial fiction” (2) in Latin America, particularly in the Southern Cone, Avelar draws heavily on Fredric Jameson’s understanding of late capitalism and on the notion of allegory developed by Walter Benjamin in *Allegory and Mourning: The Origins of German Tragic Drama* as a mode intricately related to mourning that “flourishes in a world abandoned by the gods” (7). Why allegory? Allegory’s penchant for breaks, discontinuities, and paradox makes it the mode best suited to narrate the break in representation (237) brought about by experiences of loss and exile. Its emphasis on the impossibility of representing totalities, its resistance to interpretation and transcendentalization, and its connections to the task of mourning and the problem of memory, at least in Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of the term: all of these features, along with the observation that the allegorical interpreter of the past, as opposed to the historicist, “does not forget what s/he knows about the later course of history” (97), make of allegory the preferred narrative mode to address the temporal impasse characteristic of postdictatorial societies, the simultaneous yearning for and the impossibility of restitution being one of the most crucial paradoxes it confronts. Other recurrent dilemmas include: How to mourn or move out of melancholia without forgetting? How to write one’s way out of melancholia while refusing to remain at what Freud calls its triumphant, affirmative phase which would entail forgetting or repressing loss? How to bring about the eruption of the past into the present in order to destabilize its complacency without being trapped in and by the past? How to open up the possibility of an unimaginable future without ignoring the past or succumbing to the triumphant rhetoric of neoliberalism? In short, how to resignify melancholia’s self-reflexive obsession with the negative as a critical form of thinking rather than as an affective state conducive to the belittling of self?

It would be easy to classify *The Untimely Present* as a reflection on the preference in recent Latin American writing for allegorical narratives, given the difficult task it faces of working with and through the legacy of trauma left by dictatorships. The significance of Avelar’s book, however, goes beyond the field of Latin American literary studies insofar as the questions raised in the selected texts—What possibilities of writing remain after catastrophe? How can one trace a hidden trauma that present conditions prevent from tracing?—emerge at the present juncture of economic globalization. The tasks confronting postdictatorial writing for Avelar are not unrelated to those confronting intellectuals and literary studies within the current transition from State to Market which he considers crucial to understanding the selected texts. Insofar as dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile were instrumental in bringing about the transition from State to Market that we have been witnessing on a world-wide scale in the last decades and

which, Avelar insists, has affected all spheres including the university with its shift towards the specialization and “technification” (14) of knowledge, *The Untimely Present* can be considered an important contribution to the developing area of global literary and cultural studies.

To return to Avelar’s introduction, allegory is the mode chosen by survivors of a catastrophe who are faced with a contradictory imperative: to mourn and yet to resist the restitution of the lost object that mourning entails, to underline the impossibility of substituting loss on the one hand and, on the other, to find a way of working through loss, a condition necessary for the task of mourning to begin. In order to insert the untimely and thereby unsettle the present, the texts in question must first acknowledge trauma along with a series of historical failures: the loss of literature’s auratic role in the era of the information industry, the failure of utopian thinking or the difficulty of imagining alternative political futures, and what Avelar sees as “the dissolution of the signature” (152) or “the loss of the proper name” (101) pervasive in Piglia’s *La ciudad ausente* (1992), Santiago’s *Em Liberdade* (1981), and Noll’s fiction. Skeptical of “nationalist fables” and myths of a continental identity, postdictatorial narratives interrupt the telos and the appearance of coherence underlying celebratory narratives of progress that cushion defeat and loss. In this sense they confirm Avelar’s insistence on allegory as “the aesthetic face of political defeat” (68).

The emphasis in *The Untimely Present* on allegorical texts where political failure, fragmentation, and psychological defeat are the main experience seems to be at odds with its reliance on Fredric Jameson’s cohesive narrative of late capitalism around which Avelar elaborates his theoretical framework. For in order to account for the emergence of allegory in late twentieth century Latin American fiction, Avelar follows the same logic that Jameson uses when he establishes correlations or parallels among a set of political, economic, and cultural transitions to explain the rise of postmodernism. The implicit reliance on Jameson’s reading of postmodernism as the cultural politics that accompanies the shift toward the transnational phase of capitalism which in turn coincides with “the colonization of the planet” betrays a certain nostalgia on Avelar’s part for a time prior to a market economy in which intellectuals could still engage in “the formulation of projects for the totality of the social fabric” or in “the mapping of knowledge” to which, he claims, they can no longer aspire. This is ironic, in light of the efforts Avelar takes to stress the cautionary stance toward nostalgia that he detects in his allegorical objects of study. And yet, the Jamesonian logic behind Avelar’s project allows him to place his discussion of contemporary Southern Cone narratives in a broader comparative context. On the other hand, it also leads him to equate the predicament of postdictatorial societies with that of postmodern and postcolonial societies. By taking such a step Avelar risks losing the specificity of the Latin American postdictatorial situation that he otherwise so carefully builds through his nuanced reading of individual texts. However intricately woven the presents and futures of postmodern, postcolonial and postmilitary societies might be, it is highly debatable whether their predicaments are really the same.

At any rate, because of its untimeliness, then, its essential discomfort with both past and present, allegory emerges as the preferred mode to address the current challenge to rethink relationships between past, present, and future. According to Avelar, whatever conditions of possibility are left in postdictatorial allegorical narratives reside in their incorporation of the ruins of history; the embrace.