

Article

The Misfortunes of a Genre: *Prins* by César Aira as an Allegory of the Gothic

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Abstract: The gothic genre in Latin American literature has been the object of fashionable interest in recent decades and seems to absorb all the elements of the politically correct agenda; however, in the current trend of absolute presentism that seems regular in the critics, it is not taken into account that there exists a previous tradition more or less connected with its European sources but in search of its own cultural character. I would like to comment on some specifically gothic novels published in Argentina between the 1980s and the 1990s, as well as a recent one by the prolific writer César Aira. *Prins* can be analyzed as an ambiguous culmination of the gothic tendency, as well as a symptom of the disorientation of a genre that threatens to become a label as broad as it is empty.

Keywords: Latin American gothic; César Aira; gothic genre; allegory; genders

1. Introduction

Is there really a Latin American gothic literature? Is it useful to decontextualize the original generic categories? Should these categories serve, in their abstract quality, as mere classification tools that help order the enormous diversity of literature?

The current gothic fashion in literature forces us to ask ourselves these and other questions, perhaps without the possibility of obtaining an immediate answer. If in its origin the gothic emerged as a dialectical counterweight to the novel of formation or Bildungsroman (Amícola 2003), an opposition against both its structure and themes as well as an uncomfortable response to the Enlightenment project, over time it came to be more superficially identified only with dark elements and in general with horror plots laced with melodrama. Among the easily parodied elements are the castle, the despotic lord, the persecuted virgin, and some character locked in the castle's remote catacombs, who ends up being the bearer of the secret that solves the enigma and ties up loose ends.

Naturally, the modern designation of gothic (as in American gothic, or Latin American gothic) can do without these anachronistic elements, although to be called gothic it will have to keep some invariants. This article serves as an introduction to some works of Argentine literature from the 1980s and 1990s (as well as some significant precedents) and to the curious "revival" represented by César Aira's *Prins* (Aira 2017), a novel that seems to operate as an inventory of the gothic elements presented in Aira's previous novels and in the work of some authors close to him. Although in Aira, the concept of gothic is ambiguous, given the way in which it seems to oscillate between allegory and irony, I will analyze to what extent his novel, and some of the others' works, seek to recreate a gothic mode outside the tradition of fantastic literature. Consequently, I will also argue whether fantastic literature is replaceable or not by the gothic and vice versa.

The latter is significant when considering a part of Latin American literature as gothic. If classifications such as "fantastic literature" or "magical realism" were in vogue for Latin American literature (and served to simplify and commodify it in first world markets), perhaps it is worth questioning the proposal to replace these categories with something like Latin American gothic. It is not a question of defending the immutable essence of a genre



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but of challenging the export of certain labels and the possible colonialist gesture (many times involuntary) implied in that gesture. Renaming a genre should not be the same as changing one label for another, even when considering the necessary adjustments.

2. Some Gothic Themes in César Aira's Novels

It is possible that the Argentine writer César Aira (Colonel Pringles, Buenos Aires province, 1949) does not need an introduction outside the Spanish-speaking sphere, since his vast work has been disseminated through translations into French, English, and German, among many other languages. A paradoxical phenomenon of avant-garde literature that nevertheless resorts to the novel and the accelerated production mode of commercial writing, Aira combines precisely this coincidentia oppositorum in his metaliterary reflections, present in almost all his titles, sometimes explicitly and as an articulating force of his narratives, among which is the novel *Prins* (Aira 2017).

Although *Prins* deals with the story of a writer of gothic novels in crisis, gothic is something present in Airean production since its inception. In the text on the back cover of one of his first novels, *Ema, la cautiva* [*Ema the Captive*], which he himself signs, he acknowledges that through its writing he wanted to carry out a “simplified gothic” in line with his work at that time as translator of best-sellers for the Emecé publishing house.¹ According to the context in which he uses this term, Aira seems to suggest that “gothic” is basically synonymous with “genre literature”, that is, “commercial literature”. In a sense, Aira seems to admit that the conventions of the elements that converge in best-sellers (melodrama, horror, adventures) are largely the conventions of the gothic. This fluctuation or deliberate confusion is significant, and we will return to it later.

During that first stage of César Aira's novels, we do not have half-ruined castles or hermits that decipher ancient parchments, but we do find some gothic recurring elements: the importance of space, in particular of certain buildings and their surroundings, and the ominous influence that buildings and nature may have on the characters and the plot; the labyrinthine or circular space as a metaphor for writing that deepens the story in its recursive pattern; a Manichaean opposition between good and evil; perceptive alterations; the mysterious atmospheres that conceal a secret from the past. Thus, in *Los fantasmas* [*Ghosts*], a building under construction in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Flores, in contemporary times, takes on particular prominence. The daughter of the night watchman who guards the building will find herself confronted by bizarre ghosts who converse as in an Oscar Wilde play and who invite her to spend New Year's Eve with them only if the girl is willing to kill herself to do so. In *El bautismo* [*The Baptism**],² on the other hand, the Gothic setting is given by a storm of apocalyptic overtones even though the action takes place in the middle of the pampas. Again, in *La luz Argentina* [*The Argentine Light**], architectural prominence is given by a skyscraper in which the fragile and sleepwalking Kitty lives, in a certain way, trapped by her husband. In *La liebre* [*The Hare*], the complex plot of twins separated at birth and a widow in distress, together with the idyllic but lethal Patagonian setting, make up, especially towards the end, an ironic gothic pastiche. *Los misterios de Rosario* [*The Mysteries of Rosario**], with its appeal to the 19th-century serial (*Les Mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue), establishes perhaps the most genuine gothic artifact through the perceptive failure of its protagonist, who suffers from a drug withdrawal syndrome that alters the space and the characters that surround him, transforming him into a spectator of monstrosities, gigantisms, and large-scale cataclysms. In other novels, the possible gothic elements are diluted in plots where another genre takes prominence, such as adventures (*El volante* [*The Flyer**], *Las aventuras de Barbaverde* [*The Adventures of Greenbeard**]), terror (the end of *Cómo me hice monja* [*How I Became a Nun*], the zombies of *La cena* [*Dinner*]), TV melodrama (*La mendiga* [*The Beggar Woman**]), science fiction (*Embalse* [*Reservoir**]), and even video games (*La guerra de los gimnasios* [*The War of Gyms**]). Aira also recreates paradigmatic scenes of gothic literature such as that of Jane Eyre's humiliation before her companions in Lowood in a similar sequence in *How I Became a Nun*, a kind of self-fiction that flirts with a certain gothic sensibility.

3. Other Gothic Approaches in the 90s

This fondness for the openly novelistic structure of gothic (let us remember the assimilation of the “gothic novel” with a long novel full of adventures that operates on the verge of the improbable) was not exclusive to César Aira in the Río de la Plata of the late 1980s. A handful of writers close to him also tried some devices linked to the genre.

Charlie Feiling published in 1996 *El mal menor* [*The Lesser of Two Evils**], considered the first “pure horror” novel to appear in Argentina. Although in it we find a plot very much in tune with the cosmic horror of H. P. Lovecraft, *El mal menor* is worth highlighting because of the choice of a real building in Buenos Aires, the great tower located on San Juan Avenue and Bolívar, the setting of the unleashed evil that is presented as a substitute for the castle.

Alberto Laiseca, a quirky writer devoted to the gothic universe of Edgar Allan Poe and admired by Aira, Fogwill, and Ricardo Piglia, used only some indirect references to the genre, especially some esoteric and magical aspects in *El jardín de las máquinas parlantes* [*The Garden of Speaking Machines**] (1993) and in his monumental *Los Sorias* [*The Sorias**] (1998). Another author closely linked to Aira, whom he considered his teacher, Osvaldo Lamborghini, opts for the creation of an imaginary space, LacOmar, which exalts hybridization in his unfinished novel *Tadeys* (published posthumously by Aira) in which some little monsters—half human, half animal and strongly sexualized—proliferate in the midst of a sinister environment of sadistic characters where we also find a monk who deciphers an old manuscript that narrates the epic of the tadeys, the creatures of the title.

It is undoubtedly, however, another writer linked to Aira, almost a disciple of his, who directly explored the resources and themes of the gothic novel. Beginning with its title and subtitle, *Arnulfo o los infortunios de un príncipe* [*Arnulfo or the Misfortunes of a Prince**] (Guebel 1987) by Daniel Guebel makes a clear reference to the traditional gothic novel. The archaizing writing as well as its content parodies the style of those old narratives. We find ourselves in an unnamed kingdom, where a newborn is left at the door of an elderly couple with a letter indicating that he cannot be raised in the palace because he is a bastard of the king, and from a chapter dedicated to summarizing the life of Arnulfo with his adoptive parents (who call him Juan Vitoldo),³ the novel goes back in time to explain that initial situation.

Although the general structure of the plot seems to come from *Tristram Shandy*, not only because of the unreferenced epigraph at the beginning, but also because of the way of continually deferring what is supposed to be the core of the story and the various metaliterary jokes, we find two key elements of the original construction of the genre. On the one hand, there is the appeal to Rousseau, its relationship with the idyll, and the prefiguration of nature as another protagonist of the plot. On the other, there is the presence of sadistic elements that combine violence and sexuality and are derived from libertine literature, particularly that of the Divine Marquis.⁴ Indeed, the first novel by Ann Radcliffe, in which this combination is presented and for which she would become an idol of the romantics, *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), already establishes, through the name of its protagonists, Julia and Emilia, a clear link with Rousseau, from whom she also takes the poetic descriptions. What is more, the violent plot associated with the girls’ father relates to the hair-raising Sadian libertines who lock their victims in impregnable fortresses (i.e., *Juliette*, *The Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*). The uncertain origins of the protagonist, the confusions, concealments, and revelations, the disguises and cross-dressing throughout different generations, would make *Arnulfo* a true gothic specimen if it were not for the fact that his intrinsic sensitivity does not work in gothic mode. The permanent parodic detachment inherited from Sterne (at least from *Tristram Shandy*, if not from *A Sentimental Journey*) precludes the minimal emotional involvement that gothic requires, even though it may resort to irony. On the contrary, there is something of adolescent callousness in his jokes about cripples (cf., the unfortunate chapter on the asylum), in his coarse sexual insistence, as well as in his portrayal of women, which is modified in later titles.

Thus, a better elaborated work such as *Matilde* (Guebel 1994) would at least confirm the author’s inclination towards this thematic repertoire. *Matilde* is an elusive, phantas-

magorical, enigmatic novel, in which Emilio G . . . , lover of a woman older than him, decides, after learning about her supposed death, to erect in her memory a cenotaph related to a mysterious object he has seen in his dreams. The planning and construction of this mausoleum constitute the core of the narrative and confirm its ascription to the gothic in terms of what has already been said about the importance of certain spaces and their relationship with the plot and the characters. There is no parody here, at least on a sustained and evident level, nor are language or names bizarre imitations of gothic. The strangeness lies in the construction of the funeral monument, which progressively acquires a life of its own.

Another significant case, although late with respect to the exploration of this repertoire between the 1980s and 1990s, is *Rabia* [*Rage*] (2005) by Sergio Bizzio (an author who wrote, together with Guebel, a highly successful play, *La china* [*The Girl**]), in which a construction employee, due to a convoluted incident, ends up hiding in a mansion in the middle of the city of Buenos Aires. Although this novel tends to reflect on social classes as parallel worlds that are still close in space but never coincide, its suspense is based on the use of the mansion, as well as on the ignored presence of the bricklayer inside the house, which could be considered gothic if not for the chosen point of view. Indeed, José María, the protagonist, whom the novel refers to only as María, feminizing him, is the one who organizes the perspective of the narration. From the outset, we learn that he hides in the mansion where his beloved Rosa works as a servant and that he moves through secret passageways that he comes to dominate as his time in the house lengthens. In a conventional gothic novel, we would learn that there is a mysterious presence, perhaps ghostly, until the typical revelation of the denouement, a bit in the manner of *Jane Eyre*, or as in Jean Rhys's deconstruction of this classic novel in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where she works from the point of view of the "madwoman in the attic", the first wife of Rochester. In *Rabia*, however, the working class, represented by José María, is the feminized victim, both in its survival strategies and in its fragility and good feelings: the rat that José María refuses to kill is the one that will bite him, eventually transmitting the rabies that will kill him.

4. South American Gothic vs. Fantastic Literature

Gothic outside Europe has posed various adaptation challenges. In Latin America, and more specifically in the Río de la Plata, the possibilities of gothic seem to be largely overshadowed by the development and rise of fantastic literature. One of its forerunners, Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg, admirer and translator of Hoffmann and Poe, adopted some themes from the gothic repertoire, in works such as *Nelly*, *La casa endiablada* [*The Devilish House**], and *La bolsa de huesos* [*Bag of Bones**], although the rest of his work deals clearly with fantastic or science-fiction issues. In a certain way, his successor, Leopoldo Lugones, although mainly known as a poet, stands out today because of an influential volume of fantastic short stories, *Las fuerzas extrañas* [*Strange Forces*]. Lugones, an overwhelming and egotistical personality, was also the ideologue of the 1930 coup d'état, although his previous involvement in politics, around the 1810 centenary celebrations, led to one of his most delusional texts of inadvertently gothic inspiration, *Piedras liminares* [*Liminal Stones**]. In it he proposed a vaguely Greco-Roman "altar of the fatherland" that would recreate the highlights of the national anthem, just as he did in his *Historia de Sarmiento* [*History of Sarmiento**], where he proposed the construction of a monumental pyramid cenotaph for the nineteenth century Argentine president and whose conception was compared to the "pharaonic projects worthy of Albert Speer", the notorious architect of Nazism (Dobry 2010, pp. 19–20). Beyond the hyperbolic gestures of these monuments that remind us of the anecdote of *Matilde*,⁵ there are few gothic elements in Lugones, namely the attraction for the occult (something that connects him with Feiling, who, not coincidentally, wrote the novel, *Un poeta nacional* [*A National Poet**], where the figure of Lugones is important), as seen in several of the scientists of *Las fuerzas extrañas* or in the "initiated" Juan Medina of *El ángel de la sombra* [*Angel of Shadow**] (Feiling 2007). As in Holmberg, then, the fantastic weight in Lugones is still more evident than the gothic one, and it can be said that the

publication of fantastic short stories by a poet laureate in a moment when it was improper to cultivate minor genres, was decisive for the fantastic genre in Río de la Plata's literature.

Two paradigmatic authors of fantastic literature have notable but scarce examples of the gothic genre, although always from short stories and not novels. I am referring to Silvina Ocampo's *La casa de azúcar* [*The Sugar House**] and Julio Cortázar's *Casa tomada* [*House Taken Over**]. In both, right from the title, we find the omnipresence of the spatial, of the house that, one way or another, will end up altering the lives of its protagonists. In the story by Ocampo, a very representative writer of the fantastic with sometimes dark, sometimes grotesque plots, the resplendent little house of the title seems to have a sinister energy similar to the houses of witches in fairy tales. Decidedly gothic is the scheme of a woman from the past (Violeta) whose dark memory ends up imposing a threatening weight on the diaphanous protagonist (Cristina). Ocampo had already flaunted her consummate handling of gothic elements transferred to the Argentine countryside in her masterful and disturbing story *El impostor* [*The Impostor**], another case of a personality that slowly devours another. Julio Cortázar, an early admirer of Ocampo's writing, rose to fame precisely with *Casa tomada* (which Borges published in the magazine *Anales de Buenos Aires*), a supposed allegory of Peronism in which two adult siblings who live together begin to be displaced by an invisible but ominous force that suddenly settles in their home. Although both stories can rightly be classified within the constants of the gothic genre, this should not lead us to consider them gothic but rather fantastic, which I will clarify below.

A few years ago, Routledge published a significant collective volume devoted to South American gothic. The editors, Sandra Casanova-Vizcaino and Inés Ordiz, questioned from the outset the affiliation of many authors of Latin American literature in the so-called "fantastic literature", a literature which was largely imposed by the figure of Jorge Luis Borges (Borges et al. 1965), who took the baton from Lugones and was himself a distinguished creator of stories that opened certain concerns of a metaphysical nature, with strange elements in carefully realistic contexts. Although the problematization and questioning of fantastic literature is an undoubtedly timely gesture, necessary to consider certain poetics in their specificity, I believe, as I made clear in my review of that volume (García 2020), that the good critical intentions turned against the compilers, who accused fantastic literature of absorbing or overshadowing other manifestations. However, the South American gothic label ends up doing the same with gothic: everything can be gothic, from zombies, witches, and vampires to any other disturbing modern story. It is true that there is now a fashion for gothic, and that fashions contaminate the present with their absolutism (what François Hartog calls presentism (Hartog 2003)) of any perspective, as it happened before with the category "fantastic literature" or still happens with the disastrous epidemic of "magical realism". However, I believe that not losing sight of the foundations of the genre, its emergence, and its tradition help to better characterize the most recent specimens, their contributions, deviations, and variations; in short, a comparative perspective. In my opinion, and beyond being an admirer of stories such as *The Sugar House* or *House Taken Over* for their ability to synthesize and give a life of their own to a series of gothic artifacts withing a contemporary mindset, the gothic sensibility is necessarily linked to the lengths, delays, and pauses related to the novel. Although it is not always the case, the gothic tale usually comes to be an ironic reduction of the gothic novel, a way of showing us that the stretched-out thaumaturgies of the novel can be resolved into a synthetic and compact anecdote.

The introduction—in certain way also a manifesto—written by Adolfo Bioy Casares to the *Antología de la literatura fantástica* [*Anthology of Fantastic Literature*] compiled by him, his wife Silvina Ocampo, and Borges leaves not the slightest doubt. Although Bioy Casares gets a little confused and does not offer a convincing definition of fantastic literature, it is clear, at least to him, what differentiates fantastic literature from the Gothic novel: the technical and narrative mastery that the fantastic story must display quarrels with the rather indeterminate lengths of the gothic, just as the explanation or rationalization of the supernatural (at least in Radcliffe) cannot be found in true tall tales (Louis 412–3)

(Louis 2001). Although Bioy grants Walpole the honor of being a precursor of fantastic literature together with other authors, he clarifies in a note that “*The Castle of Otranto* must be considered the ancestor of the perfidious race of Teutonic castles, abandoned to decrepitude in cobwebs, in storms, in chains, in bad taste” (Borges, Bioy Casares, and Ocampo 5), thus returning to a commonplace of criticism that sees in the Gothic a crude prefiguration of the fantastic genre of the 19th century. In fact, the fantastic short story is closer to the symbolist and decadent tradition and is a more self-conscious verbal construct than the gothic novel, whose conventions relate to that of the serialized novel. In any case, this anthology established a preference for brief, well-constructed, and ingenuous fictions in opposition to the supposedly “cheap thrills” of the gothic.

5. *Prins*: A Summary

Before approaching the analysis of *Prins*, it will be convenient to summarize, as far as possible, what this novel tells us.

A first-person narrator begins by confessing that he is tired of writing the gothic novels for which he has become rich and famous, and therefore decides to devote himself to opium in order to fill the empty time left by the hours he previously spent on writing. To do this, he fires his assistants and turns to someone known as the Ermine, who advises him to look for opium in Antiquity: bus 126 will leave him at the corner. On the bus, the narrator strikes up a conversation with a proletarian-looking mature woman named Alicia. In front of Antiquity (a temple of heterogeneous style), he recalls his youthful desire to dedicate himself to history until he had to deal with the problem of the inverted numbers of the years before the Christian era. The abandonment of his studies leads to the loss of Alicia.

The usher who receives the narrator in Antiquity shows him a huge block of opium on a stage. The narrator also notes the presence of a file. The usher loads the block of opium into his truck, and they go to the narrator’s house, but at that moment the usher clarifies that he cannot go back to Antiquity since the key is in the center of the block of opium: until the narrator finishes it, the usher will have to live with the narrator. Later he clarifies that in the filing cabinet of Antiquity the data regarding the Cofrecillos or “little trunks”, a fearsome gang of adolescent drug dealers, is hidden in code.

After a certain time, Alicia appears as the narrator’s lover and servant in his house. It is not clear whether Alicia is indeed the woman from the narrator’s past, since he recognizes that all the women in his life are for him Alicia (p. 64).

The narrator talks about the props from his previous gothic novels, which he gathers in the attic of his house (p. 70). Shortly after we learn that he has (re?)written the great gothic titles such as *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Monk*, and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (p. 74) and has become rich because he has sold them as best-sellers and not as long sellers.

Meanwhile, two suspicious individuals burst into his house: Commissioner Tarantula and his assistant Procopio. Alicia and the usher remain hidden during the visit. The commissioner explains that a gang spreads terror in the city using gothic devices. The narrator immediately understands that these are the seven clerks he fired when he decided to give up writing. But he soon suspects that the commissioner and his assistant may be the usher and Alicia in disguise.

Once again, the narrator goes back in time to remember how he met Alicia: he was doing research on the top floor of the Faculty of Engineering, one of the few neo-Gothic buildings in the city of Buenos Aires, and from there he contemplated wistfully the Recoleta cemetery with its mists. An apocalyptic storm occurs. The narrator establishes a relationship with a student, Alicia, who seeks to find the

formula for the concave–convex fusion. The narrator invites her to go up to his workplace at the top of the building, and after some hesitation Alicia accepts, only to find that the narrator keeps the corpses of his parents in separate glass cases.

Then the narrator acknowledges that he is married to Estela, a wealthy woman who allowed him to write comfortably until he himself made his own fortune, thus losing the motivation on which his marriage was based. The relationship dissolved but both continued to live in the same huge mansion.

Thinking about his refusal to reproduce himself and remembering that he had done nothing but reproduce when writing novels, the narrator draws an “external female genital apparatus” (p. 129) that he hides in a music box.

The dwelling becomes an extensive novel in code (p. 133). The house takes center stage (p. 134), and Alicia and Estela share the same roof without crossing paths or seeing each other.

The first thing that necessarily jumps out in this summary is the number of gaps, elisions, and inconsistencies that are justified a posteriori. This is part of Aira’s characteristic procedure, which disregards psychological coherence and all probability, but is at the same time a reflection of the twists and turns sometimes bordering on the absurdity of the gothic novel, with the great difference that the classic gothic novel (except perhaps for *The Monk*) will always try to “logically” justify the delirium in an “effort to justify the extraordinary nature of its narratives under supposed scientific reasons that we know are totally absurd” (Raquejo 1991, p. 43). On the contrary, the avant-garde literature practiced by Aira does not seek such explanations. In turn, the narrator’s insistence on going back to the past to find some kind of key or cipher for his present has many points in common with the structure of gothic. This recursive and circular structure not only expands with each recollection, but also slightly distorts the previous evocation. We find a striking insistence (common in this last stage of Aira’s writing) between symmetry and asymmetry, applied mainly to the relationships between the characters, but extensible to the places of the novel: first of all, the most obvious gothic presence (exceptional in a city like Buenos Aires) of the Faculty of Engineering, a bizarre building that remained unfinished; second, the narrator’s own house, a mansion made of successive additions, with columns, gargoyles, towers, and mansards (p. 76), full of “irrational environments, extensions that turned on themselves, superpositions, basements, attics, bay windows, inaccessible patios, blind terraces” (p. 135); in other words, a place of asymmetrical and tentative amplifications, a decorative but non-functional space, which holds many points in common with the novel we are reading; indeed, in various moments, mansion and novel are explicitly equated, in the same way that opium is presented as substitute for writing and reading. Likewise, the coexistence of the “official” woman and the mistress-servant in the same house generally refers to the gothic (and later romantic) imagery of that game of female doubles in the manner of Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*.

6. Metafictional Gothic

To begin with, this enigmatic novel, in which everything seems encrypted, offers us a riddle right from the start in its title: “Prins” could be the name of the narrator, a detail that is never clarified, since the narrator can be considered to a great extent a prince of the gothic novel. To this homophonic suggestion we can also add that Prins is an apocope or misprint for Prin(gle)s, a town in the pampas and birthplace of César Aira where some of his autofictions take place (*El tilo* [*The Linden Tree*], *Margarita un recuerdo* [*Margarita, a Remembrance**], *El cerebro musical* [*The Musical Brain*], *La cena* [*Dinner*], etc.). It is worth remembering the productive value of error in Airean poetics, for example in *La mendiga*, where the narrator confuses “Berlín” for “Brelín”, which generates an interzone in which the apparent initial realism rushes towards delirium. However, the name Prins turns out to be the main riddle of a novel that insists on secrecy, hieroglyphs, and encryption as well as on the importance of space: Arturo Prins is the name of the architect who designed the

blueprints for the Faculty of Engineering of Buenos Aires that has so much prominence in this novel.⁶

Symmetrically, almost at the end (matching the riddle of the title), the unexpected drawing of female genitalia hidden in a music box almost inevitably refers to Courbet's famous *L'Origine du monde*, not so much because the description of Aira fits the controversial painting but rather because of the layers of secrecy surrounding the genitals themselves and the bizarre history of that painting. In fact, Courbet's work ended up in the hands of none other than Lacan, for whom André Masson, brother-in-law of Sylvia Bataille, Lacan's partner, designed a painting and the "system" that covered it, an "aggregate" that reproduced the same painting in a surrealist key and which he titled *Terre érotique*, thus exponentially densifying Lacan's own considerations on gaze and anamorphoses in *Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*.

As for gothic itself, it can be said that the themes associated with it follow one another here, but in a distanced, critical, metafictional way. If what characterizes gothic to this day is the melancholic sensibility akin to the dark environments, here we do not find much of this, nor none of the pleasure derived from the sublime of certain gothic mise-en-scènes in which violent chiaroscuro predominates. From the outset, the narrator lists a catalog of gothic stereotypes:

The gothic novel that I practiced was a tired combination of elements that were always the same. I already knew them by heart: the medieval manuscript found in a trunk in a convent attic, written in Greek or Aramaic and translated by a providential wandering monk; the castle on top of the hill, surrounded by a deep moat, with the drawbridge, the dilapidated rooms, the arches in which the bats got lost; the evil count owner and lord of the castle, if possible usurper of the domain; the beautiful orphan maiden kidnapped in the dungeons until she yielded to the lewd demands of the feudal lord; the young man raised by peasants who found him abandoned in the woods along with a strangely patterned seal ring, and possibly a birthmark on the man, in the form of an arrow or cross or star; the old priest who has kept for forty years the secret entrusted to him on her deathbed by the queen or duchess; the specter that will not stop haunting the battlements until the blood of the last descendant of the usurpers is shed; the statue that comes to life, the rose that bleeds, the prolonged catalepsies, the inexplicable noises; and as a way of circulation between all those trifles, the secret doors, the underground passageways, the tunnels, the long corridors at midnight in which a sudden current of air extinguishes the only candle . . . (pp. 7–8)

As can be seen, the narrator is very clear about the classic (and anachronistic) repertoire of the gothic novel that he practices; he returns to list some slight variations on pages 79–80. However, what Aira offers us are not "terrors of the imagination" (p. 31) but rather an allegorical and asymmetrical reflection in coded language (against which the narrator declares himself adverse (p. 19) and a displacement from the figurative to the abstract (p. 61) where "all the adventure [is] mental" (p. 22) and is more "avant-garde, of those who can put all the clumsiness and contradictions under the generous mantle of originality or transgression" (p. 135). This allows it to include phrases without meaning or possible semantic recovery such as "a spider's web crossed by the fire parakeets" (p. 83); "He opened and closed the lotus gates" (p. 85); or the whole episode of the King of Opium (pp. 15–7). Even so, there is no shortage of critical comments on the gothic genre and its "worm-eaten conventions" (p. 7), the "endless days of gothic tedium" (p. 10). The narrator explains how his first novel (in a similar way to the one we read) was rather a use of gothic elements as an allegory for Argentina, a way to justify the use of imagery that is not very credible in those latitudes:

Gothic novels had not always been in the category of genre literature. The first one I wrote was literature proper, it was part of the History of Literature in its own right, being an inevitable product of its time; it fulfilled the conditions

of allegory that corresponded to Argentina, and to Latin American discursive production in general. The fortified castles with their deep moat represented the exploiting oligarchies allied to colonialist capitalism, the cruel feudal lord the dictator of the day, the specter in the tower the worker martyr, and so on. The repetition degraded it: the allegory can be used only once. I wrote a second novel, a third . . . Of the allegory only the shell remained, which took on a life of its own (pp. 12–3).

But with repetition, literature becomes a genre, establishes formulas, depreciates itself and loses “depth”. Notwithstanding this, readers of popular genres are “demanding realism, plausibility, complete explanations (while readers of pretentious literature can be satisfied with metaphors or puns)” (p. 56), which is why the “genuine need of the popular novel to generate the theory that supports it” (p. 79) is mentioned. Little by little we begin to understand that what we read leans more towards “pretentious literature” than towards the genre it deals with: despite the narrator’s confessed aversion to the polysemy of literature with a capital L, it becomes undisguisable that there are games of words such as the initial opium/obvious, the unclear name of the title, or those of characters such as the Ermine, Tarantula, etc., none of which would have a place in the plausible “realistic” and “explained” novels that the reader of the genre consumes.

Strangely enough, the narrator recognizes the anachronism of the genre, which he himself has not tried to update: “any literary history manual could inform me (if I did not know it in advance) that the dark tower and the maidens locked in subterranean dungeons would be very well replaced soon by the realist novel: not content with replacing them, it would make them seem childish and ridiculous” (p. 74). But the anachronism is his own, a somewhat confusing key to the narrator’s procedure, who acknowledges to the curator how demanding it is to deal with anachronism, despite the fact that the gothic novel was not even taken seriously from its inception: it was merely a fashion of escapism (p. 81).⁷ The narrator takes up an idea formulated by Aira many years ago, in a brief article in which he tries to distinguish between literature as an art form and commercial narrative (Aira 2000):

[. . .] the key for a successful book is that it sells a lot in a short time. These gothic novels sold a lot but over the centuries. The idea for which I have been celebrated was to write them now, in the hot present, and charge for the large sales produced in the past (p. 81).

Faced with this opportunity, the position of the narrator continues to become rarer before our eyes: he has appropriated the great gothic titles of the past, turning the long history of these novels into best-sellers that earn him a lot of money in a short time. However, the questions that the Commissioner does not ask accumulate in the reader’s mind: What kind of appropriation is it? Is it a copy? Is it a word for word rewriting à la Pierre Menard? Are these titles barely perceptible variations? The mention of anachronism makes it clear to us that there was no attempt to adapt Gothic procedures to the present. The narrator speaks of the effort to create the atmosphere of “the authors of the gothic novels that I wrote” (p. 106), as if he were overwriting, in a dreamlike way, texts already written by other authors. The final sentence of the book seems to give us the elusive key, although it is neither convincing nor explanatory enough (the explanation demanded by the public of “popular novels” is hidden from us): “Taking an event that has already happened, in all the perfection of what happened just as it happened, and trace over it, or rather, given that reality is three-dimensional, use it as a mold on which to cast the new” (p. 137).

7. The Recursive Procedure

At this point we can think that the operation of *Prins* is analogous, although not identical, to that carried out by the visual artist Rodney Graham with his *The System of Landor’s Cottage*, in which he amplifies the last complete text written by Poe (a text that, not coincidentally, speaks of landscape), and which is a work greatly admired by Aira,⁸

who at the time was also defended by a young Argentine author, Pablo Katchadjian, for a similar operation with the story *El Aleph* by Borges, which Katchadjian “fattened” through the consequent legal battle with Borges’s widow.

Graham’s novel is based on Poe’s story *Landor’s Cottage*, which is in turn a pendant to *The Domain of Arnheim* (Poe 1984), itself a reference to *Philosophy of Furniture*, the three almost entirely theoretical disquisitions on landscape and architecture that Baudelaire wanted to publish under the significant title of *Habitations imaginaires* (Graham 2012, p. 13). In *Landor’s Cottage*, the narrator, who walks with his hound and a servant, recognizes himself lost in a strange landscape until he finds a house, a supposed sublimation of Poe’s own modest house in Fordham and which, in his description, the narrator compares to Vathek’s palace from William Beckford’s homonymous novel. Graham’s operation, he tells us in his preface, consists of conceiving an addition to Landor’s house in which there is strange machinery, in the confessed manner of Raymond Roussel, a capital writer for modern visual arts and in general for all state-of-the-art procedures. But Graham’s intention is also to insert stories in the form of Chinese boxes, imitating the structure of Jan Potocki’s *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, as well as rescuing the fairy tale atmosphere of Beckford’s famous novel.

We thus have a recursive scheme in Poe that Graham repeats⁹ and that is thematized in the amplification itself (Graham 2012). In turn, construction becomes a metaphor for the artist’s own work, which rationalizes the elements and processes used in his work, so that in this case the categories of “sublime”, “melancholic”, “picturesque”, or even “beautiful” are disabled because their effect is impossible to replicate in such an intellectual approach.

In *Aira* we see the technique repeated, not exactly the same as in Graham, although *Prins*’s final sentence is the (partial) revelation of the procedure, the recursive procedure within the same story, and the allusions to *Aira*’s own trajectory as a writer. We also find the insistence on the spatial dimension as a decisive aspect of the gothic genre, in the very veiled allusion of the title, in the leading role of the building of the Faculty of Engineering of Buenos Aires, and also in the narrator’s house, made of aggregates in the manner of those of Graham and which in a way refer us to the famous Fonthill Abbey that Beckford commissioned to Wyatt and whose elegant original design Beckford himself grotesquely enlarged (Clark 72–6). However, if the sublime appears in Poe already reduced for the benefit of an analytical (or sometimes ironic) approach to the topics of the gothic, in Graham and *Aira*, not in vain spiritual sons of Roussel, those feelings disappear to give way to mental explorations of “imaginary rooms”. Thus, chiaroscuro as a characteristic rhetorical procedure of the gothic is transformed in *Prins* into the concept of coincidentia oppositorum that Alicia’s project proposed by merging the concave with the convex, that is to say, a reduced, compact, conceptual version of chiaroscuro that not by chance Alicia never comes to settle on. If melancholy prevails in *Aira*, it is not the melancholy produced by a Piranesi-style ruined landscape nor that of Salvator Rosa-style mountains, but rather the phantasm (in Lacanian terms, the ghost of something that is absence and presence at the same time) of not being able to reproduce the original feelings of the revisited genres: not escapism, not horror, not awe, but the necessarily distanced, vaguely ironic representation of those feelings.

8. Conclusions

Prins can be seen as a culmination of some gothic recurrence in *Aira*’s work but also in Argentinian literature. Nevertheless, it is at the same time a recognition of the artificial use of this genre in South America, as an exhausted allegory for the country that turns on its own devices and makes an allegory of itself. *Prins* tells us that there is not a gothic tradition in Argentinian literature but that the gothic novel is in the first place a mere copy, and, secondly, an abstraction, an intellectual gesture of free choice (derived from the influential essay *The Argentine Writer and Tradition* by Borges) represented by some isolated examples but not by a homogeneous practice.

Through this review, more descriptive than analytical, I just wanted to demonstrate that beyond gothic elements and affinities, there are few examples of a specifically gothic

novel in Argentine literature and that, in the case of Guebel and Aira, it offers above all self-conscious artifacts that culminate in the metafictional reflection that *Prins* represents. A broader comparative study could determine the accuracy of my provisional conclusions, since it is essential to establish a comparison between the European roots of the genre, its development in the United States, and the dialogue between Europe and the United States in order to include Latin American literature in the discussion. I am aware of the great production of horror that the region has developed in recent years, but in the same way I also believe that “horror” and “gothic” are not necessarily synonymous, just as “gothic” and “fantastic literature” are not the same either. Consequently, a broader investigation should cover these issues and help us determine an eventual specificity of the Gothic genre in Latin America.

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Notes

- ¹ “Hace unos años yo era muy pobre, y ganaba lo necesario para analista y vacaciones traduciendo, gracias a la bondad de un editor amigo, largas novelas, de esas llamadas ‘góticas’, odiseas de mujeres, ya inglesas, ya californianas, que trasladan sus morondangas de siempre por mares himenópticos, mares de té pasional. Las disfrutaba, por supuesto, pero con la práctica llegué a sentir que había demasiadas pasiones, y que cada una anulaba a las demás como un desodorizante de ambientes. Fue todo pensarlo y concebir la idea, atlética si las hay, de escribir una ‘gótica’ simplificada” [“A few years ago I was very poor, and I earned just enough for an analyst and vacations by translating, thanks to the kindness of a publisher friend, long novels, those so-called ‘gothic’ ones, women’s odysseys, both English and Californian, that translate their usual junk through hymenoptic seas, seas of passionate tea. I enjoyed them, of course, but with practice I came to feel that there were too many passions, each canceling out the others like air freshener. It was all thinking about it and conceiving the idea, athletic if any, of writing a simplified ‘gothic’”] (Aira 1981, back cover).
- ² I have marked with an asterisk the titles whose translation is mine and, therefore, approximate. Titles without an asterisk are those that have already been translated into English as far as I know. Aira’s fragments cited in this paper have been translated also by me just to make clear his ideas and without any literary pretence.
- ³ A possible reference to Witold Gombrowicz, the mythical Polish writer who lived twenty years in Argentina and who was also an enthusiast of gothic environments, especially in his unfinished and serialized novel *Opetani* [*Possessed*] (1939).
- ⁴ Sade was a contemporary of the gothic novelists and wrote about them in an essay entitled *Idées sur le roman*, which precedes his volume of novellas *Les Crimes de l’amour*. It is difficult to determine whether the gothic novelists read Sade. It is claimed that Radcliffe could not have read it, but perhaps Lewis did. In any case, Sade’s literature has innumerable gothic elements, and gothic novels reflect varied sadistic attitudes.
- ⁵ Another novel by Daniel Guebel, *Nina*, is presented in a certain way as a variation of *Matilde* (both novels share the same epigraph). In *Nina* the protagonist is called Julio Speer and he is an architect (Guebel 1999).
- ⁶ I owe this piece of information to generous conversation with Christilla Vasserot, Aira’s current translator into French. My thanks to her for this and other guiding considerations about *Prins*.
- ⁷ Curiously enough, in the essay *Evasión* [*Escapism* *] (Aira 2018), Aira rescues a literature that flees from conflict and opposes itself to the literature that must invent a conflict (and that he obviously associates with contemporary autofiction). In short, the essay *Evasión* contradicts *Prins*’s position, which charges escapism literature with a negative cast. However, the constant self-referentiality of *Prins* and the way in which it puts language, genre, and writing in the foreground also seem to go against what is defended in *Evasión*.
- ⁸ In *Continuación de ideas diversas* [*Continuation of Diverse Ideas* *] (63), Aira includes notes for an “Introduction” to the book by Rodney Graham where he highlights that the perfect pastiche is the one that is made outside the discipline (Graham is a visual artist and here he imitates certain types of literature) and that thanks to modernity, we have works in a state of incompleteness, opened as a process and not closed as a product (Aira 2014).
- ⁹ He will write his own pendant after *The System of Landor’s Cottage* in *The Piazza* 4.1, which amplifies Hermann Melville’s story *The Piazza*, as well as a description of his new house in Pittsfield to which Melville adds a verandah and Graham “a small ornamental gingerbread bracket in the then-recent carpenter gothic style” (14), although Graham also worked with Wagner, Büchner, or

Ian Fleming materials in the 1980s) and previous structures that serve as a base for the amplification (Graham uses the term “interpolation”).

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