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TITLE: The Banal Everyday in Julio Ramón Ribeyro's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT: Ribeyro's short stories do not stage the everyday, but rather are staged in it. They are formally and thematically framed by the spatiotemporal bubble that is the everyday. I propose that his stories need to be read as oblique yet insistent examinations of space and time for and in realism. They thus become singular narratives, thematically and stylistically, in both cases characterized by unceremonious repetition and subtle insistence. Ordinary figures, the characters undergo experiences that hardly exceed the mundane constitution of everyday banality. Unlike Lefebvre's famed characterization of the everyday, Ribeyro's does not become a site for sociopolitical potentiality in pursuit of political transformation or social progress. Instead, the everyday in his short-form fiction invites us to reconsider the realism of time and space from a different set of coordinates.

KEYWORDS: Julio Ramón Ribeyro, Everyday, Banal, Time, Space, Narrative, Realism

RESUMEN: Los cuentos de Ribeyro no escenifican lo cotidiano, sino que se motan dentro de él. Sus narrativas se estructuran temática y formalmente en la burbuja espaciotemporal que es el día a día. Aquí propongo que su cuentística debe leerse como un cuerpo de exámenes indirectas pero insistentes del espacio y tiempo del realismo. Son narrativas singulares caracterizadas por una repetición poco ceremoniosa e insistencia sutil de ciertos temas y estilos. Ordinarios, sus personajes padecen experiencias que raramente exceden la constitución cotidiana de la existencia banal. A diferencia de la reconocida definición de lo cotidiano de Lefebvre, el de Ribeyro nunca se reproduce como el lugar del potencial sociopolítico en búsqueda de reforma política o progreso social. En el caso de Ribeyro, lo cotidiano nos invita a reconsiderar el realismo del tiempo y espacio desde otra serie de coordenadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Julio Ramón Ribeyro, cotidiano, banal, tiempo, espacio, narrativa, realismo

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BIOGRAPHY: Eunha Choi is an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Pitzer College, CA. Situated where literature, cinema and philosophy meet and fail to meet, her research interrogates realism less as an aesthetic or literary form of representation than as an always-in-flux theory of the real and a model of critique. Traversing from the literary theory of Erich Auerbach through the film theory of André Bazin to the philosophy of Markus Gabriel, her work contends that, only by posing questions about realism's ontology (or existence), can new models of viewing and critiquing cinema and literature be forged. Her recent publication includes "Iciar Bollain's Flores de Otro Mundo via Cathy Song's Picture Bride: Photographic and Poetic Images Recreate the Art of Forming and Experiencing Community" (*Pacific Coast Philology*), "The Precarity of Literary Form: Julio Ramón Ribeyro's and His Fabled Narratives" (*Confluencia*), as well as book and film reviews in *Ciberletras* and *Chasqui*.

The Banal Everyday in Julio Ramón Ribeyro's Short Stories

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Part I

Most of Peruvian Julio Ramón Ribeyro's short stories feature life as it happens in the course of a day or few days, or mundane activities that transpire during moments in a given day. The narrative gaze zooms in to capture ordinary details, habits or experiences that show life to be the repetition of routines characteristically stripped of differentiating significance. Even stories that are built around vague references to a character's entire lifetime or numerous years in his or her life, such as "Silvio en el rosedal" (1977), "Tristes querellas en la vieja quinta" (1973), and "Tía Clementina" (1992) among others, center on particular daily occurrences, many of which prove to be significant as a result not so much of their singularity, as of their ordinary repeatability. What connects the multiplicity of characters populating the entire body of stories spanning almost 40 years of writing is the undisguised banality that characterizes the lives of most of his characters. In this vein, his first story ever published, "La vida gris," begins thus,

Nunca ocurrió vida más insípida y mediocre que la de Roberto. Se deslizó por el mundo inadvertidamente, como una gota de lluvia en medio de la tormenta, como una nube que navega entre las sombras. ("La vida gris" 23)

Regardless of their socio-economic standing, Ribeyro's characters tend to lead rather inconsequential lives.

Roberto's life ends just as the title augurs it: "De su paso por el mundo no quedó nada bueno, ni nada malo. Era como si no hubiera existido[...]" (27). The theme unifying many of his short stories is that they are both about the subjects that populate them and about something else. The continual presence of this other component becomes decisive to the extent that the overall thrust of the narrative would not be threatened if the characters were to be replaced by others, whether similar or starkly different in composition. I do not mean to say that they are dispensable creations or flawed fictional devices. If they are in any way dispensable, it is because Ribeyro's narratives illumine less the characters as subjects than what happens to those subjects ordinarily. Thus the relentless theme that pervades across almost 100 short stories is, I wager, the spatial and temporal figure of the everyday.

Ribeyro's short stories do not stage the everyday, but rather are staged in the everyday. They are formally and thematically framed by the spatiotemporal bubble that is the everyday. His stories need to be read as oblique yet insistent examinations of space and time for and in realism, more precisely urban realism. Ribeyro's narrative gaze has been described as peculiarly urban (Valero Juan 2003). His short tales thus become singular narratives, thematically and stylistically, and in both cases they are characterized by unceremonious repetition and subtle insistence.

Ordinary in constitution, the characters undergo experiences that hardly exceed the mundane quality of banal daily existence.

Unlike Lefebvre's famed characterization of the everyday, Ribeyro's does not become a site for sociopolitical potentiality in pursuit of transformation or progress. The everyday in Ribeyro's short-form fiction invites us to reconsider the realism of time and temporality from a different set of coordinates.

A las seis de la mañana la ciudad se levanta de puntillas y comienza a dar sus primeros pasos. Una fina niebla disuelve el perfil de los objetos y crea como un atmósfera encantada. Las personas que recorren la ciudad a esta hora parece que están hechas de otra sustancia que pertenecen a un orden de vida fantasmal. ("Los gallinazos" 31)

Such is the beginning of "Los gallinazos sin plumas," which is part of the eponymous anthology. Many critics have noted that Ribeyro's short stories are primarily about Peru's capital, Lima (Kristal 1984; Elmore 1993; Pérez Esáin 2006). "Los gallinazos," both the short story and the entire anthology, amply exemplify that view. Even an unexamined reading of a few of his stories makes it clear that his narratology privileges Lima as both its background and foreground, as the stories' location and subject matter. At the same time, as the introduction of "Los gallinazos" demonstrates, the stories tell occurrences that could take place any day in many unnamed places. With the exception of some street names, local expressions,¹ and particular collective customs, there is hardly anything that is sociologically specific to Lima. In other words, very little in these six stories can be deemed to be exclusive to the period in which the narratives seem situated: Odría's government from 1950 to 1956.² And yet, there is a great deal of historical and particularly temporal specificity in Ribeyro's narratives.

Besides being a climatologically accurate reference, the fog featured in the excerpt also alludes to the literary function of veiling, by dissolving, what is less important at the start of the story: the objects and the people that populate the city at this time of the day. The

reference that remains solid when the others either dissolve or hold a spectral appearance is the initial reference to the time, six in the morning. This is not a particular morning but any morning, and what is described happens every waking morning of everyday. Javier de Navascués comments on the spatial configurations in Ribeyro's literature by declaring that in both his fictional and nonfictional writing Ribeyro displays "una actitud ante la vida que renunciaba a decir nada de forma absoluta" (11). The depiction of veiled or dissolving urban presences demonstrates the author's preference for narration pregnant with tentativeness and skepticism. Similarly, Ortega remarks on Ribeyro's fiction as enduringly enigmatic. Moreover, he notes that Ribeyro's literature does not lend itself to easy, neat categorization within the Latin American or Peruvian literary tradition because "su escritura busca precisamente borrar las evidencias formales y las marcas de estilo" ("Los cuentos de Ribeyro" 128). The qualities that I regard to be imbued with tentativeness and skepticism, Ortega deems the effacement of singular literary form and style.

A relatively short narrative, "Los gallinazos," is divided into six brief parts, each of which begins with a temporal marker: "Cerca del mediodía Enrique regresó con los cubos repletos," (36) begins the third part whereas the last part of the story describes how on the night of the last full moon, no one (it is unclear if this refers to the characters or the city), was able to sleep. The narrative frames each of the six parts with a temporal description that reflects the tenor or mood of the narrative. The last part, for instance, which begins with a full moon with decidedly ominous undertones, leads to the story's tragic conclusion, in which the two boy characters, Enrique and Efraín, leave their greedy and abusive grandfather behind as he fights a hungry and furious pig.

Enrique cogió a su hermano con ambas manos y lo estrechó contra su pecho. Abrazados hasta formar una sola persona cruzaron lentamente el corralón. Cuando abrieron el portón de la

calle se dieron cuenta que la hora ceste había terminado y que la ciudad, despierta y viva, abría ante ellos su gigantesca mandíbula. Desde el chiquero llega el rumor de una batalla. (43)

Temporally, the story ends at the same moment at which it begins, at six in the morning when the city wakes up yet again.

Based on this one narrative and many others with an undeniable element of the tragic, some critics have argued that Ribeyro's short stories focus on representing the underprivileged or disenfranchised class in Peru, and in Lima specifically. Bryce Echenique notes, "Ribeyro afirma que en el fondo de sus relatos están 'la vejez, el deterioro, la frustración y el perecimiento' y es cierto que el autor quiere darles una voz, al menos una vez en la vida, a aquellos personajes tan suyos que han quedado expulsados del festín de la vida[...]" ("El arte genuino de Ribeyro" 119). In a letter to translator and literary critic Wolfgang A. Luchting, Vargas Llosa opines that all of Ribeyro's writing, including his three novels, "son fragmentos de una sola alegoría sobre la frustración fundamental del ser peruano: frustración social, individual, cultural, psicológica y sexual" (qtd. in Osorio 81). Other critics have noted repeatedly how his literature maps a body of urban archetypes in the transforming terrain of mid-twentieth-century Lima (Ortega 1985, 1988; Higgins 1991; Vich 2004; Pérez Esáin 2006). The other stories in the first collection also depict the lives of individuals who are poor, abused, and exploited. Ortega describes Ribeyro's fictional characters as "sujeto[s] desposeído[s]" ("Los cuentos de Ribeyro" 144). Discretely, the stories do not highlight those tragic elements; nor do they present these characters as leading exemplarily unfortunate lives. Each story, as well as the collection as a whole, advances by narrating what appears to be any day in the lives of these individuals, some of which are tragic and others are not. If the particular tragic event serves any thematic purpose, it is to highlight the fact that despite what happens, this is just

an ordinary day in the characters' life, namely that whatever happens constitutes the character's everyday experience.

Part II

To explore critically the concept of the everyday can strike us as puzzling because of the concept's apparent ordinariness.³ For being so ubiquitous, the everyday loses critical visibility. However, I propose that the fact that the everyday may stare at us as a transparent, straightforward referent ought to raise our suspicion. In fact, the everyday's critical capacity, which stems from its pervasive ubiquity, incites a diversity of views that became organized into various schools of thought especially during the 1960s and 1970s. According to many scholars of the everyday, the term becomes a critical and philosophical concept with the pioneering work of Lefebvre in the 1940s, when he wrote the first of the three volumes of *The Critique of Everyday Life*.⁴ The trilogy treats the everyday from a Marxian perspective as the redemptive site of critical and sociopolitical thought and even practice.⁵ For Lefebvre, the everyday, far from being a concrete and fixed component of reality, is primarily an abstraction and thus a concept that names "the social and experiential space in which the relations between technology and cognition, art and labour are configured and brought to critical consciousness" (Roberts 13).⁶ For the post-WWII period, argues Lefebvre, the everyday encapsulates an unprecedented level of critical and sociopolitical potential.

My approach to examining spatial and temporal configurations in Ribeyro's fiction differs from Gaston Bachelard's study of private and public spaces as "metaphor[s] of humanness" in *The Poetics of Space* (vii). As hinted earlier, the everyday in Ribeyro's short stories, for instance, cannot be regarded as only or chiefly a poetic metaphor or image. On the other hand, I do concur with Bachelard's view that setting proves just as important as character and plot in literary representations (x).

For French critical theorists and philosophers of the mid-twentieth century, focusing on the everyday promises to challenge tendentially teleological hermeneutics that views each story, character, and event as part of a much larger, universal narrative—a totality in which difference and sameness lose their political and ethical potentiality. In this sense, the everyday is re-inscribed within the Aristotelian conception of narrative, whereby each piece of the story is mobilized for the sake of the single aim of the narrative as a whole. Such a conception, story, character, or event could only contain and reveal significance in so far as they each stem from and reinforce the purpose of the macro-story. The everyday, however, provides an advantageous critical frame for analyzing the different ideologies that master narratives either erase or obfuscate.

Even though Maurice Blanchot belonged to the same generation as Lefebvre's, he defines the concept from a different set of coordinates, which inject into the concept a potential that does not consist of only social or political dimensions.⁷ If Lefebvre defines the everyday as the spatiotemporal site of present contradictions and future-oriented potential, Blanchot understands the space of the everyday as the infinite present of antinomies. He considers the everyday to be far from pedestrian or ordinary in that it contains no specificity, and consequently proves to be pure potential. Blanchot directs our attention to the paradox that, predicated on the absence of specificity, the everyday prevails as a singularity rather than a generality applicable to many, if not all, things. For the modern subject, the everyday is invisible simply because it is just too familiar as it has become an all-encompassing matrix for modern times. The everyday is common to all of us, yet singular to each of us, a seeming paradox that makes the theoretical analysis of it a difficult task. According to Blanchot, the everyday's misconstrued familiarity ironically leads to its elusiveness. Not only is the concept of the everyday abstract, but it also proves irreversibly finite and fragile.

Conceptually speaking, the everyday claims to be neither a particular kind of topic or theme nor a definition, but both of them synchronically and diachronically. The following quote from Blanchot illustrates this point rather enigmatically:

When I live the everyday, it is anyone, anyone whatsoever, who does so, and this any-one is, properly speaking, neither me, nor [...] the other[...]. We are neither born nor do we die: hence the weight and the enigmatic force of everyday truth. (19-20)

The everyday experience seems free of weight brought about by iconic events, such as birth, death, revolutions or wars. Moreover, it is free of singular, namable individuals who could narrate such experiences, such as Enrique or Efraín. A non-spectacular quality has come to define it; and around it, specificity and precision become almost impossible to pin down. Waiting and boredom in temporal distension seem to be the everyday's main structural modes, which nurture the sense of a continuum bereft of compartmentalized significant events.

The everyday prevails as the possibility of continuously straddling two sites, that of death (end) and that of redemption (birth), that of destruction and that recreation—though not necessarily recuperation or restoration, which aims to preserve at the expense of rejecting, excluding, or stopping. The prefix *re-* merely indicates an act of repetition rather than restitution. Repetition does not participate in an economy of gain and loss, but rather of difference. If for Blanchot the everyday configures the infinite (eternal) trapped in the finite (the spatiotemporal circumscription of a day); Lefebvre, on the other hand, treats the everyday as the site where the infinite and finite are juxtaposed, where their encounter takes place, where the conjuncture of each other's polar difference makes them visible and imaginable. As the site where conceptual binaries make their opposition visible,

the everyday projects itself as a conceptual midpoint: the space in which antithetical ideas circulate and interact because no enunciating subject position must be established.

What happens in Ribeyro's first anthology emblematically prefigures what happens in many of his later narratives. In these first stories, the protagonists find themselves waiting or stalling to fulfill a desired action or reach a final decision. The stalling is configured temporally rather than being dramatized with proliferated narrative. There is no moral outrage in Ribeyro's stories or characters—at least none that promotes or protests against a particular ethical system, as in the famed boom literature of the period. The stories in this first anthology offer a glimpse of what seems to be quotidian life for the characters. All the characters in the stories suffer what can be described as a tragic event: apparent death and rape in “Interior ‘L,’” abuse in “Mientras arde la vela,” exploitation in “La tela de araña,” and persecution and threat in “Mar afuera.” With palpable aplomb and almost elegant resignation, these characters face inordinate occurrences in their lives with curiously unaffected dispositions. There is no dramatic reaction or protest, which leaves the reader feeling that nothing actually happened despite such dramatic events.⁸ Within the frame of the everyday, there are no events, just occurrences.

The characters we encounter in “Los gallinazos sin plumas” are figures whose basic daily subsistence depends on their day-to-day earnings.⁹ The characters can consider very little to be secured on a regular basis, because their basic sustenance for the next day, let alone the distant future, is seldom guaranteed. They belong to the masses whose dire needs Odría's government attempted yet largely failed to address. The collection includes six stories that portray what appears to be just another day in the lives of these manual-laborers. These characters are indicative of the changing demographic and topography that came to characterize Lima during the mid-twentieth century.

Controlled by a tight colonial (and post-colonial) aristocracy, Lima's coastal landscape

had remained fairly intact despite the country's republican transition in the early twentieth century. From the 1950s on, however, Peru's population began to concentrate in the capital in volumes never seen before, a phenomenon occurring in many other major Latin American cities as a result of abrupt and massive migration from the rural areas to the capitals.¹⁰ *Un mundo para Julius* (1970), the best known of Bryce Echenique's novels, offers one interpretive illustration of the physical and social transformation of Lima, for example. From the vantage point of Julius, the young protagonist, the novel tells the story of his family's gradual decline as the traditional social hierarchy in Lima crumbles irreversibly by the mid-twentieth century. As Julius's family's *mundo*, illustrated mainly by his house, or *palacio* as the novel calls it, stops being geographically isolated, its social standing in the city also suffers.¹¹ As the size of the manual-labor class in Lima increased exponentially, the small aristocratic or upper-class's clout in the city diminished. Situating my discussion in the Peruvian capital under the Odría's presidency, I argue that a particular rhythm of urban life that I identify as the banal everyday takes form as the city's population expands and redistributes itself across a changing physical landscape.

Though the diminishing influence of previous setters of collective styles coincides with (and reciprocally influences) the onslaught of human mobility in shaping the experience of the modern everyday, here I focus on the effects less of the former than of the latter through detailed analysis of “Mientras arde la vela.”¹² The everyday can be recognized as a central theme of “Los gallinazos.”¹³ In this discussion temporal and spatial elements require our attention because everyday life forms around a specific structure that conversely organizes the imagination of time and space in particular ways. First, time appears as something that is possessed rather than being represented by objects. On the contrary, objects become time, not so much reminder or tellers of it, but time itself. The objects that adopt such a leading role in his

narrative become the indices of what Blanchot understood as the infinite trapped in the finite. Second, temporality is presented as duration rather than as a linear succession of interdependent *nows* in the service of History.

Part III

It could be said that Ribeyro possessed a remarkable ability to remain distant, both geographically and temporally, from the Peruvian realities he was capturing in his short stories. Julio Ortega regards the quality of distance in Ribeyro's fiction as the emphasis of an urban and neutral gaze inscribed in a prose that remains "severa, sobria, y a la vez irónica, que posee el brio de lo oral, aunque rehusa darse al mismo" ("Los cuentos de Ribeyro" 136). I propose instead to read the distance as the expression of spatiotemporal displacement or dislocation. Ribeyro frequently stated that the stories composed during the 70s depict most likely a Lima closer to how it was in the 50s, when he left Peru to relocate in Paris for what would become a residency of over 30 years. Spatiotemporal dislocation appears in multiple forms in his body of short texts. In sum, *Los gallinazos*, together with other anthologies like *Cuentos de circunstancias* (1958), offers stories whose characters, all of them, incarnate the experience of waiting as duration rather than waiting as suspension or stasis. They embody distension in time, an embodiment that is figured as a diachronic or non-chronic aggregate rather than as a linear succession of moments, with or without interruptions.

"Mientras arde la vela" recreates one evening in the life of Mercedes, her abusive alcoholic husband, and their tormented son. The story's brief length, unadorned prose, and interpretive accessibility parallel the ordinariness of the narrated tale: the life of no particular woman in any shantytown or indigent manual-labor class neighborhood in Lima. She is no literary heroine; nonetheless, she is undoubtedly a literary construct. Even though an observational realism predominates in the

narrative, "Mientras arde la vela" also includes instances that dress everydayness with concerns of a metaphysical and physical nature. A similar characterization can be attributed to most of the stories in the anthology.

Los gallinazos can be considered the collection whose language, overall, contains elements that do not fit the classical realist modality of social or regional representation.¹⁴ The case could be made that (abstracting) metaphoric overtones run pervasively through the first anthology. For instance, in "En la comisaría" the protagonist, Martín gets lost in thought observing his hands right before meeting his girlfriend, who is increasingly less tolerant of his constant brawls.

[...] murmuró y observó sus puños cuyos nudillos estaban cruzados de cicatrices. En esa parte de sus manos y no en las palmas estaba escrita toda su historia. Lo primero que le exigía Luisa cuando se encontraba con él era que le mostrara sus puños, porque sabía que ellos no mentían. ("En la comisaría" 59)¹⁵

This moment in the narrative shows in a self-referential way that it seeks to be referential. The marks on his hands are an issue because they signify much more than solely the marks. Similarly, there are moments in "Mientras arde la vela" that seem to materialize Mercedes's mind by making immediate reference to her hands every time her inner voice emerges in the narrative. "Mientras arde la vela" does not humanize the characters but rather materialize Mercedes's inner self by contextualizing it spatio-temporally. The marks on Mercedes's hands or Danilo's (the protagonist of another story in the same collection, who also displays a similar fixation with the state of his hands because they reveal more than desired) tell us that language is hardly the exclusive vehicle for communication in daily urban existence. In the city, the space of signs par excellence, both the human body and prosaic objects, have become not just

legible but also holders of unsayable (not so much unutterable as unspeakable) truths: they signal efficiently to that which is left unsaid.¹⁶

My reflections do not deny that there is referential realism in Ribeyro's fiction. There are moments that can—or ought to—be regarded as symbolical in that they signify both literally and metaphorically. Being framed within the everyday, however, these moments get contained within the logic of the story itself rather than point somewhere or to something else. The everyday becomes a useful formal device or form to allow this kind of referential containment. The everyday serves as both spatiotemporal, formal container and thematic (metaphoric) containment. My analysis of "Mientras arde la vela" shows that the formal and thematic leveling that occurs because of the temporal configuration of the everyday as the containing frame of Ribeyro's short story, also suggests a hermeneutic leveling: literal reading is no longer subservient or inferior to metaphoric (allegorical or symbolic) reading. Thus his short fiction generates the model for another type of realist interpretation—one that does not exceed the aesthetic reach or formal configuration of the narrative itself.

Time in Ribeyro's fiction is not an abstraction. Rather, being configured in space it adopts a material composition for which the notion of the before and after do not necessarily undergird the now of the present.

Mercedes tendió en el cordel la última sábana y con los brazos aún en alto quedó pensativa, mirando la luna. Luego fue caminando, muy despacito, hasta su habitación. En el candelero ardía la vela [...]. A pesar de encontrarse fatigada y con sueño no se acostó de inmediato. Sentándose en una banqueta quedó mirando ese cuadro que al influjo de la llama azul cobra a veces un aire insustancial y falso. —Me acostaré cuando termine de arder—pensó y se miró las manos agrietadas por la lejía. ("Las botellas y los hombres" 103)

This passage exemplifies the central place the candle occupies in the narrative. The short

story begins and ends by focusing on Mercedes and the candle—both of which couple critical and dramatic importance. "La tela de araña" is another story in the anthology that complements the depiction of how time and temporality are configured around objects rather than humans. Time is not chiefly subjective perception. The narrative tells the story of María's grave misfortune, which takes her from being harassed by the son in the household that employs her as a maid to the grips of a much older man to whom, despite the absence of any affection for him, she surrenders herself. If the candle remains the spatiotemporal index of everyday duration in "Mientras arde la vela," in María's story duration is configured by a spider on a web. When María realizes that her situation as a maid in an abusive house will not change, the narrator in third person says:

En pocos minutos, sin embargo, su optimismo había decaído. Algo ocurría muy dentro suyo: pequeños desplazamientos de imágenes, lento juego de sospechas. Un agudo malestar la obligó a sentarse en el borde de la cama y a espiar los objetos que la rodeaban, como si ellos le tuvieran reservada alguna sorpresa maligna. La araña había regresado a su esquina. Aguzando la vista, descubrió que había tejido una tela, una tela enorme y bella, como una obra de mantelería. ("La tela de araña" 72)

Numerous references to the spider on the web appear immediately after a specific reference to María's state of mind or thoughts, just as the spatiotemporal flickering of the candle accompanies descriptions of Mercedes's inner self. Ribeyro's first anthology shows plenty of this type of unexpected juxtapositions: the description of the protagonists' inner world precedes the depiction of seemingly inconsequential objects surrounding the characters. The description of such mundane objects accentuates the banal condition of the protagonists' emotions and thoughts. The effect of such a disconcerting juxtaposition is compounded

by Ribeyro's ascetic prose. Regarding his prose, Augusto Higa accurately notes:

Nada más lejos de Julio Ramón Ribeyro que el barroquismo y la exhuberancia imaginativa, espíritu cartesiano por temperamento, su prosa no acude a los relieves sensoriales ni a los destellos de imágenes, por el contrario, siempre encontraremos en él a un narrador frío, calculador, desapasionado, que lleva los acontecimientos impersonalmente, sin identificarse con el personaje, tal como lo haría un científico riguroso y metódico. (237)

He obsessed less with the inventive metaphysics of language than with the *techné* of an exact, efficient prose that accomplishes perplexity in simplicity rather than baroque excess.

What follows is an extended analysis of Mercedes's story. "Mientras arde la vela" grips us through sheer simplicity and perhaps also illusory familiarity. The narrative revolves around a rather private, domestic scene. A working-class woman, Mercedes, finishes another long day of work and prepares to go to bed when her inebriated husband, Moisés, goes into another of his frantic displays of emotional and logical incoherence, which includes violence toward their son, Panchito. Attempting to calm him, Mercedes wrestles with him and hits him unconscious. The story does not clarify whether Mercedes intended to hurt him, but she certainly seems satisfied with the prospect of becoming a widow—and free. The remaining two-thirds of the story narrates Mercedes's hesitation about how to respond to the situation and what to do with her unconscious husband. She finally decides to seek help from her neighbors. When, accompanied by a few neighbors, she returns to her house to deal with her presumably dead husband, the shocking news that Moisés is in fact alive is delivered by a confused Panchito who does not understand why an agitated crowd has gathered in his house so late at night. Irritated, the neighbors leave confused and disappointed by the non-materialization

of the expected of drama. Mercedes is left alone staring at the burning candle once again.

Mercedes's dreams of opening a grocery store disappear along with the last flickering of the one candle that frames the entire temporality of the tale:

-¡No podré abrir la verdulería!— se dijo Mercedes con cierta cólera reprimida y se levantó. Abriendo la puerta del patio quedó mirando el cordel donde las sábanas, y limpias, flotaban como fantasmas. A sus espaldas la vela ardía, se obstinaba en permanecer. ¿A qué hora se apagará?—murmuró con angustia. ("Las botellas" 105)

From the beginning of the story, Mercedes measures the pace of her work as well as her routine on another inconsequential day's end by assessing how much of the candle is left to burn. What experiences of time and space can be drawn from measuring with candlelight the passing of time and one's perception of life in that time? Mercedes's working-class life conditions her to operate under particular time-space dynamics. For instance, in terms of space, the most salient characteristic of her place of residence is the sheer lack of space. She and her family are limited to what appears to be a single room sparsely furnished. Her house lacks room partitions. In the absence of much description of the furniture, we can safely assume that not much is there to describe. There is one bed where Danilo is lying whereas the young son sleeps on the floor, in one dark, unobtrusive corner of the house. The candle is a constant though perhaps tenuous reminder of the socio-economic inequalities that constitute any urbanizing city.

The kind of partial, shadow-ridden vision that candles create, fashions a certain type of visibility that essentially lacks uniformity. The candle allows an experience of light that stands in between complete obscurity and the illusion of complete vision generated by electric light. The interplay of shadows, irregular like the flickering of the candle,

creates a certain spatial rhythm, that is, the movement of light impressed on space: the wall, the ceiling, furniture, etc. This is literally an illumined vision. But is it also metaphorically? Does the candle allow Mercedes to have a vision of her room and her life in that room, one bereft of the false illusion of unhindered, clear vision that electric power is able, allegedly, to furnish. As the flickering persists, the visual continuities and discontinuities persist as well.

La vela osciló nuevamente y Mercedes temió que se apagara, pues entonces tendría que acostarse. En la oscuridad no podía pensar tan bien como bajo ese reflejo triste que le daba a su espíritu una profundidad un poco perversa y sin embargo turbadora como un pecado. La señora Romelia, en cambio, no podía soportar esa luz. Cuando la acompañó hasta la casa para los menesteres del velorio, se asustó del pabito más que del cadáver. (106)

In “Mientras arde la vela,” the flickering candle is as much a protagonist as is Mercedes. At times, there seems to be an almost mimetic connection between the movement of the candle’s flame projecting light and the heroine’s inner thoughts. The narrative opens and closes with both of them, showing how the lit or unlit presence of the candle affects directly Mercedes’ thoughts, if not her entire self. Throughout the story, Mercedes hardly speaks, but brief monologues occur inside her head. As the quote also shows, the candle offers her spirit a more profound, albeit sometimes perverse, understanding of her circumstances (“le daba a su espíritu una profundidad un poco perversa [...]”), whereas her neighbor experiences terror at the mere presence of the candle in the room. A quiet character, Mercedes seems to do most of her talking silently.

Part IV

Descriptions of the candle either precede or follow the formation of thoughts in Mercedes, who from beginning to end struggles between her awareness of what her life is and her imagining of how her life should or could be better. Though there is a constant and complex interweaving between the plot and the description of Mercedes’ thoughts, the divorce between her reality and her inner idealized world is never completely blurred or erased. In fact, the interweaving makes the two realms’ dramatic difference even more evident and irreconcilable. Ribeyro is not suggesting that reality and fantasy (or things and ideas, concrete and abstract, matter and spirit, phenomenology and metaphysics, etc.) cannot be distinguished, but rather that they should not be confused.

The candle performs a dual function of temporal and spatial dimensions. It illuminates the space and thus renders visible the latter’s physical characteristics as well as the objects in it. As the candle remains lit, however, it also serves as a marker of time. The earlier quote describes how, once the candle goes out, Mercedes will have no alternative but to go to bed, to cease all conscious acts. The candle, in this way, marks the temporal limits of her productive life. The flickering of the candle’s flame is a pace-marker telling Mercedes how quickly or slowly she must finish her laundry job because time, as the candlewick burns down, is also running out. It is not so much that time is represented by the candle as that time, both literally and figuratively, resides in it. A suggestive interpretation inspired by the candle’s presence in the story is that modernization takes place in uneven and contradictory ways. Julio Ortega has noted how Ribeyro’s stories represent a Peru that modernizes without necessarily democratizing (“Los cuentos de Ribeyro” 133).

In addition, the candle's ephemeral light suggests that its imminent end constantly hints at an initial place of origin, since every final point carries shadows of a distant or close beginning. While her neighbors own gas lamps, Mercedes's day is still ordered around the finite existence of a candle, which can never be restored to its original state. The candle's burnt wax cannot be recuperated, suggesting that time spent, or experienced, cannot be recovered unless it is in a reconfigured form as narrative or memories. In this way, Ribeyro offers a story that illustrates the complex relationship between temporality and modernization in mid-twentieth century Lima. Rather than just experienced, modern time is spent, used, or wasted.

By sparingly depicting particular objects imbued with spatiotemporal significance or presence, Ribeyro offers a story that, when read in a certain way, is concerned with cataloguing urban typologies, as well as reflecting on how characters like Mercedes engage time in the space of banality. The story is far less interested in representing a class identity than in narrating a singular experience, one that does not necessarily stand for a general precept. Mercedes does not symbolize poverty and desperation, nor is she an allegory of the entire manual-labor class whose presence, during the 1950s and on, was certainly multiplying in Lima.

Keeping in mind García Canclini's treatment of temporality and the desynchronized and divergent quality of how modernity has manifested itself in Latin America (1989), it seems relevant to note that Mercedes's desire is not only for autonomy but also for greater synchronization with the rest of the world. This synchronized movement and measuring of time seems to pair more readily with the autonomous individual's propensity to make his or her own decisions: an individual's ability to decide to rest or work at any given time, for instance. "This moment" gains impetus and precision when it is accompanied by the mechanical temporal exactness of the clock. In this respect her determination to organize

her daily life by the clock rather than by the candle's pre-modern conceptualization of time can be seen as the desire to become synchronous, contemporaneous with the rest of society, and perhaps also the world. Fredric Jameson notes that modernity "always means setting a date and positing a beginning[...]" (31). Mercedes seeks to transcend the chaos of her circumstances by attaining a life of order in which the routine of work and leisure will be regulated by the seeming steady temporality of the modern clock.

This interpretation, while present in the story, is not however a dominant one. It is not the material particularities of her hard life vis-à-vis social and economic progress that stands out in the narrative—but rather the candle, its flickering light, its vanishing presence, and with it, literally light and time.¹⁷ The desire for progress or rejection of her current situation is not the thematic force that drives the storytelling. By force, I mean a point of narrative departure, thrust, or end. What remain undoubtedly consequential in "Mientras arde la vela" are the candle and its embodiment of time configuring a particular temporality. Thus emerges the way to conceptualize a brand of realism undergirded by coordinates other than those of narratives of foundation or origin (etiology) and progress or utopia (teleology). These stories are about neither beginning and end, nor birth and death.

Narrating the banal everyday of ordinary figures (people as well as non-human things), Ribeyro's short stories embody the confluence of storytelling technique and spatiotemporal form to forge a new understanding of realism as well as of the role of time and temporality in it. They show how the banal everyday does not necessarily indicate the absence of modernity, but rather its intricate relation to it. By way of conclusion, let us heed Ribeyro's own words on the matter:

En otras palabras, me he esforzado por mantener un mínimo de sensualidad formal. En lo que respecta a la intención de los cuentos, podrá observarse

que están animados de cierto espíritu de objetividad. No quiero con esto declararme partidario de la impersonalidad literaria. Muy lejos de ello. Lo cierto es que el cuento no me parece el vehículo más apropiado para el desarrollo de una tesis o el planteamiento de una solución. Para ello están la novela, el teatro o el ensayo. Mis cuentos sólo pretenden enfocar determinadas situaciones—exactas o verosímiles—de nuestra realidad, sin permitir acerca de ella algún juicio explícito. No es difícil, sin embargo, discernir hasta qué punto me solidarizo con ella. En el fondo de toda pintura realista hay un no-conformismo y como el germen de una crítica. (“Prólogo a *Los gallinazos*” 518)

Ribeyro's short narratives demonstrate with exemplarity that the form of the short story (temporal and spatial) offers a rather propitious stage for the everyday, as both literary figure and critical device.

Notes

¹ Cholo, cholita, and huaca are few of the terms in the stories that are particular, though not exclusive, to Peru. Huaca, for example, derives from a Quechua word, whereas cholo is an urban term that describes Peruvians with indigenous heritage.

² In Latin American political history, Odría's government has been compared to Perón's government in Argentina, also in the 1950s. The comparison is less because of the temporal contemporaneity than for the so-called populist policies that both governments seem to have privileged as the organizing tenets of both their politics and administration.

³ One may question the value of critiquing a notion that names a repeating reality in which everything seems to transpire at a surface level. Conventionally, we understand the everyday to refer to daily personal habits, social routines, and political agreements or consensus that hardly resist intelligibility; within this frame, even disputes, missed encounters, and the accidental have been normalized. That is, the term falls under such a pragmatic, day-to-day category that pursuing an interdisciplinary critique of it may seem blatantly

contradictory and futile. That which generously lends itself to representation and interpretation must be devoid of obscure complexity.

⁴ In “Lessons in Surrealism: Relationality, event, encounter” Sara Nadal-Melsió shows how Lefebvre's work “refunctionalizes” the everyday as a critical and philosophical concept (in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre* 2008).

⁵ In his pioneer work, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre defines modern everyday life as that which remains after the elimination of all specialized activity. By specialized activity Lefebvre refers to the work or labor that happens outside the *oikos*, in the public space of the *polis*. Moreover, it is primarily the result of significant human movement from the countryside to the city, which gradually becomes an urban center. Scholarship on urbanity draws the difference between the city and urban centers from their levels of density. Though Lima's density is a matter I will not completely disregard, my references to the Peruvian capital will chiefly treat it as a city rather than an urban place.

⁶ More on the philosophical development of the everyday concept, see Roberts' *Philosophizing the Everyday: Evolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory*.

⁷ Despite the profound differences between the two, there is hardly any doubt that Blanchot's essay was inspired by Lefebvre's own work on the concept. For more on this connection, see Michael Sheringham, “Attending to the Everyday: Blanchot, Lefebvre, Certeau, Perce” (*French Studies* 187-99).

⁸ In many of the interviews Ribeyro offered throughout his life, he frequently stated how the Lima and *limeños* portrayed in his stories are fundamentally anachronistic figures because no matter when he wrote, he always drew from the memories he created in the 1950s immediately prior to his relocation in Paris (“Individualista feroz y anacrónico” 577-612).

⁹ In later short-story collections, Ribeyro focuses on more middle-class figures, especially those in various stages of decline. The first two anthologies, however, exclusively narrate stories about the manual-labor class.

¹⁰ At this time similar migratory phenomena were happening, albeit in concentrated form, in many parts of the world. The unceasing displacement (or dislocation) toward cities that offered the possibility of primarily economic improvement, nurtured studies, research, and exploration that became a discipline in its own right: urban studies. It would be incorrect to presume that migration

to the city was a phenomenon exclusive to Latin America or so-called developing countries such as in Asia and Africa. Europe and North America, too, experienced unprecedented levels of mobility from the countryside to the cities, which quickly became dense urban centers. M. Carmagnani and G. Casetta explain that,

the great transformation that took place between 1945 and 1970 in Latin America can also be defined succinctly as the transition from a situation of equilibrium between city and countryside to a different situation characterized not just by urban primacy, but more precisely by hegemony of the great metropolises. (Quoted in Franco Moretti 238).

¹¹ Julius's house is located in a rather exclusive area where most residences stand on the mountains in isolated fashion thus marking the privacy of their domain. With the onslaught of migrant movement to Lima, people in search of new homes settled on neighboring mountains, obstructing the physical isolation affluent residences had maintained since colonial times. A curious phenomenon already appearing in many other Latin American cities emerged, whereby physical proximity of the very rich to the very poor increased thus ever more. The increasingly visible discrepancy drove the need to explain and even legitimate discursively the presence of such sheer inequality. As a consequence, the colonial discourse of deficient modernization and modernity manqué that developed abroad in European and North American metropolitan centers began to be replicated at a local level.

¹² "Mientras arde la vela" receives closer attention than the rest because it allows me to illustrate my main part of the argument, which is how the everyday, as temporal and spatial conceptual frame, serves as a formal device in Ribeyro's short stories. In short, the everyday becomes the very form that structures as well as thematizes his short narratives.

¹³ All six stories in this anthology tell the story of a main character on one particular day, or how they are defined by the ordinary activities of each day. Even when something irregular, inordinately tragic happens to them, the characters respond to it in a contained fashion, as if given occurrence or event is framed only by that one (every)day. This creates a radically different conception and configuration of time and temporality.

¹⁴ Of the seven stories included in *Los gallinazos sin plumas*, the eponymous story contains the most elements verging on the fantastic style.

¹⁵ More indisputably metaphoric moments can be found in "Los gallinazos sin plumas," a story about two orphaned brothers who end up living with his aged, sick grandfather who abuses them by denying them food if they fail to collect useful goods from the streets and the collective garbage site nearby.

Las personas que recorren la ciudad a esta hora parece que están hechas de otra sustancia, que pertenecen a un orden de vida fantasmal. Las beatas se arrastran penosamente hasta desaparecer en los pórticos de las iglesias. Los nóctambulos, macerados por la noche, regresan a sus casas envueltos en sus bufandas y en su melancolía. ("Los gallinazos" 31)

¹⁶ Ribeyro writes a painting, or linguistically paints a scene in which quiet gestures ought to communicate as much if not more than the textually explicit or the explicitly textual. These hands try to communicate that which words cannot because the former escape the real of the iteration but not intelligibility, since they point to themselves as they remain quiet, silent or absent. These domestic portrayals by Ribeyro remind us of the Dutch painter Vermeer, who also reproduced domestic life of ascetic diligence and order.

¹⁷ It could be said that the idea of progress takes visible form in the habit of planning, which is predicated on the expected forward-movement of time. Jameson notes that "Modernity always had something to do with technology (at least in 'modern times'), and thus eventually with progress" (7).

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