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On Becoming Virginia: The Story of a Man Who Crashed a Woman's Body: A Translation of Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's Postumo el envirginiado [1882]

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**ON BECOMING VIRGINIA: THE STORY OF A MAN WHO CRASHED A
WOMAN'S BODY: A TRANSLATION OF ALEJANDRO TAPIA Y RIVERA'S
PÓSTUMO EL ENVIRGINIADO [1882]**

A Thesis Presented

by

AARON M. M. SUKO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Comparative Literature

Translation Studies Program

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In loving memory of Maxine McCune (1930-2009)

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ABSTRACT

ON BECOMING VIRGINIA: THE STORY OF A MAN WHO CRASHED A WOMAN'S BODY: A TRANSLATION OF ALEJANDRO TAPIA Y RIVERA'S *PÓSTUMO EL ENVIRGINIADO* [1882]

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This thesis establishes a biographical and critical context pertaining to the life and work of the nineteenth-century Puerto Rican author Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1826-1882), and presents a proposed translation of his final novel, *Póstumo el envirginado o la historia de un hombre que se coló en el cuerpo de una mujer* (1882). In a discussion of Tapia's life and work, I highlight important historical factors for comprehending the text's and Tapia's relatively obscure status. Then I turn to the text itself to analyze key themes and narrative techniques, referring to literary scholars of *Póstumo* in order to provide a general interpretive frame work for contemporary readers of the text in translation. Next, I address the functions and metaphors of translation in the novel, and how these relate to discussions in translation theory around the metaphors of fidelity, gender, and cosmopolitanism, before finally presenting my translation of the novel itself.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
INTRODUCTION	
TRANSLATION AND TRANSMIGRATION OF AND IN <i>ON BECOMING VIRGINIA/PÓSTUMO EL ENVIRGINIADO (1882)</i>	1
PROLOGUE	34
CHAPTER	
I. RETURNING TO THE WORLD.....	37
II. PÓSTUMO’S SPIRIT FINDS NEW LODGINGS.....	41
III. THE INTRUDER UNEXPECTEDLY OUSTS THE LANDLORD.....	46
IV. APPARENTLY THE BODY COMES WITH CERTAIN PRIOR COMMITMENTS.....	50
V. COMING TO TERMS.....	56
VI. THE WEDDING.....	60
VII. THE VOICE.....	65
VIII. MATILDE, THE YOUNG CONDESA DEL CIERZO	70
IX. PÓSTUMO HEARS THE GUARDIAN’S VOICE AGAIN.....	75
X. REFLECTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS.....	78
XI. VIRGINIA AND MATILDE.....	82
XII. THE MANY WAYS TO FULFILL PENNANCE	85
XIII. A VISIT WITH THE DRESSMAKER	87
XIV. THE DUQUESA FINDS OUT	94

XV.	SEEING AND BEING SEEN	100
XVI.	VIRGINIA IS NOT FOND OF CERTAIN SOLUTIONS	105
XVII.	VIRGINIA IN PARIS.....	110
XVIII.	TWO FRIENDS AND THE DEMIMONDE	115
XIX.	EDIFYING DISCUSSION BETWEEN VIRGINIA AND HER GUARDIAN.....	120
XX.	VIRGINIA THE ARTIST.....	125
XXI.	AN ECCENTRIC ENGLISHMAN EXPRESSES HIS LOVE	129
XXII.	VIRGINIA REFLECTS ON HER NEW CIRCUMSTANCES	133
XXIII.	THE ROMANCE OF A POET IN LOVE.....	136
XXIV.	A TRAGIC FAREWELL	142
XXV.	THE SADDENED ARTIST’S RESOLUTION.....	145
XXVI.	PÓSTUMO-VIRGINIA’S ROAD TO DAMASCUS	149
XXVII.	VIGINIA AND HER GUARDIAN MEET AGAIN	160
XXVIII.	VIRGINIA AND THE NORTH AMERICAN UNION	164
XXIX.	SPREADING THE WORD.....	166
XXX.	DANGEROUS ENCOUNTER.....	169
XXXI.	FOR ECCENTRICITY, AN ENGLISHMAN.....	178
XXXII.	VIRGINIA ARGUES HER CASE IN MADRID.....	184
XXXIII.	FANATICISM	196
XXXIV.	ENCOUNTERS	200
	EPILOGUE	
	IN THE OTHER-LIFE	204

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....205

INTRODUCTION

TRANSLATION AND TRANSMIGRATION OF AND IN *ON BECOMING VIRGINIA/PÓSTUMO EL ENVIRGINIADO* (1882)

Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1826-1882) is considered to be a founding father of Puerto Rican letters for being among the first published authors from the island in many genres. He wrote and published articles, stories, novels, plays, biographies, histories, poems, epistles, operas, and essays. Nevertheless, his work remains largely unknown outside, and even unfamiliar within, the fields of Caribbean and nineteenth-century Latin American literature. The efforts of Editorial Edil, Inc. of Río Piedras, Puerto Rico to reprint many volumes of Tapia's work in 1975 helped make available texts that had long been forgotten and extremely inaccessible. Currently, though, nearly all of his work is out of print and difficult to find. To date, only one translation has been published of any of his works.¹ The author's last two novels are widely considered to be his masterpieces: *Póstumo el transmigrado*, originally published in Madrid in 1872; and *Póstumo el envirginado*, published in Puerto Rico in 1882 shortly after the author's death. This two-part story about an errant and subversively unpredictable spirit reflects Tapia's views on gender, politics, spirituality, and social change and illustrates his eclectic writing style. Until 1982, though, the second part was written off as inferior and was never discussed in detail.² Since the centenary of his death and increasingly since the year 2000, some scholars have revisited the *Póstumo* duology, proposing new

¹ *Enardo and Rosael: An allegorical Novella* (1952) is Alejandro Tapia, Jr.'s translation of his father's *Enardo y Rosael* which was written in the 1860's, but not published until 1880 in the book *Miscelánea*.

² Manuel García Díaz's discussion of *Póstumo* in his biography of Tapia is the exception.

readings regarding the work's significance for discussions around literary manifestations of modernity, gender identity, the body in construction of the self and meaning, spirituality, and coloniality/post-coloniality. In light of the relative lack of study of this work since its initial publication as well as the recent signs of interest, this text could prove fruitful to the field of Comparative Literature not only for its literary merits, but also because of the text's potential contributions to studies of gender, social change, and identity in literature. Furthermore, in translation, this text would contribute to the complexity of Puerto Rican literature in English translation.

Exploring the Web: Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's Life, Art, and Legacy

The lack of established codes of reading, unfamiliarity with the details of the author's biography, and the fact that part of his work remains buried in periodicals of the period all inhibit the elaboration of uniform, finished interpretations.³

A look at Tapia's life and work, along with important events affecting literary studies in Puerto Rico after his death, may help explain the obscure status of Tapia and *Póstumo*. His mother was born in Arecibo, Puerto Rico and his father was born in Murcia, Spain. Although Tapia y Rivera's life began and ended in Puerto Rico, he did not spend his entire life there. The first time Tapia left the island was in 1834 when he, his mother, and sister went to Málaga, Spain to be reunited with Alejandro's father, a military man who had to leave Puerto Rico due to poor health three years earlier (García Díaz 9-11). The mother and children returned to Puerto Rico after two years, and even though Tapia

³ All translations of passages quoted from this and other Spanish language sources in this introduction are my own. Marta Aponte Alsina, "Póstumo interrogado: relectura de Tapia", *Tapia ayer y hoy: edición conmemorativa, 1882-1982* (Santurce: Universidad de Sagrado Corazón, 1982) 56.

was young at the time, the experience made a lasting impression on him. Tapia recognized this in his memoirs, when he wrote: “One does not need spectacles to see how different my life would have been had I stayed [in Spain] indefinitely” (70). He would not return to Spain until 1850.

Tapia was not a rich man, yet as the son of a Spanish military man and Creole⁴ mother, he inhabited an intermediary space in terms of the island society’s social hierarchy. During the 1840’s Puerto Rico suffered an economic crisis and was ruled censoriously by military governors. Historian Fernando Picó reports several instances of social upheaval that were met with increasingly repressive responses, among which were policies enacted by Governor Juan de la Pezuela to displace rural peasants and strict vagrancy laws requiring anyone without land to be registered and carry a passbook or face imprisonment and hard labor. Due to his intellect and upbringing in the colonial capital San Juan, as well as being a *Criollo*, Tapia was able to participate in elite circles. His family did not live an extravagant life and owned no slaves. As an urban *Criollo* in a slave society, however, he was not subject, for example, to carrying a passbook, or to a governor’s edict of 1848 decreeing “exceptional punishment for all persons of African ancestry who committed violent crimes or transgressions against property” (Picó 179). The mix of privileged mobility and colonial limitation that Tapia experienced in life would greatly impact his life and work.

⁴ In the case of colonial Puerto Rico, *criollo* was the term used to designate a person of Spanish descent born on the island. Those on the island who were born in Spain were known as *peninsulares* referring to the Iberian Peninsula. Island inhabitants of African descent, whether free or enslaved, were referred to as *negros*, *mulatos*, or *cuarterones*, depending on their degree of African ancestry.

Tapia's liberal politics and artistic freedom would lead to conflict with the censors soon after his literary career began when several of his poems and short stories were published in a newspaper in 1847. One year later, Tapia had his first encounter with government censors over a play script titled *Roberto D'Evreux* (García Díaz 19). In this case the author's first play script was prevented from being printed or performed because, as Tapia writes in his memoirs, "plays in which the royalty is humanized could not be allowed in print or on stage in the American provinces" (126). After minor changes, he would eventually publish the play in Madrid in 1856. Before that, though, in 1850 Tapia was deported to Spain after engaging in a duel with a Spanish artillery captain. Tapia writes that the conflict arose over his refusal to yield the right of way to the soldier on a narrow San Juan sidewalk (127). The tension in this encounter was further heightened by the social implications of Tapia's actions, for in the colonial social hierarchy, a Spanish soldier was held in higher regard than a *Criollo* islander. Thus, given the colonial context, this dispute between two hot-headed young men was in fact quite significant and would greatly shape the author's life thereafter. The soldier challenged the young writer to a duel. Tapia recounts how his bullet narrowly missed the Captain's head and Tapia suffered a wound to his right arm and side. The young author, who had already caught the authorities' attention due to the censorship of his play, was deported back to Spain. In Madrid, Tapia immediately began petitioning for permission to return to his mother and sister in Puerto Rico. He also made the most of his exile by studying in public and private libraries, attending public lectures, and receiving private lessons from tutors and professors in the French, English, and Arabic languages as well as in mathematics, chemistry, and physics. He also participated in

meetings with other Puerto Rican intellectuals studying in Madrid to discuss issues such as the abolition of slavery, and the repeal of laws that established records for tracking racial purity in Puerto Rico (García Díaz 25). Deportation thus gave him the chance to pursue studies and develop his critique of the colonial status quo that would have otherwise been much more difficult given his family's economic state and the governmental policies that greatly limited access to education on the island. Tapia was able to return to Puerto Rico in 1852 at the permission of the new governor, Fernando Norzagaray. With his mother and sister in a desperate economic situation, Tapia worked various clerical jobs in Havana from 1857-1863. Upon returning to Puerto Rico he worked in Ponce as a teacher, and in San Juan as a clerk in a government office. During this time he began to receive occasional income from various publications. Tapia was active in numerous educational and cultural initiatives including the foundation in 1876 of the still operative intellectual and cultural center, the Ateneo Puertorriqueño in San Juan. He died on July 19, 1882 from a stroke suffered just after taking the floor in the Ateneo during a meeting of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País (Economic Society of Friends of the Country) to discuss the administration of scholarships for sending promising students abroad for continued education since Puerto Rico at that time still had no formalized venue for secondary or higher education.

Tapia's literary work spans the Romanticist, Realist, and Naturalist movements in Puerto Rican literature. Casanova credits Tapia's *La palma del cacique* (1852) with being one of the first novels by a Puerto Rican author.⁵ Other important works of his

⁵ This novel is short in terms of page count. *La peregrinación de Bayoán* (1863) by Eugenio María de Hostos (1839-1903) is generally recognized as the first full-length novel.

include *La biblioteca histórica de Puerto Rico* (1854), a compilation of historical documents tracing the history of Puerto Rico from the conquest through the eighteenth century culled from archives while working with the Sociedad Recolectora de Documentos Históricos de la Isla de San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico (Society for the Collection of Historic Documents of the Island of San Juan Bautista de Puerto Rico) in exile in Madrid; *La Cuarterona* (1867), a play about a young *Criollo* man in love with his mother's slave maid; *Cofresí* (1876), Tapia's telling of the legend of the last Puerto Rican pirate, Roberto Cofresí, who was captured, brought to San Juan, tried, and executed in 1825; *La Sataniada, grandiosa epopeya dedicada al Príncipe de las tinieblas* (1878), published under the pen name of Crisófilo Sardanápolo, is a philosophical-theological narrative poem whose 8,194 structured, rhyming verses reflect the neo-classicist current of some of Tapia's work; and *Mis Memorias*, his memoirs published posthumously in 1929. He also founded and edited the weekly literary and cultural newspaper *La Azucena* in Ponce from 1870-1871 and then in San Juan from 1874-1877. Among other segments, *La Azucena* featured Tapia's fictional and didactic epistolary exchange between two women discussing great works such as Goethe's *Faust*, a favorite of Tapia.

The titles listed here comprise only a fraction of his total work. Given Tapia's prolific output and his pioneering role in Puerto Rican literary history, why then, would scholar Marta Aponte Alsina write in 1982 that there was an "enormous injustice (equivalent to a conspiracy of silence, if not of misunderstanding) weighing on Tapia's work" (50)? Some answers to this question can be found by discussing three interconnected factors: 1) Tapia's own political and social views; 2) changes in Puerto

Rican society and politics occurring after his death; and 3) reactions to these changes among literary critics. All of these factors are impacted by Puerto Rico's continued colonial status and the historical policies of neglect and/or repression enforced by the island's overseas rulers.

Tapia was a social liberal in support of administrative autonomy for Puerto Rico as a province of Spain. This meant that he wanted Puerto Rico to have the same rights and responsibilities as the Spanish provinces on the Iberian Peninsula and thought all individuals born on the island should enjoy the rights and responsibilities of Spanish citizenship. This political stance opposed several alternative options: the hard line loyalists referred to themselves as *Españoles sin condiciones* ("unconditional Spaniards") who would change nothing and who viewed all others as separatists; the *independentistas* generally either wanted Puerto Rico to become its own sovereign nation or to join with an independent Cuba and Dominican Republic to form a sovereign Antillean federation; and finally those who wanted the island to be annexed by the United States, presumably as a state. Tapia's convictions were grounded in his belief in individual autonomy (for women and men) obtained through education as the best means for promoting national wellbeing, industry, and high culture to enrich each individual's life. A belief in Christian values is evident in his work, yet Spiritism (also known as French Spiritualism), which was popular at the time in Spain and the colonies among the elite, also figures in his work. Unlike authors contemporary to Tapia such as Eugenio María de Hostos (1839-1903) and Manuel Corchado y Juarbe (1840-1884), Tapia was never directly involved in politics himself. Nevertheless, although his political ideas, strictly speaking, are often ambiguous or absent from his fiction, his

socially progressive ideas on women's equality, the importance of education, and the abolition of slavery among other issues are quite clear. For example, his essay "Universidad para Puerto Rico" (1867) exemplifies his ideas on education, colonialism, and how to improve life in Puerto Rico. In this essay he challenges the secondary status in which Puerto Rico has been perpetually held. For Tapia, education and industry on the island were in such poor states due to this enforced secondary status and the resulting lack of infrastructure, colonialism in short, and not due to any innate characteristics of the islanders or island society. Also, Tapia intersperses the narrative of his novella *Cofresí* (1876) with commentary detailing the difficulty of travel and communication among regions and villages on the island as well as the lack of education and infrastructure, finally citing these factors as the reasons that piracy existed in Puerto Rico in the first place. Furthermore, his memoirs, *Mis memorias*, contain repeated commentary on the lack of access to education on the island and the perversion of slavery, and the novel *Póstumo el envirginado* presents ideas on the social necessity of education for women. Although every sample of his entire body of work is not necessarily overtly political, his biography and works are revealing of his progressive social beliefs and moderate political views.

The second factor impacting the status of Tapia's work includes historical developments⁶ transpiring after his death. Although the United States of America did not invade and take over Puerto Rico until 1898, the possibility of annexation by the then burgeoning North American colonial power had been on the horizon since the early nineteenth century. In 1898, following the brief Spanish American war, Puerto

⁶ My discussion of Puerto Rican history and U.S. policy is informed by the works of Fernando Picó and Pedro A. Malavet.

Rico became a territorial possession of the United States. Although this transfer was greeted with jubilation by some, it soon became evident that the goal of the United States was not to secure Puerto Rico's sovereignty, but rather to obtain a geopolitically and economically strategic foothold in the Caribbean. Under the Jones Act, passed by the United States Congress in 1917, U.S. citizenship was granted to, or imposed on, Puerto Ricans. As a result, native-born residents of the island were allowed to obtain U.S. passports for international travel and could travel to and from the United States mainland without special permits. In spite of these and other changes in policy affecting how the United States managed Puerto Rico and its relationship with Puerto Ricans, native residents of the island could not vote in U.S. presidential elections and had no voting representation in either house of the U.S. Congress, which continues to be the case today. During the decades following the United States takeover, as in Tapia's time, education in Puerto Rico continued to be negatively impacted by colonialism. Educational policies of a harsh brand of Americanization were dictated from Washington without regard to local realities, history, language, and culture. The new ruling power effectively deemed Spanish and all things Puerto Rican as inferior and suspect, fit to be wiped out and replaced with English and cultural subservience to the new American rulers.

The third factor for understanding Tapia's current obscurity has to do with a rapidly changing Puerto Rican society and the responses of intellectuals to these changes. The University of Puerto Rico, finally founded in 1903, opened its Department of Hispanic Studies in 1927, some three decades after the island's transition from being a Spanish colony to a colony belonging to the United States. By the late 1920's many

intellectuals were dissatisfied with the way the United States was handling Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico continued, and continues, to be in a politically ambiguous limbo: a commonwealth by name, but a colonial territory in practice.⁷ Furthermore, the altered political climate along with local and international economic trends led to the downfall of the old elite. In all, 1930 marked the beginning of a decade of social and economic crises that lead to a collective soul searching in Puerto Rico. In this traumatic period, defining a national identity within the colonial political context became a priority for intellectuals. Scholars and authors affiliated with the UPR Department of Hispanic Studies had a major impact on shaping notions of Puerto Rican identity at home and abroad for decades to come. With his *Insularismo* (1934), the influential critic and head of the department, Antonio S. Pedreira set the literary agenda that would be followed by the field with his review of Puerto Rican literature against his criteria of their contribution to the formation of a national identity (Janer 77). Works that did not fulfill this nation-building function were deemed unworthy of attention and were left out of the canon. Early Romanticist, and then Naturalist, literary depictions of the *jíbaro* or Puerto Rican Creole yeoman farmer culture were held up as examples of the origins of Puerto Rican identity and fulfilled the new nation-building criteria. As a result, works that were set in Puerto Rico, and especially works portraying the *jíbaro* ideal were valorized as presenting the origins of the national literature. To not write *jíbaro*

⁷ Pedro Malavet writes: “Puerto Rico, with a definable territory as well as an identifiable culture that is different from that dominating in the colonial power (the United States), is a ‘cultural nation’ that lacks sovereignty; it is therefore an [American] colony” (4). For a detailed analysis of Puerto Rico’s legal relationship with the U.S., see Pedro Malavet, “The Legal Relationship between Puerto Rico and the *Estados Unidos de Norteamérica* (United States of America)”, *America’s Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* (New York: New York University Press, 2004): 49-99.

literature, which was produced for and consumed by urban intellectuals, was thus viewed as an evasion of the true task of the Puerto Rican author.⁸

Tapia's work casts a wide net in terms of place, time, themes, and genres and is not limited strictly to the naturalist mode or Puerto Rican settings. He was therefore left on the shelf as intellectuals sought less nuanced metaphors of resistance and models for cultural identity in establishing the Puerto Rican literary canon. The valorization of the *jíbaro* ideal by intellectuals in the 1930s as the essence of Puerto Rican literature and culture resulted in part as a reaction to the new colonial power's policies of Americanization. After decades of political frustrations and an imposed English-only education policy in a Spanish speaking land, simply studying Spanish language literature thus became a mode of cultural resistance; studying or producing Puerto Rican literature became a means of cultural survival. Under Spain, interest in North American and European artistic trends and ideas were often markers of social liberalism in the Spanish colonies. In a matter of years, the interests that had previously served as markers of opposition to Spain's colonial status quo thus became associated with support for the new American regime. English and American literature and culture became ineffective models or sources of inspiration for patriotic opposition to colonial rule. In the socio-political context of the 1930's, then, influential literary and cultural intellectuals came to see fictional works created by urban Creole intellectuals depicting rural Creole farmer life as valuable chronicles of the origins of Puerto Rican culture, and the naturalist literary genre gained precedence in the process of canonization.

⁸ This analysis is based on the works of Ángel A. Rivera (see pages 1-13) and Zilka Janer (70-78) cited in the bibliography of this thesis.

In this new critical context, then, Tapia's ideas about how Puerto Rico should be governed would have seemed anachronistic given that affiliation with Spain was no longer an option. From the naturalist and *jibarista* perspectives, his writing style and themes are seen as escapist for not focusing solely on the problems of what these viewpoints consider to be Puerto Rican reality (i.e., Puerto Rican characters in Puerto Rican settings). To further complicate the picture, today it would be easy to write off Tapia's liberal humanist notions of education and culture as elitist and euro-centric. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the web of historical, political, and literary interests surrounding the text, if we view it in a new light, we see that the text has much to offer for those interested in the complexity of Puerto Rican literary history in particular, and Latin American literary history over all. *On Becoming Virginia* is also pertinent to discussions of the history of ideas and thought concerning literary depictions of gender identity, women's equality, construction of meaning and the self, and even translation and social change as I will discuss in more detail later in this essay. Therefore, because of its potential to broaden knowledge in English of Puerto Rican literature and to contribute to many literary discussions, this text could be of interest to scholars in Comparative Literature, Translation Studies, and among readers at large.

Reading On Becoming Virginia / Póstumo el envirginado

Throughout this section I refer to the analyses by Marta Aponte Alsina, Ángel Rivera, and Marcela Saldivia-Berglund, who have all revisited Tapia and addressed *Póstumo el envirginado* in more detail than previous scholars. Although each scholar highlights different aspects of *Póstumo* and Tapia, all agree that the author was a pioneer, that

Póstumo was a masterpiece ahead of its time, and that Tapia's work should be revisited in earnest. This analysis, then, is intended to provide an analytical context for English readers in light of contemporary discussions of the story by specialists in the field.

A brief plot summary will be helpful before delving into an analysis of *On Becoming Virginia*.⁹ The story begins with Póstumo in Limbo with his Guardian Angel. After only a short time in Limbo, Póstumo already yearns to return to Earth. Due to the irregular circumstances of his previous incarnation and subsequent death by suicide, Póstumo has lost his turn in line for reincarnation and is to remain in Limbo indefinitely. Another result of these circumstances is that he has not been given the waters of forgetfulness routinely administered to spirits before reincarnation. As a result, unlike other spirits, Póstumo remembers his two previous lives on Earth. Póstumo decides he wants to return to Earth and convinces the vacillating Guardian Angel to accompany him. Upon returning to Madrid, Póstumo possesses the body of the beautiful young Virginia, primarily out of curiosity to see what life as a woman is like. Póstumo takes over Virginia's body, sending her spirit back to the spirit realm. Virginia was engaged to marry the Duque de la Verbena, an older nobleman, before Póstumo's intrusion. After initially resisting the thought of a marriage not based on love, Póstumo as Virginia decides to continue with the marriage, realizing how difficult life would be as a single woman disowned by her family and society. The marriage does not go well. The Duque de la Verbena soon becomes jealous and spiteful of Virginia's platonic relationships with women and men alike while he is in fact the one having an affair. After the Duque tries to kill Virginia in a fit of jealous rage one night, Virginia flees for

⁹ For a synopsis of part I *Póstumo el transmigrado*, see the prologue to *On Becoming Virginia* on page 34 of this thesis.

her life with her friend Matilde. The pair head to Paris where Virginia becomes a renowned singer and performer in the Parisian theaters and performance halls. She eventually makes a marriage pact with the eccentric Englishman Lord Berckley, and the couple travels to the United States where Virginia is amazed at seeing women holding various professions and agitating for the right to vote. After hearing a powerful speaker for women's rights, Virginia is more convinced than ever of the need for women's emancipation and full citizenship. She returns with her partner to Spain to continue the struggle. She must pass as English so as not to encounter problems concerning her still legally intact marriage with the Duque de la Verbena. The September Revolution of 1868 breaks out in Cádiz and Virginia takes advantage of this rupture to fight in hopes of securing women's full and equal participation in society. In the end, Virginia dies from a wound she receives on the barricades. Upon returning to the afterlife, Virginia, or rather, Póstumo's spirit is locked away in perpetual solitary confinement as punishment for these transgressions of the social and spiritual order.

Structurally, *Póstumo* is generally classified as a novel, yet Tapia's adoption and incorporation of forms into the work exhibits an extreme literary eclecticism. The story is conveyed by way of narrative passages in the third person, and references to the reader and author in the second person and first person plural, respectively. Much of the dialog is more similar in presentation and function to a play script than traditional novel dialog format. Furthermore, the narrative also appropriates the genres of poetry, newspaper articles, and speeches. Marta Aponte Alsina discusses whether to classify the work as a political novel, a dramatic or theatrical novel, a philosophical or theory novel, or not even a novel at all and instead a romance in the traditional sense. Is it a satirical

or metaphysical romance, as she asks, or is it a transgender novel on cultural translation? Is the story best classified as pertaining to the Romanticist, Naturalist, or Realist literary movements? Was Tapia more influenced by American and British writers, or directly by the Greco-Roman and European classics?¹⁰ What is most important when approaching *Póstumo* is to not hastily or unquestioningly apply any one classification to the story, or searching for any simple answers (Aponte Alsina 57-60). The genius of the story is that it evades and frustrates simplistic or monothematic interpretations.

Tapia employs the motifs of reincarnation and other Spiritist beliefs as one strategy for creating an artistic space for critiquing prevailing notions of gender as well as women's inequality in society among other issues. Spiritism was popular at the time in Europe and among Latin American elites and was a frequent topic in the contemporary literature. Marta Aponte Alsina refers to Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo's *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* (1956) to demonstrate the popularity of Spiritism at the time, noting Menéndez y Pelayo's mention of "the publication of 36 books and treatises in Spain between 1868 and 1878, not including the copious translations of Allen Kardec, Camille Flammarion and other apostles of the French spiritualist current" (43). Spiritists believed in the evolution of the soul as well as the ability of the soul to reincarnate or transmigrate, and claimed to be able to communicate via mediums with souls as well as intelligent life on other planets (Saldivia-Berglund 35). Although many

¹⁰ In answer to her own question, Aponte Alsina gives a provocative response: "It would be risky to affirm that Tapia learned the romancer's craft by the direct influence of Anglo-Saxon literatures... And nevertheless, the trace of Poe, at least, is evident in [Tapia's] short stories (and perhaps even in *Póstumo*), which signals a possible path of further investigation" (60).

present day readers might find the esoteric themes and references obscure, these were essentially elements of period pop-culture when Tapia wrote and published his final novels. Furthermore, all three studies referenced in this section point out how Tapia adapted Spiritist elements to his own ends and expanded the metaphorical possibilities of reincarnation as a literary strategy for satire and social critique.

What exactly is Tapia satirizing though? In an example of how interpretations of a text change over time, compare Carmen Gómez Tejera's discussion of satire in *Póstumo* with that found in works by more recent scholars. In her 1947 study, Carmen Gómez Tejera cites satire as a primary element of both parts of *Póstumo*, yet she sees the satire as being targeted only at Spiritism. She avoids discussion of *El envirginado* except to ambiguously repeat earlier reviews of it that write it off as inferior and uncreative. In sharp contrast, however, more recent scholarship notes the straightforward critique of inequality between women and men found in the second part as one of the most important components of the novel. Recent studies also note the critique found in this work written by an elderly author near the end of his life as a likely reason for the lack of commentary for nearly a century following its original publication. The novel also deals with and alludes to sexual taboos, for example, in the scenes of mutual flagellation between Virginia and Matilde; and in another scene in which Póstumo the spirit stares at his/Virginia's naked body in the mirror. These and other scenes would have likely negatively impacted its reception in more restrictive times. In short, *Póstumo el envirginado* was too blunt and too ahead of its time in terms of what the narrative has to say about gender roles and women's equality. Thus, due to the hindsight gained over time, as well as the advances of feminist movements within

literary circles and society at large, contemporary scholars have been able to explore the issues raised in *Póstumo* at greater liberty and in more detail than their predecessors.

The importance of gender and bodies is important from early on in the novel. The following passage from the invasion and chase scene immediately following Póstumo's return to Earth provides a rich example of Tapia's techniques and humor. It also indicates the importance of the body in the novel. In this passage, Póstumo's spirit has already entered Virginia's body, and Virginia has fainted while Póstumo chases her spirit:

You may be doubtful of our ability to slip behind the vital tissue and witness the increasingly complicated spiritual chase. The organic fabric however, is susceptible to what science calls endosmosis and exosmosis. Along with this fact, bear in mind their subtlety as spirits, as well as the properties of vermicular movement or contraction and distraction of some organs... In any case, allow us these pedantic technicalities in order to prove that the spirit is naturally capable of anything inside such ductile, elastic, and porous organs.

The physicians had no idea whatsoever as to what to do. The cough was followed by an intestinal rumbling, somewhat prosaic in the body of a beautiful woman. This effect, to be sympathetic, resulted from the agitation produced in and around the stomach by the turbulent spirit's assault. (47/154)¹¹

The long winded sentences display Tapia's scientific knowledge base with vivid and technical descriptions of the human anatomy. Humor results from the employment of highly formal language to describe scatological functions. This scene is important not only because it exemplifies Tapia's humor, but the use of military and anatomical terms presents the body, and particularly the body gendered as *female*, as a zone of conflict and colonization.

¹¹ Page numbers for corresponding passages from *On Becoming Virginia* and the 1975 edition of *Póstumo el transmigrado y Póstumo el envirginiado* used as the source text for this translation are given in the following format: (page from this thesis translation/page from the 1975 edition).

Metaphors of the double, of contrast and complexity, of internal conflict and external appearance, are present early on and effectively open the text to multiple readings. Scenes involving hidden internal realities in conflict with outward masks and appearances abound throughout the narrative. Narrative descriptions and character dialogs repeatedly show that more is going on behind the scenes than what is readily apparent. Rather than a simple, unified entity on a fixed trajectory, *Póstumo* is the embodiment of conflict and compromise between the self and body, and between the self and society. The discourse on the social construction of meaning evident in *Póstumo*, and *Póstumo-Virginia*'s conflicting and conflicted identities are primary reasons that Ángel Rivera views Tapia as an avatar of Caribbean modernity. As Rivera writes, "Póstumo, as a text and a character, makes the ideological and literary canon of modernity tremble in that the character and text have the *normal* peculiarity, from the perspective of our unstable century, of being profoundly abnormal for the various discourses of Latin American modernity" (5, emphasis in original). For Rivera, *Póstumo* embodies the turmoil, conflict, and chaotic aspects of modernization.¹²

Tapia further triangulates the double metaphor by not simply adding gender to the picture, but by repeatedly questioning strictly essentialist conceptions of gender and positioning a critique of women's inequality at the narrative's core. At the same time that the double metaphor in the narrative allows figurative connections with the Puerto

¹² "Although it is exceedingly difficult to establish a precise meaning for the concept *modernization*," Rivera writes, "it is productive to see this concept as a multiple entity, complicated in its divergent directions, and for which any definition should indicate the contradictions resulting from the process. Above all, the definition that is useful for studying Tapia and Hostos, in their literary manifestations, should be one that reveals the conflictive relationship with modernization sustained by the majority of nineteenth century intellectuals, represented particularly well by Alejandro Tapia y Rivera and Eugenio María de Hostos" (Rivera 7).

Rican colonial context, the novel's discourse in favor of women's equality is overtly apparent. The text presents numerous feminist critiques of gender norms and women's status in nineteenth-century Spanish society. By extension, these critiques are also pertinent to colonial *Criollo* society given how influential peninsular Spanish culture was in the islands as the culture of the ruling power. The following sampling is representative of several instances in which the narrator reflects on gender and posits a critique of women's status in society:

[Virginia] realized that on this planet people make each others' lives miserable by ignoring the voice of natural equality, which is continuously perturbed by concerns that turn women and men into victims and tyrants rather than sisters and brothers. From this she concluded that if women tend to bear the brunt, it is not due to nature but to society. (134/232)

Here the narrator points to the social environment rather than to the individual or nature alone or to supernatural forces as the determining factor for the injustice of gender inequality. Later, while in the United States, Virginia and Lord Berckley attend a gathering of the *American Society for Equal Rights*, where a speaker says the following about marriage:

Marriage is invoked in order to quell our movement, yet in no part of modern Europe is marriage what it once was in ancient Greece and Rome or what it was in the Middle Ages, and for that matter, even what it was at the beginning of this century. It has changed within our society, and we are still alive, and nobody notices the changes because they are slow and are born of the new circumstances of each day. Marriage will not die around here, do not worry. But it will change gradually and unnoticeably. (157/253)

Virginia is galvanized by her trip to the United States and this speech in particular, as relayed to her through her interpreter Lord Berckley, who is referred to as her "tongue of fire" (150/246). This speech reiterates the notion that social convention, more so than

biology or divine will, shapes the way humans interact and perceive their interactions. Importantly, in the passage above on marriage, we see another example of the belief that behaviors and institutions (marriage in this case) shape the individuals involved, yet these behaviors and institutions are forever changing and adapting to new realities. The speaker argues against static notions of cultural institutions and in favor of a dynamic view of history, society, and cultural institutions.

The message in favor of women's equality and views on the social construction of gender that emerge from these passages, though, are complicated by the troubling gender dynamics of the initial dispossession. Paradoxically, Póstumo ends up speaking in favor of women only after invading and commandeering a woman's body. On one hand, this violent image casts shadows over the feminist ideals espoused throughout the remainder of the story and represents the male colonization of the female body. On the other hand, this highly unexpected and shocking twist immediately after the story's beginning effectively draws the reader in to continue along in order to find out what transpires next. In this manner, Tapia employs the motif of reincarnation to develop a message for women's equality. Reincarnation is the vehicle used to draw in the readers in order to convey the social critique and to embody the call to action. The contradiction between the initial dispossession and the following developments is never entirely resolved, yet Póstumo does change and ultimately decides to make the most of his new situation. For Ángel Rivera, in light of the notion shared by Tapia and his contemporaries that men needed to "rehabilitate" women, the androgynous character presented by Póstumo-Virginia symbolizes the alliance of women and men necessary for carrying out "broader modernizing projects of a liberal nature in Puerto Rico, in the

Caribbean, and Latin America” (99). Although the problematic nature of this invasion is never entirely resolved, the theme of allegiance proves to be a prominent feature in the plot.

After drawing the reader in, the narrative voice repeatedly disrupts the conventional suspension of disbelief with meta-narrative interjections. The narrator’s recurrent use of the first person plural may not simply be a matter of convention or the “royal we” as it is referred to in English. Recurrent references to “the reader,” “dear reader,” and use of the first person plural are in fact matters of meta-textual reflection employed to establish a connection between readers and narrator. These references to the narrator and the reader disrupt the fluidity of the narrative and notions of narrative omnipotence. The interjections remind the reader of the corporeality of the acts of reading and writing, thus establishing a community among readers. In this sense, Póstumo and his actions can be interpreted as an allegorical critique and call for readers to take action in the world outside of the text. Yet this call to action only encourages readers to go so far. As both Aponte Alsina and Rivera point out, and as evident from the biographical discussion earlier in this essay, Tapia was by and large writing to a liberal and metropolitan audience. He was not writing to urge readers to take up arms. This can be supported by the dismal fate met by Virginia as soon as she pursues armed revolt. In this sense, the tale cautions readers against what the narrator views as excess, yet urges the reader to seek quite radical social changes through moderate means within already existing structures.

This notion of struggling within the existing structures for change as well as the setting of the novel would likely raise concern for critics or readers subscribing to the

jibarist paradigm of nation-building literature discussed earlier as set forth by Puerto Rican scholars and intellectuals in the 1930's. The story is set in Madrid, Paris, and the United States, as well as the "spiritual Limbo," or other-life¹³. In discussing such hypothetical concerns, we must consider the limitations faced by colonial authors regarding their treatment of colonial life, not to mention the problems inherent in expecting a writer from a certain place to only set her stories in that same place. Considering Tapia's own experience with censorship, as well as the position of his views in the complex political spectrum as discussed earlier, his choice of setting cannot simply be written off as a symptom of euro-centricity. In fact, Marcela Saldivia-Berglund posits that "setting the plot in the colonizer's metropolis –Madrid– empowers Tapia's writing as a space for representation and political agency that appropriates the urban empire" (42). Saldivia-Berglund is apparently referring only to the first part *Póstumo el transmigrado*, for *Póstumo el envirginiado* takes place in other locations; however, the other physical locations of *Virginia/Envirginiado* (France, the United States, and England), also support this reading. For nineteenth-century Latin American liberal intellectuals interested in social progress or modernization, England and the United States served as symbols of dissatisfaction with the colonial status quo; and Paris has long figured as a place of self-discovery, revolution, and rebirth in European

¹³ The term "other-life" reflects my translation of the title of the novel's epilogue, "En la otra vida" which, one could argue, could be translated as "In Another Life." I have based my translation off of the common English term *Afterlife*, combined with my understanding of the significance of Tapia's use of *other* instead of *after*. The use of *other* more accurately reflects the Spiritist cosmovision established in the text, in which souls transmigrate from Earth to the spiritual realm (and in which Limbo and Heaven effectively become a great bureaucracy in the sky as part of Tapia's political satire), and then back to Earth in a perpetual cycle. In this sense, death leads to *another*, or the *other* stage of life, rather than the *After*.

language literatures. This illusion with the United States would of course begin to lose its footing in the tumultuous final 15 years of the century as a result of questions and warnings raised by José Martí, among others. This vision would come tumbling down due to the United States' own imperialist incursions in the final years of the century. Yet, in the 1870's when Tapia was writing near the end of his life, the progressive aspects of North American and British feminism that appear in the narrative in the form of references to Wendell Phillips, the fictional American Society for Equal Rights, and the egalitarian marriage pact between Virginia and Lord Berckley, among other examples, still symbolized a critical stance with regard to the colonial situation. Tapia appropriates these symbols of progress and equality to express his autonomist *Criollo* opposition to the "cowardly provincialism of Madrilenian society" (Aponte Alsina 60). In this sense, Tapia assimilates the European and North American figurative spaces from a colonial vantage point in order claim his agency and to critique the colonizer.

Virginia leaves Madrid as a cultural and political exile, only to return to the belly of the beast, fully dedicated to her cause. Her return entailed a great degree of danger given that the Duque had previously tried to kill her. Furthermore, given the prohibitions against divorce, legally she was still married. Virginia, like Tapia and so many other Puerto Ricans, then, leaves the homeland in exile, and returns to struggle in pursuit of better conditions. Therefore, even if the story itself is not set in Puerto Rico, the itinerary and messages of the plot resonate well with Puerto Rican history and the life experiences of many Puerto Ricans. In this sense, *Póstumo* is more of a metaphorical and semantic portrait, rather than a naturalist or descriptive portrait of Puerto Rico. Rather than write off the novel because it is not set in Puerto Rico, scholars

and readers could explore the multiple layers of meaning, relishing the work for its complexity.

Translation in and of *On Becoming Virginia/ Póstumo el enviriniado*

THE ANGEL: That is very wrong. You don't know whether the owner of the body you stole would have done that. You should not impose sin on that which is not yours.

VIRGINIA: This body? What a nuisance! I've received no shortage of advice in this flesh.¹⁴

Perhaps a useful term for discussing language, culture, and translation in *On Becoming Virginia* is that of “transculturation.” In *Translation and Identity in the Americas*, Edwin Gentzler addresses transculturation and Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s analysis of it as important concepts for understanding translation and identity in the Caribbean.

Although the term *transculturación* was coined by Cuban writer Fernando Ortiz in the 1930s in his essays on cultural phenomena that had been occurring for centuries in Cuba in particular, the term is applicable in the Puerto Rican context given the historical, cultural, and regional ties with Cuba. Transculturation “denotes processes of translation, passage, transition, and change, calling into question any fixed notion of a stable culture or text” (Gentzler 178). Learning and adapting to other languages and ways in a colonial context, whether by forced or voluntary travel abroad or from interactions with outsiders, returning home and assimilating multiple socio-cultural currents to assert an autonomous expression are elements of transculturation and recur throughout Spanish Antillean literature and Caribbean life experience. Alejandro Tapia y Rivera’s biography and work predate the term, yet reflect the phenomenon. Tapia was exiled to

¹⁴ *On Becoming Virginia / Póstumo el enviriniado*, (123/223).

Spain, and read classical and contemporary literature in translation and in original languages. Travel, including involuntary travel, language, learning other languages, and especially the ability to enhance his own life experience through reading, were important components of Tapia's educational and artistic processes. In his memoirs, Tapia writes:

I am a cosmopolitan, as I've said before. I'm interested in even the fate of Japan and am delighted by any progress, even if it happens in China, which I will never see. I believe, however, that in any well organized nation, the love people feel for the place in which they are born is akin to the love children feel for their mother. I do not love Puerto Rico for what she is worth, on the contrary, given that she is worth so little and so much remains to be done, the more she needs from her fair children, the more I love her; the more defeated and helpless she is, the more indebted to her I feel. (72-73)

Tapia saw Puerto Rico as imperfect and loved it precisely because of that imperfection. For him, working to improve the island's situation was a necessary task, an act of love. Transculturation entails a sense of going against the colonial or imperial grain, and even if Tapia did not advocate for complete independence, his belief in autonomy for Puerto Rico and full citizenship pitted him against the established colonial order. Rather than presenting an uncritical, unified, and romantic ideal of Puerto Rico as a homeland that can do no wrong, the previously cited passage is representative of Tapia's more nuanced and critical, if albeit patronizing, patriotism. The previously cited passage, along with other similar instances, contributes to the generally fatalistic sentiment established throughout *Mis memorias* regarding Puerto Rico's present and past. At the same time, though, he expresses a positive commitment to Puerto Rico's future precisely because of this suffering. Tapia is fascinated with other cultures and places. On multiple instances throughout *Mis memorias*, he writes that he feels as if he were

born in the wrong time and place, and yet he feels deeply committed to working to change the place where he was born.

Bearing Tapia's cosmopolitanism in mind, note the presence of multiple languages, different countries, and translation in *On Becoming Virginia*. The different languages and locations do not simply serve as exotic backdrops. On the contrary, they are important themes and literary strategies on par with that of reincarnation in the text. As any translator must do, Póstumo-Virginia is constantly reinventing herself, switching identities, incorporating new elements and adapting to new linguistic and cultural contexts. She speaks French because Póstumo knew French in his previous life, and lives in Paris briefly. She travels to the United States and England, relying on Lord Berckley as an interpreter until she masters English as well. The ability to master a new language allows Virginia to adapt and survive.

Perhaps the most important instance for any discussion of translation and linguistic and cultural differences in the novel occurs in the chapter titled "Póstumo-Virginia's Road to Damascus." Upon seeing women holding an array of professions in various institutions and as leaders and activists in the suffragist movement, Virginia's inclinations and ideas, "the seedlings of her womanly calling, found the appropriate soil" (149/245). She was already critical of the plight of women before visiting the United States. At a meeting of the American Society for Equal Rights, Lord Berckley acts as Virginia's interpreter for the speech in favor of women's suffrage and equality:

Póstumo knew a bit of French in his primitive existence and could therefore manage in Paris, in spite of speaking like a Spanish cow, as people would say. Our protagonist knew nothing of the Englishman's tongue in other times, though, and while rapidly progressing in the language ever since their [marriage] pact she had to rely on the nobleman's translations. Doubtlessly spurred on by her eagerness to

educate herself about anything relevant to her calling, she was advancing phenomenally in the language of Byron. Lord Berckley was her *tongue of fire* since the Holy Spirit had not inspired in her the universal gift bestowed upon the apostles of the Gospel. (149-150/246)

In this instance, Lord Berckley's interpreting enables Virginia to further develop her own ideals. The brand of feminism presented in Lord Berckley's interpretation of the speech serves as a model or source of inspiration for Virginia. The fictionalized verbal translation occurring in this scene is doubly significant. First, as an interpreter, Lord Berckley is a male ally. He channels or relays a woman's words and ideas about emancipation from one language to another, from one woman to another, and thus from one culture to another. In terms of the novel's gender discourse, Berckley's actions in this instance are an example of cooperation and allegiance in the movement for women's liberation and gender equality. Second, this fictional instance of translation entails a cultural translation that is central to the plot as well as the discourse on gender roles presented in the narrative. By situating the locus of women's emancipation in the United States and England, Tapia reflects the anglophilic tendencies noted earlier among nineteenth-century Latin American intellectuals. Some critics might hold this and his cosmopolitanism against him. Nevertheless, considering the differences in relations between Puerto Rico, Spain, and the United States at the time that he lived and wrote, this strategy may also be interpreted as a figurative means to challenge the colonial and patriarchal status quo of Spanish and Creole society in favor of a more democratic society with women's equality as a core principle. After traveling to various cities and seeing various elements of early or proto-feminist movements, Virginia "burned with a desire to return to her beloved Spain in order to preach her new ideas" (165/260). Her personal critiques of patriarchy were translated into an urge to take

social action after her experiences in the United States and England. Virginia's return symbolizes Tapia's attempt to "transculturated" U.S. feminism for his contemporary readers.

Although Virginia accepts a liberal elitist paradigm of social change in terms of class, with regard to gender and cultural identity, Virginia's cosmopolitanism is a type of subversive cosmopolitanism. Michael Cronin discusses various forms of cosmopolitanism in *Translation and Identity* (2006), including micro- and macro-cosmopolitanism. Macro-cosmopolitanism is often affiliated with empire and privilege and is characterized by hostility toward political entities defined by notions of national sovereignty or cultural particularism. Micro-cosmopolitanism is a cosmopolitanism from below seeking to diversify the smaller unit and is therefore of relevance to especially post-colonial nations and "nation peoples" striving for nationhood (15). Micro-cosmopolitanism also occurs among communities of exiles, refugees, and immigrants living within geo-politically and economically dominant nations, including former or current colonial powers. This cosmopolitan view is intended to bring out the foreign in the local as a means to obtain recognition and justice. "Indeed," Cronin writes, "if one of the recurrent criticisms of cosmopolitan approaches has been the charge of cultural, economic and political elitism, then a micro-cosmopolitan awareness is vital to a proper democratization of inquiry and response" (16). Although gender does not appear in Cronin's discussion of micro-cosmopolitanism, parallels may be drawn between political and gender hierarchies. In this sense, in terms of gender, Virginia's actions relate to the subversive aspects of micro-cosmopolitanism. It is important to remember that she leaves Spain in the first place when her husband-by-law tries to kill

her out of fear that she is engaging in an extra-marital affair. Virginia realized she could no longer survive in a cultural and political climate that would condone such action, and she thus became a cultural and political refugee, an outlaw. Upon returning to Spain, she relies on her experience abroad and her ability to translate in hopes of achieving women's full and equal participation in society. Virginia's attempt to inspire the elites fails, leading to her attempt to fight for women's rights in the streets, which fails catastrophically. The moral seems to be that both pursuing change from the top-down and mass armed action are unsuccessful strategies for social change. Again, micro-cosmopolitanism is a helpful concept for understanding translation as well as the apparent moral of Virginia's failure: "The micro-cosmopolitan dimension helps thinkers from smaller or less powerful polities to circumvent the terminal paralysis of identity logic not through a programmatic condemnation of elites ruling from above but through a patient undermining of conventional thinking from below" (16). The fatalism of the novel's ending leads me to ask if Virginia would have been successful if, rather than pursuing a street battle against the patriarchal order, she had continued to translate her experiences with American feminism, pursuing a course of "patient undermining of conventional thinking from below?" The novel ultimately leaves this question, and so many others, open for discussion.

Póstumo also resonates with portrayals of translation as an act of invasion in which the source text is ravaged by the translator/aggressor with complicated ethical implications. In "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation" (1988), Lori Chamberlain discusses the history of phallogocentric, paternalistic, and patriarchal tropes used in the historically male-dominated field of translation theory. Fidelity is a prevalent criterion

for judging translations and Chamberlain draws a connection between fidelity and the patriarchal bias in marriage and other societal and legal institutions. She notes how these notions of fidelity portray the source text as a female being raped by the male translator, and yet at the same time the translator is a type of maid servant who is to heed to the male/author/master. These metaphors gender the text and affect our perceptions of the body as text. If the body is a text, in this case we may say that Virginia is a text and Póstumo is a translator, inhabiting the body/text he has invaded and appropriated. The stolen body, mentioned in the Angel's admonition to Virginia cited at the beginning of this section, is the text stolen for translation. In advising Virginia "to not impose sin on that which is not [hers]," the Angel resorts to fidelity as a means to judge Virginia's actions. If the body is a text, and if the translator inhabits a text in the same manner that Póstumo's soul inhabits Virginia's body, then Virginia's exasperated response accurately expresses the sentiments of an archetypical literary translator under fire, "This body? What a nuisance! I've received no shortage of advice in this flesh." The Angel reminds Virginia that her body is stolen, and he also calls on her, or Póstumo's soul, to behave as virtuously as Virginia would have. The critic reminds the translator that her text is stolen, and calls on her to be faithful or to behave as the author would have. The Angel relies on static notions of identity and authenticity from traditional morality, basing his ability to pass judgment on his position of authority alone. Yet, as translation studies scholar Edwin Gentzler writes, "as translations are invariably unfinished, so too are cultures and individual identities equally unfinished" (178). In the task of questioning and undermining fixed, stagnant, and unilateral conceptions of identity and culture, Póstumo, and the subversive translator, is well

aware of and inspired by the unfinished and fluid state of translation, culture, and identity.

Conclusions

The analyses referenced by Tapia scholars in this essay, along with my own contributions provide a solid introduction to Tapia and *On Becoming Virginia* for readers of English, and hopefully shed new and interesting light on the subjects for readers of both languages. *On Becoming Virginia* presents a multitude of possibilities for further research and discussion in Comparative Literature, Gender Studies, and Translation Studies for decades to come. All of this potential, however, is dependent upon this translation's being read by a certain number of readers. As the translator it is difficult to assess exactly how a never-before-translated text would be accepted and where exactly it would fit in to the overall body of literature in the new language. Then there is also the issue of how the translation might affect interest in or perceptions of the text in its original language, or even the entire Spanish language or Puerto Rican culture and history from which the text emerges. Furthermore, given the polyvalent nature of any translated text, and especially the one currently in question, it would be impossible to cover every angle of interpretive approach. Realistically, and slightly more optimistically, though, if this translation garners interest among a body of contemporary readers, that body would most likely be pieced together by a cross section of students and scholars of literature or avid readers in the areas of Latin American literature overall, Puerto Rican literature in particular, and/or gender studies. Most readers will be at least somewhat bilingual in Spanish and English, although some mono-lingual

English readers will likely be drawn to the translation. Ideally, this translation could spark interest among readers of both languages in Tapia and his work, as well as the work of key Tapia scholars referenced in this essay. In turn, an increase in interest could lead to more dialog among scholars and readers in both languages, and more translation.

Admittedly, this will not be a best seller and the market is pretty slim for Puerto Rican authors in translation in English, much less obscure nineteenth-century ones. However, non-specialists, especially those interested in Puerto Rican history either for intellectual or personal reasons, could be drawn in given Tapia's historical significance for Puerto Rican letters. Therefore, I have tried not to overly mark the translation as an academic translation. By keeping foot notes in the translation to a minimum, I intend for the text to be more approachable for the non-specialist. Nevertheless, Tapia was an astute and phenomenally well-read intellectual, and an extremely prolific writer. To overly simplify his language and style would be misguided and would do a great disservice to all who approach the text.

Ultimately, Póstumo does what any translator must do, he comes to terms with the dispossession he has enacted and moves forward, doing the best he can with a new life, body, and text. This interpretation is not meant to excuse Póstumo's or any translator's decisions, but to help make some sense of factors that influence those decisions. On one hand, Póstumo's invasion and dispossession of Virginia's body is highly offensive. On the other hand, Póstumo-as-Virginia goes on to fully believe in and agitate for full citizenship for women and equal rights, which are laudable causes indeed. Does one act fully negate or fully justify the other? The ethical implications and diversity of possible interpretations of the text are too complicated to either

categorically dismiss or uncritically defend Póstumo's actions and Tapia's ideas. To appreciate the story requires characteristics that reflect Tapia's views on social change which include intellectual flexibility, imagination, and a willingness to continue.

PROLOGUE TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

For those readers who may not have read the first part to this story (yet to be translated as *Póstumo's Transmigrations: The Story of a Man Who is Resurrected in His Rival's Body*), or who might be due for a refresher, we provide the following synopsis as a prologue to the second and final part of Póstumo's story.

A young and attractive man, a dreamer, and an employee of the state, Póstumo falls in love with Elisa de Doble Anzuelo, a young and attractive woman. The young man's dreams shatter when he unexpectedly dies several days before the wedding. After initially refusing to leave his body, Póstumo's spirit is apprehended by the spirit police force and taken to heaven. Unsatisfied with this occurrence, he requests and eventually is granted the Lord's permission to return to Earth, thus bypassing the normal bureaucratic channels for requesting a special assignment for reincarnation. Even with this direct authorization, Póstumo and his Guardian Angel must visit the Department of Incarnations and show their permission slip to the Director of Incarnations before returning to Earth. The Director is disgruntled by the order, although he ultimately complies. By chance, the next available body belongs to Sisebuto, Póstumo's former rival in pursuit of Elisa's heart.

Sisebuto's cadaver lies on an examiner's table, awaiting an autopsy in front of a group of doctors-in-training. Póstumo's spirit overtakes the body and kicks out the reluctant and barely living spirit of Sisebuto with the Angel's help. When Póstumo's spirit comes to life in Sisebuto's naked body he runs out of the room into the street, which provokes quite a scandal throughout the plazas and markets of Madrid. Our protagonist is eventually arrested, brought before the court, and sent to an asylum.

Elisa comes to Póstumo's aid and obtains his release. As a Spiritist and regular communicant with those from the spiritual realm, Elisa eventually understands that Sisebuto is no longer Sisebuto. She attempts to make her former fiancé happy, but is unsuccessful in this endeavor due to Póstumo-as-Sisebuto's tormented reluctance and her own inability to resist the company of other men. Elisa charms Don Cósmico, a top government official who was granted his wish of perpetual memory, allowing him to remember all of his previous lives, into granting Póstumo a job. Póstumo leaves Elisa and becomes passionate about achieving progress and justice in society and so decides to follow and perhaps engage more directly in the political process. Señor Horóscopo, who is able to see the future, tells Póstumo that if he marries Elisa, sooner or later she will betray him. A short lived uprising breaks out in which Don Cósmico goes from being a ministry head, to an opposition leader, and back to his former position once the government troops quell the rebellion.

Póstumo returns to Elisa and she finally convinces him to marry her. Two months into the marriage, Elisa becomes pregnant and Sisebuto, who wants to return to Earth, sees this chance to get back at Póstumo and is granted permission to be reincarnated in the body of the baby-to-be. The baby, named Postumito, is born looking exactly like Sisebuto, much to Póstumo's consternation. Póstumo eventually learns from his terror of a son that Elisa is having an affair with Perpetuo Paquidermo, who has been granted his wish of perpetual life. Subsequently, Póstumo realizes that Paquidermo is invincible and so decides to exact his revenge on his wife. Elisa learns of his plans and flees with don Cósmico, who had been her lover in another life, which they realized in a Spiritist session.

Meanwhile, Póstumo decides to visit Paquidermo, who literally kicks him out of his house and onto the street. Póstumo returns home and falls ill when he reads Elisa's note informing him of her departure. The tormented Póstumo can no longer stand his situation and inability to control his destiny. He jumps out of his second floor window and smashes his head on the cobblestones below.

Back in Limbo, Póstumo asks his Guardian Angel to never let him return to Earth again. He talks with other spirits, including that of Cervantes and other great thinkers and artists, who are disdainful of life on Earth. The spirits of Sisebuto, Elisa, Cósmico, and Horóscopo return to the afterlife and look on while back on Earth, Don Perpetuo curses his eternal life.

This is how we left Póstumo, and now, let us pick up his wandering story once more.

CHAPTER I

RETURNING TO THE WORLD

It was against Póstumo's nature, as we saw in this world before and after his transmigration to Sisebuto's body, to be content for very long with the tranquil atmosphere of the spiritual Limbo to which he was banished after his second death. This was quite tragic indeed, as all who had the opportunity to read his wandering story will have learned.

We could assert that a person's nature or character is the external aspect of the spirit, and in this case Póstumo's spirit clearly did not die along with the flesh of the two previous bodies which it had the misfortune to occupy. Nor was the spirit able to leave its individual idiosyncrasy behind in the tomb. By nature Póstumo remained fickle and irritable. Even after seemingly learning his lesson, as he well should have, he in fact had not changed in the least bit.

The stillness of Limbo bothered Póstumo, and he began to pine once more for Earth.

"Oh Angel of mine," he impatiently cried at last, speaking to his guardian, "all of this beauty is boring after a while. Life on Earth must be the worst thing imaginable, but I've been unable to forget it. At least things happen there...life...emotions. Whereas here, well...Whoever said it was right: only children, who are incapable of both sin and glory, should end up in this Limbo place.

“Here we go again,” muttered the Angel, notably displeased. “You and your crazy ideas! I see that [146]¹⁵ you are even worse after such a short time here. I was right when I said you were too stubborn to mend your ways. Oh I am such a fool. To imagine, I thought you were cured.”

“I would be fine with all of this, if only it wasn’t so monotonous. And then, I don’t like to bring this up, but do you recall what nearly happened to me the other day? Remember how you wanted to trap me and force me to occupy a Laplander’s body that was waiting on a soul in order to be born. Imagine if I wound up in Lapland, freezing to death and surrounded by wild animals. That would have been simply splendid, wouldn’t it?”

“That is all because you lost your place in line for reincarnation when you returned to life in Sisebuto’s body, not because you were not warned in time. You must accept that you may not incarnate again until Lord knows when and where it is your turn.

“So that explains why my *perispirit*¹⁶ doesn’t fit my spirit,” Póstumo replied, unable to say *shirt* and *body* since neither of these two things exists in Limbo.

The Angel tried to play deaf to such impertinence, but as already stated, our Póstumo was an excessively restless and picky spirit. Póstumo shot out, “Well I’m ready to escape from here as soon as possible!”

¹⁵ The numbers in brackets indicate the corresponding page numbers of the 1975 edition cited in the bibliography on which my translation was based.

¹⁶ Spiritism was wildly popular throughout the high societies of Europe and the Americas in the 1850’s. The term *perispirit* refers to the outer coating of the spirit which acts as an intermediary between the body and the spirit. See Allan Kardec, The Spirit’s Book [1856] (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2006).

“And where would you go?” the flustered Guardian asked.

“Anywhere. To Earth, the place I know best.”

The angel, now trembling with fear, cried out, “Another crazy idea!”

We should recall here that our hero missed the opportunity to drink the waters of forgetfulness from the River Lethe administered to all free spirits before reincarnation. As a result, he remembered his previous lives unlike most other souls. He missed his chance the first time and also the second, given the irregular means by which he came to occupy his prior form. Upon returning to Limbo he had lost his place in line and missed his turn at reincarnation. So inasmuch as this matter would not be resolved for the time being if not [147] forever, he found himself in quite an extraordinary predicament.

“I’m out of here!” Póstumo exclaimed as he set off, taking wingless flight to leave Limbo.

Feeling pulled by the sympathy a guardian feels for the mortal under his care and protection, the angel began to follow; however he spitefully stopped short, as if to say, “Fine, if you’re that stupid just leave, you’re on your own now. I’m not about to follow you on any new adventures or go along with your crazy ideas. That would be outrageous.”

Póstumo turned around. Perhaps he could not find the exit or he could not help but feel slightly afraid upon seeing that he was alone in such unfamiliar whereabouts.

“Well,” said the Angel, “did you change your mind?”

“Wouldn’t even think of it. Actually, I thought maybe you’d like to accompany me.”

“Absolutely not, stop this at once.”

“So you’ll stay here all by yourself?”

“I would prefer to,” replied the Angel in a huff.

“Impossible! Surely you won’t let me get lost all alone in that endless maze of worlds and limbos. Our destiny is linked; our beings are inseparable. What have you got to lose? All I’m proposing is that, just to have a little fun, we take the liberty to go on a brief, recreational excursion.”

“Do we have to go to Earth? Do you mean to tell me that you are still drawn to a planet where people treated you so poorly?”

“On Earth things aren’t always or equally as bad for everyone. Come on; humor me my dear, sweet angel! ...”

We are not sure whether it was because one nut quickly attracts a hundred, or because a spirit and its guardian are naturally drawn to one another (which would explain the visionary streak in Póstumo’s angel); we are certain, however, that after [148] further reasoning along similar lines, the guardian’s will was rendered weak and fickle by his fondness for Póstumo and he was convinced like a maiden in love. So off they went, away from Limbo, Earth-bound and they arrived finally in the atmosphere of Madrid.

CHAPTER II

PÓSTUMO'S SPIRIT FINDS NEW LODGINGS

It was five o'clock on a beautiful spring afternoon. All was happy under the reclining sun which cast a handsome light on the serene and azure Spanish sky.

The Paseo de la Castellana was teeming with people.

Beautiful ladies abounded, and right in the midst of that pageant was where the captivated and fantastical Póstumo felt the urge to land, or rather, to float along with his guardian like an invisible butterfly, since as two spirits nothing else was possible.

"Whoa, what a woman!" exclaimed Póstumo's excited spirit as he recalled from another time what a spirit incarnated in a shapely, gracious, and expressive feminine form had meant to him. A crown of silky locks, fiery eyes, coral lips, pearly white teeth, a swan's neck, diminutive feet, and a ravishing gait, all wrapped in diaphanous gauze, shining silk, and exquisite lace... So much time had passed since he had seen or smelled a spirit in skirts! You see, spirits in Limbo have no gender. And since he only remembered the good part about Elisa, her body that is...!

After letting out that exclamation, our hero began circling around the lady like a fly. [149]

She was on foot and accompanied by another woman who, judging by her age and looks, must have been her mother.

Each passing man turned his eyes to admire her. In short, Póstumo had good reason to be worked up. After all, she was a woman from Jerez through whose graceful body coursed:

*rayos del sol de aquella tierra
que da aquel vino!...*

*sun beams from that land
that yields that wine!...*

Both were women of high standing, as they revealed through their airs, dress, and manners.

“Guardian of my soul!” said the enthused Póstumo, “what a treat it would be to return to earth in such a beautiful body!”

“Good heavens!” the angel replied, “Do we have a new bright idea?”

“And why shouldn’t it be my luck since when I returned to the world the first time it was in such an unpleasant body?”

“That was your choice.”

“I don’t deny it, but wouldn’t it be fair to call it even now by resuscitating in such a nice and attractive specimen? That way I could see and learn for myself what goes on in a woman’s body, especially a pretty one. In Limbo we know that the soul has no gender; but in the world things tend to work differently. The majority of human customs, laws, and concerns are based on physical organization, that is, on sex, which results in two standards, one for the male and another for the female. This strikes me as injustice by another name, for what is right is neither man nor woman. And if laws and customs are to be just, they should be based on the soul, which is the essence, and not on the body’s sex which is purely accidental. The eternal should be based on nothing but the surviving essence and not on accidentals that die along with the flesh.” [150]

“Ugh,” replied the angel, “are you philosophizing now? All it takes is for you to imagine yourself in a woman’s body and you start to champion them. Where will all this talk lead us? Another scheme!”

“I’m feeling an urge to slip right into that Andalusian beauty. She’s gorgeous!”

“Aha! Now that would be just fantastic. What an absurd notion. Just as I was saying, I knew all that talk would lead to no good.”

“Absurd you say?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, say what you want, I’m winding up, and it looks like I’m going in.”

“You fool! How can you do that? That body is already inhabited.”

“Come on! I slipped into Sisebuto’s, and you saw how he shot out. As long as you help me run that spirit out by calling on her once I’m inside...”

“No, no, no: that is enough. I’m not going on any more adventures, and I will not be an accomplice to any more nonsense. My mission from God is to protect you, not to violate his divine laws.”

“And what would God know about it?”

“What! Don’t you know he sees everything?”

“He’ll see; but he won’t say anything. In all of his divine grandeur he wouldn’t bother with such a trifling matter.”

“Trifling!” burst the angel, frightened. “Not even a blade of grass would move if not by his order and command.”

“Why does he care if I live in that body or in any other? A body’s a body, what’s the difference?”

“I will not consent without his permission.”

“There you go: another file! Always with the paperwork and more paperwork! Why bother Divinity with such silly little things? Once we take care of this...”

“But the spirit you wish to dispossess will arrive there in an outrage and rail against us in heaven; against me because I’m responsible for your actions.” [151]

“Well let them handle their own business up there. I’m going in.”

“I wash my hands...”

“Wash what you like.”

“You pesky, flighty spirit. What are you doing?”

“I’m going in.”

“Stop!... It’s too late, he slipped in!”

“Virginia, my daughter! What’s happening?” screamed the mother, and half the avenue turned to see what was going on.

The young lady closed her beautiful eyes:

*y solo armiño
quedó en su Hermosa tez,
la rosa huyendo*

*and only snowy-white
remained in her beautiful complexion,
the pink fleeing*

Imagine, dear reader, such a devil entering your own body.

The young lady fell faint into the arms of the first handsome young *beau* or *galán* who was just so eager to be of service.

Her mother, Doña Flora, continued to call for help.

“A coach! Hurry, a coach!” shouted one man; and right away another ran off in search.

Another *galán* stopped and offered his coach to Doña Flora. In a flurry of emotion she climbed in and received her poor, sickly daughter from the man’s arms.

“Quick, Fuencarral Street, number...”

The vehicle took off with Virginia convulsing frightfully all the while. Having two spirits inside of her body, she could do nothing else. A rough and tumble fight began, a true death match; especially since one of the contenders was Póstumo's mischievous and scheming spirit.

They arrived at the house and several doctors came. The physicians tried everything, all in vain as the battle raged on.

Now we will do what those present could not as we follow the invader into the invaded body. [152]

CHAPTER III

THE INTRUDER UNEXPECTEDLY OUSTS THE LANDLORD

When Virginia's spirit realized that such an audacious invader was sneaking into her body, it shrank back like a squadron of retreating soldiers and sought refuge in any available nook among the labyrinth of nerves, membranes, vessels, veins, arteries, and muscles known as the human body. The spirit was so hasty and fraught with terror, though, that instead of heading for the heart it turned toward the stomach. The heart could have served as a redoubt given the strategic interaction of the ventricles and valves which would complicate entering and exiting enough to keep the opponent at bay until external reinforcements could arrive. The stomach was quickly abandoned and the spirit took refuge in the pylorus, utilizing it as an impromptu parapet.

Póstumo, meanwhile, had entered that beautiful woman by taking advantage of the instant she opened her pink lips to offer an encouraging and flirtatious smile to a particular gentleman who had just expressed his positive opinion of her appearance. Póstumo buzzed in between that row of pearls and found himself between the larynx and the bronchioles. He missed the route leading to the esophagus which would have led him directly to the fugitive spirit.

Consequently, the intruder's location in that spot provoked a cough, and the physicians simply could not explain how Virginia could faint and cough convulsively at the same time. [153]

When he realized there was nothing there, Póstumo took the esophagus and headed for the stomach. Surely his spiritual clairvoyance allowed him to sense the home owner hiding in the pylorus. Seeing that she was in danger, the owner shot out

randomly, taking some vein or nerve and wound up in one of the carotid arteries leading to the brain.

You may be doubtful of our ability to slip behind the vital tissue and witness the increasingly complicated spiritual chase. The organic fabric however, is susceptible to what science calls endosmosis and exosmosis. Along with this fact, bear in mind their subtlety as spirits, as well as the properties of vermicular movement or contraction and distraction of some organs... In any case, allow us these pedantic technicalities in order to prove that the spirit is naturally capable of anything inside such ductile, elastic, and porous organs.

It is indubitable that the physicians were clueless as to what to do. The cough was followed by an intestinal rumbling, somewhat prosaic in the body of a beautiful woman. This effect, to be sympathetic, resulted from the agitation produced in and around the stomach by the turbulent spirit's assault.

“Involuntary synapses,” said one.

And as the convulsion spread when Póstumo entered one of the carotids, thus disturbing the circulatory system, another doctor called for:

“Calmatives, friction, and warm towels.”

Not to be left out, others prescribed cupping, bloodletting, blister-plastering, and even flies.

Virginia's spirit was holed up in the medulla, but not having read Descartes, it was unaware that according to the philosopher this was the seat of mood in the brain. Póstumo decided to position himself there, muttering about his apathetic guardian for taking so long to call on the defensive spirit. The angel must have heard this [154] and

decided to rescue Póstumo from the conflict by beginning to invoke poor Virginia's spirit.

All the while Póstumo was saying to himself, "If just one spirit is enough for a body to deal with, how can it manage with two at once? My angel must have forgotten me or is getting back at me by playing this devilish trick. What will become of me? No, if he wants me to abandon this little body he is dead wrong and doesn't know me well. I don't give up that easily. Let's just see how the owner and I can work this out in here. In the meantime, this body will remain inoperative as long as this intestinal spiritual warfare rages on. Or, in spite our best efforts to avoid it, a major vessel could break in which case the body would break down and die on us. Then we would both have to flee, or be willing to live with the worms. You try dislodging a female spirit, if spirits have a gender, from its bunker! And people say women are ignorant of metaphysical mysteries, or physical strengthening strategies. Then there is chivalry, the title deed, and the rights of the owner.

"I sure have gotten myself into a mess. It's just my luck that unless Mr. Guardian starts exorcising that spirit..."

At that point, though, the invocation began, and so powerfully that Virginia's spirit had to abandon its redoubt and bolt forth from the patient's mouth by way of a great sigh.

The attending doctor was in the process of trying to revive the now ex-Virginia by applying smelling salts that were a special invention of his for such occasions. He saw the body exhale and open its eyes as it regained life and became

calm. He enthusiastically shouted, “So what do you say? Just how do you like that?”
and the others provided their tacit agreement as to his skillfulness. [155]

CHAPTER IV

APPARENTLY THE BODY COMES WITH CERTAIN PRIOR COMMITMENTS

Póstumo, in the form of Virginia, sat carefree in an armchair in her family home's elegant study. Doña Flora tried to stir her from this pensive state with talk of wedding plans.

This coquettishly carefree demeanor cannot be attributed to Póstumo, but rather to that womanly body so naturally inclined toward elegance.

“My daughter,” expressed Doña Flora, “we must set a date.”

“What for, mother?”

“For the wedding.”

“What wedding?”

“Oh my. Your wedding!”

“My wedding!”

“Who else's wedding could it be? I must say that ever since your accident or fainting fit the other day, you have lost your memory and you always seem distracted. How can you not remember something so important to you, and even to me? How can you forget your wedding with the Duque?”

“What Duque?”

“So you do not even remember your engagement with the Duque de la Verbena? You so readily accepted it.”

“Oh! I see. The previous owner of this body was going to marry a real live Duque, and a rich one at that.” [156]

“Extremely rich, as he owns half the province of Castilla; and... But, what was it you said about the previous owner of your body and other nonsense? I do not understand what you’re saying,” cried the poor mother. Her eyes were tearing up as she shook her head in a gesture of sorrow, as if lamenting, “Oh what a shame, my daughter has gone mad.”

Póstumo understood from experience, recalling the troubles following his first reincarnation, that it was not in his best interest to correct her at that moment. He had interfered with Virginia’s life and now the most reasonable and convenient thing to do was to accept his role as a marriage-bound maiden and take on any prior commitments made by the body he had entered.

“So Duque de la Verbena...”

“He is such a nice gentleman and even though he is a bit older, in his day he certainly was something to behold, and a fashionable man.”

“How old is he?”

“What, you don’t know him?”

“Yes, but it’s the part about marrying an old man...”

“There is no turning back now. You already told him yes and you even agreed to set the wedding date.”

“Well I don’t think I am obligated to marry an old man no matter how big of a Duque or how rich is.”

“Why not? He’s giving a splendid dowry.”

“Even still.”

“Think of how this makes me look. What will he say?”

“Let him say what he wants.”

“Ever since your good father died you know things have been difficult for us. You cannot pass up the chance at a wonderful marriage...But, why am I getting upset? You already agreed to marry him.”

“I did?”

“Well this is simply grand! Are we back to that again? I’m starting to think you are mad, or silly at least.”

“But, I do not want to marry right now.”

“I will not tolerate such unpredictable behavior. [157] Haven’t I told you that if you marry the Duque, he would dedicate himself to pleasing you in every way? You would have complete control over him because of how in love with you he is. You could have a palace, servants, coaches, jewels, a box at the theater and anything else you could imagine. You could dazzle so many fools who have spent their entire lives living that way, not to mention the famous title of Duquesa. Have you forgotten the fuss I raised to persuade you? I told you in the first place that the Duque is no up-start and comes from a respectable family. You could proudly display the family tiara in your gala coach on court days, to the rage of so many women less beautiful... Jesus! Oh and how pretty you would be in your gown and your diamonds. ‘There goes the queen of the Duquesas,’ all the gentleman admirers will say. ‘There goes a true ruler of vassals,’ respectful people will say. And all for you, envy and praise. But, why bother when you are off in your own little world and not even listening?”

Póstumo-as-Virginia did not know how to respond. It was clear that retreat or complete negation were not viable options for now there was no way to leave the body taken so rashly by assault.

One cannot go around taking and then simply abandoning bodies on a whim. Besides, leaving was possible only by suicide, and Póstumo thought it would be a shame to hurt or mistreat this particular body given how beautiful it was. Couple with this the fact that the fanciful spirit was excited and interested in sticking around to watch the ducal episode unfold in which he now unexpectedly figured as a primary character.

At this point Doña Flora's speech was interrupted by a voice coming from the study room door.

Somewhat coarse, yet slightly tempered by the speaker's best efforts to sound smooth, the voice petitioned, "May I?"

"Come in Duque," answered Doña Flora. "Come in." The Duque entered and she continued. [158] "Here is your future bride. She is still brooding and somewhat finicky from yesterday's accident."

The Duque de la Verbana was over 60 years old. It showed in the roughness of what at another point in his life must have been attractive and even handsome features. He attempted to conceal the abuses of time with a toupee, dye on his eyebrows and moustache, and false teeth.

He strived to maintain an upright posture. His tall height was evidence of a gallant and distinguished past; but his sixty some odd years betrayed him in spite of the facades and artifices, and there was no chance of him flattering any bride.

Through and through he was what you could call a dapper and elegant old man whose sugary words tried to hide the effects on his vocal system of a senile cough that racked him more frequently than he would like.

“Is that so, enchanting Virginia?” asked the Duque. “Is that pesky little accident still tormenting us? Yesterday was quite enough of an ordeal, and that should have sufficed to cause fate to grow weary of pestering us. But I am flattered that our engagement and upcoming marriage will cure your deliberations and suffering. To become united with a beloved person can erase all manner of heartaches.”

Doña Flora then instructed Virginia in a low voice, “Answer him, daughter.”

“Duque, you are very kind and worthy of the best of fortune. But what if the marriage you have such high hopes for did not happen so soon...?”

“What!” barked the Duque.

“In spite of my best intentions, I need to think about it” Virginia responded.

“What? Was it not already decided?” pleaded the Duque.

“What can be done? We women are like this!”

Dona Flora stepped in and attempted to calm the Duque, “When I told you [159], dear Duque, that this child has suffered some sort of brain damage... Well, let’s be patient.”

“Patient? How can a man burning with desire to take her as wife remain patient?”

With that the Duque’s eyes lost their sixty year old glaze and were alight again with a twenty-something flame.

Virginia started, “I understand; but...” And here the young lady realized the benefit in not upsetting the old man and with an entrancing caress, she said to him while holding his hand with affectionate grace, “Won’t you give me just a few little days more, my darling Duque?”

The Duque crumbled and resigned himself to accepting the new terms.

“This is not good,” huffed Doña Flora. “You have gone truly mad. Next you’ll want bows and jewels. You be careful. With the widow’s pension your brigadier father left us, after taxes and always arriving late, and after my *chinchón* rummy, and if the tenants pay and the manager does not fuddle it up, I have no idea how we will get by with the luxury and ease you expect. *Mamá*, theater; *mamá*, jewelry; *mamá*, gatherings. Well that all has to come from somewhere. You can start resigning yourself to just staying at home and being prissy. As for me, I am giving up everything, and do not come crying to me for anything. No more promenades and no more gatherings. From now on we stay at home; working alone huddled next to the coals. And I assure you there will be no lack of chores.” [160]

CHAPTER V

COMING TO TERMS

A few days passed before our heroine convinced herself that the poor life was not for her and the marriage needed to happen fast.

But marriage came at a price.

Standing alone in his bed chamber, curiously reviewing his new body, Póstumo saw that it was fine indeed, beautiful and worthy of being loved. We do not know whether he examined it with a man's or a woman's eyes, but the soul must have had traces of the latter, which is the only way to account for the onset of Narcissus' spell. Póstumo fell in love with what from then on was to be his person.

Narcissus saw himself in a fountain, Virginia or Póstumo in a mirror. The new Virginia felt beautiful, and this should not seem odd since it is rare for a pretty woman to not be in love with herself. The truth is such narcissism is common among men too no matter how hard they try to hide it.

Being so in love with herself, this story's heroine or hero, felt the urge to make everybody think she was as beautiful as he or she did which explains the impulse to please others and take care of her looks, both necessary means to this end.

And certainly in the game of pleasing others and looking good nothing came more easily. The fine [161] Andalusian female body Póstumo now inhabited knew, or must have remembered, all the necessary moves and executed them marvelously out of custom or habit. Since it retained those *certain somethings* about the way it moved...

Póstumo had to do only a little and leave the rest to the body. He could not have asked for more.

Let's be honest. Haven't you noticed some habitual tendency, some movement, that your body executes every now and then unconsciously and sometimes even against your will? It would be strange if you have never experienced this. You can be sure, then, of the plausibility of this tendency and the life of its own we are conceding to a body that is fully intact and is still what it was before, although it belongs to another owner or soul.

The life being attributed to this organism has no other explanation.

One more example: Have you ever noticed how when you play an instrument, your experienced fingers automatically do exactly what they are supposed to?

Well that is how it is for women when they roll their eyes, sway their hips, and tilt their head, hands, and feet!

Of course they are chaste and restrained in everything when it comes to bad intentions for nothing is more diabolical than what is only half-way hidden or denied so as to appear virtuous.

Here, from Crisófilo in his *Sataniada*:¹⁷

*¿Y cómo no temer aquellos ojos
donde mágica lumbre centellea,
y aquel foco de amor en labios rojos
do se asienta el placer, brinda y desea?
Y el seno que al latir aviva antojos,
la cadera gentil, talle que ondea...
Basta, basta: su autor, su rey eterno
temió que se quedarán con su infierno.*

*And how not to fear those eyes
which harbor a glittering magical flame,
and that ray of love shining on ruby lips
harboring pleasure, provision and desire?
And the breast that arouses desire as it beats,
the kind hips, the undulating curves...
Enough, enough: the author, the eternal king
feared they would overtake his fiery ring.*

¹⁷ Here, Tapia y Rivera references his own philosophical-theological epic narrative poem published under the pen name Crisófilo Sardanápolo, *La Sataniada: Grandiosa Epopeya* (Río Piedras: Editorial Edil, 1975) 148.

[162]

To end this argument, to prove that a woman's body has habits or life of its own, idiosyncrasies or whatever you wish to call it, you have only to consider how a French woman's mannerisms and *je ne sais quois* are not the same as the Spanish woman's *no sé qué*. In fact there is a world of difference between that *no sé qué*, and the English woman who either has little or none at all, and the Andalusian who has all of it and then some, whether she likes it or not, because she is born with it.

Natural gifts are not enough, however, and among Spanish women natural grace is so common that it is difficult for them to stand out on this point alone. Beauty alone is not enough to irresistibly impress, dazzle, and attract in the high society parlors of that nation where daughters of the Andalusian sun strive for glory just like their homeland all in the name of *María Santísima*. Rather, attentiveness and elegant dress are mandatory to the extent that women become priestesses of the increasingly demanding deities of luxury and fashion. A brigadier's pension and the occasional *chinchón* winnings, it turns out, simply will not suffice. Even the vast riches of the silver mines of Potosí could not withstand this insatiable whirlwind of desire propelled by the destruction of anything in its path.

Virginia discerned all of this. Póstumo was incurably prone to dreaming and extreme measures. He had never before faced what is ordinary among his new sex. Given the now imperious need to be a woman, he had to rely on instincts in this new tyranny of circumstances and do what the new situation was suggesting: to be a woman through and through.

The body was accustomed to its former possessor, as we stated earlier, and it strutted about when praised. When it saw a nice and smooth talking *galán*, the heart would work itself into a frenzy longing for what Póstumo used to long for in another form. [163]

In short, Virginia was a vain and fickle tease.

Now, men are not so famous for this behavior, but who among them is not the same?

This is why the seed that was Póstumo was not acting inappropriately in this respect. The female body was simply predisposed for the case. Two things came together that in the end were meant to harmonize with each other.

Someone wrote that the woman will always win. From the earthly paradise to the present this has been the case. Sampson lost his hair and his strength in Delilah's arms.

It seems when being a woman, it helps to start at birth. Coming back like that in a female body that is already set in its ways? No thanks! To be a woman, then, is to be twice a woman. Once for the soul and twice for a body that has it all. [164]

CHAPTER VI

THE WEDDING

The wedding day arrived and no expense was spared on its celebration.

The Duque wore his gentleman's uniform and strutted proudly about with his crosses great and small. Since they were all just like the Redeemer's, one alone would have sufficed. There was one thing that could be found in common between him and that God-man: neither of them deserved it.

His demeanor, along with the slim waist and the fineries or miracles of chemistry, made us forget the ravages wrought by the sword of time on his face.

Doña Flora was elegantly dressed, although she was a bit too done-up for a woman of her age and role as mother-in-law.

Elegant sirs and lords mixed with bright and colorful ladies of the old Madrilenian aristocracy, interspersed by the new breed and even what they took to calling the petty upstarts. Also on display were the *bankocracy* and the coattail democracy. The talented nobility was represented, and a legion of politicians was sure not to miss out on a chance at the limelight as it were, as in these situations the line between non-official and official tends to blur or fade.

Of all the ladies, however, one outshined the rest by far: the bride. Her dress was made of the finest and whitest silk, yet the silk's fairness could not even compete with the [165] bride's beautiful skin. The virgin's veil, appropriate for the occasion, hung from a crown of orange blossoms and pearls that contrasted with the shine of her jet-black hair.

Her dewy, black pupils radiated a modest fire through the veil, capable of igniting a thousand hearts. Her lips, two purple dawns of beautiful and misty first light, parted every now and then in candid smile to reveal two rows of white enamel that were more pearl than tooth. Her teeth seemed incapable of fulfilling any functions other than interrupting tender sighs and molding the echoes foretelling a delightfully sweet voice and accent.

Because of their attention to gossip the tabloids are devoured by the public, and the gossip column is the most widely read section of any newspaper. Therefore, regarding the guests, we list them off just as the tabloids did.

First, we should warn that if any of the guests' titles of nobility seem strange or outlandish, it is because many of them are nicknames or *nombres de guerra* used behind their backs among their social circle.

Standing out among other members of the choir were Conde Golden Horns and his wife, as well as the Marqués of the Royal Service; not to be outdone, though, was the Duque Sly Guy and his Duquesa, as well as the Green Grass's, the Barón of Military Provisions, and Conde Dry Pine, husband of the Vizcondesa de Mount Blonde. Also in appearance and covered in medallions were the deputies Don Hush-Hush and Señor Royal Order with the illustrious senators Don Yes-Man, and Don No-We'll-See. We also cannot forget to mention the bankers known as Fatzero and Sacred Cow, nor generals Bingeman and Boom-boom, accompanied by their wives Condesa Pointybottom and the Baronesa Hot River. Each of the women was as beautiful and [166] dazzling as the rest, each of the men as courtly and formal as the rest. Then there were the swarms of pretty ladies and lovesick, dapper little men. There was no small

ration of buxom women and old chatterboxes, and lastly the gossip columnists were surely there. It is customary these days to invite them to serve as scribes providing testament to what happened and did not happen, who saw it and did not see it, always on the premise that, like grateful stomachs, they will sing praises to the house and especially to the bride and her bridesmaids.

The couple said their I-do's, which often can mean anything, and it was off to the buffet, the dance floor, and home.

But wait! Among the guests there was a certain handsome, young, seductive Apollo of a man: an Adonis in coattails who shot a love dart from the quiver of his eyes that mercilessly injured the newly wedded bride's soul.

We do not know what mystery was revealed in the spiritual sympathy between Póstumo and this shaveling, a mystery we will try to clarify further along. But one thing is certain. At that wedding, as is likely the case at many more and in similar circumstances, if the hand was married to a Duque for example, the heart and mind were married to another, in this instance the bachelor.

Who could he be?

Such sympathy could only be explained as the mysterious meeting of two souls that happen to be in this world, yet that still retain a mutual affection felt in another.

Judging from Virginia's eyes, though, it seems that Póstumo's new body was not indifferent to this sympathy; although truth be told, this has an even clearer explanation. One might say that in this case what was happening to Virginia's body was something that had doubtlessly occurred during her life, that is, she would melt ever so slightly in the presence of a handsome, lovesick young man. The heart palpitations

could be explained, then, as a habit or tendency of that charming little body. If the heart is nothing more than a muscle and a great burner [167] or motor of blood, could it be insensitive to the emotions felt by the body to which it belongs, or in other words, the physical organization we have tried to demonstrate when talking about the body's habits or memories?

Yet there was something more to observe, something strange, in this postumo-virginian anomaly, which is that one cannot simply go about changing sex like that or assault another person's body. God did not make things as they are for the dreamers and Póstumos of the world to try and upset them without suffering any consequences.

Póstumo saw among the ladies the young Matilde, Condesa del Cierzo, whose name happens to mean "North Wind." He must have seen her with the eyes of the man he used to be, for *Zing!* Cupid's arrow struck again! The body, however, did not feel the sympathetic attraction it had felt for the young Adonis, perhaps because Matilde was a woman.

Sparks flew when Virginia met her Romeo's eyes among the lines of dancers!

To not call him Romeo, we need to state his real name: Segismundo; not the one from *Life is a Dream*, rather the one from Salazar y Mendoza. In other words he is a young gentleman just like any other, with more than one last name as is common among those of his ilk, and wearing a coat with ribbons to boot, for these adornments are all deemed proper; and he remembers to sit properly (*comme il faut*) like the young lads and big machos in some pretentious parlors.

But the whole scene really was on the verge of turning into Troy during the last cotillion, when to the sweet echoes of Strauss, Virginia and Segismundo were locked in

a sweet embrace, lost in an abyss of fantasy and emotion. This was all none too pleasant for the Duque who followed them out of the corner of his eye, trying to conceal his jealousy as a worldly man and a married gallant. All he could do was order the orchestra to abbreviate its devilish tune.

The dance ended and the couples separated. It took a good deal of restraint for the Duque to act as though he did not understand what he had just observed. [168]

Virginia went away excited and pensive; the Duque was left in no less a state, although for a different reason. "Four o'clock," sang out the night watchman, and perhaps all seemed well. [169]

CHAPTER VII

THE VOICE

The day after the wedding, Virginia sat alone in her boudoir deep in thought when suddenly she heard an invisible and familiar voice. It was the Guardian:

THE VOICE: Remember that you are now Virginia and not Póstumo, for it is the body and not the soul that determines the sex. This is simply an accident of circumstance, but as long as you are alive you must bear these conditions in mind. You are, then, a woman and not a man. By taking over your new body, you have taken on the duties that come with it. And you will be responsible for whatever you do, as was the spirit that previously inhabited it. Can you be sure that Virginia, the former owner of that body, would not have behaved honorably and even virtuously? You were wrong to have evicted her. From now on only your actions can make up for your violent usurpation.

PÓSTUMO: I recognize you, I recognize you, my angel, by your sermons. I'm shocked you didn't come bother me sooner. Anyway, who told you I'm thinking of doing anything wrong with Virginia's body?

THE VOICE: Who? I can see it with my own eyes. You think I don't know your intentions with young Salazar? You two caused your poor husband the Duque a good deal of consternation last night.

PÓSTUMO: And is it my fault that this lovely [170] body feels a magnetic attraction towards that young man instead of the Duque? I don't understand how the ex-

owner of this body was planning to marry him given how coldly it responds to him.

THE VOICE: That is how it is with women. Marriage is imposed by poverty or the need to improve their lot in life, and they must submit to the faithfulness this institution requires, under penalty of losing their honor and suffering further consequences.

PÓSTUMO: Why do they get married then? Why don't they refuse?

THE VOICE: Why did you get married? It certainly was not because of ulterior motives. You married because you love luxury. You cannot even use misery as your excuse as is the case with many others. Do you even know who that striking bachelor Segismundo is who you are so concerned with?

PÓSTUMO (*very interested*): Who is he?

THE VOICE: None other than the spirit of Elisa, Elisa "Two Hooks" *Doble Anzuelo*, set in a masculine body; the same Elisa who was your beloved wife, or better said, your domestic calamity in your former life.

PÓSTUMO (*extremely shocked*): That's impossible! Are you serious? Who could have imagined?

THE VOICE: Whether she felt it or not, the sympathy that attracted the two of you before is now undoubtedly influencing the both of you.

PÓSTUMO: You mean, since in a previous life we were what we were for each other, we are to be linked forever?

THE VOICE: It is not necessarily that way in all cases, but since you had to go and be different you have created quite an exceptional situation... For everyone else

these are mysteries of the spirit life and affinities whose causes are beyond our grasp.

PÓSTUMO: Well, if Elisa and I were spouses in another life, I don't think that simply because [171] the roles have changed in this one that our mutual attraction should cause a fuss.

THE VOICE: Quiet! That is enough. You are the most anarchistic and disorderly spirit our Eternal Father could have possibly created for this world.

PÓSTUMO: But it is odd. Love is either reprehensible or it is not. If it is, then why does it stop being so and in fact become a good thing upon marriage? It goes from being something impure to becoming a virtue, legalized at the hands of a judge or a priest.

THE VOICE: Good Lord that is enough. Don't start with that. I can't listen to you. You will force me to leave and abandon you to your fate. That is simply the way things are and as long as that is so you will dishonor yourself as much as your husband if you do not fulfill your duty as wife and rein in your passions.

PÓSTUMO: But are passions born of the soul or the body? I believe that greed, pride, and jealousy are daughters of the soul because some angels, disembodied beings such as yourself, felt them and fell from heaven with Lucifer being the first. Well there are other passions that are purely daughters of the body such as gluttony, luxury, and so on.

THE VOICE: So...

PÓSTUMO: So, the amorous inclinations felt by this body are not my own since they are not a matter of the soul, which is the one and only thing I have contributed to the current, peculiar state I am in.

THE VOICE: But don't you know that the governing soul of that body is being tested, so to speak, in this world on how it responds to different passions? On the other hand, who says the seduction you feel to whatever is tempting you is not simply a figment of your imagination? The same could be said, although to a lesser degree, for the horrors of remorse or punishment. Who says that your capacity to reason, whether disturbed by your own fantasy or by your own will, has nothing to do with this act born of passion? Your will is weak enough to work against your own desires and strong enough to follow them. If your spirit enters into all of this then, albeit [172] dominated to a certain extent by your body, how can you evade your own moral responsibility?

PÓSTUMO: As you like it, my angel, but I don't see what could happen if I chose not to follow your advice, or even how I could be held accountable for this responsibility you're going on about.

THE VOICE: What! That is precisely what you should know and at all costs. God might have allowed the outrage you have committed in taking over another's body, but he will not be so lenient with your behavior from now on. The first time might have been seen as a madcap escapade or prank in the magnanimous Supreme Being's eyes; but the second time reveals perversity which will face his unyielding justice. As we speak, word in Limbo has it that his all-seeing Divine Majesty is highly dissatisfied with your behavior and I would not be

surprised if at any moment he snatches you from this world and punishes you severely. Do not forget that in spite of his infinite mercy, it's not all cake and candy up there.

PÓSTUMO: So what do I do?

THE VOICE: Proceed with a clean conscience and nothing more. Goodbye until another time.

PÓSTUMO: But wait...

The angel retreated and did not look back, leaving a brooding Póstumo. [173]

CHAPTER VIII

MATILDE, THE YOUNG CONDESA DEL CIERZO

The Guardian's speech must have influenced our hero's or heroine's thought and behavior to some extent. The last part of the sermon, on the rumors circulating around Limbo that the Supreme Being was unwilling to tolerate any more foolishness was especially effective. And so, in spite of disliking the Duque as a husband, Póstumo decided to treat him with some semblance of affection and, more importantly, wifely faithfulness. This did not come easily given the human spirit's known preference for case-based or relative reasoning, especially if the spirit is harbored by a woman's body, perhaps because women are more subject than men to the yoke of appearance and expectation.

An ounce of self-preservation at the right time can excuse many wrongs and avoid plenty of difficulties. A crafty woman is adept at appearing to be dedicated to her duties while actually consecrating her soul to that which pleases her, as tends to be the case with any slave. Show the master the mask, reserve thought and intimate willingness for true desire. Such a moral code is very accommodating, and, save for intent, leaves the order of things undisturbed. In a word though, it is pretense, and Póstumo-Virginia forgot that this opens the door to let deceit and betrayal slip in behind. [174]

The Duque seemed happy, as with any man living on illusions.

Thinking out loud, the one we shall begin calling Virginia said, "Some old men have vigorous, enthusiastic, and cultivated spirits that replace and even surpass youthful charm with interest and pleasantness. If the man calling himself my husband was

anything at all like them, I could forget about his years and even occasionally find him more healthy looking and attractive than a much younger man, for if that were the case, only his body would be old. But that man is so frivolous! Take away a few of his petty pleasures and aristocratic vulgarities and he is nothing but a void. He must have been a bore even as a little boy. Everything about him is stiff and only the veneer of polite society makes him tolerable. He's like a sealed tomb, or some ruin of no historic importance. Instead of Verbena, he should be called Ragwort. Am I supposed to be hobbled with this walking cadaver? Poor woman! People will ask, 'why did you give him your hand?' Unfortunate woman, she is either forced by hunger, by being raised in vanity, or by the need to attain status and respect among the pants-wearers in this world, as they say. When will she obtain the means to develop her own will and emancipate herself from the need to marry, as men have done? The old spinster is a poor wretch, disdained by all for her loneliness which is attributed to her bad luck or lack of worth."

In spite of all this, Virginia resolved, since there was no other solution, to get along as well as possible with her husband and to not make his life difficult. After all, the good Duque made every effort to satisfy not only her needs, but also the whims of her womanly vanity in every way. She lived in opulence and her cravings became decrees.

She held *the magic wand* children dream of when they listen open-mouthed to mother or nanny tell unforgettable tales of [175] wizards or witches who do the most amazing things.

The flying carriages, decadently elegant dresses, sparkling jewelry, shows, dances, and parties, however, were not enough to bring joy to a soul satiated in whims

and wanting in aspirations. Without being truly savored, too much sickly sweet food can dull the senses of the most avid palate. In such instances, even the rudest fare becomes preferable when seasoned by appetite.

To flee from the handsome Salazar (in other words the masculine Elisa de Doble Anzuelo) who had not given up pursuit ever since the night of the wedding reception, Virginia began searching for more intimate, yet less dangerous, friends who might console to a certain degree her lonely, affection-deprived heart.

The Condesa del Cierzo, mentioned in an earlier chapter, was young and beautiful. She wore a well-fitting air of piety, acquired in the nun's school where she had been educated. This was nothing more than a veil to cover a mind open to mischief.

Virginia liked her from the instant they met and hoped for any chance to befriend her. As an experienced spirit, Virginia must have perceived an inner attraction.

But this pious air, so likeable in Póstumo's eyes, did not please the Condesa's husband. Educated in a Parisian lay school, he picked up a healthy distaste for anything that smelled of mysticism from that Voltaireian society.

At first her husband was bent on reforming her, struggling to convert her into something more mundane and less potentially scandalous. He hoped to harmonize with that spirit that was so dissimilar to his own and with whom he was to live. He grew tired of trying after a while though, and gave up, figuring she was incorrigible. It was not so with her. Her husband was not only anti-Catholic, but he also scorned any organized religion (as is the case with many people these days, even [176] if they act otherwise so as to stay on the wagon or because it is convenient). Upon realizing this, poor Matilde spent a great deal of time crying during the day and praying through the night,

petitioning God to pull this stray sheep back into the flock. It pained her that her husband, who she loved so much and who shared in this life's struggles with her, would let her go to heaven all alone. Love him as much as she might, she had no interest in trading such a glorious place and accompanying him to the fiery cauldrons of hell.

She complained, furthermore, of the Conde's coldness. He looked upon her disdainfully, so she thought, because he was not a *strong spirit*. She suspected that if he found her a nuisance, he would look for someone else to provide the happiness she was unable to offer. In other words, her complaints were not strictly motivated by charity, but jealousy made up a healthy part of the whole as well.

Such suspicion would increase ever since that night when, guided by who knows what manner of temptation, perhaps by jealousy, she went to the theater (What horror!) in secret and in a modest veil of course, and saw the well-known comedy *The Pious Wife and the Unfaithful Husband* which so accurately portrayed her fears.

The sentimental Póstumo, or rather, Virginia found all of this to be simply delightful.

When recounting the story of our Duquesa's wedding, we said that her body did not share the sympathy felt by Póstumo's spirit for Matilde. By not drinking the waters of Lethe, though, and with no chance to forget the traces of manhood, this spirit undoubtedly looked on Matilde with manly eyes, which would explain such obvious sympathy. The friendship between the two women became intimate.

Perhaps women are predisposed to feel the attraction of natural beauty more strongly due to their more affectionate nature, or perhaps because their nervous temperament begets more lively and delicate instincts. [177]

When rivalry does not lead them to mutual hatred, beautiful women tend to feel reciprocal affection. Here we speak of women as they have been molded by the concerns, laws, and customs of men. [178]

CHAPTER IX

PÓSTUMO HEARS THE GUARDIAN'S VOICE AGAIN

Once again Póstumo-Virginia heard the Guardian's voice as follows.

THE VOICE: Be very careful in what you are doing.

PÓSTUMO: How? I'm not doing anything.

THE VOICE: Your responsibilities are the same they would have been for the former owner of your body.

PÓSTUMO: What do you mean my angel?

THE VOICE: Apart from the fact that the soul and body are unified in life, could you be so kind as to answer me this: Under your manly forms, could you have gained the friendship and trust of a woman like Matilde so easily? She sees and has seen you as only another of her sex. Why don't you reveal what you used to be and how you snuck into the body you inhabit today?

PÓSTUMO: Ever since you told me that Salazar is Elisa I have gone mad with curiosity. Now you're telling me that I must also drown my heart's sympathy for that charming Matilde? What a bore this will be if everything is off-limits. So I guess my only option is the most disagreeable one, one my soul and my body do not want: the blessed Duque.

THE VOICE: Exactly.

PÓSTUMO: Then I renounce the marriage. I do not accept being hobbled all my life to a vain and futile old man who is so pretentious as to think that I could feel

passionate for [179] him. How can he think himself capable of inspiring anything other than boredom? I would rather leave this body.

THE VOICE: How?

PÓSTUMO: It's quite simple. I'll go out the same way I came in. You'll invoke me loudly and since I'll assist your invocation at the same time...

THE VOICE: I will do nothing of the sort, even if I could. Furthermore, in order to invoke a spirit towards eternity from a live body, another spirit must be inside.

PÓSTUMO: Then call the old owner and have her claim what is hers. If she doesn't find it in the same state, it is because I consented to honor the commitments she made herself.

THE VOICE: That is not an option either. You try finding her. I do not know if she is even still disembodied and will not bother to find out.

PÓSTUMO: Then I shall commit suicide as my last resort.

THE VOICE: Yes, precisely, and up there you would be received as the most criminal of killers. First you steal a magnificent body, and then you destroy it! You sure know how to please our Eternal Father... Go on, accept your fate and mend your ways, you still have time.

Our heroine was extremely upset. The secret chronicle detailing these events recounts how that night Póstumo had terrible visions, possibly born of fear, and decided to reveal his secret to Matilde, certain that she would not believe it. Then, being such a schemer, he finally said to himself, "After I tell her who I was and what has happened, if she doesn't believe me and continues being my friend then I should be fine." He

whispered this, though, as if he feared the Angel's voice would return and deflate his hopes. This was inevitable, though, and he heard a terrible voice saying to him, "Oh Póstumo, you miserable conniver, to think you can fool God!"

We are not sure if it was the Guardian throwing his [180] voice, or if it really was God, but the fact remains that for the first time Póstumo felt that he had greatly taken advantage of divine grace. The new and terrible visions of the previous night disconcerted him. He was unable to make sense of these new terrors. [181]

CHAPTER X

REFLECTIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

In the meantime, Salazar missed no chance to be in Virginia's company, while she evaded him incessantly.

To avoid alarming the Duque, she never made herself available to receive Salazar; but she could not avoid repeatedly finding his horse next to her coach on the street, or finding him sitting next to her at gatherings. Neither could she avoid the young beau's binoculars devouring her from his seat in the theater. She felt obligated to let him know in the end, her heart fluttering terribly all the while, that she had resolved not to entertain his courting or to disappoint her husband, who was peeved by the tactless Salazar's relentless pursuit.

Although the Duque was a worldly man, he grew jealous at the sight of what was so blatantly there for all to see.

Virginia was certain that the Duque, as with many others in his circle, would have been more lenient if Salazar was not so flagrant. She was very careful not to reveal this to Salazar, however, for it only would have encouraged him.

Doing so would be comparable to saying, "If only you weren't so showy and nobody found out;..." but our Duquesa could not escape the impression left by the divine threats mentioned by the Guardian in the two exchanges we have already witnessed; and she was determined to be faithful, or at least prudent.

This resolution bored her to no end, and she complained [182] to herself about such a meaningless way to spend a life.

As for the Duque, he could not figure out how to please his woman. He besieged her with gifts, presents, indulgences, and no small number of caresses because she did not permit every single one that the poor old man tried to lavish her with. In spite of all of this, though, he could not achieve what he was after. Although in hindsight, every now and then, whenever it was in her best interest to not sour the old man too much or when it suited one of her plans, the young lady was less evasive and could even be affectionate.

Virginia wished and yearned for the opportunity to dash once and for all the marital hopes that she found to be none too pleasing. “But getting married like this,” she said to herself, “isn’t it a transaction? Why does everyone treat me as if I was commerce and not take me seriously?”

“Ah! This type of marriage is unfortunately all too common; motivated more or less by hunger or dreams of luxury. Men celebrate our beauty, and since it befits this type of delicacy to serve as a backdrop to costly adornments, the more visible we are, the more they celebrate us. We are trained to please men and to compete with each other to the extent that all of us women, from the poorest worker to the grandest aristocrat, long only to catch at least a man’s eye, if not his compliments.

“In general they want us ignorant, and if some more enlightened men say we should be educated a little, it is only so the husband’s image isn’t tarnished, or so he does not have to have a vapid idiot for a mate. What does it matter if we learn anything, if afterwards we atrophy in silence so as not to appear immodest by revealing the little we have managed to learn, and without any stimulus or social purpose whatsoever at that?”

“A woman’s ideas and opinions? She should have none. That way, things will go smoother for whoever ends up being her husband. Otherwise, she risks missing out on marriage thanks to those men out there who [183] only want a woman to tend the stewpot and raise the children.

“I see this so clearly now. I didn’t see it as a man, though, when I thirsted for justice and wanted to right so many wrongs. I didn’t realize that this difference is the most important and transcendent of all.

“We are nothing more than slaves whose futility and exclusion are adorned in order to put us on society’s market, in search of marriage, like so many captive women in the Orient sent to the Sultan’s market.

“The wife of a poor man works with her husband, if she does not work alone as among some savage peoples. Beatings alternate with work for there is no other way to treat a beast.

“And I laugh at the schools they send us to, because very few women can say they are educated at the same level as their husbands, with whom they are to spend their entire existence.

“Go on, let’s face it. A woman is a pariah crowned with flowers. And where there are pariahs, no true societal or moral progress is possible. There are pariahs who are fools to think things are fine the way they are, and nonetheless, everything today comes back to talking and writing about woman’s education and her place in society. To those women duped into defending their current status or maintaining it with hope for nothing else, I say that such indifference is the principle symptom of their enslavement. It’s despicable!

“As far as my former cohorts men are concerned I would tell them to turn into women like me without forgetting that they used to be men. Then we would see if they don’t think the same as me. Now I’m beginning to understand the nonsense of how some would establish differences that are unfavorable to one sex only to then throw it back in the face of the oppressed, as slaves are reminded of their inferiority, even after being trained as inferiors and slaves.

“As for my husband, I need to find [184] the opportunity to dash once and for all his annoying marital demands.

“They say we are astute, cunning, and discreet, and what else are we taught? What is the role of the oppressed?”

After this long and anarchic reasoning Póstumo studied the options. And, what else might you expect from a wolf in sheep’s clothing, or from a male root grafted to a female trunk? Fortunately, for the sake of the world, such a phenomenon is very rare and we believe this to be an extraordinary case. [185]

CHAPTER XI

VIRGINIA AND MATILDE

After resolving to share her story with Condesa Matilde, Virginia took the first opportunity that came her way.

PÓSTUMO: Matilde, you must know that I am not what I appear to be.

MATILDE: What?

PÓSTUMO: I am not a woman!

MATILDE: You are not a woman. Ha, ha, ha! So what are you then?

PÓSTUMO: A special being, a man with a woman's body.

MATILDE: Ha, ha, ha! What a monstrosity! And, how can you explain such a thing?

PÓSTUMO: It's simple. I am the spirit of a man.

MATILDE: Spirits have a gender?

PÓSTUMO: Of course not. But I used to be a man. I didn't drink the waters of Lethe, and then I felt like leaving Limbo and so I came to Earth. I've always been a free spirit and out of curiosity I entered the first female body that caught my eye. I kicked out the spirit occupying the body and now I have turned into something I am not. Do not trust what you see.

MATILDE: But, what is this about going around changing bodies and entering them and leaving them [186]? Come on, are you mad or is this a joke?

PÓSTUMO: Neither. God allows these things, although he does not always endorse them.

MATILDE: So you had his permission?

PÓSTUMO: No, of course not.

MATILDE: Oh Lord! You have committed a mortal sin.

PÓSTUMO: That is why you must not be my intimate friend.

MATILDE: But I thought you were another woman. And besides, you are one now!

PÓSTUMO: Yes, but I haven't forgotten that I used to be a man, and my soul still
retains a man's habits and vices.

MATILDE: Well, what do I care about that? Anyway, what you're telling me is
unbelievable; and you look so serious I don't know what to make of what
you're saying.

PÓSTUMO: It is the truth.

MATILDE: But I don't understand what you're telling me. I'm not that stupid.

PÓSTUMO: I know you are guilty of mischief, even if on the sly.

MATILDE: Me!

PÓSTUMO: That's right. See how you are pretending not to understand that I am a man
with a man's instincts and intentions, although I look like something else.

MATILDE: No, if you are going to misjudge me, I will take this how I must, but I do
not understand how such nonsense can happen.

PÓSTUMO: Will you still be my friend?

MATILDE: Not as openly as before if you yourself are telling me to be on guard. I'll
have to abstain from being as close as before; meanwhile somebody who
knows more than me will have to clear up this mess.

PÓSTUMO: But Matilde...

MATILDE: No, no, what you said worries me and even makes me feel like
crying...[187]

PÓSTUMO: But...

MATILDE: No, bye for now: nothing in common between us until I find out whether
you are mad or are playing a joke on me. Goodbye, goodbye!

Póstumo could not stop her and, on the other hand, was afraid of hearing the Guardian's terrifying voice. He had never spoken so severely, judging from the threatening echo left by his most recent words. As imperious and terrifying as they were, it was difficult to imagine them being uttered by the same angel who was always so good-natured and obliging. In any case, it could not hurt to be careful. And was his conscience sullied now! He had disobeyed so greatly that he now feared that this new life he had gotten into might entail some trap that he himself had subconsciously set as punishment for his audacity.

As for Matilde, she went to consult with her confessor Padre Benito who ordered her to steer clear of danger. According to him, all of that changing from one body to another was the work of Satan. He told her that the devil himself was causing her friend to imagine such an outlandish scenario. In short, this woman was possessed and Matilde was to flee from her, to avoid contact, to protect herself from temptation with penitence, prayer, fasting and punishment of the flesh. The Padre advised her that if she could have the possessed woman to agree to an exorcism, he would lend his services in which case he would also discipline her by punishment of the flesh. [188]

CHAPTER XII

THE MANY WAYS TO FULFILL PENNANCE

Our postumized Virginia was crestfallen when Matilde came to say goodbye and to inform her of what Padre Benito had told her. She did promise, however, not to abandon their friendship if Virginia would agree to meet with her a few times to share in penance by flagellation.

“I feel so much pity for you, dear Virginia, I can’t leave you to the devil’s power. So then, a dozen lashes should do.”

This proposition confirmed Póstumo’s suspicions that Matilde’s foolishness was all an act to disguise her mischievous side, and the pity lashing was only an idea for a means to maintain contact and remain friends with him, or her. It was even obvious that the man/woman mystery fascinated her and drove her imagination wild.

Ascetics are far more prone to fantasize about falling for the devil’s trickery than they let on. The *en-virginiated* Póstumo also deduced from what was happening with Matilde that she must have tried to trick Padre Benito and God, just as he had attempted in his own way with God and his guardian. “She probably said to herself,” Póstumo murmured, “I won’t exactly lie to Padre Benito, I’ll just bend the truth a little. That way, as soon as he responds I can say, ‘well that is exactly what I meant to say!’” In other words, in thinking that she had fooled God, she was fooling herself. [189] She could say, “I confessed,” give herself a few lashes, and go on being innocent only of innocence. “This girl is crafty!” concluded Póstumo. “If I slip up, she’ll school me!”

The next day Matilde came to Virginia and showed her a raspy hemp cord under her dress that was hurting her beautiful flesh. They then took out a few lashings on each

other that were enough to cover whatever they owed plus interest. Matilde struck with the fervor of a believer, a believer in a good cure or a well-deserved punishment. Póstumo, not holding back either, responded in kind, thinking, “true love will make you cry.”

Matilde did not return to see Padre Benito for a few days during which she and her friend continued to flagellate each other more soundly and more often. The Condesa kept on wearing the cilice as penitence and when she finally saw the Padre again, she told him she was complying with the cilice penitence and even showed him that she was wearing sackcloth. Furthermore, she added that she also gave herself a good round of lashes daily. She made no mention, however, of the continued visits with the possessed woman; and there was no need to mention the broken fasts.

When Matilde saw how spiritually and charitably interested the good clergyman was in the possessed woman, she told him that her friend already seemed to be doing better, thanks to the prescribed lashings. [190]

CHAPTER XIII

A VISIT WITH THE DRESSMAKER

The Duquesa de la Verbena (Póstumo-as-Virginia that is) was a regular client of Madame Chouffleur. This famous French dressmaker based in Madrid found our heroine to be a dependable, steady, and copious source of income given the vast amounts allocated by the Duque expressly for Virginia to invest in wanton elegance and splendid luxuries.

In turn, Chouffleur, who was an expert at this type of extraction, employed her creativity to the fullest extent in order to arouse the new Duquesa's imagination, all the while adeptly employing a flattering amount of Parisian vocabulary, as she tended to do with other rich, vain women.

At this point, it would not hurt to add that the phalanx of *burguesas* or Madrid's middle class women, forever fixated on the aristocrats in aspiring to imitate their luxury and high tastes, were also founts of wealth for the dressmaker who was so well known and in vogue at the time. It was therefore to be expected that the most exploitable clients would always be the *parvenues* (*advenedizas*, upstarts,) and prissy rich girls, so bent on employing brute luxury to outshine those who enjoyed the envious status of "fashionables". Here we sprinkle in some foreign vocabulary to make expressions seem more important, since words that have been with us from the cradle and are used by all never seem quite as expressive as the new ones smuggled in from abroad that have not yet been worn out.

The Duquesa's body naturally had the appropriate *no sé qué* [191] of elegance, and belonged in its former owner's time to a social circle of women who always dress

well and look fine in anything. Here the French *chic* would be a perfect word to use except it is entirely unnecessary given that our rich language already provides the means for expressing that a woman's body has *el aquel natural* or *que era cortado para el caso* which is to say that it was cut for the occasion.

But does grace come from the body or the soul? The answer to this is that the soul has its instincts of grace, just as it does for colors, sounds, and many other things; and these instincts become manifest through the sex of the body that the soul inhabits. Thus it is natural for the soul to contain bisexual properties through and through that are only revealed according to circumstance. This does not preclude *that something* about the body from appearing on its own, given that the body's elegant and well shaped proportions have nothing to do with the soul.

This brings to mind the observation made by I forget which thinker, about how human beings need a hybrid makeup from both genders, in order to produce decent art and good writing. In other words, good artists, and perhaps philosophers too, need to have a bit of man and a bit of woman in order to be fruitful, true, and complete in their conceptions. Upon examination, truly sound works always reveal elements pertaining to both sexes.

Nevertheless, Choufleur was aware of how greatly it behooved her for our Duquesa to dress *a la dernière* and *comme il faut*, that is to say *properly* in full compliance with the latest fashion or *con toda propiedad* as we would say in *castellano*.

MADAME CHOUFLEUR: Currently dresses worn tight from the hips to the ankles are *de rigor* and that is why all of your Excellency's dresses come that way.

VIRGINIA: And they are very uncomfortable. If this keeps up, pretty soon we won't be able to walk. [192]

CHOUFLEUR: Well some ask for them to be even tighter. That Condesita del Cañuto wears it so she can barely walk.

VIRGINIA: She is a real fool.

CHOUFLEUR: I shall not say that wearing it so tight is a good thing; but when it comes to the hips, does Your Excellency not find the way it accentuates the form to be quite artistic?

VIRGINIA: You call whatever is in fashion artistic. For you, art changes with the season or if any four bimbos fancy something new.

CHOUFLEUR (*smiling*): Not all the ladies are as discerning as you, lady Duquesa, and we must give them what they want.

VIRGINIA: What's next, huge skirts and hoops? We'll end up looking like barrels or casks and then what will you say?

CHOUFLEUR: That it was the best thing every invented.

VIRGINIA: See! By the way, for the velvet dress, don't make the bodice so tight, it's uncomfortable. I don't like it to be so exaggerated as the others do. The one I wore a few nights ago to the Russian Embassy ball was a little bothersome.

CHOUFLEUR: Your Excellency's waist is truly as thin and flexible as a reed, by just going as is it's enough to make your rivals furious. But I...

VIRGINIA (*laughing*): So that I might show off your work...

CHOUFLEUR: Oh no, my lady! It is simply because that is more *comme il faut*.

VIRGINIA: There's that little word, the great convincing argument, or better yet, the great silencer of fools.

CHOUFLEUR: If my lady the Duquesa only knew that even men earn a living from these things, and some of the most serious and educated among them at that.

VIRGINIA: I understand. We were made for each other. The most serious and learned man becomes ecstatic at the site of a bow or a frill. [193]

CHOUFLEUR: Or perhaps at the site of who is wearing it.

VIRGINIA: What I am trying to say is that their luck or ours just might depend on how well or poorly a bow is pinned on. They call us frivolous and try to make fun of our passion for dresses and adornments, as if all of those things were not like so many hooks to catch them with.

CHOUFLEUR: Oh! When it comes to suits men are no less finicky than women. Just ask a tailor and you will learn that all some men think about is their wardrobe. They'll even say, "Oh, that looks good," about medals. It sounds like a lie, but even a certain diplomatic gentleman who seems very discreet says it; it is true he always used to turn my shop upside down.

VIRGINIA: How?

CHOUFLEUR: By chasing after my girls.

VIRGINIA: That reminds me, is there a young lady named Carlota working for you?

CHOUFLEUR (*somewhat surprised*): Yes, *señora*.

VIRGINIA: Isn't she the one you sent yesterday?

CHOUFLEUR: The very one.

VIRGINIA: Very pretty indeed. She lives up to her fame as a beauty among our boys.

CHOUFLEUR: And among the men too.

(And here Choufleur made a little face, as if to say, “Damn mouth! I wasn’t supposed to let that one out.”)

VIRGINIA: We’re going deaf from hearing her name all the time.

CHOUFLEUR: That’s why I will soon dismiss her from the shop.

VIRGINIA: Don’t do that. You could use her as bait to draw more business.

CHOUFLEUR: It’s not her fault for being so attractive. She also supports her family.

Otherwise I would have put her on the street long ago.

VIRGINIA: So she has family, eh?

CHOUFLEUR: Mother and three little sisters who survive from her work.

VIRGINIA: Then you should keep her. [194]

CHOUFLEUR: Yes, to dismiss her would go against God’s will. Furthermore, the poor girl wants to save money for marriage.

VIRGINIA: Oh! Who?

CHOUFLEUR: With an engraver who is much more respectable than he is handsome; but alas since a woman has no other choice but marriage... Both could help each other with work, and since he earns much more than she does... Even in salary the pants have to outdo us!

VIRGINIA: And the girl, does she love him?

CHOUFLEUR: It seems so, but in spite of her shy manner I don’t think she disdains or is upset by compliments from men.

VIRGINIA: Oh the poor thing! Praised by those worth more than she...

CHOUFLEUR: And women love the rascals.

VIRGINIA: Especially simple women. Even among our class, though, the same thing happens.

CHOUFLEUR: Few women go beyond the superficial; that's why so many things happen to us.

VIRGINIA: And between you and me, the Duque gets around too, doesn't he!

CHOUFLEUR: Ah! No, *señora...* (*and Virginia discovered a poorly hidden truth in the dressmaker's face*).

VIRGINIA: Yes, he does! As I said then, prepare the gown for the gala the day after tomorrow how I want it, or rather, how you want it for that is how it must always be.

CHOUFLEUR: I do not think the lady Duquesa has any reason to complain...

VIRGINIA: To the contrary, I am satisfied; I am indebted to your skill. Your good fame is my guarantee. The only thing I recommend is that, as fashionable as it is, you don't go too...

CHOUFLEUR: Oh, the neckline...

VIRGINIA: Yes. Let it show a little, just a glimpse will do no harm, but I don't want it to be as shocking as some others.

CHOUFLEUR: Some women like to exaggerate. [195]

VIRGINIA: Gullibility will be their downfall: showing too much lessens the effect; better to let them guess.

CHOUFLEUR: Yes, a little bit, to let people know there is no fraud...

VIRGINIA: Oh, these are the real thing alright...

CHOUFLEUR: Yes ma'am, I understand.

The dressmaker finished dressing the Duquesa, whose under garments revealed beauties that were dutifully celebrated by the sweet-talking dressmaker. As a faithful client, even if she were less beautiful or even ugly, she would still receive similar praise from that mouth. The dressmaker normally stands in for the servant who was sent away from the room so as not to disturb this special confidence and with this operation finished, she placed the ubiquitous dress on an elegant platter and covered it with a shiny silk cloth. Then she called on one of the lovely apprentices brought along for the occasion who waited outside of the boudoir to come take the package.

Clearly such functions as making house calls and playing the servant are not usually performed by a classy dressmaker, who is instead substituted for by one of her underlings; but such exceptional distinctions are later worth a handful of coins in the account. This and other plusses of privilege end up contributing to more than one husband's ruin; for not many can endure them. Woman sets the tone in fashion, it is true; but the spouse be damned if he is not very well monetarily endowed! [196]

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUQUESA FINDS OUT

“My suspicions were true after all,” Virginia said to herself after the dressmaker left.

“Thanks to the Baronesa’s loose lips I now know it’s true that the Duque is a fixture at my dressmaker’s shop. Is he trying to replace the boys in Carlota’s heart? I’ll try to find out. Maybe this could free me from his pestering.

“As for Choufleur, her reluctance and her appearance, her attempted cover-up says it all. Of course she wouldn’t reveal any more; and any new questions on my part would only have helped call off the hunt.”

The Baronesa Virginia is referring to was an old widowed chatterbox addicted to slanderous gossip who Virginia visited for updates on the intimate lives and adventures of the ladies and characters of the court.

Although the Baronesa was rather good-looking, she tried to hide her years by force of makeup and beauty products. She was fond of young men, *if they were elegant and of society*, and had them wrapped around her finger; and since she was filthy rich, she could ensure their devotion to her even if they became *beloved disasters*, as she calls them.

In turn, this ever-rotating group came and went; forever taking off out of boredom or on a lark and then returning like prodigal sons. Some obeyed the flightiness of their planetary cores, others obeyed their centrifugal [197] impulses. Although in nearly every case they returned to the fold worn-out. These men were but so many echoes of the scandalous chronicle that kept her in the know regarding her favorite treat: the lives of others.

* * *

Everyone sang along to the *habaneras* and danced to intimate polkas in a public dance hall filled to capacity. This hall was livelier than others of higher society because it attracted the most people who loved to dance.

Many attendees wore elegant, satin domino costumes along with masks for a heightened mystique, intended to hide the presence of some lady or another not of that locale. In turn, many uncovered, pretty and seductive feminine faces were there to be seen as well. Mystery on the part of Eve's daughters was not always protected by the hood and mask of an extravagant domino costume, for there were also more modest regalia, donned by women who would not dare to come otherwise.

At the building's front door stopped a decent carriage, albeit a coach for hire, from which two masked, aristocratic looking women descended.

We will soon recognize them in spite of their hooded cloaks and masks.

THE ONE: What are we doing here?

THE OTHER: Just relax.

THE ONE: But...

THE OTHER: Didn't I tell you I was going to take you to the masquerade?

THE ONE: But what is this place?

THE OTHER: Why it's the famous Capellanes.¹⁸

THE ONE: What! [198]

THE OTHER: Hush! It's a masquerade ball just like any other.

¹⁸ The Capellanes dance hall was renowned for extravagant dances held during the 1850's in Madrid.

THE ONE: I didn't imagine it would be like this.

THE OTHER: More or less, everybody goes to one or another, the trick is to find the most expensive ticket and the most luxurious domino. Don't tell Padre Benito. For him any dance is despicable, whether it's at a respectable or high crested private hall or not. Masks and dance! What horror! For some people, the world must be nothing but tears, or boredom which is the same.

The two ladies entered the dance hall, all the while trying rigorously to maintain their disguises.

The audience abounded in seamstresses and petty dressmakers, as well as theatrical performers, among whom there were a few choristers and extras.

A contingent of second tier ladies' men and mistresses was also present. The first tier prefers the dances at the *Teatro Real*. This is not to say that one group never attends the other dance, it is simply a matter of feeling superior in one's own locale, nothing more. Such variations are purely contingent, and depend only on circumstance. Thus the groups rise or fall in status, according to the times or fickle luck.

Our readers must have recognized by now their two friends the Duquesa de la Verbena and the *Condesa* del Cierzo. You might have also guessed, and this is too simple, the reason that brought the pair to the dance, principally the Duquesa. She imagined that she would find her husband the Duque there, or better put, she would catch him in the act.

Other men found there, though, were not so discreet and they approached the ladies one after the other, as if trying to identify species of otherworldly birds whose behavior and appearance were patently obvious.

Our ladies had to expend quite an effort to avoid these pests. Eventually, however, the petitioners were convinced that their attempts at gallantry [199] were not accepted and, as stubborn as the ladies were about not being recognized, it was better to leave them in peace and to turn in pursuit of other women who were less determined to be left alone.

The tumultuous crowd pulsed to a popular *habanera* as the ladies searched in vain for Carlota the dressmaker, who Virginia suspected was having an affair with the Duque.

If she was at the dance, her determination to not be recognized was only natural.

This was not the Duquesa's first time visiting this locale for this same purpose. She had also visited other dances, for the same purpose, and for several nights she had been chasing a surprise.

The investigation was beginning to wear them out and since this was the last night to be devoted to this cause, she wanted to take advantage of the occasion until she was convinced.

Besides dancing, who knows what exactly was going on there; something trying to hide behind that name. Dancing served as a pretext. Innocence could pass as foolishness, if only it was not aware that it was guilty of innocence; and mischief has a long record of trying to pass as naïve. The people danced and danced; first severe *habaneras*, then *intimate* polkas. As our Duquesa grew tired of not finding what she

sought, she began to imagine she was in another place. She headed with the Condesa to the restaurant as a last recourse.

“Hot!” someone could have cried if she were in a game of hide and seek. A couple was dining at one of the less visible tables. They conversed affectionately wearing only hoods and no masks. The Duquesa recognized Carlota at first sight.

“There they are,” she said to Matilde, “let’s hide before we scare away the fish.”

[200]

The discussion was so warm and involving that Carlota did not notice she had been spotted without her mask.

Although other groups were dining there, each was occupied with itself and the couple Virginia was after had let down its guard. Virginia promptly retreated to a convenient site that allowed her to see and not be seen which gave Carlota and her accomplice no chance to realize they were being watched.

“You see, my sweet,” the Duque said with his back to the rest of the crowd and therefore not wearing his mask, “you see you should not be upset with me. I will give you away at your wedding and I promise you a splendid gift.”

“I do not think ill of your intentions, and if it is true that acts are love, then I must already be very thankful toward you.”

“But you do not show it.”

“What!”

“So far you have shown no interest in repaying my love with the very indulgence I have asked of you. You flatter me with four sweet words and a little cuddling; yet you blush all the while. That is all I have managed from you.”

“And that is not enough?”

“Not even close.”

“Well, what else can someone give who is soon to be married and wants to behave as she should?”

“And if for a wedding gift I present you a good dowry?”

How tempting! The young woman lowered her head in a gesture somewhere between prudish and pensive.

“Very well!” exclaimed a woman’s voice quietly, but in a firm tone, resonating from behind a curtain located next to the Duque. Suddenly, and without giving him a chance to reply, the two ladies appeared at the table.

Matilde’s face was still covered, but Virginia tore off her mask to reveal the enraged visage of a Melpómene, the Muse of Tragedy. [201]

We are not sure whether this tragic face was sincere or not; it seemed to be so, and the Duque took it as such.

“Sir,” Virginia said to him in a muffled voice, loud enough only for both to hear, without provoking a scandal in the room. “I have seen and heard it all. You are despicable, and from now on are unworthy of being my husband. All ties between us are broken. Let’s go, Condesa, I have nothing more to say.”

She spoke and covered her face again with the mask before leaving the room and the dance, followed by Matilde. The Duque and Carlota were left speechless.

She had met her objective; and upon climbing into the first carriage for hire that appeared, she burst out in mocking laughter:

“He fell for it just as I intended.” [202]

CHAPTER XV

SEEING AND BEING SEEN

The scene occurred in the Teatro Real on opera night. The great pains taken over sets and costumes that is catching on in the production of operas, once provoked someone to say that opera is no longer simply music and lyrics, it is also an exhibition of painting and fine arts. In this particular theater's case, one could add that it is also an exhibition of ladies in low-cut, bejeweled and beautiful costumes.

Virginia was one among many.

The name of the opera being performed here does not matter. What counts is hearing from time to time some agreeable sounds, flattering the eyes with fantastically luxuriant sets; and flaunting the vain satisfaction of being a theater season-ticket holder, implying wealth, luxury, and fashion. In this arena the production is rivaled in splendor by the spectators themselves, who are as much a part of the spectacle for one another as are the actors on stage.

Virginia had resolved to live the single woman's or widow's life while still married.

Her husband could not let this happen.

The Duquesa's box was teeming with the cream of the crop of young men from the court given her preference for their company over that of the ladies, save rare exceptions. This can be easily explained in that [203] although it might be more dangerous to keep company with young men than other women, by doing so Virginia was less inconvenienced by frivolity, pretention, and rivalry. In effect, she reigned over her circle without competition.

All of this infuriated the Duque more out of spite than jealousy.

The ring of brilliant fools encircling Virginia did not impede her from reflecting internally on what could occur only in her mind.

In fact, who among the audience could imagine that the radiant Duquesa was none other than an otherworldly spirit that came to this one not by birth, but by throwing another spirit from life without killing its body?

“I am quite extraordinary,” she said to herself. “So many people here must have visited this place under another form without knowing it! Some who today appear as men were as women before; perhaps from these boxes some of those singers or dancers would pretend to scorn those who once were what they are today. All are extras whether here or there. And so the world turns! Who knows? That unpleasant-looking chorister with such a lowly role to fulfill in the spectacle might have been a *prima donna* or minister of the court or even perhaps a sovereign in some other theater on another planet! As for me, how could I think any of this was implausible?”

“When I was a man and I called myself Póstumo, and the month’s pay was already spoken for or late, I used to sit in one of those seats down in front and look with envy on those who now sit in these luxurious boxes.

“Back then I came exclusively for the opera. I still find it enjoyable. After all, it is pleasing to the ear and is art available to all, but my social position, my current sex, and the tendencies of this ladies’ body make me simply one among many. I’m just one more of these fools who come for anything and everything except Art.”

And speaking of Virginia the Jerezana's¹⁹ body, it caught a glimpse, as was customary, of Salazar in his [204] seat near the orchestra. Even though he did not dare visit the box, in order to avoid alarming the Duque, he did not for an instant take his eyes from Virginia's, as if listening to music of her gaze through his pupils. In turn, in obeying the voluptuous and womanly tendencies of her body, she returned his gaze in kind with her exceptionally beautiful eyes. Music coming from beloved and bewitching eyes surely belongs to a celestial world. All the poetic variety of sound served as a language between those two souls that became increasingly eloquent in its silence. Both hearts merged into a single chord.

The Baronesa popped into Virginia's box and clipped the wings of those two souls, interrupting the silent voice of two hearts. Luckily for them the curtain, another Baronesa, fell as well, thus erasing the sweet fictions from the captivated spectators' eyes.

After the obligatory greetings and caresses, the Baronesa put her mouth, or better yet, her scissors, to work, much to Virginia's delight.

She promptly began with the neighboring box, the Condesa de Astas de Oro, or "Golden Shaft". She earned this moniker because her husband, ruined by luxury and consumed by debt, never asked the woman (what a tactful man!) what little magic wand she thought he used to pay for the ostentatious things she bought for the house. Instead, he resigned himself to live in splendor, as if his debts were being miraculously paid and all that opulence was the result of some spell.

¹⁹ *Jerezano/a*: from Jerez in Cádiz province of Andalucía (Andalusia) in southern Spain.

“And the other night she was one of those who applauded most during *El médico de su honra*”²⁰.

“Maintaining appearances is strenuous labor,” replied the Baronesa.

“Even if it makes a good impression,” said Virginia, [205] “so much applause is more a jab at her husband than anything else.”

The Baronesa then fixed herself on another box. A young and beautiful woman was dressed in considerable elegance and luxury which set off her natural attractions, yet her face revealed that she was dissatisfied with herself. She seemed distracted and melancholy. Her face and careless *no sé qué* evidenced the virus of a moral infirmity. The Baronesa revealed the cause of that woman’s hidden suffering, and of the smile she forced to welcome an important figure who entered her box.

“Ah yes, the Bribiesca girl, that young and unsuspecting thing. Her husband sold her to that character we were just discussing who is the soul of the political situation.”

“She’ll learn to deal with her luck. If today it’s a repugnant old man, tomorrow it’s a young seducer; and she might be so adept at seeing what’s coming, going along with it, and staying on, that could be one of those attractive female chameleons who find the means to dominate any situation. If she is pretty and crafty, that is enough and then some.”

At that point the curtain arose.

²⁰ *El médico de su honra* (1637) is a play by the Spanish Golden Age playwright and poet Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681). This secular drama depicts the story of a surgeon who kills his wife out of fear that her conduct might stain his honor. See the English translation by Donald Hindley and Dian Fox, *The Physician of His Honour/El Medico de su Honra* (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1997).

The game between Salazar and Virginia resumed. With their eyes being so occupied in so sweet a task, they could not see the two other eyes contemplating them with jealous rage. [206]

CHAPTER XVI

VIRGINIA IS NOT FOND OF CERTAIN SOLUTIONS

We do not know whether the staring contest referred to earlier was more a result of the Duquesa's or Salazar's intentions; but the telegraphic gazes certainly did not please the Duque and served as a pretext for him to believe his honor had been offended.

With the performance finished, all climbed into their respective carriages, and Virginia, more pensive and melancholy than usual, arrived at her home, dismissed her maid, and threw herself on the bed half-dressed as she did not have the spirits for undressing all the way.

Once there, she abandoned herself to dreams of heavens and paradises. She had yet to regain her composure after indulging her imagination in so much delight and she wanted to continue dreaming at any cost. If we were to question Virginia regarding the cause of all of this, her indecision would frustrate her ability to supply us with a satisfactory answer. Virginia's detachment, which she herself was not fully aware of, had more to do with boredom than love. Was this coming from Póstumo or Virginia? We cannot know. Presumably, though, it is through the body that the devil normally traps a person's soul.

Virginia was still daydreaming when she heard footsteps in her room. In a state of alarm, she arose and saw Salazar imploringly on his knees.

VIRGINIA: *(after convincing herself that this [207] was no figment of her imagination)*

How on Earth do you enter here?

SALAZAR: Love opened the doors for me.

VIRGINIA: My maid or the servants must have betrayed me... That is the only possible answer.

SALAZAR: What does it matter? My presence alone in this bedroom should prove that my love is great enough to overcome any difficulty.

VIRGINIA: (*upset*) It is not entirely your fault.

SALAZAR: Of course, for those beautiful eyes are complicit. I have been consumed by their fire, a heavenly and delightful fire I would say, but now it seems a hellish fire judging by its irresistible force...Oh! Virginia!

VIRGINIA: Leave now whichever way you came or I'll think that your only longing is to threaten me. The Duque likes to spy when the opportunity arises, and you are so foolish you make it easy for him.

SALAZAR: Leave, with happiness so near? Impossible!

VIRGINIA: I will scream. Yes, I will scream and there will be such a scandal you would become the butt of all the court's jokes and stories.

SALAZAR: What will you gain from screaming? Who will come to your aid? I have taken precautions in order to not be surprised. My love...

VIRGINIA: Your love is a miserable desire, unworthy of any other name. You have taken precautions? You told yourself, she is an unhappy, helpless woman all alone and all I need to do is to keep pressing, reach her and conquer her... You are mistaken.

SALAZAR: Virginia!

VIRGINIA: Come one step closer and I'll open that window onto the street and yell...

No, I will not be intimidated. My soul is very bold. The body may obey reprehensible impulses, but the soul is not overcome by petty tricks. [208]

Virginia's voice trembled as she spoke. Her heart pounded and her manner contradicted her words.

VIRGINIA: Really, for the love of God, Salazar, get out of here. This room is not too high up from the street. You can leave through there... Don't you hear someone calling?...

THE DUQUE: Open the door.

SALAZAR: It's the Duque! They gave us away!

VIRGINIA: He obviously followed your trail and took the same measures.

SALAZAR: As legitimate as the rights of a husband may be, I will defend myself and I will defend you.

VIRGINIA: I do not need defending... Go on, get out.

She was opening the window while saying this in order for Salazar to climb through, just as the bedroom door opened and in came the Duque.

THE DUQUE: Where is that scoundrel?

VIRGINIA: Look for him someplace else.

While the Duque searched the room with pistol in hand, Virginia seized the moment and ran out through the open door.

When he saw that Virginia was escaping, the Duque fired a shot at her. The bullet shattered the glass panes of the door through which Virginia had just exited.

Virginia knew that the Duque would follow her and managed to dodge him. The servants, alarmed by the shot, quickly arrived on the scene. At finding the outraged Duque there, they were deeply confused, which Virginia again used to her advantage. She was out on the street before the police, who wasted no time, could arrive and make leaving difficult. In fleeing the bedroom she kicked a newspaper and picked it up, suspecting that it belonged to the Duque and tucked it away swiftly.

Once out on the street Virginia realized she [209] was only half dressed and had no capital other than her costly wedding ring. She thought of her friend Matilde and headed for her house.

The newspaper we mentioned contained the following paragraph outlined in bold ink which she read as soon as she could after arriving at Matilde's house.

And honor, which is no less than the supreme form of dignity, is today the true base of morals, especially in those who are not bold enough to rise up to the abstract and harsh notion of responsibility. No matter how rapidly the foundations of traditional moral values may be crumbling before our eyes, we must bolster what remains and build upon it a true religion. We are not concerned with trying to decide whether the actions of the protagonist in The Gordian Knot are justifiable on abstract moral grounds. Therefore, if you find yourself in a similar situation as this character, we do not hesitate in advising you to cut the knot with the saber placed in your hands by the law of honor. It is imperative to do so before divorce comes along (Why not say it?) to try and moralize marriage or repair its faults. If infidelity were always handled in this manner, strumpets would not be so numerous and womanizers would not be so audacious.

After reading this, Virginia decided to flee from a land where authors, instead of asking for divorce *frankly*, generally applauded the prescriptions of *El Médico de su honra*, and where those calling themselves critics could approve of and even recommend such actions! [210]

CHAPTER XVII

VIRGINIA IN PARIS

Here we are in the vast city on the Seine. Virginia has fled here seeking refuge from the wrath of a jealous husband who is encouraged in his furor by the vicious and conservative customs of bloody traditions, and even to a certain extent the laws of our time, not yet exempt from the feudal spirit of the past.

Virginia was joined by her faithful friend Matilde who resolved in kind in the end to do away with her conjugal imposition. To be honest, we can say that this escape did not upset her husband in the least. He was tired of her and eager for space: so, then, a few hundred kilometers between them could do no harm. They had grown weary of bearing the yoke of marriage, made heavy by incompatible tastes, tendencies, and interests. Here is a case in which absolute divorce, as established in some nations of Northern Europe and North America, would have been appropriate, for their continued relationship could only result in mutual hatred, the likes of which love was incapable of mending.

It is true that they remained united by sacrament, yet they were free in practice and the law should have acknowledged as much. This situation inconvenienced her chiefly due to the fact that for her, the marriage was intact *ab aeterno*, forever and always, and therefore she faced accusations of adultery for any affection she might incur.

The same was not the case for the husband, for he, counting on social impunity, had for some time been engaging [211] in unfaithful love and frivolous pastimes.

Nonetheless, his recurring debaucheries would have altered greatly in moral character had he been completely free.

Virginia sought refuge at Matilde's house after fleeing her own and found her friend quite willing to follow along and emancipate herself from a husband she did not love and who was impossible to love sincerely.

All the capital the two friends could take with them was the valuable ring Virginia wore, Matilde's jewelry, and her best luggage. Clothing and fineries could be easily shared between the two by means of slight modifications as they were of similar physical proportions.

They arrived in Paris and found a well-appointed hotel, decent but not too showy out of necessity to avoid attracting too much attention.

They knew no one and were seen as adventurers, they gave fake names, and they began unwittingly working their way into the society of those who found themselves in similar circumstances. And that is how, without further ado, they ended up joining the famous *demimonde* circle, so well photographed by Dumas Jr. who compared it to a basket of half-damaged peaches that were placed by the seller in such a way so as to hide the rotten spots.

In that circle they passed as two widowed, first cousin Spanish Marquesas. Virginia used the last name Monte-Bello, and Matilde's became Río-Seco. Nobody actually believed these were their real titles, but all the women were in similar circumstances and accepted them as *nombres de guerra* to conceal their true identities.

Most of that little world, which any inexperienced foreigner would mistake for true aristocracy with its ostentation and worldly flare, was comprised of ladies of

questionable style. They all claimed to be the widows of illustrious figures, and [212] those who appeared to be married and accompanied by their husbands tended to not be legitimately so. Among the bunch there were a few beauties who caused a great stir. But how peculiar that many of them should hold foreign titles or names, especially from Russia and England! This circle was within inches of living in open debauchery.

Our two friends were found in one of the circle's gatherings. People sang, chatted, played, and you might even say loved except that Cupid's love was second to Mammon's wealth and greed. The form covered the content perfectly and was purely a pretext.

Lights shined in luxuriant and elegantly adorned salons. Beautifully attired ladies at once flaunted and served as the best ornament. The gentleman echoed the elegance and mood of such a showy gathering.

We noted that most of the women said they were married or widowed. In general none of them were single.

Some rich youngsters were there, pleasing and easy on the eye; as were many big men from abroad who were not to be outshined. The latter came to be the true rulers of those parties.

The woman of the house presented herself as the widow of a French high-level court magistrate.

Piles of gold shimmered on the green felt.

Poor Virginia was losing at the moment; and when she was winning - which was rare - someone inevitably tossed in another coin to up the ante.

Virginia and the inexperienced Matilde grew tired of losing and so left the table and went to a sofa. Once seated, they were swarmed with aspiring suitors, both young and old, who were obsequious and overbearing, as they tend to be toward available women of ambiguous status.

Virginia did not have any feed for the boy-chicks and so focused on the roosters instead who were more respectable people. Virginia, due to her age and self-esteem, was not interested in any romantic calamities. [213]

Poor, over-pious Matilde also tried to escape.

They both felt out of place. Matilde seemed scared of herself. Truth be told, they entered that circle because there was no way for them to enter any other. Virginia felt helpless and unsure of how to be rid of all of those pests, and she was feeling very indecisive about giving herself over to the lives of others. She walked over to the momentarily abandoned piano, and with Matilde's accompaniment began singing some arias they had learned together by ear in their idle times in Madrid. This was enough to attract many of those who were not playing cards.

And oh the admiration, the bravos, the celebration of that refreshingly toned voice, that passionate accent, that energetic phrasing! Virginia thought of herself as an artist or at least well disposed towards being one. At first she took the applause as simply flattery. Then, she gradually came to believe it was sincere. That soul, displeased with its surroundings, became even more expressive, with all its many secrets to tell through the vagueness of song. When she finished she was very satisfied with herself; she felt called upon and even selected. This was all a revelation for her and

Matilde. It went over as real entertainment. Virginia felt like an artist as in another time she had felt beautiful, and truly she was both.

Matilde's private and sincere congratulations served to ratify her belief. "You were incredible," she said. "You're a finch, a nightingale."

That night Virginia was lulled by glory and could not sleep. She cheerfully figured that she had spent all of her francs, the product of the magnificent ring and all that remained of her estate, and she dreamed of angelic choirs, wind harps, and maddening rounds of applause. [214]

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO FRIENDS AND THE DEMIMONDE

Following the revelation that she was a singer, Virginia did nothing but study. She dedicated herself frantically to music. Her voice was full, rich, admirably steady, and of a sonorous and agreeable timbre. Add to that a naturally perfect pitch and self expression as an artist and she had everything nature could offer. Execution and mastery were the only remaining elements needed to compliment her indispensable latent capabilities.

She no longer dallied at gatherings. Her singing was celebrated and her name was on everyone's lips. She was on the path to fame.

As for Matilde, she had not entered willingly into the demimonde and felt little or no satisfaction. She would have gladly retreated from this circle except she was dying of boredom. Unfortunately she did not share her partner's great enthusiasm for Art. Nor could she easily return to the devout life. She had strayed too far with her escape to now bow at a confessor's feet. In that case the first order would surely be to reunite with her husband, something she was not willing to do.

The two friends frequented theaters. The life of ease and luxury steadily dissipated the fruits of Matilde's jewels and garments; and as large as it was, this source constituted their only funding. No amount can cover living somewhat comfortably [216] in Paris, where luxuries are powerful temptations that end up turning into true necessities. And so it was that their resources ran thin.

Scarcity, followed by urgent necessity, soon came calling at their door. It was obligatory to do away with the *essentials* before going without the *extras* because these terms trade places in the way of life of some cities.

One night a gentleman gifted them some oranges and bonbons at a concert. Matilde burst into tears! What a luxury; a carriage and all, and that day they had gone without food!

They even purchased their tickets for the concert, for they still were not of the kind that, in certain places, gain entry free of charge, or are paid to lure in the male audience. They had a few hundred francs remaining; but they were for the extras. You might ask what they were doing there. In all honesty, if they were not planning to hunt for lovers, then... But not even they knew. That is how extravagant life can be. One gets carried away and ends up finding boredom when seeking amazement. When fleeing from boredom and searching for amusement, the first is the only thing to be found, for amusement is impossible in souls that are inherently boring.

In those days they made do with a light breakfast and meager dinner; but this was not enough to fend off hunger, and it was cold.

The house servants received good salaries and the pair had agreed to keep them on no matter what. Ultimately, though, they had to be dismissed.

They moved from house and neighborhood, withdrawing from all company.

They served as each other's maidservants, and they thought about working for hire as dressmakers. That profession, though, in which so many women worked, offered its laborers no credit or capital! [216]

Women in Paris have some, although still not many, professions at hand, and in these they kill each other, economically speaking, through competition. Besides, our two friends were not physically or morally made out for such a fight. They were simply unaccustomed to work and their souls did not possess the courage to aptly handle whatever may occur. Their situation became more and more desperate, and they were on the brink of vice which, when it is lucrative, offers a competitive market even in Paris.

Matilde spent many nights working by lamp light, which she was thankful to find. After being holed up and working hard for many days, unhappy days for her stomach, Matilde slipped...and fell into the arms of an opulent Russian Count.

The two friends parted ways.

Matilde was restored to greatness, thanks to the tycoon's copious rubles. Luxury once again, but this time it was not claimed by her noble and inherited income, but rather by pragmatism, social contagion, the temptations of golden vice, and why not also say hunger?

What do you see, other than the specter of hunger, dear readers, in great cities where, thanks to the imperious necessity to eat, all is pleasure and happiness for those who have the means to exploit the hunger of others?

Are you well served at home, in the hotel, on your outings?

Hunger.

Oh, the ballerinas, the choristers, the beautiful houses, and the happy smiles!

Hunger.

How many theater extras at a dime a dozen!

Hunger.

So many prodigies of industry and the arts!

Hunger.

So much prostitution of the body and soul!

Hunger.

If we were to consider, if we could see the marks on every object, on each exquisite work we enjoy, left by the tears, the sighs, the anxiety, and the sleepless nights spent [217] on their creation. If these works could talk and could recount to us the bereaved histories of their inception! We would hear tales of hunger and misery in order so that one part of humanity might find pleasure in the suffering of the rest.

How can there be pleasure for one, without deprivation for the other and many more.

Oh miserable world! There must be another where things do not happen this way.

If only we could claim in consolation that this happens only in big cities and thank God we still have the villages.

Reflect on it, though, dear reader. In the countryside the same thing occurs albeit differently.

Oh, if we could only protect children from exploitation! Yet, steps are being taken to this end.

If only there was no prostitution of women! This still remains to be accomplished.

The day that this last goal is achieved, we believe, will be the day that sees the end of the exploitation of children, and possibly even hunger. Something would be fixed, but how can this be achieved as long as there is misery?

Let us proceed to the end with our story, or rather, Virginia's unique story.

Hunger had sounded the call of *everyman for himself* in the home of the two friends.

They managed to maintain friendly relations, except that Matilde was ashamed of her impromptu wellbeing to the point of tears. She felt very far from happy.

Virginia also pondered whether she should fall or not into the hands of an English nabob who was taken by her beauty and enchanting song. Her enthusiasm for music, however, distracted her from hunger and the tempting suggestions of her suitor. Nothing can attract the spirit and can keep it fully occupied to the extent that it forgets about the body. To overcome this tendency there is nothing like vanity, ambition, self-esteem, or the purposes and goals of life, whichever you prefer to call it. [218]

Be careful, though, for a spirit to be only half-entertained is almost as dangerous as complete emptiness. All entryways to the top floor must be shut off to vice or the Devil. As wily as he is he might slip in through a crack and boy, are we in for it if he finds the room empty! [219]

CHAPTER XIX

EDIFYING DISCUSSION BETWEEN VIRGINIA AND HER GUARDIAN

One night the Guardian returned to pay a visit to Virginia, but who would council poor Matilde? Her reason, atrophied as a result of being brought up in a world of dolls, a world of bows, ribbons, and frivolities, could not enlighten her or guide her with a strong hand. Women rarely have any greater and permanent interests in life that occupy and absorb the soul's faculty. In general, emptiness predominates in their minds. Virginia might have a man inside, and even still she was on the verge of collapse.

What would the Angel say? Apparently the following:

THE ANGEL: You are to blame for what is happening to Matilde.

VIRGINIA: Can't she make her own decisions? Why should I have to answer for someone else's actions?

THE ANGEL: You have been a bad example; your friendship has infected her.

VIRGINIA: By the way, is it also my fault that she was educated in the convent and he at the University? Have I perhaps sown discord in her marriage? When I spoke of leaving Madrid, the Devil had already cleared the path in her soul and I found her willing to follow me.

THE ANGEL: Aren't you nearly ready to do the same as her?

VIRGINIA: My fear of hell holds me back quite well. [220] Only a strong woman, when suffering such deprivations and sleepless nights dedicated to work, could do as I and resist thus far the golden temptations offered by my Englishman. By the way, he isn't old, or ugly, or lacking in personal charm. This could go

on for some time, as desperate and spiteful as I feel; not towards the Englishman, but rather the horned and tailed demon himself.

THE ANGEL: All the better for you in the other life if you remain in danger. You shall be rewarded as a strong woman.

VIRGINIA: Yes, but all of this singing and more singing without ever eating... Even goldfinches eat regularly.

THE ANGEL: Heed the advice given by the music instructor God has afforded you. You have the throat and talent to be an artist, which is no small thing.

VIRGINIA: It strikes me as odd, my angelic friend, that you should give me such advice when you know that this teacher has agreed to get me on stage with one condition: that I be his lover.

THE ANGEL: Well, try to strike out on your own path. You're talented enough.

VIRGINIA: Businessmen notice an attractive face and a dazzling figure more often than artistic merit, and as I have no name...

THE ANGEL: But you have the one, is that not enough to attain the other?

VIRGINIA: Thanks for the compliment.

THE ANGEL: No, you have no reason to brag. Remember, that little body is not yours but was stolen.

VIRGINIA: In the meantime, aren't I the one who moves it from here to there?

THE ANGEL: All in all, you are no fool. Take advantage of the opportunities fate has offered you. Be bold; use what you have to free yourself from misery and its effects.

VIRGINIA: This is a sad situation, and now I've had the chance to see it clearly. A woman is treated as [221] a beautiful little creature to be adorned with special, childish superficialities so she can captivate, or rather, so she might trick a man into becoming her husband or lover. As for any sort of opinions, women are educated to have none and to go along subserviently with those of whichever gallant happens to be nearby. This is a man's world.

THE ANGEL: Although in a way women govern it; and with no responsibility which is the worst, because their influence is felt more than it is seen.

VIRGINIA: By believing we are dangerously seductive, men make us even more dangerous. How is that our fault?

THE ANGEL: You are all fickle.

VIRGINIA: As is anybody who is denied the right to think for herself.

THE ANGEL: Women are hypocrites.

VIRGINIA: As are all who must hide their thoughts if they oppose the little bit that they are allowed.

THE ANGEL: Schemers.

VIRGINIA: As are all who must confine their actions to a strict code that makes anything a woman does a sin. Even the most intelligent woman, for example, the famous Stael had to praise the abject state imposed on her sex, doubtlessly out of fear. There is no other explanation for her assertion that a woman with no religion is no woman at all; as if it had been established for women alone. In other words, men may cynically emancipate themselves from religion with

impunity, as a mere knick-knack belonging to and indispensable only to women.

THE ANGEL: What is the point of all this chatter? That's just the way it is. Are you the chosen one to come and change things? Furthermore, if you are not simply a woman, but an *en-womaned* man, why do you care if they go to hell? Let them put up with it. You know those who are born as women resign themselves perfectly, as much as you'd like to imagine they will follow you in this madness. But I already know you are incorrigible. As a man you were a visionary afflicted [222] with an obsession to better the world. No wonder the same thing should happen to you now as a woman.

VIRGINIA: Because now I clearly see the injustice weighing over my current sex. Now I can forgive Elisa de Doble Anzuelo, my wife when I was a man. Instead of just two hooks, I'd use fifteen hooks and make out fine.

THE ANGEL: That is very wrong. You don't know whether the owner of the body you stole would have done that. You should not impose sin on that which is not yours.

VIRGINIA: This body? What a nuisance! I've received no shortage of advice in this flesh.

THE ANGEL: Come now, let's stop this discussion. It can only bog us down.

VIRGINIA: From this day forward I declare myself the champion of ill-fated women.

The worst is that I can't say to men, "I know you; I too once was a man." They wouldn't believe me and would take it as a slur. They think they can make me

the object of their jokes and passions as with the rest of my sex. From now on,
I will set out to make fools of men.

THE ANGEL: Do what you may; but be careful in what you risk. That is all I have to
say to you, and goodbye, because I know you could go on forever. [223]

CHAPTER XX

VIRGINIA THE ARTIST

Virginia arranged to sing nightly in one of the most popular cafés. This brought in enough for her to fend off hunger, and nothing more. In terms of wellbeing, this life resembled very little the one she led when playing the true Duquesa, or the fake Marquesa.

She attracted quite an audience to the café with her fluid and masterful execution of Spanish, Italian, and French songs, and her foreign accent and poor pronunciation did not result in less applause. Needless to say, the owner was overjoyed with the Spaniard.

This gave the hacks something to write about and soon enough, half of Paris flocked to hear the marvel, the café diva. This artist also happened to be a beautiful and attractive woman, and theater impresarios promptly began soliciting the *Bella Jerezana*, as she was known.

Incidentally, Virginia's origins inspired some droll hack to compare the excellence of her voice and persona with the famous wine of her land, a comparison that was picked up by the public and only boosted the singer's celebrity status. The excellence of the wine contributed to the woman's fame; wine and woman, two delicious enemies of man.

Virginia of course then set herself up in a second-class theater. All the while the Englishman did not cease to be of service with the [224] influence his sterling pounds garnered. This allowed him to secure advantageous contracts, with even more motivation as other companies fought to acquire the British currency.

The young gallants and chatterboxes of the aristocracy and, even better, of the plutocracy, turned the backstage of the theater where she sang into their *rendezvous* point. The bidding began with the applause, and each man offered more to win the favor of the *prima donna* or *virtuosa* (a name of controversial origin that Italians give to first-rate vocalists, who in most cases turn out to be puzzling antitheses). Fashion, like fortune, is mad and tyrannical, and Virginia came to be the queen of fashion. With this scepter she needed nothing more.

Her debut in comedic opera was a splendid triumph. The public applauded wildly, the bachelors competed in cheers and applause.

She had set out to make fools of men. She allowed herself the Englishman's protection, yet kept him on a tight rein in the platonic sphere. Her wiles were more than enough for this task. Along with a woman's instinctive shrewdness, which Virginia had acquired upon ceasing to be male and passing to the other gender, she also possessed a man's malice and knowledge of his heart and weaknesses. Thus she was able to keep her Englishman hopeful and more obliging.

And so she began the life of an artist, but a merry artist, without disappointing the flock of obsequious admirers and suitors. She wished to study woman's condition further, as she had set out to do, and so she trained another artist to imitate herself. Virginia dressed as a man and attended along with her cohort the debaucheries of the unfortunate or lost beauties of the city. She then became convinced, by what these women confided in her, that in prostituting women, men prostitute themselves. In this situation the woman are nothing other than a reflection of the miserable whims and

inconceivable baseness of the other sex. Therefore, women are right in paying contempt with contempt, and so the cycle continues. [225]

Returning to Virginia in the theater, her reputation grew among the public as a singer to the degree that she rescinded one contract in favor of an even better one. This of course elevated her to the category of the top warblers of Paris, and therefore the world. Every rose has its thorn, though, and envy emerged alongside success, encouraged by those who, disillusioned in their aspirations, needed to furiously applaud others out of spite in an ill-willed attempt to torment the performer's pride. And these spiteful individuals succeeded in a certain degree, for the public tends to be influenced by appearance, of which Virginia was well aware. And farce resulting from skillfully plotted intrigue does not fail to injure or torment true merit. It is well known that in the theater the multitude, ever fond of novelty and therefore impressionable, is easily surprised and won over.

Among Virginia's admirers there was a young poet who always followed her, like the Englishman, and who apparently had become one of her fanatics. His name was Alfredo and he did not miss a single performance. When Virginia was not singing he let his head fall and became absorbed in his own thoughts. Familiar with such silent admiration, she would direct all of her songs and especially her solos to him. The shaveling's soul absorbed every single note, like drops of so much celestial nectar. Whenever the curtain fell, he remained in his seat, head down, pensive, solitary and silent, as if nothing existed around him. The theater became [226] a temple for him where she was the divinity and all of his being became absorbed in mystic rapture.

The Englishman, jealous of such passionate admiration, was the first to speak of the young poet with Virginia. [227]

CHAPTER XXI

AN ECCENTRIC ENGLISHMAN EXPRESSES HIS LOVE

THE ENGLISHMAN (*in broken Spanish which for Virginia alone he had set out to learn*): Virginia, it seems that when you sing, the sky opens up for one being who can't possibly love you as much as I. But he has found my secret: that happiness is named Virginia, and apart from her the universe ceases to exist.

VIRGINIA: In all honesty I hadn't noticed.

This was not true, how could such idolatrous and pertinacious admiration go unnoticed?

ENGLISHMAN: That is certainly strange. Anyone would say that the looks you give him spur him on.

VIRGINIA: When I sing, I am inspired by the public in general, and even if it seems as though I'm looking, I see no one. I find myself in a different world than that of the living.

ENGLISHMAN: Well I could swear then that this young man belongs to the same world as your transported soul.

VIRGINIA: Without a doubt he carries my song with him. You say I sing well, don't you?

ENGLISHMAN: Admirably so and to my misfortune or to my happiness, I do not know which. But that song is like a siren's, cursing and enrapturing us all.

VIRGINIA (*bursting with laughter*): Well, that poor [228] young man! Letting himself be pulled along like that. He could crash into a reef and be shipwrecked.

Her seemingly frank and indifferent laughter calmed the Englishman somewhat.

ENGLISHMAN: Ah! Virginia, if you had any heart...

VIRGINIA: I have plenty for everyone? Even you say I sing with such expression, with such soul.

ENGLISHMAN: Heart for me. I adore you, Virginia.

VIRGINIA: Who said I do not adore you? Milord, what do you think, doesn't this corset look good on me?

The Englishman sighed, sad that she should change his favorite topic of conversation as always. At the site of her figure, though, he nearly forgot his woes and responded sorrowfully yet passionately.

ENGLISHMAN: What would not look good on a body that made sin in order to lead souls astray?

VIRGINIA: Jesus! Milord, what are you saying?

ENGLISHMAN: What!

VIRGINIA: Me, Poor little me, lead souls astray? Don't people say that my voice carries them to heaven?

ENGLISHMAN: That is the problem. Your song lifts souls as the eagle lifts its victims; only that when the eagle reaches the summit it takes pleasure in pushing the victim off the edge.

VIRGINIA: About my admirer the poet you mentioned earlier, when will you introduce him to me?

ENGLISHMAN: I would not even think of it. Do you want me to bring someone close to the altar of my idol who could end up running me from the temple?

VIRGINIA: Do not be so hard on yourself, Milord. Do you really find me to be so fickle?

ENGLISHMAN: What do I know!

VIRGINIA: Well I am not. It is curiosity, nothing more. The least I can do is respect his talents.

ENGLISHMAN: Can I consider myself safe?

VIRGINIA: And why not? Have I promised anything to any of the many men who surround me and want me? I am [229] fond and respectful of you and I could never forget that.

ENGLISHMAN: Very well, I shall begin by telling you that the young man who has caught everyone's attention at the theater, except for yours, mysteriously, is a poet like our Moore, like your Bécquer, a melodious harp strummed by the soul. My fears of rivalry will not strip one single laurel from his crown.

VIRGINIA: Can someone so generous to his rivals be fearful of them as well?

ENGLISHMAN: No rival will say that I use tricks or treason in trying to combat him, robbing him of his merit which belongs exclusively to him. If you love me

now or some day, I do not want it to be because you are isolated, nor because no one else came along who is worth as much or more than I. Of course my English eccentricity, which they say we are so prone to, will not bring me to hate a rival. The admiration and love alone that this young man seems to feel for you give him merit, and prove that his chest encloses a first rate soul. I look on him now as a brother in my religion of love. I sympathize with his fate if it is bad, and I will envy him should it be to the contrary. I will bring him to meet you.

VIRGINIA: What a gentleman you are Milord! Bring him, bring him and do not worry.

The Englishman exited and once alone, Virginia exclaimed with a sigh of romantic interest or pity, we can't be sure, that nevertheless was revealing of respect, "Poor Englishman!" [230]

CHAPTER XXII

VIRGINIA REFLECTS ON HER NEW CIRCUMSTANCES

We have already told how Virginia noticed the poet's presence and admiration. And by the way he was not all that bad looking. She took pleasure in singing for him and driving him mad. Too bad she had already taken on the role of avenger of her new sex.

But Virginia was Póstumo, that is to say, good-natured in the midst of it all, and in this matter she felt the same as with the Englishman. In the end she determined to fleece and make a fool out of him. But, nonsense! That was nothing more than a ruse. Perhaps she had set out with brilliant tact. In any case, the Englishman possessed natural qualities that even a soul with little dignity could at least respect. Then along came scrupulousness to dash her plans.

She wanted to be like other artists who begin only wanting applause and end up coveting riches. Unfortunately the world is made up of madmen, if not fools. True merit is allowed to die in the attic, or be hoodwinked of its gold medal. As for singers and dancers, the world strips their cupboards bare.

An artist who begins her career goaded on by hunger or thirst for luxury (be it for herself or for her relations), and who comes to understand that all idolatry is fleeting and that the world will drop her as soon as her voice or the superficialities that contribute to her fame give out, comes to cling to the only thing that can remain after all else: gold. In any case so much applause, praise, and adulation begin to wear on her, [231] and if one day the smoke of attention blinds her then on the next it vanishes because it is no longer novel, or because she sees others lavished with attention for more or less futile reasons. From here she goes on to become selfish or greedy. When

her heart is exploited by some or spent by others she often ends up substituting it with something she judges to be more positive: money. Not enough time had transpired, however, for Virginia to grow tired of glory, or to completely feel its thorns, or to wear out her heart; and everyone's attempts with her were in vain.

Besides, we should remember and repeat that she was Póstumo, or rather, his visionary soul that clung to good whether it was possible or not in this world, and he was prepared to start out as an apostle and end up a martyr or fool, as some spiteful people or egoists in general would say. Upon seeing the young poet and noticing his sincerity, then, she felt too weak for the role of Elisa de Doble Anzuelo she believed to have adopted. If she felt pity for women as victims, upon seeing how much sway she had over that young man, ready to submit to her tyrannical whims, she now pitied men, because with all of their real or fictitious power they end up, all too often, volunteering as toys of the sex they call weak.

She realized that on this planet people make each others' lives miserable by ignoring the voice of natural equality, which is continuously perturbed by concerns that turn women and men into victims and tyrants rather than sisters and brothers.

From this she concluded that if women tend to bear the brunt, it is not due to nature but to society.

Following the rational nature of things, on what grounds can men base their superiority over women? Is it, by chance, based on intellectual might? When, as a celebrated orator says, woman has had as many centuries of equality with man as he has had of supremacy and power over her, only then will he be able to throw back [232] in her face any lack of aptitude that only then would she have had the time and occasion to

prove. Is it due to physical strength? But, aside from the fact that using physical capability as a basis for questions of morality or law would be utterly absurd and would remove such questions from their proper and legitimate terrain, the world should then belong to athletes and day-laborers.

Virginia understood then that if men are capable of something, it is certainly not in the realm of passions or in natural insight, for throughout the history in which they have thus far been the main actors and, therefore, the only ones responsible, they have demonstrated nothing but enslavement of the former or their lack of the latter. After all the years, all the relative liberty they have enjoyed, and all the science they have had at hand, what have they done that is extraordinary or stable? Not much, truly. If woman has helped, the sex that has managed in spite of its servitude must merit something. If to the contrary, let man blame himself for wanting to keep her in serfdom.

When Virginia first met Alfredo the poet, her body notably felt the attractive sympathy that at another time it had felt in the presence of Salazar, not because of his talent, but due to his beautiful and interesting figure. Nevertheless, her soul was absorbed by her love of Art. [233]

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ROMANCE OF A POET IN LOVE

VIRGINIA (*in response to a few verses recited by the poet*): Such beautiful verses!

ALFREDO: An inspired being can do anything. When the soul feels, the word sadly paints. The painting is always inferior to the feeling.

VIRGINIA: In the same sense that a reflection is not entirely the light, you have to consider all that remains ineffable within the soul.

ALFREDO: That is so.

VIRGINIA: And can you reveal the mortal's name, the fortunate muse capable of inspiring such words?

ALFREDO: She is the type of woman who decides on fortune in this life and on the soul in the other.

VIRGINIA: If her name is a secret... I must not be trustworthy...

ALFREDO: If my eyes, if my entire being has been unable to reveal it at certain times, then I deserve it for dreaming of happiness that was not meant for me.

VIRGINIA: You are very easily disillusioned. I am the one who should be truly disappointed. A lady imagines she has worked the wonder of making herself unselfishly admired, and the enthusiast presents himself only once he thinks she is in love with him. The poor actress or singer, or woman who is more pleasing only because she has put herself on display will be sorry if she does not return [234] any of the affection or longing that she inspires! I do not mean you, but you cannot deny that is how it goes.

ALFREDO: Forgive me Virginia; it is not my fault that I was born so mistrustful. When milord Berckley told me you were interested in making my acquaintance, I thought it natural for you to wish to see somebody who admires you so, and nothing more. Unfortunately I noticed in milord what he could not hide and what everybody says: that I was the lucky one. I have come with no hope other than to see you up close and continue loving you in silence. No, I am not one of those beings that the world would call ridiculous if it were not already made up of so many of them. Contemptible beings who would grovel to obtain a woman's favor, like a boy crying for a toy. Should they achieve it, they are the first to humiliate her; and if not, they are driven by spite over defeat to base vengeance. Triumph turns them into insufferable petty tyrants. They attribute to their own merit the fruit of vain obsessions and generous condescension toward women. They are Adonis and Apollo dressed as dunces, and you women are weak or silly enough to encourage them in their vanity. No my lady; my passion is different from what those men feel.

Alfredo's words moved Virginia's heart. She was captivated by such loving affection and admiration. She did not want the poet to cease his adoration of her, but she did not dare encourage him either, to avoid displeasing Lord Berckley who so generously went along with her wishes to meet the poet. Nor was it wise to let down the nobleman whose character and high regard imposed certain considerations on her and whose conduct towards her was worthy only of gratitude. Let's slacken the reins a little, she said to herself, but not let go of the end.

VIRGINIA: When I requested that Lord Berckley introduce you to me, I took you to be the type of being you just mentioned. I wanted to encourage your exaltation to the benefit of my own self-esteem; but upon meeting you, I have seen that you deserve otherwise. [235]

ALFREDO: I was so happy before meeting you. At least every time I saw and heard you I had wonderful dreams and hopes. I lived in an incomprehensible state; but I was happy. To me you were more than a being of this world. You were a star to be contemplated in resigned silence, and since you could never be reached, there was nothing to fear, for nothing was aspired to. Then I was a mortal dreaming of a fleeing angel that had abandoned me.

VIRGINIA: What have I lost at being seen up close? What a letdown for me if I actually was anything other than vainly curious!

ALFREDO: Curiosity. Woman began by frightening off the angel; now she takes pleasure in making her cruelty manifest.

VIRGINIA: Ah! Don't speak that way. You love me, I know it. What is more, I already knew. I see myself and identify with those beautiful verses you attribute me with having inspired and I am honored, even if it is a lie as sweet as it is flattering. But just as only a beautiful soul could sense, the soul of a true poet, who must surely be one among few for he only works with the clay of this world, I must speak as sincerely as you and...

ALFREDO: Disillusion me, isn't that what you were going to say? Why disillusion me? I was fine with my sweet self-deception. Damn reality!

VIRGINIA: Don't take it that way; accept my friendship and who knows... it is as much as I can offer. The way you admire me is so pleasing! But at the same time, even if it pains my soul, I must stop a heart like yours from giving in to feelings that lead to a true disaster. I don't flatter myself thinking that your admiration rests on my merits, no. For hearts prone to sincere love, the merits do not always exist in the idol itself, but in the idolater's mind. Besides I must warn you to cure you of your noble and generous [236] mania. My heart does not belong to me, and since I see certain things all too clearly, I am not at all the one you have dreamed of.

ALFREDO: That was a handsome and categorical speech; impassive, tough, and cutting as an executioner's ax. Bitter reality kills all illusion and shatters the soul. Your words contain truths as cold as death. It seemed impossible to me that from such beautiful lips so much despair could pour forth. It seems a lie that the sweet voice that snatched me from paradise could express words as ruthless as a death sentence.

VIRGINIA: Dear friend, do not go on the defensive with such cruel words. I am merely a simple singer with a bit of talent and nothing more. Whose fault is it that your romantic imagination has held me up as an angel to later find only a poor woman? What you dream, and what I really am are as far apart as the heaven you have forged for me and the world in which I live. The creature you thought was a celestial body takes off to the clouds and leaves behind on earth the miserable clay from which she is made. Well, which is my fault? Not entertaining your deception or treacherously poisoning your existence?

Poor Alfredo lowered his head overwhelmed. Those words had frozen his heart. If any hope was wrapped in them, it was such a faint ray of light, not enough to dispel the darkness enveloping him, they served only to nurture his horrible sadness. He bid farewell to Virginia with unspeakable emotion and left the scene.

Virginia, dressed in the splendid costume of her role, from afar looked like a celestial body; up close an actress.

All the glitter bedazzled the spectator's eyes; up close it revealed its truth, that is, its falsehood. All was beautiful imitation, except for the gifts she received from the Englishman.

The same happened with the poet as all the rest, he mistook pinchbeck and zirconium for gold and diamonds. Regarding Virginia [237], she was always, even up close, the beautiful woman; but, had Alfredo used a microscope and seen the pores and bumps of her seemingly smooth skin... The beautiful woman, the human Venus.

On that note, when speaking of these games and combinations of truth and lies we can make several observations. Theater is truly illusion. Yet nonetheless, from another viewpoint, the opposite may be said. Theater is truth and the world is all lies. For example, frequently the best actor plays the role of the beggar and the simple bit parts player takes the role of an important figure. The public applauds the best actor and not the third-rate one who they only receive with jeers and whistles. In other words, the social position being represented is not what counts; rather it is the artist's merit. In the world, which is only another fiction, another comedy except that it can last a lifetime,

the role is lauded and not the man. Merit takes a back seat to the flare of appearance. Which, then, is more true or more conventional, the theater or the world stage?

But let us return to our Alfredo.

He left, as we said, and returned to his seat in the orchestra. The curtain lifted and he tried to go back to dreaming when Virginia sang. Between the illusion struggling to elevate him, and his spirit longing to be shattered, however, along came inevitable reality in the guise of a woman.

Virginia sighed when the poor poet left her room. She thought the poet was highly likeable and during the dialog she barely managed to dominate her more lively emotions.

Did that sigh and those emotions come from the soul or that tyrannical little southern body that tended to reveal itself between her words and her intentions?

Oh, the mysteries of the human being, an incredible fusion of duality and unity. Incomprehensible organism! [238]

CHAPTER XXIV

A TRAGIC FAREWELL

Young Alfredo left the theater in a speechless fit the night of his meeting with Virginia. Feeling as though he had lost everything on earth, the world sank beneath his feet, and his heart aged rapidly from disappointment. He was in such a state, that anyone who might have spoken to him, and who was aware of his romantic nature, must have noticed that he was teetering on insanity.

Virginia and the Englishman missed his presence several nights in the theater, and they began to fear that his absence was the result of some disaster. The Englishman searched everywhere for him; but found no news other than that he had disappeared from his house without a trace. To fall from such heights would be truly fatal.

The night for Virginia's charity performance arrived. The theater was lit *a giorno* and packed full. When the *prima donna* appeared onstage she was greeted with furious applause, posies, and doves. She also received verses written purely by those who write for themselves that therefore entailed enormous hyperboles and countless celebrations. None of these exhibited any concept worthy of comparison with Alfredo's truly passionate and sincerely enthusiastic compositions as mentioned in the previous chapter.

The Englishman had gone for broke, as they say.

Opposite the *claque* and Virginia's numerous fans [239], there was a minority that did not deny her merit, but that, guided by spite, attempted to torment her by applauding all the other performers, even those who did not deserve half as much as Virginia.

That night, though, Virginia sang in such a manner, encouraged in fact by such tactless hostility that her enthusiasm overwhelmed the audience and her enemies felt conquered and humiliated.

Surprisingly, Alfredo was in his seat at the start, as in times past. He was unrecognizable though; pallid, with bags under his eyes, his countenance visibly shaken, as if an entire year of misfortune had passed over his soul and being.

Virginia was overjoyed at the sight of him and signaled as much to him with a slight smile and a wave that was as affectionate as it was discreet.

The first act concluded and Alfredo disappeared... Virginia felt this setback. The third act was followed by a splendid ovation, in which valuable gifts (likely from the Englishman) were joined by applause, cheers, and other enthusiastic displays. A rumor made its way onto the scene, a piece of news that froze the singer's heart and soured her triumph. A young man, Alfredo according to all signs, had just committed suicide not far from the theater. His presence at the theater that night was his farewell. He had come to tell Virginia what in other times a gladiator would say to Caesar, "a man who will soon die salutes you."

Virginia's spirit was filled with dismay. She cried tears that were not a woman's tears. She realized she had served as an instrument of the most horrible misfortune.

And wasn't she the spirit of Póstumo? You will ask us. Didn't she know from experience what all other mortals are completely unaware of? Is death anything but a façade for someone who is certain of another world? You are correct. But Alfredo loved life by loving her, and he suffered long before turning to suicide. She had assassinated the illusions that made him so happy; she had awakened him from a delicious dream to

an unacceptable reality. [240] This is what saddened her. Apart from that, Póstumo had thrown out by brute force the former owner of that body, to the infinite Limbo, and had to console himself quickly, knowing that if death is not an evil, but rather the beginning of life, then he had caused Alfredo's spirit no true and permanent damage.

Certainly purely organic and earthly interests, not to be mistaken for what they are, came into play to the extent that even Póstumo was fooled. Nerves are essentially nothing but the organ or instrument of happiness. And what are nerves but a form of matter, and as such capable of confusing sensibility with sensation, thus disrupting the former?

Virginia did not have in mind that if glass can break by fire or by ice, there are entities that cannot be inflamed, repelled by indifference, or shattered. [241]

CHAPTER XXV

THE SADDENED ARTIST'S RESOLUTION

Virginia was deeply saddened by the events of the night of her benefit performance. Upon seeing the disaster brought about by her fatal singing, she decided to rescind her agreement and distance herself from theater for a while.

In theater she had found what one finds at the end of all paths in life; more smoke than joy, more bad than good.

People often forget that Earth is not the center of the soul. If we disregard faith in heaven, this thinking can be synthesized in the lines by Campoamor:²¹

*Porque en la paz de la más dulce vida For in the peace of even the sweetest life
tarde o temprano es infalible el mal. sooner or later evil is unerring.*

Virginia's career up to this point had been easy. Perhaps for no reason or motive other than Póstumo's fickle spirit, she was already tired of being an artist and now dreamed of another grand endeavor. She may have taken the young poet's death as a pretext. This endeavor could possibly have consisted of the womanly calling she had stuck in her head.

VIRGINIA (*to the Englishman*): Milord, I have decided to break with theater for a while and travel.

²¹ The Spanish poet Ramón de Campoamor y Campoosorio (1817-1901) was known for his *humoradas* and *doloras* which are types of humoristic and philosophic epigrams. The line quoted here is from the poem "La ciencia de la vida" in Ramón de Campoamor, *Doloras y humoradas* [1905] (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual de Miguel de Cervantes, 2000
<<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/servlet/SirveObras/01383819700359725644802/p000001.htm#20>> First accessed on 3/24/2009).

ENGLISHMAN: I am prepared to accompany the sun [242] of my existence to the earth's end. For our companionship to be once and for all more firm and marked, however, I am also prepared to offer you, Virginia, along with my fortune, which was already yours, this: my hand. I am the only son of a noble and long-standing house. I possess an immense fortune and an immaculate name. Name and fortune belong to the one who owns my heart.

VIRGINIA: Forgive me, milord, for not accepting the illustrious name you have so graciously offered. Even if I deserved it, I could not accept it. No one deserves to know my secrets more than you, so understand once and for all. I am not the widow Marquesa you know, but rather the Duquesa de la Verbena whose husband is still alive. So you see I cannot accept you as my husband. I am dismayed by your offer because such a great honor is forbidden to me.

ENGLISHMAN: What appears to be an obstacle is not. According to English laws the wife takes the husband's nationality, which is bestowed by his name and class. In England there is absolute divorce, in other words the complete dissolution of marriage. The Duque is no longer your husband according to such laws.

VIRGINIA: But we do not live in England...

ENGLISHMAN: But I am English and nothing impedes us from living in England and forgetting the past.

VIRGINIA: Even if that is so I must confess to you my dear lord that I am not fond of marriage. The first one went badly enough to go trying a second, even with someone as dignified as you. Right now you are a likeable fellow who could turn into a master.

ENGLISHMAN: I...

VIRGINIA: What do we know! It is not the man but the way the institution is structured. Better for you to continue what you have been for me thus far. I prefer having a friend to a husband.

ENGLISHMAN: And a decided friend; but my love...

VIRGINIA: Be my lover, am I opposed to that?

ENGLISHMAN: But your heart, Virginia... [243]

VIRGINIA: What does the name matter? Call yourself friend or lover, what difference does it make? Nevertheless I prefer the first. You are eccentric enough to love me, as you have said. Please allow me some eccentricities of my own. Call yourself my lover; I will only be your friend, but a friend indeed, your sincere and most affectionate friend.

ENGLISHMAN: But...

VIRGINIA: Who knows!

ENGLISHMAN: But to live without hope...

VIRGINIA: For what, for me to be your beloved? Who is robbing you of that? Can I say that someday the devil won't take me? Now you are after me, later I'll be the suitor. Leave me the liberty to live how I choose if you say you love me so much.

Apparently Virginia recalled the Guardian's threats.

VIRGINIA (*extending her beautiful right hand and in a warm tone*): So do you accept the agreement?

The Englishman quieted and pressed the offered hand. Those in love and who have already let themselves be dominated by the person they love will agree and resign themselves to anything. The pair agreed to live as spouses for the world and as comrades between each other. This singular couple arrived a few days later in Le Havre and set sail for the United States. [244]

CHAPTER XXVI

PÓSTUMO-VIRGINIA'S ROAD TO DAMASCUS

The North American republic offered a vast new territory to Virginia's spirit.

The seedlings of her womanly calling found the appropriate soil. She greatly admired seeing women dispute men's supremacy in the realm of science, in industry, and in social life.

Universities and colleges shared by both sexes, special secondary schools for women; what more could she ask for on this matter? She found women serving profitably and independently on scientific faculty and as physicians, lawyers, journalists, engineers, public employees, and even as ministers of religion. Not to mention those who dedicated themselves to the arts, as well as to printing, to clock-making, and other trades still considered today to lie solely within the purview of men; and finally what must have astonished her most, was to see in political matters organized societies seeking the right to vote the same as men, and to be elected for positions in public office.

For Virginia this was truly a road to Damascus. She fell from the mule injured by the revelation of truth, like the apostle, and from then on understood that she was undertaking a true mission. Up to that point what seemed to be a simple instinct of fairness [245] offered positive foundations and now was by and large a practical matter.

One night, along with Lord Berckley, she attended a meeting of the *American Society for Equal Rights* being held in the halls of the Cooper Institute.

Póstumo knew a bit of French in his primitive existence and could therefore manage in Paris, in spite of speaking like a Spanish cow, as people would say. Our

protagonist knew nothing of the Englishman's tongue in other times, though, and while rapidly progressing in the language ever since their pact she had to rely on the nobleman's translations. Doubtlessly spurred on by her eagerness to educate herself about anything relevant to her calling, she was advancing phenomenally in the language of Byron. Lord Berckley was her *tongue of fire* since the Holy Spirit had not inspired in her the universal gift bestowed upon the apostles of the Gospel.

At the meeting Virginia had a chance to see and hear things new not only to her but to Póstumo as well.

Imagine, reader, a great room, filled mostly with women, and primarily older women, facing a dais or table at which the president and secretary were also women. On the platform a speaker of the same gender was making a speech:

"It is a proven fact, ladies and gentlemen," the orator spoke, "it is provable and now incontrovertible that when the well-known preamble to our sound political constitution discusses the reasons for which governments are instituted, no distinction is made regarding the sex of the citizenry. And you should see just how clever those from among our brothers who oppose our rights have been, to prove to us that the word *men* used therein refers only to the male sex.

"These are also axioms of the English Constitution, the mother of our own: first, that any constitution not born from the people's representation is a robbery, and second, that any law [246] not emanating from the represented people, is usurpation. Now, tell me if each of you who have property (and if we work, we have it, for to begin with, work is the source of all property or is property itself), do you have the right to not be forced to release it without your consent and to not have your investment overseen by

public officials? Should the laws that govern our property, our honor, our happiness, and our lives be dictated without our consent and representation and be applied without our oversight, simply because we are women?

“In this great republic women are still hanged, and distinction of sex is not made when dealing with punishment. Then, gentlemen, I say that if the same responsibility is asked of women as for men, we should have their rights. Otherwise each time this penalty is applied to a member of our sex as well as any other, it is a cruel act of murder and a downright injustice. After all, men alone intervene in the laws and their application.

“Are we not capable of intervening in the formation of laws that treat us in such a way? Neither should we be responsible for the crime; we are as incompetent as children, beasts, or material things.

“What distinction was made among the assassins of the great Lincoln? None. All who were apprehended in time were hanged. And remember that among them there was a woman. Was there, by chance, any distinction? Not a one. Did sex matter? Not at all. She was left with no rights when the laws were made, and when it came time to apply the laws, she was called to face her punishment. Nothing mattered except that there was a conscience, a soul, and therefore a responsibility. You should bear in mind then that we women have a soul and a conscience when it comes to rights as well. (*Loud applause.*)

“There would be no argument for people unaware of the nature of law, and [247] as much as the governments of those people like to call themselves representative, they do not understand the essence, base, and origin of such class of government. But

among us, all of this is self-evident, and the violation of these fundamental principles signifies an enormous and shameful failure. (*Applause.*)

“Then let us have the same right as you men to make the laws and it will be our own fault if after a short time we do not strip from our legislation so much barbarous and monstrous corraling against us.

“They will tell us we are represented by our fathers and husbands and brothers. What about women who have none? Besides, what gave the other sex the right to keep us under guardianship? Strength? Strength should be stamped out from our laws if law is to rule. Strength and law are anathema to each other. (*Bravo.*) We do not want to be protected, for behind any protection usually lies the protector’s interests. The protector attempts to use protection to justify all manner of abuses. We want to protect ourselves and to have the freedom to exercise that protection. (*Applause.*)

“In England suffrage is limited to those who hold property, for contribution of a certain amount was set as the basis for establishing the right to vote. Today, even in England there are thinkers saying that the choice should not be founded on property: first, because now with advances in economic science we know that the consumer is the true contributor and we all are consumers, and second, because it could only occur to a boastful plutocrat’s feeble mind that money, a material and inanimate thing, should have rights that only belong to moral beings. (*Here, here!*) The law shall base the capacity for exercise of rights solely on the state of the individual’s reason, but should never strip a rational being of nature’s unique and singular gifts.

“In that same England the distinguished Stuart Mill has asked for the right to vote for women in certain circumstances, which proves that the [248] circumstance of

being a woman is no longer judged to be an impediment itself to such exercise, precisely in the country with restrictions on the matter.

“Some say we should not have electoral rights because we are weak.

“Weak in what sense? Physically? Then only day laborers should vote because they are the strongest.

“Morally? And who can hold that man is stronger against his whims and passions? (*Spectacular.*)

“In the pains of maternity, at the bedside of the infirm, do you have our stamina?

“Do you know how to rein in your passions better than we who are forced into suppressing them by habit and out of duty?

“How many of you, judges, are not in the same position as Angelo, the judge from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, and how many of you could be compared to Isabel in that play?

“You are strong. Let you prove yourselves against the determination of a beautiful woman and see how many of you will falter in your duty! The mighty sex... In muscle and nothing more.

“Domestic chores do not give us time for exercising our rights. Well, would you deny them of men who are in the same situation?

“We are not independent enough. Then let us cultivate professions that give us the independence that even you lack.

“We should not have an influence on the State. What? We do not have it now? If you deny it to us as citizens, we exercise it as women, in other words, by seducing and corrupting; forever incompetent, as women you would have mutilated and made slaves

and therefore frivolous and childish. But remember that slavery has caused empires to collapse. Examine the corruption and fall of a people and you will always find at the root cause the hidden influence of a woman, or better stated a slave. [249]

“We cannot be citizens. Yet we can be queens and absolutes!

“We can be such and such a thing, exercise such and such profession... but why not others?

“And above all, who gave one sex the absolute power to legislate over the other?

“You like us ignorant and superstitious. You ask nothing more for the great masses of your sons than slaves for their worries and passions, and at the same time slaves in the nation.

“You want us outside of public matters; well good, as long as that is the case, you have nothing to complain about if corruption and force have so much influence on the state.

“No, humanity cannot be good as long as one sex is in the light and the other in the shadows. Half of humanity, which is woman, can be found in the shadows.

“This country has reached great heights among the rest by making order compatible with liberty. Simply ask why women have freer personalities than in any other country.

“Now you are able to visit other nations in Northern Europe. I have already told you of how in England a celebrated expert on public law is arguing in favor of women entering the Parliament, and at other points they have opened the scientific professions to our sex. That is to say, the redress duly owed to us by society has begun to be taken into account by the more serious nations of the world.

“Let those who fear us by instinct make fun as much as they want, those who like us yoked, so that we more readily bend to their own interests under the pretext of being more honorable; those who fear our competition in intelligence, in activity, and in work. This peaceful revolution is already happening around the world and especially in this country. [250]

“There is no lack of those who, appealing to poetic sentiments, fear that poetry itself will disappear in the face of the mundane civic-mindedness they say we seek for she who was born for sentiment. We say that poetry has been modifying its sources from Greece to the present, except for what is eternal and permanent in it and that the worship of the form will be eternal; but increasingly spiritual. The form did not falter because Christianity made human beings more spiritual, and we believe that as long as pain and beautiful passions, sadness and noble enthusiasm exist in the world, in short as long as there is soul, there will be poetry. Join the magic of a Roland with the beauty of a Recamier, and tell me if there is a more irresistible poetic match. Gather the double spell of feeling with intelligence, and tell me if there is anything more poetic than the soul of a Teresa de Jesús with the energetic understanding of a Stael. And as for what is possible in a man such as Lamartine or Michelet, can the same not be possible in a woman? Furthermore, that ensemble in a woman would be less dangerous and still very attractive.

“What we want is to set woman free from the chain of flowers that, under the name of *poetry*, attempts to enslave her and that is merely sensuality and paganism in the worship of the form. We want physical beauty to be the last of a woman’s attractions or good qualities as with men; we want to spiritualize the world by

spiritualizing women and changing the poetic ideal precisely in this regard. For it would be sad to sacrifice her in order to maintain a false poetry, and to keep her a slave in order to please man's desire that she be more poetic. The world has entered the mature period of reason; science, institutions, everything shows signs of this change. Let us try, then, to rationalize woman to the furthest extent possible with the only limiting factor being her true abilities and not the whims of men. If until now we have only recognized her imagination, then let this imagination be reflective just as poetry and everything else of our times. Man [251] surely stands to gain from this for the two sexes have common interests; and we see no reason why they should lose out in such a sensible and just modification. Man will become more reflective, for by not being woman's tyrant he will not make her a slave, and will pay less tribute to the double edged sword that is the world of dolls he has created for her. With frivolous mothers and wives we will have frivolous men. Make woman manlier in terms of reason and spirit, and man too will be manlier in this regard, rather than in the sense of muscle and might. No, then, to the reign of brute force and frivolous beauty. No to idolatry of the form and down with beautiful sensuality. Women need to be less womanly, in order for men to be manlier in terms of moral force.

“Someone I do not recall said that only equals can be friends; let us equalize the two sexes then so they can become friends.

“Someone also said that nature has created the sexes to complete each other. Well, this should only be understood as such in terms of individuality. One sex lends civil fortitude to another and in turn receives greater sensitivity in feelings.

“Thus we will have the fruitful bisexual hybrid, so convenient and even indispensable for the production of soul and spirit, or rather of heart and intelligence, just as we admire it in the makeup of true poets and artists whose works reveal the predominant elements of each of the two sexes: strength and moral sensitivity, virility and grace, vigor and tenderness at the same time. All of these contribute to the harmonic combination of the ideal human personality.

“Distinguished orators, like our Wendell Phillips, have sounded their eloquent voices in this same association. Anything said hereafter will only repeat his exhaustive arguments on the matter. All that remains now is to reiterate this manner of reasoning until [252] the woman’s gospel reaches every conscience.

“We do not want to disrupt society. If our words should resonate, it will be because they are founded on justice. Time will tell and will have no choice. We will continue to make ourselves heard as we continue to become more and more worthy of this great task.

“In this free land we have platforms, press, and associations; what more do we need?

“Marriage is invoked in order to quell our movement, yet in no part of modern Europe is marriage what it once was in ancient Greece and Rome or what it was in the Middle Ages, and for that matter, even what it was at the beginning of this century. It has changed within our society, and we are still alive, and nobody notices the changes because they are slow and are born of the new circumstances of each day. Marriage will not die around here, do not worry. But it will change gradually and unnoticeably. It will continue to change for our children and grandchildren who will be increasingly

enlightened in this regard and will surely find the changes to be very rational. They themselves will find these changes at birth, without realizing it or they will continue making them while they are alive.

“This work is now coming to fruition. When our mothers began they were few and their enslavement greater. Currently we already see the gates of science open to us. The host of women making a living from scientific professions in the United States is honorably represented here today. We have advanced, and our work has not been sterile for we work together and the results have been more abundant than we could have imagined.

“Men wanted to be free without suspecting that their example would open our eyes or that we would champion our cause with their same arguments. And, who opposes us? The same people who opposed them and the same who oppose all slaves in favor of the masters who benefit from abuse. ‘You are incapable [253], it is unnatural,’ they say, as if the work of men was the work of nature!

“Wherever man is still an animal, no matter how much he calls himself a man, because he has physical strength, because he repels might with might, he reigns like a slave who thinks he is free. In countries like this one, though, if you want to be free and not have your peaceful revolutions sterilized, let us be free also; for if women are not free, none of us are.

“And it is not that we are selfish, to the contrary we have made our cause the cause of all destitute people of the world, and no one can be enslaved once woman is free. No one can be born a slave if all mothers are free. We struggle peacefully for the

force of law, as for brutality, we leave that to those who boast of it and base everything on it.

“We used to call this the *Society for Women’s Rights*. Now its name encompasses a broader moral ground as the *American Society for Equal Rights*. That means equal rights not only for woman, but for the entire human race.” [254]

CHAPTER XXVII

VIRGINIA AND HER GUARDIAN MEET AGAIN

How can we convey the admiration and excitement Virginia felt after such a meeting and such a speech? Imagine Archimedes, bursting out of the bath, running and screaming his famous *Eureka* through the streets of Syracuse.

The Englishman, who by the way was converting bit by bit to the new ideas that he at first looked upon with the disdain common to his sex, was at her side and translated the orator's words. Finally, he translated the first account they found that was taken down by reporters on the scene.

With this woman's gospel, as Virginia called that speech, her plan was clear and fixed.

When the former singer sat alone in her room the Guardian appeared.

GUARDIAN: Madame Visionary, now I regard your highness as she wishes. And now, what do you plan to do?

VIRGINIA: Preach these ideals and try to make them reality.

GUARDIAN: So, have we a true calling then?

VIRGINIA: Is there anything more just?

GUARDIAN: But remember the fate of a redeemer.

VIRGINIA: Maybe the world needs one more and that is why I was inspired to incarnate in a woman's body. As a man I would have had no sense of justice, as a woman I would not have had so much conviction. As a man [255] who has turned into a woman, and one from Andalusia to boot, it is a different

story. I must have felt the unheard of urge to get inside this female body without leaving behind the male traces in my soul for some reason. To be a woman and to feel as a man; is there any better situation for seeing and sensing truth and justice? If the tyrant feels with the victim's heart and faces her fate, how could he let the murderous ax fall?

I hope that my extravagance is forgiven and God is pleased upon seeing that I have done something that is a work of justice in the world.

GUARDIAN: But the assigner of missions does not want people to take them upon themselves. Would it not be better for you to be nice and behaved, singing in the theater, before you go getting yourself into a mess? Wouldn't that save a great deal of trouble that is sure to come?

VIRGINIA: Those are the words of an egoist and not mine. If everybody thought that way, what would become of the world, or rather, the Work of God? And I am quite surprised, my angel, that you would give such advice.

GUARDIAN: It is out of prudence and the love I profess to you, along with my duty to look over you.

VIRGINIA: Prudence was always the patrimony of those who look out only for their own self interests. As for love, let's start with being more charitable. Charity is not the unconditional love of considering only one's own convenience.

GUARDIAN: But what does it matter to you when you are only to live for a certain amount of time?

VIRGINIA: You mean to tell me that the most important thing is to live by Luis XV's words, *Après moi le déluge*, which have gone on to become an egoists'

proverb? Humanity was made to live for more than one day. I am merely a child of humanity and owe myself to it.

GUARDIAN: But do you really think that what these crazy women are proposing is just?

VIRGINIA: Now, now there it is. I already thought [256] that my angel was reactionary or conservative at least. You angels live in a perfect world and your nature is immutable, you do not believe in progress. That isn't the case with us humans. As imperfect beings we must seek perfection. And what better way to perfect the self than to better the world?

GUARDIAN: Yes, by disturbing it, by driving women mad, by doing what has never been done, by trying to label as imperfect that which has never been better. The woman who lost paradise, governing the world!

VIRGINIA: And was Holy Mary not a woman, did she not smash the Dragon of Hell?

GUARDIAN: But Mary was chosen.

VIRGINIA: That is exactly why even though we are not her equals we should imitate her by continuing her work. If she produced the Redeemer of men and women, we should not accept that men, by only being the muscle of creation necessary to rule when brute matter needed to be explored and dominated, should attempt to continue ruling when the time of iron and might is over. We must reject the rule of might in order to bring about the kingdom of God and Christ, who is the Christ of justice for all, and of the weak who render strength useless.

GUARDIAN: Oh, ho, ho! I see how full you are once again of the terrible doctrines of the times. You are incorrigible.

VIRGINIA: Oh, ho, ho! I see, my angel, how full of the doctrines of quietism you are, which is only fitting given your angelic nature. You are shocked by what you have not learned until now, and it is unfair of you, like all reactionaries, to write off the new ideas as unfeasible. Now I understand how man in his fight against sin and malice can come to surpass your everlasting innocence.

GUARDIAN: Error, audacity, insolence. From now on you may no longer count on me.

VIRGINIA: And then you angels go on calling yourselves good! Do you mean to say you are abandoning me because I tell you how I feel?

GUARDIAN: I shall not cease to keep watch over you in spite of yourself; but [257] do not blame me if I am unable to free you from evil. I have done enough by advising you. You are free and therefore responsible, yet later on both of us will suffer. It is not that I am reactionary as you say, but I, as anyone who loves as a father does, see only the danger facing the being that I am charged with protecting. Goodbye...

And the angel left; but our fanatic protagonist remained unyieldingly resolute in believing that her intentions were in the service of God. [258]

CHAPTER XXVIII

VIRGINIA AND THE NORTH AMERICAN UNION

Virginia visited the various cities of the North American Union, accompanied by her Englishman. Her forever resigned and enthusiastic lover was now a believer in the teachings of which Virginia had become an ardent apostle. Everywhere they went they saw similar latent, if not outright, agitation around women's emancipation. In the Boston Athenaeum they found a woman working as librarian, and everywhere, especially in New England and Illinois, Virginia found those of her sex established in various scientific and industrial professions that until then she thought were exclusively for men; well-compensated department chair positions held by women who lectured to increasingly more women than men. In short, she saw in practice what are still considered outlandish theories which are resisted in other countries. She realized that in the United States if some day there were no men worthy of governing, the women would take charge.

She also found, and this was logical, societies of extravagant hotheads who attempted to put equality with men into practice, such as the *Blumeristas*, or *Bloomerites*, for example who attempted to dress, live, and carry on as men. Some of these societies went even further, letting their ambitions and exercise of this fair freedom reach extremes. This is only a natural exaggeration since the same happens with all new ideas. There is always a [259] type of vanguard that exaggerates everything and takes whatever it finds most pleasing from liberty. These extremists helped harm the idea by turning it into a joke, and served as a leveling threat to society by harming the chances of rational success of the very same cause they pretended or

tried to defend. In other words, alongside good and well founded preaching, there was madness. Yet Virginia understood that good sense, able to distinguish true from false, would in the end overcome the excitement of these crazy women who strayed from good intention. Nevertheless, she was convinced that all of this only proved the need for the other, more moderate approach that in the end would surely prevail.

On this matter Virginia consigned to memory what she had read in a magnificent speech by the famous American Wendell Phillips. The orator and activist had said that when a new doctrine enters into a discourse, one should begin by examining it for any principle of natural justice. If this principle is established, any reasonable spirit must decide immediately on the matter and leave sorting out the consequences for God, for this sorting does not concern men but rather God who consents to such a principle being natural, rational, and therefore, advisable.

This story's heroine burned with a desire to return to her beloved Spain in order to preach her new ideas. She set out with her cuddly Englishman and stayed for a spell in England, which Virginia wanted to study and observe from the vantage point of her beliefs. There too she found the same ideas sponsored by a few and initiated into practice to a certain extent, although in a slightly modified manner, as a result of the peculiar institutions and customs of that country. [260]

CHAPTER XXIX
SPREADING THE WORD

Madrid was the same as always: happy, beautiful, lively, burning in pleasures, and full of idle people.

Doña Flora died unaware of the location of who she took to be her daughter. This, as one would imagine, caused our Virginia no grief whatsoever. What maternal warmth could be asked of this intruder born to no one?

The Duque kept on ticking, playing the dirty old man and dissipating his vast estate. His favorite, not to say his only, occupation was wooing dressmakers and seamstresses, dancers and chorus girls who spent his gold and laughed at his attempts at love.

Our heroine appeared in that society dressed and appointed as an Englishwoman with haughty airs and called herself Lady with the Lord as her husband.

Very soon she would learn that her theories were green there and that for our fatherland they were truly utopian.

Women wanted no innovation whatsoever. They were fine with their frivolity, their ignorance, their masculine idolatry, and their superstitions. Anything that did not coincide with these was deemed madness and excess. The new ideas, according to what they heard the men say, were tantamount to social insanity. The few who did [261] sympathize with the new doctrine ended up taking from it whatever best suited their whims and passions. As such, this calling required seriousness, study, work, and perseverance. It did not come easily to routine, slothful, light, and superficial spirits.

Some said it resulted from *Yanqui* extravagance and licentiousness, unfeasible in other well organized countries; and that they would end up ruining the United States, already astray with its exaggerated liberties.

Even erudite men who fancied themselves liberals smiled disdainfully. They either settled for opposing the new principles, which they called false and *flattering theories*, a routine and confused observation, or they shrugged their shoulders.

One of them reasonably objected that, how could one speak of emancipation and rights for women, when these still need to be debated and secured for men? All of that might be so, but this should at least be postponed as premature.

Whenever Virginia returned the attack by saying that justice has always been appropriate, a cold when not disdainful silence was the only response.

She founded a publication calling upon those of her sex to unite in such a beneficial movement; but the reactionaries cried social subversion and were furious, the conservatives joked, the liberals scorned, other women were indignant if not indifferent, the preaching from the pulpit screamed scandal and anathema, and lastly the district attorney ordered the newspaper's termination.

Virginia locked herself in silence, without courage even to wait...

At one point she was seen about by the Duque who believed he recognized her. She so properly butchered her Spanish, though, in playing the Englishwoman so well, and spurned him so coldly, that he guessed he was wrong, [262] especially upon seeing her with her serious and less than approachable Englishman. Virginia had clued him in on the secret.

The Duque figured she was a stranger, and begging her a thousand pardons, never approached her again; although he always assured whoever wanted to listen that he was not altogether convinced that his woman had not gone English.

Everyone found this Englishwoman to be very nice and above all very Spanish, that is to say, very charming.

Virginia wanted news of poor Matilde, although without revealing her cover or encountering her old friend, if possible, for she only trusted her secret with her Englishman, as interested as he was in keeping it safe.

She learned that Matilde's husband, needing his wife to sign a few documents that required a spouse's signature by law in order to sell certain goods, in this case the last remains of his rapidly dwindling estate, sought and found her in Paris. Flattering her and forgiving everything, he made her return with him to Madrid where he managed to secure the authorizations needed before promptly abandoning her once more. In such a state, coldly spurned by the society that saw her as destitute and alone, and to whose ears her dissolute Parisian life had arrived, she took to one thing or another and lived in poverty, her health and beauty deteriorating all the while.

Virginia came to her aid constantly, but she knew and was content with the fact that this relationship was damaging to her ministry. [263]

CHAPTER XXX

DANGEROUS ENCOUNTER

Our heroine had returned to Madrid only a short time ago. Evading recognition was to prove a difficult proposition given the prominent position she had formerly occupied among the circles of Madrid. She always stood out due to her beauty and social position, and then of course there was the stir provoked by her escape with Matilde.

The few years of her absence from the court were not enough for recollections of her to fade away, at least not among her closer and more intimate friends. Besides, given that her face and figure had not changed at all, she faced a thousand suppositions and conflicts that she could avoid only with presence of mind.

Good or bad fortune would have Virginia run into her old sweetheart Salazar who, as soon as he saw her, could do nothing but approach her. As one would expect, this placed her in quite a bind.

“Virginia!” he cried. “I cannot believe it is you!”

She saw him approaching and remained as calm as possible; although it must have been difficult for she recalled scenes from another time.

VIRGINIA (*employing her thickest English accent possible*): I believe, sir, that you are mistaken. I have not had the pleasure of making your acquaintance.

SALAZAR: You resemble a certain person in every way.

VIRGINIA: I do not know who you are referring to. [264]

SALAZAR: To Virginia, my friend, the Duquesa de la Verbena.

VIRGINIA: I am *not* a Duquesa, I am Lady Berckley.

SALAZAR: Forgive me please, I could have sworn... I have never seen such
resemblance.

VIRGINIA (*politely waving her hand and then starting to walk away*): Good day, sir.

SALAZAR (*trying to stop her*): *Señora, señora*, Could I have the pleasure of being
granted permission to visit you?

VIRGINIA: You will not visit me. (*She moves to continue walking*).

SALAZAR (*stopping her*): Pardon me, but...are you married?

VIRGINIA: (*showing anger*): This is outrageous! What a lack of respect for women
there is in this country!

Virginia moved on, yet, her heart was still sensitive to Salazar's presence and she found the conversation with Salazar pleasing given the pleasant memories it conjured. The handsome man did not stop following her and was eager to find out where she lived.

Salazar was amazed at this woman's resemblance to Virginia, and his heart was hers. The lovebird could not possibly forget her. He eventually found someone who would introduce him to the Englishwoman the first time they happened to be at the same gathering.

Virginia easily managed to evade the Duque's inquiries. Aside from the adverse reaction her soul and body felt towards him, there was also her freedom, her mission and possibly her life. It was not so easy to resist the persistent Salazar, as pleasing as he was not only to the former Virginia's body, but also to the soul, to Póstumo that is, for

Salazar had been Póstumo's beloved Elisa in a previous incarnation. Salazar powerfully attracted the combined or dual being of Póstumo and Virginia. [265]

The next day, so as not to be missed, Salazar visited Lady Berckley's house. She nearly expected the visit, although she tried to hide her anticipation.

"*Mister Salazar,*" said Virginia, using the English form of address after exchanging the proper greetings, "do you still insist that I strongly resemble your friend the Duquesa? I shall fear that you are not pleased by my company."

SALAZAR: "My lady, you are the most flagrant testament to the fact that that beauty and kindness are not mutually exclusive.

VIRGINIA: Thank you for the compliment. I now see that you live up to the beautiful land of your birth. Spanish and gallant are synonymous.

SALAZAR: Spanish and in love, you must have meant.

VIRGINIA: Now that is too much. You mean to say that Spaniards instantly fall in love with any woman they see. Ha, ha, ha! (*Laughing to hide her excitement. She had to control herself.*)

Salazar, equally moved, did not know how to continue or what to say. He was already in love with this woman, in an instantaneous southern ardor. All of a sudden, as if he had a solution, he exclaimed, "Virginia!"

At hearing her name so suddenly in such a pleasant voice, she nearly responded, as if her expression alone was not enough. Luckily, though, she managed to contain herself.

VIRGINIA (*trying to affect calmness and indifference*): Do you know what I think?

SALAZAR (*with great interest*): What do you think?

VIRGINIA: That the Duquesa you speak of was more than a friend. You always speak of her, and what is on the lips is in the heart. If we were not disinterested in each other, if anything more than friendship was between us, you would almost make me jealous.

At this point Virginia lost her crafted accent. [266] The discussion was becoming increasingly difficult, for it was more a matter of feelings than pure reflection.

In accepting Salazar's company in this new chapter of her life she fooled herself in thinking that she was doing so in order to be sure of herself, or to have a little fun at his expense. She was actually propelled by complacency in all of this. In this regard the same thing was happening to her as with many women, they begin to buzz around the light like moths thinking they are safe from being burnt and then...

"Ah, Virginia!" Salazar cried, grabbing her hand, which the pseudo-Englishwoman retracted with feigned dignity before he had the chance to bring it to his lips as he had intended.

VIRGINIA (*standing up, speaking in an angry tone and using angry gestures*): That is enough!

SALAZAR: Forgive me please for the uncontrollable fit your presence has provoked in my heart; accept my apologies for my daring behavior. Please forgive a madman, for I surely have been one ever since I saw you.

VIRGINIA: Enough with the excitement already; calm yourself. Hands to yourself and do not mistake me for some other woman. I forgive you.

SALAZAR: I was so attracted by, so fascinated with such a striking resemblance that I ended up seeing only my unforgettable friend Virginia. I must say that the resemblance is in your favor. Oh yes, you are even more beautiful and adorable than she. To imagine that I thought no one could possibly surpass her!

VIRGINIA: You make me want to laugh!

In effect, she laughed at this hallucination made obvious, so typical of a man in love. Salazar thought she was more beautiful than herself. Then it occurred to her that perhaps he did not find her so beautiful in the past and out of vain concern for the Duquesa de la Verbena, she became momentarily stern, but then she thought, I can't be upset, he thinks I'm better than before.

SALAZAR: She was a woman I would still love if you did not exist or I had not met you. [267]

Virginia seemed satisfied with Lady Berckley's triumph over her rival the Duquesa. She thought it natural that today should triumph over yesterday.

VIRGINIA (*in a friendly mocking tone*): So you mean you are abandoning the original for a copy.

SALAZAR: Please do not make fun of me, by God. My heart has been painfully affected by Virginia's absence. I may never see her again, yet you have managed to dispel her from my heart. Your love fills all.

VIRGINIA: Your poor little heart, how easily the Virginias come one after the other. As long as they look alike, the last one will always be the best and most beloved, filling it all.

SALAZAR: What began as an affectionate memory of another woman has turned into love for you. Your presence made this miracle happen, you turned the few days that have passed since I first had the good fortune of meeting you into a century of happiness and torment. I am being devoured by passion that cannot be erased from my existence.

VIRGINIA: Little by little. What would Virginia say if she found out that you are transferring the passion she inspired in you and therefore belongs to her, to an upstart like me?

SALAZAR: For pity's sake, less cruelty please. Do not mock my words.

VIRGINIA: They truly are words; words fit for Hamlet.

SALAZAR: I speak of passion, *señora*, true and eternal passion.

VIRGINIA: Eternal until another Virginia looking like me comes along. I now see that you are a great *maestro*. What would you say if I gave you another surprise?

SALAZAR: What is it? Tell me!

VIRGINIA: You only know me as Lady Berckley, my husband's name; but you do not know my name. I am also named Virginia. [268]

SALAZAR: A miracle from heaven above! From now on I must call you by that name.

VIRGINIA: But be careful, this Virginia is not the other. And about the other, who was the lady accompanying you when you first spoke to me? You left her alone, the poor thing!

SALAZAR: She is not a proper lady... at one point she was a seamstress.

VIRGINIA: But now she is not. Very pretty indeed and dressed as a grand lady: a sign that she no longer sews except when it comes to hearts and hearts of gold at that. She would not happen to be the one who, so they say, was a certain Duque's beloved and who, along with him, spent more than was wise?

SALAZAR: The Duque de la Verbena!

VIRGINIA: I have heard the name. Does the Duque still support her?

SALAZAR: The poor thing separated from her husband to follow the Duque, who she initially resisted because she was respectable. I am unaware of who is currently ruining himself for her.

VIRGINIA: Yet another victim of vanity and seduction. One degenerate leads to a hundred. Some women are empty headed, and due to a lack of any greater social concern they succumb to the siren that sings of luxury and pleasure. It comes as no surprise that her story is like so many others.

Here, Póstumo-Virginia's missionary craze came through. Our protagonist recognized the former seamstress as Carlota, Virginia's previous dressmaker.

VIRGINIA: And have you also ruined yourself for her?

SALAZAR: I was accompanying her with no interest in particular, believe me.

VIRGINIA: You remind me of Elisa, the one who always fished with two hooks. If one fish doesn't bite, another one might.

SALAZAR: Which Elisa are you referring to?

VIRGINIA: A woman I knew in another time and [269] who was my wife; extremely beautiful indeed. But that happened previously in another existence.

SALAZAR: What! What are you saying? You are venturing into pure Spiritism.

VIRGINIA: You do not believe we have other lives?

SALAZAR: Now and then; but I am very fine with this one when I am fortunate, and I would be if you fell in love with me. Why wish for paradise, let alone another life?

VIRGINIA: But are you forgetting, you good Christian man, are you forgetting that I am not my own, that I am married?

SALAZAR: So was the Duquesa.

VIRGINIA: How cynical! Very well then, I can speak of other lives, I know there are many lives. I was a man before and you were a woman.

SALAZAR: Come now, beautiful, darling Virginia. Are you trying to make a fool of me?

VIRGINIA: You were the Elisa with two hooks and I was Póstumo your husband. Our friend took pleasure in these mischievous and incredible statements.

SALAZAR (*smiling*): Well so be it; let us make the most of that circumstance. Our souls are the same which explains why we are drawn together. The only difference is the roles have switched; and since life is but a stage, what does that matter?

VIRGINIA (*feigning sternness*): But the roles cannot change in the same play let alone in the spectators' sight; and given that this time I am tied to another man for the remainder, I cannot be yours. Here is milord and husband. [270]

CHAPTER XXXI

FOR ECCENTRICITY, AN ENGLISHMAN

Lord Berckley received Salazar's greeting and responded coldly yet politely.

VIRGINIA: Milord, this gentleman was just telling me that he thinks you are jealous.

LORD BERCKLEY: Me, jealous! Leave jealousy for bulls and cocks. Any man who does not wish to confirm my compatriot Darwin's ideas should distance himself from brutishness; otherwise he would show that his ancestors were brutes.

SALAZAR: You mustn't love either. (*Salazar was still surprised by the strange direction in which Virginia had steered the conversation.*)

LORD BERCKLEY: Love is a feeling that can become infinite, mortal, inextinguishable; felt at all hours, at every minute. It can absorb our lives to the point that we no longer see, feel, or breathe but for the beloved object making us capable of all manner of heroism and abnegation. If by rising, however, it transforms into passion, into blindness, into wild madness capable of loathing and killing, it makes the man devolve into a brute. Only the sensual part that love carries along with it can engender blind and [271] terrible passions. Man is far from perfect, and I do not consider myself free from the sensual; but it is far better to esteem oneself on being rational. Jealousy assails me it is true, but don't I have the reason and will to dominate it? I could die of jealousy, but reason and will power cannot degenerate my character or my intentions. When our Shakespeare wanted to portray the ferociousness of

jealousy, he painted Othello, a moor, an African; a type of panther who only appeases his rage by devouring the same thing he loves. His regret later is that of the madman returned to reason, that of the brute who recovers his human qualities.

SALAZAR: I love because I love; with everything, without knowing why, and I say that love is the vivid desire to completely and exclusively possess the beloved object. A man in love always believes himself to be justified in his passion for the imagined perfection of the being he worships.

LORD BERCKLEY: That should be fine; but be careful with disregarding the voice of reason and letting your will be passive.

SALAZAR: I love, I do not think, I love and do not bother with analyzing, what would remain otherwise?

LORD BERCKLEY: You feel without thinking? Well be careful to not let such feelings degenerate into fatal madness. That borders on sensuality, not true love. For example I love milady with all my soul and would even give my life and all that I have for her; but without losing my reason, which in my eyes is what makes my love even more beautiful. My jealousy will be that of a man who suffers bravely and in silence; not that of a madman who hates and kills over it. I leave such brutality for the Othello's and other desert beasts. Let's be frank. Do you also love this woman in the same way?

SALAZAR (*stupefied*): Me!

VIRGINIA (*surprised*): What sort of question is that!

LORD BERCKLEY (*to Salazar*): Yes, speak up. Your sudden eagerness to be near her, and other things that are more easily understood than demonstrated, make me sure of it. I would bet my best horse Ralph that you have succumbed to such a [272] sudden and motivated affliction. What happened with me could easily happen to anyone with eyes. She is not only beautiful, but also adorable, isn't she?

Salazar could not respond; he looked at Virginia who was no less shocked. She had witnessed many of the Englishman's eccentricities, but none as distinct as this one.

LORD BERCKLEY: Come now, answer, do not be afraid, good man. I am not just any man. I have set out to understand everything in this life.

SALAZAR (*emotional and confused*): Forgive me... after all you are her husband.

LORD BERCKLEY: And how does that circumstance keep you from saying the truth? You love her if you do not deny it. Can there be anyone who deserves it more? I am not invoking the rights of a husband but the rights of a lover. You love her and so do I; let her decide.

VIRGINA (*to herself*): Now this is awkward! (*then speaking aloud and feigning calmness*) When I first met milord I sensed that I had crossed paths with not only a superior but an admirable man. Then, time together led to affection and now I not only admire him but I love him as I never have loved before, and never will again.

We do not doubt Virginia's sincerity; but her heart skipped a beat or two. She strained to sound calm, and an indefinable fluid coursed throughout the nerves and veins of her entire body.

"I would not be in keeping," the lady continued, "with my mission, if I was less frank than milord. I appreciate the conviction you have expressed for me," she added, extending an affectionate hand to Salazar, "but there are others, who may favor your sudden love; more appropriate than I given how concerned I have been for some time with my mission. I can belong only to my ideals."

Salazar mechanically received that bewitchingly contoured hand that he could now barely grasp, for even if [273] she appeared somewhat tremulous and was not cold because blood pounded in her heart, she seemed to be dismissing him.

VIRGINIA (*to Salazar*): If you prove yourself to be less than milord, you would lose everything in our eyes. He would not see you as an equal, and to me you would not resemble him at all.

Salazar, embarrassed and seemingly spiteful, took his hat and left almost without a word, but doubtlessly ashamed of his flight, he returned and said to the Englishman. "I would fight for her with bullets, against you and against the entire universe."

LORD BERCKLEY: If Virginia's decision leaves you with only that miserable way out, I could kill you bare handed.

The nobleman went to a nearby cabinet, opened it, and pulled out a pistol which he aimed at Salazar and called his shot, "I am shooting your hair on the left." The shot went off and brushed the tip of Salazar's hair.

"You see I have done you no harm; I would kill you with this weapon or any other if you insist on this ridiculous matter."

"And I would despise you!" cried Virginia, terrified.

Salazar went from being furious, to surprised. Virginia's last words made up his mind.

He reacted quickly and coming at the Englishman he said "Do you take me for a coward?"

LORD BERCKLEY: Why should I do you such a disfavor? You could kill me as I could kill you and at less distance with the same or better aim. I must admit that you did not back down or flinch when I aimed at you.

SALAZAR: Very well, you have defeated me in love and in weaponry; but you shall not defeat me in generosity (*and clapping his hands together once, Salazar left without looking at Virginia.*)

VIRGINIA (*after seeing him exit*): Poor thing! If he suffers [274] it's not because he is in love, but because he hasn't managed to satisfy his instincts.

LORD BERCKLEY: I believe we have cured him; if not, all the worse for him.

As soon as she was alone Virginia said.

“Luckily he did not recognize me. This time he left in better shape, at least not through the window. On that night a husband went against him who invoked his rights with gun in hand, and now it is a generous lover who does not invoke rights as a husband as he could, even if only in appearance. For him it is enough to invoke his rights as a man, only using weapons to prove that when provoked, he knows how to handle them.

“The Duque was a husband like any other, and would never change. Such peculiarities could only be found in an Englishman.”

Virginia was decided on Lord Berckley, in spite of her attraction to Salazar, because she was already familiar with the latter’s frivolousness and she respected the Englishman’s serious and noble character which she at least wanted to appear to match. We might also add that this son of Great Britain’s originality figured in no small part in her decision. As a *romantic*, such unique behavior must have impressed her and made Berckley more likeable than Salazar. Such are the ways of women, especially the dramatic ones; and the same goes for many men for that matter. [275]

CHAPTER XXXII VIRGINIA ARGUES HER CASE IN MADRID

It was the summer of 1868.

All signs indicated that a revolution was near, as if the established order of things, already prone to withering away, would fall and tumble in the wind along with the leaves of the approaching fall.

September approached, September arrived; and the cry for revolt first heard in Cádiz²² echoed throughout all of Spain.

Virginia believed that the time had come and that she should be on this movement's side, judging it to be convenient for her own purposes.

She began to write again for the public; but her voice was lost in the vast sea of theories that abounded. No one came to second her plans.

Soon after appearing in the Court of Spain, Virginia was introduced in some aristocratic circles as Lady Berckley, thanks to a high ranking employee of the English embassy who was a friend of her supposed husband, Lord Berckley.

Virginia was still passing as an Englishwoman. Even if her appearance did not help, for it revealed her patently Andalusian origins, her manner of speaking helped to a certain degree. In her Castilian she affected a bit of a British accent, having only to imitate her pseudo-husband. Thanks to his diligent effort she was trained in the language of Byron during [276] the time they spent in visiting the countries of the English race from one hemisphere to the next.

²² In 1868 a coalition of liberals, republicans and conservatives dethroned Queen Isabella II in a revolution that broke out in Cádiz, referred to as *la Gloriosa* or the Glorious Revolution. For a discussion of the ramifications of this revolution in Puerto Rico, see Fernando Picó, *History of Puerto Rico: A Panorama of its People* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006).

She understood that for her mission to fully succeed, she must begin propagandizing among the high society; not so much because fashion and doctrines good and bad tend to come from above, but because acceptance among the aristocrats would make her more acceptable to the other classes.

One of the first people she met at a gala to which she was invited was the Baronesa, her old friend, who upon seeing her could not help but exclaim, “Duquesa, what are you doing here!”

Virginia tried to maintain the serious appearance and manners of her supposed compatriots, controlling the continental severity ingrained in her and substituting a majestic air in place of her native vibrant gracefulness.

When she heard the Baronesa, Virginia answered ceremoniously and in a serious tone and foreign accent, without losing her newly accustomed presence of spirit in such a dangerous situation, “I am Condesa de Berckley... Milord Berckley, my husband,” she added, introducing him to the Baronesa.

The Baronesa was left shocked and muttering. She could have sworn that... She sat next to Virginia who offered her a seat.

BARONESA: Forgive me Condesa, I thought... but I have not yet recovered from my surprise... How greatly you resemble my friend the Duquesa de la Verbena! She left Madrid several years ago.

VIRGINIA (*incredibly calm*): I was never in Spain before, although I traveled considerably. As a child I learned some Spanish. It is such beautiful language and I have been careful to not forget the little I knew.

BARONESA: I cannot say that Englishwomen are ungraceful, but you seem purely Spanish.

VIRGINIA: If I am so graceful, as you are kind enough to imagine, I do not know what to attribute it to. I beg you [277] forgive my Spanish; it is not my fault that I'm a poor foreigner and was not lucky enough to be born in Spain.

They began to carry on a conversation in a similar fashion.

This circle was one of the most colorful and pleasant to be found in the crown city. It entailed a bundle of gorgeous women, some of them single, some of them matrons; all capable of disrupting even the gods on Mount Olympus. Feminine ugliness was an exception, as is common in Spain, where even those who are not beautiful appear otherwise on account of a certain *no sé qué*. Thus, Virginia must have been a site to behold with her Venus figure, her Juno gait, her Hebe locks, her Andalusian eyes and her mouth of glazed ivory that she loved to reveal from beneath the glimmering coral of her lips as if to say, "here, there is only glory."

Add to this the elegant and exquisite attire highlighting a figure that would make a goddess envious and that set off her milky white neck and her well shaped arms. This along with a consort of brilliant lights and bright colors, namely the shades of the rainbow and others even more lively, along with the soft music and delightful sounds of women's voices adorning and glazing the happy celebrations of our youth comprised an ensemble that remains a rich and varied kaleidoscope in our fantasy; making us recall treasures lost when we encounter the desert of old age and its beautiful mirages, the

good old days, as we exclaim with incurable sorrow that youth is the only possible paradise under the sun.

In another group of the circle the following discussion was taking place:

EL GALLO (*A macho man with the airs of a Don Juan and in a mocking tone*): So that's her! That is the Englishwoman come to civilize us as word would have it. My, is she ever good-looking, beautiful as the sun. [278]

EL COTORRÓN (*An older man acting and trying to pass as much younger than he obviously is*): Even though she is English, she is as graceful as our own.

EL GALLO: Haughty female!

At that he began sliding towards her. He looked like a general, tracing parallels and cautiously approaching a plaza to attack with a sure strike.

EL SEÑORÓN (*A big fat, beet red, and serious man*): That is just what we need after the catastrophe brought on by that September business: women abandoning the hearth and turning into bastards like men in public matters! I mean what kind of nonsense doesn't occur to these revolutionaries once they're in the spotlight. And what does Serafina say about all this?

SERAFINA: About what?

EL SEÑORÓN: About the Englishwoman who has come to liberate you women from our tyranny.

SERAFINA: I find her madness more ridiculous than fearsome.

EL SEÑORÓN: Well said, now that is thinking with judgment.

REPORTER: Don't ask the single women, Don Ramón. They wouldn't dare contradict the vast majority of men, who currently share your manner of thinking. They would fear gaining the reputation of being libertine and would lose out on marriage.

DON RAMÓN: This lady is right, and speaks sincerely. Women would lose more than anyone if such madness were put into practice. They would nullify the respect they have in men's eyes.

A LADY: Don Ramón, don't waste your time with that gentleman speaking against such vain theories. The pretty Englishwoman seems to have bowled him over. Ha, ha, ha! You're right. What would come of us? We would fall down from our high pedestal, where we reign supreme in the world of attention, to become equal with men. You'll see. They want all of that in favor of our [279] loss of prestige and to treat us as fertile soil. One way or the other, they are already doing it.

BARONESA (*approaching the group*): No, she is not the Duquesa as I thought at first. I think that Englishwoman is a schemer, and the one calling himself her husband, he's one of those flamboyant characters who goes along with anything.

REPORTER: New ideas are doomed! The tribunals of any social or political movement initiated in favor of the oppressed classes have always been overlooked by the oppressor, just as the greatest resistance comes from the oppressed. And it is logical, nevertheless, for the oppressed do not dare champion their own cause.

Being accustomed to oppression, they come to think it only natural and even just. And you, Mercedes, aren't you planning to help this, the most just cause of your sex, with your talented and elegant pen?

MERCEDES (*a writer*): God save me! Unleash a storm on my poor writing? Already, without that, men and most people in general cannot tolerate what we women write. We are already tired of being called pedantic know-it-alls. Imagine what would happen to us if we became involved in this mess! People will say that by liberty, we mean license; and that we only aim to satisfy our desires and give our passions free range. With such an outburst it's goodbye family, goodbye society, goodbye to the venerable institutions of our forefathers and the rest. We would be seen as *provocateurs* and public enemies. No, given that we already commit the sin of writing, let us reserve ourselves simply for literary flowers, for family values, and for novels about the home; little blue, pink, and white stories. We women should not venture into briar patches. Just look at what happened with one of our best writers. Thirsty for knowledge, and longing to obtain it, she visited classrooms that we women are excluded from, as true pariahs. She dressed as a man. You would not believe! A woman in a lecture hall! A [280] convict in paradise, so to speak. In spite of her noble lack of concern, and her elevated motives, oh the criticism, oh the stir this is causing! And even men, didn't you nearly have an episode because you affirmed that as in other countries, women should be able to pursue academic degrees and graduate like those of the other sex?

DON RAMÓN (*who happens to be a magistrate*): About this graduating; the problem would already be solved if I were a public minister. We want to study and graduate. That is all you want too, right? You've gone poking around? Alright, let's go. I order and command: that individuals of the feminine sex study all manner of fields, that they graduate and everything as much as they like; but that they do not leave their homes or stop looking after their children to go messing with men's business, or as people like to say now, with public life. That public bit does not sit well with women as far as I am concerned. What's next!

A LIBERAL (*strong supporter of Spain having a republican, rather than monarchist, form of government*): And what do you say to the claim that women can be judges and magistrates? Imagine a poor woman, all her feelings, having to endorse a death sentence...!

REPORTER: I know plenty of men who would not be capable of doing that, but I don't think they should therefore be stripped of their rights as men.

EL COTORRÓN (*who spoke earlier and moved on to another group to chat with a married woman he is courting*): I am not arguing nor am I upset by the issue of women's liberation. I think they are freer than us seeing as how they order us about.

THE LADY: On the matter of freedom, whoever wants it takes it; what greater liberty is there than owning one's house and going wherever one wishes?

EL COTORRÓN: Of course you would say that. [281] You own not only your own house but any other man's house who has the pleasure of your company.

THE LADY: But just take that Inígues fellow. Ha, ha, ha! I bet he's been jilted a few times.

EL COTORRÓN: He is a romantic fool, and would serve you well. (*To El Gallo.*) What about that Englishwoman?

EL GALLO: She is surly. No! Her company is not worth a thing. Right away she began speaking to me of her favorite topic. I followed her; but I said something that I'm sure she did not find pleasing because she suddenly turned as indifferent and cold as marble. What a harsh way to accept a compliment!

EL COTORRÓN (*aside*): Dirty remarks, more likely.

EL GALLO: She even appeared to be angry.

THE LADY: Don Juan's sword, blunted on her shield of ice. Ha, ha, ha!

EL GALLO: I thought that given how she preaches freedom for women... But no! She is a ridiculous, prissy type, overbearing in her pretentious seriousness. If that is being a woman, then I am on my own.

REPORTER: (*bringing a newspaper from a table nearby*). By the way, see what it says here in *El Popular* about these things (*reading*), "To our dismay, we know that a certain primary character, very important to the Revolution, is lending an ear to the influence of a person who is legitimately very dear to him, and who in turn is swarmed with intrigues and suggestions that run counter to the regenerating principles proclaimed in September. Therefore it is no surprise that things are moving at such a deplorably slow rate and that the provisional government is so bogged down. We are wasting precious time for our noble

cause, even more precious for our enemies who will know how to take advantage of the situation.

“We hope that our fears do not become reality, and that the person we are alluding to, rather than let his revolutionary zeal cool down, reject all manner of obscurantist influences, regardless of the sex or character of their source.” [282]

See this other piece in *El Liberal*, it is even more direct (*reading*).

“Several petitions signed by thousands of women have been presented, demanding, under the pretext of religion, that decrees regarding the suppression of certain out-dated practices be suspended, and that slavery be preserved in the Antilles.

“Never until today have we seen women gather in Spain to petition the Government. It is with great pain, then, that we see they have not petitioned for themselves, and that they are more backwards than ever in terms of beliefs. Whoever spoke of the need to prepare women for citizenship, and thereby ally them to our aspirations, was right. We did not understand in time all of the harm their backwardness could cause us, and we still leave them in such a state. With such an unfortunately sizeable auxiliary in this case, the extremists now have reason to celebrate.”

That’s true, and now I am convinced that as long as there are no shared interests between the sexes, any revolution will be unsuccessful or one sex will undo in the dark what the other has done under the light of day. The same man

who proclaims freedom in the streets fears it in the home and thereby undoes whatever he has achieved in the streets.

DOCTOR (*approaching the group*): Physiology can put paid to such doctrines. Nature denies equality of the sexes and gave each one its own mission.

REPORTER: Begging your pardon, my doctor friend, but this is a question of rights and sociology, not medicine. There is no need to confuse the subjects. Physicians handle sickness, lawyers handle lawsuits. Problems of natural justice belong to all, to no one exclusively. Look already at what has happened and what is happening with the enslavement of the blacks. Some men of science participating out of some concerns, spoke of physical inequality; and after a bloody war in imitation of other nations, justice has recently prevailed in the United States; and so [283] has equality of rights for all men. By being free, all have rights, regardless of the color that appears to distinguish one from another.

DOCTOR: But the supporters of women's emancipation well know how to take from physiology what seems favorable to them.

REPORTER: As it should be. Physiology, which has not yet spoken its last word, can only come in support of justice; in any case it has the right to disrupt justice. Who says that anything that is now commonly accepted, as indisputable as the law, will not need to be changed further along due to improved observations?

As this argument was playing out at one point in the hall, at another, Virginia was found to be similarly engaged with no less aggressive an opponent.

MILITARY MAN (*of high rank*): You will agree with me, *señora*, that woman, who is the angel of the home, the charm of nature...

VIRGINIA (*interrupting him, smiling*): *And its beautiful defect*, according to the poet Milton.

“You see,” exclaimed a salon poet, very given to the poetry of flower gardens and to sentimental, erotic songs, “there is no nonsense that a wise man has not said. The poet Milton should have been more gallant by always saying the opposite; that woman is the most beautiful flower of the garden of life; that the purest colors are her charm and happiness her perfume.”

VIRGINIA: I believe, good sir, that an idyll is not an argument. It may cause amazement, but it is not convincing.

The disoriented poet kept quiet.

THE MILITARY MAN: I was saying that if in fact women do by nature have more rights than man, those rights are in a different realm. For example, it is not good or natural for women to take up arms. On what foundation of reciprocity can one demand from the fatherland rights identical to those belonging to a person who can and is called to defend it?

VIRGINIA: Who said that all men [284] are fit for war? By not being fit for an accident must they lose their essential rights? If women cannot be soldiers, they can certainly provide them for the fatherland. Lastly, without prolonging this argument, for there will be plenty more, who hasn't heard of the countless women who have shouldered weapons heroically in defense of their fatherland? To mention only one among thousands who you should know as a Spaniard, how many others are there such as Manuela Sancho²³? Whether or not she fainted at hearing the first shot, later she was one of bravest heroines of Zaragoza.

This group and many others in the gathering had reached similar points in their discussions when the band struck up a *habanera*, and all of the younger attendees went off to be lulled by the languorous rhythms. They could not be awakened until nearly dawn, when the call rang out of *ladies and gentlemen, the buffet is now open*. The nearly empty room cleared out entirely at the sound of this announcement. An exploding bomb could not have had so great an affect. [285]

²³ Manuela Sancho Bonafonte (1783-1863) was a hero of the Spanish War of Independence for her bravery during the sieges of Zaragoza in 1808 and 1809 by Napoleonic French Troops. Fundación Zaragoza 2008, "Contexto histórico: el pueblo", Bicentenario de los sitios de Zaragoza (<<http://www.fundacion2008.com/web/personajes/sancho.php>> First accessed on 3/23/09).

CHAPTER XXXIII

FANATICISM

The revolution was brought to the brink of collapse by the opposition's intrigues and the supporters' demands. Blind passions made it impossible to see that the opposition was well awake, lying in wait for the moment to pounce on any mistake.

During this time protests and riots were common.

Virginia was already worrying about the revolution's chances for successfully expanding its program, which she imagined could accommodate her thinking. Her despair verged on delirium.

Póstumo was still a visionary and fanatic for what he imagined was all of humanity's cause, even if, by the looks of the body he now occupied, he was the womanliest woman of them all.

Virginia thought she should play the part of the redeemer at the first rebellion that occurred which was intended to force the government to take more decidedly revolutionary action.

It is true that Christ did not engage in combat, but that the meek lamb martyred himself as the righteous one, giving in to death with no resistance. This gave Virginia reason to think and pause. She would settle for the seditious and armed route, however, for in the end she was not the righteous one. [286] She was Póstumo, brought up in the Spanish fashion, with a southerner's blood running through her veins, and it is well known that when passion burns in a woman's breast, being more nervous than a man, she is given to even greater extremes.

The emancipation of women is a problem that men are called upon to solve to the extent that men manage to convince themselves that it would be to their convenience. It is in this sense that women should impose their will more so by employing skill rather than force; good sense rather than the delirium of fanaticism.

But Virginia, once dominated by emotions at a fever pitch, wanted to be the first soldier for her cause. She donned a man's suit and armed herself with a magnificent rifle to fight on par with the rest.

The Englishman followed her similarly armed. From atop a barricade two fanatics could be seen: one fighting for the rights of her sex, the other to do his lover justice.

Nature has its laws, and if Póstumo's spirit recalled its time as a man, once it became a woman, it must have began feeling the influence of a more delicate organization. But this weak make-up also faced the powerful fever that leads to new marvels. Once Virginia became determined, the saying became true: give woman passion and you will turn her to rage. Besides, we already observed at another point how someone who knows from experience that other lives exist beyond the tomb such as Virginia-Póstumo could have little to fear from death. It would be so easy to return to this world and simply commandeering the first suitable body. Nevertheless, Póstumo could not help but remain somewhat wary. How could he be sure that God would not punish him for such escapades by prohibiting him from reincarnating for some time or ever again?

The Englishman fought calmly at her side, as is normal of his race, with his only being Virginia. He wished he could have two bodies and cover her with one of them.

[287]

A merciless bullet wounded Virginia. The Englishman abandoned his rifle and went to her, taking her into his arms and removing her from danger.

The empty look in her eyes and her pale countenance could not dispel her beauty but they were the mortal expression of impending agony. Good sense tends to regain command at the terrible hour.

“No!” Virginia exclaimed in a choked voice. “Woman will not be freed by the rifle or by cannons but by the truth of her rights. When women are worthy of the rule of law, and man is convinced that force is useless and should not prevail over the weak, woman will then be free to moderate the acts of public life. Then the kingdom of the weak preached by Jesus Christ will be realized,” she said before losing consciousness.

Lord Berckley carried her into an alleyway and managed to hide the wounded woman from the Government troops who had just overtaken the barricade; but all the doors were closed. There was no escape. Time was passing and Virginia was going to expire in the street where he could neither defend her against so many attackers, nor leave her to suffer the soldiers’ rage and humiliations. He desperately looked from one side to another, and when he was prepared to die alongside the one he adored, in defense of her remains, he heard what sounded like a faint noise on the windowpanes of a room across the alley.

It was a normal looking house. At the moment it was entirely closed up, except for the barely noticeable wooden shutter slats located on a balcony in the mezzanine. A

woman's face was discernable through the window panes, young and pretty, she signaled to the Lord offering him refuge.

The shots had ceased almost completely, and the murmur of the victorious ranks could be heard steadily approaching. There was no time to spare for investigation. Once the doorway was open, Lord Berckley looked all around to see [288] if anyone could help him. He realized he had no other choice, however, and swept the moribund woman into his arms, rapidly dashed across the deserted street, and ducked in through the door which immediately closed behind him. [289]

CHAPTER XXXIV

ENCOUNTERS

Virginia came to lying on a sofa in the room where Lord Berckley had taken her. She opened her eyes and, imagine her surprise when she saw, among the half dozen women there watching her with concern, her friend Matilde.

All of the women accompanying Virginia's old friend displayed attractive and provocative features. Concerning the former Condesa del Cierzo, she had lost the veneer of a Rubens or Murillo *Madonna*, and was left only with the gleam of her beautiful, great, black eyes that occasionally radiate a feverish ardor, similar to lightning flashes that illuminate only gloomy ruins.

After a life spent in the forced insomnia of debauchery, mixed with the dregs of shame, the scarcities of misery, and a jaded heart, exhaustion and muffled sorrow had left their mark on her previously notable yet now faded beauty. Through all of this, signs of the dreaded consumption were evident.

Misery born of the absence of a profession, lucrative work, abandonment, and the lack of any noble objective in life are what goad some women into vice, which gathered the inhabitants of that sad house together in common disgrace.

After being swindled and abandoned by her [290] unworthy husband, Matilde had reached the limits of despair. Without any material means for survival, the slight amount he had left her soon disappeared; and with no one to offer her assistance and advice in her isolation, she began descending the ladder of debasement until she reached the final rung.

Upon recovering consciousness, Virginia saw her and cried out in pain as much as surprise, “Matilde!”

Matilde hung her head in shame, offering only silence in response.

VIRGINIA: You don’t need to say anything. Poor wretch! Here is another victim who will not attain redemption; but the world moves on, one solution after another, and people keep taking the quickest path. I die convinced that in order for liberty to shine in the world without eclipse, it must be for all, so that tyranny might not find one single enslaved heart for refuge.

LORD BERCKLEY: Poor, heroic woman. My beloved Virginia! If I have the horrible misfortune of losing you, I swear by my being and by my race to continue your calling so that when women are free, they can be the true liberators of all humanity.

Virginia closed her eyes briefly before opening them and shouting, “Thank you! Thank you, dear friend!”

“Arturo, listen to me.” Lord Berckley drew his ear close to Virginia’s lips, “It is not good for me to die in this place. Take me home, even if I am already dead.”

With these words a gush of blood appeared at her already waxy lips. The hemorrhage revealed the profound gravity of her wound. She was in a mortal state.

MATILDE (*desperately*): She's dying! She's dying with no help. My God! We meet again only for her to die like this and in this place... She's dying and I am condemned to life! Horrible, wretched, cursed life! [291]

LORD BERCKLEY: I'll give half of my fortune, my entire fortune for a doctor who can save her!

MATILDE: Somebody run to find a doctor (*opening the balcony*). The fighting seems to have stopped and all is quiet. You can go out now, it's quiet out and nobody is in the street. Quickly, quickly... I'll give my life for hers if possible.

Lord Berckley remained silent next to the dying woman. In the serenity he strained to preserve, feelings of the most terrible anguish intruded and interfered.

VIRGINIA (*to Berckley*): Thank you, Arthur; my Arturo. You haven't abandoned me. Don't worry about me. There is another life. I know it from experience... I have done this more than once... I have lived in this world on more than one occasion... God will forgive my sins... Maybe my existence in this body began on a whim, but it ends... in a good endeavor... The redemption of a destitute sex... half...of the human race...

BERCKLEY (*horrified*): She's delirious! My Virginia, do not say such things. Be calm, rest your brain.

VIRGINIA (*reviving herself*): Yet, my life was going so well! I dreamed of finishing my work, and then going to England... to live with a satisfied soul... and be your wife and to fill your life with all of the happiness you deserve.

This last effort exhausted her. Death cut short the thread of her words. Virginia had lived in awe of what could happen to her upon returning to eternity, where she might have to repay the debt she contracted by returning to this world without God's permission; but that is how life goes. Life is pleasant and seductive, even more so when one is pursuing a worthwhile goal. That is how we forget about Eternity which we always believe to be more distant than it truly is.

In fulfillment of her request, Virginia was taken to her house and from there the lavish funeral began. A great number of people attended. This was the rich and notable Englishwoman [292] known by society. Having died fighting it out at a barricade for women's emancipation her funeral was quite novel. She was English and such eccentricity seemed rather natural, although it was new and admirable. Her sacrifice served to sober perceptions of what until then had seemed to be comic extravagance, to be expected of a woman. This gave people quite a bit to talk and think about, especially women, as long as the gossip column covered it at least.

As the funeral procession headed toward the cemetery it passed an open carriage occupied by a dandy and a lady. They were none other than the grandly attired Salazar and Carlota, the former dressmaker.

Salazar went pale. As a worthy representative of Elisa de Doble Anzuelo, though, now that Virginia would only be good for the worms, he consoled himself with the fish Carlota who had already nibbled at the bait and promised to keep on biting [293].

EPILOGUE

IN THE OTHER-LIFE

Virginia, or rather the spirit of Póstumo, arrived in Limbo. The souls were already awaiting this arrival, and on the Almighty's orders Póstumo was locked up alone in a dungeon-like cell, not the sort of place from which a wily and impatient spirit could escape and return to Earth to cause problems again. We won't even mention the abuse of the unique and never to be repeated concession granted previously to Póstumo by the Eternal One.

The Guardian took his reprimand. To declare in his defense that he had abandoned Póstumo would not have helped much. The Guardian had grown weary of advising Póstumo and believed him to be incorrigible. The angel was taken away and Póstumo landed in prison. The celestial judiciary then entrusted the errant spirit's custody to another angel, one more proven in the field. Everyone was justifiably suspicious of the mischievous prisoner's words and all communication was forbidden with Póstumo.

FIN

[294]

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