Against Ulro: on the Creation of Poetic Space in the Work of Delmira Agustini, Alejandra Pizarnik and Marosa di Giorgio

by

Jeannine Marie Pitas

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Abstract

Poetry is the language of subversion. It is a linguistic mode where rules are broken and foundations are shaken, where reality twists and changes its shape, where metaphors startle and confound us. Looking at the work of Southern Cone writers Delmira Agustini (1886-1914), Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972) and Marosa di Giorgio (1932-2004), this dissertation explores the ways in which poetry becomes a discourse of resistance. I argue that these writers, though traditionally considered apolitical, have created a discourse that is actually politically charged. Drawing extensively on literary theorist Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, I argue that all three poets seek contact with a “space of knowledge” of an ultimate reality, refusing to abandon their quest even as it proves unrealizable. Through this search, all three poets subsequently create a “space of resistance” that subverts the epistemic structures of their social context. Whether or not these authors intended for their work to make a political statement lies
beyond the scope of this investigation and, in my view, has little bearing on the outcome.

Because the social structures in which they lived – technocracy and rational utilitarianism during Agustini’s era and dictatorship in Pizarnik’s and di Giorgio’s – are inherently oppressive, the three poets’ determination to go beyond them is indeed a political act.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of three exceptional women: my grandmothers Emille Frost Pitass (1902-1995) and Helen Pazderski Kwiatkowski (1911-1999) as well as my aunt Susan Pitass (1938-1985). This dissertation is also dedicated to my cousin Margaret Pitass, who never ceases to inspire me.
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Introduction

Poetry is the language of subversion. It is a linguistic mode where rules are broken and foundations are shaken, where reality twists and changes its shape, where metaphors startle and confound us. As linguist and philosopher of language Ivonne Bordelois comments in her essay *La palabra amenazada (The threatened word)*,

> Cuando Platón expulsa a los poetas de la ciudad está reconociendo la capacidad de subversión que conlleva la poesía. La ciudad contemporánea no es ciertamente platónica pero sí patriarcal y autoritaria; sigue sospechando los conmocionantes poderes de la palabra poética y por eso la confina a las catacumbas (29).

> (When Plato expels the poets from his city, he is recognizing the capacity for subversion that poetry carries. The contemporary city certainly is not platonic, but still patriarchal and authoritative; it remains suspicious of the poetic word’s disruptive powers, and it thus confines poetry to the catacombs).¹

According to Bordelois, language is given a designated public space in the realm of the media, which initially sought to permit the free flow of information. But, she argues, in this globalized, corporatized age in which we live, the media cannot legitimately be described as vehicles of such uninhibited communication. Instead, they serve the interests of power. And, in her opinion, words uttered in the service of power hardly deserve to be called language (which is inherently a free space where ideas are freely given and received), but instead become a form of exploitation (30).

Nevertheless, since the time of Plato, writers have dared to challenge the rules and norms that govern our language and, as a consequence, our thought. At times, this challenge is direct and explicit, as it is in the case of much twentieth-century Latin American writing, such as Ernesto Cardenal’s denunciation of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza and Roque Dalton’s advocacy for Salvadoran peasants and workers. At other times, this rebellion is much more subtle; it does not seek to make its voice loud, to be heard over the din of chanting crowds and

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
political speeches. Rather, it works through a quiet subversion, often at the level of ambiguous metaphors and implicit alternate meanings. According to Theodor Adorno in his essay “Lyric Poetry and Society,” the lyric dwells within the realm of the subjunctive; it envisions an alternate reality to the one that we inhabit. “The lyric’s idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life,” he states (40). In an age where the discourses of utility and technology seek to offer a single, authoritative explanation of the world, poetry slyly suggests that reality is much more complicated than it seems. It is this second form of resistance – the subtle, beautifully subversive form – that is of most interest to me. It is a resistance that challenges not only the power of dictators of nations, but the dictatorial aspect of thought itself – the dogmatism that constantly offers a false refuge for our minds, the conviction that seeks to whitewash all stains of ambiguity. This dissertation will explore the writing of three poets whose work resists the structures of power. However, Delmira Agustini (1886-1914), Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972) and Marosa di Giorgio (1932-2004) offer this resistance not by answering slogans with more slogans; indeed, overtly political discourse is absent from their work. Instead, their poetry manages to subvert the dictatorial overtones inherent not only in our human social environment, but within our very thought.

This focus on the oppressive power of thought has provided inspiration for the first part of the dissertation’s title, “Against Ulro.” The name “Ulro” comes from the work of the eighteenth-century British visionary poet William Blake, whose work will be discussed in conjunction with di Giorgio’s. In Blakes’s mythology, Ulro is a hellish “realm of spiritual pain” which most humans in the current world have to bear (Milosz 32). It refers to an ugly, totalized world of rigid scientific laws and unbending religious doctrines, a world that leaves little scope for the freedom of the imagination. In his book-length essay The Land of Ulro, Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz argues that most of the thinkers and artists who have been prominent on the international stage since Blake’s time have indeed been denizens of this unfortunate realm – most often unwittingly so. But, he goes on to explore the lives and work of a few figures – including Emmanuel Swedenborg, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Simone Weil and his own distant cousin Oscar Milosz – whose work he sees as challenging this structure. Opposing themselves both to
the dogmatism of traditional religion and the totalizing rationality of modern scientism (the ideology that views science as the only valid means of coming to know the truth), the writers who capture Milosz’s attention in this essay have one fundamental feature in common: they consistently affirm the emancipatory power of the human imagination. And in this way, they manage to resist the dictatorial aspects that are present in our very consciousness. This dissertation postulates that Agustini, Pizarnik and di Giorgio stand among the company that Milosz envisions. I argue that, while the Polish writer conceived his “Ulro” only within the context of European culture, it resonates with similar concepts in other regions, particularly Latin America.

The relationship between dictatorship and thought has long been a serious concern for theorists of Latin America and its cultures. In The Idea of Latin America, Walter Mignolo asserts that “The most radical struggles in the twenty-first century will take place on the battlefield of logic and reason” (100). How do we go about envisioning the world? What are we really saying when we use terms like “developing” and “developed” nations, or even when we designate a large global region with a name such as Latin America? How can we resist our own totalizing impulses? For Mignolo, the various forms of oppression that we encounter in the external world have their roots in our mental landscapes – our epistemology, our ways of understanding the world, our very thoughts. What the three poets to be discussed in this investigation hold in common is their commitment to establishing different epistemologies, alternative ways of knowing and understanding the world than those which are readily provided by their social environment. In the words of Octavio Paz,

Cada vez que surge un gran poeta hermético o movimientos de poesía en rebelión contra los valores de una sociedad determinada, debe sospechase que esa sociedad, no la poesía, padece males incurables. Y esos males pueden medirse atendiendo a dos circunstancias: la ausencia de un lenguaje común y la sordera de la sociedad ante el canto solitario (44).

(Whenever there appears a great hermetic poet or poetic movements that rebel against the values of a given society, we must suspect that the society, not poetry, suffers incurable
ills. And these ills can be measured according to two circumstances: the absence of a common language and society’s deafness to a solitary song).

The three poets to be studied in this dissertation all lived in societies that suffered incurable ills. In the case of Agustini, who lived and wrote in fin-de-siècle Uruguay, society was oppressive and confining, particularly for women. Although the reforms brought by President José Batlle (such as the legalization of divorce and the limitation of the work week) were considered liberal and progressive, as an upper-class woman Agustini was compelled to manoeuvre cautiously within the norms of her social stratum, often relying on various masks (such as the virginal “Nena,” which was her familial nickname, or the ingenuous “Joujou” who wrote a society column for one of Montevideo’s most prominent literary magazines). Also, this investigation will seek to show that the entire era of Batlle’s presidency was influenced by European positivism – a nineteenth-century rationalist movement that valued order, progress and social cohesion as utmost virtues and frowned upon attitudes or behaviours that seemingly posed a threat to that order. Thus, returning to Paz’s statement, I want to argue that the ills of Agustini’s era can be attributed not to the absence of a common language (indeed, the rationalizing discourse of positivism provided that) but rather to the inability of society to hear a solitary song – particularly if the singer happened to be a woman.

It turns out that this was also the case with the other poets to be studied in this dissertation. In 1936, Alejandra Pizarnik was born in Argentina to immigrant parents fleeing European Nazism. She then came of age in an environment of great political instability. Although she did not live to see her country’s infamous Dirty War, tortures and killings had already begun under the dictatorial regimes that Pizarnik witnessed during the 1950’s and 60’s. Similarly, Marosa di Giorgio (born in Uruguay four years before Pizarnik) also experienced the anxiety of life under a totalitarian regime. In both countries we might argue that there was no lack of a common language during this time period; many writers did speak up to denounce the wrongs that they perceived and at times experienced personally. However, much like Agustini, these two mid-to-late twentieth-century poets were much more interested in singing a solitary song – a song that, especially in the case of di Giorgio, their listeners were not prepared to hear. In hearing a different melody, in seeking a different truth than the ones offered by the principal epistemologies of their cultures, these three writers all challenge the apparent stability of the
reality that they inhabit. They suggest that alternative ways of knowing, different means of conceiving the world are indeed possible. In the words of Maurice Blanchot (whose *The Space of Literature* forms the primary theoretical framework for this dissertation), poetry leads us to a central point “at which complete realization of language coincides with its disappearance. Everything is pronounced…everything is word, yet the word is itself no longer anything but the appearance of what has disappeared – the imaginary, the incessant, and the interminable. This point is ambiguity itself” (*The Space of Literature* 44). Driving its readers toward this ambiguity, poetry opens up a space of uncertainty within language that by its very nature works against other forms of discourse that dominate our social reality – the discourses of politics, institutional religion, the military, technology, law, and commerce. And in this way, without ever mentioning the name of a president or a union or a social movement, poets manage to create spaces of subversion and become agents of resistance. For Blanchot, this movement toward ambiguity is common to all poetic discourse; it is an inherent aspect of the art form itself. Nevertheless, the fact that his attention is captured by two poets in particular (Rilke and Mallarmé) suggests that for him, there are some poets in particular who demonstrate this process with particular grace and clarity. Were Blanchot still alive and about to write a second, updated, globally-focused version of *The Space of Literature* today, I dare to imagine that Delmira Agustini, Alejandra Pizarnik and Marosa di Giorgio might all be prime candidates for his case studies.

Nevertheless, I suspect that one of the first questions that might be directed toward this dissertation is, why these three poets? What is the relationship between them? They hardly share a historical link. It is true that Marosa di Giorgio read and loved the work of Delmira Agustini – indeed, in an interview with Marcelo Figueredo, she describes Agustini’s spiritual erotism as a precursor to her own (Figueredo 130). There is also evidence that she read and enjoyed Pizarnik’s work (Nidia di Giorgio, Personal Interview). However, there was no close personal relationship between the two. Conversely, it must be noted that while Pizarnik read di Giorgio’s work, she did not particularly care for it. In a 1969 letter to her friend Antonio Beneyto, a Spanish writer and editor, Pizarnik urges him not to publish the Uruguayan writer:

Re MAROSA D.G. Medicis. Surely the opinion of Manuel Pacheco – and thanks (tell him for me) for his esteem for my little works – must be undisputed. But I like our friendship because we are keeping it free of misunderstandings (as happens with me and
dear A.F. Molina). I think that Marosa is good, I think she is more of an innate poet than Molinari, than Carrera Andrade, than so many famous well-read and educated men. But something happens with the loveable Marosa. She doesn’t draw on her whole self to write. She fantasizes – and there are always beautiful images – and fantasizes but she isn’t conscious of the body of the poem, nor of the rigorous lucidity which is worth putting at the service of the treasures emanating from the unconscious inspiration or the “other voice” or whatever it is. The sum total is: if you and I know the reason we love Michaux, Artaud, and above all the unexcelled Lautréamont, then we have to ask Marosa for something more than some fantasies written in fluid but precarious, very poor language. And how is it possible to disdain the somewhat suicidal conflict which each of us maintains with language? Therefore: 1) my liking for Marosa would tell you to publish her. 2) my intense love for the true and dangerous poetry would tell you to wait, or that you read her with very clear eyes, or that you managed to extract an “ultranthology” from her texts (Caulfield 44).

While the personal literary connection between Pizarnik and di Giorgio was tenuous at best, between Pizarnik and Agustini it was nonexistent. While Pizarnik mentions hundreds of beloved writers in her diaries and books of literary quotations, Agustini is not among them; according to critic Cristina Piña, Agustini’s poetry was absent from Pizarnik’s vast library (Cristina Piña, Personal Interview). Thus, it is fair to assume that Agustini’s work was unknown to Pizarnik.

We run into a similar problem if we try to look for common influences in the three authors. It is evident that Pizarnik and di Giorgio shared many literary loves – particularly Lautréamont and the surrealists – but these were all unknown to Agustini. Perhaps the only figure common to all three writers is Rubén Darío, whom Agustini knew personally, di Giorgio cited as an early literary love, and Pizarnik wrote a poem in response to (“Sobre un poema de Rubén Darío,” “About a poem by Rubén Darío,” which engages with the Nicaraguan modernista’s “Sonatina.”) However, linking these three writers on the basis of a common influence would be similarly problematic due to their vastly different attitudes toward such influence. Di Giorgio famously denied having any literary influences or belonging to any movement or school. Pizarnik, with her literary diary (self-consciously modelled after those of Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield) and her palais du vocabulaire (notebooks of beloved
quotations), was eager to fit herself into a tradition. As for Agustini, as Cathy Jade observes in her 2012 study, *Delmira Agustini, Sexual Seduction and Vampiric Conquest*, the young poet’s relationship with Darío’s influence was complex; she simultaneously imitated him and rebelled against his forms, gradually forging her own very distinct poetics. Therefore, seeking to link the authors based on common influences is hardly a viable approach. Instead, this dissertation asserts that the relationship between the works of these three authors lies more at the thematic and stylistic levels. As I mentioned, the primary theoretical approach of this thesis is the work of Blanchot, who focuses on poets’ pursuit of an alternative epistemology and subversive uses of language – concepts that clearly apply to all three of these writers. However, there are other thematic commonalities that are worth exploring: the *eros* in the work of all three writers, the play with religious imagery and themes, (Christian in the case of the Uruguayan writers, Jewish in the case of Pizarnik), the construction of startling images. Overall, some of the most striking features that all three writers share in common is a desire to transcend limits and a tendency toward excess.

In his book *Orientales: Uruguay a través de su poesía*, the writer and critic Amir Hamed explores this excess in the work of Agustini and di Giorgio. He is immediately struck by the images of food and eating present in both, and he sees them as interrelated. Looking at di Giorgio’s work, Hamed asserts,

> Si Delmira tiene hambre de leones o buitres, Marosa juega a repartir la voracidad en un ambiente de cultura, como la cocina. Es la madre o la abuela la que ha guisado, lo que es decir, es una Delmira la que hizo la primera cocción. Desde esa traviesa postura el hablante distribuye los referentes a ser comidos en cucharones, haciendo cómplices de sus hambres a los demás. Si Delmira reclamaba para sí la deglución de manjares salvajes, Marosa, por el contrario, pone frente a los demás los platos vaciados (y con ello los coaliga con sus propios apetitos) (82).

(If Delmira’s hunger is that of lions or vultures, Marosa plays at expressing her voracity in a cultured environment such as the kitchen. The mother or grandmother is the one who has done the cooking; that is to say, it is Delmira who has made the first meal. From this witch’s cauldron the speaker ladles out these tidbits to be eaten, thus making others...
accomplices in her hunger. If Delmira needed to gulp down wild meals, Marosa, on the contrary, places the dirty plates before everyone else [and thus associates them with her own appetites]).

Hamed’s perspicacious exploration of the food metaphor in di Giorgio’s writing – which, though arguably not a central point of focus, is ubiquitous throughout her work – and his link to a similar appetitive impulse in Agustini is highly significant. In both writers, we see a rapacity, a voracious erotism that alternates between innocent and excessive. And, while Hamed’s study does not cross the Río de la Plata to look at Pizarnik’s work, we can argue that she too, with the linguistic madness of Hilda la Polígrafa and the voracious appetite of La Condesa Sangrienta, exhibits this deep, voracious desire. Indeed, the critic María Minelli makes this link between di Giorgio and Pizarnik, seeking to locate them within the mid-to-late-twentieth century “neo-Baroque” poetic tradition in the Río de la Plata region (a tradition dubbed “neobarroso” by Argentinian poet Néstor Perlóngher) that rejected realism and sought to replace old paradigms of writers as intellectual elites with images of them as puerile, amoral, sexually ambiguous “herejes” (“heretics”; 203). Thus, what the three writers share in their themes and aesthetics is a kind of erotic excess, an insatiable desire for transcendence that crosses all limits.

0.1 Approaching the Limits

Looking back on a lifetime of academic work, the philosopher, poet and translator Walter Kaufmann notes that something is lacking in almost the entire history of Western philosophy. And, as it turns out, what is lacking is nothing other than the most important thing. “Much of the greatest art shows us life at the limits, which almost all philosophers have ignored,” he states in Life at the Limits, a 1978 book-length essay on art and literature accompanied by a series of photographs that Kaufmann took while travelling in India. As Kaufmann sees it, “life at the limits” consists of extreme situations that take us to the very edge of our human experience. Making a list of some of these experiences, Kaufmann includes “delivery, deformity, disaster, defeat, disgrace, destitution, distress, desolation and darkness, dehumanization, danger, decay and death” (66). I find it interesting that some of these experiences – such as “delivery” (consisting of being born and giving birth), distress, and death – are common to all humans; it is impossible to get through life without encountering them. Also, in the case of delivery and death,
they are extreme experiences that happen quickly in a relatively short period of time (while illness or pain can be long-lasting, death itself comes quickly). Others, meanwhile, are not common to all and may be experienced over a very long period of time, indeed even an entire lifetime: destitution, including extreme hunger and thirst; dehumanization, which some people never know while others experience daily over the entire course of their lives, and danger, which can be experienced in varying degrees. And of course, some of the terms are more than a little problematic, such as deformity – what does such a term even mean, and when could it be rightly applied? These types of questions, as well as criticisms of which terms Kaufmann has chosen to include and omit, are beyond the scope of this investigation. For me, it is much more interesting to look at the responses that Kaufmann gives to his experiences: “dread, depth (intensity and profundity), disillusionment, despair, derangement… debauchery… degradation of others, destruction (including suicide and murder), defiance, devotion or love, Dionysian joy (often associated with music) and Dionysian abandon (often associated with dance)” (66). What fascinates me is that while all of the limit experiences that Kaufmann identifies are associated with pain and some kind of negation, the responses can be either destructive or creative, negative or positive. I find it incredibly interesting that the response to disaster, defeat or disgrace – experiences that most of us go to great lengths to avoid if possible – might be one of love, joy or abandon (which, admittedly, is not always joyful and can be destructive, but for Kaufmann it is associated with the intense, often ludic beauty of dance). Looking at the work of the three authors to be studied in this dissertation, it becomes clear that these limit-experiences are central to their work.

In Agustini’s writing, we find that love is indeed a limit-experience that leads her to distress. In the sonnet “Amor,” which appeared in her first collection, Agustini speaks of love thus: “Yo lo soñé impetuoso, formidable y ardiente; / Hablaba el impreciso lenguaje del torrente; / Era un mar desbordado de locura y de fuego, / Rodando por la vida como un extraño riego” (I dreamt that it was impetuous, formidable and burning / It spoke the muddy language of the torrent / It was a sea spilled over with insanity and fire / encircling life, a strange irrigation) (Poesía completa 213). Love, for Agustini, is an experience that causes the sea to overflow and catch fire; indeed, it has the gravity of a natural disaster or even a descent into the fires of hell itself. Later, she dreams that love is “triste, como un gran sol poniente / que dobla ante la noche
la cabeza de fuego” (sad, like a great imposing sun / that turns its head of fire away from the night) (213). In this personification of the sun conquered by the night, the poem expresses Kaufmann’s limit-experiences of defeat and desolation. In the last stanza of the poem, however, Agustini responds to these initial negative experiences with a joy so sudden and spontaneous that it deserves to be called “Dionysian” in the sense that Kaufmann means – the Nietzschean idea of wildness and chaotic passion: “Y hoy sueño que es vibrante, y suave, y riente, y triste, / Que todas las tinieblas y todo el iris viste; / Que, frágil como un ídolo y eterno como Dios, / Sobre la vida toda su majestad levanta: / Y el beso cae ardiendo a perfumar su planta / Como una flor de fuego deshojada por dos” (And today I dream that it is vibrant, and soft, and laughing, and sad / That it is dressed in all the shadows, all the rainbow / That, as fragile as an idol and as eternal as God / above all life it raises its majesty / and the kiss falls burning to perfume its plant / like a flower of fire plucked by two) (213). In a whirl of colours and textures, Agustini presents an image of love as a chaotic unification of opposites – laughter and sadness, shadow and light, strength and fragility. Neither of these oppositions dominates; instead, they are brought together in a passionate movement that, in all its chaos, majestically rises above life itself. Invoking Barthes’s ideas of pleasure and bliss (which will be discussed more fully later in relation to Agustini), this image truly evokes the latter; the poetic speaker expresses a joy that is not light-hearted or innocent, but very powerful, potentially dangerous and disruptive, bordering on excessive – in a word, Dionysian.

Looking at the other two authors to be studied, we see similar expressions of limit experiences. In Pizarnik’s writing, we frequently encounter moments of desolation, of darkness and silence, of a distress that is always present in the wounding that the speaker experiences: “El viento muere en mi herida / La noche mendiga mi sangre” (The wind dies in my wound / The night begs for my blood) (Obras completas 47). There is a pain, a woundedness that permeates the speaker’s entire experience. It can be bodily, as in this short lyric from her early collection Las aventuras perdidas or in her poetic prose text La condesa sangrienta (The Bloody Countess), an account of the medieval Hungarian countess Erzsébet Báthory’s tortures of hundreds of young girls. At other times, however, the wound exists within language itself: “La lengua natal castra / la lengua es un órgano del conocimiento / del fracaso de todo poema / castrado por su propia lengua / que es el órgano de la re-creación / del reconocimiento / pero no el de la resurrección”
(the native tongue castrates / the tongue is an organ of knowledge / of the failure of all poems / castrated by their own tongue / which is the organ of re-creation / re-cognition / but not resurrection) (Obras completas 239). In this poem, which is one of Pizarnik’s last and most famous, it is language itself that is simultaneously violent and violated. As a system of representation, it blocks us from the very knowledge that it purports to reveal: the reality behind the words. We are only able to re-create, to re-cognize – to see the representation, but never the original. And in constantly, aggressively seeking that original, we arguably become violent in our use of language – fighting it, pushing against it, attempting to break through to a realm beyond it rather than dwelling within it. We experience defeat and desolation; we respond with a kind of destruction. For Pizarnik, these experiences leave the poem – and indeed language itself – with an open wound.

Speaking of limit experiences (and commenting on the possible reasons as to why all of his terms begin with the letter d), Kaufmann states,

Is it a mere accident that all these words begin with the same letter? Most of them actually begin with the same two letters (de), but many of these are not derived from the Latin prefix de, which signifies separation and usually also a descent, a downward motion. It will be noted that “down” and “deep” also begin with a “d” – like danger, death and dread. But that there are so many terms with the same first letter is clearly due to the Latin prefixes. Dis in Latin also suggests separation, and we may conclude that most often it is a separation from a sheltered state that brings a confrontation with the limits. Conversely, this departure may be actively sought in a quest for the boundaries (67).

For Pizarnik, the poem itself is indeed a downward motion, a separation, and a quest for limits. And, when she finds that the boundary cannot be crossed – in other words, when she loses her confidence in the ability of language to represent reality fully and completely – her response is similar to Agustini’s in that it involves a descent into linguistic chaos, a bringing together of contrary elements and ideas in a way that does not seek to unify them, but allows them to intertwine and collide in the unexpected patterns of an abstract painting. In her late poetic works, particularly “La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la Polígrafa” (The Buccaneer of Pernambuco
or Hilda the Polygraph), language breaks open in a wild wordplay reminiscent of experimental Argentinian poet Oliverio Girondo and other poets of the avant-garde generation that prefigured the Latin American neo-Baroque. For example, Pizarnik presents us with a character called the “Bufidora” (an invented word that might be translated as “snorter”) and describes her thus:

Bufe el eunuco
silbe el cuco
encienda la hacienda
perfore el foro
forre el furor
despilfarrado a ras de la desdentada calavera
paramera, cale la cala la calavera,
lije el lejano lejos,
luelve el licor del delincuente
amarreteee a Maritornes,
hornee su honra,
peine sus penas, afane su afân,
felicite en fellatio,
colacione poluciones,
matadlos
pum-pum
de nuevo
pif-paf
¡más!
Toc
¡más!
Clic
contactad
clic-toc
contraed
langue d’oc (Obras completas 311).
(Snort the eunuch
whistle the cuckoo
raunch up the ranch
perforate the forum
fumigate the fury wasted as badly as a toothless mountain skull,
soak the slit, the skull,
sand down the distanced distant
liquefy the delinquent’s liquor
miser yourself to Maritornes,
oven-roast your honour,
part your pities in the middle
steal your zeal
felicitate in fellatio
collate pollutions
kill them
pum-pum
again
piff-paff
more!
Tock
more!
Click
contact
click-tock
contract
langue d’oc).
Even a brief glance at this text, which flits freely between the obscene and the sublime, dissolving into a cacophonous, absurd sort of bliss, tempts us with a taste of Pizarnik’s later writings. Having lost her confidence in the ability of language to represent reality, Pizarnik engages in a form of Kaufmann’s Dionysian abandon – a wild dance between meaning and meaninglessness. This response differs greatly from Agustini’s in its style (it is at least to a certain extent derived from Pizarnik’s intertextual contact with avant-garde and surrealist writers, who lived and wrote after Agustini’s time) and also in its tone (I would argue that while Agustini’s response to the limit experience is primarily joyful, an affirmation of the power and beauty of eros, Pizarnik’s is much more melancholy – there is a despair underlying her dance). Nevertheless, what the two poets share is an insatiable desire for the limit, a constant need to go beyond. And, faced with the inability to achieve the transcendence that they are seeking, they respond with a passionate, playful excess that we might arguably call Dionysian.

In reading the work of Marosa di Giorgio, we again experience the extremity of the limit and a response that, to my ears at least, exhibits Dionysian joy in some poems and Dionysian abandon in others – or, in some cases, both at once. “Cuando se dieron cuenta, la tragedia ya había empezado,” (When they realized what was happening, the tragedy had already begun), she informs us in the first poem of Clavel y tenebrario (Carnation and Tenebrae) (191). Transforming a domestic scene into an apocalypse, di Giorgio brings together disaster and dread with joy and abandon, revealing the disconcertingly close relationship between seemingly different modes of being:

Una nube vino, rápida, del sur, y se posó sobre la casa, negra, gris, de un blanco tenebroso, llena de granizos y silbidos, daba a ratos, su terrible uva.

Y las aves, a punto de morir, caían sobre el patio. Las palomas charlatanas, ya, como papeles, como recuerdos; y los loros de alas de oro, que habían dicho grandes discursos, de pie, sobre el naranjo, bajaban más allá – sin ton ni son, – como ramos de flores multicolores.

Parecía que era el final de todo.

Las almas tenían miedo y espiaban por un resquicio, la rota eternidad (191).
(A cloud came, quickly, from the South, and it hovered over the house, black, grey, a dismal white, full of hail and whistling, and from time to time, it sprouted with terrible grapes.

And the birds, at the point of death, collapsed over the courtyard. The chattering birds, then, like papers, like memories, and the golden-winged parrots, who had made great speeches, standing, above the orange trees, disappeared into the distance – without rhyme or reason – like bunches of multi-coloured flowers.

It seemed like it was the end of everything.

In this strange scene birth and death are mixed with disaster in a chaotic combination reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings. Birth (or “delivery” as Kaufmann would describe it) occurs with the grapes that sprout from the cloud; at the same time, birds collapse over the courtyard, dying. The whole scene is one of disaster – it is nothing short of an apocalypse, “the end of everything.” And, as in Pizarnik’s writing, there is a sense of woundedness – the “souls” described in the poem search for wholeness within destruction, a “broken eternity.” However, while the text asserts that the parrots disappear “without rhyme or reason,” we see that there is much order to the chaos. One characteristic feature of di Giorgio’s writing is her use of punctuation – her splicing of commas that break long, run-on sentences into short fragments. Thus, while there is an element of the kind of wild abandon that we see in Pizarnik’s writing, it is not a full-out abandon. In separating the images by commas, di Giorgio expresses a determination to preserve the individual integrity of each particular phrase. If Pizarnik’s “Hilda la Polígrafa” can be compared to an abstract painting in which the colours swirl together, di Giorgio’s writing bears more resemblance to a work by Hieronymus Bosch, in which an overwhelming amount of images are juxtaposed and made to interact while still retaining their individual form. This juxtaposition is reminiscent of the union of contraries visible in Agustini, in which fire and water, pain and joy are brought together in the experience of love. Here, we see the exquisite intimacy of birth and death, a “dismal white” cloud and diaphanous multi-coloured flowers. I would argue that in this elaborate play of images, di Giorgio expresses both the destructive impulse of collective abandon and dance with the life-affirming music that Kaufmann
sees as an expression of joy. The limit experience of destruction, though not freely chosen, is affirmed as positive even as it is destructive. For di Giorgio, the transcendent más allá of eternity is the ultimate object of desire – even if that eternity can only be reached through wound and brokenness.

Thus, I am arguing that one of the main features that unites these three authors is precisely this commitment to expressing life at the limits. In reading the work of these poets, we encounter a process that attempts to transcend the immediate conditions of everyday life and reach another reality, an alternative world beyond this one. At times, this process is deliberately sought out (as in Agustini’s relentless pursuit of eros and ideal love); at other times, it occurs spontaneously (as in Pizarnik’s disillusionment with language and subsequent break into the precarious realm where sense dances with nonsense). And in all three cases, as this dissertation will argue, this break entails a mode of resistance to quotidian realities, expressing what Adorno simply calls a “dream of a world in which things could be different” (40). But, while Adorno asserts that this process occurs in the work of all lyric poets, I hesitate to agree with him. For Kaufmann, all great art shows us life at the limits; however, he mentions that, excepting existentialism, most Western philosophy – which for the most part has concerned itself more with understanding the nature of non-human reality than engaging with our deepest and most disconcerting human experiences – has not touched upon this theme. Of course, the timing of this statement must be taken into account – Kaufmann was writing in the ‘70’s; since then, we have seen an increase of philosophical studies around affect, for example. And, looking at the history of philosophy, what are we to make of Augustine’s spiritual anguish, or Plato’s portrayal of the trial and death of his beloved teacher Socrates? Surely these are limit-experiences at their most profound. But while I find Kaufmann’s argument to be too totalizing, I do see a certain amount of truth in it. The same could be said for much lyric poetry as well. Emily Dickinson famously remarked to her friend and mentor Thomas Higginson, “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?” (Higginson 458). For Dickinson, poetry that does not evoke the limit experience simply does not deserve to be called poetry. Without seeking to make specific judgements on this
matter, I think it is fair to say that there are many, many lyric poems written in all languages that do not meet Dickinson’s criteria.

Looking specifically at the Uruguayan context, the critic Ángel Rama also suggests that much – in fact most – of the literature of his country does not deal with these limit experiences. Heavily influenced by nineteenth-century positivism, most Uruguayan writing is, according to Rama, realist in nature and rationalist in its focus. A prime example of such an author would be Rama’s contemporary Mario Benedetti (1920-2009), an acclaimed poet and novelist known for his political resistance during the period of dictatorship and social criticism afterwards. However, Rama also observes a “línea secreta” of writers who reject this realism. In his 1966 book *Cien años de raros* (*One hundred years of oddballs*), Rama states this secret line “Esporádica, ajena, indecisa en sus comienzos, progresivamente emerge a la luz […] y en los últimos veinticinco años se incorpora autores, estilos, búsquedas artísticas originales hasta formar, si no una escuela, una tendencia minoritaria de la literatura nacional” (emerges sporadically, distantly, indecisively in its beginnings […] and in the last twenty-five years it has incorporated authors, styles, original artistic quests that have formed, if not a school, at least a minority tendency within national literature) (*Cien años de raros* 8). Rama does not provide a list of unifying characteristics for these writers; indeed, he rejects the tendency to reify them and asserts that they should not be labelled as writers of the “fantastic” or any other literary brand. However, looking at the list of authors included in this anthology – among them Horacio Quiroga, Felisberto Hernández, and Armonía Somers – we see that what they all have in common is a commitment to exploring life at the limits, the threshold experiences of dread and death, of despair and “Dionysian dance.” It is also highly significant that Rama includes di Giorgio in this anthology, an inclusion that helped the then-emerging poet to make her presence known on the Uruguayan literary stage. Although Rama refuses to offer a clear definition or characterization of his “raros,” I believe that it is fair to see them as writers who defy easy categorization, but who share the characteristic of invoking wildness and excess. I have no doubt that, had Rama broadened the scope of his study to include *rioplatense* rather than just Uruguayan authors, he would have included Pizarnik as a “rara” who, despite her constant desire to fit into the literary canon, is viewed to this day as something of an oddball within Argentinian poetry, not easily categorized as belonging to any particular literary school (despite her concerted effort to fit herself into a tradition). While
Rama’s decision not to include Agustini in his list is to me somewhat surprising, it makes sense when we observe his comments on early twentieth-century Uruguayan modernismo, the literary movement with which Agustini is most commonly associated. According to Rama, modernismo was a movement that, although initially subversive in Uruguay, ended up being subsumed by the dominant class:

El producto que ofrecían los modernistas sufría esa interna contradicción, pues presentándose como agresivo rechazo de la sociedad dominada por el fariseísmo burgués…concluía siendo anexado por este burgués que lo integraba a un mundo dependiente, ya no como una presión sino como un simple elemento decorativo, valorado en su virtualidad artística (Cien años de raros 10).

(The product offered by the modernistas suffered from that internal contradiction: although it was presented as an aggressive rejection of a society dominated by bourgeois Phariseanism, it ended up being annexed by that same bourgeois who integrated it into a dependent realm, no longer as a pressure against it but rather as a simple decorative element, valued for its artistic potential).

Rama’s argument, which I will discuss in more depth when analyzing Agustini within the context of modernismo, certainly has much validity. But, Agustini herself, who was somewhat of an outsider to the modernista movement and (much like the other two writers in this study) defies easy classification, could indeed be characterized as a rara. By daring to write blatantly erotic verse at a time when few authors – especially upper class women – could do so, Agustini sets herself against her literary and intellectual context even as she works within it. In her essay on Agustini, the critic Cristina Fangmann notes the risks and dangers that Agustini (and other women who dared to challenge the social norms of their time) had to face in order to express fully their passions. As Fangmann puts it,

El exceso conlleva siempre un costo. En el caso de las mujeres pareciera que ese costo es más alto, y que cuando es una mujer la que se excede, las consecuencias son peores. Así se confirma en el campo de la sexualidad donde la mujer esta siempre más expuesta a los peligros, donde siempre le pide ser cauta, tener cuidado, no mostrarse y, sobre todo, ocultar su deseo para no correr riesgos (153).
(Excess always carries a cost. In the case of women it seems that this cost is especially high, and when it is a woman who goes too far, the consequences are worse. Thus we can see that in the field of sexuality a woman is always more exposed to dangers and therefore is always asked to be careful, to not exhibit herself and, above all else, to hide her own desire so as not to run any risks).

By constantly pushing the boundaries and seeking to experience life at the limits through spiritual and erotic transcendence, Agustini challenges the predominant realist and rationalist paradigms of her day, and while her society did indeed treat her as a “simple decorative element,” fortunately posterity has not.

Thus, I would like to argue that, though not included in Rama’s anthology for the aforementioned reasons, Agustini and Pizarnik share with di Giorgio this “rara” identity, which in their case is characterized by a wild, excessive desire and a constant engagement with the limits. And, before I proceed to outline the central theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation, I think that it might be worthwhile to take a look at a figure whose aesthetic resonates strongly with that of Agustini, Pizarnik and di Giorgio. According to Rama, the first Uruguayan “raro” was a young poet named Isidore Ducasse who, born in Uruguay in 1846, emigrated to France at a young age and wrote in French under the pen name comte de Lautréamont.

0.2 Heirs of Maldoror

“I will state in a few lines that Maldoror was good during the first years of his life, when he lived happily. That is that. Then he noticed that he had been born evil: an extraordinary fatality!” states Lautréamont in the first canto of his best known work, Maldoror, a long prose poem describing the life and exploits of a young man who is at once an idealist and social pariah. Lautréamont informs us that the title character hid his true personality for some years, but then found that he could no longer do so: “…In the end, because of the concentration this required, which did not come naturally to him, the blood used to rush to his head every day; until, no longer able to bear such a life, he flung himself resolutely into a career of evildoing… a sweet atmosphere!” (I.3). Drawing on such Romantic anti-heroes as Lord Byron’s Manfred and Adam Mickiewicz’s Konrad, the poet creates a character that has received much attention from writers and critics throughout the twentieth century, including Blanchot, whose thought offers the central
theoretical framework of this dissertation. In *Lautréamont and Sade*, Blanchot lists some of the central themes of Lautréamont’s work as those of human pain, erotic excess, and the slippery, often undefined relationship between goodness and evil. We also see the Romantic theme of the Promethean hero who dares to challenge God and the traditional dualistic worldview: “You will not, in my last hour, find me surrounded by priests. I want to die lulled by the waves of the stormy sea, or standing on a mountain-top… my eyes looking upwards, no: I know my extinction will be complete,” declares Lautréamont’s hero Maldoror (I.10). Looking at the ninth section of the first canto, we see a long meditation on the sea, a kind of apostrophic litany in which the ocean is addressed as a kind of divine figure, but at the same time remains imperfect and intimately associated with human suffering:

> Old ocean, crystal-waved, you resemble proportionally the azure stains seen on the disfigured tops of mosses; you are an immense blueness on the body of the earth: I love this comparison. Thus, on seeing you first, a prolonged breath of sadness, which one would take for the murmuring of your delicious breeze, passes, leaving ineffable traces on the deeply-moved soul, and recalling to the minds of those who love you – though one does not always realize this – man’s crude beginnings, when he first came to know sorrow, which has been with him ever since. I hail you, old ocean! (I.9).

In this stanza Lautréamont explores the link between the lifeless, mineral ocean with the bodily life forms that exist on earth, such as the disfigured tops of mosses and indeed the human body, which has always known pain and sorrow. What is curious about this description is the juxtaposition between the jubilant, laudatory form of the litany and the dolorous content, which essentially transforms the ocean into a symbol for the universe’s indifference to human misery. We also see that, as the litany progresses, the images become more intense and violent:

> Old ocean, you are the symbol of identity: always equal to yourself. You never vary essentially and, if somewhere your waves are raging, further away, in some other zone, they are perfectly calm. You are not like man who stops in the street to watch two bulldogs snarling and biting one another’s necks, but who does not stop to watch when a funeral passes; who is approachable in the morning, in a black mood in the evening; who laughs today and cries tomorrow… I hail you, old ocean! (I.9).
The striking image of the two bulldogs snarling and biting each other is highly significant for Lautréamont; indeed, Gaston Bachelard describes the emphasis on the animal nature of man along with human instincts for aggression (15). This image of the dog, which recurs throughout the text, corresponds directly to Alejandra Pizarnik’s invocation of “maldoror y su perro” (maldoror and his dog) in her famous poem “En esta noche, en este mundo” (“On this night, in this world”). And, as we shall explore more fully further on, this focus on animality is highly significant both to Agustini’s and di Giorgio’s writing. However, animality is only part of the picture that Lautréamont presents in these lines. We also see an image of the universe’s inconsistency and, as I have already mentioned, its indifference to us. Lautréamont presents the human being as completely unpredictable and unreliable; his mood changes ceaselessly; he can easily oscillate between compassion and indifference, moved by a dogfight but cold to a passing funeral. The ocean, in contrast to man, is presented as always the same, always equal to itself. However, we are immediately faced with a contradiction. “If somewhere your waves are raging, further away, in another zone, they are completely calm.” The ocean is not a simple, undifferentiated mass; it does not smooth and free itself of contradiction; it does not remain static. Its unchanging nature lies in that it is the fount from which all changes come, the container of all realities. Within its waves, good and evil are very close, as are order and chaos, kindness and hatred, a man as he stops to watch a dogfight and the same man the next day as he passes a funeral unmoved. Focusing on this image of the ocean, Blanchot comments,

Who sees the tension that violence places on his language and on his being, a violence so powerful that it does not permit any respite in the excessiveness of one single passion and that this instability, which forces it to go beyond the form of feelings, is able to bring it beyond every form? Who also has the premonition of the kind of vertigo through which Maldoror enters into contact with this indeterminate power that is the ocean, the primordial centre of metamorphoses, an originally pure element, an originally vague, diffused substance, formless and ready to take on any form, an existence as compact as rock, but living, a fullness always one and always other, and wherein he who enters becomes another (Lautréamont and Sade 89).

The ocean corresponds to the themes of excess and limits – not only the desire to cross them, but the complete impossibility of locating them. According to Blanchot, Lautréamont constantly
struggles to find the “very limit of the day, of this day that is already in Lautréamont an unlimited aspiration” (*Lautréamont and Sade* 163). Existence itself is excessive, infinite, indeterminate; it is an overwhelming flood of reality that cannot be contained. What is most striking about Lautréamont’s work is the sheer proximity between tenderness and violence, beauty and ugliness. This juxtaposition of forces often considered opposite and mutually exclusive is highly important to all three of the writers to be discussed in this dissertation; it is also closely related to the theme of Dionysian excess and transgression of limits that serves to unite them. In terms of Agustini, we see that love and desire are often linked to violence, as in her depiction of the injured swan in “El cisne” and the dismembered body parts of former lovers in “Mis amores.” In Pizarnik’s work, we see a constant darting between positive and negative images that ultimately breaks down into the kind of oceanic excess that appears in a work such as “Hilda la polígrafa.” Meanwhile, I would argue that the entire landscape of di Giorgio’s work resembles Lautréamont’s ocean; it is a consistent yet ever changing well of life forms that are at once beautiful and dangerous, sacred and profane.

I have already mentioned that I do not intend to analyze Lautréamont as a common influence on the three writers; indeed, given that his work was unknown in Uruguay during Agustini’s lifetime, it is impossible to describe him as such. Nevertheless, he shares the same cultural antecedents as Agustini, undoubtedly having read the same nineteenth-century French authors (Agustini was well-educated and fluent in French) and also emerging from a similar Uruguayan milieu. Uruguayan critic Amir Hamed locates the animality, brutality and aggression of Maldoror as stemming directly from Isidore Ducasse’s Montevidean childhood, where he undoubtedly came into contact with the genre of Uruguayan gaucho literature – poems and stories that played with the boundaries between human and animal while showing the former in his most ferocious aspect (37). Meanwhile, Lautréamont is one of the principal “raros” whom Ángel Rama discusses in his book, and I have already argued that Agustini belongs to this company. Looking at much of Agustini’s poetry, with its own wildness, vampirism, and erotic excess, it is quite natural to understand her work as belonging to the same tradition of Lautréamont’s, even in the absence of direct contact. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that he was one of di Giorgio’s most beloved authors (Nidia di Giorgio. Personal Interview). Pizarnik also studied his work thoroughly and enthusiastically. Speaking of the sexual aspects of Pizarnik’s
work, the critic Cristina Piña describes them as a form of “the obscene,” which she contrasts with the erotic (defined as seeking to celebrate physical beauty rather than to evoke desire) and the pornographic (which in its explicit revelation of sexuality seeks to evoke nothing but desire). In a move reminiscent of Roland Barthes, Piña draws a distinction between pleasure (which she associates with the erotic and pornographic) and bliss (which she associates with the obscene). For her, bliss goes far beyond pleasure, driving toward that which cannot be represented or articulated, that which is closely linked with death and the unknown. Looking at Pizarnik’s work, Piña sees in “the obscene” a drive toward bliss that can be traced directly to Lautréamont:

Lo obsceno en su articulación específicamente sexual pero asociado con una búsqueda del absoluto no religioso empieza a aparecer en Rimbaud para estallar en Lautréamont, cuyos Cantos de Maldoror, en tanto representan lo casi irrepresentable y traen a escena la búsqueda del absoluto a través de una sexualidad impregnada de muerte, de sadismo y crimen, es decir, articulando lo prohibido, lo oculto, lo horrible, se presentan como la obra mas transgresora del siglo [XIX] (Poesía y experiencia del límite 26).

(The obscene in its specifically sexual articulation, but associated with the search for a non-religious absolute, begins to appear in Rimbaud and then bursts out fully in Lautréamont, whose Maldoror presents itself as the most transgressive work of the nineteenth century due to its sexuality impregnated with death, its sadism and crime that articulate the forbidden, the hidden, and the horrible).

I would dispute Piña’s assertion that the absolute sought by these writers is necessarily non-religious; however, this is a separate discussion that will be taken up later on in the chapters. Nevertheless, I find her definition of “the obscene” as particularly interesting and relevant to all three of the writers in that it relates to the themes of excess and transgression of limits. While I cannot argue that Lautréamont influences all of these writers, I do think that it is fair to designate them all as heirs of his most significant literary creation, Maldoror.

Looking at Agustini’s writing, we can see this ferocious spirit in her second collection, Cantos de la mañana (Morning Songs). In a poem entitled “El Vampiro” (“The Vampire”), which has been anthologized and translated by Alejandro Cáceres in Selected Poetry of Delmira...
Agustini, the poetic speaker finds herself taking on the “maldito” character of the evildoer, feeding off the sorrow of others, unable to control her vicious impulses:

En el regazo de la tarde triste  
Yo invoqué tu dolor… Sentirlo era  
Sentirte el corazón! Palideciste  
Hasta la voz, tus párpados de cera,  
Bajaron…y callaste… Pareciste  
Oír pasar la Muerte… Yo que abriera  
Tu herida mordí en ella – ¿me sentiste? –  
Como en el oro de un panal mordiera! (Agustini 66).

(In the bosom of the sad evening  
I called upon your sorrow… Feeling it was  
Feeling your heart as well. You were pale  
Even your voice, your waxen eyelids  
Lowered… and remained silent… You seemed  
to hear death passing by… I who had opened  
Your wound bit on it – did you feel me?  
As into the gold of a honeycomb I bit!) (Cáceres 67).

What is striking about these opening lines is the willfulness of the speaker. The vampiric act is consciously and deliberately chosen; just as Maldoror triumphantly opts to do evil after deciding that it is his true nature to do so, this speaker purposely invokes the pain of the other and watches him die. The image of the gold honeycomb is reminiscent of the juxtaposition of beauty and violence that we see in the “old ocean” stanza and many other parts of Lautréamont’s masterpiece. This proximity between seemingly contrary forces escalates in the next stanzas, where the speaker states, “Y exprimí más, traidora, dulcemente / Tu corazón herido mortalmente, / Por la cruel daga rara y exquisita / De un mal sin nombre, hasta sangrarlo en llanto! / Y las mil bocas de mi sed maldita / Tendí a esa fuente abierta en tu quebranto” (I squeezed even more treacherously, sweetly / Your heart mortally wounded, / By the cruel dagger, rare and exquisite, / Of a nameless illness, until making it bleed in sobs! / And the thousand mouths of my damned thirst / I offered to that open fountain in your suffering) (Cáceres 67). Not satisfied by the first
In addition to reading this poem as a scene between two lovers, we might indeed read it as an encounter between the speaker and herself, where the “I” is the wild, transgressive, unconscious component of the speaker’s identity while the “you” is the calm, gentle, innocent part who falls victim to the speaker’s ravenous desires. Such a reading certainly makes sense within the poem’s context; Agustini’s world in fin-de-siècle Uruguay was characterized by staid, somewhat puritanical social mores and a political regime that, for all its progressive policies, was “disciplinary” in its focus on reason and order as the means to that progress. In this poem, however, we see the rebelliousness inherent within that order – a rebelliousness that recalls Lautréamont’s image of the ocean as a churning, mercurial mass from which contrary forces arise. This disorder intensifies toward the poem’s conclusion as the speaker’s willfulness is diminished. The idea of illness is a recurring motif within Agustini’s work, resonating with the “malaise of modernity” that Charles Taylor has described beginning in this period and increasing to the present day. Along with the “damned thirst” of the speaker and the suffering of her addressee, this image of illness reveals that the original triumphant tone of the speaker cannot be sustained indefinitely; eventually both the “I” and the “you” are made to suffer pain. In the final stanza, the speaker questions herself; like Maldoror and other Romantic and post-Romantic anti-heroes before him, the poetic voice asks why she has been made to suffer this fate: “¿Por qué fui tu vampiro de amargura? / ¿Soy flor o estirpe de una especie oscura / Que come llagas y que bebe el llanto?” (Why was I your vampire of bitterness? / Am I a flower or a breed of an obscure species / That devours sores and gulps tears?) (Agustini 66; Cáceres 67). What is curious about these lines is that the speaker begins to question her own identity. What am I, she asks. While at the beginning of the poem she acts wilfully, at the conclusion she appears to have been determined by the ways of nature. She suddenly does not know why she has become this “vampire of bitterness”; interestingly, she begins to question her own humanity, suggesting that
she may be another life form, a flower or breed of an obscure species. This final question resonates with the idea of the Great Chain of Being, the medieval concept that all life forms were arranged according to a stable hierarchy with humans clearly superior to animals – a concept that was completely turned on its head with the growth of science and growing acceptance of Darwin’s theory of evolution in the nineteenth century. For Lautréamont and his contemporaries, all of the aggressive and violent instincts of the beasts are inherent within man, and his anti-hero simultaneously rejoices and recoils at this fact. The same is true for Agustini, whose poetic speaker delights in her own vampiric tendencies only to be pained by them. Commenting on Lautréamont’s writing, Bachelard argues that it cannot be described as a form of vampirism; “the symptoms are so changeable and numerous, the states so transitional and accordingly ill-defined,” that we see much more multiplicitous transformation and energy directed toward many places at once than vampiric conquest, where aggression is directed toward a single object. The same is true in Agustini’s poem; despite the initial single-minded focus on conquest, the speaker is soon directed elsewhere, toward the dissolution that leads toward pain. Returning to my suggestion that the poem might be read as a conflictive encounter between two facets of the same subject, we see that in the end, both sides experience tremendous suffering – the same suffering that Lautréamont invokes in such scenes as, for example, the encounter with a beggar in Canto 10: “My mother left the country. I never saw my father again. As for me, they say that I am mad and I live by begging. What I do know is that the canary no longer sings” (10.6). In Agustini, as in Lautréamont, we witness a search for transcendence at all costs, an excessive, obscene insistence on bliss that brings the speaker closer and closer to the limits – an experience that ultimately leads to dissolution and pain.

We see a similar movement in the work of Alejandra Pizarnik who, unlike Agustini, was able to read Lautréamont’s writing and allow it to influence her own. As I have previously mentioned, the most direct image of this influence occurs in her famous poem “En esta noche, en este mundo,” (“On this night, in this world”). In this deeply painful lyric, Pizarnik meditates on the inexorable distance between language and the objects that language claims to represent: “palabras embozadas / todo se desliza / hacia la negra licuefacción / y el perro del maldoror / en esta noche en este mundo / donde todo es posible / salvo / el poema” (muffled words / everything slides / toward black liquefaction / and maldoror’s dog / on this night in this world / where
everything is possible / but the poem) (Obras completas 240). While this poem will be discussed in more depth in my chapter on Pizarnik, it is worth bringing up specifically the connection to Lautréamont. According to the critic Jaime Rodríguez-Matos, the reference to Maldoror’s dog refers to a moment when Maldoror is told that dogs “have an insatiable thirst for the infinite,” and he finds that he shares this same insatiable thirst (Rodríguez-Matos 584). In Lautréamont’s text the episode occurs thus:

After some hours, the dogs, exhausted by running round, almost dead, their tongues hanging out, set upon one another and, not knowing what they are doing, tear one another into thousands of pieces with incredible rapidity. Yet they do not do this out of cruelty. One day, a glazed look in her eyes, my mother said to me: ‘When you are in bed and you hear the barking of the dogs in the countryside, hide beneath your blanket but do not deride what they do: they have an insatiable thirst for the infinite, as you, and I, and all other pale, long-faced human beings do. I will even allow you to stand in front of your window to contemplate this spectacle, which is quite edifying.’ Since that time, I have respected the dead woman’s wish. Like those dogs, I feel the need for the infinite. I cannot, cannot satisfy this need. I am the son of a man and a woman, from what I have been told. This astonishes me… I believed I was something more (I.8).

In this passage Maldoror stresses that the violent aggression of the dogs does not stem from cruelty; rather, it comes from this desire for the infinite, this drive to transcend apparent realities and grasp something beyond them. Maldoror cannot believe he is a mere human; he later goes on to say that he would rather be the son of a shark. In Lautréamont’s version of the Great Chain of Being, animals are not inferior to humans; if anything, they represent something higher, this drive toward a realm beyond pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, a transcendent reality beyond the one that we can see and touch. As this thesis develops, I will argue that all three of the authors are seeking such a reality, though this search manifests itself differently in all of them. In terms of Pizarnik, we see that her preoccupation is largely with language; she yearns to go beyond the linguistic sign and arrive at the realm of pure meaning – a movement that consistently proves itself to be impossible, leading to the linguistic explosion of Hilda la polígrafa and the absolute, unchecked aggression of La condesa sangrienta. As in Agustini’s writing, the desire for transcendence ultimately leads to suffering; the speakers of her poems
painfully undergo the experience of finding out that, like Maldoror, they are children of men and women. But, this awareness does not stop Pizarnik from continuing to push at the limits, continuing to strive for that transcendence that can never be reached.

Looking at di Giorgio’s work, we again see this excessive, insatiable desire for the infinite. Of the three poets to be discussed, di Giorgio perhaps bears the greatest resemblance to Lautréamont in the style of her work (prose poetry) and also in the juxtaposition of images that are at once beautiful and terrifying. There are also constant metamorphoses in di Giorgio’s work; angels infest houses like rats; grape vines become stern monks; the child narrator turns into a hare. One of the many instances of this type of sudden, radical transformation can be found in di Giorgio’s fifth book, Magnolia, in which she describes the death of a loved one thus:

El ciruelo sostiene sus cirios rosados, el manzano, sus grandes uvas blancas. Un perro del diablo, una bruja, hace señas hacia la casa en que habito. Hace mucho que esa llamarada recorre toda la huerta. Es una de mis amigas – la que se murió de muy joven – pasa junto a las azucenas sin quemarlas, a los cebollines, la mujer sin rumbo, en llamas, dice que se llamaba Adela, y Rama de Flores, y Arvejilla, provoca disturbios en el jardín, pequeñas peleas, entra en la casa, se para en la frente del perro, recorre los marcos, los retratos, la cara de los ángeles. Dice que se llamaba Arveja, y Rama de Flores, y Adelina; se fija en la puerta de mis primos, los que la cortejaron durante un año, y ellos no saben qué hacer, qué ocurre, aprestan sus cuchillos, sus revólveres, quieren matar a las nubes, a esa noche solitaria, rarísima (128).

(The plum tree bears its rosy candles; the apple tree, its huge white grapes. One of the devil’s dogs, one witch, is sending signals to the house where I live. For some time now this blaze has been licking the orchard. It’s one of my friends – one who died very young – and now she is stepping over the lilies, the onions; this directionless woman in flames does not burn them; she says that her name was Adela, and Flower Branch, and Peablossom; she provokes a riot in the garden, little fights; she enters the house and stands before the dog; she examines the frames, the portraits, the angels’ faces. She says that her name was Pea, and Flower Branch, and Adelina; she stands in my cousins’ doorway – my cousins who wooed her for one year, and they do not know what to do,
what is happening; they gather up their knives and guns; they only want to murder the clouds, to kill this lonely, strangest night).

In this poem, the world is fluid, much like the “old ocean”; the candles grow on a plum tree, while an apple tree bears grapes. Nature does not conform to its typical, expected patterns; instead, it grows wildly and uncontrollably, bringing together disparate elements in unpredictable configurations. The image of “the devil’s dog” immediately recalls the dogs of Lautréamont, even if they are not mentioned explicitly, and the inherent instability of his world, the constant pushing of boundaries without a clear knowledge of just where those boundaries lie. The ghost that returns in this scene is likewise completely slippery in her identity; she is in the process of burning, thus undergoing a chemical change that renders her simultaneously present and absent. Meanwhile, her name is changeable and unstable; she introduces herself by three separate names only later to give different versions of those same names in a different order. This is significant in that it reveals a central aspect of the world that di Giorgio creates throughout her large body of poetry: a world that is simultaneously changing and unchanging. Like Lautréamont’s sea, di Giorgio’s world is one entity; it is a realm of childhood fantasy and eroticized nature, of innocence and danger. We could arguably begin reading di Giorgio’s work at any point; it does not follow a linear narrative trajectory, and while there are differences among her many books, the basic world in which the reader finds herself remains the same. Lautréamont differs from di Giorgio in this aspect, as *Maldoror* does follow a narrative structure. However, they share a common propensity for imagery characterized by excess and unceasing transformation, and the same insatiable “thirst for the infinite” that can be seen again and again in the work of Agustini and Pizarnik. Likewise, another striking aspect of di Giorgio’s work is the ubiquity of violence, which is usually linked to *eros* and drives the poetry toward the excess characteristic of the obscene as defined by Piña. In this poem the apparition of the dead figure incites the speakers’ cousins (who were romantically interested in her while she was still alive) to become violent, gathering their weapons and wanting to murder not the ghost, but the very order of nature itself, represented by the clouds in the night sky. The natural order is indeed too dangerous, too unpredictable in its transformations, that the cousins feel compelled to respond to its violence with their own. Speaking of Lautréamont, Bachelard comments, “In a literary system, precise reactions to the acts of creation are deliberate rather than merely passive metamorphoses.
Metamorphosing reactions are violence because *creation is a form of violence*. Suffering already experienced cannot be eradicated except through projected suffering” (40). While creation occurs spontaneously in di Giorgio’s writing – as in the startling fruits growing from the trees – it also occurs deliberately and wilfully as we have seen in Agustini’s “El vampiro.” The ghost wilfully steps through the garden and provokes fights among the living creatures; the cousins wilfully respond with violence. Then again, looking more broadly at di Giorgio’s work, we see that the connection between willed and spontaneous creation and violence is often quite blurry; as in Lautréamont, the limits are not clear. What is clear, however, is the link between creation and violence in di Giorgio – a link that will be explored in more depth later on. Like Lautréamont, Agustini and Pizarnik, di Giorgio is a poet who constantly pushes against the limits, always driven to a rapturous excess.

In the previous two sections I have sought to reveal what unites these three poets most strongly: a wild, excessive, possibly obscene spirit that manifests itself in a desire to transcend limits, an inability to distinguish limits, and a close juxtaposition of seemingly opposite forces, all culminating in a discourse of subversion. These features will form the crux of my central thesis throughout this dissertation, which seeks to explore the ways in which this search for transcendence establishes a space of resistance. However, before turning more explicitly to the construction of this argument, I believe that it is worth mentioning one more characteristic that these three poets share with Lautréamont: they are all enthusiastic wearers of masks. Maldoror, this beautifully Byronic evildoer, is essentially the mask of Comte de Lautréamont…and Comte de Lautréamont is of course the mask of Isidore Ducasse. For di Giorgio, the mask appeared at the borderline between her life and her work. With some professional training in acting, di Giorgio enthusiastically transformed her poetic readings into dramatic staged performances; meanwhile, her notorious dyed red hair and extravagant style of dress gave many of her contemporaries the impression that her entire public persona was a theatrical show, carefully and deliberately fashioned as a service to her art. It is for this reason that a critic such as Hugo Achugar questions naïve readings of di Giorgio’s poetry as the spontaneous overflow of mystical visions; taking a more skeptical view, he is eager to point out the humour, irony and *camp* aesthetic running through di Giorgio’s work. Meanwhile, with Pizarnik we see the first mask in her name, Alejandra, which she chose for herself when she became a writer as a replacement for
her given name of Flora. We can also observe it in her diaries (which she deliberately wrote with the intention of publication) and the long lists of literary quotations that she kept, thus demonstrating her desire to fit herself into a literary tradition. And, for none of these was the donning of masks as important as it was for Agustini, who, daring to write blatantly erotic verses such as “El vampiro” and thus risking scandal in staid 1900’s Montevideo society, found it necessary to conceal herself behind acceptable social masks: “Joujou,” the anonymous newspaper columnist who wrote laudatory society articles about various upper-class young women, and “La nena,” the family nickname that Agustini maintained until her death at the age of twenty-seven, thus presenting herself as an innocent, respectable ingénue from a family of good standing. These masks worn by all three poets form an intriguing counterpoint to the constant quest for transcendence in their work, and as we will soon see, they form an integral component of the subversive strategies. Nevertheless, throughout this dissertation I will argue that these two movements – the quest for knowledge of a transcendent reality and the subversion of immediate realities – are actually very closely linked. In order to explore this relationship, I am structuring the primary theoretical approach of this study around Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature.*

0.3 On the Creation of Poetic Space

Bearing in mind the aforementioned observations about the tendencies toward wildness, excess, the exploration of “life at the limits” present in the three chosen authors, this dissertation is organized around two central theses. The first focuses on the epistemological process of transcending apparent limits and obtaining knowledge of a reality beyond that which is immediately apparent. The second focuses on the ways in which this movement toward transcendence becomes a subversive kind of language, a mode of resistance not only to the obvious discourses of power (such as the slogans of dictatorial regimes prevalent during the lives of Pizarnik and di Giorgio) but also to the more subtle ones, like those related to technological hegemony (prevalent during the period when Agustini was writing). In order to explore these two processes, I will suggest that the most fruitful metaphor is that of poetic space that Blanchot explores so passionately. According to critic Timothy Clark, the primary subject of Blanchot’s essay is artistic inspiration, which by its very definition exists outside or beyond the writer’s own

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4 From this point forward, all citations from Blanchot are from *The Space of Literature.*
consciousness: “in Blanchot, the outside from which inspiration comes is, counterintuitively, both the emerging work itself and, literally, nowhere. Inspiration forms a complex and contradictory passion, one that does not belong to the writer, but possesses from out of nothing” (46). This idea of nothingness is a constant theme running through Blanchot’s work, and it forms the core of his concept of literary space. Translator Ann Smock describes such nothingness thus:

The word *espace* recurs regularly in the titles of the chapters… It means “space,” the region toward which whoever reads or writes is drawn – “literature’s domain.” But, although words such as “region” or “domain” or “realm” are often used to designate this zone, it implies the withdrawal of what is ordinarily meant by “place”; it suggests the site of this withdrawal. Literature’s space is like the place where someone dies: a nowhere, Blanchot says, which is *here*. No one enters it, though no one who is at all aware of it can leave: it is all departure, moving off, *éloignement*. It is frequently called *le dehors*, “the outside” […] Literature’s space is […] inaccessible *and* inescapable; it is its very own displacement or removal. It is the space separating this space from itself. In this strange ambiguity literature dwells, as in a preserve (10).

The space of literature, Smock suggests, cannot easily be pinned down or located; it constantly eludes us even as we are immersed within it. The comparison to “the place where someone dies” is apt. As human beings we find our entire life stories to be shaped and defined by death; it is the constant reality that gives form to our lives, and we know that (despite all of our medical and technological efforts to stave it off) there is ultimately no escape from it. Nevertheless, the actual experience of dying is unknown to us; we can only imagine it and observe others as they go through it, but it remains beyond our reach. It is perhaps this unknowability of death that paradoxically causes it to become the primary shaper of our lives. If we knew in advance what the experience of dying felt like, if we had some tangible inkling of what (if anything) follows after it, then perhaps we would not fear it so; perhaps it would not be the most sinister shadow hanging over our lives. In any case, Smock suggests that Blanchot’s literary space is analogous to this space of death – simultaneously absent and present, inaccessible and inescapable. One interesting idea put forth by Blanchot is that writers do not freely choose to engage in the creative process; rather, they find that it is thrust upon them whether they will it or not. Writing becomes a kind of responsibility that the work – assuming a life and volition of its own – obliges.
writers to take on. As Clark puts it, a literary work comes into being “when the writer reaches the stage at which the linguistic structure is something other and more pressing than the mere externalization of personal expression, when it takes on a certain force of speaking for itself; an authority whose law may dictate, impersonally, the work’s future unfolding” (49). The space of literature is not created by the writer; rather, it is something that stirs the writer to action, sweeping her up in it, obliging her to comply with its demands. This process, we will see, occurs in all three of the writers to be studied, all of whom are compelled to seek through their poetic practice this space which eludes them even as it surrounds them, which remains beyond their reach even as they enter into it through language.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will attempt to provide a brief overview of some of Blanchot’s theoretical explorations that will be invoked throughout this dissertation. This is not an easy task, for Blanchot’s ideas and arguments are not easily summarized. Resisting the reader’s potential attempts at reification, he offers a text that is as poetic as it is critical, containing more implicit than explicit meaning, resisting any easy interpretation. Therefore, rather than attempting to present a study of *The Space of Literature* as a whole, I will instead attempt to point out some of the central points that will prove relevant for the double conception of poetic space that I intend to develop in this dissertation. The first such point is the concept with which Blanchot opens his essay – “the essential solitude,” the basic condition of aloneness in which the writer finds himself. Blanchot mentions that writing means living in a state of constant uncertainty, for he can never know when his work is complete – indeed, his work remains by its very nature incomplete, for ultimately the writer is more mortal than the work he leaves behind. When a writer dies, there is always more that he could have written; his work naturally transcends him. Thus, Blanchot’s concept of writing proves a stark contrast to that of Plato in his *Phaedrus* and others who would assert that writing is a technology by which humanity exerts domination over nature. In Plato’s famous dialogue, Socrates suggests that speech – living, engaged, dialectical conversation – is an inherently preferable mode of communication to writing, which is an outsourcing of memory and ultimately embodies stagnation and stasis. Against this idea, Blanchot asserts that writing is dynamic and living – indeed, it is more dynamic than the writer, who ultimately must die before writing everything that she might have written. In this sense, writing is not, as Plato would have it, an attempt at
reifying memory and imposing human mastery over all knowledge. On the contrary, it involves the complete relinquishment of mastery:

The solitude which the work visits on the writer reveals itself in this: that writing is now the interminable, the incessant. The writer no longer belongs to the magisterial realm where to express oneself means to express the exactitude and certainty of things and values according to the sense of their limits. What he is to write delivers the one who has to write to an affirmation over which he has no authority, which is itself without substance, which affirms nothing, and yet is not repose, not the dignity of silence, for it is what still speaks when everything has been said (26).

The idea here is that, in contrast to Plato’s view that writing is stagnant and devoid of dialogue, writing is actually completely dialogical. But, it is a dialogue in which one of the interlocutors is invariably absent. Unlike in speech, where two people speak to each other in real time, the writer speaks to a reader who is absent at the time of his writing. Meanwhile, when the reader encounters the text, it is possible and very likely that the written word will communicate something quite different from the author’s original statement. Therefore, “To write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself. It is to destroy the relation which, determining that I speak toward ‘you,’ gives me room to speak within that understanding which my word receives from you” (26). In this sense, the written word proves itself more powerful than the person who writes it; the writer has no control over the ways in which the interlocutor will understand it. Meanwhile, from the reader’s perspective, the encounter with the written text is not a meeting between him and the writer; instead, it is the place where he encounters the word itself. What Blanchot thus reveals to us is the written word’s immense force, a power that cannot be harnessed or mastered by either writer or reader, that constantly eludes us. This contact with the transcendent reality of language is significant for all three of the writers to be discussed, but most explicitly in the case of Pizarnik, who constantly struggles to surmount the gap between words and the objects to which those words refer. Dwelling within language, all three of the poets seek to employ the written word to obtain a kind of mastery over the limits; they yearn to break forth and enter the space that lies on the other side of language. But, they find that they cannot do it. Again and again, language continues to transcend them. This problem forms the basis for what I am calling in my dissertation “the space of knowledge.” Again and again, these writers seek to
obtain knowledge of an ultimate reality. Nevertheless, they continue to find that knowledge to be ungraspable. Language is not something that can be mastered.

Another important point that Blanchot advances at the beginning of his essay relates to the anti-utilitarian nature of poetic language. He asserts that the poetic word opposes itself both to what he calls “ordinary language” and “the language of thought” (41). Due to the deliberation and artifice involved in creating poetry, poetic language turns out to be very different from the ordinary language that we use in our day-to-day conversations. It is also different from the rational language that we use when seeking to gain empirical knowledge of a given phenomenon or to make complex decisions. In both of these modes, language can be said to refer to something outside of itself; it deliberately seeks to understand the world and act on it. In this sense, our everyday use of language might be described as referential or instrumental. Language is a tool, a technology that humans have employed for millennia in order to bring about a desired result – whether begging an enemy for mercy, communicating the threat of danger to one’s tribe, or engaging in trade and bargaining. Meanwhile, poetic language (which has been with us for as long as these other more practical language modes have) operates in quite a different way. Speaking of the poet Mallarmé, Blanchot explains it thus:

The poetic word is no longer someone’s word. In it no one speaks, and what speaks is not anyone. It seems rather that the word alone declares itself. Then language takes on all of its importance. Language speaks as the essential, and that is why the word entrusted to the poet can be called the essential word. This means primarily that words, having the initiative, are not obliged to serve to designate anything or give voice to anyone, but that they have their ends in themselves. From here on, it is not Mallarmé who speaks, but language which speaks itself: language as the work and the work as language (41).

Because poetry transcends human agency and human volition, it is by its very nature anti-utilitarian. It is not a means to any end, but rather an end in itself. And it is this concept that forms the basis for the second idea of poetic space that I am developing in this dissertation – an idea that I call the “space of resistance.” By going against all goal-directed behaviours, poetic language resists our tendency to transform the phenomena we encounter into objects for our use.
Thus, the space of resistance that occurs in poetry is not necessarily deliberate or dependent on the will of the poet. As we have already seen, in Blanchot’s view of things, the poetic word is more powerful than the agent who writes it. And, he informs us that words “are not obliged to serve to designate anything or give voice to anyone.” This is a very different idea from that expressed by some well-known poets who are commonly described as “political.” An example that immediately comes to mind is Pablo Neruda, who in his “Deber del poeta” (“The poet’s obligation”) expresses the idea that a poet should invariably act as an agent of social change, bringing freedom to all who are oppressed:

Así por el destino conducido  
debo sin tregua oír y conservar  
el lamento marino en mi conciencia,  
debo sentir el golpe de agua dura  
y recogerlo en una taza eterna  
para que donde esté el encarcelado,  
donde sufra el castigo del otoño  
yo esté presente con una ola errante,  
yo circule a través de las ventanas  
y al oírme levante la mirada  
diciendo: cómo me acercaré al océano?  
Y yo trasmitiré sin decir nada  
los ecos estrellados de la ola,  
un quebranto de espuma y arenales,  
un susurro de sal que se retira,  
el grito gris del ave de la costa (Neruda).

(So drawn on by my destiny,  
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep  
the sea’s lamenting in my consciousness,  
I must feel the crash of the hard water  
and gather it up in a perpetual cup  
so that, wherever those in prison may be,
wherever they suffer the sentence of the autumn,
I may be present with an errant wave,
I may move in and out of the windows,
and hearing me, eyes may lift themselves,
asking “How can I reach the sea?”
And I will pass to them, saying nothing,
the starry echoes of the wave,
a breaking up of foam and quicksand,
a rustling of salt withdrawing itself,
the gray cry of sea birds on the coast) (Delaney).

The sea in this poem is a symbol of freedom, for the potential of an individual or a community to leave home and travel, thus beginning a new life; it also might be read as a metaphor for the bonds which we share with other human beings (as it is a common experience to look out at the sea and feel a sense of unity with friends in far-flung places). For Neruda, the poet is an individual who actively listens to the sea and offers its liberating potential to prisoners. And, it is not an option; it is a “deber,” an obligation, a task that needs to be completed. Neruda is not the only writer to conceive of the poet’s task in such a way. However, as I have already mentioned, this attitude is completely absent in the work of Agustini, Pizarnik, and di Giorgio; it is perhaps for this reason that none of them are normally considered to be political writers. But for Blanchot, the very act of writing itself is political. In resisting the utilitarian nature of language as it is normally used, the poetic word resists the dictatorial instincts within all of us – our claims to mastery, our attempts to transform knowledge into power and thus dominate our surroundings. We do not choose to resist our surrounding conditions; rather, language resists them through us.
In this experience there occurs what Blanchot calls a “lightning moment” that occurs in the space of the poem, where language becomes “supremely unreal.” The poem “suspend[s] all possible beings” and then faces an “irreducible residue,” leaving behind only the words “it is.” “Those words sustain all others by letting themselves be hidden by the others, and hidden thus, they are the presence of all words, language’s entire possibility held in reserve. But when all words cease… those very words, it is, present themselves, ‘lightning moment,’ ‘dazzling burst of light’” (45).
These two ideas drawn from Blanchot – which I am calling the space of knowledge and space of resistance – form the central lens through which I will look at the work of Agustini, Pizarnik and di Giorgio. However, Blanchot makes several more points that are relevant to this discussion. One of these is his interest in contradiction and contrary movements within a text. As we have seen, Blanchot argues that the work transcends the writer’s agency and volition; it quite naturally escapes any realm of authorial intentions. And this means that, by its very nature, the work ends up contradicting itself. Speaking of the totalizing impulses that constantly contain and form the outermost boundaries of human thought, Blanchot states,

Man wants unity right away; he wants it in separation itself. He represents it to himself, and this representation, the image of unity, immediately reconstitutes the element of dispersion where he loses himself more and more. For the image as such can never be attained, and moreover it hides from him the unity of which it is the image. It separates him from unity by making itself inaccessible and by making unity inaccessible (80).

As we have already observed, poetry defies our will to totality. Not only does the transcendent knowledge that we seek elude us, but the poem itself – the poetic image that we would like to scrutinize with our eyes and hold in our hands – continues to lie beyond us. The unity that is characteristic of an image – indeed, the classic unity that Aristotle saw as so essential to the work of art when he wrote his Poetics – is simply not there, as much as our interpretations and criticism might attempt to will it into existence. Instead, poetry is in constant motion, and its movements always go in more than one direction. As Blanchot states later in his essay,

The work is not the deadened unity of repose. It is the intimacy and the violence of contrary movements which are never reconciled and never appeased – never, at least, as long as the work is a work. The work is the intimate confrontation with itself of an opposition between contraries, neither of which, though they are irreconcilable, has coherence except in the contest that opposes them one to the other. The work is this torn intimacy inasmuch as it is the “unfurling” of that which nevertheless hides and remains closed – a light shining on the dark, a light bright from the clarity of this darkness, which abducts and ravishes the dark in the first light of the unfurling, but also disappears into
the absolutely obscure whose essence is to close in upon what would reveal it, to attract this disclosure into itself and swallow it up (226).

For Blanchot, paradox and contradiction lie at the very core of literature. Every work, by its very nature, goes against itself. This idea of contrary movements is evident in the works of all three of my authors at the thematic and imagistic levels. In Agustini, we see an erotic drive toward wholeness, toward unity with the divine embodied in the physical presence of a beloved, juxtaposed to a thanatic drive toward fragmentation, dissolution and destructiveness. In Pizarnik we encounter a similar tension between a confidence in the ability of language to represent reality accurately and a complete lack of confidence in this ability. However, nowhere do we see these contraries in such a dramatic form as in the work of Marosa di Giorgio. For her, nature itself is characterized by constant contrary movements. A child can be simultaneously innocent and sexually precocious. A wedding can simultaneously be a beautiful ritual of purity, an outlet for erotic desire, and a violent act of rape. A mother can at once be a loving protector, a stern judge, and a mischievous conspirator in her children’s games. A family farm is on the one hand a joyful place filled with the familiar sentiments of home and a dangerously false refuge always vulnerable to attack. Angels can be trustworthy, noble guardians or pesky vermin whose insatiable hunger and impish antics refuse to leave the narrator and her family in peace. In di Giorgio’s universe the usual boundaries between goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness, the natural and the supernatural are completely broken down, and all attempts to gain access to the “space of knowledge” are thwarted by the dizzying movement of these contrary impulses. In order to respond to them, I turn to the ideas of Blanchot and also to the work of William Blake, who, like di Giorgio, views reality itself as characterized most fundamentally by these dynamic oppositions.

Another important issue that Blanchot raises is that of the relationship between the poetic work and death, which is always present. I have already mentioned Blanchot’s idea that the work by necessity transcends its maker’s will toward mastery simply because it outlives him. Rejecting the trope of the creator who seeks to live on past death through his artistic creations, Blanchot argues that the only way to “overcome death,” to gain some kind of life-affirming victory over it, is by performing small actions in the world – not through art, which always transcends the “idle name” of its creator (94). But more important than this is Blanchot’s idea
that death is always present in any act of artistic creation; it is the underlying reality that motivates the production of a work. Indeed, it is this presence of one’s impending death that motivates the initial search for transcendence, the initial desire to reach the space of knowledge. Speaking of Rainer Maria Rilke, Blanchot notes this Austrian poet’s constant preoccupation with death, his desire for each individual to be granted “his own death,” a meaningful, dignified departure from this world rather than the absurd death of the masses killed in violence and war. According to Blanchot, Rilke views death as a transcendent reality that we are to learn, recognize and welcome. It is not something to be feared; rather, it is the ultimate object of our desire (133). However, it remains beyond us, and we “are turned away from it.” This turning away is, for Blanchot, the defining feature of our human condition:

But we are no less turned away from each thing by the way in which we grasp it, representing it to make it ours – to make of it an object, an objective reality, to establish it in our utilitarian world by withdrawing it from the purity of space. “The other side” is where we would cease to be turned away from a single thing by our way of looking at it, averted from it by our gaze (134).

Once again, Blanchot touches on the idea of poetry as a vehicle of resistance to our tendency to objectify the world around us. However, more significant than this is the idea that “the other side” – what Rilke calls “the Open” and what I am calling the space of knowledge – is intimately bound up with death. Death is, for lack of a better descriptive phrase, humans’ final frontier. And the desire to accede to the mysterious realm that it represents is a theme common to many writers and philosophers, including Georges Bataille, whose work will be explored in conjunction with that of Agustini. For Bataille, death (like the time before our birth) is a state of “continuity” in which human consciousness is not individuated; it is simply part of material nature. Meanwhile, the individuated, isolated state in which we live during our lifetime is a state of “discontinuity.” In Erotism: Death and Sensuality, Bataille argues that one of our basic desires is to break through the wall of discontinuity and arrive at continuity – without actually having to die. We would like to be able to move freely between states of continuity and discontinuity, but we cannot. As Blanchot states (in a way reminiscent of Kaufmann’s discussion), “We are limited beings” (133). Our very consciousness – the lens through which we apprehend reality – at the same time serves to hold us at a distance from this reality. And the only way to cross that
boundary, to gain that access would be to step over the threshold from discontinuity to continuity, consciousness to unconsciousness, life to death.

This idea of the presence of death underlies the search for the space of knowledge in the three poets whose work will be discussed. In Agustini’s poetry, death is always present and often closely linked to eros – a relationship that will be discussed in depth when we come to the chapter on her work. Death is also very much present in di Giorgio’s writing, and it is intimately bound up with life – it is not unusual for the dead to return, transformed into saints and gods, and come to visit the living. However, death in the way that Blanchot describes it is especially present in the work of Pizarnik. For Agustini (whose work the Uruguayan critic Alberto Zum Felde described as mystical in the vein of Saint Teresa) and di Giorgio (a professed Catholic all her life), death is inherently linked to the possibility of resurrection. The ultimate reality that Agustini seeks beyond this immediate one is a divine reality, where death is intimately connected with life. Di Giorgio, meanwhile, rejects dualism, asserting that “Lo natural es sobrenatural” (The natural is supernatural) and thus bringing death and life together in an immanent realm filled with the presence of the divine (Mascaró 54). For Pizarnik, a cultural but non-practising Jew, the story is different. Like Agustini, she seeks a reality that is not immediately present; however, as I will argue in the chapter devoted to her work, her movement might better be described as a descent rather than a transcendence. For her, language poses a barrier between representation and reality; she would like to dig a tunnel under the wall of words in order to gain access to that reality. Nevertheless, in attempting to do this, she finds that this reality is not only inaccessible, but barren; it is characterized by the underlying nothingness that Blanchot encounters, the silent realm where all gods are absent. The metaphor of silence – so present in Pizarnik, and linked to this idea of the absence of the gods – will be discussed in terms of Blanchot’s meditation on the constant presence of death within any creative endeavour.

Thus, my intention in the following chapters will be to discuss different aspects of Blanchot’s thought with each of the three writers. With Agustini, I focus extensively on his discussion of Rainer Maria Rilke (with whose work I compare Agustini’s in terms of its spiritual themes and quest for transcendence). I also draw on Blanchot’s retelling of the Orpheus myth as

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a metaphor for the poet’s desire to stare ultimate reality full in the face, to leap from discontinuity to continuity rather than patiently following the long and arduous road through the underworld and across the river Styx. This is very much Agustini’s temptation – to achieve transcendence in a sudden motion, to achieve contact with what Blanchot calls “the other night” of the reality beyond all representation. With Pizarnik, I look at Blanchot’s discussions of silence and absence along with the aforementioned constant presence of death – a presence that is indeed just as constant in Pizarnik’s work. And with di Giorgio, I focus on Blanchot’s discussion of contrary movements, which for her are embedded not only in the text, but within reality itself. In order to better illustrate this movement, I engage in a comparative analysis of her work and that of William Blake, whose poetry she read and admired. In exploring the work of all three poets, I draw extensively on Blanchot in order to establish my central concept of poetic space. I argue that all three poets seek contact with a “space of knowledge” of an ultimate reality, refusing to abandon their quest even as it proves unrealizable. Through this search, all three poets subsequently create a “space of resistance” that subverts the epistemic structures of their social context. Whether or not these authors intended for their work to make a political statement lies beyond the scope of this investigation and, in my view, has little bearing on the outcome. Because the social structures in which they lived – technocracy and rational utilitarianism during Agustini’s era and dictatorship in Pizarnik’s and di Giorgio’s – are inherently oppressive, the three poets’ determination to go beyond them is indeed a political act.
Chapter 1
Reaching for the Nothingness Beyond: Delmira Agustini and the “World’s Inner Space”

Fänden auch wir ein reines, verhaltenes, schmales
Menschliches, einen unseren streifen Fruchtlands
Zwischen Strom und Gestein. Denn das eigene Herz übersteigt uns
Noch immer wie jene. Und wir können ihm nicht mehr
Nachschaun in Bilder, die es besänftigen, noch in
Göttliche Körper, in denen es größer sich mäßigt.

(If only we too could find a pure, carved-out, narrow
human place, our own small strip of fertile soil
between stream and stone. For even now our heart
transcends us, just as it did those others. And no longer
can we gaze after it into images that soothe it, or
into godlike bodies where it finds a higher restraint).

– Rainer Maria Rilke, Duino Elegies, trans. Edward Snow

Pero arrancarla un día en una flor que abriera
Milagrosa, inviolable!...Ah, más grande no fuera
Tener entre las manos la cabeza de Dios!

(But to uproot it one day in a flower that would bloom
Miraculous, inviolable...Ah, it would not be greater
To hold in one’s hands the head of God!)

– Delmira Agustini, “Lo Inefable,” from Cantos de la mañana (Morning Songs), trans. Alejandro Cáceres

There is a world that lies beyond this one. A realm in which everything we have ever hoped to know, the origins and destinations of the universe and our place in it, the source of all
our desires and aspirations might be found. Is this the realm of eternity, of the Platonic forms, of Dante’s Empyrean? Is it divinity itself? Or, is it utter nothingness, a kind of metaphysical black hole that everything in the physical world whirls around? This bold early twentieth century poet – the only female member of the Hispanic *modernista* movement – does not claim to know. Sometimes she is confident that there is a realm beyond her apparent reality and that she herself might reach it, even going so far as to hold God’s head in her hands. At other times, she is filled with fear and doubt when confronting this absolute, all-encompassing nothingness that paradoxically gives rise to everything that exists. Nevertheless, her passionate curiosity is forever piqued, and she will stop at nothing to find what lies beyond the everyday reality of upper-class, *fin-de-siècle* Montevideo. In the poem quoted above, “Lo inefable,” Agustini describes her thirst for knowledge thus:

Yo muero extrañamente…No me mata la Vida,
No me mata la Muerte, no me mata el Amor;
Muero de un pensamiento mudo como una herida…
¿No habéis sentido nunca el extraño dolor
De un pensamiento inmenso que se arraiga en la vida
Devorando alma y carne, y no alcanza a dar flor? (Selected Poetry 74).

(I die strangely…It is not life that kills me
It is not death that kills me, nor is it love;
I die of a thought, mute as a wound…
Have you never felt such a strange pain
Of an immense thought that is rooted in life,
Devouring flesh and soul, and without blooming?) (Cáceres 75).

This “immense thought rooted in life” which Agustini describes as “the inefable” establishes an image of a fallen world characterized by mystery, confusion, and the absence of meaning – an absence that is gradually spreading and destroying what little meaning remains, “devouring flesh and soul, without blooming.” This idea of an absolute, terrifying reality can be seen in other poets of the period as well, perhaps most famously in the work of fellow *modernista* Rubén Darío, who describes it as “lo fatal,” or the terror of “no saber a dónde vamos / ni de dónde venimos…!” (not knowing where we are going / or where we come from) (Poesías 193).
However, while Darío laments the fatal power of this uncertainty, Agustini finds within it the potential for liberation: “Para arrancarla un día en una flor que abriera / Milagrosa, inviolable… Ah, más grande no fuera / Tener entre las manos la cabeza de Dios!!” (But to uproot it one day in a flower that would bloom / Miraculous, inviolable… Ah, it would not be greater / To hold in one’s hand the head of God!) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 74; Cáceres 75). With this statement, the poetic speaker expresses the unbounded desire for transcendence sought through erotism (the images of roots, flowers, and indeed holding the head of God – reminiscent of Salome holding the head of John the Baptist – quickly lend themselves to erotic interpretation) and heterodox religiosity (in saying that the effect of pulling out the root would be greater than holding the head of God, Agustini suggests that there is a transcendent reality even greater than that which God inhabits, and she expresses her determination to reach it). Indeed, the possibilities for transcendence are endless, and even though it proves highly difficult for Agustini to break through the nothingness, she refuses to abandon her quest.

As one of Uruguay’s most well-known poets of the twentieth century and the only recognized female member of the Latin American modernista movement, Delmira Agustini has received substantial critical attention since her death in 1914. Daring to write blatantly erotic verse at a time when such sentiment was forbidden to women, she initially provoked disapprobation on the part of many of her critics. They also frequently tended to shy away from the erotic dimensions of her work, interpreting her poetry as spiritual or mystical, rather than carnal, in nature. According to Tina Escaja, Agustini’s early critics constantly sought to “discipline” her, either by portraying her as an “angel virginal” who was surely unaware of the erotic innuendos of her verses (which she allegedly scrawled in nocturnal fits of muse-inspired passion and then passed to her father for transcription) or by condemning her as a “ninfomaníaca del verso” deserving of censure (Escaja 13). One of many examples of this can be seen in the commentary of the critic Clara Silva, who judges Agustini as egotistical: “Las referencias que hace a Dios y a Cristo no tienen nada que ver con el cristianismo conceptual o tradicional. Su profundo egoísmo no admite el menor rastro de Fe, Esperanza o Caridad” (The references that she makes to God and Christ have nothing to do with traditional or conceptual Christianity. Her deep egotism does not allow the slightest expression of Faith, Hope or Charity) (132). This tendency to discipline a female writer who dares to express erotic sentiments is not uncommon in
critical literature. In her analysis of Jane Austen criticism, Eve Sedgwick has pointed out a
depiction of the English novelist’s more romantic or rebellious heroines, such as Marianne
Dashwood, as “Girls Being Taught a Lesson” to forgo their passions in favour of self-restraint,
practicality, and other virtues viewed as essential for upper-class women in nineteenth century
England (Sedgwick 833). Agustini, who was commonly known as “La Nena” – the “Little Girl” –
right up to her death at age twenty-seven – was personally subjected to this kind of discipline
throughout her life, and her work continued to be read through this repressive lens in the years
following her death.

Conversely, another way that early critics dealt with Agustini’s work was to ignore the
erotic aspect altogether by interpreting it in religious or spiritual terms (Escaja 13).
Understandably, more recent critics of Agustini have sought to challenge these ideas. In Delmira
Agustini, Sexual Seduction and Vampiric Conquest, Cathy Jrade interprets Agustini not as a
naïve “angel virginal” but a highly self-aware and assertive artist who worked deliberately and
tirelessly to advance her career as a poet, initially taking Rubén Darío as her literary model but
later seeking to overcome her “anxiety of influence” and to create her own place in the male-
dominated literary world of fin-de-siècle Montevideo (27). Likewise, Patricia Varas and
Jacqueline Girón Alvarado comment extensively on Agustini’s use of consciously created
“masks” which enabled her to survive in her stuffy, repressive social environment while assuring
herself the freedom that she needed to pursue her career as a writer. According to Girón
Alvarado, Agustini’s supposed Christian “mysticism” is one of these masks; she uses the rhetoric
of mystical poetry to legitimize her role as woman-poet through a respected, sacred tradition
while actually invoking paganism and the decadence often employed as a literary strategy by
modernista writers (12). Similarly, Varas asserts that Agustini “fue consciente de la ideología y
los rituales de la época y como era una mujer astuta supo cómo inscribir su comportamiento
anticonformista creando máscaras y elaborando estrategias que le permitieron moverse y respirar
con mayor libertad en la sociedad montevideana” (was conscious of the ideology and rituals of
the period, and as she was an astute woman she discovered how to inscribe her nonconformist
behaviour by creating masks and elaborating strategies that allowed her to move and breathe
with greater freedom in Montevidean society) (50). Thus, her usage of religious imagery and
invocation of modernista tropes in her work – such as the swan, gods, muses, light and flowers –
might be interpreted as Agustini’s way of fitting in with the established literary canon of the
times, of playing the socially acceptable role of a poetisa writing in imitation of such masters as
Dario while subtly supplanting their poetics with her own.

While I acknowledge the significance of Varas’ and Girón Alvarado’s analysis of the
masks that Agustini used to express herself fully and also to write deeply erotic verses, I do not
believe that the poet’s “mysticism” need be read only as a strategy for concealing (or at least
tempering) the subversive nature of her work. Looking at the poetic collections that Agustini
published during her short life – El libro blanco (frágil), Cantos de la mañana, Los cálices vacíos,
and the posthumous Los astros del abismo, this chapter will argue that this so-called
mysticism is actually central to Agustini’s project of seeking transcendance by whatever means
possible. In my view, her erotic quest for jouissance cannot so easily be separated from a
spiritual quest for knowledge of an ultimate más allá that, though not immediately accessible, is
constantly sought and desired. Likewise, I intend to argue that, rather than masking her desire for
resistance, Agustini’s mysticism actually is a form of resistance to the social world that she
inhabited – a world that, not unlike Jane Austen’s England one hundred years earlier, stressed the
ideals of duty and conformity alongside the newer, supposedly more modern concept of
“progress” that was sweeping across the Latin American intellectual landscape at the time. In
terms of the first argument – that Agustini’s eros is spiritual and physical, and that it constitutes a
quest for ultimate knowledge, I follow an earlier critic of the poet, Doris Stephens, who embarks
on a formalistic study of the poet’s oeuvre and attempts to trace the quest for transcendance
throughout (Stephens 8). Although my investigation will be neither as formalistic nor as
comprehensive as Stephens’, and while I suspect that I will arrive at very different conclusions, I
follow her lead in choosing not to separate the physical from the spiritual erotism of the poet’s
work, instead viewing them as intertwined fibres of the rope that Agustini climbs in her quest for
ultimate reality. I also concur with the mid-twentieth century critic Sarah Bollo that Agustini “no
busca el goce como criatura sino el cumplimiento del destino cósmico como componente de la
estirpe humana. Es un peldaño de la raza en su lenta y difícil ascensión a las alturas del ser”
(does not seek delight like an animal but rather looks for the fulfillment of the human race’s
cosmic destiny. It is one step along humanity’s slow and difficult ascension to the heights of
being) (13). While I disagree somewhat with Bollo here – I do in fact believe that Agustini seeks
“animal delights” – I believe that she views these pleasures as a vehicle toward spiritual transcendence. In terms of my second argument – that Agustini’s spiritual quest can be construed as a kind of resistance to the poet’s social environment – I will contextualize the poet’s work within Jrade’s and Aníbal González’s analyses of modernismo as a response to the social and technological changes that were occurring at the time and suggest that Agustini’s work might be interpreted as developing and intensifying a movement that was already in place while contributing several unique elements to it.

In order to situate my analysis of Agustini’s work theoretically, I will invoke the concept of poetic space that I am seeking to develop throughout this dissertation. Looking at the work of Maurice Blanchot, I am drawn to his discussion of the poet’s constant quest for transcendence. “Poetry is experience, linked to a vital approach, to a movement which is accomplished in the serious, purposeful course of life” he says. “In order to write a single line, one must have exhausted life. And now, the other answer: to write a single line, one must have exhausted art, one must have exhausted life in the search for art” (89). For Doris Stephens and many other critics, Agustini is such a poet, one who exhausts life in her constant, never-satisfied desire to cross every threshold in search of inaccessible knowledge: “Vamos más lejos en la noche, vamos / Donde ni un eco repercuta en mí, / Como una flor nocturna allá en la sombra / yo abriré dulcemente para ti” (Let us go further away into the night, let us go / Where no echo can rebound in me, / Like a nightly flower there in the shadow / I shall softly open for you) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 44; Cáceres 45). The night is not enough for Agustini; instead, she seeks what Blanchot calls “the other night” of even greater transcendence, greater knowledge. Given that this drive for “the other night” is so prevalent in Agustini’s writing, I believe that analyzing her poetry in conversation with Blanchot’s theory will prove fruitful, and I intend to analyze the ways that this “space of knowledge” recurs and develops throughout Agustini’s poetic oeuvre.

It is also noteworthy to me that much of Blanchot’s discussion of poetic space occurs through his examination of a particular case study: the Bohemian-Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke, who constantly seeks what he calls “the world’s inner space.” In the conclusion to the second of his Duino Elegies, Rilke expresses what initially seems a simple desire: to find a small, solid place where humans might take refuge, a safe destination for restless spirits. However, this seemingly simple desire points toward a much more complex underlying reality: the post-
Enlightenment disenchantment of the world, the loss of religious faith as an unchallenged guiding principle for human beings, and the general anxiety over life’s possible meaninglessness. According to Blanchot, this constant search for meaning and perhaps a kind of “re-enchantment” of the world is at the centre of a poet’s work. I find it incredibly interesting that Blanchot chooses Rilke as his primary case study, and I am also excited to see that, despite a large cultural and political division, Rilke and Agustini’s poetic journeys share many parallel features. It is important to bear in mind that, to the best of my knowledge, there was no direct contact between these poets. Likewise, while they share many of the same precursors and influences (particularly in French symbolism, of which both are considered heirs), they belong to very different literary movements. Despite the similarity of their names, Latin American modernismo is considered to be quite distinct from European modernism in that it was more eclectic and refused to identify completely with European influence even while consciously embracing some of its elements, such as Romanticism and Symbolism. Nevertheless, the common features of these poets’ quest for spiritual transcendence is striking. Therefore, in addition to looking at Blanchot’s examination of Rilke, I think that an analysis of some of the poems from his Book of Hours – which precedes Agustini’s El libro blanco (frágil) by only two years – will provide an interesting counterpoint that will help to further illuminate the erotic mysticism of Agustini’s ceaseless search for knowledge.

The second argument that I am trying to make is that the “space of knowledge” which Agustini seeks, rather than serving as a retreat from social and political realities, stands as a bold form of resistance to them. Like the other two authors being treated in this investigation, Agustini is very often construed as apolitical. According to Gwen Kirkpatrick, Agustini’s work is surprising in its lack of temporal and political markers, particularly when considering that she lived during a time of reform under the progressive president Jose Batlle y Ordonez, who established the eight-hour workday, old-age pensions, and a strong public education system. Likewise, though the first wave of feminism had already occurred in Uruguay, Agustini did not identify herself with it nor with any of the other progressive political movements sweeping the country (Kirkpatrick 77). Nevertheless, this chapter will argue that Agustini’s work is one of resistance. In many ways, her struggle is shared by her precursors José Martí, Rubén Darío, and indeed most if not all of the poets of the modernista movement, who reacted quite strongly to the
many changes sweeping across the young Latin American nations in the *fin-de-siècle* period. New scientific discoveries, technological developments, modes of political organization and economic systems all led to a crisis of ideologies, beliefs and values as societies were faced with these changes. Many *modernista* poets often express the belief that society is somehow in decline, that the social and economic order produced by modernity is actually a fallen, ruined, entropic world from which they must seek some kind of transcendence. According to critic Aníbal González, this idea of decadence was influenced by the growth of scientific knowledge – the concept in thermodynamics of entropy, which states that the world naturally tends toward decay and disorder (38). The focus on decadence can also be viewed as a reaction to positivism, a late nineteenth century intellectual movement which became prevalent throughout the world, including Latin America.

Founded by French sociologist August Comte, positivism maintained that scientific rationalism was the most legitimate approach to gaining knowledge and that the careful application of scientific principles to political and social problems would bring much benefit to society. Affirming order as essential to any good society, positivists conceived of modernity as an inevitable progression, a development toward clearly-defined teleological goals. This idea was applied in Brazil, where Comte’s “order and progress” became enshrined on the country’s flag as a national motto in 1889, and also in Mexico, where the autocratic leader Porfirio Díaz set up a panel of scientists as his political advisers. On both sides of the Atlantic, intellectuals found themselves “torn between the reigning faith in technology, progress and empirical science and an enduring fascination with intangible realities and nonmaterialistic goals” (3), as Cathy Jrade describes in *Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American Literature*. This was particularly true in Latin America, where, unlike in Europe, religious belief did not decline so readily and more people maintained a “spiritual orientation toward the world” (Jrade 4) while seeking to bring about political change.

My analysis of Agustini will aim to contextualize her work within the framework of *modernismo* while also seeking to reveal her own unique contributions to and deviations from the movement – particularly, through her insistence on sensual as well as spiritual bliss as both the vehicle and object of her search for knowledge. While this kind of spiritual and often physical *eros* exists throughout *modernista* writing, nowhere does it occur so boldly as in
Agustini’s work. In order to elucidate the subversive power of this focus on *eros*, the exploration of Blanchot and Rilke will be accompanied by an invocation of Roland Barthes’ *Pleasure of the Text* and Bataille’s *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. By focusing on the exquisitely disruptive and frightening aspects of sensual desire, these two theorists reveal the anti-utilitarian nature of *eros* and its great potential to disrupt the very kinds of reified systems that were taking root in Agustini’s time. Meanwhile, while I hesitate to focus too heavily on Agustini’s personal biography, it is hard to ignore the significance of her social identity as a young, upper-class woman. Though sheltered from active political participation and generally not considered a feminist, Agustini dared to speak of themes generally forbidden to women of her social stratum. Also, it is significant to note that she was the only female writer to be considered a member of the heavily male-dominated modernista movement, and as Jrade describes in her analysis of Agustini’s ongoing poetic dialogue with Darío, she constantly sought to differentiate herself from her colleagues even while acknowledging a debt to them (*Delmira Agustini* 4). Ultimately, I will argue that while Agustini’s quest for transcendent knowledge is shared by many of her colleagues, its intensity is uniquely her own, and this intensity creates a space of resistance that continues to push boundaries and unsettle her readers.

1.1 Space of Knowledge: The Poet Weighs the Anchor

The strength of Agustini’s desire for transcendent knowledge is evident from the first poem of her first book: “El poeta leva el ancla” (“The Poet Weighs the Anchor”) in *El libro blanco (frágil)*. Like a sailor setting off on a journey of exploration, the speaker of this poem looks ahead to a realm of immense possibility: “El ancla de oro canta…the blue sail ascends / Como al ala de un sueño abierta al nuevo día, / Partamos, musa mía / Ante la prora alegre un bello mar se extiende” (The golden anchor sings…the blue sail ascends / Like the wing of a dream open to a new day. / Let us part, O Muse! / Before the joyful prow lies a beautiful sea) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 34; Cáceres 35). Like many of her poetic predecessors, Agustini postulates a male epic hero (referring to “el poeta,” not “la poeta,” though initially the poem was titled simply “Levando el ancla” or “Weighing the anchor”) and begins with the nearly universal epic trope of the invocation of a muse (though, interestingly, in the original Spanish the invocation is not “O Muse” but “my muse,” suggesting a close personal relationship with the one who will guide the hero on the journey toward the más allá). The idea of setting sail on a sea
voyage of limitless perspectives is reminiscent of Odysseus’ journey, but instead of heading for home, this speaker is setting out on a sea of wide open possibilities. However, though the image of a “joyful prow” and “beautiful sea” suggest wonder and optimism, the poet’s journey is not without its ambiguities. While the image of the golden anchor is also familiar – gold evoking the idea of riches and explorers searching for treasure – the concurrent symbol of the blue sail is curious, as blue is an unusual colour for a ship’s sail. Art historian and literary critic Carol Mavor has suggested that blue is an inherently ambiguous and even duplicitous colour in many cultures, capable of signifying sadness (“feeling blue”) in equal measure with loyalty and friendship (“true blue”) (Mavor, public lecture, University of Toronto). This ambiguity is present in much modernista verse, including Rubén Darío’s collection Azul (Blue). In Agustini’s poem, it adds an element of darkness or melancholy to the poet’s journey, suggesting hardship or at least uncertainty.

The next stanza returns to images of the Odyssey; indeed, the image of “el fanal sonrosado de Aurora” (the rosy lantern of Dawn) in the sixth line evokes Homer’s epithet of “rosy-fingered Dawn,” and the image of Fantasy preparing “para vagar brillante por las olas” (to wander, glorious, by the tides) recalls Odysseus’ ceaseless wandering (Agustini, Selected Poetry 34; Cáceres 35). But, whatever optimism this image allows is again interrupted by the blue sail, which “ya tiende…a Eolo su oriflamma de raso” (To Aeolus… now unfolds its satin oriflamme) as the ship prepares to depart (Agustini, Selected Poetry 34; Cáceres 35). Interestingly, the word “oriflamme,” though referring to any banner or standard, historically refers to the red banner of St. Denis, which early French kings carried as a military symbol. Thus, the melancholic ambiguity of blue is juxtaposed to the passionate fervour of red, further displaying the ambivalence of the poet’s journey. At this point, there is a moment of fear that tempers the sense of wondrous expectation: “Yo me estremezco; acaso / Sueño lo que me aguarda en los mundos no vistos?…” (I tremble / do I perhaps / Dream of what awaits me in worlds unknown?…) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 34; Cáceres 35). The array of possible discoveries is utterly confounding to the speaker and to the reader: “¿Talvez un fresco ramo de laureles fragantes / El toisón reluciente, el cetro de diamantes, / El naufragio o la eterna corona de los Cristos?” (Perhaps a fresh bunch of fragrant laurels / The shining Golden Fleece, the diamond sceptre / A shipwreck or the eternal crown of the Christs?) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 34; Cáceres 35). The
laurels and golden fleece suggest the familiar Greek mythical images of the rewards a hero could expect – specifically, the receipt of the long-desired object (the fleece) and renown that would last after death. While the diamond sceptre connotes earthly glory and stature, the shipwreck introduces the possibility of disaster and death into the poem, perhaps piquing the speaker’s fright. But, even more perplexing is the image of the “eternal crown of the Christs,” suggesting entry into a divine realm generally inaccessible. According to critic Tina Escaja, the image is inspired by Christian iconography, invoking the images of the Christian deity and its cultural legacy rather than the deity itself. For Escaja, this image connotes the idea of self-sacrifice and, coupled with the other ideas in the final stanza, vacillates between possibilities of “la sangre, la muerte o la divinidad del sobrehombre” (blood, death, or the divinity of the superman) (Escaja 39). Meanwhile, Jrade also views the invocation of “Christs” as suggesting sacrifice and salvation, referring specifically to Dario’s “La página blanca,” which depicts a poet’s journey across the inhospitable landscape of the white page. Contrasting Agustini’s poem to Dario’s, Jrade suggests that the former is more youthful and optimistic (through the imagery of the sea’s movement and rebirth) feminized (subtly invoking the “supreme moment” of Venus’ birth) and hinting at the eroticism that will later take centre stage throughout her work (Delmira Agustini 40). According to Jrade, Agustini’s “declaration of pleasure is subtle but strong enough to overcome her fears of failure. She limits her expression of her anxieties to a reference to a possible shipwreck, which she juxtaposes to the equally possible realization of salvation and messianic ascent” (40). Nevertheless, while the possibility of achieving the desired knowledge is very real to the young poet, the journey is not an easy one. A sea must be traversed; obstacles must be overcome, and apparent realities must be transcended. Yet, from the very beginning of her poetic career, Agustini insists on pursuing this world beyond.

I have mentioned previously that many critics have commented on Agustini’s compulsion to don social masks – particularly, that of “la nena,” the angelic fifteen-year-old “pequeña maga” who first walked into well-known editor Manuel Medina Betancort’s office, politely asked him to publish her first book, and went on to enchant all of Montevideo with her precocity. Eleonora Cróquer Pedrón comments that the book’s title reinforces the idea, “The White Book” suggesting the idea that Agustini herself was something of a blank slate, a luminous, empty page on which anything might be inscribed (33). Meanwhile, the qualitative description of “fragile” presents the
book as a delicate, decorative object and the artist as a lovely but vulnerable ingénue whose spirit might be threatened by the corruption of the immense, growing city and whose precious femininity might be compromised by the nascent women’s rights movement brewing at the time (33). Nevertheless, it is perhaps the very act of masking her work behind this precious title that allowed Agustini to pursue her desire for knowledge with such fervour. The immensity of her desire is expressed fully in a poem entitled “La Sed” (“Thirst”) where Agustini’s poetic speaker cries out, “Tengo sed, sed ardiente!” (I am thirsty, burningly thirsty!) and asks a sorceress for help. Initially offered a magical nectar, the speaker replies, “O, no, no eso empalaga” (Oh no, not that, it’s too sweet for me!) (Poesías completas 139). Later, she is offered a “rare fruit” that is also exceedingly sweet, at which she replies, “Hay días que me halaga / Tanta miel, pero hoy me repugna, me estraga!” (There are days when I’m flattered by all that honey, but today it repulses me, ravages me) (139)! Only when led to a green valley and a “diamond current” does she find her thirst sated, drinking the “límp cristalina” (crystalline lymph) and rejoicing in the “sensación divina” of its purity (139). This poem reveals that, regardless of the “sweet” persona that the poet had to assume in life, in poetry she wants no part of false sweetness or, if we interpret this poem in terms of the pursuit of transcendent knowledge, she seeks no simple, superficial answers. Instead, her thirst can only be sated by the clear, pure waters of truth – waters not available upon her first request to the sorceress, but only after much insistence.

Agustini’s early insistence on going beyond apparent reality toward the deeper truth that lies beyond reaches its fullness of expression in “La orla rosa” (“The Rose Border”), an appendix to El libro blanco that includes seven poems dealing with themes of sensuality and erotic love. In “Explosión,” the poetic speaker cries out triumphantly, “Si la vida es amor, bendita sea! / Quiero más vida para amar!” (If life is love, blessed be life! / I want more life to love!) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 46; Cáceres 47). This delicious, insatiable desire for more life mirrors the intensity expressed in the previously quoted section of another poem from this mini-collection, “Íntima”: “Vamos más lejos en la noche, vamos” (Let us go further into the night, let us go) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 44; Cáceres 45). The life that Agustini is given is not enough; the night and its mysteries are not enough; Agustini insists on more life, on journeying further into the mystery through the vehicle of erotic love. For me, this excessive insistence on more life resonates with Blanchot’s discussion of inspiration, which invokes the Greek myth of Orpheus.
and Eurydice. In order to reach his lost love, Orpheus must descend to the underworld through a frightening, mysterious night that is opened to him through art. Eurydice embodies the furthest that his art can reach, and while ostensibly she is the object of his desire and the motive for his journey, Blanchot asserts that there is something more that he is seeking. Ultimately, he does not want his love to be restored to her previous state in life; instead, he wants to embrace her in death, to transform her into a vehicle through which he can transcend the bounds of his mortal existence and experience something greater, the “other night” that she embodies. For this reason, when he is just about to lead her out of the Underworld, Orpheus finds himself compelled to turn back and look at her:

Not to look would be infidelity to the measureless, imprudent force of his movement, which does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face – wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy, and wants, not to make her live, but to have living in her the plenitude of her death. That alone is what Orpheus came to seek in the Underworld. All the glory of his work, all the power of his art, and even the desire for a happy life in the lovely, clear light of day are sacrificed to this sole aim: to look in the night at what night hides, the other night, the dissimulation that appears (172).

In Blanchot’s interpretation of the myth, Orpheus’ intense, insatiable desire for this “other night” has tragic but necessary consequences. The issue of tragedy in Agustini’s work will be approached in due course; nevertheless, the impulsive movement of Orpheus’ gaze clearly exists already within the joyous optimism of “Explosión,” where a glimpse at this wondrous “other night” occurs the very moment that the speaker’s experience of love occurs: “Hoy siento / Que no valen mil años de la idea / Lo que un minuto azul del sentimiento” (Today I feel / A thousand years of an idea are worth not / One beautiful instance of the soul), she declares (Selected Poetry 46; Cáceres 47). The ultimate reality that Agustini seeks is not to be found through disciplined, methodical thought and inquiry, but in a transport of passion reminiscent of the Romantic belief in the sentiments’ power to lead toward ultimate knowledge. The explosion occurs suddenly, “como un mar violento / Donde la mano del amor golpea” (like a violent sea / Where the hand of
love strikes) (Selected Poetry 46; Cáceres 47). It is interesting for me to note that Alejandro Cáceres chooses to translate the phrase “un minuto azul del sentimiento” as “one beautiful instance of the soul”; once again, Agustini invokes the colour blue. But, while in “El poeta leva el ancla” this blue signified uncertainty and danger as well as optimism, here it reflects pure joy; it is the very colour of the soul breaking through the barrier of melancholy and reaching the fullness of happiness. Returning to Mavor’s argument, we see that blue is an inherently ambiguous colour, and Agustini’s use of it indicates that, in spite of her joyful optimism, the poetic journey on which she embarks is far from easy. In “Íntima,” blue is the colour not of the soul on its path to knowledge, but of the very barrier to that knowledge:

Imagine the love I must have dreamed of
In the glacial tomb of my silence!
Greater than life, greater than the dream itself
Under the endless azure it felt captured.
Imagine my love, a love that wants
An impossible life, a superhuman life,
You who know how the soul and dreams of Olympus
Weigh upon and consume human flesh.
And when before the soul for which
The azure did little to bathe its wings,
Like a great golden sunned horizon,
Or a beach of life, your soul emerged:
Imagine! To embrace, vivid, radiant
The impossible! The lived illusion!
I blessed God, the sun, the flower, the air
And life itself, because you were life) (Cáceres 45).

Here, the speaker begins in a state of captivity – her ardent desire trapped under the “glacial tomb” of silence, “the endless azure.” The blueness is a trap, the barrier which the soul must transcend. Meanwhile, after acknowledging the desire for a “superhuman life,” the speaker suggests that this desire is potentially impossible and even dangerous. The azure hue is associated with the sky, with “the soul and dreams of Olympus” that “weigh upon and consume human flesh,” putting an immense strain on the senses and perhaps even threatening bodily integrity. By rejecting the blue sky in this way (or at least, in drawing attention to its ambiguous nature), the poetic speaker questions many of the traditional approaches to transcendence. Traditional Christianity, which holds that our fleshly, earthly existence is but a shadow of the celestial magnificence that awaits us after death, is called into question. Instead, transcendence can potentially be reached immediately, in this life through the union of the speaker’s soul with that of the beloved. Unlike in Catholicism (where the desired knowledge of God might be achieved through a lifelong regimen of prayerful faith and good works) or the scientific method (where knowledge of truth comes is achieved when one follows the clear-cut steps of hypothesis, research and experiment), Agustini’s transcendent knowledge comes about through a spontaneous experience of erotic passion. It is a moment in which, if we may invoke Bataille, there occurs a sudden “movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order” (41) – thus, a profound erotic and spiritual transport.
However, the shifting significance of the symbols – particularly, as we have seen, with the colour blue – reveals that this desired knowledge is by no means easy to achieve; it is not a matter of simply overcoming obvious obstacles. Instead, Agustini seeks to catch hold of a fleeting vision, a kind of rainbow that vanishes before she can even comprehend it. In “Una chispa,” (“A spark”), she describes the fleeting nature of her visions thus: “Fue un ensueño del fuego / Con luces fascinantes / Y fieras de rubíes tal heridos diamantes; / Rayo de sangre y fuego / Incendió de oro y púrpura todo mi Oriente gris. / Me quedé como ciego… / ¡Qué luz!… – ¿Y luego y luego? … / – ¿Luego?… El Oriente gris…” (It was a vision of fire / With fascinating lights / And beasts of ruby like wounded diamonds / Rays of blood and fire / Inflamed in gold and purple the whole of my grey eastern sky. I stood as if blind… / What a light!… – And then, and then? / Then? …The grey eastern sky…) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 38; Cáceres 39). In this poem, the speaker is offered a spark, a tiny, fleeting moment of the luminous reality that she seeks. The image of fire suggests an immense passion. The “wounded diamonds,” like the violent sea struck “by the hand of love” in “Explosión,” suggest an experience so intense that pleasure and pain become indistinguishable, and the light is so bright as to temporarily blind the speaker. And then, just as quickly as it has appeared, the revelation vanishes, leaving the speaker with everyday, basic reality of the “grey eastern sky.” For one moment, a possibility was opened for the speaker – the chance of transcendence that Blanchot describes as the “lightning moment” when all words cease and being itself is apprehended – not through the medium of language, but in its purest, most immediate form:

The lightning moment flashes from the work as the leaping brilliance of the work itself – its total presence all at once, its “simultaneous vision.” This moment is the one at which the work, in order to give being and existence to the “feint” – that “literature exists” – declares the exclusion of everything, but in this way excludes itself, so that the moments at which “every reality dissolves” by force of the poem is also the moment the poem dissolves and, instantly done, is instantly undone (45).

While Blanchot understands this sudden dissolution of reality and flash of unadulterated brilliance as occurring through a reader’s interaction with the work, in Agustini we see the phenomenon occurring within the work. A sudden leap takes place; reality is completely undone
and for one moment, the transcendence that Agustini so urgently seeks is realized. But then, just as suddenly, the world comes back together, and grey everyday reality is restored.

The use of the colour grey is interesting in that, like blue, it contains a certain amount of ambiguity. Here, the return to the “grey eastern sky” suggests a kind of disappointment – the great moment of transcendence cannot be sustained, and the speaker again returns to dull, quotidian reality. But, in “La musa gris” (The Grey Muse), Agustini expresses a certain amount of affection for this dull everydayness and describes the colour grey as one of her muses: “Yo adoro esa musa, la musa suprema / del alma y los ojos color de ceniza / La musa que canta blancuras opacas / Y el gris que es el fondo del hombre y la vida” (I adore this muse, the highest muse / of the soul and ash-coloured eyes / the muse that sings opaque whitenesses / And grey, the backdrop of man and life) (Poesías completas 158). What are we to make of this ambiguity?

As I have stated previously, for me the multifaceted symbolism of these colours is related to the complexity of the quest for transcendent knowledge that Agustini is undertaking. In El libro blanco, the poet’s first book, we see that this desire is already intense; she is very much determined to overcome the everydayness of her existence and achieve knowledge of ultimate reality through erotic love. As Jrade and others have observed, there is at this point a high degree of optimism in this search; thus, while a “blue sail” or an “endless azure” might seem like obstacles to the spirit’s progress, these fleeting moments of transcendence quickly transform them into a “blue moment of the soul.” While the “grey eastern sky,” returning after a sudden vision of beauty, might initially seem a disappointment, the “grey muse” is a constant, stabilizing force in life, a companion to be appreciated rather than merely endured. At this point, Agustini’s poetic journey is just beginning, and she is filled with optimism. However, the situation becomes considerably more difficult – and the possibilities of transcendence more limited – in the poet’s next collection, Cantos de la mañana (Morning Songs).

According to Cathy Jrade, Agustini’s second book marks a shift in her poetic consciousness and maturity as a writer. No longer relying so heavily on the influence of Darío and other modernistas, she begins to speak more clearly in her own unique voice. But, it soon becomes clear that this voice is considerably more lugubrious than the boundlessly optimistic poetic speaker of El libro blanco. In a set of poems entitled “Elegías dulces” (Sweet Elegies), Agustini speaks in a tone of deep lamentation:
Hoy desde el gran camino, bajo el sol claro y fuerte,
Muda como una lágrima he mirado hacia atrás,
Y tu voz de muy lejos, con un olor de muerte
Vino a aullarme al oído con un triste “¡Nunca más!”
Tan triste que he llorado hasta quedar inerte…
¡Yo sé que estás tan lejos que nunca volverás!
No hay lágrimas que laven los besos de la Muerte…
– Almas hermanas mías, nunca miréis atrás! (Selected Poetry 62).

(Today from the great path, under the bright and mighty sun,
Silent like a tear I have looked back,
And your voice from far away, with a scent of death,
Came to howl to my ear a sad “Never again!”
So sad that I have cried until turning numb…
I know you are so far away you will never return!
There are no tears able to wash the kisses of death…
– Sister souls of mine, never look back!) (Cáceres 63)

Like so many of Agustini’s poems, this one is addressed to a “you” whose identity cannot be ascertained – perhaps an absent lover, perhaps an imaginary lover, perhaps an absent God. The overall tone of sadness as well as the sensory images – the mixed metaphor of a voice “with a scent of death,” the sound of that voice howling, and the sensation of numbness all contribute to a mood of despair which leads the poetic speaker face to face with an absolute nothingness. However, for Agustini it is not the case that reality is essentially characterized by this nothingness; instead, this vacuum has been brought about by loss and the time that has passed since the occurrence of this loss. The poem continues, “Los pasados se cierran con los ataúdes, / Al Otoño, las hojas en dorados aludos / Ruedan…y arde en los troncos la nueva floración…” (Past times close like coffins, / In the Fall the leaves in golden cascades / Roll …and the new blossoms blaze in the trunks…) (Selected Poetry 62; Cáceres 63). For me, this image of autumn leaves rolling in golden cascades recalls the poem “Autumn” by Rainer Maria Rilke, whose work will be discussed more fully in the next section of this chapter. In this poem, Rilke describes the leaves as “fallen, fallen wie von weit, / als welkten in den Himmeln ferne Gärten; sie fallen mit
verneinender Gebärde” (falling, falling as from far away, / as if distant gardens withered in the skies; they fall with gestures saying “No.”) (Rilke 86; Snow 87). However, while Rilke asserts that “Wir alle fallen” (We are all falling), he also expresses the confidence that there is “Einer, welcher dieses Fallen / unendlich sanft in seinem Händen hält” (one who with infinite tenderness / holds this falling in his hands) (Snow 87). For Agustini, though, there is no such One; if there ever was, this One has long departed. Perhaps in the past the situation was different, but the past has closed like a coffin. And yet, the poem does not end on a note of despair. In asserting, “Hablemos de otras flores al corazón” (Let us speak to the heart of other flowers) (Selected Poetry 62; Cáceres 63), the speaker reflects a weary resignation at the lack of meaning, but she also suggests that there are still other flowers that can be spoken of (and to). Thus, the elegy is not without hope. For Jrade, the adage “Never look back!” is reminiscent of two famous myths – that of Orpheus, who in looking back toward the past lost the chance of a renewed life with his beloved Eurydice, and Lot’s wife, who in the Genesis story looks back at her lost city and as punishment is transformed into a pillar of salt. According to Jrade,

The famous “don’t look back” is addressed to “almas hermanas mías.” In this phrase Agustini cleverly draws upon the grammatical gender of “almas” to move the apostrophe to a female perspective, that is, to “her sisters” in poetry. While on first reading it seems to warn against Orpheus’s tragic fate and the everlasting entombment of former lovers and previous voices, it actually exhorts her sisters not to repeat the mistake made by Lot’s wife. She urges them not to turn to the past for models of inspiration, which will confine them to a position of inferiority or, worse, turn them into a worthless pillar of salt. As a transition to the tercets, it becomes an appeal to let the coffins of the past close, to move forward instead of backward, to become the new bearers of culture (Delmira Agustini 89).

Jrade’s interpretation of Agustini’s “sister souls” being directed toward other women poets is an interesting one, and it places the poem in an important social context (Agustini was, after all, the only female writer of the modernista school and, as I have mentioned in the case of El libro blanco (frágil), she herself could not write poetry as a woman without constantly finding herself under the microscope of social scrutiny). At the same time, I hesitate to agree with Jrade’s dismissal of the Orpheus myth in the cry of “Never look back.” Returning to Blanchot’s retelling
of the story, it is quite possible that, like Orpheus, Agustini’s poetic speaker yearns to reach the “other night” that can only be attained by turning around and looking, but she recognizes the inherent danger and destruction within. Though aware of the possibility of entering this “other night,” the speaker knows that she has reached the point where art ends, where transcendence might only be achieved by somehow moving beyond it. And, since there is currently no other way to do this other than through poetry itself, there is consequently nothing left to do but “talk to the heart about other flowers.”

The vague, resigned sense of hopefulness on which Agustini ends the first elegy is strengthened in the second, in which further images of decadence are linked to the desire for transcendence. The poem begins with an evocation of “mystery” as a negative and frightening force – perhaps the “other night” that is so deeply desired by Orpheus, but which promises death alongside this sought-after knowledge. “Pobres lágrimas mías las que glisan / A la esponja sombría del Misterio, / Sin que abra en flor como una copa cárdena / Tu dolorosa boca de sediento! / Pobre mi corazón que se desangra / Como clepsidra trágica en silencio, / Sin el milagro de inefables bálsamos / En las vendas tremantes de tus dedos!” (Poor tears of mine those that slither / Towards the dark sponge of Mystery, / Without blooming like a purple cup / Your sorrowful mouth of a thirsty man! / My heart, poor, bleeds / Like a tragic and silent water-clock / Without the miracle of ineffable balms / In the trembling bandages of your fingers) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 64; Cáceres 65). Here, we see images of decadence in the form of illness, recalling Baudelaire’s idea of life as a hospital in which every patient desires to switch beds. The thirst and the trembling bandages combine with the scent of death in the previous poem to create this sense of decay. Meanwhile, the idea of a void or nothingness appears with the image of the “dark sponge of mystery” which takes in the speaker’s tears, the nothingness which she must go beyond if she is to achieve contact with ultimate reality. Unlike in the first poem, the “you” whom the speaker addresses is not remote, but clearly and immediately present; the speaker’s heart is indeed held “En las vendas tremantes de tus dedos!” (in the trembling bandages of your fingers!) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 64; Cáceres 65). This intimacy between the “I” and the “you” culminates in the final stanza, in which the speaker cries out, “Pobre mi alma tuya acurrucada / En el pórtico en ruinas del Recuerdo, / Esperando de espaldas a la vida / Que acaso un día retroceda el Tiempo!” (Poor, my soul of yours huddled / At the gates in ruins of memory /
Hoping, its back turned toward life, / That perhaps some day time will turn back! (Selected Poetry 64; Cáceres 65). The curious image of “my soul of yours” reveals the speaker’s determination to gain access to this lost “you” at whatever cost, seeking to go beyond the fragments of memory and indeed to transcend time itself. While in the first elegy the speaker admonished her sister souls to “never look back,” in this second she expresses the hope that time itself will turn back. Returning to Blanchot’s interpretation of the Orpheus myth, we see the speaker’s burning desire to engage in the forbidden action of turning to stare at the “other night” of ultimate reality full in the face, to “look at Eurydice, without regard for the song, in the impatience and imprudence of desire which forgets the law” (Blanchot 173). At this point she is not quite ready to do this, but the possibility becomes much more real.

As close as Agustini comes to holding in her hand “the head of God,” however, the film of nothingness returns to pose a barrier. In “Las Alas” (“The Wings”), Agustini’s poetic “I” relates a vision that appears to be a retelling of the myth of Icarus. “Yo tenía… / ¡Dos alas! … / Que del Azur vivían como dos siderales ¡Raíces! / Dos alas, / Con todos los milagros de la vida, la Muerte / Y la Ilusión.” (I had… / two wings, / Which of the blue lived like two astral / Roots… / Two wings / With all the miracles of life, / Death, / And illusion) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 78; Cáceres 79). As “astral roots,” these wings in a sense enable the speaker to attain a connection to the stars. Like the apparition of Beatrice in Dante’s Paradiso, they proceed directly from the level of the ultimate reality that she is seeking; she need only lift her arms and expect to be lifted toward the ultimate reality – interestingly, again characterized by the ambiguous colour of blue – in which the disparate elements of life, death, and illusion are united. For Agustini (as for di Giorgio, as will be discussed in the third section of this investigation) the interplay between binary oppositions is highly significant. It is often remarked that in conventional Christian eschatology, the ultimate desire is for an absolute separation of goodness and evil – an unequivocal distinction of sheep and goats establishing the reign of the former under the Lamb of God and the banishment of the latter to the kingdom of the Devil. In Agustini’s interpretation, however, ultimate reality is not characterized by this kind of distinction; on the contrary, it consists of an absolute unification rather than a separation, a complementarity between these “Dos alas / Como dos firmamentos / Con tormentas, con calmas y con astros…” (Two wings / Like two skies / With storms, with calms and with stars) (Selected Poetry 78; Cáceres 79). For

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this speaker, the ambiguous, multifaceted nature of ultimate reality is not something to be feared,
but embraced, leading toward “El vuelo ardiente, devorante y único, / Que largo tiempo
atormentó los cielos, / Despertó soles, bólidos, tormentas, / Abrillantó los rayos y los astros; / Y
la amplitud: tenían / Calor y sombra para todo el Mundo / Y hasta incubar un más allá pudieron”
(The eternal flight, devouring and unique, / That long tormented the skies, / Awoke suns, meteorites, storms, / Brightened rays and stars; / And the ampleness: they had / Heat and shade for all the World, / And they were even capable of incubating a world beyond) (Selected Poetry
78; Cáceres 79). As in “Lo inefable,” where Agustini draws close to the moment of holding in
her hand the head of God, here she breaks through the apparent realities of everyday life and approaches the ultimate. According to Cathy Jrade,

In this passage, Agustini expresses the most fundamental of modernista aspirations, namely, to provide a transcendental vision that breaks with the predominant positivistic ideology of the day. The materialism, pragmatism, and utilitarianism that informed daily activity are implicitly contrasted with a search for ultimate truths. Her focus is on what others cannot see. Her perspective reflects a dynamism and an eroticism that become all-consuming (“ardiente, devorante y único”). Equally significant is the way Agustini appropriates the sexual metaphors of creation previously used by male authors and makes them female and birdlike as well. She has the power to incubate a “beyond,” that is, to hatch a vision that elevates her above the here and now. This semantic shift and the foregrounding of wings and flight hint at the emergence of a new swan of modernista verse, one that embraces women writers. (Delmira Agustini 114)

Jrade’s efforts to situate Agustini’s aspirations among those of other modernistas as well as the idea of the contrast between utilitarianism and a search for ultimate truths will be discussed in detail later in this essay. For now, I find it important to note that while this desire for the space of knowledge is not unique to Agustini among modernista writers, she, more strongly than others, finds it to be unattainable. According to Jrade, “Las alas” might be read as a response to Darío’s “Sonatina,” which also involves an image of flight and ascension (albeit on the part of a male poetic subject rather than a female one) (Delmira Agustini 116). However, while Darío’s knight achieves the flight that he is seeking, Agustini’s speaker falls just as Icarus has fallen: “Un día, raramente / Desmayada a la tierra, / Yo me dormí en las felpas profundas de este bosque…” /
Soñé divinas cosas! / Una sonrisa tuya me despertó, parézeme… / Yo no siento mis alas!… / Mis alas? … / – Yo las vi deshacerse entre mis brazos…¡Era como un deshielo!” (One day, strangely, / Fainted upon the earth / I fell asleep in the deep velvet of this wood… / I dreamt divine things! … A smile of yours awakened me, it seems… / And I don’t feel my wings! … / My wings? … / I watched them disappear between my arms / As if melting away!) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 80; Cáceres 81). The reference to “a smile of yours” instantly stands out – who is the “you” whose smile leads the speaker to lose her wings? Is it an imagined lover? It is a demon who has deceived her with the aim of taking her wings? Is it perhaps the “you” she hopes to encounter in the más allá that she seeks so desperately as to lose the possibility of reaching it while immersed in a vision of it? Jrade concludes that in this poem Agustini is speaking as a woman writer, and the duty to fulfill the expected roles of marriage and motherhood play a large role in the failure to achieve transcendence as a poet. We indeed see this idea in the image of a lover’s smile distracting the speaker from her poetic quest. However, the uncertainty of the identity of the “you” suggests that Agustini might also be pointing toward a more universal phenomenon that extends beyond the confines of gender (Icarus was a man, and he also lost his wings). Is it simply youth and inexperience that holds her back, or perhaps the intensity of her desire? According to Blanchot, in turning to gaze at Eurydice, Orpheus reveals himself guilty of impatience, wanting to “exhaust the infinite, to put a term to the interminable, not endlessly to sustain the very movement of his error” (173). Does the speaker of this poem commit a similar sort of error, seeking to put a term to the interminable, to cling to something clear and definite like a lover instead of forging ahead toward the knowledge she seeks? I suspect that this desire for the tangible indeed characterizes Agustini’s movement, but it should not be seen as an error. While her teleological journey toward ultimate truth bears much resemblance to Christian eschatology (where God is held as the supreme object of love and desire), it differs from traditional Christianity in that it refuses to posit a clear separation between the soul and the body. In the most common Christian narratives we find that the body must be suppressed if the soul is to make its journey, and in this poem it is indeed the imagined physical union with the “you” that causes the speaker’s wings to melt away. However, looking at Agustini’s next book – Los cálices vacíos (The Empty Chalices), we see that this physical union with a lover is actually the vehicle that leads toward the transcendent knowledge that she is seeking.
Most of the examples of Agustini’s quest for transcendence that I have discussed thus far involve some sense of failure. While Agustini “weighs the anchor” with much optimism in the first poem of *El libro blanco*, we see that there is still much uncertainty in her journey; later, while uprooting the ineffable and holding it in one’s hand “like the head of God” seems to be a possibility for the speaker, the fulfillment of this desire is not granted. And, as I will discuss when analyzing her posthumous works, it is clear that in many cases the desire for transcendence is not realized – at least, not as fully as Agustini would have hoped. Like Moses in the Biblical story, she is able to glimpse the promised land, but she is not permitted to enter; her wings melt before she can reach the place that she is seeking. However, there are moments when it appears that Agustini does manage to enter the long-expected land that flows with milk and honey, to touch the knowledge that she seeks even if not to grasp it. While such moments of fulfillment can be seen throughout Agustini’s work, they become most clear in *Los cálices vacíos*. In these poems, the melancholy of sister souls and broken wings is not forgotten, but purposefully cast aside; body and spirit are fused, and Agustini’s poetic speaker obtains the beatific vision that she is seeking – not by subordinating the physical to the spiritual, but by seeking one through the other, finding spiritual fulfillment through the medium of physical desire. In the famous poem “¡Oh Tú!,” Agustini expresses more vividly and vehemently the sense of desperation that her alienation from ultimate reality has caused her: “Yo vivía en la torre inclinada / De la Melancolía…Las arañas del tedio, las arañas más grises, / En silencio y en gris tejían y tejían” (I lived in the leaning tower / Of Melancholy… / The Spiders of tedium, the greyest spiders. / Wove and wove in greyness and stillness) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 102; Cáceres 103). In this poem, Agustini plays with the trope of the princess locked in a tower – perhaps a metaphor for the woman writer locked within the confines of social expectation – surrounded by greyness. However, the idea of being locked in a “leaning tower of melancholy” also points toward Agustini’s more general search for knowledge of the reality beyond the immediately visible one. Also, once again colour is significant. In Agustini’s earlier works grey is an ambiguous colour – sometimes, as in “Una chispa,” signifying dullness, emptiness and isolation from the transcendent reality that she seeks, while at other times, as in “La musa gris,” connotating the unobtrusive, comforting backdrop to quotidian reality. Here, though, grey is the colour of melancholy and “the spiders of tedium” that plague the speaker. The only other companion for the speaker, other than these horrible spiders of frustration and *ennui*, is
[..] la presencia
Siniestra del gran búho
Como un alma en pena;
Tan mudo que el Silencio en la torre es dos veces;
Tan triste, que sin verlo nos da frío la inmensa
Sombra de su tristeza.
Eternamente incuba un gran hueve infecundo
Incrustadas las raras pupilas más allá;
O caza las arañas del tedio, o traga amargos
Hongos de soledad (Agustini, Selected Poetry 102).

([..] the sinister
Presence of a great owl
Like a soul in torment;
So mute, that the silence in the tower is twofold;
So sad, that without seeing it, we are chilled by the immense
Shadow of its sorrow.
Eternally it incubates a great barren egg,
Its strange pupils fixed on the hereafter;
Or hunts the spiders of tedium, or devours bitter
Mushrooms of solitude) (Cáceres 103).

In most of the poems where Agustini explicitly mentions the más allá, she portrays it as the object of her desire, the ultimate space of knowledge that she seeks to fly up toward and inhabit. Interestingly, here it is not the poetic “I” who desires to travel to this other realm, but the great, mute owl that sits upon a barren egg. This grim image, compounded by the spiders of tedium and mushrooms of solitude, unexpectedly connotes the más allá not as a space of beauty and wonder, as in the earlier poems discussed here, but as a realm of decay and death. The meaning here is fairly ambiguous. We might interpret this owl and the melancholy it represents as a symbol of the nothingness which the speaker must break through if she is to attain the ultimate knowledge she yearns for so intently. On the other hand, the image of the “great barren egg” allows for a different possible reading; the idea of barrenness introduces the possibility that perhaps the
whole original project of trying to transcend nothingness through the means of a spiritual leap – as we see in poems such as “El poeta leva el ancla” and “Lo inefable” is fundamentally futile.

Against this approach, Agustini unexpectedly offers another possibility as the “tú” of the poem’s title appears: “¡Oh Tú que me arrancaste a las torre más fuerte! / Que alzaste suavemente la sombra como un velo, / Que me lograste rosas en la nieve del alma / Que me lograste llamas en el mármol del cuerpo; / Que hiciste todo un lago con cisnes, de mi lloro… / Tú que en mí todo puedes, / En mi debes ser Dios!” (O you who tore me down from that mightiest tower! / Who gently lifted the shadow like a veil, / Who bore me roses in the snow of my soul, / Who bore me flames in the marble of my body, / Who made a whole lake with swans, of my tears… / You who in me are all powerful, / In me you must be God)! (Selected Poetry 104; Cáceres 105). Although Agustini makes use of the trope of the rescued princess, she presents it in a very different way than do so many of the classic fairy tales (in which the princess is an object of male desire). The imprisoned princess’s waiting is active rather than passive; while she is compelled to endure the disturbing presence of the spiders and owl, she does so with forbearance and the firm belief that something better lies in the future. Meanwhile, while she credits her awakening with the influence of the “tú,” the focus remains fixed on the self – on the triumphant delight of finding herself torn down from the tower, filled with roses and flames. The bold, heterodox statement “In me you must be God,” is particularly striking in its unification of the physical with the spiritual; suddenly, the speaker finds that the transcendent space of knowledge that she is seeking is actually immanent. While previously the speaker has followed the barren owl in looking outward toward an inaccessible más allá, she now triumphantly turns inward. The God that she is seeking becomes embodied in an earthly lover with whom she shares a physical connection; at the same time, this earthly lover is God within her. He stands as the vehicle toward the higher knowledge that Agustini seeks, and the knowledge itself is realized through the dialogical encounter between them. In this moment, transcendence and immanence are one and the same, and Agustini experiences the moment which, according to Michel de Certeau “I and thou seek… one another in the thickness of the same language” (90). For de Certeau, the mysticism evoked in such famous spiritual writers as Teresa of Avila involves an entry into a space which one already inhabits without realizing it. In Agustini’s poem, the “leaning tower of melancholy” is a symbol for a mental and spiritual darkness that consumes the poetic subject; once the lover tears her
down from this tower, she finds – through their union – the awareness of the space that she already has inhabited, now made manifest through the union with the other. Moving toward the poem’s joyous conclusion, the speaker passionately exclaims, “Soy el cálice brillante que colmarás, Señor” (I am the shining chalice that you will fill, Lord) (Selected Poetry 104; Cáceres 105), thus enhancing even further the unification of sexual eros and spirituality. According to Jacqueline Girón Alvarado, this image of the chalice converts the speaker into a kind of priestess, a shamanic figure who receives divine knowledge and manifests it through her physical experience:

Se presentan dos significados para cálice: el religioso, copa que contiene la sangre o las sustancias mágicas de los dioses para llenar el espíritu de los fieles creyentes; y el vegetal, la flor que espera el polen para la fecundación y producción del fruto. Ambas son imágenes femeninas que se relacionan con su cuerpo (matriz, urna, vasija, recipiente, vacío) y su función reproductora (embarazo-fecundación; hijo-fruto). La voz poética está pidiendo ser usada como objeto sagrado en el cual se vierta la potencia divina de Eros (171).

(Two meanings of “chalice” are presented: the religious one as a cup containing the blood or magical substances of the gods to fill the spirits of faithful believers, and the botanical meaning, the flower that waits for pollen for the fertilization and production of the fruit. Both are feminine images related to the body (womb, urn, vessel, receiver, void) and the reproductive function (pregnancy – fertilization; child – fruit). The poetic voice asks to be used as a sacred object through which the divine power spills out).

By wilfully transforming herself into this priestess figure, the speaker of this poem is able to realize the union of the sacred and profane, the transcendent and the immanent. In the brief span of the poem, she enters the space of knowledge that has she has yearned for so intently.

But, as we shall see when looking at Agustini’s later work, such glimpses of the Promised Land are only intermittently accessible; eventually, they prove themselves fleeting and short-lived. In “Diario espiritual” (Spiritual Diary) in the posthumously published Astros del abismo (Stars of the Abyss), Agustini describes the soul’s transformation (through many stages) from a lake to swamp, signifying a shift from health and vitality to stagnation and despair. Before
turning to this poem, though, it is necessary to raise the question as to why the transcendence that Agustini seeks is only briefly, intermittently accessible. Doris Stephens, who devotes her entire book to the discussion of Agustini’s quest for a fused spiritual and physical transcendence, echoes the common twentieth century critical tendency to “discipline” Agustini by attributing her repeated disillusionment to inflated and narcissistic expectations. “In her quest for love in the real world, [Agustini] seeks a lover who will be the flesh and blood counterpart of the ‘amante ideal’ of her dreams and who will reflect her own self and the ideal she has imagined as would a mirror,” Stephens says. “No human being, however, can ever measure up to her ideal, and, consequently, her love turns to hate and cruelty bordering on death” (206). While Stephens’ focus on the desire for transcendence has provided much inspiration for my own investigation of Agustini’s work, I strongly disagree with this conclusion. To my ear it sounds far too much like Sedgwick’s trope of the “girl being taught a lesson” and fails to account for those moments, such as the one we have just explored in “Oh tú,” where the speaker does in fact enter the space of knowledge through the experience of ideal love. Indeed, in the poems analyzed here, we encounter beauty and great joy much more than disillusionment. However, we also repeatedly see that this joy has its limits. So, what are we to make of this ambiguity in Agustini’s poetic striving for transcendence?

For many of the critics cited here, the answer lies at least partially in Agustini’s social identity as a woman writer, forced to constrain her identity and to don various masks – the imprisoned princess of “Oh, tú” indeed one of them – in order to live and work as a female writer in fin-de-siècle Montevideo. On the other hand, Blanchot suggests that the desire for transcendence is a universal drive that inspires the poetic work – as is the impatience that compels the writer to turn back and glimpse the “other night” written upon Eurydice’s face and thus inevitably to lose her. There is definitely some truth in both of these claims. Indeed, the desire for ultimate knowledge, for some kind of intimate apprehension of the gods, has provoked writers in their quests for ages, and it continues to do so today. However, a particular writer’s social context is also highly important. In addition to dealing with the limits imposed by her gender, Agustini confronts the same social changes faced by all of her fellow modernistas. In the latter two parts of this chapter, I will discuss the way in which Agustini’s quest for transcendence becomes a form of social and political resistance against these changes. But, before making this
transition, it is necessary to investigate more fully the nature of this concern for life’s meaning
and the obstacles that Agustini faces in trying to reach the desired promised land. In order to do
this, I intend to add to the discussion of Agustini a brief exploration of one of her contemporaries
(and, interestingly, Blanchot’s primary case study): Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

1.2. Fragments of the Ancient Name

To the best of my knowledge, Rilke and Agustini never encountered one another,
personally or through their work. Likewise, their political and cultural contexts – Europe on the
eve of the First World War and Uruguay under the leadership of progressive president Batlle –
are very different. Nevertheless, they share common antecedents in the poetry of the Romantics
and French symbolists, and they repeatedly express the same fervent, almost desperate desire to
transcend the social realities of the rapidly changing industrial age in which they live, to seek
refuge in what I have termed “the space of knowledge” and what Rilke describes in his Duino
Elegies as “the world’s inner space.” And, both of them find that movement to be exceedingly
difficult if not impossible. Considering the time and place when Rilke wrote (in fragmented
World War I Europe) and also Charles Taylor’s analysis of the fin-de-siècle and twentieth
century “malaise of modernity,” it is easy to imagine the social and political reasons for this
difficulty. But, according to Blanchot’s interpretation of Rilke, the fundamental problem of the
human condition is that of consciousness itself. On the one hand, consciousness is a marvel – the
very medium through which we experience the world – and it grants us access to realities that are
not immediately present. At the same time, it is problematic in that it serves to alienate us from
others and from the truths that we are seeking – truths that, in Rilke’s poetry, are indeed
immediately present. Blanchot describes the problem thus:

We are limited beings. When we look in front of us, we do not see what is behind. When
we are here, it is on the condition that we renounce elsewhere. The limit retains us,
contains us, thrusts us back toward what we are, turns us back toward ourselves, away
from the other, makes of us averted beings. To accede to the other side would be thus to
enter into the liberty of that which is free of limits. But are we not, in a way, beings freed
from the here and now? I see, perhaps, only what is in front of me, but I can represent to
myself what is behind. Thanks to consciousness, am I not at all times elsewhere from where I am, always master of the other and capable of something else? Yes, it is true, but this is also our sorrow. Through consciousness we escape what is present, but we are delivered to representation (134).

Thus, for Rilke, the principal goal is to overcome representation, to leap beyond the divisions imposed by consciousness and to gain access to “the other side…where we would cease to be turned away from a single thing by our way of looking at it, averted from it by our gaze” (134). Seeking a sublime unification of interior and exterior realms, Rilke works against the period’s prevailing positivist worldview, which urged seekers of knowledge to solve mysteries and gain scientific mastery over the world. In contrast to this, Rilke follows a path that aims to live with uncertainty in a way reminiscent of Keats’ concept of “negative capability”: to avoid striving after facts, indeed to move toward deeper shadows, to transform the visible into the invisible, the known into the unknown without “any irritable reaching after fact or reason” (Keats, Poetry Foundation). Paradoxically, it is through this movement away from knowledge that Rilke gains knowledge of the “inner space” he so urgently seeks. Initially, this seems to pose a contrast to Agustini’s movement, which again and again frames itself not as a journey within, but toward a más allá that lies beyond the apparent physical world, as we have seen in most of the poems analyzed in the previous paragraphs. However, when we come to “Oh Tú” in Los cálices vacíos, we see that the movement turns inward, and the brief moment of transcendence that the poetic speaker experiences occurs only through intimacy with the other – an intimacy that leads her away from the knowledge that she originally sought, away from the más allá and toward a more intimate, interior space. Seeking to understand the reasons why this deeply desired movement is so difficult, my argument will focus simultaneously on the problem that Blanchot has identified – the divisions imposed on us by consciousness – and the cultural context of early twentieth century modernity, which left anyone seeking wholeness to contend with ruins and fragments. In the paragraphs that follow, I will first explore some poems from Rilke’s Das Stunden-Buch (The Book of Hours) and treat them as a prism through which to examine some of the central pieces from Agustini’s Los astros del abismo (The Stars of the Abyss). Ultimately, I will argue that while Agustini struggles against the limits imposed by consciousness, she also encounters much
freedom and joy in that struggle – a freedom that subtly permits her to turn her work into a strategy of resistance.

While Rainer Maria Rilke is perhaps best known for his *Duino Elegies*, I am choosing instead to look at *Das Stunden-Buch* (1905), which was published two years before Agustini’s *El libro blanco* (fragil). Primarily concerned with Christian themes, the poetry in this collection brims with *eros* in the sense of the individual subject’s desire for knowledge of and communion with God. However, like Agustini, Rilke finds that his desire is not easily fulfilled. The God that he seeks is neither absent nor present; rather, he exists in fragmented ruins that he is urgently struggling to piece back together. In an untitled poem from the collection, the poetic voice cries out,

Ich lese es heraus aus deinem Wort,  
aus der Geschichte der Gebärden,  
mit welchen deine Hände um das Werden  
sich rändeten, begrenzend, warm unde weise.  
De sagtest leben laut und sterben leise  
und wiederholtest immer wieder: Sein.  
Doch vor dem ersten Tode kam der Mord.  
Da ging ein Riβ durch deine reifen Kreise  
und ging ein Schrein  
und riβ die Stimmen fort,  
die eben erst sich sammelten  
um dich zu sagen,  
um dich zu tragen,  
alles Abgrunds Brücke –  
Und was sie seither stammelten  
sind Stücke  
deines alten Namens (Rilke 14).

(I read it in your word, learn it from the story  
of those gestures with which your hands
cupped themselves around each fledgling thing –
warm, encompassing, wise.
You pronounced live strongly and die softly
and ceaselessly repeated: Be.
But before the first death murder came.
With that a rent tore through your perfect circles
and a scream broke in
and scattered all those voices
that had just then come together
to sing you,
to carry you about,
their bridge over all abysses –
And what they have been stammering since
are fragments
of your ancient name) (Snow 15).

Here, we encounter a poetic speaker who is searching, like Agustini’s speaker, for union with a “you.” Placing the poem in its historical context, we can offer the interpretation that the alienation that he experiences might be a result of the secularization and fragmentation of European society on the eve of World War I. If we interpret the “You” here as God, then the poem begins to appear a bit like the biblical narratives of the creation story, in which the creator fashioned each fledgling thing with his own hands and brought the entire world into being. However, unlike the two Genesis creation stories, in which God’s work is portrayed as reaching a final state of completion, Rilke’s vision depicts it as a more ongoing process – a ceaseless repetition of the word “be.” We might extend this repetition beyond the biblical story to portray God’s relationship with his people throughout history, culminating in what Charles Taylor describes as the “enchanted world” that dominated Europe until the sixteenth century. When Rilke interrupts this continuity with the startling proclamation, “Before the first death, murder came,” we are reminded of Cain’s murder of his brother Abel – the first act of violence committed by one human being against another – but perhaps also the murder of God himself through the process of secularization, culminating in the many nineteenth and early twentieth-
century proclamations regarding the death of God. The image of a “rent that tore through your perfect circles” evokes the image of splintering and fragmentation, in particular the rupture of the medieval cosmos, a series of concentric circles with the earth at the centre which Galileo’s telescope soon proved contrary to fact. However, Rilke’s depiction of the destruction of God also evokes the very immediate image of a group of people gathered in his name – people who are scattered everywhere after the scream breaks out. Blanchot suggests that part of the poet’s responsibility is to be the one to speak in the absence of these vanished gods: “It seems that art was once the language of the gods; it seems, the gods having disappeared, that art remains the language in which their absence speaks – their lack, the hesitancy which has not yet decided their fate” (218). I would argue that in this and many of his other poems, Rilke is not willing to accept the absolute absence of the gods, but he does express this hesitancy which has not yet decided their fate. The poem’s final image – of people stammering fragments of the ancient name – evokes the idea of the tower of Babel, not only in the biblical story but also in Walter Benjamin’s idea of translation as an act which reveals the original kinship of language – a kinship that has been lost but can be momentarily recuperated through the act of translation. Having experienced the fragmentation of meaning and dissolution of the old perfect circles, Rilke struggles to recuperate the wholeness of a God that is simultaneously absent and present. Meanwhile, the focus on language also relates to Blanchot’s idea of consciousness as simultaneously the medium of experience and the wall that divides us from fully knowing ultimate reality. Like consciousness, language unites and divides this poetic speaker from the desired knowledge of ultimate reality, leaving humanity “stammering” – able to approximate the ancient name, but barred from a full articulation of it.

Rilke expresses this simultaneous proximity to and separation from the desired truth even more strongly in a poem that likens God to a lone neighbour in need of care: “Und wenn du etwas brauchst, ist keiner da, / um deinem Tasten einen Trank zu reichen: / Ich horche immer. Gieb ein kleines Zeichen. / Ich bin ganz nah.” (And should you need something, no one is there / to lift water to your lips. / I listen always. Give a small sign. / Feel me here) (Rilke 10; Snow 11). This neighbourly God is immanent rather than transcendent; we get the sense that he and the speaker have met before, that they may even know one another very well. But then, we learn of the division that stands between them:

(Only a thin wall lies between us, and that by purest chance: maybe just one call from your mouth or mine – and it would collapse completely, without a sound. It’s a wall built from your images. And your images stand before you like names. And when the light within me kindles – that light by which my inmost soul discerns you – it glances off their frames like glare. And my senses, which quickly fail, are derelict, cut off from you) (Snow 11).

Perhaps the most striking feature of this wall, other than its thinness, is that it is built from images – in other words, from representations. Like names, these images are signifiers that point toward their antecedent but in no way embody it; signifier and signified are cut off from one another, and there is no way that they could be united. Then again, Rilke suggests that this wall is not firm, but flimsy to the point where a chance sound might lead it to collapse. At the same time, we might say that this wall is the very condition on which the relationship between these two neighbours depends. In some sense, the speaker is content with the relationship as it is; he is
not moved, for instance, to stand, leave his room, knock on the neighbour’s door and enter. Just as consciousness provides the background condition of all our human experience, this thin wall provides the basic condition of the speaker’s relationship with his neighbour God. And yet, the wall is not everything. In stating that just one small sound might cause the wall to collapse, the speaker suggests the possibility that this wall might fall – either neighbour’s desire for contact with the other, as expressed in a call, could lead the wall to come down. Therefore, if we allow ourselves to interpret the wall as a symbol for ordinary human consciousness, we see that it is fragile and, more significantly, that it is not everything. The poetic speaker refers to “the light within me” and “the light by which my inmost soul discerns you.” While Agustini turns outward toward a más allá, Rilke turns inward to an “inner space,” an inner soul that seeks to communicate with a nearby neighbour God who is simultaneously seeking contact with him. For the speaker, this inner space is much more real than the wall that forms the apparent mediating condition of his and the neighbour’s relationship. Nevertheless, while he expresses hope that the wall might fall, that the inner space might be let out, the final situation proves to be quite the contrary: the light is reflected off the wall “like a glare,” and the speaker’s failing senses are “derelict,” cut off from his neighbour God. The use of the word “derelict” is interesting in terms of the idea of a neighbourly relationship, as dereliction implies desolation and loneliness – a lone dweller cut off from others, often isolated by social stigma. Although close to the neighbour he seeks, the speaker cannot reach him; he cannot stand and go to his door, and though the wall of representations is thin, neither the speaker’s nor the neighbour God’s light is enough to bring it down.

Then again, can we be completely sure that Rilke wants this wall to be brought down? As we have seen, the wall of representation may pose an obstacle to the full relationship that the speaker desires; at the same time, it is also the condition of there being any relationship at all. As we have seen, the speaker does not mention the possibility of leaving his room and knocking on the neighbour’s door; the only possible relationship is through the wall; perhaps, to quote Robert Frost, good fences really do make good neighbours. Blanchot comments on this two-sidedness of language, stating that, as limiting as it may be, it is the only way of achieving any access whatsoever to the “world’s inner space”: 
Sometimes it seems that, for Rilke, what makes the human word heavy, foreign to the purity of becoming, is also what makes it more expressive, more capable of its proper mission – the metamorphosis of the visible into invisibility where the Open is at hand. The world’s inner space requires the restraint of human language in order truly to be affirmed. It is only pure and only true within the strict limitations of this word (143).

Just as the world’s inner space requires this kind of restraint, it also requires a degree of mystery. As much as Rilke yearns to know God, in many poems he expresses the contrary idea that divinity is ineffable and should remain so; it simply is not meant to be known, and in some sense it needs to become even more unknowable, more unknown. In a poem that appears near the end of the collection, Rilke speaks of man’s acquisitiveness and desire to declare ownership over things that are by nature not meant to be owned – such as life, land and other people. And, indeed, divinity itself is often modified by the possessive pronoun, as in “my God.” Reacting to this tendency, Rilke affirms that God is not an object in anyone’s possession: “Falle nicht, Gott, aus deinem Gleichgewicht. / Auch der dich liebt und der dein Angesicht / erkennt im Dunkel, wenn er wie ein Licht / in deinem Atem schwankt, – besitzt dich nicht. / Und wenn dich einer in der Nacht erfaßt / so daß du kommen mußt in sein Gebet: / Du bist der Gast / der wieder weiter geht.” (God, don’t lose your equanimity. / Even he who loves you and discerns your face / in darkness, when he trembles like a light / flickering beneath your breath – does not possess you. / And if at night someone takes hold of you / so fiercely that you must appear in his prayer: You are the guest / who goes away again) (Rilke 40; Snow 41). Blanchot has spoken of the poet as one who stands before the absence of the gods; it is important to bear in mind that absence does not necessarily entail non-existence. Here, God is voluntarily absent, purposely refusing to allow anyone to deem him his own, insisting on being a guest who comes and goes according to his will. In his famous tract, I and Thou, Jewish theologian Martin Buber describes religious experience as a face-to-face encounter between an “I” and a “You” in which neither one demeans or objectifies the other; the two meet as subjects in the fulness of their being. For Buber, such an experience poses a sharp contrast to typical human relations, which he describes as “I-It” – we view the world as a set of objects to be understood rather than encountered, and ultimately to be possessed and used instrumentally. As Buber puts it, “I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of a human
being does not consist merely of all this and its like. All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It. But the realm of You has another basis” (54). It is this other basis that is of interest to Rilke – this “You” that can only be encountered through a fleeting relationship, that cannot be reduced to mere possession. Resisting the utilitarianism of “It,” Rilke insists that God remain beyond the grasp of anyone’s possession, a subject who greets us in a fleeting encounter and then departs, a guest who goes away again. Thus, for Rilke, access to the “world’s inner space” is only intermittently accessible, and effectively it cannot be sought – it can only be given. Returning to “Oh tú,” we see that the same is true for Agustini: after repeatedly trying and failing to achieve transcendence through the force of her own will, she finds that she can only do so briefly through an encounter with a “You” that, through the vehicle of eroticism, leads her toward the transcendence that she finds within rather than beyond.

Nevertheless, the elusiveness of this knowledge poses a huge obstacle for Agustini. In the work of Rilke, we see an ambiguous attitude toward this “space of knowledge”: on the one hand, he laments that God’s ancient name can only be found in fragments, or that the wall of language perpetually divides him from the neighbour God whom he would so much like to know. At the same time, as we see in this last poem, Rilke expresses the belief that to a certain extent God does not want to be known and should not be known – at least, not if knowledge entails possession. It is for this reason that Blanchot – who views poetic language as an anti-utilitarian mode of discourse, one that moves from clarity and lucidity to obscurity and mystery, from knowing to un-knowing, from appearance to disappearance – finds Rilke’s poetics so fascinating. Turning to Agustini, can the same be said to be true? Looking at her first three books, we again and again see a desperate, urgent desire to gain access to the más allá. In her last book, the posthumously published Los astros del abismo (The Stars of the Abyss), many critics have observed a much more lugubrious tone, a weary frustration with the inability to achieve transcendence that forms a sharp contrast to the generally optimistic tone of early works like those in El libro blanco (frágil). Reading one of the central poems from this collection, “Diario Espiritual” (Spiritual Diary), we see the soul described as six different bodies of water – a lake, a fountain, stream, a torrent, a sea, and finally a swamp: “Mi alma es un fangal; / Llanto puso el dolor y tierra puso el mal. / Hoy apenas recuerda que ha sido de cristal” (My soul is a swamp; / Weeping placed the pain and earth placed the evil. / Today, it hardly remembers that it was
crystal) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 152; Cáceres 153). Cathy Jrade describes the poem as “riddled with dashed hopes and disappointment” (*Delmira Agustini* 182). According to Jrade,

The poem is constructed as a type of dialogue between glorious achievements and the recognition of having lost them. While the sections assert the lyric voice’s abilities by describing her soul in terms of the powerful and productive water imagery that appears throughout modernista poetry, the single line that follows each section and changes the verb from present to past tense implies that those abilities have been lost (182).

Doris Stephens also concludes that this change in verb tense signifies a profound nostalgia for the past and disillusionment with the present leading to a sense of despair at the poem’s conclusion, where the verb tense is not changed and “Mi alma es un fangal” is the definitive end to this spiritual journey. Undoubtedly, the tone at the poem’s conclusion resembles that of Rilke when cut off from his neighbour God: it is lugubrious, lamenting, perhaps even bordering on despair.

But, if we look more closely, we see that, again as in Rilke, there is a hint of joy amid this melancholy: “Mi alma es un fangal / ¿Dónde encontrar el alma que en su entraña sombria / Prenda como una inmensa semilla de cristal?” (*My soul is a swamp; / Where to find the soul that in its dark bowels / Springs forth like an immense crystal seed?*) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 152; Cáceres 153). Keeping with Jrade’s and Stephen’s observations of the significance of the verb tenses, I find it important to note that at the end we are told not that the soul “sprang forth” like an immense crystal seed, but that it springs forth. Moreover, in the original Spanish the verb “to spring forth” (prender) is conjugated in the subjunctive – perhaps a more exact translation would be “Where to find the soul…that might spring forth.” This use of the present subjunctive at the conclusion suggests, contrary to Jrade’s and Stephen’s interpretations, that all has not been lost; the swamp, though weeping in pain and ridden with evil, contains an immense crystal seed that might spring forth at any moment. Also, the previous states of the soul as more forceful bodies of water are not necessarily ideal, as María José Bruña Bragado points out in her own analysis of the poem. For Bruña, the lake “remite indefectiblemente a la estética plácida y atemporal del modernismo, a sus paisajes artificiales” (inevitably complies with the placid, atemporal aesthetic of *modernismo*, with its artificial landscapes) (205). Indeed, the lake, which is described as a
“nido de estrellas en la noche calma” (nest of stars in the calm night) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 150; Cáceres 151) reflects a subdued ambiance and perhaps an imposed tranquillity – absent is the passionate Agustini we know from such poems as “Lo inefable” and “Oh, tú.” The image of calmness continues when the soul is described as a fountain – which according to Bruña is another artificial body of water that suggests “Parnassian preciousness” – and a stream, which suggests melancholic calm (Bruña 207). We see a return to Agustini’s triumphant erotism in the next stanza, where her soul becomes a torrent that “todo lo envuelve voluptuosamente” (lustfully swallows all) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 150; Cáceres 151), but even this image is overshadowed by darkness as it exemplifies “un manto infinito desbordado / De una torre sombría” (an endless shroud overrun / By a gloomy tower) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 150; Cáceres 151); indeed, the torrent is hardly an ideal state of the soul. As for the next idea of the soul as a sea, Bruña interprets it as inextricably linked to the final image of the swamp. “De ese panteísmo amoroso tan característico de Agustini, pasamos, sin embargo, a la bicefalia del amor, amor que es vida y muerte, claridad y tiniebla, ‘mar’ y ‘fangal’” (From that loving pantheism so characteristic of Agustini, we nonetheless reach a two-headed love, love that is life and death, clarity and darkness, ‘sea’ and ‘swamp’) (206). This dual nature of love bears a certain resemblance to the dual nature of the wall in Rilke’s poem, which provides the condition for the relationship between the neighbours even as it divides them. In Agustini’s case, love is similarly ambiguous – on the one hand, it is something purely good, a clear, powerful sea in which “ni un lirio puede naufragar” (even a lily cannot drown); on the other hand, it is a swamp of suffering. Thus, the speaker’s melancholy – though really and truly present – is not as absolute as it initially appears. Just as Rilke’s poetic speaker finds a kind of joy and beauty amid the dereliction of his isolation from God, Agustini’s likewise finds joy in the conclusion of her spiritual journey – which, despite its inherent misery, offers hope in the immense crystal seed and implies conation rather than stagnation. According to Bruña, one way that we might interpret the conclusion is to view it as a sign of Agustini’s movement away from the *modernista* tradition toward something new and unexpected: “Se ha olvidado la etapa cargada de lujo y cuidado estilístico para optar ahora por lo feo, lo doloroso y lo maldito. Se aventura totalmente sola en esta nueva estética, pues encontrar compañero / a de fatigas en ese terreno se revela casi imposible” (The period filled with luxury and stylistic caution has been forgotten in favour of the ugly, the painful and the cursed. The speaker travels completely alone in this new aesthetic; to find a comrade-in-arms reveals itself’
nearly impossible in this landscape) (206). Despite this isolation, Agustini insists on continuing her quest for transcendence. And, when we look at the next poem in the collection, we see that, as in Rilke, to a certain extent Agustini’s space of knowledge can only be reached by moving toward greater mystery and obscurity. It is only in this way that she can reach what Blanchot calls “the other side” – that place where “we would cease to be turned away from a single thing by our way of looking at it, averted from it by our gaze” (Blanchot 134).

As I have previously mentioned, Blanchot admires Rilke for his willingness to venture into greater unknowing, to accept uncertainty and obscurity rather than recoiling from them. Although Rilke frequently speaks of – and to – God, in Blanchot’s view he rejects the Christian answer to life’s mysteries; he expects neither complete salvation nor the absolute subordination of evil to goodness that Christians seek (Blanchot 133). Blanchot admires his capability to abide in darkness and mystery; meanwhile, he laments other human beings’ inability to tolerate any kind of obscurity:

Men have recoiled from the obscure part of themselves, they have rejected and excluded it, and thus it has become foreign to them. It is an enemy to them, an evil power which they evade through constant distractions or which they denature by the dread which separates them from it. This is a great sorrow. It makes our life a desert of dread, doubly impoverished: impoverished by the poverty of this dread which is a bad dread, impoverished because deprived of the death which this poor dread thrusts obstinately outside us (129).

Like Rilke, Agustini refuses to be impoverished by recoiling from the obscure side of existence. As much as she desires transcendence and knowledge of a world beyond, she also expresses an awareness that this world beyond cannot always be reached. In a poem entitled “La cita” (“The Encounter”), she invites her beloved to accompany her on a journey toward greater mystery: “En tu alcoba techada de ensueños, haz derroche / De flores y de luces de espíritu, mi alma, / Calzada de silencio y vestida de calma, / Irá a ti por la senda más negra de esta noche” (In your chamber covered with reverie, make waste / Of flowers and spiritual lights; my soul / Shod in silence and dressed in calm, / Will go after you down the darkest path of this night) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 154; Cáceres 155). The image of flowers and spiritual lights evokes the flowers and
candles that characteristically adorn Catholic churches and call believers to knowledge of a saving God. The speaker of this poem, however, rejects any such promise of salvation and instead urges her beloved to “make waste” of such trappings, and instead to accompany her down the darkest possible path. Continuing in this vein, the speaker urges her beloved, “Apaga las bujías para ver cosas bellas; / Cierra todas las puertas para entrar la Ilusión; / Arranca del misterio un manojo de estrellas / Y enflora como un vaso triunfal tu corazón” (Turn out the lights and behold things beautiful; / Close all doors and enter illusion; / Uproot from mystery a handful of stars / And cover with flowers, like a triumphal vase, your heart) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 154; Cáceres 155). Once again, we can interpret this verse as a rejection of Christianity and its promise of spiritual illumination; the instruction to “apagar las bujías” refers not only to a turning off of lights, but to an extinguishing of candles – again, the religious candles of prayer. While knowledge is so often described in terms of sight, enlightenment and illumination, Agustini insists on moving toward greater darkness, toward closing doors rather than opening them. Paradoxically, it is only through this hermeticism and obscurity that the space of knowledge can be reached. In the next two lines, the image of uprooting a handful of stars from mystery stands as the culmination of the desire for transcendent knowledge that Agustini expresses in “Lo inefable”: “¿No habéis sentido nunca el extraño dolor / De un pensamiento inmenso que se arraiga en la vida […] Pero arrancarla un día en una flor que abriera / Milagrosa, inviolable…” (Have you ever felt such a strange pain / Of an immense thought that is rooted in life […] But to uproot it one day in a flower that would bloom / Miraculous, inviolable…) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 74; Cáceres 75). Here, the most immense thought, the most immense light that exists – the stars themselves – can be uprooted and held in one’s hand, but only after this journey into darkness is completed. Likewise, the beloved’s heart is covered “like a triumphal vase,” an image that parallels the filled chalice in “Oh tú.”

Taking this image as a point of departure, Agustini concludes the poem with a characteristic fusion of spiritual and erotic love: “¡Y esperarás sonriendo, y esperarás llorando!… / Cuando llegue mi alma, tal vez reces pensando / Que el cielo dulcemente se derrama en tu pecho… / Para el amor divino ten un diván en calma / O con el lirio místico que es su arma, mi alma / Apagará una a una las rosas de tu lecho!” (And you will wait smiling, and you will wait weeping!… / When my soul arrives, perhaps you will pray, thinking / That heaven sweetly spills
over your chest… / For divine love sits upon a sofa of calm / Or with the mystical lily that is its sword, my soul / will make vanish one by one the roses of your bed!) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 154; Cáceres 155). In its conclusion, this poem becomes a kind of inverse of “Oh tú.” There, the poetic speaker is a princess in need of rescue, and it is through contact with the lover that she finally finds that transcendence that she has been seeking – not in the más allá that the great owl perpetually points toward, but in an intimate, inner space where, in Blanchot’s terms, she achieves “no less things’ intimacy than ours, and the free communication from one to the other, the strong, unrestrained freedom where the pure force of the undetermined is affirmed” (Blanchot 136). Here, in contrast, the poetic speaker is not the one in need of rescue, but the one who does the rescuing – the guide who leads the beloved on a mystical journey toward this undetermined space, this meeting of “I” and “You” that Buber describes as the quintessential religious experience – only here, in Agustini, it is realized through the vehicle of erotic love. The final image – of her soul making the beloved’s roses vanish – is curious, but it corresponds to the speaker’s earlier instruction to make waste of flowers, to move from knowledge toward obscurity in the hopes of achieving a deeper knowledge, to discover that transcendence lies not beyond, but within.

In comparing Agustini to Rilke, I have attempted to analyze the apparent difficulty of achieving the transcendence that she so desperately seeks. Initially, I suggest that this difficulty might have something to do with the time period in which Agustini lived – a period that celebrated order and progress and dismissed the more spiritual aspects of human experience as inconsequential. However, looking at Rilke and Blanchot’s commentary on him, I have suggested that the difficulty inherent in this quest for transcendence might not be as absolute as it initially seems. Indeed, we might read it as a deliberate effort on the part of both authors to resist the utilitarian, instrumental quests for knowledge so characteristic of the fin-de-siècle and instead seek a different kind of knowledge – one that, paradoxically, can only be achieved by dwelling in mysteries rather than solving them, by embracing illusion instead of recoiling from it. Much has been said about the subversive nature of Agustini’s work – to write such blatantly erotic poetry as an upper-class woman in early twentieth century Montevideo certainly raised many disapproving eyebrows at the time and for decades afterwards. However, for me, Agustini’s depictions of physical desire form only the tip of the iceberg of her subversion. The crux of her
resistance lies in the movement I have just noted – the desire to extinguish the candles and shut the doors, to transform the visible into the invisible, to move toward greater unknowing. Speaking of the problem of consciousness – which, as we have seen, is both the primary condition for our knowledge of reality and our greatest obstacle from reaching that knowledge – Blanchot states, “Our bad consciousness is bad, not because it is interior and because it is freedom outside our objective limits, but because it is not interior enough and because it is by no means free” (137). In the sections that follow, I want to argue that it is this freedom of consciousness that Agustini seeks. It is this insistence on freedom that renders her work – which initially seems apolitical – a deliberate strategy of political resistance to the social structures in which she lived.

1.3 Space of Resistance: Agustini in the context of modernismo

Most scholars characterize modernismo, which is generally considered to include writers from 1880 to 1910, as Latin America’s unique response to modernity. To a large extent, this eclectic movement – which drew on many European cultural movements such as Romanticism and symbolism – can be seen as “the appropriation and partial reorganization of the library of European culture by Spanish America” (González 10) as Latin American intellectuals strove to assert their cultural independence from Europe and develop a distinct cultural identity within their relatively young nations. And yet, as Aníbal González points out, the concerns of the modernista writers – who were generally well-travelled, multilingual and cosmopolitan in their identity – were in many ways quite similar to the European writers whose literary styles they were appropriating and transforming. Like their European counterparts, late-nineteenth century Latin American intellectuals found themselves in a fragmented reality characterized by conflict between enthusiasts of technology and its detractors; between the bourgeoisie and those who opposed the increased commercialization of culture; between empirical, scientific thinkers influenced by Comte’s positivism and those who experienced nostalgia for a pre-Enlightenment enchanted world. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes this conflict in
A Secular Age, his comprehensive study of the Western transition toward greater secularism over the last five hundred years, which has led Western society from a paradigm in which religiosity was so institutionalized that unbelief was virtually impossible (the European scenario in 1500) to one in which religious belief is a matter of personal opinion only (the European and North American scenario in 2000). Speaking of nineteenth century positivism, Taylor notes that many people reacted against its moralistic focus on duty and its naturalistic, utilitarian concern for the welfare of others (the word altruism was not in use before the nineteenth century and is said to have been coined by Comte). Along with industrialization and the institutionalization of rules and social codes, this type of naturalistic morality appeared to leave little room for matters of the spirit:

Like all moralisms, [altruism] could come to seem too thin, too dry, concerned so exclusively with behaviour, discipline, control, that it left no space for some great élan or purpose which would transform our lives and take us out of the narrow focus on control. The obsession with getting myself to act right seems to leave no place for some overwhelmingly important goal or fulfilment, which is the one which gives point to my existence. This complaint, sometimes interwoven with the “Romantic” one, that modern moral, disciplined life represses feeling, recurs again and again in the last two centuries. It is one of the defining concerns of the modern world. It is related to that other great defining concern, the worry about meaning, that is, about the possible meaninglessness of life… It is just that, while the reproach against dry-as-dust moralism has analogies in earlier centuries, the anguish about meaning is quintessentially modern (399).

While Taylor’s study claims to focus on Europe only, I believe that the situation which he is describing can be applied to the Latin American modernistas, who were very much concerned with maintaining that “élan” in their lives and in the culture as a whole, and saw its erosion not as the positivist “progress,” but rather as a form of entropy or decadence within the culture. As Taylor argues, the potential meaninglessness of life had become a great concern on both sides of the Atlantic, and to a large degree, Latin American modernismo embodies this concern for meaning. According to Cathy Jrade in her study of the movement, the work of the modernistas is somewhat analogous to that of the European Romantic writers, who also reacted against the positivism that had, in their view, robbed other modes of discourse of their legitimacy. Jrade
states that the movement resembled Romanticism in that it “proposed a worldview that imagined the universe as a system of correspondences, in which language is the universe’s double capable of revealing profound truths regarding the order of the cosmos” (Modernismo 4). Meanwhile, she observes that the modernistas also exhibited what she calls a “realist” tendency, “seeking to establish more directly political and worldly images of change” (4). She adds that these writers were at something of a historical crossroads, emerging in the wake of their nations’ struggles for independence or – in the case of the Cuban poet José Martí – fighting for the desired freedom. In addition to asserting their cultural independence from Europe, many modernistas expressed a concern for maintaining cultural and political independence from the United States, which, in the wake of its Civil War, had begun to consolidate its power and set its economic and imperial gaze on various Latin American nations. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of this concern can be seen in Rubén Darío’s “To Roosevelt,” in which he scathingly deems US President Theodore Roosevelt “el futuro invasor / de la América ingenua que tiene sangre indígena / que aún reza a Jesús Christo y aún habla en español” (the future invader / of the naive America that has Indian blood / that still prays to Jesus Christ and still speaks Spanish) (Poesías 167). It is interesting that in these lines Darío affirms his continent’s indigenous heritage, but also embraces certain aspects of European cultural influence (the Spanish language and Roman Catholic religion, which to this day some indigenous groups still reject as symbols of Spanish colonization and all the brutality that accompanied it) when resisting the influence of what Darío fears will become the next colonizing agent – the English-speaking, Protestant United States of America. However, for Darío, Latin American Catholicism proves to be an important locus of resistance against what he sees as the greedy, expansionist, uncultured future invader. After ironically praising the United States’ military might and economic power that joins “el culto de Hércules al culto de Mammón” (the cult of Hercules to the cult of Mammon) Darío sardonically concludes, “Y pues contáis con todo, falta una cosa – ¡DÍOS!” (Although you count on everything, you lack one thing – God!) (Poesías 167). This is undoubtedly a harsh and daring charge (surely Darío had to be aware of the many forms of religiosity pervading American culture at the time).

However, to my understanding, the God which Darío finds lacking in the United States (and, by implication, present in the Latin American cultures which he seeks to juxtapose to that ambitious nation) is not the God of institutionalized religion, and certainly not that God that Americans believe to have unconditionally favoured their endeavours (as stated in the US Great Seal Motto,
Annuit Coeptis) but instead a mystical, spiritual entity that underlies all experience – an entity that has been lost amid the economic and technological changes brought forth by modernity. It is this concern that underlies Darío’s charge against the United States, and it is the same concern that underlies the work of many of the other *modernista* poets, including those who, like Agustini, fear that something important is lacking in modernity. For this reason, while not all *modernista* poetry – Agustini’s, for instance – deals overtly with political issues, almost all of this writing touches upon the theme of social decay. These poets firmly believe that society is somehow in decline, that the new social and economic order produced by modernity is actually a fallen, ruined, entropic world from which they must seek some kind of transcendence. And, for many of them, this poetic resistance stands as a form of political resistance.

According to Octavio Paz, “*Modernismo* is modern not only because it tries to imitate the social, political and cultural institutions of modernity, but also because it explicitly or implicitly critiques them, and even casts a self-critical eye on its own modernity” (qtd. in *Jrade Modernismo* 6). And, as González points out, the principal way that it forms this critique is through a focus on decadence – both through the journalistic *crónicas* of the period, hybrid literary/journalistic essays in which writers seek to infuse journalism with a more subjective, humanistic perspective as well as to reveal the many injustices that could be found in this supposedly ordered society, and poetry, in which the desire to transcend a fallen, decadent world becomes very prevalent. In the paragraphs that follow I will seek to situate Agustini’s movement toward resistance in the context of *modernismo* by taking a look at two other *modernista* writers: José Martí and Rubén Darío. Although Martí is quite different from Agustini, a glance at his work is useful for understanding the ways in which *modernistas* viewed an individual, subjective quest for transcendence as a form of resistance to the society around them, the world that, according to Baudelaire, “is a hospital where every patient is possessed by the desire to switch beds” (qtd. in González 38). I will then look a little more closely at Darío, who according to *Jrade* is Agustini’s primary influence and the one with whom most of her work is in dialogue. I will then return to Agustini’s poetry itself and argue that it continues the *modernista* project while also transforming it.

What is the relation between literature and politics? What is the place of literature in this new society that has been created by modernization and the ethos of order and progress? This is
the main question which José Martí – poet, journalist, and fighter for Cuban independence asks. Julio Ramos argues that for Martí, literature is a way of overcoming the confusion and fragmentation generated by modernization. Rather than giving in to the rapid changes that are occurring, Martí offers literature as a way of containing and resisting these changes. He also proposes that artistic knowledge is superior to rational knowledge due to its ability to imagine a better future, which for him is a utopian vision of a harmonious society (Julio Ramos 10). This focus on non-rational forms of knowledge becomes clearer if we look at *Ismaelillo*, one of Martí’s early books of poetry, which interestingly was not a revolutionary cry for Cuban independence, but rather a devoted, perhaps even sentimental book of verses dedicated to his estranged son. “Estranged” is the key word here, and indeed the one that reveals Martí’s desire to transcend the decadence which he encounters. In a poem entitled “Sueño despierto” (“I dream awake”), Martí declares, “De día / Y noche siempre sueño. / Y sobre las espumas / Del ancho mar revuelto, / Y por entre las crespas / Arenas del desierto, / Y del león pujante, / Monarca de mi pecho, / Montado alegremente / Sobre el sumiso cuello. / Un niño que me llama / Flotando siempre veo!” (Day and night / I always dream with open eyes / And on top of the foaming waves / Of the wide turbulent sea, / And on the rolling / Desert sands, / And merrily riding on the gentle neck / Of a mighty lion, / Monarch of my heart, / I always see a floating child / Who is calling me!) (73). At first glance, a poem such as this one may not seem particularly revolutionary, but according to Martí’s critics it is a statement of resistance against the decadence brought on by modernity. According to González, *Ismaelillo* is significant in that it lyrically evokes childhood’s power as a symbol for origins as well as new beginnings, a notion that, before the publication of this work, was relatively unheard of in the Spanish American context (113). Likewise, Julio Ramos asserts that

6 Paradoxically, in order to resist modernity, Martí also had to take part in it, working as a journalist in New York (a profession which many poets struggling to earn their living as writers found cold and alienating, in that it did not allow them to express themselves openly). However, Julio Ramos observes that Martí and others found their way around this problem through the genre of the *crónica*, a semi-literary, semi-journalistic genre which allowed them to write from a more subjective perspective and provide commentary on the decadence which they saw in their surrounding environment, a way of revealing the heterogeneity of urban life. Ironically, while this journalistic work in part helped to support the modern paradigm, of which the mass dissemination of information through newspapers was a central component, it was this very work which allowed Martí to pursue his poetry, which is where he made his strongest critique of the decadence which he saw in his surroundings. According to Ramos, this poetry, which in Martí’s case was often oneiric and perhaps hermetic, can be seen as a kind of “interior space” that exists within the “exterior” space of journalism. On the one hand, this interior space simply cannot exist without the exterior – the only way in which Martí could support his career as a poet was by working as a journalist. Nevertheless, this interior space manages to challenge and disrupt the exterior.
Ismaelillo presupposes another form of knowledge – that of a child, that of a vision, sometimes oneiric – as a place of that which is specifically imaginary…a refuge from a rationalization that “horrifies.” From this zone which is simultaneously created by and excluded from rationalization, a new literary subject speaks, frequently articulating the ideal of informality, indiscipline, sometimes even transgression and madness (55).

In the poem itself, words such as “turbulent” and “rolling” and “mighty” suggest the frightening power of modernity; nevertheless, the child manages to float above this power and call out to the father. An echo of this image can be seen in the first poem of Martí’s Versos Sencillos in which the speaker declares, “Oigo un suspiro, a través / De las tierras y la mar, / Y no es un suspiro, – es / Que mi hijo va a despertar.” (I hear a sigh across the earth / I hear a sigh over the deep / It is no sigh reaching my hearth / But my son waking from sleep) (147). The image of a sigh over the earth certainly relates to the theme of decadence, as does the statement that “It is not a sigh reaching my hearth,” which highlights the distance between father and son. And yet, this son has the great power of transcending both time and space, calling to his father over and above the earth’s confusion. According to Julio Ramos, the poignant tone of Martí’s poems in honour of his son seeks to confront the meaninglessness of the period by expressing a concern for broken families (as his own family is broken) and to represent culture as “filiation, in contrast with the ferocious individualism and incapacity for such filiation” at the turn of the century (201).

Meanwhile, this sense of an a very personal, intergenerational relationship points toward Martí’s commitment to the revolutionary cause of his nation. In the first poem of Versos sencillos he declares: “Oculto en mi pecho bravo / La pena que me lo hiere: / El hijo de un pueblo esclavo / Vive por él, calla y muere” (On my brave heart is engraved / The sorrow hidden from all eyes: / The son of a land enslaved, / Lives for it, suffers and dies) (148). The “son” mentioned here could most certainly refer to the same estranged biological son whom he addresses in Ismaelillo; otherwise, it might also be seen as a self-reference; the “son of a land enslaved” is also Martí himself, struggling for Cuba’s freedom. In this way, the personal and the political cannot be separated in Martí’s work; the fight for one immediately entails a fight for the other. Martí acknowledges the reality of political limitation as well as the potential meaninglessness inherent in society and in his own life. But, his poetry maintains the relentless hope that, by invoking spiritual values, imagination can overcome the bonds wrought by modernity.
With verse that is much more ornate and stylized, Ruben Dario’s oeuvre initially appears to pose quite a stark contrast to that of his predecessor Marti. However, as Cathy Jrade notes in *Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American Literature*, Dario shares the Cuban poet’s conviction that the poet’s personal struggle for the autonomy of the imagination is related to the struggle for Latin American political and cultural autonomy. According to Jrade, Dario makes this commitment explicit in his *Cantos de vida y esperanza*:

In [the introduction to the collection] Dario reiterates his ties to romantic literary theory and its insistence that the artist must remain true to himself. As early as 1882, Marti had expressed a similar commitment to sincerity and integrity, one that was not simply personal or aesthetic in nature. For Marti, being faithful to himself entailed presenting his positions related to cultural identity and national autonomy openly and imaginatively. While this aspect of the modernista project had usually been addressed indirectly in Dario’s writings, it takes on a new urgency with *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, a legacy of the Spanish American War of 1898 and the “creation” of Panama in 1903…At this moment in his career, Dario sets forth with renewed impetus to reaffirm Victor Hugo’s ideal of poetic responsibility…it encompasses a commitment that is both spiritual and political, a moral obligation to understand the world and improve it (*Modernismo* 86).

As we have already seen, Dario’s scathing poem to Roosevelt explicitly expresses his concern about the expansion of US power and the need for an autonomous Latin American cultural identity, which he locates in its Hispanic and indigenous heritage as well as its spiritual orientation to the world. According to Jrade, this commitment is revealed more subtly in another poem from the collection, “Salutación del optimista” (“The Optimist’s Greeting”), in which Dario calls upon the “íncitas razas ubérrimas, sangre de Hispania fecunda” (illustrious, fertile races, blood of fecund Hispania) and informs them that “llega el momento en que habrá que cantar nuevos himnos” (the time is arriving when you will have to sing new hymns) (Dario, *Cantos de vida y esperanza* 19). As in the poem to Roosevelt, Dario calls upon the peoples of his continent under the banner of “Hispania,” thus affirming the importance of their Spanish heritage. At the same time, the idea that they must prepare to sing “new hymns” suggests the desire for an idealism that is forward-thinking rather than nostalgic. He promises a hope that will come amid the despair, declaring, “En la caja pandórica de que tantas desgracias surgieron /
encontramos de súbito, talismánica, pura, riente, / cual pudiera decirla en sus versos Virgilio divino / la divina reina de luz, ¡la celeste Esperanza!” (In the Pandora’s box from which so many misfortunes appeared, we suddenly find something talismanic, pure, laughing / that the divine Virgil may have found in his verses / the divine queen of light / the blue Hope!) (Cantos de vida y esperanza 20). In these lines Darío affirms the European heritage of his continent, celebrating its Greek and Latin cultural roots. Unlike “To Roosevelt,” this poem largely ignores the indigenous side of his continent, preferring instead to focus on its European, Hispanic identity. Contemporary critics of the poem might view this approach as an endorsement of colonialism; however, as Jrade suggests, we must put this poem into its historical context – Latin America in the wake of the Spanish American War, in which the seat of imperial power had already been transferred to the United States. Perhaps Darío finds it necessary to invoke Hispanic and European culture – with their long-standing roots that date back to ancient empires – in order to claim cultural authority against the militarily mighty but seemingly philistine United States of America. As the poem progresses, Darío’s “optimistic” speaker warns of a danger which his singers of new hymns must prepare themselves for:

Abominad la boca que predice desgracias eternas
abominad los ojos que ven sólo
zodiacos funestos
abominad las manos que apedrean las ruinas ilustres
o que la tea empuñan o la daga suicida.
Siéntense sordos ímpetus de las entrañas del mundo
la inminencia de algo fatal hoy conmueve a la tierra,
fuertes colosos caen, se desbandan bicéfalas águilas,
y algo se inicia como vasto social cataclismo
sobre la faz del orbe (Cantos de vida y esperanza 20).

Abhor the mouth that preaches eternal misfortunes
abhor the eyes that see only ill-fated zodiacs
abhor the hands that stone the famed ruins
those that grip the torch or the suicidal dagger.
Feel yourselves to be a deaf force from the core of the earth
For all his optimism, Darío’s speaker urges his listeners to maintain a certain amount of anger, fear and even hatred toward those who preach and enact violence. In spite of his concern about moving into the future, he also seeks to protect the “famed ruins” of the past and opposes anyone who would desecrate them. Like the Romantics before him, Darío strongly believes that the only way to move forward is to remain rooted in the beauty and tradition of the past. The object of his rancour becomes clear in the next lines, in which he urges his audience to consider themselves “a deaf force from the core of the earth” that will not be overcome by “the imminence of something awful” that is moving across the globe. For Darío, Latin American culture – which he sees as rooted in a long-standing Hispanic tradition – is a strong, impenetrable force from the earth’s core, much stronger than this awful force that is moving over the surface. Nevertheless, there is much to be feared in the “strong colossi” that are falling – clearly a reference to the “Colossus of the North,” the United States of America – and the “two headed eagles” being disbanded. The two-headed eagle is an imperial symbol, used by the Byzantine and Austro-Hungarian empires and also by the United States (in 1849 a gold coin was minted with the symbol). Nevertheless, while Darío’s speaker fears this imminent social cataclysm, he also anticipates that the Latin American cultures that he has come to know (we must remember that Darío travelled widely throughout the Latin American continent) will be united in a sole voice, a single “haz de energía ecuménica” (beam of ecumenical energy) (21). Thus, if we follow Jrade in reading this poem as a companion to “A Roosevelt,” we see that Darío’s invocation of Hispanism is not an endorsement of colonialism, but a call for the various peoples of his continent to embrace their common roots and prepare to resist military strength with cultural strength. For Darío, this cosmopolitanism is key to creating a distinctly Latin American identity and resisting not only the newest imperialist threat, but also the technocratic culture that it represents. Like Martí, he strongly affirms subjectivity and spirituality to renew “la eternidad de Dios, la actividad infinita” (God’s eternity, the infinite activity), the great transformative élan that Charles Taylor finds
missing in the modern world. It is in this way that Darío’s poem becomes strongly optimistic, uniting the personal and the political in a strong sense of hope.

Returning to Agustini, we can see that her work is very different from that of Martí and, while closer to the poetics of Darío – whom she considered one of her mentors – completely distinct from his work as well. As I have mentioned previously, Agustini did not address political issues directly – even though many political changes were sweeping through Uruguay during her life. She was not explicitly concerned, as Martí and Darío were, with resisting the “colossus of the North.” Nor does she overtly state any sense of a “poet’s obligation” as Darío does. Nevertheless, Agustini shares with her modernista precursors a concern for finding meaning in an apparently meaningless world. In the first half of this investigation, I have sought to explore the ways in which Agustini’s search for transcendent knowledge leads her to create a new poetic space previously non-existent. In the remainder of this essay I will show that, similar to the subjectivity affirmed in Martí’s Ismaelillo, Agustini’s poetic space constitutes a strategy of resistance to the dominant epistemologies of the modernista period. Like Martí, Agustini affirms the richness and authority of subjective experience – only in her case, the focus is not on familial devotion but on erotic love. According to Anibal González,

Like [Leopoldo] Lugones and her countryman Herrera y Reissig, Agustini found in a heightened eroticism a way to move modernismo forward and to break with the movement’s dependence on prior literary models from past literary periods. Agustini’s eroticism […] was not only intended to shock her bourgeois readers, but also signified a shift away from the erudite, often bookish literature held by many modernistas and toward a view of poetry as a form of creation associated less with the spirit and the intellect than with the flesh and the senses (126).

While I would hesitate to describe Martí’s writing as “bookish,” Darío’s definitely could be described as such. In this way Agustini’s focus on the senses most certainly marks a change in the modernista consciousness. Jrade, who classifies Agustini (along with her compatriot Juana de Ibarbourou, the Argentinian Alfonsina Storni and the Chilean Gabriela Mistral) as a postmodernista writer, affirms that Agustini’s images reveal their modernista roots, but that they “reject established patterns of (male) perception” and “struggle against imposing inflexible
While I plan to discuss the subversive nature of Agustini’s eroticism in the last section of this investigation, at this point it is necessary to comment on another important aspect: her resistance to the rigidly traditional gender roles of fin-de-siècle Montevideo.

While many critics and biographers have discussed this subversion in terms of Agustini’s life, it is also evident in much of her work – particularly in her poetic responses to Rubén Darío, which Jrade analyzes in depth throughout Delmira Agustini, Sexual Seduction and Vampiric Conquest. One of the clearest examples of this kind of response can be seen in Los cálices vacíos in her poem “El Cisne” (“The Swan”) which takes a familiar modernista image employed extensively by Darío and transforms it into something completely new. For Darío, the swan is a sign of purity and hope that serves to soothe and heal human beings. As he states in the first section of “Los Cisnes” (The Swans) in Cantos de vida y esperanza, “Cisnes, los abanicos de vuestras alas frescas / den a las frentes pálidas sus caricias más puras / y alejen vuestras blancas figuras pintorescas / de nuestras mentes tristes las ideas oscuras” (Swans, may the fans of your fresh wings / offer pale foreheads your purest caresses / and may your white picturesque figures / banish dark ideas from our sad minds) (41). Swans are symbols of innocence and purity that, like the Virgilian reference in “Salutación del optimista,” hearken back to our noble roots in antiquity. Indeed, Leda – who in the famous myth was raped by Zeus in the form of a swan and then gave birth to Helen and Clytaemnestra – is presented as a heroic figure. In the fourth section of “Los Cisnes,” Darío exclaims, “Antes de todo, ¡gloria a ti, Leda! / Tu dulce vientre cubrió de seda / el dios, ¡Miel y oro sobre la brisa! / Sonaban alternativamente / flauta y cristales, Pan y la fuente. / ¡Tierra era canto: Cielo, sonrisa!” (Before anything else, glory to you, Leda! / Your sweet womb covered with silk / the god – Honey and gold on the breeze! / They sang in turns / the flute and crystals, Pan and the fountain / the earth was song / Heaven, a smile!) (44). Rather than a violent rape, the encounter between Leda and the swan is a kind of primordial unification of heaven and earth that signifies beauty and triumph. The critic Sylvia Molloy, in her comparative study of the treatment of this swan image in the work of Darío and Agustini, describes the former thus:

En Darío, el encuentro entre Leda y el cisne se presenta como espectáculo, escena ritual, con su plena carga sagrada. El poema da a ver: tanto hablante como lector están “ante el celeste, supremo acto” como observadores, adoradores, y partícipes vicarios…En otras
palabras: en Darío se escoge una escena ya construida, ya enmarcada – distanciada por el mito – para observarla, espiarla, celebrarla, y eventualmente, reconocerse en ella (100).

(In Darío, the encounter between Leda and the swan is presented as a spectacle, a ritual scene with all its sacred wait. The poem *makes this seen*: the speaker as well as the reader stand “before the sky-blue, supreme act” as observers, adorers, and vicarious participants...In other words: in Darío a scene is chosen that has already been constructed and marked – distanced through the myth – in order that one might observe it, spy on it, celebrate it and, eventually, recognize oneself within it).

According to Molloy, Darío’s poems treat the image of the swan as a kind of eternal template, a story in which we can recognize our own stories. In this sense, Leda is not a woman, but an archetypal goddess figure, a symbol for humanity infused with the divinity of Zeus embodied in the swan. This certainly relates to Darío’s vision of the modernista project, which aims to recuperate a lost sense of spirituality and higher value within humanity. Nevertheless, while it celebrates the myth, it completely ignores the reality of Leda as a mortal woman, cruelly violated by the ruler of the gods in the form of an animal. Agustini’s approach to the swan image, however, transforms it completely from a public, mythical display to a lived human experience: “No se parte de una escena consabida, no se parte del mito (ni una vez aparece la palabra Leda) sino de una primera persona que activamente fabrica un ámbito personal, un paisaje puramente artificial – proceso frecuente en la poesía modernista – que es fondo metonímico del yo” (It does not depart from a well-known scene or a myth (the word “Leda” does not appear even once) but from a first person that actively fabricates a personal realm, a purely artificial background – a frequent process in modernista poetry – that forms the metonymic background of the “I”) (Molloy 100). Indeed, the “I” is not a mere observer of the scene, as in Darío, and it is not an archetypal, mythologized Leda, but a specific female subject in a specific place: “Pupila azul de mi parque / en el sensitivo espejo / De un lago claro, muy claro!” (Blue pupil of my park / in the sensitive mirror / Of a clear lake, very clear) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 126, Cáceres 127). As Molloy points out, the invocation of “my park” and “a lake” form a stark contrast to Darío’s universality; the poetic speaker is not a general, mythical subject, but a specific woman. Meanwhile, the swan is not merely a mythical creature, but a real, embodied lover with whom the speaker indulges her erotic desires: “Y vive tanto en mis sueños / Y ahonda tanto en mi carne
Que a veces pienso si el cisne / Con sus dos alas fugaces / Sus raros ojos humanos / Y el rojo pico quemante / Es sólo un cisne en mi lago / O es en mi vida un amante” (And he lives so much in my dreams / and sinks so deep in my flesh / That sometimes I wonder whether the swan, / With his two fleeting wings / His rare human eyes / And the red burning beak / Is only a swan in my lake / Or a lover in my life) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 128; Cáceres 129). When the speaker questions the creature on this matter, it responds with silence, answering cryptically, “A veces ¡toda! Soy alma; / Y a veces ¡toda! Soy cuerpo” (Sometimes, I am all soul; / And sometimes, I am all body) (Selected Poetry 128; Cáceres 129). Unlike the speaker, who inhabits the spiritual, imaginative realm of the lake and embodied human existence simultaneously, the swan is limited in its powers; it can be either a god or an animal, but not both at once. At the end of the poem, the swan finds itself wounded by the depths of the speaker’s desire. While Darío’s swans are pure, white symbols of heavenly perfection, this one, torn as it is between heaven and earth, ends up destroyed by the speaker’s power: “Hunde el pico en mi regazo / Y se queda como muerto… / Y en la cristalina página / En el sensitivo espejo / Del lago que algunas veces / Refleja mi pensamiento / El cisne asusta de rojo / Y yo de blanca doy miedo” (He buries his beak in my lap / And remains still as if dead… / And on the crystalline page / In the sensitive mirror / Of the lake that sometimes / Reflects my thoughts, / The swan is frightfully red, / And I dreadful in my whiteness!) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 128; Cáceres 129). If whiteness is a symbol for purity and beauty, in this poem it resides not in the limited swan, but in the speaker, who is able to unite divinity and humanity through the act of erotic desire. According to Cathy Jrade, this transformation of the conventional modernista swan image can be seen as an act of defiance against the movement’s implicit patriarchal norms, and the wounded swan can be interpreted as a reference to Darío himself. According to Jrade,

The unequivocal description of the amorous encounter reveals [the speaker’s] womanly nature, but she is not passive; her response is assertive and authoritative. After penetration, the swan / Darío appears dead; “he” is limp and unresponsive. “His” energies have been spent within the context of her poetry, in the realm of the crystalline page / sensitive mirror of the lake that reflects her thoughts. He is no longer the white, guileless bird but a red swan that is both injured and injuring. Both he and she are locked in a passionately erotic encounter that ultimately revolves around artistic control. His

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condition is alarming, as is her own whiteness. He is defeated and she emerges as the new white emblem of poetry, frightening those around her. She assumes authorial authority and inherits the full weight of its responsibilities (157).

By appropriating the conventional image of the swan and the reference to a famous Greek myth, Agustini ultimately creates a new Leda who is an erotic subject rather than an object, an embodied woman rather than an archetype, one who names rather than one who is named by others. Thus, while the entire modernista movement affirms the integrity of the human subject in the face of an increasingly mechanized world, Agustini stands out as the only female member of this movement and the one who most strongly resists the patriarchy embodied not only in her immediate social surroundings, but indeed the wider literary and cultural tradition that has its roots in such a myth as Leda and the Swan.

However, while Agustini’s resistance to cultural patriarchy is quite clear through much of her poetry – and has been discussed extensively in several critical investigations of her work – her connection to the broader political concerns of the modernistas is not as immediately obvious to the reader. As I have already mentioned, the overt political commitments that we have seen in the work of both Martí and Darío are absent in the writings of Agustini. And yet, I seek to argue that she is just as political if not more so than the others. As Jacqueline Girón Alvarado and others have observed, Agustini by necessity had to don an array of social masks simply to have a career as a poet. Due to her social status and literary ambition, it probably would have been difficult for her to engage directly in the political movements of her time. But, as I have sought to show throughout this essay, Agustini shares with the other modernistas an alternative epistemology, a search for truth that takes place not through the medium of fact and reason, but through the vehicle of erotic transcendence. While Doris Stephens suggests that Agustini’s quest for transcendence ultimately proves futile, in the previous sections I have sought to reveal its success in creating an alternative means of creating a space of alternative knowledge – even if this space is only intermittently accessible, for fleeting moments. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that while in some poems – “Oh Tú” being the foremost – this transcendence is achieved, in others, like the “Elegías Dulces,” the speaker is left searching. The next section of this investigation will look at some of these supposed failures at achieving transcendence; it will
seek to show that they, as much as the successes, constitute a form of resistance to the rigid social and epistemological structures brought into fruition by modernity.

1.4 Toward the blissful dissolution: Agustini’s erotic mysticism

One of the more curious motifs that occurs throughout Agustini’s work is that of fragmentation – often involving the human body itself. At times, this fragmentation might appear like vampirism or the desire for dominance, as in “Lo inefable,” when the poetic speaker expresses the desire to hold in her hand the head of God – to overcome all obstacles and achieve poetic transcendence. At other times, however, this fragmentation is not brought about by the speaker’s desire for dominance; rather, it occurs spontaneously and manages to overwhelm the speaker. Nowhere does this fragmentation affect the speaker so intensely and disturbingly as in “Mis amores,” the first poem of her posthumously published *Los astros del abismo*. In this deeply haunting poem, we are presented with the ghostly image of all the speaker’s former loves gathering around her bed and weeping: “Hoy han vuelto. / Por todos los senderos de la noche han venido / A llorar en mi lecho. / ¡Fueron tantos, son tantos! / No sé cuáles viven, yo no sé cuál se ha muerto. / Me lloraré yo misma para llorarlos todos. / La noche bebe el llanto como un pañuelo negro.” (Today they have returned. / Through all the paths of the night they have come / To cry on my bed. / They were so many, they are so many! / I know not which are alive, I know not who has died. / I myself shall melt in sobs to cry for all of them. / The night drinks the tears like a black kerchief) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 138; Cáceres 139). Beginning with the disturbingly sad, almost demonic image of these crying apparitions, the scene quickly breaks down into a strange movement of dismembered heads: “Hay cabezas doradas a sol, como maduras… / Hay cabezas tocadas de sombra y de misterio / Cabezas coronadas de una espina invisible, / Cabezas que sonrosa la rosa del ensueño, / Cabezas que se doblan a cojines de abismo / Cabezas que quisieran descansar en el cielo” (There are heads gilded by the sun, as if ripened… / There are heads touched by shadow and mystery, / Heads crowned by an invisible thorn, / Heads that the rose of reverie makes blush. / Heads that bend over cushions of the abyss, / Heads that would wish to rest in the sky) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 138; Cáceres 139). These heads, which hurt
the speaker “como llagas” (like wounds) and “como muertos” (like the dead) do not appear to represent actual human beings; rather, they swarm around the speaker like apparitions reminding her of past ecstasies and agonies (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 138; Cáceres 139).

As the poem progresses, the fragmentation continues, leading the speaker to focus on the lovers’ eyes, mouths and hands in a whirling motion that recalls the medieval *danse macabre*. Names and personal histories are lost; instead, all of these images float loosely around the speaker, weeping, beckoning to her but maintaining a certain degree of distance. It is only after a considerable period that the speaker’s dizzy navigation through these moving body parts gives way to a focus on one specific love: “¡Ah, entre todas las manos yo he buscado tus manos! / Tu boca entre las bocas, tu cuerpo entre los cuerpos, / De todas las cabezas yo quiero tu cabeza, / De todos esos ojos, ¡tus ojos solos quiero!” (Ah, among all hands I have sought your hands! / Your mouth among the mouths, your body among the bodies, / Of all the heads I want your head, / Of all those eyes, your eyes only I want!) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 140; Cáceres 141). Thus, from the general *danse macabre*, one specific lover eventually emerges to tell the speaker whether or not he wept when she left him, and also whether or not he has died. At this point, the speaker informs us that if he has indeed died, she will embrace his shadow and dress the chamber in mourning. “Y en el silencio ahondado de tiniebla, / y en la tiniebla ahondada de silencio / Nos velará llorando, llorando hasta morirse / Nuestro hijo: el recuerdo” (And in the silence deepened in darkness / And in the darkness deepened in silence, / He will weep over us, weeping until death, / Our son: memory) (Agustini, *Selected Poetry* 142; Cáceres 143). While the general atmosphere of suffering and death briefly gives way to yearning for a specific love, this specificity ultimately proves fleeting – the desired love remains unnamed and lacks any defining characteristics that distinguish him from the others. At the poem’s conclusion, the speaker suggests that she will give him her attention only if it turns out that he has died, and that all that can remain of their union is weeping, spectral memory.

In seeking to interpret this poem – which is indeed a *danse macabre* where specific human loves are dissolved in the speaker’s tears – I am immediately reminded of Bataille’s discussion of eros in his work *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. As I have previously mentioned, Bataille suggests that human reality (and indeed, the reality of all living things) can be divided into two states: continuity and discontinuity. Continuity is associated with preconception and
death; it implies a union with all other matter in the universe. Discontinuity, in contrast, is the state in which we find ourselves as living, breathing human subjects. We are limited by our own subjectivity; we cannot know what it is like subjectively to be another person, just as we cannot know what it is like to be dead or unborn. And yet, even as we fear death, we have an urge to break free of our individual, discontinuous existence. As Bataille puts it, “Continuity is what we are after, but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run. What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain” (19). It might be said that we grow tired of our socially-imposed duty to be one person, to claim integrity as individual selves. Just as American poet Robert Frost famously laments that, when faced with two diverging roads in a yellow wood, he cannot simultaneously “travel both / and be one traveller,”(117), so Bataille points out that our basic human desire to dissolve, to become continuous with the rest of matter is expressed in our drive toward erotism. Through the physical union with another, we seek our own dissolution:

The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still. The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity. Dissolution – this expression corresponds with dissolute life, the familiar phrase linked to the erotic activity…The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives (17).

Looking at “Mis amores,” we can see that Agustini’s poetic speaker rejoices in the multiplicity of her loves even as their return causes her such grief; their appearance is beautiful as well as frightening, and they promise to bring her the transcendence that she seeks. “Con tristeza de almas / Se doblegan los cuerpos, / Sin velos, santamente / Vestidos de deseo. / Imanes de mis brazos, panales de mi entraña / Como a invisible abismo se inclinan a mi lecho” (With sadness of souls / The bodies bend / Unveiled, saintly / Dressed in desire. / Magnets of my arms, honeycombs of my bosom / As to an invisible abyss they lean toward my bed) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 140; Cáceres 141). These spectral figures are indeed intimately bound with the speaker – magnetically joined to her arms, surrounding her. As she rejoices in the dissolution of these loves, the speaker thus also seeks her own dissolution. As we have seen, Agustini’s “space
of knowledge” is reached through the vehicle of erotism; it is through the encounter with the other, with the “you” that leads toward a higher reality that lies within rather than beyond. Here, however, this encounter is not achieved; perhaps the speaker’s desire is indeed too extreme, as Stephens has suggested. But, returning to Girón Alvarado’s discussion of the many masks that Agustini employed in order to preserve her identity as a poet, we might choose to view this poem not as a failed attempt at transcendence (indeed, the speaker who urges her love to return to her appears to rejoice too much in the encounter for it to be a failure). Rather, this urgent dissolution might instead be seen as a strategy of resistance to the highly ordered society that Agustini inhabited. In order to understand how such a focus on the erotic can become a form of resistance, it is worth our while to look at another well-known theory of erotism: Roland Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*.

Drawing on the work of Bataille and other philosophers, Barthes’ essay is perhaps most famously known for its distinction between “texts of pleasure” and “texts of bliss,” where the former is associated with euphoria and a “comfortable practice of reading” while the latter is associated with “a state of loss” that “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions” (14). Indeed, in Agustini’s work we can see that both of these phenomena are at work: the pleasure of “Oh tú” and the dark, immense bliss of “mis amores.” According to Barthes, both pleasure and bliss are wrongly associated with a reactionary mindset, whereas more “progressive” viewpoints are more likely to celebrate a kind of purity and asceticism: “No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policeman are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion” (57). He observes that while values such as truth, struggle, joy, and even desire are considered strong, noble values, pleasure is seen as trivial, associated with nineteenth century upper-class drawing rooms and light amusements. For Barthes, these ubiquitous attempts to marginalize or trivialize both pleasure and bliss amount to true signs of their power. Barthes argues that the persistence of these two forces in literature allows them to pose a powerful challenge to ideology:

Commonly said: “dominant ideology.” This expression is incongruous. For what is ideology? It is precisely the idea *insofar as it dominates*: ideology can only be dominant. Correct as it is to speak of an “ideology of the dominant class,” because there is certainly
a dominated class, it is quite inconsistent to speak of a “dominant ideology” because there is no dominated ideology: where the “dominated” are concerned, there is nothing, no ideology, unless it is precisely – and this is the last degree of alienation – the ideology they are forced (in order to make symbols, hence in order to live) to borrow from the class that dominates them. The social struggle cannot be reduced to a struggle between two ideologies: it is the subversion of all ideology which is in question (33).

While I do not agree entirely agree with Barthes here – ideologies can and do compete with and dominate over other ideologies – he expresses an important truth when he states that all ideologies are in a sense dominant. Returning to Darío’s “A Roosevelt” and “Salutación del Optimista,” we can clearly see a resistant stance against the imperial North; however, the alternative Hispanic identity which he proposes is also a product and sign of power, and we might raise many questions about just which peoples and cultures are included in the formation of this identity. Surely there are dominant and dominated groups and peoples in this process. When we look at Agustini, however, we do not see such expressions of collectivity. The experience, though often shared with a beloved, is mostly subjective and individual, as Sylvia Molloy has observed in contrasting Agustini’s interpretation of the swan image with Darío’s. Likewise, in her search for transcendent knowledge, she is not afraid to approach the very limits of human experience, to go beyond consciousness itself, to get as close as she can to the continuity that Bataille insists we all desire so. I have argued that in many ways Agustini does share the same concerns as Martí and Darío about the utilitarianism overtaking modern life; she does seek the great élan that is so under threat. But, while Martí and Darío discuss this concern openly in the public sphere through crónicas and poetry deliberately addressed to a wide audience, Agustini chooses instead to do so through an individual, subjective quest for knowledge. Of course, there is no doubt that this defiant poet – who as a teenager boldly approached a publisher with her verses – also aspired to reach wide audiences, but the poetic voice of her work is focused much more intensely on an individual quest for knowledge through the vehicle of eros. Unabashedly she embraces “the asocial character of bliss: it is the abrupt loss of sociality, and yet there follows no recurrence to the subject (subjectivity), the person, solitude: everything is lost, integrally” (Barthes 39). And, as Barthes suggests, this erotic tendency is not only anti-utilitarian, but also anti-ideological. By refusing to address political questions directly,
fusing religious and sexual imagery, and leading her readers toward both pleasure and bliss, Agustini poses a challenge not to a particular ideology, but to all ideologies. It is most likely for this reason that her early critics found it so necessary either to condemn her as a poetic nymphomaniac or tame her by labelling her a mystic. Then again, has mysticism ever been tame?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the supposed mysticism of Agustini is the subject of some contention among her critics. For Varas and Girón Alvarado, her invocation of spiritual themes and religious imagery is a mask that allows her to address freely the otherwise taboo topic of sexual desire. This investigation has argued instead that, if we define mysticism as an alternative epistemology, a quest for divine, spiritual knowledge, then we may indeed view Agustini’s work as a form of mysticism. Rather than serving as a mask for her eroticism, her spirituality binds together with it in a search for poetic truth. Speaking of sixteenth and seventeenth century European mysticism, Michel de Certeau describes it as a quest for intimate knowledge of God, not through the truth criteria of theology or the desire for a sudden generalized vision of the deity sought in theosophy, but through the use of language, the creation of a discourse between “I” and “you” in which the divine speaks to the one who dares to listen (90). Mysticism is a new, alternative language mode that opens the seams of dominant languages (theology being one of them) and essentially creates a “transparent, finite space that has no place of its own yet includes ‘many dwellings,’ [where] the models of the celestial Jerusalem (an apocalyptic image), of ‘paradise’ (an image of the origin) and of ‘heaven’ (a cosmological image) become miniaturized and combine a translucent gem where ‘he takes his delights’” (95). Thus, for de Certeau mysticism is intimately bound up with pleasure and delight. Large, cosmological concepts such as apocalypse, paradise, and heaven are made miniature, joined together in a space of beauty and freedom where the blissful dialogue between “I” and “you” occurs. This idea of such an alternative space clearly resonates with Barthes’ concept of pleasure as “a drift, something both revolutionary and asocial, and it cannot be taken over by any collectivity, any mentality, any ideolec[t. Something **neuter**? It is obvious that the pleasure of the text is scandalous: not because it is immoral but because it is **atopic**” (23). For Barthes, language in most of its modes is **topical** – that is, it is concerned with expressing an ideology. As we have already seen, in creating an alternative space, pleasure subverts ideologies – and is thus highly disciplined and controlled. In a similar way, mysticism (which, according to de Certeau, is
inextricably linked with pleasure) is also perceived as a threat to dominant language modes; for this reason, throughout the history of Christianity the masses have deliberately been shielded from their religion’s more esoteric side, and the border between mysticism and heresy has often been slippery. While apparently apolitical, the mystic’s speech is subversive in that it inevitably resists the structures of power.

For this reason, I do think that it is fair to describe much of Agustini’s writing as mystical. In the search for transcendent knowledge, Agustini reaches up toward the más allá; however, she soon finds herself entering a space that she already inhabits, an atopic space that can be reached only intermittently through intimacy with the other. “Elevad a mí los lises hondos de vuestra alma; / Mi sombra besará vuestro manto de calma, / Que creciendo, creciendo me envolverá en Vos,” (Raise to me the deep lilies of your soul; / My shadow will kiss your shroud of calm, / Which rising, rising will enwrap me in you), she entreats her beloved in her posthumously published “El rosario de Eros” (The Rosary of Eros) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 182; Cáceres 183). It is through the mystical union with this beloved that the promise of mystical transcendence is made, allowing the speaker not only to encounter but to embody the divine: “Luego será mi carne en la vuestra perdida… / Luego será mi alma en la vuestra diluída… / Luego será la gloria…y seremos un dios!” (Then my flesh will be lost in yours… / Then my soul will be diluted in yours… / Then there will be glory… and we will be a god!) (Agustini, Selected Poetry 182; Cáceres 183). Although this promise is not fully achieved – leaving Agustini repeatedly to cry out, “¡Tú me lo des, Dios mío!” (Give him to me, my God!) (Cáceres 182) again and again throughout her œuvre, she attains intermittent glimpses of the beatific vision; she briefly enters into the “inner space” where there is no barrier to be transcended, no meaningless modern life, but full, divine truth. In seeking to communicate this truth to her readers, Agustini employs a discourse that by necessity works against the dominant language modes of her day – those of technological progress, conservative religion and bourgeois propriety. While many of her colleagues in the modernista movement, including Martí and Dario, challenge these discourses by arguing against them, Agustini subverts them by embracing another discourse, the atopic speech of mystical eroticism and bliss that provoked a combination of fascination and consternation in her early twentieth-century readers. Now, one hundred years later, we again find ourselves in times of great change and uncertainty; exponentially increasing
technological change along with political divisions and continued oppression in many parts of the world lead many of us to question the very meaning of our humanity. Indeed, the concerns of the modernistas are as relevant now as they were one hundred years ago, and Agustini’s passionate commitment to transcendence is just as subversive.
Chapter 2
Up Against the Wall: Alejandra Pizarnik’s Search for a *Patria*

Si te atreves a sorprender
la verdad de esta vieja pared;
y sus fisuras, desgarraduras,
formando rostros, esfinges,
manos, clepsidras,
seguramente vendrá
una presencia para tu sed,
probablemente partirá
esta ausencia que te bebe.

(If you dare to intercept
the truth of this old wall;
and its cracks, its tears,
forming faces, sphinxes,
hands, hourglasses,
surely there will come
a presence for your thirst,
most likely it will go away
this absence that drinks you).

– Alejandra Pizarnik, “Cuarto Solo” (“Lone Room”) from Los trabajos y las noches (The works and the nights)

Four walls. A typewriter. A solitary woman sitting in silence, furiously writing, tearing away the sheet of paper, writing again. For Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972), the wall is a barrier to the truth that she is seeking; it is something that asks to be overcome. At the same time, it also provides comfort and shelter, allowing one to feel safe and protected. In the poem quoted above, we can see Pizarnik’s ambivalence about the wall. On the one hand, it is a jailer that locks the subject away in solitary confinement, overwhelmed by thirst and “the
absence that drinks you.” On the other hand, there is much meaning in the wall: faces and hands, which indicate the presence of others (in the past if not in the present); sphinxes, which symbolize beauty and mystery as well as danger; hourglasses, which suggest the idea of time and change as opposed to the stagnant space of the room. It is this unresolved tension between presence and absence that underlies Pizarnik’s poetic quest. Much like Agustini, Pizarnik seeks to transcend apparent realities, to make contact with another realm beyond that which is immediately present. But, while Agustini seeks to go beyond the wall to find bliss in a celestial realm, the reality that Pizarnik seeks is more of an earthly paradise, a patria or homeland where she might find rest from ceaseless travels. And, while Agustini insists on reaching her goal at all costs, Pizarnik takes a step back to contemplate the wall, struggling to discern its truth, relishing what critic María Negroni describes as “un deseo de lo inexistente, en el vacío y ciego, para hacer surgir lo imposible: el festín del significado” (a desire for the non-existent, for the impossible to emerge from void and blindness, the feast of the signified) (12). For her, the space of knowledge that she seeks is not to be found in going beyond the wall, but in walking up and down alongside it, tracing her fingers over its many forms, much like Sisyphus ceaselessly carrying his boulder. Through these small but purposeful steps along the edge of nothingness, Pizarnik searches for knowledge and quietly carves out her own space of resistance. Living in a nation known for its patriotism (and during a time of political instability) Pizarnik reveals that the only patria she can claim is her verse, and the only foundation any system can stand upon is ultimately characterized by precarity, absence and nothingness. In this chapter I plan to discuss the ways in which Pizarnik’s futile search for knowledge of ultimate reality – a stable patria within language – creates two forms of resistance. First, this futility destabilizes the very idea of nation and nationhood – concepts that were very important in Pizarnik’s country of citizenship during her lifetime. Additionally, the mourning which she experiences at this loss of the imagined homeland does not lead her to what would be the seemingly rational response of abandoning her search; instead, she continues it, repeating the same patterns again and again, allowing her mourning to develop into what Sigmund Freud famously described as melancholia. Through this repetition, Pizarnik evokes not only her personal trauma, but the collectivized trauma of her Jewish ancestors as well as her Argentinian compatriots, who during her lifetime
were experiencing the beginnings of political turmoil.\footnote{According to linguistic and philosopher Ivonne Bordelois, who was a close friend of Pizarnik, the young poet did not have much respect for politics, stating that she encountered anti-Semitism on both the Right and the Left (Bordelois, Personal Interview). Nevertheless, Pizarnik was inevitably made to witness several political upheavals during her lifetime: the regime of Juan Perón, a populist leader who is known to have tortured his opponents, anti-Semitic terrorism led by the right-wing Tacuara Nationalist Movement during the 1960’s, and several coups and de facto governments, such as that of Juan Carlos Ongania, who seized power in a coup in 1966 and closed the university. While Pizarnik did not write directly about these events, Bordelois asserts that they were very much on her mind as she was writing, especially her later work.} In order to construct these arguments, this chapter will examine a wide range of work of Pizarnik’s extensive oeuvre in dialogue with Blanchot, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus and Sigmund Freud. Invoking Blanchot and Heidegger, I explore the ways in which Pizarnik’s poetry seeks access to a space of knowledge of ultimate reality within the confines of language. Meanwhile, my readings of Camus and Freud offer insights into what occurs when Pizarnik fails to find this knowledge and loses her confidence in the ability of language to convey genuine meaning. Much like Camus’s Sisyphus, Pizarnik is condemned to roll the boulder up the hill again and again. According to Freud, this kind of repetition is an evocation of trauma – a woundedness that I argue is both personal and collective.

Publishing her first book, \textit{La última inocencia (The last innocence)} in 1956 at the age of twenty, Pizarnik began her poetic career early and soon established herself as one of the foremost voices in Argentinian literature alongside such figures as Jorge Luis Borges, Silvina Ocampo and Olga Orozco. Her literary career garnered her much critical attention during her lifetime – attention that has only increased in more recent decades. One of the most salient features that critics point out in Pizarnik’s work is her deliberate self-fashioning as a writer, which began when she was very young. While she expressed a strong interest in French symbolism and surrealism and had a great desire to insert herself into what she saw as a long-standing literary tradition, she was also critical of that same tradition and committed to finding her own voice. As César Aira comments,

\begin{quote}
En la joven A.P. hay un sinceramiento, o simplificación, de la postura del poeta. No hay ningún disfraz utópico o ideológico, sino un objetivo único y explícito: escribir buenos poemas, llegar a ser un buen poeta. El resultado lo es todo, es deseo de escribir “buena” poesía se sobrepone a todo, con la convicción, que A.P. comparte con todos los poetas
\end{quote}
jóvenes que ha habido y habrá, de que a ese fin se le pueden sacrificar todos los demás, porque alcanzándolo se alcanzarán por añadidura todos los demás (15).

(In the young A.P. there is an authentication, or a simplification, of the poet’s stance. There are no utopic or ideological costumes, but rather one single and explicit objective: to write good poems, to become a good poet. The result is everything; the desire to write “good” poetry is superimposed on everything else. With this comes a conviction that A.P. shares with all of the young poets that have been and will be: that to this end one can sacrifice all other goals, because in reaching this goal, one also reaches all of the others.

While resisting the temptation to read too much of Pizarnik’s life into her work, some critics note the difficulty in separating the two. Indeed, one of Pizarnik’s first acts as an author was to change her name from Flora to Alejandra, which she decided to use as a writer. She meditates on this name in the poem “Solo un nombre” (“Only a Name”): “Alejandra Alejandra / debajo estoy yo / Alejandra” (Alejandra Alejandra / I am underneath / Alejandra) (Obra completa 156). There is another “Alejandra,” that lies beneath her name. But, what is the difference between the two? Which of them is the poetic speaker, and which is the author? Does such a distinction even make sense? As critic Paola Gallo comments, “La repetición del nombre es búsqueda, denuncia. El potencial ontológico de la poesía en su capacidad nominativa es llevado…hasta la eclosión de su identidad, de su nombre propio, y por eso el yo lírico no puede distinguirse de su lenguaje, su vida de su literatura” (The repetition of the name is a search, a complaint. Poetry’s ontological potential in its capacity for naming things is carried…as far as the manifestation of identity, her own name, and for this reason the lyric “I” cannot be distinguished from her language; her life cannot be separated from her writing) (47). Indeed, this unsettling relationship between the authorial “I” and the voice of the poetic speaker leads several critics to explore Pizarnik’s treatment of subjectivity – which includes a sense of fragmentation, with very short poems alternating between first, third and at times second person perspectives, as in “Cuarto Solo” quoted above. By decentring the subject in this manner, Pizarnik questions the very idea of subjectivity in a way reminiscent of her compatriot Jorge Luis Borges, who in his famous essay “Borges y yo” makes a distinction between the authorial “I” and a figure called Borges, the
“otro” (the other one) “a quien le ocurren las cosas” (to whom things happen) (Borges 2: 349).
What is the difference between “I” and “me,” between the self as subject and as object?

This idea of subjective fragmentation and dissolution into nothingness has led many critics to focus on another theme that comes up again and again in Pizarnik’s work – the idea of “saying the unsayable,” of looking beyond the signifier to the non-existent signified and struggling to speak its name. As subjects disintegrate, as the bonds between objects and their signifiers are loosened, Pizarnik seeks the “compromiso engañoso de hacer presente algo que por definición se encuentra ausente, más allá de la sonoridad. Las palabras – desde su esencia simbólica – solamente pueden anunciar la cosa, evocarla, convocarla o mostrarla evanescentemente, pero no ser la cosa” (the deceitful commitment to making present something that by definition is absent, beyond sound. Words – due to their symbolic essence – can only announce the thing, evoke it, summon it or briefly reveal it, but they cannot embody the thing) (Gallo 59). This great gulf of meaning between signifier and signified – with the latter often proving to be completely hidden and unreachable – is a source of great anxiety throughout Pizarnik’s work, expressed most poignantly in her famous “En esta noche, en este mundo” (On this night, in this world) in which the poetic speaker cries out, “Las palabras / no hacen el amor / hacen la ausencia / ¿si digo agua beberé? / ¿si digo pan comeré?” (Words / don’t make love / they make absence / if I say “water” will I drink? / if I say “bread” will I eat?) (Obra completa 181). Like Agustini, Pizarnik struggles to reach a reality beyond that which is immediately present, to discern the poetic truth of the Ding an sich – the thing-in-itself – that is masked by the veil of language. But, this signified remains forever elusive; the wall, though covered with cracks, tears and elusive images, remains firmly in place.

8 This same issue is raised by Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz (who lived for over twenty years in Argentina and whose work Pizarnik read, as we can see from the epigraph she includes in La condesa sangrienta) in his diaries: “Monday – me. Tuesday – me. Wednesday – me. Thursday – me.” (Gombrowicz, 1.3). In addition to having a comic effect, Gombrowicz’s repetition of the first person pronoun raises several questions. Who is this “me,” this “I” who is speaking? Can we simply presume it to be the author, or is it some other voice? Also, why is it repeated? Does the “I” who speaks on Tuesday refer to the same individual as the “I” who speaks on Thursday? By stripping the “I” of any specific identity, Gombrowicz seeks to show us that existence is more important than essence. The “I” is indicative of a lack or an absence; its role in language is that of an indicator which could refer to anyone. In a similar way, Pizarnik’s poetic speaker (along with the authorial “I” of her own copious diary) is likewise unstable, calling into question the very idea of subjective integrity, revealing the “I’s” ever-present tendency to disintegrate into nothingness.
This unattainability of the signified leads some critics to focus on another aspect of Pizarnik’s poetic quest: the desire for permanence and stability. Just as she seeks to grasp the stable thing-in-itself beneath the arbitrary nets of language, she also seeks a permanent dwelling, a home where she can find rest and stability rather than being compelled to wander. Some critics, such as Cristina Piña, argue that this desire for rootedness cannot be separated from Pizarnik’s Jewish heritage and diasporic identity (her parents migrated to Argentina from Ukraine in 1936, right before her birth). Though generally less interested in her specific Jewish heritage as she was in establishing herself as a writer on the international scale (as a young adult she chose to travel not to Israel but France, residing in Paris for four years and seeking out the company of other writers), Pizarnik expresses throughout her work a desire for a refuge, a patria, a stable “poetic Israel.” As Piña comments,

La nocion de extranjería que se repite en sus poemas y la necesidad de hallar una lengua propia, una patria propia – el Israel poético de Alejandra – un nombre propio que respondiera a su verdadera identidad que signa el camino poético y vital de Flora/Blimele/Buma (respectivamente, su verdadero nombre y los sobrenombres de la infancia) pueden leerse como la marca profunda de su conciencia de pertenecer a un pueblo al que se ha negado un lugar en la tierra y que, a partir de la inmigracion, ha de reencontrar, en el lenguaje del otro, su propia patria y su lenguaje (*Poesía y experiencia del límite*) (82).

(The notion of foreignness is repeated in her poems along with the need to find a language of her own, a country of her own – Alejandra’s poetic Israel – a name of her own that might respond to her true identity, signifying the poetic and vital journey from Flora/Blimele/Buma (her given name and two childhood nicknames, respectively). This can be read as the deep mark of her awareness of belonging to a people that has been denied a place on the earth and, though the experience of migration, has had to find its own country and language within the language of the other).

Indeed, motifs of foreignness and wandering are frequent in Pizarnik’s work, always juxtaposed to the desire for stability that – similar to the unchanging thing-in-itself beneath the net of language – remains unattainable. In this way, Pizarnik’s poetic journey is a kind of static
movement, wandering back and forth alongside a wall that, though sometimes changing its shape and size, always refuses to budge.

These themes – the poet’s self-fashioning juxtaposed to a dissolution of subjectivity in her work; the search for the non-existant signified; and the idea of wandering in search of an elusive homeland – are only three among many issues that have come to critics’ attention. However, I choose to draw attention to these three in particular as they serve as the springboard for my own arguments. Pizarnik is very much a poet of space – whether these be the physical spaces of lone rooms and the Bloody Countess’s cold, horrific castle or the emotional spaces of isolation and silence. Meanwhile, she aspires to find a place – a unified identity for the self, a reality that transcends language’s ability to describe it, a patria that she can call home, or what Cristina Piña has called an “illud spatium” – an ideal, absolute landscape that simultaneously offers freedom and protection (*La palabra como destino* 17). Also, given that Pizarnik was herself a reader of Blanchot (mentioning him and quoting him in her diaries), it seems most appropriate to examine her work in light of the idea of poetic space that I have set out to explore in this dissertation. As I have mentioned, for Blanchot, the poetic language mode is intimately bound up with a sense of nothingness that underlies all things. Through the written word, the poet allows silence to speak:

> When we admire the tone of a work, when we respond to its tone as to its most authentic aspect, what are we referring to?…The tone is not the writer’s voice, but the intimacy of the silence he imposes upon the word. This implies that the silence is still *his* – what remains of him in the discretion that sets him aside. The tone makes great writers, but perhaps the work is indifferent to what makes them great. In the effacement toward which he summoned, the “great writer” still holds back; what speaks is no longer he himself, but neither is it the sheer slipping away of no one’s word. For he remains the authoritative though silent affirmation of the effaced “I.” (27)

The silence that speaks through the poem is not the universal, absolute “slipping away of no one’s word” – the “I” is still affirmed. Nevertheless, the writer’s desire is to impose a silence upon the word, to allow the nothingness beneath language to speak. I have stated that Pizarnik differs from Agustini in that she does not seek to transcend the wall that separates her from
knowledge of ultimate reality; instead, she treats the wall as all there is; she speaks to it and waits for it to speak in return. And, as we look at her work, it seems that the only way to hear this speech and enter the space of knowledge is to affirm silence, to create silence and grant it a voice. Therefore, the first part of this chapter will explore this relationship between knowledge and silence in Pizarnik’s work – particularly in *Los trabajos y las noches* (*The Works and the Nights*) in which it appears as one of the most salient themes.

However, while Pizarnik is eager to meditate on nothingness and create a space in which silence might speak, it soon becomes clear that such contemplation is not sufficient for her. While there is much to be gained from stillness, she soon is compelled to move alongside the wall – not by jumping over it, but studying it carefully, contemplating it and attempting to dig a hole underneath it. In poems such as “En esta noche, en este mundo,” (On this night, in this world) the silence proves unbearable for Pizarnik; she yearns to believe in Heidegger’s promise of a language that “beckons beyond us toward a thing’s nature” (Heidegger 216). But, in “En esta noche, en este mundo” and other poems from her last published collection, *Textos de sombra*, we see that this knowledge of the thing in itself proves impossible; upon peeling away layers of language Pizarnik encounters only more language. Looking at Heidegger’s theory of poetry in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, the second part of my investigation will examine the ways in which Pizarnik’s attempts to go beyond language yield an even greater abundance of language that ultimately points back toward the original silence, the original wall.

Thus, for Pizarnik, the only way to reach the space of knowledge is through the dwelling that Heidegger describes – dwelling within silence and absence, dwelling alongside the walls. But, looking at the entire body of Pizarnik’s work, we see that this dwelling is by no means secure. Instead, Pizarnik’s search for a *patria* which she might call her own proves futile; as she states at the end of her early poem “Al despertar” (Upon waking), “La jaula se ha vuelto pájaro” (The cage has turned into a bird) (*Obra completa* 57). Nothing is fixed or stable; a bird cannot be distinguished from the cage that contains it, and Pizarnik is compelled to move constantly from one space to another, never finding rest. At the same time, her desire for fixity entails that there are limits to this wandering. As César Aira has observed, Pizarnik returns again and again to a series of what might be called “stock images” – wind, shadow, silence, absence, night, the garden and several others – exploring them in different permutations. It is as if she were flying
through a finite universe, passing again and again through the same places but continually finding herself somewhere new. Thus, her wandering is a kind of movement in place, a repetition that recalls Albert Camus’s famous depiction of the condemned Sisyphus rolling his boulder up the hill. It is these two themes – the impossible search for a patria and the drive toward repetition occurring throughout her work – that will be my concern in the latter two parts of this chapter. And, I will argue, it is through these two tendencies that Pizarnik’s search for the space of knowledge leads toward a space of resistance.

Like the other two poets explored in this investigation, Pizarnik makes no overt reference to the political realm in her work. As I have mentioned, Pizarnik lived through a time of social upheaval and political change. Born during the “infamous decade” in which the military coup of 1930 instituted authoritarian rule, Pizarnik lived through the Revolution of 1943, the rise and fall of Juan Perón, and a succession of military coups in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Pizarnik did not live to see what was arguably the worst period of her country’s history, the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (Process of National Reorganization), a military dictatorship that kidnapped, tortured and murdered 30,000 Argentinians during the period between 1976 and 1983 (Oren 123). However, Pizarnik had already witnessed the beginnings of violence and political instability during the 1950’s and 1960’s: the autocratic regime of Perón, the coups that followed, right-wing terrorism against Jews led by the Tacuara movement, and the closing of the university in 1966. The political environment she inhabited was complex and certainly led many popular, intellectual and religious leaders to enact various forms of resistance. Then, there is of course Pizarnik’s own identity as a diasporic subject. As the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine (most of whose family members perished in the Holocaust during World War II), Pizarnik is a person of complex identity. But, as Aira has commented, Pizarnik wore no ideological costumes; her life’s objective was to create good poetry, and her concerns aimed more at the existential and ontological than the social and political. Nevertheless, I will argue that while Pizarnik perhaps had no intention of engaging in politics, both the anxious search for a fixed patria and the tendency toward repetition inevitably lead her work into the political realm. In revealing the impossibility of securing a fixed dwelling, Pizarnik’s work might be read as a strategy of resistance against nationalist projects in any form. And, in expressing the need for repetition (in the poems as well as in the prose work, La condesa sangrienta), Pizarnik depicts
with poignant irony the experience of trauma. This trauma arguably stems from many sources: Pizarnik’s lifelong struggle with biological depression, her identity as a diasporic subject in an anti-Semitic social environment, her identity as a queer women inhabiting a predominantly male world, and her witnessing of political upheavals. I cannot argue that Pizarnik intended her work as a mode of political resistance; indeed, given her stated disdain for politics, the evidence points toward the contrary. The wall which Pizarnik finds herself up against is an existential wall, not a political one; it is created not by man’s subjugation of man, but our human nature itself, which limits us and prevents us from knowing reality in its entirety. Nevertheless, no art is created in a vacuum, and the way in which we view the world is inevitably shaped by the concrete, historical realities that surround us. I argue that these political realities nevertheless form the backdrop of Pizarnik’s work. The trauma that she evokes is a disruptive, fragmenting force, a subtle form of resistance against totalizing political language modes and an affirmation of the poetic drive toward constant creation.

2.1 Space of Knowledge: Songs into Silence

“Writing never consists in perfecting the language in use, rendering it purer,” states Blanchot (48). For him, a poet is not an artisan who simply uses ordinary language with more grace or elegance than is usually done. Instead,

Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to silence if one wants, at last, to be heard (48).

A key idea here is that poetry approaches a point where “nothing reveals itself” – in other words, where the nothingness that underlies all things becomes apparent. For Blanchot this nothingness – a language that no one speaks – is essentially a form of silence. Paradoxically, however, we hear it murmured in the loudest voice – the “incessant and interminable” sound that no one can halt. No one, that is, except for the poet. Hearing this silence, the writer responds to it by creating her own silence, and through this quieting she makes her own voice heard. Referring to the sculptures of Swiss artist Albert Giacometti, Blanchot states that there is a vantage point from
which we see them absolutely; they cannot be reduced or broken down into parts; they defy all analysis and interpretation. “This point, whence we see them irreducible, puts us at the vanishing point ourselves; it is the point at which here coincides with nowhere,” Blanchot states. “To write is to find this point. No one writes who has not enabled language to maintain or provoke contact with this point” (48). It is at this point that Alejandra Pizarnik finds herself when faced with the wall – a nothingness that she cannot expect to transcend, a deafening silence that demands response. And, we see that Pizarnik does respond – with a silence of her own, the only one that will enable her truly to speak. As she says, “silencio / yo me uno al silencio / yo me he unido al silencio / y me dejo hacer / me dejo beber / me dejo decir” (silence / I unite with the silence / I have united with the silence / and I let myself make / I let myself drink / I let myself speak) (Obra completa 61). Rather than presenting Pizarnik with an obstacle, the silence in this poem (from her 1958 collection Las aventuras perdidas (The lost adventures)) proves to be an ally. By joining herself to it as fully as possible, she permits herself to make, to speak, and to receive nourishment (as we have seen in “Cuarto Solo,” thirst is another important motif in Pizarnik’s work – thirst signifying the horrible absence of meaning, the essential silence that leaves one face to face with a void). Here, Pizarnik reveals that the answer to this absence is not to seek transcendence beyond it, but to ally oneself with it, thus receiving “a presence for her thirst,” an antidote to absence. In this poem, silence proves itself to be a force of liberation – it is the wall on which the poetic word may be written. But, as we look more closely at Pizarnik’s work, we see that silence does not always hold such a positive connotation. As Carolina Depetris has observed,

La presencia de la palabra “silencio” comienza a ser constante en la poesía de Pizarnik después de Árbol de Diana y, a lo largo de sus escritos, el silencio nunca deja de referir a valores contrastados… el silencio es pureza, es certeza, es lugar de reposo y unión, es promesa, es orientación; también es ausencia, oscuridad, deslizamiento, es desconocimiento, es tentación, es un lugar peligroso de vértigo y de posible anulación (64).

(The presence of the word “silence” begins to be a constant in Pizarnik’s poetry after Árbol de Diana and, throughout her writings, it never ceases to refer to contrasting values… silence is purity, certainty, a place of rest and union; it is promise and
orientation. But, it is also absence, darkness, slipping, ignorance; it is temptation, a dangerous place of vertigo and possible disintegration).

The following paragraphs will explore these contrasting meanings of silence in Pizarnik’s work, arguing that these seemingly contradictory meditations on silence are Pizarnik’s attempt to intercept “the truth of this old wall” which simultaneously protects and confines her.

For Pizarnik, as for so many other poets and philosophers, silence is a paradoxical problem that never ceases to confound us. “En verdad, no hago más que pensar en el silencio,” she states in 1963 letter to the poet Antonio Porchia. “Y he terminado preguntándome si el silencio existe. Pero si lo pregunto ya no hay silencio” (Really I don’t do anything more than think about silence. And I’ve ended up asking myself whether or not silence exists. But as soon as I ask this question, silence goes away) (Bordelois, Correspondencia Pizarnik 130). Looking at Los trabajos y las noches (Works and Nights), Pizarnik’s fifth collection, we see the theme of silence in its many permutations. In the first piece, which has four lines and is simply entitled “Poema,” Pizarnik states, “Tú eliges el lugar de la herida / en donde hablamos nuestro silencio / Tú haces de mi vida / esta ceremonia demasiado pura” (You choose the place of the wound / where we speak our silence / You turn my life / into a ceremony that is much too pure) (Obra completa 77). Like many of Pizarnik’s poems, this one is disconcerting in its ambiguity. Who is the “you” whom the speaker addresses? Is it a lover? A double for the speaker? Taking into account the title, I would suggest that the addressee is none other than the poem itself.

Throughout The Space of Literature, Blanchot intimates that the work of art is in some sense an autonomous being, an agent that dares to speak through the medium of the author. “The poet exists only poetically, as the possibility of the poem,” he says (227). The poem is a being, an agent that desires to “speak its silence” in collaboration with the writer. And, we get the sense that the poetic speaker is not completely satisfied with the poem’s desire; rather, she responds with a certain amount of disillusionment. We can hear this bitterness in the idea of the poem choosing “the place of the wound” – the idea that writing is inevitably linked with pain. “Only if it is torn unity, always in struggle, never pacified, is the work a work,” states Blanchot. “Because it cannot sustain within itself the antagonism which unifies by splitting, the work bears the principle of its ruin” (229). While this idea of pain and trauma in Pizarnik’s work will be explored in depth later on, for now it suffices to observe that the poem’s insistence on directing
the speaker toward a wound leads her toward ambivalence and perhaps a certain degree of bitterness, as when she states that the poem has transformed her life into “a ceremony that is much too pure” – the natural flow of life has been forced to order itself in the pure, formalized structure of the poem. The task of “speaking silence” is not chosen freely by the poet; it is rather a demand that the work imposes upon her. Thus, unlike in the poem “yo me uno al silencio,” in which silence is a force of liberation, here it assumes a character similar to that which Pizarnik describes in her letter to Porchia – it is a kind of burden, a mystery that she is compelled by necessity to resolve.

But, while silence is at times an encumbrance that reminds the speaker of her wounds, it is also the object of desire. The motif of the wound occurs again in the poem “Pido el Silencio” (I ask for Silence) which bears an epigraph by Cervantes: “canta, lastimada mía” (sing, my wounded one). “aunque es tarde, es noche / y tú no puedes. / Canta como si no pasara nada. / Nada pasa” (although it is late, it is night / and you can’t do it / Sing as if nothing were to happen / Nothing happens) (87). In this poem Pizarnik, taking pain as a point of departure, seeks to sing the words of silence, to touch the nothingness underlying reality. In normal speech, “nothing” is seen as absence, the negation of the present “something.” Indeed, if we read the poem this way, the command to “cantar como si no pasara nada” might be interpreted as “to sing as if nothing were happening” – to employ a song as a means of resisting some horrible thing that is happening, to negate the sounds of pain and terror with the silence of the song. For me, this idea conjures an image of a torture victim singing in her prison cell, or the early Christian martyrs purported to have gone singing to their deaths. However, it is also possible to interpret this “Nothing” as positive rather than negative – positive in the sense that Blanchot describes when he states that writing approaches a point “where nothing reveals itself.” There is an underlying nothingness that paradoxically asks to be brought into being, a negative number that wants to be transformed into a positive one, an absence that yearns to become a presence. “How hard it is to situate the values of being and nonbeing! And where is the root of silence? Is it a distinction of nonbeing, or a domination of being?” asks Gaston Bachelard in his Poetics of Space (180). As Pizarnik shows us, it is both. The phrase “nothing happens” need not imply stagnation or passivity but rather determined activity. Nothingness has something to do, and only by the speaker’s command that we “ask for silence” through song that we might allow it to complete its
task. Once again, silence (as a vehicle of nothingness) has an objective; it needs to speak in
response to pain, to what Pizarnik in another poem (“Destructuciones” or “Destructions,” p. 78)
calls “el combate con las palabras” (the combat with words) and “el furor de mi cuerpo
elemental” (the rage of my elemental body). As Blanchot has suggested, this silence is very
powerful; it is a means of being heard over the “deafening and interminable murmur” that
conceals it (Blanchot 48). Thus, Pizarnik’s ambivalence toward silence is the abstraction of her
ambivalence toward the wall: on the one hand it confines her, imposing restrictions and
demanding attention; on the other, it invites her to examine it, touch it and perhaps listen to the
echoes that reverberate from it. In this way, it simultaneously demands and invites the poetic
speaker to enter a space of knowledge, to approach the underlying nothingness of all things that
paradoxically is the source of being itself. It is this idea that stands out in most of the other
poems from Los trabajos y las noches. Viewed across the spectrum of all these poems, silence is
indeed neither positive nor negative; rather, it is the underlying substance from which all sounds
are made, the basic condition for reality’s existence. “Años y minutos hacen el amor,” she states
in “Del Otro Lado” (From the Other Side). “Máscaras verdes bajo la lluvia. / Iglesia de vitrales
obscenos. / Huella azul en la pared. / No conozco. / No reconozco. / Oscuro. Silencio” (Years
and minutes make love / Green masks under the rain. / Churches with obscene stained-glass
windows. / Blue footprint on the wall. / I don’t know it. / I don’t recognize it. / Darkness. / Silence) (Obra completa 94). This poem offers us an image reminiscent of a Chagall painting;
colours dissolve into one another; time expands and contracts; the wall, as in “Cuarto Solo,” is
not solid, but covered in mysterious blue footprints (reminiscent of the ambiguous “blue sail” in
Agustini’s “El poeta leva el ancla”), signifying the desire for transcendence. However, as the
poem draws toward its conclusion, we see that the colours dissolve into a single darkness, and
the only definitive emotion is one of uncertainty as expressed in the lack of knowledge and
recognition.

I have suggested that Pizarnik differs from Agustini in that, while the latter seeks to
transcend the barriers that block her from knowing ultimate reality, the former is in some sense
aware that the wall is itself the ultimate reality, that her space of knowledge consists in seeking
to know and comprehend it, to trace her fingers over it. However, this is not to say that she faces
it stoically or without frustration. Instead, its constant presence continues to confuse and distress
her, repeatedly re-opening the “herida” (wound) that is felt throughout her work. We see this clearly in a poem entitled “La verdad de esta vieja pared” (The truth of this old wall), whose title corresponds to the second line of “Cuarto Solo” (“Lone Room”) quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Seeking to “intercept the truth” of the wall, Pizarnik’s speaker finds that she cannot do it: “que es frío es verde que también se mueve / llama jadea grazna es halo es hielo / hilos vibran tiemblan / hilos / es verde estoy muriendo / es muro es mero muro es mudo mira muere” (that it’s cold it’s green it also moves / it calls it gasps it cackles it’s an aura it’s ice / threads vibrate tremble / threads / it’s green I’m dying / it’s a wall a mere wall it’s mute look it’s dying) (Obra completa 91). In this poem, as in “Cuarto Solo,” we see that the wall is complex; rather than being fixed, it has the ability to move and change its shape (an idea that will be explored further in the discussion of Pizarnik’s wandering and search for a patria); it is made of threads that vibrate and perhaps threaten to break. Meanwhile, it gasps and is green, a colour associated with illness; it cackles like a bird, which for Pizarnik is a very ambiguous motif (simultaneously suggesting freedom and limitation, weakness and strength). It is mute and therefore silent; it is inextricably bound up with the reality of death. Meanwhile, the alliteration between such words as “halo,” “hielo” and “hilos” as well as that in the “mero muro es mudo mira muere” of the final line move the poem from sense toward sound, from a focus on imagery to a focus on alliteration and rhythm. In a move reminiscent of her compatriot Oliverio Girondo, also known for his tendency to play with language, Pizarnik foregrounds the rhythm and sound of the words rather than their meaning. Language threatens to dissolve into gibberish, which then does in fact dissolve into silence as the poem reaches its conclusion. Meanwhile, the structure of the poem (a complete lack of capitalization and punctuation as well as the jarring indentation of the word “hilos”) creates a mood of anxiety and desperation, a sense of growing confusion leading up to the cry of “estoy muriendo” and the dissolution into chaos and then silence. Thus, while the wall of silence may be the basic condition for the existence of all reality, it is also a source of anxiety and confusion for the speaker; its nothingness is something that provokes anxious uncertainty rather than resolute stoicism.

In other poems from the same collection, however, Pizarnik expresses a somewhat more resigned and reflective stance toward death’s constant presence. “La muerte siempre al lado,” states Pizarnik in a poem entitled “Silencios” (“Silences”). “Escucho su decir. Sólo me oigo”
(Death always at my side / I listen for its speech / I only hear myself) (Obra completa 89). The wall of silence that she faces is inextricably bound to death – a shadow that is constantly present, that she hopes will offer a response to her questions but instead offers only the echo of her own voice. The mood of this poem evokes melancholy and perhaps a bit of bitterness reminiscent of the encounter with nothingness in a poem such as Robert Frost’s “The Most of It” – in which a man finds himself alone in a forest and, calling out to the wilderness, finds that: “For all the voice in answer he could wake / Was but the mocking echo of his own / From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake” (193). The desire for company in his solitude leads to a sense of despair: “Some morning from the boulder-broken beach / He would cry out on life, that what it wants / Is not its own love back in copy speech, But counter-love, original response” (193). Like Frost, Pizarnik also finds the sound of her own voice to be insufficient; the speaker listens for death to offer some kind of “original response,” some antidote for her solitude. And, unlike in Frost’s poem, there is not even the possibility of a response – while Frost’s speaker is at least able to retreat to the woods, hoping to find some companionship in nature, Pizarnik’s encounters the same silence always; there is not even the hope of a response. At the same time, the detached tone with which the speaker relates the experience suggests that this absence of company – or rather, the constant presence of death, which implies absence of company – is not wholly negative. It is not a threat that needs to be feared. It is simply the basic condition of life, the reality of everything that exists.

We see a similar idea in “En un lugar para huirse” (In a place to flee to), which also evokes a dark mood. We might expect that a “place one can flee to” would be safe, a solid refuge where one can feel protected and at home. But of course, for Pizarnik this is not the case. While this space as she evokes it is not dangerous or frightening, neither is it comforting. Silence is bound up with shadows, which are themselves a symbol of death: “Espacio. Gran espera. / Nadie viene. Esta sombra. / Darle lo que todos: significaciones sombrías, no asombradas. / Espacio. Silencio ardiente. ¿Qué se dan entre sí las sombras?” (Space. The great wait. / No one comes. / To give it what everyone gives: dismal meanings, not astonishing ones. / Space. Burning silence. / What do the shadows give to one another?) (Obra completa 85). The space which the speaker “runs away to” has the aura of Sheol or Hades – a deathly, static place where one is compelled to wait in solitude, watching the shadows communicate with one another but
not having access to their language. While the idea of “burning silence” might evoke Dantesque images of hellfire, I find the speaker’s situation in this poem to be one more of confusion than torment. As precursors to the Christian ideas of the afterlife, Sheol and Hades were not moralized; they were simply the domain of all of the dead, with no easy, clear-cut distinction between the righteous and the damned. Perhaps one of the greatest existential difficulties that humans experience is the mixture of goodness and evil in the world; we long for a moment when all such ambiguities will be resolved, when sheep and goats will be led to separate abodes. At times Pizarnik expresses this same yearning; indeed, throughout her work we see a nostalgia for wholeness and simplicity in the image of the “garden,” which according to Piña can be interpreted as having its traditional edenic connotation as a lost paradise (Piña, La palabra como destino 28). But, while Pizarnik does express a yearning for this paradise, she does not strive for it in the sense that Agustini and (as we will see later) di Giorgio do; instead, she experiences nostalgia for the garden while fully occupying a space of silence, shadow, ambiguity and confusion:

Sólo vine a ver el jardín.
tengo frío en las manos.
frio en el pecho.
frio en el lugar donde en los demás se forma
el pensamiento.
no es este el jardín que vine a buscar
a fin de entrar, de entrar, no de salir.
[...] yo, ahora, creo amar y me siento acabada, epilogada.
¿cómo aprender los gestos primarios / de las pasiones elementales?

no me consuela (Obra completa 215)

(I only came to see the garden.
my hands are cold.
my chest is cold.
the place where, for others, thoughts form
is cold.
this isn’t the garden I wanted to see

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the one I wanted to enter, to enter, not to leave.

[...] now, I believe I’m loving and I feel finished, summed up.

how to learn the first gestures
of simple passions?

it doesn’t console me).

The phrase “I only came to see the garden,” a reference to Lewis Carroll’s Alice when she finds herself in Wonderland, is repeated throughout her poetry, especially in her late work. But, in this fragment from the poem “Ojos Primitivos” (“Primitive Eyes”), she finds that the garden which she envisioned herself entering – the child’s garden which she once happens – is not the place where she now finds herself. Instead, that garden has been lost, replaced by another one that bears some resemblance to the original but is nevertheless different, changed. The consolation that she had hoped to find is simply not there; instead, she finds that “en la noche del corazón. / en el centro de la idea negra. / ningún hombre es visible. / nadie está en algún jardín” (in the heart of the night / in the middle of the black idea / no man is visible. / there’s no one in any garden) (Obra completa 217).

Speaking against the philosophy of Descartes (who constructed an entire epistemological system on the tireless desire for certainty and clarity), Blanchot states that a work of art by its very nature leads us toward shadowy regions:

The work brings neither certitude nor clarity. It assures us of nothing, nor does it shed any light upon itself. It is not solid, it does not furnish us with anything indestructible or indubitable upon which to brace ourselves. These values belong to Descartes and to the world where we succeed in living. Just as every strong work abducts us from ourselves, from our accustomed strength, makes us weak and as if annihilated, so the work is not strong with respect to what it is. It has no power, it is impotent: not because it is simply the obverse of possibility’s various forms, but rather because it designates a region where impossibility is no longer deprivation, but affirmation (223).

Pizarnik states that the shadows to be found in the space where she takes refuge offer “significaciones sombrías, no asombradas.” The adjective “sombría” can be translated as
“murky” or “dismal”; it reflects the ambiguity in which she finds herself. “Asombrado,” on the other hand, has the connotation of amazement or astonishment – emotions that often accompany the “eureka” moments of clarity upon which Descartes’s rationalism founds itself. Unlike Descartes, Pizarnik has no solid foundation on which to stand; as a poem such as “La verdad de esta vieja pared” suggests, the wall before her is just as fluid as it is solid, amorphous as it is unyielding. Standing before it, she finds herself “weak as if annihilated,” as Blanchot describes (223). According to him, the poetic work is impotent within the world, where certainties enable us to live. But, paradoxically, the work gains power in its very ability to destabilize such certainties – in effect to transform them into uncertainties, transforming speech into silence.

Related to this uncertainty is a feature that many critics have observed in Pizarnik’s work: the decentring or dissolution of the subject, the shattering of wholes into fragments, as seen in “la verdad de esta vieja pared” in which the wall explodes into a collage of varied shapes and colours. At times, this dissolution is a result of woundedness, in the pain of death’s constant presence, in the disorienting metamorphoses of the wall. However, there is also power to be found within this fragmentation – the same power that Pizarnik asserts in the poem “Sólo un Nombre,” where she affirms the “I” that exists independently of the name. In Extraccion de la piedra de la locura (Extraction of the Stone of Folly), Pizarnik suggests that silence is closely linked to this kind of fragmentation, which ultimately renders poetic creation possible and necessary – thus empowering the poet to “designate a region where impossibility is no longer deprivation, but affirmation,” as Blanchot suggests. Pizarnik reflects this idea in the third section of her poem “Fragmentos para dominar el silencio” (Fragments to Dominate the Silence): “La muerte ha restituido al silencio su prestigio hechizante. Y yo no diré mi poema y yo he de decirlo. Aun si el poema (aquí, ahora) no tiene sentido, no tiene destino” (Death has restored to silence its enchanting prestige. And I won’t speak my poem and I have to speak it. Even though the poem (here, now) makes no sense, has no destination) (Obra completa 101). As in the poem “Silencios,” Pizarnik suggests that silence is bound up with death, which offers silence “its enchanting prestige,” leaving us unclear as to the origins of this enchanting prestige that death offers to silence – does it stem from death, or from silence? The poetic speaker’s response is likewise uncertain; she simultaneously refuses to speak her poem and expresses the conviction that she must speak it. In this moment, much like the two “Alejandras” of “Sólo un nombre,” the
subject of this poem is divided into two – one which is compelled to speak, the other which has the freedom to remain silent. Pizarnik’s final line (in which she suggests that her words make no sense) resonates with Blanchot’s comment on poetry’s weakness “with respect to what is”; however, as with Blanchot, it is easy for us to detect the irony behind these words. For it is precisely in creating a space for words that have neither meaning nor destination that Pizarnik allows the possibility of new meanings, new destinations. Indeed, it is quite possible that something is about to be said. But first, it is necessary for all that is currently being said to dissolve into silence. “Algo caía en el silencio,” Pizarnik states in the seventeenth section of the long poem “Caminos del Espejo” (Ways of the Mirror). “Mi última palabra fue yo pero me refería al alba luminosa” (Something was falling in the silence. My last word was I, but I was referring to the luminous dawn) (Obra completa 111). As in “Fragmentos para dominar el silencio,” Pizarnik’s speaker paradoxically dominates the silence by submitting to it. The image of an unidentified object falling in the silence is disturbing due to the undefined nature of the thing. The image of falling is itself disturbing, as it evokes many negative images in human consciousness – falling dreams, fallen angels, and the Biblical idea of a fallen world. The idea of a fall immediately implies a loss of control, innocence, and joy. The second line might also appear disturbing at first due to the radical breakdown of subjectivity, in which the speaker cannot distinguish between herself and the luminous dawn before her. However, this union of the internal and external – so similar to the erotic union that Agustini seeks in order to achieve transcendent knowledge – is nothing other than the coveted prize of mystics of all ages: the beatific vision, the return to an original state of union with the divine, the “continuity” that Bataille claims all erotic experiences seek to achieve. In this poem, for one brief instance, perhaps even without trying, Pizarnik’s poetic speaker achieves this mystical union – not by flying or transcending, but essentially by falling alone through the silence. “Mi caída sin fin a mi caída sin fin en donde nadie me aguardó pues al mirar quién me aguardaba no vi otra cosa que a mí misma” (My fall without end to my fall without end where no one awaited me or rather when I looked to see who was awaiting me I saw nothing but myself) (Obra completa 111). After this disturbing fall into a strange and frightening realm of solitude, Pizarnik’s speaker finds this silence to be liberating rather than threatening. Through it, she is able to enter the space of knowledge that can only be reached by breaking down the barriers between subjectivity and objectivity, between “I” and “not I.” So significant is this moment to Pizarnik that she went on
the republish the couplet from “Caminos del Espejo” as a stand-alone poem with the title “Alegría” (“Joy”). Within a body of work characterized by much anguish and isolation, this piece reflects the long-awaited moment when the wall is finally discerned, when truth is – if only for one fleeting moment – encountered.

Thus, we see that, very much like Agustini, Pizarnik yearns to break down barriers and pass through walls. But while Agustini’s space of knowledge is found through the act of breaking through ceilings and hurtling up to the heavens, Pizarnik’s is found by silently placing her hand against the wall and then burrowing deep inside it, searching for what her compatriot and poetic colleague Susana Thénon describes as the “cosa casi sagrada” (the almost sacred thing) that “se resiste con todos sus botones / a ser casi descubierta / analizada remolida destripada / a ser casi descubierta / en sus causales últimos internos” (resists with nearly all its buttons / from being almost discovered / analyzed picked apart disembowelled / in its ultimate inner causes) (143). For brief fleeting moments, such as in the unification between the self and the dawn, it seems that Pizarnik indeed reaches this sacred thing. However, more often than not, Pizarnik’s space of knowledge is much closer to Thénon’s as suggested in the lines above; the “thing almost sacred,” besides being not fully sacred, completely resists all attempts to know and understand it. While in many of these poems Pizarnik is indeed able to “dominate the silence” and respond to it by imposing her own silence upon language as Blanchot suggests is a principal part of the poet’s task, we soon see that Pizarnik is compelled to walk along the wall rather than doing what she would most like to do: to pick it apart and burrow deep inside it, to make a home for herself at the origins of language itself. In this way, Pizarnik’s epistemological poetic journey resonates interestingly with that of Martin Heidegger, who also seeks to overcome a wall of language and representation, to enter the space of knowledge behind it and to find a dwelling place there.

2.2 Toward the Non-Existential Centre

“Language beckons us, at first and then again at the end, toward a thing’s nature,” states Heidegger in his essay “Poetically Man Dwells” (216). In this collection of essays we encounter his preoccupation with striving for knowledge of “Das Ding an Sich” (The Thing in Itself), being’s underlying ontological reality, unencumbered by any of the language that we normally
use to describe it. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger confidently insists on the role of art in this epistemological process of coming to know things as they are. In our typical approaches to knowledge, he states, we are encumbered by our own descriptions of things. Thus, we might take them apart and analyze them, but such reductionism destroys their underlying reality more than revealing it; we also might understand objects in terms of their use value, thus turning them into tools or means rather than ends, but this enables us to understand things only in a utilitarian context; their essence continues to elude us. Heidegger offers the example of Vincent Van Gogh’s famous painting of peasant shoes. Normally, when we put on a pair of shoes, we think of them in terms of our usage of them – do they fit? Are they comfortable? Are they sturdy and water resistant? Such questions might then lead us to examine their material composition, understanding them so as to make better use of them. But what are the shoes in themselves? What is their deepest essence, their ultimate truth, their “thingliness?” According to Heidegger, such a truth can be revealed only through the work of art:

The art work lets us know what shoes are in truth. It would be the worst self-deception to think that our description, as a subjective action, had first depicted everything thus and then projected it onto the painting. If anything is questionable here, it is rather that we experienced too little in the neighbourhood of the work and that we expressed the experience too crudely and too literally. But above all, the work did not, as it might seem at first, serve merely for a better visualizing of what a piece of equipment is. Rather, the equipmentality of equipment first genuinely arrives at its appearance through the work and only in the work (36).

For Heidegger, art reveals not only beauty, but also an essential truth about the object. It is aletheia – “unconcealment,” a revelation that transcends our subjective descriptions of things, that reaches out to grasp their very being.

Looking at Pizarnik’s work, we encounter her constant desire to reach this truth underlying all things. But, language continually poses a hindrance for her; paradoxically, it is the means by which she seeks knowledge but also the principal obstacle to that knowledge. Essentially, there are two separate and incommensurable worlds – the world that we perceive through our senses and describe by using the tools of our intellect, and the world that exists
outside our perception of it. For Pizarnik, as for Heidegger, the basic desire is to enter the latter world – to know reality as it is in complete fullness of truth. But while Heidegger suggests that art renders this latter reality-in-itself accessible to us (and thus shows that all our representations are derived completely from it), Pizarnik does not express this same degree of confidence. In the thirteenth poem of “Caminos del espejo” she exhibits the irony of a writer seeking ultimate knowledge. For her, this knowledge is of course to be found in silence…But that silence remains ever inaccessible, ever elusive when approached through the net of language. “Aun si digo sol y luna y estrella me refiero a cosas que me suceden. ¿Y qué deseaba yo? Deseaba un silencio perfecto. Por eso hablo” (Even if I say sun and moon and star I refer to things that happen to me. And what did I want? I wanted a perfect silence. That’s why I speak) (110). The first line of this poem expresses the problem most clearly – “sun,” “moon” and “star” are all words that we humans have invented for the lights we discern in the sky. The act of pronouncing these words brings us no closer to understanding the reality of these lights (and, arguably, neither would viewing them through telescopes or sending spacecraft to probe them). If anything, these pronouncements create a distance between ourselves and the reality of matter; the words become a wall between ourselves and the things that we are seeking to know. In expressing the desire for a “perfect silence,” Pizarnik demonstrates a yearning for complete knowledge without any such barriers – a full, complete understanding based on intimacy and unity rather than either separation or utilitarian apprehension.

But, the poignant irony of the situation is that the only way to reach this knowledge is through speech. With the exception of some monks under strict vows to eschew speech, human beings find it incredibly difficult to attain complete silence; our very nature compels us to speak. (And even those monks speak through song, the written word, or if nothing else, silent prayer that still assumes the forms of words). In the previous section I have indicated Pizarnik’s hope that her words will create silence as Blanchot has suggested, turning presence into absence, overcoming the constant deafening murmur of language and thus approaching the truth of every old wall. But, here we see that this perfect silence cannot be achieved; words continue to surround it. “Al negro sol del silencio las palabras se doraban,” Pizarnik states in the eleventh poem of “Caminos del Espejo” (Words turned the black sun of silence to gold). This gold – a product of our perception, a colour corresponding to the insides of our eyes rather than the sun

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itself – is a momentous problem for Pizarnik; she wants to peel this veil away, to encounter the
darkness underneath. And while Heidegger assures us that art (and likewise poetry) is the
ultimate way of bringing this reality to life, Pizarnik finds this not to be the case. Like Susana
Thénon, who finds that “la cosa en sí / no se deshoja fácilmente / sino capa tras capa / como los
alcauciles” (the thing itself / is not stripped with ease / rather layer after layer / like an artichoke)
(142), Pizarnik finds herself peeling back layers of language only to find more underneath. In the
last poem of her 1971 collection El infierno musical (The Musical Hell), Pizarnik states, “El
centro / de un poema / es otro poema / el centro del centro / es la ausencia / en el centro de la
ausencia / mi sombra es el centro / del centro del poema” (The centre / of a poem / is another
poem / the centre of the centre / is absence / in the centre of absence / my shadow is the centre /
of the centre of the poem) (Obra completa 165). Upon peeling back the layers of a poem,
Pizarnik manages only to encounter another poem; the attempt to escape from language only
yields more language. Digging deeper for the truth at the centre, the “black sun of silence,” the
speaker of this poem manages only to find absence and ultimately her own shadow. She is unable
to escape the veil of representation; the only essential truth to be found at the centre is still
completely attached to herself in the form of the shadow. Thus, while Pizarnik expresses fully
the Heideggerian intention of aletheia – to unconceal the true nature of things through art – she
finds that the prospect of doing so continues to evade her. The centre simply cannot be grasped,
and it contributes to the tone of woundedness and despair that runs throughout her work.

This sense of despair and inability to find a solid reality underlying all things leads
Pizarnik toward the creation of what is perhaps her most famous poem, “En esta noche, en este
mundo” (“On this night, in this world”), which was published in her last book, Textos de Sombra
(Shadow Texts). In order better to understand Pizarnik’s search for knowledge, it is worth
examining this poem at some length. The poem begins by locating us in time and space – in this
night, in this world – not the “illud tempus” and “illud spatium” that, according to Piña, Pizarnik
is constantly striving for. That realm, if it even exists at all, lies on the other side of the wall.
Approaching it through language, the speaker notes the inadequacy of words in the attempt at
this approach: “las palabras del sueño de la infancia de la muerte / nunca es eso lo que uno quiere
decir / la lengua natal castra / la lengua es un órgano del conocimiento / del fracaso de todo
poema / castrado por su propio lengua / que es el órgano de la re-creación / del re-conocimiento /

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pelo no el de la resurrección” (the words of a dream of childhood of death / that’s never what one means / the native tongue castrates / the tongue is an organ of knowledge / of the failure of all poems / castrated by their own tongue / which is the organ of re-creation / re-cognition / but not resurrection) (Obra completa 181) After clearly situting her discourse in this context of time and space, Pizarnik immediately reaches back toward another – that of dreams, which are characterized by rapid movements through many times and spaces; childhood, which for Pizarnik is an idealized time of magic and an eternal present, and death, which from the perspective of the one who has died is the negation of time and space themselves. All of them are sites where the normal temporal and spatial rules no longer apply; thus, they are the places where the speaker first goes to seek the solid Platonic realm of being that lies beneath the realms of change and becoming. But, in order even to begin to approach these spaces, Pizarnik finds it necessary to use language – a language that is not only inadequate for the task (“nunca es eso lo que uno quiere decir”) (it’s never that which one wants to say) but also threatening and violent (“la lengua natal castra”) (“the native tongue castrates”). And, given that this violent language is associated with origins and childhood in its status as native tongue, it immediately puts into question the Platonic view suggested by the first line. If the native tongue has the power to castrate, perhaps childhood cannot be viewed as an idyllic “illud spatium”; perhaps the origin, the underlying truth does not exist after all. However, the speaker is not certain of this. She states that this tongue is the organ of knowledge, re-cognition and re-creation – in other words, it is what we use to apprehend all that is a derivative copy of an original. Meanwhile, she tells us that it is not the organ of resurrection – in other words, language is not a vehicle that leads toward transcendence. The fact that the speaker even mentions resurrection suggests that, in her view, it is possible by some means other than that of language, but of course we cannot be sure of this; we might also read this statement as a complete negation of any possibility of reaching for knowledge of the being that underlies all things. Either way, Pizarnik reveals that language is a large problem; that which she would like to say remains unsayable.

Continuing to complicate the issue of language, Pizarnik states, “de mi horizonte de maldoror con su perro / y nada es promesa / entre lo decible / que equivale a mentir / (todo lo que se puede decir es mentira) / el resto es silencio / sólo que el silencio no existe” (from my horizon of maldoror with his dog / and nothing is a promise / between the sayable / which amounts to
lying / (everything that can be said is a lie) / the rest is silence / only silence does not exist)  
(*Obra completa* 181). The reference to Maldoror is from the long poem by Comte de Lautréamont, whose work Pizarnik read and admired. As Jaime Rodríguez-Matos observes in his own discussion of this poem, and as I have already mentioned in the introduction, the reference to Maldoror’s dog refers to a moment when the child Maldoror was told that dogs “have an insatiable thirst for the infinite,” and he finds that he shares this same insatiable thirst (Rodríguez-Matos 584). In the same way, the poetic speaker here also has this thirst – a motif that appears at various points in Pizarnik’s work. However, from this perspective of a desire for the infinite, we find that all that can be said is actually a lie. Just as lies are derivative, twisted forms of truth, so the sayable is a derivative, twisted form of the unsayable, a mere shadow of the Platonic forms. The infinite, as we have seen in Pizarnik’s earlier works, is characterized by silence – the space, the eternal night which contains all that cannot be said. But then, Pizarnik informs us that silence does not exist, thus expressing the same paradox that she relates in her letter to Antonio Porchia. As soon as we even begin to talk about silence, our speech immediately destroys it. But, we may also interpret Pizarnik’s assertion that “el silencio no existe” as suggesting that the origin she has sought so desperately, the “illud spatium” where the subject is mystically dissolved and united with the infinite, is simply non-existent. According to Paola Gallo, the sense of woundedness and pain that intensifies in the latter stages of Pizarnik’s work has to do with her loss of confidence in the ability of language to provide knowledge of reality. “Pizarnik’s early lyrics involve a search, a trust in language; from *El infierno musical* onwards we see a loss of this trust, and the original edenic paradise is demolished” (Gallo, Personal Interview). The poetic speaker expresses the bitterness of this loss in the next lines of the poem, which I have already quoted above: “Las palabras / no hacen el amor / hacen la ausencia / ¿si digo agua beberé? / ¿si digo pan comeré?” (Words / don’t make love / the make absence / if I say “water” will I drink? / if I say “bread” will I eat?)  
(*Obra completa* 181). Against those who argue that there is no reality outside of language, Pizarnik insists that there is, and it matters gravely that there is. It is a reality to which we must gain access if we are truly to understand our spatial and temporal positioning. But, the door that language once appeared to promise has been replaced by a solid wall: “lo que pasa con el alma es que no se ve / lo que pasa con la mente es que no se ve / lo que pasa con el espíritu es que no se ve / ¿de dónde viene esta conspiración de invisibilidades? / ninguna palabra es visible / sombras / recintos viscosos donde
se oculta / la piedra de la locura / corredores negros / los he recorrido todos” (what happens with
the soul is unseen / what happens with the mind is unseen / what happens with the spirit is
unseen / where does this conspiracy of invisibilities come from? / shadows / murky enclosures
where / the stone of folly is hidden / black corridors / I’ve been down them all) (Obra completa
182). Blanchot has spoken of the poetic word as that which renders the visible invisible; “to
speak is essentially to transform the visible into the invisible,” he says (141). For him, this
transformation implies openness and possibility; by taking language out of its everyday contexts
and reconfiguring it in different forms, the poetic word is given a new power. For Pizarnik, in
contrast, this “conspiracy of invisibilities” is highly problematic; the very things which she most
urgently seeks to attain knowledge of are closed off to her. Rather than the coveted philosopher’s
stone, the speaker is left only with “la piedra de la locura,” the stone of madness hidden not in
the realm of eternal light, but in the shadows of the present realm. And it seems at last that there
really is nothing beyond it.

At this point, the speaker expresses the wound that this realization of nothingness has
inflicted upon her: “Mi persona está herida / mi primera persona del singular” (My person is
wounded / my first person singular) (Obra completa 182). This couplet might be viewed as the
absolute antithesis of the two-line poem “Alegría,” in which the speaker finds herself so united
with the luminous dawn as to identify with it completely. Here, the speaker is not only isolated,
but fragmented (thus desperately begging her listener to “quédate un poco más entre nosotros”
(stay with us a little longer) (Obra completa 182). The “nosotros” might be viewed as
corresponding to the divided self that Pizarnik postulates – soul, mind and spirit – as a
“conspiracy of invisibilities,” and this absolute division proves to be unbearable for the poetic
speaker. Interestingly, she then links this problem of the rupture between language and reality
with the ideas of sexuality as well as death. “Los deterioros de las palabras / deshabitando el
palacio del lenguaje / el conocimiento entre las piernas / ¿qué hiciste del don del sexo? / Oh mis
muertos / me los comí me atraganté / no puedo más de no poder más” (The deterioration of
words / moving out of the palace of language / knowledge between legs / what did you do with
your talent for sex? / Oh my dead ones / I ate them up I choked them down / I can’t bear being
unable to bear it) (Obra completa 182). This appearance of sex and death resonates with
Bataille’s idea of continuity, which exists in death and which we seek to attain through love and
sex: “What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain,” (19) he states. Later, he goes on to note the link between love and death: “An urge toward love is, pushed to its limit, an urge toward death” (42). But, there is no pleasure, no bliss, no love to be found in Pizarnik’s evocation of sex and death; indeed, the only continuity that can be found is a gross parody of such continuity; it is not the glorious union with the dawn, but rather a hellish moment in which all colours are mixed together into a dark sludge: “palabras embozadas / todo se desliza / hacia la negra licuefacción” (muffled words / everything slides / toward the black liquefaction) (Obra completa 182). Linked to an image of the “palace of language,” Pizarnik’s depiction of sex suggests ruin and desolation; meanwhile, her cannibalistic portrayal of the dead (also connected to language in the locus of the mouth, responsible for both speech and consumption) evokes pain and violence. Nevertheless, from this wounded state, where all confidence in language has been lost, Pizarnik’s speaker returns once again to the image of “el perro de maldoror” and the insatiable thirst for the infinite that words promise to quench (Obra completa 182). And although she laments that “todo es posible / salvo / el poema” (everything is possible / except / the poem) (Obra completa 182), even though she recognizes not only the futility of language in seeking the reality that she seeks, but also the futility of believing in that reality’s existence, she still insists on speaking her words: “oh ayúdame a escribir el poema más prescindible / el que no sirva ni para / ser inservible / ayúdame a escribir palabras / en esta noche en este mundo” (oh help to write the inessential poem / the one that’s good for nothing but / to be good for nothing / help me to write words / on this night in this world) (Obra completa 183). In this poem, it is clear that silence is not the fullness of being, but nothingness, lack and the complete absence of meaning; the “thing in itself” cannot be reached, not only because language poses an obstacle, but because the underlying reality cannot even be said to exist. Nevertheless, Pizarnik insists on continuing. Fully aware of the futility of her endeavour, filled with hopelessness and cynicism, Pizarnik’s poignant, passionate lyricism affirms the poem even while rejecting it.

This tension between an insistence on poetry and a full awareness of its impossibility recalls the distinction that Heidegger makes between what he describes as the “world” (“the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people”) and the “earth” (“the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually
self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing”) (48). I would argue that the “world” corresponds to Pizarnik’s idea of language; it is created through history by human beings and facilitates all of their mutual interactions. Meanwhile, the “earth” corresponds to the underlying reality that Pizarnik seeks – the reality which, though practically non-existent in “En esta noche, en este mundo,” nevertheless still commands her attention and imagination. Just as Pizarnik struggles with the conflict between the precarious word as signifier and the elusive, always ungraspable signified, Heidegger senses a conflict between the world and the earth; each seeks to dominate the other. For him, the best way to characterize this conflict is through the idea of striving:

    In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating of this striving. This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the strife may remain a strife. Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this striving. The work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between the world and earth (49).

Reminiscent of Blanchot’s idea that “Only if it is torn unity, always in struggle, never pacified, is the work a work,” (229) Heidegger’s concept of the conflict between the world (that which the human makes and understands) and the earth (that whose mystery confounds us in our inability to know and comprehend it fully, but which nonetheless holds us and allows us to have our being) is a possible way of approaching the unresolved conflict in “En esta noche, en este mundo.” Heidegger and Blanchot suggest that all poetry is characterized by conflict, no matter what its subject matter; Pizarnik in effect intensifies their critical gaze by turning it upon the conflicts within the act of writing itself. By writing the poem, Pizarnik attempts to “set up a world,” to create a space in which she can use language as a vehicle of knowledge. However, when language reveals its futility and inability to describe underlying realities, the poem “sets forth the earth” in all its strangeness and complexity. The result is a conflict so painful that we can sense the despair in the flow of the words. Nevertheless, the poem’s steady rhythm, conversational tone and constant flow of language through long and short lines all contribute to a sense of striving. We get the feeling that, even if the reality that Pizarnik seeks can be neither known nor articulated, she still insists on striving for that articulation.
The significance of this striving, I intend to argue, is that through it, Pizarnik creates a space of poetic knowledge that becomes transformed into a space of resistance – a process that I will explore throughout the second half of this chapter. While Pizarnik may not be able to succeed in attaining the knowledge that she is seeking, her insistence on striving for it brings her (as well as her readers) as close as possible to the paradox of knowledge itself: to the place where language’s ability to represent the world breaks down, forcing us to draw uncomfortably close to the nothingness from which all things are made. Faced with this uncanny experience of approaching this paradoxical absence that gives rise to all presence, we see that Pizarnik desires that the wall be not a barrier from truth’s light, but a shield from its dark, frightening aspects. She seeks to create a dwelling there. But, as I will discuss in the next section, she soon finds that she cannot establish this dwelling. Speaking about ambiguity around the image of silence in Pizarnik’s work, Carolina Depetris observes that this indeterminate space simultaneously allows Pizarnik to create such a dwelling and inhibits her from doing so:

Es en la extraña naturaleza del silencio donde Pizarnik encuentra la topografía necesaria para “ejecutar el acto” de hacer presente lo ausente. Este lugar no es lo vacío ni es lo pleno, sino la misma pendiente de la colina de Sísifo, lo que Pizarnik bautiza en la densa paradoja de ser “el móvil punto fijo,” un lugar que es espeso y es lábil, donde nada encuentra un reposo concluyente, donde se pone en juego el carácter de la presencia y la huella de la ausencia en un diferir continuo. En el móvil punto fijo, presencia y ausencia tienden invariablemente a un cumplimiento que se despoja (Depetris 66).

It is in the strange nature of silence that Pizarnik finds the necessary topography to “do the deed” of making the absent present. This place is neither void nor plenitude, but rather the slope of Sisyphus’ hill, that which Pizarnik offers the dense paradox of being the “mobile fixed point,” a place that is brittle and mutable, where nothing ever finds a definitive rest, where the character of presence and the trace of absence are put into play in a continuous conflict. In the mobile fixed point, presence and absence tend invariably toward a performance that is relinquished.

Indeed, Pizarnik’s stance in “En esta noche, en este mundo” is quite reminiscent of the image of Sisyphus rolling his boulder again and again up the mountain, aware of the futility of this
repeated action yet still finding meaning, purpose and necessity in doing it. He is simultaneously mobile and immobile; he is trapped by his circumstances but, as Albert Camus suggests in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, there is a sense in which he is free. In the section that follows, I seek to reveal the ways in which Pizarnik’s constant striving for knowledge of ultimate reality in the face of its absence might be viewed as a strategy of resistance – not toward any specific political ideology, but to the very possibility of having an ideology or an allegiance to any particular nation.

2.3 Space of Resistance: The Absent *Patria*

In all three of the poets that I am investigating in this dissertation, I am interested in the ways in which the poetic word becomes a vehicle for the search for knowledge of ultimate reality. Less interesting to me, admittedly, is the question of why they are embarking on this search to begin with. In the case of Agustini and also di Giorgio, the search appears to be its own reward. Both write within the context of Christianity (though both interpret the religion of their upbringing in a heterodox manner) and, given that Christianity is inherently eschatological, it makes sense that they are driven to pursue this esoteric knowledge for its own sake. In Pizarnik, however, the situation appears to be different. All three poets recognize that we inhabit a “fallen world”; all three express the experience of woundedness and pain. But of the three, Pizarnik appears to express it most deeply. Other than in fleeting moments, such as the poem “Alegría,” there is no transcendence in Pizarnik’s work; the underlying reality is characterized by nothingness rather than by God. Meanwhile, we witness her loss of confidence in the very ability of language itself to accurately mediate our perceptions of reality. I would argue that the pain and despair that she experiences in the poem “En esta noche, en este mundo” go far beyond what we have seen in Agustini and what we will see in di Giorgio. The question, then, is why does she continue on this path of striving? Why does she continue to expose herself to such a degree of emotional and existential pain?

One obvious answer can be found simply in Pizarnik’s drive to write good poetry. Indeed, I began this chapter by offering César Aira’s comment that to become a good poet and create good work was her only aim. And, as we have seen in both Blanchot and Heidegger’s work, the act of writing good poetry by its very nature entails this search for knowledge:
Poetry…is not an aimless imagining of whimsicalities and not a flight of mere notions and fancies into the realm of the unreal. What poetry, as illuminating projection, unfolds of unconcealedness and projects ahead into the design of the figure, is the Open which poetry lets happen, and indeed in such a way that only now, in the midst of beings, the Open brings beings to shine and ring out (Heidegger 73)

This “Open,” in its various forms, is indeed the “space of knowledge” that poetry by its very nature strives toward; while poets may approach it from different directions and understand it in different ways, the ultimate drive is the same. And this is definitely true of Pizarnik. But, I now want to argue that it is by no means her only drive. Looking at her anxious desire to know the true, unmediated, unambiguous “thing in itself” in all its fullness, we can see that this epistemological drive is intimately bound up with another: the desire to find a secure dwelling place, a refuge, a home.

Many critics have commented on this desire in Pizarnik’s work. Fiona Mackintosh notes Pizarnik’s lifelong habit of keeping a diary, which, inspired by the diaries of Virginia Woolf, she very self-consciously viewed as the “diary of a writer” that would be read after her death. She also kept a “palais du vocabulaire,” a notebook of quotations by other authors who inspired her. Looking at this book and also at her diary, we see that it is very literary, focusing on the diverse and copious amounts of reading that Pizarnik did as well as her interactions with other writers, particularly while she was living in Paris. Thus, she expresses a desire to situate herself within a literary tradition, to make a clear home within its walls. In this respect, she is quite different from both Agustini (who clearly sought to differentiate herself from the other modernistas even while seeking their company and respect) and di Giorgio (who firmly denied membership in any literary movement or school). Meanwhile, her work abounds with images of homes, walls, and at times also clothing, an image which suggests protection and the sense of dwelling within a fixed space, a morada within language “which will paradoxically allow the poet to go beyond its limitations” (Mackintosh 10). According to Mackintosh, this anxious desire for a homeland is related to Pizarnik’s ethnic and religious background as well as her identity as a second-generation diasporic subject.
In both poetry and notes, Pizarnik repeatedly expresses (or copies out quotations which express) a sense of dislocation, orphanhood, “extranjería” and not-belonging, which has been attributed by critics to her Jewishness and to her family’s forced emigration from Russia prior to the Second World War. This combination of non-belonging, diffidence and the obsession with learning about literary tradition and language produce a powerful drive toward creating an alternate place through poetry…However, this quest for an other place where what is not, will be, and where the poet can belong, is coupled with the realization that that place is nowhere (Mackintosh 114).

Pizarnik herself mentions this sense of dislocation and despair at the lack of a fixed homeland in a diary entry from March 1965, in which she states,

Todo esto se reduce al problema de la soledad. Por mi sangre judía, soy una exiliada. Por mi lugar de nacimiento, apenas si soy argentina (lo argentino es irreal y difuso). No tengo una patria. En cuanto al idioma, es otro conflicto ambiguo. Es indudable que mi lugar es París, por el solo hecho de que allí el exilio es natural, es una patria, mientras que aquí me duele.

(All of this is reducible to the problem of solitude. Thanks to my Jewish blood, I’m an exile. In regards to my birthplace, I’m hardly Argentinian (the Argentinian is unreal and diffuse). I have no homeland. In terms of my language – that’s another ambiguous conflict. Undoubtedly my place is Paris, due to the sole fact that over there exile is natural, it’s a homeland, while here it pains me) (Diarios 398).

In this truly poignant and painful passage, Pizarnik eloquently expresses some of the principal problems of the diasporic experience. According to scholar Robin Cohen, the central characteristics of this experience include a collective myth of the homeland, an idealization of a supposed ancestral home, the development of a return movement, a strong ethnic consciousness, a troubled relationship with the host nation, and a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic peoples in other countries (Cohen 186). Admittedly, Pizarnik does not display all of these characteristics. Though she did visit Israel as an adult, there is no suggestion of Zionism in her work, for example. Nor do we see a strong ethnic consciousness or a particular identification with Jews in other countries. What we do see, however, is the idealization of a supposed ancestral home,
which in Pizarnik is not the modern political state of Israel but rather a purely mythical child’s garden, a universal, edenic patria that predates the divided world in which we currently find ourselves. For Pizarnik, this idealized space amounts to nothing less than a “jardín recorrido en lágrimas / habitantes que besé / cuando mi muerte aún no había nacido” (a garden traversed in tears / its dwellers whom I kissed / when my death had not yet been born) – thus, a true illud spatium, an Eden of undefiled perfection (Obra completa 51). We also see a troubled relationship with the host nation – despite having been born in Argentina, Pizarnik views herself as “hardly Argentinian” and indeed sees her host country itself as somehow vague, unreal, indefinable. This attitude clearly recalls that of Witold Gombrowicz – also a kind of exile in what he found to be a strange, amorphous country. A staunch critic of nationalism in all its guises – whether displayed by his Polish compatriots or his new Argentinian acquaintances – Gombrowicz admired Argentina for what he saw as its “lack of form” and freedom from strict social rules but also criticized Argentinians’ constant drive toward patriotism and national self-definition, saying that they “treat art like an international sports championship and they worry for hours about why there are so few goals for the [Argentinian] team” (1: 128). In a similar way, Pizarnik likewise fails to relate to Argentinian nationalism; indeed, the patria she yearns for has no political borders. The only physical place that she dares to mythologize is Paris – a place that by its very nature is a refuge for other exiles, other wanderers unable to claim any one geographic location as home.

But, ultimately, Pizarnik’s patria is sought within her poetry. It is there, in the space between the signifier and the signified, that she aims to establish her dwelling. At the same time, she finds that this dwelling is precarious, unstable, impossible, compelling her to remain in constant motion, to never find a fixed place. From her very first published collection, La última inocencia, we see the idea of motion and travelling: “Partir / deshacerse de las miradas / piedras opresoras / que duermen en la garganta,” (To depart / get away from the stares / oppressive stones / sleeping in the throat) is the goal of her youth; at this moment, the wall that she finds herself faced with is oppressive rather than comforting (Obra completa 45). “He de partir / no más inercia bajo el sol / no más sangre anonadada / no más formar fila para morir / He de partir / Pero arremete ¡viajera!” (I have to depart / no more inertia under the sun / nor more diminished blood / no more lining up to die / I have to depart / so get to it, traveller!) (Obra completa 45). In
this early poem, stagnation is repulsive; we see the youthful desire to set off on a journey whose destination is uncertain, to go and begin a new life. Later on, however, we see that she questions this desire to travel, recognizing it as a kind of compulsion, the journey that Adam and Eve were forced to begin in the wake of their eviction from Eden: “Pero esta inocente necesidad de viajar / entre plegarias y aullidos. / Yo no sé. No sé sino del rostro / de cien ojos de piedra / que llora junto al silencio / y que me espera” (This innocent need to travel / between prayer and howling / I don’t know. I know of nothing but the face / of one hundred stone eyes / as it weeps in the silence / waiting for me) (Obra completa 51). Here, the compulsion to travel is depicted as a desire to flee from the wall – personified here as a dangerous, sinister face that the poetic speaker constantly senses is waiting for her. Once again, we see the image of silence, this time clearly associated with pain and death. In this moment, the speaker goes on to express her desire for the “jardín recorrido en lágrimas,” the Eden to which she can never return. In this way, we see that Pizarnik’s motion is simultaneously a running away and a running toward – there is a desire to flee from death and to run toward Eden, even as she knows the latter is not possible. Nevertheless, just as she ceaselessly strives to achieve ultimate knowledge of the thing in itself through the utterance of poetic language, she also strives to find a destination for her travels, a place where she at last can lay her head. But, returning to Los trabajos y las noches, we see the futility behind this motion. No matter how hard she tries, her movement refuses to conform itself to any teleological path; instead, it turns into kinesis – a wild, flitting movement in multiple directions.

One instance of this frenetic movement occurs in the poem “Formas” (“Forms”), in which the speaker finds herself navigating between binary oppositions of opposed images, unable to settle firmly on any of them: “no sé si pájaro o jaula / mano asesina / o joven muerta entre cirios / o amazona jadeando en la gran garganta oscura / o silenciosa / pero tal vez oral como una fuente / tal vez juglar / o princesa en la torre más alta” (I don’t know if a bird or a cage / a murderous hand / or a young woman dead among candles / or an amazon panting from her great dark throat / or a silent woman / but perhaps oral like a fountain / perhaps a jongleur / or a princess in the highest tower) (Obra completa 92). This somewhat cryptic poem faces us with a range of choices between different figures, many of them unsettling. Giving this poem a feminist reading, Susana Chávez Silverman interprets this array of objects as “a curiously bisemic image
of silence; it also presents an emblematic set of images located at the positive and negative poles of the spectrum of gender and sexuality. The title itself is significant. The idea of ‘forms’ gestures toward identitarian provisionality and disguise or inauthenticity” (23). According to Chávez Silverman, this poem vacillates between “positive” and “negative” feminine images of femininity: “strong” images of a cage (often a positive symbol in Pizarnik’s work); “a murderous hand”; an “amazon”; “oral”; and a “jongleur” are juxtaposed to “weak” images of the dead woman, the silent woman and the passive princess (24). While I find Chávez Silverman’s reading of these oppositions as a critique of oppressive, culturally constructed representations of femininity to be very interesting, I believe that these images also play a more basic role as the forms that Pizarnik’s speaker encounters as she struggles – and fails – to go beyond the wall that prevents her from encountering ultimate reality, and also to find the patria that she is seeking there. Instead, she comes to understand that the wall is that ultimate reality, and that her words only serve to transform the minute, fragmented forms which she encounters into that absent, silent totality. Instead of finding that safe refuge, she is compelled to remain in a state of movement, wandering from one image to another, flitting between binary oppositions, always encountering silence. We see a similar phenomenon when we look at another poem from the same collection, “Moradas” (“Dwellings”). In this poem, Pizarnik even more explicitly suggests the impossibility of the dwelling which she is seeking, revealing the inexorable paradox that it can only be found in the places where it cannot be found: “En la mano crispada de un muerto / en la memoria de un loco / en la tristeza de un niño / en la mano que busca el vaso / en el vaso inalcanzable / en la sed de siempre” (in the tense hand of a dead man / in the memory of a madman / in a child’s sadness / in the hand that seeks a glass / in the unattainable glass / in the eternal thirst) (Obra completa 86). In this poem, Pizarnik suggests that dwellings can only be found within spaces that are absent or unattainable – the hand of a dead man (which is no longer capable of holding or grasping anything) and the memory of a madman (which certainly is false). The sadness of a child is a jarring image; conventionally we think of childhood as a carefree time, of children as being happy. Then, there is the unattainable glass, and the poem concludes with the image of eternal thirst that is never sated, a frequent motif in Pizarnik’s work that corresponds to the idea of silence and absence. Thus, the poem suggests the paradox that dwellings can only be created in places where they cannot be created – places of lack and absence.

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What are we to make of Pizarnik’s constant movement toward an unattainable dwelling? I would like to argue that these poems suggest a kind of mobile stillness, a fluid fixity, a kind of running in circles without realizing that the movements are in fact circular. Analyzing Pizarnik’s work as a whole, César Aira observes that her work revolves around a set of stock images – night, shadow, death, silence, blood, wind, birds, gardens and many others (36-40). The strength of Pizarnik’s writing, in his view, is the way in which she takes these images and unites them in many permutations, many combinations. With the skill and grace of a dancer, she turns her work into a choreography of movements drawn out from a set of basic steps:

A su poesía la acecha siempre la abstracción: siempre está en peligro de cerrarse en el círculo vicioso de la combinatoria de palabras huecas. El sujeto debe recurrir constantemente a lo concreto objetivo en busca de alimento, y por ello debe vivir en una constante fuga de si mismo. El enlace de lo abstracto y lo concreto en ella es el miedo, que como no cede nunca, asegura el movimiento constante. En sus permanentes migraciones, de las que el desdoblamiento es apenas un primer estadio preparatorio, el sujeto sufre curiosas mutaciones (52).

Abstraction always stalks her poetry: it is always in danger of enclosing itself in the vicious cycle of the combination of empty words. The subject must return constantly to the concrete objective in search of nourishment, and therefore it lives within a constant fugue based on itself. The link between the abstract and concrete is fear that, as it never ceases, ensures constant motion. In its permanent migrations, of which the splitting of the subject is only an initial, preparatory state, the subject suffers odd mutations.

For me, Aira’s assessment of Pizarnik’s constant movement is very much related to the search for a patria. Analogous to Pizarnik’s palais de vocabulaire and attempts to situate herself within a literary tradition, the return to motifs, the drawing of material from a bank of stock images might also be viewed as Pizarnik’s attempt to confine herself within secure walls, to build a solid house in which she might take refuge. But, as Aira observes, this does not permit Pizarnik to lapse into stagnation; indeed, such a lapse would entail the end of poetry altogether – the enclosure in a circle of empty words. Therefore, Pizarnik finds herself in constant motion. It is constant because she is unable to go anywhere; the words continue to fold back on themselves.
This fugue-like motion, for me, is reminiscent of the description of the universe in Borges’ “La biblioteca de Babel” (“The Library of Babel”). At the time of this writing, it is unknown whether the physical universe is finite or infinite; obviously, the part that we can detect is finite, but then, the part that we can see is hardly the sum total of everything that exists. In “La biblioteca de Babel,” Borges struggles with this conundrum. Conceiving the entire universe as a vast library housing every book that could ever be written in any language and on any subject, Borges suggests that while the desire to travel and know the library is common, most dwellers realize that they cannot do so: “Como todos los hombres de la Biblioteca, he viajado en mi juventud; he peregrinado en busca de un libro, acaso del catálogo de catálogos; ahora que mis ojos casi no pueden descifrar lo que escribo, me preparo a morir a unas pocas leguas del hexágono en que nací” (Like all men of the Library, I have travelled in my youth; I have gone on pilgrimages in search of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can barely decipher what I write, I am prepared to die just a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born) (Borges 1: 361). After describing the vastness of the library and the futility of ever expecting to find any specific book within its hexagons, Borges concludes by addressing the paradox of a universe that is simultaneously finite and infinite, determined and random. After asserting that his library is infinite, Borges states,

Acabo de escribir infinita. No he interpolado ese adjetivo por una costumbre retórica; digo que no es ilógico pensar que el mundo es infinito. Quienes lo juzgan limitado, postulan que en lugares remotos los corredores y escaleras y hexágonos pueden inconceiblemente cesar, lo cual es absurdo. Quienes la imaginan sin límites, olvidan que los tiene el número posible de libros. Yo me atrevo a insinuar esta solución del antiguo problema: La biblioteca es ilimitada y periódica. Si un eterno viajero la atraviesara en cualquier dirección, comprobaría al cabo de los siglos que los mismos volúmenes se repiten en el mismo desorden (que, repetido, sería un orden: el Orden). Mi soledad se alegra con esa elegante esperanza (Borges 1: 368).

(I have just written the word “infinite.” I have not interpolated this adjective out of rhetorical habit; I say that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who judge it to be limited postulate that in remote places the corridors and stairways and hexagons can conceivably come to an end – which is absurd. Those who imagine it to be infinite)
without limit forget that the possible number of books does have such a limit. I venture to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: The library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveller were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope).

In a sense, Borges’ vision of the universe is the exact opposite of Pizarnik’s. He does not claim to know whether the universe is finite or infinite, but he imagines that it has to be the latter – given all of the books that exist (most of them containing random strings of letters with only one intelligible phrase), it seems impossible that it could be finite. Nevertheless, despite its infinite nature, he dares to suggest that it is cyclical and thus ordered; it is possible to travel through it and then, after centuries of journeying, find himself back in a familiar place. Thus, for Borges it is possible to imagine that a weary traveller might some day return to his patria – an ordered place that he remembers from the past – and experience it as his real home. For Pizarnik, in contrast, the opposite is true. Like the other two poets studied in this dissertation, she suspects that the universe is infinite, and she also believes that some great truth might be found in making contact with that infinity. However, this infinite nothingness fills her with dread as much as hope. Meanwhile, the world that she inhabits in her poetry – the spaces between the many stock images that recur throughout her work – is indeed finite; we watch as she returns again and again to the same spaces of silence, absence and death. And yet, every time she does return, she finds that they have altered their form; they simply are not the same places that she left behind. What she shares with Borges, however, is a sense that the universe is simultaneously vast and minuscule, surrounded by walls that concurrently offer protection and threaten confinement. Like Pizarnik, the travellers of Borges’ library seek to go beyond the wall, to find that one sacred book which will offer the answer to all mysteries. Like Pizarnik, they find that the probability of achieving this is equal to zero. But, while many of them return to the hexagon where they were born, mentally they continue to travel, imagining what it would be like to journey indefinitely through the library, to find that illud spatium, that perfect garden, that idealized patria they might claim as their own. And, we see that Pizarnik does this too – she restlessly strives to find the homeland that she knows she will never find, leaving her in a state of constant motion, a kind of fixed wandering that can never have an end. Indeed, as Carolina Depetris has noted, Pizarnik’s
movement truly does resonate with that of the figure of Sisyphus, who is placed in what Albert Camus describes as a truly absurd situation – one that indicates a universe that is lawless, godless, and indifferent to human concerns. And yet, there is a kind of freedom in this absurdity; Sisyphus assumes a tragic dignity while bearing his rock. For Camus, the absurd

teaches that all is not, has not been exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile suffering. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men. All Sisyphus’ silent joy is contained therein. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing (110).

In the case of Sisyphus as Camus envisions him, we see that the inability to take refuge in a loving God or caring universe, the lack of any possibility that he might set down his rock and rest is not a fact to be lamented; there is a kind of grave beauty in it, a joy in the constant striving. It is difficult to see such a similar joy in Pizarnik, however. Other than a few brief moments, most often we see that the rock weighs heavily upon her shoulders, as in such a poem as “En esta noche, en este mundo.” And yet, while there may not be much joy in the striving, there is a strong sense of its necessity. While Pizarnik recognizes the impossibility of locating herself in a patria and clearly laments this impossibility, she refuses to let herself collapse into the “vicious cycle” that Aira describes; she is not content to remain just a few leagues away from the hexagon in which she was born. With great determination in her fixed wandering, she continues to bear the rock upon her shoulders. And, through this movement she begins to carve out a new space for herself – a space that I intend to argue is one of resistance.

Returning to Blanchot, we see a discussion of the place of poetry in the world dominated by historical change. Blanchot suggests the impossibility of art to bring about concrete changes in the world. Commenting on Karl Marx’s early ambitions of becoming a novelist, he remarks that had the great philosopher achieved his early goal, he would have enchanted the world, but he
would not have shaken it. Blanchot suggests the impossibility of art to bring about concrete, historical changes in the world; he mentions that in the past, when the world was universally believed to be under the power of transcendent deities, it was art that allowed these deities to speak (218). Now, however, the highest authority governing world events is that of history, and what place can art have there? This is a question that has been directed toward many writers in the twentieth century, and it could certainly be addressed to Pizarnik, who, as we have mentioned, does not overtly address political concerns in her work. However, Blanchot is clearly on the side of artists, and he seeks to resolve the issue by focusing on the artist’s role in seeking and communicating ultimate meaning, which, paradoxically, cannot be communicated, but must be approached nevertheless. One of the ways in which artists do this, he suggests, is by engaging in a level of risk and precariousness that is characteristic of one who wanders:

The wanderer’s country is not truth, but exile: he lives outside, on the other side which is by no means a beyond, rather the contrary. He remains separated, where the deep of dissimulation reigns, that elemental obscurity through which no way can be made and which because of that makes its awful way through him…He departs; he becomes, as Hölderlin calls him, the migrator – he who, like the priests of Dionysus, wanders from country to country in the sacred night. This errant migration can sometimes lead him to insignificance, to the facile contentment of a life crowned with approval, the platitudes of honorific irresponsibility. Sometimes it leads him into wretched vagrancy which is only the instability of a life bereft of a work. And sometimes it takes him to the deep where everything wavers, where everything meaningful is undermined, destabilized, where this upheaval ruins the work and hides in forgetfulness (238).

Pizarnik – to an even greater extent than Agustini and, as we will see, di Giorgio – is most often seen as an apolitical poet. While her personal writings occasionally do make mention of the goings on in her country, these do not appear to cause her great concern. And yet, the political is nevertheless present in her work through this aspect of wandering and exile. Pizarnik’s errant migration does not lead her to the facile contentment of a life crowned with approval, nor to wretched vagrancy. I would suggest that it does, however, lead her to the deep where things waver, where meanings are destabilized. The first meaning to be treated such, as I have mentioned, is that of nationhood. As Gombrowicz has observed, the question of nationhood was
very central in Argentinians’ collective mind at the middle of the twentieth century, and we may indeed argue that this struggle for definition and ownership of national identity led to the many coups that occurred during Pizarnik’s lifetime and indeed in the Dirty War, which began right after her death. Thus, while Pizarnik certainly did not set out to be a poet of resistance, I suggest that she truly is one. As much as she tried to fit herself clearly into a literary tradition, she still stands out as an unclassifiable figure in Argentinian letters; despite her many friendships with authors like Olga Orozco and Julio Cortázar, she is not clearly identifiable with any literary school. Thus, while it might be argued that her attempts to find a patria failed on all counts, this failure manages to put into question the very idea of nationhood itself. And, given the oppression and division that concepts of nation have given rise to (and continue to do), her questioning of them constitutes a mode of resistance. Challenging the very ideas of homeland, nation, and fixity of any kind, Pizarnik suggests that exile is the basic condition of all of us, that wandering is our compulsion, that any attempt to take refuge in a safe, secure patria will ultimately be met with silence.

That said, it of course must be noted that it is not with joy that Pizarnik rejects the idea of nationhood – nor with cynical irony as Gombrowicz does. Instead, we see that she experiences the loss of nationhood as a deep wound, a trauma that can never be completely healed. In the poem “Piedra Fundamental” (“Fundamental Stone”) from El infierno musical (The Musical Hell), which is the book where she exhibits a loss of confidence in the power of language to lead us closer to the true meanings of things, she describes this as a sort of musical problem:

Yo quería hundirme, clavarme, fijarme, petrificarme. Yo quería entrar en el teclado para entrar adentro de la música para tener una patria. Pero la música se movía, se apresuraba. Sólo cuando un refrán reincidentía, alentaba en mí la esperanza de que estableciera algo parecido a una estación de trenes, quiero decir: un punto de partida firme y seguro; un lugar desde el cual partir, desde el lugar, hacia el lugar, en unión y fusión con el lugar. Pero el refrán era demasiado breve, de modo que yo no podía fundar una estación pues no contaba más que con un tren salido de los rieles que se contorsionaba y se distorsionaba (Obra completa 129).
I wanted to bury myself, drive myself in, secure myself, petrify myself. I wanted to enter the keyboard to enter into music, all in order to have a homeland. But the music kept moving; it quickened. Only when a refrain repeated itself, it encouraged in me the hope of establishing something like a train station. By this I mean a firm, secure point of departure; a place to depart from, from that place toward the place in union and fusion with it. But the refrain was too brief; therefore I could not build a station; I couldn’t count on anything but a derailed train, contorting and distorting itself).

This idea of moving music recalls Aira’s description of Pizarnik’s writing as a “fugue” – she wants to find a clear refrain, a strain of music that will repeat itself again and again. In this futile desire, as in so much of Pizarnik’s writing, we see a pain, a wound that refuses to be healed. This is another aspect of Pizarnik’s resistance. Previously, I have argued that the wound that cuts through Pizarnik’s work is existential in nature; it relates to the impossibility of ever completely reaching the other side of the wall, the constant evasion of the signified. But I believe that we can make a case that there is a historical aspect of this trauma as well. It relates to the troubled relationship to the nation that Cohen sees as an aspect of every diasporic experience as well as to collective memory – in Pizarnik’s case, the memory of European anti-Semitism and the reality of having family members who perished in the Holocaust. Although these realities are never mentioned explicitly in the poetry, they are present in the wound that her work depicts – a wound that leads ultimately toward melancholy and the drive toward repetition. In discussing this trauma, I believe that it is worth our while to look at Pizarnik’s later text, La condesa sangrienta.

2.4 Wound and Repetition

In the previous section, I quoted an entry from Pizarnik’s diary in which she discusses the problems of solitude and the lack of a patria. In my view, it is hardly coincidental that Pizarnik expresses this lamentation while in the midst of writing what can be considered one of her strangest works – La condesa sangrienta (The Bloody Countess), a depiction of melancholy, loneliness and trauma taken to their most extreme conclusion – in Pizarnik’s words as written in her diary, “la pura bestialidad” (pure bestiality) (Diarios 397). According to Bordelois, it was not easy for Pizarnik to write this text. Well aware of the tortures and imprisonments that were already occurring in Argentina during the 1950’s and 1960’s, Pizarnik was simultaneously
attracted to and repulsed by the theme of man’s inhumanity to man (Bordelois, Personal Interview). Part fiction, part essay, part prose poem, *The Bloody Countess* began as a book review of a historical, expository 1963 work by French writer Valentine Penrose. Both works concern the case of a sixteenth century Hungarian countess, Erzsébet Báthory, who is known as one of the first serial killers in history but has become surrounded by a mythology which has portrayed her as a monstrous, even vampiric figure.⁹ According to Pizarnik’s account, Báthory showed violent tendencies from a very early age; she liked to bite her servants or subject them to various physical punishments in case of any sort of offense (*Obra completa* 252). Pizarnik suggests that it was after her husband’s death that the gravity of her crimes increased; first she lured peasant girls to her castle with promises of well-paid work; then she began luring aristocrats with the promise of instruction in languages and fine manners. Among the tortures described by Pizarnik include the Iron Virgin, a machine that would embrace a woman with daggers, and “death by water,” where she would take a girl outside, nude in the freezing cold, and watch as the servants poured cold water over her, leaving her there to freeze.

One of the interesting aspects of the Erzsébet Báthory’s crimes is that all were committed against young, virginal women. And, what is most interesting to me is the phenomenon of repetition. Her desire was insatiable; after torturing and killing some young women, she was compelled to seek out more, all with the intention of bathing in the girls’ blood in order to preserve her own youth. Báthory’s principal advisor, the sorceress Darvulia, “ponderó las excelencias de la sangre de muchachas – en lo posible vírgenes – para someter al demonio de la decrepitud y la condesa aceptó este remedio como si se tratara de baños de asiento” (pondered

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⁹ During the early seventeenth century, Báthory became infamous for luring young teenage girls to her castle, torturing and killing them; according to Pizarnik she murdered 650, but other sources suggest the number was much lower. Born in 1560 to the aristocratic Báthory family of Hungary – a Protestant family, Báthory lived in a time of ongoing religious wars and political conflict between the Catholic Hapsburgs and the Protestants; there were also constant wars against the Turks. Therefore, the political situation was very unstable. Báthory was raised by a governess and given a very good education (she could speak and read four languages – rare for a woman at the time). She was betrothed at age eleven to Ferenc Nadsady, who was a nobleman, and married before turning fifteen. The marriage lasted until his death in 1604, reportedly due to an injury sustained in battle against the Turks. She had seven children, all of whom were cared for by governesses and lived far away from her. Eventually, accounts of the disappearing girls emerged, and people began to suspect the Countess. But, Báthory relied on the feudal system to protect herself, invoking the idea that she was the owner of the land and everything on it. Her relatives wanted to avoid a trial because of the scandal it would bring to the family name, so they placed her under house arrest in her castle in 1611, where she lived in darkness until she died four years later, allegedly never repenting for what she had done.
the graces of the blood of young girls – virgins if possible – to overcome the demon of decrepitude, and the countess accepted this remedy as if these were sitz baths) (Pizarnik, *Obra completa* 256). Commenting on this phenomenon, Cristina Santos finds it important to observe that, in addition to her perversion and megalomania, Erzsébet was motivated in her crimes by the pressures placed upon women within her culture:

> It seems that Erzsébet, apart from enjoying the privileges her social status provided her, was herself a victim of the socio-cultural pressures of female beauty. Erzsébet recognized that within her socio-cultural environment women were appreciated for being young and beautiful and with the passing of time and the decline of their beauty these same women, who were once prized for being beautiful, were relegated to a secondary position within that same context (“Vampires and Witches and Werewolves – Oh My!” 38).

Paradoxically, Erzsébet’s abominable social deviance was motivated by a desire – indeed, a compulsion – to conform to the standards of the society in which she found herself. In another essay on the Countess, Santos argues that like all perpetrators of heinous crimes, Erzsébet was also a victim: “The monstrous characterization of Báthory is unfairly and predominantly linked to her sexual deviance: her suspected lesbianism, her marital infidelities and an overall deviation from the prescribed role for women in her society and culture” (“Vampire or Megalomaniac Serial Killer? The Bloody Countess Elizabeth Bathory” 1). In the essay “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through,” Sigmund Freud postulates that the human compulsion to repeat past actions in new forms can be viewed as a response to repression (151). It is a kind of transference of a forgotten past onto current circumstances, and it signals the existence of a past trauma that, though forgotten by the conscious mind, is nevertheless present. I imagine that for most readers of the stories surrounding Erzsébet, it is difficult to empathize with the Countess deeply enough to view her repeated crimes as symptoms of a past personal trauma; it is hard to go so far as to place ourselves in her mind and allow ourselves to feel that emotions that would lead someone to do such a thing. For this reason, it is difficult for us to imagine Pizarnik’s own attraction to this story and need to retell it – which is, interestingly, also a form of repetition. Might there be some commonalities between the brutal Erzsébet and Pizarnik herself?
Several scholarly readers of *La condesa sangrienta* have commented on the cold, detached tone that Pizarnik assumes when discussing the tortures inflicted by the Countess; despite the vivid descriptions of the Iron Virgin and other methods Erzsébet used to kill the young girls, there is no sensationalism. There is also a complete suspension of judgment in Pizarnik’s tone toward the Countess except in the section entitled “El espejo de la melancolía” (The mirror of melancholy), in which Pizarnik actually appears to empathize with Erzsébet:

(For the melancholic person, time manifests itself as a suspension of its passing – in reality, there is a passing, but its slowness evokes the growth of corpses’ fingernails – proceeding and continuing from a fatally ephemeral violence. Between two silences or two deaths, the prodigious and fleeting speed, cloaked in various forms that range from innocent drunkenness to sexual perversions and even to crime. And I think of Erzébet Báthory and her nights whose rhythm is is mediated by the screams of adolescent girls. The book that I comment on in these notes bears a portrait of the countess: the sombre and beautiful lady looks like the allegory of melancholy shown in many old engravings. I also want to remind you that in this time a melancholic woman meant one who was possessed by the devil).

In the Countess’s melancholy and emotional torment, Pizarnik ultimately recognizes her own. Plagued by a similar loneliness, melancholy and outsider status, Pizarnik is able to experience the degree of pain that might lead someone to become “possessed by a demon” and to commit
such heinous crimes. Refusing to view the Countess as a monster, completely other and distinct from herself, Pizarnik also is able to see some beauty in Báthory’s tortured face. The critic Stephen Gregory extends this analogy between the Pizarnik and the Countess even further, arguing that the poet treats Penrose’s text in the same cannibalistic, devouring way that Erzsébet treats her victims. According to Gregory, the Countess invented “a nether world where she was a minority within a minority, inhabiting a secret, taboo, private domain where she believed her authority to be all but divine, her imagination unbounded and her immunity from earthly law absolute. It is here, I believe, that we can locate the point of Pizarnik’s self-recognition in the Countess’s plight” (300). Gregory argues that Pizarnik was marginalized within a ‘high culture’ of Argentinian literature that led her to form an exclusive ghetto within it through her focus on the most extreme, unusual and “maldito” (cursed) of the surrealist writers (302). Pizarnik was also marginalized as a lesbian and a Jew, and like the Countess, she also was obsessed with youth (when publishing her poetry she often lied about her birth year, often citing the year of her birth as 1939 rather than 1936). After describing the Countess’s tortures in this detached, nonjudgmental way, Pizarnik tries to come up with an explanation for them, and she ends up exploring the idea of melancholy. She states,

Un color invariable rige al melancólico: su interior es un espacio de color de luto; nada pasa allí; nadie pasa…Pero hay remedios fugitivos: los placeres sexuales, por ejemplo, por un breve tiempo pueden borrar la silenciosa galería de ecos y de espejos que es el alma melancólica. Y más aún: hasta pueden iluminar ese recinto enlutado y transformarlo en una suerte de cajita de música con figuras de vivos y alegres colores que danzan y cantan deliciosamente. Luego, cuando se acabe la cuerda, habrá que retornar a la inmovilidad y al silencio (Obra completa 255).

The melancholic is governed by one colour only; her interior is a space coloured by mourning; nothing happens there; no one passes by…But there are fugitive remedies for this: sexual pleasures, for example, for a brief moment can erase the silent gallery of echoes and mirrors that is a melancholic soul. And even more: they can even light up these funereal premises and transform them into a little music box with lively, colourful figures that sing and dance deliciously. Later, though, once the spring runs out, the melancholic must return to immobility and silence.
In this commentary for the possible reasons that motivated Erzsébet’s actions, we see a repetition of the motifs that recur throughout Pizarnik’s work; most specifically, those of music, silence, and the wall – this time rendered abstractly through the idea of “immobility” and concretely through the figure of the mirror, which serves as a kind of prison by reflecting the subject’s own image back at her and refusing to reveal anything that lies beyond. As María Negroni comments, *La condesa sangriente* should not be read in isolation from Pizarnik’s other work; rather, the images can all be interpreted in relation to one another: “[La] herida es precisa como un mecanismo de relojería, se repite a lo largo de la obra, con la monotonía obsesiva de una cajita musical donde resuenan pequeñas palabras desesperadas. En el mundo pizarnikiano diría, todo es espejo” (The wound is as precise as a clockwork mechanism; it is repeated throughout the work, with the monotony of a music box singing with little, desperate words. In the Pizarnikian world, I would say, all is mirrors) (13). Thus, while the Countess again and again repeats her crimes against guileless young women, Pizarnik also engages in a kind of repetition, again and again returning from the music box back to silence. And, if Freud and Negroni can be trusted, we may dare to associate this repetition with a deep sense of woundedness that runs throughout the work.

Looking a bit more closely at Pizarnik’s view of melancholy as embodied in the Bloody Countess, we see that it is a problem of colour and sound. After describing the music box with its colourful images, Pizarnik states, “Creo que la melancolía es, en suma, un problema musical: una disonancia, un ritmo transtornado” (I believe that melancholy is, in sum, a musical problem: a dissonance, a distorted rhythm) (*Obra completa* 255). In this strange music she locates an interior space characterized by utter monotony and stasis, a state of immobility which requires some kind of diversion, some kind of sound and color to bring life into this space. Pizarnik’s mention of mourning and melancholia is immediately resonant with Freud’s essay of the same title, in which the two ideas are presented as different responses to a loss. According to Freud, mourning is a process that occurs when one is faced with a loss and gradually moves from the initial shock toward some kind of acceptance; melancholia is similar on the outside, but it is different because it is not a process; it is a kind of stasis in which the subject does not quite understand what has been lost, and the mourning never quite goes away. According to Freud, “The melancholic displays something else besides which is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. In
mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (245). Is this what has happened to Erzsébet? Initially it does not seem so – on the contrary, her ego seems to be completely inflated. Then again, her compulsion to repeatedly murder young girls and bathe in their blood might be viewed instead as a total rejection of life, what critic Karl Posso describes as an identification with death itself as the ultimate and therefore perfect negation (because how can death die?) (63). The Countess expresses a desire for pure negation, a paradoxical need to become death in order to defeat death. Developing his theory of melancholia, Freud goes on to say that all thoughts of suicide are actually murderous impulses against others that have been turned back upon the self. “The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object – if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego’s original reaction to objects in the external world.” (251) It seems that Erzsébet is Freud’s melancholia in reverse – the desire to kill the self is transformed into a desire to kill others.

Erzsébet hates herself for what she lacks – youth and beauty, which patriarchal cultures throughout history have equated with femininity itself – but perhaps also innocence, which was never available to her in the political climate in which she lived; virginity, which was also never available to her – it was a commodity sold on a promissory note when she was eleven years old and purchased three years later. Thus hating herself for what she lacks, she hates it when she sees it in the young girls whom she goes on to victimize. Her melancholy over this loss leads her not to seek to destroy the self, but simultaneously to seek out reminders of this loss, thus holding on to the pain, and to destroy them, again and again. The crimes of Erzsébet Báthory, exaggerated or not, were undoubtedly cruel and vicious; however, it would be all too easy simply to transform her story into a myth. Pizarnik’s detached tone, on the one hand, highlights the cruelty of the Countess; at the same time, she also expresses a sort of compassion for her, a recognition of her own latent melancholia, this “musical problem” that, as her comments in “Piedra Fundamental” reveal, are intimately bound up with the desire for a lost patria.

Looking at Freud’s depictions of both the compulsion to repeat things and the analysis of mourning and melancholy, we see that the melancholic is, by her very nature, a figure who resists. Unlike the mourner, who briefly turns against the world and then, accepting the reality of her loss, goes back to rejoin it, the melancholic takes mourning and turns it into a solid space that
remains separate from the rest of the world, a shape that remains impervious to the changes that take place outside of it. Built upon repetition and static movement, this precarious space – perhaps the only patria that can be said to exist – most certainly destabilizes the surrounding structure. Pizarnik concludes her poetic essay on the Countess Báthory by censoring her, stating that her crimes demonstrate once again that “la libertad absoluta de la criatura humana es horrible” (the human creature’s absolute freedom is horrible) (Obra completa 259). Nevertheless, looking at Pizarnik’s affinity for the Countess’s story, we also see the desire for this freedom, the attraction that accompanies the repulsion. While Erzsébet’s castle might be seen as a space of resistance in the worst possible sense – an absolute rejection of all social value and morality – Pizarnik’s search for a patria demonstrates the desire for a space of resistance in a positive sense. In poetry Pizarnik seeks an alternative reality to the one she inhabits – one characterized by unbreakable national boundaries and social divisions that led both to the Holocaust in Europe and the struggles for power and ownership of national identity in mid-to-late twentieth-century Argentina. And, I believe that, looking at these poems, we see that this patria – though non-existent in the material reality of politics and commerce – is to be found within Pizarnik’s poetic lines. Digging deeply into the reality underlying all things, seeking that space of knowledge that she believes to exist on the other side of the wall, Pizarnik is unable to find the truth that she is looking for, the clear, unequivocal correspondence between the word and the thing it refers to. In the same way, she is unable to find the patria that she so urgently seeks at this mythical place where signifier and signified supposedly meet. In a poem such as “En esta noche, en este mundo” and indeed in much of her later writing, the capacity of language to represent reality breaks down; Pizarnik simply cannot find the truth behind the words. However, she insists on striving for it – an insistence that I have connected to the drive toward repetition associated with a response to trauma and pain. This pain is on the one hand existential, wrought by the constant awareness of impending personal death; however, it is also the more earthly pain associated with exile, a complex diasporic identity, and the memory of collective trauma faced by previous generations. Responding to this trauma, Pizarnik embarks on a frenetic movement that is at the same time a form of stasis, Sisyphus bearing his rock, passing through a universe that is infinite and finite at once. In this impossible, paradoxical space, Pizarnik takes her refuge, free from those who would hurry to place her in boxes delineated by such categories of nation, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. In this way, Pizarnik’s resistance resembles Agustini’s in that it subverts not
a specific ideology, but in fact the very possibility of ideology itself. Reading Pizarnik’s exquisitely melancholic poems, we learn that a secure dwelling can be found only in chaos; language succeeds in creating meaning only through its failure to represent meaning, and speech occurs only through the creation of silence.
Chapter 3
Spaces of Escape and Wandering: Marosa di Giorgio’s Worldmaking

There exists a most beautiful language. She has not heard it; she has not seen it, yet she knows that even the world’s most beautiful scripts cannot compare to it. She senses this language; she desires it, and the strength of her desire is enough to bring it into being. Is it the key to some hermetic knowledge, some ancient, sacred code? It seems to be so. But, she discovers it within the immediacy of her own experience, the familiar environment that she knows. Suddenly, the ordinary world becomes extraordinary, shining; candies and pearls fall from the sky; divinity is more immanent than transcendent. Just as this new world is created, so is a new language. But, though new and completely unfamiliar, Marosa di Giorgio understands it perfectly, and she eagerly shares it with us.

Like her compatriot Delmira Agustini and her contemporary Alejandra Pizarnik, Marosa di Giorgio urgently seeks knowledge of an ultimate reality. However, while Agustini looks for this reality in another realm beyond that of everyday life, and while Pizarnik seeks it behind a
silent wall of language, di Giorgio finds it to be quite close to the familiar landscapes she knows. Often writing from the perspective of a child narrator (or, just as often, an adult narrator engaging with the magical and disturbing memories of childhood), di Giorgio transforms the quotidian space of a family farm into a strange landscape populated by angels, demons, gods, druids, monsters, and the constant presence of nature, which reveals itself to be dangerously sublime as well as beautiful. Just as Lewis Carroll’s Alice struggles to navigate the completely unfamiliar world on the other side of the looking glass, di Giorgio’s poetic voice seeks to find her way in a landscape where the borders between reality and dream, memory and desire are never clearly defined. Sometimes, we listen to this voice as it aims to apprehend the transcendent reality it perceives, a poetic truth that can only be found in this “most beautiful language” discovered in the poem quoted above. At other times, di Giorgio’s narrator finds herself in danger and seeks to escape from whatever threat presents itself, whether that of thieves, wolves, or young, godlike men who are simultaneously enticing and horrifying. While the poetic truth that di Giorgio seeks is said to be located in memory, sometimes this same memory is oppressive, cumbersome, something that she would rather leave behind. And, while it is occasionally possible to understand this hermetic truth “as if it has always been my own,” there are many other instances when such attempts prove futile, and di Giorgio’s narrator responds with either inexorable pathos or dark, ironic humour.

As readers, what are we to make of di Giorgio’s ceaseless transformations? Critics are quite distinct in their interpretations. For the Uruguayan poet and critic Leonardo Garet (who was a close friend of the author), di Giorgio is an observer of esoteric mysteries in the vein of the surrealists and William Blake, offering us “seres y situaciones que están al alcance de la mano, a la vez que en la esfera del mito” (beings and situations at hand’s reach, but also in the realm of myth) (170). Garet views di Giorgio as primarily a mystic visionary who creates new worlds out of words, or reveals the extraordinary aspects of this world. However, the critic Hugo Achugar cannot ignore the sneaking suspicion that in claiming to be visited by angels, di Giorgio might just be teasing her readers a bit. Describing her work in terms of Susan Sontag’s camp aesthetic, Achugar states,

A veces creo que Marosa creía sincera e inocentemente en las visitas de los ángeles susurrándole esos extraños universos que habitan sus textos, otras, pienso que esa figura
extraña, vestida con un gusto o una estética disonante o bizarra, bordeando siempre el llamado “mal gusto”, no era un desajustado personaje de la cursilería provinciana uruguaya sino un alguien perversamente contemporáneo, una poeta que se construía a sí misma como otro personaje más de su particular universo (110).

(Sometimes I believe that Marosa sincerely, innocently believed in the visits of angels who whispered those strange universes into her ear, inspiring her to place them in her texts. Other times, I think of her strange presence, how she dressed in bizarre, dissonant ways always bordering on “bad taste.” She wasn’t just another character of the schmaltzy Uruguayan countryside, but rather someone perversely contemporary, a poet who fashioned herself as another character in her poetic universe).

For Achugar, di Giorgio (who indeed spent some time as an actor in a theatre company in her home city of Salto) is essentially a performer, using pastiche to create a text filled with irony and play. However, these two contrasting views of di Giorgio – as a true seeker of ultimate reality and a disingenuous parodist of any attempts to know such reality – are not mutually exclusive. Uruguayan poet Roberto Echavarren celebrates the ambiguity in di Giorgio’s work. Reading her work primarily through a psychoanalytic lens, he states, “La vida, aquí, es exaltada a una intensidad siniestra: el peligro es una ocasión para apreciar que aún estamos vivos, aunque divididos entre el placer y el goce, entre la tranquilidad y la intensidad, entre la sobrevivencia y la vida / muerte, al experimentar devenires que sobrepasan, o parecen sobrepasar, las capacidades orgánicas del cuerpo” (Here, life is exalted to a sinister intensity: danger provides occasion for us to be thankful that we’re alive, though torn between pleasure and bliss, peace and intensity, survival and life / death, experiencing transformations that overcome, or seem to overcome, the body’s organic capacities) (1111). For Echavarren, di Giorgio’s truly ironic and well-calculated humour goes hand in hand with the visionary quality of her poems and the constant search for transcendence. Meanwhile, other critics such as K.A. Kopple and Anna Deeny have focused intently on the political aspect of di Giorgio’s work. Both are intrigued that, while not overtly political and appearing to be escapist in nature, di Giorgio’s work engages with the harsh reality of Uruguay’s two military dictatorships of the twentieth century. As Kopple comments, “As one would expect from a writer who is a surrealist, di Giorgio does not represent
social or historical events. She hallucinates them” (56). More recently, other critics have followed a similar line of interpretation of di Giorgio’s work.

In the chapter that follows, I will seek to follow Roberto Echavarren in exploring the many ambiguities that pervade di Giorgio’s writing particularly with respect to the desire for transcendence and the impossibility of achieving that transcendence, as well as the relationship between genuine vision and fabricated performance described by Achugar. I also want to follow Kopple and Deeny in their explorations of di Giorgio’s precarious relationship with the political dimension that, though never discussed directly, is unmistakeably present in the text. In order to do this, I intend to invoke the concepts of poetic space that I am seeking to develop throughout this dissertation. Looking at Blanchot’s work, I will focus on the discussion of memory – the drive toward an authenticity that lies in the past and the impossibility of achieving that memory. More generally, I will also look at his discussion of poetry as a process of hearing “a language which makes nothing heard” (51). However, one question that I seek to raise in this investigation is, just what does it mean to make nothing heard? And, is this really what is happening in di Giorgio’s writing? As we have seen, Blanchot envisions the poet as someone who stands before the absence of the gods, who allows their absence to speak. But, in di Giorgio’s work, the gods are hardly absent; indeed, they are deeply, palpably present. Unlike Hugo Achugar, I do not believe that di Giorgio is merely employing religious imagery in an ironic way (though irony is definitely part of her poetics). Therefore, I plan to supplement my discussion of Blanchot with a glimpse at a poet who, despite the lack of any direct or historical link with di Giorgio, is certainly linked thematically to her work: the early British Romantic poet William Blake, whose work Marosa di Giorgio read and loved (Garet, Personal Interview). While Leonardo Garet has asserted that di Giorgio “no debe nada […] a William Blake” (owes nothing […] to William Blake) he does acknowledge the presence of certain thematic parallels between the two (Garet 169). These include the use of religious imagery, the transformation of mystical visions into poetic art, and the constant tension between such binary oppositions as goodness and evil, innocence and experience, beauty and ugliness, and many others. Blake’s work (along with some of the criticism of it) provides an interesting theoretical supplement to Blanchot. To my understanding, Blake is similar to Blanchot in that he views poetic space as an ultimate reality from which all particulars – including seemingly contradictory ones – emerge. The obvious
difference, however, is that while for Blanchot the ultimate reality is nothingness, for Blake it is the presence of God embodied in man. I believe that at its most profound level, the question of the nature of this reality – whether as complete absence or absolute presence – is not particularly relevant; it might be argued that the two visions mirror each other and are actually quite similar. Whether composed of God or nothingness, this underlying reality approached in the poem can inspire wonder and fear in anyone who encounters it. In terms of di Giorgio’s writing, I intend to argue that this space of knowledge is inextricably linked with binary oppositions between innocence and experience, goodness and evil, chaos and order. Reality is itself characterized by a tense, dynamic interplay between contraries that are not resolved even temporarily; instead, they coexist in a state of constant conflict and contradiction. It is for this reason that I see di Giorgio, much more so than the other two poets in this study, as resonating specifically with the ideas seen in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience* and *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Like Blake, di Giorgio views reality as a dynamic interplay between contraries, and it is this reality that manifests itself in the poetic space of her poems.

Meanwhile, I also want to argue that, like the other two poets included in this study, di Giorgio’s writing transforms the space of poetic revelation into a space of resistance that constitutes a mode of resistance against the political oppression that Uruguay experienced during the poet’s lifetime. As María Soledad Montañez has observed, many critics have been quick to describe di Giorgio as an apolitical writer and to analyse her work out of context (145). In a similar way, Herbert Benítez Pezzolano argues that, writing during one of the “momentos históricos más brutalizados y regresivos de la historia del Uruguay del siglo XX” (most brutal and regressive historic moments of twentieth century Uruguay), di Giorgio elaborates a complex poetic universe, an alternative possible world that rejects the “determinadas estructuras de la realidad” (determined structures of reality) in which she lived (17). Di Giorgio’s opposition is not obvious or overt; rather, it is embedded in the poetic images (which often depict soldiers patrolling the countryside and civilians becoming implicated in the violence). However, di Giorgio also resists on a more conceptual level. Through the precarious dance between the transcendent and the comic, di Giorgio creates her own poetic epistemology, resulting in a language mode that works against the totalizing “consent of language” through which powerful, totalitarian governments seek to assume absolute power over the individual self (Deeny 99). In a
very interesting analysis of di Giorgio in terms of John Locke’s treatises on government, the critic Anna Deeny reveals the ways in which this language of obligatory consent is created in the Uruguayan context, and she cites di Giorgio’s work as a locus of resistance to it. Building upon Deeny’s analysis, I plan to explore some of the ways that this resistance surfaces at the textual level (this I am calling the space of resistance). In order to undertake this investigation, I will refer again to Blanchot’s discussion of the ways in which poetic discourse, as an anti-utilitarian language mode, manages to resist structures of power. However, I think that it also might be interesting to include Edouard Glissant’s concept of errantry and Relation identity in this discussion. While Glissant is usually discussed in terms of postcolonialism, race, and hybrid identities, he is relevant here due to his concept of “poetics of Relation,” described in his 1997 book of that same title. In this very poetically written work, Glissant suggests that the main force behind colonialism, imperialism and other types of oppression throughout history is the oppressors’ sense of identity. Those in power most often experience “root identity,” which is founded in the distant past in a vision, myth of the creation of the world; is sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation that strictly follows from this founding episode; is ratified by a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of a land, which thus becomes a territory; is preserved by being projected onto other territories (143).

According to Glissant, colonial powers legitimize their imperial ambitions by creating a foundation myth grounded far in the past through which they identify themselves as being somehow set apart from the people over whom they exert their dominance. This can be seen in societies throughout history, ranging from the ancient Greeks (who set themselves against the barbarians) to the Americans, who during the nineteenth century declared that their new nation was ordained by God to expand across the continent and refused to recognize the rights and land claims of indigenous groups. For Glissant, every national myth is sanctioned by such hidden violence. Meanwhile, those without power experience “Relation identity,” which “is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures” and “does not devise any legitimacy as its guarantee of entitlement, but circulates, newly extended; does not think of a land as a territory from which to project other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps” (144).
When looking at the space of di Giorgio’s poetic universe, I think that it would be wrong to claim that there is no drive toward “root identity.” In transforming her grandparents into gods and seeking the “most beautiful language,” di Giorgio does indeed seek an edenic, pre-Babelian wholeness from which all experience comes. However, as this chapter will seek to show, di Giorgio’s attempt to find this wholeness results in one failure after another. Past events cannot be remembered with enough accuracy. Treasured possessions, even treasured family members are snatched away at a moment’s notice. A beautiful landscape instantly becomes sinister. In seeking transcendence, di Giorgio finds that she inhabits a world of constant flux were sacredness is quickly transformed into profanity, where the ugly suddenly becomes beautiful, where fear collapses into humour. It is these changes, these sudden shifts, this sense of constant wandering in di Giorgio that resonate with Glissant’s concept of Relation, and they are also what allow her to create a space of resistance.

3.1 Space of Knowledge: In Search of the Lost Authentic

In Polish writer Bruno Schulz’s 1937 short story collection, Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass, we are introduced to the character of Józef, a young boy for whom everyday life in his small, Eastern European town is imbued with magic and the constant presence of the sacred. In a short story entitled, “The Book,” Józef speaks of his fascination with a beautiful book kept in the family’s kitchen. For the child narrator, this book is so complete and holy that it contains the totality of all truth, which he names “the Authentic.” As the story progresses, the young Józef is struck by a sudden fear; the book has been misplaced, and he receives no reply when he asks his parents where it is. The climax of the story occurs when, to his utter horror, he learns that the family’s servant has been tearing out pages from the Book on a daily basis and using them to pack meat. At this point the reader learns that this sacred Book is nothing more than scraps from old newspapers, hardly a tome of “authentic” knowledge. By the story’s end, Jozef realizes this as well, but he holds fast to the firm belief in the existence of this one true book, written in a primordial time which he calls “the Age of Genius.” In a world where cheap trinkets glitter with the same radiance as genuine jewels, even the childhood narrator doubts the
reality of this past Age. And yet, even if he cannot remember this time as actually having occurred in the past, he seeks to create it in the present: “Thus we shall collect these allusions, these earthly approximations, these stations and stages on the paths of our life, like the fragments of a broken mirror. We shall recreate piece by piece what is one and indivisible – the great era, the Age of Genius of our Life” (130). Though he walks among ruins, he hopes to piece them together in a newly created version of the lost Authentic.

I have begun my discussion of di Giorgio’s poetic quest for knowledge with this reference to Schulz because I can hardly think of a better way to describe the process that occurs again and again in di Giorgio’s writing. Like Schulz, di Giorgio seeks this ultimate truth, this authentic reality that is located somewhere in childhood. In Clavel y tenebrario (Carnation and Tenebrae Candle), di Giorgio’s eighth book of poetry, the child narrator describes an immense bunch of daisies that magically contains all other kinds of flowers:

Era un ramo de margaritas, con una rosa rosada, que es la suprema flor, y un clavel amarillo como una copa de almíbar, y un jazmín de color de rosa, y una flor sin nombre, y otra con muchos nombres, y santas ramitas de mirra, de bálsamo y de nardo, y un repollito de agua, y una perla muy madura, Era un ramo inmenso con todos los colores y todas las flores, en mitad del pupitre, de la sala, de la tarde de tormenta, mientras las nubes brillantes corrían por todo el cielo, y se avenindaba el viento del sur, desolador. Y la maestra miraba a las páldidas niñas de vestido blanco y a los varones diabólicos, y todos nos juntábamos en torno a la maestra, en torno del ramo, como si su sola presencia nos fuera a amparar de todo (1: 229).

(It was a bunch of daisies, with a pink rose, which is the sovereign flower, and a yellow carnation like a cup of syrup, and a pink jasmine, and a nameless flower, and another one with many names, and holy branches of myrrh, of balsam and spikenard, and a little water cabbage, and a very ripe pearl [...] It was an immense bunch containing every colour and every flower, in the middle of the desk, of the classroom, of the stormy afternoon, while the shining clouds ran across the entire sky, and the south wind settled, devastating. And the teacher looked at the pale girls in their white dresses and the

10 All of the texts by Marosa di Giorgio discussed in this chapter have been compiled in the two-volume Los papeles salvajes (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editora, 2000).
devilish boys, and all of us gathered around her, around that bunch of flowers, as if their mere presence might be enough to protect us from everything).

Like Józef’s great book, this seemingly simple bunch of daisies grows and expands to include the reality of everything that has ever existed, and then to point to an even higher reality. The images of the “nameless” flower and the “flower with many names” suggest the presence of both nothingness and excess, and they might both be taken to refer to the divine, which in some religious traditions is nameless (or at least, as in Judaism, its name cannot be spoken) while in others it is diffused over a pantheon of many deities (or, in the case of Catholicism, many saints who are not gods but bear some marks of sanctity). This idea of divinity is further developed by di Giorgio’s use of biblical imagery. Myrrh is one of the gifts of the Magi to the infant Jesus and a symbol of his inevitable death; the spikenard (a plant which is mentioned many times in di Giorgio’s writing) is a symbol of the sensual, ecstatic love celebrated in the Song of Songs. In the middle of the poem (which I have not quoted in full), di Giorgio adds more images to the description of this marvellous bunch of flowers, mentioning a spider, a hummingbird, a butterfly and a fairy, among other creatures. Just as Józef finds the whole of the cosmos contained in his precious book, the unnamed child narrator of di Giorgio’s poem finds the entirety of organic plant life compressed into this single bunch of flowers. And, by infusing this phenomenon with divine power, di Giorgio’s poetic speaker treats the object as a kind of talisman. Like the “most beautiful language” described in the twenty-third poem of the same collection, this image of the flowers compresses the immensity of the divine into something small and graspable. The sacred language can be understood; the flowers stand on the middle of the desk, waiting to be held. But, as is so often the case in di Giorgio’s work, they ultimately cannot be grasped. Beauty is met with danger as a strange storm advances, and evil is present in the girls – who look more ghostly than innocent in their white dresses – and the devilish boys. All of the children seek protection from the evil that they sense in the storm; they approach the teacher and the flowers, which seem to promise only goodness, “As if their mere presence might be enough to protect us from everything.” Unfortunately, “as if” is the key phrase here. The poetic speaker’s desperate tone and counter-factual way of speaking suggests that these beautiful, all-encompassing flowers are not enough to protect them from imminent danger. As Józef’s great, sacred book turns out to be
nothing more than the daily newspaper, this magical, all-encompassing flower bouquet turns out to be, in the end, just a normal flower bouquet.

This tension between the extraordinary and the ordinary, as well as between beauty and danger, occurs repeatedly throughout di Giorgio’s work. Like Schulz’s narrator, di Giorgio’s poetic speakers seek a transcendent knowledge, a uniquely authentic reality that is located in childhood. Sometimes, as in the case of the “most beautiful language” described above, this knowledge is achieved; other times, as in this example, it is not achieved. And while in some cases this authenticity is almost at hand’s reach, at other times it is quite distant, and the poetic voice (speaking from the vantage point of adulthood) tries to travel back in time in order to find it. We see this phenomenon in di Giorgio’s second book, Humo (Smoke), in which the poetic speaker passionately cries out, “Niña, niña mía” (Child, child of mine) (1: 55). Speaking as if to a saint, the speaker addresses this child with a litany of epithets such as “little snow nun,” “guider of the snow animals,” and “little goat of the iridescent antlers” (1: 55). The speaker asserts again and again, “Tu edad ha vuelto” (Your age has returned), suggesting that this child is an adult who has miraculously been made young again. While the cry of “Child, child of mine” might initially make the speaker appear as a mother addressing an estranged daughter, this focus on moving back in time – transforming the adult into the child – as well as the intensely desirous tone of the speaker – suggests a different relationship. (“Voy a besar de nuevo tus senos de higos misteriosos, tus uñas opalinas” / Again I shall kiss your breasts made of mysterious figs, your opal fingernails) (1: 55). However, this depiction of the girl as an object of desire is starkly juxtaposed to the portrayal of this child as a completely innocent, virginal “little snow nun.”

In reading this passage, I cannot help but refer to the author’s biography. Di Giorgio, who never married and publicly presented herself as never having had a relationship, describes herself as a “a nude, barefoot princess, a nun with some gipsy tendencies, waiting for something to fall from the sky into [her] hands” (Foffani). In many of di Giorgio’s poems, the speaker is a virginal, nun-like figure, whether as the Virgin Mary (in La liebre de marzo) (The March Hare), or as a bride in a wedding with no groom (as in the second poem of Está en llamas el jardín natal [The Native Garden is in Flames]). Therefore, when I read this particular poem, I sense that the speaker’s desire is essentially autoerotic; the child for which she so desperately yearns is her own former self. But, her yearning proves futile. Ultimately, the child that this speaker so
desperately yearns to be is a “cadáver oculto en la más antigua cómoda, en el más viejo mueble” (a corpse hidden in the most ancient wardrobe, in the oldest piece of furniture) (1: 56). The child is dead, buried in the old home’s furniture, still very present but decaying nonetheless. This episode recalls other instances in which di Giorgio’s speaker seeks to return to the past by means of furniture, as in Historial de las violetas (The History of Violets), in which she hopes to open “la cómoda, la más antigua, la de las bodas de mi abuela y la juventud de mi madre y de sus hermanas” (the chest of drawers, the oldest, the one from my grandmother’s weddings and youth of my mother and her sisters) (1: 97). Immediately, a white chick appears which, like the child in Humo, is so lovely that the poetic speaker feels the impulse to kiss her. But, while the child turns out to be a long-deceased corpse, this chick and the old chest of drawers in the background burst into flames and disappears. “Dios tiene sus cosas bien guardadas / God stows his things away safely,” we are told (1: 97). The true, authentic reality which di Giorgio’s narrator seeks is not hers to take; it is property of God, who might go so far as to send fire if he so chooses in order to prevent her from gaining the access that she so urgently seeks. The magic of childhood, which the speaker yearns to recapture through memory and desire, remains unattainable.

Looking at this tension between the desperate desire for knowledge of this authenticity and the impossibility of achieving it, I find an interesting resonance with Blanchot, who explores the connection between poetic space, memory and absence. “To write is to surrender to the fascination of time’s absence,” he tells us (30). Time is a film, a barrier which the writer seeks to overcome, but finds that he cannot. Or else, perhaps time is an illusion. “The time of time’s absence has no present, no presence. This ‘no present,’ however, does not refer back to a past. Olden days had the dignity, the active force of a now. Memory still bears witness to this active force,” he states (30). The “active force” that memory bears witness to is in fact a kind of “now.” Memory does not truly allow us to travel back in time to the past; instead, we attempt to create a new sort of space in the present. If we insist on trying to recuperate the past, we inevitably encounter “the time of time’s absence,” which informs us that the event which we are trying to recall “never happened, never for a first time, and yet it starts over, again, again, infinitely. It is without end, without beginning. It is without a future” (30). We cannot say that the events which we are recalling in our memories happened in the past and were completed in the past because they exist in our imagination in the present. But, because they exist only in the realm of desire
and imagination, they cannot be actualized and brought to completion. In one sense, the process of memory allows these events to recur again and again; in another, nothing occurs at all. The desired memory remains irretrievably absent.

While this process might seem like a cause of angst or suffering for the writer, Blanchot describes it instead as a source of joy. It is the inherent solitude of the writer – the distance between the writer and her desired but absent memory from the past – that brings about this fascination:

What happens when what you see, although at a distance, seems to touch you with a gripping contact, when seeing is contact at a distance? What happens when what is seen imposes itself upon the gaze, as if the gaze were seized, put in touch with the appearance? What happens is not an active contact, not the initiative and action which there still is in real touching. Rather, the gaze gets taken in, absorbed by an immobile movement and a depthless deep. What is given by this contact at a distance is the image, and fascination is passion for the image (32).

Looking at di Giorgio, we see this fascination again and again. Di Giorgio began writing at a young age and published her first book of poetry in 1954; her last was published soon after her death exactly fifty years later in 2004. And, while each of her books is somewhat different in theme and style, there are certain motifs that recur throughout the body of her work. Echavarren comments that some critics (principally journalistic ones) have criticized this consistency in theme and tone, saying that she is too repetitive and lacks versatility. He himself defends di Giorgio, saying, “a mí me parece, al contrario, que el explorar un territorio, el registro de variantes de una manera y un ‘mundo’ es, aquí como en otros casos, el síntoma perentorio de un poder” (it seems to me, on the contrary, that di Giorgio is exploring a territory, certain variations on a theme, and a ‘world’ is, here as in other cases, an immediate symptom of power) (1103).

The discussion of power will be taken up later in this essay, when I will discuss the various forms of resistance that occur in di Giorgio’s writing. For now, I am more interested in exploring the thematic cohesion of her work – specifically, the constant focus on childhood and the desire to recuperate a lost prelapsarian innocence. In her second book, Humo, she imagines a utopian future in which she and all the people whom she loves will be reunited, after which they will
return to an edenic, idealized past. “Vamos a dejar esta tierra amarga para siempre. / Vamos a volver al leve país donde nacimos.” (We are going to leave this bitter land forever. / We are going to return to the delicate country where we were born) (1: 53). Meanwhile, at the beginning of her seventh book, *Está en llamas el jardín natal*, she makes a similar nostalgic gesture toward the past. Describing a moment when her grandfather offered her a coin that transformed into a piece of candy, then changed again into a flower that grew for many years, the poetic voice asserts, “Soy de aquel tiempo / Los años dulces de la Magia” (I am from that time / The sweet years of Magic) (1: 169). Di Giorgio consistently expresses a fascination with childhood and a desire to return to this magical time, so much so that it comes to seem like an obsession. But, as K.A. Kopple suggests, childhood is always described in terms of the poetic speaker’s overarching, insatiable, perhaps objectless desire (53). I would say that the object of this desire is related to the “image” that Blanchot describes as the object of our passion that transcends space and time. Commenting on the ways in which this image fascinates us, Blanchot states,

If our childhood fascinates us, this happens because childhood is the moment of fascination, is itself fascinated. And this golden age seems bathed in a light which is splendid because unrevealed. But it is only that this light is foreign to revelation, has nothing to reveal, is pure reflection, a ray which is still only the gleam of an image. Perhaps the force of the maternal figure receives its intensity from the very force of fascination, and one might say then, that if the mother exerts this fascinating attraction it is because, appearing when the child lives altogether in fascination’s gaze, she concentrates in herself all the powers of enchantment. It is because the child is fascinated that the mother is fascinating, and that is also why all the impressions of early childhood have a kind of fixity which comes from fascination. Whoever is fascinated doesn’t see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity; it seize and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance. Fascination is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence, to the indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone. Fascination is the relation the gaze entertains – a relation which is itself neutral and impersonal – with sightless, shapeless depth, the absence one sees because it is blinding (33).
According to Blanchot, we become fascinated with childhood because it appears to reveal a deep, fundamental truth – just like Bruno Schulz’s “Authentic” or di Giorgio’s “most beautiful language.” But, what seems like an unshakeable truth ultimately proves to be an illusory absence. “No puedo ordenar mis recuerdos” (I cannot put my memories in order) she tells us. “La luna me los desbarata cada vez” (The moon just wrecks them every time) (1: 100). In La liebre de marzo she similarly states, “No volveré al lugar que vi de chica” (I will never return to the place I saw as a child) (283). After describing a magical garden filled with orange trees, honey and violets, she informs us, “Entonces, algo extraño pasaba por el mundo (se nos caían los vestidos y las tazas), una figura con alas, la palabra nunca” (Then something strange passed through the world [our dresses and cups fell away], a winged figure, the word “never”) (1: 283). What is this “never”? Is it located in the past, or is it only encountered as the adult poetic speaker seeks to return to the past? Clearly it is an oppressive force, but what kind exactly? Is it a form of political oppression? Is it the spectre of the child’s mother, who, as on so many other occasions, acts as an agent of discipline and restriction? I would say that it is the force of time itself. Even as a child, the poetic narrator knows that the magical garden which she inhabits is temporary; eventually, she will be forced to leave it, turn to look back, and find that it has burst into flames. In di Giorgio’s writing the barrier between the subject and ultimate reality – in this case, the barrier of time – is itself the reality; the source of the narrator’s fascination is not some great truth to be unearthed through the process of recollection, but rather fascination itself when faced with the “immense, faceless Someone.”

If this is the case, though, then what are we left with? Schulz’s Jozef finds that his great authentic book is nothing more than the newspaper, used by the maid every day for wrapping food items. There is no clear distinction between originals and copies, between treasures of great value and cheap junk. Is something similar occurring here? Hugo Achugar, who views di Giorgio’s use of pastiche as a kind of camp aesthetic, might argue thus. But, as I read di Giorgio, it seems that the process of desiring this ultimate truth creates the space in which this truth dwells. Unlike in Agustini’s work, where poetic space is somehow transcendent, beyond an apparent nothingness, in di Giorgio’s writing it is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, embodied in the very act of desiring it. “Fascination is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence, to the indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone,” Blanchot tells
us. Taken out of context, this “someone” would seem to be God, but we know that for Blanchot the gods have long ago disappeared. Who is the “someone” in di Giorgio’s writing? Is it the God who “cruza volando la noche, / como si fuera a irse” (crosses the night flying, as if he were going away) (1: 183)? Is it the devil? Is it – as Blanchot suggests in his discussion of fascination – the child’s mother, who, according to Roberto Echavarren, is an ambiguous figure, “en algunos lugares censora; requiere del yo comportamientos conformes, decoro, silencio” (sometimes a censor, demanding of the speaker conformist behaviour, decorum, silence), but at other times “haciéndose cómplice de las fechorías o transgresiones” (making herself complicit in transgressions) (1113)? I want to suggest that the transcendent reality that di Giorgio is seeking is embodied in all of these figures. However, it is not available in the pure, unadulterated, prelapsarian form. The world that di Giorgio’s poetic voices inhabit – far removed from the perfect, total, authentic reality lost in childhood and inaccessible to the adult memory – is a place of constant tension between binary oppositions. For Blanchot, this sort of tension is inherent in all literary works. “The antagonistic violence due to which [the work] was, in the course of its genesis, the opposition of its contrary movements, is not just a feature of this genesis, but belongs to the character of agonistic struggle which is the character of the work’s very being” (1: 204). Looking at di Giorgio, we see that these contrary movements are a characteristic not only of her work, but also of reality itself. If pure, whole, authentic truth has been lost to the past, we are left with constant flux and motion. And, I plan to argue, the divinity which di Giorgio is seeking lies somewhere between these movements. In order to develop this idea further, I think that it will be useful to compare di Giorgio to a poet who, though of a completely different historical and cultural context, shares certain points of commonality with di Giorgio: the early British Romantic William Blake.

3.2 Fearful Asymmetries

Critics love to compare di Giorgio’s work to that of other authors. This seems to be especially true for North American and European readers; when faced with a body of work so unfamiliar, presented by a poet who is still not universally considered a major poet of the Latin American poetic canon, we perhaps feel compelled to seek a more familiar point of reference.
However, di Giorgio’s uniqueness also leaves Latin American critics grappling to situate her work within a wider context. After informing us that di Giorgio’s poetry “no tiene nada que ver con los programas y los proyectos que se consideraban válidos en el Uruguay de los años sesenta, dominados por una poesía coloquial y ‘comprometida’” (has nothing to do with the programs and projects that were considered valid in the 60s, dominated by a colloquial and ‘committed’ kind of poetry), Roberto Echavarren seeks to situate di Giorgio as inheriting the influence of the Latin American modernista tradition (of which Agustini is one of the primary representatives) and, prior to that tradition, to two late-nineteenth century Franco-Uruguayan Symbolist poets, Jules Laforgue and Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont) (Echavarren 1103-1104). Indeed, the use of the prose poem form invites comparisons with many of the French symbolists; the combination of surreal imagery and strange, dissonant humour recalls Lautréamont. However, for other readers, the focus on nature, spirituality and erotic female subjectivity has led to comparisons with Emily Dickinson; the weirdness and displaced sense of life on the other side of the looking glass reminds some readers of Lewis Carroll; the frightening, pseudo-Gothic imagery recalls Emily Bronté. Then, there are the authors whose work di Giorgio herself explicitly references in the text, including Edgar Allan Poe, Dylan Thomas, William Butler Yeats and the aforementioned Carroll, whose Alice in Wonderland has given di Giorgio the title for one of her longest poetic works, La liebre de marzo.

I believe that it is necessary to be cautious when bringing all these other (primarily European) writers to bear on di Giorgio’s work, lest we focus too much on apparent and imagined connections and lose sight of the uniqueness of di Giorgio’s own voice. While she was an avid reader, she explicitly denied membership in any literary movement or school. Defending her uniqueness, Leonardo Garet has stated, “La poeta uruguaya no debe nada […] a Lewis Carroll, ni a los surrealistas, ni a William Blake. Con todos ellos tiene, sin embargo, coincidencias. Los creadores de la mejor poesía de todos los tiempos avizoran el misterio y parten de heridas cercanas” (The Uruguayan poet owes nothing to Lewis Carroll, nor the surrealists, nor William Blake. Nevertheless, she shares some features in common with them. The greatest makers of poetry in all times observed similar mysteries and experienced similar wounds) (169). While Garet makes it clear that di Giorgio owes nothing to Blake (and thus negates the idea of tracing a chain of influence) he recognizes the common features. When I first
encountered di Giorgio, I immediately saw a parallel with three of Blake’s earlier works – *The Songs of Innocence*, *the Songs of Experience*, and the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. While I do not claim that there exists a chain of influence between the two authors, I was not at all surprised to learn that di Giorgio, who was well versed in many works of the English tradition, read and enjoyed Blake. The conviction that the present world is a fallen one, the focus on binary oppositions – which Blanchot calls contrary movements and Blake refers to simply as “contraries” – and the conviction that “All deities reside in the human breast” (*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 117) are interesting parallels between Blake and di Giorgio. As I seek to explore the poetic space that di Giorgio creates in her repeatedly failed attempts to arrive at the total, pre-Babelian truth lost in childhood and inaccessible by memory, I find that Blake offers an interesting supplement to Blanchot’s discussion of “the time of time’s absence” and the binary oppositions that exist within the literary work. Like Blanchot, Blake speaks much of these contrary movements. However, while Blanchot focuses on the ways that these occur within a work of literature, Blake sees them as a characteristic of reality itself. In the paragraphs that follow, I will discuss the ways in which binary oppositions appear in both Blake and di Giorgio, ultimately serving to offer glimpses of an immanent divinity embedded in humanity.

Perhaps Blake’s most famous images are those of two creatures of nature, both of which he describes as being fashioned by an unknown (but perhaps not unknowable) Creator. “Little lamb, who made thee?” he asks in the fifteenth poem of *The Songs of Innocence*. “Dost thou know who made thee, / Gave thee life and bid thee feed / By the stream and o’er the mead / Gave thee clothing of delight / Softest clothing, woolly bright, / Gave thee such a tender voice / making all the vales rejoice?” (70). In this oft-quoted poem, we are introduced to Blake’s view of nature. Unlike many of the later British Romantics, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake does not view nature as a green, edenic paradise to which we retreat in search of solace amid the chaos and turbidity of the modern, industrialized world. Instead, nature is created and shaped by the mind of man. “Where man is not, nature is barren,” he states in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (116). It is not nature that sustains man, but rather man – through vision, creativity and ingenuity – that sustains nature, shaping it and transfiguring it. As Polish poet and critic Czeslaw Milosz observes in his essay on Blake, *The Land of Ulro*,

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Blake did not approve of Nature. At a time when conservationists are fighting to protect the “natural environment,” this might be misconstrued. Blake disliked Nature in the same way Nature dislikes itself, as expressed in the words of St. Paul: “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Romans 8:22). In an age when the Deists revered Nature as an ingenious machine, when Rousseau prescribed it as the cure for a corrupted civilization, when the sentimental novel and early Romantic poetry were hymning the exaltation of souls in communion with a Nature viewed pantheistically, Blake strenuously opposed all such fashionable cults, waiting, along with St. Paul, for “the manifestation of the sons of God” – for the transfigured man destined to save Nature from suffering and death (160).

I raise this point about Blake’s mistrust of nature because I find it interesting to compare it to di Giorgio’s view, which appears to dance between Romantic pantheism and Blakean disapproval – an ambivalence that I will discuss later in this section. Looking at Blake’s poem, we see that, rather than simply praising the beauty of the lamb as a wonder of nature, he raises the question of how the phenomenon came to be. And, the inevitable response – that it was made by a God who became “a little child,” (incarnate in the fully human, fully divine Christ) – is accompanied by technological imagery invoking human ingenuity (71). The metaphor of the lamb being “clothed” is indeed a technological image, as is the lamb itself, an incarnation of the wild sheep domesticated for the benefit of man. The gentle, loving God who created the lamb is not the distant, impersonal force envisioned by Newtonian physics and Enlightenment deism, but rather an active, immanent being who has assumed human form and is therefore present in human consciousness and imagination. But, what is the nature of this being? While the lamb is a universal symbol of innocence and, in the Christian context, of Christ’s absolute sacrifice for man, Blake offers a contrasting creation story in his later work, Songs of Experience. “Tiger, tiger, burning bright / In the forests of the night, / What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (221). The poem goes on to describe the animal as being fashioned with such industrial images as the “hammer,” “chain,” “furnace,” and “anvil.” Ultimately, Blake makes a specific reference back to the Lamb, stating, “When the stars threw down their spears / And watered Heaven with their tears, / Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (220). The speaker of this poem is presented with a paradox. If everything that
exists has been brought into being by the same divine force, how is it possible that this one God could create an animal as gentle and docile as the Lamb alongside the dreadful, terrifying Tiger? The only possible conclusion is that this God himself must be as violent as he is gentle, as terrifying as he is good, one who seizes fire, twists sinews, and moves with “dread hand” and “dread feet.” For Blake, this harshness is an integral part of the divine nature. God is simultaneously the gentle Jesus who bid the children come to him and the terrifying voice in the whirlwind that refused to give Job a justification for his suffering. In this sense, Blake clearly departs from the traditional Christian concept of a God who is only good – there must be evil within this divinity as well.

As many critics, including Czeslaw Milosz, have observed, Blake was heavily influenced by the eighteenth century Swedish Protestant philosopher Immanuel Swedenborg, who challenged Catholicism’s conviction that Christ was fully good. Though he saw Jesus as fully divine as well as fully human, he did not believe him to be without sin (Milosz 149). This concept of a humanized divinity (and, by the same logic, a humanity made divine) is extremely important for Blake, for whom divine works are realized through human subjective experience and imagination. And yet, Blake takes this idea of a humanized deity and divine humanity somewhat further, suggesting that God, man and even reality itself are characterized by the tension between binary oppositions. God, humans and nature are simultaneously good and evil, beautiful and ugly, angelic and demonic. This ambiguity, this constant movement between goodness and evil, is not easy to understand, and it is certainly not easy to accept. Indeed, the presence of this evil and raw power embodied in the Tiger (and his creator) is so sublimely frightening that Blake is filled with the desire to account for this duality, to seek an explanation of this bipartite god, even though he knows that this desire for unambiguity can never be gratified. Instead, reality itself is characterized by contraries. As Milosz comments,

A revolt against Nature does not, in Blake, imply a yearning for an ideal realm or, if you prefer, a heaven of ideas. On the contrary, his Garden of Eden is earth; his source of heavenly pleasure, the five senses; his salvation, the eternal now and not some tomorrow beyond the sunset of life. For no one can understand Blake who ignores that war of opposites – the “no” rendered every “yes” and vice versa – raised by him to the level of axiom. Nonetheless, Blake is adamant in distinguishing opposition from negation, which
he condemns. Nor does he subscribe to any dialectical triad – of a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis – and its procession in time. Antinomies exist for their own sake, for their mutual enhancement through *conjunctio oppositorum*, and that is why Blake’s heaven, while no less dedicated to action than Swedenborg’s, is founded on a collision of opposites – but opposites liberated from the egoistic will: to be saved is to participate, both in the now and in the eternal, in the “Intellectual War” and “Intellectual Haunts” (149).

This collision of opposites can be seen clearly when reading the *Songs of Experience* in relation to the *Songs of Innocence*. Just as The Tiger makes reference to the Lamb, so other poems in the later work correspond to poems in the earlier one. In “The Divine Image,” Blake’s speaker declares, “To Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love / All pray in their distress; / And to these virtues of delight / Return their thankfulness” (75). For Blake, these four virtues are “the human form divine” universally to be found in all people and all cultures and exemplify his view that God is fully immanent within man, his works realized through human action. However, this overwhelmingly positive, even utopian vision of the inherent goodness and divinity immanent within humanity is challenged in the sardonic tone of “The Human Abstract,” this poem’s counterpart in the *Songs of Experience*: “Pity would be no more / If we did not make somebody poor; And Mercy would no more be, / If all were as happy as we.” (75). There is no reference to God in this poem, and the virtues are not an image of the divine, but a corrupt, fully human means of justifying vice and injustice. Here, peace is not a “virtue of delight,” but a product of “mutual fear”; love is purely selfish, leading only to cruelty. This leads to the growth of Blake’s detested “Tree of Mystery,” which is watered with tears, rooted in humility, and bearing the fruit of deceit. For Blake, “mystery” is an inherently dark force, leading to confusion, suffering, and self-contradiction, which, according to Northrop Frye, is “one of [Blake’s] most contemptuous comments” (14). While Blake views such concepts as truth and clarity as being revealed subjectively (and thus very different from the universalized, objective truth of deism and Newtonian physics) he insists on their importance; in contrast, shadowy mystery is dangerous and undesirable. And yet, this mystery exists, growing in the human brain along with all its fruits of sorrow and deceit. As readers, we are left with the glaring question: which of these two juxtaposed poems is true? Are human beings virtuous images of the divine or cunning, deceitful
incarnations of this horrible mystery? This opposition remains unresolved. It might be said that both images are simultaneously true, but there is no sense of peace, no easy equilibrium reached between them.

According to Northrop Frye, such a balance would be neither possible nor desirable. Speaking of the contrary movements that occur throughout Blake, Frye suggests that Blake himself is a contrary to his philosophical adversary John Locke. “Blake and Locke are contraries: both feel that imagination, liberty and life are in their systems, and they must clash or we shall never know who is right” (188). According to Frye, then, the contraries are not symmetrical, but asymmetrical – ultimately, one side should win over the other. Indeed, Blake himself states in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, “Without contraries, there is no progression,” (111) suggesting that contraries of “Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate” are not only the basic ontological reality in which human beings find themselves, but a desirable reality that prevents stagnation and keeps human experience moving forward – not in the linear sense of a thesis, antithesis and synthesis, but in the sense of gaining new insights and awareness through this constant process of navigating between these opposite poles. In theory, one of the contraries should win over the other – just as Blake hopes to win over Locke and, as June Singer argues in her psychological study of Blake’s writing, to assert the triumph of Energy over Reason (66). This determination is evident in the second part of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which Blake introduces “the voice of the devil” (a positive, life-affirming figure in the Blakean cosmology) as affirming the following precepts:

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors:
1. That man has two real existing principles, viz, a Body and a Soul.
2. That Energy, called Evil, is alone from the body, and that Reason, called Good, is alone from the soul.
3. That God will torment man in Eternity for following his energies.

But the following Contraries to these are true:
1. Man has no Body distinct from the Soul, for that called Body is a portion of the Soul discerned by the five senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life and is from the body, and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is eternal delight (111).

Here, Blake’s devil asserts certain statements to be true and their opposites to be false: soul/body monism is true (with the body being only a portion of the soul), while dualism is false; the idea of energy and reason as separate is false, while their unity is true; the idea that man will be tormented in hell for following his energies is false; the belief that energy will bring eternal happiness is true. However, this entire argument is itself only one perspective – that of the devil, who advocates for exuberant passion over the restraints of reason. For Blake, people who follow such a belief are indeed devils and, in seeking to radically transform society, form the contrary to the “angels” – guardians of the social status quo and thus defenders of tyranny. History moves under the guidance and leadership of these angels and is periodically transformed by the influence of the devils. But, while in theory one of the contraries should win over the other, in truth there is never a definitive victory for either side; the process is continual, and the strength on both sides prevents any triumph from being achieved. The Tiger, no matter how fearsome and powerful, cannot destroy the Lamb; the Human Abstract cannot supplant the Divine Image – it can only wage war against it, providing a contrasting force that competes for dominance but never achieves it. It might be argued that a great part of the utopian Christian vision of the Final Judgement is our natural human drive for unambiguity – to finally overcome the mixture of goodness and evil that all human experience is embroiled in. But, Blake’s vision of heaven – though revolutionary and in some sense utopian – exists not in a future, but in the eternal present. Creation is an ongoing process never completed; the divine creator dwells within the fallen world of humanity. Reality itself is characterized by an ongoing war between contraries, and while Blake himself appears to be most strongly on the side of Energy against Reason, he knows that the war will never be lost or won.

What, then, might we gain from reading Marosa di Giorgio through a Blakean lens? I hardly need to say that the differences between these authors is huge – not only in terms of the lack of historical connection, but also in the style of writing. Blake is a highly conceptual, self-reflexive poet; indeed, a work such as The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, filled with aphorisms and critiques of Immanuel Swedenborg’s theological writings, at times seems more a philosophical treatise than a poem, with the poetic speaker somewhat distanced from the world explored in the poem. Di Giorgio, in contrast, is more immediate in her writing, much more
sensual, immersing the reader in the world that she creates. Additionally, while both are consciously and deliberately intertextual, making many allusions to other works and artists, Blake does so in the spirit of a critic, personifying Milton or attacking Swedenborg for having “not written one new truth” (125). With di Giorgio, in contrast, the references to other writers appear much more casually, even haphazardly, appearing in the course of everyday events – “Sobre el jardín cae la lluvia. Mi madre tiene visitas. Yo estoy entre estas otras cuatro paredes. Llueve. Tendría que leer a Edgar Poe y a Dylan Thomas… The rain is falling in the garden. My mother has visitors. I sit between these other four walls. I should read Edgar Poe and Dylan Thomas…” (1: 138). While I do not think that di Giorgio’s references to Edgar Allan Poe and Dylan Thomas are haphazard in any way – indeed, in mentioning them she is essentially paying them a kind of homage – she only refers to them in passing; she does not engage in a long reflective discourse as Blake does. However, there are also significant similarities between the two writers. Both share an immanent view of God – divinity is inextricably bound up with humanity – and the desire to know this divinity fully initially appears to place both of them in the company of the mystics. I hesitate to use the word “mystic” too quickly, however. Frye adamantly denies that Blake is a mystical poet, stating that while he does indeed seek knowledge of and communion with a higher reality, this hermetic knowledge is not an end in itself (as it would be for a true mystic) but rather a means toward the end of poetic creation. Rather than a mystic, Frye asserts, Blake might better be described as a “visionary,” one who “creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism” (8). Di Giorgio is also a visionary, infusing traditional Christian images and symbols with new meanings and creating new poetic worlds. Another similarity between the two is their view of nature. Both view the world that humans inhabit as a fallen realm, which can be seen in Blake’s disapproval of nature until it is transfigured by man. I would not describe di Giorgio’s attitude toward nature as one of “disapproval”; however, for her the only way to experience it is through the human imagination. We see this again and again in her writing through the desperate desire to return to an edenic state in the past – a prelapsarian state which can never be reached in its totality, but is created in fragmented form through the act of desiring itself: “Pasan las mariposas nocturnas con piedrecitas brillantes en el ala y hacen besarse a las flores, enmaridarse. Y aquello ocurre con sólo quererlo. Basta que se lo desee para que ya sea.” (The nocturnal butterflies fly over them,
their wings glittering with tiny gems, and make the flowers kiss each other, marry each other. And this occurs purely through desire. If I wish for something, it will appear) (1: 94). But, what di Giorgio most strongly shares with Blake is the conviction that reality itself, though monistic and devoid of any mind vs. matter, soul vs. body dualism, is created through the constant clash of binary oppositions. In the paragraphs that follow I will seek to discuss the ways in which these contraries operate in di Giorgio’s work through the exploration of three themes: the image of God, the image of the child’s mother, and the previously discussed intense desire to locate an impossible truth in memory.

For di Giorgio, as for Blake, divinity is immanent rather than transcendent – present in the visions and creative actions of man. And, as the images of the tiger and lamb reveal, this divine force is bipartite in its nature; unlike in Christian theology, where goodness and evil are clearly separated (with the former constantly seeking dominion over the latter), here they are very closely bound to each other. Thus, for di Giorgio, gods are sometimes malicious or even brutal tricksters. In the thirty-second poem of Historial de las violetas, the poetic speaker’s family is informed that “iba a venir de visita el dios” (the god was coming to visit) (1: 108). The family proceeds to prepare an exquisite feast for him – but, there is much more fear than happiness in their preparations. When someone knocks on the door, the family members do not get up to answer it; as if paralyzed, they prefer to remain on their knees, “rezábamos, llorábamos” (praying and crying) (1: 109). Even before he appears, they know that they have reasons to be frightened. When he does arrive – unexpectedly, completely without warning – he is a frightening figure with braided hair and a long wooden staff. After serving him a well-prepared, perfect meal, the family watches as he solemnly declares his intention to take something from the house away with him. After examining the entire house, he finally looks through the family photo album and chooses the speaker’s younger sister, at which point the poem ends abruptly, leaving the reader to digest the horror that has just occurred. It is noteworthy that this is a “dios” with a lower case d rather than a capital one; he is but one of the manifestations of the divine, just another apparition among the many other angels (sometimes good, sometimes dangerous), monks (sometimes warm and friendly, sometimes frightening) and monsters that populate di Giorgio’s cosmos.
However, “Dios” with a capital D also appears throughout the poems. Sometimes, he is just another character in di Giorgio’s universe, as at a celestial banquet attended by the child narrator where “Dios está allí en el centro con su batón negro, sus grandes alas” (God is there in the centre with his black staff, his great wings) (1: 94). However, at other times he is a greater force, a power that holds the universe in existence and appears to be inextricably linked with the authentic truth that the speaker is seeking in the past – a truth that is revealed only in fragmented form, and created in the midst of the speaker’s attempt to recall it. “Para revivir la edad anaranjada, hay que no olvidar a nadie, y hay que llamar a todos…Y hay que invite a Dios.” (In order to revive the orange age, you have to not forget anyone, you have to call everyone…And you have to invite God) (1: 51). The “orange age” is another iteration of the prelapsarian realm of childhood that di Giorgio’s narrator perpetually seeks; here, we are told that God is necessary in order to reach it. As in Blake, the nature of this god appears to be, as is reality itself, founded upon the war of contrary movements. In Està en llamas el jardín natal, we see an example of this dual nature through the speaker’s description of the God who has spent years dwelling in the family home:

Dios está aquí.
Dios habla.
A veces en la noche, cuando menos espero, de entre las cosas, sale su cara, su frente, inmensa y diminuta como una estrella. Centelleante y fija.
Hace años que anda por la casa.
Allá en la infancia yo no me atreví a decirlo a nadie; ni a papá, ni a mamá; era como un cordero, una forma pavorosa, que se comía las hierbas, bramaba un poco, topaba la casa.
Una gallina blanca como la muerte, como la nieve; o negra;
una gallina crucificada con las alas bien abiertas,
y el cuello manando sangre.

(God is here.
God is speaking.
Sometimes at night, when I least expect it, his face appears among my things, his forehead tiny and immense as a star. Gleaming and still.
For years he has been moving through the house.
In my childhood I did not dare to say anything to anyone, not to Father, not to Mother; he was like a lamb, a dreadful shape that devoured the grass, roared a little, ran into the house.
A hen white as death, as snow, or black;
a hen crucified with its wings spread open, its neck bleeding) (1: 182).

Di Giorgio presents us with a deity that is simultaneously great and small, still and constantly moving, white and black. The image of God as a lamb recalls not only Blake’s use of this symbol, but also the more universal Christian view of Christ as the lamb of God, the innocent sacrificial victim led to slaughter. Both Blake and di Giorgio play with this image, complicating the traditional idea of perfect innocence with its terrifying binary opposite. While Blake reveals this opposition through the appearance of the Tiger as the Lamb’s wild, fearsome counterpart in *Songs of Experience*, di Giorgio sees the lamb itself as embodying dreadful characteristics that might naturally seem more suited to the tiger: a dreadful shape, ravenous hunger, and roaring, altogether creating an image of a powerful God who is to be feared. However, this idea of power is sharply contradicted by the contrasting image of the hen, either white as death or black, which is crucified as a sacrificial victim. Interestingly, di Giorgio transforms the conventional symbol of purity and innocence into a dangerous figure, while the hen becomes the sacrificial victim whose death simultaneously inspires disgust and pathos.

Looking at this section as a whole, it might initially seem that di Giorgio’s view of God is overwhelmingly negative. And yet, he is a welcome presence. Visible only to the child narrator, he appears to be a stabilizing factor in the chaos of everyday life. The speaker proceeds to describe his quiet presence as one of “un comensal de ojos inmóviles y grises” (a guest with immobile grey eyes) amid a lavish feast where women in necklaces and crowns serve themselves honey, wine, apples and other candies (1: 182). This God is not frightening; he is simply part of the scene, a tranquil, grey presence amid the lively, colourful world of the speaker’s mother and her friends. But, at the poem’s conclusion this stillness is broken by a sudden movement as “Dios vuela un poco; / a veces, cruza volando la noche, / como si fuera a irse” (God flies a little; / sometimes, he crosses the night flying / as if he were going away) (1: 182). Here, God becomes playful, teasing the speaker with the possibility of leave-taking, but only flying a little – the
departure remains a suspended “as if.” While the speaker’s attitude toward this possibility of God leaving is not stated directly, the general tone seems to be one of wonder and love, which in this as in so many other of di Giorgio’s poems is coupled with fear. Deeply present to the speaker, intimately linked to the routine movements of everyday life, this divinity is a dynamic and static, loving and fear-inducing single entity predicated on the clash of contraries. As Alan Watts discusses in his study of mythology, *The Two Hands of God*, this bipartite vision of the divine is nothing new. Rather, it is present in many religions and was indeed part of Christianity prior to the late Middle Ages, when church theologians transformed the devil from a buffoon-like character – indeed an enemy to man, but also an integral part of human nature and a natural counterpart to God – to an absolutely malicious force constantly warring against an unambiguously good God. According to Watts, the division of reality into clearly opposed binary oppositions such as that of goodness and evil only occurs when we think in abstract terms. When we return to the concrete, we find that these binaries are embodied in human beings in all sorts of configurations; we might say they much more closely resemble long, complex chains of molecules than basic subatomic particles. As Watts states,

> Good and evil are abstract categories like up and down, and categories do not perform their function unless they are kept distinct. It is thus perfectly proper that the *concepts* of good and evil be distinct, dualistic and irreconcilable, that they be as firm and clear as any other measure. The ‘problem of duality’ arises only when the abstract is confused with the concrete, when it is thought that there are as clearly distinguishable entities in the natural universe. As we have seen, factual language, in which categories of this kind belong, is never more than a strictly limited symbolism for what is happening in nature. The image, poetic or mythic, is closer than linguistic categories to events themselves, or to what I would rather call natural patterning. We pay for the exactitude of factual language with the price of being able to speak from only one point of view at a time. But the image is many-sided and many-dimensional, and yet at the same time imprecise; here again, it is like nature itself (1: 18).

This movement from the abstract to the concrete is evident in both Blake’s and di Giorgio’s poetic work. While Blake does refer to such abstract concepts as innocence, experience, reason, and energy, these concepts are by no means discussed in isolation; rather, they are embodied in
concrete images of angels, devils, wandering children and locked chapels. In di Giorgio, meanwhile, these opposing concepts are completely embodied within concrete images that are often ambiguous in nature. Describing her style as “lo maravilloso negro” (the dark marvellous), Uruguayan critic and literary historian Luis Bravo states, “Lo monstruoso pone en juego la dicotomía del inconsciente, pues hace realidad el deseo oculto, inefable, activando un poderoso discurso en el que se retroalimentan lo inocente y lo perverso. Figuras del imaginario judeocristiano […] encarnan lo pagano, lo salvaje y sus instintos en una contraposición barroca” (The monstrous plays with the dichotomy of the unconscious, making hidden, ineffable desire into reality, activating a powerful feedback between the innocent and the perverse. Figures from the Judeo-Christian imaginary […] embody pagan, wild, instincts in a baroque set of contrasts) (260). Thus, images such as saints, angels, God and the Devil are much more complex than in the traditional Christian stories; a god can be malicious; angels can be vermin (while rats can be angelic); a devil might be sympathetic. Thus, the binary oppositions are not fixed, but slippery and often ambiguous.

A good example of this duality in di Giorgio’s work can be seen in the figure of the child’s mother, who appears throughout di Giorgio’s poetry as simultaneously loving and violent, playful and repressive. One example of the mother in her repressive role occurs in the fourth poem of Historial de las violetas, which I have described above as establishing a magical landscape that the child creates through desire. Flowers kiss one another, God appears in a priestly role, and the narrator’s deceased grandparents and relatives share a feast. The borders between erotic, spiritual and familial love are blurred, as are spatial and temporal ones; the child enters a mystical state. However, this blissful flight of fancy is cut short with the appearance of the child’s mother: “Pero, una vez mamá llegó de pronto, me tocó los hombros y fueron tales mi miedo, mi vergüenza, que no me atrevía a levantarme, a resucitar” (But then, one time Mother came all of a sudden and tapped me on the shoulder, and such was my fear, my shame that I did not dare to rise, to resurrect) (1: 94). In this moment, the mother’s authority is greater than that of

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11 In describing di Giorgio’s writing as “lo maravilloso negro,” Bravo draws on Roger’s Callois’s distinction between the “féérico” (which takes place in a world where nothing is impossible) and the “fantástico” (which draws upon conflicts between the real world and various possible ones). According to Bravo, di Giorgio’s writing takes place in a setting somewhat between these two – on the one hand, nothing is impossible; on the other, there is a distinction between the narrator’s quotidian life and the marvellous visions and terrors that occur. Therefore, it is a hybrid between the “féérico” and the “fantástico.” See Bravo, p. 360 for a fuller explanation.
the deceased patriarchs and indeed God himself; she appears as a supreme lawgiver, a repressive force who snatches the child out of her heavenly vision. The immense shock of this law is reflected in the narration itself, which shifts abruptly from present to past tense; the vision, initially alive and in progress, is suddenly transformed into an unattainable memory, just like so many of di Giorgio’s other idealized, prelapsarian visions. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva speaks of the semiotic realm, a pre-linguistic, impressionistic state the subject inhabits before becoming a speaking being. With language the subject enters into a new symbolic order which is constantly threatened by a trace of what she calls the *chora*, an unstable trace of a semiotic preserved even within the symbolic order’s constraints (93-97). Normally in psychoanalytic theory, the symbolic order is associated with the figure of the father; however, as we see here, in di Giorgio’s terms the mother is dominant. If we think of the poem in Kristeva’s terms, I would suggest that in this particular moment, the child narrator gains visionary access to the playful, unstable semiotic realm underlying all experience; meanwhile, the mother embodies the symbolic order that seeks to stabilize and control that experience. However, just as the relationship between semiotic and symbolic is much more complex than that of repressor and repressed, the true relationship between mother and daughter is also highly complex. In *Historial de las violetas* XIII, she walks alongside her daughter, “tomada de la mano” (hand in hand) (1: 97) through the orchard and enters into the vision with her. Inebriated by the sun, they cross “la línea casi invisible” (the nearly invisible line) and trespass on the property of some monks, thus mischievously conspiring in this act of transgression. When faced with their punishment – a cold, hard stare “como una flecha de oro o de plata” (like an arrow of gold or silver) they both flee, sin volvemos, temblando bajo el inmenso sol) (never to return, trembling beneath the immense sun) (1: 97). The two women experience both the transgression and the punishment together; the mother is just as vulnerable and terrified as the daughter when faced with these monstrous monks. Simultaneously a stern lawgiver and a mischievous lawbreaker complicit in her daughter’s schemes, the mother embodies the two contrary ideas represented by Blake’s cautious, conservative Angels and wild, rebellious Devils that wage war in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. By embedding these contrary ideas in one single figure, di Giorgio emphasizes the ambiguous nature of these contraries; to a much greater extent than in Blake, they are tangled up with one another and cannot be isolated. This ambiguity becomes even more apparent in the contrast between the images of a mother who is loving (“Sólo mamá es el Amor,” – Only Mother
is love) (1: 106) and monstrous with the potential to inflict great damage and destruction on her family. In the fifteenth poem of the series, the narrator describes the annual gathering of mushrooms on the family property as a violent act permitted by the mother. These mushrooms appear as living creatures that bear the initials of the dead family members from which they have sprung, a phenomenon which leaves the child simultaneously horrified and filled with a strange reverence. “No me atrevo a devorarlos; esa carne levísima es pariente nuestra.” (I do not dare to eat them; that most tender meat is our relative) she declares (1: 98). Juxtaposed to the child’s reverence is the mother’s nonchalance; when the mushroom buyer appears, she gladly gives him permission to begin the harvest, thus condoning disrespect for the dead and indeed cannibalism. However, while obviously horrified by her mother’s action, the young narrator excuses her due to her ignorance of the situation: “Mi madre no se da cuenta de que vende a su raza” (My mother does not realize that she is selling her race) (1: 98). Thus, while the mother commits a monstrous act, the daughter does not permit herself to define her as a monster – perhaps for fear of punishment, perhaps due to the love and admiration which is combined with that fear. But, other poems focused on this theme of mother-daughter relationships reveal the daughter to be as ambiguously polarized as the mother. No innocent lamb by any means, di Giorgio allows one of her many first-person narrators (this time, a young girl named Marge) to enact the most bloodthirsty form of revenge against the mother. In Magnolia, the child narrator experiences great anxiety while listening to the orders of a domineering mother: “Oye, Marge. Mira, Marge” (Listen, Marge. Look, Marge) (1: 125). In a revenge fantasy made morbidly real, the child waits until her mother goes out to meet the postman and then is transformed into a monstrous, wolf-like creature with sharp claws. Like the mother who nonchalantly destroys living mushrooms, the daughter is metamorphosed into a creature without empathy; indeed, the only emotion which she now experiences is a strange exhilaration and curiosity: “Vi transitar las ratas nocturnas de largas colas y caritas picudas. Un enorme curiosidad me vino a las uñas; quería ver si podría dar muerte. (I watched the nocturnal rats scurry by with their long tails and pointy heads. An enormous curiosity entered my claws; I wanted to see if I could kill one of them) (1: 125). Upon discovering that she can, the monster/child lies in wait for her mother to return with the letters and then attacks her, ripping her dress. The mother cries out desperately for her daughter to rescue her, looking wildly about; on receiving no response, she turns her attention back to the monster: “Tal vez me reconocía, pues, me miró fijo en los ojos, pero yo la desgarré
violentamente y ella entonces, casi enseguida, murió.” (Maybe she recognized me, then; she stared straight into my eyes, but I clawed at her violently and then, almost immediately, she died) (1:125). Initially, the child’s identity remains separate from that of the monster which she has become, and the mother continues in her domineering role as she calls out to her daughter to save her. However, when she receives no response, she can only stare at the monster which is about to kill her, perhaps finally recognizing her own child there. It is also interesting that, while in the poems where the mother is portrayed as a monster her actions are inadvertent or based on ignorance, the child’s crime is completely voluntary and premeditated. The visionary magic which surrounds her allows her to transform into another creature and escape social strictures, thus enacting her most prohibited desires.

Looking at this dichotomy between goodness and evil, tranquillity and violence in di Giorgio’s work, Kathryn Kopple turns to Kristeva’s reading of the classical myth of Electra. According to Kopple, the daughter’s hatred of the mother is not based only on incestuous yearning for the father but also for the mother, who is really the primary object of the daughter’s desire but has chosen to love the father instead. Meanwhile, the daughter’s desire to love her mother actively or, in Freudian terms, as man would a woman, is consequently transformed into hatred for the mother (55). But, Kopple suggests that this idea does not provide a complete explanation for the relationship between the mother and the daughter. Unlike the child in the Electra myth, di Giorgio’s narrator does not vie for power with the mother, but seeks to destabilize her authority in the same way that the semiotic destabilizes the symbolic. “She repeatedly returns to the question of the mother because she is actively searching for an escape – not from her mother, but from a symbolic order that reduces women to either victims or militants,” Kopple suggests (55). For di Giorgio, the mother truly is situated at the uncertain border between symbolic and semiotic. She is a sacred being in the sense that Kristeva suggests when she asks,

Could the sacred be, whatever its variants, a two-sided formation? One aspect founded by murder and the social bond made up of a murder’s guilt-ridden atonement, with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it; and another aspect, like a lining, more secret and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility – both threatening and fusional – of the
In this statement, Kristeva parallels Watts in suggesting the two-sided nature of the sacred. Just as Watts explores the tendency within older forms of Christianity to “give the devil his due” and to recognize the dual nature of divinity, Kristeva suggests that the sacred is related to the original “nonseparation of subject/object” which all humans have experienced in the prelinguistic realm that we inhabit before birth. Looking at di Giorgio’s concept of the divine, I see a definite resonance with this idea. However, while for Watts and perhaps even Kristeva there is a sense of harmony between the two sides of the sacred, in di Giorgio as in Blake there is no such peace; the dyad is not symmetrical. Just as, in Blake, the force of energy constantly seeks to supplant the rule of reason rather than coexisting with it, in the di Giorgio texts discussed here, violence seeks to supplant love. But, because love remains just as strong as violence, it cannot be overcome. Thus, the conflict between mother and daughter (as well as the internal conflicts between love and fear within each) can never be resolved; instead, it only temporarily changes its shape. As the primary source of life, the mother embodies the entire sum of creative mechanisms that govern di Giorgio’s universe; she can be seen as a symbol for reality itself and the divinity embedded within it. When we look at this reality, we encounter a realm where creation and destruction are forever intermingled, where the ugly will always be oddly transcendent, where the divine inspires fear as well as joy. In this way, di Giorgio resembles Blake in creating a world that is not dualistic – there is no transcendent reality beyond that which the mind creates, inhabits and experiences. As Ricardo Pallares observes, all of reality is a sui generis space where there is an “extraordinaria producción de efectos de significación en especial en el nivel de la sustitución de los significantes por otros, conforme a los principios de la poesía” (extraordinary production of effects of meaning, especially at the level of the substitution of some signifiers for others, in accordance with poetic principles) (53). In di Giorgio, reality is monistic but unstable, composed of clashing movements of irreconcilable yet mutually dependent contrary forces.

I now want to return to the discussion of memory. As I have discussed in the previous section, memory remains a central preoccupation for di Giorgio. And, here we see another interesting point of comparison (but also a point of contrast) with William Blake. For Blake, as for di Giorgio, childhood is filled with fascination; it seduces the adult with its promise of a
buried treasure, a time capsule containing a sacred truth. But, Blake and di Giorgio both find this promise to be illusory; the unified, unambiguous authenticity that they so desperately seek has been lost (if it ever existed at all) and the world that they currently inhabit is fallen. While Blake is perhaps not as preoccupied with childhood throughout the body of his work as di Giorgio is, he nevertheless addresses it extensively in his lyric poetry. Just as di Giorgio’s narrator struggles to identify a mysterious gleaming object – allegedly a saint – that her grandparents always held in their hands and finds that she “no [puede] ordenar [sus] recuerdos / cannot put [her] memories in order,” (1: 100) Blake’s poetic speaker finds that the delightful landscape he inhabited as a child has now been destroyed:

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen;
A chapel was built in the midst
Where I used to play on the green.
And the gates of this chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not writ over the door;
So I turn’d to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore,
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be –
And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds
And binding with briars my joys and desires (218).

In this poem from the *Songs of Experience*, we see an image of a failed return to the past. Just as di Giorgio’s attempts to return to a previous time characterized by freedom, desire and love are blocked – whether by a failure of memory, the repressive aspect of the mother, or some other interfering force – Blake finds his attempt blocked by the oppressive, law-giving influence of institutionalized religion, which has replaced the wild freedom of the garden with an image of stagnation and death: the closed chapel surrounded by cold graves and monstrous, oppressive priests. Any attempt to recuperate past joys through memory will ultimately prove futile; the doors to Eden are locked and can never be reopened. Perhaps this is why, for Blake, the ideal image of a utopia is not a garden, but a city – the new Jerusalem that can only be created in the
future through the ingenuity of man. Discussing the visionary quality of Blake’s poetry, Northrop Frye states that he views memory negatively, subordinating it to the greater faculties of vision and sight:

It is no use saying to Blake that the company of angels he sees surrounding the sun are not “there.” Not where? Not in a gaseous blast furnace across ninety million miles of nothing, perhaps; but Blake will not point to the sky but to, say, the fourteenth plate of the Job series illustrating the text: ‘When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.’ That is where the angels appear, in a world formed and created by Blake’s imagination and entered into by everyone who looks at the picture. It appears, then, that there are not only two worlds, but three: the world of vision, the world of sight and the world of memory: the world we create, the world we live in and the world we run away to. The world of memory is an unreal world of reflection and abstract ideas; the world of sight is a potentially real world of subjects and objects; the world of vision is a world of creators and creatures. In the world of memory we see nothing; in the world of sight we see what we have to see; in the world of vision we see what we want to see. These are not three different worlds, as in the religions which speak of a heaven and hell in addition to ordinary life; they are the egocentric, the ordinary and the visionary ways of looking at the world (26).

For Blake, memory is the egocentric way of looking at the world, an escape route that inevitably leads to nothingness. What can the speaker of “The Garden of Love” gain from watching the sad priests make their rounds? Memory can bring no comfort in this situation; if anything, it might only serve to exacerbate the speaker’s isolation and general hopelessness. It is necessary to move on, and, if we look at Blake’s œuvre as a whole, we see that he did indeed move on, turning his attention away from the lyric and toward the great visionary epics that comprise his later work. In Blake’s view, the visionary way of looking at the world is the desirable one; all nature, all divinity exists within the realm of human and vision and creativity. And it is here that we see the greatest contrast between Blake and di Giorgio, who – despite addressing many themes and employing many different styles – consistently returns to the childhood landscape of the family farm as her point of departure. Her repeated failed attempts to recapture the past in the present drive her fervent creativity in the present, plunging her into a disorienting landscape of contrary
movements which her narrators, much like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, navigate with both wonder and fear. In this way, her work is quite different from that of Blake, whose carefully crafted lyrics and elaborate mythological systems suggest an almost artisanal attempt to transform visions into art.

It is this carefully deliberated artistry that makes Frye refuse to denote Blake as a mystic. Di Giorgio’s writing, in contrast, appears to be much more mystical; her visions occur spontaneously and seemingly unconsciously, as if she were taking notes from an angel whispering in her ear. This is obviously a very naïve reading of di Giorgio; as Achugar and other critics have argued, she is a highly self-aware poet, and her writing, like her style of dress, stems from much deliberation and craftsmanship. Nevertheless, her texts suggest a compulsiveness, a drive toward this impossible memory which, almost in spite of itself, yields a frenetic creativity as she struggles to piece together details from her memory: the old house, her father’s horse, the mushroom growing alongside the house, the incessant dialogue between the mother and the other relatives, the blue chards, the stars…Images tumble over one another, culminating in the frantic creativity that never reaches completion. Blanchot tells us that in time’s absence, the drive to grasp a concrete reality in the past becomes a kind of compulsion:

> It comes already and forever past, so that my relation to it is not one of cognition, but recognition, and this recognition ruins in me the power of knowing, the right to grasp. It makes what is ungraspable inescapable; it never lets me cease reaching what I cannot attain. And that which I cannot take, I must take up again, never to let go (51).

While Blake deliberately subordinates memory to vision, di Giorgio desperately strives toward memory; her visions occur only due to the impossibility of attaining knowledge of the lost authentic, even though she tries again and again.

In all three of the authors examined in this dissertation, the phenomenon that I am calling the poetic space of knowledge occurs through the desire to grasp for something ungraspable, to reach for what cannot be attained. In di Giorgio, as in the others, this process stems from a clear desire for knowledge beyond the apparent reality of everyday existence (what Frye terms “the realm of sight” and Blanchot describes as the area of “ordinary language”). But, unlike Agustini, who seeks this transcendent realm beyond apparent reality through the pursuit of mystical *eros*,
and Pizarnik, whose search for transcendence leaves her face to face with nothingness, di Giorgio repeatedly attempts to locate this reality in memory. Again and again, her failure to do so leaves her in a monistic universe of her own creation characterized by the constant tension between binary oppositions. Though she seeks divinity beyond the realm in which she lives, she finds, as does Blake, that this divinity is immanent rather than transcendent. Her restless pursuit of memory only serves to drive her own compulsive process of creation, leaving her in a monistic, pantheistic universe made, as in Blake, by the human imagination – a universe that is divine but ambiguous, characterized by constantly warring binary oppositions between goodness and evil, the sacred and the profane. I have brought Blake into this discussion because the two poets envision reality in much the same way; divinity is immanent within the human mind, which has the imaginative capacity to create all that exists. But, I am also interested in the previously discussed major difference between the two. While in Blake the drive to create is conscious and deliberate, in di Giorgio it appears to be (whether genuinely or not) unconscious and compulsive. According to Frye, even Blake’s most extraordinary visions are not ends in themselves; they are means toward his creative end. In contrast, di Giorgio’s writing, which is much more immersive than self-reflexive, appears to stand completely as an end in itself. It is this anti-utilitarianism, this refusal to be employed as a means, that transforms di Giorgio’s quest for an epistemological poetic space into a covert strategy of political resistance.

3.3 Space of Resistance: Against Ulro

For many critics, di Giorgio is a poet of interior landscapes and mystical desires; her work concerns private spaces rather than public ones. Critics such as Leonardo Garet and Roberto Echavarren (both of whom were good friends of the author) do not like to think of her as a political writer. Indeed, there are almost no explicit references to politics in di Giorgio’s work, and this sets her apart from many if not most other major twentieth century Uruguayan writers. Nevertheless, di Giorgio lived through both of the historically democratic country’s two military dictatorships, and the political trauma of institutionalized violence appears suddenly in her work, flickering like a firefly, quickly disappearing, and then flickering again. Soldiers come inspecting the villages; public executions occur; family members turn against each other in war. “Antiguos
parientes, finados ya, se salían de la pared, hablaban con mamá, querían, a toda costa, participar en las guerras” (Ancient relatives, long since deceased, were coming out from the wall, talking to Mother, they wanted at any cost to participate in the wars), di Giorgio tells us in *Está en llamas el jardín natal* (1: 179). At other times, the references to the fear wrought by the dictatorial regime are even more subtle, such as when the child discovers that her mother has disappeared mysteriously in *Mesa de esmeralda*, which is included in the second volume of *Los papeles salvajes*: “Noté que no había nadie, que no estaba ni mi madre. Volví en puntas de pie. Los ojos hacia afuera. Y así vi vehículos desconocidos. Ah, entonces, entendía” (I saw that there was no one there, that my mother wasn’t there. I came back on tiptoe. My eyes looking outwards. And then I saw unknown vehicles. Ah, then I understood) (2: 47). These violent occurrences evoke – rather than stating directly – the violence that occurred during Uruguay’s two military dictatorships. The first of these was that of President Gabriel Terra, who dissolved the Uruguayan Parliament in 1933 and maintained power until 1938, and the second began with a 1973 coup led by Juan María Bordaberry and lasted until 1985.

The critic Ángel Rama has described the writers active during the thirty-year period between these two dictatorships as the *generación crítica*, which he then subdivides into two other groups (*La generación crítica* 28). The first wave of this generation consisted mostly of writers born in the 1920’s, who thus came of age during the first dictatorship and also witnessed the rise of fascism in Europe and the Second World War. According to Rama, this experience led these first writers to express a combination of nostalgia and cynicism, which figures in the disillusionsed love poems of Vilariño, or else to resist the confusion around them through an emphasis on realism and objectivity, which can be seen in the more explicitly political tone of Benedetti. Rama places di Giorgio in the second wave of the *generación crítica*, which also includes such writers as the aforementioned Roberto Echavarren, Hugo Achugar and Eduardo Galeano. These writers, mostly born in the 1940’s, came of age during the second military dictatorship and experienced its institutionalized violence. Focusing on poetry rather than prose, many of them employed baroque forms and took on a caustic, parodic tone; others set out to create an “imaginative narrative” focusing on distortion and metamorphosis of images that set out to challenge the totalizing discourse of the dictatorship.
According to Anna Deeny, who analyzes the political dimension of di Giorgio’s work, the many metamorphoses and play in a text such as La liebre de marzo fit into the “imaginative narrative” paradigm. However, Deeny also thinks that di Giorgio is distinct from other writers of the generación crítica due to her attempt to create an alternate reality to the one which she encounters within the dictatorial regime:

While di Giorgio’s texts seem saturated with nostalgia and undermine the idea of consensually established meaning, she does not elaborate a world of disorder or the absurd; she ushers forth a vision of things. At stake within her “reality under siege” was an ability to individually interpret the objects of observation, namely, things. Di Giorgio distills this dynamic of consensually established meaning and things to maintain the idea of an interior ordered consciousness…while simultaneously refuting the individual’s consent to society, government, and language, paradigms derived from the objectivization of the self (109).

Comparing the construction of subjectivity in di Giorgio and her “poetic twin” Emily Dickinson, Deeny proceeds to describe John Locke’s idea of “consent.” This Enlightenment philosopher’s idea of sociopolitical consent stems from modern empirical science, which tells us that our naive perception of the world is wrong. The images that we see before us do not necessarily represent reality as it is. We can no longer naively say “this is” or “this is not”; we need the empirical method of science to tell us what is true and false. The scientific method, institutionalized in democratic government, subordinates the subjective to the objective; once a claim is declared true or false according to the scientific method, we are expected to accept these ideas as fact and alter our vision of the world accordingly. It is easy to see why Blake, who truly viewed human imaginative capacity as divine and railed against reason’s dominance over energy, was also opposed to Locke’s philosophy. Looking at the twentieth century context, however, Deeny expresses other concerns about the consequences of scientism taken to the extreme level: the eugenics movements, the experimentation on vulnerable human beings, the atom bomb, and the Latin American military dictatorships that, though usually not led by scientific thinkers, used the products of science – particularly military technology – to achieve their political ends. I do not think that Deeny intends to make any kind of attack on the scientific method, but rather to point out the dangers of objectivity taken to an extreme degree – an extreme at which individual
subjectivity is squelched at the hands of a totalizing, overgeneralized discourse that is often employed in the interests of power and robs the individual subject of the chance to say “this is.”

For Anna Deeny, di Giorgio’s poetic epistemology reveals itself to be a way of preserving the integrity of subjective experience as well as the capacity to interpret the objects of perception according to one’s own imaginative vision. In “Lyric Poetry and Society,” Theodor Adorno comments that “The ‘I’ whose voice is heard in the lyric is an ‘I’ that defines and expresses itself as something exposed to the collective, to objectivity; it is not completely at one with the nature to which its expression refers. It has lost it, as it were, and it attempts to restore it through animation, through immersion in the ‘I’ itself” (41). The poet does not see to fuse with nature, but rather to animate nature with subjectivity and thus affirm her own subjectivity. It is this idea that I intend to build upon in my own discussion of di Giorgio’s political resistance. This concern with preserving the individual’s integrity in the face of overwhelming totality resonates with Blanchot’s idea of poetry as an anti-utilitarian language mode that is “no longer opposed only to ordinary language, but also to the language of thought. In poetry we are no longer referred back to the world, neither to the world as shelter nor to the world as goals. In this language the world recedes and goals cease; the world falls silent” (41). I have already discussed the ways in which di Giorgio’s attempts to locate a universal truth in childhood, to hear that “most beautiful language” in memory are met with failure. Now, I want to suggest that this failure is positive rather than negative. I do not think that di Giorgio is left with a silence as Blanchot suggests, a silence we hear so clearly in the work of her contemporary Alejandra Pizarnik. Instead, she is left with a cacophony, a polyphony of sounds that nevertheless pose a resistance to the babble of ordinary language and the precise, goal-oriented totality of what Blanchot calls “the language of thought.” Through poetic language, the subject retains her capacity to establish her own vision of the world, to insist stubbornly on creating new realities ex nihilo and to passionately declare, “this is.” Speaking of Mallarmé’s creative process, Blanchot states,

In the poem, language is never real at any of the moments through which it passes, for in the poem language itself is affirmed in its totality. Yet in this totality, where it constitutes its own essence and where it is essential, it is also supremely unreal. It is the total realization of this unreality, an absolute fiction which says “being” when, having “worn
away,” “used up” all existing things, having suspended all possible beings, it comes up against an indelible, irreducible residue. What is left? “Those very words, it is.” Those words sustain all others by letting themselves be hidden by all the others, and hidden thus, they are the presence of all words, language’s entire possibility held in reserve. But when all words cease…those very words, it is, present themselves, “lightning moment,” “dazzling burst of light” (45).

In the poem “language itself is affirmed in its totality”; all its potential configurations are there, contained in the books of Borges’ Babelian library. However, this totality is unreal somehow; the potential infinite configurations of reality are all present, but it is not possible for the poet to express all of them; as much as she hopes to speak of Being, she finds that she can only speak of beings. Faced with this limit, she speaks the only words she can: “It is.” Thus freed from the duty to reveal the totality of Being, she can instead create in multiple bursts of lightning, thus revealing her own vision of things to us.

Anna Deeny’s emphasis on di Giorgio’s affirmation of individual agency in creating a poetic epistemology also resonates very clearly with Czeslaw Milosz’s view of William Blake, whom he views as one of recent history’s greatest defenders of the human imagination. In Blake’s mythology there figures a land called Ulro, a hellish “realm of spiritual pain” that comes about from strict adherence to dogmatic religious doctrines or scientific strictures (Milosz 32). According to Milosz, the main problem is the subordination of the particular to the universal. “If man is but a fleeting fleck of foam on a wave, then he can be easily absolved, since what matters is the wave and not the foam,” Milosz states. “All of Blake’s work is a violent assault on the Universal in defense of the ‘Minute Particulars’” (44). In di Giorgio, the relation between the universal and the particular – the one and the many – is highly complex. In The History of Violets 29, di Giorgio’s narrator describes magical horses that come in the night to gallop inside her grandmother’s cupboards. “No sé si eran cincuenta o sólo uno…I don’t know if they were fifty or just one,” she says. “Nunca pude contarlos…I never managed to count them” (1: 106). A similar confusion occurs in La liebre de marzo, when an unidentified, vampiric creature threatens the community. Even though this organism that comes without warning has been seen by everyone including the speaker, she tell us, “No sé si eran muchos, cientos y miles como los pájaros, o sólo uno…I don’t know if they were many, hundreds and thousands of them like birds,
or just one” (1: 266). As I have discussed above, in di Giorgio’s work we so often see a desire for one, clear universal truth to be apprehended through memory. However, this attempt constantly leaves the narrator with a multiplicity of fleeting fragmented images, and it is from these that di Giorgio’s imaginative world receives its form.

And yet, there is another aspect of di Giorgio’s obsession with memory than the impossible desire to remember. In the path there is truth that yearns to be remembered, but there is also trauma that begs to be forgotten. In the discussion that follows, I will first look at this other aspect of di Giorgio’s obsession with memory: the desire not to recuperate the past but to escape it, to release oneself from its weight, to begin anew. Paradoxically, however, just as the transcendent truth located in memory cannot be recuperated in the present, the trauma and violence found there cannot be forgotten. But, in unsuccessfully attempting to forget with as much passion as she attempts to remember, di Giorgio’s poetic speaker begins another poetic process: one of escape and wandering, of constant kinetic motion with no apparent teleological goal, a constant desire to flee the universal and lose oneself among the multiplicity of things. This, I believe, is di Giorgio’s primary strategy of resistance against “the consent of language.”

3.4 ¿Adónde voy? Errantry and Relation

While di Giorgio’s escapist tendencies run throughout the body of her work, one place where they become especially apparent is in Mesas de esmeralda, one of her later works from the second volume of Los papeles salvajes. We see this most clearly in the forty-fifth poem of the series, which begins with one of di Giorgio’s many attempts at recollection:

Recuerdo los atardeceres, las cúspides bermejas…Era la hora en que la Virgen subía de entre las flores envuelta en la manta de organdí, parecía estar siempre de perfil, parecía hablar. Venía a sentarse entre la madre y las tías. Mi madre se apresuraba a servir la miel, y ella fingía beber. Le llamábamos “Consuelo,” “Amparo,” “Virgen,” le decíamos “Liliana,” “Iris,” “Lirio,” le decíamos “Paloma,” “Nieve,” “Estela.” Era la hora en que también llegaban los primos, desde las chacras próximas y las más remotas chacras, se izaban sin alas, usando una antigua condición de los habitantes de esa comarca, venían
por el aire vestidos de colores o desnudos…Por entonces yo ya soñaba con otro país, otro lugar, en el que ya me parecía tener puesto un pie. Otro lugar, sin padres, ni pájaros, ni Virgen (2: 71).

(I remember the evenings, the red peaks…It was the time when the Virgin used to climb up from among the flowers wrapped in her organdy shawl; she always seemed to be in profile; she seemed to talk. She would always come and sit between my mother and my aunts. My mother always ran to serve the honey, and the Virgin pretended to drink it. We called her “Consuelo,” “Amparo,” “Virgin,” we’d say “Liliana,” “Iris,” “Lirio,” we’d say “Dove,” “Snow,” “Estela.” It was the time when our cousins would arrive from the nearby farms and the most distant ones; they were hoisted up without wings, using an ancient capacity of the people from that region, they came by air dressed colourfully, or naked…At that time I started dreaming of another country, another place I’d already put one foot in the door of. Another place, without parents, or birds, or a Virgin).

Reading this poem, it is easy to understand why a critic like Achugar focuses on the parodic side of di Giorgio. In this scene, childhood is not a site of divine truth but of utmost boredom – a description we often encounter as di Giorgio speaks of incessant conversations between her mother and the other relatives. The irony, though, is that the world which the child inhabits is fantastic and magical; however, this magic bears a closer resemblance to the ridiculous than the sublime. The Virgin Mary appears more like a cartoon character than a powerful mediator between the human and the divine realm; she comes up from the flowers, sits with the mother’s guests, and pretends to drink the honey placed before her (perhaps in an effort to appear as a gracious guest?) The children address her first with names often used in Catholic tradition to describe the Virgin: she is called “Consuelo,” or consolation, and “Amparo,” which suggests protection. But, the children then proceed to barrage her with other titles that seem chosen almost at random – names of flowers, then “Dove,” “Snow” and “Estela,” which means a slipstream or a ship’s wake. The quotidian tone of the poem suggests that the Virgin is a regular guest at these household gatherings; for the children, she is more of a plaything than an object of worship; the children offhandedly assign names to her as they would to a doll. Then, there is the arrival of the cousins, who through some inherited ability are able to arrive flying in the air. However, their entrance is comic and perhaps absurd; some are dressed ostentatiously, others are naked for no
apparent reason. There is nothing sacred about this scene; it is completely profane, perhaps
carnivalesque. Its marvels are excessive, baroque, perhaps bordering on the “trash aesthetic” that
Hugo Achugar describes as central to camp (110). And yet, there is something seductive about
the place that these cousins have travelled from. The juxtaposition of their wild dress to the
Virgin’s banality suggests the idea of gender-based repression; perhaps the banality that the
speaker is hoping to escape from is that of the staid world of her mother and aunts, always sitting
still over their tea, accompanied by this insipid Virgin. The speaker longs for a different reality;
in wanting to escape to a place “without a Virgin” she aspires to inhabit a space where desires
are not constrained. And, from the vantage point of the present, the memory of this constriction
is likewise oppressive. The adult narrator does not desire to recall this stream of images from the
past; nevertheless, they provide an onslaught from which there is no escape.

We see a similar desire to escape in the thirteenth poem of the same book. This time, the
child is described in third person narration rather than first, suggesting a division within the child
subject, who desires to escape but is trapped within her situation. “Al ver las cosas resolvió irse”
(Seeing how things were, she resolved to go away) (2: 52). The simple resoluteness of this
statement recalls Deeny’s discussion of the assertion of subjectivity over collective consent; the
child refuses to consent to the reality that is placed before her; she demands an alternative. We
are told that the child does not go to the outside garden, nor to another country, nor to death. “Se
posó entre la sala y la cocina. Es decir se veía donde estaba y no se sabía donde estaba. Quedó
fija, pero, flotó. Flotó fija” (She positioned herself between the living and the kitchen. In other
words, you could see where she was, and you couldn’t. She remained still, but she floated. She
floated, fixed) (2: 52). The contradiction in these lines is jarring – how is it possible to be
floating (and thus presumably moving) and also motionless? But, if we link these lines to the
staunch determination of the first, we might find that this contradiction makes perfect sense. The
child’s stillness is a stance of firm, uncompromising resolution; the floating is her effort to
escape the confines of the family home and the mother who begs her to come down to earth and
“comer, dormir, casarse” (eat, sleep, get married) (2: 52). In our ordinary language, words like
“flight” or “escapism” connote passivity, fear, perhaps irresponsibility, and it is perhaps for this
reason that some critics of di Giorgio have described her as apolitical. But, for di Giorgio, escape
is not a form of passivity, but a deliberate strategy toward fighting a system that she refuses to let
control her in any way. She is not merely running away from the reality that surrounds her; she is actively seeking a new reality, a new space whose integrity cannot be marred by the totalitarian regime’s insistence on consent. According to Kathryn Kopple, who reads di Giorgio psychoanalytically, when faced with the brutalities of totalitarianism, di Giorgio relies on the images provided by the unconscious mind, thus asserting the integrity of her own imaginative capacity in the face of forced consent:

[Di Giorgio] has created a remote, solitary and peculiarly brilliant world complete with its own delirious cosmology. But even in this spell-bound place there are unmistakable signs of economic and political instability. She writes that no one has enough money to pay the rent, travel or change their circumstances. Soldiers and ferocious dogs patrol the countryside. Landowners engage in bitter and violent rivalry. Neighbours disappear.

What course of action can be taken when the forces of nationalism, terrorism, have come pounding at the door? What can be done when social, political, forces have channelled desire into an uncontrollable fear of lacking possessions, position, power? […] From this perspective, the historical and social imagery and references running throughout di Giorgio’s work are significant. Although her escapism has negative aspects, she abides by the principle that we never discover ‘no’ in the unconscious. The positive unconscious is not merely a theoretical construct for Di Giorgio; it is her signature. Nor does she equate escapism with a progressive dissolution of social contradictions much less their transcendence […] She invests the full force of her creative energies in fleeing a system of codes, beliefs, on which the very act of rejection would make her all the more dependent (56).

For Kopple, di Giorgio’s determination to escape from the world in which she finds herself is not passive renunciation, but an active refusal to legitimize the political and social systems that oppress her. I agree with Kopple that this is indeed one of the main processes that occurs in di Giorgio’s writing and forms the poetic counterpoint to her unceasing quest for knowledge of ultimate reality. Just as her repeated failed attempts to find the lost Authentic propel her to transform her own visions into a new poetic space, so her desperate desire to flee oppressive totalities also sends her running toward that space.
But, while we may have some ideas as to the political and gender-based strictures that di Giorgio is running away from, it is harder to determine just what she is running toward, and if it is even possible to get there. While I agree with Kopple that the desire to escape is always present in di Giorgio, this flight is difficult if impossible to achieve. Indeed, in many of the poems, the poetic speaker seems to be lost, or else the journey that she hopes to begin is itself made impossible by the social strictures that confine her. “Soy la Virgen,” (I am the Virgin), the poetic speaker informs us in the opening line of one of the poems from *La liebre de marzo* (1: 312). At times, the Virgin Mary is portrayed as deserving the utmost of honour and veneration; at other times, as I have shown above, she is portrayed as a banal, quotidian presence that the child wants to escape from. Here, the poetic subject finds that she has become the Virgin, and she does not understand her new identity. “El Ángel me hablaba entre jazmines y en varios planos. Me dijo algo rarísimo; no entendi bien.” (The Angel spoke to me among the jasmines and on various levels. He told me something incredibly strange; I didn’t understand him well) (1: 312). The obvious antecedent to this episode is the Annunciation, which in the Christian tradition is the moment when the Angel Gabriel appears to the Mary and informs her that she is to become the mother of God. In this somewhat parodic retelling of that myth, the poetic speaker is not so eager to say “yes” to the Angel’s command; in fact, she does not even understand what she is being asked. The original Mary was an instrument, one component of the divine plan. This Virgin, in contrast, does not see any purpose to the transformation that she has just experienced, and she neither desires nor expects to be part of any greater plan. If anything, she would like to be return to her former state: “Voy por el antiguo huerto – Isabel, Ana – por las antiguas casas; quisiera ser una mujer en una de estas casas…pero, soy la Virgen.” (I walk through the ancient orchard – Isabel, Ana – through the ancient houses; I would like to be a woman in one of those houses… but I’m the Virgin) (1: 312). Di Giorgio’s narrator finds that her status of the Virgin Mary has transformed her into an outsider; she is set apart from her peers in a way that she would rather not be, and she realizes that she would rather be an ordinary woman living an ordinary life rather than an untouchable, awe-inspiring goddess. The whistling wind and the stark image of wolves devouring lambs add a sense of desperation to the scene, as do the stars that fall “like tears” over her diadem. Here, we do not see a deliberate strategy for escape, but rather the interminable wandering of a desperate subject whose metamorphosis appears to have stripped her of her own agency and rendered her a ghostly presence. “Estoy sola. Silba el viento. ¿Adónde voy? ¿Adónde
voy? Y jamás habrá respuesta.” (I am alone. The wind whistles. Where am I going? Where am I going? And there will never be an answer) (1: 312). Paradoxically, the elevation of the poetic subject to one of the most iconic figures in the Catholic pantheon reduces her to a state of powerlessness. She is condemned to wander without end, and, like Sisyphus carrying his rock, her journey will have no end. Her motion is active, but not teleological; the very possibility of a goal is not given to her.

A similar scenario to this occurs in the ninety-seventh poem of Clavel y tenebrario, in which, walking among the trees of the family farm, the speaker experiences a sudden fear and the same kind of immobile wandering, the same kind of “fixed floating” that is the closest she can come to a true escape:

Mamá, ya había cazado en la pradera; las pequeñísimas vaquitas que se comían vivas: las ató y aderezó; yo almorzaba, lentamente; veía el porvenir, los largos años; la premonición exacta. La huerta me amenazó, se caía sobre mí. El este y el oeste estaban sellados. Nunca iba a encontrar el norte. Nunca iba a llegar al sur (1: 240).

(Mother had already been hunting on the prairie; the most minute cows that were eaten alive; she tied them and dressed them; I ate my lunch slowly; I saw the future, the long years, the exact premonition. The orchard threatened me; it was falling on top of me. The East and West were sealed off. I would never find the North. I would never reach the South).

Images of food in di Giorgio are often associated with violence, such as the episodes in Historial de las violetas when the mother orders the harvesting of mushrooms that bear the initials of deceased relatives or when the family sits down to devour a meal of meat that, still alive, begins moving on the plate. The domineering figure of the mother can, in this case, be interpreted as a sign of the gender-based oppression in which the female poetic speaker finds herself; the cows that are cruelly eaten alive evokes images of the cruelty against innocent victims under the second Uruguayan dictatorship. Here, we witness a most terrible form of entrapment; the speaker longs for freedom as she walks among the trees, but finds that her movement is restricted. The definitive “There will never be an answer” in La liebre de marzo is paralleled by the definitive certainty that the speaker will never reach the north or south. It appears that her movement is
circular, elliptical, reined in by her circumstances. This is what it means to “float fixedly,” as we later see the narrator doing in *Mesa de esmeralda*. Her motion may be limited, purposeless, futile, and yet, she has to keep moving. It is a compulsion analogous to her compulsion to remember. And this unceasing motion, this non-teleological kinesis, ultimately creates a space of its own, a realm that cannot be dominated by any discourse of political power.

In order to develop this point further, I would like to invoke the work of a thinker who may initially seem a bit out of place in a discussion of di Giorgio. Martinican writer Edouard Glissant is most often discussed with regard to issues of race, colonialism and postcolonialism. However, I believe that it might be worthwhile to discuss his work here. As I have mentioned, Glissant elaborates a distinction between two forms of identity: “root” identity, which is formed through the top-down imposition of a narrative and always rests on the exclusion and exploitation of the other, and “Relation” identity, which is much looser in its formation and comes into being through the contacts formed among different cultures. Exploring this concept in the Caribbean context, Glissant suggests that this concept of identity is based on wandering, dispossession, and so many different forms of contact between selves and others that any desire for “root” identity becomes virtually impossible to fulfill. The new identities formed in the absence of the root are composite or hybrid, resulting in such disparate phenomena – what Glissant calls *echos-monde* – as Faulkner’s work, Bob Marley’s music, Rio’s shantytowns, Chicago’s architecture, the Creole language, and indeed, he argues, all spoken languages (93). He asserts that, unlike root identity, Relation is not exploitative due to its constant focus on differences and particularities combined with its refusal to give in to any totalitarian impulse.

It is important to recognize that, in Glissant’s view, Relation identity is not a choice. “One does not first enter Relation, as one might enter a religion,” he tells us. “One does not first conceive of it the way we have expected to conceive of Being” (172). It is a condition that one finds oneself in, generally as a result of poverty and dispossession. Speaking of the plantation in particular, Glissant tells us that, by transporting African slaves to the Americas against their will, this economic system led to “the derangement of memory,” the creation of a “multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance” (71). The peoples of the Caribbean did not choose Relation identity; instead, it was forced upon them. The
resulting condition of this dispossession is a phenomenon that Glissant describes as wandering or “errantry.” The reality of the dispossessed is one of incessant flux, of constant exposure to different realities and different cultures. However, once again, this errantry is not a choice. “At this point we seem to be far removed from the sufferings and preoccupations of those who must bear the world’s injustices,” Glissant informs us. “Their errantry is, in effect, immobile. They have never experienced the melancholy and extroverted luxury of uprooting. They do not travel” (19). Paradoxically, most of the people who experience this errantry are stationary; most of them do not have the capacity to pick up and begin a new life elsewhere (as much as they may desire to do so), nor are they able to indulge in voluntary Relation in the form of tourism. (However, very often they are compelled into Relation as tourists come to them). Nevertheless, they are errant. As much as they might seek a foundational myth, their history is a product of wandering much like Odysseus’, which might offer a clue to many Caribbean writers’ fascination with Homer’s epic of errantry, which both Alejo Carpentier and Derek Walcott have retold in modern forms.

Admittedly, the reality of Marosa di Giorgio’s Uruguay is quite removed from that of the Caribbean. A country founded on the obliteration of indigenous cultures, a country that to this day prides itself on its purportedly homogeneous “European” identity, that idolizes its founding father José Artigas, Uruguay constantly seeks to present itself as a rooted nation. And yet, with its precarious identity as a small country geographically positioned between two economic and cultural powerhouses, its history as a heterogeneous nation of immigrants from across the European continent, its legacy of slavery (which still plays out in racial discrimination against Afro-Uruguayans), its murga (a satirical form of drama that has its roots in Spanish theatrical traditions), tango (which is associated with Uruguay’s nineteenth century European immigrants but also has African roots) and candombe (an Afro-Uruguayan rhythm), Uruguay is marked by the ebbs and flows of Relation, as is di Giorgio’s work. Throughout her work we see a constant fascination with other, exotic cultures, an orientalism that recalls the decadence of the modernista period. But, a simile comparing a magnolia tree to “una esclava negra sosteniendo criaturas inmóviles, nacaradas” (a black slave girl holding immobile creatures of pearl) reveals that di Giorgio’s understanding of Uruguayan political and social reality has indeed been marked by the same history as the Caribbean (95). But, in this sense, di Giorgio writes from the
perspective of the privileged rather than the dispossessed; she is the one who gazes at the other, rather than the one who is gazed upon. And, as I have tried to show in my discussion of the poetic space of knowledge, di Giorgio’s work is definitely driven by the desire for root identity—the same desire that Glissant sees as driving conquerors toward their exploits. As critic Patricia Esteban comments, even the rhythm of di Giorgio’s language is imbued with a cadence that recalls the Bible or ancient, pre-Columbian texts, allowing the author to imagine her own childhood as the beginning of civilization (60).

In transforming personal experience into collective myth, di Giorgio strives to reach a root. However, as this essay has sought to show, and as Esteban also observes, the repeated failure of this attempt leaves di Giorgio with a proliferation of disordered memories that forces us to experience a past filled with “fragmentos reiterativos e incomunicados […] por el que los sucesos no llegan nunca ‘a encajar’ sino que se amalgaman, se superponen, se interfieren” (reiterative, isolated fragments, leading events never to be ‘fit together,’ but to amalgamate, to superimpose, to interfere with each other) (64). We can see this contradiction throughout di Giorgio’s work: the more she attempts to arrive at a single, authentic truth, the more she loses herself amid contrary fragments. We might view this proliferation of “minute particulars” as a form of Relation; indeed, for Glissant, arrival at this kind of Relation is ultimately the fate of all who seek to put down roots. Speaking of the Bible and other foundational texts of Western civilization, Glissant notes that every tale of triumph or goodness bears some mark of its opposite:

Within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim. When the very idea of territory becomes relative, nuances appear in the legitimacy of territorial possession…The Greek victory in the Iliad depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his Odyssey and is recognized only by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the Chanson de Roland is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the Sagas are branded by an unstemmable fate, and so forth. These books are the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history (16).
Every attempt at finding a single, unified, unambiguous root plunges the seeker into a labyrinth of contradictions and ambiguities. This is the case with every Western epic and also with di Giorgio. I have devoted considerable time in this essay to the concept of contraries as seen in Blanchot’s theory, Blake’s poetics and Alan Watts’ religious views, and I have suggested that, in seeking the authentic reality that transcends all things, di Giorgio finds that the transcendent is actually immanent, taking the form of binary oppositions. Faced with this reality, di Giorgio’s narrators are compelled to wander – sometimes still seeking the root, at other times fleeing the oppressive systems in which they find themselves, but always “floating fixedly,” moving with nowhere to go. To my understanding, this stationary motion is the main characteristic of Glissant’s Relation. It is not something that is chosen; it is not a conscious process. It is instead an almost organic process, embodied in nature itself, that works against the totalizing impulse. In di Giorgio’s world, as we have seen, it is not only the subject who is errant, but also nature itself, as in this passage from *Clavel y tenebrario*:

Los vegetales de mi casa eran errantes. A la tarde salían los gladiolos, rojos, rosados, blancos, amarillos, color vino, plateados y dorados. Eran cien varas, una de cada color. Los otros hortelanos los veían andar con un poco de odio y de desprecio. Sentían fastidio por esas flores caminantes. Al caer de la tarde, ellos volvían, se estaban un rato, rígidos como militares, y, luego el viento les volvía a abaniciar. Esto no es para mucha extrañeza, pues, ya, se sabe la mágica condición de los gladiolos (1: 226).

(My house’s plants were wandering. In the evening the gladioli went out, red, pink, white, yellow, wine-coloured, silver and gold. There were one hundred stalks, one of each colour. The other market gardeners saw them moving with a bit of hatred and contempt. They were annoyed by these walking flowers. When dusk fell, they came back, they stood a while, rigid like soldiers, and then the wind sent them fanning out again. But this shouldn’t be all that surprising; everyone knows about the gladioli’s magical condition).

The poem then goes on to describe the movements of other plants – basil, violets, carnations, eucalyptus. All of nature is in a state of flux that leads the child’s mother as well as the market gardeners – those guardians of order and stability on the farm – to become highly frustrated. The
gladioli tease them, briefly standing still “like soldiers” and then dispersing again, thus mocking all attempts at imposing order. They refuse to be held down by any root. This is not a deliberate effort on their part, but rather their very nature, their innate “magic.” Even though there is nowhere for them to go, they still insist on going. Relation is not a choice for them, but a state of being.

For me, it is easy to understand why some critics of di Giorgio deny that she is a political writer. The question of whether or not her resistance is consciously crafted lies beyond the scope of this investigation; however, were I to venture a guess, I would say that di Giorgio did not set out to be a poet of political resistance. Like Blake, she is a visionary, a mystic whose insights are not ends in themselves, but points of departure toward the poem. Nevertheless, within these poems there exists a spontaneous, seemingly unconscious form of resistance, a poetic power that, in the words of di Giorgio’s Argentinian contemporary Juan Gelman, “como una hierba como un niño como un pajarito nace / la poesía en estos tiempos en medio / de los soberbios los tristes los arrepentidos” (like the grass like a child like a little bird it comes / poetry in these times in the midst / of the arrogant the grieving the repentant) (Gelman 337). For Gelman, poetry is a phenomenon of nature, as banal as grass, children and birds – resilient forms of life that cannot be destroyed by dictatorship, torture or war. For di Giorgio, it is an ongoing quest to seek a poetic knowledge of reality, locating the extraordinary within the ordinary, the divinity within humanity. In this chapter, I have argued that the ultimate reality that di Giorgio seeks does not lie beyond the realm of everyday life and experience, but is embodied within them. However, this reality is ambiguous, characterized by contraries that constantly struggle for dominance. Navigating these precarious oppositions, di Giorgio constantly wanders, “floating fixedly,” refusing to be confined within the spaces allotted to her by those in power. With the same spontaneity of growing plants, of the fairies and monsters that emerge from all corners of her poetic universe, di Giorgio again and again affirms the integrity of human imaginative capacity and defies any totalizing discourse that might seek to suppress it.
Conclusion

A few years ago I became involved in a Toronto organization dedicated to organizing a cultural festival dedicated to what it called “poetry of resistance.” Viewing poetry as a vehicle for speaking truth to power and as a source of inspiration for the pursuit of social change, this organization organized various literary events honouring various socially engaged poets – Ernesto Cardenal, Mario Benedetti, Mahmoud Darwish, Aimé Césaire, and Vladimir Mayakovsky stood among this company. While I firmly agreed with the intention behind this organization, I nevertheless found myself puzzled over just what it meant to be a “poet of resistance” (as opposed to a mere poet). To receive this designation, does the writer in question need to denounce unjust political leaders? To engage in social activism? Or is this description simply a comment on the thematic content of the poetry? As readers, how do we distinguish between poetry that is political and poetry which is not?

This dissertation has argued that the dividing line between “political” and “apolitical” (if it even exists) is blurred to say the least. I have suggested that poetry is an inherently subversive mode of language – a discourse that is opposed, as Blanchot states, both to “ordinary language” and “the language of thought.” In creating and listening to poetry, we engage with language in a way that differs drastically from that of our everyday speech. It also differs substantially from the discourses that dominate the public arena – those of politics, education, commerce and the media. Meanwhile, poetry is also involved in the “language of thought” that seeks to make sense of the world through philosophical and scientific inquiry. For Blanchot, poetry is distinguished from other language modes by its lack of utilitarian value. “[In poetry] beings with their preoccupations, their projects, their activity are no longer ultimately what speaks,” he says. “The poetic word is no longer someone’s word. In it no one speaks, and what speaks is not anyone. It seems rather that the word declares itself. Then language takes on all of its importance. It becomes essential.” (41). Poetry is perhaps the only mode of language that is not instrumentalized; it has no goal, no objective beyond linguistic expression itself. In a world where nearly all aspects of our lives – even our friendships and familial bonds – have been turned into commodities, poetry offers a powerful discourse of resistance to the systems under which we live.
While there may not be any viable escape from the economic, political and social systems that govern our lives, poetry allows us to create alternative spaces within these systems, to find ways to give them a new shape, to continue imagining a world where things could be different. It is this ability to imagine other realities and question this one that brings so many poets into the realm of the political. At times, as in the case of the “poets of resistance” honoured by this Toronto organization, this subversion takes the form of active engagement in the public sphere, as seen in Mahmoud Darwish’s staunch advocacy for the rights of the Palestinian people or Mario Benedetti’s active denunciation of Uruguay’s second military dictatorship, which eventually compelled him to go into exile. As I have aimed to show here, however, this public social engagement is only one among many forms of resistance. When reading the work of Delmira Agustini, Alejandra Pizarnik and Marosa di Giorgio, we encounter a poetic discourse that on the surface barely seems political at all. With a closer look, however, we see that – regardless of what their intentions might have been – the political realm is present in their writing. For all three of these writers, the act of writing poetry becomes a quest for knowledge of ultimate reality, of the higher truth that we seek beyond what Charles Taylor would call the “immanent frame” of our everyday experiences. None of these poets are content to accept the vision of the world offered by the leaders of the societies in which they lived (rationalist positivism in the case of Agustini; various competing left-wing and right-wing political ideologies in the case of Pizarnik, and an extreme right-wing dictatorship in the case of di Giorgio). Through the act of writing, they each engage in an epistemological quest that challenges dominant paradigms and dares to imagine an alternative.

This investigation began by looking at the work of Delmira Agustini, a writer whose work has perplexed critics since the time when she lived and wrote to the present day. I noted that many critics have sought to “discipline” her and chastise her for her focus on eros; likewise, others have attempted to downplay the eroticism of her verse by describing her as a mystic poet whose erotic images are best read as symbols for the poet’s search for God. More recent critics, however, have rejected both of these views, instead choosing to treat Agustini’s eroticism as an expression of physical desire. Thus, for some readers Agustini is an inspired mystic in the tradition of Saint Teresa; for others, she is a highly sophisticated, self-aware poet who donned various social masks in order to write blatantly erotic verse in a highly restrictive society. My
interpretation has sought to find a middle way between these two positions. I have argued that what Doris Stephens calls a “quest for transcendence” is indeed a defining feature of Agustini’s poetry; the speaker of her verses yearns to go beyond the realm of ordinary experience, to apprehend a truth that is not immediately apparent. In the first part of the chapter, I explored the ways in which Agustini seeks to gain access to a “space of knowledge” beyond the limits of everyday life and experience – what Blanchot, invoking the Orpheus myth, refers to as “the other night” that is even darker and more mysterious than Hades, the realm where his forbidden love Eurydice awaits him. Focusing on the poetry of her first two books, I suggested that Agustini’s focus on *eros* becomes a kind of spiritual transcendence; there is a deep desire for contact with the other – a contact that Michel de Certeau describes as the core of the mystical experience.

However, when looking at these poems, we see that while Agustini does manage to enter this “space of knowledge,” these moments of transcendence are brief, fleeting and only intermittently accessible. In order to understand the elusive nature of this space of knowledge, I devoted the next section of the chapter to a discussion of a writer whose work shares many common features with that of Agustini: the Bohemian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who was writing at the same time on the other side of the Atlantic. Though the two writers did not meet or even read one another’s work, they share a common desire. For both of them, the utilitarian, instrumental quests for knowledge so characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are not enough; instead, they seek a different kind of knowledge, one that can be found by dwelling in mysteries rather than solving them, by embracing illusion rather than recoiling from it. Due to the Enlightenment’s “disenchantment” of the world, the knowledge that they seek is to be found only in fragments; it is not possible to apprehend the whole. At the same time, as Blanchot suggests in his discussion of Rilke, perhaps such apprehension of the whole is not what is desired. As we have noted, Blanchot sees poetry as a movement not toward clarity so much as mystery; in a sense, it is a journey toward greater unknowing. Given the context in which both writers were living – the neo-Enlightenment of Comtian positivism – this is indeed a radical move. I have argued that Agustini’s lack of engagement with the major social movements of her time (such as the Uruguayan labour movement and also the burgeoning feminist movement) do not mean that she is an apolitical writer. Instead, like her fellow *modernistas* – in particular Rubén Darío, her main poetic mentor – she seeks to critique the underlying premises of the
system under which she lives. While the positivists seek clarity, certainty, and wholeness of the truth, Agustini knows that such truth can only be found in a fragmented form. The space of knowledge that she seeks is actually a space of unknowing, and her desire ultimately leads her toward the kind of dissolution that Georges Bataille describes as central to erotic experience. Resisting the dominant language modes of her day – those of scientific positivism, religious conservatism, and bourgeois propriety, Agustini proposes an alternative way of truth-seeking that is arguably as subversive now, one hundred years since her death, as it was during her lifetime.

In my second chapter, I moved to the middle of the twentieth century to explore the work of Alejandra Pizarnik, who, though having no direct contact with Agustini’s work, shares common literary precursors (particularly French Symbolism) and many common concerns. I have argued that like Agustini, Pizarnik is also concerned with coming to know a reality that is not immediately apparent. However, if for Agustini this reality is to be found above and beyond our everyday experience, for Pizarnik it is to be discovered within language itself. Looking at her early writings, we see the image of a wall that needs to be transcended so that Pizarnik might enter what Cristina Piña calls the “illud spatium,” the child’s garden where this knowledge might be found. But, while Agustini finds her space of knowledge only in fragmentary form, we see that Pizarnik does not find it at all. As her work progresses, she gradually loses confidence in the ability of language to provide any point of reference, any accurate representation of a reality beyond it. Pizarnik’s disillusionment with language reaches its climax in her late work, particularly in her famous “En esta noche, en este mundo,” where the speaker laments the inability of language to reveal any solid or lasting truth about the world. Thus, I have suggested that, for Pizarnik, the space of knowledge, if it even exists, is impossible to enter. Our only possible point of entry is language; however, due to its inability to represent the world accurately, this same language presents us with an insurmountable obstacle. Nevertheless, Pizarnik refuses to give up her search; like Camus’s Sisyphus, she continues to roll the boulder up the hill, even though she knows that again and again it will fall.

While it might seem improbable that this futile search for knowledge could constitute a mode of resistance, in the second half of my chapter on Pizarnik I have argued that it does. While Agustini may have been detached from the political realm of the world that she inhabited, Pizarnik was disdainful of hers. Encountering anti-Semitism on both the Right and Left of the
mid-twentieth century political arena in her country, Pizarnik preferred to focus, as César Aira has suggested, on creating good poetry for its own sake. Even so, I have made the argument that, whatever Pizarnik’s intentions may have been, the political realm is indubitably present in her work. I have suggested that the futile search for a space of knowledge is intimately bound up with the search for a patria – a country where she might find herself at home. In addition to drawing attention to Pizarnik’s diasporic identity, this search for the absent patria suggests that her native Argentina – for all the national pride that a writer such as Gombrowicz observed during the middle of the twentieth century – is not a nation where everyone can feel at home. In this way, she draws attention to the nation’s artificial nature, revealing that it is, as Benedict Anderson has revealed, an imagined community. Furthermore, while Pizarnik does not explicitly discuss the political oppression that had already begun in Argentina during the 1950’s and 1960’s, a work such as La condesa sangrienta indeed manages to evoke it. Additionally, by engaging with Sigmund Freud’s writings on repetition, I have argued that the desperation that we see in Pizarnik’s search for an absent patria evokes a trauma that is collective as well as personal. In this way, Pizarnik’s work resists the hegemonic discourses of nationalism and also what I have described as the dictatorial, totalizing aspect of thought itself. Language cannot accurately represent the world, but given that we cannot communicate or even think without it, language forms the wall that confines us. In a movement quite evocative of Blanchot, Pizarnik suggests that there may indeed be a way to escape language’s totalizing power: by paradoxically moving from knowledge to unknowing, from speech to silence.

The third poet whose work I have explored in this dissertation is Marosa di Giorgio. Though born around the same time as Pizarnik (four years earlier), di Giorgio lived to a much older age and arguably produced some of her most powerful work toward the end of the twentieth century; thus, I have presented her as representing a kind of third generation in comparison to her two predecessors discussed here (both of whom she studied and admired). Like both Agustini and Pizarnik, di Giorgio seeks knowledge of an ultimate reality that is not immediately available to her. We have seen that for Agustini, this reality is transcendent, existing in a realm beyond that which is immediately apparent; for Pizarnik, it is immanent, to be found in the silence underlying the sounds of the words that we speak. For di Giorgio, however, this distinction between transcendence and immanence makes little sense; rejecting dualism and
inhabiting a world where the natural and the supernatural are one, she finds that the reality which she is seeking is most often quite close to her, often at the reach of a hand. And yet, just as for Agustini this reality is only intermittently accessible, for di Giorgio it is likewise elusive. To a certain extent, this reality seems to be located in childhood memory; throughout her work we see a tension between the adult narrator and child protagonist. Then, there appears the unstable nature of this reality when it does indeed appear; it is characterized by a strange, dynamic interplay of contrary movements between goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness, domesticity and wildness, safety and danger. While Blanchot discusses these contrary movements in his study, arguing that all literature is made from the “torn unity” of opposites, I have found it beneficial to supplement my look at these contraries with an examination of the work of William Blake, for whom the Lamb and the Tiger inevitably inhabit the same ontological plane. Unlike Blanchot, who dwells in a world where the gods are absent, di Giorgio believes the ultimate reality that she seeks to be inherently divine; however, this divinity is itself fraught with opposition and contradiction. Engaging in a comparative analysis of the two poets, I have sought to show that di Giorgio, like Blake, finds the reality she seeks to be suspended between two poles, neither of which is able to exclude the other. I conclude that for di Giorgio, as for the other two poets in this study, the desired space of knowledge is always elusive; however, it remains intermittently close, often just barely eluding her. Therefore, her search for it becomes a kind of dance, a ceaseless movement in multiple directions. It is this movement, I argue, that permits di Giorgio to create her own space of resistance.

In the second half of my study of di Giorgio, I argued that while critics initially saw her as an apolitical writer, more recent readers of her work – among them María Soledad Montañez, Hebert Benítez Pezzolano, and Anna Deeny – have observed that the political is indeed present in her work. Building largely on Deeny’s analysis, I argue that the visionary world-making in di Giorgio’s poetry can be seen as a response to the “consent of language” that dominates the consciousness of people living under totalitarian regimes. Rather than accepting (or even arguing against) the official discourses regarding what is true and acceptable, di Giorgio sets out to create her own world, an alternative reality to the one that was offered to her by a government that illegally imprisoned, tortured and disappeared thousands of people during the 1970’s and early 1980’s. It is often remarked that a totalitarian regime might be compared to a smooth, steady ship
that sails in one clearly set direction; democracy, in contrast, is a fragile raft pulled in multiple
directions. In a similar way, Martinican literary theorist Edouard Glissant draws this dichotomy
between what he calls “root identity” and “Relation identity” (although it must be noted that, for
him, democracy can also be characterized by the desire for a root). In Glissant’s view, societies
built on “root identity” see themselves as stemming from a heroic, perhaps even mythic past that
they seek to bring into the future; societies created on “Relation identity,” in contrast, are formed
by what he calls “errantry” – ceaseless contacts between cultures, a kind of being in constant
motion even in the absence of physical travel. In the final section of my chapter on di Giorgio, I
argued that her writing, with its constant pushing and pulling between binary oppositions in
search of a space of knowledge is characterized by its own kind of errantry. And, through this
(arginably escapist) wandering, di Giorgio manages to create a space of resistance to the
unidirectional discourse of the political regime under which she lived.

Having come to the end of this study, I now find that the act of reading these three poets
alongside Blanchot and other literary theorists has brought new questions to the surface. While a
full investigation of these concerns would most likely require me to write a completely different
study, I believe that it is appropriate to bring up two of the main points here. The first of these
has to do with gender and sexuality. Readers of this thesis might notice that all three of the
writers chosen here are women. And, considering them in the context of the twentieth century
Latin American literary canon, their gender is not something that can simply be shrugged off as
insignificant. Indeed, Agustini is the only female writer to be included in the modernista
company; meanwhile, Pizarnik’s and di Giorgio’s literary careers both overlapped with the Latin
American “Boom” of the 1960’s and 1970’s, which also excluded women writers. In a similar
way, the issue of sexuality must also be considered when considering the work of these writers.
While Pizarnik is the only one of the three who actually identified as queer, Agustini and di
Giorgio are indeed deviant given their social contexts. In an era where marriage was the only
social option open to an upper-class young woman, Agustini delayed it as long as she could (her
engagement to Enrique Job Reyes lasted for several years before the wedding) and separated
from her husband one month after the wedding, reportedly stating that she could not stand the
vulgarity of married life (and yet, she continued meeting with Reyes as a lover, thus further
defying the social rules of her time). While those rules had changed considerably by the time
Marosa di Giorgio came of age in the 1950’s, the truth is that the change was not that substantial; indeed, by eschewing marriage in favour of a complete focus on her literary life, di Giorgio also chose a path that was not common for a woman, instead establishing herself as a “gypsy nun” who chose to express eroticism in her work rather than her life. As Hugo Achugar observes, “While one might be tempted to see di Giorgio simply as a heterosexual woman, I believe that this assumption is too simplistic; it does not tell the whole story” (Achugar, Personal Interview). The question that follows from these observations, then, is just what role do gender and sexuality play in these writers’ constructions of poetic space? At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned several writers who are often described as “poets of resistance” and who speak directly about political and social issues in their writing – Mario Benedetti, Roque Dalton, and Ernesto Cardenal, among others. It is noteworthy that most of the writers given this designation (at least by the Toronto organization dedicated to promoting “resistance poetry”) are heterosexual men. For me, this immediately raises the question of whether we might speak of non-heterosexual and women writers as engaging in a different kind of discourse of resistance than the one usually defined as such. A concept such as Hélène Cixous’s “écriture féminine” immediately comes to mind. In The Newly Born Woman, Cixous states that the basic cultural and intellectual reality that we inhabit – at least since the work of Freud and Joyce – is phallocentric and that women have engaged in a different practice of writing to resist this reality. Although such writing is difficult to define, Cixous insists that it is real:

At the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean that it does not exist. But it will always exceed the discourse governing the phallocentric system; it takes place and will take place somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination. It will not let itself think except through subjects that break automatic functions, border runners never subjugated to any authority. But one can begin to speak. Begin to point out some effects, some elements of unconscious drives, some relations of the feminine Imaginary to the Real, to writing (92).

For Cixous, this type of writing – which does not necessarily have to be practised by a female writer – defies phallocentric culture by focusing on the body, subjectivity and the unconscious: “Woman must write her body, must make up for the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions,
classes and rhetoric, order and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves” (95).

Looking at the work of the three writers in question, with the focus on *eros* in Agustini, the bodily descriptions of the tortures enacted by the Bloody Countess seen in Pizarnik, and the various descriptions of sex and erotism in di Giorgio’s work, we can see that some of Cixous’s descriptions might indeed apply. Nevertheless, I am very hesitant to describe any of these writers’ work as “écriture féminine” as Cixous describes it – or, indeed as she practises it in her own writing. For Pizarnik especially, the description does not seem apt, given that Pizarnik’s poems were written with much deliberation and correction – hardly the kind of spontaneous overflow of passion that Cixous describes. Even the long poem *La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la Polígrafa*, perhaps the most seemingly spontaneous of Pizarnik’s works, is characterized by a wordplay and witty irony that seems just a bit too characteristic of the rational, “phallocentric” discourse that Cixous defines “écriture féminine” against. The term might be more appropriate for discussing Agustini (who notoriously wrote her verses spontaneously on the backs of playbills and railway tickets, then passed them to her father for transcription) as well as di Giorgio (who barely corrected her work and was notorious for writing while lying down, allowing the words and images to flow in the kind of unconscious stream that Cixous describes). While a Cixousian reading of these three poets might shed some more light on this topic, however, I am hesitant to categorize any particular style of writing as “feminine.” Likewise, I am also hesitant to characterize the indirect, slippery approach that Agustini, Pizarnik and di Giorgio take toward the political dimension as “feminine” or “queer.” While I know that “feminine” does not necessarily mean “female,” it must be observed that there are many Latin American women writers who take the direct, overt approach toward politics that we see in Benedetti or Zurita; among them we might mention the Cuban poet Nancy Morejón, whose work deals overtly with themes of racism, women’s rights and her country’s revolution; the Nicaraguan writer Gioconda Belli, whose novels and poetry chronicle her own country’s revolution, and the Uruguayan writer Cristina Peri Rossi, who was exiled in 1972 due to her opposition to the dictatorship and who has since written very overtly and directly on the themes of women’s and LGBTQ rights. Similarly, there are many male writers whose approach to the political realm takes the same kind of quiet subversion that we see in the work of the three poets in our study. The Chilean writer Raúl Zurita
comes to mind, as his work evokes—rather than describing directly—the experience of living under the dictatorship of August Pinochet; the Argentinian Juan Gelman also comes to mind. Returning to Agustini, Pizarnik and di Giorgio, I have no doubts that their experience as women definitely influenced their experience as writers. We see this in Agustini’s constant donning of social masks in order to be able to get away with writing erotic verse and also in di Giorgio’s constant and often ironic images of weddings and female domesticity. In terms of Pizarnik, meanwhile, we might suppose that her identity as a queer woman in a world that was not so accepting of difference as the world we inhabit now surely had its impact on the sense of pain and woundedness that is evident in their work. Earlier in this dissertation, I have suggested that all three of these writers might have fit into Rama’s anthology of “raros” due to their reaction against the realist tradition of the Río de la Plata. However, I do not think that the styles of their writing—nor their quietly subversive approach to resistance—can easily be labelled by such adjectives as “feminine” or “queer.” While gender and sexuality definitely influence their writing, I do not believe that they define it. Nevertheless, this question remains open for further discussion.

The second question that arises from this dissertation is related to the issues of religion, secularism and postsecularism (a theoretical concept that Western secularism may have come to an end, or at least that it may not be the best framework to describe the way in which most of us lead our lives)\(^\text{12}\). Though not explored directly in terms of these poets’ work, it is an issue that nevertheless comes up. We have mentioned Agustini and di Giorgio’s Catholicism (both writers were practising members of the Church) and Pizarnik’s Judaism which, though she did not necessarily hold the beliefs or adhere to the practices, undeniably had much influence on her writing. In looking at modernismo, we have seen a tension between a vitalist spiritual orientation toward the world (which embraced the mystical aspects of religion even if it rejected some of the doctrines and laws) and the positivist worldview, which viewed the empirical scientific method.

\(^{12}\) In an essay entitled “Notes on a Post-Secular Society,” Jürgen Habermas argues that the growth of religion around the globe along with the increased presence of Islam in Europe “undermines the secularistic belief in the foreseeable disappearance of religion and robs the secular understanding of the world of any triumphal zest. The awareness of living in a secular society is no longer bound up with the certainty that cultural and social modernization can advance only at the cost of the public influence and personal relevance of religion” (5). Habermas concludes that if self-proclaimed secular societies such as Canada, Australia and European countries are to treat their fellow citizens as equals, they must be willing to recognize the validity of a religious worldview even without embracing it. In this sense, they must become postsecular.
as the only legitimate means both to knowledge and social improvement. The issue of religion lies in the background of the theoretical framework for this dissertation as well. As I mentioned at the very beginning, the dissertation’s title “Against Ulro” comes from the writer Czeslaw Milosz, a practising (though certainly questioning) Catholic who was intrigued by William Blake’s Ulro, a realm of “spiritual pain” inhabited by those whose imaginations were restricted, who could not envision anything beyond the strict laws of traditional religious doctrines and scientific rules. While Milosz may reject religious absolutism, we see that he also rejects the scientific absolutism embodied by positivist thinkers at the turn of the last century and New Atheists at the turn of this one. By focusing on the importance of the spiritual imagination (as well as choosing such writers as Simone Weil and Fyodor Dostoevsky as representatives of resistance to this Ulro that he sees in modern society) Milosz clearly allies himself on the side of religiosity in some form. In a similar way, the discussion of Agustini and modernismo draws on the work of Charles Taylor, who, while arguing that our society is irrevocably secular in that the very conditions of our belief insists that we treat religion as a private rather than a public matter, remains determinedly Catholic not only in his private life, but in his public identity as an intellectual. On the contrary, Maurice Blanchot, whose work forms the primary theoretical lens of this dissertation, appears wary of describing the poet’s quest in religious terms; he adamantly asserts that poetry does not allow the gods to speak, but rather their absence. Nevertheless, speaking of Franz Kafka, he asserts,

> When writing becomes ‘a form of prayer,’ it is implied that there are probably other forms. And even if, as a consequence of this world’s unhappiness, there were no other forms, to write is no longer from this perspective to approach the work, but rather to wait for that one moment of grace – Kafka acknowledged that he lay in wait for it – when one would have to write no longer (72).

In this passage, Blanchot suggests that writing, though not synonymous with prayer, emerges from the same psychic space; it is “the consciousness of unhappiness, not its compensation.” He then suggests that, just as the spiritual seeker yearns to find God (and thus put an end to his search), the writer likewise desires an end to the journey, a moment when the truth or revelation or perhaps even salvation that he seeks is thus found, and he no longer finds it necessary to write. Obviously, the three writers in my investigation never reached such a point; Agustini’s and Pizarnik’s writing careers were both cut short unexpectedly by their tragic deaths; di Giorgio
continued writing even when her own death from cancer was visible on the horizon, and her posthumous collection *La flor de lis* was published soon after her passing. Nevertheless, looking at all three writers, the question remains prominent: just what role does religiosity play in their work? In the cases of Agustini and especially di Giorgio, who inhabited a society that prided itself on its secularism, might their writing be described as taking a postsecular turn? Might the ultimate reality that Pizarnik seeks behind the wall of language be described in overtly religious terms?

I suspect that even a partial answer to this question would inevitably depend on a clear decision as to how we might define the terms “religious” and “secular” to begin with, and this is not an easy task as the meanings of both terms are continually up for debate. Indeed, the Puerto Rican literary theorist Francisco José Ramos argues that while poetry expresses a “fable of the ineffable,” this fable exists within the realm of aesthetic – not religious – experience:

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[\ldots] \text{La fábula de lo inefable responde a una experiencia poética que opera dentro del registro estético, y no ya ‘religioso’ de lo innombrable. Es necesario tener en mente una demistificación de la poesía para dar a entender que por más ‘espiritual’ que sea un poema, lo que con él se despliega es la iniciativa de las palabras, el rigor de la forma y un pensar afín a la experiencia literaria, y no al fervor ‘religioso.’ Si por ‘religión’ entendemos el anhelo de unión o de comunión con ‘dios’ o con lo ‘divino,’ entonces salta a la vista que la experiencia religiosa es el revuelo de un sentimiento, y no necesariamente de una emoción poética ligada al llamado o vocación de la escritura. Y si, en un sentimiento más elevado, entendemos la religio como el anhelo, sereno o desesperado, por ligarse a lo imposible, entonces lo que resulta fabuloso es la nostalgia de lo absoluto cuya expresión puede o no desembozar en una forma y pensar poéticos que ya nada tienen que ver con lo que, sin más, se siente, se cree o se desea. La verdad de un poema, por su complicidad con la ficción, es un ejercicio de libertad que obliga ser fiel a las palabras, y no a la fe de un sentimiento o al asentamiento de la fe. No hay una poesía religiosa o una poesía mística, pues la poesía, por ser lo que nunca llega a ser, se basta y se justifica a sí misma en tanto que juego con lo que no necesita ser nombrado, es decir, lo real (40).}
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… The fable of the ineffable responds to a poetic experience that operates within the aesthetic register and not the “religious” one of the unnameable. It is necessary to bear in mind a demystification of poetry in order to understand why, when a poem appears “spiritual,” this is due to the initiative of the words, the rigour of its form and a type of thought related to literary experience and not to “religious” fervour. If by “religion” we mean a yearning for union or communion with a “god” or with the “divine,” it becomes apparent that religious experience is the tempest of a feeling, and not necessarily of a poetic emotion linked to the writer’s calling or vocation. And if, in a more elevating feeling, we understand religio as a serene or desperate yearning to bind ourselves with the impossible, then what turns out to be a fable is the nostalgia for the absolute whose expression may or may not result in a poetic form and mode of thought that have nothing to do with what is actually felt, believed or desired. The truth of a poem, due to its complicity with fiction, is an exercise of freedom that requires one to be faithful to words, and not to a faith in sentiment or to an affirmation of faith. There is no religious or mystical poetry because poetry, by being what it never comes to be, suffices unto itself and justifies itself as playing with that which need not be named, that is to say, the real).

Indeed, Ramos’ very thoughtful observations reveal a great deal of complexity and could indeed be the subject of a completely different study. In this passage, we can see that he affirms the materiality of language; he argues that any poetry which appears to be “spiritual” actually only appears to be so due to the rigour of its poetic form and its faithfulness not to a supernatural being or even to the “impossible” absolute, but to language itself. This comment is reminiscent of Northrop Frye’s assertion that William Blake, contrary to much popular misunderstanding, was not a “mystic” who sought a spiritual connection to God for its own sake, but as a means toward an end – the poem (7). For Ramos, religiosity is inextricably linked with sentiment – either the sentiment of desire for closeness with God or a nostalgia for a lost absolute. He argues that poetry goes beyond such sentiment; its objective is language itself, a language that plays with the real.

The question that follows from this point, however, is just what is meant by “the real?” Does Ramos refer to the psychoanalytic meaning, or some other? Indeed, from the standpoint of a religious believer, surely nothing is as real as God. And, is religiosity always so bound up with
sentiment as Ramos finds it to be? This is another question that would need to be answered in the space of a larger study. In general, I concur with Ramos (and also with Frye) that the concerns of one who seeks union with the divine are not the same as someone who seeks to write poetry; while the two goals may be pursued simultaneously, they might also be pursued in complete separation from each other. And, while this dissertation has argued that the three poets in question seek knowledge of an ultimate reality, it does not necessarily follow that his ultimate reality is divine – particularly in the case of Pizarnik. Indeed, no matter what one’s personal belief system may be, the fact remains that reality constantly eludes us; none of us can claim to have known being-in-itself or reality as it exists beyond our perceptions of it. Therefore, a study specifically focused on the relationship between religiosity, secularism and the discourse of resistance in the work of these three poets would require a great deal of theoretical exploration and a completely different perspective on the work of these three writers. Therefore, for the present moment this question will remain unanswered.

These questions reveal that there are many obvious differences between the three authors discussed in this investigation. Their experiences of their gender and sexuality are invariably different, as are their attitudes toward religiosity. As I point out at the beginning of this thesis, they also differ due to their historical and political contexts; indeed, Agustini was writing in a very different Uruguay than the one that di Giorgio began writing in half a century later; likewise, di Giorgio’s Salto and Montevideo were very different places than Pizarnik’s Buenos Aires and, later, her Paris. However, they are united by several common features: a tendency toward excess reminiscent of Lautréamont’s Maldoror, a passionate pushing at the limits of their lives. Also, all of them were witness to moments of rapid historical change: the democratic, positivist reforms brought to Uruguay in the first decade of the twentieth century by President José Batlle; the political upheavals shaking Argentina during the middle of the twentieth century, and the harsh reality of dictatorship that controlled Uruguay (and indeed nearly all Latin America) during the 1970’s. In all three writers, we observe a desire to seek beyond the ordinary boundaries of experience, to achieve a kind of knowledge not provided to them by the dominant epistemological paradigms available to them. In taking the risk to envision alternative realities, all three of these poets create a space of resistance. Now, at a moment when we find ourselves again in the thick of rapid technological changes, economic crisis, and political instability in
much of our world, we are very much in need of this space. Agustini, Pizarnik and di Giorgio all remind us that, even in times of uncertainty or even crisis, we do not have to cling to the answers offered by those in power; we do not have to become captives in the land of Ulro. Even when faced with obstacles, the human imagination retains its autonomy, its ability to create a new reality where things might be different. In refusing to take this world for granted, in daring to imagine alternatives, these three poets present us with a mode of passionate and subversive resistance that, if powerful at the time when they were writing, is just as salient in the world we inhabit today.
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