

The Blind Knot: José Revueltas' *Los errores* and the Subject

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ABSTRACT: The fiction of the Mexican writer, poet, and theorist José Revueltas (1914-1976) continues to inspire critical work. One aspect that underlies a good deal of this criticism is the way in which Revueltas' fiction was often at odds or contradicted his political commitments throughout his life. In this article I argue that this tension can be attributed to a questioning of the ontological assumptions that inform both communist and liberal theory and practice of Revueltas' era. In particular, I will focus on the novel *Los errores* (1964) in which this deconstructive impulse can be seen in the treatment of the subject, which is represented as constitutively divided, at times even effaced. The novel is concerned with the various aporias that the notion of a centered subject presents, including the relation between the subject and action, the role of the unconscious, and an epistemological gap between language and the real introduced by one of the protagonists from whose ideas the novel derives its title. I argue that *Los errores* represents an effort to think of ethics and politics beyond the notion of a unitary subject. This inclination is also evidenced in the life of Revueltas with his eventual move away from the various communist parties and towards the more experimental politics that he associated with the student movement in Mexico.

Keywords: José Revueltas, subjectivity, deconstruction, politics, ethics

There are arguably few Latin American writers whose lives have inspired more critical speculation than José Revueltas (Mexico—1914-1976). Critics have particularly focused on his lifelong political activism. The political trajectory of Revueltas begins at the age of fifteen, when he joins the *Federación de Jóvenes Comunistas*. As a result of his allegiance to various communist parties, Revueltas was imprisoned on at least four occasions. He was also expelled three times from the very same communist parties for which Revueltas was persecuted by the Mexican state. These excommunications were due to fallouts with party leadership over his perceived ideological deviations, especially in the two novels, *Los días terrenales* (1949) and *Los errores* (1964). In addition, attention has been paid to his move away from the parties and gravitation towards the student movement of 1968 in the last part of Revueltas' life. Without a doubt, besides writing fiction, the life of Revueltas was consumed by the theoretical and practical aspects of politics.¹

In regards to the reception of his fiction, Revueltas faced a backlash among his fellow-travelers with the publication of *Los días terrenales*. The most public and extensive criticism came from the Marxist critic Enrique Ramírez y Ramírez, who, in an article titled 'Sobre una literatura de extravío,' accused Revueltas of subordinating realism to harmful ideas, variously identified as individualism, mysticism, nihilism and existentialism, calling the last a 'philosophy of decadence' (344). Revueltas responded by trying to recall the novel from circulation and wrote several pieces of self-critique. During this period, in 1961, Revueltas also published an introductory essay to mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of his first

novel *Los muros de agua* (1941). The essay ostensibly concerns this inaugural novel but is more preoccupied with explaining his philosophy and method of writing fiction, which he called dialectical materialist realism. His elaboration of this realism in the essay works to bring his life and literary work together. Indeed, he ends the introduction by affirming that his fiction and his Marxist-Leninist militancy are complementary practices (20). However, just three years later, the novel *Los errores*—the focus of my analysis here—restates the criticism of the party, both in the Soviet Union and Mexico, but in more vociferous terms. The starting point of my investigation is a question or puzzle that has continued to animate critical work on the fiction of Revueltas: how to explain the apparent contradiction between Revueltas' political activism and his literary work? Throughout his life, Revueltas insisted that he had remained a faithful communist. And yet, in his fiction, one finds that this trenchant critique of the communist party leadership of his day is not so much premised on a non-dogmatic stance to politics; nor does his censure pertain to a limited group of rogue actors, who have betrayed the truth of communism. I argue that the actions of the party leadership compel Revueltas to reflect on the ontological assumptions on which communist thought and politics are based. More specifically, it calls into question the centered individual and collective subject that are presupposed in notions as ostensibly varied as the communist New Man, the Mexican national subject, and economic liberalism's notion of the *homo economicus*.

Critics have sought to explain the tension between Revueltas' life and fiction by positing a combination of often antagonistic in-

fluences in his work, producing a dialectical relation that serves to generate the fiction. The poet and critic Octavio Paz points out the paradoxical copresence of Christianity and Marxism in the revuelian oeuvre.² In a similar way, the critic Edith Negrín asserts that, rather than an opposition between Christianity and Marxism, we find a dialectical relation between existentialism and Marxism. For Negrín, this theoretical tension in Revueltas' fiction expresses a human condition that is tragic in its finitude (156). Philippe Cheron takes up this tragic human condition and argues for a dialectical relation as well. He focuses on the predominance of prison in the fiction of Revueltas, which is not merely a frequent theme in the work of Revueltas but the central figure that structures the entire output of the author (296). He points out that in Revueltas' work, every disciplinary control engenders a concomitant resistance. As a result, there is in the fiction a constant tension between imprisonment and the desire to escape (212). Cheron goes on to call this tension the 'dialectic of imprisonment' (286). Ignacio Sánchez Prado points out that the growing tension between Revueltas' political practice and his literary practice produces a break with both Marxist Leninist and Mexican nationalist ideologies. It is in his literary work that Revueltas shows his true political orientation, which is a concern for the poor of the world that takes priority over any theory or dogma (154).

Marxist critics view their work on the fiction of Revueltas as a recuperative effort, in opposition to what they see as a hegemonic and erroneous reading of Revueltas' fiction that is informed by a thinly veiled anti-communism. These critics argue that the ambiguity in Revueltas' work contains a coherent, albeit idiosyncratic, articulation of a Marxist theory and practice. For Evodio Escalante, there is a clear systematization at work in Revueltas' fiction that adheres to key Marxist categories (*del lado moridor* 26). Similarly, in his intellectual biography of Revueltas, Jorge Fuentes Morúa sets out to trace the influence of Marx in the work of Revueltas and closely follows Escalante's analysis.³ Bruno Bosteels is another critic whose recuperative efforts seek to establish a reading of Revueltas' body of work that is in harmony with the political activism of the author. In an article on the novel *Los errores*, Bosteels argues that though the novel contains a call for ethical reform directed at the communist party, one should not understand that this critique puts in doubt Revueltas' fealty to communist thought and politics. What underlines Bosteels' methodological approach to the author's work is a form of biographical criticism. Though Bosteels concedes that *Los errores* lends itself to a reading like the one that I am developing in this article, or like that of Sánchez Prado mentioned above, he attributes this element to a sort of cognitive lapse on the part of Revueltas. After all, if Revueltas insisted on his loyalty to communist thought and politics, then readers ought to interpret his fiction with this conviction in mind. As Bosteels insists, 'sin duda alguna, aunque su novela puede leerse de esta forma, nada hubiera horrorizado más al eterno comunista que fue Revueltas' (143).

Though critics may not agree on the precise terms, they are

in accord regarding a dialectical element in the fiction, something that Revueltas encouraged, as we see in the 1961 essay for the anniversary marking his first published novel. Revueltas' notion of dialectical materialist realism is based on his assertion that existence adheres to a certain order: 'la realidad tiene un movimiento *interno* propio, que no es ese torbellino que se nos muestra en su apariencia inmediata, donde todo parece tirar en mil direcciones a la vez.' As a result, there is an imperative that the fiction of politically committed writers such as Revueltas represent this movement, which is headed towards a final synthesis: 'Tenemos entonces que saber cuál es la dirección fundamental, a qué punto se dirige, y tal dirección será, así, el verdadero movimiento de la realidad, aquél con que debe coincidir la obra literaria' (19). Nonetheless, I contend that the ontological assumptions in Revueltas' novel under consideration here differ greatly from those of dialectical materialist realism. The latter assumes a world that possesses laws, whose origins and the properties that are engendered by these laws, are available to human thought and language. What we are confronted with in *Los errores*, however, is an unknown origin, and, as a result, the lack of substantial ground on which any sort of eternal truth may be based. This condition is evinced from the position of a human subject that is not centered but fissured. Revueltas' fiction expresses an epistemological skepticism that bars a transparent relation between thought and language and the world. This does not give way to the chaos that Revueltas refers to in his essay, but any necessity in the literary world of the novel is determined by contingent and changing conditions rather than eternal laws. Crucially, then, human existence is without a fundamental direction that necessarily leads to an ultimate synthesis—absolute knowledge or the end of alienation. The deconstructive mode of thought at work in this novel brings the assumptions of a centered subject to their limits and as a result affects how we understand the categories of politics, ethics, and community.

The figure of disjunction is emphasized in the doubling or dualistic form of the plot structure of *Los errores*. In terms of structure, *Los errores* is a double narrative, composed of two largely discrete stories that take place alongside each other. At the center of the first story are Mario and Lucrecia, a petty thief and a prostitute, who are lovers. In the second, a group of communists are planning to stage a general strike, which a fascist group in the pay of the state is conspiring to defeat. Though the two narratives are largely separate throughout the novel, I argue that they are, nonetheless, thematically linked, something that is intimated in the epilogue, which includes the dénouement of both plots, and is titled '*Nudo ciego*.' The blind knot serves as an emblematic figure in both stories, indicating the condition of a fissured subject to which the characters are equally exposed, though they are unaware of or blind to this condition. In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on the varied turns in the exploration of this condition that can be read throughout the novel. My analysis begins with a recurrent reflection in *Los errores* on the ontological assumptions that trouble the notion of a unitary or cen-

tered subject. I will then turn my attention to the deconstruction of this subjectivity as it is dramatized in the stories of the characters of Mario and Lucrecia. The novel is also concerned with the ethical and political implications of a divided subject, which I will discuss before moving on to the conclusion. I end the essay with a consideration of the tragic outcomes that mark not only *Los errores* but many of Revueltas' novels. It is in the tragic denouement of the novel that we may catch a glimpse of an affirmative thinking of an ethico-political thought and action beyond the centered subject.

The narrative of *Los errores* includes passages that reflect on the ontological conditions that produce this divided subject. Early in the novel, this intention is announced in the thought of one of the characters, Jacobo Ponce, a dissident intellectual from whose ideas the novel derives its title and the provocative thesis that marks Revueltas' story. Ponce elaborates an epistemological skepticism that posits a constitutive disjuncture between thought and action, as well as language and the real. In an often-quoted passage, which forms a sort of excursus in the novel, Ponce puts forward his notion of the human as an erroneous being that begins in the following manner:

El hombre es un ser erróneo (...) un ser que nunca terminará por establecerse del todo en ninguna parte: aquí radica precisamente su condición revolucionaria y trágica, inapacible. No aspira a realizarse en otro punto—y es decir, en esto encuentra ya su realización suprema —, en otro punto—se repitió—que pueda tener una magnitud mayor al grueso de un cabello, o sea, ese espacio que para la eterna eternidad, y sin que exista poder alguno capaz de remediarlo, dejará siempre sin cubrir la coincidencia máxima del concepto con lo concebido, de la idea con su objeto. (67)⁴

This is to argue that language and thought are constitutively unable to represent the world. In a recent article, Evodio Escalante swerves from his earlier Marxist reading of Revueltas' work discussed above and indicates this radical stance. He states that Revueltas, in the guise of his *alter ego* Ponce, becomes 'un disidente no sólo del marxismo oficial, sino del marxismo a secas' ('El problema' 198).

This condition of erroneous being is further developed when Ponce's explanatory digression continues in the form of a fanciful thought experiment. As Ponce speculates about erroneous being, his reflections are interrupted by a traffic jam just outside his apartment. The noise of honking cars is directed at a large moving truck that is blocking traffic. Ponce imagines himself as a rational extra-terrestrial from another part of the universe, who travels to earth to understand the 'action of being' as it can be inferred in the traffic jam (74). After several observations, he finds that though humans possess consciousness, it is far from a faithful reflection of the world but rather a figure of the divided human subject: 'A todas luces parecía tratarse de una conciencia enferma y tal vez, en el fondo,

malvada. Era una conciencia rabiosa, enloquecida, febricitante y violenta, en lucha contra su propio ser en el tiempo, contra su propia unidad' (78). Similarly, humans possess the use of reason, but the timing of its appearance in the existence of humans is late and therefore fatefully limited: 'la [razón] de los seres terrenales habría aparecido mucho tiempo después del momento oportuno para que pudiera esperar algo de ella. Debía tratarse, sin duda alguna, de un planeta tardío' (79). According to Ponce, the condition of humans is determined by chance and not a destiny that precedes human existence. In similar terms, Giorgio Agamben states that 'the mystery of the human being is not the metaphysical one of the conjunction between the living being and language (or reason, or the soul) but the practical and political one of their separation.' The ground for ethical and political thought and action is this gap, one in which 'the becoming human of the human being will never be achieved once and for all, will never cease to happen,' rather than a current or future conjunction (208).

The centrality of Ponce's ideas is further signaled in an etymological examination of the syntagma 'error.' Most commonly, the word "error" refers to the 'holding of mistaken notions or beliefs' (OED), and equally, to a 'concepto equivocado o juicio falso' (RAE), which is voiced in the critique of the communist party throughout the novel. But more important, 'error' derives from the Latin *errare* which describes a roaming or wandering, which characterizes the movement of perpetual becoming that the split between language and being produces in the thinking of Ponce. Moreover, 'error' is related to *errorem*, or nominative error, that is, an inability to name the subject of a verb of a given sentence, implying a disjuncture between the subject and their actions, as we see dramatized in the cases of the characters of the novel, which I will discuss presently.

One may find in the fiction of Revueltas a further attempt to provide an ontological explanation of sorts for this notion of a gap between language and being that Ponce develops in *Los errores*. In the novel, this gap is tied to the relation between thought and action and the question of origin, which constitutes a necessary ground on which a harmony between thought and action are allowed to occur. The two stories that make up *Los errores* concern characters who are wanting to effect what the narrator repeatedly calls a 'supreme act,' in which an act made by a conscious, centered subject will produce results that coincide with the intentions of the agent of that action. The situation of Mario Cobián, whom the reader encounters in the opening scene of the novel provides an exemplary case. He is hiding out in a cheap motel, where he is preparing to rob Don Victorino, a money-lender in the neighborhood. The set-up is familiar: Mario is planning to pull off this robbery so that he and his girlfriend Lucrecia are able to leave Mexico City and start a new life as the owners of a store or bar in northern Mexico. As a part of Mario's scheme to rob Don Victorino, he plans on disguising himself as a travelling salesman. Though there are other ways to avoid detection, the choice of disguise intimates that Mario is attempting more than an improvement of his material situation; he is seeking

a total break with his former life by means of an act that will allow him to cast off his old self and become somebody new: 'aquel acto supremo y definitivo que lo hará cambiar su vida. Se iba a convertir en otra cosa, iba a cambiar de rumbo' (16).

As the narrative progresses, however, we find that the characters' supreme acts repeatedly produce unexpected outcomes. An explanation for this element of contingency in *Los errores* may be elucidated by referring to one of Revueltas' later stories, 'Hegel y yo,' as it addresses in more detail what one of its protagonists calls an 'acto profundo' and its relation to the absence of an origin that would allow for a predictable relation between thought and action. The story takes place in the notorious Lecumberri prison (where Revueltas wrote the story), and the *Hegel* of the title is the narrator's cellmate. As the narrator attempts to understand how he has ended up in prison and estranged from his girlfriend, *Hegel* interrupts his ruminations to explain that the answer to this question resides in an ordinary act. Origin, derived from the Greek *archē*, denotes a beginning as well as a command, that is, a determinative ground that is the condition of possibility for a transparent relation between thought, language, and the world. It is an enigmatic act, *Hegel* explains, because on one hand nobody has any memory of it: 'es tan antiguo que no se guarda memoria de su comienzo, nadie sabe de dónde arranca, en qué parte se inicia o si no se inicia en parte alguna'; this act, in effect, does not exist: 'el acto profundo no tiene principio, no ha comenzado jamás...' (20) Nonetheless, something like a memory of this act is inscribed in a part of the self that is presubjective. He tells the narrator that this act 'está inscrito en tu memoria Antigua, en lo más extraño de tu memoria, en tu memoria *extraña*, no dicha, no escrita, no pensada, apenas sentida' (20). Though it is unknown, one's memory compulsively endeavors but fails to remember this ordinary act. It is both integral and heterogeneous to one's self: 'Tú eres quien le pertenece, con lo que, por ende, dejas de pertenecerle a ti mismo' (20). Attempts to assign to it a proper name and coherent narrative are limited to various erroneous explanations: 'no hacen sino borrar sus huellas y falsificarlo, erigiéndolo así en un Mito más o menos válido y aceptable durante cierto periodo: Landrú, Gengis-Kan, Galileo, Napoleón, el Marqués de Sade o Jesucristo o Lenin, da lo mismo' (21). In the world of Revueltas' fiction, the origin is a paradoxical absent presence, a necessary ground for thought and action that is at the same time impossible to apprehend.

In addition to the sections devoted to the ontological conditions that engender a divided subject, part of the deconstructive strategy in *Los errores* includes the staging of a confrontation that pits the notion of an ideal centered subject—espoused by the communist party leaders—against a sense of subjectivity that emerges in lived life that troubles this conception of subjectivity. This critique is illustrated in a passage that confronts a fundamental disjunction between the party's notion of a substantial, transcendental subject and lived human experience. In a speech at a party tribunal that is deliberating on whether to expel a party militant, Olenka Delnova,

another militant, Eladio Pintos, expresses this opposition in the following: '¿De dónde se sacaban estas conclusiones obtusas, mecánicas, frías, donde ante todo lo primero que se ignoraba era la existencia del ser humano? ¿O alguien abrigaba la enloquecida idea de que el socialismo y el comunismo podrían reducirse a un helado esquema de cifras y ecuaciones inexorables y sin alma?' (145-46). The passage is focalized on another dissident, Olegario Chávez, who is present in the audience and is compelled to stand and applaud upon the conclusion of the speech, which is noted by the party leaders.

The novels' response to the party's notion of subjectivity is developed in *Los errores* in the stories' of the characters of Mario and Lucrecia, which dramatize the gap between thought and action as well as thought and the real that Ponce's erroneous being asserts. What we encounter as the narrative unfolds are subjects whose thoughts and actions are conditioned by a knot of reason, the unconscious, and memories of past traumas. To once again pick up the opening scene of the novel that takes place in the motel, Mario is standing in front of a mirror assessing his disguise. This moment in front of the mirror is a prelude to the action that will follow in the narrative, whose outcome, affirms the narrator, stands beyond the calculation of the protagonists, and thereby announces the gap between the act and its incalculable outcomes, which will be dramatized throughout *Los errores*: 'dentro de algunos momentos, comenzarían todas las cosas, sin que ya nadie pudiera detenerlas, una detrás de otra, sometidas a su destino propio' (13).

The double of Mario and his image in the mirror initially reflects a sense of a unitary subject that then becomes perturbed as Mario observes himself. Regarding the experience of reflection, Martin Jay observes that 'although the two images may be apparently identical, there is always a surplus, an invisible otherness, that necessarily disrupts their specular unity' (505).⁵ The experience of self-relation assumes a clear distinction between the interior of self from which one perceives and acts in an exterior world. However, we see that in this moment, as well as in a repeated sequence with Lucrecia, self-reflection always involves an alterity that exists within the self in two senses: there is the other of the unconscious in this scene and throughout the first story. As Mario gazes at himself, he senses that his actions do not entirely belong to him: 'Con todo, los gestos que el espejo había repetido no lograron disipar la sensación impune (...), donde las cosas previstas, calculadas, que iban a ocurrir y que él realizaría, de cualquier modo no eran suyas, o no suyas por completo' (14). The second sense of otherness is found in the way in which the living present is continually traversed by the past and the anticipation of the future, as is demonstrated in this scene in which Mario's consciousness is a continual oscillation between the present, the past that he wishes to repress, and the future that he is sure awaits him after the robbery.

This same chapter reveals the memory of an event about whose influence Mario is unaware and engenders fateful consequences. In one of the few moments that the narrator comments in the first person, the reader's attention is called to Mario's physical character-

istics, which bear a strong resemblance to his mother. The narrator describes these traits as belonging to him and not belonging at the same time, indicating an inner exteriority. 'He aquí, empero, unos rasgos: aunque tampoco suyos, tampoco pertenecientes en forma estricta a su persona (...) puestos ahí por un pasado anterior a su propia vida, anterior a su nacimiento: los rasgos del rostro de su madre' (14). The reader is given to understand that Mario's mother is no longer alive but haunts him. The memory of his mother is integral to the action he will carry out: 'Ella lo acompañaría, ella lo protegería con su presencia invisible e íntima' (14). There is an oedipal ambivalence that we find towards the end of this moment in front of the mirror that is linked to something that happened when Mario was a child, whose repressed memory forces its way into his consciousness.

The narrator explains that this event begins with a young Mario, who wants to produce another supreme act that is an expression of his will and agency. One day he climbs up on the roof of the neighboring tenement building and fires a pistol at the water tower of the building where he lives, causing a commotion among the neighbors. At some point later Mario returns to the roof, but instead of shooting at the water tower, he impulsively fires into an apartment. After pulling the trigger, the passage narrated in the third person but focalized on Mario describes him as languidly reclining, 'como después de una larga jornada amorosa' (19). As neighbors begin to gather in the apartment where Mario fired the pistol, he remains on the roof, feeling a 'cierta especie de delirio abismal y dulce,' comparing himself to a god or to a magician (20). When Mario finally makes his way to his apartment building, the account becomes opaque, but the reader gathers that Mario has unintentionally shot and killed his mother. The bedroom into which he assumed he was shooting becomes his mother's bedroom. Mario enters his apartment to find his mother, sitting with her back to him, motionless. He recalls a noise that came from her body and sounded as if it were filling an imaginary cup. As an adult, he associates this noise to his girlfriend Lucrecia: 'La propia Lucrecia era parte de ese ruido, estaba inodada en aquella especie de conjura, en todos esos turbios y siniestros manejos fisiológicos' (22). Mario's plans to rob Don Victorino and start a new life with Lucrecia are conditioned by the relationship between he and his mother, more than any sovereign will to bring about a supreme act.

Moreover, the awareness of a fissured subject is emphasized in the varying use of names throughout the narrative that refer to this protagonist as both Mario and El Muñeco, the name by which he is known in the neighborhood where he lives and works. In one particular moment, the narrator relates the interaction between Mario and the front desk manager of the motel in which Mario is recognized, or interpellated, as a traveling salesman. At this point the costume is much more than a disguise; it confirms what the narrator calls Mario's doubling or division. The sentence that fittingly concludes this sequence is made up of fragments and conveys a self that exceeds one's proper name and requires supplementation: 'Reflejado en el espejo como un simple agente de ventas, pero tam-

bién de este lado, donde estaba el Mario Cobián real, irreflejable y secreto, aquel conjunto de hechos, situaciones y relaciones que era El Muñeco' (16). There is, moreover, the two antithetical lexical pairs in the sentence that evoke both transparency (*reflejado, real*) and opacity (*irreflejable, secreto*) that exist uneasily beside each other.

But who is Lucrecia? Though she is a central character, she appears only in the middle of the narrative. Previous to that moment, the reader learns of her through the perspective of Mario and her fellow prostitutes. Part of Mario's convoluted scheme to rob Don Victorino involves leaving a large valise, which contains his accomplice Elena, in the office of the loan shark, and returning for it later when Don Victorino closes his storefront for the day. Mario has a few hours before he goes back to pull off the robbery and decides to find Lucrecia and tell her about his plans. When he does not find her in the usual places, he grows increasingly desperate and we see once again the dissonance between actions and their intended outcomes prefigured here: 'El plan no se desarrollaba conforme a lo previsto, sino que tomaba sus caminos propios' (114). As Mario searches, the reader is introduced to Lucrecia, who we come to learn is preparing to escape from Mario by leaving Mexico City.

In this introductory scene Lucrecia is standing in front of a mirror shortly before she leaves the city to start a new life in Veracruz. In addition to the figure of the double, the narrative is marked by repetition, as is evidenced in this passage, given its likeness to the opening scene of the novel. Both Lucrecia and Mario stand before a mirror just before they attempt to accomplish their supreme acts of will. However, the doubling does not imply sameness but rather the difference that exists in the figure of the double. What leads each character to this point is an aleatory and overdetermined number of factors. In this scene, the mirror signals not a mere reflection but an interior disjuncture. When Lucrecia observes her image, she appears as a stranger to herself:

En conjunto, un rostro sugerente, extraño, cuyas expresiones resultaban siempre imprevisibles para Lucrecia (...) Hoy se veía fatigada, sin voluntad, a la deriva, pero no se advertían su desesperación ni su pánico interiores. Aunque también la parte que correspondía al espejo era real: una vaciedad completa, un desgano, un desfallecimiento de suicida (130).

By leaving Mario and her life behind, Lucrecia is another character attempting a supreme act, a forceful break from the past and present.

There is also a marked compulsion to repetition in Lucrecia's life, which is indicated in the metaphor that the narrator uses to describe Lucrecia's sense of being in the world as that of living in a prison. Though not physically imprisoned, she feels that the string of abusive men with whom she continually becomes entangled resemble the circumscribed and isolating experience of prison cells. We are meant to understand that this repetition is tied to the trau-

ma of being effectively abandoned by her parents, though they were present in Lucrecia's life. The figure of prison is one of repetition and difference: 'El padre borracho, Ralph, la miseria, otros hombres, prostíbulos: distintas celdas de esa única larga cárcel que era el haber nacido a la vida' (133). At one point we learn that Lucrecia was involved with Mike, a boy that she adopted after he was abandoned by his parents. Lucrecia's relationship with the boy reinforces the incestuous relationship between Mario and his mother. As the narrator relates, 'Mario amaba su madrecita santa del mismo modo en que Mike a Lucrecia, con los mismos sucios y ardientes deseos, como si la matara' (136). Both cases evoke a putative rational subject that is divided by taboo desires.

As the reader finds out, and perhaps suspects from the beginning, very little turns out for the characters in *Los errores* quite like they plan it. Each of the two stories in the novel present a sort of empirical case in which the intentions of the acting subject and the outcomes of action are at odds. Jacques Derrida elucidates this incongruity in which a knot of various elements gives way to chance: 'a decision has to be prepared by reflection and knowledge, but the moment of the decision, and thus the moment of responsibility, supposes a rupture with knowledge, and therefore an opening to the incalculable—a sort of 'passive' decision' (*A Taste* 61). The contingent outcomes of action suggest a future that is incalculable, which is emblemized in the repeated image of characters that tremble or fall to their knees at moments of dramatic pivots in the first story. Don Victorino, the hardened former *porfirista* soldier, secretly trembles in anticipation of his future death (61). In the same way, the prostitute *La Magnífica* begs her friend *La Jaiba* to allow her to run away from Mexico City with Mario (189). And finally, Mario falls on his knees before the militants whom he confuses for police agents looking to arrest him (186).

The contingent nature of action is also embodied in the denouement of the first story in which a certain necessity prevails, but one that adheres to chance rather than any eternal principle or law. Mario eventually finds Lucrecia and beats her for trying to leave him. As he flees from her apartment, Mario believes that he has killed her. The robbery goes terribly wrong and Mario's plans are ultimately thwarted. His accomplice, Elena, kills Don Victorino. Mario in turn murders Elena and attempts to make off with the money. As he is looking for a place to count the money, Mario encounters two of the communist militants from the second story, whom he comes across in an earlier scene, and mistakes for the police. Believing that they are aware of the robbery, as well as the murder of his accomplice and Lucrecia, Mario pleads with them to let him go. He turns over the money to the bewildered militants and flees, seeking to hide out with one of the prostitutes. Mario, however, is betrayed by another prostitute for what she believes is the murder of Lucrecia. In the end, Mario is not able to leave the capital, but obtains a form of legal employment when he is blackmailed into being a police informant. We find that Lucrecia survives Mario's attack, and in the hospital, where she is recovering, Lucrecia resigns herself to

a life with Mario.

These concerns are further developed as it relates to the ethical and political realms and ask after the conditions through which one's acts are considered ethical and politically effective. This is again a question of the status of thought, language, and action as they relate to the real. Specifically, it concerns the status of truth, which serves to guide ethical and political action for the centered subject. If we take into account the ontological coordinates detailed in Revueltas' fiction, then the existence of any stable, eternal truth is put in doubt. This assertion has implications for the conditions of possibility for ethico-political thought and action of the centered subject. In particular, the novel focuses on the status of sovereignty and the logic of ultimate ends that guide actions. What informs the action of the ethico-political subjects that populate the novel is not so much the force of a truth or the perceived unfolding of a destiny, but rather calculation, violence, the unconscious, and a sort of thanato-politics that moves towards death as opposed to some final reconciliation in life.

In one instance, the ethico-political act is subjecting oneself to the sovereign authority of the party, which is by definition an autonomous, uniform subject. Straying from or criticizing the party line, as Revueltas was accused of on many occasions, calls for censure, excommunication, or worse. As a result of calling the unitary subject into question, the novel also impugns the grounds on which the party is considered legitimate and thus authorized to represent the other members who subject themselves to its power. If there is no access to truth, or if the predestined role of the party is absent, then the legitimacy of the party is in question. *Los errores* deems the party's claim to sovereign power as a secularization of a theological concept that replaces the party for the figure of God as absolute authority. In the novel, the critique is framed in terms of an equivalence between the party and the voice of God, as well as in the repeated analogies between the party leaders and ecclesiastical figures, such as priests and inquisitors. In addition, party doctrine is referred to as a 'red theology.' At one particularly emphatic moment in *Los errores*, Chávez says:

Creer que se tiene la razón y la verdad en virtud de un sistema de revelaciones divinas, del que se nos habrá hecho gracias quién sabe por qué ni a cuenta de qué preferencia especial. 'La voz del partido es la voz de Dios.' (...) Pero esta creencia, esta convicción, no representaba, ni con mucho, una actitud inofensiva (...) Había algo aún más tremendo y desazonante en todas sus implicaciones (270).

What is unsettling in this assertion for Chávez is that this thinking engenders a logic of sacrifice in which the party's actions are permitted, no matter how abominable they are, as long as it furthers the ends of a redeemed or reconciled humanity. What ensures power for the party in the novel, however, is neither any particular

truth nor destiny, but the force of violence. To be sure, the novel foregrounds the calculations, the expulsions, and the assassinations carried out by the party in Mexico and the Soviet Union. In particular, it details the fate of a fellow communist from Mexico, Emilio Padilla, who was imprisoned in the Soviet Union and later died under mysterious circumstances; and Olenka Delnova, a militant who is expelled from the party and then disappears. The party attempts to cover over this condition by prohibiting any talk of these party members, but their names are evoked throughout the novel, along with some of the victims of the Trials of Moscow, in the form of involuntary memories in the consciousness of Chávez, throughout the story. These figures form a spectral presence that puts Chávez's loyalty to the party in doubt and to which he attempts to respond.

The logic of sacrifice that is played out in party politics concerns ultimate ends. This is particularly clear in *Los errores* and the way that it links the act of sacrifice to a philosophy of history that ends in final redemption. The cases of Delnova and Padilla, as well as the Russian victims of Stalin's trials, indicate an immunity mechanism at work that attempts to maintain the integrity of an order against internal and external threats. But it is possible for this mechanism to produce a sort of auto-immunity crisis in which the beliefs, institutions, traditions, and, worse, the members of a particular order are sacrificed, presumably in order to preserve the very same order. The novel suggests that this crisis is particularly deadly if the order is organized around the eschatological belief in a final reconciliation, in which the auto-immunity becomes a veritable thanato-politics, oriented towards death. *Los errores* presents just such a crisis at work within the party, indicated by Chávez, who asks whether the twentieth century 'será designado como el siglo de los procesos de Moscú o como el siglo de la revolución de octubre' (223). The response in the novel marks an attempt to conceptualize this crisis that takes the form of an opposition between two types of political subjects. The party leaders constitute the first type, principally the characters Patricio Robles and Ismael Cabrera, who are regarded as priestly figures that betray Marx's thought by turning it into a dogma. They and others like them are referred to as 'oportunistas y arribistas y poetas y "compañeros de ruta" y burócratas y clérigos y paranoicos y gendarmes del espíritu (...)' (235). The second type of political subject is the saintly communist, embodied by Olegario Chávez, Jacobo Ponce, and Eladio Pintos, who remain faithful to a non-institutionalized understanding of Marxism and suffer at the hands of the inquisitorial party leaders. The former group accuses the saintly communists of willfully ignoring the necessary sacrifices demanded in the struggle to bring about the revolution and are therefore considered as betraying the shared communist destiny.

Again, Chávez opposes the logic or necessity of sacrifice. As the novel proceeds, however, the opposition between priest and saint becomes ambivalent and thus complicates the duality of the two figures. Both assume a centered subject and, crucially, an understanding of history as moving towards some end. Indeed, an essential identity between saint and priest is revealed in Chávez

himself. Towards the end of the novel, there is a confrontation between the communists and the anti-communist league before the beginning of the general strike. Despite his criticism of the party, Chávez participates in the strike. Two incidents occur in the course of this sequence. In the first, he foils the party's plan to assassinate another dissident in the confusion of the strike in order to blame the murder on the enemy. In this act, Chávez interrupts the sacrificial logic of the party. The second event that takes place is puzzling but significant. In what appears to be an accident, Chávez shoots and kills a fellow militant, believing that he is firing at Nazario Villegas, the leader of the anti-communist league. The narrative, now focalized on Chávez, becomes confused in a way that is comparable to the scene in which Mario shoots his mother mentioned above. Contrary to the narration of the events, he claims to have killed his partner on purpose:

¿Por qué él, un hombre como él, Olegario Chávez, había podido llegar a ese extremo increíble, absurdo, de anulación propia, de dogmatismo fanático que le permitiera aceptar la comisión del más inicuo y cobarde de crímenes, la muerte de un camarada desprevenido (...) Algo se le dijo, en algún sitio del que no tenía memoria, acerca de este crimen *necesario* (...) Pero no, por Dios, tal crimen no era necesario, ningún crimen era necesario. (250)

He prevents one murder but carries out another, both ordered by the party leaders. For all of his opposition to the party, he is somehow convinced to participate in the assassination. The reader is not privy to Chávez's reasoning before the incident, but it seems plausible that what leads him to accept the party's plan is the shared conviction of the promise of final reconciliation and his role as an agent of this event. Chávez is captured by the police, who ignore the murder of the militant and falsely charge him with the killing of Don Victorino as a part of an anti-communist media campaign. When the police take Chávez away, he offers no resistance. After he is captured, the party denies that he belonged to the party, and thus he constitutes one more necessary sacrifice. In addition to Chávez's fate, things do not turn out for the communists like they had planned: many of the party members are killed or imprisoned in the unfolding of the events that are meant to commence the strike. We are not given any more details regarding what occurs after the protagonists' disastrous outcome.

As is almost always the case in the fiction of Revueltas, the protagonists of the novel face a tragic end and the constant evasion of any hint of a movement towards some final reconciliation. Escalante acknowledges that Revueltas' work is characterized by a deep pessimism, but he chastises those critics who fail to understand that the dialectical movement of history is not always ascendant. The fiction of Revueltas describes a descending or degrading turn that paradoxically moves towards an emancipatory end (*del*

lado moridor 67). Still others, such as Enrique Ramírez y Ramírez, argue that Revueltas's novels give way to a passivity or a form of mysticism. Similarly, Revueltas' erstwhile friend Pablo Neruda writing about *Los días terrenales* declares in rather grandiloquent terms: 'Por las venas de aquel noble José Revueltas que conocí circula una sangre que no conozco. En ella se estanca el veneno de una época pasada con un misticismo destructor que conduce a la nada y a la muerte' (9). I affirm that the ending of *Los errores* gives way neither to a quietism nor to a rejection of politics. Together with the other elements that I have detailed here, they are concerned with the presuppositions of a centered, conscious subject. To think at the limits of the category of the centered subject as it relates to our understanding of the relation between thought and action, as well as language and the real, signifies important implications for politics and ethics.

Still, critics like Ramírez y Ramírez and Neruda raise some important doubts regarding the deconstructive thrust of the novel: how are thought and language possible without some connection to the real? And, how is action possible without some thinking of truth and ends? The deconstructive mode that is found in *Los errores* does give way at certain moments, if only obliquely, to an affirmative thinking of what ethico-political thought and action beyond a centered subject entails. This is particularly evidenced in the final scene with Chávez in *Los errores*. After he is arrested by the police, the reader is left with his confession of guilt and this paradoxical fragment that concludes the chapter: 'Pero, con todo, la lucha no terminaba, ni terminaría jamás. El socialismo y el comunismo eran el porvenir de los hombres. Era preciso proseguir el combate sin descanso. Sí, pero..., ¿en qué dirección...?' (252). The conviction of an unconditional destiny of socialism and communism appears alongside the idea of a fight that will never end, evoked in the temporality of the grammatical tense, as well as in the negative adverbial phrase. The juxtaposition of these heterogeneous notions calls

attention to an element that underlines thought and action beyond any sort of deconstruction of presuppositions, what Derrida variously calls the 'emancipatory promise,' and 'the promise of justice.' In a reasoning that evokes Chávez's enigmatic words, Derrida calls for an opening or an 'access to an affirmative thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise as promise: as *promise* and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design' (*Specters of Marx* 75). The ethics and a politics of a divided subject do not call for the rejection of this desire but a change of relation to it, from destiny to promise. A promise in contrast to program here means a commitment to something that cannot be named in a formula or a set of laws. This is to say that it is not about bringing the world in line with some eternal truth, but an orientation to a sense of justice that always exceeds the categories of any stable notion of difference and identity.

The notion of a conflict without end also refers to community. If the politics of the centered subject imply a collective that will give way, in the present or the future, to a community based on a fusion of its members, producing a unitary collective identity, *Los errores* suggests a notion of community as a being-in-common without such a millenarian bond. Roberto Esposito elaborates on this understanding of community: 'community refers to the singular and plural characteristic of an existence free from every meaning that is presumed, imposed, or postponed; of a world reduced to itself that is capable of simply being what it is: a planetary world without direction, without any cardinal points' (149). This notion of community does not necessarily prevent the auto-immunitary crises like the one that *Los errores* dramatizes. But the novel is more interested in thinking of a politics that reduces rather than overcomes these often deadly crises. *Los errores* could be said to prefigure Revueltas' eventual move later in life away from the various communist parties and towards the more experimental politics that he associated with the student movement in Mexico.

NOTES

¹ In the *Obras completas*, Revueltas' political and theoretical writings make up nearly half of the 26 volumes.

² Paz makes this assertion in two reviews that he wrote regarding Revueltas' novel *El luto humano*, which are reprinted for the introduction to the English translation of the novel.

³ See, *José Revueltas: una biografía intelectual*. Mexico City: Miguel Ángel Porrua, 2001.

⁴ Ponce's conception of the *ser erróneo* bears a strong likeness to Theodor Adorno's *negative dialectic*. In the introduction to his important work, *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno explains that 'the name of dialectics says no

more, to begin with, than that the objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy (...). It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived' (5).

⁵ The critic Christopher Domínguez Michael also considers the preoccupation with mirrors in Revueltas. Looking into a convex mirror intimates a disjuncture: 'Pero al rechazar este espejo-que-sólo-refleja, Revueltas resume su obsesión por los espejos cóncavos, que registran y devuelven una imagen negativa, una mueca perturbadora' (74).

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