

**The Other Against the World:
On the Fiction of Ariana Harwicz**

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What at first sparked if not a scandal, I would say a degree of suspicion and even unease about *Matate, amor* (Buenos Aires: Paradiso, 2012) (*Die, My Love*, Charco Press, 2017), was the blinding glare of the absolute consciousness it put on stage. I refer not just to the consciousness presumed implicit in the unhinged character's furious critique, her internal monologue that questioned the structure of socialization in which she was immersed, but fundamentally, the good conscience her questioning challenged by way of contrast, placidly buried in a stupor of hypocrisy, correctness, and paralyzing sublimation. Ariana Harwicz's first novel does not narrate a learning experience: it does not evidence an awakening or a newfound consciousness because the character is conscious of the frustration she feels for a life led in this manner from the start. It's like a heavy stone she drags intact through the story. Indeed, this is not the story of a hideous reality unveiled—one obscured by the smooth skin of daily reality; it's the harsh exposure of the

state of hypocrisy with which day after day the armor of this reality is constructed.

The voice that narrates does not skimp on poetic fireworks or critical acidity. It swirls in a prose at times hallucinatory, almost baroque in its syntax (a baroque laden with ellipses), attacking the increasingly unbearable reality with elegant violence. Concentrating a notable volume of lyricism and an unrelenting density of litany, Harwicz's writing is realized as a sovereign body, while the body of characters in it adapts to the order of what is portrayed. Her writing takes on a material consistency over the course of the hundred or so pages in which it maintains an allegation for a refutation at once proud and scathing of any sugary image of family life.

The energy sapped by the work of maternity, the decline of marital sexuality, the experience of a symbolic—and as such ultimately and necessarily thwarted—act of furtive adultery, and later, the allegorical sacrifice of a suffering animal, lay out the conditions of an immobile dialectics. She who speaks cannot cease to be who she is. Hers is a closed case, an impasse with no solution. Without points of concession or passageways, her worlds come apart, irreversibly, and in a definitive manner. Reality is perceived as a metal plank—rigid, solid, uniform, and with no cracks; the voice that describes it with disdain offers no concessions. This woman cannot cease to be what she is (from the first line to the last) as she

finds herself embedded and a foreigner in a scene where she is like a fish out of water.

The fable includes the predictable protocol of a few attempts at “normalization”—which, fortunately, don’t follow the course of pharmacological addiction. The narrator’s failure to reincorporate into reality removes her from the scene. One need not reach the last page of the book (where she will be discovered to “disappear into the undergrowth” of a dark forest) to sense the exile to come—the allegorical nature of which one could certainly expound on. But there is no question that what the ending makes apparent is a suture inscribed like resignation: “I got out without opening the door,” the protagonist says suggestively on the last page of the book. The fable recognizes the loss (what is lost that night is the untamed beast that has sustained the novel) and the pain occurs in the only way that a loss is felt (as “nothing but pain,” “the kind of pain a person doesn’t share, not even with herself,” and which in the end becomes “a sadness that was exhilarating, wild”). Harwicz knows this: she who stays is she who ultimately accepts the relationship. The other woman, the one who gets out without opening the door, can only keep herself going on a plane that is intolerable. “Those who write don’t need leather jackets because in their universe it’s always summer.” For Harwicz, the choice will always be absolute: either write or throw herself out the window.

Die, My Love is the novel of sublimation and conjuring. What makes its statement in the novel is the conscience on the edge of madness, what judges is the law on the edge of exception, what inhabits it is humanity on the threshold of an impossible mutation. For these reasons, in its fictional space, narrative is strictly subjected to judgment. The rules of the story are focused on the work of giving body, meaning, and plausibility to the voice, the perspective (culturally charged with political incorrectness) that is established by imposing itself, justifying itself. But it does not justify itself via the character's actions; rather, it justifies itself via her thoughts, via the thoughts she does not choose to carry out, which inundate her, and yet never leave her head. In this sense, the voice justifies itself not in the eyes of others, but to the character, to her own guilty conscience, as if—though she knows it will be defeated—the woman who will be exiled wished to leave a complete record of her passage through life before the other woman could be left, irremediably, with what was once hers.

In the almost seven years that have passed since the appearance of Harwicz's *opera prima*, she has published another two novelistic soliloquies around the subjects of incestuous passion and infanticide—*La débil mental* (Buenos Aires: Mardulce, 2014) (*Feeble-minded*, Charco Press, 2019) and *Precoz* (Buenos Aires: Mardulce, 2015) (*Tender*, Charco Press, forthcoming)—thereby consolidating a singular narrative project that

Degenerado (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2019) [Degenerate], centered on the subject of pedophilia, has confirmed. In her latest novel, the author's strategy is repeated almost without variation. Here too, the monologue articulates a dissociation that can be read, between the lines, as a pathology. Again, a voice is in flux; again, a world is seen from a politically incorrect and morally reprehensible perspective; again, a universe is organized only by roles in a network of relationships connected with the voice that narrates them. Continuing the line Martín Kohan began with *Fuera de lugar* (2016) [Out of Place], Harwicz has produced a discomfiting work of fiction that at once creates an association and a separation between the "neighbor with no record," the "normal guy," and the man who allows himself to be dragged along by the "filthy sleigh" of the mind. But that which in Kohan's novel is resolved by a deviating narrative and an amenable crime plot consisting of prints, actions and consequences, in Harwicz's work is impressed—deliberately—in an immobile dialectics, like a story torn to pieces and reconstructed from the ruins of an absent testimony, like the fresco ripped to shreds from which the useless defense can proceed in a trial that was always predetermined. It's not a question of establishing the facts on which the accusation is based; it's a question of going through the rubble of a mind that has conceived them in order to understand the state of imagination that could ultimately have led to their being carried out.

The man accused of abuse and pedophilia does not defend himself; he justifies himself. His irritating and labyrinthine monologue is a response to being judged by the good conscience of “a town suffering because it has been deceived.” It is focused simply on providing explanations for his sexual “avidity” for all “the girls that play hide and seek in the undergrowth.” Up against a subjected society that expects him to be “someone normal,” he justifies himself by excusing the monstrosity he has discovered alive within him. He does not state his ideological position (“No one asked me, but philosophically I’m right-wing and politically I’m anarchist”), but also asserts his identity in opposition to an “elite” that only gives itself license in areas of consumption such as literature, where transgression is—of course—without consequence, and oftentimes associated with the distinguished mark of eccentricity. The character’s reasoning does not skimp on irony: “The self-righteous elite read Genet because he’s good and dead, they remember Céline, they visit his country house like it were a mausoleum because he ended up poor, and Kerouac, though they wouldn’t put up with him for a second, and Malcolm Lowry, they’d kick him out for being fawned over like he was, they’d smell him through the peephole and wouldn’t open the door, not even if they were having Christmas dinner or under police orders” (p. 11).

The man who speaks is an old child abuser. He's a retiree, a widow lost in the theater of a life marked by splinters from a past of family trauma, disillusionment, misfortune, and indelible images of war. As in *Die, My Love*, a broken life propels a story of destruction that begins with its own voice. Here too, Harwicz stresses the "learned" side of this voice. In *Degenerado*, it emerges from a fog of senile confusion and vacillation, one of fragmentary memories from different moments in time that trample each other and mix with oneiric remains, or else are buried by unexpected bursts of reactionary spite, materializing, violently, in a scene that hints at Guernica. Bull, horse, dove—the defense by confession here is an auto-da-fé: "You've got to repress yourself, be on guard, tighten the belt of words, steer the tiller, select what you think, and have the courage to discard any word that's not right," he says. It's clear: he who speaks speaks in defense, justifying himself. But he does not justify himself to the "good neighbors," who, indignant outside the house where he's stationed, accuse him of having deceived them. Nor does he do so to the implacable gendarmerie officers, or the "post-crime scavengers" as he calls the tabloids; nor to the "honorable members of the jury," or the other prisoners who will rape him over and over in the perverse pleasure of revenge; nor even to the "followers" who will eventually join his "cause." He instead justifies himself to a state of imagination soldered to the hypocrisy of "common sense"—that consensus

that annihilates desire. The sentence arrives already pronounced (“there’s no need to defend myself or squander speech”); there will be no ears open to his confession. What the stream of consciousness reveals is a record: the epigraph of a person who’s “abnormal,” the flesh of language that does not fail to reproach us for *this*, as it inhabits us as well. Indeed, in Julia Kristeva’s view, the other appears to constitute something like a projection of the unconscious fear of the monster we could become.

This voice earned by old age thus reaches a conclusion that, though no doubt categorical—the strength of desire necessarily lives in the margin of common sense, which is why “we need the courage to think less of the rapist as a monster and more of the abuser as an expert ventriloquist”—is received as nothing but white noise in the arena of the judicial process. No one is willing to follow his reasoning to the end because no one wants to risk agreeing with him. What’s convenient is to “cut one’s losses,” even when the accusation originates in an unfounded rumor or the dark desire for recognition or public visibility via the appeal of a guilty plea.

Harwicz’s novels are constructed with a deliberate ambiguity that dismantles any lawsuit that might arise through police investigation and ridicules the lure of reductionist moralization. Far from a good conscience and bad faith, but above all far from cynical simplification, Harwicz produces literature that sabotages the pleasure administered by ideology;

literature that is a terrorist attack against the consensus obedient to what is naturalized as “normality.” It is here that she takes up two recurring points that connect her literary work to the transgressive cinema of Gaspar Noé, and that certainly cause conflicted feelings in those who read it: on the one hand, both exist in a space fertile for the investigation of the human condition (that imaginary threshold where the “normal guy” begins his transformation into the “degenerate,” and where the most repulsive of degenerates can also aspire to a degree of “humanization”); on the other, they share the irreducible, alluring blind force that dwells and lurks in the sublimated voices of those deemed unacceptable, monstrous, abnormal.

To read Harwicz is without a doubt to accept the challenge of confronting the letter of fiction via writing in its most raw and fascinating state: that is, when it goes without saying that, as with death and desire, the truth of literature cannot be legislated.