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TRANSATLANTIC EXISTENTIALISMS:
EXISTENTIALIST TRIANGULATIONS IN FRANCE, THE RIO DE LA PLATA,
AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract

This project examines existentialism as a historically relevant and deep-rooted American phenomenon. By triangulating the three geographical points of France, the River Plate region (Argentina and Uruguay), and the U.S. through their literary treatment of existentialism, this study shows how existentialist theories are developed and contested in the work of a number of key writers in the Americas. When approaching existentialist concerns through literature, not only French authors but also U.S. and River Plate writers display distinct existentialist trends that span the entire twentieth century. In order to reveal why the American continents were in fact a natural locus for the development of existentialist thought, I examine a wide array of modernist, post-World-War-II, “post-boom,” and postmodern works that illustrate and challenge some of the shared characteristics that are specific to America as a hemisphere and as a discursive concept. In examining late twentieth-century permutations of existentialism, I also demonstrate how postmodern works sometimes subvert and build on Sartrean existentialist theories through parodic strategies and integrate apparently incompatible postmodern and existentialist insights, developing what we might call a “postmodern existentialism.” Such late twentieth-century transformations of existentialism, I argue, innovate this movement and further reveal the need to study American and postmodern literature as a part of the existentialist canon.
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Introduction

Literary critics have tended to associate existentialism almost exclusively with European literature and philosophy; however, this project examines existentialism as a historically relevant and deep-rooted American phenomenon. I argue that, over the course of the entire century, the works of not only French authors but also U.S. and River Plate writers display distinct existentialist trends. In this study, I triangulate the three geographical points of France, the River Plate, and the U.S. through their treatment of existentialism as a literary project that is grounded in that philosophical concept. Throughout the twentieth century, existentialism permeated the literature of the Americas, most significantly that of the United States, Argentina, and Uruguay. In order to examine the ways in which existentialist theories are developed and engaged with in the Americas, I consider a wide array of modernist, post-World War II, “post-boom,” and postmodern works. I contend that these diverse American existentialist phenomena reveal shared characteristics that are specific to America as a hemisphere and as a concept. For instance, numerous U.S. and River Plate authors repeatedly contrast the feelings of

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1 In Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana, José Miguel Oviedo describes existentialism as “uno de los movimientos más influyentes” (“one of the most influential movements”), as a “fase de nuestra literatura” (“a phase in our literature”) during which existentialist motives “se filtran” (“filter down”) among Latin American writers, (Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana [Madrid: Alianza, 2001], 4: 60-61). Similarly, according to The Cambridge History of American Literature, during the 1940s, the United States “grew receptive to European existentialism” (Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., The Cambridge History of American Literature [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 6:166). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

2 Throughout this project, I employ the adjective “American” to refer to the literature and people from the American continents (from South, Central, and North America). The term “America,” similarly, applies to the American continents. I employ the adjective “U.S.” or “USAmerican” to refer to the literature and people from the United States of America.

3 In this project, I employ the term “River Plate” (Río de la Plata) to refer to Argentinian and Uruguayan literature (or, more specifically, to discuss the literature produced in the cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo).

4 Of course, existentialism is also present in the literature of many other countries around the world. Its historical relevance and persistence in literature, however, is most significant in the national phenomena analyzed in this project.

5 Djelal Kadir, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Earl Fitz, among other scholars, describe and theorize these characteristics, which are often the basis for the development of inter-American studies.
disillusionment and anxiety that they observe in their respective nations with the unrealistic expectations commonly associated with this “land of opportunity,”⁶ a contrast that makes the ethos of U.S. and River Plate literature profoundly existential. In this project, I analyze the roles that existentialist literature has played in each of these locations, and I conclude that existentialist works written by U.S. and River Plate writers should not be reduced to mere derivatives of a European “influence” or an imitation of a “French fashion.” To examine these literary trends, I propose that they should be studied as contributions to a trans-Atlantic international dialogue. This dialogue grows out of specific national concerns and allows writers to participate in ongoing debates over what is identified as existentialist discourse.

Over the course of the twentieth century, U.S., French, and River Plate writers often explored and challenged existentialist notions of individual freedom, responsibility, alienation, indeterminate meaning, and existential angst. Existentialist themes and theories provided them with useful insights to question the problematic relationship between the individual, the collective, and the state. The inquisitive strategies and persistent focus on power relations that are typical of existentialism appealed to numerous writers from these regions. Existentialism allowed them to shed light on some of the major social, political, and economic crises suffered in the U.S., France, and the River Plate region. As a result, this cultural and philosophical movement came to occupy a significant place both in North and South American literature. However, specific political and economic interests, which I shall discuss later, caused existentialism to be perceived as a temporary influence that attracted a number of writers who

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⁶ Although all of America has been conceptually determined since the colonial period as a land of opportunity, this feeling is particularly strong both in the U.S. (due to its Puritan founding) and in the River Plate region (due to the immigration waves that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). In my view, the pronounced interest in existentialist philosophy and the recurrent representations of existentialist themes such as alienation, existential angst, freedom, and responsibility, are intimately related to the unfulfilled expectations that were so common in these parts of America.
were thought to be more “receptive” to European ideas. In this project, I analyze the various sociopolitical and cultural representations associated with existentialist literature and the role that existentialism has played in each of these locations. I also show why, as I contend, the American hemisphere was in fact a natural locus for the development of existential thoughts. The different literary manifestations and permutations of existentialism that I study in this project, thus, should be studied as symptoms of the social and/or political conditions out of which they emerged.

Existentialism proposes, in the most basic terms, that human life has no predetermined meaning. This philosophy, which finds its roots in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger, among others, often posits that existence precedes essence, which means that individuals are responsible for determining and developing their own “essence” through the choices that they make. In order to render life meaningful, each individual must first become aware of this lack of predetermined meaning and assume the responsibility that it entails. Whether atheist or religious, most existentialist philosophers focus on this experience of existential awakening that reveals freedom as an unavoidable burden. They also link the confrontation of freedom with feelings of anxiety, alienation, and angst, as well as other common existentialist concerns such as the fear of death and the role of the “other.” At any rate, the common denominator of most existentialist philosophies resides in the study of existence from a human-centered perspective. This perspective sheds light on the ways an individual’s actions and interactions with other human beings, institutions, and society in general, may potentially alter a person’s understanding of him/herself and the world.

Since existentialism tends to focus on human experience, philosophers and writers have often sought to explain, challenge, and test the limits of existentialist theories through literature. Indeed, this medium has allowed writers to shed light on human subjectivity in ways of which
plain language is incapable. Literary genres that emphasize the perspective of the protagonist (e.g. the diary novel or the *Bildungsroman*) allow writers to represent and comment on what French existentialists refer to as *l'être-en-situation*. In Ernesto Sábato’s *El túnel* (1948, *The Tunnel*), for instance, Juan Pablo Castel’s narration of his thoughts and experiences provides valuable insights into the roles of alienation, dread, and authenticity within the context of post-World War II Argentina. In addition, literary genres that focus on how characters interact among themselves (e.g. stage plays) are often employed to explore other typical existentialist themes, such as the role of the “other” and power relations. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis clos* (1944, *No Exit*) is one of the most famous examples of this type of genre.

In this project, I propose that, over the course of the twentieth century, the many works of literature of an existentialist nature produced by French, River Plate, and USAmerican authors tackle at least four major concerns. First, in the first few decades of this century, writers turned to existentialism as a cultural symptom to elucidate the causes and consequences of the growing disillusionment that characterized their respective generations. As they combined existentialist themes and a modernist aesthetic, writers such as Saul Bellow, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Juan Carlos Onetti sought to denounce the causes of such disillusionment through the genre of the diary novel. Second, existentialism resurfaced frequently in post-World War II novels by North and South American authors who sought to condemn the increasing political and ideological hostility and authoritarianism they perceived in their respective nations. These writers also engaged in dialogue with French existentialists while transforming existentialism into a distinctively American concern. Third, during the second half of the twentieth century, French, U.S., and River Plate writers often employed and contested existentialist insights through parodic

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7 The term “being-in-situation” refers to the facticity of human existence. Existentialist philosophers often employ this term to address the series of limitations that condition an individual’s existence (culture, physical appearance, age, past, etc.).
strategies in order to reveal the intricate ways in which society and the state are detrimental to individual freedom. This renewed interest in existentialism, in fact, coincides with a growing awareness of social inequality, political repression, and gender oppression in each of these nations. Finally, U.S., River Plate, and French writers also revisit existentialism in a post-postmodern epoch in an attempt to offer new critical perspectives following the disorientation and “crisis of meaning” that characterized the last few decades of the twentieth century. Thus, as a discourse, existentialist thought became one of the means by which French, U.S., and River Plate writers denounced social ills while reiterating the role of individual freedom and responsibility that has been historically central to existentialism.

Many characteristics of the national existentialist phenomena that I analyze in this project surfaced as early as the first few decades of the twentieth century, when existentialist themes started to predominate in French, River Plate, and U.S. literatures. After World War I, numerous global changes negatively affected the ways in which people were able to interact. These factors include the intensification of capitalism and bourgeois values, mass migration, technological developments, and the failure of the Enlightenment. Further, the Robber Baron era of the U.S. at the end of the nineteenth century and the series of dictatorial regimes and fraudulent governments that became dominant in the early twentieth century in the River Plate added additional sources of disillusionment in the American hemisphere. Modernist and existentialist writers often illustrated the impact of these drastic changes in their works. As a result, the impossibility of feeling at home, political alienation, and existential angst became prevalent literary themes. The *Cambridge History of American Literature* explains: “[a]s the [US]American economy moved from Depression and war production to affluence, consumerism, and worldwide geopolitical dominance, writers turned away from economic and social concerns
to engage more with spiritual and personal issues." A heightened literary interest in existentialism coincided with this period. Similarly, in the River Plate, as Djelal Kadir explains in *Juan Carlos Onetti*, writers were “forced to confront inner nature, the fundamental identity of man in the face of odds precipitated by his own actions and the interrogatives engendered by his own consciousness.” As a result, this region, as most of Latin America, ushered in the era of the “social novel (extending the earlier traditions of costumbrismo, realismo, and naturalismo, and embracing regionalismo, the novela de la tierra, indigenismo, and other similar trends).” In many works from this time, the protagonists express a feeling of homelessness and perceive themselves as outsiders. They are usually eccentric orphans, outcasts, or migrants who share their complex and multilayered views of their “homes,” their communities, and their own selves. In the River Plate, the Onettian hero, whom Kadir describes as an “alienated, existentially tortured human type,” is emblematic of this generation. In fact, Juan Carlos Onetti’s *El pozo* (1939; *The Pit*), written in the early thirties, can be regarded as the first and most important twentieth-century existentialist novel from this region.

Despite the evident existential ethos of numerous early River Plate and U.S. works, literary critics have tended to associate these works with movements other than existentialism. For instance, Onetti’s *El pozo*—an existentialist novel *avant la lettre*—is frequently associated with magic realism. Although this work might indeed be considered a precursor of that “popular” literary movement, the core of Onetti’s novel is its focus on existentialist themes and city life. In the U.S. and the River Plate, various existentialist works, such as *El pozo*, were in fact being written at the same time that Jean-Paul Sartre and other French writers (typically recognized as

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existentialist) were in the process of writing their own works. This is a clear indication that American existentialism resulted from not a mere post-World War II influence but a central concern among River Plate and U.S. writers. As Gerald Martin explains, literary works such as El pozo “show that writers in Montevideo or Buenos Aires had no need to read Céline, Sartre or Camus to know that they were alienated or anguished.”

Some River Plate writers were already examining existential concerns even before the French existentialists published their famous novels and theoretical works. In spite of this precedent, River Plate writers, such as the Argentine Roberto Arlt (1900-1942), were neglected by scholars and received critical attention only belatedly. The literary themes and the urban setting that Arlt presents in novels such as Los siete locos (1929; [The Seven Madmen]) are profoundly existential. Furthermore, as Martin explains, Arlt “gave an early indication of the extent to which Latin American fiction, particularly in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, would be able to echo or even anticipate European currents of nihilism and absurdism.” Indeed, literary critics and publishing houses in the U.S. and Europe seem to have deliberately chosen to neglect such River Plate works that openly address existential concerns.

Perhaps the decision to award the 1941 New York Prize to Peruvian Ciro Alegría’s El mundo es ancho y ajeno (1941; [Broad and Alien is the World]) rather than Onetti’s El pozo may help reveal why Uruguayan and Argentinean existentialist literature did not receive the critical attention that it deserved. As regards content, Alegría’s indigenista novel satisfied the degree of exoticism that most non-Latin American audiences tended to expect in works by Latin American authors during most of the twentieth century (and perhaps even today). El mundo es ancho y

13 At the time that his works were published, Roberto Arlt was criticized for his use of colloquial porteño Spanish and lunfardo, an urban Buenos Aires idiolect, for his numerous representations of violence, and for his focus on the lower classes. Arlt’s works received serious critical attention only after the 1960s.
“ajeno” is considered one of the most important Latin American regionalist novels.\footnote{In fact, this novel was published quite late in comparison with other regionalist works such as José Eustasio Rivera’s *La vorágine* (1924; *The Vortex*), Ricardo Güiraldes’ *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), or Rómulo Gallegos’ *Doña Bárbara* (1929).} Whereas *Alegría* seeks to provide a more realistic representation of Perú’s indigenous population, Onetti’s *El pozo* explores the theme of alienation in the modern city. Written in the genre of the diary novel, this work narrates the story of a disillusioned middle-aged man who can no longer communicate with other people, feels uncomfortable in the place where he lives, and suffers because he does not know what to do with his life. In many ways, Onetti’s novel is very similar to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée* (1938; *Nausea*) and Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* (1944), which also use the genre of the diary novel to depict the protagonists’ search for a new concept of “home.” However, as I explain in chapter I, the differences between these works are very significant as they evince some of the major national trends that can be perceived in existentialist literature from the River Plate, France, and the U.S. For instance, Onetti’s interest in psychoanalytic insights and the role of the fantastic, and Bellow’s attempt to relate U.S. politics and ideology to feelings of chronic alienation, are in fact typical of River Plate and U.S. existentialist literature, respectively.

The concurrent interest in existentialist themes in France, the U.S., and the River Plate can be linked to specific European and non European literary influences that these writers shared. On the one hand, Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky, who are often regarded as two of the most important literary precursors (or even early exponents) of the existentialist novel, were widely read in all three of these locations. On the other hand, many French and River Plate authors, in particular, were fascinated by USAmerican literature of the “Lost Generation.”\footnote{The term “Lost Generation,” which was coined by Gertrude Stein, refers to a group of USAmerican writers who sought to express their disillusionment with American society after World War II. This group includes writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Hart Crane, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.}
Many Lost Generation writers were highly disliked in their country of origin, where European modernism still defined the literary canon. But in France, numerous existentialist writers (such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir) claimed inspiration from literary works by Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John dos Passos. For instance, Faulkner introduced French existentialists to new narrative techniques such as the breaking of chronological time, the use of multiple narrators, and the creation of snapshot-like representations of society. In an article entitled “American Novelists in French Eyes,” published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre went so far as to claim that “[t]he greatest literary development in France between 1929 and 1939 was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell, Steinbeck.”

Not only did the writers of the Lost Generation largely affect French literature, but they also influenced Latin American writers considerably. In Buenos Aires, the literary journal *Sur*, founded by Victoria Ocampo in 1931, started to avidly publish and discuss numerous selections by U.S. authors. In 1939, *Sur* translated Faulkner’s “Dry September” (“Septiembre ardido,” nº 59) and published numerous articles on existentialist philosophies and French and U.S. fiction. Faulkner’s works, in fact, are often compared with Juan Carlos Onetti’s novels due to the evident influence of the USAmerican writer on Onetti. The fact that many of the precursors of French and River Plate existentialist literature were American reinforces the need to examine existentialism as an American phenomenon.

U.S., River Plate, and French existentialist works of literature have distinct qualities that can be regarded as the result of the different philosophical schools that influenced writers in each

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17 New York intellectuals had established a canon for American literature that was largely based on European modernism and excluded social realist writers, whose writings were considered unrefined and crude.
of these locations. The insistence on revealing the fundamental role of the past (and therefore of history) and the focus on the future, for instance, are typical of River Plate and U.S. existentialist literature, respectively. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the works of Søren Kierkegaard, José Ortega y Gasset, G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Miguel de Unamuno, and Friedrich Nietzsche have influenced and shaped the literary production that we now associate with twentieth-century existentialist philosophy. From a philosophical standpoint, French existentialist writers (especially Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) were highly indebted to German philosophers for the development of their own theories, whereas twentieth-century writers in the U.S. and Latin America, as Lois Parkinson Zamora points out in “The Usable Past: The Idea of History in Modern U.S. and Latin American Fiction,” were greatly influenced by Hegel and José Ortega y Gasset, respectively. On the one hand, in the U.S., Hegelian idealism and materialism influenced the way in which USAmericans came to disregard their past and focus on the future in the formation of their national identity. Hegel’s theories contributed to the development of what has been perceived as a “forward-looking mentality” and as a “facile doctrine of progress.” This “mentality” is also present in U.S. existentialist literature, where the tendency to lean towards optimism and an interest in spirituality or religion are typical. On the other hand, twentieth-century Latin Americans were drawn to the work of José Ortega y Gasset and came to see history as a non-linear, non-progressive phenomenological process, located in geographical

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19 Lois Parkinson Zamora, “The Usable Past: The Idea of History in Modern U.S. and Latin American Fiction,” *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*, ed. Gustavo Pérez Firmat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 7-41. In Argentina, the interest in existentialism is evinced by the numerous articles that the magazine *Sur* published on the subject. As early as 1936, for instance, Carlos Estrada published an article entitled “De Kierkegaard a Heidegger” (“From Kierkegaard to Heidegger”). Furthermore, in 1937, Carlos Alberto Erro, also a frequent contributor to *Sur*, published *Diálogo existencial (Existential Dialogue)*, a work where he discussed various existentialist philosophies, including Heidegger’s and Kierkegaard’s.


21 Ibid., 18.
and political space.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, for Latin American existentialists, the understanding of the past became crucial due to its capacity to shed light on everyday experience.

The question remains, how and why would a country like the U.S., which placed such importance on the future, become receptive to existentialist ideas? In \textit{Existential America}, George Cotkin attempts to answer this question, challenging Sartre’s opinion that “Americans were overly optimistic and materialistic […] for the recruitment of disciples to the existentialist cause.”\textsuperscript{23} As Cotkin shows, existentialism not only permeated U.S. literature and culture, but also became very popular in the U.S. In fact, the U.S. was initially very receptive to existentialist ideas. Kierkegaard’s works, in particular, were widely read during the postwar years. His God-oriented philosophy was very appealing to USAmericans, who lived in an “age of grand expectations and an age of doubt, couched in a revival of religion.”\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, U.S. existentialist works tend to possess a religious or spiritual character that is quite incompatible with Sartrean existentialism. Despite the initial interest that USAmericans manifested towards Sartre’s writings, many writers and intellectuals eventually distanced themselves from Sartre because they disliked his emphasis on atheism. In U.S. existentialist novels, the typical protagonist goes through a period of self-questioning, hatred towards society, and general discontent. However, he/she finally manages to envisage a better future where hope and spiritual renewal occupy a crucial place. Conversely, in most French and River Plate works, spirituality and religion are absent from the protagonists’ existential quests. Instead, writers from these regions tended to

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 29-31.
\textsuperscript{23} Qtn. George Cotkin, \textit{Existential America} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003), 112.
\textsuperscript{24} Cotkin, \textit{Existential America}, 56.
focus on the process of existential awakening, which often implied that their characters confronted their responsibilities to themselves and others.²⁵

The years following World War II were the pinnacle of existentialism: French existentialism became widely known and existentialist works of literature proliferated not only in France, but also in the U.S. and the River Plate. As a result, authors in these regions sought to further clarify their approaches to French existentialism in order to situate their own works philosophically. In Argentina, in general, French existentialism was received very enthusiastically. As Robert Mead points out in “Argentine Literature Today,” Argentina was indeed “one of the first (if not actually the first) countries outside of France in which the significance of Existentialism began to be appreciated.”²⁶ Emile Gouiran, a French professor of philosophy and literature who lived in Córdoba, Argentina between 1932 and 1945, helped promote existentialism through his various contributions to the magazines Sur, Criterio, and La Voix de France.²⁷ He was also responsible for the creation of the Instituto de filosofía in 1934 and the Instituto de Humanidades in 1940, which later became the Facultad de Filosofía y Humanidades in the city of Córdoba. By the time French existentialism became widely known, most Argentine writers and intellectuals were already well-acquainted with most of its basic precepts. Among the various existentialist works that were published during this historical period, Ernesto Sábato’s El túnel (1948; [The Tunnel]) best exemplifies the disillusionment, anxiety, and pessimism that characterized River Plate literature during the postwar years. In addition, after 1945 (especially during the 1950s), existentialism became a very influential

²⁵ These trends may be related to these writers’ interest in the role of the individual within the context of collective action, which I also discuss throughout this project.
²⁷ All of these magazines were published in Argentina.
movement not only in the River Plate region but also in all of Latin America. As Oviedo explains, “[c]iertas notas existenciales empezaron a dominar en nuestro lenguaje y pensamiento literarios” (“certain existential notes started to resonate in our literary language and thought”). Moreover, existentialist authors “tuvieron un impacto profundo en nuestra sensibilidad y en la forma como percibíamos la posición del hombre en un mundo desgarrado por grandes tragedias: los bombardeos masivos, los campos de concentración, el exterminio de millones de judíos, el fascismo, el estalinismo y finalmente la amenaza de la destrucción atómica” (“had a profound impact on our sensibility and the way in which we perceived the position of human beings in a world that was torn apart by great tragedies: mass bombings, concentration camps, the extermination of millions of Jews, Fascism, Stalinism, and finally, the threat of the atomic bomb”).

In the U.S., as I mentioned earlier, French existentialism also became a culturally-significant phenomenon, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. As Cotkin explains, the dissemination of French existentialism in the U.S. “occurred simultaneously at the levels of both popular and elite culture.” For instance, as early as December 1944, the magazine *Atlantic Monthly* published “Paris Alive,” the first article that Jean-Paul Sartre ever wrote for a U.S. audience. Later on, popular magazines such as *Vogue* started to publish articles on Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, and existentialism in general. Sartre visited the U.S. for the first time in 1945 (for a five-month stay) and then again in 1946. His popularity was remarkable. However, Sartre’s affinities with Marxism and Communism (Sartre believed that in order to produce social

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28 In the River Plate, however, the interest in existentialism was more pronounced (as documented by the numerous articles and books published on this subject in Buenos Aires, as well as by the recurrence of existentialist themes in late twentieth-century River Plate literature).
29 Oviedo, *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana*, 4:60.
30 Ibid., 4:60.
change it was necessary to be organized as a part of a collective movement) eventually produced
great antipathy towards him and his work. USAmericans even came to associate Sartrean
existentialism with Stalinism.  

The tension was two-sided: Sartre and Beauvoir became very
critical of American culture and society. As Cotkin explains, Beauvoir thought that
“[US]Americans were afraid of freedom, unwilling to engage in high-level discussions of serious
ideas, childish in some ways, and unable to trust themselves.”\(^\text{34}\) Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s constant
critiques of the United States further interfered with the reception of their works in the U.S.\(^\text{35}\) In
fact, Sartrean existentialism was often dismissed as “pessimistic effusions arising largely out of
the exigencies of the Second World War.”\(^\text{36}\) Interestingly, however, at the same time that French
existentialism started to be associated with Communism in the U.S., it also came to be seen as a
bourgeois commodity and a temporary French fashion.

In this way, the ambiguous reception of French existentialism strongly divided U.S.
writers, who sought to distinguish their own works from this controversial movement. Most
likely, this contributed to the development of “the outsider character,” which, according to the
Cambridge History of American Literature, “emerged in fiction, poetry, movies, and music as
one of the great nay-saying figures in American culture”\(^\text{37}\) after World War II. Outsider
characters abound in postwar U.S. existentialist literature. To name just two, Cross Damon, the
protagonist of Richard Wright’s The Outsider (1953), and Ralph Ellison’s unnamed protagonist

\(^{32}\) As Cotkin explains, “[Sartre] viewed the Soviet Union as a necessary counterbalance to the expansionist
imperatives of American capitalism in Europe and around the world. To the New Yorkers, Sartre too often
apologized for Stalinism” (Cotkin, Existential America, 113).

\(^{33}\) Beauvoir’s impressions and thoughts about the United States of America are recorded in her article “An
Existentialist Looks at Americans” (1947, published in the New York Times Magazine) and in her book America
Day By Day (L’Amérique au jour le jour, 1947).

\(^{34}\) Cotkin, Existential America, 116.

\(^{35}\) Conversely, Camus’ works were highly acclaimed. Since Camus did not openly criticize the U.S. and had
distanced himself from Sartre because of political reasons (Sartre had harshly criticized Camus’ politics of revolt
and his advocacy of nonviolence), his works were better received in the U.S.

\(^{36}\) Cotkin, Existential America, 93.

\(^{37}\) CHAL, 7:166.
in *Invisible Man* (1952) are great examples of this type. Very often, writers who chose to represent outsider characters belonged to either racial or religious minorities (e.g. Saul Bellow was Jewish, and Wright and Ellison were black). They came from groups “that had known defeat and oppression and had experienced the direct impact of history on their collective and personal lives.”

In their novels, the notion of freedom is analyzed from a perspective that clearly challenges Sartre’s view of freedom. Indeed, “[t]he idea of man’s unbounded freedom had little resonance for them except as a misguided form of hubris.” Interestingly, the sorrow, anxiety, and nostalgia that writers explored through the representation of outsider characters were often associated with the existential ethos of blues and jazz. Ralph Ellison once claimed in an interview that “[t]here is an existential tradition within American Negro life and, of course, that comes out of the blues and spirituals.” Thus, just like blues and jazz, existentialism in the United States is intimately tied to this country’s history of oppression. Masterpieces such as Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, however, reached well beyond the racial topos and successfully managed to invoke the themes of alienation, authenticity, and existential angst from the general perspective of human experience.

Although by the early 1960s novels by French and U.S. existentialist authors were widely known both in Europe and the Americas, most River Plate authors (and Latin American writers in general) were not read outside of Latin America. Only after the U.S. started to become more interested in Latin American affairs in the 1960s for political reasons did Latin American literature become more appreciated in Europe and the U.S. In fact, Latin American literature

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41 The only exceptions were writers who had produced works that were thought to contain a certain degree of exoticism that non-Latin American audiences found appealing.
started to be promoted in the U.S. as a part of a political and economic strategy that sought to lure Latin American writers away from Communism by fostering bilateral relations between the U.S. and its southern neighbors. As a part of this initiative, numerous Latin American works were translated into English and published in limited numbers. Harriet de Onís, the wife of Federico de Onís (himself a former student of Miguel de Unamuno and the founder of the department of Hispanic Philology at Columbia University), became the premier translator of Latin American literature into English under the aegis of the Center for Inter-American Relations (CIAR). This center was key to the dissemination of Hispanic literature in English-speaking countries. It published the magazine Review (covering Latin American arts and literature in general) and also facilitated the publication of Hispanic novels, including Eduardo Mallea’s La bahía del silencio (1940; [The Bay of Silence], translated in 1944), Todo verde perecerá (1941; [All Green Shall Perish], translated in 1967), Héctor Alberto Murena’s Las leyes de la noche (1958; [The Laws of the Night], translated in 1970) and Julio Cortázar’s Rayuela (1963; [Hopscotch], translated in 1966). In addition, Federico de Onís sought to increase the dissemination of Hispanic literature in American academia and also in France, where he was the editor of the Anthologie de la poésie ibéro-américaine (1956), a project financed by UNESCO.

In France, Latin American literature began to be reviewed with considerable interest after World War II. However, as “New World imports,” Latin American works were required to exhibit a certain degree of “exoticism” (expected by the French public) if they hoped to be

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42 Latin American writers, who had been isolated from each other and the rest of the world for decades, started to become acquainted with each other’s works thanks to the initiative of the Casa de las Américas, which organized intellectual gatherings in Havana and helped promote Latin American literature both in Latin America and in Europe in the early 1960s. Latin American authors who participated in this initiative were in general very critical of U.S. politics and supported Castro’s socialism.

43 Formerly known as the Inter-American Foundation for the Arts, the CIAR, founded by David Rockefeller in 1962, sought to promote Latin American relations in an attempt to counter the influence of the Cuban Revolution. For more information on the role of the CIAR, see Irene Rostagno, Searching for Recognition: The Promotion of Latin American Literature in the United States (Westport: Greenwood, 1997).
translated, let alone studied. The return of Roger Caillois to France, after five years in Buenos Aires, was crucial for the promotion and translation of Latin American literature in French. He founded the series *La Croix du Sud* (Gallimard), which published Latin American works translated into French, and was also in charge of the publication of *Collection d’œuvres représentatives*, a series of compilations of Hispanic literature financed by UNESCO. Although *La Croix du Sud* made a substantial contribution to the dissemination of Latin American literature, it was also criticized for basing its selections of works on the criteria of “entertainment” or “exoticism,” rather than literary quality. For this reason, many writers, such as Julio Cortázar, eventually demanded that their works be published in Gallimard’s collection *Du Monde entier* (selections of world literature) instead. The journal *La Licorne*, founded by the Uruguayan Susana Soca in 1947, was the first French journal to publish more “serious” Latin American literature. However, this journal was more successful in Latin America than in France. Fortunately, over time, many famous French literary journals, such as *Les Temps modernes*, *Esprit*, and *Les Lettres nouvelles*, started to take Latin American literature more seriously.

According to the Argentine critic Sylvia Molloy, many French journals became particularly interested in what she describes as “romans citadins” (“novels of the city”). Albert Camus’ letter to Ernesto Sábato, in which he mentions that he has recommended *El túnel* for publication in France, for instance, is a clear example that the influence between River Plate and French existentialist writers had ceased to be unilateral.

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44 In 1939, Roger Caillois had been invited by Victoria Ocampo to participate at a conference in Buenos Aires. As the war broke out, he had to remain in Argentina for five years, during which he became acquainted with Latin American literature, created a journal (*Lettres Françaises*), and frequented literary circles.


The grounds on which U.S. and River Plate writers challenged French existentialist theories (most importantly Sartre’s) reveal some of the major characteristics of the national existentialist phenomena that I analyze throughout this project. For instance, many of the differences between U.S., River Plate, and French existentialist phenomena derive from intense debates over the notions of freedom and responsibility. In his seminal work *L’Étre et le néant* (1943, *Being and Nothingness*), Jean-Paul Sartre argues that, since existence precedes essence, human beings supposedly enjoy “absolute freedom.” Sartre’s theories on freedom, which explain that human beings are held responsible for all of the choices that they make, became a constant source of controversy during the second half of the twentieth century. Across the Atlantic, U.S. and River Plate writers and intellectuals often sought to challenge, whether explicitly or performatively, Sartre’s view of freedom. River Plate authors explored questions of freedom and free choice by juxtaposing their protagonists’ personal plights with their social, political, and economic circumstances. In their works, these writers often alluded to the numerous dictatorial regimes and recurrent periods of economic recession and stagnation that Uruguay and Argentina suffered throughout the twentieth century. In this way, River Plate existentialists emphasized collective action as a prerequisite for social change. Writers such as Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Sábato, Abelardo Castillo, and Griselda Gambaro, whose works I examine in this project, explore the numerous impositions on individual freedom to which a deeply disillusioned Argentine nation had grown accustomed. In *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (1962; *On Heroes and Tombs*), for instance, Sábato attributes the typically Argentinian feeling of nostalgia and uprootedness (best exemplified by tango music and lyrics) to the series of adverse circumstances that Spaniards, Indians, gauchos, criollos, and European immigrants had to face.

47 Sartre discusses his theory of freedom most fully in *Being and Nothingness* (1943; *L’Étre et le Néant*). Later in his career, Sartre revised this theory. *Being and Nothingness*, however, has been one of his most influential (if not his most influential) philosophical work.
on Argentine soil. In addition, River Plate writers often reveal that the choices that are available to their characters are predetermined by the circumstances in which they live. To be able to induce social change, these writers point to the need to increase solidarity among people in order to transcend alienation.

In the U.S., existentialist writers also challenged Sartre’s concept of total freedom and free choice by exploring the theme of ideological hegemony, which constantly resurfaces in their writings. The notion of the “American dream,” in particular, is repeatedly examined as a false illusion whose only raison d’être is to induce and maintain support for the U.S. socio-economic system. In their works, U.S. existentialist writers such as Norman Mailer often seek to unveil the many ways in which USAmericans are ideologically oppressed. As they explore the consequences of this oppression, these writers attempt to establish a link between the widespread alienation, frustration, and anguish that they perceive in their society and the various instances of ideological hegemony that they wish to denounce. For instance, in An American Dream, Mailer reveals through Steven Rojack’s narration that the notion of the American dream is deceptive and illusory. As Rojack himself tells the reader at the beginning of the novel, his life seems to be the perfect embodiment of the American dream: he is successful at his job, married to a wealthy and beautiful woman, and even enjoys a certain degree of fame. In spite of his success, Rojack is extremely unhappy and depressed and seriously considers committing suicide. Through Rojack’s confessions, Mailer is able to offer a critique of the industrialized, dehumanizing, power-driven USAmerican society. Thus, in the U.S., existentialist authors constantly focus on revealing the ways in which individuals may successfully transcend or evade, at least partially, deep-rooted mechanisms of oppression that often go unnoticed in U.S. society.
In addition, U.S. and River Plate writers typically employed existentialism as a means to fight against various forms of totalitarianism. As George Cotkin explains, “the existential problems of the anxious individual lur[k] at the heart of totalitarianism.”48 In fact, totalitarian states, very often “res[t] on their promised solutions to the chronic loneliness, alienation, and malaise of modern men and women.”49 The German Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt50 became a very influential figure for the dissemination of existentialism on U.S. soil. In her seminal work The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), Arendt, who fled from Germany to New York during World War II, claimed that loneliness lies at the very roots of totalitarianism. As she further argued, “total loyalty” is a key element in the totalitarian state that can “only be expected from the completely isolated human being.”51 Arendt thought that the more alienated people were, the easier it was to control and subjugate them. Her insights were quickly taken up by U.S. existentialist writers, who sought to stress (like their South American counterparts) the fundamental role of solidarity within the context of social change.

The desire to reveal diverse forms of totalitarianism led writers in the U.S. and the River Plate to consider psychological (especially psychoanalytic) and/or surrealist theories and techniques, which they saw as powerful tools for detecting and addressing totalitarianism. In the River Plate, psychoanalysis and Surrealism permeated existentialist literature, most remarkably in the so-called “boom” and “post-boom” novels. For instance, Sábato’s Sobre héroes y tumbas includes a surrealist exploration of the confrontation between the human psyche and the impositions of the outside world (the “Report on the Blind”). Griselda Gambaro’s short stories

48 Cotkin, Existential America, 135.
49 Ibid., 135.
50 Arendt (1906-1975), who became a very important figure among New York intellectuals, was also, according to Cotkin, “the perfect candidate to explicate existentialism for an American audience” (Cotkin, Existential America, 136). Not only was her own work informed by existential themes, but in 1946 she also published two articles on existentialism entitled “What Is Existenz Philosophy?” and “French Existentialism.” Furthermore, she had been a student of Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Karl Jaspers.
commonly incorporate numerous psychoanalytic techniques as well. Through psychoanalytic and surrealist insights, River Plate writers sought to show how a history of repressive political regimes may affect the collective unconscious, thereby limiting individuals’ abilities to make choices and induce social change. In their writings, River Plate authors often integrated the realm of the irrational into everyday experience, employed or created myths, represented the “collective unconscious,” and attempted to shed light on their nation’s “repressed desires.” Similarly, the representation of dreams was also commonly employed as an alternative means to observe and modify reality.

As I show in this project, the interest in psychoanalytic insights, which French existentialists rejected fiercely, became emblematic of River Plate existentialist literature. In fact, over the course of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis became a very popular and culturally significant movement in Argentina. As Avery Gordon explains in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, psychoanalysis “appealed to many liberal and left activists and students, particularly after Perón’s loss of power in 1955, the subsequent rise of the right, and the military coup of 1966.” Furthermore, in Argentina, psychoanalysis “provided a source of answers to a range of existential, philosophical, and social questions” and was “a source of critical thought and radical opposition to exploitation, oppression, and political repression.” As a result, River Plate authors incorporated many psychoanalytic insights into their works as they attempted to reveal how a country’s political circumstances could influence people’s choices, thereby limiting their freedom. Their interest in the unconscious, in addition, went hand in hand

52 Indeed, psychoanalysis has played a fundamental role in Argentine intellectual history. Freud’s writings were extremely well received in Argentina, where a psychoanalytic association was founded as early as the 1940s.
54 Ibid., 90.
with their use of surrealist techniques, which were viewed as the most adequate for representing
their characters’ states of mind as well as their countries’ political atmospheres.

USAmerican writers also merged existentialism with Surrealism to express their concerns
with the lack of spontaneity and the increasing consumerism, conformism and indifference that
writers perceived in their society. Writers such as Ralph Ellison employed surrealist techniques
to represent their protagonists’ existential quests in a society that has grown accustomed to social
injustice, racism, and violence. For instance, in *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison represents the
United States as a quintessential example of totalitarianism that requires loneliness,
uniformization of the masses, patriotism, and the use of terror as the bases for its success. To do
so, however, Ellison often interpolates a series of realistic and surrealist descriptions that suggest
that lived life in the United States may in fact be more uncanny than most of the nightmarish
moments that he represents in his novel.

Conversely, in France, the focus on individual responsibility that is typical of French
existentialists is also connected to the rejection of both surrealist and psychoanalytic theories.
Most French existentialist writers opposed the concept of the unconscious. Sartre, in particular,
considered Freudian theories on the unconscious as a prime example of bad faith; in his view,
attributing one’s decisions to one’s unconscious was a way of relinquishing the responsibility for
one’s choices.\(^55\) Albert Camus also resisted the use of psychology for gaining insights into the
motivations behind his characters’ actions.\(^56\) In France, other literary movements that are often
associated with existentialism, such as the “theater of the absurd” and the *nouveau roman*,\(^57\) also

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\(^{55}\) Sartre criticizes psychoanalysis in various works, most importantly in *Being and Nothingness*.

\(^{56}\) For instance, the actions of Meursault, the protagonist of *L’Étranger* (1942; [*The Stranger*]), are never explained
or justified psychologically.

\(^{57}\) Coined by the critic Martin Esslin, the term the “Theater of the Absurd” (“Théâtre de l’Absurde”) is employed to
describe mainly European plays written during the 1950s and 1960s that explore Camus’ concept of the absurd as
presented in his seminal essay “Le Mythe de Sisyphe” (1942, [“The Myth of Sisyphus”]). The term *nouveau roman,*
share this lack of interest in causal psychological explanations. Marguerite Duras’ works, which are often associated both with existentialism and the *nouveau roman*, and Samuel Beckett’s plays, which belong to the genre of the “theater of the absurd,” are also deeply existentialist and reject the insights of psychoanalysis in the same manner as the major French existentialists.

Finally, with the advent of the civil rights movement, postcolonial theory, and the height of feminism, many twentieth-century writers also sought to contest Sartrean existentialism to reveal the many ways in which human freedom may be further limited. Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, often emphasizes in her works how the reduced number of choices available to women affects them existentially. In addition, during the last few decades of the twentieth century, writers challenged and employed existentialist insights in an attempt to explore the subversive potential of literature and its role as a medium to induce social change. Existentialism also resurfaced in late twentieth-century postmodern literature. By reintroducing concepts such as “freedom,” “responsibility,” and “authenticity” into postmodernism, writers such as Paul Auster (U.S.) and Vassilis Alexakis (France) sought to provide more compelling explorations of human reality without necessarily arriving at “dead-ends,” creating “grand narratives,” or leading to nihilism. These tendencies are some of the main accusations that critics have made against postmodernism and existentialism.

Throughout this project, which chronicles the historical presence of existentialist literature and philosophy, I examine existentialism particularly as a twentieth-century cultural phenomenon. In each of these chapters, I trace the role of existentialism in American works of literature, as well as the three-way literary conversation that developed among U.S., French, and River Plate existentialist writers. The main goal of this work is to shed light on the need to study

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coined by Emile Henriot in 1957, is employed to refer to certain French writers (Allain Robe-Grillet, Natalie Sarraute, etc.) whose novels are highly experimental and tend to reject most literary conventions.
and understand existentialism as an American phenomenon. Driven by this purpose, I take an inter-American approach to reveal how the roles and features of River Plate and U.S. existentialist literature both challenge and comply with existing discourses and national mythologies that have sought to define America as a land of opportunity. In chapter I, “‘Alien Nations’: Existentialist Literatures and the Origins of a Transatlantic Discourse,” I examine Juan Carlos Onetti’s *El pozo* (1939; [*The Pit*]), Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée* (1938; [*Nausea*]), and Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* (1944) as early examples that demonstrate some of the major characteristics and functions of existentialism in U.S., French, and River Plate literature prior to the peak of French existentialism during the postwar years. In chapter II, “American Existentialisms,” I analyze four American existentialist novels: Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream* (1965), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963; [*Hopscotch*]), and Ernesto Sábato’s *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (1961; [*On Heroes and Tombs*]). In this chapter, I show how and why these writers seek to distinguish their works from French existentialism and argue that these novels actually attempt to establish the relevance of existentialism in the American continents, both on a national and a hemispheric level.

In chapter III, “Reinscribing Existentialism: Late Twentieth-Century Avatars,” I analyze Joyce Carol Oates’ “Accomplished Desires” (1970), Abelardo Castillo’s “El asesino intachable” (1970; [“The Flawless Assassin”]), and Marguerite Duras’ *Moderato Cantabile* (1958). I examine how these works subvert and build on Sartrean existentialist theories through the use of parodic strategies. Finally, in chapter IV, “Postmodern Existentialism,” I analyze postmodern works that integrate apparently incompatible postmodern and existentialist insights and develop a “postmodern existentialism.” Despite their postmodern ethos, Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1983), Griselda Gambaro’s “Las paredes” (1965; [“The Walls”]), and Vassilis Alexakis’
Contrôle d’identité, (1985; [Control of Identity]) reveal their authors’ marked interest in reviving existentialism. Indeed, Paul Auster’s scholarly interest in French literature, which he demonstrated as a lecturer at Princeton University and as a translator of Beckett, Joubert, and Sartre, clearly resurfaces in City of Glass. Thus, these authors confirm through their works William V. Spanos’ claim that “the postmodern imagination […] is an existential imagination.”

Chapter I:

“Alien Nations”: Existentialist Literatures and the Origins of a Transatlantic Discourse

In every man’s memory there are things that he won’t reveal to others, except, perhaps, to friends. And there are things he won’t reveal even to friends, only, perhaps, to himself, and then, too, in secret. And finally, there are things that he is afraid to reveal even to himself, and every decent man has quite an accumulation of them. In fact, the more decent the man, the more of them he has stored up.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*.¹

During the first part of the twentieth century, existentialism permeated both European and American literatures. Not only in France but also in the River Plate and the U.S., in particular, a number of writers repeatedly examined various existential themes, such as alienation and dread, with at least two specific purposes. First, they attempted to account for the general atmosphere of frustration and disillusionment that characterized their own countries during the early twentieth century. Second, they sought to establish existential concerns as major trends in their national literatures. Existentialist works of literature thus allowed authors to discuss their generations’ malaise in the context of their respective cultural, political, and economic conditions.

Among these writers were Juan Carlos Onetti (1909-1994, Uruguay), Saul Bellow (1915-2005, U.S.), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980, France), all of whom became key figures in the cultural histories of their countries. Most famously, Jean-Paul Sartre synthesized various existential theories and philosophies (Heidegger’s, Hegel’s, Husserl’s, Nietzsche’s) and introduced in his novel La Nausée (1938; Nausea) the main concepts of what came to be known as Sartrean existentialism. Similarly, both as a novelist and as a literary critic for the journal Marcha, Juan Carlos Onetti was fundamental to the development of twentieth-century Uruguayan and Latin American literature. His many contributions to Marcha, written under the pseudonym of “Periquito el Aguador,” and his own novels—most importantly, El pozo (1939; The Pit)—signalled a shift in focus to existential and modern themes (such as city life) in River Plate literature. Finally, Saul Bellow became one of the first USAmerican writers to consciously address existentialism in a novel when he published Dangling Man in 1944.

Although many other USAmerican authors had examined various existential themes in their

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3 Sartre borrowed the term “nausea” from Friedrich Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None (1883-5, Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen), where this word is employed to refer to the nauseating quality of existence.

4 Founded in 1939, Marcha played a key role in Uruguayan cultural life and politics. As Emir Rodríguez Monegal explains in the prologue to A Tribute to Marcha, this journal “was not only of decisive importance to the left—Che Guevara’s letter about the new revolutionary man, addressed to its editor, Carlos Quijano, was originally published there—but also instrumental in promoting the new literature. Marcha’s first literary editor was Juan Carlos Onetti, who brought to its pages some of his favorite authors—Céline, Faulkner—and opened the magazine to a new generation of Uruguayan writers. In the fifties and sixties, Marcha became a truly Latin-American publication: the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante and the Argentine Julio Cortázar became contributors” (“Prologue,” A Tribute to Marcha, http://www.archivodeprensa.edu.uy/r_monegal/bibliografia/prologos/prol_02.htm).

5 As Mirian Pino explains in “El semanario Marcha de Uruguay: una genealogía de la crítica de la cultura en América Latina,” as Periquito el Aguador, Onetti sought to “advertir cómo el rostro de Montevideo se había modificado ante la ola inmigratoria” (“advert how the face of Montevideo had changed after the immigration wave”) and to criticize “la fijación de la literatura uruguaya en un romanticismo démodé” (“the fixation of Uruguayan literature on a démodé romanticism”) (“El semanario Marcha de Uruguay: una genealogía de la crítica de la cultura en América Latina, Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana 56 [2002]: 146).


7 Even though he was born in Canada, Bellow is considered a USAmerican writer since he emigrated with his family to the U.S. at a very early age and became a citizen of this country.

8 Saul Bellow, Dangling Man (New York: Penguin, 1988).
works (e.g. Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck), Bellow, who had also read Sartre’s early works, was among the first to create what could be regarded as a typical existentialist novel, along the lines of Onetti’s *El pozo*, Sartre’s *La Nausée*, and, of course, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864)—a common precursor to them all.

In this chapter, I argue that Sartre’s, Bellow’s, and Onetti’s first-published novels pave the way for the development of national existentialist trends in French, U.S., and River Plate literatures. Through their various representations of homelessness, which surfaces as a metaphor of alienation in *Dangling Man*, *El pozo*, and *La Nausée*, these writers anticipated the different roles that existentialism would play in their own nations and literary traditions. In addition, these novels’ lonely, uprooted, and disoriented protagonists become the means through which Bellow, Sartre, and Onetti illustrate the political, cultural, and economic circumstances that exacerbated alienation in the U.S., France, and the River Plate in the early twentieth century. During the 1930s, for instance, the U.S. suffered the consequences of the Great Depression, a period characterized by recession, deflation, poverty, and high unemployment which resulted in heightened economic isolation. Argentina and Uruguay also experienced a different kind of isolation at this time, due to political repression at the hands of the dictatorial regimes that rose to dominance during the early 1930s. In addition, the absence of a developed critical tradition and consensus on a national literature in these countries also made many River Plate writers such as Onetti feel out of place. Conversely, the general uncertainty that characterized post-World War I France influenced how French writers understood alienation, which they often treated as an ontological condition. The different causes of alienation that affected the U.S., France, and the

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9 In *Existential America*, Cotkin observes even earlier existential trends in USAmerican literature in the works of William James, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Emily Dickinson.

10 Onetti, for instance, claimed that he was not acquainted with a Uruguayan national literature. For more information on Onetti’s views of Uruguayan literature see Mirian Pino, “El semanario Marcha de Uruguay: Una genealogía de la crítica de la cultura en América Latina.”
River Plate, then, are reflected in the behavior of the protagonists, who act as exiles in their own home countries.

Moreover, this chapter, by tracing the origins of the conversations among U.S., French, and River Plate existentialists, reveals the need to incorporate U.S. and River Plate literature into the existentialist canon. However, in order to recast existentialism as a transatlantic phenomenon, we must first reevaluate the roles that existentialism has played in each of these locations. These roles not only shed light on the relevance of existentialism within an American context but also help us question common assumptions about American literature in the field of inter-American studies. Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* and Onetti’s *El pozo*, for instance, both evoke and reject myths of America as a land of opportunity through the eyes of their narrators. In fact, in the U.S. and the River Plate, these myths are particularly heightened due to the Puritan founding of the United States and the massive influx of European immigrants to the River Plate region in search of a better future. Thus, the differences between USAmerican, River Plate, and French existentialist literature can be studied as both symptomatic of these locations’ national mythologies and their incongruent social, political, and economic realities.

In what follows, I will examine *El pozo*, *Dangling Man*, and *La Nausée* as emblematic of the diverse existentialist phenomena that developed throughout the twentieth century in France, the U.S., and the River Plate. To do so, I will first introduce the texts and try to elucidate the function of the diary novel, as exemplified by these works, within the context of existentialism. As the diary novel has proven a preferred genre of existentialist writers, this analysis is

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12. Following the various government initiatives that sought to organize and encourage immigration from Europe to populate and help develop Argentina, an unusually high number of (mostly Italian and Spanish) immigrants moved to the River Plate region in search for a better life. The immigrants’ expectations and dreams of “fare l’America” [“making America”] were shattered due to the high rates of unemployment and the political instability that characterized the first decades of the twentieth century.
applicable beyond the three novels considered here. Then, I shall analyze the roles of alienation, metaphorical homelessness, and the notion of home to shed light on some of the key differences between French, U.S., and River Plate existentialist literatures. Finally, I will examine the solutions that Bellow, Sartre, and Onetti propose to transcend alienation. In doing so, I hope to elucidate the significance of their works within their respective national and continental literary traditions.

Onetti’s, Sartre’s, and Bellow’s diary novels are usually studied in relation to their historical context as modern works that consciously depart from previous literary traditions. For instance, Onetti’s *El pozo* has been considered by many critics and writers as the first truly modern Spanish American novel and as a precursor of magic realism. In this work, Eladio Linacero, the protagonist, describes his inability to communicate with other people, his encounters with prostitutes, the memories of a girl he once raped, and his relationship with Cecilia, his ex-wife. Linacero also narrates what he refers to as “aventuras” (“adventures”), a series of dreams and imaginary stories that occupy a very important place in his life. No major events take place in this novel, which ends in the same way as it starts: with the reflections of a lonely protagonist who comments on his apparently purposeless existence. Because of its modern themes and experimental narrative techniques, this novel has also been considered a precursor (or early example) of what came to be known as the “new” Latin American novel (also referred to as the “boom” novel). Indeed, as Mario Vargas Llosa explains, *El pozo*,

*es la primera novela de un escritor hispanoamericano que crea un mundo riguroso y coherente, que importa por sí mismo y no por el material informativo que contiene, asequible a lectores de cualquier lugar y de cualquier lengua, porque los asuntos que expresa han adquirido, en virtud de un lenguaje y una técnica
funcionales, una dimensión universal. No se trata de un mundo artificial, pero sus raíces son humanas antes que americanas, y consiste como toda creación novelesca durable, en una objetivación de una subjetividad.\(^\text{13}\)

[is the first novel written by a Spanish American author that creates a rigorous and coherent world, which matters in itself and not because of its informative content. A world that is accessible to readers from any place and of any language because the issues that it expresses have acquired, by virtue of a functional language and technique, a universal dimension. It is not an artificial world, but its roots are human before they are American, and it consists, like any lasting novelistic creation, of an objectification of a subjectivity.]

In *Juan Carlos Onetti*, Djelal Kadir also discusses the universal dimension of *El pozo*, which he ascribes to the existential ethos of the novel. As Kadir explains, at the time that *El pozo* was written, around 1932,\(^\text{14}\) “[t]he focus of literature [had] turned away from nature,” and the new generation of writers, of which Onetti was a key figure, “was forced to confront inner nature, the fundamental identity of man in the face of odds precipitated by his own actions and the interrogatives engendered by his own consciousness.”\(^\text{15}\) Thus, the Onettian hero, whom Kadir describes as an “alienated, existentially tortured human type,”\(^\text{16}\) is emblematic of the break with prevailing literary traditions and becomes characteristic of a new generation of writers and a new literary practice. Likewise, Angel Rama, in “Origen de un novelista y de una generación


\(^{14}\) “In 1932 Onetti wrote the first version of El pozo (The Pit) which, like many subsequent manuscripts of his, was misplaced and lost” (Djelal Kadir, *Juan Carlos Onetti* [Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977], 14).

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 18.
literaria” (1965; “Origin of a Novelist and a Literary Generation”), emphasizes the historical relevance of *El pozo*, which he describes as a “pieza fundamental de la literatura”\(^\text{17}\) (“fundamental work of literature”), in which Onetti “nos manifiesta un entendimiento de la realidad a partir de la suya propia y de la social de su tiempo"\(^\text{18}\) (“manifests an understanding of reality from his own reality and from the social reality of his time”).

Sartre’s *La Nausée* has also been described by many critics as a groundbreaking work. This novel constitutes Sartre’s first attempt to conceptualize and explain his developing existentialist philosophy. In *La Nausée*, which was written over a period of eight years starting in the fall of 1931,\(^\text{19}\) Sartre introduces the reader to Antoine Roquentin, a thirty-year-old man who lives in Bouville, a French seaport town. Throughout the novel, Roquentin unsuccessfully attempts to work on a biography of Marquis de Rollebon,\(^\text{20}\) an eighteen-century political figure. Instead, he finds himself devoting many of his thoughts and diary entries to the description and elucidation of a feeling that he decides can best be termed “nausea.” His disgust at existence, human beings, and himself eventually leads him to a revelation on the nature of being: that everything is fundamentally pointless and there is no reason for people, or anything else, to exist. This insight causes Roquentin much anxiety, as he explains, “[j]’ai envie de partir, de m’en aller quelque part où je serais vraiment à ma place, où je m’emboîterais… Mais ma place n’est nulle part; je suis de trop” (“I want to leave, go to some place where I will be really in my own niche,

\(^{17}\) Angel Rama, “Origen de un novelista y de una generación literaria,” *El pozo* (Montevideo: Ediciones Arca, 1963), 50.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 53-4.
\(^{19}\) As Editions Gallimard’s documents indicate: “Depuis l’automne 1931, Sartre travaille laborieusement sur le manuscrit de l’ouvrage qui deviendra *La Nausée* mais qu’il appelle encore à cette date son ‘factum sur la contingence’” (“Since fall 1931, Sartre works laboriously on a manuscript of the novel that later becomes *Nausea*, which he still calls at this date his ‘factum on contingency’”) http://www.gallimard.fr/catalog/Html/actu/sartre-nrf.htm.
\(^{20}\) Based on Roquentin’s failure to write this biography, critics have commented extensively on Roquentin’s relationship with the past. For more information, see, for instance, Robert Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts. Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
where I will fit in... But my place is nowhere; I am unwanted, de trop”).\textsuperscript{21} From this point on, Sartre’s novel emphasizes Roquentin’s attempts to cope with his feelings of existential angst and superfluousness. One such attempt leads Roquentin to become a writer, in the hope that he might transcend nausea by way of art. By having the protagonist make this choice, Sartre suggests that Roquentin’s feelings have an ontological origin and, therefore, cannot be eradicated. Thus, art and self-creation emerge as two possible means to temporarily escape from this state.

Bellow’s \textit{Dangling Man} is a USAmerican existentialist novel \textit{par excellence}. In this work, like Sartre, Bellow also portrays a protagonist and a society that are “de trop” in numerous ways; however, his novel focuses on the need to transcend this reality. Joseph (the protagonist) begins his diary by describing how he has been living in a “dangling” state ever since he quit his job and began waiting for the army to deploy him. Many of his diary entries depict his isolation and inability to communicate with his friends and wife. Other entries are imaginary conversations with an alter ego, which Joseph refers to as “Tu As Raison Aussi”\textsuperscript{22} (or “The Spirit of Alternatives”). As the novel develops, Joseph increasingly desires an end to his malaise. Joseph finds this end when, towards the close of the novel, he suddenly throws himself into action as he goes to war. Unlike Roquentin, Joseph rejects existential angst and alienation and manages to quit his state of suspense. This decision is evident when he argues with “Tu As Raison Aussi” (or perhaps Jean-Paul Sartre?) and states: “I didn’t say there was no feeling of alienation, but we should not make a doctrine of our feeling.”\textsuperscript{23} As Porter Abbott explains in \textit{Diary Fiction: Writing as Action}, “[w]hereas Sartre’s hero bravely shoulders the burden of nothingness, Joseph resists it up to the end.”\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, Bellow’s protagonist acts as a prototypical

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{21} Sartre, \textit{La Nausée}, 174; \textit{Nausea}, 122. \\
\textsuperscript{22} [“You are right too”] \\
\textsuperscript{23} Bellow, \textit{Dangling Man}, 138. \\
\end{flushleft}
American existentialist hero as he confronts and attempts to overcome his feelings of despair and alienation.

In this way, while they take diverse approaches to existentialism, Bellow’s, Onetti’s, and Sartre’s diary novels exhibit striking similarities of plot and structure. The protagonists/narrators describe their hometowns as estranging sites that lead them to a profound state of discomfort and isolation. The narrators elucidate the ways in which social and economic transformations heighten their feelings of alienation and anxiety. In these insights, these narrators fit the description of the prototypical writer of fictional diaries, which Porter Abbott depicts in the following manner: “[h]e is intelligent. He is sensitive. He is acutely introverted and self-conscious. He is alienated. He has no gift for social life. He is either in love or obsessed with the fact that he is not. He is poor. He is powerless. He is young, in his twenties or early thirties. He is alone. He is prone to melodrama. He is doomed.”

Roquentin, Joseph, and Linacero (except for the fact that the latter is forty years old, like Dostoevsky’s Underground man) fit this definition to the letter.

Through their writing, the protagonists attempt to come to terms with their feelings of dread and lack of belonging and, as a result, embark on a search for new concepts of home. As part of this search, they explore various alternatives in an attempt to transcend alienation: art and literature, imagination, psychoanalytic insights, human relationships, and political action. These alternatives, I contend, form the basis for recurrent literary traits that ultimately become associated with the national existentialist trends that Sartre, Bellow, and Onetti helped to establish through their first-published diary novels.

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25 Ibid., 15-16.
The Choice of the Diary Novel as a Genre

The fact that these three authors choose the diary form for their first-published novels reveals an affinity between this genre and existentialism and highlights one of the roles of existentialism in the early twentieth century. The first-person narrative of the diary form allows these authors to explore the intricate relationship between subjectivity, literature, and epistemology. This relationship is central to existentialism as it sheds light on the extent to which it is possible to theorize human existence, given the limitations of language and subjectivity. The diary novel, with its sense of immediacy and fragmentary form, allows writers to examine the gap between people’s raw perceptions and experience of the world and their description and representation of it. This genre also allows writers to explore how the social collective influences an individual’s understanding of his/her own environment. Thus, as the diary novel requires that authors necessarily examine subjectivity and address its limits, this genre facilitates both the representation and the analysis of existential themes.

Furthermore, Bellow’s, Sartre’s, and Onetti’s interest in representing existential concerns through the fragmentary form of the diary novel reveals how their common precursors may have shaped their thinking and aesthetics. As I mentioned in the introduction, literary critics often study existentialism as merely a temporary post-World War II phenomenon. However, the well-documented influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s and William Faulkner’s works on Onetti, Sartre, and Bellow proves otherwise. Clear echoes of Faulkner (1897-1962) resound, for instance, in

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26 Other writers contributed to the development of existentialist literature in France, the U.S., and the River Plate. Within the context of the present chapter, the names of the following authors are worth mentioning: Ivan Turgenev (b. Russia [1818-1883], in particular, his novel *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*, published in 1850), Knut Hamsun (b. Norway [1859-1952], in particular, his work *Hunger*, published in 1890), and Franz Kafka (1883-1924).
the ways these three writers employ the fragment and represent time. The fact that writers like Faulkner and Dostoevsky (1821-1881), who are considered precursors of the twentieth-century existentialist novel, influenced Bellow and Onetti is then very significant as it suggests that these writers’ interest in existentialism predates World War II. In particular, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* (1864), another diary novel generally considered the first existentialist novel, is key to understanding the role of existentialism in the novels analyzed in this chapter.

Following Dostoevsky, Onetti, Sartre, and Bellow employ the diary novel to represent their societies through their narrators’ personal confessions. This technique, which Mikhail Bakhtin discusses in relation to Dostoevsky’s works, is fundamental for understanding the relationship between existentialism and the diary form. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky constructs reality through the contradictory and ever changing self-consciousnesses of his characters. “What is important to Dostoevsky,” Bakhtin claims, “is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to his hero, and how the hero appears to himself.” As Bakhtin discusses the trajectories of Dostoevsky’s heroes, he points out “[a] plurality of independent and unmerged consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.” The concept of “polyphony,” which is central to Bakhtin’s critical work, is also central to understanding the diary novel as a genre. According to Bakhtin’s theory, reality is a polyphonic concept: the result of multiple independent and often contradictory voices. In his view, a person’s perception of reality is inevitably influenced by the views of other people. No single voice, therefore, can ever be fully isolated from others. Sartre’s,

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27 See, for instance, Djelal Kadir’s discussion of the use of time in Onetti’s works in “Cells and Fragmented Eternity: Time and Place in Onetti’s Work” (Kadir, *Juan Carlos Onetti*, 54-77).
28 This indicates that studies that examine existentialism merely as a temporary postwar fashion are historically deficient.
30 Ibid., 6.
Bellow’s, and Onetti’s diary novels follow a similar premise. By giving access to an individual’s changing consciousness, they offer glimpses of a reality that is questionable, slippery, difficult to grasp, and never stable. In this way, these writers also seek to represent reality as a polyphonic result of both personal and collective experience. Indeed, as Bakhtin further discusses, in Dostoevsky’s novels a hero “is not only a discourse about himself and his immediate environment, but also a discourse about the world; he is not only cognizant, but an ideologist as well.”

Since the diary novel facilitates the representation of often contradictory discourses through the narrator’s confessions, it offers Onetti, Bellow, and Sartre a perfect medium to reveal the significance of existentialism in their respective nations. The various approaches to existentialism that these writers take, then, shed light on how each writer perceived his generation’s alienation and disillusionment vis-à-vis its various unfulfilled expectations. As such, these works may be studied as symptoms not only of the harsh socioeconomic and political circumstances under which they were written but also of the conflicting discourses that shaped people’s understanding of their respective national cultures in the early twentieth century.

Furthermore, because of its capacity to represent a variety of discourses through the protagonist’s confessions, the diary novel lends itself to the examination of subjectivity. This concept, as Sartre explains in his essay *Existentialism and Humanism*, is central to both atheist and religious existentialism:

> There are, on the one hand, the Christians, amongst whom I shall name Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and on the other the existential atheists, amongst whom we must place Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they

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31 Ibid., 78.
believe that existence comes before essence – or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective.\(^\text{32}\)

Although reductive in its distinction between atheist and Christian existentialisms, this explanation reveals the key role of subjectivity in existentialist philosophy, thereby elucidating further the reasons for the predominance of the diary form in existentialist literature. As Sartre explains, existentialism “affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity.”\(^\text{33}\) Because of this, the diary novel, as Sartre’s own La Nausée, Onetti’s El pozo, and Bellow’s Dangling Man demonstrate, provides a suitable form for exploring the consequences of such a statement. The confessions and observations that are narrated in these fictional diaries emerge only through the narrators’ changing perceptions, which, as Bakthin points out, are inevitably influenced by their complex social environments. As such, the constructions of reality that these works offer stress the unstable and constructed nature of a person’s understanding of both the outside world and the self.

The complex subjectivity of diary novel’s protagonists places the reader in a position of uncertainty, as well. Indeed, the genre of the diary novel in part appeals to existentialist writers because, as Onetti, Bellow, and Sartre demonstrate, it allows them to guide the reader’s experience of their texts by deliberately blurring the distinction between truth and fiction.\(^\text{34}\) With its fragmented structure, seemingly unedited style, and sense of immediacy, the diary novel often leads the reader to question not only the veracity of the diary entries themselves but also the overall capacity of humans to interpret their own experiences and apprehend human existence. As it allows writers to explore the concepts of writing and reading as epistemology, this genre is


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{34}\) For more information on the diary novel as a genre, see Lorna Martens, *The Diary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Porter Abbott, *Diary Fiction: Writing as Action*. 
thus a perfect vehicle for existentialist theories, which seek to show how meaning is ultimately constructed and never a given.

The “second-hand” experience that readers acquire as they read these diaries allows them to grasp the ontological and social implications that these personal narratives indirectly address. However, before readers are able to see the links between the narrators’ personal confessions and society, they are given an initial impression of sincerity and transparency that is necessary for subsequently revealing these implications. Thus, following Roquentin, Linacero and Joseph also stress the fact that they are trying to “écrire au courant de la plume; sans chercher les mots” (“follow the pen, without looking for words”). Linacero, for instance, starts his narrative by merely describing his room, which he seems to have just noticed: “Hace un rato me estaba paseando por el cuarto y se me ocurrió de golpe que lo veía por primera vez. Hay dos catres, sillas despatarradas y sin asiento, diarios tostados de sol, viejos de meses, clavados en la ventana en lugar de los vidrios” (“Earlier on I was walking round the room and it suddenly occurred to me I was seeing it for the first time. There are two beds, bandy-legged chairs with no seats, month-old newspapers browned by the sun and nailed to the window in place of panes of glass”). By starting his narration in medias res, with the words “hace un rato” (“a while ago”), Onetti allows the reader to become a spectator of his protagonist’s consciousness in process, thereby leading the reader to trust the veracity of the diary entries, at least initially.

Similarly, in Dangling Man, Joseph’s description of his routine and environment is intended to evoke an impression of intimacy between the reader and the narrator that is necessary to guide the reader’s experience of Bellow’s novel. For example, after briefly referring to the origin of his “dangling” condition, Joseph darts back to the present: “I sit idle in my room,

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35 Sartre, La Nausée, 87; Nausea, 56.
36 Onetti, El pozo, 7; The Pit, 3.
anticipating the minor crises of the day, the maid’s knock, the appearance of the postman, programs on the radio, and the sure, cyclical distress of certain thoughts.” Thus, Joseph’s monotonous routine and deeper concerns are rendered visible for the reader, who eventually gains important insights into the social conditions that affect Joseph’s life through the protagonist’s fragmentary narration.

La Nausée’s beginning also produces an illusion of intimacy with the reader that Sartre later shatters throughout the narration. As Sartre has fictional editors introduce Roquentin’s diary, his novel takes the appearance of a found manuscript, which increases its apparent authenticity. The editors, in fact, claim to have found Roquentin’s diary in a pile of documents and explain that they decided to publish the diary without any modifications. The first few pages offer the reader a series of undated fragments, in which the protagonist provides a false start for his diary. This false start is meant to emphasize the apparent sincerity and sense of immediacy of Roquentin’s text. Roquentin’s attempts to put down on paper his thoughts regarding what he observes and what happens to him further produce an impression of truthfulness. Early in the novel, for instance, he writes, “[c]e qu’il y a de curieux, c’est que je ne suis pas du tout disposé à me croire fou, je vois même avec évidence que je ne le suis pas: tous ces changements concernent les objets. Au moins c’est ce dont je voudrais être sûr” (“[t]he strangest thing is that I am not at all inclined to call myself insane, I clearly see that I am not: all these changes concern objects. At least, that is what I’d like to be sure of”). In this way, Roquentin’s writing is initially presented as a conscious attempt to come to terms with a phenomenon that only seems to concern the outside world. However, Roquentin’s personal experiences and thoughts, as readers eventually come to understand, concern human beings in general. The apparent sense of

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37 Bellow, Dangling Man, 12.
38 Sartre, La Nausée, 14; Nausea, 2.
immediacy and the impression of sincerity that the diaries evoke, thus, are employed to explore the relationship between the individual and the collective and also to shed light on the social circumstances that these diaries seek to address indirectly.

In order to reveal how the protagonists’ diaries are in fact discourses about society and, more broadly, about human existence, the reader is progressively led to a position of doubt. As the narrators change their minds and contradict themselves throughout their entries, their claims to sincerity become problematic. Very often, as they write down their thoughts and impressions, Linacero, Joseph, and Roquentin discuss the limitations of language as a means of expression and manifest their concerns about narrative styles and techniques. For instance, in El pozo, as Linacero points out early in his diary, the protagonist makes a conscious decision to alternate the use of the synonyms “choza” (“hut”) and “cabaña” (“cabin”) in order to “evitar un estilo pobre” (“avoid an impoverished style”). Joseph also discusses his interest in literature and metaphorical language and, twice in the novel, sets up imaginary conversations with the “Spirit of Alternatives,” his alter ego, or imaginary Doppelgänger. Such artifices, which are typical of these diaries, further blur the fine line between truth and fiction. In doing so, they question the possibilities of literature as “sincerity” and as epistemology.

As readers start to focus on the “literariness” of the narrators’ personal confessions, the metaphorical, ontological, and social character of the protagonists’ malaise becomes evident. These diaries, in fact, comply with Sartre’s description of the social role of literature, which is to offer to human beings, who “[live] in the midst of images, […] a critical image of [themselves].” When examined as symptoms of their respective historical contexts, the descriptions of alienation and existential angst that abound in these diaries offer insightful

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39 Onetti, El pozo, 15; The Pit, 8.
critiques of their societies. Indeed, Onetti, Bellow, and Sartre shed light on the various ways in which Uruguay, Argentina, France, and the U.S. alienated their citizens politically, economically, and socially. In the U.S. and the River Plate, in particular, these diaries also indicate the extent to which these nations did not fulfill many of the expectations associated with conceptual constructions of America. Thus, as they critically assess their countries’ transmutations into “alien nations,” Linacero’s, Roquentin’s, and Joseph’s diary entries establish the theme of metaphorical homelessness as a literary topos of twentieth-century existentialist literature.

**Alienation and the Collective**

In their novels, Onetti, Sartre, and Bellow employ homelessness metaphorically to elucidate the diverse causes of alienation that affect their respective nations. Through the protagonists’ alienation, these writers show why, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, it is no longer possible to represent a traditional concept of home.41 As the protagonists become estranged in their respective life worlds, their alienation indicates the multiple ways in which their surroundings are transforming themselves. Indeed, Linacero, Joseph, and Roquentin perceive their homes as a source of oppression, violence, and discrimination, whether on grounds of origin, gender, social status, religious beliefs, or political convictions. In Saul Bellow’s novel, for instance, not only Joseph but also American society in general is represented as “dangling.” Joseph’s diary, then, depicts that status of an entire generation. As he realizes, “whether I liked it or not, they were my generation, my society, my world. We were figures of the same plot, eternally fixed together. I was aware, also, that their existence, just as it was, made mine

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41 Where home is a place of origin or refuge that shelters and protects its inhabitants.
possible.” As Joseph’s comment suggests, his own life may indeed be read as a symptom of his times. In this light, his decision to document his “state of demoralization” designates his journal as an instrument to examine the drastic changes in USAmerican society during the early twentieth century.

Through his narrator’s eyes and isolation, Sartre also voices his own impressions and concerns regarding the ontological impossibility of feeling at home. Indeed, in La Nausée, although Sartre discusses historical facts and societal elements that increase alienation, he focuses on alienation and existential angst as ontological phenomena. As a young intellectual who suffers from extreme loneliness, Roquentin attempts to comprehend the source of his anguish, which he identifies as the outside world. In many of his entries, he describes himself as an outsider who is not a part of the society that he internally disdains: “Moi je vis seul, entièrement seul. Je ne parle à personne, jamais; je ne reçois rien, je ne donne rien” (“I live alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing”). Also, his self-awareness and inability to communicate with others heighten his feeling of non-belonging. As Roquentin states, “[l]es gens qui vivent en société ont appris à se voir, dans les glaces, tels qu’ils apparaissent à leurs amis. Je n’ai pas d’amis: est-ce pour cela que ma chair est si nue?” (“[p]eople who live in society have learned how to see themselves in mirrors as they appear to their friends. I have no friends. Is that why my flesh is so naked?”). Roquentin’s sensibility and vulnerability lead him to withdraw from society. As a result, he devotes most of his writing to observations of his surroundings and other people. Sartre’s emphasis on ontology, then, reveals a key contrast with Bellow’s existentialism (and, by extension, with American

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42 Bellow, Dangling Man, 25.
43 Ibid., 9.
44 Sartre, La Nausée, 21; Nausea, 6.
existentialism), which focuses on transcending alienation and is consequently less grim than Sartre’s.

Conversely, in *El pozo*, through Linacero’s reflections on River Plate literature and history, Onetti questions the concept of home as he represents the adverse economic, political, and cultural conditions suffered in early twentieth-century Argentina and Uruguay. For instance, Linacero often describes his inability to feel at home in a place where his existence is regarded as superfluous. Indeed, Linacero even sees himself as “un hombre solitario que fuma en un sitio cualquiera de la ciudad” (“a lonely man having a smoke in some old corner of the city”). In addition, Linacero’s diary often emphasizes Onetti’s belief that there is no national Uruguayan literature or cultural tradition for writers to build on in the River Plate. As Linacero claims, “[d]etras de nosotros no hay nada. Un gacho, dos gauchos, treinta y tres gauchos” (“[w]e’ve nothing behind us. One gaucho, two gauchos, thirty-three gauchos”). Linacero’s loneliness and disorientation, then, illustrate the general disillusionment of Uruguayans and Argentinians during the 1930s as a result of the harsh political, cultural, and economic circumstances that increased people’s disenchantment and alienation.

46 In the 1930s, for instance, while Juan Carlos Onetti was writing *El pozo*, Uruguay was under the dictatorial rule of Gabriel Terra, who organized a coup d’etat in 1931. Argentina, where Onetti lived during many years of his life, was also going through a series of dictatorial regimes and illegitimate governments which came to be known as “La década infame” (1930-1943), which started with José Félix Uriburu’s coup d’etat in 1930. Moreover, after World War I, as Kadir points out, “[t]he youth of [the] twin cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo underwent a […] process of disillusionment and disorientation” (Kadir, Onetti, 16). The impact of mass migration from Europe into Uruguay and Argentina and other international events, such as the Spanish Civil War and General Francisco Franco’s dictatorship, also increased this generation’s disappointment with their own countries and the world in general.

47 The concept of human existence as “superfluous,” also a very common theme in existentialist literature, finds its literary roots in Russian 19th century literature, where the “superfluous man,” whose name was introduced in the title of Ivan Turgenev’s novel *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850), became a very popular literary character. Onetti, *El pozo*, 45; *The Pit*, 28.

48 When he joined *Marcha*, Onetti repeatedly manifested his concern with the nonexistence of a literary tradition in Uruguay. For more information, see: Mirian Pino, “El semanario Marcha de Uruguay: Una genealogía de la crítica de la cultura en América Latina.”

As the protagonists of *La Nausée, Dangling Man*, and *El pozo* examine and search for a new concept of home, their approaches to surrealist and psychoanalytic insights, the function of the past, the role of the “other,” ontological speculations, capitalism, and political action set precedents for the development of existentialist trends in US American, French, and River Plate literatures. In *El pozo*, for instance, Linacero’s dreams anticipate an interest in psychoanalysis and Surrealism that is typical of River Plate existentialist literature. Through his actual dreams and constant daydreaming, the protagonist attempts to create a world that better satisfies the needs that his actual home fails to fulfill. This is a recurring trope in Onetti’s work; many critics have discussed the relevance of dreams in his first-published novel. In “Origen de un novelista y de una generación literaria,” for instance, Angel Rama stresses Linacero’s “calidad de soñador” (“dreamer quality”) and the overall significance of dreams in Onetti’s work. Linacero’s reverie, which is also a consequence of his alienation, does indeed occupy a fundamental place in his narration.

Onetti’s descriptions of Linacero’s “aventuras” (“adventures”) provide the reader with psychological insights into Linacero’s conscious and unconscious states of mind. For instance, his adventure in the Netherlands reveals more about the way Linacero feels about his own nation and his present emotional state than about his understanding of the Netherlands, per se. In this story, which Linacero makes up entirely, “[t]odo va bien, pero yo no soy feliz. Me doy cuenta de golpe, ¿entendés?, que estoy en un país que no conozco, donde siempre está lloviendo y no puedo hablar con nadie” (“[i]t’s all OK, but I’m not happy. I suddenly realize, do you follow me?”

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51 Rama, “Origen de un novelista, 83.
52 Dreams constitute crucial moments in Linacero’s narration. They become as significant as or even more significant than “real” events. Not only do they provide insights into the narrator’s consciousness, but they also become the basis for the formation of myths and worlds where the fantastic and the real are inseparable. Because of this oniric quality, Onetti’s *El pozo* has been considered by many critics a precursor of magic realism.
That I’m in an unknown country, where it’s always raining and I can’t talk to anybody”).\(^{53}\) This description highlights Linacero’s omnipresent feelings of non-belonging and inability to communicate with other people, which are here compared to the experience of being in a foreign country whose language one does not speak or understand. The theme of metaphorical homelessness, then, resurfaces in Linacero’s daydreaming to emphasize the inaccessibility of feeling at home in early twentieth-century Uruguay. This strategy persists in later River Plate existentialist works, as we shall see in the next chapters: the protagonists’ dreams, imagination, and incursions into the fantastic act as windows into the collective unconscious and as appropriate vehicles for social critique.

Through their representations of failed relationships with the opposite gender, Bellow, Onetti, and Sartre address the impact of the past and the “other” on the notion of home in ways that also anticipate recurrent themes in French, U.S., and River Plate existentialist literatures. Most specifically, the protagonists’ failed marriages reveal how these authors understand the relation between the past and the possibility to transcend alienation through the “other.” In *El pozo*, Eladio Linacero confesses that he once felt very close to Cecilia, his ex-wife, but that his feelings for her have faded away. According to Linacero, “[e]l amor es maravilloso y absurdo, e, incomprensiblemente, visita a cualquier clase de almas. Pero la gente absurda y maravillosa no abunda; y las que lo son, es por poco tiempo, en la primera juventud. Después comienzan a aceptar y se pierden” (“[l]ove is wonderful and absurd and visits all kinds of souls. But wonderful, absurd people are not easy to find; and those who are, it doesn’t last for very long, just their first youth. Later they start to accept things and they’re done for”).\(^{54}\) However, Linacero’s stated disbelief in love contrasts his constant preoccupation with his inability to

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54 Ibid., 28; 16.
understand why his marriage actually ended. Linacero’s various reflections on his failed marriage and his inability to move on after his divorce reveal an approach to the past that is typical of River Plate existentialist writers. Indeed, in many Uruguayan and Argentine works, understanding the past constitutes a necessary step for modifying the present. In addition, the conflict between Linacero’s failed relationship with Cecilia and his hope and desire to love someone else one day reveals another common trend among River Plate existentialists: the belief that through the “other” human beings might transcend alienation. In fact, this same belief leads Linacero to wake up his ex-wife, in the middle of the night, in order to recreate a scene he has imagined, a scene that, he thinks, will allow him to “atrapar el pasado y la Ceci de entonces” (“catch the past with Ceci as she was”).

Conversely, Joseph’s ambivalent feelings towards the past and his wife emphasize the more optimistic ethos that characterizes USAmerican existentialism. In his diary, Joseph remembers nostalgically the moments in which he felt emotionally connected to his wife and did not experience such utter loneliness. Like Linacero, Joseph confesses that his relationship with his wife Iva once provided him with joy. According to him, “[b]abble, tedium, and all the rest were to be expected; they came with every marriage.” Joseph’s desire to remain with his wife despite his lack of love towards her goes hand in hand with his hope that joining the army will help him transcend alienation. As he focuses on the life he might yet build, both with his wife and as a soldier, Joseph’s emphasis on the future anticipates a more optimistic approach to alienation and existential angst that is typical of U.S. existentialism. Because of this general hopefulness, as we shall see in chapter II, U.S. existentialist writers often base their central

55 Ibid., 31; 18.
56 Bellow, Dangling Man, 22.
existentialist quests on transcending anguish, searching for meaning, and emphasizing the prospect of a better future.

In Sartre’s novel, Roquentin’s relationship with his ex-wife Anny also reveals traits common among French existentialists: the focus on the present and the ontological quality of alienation. According to Roquentin, his marriage ended because neither he nor Anny could accept that it was impossible to recuperate the feelings that they once felt for each other. When they meet after their divorce, Anny tells Roquentin, “[j]’ai besoin que tu existe et que tu ne changes pas” (“I need you to exist and not to change”). As they realize that it is not possible to recreate their memories and bring to life the feelings that they once shared, Anny and Roquentin come to understand that the past is unimportant and so is the future. In Sartre’s view, then, since the present defines human existence, individuals change constantly, thereby increasing the difficulty of communing with others. In this way, Sartre emphasizes an ontological understanding of alienation that later becomes a key feature of his literature and philosophy, as well as a typical strand of French existentialist literature.

In this vein, Bellow, Sartre, and Onetti elucidate the diverse causes of alienation that affect their respective countries at the same time that they help establish a national existentialist literature. As the narrators realize nostalgically that they must change their understanding of the term home if they ever intend to transcend their loneliness, their search for a new concept of home prompts a critical examination of capitalism, which Bellow, Sartre, and Onetti consider a central cause of alienation. Along with this examination, the protagonists’ search inevitably leads them to consider Communism as an alternative to capitalism. Ultimately, their quest for ways to counteract the effects of capitalism results in a shared query into the possibilities of individual and collective political action.

Sartre, *La Nausée*, 195; *Nausea*, 137.
Existentialism and Political Action

As Linacero, Roquentin, and Joseph examine capitalism, bourgeois society, and Communism in an attempt to construct a new notion of home, their opinions and approaches to individual and collective political action also anticipate typical trends in U.S., French, and River Plate existentialist literatures. Bellow’s, Sartre’s, and Onetti’s novels illustrate how the concepts of home and nation (and their representations) have changed since the beginning of the twentieth century as a consequence of modernity and industrialization. Edward Said’s, Georg Lukács’s, and Theodor Adorno’s theories, which tackle the same subjects, can help us better understand the contexts of the representations of home that prevail in these novels as well as their functions. In “Reflections on Exile,” Said argues that “homes are always provisional,” and “[b]orders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons.”

This insight is also explored in El pozo, Dangling Man, and La Nausée, where the protagonists’ life worlds emerge as sources of dread and anxiety that confine (and never provide shelter for) the narrators. Furthermore, as Said’s discussion of Georg Lukács’s The Theory of the Novel (1920) reveals, in the Western tradition the novel itself constitutes a search for a home grounded in the experience of a “changing society in which an itinerant and disinherited hero or heroine seeks to construct a new world that somewhat resembles an old one left behind forever.” Indeed, Lukács compares the modern novel to the classical epic and argues that “the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become the homeless.” Moreover, Lukács’ believes that the protagonist represents

60 Ibid., 41. Furthermore, as Sartre’s, Onetti’s, and Bellow’s works evidence, the homeless also find an adequate form of representation in the existentialist diary novel. Indeed, since according to Lukács the novel’s protagonist
“never an individual” but always “the destiny of a community.”

In light of this insight, Sartre’s, Onetti’s, and Bellow’s representations of metaphorical homelessness—a condition that was more than metaphorical for Onetti, as, certainly, for Said—may then be studied as reflections or anticipations of the destinies of the communities where these works emerged.

Theodor Adorno’s Minima Moralia. Reflections from a Damaged Life (1951) confirms many of the observations that Bellow, Onetti, and Sartre introduce in their works and elucidates further the role of the search for home in their novels. Written during World War II, while Adorno was exiled in the United States, Minima Moralia posits that an honest life is no longer possible in the modern inhuman society. Adorno argues that twentieth-century culture, politics, social structures, and human interaction, among other things, indicate how human beings have become complicit with inhuman acts. As he states, “[a]ll of the playing along, all of the humanity of interaction and participation is the mere mask of the tacit acceptance of inhumanity.” Thus, the fact that society has become not only accustomed to inhumanity but also, to a great extent, contaminated by it, convinces Adorno that something fundamental has gone wrong in Western society.

Moreover, Adorno observes how this acceptance of inhumanity interferes with private life in multiple ways. For instance, he argues that the construction of what we once conceived as a home is no longer possible:

How things are going for private life today is made evident by its arena [Schauplatz]. Actually one can no longer dwell any longer. The traditional

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becomes a “seeke[r]” (Ibid., 60) and “the product of estrangement from the outside world” (Ibid., 66), the diary form provides an ideal means to represent his/her state of demoralization.

61 Ibid., 66.
62 Published in the original German as Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben (1951).
dwellings, in which we grew up, have taken on the aspect of something unbearable: every mark of comfort therein is paid for with the betrayal of cognition [*Erkenntnis*]; every trace of security, with the stuffy community of interest of the family. The newly functionalized ones, constructed as a *tabula rasa* [Latin: blank slate], are cases made by technical experts for philistines, or factory sites which have strayed into the sphere of consumption, without any relation to the dweller: they slap the longing for an independent existence, which anyway no longer exists, in the face. 

The dominant form of commodified home that Adorno describes in this passage resurfaces in Bellow’s, Onetti’s, and Sartre’s novels, where capitalism is examined as a major cause of alienation.

Through their protagonists’ comments on bourgeois society and capitalist economy, these authors are able to suggest that capitalism may well be responsible for rendering individuals, as well as an entire nation, “alien.” Indeed, in the same vein as Adorno, Bellow reveals in *Dangling Man* how USAmerican society has increasingly grown accustomed to inhumanity and how the capitalist economy negatively affects the notion of home. Although Joseph is Canadian and presumably Jewish, like Bellow himself, he is portrayed as a representative of a class and generation that is seen as a disposable, rather than integral, part of society. Moreover, Chicago,

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65 In the same vein as Onetti, Bellow, and Sartre, Adorno further explains how bourgeois society and capitalism are symptomatic of the move towards inhumanity. As he examines the negative impact of capitalism and its “senselessness” (Ibid., “Aphorism 15,” http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/MinimaMoralia.html) on private life and society as a whole, Adorno extends the logic of late capitalism to private life and beyond. Capitalism, then, also emerges as a major cause of alienation, a force that increases people’s desire to exert power and control over others. As Adorno states, “[t]he Fascist regimes of the first half of the 20th century have absurdly stabilized an obsolete economic form, multiplying the terror and misery the latter required for its continued preservation, now that its senselessness is plain as day. Private life however is also marked by this. Along with the reach of administration, the asphyxiating social order of the private, the particularism of interests, the long since obsolete form of the family, the right of property and its reflection in the character have all been shored up once more. But with a bad conscience, the barely disguised consciousness of untruth. […] The bourgeoisie live on like ghosts who threaten catastrophe” (Ibid., “Aphorism 15,” http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/MinimaMoralia.html).
the city where Joseph lives, is described as the epitome of inhumanity. According to Joseph, in Chicago one can observe “the lack of [the] human in the too-human” and how “[people] have easily accustomed [them]selves to slaughter.” Joseph also criticizes USAmerican society for its unequal distribution of wealth and its consumerism, as well as its indifference and lack of concern for other human beings. In this way, throughout his narration, Joseph ironically reveals the consequences of capitalism as he describes Chicago, a city where, “[f]or every need there is an entrepreneur, by a marvelous providence. You can find a man to bury your dog, rub your back, teach you Swahili, read your horoscope, murder your competitor. In the megapolis, all this is possible.”

Similarly, Linacero and Roquentin often associate capitalism with the changing notion of home and their utter alienation. Linacero documents his feelings of disgust towards bourgeois society at the same time that he explores its impact on the concept of home. In his view, bourgeois society is “despicable” and “inútil” (“contemptible” and “useless”) and gathers up “[t]odos los vicios de que pueden despojarse las demás clases” (“all the vices cast off by the other classes”). Likewise, according to Roquentin, bourgeois society renders human interaction artificial and despicable. For instance, after a long conversation with the Autodidacte (the Self-Taught Man), Roquentin confesses that a young couple sitting at a café playing the roles of lovers and “représentants de la jeunesse” (“representatives of youth”) annoy him profoundly. Roquentin considers their gestures, words, and actions and concludes that they seem rehearsed. Likewise, he criticizes how people attempt to agree on any given topic of conversation, a

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66 Bellow, Dangling Man, 153.
67 Ibid., 83.
68 Ibid., 110.
69 Onetti, El pozo, 38; The Pit, 23.
70 Ibid., 38; 23.
71 Sartre, La Nausée, 176; Nausea, 123.
behavior that he attributes, like the lovers’, to the bourgeois values that he despises. Finally, the
figure of the Self-Taught Man illustrates Sartre’s critique of the commodification of knowledge.
The *Autodidacte*’s attempt to read every library book in alphabetical order and his defense of
humanism (in which he declares his unconditional love of Man), indicate the extent to which
bourgeois ideologies have invaded every aspect of human life, including philosophy.72

As a counterpoint to capitalism, Bellow, Onetti, and Sartre examine Communism in ways
that anticipate typical approaches to individual and collective political action in later U.S.,
French, and River Plate existentialist literatures. Joseph’s skeptical, critical attitude towards
Communism and his ambiguous attraction to leftist ideologies reveal a typical treatment of
collective action in U.S. existentialist novels. Furthermore, Joseph’s interest and subsequent
dismissal of Communism parallel Saul Bellow’s own disillusionment with the Communist party.
Bellow became acquainted with Communist circles starting 1938, when he began to work on the
Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writer’s Project. Established in the United States
in 1935 under Harry Hopkins as part of the New Deal struggle against the Great Depression, the
WPA provided jobs for unemployed writers, editors, artists, and researchers.73 Richard Wright,
Jack Conroy, and Nelson Algren were also members of the Chicago branch attended by Bellow.

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72 The destructive consequences of capitalism and the antagonistic relationships among human beings that they
produce also inform Jean-Paul Sartre’s theories on the roles of the “other,” which are indebted to G. W. F. Hegel
and Karl Marx. According to these theorists, alienation is the product of an individual’s relationship with other
human beings. It is the result of the interaction between a subject and an object (where a self may be perceived by
other people as an object, or one may see others as objects). Pietro Chiodi’s *Sartre and Marxism* helps clarify
Sartre’s, Marx’s, and Hegel’s distinct approaches to alienation. Indeed, as Chiodi explains, whereas for Hegel
alienation must be suppressed, but alienation and the subject/object relation coincide, the suppression of alienation
necessitates the suppression of the relation. According to Marx, conversely, even if the suppression of alienation is
also necessary, the relation between subject and object cannot be eliminated. However, historical conditioning,
which produces alienation and is a constant, can be modified. Sartre’s theory on alienation, like Hegel’s and Marx’s,
also identifies alienation with the subject/object relation, but implies that alienation cannot be eliminated (*Sartre and
Marxism*, trans. Kate Soper [Hassocks: Harvester Press Limited, 1976], x). In fact, although he incorporates the
Marxist concept of historical conditioning, Sartre still rejects “scholastic Marxism” as he finds that “its theory of
alienation renders de-alienation ‘too easy’ in that it makes the effect simply of economic change” (Ibid., xii).
Because of its alleged Communist activity, the program became a major concern for the U.S. Congress, which terminated the WPA in 1943 (EAS). During the 1930s, Bellow also became acquainted with the leading contributors of Partisan Review, who, according to Bellow himself, were Marxists. Although Bellow considered himself a Trotskyist during his early years, he preferred not to identify with the Communist Party.

In Dangling Man, Bellow voices his negative opinion of the Communist party through Joseph’s anecdotes. For instance, Joseph narrates a story about a time he ran into a Communist ex-comrade named Jimmy, who refused to greet him. He tells Myron, a friend, that “[Jimmy’s] party doesn’t want him to think, but to follow its discipline. So there you are. Because it’s supposed to be a revolutionary party. That’s what’s offending me. When a man obeys an order like that he’s helping to abolish freedom and begin tyranny.” Furthermore, Joseph finds that the Communist party is not only tyrannical but also ineffective. He states, “[b]y the time I got out [of the Communist party] I realized that any hospital nurse did more with one bedpan for le genre humain than they did with their entire organization.” As a result, Joseph confesses that he “changed [his] mind about redoing the world from top to bottom à la Karl Marx and decided in favor of bandaging a few sores at a time.”

In Onetti’s novel, Linacero is likewise ambivalent about Communism. Like Joseph, Linacero attends at least one of the party’s meetings with his friend Lázaro. According to Linacero, “[t]rataba de convencerme usando argumentos que yo conocía desde hace veinte años, que hace veinte años me hastiaron para siempre” (“[h]e tried to persuade me by using arguments

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75 EAS, “Federal Arts Projects.”
76 Bellow, Dangling Man, 34.
77 Ibid., 34.
78 Ibid., 34-35.
I had been familiar with for twenty years and which I had enough of twenty years ago”).

Linacero does not approve of the party, which he sees as corrupt: “Hay de todo;” he states, “algunos que se acercaron al movimiento para que el prestigio de la lucha revolucionaria o como quiera llamarse se reflejara un poco más en sus maravillosos poemas. Otros, sencillamente, para divertirse con las muchachas estudiantes que sufrían, generosamente, del sarampión antiburgués de la adolescencia” (“There’s a bit of everything; some who have joined the movement so the glory of the revolutionary struggle, or however you want to call it, would be faintly reflected in their wonderful poems. Others quite simply wanted to have a good time with the female students who had been smitten by a generous attack of the anti-bourgeois rash of adolescence”). Conversely, Linacero believes that the party also includes people who might be able to make a difference:

Conocí mucha gente, obreros, gente de los frigoríficos, aporreada por la vida, perseguida por la desgracia de manera implacable, elevándose sobre la propia miseria de sus vidas para pensar y actuar en relación a todos los pobres del mundo… [L]a gente del pueblo, la que es pueblo de manera legítima, los pobres, los hijos de pobres, nietos de pobres, tienen siempre algo esencial incontaminado, algo hecho de pureza, infantil, candoroso, recio, leal, con lo que siempre es posible contar en las circunstancias graves de la vida. […] Queda la esperanza de que, aquí y en cualquier parte del mundo, cuando las cosas vayan en serio, la primera precaución de los obreros sea desembarazarse, de manera definitiva, de toda esa morralla [los partidos revolucionarios].

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79 Onetti, El pozo, 37; The Pit, 23.
80 Ibid., 38; 24.
[I met lots of people, workers, people from the cold-stores, crushed by life, pursued by implacable misfortune, rising above the very poverty of their lives to think and act in relation to the poor throughout the world. […] The real people, the legitimate people, the poor, children of the poor, grandchildren of the poor, always have something vital, unpolluted, something pure, childish, naïve, sturdy, loyal, that you can always rely on in the most difficult of life’s circumstances. […] We can only hope, here and anywhere else in the world, when things get serious, that the workers’ first step will be to rid themselves of the whole crew [revolutionary parties] for good.]81

Thus, in El pozo, in spite of Linacro’s pessimism and cynicism, Onetti allows the protagonist to consider the possibility of envisaging a better future through the direct intervention of the “legitimate people:” the working class. In this way, Onetti’s approach to Communism anticipates the interest in organized political action and leftist ideologies that recur in later River Plate existentialist works.

Though Sartre’s novel does not focus on political action or liberation (a topic which would come to preoccupy him later), his ambivalent attitude towards Communism still surfaces in La Nausée. Through Roquentin’s conversations with the Autodidacte, Sartre voices his opinion that scholastic ideologies are problematic at the same time that he comments on the crucial role of individual action and freedom. As Raymond Aron explains in Marxism and the Existentialists, even though Sartre demonstrated an “anti-anti Communism,” he did not consider himself a Communist. Indeed, “[i]n 1947 Sartre tried to form an organization which

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81 Ibid., 37-38; 23-24.
would have fallen somewhere between Communism, which was unacceptable to free minds, and a bourgeois type of socialism, which was too prosaic to satisfy a revolutionary desire.\textsuperscript{83}

Although Sartre does not center his narrative on the role of political action, the proposed solutions to Roquentin’s suffering anticipate yet another typical interest of French existentialist writers: the potential of art and literature to transcend alienation. As Roquentin listens to a Negro singer, he realizes that art, literature, and music may be able to dissolve feelings of nausea.\textsuperscript{84} Towards the end of the novel, then, Roquentin decides to become a writer in an attempt to overcome his feelings. In this way, in \textit{La Nausée}, Sartre proposes that art, both as concept and as practice, offers individuals an arena for coping with existential angst and alienation. In later novels, plays, and theoretical works, such as \textit{Critique de la Raison Dialectique}\textsuperscript{85} (1960; [\textit{Critique of Dialectical Reason}]), Sartre will attempt to reconcile his interest in individual action with his growing concern with political activism and collective action.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{84} Sartre, \textit{La Nausée}, 41; \textit{Nausea}, 22.
\textsuperscript{85} In his \textit{Critique}, Sartre attempts to supply Marxism with an existential background and theorizes the structure of human existence as a “praxis project.” According to Sartre, “praxis is directly revealed by its end: the future determination of the field of possibilities is posited at the outset by a projective transcendence (dépassement) of material circumstances, that is to say, by a project; at each moment of the action, the agent produces himself in a particular posture, accompanied by a specific effort in accordance with present givens in the light of the future objective” (\textit{Critique of Dialectical Reason}, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith [London: Verso Books, 2004], 549). Sartre’s praxis project, a notion that he developed based on both on his former concept of “l’être-pour-soi” and Marxism, constitutes Sartre’s proposition to transcend alienation, at least momentarily, both as individuals and as a collective. In \textit{L’Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)}, Sartre makes a distinction between “l’être-en-soi” (being-in-itself) and “l’être-pour-soi” (being-for-oneself). These notions, which are based on Martin Heidegger’s theories on being and \textit{Dasein}, as presented in \textit{Sein und Zeit} (1927, \textit{Being and Time}), contrast plain, purposeless existence, whether passive or active (“l’être-en-soi”) with a meaningful existence, characterized by consciousness and freedom (“l’être-pour-soi”). This second notion, which emphasizes the creation of meaning through choice-making, is very close to the notion of “praxis project,” which highlights the importance of the future objective, both on an individual and a collective level. In the River Plate region, most noticeably, and in Latin America in general, Sartre’s \textit{Critique} became a very influential work in post-colonial studies after its publication in 1960. Indeed, as Enrique Dussel explains in \textit{Underside of Modernity: APEL, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation}, Sartre’s work became very popular in the 1960s, when “Liberation Philosophy emerged in Latin America; in Argentina at first, but slowly in the entire continent” (\textit{Underside of Modernity: APEL, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation}, trans. Eduardo Mendieta [New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996], 2). Indeed, Sartre’s attempt to combine existentialism and Marxism in the \textit{Critique} and his concept of both individual and collective praxis projects found a welcoming audience among Latin American intellectuals and activists. His ambivalent attitude towards Communism, however, decreased his works’ appeal and popularity in the United States of America, most noticeably among New York intellectuals.
Finally, the ending of *Dangling Man* also sets a precedent for the focus on hope, future possibilities, and even spirituality that is typical of U.S. existentialist literature. As Joseph trusts that his life will gain new meaning once he joins the army, he accepts the need to “give [him]self up.”\(^{86}\) In fact, going to war offers Joseph an opportunity to put an end to his state of suspension at the same time that it allows him to hope that the future might “teach [him], by violence, what [he] ha[s] been unable to learn during those months in the room.”\(^{87}\) The typical American existentialist focus on an uncertain future and its many possibilities as well as the belief in the temporary character of alienation are anticipated through the thoughts and decisions of Bellow’s protagonist.

In these three “romans citadins,”\(^ {88}\) which describe the metropolis as a major cause of alienation, metaphorically homeless narrators describe their hometowns as adverse sites. As representatives of their own generations, Joseph, Roquentin, and Linacero explain that they are no longer recognizable as an integral part of the phantasmagorical, nightmarish, incoherent, disorienting towns they inhabit. In this way, Sartre’s, Onetti’s, and Bellow’s diary novels simultaneously dramatize alienation as undesired isolation, as a condition that instills creativity, and as an inevitable state. The feelings of anxiety and alienation that the protagonists experience cause them to attempt to find relief through new concepts of home. The different ways in which they approach this search and the solutions that they indirectly propose become precedents for the diverse existentialist traditions in the U.S., France, and the River Plate.

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86 Bellow, *Dangling Man*, 183.
87 Ibid., 191.
88 Sylvia Molloy, *La diffusion de la littérature hispanoaméricaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 193. Sylvia Molloy explains that in France, after World War II, there was a shift in interest with regard to the content of Hispanic American novels. They began to be taken more seriously and were reviewed with considerable interest. A certain degree of “exoticism” ceased to be a requirement. Because of this change, numerous urban novels, or, as Molloy puts it “romans citadins” (“city novels”) were translated into French.
During the twentieth century, existentialist literature has played a fundamental role in determining the impact of modernization, migration, and political instability on the notions of home and self. Because of this phenomenon, Onetti, Bellow, and Sartre attempted to critically assess this impact in order to envision a notion of home that could fulfill their generations’ needs. In America, in particular, writers of existentialist literature such as Julio Cortázar, Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, and Ernesto Sábato, whose works I analyze in the next chapter, further attempted to revise the notion of home both from national and American hemispheric perspectives. Indeed, through their literary works and conversations, these American writers sought to elaborate social and historical diagnoses and suggest possible means for inducing change in the increasingly existentialist American continents that they envisioned and inhabited.
Chapter II:  
American Existentialisms

America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself,—perhaps in a contest between North and South America. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe.

G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*.¹

America is a vast conspiracy to make you happy.

John Updike, “How to Love America and Leave it at the Same Time.”²

The American hemisphere was a natural locus for the development of existentialist literature due to the disillusionment and unfulfilled expectations that came to characterize this “land of the future” prophesied by Hegel. In this chapter, I take an inter-American approach to examine existentialism as one of the means through which American authors attempt to debunk myths that define America as unique, prosperous, and new. I contend that existentialist writers such as Ralph Ellison (U.S., 1914-1994), Julio Cortázar (Argentina, 1914-1984), Ernesto Sábato (Argentina, 1911- ), and Norman Mailer (U.S., 1923-2007) employ existentialism to contest the notion of America as a land of opportunity while they further establish existentialist trends in River Plate and USAmerican literature. These literary trends, in fact, reveal the social, economic,

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and political transformations that, for many, turned America from a promised land into what John Updike describes as a “conspiracy to make you happy.”

Whether actual or imaginary, America’s differences with Europe, its colonial past, and its history of miscegenation have become the basis for approaches to inter-American studies that I examine and challenge throughout this chapter. For instance, in *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in a Comparative Context*, Earl E. Fitz argues that “[t]heir very real differences notwithstanding, the nations of the New World share enough common history that they can legitimately be studied as a unit, as different manifestations of the Americanism or New Worldism that each presents.” However, as Djelal Kadir contends in “America and Its Studies,” such manifestations can be problematic when scrutinized.

First, if we focus on analyzing expressions of Americanism or New Worldism, we may contribute to reinscribing myths and conceptions of America that by no means reflect these continents’ realities. In addition, by reinstating, for instance, the myth of America as a land of opportunity, we not only reduce the scope of literary criticism but also empower political discourses that are based on such a premise. As Kadir claims, for instance, in the field of American studies,

To arrive at a discriminating and self-critical position by and on America, we will have to persuade those self-differentiating human subjects, including the perennially “new” American Americanists who continually reinforce this illusion.

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3 Although, here Updike most likely refers to the U.S. rather than the American continent as a whole.

4 Earl E. Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World: Inter-American Literature in A Comparative Context* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991), xi. To study the nations of the New World as a unit, Fitz attempts to establish in his work some of the key themes and issues that, in his view, prevail in American literature. On the one hand, Fitz discusses the quest for identity, which leads to the search for cultural, sociological, and political awareness, a new language, and a desire to be innovative and authentic. He also mentions the evolution of solitude as a recurrent motif and the representation of disillusionment, which is the product of the failure of the American dream and the social, political, and economic systems in the New World. On the other hand, Fitz focuses on America’s shared history of “miscegenation” and “colonial past, the relationship between the past and the present, and finally, the conflict between civilization and barbarism.
of novelty, that America is something other than what it deems identical to itself. We must endeavor to demonstrate, theoretically, materially, and through invocation of historical precedent, that the investment in self-differentiation as unique and unilateral entails a necessary violence.\(^5\)

The existentialist literary texts that I analyze in this chapter constitute insightful attempts to shatter this illusion of the novelty and exceptionality of the American continents. Indeed, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*\(^6\) (1952), Ernesto Sábato’s *Sobre héroes y tumbas*\(^7\) (1961; *On Heroes and Tombs*), Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela*\(^8\) (1963; *Hopscotch*), and Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream*\(^9\) (1965) employ the (typically existentialist) theme of the search for authenticity to unmask the myth of America as a promised land. Through their searches, which necessarily involve self-diagnoses (both on a personal and a collective level), the protagonists confront various forms of totalitarianism that have increased people’s alienation, subordination, and general feelings of disenchantment.

In this chapter, I employ the term “totalitarianism” to address two different phenomena. Following Hannah Arendt’s description of totalitarianism as presented in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, I use this word to refer to dictatorial regimes and totalitarian elements in “democratic” governments. According to Arendt, the most common forms of totalitarianism include propaganda, uniformity of the masses, terror, and isolation.\(^10\) In addition, she describes

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totalitarianism as demanding and inducing “total loyalty” and as “the psychological basis for total domination.”11

Second, I would like to employ the term “totalitarianism” to refer to the phenomenon that Julio Cortázar once described as “la insuficiencia de la inteligencia binaria” (“the insufficiency of binary intelligence”) that misses “[l]a existencia interna, la esencia de las cosas” (“the internal existence, the essence of things”).12 Indeed, the novels that I analyze in this chapter very often bring to light the various ways in which rationality and binary thinking have dominated Western culture. They also reveal the dangers inherent in a society controlled by such perilous, overrated forms of thought.

Although Ralph Ellison, Ernesto Sábato, Norman Mailer, and Julio Cortázar rebel against various forms of totalitarianism through their protagonists’ searches for authenticity, they do so in diverse ways that further accentuate the distinctiveness of U.S. and River Plate existentialist literatures. Their novels, which differ greatly in terms of style, use of metaphors, and form, explore the value of psychoanalytic and surrealist techniques and insights as possible means for representing human existence. In fact, as I mentioned in the introduction, the significance of psychoanalysis and Surrealism constitutes a major source of disagreement among existentialists. U.S., French, and River Plate writers tend to consider surrealist and psychoanalytic techniques as either enlightening or futile exercises and, occasionally, as examples of “bad faith.”13 Through their varying approaches to these techniques, U.S. and River Plate writers such as Mailer, Cortázar, Ellison, and Sábato attempt to shatter the illusion of America as prosperous, unique,

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11 Ibid., 323.
12 Cortázar, Rayuela, 416; Hopscotch 419.
13 In L’Être et le néant (1943), Sartre claims that, “[o]n ne subit pas sa mauvaise foi, on n’en est pas infecté, ce n’est pas un état” (“[o]ne does not undergo his bad faith; one is not infected with it; it is not a state”). Thus, Sartre’s concept of “bad faith” reveals how human beings are in fact responsible for what they choose to do and not to do. His theory goes against Freud’s premise that a person’s unconscious and repressed desires may be used to explain (and indirectly justify) his/her actions and decisions. (Jean Paul Sartre, L’Être et le néant [Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1990], 84; Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes [New York: The Routledge, 2001], 89).
and new. At the same time, they offer insights as to how to fight totalitarianism and reveal the significance of existentialism within an American context.  

**Inter-American Existentialist Literature**

In order to examine existentialism as an American phenomenon, we first need to determine which methodological approaches might help us to avoid reinscribing common myths and conceptions about American literature. Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s overview of the common critical approaches to inter-American literature may help us to identify an appropriate method for a comparative study of U.S. and River Plate existentialist literature. In his introduction to *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*, Pérez Firmat defines a “generic approach” as an “attempt to establish a hemispheric context by using as a point of departure a broad, abstract notion of wide applicability.” Conversely, a “genetic approach” brings to light the “causal links among authors and texts.” By combining these two approaches, we may situate and trace the development of River Plate and U.S. literary trends within the context of an ongoing conversation among existentialists. However, this combined approach could very easily restrict our analysis to a study of influences or an examination of American literature as a homogenized unit.

In an attempt to avoid this second danger, the present chapter offers a comparison of four novels that have enjoyed various levels of popularity in the world of academia and beyond. Some

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14 Given its ubiquity on American soil, American existentialist literature deserves more critical attention. Among the few comparative works that discuss both existentialist philosophies and literatures, Walter Kaufmann’s widely read *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, first published in 1956, does not discuss the work of any American writer. Conversely, George Cotkin’s *Existential America*, although centered on the role of existentialism in USAmerican literature and culture, does not discuss its development and reception in other parts of America.


16 Ibid., 3.
of them are canonical works (e.g. Cortázar’s *Rayuela*), while others have been met with far less enthusiasm (e.g. Mailer’s *An American Dream*). Indeed, when *An American Dream* was published, J. J. McAller, one of the first critics to comment on the novel, described it as “deplorable,” “a book calculated to leave all America holding its nose.”\(^{17}\) The decision to include “canonical” works in this chapter is not grounded in a belief that such works might “reflect themes or ideas that are themselves fundamental to our better understanding of the entire Inter-American experience,”\(^{18}\) a power Fitz attributes to “the canonical works of New World literature.”\(^{19}\) Rather, by analyzing both canonical and non-canonical works that react against common social, political, and economic concerns, this chapter intends to reveal some of the problems of approaching “the entire inter-American experience” as a single or uniform unit of study.

*Sobre héroes y tumbas, Rayuela, An American Dream,* and *Invisible Man* help elucidate how the farther we move into the twentieth century, the more difficult it is to talk about a common American experience. In this century in particular, U.S. and River Plate culture, economics, and politics (as well as literary criticism) have rendered inadequate or futile most attempts to study American works as part of a homogenous unit.\(^{20}\) As an alternative, I propose to look at *Invisible Man, Sobre héroes y tumbas, Rayuela,* and *An American Dream* independently as works that, when studied comparatively, offer insightful perspectives on the American continents. Thus, rather than a “generic” or a “genetic” approach, I propose an approach that may be labeled as “symptomatic.” Such an approach would come closer to Pérez Firmat’s definition

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\(^{17}\) McAller, J. J, [Untitled], *Best Sellers*, March 15, 1965, 481.

\(^{18}\) Fitz, *Rediscovering the New World*, xii.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., xii.

\(^{20}\) Furthermore, in my view, the term “New World literature” is also problematic when employed to refer to twentieth-century American literature.
of an “appositional approach” as one that “involves placing the works side by side without postulating causal connections.”

When studied as symptoms of the social, economic, and political histories of their countries of emergence, Invisible Man, Sobre héroes y tumbas, Rayuela, and An American Dream challenge the common illusions and unfulfilled expectations that characterize the American continents as well as the U.S. and the River Plate. Moreover, their (explicit and implicit) critiques bring to light how different forms of totalitarianism have filtered down into everyday life. In these works, the protagonists embark on quests for authenticity that involve diverse confrontations with totalitarianism, which in turn lead them to question the possibility of ever feeling at home. As in Juan Carlos’ Onetti’s El pozo (1939), Saul Bellow’s Dangling Man (1944), and Jean-Paul Sartre’s La Nausée (1938), discussed in the previous chapter, the reformulation of the concept of home also becomes an integral part of the protagonists’ existentialist searches.

Indeed, in the novels that I analyze in this chapter, the protagonists’ relationships with their surroundings trigger a series of surreal encounters with various forms of totalitarianism. From Martín’s witnessing of the events surrounding the bombardment of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, to Steven Rojack’s visits to New York’s bars, ghettos, and corrupt police station, the protagonists’ home cities emerge as highly threatening sites where everyday existence appears utterly unreasonable and nightmarish. As we read these novels, the lines dividing the real and the unreal, waking and sleeping, as well as the rational and irrational gradually fade. These lines eventually disappear as these works reveal how the order that human beings impose

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21 Perez Firmat, Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?, 4.
22 Franz Kafka’s Der Process (1925, [The Trial]) constitutes a key literary precedent for existentialist and modern literature. In this novel, Josef K., the protagonist, finds himself accused of an unnamed crime and must find a way to defend his case as he wanders around a phantasmagorical, nightmarish town.
on things is an illusion that allows active forms of totalitarianism to remain concealed. Thus, these works represent human existence as caught up in a web of social, political, and conceptual totalitarian structures. Alternative ways of comprehending and representing reality are thus required in order to explore how such structures may be altered.

In *Invisible Man*, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, *Rayuela*, and *An American Dream*, the protagonists rebel against totalitarian elements in society through surreal and psychoanalytic explorations. When they switch to these modes of representation, Mailer, Cortázar, Ellison, and Sábato provide the reader with less cogent—although no less insightful—access to their protagonists’ searches for authenticity. Surrealism and psychoanalysis are also employed to emphasize spontaneity, which, according to Arendt, must be “liquidate[d]” by “[t]hose who aspire to total domination.” In addition, surrealist and psychoanalytic techniques help to unveil uncanny elements in everyday experience and ease the transition from the realm of the “real” to that of the “unreal.” This effect allows Mailer, Cortázar, Ellison, and Sábato to project various critiques of their nations in artistically engaging and less straightforward ways.

In addition, these authors sometimes employ psychoanalytic strategies in particular to disclose the content of their nation’s collective unconscious through the representation of archetypes and the narration of myths. These strategies seek to bring to light the common fears operating on an unconscious level in a specific community at a precise historical moment. Psychoanalysis and Surrealism, just like existentialism, become a means through which Mailer, Cortázar, Ellison, and Sábato express the desire to change people’s perceptions of reality as well as reality itself. Indeed, these three movements overlap in their attempt to bring to light elements of reality which, for various reasons, tend to get shoved aside. By revitalizing spontaneity and imagination and examining the possibilities of irrationality, dreams, the unconscious, and

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subjectivity, these authors search for alternative methods for confronting the forms of totalitarianism that prevail in their own nations.

Since psychoanalysis, Surrealism, and existentialism share a common interest in changing the ways people perceive, represent, and approach reality, the techniques that they propose are often very similar. For instance, they frequently call to attention definitions based on binary thinking. The necessity to suspend the use of rationality and analyze how it differs from irrationality is in fact a common concern among existentialist writers. In “Aspectos del irracionalismo en la novela,” in *El escritor y sus fantasmas*, Ernesto Sábato argues that “[e]l irracionalismo es […] un atributo específico de la novela y un indispensable indicio de realidad” (“irrationalism is […] a specific attribute of the novel and an indispensable indicator of reality”). For this reason, integrating irrationality into everyday experience, creating myths, representing the content of the collective unconscious, and exploring repressed desires become alternative means through which Mailer, Cortázar, Ellison, and Sábato attempt to represent and modify reality.

**Totalitarianism and the Origins of Solitude**

Because of the potential of psychoanalytic and surrealist techniques to detect and examine mechanisms of oppression, Mailer, Cortázar, Ellison, and Sábato sometimes employ these techniques to frame their protagonists’ encounters with totalitarianism and guide their searches for authenticity. As George Cotkin argues in “The Canon of Existentialism,” existentialism and totalitarianism are intimately related. In fact, “the existential problems of the

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anxious individual lur[k] at the heart of totalitarianism.” Furthermore, totalitarian states, as several theorists have argued, very often “res[t] on their promised solutions to the chronic loneliness, alienation, and malaise of modern men and women.” Alienation is necessary for producing “total loyalty,” an attribute that permits greater control and indoctrination of the population. Therefore, as Hannah Arendt has claimed, maintaining and increasing loneliness constitutes a goal in itself for totalitarian regimes, which depend on alienation to make total domination possible. Thus, totalitarianism constitutes a natural interest for existentialist writers, who work to understand and transcend alienation. As Arendt further argues,

Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. Uprootedness can be the preliminary condition for superfluousness, just as isolation can (but must not) be the preliminary condition for loneliness.

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26 For more information, consult the work of the Jewish-German-American social psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm, the American existential psychologist Rollo May, and Hannah Arendt.
29 Arendt, who became a very important figure among New York intellectuals, was also, according to Cotkin, “the perfect candidate to explicate existentialism for an American audience” (136). In fact, not only was her own work on other topics informed by existential themes, but also she published, in 1946, two articles on existentialism entitled “What Is Existenz Philosophy?” and “French Existentialism.” Also, she had studied with Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Karl Jaspers.
30 Ibid., 475.
Thus, as Arendt’s insights reveal, the interconnections among loneliness, isolation, uprootedness, and superfluousness—all existentialist themes *par excellence*—are both preconditions and consequences of totalitarianism. Arendt’s analysis of these feelings, which cause alienation and imply a form of displacement into actual or emotional exilic states, sheds light on the reasons why existentialists and post-colonial theorists have invested their efforts in envisioning possibilities for transcending these feelings.

Since they analyze the relationships between rebellion, despotism, loneliness, isolation, uprootedness, and superfluousness among the oppressed, Frantz Fanon’s and Albert Camus’ works may help us better comprehend the role of the search for authenticity in Cortázar’s, Ellison’s, Mailer’s, and Sábato’s novels. In *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*), Fanon studies the effects of colonization on the human psyche and reveals how the oppressed, who are placed in the category of “the inessential,” must first recognize the need for a change and gain a new understanding of their own condition before they attempt to reclaim their agency and fight against their oppressors. Fanon states, “[l]a nécessité [d’un changement] existe à l’état brut, impétueux et contraincant, dans la conscience et dans la vie des hommes et femmes colonisés” (“[t]he need for [a] change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized”). To a great extent, Ellison’s, Mailer’s, Sábato’s, and Cortázar’s protagonists fit Fanon’s description of colonized subjects. Their search for authenticity, a concept that I shall be defining presently, in fact, truly begins as they recognize the need to fight the totalitarian systems and conceptual constructions that oppress them.

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However, the ways in which the protagonists fight these oppressors vary dramatically from one work to another. The protagonists’ rebellions can be understood in light of the two categories of resistance that Albert Camus defines and analyzes in *L’Homme révolté* (1951, *The Rebel*). Camus contrasts the concepts of “révolte” (usually translated either as “rebellion” or “revolt”) and “révolution.” According to Camus, the former is motivated by feelings (as opposed to reason) and a great degree of spontaneity, while the latter involves the collective organization of a movement and the clear intention to take over the power of a different group or political party. In Ellison’s and Mailer’s novels, both protagonists come to privilege the state of “révolte” as a means to fight totalitarianism. In fact, USAmerican existentialist works in general tend to stress the importance of individual rather than collective rebellions. Conversely, River Plate writers focus on linking individual rebellion with a collective search for authenticity. In other words, while U.S. authors privilege the “révolte,” River Plate writers seem to favor the “révolution.” This major discrepancy considerably affects the particular development of the protagonists’ searches for authenticity as well as the role of politics in each novel.

Furthermore, the approach of each protagonist to the search for authenticity also emphasizes either individual or collective action and offers diverse solutions to overcome alienation in ways that contribute to further establishing literary trends in U.S. and River Plate existentialist literature. Indeed, in *An American Dream*, *Invisible Man*, *Rayuela*, and *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, the protagonists reject external dictates that cause them to live inauthentically as they go through different revelatory states. Their various realizations and epiphanies radically change their perceptions of themselves, other people, and the world. As a result, the protagonists abandon their more comfortable lifestyles in order to prioritize their own beliefs and values. In the case of Sábato’s and Cortázar’s novels, the search for authenticity also coincides with

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Oliveira’s and Martin’s search for love and friendship as a possible means of transcending alienation. In fact, this quest for communion with others becomes a distinctive literary trait in many River Plate existentialist works. In Ellison’s novel, the search for authenticity is superposed with the protagonist’s desire to succeed and find a place in the world, while Mailer’s protagonist Rojack combines his quest with the liberation of libidinal energy and a spiritual journey. As in these examples, other USAmerican existentialist literary works often focus on the individual and spiritual character of the protagonist’s search.

**The Search for Authenticity**

Before analyzing the role of the search for authenticity in Sábato’s, Cortázar’s, Ellison’s, and Mailer’s novels, I will briefly clarify what we are to understand by this term. In existentialist literature and philosophy, the search for authenticity constitutes a fundamental concern. Nineteenth-and twentieth-century philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Albert Camus (1913-1960), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) devoted many of their studies to exploring the differences between inauthentic and authentic human behavior. A related goal was to determine what constitutes authenticity and how one attains it. In spite of these efforts, philosophers generally agree that the notion of authenticity escapes all definition. However, examining the ways in which this concept is employed may allow us to comprehend better what a search for authenticity necessarily involves. For instance, philosophers often invoke this concept to address both individual and collective phenomena. Also, authenticity requires an initial understanding of

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33 See, for instance, Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (1843), chapter VII of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927), Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943).
the various ways in which the self and a collectivity may be affected by external dictates. As Jacob Golomb explains in *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus*, “the concept of authenticity is a protest against the blind, mechanical acceptance of an externally imposed code of values.”\(^{34}\) In this regard, the search for authenticity leads human beings to claim and embrace the freedom to choose their own codes of values and recreate themselves individually and as a collective. As Golomb further explains, “authenticity requires an incessant movement of becoming, self-transcendence, and self-creation.”\(^{35}\) Thus, whether individual or collective, the search for authenticity seeks to weaken and transcend the social structures and constructs that perpetuate the human tendency to live inauthentically.

As previously mentioned, in Ernesto Sábato’s and Julio Cortázar’s works, the search for authenticity is paralleled by a common motivation that marks a decisive trend in River Plate literature: the desire to transcend alienation through love and friendship. Martín, an unemployed seventeen-year-old Porteño, and Horacio Oliveira, an Argentine intellectual living in Paris, pursue their respective lovers, Alejandra and la Maga. In fact, with a quick name replacement, Sábato’s novel could well begin with the same question as Cortázar’s: “¿Encontraría a la Maga?” (“Would I find la Maga?”)\(^{36}\) As Andrés Amorós summarizes in his introduction to *Rayuela*, Cortázar’s novel is indeed at heart a “novela romántica, novela de amor, novela sentimental, novela erótica”\(^{37}\) (“a romantic novel, a novel about love, a sentimental novel, an erotic novel”). Similarly, Sábato’s novel is in essence a love story. Both Alejandra and la Maga, in fact, are pivotal figures that motivate the action of the plot. They structure the novels and catalyze the


\(^{35}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{36}\) Cortázar, *Rayuela*, 11; *Hopscotch*, 12.

protagonists’ searches for authenticity. In this respect, the relationships between Oliveira and la Maga and Martín and Alejandra are key to understanding these works.

In *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, Sábato narrates a love relationship between Martín, a low-class, naive adolescent boy and Alejandra, an older girl who suffers from an unnamed illness. Because of her poor health, Alejandra, who belongs to a traditional, aristocratic Argentine family, must sometimes remain secluded in her home. Conversely, Martín, the result of a failed abortion, is unemployed and (literally) homeless. Throughout the novel, the obsessive relationship between these two characters leads Martín to examine Argentina’s history and politics through the eyes of Alejandra and her family. In doing so, he juxtaposes the dictatorial government of Juan Manuel de Rosas—who ruled from 1829 to 1852—with Juan Domingo Perón’s presidency. In fact, the novel’s events span the years that correspond to Perón’s first mandate (1946-1955). This historical overview of totalitarian governments leads Martín to become more insightful and mature and less self-involved. Eventually, he changes his perspective on his own life, his nation, and his expectations regarding the future. Finally, following Alejandra’s death, Martín finds comfort in the company of a friend named Bucich and decides to pursue a fresh start as a more authentic, responsible individual. Sábato’s novel suggests that in order to make progress as a nation, all social classes—criollos, mestizos, and immigrants alike—must be educated and integrated into the history of their country. The study and interpretation of history emerges as a fundamental step for understanding the present and avoiding past mistakes (as suggested by the juxtaposition of past and present historical crises). Also, this novel posits that if human beings manage to bond with each other, they might be able to transcend solitude, develop a sense of fraternity, and build more solid nations.
In Cortázar’s *Rayuela*, fraternity and love also emerge as a major goal of Oliveira’s search. Horacio’s pursuit of la Maga takes him from Paris back to his native Buenos Aires, where he comments on Argentine life and culture as he spends time with his best friend Traveler and his wife Talita. This journey from the view “El lado de allá” (“From the Other Side”) to that of “El lado de acá” (“From This Side”)—the titles of two of the novel’s sections—allows Oliveira to consider how binary thinking and rationality may be detrimental to Western society. Moreover, Oliveira describes the creation of taxonomies as limiting human interaction and negatively influencing every aspect of human existence. In the third section of *Rayuela*, entitled “De otros lados” (“From Diverse Sides”), Cortázar explores the possibilities of writing a novel that will allow a plurality of readings rather than impose a single way of reading and a specific message. Critics often consider *Rayuela* the result of such an experiment. Indeed, as the novel’s structure suggests, by accepting contradictions, inconsistencies, and a certain degree of disorientation, human beings might be able to better understand the world, other people, and their own selves. In this novel, then, Cortázar invites the reader to cease perceiving reality as a coherent whole. In his view, arbitrary ways of thinking (such as the use of taxonomies and binary systems) negatively influence not only critical thinking but also artistic expression. By adopting a different way of perceiving reality—accepting its contradictions—human beings, Cortázar suggests, might transcend alienation, develop new uses of language and artistic forms, and induce social change.

The possibilities of transcending alienation are also explored in Mailer’s and Ellison’s novels. However, in *An American Dream* and *Invisible Man*, the protagonists’ searches do not revolve around the potential of love and friendship. In fact, both protagonists begin and end their first-person narratives in states of extreme loneliness. Furthermore, Invisible man’s and Rojack’s
searches for authenticity coincide with moments of rebellion prompted by great frustration, anguish, and disillusionment. The causes of these feelings are often found in the protagonists’ oppressive circumstances.

Mailer’s novel begins as Rojack narrates his own life, revealing the American dream as deceptive and illusory. Indeed, in the first few pages of the novel, the reader learns that, as a television celebrity and ex-US Congressman, Steven Rojack has achieved fame and power. He is also a war “hero” and Harvard graduate who has succeeded in the world of academia as a published full professor of existential psychology. In addition, Rojack is married to Deborah Kelly, the heiress to a great fortune. His life is described as the perfect embodiment of the American dream, yet Rojack finds no enjoyment in his successful life. In fact, his unhappiness is so severe that he considers suicide. After reaching the bottom of his despair, Rojack fights with his wife and unpremeditatedly chokes her to death. From that moment on, Rojack feels liberated and energized and seeks to increase his freedom by liberating his libido. Towards the end of the novel, Rojack finally sets upon a spiritual quest after Cherry, his new lover, dies. In this way, in An American Dream, Mailer offers a critique of the industrialized, dehumanizing, power-driven USAmerican society. The protagonist’s search for an “apocalyptic orgasm,” a term that Mailer employs in his controversial essay “The White Negro” (1957), triggers his search for authenticity. Rojack rebels against social conventions and impositions, succumbs to his instincts, and privileges his emotions over his rational mind. In my view, instead of an apology for violence and anarchy, however, Rojack’s violent révolte—which is also reflected in his convulsive narrative style—constitutes a performance of Mailer’s “hipster existentialism.”

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Similarly, in *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison also criticizes forms of oppression that prevail in USAmerican society through an existentialist lens. From the outset of the novel, the unnamed protagonist, who describes himself as invisible, narrates a series of past experiences that reveal his deep-rooted inauthenticity. As a young man, Invisible man\(^{39}\) constantly attempts to please other people, even when he must betray his own beliefs to do so. For instance, instead of giving his honest opinion, he creates persuasive speeches to manipulate and win over his various audiences. Furthermore, Invisible man is also determined to take no notice of society’s ills and hypocrisy, which indicates that he seeks to remain in a state of bad faith. However, the protagonist very often betrays his inauthentic existence by unconsciously (or consciously) becoming a nuisance to the social structures and institutions that oppress him. As his desires of rebellion become more evident, he joins the “Brotherhood,” a communist organization in which he sees the potential of helping other people. Eventually, Invisible man arrives at the conclusion that the Brotherhood is yet another oppressive system that seeks to impose its own views on others. He comes to understand that “[l]ife is to be lived, not controlled.”\(^{40}\) Ellison suggests that even while human beings search for freedom, they must constantly monitor their actions (and the motivations that prompt these actions) in order to evaluate their levels of authenticity. Thus, Ellison’s critique of organizations and political movements as power-ridden and authoritarian is redolent of Albert Camus’s analysis of revolutions as attempts to replace an old order with a new, equally totalitarian one. Indeed, Invisible man’s “révolte” constitutes the means by which the protagonist attempts to rid himself of the limitations on his freedom. As an oppressed subject, however, he eventually embraces responsibility, a necessary step preceding positive change. This

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39 For practical reasons, I will refer to Ellison’s unnamed protagonist as “Invisible man.”
shift is signaled by his realization, towards the end of the novel, that “there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.”\textsuperscript{41}

In this way, the protagonists of both \textit{An American Dream} and \textit{Invisible Man} try to achieve the American dream and realize that it is a farce, an illusion meant to keep USAmerican society under the control of the state to help it reach its own goals. Throughout the novels, both protagonists understand more and more that the nation that they inhabit is not a land of opportunity. Instead, the U.S. emerges as a major source of impositions and obligations that curtail the freedom of its citizens in multiple ways. In fact, both \textit{Invisible Man} and \textit{An American Dream} represent the U.S. as a quintessential example of totalitarianism that requires loneliness, uniformization of the masses, patriotism, and terror as the basis for its success. Intriguingly, both novels offer representations of totalitarianism through surreal or psychoanalytic lenses. Sábato’s and Cortázar’s novels also switch to these modes of representation as a means to offer more compelling critiques of Argentine society, binary thinking, and the totalitarian state.

\textit{Sobre Héroes y Tumbas: Freud, Jung, and Fernando’s Surreal Journey}

Ernesto Sábato employs surrealist techniques and psychoanalytic insights to illustrate how totalitarianism affects the human psyche as well as to suggest ways of confronting political oppression and deep-rooted loneliness. In addition, as Cecilia Beuchat explains in “Psicoanálisis y Argentina en una novela de Ernesto Sábato,” Sábato’s novel uses psychoanalytic theories to reveal Argentina’s need to renovate itself as a nation.\textsuperscript{42} Beuchat further claims that the “Informe sobre ciegos” (“Report on the Blind”), which constitutes a major turning point in the novel, is in

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 581.
fact a “vuelta al seno materno”\textsuperscript{43} ("return to the mother’s breast") and a representation of the Jungian concept of the “individuation process,” which leads Fernando Vidal to a confrontation with “[el] saber ancestral, [el] inconsciente colectivo, que lleno de resentimiento lo vigila”\textsuperscript{44} (“ancestral knowledge, the collective unconscious, which, full of resentment, watches him”). Indeed, the influence of psychoanalysis on Sábatos’s work is quite evident in \textit{Sobre héroes y tumbas}, where Sábatos demonstrates his familiarity with both Freud’s and Jung’s works.

In \textit{Sobre héroes y tumbas}, Sábatos employs well-known psychoanalytic concepts and theories (such as Freud’s dream theory and Oedipus complex and Jung’s archetype theory) to investigate feelings of uprootedness and superfluousness both from an ontological perspective and as possible effects of totalitarianism. All of the main characters in this novel are alienated. Though they try to transcend this state and bond with others, all of their relationships end up in failure. For instance, Martín’s love affair with Alejandra remains superficial because neither of them manages to communicate sincerely with the other. For Martín, Alejandra remains a stranger, a person with “[un] alma desconocida” ("[an] unknown soul")\textsuperscript{45} whose body appears “tan cercano y a la vez remoto y misterioso” ("so close and at the same time so remote and so mysterious").\textsuperscript{46} Indeed, throughout the novel, Martín seeks a mother figure in his lover, who he hopes will be able to comfort and reassure him and might put an end to his solitude. Yet Alejandra never ceases to appear as “lejana” [“far away”] and “inaccesible” [“inaccessible”].\textsuperscript{47}

In his novel, Sábatos establishes a parallel between Martín’s lover and the Argentine nation. As Martín himself comes to realize, Alejandra symbolizes Argentina in various ways:

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 45; 38.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 73; 68.
Y de pronto parecía como si ella fuera la patria, no aquella mujer hermosa pero convencional del los grabados simbólicos. Patria era infancia y madre, era hogar y ternura; y eso no lo había tenido Martín; y aunque Alejandra era mujer, podía haber esperado en ella, en alguna medida, de alguna manera, el calor y la madre; pero ella era un territorio oscuro y tumultuoso, sacudido por terremotos, barrido por huracanes. Todo se mezclaba en su mente ansiosa y como mareada, y todo giraba vertiginosamente en torno de la figura de Alejandra, hasta cuando pensaba en Perón y Rosas.

[And suddenly it seemed as though it was Alejandra who was his native land, not that beautiful but conventional woman who serves as its symbolic representation. One’s native land was childhood and a mother, a home and tenderness; and Martín had not had that. He doubtless hoped to find in Alejandra in some measure, in some way, warmth and a mother; but she was a dark and turbulent territory shaken by earthquakes, swept by hurricanes. Everything was all mixed up in his anxious mind, as though he were suffering from vertigo, with everything revolving dizzily around the figure of Alejandra, even when he thought about Perón or Rosas].

Thus, just like Alejandra, Argentina as a nation proves unable to provide Martín with the comfort that he seeks. As a “dark and turbulent territory shaken by earthquakes,” Argentina emerges as an unstable, threatening site where Martín—and almost all the rest of the novel’s characters—are desolate.

In this way, Sábato challenges the myths of America as a land of opportunity as he shows the ways in which his own nation has become “inhóspita, tan áspera y sin amparo”

48 Ibid., 197; 177-8.
(“inhospitable, so harsh, so unprotective”). To accomplish this task, he shifts the focus of the novel from the representation of Martín’s personal history to that of the Argentine population as a whole. In fact, in the novel’s first section, entitled “El dragón y la princesa” (“The Dragon and the Princess”), Sábato develops a new myth as he provides an account of Martín’s relationship with Alejandra and her family history. In “Los rostros invisibles” (“The Invisible Faces”), the subsequent section, he shifts his focus to “los millones de habitantes que parecían ambular por Buenos Aires como en un caos” (“the millions of inhabitants of Buenos Aires who seemed to wander through the city as though in the midst of chaos”). Here, Sábato provides a panoramic view of Argentina’s political atmosphere under Perón’s government.

One clear example of this more national view is the character of Bordenave, an acquaintance of Martín, who criticizes the decadence of Argentine society during Perón’s first mandate and concludes that Argentina, “era una nación de acomodados, de cobardes, de quinieleros napolitanos, de compadritos, de aventureros internacionales, como esos que estaban ahí, de estafadores y de hinchas de fútbol” (“was a nation of the filthy rich, of cowards, of Neopolitan gamblers, of scoundrels, of international adventurers, like those two over there, of swindlers and soccer fans”). Furthermore, following his description of the decadence of Argentine society, Sábato identifies what he considers as typical attributes of Argentine character: pessimism, nostalgia, and a marked interest in metaphysics. These attributes are closely related to the feelings of solitude and uprootedness that Bruno—Sábato’s porte-parole in Sobre héroes y tumbas—attributes to Argentinians. As Bruno states,

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49 Ibid., 247; 223.
50 Interestingly, like Ellison, Sábato also employs the term “invisible” to characterize the masses. Revelation through the absence of sight or speech is indeed a common strategy in many existentialist novels.
51 Sábato, Sobre héroes y tumbas, 198; On Heroes and Tombs, 178.
52 Ibid., 204; 185.
Pero es que aquí todo era nostálgico, porque pocos países debía de haber en el mundo en que ese sentimiento fuese tan reiterado: en los primeros españoles, porque añoraban su patria lejana; luego, en los indios, porque añoraban su libertad perdida, su propio sentido de la existencia; más tarde, en los gauchos desplazados por la civilización gringa, exiliados en su propia tierra, rememorando la edad de oro de su salvaje independencia; en los viejos patriarcas criollos, como don Pancho, porque sentían que aquel hermoso tiempo de la generosidad y de la cortesía se había convertido en el tiempo de la mezquindad y de la mentira; y en los inmigrantes, en fin, porque extrañaban su viejo terruño, sus costumbres milenarias, sus leyendas, sus navidades, junto al fuego.

[But it’s because everything here is nostalgic, because there must have been few countries in the world where this feeling has been experienced so repeatedly: by the first Spaniards, because they were homesick for their far-off homeland; then by the Indians, because they mourned for their lost freedom, the sense of life that had been theirs; later by the gauchos, displaced by foreign civilization, exiles in their own land, thinking back of the golden age of their wild and woolly independence; by the old Creole patricians, like Don Pancho, because they felt that the good old days of generosity and courtesy had turned into an age of pettiness and lies; and by the immigrants, finally, because they missed their old homeland, their ancient customs, their legends, their Christmases around the fire].

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53 Ibid., 199; 179.
Thus, as Bruno’s account reveals, Argentina’s chronic nostalgia, overall decadence, and history of political oppression emerge as the central causes of the heightened feelings of loneliness and uprootedness that characterize the Argentine population.

In order to investigate further these feelings and national features, in the third section of *Sobre héros y tumbas*, Sábato embarks on a surreal exploration that constitutes the climax of the novel. To transition into this section, Sábato describes a real historical massacre that Argentina suffered during Perón’s presidency: the military attack on Plaza de Mayo. In 1955, a naval aircraft bombed Plaza de Mayo (the square in downtown Buenos Aires where *la Casa Rosada*, home to the Presidential offices, is located). The military’s failed attempt to assassinate Juan Domingo Perón left three hundred civilians dead. Later that day, Peronist supporters responded by torching a dozen churches. In *Sobre héros y tumbas*, Sábato alludes to this event as he narrates a story in which an aristocratic lady and a *cabecita negra* (a working-class youth) join forces to save the statue of a virgin. This story ends the novel’s second section. In fact, this “alucinante noche” (“phantasmagorical night”), which follows the bombings, serves as a perfect transition into Part III, the “Informe sobre ciegos” (“Report on the Blind”), a short novella where Sábato stages a confrontation of the human psyche with the outside world.

In his dream-like “Report on the Blind,” Sábato represents the necessity to confront oppressive systems and regimes as well as the need to grasp the incomprehensibility of human reality. For Sábato, a dream (just like art) “invades the archaic terrains of the human race and, therefore, can be and is being the instrument for recovering the lost integration of which reality and fantasy, science and magic, poetry and pure thought form an inseparable part.” The Report, which is written in the first-person by Fernando Vidal Olmos (Alejandra’s father and lover),

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54 Ibid., 259; 233. “Alucinante” might be better translated as “hallucinatory” or “insane.”
narrates the discovery of the sacred cult of the blind who, as Fernando comes to believe, seem to rule the world. Fernando’s novella, which also takes the form of a myth, begins by narrating Fernando’s descent into the universe of the blind. This descent takes him through numerous underground tunnels and labyrinthine passages to the house of a blind woman. There, Fernando faints and attributes his weakness to the “poderes mágicos de la ciega” (“the magic powers of the blind woman”) who “[lo] observaba. Era como una aparición infernal, pero proveniente de un infierno helado y negro” (“was looking straight at [him]. It was like an infernal apparition, though the hell it had come from was frigid and black”). Later on, as he wakes up, Fernando describes the beginning of what seems like a horrible nightmare but is actually “una realidad que me pareció, o ahora me parece, más intensa que la otra” (“a reality that appeared to me, or appears to me now, to be more intense than the other one”). In this way, the limits between “reality and fantasy, science and magic, poetry and pure thought” start to fade in Fernando’s narration.

Although the “Report on the Blind” sometimes resembles a bad dream or the confessions of a madman, it is in fact an introspective surreal exploration of the fears that a human being experiences as s/he comes to terms with the outside world and attempts to confront his/her inner self. In fact, as Fernando himself explains, his exploration of the world of the blind “había sido […] la exploración de mi propio y tenebroso mundo” (“had been […] the exploration of my own dark world”). Fernando’s descent into the world of the blind, however, not only reveals his own state of mind but also provides insights into his own society. Sábato’s “Testimonio de la novela” further supports this interpretation of Fernando’s Report. As Sábato argues,

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56 Sábato, Sobre héroes y tumbas, 345; On Heroes and Tombs, 316.
57 Ibid., 345; 315.
58 Ibid., 346; 316.
59 Ibid., 338; 309.
el individuo no existe solo nunca: existe rodeado por una sociedad, inmerso en una sociedad, sufriendo en una sociedad, luchando o escondiéndose en una sociedad. No ya sus actitudes voluntarias y vigilantes son la consecuencia de ese comercio perpetuo con el mundo que lo rodea: hasta sus sueños y pesadillas están producidos por ese comercio. Los sentimientos de ese caballero, por egoísta y misántropo que sea, ¿qué pueden ser, de donde pueden surgir sino de su situación en el mundo en que vive? Desde este punto de vista hasta la novela más extremadamente subjetiva es social, y de una manera más o menos tortuosa, más o menos sutil, nos da un testimonio sobre el universo en que su personaje vive.60

[an individual never exists alone: he exists surrounded by a society, immersed in a society, suffering in a society, struggling or hiding himself in a society. Not only are his voluntary and vigilant attitudes the consequence of the perpetual exchange with the world that surrounds him: even his dreams and nightmares are produced by this exchange. This gentleman's feelings, no matter how selfish and misanthropist he may be, what can they be? Where can they originate from if not from his situation in the world he lives in? From this point of view, even the most extremely subjective novel is social, and in a rather tortuous, quite subtle way, it gives us a testimony about the universe in which its character lives].

Thus, Fernando’s narration of his descent into the world of the blind may also be read as a reflection on the social context where it originates. Moreover, if we examine the Report’s dream-like atmosphere, Sábato’s evident use of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic insights further reveal the function of Fernando’s narration within Sábato’s novel.

Sábato often employs psychoanalytic insights and surrealist techniques to reveal the content of his characters’ deepest desires and his nation’s collective unconscious. By revisiting some of these insights, then, we may better comprehend the overall significance of Fernando’s Report. Indeed, according to Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), the analysis of dreams is necessary to understand “phobias” as well as “obsessive and delusional ideas.” Fernando’s obsession with the blind, thus, can be comprehended better in light of the dream-like passages of his Report. Furthermore, Jung’s theories on the roles of archetypes, the collective unconscious, myth, and dreams may also clarify the ways in which Sábato’s “Report on the Blind” ultimately offers a critique of totalitarianism in Argentine society.

A brief overview of Freud’s and Jung’s theories on dreams may help us elucidate the role of Fernando’s Report as the novel’s climax. As Freud maintained, dreams may take the place of action. When reading the Report, then, the task of the reader is to translate the Report’s dream-content “into the language of dream-thoughts,” for, according to Freud, dream-content is often presented “in hieroglyphics, whose symbols must be translated, one by one.” Conversely, in “On the Nature of Dreams,” Carl Gustav Jung states that even if dreams are usually “strange and disconcerting” and “distinguished by many ‘bad qualities,’ such as lack of logic, questionable morality, uncouth form, and apparent absurdity or nonsense,” they contain “symbolical images which we also come across in the mental history of mankind.” In Jung’s view, these images, which he called “archetypes,” reveal the content of the “collective unconscious,” the ancestral knowledge and abstract notions that people inherit from history and their environment.

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62 Ibid., 88.
63 Ibid., 183.
65 Ibid., 77.
Moreover, as Vernon Grass clarifies in “Myth and the Reconciliation of Opposites: Jung and Lévi-Strauss,” Jungian archetypes “have a mythological character.”⁶⁶ Following Jung’s theory, archetypes, as universal symbols or myths, “emerge from the unconscious when the psychic conditions they are said to symbolize call them forth.”⁶⁷ Thus, the emergence of certain archetypes in the Report also reflects on the psychic conditions of Fernando’s time and context.

The archetypes that Sábato presents in Fernando’s nightmarish struggle reveal the challenges that Argentine society faced in the 1950s. As a “mythological dream,” it “never point[s] back to a forgotten early crisis but obliquely hint[s] at a potential synthesis which will move the present conflict or impasse to a higher level of integration and meaning.”⁶⁸ In Fernando’s dream-like odyssey, his initial boat ride in “aguas quietas, negras e insondables” (“still, black, bottomless waters”)⁶⁹ takes him to the entrance of a “gruta” (“cavern”) that marks the beginning of his “individuation process.” For Jung, “[i]ndividuation means coming to Self-hood or Self-realization.”⁷⁰ Indeed, the individuation process consists of bridging the gap between a person’s consciousness and the archetypal collective unconscious in an attempt to find the center of his/her own psyche.

Among the many archetypes that are represented in Fernando’s journey, the figure of the “anciano” (“old man”) is one of the most prevalent. At the beginning of his first nightmarish experience, Fernando feels that he is being watched by “un anciano, que lleno de resentimiento, también vigilaba mi marcha: tenía un sólo y enorme ojo en la frente, como un cíclope” (“an old man, bristling with resentment, also keeping watch over my journey: he had a single enormous

⁶⁷ Ibid., 472.
⁶⁸ Ibid., 473.
⁷⁰ Grass, “Myth and the Reconciliation of Opposites: Jung and Lévi-Strauss,” 473-4
eye in his forehead like a cyclops”).\(^7\) Fernando desires escape from the old man’s look and hurries towards the cavern. Beuchat interprets the figure of this old man as representing “[el] saber ancestral, [el] inconsciente colectivo”\(^7\) (“ancestral knowledge, the collective unconscious”). Certainly, the representation of this archetype seems to indicate Fernando’s refusal to confront societal impositions. Furthermore, by describing the one-eyed old man as a cyclops, Fernando’s account evokes the myth of Polyphemus, the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* who is blinded by Odysseus as the hero attempts to escape from the creature’s cavern. In Homer’s tale, this act provokes the ire of Poseidon, who punishes Odysseus by delaying his return home to Ithaca. Therefore, the archetype of the one-eyed old man in Sábato’s novel emphasizes the necessity to confront rather than escape from societal impositions to avoid unwanted destructive consequences.

The Report’s conclusion, which reveals Fernando’s incestuous relationship with his daughter, conveys the symbolic meaning of Fernando’s and Alejandra’s deaths. Fernando’s second nightmarish adventure takes him inside the womb of the statue of a woman (referred to as “the Deity”), which represents his incestuous desires and foreshadows his death. As he metamorphoses into a fish and moves towards the Deity’s blind “phosphorescent eye,” Fernando returns to a primitive state from which he hopes to be reborn. His inability to face the archetype of the collective unconscious and his failure to integrate it into his own consciousness finally cause his actual death. In this way, the psychoanalytic and mythical allusions that Sábato incorporates into Fernando’s narration reveal information that is crucial for understanding *Sobre héroes y tumbas*. By alluding to archetypes through Fernando’s personal experiences, Sábato seeks to communicate key information to the reader on a deeper level of consciousness. At the


\(^7\) Beuchat, “Psicoanálisis y Argentina en una novela de Ernesto Sábato,” 40.
same time, he develops a “dialectic of existence” which, in his view, “operates in such a way that the deeper we plumb our own subjectivity the closer we come to others.”\textsuperscript{73} Thus, Fernando’s surreal journey becomes as well an exploration of the roles of subjectivity. In fact, Surrealism, according to Sábato, “prolongs and deepens the existentialist movement” because of its “concern to grapple with the problems of man and his destiny.”\textsuperscript{74}

Importantly, Fernando’s dream-like adventure marks the true beginning of Martín’s search for authenticity, thereby leading to a final reflection on the possibilities of transcending alienation through solidarity. Not only does the decay of the Olmos family lead to Martín’s eventual transformation into a more authentic and responsible being, but it also forces the protagonist to seek to transcend alienation without Alejandra. Solidarity, then, emerges as an opportunity to help the devastated Martín. For example, his brief conversation with Hortensia Paz, an optimistic single mother who happens to care for him after he faints, provides a solution to his despair. That brief encounter leads Martín to leave the city of Buenos Aires for Patagonia, a place that he pictures as “todo blanco y helado” (“white and frozen”), and describes as a land that might be “inhóspita pero limpia y pura” (“inhospitable but pure and clean”).\textsuperscript{75} Finally, as the end of the novel approaches, Sábato further emphasizes the birth of a new cycle by interpolating scenes of General Lavalle’s\textsuperscript{76} death and Martín’s departure with his friend Bucich, the truck driver.

\textsuperscript{73} Sábato, \textit{The Writer in the Catastrophe of Our Time}, 16.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 77-78.
\textsuperscript{75} Sábato, \textit{Sobre héroes y tumbas}, 496; \textit{On Heroes and Tombs}, 469.
\textsuperscript{76} Juan Galo Lavalle (1797-1841) was an Argentine nineteenth-century independence hero who attempted to overthrow Juan Manuel de Rosas. Persecuted by Rosas’ troops, he had to withdraw and move further north but was finally assassinated in 1841. To keep his body from being profaned, Lavalle’s own men carried his corpse further north.
In this way, towards the end of the novel, Sábato reinforces the idea that evaluating and understanding history is fundamental for social renewal. As Martín gains a deeper understanding of Argentine history and decides to head to Patagonia in the company of Bucich, he leaves behind a “patria tremblequeante y enigmática” (“tottering, enigmatic homeland”) where he has always felt “solo, solo, solo” (“alone, alone, alone”). He also cultivates his friendship with Bucich and searches for a way to recreate himself. Finally, Bucich’s exclamation “—Qué grande es nuestro país, pibe…” (“How great is our country, kid…”) leads Martín to enjoy “una paz purísima [que] entraba por primera vez en su alma atormentada” (“a perfect peace [that] enter[ed] his tormented soul for the first time”). In this way, towards the end of the novel, Martín’s search for authenticity truly begins.

**Invisibility and Self-Awareness in Invisible Man**

In a similar way, in *Invisible Man*, the protagonist also embarks on a search for authenticity. Like Sábato, Ellison turns to Surrealism in order to condemn the various forms of totalitarianism that, in his view, are responsible for rendering the population of the U.S. “invisible.” As the protagonist comes to realize, people’s inability to become aware of their

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77 As Lois Parkinson Zamora points out in “The Usable Past: The Idea of History in Modern U.S. and Latin American Fiction,” twentieth-century writers in the United States and Latin America were greatly influenced by G. W. F. Hegel and José Ortega y Gasset, respectively. On the one hand, in the United States, Hegelian idealism and materialism influenced the way in which Americans would come to disregard their past and focus on the future in the formation of their national identity. It contributed to the development of what has been perceived as a “forward-looking mentality” (”The Usable Past,” 26) and as a “facile doctrine of progress” (Ibid., 18). On the other hand, twentieth-century Latin Americans were drawn to the work of José Ortega y Gasset and came to see history as a non-linear, non-progressive phenomenological process, located in geographical and political space (Ibid., 29-31). Thus, for twentieth-century Latin Americans, the understanding of the past became crucial, and the emphasis was placed on the present rather than the future. Consequently, it is not surprising that existentialist philosophies, which focus on l'être-en-situation, became so popular among South Americans.


79 Ibid., 505; 479.

80 Ibid., 505; 479.
invisibility increases their responsibility. In other words, Ellison seems to subscribe to Sartre’s belief that human beings may be partially accountable for whatever happens to them if they remain in a state of denial or submission (or as Sartre called it, “bad faith.”) For instance, at the very beginning of *Invisible Man*, the protagonist writes: “I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.”\(^1\) Although the protagonist’s superfluousness in the U.S. is evident, as Invisible man later recognizes, his search for authenticity only begins once he becomes aware of that fact. Once he stops denying his invisibility and looks back and remembers his past experiences, Invisible man realizes that he needs to become aware of his position in USAmerican society if he hopes for any change for his future.\(^2\)

Throughout the novel, Ellison develops a writing style that allows him to portray Invisible man’s everyday experiences as surreal. By interpolating a series of realistic and surreal descriptions, Ellison suggests that real life is in fact stranger than the novel’s most nightmarish moments. For instance, as Invisible man explains, “[w]alking about the streets, sitting on subways beside whites, eating with them in the same cafeterias (although I avoided their tables) gave me the eerie, out-of-focus sensation of a dream […] I felt that even when they were polite they hardly saw me.”\(^3\) When Invisible man describes his interaction with white people as surreal, he subtly brings to the surface the many challenges that African Americans experienced on a daily basis in the U.S.

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\(^1\) Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7.

\(^2\) Furthermore, as the novel’s various surreal scenes suggest, “invisibility,” or being “de trop,” also constitutes a major source of creativity. As the protagonist explains very early in the novel, “[p]erhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible” (Ibid., 8). His search, as he indirectly announces with these early statements, is then twofold: first, it requires an understanding of the significance of the feelings of redundancy that society evokes, and second, it necessitates the creation of an artistic form that will allow the representation of invisibility to be effective. As the product of such a search, the novel *Invisible Man* fulfills both requirements brilliantly.

\(^3\) Ibid., 168.
Furthermore, the novel’s peaks of surrealism, such as the description of the hotel reception that Invisible man attends at the beginning of the novel, offer the reader a different perspective on the ways that oppression functions and influences the human mind. Many of Ellison’s surrealist descriptions may be regarded as instances of what Walter Benjamin referred to as “profane illumination.” In “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” Benjamin discusses the potential of Surrealism as a means to both modify the ways in which human beings perceive reality and to change reality itself in a revolutionary way. By rendering reality bizarre, Benjamin believes that Surrealism may lead to a moment of “profane illumination,” an act which, according to him, constitutes “a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”84 Thus, as demonstrations of disorientation by art, Invisible Man’s surreal passages may be perceived as subtle, indirect opportunities for social change. For instance, at the hotel reception, when Invisible man is expected to give a speech and receive an award, Ellison successfully represents the internal struggle that human beings endure when trying to interact with their oppressors. During the reception, Invisible man is injured while he fights blindfolded and feels that “[his] saliva became like hot bitter glue.”85 Then, as he attempts to collect the coins that have been thrown on an electrified rug, he expresses his persistent desire to read his speech and make a good impression on his white oppressors. This nightmarish atmosphere allows Ellison to better represent the protagonist’s first steps in his search for authenticity, thereby foreshadowing that Invisible man will no longer be able to remain within the confines of the system that oppresses him.

85 Ellison, Invisible Man, 22.
Indeed, throughout the plot, Invisible man increasingly attempts to lead a more authentic existence as he aims to find a way to improve his own life and that of fellow invisible Americans citizens. In his search for authenticity, the protagonist encounters various opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of his own position and possible roles in society. However, his professional ambitions and desire to captivate others through his rhetorical skills as a speaker (his instances of “bad faith”) prevent him from taking advantage of these opportunities. For instance, when he is asked to deliver his first political speech as a member of the brotherhood, he decides to take a propagandistic, populist tone to convince people to form an alliance and, as a result, he makes a mockery of himself. Furthermore, his allocution lacks any kind of substance; it aims merely to manipulate people by making common unpleasant feelings of oppression come to the surface. Also, his final remarks: “SISTERS! BROTHERS! WE ARE THE TRUE PATRIOTS! THE CITIZENS OF TOMORROW’S WORLD! WE’LL BE DISPOSED NO MORE!” are followed by much applause, which increases his vanity. Thus, his sense of pride and bad faith interfere with his critical capacity, and he is not able to see the erratic nature of his success.

Arguably, Invisible man’s relationship with Mary, the landlady who looks after him like a mother, constitutes his best chance to transcend alienation through the other. Only towards the end of the novel does Invisible man realize that he has never helped others in a selfless or successful way. Neither has he managed to develop a relationship with “his people” or anyone else. The protagonist’s attempts to transcend solitude under the patronage of the Brotherhood and college authorities, as a leader of a community, and as a friend and lover all result in failure. Mary, however, represents a clear opportunity to transcend alienation that the protagonist categorically dismisses. Nonetheless, when he abandons her, he is temporarily haunted by

86 Ibid., 346.
feelings of remorse: “I rode with my eyes shut, trying to make my mind blank to thoughts of Mary.”\textsuperscript{87} By having the protagonist reject Mary and remain alone, Ralph Ellison’s commitment to the individual character of Invisible man’s search becomes evident.

In \textit{Invisible Man}, in addition, although Ellison focuses on the role of individual action, he also explores its link with collective action. Ellison’s approach to political action is very common among USAmerican existentialist writers. In Ellison’s novel, the protagonist comes to dismiss the Brotherhood’s revolutionary goals as he realizes that this organization only seeks to manipulate the masses to impose its own will. Thus, as Brother Hambro explains to him, as a political organization they must “say the things necessary to get the greatest number of […] people to move towards what is for their own good.”\textsuperscript{88} Then, only after the protagonist quits the Brotherhood, as Cotkin points out, “Invisible Man eventually comes to recognize [that] only by coming into the open air of self-consciousness does collective solidarity become a possibility.”\textsuperscript{89} In fact, he is only able to come to this realization towards the very end of the novel. As he hides in the basement of a white-only building, stealing electricity to light 1369 bulbs and living rent-free (a symbolic act of both rebellion and enlightenment), Invisible man comprehends for the first time that it is necessary to become responsible for his own self first if he intends to bond with others and do something for his people. Therefore, by narrating his life, Invisible man seeks to redeem himself partially through the confession of his various acts of bad faith and his lack of responsibility. Or, as he explains, by “torturing [him]self to put it down,”\textsuperscript{90} he is finally able to come to terms with his own self and to understand that “[t]he hibernation is over.”\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 331.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 505.
\textsuperscript{89} Cotkin, \textit{Existential America}, 178.
\textsuperscript{90} Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, 579.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 580.
Oliveira’s Search for a “bridge” in Rayuela

In Cortázar’s Rayuela, Oliveira’s “hibernation” (or inauthenticity) also comes to an end once the protagonist identifies a way in which he may be able to transcend his solitude. Though the transcendence of feelings of solitude and alienation is a central concern in Cortázar’s novel, Oliveira’s uprootedness has little to do with his situation as an Argentine expatriate living in Paris: when he returns to his homeland, in fact, his feelings remain the same. In Rayuela, uprootedness and exile are, first and foremost, a metaphor for the human condition. They originate from feelings of existential anguish and extreme loneliness caused by “le néant” (“nothingness”), to use Sartre’s term, or the “absurd,” to employ Camus’. In addition, exile works as a lens through which Cortázar provides a critique of his society. In Rayuela, the negative consequences commonly associated with forced exile (e.g. the absence and forgetting of one’s mother tongue and culture, feelings of nostalgia, uprootedness, and lack of belonging) also become sources of creativity that stimulate critical reflection and provide the necessary freedom and lucidity to recreate oneself and the world. Thus, like Ellison’s novel, Rayuela first emphasizes the protagonist’s feelings of superfluousness and disorientation and then, after a series of surreal explorations, offers a reflection on the nature of Oliveira’s place vis-à-vis the world.

In Rayuela, the rational and the irrational switch places; in fact, the irrational becomes more significant and more “real” than the rational. One of the most significant surreal segments of Cortázar’s novel is “el capítulo del tablón” (“the chapter about the board”), in which Oliveira, Traveler and his wife build a bridge to connect their respective apartments so that Oliveira will be able to get some yerba and straight nails without having to go down the stairs and cross the
street. The narration of this story constitutes a key moment in the novel; in fact, as Cortázar once acknowledged, “lo primero que yo escribí [...] fue el capítulo del tablón, sin tener la menor idea de todo lo que iba a escribir, antes y después”\(^92\) (“the first thing that I wrote [...] was the chapter about the board, without having the slightest idea of what I was going to write, before or after”).

In this chapter, the bridge that Oliveira, Traveler, and Talita build represents an attempt to test the stability of their relationships and explore the possibilities of transcending solitude through love and friendship. What is most extraordinary about this chapter is the way in which Cortázar manages to give the reader the impression that Talita’s absurd attempt to cross this bridge is much more relevant than most of the other events that are narrated in the novel. For instance, when Gekrepten, Oliveira’s girlfriend, arrives at their apartment and starts to discuss a series of banal activities (such as her recent visit to the dentist), her comments about the ordinary are perceived as far more bizarre than Oliveira’s and Traveler’s obscure conversations over the board. Moreover, as Amorós argues, in Cortázar’s literature, “lo fantástico no es —no pretende ser, al menos—el punto de partida ni algo sobrepuesto arbitrariamente, sino una realidad que irrumpe de modo absolutamente natural, irremediable, en la entraña de lo más cotidiano”\(^93\) (“the fantastic is not—or at least, it does not claim to be—a point of departure or something superimposed arbitrarily, but a reality that irrupts in an absolutely natural, irremediable way into the depths of the quotidian”). Indeed, in “el capítulo del tablón,” Traveler’s idea to build a bridge to link the two apartments is described as a perfectly rational decision. Neither Talita nor Oliveira find this idea at all odd; walking down the stairs, crossing the street, and getting some yerba from Traveler’s apartment seems like a much more unreasonable task.

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\(^92\) Cortázar, cited in Amorós, *Introducción a Rayuela*, 5.
\(^93\) Amorós, *Introducción a Rayuela*, 17.
In this chapter, the use of rationality is suspended and the characters’ actions seem to respond to greater truths that straightforward language cannot adequately represent. For instance, Oliveira’s request for some nails remains unquestioned by his friends, who understand, as Traveler explains, that Oliveira wants to find “[p]rimero los clavos y después la finalidad de los clavos” (“[f]irst the nails and then their ultimate use”). Likewise, when Talita exclaims, “[e]l tablón nuestro está perfecto […] Tu tablón parece menos sólido que el nuestro” (“[o]ur board is fine […].Your board doesn’t look as solid as ours”), her observation indicates how Oliveira still remains alienated and has not yet managed to find a way to truly connect with them. Thus, in Rayuela and in An American Dream, the authors require that their readers suspend rationality and focus on experiencing rather than analyzing their texts.

**Narrative Performance in An American Dream**

Because of its many violent, surreal passages, An American Dream has received a great number of negative reviews since it was first published. In 1965, for instance, an anonymous reviewer wrote that An American Dream could be seen as “a gorge-raising purgative that aims to induce flashes of revelation, sexual ecstasy, and apocalypse of galloping gorgons to trouble all who are cloyed, as Rojack and Mailer are, by the sweet, sick narcotic of twentieth-century life […]. Hipster, faith healer, dour diagnostician, Norman Mailer serves up in ‘An American Dream’ the purgative for an American nightmare.” More recently, critics such as A.A Mutalik-Desai have attempted to look beyond the violence of Mailer’s text to provide more positive interpretations of the novel. In “Norman Mailer’s An American Dream: A Twentieth-Century

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94 Cortázar, Rayuela, 252; Hopscotch, 247.
95 Ibid., 260-4; 254-258.
Fable,” for instance, Mutalik-Desai argues that *An American Dream* could also be read as an allegory⁹⁷ since it narrates a “symbolic journey of a troubled, morally divided and alienated pilgrim soul struggling for an escape into health and sanity.”⁹⁸ However true either of these interpretations may be, in my view, *An American Dream* is essentially a performance of Mailer’s hipster existentialism. Indeed, even if violence and anarchy are present everywhere in this novel, Mailer does not necessarily encourage either of them, as some critics have suggested. Rather, he explores violence and anarchy as two possible ways to confront totalitarianism. Thus, Mailer’s novel should be read as a performance of hipster existentialism, not an advocacy of violence and anarchy.

Indeed, the novel’s detailed scenes of violence and its crude, nearly pornographic descriptions of sexual encounters represent experiences of freedom and pleasure that perfectly illustrate Mailer’s hipster theory. According to Mailer, violence and sex play a fundamental role in society because of their liberating power. In “Mailer and the Radical Hero: A Study of *An American Dream*,” S. Shanmugiah explains that “Mailer believes that the totalitarian society can succeed in restraining all emotions of man; but the libidinal energy diverted into sex cannot always be controlled. Hence the first symptoms of social revolution are noticed in the sexual rebellion.”⁹⁹ Moreover, the release of violence also occupies a central role in Mailer’s theory because “[a] hipster, like a psychopath, is unable to contain violence in him. Hence he indulges in it as a revolt against the faceless state violence.”¹⁰⁰ On this point, Mailer’s theory, with its emphasis on the liberating effects of violence when performed against an oppressor, is

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⁹⁸ Ibid., 119.
¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 41.
reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. In Mailer’s case, however, an impulsive action like Rojack’s murder of Deborah also constitutes a valid gesture of rebellion against the American dream, which she embodies. Thus, Rojack’s confrontation and rejection of the American dream shows how it “is not only an inadequate and outmoded myth, but even the search for it results in moral and spiritual alienation.” Thus, in his novel, Mailer suggests that in order to regain its health, USAmerican society must find a way to rid itself of the American dream and fight prevalent forms of totalitarianism in the U.S.A.

Moreover, the evolution of Rojack’s liberation and his fight against the American dream are paralleled by his choice of sexual partners. For instance, Deborah is described as one of the main causes of Rojack’s initial anguish and disenchantment. By staying married to her, he remains in a state of inauthenticity. Thus, in killing Deborah, Rojack seeks to eradicate his own alienation and guilt, for Deborah represents Rojack’s submission to the American dream. Furthermore, as the heiress to Mr. Kelly’s fortune, she is also associated with her father’s corrupt, power-driven ideology. As Kelly confesses that he had an incestuous relationship with his daughter, the murder of Deborah comes to stand for Rojack’s attempt to rid himself of the morally degrading, devastating effects of the American dream.

The names that Mailer chooses for Rojack’s sexual partners are also evocative of the steps in Rojack’s search for authenticity. For instance, in Hebrew, the name “Deborah” means “bee,”—the symbol of kingship—and is close in sound to “devora” (“devour”), which in Latin means to swallow down. Thus, Deborah’s name may evoke the authoritarian power of the

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101 As Sartre argues, “les marques de la violence, nulle douceur ne les effacera: c’est la violence qui peut seule les détruire” (29; “[no gentleness can efface the marks of violence; only violence itself can destroy them” 21).
102 Mutalik-Desai, “Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream*: A Twentieth-Century Fable,” 118.
103 In this regard, Rojack’s murder of Deborah is reminiscent of Alejandra’s and Fernando’s deaths (in Sábato’s *Sobre héroes y tumbas*), which force Martín to pursue his search for authenticity through solidarity, as we have seen above in this chapter.
American dream and its annihilating effects. When Rojack kills her, he is finally able to experience some relief and states, “I was weary with a most honorable fatigue, and my flesh seemed new. I had not felt so nice since I was twelve.” After committing his crime, Rojack gives in to exhaustion and attempts to reconnect with his feelings. “I did not feel a thing,” says he, “[w]hich is not to say that nothing was happening to me. Like ghosts, emotions were passing invisibly through the aisles of my body.” From this moment on, the protagonist’s stirring révolte leads him to increasingly obey his instincts in order to recover his long-repressed spontaneity. The first symptoms of his new search become apparent through the return of sexual desire. Rojack very soon perceives that “[s]omething fierce for pleasure was loose” and decides to go to the cleaning lady’s room in order to seduce Ruta.

Rojack’s sexual encounter with Ruta, which takes place just a few steps away from his wife’s body, marks the beginning of the protagonist’s search for an “apocalyptic orgasm.” Ruta’s name, in this regard, evokes her role as a transitional figure in the novel. Though the character is German, her name comes from Hebrew and means “friend.” Moreover, as a noun “ruta” comes from the Latin “rupta” (broken) and is equivalent to the English word “route.” Ruta, thus, guides Rojack to the next step of his search for authenticity by fulfilling his desires and arousing his sexual instincts. Eventually, Rojack’s liberation comes to an end when he manages to experience the ultimate freedom of the “apocalyptic orgasm” as Cherry’s lover.

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106 Ibid., 43.
107 Ibid., 44.
108 In “The White Negro,” Mailer describes the “apocalyptic orgasm” as the psychopath’s “therapy” (Mailer, “The White Negro,” 347). The “logic of the sexual outlaw,” furthermore, “is that one has at least a running competitive chance to be physically healthy so long as one stays alive” (Ibid., 348). According to Mailer, the “[h]ip ethic of immoderation” (Ibid., 354) and sexual freedom are fundamental in society. In fact, he proposes that “every social restraint and category be removed, and the affirmation implicit in the proposal is that man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself” (Ibid., 354).
Cherry’s name is also very evocative. As a name, it is either a variant of “Cherie” (which comes from the French chérie and means “dear one”) or “Charity.”\(^{111}\) Furthermore, besides a fruit, in English “Cherry” is a slang word for “virgin.”\(^{112}\) Thus, her name illustrates her role as the object of Rojack’s affection and as a source of regeneration. Moreover, it also reveals Rojack’s experience of purity and peace. Following their sexual encounter, Rojack feels energized. “I traveled (eyes sealed) through some midnight of inner space, aware of nothing but my will,”\(^{113}\) writes Rojack, and “felt love fly in.”\(^{114}\) Thus, the brief moments of happiness that he shares with Cherry prepare him for the final stage of his search, which he must undertake all alone.

In *An American Dream*, Mailer emphasizes the importance of the individual search for authenticity as the only true means to fight totalitarianism.\(^{115}\) In fact, as Shanmugiah argues, throughout his writing career, “Mailer has come to depend more on individual action and initiative as the only way of fighting the unhealthy trends in contemporary society. Hence, […] he has tried to create an American prototype hero, who has all the potential for effectively thwarting the effects of the totalitarian society.”\(^{116}\) Thus, Mailer’s emphasis on individual action, which becomes more evident during the novel’s various surreal explorations, is a key component of *An American Dream*.

Rojack’s final attempt to walk on the terrace’s parapet constitutes one of the most significant surrealist segments of Mailer’s novel. It reveals Rojack’s desire to redeem his crime and reconcile with society. As he looks at the terrace, the protagonist feels that “the message


\(^{113}\) Mailer, *An American Dream*, 121.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{115}\) In “The White Negro,” furthermore, Mailer claims, “[t]he only courage, with rare exceptions, that we have been witness to, has been the isolated courage of isolated people” (Mailer, “The White Negro,” 338-9).

came clear, ‘Walk the parapet,’ it said [...] ‘Walk it,’ said the voice, ‘or you are worse than dead.’”117 Then, as Rojack overcomes his fears and attempts to go around all three sides of the terrace in spite of the rain and the wind, he suddenly feels “more exposed,”118 his vision fails, and Rojack desires to fly. However, he does not withdraw from this symbolic challenge because, as he explains, “something else said, ‘Look at the moon, look up at the moon.’ A silvery whale, it slipped up from the clouds and was clear, coming to the surface in a midnight sea, and I felt its pale call, princess of the dead, I would never be free of her, and then the most quiet of the voices saying, ‘You murdered. So you are in her cage. Now earn your release,’”119 In this way, Rojack’s dream-like experience on the rooftop leads to his spiritual rebirth. Mailer’s narration of this incident towards the end of the novel produces a moment of “profane illumination” before transitioning to the novel’s resolution.120

The ending of An American Dream reveals Mailer’s desire to wed existentialism with religious faith. As Rojack decides to leave New York City to cross the deserts of Arizona and Nevada, he actually departs on a spiritual journey. Although Rojack remains alone, his final loneliness is quite different from the feelings of alienation and oppression that he experiences at the beginning of the novel. The corrupt, nightmarish atmosphere of New York City is contrasted with “the arid empty wild blind deserts” of the West, which, according to Rojack, “were producing again new breed of man.”121 The protagonist’s final destination—the peninsula of Yucatán, home to the Mayan Indian civilization—confers a certain degree of mysticism to his journey, representing an opportunity for spiritual renewal. For Mailer, religion occupies a

117 Mailer, An American Dream, 238.
118 Ibid., 241.
119 Ibid., 242.
120 In this respect, this passage is very similar to Cortázar’s “capítulo del tablón,” in Rayuela, in terms of its function within Mailer’s narrative.
121 Mailer, An American Dream, 251.
fundamental place in existentialism because “one must have one’s sense of the ‘purpose’” and “a life which is directed by one’s faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful and mysterious.”

Rojack’s journey, which begins after he murders his wife, takes him from the depths of his infernal existence in New York City, through the purgatorial landscapes of the West, to a calm, soothing site where he may be able to make himself anew. Thus, with its emphasis on renewal, the novel’s ending provides an interesting counterpoint to Sábato’s ending in *Sobre héroes y tumbas*. Although both Rojack and Martín leave their cities in search for new beginnings, the circumstances in which they leave are very significant, accentuating the need of spiritual regeneration, in Mailer’s case, and the importance of solidarity in Sábato’s.

In these four novels, through their searches for authenticity, the protagonists question the origin of their feelings of loneliness, uprootedness, and superfluousness vis-à-vis their own nations. Their searches lead them to inquire about the possibilities of transcending solitude, which, as they come to realize, is often caused by totalitarian elements in society and by arbitrary impositions on human reality based on rationality and binary thinking. Indeed, *An American Dream*, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, *Rayuela*, and *Invisible Man* dig into the underpinnings of alienation and suggest ways to counter totalitarianism. To do so, they employ surrealist and psychoanalytic insights and techniques, which allow writers to better represent aspects of reality that often remain concealed or are shoved aside. Furthermore, in their novels, Ellison and Mailer focus on the individual character of their protagonists’ search, whereas Sábato and Cortázar emphasize the need to cultivate solidarity. These tendencies affect how each novel attempts to

122 Mailer, “The White Negro,” 341. In addition, Mailer has claimed that, “[i]f existentialism is to flourish (that is, develop through a series of new philosophers building on earlier premises), it needs a God who is no more confident of the end than we are; a God who is an artist, not a law-giver; a God who suffers the uncertainties of existence.” (Norman Mailer, “On Sartre’s God Problem,” *The Nation*, June 6, 2005. http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050606/mailer).
propose a method for facing oppression. On the one hand, *An American Dream* and *Invisible Man* emphasize the importance of individual rebellion. *Rayuela* and *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, on the other hand, constantly seek to find ways to link their protagonists’ searches to collective attempts to produce social change and transcend alienation through the other.

During the last few decades of the twentieth century, with the rise of postmodern and postcolonial theories, both critics and writers have lost considerable interest in existentialism. However, existentialist themes have continued to play an important part both in French and American literature, and beyond. In fact, it is my belief that existentialism often resurfaces in U.S., French, and River Plate literatures in order to raise awareness whenever basic human rights or individual freedom are threatened. With the advent of feminism and the human rights movement, as we shall see in the next chapter, U.S., French, and River Plate writers sought to challenge and transform existentialism in order to question and deconstruct dominant discourses. In chapter III, then, I examine works by Marguerite Duras, Joyce Carol Oates, and Abelardo Castillo and seek to elucidate the diverse roles of existentialism in a postmodern context.
Chapter III:

Reinscribing Existentialism: Late Twentieth-Century Avatars

[T]anto la mentira es mejor cuanto más parece verdadera
y tanto más agrada cuanto tiene más de lo dudoso y posible.

Cervantes, Don Quixote

As a twentieth-century phenomenon, existentialism reaches through the whole century. One of its manifest avatars is in the parodic. For centuries, writers of fiction have employed the various strategies of parody to voice their opinions and offer critiques of diverse cultural phenomena, their societies, and the literary traditions then in vogue. However, in the last couple of decades, numerous literary critics (especially postmodern), such as Linda Hutcheon and Judith Butler, have manifested their concern with the nature and practices of parody, which they perceive as double-edged. Indeed, in The Politics of Postmodernism, Hutcheon examines the role of parody and argues that this genre is “doubly coded in political terms” as “it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies.”\(^2\) Furthermore, in “Critically Queer” and Bodies That Matter, Judith Butler revises her well-known theory of gender as performance\(^3\) in which she looks at the subversive power of “parody” within the context of gender. In these more recent works, Butler claims that norms “taken not as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be ‘cited,’ twisted, queered, brought into relief as heterosexual imperatives, are not […] necessarily

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\(^1\) “[A] lie is better as verisimilitude and most pleasing when doubtful.” Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quixote de la Mancha. Centro Virtual Cervantes, http://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/quijote/edicion/parte1/parte04/cap47/default_01.htm.
\(^3\) Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990).
subverted in the process.”⁴ Similarly, in “The Reflexive Function of Parody,” Michelle Hanoosh succinctly summarizes the “double-edgedness” of parody, explaining that the genre “ensures that the tradition it revises will continue even beyond itself.”⁵

In spite of this typically postmodern skepticism of parodic techniques, existentialist works of literature very often employ the strategies of parody as a means to challenge existing discourses and traditions, including the tradition of existentialism itself. For instance, as we saw in chapter I, in La Nausée (1938) Jean-Paul Sartre critiques humanism through the humorous representation of a character whom Roquentin dubs l’Autodidacte. However, existentialism itself has also been challenged as an established, indoctrinating ideology, despite its intention to confront and subvert other discourses. Sartrean existentialism in particular has borne criticism from numerous writers, philosophers, and theorists. In fact, authors such as Joyce Carol Oates, Marguerite Duras, and Abelardo Castillo, whose work I analyze in this chapter, often contest Sartrean theories on freedom and choice in their own fiction (and sometimes in their nonfiction and/or interviews). Moreover, as they practice the various techniques of parody, these writers reveal the potential of parodic techniques to subvert discourses by further exploring the roles of emotions from an existentialist perspective.

Emotion, in fact, occupies a central place in existentialist philosophy in general. Both Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, most importantly, made significant contributions to the study of emotion.⁶ As Joseph Fell explains in Emotion in the Thought of Sartre, Sartre “departs from the traditional view that feelings, emotions, and passions are superventions, experiences in

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⁶ Heidegger argues that the study of emotions as “accompanying phenomena” is inadequate ( Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit [Tübingen: Neomarius Verlag, 1949], 138). Sartre discusses emotion in three different works: The Emotions: An Outline of a Theory (1939), The Psychology of Imagination (1940), and Being and Nothingness (1943).
which the individual is in some sense genuinely ‘passive’.”

Moreover, in *Esquisse d’une théorie des emotions*, Sartre claims that emotion “is a mode of existence of consciousness, one of the ways in which it understands […] its being-in-the world.” In Sartre’s view, emotion also seeks the “transformation of the world.” It is a way of confronting and interpreting any given event, fact, or situation. Thus, from a Sartrean existentialist perspective, emotion is perceived as a fundamental component of human experience that constitutes not a passive but an agentially “‘chosen’ response.”

In this existential view, because of their significance and purposiveness, emotions can be regarded as choices. As such, they may be able to validate a person’s existence, but they may also represent instances of bad faith. Emotions induced through the strategies of parody may influence the reader’s understanding of texts and events, as well as his/her future actions. Thus, an exploration of the edgy roles of emotion may allow us to comprehend better how Oates’, Castillo’s, and Duras’ parodic strategies subvert the discourse of existentialism itself. Indeed, even if it could be maintained from a formalist perspective that parody “legitimizes” its targets, its capacity to subvert and induce change, as we shall see, is not necessarily put at risk by its alleged “double-edgedness” (a double edge cuts in both directions, after all).

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9 Ibid., 58.
11 In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines this term (“mauvaise foi” in French) as “négation de soi” (“self-negation,” in Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Etre et le néant* [Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1990], 83; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. [New York: Routledge, 2001], 47), and as a “mensonge à soi” (“lie to oneself,” ibid., 83; 48). Furthermore, *mauvaise foi* consists of “masquer une vérité déplaisante ou […] présenter comme une vérité une erreur plaisante” (“hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth”, ibid., 84; 49).
Building on existentialist perspectives on emotion, recent psychological studies further demonstrate that emotion is fundamental both for interpreting life events and literary texts. In *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, Jenefer Robinson suggests that the “educational value” of the experience of reading “consists not just in the fact *that* it may eventually lead to new beliefs, but also in *how* it does so.” Thus, it is crucial to explore how the strategies of parody elicit emotions in order to understand the extent to which Oates’, Castillo’s, and Duras’ works fail or succeed in subverting existentialism. In addition, it is necessary to consider whether the self-conscious genre of parody evokes emotions that constitute acts of bad faith—that is, to explore the relation between bad faith and parody itself. By examining how emotion affects parody’s effectiveness (a key element neglected by postmodern criticism), we may comprehend why these strategies persist in twentieth and twenty-first century literature and how they manage to subvert established discourses, such as existentialism. In fact, numerous writers of fiction seem to be well aware of the importance of emotion in the acts of reading. Mario Vargas Llosa, for instance, claims that “la buena literatura, la obra maestra, deja siempre un sedimento en la personalidad, la memoria y la sensibilidad del lector” (“good literature, masterpieces, always leave a sediment in the personality, memory, and sensibility of the reader”) and “luego, de una forma imprevisible actúa en la conciencia y actos del lector” (“then, in an unpredictable way, they work on the reader’s conscience and actions”). The subversive power of literature might thus lie in a work’s ability to provoke new thoughts and emotions in order to “leave a sediment” in the reader.

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12 In fact, in the field of psychology, since the publication of Sigmund Freud’s theories on humor and essays on literature, the interest in the impact of literature and art on the human mind has never ceased to grow.
As they employ the parodic strategies of imitation with subversive purposes, the series of works that I analyze in this chapter offer several insights regarding existentialism. Indeed, in Marguerite Duras’ *Moderato Cantabile* (1958, France), Abelardo Castillo’s “El asesino intachable” (*Las panteras y el templo*, 1976, Argentina), and Joyce Carol Oates’ “Accomplished Desires” (*The Wheel of Love*, 1970, United States), parodic strategies allow writers to introduce new perspectives on popular existentialist themes and/or attack existentialist philosophy in general. In doing so, these authors bring insights from their respective national contexts into existing existentialist debates, while simultaneously “replenishing” a literary tradition that would otherwise remain “exhausted,” to paraphrase John Barth. Whether these texts subvert and renovate the discourse of existentialism through the strategies of parody, to what extent, and how they do so are the motivating questions of the present chapter.

As John Barth explains in his seminal essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” imitation, which lies at the core of parody, “is something new and may be quite serious and passionate despite its farcical aspect.” The technique of imitation is the rhetorical strategy that has received the most accusations of “double-edgedness.” However, according to Barth, imitation is a very powerful tool. In fact, he employs it constantly in his own works as a means of putting into practice what he describes in his essay as “paradoxically turn[ing] the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for [an artist’s] work.”

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15 I examine the strategies of parody instead of parody in general because I am interested in exploring how these strategies function both within works that could easily fit into this genre and within works that would ultimately reject this label.
19 Barth discusses these concepts in “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967) and “The Literature of Replenishment” (1979).
21 Ibid., 78.
In their short stories, Abelardo Castillo, Marguerite Duras, and Joyce Carol Oates follow Barth’s initiative as they renovate existentialism by representing new conceptions of the existential notions of “choice” and “freedom.” Whether deliberately or not, these authors’ texts reveal how these concepts are limited by external factors, thus contradicting the idea of “total freedom” that Sartre proclaimed in his early writings.\(^{22}\) Of course, each author pursues their own path and accomplishes this shared end in their own way. Castillo focuses on the impact of contingency on the notion of choice and how a country’s political situation may interfere with the possibility of authentic behavior.\(^{23}\) Oates addresses the ways in which society predetermines the diverse choices that human beings (and especially women) may take. Also, Oates explores how people’s environment inflicts violence upon them and leads them to become violent towards themselves or towards others.

Following Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras explores the need for a new discourse to address and represent existential concerns from women’s perspectives. Constituted by a male elite\(^{24}\) and based on the study of how human beings “experience” the world, the philosophical and literary tradition of existentialism has unarguably neglected the perspectives of women. As a result, in the same vein as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler, Marguerite Duras explores in her work how imitation may become a means of subverting dominant discourses. Like Joyce Carol Oates, Duras also manages to contest existential theories on choice, authenticity, and freedom by way of the protagonist’s experiences and performance.

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\(^{22}\) See, for instance, *L’Etre et le Néant* (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943) 
\(^{23}\) In his short story “Le mur” (1938), Sartre also examines how chance and the unexpected can affect choice. However, the focus of most of his works is not on the role of chance, but rather, on free will and its repercussions. 
In order to determine whether the parodic strategies employed in these works succeed in challenging existentialism (and whether they constitute acts of bad faith), I will define parody, explain how it operates, and clarify the distinction between parody and satire. In addition, I will review the positive and negative criticism of parody and explain why, as I argue, it is necessary to consider the role of emotion from an existential perspective if we intend to understand how parodic techniques evade the trap of bad faith and successfully subvert existentialism (or any other discourse). With this purpose in mind, I consider diverse existentialist and psychological insights into the process of reading literature and its impact on the human mind. Once I establish the relevance of the role of emotion within the contexts of parody and existentialism, I move on to examine how Castillo’s, Duras’, and Oates’ works employ the strategies of imitation to criticize and comment on existentialism. I will situate their works within their national traditions, and, finally, evaluate comparatively the extent to which they legitimate or subvert the targets of their criticism.

The Subversive Power of Parody

Before undertaking a literary study of parody, it is most helpful to clarify the distinction between this form and satire. In *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Linda Hutcheon devotes almost an entire chapter to explaining how parody and satire differ and sometimes overlap. In “On Satire and Parody: The Importance of Being Ironic,” Roger J. Kreuz and Richard M. Roberts claim that this distinction is fundamental because, “[w]hen readers encounter texts, they bring to these works prior knowledge about texts in

general. Expectations about the type of text being read are one component of this prior knowledge. In particular, readers use their expectations about the genre of a text in order to interpret it.”26 To distinguish the genres of parody and satire, as Linda Hutcheon and other critics have pointed out, dictionary definitions confuse more than clarify. The Oxford English Dictionary defines parody as “[a] literary composition modeled on and imitating another work, [especially] a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized,” whereas satire is described as “a prose composition, in which prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule.”27 However ambiguous the characterization of parody may be (especially in employing the word “satirize” to define parody), these definitions at least reveal the most prominent difference between the two genres: while parodies are based on other works, satires are not.

Indeed, satire requires that the reader recognize the object of its criticism in society, historical events, and so on, whereas parody (given its intertextual quality) demands precise literary and/or artistic knowledge on the part of the reader, thereby conditioning the production of humor. The (limited) humor found in Oates’ “Accomplished Desires” and Castillo’s “El asesino intachable,” for instance, derives from ironically juxtaposing these short stories with the specific works of literature parodied in each case. These works do not seek to attack the novels they reference, thus supporting Linda Hutcheon’s theory that parody is “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text.”28 Parodies that do not mock their source texts but rather, pay “homage” to them (as with Oates’ and Castillo’s texts), generally do not seek to be humorous. Furthermore, as Hutcheon’s analysis

of the etymology of the word parody reveals, the word *para* means “besides,” in addition to “counter.” Thus, the “pragmatic ethos” in parody may range “from scornful ridicule to reverential homage.”

From an existential perspective, as I intend to show, these two *ethe* are intimately related to a work’s subversive potential and determine the emotions that a parody may elicit. These *ethe* also help reveal whether the emotions evoked through parodic strategies and parodies themselves may be regarded as acts of bad faith. In her work, Linda Hutcheon devotes an entire chapter to the subversive possibilities of parody, which she refers to as “the paradox of parody.” According to Hutcheon, parody “operat[es] as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance.” As such, it can “function as a conservative force in both retaining and mocking other aesthetic forms,” but it may also be “capable of transformative power in creating new syntheses.”

Though Hutcheon’s main argument is that parody can be both conservative and subversive, her theory does not explain how parody’s subversive efforts may transcend their tendency to reinscribe the parodied object. Even though she recognizes that parody can also be “a threatening, even anarchic force, one that puts into question the legitimacy of other texts,” Hutcheon constantly returns to the theme of double-edgedness: “parody’s transgressions ultimately remain authorized [...]. Even in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence.”

Judith Butler’s examination of this “paradox of parody” may further illuminate why numerous twentieth-century authors—especially female authors like Oates and Duras—turn to these writing strategies for subversive purposes. Butler’s concludes that parody may indeed

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29 Ibid., 37.
30 Ibid., 20.
31 Ibid., 75.
32 Ibid., 75.
subvert an existing discourse, but that it may be difficult to pinpoint exactly when or how it does so. Although it does not solve the aforementioned paradox, her analysis of parody from the perspective of gender roles sheds light on the conditions that writers need to consider to increase their parodies’ subversive potential. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that “[p]arody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculate as instruments of cultural hegemony.” Like Hutcheon, then, Butler wants to grasp how a parody can transgress its parodied object. However, her focus is not on parody in general but on those parodies that seek to subvert the performativity of gender. In her own words, her central concern is to find out “what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire.” Butler examines Luce Irigaray’s concept of “critical mimesis” and contends that if “subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself.”

If we accept this premise, it follows that in order to subvert the established discourse of existentialism (and also patriarchy in the case of *Moderato Cantabile* and “Accomplished Desires”), Oates, Duras, and Castillo also need to work from within this particular discourse. Through the use of parodic strategies, which are self-conscious in nature, these writers transgress existentialism by anticipating the effects of the emotions elicited by their writing techniques. As

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33 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.
34 Ibid., 139.
35 Irigaray discusses the concept of critical mimesis in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (*Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, 1977). Critical mimesis seeks to “faire ‘apparaître,’ par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devait rester occulte” (“make ‘visible’, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible”) (Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* [Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977], 74; *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter. [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985], 76).
36 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 93.
they work to carefully induce specific emotions, these writers produce *expected* instead of *unexpected* permutations of existentialism. Indeed, although “subversive actions always signify in unexpected ways and with unintended effects,” as Butler further claims in *Bodies that Matter*, they may also signify in ways that can sometimes be predicted (or at least encouraged). In “Performativity, Parody, Politics,” Moya Lloyd challenges Butler’s claim and argues that “[e]ven though there is no guarantee of efficacy, there is a likelihood that certain parodic practices will be more efficacious in certain contexts than in others.” In Lloyd’s view, however, “[c]ritical reflection upon past, present, or future practices is essential to the exploitation of the gaps within hegemonic norms that allow for potential transformation of social relations.” Even though it cannot be guaranteed that a given parody will succeed in becoming subversive, there are still various elements that can be taken into consideration to try to make sure that it does. As Lloyd states, “[a]ccepting that there will be unplanned effects of any discourse or practice does not mean that there is no point in planning political tactics.”

Duras’, Oates’, and Castillo’s works illustrate well Lloyd’s argument and further show that critical reflection and a careful evocation of emotions are necessary to reasonably predict a work’s subversive effects. Through the articulation of parodic techniques, these writers attempt to guide readers’ interpretations of their texts while facing the uncertainty that is inherent in the subversive possibilities of the parodic. Indeed, the “unexpected permutations” and countersubversive effects of parodic strategies are fundamental within both the context of parody as a genre and existentialism. On the one hand, parody can benefit from the unplanned effects that it may have on the reader. Unexpected emotional reactions and interpretations of a text may

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38 In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler revises her earlier theories of parody and gender as performance.
40 Ibid., 207.
41 Ibid., 210.
result in far more effective subversion. On the other hand, from an existentialist perspective, parody’s double-edgedness becomes a great asset because it forces readers to make meaningful choices when trying to interpret a text’s ambivalencies. In addition, parodic strategies go hand in hand with existentialism as they allow writers to defend themselves from possible accusations of bad faith. The uncertainty that lies at the core of parody is a clear sign of self-consciousness, an element that is necessary to circumvent the trap of bad faith. In light of this, performative “choices,” like political determinacies that define the context of those “choices,” if not, paradoxically, the “choices” themselves, are profoundly existential concerns. These concerns are dramatized, if not resolved, by the French and American writers under discussion in this chapter, as we shall see shortly.

**The Roles of Emotion in the Act of Reading**

In “Accomplished Desires,” “El asesino intachable,” and *Moderato Cantabile*, emotion is fundamental not only because it constitutes a significant human experience (existentially speaking) but also because it leads to these texts’ eventual subversions of Sartrean theories. From an existentialist perspective, since emotion is a choice that is as significant as any other human experience, it has the potential of becoming a subversive act in itself but also an instance of bad faith. Indeed, as Fell explains, for Sartre emotions can be regarded as acts of self-deception because they constitute “a way of acting on ourselves when action in the pragmatic world is of no avail.”

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angry at his/her employer, it means that s/he perceives his/her employer as aggravating, offensive, and so on. The experience of an emotion, then, changes a person’s view of an object by transforming it into whatever s/he wants it to be. For this reason, Sartre believes that “any emotion is a sign of the whole man, an index of his total value-system.”

“Accomplished Desires,” “El asesino intachable,” and *Moderato Cantabile* reach their climaxes at the precise moment that the protagonists become aware of the burden that freedom entails and embrace their emotions of anguish. Sartre defines anguish as “the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself” (a claim developed in *Being and Nothingness*). Sartre’s theory may help clarify the fundamental role of anguish plays in the works I analyze in this chapter. Sartre’s insights suggest that anguish, which also occupies a central place in Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s theories, may be directly related to the mechanisms of subversion in Oates’, Duras’, and Castillo’s works. Therefore, we must carefully examine this emotion, which, according to Sartre, is the only non-deceptive emotion and marks “the beginning of emancipation from ‘bad faith’.” Yet “deceptive” emotions also play strategic roles in these writers’ works.

Recent psychological insights show that the role of each feeling in the reading experience and the ways an author elicits specific emotions (such as amusement anger, disgust, or fear) at specific moments in a narrative may determine a work’s potential subversiveness. The most interesting insights along these lines are offered by cognitive appraisal theories and studies that focus on both the cognitive and non-cognitive processes of emotion. To start, they analyze the role of “positive” and “negative” emotions evoked by works of literature. Second, they facilitate

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43 Ibid., 33.
44 *Angoisse*, in French, also commonly referred to as “dread” and “angst.”
our understanding of the reasons why a particular text may elicit diverse emotions in different people and what the consequences of those emotions may be.

Appraisal theories support Sartre’s belief (as presented in the *Esquisse*) that emotions constitute “choices.” In “Anger, Disgust, and the Negative Aesthetic Emotions: Expanding an Appraisal Model of Aesthetic Experience,” Paul J. Silvia and Elizabeth M. Brown hint at how cognitive appraisal theories of emotion may elucidate literature’s subversive potential. These theories propose that emotions,

come from people’s evaluations of events, particularly evaluations of how events relate to important goals, values, and concerns [...]. These evaluations, known as *appraisals*, give rise to emotions. Appraisal theories are inherently subjective—the appraisals of events, not events themselves, cause emotions. As a result, it is easy for appraisal theories to explain why people have different emotions to the same event.\(^{47}\)

Because of their emphasis on subjectivity, cognitive appraisal theories (also known as “judgment theories”) can account for the wide range of responses that people may experience when reading a text. According to these theories, when a person evaluates an event (or a work of art or literature) that threatens his/her goals, beliefs, or desires, an emotion is experienced. The structure of the individual’s evaluation then induces specific emotions. For instance, the appraisal structure for anger involves “goal congruence,” the sense that a work goes against a person’s goals or values, and “intentionality,” which suggests that the work’s author was deliberately trying to attack that person’s goals or values.\(^ {48}\) Conversely, the emotion of disgust requires judgments of “goal incongruence” and “intrinsic unpleasantness,” which implies that an

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\(^{48}\) Ibid., 102.
object is aversive in and of itself. Appraisal theories, then, support Sartre’s view of emotions as choices and emphasize how personal judgments are based on sets of criteria used to interpret the world.

Finally, according to appraisal theories, emotions also derive their subversive potential from their ability to lead human beings to specific actions. For instance, “when angry, people try to deal with the threat to their goals.” Disgust, on the contrary, “is avoidance-oriented—people withdraw from the disgusting object, consistent with repulsive as a synonym of disgusting.” Thus, as we shall see in Oates’ “Accomplished Desires,” Castillo’s “El asesino intachable,” and Duras’ Moderato Cantabile, writers who are aware of the values, goals, and concerns of their target audiences may induce emotions of anger and disgust with the intention of influencing the reader’s actions. In this way, they may “attempt to evoke negative emotions in the audience, thereby spurring the audience to reflect on and learn from the negative feelings.” If we consider the possible effects of these emotions on an individual during (and after) the act of reading, then, we may gain a measure of a text’s subversive potential that extends beyond what a strictly formal analysis would offer.

Though they slightly disagree with Sartre’s theories, non-cognitive approaches to emotion also prove helpful within the framework of the present chapter, particularly in their challenge to Sartre’s view of emotions as “deceptive.” Jenefer Robinson, who follows this line of research, calls for a different understanding of emotions in order to explain the reading experience from new perspectives. According to Robinson, an emotion is not produced by a person’s evaluation of events, but rather, by instinctive “affective appraisals” which eventually

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49 Ibid., 102.
50 Ibid., 102.
51 Ibid., 102.
52 Ibid., 105.
“play a crucial role in the way we actually understand and interpret a text.” In *Deeper than Reason*, she defines emotion as “a process of interaction between an organism and its environment” and tackles two fundamental questions. First, she theorizes on how authors induce certain emotions and on how readers experience these emotions, and second, she shows how the emotions that literature evokes differ from those elicited by real events.

Though Robinson focuses on realist novels and poetry, her discussion of formal devices is very helpful as it also sheds light on how and why other genres, such as parody, may use form to evoke emotions. According to Robinson, even though “[d]ifferent people respond emotionally in different ways to the same novel, play, or movie, […] perhaps only some of these responses are ‘authorized’ by the work itself.” I would like to focus on this concept of “authorized” responses as it can help us understand how the “planned” and “intended” inducement of emotions plays a fundamental role in subverting existentialism in Oates’, Duras’, and Castillo’s works. Robinson argues that, when the reader experiences emotions while reading a passage, s/he is well placed to discover what causes those emotions. In this way, emotions guide the reader as s/he turns to the text in search of an answer. Moreover, in Robinson’s view, emotions jumpstart the reader’s reflection on the different components of a work of fiction. Indeed, when a person reads, s/he is required to make “appropriate inferences” (which are all cognitive) based on

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53 Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*, 107. In Robinson’s view, when human beings read works of literature, their emotional experiences are comparable to those elicited by “real” events. According to Robinson, emotions occur in the following way: “When human beings have an emotional response to something in the (internal or external) environment, they make an affective appraisal [an automatic, instinctive evaluation] that picks that thing as significant to me (given my wants, goals, and interests) and requiring attention. This affective appraisal causes physiological changes, action tendencies, and expressive gestures, including characteristic facial and vocal expressions, that may be subjectively experienced as feelings, and the whole process is then modified by cognitive monitoring […]. Cognitive monitoring may confirm or disconfirm affective appraisals” (Ibid., 113).

54 Ibid., 113.
55 Ibid., 102.
56 Ibid., 111.
his/her emotional responses.\textsuperscript{57} Therefore, a work’s “message” is “inextricable from the reader’s [emotional] experience of [it].”\textsuperscript{58}

From an existential perspective, then, the emotions that Duras, Castillo, and Oates evoke through their works emerge as key factors in the success of their parodic strategies. In the section that follows, I articulate the relationship between emotions and parodic techniques in these authors’ works in order to elucidate the various ways these writers “replenish” existentialism by drawing upon their respective national and cultural perspectives. Though the works analyze in this chapter employ more than one strategy (“overt” and “incongruous” imitation, misdirection, exaggeration, and so on), I will structure my analysis based on the technique that each uses most saliently. Thus, I focus on “overt” imitation in Duras’ \textit{Moderato Cantabile} and on “incongruous” imitation in Castillo’s “El asesino intachable” and Oates’ “Accomplished Desires.” By structuring my analysis in this way, I hope to reveal how these strategies allow the writers to subvert and renovate the otherwise “exhausted” existentialist tradition, while simultaneously building on (and departing from) many of its key concepts and doctrines.

\textbf{Imitation, Critical Mimesis, and Parody}

\textit{Moderato Cantabile}, which parodies the murder story that is narrated within the novel itself, and “Accomplished Desires,” which parodies Charlotte Brontë’s \textit{Jane Eyre} (1847), successfully subvert existentialist theories through the use of imitation. Duras and Oates question existential theories on freedom, choice, and authenticity and reinscribe these notions from female perspectives. In the same vein as Simone de Beauvoir, Oates and Duras are invested in how a

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 117-120.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 156.
person’s “situation” relates to their experience of freedom, choice, and authenticity. Indeed, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir argues that a person’s freedom depends on the freedom of other people,\(^5^9\) thereby contradicting Sartre’s notion of radical freedom as presented in his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, human beings are essentially free and responsible for all of their choices. Denying one’s total freedom or relinquishing one’s responsibility for one’s own choices constitutes an act of bad faith. The practice of bad faith works against authenticity, which, according to Jacob Golomb, “requires an incessant movement of becoming, self-transcendence, and self-creation.”\(^6^0\) Beauvoir’s more complex and nuanced understanding of freedom and choice differs from Sartre’s, in that, for Beauvoir, situation plays a fundamental role, interfering with a person’s freedom and limiting his/her choices. Barbara S. Andrew, in “Beauvoir’s Place in Philosophical Thought,” explains the theorist’s arguments as follows: “Women’s situation may influence and even impede women’s freedom. While Beauvoir holds women culpable for not taking up their freedom and for the choices they make, she argues that some choices are not available. Neither men nor women can be radically free. All human freedom is situated.”\(^6^1\)

Joyce Carol Oates and Marguerite Duras seem to adhere to Beauvoir’s view. As they employ the technique of imitation, their works show how existentialist notions of freedom, responsibility, choice, and authenticity vary when examined from the perspectives of their female characters. Though neither of these authors openly considered her writings as a part of the existentialist movement (like Albert Camus, who also refused to be labeled “existentialist”), its influence permeates their works. David Coward designates Duras’ *La Vie tranquille* (1944) her

\(^6^0\) Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.
“clearest ‘existentialist’ statement.”\textsuperscript{62} Duras became interested in existentialism during the war, and “clear echoes of Camus and Sartre are detectable as late as \textit{Le Marin de Gibraltar} (1952).”\textsuperscript{63} In addition, the existentialist themes of alienation, freedom, the search for authenticity, and anguish populate most of her later works. These themes are particularly salient in \textit{Moderato Cantabile}, where Duras revises existential theories through the protagonist’s performance. As Coward further states, “[t]he experience of ennui is […] crucial” in most of Duras’ works, “for it helps to locate and identify those forces of oppression which must be resisted by an act of revolt.”\textsuperscript{64} Oates’ fiction also explores fundamentally existential themes such as the burden of freedom, choice, the role of the “other,” alienation, and dread. For instance, Marie Mitchell Urbanski claims that Oates’ famous story “Where are you going, Where have you been?” (which appears in the same collection as “Accomplished Desires”) should be read as “an existential allegory which applies existential initiation rites to the Biblical seduction myth to represent Everyman’s transition from the illusion of free will to the realization of externally determined fate.”\textsuperscript{65}

However, in spite of the predominance of existential themes in their novels and short stories, both Oates and Duras also challenge existentialism (whether intentionally or unintentionally) in their works of fiction and nonfiction. Their interest in existentialism, as well as their disagreements with some of the movement’s doctrines (especially Sartrean), is in fact well documented by their biographers, critics, and interviewers. Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, declared that her own work was influenced by “Faulkner, Kafka, Freud, Nietzsche, Mann,

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 22.
Dostoyevsky, Melville, Stendhal, Proust, and Sartre.”66 In The Deadly Sins/Despair; The One Unforgivable Sin, Oates discusses her interest in what she calls, “the literature of despair” which she encountered “at a time of chronic adolescent insomnia” through “the ravishing experience of reading certain writers—most of them […] associated with what was called European existentialism.”67 In this article, Oates further discusses the impact of writers “linked by so-called existentialist themes” on her generation. She mentions that, in her view, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Mann, Sartre, Camus, Pavese, Pirandello, Beckett, and Ionesco “seemed to characterize the very mission of literature itself: not to uplift, still less to entertain, but to penetrate to the most inward and intransigent of truths.”68

Despite her interest in existentialism, however, Oates also criticized the movement vehemently. For instance, in “The Short Story” she argues that Sartre’s distinction between “living” and “telling,” as presented in La Nausée, is inadequate, claiming that “[i]n making such a blunt distinction between a life of action and a life of reflection, Sartre is insisting that the materials of life cannot become translated immediately into the materials of art.” According to Oates, “[w]ithdrawing from life does not diminish the mystery of life […]; instead, the mystery is deepened.”69 Oates also criticized the role of subjectivity in existentialism, stating that “[t]he ‘subjectivity-is-truth’ of Søren Kieerkegaard and others is an outdated existentialism, which fails to see how the consciousness of any man is an objective event in nature […]]. It is not the private possession of the individual just as the individual is not ‘his’ own private possession, but belongs

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Oates’ interest in the ways in which culture and society interfere with freedom and shape human subjectivity is a recurring theme of her works of fiction.

Although Duras’ affinities with existentialism are evident in her works, her disagreements with Sartre and Beauvoir led the author to distance herself from that literary and philosophical tradition. The Marguerite Duras of 1943, as Laure Adler explains, “est furieusement, et comme beaucoup d’autres jeunes intellectuelles de la rive gauche, naturellement existentialiste. Pourtant elle ne le reconnaîtra jamais cette influence, s’en défendra même avec vigueur, voire avec agressivité”71 (“is furiously, and like many other young Left-Bank intellectuals, naturally existentialist. However, she will never recognize this influence; she will even reject it vigorously, perhaps even violently”). Because of Duras’ writing style and numerous literary influences, ranging from Beckett and Sartre to Hemingway and Dos Passos, the author never identified herself with any literary movement in particular (not even the *nouveau roman*). Furthermore, her unique writing style, which Simone de Beauvoir strongly disliked, as Adler documents in Duras’ biography, led Jean-Paul Sartre to refuse to publish her work in *Les Temps modernes*. These reactions demonstrate that, although the influence of existentialism on Duras’ work is quite evident, she still challenged and departed from many of its premises.

Finally, despite his open admiration for Jean-Paul Sartre, Abelardo Castillo (like Oates and Duras) also challenged Sartrean existentialism. He once stated,

“ningún escritor me influyó como Sartre. Porque tampoco hay casi página de esos libros [*Situations*] en las que no redescubra una idea que hoy siento naturalmente como mía. Y esto no es una mera acotación personal: es un hecho constatable en

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casi todos los intelectuales de la generación del 55 y de mi propia generación. Todos, en algún momento, hemos sentido el derecho a discutir con él. Todos hemos saqueado sus libros. Dicho de una vez: nos enseñó a pensar.72

[no writer has influenced me as Sartre did. Because there is almost no page in those books [Situations] in which I do not rediscover an idea that today I naturally feel as my own. And this is not a mere personal remark: it is a fact that can be observed in almost every intellectual of the generation of 55 and of my own generation. All of us, at some point, felt the need to argue with him. We sacked his books. Let it be said at once: he taught us how to think.]

Indeed, Castillo’s desire to “argue” with Sartre led to frequent dialogues with Sartre’s theories. “El asesino intachable” is a clear example of this pattern. Through his rewriting of Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment, Castillo comments on the role of contingency in relation to freedom and choice. This approach allows him to introduce an element largely neglected by Sartrean existentialism.

The different types and degrees of subversiveness that Castillo, Duras, and Oates produce depend on the employment of imitation in each of their works. In Moderato Cantabile, Duras implicitly contests, through imitation, Sartre’s view of freedom as a “given” attribute. Anne Desbaredes, the novel’s protagonist, attempts to reconstruct and orally reproduce, in the company of a stranger named Chauvin, the story of a woman who was murdered by her lover. As Anne and Chauvin continue to meet at a café, she becomes increasingly subservient as she positions herself in the role of the murder victim. However, her impersonation of the woman

eventually leads to a new understanding of her own self and a major déclic in her behavior. Through this reproduction of a story told within her own novel, Duras questions how women can truly be “free” and explores how dominant discourses predetermine their available choices.

In this novel, language becomes the tool through which Anne recreates herself existentially. Her identification with the victim of the murder story that Chauvin narrates is parodic. By reproducing an existing patriarchal discourse that places women in a position of passivity and submissiveness, Anne is able to break away from this stereotype, recuperate her agency, and achieve authenticity. Doing whatever Chauvin tells her to, Anne follows in the murdered woman’s path, but her death never takes place. Instead, she is able to recognize her own inner death and anguish, to which she has grown accustomed, and “speak” herself into existence through the use of language. Imitating patriarchal discourse and narrating her own story allows Anne to recognize her own oppression and develop a new discourse that will allow her to live authentically. The reader is thus able to benefit both from Anne’s experience as a reader of the murder story as well as from his/her own reading of the novel. *Moderato Cantabile*’s representation of Anne’s narrative experience proves how the act of subverting through imitation may be successful both within and beyond the formal structure of a work.

Likewise, in “Accomplished Desires,” Joyce Carol Oates employs imitation to question the applicability of existentialist theories about freedom, authenticity, and choice to women’s experiences. The story loosely retells Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of the “madwoman in the attic.” As Dorie, a young and beautiful college girl, becomes Barbara

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73 *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* is a book published in 1979 (nine years after the publication of Oates’ story) by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. In this work, which draws its title from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (where the protagonist’s beloved keeps his “mad” wife locked in the attic), Gubar and Gilbert argue that the term madness was commonly employed in nineteenth-century literature written by women as a metaphor for suppressed female revolt and anger. Indeed, “by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the
Scott’s housekeeper and her husband’s mistress, the talented and accomplished Barbara suffers increasing depression and experiences writer’s block. As she allows Dorie to take over her life, Barbara’s isolation and anguish grow by the day. Her own children start to dislike her and tell her that she is “out of [her] mind” and “losing control of [her]self.”74 Barbara feels that she no longer belongs in her home. In fact, the attic is the only place in the house where she is still able to find any comfort. Oates’ story ends as Barbara commits suicide after Dorie becomes pregnant. The young girl “inherits” her predecessor’s marital difficulties, depression, and, of course, the attic. As Oates pays “homage” to Charlotte Brontë’s novel, she raises questions about how women’s decisions may be influenced and even predetermined by patriarchal societies. Like Simone de Beauvoir, Oates also posits that the lack of solidarity among women is one of the major obstacles for the development of a feminine75—or at least non-patriarchal—discourse. Her revision of Jane Eyre, then, builds on Brontë’s criticism of patriarchal society by questioning existentialist notions of choice, freedom, and responsibility. Thus, much of this short story’s subversive potential emerges from the emotions produced through the juxtaposition of “Accomplished Desires” and its parodied work.

Like Oates’ story, Abelardo Castillo’s “El asesino intachable” also pays homage to a famous nineteenth-century novel—Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment (1866)—at the same time that it explores how the notion of contingency affects the existential concept of strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them. What this means, however, is that the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Indeed, much of the poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be” (The Madwoman in the Attic [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984], 85).

75 In Le Deuxième sexe (1949; [The Second Sex]), Simone de Beauvoir shows her concern with the lack of solidarity among women and the absence of “concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit” (The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley [New York: Vintage, 1974], xxv).
choice. As Marta Morello-Frosch explains in the introduction to Castillo’s *Cuentos Completos*, many of Castillo’s stories suggest how useless it is to intend to control one’s destiny when establishing the arbitrariness of possible options and the limited control that an individual has on them. But Castillo does not create characters that are manipulated by destiny, rather he explores ironically the frequent and vain struggles of human will in face of the disorientation created by the fortuitous and the unexpected.76

Indeed, the fortuitous and the unexpected are crucial in Castillo’s short story. The target of his parody, then, is not so much Dostoevsky’s novel, a work of extreme significance in existentialist circles, but a philosophical and literary existentialist tradition for which freedom and choice are thought to produce meaning. In fact, many existentialist works (such as Camus’ *L’Etranger* [The Stranger] and most of Jean-Paul Sartre’s plays) are centered on the significance of choice making. In these works, the positions in which the protagonists are placed very often lead them to make crucial choices that could give meaning to their otherwise meaningless lives.

With this tradition as his background, Castillo bases his parody on the story of a famous existential hero and reveals the limitations of Sartre’s theories about freedom and choice. Like

76 Marta Morello-Frosch, introduction to *Cuentos Completos*, by Abelardo Castillo (Buenos Aires: Alfagura, 1997), 9-10.
Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, Don Cacho, Castillo’s protagonist, decides to murder an innocent old lady. He wants to commit a “crimen puro” ("perfect crime") to see if he is capable of eluding all punishment. However, his murder comes to signify something else due to an unexpected event: his victim is in fact a wealthy (and eccentric) lady who has left her fortune to the person who would murder her. In this short story, Don Cacho’s decision to murder this woman is eclipsed by the new meaning of his action once the victim’s will is released, he confesses to the crime, and he receives her money. Through this plot, Castillo suggests that human beings cannot necessarily control the meaning of their actions. The possibility of behaving authentically or not does not always depend entirely on oneself, despite Sartre’s claims. Castillo’s parody of Dostoevsky’s novel humorously reveals the importance of the role of contingency in the existentialist debate over the concept of choice. However, Castillo’s intention in this story is not to subvert existentialism, but rather to make a contribution to that tradition by shedding light on an aspect of choice that deserves more attention.

As Oates’, Duras’, and Castillo’s works show, the technique of imitation, which allows writers to juxtapose two texts, evokes key emotions that considerably facilitate the subversion of dominant discourses. These writers often manage to elicit an emotional response when the reader observes a major discrepancy with the parodied work or when an element of the parodied text is quoted overtly. For this reason, works that employ imitation must be alert to their insinuations about the kind of connection they have to their parodied texts. Titles, for instance, are chosen very carefully. Duras’ title, *Moderato Cantabile*, announces the main function of imitation in her novel. Referring to a style in which instruments and the human voice can be played, “Moderato Cantabile” already suggests the kind of performance that will be involved in the novel. Unthreateningly, softly, and at a moderate pace, Anne Desbaredes will in fact “play” the role of

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77 Castillo, “El asesino intachable,” 140.
the victim within an existing patriarchal discourse in the very style that the novel’s title announces. Once she masters this discourse, she will stop playing. She will cease to sing in the style of *moderato cantabile*, which, as the piano teacher tells Anne’s son, should remind us of “une chanson qu’on te chanterait pour t’endormir” (“a lullaby”). In this way, Duras’ title foreshadows Anne’s impersonation of the murdered woman through the use of a term that explicitly refers to a style of performance. This places the reader in a double-layered spectating role, as s/he attempts to understand Anne’s interpretation of the murder story through her performance.

Conversely, Joyce Carol Oates’ title, “Accomplished Desires,” forgrounds a major discrepancy between Brontë’s and Oates’ works that illuminates the influence of culture and society on the existential notions of freedom and choice. Once Dorie and Jane Eyre are able to marry their employers after the men’s wives (Barbara and Bertha) commit suicide, Jane’s “accomplished desires” result in a happy life with Edward Rochester, while Dorie experiences extreme isolation and depression in the company of her new husband. Oates’ title suggests to the reader that the young woman may indeed manage to marry the man she is obsessed with. The story’s title, however, acquires an ironic quality once the ending reveals how significantly the experience of accomplished desire plays out in this novel as opposed to Charlotte Brontë’s. Much of this significance is conveyed through the narrator’s shift from Dorie’s to Barbara’s perspective, the representations of their emotions, and the feelings that the story evokes in the reader.

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Finally, Abelardo Castillo’s “El asesino intachable,” which could be translated as “The Flawless Assassin,”79 pokes fun at both the story’s own protagonist and Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov. Indeed, both characters attempt to use their intellect to come up with a perfect murder, but fail. Raskolnikov is troubled by his conscience after murdering the pawnbroker and her sister (and becomes responsible for the fact that he is imprisoned), whereas Don Cacho80 commits a flawless crime and is found guilty because of the inheritance that he is entitled to receive after the murder. At this point, it becomes clear that the story’s ironic title prefigures Castillo’s intention to represent how one’s actions may acquire an entirely different meaning due to uncontrollable and unforeseeable external events. He communicates his perspective on choice mainly through the emotions evoked by his story’s discrepancies with Dostoevsky’s text.

Oates, as well as Castillo, often employs discrepancies within her parodic imitations to elicit key emotions that guide the interpretation of her texts. By alluding to a text that their (ideal) readers may recognize, these writers are able to play with their audience’s expectations. Discrepancies with parodied works may produce a variety of emotions, and Castillo and Oates use them with different purposes in mind. Castillo’s discrepancies tend to induce amusement and suspense (fear and hope), while Oates’ seek to evoke feelings of sorrow, anger, and disgust. In “El asesino intachable,” the narrator’s initial remarks and his own description of himself, which produce suspense and evoke amusement, are significant in shaping the reader’s interpretation of the text. Unlike Raskolnikov, who considers himself superior to most people, Don Cacho describes himself as “igual a casi todo el mundo”81 (“about just like everyone else”). Although

79 “Intachable” also means, ironically, non-erasable (a person who cannot be “rubbed out”—killed—in detective parlance).
80 Don Cacho’s name, in addition, is also ironic as the verb “cachar” means “to catch” in Argentine Spanish.
81 Castillo, “El asesino intachable,” 140.
he claims to be an ordinary man who “piens[a] poco”\textsuperscript{82} (“does not think much”), he still fantasizes about committing a perfect murder to test his own sagacity. It seems to him that “matar con impunidad”\textsuperscript{83} (“killing with impunity”) is a fantasy most people experience at some point in their lives. The short story’s beginning, reminding the reader of \textit{Crime and Punishment}, and this initial difference between Castillo’s parody and its parodied work, then, may perplex the reader as s/he juxtaposes both texts. Don Cacho may be similar to Raskolnikov, but the differences between the two and their respective criminal intentions, which are quite evident from the beginning of his story, create suspense as the reader attempts to predict where the similarities begin and end and how the differences will affect the result of each murder.

Here, it is helpful to consider Jenefer Robinson’s discussion of suspense as a means to understand how Castillo leads the reader interpret his short story as a reflection on choice. Robinson turns to the work of Richard Gerrig, who suggests that “suspense involves the emotions of hope and fear together with a cognitive state of uncertainty about something deemed significant.”\textsuperscript{84} The fact that Don Cacho claims to be an ordinary man (not superior to his peers), and his belief that everyone shares his fantasy of murder are likely to trouble the reader through the evocation of emotions of fear and hope. Since his imminent murder (which is “deemed significant”) is reminiscent of and yet different from Raskolnikov’s, these emotions may rise to the fore. In this way, the reader who experiences these emotions instinctively focuses his/her attention on an element that is key to understanding Castillo’s approach to previous understandings of choice. As the reader draws inferences about how Don Cacho’s murder will differ from Raskolnikov’s, the emotions of fear and hope start guiding his/her interpretation of Castillo’s text.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{84} Robinson, \textit{Deeper Than Reason}, 121.
Abelardo Castillo also appeals to the reader’s emotions in order to comment more broadly on Argentine society and political history at the same time that he builds on past existentialist debates over choice. First, Castillo comically represents the fascination (that often turns into excitement) that some people feel when they read yellow journalism. Second, he makes oblique references to illegitimate governments in Argentina. By indirectly introducing his country’s history of political oppression into his discussion of choice, Castillo is able to emphasize the importance of contingency to existentialist debates over choice, authenticity, and freedom. His story shows how a succession of violent illegitimate governments (such as the one Argentina experienced during most of the second half of the twentieth century) may limit people’s freedom and influence them on an unconscious level in ways that affect their ability to live authentically. The abruptness of military coups, Don Cacho’s unforeseeable murder, and his neighbor’s delirious resolution to leave her fortune to her assassin are various examples of how one’s environment and other people may suddenly interfere with the significance of one’s own decisions.

Castillo’s references to Argentina’s political history help the reader understand the degree to which the omnipresence of violence has permeated the characters’ minds, thereby affecting their freedom and capacity to make choices. Castillo’s interest in representing Argentine history and the psychological impact of violence on the human mind is thus consistent with the River Plate existentialist tradition discussed in previous chapters. In “El asesino intachable,” Castillo describes Don Cacho’s door lady as a person who has grown so accustomed to violence that she actually turns to criminal news for entertainment. Although she is a “good” person, as the protagonist explains, she “escucha los informativos de las radios uruguayas, [y] lee, con fervor,
las noticias policiales de *Crónica*”85 (“listens to the news on Uruguayan radio stations [and] fervently reads *Crónica*’s crime news). Furthermore, the protagonist’s description of his doormaid’s fascination with violence leads him to manifest his belief that “el género humano” (“humankind”) is not “inapelablemente sádico” (“irrevocably sadistic,”) but rather it “posee un substratum demoniaco, un sedimento maligno que, en condiciones favorables, da por resultado actividades como el fascismo, la Sociedad de Beneficencia o los gobiernos”86 (“possesses a demonic substratum, an evil sediment which, under favorable circumstances, leads as a result to activities such as fascism, the Welfare Society or governments”).

Don Cacho’s commentary on how humankind’s “demonic substratum” may grow and ultimately materialize in the form of a government prepares the reader for the most significant reference to Argentine history, which occurs as Don Cacho narrates his thoughts just before committing his murder. As he explains, at that very moment, “recordé una frase histórica. En mitad de la noche, como una revelación, me vino a la memoria: ‘Ni un minuto antes, ni un minuto después’. Entiendo, sí, más de uno podrá preguntarse por qué evoco justamente un gobierno de facto, habiendo presidentes constitucionales que han dicho cosas mucho más bonitas […]. Pero, ¿qué puedo hacer si lo pensé?”87 (“I remembered a historical phrase. In the middle of the night, as in a revelation, it came to my memory: ‘Neither one minute earlier, nor one minute later’. I do understand that more than one person might ask himself why I evoke a de facto government, when there have been constitutional presidents that have said much nicer things […]. But, what can I do if I did think about it?”). This phrase, as Don Cacho’s interlocutor explains in a footnote signed “A.C.”88 is attributed to Pedro Eugenio Aramburu (1903-1970).

85 Castillo, “El asesino intachable,” 140.
86 Ibid., 140.
87 Ibid., 142.
88 The initials are a reference to the author, Abelardo Castillo, who appears to be Don Cacho’s interlocutor.
Aramburu, a general in the Argentine army, orchestrated the military coup against Juan Domingo Perón and became an illegitimate president in 1955. Among his various despotic acts, Aramburu annulled the existing constitution, reinstating one that dated back to 1853, and detained numerous political leaders and their supporters. The phrase “neither one minute earlier nor one minute later” would have been uttered when Aramburu was asked when he would put an end to his de facto government. Thus, Don Cacho’s quote invokes Aramburu’s use of violence to commit repressive and tyrannical acts and reminds the reader of the deliberateness of Don Cacho’s decision to murder his neighbor. When his “perfect crime” backfires as he finds out that he is entitled to inherit his victim’s fortune, Don Cacho experiences contingency’s ability to rob human beings of the chance to determine the meaning of their choices. The thought of his neighbor’s fortune distresses him greatly, to the point that he faints repeatedly, like his Dostoevskian counterpart.

By choosing the act of fainting to manifest Don Cacho’s emotions, Castillo humorously parodies Raskolnikov’s panic attacks. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov faints when he experiences feelings of guilt and remorse. Don Cacho, on the contrary, passes out whenever he is reminded of his victim’s fortune. What troubles him is not having murdered someone, but his ignorance of his neighbor’s wealth. He faints for the first time, for instance, when he realizes that the necklace that he has destroyed (to make his murder look like the result of a robbery) was extremely expensive. He narrates: “Estaba leyendo que el asesino había sustraído un collar valuado en ochenta y cinco millones, cuando me desmayé” (Ibid., 62). It is a way of annihilating an unpleasant element of reality “by eliminating consciousness itself” (Ibid., 62-63). As such, it is an example of bad faith.

90 Castillo, “El asesino intachable,” 144.
that as the murderer he has the legal right to the victim’s inheritance, he passes out again. Don Cacho’s distress, unlike Raskolnikov’s, is motivated by greed. By replacing the moral root of Raskolnikov’s attacks with his own protagonist’s superficial and materialistic concerns, Abelardo Castillo humorously reveals the unexpected effects of contingency. The victim’s unpredictable and eccentric decision not only destroys Don Cacho’s carefully thought-out plan, but also stirs his emotions so much that the police inspector becomes suspicious of him. The comic resolution of Castillo’s story proves how an unexpected event such as the one represented by Castillo may profoundly change the meaning of a person’s actions. With this ending, the story ceases to produce suspense, and the murder is no longer “deemed significant” by the reader. Thus, Castillo’s story departs from Dostoevsky’s novel, leading the reader to a completely different interpretation and revealing how the unexpected and the unforeseeable affect a person’s freedom and choices.

In “Accomplished Desires,” Joyce Carol Oates’ critique of existentialism also emerges through her careful evocation of emotions. As in Castillo’s short story, the most significant difference between Oates’ work and its parodied text is also made clear from the first few lines. The initial distinction between Oates’ and Brontë’s characters evokes emotions that are strategic and key to understanding Oates’ story. Unlike Brontë’s madwoman (who is locked up and concealed in the attic and occasionally attacks various members and guests of the Thornfield Manor), Oates’ “madwoman” is an accomplished Pulitzer Prize-winning author who writes from her attic. Dorie’s desire to usurp Barbara’s life and aquire the latter’s fame and talent greatly differs from Jane Eyre’s complete ignorance regarding the existence of Rochester’s wife. These major discrepancies, which are introduced early in the story, immediately suggest that Barbara’s

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91 Ibid., 145.
“madness” and decision to seclude herself in the attic have nothing to do with insanity. In fact, Barbara’s acceptance of the humiliation and grief that she feels after Dorie’s arrival leads her into a depressive state. Dorie’s naïveté also differs from Jane Eyre’s due to the former’s unfounded expectations of personal fulfillment in her hoped-for roles as mother and wife. When juxtaposed with Bertha’s and Jane Eyre’s personal struggles, the description of Dorie’s and Barbara’s suffering may trigger key emotions that are necessary for comprehending Oates’ parody.

Oates employs emotions performatively in order to discuss the concept of choice within the context of gender in USAmerican society. In this story, although Oates follows Brontë’s plot to a great extent, her shift in perspective from Dorie’s point of view to Barbara’s reveals key differences between these writers’ texts. Unlike Charlotte Brontë, whose main concern is centered on the life of Jane Eyre—a young, plain-looking, and single governess—, Oates is interested in representing the misfortunes of a married, professionally established, and economically stable American woman. With Jane Eyre as her background, Oates is able to show that despite the difference in the position that women held in Victorian England and the position that they enjoy in contemporary U.S. society, women’s existential isolation, lack of fulfillment, and submission to patriarchy remain constant. Thus, unlike other USAmerican existentialist writers, Oates focuses on the need for collective rather than individual action. As the reader moves from the perspective of a “leggy, long-armed, [and] slender”92 Dorie to that of a “big, energetic, [and] high-colored”93 Barbara, s/he is able to contemplate the latter’s eventual exclusion from her own “large, ugly, peeling Victorian home,”94 the emotions that lead to her death, and the disillusionment that Dorie receives as Barbara’s “legacy.” In this way, Oates’s

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93 Ibid., 160-1.
94 Ibid., 160.
shift in perspective reveals how U.S. society influences, if not predetermines, the choices that are available to most women.

Oates’ representation of the emotions of her female characters and, most importantly, their existential anguish, guides the reader’s interpretation of her short story. By evoking compassion, Oates facilitates the understanding of Barbara’s impotence and Dorie’s misfortune. Robinson defines compassion as “a basic emotional response of sadness evoked by a perception or thought of another person’s unfortunate state.”95 Thus, the reader’s sadness is necessary to recognize the adverse situations that Dorie and Barbara must face and to sympathize with either woman. A lack of sympathy on the part of the reader would interfere with the interpretation of the text. Without compassion, the reader could condemn Barbara’s passive acceptance of her unfortunate situation in spite of her intelligence and various accomplishments. However, her extreme loneliness and her feeling of existential anguish, which eventually lead to her death, seek to elicit an emotion of sorrow that helps the reader to understand the scope of Barbara’s hopelessness. In a similar way, without experiencing compassion for Dorie, the reader may view the young girl simply as an evil mistress who receives the punishment she deserves. Her initial disorientation, her desperate desire to please, and her need to belong provide the information meant to evoke compassion for her position, too. Like Barbara herself, the reader comes to understand that “of all of them it was Dorie who was most trapped.”96 By evoking sympathy in the reader, Oates illustrates Robinson’s claim that emotional responses “communicat[e] something important.”97 The discrepancies between “Accomplished Desires” and Jane Eyre function to either reinforce or complement the inferences that the reader makes based on the emotions that the author induces and represents.

95 Robinson, Deeper than Reason, 109.
96 Oates, “Accomplished Desires,” 175.
97 Robinson, Deeper than Reason, 108.
By revealing these discrepancies through emotion, Oates alludes to the difficulties that she perceives in her own society and shows, performatively, the inadequacies of Sartrean views on freedom and choice. The contrast between Oates’ and Brontë’s works elicits emotions without which the reader would not understand many of the key themes in “Accomplished Desires.” Reflecting upon a work of literature without experiencing any emotions, as Robinson notes, does not suffice to develop an adequate interpretation of a text. As Oates juxtaposes her own work and Brontë’s novel, she reveals her interest in portraying the alienation, anxiety, and existential anguish experienced by an educated, well off USAmerican middle class. Unlike Jane Eyre, at the beginning of the story Dorie already has access to everything that she needs to become an independent and successful woman. She attends an expensive private school and has no financial difficulties. However, Dorie believes that “she must be grateful always for her good luck, for there was no justification for her existence any more than there was any justification for the wretched lots of the world’s poor.” Her lack of purpose in life and her feelings of redundancy are the origin of her interest in Mark Arber. Likewise, Barbara has everything that she needs to achieve fulfillment: she is an accomplished writer married to a successful scholar with whom she has had three children. As the narrator points out, however, “[b]eing ‘established’ should have pleased [Barbara and Mark], but instead it led them to long spiteful bouts of eating and drinking in the perpetual New England winter.” In fact, Barbara, unlike Bertha, enjoys the freedom to do whatever she wishes, but still feels trapped. In addition, Mark Arber (like Rochester) is also a successful man, but he is described as “the most disillusioned and the most eloquent of the Harvard men.” His wife’s accomplishments are a source of extreme unhappiness for him.

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98 Ibid., 107.
100 Ibid., 166.
101 Ibid., 161.
Because of his anxiety, Mark “need[s] his prescription for tranquillizers refilled constantly.” In this way, his lack of personal fulfillment contributes to the contrast between Oates’ and Brontë’s texts. This contrast aids readers in gaining the necessary insights to make inferences about the “meaning” of “Accomplished Desires.”

By evoking compassion for female characters with limited choices, Oates invites the reader to reflect on the possibilities of changing women’s position in USAmerican society. Compassion, in fact, leads to “an urge or impulse to action of a certain sort, and where this is impossible […] it requires ‘hope and desire for the relief of the condition by those in a position to provide it’.” Because of this function of compassion, the subversive potential of Oates’s story is by no means threatened by her reinscription of patriarchy through the representation of frustrated and subdued women. Much to the contrary, the experience of compassion for and reflection on these entrapped female characters may lead not only to the acquisition of new beliefs but also to the desire to “relieve” the conditions that produce the women’s sorrow.

The parodic techniques that Oates employs to evoke and represent emotions also function as “coping mechanisms” that affect the reader’s “emotional memory,” thus increasing her story’s subversive power. As Robinson explains, “formal or structural devices in literature play the role of coping mechanisms” which “guide the reader through a work, both encouraging initial emotional responses to characters and events, and also managing those responses.” Parodic

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102 Ibid., 170.
103 Robinson, Deeper Than Reason, 110.
104 In fact, numerous critics, such as Henry Louis Gates, have claimed that Oates had a “troubled relationship” with “normative feminism” because of her insistence on “exploring the nature of female masochism” and her refusal to “add to our supply of positive role models” (Henry Louis Gates, “‘Murder She Wrote’. Review of Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart,” The Nation, February 2, 1990, 28.)
105 Robinson, Deeper Than Reason, 196.
106 Ibid., 207. Moreover, their function as “coping mechanisms” reveals a major difference between emotions evoked by “real” events and those induced by literature. Even though in a work of literature “initial affective responses [treat] the events and characters […] much as if they were in fact real,” (Ibid., 117) emotions are guided “much more carefully than is possible in life” (Ibid., 197).
strategies, in particular, work as self-conscious coping mechanisms as they seek to evoke emotions in the reader to lead him/her to a specific reflection based on an emotional response. In addition, the emotions experienced while reading a parody may encode themselves in what Robinson refers to as the reader’s “emotional memory.” Robinson explains that this memory stores and categorizes a person’s emotional responses by similarity of scenario based on the feelings a certain genre of scenario produces.107 Following Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux, Robinson claims that the “emotional memory,” which is “independent of declarative memory,” may then “influenc[e] [a person’s] thoughts long after [s/he] has finished [a] novel,”108 thus increasing a work’s potential of causing subversive change in a reader’s perspective and life.

In accordance with Jean-Paul Sartre’s theories, Joyce Carol Oates represents anguish as the most subversive of all emotions. Through Barbara’s final confrontation of facticity and the existential anguish that this experience entails, Oates successfully challenges Sartre’s theories on freedom and choice. By showing how Barbara’s newly acquired insights into her inauthentic behavior lead her to seek freedom in death, Oates shows how society limits women’s choices and interferes with their capacity to live authentically. In order to lead the reader to this understanding of her story, Oates makes sure that the ending of “Accomplished Desires” significantly differs from that of Jane Eyre. After Dorie becomes a part of her household, Barbara sinks into depression and becomes increasingly troubled by the perception of her own body, which cannot match Dorie’s beauty and youth. She feels “locked in this particular body”109 and hopeless about her unfortunate situation. The fact that she can only engage in superficial conversations with her friends keeps her from sharing her feelings with other people. Completely

107 Ibid., 116.
108 Ibid., 116.
alienated, having lost her sense of self, and feeling reduced to the facticity of her physical self, Barbara wonders what to do and concludes that “[t]here was no way to escape what the years had made her.” In Barbara’s view, the isolation she feels, her acceptance of her husband’s various infidelities and their accompanying humiliation, and people’s perceptions of her unattractiveness have determined the choices available to her.

The story’s turning point occurs when Dorie gets pregnant and Mark asks Barbara to help the young girl get an abortion so he can attend a conference. Mark’s request is followed by Barbara’s decision to take the girl to the hospital, thus becoming a participant in her husband’s most extreme humiliation of her. This situation is likely to produce repulsion in the reader, who expects Barbara to express indignation towards her husband. Repulsion and disgust, as we saw earlier, involve appraisals of goal incongruence and intrinsic unpleasantness. Goal incongruence means in this case that at least one of the reader’s beliefs (e.g. respect for one’s spouse, the value of human dignity, and so on) is threatened by Mark’s request and Barbara’s compliance. Intrinsic unpleasantness suggests that either Mark may be doing something repulsive with the specific purpose of annoying his wife or that Joyce Carol Oates may be deliberately trying to disturb the reader. If disgust produces withdrawal, then, it is comprehensible, though still surprising, that after much consideration the already depressed Barbara is only able to feel “pity for the girl who was, after all, nobody, and who had no personality, and who was waiting in the ugly maid’s room for her fate to be decided.” In the face of humiliation, Barbara feels sorry for the clueless girl who desires to have a baby. After all, Dorie is the only character who at this point in the story still has the illusion of ever “accomplishing” her own “desires.”

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110 Ibid., 168.
In this way, through Barbara’s decision to commit suicide, Oates demonstrates that the concept of free will (as described by Sartre) is also an illusion. In fact, Barbara’s suicide constitutes her only means of withdrawing from her hopeless situation other than madness and compromise.\textsuperscript{113} It is the only solution that she finds appropriate to free herself from her own unhappiness. Her past decisions, alienation, and the lack of opportunities available to her considerably predetermine her choice in the present. Barbara thus emerges as a part of the “sociedad decadente, desordenada y anómica”\textsuperscript{114} (“decadent, disorderly, and anomic society”) that, according to Marina Fe, Joyce Carol Oates constantly represents in her narratives. Barbara can find no comfort or hope in “la sociedad norteamericana contemporánea, desgastada por la violencia hacia fuera y, sobre todo, hacia adentro, hacia la propia comunidad paralizada por su incapacidad por cambiar las cosas”\textsuperscript{115} (“USAmerican society, worn-out by violence towards the outside, and especially towards the inside, towards its own community paralyzed by its incapacity to change things”). Because of her hopelessness, alienation, and her ultimate embrace of violence towards herself, Barbara Scott becomes emblematic of the USAmerican society that Oates represents in “Accomplished Desires.”

In a similar way, Oates shows that Dorie’s choices are also predetermined by American society. Once she becomes pregnant, Dorie has no choice but to drop out of college in order to raise her own baby and take care of Mark’s children. Reduced to the roles of mother and wife, Dorie feels that “she was herself and that was a fact, a fact she would never overcome.”\textsuperscript{116} What

\textsuperscript{113} Indeed, as Ellen Friedman argues in \textit{Joyce Carol Oates}, \textsuperscript{113} “[s]uccess or failure, transcendence or doom, affirmation or denial do not describe the choices inherent in [Oates’] fiction. Rather, […] compromise—which is both success and failure, but which is neither transcendence nor doom and which includes denial in its affirmation—is the only choice available outside of death or madness” (Ellen G. Friedman, \textit{Joyce Carol Oates} [New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1980], 73).

\textsuperscript{114} Marina Fe, “La prisión del ser: \textit{The Rise of Life on Earth} de Joyce Carol Oates,” \textit{Anuario de Letras Modernas} 10 (2000-01):73.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 73-4.

\textsuperscript{116} Oates, “Accomplished Desires,” 178.
Dorie has become seems unchangeable to her. Her retreat to the attic suggests that her fate will not differ much from Barbara’s. Despite the contrast between their desires, looks, and talents, the choices available to Barbara and Dorie are very much the same. Therefore, Dorie’s joy that her “baby was a girl” because of the “kind of pact or understanding [that there always was] between women”¹¹⁷ may ironically remind the reader of the lack of solidarity between Dorie and Barbara. In addition, it may also make the reader reflect upon the limited future choices available to this baby girl. Like Simone de Beauvoir, who manifests her concern about women’s lack of cooperative organization, Oates suggests that the absence of solidarity among women may be one of the major obstacles to a subversion of patriarchal society that could open up new opportunities for women. To a great extent, Oates indirectly blames her female characters for many of the choices that they make, choices that result in further passivity and submissiveness and cause the erasure of their personalities. However, the numerous references to the widespread alienation and the influence of the patriarchal system indicate that a woman’s choices are extremely limited and even predetermined by her environment.

Moreover, as Oates suggests, even men’s happiness is threatened by patriarchy and alienation. After all, Mark is also disillusioned and is only able to experience some fulfillment once he marries a woman whose accomplishments are far inferior to his own. Oates suggests in this way that until American society changes, women’s freedom and choices will remain largely restricted. In order to become authentic, then, American women must first and foremost attempt to break away from alienation by cultivating solidarity with fellow women. The experience of emotions of compassion and disgust and the inferences that these entail lead to this interpretation of the story. Thus, “Accomplished Desires” may produce in the reader a desire to “relieve”

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 178.
women from the conditions that cause Dorie’s and Barbara’s tragic endings. By doing so, Oates’ story shows how a parody’s subversive potential is by no means threatened by the necessary reinscription of the object of its criticism.

As Abelardo Castillo’s “El asesino intachable” and Joyce Carol Oates’ “Accomplished Desires” show, incongruous imitation is a useful technique that allows writers to elicit emotions through the juxtaposition of texts. A parody’s differences with its parodied work often focus the reader’s attention on key elements of a text that would otherwise be less noticeable or left undetected. In Oates’ and Castillo’s stories, these differences also work as coping mechanisms that help the reader understand these writers’ contributions to existentialist debates over the notions of freedom and choice. These works’ discrepancies with their parodied object thus participate in the subversion of existentialism. The technique of “quoting” or imitating another work in a very open way, as we shall see next, functions in a similar way.

Marguerite Duras’ use of overt imitation in *Moderato Cantabile* reveals her troubled relationship with Sartrean existentialism. Through imitation, Duras reveals that women are capable of living authentically only by consciously participating in the discourses that oppress them. In other words, since women’s choices are limited by patriarchal discourse, women must work from within this dominant discourse in order to understand exactly how their freedom is conditioned. Only after gaining control over patriarchal discourse can women begin to assert themselves. For Duras, in fact, power and discourse are interrelated; they are two sides of the same coin. In *Moderato Cantabile*, Anne must first rewrite the discourse that oppresses her if she intends to live authentically and be able to embrace her freedom. In order to take control of patriarchal discourse, Duras reproduces key elements of the murder story (the scream, wine, death) while reassigning new meaning to each of these elements through a careful evocation of
emotions. In this way, by emphasizing how discourses condition human freedom and predetermine people’s choices, Duras challenges through Anne’s performance Sartre’s view of freedom as a “given” attribute. *Moderato Cantabile*, then, shows how individuals (and particularly women) can be “free” only after they understand (through experience) how oppressive discourses function, take control of them, and attempt to pursue their own desires.

In order to lead the reader to this understanding of her novel, Duras also relies heavily on the evocation of emotions. Emotions, as we saw, affect considerably the way in which the reader interprets a text. In fact, readers who are not able to respond emotionally to Duras’ novel might not even be able to discern the subject of this literary work. Whereas very few “events” happen in this novel, emotions such as desire, sorrow, and fear abound. In fact, due to Duras’ frequent representation of emotions that are never analyzed or commented upon by her narrators, many literary critics have attributed a certain spontaneous quality to Duras’ writing, thus obscuring the complexities of her carefully constructed narrative and reducing it to the mere ebb and flow of consciousness. In “La motivation des styles chez Marguerite Duras: cris et silence dans *Moderato cantabile et La douleur*,” Pascale Michelucci describes Duras as a “non-théoricienne, pour qui l’écriture est première, non la théorie qui y préside” (“non-theorist, to whom writing comes first, not the theory that presides in it”). Furthermore, as Michelucci claims, “[l’]écriture durassienne accorde stylistiquement une grande importance à l’immédiateté de l’expression, […] elle refuse de se transformer en un écrit travaillé et repensé” (“[s]tylistically, Durasian writing gives great importance to the immediacy of expression, […] it refuses to transform itself into a

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118 The attempt to frustrate the reader’s expectations regarding literary conventions is typical of the “nouveau roman,” the literary movement with which Duras’ work has often been associated.

well worked, thought-out piece”).\textsuperscript{120} In my view, this reading of Duras’ writing style does not do justice to her talent and skills. What critics refer to as Duras’ “immediacy of expression” is in fact preceded by a carefully developed theory in which emotions play a very important part. To understand the novel on its own terms, one must carefully analyze both Duras’ style and uses of language and the role of emotions in her novel.

As she carefully recreates the murder story (thereby reinscribing the patriarchal system from which the story emerges), Duras shows some of the deficiencies of Sartre’s theories by revealing how discourses affect human experience. Duras also demonstrates that any discourse, no matter how dominant, can be subverted by destabilizing the meaning of its referents. Conscious imitation or, as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler would call it, “critical mimesis,” proves to be a highly subversive tool when appropriately employed. In her work, Duras uses imitation to dismantle normative heterosexuality and, most importantly, to allow her female protagonist to become empowered though the subversion of patriarchal discourse. Critical mimesis, as Luce Irigaray explains, is able to “faire ‘apparaître,’ par un effet de répétition ludique, ce qui devait rester occulte” (“make ‘visible’, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible”).\textsuperscript{121} Judith Butler also describes this process of imitation as functioning “not as enslavement or simple reiteration of the original, but as an insubordination that appears to take place within the very terms of the original, and which calls into question the power of origination.”\textsuperscript{122} In Duras’ novel, through repetition, Anne is thus able to successfully subvert patriarchal and existentialist discourses while attributing new meaning to key elements and “motifs” of the murder story.

For instance, the motif of the scream foreshadows Anne’s exploration of discourse as a

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{121} Irigaray, \textit{Ce sexe que n’en est pas un}, 74; This Sex Which is Not One, 76.
\textsuperscript{122} Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter}, 45.
means of transition from inauthentic to authentic life. In *Moderato Cantabile*, the scream, which initially represents the murdered woman’s defeat, submission, and hopelessness, eventually changes in meaning through its juxtaposition with Anne’s scream at childbirth. Duras’ poignant description of the victim’s scream, which is meant to disturb the reader, clearly contrasts with Anne’s own cry of life: “Dans la rue, en bas de l’immeuble, un cri de femme retentit. Une plainte longue, continue, s’éleva et si haut que le bruit de la mer fut brisé. Puis elle s’arrêta, net. [...] Le bruit de la mer resucita de nouveau” (“In the street downstairs a woman screamed, a long, drawn-out scream so shrill it overwhelmed the sound of the sea. Then it stopped abruptly. [...] The sound of the sea moved in again”).

This scream is, above all, a complaint and an expression of pain (both meanings of the word “plainte”) that abruptly “shatters” the sound of the sea (another recurrent motif in Duras’ novel). The English translation sacrifices much of the strength and imagery of the original French. In the first sentence, for example, Duras writes that “a scream burst in sound” (retentit). The word “briser” (to shatter) implies that the scream interfered with the sound of the sea in a much more violent way than the English word “overwhelm” would suggest. Finally, the last sentence in the quote above states that the sound of the sea “resuscitated” (resucita). The words “moved in again” do not adequately evoke the contrast between life and death that the sea and the scream come to represent, respectively. Thus, when the victim screams, the complaint that she utters denotes a loss of vitality, freedom, renovation, and harmony, all states which Anne eventually achieves towards the end of the novel. When Duras juxtaposes the victim’s scream with Anne’s own cry of life, then, she anticipates that Anne’s own symbolical death will differ from the murdered woman’s.

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124 Indeed, throughout *Moderato Cantabile*, “la mer” (“the sea,” which in French may also be heard phonetically as “the mother” [la mère]) comes to signify freedom, life, renovation, and harmony.
125 Significantly enough, the scream itself (instead of the woman who screams) performs the action in this sentence.
Anne’s life-giving scream suggests that motherhood may be Anne’s only potential source of happiness, thus disclosing the numerous ways in which Anne’s life is lacking. Indeed, the reader can infer from Duras’ representation of her life that patriarchy (epitomized by her husband and Chauvin) has considerably delimited Anne’s freedom and reduced her choices. As a high-class housewife, Anne leads a monotonous life in which she must conform to others’ expectations. As the murderer’s desirous gaze piques Anne’s curiosity, the victim’s scream triggers her own progressive confrontation of her desires. Indeed, the pursuit of desire (whether sexual or otherwise) is very significant not only because it is the force that drives most, if not all, of the actions in *Moderato Cantabile*, but also because of the implications that desire has from an existential perspective.

Significantly, Duras’ approach to desire goes hand in hand with Sartre’s definition of consciousness as desire. For Sartre, as Fell explains, consciousness is the “quest to regain a ‘being’.” It is the desire to search for one’s own self. Human reality, then, “is a perpetual surpassing toward a coincidence with itself which is never given” (*Being* 89). In Duras’ novel, as Anne reproduces the murder story, she eventually ceases to see herself as the object of other people’s desires, regains her freedom through the experience of anguish (as she recognizes her inner “death”), and becomes a desiring self. As such, she is able to determine and articulate her own wishes, stop being subservient, and subvert patriarchal discourse. In the company of Chauvin, who bribes her into meeting with him with the promise of reconstructing the murder story, Anne is thus able to recognize and pursue her own desires.

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126 Sartre discusses the concept of consciousness in many of his works, most notably in *Being and Nothingness*.
128 Chauvin’s name is very significant. In French, the term “chauviniste,” which comes from the name of Nicolas Chauvin (a nineteenth-century French soldier at the service of Napoleon Bonaparte), is used to refer to individuals who are extremely patriotic. During the 1960s, especially in the English language, this word took on its gender-related meaning. “Chauvin,” CNRTL. *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales*, http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/chauviniste.
Anne’s desire and embrace of freedom are represented through the act of drinking—a motif that also changes in meaning throughout the novel. Originally, drinking carries a negative connotation as the murdered woman is pejoratively described as “une ivrogne” (“a drunkard”). Like the murdered woman, Anne also gets inebriated during her meetings with Chauvin. Wine not only allows Anne to relax, but also comes to represent her own desire. As she drinks, she becomes increasingly interested in the erotic undertones of Chauvin’s obsessive description of the “fleur blanche de magnolia” (“white magnolia [flower]”) that Anne supposedly once wore “[a]u-dessus de [ses] seins à moitié nus” (“[a]bove [her] breasts, which were half bare”). The motif of drinking, which represents her own desire, and the magnolia flower, which represents Chauvin’s, turn out to be fundamental for understanding the novel’s denouement.

During a dinner party, Anne is placed within the context of her own home and social class. Other rich women like herself are present, but Anne’s behavior makes her appear an outsider. The description of these women highly contrasts with Anne’s inner state. As they eat, “[l]e saumon repasse dans une forme encore amoindrie. Les femmes le dévoreront jusqu’au bout. Leurs épaules nues ont la luisance et la fermeté d’une société fondée, dans ses assises, sur la certitude de son droit, et elles furent choisies à la convenance de celle-ci” (“[t]he remains of the salmon are offered around again. The women will devour it to the last mouthful. Their bare shoulders have the gloss and solidity of a society founded and built on the certainty of its rights, and they were chosen to fit this society”). The female guests only seek pleasure in devouring the food they crave, thus remaining within the pre-set social boundaries considered acceptable for an aristocratic lady. Conversely, Anne’s craving can only be appeased with wine: “Sa bouche est désèchée par d’autre faim que rien non plus ne peut apaiser qu’à peine, le vin” (“Her own

130 Ibid., 60; 88.
131 Ibid., 103-4; 108.
mouth is desiccated by another hunger that nothing, except perhaps the wine, can satisfy”).132 By getting inebriated at her own house, in front of her husband and acquaintances, Anne recognizes and publicizes her right to pursue her own desires. She also manifests her need to mark a difference between her female guests and herself. The fact that the magnolia that she wears on her chest “se fane tout à fait” (“is completely wilted”)133 reveals that her desire is finally free. Anne’s symbolic death, which she seals with a kiss in the final pages, marks the end of her submission to patriarchal discourse.

In this way, Duras’ reproduction of a story told within her own novel successfully stages the interdependence of discourses and power, thus revealing, through parodic strategies, some of the deficiencies of Sartrean existentialism. Her novel proposes that women must subvert existing dominant discourses in order to develop discourses based on their own experiences. To be of any relevance to women, existentialism also needs to be rewritten from a non-patriarchal perspective that addresses the experiences of women. It needs to reflect how the notions of freedom, choice, authenticity, alienation, and so on are experienced from women’s perspectives.

All three authors stake their own claim in challenging the precepts of existentialism. Like Joyce Carol Oates, Duras demonstrates that traditional existentialist discussions of freedom and choice are not applicable to the decisions of her female characters. Neither do existentialist debates account for the role of contingency, as Abelardo Castillo shows in his own story. By turning to the techniques of (overt or incongruous) imitation, Castillo, Oates, and Duras evaluate the weaknesses of existentialism and attempt to subvert and/or build on this philosophical and literary tradition. Whether it is to show the need of developing a “feminist” existentialism or to

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132 Ibid., 107; 109-10.
133 Ibid., 111; 111.
account for the interdependence of individual and collective freedom, Oates, Duras, and Castillo turn to the technique of parodic imitation to voice their opinions.

Existentialist writers (as well as authors who are interested in existentialism) are frequently drawn to the parodic strategies of overt and incongruous imitation because of the potential of these strategies to subvert other discourses. As a part of their subversive processes, parodic techniques rely on the evocation of emotions, which, from an existential perspective, are regarded as (potentially meaningful) choices. By representing and inducing emotions, parodic strategies guide and manage the reader’s interpretation of a text, thus anticipating the acquisition of beliefs that interpretation entails and influencing the reader’s future actions through the “education” of his/her emotions.

In the literary works analyzed in this chapter, Duras, Castillo, and Oates challenge existentialism (and patriarchy, in the case of Duras’ and Oates’ works), replenishing this movement by introducing new insights from their respective national contexts. The parodic techniques that they employ also allow them to both depart from and contribute to the existing existentialist literary trends that developed in the United States, France, and the River Plate region. For instance, Joyce Carol Oates shares with USAmerican existentialist writers her interest in showing how the power that the United States exerts over its citizens increases people’s alienation and leads to their inability to experience personal fulfillment. Oates also portrays the same growing conformism, lack of solidarity, and indifference that numerous U.S. writers perceive in American society. However, unlike many U.S. existentialist authors, Oates is more interested in highlighting the importance of collective action than individual action because she sees collective action as intimately related with individual freedom.
Conversely, Abelardo Castillo shares with River Plate existentialist writers the interest in exploring his country’s history. Familiarity with the historical events referenced in his stories is key to the interpretation of his texts. Moreover, Castillo’s representation of the impact of repressive illegitimate governments on people’s psyches is consistent with the interest in psychology and psychoanalysis that is characteristic of River Plate existentialist writers.

Finally, Duras shares with many French existentialist writers an interest in examining the various interconnections between individual and collective action. Although Duras focuses on one character only, her work emphasizes how individual freedom may be influenced by a person’s environment and by collective existing discourses. Duras also explores to what extent a single individual can subvert a collective dominant discourse.

Although the works that I analyzed in this chapter still contribute to developing literary trends that are typical of USAmerican, French, and River Plate existentialist writers, in many postmodern works these national trends fade into the background or disappear completely. In fact, literary works, regardless of nationality of origin, that combine existentialist and postmodern concerns and techniques often converge in their points of emphasis. In the next and final chapter, then, I examine Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, Griselda Gambaro's “Las paredes,” and Vassilis Alexakis’ *Contrôle d'identité* in an attempt to explain what their “postmodern existentialism” consists of and how it relates to the prior traditions of French, River Plate, and U.S. existentialist literatures.
¿Por qué nos inquieta que Don Quijote sea lector del Quijote y Hamlet sea espectador de Hamlet? Creo haber dado con la causa: tales inversiones sugieren que si los caracteres de una ficción pueden ser lectores o espectadores, nosotros, sus lectores y espectadores, podemos ser ficticios.

Jorge Luis Borges

¿Qué es la vida? Una ilusión, una sombra, una ficción

Pedro Calderón de la Barca

Following the decline of existentialist philosophy in the late 1960s, language-based postmodern theories reached a peak while addressing various existentialist concerns, such as freedom and responsibility, as products of ideology or as “metanarratives” (méta-récits). Since Jean-François Lyotard first coined this term in his work La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir (1979), postmodern critics have employed the words “grand narrative” and

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1 (“Why does it disquiet us to know that Don Quixote is the reader of the Quijote, and Hamlet is a spectator in Hamlet? I believe I have found the answer: those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious.” Jorge Luis Borges, “Magias parciales del Quijote,” Otras Inquisiciones. Obras Completas (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2005), 2: 50; Other Inquisitions, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms [New York: Washington Square Press, 1966], 148.)


“metanarrative” to describe authoritative accounts of human nature and history that make a claim for universality. Because of its focus on the critique of grand narratives and its analysis of the “postmodern condition,” postmodern theory initially attacked existentialism as yet another ideology-driven system of thought. Nevertheless, postmodern critical tactics also cut both ways: Critics such as Stuart Sim and Lloyd Spencer, among others, have accused postmodernism itself of being “symptomatic of the ills that need to be diagnosed” and of having become “its own grand narrative.” Furthermore, as Spencer points out, neo-Marxist critics also “allege that postmodernist criticism is always already complicit in the system that it criticizes.” To a great extent, both postmodernism and existentialism have been blamed for not practicing what they preach. In fact, the relative inability of both movements to develop insightful theories to discuss human freedom without arriving at a dead end suggests that, upon closer examination, postmodernism and existentialism may have a lot more in common in their aporetic predicaments.

In this regard, William V. Spanos’ insights, as presented in “The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination,” reveal a crucial connection between existentialism and postmodernism: “the postmodern imagination [...] is an existential imagination.” Postmodernism and existentialism, indeed, also share the failure to resolve major existential concerns such as the possibilities of leading an “authentic” life, combating discourses of power, embracing freedom, and so on. Despite criticisms, however, these movements have

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6 Spencer, Postmodernism, Modernity, and the Tradition of Dissent,” 166.
7 I will use the word “movement” to refer to postmodernism, modernism, and existentialism, even though the terms “cultural and artistic phenomenon,” or “trend” might be more appropriate.
provided important insights from which many of their strengths derive. Thus, a comparison of the strong and weak points of existentialism and postmodernism may allow us to envision a more fruitful, appropriate, and satisfying theory with which to examine contemporary society and its artistic and literary production.

This chapter, then, investigates the relationship between existentialist and postmodern theory. I contend that, when juxtaposed in the form of fiction, existentialist and postmodern explorations sometimes offer more valuable theoretical stances and practical solutions than traditional postmodern and existentialist discursive theories. By reintroducing concepts such as “freedom,” “responsibility,” and “authenticity” into postmodernism, literary works such as Griselda Gambaro’s *El desatino y otros cuentos*[^9] (1965, Argentina), Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*[^10] (1983, United States), and Vassilis Alexakis’ *Contrôle d’identité*[^11] (1985, France) provide more compelling and plausible explorations of human reality without necessarily arriving at “dead-ends,” creating “grand narratives,” or leading to nihilism. Furthermore, these works are perfect examples of the intricate ways literature and art can sometimes comment more judiciously on certain issues than theory and plain language. Therefore, the “postmodern existentialism” of the literary works analyzed in this chapter may provide critics with more fertile grounds on which to theorize key elements of human existence.

Before turning to these examples of postmodern existentialist literature and attempting to analyze how they operate within each of their respective regions and literary traditions, we must first elucidate the relationship among existentialism, postmodernism, and modernism. In undertaking such an enterprise, it is not only useful but also inevitable to offer definitions of

[^9]: Griselda Gambaro, *El desatino y otros cuentos* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1965). Many of Gambaro’s plays have been translated into English; however, this collection of short stories is an exception.
these terms as I use them here, even if, at their very core, these movements seek to avoid or go beyond all possible definitions. In any case, once this relationship is outlined, I proceed to examine these exemplary works to explore how the existentialist literary trends analyzed in the previous chapters converge in these postmodern fictions. Finally, I evaluate to what extent and in what ways these works’ “postmodern existentialism” fails or succeeds to address existential concerns.

**Postmodernism, Existentialism, and Modernism**

As has been discussed in this study, existentialism has contributed to the fields of philosophy and theory, literature, film, and psychology. As a movement, existentialism is characterized by its tendency to either incorporate a religious or spiritual dimension into its theories (e.g. Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich, most notably\(^\text{12}\)) or to promote non-religious or even atheist theories of existentialism (Sartre being the most prolific advocate of the latter). As I discussed in my introduction, the common denominator of most existentialist philosophies may be described as a concern with the study of existence from a human-centered perspective. Existentialists commonly theorized on the ways in which human beings experience the world around them, as well as on the creation and understanding of their senses of self. For instance, philosophers such as Hegel and Sartre,\(^\text{13}\) and, most remarkably, Simone de Beauvoir explore the tension between notions of “self” and “other” and suggest that an individual defines him/herself

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\(^{12}\) See, for instance, Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Dread* (1844) and Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* (1952) and *Systematic Theology* (1951–63).

\(^{13}\) See Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807; [*Phenomenology of Spirit]*) and Sartre’s *La Transcendance de l’ego* (1937; [*The Transcendence of the Ego]*) and *L’Etre et le néant* (1947; [*Being and Nothingness]*).
as a subject through alterity. Moreover, Beauvoir\textsuperscript{14} extends this dynamic to issues of gender and examines the various ways in which women have been defined by men as the major source of gender inequality.

In addition, existentialists also analyze how human freedom is commonly curtailed by one’s own actions, other people, and more broadly by institutions. They focused on problems of epistemology and alienation and discussed the nature of feelings of “néant” (nothingness) and being “de trop” (redundant or superfluous), to use Sartre’s terms. These notions, which are related to Camus’ “absurde” and Kierkegaard’s concept of “dread,” constitute some of the key concepts of existential philosophy. Other common existentialist concerns include the discussion of “authenticity,” a notion that occupies a central role in the works of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Heidegger, which Sartre contrasts with living in a state of “mauvaise foi” (bad faith). This term, which is also related to Nietzsche’s concept of “ressentiment,” is defined in \textit{L’Être et le néant} as “négation de soi” (“self-negation”)\textsuperscript{15} and as a “mensonge à soi” (“lie to oneself”).\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, \textit{mauvaise foi} consists of “masquer une vérité déplaisante ou […] présenter comme une vérité une erreur plaisante” (“hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth”).\textsuperscript{17} Thus, bad faith is characterized by its deliberateness; in fact, as Sartre explains, “[o]n ne subit pas sa mauvaise foi, on n’en est pas infecté, ce n’est pas un \textit{état}” (“[o]ne does not undergo his bad faith; one is not infected by it, it is not a \textit{state}”).\textsuperscript{18} According to Sartre, human beings have the choice to either live authentically or remain within a state of \textit{mauvaise foi}.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Sartre, \textit{L’Être et le néant}, 83; \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 47.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 83; 48.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 84; 49.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 84; 49.
\textsuperscript{19} Various authors have discussed the concept of \textit{mauvaise foi}. I use Sartre’s definitions because much of his writing was devoted to the analysis and exploration of this seminal notion.
Moreover, existentialists like Sartre also argued that, since existence precedes essence, human beings enjoy absolute freedom—another existentialist theme *par excellence*—in making choices and creating themselves. This freedom, which confers a great degree of responsibility, often becomes a burden instead of a source of enjoyment. Indeed, as it requires a constant recognition of one’s own responsibility, this freedom is often denied by individuals. Sartre considers the refusal to embrace one’s total freedom and the rejection of the responsibility for one’s own actions as two major types of bad faith. Although he also acknowledges that institutions and life events might interfere with one’s total freedom, Sartre still contends that one must act responsibly, in accordance with one’s own beliefs. As a result, leading an authentic life involves a ceaseless self-supervision and evaluation of one’s actions.

Typically existentialist dichotomies such as the ones outlined above (authentic vs. inauthentic life, responsible action vs. bad faith, and so on), and all-encompassing authoritarian concepts such as “absolute freedom” constitute the grounds on which postmodern theorists based much of their criticism of existentialism. To some extent, these concepts and dichotomies seemed to follow the patterns and logic of the concept of “metanarrative,” as described by Lyotard, who urged postmodern critics to become suspicious of such discourses’ assertions of legitimacy. According to Lyotard, the term postmodern itself may be defined as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” As Stuart Sim explains, for Lyotard metanarratives are theories “whose authority must never be questioned,” which “pretend to have the answers for all society’s problems” and “resist any attempt to change their form (narrative).” From this perspective, existentialism, most specifically Sartrean existentialism, may be perceived as a

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21 Sim, “Postmodernism and Philosophy,” 8.
22 Ibid., 9.
23 Ibid., 8.
movement assuming an authoritarian tone and erecting its theories through a somewhat rigid set of categories. In this light, it is not surprising that the postmodern disbelief in inflexible, all-embracing postulations led to postmodernists to reject and dismiss existentialism.

As Frederic Jameson explains in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), postmodernism may have emerged as a result of a “radical break or coupure” with “the final, extraordinary flowering of a high modernist impulse” which was “spent and exhausted” with “abstract expressionism in painting, existentialism in philosophy, the final forms of representation in the novel, the films of the great auteurs, or the modernist school of poetry.”

Clearly, as Jameson shows, if we look at postmodernism as a break from many of the central doctrines and practices of modernism, existentialism then becomes relegated to the category of a “high modernist impulse” and, as a result, may be considered “pre-postmodern.” However, if we look at postmodernism as a movement in continuity with the modernist project, or as a development or extension of some of the latter’s main concerns, it might be more efficacious to study existentialism as a cultural phenomenon that overlaps with both modernism and postmodernism in various respects.

As Ernesto Laclau claims in “Politics and the Limits of Modernity,” “[p]ostmodernity cannot be a simple rejection of modernity; rather, it involves a different modulation of its themes and categories, a greater proliferation of its language-games.” In a similar way, existentialism also addresses modern and postmodern “themes and categories” from a different (and sometimes not-so-different) perspective. Furthermore, as Ihab Hassan concludes in “Towards a Concept of Postmodernism” (in which provides a list of postmodern authors and artists), postmodernists do

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not constitute a “movement, paradigm, or school” but, rather, “evoke a number of related cultural
tendencies, a constellation of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes. These we call
*postmodernism*.”²⁶ As I intend to show in this chapter, existentialists also share many of these
postmodern cultural tendencies, values, procedures, and attitudes.

Before comparing the different approaches each movement has taken to address their
shared concerns, it will be useful to briefly overview some of the key ideas and practices of
postmodernism. As Christopher Butler argues in *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction*,
skepticism constitutes one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism.²⁷ Stuart Sim
supports this statement with his claim that “[o]verall, postmodern philosophy is to be defined as
an updated version of skepticism, more concerned with destabilizing other theories and their
pretensions to truths than setting up a positive theory of its own; although of course to be
skeptical of the theoretical claims of others is to have a definite program of one’s own.”²⁸ In
addition to skepticism and incredulity toward metanarratives, as Butler explains, postmodernism
is also concerned with the deconstruction of “previously trusted relationship[s], like [the] one
between language and the world.”²⁹ Moreover, the study of the construction of meanings comes
to play a central role, as is evidenced in “The Death of the Author” (1977), where Roland
Barthes argues that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the
‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none
of them original, blend and clash.”³⁰

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²⁶ Ihab Hassan, “Towards a Concept of Postmodernism,” *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New
²⁸ Sim, “Postmodernism and Philosophy,” 13.
²⁹ Ibid., 18.
 experientialism.freewebspace.com/barthes06.htm.
Among the many other postmodern themes and practices, the rejection of all forms of realism is a common denominator among most postmodern theories and literary works. For instance, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernist fiction “puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin.”\(^{31}\) The postmodern emphasis on the critique of realism also led to a different understanding of human identity among postmodernists. As Christopher Butler explains, “[t]he postmodernist self […] is very differently conceived from the self at the centre of liberal humanist thought, which is supposed to be capable of being autonomous, rational, and centred, and somehow free of any *particular* cultural, ethnic, or gendered characteristics.”\(^{32}\)

Furthermore, in postmodernism, the construction of human identity is compared with the processes of fiction. Thus, the inseparability of the realm of the real and the world of representation became yet another major postmodern concern. For instance, Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, among other theorists,\(^{33}\) discuss in their works the notion of a “crisis of representation.” On the one hand, Baudrillard explores the concept of “simulacrum” and claims that an image can be read in four possible ways: as “the reflection of a basic reality,” as “mask[ing] and pervert[ing] a basic reality,” as “mask[ing] the absence of a basic reality,” and, finally, as “bear[ing] no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”\(^{34}\) Thus, according to Baudrillard, a simulacrum is not a representation of the real; it is itself real, or, in


\(^{33}\) Such as Gilles Deleuze, for instance.

fact, “hyperreal,” to use Baudrillard’s own term. On the other hand, Jameson also believes that “with postmodernity, signs have been relieved of their function of referring to the world, and ‘this brings about the expansion of the power of capital into the realm of the sign, of culture and representation, along with the collapse of modernism’s prized space of autonomy’.” As Jameson and Baudrillard attest, the act of representation and the world of images occupy a central role in postmodern theory. In fact, the study of the relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified,” or between images and what they come to represent, is also employed to destabilize authoritarian imperatives in society. The task of undermining such imperatives could possibly be designated as the ultimate goal of postmodern theory. However, this task has also become the target of much criticism of postmodernists.

Because of its emphasis on skepticism and relativism, postmodern theory has been criticized for its inability to offer practical views or viable solutions for the benefit of society. Disrupting the ways in which human beings commonly perceive things might be enlightening, and it is also true that whenever something is criticized, an affirmation of some kind is inevitably being made. Nevertheless, postmodernism has often been accused of offering criticism that leads nowhere. For instance, as Butler explains, “the accusation frequently made against deconstructor postmodernists [is] that they are just sceptics who cannot make significant moral or political commitments.” In the introduction to The New Constellation: The Ethical-political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity, Richard J. Bernstein also claims that “the very ‘grammar’ of critique requires some standard, some measure, some basis for critique. Otherwise there is —as

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36 Simply put, the term “signifier” (significant) refers to the form of a sign, whereas the “signified” (signifié) refers to its meaning. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) discusses these terms in Course in General Linguistics. (La Salle: Open Court Classics, 1984; Cours de linguistique générale. Paris: Payot, 1965. Published posthumously in 1916).
Habermas claims—the danger of the critical impulse consuming itself.\textsuperscript{38} In this way, the apparent purposelessness, impracticability, or self-consumption of postmodern criticism has been regarded as the major weakness of postmodernism. The successor to existentialism and postmodernism must not only disrupt the way in which human beings perceive the world around them, but also allow for the development of viable solutions to counter the magnetism of the nihilistic abyss. In this regard, both existentialism and postmodernism have failed to a great extent as they do not manage to succeed in providing answers to existential questions.

Curiously, however, in their wariness toward existentialism, postmodern theorists have both overlooked their similarities with this philosophy and neglected to acknowledge that many postmodern authors were directly influenced by existentialist philosophers and writers. For instance, Michel Foucault’s concern with the rise of unfreedom is highly reminiscent of Sartre’s theories and Judith Butler’s \textit{Gender Trouble} (1990) is overtly indebted to Simone de Beauvoir’s \textit{Le Deuxième sexe} (1949). Frederic Jameson and Lewis Gordon, to name just a few, are also among the many postmodern theorists that have drawn heavily on existential philosophy. In fact, postmodernism’s “existential imagination,” as Spanos puts it, can be clearly observed in many of the postmodern concerns that I have just outlined. For instance, the postmodern interest in skepticism and relativism is not unlike the existential preoccupation with examining human reality from the subjective perspective of human experience. When theorizing from such a perspective, a skeptic or relativist attitude inevitably follows. The postmodern reformulation of the concept of identity also has much in common with the existential discussion of self and other. Existentialists such as Beauvoir saw human identity as the product of a given context, an individual’s interaction with that context, and his/her actions to create him/herself as a project.

By no means does such a view reveal a rigid or essentializing conception of reality; on the contrary, it implies a certain degree of fluidity and creativity similar to that encouraged by postmodern theory.

Other postmodern concerns such as the relationship between discourses and power, the functioning of language, and the problems of representation have also been addressed by existentialist theories, although to a much lesser degree. However, the major point of convergence between existentialism and postmodernism is their desire to undermine authoritarian imperatives that claim legitimacy. In the absence of absolute criteria, both postmodernism and existentialism actively seek to show how human beings are constantly assailed by authoritarian discourses. However, to a great extent, both existentialism and postmodernism failed in creating a theory that would effectively criticize existing systems of power without imposing new metanarratives. If we are to envision a theory capable of providing more satisfying answers to existential concerns, we must return to Lyotard’s interrogative as formulated in *The Postmodern Condition* and ask ourselves: “Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?”

**Postmodern Existentialism**

In this attempt to address Lyotard’s question, I use works of fiction as my prooftexts. As representatives of a “postmodern existentialist literature,” the short stories of *El desatino y otros cuentos* and the novels *City of Glass* and *Contrôle d’identité* address both postmodern and existentialist concerns from new perspectives that “resuscitate” some form of the notion of “legitimacy.” In these works, Griselda Gambaro, Paul Auster, and Vassilis Alexakis combine

references to concepts considered typical of metanarratives and postmodern techniques that constantly disrupt the reader’s understanding of their works. This combination of metanarrative and postmodern techniques allows these writers to elaborate representations of reality that are closer to the experience of reality in daily life. In other words, these representations insert an impression of stability and certainty into a backdrop of disorientation. In these works, although the protagonists’ understandings of the worlds around them is often torn to pieces, the protagonists always find new points of reference to reorient themselves, some grounds on which to build systems of thought and belief that, in turn, are then undermined. In this way, Gambaro, Auster, and Alexakis show how metanarratives are both “illegitimate,” as they do not refer to anything more lawful or truer than themselves, and capable of providing impressions of order and purpose that are necessary (or at least desirable) to find a sense of direction in human lives.

Postmodern existentialism, as explored in these works, is able to reincorporate the notion of metanarrative into its discourse and reassign to it a sense of “legitimacy” that is inevitably personal, temporal, and fluid. For instance, in Gambaro’s “Las paredes,” the reader observes the protagonist’s nightmarish world from the perspectives of the three main characters and perceives how the central concepts of freedom, responsibility, and authenticity operate and evolve throughout the narration, yet without suggesting any form of closure or ultimate truth. This is achieved through Gambaro’s use of metafiction and careful selection of narrative techniques that destabilize the reader’s understanding of her story.

Gambaro’s, Auster’s, and Alexakis’ works present their modified concept of metanarrative through the implementation of typically postmodern techniques such as the abundant use of language play and diverse examples of metafiction. The numerous references to other works of literature and to the act of writing itself play a fundamental role in El desatino y
otros cuentos, City of Glass, and Contrôle d’identité. For instance, in Auster’s and Alexaki’s novels, the protagonists come to suspect or even realize that they are fictional and must face the anguish caused by such a revelation. Their lack of ontological essence and the limitation on their freedom thus becomes a burden and a major concern. In Gambaro’s short stories, the protagonists also fall into desperation when they cannot tell whether they are waking or dreaming and try to rebel against presentations of reality and their own selves. Thus, while choosing to represent existential concerns through a postmodernist lens, these three authors strengthen the legitimacy of such concerns without cliiming univocal or universal value.

In this regard, William Spanos’ analysis of “the post-modern strategy of decomposition” from the perspective of existentialism elucidates the convergence of postmodern writing and existentialist theory. He writes:

In the more immediate language of existentialism, [the post-modern strategy of decomposition] exists to generate anxiety or dread: to dislodge the tranquillized individual from the “at-home of publicness,” from the domesticated, the scientifically charted and organized familiarity of the totalized world, to make him experience what Roquentin sees […]. [Such experiences] reveal the Urgrund, the primordial not-at-home, where dread, as Kierkegaard and Heidegger and Sartre and Tillich tell us, becomes not just the agency of despair but also and simultaneously of hope, that is, of freedom and infinite possibility.40

As Spanos suggests, postmodern strategies may provide writers with a form suited to exploring existential concerns without resulting in metanarratives or nihilism. Gambaro’s, Auster’s and Alexakis’ texts support this hypothesis. Their intriguing plot twists and approaches expose alternative forms of representation, such as the use of metafiction. These alternative forms

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become the means through which the authors effectively address common existential themes from a postmodern perspective.

**Existentialism and the Postmodern Plot**

The plots of postmodern works are often characterized by the predominance of metafictional references and language play.\(^{41}\) They also require that readers actively participate in the interpretation of the plot (or, sometimes, the lack thereof) being narrated or represented. Moreover, postmodern storylines usually contain gaps and contradictions that disorient the reader. In this way, by interfering with the reader’s tendency to mentally reconstruct a semblance of order and logical coherence, authors prevent their reader from fully understanding what is being narrated. Moreover, postmodern authors often achieve this rhetorical end by constructing a partial or incomplete narrative that limits the reader’s perspective; this technique becomes a necessary element that maintains the reader in active conversation with the text, rather than in a subordinate or passive position. As a result, the postmodern plot commonly allows the reader to take a peek at the process of writing itself and reveals its own status as a work of fiction. As Julio Cortázar phrased it by way of Morelli in *Rayuela*, the reader becomes an “accomplice” who plays along as he/she reads and participates in elucidating the “reality” framed by the writer.

Vassilis Alexakis’ novel is a prime example of many of these writing strategies, some of which are already apparent in its very first chapter. *Contrôle d’identité* begins as the protagonist, first referred to as “le voyageur”\(^ {42}\) (“the traveler”), realizes, while traveling on a train, that he does not even know his own name. His disorientation is further demonstrated once he arrives at

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\(^{41}\) The description of the postmodern plot that follows is by no means exhaustive. The works analyzed in this chapter follow most of the points here discussed.

\(^{42}\) Alexakis, *Contrôle d’identité*, 9.
the station and goes to a bar, where he cannot identify his face in the mirror or distinguish it from anyone else’s: “Il y voit le dos du barman et les clients, il les regarde un à un, de gauche à droite puis, plus attentivement, de droite à gauche, il ne sait pas qui il est, il ne sait pas lequel de ces visages est le sien. ‘Je ne suis peut-être pas là’”43 (“There he sees the barman’s back and the clients, he looks at them one by one, from left to right, then more attentively, from right to left; he does not know who he is, he does not know which of these faces is his. ‘Perhaps I am not there’”). This initial disorientation, shared by the protagonist and the reader, leads both to wonder whether the former has suffered some kind of psychological or mental collapse that has caused an amnesic disorder. Later on, when he finally recognizes his own face and discovers his carte d’identité (id card), the protagonist is seized by an impression of unreality when his document “informs” him that his name is Paul Dufresnes and that he was born in Yugoslavia. With this somewhat unsettling opening, the novel’s first chapter introduces an almost “hyperreal” object—Paul’s id— which delineates important elements of Paul’s life: his name, age, physical appearance, citizenship, date and place of birth, and current address. It is significant that the first outside imposition on Paul’s notion of self comes from a seemingly “inoffensive” inanimate object, which he allows to determine his identity and actions, as he eventually resigns himself to seeking more information about himself at the place listed as his “address.”

Paul Auster’s City of Glass begins with a non-event: a call made by a stranger who has dialed a wrong number. This everyday occurrence—a simple call—answered by Daniel Quinn, the protagonist, leads to a series of questions regarding his identity. As the narrator explains, Quinn used to be a poet who but stopped publishing under his real name sometime after his son’s

43 Ibid., 15.
death. Although he continues to write under the pseudonym of William Wilson, Quinn’s literary interests have shifted to mystery novels. Writing mystery novels provides Quinn with great pleasure; furthermore, as the narrator explains, “[b]ecause he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it.” In addition, Quinn has become a great admirer of Max Work, a detective created by “William Wilson.” The call from the stranger, which intrigues Quinn, leads him to pretend to be “Paul Auster” — the “detective” whose services are solicited by the stranger — when the stranger dials his home number for the second time. In this way, Quinn’s multiple alter egos (William Wilson, Max Work, and “Paul Auster”) jumpstart a highly disorienting quest for identity, especially given the additional conflation of the character and the author.

Unlike Alexakis’ *Contrôle d’identité*, *City of Glass* begins with a few more or less explicit “warnings” on behalf of the narrator that are meant to make the reader suspicious of the way Quinn’s story is told in this novel as well as of the act of narration itself. In the very first paragraph, the narrator informs the reader that Quinn would later “conclude that nothing was real except chance.” Even though the reader cannot understand at this point what is meant by “nothing was real” or “chance,” this early statement raises questions of epistemology and verisimilitude. In addition, the reader finds out that Quinn’s enjoyment of mystery novels comes from their “sense of plenitude and economy.” As the narrator explains:

In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so — which

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44 William Wilson is the name of a character in a short story by Edgar Allan Poe that is the *locus classicus* of the double and a primal text of detective fiction, or the logical pursuit of identifying and authenticating the subject (“William Wilson,” 1839).

45 Auster, *City of Glass*, 5.

46 To distinguish the writer Paul Auster from the character(s) “Paul Auster,” I will employ inverted commas to refer to the latter.

47 Auster, *City of Glass*, 3.

48 Ibid., 9.
amounts to the same thing. The world of the book comes to life, seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions. Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence, the centre of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end.⁴⁹

Thus, in the first chapter of City of Glass, mystery novels are described both as the result of a very detailed and careful conception and as an intricate puzzle that, in order to be solved, demands sharp reasoning on the part of the reader. As Quinn’s own life becomes a mystery novel when he assumes the role of a detective, the reader must then decide how to read the protagonist’s story. If the roles of chance and contingency are fundamental, as indicated by the narrator’s statement in the novel’s first paragraph, then the reader must determine which information is incidental or central in order to solve the puzzle of City of Glass. Furthermore, since the narrator also explains that in Quinn’s view “the writer and the detective are interchangeable,”⁵⁰ the reader, placed in a similar position as an “interpreter of words,” may assume the role of writer as well. Thus, Quinn’s search for his own identity simultaneously begins with a defense of the importance of reason and a warning against it. The beginning of Auster’s novel also raises questions of identity, responsibility, and epistemology, all of which this chapter later examines from a postmodern existentialist perspective.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.
Gambaro’s short stories, most specifically the novella “Las paredes,” on which I shall focus my analysis, also discuss typically existentialist themes while employing postmodern techniques. Like Auster’s and Alexakis’ novels, “Las paredes” begins with a disruption of the protagonist’s quotidian life by an unexpected event. In this story, the narrator first provides a brief description of the protagonist: a simple man who enjoys his job as an office clerk. The narrator, who cannot determine whether the protagonist’s name is Ruperto de Hentzau or Hencau, also describes him as an “empleado subalterno” (“subaltern employee”) who “no sabía hacer otra cosa” (“could not do anything else”). An unexpected event suddenly interferes with Ruperto’s routine as he gets off a train after a day in the countryside with fellow workers. Two strangers take him by the arm and lead him to their car without offering any explanation for their unwarranted action. Ruperto, who is referred to as “el joven” (“the young man”) during most of the narration, at first tries to find out what is going on, but later gives up and falls asleep in the car. This conformist, submissive attitude, which becomes a constant in Ruperto’s behavior, provides the basis for Gambaro’s exploration of the ways bad faith, responsibility, and authenticity operate and evolve.

In the remainder of chapter I, as Ruperto and his escorts arrive at their destination, the former is informed that “[h]abían descubierto una conspiración gravísima que se mantenía en el más estricto secreto para que nadie se inquietara” (“[t]hey had learnt about a highly grave
conspiracy that was being kept in the strictest secret so that no one would worry”). After being is led to an elegantly decorated bedroom, the protagonist, who is pleasantly surprised and satisfied with the room, must determine whether he is a guest or a prisoner. Despite the luxurious furniture, Ruperto is perturbed by the fact that the bedroom contains no windows. In fact, as he realizes later, the only “window” in the room is simulated by a curtain that simply hides a wall. Ruperto briefly wonders whether the bedroom is actually a cell, though he easily convinces himself of the opposite after talking to the doorman and the public official, both of whom enact a pleasant welcome. Again, Ruperto’s ability to convince himself that the less adverse interpretation of his reality is the “true” one further contributes to the exploration of existential themes developed later in the novella. The beginning of “Las paredes” anticipates literary themes central to postmodern existentialist writings: the interpretation of reality from a human perspective and various means of representing reality.

The clear intertextual references that Gambaro’s title and first chapter evoke—Sartre’s “Le mur” (1939) and *Huis clos* (1944; *[No exit]*)—illuminate the fundamental role of metafiction in postmodern existentialist Works. As Catherine Burgass argues in “A Brief Story of Postmodern Plot,” “beginnings and endings have a special function in postmodern metafiction, marking the entrance and the exit of the fictional world.”57 Indeed, the beginnings of *City of Glass*, *Contrôle d’identité*, and “Las paredes” provide a transition into fictional worlds in which the relationship between reality and fiction is implicitly and explicitly explored. The reader’s task thus involves interpreting from the very beginning the clues left by the authors in order to learn how to read these works. Gambaro, Auster, and Alexakis use their respective first chapters to introduce the themes that will become key to understanding how their representations shed light on the human experience of reality. The narrator of *Contrôle d’identité*, for instance,

explains that the writer-character “a l’impression que les choses n’existent vraiment que quand elles sont écrites”58 (“has the impression that things do not truly exist unless they are written down”). Thus, when examined both as reflections and reenactments of the ways humans experience and understand the world, these works open up numerous opportunities for introspective analysis and promote readers’ reformulation and questioning of their own approach to reality.

Gambaro’s, Auster’s, and Alexakis’ representations also engage with their respective national contexts. Although less emphatically than the works analyzed in the previous chapters, *City of Glass*, *Contrôle d’identité*, and “Las paredes” still conform to some of the national trends that I have traced. In fact, since these works combine existentialist and postmodern concerns and techniques, they often converge in terms of their emphases and proposed solutions. To recapitulate, as we have seen in the previous chapters, River Plate existentialists commonly focused on the importance of psychology (particularly psychoanalysis), imagination, and the fantastic in the process of representing and elucidating feelings of alienation and existential angst. They analyzed the functions of writing and history and discussed their potential as a possible means to reduce alienation and foster positive social change. In the River Plate region, writers also proposed that individual action, especially within the frame of collective action, could create a renewed version of the long-lost notion of “home” through social change and solidarity. Conversely, USAmerican writers, in unconscious enactment of Poe’s “William Wilson” and its ironic subterfuge of individualism through the inevitable double, emphasized the importance of individual action as practically the only possible means of an “uncontaminated” contribution to improving society. Their criticism typically targeted their own nation and the power it exerts over its citizens. In addition, USAmerican existentialists manifested their concern

with the lack of spontaneity in American society, and its increasing consumerism, conformism, and indifference towards injustice, racism, and violence. One of the most distinctive characteristics of their writings lay in the integration of a spiritual or religious dimension into their characters’ existential quests. Finally, unlike their North and South American counterparts, most French existentialist writers preferred to distance themselves from the surrealist movement, and focused on exploring the potential of both individual and collective responsible action (political and otherwise).

In contrast, as authors of postmodern existentialist works focus on the dangers of metanarratives as well as on narrative strategies of metafiction and alternative means of representation, many of these distinct trends become less predominant or fade away entirely. Furthermore, other themes such as the “crisis of representation” or the notion of “simulacrum” become major concerns. In postmodern existentialist literature, as evidenced by Auster’s, Gambaro’s, and Alexakis’ works, existentialist traditions converge to a great extent, even though some of the earlier discussed differences still persist (for instance, the influence of psychoanalysis on Gambaro’s text). Not only the selection of themes but also specific elements related to plot structure and narrative strategies facilitate this convergence. Vassilis Alexakis’ novel, for example, provides a clear example of how a dual interest in existentialism and postmodern narrative techniques inevitably leads to reflections on the intricate relationship of literature and epistemology.

Vassilis Alexakis, perhaps drawing on his French/Greek bicultural background, often explores questions of identity and language in his literary works.59 In this sense, Contrôle d’identité is no exception. Just like Gambaro’s and Auster’s works, the novel constitutes a reflection on the acts of writing and self-creation. This reflection, which becomes more explicit

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in the last chapter, emerges through a number of references and clues left by the author. As the plot develops, Alexakis indirectly provides the necessary information to teach the reader how to interpret his work. For instance, the reader may find it odd that some of the characters seem aware of the fact that they are fictional and simply choose to play their parts. The detective Capélius Love, for example, tells M. Paul: “Je rêve souvent de devenir écrivain. Mais je ne suis qu’un personnage” ⁶⁰ (“I often dream about becoming a writer. But I am just a character”). M. Beau’s comment regarding Mme. Lebrun’s first name further suggests the characters’ realization of their fictional status. As the narrator explains, “[Capélius Love] pense à Mme. Lebrun. C’est curieux qu’il ne lui ait pas demandé son prénom... Beau a dit qu’elle n’en avait peut-être pas” ⁶¹ (“[Capélius Love] thinks about Mme. Lebrun. It is curious that he did not ask her what her first name was… Beau said that maybe she did not have one”). Furthermore, many of the characters’ names are purposefully unrealistic: Capélius Love, Stabilo Boss, and Professeur Fatalitas are among the most remarkable. Their strange names also stress the fictional character of the act of narration. In this way, by the time the reader reaches the last chapter, he/she anticipates that Contrôle d’identité is a novel about the similarities between the origins and development of works of fiction and human identities.

Similarly, Paul Auster’s novel attempts to teach the reader to avoid the belief that he/she is reading a story that might contain or deliver some kind of ultimate truth. In order to achieve this effect, Auster also instructs his reader about how to read his novel by leaving clues or warnings to inspire mistrust. Like Paul Dufresnes, in City of Glass, Daniel Quinn also seems aware (or begins to suspect) that he is just a character. For instance, at the beginning of the second chapter, the narrator describes his actions as involuntary. Quinn realizes that he is acting

⁶⁰ Alexakis, Contrôle d’identité, 203.
⁶¹ Ibid., 203.
like a puppet when he wakes up and finds “himself doing a good imitation of a man preparing to go out.” 62 Furthermore, as the narrator explains, “[i]t was not until he had his hand on the doorknob that he began to suspect what he was doing. ‘I seem to be going out; he said to himself. ‘But if I am going out, where exactly am I going?’” 63 As this quote indicates, Quinn’s perplexity leads him (and the reader) to the impression that he is not the master of his own actions. Two possible ways of explaining this impression are as follows: 1) Quinn is obeying his unconscious desire to pretend to be “Paul Auster” but is not yet aware of it, or 2) Quinn’s actions are being forced upon him by the author himself, pushing him into situations to get the novel’s plot to move forward. In either explanation, Quinn’s decision to play the character of “Paul Auster,” the detective, does not seem to originate from within. This sense is confirmed when Quinn arrives at Stillman’s building and warns himself against the possible dangers of playing a character assigned to him by a greater authority: “If all this is really happening,” Quinn tells himself, “then I must keep my eyes open.” 64 Thus, Quinn acquiesces to his role as if he were not in possession of the faculty to control his own actions, thereby allowing the novel’s plot to move forward. In this way, the series of disorienting events and intriguing comments that abound in the novel to some extent prepare the reader for the revelation of the narrator’s identity at the end of City of Glass.

The conclusion of Gambaro’s work also allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the various levels on which “Las paredes” can be interpreted. As Ruperto’s confinement and the eventual shrinkage of the size of his bedroom drive him to desperation and perhaps even death, the reader must reconsider the story’s events from diverse perspectives. As Gambaro narrates the story of Ruperto’s progressive acceptance of his imprisonment, she explores the

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62 Auster, City of Glass, 14.
63 Ibid., 14.
64 Ibid., 15.
ways in which human beings (and authors) construct meaning within the framework of metanarratives. For instance, towards the end of the novella, Ruperto invokes a concept of morality to explain his decision to remain imprisoned even after the door to his cell is left open. As the narrator writes, “[m]archarse, ¿podía hacerlo? Moralmente, no. Confiaban en él, la puerta abierta lo demostraba. La calle podía ser una prisión si uno tenía un peso sobre la conciencia”65 (“[g]oing away. Could he do it? Morally no. They trusted him; the open door demonstrated that. The street could become a prison if one had a weight on one’s conscience”). Thus, Ruperto’s decision to stay in his room (despite the fact that this may be his only opportunity to escape) requires a narrative that veils his bad faith through a certain construct of morality. In this way, his sense of “morality” and his “lack of authenticity” (as evidenced by his constant attempts to hide what he believes or suspects from himself) emerge as two of the ways in which metanarratives function within Gambaro’s story. They are presented as fundamental points of reference for understanding Ruperto’s actions and identity. However, they are shown to be arbitrary constructs employed in narratives—by the characters, the author, and the reader—in order to pronounce a judgment or provide an interpretation of a specific element of a fictional or non-fictional reality.

In “Las paredes,” Gambaro also questions the human ability to comprehend and make sense of a reality that is in principle unintelligible. This unintelligibility is why, in an attempt to understand what he is going through, the protagonist comes to believe that, “‘[e]sto le está sucediendo a otro”66 (“[t]his is happening to someone else”). Ruperto’s final inability to tell whether he is awake or having a nightmare further leads to the questioning of the human capacity to distinguish between the real and the unreal and, by extension, between reality and fiction.

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65 Gambaro, “Las paredes,” 90.
66 Ibid., 112.
Ruperto wonders: “Era un sueño o le faltaba el aire? Era alguien que soñaba una pesadilla donde él había quedado apresado o era él quien soñaba?” (“Was it a dream or could he not get enough air? Was someone having a nightmare in which he had become imprisoned or was he the one dreaming?”) Thus, Gambaro’s emphasis on uncertainty, through the intentional disorientation of both the protagonist and the reader, makes “Las paredes” a clear example of how postmodern existentialist narratives recognize the need for metanarratives. The novella also demonstrates simultaneously the fundamental role of metanarratives in society and their nonetheless arbitrary and non-universal character.

Even as “Las paredes,” City of Glass, and Contrôle d’identité assert the power of metanarratives, readers are still able to perceive how these same narratives can create unstable meanings that only become significant in their originary contexts. For instance, Ruperto’s discussion of morality involves a concept that can only refer to the situation that he is describing. In Ruperto’s case, morality signifies a false sense of righteousness that incites submission to one’s oppressor due to the latter’s ironic demonstrations of kindness. Furthermore, in “Las paredes,” Ruperto’s mistakes and inability to understand the situation in which he finds himself are caused by his determination to approach the situation from a very restrained perspective in which meanings are fixed beforehand. For instance, as the public official refers to him as a “huésped” (“guest”), immediately after the doorman accuses him of stealing a silver-plated spoon, Ruperto is not able to see behind this simulation of courtesy. As a result, his inflexibility with regard to the limited view of reality that he maintains despite all evidence leads to his own annihilation. Ruperto is not able to “read” his own story; he does not dare go beyond what he wishes his story to be about. He is overwhelmed and consumed by a reality that he does not understand. In order to avoid Ruperto’s mistake, the reader must observe the plurality of possible

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67 Ibid., 112.
interpretations of his story and avoid imposing a single reading on it. Thus, Ruperto’s predicament further reveals Gambaro’s interest in showing the unstable, albeit significant, nature of the creation of meaning in understanding both reality and fiction.

Paul Dufresnes’ attempt to commit suicide when he is confronted by an identity that feels alien to him also reveals Alexakis’ writerly intentions. Like Quinn, Paul believes that his suicide attempt is not the result of his own will. When Gina, his girlfriend, asks him, “-Pourquoi as-tu fait ça?” (“-Why did you do that?”), he replies, “-Je n’ai rien fait, Gina... C’était deja fait. […] J’ai pensé que cela ne me concernait pas”68 (“-I did not do anything, Gina... It was already done […] I thought that it did not concern me”). Thus, by the time he attempts to kill himself, Paul seems to have understood that he is a literary character and that his own reality is itself part of a greater reality he cannot grasp. However, unlike Paul Dufresnes, the reader comprehends that the author needs the protagonist to “die” in order to illustrate the difficulty of confronting the fact that meaning and identity are just constructions and reality is, to a great extent, unintelligible.

The second story that is interpolated in italics throughout Contrôle d’identité has a similar effect. In the story, a “petite fille” (“little girl”), actually an old lady, refuses to understand that she is attending her own funeral until it is too late. Towards the end of the novel, as she tells herself, “‘[j]e devais me douter de quelque chose’”69 (“‘I must have suspected something’”), she also accepts her literary fate and walks towards her grave. Unlike Paul, the little girl, and the other characters, Paul Athanassoupoulos (the character-writer who is responsible for writing the novel), makes his first appearance in the last chapter of the book (conveniently entitled “La représentation”) and comfortably ends his trajectory in the pleasant company of his children. His participation in the novel is crucial as it illustrates how, through creativity, human

68 Alexakis, Contrôle d’identité, 172.
69 Ibid., 185.
beings may satisfy their desire to construct meaning as well as enjoy fluid notions of identity and reality.

In Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn, like Paul Dufresnes and Ruperto de Hentzau, also becomes a poor reader of his own reality. As he waits for Stillman’s arrival at the train station, his detective skills falter whenever he attempts to impose logic and coherence on what he observes. For instance, when two men who look like Stillman appear at the train station, Quinn decides, after initially following the second man, to follow the one he saw first. As the narrator observes, “[h]e was acting out of spite, spurred on to punish the second Stillman for confusing him. He turned around and saw the first Stillman shuffling off in the other direction. Surely this was his man.”

Furthermore, Quinn’s pursuit of reasoning and coherence leads him to seek patterns in Stillman’s daily walks around New York City. According to Quinn, “[t]he implication was that human behaviour could be understood, that beneath the infinite facade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation.”

Thus, Quinn becomes a poor reader of both his entourage and eventually his own self as he searches for meaning in arbitrary and unintelligible elements of the reality that he observes. For this reason, he fails to see that Stillman has actually lost his mind and truly believes that “the world is in fragments” and that his “job is to put it back together again.” Furthermore, as Richard Swope argues in “Supposing a Space: The Detecting Subject in Paul Auster's *City of Glass,*” Quinn’s failure to solve his case “indicates the instability of the world as well as the

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70 Auster, *City of Glass*, 68.
71 Ibid., 80.
72 Ibid., 91.
indeterminacy of language and the self.”73 In fact, his unsolved case prevents him from realizing that he is increasingly losing his own identity and sense of self.

Indeed, in *City of Glass*, Quinn’s successive identifications with William Wilson, Max Work, and “Paul Auster” result in his self-effacement and perhaps even his death. Quinn’s disappearance is originally triggered by his gradual interest in portraying other characters. This interest emerges as a desire to free himself from his own responsibility by adopting someone else’s objectives and obligations. As Dennis Barone explains in “Introduction: Auster and the Postmodern novel,” in Auster’s works, “[r]esponsibility, old-fashioned as this may sound, is a virtue.”74 Thus, Quinn’s avoidance of his own responsibility becomes one of his major mistakes and eventually leads to his disappearance. As the narrator observes,

As he wandered through the station, he reminded himself of who he was supposed to be. The effect of being Paul Auster, he had begun to learn, was not altogether unpleasant. Although he still had the same body, the same mind, the same thoughts, he felt as though he had somehow been taken out of himself, as if he no longer had to walk around with the burden of his own consciousness. By a simple trick of the intelligence, a deft little twist of naming, he felt incomparably lighter and freer. At the same time, he knew it was all an illusion. But there was a certain comfort in that. He had not really lost himself; he was merely pretending, and he could return to being Quinn whenever he wished.75

Quinn’s decision to devote his time and energy to this “illusion” turns him into a simulacrum of a person that he does not know. At no point is he able to go back to being Quinn. By the last few

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75 Auster, *City of Glass*, 61-2.
chapters of the novel, when Quinn’s apartment and personal belongings have vanished, so has his sense of self. Having nothing else to do, Quinn eventually disappears, perhaps aware of his fictional status, having discovered “ultimately, that the world does not behave according to the detective logic he so admires, meaning he has no access to that core self he assumes exists.” As a result, all that remains as proof of his existence is his red notebook—the core of a story, which, according to the narrator, deserved to be told.

This last reflection on the act of storytelling, with which City of Glass leaves the reader, is one of the numerous illustrations of self-reflexivity and concern with writing itself—both forms of metafiction—present in Auster’s novel. The use of metafiction, a technique that Gambaro’s and Alexakis’ texts also employ, is a common practice in postmodern existentialist works. In fact, as I will show, the various techniques of metafiction constitute an excellent means of discussing existential concerns while creating a non-authoritative atmosphere.

The Role of Metafiction

Patricia Waugh’s definition of “metafiction,” as presented in Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction, suggests the possible motivations of authors like Auster, Alexakis, and Gambaro who make use of metafiction in their works. According to Waugh, metafiction is

a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact [sic] in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own

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methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.\textsuperscript{77}

Indeed, as metafiction allows writers to comment on the “possible fictionality” and—I would add—hyperreality of the “real world,” it also becomes an effective means to incite human beings to reinvent their reality in ways that might produce satisfaction. Furthermore, as Waugh argues, “[i]f, as individuals, we now occupy ‘roles’ rather than ‘selves’, then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels.”\textsuperscript{78} In this regard, Ruperto’s, Quinn’s, and Dufresnes’ trajectories might provide powerful tools for prompting readers to question and modify their own understandings of self and reality.

In \textit{City of Glass}, “Las paredes,” and \textit{Contrôle d’identité}, numerous forms of metafiction are employed to remind the reader that he/she is reading a work of fiction. For instance, the narrators often provide self-conscious commentary on the devices of fiction. Also, as I explained above, some characters express awareness of their positioning within works of literature. Moreover, the numerous allusions to other literary works are fundamental for understanding Gambaro’s, Alexakis’, and Auster’s texts. In some cases, such as in Alexakis’ and Auster’s novels, the authors themselves step into their works and become characters. These strategies, which, as Waugh explains, allow writers to “explore a \textit{theory} of fiction through the \textit{practice} of writing fiction,”\textsuperscript{79} expand the scope of these texts well beyond their basic plotlines and uses of literary figures. In this way, the various forms of metafiction allow intriguing readings of these authors’ texts that facilitate the exploration of postmodern existentialist themes.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 2.
For instance, in *City of Glass*, metafiction gives the reader the opportunity to realize, before the conclusion of the novel, that Auster’s is not really a mystery story but, rather, an exploration of the acts of reading, writing, and self-creation. In “The Detective and the Author: City of Glass,” Madeleine Sorapure argues that “what the author knows and withheld from the reader is not the redeeming truth—the solution which puts the mystery to rest—but instead the fact that the whole thing is a sham, with Auster representing ‘Auster’ and constructing an elaborate hoax.”80 Thus, to solve the mystery of *City of Glass*, the reader must realize that this work is by no means a typical mystery novel.

In order to help the reader arrive at this conclusion, Paul Auster drops a series of clues, the most significant of which are provided through the literary discussion of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Occurring in a novel that is itself an exploration of the acts of reading and writing, Quinn’s conversation with the character named “Paul Auster” and the ensuing discussion of *Don Quixote* are very significant. “Auster’s” analysis of *Don Quixote* illuminates Daniel Quinn’s own identity and status as a literary character. As Quinn himself realizes towards the very end of the novel, it might not be a coincidence that “he had the same initials as Don Quixote.”81

Furthermore, “Auster’s” analysis also challenges the interpretive skills of the reader, who must figure out what to make of this apparent digression. The discussion, introduced as an incidental conversation about literature between two writers, Quinn asks “Paul Auster”—who he hoped would be the detective he was impersonating—about his writing. “Paul Auster” replies that he is working on a collection of essays, one of which provides a new interpretation of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Cervantes’ masterpiece, a work of metafiction *par excellence*, happens to be one of Quinn’s favorite books. Moreover, the reason Quinn is interested in writing works of

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81 Auster, *City of Glass*, 155.
literature, as the narrator explains in the first chapter of the novel, “[i]s not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories.” In other words, what truly interests Quinn is metafiction itself.

According to “Auster’s” interpretation, Don Quixote was not written by Cervantes, but by Don Quixote himself. Moreover, in his view, Don Quixote “was not really mad” and in fact “orchestrated the whole thing himself” in order to “test the gullibility of his fellow men.” Following this remark, “Auster” pronounces a brief statement that becomes key to understanding City of Glass. He wonders:

to what extent would people tolerate blasphemies if they gave them amusement?
The answer is obvious, isn’t it? To any extent. For the proof is that we still read the book. It remains highly amusing to us. And that’s finally all anyone wants out of a book—to be amused.

This insight provides “Paul Auster” with great satisfaction. As the narrator indicates, “[t]he man was obviously enjoying himself, but the precise nature of that pleasure eluded Quinn.” In fact, at this precise moment, “Paul Auster” the character and Paul Auster the author seem to coincide. It becomes clear that they are the same person. Thus, Auster’s statement works as a clin d’œil that allows the writer of City of Glass to laugh at both Quinn, who cannot perceive the irony of Auster’s comments, and the reader, who is implicated in the category of people who would do anything to be amused. Indeed, for the sake of amusement, the reader of City of Glass must put up with several “blasphemies,” such as Paul Auster’s stepping into his own work of fiction to discuss literature with his protagonist. Finally, the discussion about Don Quixote ends as

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82 Ibid., 8.
83 Ibid., 119.
84 Ibid., 120.
85 Ibid., 120.
“Auster’s” wife and son arrive. As it turns out, “Auster’s” son has the same first name as Quinn. In the end, however, neither “Auster’s” comments nor the various clues that the author includes in Quinn’s story interfere with the protagonist’s obsession with the mystery he has determined to resolve.

Quinn’s obsession with mystery novels makes the references to *Don Quixote* even more suggestive. Like Cervantes’ protagonist, Quinn’s passion for books leads him to pretend to be someone he is not. Moreover, it also leads him to lose his sense of self towards the end of the novel. In addition, Quinn’s general trajectory resembles Don Quixote’s. To a great extent, Quinn decides to become a detective and Don Quixote a “caballero andante” (“knight-errant”) because they are disillusioned with the values that prevail in their respective societies. Thus, besides addressing the acts of reading, writing, and self-creation, *City of Glass* also provides a critique of the threatening and alienating atmosphere of the American megalopolis. The title of the novel reflects on this theme. New York City, where Quinn’s story takes place, is indeed a “city of glass,” a source of images and reflections which provide no *point de repère* or sense of home for the protagonist as well as the majority of its inhabitants. Furthermore, as Richard Swope argues, “*City of Glass*, as its title indicates, suggests that the security of the middle-class notion of home is itself little more than an ideological fantasy, as this space is continuously invaded by that which it seeks to erase or escape: that homelessness to which Quinn has in effect always belonged.”

Homelessness in the metropolis—an existentialist theme *par excellence*—also constitutes a central theme of Auster’s novel. Quinn’s trajectory takes him from a state of metaphorical homelessness to an actual one. Throughout the novel, his interaction with the city of New York

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keeps him from bonding with other people; moreover, it even isolates him from his own self, bringing him to the ultimate state of alienation. As Swope claims, “in the postmodern space of the city, the subject risks more than being temporarily alienated from his or her home, a place which remains, ideologically speaking, permanent even in the modernist urban environment. In the postmodern city, however, place, home, the ‘proper’ is exposed as an illusion.”

This illusion, suggested by the title’s imagery of glass, becomes one of the central targets of Auster’s critique, which surfaces as Quinn’s disorienting and interminable walks through the city of New York result in the eventual loss of his identity.

In “Criminality and (Self) Discipline: The Case of Paul Auster,” Joseph Walker further elucidates the nature of Paul Auster’s critique, observing “a sense of deep meaning in the fiction of Paul Auster that concerns itself primarily with the position of the individual in contemporary society—and more specifically, with how (or whether) that individual can free him or herself from dominant hegemonic systems to achieve a measure of self-determination.” In fact, the hegemonic systems at work in City of Glass come from two different sources: New York City (and its society) and the godlike figure of the author. As it turns out, not only the city but also the author interfere with the protagonist’s freedom. However, even if Quinn is in a subordinate position with regard to his creator, his actions in the novel indicate that human beings are given the choice of either acting responsibly and attempting to achieve a certain degree of self-determination or relinquishing this opportunity by yielding to bad faith and pretense. For instance, in Quinn’s case, quitting poetry to publish mystery novels under a pseudonym and deciding to impersonate a detective in order to find some purpose in life constitute two major

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87 Ibid., http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/swope.htm.
mistakes that lead to a deep state of inauthenticity. Thus, Quinn’s failures and possible death are the result of bad faith.

In spite of Quinn’s sad end, *City of Glass* is not a pessimistic novel overall. In fact, “Paul Auster” the character, Quinn’s *Doppelgänger*, is represented as someone who has succeeded both in his personal and professional life. As Quinn himself realizes, “Auster” is actually living the life that Quinn once had and has forever lost. Through the acts of creation and human bonding, “Auster” has achieved the happiness and self-fulfillment that eludes Quinn. The result of self-representation, Paul Auster makes “Paul Auster” a prime example of the benefits of self-creation. Therefore, even though *City of Glass* does end on a low note, it still conveys hope and renewal, strong themes in the tradition of USAmerican existentialism. In this regard, Paul Auster’s comments on his own work are very suggestive:

I think my work has come out of a position of intense personal despair, a very deep nihilism and hopelessness about the world, the fact of own transience and mortality, the inadequacy of language, the isolation from one person from another. And yet, at the same tie, I wanted to express the beauty and extraordinary happiness of being yourself alive, of breathing in the air, the joy of being alive in your own skin.\(^89\)

These ambiguities and feelings find an ideal representation in *City of Glass*. As Quinn recalls the discussion of *Don Quixote* towards the end of the novel, his reflection on Cervantes’ work further elucidates how Auster’s conflicting feelings may be resolved. The narrator writes: “He thought through the question of why Don Quixote had not simply wanted to write books like the ones he loved—instead of living out their adventures.”\(^90\) From the author’s perspective, artistic

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\(^{90}\) Auster, *City of Glass*, 154-5.
production and the creation of identity as yet another work of fiction offer writers an opportunity to experience both options. Therefore, Auster suggests that art and the constant practice of self-creation may allow human beings not only to transcend “intense personal despair, a very deep nihilism and hopelessness about the world” but also to achieve self-determination.

Similarly, in Vassilis Alexakis’s novel, among all of characters of Contrôle d’identité, Paul Athanassopoulos (the writer-character) is the only one who achieves fulfillment. In this work, Athanassopoulos’ appearance constitutes one of the most significant instances of metafiction as it makes clear that this is a novel about a writer creating a story. However, before his introduction in the last chapter, other characters, such as Capélius Love, also prompt reflections on the devices of fiction, reflections that further accentuate the importance of metafiction in Alexakis’ work. Capélius Love is first introduced by the narrator as an archetypical hardboiled detective who has just solved a very difficult murder case. Despite his fame and pride, Capélius is extremely unhappy at his job. In fact, what he enjoys most is the writing of police reports. Capélius internally yearns to be a writer, but has never dared to pursue this dream. Nonetheless, he has been complimented on his writing of police reports, which resemble pieces of fiction. His first superior tells him, “[c]’est très vivant, on voit très bien les personnages […]. Simplement, éviter d’ajouter, quand vous terminez, le mot ‘fin’. Le titre non plus ne me paraît pas indispensable” (“[i]t is very vivacious, you can see the characters very well […]. Simply avoid adding the words ‘The End’ once you are done. The title also does not seem indispensable to me”). As these comments humorously suggest, the only difference between writing fiction and describing reality is the inclusion of a title and the concluding words: “The End.” This observation thus reveals the fine line between reality and fiction and raises

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91 Athanassopoulos’s name, in fact, is very ironic since it means “inmortal” in Greek.
92 Alexakis, Contrôle d’identité, 40.
questions of verisimilitude and epistemology. Furthermore, as the narrator explains, Capélius “a
parfois l’impression que la réalité elle-même n’est qu’un assemblage de mots”\textsuperscript{93} (“sometimes has
the impression that reality itself is nothing but an assembly of words”). In this way, Capélius
Love suggests that reality is nothing more than a narrative. Because of his insights, Capélius’
interventions in \textit{Contrôle d’identité} are fundamental in preparing the reader for the novel’s
decreasingly unexpected denouement.

Unlike Capélius Love, the protagonist does not manage to “read” his own story and
experience enjoyment because he has foresaken his interest in literarature and art. Thus, he forms
a counterpoint to Paul Athanassopoulos, his \textit{Doppelgänger}. Once a student of history and
comparative literature, Paul Dufresnes has quit painting, an activity that he used to enjoy and at
which he had some skill. As he finds out after “losing” his memory, Paul is now a sales
representative who works for a friend called Stabilo Boss. Having been born in Yugoslavia, Paul
also speaks Serbian, although he cannot remember a word of it since boarding the train at
Troyes. After having given up his passion for painting and forgotten his mother tongue, Paul has
lost all enjoyment in his life. He is not able to bond with any of his friends and nostalgically
longs for a home and an identity, gazing emptily at pictures of his dead mother. Perhaps because
of this sorry state, Athanassopoulos decides that Paul Dufresnes will commit suicide. Unlike the
writer that the reader meets in the last chapter, Paul Dufresnes is represented throughout the
novel as a character who does not understand how to use his freedom and who refuses to recreate
himself. Indeed, Dufresnes perceives himself as “une sorte de nouveau-né qui aurait déjà
vécu”\textsuperscript{94} (“some sort of newborn who would have already lived”).

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 55.
The novel’s final chapter, entitled “La représentation,” allows the reader to take a peek at the process of writing *Contrôle d’identité*. However, the reader must remember that this unusual access to the novel’s “writing process” has actually been framed by yet another writer: Vassilis Alexakis himself. This last chapter, as its title indicates, is a representation of an author in the process of writing the novel that the reader has just finished. Alexakis uses this last chapter to show how a novel is intrinsically related to the writer’s own life. The reader recognizes elements in Paul Athanassopoulos’s life and entourage that are represented or somehow referenced in his novel. For instance, Paul Dufresnes’ feelings of anguish and nostalgia are shared by Athanassopoulos, who has also lost his mother and, like Alexakis, is a Greek immigrant. Athanassopoulos also fears losing the ability to feel at home. As he explains his fear that “[j]e finirai par ne plus me sentir bien nulle part”\(^95\) (“I will end up not feeling good anywhere”), the reader associates Athanassopoulos’s sorrow with Dufresnes’ story. In this way, the last chapter of *Contrôle d’identité* highlights how all the characters in the work are in fact variations on the writer himself. Thus, the novel’s ending leads the reader to the same conclusion as M. Beau, who tells Capélius, “[j]e crois vraiment que nous sommes plusieurs personnages…”\(^96\) (“I truly believe that we are several characters…”). In Alexakis’ view, then, human beings should construct their identities creatively as they embrace the potential multiple characters that exist within them. Moreover, creativity may also help eradicate, at least temporarily, feelings of nostalgia or anxiety caused by an idea of home that has been lost forever.

Unlike in Alexakis’ novel, in “Las paredes,” the use of metafiction is concentrated in numerous references to other works of literature. These references are fundamental, as Gambaro employs them to comment and shed light on the actions in her novella. As the reader of “Las

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 206.

\(^{96}\) Ibid., 202.
paredes” is directed to seek answers in other works of fiction, he/she inadvertently experiences what Jean Baudrillard posits in his theory on images: By turning to other works (representations) in order to understand what he/she is reading, the reader is reminded of literature’s status as a simulacrum. In this way, Gambaro’s use of metafiction helps readers to avoid looking for underlying truths in her text by showing them some of the ways in which metanarratives operate.

Among its many references to other works, the title of “Las paredes” constitutes a minor, although very significant, literary citation. In fact, if one changes the word “paredes” from plural to singular, Gambaro’s novella shares its title with Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Le mur” (1939, “The Wall”). In this short story, which is set in the Spanish Civil War, the word “mur” refers to the wall used by firing squads to execute prisoners who have been condemned to death. In “Las paredes,” the walls, which in Sartre’s text are associated with the actions of an oppressive illegitimate government, shrink until they presumably kill the protagonist. However, unlike Pablo Ibbieta, “Le mur’s” protagonist, Ruperto is given the opportunity to leave his cell (and thus avoid death) but rejects it. The narrator explains that once the doorman finally arrives and closes the door to Ruperto’s room, which had been left open, “[e]l joven casi le agradeció que decidiera por él” (“[t]he young man almost thanked him for deciding on his behalf”). This main divergence from Sartre’s story highlights Gambaro’s central concern with the mechanisms of oppression and, most specifically, with human subjugation achieved through violence and authority.

Not surprisingly, Gambaro’s later works have often been studied as explorations of how dictatorial regimes impact the human psyche. For instance, in “Three Gambaro Masterpieces,”

97 The short story “Le mur” also lends its title to the collection that includes it (Le mur (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); The Wall, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1948). In this collection, Sartre explores the confrontation between human reason and authoritarian and arbitrary elements in society.
Severino Medeiros Albuquerque argues that, in Gambaro’s plays, “verbal and non verbal ambiguity as well as contrastive signation serve to indicate how the agents of repression confuse their victims’ perception of reality to prevent them from physically or intellectually resisting the victimization process. As a consequence, the victim gradually loses the ability to express himself coherently and eventually assumes the discourse of repression.”99 Indeed, as the novella “Las paredes” also shows, the language used by the public official and the doorman (who, for instance, refer to Ruperto as a *huésped*), is intended to fool their prisoner into believing that he is actually a guest. However, when all evidence indicates that Ruperto is in fact a prisoner and he still prefers to trust what his oppressors say, the protagonist indirectly chooses and accepts his subjugation. Moreover, when Ruperto is told towards the end of the novella that “[t]odos morimos, pero no todos vivimos en la misma forma”100 (“[w]e all die, but not all of us live in the same way”), Gambaro emphasizes that, although Ruperto’s behavior may be quite common among human beings who face oppression, it is still possible to act otherwise.

From the beginning of the novella, Gambaro’s interest in the concept of choice is exemplified through the narrator’s use of metafiction. Claiming that “[n]o era possible repetir El Proceso; faltaba la atmósfera de coherencia, de fatalidad”101 (“[i]t was not possible to repeat The Trial; there lacked the atmosphere of coherence, of fatality”), the narrator reveals the importance of making a distinction between Ruperto’s story and Josef K.’s, the protagonist in Franz Kafka’s *Der Process* (1925; [*The Trial*]). As the narrator’s reading of *The Trial* in the previous quote indicates, fate and coherence would not play important roles in Ruperto’s tale. In fact, the concepts of choice and incoherence dominate his story. Throughout the novella, with the

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100 Gambaro, “Las paredes,” 108.
101 Ibid., 49.
ultimate goal of avoiding making a choice, Ruperto uses his erroneous reasoning to explain the events that take place around him. In this way, like Jean-Paul Sartre in “Le mur,” Griselda Gambaro stresses how human beings always possess the capacity of making a choice, even if they are victimized in a repressive regime.

Perhaps inevitably, the examination of Gambaro’s plays as explorations of the relationship between victim and victimizer has produced psychological interpretations of her works. Such interpretations explore the possible influence of psychoanalysis on Griselda Gambaro. For instance, in “Una nueva interpretación de Las paredes de Gambaro,” Enid Valerie provides a psychological reading of the play Las paredes, which was based on the eponymous novella and follows roughly the same storyline. According to Valerie, most of the actions described in the play actually take place in the young man’s dreams (or, rather, nightmares). In addition, Valerie places this work in the tradition of Borges’ “El sur” (“The South”) and Cortázar’s “La noche boca arriba” (“The Night Face Up”), and claims that “[e]l Funcionario [...] representa todos los individuos que, en la vida real del Joven, vocean los valores de la sociedad, tienen poder sobre él, y que abusan de este poder”\(^{102}\) (“[t]he public official represents all the individuals who, in the young man’s real life, voice society’s values, have power over him, and abuse this power”). Moreover, Valerie associates the figure of the public official with Ruperto’s “Super-yo”\(^{103}\) (“super ego”). Conversely, in her view, “[e]l Ujier es la encarnación pesadillesca del Id del Joven”\(^{104}\) (“[t]he doorman is a nightmarish incarnation of the young man’s Id”). According to Valerie, Gambaro’s play (and by extension, her novella) is in fact a representation of Freud’s model of the structure of the mind. Thus, the relationship that develops among the

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{104}\) Ibid., 70.
three characters could also be interpreted as a series of dreams revealing the nature of the young man’s inner struggle.

In my view, while applying psychoanalytic insights to “Las paredes” (as Enid Valierie does) remains an option, the analysis of the references to dreams in this work is fundamental. Thus, the last example of metafiction that I would add to this discussion concerns dreams and further develops Gambaro’s reflections on the notion of choice. This example constitutes a reference to another work of literature and is included towards the end of the novella, as the doorman tells Ruperto: “La vida es sueño. La muerte también es un sueño. Verá usted. Sólo le costará un poco soñarla”105 (“Life is a dream. Death is also a dream. You shall see. You’ll just have a slightly hard time dreaming it”). This statement, a clear reference to Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s La vida es sueño (1635; [Life is a Dream]), is very significant as this canonical Spanish play considers the relationship between freedom and fate. In this work, when Segismundo, the heir to the Polish crown, is born, he is secluded in a tower because a prophecy predicted that he would become a violent ruler. However, when he becomes an adult, his father releases him and allows him to learn of his true identity. After Segismundo kills a man and the king sends him back to the tower, Segismundo is told that the events of the previous day were a dream. When he is finally freed, he is still not sure whether he is dreaming or not, but this time he decides to forgive his father and becomes a good ruler. In this way, La vida es sueño investigates limitations on human freedom and asserts that human beings have at all moments the capacity to choose their own actions. Thus, when Ruperto is told that both life and death are a dream, the reader who connects this statement with de la Barca’s canonical work, (a masterpiece in Spanish literature whose importance is often compared with that of Hamlet in English literature) gains a deeper understanding of the role of individual choice in Gambaro’s novella.

105 Gambaro, “Las paredes,” 100.
Indeed, the connection to Segismundo’s famous monologue, in which he pronounces the words “life is a dream,” elucidates Ruperto’s “death” at the end of the “Las paredes.” As Segismundo exclaims,

\begin{align*}
pues estamos & \quad \text{Where life and dreams are as one;} \\
en mundo tan singular, & \quad \text{And living has taught me this,} \\
que el vivir sólo es soñar; & \quad \text{Man dreams the life that is his,} \\
y la experiencia me enseña & \quad \text{Until his living is done.} \\
que el hombre que vive, sueña & \quad […] \\
lo que es hasta despertar. & \quad \text{What is life? a tale that is told;} \\
[...] & \quad \text{What is life? a frenzy extreme,} \\
¿Qué es la vida? Un frenesi. & \quad \text{A shadow of things that seem;} \\
¿Qué es la vida? Una ilusión, & \quad \text{And the greatest good is but small,} \\
una sombra, una ficción, & \quad \text{That all life is a dream to all,} \\
y el mayor bien es pequeño; & \quad \text{And that dreams themselves are a} \\
que toda la vida es sueño, & \quad \text{dream.}^{106} \\
y los sueños, sueños son. & \\
\end{align*}

When reading “Las paredes” through this monologue, Gambaro’s intentions become clear. If human beings experience life as a dream, then Ruperto’s constant desire to impose logic on his reality, which, like a dream, presents itself as uncalled for and unintelligible, is doomed to failure. Furthermore, if life is a “ficción” (“fiction”), as “Las paredes” itself is, then human reality should be “read” in the same way as works of fiction: with no single interpretation privileged and no ultimate conclusion ever attempted. Thus, besides his attempt to impose

coherence through univocal value on his reality, Ruperto’s major mistake comes from his full reliance on and exclusive privileging of constructed meanings, themselves the result of metanarratives.

As postmodern existentialist works of literature such as Griselda Gambaro’s “Las paredes,” Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, and Vassilis Alexakis’ *Contrôle d’identité* demonstrate, metanarratives occupy a central role in human life and society. Without any points of reference that are at least temporarily stable, human beings cannot come to an understanding of their own selves and the world around them. In its attempt to demystify authoritative discourses that make claims of universality, postmodern theory has increased people’s awareness of the relativism and lack of legitimacy of such discourses. However, postmodernism has not provided viable alternatives that could be implemented in place of metanarratives.

Conversely, by representing in their writings the diverse ways in which authoritative discourses operate, postmodern existentialist authors such as Auster, Gambaro, and Alexakis reassign a certain degree of legitimacy to metanarratives. Indeed, as they show how human beings have the choice to modify or abandon their adherence to stable meanings and constructions, they encourage the development of more fluid identities and understandings of reality that still function within the frameworks of metanarratives. Thus, as literary critics and theorists, or even, as readers of fiction, our central task is to find new ways of constantly modifying the roles and forms of the metanarratives in our societies while maintaining some of the points of reference that we, as human beings, so desperately seek.
Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth century, U.S., French, and River Plate writers contributed to establishing existentialist trends in their national literatures. These literary trends, which I analyzed at length in the introduction and the first two chapters, are the result of both literary conversations that developed among authors from France, Argentina, Uruguay, and the U.S. and various political, economic, and cultural crises that affected these countries. Literary critics have tended to study existentialism as a postwar European (and generally French) phenomenon that influenced U.S. and Latin American literature after World War II. However, as I have attempted to show throughout this project, American and French writers made significant contributions to the development of existentialism before World War II and also continued to challenge and revise existentialist theories in the late twentieth century. In fact, existentialism became a medium through which numerous writers represented and examined the consequences of major national and global crises both for the human subject and society.

In addition, in the Americas, existentialist literature allowed authors to attempt to shatter the illusion of America as a land of opportunity at the same time that it helped reveal the existential ethe of the American continents. These ethe, as I sought to demonstrate, manifest themselves in the distinct literary trends that U.S. and River Plate writers develop, consolidate, and alter throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, as I argued in chapters II and III, these national literary trends are sometimes the result of a desire to react against French, or more specifically, early Sartrean existentialism. After the peak of existentialism in the 1940s and 1950s, not only U.S. and River Plate but also French authors challenged Sartre’s theories, thereby renovating existentialism. Very often, however, as U.S., French, and River Plate authors
challenged existentialist theories, they further accentuated the distinctiveness of the national literary trends that I have examined.

My interest in identifying and analyzing these literary trends came from a desire to contribute to questioning the ways in which American and existentialist literatures are studied, especially in the U.S. For various ideological, cultural, and economic reasons—many of which I examined in this project—European and USAmerican literary critics, translators, institutions, and publishing houses influenced greatly the ways in which we have come to understand and study American literature. By triangulating U.S., French, and River Plate existentialist works, I have sought to bring to light the diverse roles that existentialism has played in entwining twentieth-century French and American literature. I have attempted to elucidate the significance of this literary phenomenon by examining the conversations that developed among USAmerican, French, and River Plate writers and the different trends and transmutations of existentialism that they helped create. By analyzing both canonical and non-canonical works while providing evidence of the development of existentialism in these locations, I have tried to shed light on the historical relevance of this movement within a transatlantic context.

In addition, the various functions and permutations of existentialism that I examined throughout this project hopefully have revealed how existentialist theories and themes often overlapped with postcolonial and postmodern concerns. In fact, existentialism, which spans the entire twentieth century, adapted equally well to modernist and postmodernist aesthetics. As a cultural phenomenon, it allowed U.S., River Plate, and French writers to address a wide range of social and ontological concerns. Thus, the persistence of existentialism in late twentieth and early twenty-first century literature makes it necessary to reexamine existentialism as a crucial
discourse in the national literary traditions of France, the U.S., and the River Plate, as I have sought to do here.

In chapter I, I examined early works by Juan Carlos Onetti, Saul Bellow, and Jean-Paul Sartre and argued that their first-published novels set precedents for the development of many of the literary trends that I identified throughout this project. Indeed, as we have seen, Bellow’s *Dangling Man*, Sartre’s *La Nausée*, and Onetti’s *El pozo* anticipate the ways in which existentialist writers approached human existence; the relation between past, present, and future; the role of art and literature; individual and collective political action; surrealist and psychoanalytic techniques and insights; the concept of responsibility; and Communism.

The distinct existential *ethos* that characterized these writers’ national literatures can also be identified in these early works. Bellow’s novel exhibits a more optimistic ethos since it emphasizes how future opportunities may help human beings transcend alienation and allay feelings of dread and anguish associated with modern life. By refusing to take an ontological approach to alienation, Bellow prepares the way for the development of a typically-USAmerican existentialist novel, in which the protagonists seek to put an end to their alienation and existential angst through spiritual renewal, religion, and a marked emphasis on hope. Similarly, Juan Carlos Onetti anticipates the role of Surrealism, psychoanalysis, and the fantastic in River Plate literature. Onetti’s attempt to offer to the reader a glimpse of his own times through the dreams and imaginary stories of an alienated protagonist sets a precedent for one of the most characteristic traits of River Plate existentialist literature: the tendency to explore alternative means of accessing, representing, and altering human reality. Conversely, Sartre’s *La Nausée* helps establish the focus on the ontological character of alienation that is typical of French existentialist literature. Indeed, Roquentin’s epiphany at the *jardin public*, in which the
protagonist confronts and elucidates the concepts of *néant* and human facticity while observing chestnut-tree roots, marks a key moment in a developing French existentialist tradition. At the same time, it also triggers a series of literary responses from writers in France and from around the world.

Furthermore, as we have seen in chapter I, Bellow, Sartre, and Onetti contributed to establishing the diary novel as one of the preferred genres of existentialist writers. Through the diary novel, these existentialist writers sought to offer insightful critiques of their own countries’ social, economic, cultural, and political conditions and struggles. Following Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, Bellow’s, Sartre’s, and Onetti’s first-published diary novels became an ideal medium to introduce the significance of existentialism into the U.S., France, and the River Plate. Moreover, owing to the diary novels’ focus on subjectivity, this genre facilitated the formulation and exploration of existentialist theories. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, wrote *La Nausée* in an attempt to comprehend better many of the philosophical concepts that he later examined at length in his seminal essays.

After examining the relevance and the influence of *El pozo*, *Dangling Man*, and *La Nausée* on the development of River Plate, U.S., and French existentialist literature, in the second chapter, I sought to elucidate the roles of existentialism specifically within an American context. This chapter brought forth some of the ways in which existentialism allowed writers to contest illusions of America as new, unique, and prosperous. Indeed, in their novels, Ralph Ellison, Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Sábato, and Norman Mailer defied myths of America as a land of opportunity through diverse representations of forms of totalitarianism. These representations often took the shape of dream-like, surreal journeys and experiences that allow the protagonists to gain key insights into the sources of their feelings of alienation and existential angst. Through
such representations, *An American Dream*, *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, *Invisible Man*, and *Rayuela* signaled the myths of America as a promise land as some of the major causes of feelings of disenchantment and disorientation.

Thus, as we have seen, Mailer and Ellison, represent the concept of the American dream as oppressive and responsible for their protagonists’ unhappiness. They illustrate the harsh realities that both Invisible man and Rojack must endure in an attempt to portray life in the U.S. as a nightmarish experience. In order to accentuate the contrast between the concept of the American dream and the protagonists’ lived experience, Mailer and Ellison turn to elements of Surrealism. Ralph Ellison, for instance, employs surrealist techniques to represent the effects of constant violence, oppression, and discrimination on the self and the collective. The numerous surreal passages of *An American Dream* allow Mailer to illustrate Rojack’s progressive confrontation of the American dream through his truculent search for authenticity. Without the insights that the novel’s surreal passages provide, the symbolism of Rojack’s act of murder, his attempts to recuperate his freedom and spontaneity through sexual liberation, and his desire to be reborn spiritually would remain unintelligible.

Similarly, in their novels, Sábato and Cortázar contribute to further establishing surrealist and psychoanalytic insights and techniques as a typical trait in River Plate existentialism. In *Rayuela*, for instance, Cortázar sometimes writes surreal passages to reveal the negative effects of binary thinking on human beings’ experience and interpretation of the world around them. Sábato’s surreal passages, and, most importantly, his famous “Report on the Blind” constitute key moments in *Sobre héroes y tumbas*, where Sábato attempts to offer to the reader alternative means to experience and interpret his novel through the use of surrealist and psychoanalytic techniques.
Thus, as Sábato’s, Cortázar’s, Mailer’s, and Ellison’s novels reveal, by integrating surreal and psychoanalytic insights into their writings, American writers marked a central difference between American and French existentialist literature. In fact, numerous French writers shared Sartre’s lack of interest in providing psychological explanations to justify or help elucidate the behavior of his characters. For this reason, most French existentialist writers preferred to distance themselves both from Surrealism and psychoanalysis. USAmerican and River Plate writers, however, felt that combining existentialism with surrealist and psychoanalytic insights was an appropriate move in order to provide diagnoses of their own nations and the American continents.

As I argued in chapter III, after the peak of French existentialism in the 1940s and 1950s, French, U.S., and River Plate authors began to challenge and transform Sartrean existentialist theories. Although some writers occasionally preferred to contest Sartre’s views explicitly, through their essays and interviews, they also expressed their critiques by way of parody. More specifically, Sartre’s early theories on freedom and choice, as presented in *Being and Nothingness*, were commonly disputed. As we saw in this chapter, Marguerite Duras’ *Moderato Cantabile*, Abelardo Castillo’s “El asesino intachable,” and Joyce Carol Oates’ “Accomplished Desires” defied and transformed existentialist theories through their parodies. In *Moderato Cantabile*, Duras examines numerous existential themes (such as freedom, choice, authenticity, and bad faith) and questions the validity of Sartre’s theories by exposing the various ways in which dominant discourses affect human existence. Conversely, Castillo rewrites Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* in an attempt to comment on the role of contingency within the context of freedom and choice. For his part, through “El asesino intachable,” Castillo emphasizes a fundamental aspect of human existence that Sartrean existentialism largely neglected. Similarly,
Joyce Carol Oates’s short story explores the limitations of Sartre’s existentialist theories about freedom, authenticity, and choice as it questions their applicability to the experiences of women.

Thus, as this chapter sought to demonstrate, parody also became (like the diary novel) a preferred genre of existentialist writers, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. The various strategies of parody offered writers an opportunity to subvert the diverse objects of their criticism without reinscribing their targets. Indeed, parody allowed Duras, Castillo, and Oates to lodge critiques against their own societies as well as of the discourses and philosophies that influenced and shaped their own generations. In addition, because of parody’s self-consciousness, this genre became an effective means of examining existentialist theories that seek to evaluate what constitutes authenticity and bad faith.

Finally, the relation between parody and emotion also has revealed why this genre became a key vehicle for the dissemination (and contestation) of existentialist thoughts. As we have seen, emotions can be considered, existentially speaking, as both choices and significant experiences in themselves. As such, they are capable of increasing a text’s subversive potential by influencing the reader’s understanding of a literary work and his/her future actions. Since parody is a genre that necessarily appeals to the reader’s emotions, it offers writers an ideal means of guiding the reading experience. Therefore, because they carefully adduce and infect emotions, parodic strategies were often employed by existentialist writers in order to subvert and challenge other discourses, including existentialism itself.

After analyzing how Duras, Castillo, and Oates contest existentialism through their parodies, I have concluded this study by examining one of the latest permutations of existentialism in twentieth-century literature: postmodern existentialism. In chapter IV, I argued that, when juxtaposed in the form of fiction, existentialist and postmodern explorations
sometimes offer more valuable theoretical stances and practical solutions than traditional postmodern and existentialist discursive theories. Thus, we have seen how Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, Griselda Gambaro’s “Las paredes,” and Vassilis Alexakis’ *Contrôle d’identité* engaged in successful postmodern explorations of typically existentialist themes.

These works reveal that postmodernism and existentialism are not incompatible, thus supporting William Spanos’ claim that “the postmodern imagination […] is an existential imagination.” Although postmodernism as a movement emerged as a reaction against metanarratives (and considered existentialism itself a metanarrative), these works show how both metanarratives and existentialist insights are necessary within the context of human experience. In doing so, they provide an answer to Lyotard’s question regarding the possibility of legitimacy after the would-be end of metanarratives.

Indeed, these postmodern existentialist narratives recognize the need for metanarratives and the fundamental role that they occupy in society while highlighting their arbitrariness and non-universal character. Auster’s, Gambaro’s, and Alexakis’ works demonstrate that human beings require points of reference that are at least temporarily stable in order to produce meaning and justify their existence. The fact that meaning is never given, but created, constitutes a central premise of existentialism that postmodern existentialists appropriate. However, postmodern existentialist writers take both existentialist and postmodern theories one step further by emphasizing the fundamental role of metanarratives in creating meaning. In this way, Auster’s, Gambaro’s, and Alexakis’ works reassign a certain degree of legitimacy to metanarratives and encourage the development of more fluid identities and understandings of reality that still function within the frameworks of metanarratives.

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In addition, these works combine existentialist and postmodern concerns and techniques, thus converging on many of the points that they emphasize. As this last chapter has sought to point out, the literary trends that I have examined throughout this project are less evident in postmodern existentialist works. In fact, as Gambaro, Auster, and Alexakis focus on the dangers of metanarratives and explore metafiction and alternative means of representation, many of the elements that made these literary trends distinct become less dominant or disappear into the background. Instead, themes such as the crisis of representation or the notion of “simulacrum” emerge as major concerns. In spite of this, some of these trends can still be detected. In “Las paredes” and many of Gambaro’s later works, for instance, psychoanalytic insights are often encouraged as interpretative tools.

Throughout this study, I have identified and analyzed key literary trends and transformations of existentialism in an attempt to reveal the need to question the ways in which we study this movement. I have also sought to reveal the significance of existentialism in the American hemisphere. This project hopefully contributes to ongoing debates on revising the canon of American literature and the ways in which we study existentialist literature. A further development of this study could well extend into an examination of more recent manifestations of existentialism both in literary works and films. For instance, a fifth chapter could well analyze the phenomenon of “pop-existentialism,” which is best exemplified by the 1999 blockbuster *Fight Club*, based on one of Chuck Palahniuk’s novels.

Furthermore, a focus on more recent manifestations of existentialism could also lead to the examination of the role of existentialism in a post-globalization era. Indeed, in a different phase beyond the parameters of the present project, one could analyze late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century novels that explore the significance of existentialism in a post-globalized
world. José Saramago’s novels, for example, could be most appropriate for exploring this phenomenon. Set in an unrecognizable country where characters remain unnamed, novels such as *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995; *Blindness*), *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* (2004; *Seeing*), and *As Intermitências da Morte* (2005; *Death at Intervals*) not only continue to question typically existentialist themes, but they also examine the significance that an existentialist ethics may still have in today’s world. Thus, this study, while elucidating the reach of existentialism through the twentieth century into the twenty-first, might also serve as a threshold to the ongoing relevance of existentialism in contemporary and post-contemporary literary cultures of Europe and America.
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