Self-Consciousness and Schizophrenia: The Literary World of Nuria Amat

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Harly Sonne notes that "love, death, ignorance and madness seem to be ontological themes in fiction, anywhere, at any time. But usually madness is exposed at a distance, from the point of view of the omniscient narrator or the implied, quiet dramatist [. . .]" (Sonne 232). The distinctive feature of the works of Nuria Amat (Barcelona, 1950), who writes in the main in Castilian despite being a native Catalan,[1] is that madness is consistently foregrounded and afflicts narrators as well as characters. She has produced in excess of twenty works, ranging from technical manuals on librarianship (she follows in the writer-librarian tradition perhaps best exemplified by Borges) to essays, novels and plays. We shall be referring here to several of them: *El ladrón de libros y otras bibliomanías* (1988), a collection of short stories; *Todos somos Kafka* (1993), a novel; *Viajar es muy difícil* (1995), a collection of short stories; *La intimidad* (1997) a novel; and *Letra herida* (1998), an essay. We shall also make some reference to two more recent works, *El país del alma* (1999) and *Reina de América* (2002) in order to trace the evolution of Amat's portrayal of metaliterature and madness. Her works may belong to diverse genres but they all treat, in their different ways, the twin themes of writing and madness.

Madness is associated with culture, especially book culture and with both writers and readers. In *Letra herida*, the narrator claims that her father infected her with "la manía libresca" (171). This is certainly not a fresh insight on Amat's part: Foucault points out that

> civilization [. . .] constitutes a milieu favourable to the development of madness. If the progress of knowledge dissipates error, it also has the effect of propagating a taste and even a mania for study; the life of the library, abstract speculations, the perpetual agitation of the mind without the exercise of the body, can have the most disastrous effects. (217)

He notes the strange proximity between madness and literature, explained by the role of the deranged imagination in the invention of the arts (29), an idea that underpins the work of Shoshana Felman who refers to Nerval's claim that every reading is a kind of madness, since it is based on illusion and induces us to identify

[1] In 2011 she published her first novel written in Catalan, *Amor i Guerra*, which won the prestigious Ramon Llull prize in the same year.

with imaginary heroes. "Madness is nothing other than an intoxicating reading: a madman is one who is drawn into the dizzying whirl of his own reading" (Felman 64).

Foucault refers to the observation of François Boissier de Sauvages that many people "succumb to madness through being too concerned about an object" (94). The objects in Amat's case, books and libraries, the overarching themes of her works, are treated at length in Nicholas A. Basbanes's *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books*, a title that underplays the madness of "biblio-criminals" ranging from Don Vicente, a former Spanish monk, whose consuming fascination for books led him to commit no fewer than eight murders during the 1830s, to Stephen Blumberg, whose uncontrollable collecting led him to risk life and limb in his plundering in the 1980s of more libraries than anyone before him (Basbanes 33–34; 465–519). Blumberg was largely driven by insane passions, not least jealousy of another thief (James Shinn), and his determination to surpass him (484–85). Amat displays single-mindedness and passion of the same order, albeit without the criminal dimensions described here. Her work draws on a rich tradition of bookish madness, mirroring in this respect Flaubert's *La tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874), the first literary work whose exclusive domain is that of books. Amat's focus is equally exclusive in works such as *Todos somos Kafka* whose every section deals with authors, reading or writing.

Reading and writing provide some thematic unity in *Todos somos Kafka*, an otherwise eccentric text. The main character is *la lectora* whose identity is fluid as she relates—as daughter and lover—to the main male writers, Kafka and Joyce. The latter's daughter, Lucia, who suffers from schizophrenia, also plays an important role in dramatising a literature-induced madness for which her father is largely responsible. Reading and writing and the relationship between the two provide the common thread in a text that is complex and slippery: as Amago notes, "the daunting style she employs reveals the same sort of sadistic narrative tendencies that she criticizes in Joyce" (114). Indeed, *la lectora* is contaminated by literature—"la lectora ha leído demasiado" (37)—and her personal mode of being and her world view, like that of the books she admires, is in flux rather than fixed, assuming a protean and schizophrenic aspect:

> Es Franz Kafka hombre de poco equipaje y esos trastos de allá arriba parecen estar siempre a la espera de un fin definitivo que no se atreve a darles.
>
> Antes de proseguir con la lista de objetos personales de Kafka, la lectora teme confundirse; confundir, por ejemplo, al personaje Franz Kafka, escritor, padre de la lectora, con el que fuera en verdad padre de la lectora en el caso de que la lectora no fuera un personaje y tuviera tras de sí un padre que ahora mismo estaría apenado al leer todo cuanto su hija lectora es capaz de inventar y escribir sobre el afligido padre. En este momento, la lectora se merecería un hijo escritor que escribiera [. . .] uno de esos libros en los que sus narradores [. . .] convierten en protagonistas de sus novelas a diferentes artistas que en el mundo fueron como músicos, científicos o, finalmente, escritores porque permiten al narrador decir más cosas de su vida personal sin que se note. (38–39)

Here there is flux but also fear; lines of flight that suggest fantasy and creativity—the *hijo escritor* is an imaginary figure—but also confusion and uncertainty. Madness is both positive[2] and negative, as Sass observes: “the madman is a protean figure in the Western imagination [. . .]. He is associated with insight and vitality but also with blindness, disease and death” (Sass 1). Amat’s text is about the vitality of Joyce but also about the affliction of Lucia. The relationship between author and narrator, mentioned at the end of the above extract, raises the question of Amat’s relationship with *la lectora*: Gilbert & Gubar note that “the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroin. Rather, she is usually in some sense the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (78). Amat’s own bibliomania, nurtured as it was by her career as a librarian, is well-documented. Similar mirroring is apparent in *El país del alma*: while Amat flaunts her self-conscious obsessions with reading and writing, playing the part of female *intrusa* in the male-dominated world of canonical writing, Nena displays her female beauty, playing the part of *femme fatale* and arousing thereby male fear (notably in her husband, Baltus) as well as male admiration. Nena may be seen as a postmodern as well as a feminist heroine. She remarks in jest that “en otra vida yo hubiera sido actriz” (59) but she is in reality a consummate actress: “estrenaba su maternidad por todo lo alto como un baile de gala” (154) and her identity is closely associated with her hairstyle (160). She is also role-playing as both reader and lover (63). In fact, she tires of Baltus’s unidimensional role of *enamorado* (104) and his repeated protestations of love: “Quería reír esta noche y Baltus sólo le dedicaba halagos” (197). Baltus draws on the tired and tautological discourse of the lover: “Te quiero, dijo él para detener la fiera” (92).[3] Both Amat and her character indulge in a kind of hyperbolisation: Amat of feminist self-conscious writing; Nena of the physical accoutrements of femininity. Both engage in masquerades that challenge male positioning of woman—who no

[2]In *Letra herida*, Amat notes that Virginia Woolf owes her work to Leonard Woolf who denied her the child she craved and gave her instead “la locura tan necesaria en una escritora de esa naturaleza” (60). Woolf herself extolled the virtues of madness: “As an experience, madness is terrific [. . .] in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driblets, as sanity does” (Woolf 180). Amat echoes this sentiment:

> Esa aventura de la sinrazón me parece la respuesta más adecuada hacia un mundo enfermo de razones prepotentes. Me siento cómodo viviendo en ese trampolín del delirio, como si la sombra del delirio me protegiera de las agresiones y otras hipocresías de la vida cotidiana. Y atribuyo a esa sombra de luto y chifladura la responsabilidad de mi escritura. (175)

[3]Barthes notes that “once the first avowal has been made, ‘I love you’ has no meaning whatever” (*A Lover’s Discourse* 147). Baltus’s statement is clearly intended to curb rather than to stimulate their lovemaking. The difference between Baltus and Nena can be seen in Nietzchean terms. In *The Gay Science* Nietzche refers to learning to love not depths but surfaces: “the fold, the skin, [. . .] forms, tones, words, [. . .] the whole Olympus of appearance” (3, 4). As a “counterforce” to the “over-severe demands” of our “irritable honesty”, we have discovered the “cult of the untrue”, the “*good* will to appearance.” We must turn not just the world but also the *self* into an “aesthetic phenomenon” (117). While Nena embraces such a spirit, Baltus is held back by his “irritable honesty”.

longer offers herself unproblematically to male scrutiny. The link is reinforced by the portrayal of the death of a beautiful woman (in this instance, Nena) that serves as an analogy for the creation of an art work (Bronfen 71): Baltus's mother sees Nena as "otra de sus obras artísticas descubierta recientemente en una sacristía" (36) while Nena herself is suspicious of the photographer Baltus's dark room: "me quieres momificada" (223). These instances suggest the literary aestheticisation of the dying Nene that complements the physical aestheticisation of the living woman by means of cosmetics and revealing costumes.

Returning to *Todos somos Kafka*, *la lectora* freely admits her passion for literature which includes impossible longings to transcend her individual subjectivity and time frame: she tells Calvino that she would like to read Virgil in the way that Shakespeare or Cervantes read him; or read Cervantes as Calvino read him; "o incluso Homero o al propio Borges como sin duda los leyó Virgilio. 'Porque leer como lee Joyce es ser también Joyce' he dicho finalmente." She goes on to admit that she is caught up in a vortex of deranged literary imaginings and that "la literatura es una enfermedad y yo estoy presa de ese estado morboso [. . .]. Me pierdo en el tiempo. Siempre estás leyendo, me dicen. No puedes hacer otra cosa que no sea leer" (199). In *La intimidad*, the narrator as reader is both creative—"antes que leer prefería quedarme con los silencios del texto [. . .]. Los silencios me hablaban" (54)—and also totally accepting of the world of the novel as an extension of the real world, to such an extent that there seems to be no need for any suspension of disbelief on her part: "nunca pensé que las novelas fueran historias inventadas" (54). Her mother was no other than "la señora demente e incendiaria que habitaba en las alturas del Castillo del señor Rochester" (54). She openly acknowledges her obsession with books (diagnosed as neurasthenia): "es cierto que yo padecía una afición obsesiva a los libros y la lectura. Una especie de manía incorregible" (87–88).[4] Doctors advised her to get rid of her books following her near fatal fall: "los libros despiertan espíritus dormidos en algunas mentes sencillas" (91). But there is no possibility of compliance: books are, after all, more important to her than her own mother: "yo que podía aceptar un mundo sin madre, ya no podía concebir el mismo mundo sin libros" (118). One reason for her attachment is that books bear the individual imprint of their owners: two apparently identical books can be distinguished by their ownership (39) and the strength of the often irrational emotional ties they exert is evident in the blind Borges's love of books: "yo sigo jugando a no ser ciego, yo sigo comprando libros, yo sigo llenando mi casa de libros" (61). *La lectora*'s frenzy of reading is matched by the obsession with writing displayed by authors such as Joyce who wanted his wife, Nora, to have an affair with Beckett purely to provide him with literary raw material (72). He enjoins her to deceive him: "Engáñame un poco y dame qué escribir" (140). The bookshop clients of his publisher, Sylvia Beach, are enlisted to provide literary material: they are encouraged to utter nonsensical phrases in each others' ears, phrases that Joyce transposes directly to his manuscript (124). The death of his fellow writer, Italo

[4] Vezzetti includes the reading of literature, including novels, as a cause of madness (85).

Svevo, in a car accident has no effect on Joyce, "ya que no añadía nada a la vida de Leopold Bloom, su héroe predilecto" (106). The madness of writing dulls human emotions and compassions: Joyce is not the only culprit. Louise Colet was interested in finding "amantes escritores y, a poder ser, un marido como Flaubert" (165). But Flaubert not only "quería que mis verdaderas angustias fueran literarias en vez de amorosas" but also "se sirvió de mis exigencias amorosas para construir con ellas a la protagonista de su mayor novela" (165). Amat's other writings portray the same theme: in *La intimidad*, the narrator marries the Catalan poet Carles Riba (1893–1959) because of his love of reading and his close and conflictual relationship with books (198). For Riba, sexual arousal derives from the intellectual image of a woman reading rather than from the physical one of the woman unclothed. In a similar vein, maternity for him evokes the image of a woman holding a book rather than of a woman holding a child.[5] Here Amat offers a fresh perspective on literature, repudiating the sterile image of the dusty old book, read in seclusion, in favour of the erotically-charged book, capable of sexual arousal.

For the narrator's friend, Berenice, of *El ladrón de libros y otros bibliomanías*, "el amor dura o se eterniza lo que dura la afición de lectura de los amantes: Berenice, en lugar de días, cuenta páginas" (151–52). In *Viajar es muy difícil*, the overwhelming influence of literature on life assumes tragic overtones as Lucia, Joyce's daughter, becomes a mere "prolongación de su padre-escritor" or, even worse, a mere "prolongación de su escritura" (131),[6] a circumstance to which we shall return below.

While literature plagiarises life, its own perspective is narrow and inward-looking, self-conscious and self-absorbed. Sass observes that schizophrenia "may be characterized less by fusion, spontaneity and the liberation of desire than by separation, restraint and an exaggerated cerebralism and propensity for introspection" (10). The overwhelming self-consciousness of Amat's works may be seen as schizophrenic. Its focus rarely strays from reading and writing, often focusing on literary discord rather than on literary unity: as literary craftsmen, Joyce and Kafka have contrasting styles, the one resorts to "verdaderas tormentas de palabras, un

[5] Significantly it is the woman herself who echoes such perceptions in *El país del alma* where Nena compares her pregnancy with literary gestation: "los hijos son como las palabras. Llegan cuando llegan y se quedan ahí colgando del aire como poemas inacabados" (226).

[6] The more pronounced feminist orientation of Amat's later work is reflected in a reversal of traditional roles: in *El país del alma*, Nena's literary "madness" and volatile creativity—"levanto cada palabra del papel, las junto y las separo como si fueran trenzas, juego con ellas" (49); "Nena escribía en todas partes [. . .] incluso, en el papel de seda de la ropa blanca de Almadora" (287)—intimidates Baltus who has renounced his own literary aspirations (156). It is she who plays the traditional male role, both in their everyday lives—"ella mandaba y él obedecía" (107)—and in their literary interaction. McHale notes that John Barth "has half-seriously proposed an erotic theory of reading whereby the author plays the masculine role, the reader the feminine role and the text functions as their intercourse" (226). Such an erotics has obvious associations with *El país del alma*, although it is Nena who assumes the authorial role with Baltus often playing the part of jealous "reader" of his wife's extravagant style with its cosmetic and sartorial excesses. Nena thus emerges from the shadows that darkened the lives of most female literary lovers and daughters, notably Joyce's Lucia.

alud de verborrea" (*Todos somos Kafka* 78), while Kafka's economy derives from his belief that "escribir un relato que contenga un máximo de tres frases ya es escribir demasiado" (87). Their styles impact on the reader: Joyce is a sadistic writer who torments the reader with his often incomprehensible verbiage: "dio muerte al lector. Fue su verdugo" (149). Kafka, by contrast, is "un autor honesto y antes de que el lector desista de la lectura de sus novelas, por si ése fuera el caso, tiene la delicadeza de dejarlas inacabadas" (86).

Apart from creative writing, Amat considers the practice of criticism and the relative ease of reviewing "novelas legibles, digeribles y nada problemáticas" as distinct from the work of "un autor difícil, o demasiado fácil o desconocido" (63) such as Kafka, rendered a household name by perverse marketing strategies: "y resulta repugnante que [. . .] todo el mundo devore o trate de devorar intragables Kafkas [. . .] " (63–64)—a category within which Amat herself could be placed as "una escritora para escritores" (64) though she herself remains relatively unknown. Amat also reviews genres such as autobiography and biography (65–66), emphasising that neither can be reduced to the plain evocation of the subject's life. Here Amat seems to be making a personal point since her own work has pronounced autobiographical elements. Her narrator claims that Brod's biography of Kafka was the first and the worst. Brod considered it a true biography but "una biografía verdadera es la pretensión más absurda que pueda plantearse un escritor" (65–66). The narrator also surveys the distinctive practices of individual writers. Thus Joyce's creative freedom in writing *Ulysses* was facilitated by his publisher who allowed him to develop his ideas on the proofs, of which an indefinite number was supplied (124–25). Amat also considers the rise of the paratext, stimulated by the publication of Joyce's major works: "después de Joyce, y por su causa, todo libro con pretensión de ser sublime exige la redacción de otros libros que expliquen al lector el contenido del mismo" (125). Like Amat's other works, *Todos somos Kafka* is about the production and consumption of books. Defending herself from charges of plagiarism levelled at her by small-minded librarians, she claims that her work was her own despite bearing the influence of Beckett, Artaud, Joyce and Borges. The first thing a true writer learns is to "asumir la ausencia de frases originales. Y que toda escritura verdadera tiene un aire de plagio disfrazado." In fact, she claims, contemporary literature is no more than "un enorme tapiz que se teje por medio de repeticiones" (*La intimidad* 117). This is a recurrent theme, sometimes expressed in a manner reminiscent of Borges: "El hombre ha muerto. El original al menos. El otro, es mero plagio del primero. Así la escritura y sus palabras" (*Letra herida* 124).[7] To confirm this point, she admits that "lo que escribo está dicho, lo que hablo está escrito [. . .] realicé innumerables pruebas escribiendo libros a partir de los fragmentos de otros libros" (129). Elsewhere she comments on Borges's own peculiar practice in this respect: "su mérito no consiste en copiar bien a sus mae-

[7] In "La forma de la espada" (*Ficciones)*, for example, we read: "Acaso Schopenhauer tiene razón: yo soy los otros, cualquier hombre es todos los hombres, Shakespeare es de algún modo el miserable John Vincent Moon" (174).

stros, tarea primera y final de toda buena literatura, sino en haber sabido copiar todavía con talento más brillante si cabe, a sus alumnos y seguidores" (67). If there is such a thing as literary originality, it consists in "el talento de mezclar ideas y teorías ajenas" (*El ladrón de libros y otras bibliomanías* 169).[8] Amat's practice is also reminiscent of Barthes's notion of the death of the author. He invokes Mallarmé as the first writer to realise that it is language that speaks, not the author: "to write is, through a prerequisite personality [. . .] to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me' [. . .] " (*Image–Music–Text* 143). For Barthes, as for Amat, the text "is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). Capdevila-Argüelles confirms this point: "the writer cannot think in a vacuum and, from that perspective, there is nothing new and everything has already been written". The *lectora* is exercised by the influence of dead (male) writers, "what to do with their influence in her text, how to understand it. And she has tried to do this by narrating, by writing a novel that is conscious of the presence of literary influence" (36).

Plagiarism[9] is therefore an important self-conscious theme treated by Amat, though it is Joyce rather than Kafka who plays the lead role here: he is alleged to have adopted the personal narrative mode of his student and fellow-writer, Italo Svevo, who was learning English: "copió de él su particular forma de autorredimirse a través del humor, después, claro está, de haber hecho suya la musa literaria de su alumno" (*Todos somos Kafka* 102). Despite his literary eminence, Joyce is not immune to the anxiety of influence. He resented the success of other writers and, in order to conceal his considerable literary debt to such "strong" predecessors as Freud, Poe and Dostoyevsky, he invented his own unsung precursor, making out that he had first encountered the technique of interior monologue in the work of a little known writer, Edouard Dujardin: "luchaba por convertir a Dujardin en el fundador de la nueva literatura. Para este fin, sobornó a varios críticos prestigiosos y el anciano Dujardin gozó del poder y la gloria por cierto tiempo" (95). This story has a humorous ending: Dujardin, inspired by Joyce's attention, published *Le Monologue intérieur* (1931), but failed to mention Joyce (96). Here is an unusual example of a minor writer getting the better of a major one who aspired to be "el Único" (99); the reverse normally happens, as in the case of Thomas Mann, who could not tolerate literary rivals even within his own immediate family. He therefore named his eldest son after his secret lover, Klaus Heuser: "Klaus era entonces el nombre idóneo para asignárselo al hijo mayor, al primer rival de un

[8]Sarlo identifies a similar characteristic in Borges: "he is someone who constructs his originality through quotations, copies and the rewritings of other texts" (6). Borges freely acknowledged his plagiarism: "I plagiarize. We are all heirs of millions of scribes who have already written down all that is essential a long time before us. We are all copyists, and all the stories we invent have already been told. There are no longer any original ideas" (qtd. in Kristal 135).

[9]Borges again comes to mind: in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (*Ficciones*), for example, we read that in the world of Tlön, books are rarely signed. "No existe el concepto del plagio: se ha establecido que todas las obras son obra de un solo autor [. . .] " (101–02).

escritor, el hijo que pudiendo haberlo sido todo para superar al padre no podía llegar a nada [. . .] ” (173). Even more poignant, is the case of the narrator herself who labours under the shadow of her literary masters, notably Kafka, whose style pervades her own work (68).

The obsessive focus of *Todos somos Kafka* draws upon the maniacal single-mindedness of its author-protagonists. In this respect, Kafka's exclusive commitment seems to be even more extreme than that of Joyce. Described as an “obsesión maníaca”, it inspires *la lectora* to devote her own life to writing (49–50). Kafka's devotion was, indeed, extraordinary, nullifying the appeal of “normal” pleasures: sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection and, above all, music (Corngold 2).[10] As Corngold notes, writing involves “a turn from life so radical that Kafka will name it again and again with the imagery of death.” Writing to Felice Bauer, Kafka mentioned his need for seclusion, not “like a hermit but like the dead. Writing is a sleep deeper than that of death” (22); and, in a letter to Max Brod, Kafka envisions the writer as inhabiting a place outside the house of life—as a dead man (75).

A number of parallels emerge between Amat and Kafka such as her eccentric focus on the narrator's interest in the marginalised writer with no aspirations to achieve published status: “el escritor imagina la manera de escribir una obra sin intención alguna de verla publicada” (*Todos somos Kafka* 72). (Kafka's contempt for literary success and wealth emerges in *Letra herida* (96)). The absence of any intention to publish—which would appear to be an irrational repudiation of the “normal” writer's overriding ambition—complements textual endorsement of flux and becoming rather than of stasis and being.[11] On the one hand, in *Letra herida*, the book is seen as vibrant and immediate with the lively urban environment of Barcelona taking on the appearance of a book or library: “cada barrio de mi ciudad se podría describir como el capítulo de una novela hermosa y emblemática [. . .]. Una biblioteca viva, herida y luminosa. Un aparador libresco” (165).[12] But books represent death as well as life, as in *El ladrón de libros y otras bibliomanías*: “naturaleza muerta e immortalidad por excelencia” (19). Nena, of *El país del alma*,

[10]Kafka is far from unique in this respect. Amat notes that George Steiner was equally obsessed—“A Steiner le cuesta separar vida y literatura” (*Letra herida* 107); Macey remarks that Maurice Blanchot's books bear the biographical note: “Maurice Blanchot, novelist and critic. His life is entirely devoted to literature and to the silence that befits it” (xvi). Blanchot himself states: “L'expérience qu'est la littérature est une expérience totale [. . .]. Elle est la passion même de sa propre question et elle force celui qu'elle attire à entrer tout entier dans cette question” (306). Foucault refers to Nerval's repeated observation that we must write, that we live and die only through writing (Macey 103). Amat's work manifests similar commitment.

[11]The parallels with the “marginal” Argentine writer Macedonio Fernández (1874–1952) are clear. He, too, is an absent, unknown author who fails to submit his work for publication and whose philosophy foregrounds a self that is not fixed and stable but always in the process of becoming (see Garth 37, 41, 45). Blanchot makes a similar point: “l'essence de la littérature, c'est d'échapper à toute détermination essentielle, à toute affirmation que la stabilise ou même la réalise: elle n'est jamais déjà là, elle est toujours à retrouver ou à réinventer” (293–94).

[12]Capdevila-Argüelles (142) remarks on the displacement of the social by the literary in *El país del alma* where Nena describes how the window becomes a page which she reads: “Por fin he aprendido a leer por la ventana. No necesito nada en las manos. Éste es un desafío contra el cielo” (362).

destined to die young, is conscious of the intimate relationship between books and death: “los libros cerraban las vidas en hoyos insulares. Los libros eran salvavidas de inmortalidad” (335). Ong remarks on the paradox of writing that lies in “the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers” (81).

Amat’s mother died when she was very young and she associates the image of writing with the words engraved on the tombstone: “Mi infancia era un libro abandonado con sus letras muertas en itálica. Y mi vida era un libro, y una tumba y unas letras sagradas en itálica” (45). In *Letra herida* she notes that it is the voices of dead people that give energy and sound to writing: “los escritores, algunos de ellos, son las portavoces de sus muertos familiares” (13). On a more personal note, she claims that “la escritora que hay en mí es la voz de mi madre resucitada y arrepentida de ser loca. La escritora que hay en mí castiga a mi madre mientras escribe una y otra vez el cuento de la loca suicida” (157). In *La intimidad*, libraries are compared to cemeteries: “Mi biblioteca era mi cementerio” (46). The narrator visits her mother’s tomb and is eventually obliged to “cambiar la lápida por los libros. Los libros me hablaban. Creía oír a mi madre a través de ellos” (46). Indeed, books assume extraordinary importance, sometimes taking the place of human beings, as in *Letra herida*: “la biblioteca de mi padre es algo así como decir (casi) la esposa de mi padre [. . .]. La biblioteca es además el cementerio de mi madre. Todos sus huesos catalogados en los estantes [. . .] ” (149–50).

The propinquity of reading, writing and death emerges at the outset in *Todos somos Kafka*. Reading stops and preparation for writing begins: “Cerré el libro, encendí el televisor y vi su cara” (17). The unknown man whom *la lectora* sees will become her protagonist but there is a carefully cultivated haziness which envelopes the opening pages and persists for much of the remainder of the text: “lo único cierto de la historia era que el desconocido acababa de sobrevivir a un intento de suicidio”. The reference to suicide is important since it is a recurrent theme, closely linked to writing: “los novelistas son, a fin de cuentas, unos suicidas” (20). In *La intimidad*, the narrator’s husband, Carles Riba, eventually sells his books after the pleasure of reading turns into the torment of reading: “todo se confunde. Lo real desaparece y sólo queda el aquelarre de los libros” (280). It is too late, however, since he is still driven to suicide, emulating the fate of well-known writers such as Gilles Deleuze, who—as we read in *Letra herida*—committed suicide by throwing himself out of a window, so that he could continue his dialogue with Foucault in the realm of the dead (21). The narrator’s mother committed suicide in the same way (157).[13] On holiday in Geneva, Nena (of *El país del alma*) comes upon the exiled Catalan writer, Mercé Rodoreda (1908–83), who, significantly, supplemented her income by working as a seamstress. She likes to walk to the Pont Budin: “llegar

[13] Another writer associated with suicide is, of course, Virginia Woolf who features in *Letra herida*. Blanchot notes that she contemplated suicide after completing each of her works, overwhelmed by depression as soon as she stopped working, as she herself admitted (153).

hasta allí y de comprobarlo necesario ella también podía tirarse desde el Puente de los suicidas" (167).

Referring to Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, the narrator (of *Todos somos Kafka*) reserves specific praise for the posthumous volume: "de obras póstumas e incomprendidas han salido grandes obras." The unpublished work becomes a secret treasure at a time when the reading public is sated with "tantas obras comprendidas y publicadas" (71). There is a borderline quality about the posthumous that, as Tambling states, "requires us to think of art as already not quite alive in its own time" (2); he endorses Amat's view about the quality of posthumous works: "the greatest literary glories of our time are born of posthumous works: Kafka, Simone Weil, Hopkins [. . .]. The posthumous challenges a life–death distinction" (7). As is well known, Kafka enjoined his friend, Max Brod, to burn his manuscripts (*Letra herida* 78), a request with which he failed to comply. Kafka's "cenizas susurrantes" (*La intimidad* 46) burned all the more brightly following his death. The posthumous text has a provisional form devoid of finality: "el libro que aún no tenía forma de libro superaba el propio libro" (*Todos somos Kafka* 72). It is significant that, as Eide points out, *Finnegans Wake*'s provisional title, *Work in Progess*, "suggests Joyce's interest in the process of writing, the composition and progression of a text" (115).

Madness, illness, disease and contagion have often been associated with writing: González refers to the view of the anthropologist, Stephen A. Tyler, that writing is an illness "that we cannot treat but only recover from" (10). All these inform writing according to Amat, whose work is, of course, largely about writing. For her, writing and madness go together: "escribo posesa, como si estuviera loca [. . .]. Por pura sed de *contagio* leo al azar algunos párrafos de las grandes escritoras locas" (*Letra herida* 13). (La doctora Cohen, who works at the psychiatric clinic adjacent to the family home, investigates the relationship between woman, madness and writing (*La intimidad* 255)—Amat's interest in writing is clearly gender-inflected.) Writing seems to have a will of its own: while the narrator tried to write in the manner of Dickens she was ultimately unable to: "mis páginas desobedecían mis propósitos y se convertían en textos de mujeres enloquecidas" (*La intimidad* 164)—which suggests that her own affinity with the female world of obsession and madness cannot be circumscribed within the male Dickensian mode. She claims that "los libros contagian escritura, son demonios tentadores de la desazón que sufren ciertos espíritus enfermizos" (*Letra herida* 188–89). The theme of (feminine) contagion re-emerges in a different guise in *La intimidad* where the narrator tells stories to her cousin Cristina: "Tal vez llegase a contagiar a mi prima Cristina mis dotes de narradora" (52). Another ingredient in this mix is often medicine: George Steiner's friend, Dr Claude Bouvier, is described as "un lector infinito de libros, un amigo de escritores y, aunque médico reconocido, también un enfermo de la vida y de demasiada lectura" (*Letra herida* 109). Similarly the doctor and bibliophile Carles Riba (significantly a pathologist who preferred the dead to the living, *La intimidad* 278) suffers from "una esquizofrenia maligna y benevolente" (197). Medicine, literature and contagion converge in the figure of Dr Delmas,

"psiquiatra contagiado de las debilidades literarias" (*Viajar es muy difícil* 130). Here the narrator claims that "la literatura es una enfermedad y yo estoy presa de ese estado morboso" (*Todos somos Kafka* 198). According to Felman, "dementia is, above all, the madness of books; delirium, an adventure of the text" (64).

The first book the narrator read was *Little Women*: her text had belonged to her mother. The narrative features a girl who wants to be a writer. The impression here is of a distinctly female world marked by a vortex of self-conscious references both to the physical property of the book—inscribed in this instance by the mother's hand—and also to the book's content, "la historia de una chica con grandes deseos de ser escritora" (*La intimidad* 50). Books have their own physical aura: in *Letra herida*, the narrator refers to her "raíces de infancia impregnada del calor del libro" (184). The smell of books becomes the perfume she imagined that her mother wore (172). She loved to turn the pages of books and "por encima de todo, me apetecía olerlos" (*El ladrón de libros y otras bibliomanías* 17). The closed world of books, with hardly a glimpse of any world beyond, suggests an obsessive focus, confirmed in the following reference to her second novel: "la locura era la novela, mi madre, y la loca de Jane Eyre. Mi segundo libro de cabecera" (*La intimidad* 50). She associated her mother with "la difunta o viva señora Rochester" (51), as we have seen.

Writing and madness complement each other: in *Letra herida*, the narrator seems to draw inspiration from the asylum located adjacent to the family home: "tal vez el anexo privilegiado de mi escritura. O puede que mi escritura sea el anexo privilegiado de ese lugar de locos" (145). She remarks that "el manicomio es una biblioteca de escritura. Me gusta vivir en los límites y a ratos enloquecer también, sin darme cuenta" (175). In *La intimidad*, the asylum as library of writing is portrayed literally when the narrator, while a psychiatric patient under the supervision of la doctora Cohen ("me gustaba hacer el papel de enfermera verdadera", 258), meets her fellow patients who are writers, all female: one is remarkable for her critical powers, another for her poems inspired by hallucinations—"la escritora dos llamaba fiebre a este asalto de la razón. Cuando sentía la fiebre se ponía a escribir como una endemoniada" (261)—while the third, obsessed with Anaïs Nin, produces pornographic writing. For the narrator, the asylum, associated closely with women, is the most important place because "la verdad estaba en el manicomio. En lo que nunca podía ver del todo" (269).[14]

The most haunting image of madness in *Todos somos Kafka* is that of Lucia Joyce, the writer's daughter, a diagnosed schizophrenic who was confined to a sanatorium at Ivry (Eide 109). Despite his genuine affection for his daughter, Joyce is partly responsible for her condition. He is branded a "promotor de la locura femenina, de la locura auténtica, me refiero, y no se trata de construir un simple juego de palabras" (115). The narrator is referring to a border crossing—from lit-

[14]The Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia (1941–), whose work is similarly obsessed with figures such as Kafka, Joyce and Lucia Joyce, also locates truth in madness. See, for example, "La loca y el relato del crimen" (Piglia 83–92).

erary to clinical madness. In *La intimidad*, a clear distinction is made between literary madness that is romantic, poetic and attractive and real madness, the words of a madman hardly evoking "el fácil discurso de Ofelia recitado como si fueran las páginas de un catálogo de semillas, o las efusiones de Juana la Loca que, en la ficción, nos ofrecen una excusa para el abandono poético" (122). Literature, or at least Joyce's version of it, can kill: one of a series of secretaries who typed *Finnegans Wake* threw herself out of a window: "hasta ese límite de punto y final habían enloquecido a la fiel secretaria los garabatos imposibles y corregidos de los manuscritos del maestro" (*Todos somos Kafka* 114). It is the comparatively miniscule text written by her mother, *Brief Love*, recounting Nora's alleged affair with Beckett, that provoked Lucia's jealousy and led to her madness: she tried to kill her mother. Joyce himself attributes her madness to the family's wandering life-style, believing that "their family history of wandering (moving and changing homes frequently, changing languages and cultures) throughout Lucia's youth produced the wandering of her mind" (Eide 111). Huot notes that, in Western cultural discourse, madness is often configured as a crisis of boundaries and borderlines (Huot 9–10).[15] While Amat, like Kafka, lives life as literature while retaining the ability to distinguish between them, Lucia, under her father's influence, becomes submerged in literature, speaking like a book written by her father. Joyce's reaction is ambivalent: he is both gratified and distraught. For a man determined to suppress all trace of influence on his work, he chooses a curious way of expressing his intimacy with his daughter: "Lucia soy yo" (131). Jealous of male competitors, he is aware that his work "no era creación auténtica sino ejercicio telepático" (131). He had nurtured her "como si fuese el libro de los libros" (132) and colluded with her in the invention of "una especie de media lengua y jerga extraña" (132) that made them feel powerful and superior to people who spoke one language at a time. But it is Lucia, in crossing the border into clinical madness, who is the real creator of *Finnegans Wake*; its schizophrenic language is the "producto de la mente joyceana de Lucía" (133). Eide refers to Kuberski's observation that the schizophrenic's discourse disrupts or suspends "the categories of genius, madness, nonsense [. . .] " (118). While Joyce retained his genius, Lucia slipped into madness and nonsense, or as Jung put it, they were like two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving (Eide 119). Following her father's death, her fate was sealed as a "libro viviente": "su mente era el libro, mientras su cuerpo dormía en manicomio" (134).

A specific language inevitably imposes limits and constraints on its users, circumscribing their expressive potentialities. Lucia's language breaks out of conventional categories. The narrator searches for origins, for a coherence beyond "la sencilla solidaridad de las palabras domesticadas. Azuzando unas palabras contra otras intentaba encontrar la plena liberación de las fuerzas que ocultan las palabras"

[15] Here there is a clear connection with postmodernism: as Hutcheon remarks, the "postmodernist site of operations [. . .] is clearly on the borders of what have traditionally been thought of as discrete forms of discourse, not to say disciplines" (118). As we have already noted, Amat's work is notable for its frequent genre crossings.

(*La intimidad* 95). This image suggests a kind of linguistic violence, words being forced to say new things. Jung's use of water imagery to describe Lucia and Joyce could be substituted by the imagery of fire. Is she the cinder to Joyce's flame? Her chaotic flow of words and languages suggests a desperate return to origins, or at least to Babel—like Lucia herself, a kind of "máquina de desordenar palabras" (*Todos somos Kafka* 207). The clear implication is that Lucia's schizophrenic language is closer to the source of artistic creativity than is ordinary language because it contains traces of the truth of being. Elbaz notes that the schizophrenic "questions the sense-making process offered him by an engulfing hegemonic code. It is this questioning activity that allows us to learn [. . .] from the exercise of madness" (156). Derrida associates cinders or ashes with the trace, "something that erases itself totally, radically, while presenting itself" (Derrida 1). Cinders are "all that remain of the path that might someday lead back (or forward) to the origin of language [. . .]. In the warmth of a cinder one can feel the effects of the fire even if the fire itself remains inaccessible, outside cognition though not without leaving a trace" (2). It is notable that Amat uses similar imagery regarding artistic creation, referring to "cenizas susurrantes": in *La intimidad*, the narrator states that "los libros son cenizas susurrantes" (46) and that "esa locura libresca y ese discreto extrañamiento tienen que ver directamente con las cenizas susurrantes de los muertos" (205); the book is a contradiction in itself, being a "llama y ceniza al propio tiempo" (*El ladrón de libros* 19); and in *Letra herida* the narrator is a collector of books: "guardo libros como quien colecciona ceniceros" (159). The schizophrenic reaches back to a time prior to rigid categories: Paul Kuberski describes a tendency, prevalent in schizophrenia but also characteristic of creativity, to unsettle or destabilise the commonly accepted "intersection of time and space, cause and effect, subject and object, signifier and signified" (qtd. in Eide 118). Divested of rational constraints, this language contains the trace of primordial being, what is both irrecoverable and irrevocably absent but also present, smouldering in the cinders. There is a clear echo of such language in *El país del alma*: "los poemas eran pensamientos que desconocían su ignorancia. Palabras náufragas que morían sin morir. Vivían sin vivir apenas" (311).

It is important to note that although Amat does not believe that there is such a thing as feminine literature, she does regard herself as an active feminist: "yo soy femenista y creo que todo el mundo tendría que serlo, aunque lo cierto es que hay que estar siempre batallando, es una lucha que llevo diariamente" ("Entrevista" 6). Capdevila-Argüelles argues that her work should be considered feminist because "it is gender expectations that she will be learning to challenge as her writing evolves" (3). Indeed, for Capdevila-Argüelles she is the "only Spanish female novelist with enough publications to turn gender awareness into a citational ingredient of her prose" (13), a claim justified by the gender inflection of the key themes (or obsessions) of her work which Amat herself identifies as "la muerte, la locura, los libros" (Ballesteros 681). Nena Rocamora (*El país del alma*) is closely related to all three: to death, not only because her physical decline leads her to anticipate her own early death but because, prior to her illness, her thoughts often turn to death:

thus she reflects that “cuando se creaba una familia se ponía también la primera piedra de una lápida” (58); and when on holiday on the Canary Islands she appears fascinated by a suicide site (221). An aura of madness envelops Nena: her beauty appears to be related to “delirios internos” (15); she feels “un amor parecido a la locura” (175) for her husband, Baltus, and her daughter; she is equally extreme in more casual contexts: she and her sister-in-law, Lola, “se divertían como locas” (161). She often suspects that she herself is mad (208, 243); and she is conscious of her split personality, divided between two people, “una que vive y la otra que me ve vivir” (244). She is also associated with books, not only because her grandfather was a founder of an encyclopaedia (29) but because her love assumes the form of a book (“El amor era un libro llamado Baltus abierto siempre delante de sus ojos”, 43)[16] and she herself resembles a book when she dances with Baltus (“se cerraba y se extendía como un libro”, 92).[17] Gender is linked to genre: Amat states that “la ambigüedad o mezcolanza de géneros es algo patente en mis obras” (Ballesteros 684), a characteristic which has particular resonance in the case of a female writer, as Capdevila-Argüelles explains: “when a female author produces texts that escape conventional narrative moulds, the relationship between gender and genre is summoned to the scene with all its critical impact” (11)—which relates to her later point that “the great female writers form a chaotic assembly outside the proper order of the canon” (73). It is significant in this respect that Amat is attracted to the peripheries of literature to which she herself belongs as a female Catalan writer (albeit one who writes in Castilian): “la literatura española más interesante es la literatura de la periferia [. . .]. La literatura más importante de este siglo está escrita desde la periferia” (“Entrevista” 8). Such beliefs overlap with an important strain of postmodernism: its challenging of dominant (male) discourses.[18] Foster argues that postmodernism represents a crisis in Western representation, a crisis “announced by heretofore marginal or repressed discourses, feminism most significant among them” (xiii). The discourse of *El país del alma* is not of the intellect and reason (associated with the male) but rather of Nena’s female intimacy with Lola and Carlota, from which men are often excluded (e.g. 172–73); of the body and of the senses (Nena’s poems are stitched together with the language of the body: “coso las costuras de mi cuerpo/el corazón se escapa como un punto/mi

[16]Manguel notes that “human beings [. . .] are also books to be read [. . .]. We read expressions on a face, we follow the gestures of a loved one as in an open book” (169).

[17]In *Reina de América* very different female characters are similarly afflicted: the black Aida “delira. Tiene convulsiones [. . .]. Ignora que sus manos van y vienen por el aire como si estuviera loca” (20), while another female character, horribly diseased and disfigured, is referred to as “la loca Alicia” (153).

[18]Capdevila-Argüelles defines Amat’s *Pan de boda* (1979) as “an interior monologue in which poetic form exposes the workings of the State, the Law, the Family and ultimately the Masterpiece along with the notion of authority and the authorial voice” (94). This process might be compared with the de-stratifying impact of Kakfa’s ‘minor’ language: “If, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the principal strata that bind and imprison the human being are ‘the organism, meaningfulness, interpretation, subjectivization and subjection’ (*Mille Plateaux*, p. 167), then ‘minor’ language is the instrument *par excellence* of that de-stratification” (Bensmaïa xvi).

pulmón se ha hecho dobladillo" (207);[19] of female exhibitionism; and of female death.

Referring to Spanish literature, Yvette Sánchez highlights "la larga tradición de la 'patologización'" that begins with Cervantes and extends to the present with Nuria Amat's *Todos somos Kafka* (54, n. 6). Despite her prominence in this tradition, Amat has remained a virtually invisible,[20] almost ghostly presence in contemporary literature, reminiscent in some ways of Pedro Páramo, the eponymous protagonist of *Pedro Páramo* (1955) by the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo (1917–86). In Amat's *La intimidad*, Pedro Páramo is presented as a Mexican writer who is the narrator's first husband. Rulfo's character represents the failure of modernity in Mexico but in Amat's novel he suggests, rather, the dissolution of life in the face of rampant textuality. While in later works such as *El país del alma*, what Capdevila-Argüelles regards as Amat's "inexhaustible metaliterary turn" (29) is by no means diminished, it is more firmly embedded at the level of plot: the love of Nena for Baltus is mediated through writing (43); and Nena's beauty, enhanced by an "otherness" related to her literary obsessions, is noticed even by her children—"tenía el alma en la mirada. Venía de un país extraño. Del país del alma" (267)—although one of them, Aloma, is herself infected by a "melancolía literaria" (299). In *La reina de América*, reality parallels literature as the narrator, a young Catalan woman, living in the Colombian *selva* with a much older companion, Wilson Cervantes, a writer, describes her surprise on seeing the latter's grandmother: "una de esas estrafalarias abuelas de la narrativa colombiana" who had no reason to envy "las leyendas consagradas al realismo mágico" (41). In these texts, Amat's treatment of literature has evolved: there is less explicit discussion of great writers such as Joyce and Kafka—although Nena is compared to Chekov (*El país del alma* 335)—and greater emphasis on the literary inflections of peculiarly female structures of feeling.

Amat deserves a wider readership and greater critical attention given the peculiar force of her work, a force concentrated exclusively on the relationship between literary self-consciousness and madness with their associated emphasis on death and silence. Theme and style conspire to limit Amat's appeal: Amago observes that

> the daunting style that she employs throughout reveals the same sort of sadistic narrative tendencies that she criticizes in Joyce [. . .] her acerbic criticism of 'sadistic' writers within a text that employs the same sort of difficult language and narrative structure points to a textual self-loathing—a further symptom, perhaps, of her narrative schizophrenia. (114)

[19] Altisent remarks that Nena's poems "marcan esos ritmos corporales o *jouissance maternelle* que Hélène Cixous y Julia Kristeva han relacionado con la écriture feménine" (154).

[20] Capdevila-Argüelles notes that she is treated "as an invisible writer by the same critics that write excellent reviews about her work" (4).

Amat's work illustrates Felman's thesis that literature has a peculiar relationship with madness: her writing itself assumes an almost hysterical intensity which many readers—probably the majority—find stifling and claustrophobic. In *Letra herida*, Amat describes metaliterature as "ese hermoso afán de sentirse prisionero del reino literario, también es limitada. Conduce al agotamiento" (171). Her work is inevitably repetitive since it circles consistently around two major themes, literature and madness, staging itself incessantly and offering a literary counterpart to that ironic self-consciousness characteristic of non-lunatic madness (MacLennan 46). The reader's experience of such writing could be described quite accurately as schizophrenic since full engagement with it implies withdrawal from everyday reality and immersion in a vortex of self-conscious references.[21] The scope for humour is very limited: in *El ladrón de libros y otras bibliomanías*, she describes her work as a computer programmer in Pittsburgh and the creation of a programme, "El ladrón de libros", comprising voluminous literary quotations. The material is published as the work of a new author. No one notices the fraud except for "El ladrón de libros": "pero puede una máquina poner un pleito a Rob (her work colleague and husband) o a mí que la hemos engendrado?" (149).

Amat is clearly an obsessive, if not schizophrenic, writer who comes closer than any of her contemporaries to personal experience of the madness she depicts and therefore to giving madness a voice, to restoring its language, as Felman indicates: "a language of madness and not *about* it" (14). Amat's single-minded intensity, her personal withdrawal from reality and from other people, is suggested in the prologue to *El ladrón de libros y otras bibliomanías* which she describes as her most autobiographical text (14):

> Éste es un libro personal. Las distintas facetas literarias, librescas, bibliográficas y bibliomanías que aquí se incluyen coinciden con las propias de mi mundo íntimo (pocas cosas son tan íntimas como las debilidades que uno oculta o confiesa) y profesional: literatura, escritura, bibliotecas, informática, documentación, libros y ficción. (13)

This intensity re-emerges in *Todos somos Kafka* where reading is the narrator's exclusive pursuit. Her utter obsession with it is suggested in the style of the long sentence with its circular and repetitive aspects:

> Aprendo a leer convencida de que con la lectura resolveré el gran enigma, y cuando aprendí a leer ya estaba segura de que en mi vida no haría otra cosa que leer y leer durante todo el día y que me tomaría la lectura como un medio de supervivencia y que no cesaría de leer hasta encontrar en la lectura la historia de la madre desaparecida y la historia de la hija que busca a su madre ausente. (36)

[21] Amat may be compared in this respect with the Argentine writer Alejandra Pizarnik (1936–72), who was also obsessed with Kafka (Posso 70). In her diary, Pizarnik glosses Rimbaud's lines, "Par literature, /j'ai perdu ma vie", as follows: "La vida perdida para la literatura por culpa de la literatura. Por hacer de mí un personaje literario en la vida real fracaso en mi intento de hacer literatura con mi vida real pues ésta no existe: es la literatura" (qtd. in Nicholson 66–67). Pizarnik committed suicide in 1972.

Only a matter of degree separates this spiralling introspection from the literary intensity of Lucia's speech that resembles a book (131), confirmation therefore of Gilbert & Gubar's claim, already mentioned, that the madwoman in literature is usually the author's double (78). Madness is as prevalent in her later works, such as *El país del alma*, but as we have seen, the metaliterary elements are more closely embedded in the plot, communicated in this instance through the beautiful and otherworldly protagonist, Nena Rocamora. Here Amat deploys what we might term a cured schizophrenia that marks an important stage in her literary development, one likely to attract new readers and admirers.

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