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Punctum-Punk-Punctum: On the Poetry of Martín Gambarotta

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ABSTRACT The 2011 republication of Martín Gambarotta's 1996 poetry collection, *Punctum*, offers the opportunity for new readers to approach this seminal and striking volume, one that was for some time unavailable. Furthermore, it offers the opportunity to reflect on the complex poetics of a collection that, despite its initial impression of a stark hermeticism or even banality, offers a range of literary, poetic, and political implications. Moreover, it is a collection that, alongside Sergio Raimondi's *Poesía civil*, represents the surprising variety of so-called 1990s, or *objetivista*, poetry in Argentina, and whose unexpected literary complexity runs counter to easy periodizations of Argentine literature. There is, though, a mismatch between the effectiveness of Gambarotta's poems and the apparent banality of much of the text. Despite reusing clichés and slogans from the contemporary media, Gambarotta's collection creates striking thematic, sonic, and visual effects on the reader.

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Introduction: Difficulty and Banality

Martín Gambarotta's *Punctum*[1] begins starkly:

> 1
> Una pieza
> donde el espacio del techo es igual
> al del piso que a su vez es igual
> al de cada una de las cuatro paredes
> que delimitan un lugar sobre la calle.
> La bruma se traslada a su mente
> vacía, no sabe quién es . . .
> (2011: 9)

A cube-shaped room, like a cell, next to the street, and a vague, hazy mind coming into semiconsciousness. As Tamara Kamenszain and others have commented, the opening of the 1996 collection offers an example of emergence: of a setting, a character, and the work itself. A "pieza" is a room, but its many other dictionary meanings include a theatrical work or a musical composition; thus the described and the act of describing come into being together: the room, and the composition that names it. Subsequent themes—such as naming, the incursion of the outside world into otherwise isolated or protected spaces, and the nature of sentience (not long afterwards, we read, " 'un perro que se da cuenta de que es perro / deja de serlo' " [9])—and techniques—including hard-to-attribute quotations, something close to free-indirect-style, in which characters are only liminally present, and the free and unmeasured verse that dominates throughout—are also introduced. As the author brings a space into being, he inserts subjectivities, and creates visual images and sonic effects for the reader.

Punctum is a difficult work. Its difficulty is not only a product of what George Steiner classified as the "contingent" difficulty of works that include terms or references that even the typical educated reader needs to look up. "Modal" difficulties, problems of taste or experience, may also play a part; but these are closely related to a series of "tactical" difficulties for the reader,

1. Page references in this article are to the 2011 edition; the full text can be found online via Fogwill's website, http://www.fogwill.com.ar/punctum.html (last accessed 28 June 2012).

as the collection uses contradictions, changes, twists, and occasionally the simple withholding of information, to disorient the reader. Further, in the collection's apparent refusal to fulfill the expected requirements of a collection of poetry, we might also suggest that it proposes what Steiner calls "ontological difficulties," seemingly unanswerable questions about language and speech. These are difficulties that simply *are*, and which point to contradictions at the heart of language and perception.

The 2011 republication of *Punctum* offers the opportunity for new readers to approach this seminal and striking volume, one that was for some time unavailable. Furthermore, it offers the opportunity to reflect on the complex poetics of a collection that, despite its initial impression of a stark hermeticism or even banality, offers a range of literary, poetic, and political implications. Moreover, it is a collection that, alongside Sergio Raimondi's *Poesía civil*, represents the surprising variety of so-called 1990s, or *objetivista*, poetry in Argentina, and whose unexpected literary complexity runs counter to easy periodizations of Argentine literature. There is, though, a mismatch between the effectiveness of Gambarotta's poems—a visceral effect, akin to what Frank Kermode calls, after T. S. Eliot, "the shudder"—and the apparent banality of much of the text. Kermode outlines Eliot's interest in the physical effect that poetry can have on the reader, through shock, surprise, or even sexual arousal. He writes of the possibility of a "physiology" of poetry. Through thematic, sonic, and visual effects on the reader, Gambarotta's collection creates just such a shudder.

Punctum was published initially as the first-prize winner in *Diario de Poesía*'s inaugural poetry competition in 1995, and Gambarotta's work has attracted no little critical attention. Violeta Kesselman, Ana Mazzoni, and Damián Selci included him in their recent anthology of contemporary Argentine poetry, *La tendencia materialista*. Kamenszain writes of a twin effect in *Punctum* by which the importance of the lyric subject is reduced, and the real interrupts the everyday; his vignettes employ multiple voices to create a complex panorama of urban life, often giving the sense of having been dropped into the middle of an awkward moment in a conversation, or even into a "*reality show,*" filmed, as Kamenszain suggests, by the protagonists themselves (120–21). Florencia Garamuño analyzes what she calls the destitution of the subject in Gambarotta's poetry, a characteristic she also identifies in other contemporary Latin American poets. Constanza Ceresa writes of the appearance of "sobjects" [*sic*], figures caught indecisively between subject and object, while the poems themselves perform what she

calls an emancipatory cartography, at odds with contemporary neoliberal ideology (*Poetic Cartography*). Sergio Raimondi undertakes a detailed analysis of the language of Gambarotta's poetry to argue that, in a world dominated by propaganda, marketing, and mass-media entertainment, *Punctum* demonstrates and disrupts the functioning of what one might call the mediatic-political-linguistic complex. Ana Llurba has written of Gambarotta's reworkings of Néstor Perlongher's famous poem of the dictatorship, "Cadáveres." Ana Porrúa has described the fragmentation and the workings of the gaze in the collection ("Punctum"; *Caligrafía*). More generally, critics and interviewers have written of Gambarotta as a typical example of so-called *objetivista* poetry, influenced by contemporary US poets, such as Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, and others, including earlier observational poets such as Carl Sandburg, but also in open rebellion against the supposedly excessive and passé poetic volutes of the *neobarroco*, a mode of writing that for *objetivista* writers and their critical backers had exhausted its usefulness by the neoliberal, *menemista* 1990s.

At first sight, Gambarotta can be found on the cusp between $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ or language poetry (the resistance to the instrumentalization of language, in particular in the more paratactic and hermetic sections of his writing), objectivism (in the shape of the immanent relationship between the thing described and the language used to describe it), and so-called uncreative writing (his use of TV shows, chess puzzles, and advertising slogans). Gambarotta's poetry, it can be argued, operates using something another Argentine writer, Cristian Aliaga, has called "preverso," the preverse of overheard phrases, small ideas, and snatches of conversation (Personal communication, 11/1/2011), which are then brought together by the author. As Perry Anderson notes in his review of a recent collection of essays by the historian Carlo Ginzberg, "out of certain elementary forms of language, themselves not yet literary, . . . literature emerges" (12). Isolation from the collection would strip Gambarotta's poems of precisely what it is that they do with the pre-verse or pre-literature of everyday life.

There is a far from simple relationship between contemporary US and Argentine poetics. Gambarotta first published poems in *Diario de Poesía*, seen by many critics as an organ of Argentine *objetivismo*. Yet the *Diario* did not include material by the likes of Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, or Carl Rakosi, the best-known objectivist poets. The writers with whom Gambarotta's work is most often associated, those of the so-called 1990s poetry, in particular as grouped around the *Diario*, demonstrate no

little influence from figures important to language poetry, including William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. The *Diario* did include material by Charles Bernstein, one of the editors of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and perhaps the best known of the US language poets, as well as material by another prominent language poet, John Ashbery. Furthermore, Gambarotta has noted the importance of English poets such as Tom Raworth, in particular because of the speed which the latter's poems appear to impose on their reader (Ceresa, "Conversations" 197). And the reader versed in contemporary English poetry cannot but notice certain visual similarities with the work of Bill Griffiths, another "fast" poet, and one whose equation poems bear a visual similarity to Gambarotta's work in *Relapso + Angola*.

Gambarotta's association with *Diario de Poesía*—the magazine for whom he reviewed, where he published his first poems (1992), where *Punctum* first appeared (1995), and where he was awarded his first major prize—can situate his work within an *objetivista* context, but this does not necessarily offer us interpretive tools for reading the work, nor indeed a coherent view of either the poetics of the collection or the literary context from which it emerges. How, then, does *Punctum* work? There is an approach to it that has not yet been sufficiently explored, which focuses on its coherence as a collection. *Punctum* consists of thirty-nine numbered sections. When published as the winner of the *Diario de Poesía* competition, only nine of the sections appeared (these included the opening and final sections; there is no obvious numerical or thematic link between the other sections chosen). On a purely impressionistic basis, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that such a publication is significantly less effective than that of the book itself. Although this is in part because of the cumulative effect of the thirty-nine poems—a sensation close to that described by Julio Cortázar in his observation that the novel can win by points, whereas the short story has to win by knockout (247)—there is something more fundamental missing in the edited publication. Extraction seems to accentuate the banality of the often recycled phrases that fill many of the poems, while losing the two productive actions that the poet performs on this material: first, its slight variation over the course of the collection, thus forcing the reader to reconsider clichés, truisms, and generalities; and, second, those moments of contrast when, through variation in combination, the name, phrase, or term comes to have a new effect.

In *Unoriginal Genius*, Marjorie Perloff explores a range of poetic projects that seem to reject the need for originality or creativity, what she calls "new citational and often constraint-bound poetry" (xi). In some cases, these are

works that rely mostly—or indeed wholly—on citation, often from eminently unpoetic texts, as in the case of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic*, apparently a transcription of traffic reports from a local US radio station. Perloff defends such citational practices with reference to an earlier polemic, namely the critical response to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, condemned by many early reviewers for what was regarded as an overreliance on secondary material (both literary and, in particular, the everyday speech of ordinary people) and a concomitant lack of creativity. This tendency to "defeat" the reader's expectations has survived long into the twentieth century. Perloff analyzes so-called "language" poetry of the 1980s in the US. Although these writers demonstrate "programmatic nonreferentiality" (*Unoriginal* 78) in what she regards as a typical language poem's resistance to capitalist instrumentalization, there is a persistence of the poet's *invention*, and with it, originality in language. Thus, the new noncreative or uncreative writing differs from language poetry, seemingly aiming to strip away this inventiveness, giving way to appropriation, replacing it with chance (found texts) and automatism (computer programming). Nevertheless, Perloff concludes that despite the absence of "originality in the usual sense," (21) one cannot say that "genius" is lacking in this citational, appropriational, or in Goldsmith's term, uncreative writing, from his book of the same name.

There is an important relationship between Gambarotta's title *Punctum* and the term *punctum* as used by Roland Barthes in his seminal work on photography, *Camera Lucida*, to describe the punctual effect of the point of detail that unexpectedly cuts through the general effect of the photograph's intended *studium* or subject matter (26–27). Porrúa mentions the effect of "lo que punza" ("Punctum" 111) in *Punctum*, those points in the collection that go against contemporary political correctness (not least the references to sex, drugs, and social class). Barthes's examples of the *punctum* are those "uncoded" effects that go beyond the studied effect of the photograph: a discarded boot, a challenging gaze from one not the ostensible subject of the photo, an odd gesture (59); a "subtle beyond," or something additional, but which is "nonetheless already there" (55). "The *punctum* shows no preference for morality or good taste: the *punctum* can be ill-bred" (43). So Gambarotta's *punctum* is the ability of a phrase or image to cut through—often as incongruous, bizarre, or comic—the studied banality of the world described.

Alongside the visual in *Punctum,* we also experience the sonic. Santiago Llach believes collections like *Punctum* step into the critical and oppositional

void left by rock music (193); and Gambarotta himself has pinpointed the links between the speed of his poetry, its underlying anger, and the punk DIY gesture of plugging in and playing (Ceresa, "Conversations" 198). There is a series of punk references: The Sex Pistols, Iggy Pop, and not least the hint of *punk* in the sound of the title. Attention to the collection as a whole obliges the reader or critic to treat phrases and poems not as the riffs of three-minute pop hits, but rather of an album in itself, and one that is perhaps rather more accomplished than the bedroom thrashings of a punk-tyro. Thirty-nine *minutes* is, of course, close to the perfect length for a CD or an LP; the collection was published in two parts (or sides?) by Eloísa Cartonera in 2004 (1–22) and 2005 (23–39). Within this length, notes, phrases, and lines that may in themselves be neither original nor particularly striking can work together cumulatively. This, one may argue, draws attention to the functioning of the collection as a coherent whole, whose sum greatly outweighs the effect of its parts, and indeed whose total effect is related quite closely to this unified structure. If the poetry collection *qua* collection (rather than the individual poem) does not tend necessarily towards being reread, paratextual factors, not least the reprintings of *Punctum* (1995 in fragments, 1996, 2004/2005, 2011) suggest that, like the LP or CD, this is a collection that should be appreciated repeatedly, and as a whole. One must remember also that punk was not just a musical style but also a form of dress, appearance, and design (a "subculture", in Dick Hebdige's term): punk's effect resided in large part in the shocking visual appearance of its members.

A simultaneously heuristic and retroactive approach to the collection—i.e., reading the collection in order several times—reveals another element that, while mentioned by some critics in passing (Ceresa, *Poetic;* Kamenszain, and indeed Gambarotta himself [see Murphy]) is not one that attracts sufficient analysis: the narrative element. If Gambarotta has spoken of his collection as an example of or an attempt to rework "realism" (Ceresa, "Conversations" 199–200), the presence of narrative fragments alongside what appear to be remnants of an epistolary novel, is ineluctable in the collection. Furthermore, across the collection one can immediately detect a contrast between those phrases and sections that are observational in character (e.g., the opening section, in which the room described comes into being for character, text, and reader simultaneously) or even quite banal (the section about *Kojak* that is apparently a parody of Néstor Perlongher's long poem "Cadáveres" [Ceresa, *Poetic* 191]), and the Gamboa sections, with their reflections on insurgent strategy, the history of the Argentine armed left, and

what might be called contemporary resurgences of insurrectionary violence, such as the accidental murder of the "joven narrador" (82).

This is not to say that the collection is telling a story, or that we have a novel in verse; rather, that the hints or traces of a more conventional story loosely sew together disparate and scattered lines, phrases, and sections of the collection to create a flexible, ever-changing, but in some way coherent unit. At the same time, the characters change names, lack all but the most tangential physical description, and appear or disappear with scarcely a hint of narrative logic. The sheer unpredictability of both the narrative elements themselves and their combination within the collection have a disorientating effect on the reader. While on one level this seems to reflect the mind-numbingness of channel hopping, it also has something of a classical composition—in particular the composition of late romantic or early modernist works (Debussy, Satie, Obukhov)—about it.

Indeed, what critics seldom note is this opening section's rhythm, which creates a marker for the rest of the collection. Gambarotta creates an insistent, rapid beat through frequent use of the formula *noun + preposition + noun*. More specifically, the prepositions "de," "en" and "con" link short, concrete nouns ("tabla de madera," "óxido en el cielo") or, in more or less equal measure, abstract and concrete nouns ("espacio del techo," "un orden en la material"). These constructions force the reader to move quickly in a space that is at once curiously solid and strangely fleeting. The nouns carry the stress, and given their shortness, with most being of just two or three syllables, and the shortness of the connectors, this creates a fast rhythm: of punk music, or of experimental composition for keyboard.

This opening also offers the first example of the collection's particular approach to the creation, development, and mobilization of characters. In short, Gambarotta's characters (for want of a better word) flit between brief moments of stability, of being identified and sufficiently coherently named and described to occupy a narrative focus in the poem, and moments of instability, mutability, and strangeness. In the opening lines of the poem, the subject matter emerges (the space is described in increasingly geometrically precise details, taking shape with its description), and thus performs its own immanence to the poem. Likewise, the poem introduces a character in the vaguest terms ("su mente," "no sabe quién es") before adding detail, as the character wakes, and then gains body parts ("ojos," "una red de nervios," "corazón") and intellectual and physical functions ("una idea," "palabras," "soplo" [9]).

The opening poems develop this simultaneous process of what might be called coming-into-being and peopling. Gambarotta is interested, it seems, in how spaces and characters come to life in poetry, how we see and hear through his poems. The domestic urban space, porous to the world of media and commerce that enters through television, radio, and windows onto the city, or the TV-saturated experiences of many of those named, are described in ever-clearer detail. Meanwhile, names appear, and with them characters: Cadáver (11), Guasuncho, Luca (12) and Confuncio (13). But these characters immediately surprise the reader with the apparent incongruence between their exotic names and the washed-out, second-hand setting, as well as the seemingly pointless or inexplicable activities that fill their time: Cadáver losing at letter-chess under the faded motivational slogan of a yogurt advertisement (11); Guasuncho's pseudoreligious or parapolitical activities in the "Ministerio de Ondas de Amor y Paz;" or the mysterious yet lapidary opinions of Confuncio (13), such as "nunca debiste confiar tanto / en alguien que le pone Heráclito a su gato."

The cumulative effect of these interactions between embryonic character, setting, and plot, is to reveal to the reader something like a story in verse, but not quite, something that is almost a tale of urban realism, but which tends to slip from one's grasp. Thus the syntagmatic or heuristic reading that one might expect from a narrative poem is undermined by a simultaneous turning away from the expected story and the retroactive effect of the reappearing names and phrases. A number of tendencies undermine the poems' capacity to tell a story. Firstly, there is a first-person voice, but not one that can be closely identified with the lyric subject. In particular, this voice calls into question the content of the poem itself: "me hubiera gustado empezar esto / con: de noche junto al fuego" (10). A similar effect is found in poem 4, accentuated by aesthetic judgements: "Eso / suena pretencioso y, releyendo, sería mejor cambiar París por Federación / pero / se atiene a los datos reales" (15). Secondly, this voice seems hampered by uncertainty over the names of things: "Cómo se llama eso que cuelga de la pared" (10). It is not clear (as a result, for example, of breaks between stanzas) whether it is this same voice that addresses characters directly, in an implied second person ("Cadáver, esto ya no es rock" [10]). Furthermore, quotation marks are used to identify content drawn from the media (dialogue from *The High Chaparral*, although the yogurt slogan appears in upper case), but not speech itself. This is marked as direct discourse or related as indirect speech, but in some sections—for example Guasuncho's description of the girl's t-shirt (12)—

takes over the text, thus displacing even the illusion of a stable narrative position. In addition, the grammar of some sections, in which there is some crossover between reported and direct speech, is such that the line between the two, and with it between speech and narration, becomes quite blurred: "y entonces, todo indicaba que era él, / no era yo, dice Guasuncho, con un envase / en la mano, ni ella, una mujer" (13). In some sections, the narration hesitates between first and third person, as if uncertain who is speaking, or as if the speaker is not certain who she or he is, or if there is any correlation between the words spoken and the person speaking.

There is a further disconcerting or destabilizing effect that results from the often slippery relationship to names. Confuncio appears alongside or possibly as Kwan-fu-tzu (another Hispanicised spelling of Confucius); he is referred to elsewhere as Confucio and even Hielo (44–45). And, finally, there are sections in which any mimetic or descriptive effect of the text is undercut by a narrative intervention. Poem 17, for example, opens with more than twenty lines apparently describing an episode of *The High Chaparral*, albeit one with a strange mixture of racial tension and self-hatred (the Navajo sing, "estoy sucio y desprolijo"), only for the poem then to conclude that the episode is of little importance ("si esto fuera, a fin de cuentas todo" [41]). The poem then shifts focus to Guasuncho, initially captivated by the light of an open refrigerator, and then escaping across the city to a "destino desconocido" (43) in a sequence that leaves the character's motives as unknown as his destination—if there is one—at its chilling end.

Repetition and Difference

What has been described so far may give the impression of a frustrating incoherence in a text aimed merely at undermining the reader's confidence in her interpretive faculties. Indeed, as the text progresses, the narrative and the characters become increasingly fragmented, unpredictable, and even mysterious. But we are far from the aesthetics of surrealism, automatic writing, or mechanical composition. For parallel to this fragmentation or dispersion, two processes occur. The first process is this: distinct patterns of composition emerge, or put more simply, different types of poem or verse. There are poems that seem to echo an exercise in school essay writing, for example the references to Sid Vicious ("idea para un ensayo" [16]) and the

poem that seems to realize that exercise in composition (the long final section of poem 6 dedicated to the death of Sid Vicious [20]). The second type consists of a number of shorter poems, such as "Una máscara," number 15 (38) or the poems beginning "En la lista," number 35 (92), and "La ley seca," number 36 (93). These poems take a commonplace word or phrase and repeat and recombine it, somewhat after the fashion of Quevedo's approach to language, to the point that it simultaneously loses denotational meaning while gaining myriad connotations. Their insistent rhythm, focus on the material (the different types of mask; in poem 35, the body and the list; in poem 36, the remnants of food in the room), combined with strangely abstract reflections on seemingly concrete objects (what is a "máscara real," or the "inercia del cielo," or the "paz gelatinosa" of a bankrupt state?) introduce a disconcerting break into the movement of the collection.

Thirdly, there are fragmented poems, broken up by ellipses, and occasionally demonstrating self-referentiality or metatextuality, such as the sequence of dispersed observations or statements in poems 6 and 13. A number of these sections have something of haiku about them, or at least tend towards mysterious and occasionally Zen-like self-contradictory statements ("Un tipo desnudo en campera de cuero" [19]); or in other cases, the most striking form of Poundian "right-naming" ("el abogado que mataron metiéndole / un palo en el culo" [18]). At times these are reduced to a single noun ("El cameraman" [32]); at times they appear to refer to the poem itself (the repetition of "Espacio" for example). This pattern is exacerbated later in the collection; in poem 30, ellipses take precedence over words, the latter part of a fractured and confused sequence ("fue o fui ..... a buscar hielo para la Marcela / ..... la sombra de los sifones en la pared ..... las manos . . ." [80]).

Finally, we have the bulk of the collection, poems that follow the unpredictable thoughts, jottings, and actions of the named characters, often within lives that seem to be saturated with products of the mass media, a cultural uniformity only occasionally penetrated by references to contemporary and historical political events and organizations.

The second process is that these different compositional patterns, these genres-within-a-genre, as it were, and with them the characters and situations described, cross, merge, and recombine, often in the form of internal echoes or quotations from earlier sections. That is, Gambarotta seems simultaneously to separate out and recombine; to use again a musical or punk analogy, one can identify riffs, repeated, but not necessarily with musical or sonic fidelity. For example, one notes the repetition of the advertising slogan

for a yogurt: "LO MÁS IMPORTANTE dice ES UNO MISMO." The line is glimpsed through a window in poem 2; it reappears in poem 5. In the first poem, the ad is clearly framed (by the window and by syntax) as external to the character and the room. In poem 5, this division is less clear, as the poster is described as if brightly lit ("un cartel luminoso / que se prende [. . .] / y se apaga" [16]) and there is something akin to a shift from direct speech to free indirect style, as if the vacuous self-help of modern advertising is taking over the actions and thoughts of characters. Likewise, elsewhere the action of the poem becomes that of the media productions described, such as the long section meditating on an episode of *The High Chaparral* (16–17). Furthermore, this section, built on a reflection on the character of Manolo/Manolito, highlights the imbrication of identity and media for the characters. Yet the poem is not simply condemning the media for their role in the interpellation of obedient, vacant subjects of commercialism; rather, the meeting between the wholesome entertainment of *The High Chaparral* and the death from heroin overdose of Sid Vicious turns the US serial into something close to an object of ridicule: a punk *punctum*. This is even more the case given what might be termed the "Argentinization" of the series: Manolo speaks a distinctly Argentine form of Spanish ("sacame," "dejame") and is addressed by an apparently Argentine interlocutor ("verdá que te la moves a Greta"; "come with your Navajos to live to Ciudad Evita" [*sic*] [17]).

As the collection moves on, we witness the combination of different techniques, and an increasing density of poeticization at work: in poem 30, for example, the confusion between first and third person coincides with a repetition of the first piece of reported thought, from the opening poem: "pensé o pensó / 'un perro que se da cuenta que es perro deja de serlo' / Tirado yo o él en la hamaca paraguaya" (80). Furthermore, these vague quasiphilosophical reflections of uncertain parentage come with the appearance of an actual dog—"el perro / ovejero rubio en el pasto" (80)—as if what is thought and what is seen in some way contaminated each other. It is as if, once again, poetry acts out a coming-into-being and Gambarotta performs a poetic study or problematization of ontology.

While this repetition occurs at what could be described as the macrolevel of the collection, within sections we also witness echoes, repetitions, and slight changes, which again have the effect of forcing the quoted material to resonate unexpectedly. In poem 5 Manolo is also Manolito; we read that he cannot play the guitar because "no tiene manos" (16); and he asks for a yogurt, the poster for which adorns the view in the opening poem (17). Thus

the fictional is itself contaminated by the site of consumption, the consumer, and consumption itself. The effect is a humorous deflation of the world of the TV series, underscoring the overlap between commercial television and advertising, and blurring the line between actor and character, itself a common feature of the relationship between the spectator of the long-running series and actors who become synonymous with their roles, but here with character, actor, and product all humorously debased.

Thus there is something quite physical, if not precognitive, about the poem's effect on the reader, which forces her to keep a series of places, characters, and cultural references close at hand, given the unexpected appearances and reappearances they make. For example, when the essay on Sid Vicious, hinted at above, does come, it is not at all as one would expect. The use of the title "Ensayo" (20) suggests that Gambarrotta is transcribing a child's schoolwork. Curiously, a number of the details about Sid Vicious are incorrect, including his name, family background, the source of his nickname, and his study of the bass guitar. Yet despite this apparent carelessness—alongside a more or less indifferent attitude to prosody—the shift to English for the final phrase, the preceding ellipsis, and the acute sound ("Sid Vicious —decía el titular— is dead") creates a sudden and striking moment of almost conventional narrative drama in the collection, similar to the end of the Guasuncho sequence (43).

As the collection progresses, a network of characters, situations, phrases, cultural references, and forms of composition is developed; when nouns and phrases repeat, they have the effect of simultaneously taking on the weight of the earlier mention (an echo) and of resignifying what was read earlier (a retroactive effect). This has been reinforced by the immanent emergence of setting and character from the first poem onwards, creating something like a hermetic chamber in which references resonate, or a hall of distorting mirrors. For example, poems 18 and 27 seem to take up the exchange of letters with Cadáver, this time from the point of view of Gamboa. And within these sections, we read references to this invisible weight in languages:

> Cadáver, hay palabras que no hace falta escribirlas
> para que existan. Por decir algo:
> la palabra "griega" que se pronuncia
> al leer la letra "Y". Una palabra sin peso
> que se lee sin estar escrita en ningún lado. (68)

"Y" is upsilon, ye, or in popular parlance "i griega," Greek i; this reference draws our attention to the debate in (post-)structural linguistics about the relationship between the signifier and the sign (Saussure; Lacan 414). Moreover, the reference to the "weight" of words comments on Gambarotta's work itself: the weight of words present and absent, and language that functions as a system based as much on what is missing as on what is there. Even in this metapoetic section, the reader will also notice that the phrasing echoes earlier elliptical fragments. Again, there is a physical effect on the reader.

Perhaps more importantly, the later sections begin to read differently from the book's opening; where in the former, a world (and a word) is emerging from nothing, on the very page, later the wor(l)d that is described has much in common with what has gone before it in the collection and with which the reader is now familiar, but now with the additional weight of what we know (or almost know) about the characters and their situations. So poem 28 describes an urban domestic interior ("las tazas apiladas una encima de otra, / miguitas quemadas, la cuchara, hormigas" [72]) but one in which we know of its character's exchange with Cadáver, his connections with something like the armed left of the 1970s, and his position as an English teacher (and hence the reflections on questions of language, the differences between English and Spanish, and so forth).

Poetry and Politics, Today

Overtly political content begins to appear and, at times, to dominate the later poems in the collection. This includes passing references, generally obvious to the Argentine or otherwise well-informed reader, for example to the murdered militant and actor Julio Troxler; the poet Paco Urondo (who took his own life rather than be taken alive by a military commando); and to Felipe Vallese (82), one of the first of the disappeared, and a member of the Metalworkers' Union, referenced earlier in the collection, in the form of the initials on Hielo's vest, "U O M" (Unión de Obreros Metalúrgicos, 45). Other, more detailed comments also appear.

The collection can be seen, therefore, to coalesce in the penultimate section of poem 30, apparently Gamboa's recollections of a paramilitary operation, but one which quickly collapses into absurdity, as in the *High Chaparral* sequence, or the apparent reworking of Perlongher's "Cadáveres" into a comment on *Kojak*. Gamboa is the character most closely tied to the overtly

political content of the collection. And while critics, not least Raimondi, have dismissed the idea that the political is found at the level of content in Gambarotta's work, there is nevertheless something striking about the political conjuncture that is described, at times fleetingly, at other times quite distinctly, in these sequences. In particular, the politics described is that of the revolutionary armed left of the 1970s, but somewhat out of time. Gamboa is described as a living relic of the museum of subversion (69), but this is also not necessarily a faithful or believable depiction of the armed left. Indeed, in many cases what is described is comic, if not wholly ridiculous. Several of the distinct poetic models come together in this sequence: the Quevedo-esque wordplay ("el detector de mentiras, / el detector de metales, de agua" [79]); the blurring of the first and third persons ("fue o fui"; "pensé o pensó"); the quasiphilosophical reflections ("un perro que se da cuenta [. . . . .]" [80]); and the seemingly aimless wandering of a character adrift in a world he only partially understands. Further, the section incorporates the former militant Gamboa's jotted theorizing on insurgent strategy, which begin in poem 28 ("Gamboa anota: [. . . .] Para derrotar al sistema / hay que lograr una organización superior / al sistema"). These repeat the radicalism of the 70s with a distinctive black humor, contrasting the theoretical reflections on the nature of antisystem rebellion with a bloodthirsty sequence in which a local uprising would see the governor decapitated and his head first placed on a *tacuara* (a wooden lance[2]) and then used as an ashtray, before wine is given out for free and the people enjoy "todo el año carnaval, etc." [*sic*] (71). That the sequence tails off, that the rhetoric of theory runs up against bloody reality, is related to the pragmatism imposed by the passage of time: "acá los negros saben que no queda otra" (71). The *tacuara* appears after the reference to the Navajo in the *High Chaparral* sequence, and alongside references to "negros." The latter are, in an Argentine context, less likely to be black Afro-Americans than the slang term for dark-skinned and dark-haired members of the proletariat and lumpen-proletariat, the *cabecitas negras* that lent their support to Perón and appear so memorably, for example, in the poetry of Leónidas Lamborghini. In the collection, these victimized groups appear at moments of revolt, violence, and disobedience. They are politically excluded, but politically uncontrollable.

2. Tacuara was also the name of a proto-montoneros political organization in the 1960s; see María Seoane.

Throughout the latter pages of the book we witness what remains of the 1970s, "las sobras de una revolución fallida" (71), but mediated: "Lo mismo Gamboa cuando ve en el televisor" (71). So when the domestic interiors with which we have by now become so familiar reoccur, they do so now framed by political idealism struggling to think through disappointment and defeat. The war, the poem tells us, lives on in Gamboa's head, and "el combatiente más peligroso es el combatiente resentido / que se sigue considerando un combatiente / después de la guerra" (73). Yet this revolutionary violence is now framed by sporting contests, the local derby, someone testing a gun on the street, and as the storm brews outside, Gamboa takes notes: "toda sangre derramada / viene de antemano negociada" (74). The line, of course, plays on the left-wing slogan, adopted after the Trelew massacre and the violence at Ezeiza airport on Perón's return, and used by the Peronist President Cámpora in his first speech, that "la sangre derramada no será negociada"; i.e., there was no room for negotiation with the political right, and in particular with members of the military and the Peronist right who had committed crimes against Cámpora's militant supporters. Gamboa's note can be read in a number of ways, but perhaps in this context its most striking implication is that military violence is an advantage in negotiations, and that the strength of the political right was based on its ability to commit violent crimes against its opponents. Within the context of writing, namely during the presidency of Carlos Menem, and while military and other criminals of the dictatorship years were being pardoned of their crimes, the line is a powerful observation of the constraints imposed on so-called democratic transitions by previous military violence. As Idelber Avelar suggests, the "transition to democracy," began with the 1976 coup and, one might add, with the preceding paramilitary violence, and the violent repression of any opposition, particularly left-wing and unionist opposition, formed an integral part of this process.

Gamboa's jottings thus present the former militant as an untimely element, as a remnant or, in Jacques Rancière's oft-quoted phrase, "the one who partakes in what he has no part in" (32). Rancière reminds us that "democracy" was coined as a term of abuse (by Plato especially) to describe the rule of those not entitled to rule, an unnatural form of chaos in which the rightfully excluded come to have a say: government by those with a "complete absence of any entitlement to govern" (31). In Gambarotta, the untimely element is the "satélite al que le quitan / el objeto en torno al cual gira" (75), but at odds with the contemporary meaning of "satélite," simply a satellite for broadcasting "programación satelital" (76) or satellite TV. This

connection leads to another series of wordplays, around the word "enemigo." The style of the "enemigo" is "robado de Canal 13," an independent television company run by the *Clarín* group, Argentina's largest media conglomerate, and owner of the centrist daily newspaper of the same name. In a short piece published as part of a dossier on poetry and politics in *Diario de Poesía* (summer 1995/1996), Gambarotta observed that "tanto la poesía como la política de masas están marginadas" (10). Having noted the absolute marginality of political poets (e.g., Lamborghini's struggles to publish his most recent work), the absence of poetry from, for example, the recently relaunched *Clarín* cultural supplement, and the mass media's demonization or simple ignorance of alternative political groups (Quebracho, Patria Libre), Gambarotta argues for a political poetry, focusing not on the models of the 1960s ("guerrilla-poesía"), but on new forms of political organization, for example the work of the grassroots union organizer Carlos "Perro" Santillán in Jujuy. The challenge for poetry, like that for grassroots politics outside of the *menemista* consensus, was to organise "desde el no-ser." Similarly, Gambarotta's ontology is to bring characters immanent to the poem into being, questioning this process as he goes along. Furthermore, there is an analogy between the "partlessness," as it were, of poetry and politics. Rancière's work is interested in questions of position: where is one in relation to systems of power, and how is space configured (37)? These are, in short, formal questions. But for Gambarotta, there are more practical matters at stake, to do with space and relationships, but also to do with money, communication, and means of circulation. More importantly, "la poesía aparece como el medio de comunicación más a mano para esta política hecha desde el margen" (10), a point he also makes explicitly in an interview with Nicolás Vilela, commenting on the relationship between poetry, circulation, and unresolved cultural conflicts in contemporary Argentina. Gambarotta thus goes a step beyond the formalism of Rancierean aesthetic-politics, into the realm of the practical, and in particular into the matter of the circulation—immediacy, lack of resources, speed—of poetry. Gambarotta's work, with its constant repetitions and slight differences, chimes strongly with Gilles Deleuze's writing on art in *Difference and Repetition*: "The more our daily life appears standardized, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the more art must be injected into it in order to extract from it that little difference which plays simultaneously between other levels of repetition" (Deleuze 365).

If Gambarotta carries out a repetition of the Same (Deleuze 358)—reusing

characters from television, slogans from everyday life—he also engages in a repetition of the Different (359) (the microvariations that occur within the collection), a mechanical and a symbolic repetition (362); but beyond these, an ungrounding or an ontological repetition, by which "difference is extracted from these repetitions" (366). If, as Gambarotta argues, poetry and mass politics were marginalized in 1990s Argentina, the post-crisis period saw both return. Indeed, it is precisely the presence of mass politics—youth activism, official championing of the Madres and Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, government links to organizations like HIJOS, multitudinous rallies and spontaneous street protests (of support and opposition)—that has most strikingly characterized the Kirchner and Fernández administrations. Groups like Poetas con Cristina underscore the poetry–politics link that Gambarotta has sketched, both in terms of analogy and, more importantly, as a form of practice, in particular with his distinction between poetry as movement, party, or religion (Ceresa, "Conversations" 207–08).

Nineteen-seventies politics recur in the contemporary era, but with bizarre and shocking effects. This section of the poem, number 30, is presented in the first person, rather in the testimonial vein. There is something reminiscent of the public confessions later made by Hector Jouvé and other former left militants and their supporters that formed the bulk of the so-called *La intemperie* controversy (Belzaguí). In the poem, though, the comic mode *precedes* the tragic—or perhaps the black comedy that one dares not note in the stories of failed militant missions and extrajudicial kangaroo courts and *ajusticiamientos* comes to the surface in fiction. The incident, related in prosaic verse, begins with the kidnapping of a young navy captain; after a "tribunal popular," the decision is made to execute him. It falls to Gamboa to fire the shot. The narration—for once in the collection quite clear and sustained—shifts responsibility from Gamboa to the shot itself: "Un solo tiro en la nuca y estaba muerto." But after this shocking confessional moment come bathos and black humor: "no era el Capitán de Navío / sino uno de estos jóvenes narradores actuales / con uniforme de Marina" (82). The men celebrate all the same, chanting the names of fallen comrades and waving their weapons, while the young writer is himself the jokey object of narrative scorn, via the reference to his latest "nouvelle."

The passage thus plays with the position of left militancy—moving from the real, or perhaps the political, to the fictional, or even simply to fantasy, in the passage between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s (precisely, "Concordia, / Entre Ríos, 1991" (82)). Its return, accounting for a young

contemporary author, is at once an ironic comment on creative writing's (lack of) potential to intervene politically (and, specifically, the complicity of prose writers in the post-*proceso* settlement), and an unsettling reminder of a previous political conjuncture. Several years before the *La intemperie* polemic, Gambarotta undoes narratives of repentance or guilt through black humor and cold-hearted stoicism. This also reverses one of the most striking embodiments of the failure or perversion of the revolution–poetry nexus in Latin American literature: the horrifying fictional career of Carlos Wieder, the writer, pilot, and torturer of Roberto Bolaño's 1996 novel *Estrella distante*. The poem finishes with a section about a group of "heavies" (83) or rockers and their aimless discussions. The banality of the sequence lends retrospective vivacity to the political violence of the previous section.

Systems

One word gains special weight in the final poems of the collection (it appears eight times in the collection, all but once from poem 28 onwards): *sistema*. In the Gamboa sections, the term is used in a countercultural, almost beatnik way: the "system" is the combined interests and power of the political establishment, the repressive and ideological apparatus of the State and mass media. The system, as is often observed, is capable of incorporating alternative and experimental culture, "lejos de la capital donde escuchan acid jazz / se creen los futuros T. E. Hulme, esperando / que el sistema les pague una botella de champaña" (82). The line is a jibe against contemporary trends; but the reference to T. E. Hulme, a politically conservative yet formally daring poet admired by both Pound and T. S. Eliot and known for his short and precise works, is a telling remark about fashions in Argentine poetry—towards concision and accuracy; in short, poetic *objetivismo*—and their promoters' anything but oppositional position. At the same time, this system, which can incorporate anything and which many are all too happy to partake of, is also to be understood as a system in the Blakean sense, "lo difícil no es fundar un sistema / sino refundarlo, mucho más tarde" (86).

In part, this suggests the system as the work of the individual, a product of will, and a site of struggle, or as William Blake wrote, "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans" [*sic*] (144). But it is also a reflection on the question of repetition, something central to the prosody of the collection. The line continues: "negro sobre negro / y negro nuevamente" (86).

The black on black on black brings to mind musical references (for example, the Rolling Stones' 1966 single "Paint It, Black") and artistic connotations (not least Goya): again we see music and visuals working together. But this also makes the reader reflect on the change that is no change: to paint a surface black, and then to paint it black again. The change is, of course, invisible, but it is also absolute (a different surface, a different age, a different color).

The triple alliteration of "negro nuevamente" echoes the triple coloration; the change that changes everything changes nothing, while the imperceptible change is absolute. Likewise in the refounding of the system: the repetition is always different. Here one finds the literary and the political point: to go back to the literary experiments of the past (to refound a system) is ludicrous, just as to repeat the political gestures of the past (the testimony of the deed; urban guerrilla warfare) is also ridiculous. Yet to insist on their repetition is also to remind the system that other systems exist, that it has not always been thus, and that no order is timeless. To use the metaphor drawn from Barthes's work on photography, again, these moments of political theory, debate, organization, and violence are picked out against the backdrop of contemporary media-saturated blandness and banality. For all their apparent failure and even stupidity, these sequences carry vivacity and color missing from much else of what is described. Any romanticism or nostalgia for a past political conjuncture is immediately undercut by humor and incongruity.

Gambarotta offers a reading of the past colored by neither nostalgia nor repentance. We are not being asked to go back to the past, but to see the present as not eternal. Towards the end of the collection nothing seems to have changed—and in poem 31, we read that "No deja, en sentido estricto, / la pieza" (84)—and indeed, by the end of the collection everything seems to disappear, immanent to the poem as when it appeared ("todo lo que aparece . . . / desaparece / de la pantalla nevada de su mente" (96); and yet, simultaneously, everything has changed. This, perhaps, is what the enigmatic last lines—"un andamio / para que lo suban, / que lo suban ahí" (96)—suggest: a way up, or even a way out, but one that cannot quite be descri(b)ed by the collection itself. The final poem, then, traces a narrative arc back to the beginning, but having traced a journey that weighs down the bare setting of the small room with sound and vision and political significance.

Conclusion

1990s poetry in Argentina is known for its combination of colloquial language, the influence of early US objectivist poetics, and a dialogue with near-contemporary "language" (or $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$) poetry, as well as a rebellion against earlier local styles, including the *neobarroco* (as promoted by Perlongher) and social or committed poetry (à la Juan Gelman). Yet reading Gambarotta alongside his contemporaries, such as Juan Desiderio and Daniel Durand, throws up immediate contrasts: in the works of the latter writers, the far clearer presence of either a first-person singular (Desiderio) or, indeed, the named author (Durand); the prevalence of contemporary slang, often marked almost ethnographically through misspellings and punctuation; and the strong sense that there is a world to be presented, or framed, by poetry, rather than one that emerges through it, as we see with Gambarotta.

If, as many have argued, Gambarotta's work is able to achieve anything political—a breaking through the ideology of its contemporary neoliberalism, its cracking of the consensus of *menemismo*, for example—it is in that moment that it achieves this, an untimely intervention in the mid-1990s; yet it is the aesthetic work, which can still be appreciated today, which allows us to unpick such a *punctual* intervention.

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