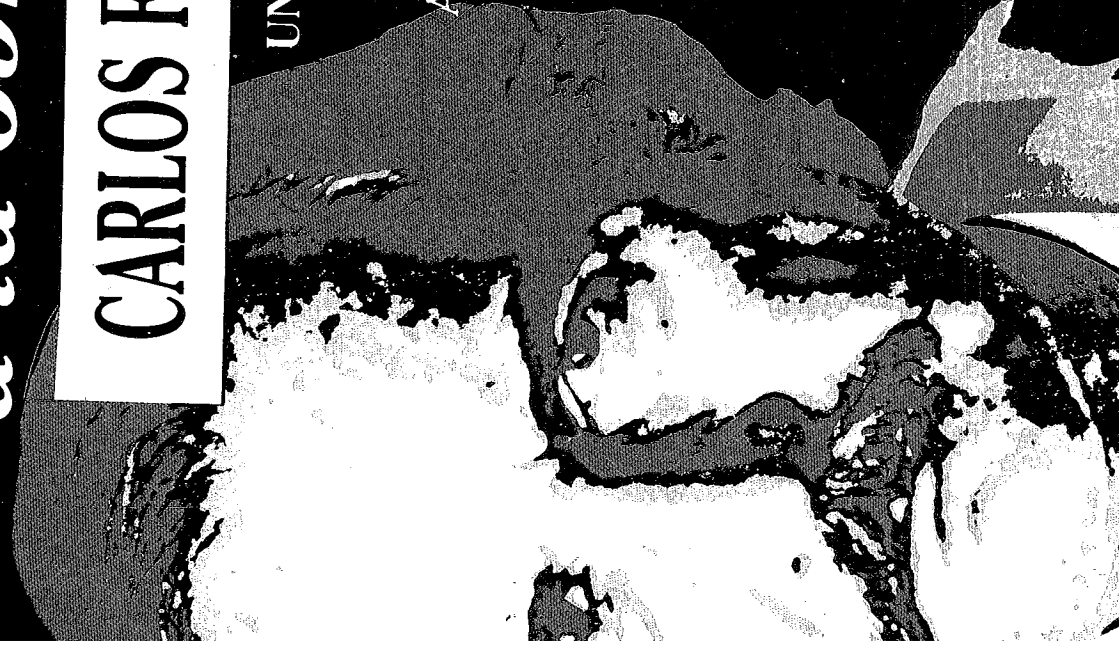


NARRATIVA HISPANOAMERICANA

Interpretaciones a la obra de

CARLOS FUENTES

UN GIGANTE DE
LAS LETRAS
HISPANO-
AMERICANAS



EDICIONES BERAMAR

*The Rapture of a Surface:
Fuentes, Robbe-Grillet, Eco*

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Borges, Fuentes, Vargas Llosa, Robbe-Grillet, Calvino, Eco: we could all add more names to the list of well-established authors who have, in recent years, succumbed to the attractions of the detective genre. Vargas Llosa has recently characterized the phenomenon as a decision on the part of (elite) novelists «to fight the mass media for the privilege of telling stories» (7), and we academic readers have good reason to rejoice at this development, for now academic approbation accompanies the secret vice of an addiction to «a good read». Not only are elite authors telling stories; they are telling them with the elegance, subtlety, and self-conscious awareness of the theoretical implications that mark works of enduring interest. The theoretical nexus conjoining these works has been most concisely defined years ago by Roland Barthes in one of several articles on Robbe-Grillet in which he discusses the «radical formalism» (57) of the French novelist's technique. The formalist element is, perhaps, obvious: the detective genre is the most structured of all novelistic forms, comprising an elaborate puzzle of intermittently released clues with each key element oriented towards the resolution of a central mystery. A rigorous attention to form, occasionally carried to the point of formalistic collapse, is essential in the traditional detective tale.¹ Any flaw in the construction would threaten the plot's logical development. «High-art» or «upscale» detective novels are as attentive to form as their more pedestrian models, yet the formalism is always tied to a radical unconventionality in elaboration. The rigor of the detective's reconstructive analysis comes paired with a suggestion of fatal flaws in the signifying system. Bewilderment bedevils

the rational process; vertigo threatens to undermine the precise temporal and spatial relationships of the archetypal detective plot.

Carlos Fuentes has stated that the detective thriller genre interests him because «the characters are (nothing but) names and the actions are (nothing but) verbs. The verb and the action have a protagonistic quality in this genre...» (*Diacritics* 54). This emphasis on the protagonistic quality of verbs and proper nouns which symbolize nothing beyond their essential semiotic functions is a prominent feature not only in Fuentes' experiment with the detective genre, *The Hydra Head*, but also in other related erudite entertainments that mine the elegant formalisms of the detective tale for the theoretical attractions of a semiotic trope. As in Fuentes, in Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* and in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, a growing recognition of the precariousness of meaning, of the necessarily arbitrary nature of signs, suffuses an elegantly told tale. Consequently, the high-art image of a formalistic tradition reflects no unequivocally acknowledged order outside it; the detective tale as trope invites the contemplation of a surface that makes no pretense at masking its (nonexistent) depths.

It is no coincidence that the act of reading in all three of these writers involves a problematic posed thematically and textually through the issue of the fundamental unreadability of a key text. In Robbe-Grillet, the inept detective, Wallas, is unable to decipher the essential words in a crucial letter; in Eco's bestselling novel an unread, poisoned classical text *apparently* provides the secret motivation for murder; and Fuentes' faceless protagonist muddles through *The Hydra Head* in search of a mysterious ring, now lost, now found, which is both inestimably valuable and completely useless.

Curiously, in each of these novels that most superficial of analyses, the dust-jacket blurb, implicitly recognizes this tension between an eminently readable form and an unreadable text in stressing the conventional plotting of the novel while simultaneously uncovering its fundamental, *radical* deviation from the detective form. The place of form and the rejection of traditional formalism is quite clear in the material which Robbe-Grillet wrote for the first edition of his novel:

The subject is a definite, concrete, essential event: a man's death. It is a detective story event—that is, there is a murderer, a detective, a victim. In one sense their roles are conventional: the murderer shoots the victim, the detective *solves* the problem, the victim dies. But the ties which bind them only appear clearly once the last chapter ends. For the book is nothing more than account of the twenty-four hours that ensue between the pistol shot and the death, the time the bullet takes to travel three or four yards—twenty-four hours «in excess».

This brief resume emphasizes the conventions of the chosen form—the unsolved mystery awaiting logical explication—but (a crucial «but» also marks this transition in the passage) Robbe-Grillet also hints at the unconventionality of the

same plot as he points directly towards the radical difference in this detective story: its alogical temporal structure, signalled by the unaccountable excessivity of a twenty-four hour period for the bullet to reach its target, and its direct involvement in the question of reading as referenced textually by the insertion of quotation marks around the key phrase, «in excess».

In Eco's novel, the blurb tells us, it is not time, but murders that are untidily in excess:

The year is 1327. Franciscans in a wealthy Italian abbey are suspected of heresy, and Brother William of Baskerville arrives to investigate. His delicate mission is suddenly overshadowed by seven bizarre deaths that take place in seven days and nights of apocalyptic terror... Brother William turns detective... He collects evidence, deciphers secret symbols and coded manuscripts and digs into the eerie labyrinth of the abbey, where «the most interesting things happen at night.»

Eco's intertextual echo of Alfred Conan Doyle's fictions in the name he gives his protagonist has been much remarked; equally significant for our purposes is the fact that Eco's is the only one of these three novels to actually name the protagonist—detective in the promotional material—a striking feature in a genre as frequently identified by favored detective as favorite author. Once again, notably, the brief resume is conventionally focussed directly on structural elements of the plot; once again, as in Robbe-Grillet, the blurb hosts an ambiguous parasitical quote, a cliché which, by its nature as cliché, prohibits closer inspection and proves completely unreadable without some further contextualization not provided by the blurb writer.

Fuentes has revealed that his novel is a «homage to the American thriller, to the works of Hammett and Chandler» and their «capacity of using the most transparent of all languages to reveal the most opaque reality imaginable» (*Diacritics* 54). Such words put the academic detective on guard; a cautionary stance justified by the conjunction of transparency and opacity which is exactly what we find on the dust jacket of the Spanish edition of *The Hydra Head*:

The Hydra Head opens at a breakfast, and almost without realizing it, the reader is trapped in a novel whose pages carry him... through the international espionage network. Mexico, its inhabitants, many of its problems, are seen by someone from a mansion in Coyoacán sold by the heirs of Artemio Cruz, that unforgettable protagonist of another Fuentes novel. The fight is cruel, pitiless... and all's fair in the effort to achieve a goal only few understand. «There is no intelligence mission which does not evoke, fatally, the affective realities of life and knit an invisible but unsalvageable web between the objective world that we go out to dominate and the subjective world that, whether we like it or not, dominates us.»

This impressively forgettable paragraph unintentionally offers the most symptomatic characterization of the emergent genre of the upscale detective story. As it wavers between hard-boiled cliché and pseudo-intellectual vagueness, between a readerly «he» and a metaphysical «us», between a concrete gesture towards the «unforgettable protagonist» of another novel, and the forgotten protagonist of this one, the blurb addresses by implication the very real concerns of the detective thriller according to Eco, Robbe-Grillet, or Fuentes. It hints at the intellectually seductive twists and turns of a well-plotted narration, the archetypal nature of the hunt, the linguistic and literary stakes involved in the adoption of a model simultaneously emulated and parodied. Thus, in the novels themselves, as the confused (Robbe-Grillet, Fuentes) or inappropriately confident (Eco) detectives pursue their slender clues, they are also, excentrically, half-comically, wholly seriously, pursued by the metaphysical and epistemological burdens of the postmodern condition—the enigmas of self and the question of the other, the inadequacy and inescapability of language as a determinant of textual and extratextual reality, the questions of authorship and authority, the role of the reader (real, «real», implied, metaphysical) in the text—in short, by all the clues we academic detectives have been trained to identify and analyze.

We are, as you can see, still clearly situated on the surface of these texts, and take to heart Barthes' warning about just such superficial fascinations: «language here is not the rape of an abyss, but the rapture of a surface; it is meant to 'paint' the object, in other words to caress it» (14). What Barthes does not say is that these fascinating surfaces are inherently, necessarily, labyrinthine.

Robbe-Grillet deftly suggests the maze-like nature of the unnamed city in *The Erasers* through a subtle parody of descriptive passages in classical narrative: «To the west, on the other side of the parkway and its canal, stretches the city proper, the streets somewhat cramped between the high brick houses, the public buildings without unnecessary ornament, the churches stiff, the shopwindows somber. The whole effect is solid, occasionally substantial...» (15) The passage creates an image of criss-crossing streets and canals, of oblique and unexpected corners, all hedged by rows of identical buildings pressing in like the walls of a labyrinth, walls which, disconcertingly, *seem* rather than *are* solid, and which consequently fade in and out of substantiality. Robbe-Grillet's gesture towards «representation» suggests something very different, what Barthes has discussed in terms of the novelist's deliberate dispersal of «the convention of substance, (in order) to dissolve it under the pressure of an overconstructed space» (19). This overconstructed, hence nonrepresentational, spatial labyrinth is paralleled by an analogous temporal one, and movement through this double maze characterizes the intricate formal structure of the novel itself. In the absence of concrete temporal markers, time too becomes insubstantial, passes too quickly, or refuses to pass at all. Wallas, the detective, is condemned to wander the city during the «twenty-four hours in excess» wearing a watch that stopped inexplicably at 7:30 the night before, the time of Dupont's supposed murder.

In Fuentes, even more so than in Robbe-Grillet, the great central cities of fiction are built of suggestion rather than substance. Despite much lush, almost baroque description, the economy of the postmodern detective form dominates; here space seems curiously *underdetermined*, reduced to a single, evanescent image. Mexico City is reduced to the elusive smell of a burnt tortilla, Coatzacoalcos in nothing more than «hot humid air laden with the scent of laurel and vanilla» (121), Houston becomes «a building soaring toward the sky like an arrow of copper-colored crystal», a fantastic building that further demonstrates its insubstantiality by housing Wonderland Enterprises, Inc. (153-4). Fuentes specifically calls up the image of the labyrinth as a dominant metaphor in the text. He evokes the «subterranean labyrinths» of petroleum (292), cites Corneille's reference to an urban maze: «Rome, to my ruin, is a monstrous Hydra Head» (210), and mentions «the labyrinth of modern Minotaurs» (175) through which the hapless Mexican agent must stumble in his ever-less comprehensible wanderings. The narrative «I» specifically alludes to yet another labyrinth, the narrative hydra so reminiscent of Borges' garden of forking paths. Musing on his reconstruction of Felix Maldonado's adventures, the narrator asks himself, «Which of the two endings would be the true one: the one I was preparing to invent, or the one he was preparing to live?» (248). The question remains open as to which, if either, of these two evanescent possibilities becomes substantial in this physical artifact, the volume before us.

Of these three exemplary texts, however, it is Eco's novel that is most obsessively features the floorplan of a historical labyrinth. The dust jacket to the Italian edition prominently features the floorplan of a historical labyrinth, now destroyed, that could once be found in a French cathedral (the labyrinth is also reproduced in Eco's *Postscript* (55), and both the frontispiece and the endplate reproduce a puzzlingly incomplete plan of the abbey that is the site of the tale. In this plan, as Walter Stephens has noted, «a building identified as the «Edificio» [«Aedificium» in the English version] has precisely the same shape as that of the labyrinth which encloses the book» (54). The implicit mirroring is repeated textually on another level of allusion; we discover that the hexagonal galleries of the «building» house a Borgesian labyrinthine library, inaccessible to all except the sole librarian who has been initiated into the secret of its construction, the library which is, furthermore, both the seat of knowledge and the site of murder. This fictive space is so overburdened with narrative detail, so richly endowed with layer upon layer of contextualized referent and allusion that, like Robbe-Grillet's city, it risks wavering into insubstantiality. Eco suggests that his novel represents a «mannerist maze» in contraposition to the Greek Labyrinth of the Minotaur or a postmodern rhizomatic maze; that is, «if you unravel it, you find in your hands a kind of tree, a structure with roots, with many blind alleys» (*Postscript* 57). This typically canny definition sounds a warning. In describing three, and only three, types of labyrinth, Eco satisfies a pedagogic formula. But formalism, in Eco, is necessarily radical, completing and undercutting itself in

one move. Once again a question remains: if three, why not four? Why not infinitely many? Borges, clearly Eco's master and model in the art of maze-imagining, has devised many others: temporal labyrinths, spatial labyrinths, labyrinths in which choices are both/and rather than either/ or, and, significantly, the precise labyrinth used by Eco in this novel: one which is neither mannerist nor rhizomatic nor classical, but which involves an infinite library, hexagonal rooms, and mirrors reflecting spaces that are, like Robbe-Grillet's town or Fuentes' cities, both substantial and illusory. By the end of *The Name of the Rose*, the monstrous aedificium has been destroyed and the narrator, an aged monk named Adso, reflects back upon the fragments he has shored against his ruins:

Poking about in the rubble, I found at times scraps of parchment... I collected every relic I could find, filling two traveling sacks with them... At the end of my patient reconstruction, I had before me a kind of lesser library, a symbol of the greater vanished one... The more I reread this list the more I am convinced it is the result of chance and contains no message... And it is a hard thing for this old monk, on the threshold of death, not to know whether the letter he has written contains some hidden meaning, or more than one, or many, or none at all. (500-501)

The problem, posed as a question of reading and interpretation, is a troubling one, and among the many possible tracings of these labyrinthine spaces, I propose in what follows to discuss, superficially, of necessity, three moments in the reading of the upscale detective novel.

I. WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In the famous chestnut root scene of *Nausea*, the novel's protagonist undergoes the vertiginous sensation that things have suddenly been released from their names: «The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference men have traced on their surface» (127). Language structures reality, defines it, sets limits, humanizes. The name anchors description—in Foucault's words, «the name is the end of discourse» (*Order* 118)—providing a superficial point of reference, an index of functionality. Significantly, *The Erasers* begins as it ends in an unnamed café, with a man who is identified only by function, the «manager» whose name is erased in favor of his function, who allows his overall indifference to his customers to be disturbed by his clarification that the name of the premature murder victim is not Albert but Daniel (13). Furthermore, Wallas' search for the supposed murderer parallels his unsuccessful search for a specific brand of eraser that he has been seeking for months: «The manufacturer's brand was printed on one side, but it was too worn to be legible any more: only two of the middle

letters were still clear: 'di', there must have been at least two letters before and perhaps two or three others after» (126). Neither Wallas nor the helpful employees of the various stationary shops are able to complete the name. Brice Morrisette, however, succinctly fills the gap in Wallas' memory, providing the missing syllables with an off-hand «*Oe-di-pe*» of course» (63). Of course. What's in this missing name is, then, a strategy of narrative elision and allusion. Oedipus is recalled, but under erasure; the points of reference are traced on the surface, then worn away by the passage of time and the vagaries of memory.

Exactly the opposite situation obtains in Fuentes' novel, but curiously, produces the identical end result of an effacement of name in favor a lumpish quiddity of function. The author has stated his intention of writing a work based on names, and indeed, his characters seem to carry about a superfluity of them. The ambiguous and much-masked narrative «I» identifies himself as a rich young oil baron, the spiritual heir of Artemio Cruz (236). He is also Timon of Athens, the shady head of the fledgling Mexican equivalent of the CIA, an English homosexual named Trevor, a mercenary German double agent named Mann, a lobbyist to the U.S. Congress, and, apparently, the sinister photophobic Director General. Felix Maldonado, the would-be James Bond of the novel, a converted Jew with the face of Velázquez, changes both face and name in the course of the narration, but remains essentially a title designating his function in the Ministry of Economic Development:

«Who am I, Malena?» (he asks his secretary).

«The chief, sir...»

«No, I mean, what is my name?»

«Uh... Licenciado...»

«Licenciado who?»

«Uh... just Licenciado... like all the others» (16)

The protagonist's identity, his very self, is transformed with startling facility since names and faces have no part in this licitly unfathomable hierarchy. In this respect, but only in this, the few names that remain in the hydra-headed bureaucratic maze are chillingly resonant. Maldonado's ministry functions under the direction of the shadowy Director General, a man identified ominously with the name of another; he wore the pince-nez of «the number one villain of modern Mexican history, Victoriano Huerta» (50). The name of the Hydra becomes the name of the father, that many-headed father: spiritual fathers like Victoriano Huerta and Artemio Cruz, Maldonado's own biological father, who conceived his son on the day oil was nationalized.

In Eco, where the name of the book is *The Name of the Rose* and the book is a collection of elaborately allusive names, identity is nothing if not intertextual: Watson/Adso/Eco, Brother William of Baskerville/ William of Occam/«The Hound of the Baskervilles», Jorge de Burgos/Jorge Luis Borges, the abbot/Abo

(Aramaic «abba»-father).² Fittingly, in this mystery centered on a library, identity becomes a matter of quotation and cross-reference. These names, like Fuentes', are both full and empty, rich in allusive significance, lacking in specificity and the individuality so dear to our concept of self. In all three of these novels, then, sparse information about protagonists who «are nothing but names» is coupled with an overcoding of name, a semiotic overload that serves as an obstacle to profundization or acts as a parodic brake on interpretation. Yet, nevertheless, the very overdetermination of name suggests and invites a second moment in the study of the upscale detective story, where names—stated or unsaid—resonate with myth.

II. OEDIPUS THE SLEUTH

Aristotle's study of comedy is the ostensible motive for murder in *The Name of the Rose*, but the crucial text in Eco's novel is his analysis of tragedy, which provides the scaffolding for the tale; and in the closed world of strangely filiated «brothers,» Sophocles' story of a star-crossed family lies lightly on the surface of the text as one of various, often conflicting, literary models. «Oedipus is the sleuth... of 'superior art',» says Robert Yeager (48), the first detective, the swollen-footed clarifier of enigmas whose name is «allusively applied to one who is clever at guessing riddles» (*OED*) Tradition suggests that mysteries can be solved; logical reconstruction of clues will lead to the truth, however unpalatable. In Eco's postmodern detective story, however, the sleuth patiently follows the evidence of the clues, constructing a pattern and later a theory, eventually reaching the criminal only to discover, in William's words, that «there was no plot... and I discovered it by mistake» (491), that chance rather than logic led him to the solution of the mystery. At the final confrontation in the library with his nemesis, Jorge, William reveals his theoretical resolution of the riddle of the series of murders while the Jorge de Burgos admires his prowess. «What a magnificent librarian you would have been, William,» says the blind librarian to the bespectacled inquisitor, while the youthful apprentice detective, heir to both spectacles and the diminished library, respectfully stands back ready to record the exchange.³ Oedipus solves the mystery of the missing father and puts out his eyes; blindness comes more slowly to the librarian's spiritual heirs.

Oedipus is also a crucial referent for Robbe-Grillet. The epigraph to *The Erasers*, «time that sees all has found you out against your will,» is taken from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and the novel as a whole, Bruce Morrissette argues, details «a modern version of the tragedy of Oedipus.» Morrissette's very lucid discussion analyzes a number of the parallels: references to the riddle of the Sphinx, description of a chariot sculpted by «Daulis» (an anagram of Laus), mention of a fortune-teller, an analogy using the ruins of Thebes, the identification of Dupont (the murder victim) as a father-figure for the detective, as well as

references to Wallas' abandonment as a child, his sore and swollen feet, etc. (53-66). Yet the Oedipus myth, like the «Oedipe» on the eraser, is both present and effaced; for the reader coming to Robbe-Grillet through Eco the very obviousness of the allusions warns of their potentially misleading, fraudulent, or parodic function. Like William of Baskerville, who searches for meaning and finds pertinent signs and symbols all about him only to discover, belatedly, that his clues are irrelevant and his meaning system merely a personal construct of wish-fulfillment, so too Wallas searches everywhere for clues to the nonexistent murder only to have all incipient systems erased by his own action when, in the climactic scene, he kills Dupont and thus becomes himself the murderer he seeks (245). The pervasive myth serves as a formal resource, but, given the radical element of the novelistic vision, also allows an ironic reflection on the role of myth in fiction.

Fuentes also recognizes in myth a necessary element of his fiction, and does so with an urgency that would seem to answer the structured game-playing of Robbe-Grillet and Eco. He says, «I'm trying in all my novels to find ways of breaking out of the prison of the time spectrum of the West. ...[T]he lack of the tragic vision leaves us with *crime* on our hands.» Myth, for all its tragic fatality, its interweaving of freedom and destiny, of necessity and failure, allows access to another time, another crime, the time and the crime of Oedipus.⁴ Hence, it is unsurprising that Maldonado/Velázquez is an orphan, and that his espionage mission is overlaid with a more personal mythic quest—his efforts to relocate his lost father, the Mexican oil worker who, on nationalization of petroleum, felt «Mexicans had looked one another in the face» (221), and consequently went home to conceive his son. Ironically, the father he recovers «in the dry docks of Galveston» (246) is not a Mexican oil worker but a gringo tanker captain, and his name, Harding, is that of an American president during the time of U.S. expansion into the Mexican oil business. This father, so briefly found, is soon lost, murdered for the ring he had agreed to carry back to Mexico, and the ring, the concrete evidence of the filiation, is likewise lost, albeit temporarily.

III. NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T

Clearly, one the most striking aspects of these detective tales is their semiotic essence; in each the metafictional function is inscribed within the text in a prominent manner. In each, an unreadable text becomes the crucial fulcrum of narration. As a result, the narrative trajectory mediates between two written artifacts, the novel, which we read, and the central embedded text, which we do not, just as the narrative structure mediates between the postmodern forms of inscription and the unwritten conventions of the surface formula. And in each case, the mediation is vexed with falsehood. The central, ambiguously unreadable text poses itself as the central dilemma to be resolved, but it is also the obstacle

preventing its resolution. Instead of decipherment of a mystery, in each work, the novel ends with a gesture of opening out into another semiotic system, another ambiguous inscription of intertextual cross-reference.

Eco offers the clearest example. He has chosen for the form of his novel a highly systematized and familiar cliché of the detective genre, «the body in the library.» In its usual manifestation, parodied already by the queen of detective authors, Agatha Christie, «the library in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body» (Christie, forward). Eco not only turns these expectations upside down, giving us a banal body in a wildly improbable library, but also makes a book—Aristotle's *Comedy*—the motive for metaphor and suspected motive for murder. While the book in question is destroyed unread (except for a single paragraph), eaten by the librarian, it is, nevertheless, in the tongue-in-cheek view of at least one critic, dispersed across the surface of Eco's text which, in consequence, must also be destroyed: «*The Name of the Rose* is Aristotle's *Poetics*, Book II. As such it cannot survive itself, ...and if it says what it reports itself to say, then it must self-destruct... But only after it has destroyed its reader» (Mackey 38).⁵ The reduplicated text both hidden from and in clear view of later readers almost too easily offers itself as what Stephen Heath has called the «scriptural of narrative» (136).

For Fuentes, the «scriptural of narrative» is embodied in the ring with the clear stone containing exact, classified information about the nature and extent of Mexico's oil reserves. It is, as Maldonado surmises, an «indecipherable object, whose secret... would turn out to be as obvious as Poe's purloined letter» (161). The ring is useless, because indecipherable, useless because the information is already common knowledge in certain circles, yet immensely valuable to the balance of power in the world. Although the Mexican agents eventually «read» the ring with the aid of a laser beaming from the left eye of a reproduction of the Virgin of Guadalupe (238) the maternal counterpart of the paternal myth), it remains undecipherable because its semiotic essence cannot be released into interpretation. Signs, as Fuentes knows well, open out only into other signs, like Poe's purloined letter which, creased and refolded, opens out only into the story of its concealment. Furthermore, in a Poe-esque inversion, the ring's insistent centrality masks other, more crucial issues. The maps of oil fields conceal by displacing the even more significant, more ambiguous, and more unreadable «maps of memory» remitting the reader-as-sleuth to the mythic/metaphorical realms of Malinche, Guadalupe's other face. And for this absent «solution» there is no «explanation» but myth.

Effaced myth is also the «solution» to the murder mystery of *The Erasers*. In the course of his investigation, Wallas is mistaken for a hired killer and given a letter addressed to «André WS,» a coincidence in name that Laurent, the police chief, immediately remarks upon in his dismissal of the cryptic and unreadable note as irrelevant, or at least, unhelpful to the case. We readers, whose superior

knowledge allows us to «decipher» the cryptic references, recognize the note's centrality to the apprehension of Bona and Garinati, and are thus misled into a premature conclusion as to its significance. Unexpectedly, the terms of Laurent's dismissal prove far more relevant. He mentions «one word that is illegible in one of the sentences you consider indicative—a word of seven or eight letters that looks like 'ellipse' or 'eclipse' or that could be 'align' or 'idem' or a lot of other things» un mot de sept ou huit jambages, qui ressemble à «ellipse» ou «éclipse» et qui peut aussi bien être «aligne», «échope», «idem» ou encore beaucoup d'autres choses (English 161, French 160). Among the list of possible interpretations for the illegible word, the most important, the one that irrevocably ties André WS with Wallas as the murderer, is the word «Oedipe», once again half-erased, unrecognized, a solution at the same time pertinent, elegant, and radically, irrelevant.

Radical irrelevance is, finally, the crucial issue in these upscale detective novels, for while their link with the genre resides in their formal structuration, radically, in each of the cases discussed here, although the mystery is «solved,» at the same time the text manages to suggest that no logically construable explanation for its resolution is possible. Thus, the structuration of meaning from chance clues reflects not the (disputable) order of the world but the ordering process of an individual mind, the interplay between the rapture of and alienation from a fascinating surface.⁶

NOTES

¹ Expectations of order are so well recognized that they have been parodied even in traditional novels. See, for example, Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library* where the stereotype is evoked, implicitly rejected, and finally repeated, with a new twist.

² These allusions have been universally recognized in the discussions of Eco's novel. I would, however, like to acknowledge a special indebtedness to the magnificent special issue of *Sub-Stance* (47 [1985]) dedicated to this novel.

³ Yeager has also noted this affiliation of Jorge-William-Adso: «William wore glasses, an unusual detail for 1327 and a clue that his vision resembled blind Jorge's more closely than anyone knew, including William himself. (And here it is useful to note that Adso, who sounds in the end like William after Jorge, also inherits the spectacles)» (50).

⁴ Fuentes interview, pp. 50-51. He specifically cites Hölderlin's meditations on *Oedipus* in this context.

- ⁵ In this very self-conscious statement, Mackey seems to echo (who else?) Borges, whose story of the burning of the books («The Congress») also ends with an affirmation of their essential indestructibility. Borges, of course, borrows the metaphor from the Hawthorne story «Earth's Holocaust,» to which he had earlier dedicated an essay of *Other Inquisitions*.
- ⁶ Further discussion of this topic would require examination of how the exploration of a surface also contains, in this postmodern, post-Octavio Paz society, the most profound reflections on the nature of the self.

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As They Lie Dying: A Comparative Study of Ivan Ilych and Artemio Cruz

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In the «Prólogo» to Vol. I of Fuentes' *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1974), Fernando Benítez writes: «Inserto en la historia, rescatado por el arte y en cierto modo eternizado, el caso de Artemio Cruz no es muy diferente al de la provinciana Madame Bovary o al del escrupuloso funcionario imperial Ivan Ilich.» The most interesting aspect of this statement is not the linking of three, on the surface, dissimilar characters, but the fact that their interconnection is established at three levels: the personal, the social and the philosophical. They are well-defined, individual characters, inserted in a socio-political context and, in a way, made eternal because of the paradigmatic nature of their particular «case». Leaving aside Madame Bovary for the purposes of this paper, a close analysis of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *The Death of Artemio Cruz* reveals a striking convergence in the narrative premise developed by both texts as well as an even more significant divergence in the conclusions reached by their authors. The relationship between Tolstoy and Fuentes formulated here does not depend on either a stated or assumed influence of the former on the latter. It is only an attempt to examine two writers dealing with essentially the same issue and the characteristic manner in which they address it. My purpose is to compare and contrast how the perhaps most important single event in human reality—namely, death—is observed, portrayed and assessed by two eminent creators of fiction.¹

The major differences between *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (*DII*) and *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (*DAC*) are readily apparent: short story versus full length novel, linear construction versus disruption of sequential order, straightforward omnis-