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Debra A. Castillo

HYPERTEXT SAINZ

Gustavo Sainz has made a habit of always appearing at the cusp of Mexico's exploration of its own contemporaneity. In 1965, *Gazapo* burst onto the literary scene as a highly touted exemplar of the so-called "generación de la Onda" with its portrayal of the middle-class Mexico City youth of the day. Directionless and hyperactive, they tuned into the latest manifestations of U.S. rock and hippy style and were turned off by Mexican establishment politics and values. They were much more interested in mass media culture and electronics than in anything available between the pages of a book. *Gazapo* is an urban novel involving constant movement—the effect of its being dictated into a series of audio tapes. The characters speak in an urban slang heavily influenced by drug terminology and English borrowings that make them sound almost like upscale *pachucos*. Sainz's *Fantasmas aztecas* (1982), written in the wake of the 1978 discovery of the Aztec temple in Mexico City's main square, offers what the author calls a perceptual invention; it superimposes times from Aztec to present like the strata in an archeological dig. Although in a very different mode than *Gazapo*'s, *Fantasmas aztecas* places Sainz at the very center of a Mexican rethinking of the symbolic and actual centrality of indigenous cultures in the formation of national identity.

In 1966, the twenty-something Sainz published a premature autobiography; he mined this material, however, along with other fictionalized autobiographical reflections, twenty-five years later in his belated examination of 1968, *A la salud de la serpiente* (1991). Sainz writes his reflection from the considerable distance of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Even so, if Sainz's exploration of 1968 represents a somewhat tardy entry into a well-established subgenre in Mexico, his chosen narrative form for this novel is cutting edge. While it is typical for writers to mine their own lives for material, overt autobiography—the nonfiction novel—is still fresh and new, and it represents an important contemporary grappling with the traditional autobiographical model.

La novela virtual: atrás, arriba, adelante, debajo y entre (1998) demonstrates Sainz's unerring grasp of contemporary cultural developments while also maintaining a continuity with his earlier works. If, by some measure, *Gazapo* described the northamericanization of Mexican youth in the halcyon hippy days of the 1960s and before the tragedy at Tlatelolco, *La novela virtual* serves as its complementary double and update, written, as it is, from the other side of that great political and historical divide. In *Gazapo*, the disaffected youth are more interested in being modern than in being Mexican. In this recent novel, Sainz describes the yearning for a pristine "mexicanidad" from the subject position of an aging Mexican intellectual who has lived too long in the United States. While contemporaneity in the 1960s was stylistically anchored and expressed through

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the device of the audio tape recording, in the 1990s, it is the computer (and the internet) that serves as the primary medium for narrative development, marking the cultural change from the electronic to the cybernetic age. Similarly, *La novela virtual* serves as an extension and update of *A la salud de la serpiente*, and it uses the now-familiar autobiographical technique to revisit thematic nodes developed in the earlier work. Joel Hancock's succinct summary of *Serpiente* also comes surprisingly close to describing *La novela virtual*:

> On its simplest level *A la salud de la serpiente* chronicles the experiences, ideas, and moods of its protagonist, Gustavo Sainz, who is a participant in the International Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa during the 1968-1969 academic year. He is sponsored by a Ford Foundation grant to complete his novel, *Obsesivos días circulares*, but his energies are also spent on interacting with other artists and literati in the program, examining the customs and culture of the new environment in which he is now immersed, writing to his friends and professional associates, and becoming romantically involved with a university student... Sainz discloses his own impressions concerning particular novels and at times offers in-depth analyses of certain works. (140, 143)

In almost identical terms, we could say that, at its simplest level, *La novela virtual* chronicles the experiences, ideas, and moods of its protagonist, an unnamed 59-year-old novelist with a distinct similarity to Gustavo Sainz who is teaching in an unnamed (but easily identifiable as Middlebury, Vermont) summer program. He is sponsored by this program partly to complete his new novel, *La novela virtual*, but he also spends his energies interacting with other artists and literati in the program, examining the customs and culture of his new environment, writing to his friends and professional associates, and becoming romantically involved with a Mexican university exchange student attending school in the U.S., with whom he begins an e-mail correspondence. Although we are rarely treated to the author's side of this correspondence, the exchange becomes increasingly intimate and sexually provocative. Through the course of his stream-of-consciousness monologues, the narrator discloses his own impressions concerning particular novels, which often appear in the guise of a summary of classroom lectures. At other times, he offers in-depth analyses of certain works, including transcriptions of and commentaries on apocryphal stories by his young Mexican girlfriend. With the apparent object of addressing transformations of autobiographical form, the novel also includes the Mexican girlfriend's commentary on the three-hundred-page manuscript autobiography of her co-worker from Jalapa, Nereída. The last chapters of the novel detail the increasingly intense obsession of the older man and the young woman with each other. The narrator's obsession leads him on a hallucinatory cross-country trip to St. Louis,

Missouri, ending with a coy obfuscation of his actual/potential meeting with the student in a St. Louis hotel lobby.

La novela virtual follows two distinct and usually disparate strands. A large part of the novel consists of a highly fragmentary and associative narrative reproducing the writer's meditations about his admittedly uninteresting, repetitive, innocuous daily activities (preparing coffee, reading books, going to the movies), as well as his musings on high art. This fragmentary, meandering text is interrupted by a traditional narrative plot following the young Mexican woman's e-mail letters, which reveal the highly colored soap-operatic events in her family life—particularly the fights with her parents and problems with her boyfriends. In this manner, *La novela virtual* provides, at the same time and in alternating formats, both a difficult but boring experimental text and a highly plotted, juicy melodrama.

While there is a clear tension between the two parts of the narrative—the intellectual palaver/implicitly elitist audience/experimental style sits uneasily on the page with its counterpart of melodramatic events/mass media audience/traditional plotting—the novel seems to resolve into, finally, no more and no less than the playing out of the most trite of all back-to-school fall questions. The first chapter queries: "¿y ustedes qué hicieron ese verano?" ("and what did you do this summer?"; 21), a question that serves as a *leitmotif* throughout the novel until the very end when the last line of the narrative reiterates this insistent question with a slight variation: "¿y ustedes qué hicieron el verano pasado?" ("and what did you do last summer?"; 495). And yet, this banal query, which presupposes a realist, autobiographical narrative as an equally banal response, crashes against the insistent textuality of the work itself where realism, autobiography, and even the concept of "novel" are all pretexts in some degree.

The first clue to addressing this apparent impasse comes from the title itself; this novel offers many possible points of entry, but it remains a *virtual* novel, never quite actualized despite its almost five hundred pages of text. It is, to follow upon the famous definition given by Roland Barthes in his eponymous non-autobiography, "an endlessly receding project." As Barthes says,

> First of all, the work is never anything but the meta-book (the temporary commentary) of a work to come which, not being written, becomes this work itself... [T]he work is a (theatrical) rehearsal, and this rehearsal ... is verbose, infinite, interlaced with commentaries, excuses, shot through with other matters. (174-5)

Thus, the "virtual" novel or the meta-autobiography reflects that prior state of creative ferment before the ordering of elements into coherently structured form. The fiction *atrás*, as Sainz hints in the subtitle, has to do with the fictionality of creating this rehearsed pre-text of an unwritten work, and the red herring of

"what did you do last summer?" serves more as a linguistic prompt than as an engine to motivate the spinning out of any traditionally imagined narrative. Sainz's narrator muses:

> pero se trataría de una novela sólo en apariencia
> una autobiografía?
> seguramente
> pero en lo más hondo: allí en donde todos los demás detenían sus palabras: él franquearía todos los umbrales. (272)
> but it would be a novel only in appearance
> an autobiography?
> probably
> but in the deepest sense: there where all the others stopped their words: he would cross all the thresholds.

Not only is this an unusual and linguistically focused meta-"autobiography," it also has as its explicit project an opening up of the genre: "arriba, adelante," says the subtitle; going beyond previously imagined boundaries, says the narrator. This kind of project is perfectly in accord with the theoretical position already elucidated by Barthes. As the narrator says at another point, in what could well be a rephrasing of Barthes:

> el significado era nuevo o no lo había
> una nueva creación o ninguna
> novela o nada
> *La novela virtual* su novela de la suerte que estaba echada
> decir una cosa para decir otra. (492)
> the meaning was new or there wasn't any
> a new creation or none
> novel or nothing
> *The virtual novel* his novel of fortune that had been drawn
> saying one thing to mean another.

From another point of view, the project of a virtual or empty novel exists not as a creative choice but, rather, as an inevitability. The narrator has made the decision that, during his summer in the eastern United States, he will write every day, producing a certain fixed quantity of material that will become the text of his new novel (469). The problem with this project is that he is faced with a paucity of material: "su vida en la que (casi) nada sucedía" ("his life in which (almost) nothing happened"; 402) means that "no tiene nada de que escribir" ("he has nothing to write about"; 366). Thus, he fills the pages of his work-in-progress with academic speculations, the minutia of an uneventful intellectual

life, and successive false starts of the project. By definition, these associative fragments never cohere, creating a problem for the writer, who "siente una como presión, cierta responsabilidad, como si le exigiéramos que nos contara su historia de una manera convencional, lineal, sencilla, periodística" ("feels something like a pressure, certain responsibility, as if we demanded him to tell us his story in a conventional, linear, simple, journalistic manner"; 366). At the same time, the writer finds himself ever more seduced by the highly plotted narratives of his e-mail fan, Camila, who shares with him long descriptions of her peripatetic life, including difficulties with her parents and lovers (this part of the novel reads like a 1990s female-focused variation on the 1965 male point-of-view in *Gazapo*). These "autobiographical" tales, by reason of their method of transmission, are also—and in a literal sense—virtual texts. Like clients who log on to chatrooms, "Camila" exists only as a coherent narrative construction of a computerized identity.

Informally, we have all heard anecdotes about how the internet has changed the shape of interpersonal dynamics through role-playing in chatrooms, cyberromance exchanges, and cyberporn sites. One of the attractions of Web technology for a contemporary writer like Gustavo Sainz, I would suggest, is precisely this democratization of fiction effects whereby adults are able to continue playing a grown-up version of make-believe. Camila constantly plays with her name: "Camila Rana," "Camilonga," "Camile des Forets," "Camilanova Bosa Nova," "Camilammermann, K," "Cami Mi Mi La Mi," etc., and both the famous author and the young woman play at an updated version of the genius and his muse. Chatting online is a game at which anyone can alternate between the roles of author and reader; what has been given far less attention is the way in which these games play themselves out theoretically.

Already in the mid-1980s, Arthur Kroker and David Cook were presciently signalling what they called the last and most purely artistic phase of capitalism, the site of power as the process of aestheticized recommodification in the computer age.[1] For Kroker and Cook, one of the key phases in this recommodification of capital involves a shift into virtuality,

> where we experience pure imagining-systems as real, and where perspective itself is always only fictional because it is perfectly simulational. Estheticized commodification is the region of virtual cameras, of virtual technology, and of virtual perspective—the region, in fact, where the aesthetic symmetries of particle physics become the structural logic of the Real. (20)

For Kroker and Cook, these changes loomed on the literary and cultural horizon as the "dark side" of the aesthetic transformation they correctly predicted, a commentary that meshes perfectly with a good deal of the anti-net hype now so

familiar to all of us. Worried commentators fear that electronic dialogue is coming to replace human interaction, that technically savvy children are all too ably maneuvering their ways into unsavory locations, that electronic input (the booming electronic market in, say, quicktime movies, interactive video striptease, etc.) can have all-too-evident real effects on the (implicitly male) bodies sitting at the keyboard, and that assumed virtual identities pose threats to users' perceptions of reality by inappropriately merging categories of fact and fiction. To this "dark side" technological aesthetics, Celeste Olalquiaga would add that, with the fusing of performance and spectator in virtual space, the "boundaries between what is being watched and who is watching barely exist" (6).

Sainz's novel explicitly inserts itself into the exploration of the effects of this e-revolution on the novelistic form, on the writerly identity, and on the rethinking of thematic development. Although in a different sense from that adduced by Barthes, the e-mail transmissions attributed to Camila also comprise a meta-autobiography in their offering of the computer age's temporary rehearsal of an assumed identity. For the author within Sainz's text, however, Camila's long, interconnected letters also represent a golden opportunity to fill out the growing pages of his novel about nothing with a simple cut-and-paste from a hypereventful narrative; in this sense, antiquity's virtual muse takes on a specific and literalized form. Thus, he notes, "todas las panes de su nuevo relato serían producidas como lados disimétricos/direcciones rotas: cajas cerradas: vasos no comunicantes" ("all the parts of his new story would be produced as asymmetric sides/broken directions: closed boxes: disconnected vessels"; 441) combining "su novela Camila" ("his Camila novel"; 470) or "su novela de Camila/una novela libre de definiciones previas" ("his novel about Camila/a novel free of previous definitions"; 478) and "su novela académica" ("his academic novel"; 471).

Not surprisingly, the author finds himself constantly beginning again; as late as ten pages before the end of the novel he is still typing in "primer capítulo" on his computer screen, staging a mock erasure of the foregoing text, and suggesting a new point of departure from which to organize the disparate elements of the as-yet-unwritten text (that we, of course, are nearly finished reading). Throughout the long novel, the author continually tries out such clarifying foci in an effort to define this text-in-process. I note just a few of these instances by way of examples: "el amor era pues un elemento constitutivo de la híperprealidad/su novela virtual" ("love was thus a constitutive element of hyper-reality/his virtual novel"; 90), or "su novela de la vigilia / aunque escribir realmente no importaba" ("his novel of vigilance / although writing did not really matter"; 107), or "la invitación posmoderna ... / su novela lúdica" ("the postmodern invitation ... / his playful novel"; 186-7), or "¿no podría ser este libro en algún sentido un cocodrilo que intentara devorar nuestros pensamientos?" ("could this book not be in some way a crocodile trying to devour our thoughts?"; 224), or "su novela del tiempo perdido / o la del arte de perder el tiempo" ("his novel of lost time/or of

the art of losing time"; 239), or, tellingly, "su novela en blanco" ("his blank novel"; 359).

Roland Barthes writes: "Fiction would proceed from a new intellectual art.... With intellectual things, we produce simultaneously theory, critical combat, and pleasure; we subject the objects of knowledge ... no longer to an instance of truth, but to a consideration of effects" (90), and Donald Shaw, in an article on several post-Boom writers, adds the following queries to Barthes's commentary on knowledge, truth, and fictional effects: "Can we, in any sense ever know reality?" and "Can literature ever have a significant social role?" (16). The answer to these questions involves exploring the implications of this still under-theorized new intellectual art. One response—Barthes's—might be to reject the presuppositions underlying such questions about reality and signification and suggest that a postmodern art would require a rethinking of how we produce and understand objects of knowledge or entertainment. Sainz's response is perhaps less radical because, while the technical difficulty of much of this novel suggests an affinity to the Barthesian model, Shaw is quite right in concluding that the Mexican writer's work more properly involves a strained relationship with these key concerns. In typical fashion, Sainz's response to the questions posed by Shaw might be an ambiguous "yes and no" (Shaw 16-17, 19). In fact, Sainz himself has defined his work as realist narratives—but in the postmodern, rather than the nineteenth-century, sense of the term, one that understands language as the only reality.

This postmodern project of a linguistically founded realism works only intermittently in Sainz's texts and remains one of the factors that produces the most narrative tension in his novels. Thus, for example, in earlier books like *A la salud de la serpiente*, the concept of a new realism has to take cognizance of unsettlingly powerful historical events like Tlatelolco. *La novela virtual*, with its explicitly more banal context, specifically elides such concrete historical embeddedness, and the combination of a novelist's meta-autobiography with that of an electronically constructed individual allows for greater free play of the intellect. Here, more clearly than in the earlier work, Sainz is able to focus—like Barthes—on the linguistic creation of the writer in search of his identity, and on his evolving understanding of the constructedness of this meta-autobiographical effort without abandoning his ongoing commitment to a postmodern exploration of the possibilities of realism in the computer age.

If one point of entry into the novel is given by the exploration of the question of virtuality, an entirely different analysis involves looking more closely at the function of the two crucial women who serve as focal points of the narrative; the lovely "Ombligo Anillado"—who seduces the writer with her perfect, postmodernly pierced body—and Camila, his Mexican e-mail love. It is worth noting that, while the author's relationship with the first woman is entirely physical, the course of this second, electronically conducted affair (like those described else-

where in the recently established sub-genre of cybernetic fiction) specifically precludes the actual meeting of the two persons involved.[2] In both cases, the author envelops his sexual attraction to the women in highly elaborated and even mannerist prose, full of poetic asides and literary comparisons. The author's literary references and allusions run the range from British metaphysical poets to contemporary Latin-American novelists, but the one inescapable figure who provides the clearest key to unraveling this eroto-literary aspect of the novel remains elusive in the text. I am thinking of Vladimir Nabokov and his novel, *Lolita*, which, like Sainz's novel, details the course of an intergenerational love affair as a way of coming to terms with the location of the international scholar with respect to U.S. culture. In his "afterword" to *Lolita*, Nabokov describes the five-year project of writing the novel as his way of becoming an American writer. He says,

> It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced with the task of inventing America. The obtaining of such local ingredients as would allow me to inject a modicum of "reality" (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes) into the brew of individual fancy, proved at fifty a much more difficult process... Once or twice I was on the point of burning the unfinished draft ... when I was stopped by the thought that the ghost of the destroyed book would haunt my files for the rest of my life. (283)

Like Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, Sainz's author is a fifty-ish, international academic working on the east coast of the United States; like that famous character, he falls in love with a much younger woman (or, in *La novela virtual*, with two young women) and, in search of some elusive quality he associates with her, sets off by car across the country. John Brushwood has spoken of Sainz as an extremely locally grounded author: "El Distrito Federal es su provincia, su terruño, su diario vivir" ("The Federal District is his province, his land, his daily life"; 49); the problem in *La novela virtual* is that, after twenty years in the United States, the narrator no longer can define himself by the daily life of Mexico City, and yet neither does he fully identify with the kind of rootless existence he leads in the United States, one so clearly delineated both in his temporary position as summer instructor and in his final road trip memoirs. At the same time, and paradoxically, his life in Mexico is always already defined by his relation to U.S. culture, and his sense of Mexican-ness is traversed by the multiple American identities he carries with him like excess baggage:

> ... lo extraño es que yo soy más americano que la mayoría de los americanos / porque a pesar de vivir in México asimilé la cultura norteamericana ... / mírame a mi, soy un escritor mexicano pero en realidad soy múltiple, porque también soy francés, y norteamericano de Chicago, y de L.A., y de New York, y de New Mexico, y de Florida, y de Maine. 371-2 ... the strange thing is that I am more American than most Americans / because, despite living in Mexico, I assimilated the North-American culture... / look at me; I am a Mexican writer, but in reality I am many things because I am also French, and North American from Chicago, and from L.A., and from New York, and from New Mexico, and from Florida, and from Maine.

He is quintessentially Mexican—a certain kind of middle-class, U.S.-influenced Mexican like Carlos Fuentes, whom he cites approvingly. Like Fuentes, his life is defined by an expatriate, peripatetic existence that incorporates and includes the knowledge that he is more American than the natives whose culture he has assimilated and who will never see him as anything other than foreign.

The narrator's very short-lived affair with the woman he identifies only as "la muchacha del Ombligo Anillado" ("the girl with the pierced navel") involves his sexual awareness of her, her seduction of him, his belief that he has fallen deeply in love with her, and her calm and educated dismissal of her time with him as an enjoyable, purely sexual interlude that she has no interest in repeating. Like Nabokov's Lolita, Sainz's slightly older nymph "era a Seductora Nata" ("was a born seducer") and, as in the earlier novel, one of the titillating attractions of his relationship with her is precisely their age difference: "las grandes historias de seducción eran incestuosas y la de él era incestuosa porque esa chica podría ser su hija" ("the great stories about seduction were incestuous, and his was incestuous because this girl could be his daughter"; 29). It is impossible to tell, of course, what might be the imaginary perspective of this woman identified only as an erogenous body part; as in Nabokov's novel, the girl is less important than the combination of delicately lyric and crassly sexual effects that cohere around her image. Nabokovian also is the association of a search for a national identity with this incestuously inflected sexuality. Interestingly enough, the narrator of *La novela virtual* interrupts his meditations on his desperate love for the girl with a comment that makes these symbolic stakes transparent:

> amor **amor amor**
> te he estado esperando
> aislado en mi soledad
> me siento lleno de cicatrices
> ¿seré un país? ¿me habré vuelto México? (176-77)
> love **love love**
> I have been waiting for you
> isolated in my solitude
> I feel full of scars
> could I be a country? have I become Mexico?

Here, the narrator's project and his obsession with the girl flip dramatically into the re-evaluation of his national identity, as if, in a reversal of the Nabokovian project, a sexual affair with a young American girl opens up the renewed possibility of remaking himself as an archetypally Mexican author, as the narrative embodiment of Mexico itself. At the same time, and as Barthes has so eloquently noted, the narrator's repeated, almost hysterical insistence on his love for this girl points to some other masked need: "'I love you. I love you!' Welling up from the body, irrepressible, repeated, does not this whole paroxysm of love's declaration conceal some lack?" (112). In this virtual love affair, the site of such profound lack is immediately apparent. Despite the narrator's many and fervent protestations of his love for Ombligo Anillado, the narrative provides no access whatsoever to the beloved Other. She rarely speaks, and then only ventriloquized by the author's indirect discourse, and, naturally, she never becomes a full-fledged character. Thus, inevitably, his protestations of devotion fall into a curious void. Ombligo Anillado is nothing more than a dismembered and decorated body part overdetermined by the narrator's reading of authors like Freud, by his association of her most important (only!) feature with the impenetrably mysterious dream's navel and by his symbolic projection of her as the essence and the lack delimiting his sense of national identity.

This poetic identification is buttressed and given even greater complexity by the narrator's allusion to John Donne's famous Elegy 19, "To His Mistress Going to Bed" (1669). Tellingly, the author uses Donne's elegy twice in the course of this novel: once with reference to the failed affair with Ombligo Anillado: "su América encontrada, Terranova, reino sólo por él poblado" (117) and later with reference to the projected relationship with Camila: "Su Terranova / su América encontrada / su Macchu Pichu" (493). Nabokov called *Lolita* the record of his love affair with the English language (288), a text where a hyperconsciousness of style, structure, and imagery outweighs the notorious depiction of a character's "tepid lust" (284). Here too, in Sainz's novel, lust for a forbidden girl-woman charges the text with an erotics focused on love of language; by further extension, the eroticized text reconnects the author with his originary (navel) body, his native (Camila) tongue. Furthermore, through the narrator's own fudging of the virtuality of space, Ombligo gives him possession of his (U.S.) "America," Camila his "América" in the more expansive Latin-American usage of the term. The two women together, then, delimit the boundaries and fractures in the narrator's sense of his profound and divided Mexican/American self. Like Donne's and Nabokov's works, Sainz's novel—to use Nabokov's words—"has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss." At the same time, this aesthetic bliss is, in fact, tempered with another project, that of discovering the meta-autobiographical self as an immigrant identity. Nabokov continues: "I am trying to be an American writer and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy. On the

other hand, my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him" (286).

While his encounter with Ombligo Anillado brings the narrator to the dream's overdetermined navel in his literary meta-autobiographical self-analysis, his concurrent dialogue with Camila serves as a projected reconnection with a Mexico that, after his twenty years in the U.S., has become for him too hypertrophied and overanalyzed, too much a (meta-) literary representation. The author's first contact with Camila comes by way of a handwritten fan letter postmarked from Manzanillo. The narrator immediately goes to his computer, types in Camila's e-mail address, and sends her a long letter associatively detailing his list of historical, literary, and cinematographic Camilas in a kind of overeducated intellectual's substitute for a personal response. This initial letter sets the tone for the correspondence that follows: for Camila's own constant playing with name and identity, what the narrator later calls the "síndrome de Camila" (297), which finds its ideal precursor in Humbert Humbert's lyric/erotic spinning out of Lolita's name in the opening pages of Nabokov's novel, "Lolita, Lo, Lola, Dolly, Dolores...." A desultory exchange of e-mail between the two exiles gradually evolves into an intense obsession. While letters from the young woman start out as a kind of footnote to his day, by the end of the novel, the narrator confesses, "ahora no podía empezar el día sin leer algo de Camila / ¡encamílame, Camila!" ("I couldn't start the day now without reading something by Camila / camilate me, Camila!"; 398). And yet, of course, Camila too remains essentially a literary abstraction; the Mexico to which she provides access is as literary as the works by Fuentes (et al.) he quotes in his classroom: "Camila o aquello que representaba / Camila nunca estaba: siempre era pensada / quizás por eso lo seducía" ("Camila or that which she represented / Camila was never there: she was always thought of / perhaps that is why she seduced him"; 422), says the author at one point, an equivocal phrase he repeats toward the end of the novel: "su verdad era su necesidad de Camila / o aquello que Camila representaba" ("his truth was his need of Camila / or that which she represented"; 484).

"Camila," then, is less a person than an objective correlative for another constellation of desires and lacks, one that complements and supplements the lack described by the absent/abstract Ombligo Anillado. Her e-mail satisfies the author's need for connection with the Mexico that he imagines her representing and, at the same time, signals the futility of these attempts: "Camila era su punto de inflexión: un collado: nudo: foco: centro punto de fusión: de condensación: de ebullición esencia de sensibilidad y máquina deseante" ("Camila was his flection point: a hill: knot: focus: center point of fusion: of condensation: of boiling sensitivity essence and desiring machine"; 482). And yet, this center always escapes him, perhaps because, while Camila is the opposite of Ombligo Anillado, she is exactly that opposite; she is all language in contrast to Ombligo's nothing but body: "¿cómo podría haberse comunicado, digamos, con la muchacha del

Ombligo Anillado? si ella no hablaba (casi) nunca y no volvió a hablar más de comunicarse comunicarse, sólo comunicaba con Camila aunque con Camila eran sólo palabras" ("how could he have communicated, let's say, with the girl with the pierced navel? If she (almost) never spoke and he did not speak again about communicating communicating, only communicated with Camila although with Camila it was only words"; 428). The narrator, then, by spinning Camila's language and e-mail into his unwritten novel, shapes his life through reference to and in implicit comparison with hers. Her love of his language and his burgeoning love for the woman he imagines behind the computer screen intersect on the page of *La novela virtual*, infecting and reinfecting each other. While the exchange begins with the older man very much in control—displaying his intellectual credentials in the play of her name through history—by the end of the novel, the author is hurtling toward St. Louis in a fever of erotic imaginings. By that time the very essence of his language has been reforged, and he can no longer either speak or think without allusion to her. Nevertheless, the "Camila" that so shapes his experience remains beyond his reach:

> camileaba
> camilándose
> obnubilado por Camila
> pero cómo pensar en Camila si le faltaban sus imágenes. (474)
> he camileated'
> camileating
> clouded by Camila
> but how to think of Camila if he didn't have images of her.

This impasse cannot be resolved, and for very good reason. Despite all the play of autobiography and identities national and personal, this novel remains incalcitrant to recuperation by any such theoretical or thematic concerns. Instead, it stubbornly insists on its own provisional quality as a set of electronic impulses coded onto an electronic screen. In this manner, *La novela virtual* most clearly delineates its departure from and modernization of masterpieces like those of Donne and Nabokov; this is a novel shaped by the computer age and its hybrid English techno-speak.

Julio Ortega has commented that, in Sainz's work, the "inmersión popular tiene el poder de lo específico, de lo material y sensorial" ("popular immersion has the power of the specific, the material and sensorial"; 674). In this novel, the specific, the material, and the sensorial are given only through an insistent reminder of the virtual text's cybernetic nature; the sign itself has become a kind of hypertext, with all its codings and links left intact. The narrator confesses that he is "rey y esclavo de su IBM" ("king and slave of his IBM"; 355), and much of his fragmentary text consists of the record of his daily interactions with the e-

world: e-mail requests for letters of recommendation or support, administrative memos from program coordinators, lesson plans, notations about having responded to e-mails or transcriptions of isolated bits from letters, "cordialmente / delete / su nuevo lector y amigo / delete / atentamente / backspace backspace backspace" ("cordially / delete / your new reader and friend / delete / sincerely / backspace backspace backspace"; 55).

Camila, too, is an able traveler in cyberspace. Her e-mail messages to the writer detail the daily boredom of her tasks as a library employee in her U.S. college, as well as constantly making flattering reminders of her obsession with him: "A veces durante el trabajo pienso en Ud.... Si estoy buscando cosas en OCAT pongo su nombre y aparecen sus libros.... Si estoy en INNOVAQ hago lo mismo.... Si estoy en OCLC recuerdo algún título de sus libros y lo busco y que lo tienen en WU y digo ..." (199). She chats to him about e-mail from her mother and from friends in various parts of the world, consults with him about the idea of getting a memory upgrade for her computer, records her delight at the message "YOU HAVE MAIL"—especially when the mail is from her beloved author—and gives him a running commentary on her boss's addiction to e-sex.

In his discussion of *A la salud de la serpiente*, Sainz tells us that one of his impulses in writing it was "el deseo de convertirme, yo mismo, en escritura" ("the desire to turn myself into writing"; 157); in *La novela virtual*, he takes this transformation a step further, making it the pervasive structuring metaphor of the work, as well as its thematic ground: "ya no existía como novelista ni como personaje / sino como una terminal de redes de computadores múltiples ... / y una desk top en su otra mente: o una think pad / un displaywriter system" ("I did not exist any longer as a novelist or a character / but as a terminal of multiple computer networks... / and a desktop on his other mind: or a Thinkpad / a displaywriter system"; 189-90). Similarly, this reminder of the computer-generated nature of characters is true not only in the obvious case of Camila but also in his meditation on Ombligo Anillado's body, which is flattened out into the two dimensions of word processing text: "entre esas líneas luminosas se filtraba un cuerpo todavía adolescente" ("between those luminous lines filtered a still adolescent body"; 63). This insistence on characters that in "reality" (to use Nabokov's quotation marks) come into existence first as text on a screen before solidifying as hard copy on the readers' printed version pervades the novel. While other markers of contemporary existence appear throughout the text—as when the author meditates on the moments of "instant replay" (477) in his life or complains that key moments remain "fuera de tiempo, sin rewind" ("out of time, without rewind"; 489), it is the computer that serves as the most essential and pervasive referent, both as metaphorical system and as *leitmotif*.

One final example serves to demonstrate this point: the narrator marks his distraction from one of Camila's e-mails by repetition of a key phrase: "entonces volvió la vista a la pantalla de la computadora / Please RETURN for more ..."

("he then set his sight on the computer screen / Please RETURN for more..."; 134). This English phrase is repeated several times during the rest of the chapter, as the narrator's attention wanders back and forth from the e-mail letter (eg, 140, 141). On the one hand, the phrase reminds us that the novel's action, such as it is, occurs on and around the computer screen, and that pressing a button on the keyboard will link the reader to additional text possibilities in the virtual world. On the other hand, the phrase also has an internal narrative function: the author within the text indeed "returns" again and again for more of Camila's continuing story. The "return" key, however, does more. It speaks directly to the reader about the essentially circular and closed nature of this narrative world in which messages fly back and forth in virtual space to appear, as in this narrative, on a single laptop located in a transient scholar's dingy summer lodgings. By extension, it serves as a reminder that we are all readers, and writers, engaged in solipsistic mono-dialogues (meta-autobiographies) on the computer screen and in the virtual world.

In a recent article on the globalization of social movements, Gayatri Spivak registers a shift in attention parallel to the narrative project explored in these pages. She suggests that the intersection of cultural studies' interest in computer databases figures a new phenomenon: "we have moved so far in degree that we have moved in kind. From the infinite care and passion of learning we have bypassed knowledge (which is obsolete now) into the telematic postmodern terrain of information command" (343). Gustavo Sainz explores and celebrates this move in kind as the latest development of a postmodern realist narrative: the computer savvy virtual identities of e-world exchanges. If, in the 1960s, he was amazing his readers with his attentiveness to the signs (sainz?) of our times, in *La novela virtual*'s meta-autobiography, he introduces us to an aggressively contemporary Hypertext Sainz.

Cornell University

NOTES

[1] These observations follow directly upon Sainz's 1995 commentary about the reflexive structure of *A la salud de la serpiente*. Sainz writes: "es evidente que mis libros son realistas, incómodamente realistas, o realistas en el más posmoderno sentido del término" ("it is evident that my books are realist, uncomfortably realist, or realist in the postmodern sense of the term"). He divides realist narrators into two large categories: (1) "unos que creen que pueden ordenar la desordenada realidad de acuerdo a valores burgueses muy bien establecidos desde la época de Balzac" ("those who believe they can organize the disorganized reality according to bourgeois values well established since Balzac's time"; 2) and "escritores que no intentan mostrar la realidad, o que aceptan como la única realidad posible la de la lengua" ("writers who do not try to show reality, or accept that of language as the only possible reality"). Finally, "El tema del joven escritor en busca de su identidad es ... una terra común ... en toda mi producción" ("The theme of the young writer in search of his identity is ... a common ground ... in all my work"; "Búsqueda" 157-8, 159, 160).

[2] The standard for this rapidly evolving sub-genre was set by the crossover success of Nan McCarthy's trilogy of e-novels, *Chat*, *Connect* and *Crash* from their self-published format (1995) and online distribution through McCarthy's Rainwater Press Web site (www.rainwater.com) to mainstream publication in the Simon and Schuster Pocketbook imprint (October 1998). The novels follow the e-mail communications of Max and Beverly. The series ends when Max, who is flying across country to meet Beverly, dies in a plane crash (*Crash* 117).

[3] Note also the sequence of prepositions in the subtitle of Sainz's novel that echoes Donne's line exactly, though in a different order ("atrás, arriba, adelante, debajo y entre" ["behind, above, forward, below, and between"]):

License my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned. (55)

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