

*Confabulation, Collaboration, and Chromolithography:
Memory as Construct in the Works of Felipe Alfau*

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the work of Felipe Alfau, a Spanish-American writer who wrote two novels and a collection of children's stories in the first half of the twentieth century which were the focus of a short-lived critical enthusiasm in the early 1990s. It recognizes the important contribution made by those early critics, but also tries to make a case for a reading of Alfau at variance with the kinds of readings his work has previously received. Specifically, it points at structural and thematic complexities in Alfau's narratives that have been attributed to his experimentation with self-reflexivity and metafiction, experimentation which many have claimed anticipates the work of writers of the second half of the century. My dissertation shows how other unrelated concerns may have led him to boldly reconsider the parameters of narrative form. I contend that for Alfau confabulation, collaboration, and art are generators of narratives that present the self as an insoluble mystery. What I intend to demonstrate is that Alfau views these sources as problematic repositories that fail to capture and preserve human experience, yet simultaneously believes that they are the only means at our disposal for doing so. His narratives communicate the frustrations such a paradox entails, but also celebrate human faith in those means in spite of such frustrations.

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Introduction: Rediscovering and Rereading Felipe Alfau

For a brief moment in the early 90s, Felipe Alfau enjoyed a certain revival. Dalkey Archive republished his first novel, *Locos* (1928, pub. 1936), in 1988, and published his second one, *Chromos* (completed in 1948 but never published), in 1990. That same year, *Chromos* was shortlisted for the National Book Award. Three years later, Alfau was the focus of the second half of an issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (the first half was devoted to the work of Georges Perec). Ilan Stavans, who translated and published Alfau's poems (1992), wrote the introduction to the split-monograph, in which he concludes by enthusiastically stating: "For too long a member of the Library of Forgotten Masters, [Alfau] is finally thundering out of the shadow" ("Curriculum Vitae" 145).

Although the *RCF* issue devoted to Alfau is a veritable boon for anyone interested in finding out more about such an obscure writer, it does not really seek to provide a sustained critical assessment of his work. Instead, various literary figures offer personal reminiscences describing their on-and-off friendship with Alfau (Chandler Brossard), or the controversy surrounding the 1990 National Book Award nominations (Paul West). Some friends recall Alfau's eccentric personality, his unconventional views on race, politics, and nationality, his one-week sojourn in Spain in 1958 (Tolby Talbot), or his reclusive last years spent in complete obscurity (Doris Shapiro). Charles Simmons contributes excerpts of his first novel, *Powdered Eggs*, explaining that one of its characters, Jose Llano, was inspired by Alfau. There is a fascinating interview conducted when Alfau was 90 and living in a retirement home in New York. The longest section reprints excerpts from *Old Tales from Spain*, an out of print collection

of children's stories Alfau wrote and published in 1929. In fact, of the seventeen contributions, only four offer detailed commentary on a specific aspect of Alfau's novels.

Fortunately, Stavans stayed interested in Alfau's work following its rediscovery. In 2001, he reprinted his introduction to Alfau's poems in *Art and Anger: Essays on Politics and the Imagination*. In 2011, he included a chapter from Alfau's *Locos* in his *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, and he has apparently been working on a biography of the writer since 1989. But Alfau's "thundering out" does not seem to have had a lasting effect on a larger readership. True, some important work has been done. Carlos Ramos published an article in *Revista Hispánica Moderna* (2003) in which he compares *Locos* to Benjamin Jarnes's *Locura y muerte de nadie* (1929), while Susan Elizabeth Sweeney built on observations made in her contribution to the 1993 issue of *RCF* to discuss Alfau's exploration of self-murder as an existential and metaphysical act in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (1999, pp. 254-6). For her part, Regina Galasso, interested in the fate of Spanish-born authors writing in America in English, recently argued that *Chromos* inverts "the relationship between translator and author" (47), ultimately celebrating the creative powers of translating techniques. Other than these, however, the rare allusions to his work have been confined to a cameo appearance in Enrique Vila-Matas's novel *Bartleby and Co*, as an example of the "writer of the no," that is the writer who decides to cut short his career by simply ceasing to write, and two online articles: one published in the *Barcelona Review*, in which Jill Adams claims that Alfau was "far ahead of his time, using techniques that would later be 'discovered' by such postmodernists as John Barth, Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon" (par. 1) and an article posted on the blog *As It Ought to Be*, in which Thomas Baughman claims that Alfau was "far ahead of his time, employing authorial techniques that would later be 'discovered' by

Postmodernists such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover” (par.1).

As the eerily similar passages above suggest, the consensus among those who have read Alfau is that he was a precursor to writers more famous than he is. Sweeney claims that, along with Borges, Nabokov, and Flann O’Brien, Alfau invented postmodernism (“Aliens, Aliases” 207), adding that he completed *Locos* in 1928, when the other three had yet to publish their innovative works. For his part, Stavans contends that John Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon (*Sentimental Songs* vii), as well as Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino, and Georges Perec (“Curriculum Vita” 143), all share an unknown precursor in Alfau. Mary McCarthy likewise detects affinities with the aforementioned authors, but also with Umberto Eco (“afterword” 206), citing the “giddy mutability” of Alfau’s characters as his most distinctive feature, while more recently, Steven Moore cites *Locos* alongside Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew* and Desmon MacNamara’s *Book of Intrusions* as examples of fiction in which characters “take on a life of their own when their creator neglects them” (213). And, indeed, Alfau draws attention to this aspect of his work in the prologue of *Locos*, describing the attitude of his characters as one of “anarchic collaboration” (xi).

Unfortunately, the focus on that one exclusive feature may have contributed to the short-life of critical interest in Alfau’s work for an obvious reason: contending that his claim to greatness lies in his having originated forms of playful metafiction that subsequent writers would be credited with “discovering” does not take into account that metafiction has been around for a while. As Robert Alter points out in *Partial Magic: the Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (1975), playful self-reflexivity was already a staple of Renaissance drama, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, as

well as the eighteenth-century (Sterne, Diderot) and nineteenth-century (Thackeray, Melville) novels. Some of Alfau's early commentators anticipated such a problem. For instance, Carmen Martín Gaité dismisses the groundbreaking claim by citing an obvious influence: "Nobody that has read Unamuno's novelas, and particularly *Niebla* (Mist), would believe this narrative strategy to be original" (177). Gaité does not quote specific passages from the work, or discuss Unamuno's presence in *Locos* beyond that one remark, but consider the following, in which the protagonist, Augusto Perez, discusses the art of the novel with his friend Victor, and says this about characters: "Yes, you may begin by thinking that you are guiding them [characters], with your own hand, but you may easily end in the conviction that it is they who are guiding you. It often happens that an author ends by being the plaything of his own inventions" (165). ["Si, que empezarás creyendo que los llevas tú, de tu mano, y es fácil que acabes convenciéndote de que son ellos los que te llevan. Es muy frecuente que un autor acabe por ser juguete de sus ficciones"] (200). Thus Unamuno defines the author as the "plaything" of his characters in 1914, while Alfau merely reformulates the idea into "helpless instrument" some 14 years later.¹

Elsewhere Franco Zangrilli shows how the more experimental plays of Luigi Pirandello may have had a lasting influence on Alfau's own work, before going on to argue that Alfau lifted the mistaken-identity suicide theme in "Identity" from Pirandello's novel *The Late Mattia Pascal*. Another source may be just as relevant here: Max Beerbohm's *Seven Men*. Indeed, the opening story in Beerbohm's collection, "Enoch Soames," can be read as an earlier, more

¹ One could even argue that the metafictional interaction between character and author is much cleverer in *Niebla*. Here, there are strong suggestions that Unamuno's protagonist (Unamuno prefers the term "agonist") turns out to be one of Victor's characters, so that one of the author's secondary characters ends up stealing his protagonist. What is more, the preantepenultimate chapter is made up of a conversation between Augusto and Unamuno, in which the character seeks advice from his creator in order to decide whether or not he should end his life, recalling the very same situation in Alfau's "Identity."

elaborate version of Alfau's story. In it, Beerbohm writes of his friendship with a struggling writer who never receives recognition for his work, and who pleads with Beerbohm to "try to make them [subsequent generations] know that I did exist" (36). The case recalls that of Fulano in "Identity" pleading with Alfau along similar lines, but the more striking parallel is that Soames, thanks to a pact with the devil, is granted a fleeting vision of life a hundred years hence, when he discovers that he exists only as a character in the Beerbohm story we are currently reading, while all the literary endeavours of the real person have been completely forgotten, as though the actual Soames never existed. Likewise Fulano, who has lived life completely unknown and unnoticed, realizes he will only achieve permanence as a character in Alfau's tale.

I mention the examples of Unamuno, Pirandello, and Beerbohm to show that if this kind of interaction between different aspects of identity – personhood and characterization – or different facets of the writing process – a writer and his creations – became a recognizable feature of fiction written after Alfau, it was nevertheless a feature of much writing that preceded him as well, so that his claim to literary greatness, if he is ever to be exhumed from Stavans's "Library of Forgotten Masters," should rely on more than this supposedly innovative aspect of his prose. After all, Nabokov, Pynchon, Barth, Calvino and company all enjoy a broad readership today, both general and professional, for precisely that reason; critical assessment has moved beyond the metafiction angle to focus on other aspects of their work. Alfau's work still awaits such a move.

Another problem is that in all this musing about possible links, no substantial commentary has been offered to explain exactly how Alfau anticipates such an impressive list of literary figures. Instead, a few sentences point to a shared fondness for experimental playfulness

and self-reference, “prose-fiction’s self-conscious attention to its own form” (McLaughlin, xxii-iii), with the effect that “the fiction’s extreme artificiality makes the events in it as distant from mundane reality as possible” (Stavans *Norton Anthology* 506). Alfau’s fiction, then, like that of his unsuspecting heirs, is quintessentially anti-representational and metafictional, as it tends to poke fingers in the seams of its own conventions, artificialities, and limitations.

To assert that an author has one unified project may have synthesising benefits, but the downside is a reductive and homogenizing effect on our reception of his work. Moreover, to go a step further and assert that a large group of writers share the same project can be seen as a disservice to the richness and complexity of their work’s specificity. A parallel reading of Alfau’s novels with the novels of his supposed imitators certainly reveals similarities, but major differences as well. Think of (say) Borges, Calvino, and Pynchon: the fact that their works share common features does not lessen the importance of their obvious differences, much too conspicuous to ignore. All this makes seeing Alfau as their precursor that much more complicated, unless, of course, we reduce the latter’s innovative contribution to amusing diegetic exchanges between himself and his characters. But here again, problems arise. If metafiction can serve as a label to describe certain elements of a protean body of work such as (say) Nabokov’s, it remains inadequate to explain other elements of that fiction. *Lolita* may in fact be the story of Nabokov’s love affair with either the romantic novel or the English language, or *Pale Fire* a novel parodying the whole enterprise of textual interpretation and literary scholarship, but this has not prevented readers and critics from analysing and commenting on the human events narrated in them. If Alfau is to be the precursor of such a polyvalent writer, then, couldn’t aspects of his fiction (and the insubordination of his characters is certainly not its only innovative, or interesting, feature) be attributable to a broader range of causes than a mere

anxiety about fiction's inadequacy vis-à-vis reality? Moreover, it is worth reminding ourselves that one of Alfau's most talked about features, namely the autonomy of his characters, is something Nabokov openly derided. When asked what he thought of a character taking hold of its author, this is what he replied: "I have never experienced this. What a preposterous experience! Writers who have had it must be very minor or insane. No, the design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him" (*Strong Opinions* 69). Such a radically different perspective on the nature of the creative process should be taken into account; otherwise, we risk sacrificing everything that is unique and fascinating about these authors' works, all for the sake of making sweeping generalisations that neatly bundle them together.

The purpose of the present work, then, is to review some of the other features that figure prominently in Alfau's work, in order to provide a prolegomenon for the sort of critical study he deserves. As a result, the following may seem to lack a unified claim about, or methodological approach to, Alfau's fiction. I am not reading him in the light of one major organizing idea, or attempting to detect a line of continuity operating throughout his entire oeuvre. Quite the opposite, actually, since I position myself against a series of critical readings that have persisted in singling out one aspect of interest in his fiction exclusively. In the process, I survey a series of unrelated issues that include a peculiar neurological disorder, metaphysical detective fiction, the Romantic writer Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, and the Spanish picaresque novel, in order to assess how they may have informed Alfau's works, and how they can help us understand more clearly features of that work which have previously been attributed to ground-breaking self-reflexive experimentation. Despite such caveats, I find that these issues manage to point to an underlying concern in Alfau's oeuvre after all, namely his desire to dramatize how our interactions with the

world as well as our concepts of self change when we begin to fear that our memories are spurious.

In my readings, I sometimes indulge in speculative biographical criticism that suggests memories of Alfau's life in Spain resurface in his fiction, all written many years later when he lived in New York. My intention is not to demonstrate with absolute certainty that a passage obliquely alludes to a personal experience, or that certain stories may have been inspired by tales he once heard, or read, as a child. Such contentions are mere speculations in regards to a writer of whom we know so little. What I hope to demonstrate in such instances is the ways in which moments of recollection are problematic for Alfau, a writer who so often draws our attention to the fact that he is himself uncertain whether his fiction consists in memories or imagination, whether the stories he narrates are his, or the inventions of others. In order to show how this common theme begins to emerge, let me first summarize the individual chapters that make up my dissertation.

A first chapter discusses confabulation in relation to *Locos* as a novel. I argue that the concept offers an alternative to calling on metafiction to explain the unruliness of the novel's characters and their fleeting sense of identity. The term designates a neurological condition in which patients develop narrative techniques to correct aspects of reality that do not happen to correspond with what has been previously assumed about them. I contend that, to a certain extent, Alfau is doing the same thing with regards to his own past in *Locos*. Because he is telling stories of people his narrator has known as a child in Toledo and Madrid in his youth, and cannot wholly reconstruct from memory alone complete episodes from his past, he confabulates, or makes up, missing information. The fact that Alfau mentions confabulation in both *Locos* (x) and

Chromos (20, 78), while one of the main characters in both novels is Dr José de los Rios, “one of the leading neurologists in the world” (9), leads me to believe Alfau was fully aware of the concept’s specialized meaning, and that, rather than merely experimenting with self-reflexivity to highlight the inadequacies of fiction vis-à-vis reality, he may have been probing the means by which memory, itself inadequate vis-à-vis the past, appeals to confabulation in order to fill in the gaps. Thus *Locos* is not exclusively about fiction distorting reality, but also about memory making up — or confabulating — the past.

In a second chapter I read *Locos* as a collection of short stories. Here, I follow Susan Elizabeth Sweeney in reading the stories as examples of metaphysical detective stories, a kind of narrative that frustrates the reader’s desire for closure by leaving most — if not all — of its riddles unsolved. These riddles have as much to do with problems of identity as they do with the conventional detective complications of thefts and murders (although *Locos* also contains its fair share of such complications as well). I build on Sweeney’s work by offering a detailed analysis of each story as different kinds of metaphysical fiction. Whereas she focuses on self-reflexivity in relation to the problem of staged suicide, my readings address a series of difficulties that include self-transformation, hallucinations, lunacy, contingent causality, visitations of iniquity, processes of decomposition and symbiosis, and mistaken identities. In doing so, I reveal how identity is threatened by all sorts of problems that are unrelated to self-reflexivity in *Locos*, and ultimately abstain from proposing solutions that the texts would inevitably confound.

I should add that, in chapter one, much that is unique at the individual level of each story is sacrificed for the sake of producing a cohesive assessment of the book as a whole. Chapter two thus pays attention to details that the earlier chapter necessarily overlooks. Readers who are not

familiar with *Locos* may consequently choose to read the second chapter before the first, taking advantage of the sort of freedom Alfau offers his readers when he encourages them to choose the order in which they read the stories in *Locos*.

The third chapter has two parts. The first is a brief account of the ten tales that make up *Old Tales from Spain*. A section that eschews literary analysis may seem like an unwelcome intruder in a doctoral dissertation, but two considerations justify its presence here. Firstly, there is not a single piece of critical writing devoted to this text to date. When dealing with a text as spectacularly non-canonical as this, some sort of informative summary seems obligatory. Secondly, the task of finding an actual copy of *Old Tales from Spain* poses something of a challenge, the book having never been re-published, so that most readers will only have access to the handful of tales (three out of ten, to be exact) included in the *RCF* issue devoted to Alfau.

In the following section, I try to determine the degree to which *Old Tales from Spain* is beholden to the past, as its title implies. This collection of children's tales was written a year after *Locos*, but published seven years before the earlier work found a publisher. Although it is not as innovative, or for that matter as interesting, as Alfau's other works, it still showcases an impressive interpolated narrative structure that evokes the *Leyendas* of the nineteenth-century Spanish writer, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. In the work of both authors, the author/narrator and characters take turns telling a story, relieving one another whenever their narrative powers are exhausted. I contend that this is an original feature of the tales and legends, which otherwise rely on an old way of telling. The distinctive traits of the old way become evident as I discuss Bécquer and Alfau's possible debt to a shared oral tradition, and then demonstrate how their

aetiological tales founded on myth set them apart from another writer who produced modern versions of such tales founded on adaptation, Rudyard Kipling.

A fourth chapter reads *Chromos* in the light of the Spanish picaresque tradition. I argue that *Chromos* modernizes that tradition on two levels. First, Alfau's friend and character Garcia updates it by writing a picaresque narrative that shifts the focus from the central *picaro* rogue to his victims. In doing so, he exposes the suffering not usually described in a tradition that tends to sensationalize the criminal behaviour and exploits of its rogue protagonist. Secondly, Alfau modernizes that tradition by shifting the focus even more radically from an episodic narrative of action towards an episodic narrative of literary readings and friendly dialogues. In the urban setting of a modern metropolis, anyone foolish enough to try to keep the old tradition alive is doomed to degenerate into a vagrant derelict leading a subhuman existence. This de-glorified version of the rogue's life spurs Alfau to discard romantic clichés of adventurous *picaros*, caught performing all kinds of supposedly hilarious and sensational mischief, in favour of a more contemporary, de-literalized conception of roguery, a life shaped by random encounters and dedicated to the leisurely pursuit of an impassioned exchange over the artistic merits of a friend's work-in-progress, or philosophical disputations on the nature of identity, the universe, time, music, and art. Just as the traditional rogue episodically endures one hardship after another, Alfau's modern rogue episodically partakes in one heated exchange after another, always seeking out improved self-knowledge (and sometimes achieving it), and more often than not carousing in the meanwhile. As will be shown, this reformulated picaresque narrative seeks to substantiate – with mixed results – both Don Pedro's cosmological theory of a universe in which all action is rendered meaningless because it is illusory, and his aesthetic theory of art as exclusive preserver of ephemeral experiences.

Finally, a brief conclusion hints at what subsequent studies of Alfau might concentrate on. I review some of the ideas I intend to pursue, discuss his book of poems *Sentimental Songs* (*la poesia cursi*), and suggest ways in which future work on Alfau might build on what I have begun. We are all profoundly indebted to an earlier generation of Alfau enthusiasts for having recovered, re-published, and reintegrated his works. Yet for thirty years, other critics have been reluctant to develop the initial assessment delivered by those enthusiasts. This may have given rise to a false impression that beyond Alfau's radical experimentation with previous modes and forms of narrative, he did little else, while the fascination he exerted on his first critics was simply overblown. Such a possibility would explain why interest in Alfau's work seems to have quickly petered out in the following years. I hope that by focusing on features of his three major prose pieces that have not been discussed previously, I will have helped rekindle interest in works which continue to elicit new responses and inarticulate admiration every time I reread them.

I want to make clear that what I have said should not be read as a deprecation of the importance of what has previously been written about Alfau. After all, a dozen or so Alfauists can't all be wrong, and when I say I hope to deepen and develop their original assessment, I am not suggesting that what they have themselves detected as the most intriguing, salient feature of *Locos* and *Chromos* is not worth looking into. In fact, I myself draw attention to metafictional aspects of his fiction in two chapters. In my chapter on *Old Tales from Spain*, I look at how Alfau conceives of the relationship between narrator and character as an interchangeable one. Had I stopped here, one might well wonder how I proposed to improve on all those early critics. What I try to add is a substantial comparative reading with an earlier writer who does something similar, in order to contextualise an interesting idea (Alfau is experimenting with narrative

structures) that others have already formulated, and provide a kind of genealogy of a writer who anticipated that experimentation (Bécquer) and a writer who innovated even more (Kipling). What I hope to show, however, is that the idea that narrator and character are interchangeable does not have to give priority to metafictional concerns (although it certainly can), but can also express the author's belief that we must sometimes stand back and take another person's account into consideration, before drawing our own conclusions about stories we tell ourselves and each other in real life.

Elsewhere, in my chapter on *Chromos*, my main contention is also an appeal to metafiction. It turns on the fact that one of Alfau's characters, namely Garcia, is dissatisfied with the inaccurate depiction of a rogue's experience in the Spanish picaresque tradition, and consequently rewrites an updated version of that tradition in order to point out those inaccuracies. As others have done before me, then, I am arguing that Garcia, via the puppet figure of his author, took issue with literature's shortcomings vis-à-vis reality. But there is a corrective element in *Chromos* as well as a critical one, since he rewrites that tradition not just to highlight its shortcomings, but also to suggest how it can become more apt at achieving a higher level of verisimilitude than its predecessors. In her book-length study of metafiction, Patricia Waugh writes that although "[m]etafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them" (18). I would go further and say that metafiction lays bare the truth claims of realism, but does not abandon them. Otherwise the metafictionist's truth claim concerning fiction's inherent mendacity would itself constitute a lie, since it is formulated within the confines of a literary text. After pointing out how previous fiction misleads, or falls short of representing reality, the author of metafiction proposes new, more effective ways of approaching verisimilitude, until the next one comes along and improves on that work. This fascination with

the obstacles that make verisimilitude so problematic, and the creative stratagems designed to overcome them, are what Alfau seems particularly interested in addressing in his fiction.

I can now return to my claim — earlier left unsubstantiated — that three unrelated issues contribute to the development of an overarching concern in *Locos*, *Old Tales from Spain*, and *Chromos*. Confabulation distorts his narrator and characters' memories in *Locos* as they struggle to organize in meaningful, cohesive narratives past personal experiences that nevertheless tear at the seams in anachronistic revolt, rather than “anarchic collaboration.” When confabulation ceases to pose a problem at the level of the stories as stories, enough mystery and bewilderment still remain to make it impossible to say with absolute certainty what is happening in them exactly. For its part, *Old Tales from Spain* is a collection of tales that can't decide whether it tells old or new stories, and in which narrators must constantly supplement their own version of what happened with other people's versions. Finally in *Chromos*, a way of recording and representing the past lives of ordinary characters is shown to have depended on generic conventions and clichés that sensationalize, and thus distort, those lives. Instead, Alfau suggests that we should content ourselves with representing the un-plotted disorder of life as it occurs in the random design of casual exchanges. Alfau attempts this with his Americaniard community, but only manages to do so by remembering — or imagining — those exchanges while staring at chromos which depict gaudy, melodramatic Spanish scenes, and are illumined only by the short-lived and oscillating light of a match. In the end, he cannot say whether any of those exchanges ever really took place, or were hallucinations caused by the “deceptive depth of a reverie” (22). In all of

these cases, then, it seems as though the characters in his fiction are chained to a writing desk located inside Plato's cavern, struggling with shadows rather than substance.²

In many ways, this tricky relation between substance and shadow is mediated, or rather complicated, by stereotypical representations of Spain, the kind of *cursi*, or corny art which Alfau as narrator criticises his friend Garcia for making such heavy use of in his various literary endeavours. While Alfau stares at the gaudy chromolithographs that inspire the whole narrative of *Chromos*, a scene illumined solely by the flickering light of a match, an ominous analogy compares his own "vigilant shadow" to a cobra keeping watch "behind and above" him (21). Ideas of poison and mesmerism, of a man not in full possession of his faculties, predominate in this passage. As cockroaches escape from an old dusty book Alfau has dropped, as they run for cover over and under the chromos "desecrated by fly-stains," their shadows merge with the stereotypical images to produce a spectacle which Alfau is no longer certain to have remembered or imagined. Those cockroaches, the faint, flickering light, the desecrated stereotypes, the morbid acuteness — but also confusion — of the senses which must surely have been induced by such extreme circumstances, all contribute to diminish Alfau's capacity to evaluate what has occurred.

The past experiences of an Americaniard community which he claims to be recalling in *Chromos*, and which itself comprises many memories and narratives of life in Spain, is the freak child of a brain fever that is itself induced by *cursi* chromos. Fulano, a character who shares telepathic communication with Alfau, experiences the same frustrations when he realizes that all his memories of Seville, a town he has never visited, derive from a series of chromos that depict

² Antonio Candau has already used Plato's allegory to describe the opening scene in *Chromos* (225).

stereotypical Sevillian scenes (313). And the same applies to *Locos*, a novel replete with distorting stereotypes of a melodramatic nature: one character tries to enact a bullfight in order to seduce a twelve-year old maid in his hotel room, and although he succeeds, his performance also manages to expose “how little he really knew about Spain” (91); another character’s life is made up of incidents that have a “secondhand romantic flavour belonging to a past, readymade age” (101), while his wife is so used to inflecting her memories through the distorting mirror of melodrama, that when a friend asks her to play something from *La forza del destino*, a work which contains its fair share of Spanish clichés, her memories are so confused that she plays “something else by some other composer” unawares (131). Truly, if this is the effect *cursi* art has on our mind’s ability to retain and preserve past experiences in a genuine form, Alfau is justified in condemning Garcia’s fondness for such forms of expression.

Stereotypes don’t really figure in Alfau’s *Old Tales from Spain*. But then again, neither does the figure of the author as narrator. In the two novels in which that figure is an important character, he contends with literary traditions, cultural clichés, and a neurological disorder that prevent him from narrating in a faithful manner precisely what the title of his work promises, old tales from his native Spain. My attempts to trace the pedigree of the tales in his children’s book do not prove altogether conclusive, and what is more, they point at narrators in dire need of assistance on numerous occasions. Whether these tales are meant to stand as a counterproposition to his other works, as a record of genuine memories, possibly stories his mother told him as a child and which survive in pristine shape even today, while so many other memories have atrophied into confabulatory delusions and literary and chromolithographic stereotypes, is perhaps too speculative a proposition to consider at length. What we should remember is that children’s fiction is itself characterized by generic conventions that may

faithfully reproduce the mythic experience a child conceives of the world and himself, but certainly not a faithful reproduction of his factual experience. Added to this, the constant shift between old and new forms of telling, which I argue can be found in *Old Tales from Spain*, links it to *Locos* and *Chromos* as works that make one basic proposition about memory: all acts of memory are themselves inextricably bound up in temporal processes, and the effects of those processes progressively erode the sense of identity we derive from recollection, whether it be recollection of a past collective self represented in literature, or recollection of a past private self captured in fleeting personal memories.

This link between memory and a tenuous sense of self is explored most fully in my opening chapter and its focus on confabulation as a constructive kind of remembering. Granted, the idea that memory as a constructive force tends to distort the past has had currency for some time now,³ yet Alfau frames that idea in terms that call for a conceptual reframing of that idea in literary criticism. Think of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, which also showcases the distorting effect of memory as revision, or as a "no-fault spectral creation" (Rampton 99) which allows Quentin and Shreve to access details of other characters' lives that would otherwise have remained inaccessible. About what we cannot speak (because we have no way of knowing), it is silly to remain silent, since we can always surmise and invent. In Faulkner's novel, revisions are intentionally conducted for the sake of shedding light on aspects of other people's past that would otherwise remain obscure. An attempt to organize and make sense of past experience is

³Although an exhaustive list here would take up much space, we can single out Frederick Bartlett's *Remembering* (1932) as one of the earliest studies promoting a view of memory as reconstructive, rather than reproductive; Elizabeth Loftus applies that idea in criminology in order to examine how reconstructive memory contributes to cases of false eyewitness accounts (1979); Daniel Schacter has been conducting research on the reconstructive nature of memory for the past twenty-five years, especially in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (1995); finally, Eric Kandel reviews his lifelong study of the connection between neural circuitry and memory formation in *In Search of Memory* (2006).

also at work in *Locos*, but because Alfau draws our attention to confabulation, we can try to find out how the distortions manifest themselves as unconscious revisions rather than intentional ones. What is interesting in Alfau's case is that these revisions cross over into the personal past of a narrator who inhabits the historical Spain of Alfau's childhood, and they allow him to arrange confused tidbits of memory into a series of coherent and coalesced narratives in *Locos*, yet they do so only as long as we view them as self-contained units. Alfau certainly encourages us to do so in his prologue, even inviting us to read those units in whatsoever order we choose. Yet the opening two words of that prologue are "this...novel," implying some sense of organic unity, and read as a whole, the coherent narratives begin to jar with each other, while the overall timeline becomes confused and riddled with inconsistencies.

I do not carry over the concept of confabulation in my chapters on *Old Tales from Spain* and *Chromos*. Still, its association of memory and ambiguous narratives lies at the heart of my discussions there as well. In the former work, the narrator constructs tales which he claims are rooted in the past, and hence in his memories, yet he is unable to complete the telling of those tales without the help of others. In the latter, narratives that assert their ability to record the actions of an individual life presented as a series of chronological episodes are shown to distort what they claim to preserve. Alfau's recollections in *Chromos* discard chronology, for the substance of memory is no longer viewed as static images of pure, *castizo* identities, but as shadows cast by the light of a match, as transient as the drunken disquisitions of friends orating on the motionless, timeless nature of the universe.

In Alfau's work, we find ourselves forced to contemplate a world of teasing contradictions and fundamental paradox. On the one hand, memory fails to provide a solid sense

of identity, constructing insoluble mysteries, while art merely flashes confusion in its distorting mirror. This view should fill us with as much despair as Don Pedro's nihilistic cosmology creates in Garcia and Alfau in *Chromos*. Yet in that cosmology both friends find the means of overcoming that despair. Garcia generates his Sandoval saga out of his mother's memories while Alfau conjures up 320 pages of fascinating narrative with the assistance of chromos depicting Spaniard stereotypes, a pictorial version of his friend's *cursi* prose. Clearly, art good and bad has the power to inspire as well as delude, to store up our memories and to doom them to the uneasy limbo of confabulation. Alfau may have turned into a surly curmudgeon near the end of his life, dismissing all art as useless, and especially his own fiction as "unreadable" in an interview he gave at the age of 90, but this is only one view. His fiction makes as good a case for trusting the fascinating young tales and not the grumpy old teller.

***Locos* as a Confabulatory Novel**

“This...novel is written in short stories with the purpose of facilitating the task of the reader” (ix). Thus begins *Locos*. The ellipsis suggests Alfau hesitates about what to call his book, and the fact that it comprises both a novel and short stories indicates he still hasn’t fully made up his mind even after having completed it. In fact, uncertainty pervades the prologue, and Alfau even grants us complete liberty to read the chapters in the order we prefer. The decision to arrange the stories in their present order is the fruit of a collaboration between Alfau and his friend, Dr. José de los Rios, and the “blame for committing this novel” lies on the shoulders of his characters which, Alfau tells us, are “far more responsible than myself” (*ibid.*).

Much of the remaining prologue expands on the idea of unruly characters, “rebellious spirits” who refuse to enact their author’s orders, characters with “passing and unsteady” personalities who “often steal into persons I [Alfau] have met” (x). Yet the opposite is probably closer to the truth, that persons that narrator has met in real life might be stealing into his characters, since he admits that *Locos* is populated by people he met one day in the Café de los Locos in Toledo. This is the premise which the following chapter will explore, that remembering real life people as though they were characters, rather than writing literary characters that aspire to attain real life, is what can give an author writing, and people recalling their past, such a hard time. But whatever we ultimately decide about this question, it might be best to begin by explaining just how those characters fail to follow orders in *Locos*.

We could start with Lunarito, identified only as a laughing waitress in “Identity.” In “A Character,” she is Maria Luisa Baez, “one-fourth daughter, one-fourth wife, one-fourth maid and

one-fourth secretary to Don Laureano” (37). In “Spring,” she is Garcia’s loyal maid, yet in “The Necrophil,” she transforms into “that girl who lives with [Garcia] and is killing him” (149). And she’s only just begun. In “The Wallet,” she is a murder victim, knifed by a jealous rival in a love triangle involving a man of dubious character named Gaston Bejarano, but in “Chinelato” she is the murderer in a case of mistaken identity, and is eventually cleared of any wrongdoing after she marries a respectable young man who has read of the incident in the papers, and who goes by the name of...Gaston Bejarano. Gaston himself is an intriguing figure. He considers cheating on his wife Carmen after falling madly in love with Lunarito in “A Character.” The odd thing is that in “Fingerprints,” he is not Carmen’s husband, but her brother.

But why settle for this odd couple when we could just as easily have chosen the eerie case of Doña Micaela Valverde, the protagonist of “The Necrophil”? She has the uncanny ability to undergo experiences similar or even identical to those that other characters undergo elsewhere. For instance, she reels down the corridor of her house “like a living corpse,” exclaiming “I have been dead...I have been dead!” (151), while in “A Character,” Carmen walks down a corridor “like a corpse” exclaiming “You have killed me...You have killed me” (35). On another occasion, Valverde is bedridden and receives a visit from her physician. The scene is described in the following terms: “Dr. de los Rios circled around her and threw the curtains aside. The room was illuminated by the yellow light of the late afternoon” (154). In “A Romance of Dogs,” the bedridden patient is Garcia, while Alfau takes over for de los Rios who has just left the room: “I [Alfau] threw the curtain aside and a stream of light inundated the room” (200). In Alfau’s strange fictional workplace, characters seem to be punching in with each other’s timecards.

But perhaps the best place to start is with Felipe Alfau himself - not Alfau as writer, but Alfau as character/narrator within his own novel. From story to story, he seems to forget having ever met or discussed characters previously met and discussed elsewhere. Even more bizarre, people he claims to have known for years in some stories, including childhood classmates, inexplicably become late adulthood acquaintances in others. He introduces Garcia as “a certain individual” in the book’s fourth story, “The Beggar,” yet he has previously introduced him as a childhood friend in the prologue. And again when he discusses the suicide of Padre Inocencio in “A Character,” he notes the following: “they say that there a priest from a nearby convent fell in love with her [Carmen] and later committed suicide” (30). But as “A Romance of Dogs” later reveals, Alfau is himself present at the time of the incident, and is a personal acquaintance of Inocencio, so that the “they say” — implying Alfau is unaware of what transpired — as well as the indefinite “a priest” — implying Alfau is unaware of the priest’s identity — become supererogatory, if not altogether misleading.

As to his friendship with de los Rios, it is impossible to determine at what moment in his life it began, although he mentions the occasion in at least three stories. “A Romance of Dogs” suggests the two meet anywhere between one and two years prior to Garcia’s death. In the course of *that* meeting, de los Rios explains that “toward the end of winter,” he had hospitalized Garcia after the latter had run out of his house screaming “Spring is coming...! Spring is coming...!” *Locos* does not disclose how long Garcia has been in the asylum when the meeting occurs (hence the uncertainty as to whether it occurs one or two years prior to Garcia’s death), but it does tell us that he spends a year there. He is visited by Alfau immediately upon his release, once again in May (195), and finally three times the following March, the penultimate visit occurring on the

“twenty-first” and thus coinciding with the spring equinox (196).¹ Garcia dies one week after that visit, with Alfau at his bedside. Thus Alfau’s story establishes an approximate timeline of Garcia’s final years, enabling us to estimate roughly the period of time Alfau and de los Rios have known each other when events in the story unfold. Yet in “The Necrophil,” Alfau states that he had met de los Rios “sometime before” the incidents he is about to narrate in *that* story. The problem is that these incidents occur over a period of years - the story covers a series of Doña Micaela’s annual death spells - during which we are told Garcia is still alive (148). How could the two friends have met here on an occasion that precedes their meeting in the novel’s last story? Granted that “sometime before” might signify anything from a few months to a number of years, the fact remains that even if the allusion to Garcia in “The Necrophil” is made a few days before he dies (and this is hinted at when Micaela refers to his sickly state and imminent death), the meetings in both these stories are still irreconcilable when we consider the meeting as described in a third story, “Chinelato.” In “The Necrophil,” de los Rios informs Alfau that one of Doña Micaela’s previous husbands, Cendreras, left her during one of her death spells, and died “not long after, the victim of a gruesome murder” (154). That the fact comes as news to Alfau here is puzzling; he has himself met Cendreras, in the company of de los Rios, at an evening given by Tia Mariquita in “Chinelato” (131), and as he explains in the last pages of that story, some years follow that evening before he learns of the murder in the papers, not from his friend (140). To make matters worse, the paper also reveals that a certain Lunarito is found guilty of the crime “following a long and notorious trial,” and is sent to a place of correction, where a

¹ Between 1902 and 1916 (the years Alfau lived in Spain), the spring equinox fell on the 21st of March every year except 1912 and 1916. A problem here is that Garcia is said to be some 30 years old during the events in “A Romance of Dogs” (190), so that if we choose to identify the author and his narrator here (seeing as the narrator identifies himself as one of Garcia’s classmates in the story, under the name of Felipe Alfau (167)), the action would have to occur sometime after 1932; *i.e.*, after the novel was written in 1928.

generous young man offers to marry and redeem her (140-1). How then, if Alfau is already a friend of de los Rios some years before the murder occurs in “Chinelato” and in “The Necrophil,” can he only meet de los Rios in “A Romance of Dogs” when Lunarito is a maid in Garcia’s employment, neither a murderer nor a wife? The obvious answer is that the murder has not yet occurred here, and that this story, which concludes the novel, actually antedates its two predecessors chronologically. The problem with that explanation is that Lunarito is also alluded to as Garcia’s maid in “The Necrophil” (149), the same story that mentions the murder as already having taken place (154). Either she commits the crime before she enters Garcia’s service, or after. To say that both scenarios are correct defies the law of non-contradiction.

Admittedly, the above observations collated and discussed in such a break-neck, hodgepodge manner run the risk of confusing more people than they convince. That being said, the purpose of making them is to show that such confusion permeates *Locos*. Such chronological impossibilities also raise questions about Alfau’s prose. Are they indicative of slipshod skills, or of a careless writer entangled in the intricacies of his own intertextual stories? Why does Alfau have such a hard time making his fiction coalesce? In order to address these concerns, and to defend Alfau against such accusations, much has been made of the novel’s foregrounding of the difficult relation existing between an author of fiction and the characters he creates. Unwieldy characters refusing to collaborate with authorial intention and the ensuing free-for-all of shifting roles and chronological insouciance certainly help explain some of what is going on, and Alfau himself repeatedly draws attention to this in his prologue and a few humorous footnotes appended throughout the stories. But an altogether different – and just as plausible – explanation lies in his admission that, as the author of *Locos*, he suffers from a kind of “giddy mutability” not

unlike the one Mary McCarthy ascribes to his characters in her afterword to the novel. Here is Alfau's comment:

I can find no connection with that individual and official author of this book who once while in the mad, fantastic city of Toledo wandered one day with his friend, Dr. José de los Rios, into the Café de los Locos (the Café of the Crazy) where he witnessed things and saw people which in his playful imagination took the shape of this book [...] and who in a persistent confabulation with the characters found in that Toledo café, is the abstract, but nevertheless real, perpetrator of this experiment (x).

We should pause and consider what exactly complicates Alfau's attempt to connect with himself here.

Alfau was born in either Barcelona or Guernica in 1902, immigrated to America in 1916, and returned to Spain only once in his life (for one week), thirty years after having completed *Locos*.² Thus, the autobiographical individual with whom he can find no connection in the above passage turns out to be two persons. Obviously, it refers to that early period of his life before his arrival in America, to a young Madrileño who for reasons undisclosed ends up spending an afternoon in a café in Toledo with his friend de los Rios. Hence, Alfau encounters difficulties connecting with his past self. Obviously, the biographical fallacy here transfers the real life Alfau's departure from Spain unto his narrator, a move that the text itself does not warrant (New York is never mentioned in *Locos*). If we want to play it safer, we still have to contend with the fact that the individual with whom the narrator finds no connection as "the official author of this

² Ilan Stavans, who provides a brief biographical sketch of Alfau in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.1 (1993): 143-45, has at times stated that Alfau was born in Guernica, at others in Barcelona.

book” is distanced by time rather than space. This suggests that Alfau’s present “I” cannot connect with a much more recent version of himself, namely the author who has recently completed a novel for which he is currently writing a prologue. This present person reflects not only on the substance of an older version of himself as a Madrileño, but also on a version of himself who was recently occupied with the task of remembering details of an incident from that Madrileño’s life. Not only is the idea of a younger Alfau considered a past version of himself, but so is the idea of Alfau distanced only by a short time lapse (the time that lapses between the completion of the novel and the beginning of the prologue). Thus a person remembering a previous self is himself a thing of the past once the act of remembering is completed, and upon reflecting on that past act of reminiscence, he has no way of connecting with it, no way of assessing whether that act has been successful or not. The present Alfau does not recognize the Alfau who recently remembered a third, less recent Alfau. Remembering is an act of alienation.

Why should any of this matter? Although Alfau acknowledges that he is the “perpetrator of the experiment” that is *Locos*, he adds that he has done so in a “persistent confabulation” with the patrons of a café he frequented only once as a young adolescent. If taken seriously, then, Alfau is suggesting that *Locos* is a transposition in fiction of a personal experience, and that his characters are inspired by real life people he happens to have met on that one occasion.³ Since *Locos* was written in 1928, at least twelve years separate that chance meeting and the turning of that meeting into a fully developed narrative. Because twelve years is a long time for someone trying to recall the particulars of a chance meeting, one might reasonably suspect Alfau of having

³ What complicates matters here is that Alfau also notices discarded literary characters in the cafe, characters that have fallen out of fashion, and are awaiting for writers of the current generation to recast them in brand new narratives. Among these unemployed protagonists, the only one identified by name is Don Quixote.

ultimately drawn from other sources to flesh out a cast of characters sustained over 200 pages of narrative.⁴ A more plausible explanation is that he also drew from acquaintances, friends, and family left behind in Spain and, indeed, most of the characters he sees and describes in the café in “Identity” are later described as friends from childhood in subsequent chapters, while people introduced as friends in the prologue (e.g., Garcia, de los Rios), either become characters in the café (Garcia), remain friends in the café (de los Rios), or switch back and forth in the following chapters (both Garcia and de los Rios). If we want to explain the author’s chronological discrepancies, then, we can suggest that Alfau is faced with a failing memory and that this poses as great a problem as the metafictional subversion of his characters. To which acquaintances do certain souvenirs pertain? Who was related to whom? Who married whom and who remained celibate? Who killed whom or who was murdered by whom? Amidst the struggle to answer these questions, what Alfau says in *Locos* is that bringing past memories to life for a person trying to remember is as frustrating as bringing characters to life for an author trying to write. In fact the enterprise poses such serious challenges that he admits finding it impossible to connect not only with the past, but also with past instances of remembering.

Such a reading seems tenuous when we consider that Alfau himself does not make memory problems a leitmotif throughout *Locos*. True, the difficulties of remembering preoccupy Garcia in the first section of “A Romance of Dogs,” but the section comprises a manuscript

⁴ Were we to read *Locos* as a roman à clef, we might do worse than to propose that the young Alfau must have spent a year of his life in an asylum (the period of time Garcia is institutionalized), under the care of de los Rios, and that the supporting characters are all patients he met during his time there. Indeed, most of the characters in his novel are introduced as patients of Dr. Rios, including Garcia, Micaela Valverde, and Gaston Bejarano, while even a minor character like Tia Mariquita is seen “talking with Dr. de los Rios about her nerves” (133). Consider also the obvious name of the café in which Alfau claims he meets these characters.

Garcia purportedly wrote, not Alfau.⁵ Elsewhere, Tia Mariquita laments being reduced to “nothing but a shadow of her former self” (130) as she unsuccessfully attempts to recall arias sung during her “famous” soirées given many years ago. Other than in these pages, however, the issue is never directly addressed in *Locos*. Still, one encouraging clue lies in Alfau’s use of the expression “persistent confabulation” to describe his process of literary creation and his relationship with his characters/friends/one-time Locos patrons. What exactly is confabulation?

Here is where the complications arise, since the term has a completely different meaning in Spanish than it does in English (Don Pedro will draw our attention to such complications in the prologue of *Chromos*). In Alfau’s mother tongue, *confabulación* means conspiracy, and to confabulate is to intrigue against another; and in *Chromos*, Alfau definitely has the Spanish meaning in mind when he uses the term on two separate occasions. In the latter novel, Don Pedro asks Alfau to visit an old haunt of theirs as a source of inspiration for writing a book about Americaniards, or “Spaniards in the Americas” (13). Once inside, Alfau discovers an old calendar chromos, an early twentieth-century print technique that produced colourful images, more often than not of a gaudy, melodramatic nature. The chromos in this particular calendar are in rather shabby condition, and all represent various Spaniard stereotypes: “chromos that had once been brilliantly bursting with color and drama, but were now faded and desecrated by fly stains; chromos in disrepute” (21). The twist revealed only a few pages before the novel ends is that Alfau’s 300 pages of narrative are generated by those chromos in the few brief seconds (the lifespan of a match he lights, to be exact) he observes them. Yet before he can even enter the building, Don Pedro proposes to act as a lookout, a remark which offends Alfau on the grounds

⁵ Carmen Martin Gaité suggests that Garcia is a mouthpiece for Alfau in this instance, and notes the “autobiographical value” of the manuscript: “To be sure, the one giving us data about his own past is obviously not the literary creature Garcia but Alfau himself” (176).

of its “insulting confabulatory implication” (20), as though they were scheming together, violating the sanctity of the past with their cheap chromolithographic-induced memories. On another occasion, Alfau reflects that his friend Garcia suspects “a confabulation of incredulity” (78) among people to whom he reads his literary works-in-progress: people are conspiring against him by disbelieving his claim that he is chronicling events that really took place, events that he is remembering in narrative form. In both these cases, then, memory attracts conspiracy. This, at least, is how Alfau seems to be using confabulation in these rather cryptic passages. But how does confabulation fare in *Locos*?

In English, confabulation has nothing to do with conspiracy. Rather, it describes a neurological disorder affecting the memory. And much points to the fact that Alfau was thinking of the English meaning when writing of a persistent confabulation in *Locos*, since one of the central characters of *Locos* and *Chromos*, de los Rios, is described in the latter work as “one of the leading neurologists in the world” (9). Moreover, neurological research proposes subtypes of confabulation to explain a variety of unusual psychological behaviour that all find their way into *Locos* in one form or another: Fregoli’s syndrome, or the belief that others can change their physical appearance (Hirstein and Ramachandran 113); apotemnophilia, or the belief that one’s limbs are “overpresent or intrusive,” not one’s own (124-5); prosopagnosia, or the inability to recognize faces of people long known to us (127); Cotard’s syndrome, or the belief that one is dead (Coltheart and Turner 175); intermetamorphosis, or the belief that people change into other people (Hirstein *Brain* 117). Of the above, the most obvious parallel exists between Micaela Valverde’s death spells in “The Necrophil” and Cotard’s syndrome, while prosopagnosia seems to affect just about every character in *Locos* - and especially Alfau - who are unable to recognize family members or spouses carried over from one story to another. In a bit of a stretch, one might

even argue that apotemnophilia makes an appearance in “Fingerprints,” since Don Gil Bejarano and his brother-in-law initially refuse to believe that his fingerprints are really his, while Alfau himself might be said to suffer from intermetamorphosis when he claims that his characters steal in and out of other characters in his stories.

No previous critic has discussed the potential importance of neurological confabulation in Alfau’s fiction. In fact, given that so much twentieth-century fiction ponders the nature of memory, I would argue that the concept has the potential of providing a new interpretative paradigm for future critical endeavours. But since confabulation, like most terms with a long semantic history, has been used to designate a variety of phenomena that have little in common, and since I wish to speak of it in relation to a specific type of memory impairment, a brief review of some of the term’s uses follows, after which I will specify how I intend to apply those uses to a reading of Alfau’s fiction.⁶

In 1928, the year *Locos* was written, Pierre Janet defined confabulation as « la fabulation ajoutée à un récit pour le mettre en ordre » [fabulation added to a narrative for the sake of organizing it] (461).⁷ These fabulations are unconscious « supercheries » [deceptions], which a person conjures whenever he experiences « des lacunes dans sa mémoire » [memory gaps] (460). Let’s imagine that an individual is asked if he has recently met an acquaintance who died some

⁶ For a full review of the semantic history of confabulation, see German Berrios’s “Confabulations: a Conceptual History” (1998). Throughout that history, confabulation has been applied to symptoms which have little bearing on the present discussion. For example, patients who suffer from Korsakoff’s syndrome experience severe memory loss as a result of chronic alcoholism, and have been diagnosed as suffering from confabulatory amnesia. That excessive drinking causes blackout periods is something a writer like Charles Bukowski addresses directly in his fiction, but in *Locos* confabulation is of another order.

⁷ The translations from French and Spanish in this chapter are mine.

years ago. If he is prone to confabulate, he fails to recall that the acquaintance is dead, and that a recent meeting is out of the question, because he is exclusively preoccupied by the fact that he is expected to generate an ordered narrative about that meeting. He assumes that he should be able to retrieve in the register of his memory what the other person has asked of him, yet he cannot. But rather than ask why he cannot do so (there is a very simple answer, only he fails to ask the question), he seeks to overcome his inability to do so. Hence he confabulates, or adds fabulation to an initially probable narrative (A met with B) to give it order (A met with B under the following circumstances), ultimately yielding an impossible narrative (B is deceased and therefore cannot have met with A under any circumstances whatsoever).

If confabulation is a form of deception that produces impossible narratives, aren't we simply dealing with an unreliable narrator when it comes into play in literary works, and do we really need to appeal to a rare and puzzling neurological condition to define what legions of literary critics have already discussed quite successfully without ever having felt the need to mention it previously? To such objections I would answer that confabulation helps us distinguish between two kinds of unreliable narrators. Because the deception involved in confabulation is an unconscious deception, we cannot really accuse, or suspect, the person confabulating of deliberately misleading others. True, German E. Berrios more recently defined confabulation as "inaccurate or false narratives purporting to convey information about a world or self which are issued by subjects intent on 'covering up' for a putative memory deficit" (225). Yet the word "intent" here is a bit misleading. Unlike the liar, the person confabulating does not intentionally produce false claims in order to distort a truth he is aware of and seeks to conceal. Instead, he intentionally produces a narrative that, although it does not correspond with what others know to be true, allows him to make sense of a given situation. Thus, while the mythomaniac

intentionally misleads others for the sake of furthering his own ends, the confabulator misleads primarily himself, and does so unwittingly. Ultimately, confabulation constitutes a kind of cognitive impairment which sometimes – but not always – follows a stroke and manifests itself through various symptoms of misidentification, or of filling in memory gaps with fabricated narratives.

An approach to confabulation of which I do want to make use in my discussion of *Locos*, and which moreover bears fruit for discussions of other literary works as well, distinguishes neutral confabulation, *i.e.* the kind that arises out of cognitive and perceptual defects, either congenital or the product of lesions in a specific brain area, and which is consequently non-delusional, from personal confabulation, *i.e.* the kind that arises out of a neurologically sound subject's misconstruing the significance of past and present experiences, and which is consequently delusional (Feinberg 93-4). Addressing confabulation in literature, we are at a disadvantage in relation to neurologists who have recourse to magneto- and electroencephalographic imagery to detect, in the human brain, the evidence and physical source of a pathological symptom. We cannot examine the cerebral configuration of literary protagonists, since we cannot force them to undergo CAT scans in their fictional universe. Since the overwhelming majority of them do not come supplied with neurological evidence of their problems, it is useless to speculate on neutral confabulations, and wise to limit ourselves to attempts at detecting instances of personal confabulations. Yet this is a fitting compromise that actually increases the concept's usefulness as a paradigm for literary criticism, since personal confabulations, unlike neutral confabulations, are not confined to clinical cases. Lauren French, Maryanne Garry, and Elizabeth Loftus argue that they can affect anybody engaged in the act of remembering, since memory is constructive in nature, and works less as a passive register in

which past experiences are stored than as a continuous reviser of these experiences each time they are revisited. Thus “virtually everyone is susceptible to memory distortion and confabulation” (60). So what initially appears to constitute an impairment of memory affecting a few turns out to manifest itself universally.

There is a simple reason that can explain why we are all given, from time to time, to instances of personal confabulations: they have practical value for individuals given to reflect on the significance of their experiences. Remember that personal confabulations involve narratives that attempt to reconcile discrepancies between a given present situation and assumptions made in regards to an unclear past. According to Jane Crisp, it does not matter that those narratives produce inaccurate versions, or revisions, of what is and what was; what matters is that they are easily recognisable as narratives, and that persons confabulating them are able to weave “out of fragments drawn indiscriminately from real, fictional, and fantasy sources,” stories about their past histories that “reinforce a threatened sense of identity” (138). Along similar lines, Thalia Wheatley qualifies certain revising features of the human brain as “everyday confabulations” that help us understand and even survive ordinary experiences by making sense of the physical world which we interact with. For Wheatley, confabulation finally consists in “compromised information” as an adaptive feature (205; 219).

Because their practical value allows us to view the sometimes disjointed experiences of life as meaningful narrative, these kinds of confabulations can be said to privilege meaning over accuracy. It is this aspect of confabulation in *Locos* that I wish to discuss, not its pathological distortion of past memories, but its sometimes inaccurate organization of experience into shape and meaning. In Alfau’s novel, each story presents self-contained meaning, coherent and

cohesive on its own, but when read alongside other stories, accuracy — or at least consistency — begins to suffer. Events no longer follow a consistent chronological order, and Alfau's text, when taken as a whole, displays the sort of "disturbance of time sense" that Berrios identifies as a staple of confabulation (231). As a result, the various narratives don't add up, and fall prey to a kind of "anarchic collaboration" which Alfau attributes or transfers to his characters' unruliness, claiming that their habit of stepping out of character arises out of their "strong desire to become real beings." Thus, he tells us, his characters "often steal into persons I have met and assume the most extraordinary attitudes according to what they think true life is" (x-xi). This is helpful; however, I believe confabulation poses a much more serious threat to Alfau's ostensible lack of authorial control, and is the cause of as many disturbances and inaccuracies as are caused by the unruly characters.

We should now return to the actual text and identify inaccuracies - beyond the mere character inconsistencies mentioned at the start of this chapter - which we can cross-reference against what we know to be true in the extra-textual world. After all, contending that the timeline in *Locos* is off because characters don't play their roles consistently probably isn't going to convince many readers that this offers unmistakable proof that the narrator is confabulating episodes culled from past personal experiences. If Carmen is a wife in one story, a sister in another, Alfau might simply have been playing around with the idea of fixed, conventional roles, and we can't conclude on that basis alone that his narrator was unable to remember who the real Carmen was, if ever there was a real Carmen in the Madrid of his youth to begin with. If we are going to make the case that Alfau's narrator is confabulating in *Locos*, we need to find independently verifiable anachronisms. Because we have no way of verifying if and when the actual persons who inspired the characters lived, or if they displayed the characteristics Alfau

attributes to them, we can't say for certain that claims made about them are wrong. But allusions to verifiable extra-textual data must measure up against what we know about that data. If they don't, then the author responsible for committing those anachronistic allusions while drawing attention to his confabulatory tendencies, can more easily be exposed in the act. Fortunately for my argument's sake, *Locos* does contain such extra-textual allusions and, what is more, Alfau gets most of them wrong.

At first glance, "The Wallet" does its best to prevent readers from identifying when events related in the story actually occurred. It opens by stating that a police convention in Madrid took place in "19—," the dash here functioning as a typographic convention of novel writing used to silence the date of an event or incident. Yet a little sleuthing reveals that an actual international police conference was held in Madrid in 1909 (Deflem 103). That said, determining exactly when that conference took place proves more challenging, if not altogether impossible. Mathieu Deflem, in *Policing World Society*, notes that "the lack of data on the organization and implications of these [the Madrid and other such conferences in the early 1900s] and other schemes is indicative of their ineffectiveness" (*ibid.*). Although in Alfau's novel, this ineffectiveness translates into a crime convention held in Madrid simultaneously with the police convention, the important thing to note in regards to the actual convention is the unavailability of precise details: no source specifies the exact dates it was held.⁸

⁸ Deflem's only source (Hagemann 1933) mentions the conference in passing, but fails to provide dates or any other specifics concerning it, while Peter Andreas, in *Policing the Globe: Criminalization and Crime Control in International Relations*, also supplies no additional information (85). In fact, Deflem has confessed in a personal email that he is beginning to have doubts as to whether the conference was ever held or not, seeing as no

Yet there is the chance that Alfau may have used the police convention as an intertextual device, allowing him to obliquely self-reference “Fingerprints,” since we know for certain that a few years earlier, Juan Vucetich had organized a similar conference in another Spanish-speaking country, in the city of Buenos Aires in 1905, and again a few years later in 1912, this time in the Portuguese-speaking city of Sao Paulo (Deflem 101-2). Thus it is not implausible that he also attended (and organized?) the one in Madrid.⁹ How would his presence at the Madrid convention point to “Fingerprints”? Vucetich is viewed by many as the man who designed “the world’s earliest criminal identification system classified according to fingerprints” (Cole 128). Henry T.F. Rhodes claims that “because the problem of personal identification was the ruling passion of his life, [Vucetich] had persistently advocated the fingerprinting of the entire Argentine population” (151), and he consequently dedicated many years of his life to promoting his ideas in various publications, including his magnum opus *Comparative Dactyloscopy* (1904). In fact, such was his enthusiasm that he believed his system would prove a “truly universal language” (Vucetich quoted in Cole 133). Ultimately, Vucetich’s system was adopted in Spain and other European countries “in the first decade of the 20th century” (*ibid.*). The triumph of his system at the expense of Alphonse Bertillon’s anthropometry, or system of body measurement, thus roughly coincides with the time (1909) of events in “The Wallet.”

documentation exists concerning it. One wonders whether the absence of information might not lie in the rather unlikely possibility that the first person to refer to the convention, *i.e.* Hagemann in 1933, may have done so after having read a manuscript of *Locos* (finished in 1928 but published only in 1936), in which the typological dashes conceal the actual date.

⁹ Vucetich embarked on a world tour and visited Europe in 1913 (Rhodes 146), but I have been unable to determine his whereabouts for the year of 1909.

Much of the above information points to the fact that Alfau had Vucetich in mind when he wrote “Fingerprints,” and that Don Esteban Bejarano y Ulloa, or his son Don Gil Bejarano y Roca, are stand-ins for Vucetich. For Don Esteban, the interest lies not primarily in crime-fighting, but in “the identification of a given individual or the unmistakable differentiation among several individuals” (57), recalling Vucetich’s ruling passion. His son Don Gil publishes various articles, including translations of his father’s monograph, and a magnum opus on which he “banked everything,” *Fingerprints*, recalling Vucetich’s scholarly publications and his own magnum opus. Don Gil, like Vucetich, militates for the compulsory fingerprinting of all citizens in official registries. And finally, in both cases, nationalistic tensions exist between different parties claiming precedence as the true originator of fingerprinting: “Patriotism and fingerprint mania” characterize Don Gil, obsessed with establishing his father’s reputation, while Vucetich had to face the quarrelsome attitude of Bertillon at their only face-to-face meeting (*v. Rhodes* 146-52), as well as contend with the American Harry Morse’s previous use of thumbprints to identify Chinese immigrants in the United States (*v. Cole* 121-27).

Notwithstanding these speculations, nothing in *Locos* can be used to substantiate the absolute identification of Vucetich with either character. One objection is that Don Esteban has been dead for some years when events in “The Wallet” take place, while his son is in jail, so that if Vucetich attends the conference in “Fingerprints,” which occurs some years after events in “The Wallet,” he must do so on his own behalf, not as the literary persona conceived by Alfau. But this is probably fitting, since both short stories examine the difficulties involved in identification (in one, an innocent man is falsely identified as a murderer, while in the other multiple mistaken identities involve multiple thieves and innocent bystanders). For our own part, although we have established that an actual convention of international police agencies

occurred in Madrid, sometime in 1909, and that it may have been attended by a historical figure which almost certainly provided the inspiration for one of Alfau's characters, we are still unable to determine exactly when it was held.

How do these dead ends pose a problem in terms of dating events described in the story, which is, after all, what I initially set out to accomplish? When Pepe and his uncle separate at the intersection of Peligros and Alcala streets, they do so in front of the Café Fornos, out of whose windows shines "a very faint glow coming from candlelight" (88). The very faint glow might more aptly allude to Alfau's memory here, since according to most accounts, the actual Café Fornos closed its doors in 1908, a year before events in the story unfold. But as was the case with the police convention, there is much uncertainty surrounding the café's history.

Hemingway describes it in *Death in the Afternoon* as follows: "Fornos is a café frequented only by people connected with the bullfights and by whores. There is smoke, hurrying of waiters, noise of glasses and you have the noisy privacy of a big café. [...] There are bullfighters at every table and for all tastes and all the other people in the café live off bullfighters in some way or another" (64-5). In actuality, the café was not primarily known for its bullfighting fans or its whores. José Blas Vega, in his exhaustive study *Los Cafés Cantantes de Madrid: 1846-1936*, reviews over 80 such cafés, and singles out Fornos as "el palacio de todo ellos" (275) [the palace of them all]. For Vega, Fornos was known as much for its Flamenco, its military and political banquets, as it was for its patrons' devotion to bullfighting. Moreover, Fornos is remembered today primarily as the gathering grounds of La Farmacia, a masonic-like group who assembled members of both the clergy and nobility. This tertulia – a literary or artistic clique that gathers regularly to discuss topics of shared interest, a kind of forerunner of

today's book clubs – was named the pharmacy “porque en ella había de todo, como en botica” [because you found a bit of everything in it, like a boutique] (31). Miriam B. Mandel, in *Hemingway's “Death in the Afternoon”: the Complete Annotations*, does note the “taurine flavour of this café,” but adds that it attracted a varied clientele: “politicians, journalists, student lovers of the bull, vagrants, the rich and the poor” (148). Regardless of what kinds of people it attracted, uncertainty prevails in regards to its actual dates of operation. Mandel gives 1880 as the year of opening, and c.1930 as the year of closure (147). Elsewhere, Blas Vega provides an inauguration date of July 21, 1870, then goes on to note that Velasco Zazo had identified José Fornos as the original owner, while he himself opts for Manuel Antonio Fornos. As to its closure, Vega suggests that after the suicide of one of the owner's sons on July 13, 1904, the café began a slow decline, and definitely closed its doors on August 26, 1908. The Café would open again sometime in May the following year, but under new ownership and a new name, El Gran Café. It would later undergo two more changes in ownership and name; once in 1918, when it became Fornos Palace, and later in 1928, when it became Café de Riesgo (Vega 290). Today it houses a Starbucks café, with a commemorative plaque noting its historical significance.

Although much of its factual history is subject to debate, one inarguable fact is that the candlelight coming from the café's window would have been an anachronism in 1909, when the actual café was closed according to all sources. Readers can argue that the police convention may have occurred after the café reopened, and that Alfau chose to designate the café after its old name instead of its new one, as some patrons must certainly have kept doing. Vega confirms this last possibility: “Asi que volvió a abrirse nuevamente en mayo de 1909, con el nombre de Gran Café, aunque eso si, siempre se le citaba, tanto la gente como la prensa, como Fornos” (287). [And it opened again in May of 1909, as Grand Café, yet for a long time both people and the

press referred to it as Fornos]. Both of these considerations make it perfectly legitimate for Alfau to designate the café with its old appellation after it has re-opened in the second half of 1909, but a few comments are in order.

First, we have to at least consider the possibility that the convention occurred while the café was closed, sometime between January and May of 1909, in which case Café de Fornos would not have been open at the time the events described occur, thus turning Alfau's allusion into a bona fide anachronism. True, he does not actually say that the café is open, only that a faint light shines from its window. That being said, he fails to mention that it may have been out of business on that occasion, or recently re-opened. This suggests he is either unaware of the fact, or fails to acknowledge it, dismissing its importance in relation to the rest of the narrative. This second possibility is unlikely, since he deems the café important enough to allude to it twice at the crucial moment when his two protagonists part (the whole story pivots around that separation). As to the first possibility, the reader may impatiently point out that it merely consists in an anachronism arising out of ignorance, the kind of time slips movie buffs like to point out (*e.g.*, the use in the movie *The Untouchables* of the dreary version of the Canadian flag that came into being in 1965). Do we really need to appeal to confabulation in order to explain what may merely be an unintended oversight? After all, Alfau wrote *Locos* in 1928, nineteen years after the events in "The Wallet" are supposed to have taken place, and twelve years since he had been in Spain, so that he may simply have forgotten about the café's closure during that brief period. This is probable, but ignorance is no guarantee against confabulation. As mentioned earlier, we confabulate not when we intentionally lie, but when what we say does not correspond with what is, when there is discrepancy between the narratives we generate and the state of affairs as they are. The intention and mechanisms behind confabulation might be of interest to neurologists,

linguists, or epistemologists; in our case, we are merely interested in detecting instances when it occurs. And because confabulation has a complex semantic history, let me reiterate that for the purposes of applying it to literary analysis, I define it as a misassumption made about a person, event, object, feeling, etc. associated with one's past: a case of mistaken identity incurred over time.

Mistaken identity is a running theme throughout *Locos*: friends, family, and the press mistake an escaped convict for Fulano in "Identity"; Gaston Bejarano mistakes the ghost of a woman deceased the previous evening for his doctor's maid in "A Character"; Garcia mistakes a five-centime coin for a twenty-five pesetas gold piece, but also a beggar for a confidence-man in "The Beggar"; Don Gil Bejarano y Roca is mistaken for a murderer in "Fingerprints"; Micaela Valverde is mistaken for a corpse in "The Necrophil"; finally, Garcia mistakes Spring for an omen in "A Romance of Dogs." "The Wallet" is no exception, containing no less than three instances when a character makes a false assumption about another person's identity; first when Gaston fails to recognize the man he is about to rob (his brother), and secondly when Pepe mistakes his uncle for the thief he had previously failed to identify (thirdly) as his brother. Of course these misassumptions fail to qualify as confabulations if they relate to misassumptions made by a person in regards to his or her present. However, the present is not the context in which these stories unfold when we read *Locos* as a narrator's attempt to recollect past incidents. After all, the narrator appears as a character in five of the eight stories in *Locos*. But even in stories in which he does not appear to be directly involved, misidentifications occur under such telling circumstances that they almost beg readers to take a closer look, suggesting ways in which they may be tied to him after all. And what happens when readers follow those hunches?

Let's resume our close-reading of "The Wallet" and its teasing reference to *Fornos*; couldn't this potentially anachronistic reference conceal more pregnant, personal significance for Alfau?

Pepe catches a glimpse of the thief running away in the light coming from the Café: "Without a minute's hesitation he sprang back and saw by the dim light that came from Fornos the figure of a man disappearing in the darkness" (89). Moments later, however, he sees a man he believes to be that same thief "faintly outlined against the glow of a match" (*ibid.*). The allusion to a match is telling here, not only because the whole of *Chromos* will subsequently be narrated during the glow of a single match, but because Alfau confesses in a footnote that he is the one responsible for having lit the match here as well. This is his explanation for doing so:

As a matter of fact, I lighted the match to illuminate the scene momentarily and get my bearings. When I began this story I did not foresee the inconvenience of such complete darkness and that it would be extremely difficult to make my characters move properly without being able to see even the paper in front of me. However, my match went out too soon for me to ascertain much, but not for Pepe Bejarano to take action, and now everything is dark again and the characters will have to be left to their own resources, meanwhile waiting until tomorrow brings the consequences to light. (89)

The author's light, lit for his own clarity's sake, proceeds to mislead his character and causes him to make a serious mistake. When an author's extradiegetic action impacts the diegetic world of his characters, we might want to praise the innovative metafictional playfulness. But note that Alfau lights his match in order to see the paper on which he is writing his story. Since the city-wide blackout affects the Madrid of the story in 1909, not the New York of the writer in 1928, Alfau identifies himself in this footnote as a character living in the past rather than an

author living in the present (New York does not seem to have suffered a city-wide blackout in 1928, as it was to in 1977). Thus he is a diegetic component of the story, also affected by the blackout, and proves to be directly implicated in the events by providing the light that illuminates the criminal's escape on at least one of the two occasions in which a source of light determines the course of events in the story. But what if Alfau also provides the source of light on the other occasion, the candlelight in Café Fornos? The story's allusion to Raquel Meller will help us elucidate this mystery.

This allusion comprises another historical anachronism (a definite one this time), and thus a second confabulation on Alfau's part. The circumstances under which it occurs are as follows. The morning following the double thefts, as Pepe returns to meet his uncle and worries about the wager he has lost and how he will pay it, he comes across a young girl selling violets in the streets. When he asks her name, she answers "Raquel Meller" (93). Two things are possible here: either this is the real Raquel Meller before she rose to international fame, or a young street vendor jokingly alluding to the famous singer because of her profession (Meller's most famous song, "La violetera," featured a young girl selling violets). This seems like the more likely option of the two, since Pepe is said to admire the wit of the reply, and one wonders what wit is displayed by merely answering with one's actual name when asked one's name. But an examination of Meller's career reveals that the young girl's remark taken as witty commentary on her own situation would have made little sense in 1909.

Born in 1888 in Tarazona, Meller is — much like Carmen in *Locos* — destined to become a novice when her parents leave for Barcelona in 1892 and place her in the care of her religious aunt, Maria del Carmen, the Sister Superior of the convent in which her niece will

receive her religious education. But Meller's fiery character disinclines her to a cloistered life, a fact attested by her biographer Javier Barreiro who recounts the occasion when Meller is reprimanded for having tied a knot in a Franciscan's beard while the latter hears her confession (29). Shortly thereafter, she leaves the convent, joins her parents in Barcelona, and begins working in an embroidery workshop until the end of 1907 or beginning of 1908 (30). There, she begins to sing and, overheard by passers-by, is sometimes offered two pesetas for her performances. Over the following twenty years, her singing will attract growing interest, eventually leading to international tours. But what was she doing in 1909, when she is supposed to have met Pepe? Iris M. Zavala says Meller "was active from 1907" (193), but does not specify on what stage or in what capacity, adding only that she would eventually become famous in Paris and "a champion of the modernists, who would transform her into a popular muse" (*ibid.*). Her first show in Spain occurs at *La Gran Pena* theatre, in Barcelona, on February 11, 1908, the year she adopts the stage name of Raquel Meller (Truccone 11). Joséph Maria Llado reports that Meller made a name for herself from 1907 to 1911 as a *cupletista*, a signer of *cuplés* — popular songs of a bawdy subject matter sung in variety shows (24). Barreiro goes further, and claims that Meller's act was outright *sicalipsis*, or pornographic, and that she sometimes defied attempts to censure the erotic provocation of her performances; on one particular occasion, she started for the stage wearing only a handkerchief precariously held to her chest, and when the shocked manager called to drop the curtain down, she rushed forward and let the handkerchief fall to the ground, to the great delight of the audience (34). Although Llado deemed those years unworthy in light of Meller's subsequent career (24-5), Alfau may beg to differ, since a footnote in "The Wallet" obliquely suggests he may have seen Meller perform at this early stage in her career. How so? One of the first *cuplés* ever composed, *La Pulga*, was a staple of Meller's repertoire

during those years (Barreiro 35), and Alfau alludes to it when it is revealed that Don Benito “abhorred candlelight and [...] was only able to tolerate it in la Danza de la Pulga” (80). Alfau then goes on to explain in a footnote that the number is usually performed in *cafés cantantes*:

The Dance of the Flea, a depraved performance usually given in second-rate theatre and *cafés cantantes*, in which a lady appears in a transparent nightgown with a candle in her hand and proceeds to look for an insidious flea which hides most cleverly, until it is found where every intelligent flea would hide. (80)

Is this another hint that Alfau is reminiscing, rather than narrating, here? The time of action is 1909. We know that Meller performed *La Pulga* regularly that year in Madrid. Alfau seems to be familiar with that performance, and tells us candlelight was an integral part of the performance. He also tells us that the only glow coming out of *Café Fornos* as Pepe and his uncle part ways was the glow of candlelight. Could Alfau be recalling his witnessing Meller perform the *cuplé* at *Fornos*, and is he alluding – in a very oblique manner – to his attending such a performance at the *Café de Fornos* as a seven year old boy (of course he would not have to be seven, if the reference to 1909 itself turns out to be a confabulation)? What if Alfau inserts a personal experience in his fiction here, and that one of his characters only witnesses the effects of that experience from outside, the faint light of a candle glowing from the windows of *Café Fornos*? Before we explore this idea, we should say a few more words about Meller’s subsequent career that will help make all these “what ifs” sound more convincing.

Meller gave her first show in Paris at the Olympia on August 31, 1919. She starred in two major film roles, *Violettes impériales* (1924, remade 1932) and *Carmen* (1926). Most famously, her interpretation of “La violetera,” written by zarzuela composer José Padilla Sanchez, pleased

Charlie Chaplin who, after seeing her perform the song in Paris in Fred Karno's theatre company, invited her to the set of *The Circus* on June 16, 1926 (Robinson 369). He would later attempt to get her to star in *City Lights*, but to no avail. He did however manage to lift the air from the song and use it as the main romantic theme in his film (Montero 121-5). A popular muse of the modernists indeed!

With this in mind, let's return to the young girl in *Locos*. We can now safely dismiss the first possibility, that she is Meller herself, since Meller was not a violet girl in 1909, having by then enjoyed enough success as a *cupletista* to abandon her job in a workshop. If she is not the real Meller then, she no doubt jokingly alludes to herself as such because she sells violets, since Meller was associated with "La violetera" more than with any other work. This would make perfect sense if "La violetera" had won popular renown by 1909, but this is not the case. In fact, not only does Meller's performance of the song postdate the novel's time frame, but the song itself was not even written until 1915. Padilla Sanchez reportedly composed it in Barcelona in 1915, but only published it two years later (Montero 54-6). Furthermore, its first performance at the time was not given by Meller, but another *cuplé* signer, Consuelo Portela, better known as La Chelito, who first performed it the year it was published (*ibid.*). A few years later, it became a popular staple of Parisian revues, and only in the early 20s did it become associated with Meller. How then can a young girl selling violets in the streets of Madrid in 1909 associate herself with a popular entertainer on the grounds that she (the entertainer) had popularized her trade in a sentimental song, when that depiction was still some ten years to come? One can argue that the girl was not alluding to Meller because of "La violetera," but because of her local fame in Madrid. That may be, but where would be the wit in that? Meller was known for her voice, and the violet girl here does not sing when Pepe addresses her. Clearly, the whole incident doesn't

hold up, unless we view it as another episode of confabulation. Alfau's narrator may be filling in a memory gap about an experience he once had (either with a flower girl in the streets of Madrid, or with Meller in a café) but cannot clearly remember.

An author is not held to higher standards of accountability than any other person engaged in the everyday act of reminiscing. It is more than likely that when asked what he did on his eighteenth birthday, a fifty-year-old man will mistakenly recall events from his sixteenth, twenty-third, or another birthday instead, or simply draw a blank. Ordinary human beings do not possess total recall, nor should the writer. One is naturally suspicious of biographies that reproduce complete conversations, as if a person could remember verbatim whole exchanges as they had unfolded. Again, there is nothing new here in claiming that memory is fallible, and we can all attest to the fact that the narratives we ourselves produce everyday assisted by memory often amount to little more than slipshod, unreliable accounts. What is surprising is that in Alfau's case, critics have focused exclusively on character unruliness rather than the author/narrator's fallible memory when trying to explicate these slipshod details. Moreover, the fact that no one has even noticed the anachronisms regarding Fornos and Meller suggests how carefully Alfau planted these sign posts of confabulation, and that more may be awaiting discovery. For example, what should we make of the fact that Micaela Valverde's first husband is named Joaquin, a sly allusion to the zarzuela composer Joaquin Valverde, who dies in Madrid in 1910 (a date which definitely does not agree with the timeline set up in "The Necrophil" when we consider that she has had two more husbands after Joaquin by the time that story begins)?

The name of a café, inaccurately alluded to in passing, and the association of a singer with a song she could not possibly have been associated with at the time the association is made,

may seem like trifles when one attempts to hang a whole argument on them. Yet we should recall that Alfau's novel is titled after a non-existent café (Café de los Locos is fictitious) in which he claims he met all his characters, or if we prefer, a café that has supposedly provided all his material. Add to this that in *Chromos*, much of the action takes place in the Café El Telescopio. There Alfau spends his time listening to his friend Garcia read excerpts from his work in progress, a sprawling family saga, and in the final pages of the novel, they and other "Americaniards" indulge in a tremendous drinking bout that ultimately ends when Alfau realizes he has mistaken the café's name all along: "Then I looked back at the café and saw for the first time its real name on the window glass, in chipped black and gold letters. It read: CAFÉ LA DEMOCRACIA" (344). If the same misidentification occurs in *Locos*, and if the real café he meets his characters in is not the fictitious Café de los Locos, but rather el Café Fornos, in which he may have seen the real-life character of Raquel Meller dance a rather provocative dance, then there also stands a chance that the novel's other characters were likewise inspired by real life acquaintances.

How do we explain the transposition of past friends into literary characters? One might conclude that through the effect of time, those real life acquaintances met in childhood in a country long abandoned have reified into literary characters, as Alfau's failing memory fictionalises real beings into the literature or confabulation of his fading personal narratives. Far from exposing the inadequacies of fiction to represent reality, then, Alfau's fiction exposes memory's inability to preserve impressions and experiences as they once presented themselves to him, his narrator, his characters, and even us. Like his character/friend Fulano who, overcome one night by the overwhelming history of Toledo, "knew he had been swallowed by this maelstrom of the past" (11), Alfau struggles to make sense of the figures of his past. Overcome

by their giddy mutability, he cannot avoid confusing them with one another, reversing irreversible processes, or anachronistically attributing traits to characters which previous chapters have shown us they did not possess. *Locos*, then, is about itself, not so much in the self-reflexive literary critical sense as in the human one, about a person misremembering the identity of past relations, and consequently confusing his own in the process. Its 200 pages of text consist in a protracted fit of paramnesia, or as Alfau has it, a “persistent confabulation.”

The retrospective glance that tallies our accounts, faintly lit by the dim light of memory, like candlelight illuminating a city cast in darkness by a power outage, misses the fleeting visions that fade in the darkness of receding time. And, like candlelight, it is an artificial source of illumination, intended to compensate for the absence of an all-preserving, all-illuminating light, but only managing to reveal the obscurity surrounding ever greater portions of our past. Don Benito is said to hate candlelight, fearing it as a “shimmering flame that hypnotized him [and] was as torturing as a string of needles boring through his eyes” (80). Like that flame, confabulation itself turns out to be a torturous tool with which to engage the past in *Locos* because it does not allow complete, accurate reconstruction of what once was.

We are given a most chilling example of this when Tia Mariquita, escorting Alfau and de los Rios through her entrance hall after one of her *soirées*, pauses before a console: “This is the grave of my child. There I keep all his little clothes and the things he used before he died and was cast into the eternal sea” (133). As the two friends leave her company, de los Rios explains that she has never had a son, and that this is merely “one of the stories she has worked out all by herself” (134). The son here is the fabulation (Janet’s supercherie/deception) which Mariquita conjures to fill the gap in her narrative about who she has been and what she has experienced.

The episode delivers an intriguing commentary on confabulation because her actual past is completely overridden by what she has confabulated about it, a deception no doubt devised over a painful period of time, since she must have collected the various counterfeit mementos which fill the console – “the little clothes and the things he used” – on a number of occasions over a number of years.

And such would appear to be the case in *Chromos*. After all, the man who tempts Alfau with confabulation in the latter novel, Don Pedro, is associated with Mephistopheles and Dracula (9). Thus confabulation not only fails to restore our actual past, but also constitutes something of a trespass, an affront against the sanctity of what has been, and may even have life-draining, vampyric effects. Yet what is remarkable in the latter novel is that in the time it takes for a match to burn out, Alfau confabulates such a rich vision of significant moments spent with friends in conversation and revel. What is more, the characters in *Chromos* are all carried over from *Locos* – even the ones who are said to have died in Spain in the earlier work, such as Garcia and Fulano. Whether these Spaniards left behind in 1916 ever made it across the Atlantic to become Americaniards does not matter. Alfau has not only preserved their memory, but has also extended it through the ever inventing, narrating power of confabulation. As to *Locos*, confabulation may produce a novelistic narrative that exposes its inconsistencies and time slips when the text is read as a whole, but we should keep in mind that Alfau also expects us to read his novel as a collection of short stories. In the following chapter, I do just this, in order to give a sense of how each story, in its own way, deals with the difficulties involved in identification.

***Locos* as Metaphysical Detective Stories**

In this chapter, I want to discuss *Locos* as a collection of short stories. The emphasis in the previous chapter on confabulation militated against a discussion of the stories as discrete entities or parts of a whole. Now I propose to take up the stories individually, and look at the thematic concerns – unrelated to confabulation – that underlie each one. Beyond the playful exchanges between author and characters, the stories are constructed as clever whodunits. In them, identities fluctuate not only from some desire to rebel against authorial control, but as a result of profound needs for transformation and discovery, hallucinations, inscrutable causality, mysterious visitations of iniquity, inevitable processes of decomposition and symbiosis, and either tragic or comical misunderstandings. Confabulation transforms the solid identity of things that have occurred under fixed, given circumstances in the past into ever-changing flashes of revised and revisable identities in the present. In a novel that makes such a claim, it is fitting that individual stories also show those transformations occurring outside confabulation as well.¹

Because Alfau never fully discloses the solutions to his whodunits, his stories can be read, and in fact have been read, as metaphysical detective stories, a modern take on detective

¹ Alfau's own hesitation when pressed to define his work as either a novel or a collection of short stories in the opening sentences of *Locos* justifies this twofold approach. Although the links between the two genres are complex, a majority of commentators are convinced that short story cycles or sequences can be read as novels. See, for example, Susan Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1989; Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995; J. Gerald Kennedy, ed. *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Rolf Lundén, *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999; Gerald Lynch, *The One and the Many: English Canadian Short Story Cycles*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001; James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. See Kennedy's introduction for a survey of the problems critics have had defining the genre. Dunn and Morris provide a detailed account of the tradition out of which collections of linked stories come. Nagel is especially helpful in highlighting how many Latin-American writers have made innovative use of the short-story cycle. Lynch makes a good case for the complex ways in which the genre creates certain kinds of meaning.

fiction. Susan Elizabeth Sweeney and Patricia Merivale define the metaphysical detective story as “a text that subverts or parodies traditional detective-story conventions — such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader — with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot” (“Game” 2). Sweeney briefly discusses how Alfau’s stories conform to such a model (“Subject-Cases” 254-6), and in this chapter, I build on her work. The metaphysical sleuth is often left “confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity” (“Game” 2). In the same way, characters in *Locos* struggle to come up with explanations to make sense of the mysterious situations their author has placed them in. What is more, Alfau often finds himself in a similar predicament, surprised and bewildered by the ingenious — and sometimes absurd — stratagems his characters come up with to achieve a clearer sense of who they are. My readings of the stories will pay attention to the “machinations” of these mysteries, as though they were written as conventional detective fiction. If Alfau’s stories are meant to frustrate readers still bent on playing the detective and arriving at eureka-styled solutions to his metaphysical conundrums, it does not follow that no pleasure can be derived from pursuing those solutions and undergoing the inevitable frustrations once they fail us. What my frustrated attempts should reveal is that such scrutiny is not expected to provide the kind of narrative closure that leaves all questions answered, but rather to reveal other kinds of insoluble complexities left unexplored in previous discussions of these stories. *Locos* as a novel is about a man struggling — and failing — to make sense of what has happened to him in his past. *Locos* as a collection of short stories is about men and women struggling—and failing — to make sense of what is happening to them in the present.

“Identity”

“Identity” is about a person who wants to become a character. Fulano, a friend of Alfau’s, is a man over whom “a cloud of inattention” hangs (3). Despite his best efforts, he constantly fails to make his presence known. All of this is problematic for Fulano because he has “no other purpose in his life except to be important” (4). Beyond grabbing bystanders and yelling his name into their ears, or throwing rocks at their windows, however, he does not do anything to achieve the status he so wants. One day, he asks his friend Alfau to write him into one of his stories, so that he may “gain fame and importance as a character” (6). Another friend of Alfau’s, Dr. Jose de los Rios, suggests suicide as a means of achieving importance. Fulano should throw himself from the Alcantara, a bridge that crosses the Tagus in Toledo, after having left behind his identity papers along with a note reading “I have committed suicide by jumping into the Tajo River.” As a result, Fulano is certain to make the headlines and achieve some local notoriety. The catch is that Fulano, because he wants to enjoy his fame, will not commit suicide, but retreats into hiding and awaits the following morning’s paper. Fulano executes the plan that same night. Unfortunately, an escaped convict discovers his abandoned papers and coat. He replaces the papers and coat with his own, and walks away. Thus in the morning the criminal is reported to have committed suicide, and he is free to assume Fulano’s identity. Enraged at this last unexpected twist in his misfortunes, the real Fulano commits a real suicide, and Alfau ends the story by declaring he has fulfilled his promise to his friend — of making him a literary character — by writing “Identity.”

An escaped convict steals Fulano's identity, and in a good-old-fashioned whodunit, readers can expect the narrative will reveal the criminal's own identity as it brings him to justice. Yet "Identity" doesn't offer the slightest clue in that direction, because a more serious crime has been perpetrated against Fulano's identity by none other than himself. As suggested above, "Identity" is about ambition and the deep-rooted human desire for self-transformation. As he stands on the Alcantara bridge, Fulano reflects that he "had come to look for an identity in the same place where he had gone to lose one" (15): to find a new identity, Fulano must previously sacrifice his old one. Unfortunately for him, Fulano is, literally and nominally, not an identity: his name means "somebody" in Spanish, but with connotations of a nondescript nobody, John Doe, or the colloquial "what's his name." The identity he is attempting to lose is actually a non-identity, or void. He hopes to gain a new one by cashing a void cheque, so to speak. Just think of his throwing rocks at a storefront window, a potentially subversive act that would endow him with something of an ideologically radical personality: vandalism as an instance of propaganda by the deed committed at a period in Spain's history teeming with so many political antagonisms that it was about to explode into full out civil war. Instead, he does it to attract fame and notoriety, to become an important figure, and this purely self-centered motif depoliticises the act and turns it into a meaningless gesture, the kind of "empty situation" Alfau condemns his characters to perpetuate throughout *Locos*, the gesture of the mad. Such gestures constitute a more serious crime against identity than the mere stealing of a coat and wallet which are, after all, accessory markers of identity.

Transformation is a profound human desire that can lead to epigrammatic paradoxes ("become what you are"). The two sentences that follow the one quoted above hint at the kind of substantial transformations that have eluded Fulano all his life: the "dark waters of the Tajo"

which Fulano stares at are described as “his only salvation,” a possible reference to baptism or some sort of spiritual cleansing which he does not seem to be considering, while the next sentence is even more intriguing: “And once more he saw Toledo covering its hills like a petrified forest of centuries” (*ibid.*). Actually, wood petrifies over millions of years, not hundreds. What occurs in petrification is the transformation of organic material into mineral, not a quantitative change, which is what Fulano strives for; that is, more recognition, but a qualitative one.

Where might this metaphor have come from? Alfau may have visited the Gilboa Fossil Forest in New York, but the specimens there are fossilized wood, not petrified. There is a collection of petrified wood in the U.S., actually called The Petrified Forest National Park, in Arizona. It offers one of the most impressive opportunities for observing the end result of metamorphosis, and seeing the giant trunks felled by time and transformed into quartz over a period of 200 million years, is an unforgettable, awe-inspiring experience. Whether Alfau saw those trunks or not, the metaphor that compares Toledo to a petrified forest is interesting here for two reasons. First, Toledo can be compared to a petrified forest because it has undergone its own qualitative metamorphosis, from city to myth. Toledo is more beautiful as petrified wood than living tree, as myth than living city, and becomes “greater in [its] downfall than in [its] glory” (15), because it thereby acquires a “historical background [...] that will lend color to [Fulano’s] action” (7). Fulano hopes the symbolic capital of a mythic city will lend colour to an absurd, quick-fix, fame-seeking scheme. True metamorphosis, and the ensuing experience of new kinds of identities, is achieved via much more painstaking, qualitatively transformative measures, a fact to which petrified wood and mythologized cities can attest. Fulano finally realises this after the quick-fix scheme fails miserably, and commits a qualitative change via a real suicide,

experiencing a new state of being so radically different and terrifyingly unknown that even the most current neurological views would probably not risk saying with absolute certainty whether or not he will get to consciously experience the effects of that new state.

Because a monistic conception of the universe as matter stipulates that individual consciousness ends with our biological death, it is easy to see how such a universe would frustrate the intended purpose of Fulano's second suicide; he would not get to enjoy his newly found importance. For this reason, perhaps, Alfau may have finally decided to keep his promise and provide Fulano with a second kind of metamorphosis as a literary character, a metamorphosis in which his identity will survive as long as other conscious beings read and think about his story. This points at his striking metaphor's other potential source: Alfau may not have had an actual petrified forest in mind, but El Greco's famous *View of Toledo* painted at the turn of the sixteenth century. Alfau alludes to the painting in *Chromos* when Don Pedro claims that it depicts "simultaneity in space" (271). In the painting, Toledo certainly gives the impression of covering its hill with still-standing, petrified trunks. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that the grayish-white towers, bridges, and steeples in El Greco's painting not only bring to mind giant trees mineralized over millions of years, but also whited sepulchres, and the overhanging, ominous sky gives the painting an even more chilling, funereal aura. Interestingly, Alfau's description of the city in "Identity" following the reference to a petrified forest could serve as the caption for El Greco's painting: "There lay the corpse of a city draped upon a forgotten hill" (15). All this to say that in "Identity," Toledo proves a tomb for Fulano, but only as the city that provides the setting for the action, and because Toledo as setting in "Identity" borrows many features found in El Greco's painting, Alfau may have chosen to write Fulano inside El Greco's painting besides writing him into his fiction. After all, in the work of which

artist would Fulano's lifelong quest for importance have had a greater chance of finding success: inside the short story of a friend who had still to publish his first work, or inside the painting of one of the world's universally recognized masters? A close look at the painting reveals just that, a dozen or so Fulanos, actually stick figures painted a monochromic beige, staring into the dark waters of the Tagus.

"A Character"

"A Character" is about a character who wants to become a person. Alfau begins the first sentence of a story he plans to write, when the doorbell interrupts him. The unfinished sentence reads: "Gaston Bejarano was returning home one night, when he met a girl..." (19). Stuck in limbo, Gaston the character picks up where his creator left off, and undertakes the composition of his own narrative. He describes that meeting, asks the girl, one Lunarito, for a kiss, and arranges an appointment with her. He then begins to wonder at the difficulty of having fallen in love with a real person, fully aware he is himself a mere character. Will he ask Alfau to make a character out of Lunarito, or rather ask that he himself be made into a real person? He ends by appealing to his author to "solve a problem which is beyond me" (26). At this point, Alfau returns and is surprised to find his character in such a predicament. He is struck by the oddity of the encounter, and decides to explain how he, a real life person, met Gaston, a character. For some time now, he had been hearing about Gaston through common acquaintances. Thus his original relation with Gaston amounts to a series of narratives before an actual meeting occurs. At this point the laws of verisimilitude still obtain. Eventually, de los Rios brings Alfau along during a consultation with his patient, Gaston. He has been lying sick in bed following a strange

occurrence: he claims to have met a woman named Lunarito under circumstances which reason cannot allow, since the morning after having met her, he reads in the newspapers that that very woman had been murdered the previous afternoon. Alfau, unable to explain how a living man could have met a dead girl, settles for explaining how his one-sentence character could have met the real Lunarito. When Alfau interrupted his work to answer the doorbell, a maid named Maria Luisa, who also goes by the name Lunarito, happens to look upon the unfinished sentence, and discovers Gaston in mid-action. As he re-enters the room, Alfau sees her “by the desk, holding a piece of paper, with a dreamy expression in her eyes” (38). When asked if anything has happened during Alfau’s absence, she is no longer there to answer: “at that moment she was living in the future, walking with Gaston Bejarano along upper Alcala Street on a rainy night” (ibid.).

“A Character” is also about metamorphosis, about encounters between different states of being, the real and fictitious, but also the dead and living. The fact that Alfau desists from exploring the agencies involved in the supernatural encounter here, bewildered by such an unfathomable mystery, and decides to focus on the mysterious interaction between real life and fiction instead, may suggest that his interest in metafiction was a kind of second-best compensation meant to console him from the frustration of repeatedly failing to explain and understand much more mysterious, fascinating, encounters that lie at the heart of just about every story in *Locos* (all of them left unsolved, or solved in unsatisfying ways).

In any case, “A Character” examines the disconcerting effects of transforming from one of those states of being to another. The moment Gaston experiences reality, he admits feeling “fearfully real,” and is surprised to discover the “plain and ineloquent” nature of unscripted

speech (21). What is more, everything the real life Lunarito says “seemed to lack life” (23). Reality is not as real as fictitious simulations of reality; it comes across in a “flat manner” (*ibid.*). Gaston is experiencing hyperreality, and the different sorts of phenomena his new state of being requires him to interpret causes confusion at first. When the rain dampens his clothes, he realises for the first time that wet clothes smell and are uncomfortable, that real rain is a real inconvenience. When he kisses a real person, however, the new experience acquires a power to delight which previous modes of kissing sadly lacked. So intense is erotic fulfilment in real life that Gaston doubts whether this facet of reality is not actually a dream.

As to the real life Gaston, the one Alfau meets during de los Rios’s consultation, his ghostly encounter is classified as an unsolved mystery. Consider the following, however. Gaston suffers from shattered nerves, according to de los Rios. He walks at night in pouring rain. The chills may have exacerbated his already nervous state, and caused a hallucination. The fictitious Gaston happens to single out this aspect of real rain as a thing of wonder. The ghostly apparition then is not a manifestation of ectoplasm or a deceased spirit, but the projection of deranged mental states, mental states that conjure haunting images. The newly realized character detects something which the real life person, too much accustomed to drizzles and downpours, has come to forget: that real rain is as fabulous as the most fantastical, far-fetched, otherworldly explanations in its effects; for it has such powerful powers of influence on our constitution that it can induce in the rain-soaked, rain-chilled man frightening hallucinations and haunting visions of delirium. The real life Gaston will have to settle for such a rational, clinical, and rather disappointing explanation: in the real world, otherworldly mysteries of ghostly visitations and supernatural phenomena made so fashionable in horror and fantasy fiction take a back seat to the humdrum of a chill caught in the rain, and its accompanying delusions. The title of Alfau’s book

hints at such a reading, a work in which almost every character confuses shadows for substance, darkness for light, life for death, seasons for spirits, and madness for meaning.

“The Beggar”

Garcia, a man who is not a beggar, has a profession which in some ways is similar to begging, but demands more “subtlety and brain work” (42). He is a confidence man who tugs at the heart strings of his marks. He shows them a twenty-five pesetas gold piece that he claims his mother gave him on his first communion. He adds that he has never been able to part with it although hard times have beset him, seeing as “a boy only has one mother.” At this point, his marks usually give him alms, touched by the sentimentalism of his story. Recently, Garcia has been offered work as a fingerprint expert by his friend Don Gil Bejarano. The problem is that he starts in a month, and in the meantime, must look “for some victim upon whom to deliver the last stroke of the profession he was forsaking” (43). As he sets out to do so, he is accosted by a beggar, and hands him a five-centime piece. After discovering he has mistakenly handed out the gold piece, he sets out to retrieve his coin.

Garcia inquires as to the beggar’s lodgings, and is surprised to find it is located in a prosperous part of town. The beggar, Don Laureano Baez, after hearing Garcia’s explanation about the mistaken coin, asks his servant, Lunarito, to fetch his “begging suit” (47). He recovers the coin and returns it. Stirred by such generosity, Garcia decides to try his mother con one last time, but he sees that Laureano is not taken in by it. Ashamed at his failed attempt to deceive a more masterful con man than himself, Garcia begins to cry, confesses his deceitfulness, and promises to live by honest work from now on. Struck by Garcia’s sincerity, Laureano entreats

him to share his meal, offers him wine, explains that he will not have to change his gold coin, and that since his father gave it to him, and a man only has one father, he must keep it. Garcia confusedly agrees. Laureano opens a wallet and takes out a handful of bills which he offers to Garcia. Lunarito enters the room and hears the two men profess effusive vows of filial devotion.

In *Chromos*, a number of characters, including Garcia and Don Laureano, are familiars of doss houses, the Bowery, mendicancy, destitution, and vagrancy. Don Laureano has only two companions in New York, his wineskin and a squirrel, while Garcia at one point lies half dead in an alleyway, in an alcohol-induced coma. In the New World, begging is not the “profitable business and enviable profession” (41) it proves to be in “The Beggar.” True, Garcia and Don Laureano are not beggars in that story, but con-men posing as beggars. The confidence-man, by definition, is not what he seems. Like Fulano, he has an identity based on an absence of identity, on the capacity to adopt any identity most likely to con a mark at any given time. In this case, the dissimulation cons Garcia, who mistakes Don Laureano’s true identity, actually believing his identity is the one he himself feigns to possess. Another mistaken identification follows once Garcia tracks the con-man down: “Garcia attributed the results of mere coincidences to the powerful will which emanated from the strong personality into whose lair he had been trapped” (46). The passage suggests that attributing will and design to contingent acts is foolish. In a random universe governed by coincidence, the idea of a supreme, authoritative will is something confidence-men use to make marks out of credulous believers. For the fact is that the contingency that shapes men’s lives in *Locos* follows an inscrutable logic of causality, one in which seemingly insignificant causes produce disproportionately significant effects.

In Garcia's case, he believes Don Laureano has orchestrated the whole thing, when in fact his careless plunge of the hand in his pocket that extracts the wrong coin is to blame. Yet that careless act leads to a veritable transformation in both Garcia and Don Laureano. Garcia is conscious of "remarkable changes inside of him" and "a revolution going on in his brain" when he realises that more important than the retrieval of his coin is his meeting with such a "great character whose existence he did not suspect in the world" (48). For his part, Don Laureano finds himself filled with "a tremendous affection" and "infinite sorrow for this poor being who had not eaten since the night before" (50). The tearful embraces and promises of lifelong filial devotion that follow are portrayed in somewhat of a heavy-handed, slapstick manner, and should probably not be taken too seriously; yet the fact remains that a contingent encounter between two individuals who have made a living out of posturing false, empty identities, suddenly allows them to experience genuine feelings of admiration and generosity, and feel a sudden transformation in themselves as a result.

Much has been made of the similar meeting between Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, as well as Joyce's take on the son in search of a father motif. The theme is treated seriously in *Ulysses*, since Bloom is still haunted by the loss of his only son nine years earlier, while Stephen struggles with both the Filioque, source of much ecclesiastical polemics, and the doctrine of consubstantiality between the father, son, and Holy Ghost. In "The Beggar," Don Laureano is never said to be grieving a lost son (although his daughter disowns him in *Chromos*, a hostility probably rooted in their having murdered Cendreras together in "Chinelato"), while Garcia is more preoccupied with cashing in a fake mother's coin than solving ecclesiastical and theological riddles concerning the mystical nature of filial bonds. Still, the fact that the effusive show of love is soaked in Ojen finds a parallel in Stephen's own drunkenness when Bloom

rescues him at Bella Cohen's. Although this last fact may suggest that three out of the four protagonists (Bloom remains sober) will have forgotten most of the episodes the following morning, it also reveals that strong — if somewhat fleeting — emotional ties emerge out of encounters that are caused by such contingent, trivial causes as a third or fourth pint of beer, or a coin carelessly cast (recall that in *Ulysses*, although Bloom has been following Stephen since the Oxen of the Sun episode, he really begins to look after him after the latter drunkenly hands over his money to Bella Cohen). In the case of Joyce, the good reader has already started imagining how those ties will deepen on June 17, 1904, when Stephen gives his first Italian lesson to Molly, Molly her first vocal lesson to Stephen, and Bloom secretly spies on the pair, interior-monologuing about seventy-five things at once. Likewise, Garcia's misplaced coin and Don Laureano's generous dispensation of Ojen may lead to a lasting relationship, since the contingent encounter produces powerful and sincere emotions in men who have previously made a living out of dissimulation and insincerity. The causality that forms and dissolves such friendships and identities proves the story's great unsolved, and unsolvable, mystery.

“Fingerprints”

Don Estaban Bejarano is the Spanish discoverer of fingerprints as a technique of “unmistakable differentiation among several individuals” (57). His son, Don Gil, stakes a great deal on fingerprint technology, not because it provides an accurate identification instrument, but because its discovery by his father assures his family name will survive. Just as physical fingerprints help identify every individual, so the theory of fingerprints helps identify the Bejarano name and distinguish it from “the infinite other names as common as Bejarano, without

which [Gil] would have been drowned in the sea of mediocrity” (58). For the past five years now, Gil has championed his father’s discovery, trying to convince citizens of Madrid that they should register their fingerprints at the office of the prefect of police, who happens to be his brother-in-law, Don Benito. The latter remains unconvinced, but according to Gil, there can be no room for error in the face of foolproof evidence of the kind fingerprints provide. Gil explains the infallibility of fingerprints thus: even if a man were in China, and his fingerprints were found in Madrid, that man alone must have made those prints (59). One evening, Benito shows up at Gil’s house and asks him to accompany him back to the station. Before he leaves, his wife happens upon their children Gaston and Carmen in compromising circumstances, and calls Carmen a *puta* (67), after which Gaston storms out of the house.

Outside, Benito explains that the moneylender Matias has been murdered and that Gil’s fingerprints were found all over the crime scene. Benito pleads with Gil to tell him fingerprints are not infallible, and that in this case, they have delivered false evidence. Gil refuses to discredit his father’s claim to immortality, even though he knows he is innocent, and asks Benito how he can be sure they are his fingerprints. Benito states that Garcia, the man Gil recommended Benito hire as a fingerprints expert, has identified them himself. He then asks him to exculpate himself by providing contradictory evidence. Don Gil knows he has an alibi, but providing it will discredit his theory. Thinking back at the evening’s incident at home involving his children, and the disgrace it is certain to cast on his family unless Carmen is sent off to a convent, and not wanting to add disgrace by discrediting a theory which has been the main endeavour of both his and his father’s life, he resignedly concludes that “I am the man from China,” and accepts blame for a crime he has not committed.

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney has argued that the stories in *Locos* boast “an ongoing parody of ‘official’ solutions to the question of human identity,” and that in most cases, identity “is validated only by written documentation” (“Aliens, Aliases” 212). The idea is interesting when we consider that Alfau, having emigrated from Spain to America in 1916, would have had first-hand experience with a sense of identity validated only through paper documents, official immigration visas, permanent residency applications, citizenship documents, etc. Sweeney writes that in “Fingerprints,” Gil preserves the memory of his father’s identity by publishing articles that emphasize the importance of his discovery (*ibid.*). In the case of Gil’s own identity, however, one official paper document misidentifies him, namely the fingerprint document Garcia produces to incriminate him. A brief remark in “The Beggar,” in which Garcia plans to get rid of the man who has helped him find employment (42), suggests Garcia has planted the evidence. Although Gil has an alibi, in this case the paper bears more authority as evidence. Why?

The friction ridges on the tip of our fingers are unique to every individual. When we touch things, sweat secreted from our glands in our fingertips leaves impressions that take the form of the unique patterns of our friction ridges, impressions which can then be printed on evidence sheets in case an identity needs to be proved or disproved. Our first publications occur before we can either read or write. Since almost everything found in man-inhabited environments will be touched numerous times, we could think of the world’s objects as palimpsests which people add to merely by touching them. In Alfau’s story, the apartment of the murdered Matias is one such palimpsest, and the latest person to have written in it is Gil. It does not matter that his friction ridges were busy playing cards while the murder occurred, and consequently could not have left impressions of their patterns in the apartment at the time of murder: an adhesive tape has collected those patterns and printed them onto an evidence sheet. The physical being of Gil

in another room witnessed by friends and family provides a weaker validation of his identity than a rectangular, finger-sized paper which reproduces smear-traces of that physical being. As Gil stares at the sheets of paper in disbelief, he has the impression that the fingerprints begin to move, grow “tiny arms and legs”, and dance and mock him (72). His sense of identity is shrunk, cut down by the “growing, multiplying” counter-evidence of an alien self which forensic science produces. As science produces more and more evidence that defines personhood as an attribute of the physical body fragmented into identifiable units (DNA, iris recognition, retinal scan, voice recognition, etc.), what chance do individuals have of preserving some integral sense of self beyond what can be biometrically quantified? Gil, himself an adamant promoter of such techniques, will nevertheless hold on to what he perceives as a more genuine sense of self, even if the move costs him his freedom.

In the end, Benito is puzzled by his brother-in-law’s bizarre obstinacy: why doesn’t Gil protest his innocence? For Gil, the family reputation is more important to his identity than his actual biological being, which is about to spend the remainder of its life in prison (the following story reveals that Gil dies in prison). That being, like friction ridges in an evidence sheet, will be fixed in a permanent cell. Yet Gil knows that by providing his alibi, and undermining his father’s great theory, he risks damaging a far more essential sense of identity, the one that allows him to escape the mediocrity of the unremarkable common lot, and which preserves for posterity his and his father’s important contribution to the vast field of human knowledge. Whether Gil has chosen wisely is up to the reader to determine.

Alfau is often praised for having written works that were far ahead of their time. Although such claims are usually made in regards to his innovative use of extradiegetic

exchanges between different facets of the creative process, we should also note that his concerns about the forensic validity of fingerprint technology in 1928, give him an eighty-year head-start on criminologists who only began voicing such concerns at the turn of the twenty-first century (Cole 5).

“The Wallet”

A police convention in Madrid coincides with a power outage affecting the city’s lighting system. City-wide darkness ensues, and criminals take advantage of the situation, with the result that for a whole week, simultaneous to the police convention, “Madrid had a criminal convention as well” (78), a crime-spree in which seasoned criminals but also well-to-do citizens participate. Don Benito Calinez, the prefect of police, is seated in the Madrid Casino, accompanied by his nephew Pepe, recently expelled from college in England. Pepe’s father, Don Gil, and one of his sisters are deceased, while Benito has assumed financial responsibility for his widowed sister and her three remaining children. Benito now informs Pepe that his brother Gaston has become a *chulo*, or pimp, and that he has already been arrested twice, once in connection with a murder and once in connection with larceny. Hearing the news, Pepe is struck with admiration for his brother, who leads a life of adventure far removed from his own.

As nephew and uncle part ways at a popular intersection, they make a thousand-pesetas bet that they will not be robbed. Five steps later, someone steals Pepe’s wallet. Determined to recover it, he springs back, believes he spots the culprit, and reclaims the wallet. The following morning, he reluctantly confesses someone has stolen his wallet, to which his uncle replies someone has also stolen his. As the circumstances of the second theft are related, Pepe realizes

he has robbed his uncle, not the original perpetrator. As he returns the wallet, claiming that detective skills learned abroad have enabled him to recover his uncle's wallet, a package accompanied by a note arrives. It is from Gaston, Pepe's brother. In it, he apologizes for unwittingly robbing his brother and returns the wallet.

Like "Identity," "The Wallet" is organized around a series of instances in which organic matter and minerals change roles. Before meeting his uncle the morning following the theft of his wallet, Pepe notes a twelve-year old maid whose breast and hips communicate "a mineralitic hardness" (91). After having enjoyed her favours, he wanders in the streets and sees a peddler selling cherries in exchange for old iron.² He then hands Don Laureano a coin and the grateful beggar offers the blessing of God ("Dios se lo pague") in return (surely, divine grace is alive). What is going on here? Why such bizarre insistence on the interchangeability of the organic and inorganic, the sentient and inanimate?

Recall that at night, a force of social disorder threatens the city plunged in darkness. Yet the morning following the theft of Pepe's wallet, we read: "And then Pepe saw what will never change in Spain. He saw that blue sky and that dazzling sun which create an exaggerated contrast between light and shadows. Shadows which are sharp, black and thick, impenetrable. And a light that is overpowering and strident" (93). Despite the blackout and accompanying crime spree, the light of the sun, which is a rock, or mineral, yet simultaneously provides the source of all life on earth, shows Pepe something less transitory and more permanent, something simultaneously mythic and real, something about his country that makes it seem larger, eternal, so much so that

² Oddly, El Telescopio (made of scrap iron?) is located on Cherry Street in *Chromos*.

the “luminous morning” guarantees a “sense of safety which made the dangers of the night before seem more a dream than reality” (93).

Interestingly, however, another instance of a shining, hope-giving rock occurs when Pepe receives a package from his brother returning his wallet and apologizing for the misunderstanding: the letter is “written on stationery from the Café El Diamante” (97). The letter triggers a powerful reaction in Pepe, his second one that very morning: “Twice this morning the human has been brought out in me by this emotional land. The thing has been aroused in me which starts us living and makes us want to keep on going” (*ibid.*). Now consider that this last source of light comes from a known thief, pimp, and murderer, in the guise of a letter written from a café named after a source of pale fire, that is light borrowed from another source (diamonds do not emit light; they only refract, reflect, and absorb it). Recall, moreover, Tolstoy's image of the sun progressively dying out in his famous justification for promoting the extinction of the human race in the *Kreutzer Sonata*. The mineralitic source of all life on earth, the sun and its radiant light, will soon cool down and become just another dark star in a lightless universe, so why not precipitate a foregone conclusion?

Thus the sun, source of the permanent light which uplifts Pepe's spirits turns out to be transient as well, just as the letter of brotherly goodwill written by a criminal (we should not be taken in by Pepe's tendency to romanticise) is sent from a café named after an arrant thief slightly less famous than the one found in Shakespeare (Recall *Timon of Athens's* "the moon's an arrant thief, and her pale fire she snatches from the sun"). The sun dies, and the victims of Gaston die either at one stroke (his murder victims) or at a thousand (his whores). The ultimate transformation in “The Wallet” is death, just as it was in “Identity.” And lest we forget, the third

light that “brings out the human” in Pepe that morning is his seduction of a twelve-year old whose living beauty communicated “mineralitic hardness.” When others are thought of as insentient stone or statue, unpleasant afterthoughts of the harm we inflict upon them must be easier to brush aside. Unlike the villains in Alfau who seem to enjoy a whole array of identities, victims are thought of as having no identity, and the fact that crimes occur at night, during a city-wide blackout, may help the criminal mind corroborate such a self-serving philosophy in “The Wallet.”

Read in such a way, “The Wallet” seems to reveal all its secrets, and as a result, its claim to metaphysical detective story seems questionable. But the story contains so many more mysteries, that even the simple task of enumerating them all would take time. In the previous chapter, I spend a great deal of effort discussing just two of them, the anachronistic references to the Café Fornos and Raquel Meller, but so many more remain. For example, why has Benito been expelled from College, and what does he do in Paris for two weeks before returning home (82)? Who is the woman who sends scented letters to Don Benito (81)? Is Don Gil killed in prison, or does he take his own life (83)? Under what circumstances does La Pelos knife Lunarito (86)? In the end, metaphysical detective stories may be insoluble not because their central mystery has no solution, but because so many more mysteries lie hidden in the darker recesses of the narrative. And in a story in which a blackout leaves a whole city in complete darkness, such recesses abound.

“Chinelato”

Juan Chinelato, also known as Señor Olozaga, is a giant figure whose mysterious origins arouse the curiosity and gossip of his neighbours. His earliest memories have to do with missionary life in China, of bandits massacring most of the missionaries when he was ten and his breakneck escape on a horse. Some six years later, we find him jumping overboard from a slave ship after having murdered one of the slave drivers. He is rescued by a smuggling ship with which he makes his fortune, but squanders it in drinking, gambling, and women in Manila. After an undisclosed period of time, during which he has regained his fortune (upward and downward financial mobility will prove a constant throughout his life), he falls for the daughter of one Don Estaban Bejarano Y Ulloa, but is rejected out of racial prejudice (Chinelato is rumoured to have mixed racial origins), but also out of consideration for his previous two wives. There follows a series of adventures that take Chinelato from Spain to the West Indies, to Mexico to Cuba. He takes up wrestling, and quickly becomes champion. Then begins a life of debauchery and cruelty in which he enjoys humiliating his wife publicly. One day, he asks her to leave the house for a few hours, and upon her return, serves her their roasted child to eat. The wife becomes insane and dies three days later.

He remarries, loses his championship, returns to Spain, acquires a circus, and becomes a butterfly trainer, directing their movements with a wand and even instructing them to spell out his name in the air above him. He later loses money backing bad toreros, while his latest wife — we have lost count at this point — has left him for one of these toreros. Her replacement, Tia Mariquita, is famous for her soirées, musical evenings during which she either sings or recites her own poetry. Mostly, she lives in the past, reminiscing about praise she once received from great musicians. She imitates the gestures and poses of Sarah Bernhardt, mixes up operas when asked to sing excerpts, and fantasises about a deceased child she never had. She writes plays

which Chinelato stages, but the performances are universally panned. The story ends as it began, since Chinelato becomes enamoured of Don Laureano's daughter Lunarito, only to brush off repeated refusals. The final word on such an eventful life is that Chinelato has "outlived his epoch...and that is sad" (140).

A tandem reading of the two episodes of marriage proposals and ensuing humiliating refusals reveals Alfau's tendency to use recurring images to connect separate scenes thematically in his fiction. In this case, the recurring images reveal an opaque, and rather twisted law of causal retribution, not unlike the one found in the Hindu concept of karma. Of course, there is no evidence that Alfau was interested in eastern philosophies, and in any case, retribution in "Chinelato" does not await cycles of reincarnation to redistribute the good and evil a character has performed in his or her lifetime. Still, the way in which Alfau arranges these parallel scenes indicates that an inscrutable logic of retributive justice sometimes heaps disproportionate punishments on trivial evils, while on other occasions it allows horrendous deeds to go unpunished.

Early in life, as Chinelato leaves the house of Don Estaban, having suffered a first humiliating refusal, he overhears from a window someone shouting "who is that ugly Chinaman," to which a feminine voice replies "Keep quiet Gil" (117). The reference is to Don Estaban's son, that is Don Gil Bejarano, and his insulting remark does not go unheeded: his cruelty is revisited upon him much later in life, in "Fingerprints," when he becomes "the man from China"(74). In that story, as Gil hands himself in, he looks into his brother-in-law's eyes and sees reflected in them "a little man that was himself, dressed in a mandarin coat and pointing accusingly at him with a fan" (73). The reader may recall that when Chinelato performs his

butterfly-charmer routine, he wears a “mandarin coat” and holds “a great fan in his hands” (124). Thus in the eyes of the man come to arrest him, Gil sees reflected the man whom he wronged all those years ago. The insult has been avenged, yet somewhat disproportionately.

But Chinelato has not only suffered at the hands of other people’s cruelty; he has more often proved to be capable of unusually monstrous cruelty. Recall that when the coveted daughter of the second proposal experiences a change of heart and accepts Chinelato’s offer (she hears of his having won an impressive sum at the Madrid Casino), she and her father kill the envoy Chinelato sends in his stead, fearing that father and daughter were planning such an attempt on his life (the murder, an obvious case of mistaken identity, is committed in complete darkness, as are most foul deeds in *Locos*). Why should Chinelato again be the receiving end of a cruel blow when his connubial bliss is in play? On the night of the murder, an unexplained source of light illumines the scene: “In the street before the house, someone had built a bonfire and the whole front of the house was illuminated with a red glow” (140). Earlier in the story, an identical scene is described: “When Chinelato left his home, he saw in the street a group of boys who had built a bonfire. The front of his house was illumined with a red glow” (122). The occasion is the death of Chinelato’s umpteenth wife, days after he has fed her their only child as roast pork. The red glow which discloses two scenes of violent murder is too symbolically charged to pin down here, but if the reader remembers the earlier description, and what horrors it is meant to disclose, Chinelato can count his blessings that his comeuppance for murdering his own child has not taken a more severe form than the death of his envoy and ruin of his marital designs.

The laws that regulate causation as retribution in *Locos* are too complex to sort out in just one reading. For example, what has Chinelato's envoy Cendreras done to merit a violent end intended for another? One would have to read how he may have contributed to Micaela Valverde's morbid condition in "The Necrophil" as her third husband. Indeed, de los Rios claims in that story that Cendreras "only deferred his payment" by leaving his wife, and that his subsequent murder settled that account (154). Then there is a third instance of the red glow of a bonfire illuminating a house, and which actually comprises Chinelato's earliest extant memory. On that occasion, his mother is murdered while a white man fights "Chinamen" outside a glowing house (105). The circumstances are never fully disclosed, but a symmetrical pattern emerges: the first bonfire illuminates a scene in which Chinelato's mother dies; the second bonfire illuminates a scene in which his wife dies; the last bonfire illuminates a scene in which someone mistaken for Chinelato dies. Chinelato is not responsible for the first murder, directly responsible for the second, and indirectly responsible for the last. In a court of law, he would be found guilty of the second murder only, but in any karmic or non-karmic system of redistributive justice, it is more difficult to tell who is responsible for what.

We don't have to read all these deaths as signs that an easily discernible law of causality is settling accounts, and the fact that seemingly innocent people die in all three cases suggests no law obtains at all. Unless visitations of iniquity are punishing characters for the sins of past generations. Are Alfau's characters expiating the sins of their roguish ancestors (of which more to come)? The law which allots punishment and reward in *Locos* is an inscrutable one. In the case of Don Gil's ordeal, however, the recurring images of the man from China, the mandarin coat, and the fan clearly inculpates a man in a past wrong. What I suggest here by focusing on these intriguing recurring motifs in "Chinelato" is that the fluctuations that affect identities in

Locos may have as much to do with retribution for offences committed earlier in life as it does with metafictional playfulness, and that the complete logic informing that retribution will only appear once all recurring images are detected, something which evidently can never be accomplished. That not much good ensues in Alfau's universe suggests his is a universe in which the total depravity of his characters forces his peculiar brand of Karma to occupy itself exclusively with avenging evil acts rather than rewarding kind ones. After all, Mary McCarthy was probably right in declaring that "police work and criminality" were the subject of *Locos* (205), if she meant by that that police work often commits its own share of atrocious crimes in the novel (Garcia may or may not have murdered Matias, but he certainly has framed an innocent man). It is hard to come away from a reading of the novel filled with admiration for one's fellow man, but detection of more recurring images may further reveal how the mysterious law that intertwines the exchange of good and evil finally evens itself out in *Locos*.

"The Necrophil"

Doña Micaela Valverde, an avid churchgoer, is obsessed by death. She attends as many funerals as she can, sometimes as many as five a day (148), whether she knew the deceased or not. She befriends an undertaker, with whom she has lengthy, philosophical conversations on the economic (the undertaker) and aesthetic (Micaela) values of death. She can predict when certain people will die, and foresees that Garcia, the poet who lives across the street, will die shortly, and thus spoils the ending of *Locos*. She also suffers from an odd condition of suspended animation resembling temporary death spells, lasting two to three months and occurring once a year during spring. She eventually becomes skilled enough to predict exactly when they will

begin by detecting the spells of melancholia which usually precede them by a month or so, spells which “assumed maddening proportions and almost verged on insanity” (150).

Doña Micaela is twice widowed, while her third husband leaves her during one of her death spells, after having left a message with de los Rios explaining that she had become a permanent *memento mori* which he could no longer live with. Eventually, de los Rios brings Alfau along during one of Doña Micaela’s death spells, explaining that his patient preserves herself in death, and uses her “will [to] hold good past the boundaries of life” (156). The reader may recall a similar situation in Poe’s “Ligeia,” in which the will of a grieving widower is presented as a boundless force capable of transgressing the finality of death and resurrecting his deceased wife. In “The Necrophil,” however, it remains unclear who stays behind to will Doña Micaela back to life, her first two husbands having passed away, the third one having left her. Unless, of course, it is Doña Micaela herself. Ultimately, de los Rios concludes that she is pregnant with death, and that an abortion alone can cure her of her spells. Since suicide anticipates one’s death by cheating it, she might get rid of her death spells by self-inducing real death. He hands her a gun and advises suicide, just as in “Identity” he advises Fulano to kill himself. Of course the gun is loaded with blank cartridges, and after she pulls the trigger and passes out from fright, she finds herself cured upon waking up. From now on, she is possessed of “a tremendous love for life” (158). De los Rios’s ultimate diagnosis is a morbid fixation with death found in religion, and he prescribes that she no longer attend church.

This and the following story are important for Alfau because they recount the beginnings of friendships he will sustain throughout *Locos* and *Chromos*: his friendship with Jose de los Rios in “The Necrophil,” and with Garcia in “A Romance of Dogs.” One could say that the

whole plot involving Doña Micaela serves as elaborate backdrop to the friendship here, because the story begins as follows: “My true friendship with Dr. De los Rios dates from the time of the incidents I am about to narrate.” If a topic sentence is meant to announce the central idea, then de los Rios, not Doña Micaela, is the true focus of the story. The title refers to Doña Micaela’s death spells, obviously, but also to the medical man Dr. de los Rios in some obscure way.

Necrophilia is defined as a perverse and idiosyncratic obsession with death. Doña Micaela seeks to stop time by holding on to death, as it were, and eventually succeeds in “dying” for a season, not in winter as the good anthropologist in us might expect but in spring, only to come to life again in a few months (June?). This is aberrant behaviour of a potentially symbolic kind, but the natural cycle seems perverted, its symbolism awry. De los Rios and his friend Alfau, whom he enjoys taking along during his consultations here and in other stories (this and their ensuing discussion of various ailments must violate a whole series of ethical strictures), are implicated too in this perversion. Here is the description of an encounter with Doña Micaela’s “corpse”: “We advanced through a corridor illuminated by a window at one end which projected our shadows in our path. We advanced, pushing our shadows ahead until they met the opposite wall and began to creep upward. They rose menacingly before us, but as we approached them, they shrank” (154). As so often in Alfau, the play of light and shadow hints at threshold states and border crossings, movement from the real to the imagined, from desire to fiction and fantasy, from life to death. The body that he and his companion see in the bed is covered by a sheet, but it is removed to expose Doña Micaela lying naked, at which point Alfau admits that they “both looked at her for a long time” (*ibid.*). We remember being obliquely informed at the outset of the tale that Doña Micaela is a virgin, “well developed,” and that were it not for “something more difficult to define about her, she would have come under the adjective of attractive” (146). The

tension in the scene becomes palpable. Contemplating her nakedness, her inertness, her implied compliance – the reader is left to draw the appropriate inference – the doctor takes a knife and “with brutal resolution” plunges it into her thigh (155). This is not just any knife, but a bistouri, a narrow-blade scalpel, a doctor’s tool that symbolizes his power over life, over death.

So what does this scene finally tell us about these men in black, these women in black, and their fascinations? That there are various forms of necrophilia, male and female, symbolic and literal. That those shadows on the walls that rise and fall read like projections of male desire writ large. That any attempt to embrace death is to shrink away from life as if it were leprosy. Such conclusions are tentative because they refer to characters that exist in a world where logic is both flouted and flaunted, as when the Doctor does his best to explain what happened. Why, for example, doesn’t Doña Micaela’s corpse rot during her spells? The explanation runs as follows: “Because putrefaction is the return to life. It is then that life snatches a body from death and claims it as its own. This woman loves death too much. She loves death for itself and has detached it from all the intimate links that bind it to life. Through decomposition a body returns to life, having lost its identity and personality” (156). Losing those precious things is of course an occupational hazard in Alfau’s fiction, and de los Rios’s fanciful diagnostic is too much founded on paradox to give the impression that he fully understands it himself. In fact, it reads like the explanation of an occultist much more than that of a man of science, recalling Don Pedro’s “esoteric necromancy” in *Chromos* (254). Is necrophilia then nothing more than necromancy, an attempt to communicate with unknown, future states of being, to relay, and receive, messages from loved ones putrefying in their graves? But what message can a bistouri communicate? After inflicting the wound in Doña Micaela’s thigh, de los Rios asks Alfau to touch it. The implication is clear: the author partakes of his own form of necrophilia, and wields

his own kind of slashing bistouri, the pen that feeds on the memories of dead friends and acquaintances. As author, Alfau stands at the mid-point between the spiritism medium who communicates with the souls of the dead, and the medicine man who communicates with the anatomical remains of the dead.

Strangely enough, de los Rios's second go at a fake-suicide solution works in "The Necrophil" and Doña Micaela is cured of her annual repudiation of the world in the end. A victory for lovers of happy endings? Not exactly: the story ends with a reminder that eventually we all go to join our lovers "in the lonely paths of nothingness" (159). The fake suicide proves a mere dress rehearsal for the protracted, real one that awaits individual identities subject to the universal law of putrefaction and dissolution. The universe that subjects all living things to such ineluctable mechanisms of decomposition may ultimately prove the greatest necrophil of all. Of all the stories in *Locos*, "The Necrophil" is perhaps the only one that delivers narrative closure in the guise of guaranteed death for all. The question is, will such a gloomy outcome satisfy fans of the conventional genre, much more accustomed to celebrate as their favourite sleuth affirms the triumph of human ingenuity in thwarting the evil henchmen of death?

"A Romance of Dogs"

De los Rios hands Alfau's narrator a manuscript written by a mutual friend, Garcia, who has recently passed away. In it, Garcia thinks back upon his childhood experience at the Colegio de los Padres Salesianos in Vizcainia: the two-hour walks undertaken twice a day to travel to and from school, the terrifying dog met along the way and the equally terrifying school watchdog

awaiting late comers, both of which “contributed largely to making those days some of the darkest of [his] life” (172). There, Garcia befriends other *madrileños*, among them Felipe Alfau and Pepe Bejarano. Sometime later, Pepe’s sister Carmen arrives at the adjoining convent. Garcia claims that Alfau entertains “absurd ideas regarding the cause of her becoming a nun” (174), ideas that inform the plot of most stories in *Locos*. If Alfau writes those stories after having read his friend’s manuscript, he may have found the inspiration for doing so in his friend’s reminding him of absurd ideas put forward in youth. A conscientious author, Alfau acknowledges his source here, yet as I will show, the identity of that source poses a number of problems.

One day, Garcia sees Carmen walking with Padre Inocencio, and recalls “a young man and a young woman whom I had seen once in Madrid in El Retiro, walking oblivious of everything, in the same style” (175-6). The reference is telling, since Alfau will describe Gaston and Lunarito walking in a similar manner in El Retiro in “A Character.” Has he plagiarized a scene from the manuscript of his sometime friend, sometime character to write his own material? Not so conscientious after all. Regardless, this is not to be the last time Garcia provides Alfau with material, since one third of *Chromos* is written by Garcia, while the epigraph to Alfau’s collection of poems, *Sentimental Songs*, is also attributed to Garcia.

Carmen eventually escapes the convent under mysterious circumstances. Garcia overhears the word incest in relation to the incident, a word he does not understand. Three days later, Padre Inocencio commits suicide. Eventually, Garcia realizes that what he had felt upon seeing Carmen could also be felt by other men, and believes he had found “the key to the dramatic mystery” (180). Today, however, he has begun doubting again, and wonders if he even

saw what he thinks he saw, or if all was not rather “half dream and half nightmare” (181), a sentiment shared by Alfau at the end of *Chromos*.

Garcia’s last childhood memory deals with the two dogs aforementioned. After a schoolmate kills the school watchdog with a slingshot, Garcia borrows the weapon and slings rocks at the dog waiting on his homeward path, and then at the window of the dog owner’s home (recall Fulano throwing a rock in a jeweller’s store – has Alfau lifted another scene from his friend’s memoir?). He breaks down in tears once he arrives home, and his mother promises he will never have to return to the college again.

At this point, Alfau resumes the narrative duties. He describes Garcia’s strange reaction to the advent of spring later in life: a rapture-like state in which he feels an overpowering appreciation for the replenishing effects of spring, and a conviction that the season is “the only dependable thing” (187). Early on, Alfau confesses that he entertains doubts about his friend’s sanity, and a letter Garcia sends him only confirms those doubts. The letter is a lyrical outburst of excessive enthusiasm, mad ravings about the chosen ones who must act as worshippers of spring’s eternal essence. As a romantic prose poem, the outburst is readable enough. But as a letter written by a friend to another, soliciting common understanding, a shared “subtle intuition” concerning man’s religious duty towards spring, it comes off as pure madness, or just plain silly.

Alfau notes that Garcia has become bent over and his hair has turned white, although he has not yet reached thirty. A relative of his has recently died and left him a house in a rich district, the Barrio de Salamanca, along with his servant, Lunarito, all of which points back at Don Laureano Baez in “The Beggar.” Is Alfau now returning the favour, and filling in gaps in

Garcia's biography with snippets from his fiction, or has he merely used this detail of Garcia's final days as inspiration for a story about the contingencies of life-changing encounters?

Alfau eventually meets Garcia's doctor, a certain José de los Rios, who explains that Garcia has been admitted to an asylum. When Garcia receives his discharge, he is blind and returns home accompanied by "two huge mastiff dogs" (193). He now believes spring has come to bring him death, while to all others it brings life. On the twenty-fourth of March, a bedridden Garcia asks Alfau to open the window in his room since he has battled for three days — since March 21, or the spring equinox — trying to keep spring out and realizes now that the struggle has all been in vain. He is resigned to let spring enter the room and take him away. As Alfau opens the window, the story, and the novel, ends with the words "Spring came in" (200).

There is some uncertainty as to what actually happens to Garcia when the novel ends. Whereas we are explicitly told that spring triggers Doña Micaela Valverde's death spells in "The Necrophil," in this story we are left to ponder what happens to Garcia. The story opens with de los Rios's claim that his patient is dead, yet we know that Garcia survives well into the last pages of *Chromos*. The hesitation here provides a link with the hesitation found in the very first sentence of Alfau's novel, or collection of short stories. Indeterminacy is the guiding principle throughout Alfau's work, it seems. And in this story, there is even indeterminacy as regards its author's identity. Garcia authors the first half, while Alfau authors the second.

One possibility is that Garcia dies as a character, and is reborn as a real person. The rather lazy symbolism of three days during which Garcia struggles with his illness supports the idea of a resurrection here. Moreover, in his prologue Alfau describes the last scene in *Locos* as an occasion in which he "flung a window open and let in real life to take the stuffy and fictional

life of the one character who was his childhood friend” (x). The idea is interesting, yet Alfau’s explanation invites the question: if Garcia was his childhood friend to begin with, why does Alfau have to restore him to real life, and how has he atrophied into characterization in the meantime?

The symbiotic relationship between the writing of Garcia and Alfau should also give us pause. The latter uses verbatim passages from the former in his fiction, and images from the one inexplicably crop up in the fiction of the other. For example, the dogs that terrify Garcia in his manuscript actually find their way into *Chromos*. On the day Garcia learns of his landlady’s suicide, he notices a dead dog while walking in Central Park, and the sight “upsets him beyond description” (76). Later that evening, after having identified the body of the landlady, de los Rios invites Garcia to rest at his place. As Garcia lies down on a couch, de los Rios’s dog stands beside him, as though “guarding Garcia.” What is strange here is that Alfau seems to lift the dogs from his friend’s manuscript, and then combine them with the narrative he provides as a sequel to his friend’s manuscript in *Locos* (recall that “A Romance of Dogs” comprises a first section written by Garcia and a second section written by Alfau), in order to recreate the ending of *Locos* in this scene from *Chromos*, where he and de los Rios open windows to let the “spring night air” come in over a sick Garcia (122).

The story, like the seven that precede it, offers no easy solution. The detective reader in us is struck by all the strange instances in which the prose of one makes its way into the prose, or life, of the other. We want to find a way to identify Alfau with Garcia, and a work in which identity is such an overarching thematic concern would certainly play on the other meaning of the word, the quality of sameness in two things. When rediscovered late in life, Alfau is reported

to have told an importunate admirer who had come knocking at his door that Felipe Alfau was away, and that he, Garcia, did not know when Alfau would return. Does the insoluble mystery at the heart of *Locos* lie in the fact that Alfau is Garcia?

One answer is found by way of appealing to the author whom Sweeney identifies as the father of both the traditional and metaphysical detective story, Edgar Allan Poe. I would argue that “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “A Romance of Dogs” concern themselves with the theme of the infectious nature of madness, and that in Alfau’s case, his progressive lunacy finally identifies him with Garcia. His story, like Poe’s, is about an initially sound character’s attempt to ease the shattered nerves of an old school friend. At first, Alfau is a sceptical, incredulous observer of Garcia’s spring mania. He slowly shifts perspectives and becomes a full-fledged believer whose final words – which also happen to end the novel – substantiate Garcia’s final delusion.

Other parallels obtain. In Poe’s story, a lifelike mansion disturbs the equilibrium of its resident, Roderick Usher, who comes to dread the “‘kingdom of inorganization’ as a really sentient order of existence” (Abel 59). As G.R. Thompson notes, however, the biomorphic mansion paradoxically portends death since it assumes the “skull-like” appearance of a “death’s head” (89). Likewise in *Locos*, Garcia becomes obsessed with the notion that spring has “chosen him” to proclaim “the eternal scene of [its] eternal life” (198), but here again it is a life that portends death, since it “wakes and drags” men to their doom (*ibid.*). In both cases, the belief that death and life have inverted their accepted values takes shape in the minds of characters that have succumbed to madness.

Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm submit that the “slippage between self and other” is a key element in Poe’s tale (14). But whereas they identify projection as the main instance of slippage, I argue that a more important one has to do with introjection. After all, the initially rational narrator in Poe’s tale is not successful in saving his friend from psychological collapse, while Usher successfully infects him with his own nervous, hypochondriac delusions. The story tells of the ultimate triumph of madness over reason, and at the story’s close, the narrator has come to resemble Usher to such an extent that both characters mutually frighten themselves in an exchange of reciprocal hysteria, or “doubled and redoubled fear” (*cf.* Thompson 93). Like Poe’s narrator, Alfau is finally powerless to save his friend from his delusional mania, and he inevitably comes to espouse Garcia’s delusion by chapter’s end. Again, *Locos* seems aptly titled, since its seemingly sane author concludes the mystery of multiple, uncontrollable identities in a spirit of kinship with his insane character, who also happens to be his childhood friend, an old age acquaintance, and probably himself. The man struggling to make sense of his present in the stories is the man struggling to make sense of his past in the novel.

Anna Shapiro reads *Locos* as a book that explores the ontological principle of the identity of indiscernibles (204). If two subjects have identical properties, it becomes impossible to discern one from the other, and what is unique about them at the level of separate identities, becomes indiscernible. As Shapiro points out, Alfau’s characters share the property of authorship with their creator (205), and as I point out in my introduction, Alfau shares his characters’ giddy mutability. For Shapiro and other critics who read *Locos* in such a light, namely as a work of metafiction, the riddle of identity is addressed via the self-reflexive structure of the book. In this

case, one of the mysteries which I have identified in “A Romance of Dogs” finds an easy solution: Garcia is Alfau because characters always take shape in the minds of their authors and are a reflection of what and how that mind perceives and thinks, not of any sort of reality, whatever that means. But the dominant mode of literary criticism over the past forty (at the very least) years has made it quite clear that an author is not pure mind alone, and that even if the fiction he or she produces is a semiotic construct or typographical materialisation of ideas that inhabit the mind, not the external or real world, the fact remains that those ideas take shape in a range of contexts, social, cultural, historical, emotional, biological, cosmological, what you will. If we read *Locos* as a work of metaphysical fiction, a series of new riddles and conundrums emerge from the texts, riddles and conundrums that reflect the complexities of those contexts. And because there are so many, they become that much more insoluble. Even after having read “A Romance of Dogs” over twenty times, I still don’t fully understand what happens in it. The same applies to the other stories in *Locos*. But I know the mysteries involve much more than “the peculiar one-way mirror that is self-reflexive art” (Shapiro 206).

Felipe Alfau's Old and New, but Mostly *Old Tales from Spain*

In this chapter, I discuss Felipe Alfau's *Old Tales from Spain* in relation to nineteenth-century Spanish folklore and the *Leyendas* of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. Before I do so, however, an opening section provides brief synopses of the ten tales. The book has been out of print since its original publication in 1929, and accessing the actual text can prove something of a challenge.¹

Section one: Plot Synopsis for *Old Tales from Spain*.

“The Rainbow”

An artist arrives in the village of N— and takes up lodgings in a *hosteria*. He spends his time perfecting his craft and pays his rent by teaching the hosteller's son how to paint. He comes to attract an entourage of the village children, to whom he tells tales of “mystery and adventure” (12). The townspeople grow suspicious and forbid their children to meet him. Angered, the painter flings his palette in the air and is amazed to discover the trailing paint freeze into a polychromic semicircle in the sky. He runs to tell the townspeople of the miracle, but they declare him insane and lock him away. Sometime later, a traveller notices the painter's works, asks about the artist's whereabouts, and intercedes on his behalf when he learns of his fate. The townspeople rush to free the prisoner, whom they find dead in his cell. As they carry him

¹ The Library of Congress has two copies available through interlibrary loan, while I purchased my copy through abebooks.com four years ago. Since then, no other copy has been made available for sale either through abebooks.com or amazon.com. Some copies of the Spanish translation, published in 1991, are still available for a reasonable price (\$30), while English-speaking readers will have to settle for the three tales reprinted in the 1993 Alfau issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Update: As I proofread this chapter, January 26, 2013, I see that a copy of the 1929 original English edition is now available at abebooks.com for \$320 (which perhaps suggests growing interest in Alfau's work – I paid only \$40 for mine).

through the field where the semicircle had been, rain begins to fall and, as it washes away the dust from the semicircle, people discover the first rainbow. At this point, the painter wakes up in the *hosteria*. What precedes has merely been a dream, yet it is not clear when exactly the dream began, for he returns to the fountain where he used to gather daily with the children to tell them stories, and begins telling them a story called “The Rainbow.”

“Twilight”

A boy in Seville sets out to discover the garden of twilight. On his way, he meets an old man who offers to tell him “the story of the garden and how it came to pass that it is always twilight there” (27). Before twilight existed, the Lady of Day and the Lord of the Night fell in love with each other. The lady looked over the labours of men, and all enjoyed prosperity and fulfilment under her guidance, while the lord watched over men’s dreams, and everyone slept peacefully. Because the two lovers can never meet, they leave messages for each other that are transmitted in a garden with a tremendous echo. One night, the lord has had enough of this arrangement and begins to cry. The first storm erupts, and the sleep of men is plagued for the first time with nightmares. The lord resolves to wait for his lady in the garden at night’s end. When she finally approaches, he refuses to leave and she dies in his arms. The sun then strikes the lord dead, and the souls of the two lovers are united in the garden where, for the first time, the meeting of light and darkness creates twilight. Since the lovers are no longer able to watch over day and night, the labour of man becomes unpleasant and his sleep disquieting. Once the old man has finished his tale, he explains that the garden is not a place one travels to; the young find it in romance, while the old find it in peace.

“The Clover”

In Salamanca, a talking goose named Juanon gives Juanin a bag of rare clover seeds. The friends then travel to Granada to rescue a lady held captive inside the Alhambra by the Moor Musa ben Nessayr. Juanon carries Juanin on his back to the lady’s window but, as he can only carry one person at a time, Juanin stays behind in the chamber while he carries the lady to safety. At that moment, the Moor walks in and threatens to torture Juanin. Left alone, Juanin spreads his clover seeds on the ground and, upon waking up the next day, finds the floor all covered with four-leaf clovers. Upon discovering this, Musa Ben Nessayr drops to his knees and reveals that an ancient prophecy predicted that the chosen one of Allah would be recognized by the sign that “wheresoever he should spend the night strange plants would blossom” (55). Juanin is freed, returns home with his clover, and the Spaniards eventually reconquer Granada. In his later years, Juanin decides to travel one last time on Juanon’s back. They spread the clover seeds all over Spain, and since then, on the night of San Juan, all Spaniards go out in quest of the four-leaf clover, singing the following:

A cojer el trebol,
 el trebol, el trebol.
 A cojer el trebol
 la Noche de San Juan.

“Sails”

A foundling is discovered on the shores between Valencia and Catalonia, and is named Salvador. He grows up to become a skilled seaman and, one day, the people choose him to be the flag bearer of the sea. He and a hundred other young men set off on a ship powered only by oars, and he fastens a white canvas onto an oar as the standard which other nations across the Mediterranean Sea must come to adopt. As they set out on their mission to unite all peoples under one “nation of the sea,” a storm erupts and threatens their lives. As all the oars break, Salvador ties the flag to the last two remaining oars, and prepares to meet his doom by singing with the other men. The flag is suddenly filled with the winds, and propels the boat forward: “The first sail had been born like a flower of the sea” (76).

Arriving at one of the Balearic Islands, Salvador is greeted by a man who reveals the story of his origins. Salvador was put out to sea in his first year of life by his mother’s jealous rival after the former had passed away during childbirth. Struck with grief, his father the king also passed away shortly afterwards. After hearing this, Salvador entreats the people of the island to build a fleet and to take up seafaring with him and his men. The fleet explores and discovers new oceans, eventually crosses the whole world, and Salvador returns to his adoptive land. The story ends by prophesying that, although other means of transportation will be discovered, sails will live forever in the hearts of seamen as a symbol of the one great nation that unites them, the sea.

“The Feud”

Pepito visits his uncle to discuss his idea of crossbreeding carrier pigeons and parrots in order to have pigeons speak their messages rather than merely deliver them. His uncle dissuades

him from doing so by telling him the story of a feud between two feudal lords that has been ongoing for several generations. Long ago, Count Don Nuño solicited the help of a sorceress to defeat his rival the Count Don Pero. She proposes a spell which can transform him at will into a pigeon, so that he may spy on his enemy. He buys the spell, but offers to pay her at the end of one month. The witch has him sign a contract stipulating certain consequences should the Count fail to keep his word. Shortly thereafter, Count Don Pero visits the sorceress under similar pretences. She sells him a spell which allows him to transform into a parrot at will. Don Pero also refuses immediate payment, and signs a similar contract.

Following a series of episodes in which both Counts make use of their newfound transformative powers, the two enemies meet in one final battle during which all their men are slain. As they are about to fight each other, the witch appears and reminds them that a month's time has elapsed since they signed their agreements. Since neither Count is able to pay his debt, she permanently transforms the rivals into their respective birds of choice. Pepito's uncle then explains that his idea would never work, since pigeons and parrots have been at war ever since, and warns against some inventions which can "prove disastrous" (115).

"Legend of the Bees"

This tale, the shortest in the collection, tells of the origins of bees in ancient times. Spain is said to have been invaded by two peoples. In the North, an industrious civilisation preoccupied with labour dedicates all its working hours to providing sustenance for itself. In the South, a civilisation said to live only for beauty and pleasure spends its entire days in aesthetic bliss and leisurely pursuits. But problems arise out of both kinds of excesses: in the North, people become

disenchanted with life, while in the South, scarcity of goods arises out of the absence of productive labour. A prophet appears and proposes a solution to both peoples. He offers to transform them into a new kind of creature that will embody the values of both civilisations, an insect whose labour will produce the sweetest fruit of all, and who derives “its industry from the flowers” (127). The humans are transformed into bees.

“The Witch of Amboto”

A Witch in Amboto flies at night over cornfields and drops seven petticoats on them, thereby ruining their crops for the season. Archers offer to rid the peasants of the witch, but their arrows are ineffective against her. The alcalde (a municipal magistrate in Spain) promises the hand of his daughter to whomever can destroy the witch. A boy named Urruchu agrees to do so, but is met with general laughter as he is the village idiot. He eavesdrops on the witch and hears her explain to another witch that only an arrow made from the branch of the sacred Guernica tree can destroy her. He obtains that branch, and soon hits his prey. Drops of blood fall from the witch onto the fields and, the next morning, poppies have grown where the drops fell. The witch is never seen again. Urruchu marries the alcalde’s daughter, and a new popular belief arises out of the incident, holding that “the corn is always better in the fields where poppies grow” (148).

“Swan Song”

Although the Prince of Castile sums up all the admirable qualities in a young prince, and is fond of music, he has one major character flaw: he is conceited. Out of such conceit, he

refuses all suitors from Spain, and his parents are forced to appeal to princesses from foreign realms. The first princess comes from the North and is dismissed on account of her voice. The second princess comes from the South and is dismissed on account of her ugliness. The third princess comes from the East and is dismissed on account of the tuneless melody she sings at the prince's request. The last princess comes from the West and is dismissed on account of the fact that she cannot sing. As the prince's parents grow impatient with their son, a fifth princess unexpectedly appears at court. She charms the prince with her beauty and voice, but when he asks her to marry him, she replies that she is not a princess, but the Fairy of Humble Land. She has come to punish his behaviour and transforms him into a swan, warning him that if he ever dare sing, he will immediately die. Many years later, having painfully abstained from singing for fear of his life, the swan prince notices a girl in a wheelchair pass by. The girl admires the bird's beauty, and is said to be happy for the first time in her life. The swan is struck with pity for another being, something he has not previously experienced and, realizing the child has led a miserable life, he sings for her. As he does, the girl miraculously stands and walks toward him. When she embraces the swan, he dies in her arms just as his song ends.

“The Weeping Willow and the Cypress Tree”

In this tale, a weeping willow and a cypress tree remember their previous human lives. The cypress was the son of poor parents, yet he was proud and valiant, and fell in love with a rich lord's daughter named Flerida. The parents of the girl oppose the union, at which point the cypress goes off to war after promising to meet with his love in a garden upon his return. After winning honour on the battlefield, he returns home to learn that Flerida has married a rich lord

and that she and her parents have fled the land. Angered, he returns alone to the garden, and is transformed into a cypress. Throughout the tale, the willow has been weeping, but when the cypress asks her what ails her, there being no wind, she explains that she is Florida, and that the night of her wedding, she became insane and fled from her husband to return to the garden where she had promised to await her lover. Discovering the cypress that had not been there previously, she was immediately transformed into a willow. Moved by her account, the cypress sheds his leaves into the pond, and the branches of the willow droop to gather and hold them in an embrace.

“The Golden Worm”

A young girl named Lolita sees fireflies and her father tells her the story of their origins. A princess is given a pin of a golden worm on her sixth birthday. Her father’s palace contains many gardens, and the insects living in them consider themselves aristocrats since they do not live in “plebeian parks” (191). A moth spoils their conceit one day when it reveals that there can be no aristocracy without a king, at which point they set about electing themselves a king. Since this only leads to disagreement, they finally try to pray for a king, when the princess playing with friends drops the pin in their midst. The golden worm is elected king, and insects from all over come to pay their respects, so much so that the human royal family is forced to evacuate the palace while the servants fumigate the infected area. One servant finds the pin and brings it inside.

At this point, Lolita interrupts her father and asks what this story has to do with fireflies. He answers that the insects, on finding their king has disappeared, ‘form a special body of flies

equipped with lights to search all over the world at night” (207). When Lolita asks her father if he believes the fireflies will find the king, he replies no. And when she asks why not, he answers as follows: “Because the story I have told you is not true” (*ibid.*).

Section two: New and *Old Tales from Spain*

Alfau wrote and published *Old Tales from Spain* in 1929, one year after having finished *Locos* (itself only published several years later in 1936). To date, the book has escaped the notice of critics. In fact, I know of only three sources that even mention it. In the introduction to her Spanish translation of the tales, Carmen Martín Gaité forgoes an actual analysis of the tales in favour of a speculative sketch of Alfau as a “fictitious character because that is the only treatment that fits him” (177). In that sketch, she envisions Alfau as an excited boy travelling by boat to America in 1916, imagines him imagining the protagonists of the book he will write thirteen years later, and suggests that these protagonists already begin to function as alter egos for the young introvert who is half mad in love with music, something she manages to tell us three times. She only briefly touches on Alfau’s art, pointing out the “fairly modern technique of having the narrator emerge out of the tale” (181), something about which I will have more to say shortly. Another source is also short on commentary, and focuses exclusively on summary. In a “real time review,” that is a review written *in media res*, or as the book is being read, Rhys Hughes provides summaries of each tale’s plot, eschews commentary, and concludes with a lukewarm endorsement for “Alfau completists” only (par. 25). Lastly, in the preface he wrote for his edition of Alfau’s poems, Ilan Stavans briefly alludes to *Old Tales from Spain*, calling it somewhat oddly “a compendium of invented stories about bullfighting and the Spanish way of

life and imagination” (*Sentimental Songs* viii). I say oddly because there is not a single reference to bullfighting in the whole collection.² As far as I know, nothing else has been written on this book.

Since consensus holds that *Locos* and *Chromos* display features that anticipate the works of more famous twentieth-century writers, a good place to start here is to determine whether *Old Tales from Spain* follows in that line. Do the tales, like the novels, transgress literary parameters by showcasing clever exchanges between diegetic and extradiegetic elements of the narrative, or do they settle for long-established motifs and structures, preferring to transcribe a Spanish oral tradition, as the title implies? In an earlier chapter, I argued that the innovative quality of *Locos* is due in part to Alfau’s interest in a neurological condition that was receiving increasing attention in the years leading up to 1928. For this reason he founded his novelistic pattern on the thought patterns of persons suffering from confabulation, and drew on a narrator seeming to recover/burly past personal experiences as primary material to fill in that pattern. In this chapter, I proceed along similar lines and look at ways in which the past might have informed Alfau’s writing process in *Old Tales from Spain*. In the later work, I contend that Alfau no longer draws primarily from past personal experiences, but from the writings of a nineteenth-century Spanish precursor, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer.³

In his title alone, Alfau hints that, at the plot level at least, he is not primarily concerned with innovation; if the tales are *old*, he does not author them, but merely records them, or retells

²Stavans may have been pressed for time when he wrote the preface. He also identifies the characters that figure in *Locos*, and gets them all right except for “Don Graciano Baez” (viii) who seems to be a mix up of the characters Garcia and Don Laureano Baez.

³ My inspiration for reading *Old Tales from Spain* in connection with Bécquer came after having read Stavans’s preface to *Sentimental Songs*. In it, he claims Alfau’s poems caricatured the nineteenth-century Spanish Romantic tradition, whose major promoter he identifies as Bécquer, whose themes of “despair, memories, deep emotional insights, and the inevitability of love” resurface in Alfau’s poems (xii).

narratives that have long been known to a Spanish public. Rather than bold experimentation here, Alfau may have chosen to add to the growing canon of folklorists who began transcribing popular oral tales in the nineteenth century: the Brothers Grimm in Germany, Giuseppe Pitre in Italy, and Cecilia Böhl de Faber in Spain, to name a few. In fact Alfau may have recorded tales de Faber would have omitted in her more regionally restrictive *Popular Andalusian Tales and Poems*, published in 1859. What complicates matters, however, is that his title's appeal to a longstanding tradition of narratives seems to be somewhat of a misnomer. Indeed, tracing the pedigree of these tales proves to be a frustrating task, as traces of earlier versions are almost impossible to unearth.⁴ This is not to say that the tales resist classification in morphological schemes that propose archetypal tale types, such as those designed by Antti Aarne or Vladimir Propp. For instance, one could make a case that the opening tale works as Aarne-Thompson type 325 (the magician and his pupil), or that "Twilight" is a slightly modified version of type 736.1 (Sun and moon as man and woman).⁵ But if the painter/story-teller/magician in "The Rainbow" can count the town children as his pupils, the miracle he performs by creating the first rainbow is an original idea that Alfau does not seem to have borrowed anywhere. And the same can be said of the nine other tales, including one that alludes to a particular work which it rewrites. In "The Golden Worm," Alfau refers specifically to Aesop's "Jupiter and the Frogs" (201), but beyond

⁴ Obviously, cross-referencing Alfau's tales with the totality of popular literature published in Spain prior to 1929 is not possible. However, the entry for Spain in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* offers a good place to start. It mentions a number of Arabic works translated by Spanish authors in the Middle Ages that contain short narratives considered as early examples of popular literature (483-7), but for the most part these narratives are made up of exempla illustrating specific Christian morals which the authors were set on rewriting into the source material, and parallels are hard to draw between these tales and Alfau's, not only because elements of plot differ, but also because the latter rarely contain an easily identifiable Christian moral. The picaresque tradition which developed in Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth century with works such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) or *El Buscón* [The Swindler] (1626) influenced - and is alluded to in - Alfau's final novel, *Chromos*, but the tone and themes in *Old Tales from Spain* are unmistakably different. This chapter looks at the work of one nineteenth-century writer as a possible source of inspiration, but it goes without saying that much work remains to be done before we can categorically credit Alfau as the exclusive author of his tales.

⁵ See Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature; a Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*.

the basic motif of an animal (insect in Alfau) species seeking a king, there is little resemblance between the two texts.⁶

If the particular circumstances of plot are mostly Alfau's doing, we need to look at how he gives narrative body to those circumstances. After all, it is as examples of formal innovation that his more studied works have been praised. Here, however, I would argue that Alfau does many things that a Spanish writer had already been experimenting with in the mid-nineteenth century. Known mostly for his poems, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer wrote a number of short prose pieces between 1858 and 1870 that have come to be known as *Leyendas*. An omnibus volume was never published in his lifetime, and subsequent editors are unable to agree about how many of Bécquer's prose works qualify for inclusion.⁷ Twenty-two legends and an "Introducción sinfónica" Bécquer wrote for a volume he did not live to complete, the *Libro de los Gorriones* [Book of the Sparrows], were included in the first English translation (1909); twenty-two legends, of which five are not included in the aforementioned edition, are included in a 1979 Spanish edition, but without the introduction; thirty entries — again without the introduction — are collected under the header *narraciones* in a Spanish edition of his complete works (1995); finally, fifteen legends and the introduction are included in a more recent edition of his complete works (2004) which prefers the header "relatos contemporáneos" to designate thirteen narratives

⁶ I discuss Aesop's fables in more detail later on.

⁷ Joseph R. Arboleda identifies "El Caudillo de las Manos Rojas," published in *La Cronica* in 1858, as the earliest of Bécquer's prose pieces to qualify as a legend (35), yet Cornelia and Katherine Bates, in their English translation of the *Leyendas*, do not include it on the grounds that it was one of the narratives Bécquer wrote dealing with East Indian traditions, and therefore lacked the Spanish setting which, according to them, characterized the *Leyendas* (xvi). The matter is further complicated when we consider that Bécquer was not adamantly set on categorizing these narratives, calling them *leyendas* on occasions ("El Miserere"), *tradiciones* on others ("El Monte de Las Animas"), and finally *historias* and *cuentos* in others ("Es Raro").

other editions classify as legends.⁸ Notwithstanding the disagreement among editors, most if not all of the legends attempt a number of things that would resurface later in Alfau's tales.

What characterizes Bécquer's legends? Cornelia Frances Bates calls them sketches and claims that Bécquer "gathered" them during his archeological expeditions through Spain, and that as a result they are often more descriptive than narrative (xix-xx). Indeed, the story is often an afterthought for Bécquer, whose main purpose seems to have been to preserve in prose the wonders of natural landscapes, dilapidated architectural monuments, and local manners and customs he encountered in his travels (think of Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*). As Philip Ward points out, Bécquer's sketches follow the tradition of the *costumbrismo*, a genre in which "special attention [is] given to the portrayal of manners and customs characteristic of a region or country" (137). Edmund L. King suggests that Bécquer's tendency to write in his verses of the world in pictorial, symbolic, impressionistic, and even pointillist terms is an effect of his years spent studying painting. But when it comes to his prose, more specifically the *Leyendas*, King suggests that by depicting "unearthly" visions springing from the author's imagination, they anticipated the kind of anti-representational techniques that modern schools of painting would introduce in art much later, such as expressionism, cubism, Dadaism, and surrealism (61-74).

The above observation might sound like an obvious place to start comparing Alfau and Bécquer, given the former's oft-praised anti-representational leanings. Yet unearthly visions have provided inspiration for far too many writers, writers never credited with ushering pictorial art into the twentieth century, to make this seem like the most plausible trail to follow in relation

⁸ This list is not exhaustive, and ignores abridged editions that collect Bécquer's verse and prose in one volume.

to these two writers exclusively. That said, something else King says can help us find a more interesting point of contact between Bécquer and Alfau, namely his suggestion that the former's work "springs from his imagination." If such is the case, why does he seek to antedate his original prose pieces by mislabelling them as legends, traditions, or histories, just as Alfau seeks to antedate his tales by calling them old? Bécquer misleads his readers because those labels imply events that have acquired wide-spread circulation in any kind of narrative form — oral or written — over time due to their extraordinary or memorable circumstances, while he elsewhere claims sole responsibility as the source of those stories: "In dim corners of my mind there sleep, hidden away and naked, the freakish children of my imagination, waiting in silence for art to clothe them with language that it may present them in decency upon the stage of the world" (1) ["Por los tenebrosos rincones de mi cerebro, acurrucados y desnudos, duermen los extravagantes hijos de mi fantasía esperando en silencio que el arte los vista de la palabra para poder presentarse decentes en la escena del mundo"] (53).⁹ Bécquer, an avid reader and translator of German Romanticism, held imagination in high regard and he would have preferred thinking of himself as a lamp generating its own narratives rather than a mirror reflecting the tales of other tellers. B. Brant Bynum makes the point quite emphatically: "Indeed, in Spain, no author's conception of the world is as clearly representative of the essential qualities of Romanticism as is Bécquer's. No author is as irrepressibly concerned with exploring the inner self [...] and no author places his confidence in the imagination more directly" (14). Since his own sensibility provided such an overwhelming source of inspiration, it is hard to imagine Bécquer satisfied with a scribe's role, merely transcribing narratives of marvels others had previously imagined.

Thus Bécquer clearly authors his own fiction rather than transcribes pre-existing source

⁹ All Spanish quotations are taken from the 2004 edition of Bécquer's complete works, while the English translations are taken from the 1909 edition.

material, regardless of how he chose to title that fiction. This is not to suggest that his narratives are confined to contemporary settings; quite the opposite, most of them take place in the long-ago setting of children's stories. Yet they narrate events which do not — to the best of my admittedly limited knowledge in the field of Spanish folklore — exist in any previous narrative form. They are his original creations. Henry Charles Turk agrees, and although he argues that German Romanticism is a distinctive presence in the legends, he nevertheless explains that that presence is one of atmosphere, such as “the vitalistic feeling for nature,” rather than a “lifting” of specific texts and plot motifs (20).

That the same tendency is at work in *Old Tales from Spain* is made evident through much more than its title. Consider how “The Legend of the Bees” begins: “There are two invasions that have not been recorded in Spanish history” (116). Here the apparent newness of a tale situated in the past is attributed to an absence of historiographical documentation. But when Alfau adds that it is not known where the invading people came from, and that “their races have not been definitely ascertained” (*ibid.*), he proposes that we take his word concerning the legitimacy of a narrative which is clearly of his own doing since, according to his own admission, absolutely nothing is known about the actual circumstances of the event beyond the fact that men were once metamorphosed into bees. Every detail about the story comes from Alfau, yet if he abstained from locating such a fantastical narrative in the past, he might be dismissed as a fool spouting nonsense, or a mere writer of silly fables. By antedating his narrative, he manages to save face, so to speak. And the same applies to the other tales, all as fantastical, and consequently as hard to give credence to, as “The Legend of the Bees.” Of course, one might object that fantastical old tales are mostly told for the pleasure gained in telling — and hearing — them, while the truth claims of the events they narrate is usually brushed aside as irrelevant. Yet the issue of

determining whether readers give credence to such narratives is a bit more complex than that. We might recall Frank Kermode's distinction between a spiritual reader, who gives credence to the latent, or allegorical meaning of narratives, and the carnal reader, who gives credence to the manifest, or literal significance of narratives (1-21). If grown adults often err on the carnal side, championing fundamentalist, literal readings of fantastical old stories that are meant to be read spiritually, do we really expect children to fare much better? Whether young and old readers believe Alfau's tales or not, the fact that he antedates them suggests he desires to invest them with an authorship, and thus authority, that transcends his own person.

A first characteristic Bécquer and Alfau have in common, then, is a desire to emphasize the traditional qualities of their original creations. By being labelled as old, legends, histories, or traditions, their tales arrogate to themselves the status of narratives that have had currency for a long period of time. Invested with a kind of ancestral stature, their prose pieces acquire a legitimacy they would otherwise lack on their own. But if Alfau does so to make credible a collection of fantastical stories too much indebted to his own "unearthly visions" to find a trusting readership in the twentieth century (who but children — and carnal adult readers — believe children's stories anyway?), Bécquer invests his stories with ancestral stature for the sake of enriching them with what he deems to be the beautifying virtues of the past. Jorge Campos notes Bécquer's "gusto por la resurrección del pasado histórico" (9) [taste for the resurrection of a historical past].¹⁰ Throughout his work, Campos argues, Bécquer shows an almost obsessive fascination with ruins, architectural sites that have been beautified through decay and the passing of time. Much of his writing is devoted to describing how those ruins, progressively covered up by nature, improve on the original. Simply stated, what is new becomes more beautiful as it ages.

¹⁰ My translation.

And in order to confer some of that beautifying ancestry onto his narratives, Bécquer not only calls them legends, traditions, and histories, but also introduces most of them with a pseudo-attribution of former authorship. How much more intriguing a story sounds when it is presented as (say) the narrative of a beautiful maiden told in times immemorial, in a setting with a rich, evocative history, or again as the narrative of a manuscript kept hidden in a ruinous abbey for numberless years and mysterious reasons.

It is important to understand how such pseudo-attributions of authorship operate in Bécquer's work because Alfau will experiment with that feature in his tales, developing complex structures of authorship that are also based on pseudo-attributions. What is more, such attributions are not limited to authors purported to have written the narratives in days of yore, but often pertain to characters that relieve their narrator whenever the latter seems to have exhausted his narrative capabilities. Regardless of what kind of pseudo-attribution Bécquer and Alfau employed in each individual tale, the feature always produces the same effect: it insets the narratives. Take the opening paragraph of "La rosa de pasión," in which Bécquer introduces the story he is about to narrate as a narrative he has heard recounted in a region tied to a rich, exotic past: "One summer afternoon, in a garden of Toledo, this curious tale was related to me by a young girl as good as she was pretty" (126) ["Una tarde de verano, y en un jardín de Toledo, me refirió esta singular historia una muchacha muy buena y muy bonita"] (241). Or consider "El Miserere," in which he claims his story is inspired by a manuscript found in the library of an old neglected abbey. If Bécquer is telling a story someone else has told before him, either directly in speech or indirectly in writing, his narrative merely constitutes a retelling of that earlier act of telling. The nature of this inset structure becomes quite complex in some of the stories, with back-and-forth exchanges between various tellers relieving one another as the story progresses.

Although they vary in complexity, for the most part Bécquer's legends are inset in a uniform fashion, so that a discussion of a few of them will serve our present purpose. In "El monte de las ánimas" Bécquer begins by telling us that the tolling of bells on All Saints' Night has woken him from his sleep, and that the sound has reminded him of a tradition he was told some time ago in Soria (179) [129]. A second section then begins, one that will narrate that tradition, or so we assume. But rather than taking up the promised narrative immediately, the narrator introduces us to two characters: Alonzo, the son of the Count of Alcudiel, and his cousin Beatriz, the daughter of the Count of Borges. Both are hunting when Alonzo warns that they must return. Faced with his cousin's objections, he relates a "tradition" which explains his sudden haste. Many years ago, Knights Templar battled the nobles of Soria in the same mountain pass the cousins now find themselves in, on All Saints' Night. Most involved were slaughtered and, as a result, the king expelled the remaining Knights Templar. Since then, on the battle's anniversary, the place is said to be haunted by the ghosts of the slain. As it happens, Alonzo and Beatriz are hunting on that very day. Here, Alonzo's tradition ends. As far as he has heard it, the tradition is complete. As narrator, he has temporarily taken over for Bécquer, who had promised us a tradition in the opening paragraphs, but then deferred in favour of his character, who narrates that tradition for him. Once Alonzo is done, however, new events will involve him and thus implicate him in a kind of sequel to the narrative he has just produced. Bécquer is now forced to pick up the thread since Alonzo will not survive those events. In that sequel, Beatriz mocks her cousin's superstitious fears, and asks him to return to the pass to retrieve a scarf she has lost. He does so, but fails to return. Beatriz grows worried and when she spots her scarf stained with blood at dawn, dies of fright. We are then told Alonzo has been devoured by wolves in the pass.

Now since we know that Alonzo dies at the end of this sequel, it is clear that we would not have had access to the original tradition as he tells it to his cousin the very night he dies, unless his storytelling was itself simultaneously being mimicked by another teller who also has knowledge of the dénouement of the sequel tradition. Such convoluted interplay between author/narrator and character/narrator here, their taking turns narrating different sections of the story, is a feature Bécquer experiments with in almost every one of his *leyendas*, and nowhere more cleverly than in “El aderezo de esmeraldas.” Here, Bécquer and a friend pause in front of a book store to contemplate “the title of a book by Méry” (244) [“leíamos el título de un libro de Méry”] (308). As they walk away, the friend begins to relate a series of events he claims to have recently experienced, one that involves a beautiful woman, an expensive set of emeralds, a jealous rival, and a fatal duel. This narrative is only interrupted when the title of Méry’s work is suddenly revealed: *Histoire de ce qui n’est pas arrivé*. As it turns out, Bécquer’s friend made the whole thing up on the spot. Thus the narrative is hijacked from Bécquer, first by his friend, playing a practical joke on him, and then by the very real Joseph Méry, whose novella published in 1854 provides the means by which a character makes a fool out of his author.

In both cases, Bécquer begins telling a story when one of his characters takes over for him. In the first instance, he resumes narrative duties once his character can no longer perform them. In the other, his character cheats him out of the story he might have intended to write by borrowing from another writer’s work.¹¹ This kind of inset narrative is a distinctive feature of Alfau’s more experimental works, *Locos* and *Chromos*, but it is also present in no less than seven

¹¹ Actually, the character merely uses Méry’s title as inspiration to write his own “story of what never happened.” What he comes up with has nothing to do with Méry’s narrative, itself an early example of alternate-history fiction that looks at Napoleon’s 1799 campaign in Egypt and conjures up a counter-factual alternative to how it went. Thus Bécquer’s friend cheats both Bécquer and Méry.

of the ten stories in *Old Tales from Spain*. “The Rainbow” ends with the protagonist beginning to tell a story called “The Rainbow” after he discovers that most of what has taken place in Alfau’s narrative was actually “lifted” from a dream of his. The odd thing here is that he begins the story “Once upon a time...” which is not how Alfau begins it – “One day the peaceful village of N—...” Thus Alfau’s character may be suggesting his author got it all wrong, and is offering to correct that version of events. Or he may simply be punishing Alfau for lifting the story from his dream, preferring to rewrite it, or co-opt it, according to his own idea of what Alfau should have written in the first place. In “Twilight,” a young boy hears a story about the garden of twilight and, after setting off to discover that garden, meets a man who takes up narrating duties for Alfau, and tells him of the origins of that garden. Having completed his tale, this new narrator warns the boy that the quest Alfau has set him on is a wild goose chase – the garden of twilight is not a topographical place one can travel to. Thus one character is telling another character that his author has lied to him. In “Sails,” a foundling grows to be a seafaring hero who, arriving in a foreign land, meets a stranger who narrates the story of his origins. What Alfau was unwilling or unable to provide his character, a sense of identity, is provided by another character. The inset narrative here serves the purpose of pointing out Alfau’s inadequacies as a storyteller. “The Feud” features the same structure as “Twilight.” Here, a young boy dreams of crossbreeding a pigeon and parrot when his uncle narrates a story that warns him of the dangers inherent in that dream. Again, one of Alfau’s characters, by becoming an internal narrator, prevents another character from falling into a trap laid by his author (an invention which “would prove most disastrous” is how the uncle puts it). In “The Witch of Amboto,” the witch pinch-hits for Alfau when Urruchu is forced to eavesdrop on her narrative to discover how to overcome and precipitate the tale’s dénouement. Thus a character turned narrator provides another character

with the solution to a conflict their author was able to conceive but not resolve on his own. In “The Weeping Willow and the Cypress Tree,” two characters take turns narrating their experiences to each other, a dialogic exchange that ultimately helps them understand the puzzling circumstances of their current status in Alfau’s narrative. Finally, in “The Golden Worm,” a character makes up a fabulous story about the origins of fireflies after his daughter enquires about them. He ends his story with the disclaimer that it was not true, thereby exposing himself as a liar, and more importantly, exposing Alfau as a reporter of second-hand lies.

What these inset narratives in Alfau ultimately showcase is his inability to tell a story on his own. Left to fend for himself, the author would quickly reveal his shortcomings. Fortunately, he is aided by a cast of competent storytellers, and the authority conferred upon him by a claim to tradition. Thus an author can write off insecurities he may be feeling about his writing by claiming that it was written by either his own characters or an author who wrote before him. What is remarkable in both Alfau and Bécquer’s cases is that this expedient starts to expose itself as a disingenuous disclaimer, or a kind of fraud, when our failure to find earlier versions of those stories leads us to suspect that their narratives are the fruits of their exclusive efforts. Thus the claim to a past tradition ultimately proves to be a bluff. As for characters authoring themselves, we know that a written text is always the product of its living, pen-wielding author, even the parts and stories his characters act and tell. To attribute anxieties about unruly characters to a writer’s serious concern about the metafictional autonomy of identities, identities that exist only as the effect of their author spilling ink or typing alphabetical symbols on a keyboard in the real world, ultimately implies a relatively narrow focus that may cause readers to miss an equally important point: it is in life as we experience it, not in the liminal divide between reality and fiction, that narratives supplement one another to produce collaborative versions of what we

think and experience. In real life, storytellers consult with their characters (just think of the journalist interviewing various people, or the police interrogating various eye-witnesses) to draft a collaborative narrative that provides a more complete picture than would otherwise be provided by an isolated, solipsistic narrating perspective. Collaboration between author and narrator and character in life as in art can be done for the sake of achieving verisimilitude as well as for exposing its impossibility.

In the case of tales and legends that may derive from an oral tradition, emphasis on collaborative authorship is a given. But do Bécquer and Alfau derive their work from an oral tradition? If we concede that they are writers of original material rather than folklorists, we still have to address the fact that some of their “original” narratives seem to be drawn from an identical source. Turk convincingly demonstrates that although previous critics have detected elements of Hoffman’s *The Golden Pot* in Bécquer’s “Los ojos verdes,” there is in fact “no similarity in plot – only in the ‘mentality’” (25) as regards a shared interest in metaphysics, art, and the longing for an unattainable ideal (26-7). But when he also mentions Friedrich Fouqué’s *Undine* and Goethe’s “Der Fischer,” and claims that both these works depict “the abduction of a man by a water spirit” (24), similarities at the plot level become harder to ignore. Of course the three sources here readapt the figure of the water nymph found in a number of earlier cultures, and merely update the particulars of the archetype to fit their intended setting. So trying to prove that Bécquer had either Fouqué or Goethe in mind when he might have been thinking of a number of other water-nymph narratives will yield only inconclusive dead-ends. Still, it makes it harder to claim that a writer is working from scratch, out of his own inspiration, imaginative powers, or whatever label we choose to use for creative genius, when a third explanation can also account for what happens here, and which moreover nuances this rather crude binary of the

original or derivative author: Bécquer freely adapted pre-existing material which he infused with his own creative strictures, temperament, and sensibility, all of which rendered the final product distinctly his own. And some of Bécquer's other legends suggest that he and Alfau were indeed drawing from an archetypal pool of narratives.

In "La promesa," a young man named Pedro leaves his lover Margarita to join Ferdinand III of Castile in his campaign to conquer Seville and reclaim it from the Moors. As he leaves, he promises to marry her upon his return. But when Margarita's love is found out by her brothers, she is killed soon after Pedro departs. When he does return, he goes to her grave, and presses her hand still sticking out of the earth as a priest "blessed the mournful union" (162) ["bendijo la lúgubre unión"] (215) in a macabre ceremony. We are not told what becomes of Pedro, but the story closes with the suggestion that Margarita has metamorphosed into a flower: "At the foot of some great old trees there is a bit of meadow which, every spring, covers itself spontaneously with flowers. The country-folk say that this is the burial place of Margarita" (162) ["Al pie de unos árboles añosos y corpulentos hay un pedacito de prado que al llegar la primavera se cubre espontáneamente de flores. La gente del país dice que allí está enterrada Margarita"] (215).

The plot here presents striking parallels with Alfau's "The Weeping Willow and Cypress Tree," in which a posthumous union of a soldier and the love he left behind is made possible in a similar plant-metamorphosis ending (arboreal in one tale, floral in the other). True, the bare bones of both stories derive from a rather generic motif: the trope of a star-crossed young lover who, become a soldier, is doomed never to see his love again, provides the material for more than one poem in Housman's *Last Poems*, while the *liebstd* idea of two lovers united in death only innovates here by adding a bit of Ovidian metamorphosis. But the similarity may give the

lie to Bécquer's claim that he was creating solely from imagination, and when he speaks of his work as "the treasure of tinsel and tatters my Fancy has been heaping up in the rubbish chambers of the brain" (4) ["el tesoro de oropeles y guiñapos que ha ido acumulando la fantasía en los desvanes del cerebro"] (54), there is a strong suspicion that Fancy here was assisted by memory recalling an ur-version of the tale both he and Alfau may have heard as children, or encountered later in life as an adult, and merely retold with different emphases and details.¹²

It seems clear that Alfau's innovative inset narrative structures, a distinctive feature of *Locos*, *Chromos*, and as it now turns out *Old Tales from Spain*, were something Bécquer was already experimenting with almost a full century earlier. In this respect, then, *Old Tales from Spain* is more indebted to an old way of telling than a new one. As to the actual plot of the tales, we have demonstrated that both Bécquer and Alfau may have been drawing from a common pool of oral tales not previously transcribed, while another likely explanation might simply be that the latter had read the former. As it stands, a claim for the presence of forerunner features in *Old Tales from Spain* has started off on the wrong foot. Still, Alfau incorporates yet another element of the *Leyendas* in his tales, namely Bécquer's reworking of the Aesopian tradition of aetiological fables, and it remains to be seen whether what he does with that tradition marks him as a follower or an innovator.

Just-so stories, adaptation, and aetiological fables.

¹² But they would not have been the first authors to do so. Consider Nathaniel Hawthorne's justification for taking certain liberties when rewriting Greek myths for children in *A Wonder Book*: "it will be observed by everyone who attempts to render these legends malleable in his intellectual furnace, that they are marvellously independent of all temporary modes and circumstances" (7). Because the essential quality of a myth is distinguishable from its outward form, Hawthorne can deviate from the original, and rename Mercury Quicksilver (22), or have his narrator, Eustace Bright, suppose Midas had a daughter, although that narrator is fully cognizant that no previous source has ever mentioned her (55). Of course the difference here is that previous versions of the myths have survived in the case of Hawthorne, but not in those of Bécquer and Alfau. And it remains rather difficult to argue that they both worked from an earlier version now lost based only on some superficial similarities, when the more likely explanation might be that Alfau had read Bécquer.

Because Margarita is the Spanish word for daisy, and because the flower she transforms into is not identified in Bécquer's "La promesa," nothing prevents us from supposing that Bécquer's Margarita is transformed into her namesake. If this is the case, "La promesa" functions as an aetiological fable, a narrative genre that can be traced back to Aesop. Such fables tell a story that explains the origins of a natural phenomenon such as an animal's particular shape or feature, the colour of a flower, the course of a waterway, etc. "La rosa de pasión" is another such aetiological fable found in Bécquer. And just as the blood of the young Sara gives the rose its color in Bécquer's legend, so drops of a witch's blood will give poppies their distinctive colour in Alfau's "The Witch of Ambotto" (here again, both tales are updated versions of an Ovidian myth, that of Adonis). Alfau may have picked up on this element of Bécquer's legends as well, since his ten tales all function as aetiology – of rainbows, twilight, four-leaved clovers, sails, pigeon and parrot antagonism, bees, poppies, swan songs, willows and cypresses, and fireflies. In fact, one could argue that Alfau's book is about origins, foundational narratives that reveal, not the epic foundation of great human civilisations, but the founding incident during which a wonder or quirk of the natural world occurs for the first time. This constitutes another reason to think of the book as engaging with a longstanding tradition of tales. That these foundational narratives are all fictions reminds us of how complex a tradition Alfau inherited.

One would expect that the aetiology fable underwent significant changes in the 2500 or so years that separate Aesop's from Bécquer's and Alfau's contributions to the genre. Yet compared to a more famous modern example of the genre, Alfau's tales seem rather old fashioned. Laura Gibbs discusses aetiological fables in her introduction to the edition of Aesop which she prepared and translated for Oxford, and she cites Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902) as a recent contribution to the genre (xviii). But if we compare Alfau and Kipling's tales, we end up

with yet another aspect of his work that roots itself in a past narrative tradition, rather than in a line of modern innovation.¹³ To understand better what I am getting at, we need to pay close attention – as we did with Alfau and Bécquer – to Kipling’s title. Just-so stories comprise best-guess explanations of what their author presumes may have happened, and their claim to truth should always be received with this hypothetical nature kept in mind; but for one twentieth-century historian of science, they were dangerously misleading.

In “Not Necessarily a Wing,” Stephen Jay Gould famously dismisses early versions of the evolutionary theory of functional shift as “just-so stories” (148). What exactly was the theory meant to account for? Darwin was pressed to explain how a complex structure, such as a wing, could function in incipient stages when its functionality was a product of its highly complex, and completely evolved, or finished, form. Simply put, a wing in one of its rudimentary stages could not have functioned as an organ of flight. The sudden origin of a wing perfectly adapted for flight offered a way out of such a dilemma, but it contradicted the fundamental Darwinian principle of trans-generational evolution. Avoiding this pitfall, Darwin countered by offering the idea of functional shift. At one time, primitive forms of wings may have served a different function from the one they currently serve. For instance, a wing may have been a thermoregulation organ before it became an aerodynamic one. The problem is that Darwin had no way of proving this theory during his lifetime. Although evolutionary biologists finally confirmed his idea by examining evidence (experimenting on insect wings), what prevailed in

¹³ I am not claiming Alfau read him, only that what he does with aetiology is a throwback to older aetiological models which Kipling had previously developed in his own way. Thus Alfau the so-called innovator proves an old-fashioned writer here again, and we see this more clearly when we contrast him with an innovative writer whom he very well may have never read.

the interim was, according to Gould, a “lamentable mode of storytelling” (149) that appealed to tall tales and best guesses rather than verifiable evidence.

Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories* certainly qualify as “just-so stories” as Gould understood them: tall tales arrived at through speculation and fancy rather than observation. Yet for the most part, with a quasi-Darwinian rigour they present adaption as a likely explanation for the variety of forms in the natural world. In “How the Leopard got his Spots,” the leopard and an Ethiopian find that their habitual source of prey has disappeared. When they appeal for advice to the wisest animal in all of South-Africa, a dog-headed baboon named Baviaan, they are advised to change as soon as they can (49). Both ultimately discover that their prey has become harder to detect because it has adapted to its environment by acquiring camouflaged coating. Their own survival will depend on their ability to adapt to their environment, and so they do: the leopard acquires spots, while the Ethiopian becomes black, in order to disguise themselves. In “The Elephant’s Child,” the elephant acquires his trunk while tugging to free himself from a crocodile who has bitten his nose (and the new, elongated form, acquires new functions, such as swatting flies, and picking up fruit, thereby confirming the functional-shift theory). In “Old Man Kangaroo,” the kangaroo acquires his shape while trying to escape from a dingo chasing him. In “Beginning of the Armadillos,” the hedgehog and tortoise morph characteristics of their respective species into a new species, the armadillo, in order to better equip themselves against the threats of predators. In all of these tales, new forms evolve out of exchange between species struggling to evade and overtake one another.

Obviously, Kipling’s narratives do not rely on empirical observation, yet the aetiology they put forward is founded on a Darwinian rationale which clearly sets them apart from the

myth-founded aetiology of Alfau's narratives. A last example, which shows just how radically Kipling's stories depart from Aesopian aetiology, can help us understand just how adamantly Alfau's tales stay committed to it. Consider "The Cat that Walked," in which the friendship between man and dog originates in the following manner. Having smelt roast mutton coming from a cave, a wild dog asks for meat. A woman throws him a piece and comments: "Wild thing out of the wild woods, help my man to hunt through the day and guard this cave at night, and I will give you as many roast bones as you need" (203). Now compare this with the first chapter of Konrad Lorenz's *Man meets Dog*, "How it may have started." He suggests that man began feeding jackals some 50 000 years ago after discovering that hungry jackals scavenging for scraps at night acted as a kind of canine alarm system by howling when dangerous predators approached, and that this "epochal-moment" comprised the first time man fed animals for the purpose of making use of them (1-15). Although Lorenz presents this as a best-guess scenario, the fact remains that a leading ethologist formulated a theory that confirmed Kipling's just-so theory presented in a narrative destined for children: if the dog guards her cavern at night, the woman will provide him with meat.

While both authors cannot rely on empirical evidence to support their theories, they nevertheless present a theory that explains a fact — the domestication of dog by man — as the result of an exchange that mutually benefits two species against potentially life-threatening enemies (starvation for dogs, predators for men). This is not only a very Darwinian explanation, but also a complete rejection of the aetiological model found in Aesop, Bécquer, and Alfau. Thus Kipling's *Just So Stories* are modern aetiological fables, while the stories in Alfau's *Old Tales from Spain*, published twenty-seven years later, hark back to an older model; although the former do not rely on observation, they still manage to avoid Aesop's reliance on myths that have no

basis either in observation or plausibility, while they formulate explanations that appeal to adaptation instead. Alfau's aetiological tales, by comparison, rely on myths involving deities and magical agencies that do not follow any rational patterns of causality. One need merely re-read the synopses included above, and count how many of them rely on metamorphoses induced by witches or wise men, magical tree branches and paint palettes, anthropomorphic deities, and other cases of miraculous phenomena. Here again, then, the tales are constructed in a way that nods to an old way of telling, not a new. Clearly, although Alfau's tales are of his own doing, they do things in accordance with a venerable tradition, and in this respect, the title is not a misnomer.

If we consider the multiple ways in which I have suggested we read Alfau's tales as inscribed in an established tradition rather than breaking away from it, readers might be surprised to hear that there is at least one other way in which Alfau is indebted to the past. The "Clover" can be read as an aetiological fable in two ways: it tells of the origins of the four-leaf clover, but also of the origins of a popular Spanish custom. In the early nineteenth century, Theresa Cornwallis West had already written of the Spanish custom of seeking the "trefoil" on St-John's Day (245). She translated a variant of the lyric relating to that custom (which Alfau uses in his story with slight variants), and published the original as an appendix: "A coger el trebol, damas, / la mañana de San Juan, / A coger el trebol dammas, / Que despues no habra lugar (301).¹⁴ James Fitzmaurice Kelly claims that the lyric was first recorded in 1817 by George Bernard Depping (117), whose version is identical to West's, so that the variants in Alfau are more than likely due to his tampering. But the point here is that Alfau took a short lyric about a popular custom and

¹⁴ Her translation reads: "Hence forth to pluck the Trefoil / This morning of Saint John; / To pluck the Trefoil, Ladies, / Ere the good time be gone!" (246).

provided it with a narrative explaining how the custom came to be. Nothing in the lyric alludes to Juanin and his magical talking goose, nor his daring rescue of the princess. It only refers to the practice of picking clovers on St-John's Day. Alfau quotes the lyric, and then conceives of an elaborate romance that explains why and how that practice was performed for the first time. Like something straight out of Frazer, there is a move from ritual to romance here, where Alfau takes a popular cultural phenomenon and writes a romance out of it, albeit a short one.¹⁵ The inclusion of the lyric here is the telltale clue that points to the ritual, a dead giveaway which other tales are not provided with (although the closing remarks of "The Witch of Amboto" pertaining to the practice of planting corn in fields where poppies grow might qualify as such). Yet one wonders how many more of his tales derive from Spanish customs, and how many might have easily been detected had Alfau provided more of these clues.

Conclusion – does metafiction make it new?

One would think that, for all of its indebtedness to tradition, *Old Tales from Spain* displays innovative features in that it is an early example of self-conscious metafiction. And it does, but in order to show how, I need to return briefly to Bécquer's *Leyendas*. In "Creed en Dios," Teobaldo de Montagut, Baron of Fortcastell, unleashes his greyhounds upon a priest who defies him during a hunt. Not long after, he returns to his domain and is surprised by the great distance yet to travel. He knocks at a village hut and requests lodgings for the night. But as he announces himself, the reply he receives confuses him: "Teobaldo de Montagut, the count of the

¹⁵ Actually, Lope de Vega did something similar in the seventeenth century, in *La noche de San Juan*. The play does not address the custom Alfau references, but it does allude to two other popular superstitions associated with the night: that a maiden's hair will grow inordinately long on that evening, and that the first name she hears will be that of her husband. Yet Lope does not explain the origins of those superstitions in his play, as Alfau does with that of the clover custom. For more on *La noche de San Juan*, and an interesting discussion of the play's self-reflexive structure, v. Anita K. Stoll's introduction to her critical edition (1988).

story! Bah! Go your way and don't come back to rouse honest folk from their sleep to hear your stupid jests!" (149) ["Teobaldo de Montagut, el del cuento!...Bah!...Seguid vuestro camino, y no vengáis a sacar de su sueño a las gentes honradas para decirles chanzonetas insulsas"] (171).

Unnerved, he resolves to carry on and arrives at his castle, but a monk opens the gate and declares that the property has been a monastery for some time now, adding that "[i]ts last lord, the story goes, was carried off by the Devil..." (150) ["A su último señor, según cuentan, se lo llevó el diablo"] (165). "The story goes" here suggests that the monk gives little credence to the narrative of Teobaldo's existence, or dismisses it as mere folktale and superstition rather than actual history. It is enough to convince Teobaldo that the life he has previously led has merely been a fictional entity sustained in a popular narrative; he declares himself a miserable sinner, and asks for admittance into the monastery.

Such instances in which characters reflect on their fictional identity were to become a staple of metafiction in the twentieth century, but even its presence in a narrative published in 1862 is not exactly ground-breaking here. As I suggest in my introduction, this feature is what critics usually identify as the most innovative of Alfau's prose. Now, *Old Tales from Spain* was commissioned by Doubleday in 1929 as part of a series destined for children, *Tales and Adventure Library for Young Folks*.¹⁶ Jessica Tiffin writes of a "proto-metafictional awareness in classic fairy tales" (20) arising out of the genre's problematic relationship with reality and goes on to argue that postmodern playful self-consciousness reprises an inherent feature of fairy tales (23). For her part, Linda Hutcheon, in *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafiction Paradox*,

¹⁶ Other titles give a good idea of the series' cosmopolitan scope: Eric Kästner's *Emil and the Detectives*, Kurt Weise's *The Chinese Ink-stick*, Donald Baxter Macmillan's *Kah-Da: Life of a North Greenland Eskimo Boy*, Herbert Best's *Garam the Hunter; a Boy of the Hill Tribes*, Selma Lagerlof's *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, Elizabeth Miller's *Pran of Albania*, and Monica Shannon's *California Fairy Tales*.

favours the term metafiction over postmodernism to designate self-conscious fiction, since the latter implies fiction written in the wake of modernism. She argues that critics opting for the latter have to explain the presence of such a “postmodern” feature in pre-modernist works such as Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, and quotes Severo Sarduy who, before her, situates the origins of the feature in Baroque Spanish literature (2-3). Both these sources, then, contend that self-conscious play is not an innovation of the twentieth-century, the same self-conscious play Alfau is often credited for having originated.

Obviously, self-conscious fiction comes in all shapes and sizes. Bécquer’s “Creed en Dios” provides an early example of a character coming to terms with the fictional nature of his identity, but other kinds of self-consciousness exist. For example, Hutcheon breaks down metafiction into various subcategories, including overt diegetic self-consciousness, metafiction “in which the focus is on the process of actually writing the fictional text one is reading at the moment” (53). Although this kind of metafiction is the most striking feature of Alfau’s other works, it does not feature in *Old Tales from Spain*. True, the narrator is constantly relieved of his narrating duties by his characters, but he never refers to himself as a diegetic figure, and never identifies himself as Alfau.¹⁷ Another kind of metafiction is at work in the tales (as well as in

¹⁷ Another title in the Doubleday series offers a great example of overt diegetic self-consciousness: the English translation of Eric Kästner’s *Emil and the Detectives* (1930 - the German original appeared in 1929, the same year Doubleday published Alfau’s tales). The novel is set in contemporary Berlin, and tells of a young boy’s efforts to recover stolen money. Early on, Emil follows the thief on a tram and realizes he cannot pay his fare, when a stranger pays for him and tells the conductor to leave the child alone. When the conductor objects that most children pretend to be without means only to laugh at the naïve kindness of strangers once they reach their stop, the man answers: “I don’t think this one will.” (44). How can he be so prescient? Near the novel’s end, after Emil has solved the theft and become something of a local celebrity, a journalist asks him a few questions, at which point Emil recognizes him as the Samaritan who helped out on the tram. Shortly thereafter Kästner informs us that the journalist in his novel is named none other than Kästner (107). Thus Kästner inserts himself in his narrative during two key moments: the first one is pivotal because his intervention allows the narrative to move forward (without the fare, Emil would have lost sight of the thief); the second one no less because he acts as a reporter transcribing in narrative — albeit journalistic — form the experiences of Emil. We know that Kästner was himself a journalist in Berlin at the time of the events described, so this use of metafiction qualifies as overt diegetic self-consciousness - Kästner

Locos and *Chromos*), and is a variant of what Hutcheon identifies as a “co-participation” in which the “making of fictive worlds and the constructive, creative functioning of language itself are now self-consciously shared by author and reader” (30). Hutcheon cites Julio Cortazar’s *Rayuela* as a case in point. Here, the author and reader are accomplices since Cortazar invites the latter to choose the order in which the chapters will be read (note that Alfau invited his readers to do the same thirty-five years earlier in his prologue to *Locos*). In *Old Tales from Spain*, we have already shown how that co-participation operates on another level, between author and characters, just as it did in Bécquer’s *Leyendas*.

So what conclusion can we draw about the one innovative — by way of Bécquer — feature of *Old Tales from Spain*? The procedure seems to be suggesting that if authors relied solely on themselves to tell a whole story, their narratives would omit crucial insights that other perspectives could have yielded, all for the sake of unity, that is of telling it *their* way. One way out of such omissive storytelling then, is to get straight to the point of one’s own story, and then give the characters a chance to tell, in their own words and in their own time, what it is their author could not have related without sacrificing the unity and cohesion of the story they were themselves busy telling. Such a turn-taking structure eschews the polyphonic cackle of simultaneous storytelling which we find, for example, in parliamentary-styled exchanges. In Bécquer’s case, the polite turn-taking allows narrator and characters the opportunity to provide their own “chunks” of the story, filling in for each other whenever the other is unable to go on. In Alfau’s case, the characters seem a bit more critical of their narrating deity, often pointing out to other characters the dangers of relying on the misleading information he has provided them.

draws from his own personal experience as a journalist to make a diegetic appearance as a character giving an earlier narrative form of the narrative he now produces as an extra-diegetic author.

What both seem to suggest is that stories are collaboratively told, a fitting admission seeing as their legends and tales may have been culled from an oral tradition not recorded elsewhere.

I may be accused of unduly emphasizing the novelty of co-participation between an author/narrator and his characters that tends to inset the narrative structure of his work. After all, *The Arabian Nights*, *The Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales*, among others, offer three examples of earlier works that proceed along similar lines, only they make use of the procedure far more conspicuously and consistently than do Bécquer and Alfau. But by acknowledging this, I want to make clear that Alfau's prose emerges out of a longstanding tradition of experimental narrative structures, a tradition that flourished long before he began writing, and a tradition which other contemporaneous writers were also exploring. Just as the experimental features of *Locos* were in part shown to be inspired by its narrator's confused memories of past personal experiences, so an experimental aspect of *Old Tales from Spain* may have been inspired by an author Alfau could have read. When I come to discuss his final work in the next chapter, I will ask the same question I have been asking of *Locos* and *Old Tales from Spain*: what are we to make of the ways in which *Chromos*, a novel clearly informed by Alfau's desire to experiment with new literary narrative forms, is also informed by the past?

The Varieties of Picaresque Experience in *Chromos*

Chromos is a loose baggy monster of a novel if ever there was one, and its heavily interpolated structure presents real challenges. We can break it down into three sections. In the first (7-22), Don Pedro asks Alfau to write a book about Americaniards, Spanish emigrants living in New York. The friends head towards an undisclosed location where Don Pedro suggests Alfau will find inspiration for his book. As they arrive, Alfau is surprised to find the key to the place in his pocket. He enters the building, lights a match, and is overpowered by the full force of his memories (21). He sees calendar chromos on the wall depicting two typical Spanish figures, one of a young man with a *calañes* hat serenading, another of a dying bullfighter. In the light of the match, the chromos “grow dolefully animated and gather the deceptive depth of a reverie [...] to form a confused tapestry depicting people and scenes that came to life, but more like things remembered or imagined” (22).

What follows this arresting beginning is no less than five inset narratives (pp. 23-344), most of them delivered in instalments: in the first, Alfau listens to his friend Garcia read from his work in progress, the intergenerational saga of the Sandoval family, told in seven instalments (25-34, 56-69, 86-102, 110-119, 153-67, 206-39, 282-92); in the second, Garcia recalls an episode from his childhood in the Spanish village of Vizcaitia (36-46); in the third, Garcia reads from another narrative endeavour, the story of Julio Ramos, a man endowed with the remarkable ability to skip over large periods of time whenever his impatience takes over. It is told in four instalments (53-6, 78-84, 104-6, 200-4). In the fourth, Alfau tells the story of the Coello family: after Don Hilarion passes away, his wife preserves his corpse at his desk where once a year, on the anniversary of his death, he is exposed to friends and family in ceremonies that become more

and more grotesque as the corpse putrefies and finally collapses (173-93). In the fifth, Alfau telepathically peers into the thoughts of a man named Fulano, thoughts either pathetic, terrifying, absurd, or ridiculously self-flattering. It is told in four instalments, of which the penultimate is broken down into numerous sections (139-40, 241-4, 299-326, 329-41).

In a final section (345-8), the flame of the match Alfau has lit at the end of part one to view the chromos bites into his fingers, and he puts it out. Outside, Don Pedro tells him to leave the door open as he exits the abandoned El Telescopio; that way, the Americaniards we have just been reading about “can escape more easily” and come “mix with the other Americaniards” not trapped in chromos but living in *Chromos* (345). A few days later, Alfau enters St Patrick’s Cathedral, and stares into the candlelight, shifting and potentially evanescent, but more permanent than that of a match. The novel closes as Alfau realises that the visions of part two were merely “a kaleidoscope of fancies materialized by forgotten chromos,” and reflects that the incidents of the past were not “really as great as they seemed now,” but only acquired their splendour through the effect of time, which “increases the proportion of such events” (348).

The above accounts for 233 of the novel’s 348 pages. The remaining 115 are spread throughout the second section and provide transitions for the independent narratives included there. They concern objections Alfau raises in regards to Garcia’s literary output, especially critical of Garcia’s extensive use of *sicalipsis*, or pornographic content, and *cursi*, or corny melodramatic situations. At other times Americaniards, most of them carried over from *Locos* (even those said to have died in Spain in the earlier work), partake in much carousing and heated debates on the nature of time, identity, the universe, and Spanish culture. Most of the drinking sessions take place in and around El Telescopio, the foremost Spanish tavern in New York. The

ringleader of this merry bunch is unquestionably Don Pedro, a Mephistophelian figure (10) who presents an “absurd combination of a slightly daffy Irish-Moorish Don Quixote with sinister overtones of Beelzebub” (22). At one time the most promising music conductor in Spain, a mysterious accident has left him with a “marked limp” in one leg and he now earns a living as a bandleader in New York, where he is referred to as “the Emperor of Latin American music and the Svengali of Swing” (9).

In this loose baggy monster of a chapter, I do a number of things that find their inspiration in Don Pedro. First, I look at how one piece of music in particular figures as ideology in *Chromos*, and discuss what Alfau and his characters think of that ideology. It favours action, and especially self-serving, criminal action, over the contemplative life, and it finds its literary counterpart in the Spanish picaresque tradition. Then, I show how Don Pedro’s theory of time as a fourth perpendicular allows Alfau to dismiss that tradition and propose a way of rewriting it that favours verisimilitude and contemplation over plot and an ideology of action. Dismissing the established model of a *pícaro* partaking in all sorts of contrived (mis)adventures, Alfau produces an episodic narrative that favours the un-plotted disorder of life as it occurs in the random design of casual exchanges. The fact that he only manages to produce such a narrative by remembering — or imagining — those exchanges while staring at *chromos* also validates another key point of Don Pedro’s theory, namely that art alone allows us to draw permanent memories out of ephemeral experiences.

From ages eighteen to twenty-five, Alfau wrote music criticism for *La Prensa*, a Spanish newspaper in New York (Stavans “Anonymity” 148). When he began writing fiction a year later,

he made use of that experience to fill *Locos* and later *Chromos* with casual allusions to classical compositions (*Kreisleriana*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *The Merry Widow*, *La Bohème*, *L'Africaine*), popular songs and Broadway musicals ("The Fountain in the Park," *A Trip to Chinatown*), popular Spanish genres (*seguidilla*, *saeta*, *chotis*), and even a zany exegesis of Beethoven's Third Symphony (261-2). He may also have developed the practice of using his characters as mouthpieces for his own views by having them theorize on the isolated nature of Spanish music vis-à-vis European music (312), or discussing the maladroitness of famous composer witticisms, as when Don Pedro muses about Berlioz's comment, upon hearing of Chopin's death, that the composer had been dying all his life (257).

In all these musical allusions, one work is invoked with particular insistence in *Chromos*. On five separate occasions (57, 59, 159, 166, 225), Alfau makes explicit reference to the zarzuela *La Gran Via* (1886), either referring to its plot in general, quoting specific passages in the libretto, or describing the particulars of its first performance, on July 2, 1886, in Madrid.¹ In fact, Garcia makes these references in his Sandoval saga, explaining to an annoyed Alfau that *La Gran Via* provides his work-in-progress's leitmotif (226). This one-act operetta — the zarzuela subgenre known as *genero chico* — showcases life in the periphery of one of Madrid's most famous streets, days before it is to be inaugurated. In some scenes, personified tributary streets

¹ Alfau seems to have been an aficionado of zarzuela in general, since *Locos* and *Old Tales from Spain* contain at least two disguised references to zarzuelas. In *Locos*, Maria Valverde's first husband is identified as Joaquin, and Joaquin Valverde was a zarzuela composer who collaborated with Federico Chueca to write *La Gran Via*. Among Valverde's lesser known compositions, we should note the elusive - and obscure - *La noche de San Juan* (Webber 275), which Alfau may have been thinking of while writing "The Clover." The Spanish National Library lists Valverde's manuscript in its catalogue, but the zarzuela was never revived, and attempts to find a printed version of the libretto have drawn a blank. As to zarzuela, it was a popular form of entertainment enjoyed by a middle and lower class audience who either could not afford to attend more expensive theatres where Italian Opera was performed for an elite audience, or who simply preferred seeing the lives of its own members portrayed on the stage. As Deborah L. Parsos suggests, there is something self-reflexive about zarzuelas: "the audience (...) visited the theatre to enjoy its own image, the pleasure of watching the whole of Madrid watching itself" (69-70), a fact which would have delighted such a self-reflexive writer as Alfau.

such as the Calles de la Sartén, Libertad, Primavera, Paloma, Luna Montera and Turco worry that the new street will threaten their very existence, while in others pickpockets, policemen, merchants and pedestrians go about their daily affairs, some eagerly awaiting the day of inauguration and its accompanying festivities. As Deborah L. Parsos points out, in *La Gran Via* plot takes a back seat to an allegory of urban redesigning in which nostalgia for the old, familiar life of Madrid progressively gives way to excitement for a new project aimed at transforming the city into a modern metropolis (74).

Since *Chromos* is about Spanish exiles living in New York, and since it continually recalls and discusses the cultural heritage of Spain, its food and wines, music, dances, and bullfights, one could read the novel as a rewriting of *La Gran Via* for an émigré audience, Spaniards who were forced into modernity and distanced from traditional Spain by spatial, not temporal, displacement. Critics have tended to focus on the novel's thematic treatment of non-native language in order to demonstrate that the Spaniard's spatial remove from Spain entails a linguistic displacement, the frustrating experience of having to learn a new language in order to survive in an unfamiliar, often hostile, environment (Galasso 2012, Castillo 2005). Interested in the role *La Gran Via* plays in Alfau's novel, yet wary of reducing the novel to simply another example of the literature of displacement, I propose to address the zarzuela's presence in *Chromos* in a somewhat different light.

On two separate occasions, a specific scene from *La Gran Via* elicits a strong emotional response from Paco Serrano, a character in Garcia's Sandoval saga. In the first, the "Jota de los Ratas" triggers memories of the Spanish picaresque tradition and its roguish heroes, and in the second, the same scene evokes memories of Paco's past and current criminal activities. Paco's

different responses on those two occasions reveal a momentary change of heart brought about by his having led the life of a rogue and seen the toll it takes on his family. What was initially appealing about the roguish lifestyle turns out to be the distortions and trappings of the picaresque genre's conventions. In *Chromos*, Alfau will try to do away with those conventions, first in Garcia's Sandoval saga, and then in his own novel, set among the Spanish expatriate community of New York in the early 1900s. In doing so, he paints an unflattering picture of what actual roguery amounts to once freed from the clichés of generic conventions, and suggests what a new sort of picaresque literature might look like: a novel that showcases the *picaro*'s evolving sense of identity through a series of dialogic encounters rather than roguish adventures. As I will try to show, such a schema supports Don Pedro's view of a universe in which all actions are shown to be illusory, and therefore meaningless. In such a universe, meaning is no longer corollary to actions as cause, but to words as effect; not actions that produce glorious catastrophes and resolutions, but conversations produced by friendly exchange, and that reveal an interiority of character much richer than the isolated, individual actions had previously done for the outward-tending heroes of picaresque fiction. Although such interiority does not translate into a clear sense of identity in *Chromos*, it nevertheless allows characters to complicate, and thus enrich, their worldview and sense of self.

In one of the rare passages of Garcia's Sandoval saga that manages to avoid *cursi* melodrama and attain a level of genuine poignancy, Paco Serrano nervously awaits his son, whom he has not seen since he abandoned his family years ago following his wife's suicide (a suicide for which his numerous infidelities are responsible). In dishevelled and dirty attire, he

overhears the *Vals del Caballero de Gracia* [Waltz of the Graceful Gentleman] being played in an adjoining room, and the music brings “back his whole life” (166). That life has been a failure, as he has turned out far differently from what he once longed to become, a “graceful, crisp old dandy” like the gentleman in the waltz he first heard more than 30 years earlier. Instead, he has become “a petty thief and crook,” a fate more accurately captured in another scene from *La Gran Via*, the “Jota de los Ratas.” It stars three playful pickpockets who enjoy taunting the police and brag that whenever they are caught, they always manage to escape the following day. On hearing it thirty years earlier, Paco had fondly recalled the rogue of the Spanish picaresque tradition, and had reflected with regret that that figure was a product of a bygone era. Yet hearing the scene again all these years later, Paco realizes he offers a broken down, shabby, and destitute version of the jota’s jovial thieves.

Paco is not the only listener to have been deeply moved by the jota. After hearing a performance of *La Gran Via* in 1889, Nietzsche experienced the same enthusiasm Paco feels the first time he hears the zarzuela. He wrote the following to his friend Peter Gast, singling out the jota for praise:

A trio of three solemn old gigantic villains is the strongest thing that I have heard *and seen* – *also* as music: genius cannot be formulated... Since I know a great deal of Rossini – am familiar with *eight* operas – I took my favorite one, *Cenerentola*, as an example for comparison: it is a thousand times too kindhearted when compared with the Spaniards. You see, only a complete rogue could think out even the plot – it is just like a conjuring trick the way the villains flash like lightning into view. (333-4)

Rafael Lamas claims that what appealed to Nietzsche in *La Gran Via* was a “popular cheerfulness [which] conformed both to [Nietzsche’s] theory of vitalism and his radical ideas on mankind” (193). Lamas does not elaborate, but for Scott Lash, who reviews three schools of vitalism, the Nietzschean tradition of vitalism “focuses on power,” and views vitalistic power as the “self-generating life force” that enables one to overcome “slave moralities” (324-5). *La Gran Via* provides a good example of such a force in the pickpockets’ cheerful defiance of moral authority as they taunt the police. Moreover, that defiance of slave morality finds an echo in another scene, the tango “La Menegilda” (the housemaid), in which a poor housemaid, aware that a dutiful performance of her menial chores shall never free her from housework drudgery in a “thousand years,” solicits advice from her conscience. And conscience replies “Aprende a sisar, aprende a sisar, aprende a sisar” [learn to thief, learn to thief, learn to thief]. Rossini’s *Cenerentola*, with its gorgeous musical portrayal of love satisfied, was never like this. Such a scene, which advocates a breaking free from guilty consciousness, along with the jota, would certainly have delighted Nietzsche, who valued *bonne humeur* and freedom from guilt complexes above all else. In the end, though, he praises the composer of *La Gran Via* by calling him a “complete rogue.” The term may surprise here, since it almost always has important pejorative connotations. Still, recall that Paco also singles out the jota for consideration on the grounds that it recalls a tradition of roguery. What exactly can a sixteenth-century literary character have to do with a modern conception of man that constitutes a radical break with previous conceptions of man, the Übermensch?

An important clue can be found in the recording of Paco’s thoughts after attending *La Gran Via*’s first historical performance, thoughts which give a good idea of what is implied by the tradition he has in mind. The passage needs to be quoted at length:

The gay, mocking music had all the vim and spark of Spanish roguery. It moved at a quick pace, it glorified the Ratas, the pickpockets of Madrid who guy all laws and amuse the public. In that dance of the pickpockets lived the ever-seditious Spanish race. It was broad, fast, accurate, fearless, bold, indifferent, but underneath it concealed a torrent of melancholy, of cynical bitterness. It brought back the tradition of Ginés de Pasamonte, scoffing Don Quixote's ideals; of Rinconete and Cortadillo aging prematurely in the poisoned shadow of the Patio de Monipodio; of the Lazarillo de Tormes, born with a wisdom which defies life and outwits age and experience. Listening to the "Jota de los Ratas," pompous and sad, brilliant, shady, straightforward and crooked, one could see the magnificent gallery of Spanish rogues in all its glory, pass by in all its wretchedness and fade away in all its sinful earnestness into the ever-thirsty, inevitable maelstrom of forgetfulness that keeps on swallowing every typical and worthwhile manifestation of Spanish life. Gone is Ginés de Pasamonte, the man who most brutally disappointed the sublime madman in life, to whom the unique hidalgo owes his conclusion that "to do a good turn to a villain is like casting water into the sea." Gone are Rinconete and Cortadillo and with them the famous Patio, that worthy school of crookery, primitive laboratory of crime in which the masterful Monipodio presided with all the prestige and dignity of a man aged in depravity who has dedicated his life to the advancement of evil. Gone is the Lazarillo de Tormes, who led the blind through existence and therefore learned to rely on his own sight, who would have made old men lower their eyes for shame that he could see the rotten core of their souls, when after all his own soul was still pure. Gone are countless others, only a few pickpockets remain astray, but their spirit is the same in quality, their attitude the same. Listening to the "Jota de los Ratas" one felt

that it was a last spark from a magnificent, extinguished cast, and it awakened something in the public, in this ever-seditious Spanish public who always is ready to aid the outlaw, to side with the *Ratas*, as a tacit reproach against the invasion of efficient morality, as a subconscious tribute to the great rogues who were. (59-60)

There are a number of things here that relate to the current discussion. First, the Spanish public's tacit reproach against conventional ethical standards recalls Nietzsche's defiance of slave moralities. Such a popular sentiment of defiance is given voice in a music that "glorifies" the *ratas* and their lifestyle, elevating them into a transcendent sphere of glorified meaning. In this way, the music, as well as the picaresque tradition which it conjures, acts as ideology, that is, as an idea about something that is meant to hide the true nature of that thing. The significance of this point in relation to *Chromos* will be discussed further on. Secondly, although Paco views the rogue as a distinctly Spanish type, the examples he recalls do not present a uniform vision of roguery (Lazarillo remains pure throughout his ordeals, while Rinconete and Cortadillo have actually "embraced crookery" long before their meeting with Monipodio). It thus stands to reason that if traditional forms of roguery do not agree with one another, modern forms will also be at odds. And indeed, Paco's anaphoric "gone is..." emphasizes that the type has not survived into the modern age, and that a handful of pickpockets comprise the sole remnants of a bygone era. The passage does not merely constitute a survey of the rogue in Spain's literary history, then, but also the rogue's eulogy. Yet for the length of time involved in an evening's entertainment, *La Gran Via* has brought him back to life. The music of the jota resurrects and conveys an ideology of glorified defiance of morality, an ideology that Paco finds so appealing that he determines to dedicate his life to its pursuit. In like manner, *Chromos* pays its own

homage — albeit satirical — to the Spanish tradition by bringing the rogue back to life in an updated, unrecognizable version, the twentieth-century Americaniard.

In the Spanish tradition, the rogue is usually a *pícaro*, and in the introduction to his English translation of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, Michael Alpert defines the *pícaro* as a “drifter and petty delinquent,” an anti-hero who abandons the socially useful labour of agriculture for the easy-pickings of city life. Like the conquistadors (as well as the Americaniards in *Chromos*, we might add), he seeks “self-enrichment in the new empire in America” (ix-xiii). In regards to America, a case in point from the early Spanish tradition is Francisco de Quevedo’s *El Buscón* [The Swindler], published in 1626, in which the protagonist tries his luck in the New World (actually the book ends as he sets out for America; his adventures there are to be the subject of a second volume which Quevedo never wrote). As for the conquistadors, they qualify as rogues because the source of their self-enrichment was spoil, not toil.

Throughout *Chromos*, Don Pedro contrasts the past splendor of those conquistadors with their modern heir, the conquered Americaniard. He notes a kind of fall from grace, a pathetic decline into a cosmopolitan mishmash where the Spaniard’s pure, *castizo* identity is dissolved by the heterogeneous identity of an internationalized, “latinamericanized” United States (16). Yet when Alfau comes to break free from Don Pedro’s domineering influence in the last pages of *Chromos*, he contemplates the possibility that the conquistadors were merely “immigrants disguised as conquerors” (348). Thus their experience, at least at a very fundamental level, would not have been altogether different from that of his fellow Americaniards. But since the move to America is not a salient feature of Spanish roguery (notwithstanding Alpert’s claim, I do not know of any Spanish narrative that actually tells — again, Quevedo merely promises — the

story of that move), and since the whole idea of *Chromos* as a narrative of displacement has already been sufficiently discussed, I want to focus on other aspects of the traditional picaresque narratives, and compare them with the picaresque features that resurface in *Chromos*. What I hope to demonstrate is that Garcia attempts to rewrite the picaresque tradition so fondly recalled by Paco because he is dissatisfied with that tradition's tendency to glorify, and thereby distort the true nature of a life devoted to vagrancy and crime. Indeed Garcia's Sandoval saga offers a reworking of the picaresque narrative that shifts the focus from a first-person narrative, told exclusively from the rogue's point of view, to a third-person perspective that reveals the effect a rogue's life has on his entourage. As it turns out, he is almost certainly motivated by personal reasons for doing so: his mother was a friend of Julieta, whom she considered her sister (119), and she would consequently have been deeply saddened by her friend's suicide following Paco's repeated infidelities and cruelties. Hence Garcia exorcises his mother's demons by excoriating in his fiction her enemy in real life. In a second part, I want to show how Alfau, too much of a modernist to sound the moralist alarm, remains critical of Garcia's melodramatic involvement in his work, his pompous moralising, and his vision of roguery not completely freed from the trappings and conventions of the genre. As an alternative, he proposes a model for the picaresque novel in which all actions are ultimately rendered meaningless, and which owes much to Don Pedro's theory of the universe, a theory which Alfau criticizes as "quite the thing for a lazy world" (279).

Before I begin, I should say that, although I do not make displacement my primary point of focus in this chapter, I am not implying that it plays no role in Garcia and Alfau's rewriting of the picaresque tradition. In fact, later on, I explain how the novel stresses that roguery in the twentieth-century metropolis of New York is necessarily different from roguery not just in

medieval and renaissance Spain, but also roguery in the nineteenth-century Spain of the Sandoval saga, a Spain not yet affected by the major urban redesigning which La Gran Vía (the street, not the zarzuela) was meant to initiate. After all, remember that the street has not yet been inaugurated when Paco hears the zarzuela for the first time, while it has recently been open for general circulation when he hears the zarzuela again later in life and reflects more gloomily on the implications of de-glorified roguery. That Madrid has begun to resemble New York more closely now that it has its own Broadway, and that Paco's roguish ways have come to resemble those of vagrants in the Bowery rather than those of his illustrious picaresque ancestors in the adventurous Spain of literary narratives, is the twofold point which both Garcia and Alfau make in their respective narratives: you can't be a rogue *à la* Pablos or Paco today, not only because *they* were citizens of an old, obsolete world in which societies were organized differently, but also because they are fictitious entities subject to the limiting exigencies of literary representation and generic convention.

Such a project may give the impression that I am merely rehashing the metafictional observations which I claim to avoid in my introduction. In his novel, Alfau exposes literature's distorting mirror, and this aspect of *Chromos* certainly qualifies it as a work of metafiction. Yet *Chromos* also proposes a refashioning of what a more realistic model of the picaresque genre can look like, a genre which has till now indulged in its romanticizing fantasies, and for very good reasons (everyone loves the thrill provided by a good escapist read), but that can still achieve a sense of verisimilitude if new picaresque narratives shift priorities and put flesh on the schematic bones of the genre. Alfau's devastating description of Garcia's destitution at mid-point in the novel is a clear indicator that fiction is still capable of depicting real human predicaments that elicit real human responses in readers. Both Garcia and Alfau, in their respective narratives,

offer their own idea of what roguery really is like, and (in Alfau's case) what it should try to redefine itself as, if it wishes to become capable of inspiring newer, truer, more relevant forms of picaresque fiction. Such fiction should present material both convincing and intriguing enough to delight and instruct without having recourse to all the rather clichéd exploits of the genre.

A first point of business will be to assess the degree to which roguish experience varies in those traditional narratives. Here I want to draw on the recent critical rejection of a unified generic theory of the Spanish picaresque. This is important because two fundamentally different types of rogues inform that tradition, and Garcia's Sandoval saga displays how one type often interconnects with the other. Following this, I move on to *Chromos* and show how it updates the tradition in two ways. First, in Garcia's saga, it domesticates the genre in order to plot the effects that the rogue's actions have on others. Then, in Alfau's own narrative thread, roguery that insists on preserving its traditional occupation in a modern urban setting is shown to bring along with it all the harsh realities of destitution and social anonymity. Then, for those choosing to forego such a lifestyle informed by romanticized ideas, Alfau suggests a new way of picaresque living, and by extension picaresque fiction: one devoted to the pursuit of idle talk – not picaresque action, but picaresque chatter, episodically wandering from topic to topic. Flitting aimlessly off in all directions, the verbal non sequiturs of an idle class in an unadventurous, deromanticized age provide the equivalent of the non *sequitur* misfortunes that befall the rogue in the picaresque tradition. The modern *picaro* is no longer a man of roguish deeds, but a man of roguish words, words that are meant to contribute to a heightened sense of identity in a world in which much contributes to the erosion of that identity. That the words Americaniards write, read, hear, speak, and sing in *Chromos* ultimately fail to do this for everyone involved (and especially for the apostle of *castizo* identity, Don Pedro) is no cause for concern: such is the effect words

should have in a real (as opposed to fictitious) world defined by complexity. They reveal the complex, non-*castizo*, heterogeneous identities that are a product and reflection of the world they live in.

First, then, a look at the sources Paco nostalgically recalls. Ginés de Pasamonte is one of the galley-bound convicts whom Don Quixote frees out of pity in Cervantes' novel (book one, chapter 22). He appears only once more in a subsequent episode (book two, chapters 25-7), as a puppeteer and master of a divining monkey. Paco remembers him as the great disenchanter who bursts Don Quixote's idealistic bubble by rewarding him with blows rather than gratitude, yet the whole of *Don Quixote* is an exercise in repeated disappointments, so it remains unclear why he is singled out here. In fact, his reputation as a rogue depends in large measure on his boast that his biography will outdo "*Lazarillo de Tormes* and all the others of that kind that have been or ever will be written" since it "deals with facts" (182) ["es tan bueno – respondió Ginés –, que mal año para *Lazarillo de Tormes* y para todos cuantos de aquel género se han escrito o escribieren"] ["que trata verdades"] (227). If that is the case, then placing him alongside a tradition of rogues whom he dismisses as fictitious constructs poses a serious problem. Walter Reed has argued that Cervantes sought to distinguish his work from the picaresque genre by injecting a self-reflexive "consciousness of literary genre and style" in *Don Quixote* (72). Whereas picaresque narratives had claimed to break free from the idealised distortions of previous literary genres (epic and romance) in order to depict the hardships of lower classes in realist terms, Ginés's comment "resituates the picaresque novel back within the literary system that it had purported to stand beyond" (*ibid.*). Thus Ginés, by undermining the truth-claims of the picaresque tradition, serves

as a precursor of the revisions Garcia and Alfau are attempting in *Chromos*, much more than as a luminary of the literary type Paco admires.

The events of “Rinconete and Cortadillo” (1613) take place over the course of a mere three days, and take up less than 30 pages in *Exemplary Stories*.² The eponymous rogues make their way to Seville where they encounter a comical slideshow of rogues of all types, all of them ruled by Monipodio, the boss of a crime syndicate who holds official weekly meetings to collect union fees (a percentage of the week’s pilfering) and regulate criminal activity by allotting districts for the upcoming week. Paco claims that Rinconete and Cortadillo ‘age prematurely’ under the influence of Monipodio, but they are already accomplished criminals (Rinconete a cardsharp, Cortadillo a cutpurse) by the time they meet the boss, and even enjoy a few laughs at the expense of his malapropism-riddled speeches. Surely Paco has in mind the nature of crimes committed by Monipodio’s crew, which are much more violent than the ones Rinconete and Cortadillo are accustomed to. And indeed, once left to themselves, they agree to leave the “God-forsaken environment which was so evil, dangerous, libertine, and corrupt” (105) [“en aquella vida tan perdida y tan mala, tan inquieta y tan libre y disoluta”] (233). Truly, Monipodio is the head of a “community of depravity [...] dedicated to the advancement of evil,” since the world

² A fact which makes it seem like an unlikely candidate to offer the episodic, wandering scope usually associated with the picaresque genre. To a certain extent, the same could even be said of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), weighing in at a mere 50 pages, when compared with the second “canon founding” text in the picaresque tradition, Mateo Aleman’s *Guzman de Alfarache* (1599-1604). For Peter Dunn, subsuming under one category (the picaresque) shorter works like “Rinconete and Cortadillo” and *Lazarillo de Tormes* alongside the 900-page *Guzman de Alfarache* is a distorting retroactive effect of reading earlier works in the light of later ones: since “disparity of scale implies difference of kind,” “scale is also a sensitive generic indicator” (*Picaresque Fiction* 50). Added to this, Dunn contends that in the three canonical picaresque texts of Spanish literature (*Lazarillo*, *Guzman de Alfarache*, and *El Buscón*), the *picaro* relates and responds in a unique way to the world he inhabits, and that those worlds are themselves uniquely configured. Finally, Dunn considers that proposed generic theories are historically and socially grounded and thus vulnerable to being challenged and superseded by subsequent ones, ultimately concluding that there was probably never a unified picaresque genre to begin with (3-28). All of this should not lead us to jettison synthesizing approaches such as Paco’s altogether, since obvious similarities remain. But we need to define the different kinds of roguish experiences depicted in those sources if we hope to show how Alfau modernizes those experiences in *Chromos*.

of “Rinconete and Cortadillo” is definitely one of exploitation and violence: a man repeatedly flogs a woman with his belt and leaves her for dead for not giving him enough money to gamble (only 24 reals as opposed to the 30 he had requested), while a gentleman hires a rogue to make a fourteen-inch cut on the face of his nemesis. When the hired goon realizes the target’s face is not broad enough to receive 14 inches, he slashes his servant instead. The petty delinquency which Alpert associates with the picaresque here exceeds misdemeanour to become outright felony.

Such is not the case with *Lazarillo de Tormes*, of whose eponymous protagonist Paco reflects that his wisdom outwits age and experience, and that by leading blind, corrupt masters, he develops a gift for seeing into their rotten souls, all the while retaining his own purity. There is more than a little truth in this. Lazarillo’s masters include a blind beggar, a priest, a con-man posing as a gentleman, a pardoner, an artist, and a constable, each one cruel and manipulative in his own peculiar way. Yet Lazarillo only begins to “outwit” his masters once their stinginess has all but pushed him to the brink of starvation. In fact, at one point he reflects that “hunger was [his] guiding light” throughout those years (24) [“que me era luz la hambre”] (92). As to Paco’s remark about Lazarillo’s enduring purity, it may refer to the fact that although he has been abused by his first two masters, once he discovers his third master is no gentleman but a starving beggar, he freely shares his meager sustenance with him (37) [109]. According to Alpert’s definition, then, Lazarillo qualifies as a *picaro* and rogue since he is a drifter, constantly finding himself at the mercy of greedy, cruel masters. Yet he never becomes a delinquent of the kind found in “Rinconete and Cortadillo,” seeking only to deceive his masters when it becomes necessary to eat and “keep himself alive” (24) [“en sustentar el vivir”] (92). The constant in Lazarillo is the suffering and hunger of the poor brought about by the selfishness and avarice of men of power, with special emphasis on men of the cloth. If anything, the book suggests that in a

world where roguery is universal, the *picaro* is the sole character whose misery absolves him from accusations of roguery and delinquency, for his deceits – when he commits them – are not committed out of dishonesty, but out of a necessity brought about by others' dishonesty.

To a degree, this vision of a rogue who does not bloom into full-out roguery agrees with the vision embodied in Paco's monologue. After all, the public cheers for Paco's *ratas*. At the same time, it is not the only vision we have preserved of that tradition. A work which Paco omits, yet which is usually considered alongside *Lazarillo de Tormes* as an example of early Spanish picaresque narratives, is the previously mentioned Francisco de Quevedo's *El Buscón*. It actually offers a better image of the rogue which Paco ends up becoming.³ Like Lazarillo before him, Quevedo's Pablos suffers at the hands of cruel masters, including a boarding school master who is first described as "Hunger incarnate," and later "Avarice incarnate" (73-4) ["*hambre viva*" and "*protomiseria*"] (99, 101) but also at the hands of individuals of similar condition (fellow students, fellow servants, fellow beggars, and fellow thieves). At one point his father, a barber, subsequently beheaded for stealing from his clients, dispenses fatherly advice which he does not immediately follow: "if you don't thief, you won't eat" (66) ["*Quien no hurta en el mundo, no vive*"] (84) (recall the advice conscience gives the handmaid in *La Gran Via*). Yet unlike Lazarillo, the school of hard knocks quickly teaches him to join in rather than opt out. The final straw comes when, following a hazing at the hands of fellow servants one night (the hazing is a decoy to allow another servant to befoul his bed), he wakes up the next morning "smothered in shit" (89) ["*sucio hasta las trenzas*"] (126). Resolved to partake of what can't be avoided, he begins to commit acts that become more and more despicable as the novel moves along, acts that

³ Don Pedro does mention Quevedo later on in the novel (309), but in relation to his style of writing characterized as *conceptismo*, not *El Buscón*.

include slashing the throat of stolen pigs, deceiving a young girl out of her gilded rosary, becoming the ruler of an underground criminal gang, and murdering policemen in a drunken raid. Such are his crimes that when he finally gets his comeuppance, he realizes he has wronged too many people to identify his assailant: “I expected to be knifed by so many people that I didn’t know whom to blame” (177) [“yo esperaba de tantas partes la cuchillada, que no sabía a quién echársela”] (249).

Two different kinds of rogues emerge from the above comparison, a dichotomy which the picaresque tradition will sustain elsewhere.⁴ In an afterword written for Tobias Smollett’s *Roderick Random*, John Barth claims that whereas Lazarillo is motivated by hunger, Roderick Random is motivated by resentment. According to Barth, “pugnaciousness and unforgivingness” are not only the latter’s “drive,” but also his “organizing principle” (473). Thus we can stand Lazarillo alongside picaresque heroes in other literatures such as Voltaire’s *Candide* and Franz Kafka’s Karl Rosmann, as examples of *picaros* who retain a kind of purity throughout their trials and maltreatment, a stoic forbearance that never fully embraces delinquency, but only dabbles in it when they are pressed by the insistent cruelty of others or the extremities of hunger.⁵ In another camp, we could put Quevedo’s Pablos alongside Smollett’s Roderick Random and

⁴ Of course, there are more than two kinds of rogues in existence, for the episodic nature of picaresque narrative obliges the rogue to adapt continuously to his new situation, thereby taking on new identities as the action unfolds. In a sense, the rogue is thus the protean literary type par excellence (Cros 88-9), a fact Stuart Miller describes as follows: “the *picaro* revels in his variability, his abdication of self-determination. If society is a chaos of appearances, he will embrace that chaos by becoming totally ‘otherdirected’” (71). Yet if the rogue is a shape shifter by trade or nature, always willing to modify his appearance and identity in order to extract the most profits from his present circumstances, basic types of roguery can still be defined. Even if Lazarillo and Pablos change superficially as they fall into the hands of successive masters, more substantial differences remain that clearly mark them as two fundamentally different literary types.

⁵ Barth is not the only reader to have drawn attention to the role of hunger in *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Kathryn Walterscheid discusses the ways in which the production and distribution of food in times of scarcity generate social stratifications that *Lazarillo* does not tire of depicting in each succeeding chapter (49-54), while Peter Dunn notes that Lazarillo’s “ecstasies” over bread draw upon the Eucharistic symbolism of Christ and the wafer, a source of daily sustenance (both bodily and spiritual) which the tight-fisted priest refuses to provide for his young acolyte (“Picaresque Novel” 25).

Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*. Such categorizations have their nuances, it goes without saying, but they help distinguish between two dissimilar literary types: the *picaro* forced into petty deceit by the cruelty and abuse of others, and the rogue who fully embraces roguery once he realizes it cannot be avoided, and who sometimes, like Wilkie Collins' Frank Softly in *A Rogue's Life*, freely acknowledges he has been of a "roving, adventurous temperament" long before the hard blows of fate, hunger, and human cruelty drove him to it (5).

Before moving on to *Chromos*, let us briefly recap. The picaresque narrative is episodic in structure. Its hero, the rogue, is forced into a life of delinquency either by expediency or proclivity. The nature of that delinquency ranges from petty deceit (using a straw to drink from the jug of a blind master who refuses to feed his servant - *Lazarillo*) to more despicable acts such as the exploitation of others (forcing one's wife into prostitution - *Guzman de Alfarache*), to the downright criminal (violent murder - *El Buscón*). Lastly, some canonical picaresque narratives depict rogues favourably, others unfavourably. But does any of this find resonance in *Chromos* beyond its tear-jerking effect on Paco? We can now proceed to show how these features figure first among Garcia's Sandoval family, and then among Alfau's Americaniand community.

The first thing to note is that Garcia's saga is unmistakably picaresque as regards its episodic structure. Although it is intergenerational and therefore lacks a central character tossed around from one cruel master to another, characters in each generation experience a series of ordeals modeled on those typically experienced by rogues in picaresque narratives. Think of Paco's duels, his affairs, his various gambling debts and the ruin they occasion, his degradation into a life of crime, and his final death alongside Jules Bonnot. Think also of the final impoverished condition of the Sandoval family, Jacinto and Ricardo's life in the streets, Lolita

becoming a prostitute, and Enrique's ruinous masochistic tendencies. By saga's end, most members of the family are reduced to begging, while others have simply disappeared without a trace.

What is most intriguing here is that Alfau claims to have excised all passages from his friend's saga, which he deems unsuitable for publication. His dismissal of much of the original manuscript as mere *sicalipsis*, or pornographic smut, and his attempt to clean it up, still fails to produce a bowdlerized version. Even though it is cut by a substantial amount, enough delinquency remains in Garcia's saga to satisfy the most avid fans of picaresque fiction. Yet there are also remarkably unroguish characters, such as the loyal employee Ledesma and the hapless wife Julieta, (in contrast, most picaresque novels feature a universally roguish cast of scoundrels and villains mutually exploiting one another). If the Sandoval saga qualifies as a picaresque work, we have to account for such an uncharacteristic feature here. How does Garcia's saga depart from the picaresque narrative when it eschews the first person narrative's exclusive focus on a rogue, preferring to also showcase characters of unflinching moral uprightness?

I want to suggest that Garcia modernizes the picaresque novel by rewriting it as a novel of domestic manners. Although there is not one central character in the saga, Paco is arguably the character whose roguish behaviour is caused by temperament rather than circumstances. He is, moreover, a husband and father, something rogues usually abstain from becoming during the course of their adventures. This is not to say that rogues don't sometimes reform their ways and settle down to a family life following the conclusion of those adventures (in fact most of them do), but that is never the focus of the picaresque novels. Rather, brief epilogues hint at that

particular dénouement. But in Paco's case, he inverts that trajectory: he marries, has children, and then becomes a rogue, or rather maintains his roguish ways following marriage, since he is known to have participated in three or four duels and a fair number of affairs with married wives before marrying Julieta (56).

What Garcia's domesticated picaresque novel manages to expose by inverting that trajectory is the effects a person devoted to roguish pursuits can have on the people with whom he comes into intimate contact. In the case of the Sandovals, little roguery occurs before Paco marries into it. True, Fernando steals his father's money and runs off to Buenos Aires with Trini when his family objects to their love, but all is forgiven when the two return in a spirit of repentance and Fernando takes the helm of the prosperous family business. It should be noted that of the proposals which the family rejects out of a concern for the family honour, two turn out to be long-lasting, meaningful partnerships (Fernando and Trini, and Rojelia and Albarran), while the only proposal which is not immediately rejected, that is Paco's, proves disastrous. As it turns out, the only time the Sandovals unexpectedly muffle their sense of honour (it is well known that Paco has been illegitimately sired) proves their undoing, for we can date the fall of the family from the moment Paco marries into it. Notwithstanding Garcia's authorial claim that the incompetence of the younger generation will doom the family to suffer a tragic fate, Paco directly functions as a catalyzer of that fall. His gambling ruins the family's finances and precipitates the business's collapse, his repeated affairs ultimately push Julieta to take her life, and his deserting his sons leads one to an early death on the streets, the other to a life of prostitution among pederasts. The end result is that members of his and subsequent generations are forced into a life of roguery by necessity, or more accurately, as a consequence of Paco's roguery by proclivity. Whereas Paco is a representative of the rogue by temperament, his

children and in-laws come to follow his lead out of a necessity to survive and adapt to circumstances which his actions have forced them into. In the end, his roguery is different from theirs not in degree, but in kind. The enthusiastic monologue of his youth fails to consider this difference, and the oversight may serve in later years as a kind of self-exonerating mechanism when the wretchedness of his family is revealed to him (in a matter of minutes he learns of his younger son's death and his older son's whoredom).

Alfau's criticism that Garcia's saga serves up a melodramatic rehash of ideas overdone in previous literature is valid here, yet in some ways it misses the point. That bad men hurt good people is a truth which everyday experience has made banally self-evident for a long time, so that if literature intent on exposing that truth is to be written in the twentieth century, it had better read like *Lolita* rather than the Sandoval saga. Moreover, the nature vs. nurture debate which the bad rogue/good rogue dichotomy proposes was already being dismissed as an oversimplification in the nineteenth-century novel and the contemporary biological, psychological, sociological advances that attempted to reformulate that debate in more complex terms. But in Garcia's defence, his saga, by depicting the devastating effect a rogue has on the lives of people who have come to trust him, manages to underscore a previous literary genre's shortcomings: the picaresque tradition admired by Paco offers an incomplete picture of reality. By doing so, Garcia's saga situates itself within the quixotic rather than picaresque tradition as defined by Reed.

When Alfau faults Garcia's domesticated picaresque, complaining that he "harp[s] strongly on the pathos of a woman abandoned with her ill-nourished children by her husband" (110), he reminds us that such pathos in a picaresque narrative radically breaks with the Spanish

model that tended to romanticize its *pícaro* protagonists. Indeed, it makes sense that Paco recalls that tradition with fondness on that first occasion, not simply because he is the representative of that tradition in *Chromos*, but more importantly because that tradition casts its rogue protagonist in a sympathetic light. Granted, I argue earlier against a theory of generic unity when it comes to picaresque narratives, and Quevedo's swindler is certainly too ruthless by the time the novel ends to attract the sympathy readers may have shown him earlier on. One would expect the same to apply to Ginés de Pasamonte who, instead of showing gratitude towards his benefactor, responds with blows. However, Don Quixote's fee for freeing him is so excessive (Ginés must travel to El Toboso, find the Lady Dulcinea del Toboso, and recount the particulars of his liberation), not to mention impractical (Ginés explains that he must flee at once since agents of the Inquisition will pursue him), that his refusal to oblige the Knight is justified here. In fact, Ginés actually offers to repay his benefactor by reciting a number of *Ave Marias* in his honour, yet Quixote angrily dismisses the offer and his stubbornness probably earns Ginés some of the readers' sympathy in the trade-off.

Rinconete and Cortadillo also come off favourably in contrast to the more violent rogues in Monipodio's gang, while it would not be much of a stretch to suggest that the abuse Lazarillo endures throughout his various ordeals makes him something of a Myshkin prototype in all his indefatigable, simple-minded saintliness, a saintliness carried to such extremes that it eventually proves the rogue's (and prince's) undoing. Lazarillo, driven by pity, turns a blind eye first on his third master's deceit and lands himself in hot water with the latter's creditors once that master leaves him in the lurch, and then on his wife and final master, an archpriest, pretending not to notice he is being cuckolded. Evidently, it suits Paco to think of himself as reviving a tradition that romanticizes - in some cases even sanctifies - criminal behaviour, a tradition that more often

than not asked readers to cheer for and sympathise with the rogue rather than to condemn his delinquency and consider the plight of his victims. Paco's callousness in the face of other people's suffering, his selfish pursuit of worldly pleasures, his dereliction of all familial duties, all of this is redeemed in his eyes when viewed through the "vim and spark of Spanish roguery" (59). Just as the jota "glorifies the Ratas," so Paco is glorified via his association with the picaresque. In the end, however, if anyone can be said to qualify as the "good" kind of rogue in Garcia's saga, the *Lazarillo* repeatedly abused by cruel masters, it is Paco's wife and children, while he himself more aptly fits the bill of his roguish idols' enemies, the cruel masters.

As stated earlier, Paco's opinion of roguery comes to evolve as a result of his having had ample opportunity to play the part directly, and he temporarily revises his favourable opinion upon overhearing "the Jota de los Ratas" again late in life. The enthusiasm of youth now gives way to bitter disillusionment following firsthand experience of what a rogue's life entails, and the full reality of the "wretchedness that was his" reveals what such a life has made of him: "a rata, a petty thief, a crook. It was not the shame of it, it was the failure it represented that wounded him; to be a rata, hiding from the light" (166). Does this "hiding from the light" mean a life led beyond the pale? Given the fact that this moment of profound self-assessment occurs while he awaits his son, whom he has not seen in years, it might hint at all the ties he has severed in order to indulge in his glorified idea of a rogue's life: the sense of a wasted life, and of loved ones lost in that wasting. The irony is that at that same moment, while he is filled with such regrets, his son Jacinto is said to have a favourite song, one which he appreciates for its "impudence," a song which makes him feel "pride in things for which inferior people felt shame," a song whose three "jingling and merry" rascals remind him of himself and his brother, the "Jota de los Ratas" (159). Unfortunately for Jacinto, he will not be granted in later life the

enlightenment afforded his father on this occasion, for the latter finally ignores what that realization might have taught him, and convinces his son to join him in a father-and-son duo of “outlaw existence” that ends in their death in Jules Bonnot’s infamous last stand (167).

Paco had ended his youthful monologue by claiming that the Spanish public always sides with the rogue, cheering him on as he makes a fool of the police. That may have been the case with petty delinquents such as Lazarillo who are far more sinned against than sinning, but Garcia’s saga, by shifting the narrative perspective from the first-person rogue to an omniscient narrator capable of narrating all lives involved, exposes the darker underbelly of a rogue’s life, making it harder — if not impossible — for a public to side with a husband whose infidelities lead his wife to suicide and with a father whose greed goads him to make a profit by whoring his own son.

So Garcia modernizes the picaresque genre by shifting the focus from the rogue’s misdeeds to the effects those misdeeds have on others. Whereas the exploits of Paco abroad are told in passing rather than shown in detail, the miseries of his family left to fend for itself in a state of destitution are both told and shown.⁶ His saga is set at the turn of the century Spain, which explains how it could innovate on a genre whose three canonical texts are almost 400 years old when Garcia adds his own contribution. As for Alfau’s novel, set in early twentieth-century New York, it modernizes the picaresque tradition in its own way, not by emphasizing roguery’s consequences for the rogue’s victims, but by emphasizing the fact that traditional forms of roguery no longer provide a relevant, meaningful, or for that matter, sustainable

⁶ Actually, Paco’s “extralegal activities, his life and associations in the Paris and Madrid underworlds” exist only in “disconnected notes” which Garcia hopes to write out once he has documented himself sufficiently (163). As is, *Chromos* remains silent on that activity, preferring to focus on the consequences that activity has on the Sandoval family.

lifestyle today. But before we look at how it does this, I want say a word about Don Pedro's rather abstruse cosmological theory and consider how it may have provided the philosophical underpinnings of Alfau's new conception of picaresque fiction. For if Garcia rewrites the picaresque novel as a favour to his mother, that is as a way of finally exposing the true story of a man who profoundly hurt her when his cruelty pushed her friend to take her own life, Alfau seems to derive his own motive for rewriting that tradition from a fascinating mix of abstract speculations on the nature of the universe, time, motion, and the power of art.

As stated earlier, Alfau's Americaniard community spends the bulk of its time going over literary works-in-progress, engaging in philosophical disputes about the universe, identity, and Spanish customs, and indulging in much carousing, enjoying more food and wine in one sitting than most rogues do in a whole novel. On one such occasion, narrated as an analepsis, Alfau goes over Don Pedro's notes for a new theory of time and motion based on the fourth perpendicular, while both he and Garcia listen to Don Pedro play piano and provide oral annotations to his theory. Don Pedro's theory draws from an impressive list of mathematicians and theosophists who contemplated alternatives to Euclidian geometry in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, a list that includes Joseph Louis Lagrange, Johann Carl Friedrich Gauss, Georg Friedrich Bernhard Riemann, Edwin Abbott Abbott, Hermann Minkowski, Charles Howard Hinton, and Peter D. Ouspensky. Peter Christensen does an impressive job of tracing the roots and evolution of that theory through those figures (1993), reviewing how each one contributed to overthrowing the Euclidean postulate of three dimensional space and one dimensional time as two separate entities. To a great extent, the

modern view of a space-time continuum as four dimensions of one unique reality emerges out of their work and is at the heart of modern physics. Freely acknowledging that his own theory derives from the work of these precursors, Don Pedro holds that all motion is merely illusion created by inclinations between the fourth perpendicular (time) and the other three, with the end result that “time and motion are but the impression we receive from four-dimensional extensions” (257).

Readers intent on making full sense of a perfectly systematized theory have their work cut out for them. Alfau skims through the notes, providing random fragments of a work still very much in a rough-draft state (252), while the “arboriform” style of Don Pedro’s oral annotations, meant to elucidate the more obscure passages, only manages to disorient and frustrate Alfau (256). Consider moreover that Don Pedro is unwilling to limit his theory to mathematical considerations, but proceeds to endow it with “an air of esoteric necromancy and exalted mysticism” which displeases Alfau (254). Alfau objects to two things here. First, he criticizes the unnecessary difficulties (esoteric) which necromancy (black magic mumbo jumbo?) adds to a theory that is already hard to access because it synthesizes a series of complex mathematical, geometrical, and physical speculations: “His was the habit of inflating a point of logic into a balloon of occultism and sending it aloft beyond the reach of anyone who could explode it” (*ibid.*). Secondly, he rejects the bleak outlook which occultism brings to a view of the universe as motionless: the richness and diversity of human experience reduced to “infinite, terrifying vistas of changeless destiny” in which men become “pinned, like flies in this endless spiderweb” (260). If time and motion are mere illusion, the theory leaves no room for autonomous identity, no possibility of performing acts that reflect a free will. Like Alfau, Garcia balks at such implications: “But if you eliminate time and motion, you rob life of all its drama, of all romance,

of all adventure [...] You kill it, you kill everything. It is a dead universe, as you say, changeless, hopeless” (270).

Hence Alfau and Garcia are taken aback by Don Pedro’s necromancy, and rightfully so; in general, we do not relish being told that all our strivings and aspirations are the futile delusions of illusory identities imprisoned in a meaningless universe. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether Don Pedro actually believes his own theory, or says things that ultimately help to disprove it. After all, he is a man of many contradictions, as Alfau points out in his prologue: “he was changeable and he was complex and [...] it would have been interesting to trace the wanderings of this complex variable...” (10). Consider moreover that in the middle of explaining his theory, he identifies the inventor of the hodograph as his illustrious countryman and spiritual ancestor (256). Surely this can only refer to a Spaniard for a man who spends most of his waking hours sermonizing other Americaniards on the importance of staying loyal to their Spaniard *castizo* identity, and even comes to blows with an Americaniard who, he claims, has betrayed that identity. Yet the hodograph was invented by William Rowan Hamilton, an Irishman. How can this tireless proselyte of the *castizo* self choose to invoke his Irish blood when it comes to something as important as his spiritual ancestry? The answer is obvious: Don Pedro is also the great theorizer of the latinamericanization of America, the hybridisation of all *castizo* identities into a melting-pot of cosmopolitan heterogeneity. If Don Pedro fathers the anti-thesis to his great theoretical idea about personal identity, we should not be surprised to catch him making claims that undermine the overall argument he is trying to articulate in regards to his great cosmological theory as well. And, in effect, he makes such a claim not on a separate occasion, but once again in the very middle of his disquisition on the motionless, timeless nature of the universe.

Throughout the disquisition, Don Pedro plays the piano. After having played sections from Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, and then *Carnaval*, he moves on to Chopin. He then interrupts his disquisition on the fourth perpendicular in order to berate Berlioz for having had the nerve to coin a witticism on the occasion of Chopin's death: "Berlioz made a mistake in judging him with a banal cruelty induced by the desire, fashionable at the time, of making one more phrase" (257). The allusion is to Berlioz's well-known response to the news that Chopin was dying, the quip that Chopin had been dying all his life. On Berlioz's behalf, we should probably specify that he never said such a thing, and that the famous witticism is actually a corruption of a passage in the necrology which he wrote for Chopin in *Le Journal des débats* in October of 1849, in which he actually writes the following: "Après une longue et terrible agonie, Chopin vient de mourir. Nous n'emploierons pas à son sujet la formule ordinaire en disant que sa mort est une perte pour l'art. Hélas ! *Chopin était perdu pour la musique depuis assez longtemps*" (par. 13)⁷

What Berlioz means here is clarified when he goes on to explain that Chopin was lost to music as a result of his final years spent in sickness. Far from being a case of banal cruelty, the necrology is a moving testimony of Berlioz's tremendous respect for and admiration of Chopin, one which says things of the deceased composer which upholds Don Pedro's own views.⁸

⁷ My italics

⁸ Here is the remainder of the necrology's opening paragraph:

Sa faiblesse et ses douleurs étaient devenues telles, qu'il ne pouvait plus ni se faire entendre sur le piano ni composer ; la moindre conversation même le fatiguait d'une manière alarmante. Il cherchait en général à se faire comprendre autant que possible par signes. De là l'espèce d'isolement dans lequel il a voulu passer les derniers mois de sa vie, isolement que beaucoup de gens ont mal interprété et attribué, les uns à une fierté dédaigneuse, les autres à une humeur noire, aussi loin l'une que l'autre du caractère de ce charmant et excellent artiste. Loin d'être morose, Chopin, aux temps où ses souffrances étaient encore tolérables, se montrait d'une bonhomie malicieuse qui donnait un irrésistible attrait aux relations que ses amis avaient avec lui. Il apportait dans la conversation cet *humour* qui fit le charme principal et le caractère essentiel de son rare talent. (par. 13)

Far from implying that Chopin was a morose, or *always dying*, character, Berlioz dismisses such views and praises the charming, good humoured man. So Don Pedro gets it wrong, which is somewhat excusable given that the famous witticism seems to have been widely attributed to Berlioz.⁹

But he then says something about Chopin which he intends will give the lie to Berlioz, and which comprises his own attempt at a witty phrase, namely that Chopin “has not died yet” (257). Now we know that Frederic Chopin, the biological being and historical figure, passed away on October 17, 1849, while events in *Chromos* takes place in early-twentieth-century New York. If Chopin is not dead yet when Don Pedro makes this statement, either Don Pedro gets his history wrong, or is speaking figuratively. Of course, Don Pedro knows his musicology quite well and the second assumption is obviously the correct one. But what exactly is Don Pedro implying by speaking in such a manner? Art allows the artist to transcend individual, perishable identity, and acquire a kind of permanent identity as long as his creative output is performed and enjoyed by succeeding generations of living beings. Art is the repository of an artist’s memories and ideas, and those memories and ideas are the repository of the artist’s experiences, experiences he lives either directly or vicariously. As long as the artist’s art is performed by other artists, or read and heard and seen by other people, a part of the deceased artist can still be said to live via the posthumous representation of his personal experiences. A novel which I mentioned earlier as more innovative than Garcia’s Sandoval saga, Nabokov’s *Lolita*, famously ends with Humbert Humbert’s assertion that he has made Dolores Haze “live in the minds of later generations,” after which he cites earlier examples of man’s capacity to grant permanence

⁹Jeffrey Kallberg mentions the lack of evidence that the dictum comes from Berlioz or Daniel Auber, sometimes also credited with having made the comment (70).

to ephemeral existence by giving an artistic shape to what he has lived, witnessed, and experienced: “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art.” (309). Just as Dolores will survive as long as people read *Lolita*, so Chopin will “not be dead yet” as long as pianists play his pieces to audiences made up of people who obtain a powerful and mysterious pleasure listening to them.

I do not mention the idea of art as preserver of impermanent experience, as espoused by either Humbert Humbert or Don Pedro, in order to argue for its originality (just think of “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”). Rather, I point it out as a potential refutation of Don Pedro’s motionless universe. Consider the following, which all occur while Don Pedro disputes the existence of motion: a separate individual (Beethoven in this case) is capable of composing a symphony which elicits a detailed, wildly imaginative exegesis from another separate individual (Don Pedro); a separate individual (Schumann) is capable of composing a piano suite titled *Kreisleriana* which has the power to hold “spellbound” (267) a number of other separate individuals many years after the composer has died (Americaniards gathered at Don Pedro’s); another separate individual is capable of acting as medium between the original composer and a contemporary audience, endowing the composition with his own power of interpretation (as Don Pedro does when he plays that suite). In all these cases, movement and time irrefutably exist, since persons are capable of acting as agents that trigger powerful emotional responses in other people over long stretches of time. Garcia is outraged by Don Pedro’s theory because it denies a whole range of experiences that enrich human existence and promise a posthumous survival of what is best in us, and without which his life (and ours) would indeed amount to a “dead universe of motionless matter” in

which “nothing passes,” as Don Pedro maintains. One more time, music proves to be the best argument against the bleak affirmations of the atheist.

In the end, Don Pedro’s theory is so extreme that it conceives of the totality of reality as one dead universe in which, paradoxically, nothing can die because nothing can change. He finally co-opts and expands Berlioz’s statement to contain everything, and concludes that the “universe has been, or is, dead all its life” (268). But if all is dead, how do we explain the presence of art, itself the fruit of individual, perishable life, and something that ultimately enables that life to triumph from death in at least one way? If art is a death-negating agent, then a static universe, in which all is reduced to a unified, undifferentiated oneness, cannot account for creations that cover the whole gamut of artistic merit, from Chopin’s compositions to Garcia’s *cursi* literary endeavours, and that express individual, separate, and unique visions of the world capable of transcending their isolated origins. Even Don Pedro believes in that power, as evinced in his witticism about Chopin surviving his own biological death in the minds of those who perform and hear his works long after he has passed away.

Now just when we think we’ve caught Don Pedro nodding, and smugly exposed his contradictions, he elevates his idea to another level, or “balloons it in occultism” as Alfau puts it, and makes it almost impossible to follow him. He develops a rather intriguing theory of personal freedom based on our selecting, out of the numberless possibilities of Aristotelian potential, one shape of being, which contains within itself “another infinity of possible shapes,” (277) all of which would suggest he finally concedes the existence of movement. But then he goes on to discuss his ideas on metanthropy and stereochronic sense (278), and claims that the ability to perceive a fifth and sixth coordinate would enlighten to an even greater degree the misguided lot

of common mortals still credulous enough to believe in free will. Ultimately, I think readers should follow Alfau's lead here and make allowances for their human limitations, in order to find some modicum of comfort in the realization that some of the finer, more abstruse points of the theory may not amount to a perfectly coherent systematic cosmology. Rather they emerge out of the drunken, fragmented manner in which Don Pedro's spiel is delivered and received; with spurts of genius intermingling in the disquisition throughout, no doubt, but as de los Rios says, also containing many silly squabbles over semantics and nomenclature (motion or extension, time or fourth coordinate).

What we should keep in mind is that, as far as we can tell, action is conceived of as something insignificant in Don Pedro's view of the universe. The exception is artistic genius, which mysteriously seems to preserve the artist from death in a universe that has always been nothing but dead. Let's pare it down even more, and say that the only possible action in life is art, and that all else is illusion. True, we move from a cosmological account to an aesthetics, but that aesthetics could be said to provide the *modus operandi* of Alfau's project in *Chromos*. Americaniard action is also meaningless in *Chromos* because it doesn't materialize. Sure, an enigmatic and erudite man like Don Pedro can cover a disorienting range of ideas in the span of a five minute speech, while Garcia and Alfau can read sprawling narratives and comment profusely on their meaning, but rarely do any of them perform any outward-tending actions. Indeed, except for the landlady's suicide that precipitates Garcia's brief stint in the Bowery, Americaniards — and the landlady emigrates from Germany, not Spain — never really do anything in *Chromos*.

In this way they keep the promise Alfau makes in his *Locos* prologue of doing away with meaningful action in his earlier novel. In that prologue, he advises his readers to abstain from reading meaning into the actions of his characters, for even if the gesture – the “action with a meaning” – is a “national speciality” of Spain, in his novel, we should expect only “empty situations” (xi). The prologue ends by warning that those who fail to do so will mistake his “more or less entertaining comedy of meaningless gestures [for] the vulgar aspects of a common tragedy” (xii). The point is taken: if the Spaniard in Spain has been too busy performing actions with meaning to have ever been interested in either “thought nor the word” (xi), in America expatriate Spaniards succumb wholeheartedly to the power of words and thoughts, to the point of neglecting gestures altogether. In contrast to the picaresque hero of the Spanish tradition, undisputed master of the supposedly meaningful action, Americaniards refuse to act. They merely meet to discuss literary works in progress, cultural customs, and philosophical conundrums. Seeming inhabitants of Don Pedro’s fourth perpendicular, their movements are reduced to the conversational pursuit of artistic and philosophic delight, the only movement which, according to Don Pedro, succeeds in achieving real, transcendent motion in a motionless universe.

It might be difficult to see how the 115 pages devoted to Americaniards arguing amongst themselves, while the rest merely transcribe their discussions and literary endeavours, can qualify as a picaresque narrative. Where are the murders, the thefts, the rapes, the beatings, the stabbings, and diabolical plots? Yet this may be to construe the genre too narrowly. Thomas Hothorn argues that most, if not all, of literature is founded on the picaresque heritage: “the picaresque is everywhere [...] anywhere someone is, literally or figuratively, on the road, heading from one place to another, meeting with various adventures on route, and learning

something in the process” (135). Hothem includes works not traditionally thought of as picaresque, including Homer’s epics and Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and argues that any character who undergoes a quest for knowledge has something of the *picaro* in him. Alfau’s Americaniards, led by Don Pedro’s eternal theorizing, clearly have a bit of the *picaro* in them as well, since they are all on a figurative quest to understand their Spanish heritage and how it translates in the context of an émigré community’s experience. Just as the Spanish *picaro* resorts to a series of deceits and schemes to outwit or fend the blows of his greedy masters and provide for himself, eventually acquiring a basis for self-understanding in so doing, so Alfau’s Americaniards have recourse to literary narratives about their Spanish heritage, as well as heated disputes about its nature, in order to acquire a sense of identity founded on the preservation and transformation of that heritage in the new world. As stated earlier, it does not matter that those literary narratives and disputes create rifts that make it even harder to discern what that identity consists of, or should consist of. The point is that they are discussing something important rather than stealing, killing, and hurting one another in pursuit of some glorified idea of meaningful action.

What is more, the novel also exposes how poorly traditional *picaros* fare when they carry over their old-fashioned, obsolete habits in *Chromos*. Don Laureano is said to have roguery in his blood, yet once his schemes and deceits fail, he is reduced to a life of mendicancy on “bum’s row.” The same fate awaits Julio Ramos, whom Garcia meets in a doss house, penniless and destitute. And remember that Garcia, responsible for creating the characters Paco Serrano and Julio Ramos (Alfau suspects his friend has made them up, although Garcia claims they are actual people), joins Don Laureano in the Bowery after his landlady - completely infatuated with him – takes her own life in her bathroom. The parallel with Paco who pursues a life of roguery

abroad following Julieta's suicide (also in a bathroom) is too obvious to miss. But whereas Paco's roguish existence is filled with daring, romantic incidents (or so the conventions of Garcia's picaresque narrative would have us believe), in the experience of a modern metropolis, demographic density reduces the urban rogue to a derelict's life of substance abuse and hopeless anonymity. According to Don Pedro, Garcia's newfound fascination with the "hobo's life" is due to an "Anglo-Saxon psychosis" caused by the New York environment (195), and this makes sense only when we acknowledge that that vagrant experience in America is radically different from the rogue's life of the picaresque novels which exert such fascination for Paco. The Spanish rogue in the New World is no longer the sharp pickpocket and jovial *rata* enlivening sympathetic crowds, dying in spectacular raids alongside infamous anarchists, and receiving glorified immortality in literary classics. He has become a vagrant drinking himself blind, an outcast whose own daughter refuses to assist or acknowledge him, and who ends up passing out in some alleyway soiled in his own blood and other, more repulsive, bodily fluids.

In this regard, the Americaniards' last drinking bout in El Telescopio may offer an ironic commentary on Garcia's alcoholic comatose state when Alfau rescues him. The excessive eating and drinking enjoyed by the Americaniards clearly qualify them as radically unroguish, traditional rogues having often been defined by their struggles with hunger and thirst. In truth, like that rogue, his modern, derelict counterpart rarely gets to enjoy a full meal (as was the case with Lazarillo and Pablos, before the latter took matters into his own hands), and is often forced to compensate by developing harmful addictions. To convince oneself that this is a theme permeating *Chromos*, one need only reread the novel, and count the number of pages devoted to men drinking alcohol (I would estimate as frequently as in any of Hemingway's early novels), or recall that as Alfau leaves El Telescopio near novel's end, he overhears "The Bowery" from A

Trip to Chinatown, and wonders whether it hints at “intuition of fate, a threat of destiny, or an evident conclusion” (344).

In all of this, Alfau proves more disillusioned than Garcia and exposes the inglorious circumstances surrounding a rogue’s life more perceptively than his friend. Although Garcia’s saga exposes the limitations of the Spanish picaresque tradition by revealing the darker consequences of roguery which that tradition has previously left out, his actual rogue still gets to perform some daring, romantic deeds, such as a daredevil pistol shot, a series of spectacular duels, and dies alongside one of the twentieth century’s most infamous anarchist criminals. With Alfau, all such exploits cease, and the rogue’s experience becomes a bum’s experience, totally stripped of any romanticized incidents, transcendental homelessness without the transcendence. When Garcia decides to waste away, Alfau knows that his friend is merely trying to Method act himself into a romanticized idea of Paco’s character: “This was the beginning of what he considered his long expiation, the downgrade epic into the mud bath. His sentimentality led him to all established situations of romantic degradation, and from his material suffering he must have derived some spiritual satisfaction” (194). But the destitute state in which Alfau finds Garcia can leave no doubt as to the unromantic and unsentimental status of the old-style picaresque rogue in the real world setting of the contemporary metropolis. Garcia’s experience in the Bowery renders him less than human as a result of his having succumbed to a dangerous romantic ideal. In other words, Garcia has become a modern Don Quixote, while Alfau assumes the role of Sancho Panza, picking up his “brutally disappointed” friend, and guiding him back to his more sober, almost completely disabused vision of twentieth-century New York roguery, a vision which consists of dispute and prose-making among friends who eschew criminality in favour of carousing and inquisitiveness.

I write *almost completely disabused*, for it would be a mistake to pit Alfau's idea of roguery against Garcia's in terms of realism and romanticism. Both offer views of what constitutes roguery that have not completely broken free from some of the genre's conventions. While Garcia's Paco still enjoys the prerogative of a few daring exploits, Alfau goes so far as to provide unlimited capital for his rogues, while failing to show them earning that capital in a salaried trade. In fact his Americaniardi community is made up of artists – a guitarist, four dancers, a would-be-writer, an unemployable bullfighter, and a conductor – who have difficulty finding regular work beyond the temp-dishwashing jobs Garcia agrees to perform every now and then, and who, throughout the course of the novel, never actually perform their art for wages but merely to entertain themselves and pass away the time. At one point, even Don Pedro refers to himself as “a well of worthless information and unmarketable achievements” (253). In so doing, Alfau's rogues perpetuate the *pícaro*'s aversion to socially valuable work. As Alpert demonstrates, in picaresque narratives the *pícaro* is rarely manhandled by merchants, shopkeepers, craftsmen or professionals, but rather by members of the clergy, gentlemen, and criminals because he does not seek his good fortune in trade (xv, xxv). Think of Cortadillo, the son of a tailor who has been trained to use scissors, yet prefers cutting the purses of unsuspecting marks rather than cutting the cloth of his father's clients (74) [181-2]. In the end, the rogue's *otium* may be his hardest habit to shake off.

Yet the fact that Alfau fears the Bowery may prove an “evident conclusion” as he exits El Telescopio with other drunken Americaniardi at the close of part two; the fact that those Americaniardi have all disappeared and survive only as “Chromos in disrepute” when Alfau revisits the shut down, dilapidated El Telescopio years later; and the fact that El Cogote, a torero who can find no work in a country where the ASPCA prohibits bullfighting, has begun to grasp

his own uselessness in a country where maximized efficiency has become a cult, and where leisure and *otium* are viewed as sinful wastes of time (136) -- all these point to an ultimatum: either shake off that illusion, or end up as the “king of bums” or the “paladin of the scum,” committing protracted suicide in some forsaken alleyway, as Garcia almost ends up doing. And the fact that Alfau never wrote another word after having completed *Chromos*, but supported himself as a translator in a bank, may suggest he chose the former option. Good for him, who may have been starving at the time for all we know, yet sad for the succeeding generations of readers who puzzle over the final fifty years of a life bound in silence, years that might have endowed posterity with so many more works of brilliance. Like Don Quixote renouncing his love of all things chivalric and literary as impractical at the end of his life, so Alfau turns his back on novel writing in mid-life for a practical, bread-winning job in a bank, the locus *par excellence* of meaningless action.

Our final appeal to *Don Quixote* shows why it would be a mistake to conclude with such a gloomy vision of human existence, one in which art, the only significant form of expression and experience in the universe, dooms the artist - let's face it, the modern *picaro* - to social uselessness, paucity, starvation, and final anonymity. For starters, *Chromos* takes its epigraph from *Don Quixote*,¹⁰ and thus confirms Don Pedro's conviction that Cervantes is not dead yet, and that the artist survives beyond his individual self through his art. Moreover, the dialogic structure of *Chromos*, its structure propelled by characters talking and reading to one another,

¹⁰ I should mention the typo found in my first edition (1990): “Una ella de algo más vaca que carnero.” The Spanish original reads “una olla,” not “una ella,” which makes little sense here: “a she of rather more beef than mutton,” vs. “a pot of...” Steven Moore, who worked from Alfau's manuscript, confessed the following in a personal email: “You're right: it's a typo for ‘olla.’ We worked from a photocopy of Alfau's old typed manuscript, in which the o's looked like e's and vice versa. Alfau did not want to proofread the book, so he didn't catch the error until after it was published. I believe Dalkey Archive corrected it for a later paperback printing, but I'm not sure.” The subsequent edition I have consulted (1999) preserves the typo.

recalls another early Spanish picaresque text: Cervantes's "Dialogue of the Dogs." In this story, a dog named Berganza relates his picaresque autobiography to another dog, Scipio, who like Alfau, interrupts his friend on numerous occasions to offer criticism about the genre's shortcomings. That Alfau was familiar with the story is made more probable when we consider that in *Locos* he tells the story of the origin of his friendship with Garcia, a story titled "A Romance of Dogs."

Consider moreover the following. Before Walter Reed, Georg Lukacs had proposed a typology of the novel that also identified *Don Quixote* as a turning — or starting — point in the genre's history in *The Theory of the Novel*. With Cervantes's masterpiece, readers were confronted with "the first great battle of interiority against the prosaic vulgarity of outward life" (104). *Don Quixote* is a parody of chivalric romances, true, but what stays with the reader are not Don Quixote's struggles against real external threats, villains, and other complications. The true pleasure of the book lies in his internal struggle with modes of perception and thought generated by false literary models, and the increasing awareness he comes to acquire from repeatedly failing to perform meaningful actions, or gestures (Lukacs preferred the expression "form-giving acts") prescribed by those models. In the meantime, the inner self is shown to be much richer than the outer world, a self in which meaning, greatness, and romance are made possible by merely imagining them, while the prosaic vulgarity of the real world offers no opportunity to exteriorize those imaginings. In *Chromos*, an experimental *and* realist novel, "form-giving acts," or gestures, or better yet the totality of all motion plain and simple, is dismissed as illusory and dangerous. Again, the only instance in the novel when a character attempts transformation via meaningful action is undertaken by Garcia, who decides to become a rogue, or bum, and that decision almost costs him his life. More reasonable Americaniards prefer self-realization and

self-discovery via literature and friendship, just as Don Quixote opted for romances and his friendship with his squire Sancho Panza before turning sour. As to Alfau himself, even those alternatives ultimately prove uncertain sources of knowledge and transcendence, since the novel ends without ever confirming whether what we have been reading is the product of imagination or memory. But then again, that final uncertainty hints at Don Pedro's theory of art as preserver, and even generator, of powerful experiences. Think of how music and literature generate an idea of life that Paco will realize, to the great chagrin and misfortune of his loved ones, but also of more pleasant examples. For Alfau manages to conjure 320 wonderfully imaginative pages of carousing, literary and philosophical debates, touching concern for sick friends, dancing, and singing while staring at chromos during the time it takes a match to die out. They are melodramatic, desecrated, fly-stained chromolithographs that nevertheless have the power to bring back to life friends dead or displaced, or to create from scratch such an irresistible cast of fascinating, human characters.

Conclusion

What my dissertation undertakes should be viewed as an initial step in rediscovering Alfau, not a definitive one. *Locos*, *Old Tales from Spain*, and *Chromos* lend themselves to many different kinds of readings and approaches. For example, although I have discussed *Locos* as both a novel and a collection of isolated short stories, another reading might look at how the cumulative effect of Alfau's variations at the level of characterization in each story finds its culmination in the final story, much like the coda in a musical piece composed according to developing variations. My reading of *Locos* as a confabulatory novel suggests stories bleed into each other, true, but in somewhat of a non-linear fashion, and the very notion of confabulation implies that there are no developing variations that culminate in a coda as the logical effect of those variations. I hint at such a conclusion in my reading of "A Romance of Dogs" as a symbiosis of Alfau and his character Garcia arrived at only after we have considered their symbiotic relation in the preceding chapters, but more needs to be said here. It would also be interesting to read *Locos* in the light of other story sequences that use similar sorts of image patterns, thematic echoes, a dominant single character and unity of place to achieve coherence, such as Joyce's *Dubliners*, Hemingway's *In our Time*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*.

One could also read *Old Tales from Spain* by drawing on recent children's-literature theory. Jack Zipes has formulated what is arguably the authoritative commentary on the function of fairy tales. He notes that they emerged out of aristocratic and bourgeois classes preoccupied with producing a literature designed for children with the specific purpose of "initiating [them] into the class rituals and customs that reinforced the status quo" (*When Dreams* 16). Hence, the highly moral and didactic tones of fairy tales serve what Zipes calls that genre's civilizing

process. As the fairy tale became fully institutionalized in the early twentieth century, however, some authors began to challenge the norms promoted in classic tales, and wrote their own sort that subverted those norms by exposing their class-bound origins while pointing at the somber underbelly of those civilizing forces (22-4). In this respect, Alfau's tales remain true to the classical model, since they mostly uphold rather than subvert traditional ideals. Eight of the ten tales conclude with a happy ending, while virtue rewarded and vice punished inform the two sad endings: "The Swan Song" punishes the traditional vice of egoism and rewards its opposite virtue of self-sacrifice, while lovers separated by fate and prejudice are reunited in death in "The Weeping Willow and the Cypress Tree."

A more extensive look at all the echoes, allusions, suggestions of indebtedness, parallelisms, links, etc. discussed herein might also include the following. For starters, there is more work to be done on parallels between specific sections of Alfau and specific works by authors that preceded him; not to argue that Alfau was familiar with the works of these writers or that he was consciously drawing upon them while writing his own stories (although he might well have been), but rather to show how, for all his formal innovativeness, he shares thematic concerns with older writers with whom he has never been compared. For example, one could read "Fingerprints" alongside Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. In Twain's novel, human reason and a technological breakthrough in forensics — fingerprints — are used to advance the cause of justice and solve a mystery (murder), with the final result of a move from ignorance to knowledge. In Alfau's story, the same technological breakthrough is used to thwart justice, and a mystery (again a murder) is obscured even more by the manipulation of that technology, with the final result of a move from ignorance to greater ignorance. Both writers then are interested in the tools available to further knowledge, although in Alfau's case, the murderer who is detected and

punished in Twain with the assistance of those tools (objective, demonstrable evidence), here uses those tools to obfuscate the truth.

In such a study, *Locos* could be read as a gothic novel dealing with a number of Poe-esque staples, including the obsession with cataleptic states, the fear of premature burial, tales of ratiocination, and supernatural phenomena. These staples could help explain the “giddy mutability” pervading *Locos* in an altogether different light than metafiction, as the product of the character’s “disintegrating psyche,” a familiar topos of Gothic fiction (Fisher 89). Given Poe’s wide-ranging presence throughout *Locos*, including the doppelganger in “Identity”; the classical and metaphysical detective fiction in almost every story, with special emphasis on “Fingerprints” and “The Wallet”; and “Ligeia” in “A Character” and “The Premature Burial” in “The Necrophil,” such a study could provide in-depth analysis of any one of these, or all. The reader is invited to work out those intriguing presences for herself; I have already touched upon the links between “The Fall of the House of Usher” in “A Romance of Dogs” in my second chapter.

It would also be interesting to discuss how Alfau’s “A Character” and Henry James’s “The Friends of the Friends” both deal with the phenomenon of percipience.¹ The phenomenon is defined as a subcategory of the supernatural phenomena collected in *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), a work Peter G. Beidler contends is “of central importance to a study of *The Turn of the*

¹ In “The Friends of the Friends,” an unnamed narrator is engaged to a man, who is one of the tale’s two percipients, and is also unnamed (in fact, nobody is identified by name in the tale). While still a student at Oxford, some 12 years prior to the time of narration, the fiancé experiences a vision of his mother smiling at him in his room. The next morning, he receives news of her death. The other percipient is a female acquaintance of the narrator. At eighteen, while visiting a museum (coincidentally also twelve years prior to the events narrated), she catches sight of her father, whom she knows to be hundreds of miles away. Before the day ends, she receives a telegram notifying her that he has passed away that very morning.

Screw” (25). According to Beidler, the popular nineteenth-century anthology provided a tradition of ghostly or psychic narratives that would have been familiar to James and his readers at the turn of the century. As a subcategory of such phenomena, percipience consists in “visual apparitions that appeared to living persons (‘percipients’) before, at, or shortly after the death of the person (‘agent’) whose apparition appeared” (Beidler 25-6). Percipience occurs three times in James’s tale, while it occurs only once in Alfau’s. The twist is that in Alfau’s case, it occurs not between a living percipient and dead agent, but between a fictional percipient and real-life agent.

Percipience makes frequent appearances in much ghost fiction. Ambrose Bierce, for example, uses it repeatedly (“A Wireless Message” and “A Cold Greeting”). What justifies a parallel reading in Alfau and James’s case is that they use percipience to explore the nature of interpersonal encounters. If a living person can encounter a deceased person during percipience, what do we truly understand of other kinds of encounters, more habitual, familiar ones such as those that occur between two living persons, and less probable ones, such as those that take place when a real person runs into a literary character? By depicting encounters that occur under seemingly impossible circumstances, the authors suggest that we know little of the agencies involved in such encounters.

There is also more to say about the presence of two (at the very least) Spanish short stories in Alfau’s novels. Leopoldo Alas, better known as Clarín, wrote “Mi entierro” (1886), a work whose subtitle *discurso de un loco* almost advertises its kinship with *Locos*, and which Alfau may have had in mind while writing passages that made their way into both *Locos* and *Chromos*. “Mi Entierro” tells the story of Don Agapito Ronzuelos who, after an evening spent playing chess with a friend in a café, returns home to the middle of his own wake. As his wife

sits by his corpse, he is struck not only by the fact that he still possesses “the extraordinary faculties of [his] conscience as a dead man” [una facultad extraordinaria de mi conciencia de difunto], but is moreover capable of communicating “directly with the minds of others (268) [“mi pensamiento se comunicaba directamente con el pensamiento ajeno”] (195). As the story ends, Ronzuelos resolves not to return to the living, preferring to make his home among the dead from now on.

Like Ronzuelos, Doña Micaela Valverde experiences death spells and comes to prefer these spells over a living, fully conscious state, in *Locos*. And like Ronzuelos, Alfau possesses the ability to mind-read another person in *Chromos*. The mind reading episode in *Chromos*, involving the mysterious Fulano, is doubly interesting because it also seems to have been inspired by another Spanish short story, Benito Pérez Galdós’s “La princesa y el Granuja” [“The Princess and the Street Urchin”]. In it, Pacorrigo Migajas passes in front of a store where a lady showcased in a window catches his eye. Pacorrigo becomes enraptured with her, and Galdos spends the next few pages pondering the nature and implications of inanimate love, much as Alfau will do in his fourth and last mind-reading session with Fulano, who has fallen in love with a store mannequin under circumstances that closely mirror the plot of Galdós’s story. Although the lady here turns out to be a doll rather than a mannequin, we should recall that Fulano’s infatuation originates from a dream involving a dollhouse (243). Either way, both stories depict the revulsion that usually follows the gratification of reified desires: Fulano awakens to the disgusting aftermath of despoliation, unsuccessfully attempts to hack to pieces the indestructible mannequin, flees his apartment which he accidentally sets ablaze while trying to burn his incombustible love, and is struck down by a fire truck (341); Pacorrigo is ultimately whisked inside the window display and transformed into a doll, condemned to permanently endure his

perverse infatuation, and as he is stripped of “life, blood, warmth, and skin” (263) [Vida, sangre, calor, pellejo] (185), his love doll claims dominion over him. Finally, both stories undermine undue seriousness with light-hearted touches near the end: Fulano dies an ironic death, killed by the engine come to extinguish “the fire of his love,” while Pacorrito finds some small comfort in discovering that, as a toy-figurine, he is worth 240 *reales*.

Recurring ideas in Alfau’s fiction also warrant more study. Consider the dialogic structure of *Chromos* that emerges out of the built-in commentary Alfau writes into his novel, commentary in which he offers pointed criticism directed at Garcia’s Sandoval saga on the grounds that it constitutes *cursi* melodrama. Antonio Candau claims that the term *cursi* originated in the nineteenth century, and was originally used to refer to a bourgeois fear of becoming the butt of a joke, a fear which prompted the bourgeoisie to adopt affected styles and manners in its dealings with lower and higher social classes in order to prevent that eventuality (227-8). The explanation is intriguing, and can help explain why Garcia intentionally writes his saga as *cursi*, or “old-fashion,” as he himself defines the term (56): to write off the weaknesses and corniness that critical readers like Alfau will no doubt detect as the consequence of his desire to intentionally write in that manner. Then there is the question of Alfau’s position in regards to that prose: if an author dismisses as derivative melodrama one third of his work (in his defense, he does claim that it is the prose of one of his characters), does this excuse him from including it in a work he authors for our own perusal? If an author produces work he is quite critical of, and instead of excising it from his final draft, merely passes it off as the work of another, then aren’t we dealing with a sort of bizarre reverse-plagiarism here, and should that author be viewed as a self-loathing producer of kitsch, criticized for his inconsistencies, or praised for his ability to adopt disarming and enigmatic postures?

In this regard, another point of interest lies in the many instances of self-censure when Alfau excises substantial passages of Garcia's saga on the grounds that they contain not *cursi* melodrama but *sicalipsis* (from the greek: *sykon* (vulva) and *aleiptikos* (arousing)), a type of pornography that was found in postcards, novelettes, magazines, and films circulating in Spain in the early twentieth century and that challenged the then dominant repressive attitudes concerning sexual matters. For Alfau, *sicalipsis* "mars like grease spots" much of literature, while Garcia defends it on the grounds of a "bold and real" type of writing (62). Yet Alfau may have cast himself as a censoring figure as a tongue-in-cheek gesture here, since Charles Simmons's portrayal of his friend in *Powdered Eggs* depicts him as a man addicted to telling ribald tales. And although *Chromos* contains only a few masochistic passages which seem to have eluded Alfau's wary watch, an incestuous relationship is at the heart of *Locos*, a work that also features numerous prostitutes, pimps, and an ominous priest who commits suicide following the escape of a novice with whom he may have had unwholesome relations. Since sex is such a driving force behind character motivation in Alfau's fiction, it might be interesting to try to determine the extent to which his approach to sex is inflected by the generic characteristics of *sicalipsis*, itself a cultural tendency whose approach to sex was inflected by the specific historical forces at work in Spain at the turn of the last century. Maite Zubiaurre's recently published study of *sicalipsis*, *Cultures of the Erotic in Spain, 1898-1939* (2012), could help those interested in launching such an investigation.

One might also want to spend some time reviewing Alfau's poems which, like *Old Tales from Spain*, still await their first serious critical assessment. The twenty-two poems were written throughout Alfau's life, some of them long after he had abandoned writing prose fiction, and thus can shed light into the later years of this enigmatic, reclusive figure. The earliest poem,

“Ciclo,” dates from 1923, and deals with geometrical speculations that will resurface in Don Pedro’s fourth-perpendicular theory in *Chromos*, while the latest one was written in 1987, “Punto final,” and imagines God distracting himself after having completed the creation of the universe by creating butterflies and flowers. A personal favourite, “El naturalista,” deals with the two conflicting personalities at the heart of Alfau, the sentimental, cursi Romantic (embodied by Garcia in his fiction) and the mathematical, clinical man of science (embodied by Don Pedro and Dr. José de los Ríos). The poem describes two manners of response when the protagonist perceives “a bush that burst in a swarm of butterflies” [un arbusto que prorrumpió en un enjambre de mariposas]. The first is immediate, and associated with the first person, while the second is detached, and associated with the second person: “For me, a flock of butterflies, / for you, the family of lepidopterae” [“Para mi, bandada de las mariposas; / para ti, familia de los lepidopteros”]. The poem also contains an analogy which would have delighted Nabokov, when it compares the naturalist to a thaumaturge and artist (Nabokov was a lepidopterologist who claimed that more imagination was involved in science than in art).

Finally, what I wish to stress as I conclude is the provisional nature of what I have begun here. My dissertation is only the second monograph² devoted to Alfau, and the first that offers sustained discussions of all three of his published prose works by contending that they are informed by elements from Alfau’s past, both personal and collective, literary and cultural. It makes claims which subsequent studies will no doubt want to call into question. After all, won’t a more seasoned Spanish folklorist (I don’t even claim to be an amateur one) eventually unearth

² In his unpublished Master’s thesis devoted to Alfau, *Thundering Out of the Shadow: Modernity and Identity in the novels of Felipe Alfau* (2005), Joseph Scott argues that Alfau’s preoccupation with identity makes him as much a proponent of modernism as his formal inventiveness makes him a proponent of postmodernism. To a certain extent, this basic idea informs the reading of *Locos* as short stories in my second chapter.

earlier versions of Alfau's old tales? And by the way, hadn't other writers already rewritten the picaresque tradition long before Alfau did, such as Dickens, for example? I had rather my dissertation spur further interest in Alfau, and see some of its claims eventually refuted, than that it become an authoritative statement on *Locos*, *Old Tales from Spain*, and *Chromos* until the next isolated burst of enthusiasm in the middle of the twenty-first century. After all, Joseph Scott wrote a thesis on Alfau in 2005, and took his title from Ilan Stavans's boast in 1992 that Alfau was finally "thundering out of the shadow." Unfortunately, Alfau quickly thundered back into critical darkness following that brief stint of fame in the early 90s, and Scott hoped his own dissertation would serve as a "project of recovery" (64), capable of rekindling the general and professional readers' interest. Thirteen years of indifference and silence separated Stavans's enthusiasm from Scott's, while eight have separated Scott's from mine. I will deem it no small accomplishment if new enthusiasts can use the material assembled here to increase the general awareness of a writer who has been neglected for far too long.

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