

**BEYOND THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION:
THE USE OF HUMOR AND
THE UNUSUAL NARRATOR
IN MAX AUB'S *MANUSCRITO CUERVO***

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Resumen

La frase famosa que Theodor Adorno profirió en 1949: “escribir poesía después de Auschwitz es bárbaro” trata la problemática de representar y comprender un evento histórico y extremo a través de la literatura. Mientras que esa declaración ha generado mucha controversia, también ha sugerido la necesidad de crear nuevas formas de representaciones literarias que ya no encajan dentro del modelo pre-holocausto. Este modelo post-Auschwitz también provoca una reconceptualización y transformación de la lengua para cumplir las necesidades de un discurso traumático que va más allá del lenguaje cotidiano. También obliga a uno a reconocer que las categorías y marcos disponibles durante el período del pre-holocausto son insuficientes para expresar un evento imposible de explicar o visualizar. Tras el posmodernismo y su deconstrucción de “lo real” y el subsiguiente debate entre la historia/ficción, la escritura traumática ha adoptado formas narrativas poco convencionales para tratar cuestiones de ausencia y pérdida. Este ensayo examina el concepto de afasia en el cuento *Manuscrito Cuervo* del escritor español Max Aub. Esta obra creativa representa un ejemplo excelente del uso de Max Aub de estrategias narrativas de vanguardia para representar la realidad del campo de concentración de Le Vernet. Aub se distancia de las convenciones literarias tradicionales y recurre a nuevas formas artísticas y estéticas como el distanciamiento, el humor y el narrador insólito a fin de representar una realidad que va más allá de cualquier forma convencional de representación.

Palabras clave: Max Aub, campos de concentración franceses, exilio español, Holocausto, Guerra Civil Española, trauma

Abstract

In his famous declaration in 1949 that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Theodor Adorno addresses the problematic of representing and coming to terms with an extreme historical event through literature. While his contention has received much criticism, it has also suggested the need for new forms of literary representation that no longer fit the pre-Holocaust models. The after-Auschwitz model forces a reconceptualization and transformation of language to meet the needs of a traumatic discourse that falls outside of “everyday” language. It also forces one to recognize that the familiar categories and frameworks available during the pre-Holocaust period are insufficient to express an event that cannot be explained nor visualized. In the wake of postmodernism and its deconstruction of the “real” and the ensuing debate between history/fiction, traumatic writing has adopted unconventional narrative forms to address issues of absence or loss. This essay examines the concept of aphasia in Spanish writer Max Aub’s short story *Manuscrito Cuervo*. This creative work represents a prime example of Max Aub’s use of the Spanish Avant-garde as a narrative strategy employed to represent the reality of the French concentration camp of Le Vernet. Aub breaks away from traditional literary conventions and turns to new, artistic and aesthetic forms such as estrangement, humor and the unusual narrator in an effort to represent a reality that goes beyond any conventional form of representation.

Key words: Max Aub, French concentration camps, Spanish exile, Holocaust, Spanish Civil War, trauma

The after-Auschwitz model forces a reconceptualization and transformation of language to meet the needs of a traumatic discourse that falls outside of “everyday” language. It forces one to recognize that the familiar categories and frameworks available during the pre-Holocaust period are insufficient to express an event that cannot be explained nor visualized.

According to Ruth Leys, the Holocaust epitomizes the paradigm of this break-down responsible for having created an epistemological-ontological crisis of witnessing manifested at the level of language itself. This gave rise to what Primo Levi called an unbridgeable gap between the world of the concentration and death camps and that of the interpreter. Lacking feasible means for expressing the extreme via conventional language, the way to bridge this gap is through the creation of a new language with a new system of signifiers. As José Ángel Sáinz states, traumatic events require new models of representation as the traditional categories of representation are insufficient as a means of describing a traumatic reality that goes beyond reason (318). While language is closely tied to systems of social conventions that allow one to reconstruct the past, when those social systems break down or are confronted with aphasic tendencies, the reconstruction of memory becomes more difficult. While many survivors of trauma experience a phase of traumatic memory manifested through dreams, flashbacks, and hallucinations, they find language inadequate to articulate those experiences. This is often exemplified by the survivor's delay, inability, or even refusal, to write about those experiences. Many survivors understood the need to testify, but they either did not know how or feared that nobody would understand. This prompted many survivors to wait years and even decades before documenting their experiences. For Elie Wiesel, who waited ten years before writing about his experiences, the Holocaust represents the death of language and the imagination and constitutes an alternative reality that forces one to create a new language.¹

For Spanish writer Max Aub, writing about his experiences in the French concentration camps of Le Vernet and Djelfa became a laborious task that consumed much of his literary work.² There are many examples in Aub's extensive literary production of *The Magical Labyrinth* that break away from the realist model of writing testimony and turn to the Spanish Avant-garde as a narrative strategy employed to represent the reality of

¹ Wiesel further problematizes writing's inability to relate traumatic events, especially through fiction, in his famous declaration that "A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka."

² While Aub's diaries and other texts that deal with his experience in the camps do not specifically manifest the psychological symptoms associated with trauma, Aub's obsession with writing and rewriting about the camps symbolizes the continual presence of the trauma and signals Aub's endeavor to work through the trauma by way of its repetition. Testimonial writing about the concentration camps for Aub is therefore an inherent process defined by repetition, retelling and rewriting. The constant rewriting and retelling allows Aub to search for answers to his own personal questions and to attempt to make sense out of this indiscernible reality.

the French concentration camp of Le Vernet.³ Aub's short story *Manuscrito Cuervo* exemplifies the Avant-garde's emphasis on the destruction, rupture and fragmentation of traditional narrative forms that result in the creation of a deformed narrative structure. Aub breaks away from the traditional narrative syntax as he engages in a series of games that creates a chaotic, unorganized structure that parallels the chaotic structure of post-traumatic memory. Aub uses an unusual narrator—a crow—and humor as a medium through which his experience may be conveyed to a distant public whose level of comprehension is far removed and disconnected from the reality experienced by the survivors. The continual playing with language, breaking and distorting traditional grammatical conventions, enables him to express what was previously "inexpressible" through normal linguistic conventions. The form of the story loses importance and is superseded by the value placed on the image and the metaphor, each of which is essential in the representation of such an atypical reality. The use of the Avant-garde thus enables Aub to enter into a discussion and criticism of the French concentration camps from an estranged point of view that, to a certain extent, diverts the reader's attention from the traumatic reality, while still implanting a harsh criticism. José María Naharro Calderón's discussion of the arbitrary and absurd nature of the concentration camp as a universe that functions under arbitrary codes that fall outside of ordinary logic explains the need for Aub to resort to discursive strategies that parallel the lack of logic in the camps.⁴ *Manuscrito Cuervo* represents Max Aub's attempt to find an adequate literary model that best illustrates the problematic relationship between writing trauma and language's inability to relate traumatic realities.

Published in 1950⁵ in Mexico, *Manuscrito Cuervo* presents a moralist, ethical discourse that denounces the corruption and injustices of the

³ Upon spending a period of two years (1940-1942) interned in various French concentration camps and jails operated under the Vichy Regime, Max Aub dedicated much of his literary production to writing about his experiences in the camps. Among some of his other works that deal with the camps are the short stories: *Vernet 1940*, *Historia de Vidal*, *Ruptura*, *El limpiabotas del Padre Eterno*, *Yo no invento nada*, and *El cementerio de Djelfa*. These stories come from the collection titled *Enero Sin Nombre*. Among Aub's most prominent plays that deal with the camps are: *Campo francés* and *Morir por cerrar los ojos*.

⁴ Naharro-Calderón also reads Aub's texts about the camp experience as a critique of modernity, a reflection of the dialectic tension between the systematic and the arbitrary, and an illustration of the final collapse of the promises of Enlightenment universalism, which the logic of fascism has stripped of all moral content and reduced to sheer administrative efficiency.

⁵ Aub began to think about and outline his ideas for *Manuscrito Cuervo* in 1940 during his first stay in Vernet. He continued to work on the writing and re-writing of this text throughout his second stay in Vernet in 1941. The final version was not finished until 1943, although the text was officially published in 1950.

French concentration camps and poses many fundamental questions regarding the reconstruction of identity and collective memory of the Spanish exiles.⁶ *Manuscrito Cuervo* is arguably one of Aub's most important short stories dealing with the camps due to its length and to its unusual narrative structure. This text, like many of Aub's other writings, represents a clear example of his humanistic tendencies and his resistance against the established order of the camps and the totalitarian regimes that sustained them, as well as the defense of freedom and human rights. In spite of its apparent simplicity and playfulness, Aub deals with a series of complex and serious issues that hide behind this fictitious narrative reality. In order to create this particular framework, Aub structures the story around a multiplicity of narrative voices that operates on various different levels and contributes to the distancing and defamiliarization technique that allows Aub to engage in his criticism. In this story, Aub chooses to distort the perception of reality, or borrowing a term from Valle-Inclán, he evokes a kind of *esperpento*, using concave mirrors that disfigure reality instead of presenting a more faithful reflection of it.

The central protagonist of this story is a crow named Jacobo who witnessed (but did not suffer) the conditions of the concentration camp of Le Vernet.⁷ Jacobo documents his observations in a notebook, written in crow language, which was later found and translated into Spanish by J.R. Bululu and edited by Aben Máximo Albarrón.⁸ This act of invoking the use

⁶ The concept of exile also becomes an important theme in this essay as it, much like the experience in the camp, represents the exile's being stripped of their identity and cut off from the social and cultural life of his national community and from the institutions that supported them. Aub's writings about the pre-war, the Civil War and exile periods illustrate that in reality he never really abandoned Spain at least from an emotional standpoint. Even while in Mexico, Spain remained a constant preoccupation in Aub's mind, as he sought to deal with the anguish of his physical separation from Spain by expressing his love and dedication to his country through writing. Exile supposed a continual desire to connect with the past in order to remember the exile's cultural roots.

⁷ The concentration camp of Le Vernet was a punishment camp primarily reserved for prisoners considered to be politically questionable or dangerous. Among other punishment camps were Collioure and Rieucros. During his first stay in Le Vernet, Aub was classified as a "suspicious" communist who was involved in dangerous activities. From 1923, Vernet had been under the auspices of the French Ministry of War, and utilized by the Ministry of Interior for the internment of Spanish Republican refugees. In September 1939, due to the declaration of war, the Ministry of Interior declared this camp a camp for all foreigners of all nationalities. Vernet was known for its strict discipline and was considered as the most repressive French concentration camp. Due to its deficient conditions (lack of food, poor hygiene and cold temperatures) Le Vernet became an authentic concentration camp, comparable, according to some survivors, to Nazi camps, but without the crematorium. When the armistice was signed between France and Germany on June 22, 1940, the French government turned over to the Nazi regime all of the prisoner's files. Vernet closed in 1944.

⁸ It is J.R. Bululu who found Jacobo's manuscript in his suitcase and was in charge of preparing the edition, writing the prologue and editing the notes of the manuscript, although as he affirms,

of a translator further obscures the transmission of Jacobo's testimony as meaning is ultimately lost in the translation from one language into another. The need to create another language is the way that the survivor of trauma translates the incomprehensible or extreme into a more familiar register. When words do not exist to describe such an experience, the survivor must resort to alternative measures to transmit or translate that meaning. It also reminds one of the systematic repression of language that characterized the concentration camps, which sought to erase the survivor's language and voice. Language, therefore, is more than a mere tool of expression, for it becomes the subject of its own discourse. This inability to fully communicate, as words also have their limitations, is one example of the limits that characters confront in *The Magical Labyrinth*.⁹ Therefore, it is no coincidence that a non-survivor of the camps fulfills the task of writing about the experience, since the camps sought to prohibit such activities.¹⁰ Bearing witness to trauma therefore does not attempt to faithfully reproduce the event but rather it enables the survivor to regain control of his/her memory or as Cathy Caruth notes, "take leave of it" (qtd. in Bernard-Donals, 7). Once the survivor has control of his/her conscious recall, then those traumatic memories that previously overwhelmed him/her now form part of his/her narrative memory. The survivor now controls his/her memory recall and can consciously decide to evoke or take leave of those memories.

The insertion of these two characters creates a fictitious world of imaginary characters that represents the antithesis to the prototypical serious-

"Yo no tenía relaciones personales con Jacobo" (*Enero Sin Nombre* 178). This affirmation immediately eliminates any personal connection that might have existed between Jacobo and J.R. Bululú, which further distances the witness's testimony from its narration.

⁹ In addition to *Manuscrito Cuervo*, another historically based text that uses distancing and estrangement is *Enero Sin Nombre*. In this text, Aub also turns to an unusual, depersonalized narrator—a beech tree—to tell the story of the tragic journey of the Spanish exiles as they traversed the long road into France after the fall of Barcelona to the Nationalists in late January 1939. In this respect, the tree, like the crow, is personified and is converted into a witness of the circumstances that surround it. The tree not only recounts these painful memories, but also gives voice to a series of anonymous people so that they too can tell their stories. As Eloisa Nos Aldás asserts, in these two stories Aub turns to the use of the classical fable, whose emphasis on granting communicative language and human consciousness to animals and vegetation demonstrates the impossibility and absurdity of coming to terms with the reality of the situation (228).

¹⁰ Not even this newly invented language succeeds in completely and faithfully transcribing this reality into a comprehensible written narrative, for Jacobo confesses that even the crow language fails to express with words the meaning that he is trying to convey, obstructing and further complicating his description of the camps. Jacobo himself points to this breakdown and aphasia: "Nuestro riquísimo idioma cuervo no puede expresar tan exactamente como yo hubiese deseado un cúmulo de palabras de las que no he podido todavía averiguar el exacto sentido" (*Enero Sin Nombre* 187).

ness attributed to the concentration-camp narrator.¹¹ Both J.R. Bululú and Aben Máximo Albarrón assume a particular role and participate as both primary (J.R. Bululú) and secondary (Aben Máximo Albarrón) narrators in the narration of Jacobo's story. The break in the narration that follows the writing of the manuscript to its discovery and translation parallels the latency period or period of belatedness that follows a traumatic experience. The fact that the transmission of the story itself passes through the hands of various narrators/voices, instead of relying solely on the testimony and discourse of one narrator/witness (Jacobo), further contributes to the estrangement of the story by diffusing the responsibility of the witness and averting Jacobo's direct testimony by providing new filters between the reality presented and the reader. Therefore, the inclusion of two human figures facilitates the transmission of Jacobo's testimony to a "human" audience. J.R. Bululú's role as the editor not only reproduces Jacobo's testimony into a more coherent text, but he also interjects additional comments and observations that go beyond his role of providing explanatory notes, granting a certain degree of subjectivity to his annotations. The insertion of J.R. Bululú and Aben Máximo Albarrón also serves the purpose of bearing witness wherein both characters become secondary witnesses to Jacobo's trauma upon their direct participation in the telling of his story. This multiplicity of voices confers to *Manuscrito Cuervo* a degree of collective trauma as the trauma of the French concentration camps now passes through the hands (and voices) of many narrators who now assume a collective responsibility of this trauma.¹²

The clearest example of estrangement comes from the use of an unusual narrator, Jacobo, to recount the traumatic story of the concentration-camp universe. Aub chooses to give voice and the authority of the word to

¹¹ From the very first page of the story, a clear Cervantine influence is detected in the usage of certain distancing and estrangement techniques in which Max Aub seeks to create a separation between the narrator and the reader. This notion of a lost manuscript, its reappearance, and then its translation into Spanish remits to Cervantes' *Don Quijote* where the end of chapter eight coincides with a break in the narration at which point the narrator is forced to discontinue his narration of the story due to his inability to find the rest of the manuscript. The manuscript is later discovered, written in Arabic and subsequently translated into Spanish by Cide Hamete, who assumes the role of the ensuing narrator.

¹² What distinguishes Max Aub's testimonial work as collective trauma is his continual need to represent the trauma of the concentration camps, not as his own, but rather as one belonging to an entire group of exiles. This is illustrated by the elimination of the first-person voice ("Yo") and the continual usage of victimized and marginalized narrators in the third person. Aub's testimonial work responds to the trauma of the concentration camps by portraying the life and experiences of the émigrés through fictitious narrators that represent their collective voice. Each protagonist, even those who are non-human, succeeds in delineating different dimensions of the trauma that Aub and his fellow concentration-camp victims experienced.

a crow, who is not only non-human, but also did not live through the concentration-camp experience. Jacobo is therefore neither a hero nor a survivor of the camp, although he was a witness who lived among the humans, flying from one barrack to another, observing their way of life and daily activities. Therefore, despite the fact that the traumatic event has its greatest impact and effect on the victim, it also affects everyone who comes in contact with it (LaCapra 8), which subsequently explains Jacobo's need to document his observations. This enables Jacobo to become a more involved narrator, for the place of enunciation of his testimony takes place inside the actual parameters and events of the concentration camp. Throughout the text, Jacobo continually reminds the reader that he has seen and heard first-hand that which he describes and documents in his study as illustrated by the following remark: "Todo cuanto describa o cuente ha sido visto y observado por mis ojos, escrito al día en mis fichas" (*Enero Sin Nombre* 185). This reinforces the testimonial nature of Jacobo's account.

The act of granting testimonial precedence to a bird, especially one who claims to speak on a more superior level than humans, subordinates the voice of the human subject. José Antonio Pérez Bowie labels this "una estrategia desrealizadora," which creates distance from the actual events presented by bearing witness to the tragedy not from the perspective of the immersed subject, but rather through the lens of a hypothetical witness and an unlikely subject (15). This symbolizes the dehumanization of the exile or survivor of the camp upon being stripped of his/her human identity and reduced to a subaltern entity and to an inferior space that even ranks below that of the bird species. The fact that the narrator of the story is also an animal, whose voice has been personified, further contributes to the dehumanizing effect of the text, since Jacobo represents the medium through which the reality of the French concentration camps is transmitted to the reader. The use of the "estrategia desrealizadora" therefore enables Aub to create the distance needed for a reporter to document painful events. It also reinforces the meta-narrative dimension of traumatic writing as it represents a continual fight against writing and the need to explore new literary and linguistic forms of expression.

In spite of belonging to the most illustrious crow family, the reader still feels sorry for Jacobo as he too becomes a victim, although not to the same extent as the internees, of the human brutality that permeates the concentration-camp world. In light of the central position that Jacobo

occupies as a victim and bystander of trauma, whose nature is essential for the narration of the traumatic account, he is ultimately converted into an antihero. Jacobo lacks the traditional heroic qualities due to his inferior place with respect to humans and his position as a non-survivor of the camps. However, his mere victimization as a witness of the trauma supposes a continual confrontation with the painful traumatic memory. While Jacobo may be viewed as an unreliable narrator, it is clear that he is a part of Aub's world of literary fantasy.¹³ Aub tries to give more verisimilitude to the story, while at the same time adding a certain humoristic and parodic dimension. The parody lies in Aub's using a scientific, rational discourse to explain an irrational world. The story is framed within a scientific study wherein Jacobo personifies a university "student" who is conducting an anthropological study of human beings and their curious behaviors from the perspective of the crows. The objective of the study is to examine the flaws of an inferior race in order to avoid that the crow race commit the same errors, while further prolonging the superiority of their culture over that of the concentration camp.¹⁴ Jacobo's references to his crow professors who provide him with scholarly information and his desire to include only facts in his study give the appearance of an academic discourse, while they ultimately provoke laughter in the face of such an exaggerated reality. This is an example where Aub uses parody to describe the tragedy of the concentration-camp world from the perspective of a wise crow. However, the irony here lies in the fact that the study is neither objective nor scientific given the plural register of voices and the incompleteness of the study as Jacobo disappears.

By framing Jacobo's study within an academic discourse, Aub also engages in a discussion about the problems or limits associated with historical facts and the representation of history. Aub enters into a discussion of the postmodernist debate of history vs. fiction where he attempts to deconstruct the traditional conception of history as a science that possesses an absolute truth. The epistemological state of writing "after Auschwitz" is placed into doubt as Aub offers other versions of the "facts" that contradict those imposed by governing institutions. Aub ultimately questions the reliability of the historical and scientific discourse as being a fixed, predetermined set of memories of the past. While the scientific study guarantees the accuracy of one's observations and conclusions, Aub

¹³ One could argue that Jacob's knowledge is limited as a result of being a bird.

¹⁴ The idea of an inferior or superior race has been connected to fascist regimes.

demystifies the use of science as a means of accurately representing traumatic experiences and advocates for the acceptance of multiple representations of the same historical event. Therefore, in spite of his lack of verisimilitude as a narrator and of belonging to the bird species, lacking a perspective of pure objectivity, Jacobo succeeds in describing a universe filled with pain, death and dehumanization through an ironical and paradoxical narrative of the human condition. As José Antonio Pérez Bowie declares, the only way to understand the reality that Jacobo depicts and to approach the communication of that reality to a public resides in reducing it to the absurd (32). The principal problem that Jacobo confronts in his study is that he mistakenly describes the behavior and customs of the camp as if they represented that of the entire human species. This leads him to come to many erroneous conclusions, on the one hand, while at the same time ironically (and comically) reflecting the unjust and absurd concentration-camp world.¹⁵ His inability to completely understand many of these behaviors also causes him to misinterpret them or at least to assign them inadequate features, which adds to the humor of the story, but also further highlights the absurdity of the reality that he is describing.

In the prologue, J.R. Bululú comments that Jacobo did not have enough time to complete his study ("Por lo visto no tuvo tiempo de acabarlo, o no se trata más que del borrador del libro publicado en lengua corvina," 178). Jacobo's inability to finish documenting his story illustrates writing's failure and language's inability to relate certain realities.¹⁶ In the second sentence of the prologue, J.R. Bululu adds that Jacobo disappeared days before he found the manuscript, but nothing was known about him nor did anyone ever hear from him again ("Jacobo había desaparecido días antes y no se sabía nada de él, ni según supe luego, se volvió a tener noticias suyas," *Enero Sin Nombre* 177). The fact that Jacobo never finishes his study nor concludes his manuscript also reveals the impossibility of telling an entire traumatic story. Max Aub's immense literary collection of works

¹⁵ As a result of this generalization, Jacobo believes that the men inside the camp are divided into two principle groups: inmates and the outside guards. He states that the second category (the "outside" guards) must be the inferior group since they attend to the needs of the interns as if they were the "chosen" ones.

¹⁶ This notion of writing's failure to depict traumatic realities becomes a recurrent metaphor in concentration-camp literature. As José Antonio Pérez Bowie expresses in his "Introduction" to *Manuscrito Cuervo*: "las distintas formas discursivas humanas utilizadas para narrar, sistematizar y transmitir la experiencia y el conocimiento no logran expresar la vivencia del campo de concentración. Es imposible narrar la barbarie, compartirla con un lector" (34). This idea also remits back to Francois Lyotard's concept of the *differend* as what remains to be phrased exceeds what one can presently express.

about the Civil War and the concentration camps exemplify the incessant need to write and re-write, threading together and unraveling these memories throughout a series of testimonial works. However, even Aub's massive literary collection fails to completely tell his story, as he states: "Las notas y recuerdos que acumulé necesitarían cien años de vida para resolverlos en libros" (qtd. in Soldevila Durante 1973; 357).

Jacobo's own sudden disappearance parallels the disappearance of many Spanish exiles, who never returned and were never heard from again. Jacobo's symbolic death remits to the concepts of death and violence that tend to characterize the trauma narrative and represent a precursor to the victim's "rebirth" and rediscovery of their new identity. Although the reader does not learn how Jacobo disappeared, his disappearance creates a metaphorical ellipsis in the narration that disrupts the logical sequence of time and space and presents a void and ultimately a dissociation from the trauma. There is no finality or conclusion to Jacobo's tale, therefore the reader never learns what happened to him beyond the end of his story. This uncertainty creates a break in the narration, and temporarily suspends the trauma, as we do not know the degree to which the trauma continued to affect Jacobo. The ellipsis also produces, what Michael Ugarte terms, the language of war, which I interpret in this context as a long period of silence that characterized the post-Holocaust period (736). Although Jacobo is silenced, the disaster continues to speak as it dissimulates itself in the text. Given that the disaster escapes the very possibility of experience, the only possible way of expressing this reality is with an ellipsis. J.R. Bululú and Aben Máximo Albarrón's presence in the narration serves the function of preserving the memory of Jacobo by organizing and publishing his manuscript. This act ultimately facilitates the reconstruction of Jacobo's identity, not as a bird, but rather as a witness to this horrible tragedy. This strange and distorted world is characterized by the subversion of logic whereby an implausible character is the narrator who not only tells the story of a concentration-camp world that completely lacks logic, but also becomes the embodiment of reason. However, Aub never attempts to rationalize the fantastic nature of this story, for in a world void of reason or logic things just appear as they are without further questioning.

When traditional language fails as a means of representing the extreme, humor helps to bridge the gap between the incomprehensible reality of the event and the disconnected world in which the listener/reader

attempts to make sense of this reality. It also functions as a mechanism that shows the inherent limits that a historical narrative of trauma ultimately confronts in its representation of language and narration. In the words of Carmen Moreno-Nuño, the appearance of the comical represents a form of reducing the solemnity and the desolation, even to such a point that the most serious of events can be the butt of a joke in accordance with the proper temporal distance (164). Confronted with the ominous horrors of totalitarian and fascist regimes whose violence and repression surpassed any realm of liberty and freedom, humor may be a victim's response to the trauma whereby their voice is temporarily restored as it usurps and undermines the once dominating totalitarian discourse. Humor becomes a vehicle that combats and deconstructs the powerful totalitarian discourse by shedding light on its repressive, coercive rhetoric while simultaneously functioning as a form of catharsis of collective memory and as a vehicle for the construction of memory traces. These therapeutic and cathartic attributes function as a pseudo-therapist that enables the victim to heal his/her wounds.

Jacobo illustrates the vivid presence of humor in a poem that he includes which depicts the sad journey of the Spanish exiles upon crossing the French border and being interned in the concentration camp at the beach of Argèles-sur-Mer. The poem reflects upon the once peaceful and joyful nation before the Civil War where food and drinks were plentiful. This contrasts the situation in the camps where the exiles lived in their own excrement with little food, water or privacy. However, in a world in which they no longer knew what to do, the poem emphasizes the importance of humor in the life of the exiles:

y algo de humor,
que es lo que hemos podido salvar
tras de tanto luchar
contra el fascio invasor. (*Enero Sin Nombre* 226)

This poem clearly illustrates the power and the importance that humor had in the lives of the detainees by not only serving as a therapeutic means of survival, enabling them to cope with their harsh reality, but also incarnating the only remnant of their beings that they could save in the face of their dispossession. As many Holocaust survivors have commented in interviews, humor was just about the only facet of their life that still remained and that had not been stripped away by the concentration camp.

In the index, which follows the Prologue at the beginning of the notebook, Jacobo also begins to pose many fundamental questions regarding the nature of the human character, highlighting the inhuman defects and the strange customs of humans. Jacobo divides his manuscript into fifteen sections and enumerates a list of the different categories that he is going to discuss, although many of them never appear in his testimony. Each section is subsequently subdivided into smaller fragments each of which elaborates on a specific aspect of human behavior. In total, the manuscript contains fifty five fragments. These fragments not only symbolize the fragmented nature of traumatic memory, but also represent the process through which Aub wrote this story, through a myriad of disjointed notes that he compiled during his two stays at Le Vernet.

The first fragment is in the form of a picaresque-like autobiography of Jacobo wherein he subverts the traditional picaresque tale by immediately alluding to his illustrious origins and extraordinary destiny, asserting himself as the anti-picaro of the crow species. However, Jacobo admits that the index promises more than the text actually offers, alluding to a certain deficiency and defect in the writing of the text, which parallels the difficulty in constructing a literary representation of posttraumatic conditions. Rather than taking the form of a coherent narrative, Jacobo's text resembles more a rough draft or notebook. Among some of the most notable defects that Jacobo highlights are the scary effects that time has on humans. Jacobo remarks that while crows reach adulthood after six months and change little after that, humans suffer all sorts of "growing old" stages: their skin wrinkles and peels, their hair and teeth fall out, the body begins to sag and droop, and they pass gas. All of these observations produce a disgusting sensation, but yet a sense of comic relief emerges as a result of Jacobo's exaggerations. The entire essence of Jacobo's manuscript can be reduced to a criticism and diatribe against the strange, barbaric behavior of humans, exemplifying their inferiority and irrationality with respect to the crow species. It is this allusion to human behavior that represents a metaphor for the characterization of the concentration-camp world, exhibited by the misery and suffering propagated by the inhumane conduct of the French authorities and of all police regimes.

Upon observing the human condition, Jacobo draws attention to many additional oddities that underscore the absurdity of the camp. Among these many burlesque peculiarities is that of the humans' obsession and fascination with papers. Jacobo enters into a discussion about the concept of

identity and nationalism, which forms one of the central preoccupations of exile. He pardons himself for not knowing his place of birth, which directly infringes upon the humans' conception of birth order as it determines their future, their living conditions and ultimately their identity. From this human perspective, one who neither knows where he was born nor who his parents were, is a dangerous person. The imposition of one's identity by birth order is further highlighted by the way in which people are defined by their nationality: Spaniards are sons of bull-fighters; Italians are sons of singers; Germans are sons of professors; Chinese are sons of rice... The notion that one's identity is pre-determined by place of birth directly re-mits to Max Aub's own identity crisis, as a man born in France with a German father and a French mother who later obtained both Spanish and Mexican citizenship. Aub highlights the true complexity surrounding identity politics, which goes beyond a mere social or economic categorization and enters into a more profound realm based on the personal circumstances and situations that one has endured.

Jacobo incessantly mocks the value that humans place on papers and tells an anecdote that clearly underlines this notion. Two Italians were detained and sentenced to one month in jail for not having their papers, although they declared that they entered France to serve democracy. Upon leaving the jail, they were taken to a French concentration camp and subsequently executed. In a sarcastic manner, Jacobo reacts to the contradictory notion in which humans express their desire for freedom by constructing boundaries and borders, and requiring papers which obstruct the realization of that same freedom. At one moment, Jacobo utters: "Sébase que frontera es una cosa muy importante que no existe y que, sin embargo, los hombres defienden a capa y espada como si fuese una cosa real. Estos extraños seres se pasan la vida matándose los unos a los otros o reuniéndose alrededor de una mesa, sin lograr entenderse, como es natural, para rectificar esas líneas inexistentes" (*Enero Sin Nombre* 208). In spite of the need for freedom, the concentration camp is characterized by its complete lack or inexistence, which is clearly illustrated by Jacobo's comment: "Por la libertad viven encerrados" (*Enero Sin Nombre* 214). In addition, Jacobo notes the humans' desire to travel, but yet they invent passports and visas that only hinder this process. These conditions only reinforce the lack of logic and the arbitrariness of the camps, and it is only through this upside-down, distorted world where one man could be interned for not enlisting in the Polish army, while another man could be interned for enlisting in the Polish army.

One of the most notable observations made by Jacobo is the way humans tend to divide themselves into specific categories or hierarchies. It is through an examination of this system of classification that Jacobo enters into the problematic of exile identity and the difficulty faced in confronting and reconstructing it. The first classification of humans consists of three categories: those who tell their story/history, those who do not tell their story/history and those who have no story/history. Max Aub is undoubtedly playing with the double meaning of the Spanish word *historia*, which in English translates into either *history* or *story*. This division corresponds to the structural framework established by Francoism in which those who told their story were precisely the "winners" of the war, while the last two categories belonged to the "losers" and the subsequent exiles. This distortion also comes from what Jacobo denominates "bulo" or false rumor, which constitutes the principal substance of humans. This notion of false rumors represents the base of Francoist historiography, which was founded on a system of lies and on the mystification of history where it was difficult to differentiate between fact or fiction. The lack of available documentation in conjunction with the silence imposed by the strict censure resulted in the fragmented and fallible nature of information distribution during the Franco regime. One part of the definition of being an exile resides in the loss of one's history/story and of one's individual and collective identity. In this respect, Jacobo's observations are accurate in that he succeeds in portraying the way in which the exilic and the concentration-camp worlds not only create divisions between humans, but also eliminate and erase traces of historical and collective memory.¹⁷ Jacobo distinguishes between three categories of people with respect to language: those who do not have a language; those who have a "bad" language and those who have a language, but do not use it. The first category of those who do not possess a language corresponds to the identity of the concentration camp survivor whose language, or lexicon, has been altered due to trauma.

The final part of the story fulfills precisely this objective by paying homage to the many fallen and forgotten exiles inside the labyrinth of the concentration-camp world. Aub suspends the fictitious narration of Jacobo's account by presenting a list, or a mini biography, of many of the prisoners

¹⁷ Jacobo distinguishes between three categories of people with respect to language: those who do not have a language; those who have a "bad" language and those who have a language, but do not use it. The first category of those who do not possess a language corresponds to the identity of the concentration camp survivor whose language, or lexicon, has been altered due to trauma.

of Le Vernet and the reasons why each one was interned. This list, which contains some eulogistic overtones, ultimately serves as a medium of recuperating the lost identity of the many victims of Le Vernet by giving them life again. It also reaffirms what Cathy Caruth recognizes as the faithfulness to the dead as a common burden on traumatized survivors. Jacobo's first-person account here disappears in favor of a collective voice. What characterizes this long list of names is the ambiguity surrounding their internment. Many were detained for being Communists, others were detained by false accusations, while a large majority were detained for ridiculous circumstances. One such example is Julián Altmann, a watchmaker, who was detained for having attended a Communist meeting by accident. What this all illustrates is the gross stupidity and senselessness of a concentration-camp world in which the French government, which was anti-fascist and anti-Franco, detained and interned other antifascists. The ultimate irony of the story is evidenced by the fact that many people escaped from their country in order to live in peace in a democratic nation, but that democratic nation imprisoned them behind barbed wire. As Luis Bagué Quílez contends, these portraits of the prisoners, which are at times grotesque, illustrate the true dimension of horror [of the camp] that until that moment had only been insinuated in a few annotations in the text (152). When an old man dreamt that he had escaped from the concentration camp, a guard knocked him down and cried out: "De aquí no se escapa nadie, ni en sueños" (*Enero Sin Nombre* 237).

What distinguishes Max Aub's use of the Avant-garde from a more traditional definition is his refusal to abandon or completely reject realism while at the same time exalting the use of the imagination. While the Avant-garde seeks to avoid the problematic associated with man by distancing itself from social and political preoccupations and by avoiding any references to collective problems in the daily lives of people, Aub's testimonial work continues to express these preoccupations while at the same time incorporating Avant-garde techniques into his narrative. Aub never attempts to deny nor forget reality, but rather on the contrary seeks to reinsert this reality back into the memory of the Spaniards. His work therefore cleverly combines elements of realism with elements of the Avant-garde to construct a different genre of narrative that enables him to accomplish his need of bearing witness to a limit experience.

In *Manuscrito Cuervo*, Aub removes the human subject as the narrative voice, but never abandons the underlying "human" concerns or condi-

tions that ultimately prompt his need to write the story. In this sense, Aub reduces this narrative world to an abstract subjectivity in the form of a dehumanized figure. As both the Avant-garde and the social realist novel came and went, Aub continued to hold on to elements of each, resulting in a harmonious coexistence that made possible his creation of many Avant-garde/realist works during the 1950s. He once stated that Spanish realism not only represents the real, but also the unreal, for in Spain it was always impossible to separate what exists from that which is imagined.

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