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Avant-Garde Aesthetics in Felisberto Hernández's *Menos Julia*

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The narrative works of the Uruguayan writer Felisberto Hernández (1902–1964)—Felisberto, as he is affectionately known—have provoked a variety of critical responses over the years and continue to fascinate readers today even if, as some believe, they do not attract the attention their complexity and originality merit.¹ Italo Calvino famously declared in his prologue to a 1974 Italian edition of *Nadie encendía las lámparas* (1947) that he is ‘un escritor que no se parece a nadie: a ninguno de los europeos y a ninguno de los latinoamericanos, es un “francotirador” que desafía toda clasificación’,² a view since supported by several other critics: Frank Graziano has referred to his ‘autodidactic, eclectically selective, and self-defensive temperament, which filtered out most potential influences and neutralized—“felisbertized”—those few that permeated his protective barriers’,³ Norah Giraldi de Cas believed that Felisberto’s playful use of ideas and language brought him close to the works of European movements like Dadaism and Surrealism of which he most likely had some knowledge

pero no así, seguramente, la *Proclama de Prisma*, *Revista Mural* de Buenos Aires de 1922, como tampoco el *Manifiesto* del grupo Martín Fierro. Tampoco tenía, entre nosotros, vinculaciones intelectuales notorias con los integrantes de los grupos de Vanguardia de ambos márgenes del Plata. Lenta pero seguramente fue creciendo con un estilo personal que no admitió pertenecer a escuela alguna.⁴

1 Maria Chiara D’Argenio, ‘El estatuto de lo fantástico en Felisberto Hernández’, *Revista Iberoamericana*, 215–216 (2006), 395–414 (p. 395).

2 Italo Calvino, ‘Felisberto no se parece a nadie’, in *Felisberto Hernández: valoración crítica*, ed. Walter Rela (Montevideo: Ciencias, 1982), 2–3 (pp. 2-3).

3 Frank Graziano, *The Lust of Seeing: Themes of the Gaze and Sexual Rituals in the Fiction of Felisberto Hernández* (Lewisburg/London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 20.

4 Norah Giraldi de Cas, *Felisberto Hernández: del creador al hombre* (Montevideo: Ediciones de Banda Oriental, 1975), 45.

Kim Yúnez summed up these views when she noted that ‘la crítica está de acuerdo que la novedad de la obra de Felisberto Hernández se debe más a su imaginación caprichosa que a su formación en alguna escuela o corriente artística’.⁵ Although this view still retains some currency,⁶ most critics—including those cited—have considered Felisberto to share many of the qualities of writers associated with the historical *avant-garde*. Yúnez, for example, believes that the Uruguayan writer ‘había absorbido el discurso de su época, y hasta había percibido las presunciones de la época’,⁷ so much so that he can be considered both an heir to the Symbolists and a precursor of a postmodern sensibility.⁸ Whatever the links—direct or indirect—between Felisberto and the historical *avant-garde*, recent critical readings of his works only serve to reinforce the degree to which he was guided by similar preoccupations with subjectivity, language, experimentation, fragmentation, the nature of reality, dreams and the creative process,⁹ much of which can be read not only as a rejection of nineteenth-century Positivism and of the rationality and mundane worldliness of bourgeois society but as a process of questioning the foundations of a national Uruguayan identity.¹⁰

Perhaps one of the most interesting links with another *avant-garde* writer is suggested by Graziano’s reference to the process of ‘felisbertization’ which finds its parallel in the term ‘ramonismo’ applied to the Spanish *avant-gardist par excellence*, Ramón Gómez de la Serna. The parallels between the two writers run deep and are reflected in the autobiographical elements of their works—an element which is neither literal nor transparent¹¹—and the desire to see the world anew through a reappraisal of the objects which exist in it. Gómez de la Serna

tells us, for example, that when he was in grammar school, two girl cousins, confined to a convent boarding school except for one day’s liberty each year, customarily spent the day with his family. Seeing the wonder and delight they derived from observing the simple things so commonplace to him, Ramón learned a lesson he never forgot. Eager for similar piquant experiences, he made a game of seeing things with the

5 Kim D. Yúnez, *La obra de Felisberto Hernández: nomadismo y creación liminar* (Madrid: Editorial Pliegos, 2000), 21.

6 Alicia Martínez, ‘La singular vanguardia de Felisberto Hernández’, *Arrabal*, 5–6 (2007), 131–37.

7 Yúnez, *La obra de Felisberto Hernández*, 22.

8 Yúnez, *La obra de Felisberto Hernández*, 107, 22–23.

9 Álvaro Contreras, ‘Pasajes de la vanguardia narrativa latinoamericana’, *Estudios*, 15:29 (2007), 215–32; Joaquín Lameiro Tenreiro, ‘Lenguaje, abstracción y símbolo en la narrativa de Felisberto Hernández’, *Alpha*, 27 (2008), 63–76; Gustavo Lespada, ‘Felisberto Hernández: el nacimiento de una estética’, *Temas*, 75 (2013), 113–20.

10 Federico López-Terra, ‘El vacío fundante en la estética de Felisberto Hernández’, *BHS*, 90:1 (2013), 65–77.

11 López-Terra, ‘El vacío fundante en la estética de Felisberto Hernández’, 69.

same sense of newness as they. The practice became a lifetime habit, for he taught himself thenceforth to approach not only things, but even concepts and words as though he had never seen or heard of them before. The result was so different an approach to reality that when it is encountered in his work, it both surprises and delights the reader.¹²

Felisberto reveals a similar preoccupation with things and with seeing the world afresh in *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling*:

Así como el sentido de lo nuevo—cuando yo llegaba a un país que no conocía—de pronto se me presentaba en ciertos objetos—las formas de las cajas de cigarrillos y fósforos, el color de los tranvías (y no siempre el espíritu muy diferenciado de las gentes)—Colling me dio un sentido nuevo de la vida con muchas clases de objetos.¹³

What is more, this new way of seeing the world is associated in *El caballo perdido* with a child-like gaze as noted by Yúnez: 'Mirando inocentemente al mundo, el niño, como el arte cubista, encuentra más sentido en los pedazos rotos que en la botella entera'.¹⁴ Both of these preoccupations – seeing the world afresh and the innocence of a child-like gaze – are central to *Menos Julia* which, like many of Felisberto's other short stories can be read as a metafictional commentary on the process of writing and the relationship between art and reality.

Menos Julia is a first-person narrative in which an anonymous narrator recalls the consequences of a chance encounter with an unnamed childhood friend from school.¹⁵ The story begins with a brief childhood reminiscence about their decision to rebel at school by playing truant. Then, the main body of the text consists of the narrator's account of how his friend, as an adult, introduced him to his secret world: his friend has constructed a tunnel in which he likes to immerse himself in darkness in order to touch both a series of objects arranged for him there by a character called Alejandro and the faces of four young female acquaintances, one of the them the eponymous Julia. After spending time in the tunnel, the friend devotes time to remembering the experience in silence. The narrator is invited into this secret world and slowly comes to understand the power of the relationship between the experience of the tunnel and the process of remembering. The tale comes to an end when the friend is angered by the

12 Rita Mazzatti Gardiol, *Ramón Gómez de la Serna* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 15–16.

13 Felisberto Hernández, *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling, Obras completas* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, [1983] Vol. I 2000, Vol. II 2000, Vol. III 1999), Vol. I, 135-198 (p. 195).

14 Yúnez, *La obra de Felisberto Hernández*, 36.

15 *Menos Julia* was originally published in Buenos Aires in 1946 in the journal *Sur* before being published in the collection *Nadie encendía las lámparas* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1947).

behaviour of the others who disrupt his experience in the tunnel by laughing. The friend asks them all to leave with the exception of Julia. However, the narrator is angered even further when he realises that the narrator has remained in the tunnel to eavesdrop on his conversation with Julia. The narrator is asked to leave, never to return.

Previous studies of *Menos Julia* have focused on psychological and metafictional readings. Graziano has discussed the story in relation to rituals used to displace the consummation of erotic desire.¹⁶ More recently, Gustavo San Román has explored the psychological immaturity and regression of the friend and the fetishistic nature of the tunnel, in which sexual satisfaction is gained through contact with objects or parts of the body other than sexual organs,¹⁷ while Andrea Simonovics has analysed the relationship between memory and the process of artistic creation.¹⁸ What all of these readings have in common is the idea of a complementarity or sense of identity between the narrator and the friend. San Román, for example, suggests that the narrator shares the friend's fetishistic desires, that 'el narrador-protagonista tiene un complemento en un segundo personaje que exhibe sus propias características de manera hiperbólica' and that there exists a 'complicidad entre los dos hombres'.¹⁹ Simonovics considers that throughout the story the friend remains in a child-like state while the narrator learns, through his own experiences in the tunnel, to be like his friend. However, in spite of the fascinating insights into the story which both of these readings provide, neither accounts fully for the distance which exists between the narrator and his friend, a distance which is marked in the opening paragraph by the narrator's recollection of his desire to 'hacer algo y salvar a aquel compañero',²⁰ and the final image of the friend with his head in his hands and the narrator's remark that 'en ese instante me pareció tan pequeña como la [cabeza] de un cordero' (110). One way of accounting for this distance is to read the story in the context of what Joaquín Lameiro Tenreiro views as a shift in Felisberto's writing which is reflected in the type of narrator he creates and the way in which his various narrators engage with others:

[...] es a partir de su etapa de madurez cuando sus narradores consiguen desligarse casi por completo de un protagonismo egocéntrico y

16 Graziano, *The Lust of Seeing*, 180–81.

17 Gustavo San Román, 'Los hombres-perro de Felisberto Hernández', in *La metamorfosis en las literaturas en lengua española*, ed. Gabriella Menczel & László Scholz (Budapest: Eötvös József Könyvkiadó, 2006), 311–19.

18 Andrea Simonovics, 'La ficción de los recuerdos de Felisberto Hernández', *Lejana. Revista Crítica de Narrativa Breve*, 2 (2010), 1-7 (p. 2). Available on-line at http://lejana.elte.hu/PDF_2/Simonovics_Andrea.pdf.

19 San Román, 'Los hombres-perro de Felisberto Hernández', 311.

20 *Menos Julia* in Hernández, *Obras completas*, II, 92-110 (p. 92). All subsequent references are to this edition.

autobiográfico que lastraba, en buena medida, el salto a la otredad para convertirse en narradores-testigos no ya de sí mismos, como ocurría en las *nouvelles*: *Por los tiempos de Clemente Colling*, *El caballo perdido* y *Tierras de la memoria*, sino en testigo de las actividades y actitudes de los otros.²¹

In this respect, *Menos Julia* can be read in parallel to *El caballo perdido* and *Las dos historias*, two stories first published in 1943—three years before *Menos Julia*—and also published in *Nadie encendía las lámparas*. These earlier works have been read as metafictional accounts of the limitations of the creative process and of the dangers of not accepting these limitations. Indeed these two stories can be seen as representations of the fundamental shift indicated by Lameiro Tenreiro. *El caballo perdido* recounts the personal crisis of an egocentric narrator who realises that writing cannot capture his memories of childhood as it was, in part because memories are not stable but also because writing always involves some degree of invention. The story revolves around the moment when the narrator finally resolves the problem of writing, which is presented as a compromise between two parts of his own self: the ‘I’ who wants to remember the past exactly as it was; and his ‘socio’, his creative self, who gives shape to these memories but, in doing so, inevitably falsifies them to some degree. As I have commented in a previous study: ‘la escritura, el acto de “convertir en cosa escrita lo poco que habíamos juntado” (48), da cuerpo físico a lo inmaterial de los recuerdos y le permite al narrador-protagonista crear una identidad estable para sí mismo, y para el mundo, aunque tiene que reconocer que sólo puede crear una estabilidad precaria que, además, encierra cierta falta de autenticidad’.²² Not accepting the compromise represented by the act of writing can only lead the ‘I’ to madness. In *Las dos historias*, the two selves which formed part of the narrator in *El caballo perdido* are separated into two characters, a young writer who descends into madness because he refuses to accept the limitations of writing and so abandons a story he has been working on and a narrator who writes ‘otra historia: la que se formó en la realidad, cuando un joven intentó atrapar la suya’.²³ As a result, while the young writer friend does not manage to write his story, the narrator turns this experience into the story presented to the reader, an

21 Lameiro Tenreiro, ‘Lenguaje, abstracción y símbolo en la narrativa de Felisberto Hernández’, 71.

22 Francis Lough, ‘La escritura como compromiso: en busca de la identidad en *El caballo perdido*’, *Fragmentos. Revista de Língua e Literatura Estrangeiras*, 6:1 (1996), 69–80 (p. 79). Page reference is to Hernández *El caballo perdido*, *Obras completas*, Vol. II, 11-49 (p. 48).

23 Hernández *Las dos historias*, *Obras completas*, Vol. II, 160-71 (p. 171).

action which requires implicitly the kind of compromise established in *El caballo perdido*.²⁴

The two principal characters in *Menos Julia* have similar functions. What unites them is their rejection of the mundane and an understanding of the very nature of the *avant-garde* desire to see things with fresh eyes; what separates them is the fact that the narrator succeeds in creating a work of art out of his experiences and encounters and so creates some link with the real world, while his friend prefers to remain locked in a child-like state in his own private world over which, ultimately, he has no control. The friend himself is aware of the impossibility of his situation. On the one hand, the tunnel, and his constantly renewed connection with objects, provides him with an escape from the mundaneness of everyday life: 'Cuando estoy en el bazar deseo este día; aquí sufro aburrimientos y tristeza horribles' (103–04). Yet, his fetishistic dependence on the tunnel remains a private, solitary and uncommunicable experience—'necesito la soledad y de no ver a ningún ser humano' (104)—and is what constitutes his illness. On the other hand, and in spite of the narrator's childhood desire to save his friend, one of the first things the latter tells the narrator when they meet as adults is that he sees any cure as worse than the sickness itself: 'Yo quiero a mi ... enfermedad más que a la vida. A veces pienso que me voy a curar y me viene una desesperación mortal' (93).

The central symbol in *Menos Julia*, as most critics have remarked, is the tunnel which has both psychological and aesthetic dimensions. Simonovic sees the creative potential of the tunnel and likens the narrative to a readymade by Marcel Duchamp in which 'Felisberto nos ofrece un inventario de palabras cotidianas sacadas de su contexto original que fomentan asociaciones'.²⁵ The text invites other interpretations of the tunnel in artistic terms. In one sense, the tunnel is experienced by the friend not as a readymade but as a piece of installation art, a three-dimensional space in which objects and the world can be seen in a new light and which, in the story, serves as a metaphor for the key aim of the historical *avant-garde*. As the friend remarks after one experience in the tunnel:

Hoy tuve mucho placer. Confundía los objetos, pensaba en otros distintos y tenía recuerdos inesperados. Apenas empecé a mover el cuerpo en la oscuridad me pareció que iba a tropezar con algo raro, que mi cuerpo empezaría a vivir de otra manera y que mi cabeza estaba a punto de comprender algo importante. (169)

Simonovic draws an interesting parallel between the random nature of the objects in the tunnel and the construction of meaning. Citing a phrase

24 Francis Lough, 'La función de la escritura en "Las dos historias" de Felisberto Hernández', *Río de la Plata*, 19 (1998), 265–74 (p. 273).

25 Simonovics, 'La ficción de los recuerdos de Felisberto Hernández', 5.

from one of Felisberto's early stories, *La cara de Ana*—'Ninguna de estas cosas tenían que ver unas con otras; me parecía que cada una de ellas me pegara en un sentido como si fueran notas'—she compares the text to a musical score.²⁶ The parallel with a musical composition is in fact made explicit in *Menos Julia*. The friend's tunnel ritual has three stages: the preparations, his passage through the tunnel and his solitary recollection of his experience. The preparations are left to Alejandro who is described as 'el Schubert del túnel' who 'compone el túnel como una sinfonía' (162). If Alejandro is the composer, the creator, the friend is the conductor who wishes to direct the performance. His desire to control everything—which does permit him to indicate to Alejandro some objects which might be removed from the tunnel—leads to anger and frustration when others introduce objects into the tunnel or when the behaviour of others detracts from his experience: he does not permit the narrator to question Alejandro about the objects (100); he scolds the young women for carrying a flower (105); he throws everyone out for laughing (107–08); and, finally, he forbids the narrator ever to return when he discovers that he did not leave and that he has spied on his conversation with Julia (109). These infractions dominate the narrator's various visits to the tunnel and serve to underscore the degree to which the aesthetic experience desired by the friend depends on José Ortega y Gasset's definition of *avant-garde* art as the playful creation of a new world hermetically sealed from the real world of everyday life. What the friend desires is to experience the purity and immediacy of this aesthetic experience which he can then contemplate later in solitude. The various invasions **by others into** his experience represent an interruption in the willing suspension of disbelief which makes the whole experience possible. When explaining to the narrator how the tunnel functions, for example, the friend says: 'tocaré las caras de las muchachas y pensaré que no las conozco' (94), a process similar to what a theatre audience must do faced with well-known actors on stage. The theatrical context is made explicit shortly afterwards when the friend explains why he requires darkness for his thoughts as 'esta luz fuerte me daña la idea del túnel. Es como la luz que entra en las cámaras de los fotógrafos cuando las imágenes no están fijadas. Y en el momento del túnel me hace mal hasta el recuerdo de la luz fuerte. Todas las cosas quedan tan desilusionadas como algunos decorados de teatro al otro día de mañana' (96).

The process of remembering which follows the friend's experience in the tunnel is, as Frédéric Parra has noted, quite different from the involuntary experience associated with the madeleine in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* as it is 'una experiencia de la memoria voluntaria'.²⁷ Simonovic interprets the friend's activity as a way of re-organizing and storing his memories, in

26 Simonovic, 'La ficción de los recuerdos de Felisberto Hernández', 5.

27 Frédéric Parra, 'Tiempo perdido, tiempo recobrado en "Menos Julia"', *Río de la Plata*, 19 (1998), 285–92 (p. 287).

other words of trying to control and give shape to them. It also replicates to some degree the function of writing for Felisberto: 'El túnel soluciona varios problemas creativos de Felisberto; evoca y controla los recuerdos, las repeticiones y variaciones dan una estructura musical, condensa la corriente de la conciencia en un cuerpo textual limitado, logrando así un impacto mayor en el lector'.²⁸ As is the case with the narrator of *El caballo perdido*, writing, whatever its limitations in terms of an accurate representation of memory, comes to serve a purpose for Felisberto and ultimately for the narrator of *Menos Julia*. The narrator's friend may seek to store and control his memories in a similar fashion in the first instance but he has no outlet for his creativity.²⁹ He is driven not only by his desire for the purity of the aesthetic experience but also by his obsession with **maintaining** his solitary immersion in his recollections of it all, which can only be achieved by his complete detachment from the world and other people. Significantly, even his attempt to share the experience with someone of like mind—the narrator—leads to disaster. In effect, the friend is seeking to escape everyday life and remain locked in a hermetic world created for him by someone else and in which things and people become objects of that aesthetic experience. He wants to live the tunnel rather than life, to immerse himself in the experience of the new but without considering how such experience, or any understanding which might come from it, may be incorporated into the mundane world which *avant-garde* artists sought to change; although there is a tantalizing suggestion that such a link with the real world can exist when he tells the narrator that, at one point, whilst fully immersed in his experience 'descubrí quién me había estafado en un negocio' (107). Ironically, the experience of the tunnel demands the work and involvement of other people to make it happen and has its roots in a lived experience.

As San Román has argued, the friend's experience in the tunnel can be interpreted as a creative, and ritualistic, response to frustrated sexual desire.³⁰ In this regard, one might see the friend as an expression of the abstract aesthetic and cultural aims of the *avant-garde* which found expression in playful experimentation but not of its artistic and vital dimensions which attempt to link the abstract with the concrete. This is reflected in the friend's relationship with Julia whom he can only accept as an element in his artistic installation but not as a partner in real life. Graziano has argued that the faces of the women in the tunnel are transformed into masks behind which the real women disappear so that they become the narcissistic projection of the narrator's friend.³¹ The tale draws to a close with the image of the friend with his head in his hands

28 Simonovics, 'La ficción de los recuerdos de Felisberto Hernández', 5.

29 Simonovics, 'La ficción de los recuerdos de Felisberto Hernández', 3.

30 San Román, 'Los hombres-perro de Felisberto Hernández', 318–19.

31 Graziano, *The Lust of Seeing*, 180–81.

when, having declared to the narrator that he loves Julia, he says he cannot marry her as this would mean giving up touching the faces of other women in the tunnel. The friend represents the image not only of sexual immaturity, as argued by San Román, but of a form of aesthetic immaturity in as much as he remains isolated in the child-like attitude of the *avant-garde* artist with no way of communicating his experiences to others.

The final lines of the story begin by communicating the narrator's compassion for his friend and end with a metafictional reference which underscores the difference between the two: 'Yo le fui a poner mi mano en un hombre y sin querer toqué su cabeza. Entonces pensé que había rozado un objeto del túnel' (110). This final reference to the friend's head recalls the opening lines of the story and makes the reader aware that there are two layers to the story, or, in effect two stories based on memories. On the surface, *Menos Julia* is a story about the friend's attempts to preserve and store his memories of his experiences in the tunnel, but the two references to the friend's head are a reminder that this story is also constructed through the memories of the narrator which have been carefully controlled and organized. This process, together with the idea that the narrator feels he is touching an object, just as his friend does in his tunnel, suggests a close parallel between them. There is, however, an important difference. If the friend's tunnel is a site in which aesthetic experiences are orchestrated through the use of objects, then the story the reader has just finished reading is an equivalent site within which the narrator organizes his own objects to convey his own aesthetic experiences. Unlike the friend, however, who prefers to remain in solitude and darkness, and who likens his condition to an illness because he has no creative outlet for his recollections, the narrator's story is precisely that outlet. The written text is the product of the narrator's own metaphorical, rather than literal, tunnel; it represents a private space where recollections have been controlled and organized and a public space in which they can be given shape, brought to light, and communicated to others in a manner in which the narrator can, at least momentarily, express and overcome his feelings of compassion not only for his friend but also for himself, given that they share the same inclinations. *Menos Julia*, then works on two levels. On the one hand it is the story of the narrator's friend and his child-like obsession, and (through their mutual sympathy) of the narrator's own situation; but, on the other, it is also the story about the transformation of the memories of lived experience into a literary text, a process which enables the narrator to avoid the same illness as his friend, or what in *El caballo perdido* and *Las dos historias* was defined as madness. As such, *Menos Julia* can be read as a metafictional commentary on its own

construction and purpose as an *avant-garde* text while commenting on the complex relationship between lived experience and art.*

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