

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE SHORT STORIES  
OF JUAN CARLOS ONETTI**

*Fictions of Desire*

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## CHAPTER 1

### "UNTO THE BREACH...": THEORIZING READING

We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace, which cannot not take the scent into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.

– Jacques Derrida

... the interpretive gesture with its assumption of superiority over a mute object is always based upon a prior rebellion against the object's power. It is the aggression and the desire in that rebellion which constitute the most authentic encounter with the object's power, where we experience not only the object's force but equally our own powerful drive to understand, to possess, that which moves us so intensely.

– Jane Gallop

This is not the first book that I have written about Onetti, and it may or may not be the last. But it represents at least partial continuity with the first insofar as it takes up and develops a preoccupation with reading and with one of the emergent strands of my *Reading Onetti*. This is part of the "wherever I am" in my beginning to read Onetti's short fiction.<sup>1</sup> *Reading Onetti* was

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<sup>1</sup> Where *Reading Onetti* looked at the most widely studied area of Onetti's work – the novels and the three major novellas, *El pozo*, *Los adioses*, and *Para una tumba sin nombre* – , this study concentrates on the short stories and the less well-known novellas, *La muerte y la niña* and *Cuando*

methodologically rather hybrid, and one of its strands, which emerged rather towards the end of its formulation, was psychoanalysis. Now, this book is not a psychoanalytical study of Onetti in any systematic way, but it draws on some psychoanalytical concepts explicitly and it relies to some extent on a psychoanalytical mode of thinking. However, in my view, the thinking in the analysis owes as much to feminist theory as to psychoanalysis: the line of thought and the critical reflexes are deeply conditioned by both areas of theory. I would insist particularly on the way that feminist theory has helped me to grasp the dynamics of gender in Onetti. Feminism has stimulated many of the fundamental questions that I ask of Onetti's short stories, and it has prompted me to bring into view their reliance on certain aspects of dominant masculine attitudes and practices.

Having said that, however, I want now to concentrate on the psychoanalytical concepts which I have employed and to explain their relation to my reading practice. Psychoanalysis seems a particularly helpful tool in analyzing Onetti because of his attention to the minute detail of the experience and responses of the human subject. On the one hand, psychoanalysis can provide a defined discourse of concepts to clarify and articulate the elements in the stories. But on the other, it is a discourse from outside and to which Onetti makes no reference, and so it can also be used to confront and question the processes at work in these representations of decentred, lacking subjects. The analyses that follow do not draw on psychoanalysis systematically, however, since the ambiguous assumption of authority in that discourse is precisely what I want to problematize in my reading. Any appeal to a system of knowledge feeds a desire for identity and

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*entonces*. This latter area of his output has been the object of much less systematic study. One should not overlook the fact that the classification of Onetti's fiction into genres has provoked different reactions since some of the stories and novellas are quite lengthy. However, as far as my analysis is concerned, such generic divisions are not germane. The subject of genre in Onetti has been partially studied in Klahn.

fixity, and while those are by no means avoidable, neither are constant questioning and reassessment impossible.

I am not going to employ psychoanalytical concepts as a way of making sense of characters' psychology, and still less of Onetti's. My aim is to trace the structures and dynamic of the thought processes in Onetti's work – the articulation of the stories as fictional constructs. In aiming to do this, I am particularly wary of the role of psychoanalysis in literary analysis, given the different analytical environment in which it originated. The relation between text and critic is somewhat different from that between analyst and analysand in therapy. To begin with, the critic has taken the initiative to choose the text, presumably for some purpose, whereas it is the analysand who generally approaches the analyst in therapy. In the nature of the critic and the text, their "dialogue" is relatively limited as compared to that between analysand and analyst, and the questions and obstacles proposed by the text to the critic can be negotiated only from the latter's position. The text is not mute, but it cannot participate in analysis with quite the same degree of independence as the analysand, though there are analogies to be drawn in the way the text resists, projects on to, cooperates with and surprises the critic. In sum, I would not claim to be carrying out a psychoanalytical reading partly because of the limited *explicit* use that I make of its concepts, partly because the richness and complexity of psychoanalysis cannot fully be exploited in literary study, and partly because I would resist the strength of psychoanalysis and its capacity to appropriate its objects of analysis into itself. At best I would claim a provisional relation to psychoanalysis.

It will be helpful to look at the main psychoanalytical concepts referred to later in order to create a base for the following analyses.<sup>2</sup> The Imaginary and the Symbolic are terms which recur consistently. They should be understood as

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<sup>2</sup> The main sources of the psychoanalytical concepts used here are: Lacan 1977, 1979, and 1982. Major works on Lacan and psychoanalysis which have furthered my understanding are: Ragland-Sullivan 1986, Benvenuto and Kennedy 1986, and Rose.

interactive in the constitution and being of the human subject: they have distinct functions and operations which are in tension but mutually implicated. The Imaginary is made up of images and fantasies, and it is the area of object choice and interaction in relationships, hence in Onetti it is particularly significant in the male characters' relation to identity and to female characters. The subject's Imaginary projections would fix and merge identity, but its projections distort and deceive, producing misrecognition and hence the potential for further projection. The Imaginary evolves out of the mirror stage of full identification in the infant's life, but it continues into the adult's experience of relations with others. There is a drive in the Imaginary towards the impossible recapture of the infant's mirror-stage unity or fusion with its specular form, but the impossibility arises because, in its quest for fusion and unity, the Imaginary is in conflict with the Symbolic, with its insistence on difference. Hence, the Imaginary seeks to avoid the Symbolic, whose constraining laws and norms disrupt its narcissistic goals. It needs to be stressed that the Imaginary has nothing to do with the unreal, for it is part of the real experience of the subject and of its complex network of drives and demands. So there is no question of choosing to "give up" the Imaginary (any more than there is of giving up the Symbolic), but what is important analytically is to understand the subject's propensity for the mirroring projections of the Imaginary. Hence, this area of psychoanalytical thinking is helpful in articulating something of the drive of male characters in Onetti to seek an escape or relocation which implies the search for a (re)new(ed) identity and a plenitude of being.

The Symbolic is the sphere of culture and language. Language introduces a third term into the dyadic relation of the infant with its mirror image, and it comes to define as well as modify that relation. It is associated with the Law and the Father which make demands of and place restrictions on the emerging subject. The Symbolic is the area of the function of symbols, of linguistic and cultural forms, and through these it is a vehicle for the subject to represent and thus to constitute itself. The Symbolic and the Law insist on the principle of separation

and differentiation, where in the Imaginary the subject's ego remains caught in identification with the Mother and the unconscious. The subject formed through the intervention of the Father's Law derives from the loss of original union, it is a construct constituted to cover up the wound of separation from the Mother. In my analysis I associate the Symbolic and the Law with Santa María (or its urban equivalent), and, underpinning this, it is important to note that story-telling is located within the town, that is, within the order of language and cultural forms. The meaning of the outside, of the effort towards Imaginary evasion, is formulated symbolically from inside Santa María: this other, this outside, is seen in the fictions from within the Symbolic. Not that this creates any security in "truth", for the Imaginary also deflects the operation of the Symbolic, so that the narrating "yo" or "nosotros" in Santa María will also be implicated in the Imaginary. By logical extension, staying outside Santa María, in the other world, is beyond the mediation of linguistic formulation, hence the characters most in touch with the outside do not narrate themselves but are mediated by those within the town.<sup>3</sup> The repeated returns to Santa María of characters who have tried to get away, or the difficulties in the path of getting away from it, are indicative of the subject's condition. There is no achieved regression to a mirror-like merging in Onetti, and for that reason the stories often end with a return to the town or with death. In psychoanalytical terms, the subject's social functioning and psychic survival require repression and the coming to terms with the conditions of shared life – without this, reality, society and compromise are lost.

In sum, the Symbolic, or the Other, infers a familial history, and a social order of symbols, rules and language, of myths and conventions. The Symbolic is the principle of intersubjectivity and cause of all subjectivity: the demands made by the Symbolic are constitutive of the subject's unconscious (that which is not

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<sup>3</sup> Analogous comments on the positioning of the story-teller on the "inside" are made in Benjamin.