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Writing and the Japanese body in Mario Bellatin's fiction

For the reader, it is obvious that El jardín de la señora Murakami takes place in Japan, but then I make inquiries about why is the answer obvious, and the answer they give me is that they use kimonos and drink tea according to certain ceremony. But we could find a neighbor from Pringles who drinks tea and uses kimono, which prevents these explanations from working.¹
Mario Bellatin. Interview.

When Eduardo Castañeda asked Peruvian-Mexican writer Mario Bellatin² in an interview about the research he carried out before writing of El jardín de la señora Murakami (The Garden of Miss Murakami, 2000), the author answered:

The Japanese theme is not something I consider important, but simply a pretext that I use now to ask myself questions about literature, which I have been posing since I started writing. It may be now Japanese, but I have Jewish texts, and from different traditions, which allow me, through decontextualization, to find answers about the act of writing and especially about the role of the writer vis-à-vis the text. I am interested in how to look for masks; that is, a distancing from what is being written, so that you do not know who the real author of the texts is.³

In the same interview, Bellatin explains that he carries out no research before writing his literary texts. In the case of those dealing with Japanese topics, he adds, he uses his previous readings, but always inventing terms, mixing truth and lies. Indeed, the characters in three of his short novels, El jardín de la señora Murakami, Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción (Shiki Nagaoka: A Nose for Fiction, 2001), Biografía ilustrada de Mishima

(Illustrated Biography of Mishima, 2009), and a short story, “Bola negra” (2005) are (or, I should say, seem to be) Japanese.⁴ This essay will explore the potential relationship between writing, physical deformity (so common in his oeuvre), and the creation of an ostensible Japanese origin for his characters.

As we can read in the epigraph to this essay, Bellatin denies that the action of El jardín takes place in Japan (even though, paradoxically, he insists on allowing readers to find their own conclusions). Yet these processes of defamiliarization and deterritorialization are only partial or relative, since it is evident that he is at least playing with the readers’ expectation along these lines and suggesting that these characters possess Japanese cultural traits. In another interview he explains, “It is something that one can also find in Ishiguro’s books, which he builds from the readers’ suppositions only to end up not satisfying them. On the contrary, this supposition keeps the reader in check, and this is, curiously, what makes him or her continue to read.”⁵ Incidentally, like the Japanese-English novelist Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-), Bellatin ends some of his novels abruptly, providing no sense of resolution to the conflicts narrated and leaving, instead, a sense of melancholic resignation that could be associated to the Buddhist concept of mono no aware (a sensitivity of ephemera). In any case, one may wonder: are Bellatin’s references to Japanese literature and culture simple japonaiseries, an exercise in exoticism or orientalism to represent a culture that perhaps he conceives as the reverse of his own? Or can the reader go beyond these assumptions or the author’s confession that his Japanese characters are only an excuse for his reflection about literature? I am aware that this could be considered a flawed endeavor from its inception. After all, Bellatin has repeatedly claimed that his opus does not have a specific message. Yet, following his own premises (as well as those of so many

literary critics), readers should try to disconnect the text from its author. We may therefore deduce that the use of Japanese-sounding referents can hint at the author's association of this culture or nationality with specific traits, hence sending a (perhaps involuntary) message.

For Bellatin, his writing is a sort of platform upon which the “accomplice reader” (to use Julio Cortázar’s term in his novel Hopscotch [1963]) can create meanings as well as her own universe, which may be different from his own (even though, he may later, in interviews, suggests that the readers are “wrong” to think that the text takes place in Japan). Characterized by a minimalist style (which he claims was influenced by Japanese literature), his works are marked by narrative silences that the reader has to fill out in her own way. Along these lines, some critics (as well as Bellatin himself) have pointed out how he strips his fiction from recognizable cultural references, including geographical and temporal contexts:

I think that the main one is to respect what I planned since I wrote my first book: generating a no time and a non-real or non-recognizable space, in a way that even when a place is mentioned, it may work as a mask. It is a sort of evolution or involution of movement to avoid being still, without saying where it is, when it is. But it is a sort of mask or veil, of a Japanese appearance, or a Jewish, Arabic, Chinese tradition. That is, an x playing with different imaginaries, referents of different traditions with the goal of doing the same thing that I have been doing since my first book: avoiding a recognizable time and space. Except for me.⁶

Critics have also pointed out how Bellatin's closed and self-contained fictional worlds play by their own rules, toying with the readers' expectations or suppositions, and negating literary and cultural traditions. The postmodern fragmentation and irony, the coldness of the narrative voice, seemingly devoid of any feeling of empathy for the characters, and the almost complete lack of dialogue typical of his writing also respond to this iconoclastic project. Even Bellatin's belonging to two different national literary canons (Mexican and Peruvian) adds, as he has posited, to the impression that his texts come out from nothingness, as if by spontaneous generation:

If you ask me about nationality at a personal level, I could tell you many things, but these things have no importance for my job, because what I try is to let books talk by themselves, to let texts become autonomous, texts without author. Then this possibility of having two nationalities, because it is true that I have two, but at the same time none, allows the writing to appear from nothingness, as if it were not sustained by a nationality, which, in my opinion, has been a burden for our literary traditions.⁷

Yet the way these traditions are negated can be equally telling of Bellatin's understanding of Japaneseness and Asianness in general. In this context, Diana Palaversich suggests that "The fact that some characters are Japanese and other one Chinese or Arab is, again, a textual trap that has an estrangement effect on the reader, who can end up thinking that he or she does not understand the character because of his 'foreignness.' However, these 'exotic' characters do not possess additional characteristics that may distinguish them from others in the text."⁸ While I agree with this approach, I believe that Bellatin's deliberate use of Japanese characters to distance himself, as an author, from his texts may

also imply that he sees Japanese culture as the most extraneous to his own. In a way, perhaps these characters embody the author's Other.

The three short novels and the short story considered in this study, Shiki Nagaoka, Biografía ilustrada de Mishima, El jardín, and “Bola negra,” share common traits. All three flirt with the absurd and present a playful tension between (or blurring of) fantasy or fiction (gigantic noses, headless men, ghosts, apocryphal or inexistent texts, false attributions of texts to authors) and reality (the writings of the Peruvian José María Arguedas [1911-1969], the Mexicans Juan Rulfo [1918-1986] and Pablo Soler Frost [1965-], autobiographical references). The first two deal with grotesque physical deformities or missing bodily parts body, which reflect (to use Mario Vargas Llosa's concept) the author's “personal demon”: a birth defect that left him missing part of his right arm.⁹ Bellatin has admitted this autobiographical source of inspiration. In fact, perhaps to prove that he has nothing to hide, in his public appearances he sometimes uses extravagant prosthetic limbs. He is known to have about a dozen of them and he even participated, along with the artist Aldo Chaparro, in a collective project to create several more prosthetic limbs and exhibit them as works of art in a public space.¹⁰ His characters may struggle to have a complete body once again, as is the case in Biografía ilustrada de Mishima, or have a very hard time coping with a monstrous nose, as happens to the outcast protagonist in Shiki Nagaoka. In both cases, these solitary protagonists are plagued by bizarre physical and psychological nightmares, as well as by a desire for a whole or different body, a situation that produces constant frustration, guilt, and existential angst.

Re-writing and physical deformity in Shiki Nagaoka: una nariz de ficción

The playful nature of Bellatin's literature is epitomized by a curious anecdote.

When asked at a conference in Mexico's *Círculo de Bellas Artes* to speak about his favorite writer, Bellatin invented a Japanese author named Shiki Nagaoka (whose name is reminiscent of Masaoka Shiki [1867-1902], considered the best modern haikai poet) and claimed that he had been one of his biggest literary influences. This imaginary writer from the early twentieth century, known for having an enormous nose, had written, according to Bellatin, a book in an unknown language that only the author himself could understand. Bellatin gave this same lecture in several countries and he even received letters from the Department of Oriental Literatures in Berlin's *Freiuniversität* explaining that they had never heard of that Japanese writer. He later turned this joke into a fictional biography, Shiki Nagaoka, dealing with this invented Japanese writer and photographer with an immense nose. He has explained his motivation in an interview:

Shiki Nagaoka is a biography of a character that does not exist. What matters about an author is the gesture, the desire, the energy, things that go beyond the concrete product. I am interested in working with a vacuum, with an object that does not have to answer to certain characteristics in order to be defined as such, but which is defined, instead, by virtue of the desire of the writer, but the writer who is subordinated to the writing drive, which is the only thing that matters; the author does not matter.¹¹

Echoing Borges, the fictional biography lists several of the apocryphal works published by and about Nagaoka, who has also created a work in an unknown language, as if it were one of the books in Borges's short story "The Library of Babel." Shiki Nagaoka also includes photographs that playfully "document" the veracity of the data provided in the book

(beginning with Shiki Nagaoka's portrait in the cover of the novel), while at the same time providing additional or alternative meanings to the written text. As Diana Palaversich points out,

Bellatin uses photographic discourse in a postmodern way: he presents the image not as proof par excellence of the referentiality and the (re)production of meaning, but rather as a site in which the real is always absent. The photographic documents recovered by Ximena Berecochea weave this contradictory double discourse: flirting with the rules of Realist discourse, photography is used as proof of the real existence of that which is represented; and, on the other hand, in postmodern fashion, it is presented as a trompe-l'oeil, a simulacrum, a playful discourse that mines even more the authenticity of the main protagonist."¹²

Incidentally, counting on the readers' lack of ability to read Japanese, among the photographs included there is, supposedly, a newspaper article about the Shiki Nagaoka's Tratado de la lengua vigilada, which in reality has nothing to do with it. Other photographs allegedly show the note of repudiation published by the protagonist's family once he chose to become a monk, the book that his sister wrote about him, and the note documenting Shiki Nagaoka's expulsion from the monastery, among others.

The first paragraph of this short novel explains its title: Nagaoka Shiki is considered a character of fiction because of his huge nose. As previously stated, this type of physical deformation has become a trademark of Bellatin's writing. In this story, the protagonist's obsession over the size of his ungainly, four-inches-long nose consumes his entire existence. He is often rejected by his peers because he looks different from the rest. Ever

since Nagaoka was born, the women who helped in the difficult delivery wondered whether the monstrous nose was a punishment for the enthusiasm with which the country had welcomed western ideas; others, in contrast, considered the foreignness of his nose a virtue. Once Nagaoka becomes a prolific writer, he obsessively writes about noses. His physical handicap, as in the case of his author, becomes his main source of inspiration and reflection. In this sense, the subtitle of the novel, “una nariz de ficción” (a nose for fiction) can be interpreted in two different ways: it could be an unreal, impossible nose, or a nose that inspires fiction, a disproportionate nose that is inseparable from the act of writing. In addition, his nose (so large that it reminds the Japanese characters of westerners) comes to embody the opposition between cultural traditionalism and modernization (or westernization), a struggle that Bellatin notices in contemporary Japanese literature, as he explains to Tsurumi in their interview. The rivalries between traditionalist and modernizing academics appear as a topic in both Shiki Nagaoka and El jardín. In the last work, as he admits in the same interview, Bellatin also tries to imitate this tension between tradition and modernity that he notices in contemporary Japanese literature. He finds this binary opposition similar to the one he experienced at the University of San Marcos:

I have been thinking that the axis of confrontations among the universities of my youth [the left-leaning University of San Marcos and the right-leaning University of Lima and the Facultad de Teología Pontificia y Civil de Lima] could be seen as a clash between the traditional and the modern, in the same way as it takes place in the book El jardín: the traditional country, represented by an allegedly indigenous population, and the modern one,

whose exponents are those who consider themselves descendents of Europeans.¹³

We are also told that Nagaoka's life was the source of inspiration for the satirical short story "The Nose" (1916), by the Japanese author Ryūnosuke Akutagawa¹⁴ (1892-1927), dealing with Zenchi Naigu, a Heian period (794-1185) Buddhist priest (incidentally, the real name of Nagaoka Shiki is also Zenchi Naigu). Indeed, like several of Bellatin's characters, Akutagawa's works are known for reflecting the clash of Eastern and Western cultures, and the intellectual tension produced by the introduction of modern Western ideals in Japanese traditional thought.¹⁵ In Akutagawa's story, Naigu follows the advice of one of his disciples and boils his enormous nose, letting the latter stomp on it to remove the beads of fat (Nagaoka will also use this method). However, once the nose shrinks, people start laughing at him even more openly than before for being more concerned with his vanity than with teaching the sutras. Instead, they feel, he should be proud of being ascribed "the wisdom of zen" and of his status as one of the few priests who are allowed to serve within the palace walls. Eventually, he is happy to see that his nose grows back to its initial size, dangling past his chin.

At the same time, Akutagawa's story is based on an anonymous twelfth-century Japanese tale from the Konjaku Monogatari (Anthology of Tales from the Past), which is also included at the end of the book, after Nagaoka's biography.¹⁶ These intertextualities, therefore, give the impression that Bellatin's Shiki Nagaoka is a copy or a translation of a previous re-writing. After all, Nagaoka, in his Tratado de la lengua vigilada, affirms that "Only by reading translated texts can the real essence of the literary become evident, which is, in no way, as some scholars affirm, in language. Only by making the accounts circulate

from a western calligraphy to traditional ideograms is it possible to know the true artistic possibilities of any work.”¹⁷ Bellatin, however, seems to follow the opposite process: translating the accounts written in Japanese ideograms into western calligraphy. Moreover, if Nagaoka’s arguments are valid, the Spanish-language version should be superior to the original and its ulterior re-writing. We should be able to find, in Shiki Nagaoka, the true artistic essence of literature, which had been denied to us in the previous two accounts. Again, the fact that Bellatin’s text is clearly in dialogue with two earlier Japanese texts leads the reader to assume “wrongly” (at least in the author’s view) that the spatial framework of the short novel is indeed Japan, even though it is never stated in the text. Perhaps more importantly, the incorporation of Spanish translations of these two classic texts leads the reader who is unfamiliar with the Japanese literary canon to assume that they have been invented by Bellatin, like the rest of the plot. This literary devise is part of his avowed goal to make truth pass as lies, a sort of inversion of Mario Vargas-Llosa’s famous association between literature and the “truth of lies” in his book La verdad de las mentiras: ensayos sobre la novela moderna (The Truth of Lies: Essays about the Modern Novel, 1990). At the same time, Shiki Nagaoka becomes the last link of a chain of Japanese narrations about extraordinary noses. To put it in Bellatin’s words: “My intention was not only to try and create a book, but to invent an entire literary tradition. I not only wanted to try the feat of creating it but, more importantly, to insert myself in it. To discover, in an invented tradition, the true traces of personal identity that, in real life, I try by all means to negate.”¹⁸

In one of his writings, titled Posthumous Diary, Nagaoka recalls how at first his parents seemed to be proud of his nose. They would even compare it to the paintings of

westerners with disproportionate noses, who had brought new freedoms to the country. However, as soon as he left the family's home, he was considered a bad omen of the terrible times to come, which contributed to his feeling of guilt. Somehow related to this episode is his falling in love with a deformed and overweight young servant with a big mole on his cheek. By asking to be photographed together, Nagaoka was hoping to blend together in a single image his defective nose and the servant's repulsive body. The servant, however, reviles him. In his last years, the protagonist will not mention noses or physical defects again, but he wrote a work in an invented language, which supposedly dealt with the relation between physical defects and writing. Scholars in different parts of the world avidly try to decipher.

Palaversich notices that "The lack of emotional bonds is also an outstanding characteristic of all parents-children relations in Bellatin's narrative."¹⁹ In this context, Nagaoka, like Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (1916), is rejected by his aristocratic family, who secretly donated a large amount of money to a Buddhist monastery so that they would accept him as one of their monks. This space functions as a sort of heterotopia for the physically unacceptable body. This interest in separation and exclusion of bodies that are considered different is also present in other works, such as Salón de belleza (1994), Flores (2000), and Lecciones para una liebre muerta (2005). The only family member who does not repudiate Nagaoka is his sister Etsuko. She will eventually help him (along with the rest of his family) to kill the deformed servant who had accused him of sexual harassment. Nagaoka spent nearly thirteen years living in poverty in the monastery, where he was often mocked for his grotesque nose and criticized for writing.²⁰ Eventually, he was expelled from the monastery, accused of having provoked a

fire. As we are told, being rejected by his family, his fellow monks, and others in society for his physical appearance and his fondness of writing increased his feeling of guilt. Incidentally, as he explains in his interview with Tsurumi, as a child Bellatin had similar feelings of guilt for his obsession with writing, an activity that was not encouraged by his parents.

Shiki Nagaoka is, like other writings of Bellatin, self-referential. The topics of writing, translation, and the role of the writer are recurrent throughout the text. For instance, we learn that, without ever being influenced by foreign authors (again the tension between Japanese traditional culture and new, western ideas), Nagaoka would write his texts in English or French only to later translate them into his mother tongue: “That way, he managed to make everything coming from his pen look like a translation. Years later, he was able to write down the ideas that supported this exercise.”²¹ Later, Nagaoka attempted to write a masculine version of the eleventh-century Japanese classic Genji Monogatari (The Tale of Genji) as well as a national version of Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past (1913-1927), but full of characters with enormous noses. The protagonist later became interested in photography and, like Bellatin, he attempted to use them for narrative purposes. Each episode of his life ends up referring back to idea of narration, of telling stories whether it is with words or images. Eventually, in an additional twist to the enigmas of the writing process, Nagaoka’s works and life are compared to those of two real-life writers, Juan Rulfo and José María Arguedas: “These three writers, Juan Rulfo, José María Arguedas and Nagaoka Shiki agreed, each in his own way, that narrative photography really tries to establish a new type of alternative medium to the written word and that perhaps that will be the way in which books will be conceived of in the future.”²² At the age

of seventy, Nagaoka ended up having an ignominious death at the hands of two drug addicts who tried to rob the kiosk he opened to develop film. Ultimately, this novel is self-referential of Bellatin's opus, since writing, re-writing, and translating are conceived of as inseparable from physical handicaps. Bellatin has highlighted the main message of the novel in an interview: "It may be that the central idea of the book is that of the impossibility of establishing, through the author, any type of belonging for a literary text. My idea is that the text can subsist without needing to be sustained by a series of factors that surround it, be it author, space, time, tradition, goals, preferred worlds, etc."²³

Decapitation, orientalism, and the death of the author in Biografía ilustrada de

Mishima

Biografía ilustrada de Mishima is the fictional story of what happened to a Japanese author and military man named Yukio Mishima after he committed suicide through harakiri and his head was severed in ritualized seppuku by his friend Morita, who ended up shooting himself in the temple. In the first scene, we find a Japanese professor who is giving a lecture at a prestigious academic institution about the opus of the renowned, dead (and autobiographical) author Mishima. The story is being narrated by one of the persons attending the event and the plot has the same temporal length as the lecture. Mishima's headless ghost is also present, dressed in a military uniform and with an air of superiority, listening to what is being said about his works. He greets a former classmate by exchanging shoes, and then informs the narrator and other people in the audience that he possesses a "certain imperial condition that validates almost any of his actions."²⁴ Mishima also observes the slides that are supposed provide his illustrated biography, hence the title of the

short novel. These narrative images are intended to provide new meanings for the story. Several occurrences in the story coincide with episodes in Bellatin's life, including his depressions, his guilt for writing, the titles of his novels (Damas chinas, Salón de belleza, and El jardín de la señora Murakami), as well as his interest in Belgian shepherd Malinois dogs (both Mishima and Bellatin have written books about them) and in the victims of birth defects as a secondary effect of taking Thalomid during pregnancy.²⁵ Mishima also claims for an indemnity, pretending that the amputation of his head was a secondary effect of taking Thalomid, but a nurse dismisses it, noticing that the head had been severed. Once again, the familiar feeling of shame about one's physical defects resurfaces. Even after his death, Mishima is ashamed to show his headless body to his relatives' ghosts: "He added that the sensation of not only having stolen with impunity, but also that of not finding at times where to hide his ashamed body was intolerable."²⁶ For fear of being rejected, Mishima's ghost begins to frequent dark places and saunas where his lack of head cannot be easily noticed. The emptiness of his lack, his absence of head is a heavy load for him.

Following in the footsteps of Shiki Nagaoka, who tried to shrink his nose, Mishima unsuccessfully attempts to replace the vacuum of his head with "a professional head,"²⁷ so that people accept him. Later, he uses a rudimentary head that an artisan has made for him, until he finds someone who makes a mask with fantasy stones. Finally, a well-known artist creates a series of artistic heads (reminiscent of Bellatin's collection of artistic prosthetic limbs) that add aesthetic value, so that the vacuum can now belong to and be shared by everyone. That is, the individual emptiness represented by Mishima's lack of head (a metaphor for the "death of the author") has been replaced by an art piece (a metaphor for literature and for the short novel we are reading) that now belongs to everyone, to all

readers: “Head and creation of words. Mishima had noticed, especially lately, that there could not be one without the other. Or, rather, that one could not exist without the absence of the other.”²⁸ In other words, literature cannot exist without the “death of the author.”

Then, the narrator provides a new metaphor for the birth of what Julio Cortázar used to call the “accomplice reader”: “He imagined the construction of that part of his body as an open action, that managed to make of the hole something like a public garden. An anonymous space where all had the responsibility to keep it in perfect condition.”²⁹

To continue with the meta-narrative nature of Shiki Nagaoka, Mishima problematizes the act of writing by wondering about the unconscious origin of the ideas for his works. Echoing Roland Barthes’s ideas in “The Death of the Author,” he comes to the conclusion that is only a medium for the texts already written somewhere else. At the end of the story, the Japanese professor claims that Mishima has never really existed, thus implying that Mario Bellatin (like all writers) does not exist either; that once the literary text is published, it no longer belongs to him and, therefore, he stops being the ultimate source of meaning. This narrative strategy can be directly related to the well-known anecdote of Bellatin’s organization in 2003 of a conference of Mexican writers in Paris, where the attendants could only find doubles of the real writers, who had memorized ten texts written by the authors.³⁰ Again in line with Barthes’s ideas, the sacred positioning of the author as the main source of meaning (or perhaps just a cult of celebrity) was desacralized. He became a simple construct, a medium who borrows, copies, or re-writes ideas and words from the unconscious world of the infinite dictionary of language and culture (after all, Bellatin claims to have spent hours copying with his typewriter entire pages from the works of his favorite authors). Therefore, even though one may argue that

Bellatin creates floating allegories with unstable meanings that do not necessarily lead to a signified or referent in real life (or outside the fictional universe of the text), Biografia illustrada de Mishima, like several of his works, can be read as an allegory of reading and writing. In fact, some passages directly address the writing experience: “And the same ghost, the one that appears more frequently, usually informs Mishima that the writer perceives the things of the world as if someone was relating what is happening around him. He feels them in such a way that the events are part of an imaginary universe.”³¹ Likewise, Mishima can hear a voice that sometimes asks him: “From what river are we spoken to in that strange exile that is writing?”³² Later, he wonders “whether after they die, writers feel ready to understand the symbols upon which they built their work.”³³

Regardless of whether it is being used as a literary mask or not, from its very first paragraph the novel suggests that we are dealing with Japanese culture, either in Japan or overseas. Characters practice Shinto, the indigenous spirituality of the Japanese people, and we even read that “Suddenly, a master who gives the impression of being Japanese appears in the room.”³⁴ There are also disconnected lists of Japanese terms with their definition that appear from time to time in the text, with words such as misoshiru, bento, or hanami. Some of the passages even have exoticist overtones:

The elderly ladies in those areas knew that losing a piece was to beginning to give away part of life. When they received the last warning, that is, when the last tooth fell off, they had to prepare for death. That critical moment came after the Ritual of the Fireflies. In that region, they talked about the existence of exclusive cemeteries for toothless women.³⁵

Other passages describe strange customs, such as exchanging shoes as a way to greet each other. In effect, even if these descriptions are simply aimed at preventing the readers' identification of the text with a concrete space or time, they end up Orientalizing Japanese culture, which is the one that readers will identify in the text.

Translation and the maleable reader El jardín de la señora Murakami

In El jardín, it is not clear whether the action takes place in Japan or not, but certain passages suggest that the characters live far away: "During that time Mr. Murakami's father still kept links with Japan . . . Back then, some members of the family would make long voyages to the islands. Shikibu had not mentioned them again since the news of a country in ruins was broadcast,"³⁶ "[Mr. Murakami] told her [Izu Nakamura] that her body made him think of the women of the islands in the archipelago."³⁷ Bellatin has pointed out that the influence of Japanese literature is not in any particular character in this novel (or the previous ones, for that matter) but in its language: "I think that the real influence of Japanese literature on my books is in the sense of being able to compress language. I am interested in what is left in the vacuum, when someone tries to translate an ideogram to a western language. I think that there is there an essence that transcends the fact that the texts comes from Japanese literature."³⁸

At any rate, what matters for this study is that the characters are undoubtedly of Japanese origin: there are numerous references to haiku, tea ceremonies, the ancient go game,³⁹ the fondness for koi, Japanese literature, emperors, and a warrior caste that obviously refers to the samurai. Even the back cover summary in the Tusquets edition claims that it recreates classic Japanese literary texts: the style and the aesthetics of the

novel are supposed to imitate, the evocative power, sobriety, and austerity of Japanese authors such as Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972) and Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1975; whom the protagonist meets in the novel). In this context, César Ferreira, in his review of El jardín, argues that “the entire novel could be read as a story of oriental refinement, as references to Japanese traditions abound: descriptions of garments such as kimonos, the daily ritual of serving tea, and the discrete actions carried out by servant who quietly accompany the main characters in their endeavors. Underneath such a harmonious façade, however, the text also hints at many actions of betrayal and human passion” (154). The novel also tries to imitate the tension between the traditional and the modern present in contemporary Japanese literature. This is noticeable not only in the two rival groups of academic art critics (the Ultra Modern and the Radical Conservatives), but also in Izu’s wardrobe, where one can find both traditional kimonos and western clothing, and in the food offered in restaurants, varying from traditional Japanese dishes to French cuisine.

Some critics have also pointed out the relation of this short novel with Murasaki Shikibu’s eleventh-century masterpiece about court life The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari). However, other than the similarities between the surname of the protagonist in Bellatin’s novel and that of the noblewoman who wrote the Japanese classic, or the coincidence of the word “monogatari”⁴⁰ in the subtitle of Bellatin’s work, Oto no-Murakami monogatari (which roughly means “Story of the village of the King God”), the two plots are completely different. The narrator of El jardín also mentions the essay on aesthetics, In Praise of Shadows (In’ei Raisan, 1933), by the Japanese author Junichiro Tanizaki, which contrasts Western culture’s constant search for light and clarity with Japanese traditional culture, which knew how to appreciate the beauty of darkness and

subtlety: “Tanikazi Junichiro affirms in In Praise of Shadows that eliminating the dark corners characteristic of the houses of yesteryear is to turn your back on all the traditional aesthetic conceptions. That treaty became for a long time Izu’s bedside book.”⁴¹ In fact, several passages in Bellatin’s novel pay homage to Junichiro’s praise to the details and nuances of shadows: “The little alcohol lamps that illuminated Mr. Murakami’s house were also a way to indicate that tradition had to be preserved”;⁴² “They referred to the importance of the game of shadows and lights in the houses that were designed there [Japan].”⁴³

In the story, narrated in a long flashback, an art theory student named Izu takes care of her ill father. Her professor Matsuei Kenzō, a member of a fanatical modernizing group known as the Modernos a Ultranza, asks her to visit the prestigious collection of traditional art owned by Mr. Murakami, a wealthy widower who is surrounded by scandal (besides having had a sex scandal in Europe that prevented him from finishing his architecture studies, he is suspected to have sold used lingerie of female students to perverts). After her visit, Izu publishes a paper criticizing the unbalanced way in which the collection was put together, using sometimes dynastic criteria to select the pieces, while others, considering only their practical or military character. As a result, Mr. Murakami is publicly mocked and, ashamed, ends up selling his collection. In reality, Izu has been used by her professor, Matsuei Kenzō, in a plot to ruin the prestige of Mr. Murakami and his traditionalist allies. She feels guilty for it, but agrees to marry Mr. Murakami anyway when the latter asks her. The cold way in which she makes up her mind should not be surprising if we consider the entire corpus of Bellatin’s works. As Palaversich explains, “it must be noted that Bellatin’s characters are incapable of relating emotionally to others or have a sexual relationship marked by pleasure and desire.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, beyond her desire to please her parents, Izu

feels that she does not have much to lose: two previous arranged marriages had already failed and she had to leave the university after she denounced the Ultra Modern faction's plot to manipulate the upcoming university elections. We later find out that Mr. Murakami blackmailed her family before her marriage. Izu knows that her mother has agreed with Mr. Murakami to a humiliating arrangement, the formotón asai, by which she will have to renounce to her dowry and lose the privilege of being covered by the suppenka after the wedding night.⁴⁵ It is all part of a slow and cold psychological revenge: Mr. Murakami has blackmailed the mother, assuring her that he has compromising photographs of her daughter in their secret dates. To avoid a scandal that could further damage her father's health, the docile and shy Izu feels compelled to accept the marriage proposal. Years after the wedding, her ill husband deliriously asks to see their maid Etsuko's breasts again, a situation that infuriates Izu, now known as Madam Murakami. After Mr. Murakami dies of cancer, his wife discovers that he has left her a very small amount of money because he had been spending most of his savings in a new art collection that will be curated by the Group of Radical Conservatives led by Takagashi. Later, Mr. Murakami's ghost appears to her floating on the ponds of the beautiful domestic garden she requested from him before the marriage. In the end, she accepts the end of her dreams and finds a bitter comfort in the destruction of the Oriental garden, her enclosed private universe, her last refuge and heterotopia where she could find spiritual peace, which now reminds her of her late husband. As Foucault explains,

perhaps the oldest example of these heterotopias, in the form of contradictory emplacements, is the garden. One should bear in mind that in the East the garden, an amazing creation now thousands of years old, was

deeply symbolic, with meanings that were superimposed, as it were. The traditional garden of the Persians, was a sacred space that is said to have joined together within its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a space even more sacred than the others which was like the umbilicus, the navel of the world at its center (this was the location of the basin and the fountain); and all the garden's vegetation was supposed to be distributed within that space, within that figurative microcosm. (Aesthetics 181-82)

The novel actually begins by the end, with this scene in which Madam Murakami orders the destruction of the garden to get rid of the apparitions that are haunting her and break up once and for all with her painful memories of her past. Incidentally, the garden had big black and white stones that are reminiscent of the little black and white stones in the go game, perhaps suggesting that Madam Murakami has become a sort of pawn in other people's game.

More importantly, Madam Murakami has become a resentful widow who, according to Bellatin, metaphorically represents the malleable reader that he is trying to avoid: "There, I establish a parallel with literature, with those literatures of the 'ought to be,' which accept preceding elements and situations because they are already traced lines, a rhetoric that 'one must accept,' and one ends up very badly, just like Izu."⁴⁶ The submissive Izu, who now dresses in a more conservative manner, has abided by all the impositions coming from her professor, her mother, and her husband, and there precisely resides her tragic flaw. She ends up being humiliated by her husband, who seldom returns home at night and who seemingly cheats on her with their maid and other women.

In the end, even though in this fictional translation of an inexistent literary text Japaneseness is not associated with physical deformity or missing bodily parts, it is still presented in the context of submission, humiliation, and cold revenge. The Japan imagined in this novel can be summarized by its central image: Madam Murakami's traditional Japanese garden with bamboo plants and a pond with golden koi, which went against the modernizing and westernizing philosophy of her husband, ends up being destroyed and turned into a park. Does it represent the triumph of modernity over traditionalist values? Around this organizing center, we can draw a cognitive mapping of the implicit author's idea of Japanese culture by following his references to haiku, kimonos, suicide, tea ceremonies, the go board game, the Kabuki traditional dance-drama, the shiatsu traditional therapy, and historical periods such as the Meiji era or the Kamakura period, among several other cultural references.

As he does in other works, in El jardín Bellatin tries to weaken the presence of the author as much as possible. This time, he denies his own authorship by suggesting, through the use of explanatory footnotes (some of them misleading, such as the second one, which claims that kimonos are made by women), that he has adopted the role of translator. In Shiki Nagaoka, we learned that the protagonist had managed to give all his writings the feeling that they were translations; now, his author is applying the same techniques. Ultimately, this rhetorical device gives the impression that the original version of the narration is missing. At the same time, it adds verisimilitude to the account. Bellatin has explained, in the interview with Tsurumi, that in both works, El jardín and Shiki Nagaoka, he tried to puzzle the reader, who has to discern which facts are true and which ones are

invented, through the use of footnotes, becoming the translator of inexistent works, and other devises.

Finally, in El jardín there are also passages that evoke an exoticist mysterious Orient: we find a model for a bungalow that includes a room for suicides; caterpillar hunts on leap years, using grey gauze to cover the faces; and illegal games with black and white stones practiced in the basements of warehouses in which the participants get terribly injured or die. Yet this time Bellatin seems to mock his own orientalism in the addendum: “At some moment in the account, it would have been convenient to mention again the Caterpillar Hunt, perhaps explaining in detail the absurdity of such an activity.”⁴⁷

A fourth text by Bellatin that deals with (seemingly) Japanese characters is the strange short story, “Bola negra,” first published in Obra reunida (2005), in which an entomologist named Endo Hiroshi, who lives on white rice and tea, decides to stop eating healthy food in order to ruin his stomach. This decision is triggered by a night of insomnia in which he felt, half asleep, half awake, that the uncontrolled voracity of his stomach was devouring his arms and legs: “The aggressiveness shown by that organ was such that Endo Hiroshi, with the first light of dawn, already felt like a member of the faction of those who eat only to damage it. Of those who expect to transform them into almost useless organs.”⁴⁸ In Hiroshi’s family, we learn, there had already been previous cases of eating disorders: one of his twin cousins had become anorexic, while the other one, a Sumo wrestler.

During a trip to Africa, Hiroshi discovers an unknown specimen that he would have named “Hiroshi camelus eleoptirus,” had it not disappeared from the plastic box where it was careful kept, leaving only a minuscule black ball in its place. Later, the protagonist discovers that this ball is actually what remained after the insect ate itself. This episode,

which ruins his prospects of achieving fame and glory in his career, reminds the protagonist of one of the teachings of the (fictional) resurrecting prophet Magetsu (who also appears in El jardín), as told in the Sacred Catechism of the Hiro Sensei sect:

it is said that one of Prophet Magetsu's deaths, seemingly the final one, took place when the Prophet decided to allow his body to be the food for his own body. To leave a trace of the process, in which his flesh gradually disappeared, curiously, in order to turn into a trace of his own flesh, he counted on the presence of his disciple, Oshiro, who wrote in a great rice paper parchment, currently available for whoever wishes to consult it, the words that his master dictated to him during the process.⁴⁹

We also learn that Hiroshi's parents were not allowed to get married until their elderly cook lost her last tooth. When this finally happened, the cook, unable to eat, joined the "Convoy of the toothless beings" and died of starvation. The only exotic touch in the feast prepared for Hiroshi's parents' wedding was "Ghost red bream," which, as we saw in El jardín, consisted in quartering the fish and showing its internal organs, but leaving it alive so that it could be eaten while it kept swimming moribund: "As a sign of good luck for the marriage, the lunch had to last the exact time that it took the fish to die."⁵⁰ To continue with the bizarre and exotic customs of Bellatin's imagined Japan, after the marriage his mother can finally paint her teeth black and his father can extract his frontal teeth. The story ends with the suggestion that Hiroshi has decided to avoid the indignity of the cook's death by committing suicide: he will eat the tiny ball that was left in the plastic box after the insect ate itself, along with weevils and other insects. Subsequently, we are told that in his closet he kept the suit he used for the caterpillar hunt that took place on leap

years (an anecdote that also appears in El jardín). As in El jardín, several footnotes explain terms such as “sumo,” as well as strange, invented “Japanese” customs. As we have seen, this short story, which flirts with the absurd, proves Bellatin right when he assures that he “does everything possible to make sure that his readers do not believe him.”⁵¹

Overall, Bellatin resorts to Japanese characters to distance himself from his own writings, as if it were the culture that is the most alien to his own. His lucubration about reading and writing are sometimes accompanied of exocitizing and orientalist overtones, which he even mocks on occasion. As mentioned, even if Japan is used as a literary mask to avoid providing specific temporal and spatial frameworks, the image of this culture that stays in the readers’ mind ends up being associated with submission, physical deformity, suicide, decapitation, missing body parts, and cruelty to people and animals. A telling scene, for example, takes place during the lunch after Izu’s wedding to Mr. Murakami, when they eat a fish that is still alive on the plate (there is a notorious video in YouTube showing a similar scene that may have been the inspiration for Bellatin). In this sense, Tsurumi has pointed out that “Bellatin’s characterization of the Japanese male protagonists [in Shiki Nagaoka and El jardín] is decidedly negative since they appear to have no moral compass to guide their behavior” (230).

However, Bellatin seems to be aware of and comfortable with this. In an interview with Tsurumi, he admits that he has never visited Japan and then adds: “I would like to keep this distorted idea of what Japan is. The essence. My interest is in what is left from the ruins. I am not interested in the origins. I am very happy with what reaches me after the translation. The mystery, the text, the characters—how they can be transmitted throughout the centuries. I am not interested in the truth about Japan, but in the rhetoric about Japan.”⁵²

Interestingly, the Cuban author Severo Sarduy seemed to have a similar approach to the East. Talking about India in an interview with Emir Rodríguez Monegal, he acknowledged the limitations that westerners have to overcome when dealing with Eastern cultures:

But I am not dealing with a transcendental, metaphysical or profound India but, on the contrary, with an emphasis on the superficial and, I would say, even on Indian tackiness. I believe, and I would have liked Octavio Paz to have agreed with me (I believe he does) that our only decodification as westerners, our only possible non-neurotic reading, considering our logocentrism, is the one that exalts that country's superficiality. To do otherwise yields a Christianizing translation, syncretism, true superficiality.⁵³

Cultural authenticity, therefore, is not one of the author's concerns. He plays with his own reception of a Japan translated and mediated by other westerners, perhaps because the other Japan would be inaccessible to him, as India was for Severo Sarduy in the previous quotation.

Another possible motivation for Bellatin's interest in Japanese culture could be a reaction against his parents' anti-Japanese racism when he was a child. In the interview with Tsurumi, he mentions how his father was ashamed that the latter's parents had hidden a Japanese family during for some time during World War II, before they were eventually sent to an internment camp in the United States. He had also forbidden eating Japanese food in his house, because he had bad memories of being forced to eat it at his Japanese godfather's house when he was a child. Bellatin believes that his parents' anti-Japanese sentiment (even though they would end up supporting Fujimori after seeing how he governed) responded to North American wartime propaganda in Peru, which presented

Japanese nationals as a danger for world peace. In this interview, the author also clarifies that he has lost contact with his family in Peru: “It has been more than five years since I have received any communication from them. This was a personal decision. At a certain point, I asked them to come to terms with the idea that I don’t exist and that they consider me dead.”⁵⁴ Considering that, according to Bellatin, his interest in Japanese literature and film while he was in college in Lima had nothing to do with the Japanese presence in Peru, it would not be too far-fetched to consider it a perhaps unconscious revenge against his parents, who had tacitly forbidden him to have Japanese friends or girlfriends.

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Notes

¹ “Para el lector resulta obvio que El jardín de la señora Murakami transcurre en Japón, pero entonces yo indago por qué resulta obvio, y la respuesta que me dan es porque se usan kimonos y porque toman té siguiendo cierta ceremonia. Pero podríamos encontrar a una vecina de Pringles que toma té y usa kimono. Lo cual hace que no den resultado estas explicaciones” (Larrain n.p.).

² The son of Peruvian parents, Mario Bellatin was born in Mexico City in 1960. Three years later, his family moved back to Peru, a society in which he always felt alienated. In Lima, he grew up, graduated with a B.A. in Information Sciences from the University of Lima in 1964, published his first five novels, and became known as a writer. In 1986, he moved to Cuba to study screenplay writing at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión in San Antonio de los Baños. After four years in Cuba, where he discovered himself as a writer, he returned to Lima. In 1994, he moved back to Mexico, as he had dreamed of doing since he was a child, and he still lives in that country. He is also the author of the Mujeres de sal (1986), Efecto invernadero (1992), Canon perpetuo (1993), Salón de belleza (1994), Damas chinas (1995), Tres novelas (1995), Efecto invernadero (1996), Poeta ciego (1998), Flores (2000), La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán (2001), Jacobo el mutante (2002), Perros héroes (2003), Obra reunida (2005), Lecciones para una liebre muerta (2005), Underwood portátil modelo 1915 (2005), La jornada de la mona y el paciente (2006), Pájaro transparente (2006), and El gran vidrio (2007), Condición de las flores (2008), and Los fantasmas del masajista. In 2000, He won the Xavier Villaurrutia Award for his novel Flores and was a finalist of the Médicis Award for the best foreign novel published in France. In 2008, he also won the National Award for Literature of the Municipal Institute for Culture, Tourism, and Art in Mazatlán for his novel El gran vidrio.

³ “Lo japonés no es algo que yo intente como importante, sino que es el pretexto que uso ahora para hacerme estas preguntas sobre lo literario que me vengo haciendo desde que escribo. Pero ahora es japonés, tengo textos judíos, de tradiciones distintas, que me permiten a partir de la descontextualización, hallar respuestas sobre el hecho de escribir y sobre todo sobre el papel del escritor frente al texto. Me interesa cómo buscar máscaras, un distanciamiento con lo que se escribe y que no sepas quién es el autor real de los textos” (n.p). Indeed, Bellatin’s works have dealt with Japanese, Jewish, Japanese, and Sufi cultures.

⁴ La escuela de dolor humano de Sechuán (2000) seems to deal with a Chinese playwright named Lin Pao. Likewise, a similar use of the “Orient” can be found in El gran vidrio, where, returning to the absurd, Bellatin problematizes the figure of the author by creating three different autobiographies: he is a boy who grows up in India, then appears in the dream of a Muslim female leader, and in the third one, he is concurrently a man and a woman.

⁵ “Es algo que también se puede encontrar en los libros de Ishiguro, que construye a partir de los supuestos del lector para no satisfacerlos. Al contrario, a partir de estos supuestos se pone al lector en jaque todo el tiempo, y eso es, curiosamente, lo que hace que siga leyendo” (Larrain n.p.).

⁶ “Creo que la principal es respetar lo que planteé desde mi primer libro, el generar un no tiempo y un no espacio real o reconocible. De manera que incluso cuando aparezca la mención de algún lugar funcione como una máscara. Es como una especie de evolución o involución de movimiento para no estar quieto, sin decir dónde es, cuándo es. Pero se trata de una suerte de máscara o velo, de una apariencia japonesa, o de una tradición judía, árabe, china. Es decir, un x jugando con distintos imaginarios, referentes de distintas tradiciones, con el fin de hacer lo mismo que hice desde el primer libro, que no exista un tiempo y un espacio reconocibles. Salvo para mí” (Larrain n.p.).

⁷ “Si me preguntas por la nacionalidad a un nivel personal, te podría decir muchas cosas, pero esas cosas no tienen ninguna importancia para mi trabajo, porque lo que yo intento es que los libros hablen por sí mismos, que los textos se vuelvan autónomos, que se vuelvan textos sin autor. Entonces esta posibilidad de tener dos nacionalidades, porque es cierto que tengo dos, pero al mismo tiempo ninguna, permite que la escritura aparezca como de la nada, como no sustentada en una nacionalidad que ha sido, en mi opinión, un lastre para nuestras tradiciones literarias” (Melgar n.p.). In a different interview, when Ezio Neyra Magagna brings up the topic of his nationality, Bellatin answers in the third person: “I think, on the other hand, that Bellatin is neither Peruvian nor Mexican” (“Creo, por otra parte, que Bellatin no es peruano ni mexicano,” n.p.). Likewise, in an interview with Tsurumi, he answers: “With relation to nationality, I don’t know well how I feel. Officially and consciously, I say that I am Mexican, but there are many aspects of my personality that give away my stay in Peru... In reality, I’m not quite sure whether I am Peruvian or Mexican. The wisest thing, perhaps, would be to define myself as Croatian.”

“Con relación a la nacionalidad no sé bien qué siento. Oficial y conscientemente digo que soy mexicano, pero hay muchos aspectos de mi personalidad que delatan mi largo paso por Perú... No tengo en realidad mucha idea sobre si soy peruano o mexicano. Lo más cuerdo quizá sería definirme como croata” (368-69). Bellatin’s paternal grandfather was from Croatia.

⁸ “El hecho de que algunos personajes sean japoneses y otros chinos o árabes es, otra vez, una trampa textual que tiene el efecto de estrangment en el lector: aquel puede llegar a pensar que no entiende el personaje a causa de su ‘extranjería.’ Sin embargo, estos personajes ‘exóticos’ no poseen características adicionales que los distinguan de otros del texto” (33).

⁹ Besides the protagonist’s missing head in Biografía ilustrada de Mishima, the protagonist’s huge nose in Shiki Nagaoka, and the moribund patients in Damas chinas, the narrator in Lecciones para una liebre muerta has an artificial arm and there

are two twins who are also the victims of Thalidome (they do not have arms or legs). Likewise, in La escuela del dolor humano de Sechuán a boy scares his friends with his orthopedic arm and that is why he is no longer invited to parties (Bellatin claims that in Cuba, he would scare people in the bus with his orthopedic arm), and there is an entire volleyball team with players who are lacking all their fingers in the right hand.

¹⁰ Bellatin has also explained how he decided to throw his prosthesis to the Ganges River in India, when he saw dead bodies floating by his boat. Then, upon his return to Mexico, he began to have a feeling of loss and emptiness. He realized that had developed a dependence on this prosthesis and was missing the artificiality that had accompanied his body almost all his life. Incidentally, his parents' obsession with his wearing a prosthesis is recreated in one of the three autobiographies included in El gran vidrio. He exposes in an interview the reasons he has one now: "Although I don't need it—because I was born without an arm and I have all the mobility—, I use it to fill the vacuum. I don't need what the orthopedics sell: usefulness or hiding; I do more things without it and I think that hiding it would be atrocious. I spent two years without wearing anything. However, I felt that something was missing in the space... to fill it, I use this one, which is not useful but makes me forget the vacuum." ("Aunque no la necesito -porque mi falta de brazo es de nacimiento y tengo toda la movilidad-, me sirve para llenar el vacío, no necesito lo que vende la ortopedia: utilidad o disimulo; hago más cosas sin ella y ocultarlo me parece espantoso. Pasé dos años sin usar nada, sin embargo sentía que algo faltaba en el espacio... para llenarlo uso ésta, que no sirve pero me hace olvidar el vacío" [Aguilar n.p]).

¹¹ "Shiki Nagaoka es una biografía a partir de un personaje que no existe. Lo que importa de un autor es el gesto, el deseo, la energía, cosas que están más allá del producto concreto. A mí me interesa trabajar con un vacío, con un objeto que no tenga que responder a ciertas características para ser definido como tal, sino que sea definido en virtud del deseo del escritor, pero el autor subordinado a la pulsión por escribir, que es lo único que importa, el autor no importa" (Valle n.p.).

¹² "Bellatin emplea el discurso fotográfico de una manera postmoderna: presenta la imagen no como una prueba por excelencia de la referencialidad y la (re)producción de significado, sino más bien como sitio en el cual lo real está siempre ausente. Los documentos fotográficos recuperados por Ximena Berecochea, tejen este doble discurso contradictorio: coqueteando con las reglas del discurso realista, la fotografía se emplea como prueba de la existencia real de lo representado; y por otra parte, a la manera postmoderna, se presenta como un trompe-l'oeil, simulacro, discurso jugueteón que mina aún más la autenticidad del personaje principal" (29).

¹³ "He estado pensando que el eje de enfrentamientos entre las universidades de mi juventud podía verse como un choque entre lo tradicional y lo moderno, de la misma forma como ocurre en el libro El jardín de la señora Murakami: el país

tradicional, representado por una supuesta población indígena, y el moderno, cuyos exponentes son los que se consideran descendientes de europeos” (Interview with Tsurumi 372).

¹⁴ Ryunosuke is spelled Rynosuke in Bellatin’s text, a change that brings to mind the Greek prefix “rhino-,” meaning nose.

¹⁵ Javier Sologuren studied the tension between Western and Eastern cultures in Akutagawa’s opus in his essay “Akutagawa y Arguedas en la perspectiva cultural.”

¹⁶ Bellatin describes it as a thirteen-century text.

¹⁷ “únicamente por medio de la lectura de textos traducidos puede hacerse evidente la real esencia de lo literario que, de ninguna manera, como algunos estudiosos afirman, está en el lenguaje. Sólo haciendo circular los relatos de una caligrafía occidental a ideogramas tradicionales, es posible conocer las verdaderas posibilidades artísticas de cualquier obra” (13).

¹⁸ “mi intención era tratar no solo de crear un libro, sino de inventar toda una tradición literaria. Yo no solo quería intentar la proeza de crearla sino, lo más importante, insertarme en ella. Descubrir, en una tradición inventada, las verdaderas huellas de identidad personal que en la vida trato a toda costa de negar” (380).

¹⁹ “La falta de lazos emotivos es también la característica sobresaliente de toda relación padres-hijos que se da en la narrativa de Bellatin” (35).

²⁰ These passages may have autobiographical overtones. Bellatin has explained in interviews how he was mocked by one of his high school teachers, who would count the students in the class, adding “and a half” when it was time to count him [Lennard n.p.]. He has also mentioned that his parents would criticize him in his youth for wasting time writing fiction instead of studying.

²¹ “De eso modo consiguió que todo lo que saliera de su pluma pareciera una traducción. Años más tarde logró poner por escrito las ideas que sustentaban este ejercicio” (13).

²² “Estos tres escritores Juan Rulfo, José María Arguedas y Nagaoka Shiki estuvieron de acuerdo, cada uno por su lado, en que la fotografía narrativa intenta realmente establecer un nuevo tipo de medio alternativo a la palabra escrita y que quizá aquella sea la forma en que sean concebidos los libros en el futuro” (31-32).

²³ “Puede ser que la idea central del libro sea la de la imposibilidad de establecer, por medio del autor, algún tipo de pertenencia de un texto literario. Mi idea es que el texto puede subsistir sin necesidad de ser sostenido por una serie de factores que lo rodean, llámense autor, espacio, tiempo, tradición, metas, mundos preferidos, etc.” (Tsurumi 383).

²⁴ “cierta condición imperial, la cual hace válida casi cualquiera de sus conductas” (12).

²⁵ Bellatin suspects that his mother may have unknowingly taken Thalomid during her pregnancy, because she remembers to have taken some pills during that time, which coincides with the years in which the medicine was prescribed.

²⁶ “Añadió que era intolerable la sensación no sólo de haber hurtado en forma impune, sino la de no encontrar a veces dónde esconder el cuerpo avergonzado” (26).

²⁷ “Una cabeza profesional” (36).

²⁸ “Cabeza y creación de palabras. Mishima había advertido, sobre todo en los últimos tiempos, que no podía haber la una sin la otra. O, más bien, que no podía existir una sin la ausencia de la otra” (46).

²⁹ ““Imaginaba la construcción de aquella parte de su cuerpo como una acción abierta, que lograra hacer del agujero algo así como un jardín público. Un espacio anónimo donde todos tuvieran la responsabilidad de mantenerlo en condiciones perfectas” (46).

³⁰ Likewise, in Lecciones para una liebre muerta the disappearance of the author occurs when the narrator talks about Mario Bellatin in the third person.

³¹ “Y el mismo fantasma, el que aparece con mayor frecuencia, le suele informar a Mishima que el escritor percibe las cosas del mundo como si alguien le fuera relatando lo que ocurre a su alrededor. Las siente de tal manera que los sucesos forman parte de un universo imaginario” (17).

³² “¿De qué río se nos habla en ese extraño exilio que es la escritura?” (24, 41).

³³ “si después de muertos los escritores se encuentran ya preparados para entender los símbolos a partir de los cuales construyeron su trabajo” (50).

³⁴ “Aparece de pronto en la sala un maestro que da la impresión de ser japonés” (11).

³⁵ “Las ancianas de esas zonas sabían que perder una pieza era comenzar a desprenderse de una parte de la vida. Cuando recibían el último anuncio, es decir, cuando caía el último diente, debían prepararse para la muerte. Aquel trance tendría que ser realizado después de la celebración del Ritual de las Luciérnagas. En aquella región se hablaba de la existencia de cementerios exclusivos para mujeres desdentadas” (22).

³⁶ “En esa época el padre del señor Murakami aún mantenía relaciones con Japón. . . . En aquel entonces algunos miembros de la familia hacían largos viajes a las islas. Shikibu no las había vuelto a oír nombrar desde que se difundiera la noticia de un país en ruinas” (52).

³⁷ “Le dijo que su cuerpo le hacía recordar a las mujeres de las islas del archipiélago” (89).

³⁸ “Creo que la real influencia de la literatura japonesa sobre mis libros está en el sentido de poder comprimir el lenguaje. Me interesa lo que queda en el vacío cuando alguien trata de transcribir un ideograma a una lengua occidental. Creo que hay allí una esencia que trasciende el hecho de que el texto provenga de la literatura japonesa” (Tsurumi 37).

³⁹ The Japanese Nobel Prize-winner Yasunari Kawabata published a novel titled Meijin (The Master of Go, 1951) that perhaps influenced Bellatin.

⁴⁰ Monogatari is a traditional Japanese literary form similar to western epic prose, which incorporates fictionalized stories even when narrating an historical event.

⁴¹ “Tanikazi Junichiro afirma en El elogio de la sombra que suprimir los rincones oscuros propios de las casas de antaño es darle la espalda a todas las concepciones estéticas de lo tradicional. Aquel tratado se convirtió durante mucho tiempo en el libro de cabecera de Izu” (74-75).

⁴² “Los pequeños mecheros alimentados con alcohol que alumbraban la casa del señor Murakami eran también una manera de indicar que se debía preservar la tradición” (66).

⁴³ “Se refirieron a la importancia del juego de las sombras y luces en las casas que allí se diseñaban” (74).

⁴⁴ “hay que notar que los personajes de Bellatin son incapaces de relacionarse emotivamente con otros o de entablar una relación sexual marcada por placer y deseo” (34).

⁴⁵ These are two of the several “Japanese” words and concepts that are invented in the novel. He also has a short story not dealing with Japanese characters or culture titled “Formotón asai” and its meaning, repudiation, is explained in a footnote

⁴⁶ “ahí yo hago el paralelo con lo literario, con esas literaturas del ‘deber ser,’ que aceptan elementos y situaciones precedentes porque son líneas ya trazadas, retóricas que ‘hay que aceptar,’ y se termina muy mal, así como Izu” (Castañeda n.p).

⁴⁷ “En algún momento de la narración habría sido conveniente volver a referirse a la Cacería de Orugas, tal vez explicar con detalle lo absurdo de una actividad como aquella” (106).

⁴⁸ “Fue tal la agresividad que mostró aquel órgano, que Endo Hiroshi, con las primeras luces del alba, ya se sentía miembro del bando de los que comen sólo para estropearlo. De los que pretenden transformarlos en órganos casi inservibles” (105).

⁴⁹ “se dice que una de las muertes del Profeta Magetsu, al parecer la definitiva, ocurrió cuando el Profeta decidió permitir que su cuerpo fuera el alimento de su propio cuerpo. Para dejar huella del proceso, en el que su carne desapareció gradualmente para, curiosamente, convertirse en una huella de su misma carne, contó con la presencia de su discípulo,

Oshiro, quien escribió en un gran pergamino de papel de arroz, disponible actualmente para quien quiera consultarlo, las palabras que su maestro le fue dictando durante el proceso” (109).

⁵⁰ “Como señal de buen augurio para el matrimonio, la comida debía durar el tiempo exacto que tardaba el pez en morir” (111).

⁵¹ “hace todo lo posible para que los lectores no le crean” (Ayala-Dip n.p).

⁵² “Me gustaría quedarme con esta idea distorsionada de lo que es el Japón. La esencia. Mi interés es lo que queda de las ruinas. No tengo interés en los orígenes. Estoy contento con lo que me llega después de la traducción. El misterio, un texto, los caracteres—como pueden ser transmitidos a lo largo de los siglos. No me interesa la verdad del Japón, sino la retórica del Japón” (376).

⁵³ “Pero no se trata de una India transcendental, metafísica o profunda, sino al contrario, una exaltación de la superficie y yo diría hasta de la pacotilla India. Yo creo, y me hubiera gustado que Octavio Paz estuviera de acuerdo--pienso que lo está--que la única descodificación que podemos hacer en tanto que occidentales, que la única lectura no neurótica de la India que nos es posible a partir de nuestro logocentrismo es ésa que privilegia su superficie. El resto es traducción cristianizante, sincretismo, verdadera superficialidad” (Rodríguez Monegal 318-9). Quoted by Julia A. Kushigian.

⁵⁴ “Hace más de cinco años que no los veo ni recibo ninguna comunicación. Ésta fue una decisión personal. En cierto momento, les pedí que se hicieran a la idea de que no existo más y que me dieran por muerto” (365).