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Masculinity As Privileged Human Agency In H. G. Oesterheld's *El Eternauta*

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La inocente lectura de 1957 dejó de ser posible [después del golpe militar de 1976]. *El Eternauta* ya no era más una conmovedora historia de ciencia ficción; se parecía demasiado a una antigua profecía de lo que estaba pasando en el mundo real. La más grande de las historietas argentinas regresaba, esquivando censores, para ser leída como un himno a la libertad, a la necesidad de pelear contra los monstruos, a que la vida es lo más importante que hay sobre la Tierra. [...] En fin, cada tiempo parece permitir sacar de estas páginas una lectura diferente. (Trillo 12-13)¹

El Eternauta (first published serially 1957-1959), with narrative by Héctor Germán Oesterheld (1919-1978) and drawings by Francisco Solano López (1928-2011), is a revered Argentine cultural text.² Other works of national culture, like José Hernández's narrative poem on Gaucho life, the *Martín Fierro* (*Ida* [1872; the title *Ida* is a reading convention], *Vuelta* [1879]),³ the poetry/lyrics of the much vaunted Argentine tango, or even Julio Cortázar's boom novel *Rayuela* (1963), are widely honored for distilling the essence of the Argentine character. However, the Oesterheld/Solano López graphic novel not only tapped into rich veins of the Argentine national imaginary, but for sheer originality it continues to stand unrivaled in Latin American graphic narrative production.⁴

I would like in this paper to explore the role of masculinity in *El Eternauta*, and how the preeminence of masculinity is related to the sense of Argentine society Oesterheld maintained and the privilege of masculine responsibility and accomplishment. I will explore 1) the masculine world of the story itself; 2) the significance of the story as it relates to Oesterheld's own personal role in the political turmoil of the late 1970s and his own disappearance at the hands of the military dictatorship; 3) the androcentrism of *El Eternauta*;

4) the importance of men as agents of social change; 5) the use of the *tú* form in the novel as a marker of masculine transcendence; and 6) the social commitment of the male narrator. I am using *masculinity* here in a very direct and transparent fashion that is consonant with the positive image of men in much popular culture: an uninterrogated view of male-male bonding that privileges male prerogatives, while at the same time assuming men's responsibility for the sustainment of the social and economic order and the protection of hearth and home. While some graphic narratives texts may submit such an interpretation of deconstructionist scrutiny, Oesterheld's heroic male characters, both in *El Eternauta* and his other work, are fully consonant with such a transparent definition.

The Story

The framing of the narrative world in *El Eternauta* is unmistakably masculinist: Juan Salvo, the Argentine Everyman, aided by a small group of male friends, attempts to save his world, paragonized in terms of his wife and young daughter.⁵ The gender disjunction could not be more stark. With a given name that is the most common male name in Spanish and a surname (likely Italo-Argentine) that evokes the verb *salvar*, "to save," Salvo is the *salvador*, the "savior."⁶ The way in which Juan Salvo is, ultimately, an ineffective Everyman for a successful savior is what makes Oesterheld's narrative interesting. Indeed, if read (or, if after 1976 it is inevitable that it be read) as an allegory of imperialist interventionism and military regimes in Argentina in the twentieth century, the foreign interventions they defended and the resistance by sectors of the ordinary citizenry to them, *El Eternauta* cannot help but confirm the inefficacy of resistance to the alien invaders, and Juan Salvo's disappearance into the time continuum, as I have already noted, eerily foreshadows Oesterheld's own disappearance, his remains (so far) unaccounted for, at the hands of the agents of state repression.

El Eternauta begins humbly enough, both in terms of the general setting of the story and the tale itself. Although so-called local color comic strips were often set in Buenos Aires, anything that counted as a serious story followed the lead of foreign imports in being set in paradigmatic international locales such as New York or London. As Carlos Trillo points out in his introduction to what is considered the definitive edition of *El Eternauta*, part of the attraction of Oesterheld's narrative from the outset was its setting in a Buenos Aires that,

despite what will be the science-fiction format, beginning with the contaminated ash falling over the city, was immediately familiar to readers, down to political slogans of the day (9).

But what is most affectively engaging about the framing of *El Eternauta*, what makes its humble narrative setting so viscerally recognizable for the Argentine reader is the way in which the narrative begins with a story within a story that involves the crucial reduplication of, literally, a homey residential setting. Moreover, this republication is tied together by a significant detail of difference between the interrelated stories. *El Eternauta* is framed initially by a first-person narrative in which the artist's alter ego is occupied, one chilly winter night in the wee hours, in writing one of the scripts for a graphic narrative. He occupies a comfortable study in a comfortable stand-alone house (what in Argentina is called a *chalet*) in one of the series of agreeable bedroom communities that extend northwest up the Río de la Plata delta from Buenos Aires.

Suddenly the narrator sees materialize in the chair in front of his desk the figure of the man we will learn is the Eternauta, who has been traveling through time on an eternal quest. He informs the narrator that he needs to have a place to rest for a while before continuing on his journey. Despite his wan appearance and his strange futuristic clothing, the narrator is sympathetic to him, but reluctant to accommodate him. Juan, as he has identified himself, undertakes to tell him his story, confident, he says, that it will convince the author to honor his request for refuge. The graphic novel we read subsequently is Juan's story.

Juan's story also begins in a comfortable *chalet* in an agreeable bedroom community, this time explicitly identified as Vicente López. It is also late at night, although not quite as late as in the outer narrative. Juan is engaged in playing a game of *truco* (an Argentine equivalent of poker) with three close male friends and associates, in the attic of the house, while his wife Elena reads in bed downstairs and Martita, his young daughter, sleeps safely in her bed, clutching her toy bunny. The radio is on, and a news bulletin announces that an atomic test by the Americans in the South Pacific has released a flurry of radioactive contamination that is moving west across the globe. Only minutes later is the quiet of the night interrupted by the sound of colliding vehicles. As the friends rush to the window they see a sort of snow, glowing radioactively, falling on the city. Contact with it seems to kill almost instantly, and they deduce that anyone exposed directly to it has died or will soon die. They have been saved because, thanks to the extra chill of the evening, Juan's well insulated house has been tightly closed against the outside air.

The group directly witnesses the toxic effects of the snowfall when one of the card players, hysterical over the fate of his family, suddenly rushes out the front door, which is fortunately slammed in time to keep any of the radioactive drifts from entering the house. They watch him through the window quickly fall victim to the contamination blanketing the city. The narrative that follows after this point will deal with Juan's, his family's, and his friend's attempts at survival and their confrontation with an alien force that arrives with the toxic cloud (which we subsequently learn did not come from the American bomb blast). In this sense, the narrative will be built as an example of action comics and the survivalist motif, around the advances and reversals, the obstacles and overcoming them, to what is the obsessive and focused concern of the survivors: to continue living. I will discuss below how this undertaking is carried out and how Oesterheld entertains a double happy ending for his narrative, one that corresponds to both outer and inner stories.

I noted that there was a significant difference, however, between these stories that affects the way in which they are linked together as reduplicating settings. This difference involves the window, first the window in the narrator's study and then the window in Juan's attic workshop/laboratory where the four men are playing cards. In the outer narrative, the man who writes scripts for graphic narratives—i.e., Oesterheld—has left his window open to admit the bracing drafts of the 3 a.m. nighttime air, which is what the writer prefers as he works. Hearing a noise he cannot place, something like a slight movement in the armchair in front of his desk, he looks up at the Eternauta, seeking a place to rest before resuming the search through time for his family. As the writer balks, Juan Salvo launches into the long narrative that is the actual graphic novel. The open window signals the invitation for the, more figurative than literal, to be sure, writer's inspirations; as we'll see in a moment, it does, in fact, become the inspiration for what the reader reads, *El Eternauta*, the mediated version of Salvo's story.

In the inner story, by contrast, it is the closed, virtually hermetically sealed window that is the occasion of the escape of the Salvo family and their truco-playing guests from the deadly ash that suddenly begins to blanket Buenos Aires and its suburbs. One of Oesterheld's conceits is that virtually no one is saved from whatever it is in the ash that kills people almost instantly: in addition to people on the street, individuals succumb because they leave windows open, if ever so slightly, despite the cold winter night. Since apparently most residents of Buenos Aires are not afraid of the night air, they are felled in their sleep or

in their armchairs by the ash, or, if they have their windows closed, they become victims when they rush to see the unheard of meteorological phenomenon, throwing wide their windows in the process. At least in terms of the radius of operations of Salvo, his friends, and eventual ad hoc crusaders against the invaders, a swath of the city extending from the Vicente López suburb down through the mostly well-to-do neighborhoods on the city's north rim and into the central plaza of Government House, virtually no one else has been saved.

Much has been made of the heroic nature of Salvo and his two close associates, Favalli, who teaches physics at the university (one of the four *truco* players), and the younger Franco (he addresses Salvo and Favalli always with the formal *usted* form), called El Tornero (lathe operator) since this is, in fact, his occupation at a factory. Their heroism derives from the sense of the abiding dignity of human life, which must be protected against the unknown invading forces; in the sense of the beauty of their world that is under threat and must be preserved; in their commitment to a solidarity of humankind, which is threatened by the breakdown of society and the potential for the emergence of the law of the jungle; in their commitment to each other, either as a longtime friend (Favalli) or as a new friend (Franco), whose manifest youthful, manly values signals to the older men that he is unquestionably one of them; in the courage with which they confront the ever-shifting face of the invader, which is represented by something like a hierarchy of forces of aggression whose superior technical range is only challenged by the human ingenuity and moral grounding of Salvo and his associates; and in their willingness to soldier on despite the many setbacks and losses they suffer. Indeed, one of the recurring motifs of the story is the cry "...Esto sí que es el final" (218), uttered in this case by Salvo, although the others seem to take turns in proclaiming their finish, the destruction of humankind, and the terrestrial world as they know it.

A large measure of the resonance of *El Eternauta* has to do with how external details of the text relate to the dark history of authoritarian and neofascist tyranny in Argentina throughout much of the twentieth century, especially in the crucial 1966-83 period in which the country experienced state-sponsored terror at the hands of recurrent military regimes.⁷ The story of *El Eternauta* and Oesterheld's personal biography have become so intimately linked that, despite the enormous importance of the graphic representation of Oesterheld's text achieved by Francisco Solano López, one of Argentina's most outstanding graphic

artists, *El Eternauta*, as a cultural text, is often evoked exclusively with reference to Oesterheld.⁸

Three separate versions of *El Eternauta* are customarily recognized (see Muñoz for a detailed account of the various editions of the narrative). The first, the 1957-59 publication in the magazine *Hora cero seminal*, corresponds with the so-called Revolución Libertadora that deposed Juan Domingo Perón in 1955, inaugurating a series of repressive military regimes that will culminate in the neofascist tyranny of the 1976-1983 period. Oesterheld undertook a 1969 remake of the narrative in 1968, turning to the equally talented Alberto Breccia (1919-93) for the illustrations; this is the period of the sequence of military regimes known as the Revolución Argentina, three regimes that sought to suppress popular political movements but which saw the emergence of intense guerilla opposition to their de facto power. Finally, Oesterheld prepared a sequel to *El Eternauta*, again with Solano López executing the graphic accompaniment, in 1975, on the eve of the Proceso de Reconstrucción Nacional, in which in 1976 the military attributed to itself the unimpeachable right to eliminate extrajudicially any and all opposition, active or passive, to its ideology of a new Argentine national state.⁹ Oesterheld's remake of *El Eternauta* in 1969, usually gauged in terms of the increased direct reference in the text to the military regime and its foreign supporters (other Latin American military regimes and various U.S. administrations), corresponded with his own personal direct involvement in armed guerilla activity with his entrance into the Montonero nationalist-leftist movement, a commitment that he shared with all four of his daughters.

Oesterheld and the 1976 Military Coup

Oesterheld disappeared at the hands of state repression in 1977 and is presumed to have died in 1978, and his four daughters disappeared between 1976-1977.¹⁰ It is the emotional impact of this fate for the authors and all four of his daughters that accounts to a large degree for the association of the graphic narrative with the author of its text alone. Oesterheld, inserted himself increasingly into the text of the remake as a character-witness of events. With his disappearance (his remains have never been located) one can say that he suffered a fate akin to that of his character. *El Eternauta's* name refers to how, through an error in handling the instruments of a space ship that produces his separation from his family, which he is trying to save, becomes lost in the time continuum, seeking eternally his lost wife and daughter.

El Eternauta enjoys privileged status in the history of Argentine graphic narrative, which extends back to the nineteenth century through a rich tradition of comic-book narrative that produced many offshoots in terms of the extended and imaginatively complex formats that we have come to identify as contemporary graphic narrative and treat as a distinct cultural genre. Its stature is a consequence of the way in which Oesterheld insisted, in a way consonant with his political convictions, on his main character as a collective or group hero,¹¹ thereby emphatically contrasting him with the recurring Western convention of solitary action superheroes, whether by virtue of extraterrestrial forces (Superman) or intensely personally cultivated commitments (the Lone Ranger). Indeed, the influence of the solitary superhero in Argentina was two-fold and therefore extensively subscribed to by the local industry. Such influence came first in the form of the many translations into Spanish of American and European (today, one would include Japanese) publications and second in terms of the way in which creations by Argentine artists adhered to those foreign models, often down to the names of the characters. Whereas an Argentine artist like Roberto Fontanarrosa will satirize this practice in his internationally famous *Boogie, el aceitoso* (first created in 1972 and published until sometime in the 1990s; the name refers to the Humphrey Bogart paradigm of the hardboiled detective), Oesterheld, less committed than Fontanarrosa's basic commitment to the outrageously humorous, views his title character as a complex human subject, deeply enmeshed, mostly against his will (at least initially), in the Argentine sociopolitical history of the mid-twentieth century.¹²

Most importantly, *El Eternauta* has engaged readers because of its ingenious use of the framework of science fiction.¹³ Although in the end, Oesterheld could not escape the attention of the apparatus of repression in Argentina in the late 1970s, it appears to have been for his overt political involvement with the Montoneros and not for his graphic novel.¹⁴ In other cases, artists were disappeared primarily for their creative works and not for direct political activity, as was the case with Harold Conti, whose writing had won an important literary prize in Cuba, or the film director Raymundo Gleyzer, who did the first substantive television reporting in Argentina on the Cuban Revolution. In the case of one of the other icons of the terror of the Proceso, Rodolfo Walsh, while his writings were suspect, like Oesterheld, he too was an early victim of repression for his organizational role in the Montoneros.

Yet, it was clear that artists could hardly provide unmediated, transparent representations of what was happening in Argentina. This was increasingly so as events moved forward from the military-imposed end of Perón's presidency in 1955, but particularly so in the case of the period after the military coup of 1976. None of the commitments of the period to documentary realism and contestatory postures, whether in the form of testimonial writing or specifically non-narrative documentary filmmaking, were viable options, and even in the case where authors availed themselves of parable, allegory, or even fantasy, censorship had become a semiotic undertaking, highly skilled in finding objectionable content, with consequences that were hardly ambiguous.¹⁵ *El Eternauta*, while the general visible contours of Buenos Aires and its daily life¹⁶ are those of the "present moment" of the narratives' successive installments, makes use of the tropes of science fiction: alien invasion, sophisticated technological equipment, and unusual events (such as the snowfall-like radioactive ash that besieges a city whose weather normally excludes any snowfall).

Also pertinent is the disjunction between the nefarious agents of Evil and the simple Everyman represented by the hero, Juan Salvo, drawn against his will into a drama almost beyond his understanding only because he is convinced that he is called upon to protect his family and a meaningful way of life that cannot be simply given up to the invading forces without a struggle. At issue is the extent to which, overlooking certain details and perhaps forcing a certain interpretation, these narrative details can be read as an allegory of a national way of life, held in sacred trust by every sane and well-intentioned citizen, threatened by superior evil extramural forces, and specifically as a question of resistance to the complicity of the internal agents of the invading forces. When Salvo and his men capture one of the Manos, the human-like agents of the unseen evil Ellos, it is he who reminds them of the world whose way of life they are defending.

It is also eventually, especially after 1976, a meaning that reflects an understanding during the period of the interventionist influence of the United States on military tyranny and the degree to which the military dictatorship, with its strategies of exploitation and procedures of state terror, was primarily doing the bidding of forces with little interest in the preservation of the daily life of the Argentine Everyman; rather, quite the contrary, all aspects of local culture were to be sacrificed to the enhancement of alien interests. The monumentalization of *El Eternauta* occurred in part because of the way in which this bare

narrative outline indexed as much for the overthrow of Perón (the mid-1950s), as for the defense of foreign interests and their local agents during the period of transnationalism opposed by guerrilla movements (the mid-1970s), and the neofascist process of the reconstruction of the national state following the ruthless destruction of all forms of opposition (the period following the 1976 coup). Where this can be particularly discerned in the narrative is not in the direct association of invading forces with Yankee imperialism or that of European allies, but in the way in which the “northern” societies are willing to take Buenos Aires out with an atomic bomb in order to annihilate the extraterrestrial evil before it attacks the north. The proposition that Buenos Aires or anywhere else in the so-called Third World is expendable in the defense of the northern civilizations is particularly troubling.¹⁷

The Androcentrism of *El Eternauta*

Only a minimal reading of graphic narratives is enough for one to grasp the way in which they are essentially androcentric, and no less so in Argentina. Indeed, in Argentina, cultural production is so resolutely androcentric that, while it has generated perhaps the most abundant feminist cultural production in Latin America as a response, it is still difficult to speak of recognized works and figures prior to the latter third of the twentieth century that are not male-identified.¹⁸ Argentine tango lyrics are androcentric; women are virtually absent from the *Martín Fierro*, except as a literary pretext; Borges’s extensive oeuvre is, with the limited exception of some memorable women, notably free of female characters, although he does occasionally, very occasionally, speak of some women authors (he was a translator of Virginia Woolf). The history of Argentine comic books turns on male characters, and this carries over into graphic fiction.¹⁹ To be sure, Salvador Joaquín Lavado’s cartoon strip *Mafalda* (drawn between the early 1960s and 1973) is an outstanding exception, with its beloved young heroine. But the most famous figure in Latin American graphic humor stands virtually alone in the field as an exponent of a female-marked outlook on her society.

Oesterheld’s work, then, was no exception to this general pattern and, save for the text he devoted to Eva Perón, drawn by Alberto Breccia, there are no female characters of note in his work. In the case of *El Eternauta*, the male-male adversarial relationship that is the core of the story is certainly understandable. Societal power is in the hands of men, whether they be the forces of Evil (repressive governments, hostile aliens, or the internal agents of

the latter—who are also the leaders of the former) or the forces of Good (the resistance on the part of the band of friends in *El Eternauta* or the organized guerrilla opposition in which Oesterheld and his daughters came to participate).²⁰

The Importance of Men as Social Agents

Oesterheld's artistic strategy is to cast against the drum beat of apocalyptic utterance the iterated representation of his male character's ability to confront overwhelming danger, to counter it and pull through, and regroup for the next challenge. While the narrative is punctured by the men's equally iterated moments of misplaced euphoria over having defeated the enemy, these rhetorical formulas serve as sort of a verbal skeleton for the narrative's displays of their prowess that is, in the final instance, based on the essential humanity of the individual working in efficient concert with the essential humanity of others. When the manly facade—i.e., the display of essential humanity that is manifest in the manly facade—breaks down (moments of terror and panic, moments of hallucination induced by the enemy, moments of profound self-doubt), it only serves as a transitory narrative reversal that quickly becomes corrected by the restoration of the façade and the movement forward of what, in affective terms, is the expected, customary flow of events in an action narrative.

This is, then, an action narrative such as the horizons of narrative meaning of the day would demand of Argentine literature and action comics would. It is a world of men battling mostly unknown forces of evil to save the world/the planet (exemplified by the loved ones, which, in this case mean Salvo's wife Elena and their little daughter, Martita). This does not necessarily mean that good will triumph. It is enough for Evil to be evaded, as is the case when Salvo commandeers an abandoned space ship, only, in his lack of familiarity with its mechanism, to launch his wife and daughter into another time continuum from the one into which he launches himself. There is a happy ending to this story, but I will return to that in a moment.

But what is significant to underscore here is that the struggle against Evil in all of the manifestations that give narrative substance to *El Eternauta* can only be executed by male characters. Indeed, aside from the wife and daughter, who are both bystanders and the motivating source of the narrative (in the sense that they symbolize why and for what the world must be saved, the promise of the heterosexual matrimonial unit and its legitimate and life-renewing offspring), there is only one woman in *El Eternauta*, and she turns out to be a

survivor who has been transformed into a robot, one of the hierarchy of agents of Evil in the narrative. Appropriately seductive in a catsuit and the unblemished visage of a starlet, she distracts Franco, who seems to have become a bit needy for opposite-sex company no matter how firm his homosocial bonds to Salvo and Favalli are. But the latter prevail, and Franco suddenly shoots the siren dead, realizing that she has been sent to dupe them and lure them into a trap.

It is never made clear in *El Eternauta* what the invading aliens are after and why they have chosen Buenos Aires as their point of entry into Earth. Although rarely directly articulated, in conventional science fiction, the so-called First World is often the site of entry, whether, in addition to European capitals, New York, Los Angeles, Washington, Chicago, although there are examples of arrival at some remote locale. The reader assumes it is for the wealth of the First World, for the threat to alien planets of the scientific and technical aspirations of Earth, or for the potential dangers those aspirations, particularly when ill-conceived, may bring: aliens, just like illegal immigrants, may invade us because we have something they need or want, or we may be invaded because our folly is a threat to what the aliens have and do not want to lose. Alternatively, the aliens want to talk to people in charge of Earth and therefore go directly to the centers of power, demanding to be taken to the earthlings' leader. Other narrative primes may be involved, but these two are strong pretexts. Yet, in neither of these two cases or potential others is it ever made clear why Ellos wish to disrupt the echt-domestic truco game of Juan Salvo and his closest friends.

Since it is a man's world that is being challenged, that of the truco players (Elena reads peacefully in bed, while Martita sleeps the sleep of the innocent in the arms of her stuffed bunny), it is the men who must save it. The weaker may fall by the wayside (two of the truco partners are felled early on), but the two stronger men of the four are able to forge an unbreakable bond and to bring others to one degree or another into their tight-knit unit to do valiant battle over and over again against the enemy. One is confident in venturing the opinion that Oesterheld's public could find no grounds to reproach the manliness of these three warriors and that the unspoken, probably most unconscious desire of predominantly male readers to enter into this homosocial inner circle is one element that accounts for the enormous success of *El Eternauta* at the time of its original publication and its continuing favor with Argentine/Latin American reading audiences. Even after Oesterheld's disappearance at the hands of the equally masculinist but decidedly nefarious military regime

was there an interest in continuing the series, although, ultimately, with little commercial or critical success.

***Tú* as a Marker of Masculine Transcendence**

One of the most curious dimensions of *El Eternauta*, one that perhaps might be explained in terms of the mythified masculinity it represents, is the writer's decision to use the non-Argentine *tú* form of familiar address.²¹ Oesterheld's characters are all Argentine (except for the agents of the invading forces, who mysteriously speak perfect Spanish), and while their speech is not assertively colloquial, they speak like Argentines, in both everyday words (e.g., *vereda*) and slang (e.g., *chambón*). The setting is clearly Buenos Aires, with all of the details of urban setting and life in place, including the details mentioned above of political and advertising slogans. It is the Buenos Aires of a certain level of middle-class prosperity (hence, the bedroom-community chalet that Salvo and his family occupy) in the late 1950s, a Buenos Aires that is on the cusp of the globalization that will come in subsequent decades of both military and democratic rule.

Buenos Aires is decidedly better off than its surrounding urban capitals, like Santiago or Montevideo, and much better off than the outer ring of La Paz, Asunción, and Lima. But Buenos Aires is neither New York nor is it Los Angeles, and only a nationalistic criterion of narrative art can satisfy the challenge as to why Buenos Aires? And yet, Oesterheld chooses to have his characters speak as though they were residents of Mexico City or Madrid, something (if one could be allowed some rhetorical exaggeration) like having the characters in a Superman action story using the *thou* form. One wonders if Oesterheld intended some sort of gesture toward a mythical realm of human conduct that was not that of the down-and-dirty everyday world of prevailing colloquial norms, with which the Argentine *vos* is unquestionably associated. Everyday men may well be associated with the use of colloquial language and slang, but social avatars are held to a higher linguistic standard.

A veritable objective correlative of the gritty urban texture of Porteño (i.e., Port resident) life, of the dank spaces that prevail in the city, of the sewer vapors that suddenly appear to give the city its signature fragrance, the *vos* is inseparable from Buenos Aires as the so-called Brooklyn twang is from New York, even when the former is more universally prevalent than the latter as a linguistic metonym of the respective cities. Surely, Oesterheld could not have thought he was "universalizing" his narrative, any more than Quino would

have supposedly universalized *Mafalda* by having her speak using the *tú* form.²² By the late 1950s, Argentine literature is being written exclusively with the *vos*, Roberto Arlt's *Los siete locos* (1929) having set (not always with complete success) the tone for this authentic morphological feature of Argentine Spanish,²³ and it is really quite inconceivable that, by 1960 any serious Argentine writer would wish to hold onto the *tú* form of familiar address for, at least, Argentine characters.²⁴ Thus, one finds quite notable Oesterheld's preference for the *tú* form in a narrative that is so quintessentially Argentine and where the virtues of Argentine manhood are so prominently on display, as they are repeatedly tested and sometimes triumph quite noticeably against extraterrestrial forces that are basically summarized as pure Evil. As a privileged note of male-male bonding, perhaps perceivable as more abstract and idealized than would be the case with the scrappily quotidian *vos*, the *tú* form in *El Eternauta* stands out as a counterpart of masculinist prevalence.

The Social Commitment of the Male Narrator

If the window brings together the inner and the outer narratives of *El Eternauta*, a secondary instance of male-male bonding also occurs here, and it serves to give *El Eternauta* a particularly satisfying *envoi* beyond the conventional one of earthly masculinity triumphant over extraterrestrial Evil. Indeed, it remains open whether extraterrestrial Evil can be defeated. As Salvo concludes his narrative, which has forged something like a bond between him and the writer of graphic narratives whose home he has "invaded" through the open window, the two men come to a startling conclusion: Salvo has been describing events that took place in 1963, while at that moment in the writer's study it is 1959, corresponding with the year in which *El Eternauta* concludes as a serial text. Salvo quickly understands that he has not been telling a tale of past events but engaging in the proleptic act of telling a story that will unfold in the future on the basis of the circumstances of 1959. Realizing that he can find his wife and daughter at home around the corner, he rushes out of the writer's house and morphs back into the Salvo of 1959, who (lovely hoary cliché), simply went out for the evening newspaper and was delayed a bit. Although Elena and Marta were beginning to get a bit worried, equilibrium is restored when Salvo's truco partners show up for their nightly game; Salvo has forgotten all about the events of the past-future and the routine daily Porteño life has rescued him from the time continuum in which he was lost.

In this fashion, *El Eternauta* enters the realm of those science-fiction tales that tell a cautionary tale of what might or could happen if humankind does not change its ways. As Oesterheld's double is left trying to sort out what he has heard and what has just happened—Salvo no longer even knows who he is, since he has been so miraculously restored to the present moment of 1959—he wonders that, perhaps, turning it into one of his own narratives might just serve to prevent so much horror from coming to take place. This is a thoroughly delightful and satisfactory conclusion for the Eternauta's story, one that avoids either a conclusive end-of-the-world scenario (always unsatisfying to action narrative readers because their heroes do not triumph) or a conclusive win by the heroes (something readers appreciate, even if it is predictable both as regards the qualities of the heroes and their privileged historical extraction—i.e., paradigmatically European white men). While Oesterheld's triumvirate might be satisfactory proxies for a U.S.-style Superman triumph over the forces of Evil, it would make *El Eternauta* just another example of action narrative formulas. By proposing a metanarrative ending for the story, it leaves open whether or not Buenos Aires will really be the site of the terrestrial Armageddon. And in the process, it proposes a masculinist supplement to Salvo's story: the pact between men that propels the narrative bulk of *El Eternauta* has now become a pact between Salvo and the writer. It is a pact whereby the writer's privilege in having heard Salvo's story—driven by Salvo's willingness to share his story with another man whose life is so similar to his own, down to the detail that they live around the corner from each other—will become the privilege of writing it up as the novel *El Eternauta* that we, in necessary complicity with this world of men (if we weren't, we wouldn't accept the premises of the narrative), will read and understand as the potential 1963 foretold in the 1959 of that narrative that will not come to pass. Thus, this “back-to-the-future” narrative acquires a metanarrative level that helps to cement its own masculinist privilege in Argentine cultural production.

Although I began by referring to the fame of *El Eternauta* as driven in large measure by the possibility of an allegorical reading (an allegorical reading, admittedly, more present in the Oesterheld-Breccia 1969 remake that never gained definitive traction with readers or critics, provoking instead much protest [Hojman Conde 143]), it should be clear that I am not advocating an allegorical reading for *El Eternauta*. Not only do many of the actual narrative details make this difficult, but *El Eternauta* was really conceived and written during a period of shaky political tranquility yet with a measure of socioeconomic stability. It was a

period that came between the second Peronista presidency and the military dictatorship that overthrew Perón in 1955 and the renewed military dictatorship of 1960s during which the real campaign from the left over American intervention, transnational onslaught, and betrayal of the people/working class actually began to be part of the national cultural discourse.²⁵ Although political stability could be sketchy during the period, it was a far cry from what would take place during the 1970s which, until the 1976 military coup, was the apex of left-wing guerilla movements in Argentina. As noted, Oesterheld was himself involved in one of these movements, and it cost him his life and that of his four daughters.

But that movement is not part of the Argentina of the late 1950s, nor is it part of Oesterheld's own artistic consciousness as he sets out to write the text for *El Eternauta*. Rather, the merits of *El Eternauta* lie with how Oesterheld is able to sustain his action narrative for almost four-hundred pages, how he sets it up in terms of a narrative within a narrative, how, in the end, he seals it with a metanarrative contextualization that has the merit of raising the stakes for graphic action narratives: telling this story might just save the world. As the closing words state: “¿SERÁ POSIBLE?” (366). If all of this is accomplished in the context of masculine privilege and the masculinist privilege of action graphic narratives, it is hardly surprising, given the work's overall contextualization in Argentine cultural production of sixty years ago and the strongly masculine dynamics of power in Argentina.²⁶

Notes

¹ Carlos Trillo (1943-2011) was an important writer of graphic narrative texts. He is most known for *El Loco* Chávez (1975-87, drawn by Horacio Altuna) and the allegorical text from the 1976-83 military period *La puertitas del Sr. López* (1979-1888?), also drawn by Horacio Altuna).

² Hojman Conde provides an excellent characterization of the narrative's status among Argentine readers). Pons discusses the narrative in the context of Spanish-language graphic art, with emphasis on the singular contributions of the Argentine tradition. Mazzocchi places the narrative in the context of Argentine graphic art and discusses the complexities of its history and current fame.

³ Hojman Conde asserts that "*El Eternauta* is as uniquely Argentine as *Martín Fierro*" (142). Von Sprecher provides a detailed content analysis of *El Eternauta* and select other Oesterheld texts.

⁴ Trillo informs us that "[*El Eternauta* es] el único relato gráfico que es comprador por el Ministerio de Educación argentino para que no falte en las escuelas ni en las bibliotecas populares" (11). For a journalistic survey of Oesterheld's work as a whole, see Sasturain, *El aventurador*.

⁵ Feinmann writes: "Juan Salvo debe abandonar el paraíso y salir al frío, al hambre, a la guerra y, por fin, al odio" (9). By contrast with Feinmann's lost-paradise vision of *El Eternauta*, Oesterheld himself preferred to stress its Robinson Crusoe dimensions (Oesterheld-Solano López, *El Eternauta* 14). Solano López, however, notes that "La comparación con Robinson Crusoe no me convenció mucho" (Oesterheld-Solano López, *El Eternauta* 15).

⁶ As an adjective *salvo* means "he or that which has been saved"; it is also an archaic past participle of the verb *salvar*, "saved," both in the sense of "placed out of danger" and "redeemed."

⁷ Trillo observes that, with these historical events, "La inocente lectura de 1957 dejó de ser posible" (11). Feinmann elaborates on how *El Eternauta* was reread after 1976, by implication by those who had read it as children with the innocence Trillo remarks on.

⁸ This is the case with the very title of Morhain's study, which only mentions Oesterheld.

⁹ For a detailed account of the Proceso, see Novaro and Palermo. Rosenblatt provides a detailed analysis of the various versions of *El Eternauta*, with an important emphasis on the Solano-López/Breccia graphic aspects. There is a need for detailed analyses of the actual graphic aspects of Latin American graphic narratives, as there is a preponderance of emphasis, as is the case with the present essay, on ideological aspects of the verbal texts.

¹⁰ There are two documentary films on Oesterheld: *H.G.O.* (1998) and *Hora cero* (2002). Vázquez discusses in detail ideological faultlines in *H.G.O.* on the basis of the intersection of biography and history.

¹¹ Sasturain discusses in detail the ideological issues associated with Oesterheld's construction of his collective or group hero in his writing in general.

¹² Hojman Conde casts Oesterheld's hero in somewhat more universal terms: "*El Eternauta* will never cease to be that myth of Man who seeks to satisfy and justify the fantasy of adventure, the search for a road to travel where the beginning point and the way back are unknown" (143-44).

¹³ Canaparo provides an excellent and detailed analysis of scientific and technological aspects of the narrative. The entire issue of the *Revista iberoamericana* in which it appears is devoted to Argentine science fiction.

¹⁴ Galvani studies in detail, nevertheless, the way in which the representation of violence in *El Eternauta* foreshadows Oesterheld's involvement with the Montonero movement. Pirela Sojo examines the autobiographical elements of the narrative.

¹⁵ Andrés Avellaneda examines the role of censorship in Argentina, commenting on the training of the censors in the careful interpretive reading of suspect texts. See Feitlowitz on the rhetorical strategies of the 1976-83 dictatorship.

¹⁶ Fraser and Méndez provide a valuable characterization of the successes and limitations of the representation of Buenos Aires in *El Eternauta*.

¹⁷ Mike Davis speaks of the readiness with which the masters of globalization are willing to convert the so-called Third World into a “planet of slums” in order to protect their way of life. This is not fundamentally different from the north directing an atomic bomb against the south as a form of pre-emptive defense. One notes that the bomb is delivered by a French bombardier, which blocks Oesterheld from being accused of pandering to anti-U.S. sentiment among the left in Argentina and the rest of South America at the time (Page comments on this point in the second, Oesterheld/Breccia, version of the story).. Muñoz in his note on the history of *El Eternauta* comments briefly on how in post-Oesterheld versions of the story “los invasores se han afincado y nos dominan con el poder económico y político” (13). Morhain appears to analyze in detail the political dimensions of *El Eternauta*; however, I have not been able to consult this study. It is important to note that *El Eternauta* is one of the Argentine cultural texts that has been promoted, so to speak, by the Kirchner/Fernández de Kirchner governments. The Argentine Biblioteca Nacional held a major exhibit, a “Muestra Homenaje” in 2007 on the thirtieth anniversary of Oesterheld’s disappearance and the fiftieth anniversary to the first publication of the narrative (Argentina. Biblioteca Nacional). See also the government-sponsored documentary, *Hora cero* (2002). Page addresses in detail the role of popular culture materials like *El Eternauta* in intellectual ideologies. Page provides a very persuasive argument that if *El Eternauta* is an allegory of anything, it is about the crisis of intellectuals in Argentina following Peronismo (1946-55) with the need of intellectuals to identify, as Oesterheld himself did by joining the Montoneros, with popular revolutionaries. This proposition is certainly very much part of the sociopolitical climate of the Kirchner/Fernández de Kirchner governments. Oesterheld addresses specifically the relationship between imperialism and Latin America in the strips he published in 1973-74 at the height of such discussions in Latin America, *Latinoamérica y el imperialismo*.

¹⁸ Germán García’s standard history in the mid-twentieth century of Argentine fiction (published in 1952) mentions, and then only in the briefest fashion, less than a dozen women novelists. The prominence of Argentine women writers today in Argentina cannot obscure the fact that only a few of those writing before the late twentieth century received any critical recognition, and early women writers have only in recent decades begun to receive their critical due.

¹⁹ Whether this means that these narratives were produced exclusively with a masculine audience in mind may be questionable, but it would seem to be confirmed by the fact that the overwhelming preponderance of Latin American graphic narrative (as is also the case of the larger field of cartoon art) is drawn by men. Foster, in his study of Latin American graphic humor, examines the work of only one woman artist, among a dozen practitioners studied. She is Patricia Breccia, the daughter of Alberto Breccia.

²⁰ All of the latter were notorious for the secondary and subservient role of women, although the presence of women was, in fact, notable, when one considers how their direct aggressors, the Argentine Armed Forces, constituted, at the time, a strictly male society. Certain women did become guerrilla leaders, such as the notorious Norma Arosito of the Montoneros.

²¹ Although Solano López is mostly consistent in representing the *tú* form graphically with its corresponding verbal forms, he does slip up on one occasion, when Martita tells her father “¡Tocá el chichón! (312), referring to an accidental bump on her neck she has received. Perhaps the “mistake” is in Oesterheld’s narrative and López Solano simply copied it verbatim, with no second thought, into his panel. Oesterheld, in the conventional narrative publication of his stories, retains the *tú* form, while the sequel by Solano López and Maiztegui (the reversal of names that puts that of the graphic artist first is due to Solano López’s greater reputation) employs the Argentine *vos*.

²² Which is, indeed, the case with some of the non-Argentine editions of Quino’s strip, and I suspect it is true with some of the video versions as well.

²³ The *vos* form exists elsewhere in Latin America, but always within a particular set of national sociolinguistic coordinates. On the geographic extension of the *vos* in Latin America, see Rona; on the affirmation of the *vos* in Argentine literature, see Gregorio de Mac. Ernesto Sábato published

his important existential novel *El túnel* in 1948 using the so-called universal *tú* form, despite its being set in Buenos Aires; in 1966 he rewrote it substituting the Argentine *vos* (Foster, “Tú y vos”).

²⁴ Oesterheld wrote many other action stories with non-Argentine characters, where it is reasonable that they would not speak with the *tú* form. On another note, in *El Eternauta*, the *usted* is used far more than it would be today. For example, Franco addresses Salvo and Favalli using the *usted* form, and Salvo’s truco partners use the *usted* form with his wife, Elena. Today in these two sociolinguistic contexts, the *vos* would mostly likely be used.

²⁵ Typical here would be the four and a half-hours long documentary film *La hora de los hornos* (1968; dir. Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas).

²⁶ One might maintain that I am overlooking Evita Perón here, but it is not hard to argue that her brief influence in Argentine politics (from the assumption of power of her husband Juan Domingo Perón in 1946 to her young death from cancer in 1952) meant essentially her manipulation, with very, very few possible exceptions, of the dynamics of masculine power. It is a total moot question as to whether, had she lived longer, she might have actualized a feminine power base.

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