

## DEVOURING SONS AND SINNERS: EKPHRASIS AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN ÁLVARO BISAMA'S *MÚSICA MARCIANA*

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Art in its many different manifestations plays a key role in Álvaro Bisama's *Música marciana*, a novel concerned with the narrator's troubled family legacy and Chilean identity. Francisco de Goya's famous painting of Saturn Devouring his Son appears early in the novel to guide the narrator's ekphrastic examination of the art created by his famous surrealist artist father and fourteen half-siblings. This article explores the how ekphrasis, the literary depiction of visual artwork, and multiple intertextual references to Dante's *Divine Comedy* function in the novel to complicate notions of time, space, and the role of art in the narrator's exploration his own identity as well as his nation's.

Keywords: Ekphrasis, mythology, Goya, Dante, Álvaro Bisama, Hispanoamerican novel

Álvaro Bisama's *Música marciana* (2008) is a novel in which art is hauntingly ever-present. The elderly narrator uses his recollection of artistic works of many sorts to tell the story of his family as he sits at home in Reñaca, a Chilean coastal town, awaiting both an impending apocalyptic hurricane and his approaching death. The only surviving son of a prolific, promiscuous, and world-famous Chilean surrealist painter who spent most of his career in Europe, this unnamed narrator recounts the deaths of his fourteen half siblings and their attempts to grapple with their own identity and their world through a variety of different artistic media. Representing diverse cultural fields such as photography, filmmaking, fashion design, tattoo artistry, and literature, the narrator's deceased siblings are each assigned a chapter of the novel, labeled by the location of their death, in which the stories of their lives, their creations, and their unusual and mostly violent deaths are told. The artworks produced by these siblings are presented to the reader ekphrastically through the narrator's detailed verbal descriptions as he either looks over or recollects descriptions of his siblings' creations and as he recalls and writes about them. Nevertheless, the guiding ekphrasis of the novel and the one that frames all of the others is not based on a work of art produced by any one of the narrator's family members, but instead is Francisco de Goya's famous painting, *Saturno devorando a su hijo* [Saturn devouring his son]. Focused in this way, the narrator creates a fragmented and abstract vision of himself, his deceased family, as well as of Chile and all of Latin America through this ekphrastic rendering of his father's, his siblings' and Goya's art. In this article I examine how ekphrasis, the literary depiction of visual artwork, and multiple references to Dante's *Divine Comedy* function in *Música marciana* to complicate notions of time, space, and the role of art in the narrator's exploration of his own identity.

*Música marciana*, Bisama's second novel, consolidated the author's inclusion in the Chilean literary movement known as Freak Power, which originally comprised a group of four young authors who challenged traditional literary formulations by modeling their texts on popular culture references from rock music, film, and comics rather than on canonical literary works (Jara). Freak Power authors "suggested visions of reality [in Chile] as odd, as invested with the kinds of strangeness and peculiarity usually associated with science fiction and horror" (Brown 347). Furthermore, Bisama's novel follows a tradition of Latin American apocalyptic narratives published since the 1970s. According to Geneviève Fabry and Ilse Logie, the apocalyptic imaginary presents itself so frequently in Latin American fiction after that time because it is the only type of literature able to do justice to dictatorship and post-dictatorship horror without renouncing the idea of a novel future in the New World (Fabry, et al. 16). After publishing *Música marciana*, Bisama's subsequent work departed from the tenets of Freak Power (Anabalón 92). The focus in his later novels on the memories of coming of age under dictatorship establish him as part of the literary generation that María Angélica Franken Osorio describes as "la literatura de los hijos" [the literature of the children] (15). Similarly, Alejandra Bottinelli includes Bisama as part of what she calls the "Post", a generation of authors who narrate from and about post-dictatorship Chile (9). While *Música marciana* does not deal with the perspective of a young or adolescent child, it is nonetheless concerned with children, parents, and the legacy of Chile's dictatorship.

While Bisama's first novel, *Caja negra* (2006) and his later novels such as *Estrellas muertas* (2010), *Ruido* (2012), *Taxidermia* (2014), and *El brujo* (2016), have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, critics have largely ignored *Música marciana*. Little has been written about the novel aside from Patricio Jara's article on the Freak Power movement, a few mentions in passing, and a scathing review by Patricia Espinosa. Known as one of Chile's harshest literary critics

(Cabello and García 48), Espinosa condemns *Música marciana* as a maudlin shitstorm of cliché and predictability (Espinosa). Nevertheless, an analysis of the novel through the lens of ekphrasis and intertextual allusions allows the reader to perceive layers of complexity that are not readily apparent.

### Understanding Ekphrasis

The word ekphrasis, which comes from a Greek term meaning “description,” has been used since classical times to refer to a rhetorical device involving a vivid description of a scene or a work of art in a literary text. Ekphrasis, in this way, links together art from different media, as the literary work mediates the visual one. Murray Krieger, in *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, distinguishes the visual from the literary in terms of space and time. Visual art, he explains, is static, existing only in space, while literature, like all language, is temporal (205). The narrator of *Música marciana* clearly understands the power of spatial art to halt time, as he notes that his brother Pascal’s photographs of the Vietnam War “suspenden el tiempo, obligándolo a cancelar su progresión” (Bisama 28). Despite the suspension of time inherent in the photographs that document the still aftermath of bombings, the narrator, with the help of an anonymous letter informing him of his brother’s life and death, concludes that Pascal perceived behind his photos an allegorical serpent in constant movement. According to Pascal, “la serpiente era en realidad un alfabeto” (Bisama 29). In this way, the narrator’s brother suggests that a moving language was slithering behind the still images. Pascal, the first sibling whose life and death are narrated in the novel, discovers the secret code of language hidden in the still images of his photographs of bombing victims. However, he is murdered with a shot to the back of the head when he uncharacteristically attempts to photograph a scene of beauty rather than one of horror.

Necessarily composed of language, literature is constantly forced out of stasis by the passage of time, as it inevitably passes from the beginning of a word to its end and more so from the first word of a text to its last. George Erdman, in discussing how a poem by Lope de Vega creates a metaphorical picture, explains that “literature, though it may imitate an arrangement of objects in space, is perceived as a series of referents in time. Its component elements are ordered in a sequence through which the reader must proceed in time” (244). As visual art belongs to the domain of space and literature to that of time, ekphrasis is, for Krieger, “the imitation in literature of a work of plastic art” that seeks to unite space and time (265). This act of imitation thrusts the two works of art—the plastic and the literary—into an eternal tension as “the spatial work freezes the temporal work even as the latter seeks to free it from space” (Krieger 265). Spatial art seeks to arrest time, freezing a fleeting moment into stasis; ekphrasis attempts to translate that frozen moment into temporal language. The result is both an unmooring of the spatial art piece, as it is thrust by language back into temporal movement, and a partial suspension of time in the literary work as it hovers over the visual one.

In Bisama’s novel, for example, the narration is frequently slowed down with descriptions of visual art pieces. Amongst them, we find Goya’s *Saturn*; Pascal’s Vietnam war photography; and an account of all fifty polaroids of the images that tattoo artist Tamara imprinted on her own body, the last of which is a reproduction of one of their father’s famous paintings (Bisama 55-6). Nevertheless, the temporality of the narration continually pulls those visual artworks out of stasis, even as it kills off each of the artists, one by one. The small polaroid of Tamara’s fiftieth tattoo depicts her father’s giant surrealist painting of a universe contracting, situated next to floating human faces that also contract “por el horror o el asombro” (Bisama 56). As the universe is in constant

expansion, a hypothetical contraction implies either a reversal of time or a space collapsing upon itself. Yet, the visual image described freezes both the time and space of the universe depicted. This frozen moment of an unfathomable contraction of space and time is inscribed on the equally incomprehensible canvas of Tamara's skin as the text describes the tattoo as "dibujado sobre una piel imposible o irreal" (Bisama 56).

Krieger's interest in ekphrasis as an area of critical inquiry arises from understanding it to be the fullest possible "visual and spatial potential of the literary medium" (6). Nonetheless, despite the tempting world of possibility seemingly offered by ekphrasis, Krieger acknowledges that ekphrastic depictions are still illusionary, as the spatial is ultimately unrepresentable in the temporal realm (xv). According to Krieger, ekphrasis depicts both a miracle and a mirage. "[It is] a miracle because a sequence of actions filled with before and afters such as language alone can trace seems frozen into an instant's vision, but a mirage because only the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem's words" (xvii). Ekphrasis, then, represents for Krieger, "our unattainable dream of a total verbal form, a tangible verbal space" (xvii). It is a way to attempt to render verbally the utopic unity of time and space through art, even when that attempt is doomed to fail, just as all of the artistic efforts of the siblings of Bisama's narrator result in violent and untimely deaths of the artists themselves. The narrator's autistic sister, Sarah, for example, fills a notebook full of writings and drawings in which her father perceives "la posibilidad de un laberinto perfecto [...] una suerte de utopia, un universo en expansión" (Bisama 79). But Sarah dies by jumping out of a burning building in Paris.

As the subtitle of Krieger's work suggests, the mirage of ekphrasis exists not only due to the shortcomings of language but because of the illusory nature of natural signs even in visual art. "Art," he writes, "in general is seen as a mnemonic device meant to reproduce an absent reality, and [...] poetry is art at yet a further remove" (Krieger 14). Nevertheless, Krieger points out that the verbal artist—the writer, the poet—privileges the complex intelligibility of language over the simplistic one-to-one nature of the natural sign. Acknowledging that, compared to the visual arts, writing is less able to achieve the status of natural sign, the verbal artist seeks instead to move beyond the natural sign. Ekphrasis, then, for Krieger, also involves literature's "coming to terms with itself" as it negotiates what it is able and not able to do (263).

The narrator's sister, Zia, a videographer in New York, grapples with the idea of literature's ability to represent reality. The future of the novel, according to her, lies in the video clip genre because "las palabras mienten [...] la pintura engaña y falla [...] y el cine es un mito" (Bisama 124). The videoclip, on the other hand, constitutes for Zia "una novela que nunca termina" and, as such, is "el único arte que controla lo real" (125). As film editor for her masterpiece, Zia envisions employing a software that could repeat all her recorded work in infinite different variations, and she believes that those images "eran un esbozo de alfabeto, las letras con las que la novela se escribiría" (127). While Zia herself disintegrates into nothingness when one of her documentary subjects blows up her apartment, the narrator believes that Zia lives on and will continue to do so even after the apocalypse (129). In a nod to the machine that reproduces reality into perpetuity in Adolfo Bioy Casares's *La invención de Morel*, or the similar storytelling machine in Ricardo Piglia's *La ciudad ausente*, the narrator states that Zia will remain "porque la máquina escribe y reescribe la novela y la lanza al éter" (129). Zia's project offers her immortality precisely because it escapes the ekphrastic tension between space and time; it is conceived as a temporal written language made of visual images that spreads into eternity.

Within the first lines of *Música marciana*, the first-person narrator offers a view of his identity that begins and ends with the task of telling his own story by recounting that of his father and his father's art. Like ekphrastic literature, he is also coming to terms with himself. "Soy lo que soy," he says, "en este orden: un narrador, un anciano, un ex drogadicto, un hombre con su genealogía a cuestas. Antes que nada y entre medio de todo, un hijo" (13). He is a narrator of his family's art and, in narrating their plastic art, he is also creating his own artistic literary text. According to Dianne Chaffee, "authors can create literature which is ekphrastic if they metaphorically transform their work into the object it is describing [...] By arresting time in space through composite descriptions of plastic art, writers produce visual art" (318). It is in this way that the narrator of *Música marciana* transforms his siblings' art and all of his father's creations—both artistic and human—into his own art. Similarly, Jeffrey Bruner explains that "the end result of Krieger's ekphrastic principle is this: as a verbal work (literature) attempts to represent a plastic object (such as a painting) in time, it will itself be transformed—metaphorically speaking— into spatial form" (103). This is, precisely, the intention of *Música marciana*: as the narrator ultimately transforms himself and his narration into his own art, he recognizes that he is also merely a product or element of his father's visual works.

#### **Goya's Saturn as *Música marciana's* Defining Ekphrasis**

The first ekphrasis in Bisama's novel is not a description of an artwork produced by the narrator, his father or any one of his siblings. Instead, it focuses on one of Francisco de Goya's Black Paintings, which were originally created in the early 1820s as murals painted directly onto the interior walls of La Quinta del Sordo, the elderly artist's home. As their name suggests, Goya's Black Paintings appear to be dark reflections of the feelings of social and political alienation experienced in near isolation during the final years of his life. According to art historian Fred Licht, Goya's solitude, his lack of any effort to publicly show the Black Paintings, albeit informally, and the contents of the works themselves make them "the most extreme manifestation of the growing misunderstanding and estrangement between modern society and the artist" (159). The narrator of *Música marciana* confesses that his family inevitably reminds him of Goya's most famous Black Painting, that in which the Roman god Saturn devours his child out of fear that his offspring will overthrow him, as had been prophesied. The narrator notes regarding his siblings, "cuando pienso en ellos, cuando pienso en mí, no puedo olvidar aquel cuadro donde un dios devora a uno de sus retoños" (16). The narrator's father enviously despised Goya for what he described as his demoniacal abilities with light. But, in the narrator's opinion, his father also admired him because the artist saw Goya's Saturn as a reflection of himself (16). The narrator describes his own father—as reflected in the father painted by Goya—as, "la imagen de un dios encorvado con los ojos abiertos que se come a su estirpe mientras la convierte en una metáfora del tiempo, en un despojo del espacio" (17).

Bisama's narrator, as the offspring of the savagely prolific and voracious father—who is both an artist in his own right and Goya's metaphorical subject—describes himself ekphrastically here as a metaphor for time and a waste product of space by dint of his father's artistic actions. By fusing his identity into a by-product of both time and space, the narrator acknowledges that, as the son of Goya's symbolic Saturn whose artwork he invokes in his own narration, he is trapped in the ekphrastic tension between static space and unstoppable time.

In her work on ekphrasis in literature and film, Laura Sager Eidt proposes a system of four categories that reflect increasing degrees of complexity with regard to the incorporation of the plastic artwork into verbal or filmic work (44-5). While attributive ekphrasis implies a mere

verbal allusion without extensive discussion, depictive ekphrasis incorporates both discussion of the artwork and the impression it may have on the viewer. Interpretive ekphrasis, the third category, requires reflections that transcend what is directly depicted in the original artwork. Sager Eidt's final and most complex type of ekphrasis is the dramatic, in which the images of the visual art are brought to life and theatricalized (56). In the category of interpretive ekphrasis, while the textual depiction of the work of art does not reach the point of dramatizing it, "the verbalization of the image may add further nuances to it. Often, then, the image may function as springboard for reflections that go beyond its depicted theme" (51). Bisama's reference to Goya's Saturn exemplifies Sager Eidt's category of interpretive ekphrasis as the narrator explicitly puts himself—and the rest of his siblings as well—directly into the mouth of the murderous father, noting that, "todos vivimos dentro de la boca de ese dios que puede ser Saturno [...] En la boca de ese dios oscuro está mi familia" (17). Moreover, Bisama's narrator indicates in this first chapter that Goya's Saturn serves as a guide to his entire narration of the family. He quickly adds that, "sentado pensando en el cuadro, mirando el mar muerto y esperando el huracán, la recompongo como las anotaciones de un testamento que no es tal" (17). In the subsequent fourteen chapters, the narrator effectively recomposes his devoured family, sibling by sibling and chapter by chapter, after describing them as "cuerpos como signos apilándose unos contra otros, dejando ver tras de sí solo pedazos" (18). Goya's depiction of Saturn devouring his son therefore allows him to make sense of the fragmented pile of dead children that his father left behind.

Furthermore, by inserting himself and the rest of his family into Saturn's mouth, the narrator alters Goya's painting, rendering its meaning both more personal and more universal. We are, he implies, all in the process of being devoured by our artist fathers, our creators. Moreover, in this depiction of the two fathers fused together into one, Bisama's narrator not only alludes to the space/time tension that for Krieger is inherent in all ekphrases, but he also establishes both the murderous Saturn depicted by Goya and his own father as timeless. They are one and the same, separated by hundreds or thousands of years, depending on whether we consider Saturn's time to be the moment Goya painted him, when the Romans revered him, or when he came to exist at all, since gods are, in theory, timeless. The two reflective fathers are, therefore, without time and yet are paradoxically time itself, since Saturn is, of course, the Latin version of the Greek god Chronos (or Cronus/Kronos), and Chronos is, in turn, both the father of the Greek god Zeus and the personification of time<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Roberto Matta as the Surrealist Father**

If we have reflecting each other in our mirror a Chilean surrealist artist and the God of time, we have little choice but to bring Roberto Matta, Chile's most famous surrealist artist, into the conversation as the model for the narrator's famous father. Just like Bisama's fictional surrealist painter, Matta studied architecture before turning to painting. With his degree in hand, Matta left Chile for Paris in 1933 to work with Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier but was soon influenced by surrealist artists such as André Breton and Marcel Duchamp and began to use his background in architecture "to apply surrealist ideas to physical space" (Dawson 5). Together with his fellow surrealist, Gordon Onslow-Ford, Matta explored the possibilities of discovering an inner world by responding to "Surrealism's Freudian orientation as well as to 'the fourth dimension' in both its mystical and scientific forms" (Henderson 208). Although many contemporary physicists reject the notion, the fourth dimension has often been understood to add the concept of time to an understanding of space. According to Latin Americanist Sarah Beckjord, "as a Surrealist, Matta sought to transcend traditional notions of time,

1. While some mythographers insist on distinguishing the titan Cronus/Kronos from the deity Chronos, David Auerbach explains that the confusion dates back to ancient times. "It is easy to confuse the Greek god of time, Chronos (Χρόνος), with Zeus' Titan father, Kronos (Κρόνος). So easy, in fact, that the conflation has been made for over two thousand years. The Greeks conflated them regularly, at least according to Plutarch. The Romans then coopted Kronos into the form of Saturn, who later became known as Father Time."

place, and space; his early work largely eschewed figurative representations in favor of landscapes of inner worlds” (9). Much like ekphrasis, Matta’s art sought to achieve transcendence over the traditional bonds of time and space.

Just like the narrator’s surrealist father in *Música marciana*, Matta himself lived much of his life outside of Chile and never returned after the 1973 coup. Since 2001, though, an enormous painting by Matta has hung in the Blue Room of the Moneda Palace in Santiago, the very chamber where each sitting Chilean President greets visiting heads of state. The last of a set of paintings known as the Blue Series, this painting is entitled *El espejo de Cronos*. In this painting—whose title implies it is a mirror of time—semi-transparent and mostly monochrome anthropomorphic and animalesque figures appear to melt together and combine with abstract elements, and all seem to float at different depths in a background of blue. According to presidential Chilean art historian Kaliuska Santibañez, the painting’s location in the presidential palace causes it to act as something akin to a trademark of the Moneda and to serve as an artistic “carta de presentación” from the Chilean state to the rest of the world (4).

While Matta’s *Mirror of Cronos* appears nowhere explicitly within the pages of *Música marciana*, the notion of it still looms large in the novel. Goya’s Saturn reflects the narrator’s father, himself a representation of Chile’s most famous surrealist, Roberto Matta, whose *Mirror of Cronos* is, in turn, a reflection of Chile. Matta’s Cronos is, of course, the Greek version of the Roman god Saturn, which brings us right back to Goya’s depiction of the father consuming the son or the inevitable ravages of Father Time. Bisama’s narrator, as the son of a reflection of Goya’s Saturn, can therefore be understood to be devoured by his father, by Chile, and by time itself, as can be visualized in the following image.

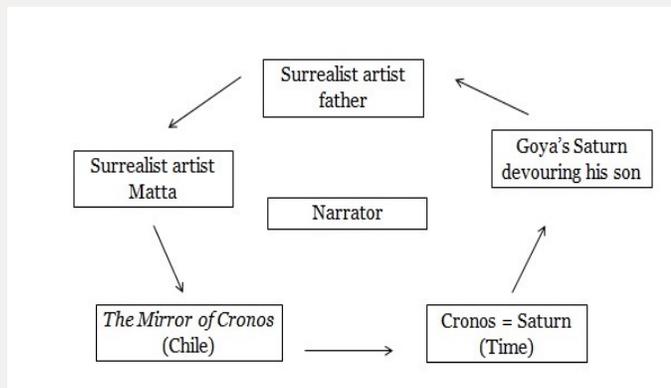


Fig 1.  
Graphic representation of the narrator consumed by his father, Chile, and time.

### The Artistic Revenge of the Devoured Son

In the mythological tradition, Saturn/Chronos devours all of his children except one. Jupiter/Zeus is saved, replaced by his mother with a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes to deceive the murderous father who unknowingly swallows the stone rather than the child. Jupiter/Zeus ultimately grows up to overthrow his father and, in some versions of the story, even to castrate him (Graves & Patai 122). The narrator of *Música marciana*, as the one surviving son of a god-like artist — therefore placed in the position of Zeus combating his voracious father — resists his destructive influence through ekphrasis. He attempts to halt time by creating his own literary text from his family’s visual art, which is in turn his own metaphorical visual artwork, all while ever-ravenous time, symbolized by the impending hurricane, devours his body, his life, and his world.

Interestingly, Goya's own son may have similarly attempted to resist being consumed by his famous father's artistic legacy. In 2003, Spanish art historian Juan José Junquera published a book espousing the theory that Francisco de Goya could not have been responsible for the Black Paintings, as one of the floors on which the artwork was later found does not appear on property deeds until after renovations that took place subsequent to the artist's death (Junquera). Instead, Junquera proposes that Goya's son Javier painted the series on the walls of the home and that Javier's son Mariano knowingly passed off the works as his grandfather's rather than his father's in order to fetch a significantly higher price (Lubow). Although Junquera's theory has been discredited by many Goya scholars as well as by the Prado Museum in Madrid that houses the Black Paintings, the debate has sparked numerous articles on the subject in the years since Junquera published his theory.<sup>2</sup> Within the context of the ekphrastic depiction of Goya's most famous Black Painting within *Música marciana*, the idea that the son of the celebrated artist—rather than the elderly painter himself—may have painted Saturn madly devouring his child would radically alter the psychological suppositions that surround the work of art.

According to Junquera, Javier Goya would have painted over the images his father had already added to the walls of his home, which would imply an erasing of his father's art in order to replace it with his own. By analyzing photographs of the Black Paintings before they were transferred off the walls of La Quinta del Sordo, Carlos Foradada concludes that Goya's dark Black Paintings were painted over bright landscapes (Foradada 327). According to Robert Hughes, underneath *Saturn Devouring his Son*, Goya had originally painted "a standing figure, doing what seems to be a dance step, against a mountainous landscape; this may even have been an image of life's joy" (383). Most Goya scholars agree that this shift from vivid joyful landscapes to the bleak Black Paintings was due to a turn toward his inner demons due to his age, isolation, and deafness, as well as to the complicated political situation in Spain and his own personal and professional situation under the autocratic rule of King Fernando VII. Jay Scott describes the inception of the Black Paintings as Goya suddenly unleashing his art, "covering over the colorful landscapes, refusing himself the bland pleasures of the merely picturesque, recognizing in every surface a new opportunity, until the Quinta mirrors his internal world, the meanings personal, all sense of decoration dismissed. Only truth remains" (42). If this internal world and this truth were that of the son and not the father, it would be difficult not to read *Saturn Devouring his Son* as a harsh personal indictment of Goya as a father. Javier Goya's painting of Saturn would therefore be very similar to the artistic text created by the narrator of *Música marciana* in that both could be seen as critiques of the artist father through the art of the son.

### Virgil as Guide to the Family's Art

Ekphrasis involves mediating visual art within a literary text. Much of the artwork in *Música marciana* is actually doubly mediated through the narrator's descriptions of what he hears over the phone from his brother, Virgilio, the last sibling to die or disappear and the only one to ever live with the patriarch of the scattered family. The portrayals of the visual art that Virgilio offers the narrator are also mediated, though, because we learn near the end of the novel that he suffers a congenital disease that caused him blindness from a young age. Virgilio's descriptions of the art are, therefore, based on the father's oral depictions to Virgilio that are then recounted by telephone across the Atlantic to the narrator back in Chile. As mediator between estranged father and son, Virgilio, described early in the novel as "el memorialista de nuestros secretos familiares," is the narrator's blind guide to his family's and his father's art (Bisama 36). Virgilio's name is, of course, a nod to Virgil, who is, in turn, both the author of the *Aeneid*—an epic

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2. See Arthur Lubow, "The Secret of the Black Paintings," *The New York Times Magazine*, 27 July, 2003; and Matt Davis, "The horror and mystery behind 'the Black Paintings'" *Big Think*, 6 December, 2018.

poem about the founding of Rome—and a character who serves as Dante’s guide through Hell and Purgatory in *The Divine Comedy*. As such, Virgilio’s role in *Música marciana*, combined with the unstated presence of Matta’s *Mirror of Cronos* in the Moneda palace, suggest that the novel is also concerned with the hellishness inherent in the foundations of Chile. In a subversion of the 19th century family romance novels that Doris Sommer argues function as foundational fictions (Sommer 140), in *Música marciana* the narrator’s dysfunctional and dispersed family stands in symbolically for an infernal vision of Chile. The correspondence between Chile and Hell becomes more explicit near the end of the novel when the narrator and Virgilio appear to take parallel journeys: Virgilio prepares to abandon their deceased father’s home in Brussels, and the narrator makes his way back to Chile after having secluded himself for a number of years in a Mennonite village in Alabama. His intention in hiding away had been to save himself from the fate of his siblings and negate his father’s legacy, or as he writes, “evitar ser el hijo de quien soy” (165). In a phone call from the desert at the border between Peru and Chile, the narrator reveals that he has met someone who believes that Satan himself would help him enter Chile. “Tengo un celular nuevo,” the narrator tells his brother, “me lo ha vendido un sujeto que dice creer en Satán, que Satán lo va a ayudar a cruzar a Chile” (178). A week later, when the narrator has settled in Santiago, he receives word that on the very night of that final phone call Virgilio boarded a train bound for Paris and then proceeded to disappear, never to be heard from again.

During his phone call to the desert, Virgilio reveals to the narrator his theory that all of the siblings are nothing more than artistic creations dreamt up and vomited out by their father. Recounting their father’s voyage out of Chile in the 1930s, Virgilio states, “yo creo que papá nos soñó en ese viaje [...] Ahí imaginó su obra completa. La soñó como un vómito [...] Fue ahí cuando pensó en una obra múltiple, hecha de óleo, pigmentos y tela pero también de carne” (180). Surrealist artists draw on the imagery of dreams—the creative impulses of the unconscious mind—and their art is often understood to be the product of those dreams. According to Virgilio, the narrator and all of his siblings are also the products of their father’s dreams; they are living, breathing, and ultimately dying works of art. They are chronological and bound by time, as are literary texts, and metaphorically they are also spatial visual art. The narrator himself, in this way, frozen in his own narration as a spatial product of his father’s feverish dreams, is the embodiment of ekphrasis. He is, albeit only metaphorically, Krieger’s tangible verbal space. Despite seeming to achieve Krieger’s miracle, though, there is no miraculous result for the narrator, as his text only traps him more securely Saturn’s mouth.

Virgilio explains to the narrator that their father’s artistic work involved remembering places in order to prevent them from falling into a space of primordial oblivion. He tells the narrator that their father’s art “tiene que ver con Chile [...] Tiene que ver con nosotros también, de cómo hemos ingresado a esos cuadros como sombras, de cómo nos hemos convertido en obras” (177-8). With this statement, Virgilio places himself, the narrator, and all of their siblings into their father’s paintings as artistic shadows, transforming them—to use Jeffrey Bruner’s expression—into spatial form. Like the narrator’s idea of himself and his siblings in the bloody mouth of Goya’s *Saturn*, Virgilio inserts all the brothers and sisters into their father’s art, effecting another interpretive ekphrasis. A moment later, Virgilio expounds upon this idea, explaining that these shadowy lines and forms in their father’s art are sketches of their future selves. As such, they are destined to search in that art for their past selves, as the ruins of an entire lost continent.

Somos bocetos, las primeras líneas de algo que está predicho pero que apenas comprenderemos. Ese es nuestro destino, nuestro legado. Buscarnos, aunque no lo queramos, en esas líneas y manchas. Recordarnos a nosotros mismos como los vestigios de un continente perdido, de un planeta muerto. (177-8)

The spatial here is the key to the temporal—and that is the miracle of ekphrasis—as the art stretches into the future to freeze in on the past. The ekphrasis in which the narrator engages requires him to use language in order to examine the visual images that hold the key to the past.

If Virgilio's role in *Música marciana* points to the novel as a foundational text for Chile, the rest of Latin America must be involved as well, as the foundation of the Chilean nation is, of course, intertwined with that of the other former colonies on the continent. The narrator's reference to himself and his siblings as vestiges of a lost continent and a dead planet allude to a troubled past for all of Latin America, a continent ravaged by colonialism and imperialism. The enigmatic planetary reference here and in the novel's title is somewhat clarified in the final chapter. Entitled "Marte," this final chapter helps explain the title of *Música marciana*, and its fantastic elements seal the novel's place within the Chilean Freak Power literary movement. The chapter is dedicated to Virgilio, and the narrator reveals that near the end of his life his brother became obsessed with an abandoned and fictional planet Mars populated with Martians who had somehow survived the devastation of the planet:

Virgilio me contaba la vida de esos marcianos, de cómo todos estaban a la deriva en una comarca despoblada mientras entonaban canciones que recordaban el esplendor de sus ciudades ahora polvorientas. Música marciana que les servía para venerar la muerte... Ellos se sentían indignos y sucios de haber quedado vivos. (174)

Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* may shed some light on some of the reasons why Mars is singled out as the dead planet representing the lost continent of which the narrator and his siblings are vestiges. In an analysis of the figure of Aeneas in Virgil's epic, Adam Parry hones in on a passage describing a landscape that will mourn Umbro, an obscure Latin leader destined to fall to Aeneas' Trojan forces. According to Parry, "the place-names invoked by Virgil [...] are from the Marsian country, a hill country to the east of Rome" (68). For Parry, the Marsi, while not Martians, appear to represent the indigenous people unsuccessfully attempting to defend their land against invaders.

To Virgil, this people represented the original Italian stock. His feeling for them had something in common with what Americans have felt for the American Indian. They were somehow more Italian than the Romans themselves. Proud, independent, with local traditions hallowed by the names they had given to the countryside, they succumbed inevitably to the expansion of Roman power (68).

Most of the original indigenous inhabitants of Latin America similarly succumbed, not to Roman power per se but to the European forces that colonized the continent. Despite the independence gained over the course of the 19th century, Virgilio's depiction of Latin America as a lost continent and a dead planet suggests that the former colonies never recovered from their occupation by the Europeans or the subsequent imperialist interference by the United States.

In a third journey parallel to that of the narrator's return to Chile and his last surviving brother's disappearance from Brussels, Virgilio discusses in that last phone call their father's original journey, his escape from Chile and from all of Latin America in order to reach Europe. "Sabemos que quería huir de Chile como quien huye de la peste," Virgilio tells his brother, and adds, "no había nada en ese país para él. Que se había dado cuenta de que en Latinoamérica no había futuro para nadie [...] Que en Chile estaba obligado, por razones de clase, a repetir un destino escrito desde antes" (179). According to Virgilio, the narrator and all of their siblings – himself included – are merely the product of their father's feverish dreams provoked by the turbulent waters of his voyage from a country he wanted to forget in order to reach the continent of its colonizers.

Furthermore, Virgilio's idea that all of the artist's children have entered their father's paintings and are destined to seek themselves within his brushstrokes reflects the narrator's notion that he and all fourteen of his dead brothers and sisters reside within the bloody mouth of Goya's Saturn. Robert Hughes proposes that "Goya's Saturn may be meant to direct our gaze back to the values of Fernando VII and his loyalists, an incarnation of a revolution that ended by eating its children" (383). Similarly, the narrator's ekphrastic depiction of his Saturn-father, the Chilean who abandoned Chile and whose many children died violently or disappeared, suggests at least a good glance back at the Pinochet dictatorship.

#### **A Confession to William Blake's Engraved Satan**

The novel's penultimate chapter, entitled "Chiloé," recounts the life and death of Guillermo, the artist's oldest child who ultimately dies as a victim of the dictatorship. The narrator's father relays this story to Virgilio, "como si se confesara nerviosamente," while contemplating a William Blake engraving supposedly signed in red by the devil himself (Bisama 146). Notably, Blake is one of few major artistic figures who was able to bridge the gap between visual and literary arts, as he is now considered a renowned poet but was famous during his lifetime for his paintings, prints, and engravings. The narrator does not specify to precisely which engraving his father whispers the secret of his first-born son, but it is presumably one created from his commissioned series of illustrations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This unspecified artwork—described solely by its demonic signature and the name of its creator—stands as an example of a somewhat complex ekphrasis. It is a reverse ekphrasis in that it is a work of visual art commenting upon a poetic text, but it is invoked ekphrastically in yet a new literary text. While the engraving is not described vividly in the text as per the traditional understanding of ekphrasis, the frequent reminder of the presence of the visual text within the narrative one during the father's story whispered to the engraving creates a tension between the staticity of the artwork and the movement of time in the narration. In addition, like Virgilio's guiding presence for the narrator, Blake's engraving serves to link *Música marciana* once again to Dante's work.

While Blake was only able to create engravings of seven of his Dante illustrations before his death, one watercolor drawing stands out as a probable candidate for the image allegedly signed by the devil that hangs on the walls of the surrealist artist's Brussels home in Bisama's novel. Entitled *Hell, Canto 34: Lucifer*, Blake's drawing depicts a moment in which a three-headed Satan—frozen in the very center of hell by the icy breeze produced by his own wings—devours Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. According to Dante scholar, Dino Cervigni, "the three mouths' mangling of the three sinners [...] perverts Christ's offer of himself to his disciples, for Lucifer feeds himself on his followers" (45-6). The narrator's father, who sees his own reflection in Goya's Saturn devouring his son, likely also perceives himself in Blake's

depiction of Dante's Lucifer consuming the three sinners. The father seems to realize that, just like Goya's Saturn, he is both his children's creator and their devourer; he is both god and devil. According to Lino Pertile's analysis of Dante's *Inferno*, in this scene Lucifer represents an insatiable appetite for knowledge, power or even happiness, and "his three mouths chewing forever without ever satisfying his hunger [... make him] an emblem of monstrous desire, colossal impotence, gigantic frustration" (Pertile 88).

In the artist's confession to Blake's devil that Virgilio later recounts to the narrator, their father reveals that a fifteen-year-old domestic worker employed in his family's home bore his son. She had been quickly fired after being discovered tiptoeing out of the future artist's room at night, and he had remained unaware of her pregnancy or the existence of his true first-born son until he returned to his home country for a brief visit to Salvador Allende's Chile in 1972. Invited by Allende himself in order to lend support to his besieged government, the narrator's father comments that "en Chile todo se había vuelto surrealista, delirante, incomprendible" (Bisama 147). He predicts the violent coup to come based on the idea that Chile could not have possibly changed so much since he had left it some decades earlier. The new leaders, he imagines, would surely be toppled. "Este es un espejismo," he concludes, "una ilusión, un país que no existe" (Bisama 147). Chile is a mirage, according to the surrealist, just as ekphrasis is for Krieger.

The story that the narrator's father confesses to Virgilio while fixated on the engraving signed by Satan involves a long journey from Santiago to a secluded village on the island of Chiloé. The artist's guide on this trip is a leftist revolutionary who tells him Chilote legends about the devil to pass the time. In the first story, "el diablo embarazaba a una joven que moría al dar a luz a un macho cabrío, el que salía corriendo hasta la playa y entraba nadando en el mar, que se teñía de sangre" (Bisama 153). As the father's confession to the devil continues, it becomes clear that the legendary bloody billy goat that disappears into the sea represents the artist's first-born and lost son, Guillermo.

Despite having been summoned by Guillermo himself to Chiloé, when the father finally meets his son after a night of restless dreams and wandering—in Dantesque fashion—lost in the fog, Guillermo takes one look at him, declares that they look nothing alike, and closes the door in his face. The son's reaction is, however, the polar opposite of the father's. "Mi padre," the narrator recounts, "lo miró y fue verse en una versión de un universo alternativo, una especie de doble perdido en el tiempo" (Bisama 159). Faced here with his own double in the form of one of his artistic creations in the flesh, time temporarily halts or at least complicates for the father. Rejected by his son, the artist leaves Chile once again and never hears another word of Guillermo until nearly forty years later when he sees a black and white image of a face just like his own held up by protesters in an anti-Pinochet demonstration in Madrid. "El pasado, le dijo a Virgilio (pero quizás también le hablaba al Diablo) volvía por él" (Bisama 161). Armed with this clue about his oldest brother's fate, Virgilio investigates and is able to ascertain that during the early years of the dictatorship, Pinochet's forces had detained Guillermo as a communist and taken him to a concentration camp. From there, like so many others, he disappeared. Guillermo, like all the other black and white photographed faces at the demonstration, is one of Pinochet's detained-disappeared. His father's whispered confession to Satan, combined with the Chilote legend of the devil impregnating a girl whose bloody billy goat son is lost in the sea, indicate the profound sense of guilt the artist feels over his son's fate at the hands of the dictatorship. The son that looked just like him—the first one that he had produced through a lifetime of unbridled promiscuity—was devoured by the Chile that he had so eagerly abandoned. The story whispered to Blake's engraving of the devil, the narrator tells us, ends as "una confesión que carece de absolución" (Bisama 162).

### Chile as Martian Heaven and Hell

The novel itself ends shortly after the narrator recounts the mysterious disappearance of his final surviving brother, Virgilio. The narrator visualizes that his own death will occur in the next few minutes and chronicles his prediction in the same notebook in which he has just written about his siblings. He will go down to the beach, he foretells, and he will hear the titular Martian music, which will then disappear. “Ya no habrá canción porque yo mismo seré la canción” (Bisama 183). Notably, the music in which the narrator transforms in the final line of the novel is said to once again be Martian. In Roman mythology, Mars is the son of Jupiter who is, in turn, the son of Saturn. If the narrator’s father is, as we saw earlier, a reflection of Saturn, and the narrator is the surviving undevoured son, Jupiter, then Mars is his son. The Martian music that Virgilio’s fictional Martians listened to “para venerar la muerte” (174) and that the narrator predicts he will hear and become at the moment of his death is actually part of his family heritage.

In addition, this Martian music constitutes yet another probable reference to Dante, since Teodolinda Barolini explains that in Dante’s *Paradiso* “the heaven of Mars is the heaven of the bloodline: of the lineage, of ancestry, of the family” (Barolini, par. 4). When Dante reaches the heaven of Mars in Canto 14 of *Paradiso*, he is entranced by a beautiful song though he is unable to fully comprehend its lyrics (Ciabattino 128). According to Francesco Ciabattino, the poet’s inability to decipher the words of this Martian song “opens a new way for Dante to speak the ineffable: music is the language that, par excellence, exalts the signifier over the signified, and represents a resource to circumvent the limits of logical language” (129). Literature’s limitations in representing the natural sign are, in Ciabattino’s view, resolved in music. Similarly, the narrator of *Música marciana*, after having struggled through the entire novel to understand his family and its art through ekphrasis, eventually eschews all reason and language as he succumbs to—and then simply becomes—the mysterious Martian music. Nevertheless, while the Mars of Dante is one of nine circles of heaven, the final sentence of the novel indicates that the narrator’s destination is, in fact, not heaven but hell. Immediately following his prediction that he will become the Martian song, the narrator forecasts a “brisa helada” that will caress his face. This icy breeze harks back to Canto 34 of Dante’s *Inferno* in which the frigid air from Lucifer’s bat wings freezes him into the Lake of Cocytus.

Furthermore, since all roads lead back to Rome, Mars is also the mythological father of Romulus and Remus, the brothers who provide a second foundational story for Rome. With Virgil as his guide, the narrator of *Música marciana*, as father to Mars and grandfather to Romulus and Remus, as incarnation of the Martian song at the moment of his death, and as embodiment of his own narration, represents, once again, the ekphrastic founding of the Roman hellscape that is Chile and the entire Latin American continent. Through the ekphrastic depiction of Goya’s Saturn, Blake’s Satan, and the photographs of his father’s and his sibling’s works of visual art, the narrator recomposes his fragmented family by means of his own narration. With the help of Dante’s Virgil, as represented by his brother Virgilio and intertextual references to *The Divine Comedy*, the narrator finds that his surrealist father and his scattered and dead siblings embody a hellish conception of Chile. The novel suggests that in the form of Goya’s Saturn devouring his son, Chile stands for the ravages of time. Ultimately unable to detain time through the literary depictions of his family’s works of art, the narrator anticipates his surrender to an apocalyptic storm, which he enters head-on after transcending both visual and literary art by transforming himself—in Freak Power style—into Martian music.

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