

THE ETERNAL CITY OF THE MIND  
JUAN JOSÉ SAER AS A CASE STUDY IN MODERN  
ARCHITECTURE

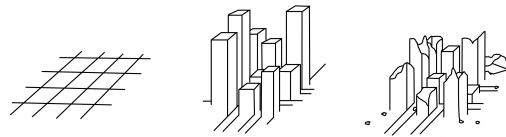
by

Lucas Daniel Cuatrecasas

An Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

Harvard College  
Cambridge, Massachusetts



March 2018

## Abstract

Much of the striking originality of the Argentine writer Juan José Saer (1937-2005) stems from the setting for his centuries-long arc of fictional narratives: the city of Santa Fe and its surroundings. Given Saer's spatial consistency, this thesis reads his fiction through the lens of modern architecture and urban planning theory with the aim of revealing in Saer a minutely-structured formal system in which mind and matter's retentive capacities converge. This argument unfolds in three chapters, the latter two of which each build upon the preceding chapter. In Chapter One, I claim that, in *Cicatrices*, *Lugar*, and *La grande*, Saer's narrative techniques, culled from genre fiction, and the polyvalence of the grid in his work point to a desire for Freudian mastery that underlies the use of grids in city planning. Chapter Two argues that Saer's novel *Glosa* distills the way in which his fictional city anticipates and shapes the actions of its inhabitants, consistent with Corbusian modernist urbanism's formulation of "the functional city." Chapter Three, drawing from Freud's likening of the mind to a city, identifies instances across Saer's fiction in which mind and matter's analogous storage capacity underpins a cross-temporal preservation at work in his Santa Fe. Extrapolated to physical cities, these mechanisms suggest that urban layouts become deterministic insofar as they retain traces of previous use; within the context of Saer's work, they suggest that we can conceptualize his fiction as an atemporal, simultaneous city, predicated on the forms of a physical referent.

## Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been an exciting intellectual and emotional endeavor—one that could not have been possible without the presence and support of many. It is with immense gratitude that I present this work to

My mother, Oliver, Josiah Blackmore, Luigi Patruno, Mariano Siskind and the students of his seminars, Roanne Kantor, Kathy Richman, Daniel Aguirre Oteiza, Cathy Downey, Eli Nelson, Julie Estrada, Caleb Shelburne, Ahmed Ragab and all of the participants in the 2017-2018 Science, Religion and Culture Program at Harvard Divinity School, Jeffrey Schnapp and the students of Italian 245, spring of 2017, Odile Harter, Robert E. Dressler, Leona E. Dressler, the administrators of the Robert Bacon Fund, the participants in and organizers of the 2017 Coloquio Internacional Juan José Saer, Princeton University Special Collections, Françoise Dubosquet, the library staff at The University of Rennes 2, and Special Collections at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

Thank you for your time, wisdom, receptivity, and unfailing kindness.

*An approach which considers works of art as living, autonomous models of consciousness will seem objectionable only so long as we refuse to surrender the shallow distinction of form and content. For the sense in which a work of art has no content is no different from the sense in which the world has no content. Both are. Both need no justification; nor could they possibly have any.*

Susan Sontag

# Contents

A Note on Translations . . . . .	1
Introduction . . . . .	2
<b>Chapter One</b>	
The Narrative Grid: Exploring Planning's Fantasies of Mastery in Saer's Santa Fe . . . . .	10
<b>Chapter Two</b>	
Saer as a Narrative Functionalist . . . . .	40
<b>Chapter Three</b>	
The Eternal City of the Mind: Saer's Santa Fe as an Urban Storage Device . . . . .	72
Conclusion: Beyond Santa Fe . . . . .	107
Works Cited . . . . .	111

## A Note on Translations

I have used English for the entirety of this thesis in the interest of ensuring total accessibility to those outside the field of Latin American and Spanish-language literatures. Unless otherwise cited in the bibliography, all translations of direct quotations from non-Anglophone sources are mine. Generally, my translations strive to be literal-minded representations of the Spanish. Phrases or words whose nuances may require explanation or escape the English translation are usually bracketed within the quotations.

Wherever I have been aware of a published translation of Saer into English, I have used it instead of my own translation. Two factors motivate this choice. First, the published translations of Saer that I have encountered almost always supply a word-for-word English rendering of Saer's words (allowing for altered syntax, punctuation, etc.). For the purposes of my analysis, which focuses greatly on the precise referents of descriptions, this literalness outweighs any missed opportunities for lyricism. Indeed, my own translations of Saer aim to hew as closely to the original as possible, avoiding potentially more poetic interpretations that would not be verbatim. Second, in view of the several translations of Saer into English that have appeared within the last decade, we are more and more able to appreciate a distinct experience of reading Saer in English. Readers familiar with the English corpus have encountered a new territory that overlaps with the Spanish but also stretches beyond it, into unforeseen resonances and connotations. In using translations that are available beyond my thesis, my hope has been to welcome the generative potential that they offer.

Unlike translations of other writers, translations of Saer are cited by the names of the translators in the text and listed under their names in the bibliography. Here too, the intent is to make transparent the diverse contributions of individual translators to shaping the tone, feel, and lexicon of Saer's works in English. Nevertheless, the titles of and names in Saer's work remain in Spanish in the text (e.g., *Cicatrices*, not *Scars*, and “el Matemático,” not “the Mathematician”), since the books and characters I am ultimately referring to are always those of the original Spanish-language corpus. My use of translations is meant to illuminate but never to replace.

# Introduction

The fiction of Juan José Saer (1937 - 2005) remains an unclassifiable event for literature in Argentina. Saer's blend of philosophical speculation, descriptive intensity, and measured realism seems to materialize in the mid-twentieth century with bracing independence—not as a part of that era's commercial “Boom” of Latin American literature, not necessarily as a reaction against it, and certainly not as an inevitable result of regional trends. Expansive, inexhaustible novels such as *Glosa* (1986) and *La grande* (2005) are perhaps most representative of Saer's writing, but his several short story collections, one book of poetry, and numerous critical essays remain just as influential. Much of Saer's striking originality grew out of the stage from which he chose to coax these works. The region of Santa Fe, containing a midsize Argentine city northwest of Buenos Aires, provides the fundamental background for all of Saer's fiction. It is omnipresent. Even in the sporadic moments in which Saer sets his work elsewhere, Santa Fe looms, as though it were a snow globe enveloping the oeuvre. More importantly, it defines the structure of Saer's narratives themselves: walks with acquaintances, meals shared with friends, the reverberations of crime, strange reunions, meditations at the steering wheel, and private romantic arrangements are all framed by the shape and feel of the city and its outskirts.

Along with Saer's linguistic and conceptual talent, this detailed spatial consistency has generated a body of criticism recognizing Saer as one of the most vital writers after Borges, both in Argentina and internationally. Moreover, the difficulty to classify Saer hasn't hindered attempts to do so. One dominant strand of scholarship on Saer, framed by María Teresa Gramuglio's pioneering essay “El Lugar de Saer” (“Saer's Place”), addresses his use of Santa Fe in familiar terms. According to her, Saer's place is at the intersection of the twentieth-century *nouveau roman* in France, the oneiric meditations of Borges, and modernist giants such as Faulkner and Proust. On this interpretation, the uniform background for his fiction is a symptom of the two latter influences. His fictional Santa Fe could be thought of as analogous to Joyce's Dublin or Proust's Paris, sculpted with a taste for the personal and the prosaic that runs counter to Borges' penchant for the fantastical (Gramuglio 842-44, 852-61). Similarly, in his influential history of Argentine literature, Martín Prieto finds in the “anomaly” of Saer a contradictory coexistence of Borgesian antirealism,

the symbolist tendencies of the Argentine poet Juan L. Ortiz, and a realist mode of presentation, bound up in the fictional scaffolding that is Santa Fe (*Breve historia* 415-18).

But the parts—if these are all of them—don’t necessarily explain the whole. Although Gramuglio and Prieto’s masterful comparisons are indispensable to unraveling Saer, the site of his fiction remains in tension. While Gramuglio plays on the word “place” to link Saer’s influences to the Santa Fe region, Prieto turns to a genealogy of incompatibilities held together by a fictional locus. Either way, definitive resolution eludes us.

I believe that Saer’s unwavering formal artistry, structural exactitude, and enduring metaphysical engagement make his work perhaps even more singular than Gramuglio or Prieto’s key insights may suggest. Unlike many similar writers, Saer varied his approach but never moved from one period to the next: spatially and stylistically, absolutely all of his writing is part of the same whole. Given this cohesion, Saer’s world continues to be more intricate, more tightly-woven, and more capacious than the twentieth-century literary context can often account for. In light of both the exceptional richness of Saer’s city and its relationship to a physical referent, my thesis proposes a different, non-literary set of analytical tools with which to illuminate his fictional Santa Fe, those of urbanist and architectural theory. Specifically, I turn to twentieth-century conversations about cities and structures that fall under the broad historical rubric of modern architecture. These conversations are especially well-suited to Saer’s work. The holistic vision of architecture that originated in Europe in the early twentieth century spawned a century of influential thinking about how space could be engineered to shape behavior and how behavior ought to affect space. From Le Corbusier’s early projections of an ideal modern city to later condemnations of this hyper-rational project by writers like Jane Jacobs, there lies a range of nuanced perspectives on the question of how cities work, sufficiently abstracted from context to be of use to us. From architectures that conceive of themselves as absolutely new to architectures that, though modernist, are suffused with personal and cultural pasts, we find a valuable width of responses to the question of what structures retain over time and how this affects their inhabitants. Overall, modern architecture (understood to include urbanism in its scope)

---

All translations are mine unless otherwise cited.

yields a highly-precise analytical system with which to confront the dialogue between the built environment and its inhabitants that lies at the heart of Saer's fiction.

Within this architectural-urbanist framework, my thesis asks two questions. As a thesis about literature, it asks "how can applying an understanding of modern architecture to Saer's work reveal the formal mechanisms that govern it as a cohesive, artistic whole?" As a thesis about cities, it asks "what can the relationships between fictional people and fictional space in Saer's city tell us about how physical cities relate to their inhabitants?"

Aiming my investigation at these two goalposts, I read Saer's fiction through modern architecture by making three different arguments, each of which builds upon the one before it. In Chapter One, I suggest that the narrative conventions that Saer borrows from detective fiction play a role in his fiction that is parallel to the use of the grid in modernist urban planning—both indulge a fantasy of control over the unpredictable. Chapter Two then makes a case for seeing Saer's work as a testing ground for radical functionalism and exclusively top-down planning, which, though effective, creates a problematic doubleness in Saer's world. In Chapter Three, I use the incorporation of tradition in modern architecture to examine the proleptic nature of Saer's fictional project, its relation to memory, and the shared logic of information storage that binds minds and cities together. Together, these chapters will assemble a larger argument, which is neither strictly literary nor design-based: that Saer's fiction reveals to us how a city and its inhabitants mutually shape one another through a fundamental homology between memory and the changes undergone by the urban fabric. Reviving a failed metaphor that Freud uses in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, I describe this overlap between mental life and the structures that define and preserve urban life as "the eternal city of the mind." The phrase can be read as signifying either a city belonging to the mind or a mind having the properties of a city. This expresses a duality to which I will arrive: in a sense, the city and the mind both contain the other. From this understanding, fictional and urbanist implications emerge. So, taken as a whole, the following chapters will point toward the intricacies of Saer's fiction, but also toward the debates that are unique to the cities of an increasingly interconnected, immediate, and populous globe.

The architectural forms I focus on in each chapter also rest upon one another. Chapter One introduces the grid—the workspace in which the urban fabric takes form. Chapter

Two then tracks the development of the buildings and streets that give the grid a texture. Finally, Chapter Three turns to ruins, in an attempt to examine how the filled-out grid retains traces of inhabitants' use of it. This progressive development seeks constantly to link fictional structures to physical, referential counterparts, echoing the dual directionality of this thesis.

Initially, this project's polyvalence may seem counterintuitive. Accordingly, I would like to use the rest of this introduction to address a few key questions that the interdisciplinary nature of this project inevitably brings up—namely, those dealing with the disparities between the fictional and the physical, urban scale, and what I mean when I use the term “modern architecture.”

*The question of analyzing a fictional city with theories about physical cities.* This project's joining of a fictional substrate and methods drawn from physical cities owes much to Saer's own outlook on the discontinuities between fiction and its referents. As one character in *La pesquisa* (1994) states about the respective truths of empirical experience and fiction, “despite their being of a different order, at times they may not be contradictory” (Lane, *Investigation* 127). That is, fiction and the empirical world obey different sets of laws, but this does not cleave them apart. They may meet, if only briefly, at crucial points. I believe that it is at these points that we often encounter broader insights that apply just as well to fictions as they do to the referential world. To arrive at these insights, however, I have found it necessary to use fiction's unique laws when analyzing Saer's texts, not only those of physical cities. As a reader inspired by psychoanalysis, I see the elements of narratives as related to one another not only by their inherent properties—as with physical referents—but by connotations, contiguities, resemblances, and spontaneous juxtapositions. In fiction, a bridge is not just a bridge but, perhaps, continuity, liminality, and ambition as well. This belief allows me to treat the physical principles that I apply to Saer's world (for example, the structural pattern of a grid in urban planning) as both purely empirical phenomena and abstract notions. So, in this thesis, when architectural principles enter the system of Saer's fiction, they begin to play by the rules of literary analysis. This process reveals new facets of the system of Saer's city but also of physical cities.

This tactic falls within a line of scholarship that uses the built environment as an inter-

preptive toolkit. For example, Bachelard's landmark *The Poetics of Space* has constructed a phenomenology of architectural space via poetry and fiction. On a similar note, key studies such as *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas* (*Latin America: Cities and Ideas*) have examined physical urban structures as a concretization of ideologies, in an effort to unpack cities' historical roles (Romero 9, 20). Within this conversation about what structures express, I turn instead to a city inside texts. I apply principles from physical architectural space to fiction, observe the consequences, and suggest points at which the fictional and the empirical intersect. The goal is mutual enrichment, not unification. Indeed, I have used the terms "physical," "referential," or "empirical" and not "reality" or "the real world" so as not to introduce an unnecessary existential inequality between these two worlds while, at the same time, respecting their differences.

*The question of the relationship between the fictional and referential Santa Fe.* It is natural to ask how this project manages its fictional focal point's ties to an urban referent. The first important point here is that in his fiction Saer does not use the name "Santa Fe." Instead, for Saer, Santa Fe is simply "the city." We recognize it as Santa Fe because of its geography (precise down to the exact buildings that appear on blocks), toponymy, situation within the national context, and consistent references to known urban landmarks, but perhaps Saer's most brilliant authorial gesture is to withhold the name of the referent and, in doing so, an easy conflation of the fictional and physical. This represents a larger schism in Saer. Everything points to the referential Santa Fe—from Saer's abundant research for his books (especially *La grande*), to his biography, to his seemingly infallible ability to reproduce the urban fabric—but there is always a rupture between the physical structures from which Saer draws and the structures that end up in his work.<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to remedy this difficulty by focusing almost exclusively on Santa Fe as a fictional city (and calling it, for the sake of convention and ease, "Santa Fe"). My thesis only rarely takes a detour into Saer's biography or the reality of the Argentine city in which he lived. At the same time, the referential Santa Fe is vitally important to this thesis. Through the lens of Saer's texts,

---

<sup>1</sup>For the extensive preparatory work Saer did for *La grande*, see the archival materials (among which are photographs and postcards of the city) in Juan José Saer Manuscripts, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, box 8.

I interpret it as a set of formal constraints within which Saer elaborates his narratives. Like the Aristotelian plot model of a beginning, middle, and end, the referential Santa Fe serves as the parameters or necessary limitations in which art flourishes. But keep in mind that once these physical elements enter the system of Saer's fiction, they too begin to obey the unique laws of fiction I discuss above.

*The question of Santa Fe's scale as compared to that of other cities I will address.* One may wonder how I arrived at thinking about Santa Fe in the context of global urbanism. Santa Fe is not Buenos Aires. It is not Paris or Vienna. Santa Fe is a midsize city in a still-urbanizing area of Argentina, not a global economic center lodged within an expanding megalopolis. And yet many of the theories and models that I will apply to it sprang from the minds of observers of Paris, New York, Osaka, and Barcelona. Isn't there a qualitative difference between Santa Fe and these cities that precludes a direct comparison?

Yes and no. My response to the issue of scale has been largely indebted to contemporary urbanism. While certain modes of urbanism (e.g., Rem Koolhaas' "culture of congestion") rely partially on size and density to function, many urban models rest on blanket hypotheses about cities, whether they happen to be closer to towns or massive pillars of commerce, transit, and resources (Koolhaas 10, 123-73). Moreover, some models approach urban problems by focusing on particular neighborhoods as microcosms of a city. The self-styled movement of "New Urbanism" exemplifies this flexibility. Responding to a broader American reaction to modernist urban planning, the New Urbanists have demonstrated applications of their organic, bottom-up, and walkability-focused approach to both small towns (such as Seaside, Florida) and massive urban centers of influence (such as Los Angeles).<sup>2</sup> Their urban vision accommodates such variation because it is predicated on unchanging, abstract postulations about how people relate to what is around them. When it comes to urbanism in the U.S. and Europe—which are, geographically, the biggest sources of data for this thesis—it is usually this fundamental relationship that defines cities, not necessarily their size. This common nature of cities provides the implicit grounds for comparison between Saer's Santa Fe and the metropolises that gave rise to some of the urbanist models I discuss. Furthermore, taking a

---

<sup>2</sup>For the applications to Seaside and Los Angeles, respectively, see Katz 3-17, 179-91.

wide perspective on the urban condition allows me to discuss the city as an abstract *form*, outside of its empirical manifestations, which will become a crucial part of my argument in Chapter Two. This thesis treasures the notion that the city is not just an accumulation of things. It is also a *way* of accumulating things.

*The question of modern architecture's meaning in this context.* I have chosen a decidedly broad category to encompass both architecture and the range of disciplines within urban planning during the historical period from which I draw. For this thesis, the “modern” in modern architecture is largely a product of populous, industrialized cities, which exist in contrast with a previous state of less immediacy, less accessibility, and fewer crowds. This modernity is born in the nineteenth century with the flâneur, the explorer of the urban masses, who can take Baudelaire’s overwhelming “bath of the multitude” where it once was impossible (Baudelaire 20). And if we accept that comparatively high degrees of speed, simultaneity, and multitudes still characterize urban environments, this narrow experience of modernity continues into the present. So, being partially defined by urbanization, modern architecture inextricably links individual structures to cities, a process the theorist Manfredo Tafuri has dissected (see “Toward a Critique” 14-25). This broad term thus becomes helpfully concrete. I also construe modern architecture so narrowly because I do not recognize a single, universal modernity (an oversimplification at best). Rather, I seek a version of modernity that dovetails with the works of the theorists and writers I focus on, who often speak of the modern condition in terms of a technological and economic shift that has changed how cities work. (The best example is Le Corbusier in his interwar books, such as *Towards a New Architecture*.) As such, modern architecture, in this thesis, is probably an unavoidably Western construction. But, given that the kind of urbanism and architectural thinking that I apply to Saer has its roots in this Western construction, I have played along and spoken of “modern” cities and other “modern” phenomena. However I never use this word to the exclusion of other temporalities that run parallel to this modernity. The specific, Baudelairean, Eurocentric modernity of this thesis’ reference points exists among many other modernities. Some tell a similar story; others, a totally different one. Still others remain unheard.

Nevertheless, I do make a distinction between the catch-all term “modern architecture”

and the narrower term “modernist architecture,” the latter of which appears more frequently in the body of this thesis than the former. For me, modernism picks out a specific cluster of stylistic conventions that share, broadly, a traceable aesthetic genealogy. Modernism occurs within modern architecture, but it is an independent part of it that moves according to its own impulses and affinities (clean lines, minimal ornamentation, and a focus on functionality, among others). It is here that the aforementioned multiplicity of modernities comes into play. Some modernist architects on whom I rely, such as Tadao Ando and Louis Kahn, operate nominally within modern architecture but incorporate tradition and vernacular styles into their work. In doing so, they confuse the timeline that modernity assumes and replace it with a modernism that encompasses vast stretches of time and holds them frozen in simultaneity. Such processes bear within them the unpredictable moments of architectural revelation that I believe speak so beautifully to Saer’s fiction. Often, fleetingly, they capture the moments of awe-inspiring vastness that long-enduring structures, whether fictional or physical, produce. In the following chapters, I hope to demonstrate an analogous enduring quality in the mechanisms of Saer’s city. Modern architecture provides the means to this end. It is the source of my analysis, but it may also become its target.

## Chapter One

# The Narrative Grid: Exploring Planning's Fantasies of Mastery in Saer's Santa Fe

## Mastery in the Grid and in the Detective Narrative

To introduce the topics covered in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud recounts the story of a puzzling game played by a one and a half year old boy, whom Freud had observed in his lodgings over a few weeks. The boy in question was very fond of his mother, but he was also well-behaved and obedient, and he never cried when she left him. In other respects the boy was unremarkable, except that he had an “occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on [...]” (*Beyond* 8). As he did this, he would make a loud “o” sound, which Freud and the boy’s mother agreed approximated “fort,” a German word for “gone.” Freud concluded that throwing away toys is the boy’s manner of playing with them. So far, so good. One day, however, Freud witnessed the second part of the boy’s game. Playing with a reel attached to a string, the boy made it disappear in his cot, uttered his “o” sound, but then pulled the reel back out by its string and made a second, “joyful” sound: “da”—German for “there” (*Beyond* 8-9). Freud had now understood the game’s meaning. To compensate for containing his discontentment at accepting his mother’s uncontrollable departures, the boy had invented a game in which he could control the disappearance and reappearance of objects in his environment. Freud analyzes this game in terms of the “instinct for mastery,” which motivates the child to “to work over in the mind some overpowering experience” regardless of whether repeatedly staging this experience is not directly pleasurable. The pleasure of the game could be the mastery itself (*Beyond* 9-10).

If Freud is right, then mastery is a longing in each of us to pretend that predictable, comprehensible rules for our environment exist, despite the discomfort or difficulty that following these rules may pose. Mastery underlies the will to put things in order when they

are not. It makes us believe that in controlling what we can, we control everything. This chapter argues that Saer's use of the detective genre and the Santa Fe city grid indulges a desire for mastery over an uncontrollable world only to demonstrate its arbitrariness in the end. With one hand, Saer's fiction points to the comfort of an orderly city or a closed case. With the other, it unveils, like Freud, the disorder, unpredictability, and randomness that the comfort of our structural games seeks to elide.

In focusing on the grid and the detective genre, this analysis invokes an analogy between attempts to impose intelligible order on a city and attempts to impose intelligible order on a narrative. It also deliberately isolates two components of Saer's fiction whose importance he and his critics have acknowledged. By aiming at the psychological roots of two distinct frameworks present in Saer's fiction, then, I attempt to extend the urban characteristics of Saer's fiction beyond considerations of its setting and into its descriptive and structural features themselves. The ultimate claim of this analysis is that images of the grid and conventions of the detective story rely on the same logic—a logic fundamental to the city. First, however, we must establish that the parallel between these two frameworks holds. How do city grids and the detective genre both reveal an underlying desire for mastery?

Let's begin with the element that both Saer's fiction and urban planning theory engage with: the gridiron pattern. The grid is a perennial tool for organizing cities, and its historical variations are too numerous and varied to be folded into one monolithic and representative "grid." For the sake of theoretical specificity, I focus on twentieth-century architecture and planning's use and reading of the grid, which we could consider a symptom of the same Freudian anxiety experienced by the boy above. Here, instead of a mother's departures, the cause of anxiety is economic and industrial modernization. The mastery game, in turn, hinges on notions of urban functionality. Le Corbusier is a natural starting point for this discussion. He is likely the foundational architect-urbanist of the twentieth century, having paved the way for many of today's conversations about architecture and planning—conversations which may equally vindicate or revile his work. He sums up his views well in his 1923 *Towards a New Architecture*: "Modern life demands, and is waiting for, a new kind of plan, both for the house and for the city [...] The necessity for order. The regulating line is a guarantee against willfulness. It brings satisfaction to the understanding" (9). Here

Le Corbusier hints at several precepts of the interwar European urbanist and architectural theory he helped develop. First, modern life has outpaced the built environment, fomenting disorder. Second, clean lines are the best antidote to this disorder.

Ultimately, Le Corbusier's attempts to stem such disorder would help produce a replicable method for mastery over it—a plan, as he calls it above. Via the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (the CIAM, active from 1928 to 1959), a large gathering of architects which Le Corbusier helped organize, the doctrine of order in modern life would have a particularly deep impact on urbanism.<sup>3</sup> In his work with the CIAM during the interwar years, Le Corbusier would help enshrine the all-encompassing city plan as a default remedy for urban ills, with the ambition of building a “functional city” (Mumford 79-81; Giedion x). He and his disciples (notably, Josep Lluís Sert, who would become dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and the *Quadrante* architects of fascist Italy) would then literally spread their views on planning across the world, from Cambridge to Como to Chandigarh.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Le Corbusier's plan for the “Radiant City,” laid out on a perfectly symmetrical grid of orthogonal zones, became an influential articulation of what better, smarter cities would look like.<sup>5</sup> The Radiant City was so influential in U.S. city planning that in 1961, Jane Jacobs blamed the notion—“hailed deliriously by architects”—for having sucked the life from many streets with a view of urbanism that is “nothing but lies” (31, 32). In doing so, she paved the way for a post-Corbusian theory of the city. Nevertheless, I would say that Le Corbusier's Radiant City remains constantly visible in generic form, even more than half a century after Jacobs' critique. Her point still stands: the “towers in the park” typical of public housing or office buildings are the effects of Le Corbusier's notorious plan (Jacobs 30-31).

Of course, Le Corbusier did not only speak in the abstract. For him, the division between order and disorder in cities was a palpable fact, particularly when comparing Eu-

<sup>3</sup>For a comprehensive overview of the CIAM's life cycle as an organization, see Mumford.

<sup>4</sup>For Cambridge, see Rovira 332-46, 351-59. For Como, see Rifkind 59. For Chandigarh, see Hall 212-15.

<sup>5</sup>See the illustrations in Le Corbusier, *Radiant* 169-70. Le Corbusier writes that he composed these images “after my return from America” (*Radiant* 156). See also Le Corbusier's Voisin Plan for Paris (*Radiant* 202-07).

ropean and pan-American cities. Writing about New York City's street grid in *When the Cathedrals Were White* (1937), he gushes that "New York lives by its clear checkerboard. Millions of beings act simply and easily within it. Freedom of mind. From the first hour, the stranger is oriented, sure of his course" (*Cathedrals* 50). With an almost childlike excitement, Le Corbusier explains to his readers just how easy and intuitive finding one's way is in Manhattan's system of avenues at right-angles to parallel streets. Taking aim at the romanticist notion of beauty in organic forms, he mocks those who find charm in urban disorganization. "This grille of streets, this 'American layout,' is precisely the excuse for the attacks of academicians and romantics. It is our particular vanity to be plunged in disorder down to the very base," he laments (*Cathedrals* 48). Indeed, Le Corbusier is exasperated by those who prefer the haphazardly intersecting streets of European cities to the efficiency of the grids found in American cities. There is no excuse for chaos in the city. As such, New York was a step toward order: a paradigmatic modern city "under the sign of the new times." The same went for Buenos Aires—another checkerboard city. "When order is in control, that city will become one of the great places of the world," he writes (*Cathedrals* 36, 38). Evidently, the pan-American city grid approximated the ambitions of the Corbusian plan (at least more closely than Paris or Rome's layouts would). If, for Le Corbusier, the regulating line brought satisfaction to the understanding, the grid was the height of comprehensibility.

Now, though it may seem counterintuitive, the grid has an inextricable relationship to narrative. As the art theorist Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, the grid's ubiquity in modern art depends on its ability to tolerate the contradictions of myth (12-13). She employs this term advisedly, however, since

the notion of myth I am using here depends on a structuralist mode of analysis, by which the sequential features of a story are rearranged to form a spatial organization. [...] By spatializing the story—into vertical columns, for example—they [structuralists] are able to display the features of the contradiction and to show how these underlie the attempts of a specific mythical tale to paper over the opposition with narrative. (Krauss 13)

Spatializing narratives, in other words, suspends their contradictory events outside of time; in doing so, it establishes control over the whole. By organizing them, the grid exposes inconsistencies. It dominates the sequence of the narrative in order to unravel it, dissect it.<sup>6</sup>

The same might be said of narrative itself. In his reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the critic Peter Brooks sees in Freud an example of narrative's compulsion toward mastering sequence: "Narrative always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered [...] as the detective retraces the tracks of the criminal" (97). Brooks relates this narrative state of accomplishment to the book's initial *fort-da* vignette, which announces an intention to revisit constantly what has already occurred (97-100). This applies to all narratives, but Brooks' detective analogy is not coincidental. This general rule—the retracing of tracks already made—is at the core of detective fiction. As Tzvetan Todorov reports in a structuralist analysis of the genre, the classic detective narrative consists of two stories; "the first, the one about the crime, recounts 'what actually happened,' while the second, that of the investigation, explains 'how the reader (or narrator) acquires an understanding of these events'" (48). The second story, "which has no importance in itself," only serves to elucidate the first story, which is not even present (Todorov 48). To use our own vocabulary, we could say that the detective narrative retraces a prior sequence to establish mastery over it. Indeed, once the sequence has been fully retraced, the detection process must show that myriad and often contradictory clues lie in a systematic, all-encompassing order. As the genre's founder Edgar Allan Poe noted, it is the conclusion that organizes the whole: "It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention" (Poe 675; qtd. in Steele 561).<sup>7</sup> In the grid's dominance of sequence, we recognize the detective genre's signature conclusions, in which the sequential pieces of the narrative puzzle snap

<sup>6</sup>Indeed, on this point, Krauss notes the extraordinary power this gives disciplines like psychoanalysis, which thrive on bringing narrative tensions into light (13).

<sup>7</sup>Heta Pyrhönen in her study *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative* lists Poe as the genre's founder (15). He seems to be a generally-accepted starting point (cf. Link 6-10 and Steele 556), although in Saer's work we will explore *Oedipus Rex* as a detective story, a seductive notion that receives a tempered exposition outside of Saer in Dubois 206-18.

into place. Repetition reveals the whole.

But of course, repetition has a broader level. As an abstract figure, the grid must replicate itself across situations. So too does the plot—and, particularly, the detective plot. Not only does the genre stand out because it underscores its own dominance over the apparent contradictions of sequences. The detective genre is also remarkable in its strict adherence to a renewable structure for revealing this dominance. Dorothy Sayers, among many likeminded writers, has contended that detective narratives share a common form derivable from the doctrine of plot in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Steele 555-56; Sayers 169-177). Indeed, whatever surprises the narrative may harbor do not change the fact that the story typically “begins with the murder; the middle is occupied with the detection of the crime and the various peripeties or reversals of fortune arising out of this; the end is the discovery and execution of the murderer—than which nothing can very well be more final” (Sayers 170). This three-part structure is the starting point for any detective story, no matter how outré. Like a map drawn long in advance, it guides the moving parts of the plot through well-worn corridors, which, upon the discovery of the murderer, reveal themselves to be aligned in a perfect latticework.

We now have two narrative tools, puzzle and plot, that work in tandem to establish mastery over largely uncontrollable events—those murders, detections, reversals of fortune, and peripeties that Sayers identifies. Channeled through the Aristotelian beginning-middle-end structure, the airtight web of causation lends the detective story its appearance of inevitability and causal order. Together, these tools become the principal method by which the detective genre allows both the writer and the reader to feel the thrill of total control. “How couldn't I have seen that *X* is the murderer?” readers may exclaim upon finishing a given story. “It's so obvious!” Connecting the dots retrospectively, the reader attains the same dominance over the whole that Poe's conclusion-focused doctrine cultivates in writers of detective fiction. Like the redundant game of the child yearning for his mother, the detective story produces mastery by mimicking unpredictable and uncontrollable events inside a replicable structure. Unsurprisingly, one critical cliché is to refer to the detective genre as game-based (Pyrhönen 17-18). Like the city grid, the detective genre's structure is mechanically reproducible, easy-to-follow, and predicated on order: first the murder, then

the detection, then the discovery, where all the clues fall into place. Although it responds to seemingly unpredictable occurrences, the mystery will always take a foreseeable course, as would a pedestrian in a grid. And, as with the grid plan, the objective of the detective game is to establish order where it is not apparent, for creating order—to echo Le Corbusier’s words—brings satisfaction to the understanding.

## The Grid and the Detective Genre in Saer

As I mentioned, both the gridiron city plan and the hardboiled detective novel are inescapable components of Saer’s fiction. They are everywhere. The influence of the detective genre in Saer is perhaps most evident in straightforward pastiches like *La pesquisa* (1994) (translated by Helen Lane as *The Investigation*) and “Recepción en Baker Street” (2000) (“Reception on Baker Street”—the former of which contains a captivating game of detection and the latter of which involves an original Sherlock Holmes story written by Saer. Additionally, Saer has acknowledged a noir influence in more genre-defying works like *Cicatrizes* (1969) as well (*Una forma* 18). References to the detective genre also crop up in characters’ day-to-day chats and correspondence across Saer’s oeuvre, as we can see in Tomatis’ noir rereading of *Oedipus Rex* in *La grande* (2005) or his adoption of Sherlock Holmes’ signature “elementary” line in *Palo y hueso* (1965).<sup>8</sup> Now, strictly speaking, *La grande* and *Cicatrizes* are not, per Sayers’ plot-based definition, detective novels. Rather, they partake in the genre in the way Derrida envisions generic relationships: “Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text [...] yet such participation does not amount to belonging” (65). Some of Saer’s works (e.g., “Recepción”) participate more overtly than others. However, Saer always deploys detective conventions in connection with broader claims about fiction, its relationship to reality, myths, and exile, filtered through his characters’ musings. Participating but not necessarily belonging, these conventions break loose of their generic moorings. They become an abstract organizational principle, adapted to Saer’s metafictional or philosophical concerns but formally rigid enough for us to recognize

---

<sup>8</sup>For Oedipus rereading, see Dolph, *La Grande* 240-42. For “elementary” [“elemental, mi querido Watson”], see *Cuentos* 334.

its detective-genre origins.

Crucially, this organizational principle comes hand-in-hand with Saer's treatment of modern urban space. As Pierre Dubois argues in *Le roman policier ou la modernité (The Detective Novel or Modernity)*, Baudelaire's conflation of the crowded city with modernity itself applies to the detective genre as well (48). Both are symptoms of modernity. Even in the isolated spaces of classic detective fiction, one feels "an urban chaos that [...] strains against the door" (Dubois 48). In Saer, the detective genre is imbricated with urban space in a similar way. *La pesquista*'s detective plot takes place in Paris and relies on the population density of the tenth and eleventh arrondissements for the logic of its crimes. *Cicatrices'* noir elements are likewise grounded in Santa Fe's density, which helps illustrate the manner in which a crime radiates outwards, setting off chains of coincidences and irregularities. Even in a novel such as *Nadie nada nunca* (1980), which resorts to detective conventions in mostly rural space, the city looms large as the source of information about crimes and the headquarters of their investigation.

Similarly, as a visual figure, the grid in Saer has two levels. First, we find it in the city plan. The city's checkerboard layout is omnipresent in works like *En la zona* (1960), *Palo y hueso*, *Responso* (1964), *Cicatrices*, *Glosa* (1986), *Lugar* (2000), and *La grande*, and it also makes weighty cameos in more rurally-situated works like *El limonero real* (1974). But aside from these instances of its urban manifestation, the grid is also a broader phenomenological principle in Saer's work, independent of the city. In his dissertation on Saer and Roberto Bolaño, Carlos Walker carefully dissects descriptions from Saer's work to reveal a consistent "writing of images as grids [en retícula], whose decomposition of the real into its component sensory elements [elementos sensibles mínimos] creates, against the grain of a linear narration, a formal tension so exasperated that it comes out as an abstract figure, in this case, the grid" (74). Indeed, Saer's tendency to linger on sensory details overtakes the flow of his narratives to such an extent that it produces a formal schema for understanding these details. Walker stresses that when he talks about the grid, he is talking about a "different way of seeing, less indeterminate than it is geometric, that is, difficult to apprehend because it is abstract, not because it is chaotic" (76). Here, Walker also refers to Krauss's notion of the grid as a container for contradictions, but his use of her work is distinct from mine in

that it focuses on problems of representation (nevertheless, as will become clear, Walker's and my uses of Krauss are ultimately related in their aims). For him, the grid in Saer serves to contain the fragmented images of Saer's world (Walker 77). The grid in Saer is a way of organizing "the decomposition of the real" by looking at it through a "punctured optical field" (Walker 74, 76). That is, the grid provides a lens. It brings disparate details into focus. Like the detective genre in Saer, the grid is its own concrete manifestation in a typical environment—the preplanned city—but also as an abstract tool in service of Saer's loftier meditations.

So, like the detective genre, the grid could potentially contain infinite possibilities. But its form, omnipresent and repeating, always cuts them into a familiar shape. But in contrast to Walker's, my analysis doesn't stop with the grid's static, stable form. Thinking about the logic of Saer's grid also involves focusing on the potential movements proposed by a reticular system, at both the abstract and concrete levels. Grids entail certain paths. When we look at Saer's city, we see characters consistently traveling in right-angled trajectories, in accordance with the demands of the urban grid. (We will explore some key examples of this movement farther below.) This is the most obvious example of the grid in motion. But to dwell on only *physical* movement at right angles in Saer would be to cheat ourselves out of a broader principle in Saer. Indeed, these orthogonal paths also appear at an abstract level in Saer's writing, untethered to their physical context.

To explain what this abstract level of movement is, I must rely on what the architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri calls the "knight's move" of architectural tendencies. Tafuri begins his study *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* by grappling with the possibility of an ideological history of architecture. In attempting to formulate what such a history would look like, Tafuri borrows from Viktor Shklovsky the concept of the L-shaped move in which "the semantic structure of the artistic product executes a 'swerve,' a side step, with respect to the real, thereby setting in motion a process of 'estrangement' [...] and organizing itself as a perpetual 'surreality'" (*Sphere* 16). Here, Tafuri adopts a notion that stems from formalist literary studies and applies it to architecture. Instead of poetic language, the language in question is that of architecture. Being an artistic language, architecture's nature is to swerve. And if for architecture,

ideology is the real, then the L-shaped move means that an aesthetic's meaning "swerves" around its ideological roots to defamiliarize them without intersecting with them. Architecture moves parallel to ideology, then over it. (In his essay *Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology*, Tafuri regards ideology as a will toward a capitalist utopia, which, importantly, is inextricable from the development of the city as a medium for commerce (15, 29).)

Via Shklovsky, Tafuri points out that this L-shaped swerve mirrors the motion of the knight piece in chess. So far, the analogy makes intuitive sense: art moves in right angles with respect to ideology and thus avoids crossing it directly. But Tafuri goes further. According to him,

The parameters proper to a history of the laws that permit the existence of any architecture must thus be called upon—like the threads of Ariadne—to unravel the intricate and labyrinthine paths traveled by Utopia, in order to project, on a rectilinear grid, the "knight's move" institutionalized by poetic language. (*Sphere* 16)

Though formulated in dense prose, this image is stunning. For Tafuri, telling the story of how architectures arise from ideology would be equivalent to moving aesthetics around like knights on a chess board. One can imagine different architectural styles traveling in right angles on a grid, swerving along the same corners every time, and always escaping the rectangular voids that lie in between them. Here, a concrete parallel to Saer's fiction emerges. For example, consider the movements of the judge in *Cicatrices*, obeying the city's right angles:

I cross the intersection still on 25 de Mayo to the south, and everything is left behind. On the next corner, I turn right, travel a block, then turn left onto San Martín to the south. [...] Six more blocks and I reach the Plaza de Mayo. I have to wait briefly at a streetlight; the red light keeps me from moving. Then the red light shuts off, the green light comes on, and I turn right onto the plaza and follow the road around toward the courthouse. (Dolph, *Scars* 176)

Saer's characters navigating Santa Fe's streets perform Tafuri's knight's moves, bound by

the grid. They act like architectures, only moving orthogonally. The frustrated historian may want to examine architecture to discover the conditions that produced it, but “No work, not even the most pedestrian and unsuccessful, can ‘reflect’ an ideology preexisting itself” (*Sphere* 16-17). Likewise, Saer’s characters *cross*, *turn*, and *follow*, but always along lines that avoid the blocks that co-create them. It is worth underscoring that for Tafuri, the real and ideology are synonymous in that they refer to the conditions underlying the work (*Sphere* 17). When an artwork eschews the real, it eschews ideology, for in both cases the conditions that made its production possible are lost.<sup>9</sup>

But more fundamentally, Tafuri’s grid overlaps greatly with Walker’s account of the mechanisms of Saer’s fiction. As Walker points out, the grid’s voids are the site of the emergence of the real in Saer. He finds support for this in *El limonero real* and *Nadie nada nunca* particularly. From the former, he cites a striking scene in which the protagonist, Wenceslao, looks through his straw hat at the “strips of light with a flash at each point, horizontal and vertical, depending on the direction of the woven straw, amid the hot and pungent penumbra” (Saer, *El limonero* 136; Walker 68). The voids of the grid, present as the flashes of light through the hat, become even more fundamental in *Nadie nada nunca*. From this novel, Walker cites a passage that anticipates the structure of these flashes: Saer describes the sun’s falling rays as they intersect with a horizontal stretch of beach, creating “an image shattered or broken down, rather, into infinite fragments, not like a puzzle but more like a moving imprint” (Lane, *Nobody* 92; Walker 75). The fragments are important to Walker. Like the flashes of light through the hat, the sun’s rays break apart in the abstract grid of Saer’s images. Citing Krauss, Walker links these moments to Saer’s preoccupation with the perception of negativity, which ultimately points toward “sudden revelations of something other than the perceived world” (77). This is largely because the grid affords negative space between its lines, through which images can enter. This allows Saer to situate the decomposing real in the grid’s voids.

Now, Walker mostly takes the grid’s lines for granted—they are simply there to contain

---

<sup>9</sup>Farther on in the introduction which is the source of the above quotation, Tafuri is categorical: “ideology has changed into reality, even if the romantic dream of the intellectuals who proposed to guide the destiny of the productive universe has remained, logically, in the super structural sphere of utopia” (*Sphere* 20).

the fragmented real. But these lines have essential properties. As Tafuri shows us, grid lines can be the product of a distinctly architectural movement around the real, which actively generates the grid. And if we look closely, in the passages Walker cites, the hat's texture and the sun's rays contain such motion. They are not static figures (Saer speaks of a *moving* imprint, of the straw's changing *direction*). Instead, for a grid to even appear, the light must pass through the hat; the sun's rays must cross the horizontal beach. These are moments of a dynamic side-stepping of the real, produced by lines literally cutting across one another—just like Santa Fe's “straight and deserted streets that intersect every hundred yards [entre cortándose cada cien metros]” (Kantor 124; Saer, *Cuentos* 128). I would thus suggest that Saer's abstract grids point to an underlying structure of knight's moves, which, like architectural aesthetics, cut across the conditions that make them possible.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Saer's work employs orthogonal movement both in the urban fabric (those right angles characters traverse) and in the very mechanisms of narration (in the generation of the fragmented real). Crucially, for this interpretation of the grid, we need both its lines and its voids.

So, as structures, the grid and the detective genre tend to operate on concrete and abstract levels in Saer. Or, to put it differently, the grid and the detective genre are at once explicit in Saer's narratives—in which there are detectives and enigmatic crimes, urban grids and their development—and implicit, churning behind the literary system of his work. This insight is important for my analysis, since I read their concrete instantiations as manifestations of the same Freudian instinct for mastery over the uncontrollable and unpredictable. However, I don't believe that Saer settles for illustrating mastery through these structures or simply subverting our expectations of their use. Instead, I would contend that Saer employs these structures in earnest while simultaneously undercutting them. On the one hand, he demonstrates to us how powerfully the grid and the detective genre bring order to a disorganized world. Yet he also shows us that there is nothing natural or self-evident about them—they are conventions, little more. The rest of this chapter aims to explore this duality. Focusing on moments in which the grid and the detective form act simultaneously

---

<sup>10</sup>In Saer, the biggest knight's move of all may be his omission of the name “Santa Fe” from his fiction about the city.

as organizing principles within the same work, I claim that Saer gives us a vital account of the desire for mastery of an urban space. In doing so, he illustrates both the utility and futility of attempts to structure the city. In the interest of depth rather than breadth, I will concentrate my efforts on three works—*Cicatrizes*, “Recepción en Baker Street,” and *La grande*—with constant reference to other parts of Saer’s oeuvre.

## The Narrative Grid

Why these three works? Why not *La pesquisa* or *Nadie nada nunca*—Saer’s most recognizably detective-influenced novels? While my analysis will draw from critical responses to *La pesquisa* and *Nadie nada nunca*, I want to focus on moments from *Cicatrizes*, “Recepción en Baker Street,” and *La grande* because these three works form an extremely dense unity. First, these three works converge spatially much more than the novels do. *La pesquisa* begins with a subordinate plot line, set in Paris, which we later learn is a story told by Pichón in a bar in Santa Fe. This bar is the final point in a day of travel which has taken the friends Tomatis, Soldi, and Pichón to Rincón Norte, a rural municipality north of the city. The Rincón area is also the setting of *Nadie nada nunca*, in which city police must drive into the rural outskirts to investigate the serial killing of horses. Scenes of the city of Santa Fe itself are sporadic in these novels, which means that scenes of the city’s grid at work, though present, are few and far between. This is not the case in *Cicatrizes*, “Recepción en Baker Street,” and *La grande*. These three works overlap in physical space with *La pesquisa* and *Nadie nada nunca*, but they also engage with the city of Santa Fe much more consistently and at geographically-similar points.

Second, these three works converge thematically and formally. *Cicatrizes* tells the story of a crime’s impact on several inhabitants on Santa Fe by beginning with the most remotely-affected characters, transitioning to those nearer to the crime, and ending with the scene of the crime itself. Moreover, *Cicatrizes* makes use of several detective-story staples: secretly following a suspicious person, the seedy underbelly of a city, and a jaded and misanthropic criminal justice system, to name a few. “Recepción” finds Tomatis articulating the plot of a Sherlock Holmes story he is composing, which centers on a crime “in which an assassin

simultaneously kills seventeen victims’” (*Cuentos* 88). (These are Tomatis’ words; the reality is less dramatic than it sounds.) He also plans to write this story in meter, making him and Sophocles “the only authors to have treated a detective mystery in verse”—a reference to *Oedipus Rex*, which he considers a detective story (*Cuentos* 88). This idea, taken for granted in “Recepción,” receives a step-by-step explanation in *La grande*, a book that does not feature a central crime but that makes use of detective staples similar to those used in *Cicatrices*: following people, seedy bars, disillusioned lawyers, and misanthropy, to echo the above. Inversely, “Recepción” also makes use of detective tropes outside of its Sherlock Holmes narrative. The best example of this are the efforts of Nula, Tomatis’ friend, to deduce the page of the newspaper that a waiter is reading based on inferences about the waiter’s psychology and social predilections (*Cuentos* 93).

Additionally, while “Recepción” is the only work that poses a central enigma and solves it, *La grande* and *Cicatrices* also exploit the reader’s desire to get to the bottom of a mystery. In *La grande*, one mystery hinges on why Gutiérrez, who left Santa Fe for Europe during his youth, has come back to the city after all these years. Is it because the daughter of his former lover and her husband is biologically his? Is he indulging some personal fantasy of Santa Fe concocted in exile? Something darker and more disturbing? Likewise, in *Cicatrices*, one mystery deals with a young man, Ángel, discovering a doppelgänger of himself who also inhabits Santa Fe; another deals with the motives behind one man’s decision to murder his wife and child. In both *La grande* and *Cicatrices*, these mysteries go unresolved. They emerge, shimmer, and fizzle out. In the end, we can only speculate as to the nature of Ángel’s doppelgänger or the motives that led Gutiérrez to return to Santa Fe.

In “Recepción,” *Cicatrices*, and *La grande*’s shared use of detective genre conventions, we find a key organizational principle at work. The abstract figure of the grid can be seen to structure the use of the detective genre in Saer. Here, the game-like nature of the detective genre becomes particularly evident. Specifically, the plots of these detective parodies (“Recepción”) or noir-inspired works (*Cicatrices* and *La grande*) appear to consist of Tafuri’s knight’s moves, unfolding over a coordinate system of events, coincidences, and impromptu connections. I call this system the narrative grid. The purpose of this section is to argue for this system’s presence in these three works, with a view to a broader claim

about the mechanisms underlying Saer's fiction.

Now, clearly, this observation is not unique to Saer's work. The analogy between the detective novel and a game played out on a grid is already present during the detective novel's inchoate era. In an epilogue to *The Wrecker* (1892), a mystery novel that was originally conceived as a detective novel, Robert Louis Stevenson laments the contrived nature of the genre, "for the mind of the reader, always bent to pick up clews [*sic*], receives no impression of reality or life, rather of an airless, elaborate mechanism; and the book remains entralling, but insignificant, like a game of chess, not a work of human art" (551; qtd. in Steele 565). Stevenson's criticism is apt for the present discussion. Of course, Saer's use of the detective genre is so imbricated with the themes and stylistic hallmarks of his literature that it isn't true that one receives no impression of reality or life while reading him. His work is always deeply human. However, the rest of Stevenson's criticism stands—in fact, Saer (or rather, the typical Saer character) seems to be especially attracted to the airless, elaborate mechanism of the detective genre. For him, the skillful use of the genre seems to resemble a game of chess, especially since, in certain cases, narrative itself is broken down into discrete moves, each building on the last. In contrast to the paradigmatic example of Cortázar's *Rayuela*, this game doesn't thrive on changes in order. The pieces must move in a fixed sequence.

If we take this part of Saer's writing into account, the connection between "Recepción" and *La grande* becomes especially strong. Based on Nula's age, we can say the events of "Recepción" precede those of *La grande* by around a year.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in "Recepción," Tomatis appears to lay out some thoughts that will take on a sharper focus in *La grande*. Principally, Tomatis cites the idea that *Oedipus Rex* is a detective story in "Recepción" by way of legitimizing his attempts at composing a Sherlock Holmes story. Mentioning his plan to write the story in meter, Tomatis clarifies that his story "would occupy a place in history next to *Oedipus Rex*, since Sophocles and I would have been the only two authors to have written a detective story in verse" (*Cuentos* 88). In *La grande*, writing a letter to Pichón, Tomatis takes the premise that *Oedipus Rex* is a detective story for granted but adds a twist: we have been looking at the myth all wrong. Oedipus is the victim of the crime, not

---

<sup>11</sup>Compare *Cuentos* 84 and Dolph, *La Grande* 10.

its perpetrator. In this claim, there is much overlap between “Recepción,” *La grande*, and *La pesquisa*, to which “Recepción,” is a continuation. Tomatis’ Sherlock Holmes story and his rereading of *Oedipus Rex* have key structural similarities, which ultimately derive from a pattern Saer begins in *La pesquisa* (whose detective story Tomatis does *not* narrate). We can learn much from looking at Tomatis’ two stories side-by-side.

“Recepción”’s Sherlock Holmes story takes place in interwar London at 221B Baker Street, where an old Holmes still lives. An old Watson and an old detective Lestrade, joined by the latter’s nephew, have come over for dinner. The young nephew is a good but slightly jaded policeman. In agreeing to host the meal Holmes had asked Lestrade that his nephew come with his pistol and a pair of handcuffs. They get to talking about a recent crime in a town outside London which has attracted much attention: a nurse in a maternity ward has allegedly poisoned 16 babies before killing herself. The babies were all of the children born in that region in the last week. The nurse is supposed to have poisoned the milk in the early morning; having consumed the same poison herself, she died several hours before the poisoned milk was distributed to the babies. In other news, the two adolescent sons of one Lord W., a member of the English nobility, have hopes of claiming the throne. These are the facts.

Holmes divides the case into four parts: the maternity ward, its benefactors, the nurse, and the 16 babies. The maternity ward is new and one of its benefactors is Lord W. Lord W. is immensely wealthy and his power in England and abroad is comparable to that of the throne itself. After having attended to a member of the W. family, the nurse had only recently begun to work in the ward. She had also been off work until the night before the crime. As for the 16 babies, in all of the news stories about the crime, there figure only 15 names. (There were no twins.) Holmes concludes that a sixteenth baby had been placed in the ward. His hypothesis about the crime is the following. During her time in the W. household, the nurse and Lord W. had had an affair. The nurse became pregnant but did not tell Lord W. Lord W. finds out, however, and will do anything to prevent a “bastard” from having the right to succeed him. Fearing for her life, the nurse writes the events of her story down in a document to be leaked to the public if she were to die. Lord W. must now wait to kill her until after she has given birth. During the days in which she was absent from

her job, she gives birth. She conceals the newborn among the babies in the maternity ward. Having waited for this moment, Lord W. poisons her and all 16 babies in the absence of the knowledge of which one is rightfully his heir. Now, recently, Holmes has communicated to Lord W. that he is in possession of the document, and, confirming Holmes' hypothesis, Lord W. bursts in on the dinner at Baker Street to demand it (*Cuentos* 88-105).

Without intervening analysis, let's consider Tomatis' rereading of *Oedipus* in *La grande*. First, Oedipus is not Laius's son and the original descendant of him and Jocasta did not survive. So, the shepherd doesn't know Oedipus. Second, the oracles are wrong, in the absence of facts that substantiate their predictions. Third, Oedipus consults the oracle because of an unfounded paranoia that struck him when he was called a "bastard" in the bar. Thus, Oedipus arrives in Thebes and irritates Tiresias by solving the sphinx's riddle. Creon is also irritated by Oedipus' arrival, as his original plans were to do away with Jocasta after Laius' death and claim the throne of Thebes. The shepherd witnesses Oedipus kill Laius and, as the only witness, flees fearing that Oedipus will kill him. Creon then sends the shepherd to Corinth to find out why Oedipus exiled himself and comes up with a plan to eliminate him and Jocasta by playing along with Oedipus' fear that he will commit incest and parricide. Creon tells the irritated Tiresias that Oedipus is Laius and Jocasta's son and makes the shepherd and the messenger from Corinth falsely reveal to Oedipus that he has committed the crimes he feared he would. Jocasta hangs herself, Oedipus claws out his eyes, and Creon takes over the throne according to plan (Dolph, *La Grande* 240-42).

Structurally—not to mention thematically—these two stories about out-of-wedlock children bear striking similarities. First, the supposed perpetrator is actually the victim of the crime. Second, the mastermind behind the crime is motivated by the position he wishes to occupy or continue to occupy as a result of the crime. Third, the mastermind exploits false connections (suicide equals guilt, prophecy equals reality) that people are ready to believe in. And fourth, there is a hypothetical key to showing the victim's innocence (the document, the real descendant who did not survive). In this sense, the two stories are variations on a single structure, which also appears in *La pesquisa*'s plot, in which the supposed murderer of numerous elderly Parisian women can also be shown to be a victim of a sophisticated crime committed by the mastermind, his coworker. (Here the false connection

is Morvan's psychological profile and the hypothetical key is a shred of paper.) Saer, the Stevensonian chess-master, exploits this structure because of its fundamental malleability: like movable parts, characters and events conform themselves to different arrangements. In "Recepción," one is shown to be more valid than the other—Sherlock cannot fail—but in *La pesquisa* and *La grande*, the question is left open. Accordingly, Julio Premat couldn't be more correct in saying of *La pesquisa* that "The apparent order of the detective genre masks, in reality, a narrative chaos barely dominated by the denouement. This tension between order and the dissolution of the narrative is what is at play in Saer's novel" (*La dicha* 362). This is as true of *La pesquisa* as it is of the three works I have looked at so far. In them, chaos adjusts itself to the order of crime-solving methods. The messiness of the real is neatly circumscribed by the grid of narrated events and movements. The same abstract rectilinear form that appears in Walker's readings of *Nadie nada nunca* and *El limonero real* applies to this narrative structure: the real shines through the latticework of the text.

But the effects of the narrative grid go beyond these brief exercises in Stevensonian narrative chess. We have seen that in "Recepción"'s frame story, in *Cicatrices*, and *La grande*, there are also detective conventions at work: person-following, deductions, a crippled legal system, etc. Yet these conventions appear dislodged from the tight structure of the stories above. Instead of pertaining to the dense cluster of events around a crime, they seem to be reverberations or echoes of a formally-recognizable detective narrative such as that of "Recepción." This is especially evident in *La grande*, which is dominated by hints of conspiracy or foul play (e.g., Gutiérrez's history or the disappearance of Gato and Elisa), but in which the enigmas these hints raise never take on the form of murder-detection-resolution. I believe that the narrative grid also controls these moments, yet more remotely and on a larger scale. As Beatriz Sarlo has indicated, description subsumes plot in Saer. Saer doesn't fill plots with descriptions. He writes descriptions, and events happen within them (Sarlo, *Zona* 44-6, 101-04). Yet, at the same time, his novels exhibit a narrative structure—even *La grande*, in which almost nothing seems to happen, is structured around the lead-up to a cookout. All in all, events must happen, and the shape these events take will depend on the formal tendencies of Saer's body of work. One of these tendencies is the grid. So, for me, these floating moments of genre are points at which the narrative

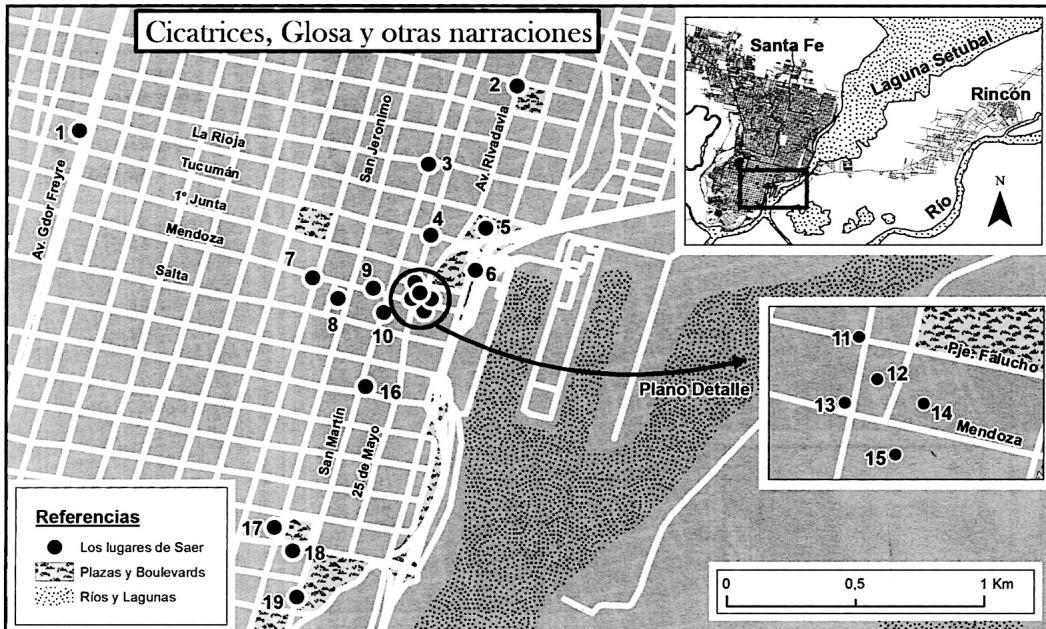
structure exhibits traces of the abstract grid, teasing order out from the chaos of the real. It is not only the physical grid that limits characters' movements through the city. Tied to the detective genre's imposition of order on the real, the narrative grid also limits characters' movements and narrative events in just as real a way.

## The Bus-Station / First-Corner Area: The Narrative Grid at Work

Now, the frame story of “Recepción” takes place entirely in and around the central Santa Fe bus station, across the street from the bar in which *La pesquisa* unfolds, later on in the day of the events of *La pesquisa*. Both the bar and the station are significant, but the station is especially significant. In *La pesquisa*, Saer describes Soldi’s view from the bar onto “the dark street, the low building of the bus terminal” (Lane, *Investigation* 178). Based on its surroundings, the bar could be the Bar Montecarlo, which appears in *Cicatrices* as a reference point for two characters, Ángel and the judge assigned to the crime. It might also be a bar very close to it.<sup>12</sup> As for the bus station, it appears innumerable times in *Cicatrices* as a landmark and destination—for Tomatis’ friends, for the maid Sergio Escalante hires, and for a judge, driving aimlessly around the city. We could say that while “Recepción” takes place in the station, *Cicatrices*’s geography revolves around the station. As the “*Cicatrices, Glosa y otras narraciones*” map from Beatriz Sarlo’s *Zona Saer* shows, the station (point 15) is at the center of *Cicatrices*’ disparate loci (points 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19) (Figure 1).

“Recepción”’s bar and the station lie on the same horizontal street, Mendoza, which

<sup>12</sup>Saer’s description of the bar in “Recepción” and *La pesquisa* could place it slightly to the right of point 13 in Figure 1, roughly across the street from point 15. From the perspective of Nula, at the entrance of the bus station, “The bar at the corner seems remote from the other side of the street [remoto del otro lado de la calle] [...] a little group of people, avoiding the drizzle, squished into the more or less dry space, contemplate the street and the rain, and given that the group finds itself at a point of observation opposite to Nula’s, they contemplate the entrance to the station where Nula is standing as well” (Saer, *Cuentos* 85). The difficulty of knowing where exactly the bar is rests in Nula’s point of view. The street he is looking across may either be 25 de Mayo or Mendoza—“Recepción” is not clear about on which street the entrance lies; nor it is clear whether “remote from the other side of the street” means that the bar seems remote from the northeast corner of Mendoza and 25 de Mayo (which would suggest but not guarantee point 13) or simply remote from the sidewalk in front of it (which would suggest that the bar is across from point 15). Either way, we can be sure the bar is on Mendoza, within view of the station.



*Los lugares de Saer*: 1. Cine Avenida. 2. Bar Tokio Norte. 3. Diario. 4. Banco Provincial. 5. Palomar. 6. Estacionamiento. 7. Casa de Tomatis. 8. Mercado Central. 9. Bar La Modelo. 10. Bar de la Galería. 11. Hotel Palace. 12. La Primera esquina. 13. Bar Montecarlo. 14. Correo. 15. Estación de ómnibus. 16. Teatro Municipal. 17. Tribunales. 18. Casa de Gobierno. 19. Casa del Juez.

Figure 1: Sarlo's map of key locations in these three works, one of three maps produced in collaboration with Roberto Maurer. 1. The Avenida theater. 2. The Tokio Norte bar. 3. Newspaper (building). 4. Provincial Bank. 5. Palomar (Park). 6. Parking spots. 7. Tomatis' house. 8. Central market. 9. The La Modelo bar. 10. The Arcade bar. 11. Palace Hotel. 12. The first corner. 13. The Montecarlo bar. 14. Post office. 15. Bus station. 16. Municipal theater. 17. Courthouse. 18. Government offices. 19. The judge's house (*Zona 112, 114*).

intersects with two main vertical streets, San Martín and 25 de Mayo (see Figure 1). In *La grande*, this particular area becomes decisive for Nula during a scene in which he follows Lucía, a woman with whom he will develop a voyeuristic relationship. Their first meeting is conditioned by the logic of the grid, to which Saer adheres precisely:

For them to meet, several things had to coincide, [...] that one September afternoon, Lucía walked past the corner of Mendoza and San Martín—where the Siete Colores bar now occupies the spot that for years belonged to the Gran Doria—at the exact moment when Nula (who after finishing his coffee, had been detained for a few seconds by a guy who shouted something from his table about a Public Law textbook) walked out onto San Martín and looked up, seeing her, dressed in red, through the crowd on the bright avenue (Dolph, *La Grande* 81-2).

Continuing this scene after some digressions, Saer details the urban serendipity of this moment. Had Nula not been held up by a potential customer—Nula and his mother sell law books—he “might have turned down Mendoza to the west to catch a bus at the Plaza del Soldado” or he might have traversed San Martín ahead of Lucía for “the twelve or thirteen blocks to his house without once noticing she was there” (Dolph, *La Grande* 103). Instead, the woman in red catches his attention and he follows her north on San Martín until the pedestrian promenade ends. Here, they turn right, cross one block, and continue northward on 25 de Mayo, the next street to the east of San Martín. At the next horizontal street intersecting with 25 de Mayo (which, though unnamed in the book, is Junín), they switch to the east sidewalk but continue northward. At this point, following the woman, Nula has ended up at the entrance to his own house, in a two-part apartment complex on 25 de Mayo. Oddly, the woman enters the complex only to exit moments later. She reverses course, moving south and then east on the cross-street, and peers into several other dwellings. Turning again at the corner of the cross-street, she makes her way northward on the first street parallel to 25 de Mayo, and stops to observe a doctor’s office. Once she reaches the end of that block, she turns west onto a cross-street immediately above the lower one. Halfway down that street, she enters a house, locks the door, and disappears into it (see Figure 2 [Dolph, *La Grande* 104-08]).



Figure 2: Nula’s path as he follows Lucía (Dolph, *La Grande* 104-08; *La grande* 98-101). Midway up the final block, Nula reverses his direction and follows Lucía around it, indicated by the transition to red.

This scene takes on a deep significance for Nula. Essentially, his fascination with the woman in red, Lucía, transforms the block on which he lives with his mother. As it turns out, the doctor's office at which she stopped is that of her husband, Riera. Riera is a handsome middle-aged man with a penchant for organized adultery. Nula identifies Riera and, malingering, goes to see him. Soon he enters into a psychological game in which Riera and Lucía make Nula witness their marital and sexual life in exchange for the possibility that Lucía will have sex with him. This game eventually goes stale, circumstances change, and Nula walks away. For my analysis, the details are unimportant. What is critical is that the drama of Lucía, Riera, and Nula unfolds mostly on this block, on which Nula's house, Lucía's house, and Riera's office sit. The Lucía-Riera-Nula triangle emerges from the city's layout itself. (Tellingly, Nula's first hypothesis when he sees Lucía stop at symmetrical but seemingly incoherent points on his block is that she is an "architect or an urban planner" studying the city fabric (Dolph, *La Grande* 109).) Beginning on the corner of Mendoza and San Martín—that three-block urban nucleus where the bus station and bar from "Recepción," *Cicatrices*, and *La pesquisa* are—this triangle moves northward to situate itself on a single block, a unit of the grid. That is, *La grande* uses the grid to organize and control the events

that unfold within it. Saer is right when he says that for the meeting between Nula and Lucía to occur, several things had to coincide. Had Santa Fe followed a different urban plan and had Mendoza and San Martín not intersected at right angles, Nula might not have easily spotted Lucía. Had Mendoza and San Martín been winding, Parisian streets, he might not have been able to follow her effectively. Had the city's grid not cut its streets so that Nula's house, Lucía's office, and Rivera's office would occupy the same block, Nula might never have been able to identify Riera and step into his life. Riera and Lucía, in turn, might never have stepped into his.

It is this reading of the grid that I want to apply to "Recepción" and *Cicatrices* in addition to *La grande*. The central-north portion of Santa Fe is a privileged locus in these three works. Appropriately for a space containing a transit hub—the central bus station—it is a site of beginnings, forays, departures, and arrivals. More important, all three works depend on the organizing principle of the grid to incite or shape to their narrative events. In *La grande*, this incitement principle is laid out in the pivotal moment in Nula's life we explored above. In "Recepción," Tomatis, Soldi, and Pichón spot Nula from an adjacent part of the grid, and this moment changes the course of both parties' nights. Nula recognizes this explicitly with a feeling of relief: perhaps this chance encounter will allow him to avoid the exigencies of his job and "end the night on a more agreeable note" (*Cuentos* 87). Finally, in *Cicatrices*, Saer simply refers to the northeast corner of the intersection between 25 de Mayo and Mendoza as "the first corner" ("la primera esquina"), point 12 in Figure 1. When Ángel randomly decides to follow "the first suspicious-looking guy I saw," he ends up circling the first corner, first to the bus station and then to the Palace Hotel, point 11 in Sarlo's map (Dolph, *Scars* 36 [see Figure 3]). When the judge in *Cicatrices* drives aimlessly through the city, his course also revolves around the first corner. The way this works can be observed in a map of the city's major motor arteries which I found at a gas station not too far from the physical Santa Fe's first corner Figure 4). Ultimately, we could say that the bus-station / first-corner area is like the point of impact from which ripples extend outward. As with Nula's walk or his impromptu meeting with Tomatis et al., one event in this area leads to another, which leads to another, and so on. One interaction in space ramifies, expands.

Accordingly, the bus-station / first-corner area is one of the places where we can best

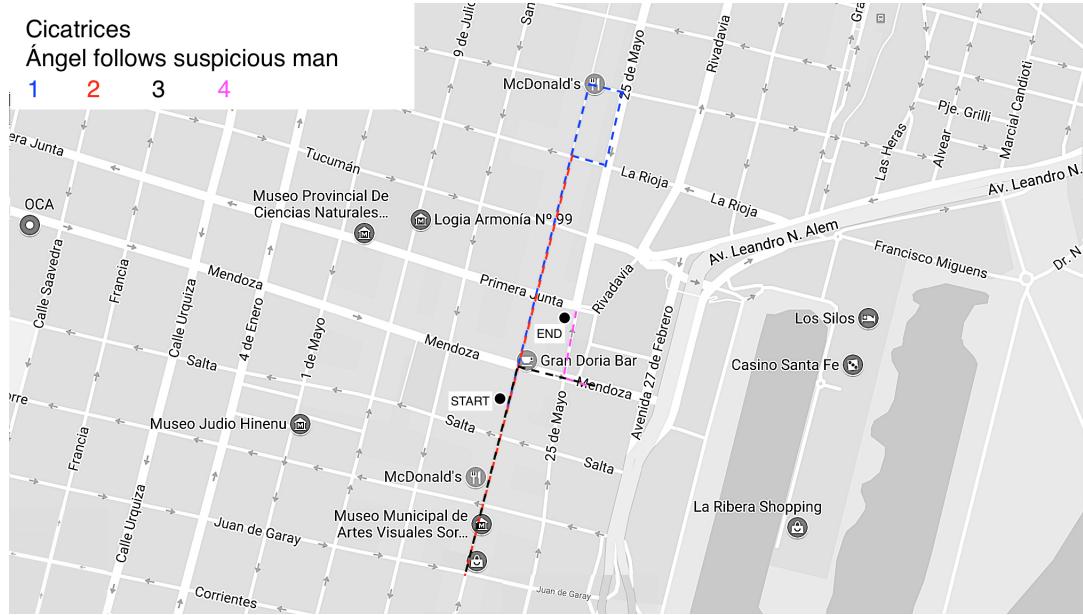


Figure 3: Ángel’s path as he follows the “suspicious” man (Dolph, *Scars* 37-38; *Cicatrices* 48-49). The colors of the lines, matched to the numbers, indicate the sequence in which Ángel’s movements take place. Note the several overlapping lines on San Martín, generated by Ángel’s walking up and down the street at various moments on his route.

see the organizing logic of the grid at work. I have concretized this interpretation in a new map of this area of Santa Fe (Figure 5), focusing on the loci of “Recepción,” *Cicatrices*, and parts of *La grande*. With this map at hand, we can see more easily how the grid literally sets the stage for the actions and reactions that shape characters’ lives. Specifically, the outward ripple effect of the interactions the grid mediates becomes clearer. First, it is the grid’s geometry of right angles that allows Nula to *see* Lucía around point 9, that allows Tomatis to *see* Nula at point 15, and that allows Ángel to *see* the suspicious-looking guy around point 10—yet another chance encounter. But not only does the grid’s form determine how these encounters happen; it determines how their effects manifest themselves. Thus, only when the Nula of *La grande* sees Lucía at point 9 does he discover the symmetry of points 2, 20, 21, and 22, on the block on which his house (point 2) rests. Only when Tomatis, Soldi, and Barco, gathered at point 13 in “Recepción,” see Nula standing at point 15, does their night take a different turn, eventually leading to the exposition of Tomatis’ Sherlock Holmes narrative at point 15. Only when Ángel sees the suspicious-looking guy at point 10, does he follow him to the bus station (point 15), to the Montecarlo Bar (point 13), and finally

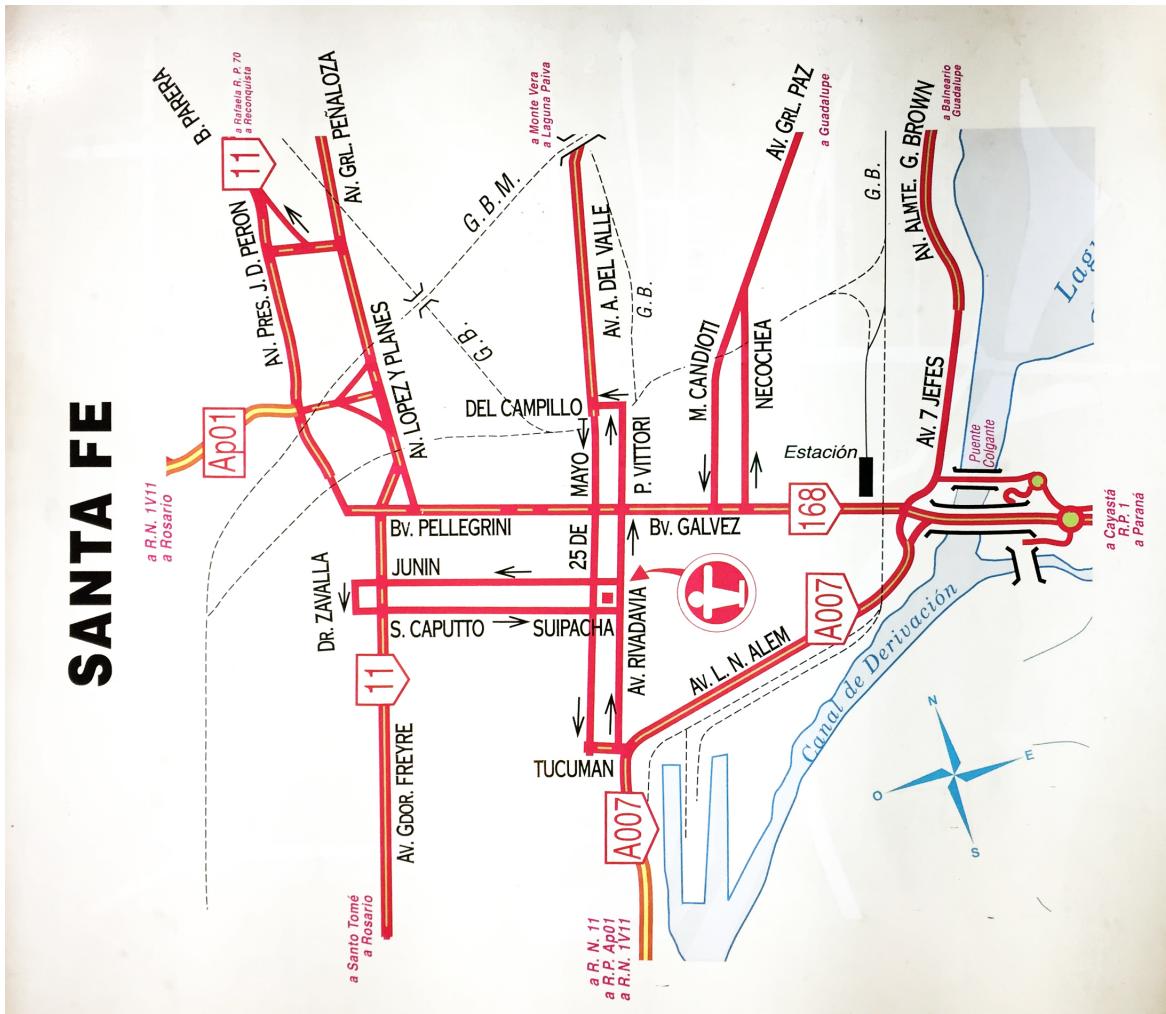


Figure 4: Map from a gas station in Santa Fe, May 2017. I have rotated the image 90° counterclockwise from its original orientation to make it more legible vis-à-vis the other maps in this chapter. The street labeled “TUCUMAN” crosses the first corner / bus station area. Note the complementary manner in which 25 de Mayo and Rivadavia Avenue channel the city’s traffic in and out of that area.

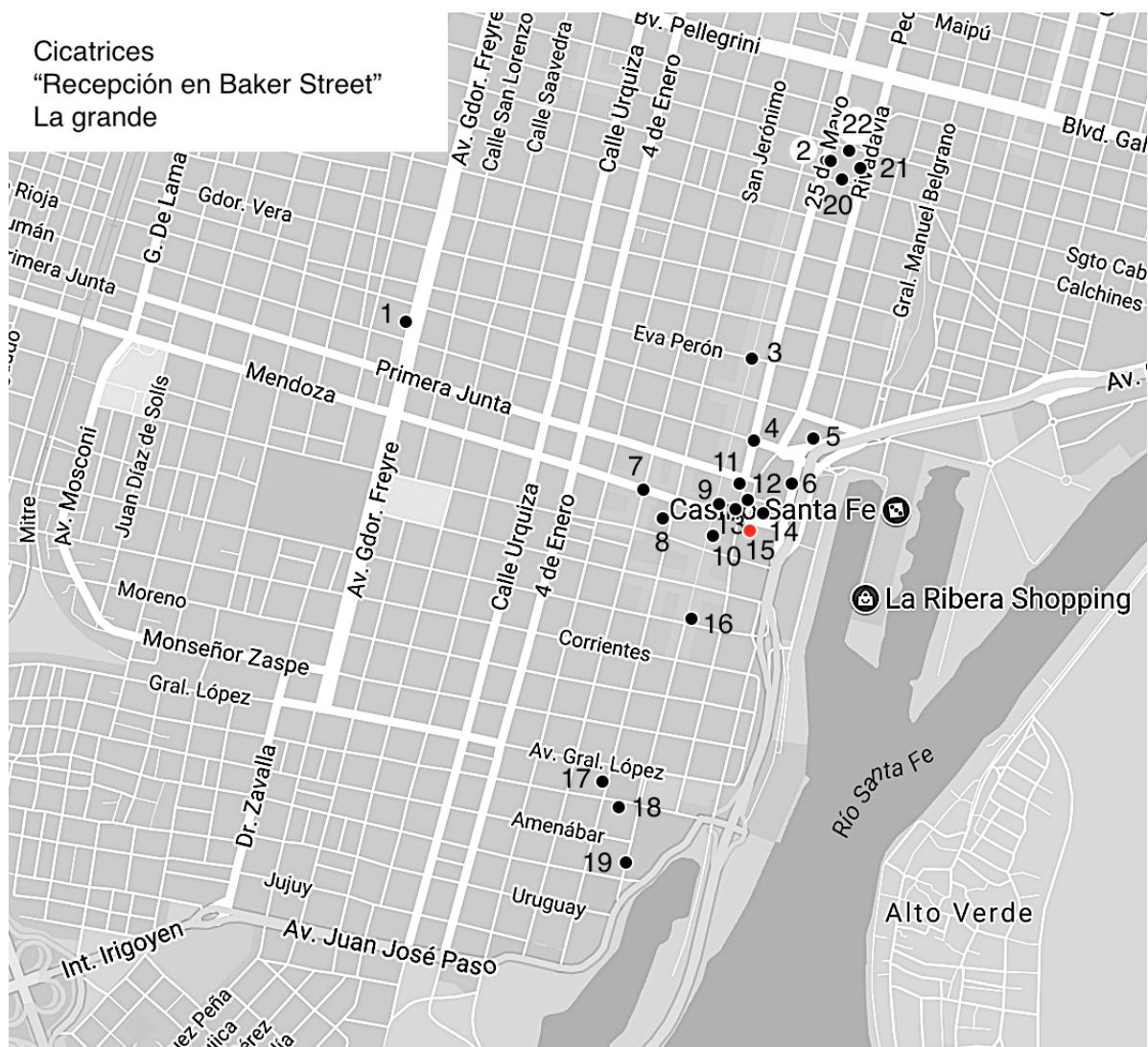


Figure 5: I have preserved Sarlo’s numeration for the landmarks in Figure 1 and simply added on to it. N.b.: this map is not exhaustive, especially with regard to *La grande*, in which much action takes place in Rincón, to the east (right) of this map.

to the Palace Hotel (point 11). As Le Corbusier observed, the checkerboard pattern of the American city dramatically simplifies urban navigation. No matter how unpredictable the motives behind people's movements are, they must obey the grid's regime of right angles and blocks.

Now, as we saw earlier, right-angled movement in Saer functions at abstract and concrete levels: in the city itself and in the lines and voids of Saer's fiction, respectively. But here, we may begin to see a deeper connection that unifies these two levels. In other words, it's obvious that the *physical* referent of Santa Fe, being a gridded city, already provides the grid for Saer to work with. The grid is baked into the map itself. But could it also be that Saer's abstract image-grid *also* structures urban situations in his work, independently of the Santa Fe grid? Do the abstract and concrete collide? Here again, I rely on Walker, who points to a description of the memory of certain city blocks in the titular story of Saer's 1976 collection of short stories *La mayor* (translated by Roanne Kantor as *The One Before*). Before getting to this memory, however, Walker finds its origin in another grid-image: Tomatis looking through the grid of the fabric of his pullover as he takes it off (Walker 80). This instance of a punctured optical field essentially conditions Tomatis' memory before he closes his eyes and remembers a scene of urban life: drinking coffee on a street corner. This conditioning is important, as it provides an abstract basis for arriving at the city grid.

At this point in my analysis, the exact location of this memory should not surprise us. It is the corner of Mendoza and San Martín, exactly where Nula first saw Lucía. It is at the heart of the bus-station / first corner area. To illustrate how Saer treats the city grid—this time in memory—I will cite some of the part of "La mayor" that Walker cites along with a part he doesn't cite:

In the corners of my memory, mobile, confused, there are, toward the center, clearer, the stains of the morning that move, the black, green, yellow, blue, white, stains, stains of the luminous morning that float, changing, not simply, like living organisms, their form, but also, and always, their place: the blue sky, full of sparkling splinters, smooth, from above the gray or white houses, the cars advancing slowly along Mendoza, from west to east, red, white, green,

blue, black, yellow [...] and the borders, crumbling, or graying, really, of the memory, move, stretch, or shrink, the memory that has been rising up, so to speak, from the black, and that flickers, patently, at the heart of the abyss [...] four corners bathed in a brilliant roar, and above all, floating from Mendoza to San Martín, the thing that would bring, like a black vessel, with its cars, its windows, its sounds, its yellow scarf, its frozen light, to this point, this memory (Kantor 144-45; Walker 81).

Here we descend on the grid, coming into focus as though it were suspended in a blank space that slowly, in accordance with Tomatis' memory, takes on the qualities of a recognizable place. While Walker reads in this moment a "logical antecedent" to *El limonero real* and *Nadie nada nunca*, I find a different link between the abstract grid and this memory (81).<sup>13</sup> For me, this memory of the grid is both anterior and posterior to images like that of the straw hat. Walker is right that the concrete space of the city grid, formally abstracted in memory, anticipates the decomposition of the real that the grid helps organize in such images. However, I would argue that moments of the grid's extreme abstraction like that of the straw hat anticipate, in turn, movement through the grid in works like "Recepción," *Cicatrices*, and *La grande*. The grid is simply a form. It exists independently of the urban context; indeed, in Saer, it preexists the city.

To see why, we need only to look to Tafuri. Shunting the real into the grid's voids relies on L-shaped movement through the grid. This works as well for architectural history as it does for people in a city grid. To live in a gridded city is to perpetually take the long way to the other end of a right angle in the service of order. To build within a grid is to enclose the real within a mechanism that prevents it from spilling over into disorder. As the architect and architectural theorist Rem Koolhaas writes of Manhattan, "The Grid defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos" (20). Perhaps truer words have never been spoken of Saer's use of the grid. At both the abstract level and on the ground, Saer

---

<sup>13</sup>Walker doesn't mean this chronologically, by the way: *El limonero real* (1974) was published before *La mayor* (1976).

deals with the messiness of the real through the grid. In his fictional Santa Fe, characters perform knight's moves through the city, in which they mirror a history of architectures on a checkerboard, producing the plots of Saer's narratives through disorderly coincidences. In Saer's descriptions themselves, we find gridded images, which organize the disorder of the real in the voids of the grid. Often, then, the grid is how Saer masters the real. Characters and descriptions fall into this game, where line and void conspire to preserve an order that, like Koolhaas's Manhattan, is a rigid chaos of impromptu meetings, hasty decisions, fragments, and flashes. Read synchronically, the area around the bus station and the first corner serves as an excellent illustration of this organizing principle at work. However, as Walker's analysis should make clear, the grid stretches much further into Saer's fiction. It is at the marrow of his narratives themselves.

Yet, Saer does not leave things there. If Saer had wished to use detective tropes every now and then in his fiction or write a good detective parody once in a while, he might have done so excellently, and we could still arrive at the same analysis: Saer moves narrative objects around on the physical and abstract grids to organize the real. But *that* Saer probably wouldn't be too interesting. His narrative grid would be complacent. It would be an empty demonstration of mastery—the equivalent of the boy Freud observes showing us how well he can play the game he himself has invented. Moreover, that Saer would have little interesting to say about grids in cities. His conclusion would be Le Corbusier's ecstatic praise of Manhattan: *The grid works! Look how easy it is to move things around in it!* In a word, that Saer would risk repeating one of the follies of the interwar urbanism of which Le Corbusier was at the forefront. His enthusiasm for the grid could allow him to place too much faith in it.

Fortunately, Saer shows us the arbitrariness of the grid as a manner of bestowing order. To see this, we only need to look at the structure we found in Tomatis's Oedipus and Sherlock stories—parallel to that of *La pesquisa*. Two interpretations fit the facts. The narrative grid, which is indifferent to the outcome of its impositions, can spit out two different and even contradictory arrangements of events. This is the staple of Saer's use of the detective structure. The suspicion of fallibility haunts the grid. Was the criminal Oedipus or Creon? Can we know? Even Sherlock's hypothesis in “Recepción” seems—perhaps—to

rest on so many assumptions as to devour itself. In this sense, Saer is like a version of Le Corbusier that recognizes the allure of mastery and never fully gives in. He is like a version of boy in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that realizes that the satisfaction that his game gives him does not translate to power over the uncontrollable and unpredictable outside world. Mastery, in Saer, is tempered with a recognition of the real's messiness. Yes—Saer seems to say—the grid *works*, but this doesn't mean it resolves any important questions. Why does Nula get involved in a voyeuristic relationship with a woman who is obviously using him? Why can't Ángel accept what is plainly in front of his face: that Tomatis is his mother's lover? Why does Tomatis spend so much time obsessively tinkering with stories about other people's lives? The answers to these questions rest in the infinite density of the real, framed in the voids of the grid. The grid won't help us get to them, because by its nature it moves around them. Perhaps Saer has only confirmed what post-Corbusian urbanism knows at heart: being able to find your way in a grid does not make you any less lost.

## Chapter Two

### Saer as a Narrative Functionalist

#### The City as a Form

There is a key moment in Saer's 1986 *Glosa* that comes at the end of the first third of the novel, just as its protagonists have finished traversing the first seven blocks of a twenty-one-block walk across Santa Fe. The walkers, Ángel Leto and el Matemático ("the Mathematician"), must cross a busy intersection.<sup>14</sup> Leto and el Matemático assess this situation. Thrown together by chance, they are very different walkers. As Martín Kohan has pointed out, Leto—having decided to skip work today—walks aimlessly but steadfastly, while el Matemático walks leisurely but with a purpose (147-48). In fact, Leto and el Matemático are in all respects very different people. Yet, in characteristically rich detail, Saer tells us how these two walkers suddenly fall into perfect synchronicity:

Maintaining their identical, regular pace, Leto and the Mathematician step off the sidewalk into the street and start to cross. A slow-moving car intercepts them, and when it slows at the intersection, they move ahead of it, both at the same time, without stopping or varying their pace, without even looking at it, like two robots with a preprogrammed electronic mechanism which makes them automatically avoid obstacles, and when they reach the opposite sidewalk both, simultaneously, bend their left leg and lift it over the curb [por encima del cordón]. (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 68; *Glosa* 86)<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>This Ángel is different from the Ángel of *Cicatrices*. They share several similarities (both are self-conscious outsiders, bashful, and prone to random walks around the city), but have distinct professions, family histories, and individual backgrounds in each novel. Furthermore, in *Cicatrices*, Saer doesn't include the last name Leto in any reference to Ángel. Ultimately, Ángel and Leto may be two sketches of the same character, and they may taken to represent an irresolvable overlap within Saer's world, in the manner of Ángel's clone in *Cicatrices*. Following critics like Beatriz Sarlo, I recognize an obvious continuity between the Ángel of *Cicatrices* and the Leto of *Glosa* (see Sarlo, "La condición" 899). Nevertheless, collapsing them into same person effaces a complex doubleness that complements some of the main concerns of this chapter. Accordingly, in this chapter, I will refer to "Leto," not "Ángel," to distinguish the two; however, this should not be taken to fully separate the two Ángels.

<sup>15</sup>I have changed the last word of the quotation of Dolph's translation from Dolph's original "cable" to my suggestion, "curb." (The rest of the quotation is unmodified.) Here and elsewhere in his translation of *Glosa*, entitled *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington*, Dolph translates the Spanish "cordón" as "cable," "cable

This scene is especially gripping in light of *Glosa*'s relationship to Saer's choice of setting. Perhaps more than any other, *Glosa* is Saer's novel of the city: Santa Fe's system of streets and intersections literally organizes *Glosa*'s story from beginning to end. The book's sections are split into equal chunks of city blocks, and the events that unfold over its course are tied to specific points in Santa Fe's urban fabric. In fact, the city's layout permeates the novel's narrative to such an extent that it is often difficult to separate the narrative structure from the city's structure. Events appear just as much a product of the city as they are of narrative necessity.

Within this highly-controlled context, Leto and el Matemático's synchronicity poses difficult questions. Are their movements a random overlap due to chance? Or does the city, being totally conflated with *Glosa*'s narrative, condition and anticipate their movement to such an extent as to "preprogram" it? If the latter is the case, do Leto and el Matemático truly choose their own course or do they, "like robots," move around in the city grid along predetermined lines? How deterministic is urban space?

Saer's Santa Fe provides us with a vivid testing ground for these questions, which are at the heart of modern projects to organize the city. Specifically, moments like the one above, in which the urban form and its narrative function are almost inseparable, point to principles in Saer's work that parallel modernist urbanism's preoccupation with the unity of form and function. In accordance with architectural conventions, I call this unity "functionalism," and, in accordance with literary conventions, I refer to Saer's attention to narrative structure as "formalism" or in terms of "forms." Thus, this chapter aims to explore the analogy between Saer's formalism and the functionalism of modernist urbanists such as Le Corbusier and Josep Lluís Sert. Broadly, I will argue that Saer's fiction embodies architectural modernism's functionalist ethos and, at the same time, reveals its inescapable tendency to

guardrail," or "guardrail" (*Sixty-Five* 10, 40, 61, 92, 167, etc.). However, I believe that Dolph's "cable" is the result of a misinterpretation of the word "cordón," which is often translatable as cable, rope, cord, etc., but which here may be used idiomatically to mean "curb." That is, there is no cable or rail running along the sidewalk. It is solely a curb that demarcates the space between the road and the sidewalk. To verify this idiomatic usage, we don't even need to look outside the book. Saer gives us a definition when Leto warns el Matemático to pay attention to the "cordón," fearing that he will "fail to perceive the change in height of a few centimeters between the sidewalk and the street and fall to the ground"—that is, that he will fail to perceive the exact thing that in American English is called a curb (my emphasis; Saer, *Glosa* 197). (Strangely, in this passage, Dolph insists on "'guardrail'" but otherwise produces a translation that is very similar to mine (*Sixty-Five* 167).)

ward disorder. In Saer's Santa Fe, form overlaps with function in obvious ways that suggest a link between Saer's construction of fictional space and some modernists' construction of architectural space. However, as with the city grid, Saer is not content with formal mastery alone. At intermittent but recognizable moments, Saer's writing undercuts functionalism's dependence on untenable assumptions about human behavior in space. Ultimately, I read Saer as accepting functionalism's pragmatics while revealing its paradoxical tendency toward doubleness—that is, function, by controlling form, duplicates it uncontrollably. Here, learning from Saer becomes urgent for planning and architecture, which are still reeling from the historical failures of functionalism to make good on its promises of smarter, more efficient cities.

I have chosen to center my argument about Saer as a functionalist on *Glosa* because I think it is Saer's work of fiction that comes closest to being a work of architecture and planning. In *Glosa*, the underlying preoccupations with urban systems that I have read in works like *Cicatrizes* (1969), *Lugar* (2000), and *La grande* (2005) become explicit, systematized, and rigid. Additionally, any reading of *Glosa* will inherently bear widespread implications for the rest of Saer's fiction. Because of its deep temporal, referential, and toponymic connections to multiple other Saer narratives, the novel occupies a central position in the corpus, paralleled perhaps only by *La grande*. Palpably, all roads lead to *Glosa*. Accordingly, building an interpretative framework out of the novel will allow me to extend my argument for Saer as a functionalist to a wider swath of works. In this capacity, *Glosa* will be for the corpus exactly what the literal interpretation of its title promises: a gloss, a key for interpretation, translation, and understanding. Its centrality will illuminate my contention that Saer is not only a functionalist in *Glosa* but a functionalist, to varying degrees, across his oeuvre. Nevertheless, this tendency probably reaches its fullest realization in this breakthrough 1986 novel, for reasons that lie in both its interpretation and its production. Accordingly, I will argue inductively, moving from *Glosa*'s unique position in the corpus toward the larger Saerian functionalism it distills.

The bulk of *Glosa*'s narrative unfolds in Santa Fe. It follows the acquaintances Leto and el Matemático as they embark, after a chance meeting, on a walk across the city from north to south. Both are young residents of the city. On their walk, the subject of their

conversation becomes a party that neither of them attended—in Leto’s case, because he was not invited and in el Matemático’s case, because he was away on a tour of Europe. The party celebrated the birthday of a legendary figure in Santa Fe’s artistic and literary circles, Washington Noriega, and Leto and el Matemático are eager to speculate on secondhand information about the event. As they speak, the reader learns more about these characters’ personal histories and differing social positions. At one point, they bump into Tomatis—a cooler friend of the two—and their recreated accounts of what happened at the party conflict with his first-hand experience. Mostly, *Glosa* plays out like a comedy, however, the novel also moves ahead in time to these characters’ futures to reveal a series of tragic outcomes brought on by increased political repression in Argentina. In one flash-forward, Leto becomes a guerrilla militant and eventually commits suicide to avoid an imminent ambush. In another, el Matemático’s wife is abducted and, fearing for his safety, he leaves for Europe. As for Tomatis, we see that his depression—already discernible during his chat with Leto and el Matemático on their walk—worsens as he ages. Meanwhile, as Leto and el Matemático approach the end of their walk, a vague sense of kinship has formed between them. Finally, el Matemático parts ways with Leto, and the latter arrives at a park where he witnesses a flock of birds frantically circling a yellow beach ball floating in a lake. Leto (and *Glosa*’s semi-omniscient narrator) speculate on the incomprehensibility of the object for the birds, and a tentative parallel is drawn to human reactions to opaque phenomena. With this, the novel ends.

Although *Glosa* stands well on its own, the novel’s narrative is far from self-contained. In fact, it is deeply interdependent with a bevy of other moments in Saer’s fiction. Underscoring *Glosa*’s crucial relationship to a much broader temporal continuity than appears in the novel itself, Beatriz Sarlo focuses on the death of Leto and the novel’s account of the abduction of two other prominent characters in Saer’s fiction, Gato and Elisa. *Glosa*’s revelation of the ends of their lives shocks Sarlo not only because of her attachment to “a category in crisis, the character” but precisely because previous works by Saer had left open the question of their ultimate fates (“La condición” 897-8). While a nineteenth-century writer might have neatly wrapped up these characters’ lives and deaths within a single novel, Saer lets their stories spill outward across his work (Sarlo, “La condición” 895-96). “You could

imagine the expansion of one point and the inclusion of other pasts and presents [tiempos pasados y futuros] within the circles that, as with a stone that drops into water, form around that point that fiction activates [...]” (Sarlo, “La condición” 898). In other works, these characters exist ambiguously, somewhere within those proliferating futures and pasts. But in *Glosa*, we finally see the stone drop. Suddenly, “What [Leto, Gato, and Elisa] were becomes resignified by these cold facts [datos duros] that appear in *Glosa* in a compressed form—in a rapid, brutal way, like transmitted information” (Sarlo, “La condición” 898). For this reason, Sarlo reads *Glosa* as a pivotal work in the internal chronology of the Saer oeuvre. Myriad narrative strands collide in its pages, where they reach their irrevocable conclusions, marked by deaths and the ensuing resolution—for better or for worse—of the lives that they bookend. *Glosa* is a point of impact whose magnitude we cannot fully sense until we’ve seen how far its ripples stretch.<sup>16</sup>

In *La dicha de Saturno*, Julio Premat offers an extremely similar reading of *Glosa*, whose narrative structure is, for him, an oasis for the possibility of representation. Yet he makes an additional point of interest. According to him, *Glosa*’s self-conscious style of narration, featuring an omniscient narrator who appears to be stricken with doubt about everything,

colors [marca] with relativity the banal or transcendent peripeteias of Leto and el Matemático’s biography [*sic*], which are exposed, just like those of many other characters, and even those of the social history of the city and the country [país] itself. There is not one past; rather the past is composed of different temporalities [tiempos] that emerge one by one, by association or by the inherently arbitrary work of memory, which contributes to sketching out the possibility of actual knowledge [conocimiento certero]. (Premat, *La dicha* 249)

These comments on *Glosa*’s descriptive scope have countervailing implications for Premat’s analysis. On the one hand, Premat sees *Glosa* as a book that seems highly skeptical about

---

<sup>16</sup>Also, consider Martín Kohan’s assertion that “*Glosa* constitutes, in this sense, a point of condensation and even of culmination of Juan José Saer’s entire work [...]” (151). Kohan is referring to Saer’s engagement with a political reality external to his work, but the point remains valid more generally.

its subject matter, per the intrinsic difficulties of representation and narration. (Indeed, this is evident from its very first line, in which the narrator isn't too interested in the exact year the story he's recounting takes place in.) But on the other hand, *Glosa*'s dense web of data, stretching from the city's multiple pasts to its imminent futures, also hints at a broad understanding of the Santa Fe region, the kinds of people living in it, and their position at a national level. Here, Premat gives us another reason why *Glosa* is central inside the Saer corpus—a reason that ultimately revives a perennial cliché in Saer criticism. *Glosa* contains, in a nutshell, “the story of a city” that Saer, in his very first book, announces a desire to write (*Cuentos* 517). To echo a foundational observation made by María Teresa Gramuglio, we cannot forget that what lies underneath Saer’s literature is “a real referent from which the construction of imaginary space unfolds” (844). Naturally, part of what *Glosa* ends up representing is a vision of Santa Fe. Perhaps through its explosion of site-specific description, *Glosa*, more than other novels, reminds us that this city exists. Beyond skepticism, something tangible emerges.

I will return to both Sarlo and Premat’s important and influential readings of *Glosa*. However, while these critics have certainly distilled the novel’s deep interconnectedness with the rest of Saer’s project, perhaps Saer’s own perception of *Glosa* is more instructive. His reading is not definitive in my eyes, and I am not making an argument for authorial intentionality by looking at Saer’s plans for and comments on *Glosa*. However, I do see Saer as another critic of his work, and his readings are often perceptive and revelatory. Moreover, the importance of looking at Saer’s own appraisal of the novel becomes clearer when we take into account how little his opinion fluctuated. In an interview shortly before his death in 2005, Saer affirms that *Glosa* is

the novel that I mentally planned out the most. It’s the novel that most resembles—I think I’ve said this before—how I had imagined it; it’s the one that came out most similar to what I had wanted to do. [...] *Glosa* is the book I prefer. The one I prefer for this: it’s the one that most resembles the project I had. And, at the same time—how would I say this? When I finished writing *Glosa* I felt I could write anything I wanted—which wasn’t really the case; it was

something like omnipotence, which reality later corrected. (“Entrevista” 928)

Saer had, in effect, said this before. In a 1998 interview, Saer says almost exactly the same thing and adds that he doesn’t know whether *Glosa* is his best book but that it is the only book, thus far, which didn’t “keep changing as it advanced” in the writing process (Saer, “Yo escribí”). These references to the book’s development are telling. Apparently, Saer prefers *Glosa* because he controlled it from beginning to end. Furthermore, this total conflation of intention, execution, and result seems to have produced itself only in *Glosa*, standing apart from the rest of Saer’s work. And while viewing the novel as “perfect” entails a value judgement that doesn’t interest me, if what Saer means to say is that *Glosa*’s formal realization is impeccable, then his assessment is in harmony with my argument.<sup>17</sup> As with Saer’s use of detective conventions, *Glosa*’s narrative structure is airtight. Things happen in a neat, detachable order, like the steps of a perfect crime: first, an inciting event; then, a series of interdependent actions; last, a careful denouement. This would appear to be a product of Saer’s seamless execution of the idea for the novel. In fact, just as the writing process behind *Glosa* lacked spontaneity, reading *Glosa* gives the impression of a total adherence to a predetermined design. In this sense, the experience of *Glosa* is the same for reader and writer: *Glosa* unfolds without a single hitch. Thus, much of *Glosa*’s uniqueness within Saer’s oeuvre stems from the fact that, unlike other works, *Glosa* the book and *Glosa* the plan for a book are structurally the same.

Yet, importantly, this plan does not only involve the events of *Glosa* proper. Indeed, Saer also saw *Glosa*’s seamless realization as affecting other works in the oeuvre. In the same 2005 interview quoted above, he speaks about how the internal chronology of his work reaches a point in *Glosa*—set in 1960 or 1961, we are never sure—where “everything [is] concentrated” (“Entrevista” 928). For one example, the narrative arc in which Tomatis struggles with depression appears to reach an apex in *Glosa*. For another, one of *Glosa*’s characters researches the indigenous people of the Santa Fe region, who appear in the earliest

---

<sup>17</sup>Premat echoes this strictly formal attribution of perfection to *Glosa*: “[*Glosa*’s] trompe-l’œil construction is the foundation of a great semantic efficacy (and *Glosa* is, surely, the most perfect of Saer’s novels), which confirms, in the practice of writing, the author’s [Saer’s] affirmations about the emotive and aesthetic value of what he calls ‘form’” (*La dicha* 252).

fictional work Saer set in this geography, *El entenado* (translated by Margaret Jull Costa as *The Witness* [“Entrevista” 929]). In this sense, Saer says that *Glosa* “unifies the rest, a bit” (“Entrevista” 929). The interviewer pushes him on this: “So *Glosa* is the work that most resembles what you wanted to do in and of itself but also with respect to the whole oeuvre. It orders it” (“Entrevista” 929). Saer agrees, adding that *Glosa* also “culminates a project to give each novel its own form” (“Entrevista” 929). Thus, *Glosa* is at once a part of a narrative project that strings together the disparate trajectories of Saer’s characters and part of a formal project in which each book gets its own form. On the former point, Saer only seems to confirm what we already know. As Sarlo and Premat have pointed out, *Glosa* communicates with a broad network of moments and people in Saer’s fiction and brings the socio-geographical referent of his fiction to the fore. This is what makes the novel so dense with implications for Saer’s larger project. In the light of these critics’ analyses, saying that *Glosa* does “a bit” of unifying is an understatement. However, Saer’s latter point is more unfamiliar. What does he mean by an intention “to give each novel its own form”? What is *Glosa*’s form?

A quick glance at the notebook in which Saer composed *Glosa* proves instructive. If *Glosa* is the plan that Saer had for it, then we can learn much about its form by looking at its rudimentary stages, the point in the creative process at which *Glosa* was still a sketch on a single sheet of paper. Right from the beginning, it is apparent that *Glosa*’s form is the city. We need look no further than the two sketches of the novel’s structure (Figures 6 and 7), in which events are literally mapped onto the cross-streets of the city grid, north and south of the first-corner / bus-station area (see Chapter One). Like a to-do list unfolding over actual geography, the sketches flatten down a linear path, leading Leto and el Matemático across the novel’s narrative, in which they are both actors and observers. Taken together, these plans reveal the extent to which Santa Fe’s structure catalyzes *Glosa*’s narrative. But their differences may be even more illustrative. In one, el Matemático meets Leto on Santiago del Estero. In the other, they meet on Junín. In one, Tomatis meets the two on Rioja. In the other, he meets them on Catamarca. Only one sketch features the bicycle that eventually makes it into the final draft. The word “destino” (“fate”) appears in one sketch on General López, and we might take it to refer to Leto’s death, which is revealed around that area

of the city in the final draft. In the other sketch, however, the word “flashforward”—also probably a reference to Leto’s last moments—appears one street earlier, on Buenos Aires. (All these cross-streets intersect with San Martín, Santa Fe’s main pedestrian artery.) These small differences raise an obvious but critical point: the streets that Saer uses never change; rather, it’s what he chooses to fill them with that shifts and evolves. In other words, the city’s streets are the novel’s immutable form—its backbone since the very beginning—while the events that happen on them are its variables. The result is a kind of paint-by-numbers story-crafting. The urban fabric shapes the narrative. It provides the space for action and, at the same time, imposes limits on it.

Accordingly, while planning *Glosa*, Saer appears to have treated these streets almost as if they were the Aristotelian narrative contours discussed in Chapter One: beginning, middle, end. To compose the plot, the streets must come in the same order, every time, like inciting events, peripeteias, and reversals of fortune. Their utility as a tool for constructing a story depends entirely on their immutability. We can find a compelling way of thinking about Saer’s literary appropriation of Santa Fe’s layout in Caroline Levine’s discussion of how design theory’s notion of “affordances” applies to fiction. As she explains in the introduction to her book *Forms*,

*Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs. Glass affords transparency and brittleness. Steel affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability. Cotton affords fluffiness, but also breathable cloth when it is spun into yarn and thread. Specific designs, which organize these materials, then lay claim to their own range of affordances. [...] Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities. Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time. The sonnet, brief and condensed, best affords a single idea or experience, “a moment’s monument,” while the triple-decker novel affords elaborate processes of character development in multiplot social contexts. Forms are lim-

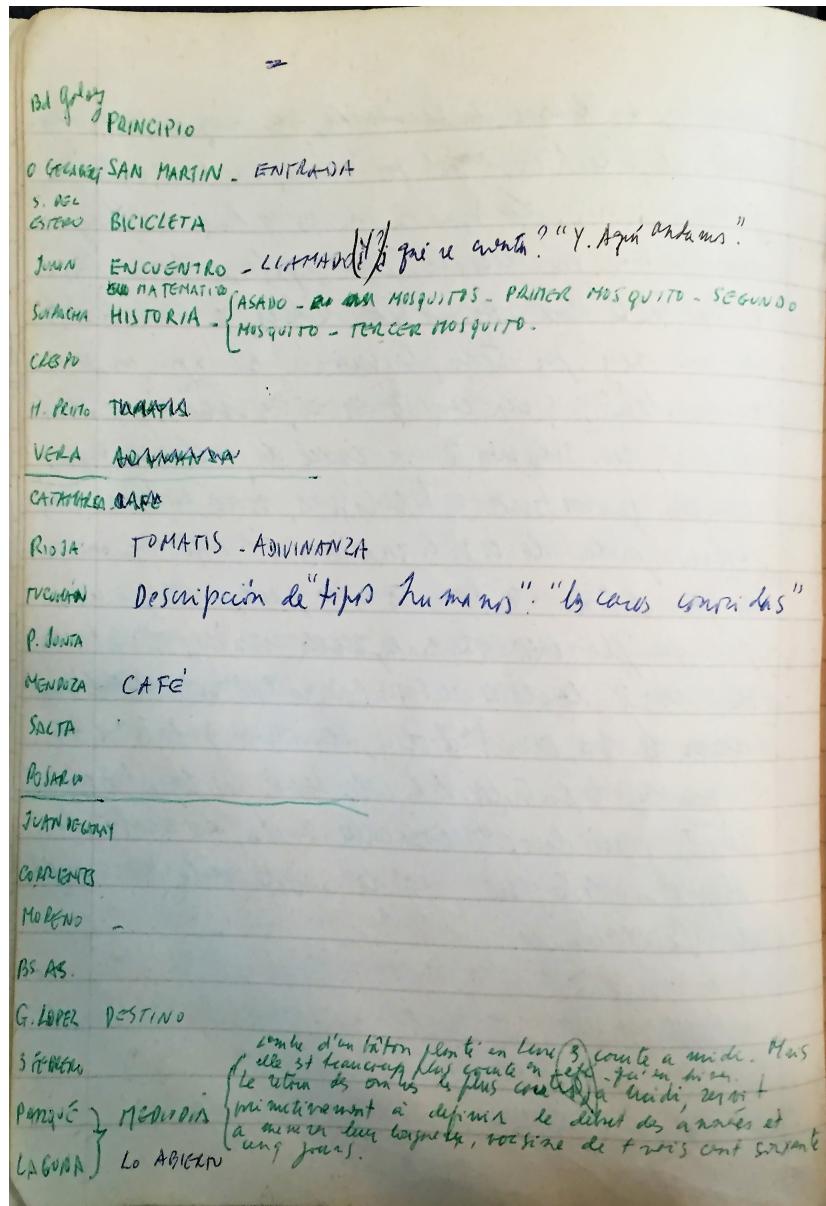


Figure 6: Saer, Juan José. *Glosa*. 1982, Juan José Saer Manuscripts, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, box 1, folder 3. Draft notebook.

This figure and Figure 7 appear early in the first draft notebook of *Glosa*'s text, among the several false starts that Saer produced before arriving at the novel's definitive beginning.

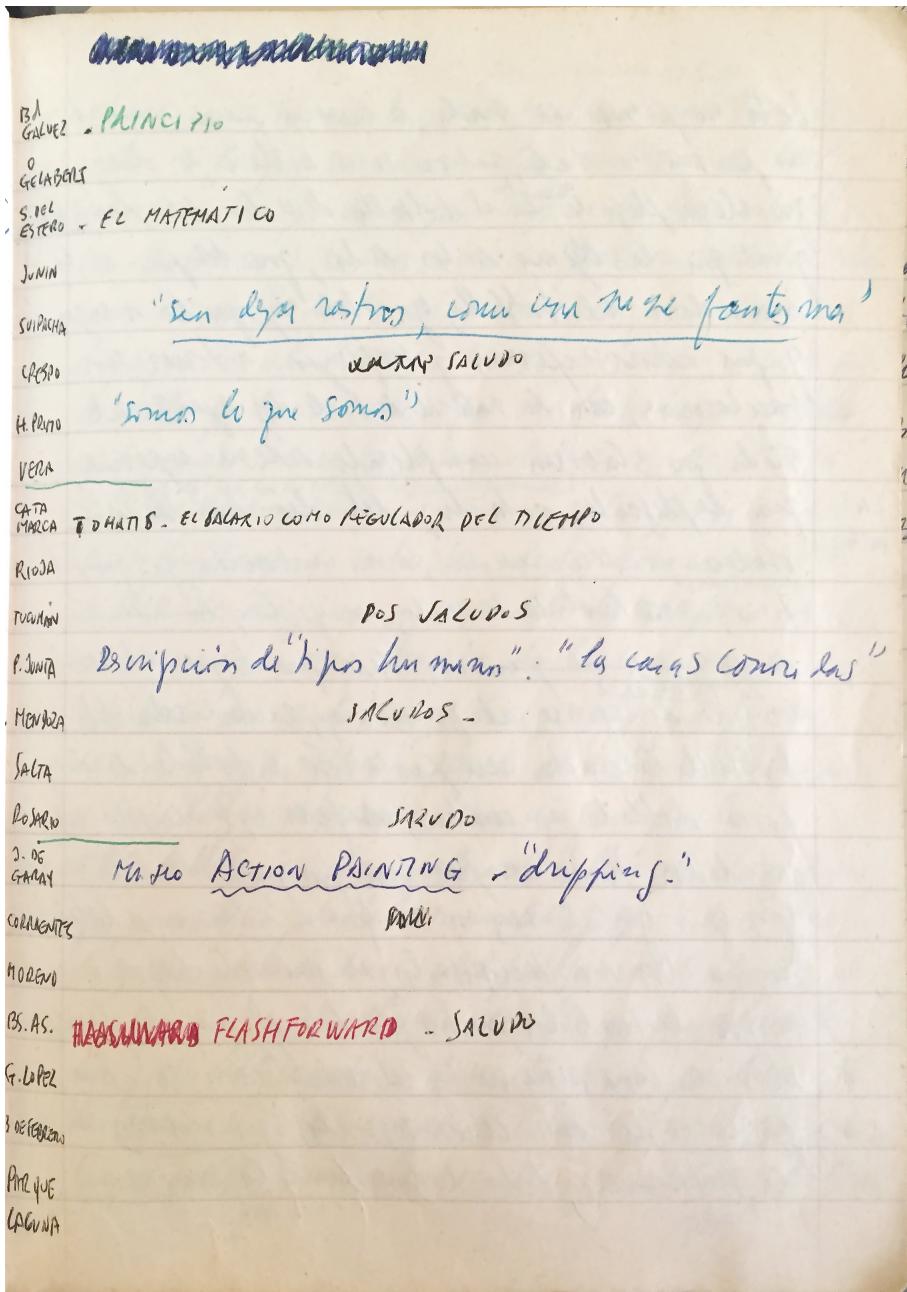


Figure 7: Saer, Juan José. *Glosa*. 1982, Juan José Saer Manuscripts, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, box 1, folder 3. Draft notebook.

iting and containing, yes, but in crucially different ways. Each form can only do so much. (Levine 6)

Levine's assessment has weighty implications for Saer's declared project to give each novel its own form. Affordances are a way of talking about what separates forms from one another, what their respective advantages are, and how they create certain possibilities while neutralizing others. Affordances also pave the road to function. Here, however, we must think beyond the umbrella form of the novel and move into the non-literary forms that populate Saer's fiction. One example of this analytic style is Chapter One's approach to the form of the grid, which appears in Saer's fiction both in the urban fabric and in the abstract. Such forms mark crucial moments in Saer because of their "potential uses or actions," to use Levine's terms; in combination, they underlie the characteristic pulses and patterns of Saer's Santa Fe. But affordances in fiction bring an even more immediate benefit to the table. Since they distinguish between forms based on what they allow us to do, affordances can help us disaggregate *Glosa*'s form from its narrative functions when often these terms seem entangled or conflated. Thinking about the city in terms of its unique qualities as a form, in the abstract, can allow us to arrive at a purpose. If Saer chose to make *Glosa*'s form out of Santa Fe, what did the city afford him as a writer? What is its range of potentialities, and how does it manifest itself in the text of *Glosa*?

These questions are deeply tied not only to *Glosa*'s design, but to a broader inquiry into the way urban environments shape behavior within them. The parallel between the fictional and the physical is particularly strong here. If we can understand how the city form shaped the events of *Glosa* and of Saer's fiction more generally, we can gain insight into how a gridded city's affordances—which may overlap between the fictional and the physical—constrain and anticipate inhabitants' use of the city. This exploration might bring us one step closer to answering the conundrum of the synchronized-step scene that began this chapter: do Leto and el Matemático act like identical robots because of a chance overlap in movement or because the structure of the city requires it? Looking at the function of the city through affordances might allow us to see how much the city controls its own use, by virtue of its very status as a form.

## Street and Building in Saer's Functional City

To tease out the affordances of the city as a form, it is illuminating to compare Saer's use of Santa Fe in *Glosa* with radical modernist theories about what a city does or should do. Such a comparison may seem spontaneous or unmotivated, despite my previous focus on the same epoch of architectural history—why twentieth-century modernism and not, say, the sophisticated eighteenth-century urban planning that brought us Washington D.C.'s wholly artificial layout? The answer lies in questions of scope. First, the influence of radical modernist urbanism was enormous and worldwide in its reach. As I mentioned in Chapter One, the urbanist vision that arose in tandem with the international style of Le Corbusier and his disciples is at the root of a uniquely ambitious project to reform the modern city. In fact, the origin of several ideas that shaped much of today's global cityscape can be found in Le Corbusier's early and mid-twentieth century work. Focusing on him as a decisive figure, Peter Hall writes that

The evil that Le Corbusier did lives after him; the good is perhaps interred with his books, which are seldom read for the simple reason that most are almost unreadable. [...] But the effort should be made, because their impact on twentieth-century city planning has been almost incalculably great: obscurity is no barrier to communication, at least of a sort. Ideas, forged in the Parisian intelligentsia of the 1920s, came to be applied to the planning of working-class housing in Sheffield and St Louis, and hundreds of other cities too, in the 1950s and 1960s; the results were at best questionable, at worst catastrophic. (204)

The point is that to understand many of today's cities, we have to look at the formative turns that they took in the twentieth century as a result of the urbanism propagated by Le Corbusier's coterie. (Because of its representativeness, I will henceforth refer to the Corbusian style of urbanism as "radical modernist urbanism.") The breadth of their impact—for better or for worse—can be seen across the globe. Moreover, the scope of their ambition had always been universal. At the formative 1933 meeting of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), a gathering that Le Corbusier had organized for architects

and urbanists from many different countries, the group analyzed upwards of 30 city plans including those of Stockholm, Paris, and Barcelona in order to formulate a series of abstract goals (“The Athens Charter”) for the modern city, wherever it may be situated (Sert 6, 10, 246-49; Giedion x; Mumford 73, 79). In view of this, it’s not coincidental that we can now simultaneously observe the results of this strand of urbanism in several continents at once. Putting aside the specificity of cities in favor of an approach that took them all on at once was at the heart of the Corbusian project. In this sense, Le Corbusier succeeded in his abstract aims at the cost of disappointing practical results—radical modernist urbanism’s irredeemable failure, of which Hall reminds us. At the same time, the global trajectory of these ideas makes them crucial for any project that seeks to talk not about Lisbon, Lagos, or Savannah specifically but about the modern city as an overarching form.

But a second, more interesting consideration of scope underlies my comparison: the total revision of the idea of a city. Coupled with the notion that all cities could be tackled at once was the idea that the city itself would need to change wholesale. Le Corbusier in his 1929 book *The City of Tomorrow* insists on the drastic revision this entails: “Modern town planning comes to birth with a new architecture. By this immense step in evolution, so brutal and so overwhelming, we burn our bridges and break with the past” (5). Indeed, the modern city would need to be an entirely new one. No vestiges of passé urbanism could survive into the future. Accordingly, to begin to build, Le Corbusier and his students would first have to draft a doctrine of urbanism from scratch. This is, in essence, what happened at the 1933 CIAM meeting. That year, the theme of the gathering was “The Functional City,” and the attendees took part in a cruise from Marseille to Athens during which they analyzed 33 cities relative to four cardinal functions: dwelling (or housing), recreation (or leisure), work (or industry), and transportation (Sert 6, 10; Rovira 63-4; Mumford 79, 133).<sup>18</sup> The overarching statement that emerged from this meeting was the “Athens Charter” mentioned above, and Josep Lluís Sert—then, a young Catalan architect—was later tasked with assembling a book in CIAM’s name that would more fully set out the group’s prescriptions for the city. The book was entitled *Can Our Cities Survive?*, published by Harvard University Press in 1942,

---

<sup>18</sup>The English translations of these functions are intriguingly variable across different sources. According to Mumford, Le Corbusier had also referred to “transportation” as “circulation” (79).

and it represented CIAM's statement of the urbanist doctrine developed at the 1933 meeting, tailored to the distinct context of an American public (Giedion x; Rovira 94, 101-3; Mumford 131-4). In it, Sert explains how

*In the new cities everything should assert man and his material and spiritual needs.* Dwellings should express his desire for shelter, repose, dignity, and intimacy; in the parks surrounding them, his hunger for open space, for recreation, and for an environment favorable to the development of his children should be satisfied. In his work-places, whether office or factory, all the elements conducive to the efficiency of his work should be found. Strategic sites in the city should be occupied by civic centers with facilities designed to stimulate the noblest propensities of the spirit [...]. (Sert's emphasis; 229)

Importantly, Sert's account of CIAM's totalizing vision of the city is rooted in judgements about what certain spaces do and the purposes they serve. In other words, it is rooted in affordances. Dwellings must afford concepts like "repose"; workplaces must afford "efficiency"; civic centers must afford the cultivation of the spirit's "noblest propensities." For a city to flourish, all of these disparate functions must coexist seamlessly. Needless to say, Sert like his colleagues did not believe that the cities he spends his book analyzing—*inter alia*, Paris, London, and New York—balanced or even provided these functions. The new Corbusian city would require reforming global urbanism entirely, either through massive architectural projects (such as those in Chandigarh or St. Louis) or building a city where no contemporary city existed (e.g., Brasilia).<sup>19</sup> Undergirding these efforts is the will to give physical shape to a reconceptualization of the urban form. New ideas would produce new cities.

---

<sup>19</sup>There is a caveat in using Brasilia as an example of Le Corbusier's rationalist vision made real. While Brasilia visibly enacts many CIAM principles that are in harmony with Le Corbusier's urban program, its principal architect, Oscar Niemeyer, was committed to introducing organicity and spontaneity into the functionalist dogma. On this point he is tendentious: "Within this [free and creative] architecture, I try to orient my projects by characterizing them, whenever possible, through their own structure. Architecture never based on the radical impositions of functionalism, but, still, in the search of new and varied solutions that are as logical as possible within the constructive system. This, without fearing the contradictions between form and technique or function, assured that what remains are only the beautiful, unexpected, and harmonious solutions" (Niemeyer 49-50). Nevertheless, in his messages of support to Niemeyer, Le Corbusier gave Brasilia his stamp of approval, which Niemeyer evidently treasured, given that it came from "the maximum leader of contemporary architecture" (Niemeyer 62). In the end, Brasilia probably deserves the compromise that Hall makes when he dubs it "The Quasi-Corbusian City" (215).

For me, this ethos of total reform is the aspect of radical modernist urbanism that motivates the comparison to Saer the most. Saer also has an idea of how the city functions—just look at the plans for *Glosa*'s dissection of urban movement. With every word, he puts this idea into action. Yet his fictional elaboration of Santa Fe, by virtue of being fiction, is never a passive representation of Santa Fe but an active recreation of it. He sketches out his own Santa Fe—superimposed on its referent—as would an urbanist on a plan given to her. Accordingly, this section's attempt to draw parallels between Corbusian urbanism and *Glosa*'s approach to the city will involve an analogy based on the process of crafting cities to provide functions through affordances. Le Corbusier and his disciples used a function-centric vision of the urban form to guide their planning. Looking at their work may, then, shed light on how Saer appropriates the urban form to perform a narrative function in *Glosa*. Ultimately, as I will argue, Saer and these modernists are doing exactly the same thing. They are using the city to control how people use space. In Saer's fiction, people are characters; in actual cities, people are people. In both cases, however, the city acts to anticipate and constrain. (As a result, my thesis about Saer as a functionalist has an opposite thrust toward urbanism as a discipline as well: isn't planning cities also an exercise in writing fiction?<sup>20</sup>)

First and most fundamentally, we must look at how cities are designed to shape movement within them. This means we must look at streets. Obviously, this is crucial for *Glosa*, which is predicated on movement along a single street. However, the importance of streets shaping movement runs deeper. As was discussed in Chapter One, Le Corbusier interpreted the urban grid as a catalyst for fast and effective movement, which was a sine qua non of the modern city. Ushering people through paths that link the city's specific functional sites is, in and of itself, a function of the city. (This is reflected in one of the four principal functions of the city, per CIAM, listed above, "transportation.") Now, as the architect James Dunnett points out, Le Corbusier's urban solution constituted a "radical break from the traditional city street which combines vehicles, pedestrians, and building frontages in a single hard-surfaced channel" (68). Rather, pedestrians and vehicles would be neatly separated into

---

<sup>20</sup>I will not explore this question here, but it represents an avenue of research that I am interested in stimulating with this thesis.

different channels, effectively destroying the mixed-use streets of cities past. CIAM likewise suggests that “*Streets ought to be classified according to their functions*, as residential streets, business streets, industrial streets, and so on” (Sert’s emphasis; Sert 248). But this revision went further. As Le Corbusier writes in *The City of Tomorrow*, “The modern street in the true sense of the word is a new type of organism, a sort of stretched-out workshop, a home for many complicated and delicate organs, such as gas, water, and electric mains” (163). The idea here is to have the street expose all of the city’s movement, not only that of people or vehicles but also that of utilities carried across the grid. Urban circulation of all kinds should become transparent in the street system; this transparency will ensure that streets announce their function instead of concealing it. Also, the traditional street would disappear as a result of Le Corbusier’s intention to shift the space inside buildings *outside*, into the street, since, in his view, buildings with courtyards or private internal carve-outs rob the streets of space that could be theirs (Le Corbusier, *City* 163). As such, Le Corbusier does away with contained space and lets the street merge with the space around buildings, an operation shown in Figure 8. By making circulation transparent and abolishing the courtyard, Le Corbusier can be said to have eliminated the “Street as the dominant organising principle of urban form” (Dunnett 57). Indeed, instead of a single Corbusian “street” it may often be easier to speak of promenades, elevated roadways, and garden paths. What unifies these channels, however, is the notion of an open diorama of simultaneous movements. The Corbusian street—in all its modalities—is a wide, breezy “masterpiece of civil engineering,” totally opposed to the narrow and convoluted “corridor-street” of cities past (Le Corbusier, *City* 163).

In *Glosa*, we find Saer using the street in an extremely similar way. For one, Saer, like Le Corbusier, separates channels by function and runs them along his city in parallel. Over the course of the novel, the principal street, San Martín, fills with storylines that move in their own lanes, intersecting as necessary. Leto lays down *Glosa*’s main narrative arc by deciding to walk down the San Martín promenade, unexpectedly running into el Matemático, and later running into Tomatis. With these bodies in transit, Saer weaves together a plot. But alongside this principal use of San Martín, a broader network of circulation works to extend *Glosa*’s scope. As Sarlo and Premat indicate, several temporalities cross one

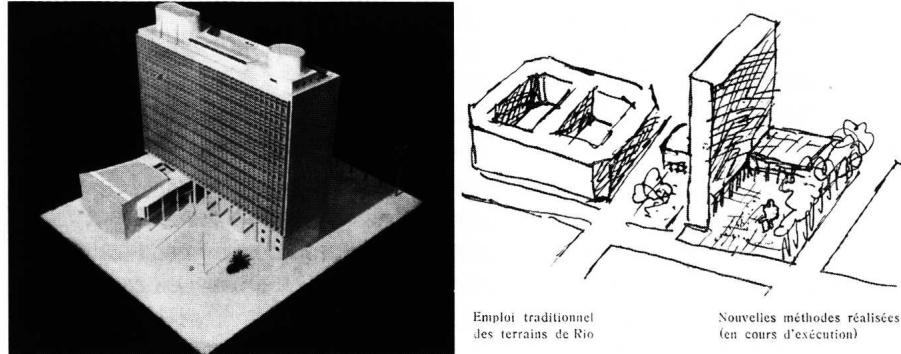


Figure 3.3 Le Corbusier shows how courtyards – ‘the traditional way of using a site’ – can be replaced by a slab, in the context of Lucio Costa’s Ministry of Education in Rio de Janeiro, 1936 © FLC

Figure 8: On the left, the Ministry of Education in Rio de Janeiro; on the right, Le Corbusier sketches out the spatial distribution of the “courtyard” model (left) compared to that of the “slab” model (right) (Dunnett 60).

another during the walk in *Glosa*. The flash-forwards to Leto and el Matemático’s futures are only one part of this dynamic. To return to another earlier example, Washington Noriega, whose birthday party neither Leto nor el Matemático attended, has famously been working on his “legendary four lectures on the Indians in Colastiné,” whose titles are Location (“Lugar”), Lineage (“Lineaje”), Language (“Lenguaje”), and Logic (“Lógica”) (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 73; *Glosa* 93). Little more is known about these lectures, but their names are extremely suggestive—Location especially so. Colastiné, the name of a real tribe, according to Saer, appears often in the current toponymy of the Santa Fe region (“Entrevista” 927). Beyond the name, however, there is little historical data, so for the earliest novel set in the Santa Fe region, *El entenado*, Saer imagines an age-of-exploration-era Colastiné society in which these four themes are explored in depth (“Entrevista” 927). Now, several centuries into the future, the Colastiné tribe retains its influence on the intellectual life of the city. The pre-Columbian history of the region begins to circulate within the street, where it affects the present reality of its pedestrians: due to el Matemático’s comments about Noreiga, Leto imagines him scrutinizing the sources for these lectures, “Space and time swirling around the motionless reader” (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 75). This connection to the social history of the region allows past events and characters in Saer’s fiction to move along San Martín in parallel to the main

narrative arc, as if the latter were a pedestrian walkway (which San Martín *is*) running alongside an elevated roadway or water main. For instance, one of Noreiga's sources for his investigation is apparently an account of *El entenado*'s events, written by one the novel's European characters, Father Quesada (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 74). Analogous to passing cars or exposed utilities, *El entenado*'s content becomes observable from *Glosa* as well, but from the perspective of a different channel (that of pedestrians of the mid-twentieth century). Like Le Corbusier's street, Saer's street becomes a workshop where multiple lines of motion zip by one another. Neatly separated by their respective temporalities, they are ultimately as transparent to one another as the discrete parts of a city's movement, circulating freely.

Additionally, Saer's street exists in clear contrast to Le Corbusier's hated "corridor-street." This is not because San Martín is especially wide; nor is it because San Martín's buildings have zero courtyards (they well might). Rather, what is crucial to note is that in *Glosa*—and in works like *Cicatrices* or *La mayor* (1976)—Santa Fe's streets always emphasize their own tangible open space, never the potential open space behind buildings. Everything is already in the street. This becomes explicit in a number of unsurprising ways. For example, at several points in the text, San Martín literally represents totality. Gesturing with his pipe, el Matemático

designates the present, which is to say the sidewalks, the street, the rows of shops, the illuminated signs, the people standing on the sidewalks or walking in different directions, the various perspective planes that stretch down the straight street, made linear by optical illusion as they extend toward the horizon, the morning light, the voice of voices, footsteps, laughter, motors, horns, the familiar smells of the city, of the heat, of spring, the clear and incessant multiplicity which could also be, and why not, a new expression for that. (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 130)

Leto, responding, seems to sense el Matemático's appreciation of the street's comprehensiveness: "*The philosophers' straight flush [niña bonita]. It was this street. This moment*" (Dolph's emphasis; Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 130; Saer, *Glosa* 155). Shortly thereafter, el Matemático lives up to his moniker and attempts to compose an equation for the nature of reality, based on this experience of the street. He fails, but the idea of the all-encompassing

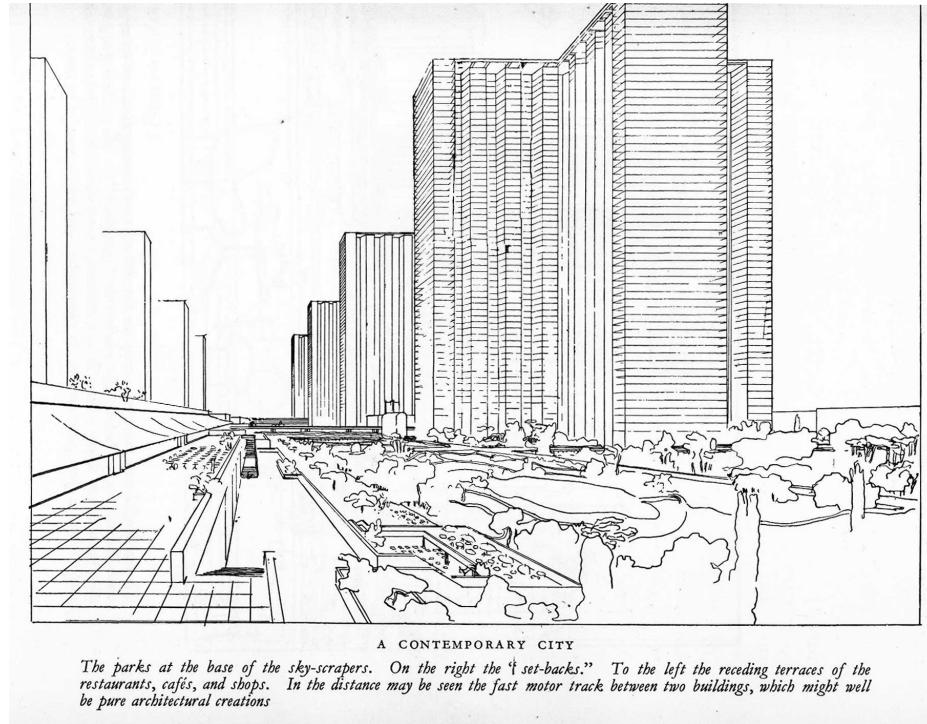


Figure 9: Le Corbusier, *City 245*.

street remains important. Similarly, at an earlier point in the text, Leto describes how San Martín contains so many different businesses, commodities, services, residences, and structures so as to comprise “in a word, essentially, or in two better yet, to be more precise, every thing [todo eso]” (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 4; *Glosa* 14). These scenes parallel Le Corbusier’s vision for the new city’s street precisely. No valuable open space ought to be concealed behind the street’s façades. Nothing should obscure the evidence of the city at work. Instead, the street must be an unobstructed stage where the city’s daily rhythm plays out. This is evident in his illustration of the broad “receding terraces of restaurants, cafés, and shops” at the center of his ideal city, an open space for public life and leisure, shown in Figure 9 (Le Corbusier, *City 245*). Likewise, for Saer, the street is not only a pathway for circulating characters and events openly and without friction. It is also an agora. For this reason, Saer’s Santa Fe is generally not a city in which important events would happen behind closed doors—perhaps in those courtyards Le Corbusier despises so much. Rather, the street is usually the open-air site of narrative inception where the building blocks of stories are already active, already in motion.

The second critical way in which the Santa Fe of *Glosa* parallels radical modernist urbanism involves not the street, but the buildings that line it. Le Corbusier was famous for having advocated, in more or fewer words, that everything in the city have its proper place. All the city's uses are compartmentalized into specific zones: "The skyscrapers are designed purely for business purposes. On the left we have the great public buildings, the museums, the municipal and administrative offices. Still further on the left we have the 'Park' [...] On the right, and traversed by one of the arms of the main arterial roads, we have the warehouses, and the industrial quarters with their goods stations" (Le Corbusier, *City* 167). These elements do not mix. Rather, each is given its own buildings and allotted space, in keeping with Le Corbusier's fundamental emphasis on order. Sert sums up this dogma in *Can Our Cities Survive?* by prescribing that a new city plan begin with a "regrouping of the land according to the functions of the buildings or spaces affected—in other words, by zones" (216). The details of this regrouping will vary with the characteristics of the city in question; however, Sert takes it for granted that there will be regrouping, "In view of the present chaotic state of most cities and their regions" (Sert 216). Of course, this sounds reasonable. In a city, there will naturally be areas where people work, areas where people rest, and areas where people live. What would the alternative, a madcap distribution of uses, even look like? Yet the reality is somewhat different. Post-Corbusian planning has broadly recognized that cities generally don't follow such strict partitions (and perhaps should not). Jane Jacobs, one of Le Corbusier's most vociferous critics, argues that "Intricate minglings of different uses in cities are not a form of chaos. On the contrary, they represent a complex and highly developed form of order" (Jacobs 290). Jacobs decries the "planning pseudoscience" that advises homogenous groups of uses, which, in her view, create generic buildings that disorient users with their lack of specificity (291-92). In contrast, mixed-uses, by virtue of arising organically, make for a lively and rich city life (Jacobs 290-99). This critique strikes at the heart of the radical modernist project, which seeks to impose order, not sit back and let it emerge.

But Saer's Santa Fe is much closer to a rigidly-zoned city than it is to a mixed-use city. This is not to say that, in Saer's Santa Fe, everyone lives in the designated residential district and walks to work in the designated business district like some Corbusian drone.

What I mean is that, in Saer's Santa Fe, narrative function is highly localized. We have seen in Chapter One how certain parts of the city play a predetermined role across several works in the example of the first-corner / bus-station area, a hive for spontaneous meetings. Yet this principle extends much further, especially in *Glosa*. For one, we can simply observe the grafting of narrative uses to spaces in the notebook sketches for *Glosa* above. In these sketches, Saer preliminarily "zones" certain streets for certain events. Often, the unique affordances of a specific street will come into play. For example, Saer's notation "ACTION PAINTING - dripping" on Figure 7 probably denotes Leto and el Matemático's discussion of a canvas painted by Rita Fonseca, a local equivalent to Jackson Pollock, aesthetically speaking. In the final text, this discussion emerges as the walkers pass Fonseca's gallery, which affords a view of the painting through a window. And, of course—too perfectly—Leto and el Matemático encounter her gallery just as el Matemático has just brought up her role in Noriega's party and reintroduced her into their conversation (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 153-54).

But Saer's use of this event-zoning tactic reaches beyond individual streets. Again, too perfectly, most of the buildings mentioned specifically in *Glosa* perform a narrative function that is largely conflated with their social or commercial function. Sometimes they are almost absurdly metonymic. For example, the record store plays music as Leto and el Matemático walk by it, amusing the two and breaking some of the formality between them (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 72). Likewise, consider how Tomatis enters the narrative:

In shirtsleeves, his head turned to the south, on the upper step of the reconstituted granite stairs that lead to the main entrance of *La región*, intersecting the door, between the windows that display the two black plush boards where movable white brass letters are arranged into the headlines of the day. Tomatis is lighting a cigarette, with the match cupped within his hands [...] (Dolph, *Sixty-five* 83-84)

In a sense, Tomatis' function in the narrative (destabilizing the relationship between Leto and el Matemático and supplying a new version of the events of Noriega's birthday party) depends on the function of the building he works in: *La región* signals "journalism" which, in turn, signals "Tomatis." Conflating him with his occupation and the place where he exercises

it, the above description turns Tomatis into a conveniently-placed cog in a machine. Similarly, earlier, when el Matemático momentarily disappears into another newspaper building to deal with a communiqué he's trying to publish, Leto is left alone. The separation caused by the building's appearance underscores Leto's exclusion from el Matemático's social circles, but it also allows Saer to continue some necessary exposition for the reader through Leto's musings on his personal history and his observations about the city itself. As such, Leto and el Matemático are like automatons gliding through a functionalist city and interacting with the uses it presupposes for them. Yet, importantly, these uses are sequential, not interlaced. They emerge exactly as Saer shows us in his sketches—one after another, in separate slices of the plot, each occupying the requisite amount of space.

We now have a few answers to the question of what the form of the city affords Saer, at least in *Glosa*. The street's affordances organize the movement necessary for events to happen. First, the street affords a workshop for collecting the moving bodies that form the narrative's primary events. Second, it affords a main artery in which different narrative temporalities—different pasts, presents, and futures—can run parallel to one another. Third, it affords the appearance of an urban totality, an agora in which anyone can meet anyone else at any time, since everything is always flowing through the street. The building's affordances, on the other hand, generate the sequential structuring of events. Together, building and street work in harmony to assemble the composite functions of the city as a form. Reading *Glosa*, one can almost feel the Corbusian love of order pulsing throughout Saer's city. Early on in the book,

seeing el Matemático advance upright and white from between the trunks of two cars that are moving in opposite directions, Leto begins to see the group, el Matemático included, not as cars or trees or houses or sky or human beings, but as a system of relations whose function is no doubt connected to the combination of disparate movements, el Matemático forward, the cars each a different way, the motionless things changing as aspect and location in relation to the moving things, everything no doubt in perfect and casual proportion [...] (Dolph, *Sixty-five* 41)

Leto couldn't be more right. In this passage, we see, in essence, *Glosa* admiring its own artifice—the exact same perfect qualities Saer himself refers to when he says that it's his favorite novel. In *Glosa* everything moves in flawless proportion to everything else, and everything moves in response to function. Like Le Corbusier and his students, Saer lays bare the city's functions and zones them into specific loci to prescribe presupposed ways of interacting with the urban layout. To return to the scene of Leto and el Matemático's synchronized steps, our exploration of Saer as a functionalist planner argues strongly in favor of a highly deterministic urban order. The Santa Fe of *Glosa* is a city that suggests the actions that take place in it. Street and building conspire to control the unfolding of narrative. If two people step in the same way and the same time, it's because the organizational power of the functionalist city wills them to do so. Perhaps unsettlingly, functionalism in fictional and physical cities often means that we fall into step with a presupposed order without even knowing it. Obsessive focus on function breeds identicalness. It homogenizes use. And as we will see, this is perhaps its greatest flaw.

## Saer's Reply to Functionalism: The Uncontrollable Doubling of Order

Now, functionalist urbanism is notoriously flawed. Perhaps one of the biggest objections to the functionalist doctrine is that it seeps the vitality of cities by artificially parcelling out zones of function, with a total disregard for what Jacobs calls the “intricate social and economic order under the seeming disorder of cities” (21-22). Largely, this critique attacks functionalism in practice, not in theory. Jacobs’ epoch-defining book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* appeared in 1961, by which point the functionalism pioneered by Le Corbusier and concretized at the 1933 CIAM had had enough time to take its toll on cities worldwide. Jacobs mounts her offensive based on evidence gleaned from U.S. cities like New York, Boston, and St. Louis. But Peter Hall reminds us that the spectacular shortcomings of the Corbusian urban dream were truly global in scope. Pointing to “hundreds” of cities worldwide affected by this urbanist doctrine, he underscores that “The sin of Corbusier and the Corbusians thus lay not in their designs, but in the mindless arrogance whereby they

were imposed on people who could not take them [...]” (Hall 204, 240). This is just another version of Jacobs’ critique. Radical modernist urban planning failed, according to Hall, because it overlooked the lifestyles of the people for whom many of its projects were intended. In other words, it did not consider that the city and its inhabitants might have their own inherent order—an order that looked nothing like the carefully zoned homogenous buildings of the Corbusian city. Like Jacobs, Hall predicates his critique on the actual results of radical modernist urbanism in cities such as London, Brasilia, and Chandigarh. Inferring a general incompetence from radical projects in these cities—or, in the case of Brasilia, the creation of a new city—Hall seems to echo Jacobs’ conclusion that functionalism wears the “dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and to be saved” (21).

In one sense, critiques like those of Hall and Jacobs are obviously right. Cities are not abstract notions. Accordingly, our evaluations of urban planning must rely on tangible results. The goal of radical modernist urbanism, as Sert puts it, was to “assert man and his material and spiritual needs.” Clearly, the functionalist city has not met its goals in practice. And clearly, there appear to be better ways to approach the modern city (which is why Corbusian planning is largely irrelevant today—see Dunnett). Moreover, the failures of functionalism have had an inexcusable impact on the lives of inhabitants who occupied spaces that flatly did not meet their material or spiritual needs. There is no way to ameliorate such a level of incompatibility.

Thus, I do not contest any of the evidence by which critics like Jacobs and Hall make their claims. And I too believe that radical modernist urbanism doesn’t work. But I want to revisit the explanations for why it doesn’t work, namely, the notion that radical modernist urbanism fails because its results are artificial and obtuse. Today, this is obvious. But is there not a deeper, more intrinsic reason for the failure of radical modernist urbanism—a reason that does not need to wait for this kind of urbanism’s real-world application to figure out what is wrong with it? In other words, is there an internal inconsistency in functionalism, independent of context, that leads to unanticipated disorder instead of anticipated order? If there existed such a reason, criticisms of radical modernist urbanism would not only be justified but inevitable. We could see—in contrast to Jacobs and Hall—a glitch in the design

itself, in the abstract. We could know, just by looking at it, that functionalism wouldn't work.

My analysis of Saer as a narrative functionalist yields a tentative but provocative answer to why radical modernist urbanism may intrinsically fail. As always, I am interested not only in what urbanist thinking can reveal about Saer but also in what Saer can tell us about urbanist thinking. As such, my reading seeks to have implications for both interpretations of Saer and ways of approaching city planning theory. This reading is based on the broad observation that, looking even more closely at *Glosa* along with several other texts, we can detect a clear pattern of doubling within rigid narrative structures. Some consideration of this duplication already appeared in Chapter One, where we saw how Saer's use of the form of the grid leads to the disquieting result of two equally plausible explanations for the same series of facts. There, I concluded that Saer undermines the efficacy of the grid by showing that its organization of events is inherently arbitrary. Finally, I hinted that Saer makes a weighty distinction between being able to orient oneself and being able to find oneself—you can find your way anywhere in the city grid and still be lost. This section's argument is very similar. First, I want to identify specific moments in which Saer's narrative functionalism produces doubling and assess the effects of this trend within the contexts of specific texts. Second, I want briefly to depart from Saer and speculate on doubling's relevance to functionalist planning of physical cities. This latter portion of my analysis will tentatively suggest that doubleness could serve as an analytic tool in discussing functionalism's failure to make good on its promises.

Working inductively from a text I have already identified as functionalist, I will begin, again, with *Glosa*. The key scene of doubling in *Glosa* is, as we have seen, the moment in which Ángel Leto and el Matemático's steps synchronize as they step over the curb separating the sidewalk from the road. On the one hand, my analysis suggests that we can read this scene as one of *Glosa*'s self-conscious acknowledgments of its tightly-structured narrative order. Their synchronicity is inextricable from that "perfect and casual proportion" that Leto observes in the city, which Saer's open, function-specific streets and zoned buildings establish. Using Saer's words, we could say that narrative functionalism is the "preprogrammed

“electronic mechanism” that makes them act “like robots.”<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, we can also appreciate how the identicalness of Leto and el Matemático, in that moment, has a doubling effect. Saer describes how their “identical, regular” pace generates a parallel in their movements as they, “simultaneously, bend their left leg and lift it” over the curb (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 68). This passage’s language contains a chain of related concepts—identicalness, regularity, simultaneity—the first and last of which assume two or more actors (or two or more comparanda, to be a bit more precise). That is, identicalness and simultaneity always mean that two or more things share the same qualities at a certain moment. Inherently, then, they imply doubling. This conceptual equivalence adds much to our conversation about formalism. We explored in the previous section how the functionalist approach to urbanism creates identicalness or homogeneity between the two walkers. But now we see that identicalness, in turn, makes Leto and el Matemático into duplicates or reflections of one another. (The description “robots”’s connotation of lack of individuality becomes even more fitting.) By controlling Leto and el Matemático’s motions to the point of making them homogeneous (since the functionalist city prescribes invariable, specific uses for itself), the city, in effect, duplicates its users: in that moment, Leto is another Matemático and vice versa. This is the paradox Saer reveals at the heart of radical modernist urbanism. Out of predictable order, doubles spontaneously emerge.

*Glosa* signals the importance of this scene to us by situating it at the end of its first part and using it as a link to its second part, in which the synchronized steps lead immediately to a metaphysical reflection of the irreversible nature of time, a major theme that *Glosa* announces with an epigraphic reference to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. However, the “doubling” aspect of this scene may seem trivial until we put it in conversation with other Saer texts and the Saer corpus as a whole. Only then does doubling reveal its full significance. Put simply, identicalness and doubles are essential to the Saer oeuvre. In *Cicatrizes*, Ángel discovers a doppelgänger of himself in the city. In *La pesquisa* (1994), the detective Morvan finds his double in his boss, who may or may not have committed

---

<sup>21</sup>Here, there is a potential connection to the question of whether a horse, a being that is presumably governed by instinct alone, can actually trip, which is presented in *Glosa* as a philosophical conundrum. I will not explore the dialectic between tripping and stepping in perfect unison in this chapter, but it is worth mentioning.

a series of crimes for which he frames Morvan. (“Here, the double culpability leads to an anarchic indetermination” remarks Premat (*La dicha* 360).) In *El entenado*, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones finds the motifs of “the *double* and *duplication* associated with the narrator,” a European boy who lives with the Colastiné tribe, who, he believes, expect that he “reflect [duplicara] like water the image they gave of themselves” (Costa 144; Saer, *El entenado* 190; Díaz Quiñones 901). In *La grande*, two newer characters in the Saer universe hallucinate characters from the previous generation standing on top of an old bridge that appears in much of Saer’s fiction, which has since been replaced by a newer bridge. These imagined doubles act out, on the doubled bridge, a scene that resembles a moment from one of Saer’s first stories, “Algo se aproxima.” I would also posit doubling at work in *El limonero real*, which follows a character constantly reliving the same day—a melancholic, infinite temporal duplication. But perhaps the most emotionally torturous instance of doubling are the identical twins—Gato and Pichón Garay—that appear in *La mayor*, *Glosa*, and *La pesquisa*, among several other works. As Sarlo alludes to in her comments cited earlier in this chapter, the twins have tragically divergent fates. Gato is forcibly disappeared with his lover as a result of political repression in Argentina. Pichón, who has relocated to Paris, is left to deal with this brutal loss.

Amid all of these compelling instances of doubles in Saer, those that best illustrate the link between functionalism and doubling are likely those of Ángel’s double in *Cicatrices* and Pichón’s departure from Santa Fe in *La mayor*. As for Ángel in *Cicatrices*, we saw in Chapter One how the narrative grid moves Ángel across a predetermined series of paths (those of the city grid) and, in parallel, moves him through a predetermined series of narrative conventions (those of the detective story). But the city grid is only part of a larger system of functional constraints that Ángel navigates on his itinerary through the city, such as his walk in *Glosa*. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that, out of Santa Fe’s rigorous and precise system of functions, there would appear another Ángel who was

following me in his world, along a duplicate and inverted path that I had  
mistakenly wandered onto the same night of carnival, when I was following him  
in my world. [...] One thing I was sure of: our spheres—our worlds—were

closed and only touched by accident. It could also be that everything has a double: Tomatis, Gloria, my mother, my notebook, my weather report, the *La región* newspaper, Ernesto's illuminated block where Schönberg's *Violin Concerto* plays. If that was true, something different had to happen in the other world, because an exact replica seemed absurd and deranged to me, especially because it threatened to multiply indefinitely. (*Scars* 64-65)

Once again, Ángel could not be more right. In my analysis, Ángel's double is not so much the estranged self that María Bermúdez Martínez argues for, nor is it the expansion of self into the oedipal void that Premat reads in *Cicatrices* (Bermúdez Martínez 55; Premat, *La dicha* 56-7). Rather, Ángel's double is the product of an urban system that favors homogeneity over heterogeneity by strictly prescribing its users' actions. The double's path must be duplicate, because the narrative order of the city would not tolerate two different paths, would not tolerate two different Ángels that, casually, use the city in different ways. Like his and el Matemático's synchronized steps in *Glosa*, the doubling in *Cicatrices* arises from functionalism's specificity of uses. However, this doubling bears within it the possibility of infinite replicas. The absurd multiplication of worlds that Ángel senses is the logical conclusion of total identicalness, so he convinces himself that there must be some differentiation between him and his double. (In my view, the text leaves open the question of whether there is actually such differentiation.)

Similarly, in *La mayor*'s story "A medio borrar" (translated by Kantor as "Half-Erased"), Pichón makes an apt observation about Santa Fe's conflation of structure and use when he tries to sear its "streets, direct like destinies [derechas como destinos]" (a line he repeats) into his memory before he leaves for Paris (Kantor 111-2; Saer, *Cuentos* 171). Indeed, as I have been arguing, the city's form determines fate. Here, however, the deterministic nature of the city seems to play out through absence and memory. Pichón mentally replays his own movements through the city in anticipation of his imminent departure. This intent to memorize the city echoes a comment Pichón makes earlier in the story about being unable to imagine that the city "will continue living without me, and then I say a city is an abstraction we concede to so we can give a particular name to a series of places that are fragmentary,

lifeless, and that most often exist in imaginary time, bereft of us” (Kantor 81). Pichón’s emphasis on retaining the city in his mind but the city, perhaps, not retaining him brings up the obvious point that his twin, Gato, will remain in the city. “It’s as if I were the inverse of Cat [Gato]. And he will stay” (Kantor 88; Saer, *Cuentos* 154). Physically, Pichón stresses, Gato will perform the same movements that he has (Kantor 88-9). Moreover, Pichón’s recollections of moments in which he and Gato have been confused for one another add to the impression that Pichón will continue to live in the city, through Gato, even as he is simultaneously in Paris. What Pichón struggles with, then, is the abstraction of a city that will also retain a part of him—even though he cannot directly observe this—just as he retains it in fragmentary form in his memory. My argument accounts well for this double-sided retention. By its very nature, the functionalist city anticipates Pichón’s movements. Even after removing himself from it, the city will continue to anticipate his presence as a user of its structure. In my analysis, Gato acts as Pichón’s double, performing his role, in absentia, in response to the city’s structural cues. At the same time, in Pichón’s memory the city’s streets will take on a divergent destiny; in his mind, he will continue to walk in them, for he is inextricable from his own memories of the city. His memories of himself will become his own double, performing the actions of the past, surviving only in abstraction. Thus, in both absence and memory—in both the fictional Santa Fe and the fictional Santa Fe within Pichón’s mind—doubles emerge. One is Gato, the other is Pichón’s memory of himself. Like Ángel and el Matemático’s steps, these Pichóns are synchronized (“in imaginary time,” to use Pichón’s words), acting in perfect harmony with the narrative order of the city.

Because they deal with central themes of the Saer universe—time, memory, mise-en-abyme structures—these scenes have analogs in many of the other works I have mentioned. For instance, a principle similar to that of the doubling within Pichón’s memory is at work in the scene of the hallucinated bridge in *La grande*, to which I made reference earlier. Such additional instances of doubling will provide the material for the next phase of this analysis, in Chapter Three. However, the above examples help us address the question of an intrinsic flaw of functionalist planning, independent of context. Functionalism entails narrowing the scope of possible uses and limiting their affordances. We have seen the effects of this tactic in *Glosa*, in which street and building condition specific events that the

narrative necessitates. However, placing limitations on affordances creates identical uses of space—the synchronized step, Ángel and his doppelgänger’s duplicated paths, Pichón and Gato’s mirrored lives in the city. These identical uses of space need doubles to act them out. But here is the pivotal point: once identical uses of space begin to create doubles, we transition from a highly-ordered environment into a highly-disorganized environment. As Ángel observes in *Cicatrices*, doubling threatens to “multiply indefinitely.” We see this tendency toward infinite reduplication not only in Ángel’s imagination, but in Pichón’s memory of himself, in which Pichón exists inside his own memory, raising the specter of endless Pichóns encased within one another. In other words, homogeneity of use can rapidly spiral into uncontrollable multiplication. Intuitively, this makes sense. When the city directs its own use so stringently as to make different people do the same things in the same places, it also creates a mechanism that duplicates these uses of the city indefinitely, in a process whose effects are potentially boundless. Exactly like the *hrönir* of Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the functionalist city’s own laws call for a recursive descent into absurdity.

This does not mean that Saer should be read as a detractor of functionalism or even as a critic of this style of urbanist thinking. In fact, if his own comments on *Glosa* are anything to go by, Saer was extremely satisfied with his success in creating the necessary conditions for a totally controlled narrative. His skillful use of the city as a form—in *Glosa* but also in works like *Cicatrices*—would seem to recommend a functionalist outlook on urban space when the designer (whether she be a planner or a fiction writer) wishes to make a specific series of actions inevitable. However, we cannot ignore moments in which Saer seems a bit too aware of the narrative’s inevitability. Here, I refer not only to moments in which fiction echoes the language he uses to describe it in interviews (e.g., Leto’s admiration of the “perfect and casual proportion” of the city) but to instances like that of the synchronized steps, which point to a kind of surplus of order in the city, an order that tends to expand uncontrollably into disorder. I have argued that doubling is a suitable tool by which to analyze this paradoxical transition, and, furthermore, that a pattern in which the city produces doubles exists in Saer’s fiction, outside of *Glosa*. Perhaps, then, the position of Saer’s texts with respect to functionalism would be a moderate one. The city as a form affords, in its streets, a valuable vehicle for “inclusion of other pasts and presents” that Sarlo identifies above as a constant in

Saer's fiction and the circulation of a transhistorical array of actors and actions pertaining to the city's social and material history. In its buildings, the city affords Saer a surefire method for producing the narrative events that interact and reshape the city's various temporalities and characters. With self-conscious precision, Saer weaves these elements together into an impeccable narrative, so controlled as to be formally inscrutable. At the same time, however, he leaves traces of a personal reckoning with the demands of function in the doubling that so often emerges from the urban fabric, like tiny knots in an otherwise smooth surface. Doubling, then, might be the way in which Saer's texts acknowledge the chaos that lurks in the shadow of order. If Le Corbusier and his followers were blind to functionalism's inherent arrogance—its presumption that it accounts for everything—Saer is well aware that a perfect plan can yield unpredictable results. His solution is to magnify moments in which order begins to consume itself and, in doing so, nullify them. In *Glosa* especially but also in the broader continuum of his work, Saer has forged a self-conscious functionalism that capitulates neither to mixed-use nor to delusions of absolute zoning. His urban planning is compartmentalized but introspective. His city runs like clockwork, yet it is never generic. Functionalism may double its subjects, but Saer's Santa Fe will never be replicated.

## Chapter Three

### The Eternal City of the Mind: Saer's Santa Fe as an Urban Storage Device

During much of the long period of his life that he spent in Paris, Juan José Saer lived within a piece of modern architecture. His home was an apartment in a large building complex directly above the Gare Montparnasse, a major railway station. The buildings that make up the complex are so characteristic of functionalist modernist architecture that they are almost a parody. Three slabs of metal and glass containing cell-like apartments rise out of the station's roof like castle walls, forming a rectangle with one open side. A utilitarian garden occupies the space between them. Farther down, beyond the open side of the rectangle, lies a vaguely brutalist building complex with a disorienting circular structure. Walking upward from the busy atrium of the station into the garden, one feels a sudden shift in atmosphere. The noise of arrivals and departures vanishes. Compared with the teeming streets below, the vast, self-contained space between the apartment buildings can appear almost deserted.

For me, it is hard to imagine Saer living there today. His presence seems locked in a remote past of which the buildings are evidence but not testimony, and a dry nostalgia dominates the scene. The same could be said, however, of the buildings' architecture. Their aesthetic—which Edgardo Dobry, writing about Saer in Paris, so accurately identifies as an “expired futurism”—also belongs to an inaccessible past (Dobry). Dating from the '60s, the buildings recall a moment at which radically-streamlined architecture signified a jarring, novel response to economic and technological modernity. But, for today's viewers, time has removed both Saer and the sense of novelty from the buildings. What remains is an architectural vision of modernity that clearly belongs to the past and that, nevertheless, has survived into our present. In other words, Saer's Parisian quarters are a kind of ruin. They are not uninhabited or dilapidated, but they certainly come to us from a time that, architecturally, has been neatly closed up and relegated to history. Above all, they communicate absence. Perhaps more than the typical limestone structures that surround them,

the future has made these buildings look old. If it were ever necessary to prove that modern architecture is over, they would be a case-in-point.

Now, I have spent previous chapters discussing the kind of modernist architectural and urbanist theories that made buildings like that of Saer's apartment possible. Broadly, these are theories that seek to break with the past and champion new designs for new lifestyles. In this chapter, however, I want to take a step back from modern architecture as a radical, revisionary practice and look at the side of modern architecture that acknowledges traditional, vernacular, or classical styles. Instead of looking at figures like Le Corbusier and the CIAM urbanists, I want to look at architects like Louis Kahn and Tadao Ando, modernists whose architecture is in intense dialogue with historical referents. Motivating this shift in focus is my interest in how architecture and cities situate themselves in time, specifically with respect to the idea of ruins. Ruins are evidence of the passage of time, a theme at the heart of Saer's work and his writing about the Santa Fe region. Indeed, in one of the texts I will analyze most closely, the 1976 short story "En la costa reseca" (translated by Kantor as "On Dry Shore"), time's ability to erase is central, breeding both anxiety and fascination. Reacting to this preoccupation, I want to use the figure of the ruin in modern architecture to argue that, in Saer, urban space constantly safeguards memories from erosion by time. Accordingly, this chapter regards the city's structure as a storage device for information and patterns of behavior that is analogous to the mind itself, an outlook which I will extract from Saer's novel *La ocasión* (1988) (translated by Lane as *The Event*). Here I will also draw heavily from the notion that the city's architecture prescribes and anticipates its own use, which I elaborated on in Chapter One and Chapter Two. In the light of these ideas, the aim of this chapter will be to respond to questions raised by both Saer's work and, incidentally, the architecture in which Saer lived: what can the urban fabric retain over time? What does the city as a form contain when it becomes ruins? What do structures do when we are not present in them? I will consider these questions in Saer's fiction, however, looking at Saer's fictional city may illuminate ways to consider the same questions applied to physical cities.

## The Archaic Clay of Being: Glimpsing Mind and Matter's Common Ancestor in Saer

Before going any further, it is imperative to clarify what memory means in this context. For me, there are two kinds of memory. First, there is the mental phenomenon of retained data and their retrieval that the word typically signifies. Second, there is memory in the sense of the capacity to store data, whether that memory be mental in nature or physical. This is the type of “memory” a computer has, for example.<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, I will often (but not always) refer to this latter type of memory as “ruins,” for reasons that the following discussion will make clear. Moreover, while these two phenomena may seem quite distinct, I believe that Saer’s work compels us to regard them as one and the same.

The conflation of mental and physical memory becomes evident in *La ocasión* in a number of ways. Set in the mid-nineteenth century, the novel has as its central character a disgraced mentalist named Bianco, who has come to Argentina to make his fortune in livestock and land speculation. Bianco holds the philosophical perspective that mental life is existentially dominant and that physical phenomena are the inferior byproducts of mental activity. Radical as they may seem, I find Saer’s descriptions of Bianco’s beliefs helpful in that they are conflated with the novel’s third-person narration and, as such, provide an aperture into the metaphysics of *La ocasión* as a whole. To Bianco, matter’s nature is that of “a secondary formation, of a minor effect of a plan that holds it in contempt or ignores it, as an excremental residue of the mind” (Lane, *Event* 4). For Bianco this excrement seems to be the totality of the physical world, which he considers false and adversarial. “[E]ven if the entire universe were to collapse, and the sun, the trees, the earth [...] his belief would remain unshakable, nor would he cease to keep close watch on the deceptive simulacrum that the adverse whole is unfolding before his eyes with the aim of distracting him and making him lose his way in its swampy jungle” (Lane, *Event* 183-84). On the other hand, mind—for which Saer uses the evocative (or Galicized) “espíritu” instead of “mente”—refers

---

<sup>22</sup>From a technical standpoint, it is a computer’s hard drive—and *not* its random access memory (RAM)—that affords long-term storage capacity. For the limited purposes of this literary analysis, it’s sufficient to recognize that both hard drive storage and RAM are forms of storage for bits.

to an entity that lies beyond anything physical—“thought beyond the bones and organs,” as Bianco puts it (Lane, *Event 4*). Bianco’s emphasis on thought and his separation of the physical and mental are philosophically complementary. Most fundamentally, they recall Descartes’ corollary to the statement “*I am thinking, therefore I exist*”: “this I—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is entirely distinct from the body [...] and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist” (emphasis in original; Descartes 36). In other words, Bianco is a biased Cartesian dualist. For him, the mind belongs entirely to a realm beyond the physical, while matter does not exist—or not to the same extent that mind does.

Of course, the most interesting moments in *La ocasión* are those in which Bianco seems to doubt or revise these convictions, however briefly. A striking, oft-cited example comes from a scene at Bianco’s remote cabin in the rural countryside. Bianco is standing outside, surveying the vast land. A cluster of movement appears on the distant horizon and gradually advances toward Bianco. As it moves closer, small animals begin to flee the area. Soon the noise of the cluster reaches Bianco’s ears: “the dull rumble spreads out into an increasing, multiple noise which none the less [*sic*] maintains a certain uniformity and which Bianco deduces is being produced by the gallop of many horses. He pats his revolver at his waist and abruptly rousing himself from his immobility, heads at a run toward the cabin” to get his carbine (Lane, *Event 20*). Approaching inexorably across the plain, the horses are an eruption of undeniable materiality. Their sheer mass inspires both fear and attraction. “There must be more than two thousand of them, more than two thousand, Bianco thinks, stirring a little in his excitement and repeatedly pounding on the ground, to calm himself, with the butt of his carbine” (Lane, *Event 21*).

Predictably, Bianco’s apprehension of the stampede of horses turns toward the metaphysical. He is transfixed by them—an “ownerless” collectivity whose component parts are both distinct and entirely in harmony:

Vigorous, disciplined, and wild, the horses resemble the archaic clay of being,  
shifting from place to place like a cosmic wind, divided into an indefinite number  
of identical individuals, like an infinity of stars separated by the darkness but

all constituted of the same substance, or like a row of poplars sprung up from the same seeds, which, viewed from a certain point in space, are superimposed upon each other and intermingled to the point of giving the illusion of being but a single one. (Lane, *Event* 21-22)

Watching the horses go by, Bianco suddenly breaks into a run, chasing the stampede “with the preposterous plan of stopping it, of taking possession of it, of domesticating it” (Lane, *Event* 22). But the horses take no notice.

I do not approach this scene in terms of matter’s “opacity” and its links to Bianco’s sexual and professional life as Alan Pauls does (166). Nor do I read it in terms of the problematic apprehension of “the real” in Saer’s fiction, as critics like María Bermúdez Martínez and Laura García-Moreno do (Bermúdez Martínez 214; García-Moreno 211). Instead, using *La ocasión*’s own terms, I will attempt to tease out its metaphysical implications. We know that Bianco maintains that the totality of the physical universe is dispensable residue created by the mind. Yet his confrontation with the stampede—its immediacy, its danger, its tacit harmony—casts doubt on this premise, for the reader and perhaps for Bianco himself. When Bianco observes the horses, he cannot easily dismiss them as a fabrication of the mind. The horses approach in a dense wave; they could effortlessly crush Bianco through their numerical and physical supremacy. How can matter, which for Bianco borders on unreality, possess so much strength against him?

However momentarily, Bianco must admit that the mind cannot triumph over all of the workings of the physical world. This moment of tension produces intriguing lexical choices. In the description of the stampede above, we see that the first comparison that Saer draws is particularly vivid: “the horses resemble the archaic clay [pasta] of being [del ser]” (*La ocasión* 35). At first, this phrase seems impressionistic, but the rest of the passage offers clues to a more concrete interpretation. A stampede of wild horses is inherently spontaneous, unrehearsed, and, as Bianco tells us, ownerless. Yet Bianco’s first impression is that they are *disciplined*. But disciplined by what, disciplined how? The stampede has no leader, no premeditated purpose. Instead, the individual horses act as a sophisticated whole: they are “superimposed upon each other and intermingled” like entities that are “constituted of the

same substance.” Indeed, we might say the horses’ discipline does not stem from external control or plans made in advance but from their very nature. Their shared physical origin (“the same seeds”) and shared materiality (“same substance”) are what accounts for the identicalness of their movements and their apparent oneness. As such, the organization that the stampede exhibits points to something beyond Bianco’s contemplative abilities: hooves, legs, and manes coalesce in a design that belongs to matter, not mind. Relatedly, Saer goes on to dwell on the horses’ simultaneous individuality and collectivity. We read that they are like poplars, whose shared origins cause them to grow into variations on a theme, and that they are like stars, which share a common materiality. An underlying preoccupation with the repetition of forms becomes evident. Though separate, these forms suggest the ability to seamlessly recombine.

The idea of an archaic clay of being begins to make more sense now. The horses are separate bits of the same substance, but the origins of this substance came long before the horses’ physical forms. And, like clay, the substance is plastic: horses are just one form it can take on. “Being”—which I take to be the common root of existence—is the seed out of which the horses’s forms sprung and the amorphous mass that will eventually reabsorb them. Now, inherently, this suggestion of existence giving rise to matter is dangerous for Bianco’s belief in the mind’s supremacy. For if we can glimpse the archaic clay of being in a stampede of matter that the mind cannot stop, then matter can plausibly lay claim to existence outside of mind. At the same time, praising his so-called *thought beyond the bones and organs*, Bianco would surely never doubt the existence of the mind outside of matter. So a problem emerges. The very fact of existence now unites mind and matter under one umbrella. One is not the product of the other; both are products of something else. For there to be horses and for there to be the mind of Bianco, first there had to be something out of which both could arise.

In his 1921 book *The Analysis of Mind*, the analytic philosopher Bertrand Russell adds a curious and enduringly original hypothesis to this conversation. He writes that

The stuff of which the world of our experience is composed is, in my belief, neither mind nor matter, but something more primitive than either. Both mind

and matter seem to be composite, and the stuff of which they are compounded lies in a sense between the two, in a sense above them both, like a common ancestor. (Russell 10-11)

On the face of it, this view is a total rejection of the Cartesian treatment of mind and matter as separate entities. However, Russell finds a clever way to preserve a distinction between these two terms. Mind obeys the causal laws of association (“the burnt child that fears the fire”), and matter obeys the causal laws of physical processes and their inevitable results (“lightning is followed by thunder”) (Russell 83, 87). Furthermore, Russell argues that entities subject to one set of causal laws but not the other are either “purely material” or “purely mental” (Russell 26). So, images (“copies’ of past sensations”), being subject only to causal laws of association, are purely mental (Russell 80, 25, 109-10). On the other hand, any occurrences that are not perceived are purely physical. Sensations, being subject to both sets of laws, are both mental and material (Russell 25, 26). In this manner, the “neutral stuff” that comprises mind and matter takes on different characteristics in different environments (Russell 287).

Russell would struggle with the above categories for the rest of his career, and the nuances of this version of his “neutral monism” thesis need not concern us now.<sup>23</sup> What is crucial is Russell’s attempt to show that mind and matter are not mutually-exclusive spheres; instead, they form a Venn diagram in which two circles overlap greatly. The true extent of this overlap becomes evident in Russell’s discussions of subjectivity. One of his recurring examples is the parallel between a photographic plate capturing images of stars and a human looking at the night sky. Fundamentally, both can capture the appearance of a set of stars from one perspective (Russell 98-100, 130). Of course, Russell notes, when humans sense something, it is not just that thing that makes up our sensation. An associative series of past sensations—our biography—combines with our sensation of a new stimulus (say, a star) to create our experience of it (Russell 83, 128-30). However, the influence of past sensations on perception is not limited to the living world. Russell tells us that the plate, by virtue of

---

<sup>23</sup>For helpful overviews and, in the latter case, a careful scrutiny of Russell’s neutral monism, see Grayling 71-75 and Schilpp 354-84.

having photographed a particular set of stars, has its own biography—the difference is that our biographies obey the associative laws of the mind, and the plate's obeys the physical laws of matter (Russell 130-31).

There is one bridge across this divide: subjectivity, “the characteristic of perspectives and biographies, the characteristic of giving the view of the world from a certain place” (Russell 296). As we saw above, both humans and photographic plates possess subjectivity. And although the photographic plate’s unresponsiveness to associative laws means we cannot say it is conscious, “the conception of subjectivity [...] though not alone sufficient to define mind, is clearly an essential element in the definition” (Russell 296). For our discussion, Russell’s most interesting claim is that a photographic plate’s ability to bear the traces of past occurrences marks one of the building blocks of consciousness. It’s information storage that binds mind and matter. Here, Bianco’s dualism has been flipped on its head. For if we accept Russell’s suggestions, not only does matter exist, it is far more on a par with mind than Bianco would wish to accept. What is more, mind is simply a relative of matter that follows different rules (we could perhaps invoke an analogy in which mind and matter are different dishes made with the same principal ingredient). Mind and matter’s shared subjectivity means they store information in analogous ways; both cities and people have memories. Indeed, as Bianco organizes his life in Santa Fe, his actions do not just fade and disappear into some nebulous exterior simulacrum. The city’s structures absorb them, just as Russell’s plate absorbs the light of stars.

This becomes particularly clear in the ramifications of Bianco’s calculated decision about where to build his home.

Unlike traditional families, who live in clusters of colonial houses in the south of the city, Bianco has decided to build his house in the northern section, near the river, almost in open countryside, and has bought several plots of municipal land, thinking that, with two or three rich immigrants who will have their little mansions built there, the value of the plots of land will go up in just a few years. But he has also bought a house in the southern section of the city, and is having it modernized little by little by his father-in-law, who is a mason, so as to show

that if he doesn't live in the south of the city it isn't because his means will not permit him to do so, and that if he has decided to settle in the northern section, it is so as to set the example of a new style of life. (Lane, *Event* 90)

Bianco's strategy of dividing his presence between the urbanizing north and the more established quarters of the south of the city connects importantly to the formation of the referential Santa Fe. The city was built from south to north, starting from what Saer has called the “colonial nucleus” and moving upward toward the rural land Saer mentions above (qtd. in Patruno 49). Consequently, Bianco's decision is at once an example of how a city's Russellian memory influences its inhabitants and an example of how inhabitants' actions can create new, durable memories in a city's structure. First, Bianco yields to the city's existing memories of a colonial past. He sees that certain patterns of use in the built environment (the south belongs to traditional families) will not yield easily to new appropriations; so he forgoes an intervention in old patterns to pioneer a new one. He builds a house in the north to mark a lifestyle associated not with the legacy of colonial settlement but with the then-contemporary reality of rich immigrants engaged in land speculation. Creating a new memory in the city's fabric, Bianco sets a precedent for the city's historical expansion. However, Bianco realizes that to achieve full social legitimacy, he must somehow engage with the built environment's current distribution of power. So, he has an existing house in the south redone, working within an established pattern of use to announce a change in the urban population's demographics.

But we must remember that, like mind, matter's stored information—its biography—shapes its future behavior. The city's physical structure, its matter preserves the shapes and patterns formed by the lifestyles and exchanges it must support. Often these shapes and patterns outlive their immediate purposes, and, in a feedback process, influence future uses of the space. Matter's storage capacity allows mind to use it as a concrete representation of data that would only occupy mental space otherwise. As with computers, the city becomes a crutch for the mind.

Illustrating this principle, *La ocasión*'s foreshadowing of Santa Fe's socioeconomic geography has massive implications for the rest of Saer's fiction. As the critic Luigi Patruno

has pointed out, the novel *Glosa* (1986) (translated by Dolph as *Sixty-Five Years of Washington*) follows its two protagonists as they walk through the city in the direction opposite to that of its historical expansion (Patruno 49). *Glosa* is self-declaredly set in “1960 or 1961”—about a century after *La ocasión*’s events—by which the urban patterns in *La ocasión* have had time to determine the city’s layout (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 3). So, in the northern part of the main pedestrian street, San Martín, the buildings boast “pretentious and elegant façades, including some—why not—residential buildings” which soon give way to the “the commercial district proper” (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 4, 35). But once we move more toward the south these façades are replaced by “the old, single-story houses with ornate façades and iron balconies that evoke the persistent comparison with a mausoleum [...]” (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 168). Even closer to the colonial center, “the small, private houses with their bronze nameplates and balconies over the sidewalk give way, as they say, to the Plaza de Mayo, bordered, on its four sides, by the cathedral, the courts, the Jesuit college, the capitol [...] suppliers of law, power, justice, and religion enter and exit with folders, briefcases, papers [...]” (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 185-86). The book and the walk end shortly after passing the historical museum, an authentic colonial building “with its tile roof, its gallery supported by columns of carved wood [...] painted white” and “the colonial church, white like the museum [...] with its tile roof” (Dolph, *Sixty-Five* 199-200). In other words, the incipient urban memories we glimpse in *La ocasión* have ossified into architectural, economic, and social strata in *Glosa*: commerce and “pretentious” residences to the north, and old money, “old single-story houses,” seats of power, and colonial buildings, now relics, to the south. (This is by no means limited to two of Saer’s most well-known novels, however. Already in Saer’s first book, *En la zona* (1960), we find detailed references to “the streets of the south, of cobblestone and low houses, many still made of adobe” (*Cuentos* 456).)

Of course, Saer is just being consistent with the history of the region he has chosen to write about. However, as we have already seen, the detail with which he chooses to reproduce the built environment suggests a project, a system of stored information whose scope reaches far beyond Bianco and nineteenth-century Santa Fe. Part of my conceptualization of this project lies in a parallel between ruins and mental memories. I define a ruin as a building in the absence of inhabitants or users. This is in sharp contrast to, for example, Walter

Benjamin's influential notion of ruins as similar to allegories degraded over time. While Benjamin sees ruins as products of "irresistible decay" that progressively accumulate as fragments, ossifying history, I see ruins as perpetually accumulating wholes that generate simultaneity, since ruins never lose, only gain information (178-79). As such, in my view, a building is ruined not by decay but by the time it spends alone. (Indeed, who are we to judge what is decayed? The "falling down" in the etymology of "ruin" only represents a common effect of absence.) Ruins are not *presently* functioning, but this doesn't mean they cannot ever function. Thus, abandonment or dilapidation may accompany an absence of users, but they are not necessary. When I consider a particular structure from Saer's fiction in the abstract, without considering its inhabitants, it becomes, for me, a ruin. These ruins interest me because they contain the physical memories that Russellian subjectivity produces in matter: when people are not using a structure, what it holds within it are the traces of former use. Accordingly, ruins represent collections of these memories, lying in wait for future use. In this capacity, they constitute part of the answer to the questions about what buildings retain that began this chapter. Ruins are memories from the perspective of structures. They do not contain everything that happens in a city. However, they do contain a *part* of everything. Like a silent witness, architecture watches over the city. It records and remembers. And as it remembers, it changes.

## The Eternal City of the Mind

Freud's discussion of memory in *Civilization and Its Discontents* provides us with a valuable point of departure from which to begin dissecting the significance of ruins as collections of physical memories. Moreover, his text can help us build toward a broader understanding of memory as both a mental and physical phenomenon. The uniqueness of Freud's insight originates in his conviction that "in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light" (*Civilization* 16). To illustrate this principle, Freud then calls upon a metaphor for memory which will serve as this chapter's theoretical framework. "We will choose as an example the

history of the Eternal City," he announces, going on to draw an elaborate parallel between memory and a city of ruins:

Historians tell us that the oldest Rome was the *Roma Quadrata*, a fenced settlement on the Palatine. Then followed the phase of the *Septimontium*, a federation of the settlements on the different hills; after that came the city bounded by the Servian wall; and later still, after all the transformations during the periods of the republic and the early Caesars, the city which the Emperor Aurelian surrounded with his walls. We will not follow the changes which the city went through any further, but we will ask ourselves how much a visitor, whom we will suppose to be equipped with the most complete historical and topographical knowledge, may still find left of these early stages in the Rome of to-day. [...] The best information about Rome in the republican era would only enable him at the most to point out the sites where the temples and public buildings of that period stood. Their place is now taken by ruins, but not by ruins of themselves but of later restorations made after fires or destruction. It is hardly necessary to remark that all these remains of ancient Rome are found dovetailed into the jumble of a great metropolis which has grown up in the last few centuries since the Renaissance. There is certainly not a little that is ancient still buried in the soil of the city or beneath its modern buildings. This is the manner in which the past is preserved in historical sites like Rome.

Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one. This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars and the Septizonium of Septimius Severus would still be rising to their old height on the Palatine and that the castle of S. Angelo would still be carrying on its battlements the beautiful statues which graced it until the siege by the Goths, and so on. But more than this. In the place occupied by the Palazzo Caffarelli

would once more stand—without the Palazzo having to be removed—the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus; and this not only in its latest shape, as the Romans of the Empire saw it, but also in its earliest one, when it still showed Etruscan forms and was ornamented with terra-cotta antefixes. Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero's vanished Golden House. On the Piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the Pantheon of to-day, as it was bequeathed to us by Hadrian, but, on the same site, the original edifice erected by Agrippa; indeed, the same piece of ground would be supporting the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it was built. And the observer would perhaps only have to change the direction of his glance or his position in order to call up the one view or the other. (*Civilization* 16-7)

Here Freud abandons the “eternal city” metaphor because of the fundamental impossibility of two objects occupying the same space at the same time. For him, memory is an atemporal system in which new elements are constantly introduced (*Civilization* 15-19). Understandably, this eternal simultaneity of multiplying contents proves difficult to conceptualize, especially when one must rely on metaphors of the tangible world to represent cognitive space. However, the usefulness of the parallel between the mind and the city lies precisely in this notion of storage capacity. Both mind and city are constantly rebuilt on top of traces of their former selves. This is how they experience the passage of time. Moreover, both mind and city—despite the difficulty of physical superposition in the case of the latter—keep a record of these traces, baked into their very structure. If we accept the Freudian model of mental life (which is functionally identical to that of Russell), what links mental and physical phenomena is their ability to be impacted by the events around them from a particular perspective. While Russell calls this property subjectivity, Freud’s analogy is perhaps more intuitive. Ruins and memories, for him, are comparable in that they retain information that we can gain access to later, once time has passed. This is perhaps why Freud chooses to introduce Rome by its nickname “the Eternal City.” Rome, even when viewed conceptually, only approximates the infinite repository that Freud sees in the mind.

This makes it an imperfect metaphor. Ultimately, Freud seems more invested in the notion of a city whose ruins have evolved forever and will continue evolving forever. Such a city—a truly eternal city—would be a mirror image of the mind itself.

This eternal city of the mind resonates strongly with Saer's metaphysical treatment of the city and the Santa Fe region. One particularly striking parallel comes via the character Carlos Tomatis, as he is returning to Santa Fe after a brief absence. "But would the city still be there?" he wonders. "When we are not empirically present in a place, does it still exist, at least in the same way?" He then conflates his recollections of the city with the city itself by observing that when he is not in Santa Fe "its existence, which is completely dependent on his memory, becomes extremely problematic" (Dolph, *La Grande* 403). The difficulty, for Tomatis, appears to hinge on the way that the physical world builds upon itself—ruining itself to change shape. "The passage of time, though imperceptible, whether of a few seconds or a few minutes, leaves clear traces in the apparent immutability of things [...] the places outside of our empirical horizon continue to churn, a continuous, shifting network woven of various threads by a loom that incessantly produces, both archaic and new, the same interconnections" (Dolph, *La Grande* 403-04). He concludes that "with every displacement of our attention, the familiar is submerged into the unknown, and when we reencounter it, it's no longer completely what it was" (Dolph, *La Grande* 404). Here, Tomatis' philosophical perspective suggests an equivalence between memory and physical space that is very similar to Freud's: if places change when we return to them, this change is only observable through a comparison of memory to present experience, leading to the formation of new memories. Likewise, over time, the "continuous, shifting network" of the physical world accumulates traces infinitely. Either way, time leaves endless marks.

But Tomatis' thoughts hint at a more urgent question, foreshadowed at the beginning of the chapter. If the physical world constantly "produces," as he says above, "both archaic and new, the same interconnections," does it continue to do so when we are not there to see it? We have already dealt in Chapter Two with a similar question raised by Pichón Garay, who wrestles with "the unfamiliar thought that a city where I was born and where I have lived nearly thirty years will continue living without me" (Kantor 81). But more than the question of whether Santa Fe will still be there when one character or another has left

it, the logical conclusion of Tomatis' musings is the question of what Santa Fe will be if no one is there to inhabit it. This broader puzzle is not only suggested by the generality of the first-person pronoun in the phrase "When we are not empirically present"—it also abounds in Saer's fiction. We can hear the echo of it, for example, in *Nadie nada nunca*, when the midsummer heat drives Santa Fe's dwellers away from it: "the city turns to ashes, abandoned" (Lane, *Nobody* 134). We find another hint of the fate of an abandoned city in "La mayor," as Tomatis gazes out upon the "deserted" streets and thinks about "the city, like a wagon, so to speak, traveling—on what road? and toward what?—in black space" (Kantor 124).

But perhaps this problem is most notable in the short story "En la costra reseca," in *La mayor*. The story's events are simple: Carlos Tomatis has just completed the last exam required to graduate from high school, and he calls his close friend Barco with a plan for some amusement. (Here, in contrast to many of their other appearances, Tomatis and Barco are adolescents; and "En la costra reseca" finds them at one of the earliest points in their story arcs.) The plan is to bury a message in a bottle in one of the islands downstream on the city river. Tomatis and Barco debate the content of the message carefully. After brainstorming several ideas about what they would like to pass on to the future, they settle on a message of a single word: "MESSAGE." Even if "message" means something different in the future, Barco reasons, simply having written it will preserve the core notion of communication for future discoverers. Tomatis writes the word on a sheet of paper, and, the next day, he and Barco paddle down the city river in a canoe containing the message, a bottle, wax, a shovel, wine, and some food. They reach an island downstream, leave the canoe, and begin walking around. Finally, they find a good spot for their message, and there they dig an enormous hole, deep enough for a person to stand in. Then, they place the paper in the bottle, seal it with a cork and wax, and carefully deposit it in the hole. Once they've filled up the hole, they go for a swim and consume their lunch and wine. That night, it rains. Lying in bed, Tomatis imagines the rain sealing the message in the ground and wonders what will become of the message. Perhaps those who find it will not be able to recover what the word message meant in Tomatis' time. Or, perhaps, humans will cease to exist, and the bottle and its message will continue trapped in "a dry, empty planet, spinning in the darkness of

space” (Kantor 69). But even if humans capable of understanding the message were to find it, he muses, it would not contain him or Barco or their individual perceptions of that day. The reader is left with the vision of a bottle that contains both something and nothing: a memory but not its experiencers, a string of moments that may never even have happened.

“En la costra reseca” is, for my analysis, a story about city ruins. Its emphasis on the preservation of the past into the future, coupled with Tomatis’ speculations on how individuals or societies of a different era will react to the message, unambiguously indicates a general preoccupation with how the remnants of previous human activities change or reconfigure themselves over time. From any angle, “En la costra” is an exploration of how the past lives on in material form. The fact that the message is a textual one, Tomatis and Barco’s painstaking selection of the word, and Tomatis’ apprehension of the difficulties of language might tempt us to assert that this exploration is a self-reflexive comment on literature: the written word, by its very presence, carries the past onward, even if it means different things to different groups of sentient beings. But this interpretation is incomplete in my eyes. For me, “En la costra” does not depict the creation of literature, represented as a “message” to posterity, vulnerable to misinterpretation. Rather, it shows us how the lived experience of a city can become buried in the earth, where it is preserved as pure material, devoid of the humans that shaped it.

The message in a bottle’s strong ties to the urban environment become clear at a number of moments. For example, among Tomatis and Barco’s initial proposals for what the message should consist of (after they discard the idea of using verse), the first is “a summary of the city’s history.” Similarly, as Tomatis and Barco return from the island on their canoe, Saer describes the city viewed from the river, “blue and full of noises and voices coming from the beach and the lit-up bar” (Kantor 65, 68). Later, when Tomatis realizes that the message will lose the specificity of his experience, this moment is among those that he recalls, knowing that the message’s future discoverers may not be able to reconstruct that urban vignette. More generally, however, the short story also hints at a preoccupation with architectural or urban forms. In its first sentence, we learn that Tomatis’ final high school exam was in geometry. Then, before he writes the text of the message, he tests out his pen “on the margin of his geometry notebook” (Kantor 64, 66). In the Saer corpus, we don’t

need to go far to establish the understandable equivalence between the notion of geometry and urban forms. Particularly, *Glosa* begins with a short, elegiac poem that opposes “fiebre” (“fever”) and “geometría” (“geometry”) and reappears farther on in the text with Tomatis as its fictional author.<sup>24</sup> Raquel Linenberg-Fressard (later seconded by Premat, *La dicha* 245) uses this opposition to split *Glosa*’s major themes into two categories, “fever” and “geometry.” Naturally, “the orthogonal plan of Argentine cities”—that is, the city grid that organizes *Glosa*’s narrative form (cf. Chapter Two)—falls into the “geometry” category (Linenberg-Fressard, ch. 3). It would be surprising if geometry did not retain these same resonances in “En la costra.” Moreover, we can also glimpse the form that the grid creates, the rectangular block, in the message’s physical form: before he and Barco insert it into the bottle, Tomatis keeps it “folded into quarters [dobrado en cuatro]” in his pocket. Thus, if the message were ever unfolded, its texture would mimic Santa Fe’s urban layout, which is itself composed of rectangles of equal dimensions. An even further derivation of the city block’s four-sided geometry can be found in the print of Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield with Crows*, which Tomatis had “gotten framed in a picture shop [taller de cuadros] that morning” (Kantor 66, 64; Saer, *Cuentos* 208, 207).<sup>25</sup>

All of the above is not to say that “En la costra reseca” is uniquely fixated on Santa Fe’s urban fabric. Rather, it is one of the many points in the corpus where the constant hum of Saer’s engagement with urban form becomes impossible to ignore. The short story’s attention to Santa Fe’s materiality envelops and cradles the central theme of preservation

<sup>24</sup>En uno que se moría  
mi propia muerte no vi,  
pero en fiebre y geometría  
se me fue pasando el día  
y ahora me velan a mí (*Glosa* 112 and front matter).

In contrast to Steve Dolph’s more lyrical interpretation (see *Sixty-Five* 92 and front matter), a literal translation would look something like this:

In one who was dying  
I did not see my own death,  
but in fever and geometry  
the day passed me by  
and now they hold a wake for me.

<sup>25</sup>In Spanish, the overlap in shape is also an overlap in linguistic form, since the word for city block, “cuadra,” and the word for canvas or painting, “cuadro,” are etymologically related to “cuatro” (“four”), the word that appears in the text to describe the folds of the message.

of the past. The shape of the city, running through the story and into the paper of the message itself, permeates the act of preservation that the message in a bottle represents. The unavoidable influence of Santa Fe's structure makes the message into a ruin of the city.

But “En la costra reseca” also deals with ruins in another, more self-conscious way. Namely, the story has atemporal connections to various important events and mainstays of Saer’s fiction. Given its early position in the twentieth-century narrative arc of Saer’s fiction, it serves to lay out things and situations that will accumulate age over the course of the oeuvre—things and situations that will contain, later, the traces found in ruins. For example, the aforementioned print of Van Gogh’s *Wheatfield with Crows* that Tomatis has only recently framed in “En la costra” becomes an essential component of Tomatis’ future dwellings, showing up at later points in Tomatis’ life in “La mayor” (which appears in the same collection as “En la costra”), *Cicatrices* (1969), and *En la zona* (1960), Saer’s first book. Likewise, the hanging bridge over the river that appears in the story also appears in innumerable works, among which are *Responso* (1964), *Unidad de lugar* (1967), *Nadie nada nunca* (1980), and *La grande* (2005). In *La mayor* (1976), Saer places chronologically later stories such as “La mayor” and “A medio borrar” before “En la costra,” introducing traces before origins.<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, Barco makes reference to Tomatis’ future occupation—“professional writer”—which will indelibly characterize his friend for the rest of his life, and indeed had already characterized him in works written earlier, such as *Cicatrices* (Kantor 65). These reverse chronologies reveal not only persistence but simultaneity. They flatten out time across works.

Yet “En la costra”’s strongest harmony is probably with “Algo se aproxima” (“Something Comes Closer”) a story from Saer’s first book that contains, in María Teresa Gramuglio’s words, an “almost programmatic enunciation” of his project to write the story of a city (845). “Algo,” which appears to be close to “En la costra” in the internal chronology, echos many of the latter’s fictional contours, cementing a network of ruin-traces throughout Saer. The points at which these two stories coincide are almost too numerous to detail, but the

---

<sup>26</sup>Note, however, that Kantor’s translation *The One Before* inverts the position of *La mayor*’s originally first and second parts (“La mayor” and “A medio borrar,” respectively) with the position of its originally third part (containing “En la costra”). The translation thus places these stories in a more sequential order, relative to the narrative arc’s internal chronology.

meaningful overlap begins in earnest with the two pseudo-expeditions Barco and Tomatis set out on. In both stories, the pair begin a journey right around dawn. (In “Algo,” the journey is across the city, on foot.) In both stories, the river, the hanging bridge, and the boat club serve as landmarks or backgrounds. Both expeditions have a proleptic tone: Tomatis chats about the future while he and Barco walk in “Algo” (*Cuentos* 535); the bottle in “En la costra” is meant to be discovered in the future. Both stories suggest the possibility of writing the story of a city: in “Algo,” this is the fundamental quotation “I would write the story of a city [...] of a region at most” (Saer, *Cuentos* 517); in “En la costra,” it is the proposal for the summary of the city’s history that we have already discussed. Both stories feature the image of a luminous city in a void (in “En la costra” it is, as we have seen, “the lit-up bar they made out from the dock engulfed in blue darkness”; in “Algo” it’s a vision of an American city “in a vacuum [en el vacío]” [Kantor 69; *Cuentos* 517]). Both stories’ expeditions end with a meal, and, particularly, with wine: in “En la costra,” the bottle of wine drunk on the island; at the end of “Algo,” the bottle of wine Tomatis, Barco, and León order with their meal (Kantor 68; *Cuentos* 536). Finally, a nihilistic or relativizing gesture ends both stories: in “En la costra” it is the future Earth containing the ruin of Tomatis and Barco’s memories with no trace of people; in “Algo” it is Barco’s response to the question of what meaning life has (“None, of course.” [*Cuentos* 536]).

“En la costra,” with its strong link to “Algo”—an explicitly foundational moment in Saer—creates a palpable sense of preservation within the oeuvre. Narratives predicated on journeys are extremely common in his work (and they take on an epic tone in works like *Glosa* or *Las nubes* (1997)). References to city lights surrounded by darkness are also frequent (consider *La ocasión*: “But with nightfall, they reach the outskirts of the city, the first houses, spread far apart and showing the lights of kerosene lamps through the windows” (Lane, *Event* 24).). And it is perhaps not trivial that Saer’s literary career also ends with a meal (the cookout in *La grande*), with wine, in *La grande*’s final line (“With the rain came the fall, and with the fall, the time of wine” [Dolph, *La Grande* 497].), and with a wry reaffirmation of life’s banality (a supernatural apparition at the end of *La grande* turns out to be a plastic supermarket bag). Such moments are recognizable because readers have seen them several times before, beginning with both the early portion of the principal internal

chronology of Saer's work ("En la costra") and the early portion of Saer's literary career ("Algo"). As such, these moments are enduring parts of the Saer edifice. They age along with it.

Furthermore, "En la costra"'s high degree of interconnectedness with the artifacts, tropes, and typical scenes of Saer's universe turns it into a summary or catalogue of many salient characteristics of his fiction. It becomes a kind of blueprint for future ruins. Throttled back and forth through fictional time, we know that several years into the future, Tomatis will be looking at his Van Gogh print listlessly, at a seeming low point in his chronic depression. We know that his career as a writer will have mediocre results. We know that the bridge he and Barco see from the river will be torn down and replaced. We know that Saer's twentieth-century narrative arc will end on an incomplete but technically-perfect note. And yet "En la costra" shows us the point at which these things—the print, the career, the bridge, the narrative arc—were still freshly-made. It takes us back to their construction. It plants them in our memory, just as Tomatis and Barco insert the message into the earth, so that, when time has acted on them, we will still be able to glimpse their origin.

This simultaneity parallels Freud's city. Like his imaginary Rome, "En la costra"'s connections to Saer's fictional world reveal structures—physical and narrative—that have become superimposed on their future selves, their revisions, and their replacements. It's helpful to point out that the literal translation of "costra" in the story's title would be "crust," a reference to the dry earth in which Tomatis and Barco bury their message. But "costra" also has the meaning of "scab." When a scab forms, new matter accumulates on top of existing matter that has undergone a change (from a scratch or wound, etc.); the scab is literally evidence of a change in physical state. This polysemy suggests the same urban accumulation that forms the basis for Freud's comparison: in Saer's city, time builds up. New structures accrue on top of old ones. Moreover, as with Freud, Saer conflates physical and mental space. Through Saer's tracking of the evolution of the city over time, the memory of what once was becomes perceptible in urban space, as if the city itself were a single mind and its inhabitants were consciousness itself. Saer's Santa Fe, like the Freudian mind, bears all the traces of its evolution within it. It retains what marks it. It is a message in a bottle, lying in wait for a future that will exist in parallel to the past it contains. Or,

better yet, it is simply a message—tangible and durable evidence that something, once, was there.

## Stopping Time: The Architecture of Personal History

Yet a difficulty with this analogy emerges. So far we have dealt with memories of the urban system itself, belonging to both its physical structure and the typical narratives that unfold in it. But what about memories that belong to individual inhabitants? As Tomatis points out, while the message of “En la costra” may preserve some elements of the moment of its creation, it will not contain his and Barco’s presence or individual recollections. This is similar to the situation we encountered earlier at Saer’s Parisian residence. One cannot necessarily feel Saer’s presence there; instead, what one feels is the memory of a certain architectural moment in the city’s history. We may be prepared to accept that from the city’s perspective, urban space acts as a repository for what happens inside it, just like the Freudian mind. But does this mean that the mental activity of its inhabitants—their memories of the city from their perspective—is irretrievably lost?

Perhaps not. In fact, I intend to argue that Saer shapes his city in such a way as to preserve precisely the kinds of memories that Tomatis worries will be lost: fleeting moments of individual perception. In this sense, the Saerian city takes Freud’s imaginary Rome one step further: not only does the city preserve all of its previous iterations; it also preserves all of the individual impressions of these iterations. That is, Saer’s city stores not only its own urban biography, but the biographies of the minds of those who live in it. The principle is dizzyingly recursive: the eternal city, like a mind, contains not only its own pasts but the pasts of the minds within it, which like cities, store the totalities of their own pasts. This comprehensiveness may seem overwhelming, but it has important limits. For example, Saer’s eternal city is not the primordial fantasy of Borges’ Aleph. While the Aleph is *everything* concentrated within a single point, Saer’s Santa Fe neither contains everything nor takes the shape of a single point. Rather, it is a bundle of interdependent memories that, per its ever-expanding nature, never encompasses all there is. And though the notion of a city may bring to mind a specific geographical point, we should never forget that Santa

Fe is just a name for a fluid system that, like the mind, retains its traces anywhere it goes. Santa Fe exists, too, at every disparate physical point Saer's fiction covers, from Paris to the moon to Chernobyl.<sup>27</sup> It eschews time—not through the Aleph's preemptive completeness but through accumulation.

How, then, does one create a repository in which inhabitants' own memories can resist the erosion of time? How does one stamp a city with marks of individuality that endure? Furthering the parallel between modern architecture and the composition of Saer's Santa Fe, it may be helpful to explore the ways in which certain modernist works reveal a concern with temporal continuity, cultural community, and individual perspective. That is, let us look at an architecture that deliberately situates itself in time. Doing so may aid us in understanding how Saer uses the city to preserve not only changes in its structures but also the indelible traces of memories from the perspectives of inhabitants.

Unlike functionalist modernism, which strains to disrupt tradition and regional styles, the architecture I now want to call on firmly embeds itself in a past that belongs to both the built environment and the architect as a person. I call this architecture "the architecture of personal history." On the one hand, it embraces both the architectural and planning styles that characterize a specific place, and, on the other, it achieves expression through the architect's own site-specific memories. Of course, it is not that Corbusian functionalist styles make no reference to architectural history or the local vernacular. The difference is that, while Corbusian functionalism deliberately tries to obscure a connection to the past, an architecture of personal history underscores this connection, along with its significance to the architect. The former screams "new"; the latter whispers "familiar but different."

Louis Kahn and Tadao Ando are prime examples of this architectural ethos. While their approaches and styles are immensely different, their architectures find common ground in gestures toward tradition and localized experience. They are both modernists, but, unlike Le Corbusier, they do not see modernism as a break with the past—whether the past be personal or architectural. Instead, architectural modernism provides them with the tools they need to give form to a vision, informed by history and the subjective experience of

---

<sup>27</sup>As Saer himself has stated, "'Paris and Buenos Aires and Santa Fe and the moon are the same place'" (qtd. in Premat, "Saer" 44).

place.

Louis Kahn was a pivotal twentieth-century figure in both U.S. architecture and the international scene. Having immigrated to the U.S. from Estonia during childhood, Kahn studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, which trained its students in the beaux-arts tradition (Twombly 13; Larson 21).<sup>28</sup> Between completing his degree in 1924 and becoming a professor at Yale University in 1947, Kahn had worked on projects across several domains, but it was only in the latter part of his career, after entering the Yale faculty, that he would receive widespread recognition (Twombly 13-14; Scully 5). Kahn's several visits to Europe had been formative. In particular, Vincent Scully explains how Kahn's 1950 trip to Italy provided a foundation for his mature work, which bore the clear influence of Roman ruins: his structures increasingly featured elementary shapes, heavy walls, massive arches, and the absence of exposed glass in favor of simple voids (Scully 4-6, 8-11). Kahn's project in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Bangladesh, is a visually stunning example of this style (see Figure 10 [Scully 10-11]). The shapes are monolithic; the silhouette is stoic, fortress-like. A similarly representative building is the Phillips Exeter Academy library, in which Khan stripped the architecture down to chunky, basic forms that refuse to merge into a smooth whole (Figure 11). "Kahn won't even let it become a building," Scully remarks. "[H]e wants it to remain a ruin" (12).

Clearly, Kahn is drawing from classical antiquity. But his anachronism is even more surprising because it flies in the face of the mainstream modernist aesthetic, which shunned the bridge with tradition that Kahn's mature work implies (Scully 5, 8). The motives for this unexpected aesthetic choice appear to be both programmatic and personal. For Kahn, building ruins might have been a way of pointing to the fundamental sources of Western architecture which still nourish our structures, especially when we heed what Kahn calls their "lessons" (Kahn 23). At the same time, per Scully, classicist romanticism had been part of Kahn's architectural DNA since his days at the University of Pennsylvania. But it was only with his later, ruin-inspired works that he came to show how deeply the beaux-arts tradition had marked him: "he had to find it [beaux-arts order] again, but he had to find

---

<sup>28</sup>This tradition, named for the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, is responsible for buildings like the nineteenth-century Palais Garnier; needless to say, it draws heavily from classical styles.

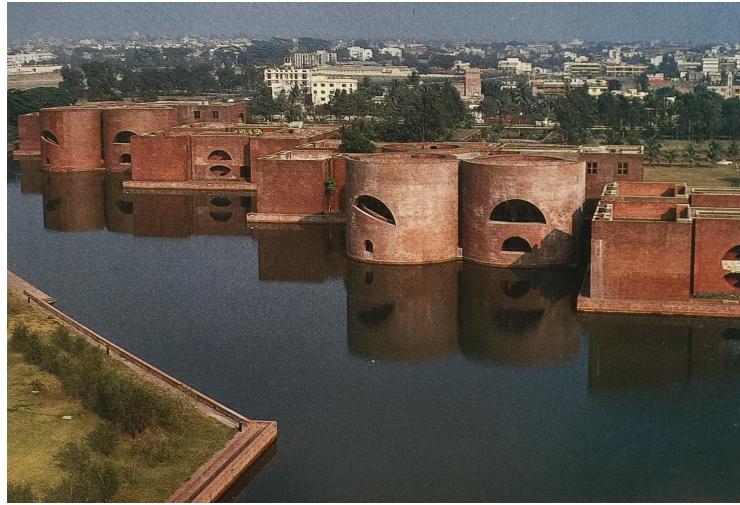


Figure 10: Kahn's work in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Bangladesh, an example of Kahn's heavy, ruin-inspired buildings (Scully 10).

Brownlee, David R. et al. *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*. Rizzoli, 1991, p. 251.

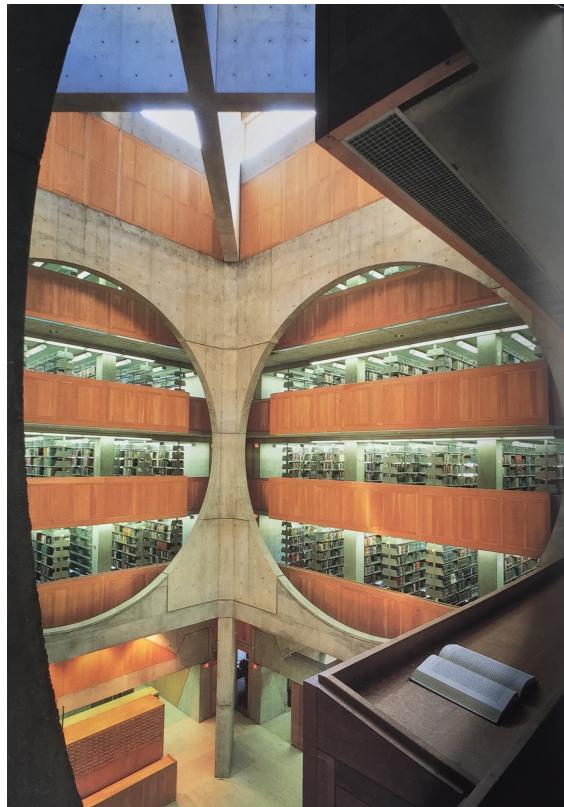


Figure 11: The Phillips Exeter Academy library, typical of the chunky forms of Kahn's later work (Scully 12).

Brownlee, David R. et al. *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*. Rizzoli, 1991, p. 260.

it on his own new terms so that he could believe, deep in his soul that he was inventive, that he was, in a sense, making it all up himself” (Scully 4, 7-8). With those works, Kahn returned to the architecture that had shaped him. Beyond a respect for classical models and their foundational status in Western architecture, Kahn’s mature buildings bespeak a reconciliation with one’s own artistic heritage. The personal memory of beaux-arts training emerges, embattled but vibrant, in these structures.

Tadao Ando’s evolution as an architect tells a similar story overall—however, the terms are different. Born in Osaka in 1941, Ando had no formal training when he began his career (Ando, *Seven* 17). But what Ando’s mature work reveals is that, as a self-described “physical being with these innate Japanese sensitivities,” Ando reflected deeply on the cultural and built environment he encountered in Japan (Ando, “Interview” 13). Indeed, among the many traditions Ando’s work speaks to, it converses especially provocatively with the Japanese canon, notably the tea-house style. As the architect Kiyoshi Takeyama writes, “Tadao Ando produces spaces symbolizing the relation between human beings and physical objects. His interpretation of this relation is imbued with distinctively Japanese emotions derived from the Japanese cultural traditions” (164). In particular, Takeyama finds numerous specific parallels between Ando’s work and tea-ceremony architecture in their use of light, nature, unpolished materials, and asymmetrical construction (Takeyama 166-79). In both architectures, simplicity reigns (Takeyama 176-77). Like Kahn, Ando never essentializes; he never quotes tradition directly. Rather, his unique repertory of bold lines, rough concrete, asymmetry, and dynamic light suggests that amid his many influences—including Le Corbusier and classical antiquity—there exists a profound interplay with historical Japanese cultural production (Ando, *Seven* 17, 25 and “Interview” 17). As Ando puts it, “I don’t think it [Japanese tradition] is a constraint, but it exists in my subconscious” (“Interview” 15). The result is an architecture that is in dialogue with both an aesthetic lineage and subjective experience, shaped by place, history, and individual affinities. Like Kahn, Ando developed an inimitable vocabulary that was both identifiably modernist and linked to tradition, to a vision of the past.

We find a representative example of Ando’s complex conversation with tradition in the Chapel on Mount Rokko (Figures 12 and 13), near Kobe. As the architect Alex Veal points

out, the building can be read as a space in which time slows, expands, and ultimately stops (351-62). In the garden path to the complex “the length of the route is physically increased, and hence the time spent moving through the space” in a way that recalls similar movement patterns at the garden of Kyoto’s Jisho-ji temple. Then, in the structurally-minimalist colonnade leading to the chapel, Ando lengthens time through a sense of receding space that evokes “the succession of torii (post and lintel gates) seen at sites of Shinto worship throughout Japan” (Veal 352, 353).<sup>29</sup> Having traversed this tunnel of gates, the visitor finally arrives at the bare, homely chapel, whose concrete recalls the textures and shades of the tea-house style discussed above (Veal 358). There, “time seems almost to pause in the still air,” encouraging a meditative state (Veal 360). Evidently, Veal has captured a modality of Ando’s architecture that uses traditional tropes to manipulate the experience of space, thereby freezing time. Seeking a solemn effect, Ando’s modernist style reaches to the past. Indeed, this analysis is particularly helpful in seeing how Ando’s individual aesthetic preoccupations interact with the cultures of the space in which he builds.

But perhaps Ando plays with time in another way as well. By suggesting referents from various points in the continuum of Japanese tradition (not only tea house design, but architectures associated with Shinto and Buddhist traditions), Ando infuses modernism with several different temporalities. In doing so, he blurs the passage of time. Ando’s buildings are neither new nor old, neither modern nor historical, neither traditional nor disruptive. Rather, Ando completely defies these terms. Within the stylistic spectrum of modern architecture, Ando’s buildings become a polar opposite to the apartment complex above the Gare Montparnasse, where Saer lived. If the latter’s style seems like an “expired futurism,” as Edgardo Dobry observes above, it’s because its modernism tried to break with the past, even though its own newness would inevitably wear off with the passage of time. In stark contrast, Ando’s buildings do not turn stale because they never try to mark a break with the past. Instead, the past courses through them, not only in their evocation of historical structures but in their unmistakeable revelation of Ando’s personal interpretation

---

<sup>29</sup> As Ando himself puts it, “The concept [of the Chapel on Mount Rokko] is based on the traditional Japanese stroll garden [...] Although I did not consciously emulate it, these frames may remind one of the hundreds of torii gates lined up in serpent-like procession along the hillsides at the ancient Fushimi Inari Shrine in Kyoto” (Ando, *Yale* 73).

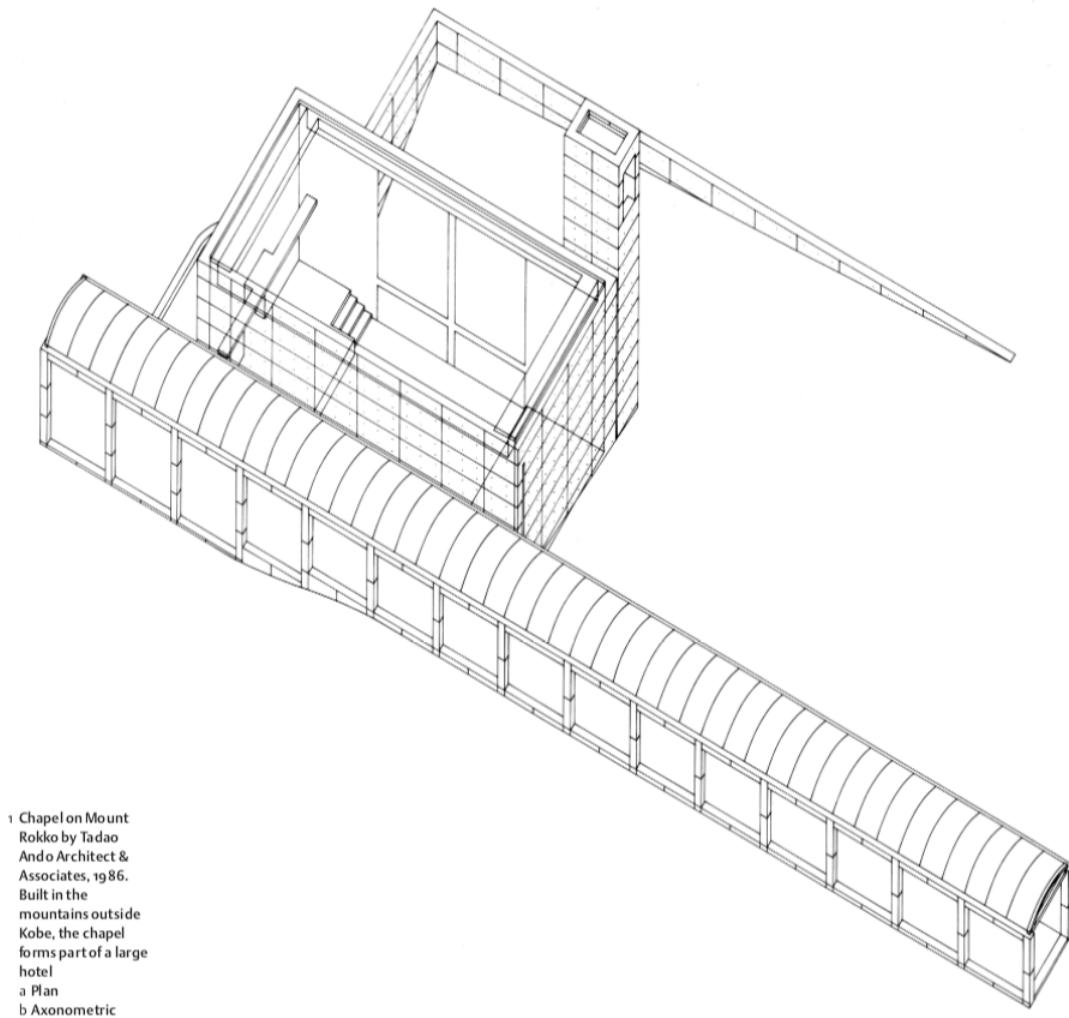


Figure 12: Axonometric diagram of Ando's Chapel on Mount Rokko. The long, lowermost portion is the colonnade leading to the chapel itself.  
Veal 351.



Figure 13: View of the Chapel on Mount Rokko from the garden path leading up to it.  
Veal 352.

of Japanese tradition—the voice of his own view of history. By acknowledging time, they stop it.

There is an analogous stopping of time in Kahn's mature work. Like Ando, Kahn is never trying to re-create traditional works. Instead, Kahn evokes the shapes, textures, and atmospheres of classical or vernacular models in a way that makes them merge with a more contemporary style. With Kahn, we cannot be sure where ruins end and modernism begins. But, as is the case with Ando, Kahn's personal history contributes greatly to achieving this effect. So ingrained was the beaux-arts ethos in Kahn's memory that it permeates the very aesthetic core of his ruin-inspired structures. His design vocabulary reveals his past. We are left with the impression of a space that teems with the memories of both Western architecture and a single individual, with the ruins of cities and the ruins of a single mind.

This architecture of personal history is the architecture I want to read into Saer's Santa Fe. Like Ando and Kahn's work, the urban fabric of Saer's city preserves both architectural pasts (the way city buildings adapt to their use) and individual pasts (they way people perceive and remember city buildings). This twofold principle is telling. It lets us see that if the architecture of Saer's fictional city had a counterpart in the physical world, it would not resemble the Parisian apartment complex in which Saer lived, which preserves little more

than a fleeting memory of late-modernist utilitarianism. Rather, it would likely remind us of Ando's chapel or Kahn's library, which contain a dense web of memories, ranging from centuries' worth of shaped and reshaped architecture to one lifetime's worth of personal aesthetic development. Indeed, for me, Saer has created a fictional urban latticework that retains the centuries of use and molding that its inhabitants—its builders—have inscribed upon it, along with the individual vignettes the city has inspired in these inhabitants. By shaping the city, inhabitants deposit their memories in it, and, as in Freud's city, this accumulation of pasts replaces the passage of time with simultaneity. Memories mingle freely, like drops in an infinite sea.

## Ruins and Memories: The Same Side of the Same Coin

To be clear, the parallel I am drawing is not between Saer as a writer and Kahn and Ando as architects. The parallel is between the kinds of structures these architects create and the kinds structures that make up Saer's city. (But if Ando and Kahn must have a counterpart, it would be the inhabitants of Saer's city, who shape its structures with their actions.) How, then, does Saer's city preserve memories analogously to Ando and Kahn's structures? This question becomes especially important in light of the inquiry that began this chapter—that of what cities contain when they are abandoned.

So far, we have seen that the preservation of the past in architecture can work in two ways. First, architecture can contain traces of its use, by which it indicates its own structural memory—its biography, as Russell would call it. This is especially the case when we look at buildings as ruins, which only contain biographies, not inhabitants. Second, architecture can contain the memories of those who give form to it. By their infusion of individual perception and experience into the built environment, Ando and Kahn's architectures exemplify this principle. On the one hand, then, we have ruins; on the other, memories. However, the line between the two is anything but clear. In fact, one of the notable features of Saer's city is that memories belonging to the city's structure itself are intermixed with memories belonging to individuals. In this sense, Saer's city blends pasts in a manner similar to that of Ando and Kahn's architecture—and particularly that of the latter. City ruins and personal

memories bleed into one another. Like superimposed images, they become inseparable.

Perhaps the best example of this inseparability concerns the hanging bridge we noted earlier in this chapter. First, the hanging bridge is a central landmark for Saer's characters, across generations and social circles. It shows up constantly, from Saer's first book to his last. But, more importantly, it is also a symbol of continuity (indeed, in the abstract, bridges are perhaps the most obvious symbols of continuity there are). A deliberate link between the aforementioned story "Algo se aproxima," published in 1960, and the novel *La grande*, published in 2005, may illustrate this symbolism. In "Algo," during a journey across the city, Tomatis and Barco stop to catch the breeze on the hanging bridge. They spend about half an hour there as "their hearts beat silently, as if in rhythmic bursts of time, with a secret and ancient rhythm" (*Cuentos* 535-36). Context would suggest that in "Algo," Tomatis and Barco are in their twenties—in other words, at an early point in their evolution as characters. By the time in which *La grande* is set—likely the late twentieth century—Tomatis and Barco are much older, the next generation of the Santa Fe intelligentsia has taken their place, and the hanging bridge, no longer in use, has become a ruin. A new highway bridge extends right next to it. Barco's daughter Gabriela and a young man named Soldi are observing the superposition of bridges upon one another: "behind the ruin, cars, buses, and trucks move slowly and indifferently down the parallel highway bridge" (Dolph, *La Grande* 219). Watching this scene, Gabriela and Soldi simultaneously begin to hallucinate Tomatis and Barco standing on the bridge. Silently, they both see "the two boys, much younger than them, leaning against the metal railing, no doubt enjoying the coolness of the river after a long walk before going home [...] They're facing upriver, toward Guadalupe, and they recognize them easily, despite the distance" (Dolph, *La Grande* 219). This hallucinated scene is practically identical to that of "Algo." That is, a moment that occurred in the city before Gabriela and Soldi were even characters plays out before their eyes. For a moment, Santa Fe becomes simultaneous. The ruin reveals the memories it contains.

But whose memory is this? Crucially, we find difficulty in attributing it to any party in particular. Part of my previous analysis of the mechanisms underlying Saer's city would suggest, on the one hand, that this memory belongs to the urban fabric of Santa Fe itself. As we discussed in Chapters One and Two, Saer's city is extremely deterministic; through a

tight narrative structure, his fictional Santa Fe anticipates the actions and events that take place in it, in a manner analogous to the functional city envisioned by radical modernists. Some events are made inevitable by the city's contours—its rigid narrative grid. Accordingly, we might say that the scene of Tomatis and Barco is determined by the city's structure to such a degree that it *must* repeat itself—even in the absence of Tomatis and Barco—like a muscle that involuntarily recalls a repeated movement. On this interpretation, the city retains this scene as part of a ruin. But, on the other hand, we may also say that Tomatis and Barco, given their foundational position in Saer's twentieth-century narrative arc, are like architects in the mold of Kahn or Ando: they inject their personal histories into the structures they work with. We might conclude that in, "Algo," at the moment during which Tomatis and Barco stood atop the hanging bridge to catch the cool morning breeze and feel their heartbeats as dawn broke, they buried a memory in the city. The city, at that very moment, was like the soil in which Tomatis and Barco place their message in "En la costra": it was ready to act as a repository for a fleeting impression, an unfinished thought, later uncovered by Gabriela and Soldi. This would seem to be the interpretation favored by Julio Premat, who affirms that *La grande* "Looks to that which no longer exists—the hanging bridge, Tomatis and Barco's youth—but that founded it" ("Estando" 32). Evidently, Tomatis and Barco can be regarded as founders whose identities are still evident, many years later, in the city. Their personal history shines through their creation.

So, are Tomatis and Barco embedded as an urban memory in a ruin? Did they store their own memories in the city by founding it? Did the memory originate in the city or in Tomatis' and Barco's minds? Purely literally, either of the two solutions is plausible (although the first is more unconventional than the second). However, if pushed to its furthest extreme, the analytical framework I have constructed over the course of this thesis shows us that these alternatives are, actually, the same. In other words, the memories of a city (which we have described as "ruins") and the memories of inhabitants (which we have described as "personal histories") overlap. They are the same substance, the same signified. To see why, we only need to revisit Bertrand Russell's assertion, cited earlier, that "Both mind and matter seem to be composite, and the stuff of which they are compounded lies in a sense between the two, in a sense above them both [...]" (10-11). Whether the impressions

of the past are made on mind or made on matter is not important. Something beyond these terms contains them. They are two manifestations of that same “composite”—“the archaic clay of being,” in Saer’s words. And, being the same, they act similarly. As Freud so perceptively suggests by likening the mind to an eternal city, mind and matter store the traces of their histories in analogous ways. In Saer, we encounter the deeply provocative consequences of this natural-seeming metaphor. Memories may pass through mind or matter, yet they do not belong to either. Rather, they travel through that infinite composite which is both mind and matter, where, once created, they never disappear.

Now, Julio Premat calls the bridge scene in *La grande* an “absolutely exceptional [exceptional] event” in Saer’s fiction, which—I concede—ordinarily does not include moments that strain the boundaries of realism (“Estando” 31). How, then, can we posit this exception as general principle in Saer? First, this simultaneity of all memories is based on a philosophical outlook that conceptualizes the physical world as inseparable from mental phenomena, insofar as both are different manifestations of the same underlying substance. We have already seen this outlook at work in *La ocasión*. Second, Premat’s comment should be read as referring to degree not frequency. Scenes like that of the bridge actually happen very often in Saer, but it is true that none is as vivid or overt in its seeming departure from realism. In fact, most such scenes seem very ordinary. Consider, for example, the way in which Gutiérrez—a character in *La grande* and *En la zona* who has returned to Santa Fe after around 30 years—sees Hotel Palace, a restaurant that, “existed, very similar to how it is now, before his mysterious departure.” The seeming identicalness of the restaurant, however, belies the

setbacks, changes of fortune, decline, death and rebirth, successive closures and triumphant but ephemeral reopenings, periods when it was even a ruins [*sic; ruinoso*] and a house of ill repute, until a few years ago an international consortium of hotels bought and restored it, improved by the prestige that age inexplicably endows, to the same look it had the day it first opened in the mid forties. (Dolph, *La Grande* 348; Saer, *La grande* 311)

In effect, what Gutiérrez sees is literally his memory, superimposed on the “ruins” the city

has accumulated. Here, again, we find that deep convergence between the memories that the city retains and those that its inhabitants carry inside them. Hotel Palace is Gutiérrez's memory, recreated for everyone to see. (In fact, much of *La grande* follows this pattern.) In this example, personal history's ability to "stop time" and the city's ability to superimpose and store information in ruins are inseparable. They are simply the same side of the same coin.

In *La pesquisa*, Pichón Garay's arrival in Santa Fe after many years abroad poses a similar but more tragic situation. Having returned to his hometown, he must deal with the forced disappearance of his twin brother, Gato, who had remained in Santa Fe after Pichón left for Europe. The circumstances produce an emotionlessness in him that not even the sight of his brother's weekend house, "not yet in ruins but badly weathered," can alter (Lane, *Investigation* 67). His gaze toward the city is cold and removed. At the same time, Pichón has brought his teenage son with him, who takes full advantage of the attractions that Santa Fe offers. "Pichón has been able to observe a curious permutation, inasmuch as it is his son who seems to have adapted himself to circumstances with greater flexibility" (Lane, *Investigation*, 41-42). The contrast between Pichón's guardedness and his son's exuberance, however, makes sense in the light of the interaction between Pichón's memories and the city itself. In a Santa Fe filled with traces of Pichón's past, Pichón's grief estranges him from his own memory—from the ruins of his and his brother's world. Too painful to acknowledge, these memories flourish in his son. It is thus the son—not the father—who lives out the joyful recuperation of youth that Gato's death has made forever impossible. (Hence, Tomatis' sudden recognition of "the twins when they were the same age" in the son (Lane, *Investigation* 68).) Simultaneity stops time once again. As with Gutiérrez at Hotel Palace, memories of the city circulate freely, oscillating between mind and matter and reconstructing themselves before the eyes of those to whom they only partially belong.

Yet this free circulation does not only apply to characters with memories of the city's past. Sergio Chejfec has observed the reverse of this process in *El entenado*, in which characters appear to react to memories that have not even been formed yet. Chejfec points to the central character of the novel, an Iberian boy who has voyaged to South America, where he is taken in by a group of indigenous people of the Santa Fe region—the Colastiné—

after they kill the crew that accompanied him. Exploring his new surroundings, the boy periodically walks around the Colastiné settlement and observes the daily ongoings of the community. Chejfec notes that, though it may seem superficially unremarkable, this form of walking and observing has actually been “extrapolated in space and time, since [the walks] belong to the world of cities (and, within this world, to the cities of a specific era, to modern cities)” (Chejfec). That is, such walks are a product of the kind of nineteenth-century urban voyeurism featured in Baudelaire’s “Crowds” or Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd.” As he puts it, the Iberian boy “is an out-of-place flâneur”; his route is “a chain of places, houses and areas, of known routes, which paradoxically does without links” (Chejfec). By bringing this anachronism into full relief, Chejfec has uncovered another signal moment of simultaneity. The boy’s walks reveal the structure of a city that, sequentially speaking, does not yet exist. In our terminology, we might say that the boy walks within the narrative grid of Saer’s geography—an abstract grid that occupies the space long before colonization and immigration fill it with the structures that later Saer characters will be familiar with. How can this be possible? My answer, of course, lies in the premise that urban memory exists outside of time. The boy’s movements reflect the stored knowledge of a future cityscape. Even before Santa Fe has its first ruin, the city is already a memory.

Importantly, this does not mean that the space that the boy walks in has always been a city named “Santa Fe” in a country named “Argentina.” Quite the opposite. Saer’s Santa Fe is not limited to the infinitesimal slice of time in which most of his narratives occur. Instead, it is truly eternal. Santa Fe is an arbitrary name for a space containing an infinite quantity of simultaneous memories, suspended in a composite of which mind and matter are facets. It is not a palimpsest, for in a palimpsest certain layers enjoy more prominence than others. It is not a collection of strata, for one stratum must always be the uppermost. Rather, it is Freud’s imaginary Rome in which every structure that was, is, and will be exists continually, from all perspectives, from the beginnings of the solar system sketched out in *La grande* to the posthuman future Tomatis imagines in “En la costra.” It has the solidity of buildings and the infinite retentive capacity of the mind.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the critic who has come

---

<sup>30</sup>For Saer’s take on the beginnings of the solar system, see Dolph, *La Grande* 81.

closest to this understanding is Chejfec, who conceptualizes Saer's oeuvre as a vast "sphere of situations" only some of which actually become texts (Chejfec). Significantly, Chejfec also mentions a visit to Saer's Montparnasse apartment in his analysis. But while for him the apartment building's characteristics adequately capture the hospitable capaciousness of what he calls the "Saer Hotel," I believe that Saer's actual oeuvre couldn't be more different from the building he lived in (Chejfec). The built space of Saer's city does not belong to an identifiable era on a timeline of design ideologies. Rather, like the architectures of Kahn and Ando, its very nature stops the passage of time. It is the kind of modern architecture that contains both the vestiges of what came before it and the blueprint for what will come after it. Drawn with confidence, skill and an impeccable appreciation of form, the lines of Saer's city emit the radiant and precise shapes of a jewel that, unmoving and ageless, reveals its inexhaustible angles to the light.

# Conclusion

## Beyond Santa Fe

The aim of this thesis has been twofold. Most of its analyses have focused on how urbanist and architectural theory can illuminate the underlying principles and patterns that govern the complex system of Saer's fiction. However, each chapter has also sought briefly to suggest what Saer's work, conceptualized as modern architecture, can teach students of cities and the structures within them. In this final note, I would like to continue this trend by sketching out the direction in which this thesis' interpretative framework takes us—mostly as readers of Saer, but also as designers and, indeed, actors in an increasingly urbanizing globe.

The amenability of Saer's work to design theory—or, at least, its ability to accommodate design theory—underscores some of its well-known characteristics while quietly revealing others. First, Saer is an absolutely singular writer in twentieth-century world literature. Most work on Saer makes this statement seem inevitable; but for me, this statement is about degree and not necessarily about properties. That is, Saer didn't reinvent the wheel that is fiction. Rather, he took fiction's unique potentials to a formal extreme that complicates a simple comparison to his influences. So while Joyce, Proust, and Faulkner all have their elaborate fictional worlds, our urbanist analysis of Saer's work reveals a unique formal rigidity behind his use of a constant geography, which may lack exact parallels in the texts of stylistically similar writers. Function is completely intertwined with structures, both narrative and architectural. Accordingly, events and actions arise as if they were inevitable. The narrative grid, together with a dynamic urban fabric, impels its inhabitants to act in almost mechanic harmony with the built environment. Comparisons to high modernists or postmodernist writers obfuscate this formalism. Even if they indicate reference points, they fail to capture the genealogical contours of Saer's fiction, many of which spring directly from the lines, shapes, and voids of the city as a form.

Second, memory is not only, as we know, a central theme in Saer; it is its principal constitutive element. Without memory in a broad sense—without the kind of Russellian storage that affects both mind and matter—Saer's world cannot function. The formal properties of

his fiction depend on retrieving traces of the past both in mental life and in the physical structures of Santa Fe. This is evident in the returns, reunions, reflections, and repetitions that undergird his narratives, some of which I have attempted to elucidate. But more so, it is evident in the way Saer's fiction works. The whole of Saer's work does not admit an interrupted progression from past to future. Instead, it accumulates, in the same space and at the same time, infinite information. Saer found the perfect medium for this mechanism in literary fiction. Like Freud's imaginary Rome, this kind of city may be paradoxical visually, sensorially, and aurally, but it finds a home in the ambiguity and capaciousness of written words.

This consideration leads us to a third takeaway from our discussion. Influential critics like Julio Premat have made much of the supposed struggle against the impossibility of adequate representation in Saer's fiction. But while this interpretation fits nicely within larger theoretical debates in the twentieth century, how much does it make sense in context? As I have argued, the focal center of Saer's narratives and the system undergirding them is the city. Cities are entities that—despite philosophically-legitimate objections to induction, the infallibility of physical laws, or number theory—hold together. Indeed, regardless of whether cities are predicated on an untenable faith in empiricism, they are still there; we still use them. Likewise, we may recognize today that fictional texts have a naïve and logocentric faith in description, and yet fiction remains, and we remain moved by it. Saer's words seem to know this. They contain friction, but little doubt of their effectiveness. Perhaps within Saer's writing lies a pragmatism that performs the problem of representation only in order to clear the space in which to build, once again, the flawed but triumphant edifices of fiction.

As for what Saer can tell us about cities and the built environment, the parameters are much more ample. The parallelism that his work reveals between urban structures and mental structures may be helpful in understanding why spatial and geopolitical context matters so much in determining the usability of designs, for memory endures not only in minds but in matter. In the city, there is no Corbusian clean slate. To be sure, Saer's work magnifies this property of cities, since fiction can flout laws that physical space and the linear experience of time cannot. Physical cities are not physically simultaneous. And yet, just as psychoanalysis claimed simultaneity in the mind when common sense would tell us

otherwise, it may behoove designers to consider physical works outside of linear time (as many architects, such as Peter Eisenman, already do).

Additionally, Saer's work, insofar as it employs tactics that modernists have also employed in architecture, does not necessarily favor organicity in urban development. Indeed, Saer's city is extremely top-down. The built environment leads its inhabitants, as if locked in the byzantine steps of a dance. Inhabitants, in turn, help give the built environment its meaning—the historical traces it must contain. This urban dialogue makes forms such as the rectilinear grid, the function-specific street, and the single-use building appear extraordinarily effective in shaping urban life, when one exploits their affordances shrewdly. But it is crucial not to confuse effectiveness with fulfillment. Cities exist not only to guide us to where we need to go, but to provide us with moments of unexpected revelation, like that of the end of *Glosa*. Functional design will only get you so far with the latter. Additionally, precise control of inhabitants' actions creates homogeneity, which bears inside it a potential for unmitigated duplication: actions, made uniform, tend to multiply themselves without a discernible stopping point, as in one mirror held up to another. In other words, if we interpret order in cities as sameness of use, then there is an inherent uncontrollability in that order. This paradox perhaps captures some of functionalism's difficulties. Lastly, in physical cities, inhabitants often do not have the same degree of architectural agency as in Saer. We are not all designers, and not everyone's personal history has the same formative effect as that of Tomatis or Gutiérrez. Matter, as Russell reminds us, also has a subjectivity, the inevitable product of perspective.

Finally, there remains the question of the empirical gap between fictional cities and physical cities. We know that Saer's city shares many properties with physical cities. We also know that it differs in crucial respects. In a physical city, one cannot conflate narrative structures with architectural structures (for the latter consist not only of narrative but of sheer undeniable mass). One does not have access to the omniscient narrator of a physical city. Nor will two independent movements in a physical city ever be exactly alike (no two feet hit the ground in exactly the same way—but in a fictional city, they well might). And yet, we might not need to overstate the disparity between the fictional and the physical—at least in this case. Saer is not Calvino. As a self-styled realist, he does not tailor his descriptions

to what is empirically impossible, generally speaking. Additionally, he did not choose to invent a city from scratch. A referential Santa Fe exists, and it serves as a recognizable referent for the architecture that populates Saer's books. What Saer has done is to take an urban referent and use it as a set of formal constraints. Within these constraints—a grid, some streets, some buildings—his fiction develops a system that respects the demands of both extra-textual referentiality and the intra-textual creation of meaning. For this reason, his works are never independent of the physical Santa Fe nor of the reality of today's cities. Perhaps, then, we can read Saer's fiction as an interpretation of its real urban system and, by extension, of the city as a form. In Saer's Santa Fe, we can see the simultaneous totality that ordinary experience hides from us, due to limitations on time and perspective. Out of this totality, incomprehensible at first sight, there emerge scenes, captured through meticulous description: here, an intersection; there, a café; farther out, the flattened square of a plaza or park. These familiar shapes blur together like recollections or unfinished thoughts. And as we move through them, only faintly perhaps, the city begins to reflect the image of the mind, which recognizes itself in the product of its labor, since few things, it seems, ever come into being out of nothing.

## Works Cited

- Ando, Tadao. *Seven Interviews with Tadao Ando*. Edited by Micheal Auping, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2003.
- . "Interview with Tadao Ando." *ANY: Architecture New York*, interview by Hiroshi Maruyama, no. 6, May/June 1994, pp. 10-19.
- . *The Yale Studio and Current Works*. Rizzoli, 1989.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, 1969.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Paris Spleen, 1869*. Translated by Louise Varèse, New Directions, 1970.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne, Verso, 1990.
- Bermúdez Martínez, María. *La incertidumbre de lo real: bases de la narrativa de Juan José Saer*. Universidad de Oviedo, Departamento de Filología Española, 2001.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Clarendon, Oxford UP, 1984.
- Chejfec, Sergio. "Hotel Saer." Coloquio Internacional Juan José Saer, 10 to 12 May 2017, Santa Fe, Argentina. Unpublished conference paper, PDF document.
- Costa, Margaret Jull, translator. *The Witness*. By Juan José Saer, Serpent's Tail, 2009.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Genre." Translated by Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn 1980, pp. 55-81.
- Descartes, René. *Selected Philosophical Writings*. Translated by John Cottingham et al., Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Díaz Quiñones, Arcadio. "Las palabras de la tribu: *El entenado* de Juan José Saer." *Glosa - El entenado*, edited by Julio Premat, Alción Editora, 2010, pp. 900-910.
- Dobry, Edgardo. "Prueba de soledad en el paisaje." *Clarín*, 26 September 2013, [https://www.clarin.com/literatura/juan-jose-saer-prueba-soledad-paisaje\\_0\\_SJBxYgVoDQe.html](https://www.clarin.com/literatura/juan-jose-saer-prueba-soledad-paisaje_0_SJBxYgVoDQe.html).
- Dolph, Steve, translator. *La Grande*. By Juan José Saer, Open Letter, 2014.
- , translator. *Scars*. By Juan José Saer, Open Letter, 2011.
- , translator. *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington*. By Juan José Saer, Open Letter, 2010.

- Dubois, Pierre. *Le Roman Policier ou la Modernité*. Nathan, 1992.
- Dunnett, James. "Le Corbusier and the city without streets." *The Modern City Revisited*, edited by Thomas Deckker, Spon, 2000, pp. 56-79.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey, Norton, 1961.
- . *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey, Norton, 1961.
- García-Moreno, Laura. "Entre la pampa del lenguaje y el alambrado de la escritura: la mancha roja como síntoma de la ambigüedad de lo real en *La ocasión* de Juan José Saer." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2017, pp. 195-215.
- Giedion, Sigfried. "Introduction." *Can Our Cities Survive?*, by Josep Lluís Sert, Harvard UP, 1942, pp. ix-xi.
- Gramuglio, María Teresa. "El lugar de Saer." *Glosa - El entenado*, edited by Julio Premat, Alción Editora, 2010, pp. 840-861.
- Grayling, A. C. *Russell: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2002.
- Hall, Peter. *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*. Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Modern Library, 2011.
- Kahn, Louis. "Monumentality." *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, edited by Robert Twombly, Norton, 2003.
- Kantor, Roanne, translator. *The One Before*. By Juan José Saer, Open Letter, 2015.
- Katz, Peter. *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. McGraw-Hill, 1994.
- Kohan, Martín. "Glosa, novela política." *Zona de prólogos*, edited by Paulo Ricci, Seix Barral, 2011, pp. 147-60.
- Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York*. Monacelli, 1994.
- Krauss, Rosalind E. "Grids." *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT P, 1987, pp. 8-22.
- Lane, Helen, translator. *Nobody Nothing Never*. By Juan José Saer, Serpent's Tail, 1993.
- , translator. *The Event*. By Juan José Saer, Serpent's Tail, 1995.
- , translator. *The Investigation*. By Juan José Saer, Serpent's Tail, 1999.

- Larson, Kent. *Louis I. Kahn: Unbuilt Masterworks*. Monacelli, 2000.
- Le Corbusier. *The City of Tomorrow*. Translated by Frederick Etchells, MIT P, 1971.
- . *The Radiant City*. Translated by Pamela Knight et al., Orion P, 1964.
- . *Towards a New Architecture*. Translated by Frederick Etchells, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.
- . *When the Cathedrals Were White*. Translated by Francis E. Hyslop, Jr., McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton UP, 2015.
- Linenberg-Fressard, Raquel. *Exil et langage dans le roman argentin contemporain: Copi, Puig, Saer*. 1988, Université de Haute-Bretagne, Rennes II. Archived dissertation.
- Link, Daniel. “El juego silencioso de los cautos.” Prologue. *El juego de los cautos*, edited by Daniel Link, La Marca Editora, 1992.
- Mumford, Eric. *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*. MIT P, 2000.
- Niemeyer, Oscar. *Minha experiência em Brasília*. Vitória, 1961.
- Patruno, Luigi. *Relatos de regreso*. Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2015.
- Pauls, Alan. “La ocasión: Mujer, gaucho malo, caballos.” *Zona de prólogos*, edited by Paulo Ricci, Seix Barral, 2011, pp. 161-171.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. “The Philosophy of Composition.” *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, edited by G. R. Thompson, W. W. Norton and Company, 2004, pp. 675-684.
- Pemat, Julio. “Estando empezando.” *Zona de prólogos*, edited by Paulo Ricci, Seix Barral, 2011, pp. 19-35.
- . *La dicha de Saturno*. Beatriz Viterbo, 2002.
- . “Saer fin de siglo y el concepto de lugar.” *Foro Hispánico*, vol. 24, no. 1, Nov. 2003, pp. 43-52.
- Prieto, Martín. *Breve historia de la literatura argentina*. Taurus, 2006.
- Pyrhönen, Heta. *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*. Camden, 1994.
- Rifkind, David. “‘Everything in the state, nothing against the state, nothing outside the state’: corporativist urbanism and Rationalist architecture in fascist Italy.” *Planning*

- Perspectives*, vol. 27, no. 1, Jan. 2012, pp. 51-80.
- Romero, José Luis. *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas*. Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1976.
- Rovira, Josep M. *José Luis Sert 1901-1983*. Electa, 2003.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The Analysis of Mind*. New York, Macmillan, 1921. Print.
- Saer, Juan José. *Cicatrizes*. Seix Barral, 2007.
- . *Cuentos Completos*. Seix Barral, 2014.
- . *El entenado*. Seix Barral, 2015.
- . *El limonero real*. Editorial planeta, 1974.
- . “Entrevista a Juan José Saer del 4 de marzo de 2005.” *Glosa - El entenado*, edited by Julio Premat, interview by Julio Premat et al., Alción Editora, 2010, pp. 923-32.
- . *Glosa*. 1982, Juan José Saer Manuscripts, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, box 1, folder 3. Draft notebook.
- . *Glosa*. Seix Barral, 2015.
- . *La grande*. Seix Barral, 2009.
- . *La ocasión*. Ediciones Destino, 1988.
- . *La pesquisa*. Seix Barral, 1994.
- . *Una forma más real que la del mundo*. Edited by Martín Prieto, Mansalva, 2016.
- . “Yo escribí ‘Taxi Driver’.” *Página 12*, interview by Marcelo Damiani, 13 Dec. 1998, <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/1998/suplementos/libros/98-12/98-12-13/index.htm>.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. “La condición mortal.” *Glosa - El entenado*, edited by Julio Premat, Alción Editora, 2010, pp. 895-900.
- . *Zona Saer*. Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales, 2016.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. “Aristotle on Detective Fiction.” *The Philosophy of Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Philip Tallon, David Baggett, The University Press of Kentucky, 2012, 167-80.
- Schilpp, Paul Arthur, editor. *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*. New York, Tudor Publishing Company, 1951.
- Scully, Vincent. “Louis I. Kahn and the Ruins of Rome.” *Engineering and Science*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1993, pp. 2-13.
- Sert, Josep Lluís. *Can Our Cities Survive?* Harvard UP, 1942.

- Steele, Timothy. "The Structure of the Detective Story: Classical or Modern?" *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1981, pp. 555-70.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Wrecker*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900.
- Tafuri, Manfredo. *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*. MIT P, 1987.
- . "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology." *Architecture Theory since 1968*, edited by K. Michael Hays, MIT P, 1998, pp. 6-35.
- Takeyama, Kiyoshi. "Tadao Andô: Heir to a Tradition." *Perspecta*, vol. 20, Jan. 1983, pp. 163-80.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "Tipología del relato policial." *El juego de los cautos*, edited by Daniel Link, La Marca Editora, 1992, pp. 46-51.
- Twombly, Robert. "Introduction: Kahn's Search." *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, edited by Robert Twombly, Norton, 2003.
- Veal, Alex. "Time in Japanese architecture: tradition and Tadao Ando." *Architectural Research Quarterly*, vol.6, no. 4, 2002, pp. 349-62.
- Walker, Carlos. *El Horror Como Forma: Juan José Saer – Roberto Bolaño*. 2013, University of Buenos Aires. Dissertation.