

**SISTERS OF REDEMPTION: ART, MODERNITY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE WORKS OF JUAN CARLOS ONETTI AND ERNESTO SÁBATO****Hermanas de la redención: arte, modernidad y representación de la mujer en los trabajos de Juan Carlos Onetti y Ernesto Sábato.****Autora:** Anna McDonnell<sup>1</sup>**Filiación:** Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina.**E-mail:** [annamcdonnell552@gmail.com](mailto:annamcdonnell552@gmail.com)**RESUMEN**

El presente artículo explora las tensiones existentes alrededor de la representación del arte y la mujer como figuras de redención en los trabajos de Juan Carlos Onetti y Ernesto Sábato. La primera parte del artículo explora cómo la respectiva obra de los autores constituye un proyecto pro-feminista dentro del contexto del pensamiento modernista. Las mujeres son elevadas a la posición de un ideal estético y como fuente de inspiración artística en una era donde el arte y sus mecanismos subliminales son concebidos como compensatorios, fuerzas autónomas en oposición a una realidad degradada, mecanizada y dominada por el trabajo. Sin embargo, la segunda parte del artículo contesta esta posición, mostrando no sólo cómo el topos de la mujer, como instrumento de la salvación del hombre, es codificada en la estructura narrativa, sino también, cómo los estereotipos acerca de la mujer como subjetividad redentora (pieza de arte, cadáver, prostituta, virgen, madre) finalmente refuerza las estructuras patriarcales. Aunque los textos de ambos autores reflejan cierta reflexividad acerca de los paradigmas relacionados con el artificio de género, la dicotomía de género es finalmente mantenida intacta para prevenir el colapso del binarismo arte-realidad. Las categorías de masculinidad y femineidad son cosificadas y mapeadas dentro de la dicotomía arte-realidad para salvar el arte "verdadero" del proyecto modernista de ser tragado por la reproducción de la realidad.

**Palabras clave:** modernidad, feminidad, arte, alienación, salvación.**ABSTRACT**

The current article explores the tensions surrounding the representation of art and women as figures of redemption by Juan Carlos Onetti and Ernesto Sábato. The first half of the article looks at how the respective oeuvre of the authors constitutes a pro-feminist project within the context of modernist thought. Women are elevated to the position of ideal aesthetic form and the source of artistic inspiration in an age where art and its subliminal mechanisms are conceived as a compensatory, autonomous force in opposition to a degraded, mechanized, and labour-dominated reality. The second half of the article,

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however, contests this position, showing not only how the topos of women as instruments of men's deliverance is encoded in the narrative structure, but also how the stereotypes of woman as a redeeming subject (work of art, cadaver, prostitute, virgin, mother) ultimately reinforce patriarchal structures. Although the texts of both authors reveal a certain reflexivity surrounding the artifice of gender paradigms, the gender dichotomy is ultimately maintained intact to prevent the collapse of the art-reality binarism. Categories of masculinity and femininity are reified and mapped onto the art-reality dichotomy to save the 'true' art of the modernist project from being swallowed up in the reproduction of reality.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Femininity, Art, Alienation, Salvation

The current article explores the tensions surrounding the representation of art and women as a dyad of salvation by Juan Carlos Onetti (1909-1994) and Ernesto Sábato (1911-2011) in the context of modernity and its alienating forces, whereby patriarchal structures are simultaneously dissolved and reinforced. Both authors were writing at a time of unprecedented change in the Southern Cone. On both sides of the Atlantic the mushrooming of capitalist consumer culture was irrevocably modifying man's experience of reality. The post-industrial, mechanized age provoked a mass exodus from rural areas to expanding megalopoli, workers were increasingly estranged from their labour, post-Enlightenment bourgeois values came to be regarded as decadent and anachronistic, and science's usurpation of religion created a spiritual vacuum. Many twentieth-century intellectuals expressed concern for the integrity of the subject in the light of these accelerated transformations<sup>2</sup>. Burgeoning in the early 1900s, the advent of modernity in the Southern Cone came later than in Europe and its development was uneven and accelerated, leading to the growth of mega-cities alongside rural communities. Despite these differences, however, the strength of resonance of modern experience validates a discussion of a universal modern subject, who Jack Murray describes as "fumbling in the ideological gloom of late capitalism", in the "search for . . . paradise . . . , a deliverance from the wretched world of the present" (48). Indeed, the oeuvre of Onetti and Sábato demonstrate how, as a result of the trans-global effects of modernity, this European zeitgeist of despair reverberated in the Southern Cone<sup>3</sup>. Brausen, in Onetti's *VB*<sup>4</sup>, deplores the alienating, life-denying routine of the modern age: "Juan María Brausen y mi vida no eran otra cosa que moldes vacíos . . . actos de la rutina" (551). Linacero, from *EP*, expresses the subject's seclusion and sense of dislocation within the modern city: "soy un hombre solitario que fuma en un sitio cualquiera de la ciudad" (75). Sábato's Martín, from *SHT*, shares this existential emptiness, described as a lost soul in an anonymous collective of isolated individuals: "uno de los tantos en aquella ciudad de desamparados" (28). Indeed, our authors witnessed a time of crisis which exposed the underbelly of "progress" and a widespread disillusionment with modernity's project.

Artists of the period responded to this wider substructure of feeling, seeking to break out of this estranged, commodified world by engaging in "the most desperate salvage operation ever attempted by the artist" (Sypher 18). Art was regarded as the road to redemption at the dawn of this atheistic century of disenchantment. Capitalism ostensibly banished modern man's imagination, mechanised labour draining his spontaneity and autonomy, preventing him from experiencing himself as "creator of his own acts" (Adams 5). The poetic mystery

of creativity offered to heal this lost freedom and humanity by suspending the benumbing, mechanical routine of modern existence: “el arte se convierte en . . . cauce de una posible recuperación humana, en medio de un mundo que tiende a la robotización” (Maturó 20); “it is only in . . . genuine creation that man reaches the sublime flesh of clarity and freedom” (Kahler 48). Terry Eagleton translates this process into Freudian terms, suggesting that artistic creation allows modern man to “take forbidden pleasure in his own unconscious processes” (156). Art was perceived as a means of restoring authenticity to the prosaic age of mass production: “The sensuous individuation of the work . . . contradicts the abstractness and self-sameness to which the world has shrunk” (Adorno 65)<sup>5</sup>. Critics have acknowledged this redemptive drive as part of the artistic vocation of our respective authors. Djelal Kadir relates how “Onetti puts his faith in art, in human creativeness” (43), and Marilyn Frankenthaler confirms Sábato’s “intento de hallar la salvación por la literatura” (159).

Furthermore, many modernist writers and artists elevated woman to the position of modern messiah, advocating a return to what they perceived as “feminine” values. Their female saviour was extolled as an embodiment of hope, an antidote to modern man’s overwhelming vacuity. In the nineteenth century, Nietzsche had described Greek tragedy as caught between the Apollonian (masculine) search for order, fixity, law; and the Dionysian (feminine) drive for the subversive, artistic, carnivalesque. In the twentieth century, Jung theorised the male’s love for objects and the female’s love for humanity. Nourished by these ideas, artists and authors of the period began to regard commercial culture, governed by science, abstract thought and reason, as a masculine age: “el comercio, basado en el intercambio y el movimiento, conduce a la abstracción y por lo tanto a la masculinización del mundo” (Sábato SMS 33). Jung’s anima/animus dichotomies assign the feminine to the realm of instinct, emotion, irrationality, intuition, and spontaneity. Contemporary thinkers were preoccupied by the possible imbalance in male subjectivity as a corollary of the quenching of the “anima”, the feminine aspect of the male subconscious, arising from an increasingly objective, analytical culture that inhibited creativity (Berry 36-8). Artists’ vindication of femininity thus became an allegory for the resurrection of those life-giving values they felt had been evacuated from the modern era. Furthermore, in accordance with the traditional binarism of logos as male and eros as female in the Platonic ordered system, woman corresponds to the subject’s yearning for ideal beauty, hence in artistic canons, “Woman is Beauty incarnate” (Perrot 176). Elisabeth Bronfen affirms, “the production of beautiful images (aesthetics) and the construction of femininity are culturally equated” (64), and Marina Warner writes, “The definition of woman partakes of the definition of art: both are beautiful and exercise fascination” (225). The female body simultaneously inspires and incarnates the art object: “Woman . . . generates creative sparks within the poet . . . and figures as a metaphor for the art he produces” (Conley 27). In Onetti and Sábato’s texts, women and artistic production thus form a healing matrix, providing men with a forked path to deliverance from his alienation by allowing him to assume his position as a creative subject, and by entering into contact with the allegedly hyper-artistic domain of femininity.

### **Muse in the mirror: women as art objects**

In their depiction of women as saviours, Onetti and Sábato’s female characters are reduced to “image, spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty” (Lauretis 37). Women transmute into *objets d’art* in which men, asserting themselves as empowered creative subjects, seek curative forces<sup>6</sup>. Female characters are displayed to gratify the voyeuristic

male gaze, converted into redemptive works of art, incarcerated in the pictorial plane, framed for contemplation rather than interaction. This representational matrix bolsters patriarchal discourse, reducing the female to passive receptor and stimulus of desire. Craig remarks how Onetti's women "are depicted first and foremost as physical objects" (19). In *EP* Linacero addresses Hanka's photograph, denying her the right to speech: "me puse a charlar con ella mirando una fotografía" (60). He aligns women with inanimate works of art, scorning their creative capacity: "Es como una obra de arte. Hay solamente un plano donde puede ser entendida" (60). Ana María becomes an idealised image in Linacero's transcribed dreams, denigrating her to an art object within his literary enterprise. In *DHV*, Medina perceives Juanina as a portrait rather than a living subject. Furthermore, the act of painting is imbricated with male possession of the female body: "Las sesiones de pose con Juanina terminaban casi siempre en la cama" (117). The fact that the paintings are later sold intensifies this sense of reification, metaphorically denigrating Juanina to an object of exchange in the capital flow of patriarchy. In *VB*, Brausen likens La Queca to "una figura pintada . . . , la imagen de un cartel" (533). His search for the younger incarnation of Gertrudis in her sister Raquel (563), and Marcos' claim that "las mujeres son la misma cosa" (*JC* 937), emphasise this notion of women as reproductions of an original icon.

In Sábato's *El túnel*, Castel regards women as imperfect copies of an aesthetic ideal, explicitly equating them to artistic reproductions: "los mismos rasgos que en [una mujer] me habían parecido admirables aparecían accentuados y deformados en la hermana . . . algo parecido me sucede con esos pintores que imitan a un gran maestro" (20). Appositely sharing the name of the universal Mother and able to comprehend Castel's composition, María is symbolically equated with Castel's painting *Maternidad*. She is assigned abstract meanings in the material world, the destruction of the painting prefiguring her murder. Indeed, Castel fails to discriminate between women as art and real women: "atraído a una mujer tal por las mujeres de sus cuadros" (Martínez Tolentino 199). In *SHT*, Martín attempts to confine Alejandra to the canvas: "trato de dibujar su cara" (26), and imbues her with allegorical meaning as a symbol for Argentina: "parecía como si ella fuera la patria no aquella mujer hermosa pero convencional de los grabados simbólicos" (197). Women are placed on pedestals as pleasure-giving spectacles, demonstrated when Domínguez, observed by Fernando paints portraits of Louise. Louise's body is doubly objectified, simultaneously transformed into art object, and visual stimulant of desire. Whilst Onetti's characters disparage women's creativity, Sábato expresses this view directly, disregarding the historical factors that oppress women: "hay radicales condiciones físicas y metafísicas que apartan a la mujer de la creación" (*SMS* 46).

### **Narratology and the male odyssey: women in plot development**

This process of inscribing women into male texts as instruments of men's deliverance is encoded in the narrative structure of Onetti and Sábato's oeuvre. Whilst men carry the burden of plot development, women assume embellishing, digressive roles as space and image, underscoring the conventional portrayal of woman as "ornament, artifice or decoration" (Bronfen 68)<sup>7</sup>. We are presented to male protagonists by male authors, and women are subordinated to this central male subjectivity. Taking the Oedipal drama as "paradigmatic of all narratives" (112), Teresa De Lauretis describes how "the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as a human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not

susceptible to transformation, . . . she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter” (119). In the writings of these River Plate authors, meaning and pleasure are focalized through male protagonists, whilst woman assumes the topographical status of “plot-space”, through which the hero navigates to identify with the Law of the Father. In Onetti’s oeuvre, the ever-male protagonist is privileged with first-person narration, divulging the internal workings of the male psyche. Women are refused such psychological depth. When endowed with complex character traits, such as Julita in *JC*, we are denied direct access to them, for our knowledge of her character is relayed through Jorge’s elliptic narrative. Women are defined exclusively by their usefulness to men. In *EP*, women appear as a “means” by which the protagonist escapes his metaphorical pit of alienation. In *VB*, Brausen describes himself as “un vencedor en tierra conquistada” (598) in his relationship with La Queca, emphasising her position as a redemptive space he enters to rupture his solitude and mundane existence. In *JC*, Julita’s body and the female space of the brothel become signifiers of obstruction through which Jorge steers, plotting his course to manhood and self-discovery. Of Julita he states, “quiero apartarla, ser y conocerme” (917). Women’s meaning is defined by male movement in relation to them: “women characters barely exist – their containment within the categories of male discourse is what constitutes them as well as what denies them” (Millington 358-59).

In Sábato’s *ET*, whilst the first-person male speaker pours out his metaphysical angst, María is denied psychological development, her actions and feelings mediated through this male ventriloquist. Focalisation markers in *SHT*, such as “dijo Martín que dijo Alejandra” (18), indicate how the female is enveloped in layers of male narrative, filtered through his consciousness. Whereas in Onetti’s work this woman-space nexus is articulated by the characters, in Sábato’s oeuvre it is given extra weight by the author’s extra-fictional interventions. In his essay *SMS*, he claims: “la mujer tiende al estatismo y el hombre al dinamismo” (44), and that “la mujer es espacial y el hombre temporal” (44). The stringent sentence structure, dividing the two sexes on either side of the conjunction, mirrors Sábato’s unflinching views on sexual difference. Women become the sign for stasis and corporeality, the magma for male subjectivity, shorn of an autonomous voice: “la mujer simboliza . . . lo estable, el hombre simboliza . . . el cambio, lo inestable” (44).

### **Metafísica, Muerte Física: female death as salvation**

Not only the spatializing, but also the annihilation of the feminine allows male characters to consecrate their position as creative subjects. Women are portrayed as sacrificial figures in the path to man’s redemption. Lauretis describes how women “must be slain or defeated so that [man] can go forward to fulfil his destiny – and his story” (110). Indeed, art substitutes an absent object and thus by denigrating woman to art-object, her organic body is de-animated, usurped by the image or text. Bronfen reminds that us of the “idea of art as transformation of living matter into inanimate form” (111). The emergence of male subjectivity is dependent upon the silencing of women, since she “figures as an aesthetic risk, as a presence endangering the artwork” (112). These texts become metaphorical burial grounds for women, male narratives forming their epitaphs. In Onetti’s fiction, women’s deaths are presented as the root of male literary productivity. In *EP*, Linacero writes about Ana María post-mortem, reducing her to the status of signified to allow himself power to assign meaning. Woman is distilled to a product of the male libido, a *tabula rasa* from which the male narrative materializes. In *VB*, La Queca reflects on her “vida de sacrificio” (94).

Brausen's allusion to her assassination as "mi obra maestra" (600) echoes this trope of the female cadaver as "perfect immaculate aesthetic form . . . solidified into an object of art" (Bronfen 5). Stein's photographic collection of his past lovers, described as "un osario de amantes y amigas" (549), allegorises the way art is produced by deactivating the female subject. Moreover, the narrative begins with Gertrudis' mastectomy, and "the sign (the text) appears in the site of destruction" (Craig 8). In *DHV*, Frieda's corpse is photographed and subjected to an autopsy (289), rendering her the visual object of men's thirst for knowledge about the alterity of death and femininity. *PTSN* centres upon three male protagonists who narrate their accounts of meetings with the deceased Rita. The fact that each version of events contradicts the others, along with the anonymous title, and Rita's ostensibly empty coffin, erase female identity outside of male narrative; a necessary condition for the configuration of the male speaking subject. As Maloof affirms, "narrative activity is closely associated with the obliteration of a woman . . . and her reappearance as a textual image in the form of a female corpse" (4)<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the genesis of male narrative in Sábato's fiction relies on the elimination of female agency. Alejandra embraces the path of sacrifice, "el goce más grande que podía sentir era el de morir en esa forma, martirizada" (*SHT* 59). Her death galvanizes Martín's independent literary voice, provoking his symbolic odyssey to Patagonia. The word "goce" highlights the compromised female liberation invoked by her pleasure in suffering. Rather than arising from any prerogative to de-animate woman to objet d'art, the destruction of the female in *ET* stages Jacques Lacan's theory of the traumatic renunciation of the mother's body. This original loss drives forward the narrative of our lives by forcing us to enter into the Symbolic Order (Eagleton 161). Castel's creativity is hindered by María, the enveloping symbolic Mother: "no pude dibujar ni pintar" (47). His narrative is symbolically unleashed by stabbing her in the womb, and destroying the painting *Maternidad*. The annihilation of the Mother and the male subject's ensuing artistic agency symbolically usurps the female's ability to create, thus reducing her to art object in "a mythic reversal of biology" in which "man is a maker and woman made" (Warner 239).

### **Dutiful daughters and fallen women**

Woman's eternal position of alterity renders her an empty signifier, as man's negative with no autonomous identity: "l'homme définit la femme non en soi mais relativement à lui" (Beauvoir I, 14). Men create women, ascribing them roles which facilitate their salvation. Men emerge as artists and authors, and women as the art produced, as fabrications of the male imaginary, a "site of fixity and fantasy" onto which men project an idea of "original identity or singularity" (Bhabha 77). Julia Kristeva remarks, "We live in a civilisation where the consecrated (religious or secular) representations of femininity", are no more than a "fantasy . . . nurtured by . . . man or woman" (234). This disavowal of "difference" allows woman no position outside the Law of the Father. She materializes within the polarised categories of the Madonna/ Magdalene dichotomy (Nead 75). In Sábato's *SHT*, Martín is symbolically caught between man-made images of the "fallen woman" and the "dutiful daughter": "Mirando fotografías de la reina Isabel por un lado y grabados de mujeres desnudas por otro" (151).

Female characters who fall outside the patriarchal order are relegated to the status of redemptive art objects in these texts. They incarnate ideals of subversive femininity contained within the male imaginary, transformed into cultural icons and images such as Eve, the original temptress, and Mary Magdalene, signifier of dangerous sexuality. These

females are stereotyped as “fallen women”, categorised as outsiders with “unofficial, non-social roles. They are not mothers, wives or daughters” (Millington 359). Their very abjectness proffers men’s deliverance from stifling bourgeois codes. In Onetti’s *VB*, La Queca’s life, “al otro lado de la pared” symbolises a subversive underworld, an alternative to Brausen’s mediocre, conjugal existence. Her affirmation, “Nunca voy a tener un hijo” (556), places her outside circumscribed gender roles, making her the site of subversion. In *JC*, the brothel is described as “una necesidad social para Santa María” (793), symbolically located outside the town’s stringent grid system, “allá en la costa ignorada”, with its “puerta celeste” (957) as an allegory for this portal to transcendence. The illicit status of prostitutes allows men to suspend societal norms, facilitating “the middle-class male subject’s escape from a stultifying existence in a society . . . increasingly dominated by consumer-orientated values unto a debased underworld characterised by abjection” (Maloff 5). In *VB*, Onetti self-consciously underscores how women’s abjectness, “her guilt” (Nead 83), serves as a cathartic displacement of men’s own frustrations. Brausen describes “el deseo de vengar en [La Queca] . . . todos los agravios que me era posible recordar” (552). Contact with these “fallen women” is portrayed as a narcissistic venture, offering the key to salvation by unlocking an authentic male self, which has been repressed in the modern age<sup>9</sup>. Sex acquires “un carácter sagrado” (Alegria 19), endowing the woman’s body with allegorical meaning and “vertus magiques” (Beauvoir II, 90). Yet paradoxically, by restoring man’s bodily experience, women are reified into art objects. Physical union with “fallen women” in Onetti’s fiction implies the possibility for the loss and “renewal of male experience of the self” (Millington 367-68). In *JC*, Jorge witnesses Rita and Marcos “[tratar] de mezclarse . . . dejar de ser para perderse” (815). In *VB*, Brausen’s bodily contact with Gertrudis and La Queca redeems his sense of integrity: “aplantar mi cuerpo contra el suyo, saltar después de la cama para sentirme y mirarme desnudo, armonioso y brillante” (544)<sup>10</sup>.

Sábato’s protagonist from *ET* seeks solace amongst prostitutes to escape the anxieties of daily life: “Cuando me invade una furia de aniquilación . . . busco a las prostitutas” (80). In *SHT*, Molinari defends as “una válvula de escape” (148) from the banality and triteness of bourgeois ethos. Castel seeks salvation through sex in *ET*: “La unión física se me aparecía como una garantía de verdadero amor” (66). Lojo de Beuter alludes to Castel’s “búsqueda metafísica: aprehender la naturaleza de lo real mediante el sexo” (1997: 227). In *H*, the author claims that during intercourse the subject goes beyond itself, forming a communion with the objectival other: “solamente mediante la plena relación con un sujeto, . . . podremos salir de nosotros mismos” (203). This synthesis of subjectivities provokes a suspension and reconstitution of the self, allegorised by Fernando’s impression of transmuting into “un molusco asqueroso y amorfo” (*SHT* 377).

Diametrically opposed to fallen women, “the dutiful daughter” submits to the “patriarchal denigration of her corporeality and pleasure” (Grosz 150). The conforming woman of these texts incarnates man-made feminine ideals of the Western canon: “elle cherche à ressembler à une image” (Beauvoir II, 26). In particular, these women seek to emulate the Virgin Mary, the religious icon of perfect femininity, maternity and chastity. They are portrayed as curative figures, allegorising redemption from mortality: “Against the dissolution of the body fusing with alterity in sexuality and death, the myth of the Virgin Mary serves as a repository for fantasies about the preservation of bodily wholeness and integrity . . . , of Woman as an ethereal being, to be venerated in her intact splendour” (Bronfen 68). Not only is this process of sublimation a precondition for artistic production, the purity of the Virgin

mother mirrors the immaculate integrity of an art object, uncorrupted by death and decay. Warner describes “the projection of immaterial concepts onto the female form, in both rhetoric and iconography” (239), suggesting that this idealised, but impossible paradigm of womanhood is a phallogocentric cult, artifice or textual image. The “muchachas limpias” (876) in *JC* aspire to this archetypal myth of femininity, evoked by the name of Onetti’s imaginary town, “Santa María”. They believe themselves locked in a crusade against the brothel to “defender la pureza ciudadana” (878). Rolanda’s obsessive repetition of the Ave Maria in *TDN* (197) and Julita’s enactment of the Immaculate Conception (812) in *JC*, highlight women’s conditioned behaviour. In *EP*, Hanka is held up as a healing Mater Dolorosa, restoring Linacero’s emotions: “sólo las cosas sentimentales mías viven cuando estoy al lado de ella” (60). These regressive fantasies about virgins reconstitute male subjectivity, prompting the “desire to return to an idealised past self” (Millington 370), a pre-fall state, or what Kristeva terms the “lost territory” of the (Virgin) mother’s body (234). In *EP*, Linacero’s wife Cecilia appears to him in a dream. Parallels with the Virgin are evoked as the episode unfolds during the “hora de milagros” (65) and Cecilia appears “con un vestido blanco . . . como un barco de vela” (65), as a symbol of purity and salvation. Similarly, the male protagonist’s yearning for his virgin spouse in *TTCE* is inlaid with religious imagery: “esperaba el milagro, la resurrección de la chica encinta que había conocido” (1314-45). Yet significantly, these idealised virgins have no existence outside the male imaginary, for like art objects, they are not subject to the corruption of death and sex. Warner speaks of man’s “image of the allegorical body as a perfect vessel, a container of fixed meanings, in contrast to an actual woman’s imperfect, permeable and changing body” (xxii). Linacero is repelled by Hanka after taking her virginity, since her body is no longer a site of immaculate integrity. Craig insists that she is “of use only as a symbol” (22). Linacero is disgusted by the degradation of the female body, signalled by his violent repulsion at the ageing Cecilia (63). He envisages physical contact exclusively with “Electra” (60); an idealised, immortal, mythical image of femininity.

Sábato’s “dutiful daughters” are defined by art as much as they define it. Martín’s experience with women arises from “dibujos . . . en que retrataba a aquellas vírgenes ideales y legendarias” (*SHT* 26). Alejandra embraces this ideal of purity, rigorously defending her chastity: “nadie, nadie, me tocará” (61). Her sexual initiation is rife with mystic imagery, elevating her to a saintly stature: “La luna le da pleno sobre su cuerpo desnudo y siente su piel estremecida por la hierba . . . siente arder su cuerpo” (67). As well as coveting the bodily integrity of the Virgin, Sábato’s women internalise the Madonna’s paradigmatic “feminine” qualities. Warner notes: “The Virgin Mary . . . represents the quintessence of qualities . . . traditionally regarded as feminine: yieldingness, softness, gentleness, receptiveness, mercifulness, tolerance, withdrawal” (xxiv). Correspondingly, Alejandra is eulogised as “suave, femenina, delicada, silenciosa” (117), depicted as an ethereal being, with access to “un territorio tenebroso” (20), hermetic to men. Indeed, Sábato’s texts suggest that “los misterios de la vida son más accesibles a la comprensión instintiva y orgánica de la mujer” (Sánchez López). María in *ET* is portrayed as a redemptive visionary, who comprehends Castel’s painting. Likewise, Alejandra is analogised with André Breton’s Nadja, presented in a state of lucidity with her “intricados dibujos” (*SHT* 203) and vagrant wonderings about the city (95), reduced to a living myth, a “niñamurciélagos” and “princesadragón” (122), rather than a woman of flesh and blood. Whereas Onetti ironizes these conforming women’s endeavours to incarnate the iconic image of the Madonna, Sábato’s essays reinforce the attitudes expressed in his fiction: “el arte es precisamente la creación del espíritu humano

que se halla más cerca de la feminidad” (*SMS* 46). He regards modernity’s logic-driven age as a “cultura viril” (45), stipulating the need to “feminizar la comunidad”, which would entail a “vuelta al arte” (47).

### **Tierra madre: the female body as redemptive unity**

As previously discussed, both the sacrifice of the maternal figure and union with the Virgin Mother are perceived conduits to salvation. The Mother is an emblem of redemption by standing as a figure of “promised wholeness” (Bronfen 62), offering to heal man’s fragmented identity<sup>11</sup>. The male characters’ desire for the Mother in these texts can be read as the longing for “Redemptive Unity” (Kristeva 145), both a pre-linguistic, pre-capitalist, and pre-colonial un-severed self. Art and women provide an analogous impression of oneness by imposing form on a fractured, fragmented world: “The beauty of Woman and the beauty of the image both give the illusion of intactness and unity, cover the insupportable signs of lack, deficiency, transience” (Bronfen 64). The identities of Onetti’s male characters are splintered across real and imagined existences. They displace the image of the Mother onto their lovers to fantasise a holistic identity. In *VB* Brausen seeks to heal his fractured subjectivity by describing himself as “un hijo . . . de los vientres de Gertrudis y La Queca” (98). *JC*’s Jorge defines himself as “un hijo para Julita” (516), venerating her as “la unidad” (813), to compromise his amputated self-image, which is invaded by the identity of his deceased brother. Larsen in *EA* symbolically regresses to the Mother in the foetal position along the river in a quest for lost unity, “acurrucado . . . encogido, negro, con la cabeza que tocaba las rodillas” (1201).

Similarly, Sábato’s male protagonists make the elision between the maternal imaginary and their lovers, seeking to heal the symbolic wound of the navel. His women stand as “transformadora[s] del mundo en un ámbito paradisiacal de mágica plenitud” (Lojo de Beuter 249). In *ET*, Castel equates María with a mother figure: “como con mi madre cuando chico, puse la cabeza sobre su regazo” (102); “su amor era . . . amor de madre” (66). Castel’s dream of a house longed for since childhood (58), and the darkness and confinement of his cell suggest his desire to regress to the womb. These concepts are explicitly mirrored in *SMS*, whereby Sábato defines man as “esencialmente esquizoide” (45), and woman as “la unidad absoluta y anterior a toda escisión” (41), affirming, “hay que retornar a la mujer porque ella . . . representa la unidad en todos los sentidos” (45). The alleged wholeness of the female body mirrors the integrity of the art object: “Para Sábato, lo femenino significa esa integración, la armonía . . . que se realiza sólo en el arte” (Sánchez López). Sábato proceeds to suggest that the “intuición femenina” renders “el artista . . . el hombre que más se aproxima a la unidad” (47), yet significantly, he refuses to envisage the possibility of a female artist.

### **Medusa’s gaze: the threat of the female gaze**

Bronfen reminds us that “the feminine body” represents the “extreme confirmation and extreme destabilisation of the self” (11). Kristeva affirms that the semiotic chora is the receptacle from which the “subject is both generated and negated” (28). Whilst the maternal imaginary promises to heal man’s fractured self, she simultaneously threatens to engulf it, posing a threat the phallogocentric order. This may be read as a thread of misogynistic discourse whereby “women are given power but only as figures of horror that terrify men” (Noys 91). However, I would insist that these authors are conscious that fear of women

arises from the instability of male identity. Their respective oeuvre critiques a society in which “machismo” is short-circuiting and becoming a source of its neurosis. In psychoanalytic terms, this fear of the “phallic mother” is symptomatic of men’s castration anxiety. Hegel’s notions of the “dialectic of recognition” suggest that identity lacks a pre-defining essence, dependent on the external, constructing gaze of the “other”. Male subjects’ anxiety that their virility be confirmed by women is transformed into an intra-psychic quandary. In this sense, Onetti allows women a compromised form of power, whereby the art object turns her critical eye onto the male artist and begins to define and create him. In *JC*, Jorge claims of Julita, “yo tengo que reconocerme en sus ojos” (802). Words such as “sumisión”, “esclavizarme”, “miedo” and “cobardía” (800) abound Jorge’s speech, underlining his inferiority complex. Like the Gorgon, Julita’s gaze becomes petrifying and corrosive to the male ego, “era una mujer, más fuerte, infinitamente más antigua; completa y solitaria” (813). Men’s vulnerability to women’s judgements is further reflected by Marcos, described with his “cara . . . indefensa ante los ojos y los pensamientos de las mujeres” (897). In *TTCE*, the fact that “la mujer . . . era más inteligente que . . . su marido” fills the latter with “cobardía” and “lástima” (1326). *EP*’s Linacero becomes obsessed with Ana María’s perception of him after she spits in his face. Millington has compared this spitting to male ejaculation (371), which humiliates and effeminizes the protagonist. Linacero compulsively plays out what Freud calls “a compensatory fantasy”, imagining his victim as a submissive, pleasure-giving object in an attempt to thwart the power of the female gaze and reassert himself as a dominant subject. Correspondingly, whilst she describes “plot-space” as a female category, Lauretis announces that woman “may resist confinement in that symbolic space by disturbing it . . . , seeking to exceed the boundary” (139).

Sábato’s writing echoes this fear of females. In *ET*, the prostitute is depicted in a predatory, savage light: “la rumana se incorporó como una vibora y me mordió el brazo hasta hacerlo sangrar” (120). The protagonist recoils from María, considering such to be a threat to his manhood: “era, entre sus manos, como un ingenuo chiquillo” (66); “lo que más me indignaba . . . era el haberme entregado a ella completamente indefenso” (68). In *SHT*, Alejandra strips Marcos of his virility: “venía siempre atrás, como arrastrado” (64). Her domineering nature infringes on Martín’s sense of self: “Él . . . pensaba que era un ser superfluo y torpe, que no hacía otra cosa que escucharla y admirarla” (118).

### **The pool of Salmacis: gender as artifice**

I have discussed how in this period, both male and female identity begin to be seen as lacking a pre-defining core, dependent on the formative gaze of others. There are moments in these narratives when gender categories are revealed as no more than artifice, as images of the collective psyche, as social and historical effects, rather than biological givens, and the masculine/ feminine dialectic becomes unfixed. Craig remarks that at times, “It is almost as though Onetti, the arch-misogynist, were, in spite of himself, revealing the process of construction of women’s roles in our societies” (45). On the contrary, I would argue that the oppositional meta-discourse that pervades Onetti’s narrative *self-consciously* highlights the social pressures at work in the construction of gender identity. Rolanda in *TDN*, refuses to be defined by her sex before being acknowledged as an individual, “No soy una mujer . . . Soy una persona” (193). It is significant that particularly Onetti’s later works in the second half of the century, such as *TTCE* (1963) and *JC* (1965), which were framed by established feminist discourse, are particularly sensitive to gender issues. *JC* underscores the

characters' efforts to forge gender masks. Jorge reflects on his mother's artificial behaviour: "es esposa y madre; yo siempre la he conocido con la cara correspondiente" (924). The novel takes place during carnival which, according to Michel Bakhtin, signifies the fluidity of identity, which can be shaken off and reconfigured. The androgynous adolescent girl (962) protests against the artifice and coquetterie associated with femininity. This idea of performance and pretence is echoed in the circus theme of "Mascarada". María Esperanza's excessive "dressing-up" echoes Beauvoir's claim: "rien n'est moins naturel que de s'habiller en femme" (II, 190). In *TTCE*, the female protagonist reverses patriarchal power structures by appropriating the traditionally male voyeuristic gaze, filled with "excitación" at the spectacle of the topless workmen (1316). The focus on the protagonist's "boca" before her suicide is significant since by placing the gun in her mouth, the site of language production is usurped by eroticism and death, emphasising women's exclusion from discourse. Nonetheless, this loosening of gender roles is fundamentally limited. The carnival and circus motifs are significant precisely because they pose transient liberations. Though he critiques female repression in *TTCE*, the protagonist's encounters with the "poceros" signal that her self-affirmation is dependent on men, and her final suicide reveals the absence of alternatives to married life.

Sábato allows Alejandra a degree of liberty from patriarchal order, rejecting motherhood and marriage: "no me casaré nunca . . . no tendré nunca hijos" (*SHT* 60), and engaging in physical fights with men. Describing her relationship with Marcos, she adopts the gaze of desire conventionally associated with masculinity: "algo puramente animal . . . me atraía, algo estrictamente físico . . . que calentaba la sangre" (68). Martín recognises how Alejandra eschews traditional concepts of womanhood: "hasta ese momento, las mujeres eran o esas vírgenes . . . de las leyendas, o seres superficiales y frívolas . . . y de pronto se encontraba con una mujer que no se encajaba en ninguno de esos moldes" (19). At times, the author self-consciously distances himself from the misogyny in his texts, exposing violence against women as an attempt to repress subversive femininity, and even recognising "machismo" as a national trait: Bruno describes the "sentimiento muy típico de cierto argentino que ve a la mujer como a un enemigo" (479), relating how Bordenave mistreats Alejandra "por sentirse incapaz de lograr algo más que el dominio del cuerpo de ella" (480). However, in order to negate her femininity, Alejandra straps her breasts during adolescence (61), underlining the persistent mapping of "masculinity" onto the male body, and "femininity" onto the female body. Martín reflects, "'persona' quería decir máscara" (172), yet this mutability of identity is never carried over to questions of sexual difference. Sábato's extra-fictional statements are less nuanced than his novels in this regard. Although he denies fixed gender attributes, he refuses to deconstruct essential binarisms: "es necesario establecer los atributos del Hombre y de la Mujer arquetípicos . . . que de alguna manera, determinan los atributos de los hombres y mujeres reales" (*SMS* 27). He reprehends the (con)fusion of "masculine" and "feminine" ideals, condemning the "masculinity" of women in modern society: "La sociedad moderna virilizó a la mujer, falsificando . . . la esencia de su ser . . . Habrá que volver a una mujer femenina" (45). Sábato's claim that *SMS* "es una apología casi religiosa de la mujer" (159) sings the praise of a masculine ideal of "femininity". The fact that Fernando's misogynist conversation with Norma in *SHT* (298-305) reproduces almost exactly Sábato's theories about women expressed in his earlier work *SMS*, makes it increasingly difficult to locate irony in these attitudes.

### Conclusion: Ivory Maidens

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As I have sought to demonstrate, the representation of women by these River Plate writers is an infinitely complex enterprise. At one level we can identify their textual production as a pro-feminist project. Feminine values are championed as antidotes to the hostile, alienating shadow of late capitalism. Women are elevated to the position of ideal aesthetic form and the source of artistic inspiration in an age where art is conceived as a redemptive and compensatory force that restores a sense of authenticity and humanity to a mechanized, labour-dominated world. Yet paradoxically, though this eulogistic depiction of woman as redeeming subject venerates femininity, it simultaneously reinforces patriarchal structures. Amongst feminist critics, including Judy Maloof, Linda Craig, and María Lojo de Beuter, Onetti and Sábato are considered “machista” writers, blind to their own discriminatory discourse. Even as women are praised, seeped in a quasi-religious light; categories that inform the representation of femininity reinforce essential archetypes of womanhood. The authors cling to patriarchal discourse and monolithic gender identities, complying with canonized notions of woman as passive muse, object, and space, and man as active creator, associated with the realm of commerce, reason and science. Furthermore, in becoming *objets d’art*, women remain a topological space, considered solely as part of the male problematic, as a medium for men’s salvation. Rather than drive the narrative forward, woman is aesthetised, poeticised and idealised; reduced to an inanimate artifice in a male-dominated text. They are the figureheads of redemption but not the beneficiaries of it, the emblems of revolution but not its agents. Though these modernist writers challenge numerous boundaries: fiction and reality, subjective and objective experience, progress and destitution; gender identity is essentialised. The paradigm of woman as incarnation of ideal artistic form denies her place in the material world, confining her to the domain of allegory and subliminal meaning. Art’s capacity to restore humanity thus collapses in on itself as women are reified, acquiring symbolic meaning rather than status as living subjects, and ultimately sacrificed at the altar of man’s redemption. They are the portals and stimuli to man’s unconscious rather than possessing one of their own; they are procreators rather than creators; and their negative place in language means that “while male protagonists struggle . . . for authenticity, female characters are too distanced from the very possibility of discourse . . . to even entertain such dreams” (Craig 45).

Nonetheless, it is fundamental to decant these texts from their imbricated ironies. My position is that Onetti and Sábato’s representation of women is nuanced, fraught by internal tensions. For though women occupy a marginal space in these narratives, their very silence may be read as an attempt to flag up and critique this liminal position, which is exposed as the corollary of pressures to conform to macho ideals. Onetti’s oeuvre self-consciously highlights gender as a societal myth, ironizing the stereotyping of woman as art object. The author hangs at a distance from the diegesis, establishing a complex, critical dialogue with his texts, at times dismantling misogynistic discourse through ironic meta-narratives. Sábato’s fiction problematises women’s objectification, but to a lesser extent. His extra-fictional work often mirrors the misogynist attitudes voiced by his characters, suggesting that the “machista” perspectives in his fictions are less self-conscious than those of Onetti.

Yet even as we peel back the layers of stereotypes, unveiling a vindication of female emancipation, woman is appropriated by modernist debates as an embodiment of art’s radical alterity to reality, ultimately reducing her to the definitive “other”. Circumscribed male and female roles are dissolved, yet the body remains the signifier of gender identity, and women are unproblematically associated with art. The masculine/feminine, logos/eros

dichotomies are never dismantled. Patriarchal structures are critiqued but never split apart and misogynistic discourse is reinstated. Despite the radical, innovatory drive of the modernist project in which these authors participate, it remains a fundamentally male-dominated movement, reducing women to “models, muses and mistresses” (Deepwell 8). Indeed, there is a more subtle patriarchal discourse that pervades the texts of both writers. To fully comprehend the complex triad of art, women and modernity as explored by Onetti and Sábato, it is crucial to understand the parallels drawn between the art/reality, and feminine/masculine dualisms in contemporary thought. Our authors were writing at a time when art was perceived as decadent and degenerate, reduced to a prosaic object of consumption for the entertainment of bourgeois audiences. Art was criticised for mindlessly reproducing reality without any imaginative (re)creation of the world<sup>12</sup>. Modernism constituted itself by resisting this reproduction of reality, based on “an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” (Huysens vii). From the nineteenth century, this cultural “other” was gendered as feminine (48), exemplified by Nietzsche’s polemic against Wagner, in which the masses and women, as threats to male-dominated culture, are placed in opposition to “true” art. However, Onetti and Sábato explode this model of women as mass culture, refusing to “[gender] as feminine that which is devalued” (Huysens 53). On the contrary, they ascribe mass culture, technological reproduction and commerce to a masculine realm. Women are aligned with a purely artistic domain, portrayed as instinctive, inspirational beings, incarnations of ideal aesthetic form, as redemptive martyrs, lovers, mothers and virginal visionaries. Our authors subscribe to the modernist drive to return to an inventive, spiritual, creative art, hermetic to the world, existing on a higher aesthetic plane. Their texts recoil from straightforward, objective reproductions of reality, subsuming their readers in the protagonist’s highly subjective worlds, which are distorted by obsessions and fantasies. The dynamics of the modernist quest search for art’s radical otherness to reality are mapped onto another self/other paradigm: the gender one. The art/reality dichotomy is transposed onto the feminine/masculine binarism: women are equated with art, and men to reality. Nevertheless, despite Onetti and Sábato’s self-consciousness about the reification of women, the underlying elision between women and art is self-constraining. Gender distinctions are maintained to prevent the collapse of the art/reality binarism, thus saving “true” art from being swallowed up in the reproduction of reality. Women thus perpetually “bear the burden of [men’s] dreams” (Warner 239), necessarily confined by the male imaginary to this realm of alterity of which authentic art is seen as forming a part.

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2 R.D. Laing warns of the neglect of the inner self in a world that privileges the empirical and the material: "Our time has been distinguished . . . by a drive to control the external world, and by an almost total forgetfulness of the internal world" (115). The dehumanizing force of industrialisation, degrading the individual to the status of commodity and automaton, is theorized by Wylie Sypher: "[Man's] existence is negative because he has been completely available to others . . . as if he were a kind of liquid capital" (10). Erich Kahler denounces the unregulated expansion of collectives to the detriment of communities, resulting in "the individual's growing alienation from his world and ultimately from himself" (14).

3 José Enrique Rodó anticipates, in 1900, the "resultados funestos" of "el sentido de la utilidad material" (210). This unilateral alienation was

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exacerbated in the postcolonial context of the River Plate province. Ricardo Piglia has referred to its imported European identity, creating what he sees as a "cultura de segunda mano" (162). Linda Craig comments that a sense of "rootlessness . . . of not really belonging, is almost endemic to the region" (2). Writing in the 1930s, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada postulates that the vast, scarcely populated landscape of the Southern Cone is internalised as solitude in the psyche of its inhabitants: "la extensión despoblada es como verdad sensible, soledad" (65).

4 Abbreviations: EA – El astillero; EP – El pozo; ET – El túnel; DHV – Dejemos hablar al viento; JC – Juntacadáveres; TDN – Tierra de nadie; TTCE – Tan triste como ella; VB – La vida breve; SHT – Sobre héroes y tumbas; SMS – Sobre la metafísica del sexo; H – Heterodoxia.

5 Other critics have insisted on art's ability to rekindle a sense of meaningfulness by imposing form on the amorphous, contingent mass of reality, enforcing "l'unité de l'esprit à la diversité de la chose" (Sartre 46). The "aura" surrounding the art work, arising from its originary "ritualistic basis" (Benjamin 217), promised to imbue secular forms of beauty with spiritual significance in an age where "God is dead" (Nietzsche 362). Moreover, art proffered to alleviate man's crippling solipsism within the modern collective, arising from its "ability to speak universally" (Robinson 159).

6 Throughout history, women have been "the preferred subject of image-makers" (Duby 17), thereby stripped of artistic agency. Rosemary Betterton highlights how "women are represented so frequently within images and yet their role as makers and viewers of images is scarcely acknowledged" (3). Ciphered through canonical representations of femininity, women have been historically construed as muse: "instrumental in provoking the imaginative license of the saints" (Scott 33), and the locus of inspiration to the male artist. Delight in the female form can be mapped onto what Sigmund Freud identifies as "scopophilia": the "pleasure in looking" (23). This indulgence in visual stimulation, he suggests, allows sexual curiosity about the object of desire to be "diverted ('sublimated') in the direction of art, if its interest can be shifted away from the genitals onto the shape of the body as a whole" (22). Desire becomes aesthetic and contemplative through the act of looking, transcending a purely sexual and fetishistic drive by allowing the subject to direct "their libido onto higher artistic aims" (22). Indeed, critics have identified the need for artifice, for this distancing from reality to produce pleasure, leading to the reification of the female: "For the spectacle to work, to produce its voyeuristic pleasure, it has to remain two-dimensional, lacking psychological motivation" (Suleiman 103-4); "She is desirable because distant, absent or not quite there, a dream, a phantom, a mediatrix, a muse" (Bronfen 205). Such is reminiscent of a Proustian model of desire, based on the displacement of desire for a woman onto the art object.

7 Grant F. Scott describes ekphrasis, the plot's spatial and deviating moments, as traditionally feminine, and how "the symbol of such digression is the Siren, who lures men away from their true course" (34). Naomi Schor underlines "the ornamental" as having "traditional connotations of effeminacy" (4).

8 However, I would insist that this female martyrdom provides women with a perverse sense of autonomy through the fascination her suffering provokes. In TTCE, the female protagonist performs "el rito con las espinas y las . . . líneas de sangre en las manos" (1319). The imagery not only heralds the reader to parallels with Christ's sacrifice for humanity, it is also erotically charged. Adams highlights the phallic connotation of the thorns (66), which ooze milk, and penetrate the flesh of the female protagonist, suggesting a kind of masturbatory pleasure in the affliction of this ritualistic self-harm. Simone de Beauvoir corroborates this view: "C'est en tombant au fond de l'abjection que la femme s'assure les plus délicieux triomphes" (II, 40).

9 Cartesian, dualistic thought structures have created an alienating split of the self into mind and body. Moreover, the mechanization of labour "estranges [man] from his own body" (Marx 114), transforming workers into "replaceable auxiliaries" (Adams 80). These writers suggest that the momentary bodily fusion with the female is a movement towards the limits of subjectivity, a reunion of mind and body, subject and object, implying a loss and renewal of the self: "le sujet et l'objet sont dissous, il y a passage, communication . . . l'un et l'autre ont perdu l'existence distincte" (Bataille 73-4).

10 However, Onetti ironically distances himself from his "machista" characters by self-consciously highlighting women's objectification in this process. In JC, the prostitutes are dehumanized, analogised to the furnishings of the brothel: "Demasiado polvo, demasiado pintura" (826). Like Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Larsen assigns women to the realm of ideal artistic form, fantasising about "una mujer perfecta, un prostíbulo perfecto" (920), as if women were "su creación artística" (Molina 181). Mauricio in TDN, explicitly equates art with prostitutes, both of which are exploited by male pleasure-seeking drives: "digo . . . macró del arte . . . Disfruto del arte, lo exploto" (121).

11 According to Lacanian theory, in the early stages of infancy, the image of the mother is internalised and understood as constituting the self. "The mirror stage" is identified as the period in which the child recognises itself as an autonomous subject. However, this process is linked to trauma, or "méconnaissance", since the child's previously held sense of unity is ruptured, perceiving itself as split and alienating throughout adulthood. Yet I would argue that the idea of the fractured subject in these texts is based not only on this universal model of the psyche, but is also rooted in the specific historical schema of modernity. Recent theorists have suggested that the rupturing of identity is exacerbated by the massification of contemporary society, which "splits the human self into a collective, functional part and a human actually individual part" (Kahler

14). I suggest that the postcolonial condition of the Southern Cone creates a further chasm in personal identity, for its inhabitants "are, and at the same time are not, European" (Craig 1).  
12 Adorno speaks of an art which has "entered into alliance with reification", creating "a poetry . . . nourished upon the work ethic" (61), and how "the elimination of the distinction between image and reality" has culminated in "collective sickness" (64). José Ortega y Gasset indicts nineteenth century Realism: "no es arte, sino extracto de vida", demanding "formas propiamente artísticas, las irrealidades, la fantasía" (16). Benjamin saw contemporary art, stripped of its "aura" and tradition (215), as a product of mass culture.