

Monstrous Birth: The Evolving Neighbor in Albert Sánchez Piñol's *La pell freda*

William Viestenz

Introduction: The Neighbor as Monstrous Birth

Nietzsche, in a riposte to the metaphysical credence in the opposition of values, queries in *Beyond Good and Evil* first “whether opposites even exist, and second, whether the popular valuations and value oppositions that have earned the metaphysicians’ seal of approval might not only be foreground appraisals” (6). The salient point is that every perception of absolute difference, including ontological demarcations, shift depending on the order of perspective. In Jacques Derrida’s own reply to Nietzsche, the French thinker posits that a perspectival metaphysics unfurls a vertiginous possibility; namely, that once the philosopher jettisons the concept of radical difference a scenario in which an antithesis germinates its thesis emerges. Nietzsche considers those who dwell on such possibilities to be foolish, whereas for Derrida the prospect is more horrifying than ignominious: “this would be tantamount to a monstrous birth, an ‘impossible’ origin . . . Anyone who dreams of this possibility immediately goes mad” (34).¹

The Catalan novelist Albert Sánchez Piñol’s debut novel, *La pell freda* (Cold Skin), reveals the neighbor to be a highly ambivalent concept, containing the seeds of both friendship and enmity, that produces a kind of

monstrous birth. Namely, friendship seemingly produces enmity and vice versa because the neighbor, rather than being a fixed situation, is a pendular state of movement that will perceive the stranger as either antagonistic or benevolent depending on the contingency of circumstance.² In a Conradian fashion, *La pell freda* narrates an unnamed Irishman's voyage to one of the "many blank spaces on the earth" (*Heart of Darkness* 8). More specifically, the narrator, a nationalist revolutionary involved in the Irish War for Independence (1919–1921), travels to an isolated island outpost on the fringes of colonial expansion near the Antarctic circle in order to fulfill the role of atmospheric scientist and carry out various experiments during the space of one calendar year.³ The island is mostly barren, save for a small forest and a lighthouse occupied by the novel's other human inhabitant, Batís Caffó, an expatriated Austrian.⁴ In a move that takes Sánchez Piñol definitively away from Conrad, a horde of cold-skinned, blue-blooded monsters that live underwater and appear to lack logos and the acumen of reason attack the narrator and Caffó each night.

In this essay, I argue that Sánchez Piñol's depiction of the Manichaeic origins of the neighbor has the additional effect of exposing another antithetical fault line under a great deal of tectonic stress: the human/animal divide. From the narrator's perspective, one must be a human in order to be a neighbor. This is problematic later in the novel when the narrator's shifts alliances to the monsters after a falling out with Caffó. The creatures become the narrator's co-conspirators and Caffó the enemy, which requires a humanization of the former and an animalization of the latter. The contingency of neighborliness therefore throws the ontological foundations of humanism into sharp relief due to the disjuncture between the putative humanization of the monster and their stark dispossession of two qualities that humankind, fairly or not, has used to denigrate its biological and material relationship to other forms of life: logos and reason.

Contingency and the Commoditization of the Neighbor

The evolution of a neighborly association between the narrator and Batís Caffó follows a movement that rests philosophically on the dictate to love thy neighbor as, and in spite of, one's self. When the narrator arrives on the island, he and the captain of the ship that drops him off approach the lighthouse and find a slovenly and barbaric Caffó inside. The question, then, becomes: Why forge a neighborly alliance with the Austrian and not the monsters when both agents bear the mark of the monstrous? To answer the question, I will analyze the narrator's first encounter with Caffó and compare the scene to the Irishman's first sustained examination of a cold-skinned monster trapped within the lighthouse. A prejudicial ontological

delimitation that presets the conditions of possibility, or impossibility, for neighborliness defines each situation.

The narrator perceives the *carasapo* (toad face), a term given to the creatures by Caffó, in completely non-human terms at the outset of the novel. Due to their provenance from nature, the cold-skinned monsters of Sánchez Piñol's fictional universe are not, in the words of the novel's narrator, enemies: "Tenia un miler de monstres anònims en contra. Però en realitat ells no eren enemics meus, de la mateixa manera que els terratrèmols no són enemics dels edificis, només són" (76) (I had a thousand anonymous monsters against me. But in reality they weren't my enemies, in the same way that earthquakes aren't enemies of buildings, they just are). Near the end of the novel, while extracting dynamite from the hull of a shipwreck off the island's coast, the narrator reaffirms his previous sentiment, arguing that the *carasapo* "pertanyien a la natura, una força de la mateixa mena que els huracans o els ciclons" (176) (belonged to nature, the same type of force as a hurricane or cyclone). From this perspective, the monsters, an irremediable part of nature, cannot be classified as immanent enemies because they belong on the same level as any natural cataclysm. Humanism, under the aegis of the narrator's worldview, is therefore at a considerable remove from nature, the *umwelt* within which the Irishman assigns the blue-blooded horde.

The narrator's dehumanizing impulse toward the *carasapo* is a curative for their monstrosity. Placing the creatures within the putatively closed-off circle of non-humanistic animality establishes a clear binary opposition that, in the Derridean citation at the start of the essay, removes the prospect of a horrifying birth from which monstrosity bears too much of the human and vice versa. In a sense, consigning the *carasapo* to a closed-off sphere of nature links the creatures to a discourse of animality, especially Martin Heidegger's notion of animal life, which exists in a closed-off *umwelt* without access to Being.⁵ The narrator's own automatic assignation of the monsters to nature comes already embedded in the symbolic reference that Caffó invented in order to refer to the horde: the *carasapo*, or the toad-faced ones. Symbolically attaching the creatures to a known amphibian genus accomplishes two things. On the one hand, the *carasapo* assume a stable place within the symbolic order of their colonizer(s). Secondly, ontological stability disallows the creatures from inhabiting a transitional state that could challenge the strictures of humanism, a concept that will reappear shortly in a discussion of the abject. For now, it is worth noting Cohen's summation that the monster "is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement" (x). The monster as process will mirror the concept of the neighbor later on, which itself is a movement, between friendship and enmity, before it is a stable situation.

The *carasapo*'s animality thus springs from an anxiety symptomatic of monstrosity, but as the novel unfolds it becomes clear that this qualification is, like Nietzsche surmises, a matter of perspective. It is ironic, then, that for Nietzsche the stability of an antithetical relationship depends on either a "foreground appraisal" or, perhaps, supposed antitheses "are not even viewed head on; perhaps they are even viewed from below, like a frog-perspective, to borrow an expression that painters will recognize" (6). A frog-perspective, in aesthetic terms, entails an observational position from below, where a frog might reside. In *La pell freda*, the frog-perspective involves a reevaluation of the very amphibian nature of the toad-faced ones, but this ontological shift will be less a matter of ethics and more an attempted symbolic subjugation.

Enmity, according to the narrator's anthropocentric belief that pertaining to nature disqualifies the horde from being willfully antagonistic, belongs firmly within the confines of humanism; by the same token, friendship—enmity's dialectical partner—ought to as well. As regards friendship, the field of ethics tends to function as a mediatory space that normalizes relationships between strangers. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas primarily theorized ethics in this way, making the potential to be a neighbor inextricably tied to the qualification for ethical treatment. Levinas puts forth that ethics springs forth from the call of the Other, an interpellation that grounds and gives birth to human subjectivity. The pre-subjective ethical call requires that the receiver transcend his own body in an identification with the vulnerability and mortality of the Other, and in this exchange the human face wields a critical function. "But that face facing me, in its expression—in its mortality—summons me, demands me, requires me: as if the invisible death faced by the face of the other . . . were 'my business'" (*Alterity* 24). The mark of the human, following Levinas, would involve a very particular and asymmetrical relationship with the visage of strangers. The Other's mortality and vulnerability requires an abandonment of my own well-being through the transcendence of the self solicited by the ethical call, in the desperate hope that he or she will similarly identify with my own susceptibility to harm. Beyond simply being a narrative of the origin of ethics, Levinas posits through this concept of transcendental subjectivity that the humanistic turn consists precisely in eschewing self-concern and *amour-propre* in order to lose oneself in the Other: "The interiority of an ego identical to itself dissolves in a totality without folds or secrets. All that is human is outside" (*Humanism* 59). All that is human, in other words, lies outside the narcissistic self.

This line of thought, as is plainly evident, affirms without a whiff of problematization the golden rule to love thy neighbor as thyself, but in an asymmetrical manner that makes the called-after subject himself vulnerable due to a radical defense of the stranger. As Levinas continues: "It is precisely in that recalling of me to my responsibility by the face that

summons me, that demands me, that requires me—it is in that calling into question—that the other is my neighbor” (25). The notion of neighborliness thus embodies the kernel of ethics and requires a taking of responsibility for those whose contiguity permits the issuing of a call. Such selfless altruism, dependent on treating the neighboring stranger as though he were one’s self, presupposes, without justification, that in the deepest recesses of consciousness the ego bears benevolent impulses towards its own well-being, a notion that is hotly contested by Sigmund Freud and his progeny, Jacques Lacan. For Levinas, the neighbor could not be anything other than a friend, treating the two terms as though they were synonymous and radically opposed to their antitheses: the stranger and the enemy.

The Irishman’s initial encounter with Batís Caffó illustrates effectively the lineaments of Levinas’s ethical call—with one important clarification. Levinas’s theory is a first philosophy that sees the face-to-face encounter as a primary, pre-cognitive experience from which originates ethical relationality and discourse. In the infinitizing visage of the Other, one does not see another singular subject, but rather it is where cultural particularities are exceeded and the face of God is glimpsed. In Sánchez Piñol’s novel, the Irishman is already a fully formed social being—what Levinas would call a phenomenon and not, strictly, a transcendental ‘face’; however, his first encounters with Caffó and the amphibious creature in the lighthouse undoubtedly are interactions that operate on an affective, pre-cognitive level with beings that appear outside the realm of socialized discourse. I will argue that the ontological state of each pre-social being determines the extent to which the narrator believes his *own* face solicits an ethical movement and allows himself to be equally drawn to others, a framework that is inspired by Levinas’s philosophy, but uses the term “face” in a different, more phenomenological way. Caffó straddles the boundary between civility and scabrous barbarity when first presented to the reader. After being commanded to stand up from his bed by the captain of the ship that brings the Irishman to the island, “L’altre [Caffó] va obeir, a poc a poc. Va enretirar les mantes i va treure els peus . . . Estava despullat. A ell tant li feia mostrar la seva nuesa” (19) (The other obeyed, little by little. He pulled up his blankets and stuck out his feet . . . He was totally unclothed. His nakedness mattered little to him). Beyond being animalistic, one could even argue that Caffó bears the character of the monstrous on an etymological level by showing (*monstrere*) characteristics that fall outside of the normative boundaries of human civility and cross over into the terrain of the animal-other (*mostrar la seva nuesa*).⁶ The narrator stresses further Caffó’s monstrous character upon noting that the Austrian, like the *citauca*, appears faceless when first encountered: “Ens mirava amb uns petits ulls de talp, sense parpellejar. Les mantes el cobrien fins al nas com la pell d’un ós . . . Era un espectacle que fluctuava entre la indefensió, la deixadesa i la ferocitat” (17) (He looked at us with the eyes of a mole, without blinking.

The blankets covered him up to the nose like the skin of a bear. He was a spectacle that fluctuated between defenselessness, carelessness, and ferocity). At first glance, without access to the Other's face, and in the absence of the visual encounter that would issue an ethical call, the Levinasian transcendence of subjectivity fails to register and Caffó infringes upon the sylvan category of animality ("les mantes" cover him like "la pell d'un ós"). As with the *citauca*, the undecideability of Caffó's ontological status forces a classification in order to eschew the anxiety pursuant to monstrosity. Here, without access to the face, Caffó lists towards animality in the eyes of the protagonist.

Despite Caffó's apparent nearness to a decidedly non-human state of existence, the narrator nonetheless carries out a subjective transcendence once the Austrian watchman bears his face and arises from his slumber. In a long paragraph that enumerates each of Caffó's facial features, the narrator loses an awareness of self in the interiority of the Other (indeed, the narrator refers to Caffó as 'l'altre' in the above quotation): "Jo no sabia ben bé si es comportava així per disciplina o per somnambulisme. Però m'hi vaig fixar i una ganyota delatava el nerviosisme interior" (20) (I had no idea whether he behaved that way due to routine or somnambulism. But I fixed my gaze on him and a grimace revealed his internal nervousness). Without uttering a word, Caffó's outward facade solicits an intentional movement toward the Other as an object—"m'hi vaig fixar." The narrator's affective identification with a "nerviosisme interior" supplants Caffó's objectivity and converts him into an ethical subject capable of the wide range of human emotion, sentiment, and vulnerability. In the Levinasian encounter, the self's fixation on the Other's susceptibility to danger is crucial, and here the narrator connotes this by pinpointing nervousness as the primary element of Caffó's interiority. With Caffó, a human form that better resembles the monstrous by "mostrar la seva nuesa" at first fails to engender an ethical encounter; it ultimately unfolds once the potential of a face-to-face encounter arises. This encounter produces a subjectivity that precedes speech, and on the next page Caffó finally responds to the captain's insistent inquiries, but only after the indignant captain contests his access to the symbolic order: "No m'entén? No entén la meva llengua?" (18) (Don't you understand me? Do you not understand my language?).

In answer to the question, "why Caffó and not the *carasapo*?" the narrator's conceptual placement of the latter beyond the fortified margins circumscribing humanism discourages neighborliness. For Caffó, his humanity is preconditioned both by the successful completion of the Levinasian transcendence and the subsequent utilization of logos. In the narrator's first encounters with the *carasapo*, the presupposed inhumanity of the island's natives sabotages the successful completion of this same process. Caffó keeps in the lighthouse a captured female *carasapo*, who by day runs errands and is subject to the expatriated Austrian's sexual desires.

On a very explicit level, the narrator speaks of the monster in terms of the non-human, describing the monster's movements, after having taken her hostage in order to get Caffó's attention, as similar to a "gos lligat que vol tornar amb el seu amo" (91) (tied up dog that wants to return to its master). Also, the recently arrived narrator relates to the enslaved monster's face in a fundamentally non-ethical—and, if one follows Levinas's logic, non-human—manner. Later in the text, once he and Caffó have joined forces in the lighthouse, the Irishman directly encounters the *carasapo*:

En observar-ho no he pogut evitar un esglai: ells ulls són uns miralls prodigiosament blaus, més rodons que ovalats . . . M'he vist allà dins, mirant-la, és a dir, mirant-me. He estat a punt de desistir. Quan un es veu reflectit en els ulls del monstre pateix vertígens ridículs però poderosos. (138)

(In observing it I could not avoid a certain horror: the eyes were prodigiously blue, more round than oval . . . I saw myself there inside, looking at her, that is to say, looking at me. I was at the point of desisting. When one is reflected in the eyes of the monster you experience an absurd but powerful vertigo.)

The narrator's "foreground appraisal" of the monster's face does not summon, require, or call to responsibility. Levinas would argue that any human-to-human confrontation summons the impossible otherness, or radical alterity, of the neighbor, who nonetheless becomes "the business" of he who receives the ethical call. For the narrator of Sánchez Piñol's novel, no such bridging of the abyss issues from the monster's pure alterity, only an absurd, powerful sense of vertigo and nausea. This, no doubt, has to do with the realization of several points of confluence between himself and the putatively inhuman Other, which germinates the symptomatic state of unease evinced by all boundary-crossing monstrosity. The narrator's uncertain syntax reflects this type of vertigo; almost on a subconscious level the above quotation begins with the pronoun "it" but slips into a gendered "her" later on.

One cannot approach the face of the stranger in a complete vacuum; prejudices, biases, and other limit determinations, such as the human-animal, will always color whether or not the self will betray an ethical openness towards the Other's face. *La pell freda*, and the usage of the human-animal as the prerequisite for neighborliness, thus forces a consideration of circumstances such as Giorgio Agamben's state of exception and the *homo sacers* that these spaces produce.⁷ Once beyond the law and the contractual strictures of the society, how does one instantaneously separate that which is a *zoon politikon* from mere or bare life? Without question, in the above scene the existence of a face—monstrous or otherwise—begs that a ethical

traversal take place, problematizing the entire premise of the theory. “És impossible observar-la i mantenir distàncies. Quan la toco, m’hi involucro” (138) (It is impossible to observe her and keep a distance. When I touch her, I fall into her). As if the *carasapo*’s visage were some kind of placebo—a face that lacks humanistic authenticity but still approximates to a certain degree the features one would expect to find in a human countenance—the Levinasian ethical mechanism involuntarily kicks in upon initial contact. Ultimately, however, the narrator, under the spell of his ontological placement of the *carasapo* within the closed-off *umwelt* of nature, rebuffs any effort to transcend his own ego in an identification with the Other. Rather, his impulse, once making physical contact with the *carasapo*, is to seek refuge back within the self: “El meu palmell es diposita en la seva galta. I la mà em fuig horroritzada, com si m’electrocutessin. Un dels nostres instints més primaris és aquell que relaciona el contacte humà amb l’escalfor, no hi ha cossos freds” (138) (I place my palm on her cheek. And my hand flees horrified, as if I were electrocuted. One of our most primary instincts is that which relates heat with the human touch, there aren’t cold bodies). The narrator looks into the eyes of the Other and only sees himself “allà dins, mirant-la, és a dir, mirant-me,” as though he were gazing into the depths of a pond but only receiving his own mimetic reflection.

But Sánchez Piñol’s novel shows that *visagéification* (faceification), to use Deleuze’s term, and the experience of affect cannot be relegated only to the “human” genus.⁸ Ethics need only apply to human-human relations, which would exempt other-than-human animal life from moral consideration. This idea, in any case, begs the question: What kind of visage do animals possess and might it elicit the same kind of subjective transcendence and call to responsibility as a human face? And moreover, why even insist upon the existence of a face as a redeeming quality? It is thus also worth considering the possibility of granting an ethical call to non-human life that lacks a face altogether, such as the environment and the responsibility to protect the vulnerable atmosphere from such things as carbon emissions.

The narrator’s ethical false start, if one can put it in those terms, denies the cold-skinned Other her subjectivity and produces a profound abjection. That the image returned to the narrator is merely himself, “mirant-me,” suggests the anxiety inherent to any objectification of the stranger. As Baumgartner and Davis cogently put forth, “at the moment we abject the monster to preserve conventional order, we consciously or unconsciously deny the presence of the possible disruption of that order” (1). The monster’s eyes, like the reflection of a pond, induce a mimetic scene that leaves unchallenged the coherence of the observing subject. This only comes to pass, however, by ignoring the interiority of the observed object and fetishizing the monster’s superficiality—note the aesthetic dimension of the narrator’s response to the monster’s face—her “prodigiously blue” eyes,

more round than oval, only return to the narrator his reflected image. Joan Ramon Resina, in a trenchant application of Kristeva's notion of the abject to the novel, precisely argues that the *carasapo*, by existing in a transitional state between the animal and the human, promote an ontological unsettling: "son algo intermedio, un estadio transitorio que encarna, desde el punto de vista de lo humano amenazado, el miedo a perder su carácter autocontenido y hacer una regresión hacia un estado indiferenciado" (139) (they are something intermediate, a transitory state that incarnates, from the point of view of the threatened human, the fear of losing an autochthonous character and making a regression toward an undifferentiated state). As Resina shows, the monster's fluidity reveals that what is at stake is not, as the narrator initially perceives, an ontological separation but rather the common trajectory of two entities—the narrator and the *carasapo*—cast along the same tenuous axis of Being, though at two evolutionary nodes.

In *La pell freda*, simply being a neighbor is not a guarantor of friendship. After meeting Caffó, the narrator, unaware of the *carasapo*'s nightly assault, bids adieu to his traveling party and returns to the atmospheric scientist's hut, which is a decidedly more vulnerable station than the lighthouse. After the first assault of the monsters, the narrator attempts unsuccessfully to solicit help from Caffó the following day. What eventually brings the two protagonists into a strategic coalition is mutual desire: Caffó, low on supplies, covets the narrator's store of rifles, munitions, and foodstuffs. The narrator, of course, desires residency in the well-fortified lighthouse. Prior to this agreement, the narrator refuses to qualify Caffó as a friendly neighbor, despite the latter's geographic contiguity: "el meu únic enemic tenia un nom i es deia Batis Caffó. El far, el far, el far" (76) (My only enemy had a name and it was Batis Caffó. The lighthouse, the lighthouse, the lighthouse). In the absence of friendship, a kind of mimetic desire, to use a term coined by René Girard, grounds enmity, a state of all-against-all chaos indicative of the way in which a social theoretician like Hobbes would describe pre-social nature. Here, the triangular web of desire comprises the narrator, Caffó, and the lighthouse—"el far, el far, el far." The mimetic triangle crumbles with the introduction of a fourth term, which in a sense balances out the equation: the narrator's supplies and munitions. Caffó's recognition of the ability to acquire a desired object through a strategic transaction—offering residency in the lighthouse—defuses a violent situation and opens space for dialogue. The narrator, in order to force the issue, takes Caffó's *carasapo* hostage, which leads to a guns-drawn staredown. After a period of dialogue in which the protagonists communicate their mutual desires and become aware of the advantages of establishing neighborliness, the situation, all of the sudden, "era molt pacífica, si pot dir-se així. Feia una estona ens volíem tallar el coll i ara parlàvem d'idees. Érem com un parell de fenícis que han gastat totes les energies en un regateig més teatral que real. L'illa era un lloc estrany" (93)

(was very peaceful, if you could call it that. A second ago we were at each other's throats and now we spoke of ideas. We were like a pair of Phoenicians that had spent all of their energies in a tit-for-tat more theatrical than real. The island was a strange place).

What, therefore, are the preconditions for friendship in a state of exception devoid of the contractual bonds of civil society? First, exposure to a common risk; i.e., the *carasapo*, is essential. Secondly, friendship issues from a transaction that offers significant advantages relative to individual autonomy—like a commodity in Marxist parlance, each party's exchange value provides the social glue. As in any market, however, exchange values are subject to devaluation and can thus provoke the transformation of the friend into the paragon of enmity. Jacques Derrida deftly exposes this economic facet of friendship:

The friend must not only be good in himself, in a simple or absolute (*aplós*) manner, he must be good for you, in relation to you who are his friend. The friend is absolutely good *and* absolutely or simply the friend when these two qualities are in harmony, when they are 'symphonious' with one another. (21; Derrida's emphasis)

The manner in which Caffó gains value in the eyes of the work's interlocutor follows a clearly Derridean curve; in spite of an initially successful ethical encounter grounded in Caffó's vulnerability and sentience, the Austrian only gains positive neighborly value when he is valuable *for* the narrator, and vice versa. Prior to this mutual knowledge of self-benefit, the narrator had only one enemy and "es deia Batis Caffó".

This effectively splits the neighbor into two components that locates on one side friendship and on the other enmity. Caffó, just in the opening pages of the novel, is both a radical stranger beyond the scope of reasoning and a friendly figure worthy of defense. While Levinas himself fails to see the pendular nature of the neighbor, critics of his work like Slavoj Žižek have. Žižek, with assistance from Peter Sloterdijk, argues that the imponderable abyss that separates the called after subject and the Other contains the seeds for both an ethical traversal *and* an encounter with:

Someone whose very reasoning is foreign to us, so that no encounter with him in battle is possible . . . Horrible as it may sound, the Levinasian Other as the abyss of otherness from which the ethical injunction emanates and the Nazi figure of the Jew as less-than-human Other-enemy originate from the same source. (55–56)

The neighbor, in other words, has embedded within both monstrosity and altruistic ethical behavior. Distilling this thought further, Žižek signals the possibility that he or she who at one time solicited an ethical defense of

vulnerability may at a later date constitute such a profound otherness that no connection whatsoever is possible. This notion reinforces that neighborliness, far from being a fixed state, is an evolving, in-flux process—like monstrosity—that eventually settles into one of two possibilities. In the next section, this ambivalence within the Levinasian neighbor comes to the fore in the dénouement of *La pell freda* once the humanized *carasapo* form an alliance with the narrator against Caffó, who has again become “l’únic enemic.”

The Lighthouse, or the Phallus as Signifier

Caffó and the narrator join forces and after more than a year together they eventually use up their stores of ammunition and explosives in a desperate attempt to beat back the *carasapo* each night. The narrator, however, changes course in the middle of the novel and begins to defend the non-monstrous quality of the *carasapo* to Caffó. In his very lucid analysis of *La pell freda*, López-Quiñones argues that the enslaved female *carasapo*’s transformation from abject monster to a being in possession of logos begins with the narrator’s decision to sexually copulate with her. The sexual compatibility that the narrator discovers “ocasiona en el protagonista dos procesos psicológicos . . . el primer proceso conlleva una revisión crítica y negativa de la propia humanidad” (151) (produces in the protagonist two psychological processes . . . the first entails a negative critical revision of humanity itself). The sexual encounter also, in the other direction, “propone un proceso en dirección contraria, esto es, la humanización de su amante” (151) (proposes a process in the opposite direction, that is, the humanization of his lover). López-Quiñones’s analysis, which resonates with Sartre’s theory of love and *l’être-pour-autrui*, pinpoints the instinct towards the satisfaction of desire—a primal need that exists beyond the mere reproduction of the species—as the alchemical elixir that refashions the boundaries between the human and other-than-human.

As López-Quiñones signals, the middle section of the novel indeed narrates a slow humanization of the *citauca*, but for reasons that deserve critical reflection that go beyond sexual copulation and extend into the subjection pursuant to naming and symbolic authority. As cited above, sexual compatibility marks the first stage of humanization. Later, the narrator recognizes in the female *carasapo*’s nightly chants, which she emits shortly before each attack, the semblance of logos, from which he divines that the horde’s proper name is the *citauca* [aquatic] and the female *carasapo* as “Aneris” [siren].⁹ At this crossroads, the narrator desists from using the term “monstre” and “*carasapo*” and inserts, *tout court*, “*citauca*” and “Aneris” into his discourse. In lieu of considering the *citauca* to be a

monstrous horde belonging only to nature, the narrator denounces both the creature's monstrosity and animality in an argument with Caffó: "Batís—el vaig interrompre sense moure'm—, no són monstres . . . No lluitem contra ferres, n'estic segur" (227) (Batís—I interrupted without moving—they're not monsters . . . We aren't fighting against wild animals, I'm sure of it.) In order to shed their monstrosity, or in other words, their capacity to coexist on both sides of the ontological divide, the *citauca* have to be firmly encased within the human dimension. Caffó, of course, is undaunted and refuses to let up his defense of the lighthouse. In terms of the friend/enemy distinction, the lines of dialogue between the Irishman and Caffó fray and the possibility of violence spikes as the incapacity of communication asserts itself between the two neighbors.¹⁰ The narrator, meanwhile, opens up to the *citauca*, playing with a group of children and befriending what he perceives to be an orphan.

The "humanization" of the creatures, then, allows the horde to become neighbors and therefore participate in the friend/enemy distinction. As with Caffó, their own ascension to the rank of friendship is borne of strategic advantage. In this case, far from responding to the innate ethical vulnerability of the *citauca*, the narrator instead recognizes that the low store of ammunition in the lighthouse portends ruin, making a peace treaty optimal. Also, once Caffó ascends to the rank of enmity, the creatures and the narrator each profit from his annihilation, making a neighborly truce only natural. And indeed, the narrator and Caffó never reach a rapprochement; in a suicidal act just outside the lighthouse, the Austrian attempts to murder the narrator with a hatchet, injures a *citauca* in the process, and is then devoured by the horde.

It is certainly reasonable to interpret the process of Aneris's humanization as a desire to create a form of subjectivity, but rather than mimicking Levinas what one sees is a Lacanian scenario in which the humanization of the *citauca*, understood as a taxonomic ordering, is borne of the symbolic imposition of two proper names—here, Aneris and Citauca. For Lacan, the proper name is the first kernel of subjective consciousness and the placemat onto which the symbolic order is mapped. The discursive law of the Father pushes the subject into the symbolic realm and away from the sense of perceived unity and oneness characteristic of the *jouissance* of a primordial mirror stage. *Jouissance* demands the unbridled satisfaction of drives—towards both pleasure and death—and is thus an aggressive and transgressive excitation within the self. Because access to *jouissance* would be auto-destructive, *jouissance* presents itself as a field "surrounded by a barrier which makes access to it difficult for the subject to the point of inaccessibility" (*Ethics* 209). However, a nostalgic desire to return to the state of oneness of the mirror stage, which Lacan locates around the age of eighteen months, means that the subject is constantly trying to overcome the symbolic laws that preclude access to *jouissance*.

The narrator's unilateral naming of Aneris and his substitution of *citauca* for *carasapo*, follows this Lacanian itinerary of development. Indeed, in the narrator's initial confrontation with Aneris he desperately wants to perceive the oneness of a mirror stage insofar as the creature's prodigiously blue eyes reflect back onto the observer his own image. However, as Lacan notes, "man cannot aim at being whole . . . while ever the play of displacement and condensation to which he is doomed in the exercise of his functions marks his relation as a subject to the signifier" (*Écrits* 287). The symbolic order to which the narrator is subject, of course, belongs to Caffó, the author of the term *carasapo* and gatekeeper of the satisfaction of sexual desire, Aneris. In Lacanian terms, Caffó's possession of a symbolic law refuses the narrator the freedom to pursue any opening up to his *jouissance*. Along these lines, it is important to note that throughout the novel, the narrator and Aneris's sexual copulation is always hidden so as to avoid Caffó's oppressive vigilance. Aneris, like *jouissance* itself, is forbidden—a veritable taboo. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator in fact comes across a bronze tube announcing Caffó as both domineer of the Oceans and author of that which is desired on the island: "*Batís Caffó viu aquí / Batís Caffó va fer aquest font / Batís Caffó va escriure això . . . Batís Caffó té allò que vol i només vol allò que té*" (49) (*Batís Caffó lives here / Batís Caffó made this fountain / Batís Caffó wrote this . . . Batís Caffó has that which he wants and only that which he needs*). The meaning of Caffó's "font" could of course be read in two ways, as both the physical waterworks and a type of writing, which points towards his symbolic dominion. Caffó's locus must be a lighthouse with all of the phallic symbolism that the edifice projects. According to Caffó's itemization above, the confluence of discursive and territorial authority produces a form of jurisdictional domination symbolized within a proper name whose repetition ends the list: "*Batís Caffó, Batís Caffó, Batís Caffó . . .*" (49). In *La pell freda*, the lighthouse is the master phallus and it is attached to a master signifier, the proper name "Batís Caffó." Indeed, for Lacan, the phallus is the master signifier that conditions "as a whole" all that is signified: "for [the phallus] is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier" (*Écrits* 285).

Being subject to Caffó's discursive regime and existing under the aegis of his phallic order means that the narrator himself can never hope to replicate the *jouissance* oneness hoped for in his copulation with Aneris. His answer is to provide a counter-phallus and an alternative symbolic order to which Aneris and her cohort will be subject. Once his relation with Caffó begins to deteriorate, the narrator plants an unloaded rifle in the sand near the where the *citauca* emerge each night. Far from being a peace offering—a symbol of an ethical, disinterested defense due to a perceived vulnerability to risk—the rifle in fact aspires to become a master signifier intended to designate, as a whole, the effects of that which the new symbolic order's

words signify; namely, *citauca* becomes the privileged all-encompassing proper name of the cold-skinned monsters beneath the ocean.¹¹ It is thus only natural that for the duration of the novel the narrator remains without a proper name; this is a master signifier that can only be revealed after the removal of the original Father figure. This new master signifier, like Caffó's inscription on the bronze tube, will be announced to the next atmospheric scientist chosen to experience the island's evolution of neighborliness.

The Posthumanistic Turn

The previous Lacanian approach to language and subjectivity allows one to see in *La pell freda* an interrogation of the repressed animality that foregrounds the human-animal divide. After Caffó's demise, the *citauca* desist from attacking the now-solitary narrator within the lighthouse but it becomes increasingly clear that the newfound peace is dependent on one condition: that Aneris be returned to her people. However, with Aneris as his only company, this is a step the narrator refuses to take: "l'únic que podien voler de mi era l'únic que no podia donar-los . . . M'hauria agradat dir-los que fins i tot la meva vida era negociable. Però una vida sense l'Aneris, mai" (288) (the only thing they could want from me was the only thing I couldn't give them . . . I would've liked to tell them that even my own life was negotiable. But a life without Aneris, never). Shortly thereafter, a shipping crew arrives on the island and leaves behind a new atmospheric scientist. That night, the *citauca*'s attacks return and the novel sets the clock back to zero with the narrator now occupying the role of Caffó, alone in the lighthouse with Aneris without the slightest inclination toward helping the ignorant newcomer to the island. What occurs is not the production of a new proper name but rather a repetition of the master signifier, "Batís Caffó." With the narrator refusing to submit to the new shipping crew's questions, a sailor picks up an official document and announces, "Aquí figura un tal Caffó, Batís Caffó" (295) (Here it lists one Caffó, Batís Caffó).

Encased within the lighthouse, the narrator senses a profound abyss between himself and Aneris; "ni tan sols estava segur que les sensacions que ella devia d'haver viscut allà, al far, fossin semblants a les meves . . . volia que entengués que m'estava fent més mal que tots els *citauca* junts. Volia que em mirés, per sant Patrici, que em mirés" (284) (I wasn't even sure that the feelings she had to have experienced there, in the lighthouse, were similar to mine . . . I wanted her to understand that she was doing more harm to me than all of the *citauca* combined. I wanted her to look at me, for St. Patrick's sake, just look at me). Becoming master of the symbolic order is itself wholly dependent on the interpellated subject, Aneris, perceiving the narrator to be an ego-ideal; i.e., an object whose discursive law will most

readily return the ego back to the state of wholeness yearned for in the Imaginary realm. Lacan, of course, argues that this is an impossible task and the life of the ego therefore consists in a long chain of “misrecognitions” of ego-ideals. This process, needless to say, requires that the human subject possess rationality, which is required in order to form judgments with respect to ego-ideals, and the capacity for logos. Without logos, no stable registering of the subject within the symbolic order is even possible.

The novel, therefore, ends in an aporia because the working out of desire only functions in the presence of the Other’s acknowledgment of symbolic enslavement, which Aneris cannot yield because, recalling Resina’s argument above, she belongs to an earlier evolutionary state and is therefore “transitional.” Without logos, the narrator’s phallus, now represented by the lighthouse, loses all potency. As Lacan puts forth, “it is the locus of the Other” from which the phallus’s message is omitted (*Écrits* 286). Here, Aneris refuses such an acknowledgment vis-à-vis the narrator, the most recent, but not the only, Other to try and impose symbolic dominion over the island. Aneris, in other words, cannot constitute a locus that omits the narrator’s phallic message. In the absence of a common symbolic code, an imponderable abyss between Aneris and the narrator opens and such notions as the common experience of affect will forever remain unknown.

The most basic explanation for the novel’s aporetic circularity is that the humanization required in order for Aneris, and by extension the *citauca*, to acquire the status of neighbor sputters in the absence of logos and the acumen for reason. What is curious, of course, is that the narrator only focuses on those two qualities that he perceives the *citauca* to lack without considering the myriad other ways he could conceptualize a commonality with the creatures. The common experience of affect, for example, is a totally non-linguistic phenomenon. Humanism, essentially, fetishizes logos and reason to a great degree, a movement that severely limits an awareness of the multiple other points of contact that all forms of life share and ignores that the human is itself a transitional concept situated on a line between objectivity and subjectivity. Cary Wolfe’s understanding of posthumanism emphasizes this kind of false consciousness; “namely, that ‘the human’ is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether” (xv). The *citauca* obviously possess a number of those qualities present in humankind’s origins in nature: a face that calls out, sentience, and the inclination towards violence that Freud and Lacan place before Law. Logos and reason, of course, are two chief avenues by which materiality and embodiment can be transcended. From the narrator’s anthropocentric perspective in which animality and humanism constitute intransigent, incommunicable *umwelts*, Aneris’s inability to conform to the *sine qua non* properties of the human

reinforces their interpersonal abyss. What occurs, ultimately, is that Caffó's removal from the picture makes neighborly association with the *citauca* no longer necessary and in the process they revert back to enmity.

Conclusion: The Neighbor as a Political Problem

In the end, *La pell freda* lays bare the inherent contradictions and equivocal presuppositions within two concepts that, in the history of Western thought, have been critical to understandings of the political: the redemptive quality of logos and the dependability of deciding between the friend and the enemy.

Logos is shown in the novel to be a tool primed for abjection. The history of Western political thought trains one to fetishize logos as the gateway toward reason. In Aristotle's *Politics*, the *zoon politikon*'s access to speech concomitantly provided a vehicle through which judgments could be made regarding the just and unjust. Starting from history's ground zero, Aristotle argues that the first sorts of partnerships are between man and woman for the sake of reproduction, which is a necessity for the survival of the species. As sexually copulating pairs produce children and acquire animals and servants, households form. Households eventually merge into villages and villages into cities. Within the city's walls, the polis simply "exists for the sake of living well" (30). Rule by force and the exertion of violence belong to the province of the household, whereas the highest political activity—and the defining characteristic of man as a political animal (*zoon politikon*)—is speech, chiefly because mastery of the polis is over "free and equal persons": "speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust. For it is peculiar to man as compared to other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust" (*Politics* 37). In Ancient Greece, of course, that speech was Greek, and those who did not speak it were considered barbaric.

The Lacanian interpretation of subjectivity that *La pell freda* mimics places a wedge in the reliability of such an Aristotelian understanding of the political sphere. Access to logos alone cannot ensure a space of plurality amongst equals, due to the subjugating nature of the symbolic order, and it is furthermore reductive to believe that it is through logos alone that one acquires an awareness of strategic advantage and malevolent harm. Neighborliness, a concept predicated on both geographic contiguity and a forging of alliances according to circumstantial benefit, allows for non-linguistic forms of compatibility between all of the forms of life spanning the human-animal axis. And if these kinds of posthumanistic neighborly alliances betray a mutual awareness of strategic benefit and disadvantage, they also, according to Aristotle, are a pathway opened up to the just and

unjust. This, of course, is theoretically the optimal horizon for political activity and it is therefore worth reconsidering the preconditions for admission to the polis.

The second political problem presented by the novel's conception of the neighbor concerns the autonomous sovereignty of the Nation-State. The State's internal coherence relies first on the reliability of boundaries and enemies and secondly on the ability to monopolize the legitimate means of violence. On the former point, Castells argues, "the very notions of state and society depend on the boundaries that define their existence in a given historical context" (16). In a post-Westphalian understanding of the State, a historical context that Castells believes is giving way to a global network society, these frontiers of national sovereignty form boundaries at the point where friendship gives way to enmity. The ambivalent notion of the neighbor, where the possibility of both fraternity and antagonism is equally present, problematizes these kinds of sovereign distinctions because nobody, both within and outside of the State, is absolutely friendly or radically antagonistic. Moreover, the shifting trade winds of circumstance will also make any configuration of friendly alliance a contingent construct. The inertia and institutional immobility of the monolithic, centralized Nation-State is, of course, completely unequipped to adapt to such a reality.

That the notion of the evolving neighbor has political ramifications thus forces one to call out the elephant in the room, which would be Sánchez Piñol's recognition of the historical and present-day struggle of peripheral nationalisms within the logic of the Spanish state. One could non-polemically argue that the relation of neighborliness, since time immemorial, between Catalonia and Castile, for example, has intermittently revealed an antagonistic and conciliatory ambivalence. This historical legacy appears in a recent column that Sánchez Piñol wrote for the Catalan-language outlet, *Ara*. Precisely concerning the question of *pactisme*, Sánchez Piñol critiques Catalans for perceiving partnerships to be merely "una inclinació natural per arribar a enteses i acords" ("Del candor") (a natural inclination to arrive at understandings and agreements). On the contrary, Sánchez Piñol posits that *pactisme* implies an understanding foregrounded by a respect for each side's autonomous institutions. "El pactisme era un principi del tot oposat, una institució segons la qual si un pretendent al tron volia ser rei dels catalans havia d'acatar públicament les seves Constitucions i Llibertats. En cas contrari els catalans estaven legitimats, si calia, a declarar-li la guerra" ("Del candor") (Pactism was originally a totally contrary concept, an institution according to which if a pretender to the throne wanted to be the Catalans' King he had to publicly welcome their Constitutions and Liberties. If not, it was legitimate for the Catalans, if so required, to declare war). The historical allusion is, of course, to the medieval Catalan charters, privileges, and *furs*. The *Nueva Planta* decrees promulgated by the Bourbon Phillip V in the early 1700s annulled these constitutions (*furs*) as well as the usage of

Catalan as a jurisdictional language of government. In comparison, these elements had been left largely unchallenged by the previous Habsburg royals. There is, however, a twenty-first century dimension to Sánchez Piñol's remarks. More specifically, his column was published not long after the Spanish *Tribunal Constitucional* in 2010 had issued several elisions and limitations of primary planks of the 2005 Catalan Statute of Autonomy, which had been passed through a public referendum. The question of alternative symbolic orders is also present in the debate, as evidenced by various decrees since the 2010 ruling limiting linguistic immersion in Catalan in secondary schools located in Catalonia and Valencia. In other words, the problematic concept of the neighbor, especially as it fits within the model of the centralizing Nation-State, possesses a crucial cultural component that for the moment places the current political configuration of Iberia under considerable tension.

In the end, Sánchez Piñol's novel does not call for the elimination of the notion of the neighbor nor for the obliteration of the symbolic order(s) altogether, just as Derrida never advocated for the absolute dismissal of friendship. Cognizance of the subjugating nature of linguistic imposition and the unbridgeable gap of difference with any partner we may call at one time "friend" helps to betray a sense of boundaries and respect for the Other's autochthonous existence, as well as an awareness of the latency of violence within any friendly partnership. What Sánchez Piñol is truly critiquing, both in the above column and in *La pell freda*, is a dimension of political neighborliness that possesses a proclivity to regress into monstrosity; an unending processional movement between friendship and enmity. If one, or both, of the neighbors within the same political space cannot keep an awareness of the nefarious implications of enmity from preserving the stasis of friendship, it is very well possible that said partnership is irretrievably broken.

Notes

1. The idea of a monstrous birth recalls Montaigne's famous essay "On the Monster Child." Montaigne concludes the treatise with an analysis of Siamese twins and a shepherd born without genitals, inferring that their monstrosity fails to be antithetical to the genus of Man when considered from the sidereal perspective of God: "What we call monsters are not so for God who sees the infinite number of forms which he has included in the immensity of his creation: it is to be believed that the figure which astonishes us relates to, and derives from, some other figure of the same genus unknown to Man" (808). Montaigne thus links monstrosity and epistemology, advocating for a decidedly non-figurative approach to the etymological grounding of the term in the Latin *monstrere*, "to show."
2. This certainly gives an added urgency to the recent neologism "frenemy."

3. Beyond the clear echoes of Conrad, the novel also resembles to a high degree the comic *Trazo de tiza* (1992) by the Galician graphic artist Miguelanxo Prado. The beautifully illustrated work features a collection of characters on an isolated and distant island with a small house and a lighthouse, but without the cold-skinned monsters appearing each night. Another recent work that, like *La pell freda*, harkens back to the seafaring adventure novel in the style of Defoe is *El año de gracia* (1985) by Cristina Fernández Cubas. Outside the ambit of Hispanism, another literary reference in the text is found in Caffò's repeated directive to return "al far, al far, al far," which calls to mind Virginia Woolf's 1927 modernist masterpiece *To the Lighthouse*. Finally, the novel is also set during the golden age of Arctic exploration in the first two decades of the twentieth century. One thus also thinks of Jules Verne's *The Lighthouse at the End of the World* (1905).
4. *La pell freda* established the author as a major voice in twenty-first-century Catalan literature. The novel, which has been translated into nearly forty languages, represents the rarest of creatures: a work that has made a successful transition into the English-speaking world. Perhaps the greatest testament to the work's success is its adaptation into a screenplay, which is presently in pre-production and slated to be released in 2014.
5. For Heidegger, the animal's world is "limited to a specific domain" and "the extent and manner in which an animal is able to penetrate whatever is accessible to it is also limited...we can characterize the relation man possesses to the world by referring to the extendability of everything that he relates to" (193).
6. Niall Scott locates the metaphorical at the very etymological root of the monster, which has linguistic roots in either "a demonstration of something (monstrere) or a warning (monere)" (1). In many of the case studies in Scott's edited volume, monstrosity, as a term, possesses a valence that combines both the demonstrative and premonitory connotations of its etymology. To offer a couple of examples, Gabriel (103–22) depicts the anarchist as a monstrous representation in fin de siècle Europe. Also, Cheng (123–32) analyzes a Disney film in which the alien works as a metaphoric expression of race and alterity. Whatever the milieu, monstrosity retains its simultaneously metaphoric and baleful function.
7. Agamben argues that the *homo sacer* is an entity with which society shares a relation of exception that resides within a "a zone of indistinction between law and nature, outside and inside, violence and law" (64). The classic example of a zone of indistinction would be the Guantanamo Bay prison. Stripped of the rights accorded by law, the entities within such spaces – *homo sacers* – are reduced to bare or mere life.
8. See Deleuze 87–91.
9. Within the Catalan literary tradition, the use of anagrams and symbolic proper names like "Batís Caffò" (or batiscafó, a submersible vessel) no doubt references Salvador Espriu. Espriu converted his birthplace, Arenys del Mar, into the poetic universe of Sinera and the Iberian peninsula proper into Sepharad, amongst other terms.
10. In a review of the novel published in *El País*, Sánchez Piñol is quoted as saying that "primero el enemigo se sitúa en el exterior, luego se traslada al interior del faro, donde se refleja la incapacidad de comunicación y, a medida que avanza la novela, la lucha se sitúa en el interior de cada individuo" ("Sánchez Piñol plasma el miedo") (first the enemy is situated outside, then he moves to the inside of the lighthouse, where the incapacity for communication is reflected and, as the novel advances, the battle shifts to the interior of each individual). Because the neighbor has the

potential for both benevolent friendship and enmity, so does the self, which Sánchez Piñol here notes in the interior “lucha de cada individuo.”

11. Lacan himself presents a scathing critique of the commandment that buttresses Levinas’s form of ethics. He argues that the refusal to respect the imperative to love thy neighbor as one’s self is really the most ethical gesture because it forces the subject to flee from *jouissance*. This aggression is then redirected back toward the self, thereby strengthening the super ego and cementing further the barrier toward *jouissance*. “The resistance to the commandment ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’ and the resistance that is exercised to prevent his access to *jouissance* are one and the same thing” (*Ethics* 194).

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