A World of Difference: The Tapestry of Creation in Cristina Peri Rossi's *La nave de los locos*.

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Introduction: saltarse la norma

In an interview with Gustavo San Román in 1986, the Uruguayan novelist and poet Cristina Peri Rossi described the crux of her novel *La nave de los locos*:

> El eje de toda la novela es el no practicar la agresividad, no dirigir la agresividad hacia los demás. Y en realidad todos son víctimas de distintas agresiones. Todo lo que aparece son aparentemente relaciones aberrantes, pero justamente son las únicas donde hay amor. En realidad es saltarse la norma para poder sentir de veras. (1048)

Many critics have observed that in order to successfully communicate the message of a respectful acceptance of difference despite the seemingly repulsive "relaciones aberrantes" between the novel's characters, Peri Rossi leads her reader to be a consciously critical observer and an active participant in the creative process.[1] The complexity of the narrative structure prompted María D. Blanco-Arnejo to note that "para realizar con éxito la experiencia de la novela, el lector tiene que tomar un papel muy activo en la obra" (441). The reader is made to experience the events, emotions and epiphanies of the novel in various ways through the use of defamiliarization. In addition, the text is presented in fragments that require the reader to imagine what is missing and thus help "write" the story. Rather than portray exile only in terms of geographical displacement, the author also evokes a more universal understanding of the experience to forge a bond between the reader and a series of characters who could otherwise be understood as monstrous in mind if not also in body on account of their deviant

behaviors.[2] In order to reiterate or anticipate many of the novel's central concerns, Peri Rossi employs a unique textual element: twelve narrative fragments describing specific scenes of the Tapestry of Creation, an actual medieval embroidery that depicts the creation according to Genesis.

At first glance, the descriptions of sections of the Tapestry in the novel may appear to be interspersed at random and too brief to be meaningful. Yet despite their brevity, these passages form an integral part of the text. Claudine Potvin explains that when reassembled in the mind of the reader, the tapestry forms "a background cloth onto which the text of the novel is woven and Equis' numerous readings are elaborated" (131). While initially admired for its scenes of idyllic harmony, the tapestry's representation of the world is slowly transformed and subverted in her text until it comes to represent nearly everything that Peri Rossi hopes to challenge. Yet it also becomes apparent that for the author, the subtle presence of creatures that could be classified as monstrous inside the tapestry's circle of creation also contributes towards the achievement of the novel's narrative goals. Lucía Invernizzi Santa Cruz observed that when woven together, the tapestry and the novel not only allow for the discussion and inversion of heterogeneous spaces but also for an "auténtico encuentro, diálogo, comunicación e intercambio" (51). When appreciated as an integrated whole, the text and tapestry create the schema of the alternate worldview Peri Rossi is proposing.

***La nave de los locos:* Exile as Opportunity**

Published in 1984 to immediate acclaim and great critical interest, *La nave de los locos* presents a kaleidoscopic, metaphoric and generally non-linear vision of the world. In the text, Peri Rossi explores various relationships between transgressive characters

with the ultimate purpose of subverting a violently exclusionary, patriarchal and authoritarian hegemonic discourse of inherited beliefs and illusionary powers.[3] The novel documents the involuntary meanderings through modern life of the anonymous Everyman and perpetual foreigner Equis (extranjero, extrañamiento) and his encounters with a series of alienated individuals who all share a basic strangeness because they exist on the margins of a ubiquitous social order. Equis is gradually changed by his relationship with Morris, Graciela, Vercingetórix, Lucía, Percival, and Gordon[4]; he becomes sensitized to the male/female binary of gender and its relationship to political domination before ultimately liberating himself from this ordering of the world by forfeiting his own virility, which Peri Rossi later defined in an interview as "la manera tradicional de enfrentarse a una mujer" (quoted in San Román 1048).

Equis is able to reconsider the hegemonic discourse that functions as a malevolent force throughout the novel because his status as an exile requires him to continually reconstruct the world without the benefit of familiar geographical and cultural markers. Having escaped the often seductive and comforting indoctrination of a particular set of cultural norms, Equis is able to analyze accepted behaviors from a more critical and questioning perspective. By exposing the invisible principles that define thought and action, political and cultural controls are broken and these spaces are re-imagined to allow for what Timothy Foster describes as "the mutual reconciliation and authentic appreciation of self and 'Other'" (74).

Peri Rossi, herself forced into exile by a dictatorial regime in Uruguay in 1972, is familiar with both the potential and the pain of being foreign, and the theme of exile pervades her work. Mary Beth Tierney-Tello notes that Peri Rossi "portrays exile as

provoking an overwhelming sense of loss but also as constituting a potentially enriching experience" (180). In an interview with Susana Camps, the author explains how exile can present opportunities to form new relationships and broaden one's sense of self:

> El exilio es una experiencia que siempre puede capitalizarse…Hay que reconstruir un mundo afectivo que no es sólo los amigos sino las relaciones que uno tenía con determinadas calles, el bar donde entraba a tomar una copa, el colegio al que había ido. Ya que [el exilio] obliga a replantearlo todo, la identidad o sucumbe o se ensancha. Si se ensancha es una experiencia capitalizable, rica. (47)

However, geographic displacement alone does not necessarily define the experience of exile for Peri Rossi who eschews any contraposition of here / there in the novel in favor of spatial ambiguity.[5] In the context of *La nave de los locos*, Mercedes M. de Rodríguez argues that the author also imbues the word with a broader meaning: "At one level, she deals with exile as banishment from one's homeland, while at another, she alludes to a more subtle form of exile, ascribing to the word the meaning of marginality to refer to the position adjudicated by men to women in the history of civilization" (521). As Equis explains to Gordon, a former astronaut who is in love with the moon, "Todos somos exiliados de algo o de alguien...En realidad, ésa es la verdadera condición del hombre." (106).[6] By evoking an experience that she believes to be universal, Peri Rossi encourages a sympathetic connection between her protagonists and the reader who, lost in the foreigner's realm of the not quite familiar, also has the opportunity to view the world from a different and shifting perspective made possible by the sense of instability and change that saturates the text. By sharing in the experiences of Equis and his fellow outcasts through the act of reading, the reader may be similarly changed as a result.

In addition to the understanding forged between the reader and the characters, a creative partnership between the author and the reader is also crucial to the novel's success. The non-linear and kaleidoscopic narrative includes newspaper clippings, unpublished memoirs, survey responses, and letters, but lacks geographical, social and temporal markers, and this disorder obliges the reader to make connections and to "write" those portions of the story that are missing in order to complete the text. The cities that Equis visits are often identified by first initial, for example "la ciudad de A." in part five of the journey. This is done "con el evidente propósito de no herir susceptibilidades" and the author suggests that the reader play a guessing game in the hope of winning "un certificado de apátrida" (38).[7] This establishes an affiliation between Peri Rossi and her reader as Blanco-Arnejo explains: "El lector participa en la creación de la novela y así se apodera de ella. El acto de lectura as tan creativo como el de escritura; lector y escritor son aliados" (442). As allies, the author and the reader can work together towards the dismantling of the hegemonic and phallocentric discourse that makes possible the acts of oppression, exclusion, and violence perpetrated in the novel.

The Tapestry of Creation: a Re-imagining

The reader's task of decipherment in this alliance is compounded by the inclusion of twelve descriptions of specific segments of a unique and complex medieval work of art. These depictions of the Tapestry of Creation, an 11th-century embroidery that Equis once encountered, seem to be interspersed at random throughout the text but actually serve to reiterate or anticipate the themes addressed by the author. Paola Bianco notes that "al leer uno de estos segmentos narrativos dedicados al tapiz, el lector puede anticipar alguno de los temas o anécdotas que siguen en el eje sintagmático" (79). Like

the novel itself, the tapestry is presented in fragments that the reader must reassemble mentally and connect to the rest of the text in order to feel the impact of the work as a whole. Despite the fact that the tapestry is missing certain segments, the reader is reassured that reweaving the complete image is possible due to the illusion of perfect symmetry: "una estructura tan perfecta y geométrica, tan verificable que aún habiendo desaparecido casi su mitad, es posible reconstruir el todo, si no en el muro de la catedral, sí en el bastidor de la mente" (21). Like the missing sections of the tapestry, the absent information in the text will similarly unfurl in the reader's imagination. Peri Rossi emphasizes that the creative act undertaken jointly by herself and the reader is unfinished and ongoing by concluding the novel with a brief enumeration of what the tapestry is missing: "Faltan enero, noviembre, diciembre y, por lo menos, dos ríos del Paraíso" (198).

The Tapestry of Creation, which measures approximately five meters across and currently hangs in the museum of the Girona Cathedral in Catalonia, is the product of a radically different cultural imagination.[8] Also referred to as the Genesis of Girona, this cloth demonstrates evidence of the influence of Byzantine, Carolingian and Romanesque art and was probably commissioned several decades after the 1037 consecration of the Romanesque cathedral (Baert 115). The embroidery represents the medieval understanding of the history of salvation and in its center sits the beardless Christ Pantocrator, omnipotent master of the universe, surrounded by six scenes from the Creation.[9] This inner circle is framed by personifications of the winds and several other thematic series including the seasons, the months of the year, the story of the invention of the True Cross, the rivers of Paradise (of which only Geon survives intact), and

representations of Annus, Dies solis, Dies lunae, Samson and perhaps Cain (Palol 23). This particular depiction of Genesis is somewhat unique in that it does not address the fall and exile of man from Paradise, prompting art historian Federico Revilla to remark that the tapestry's discourse is "esencialmente positivo y optimista" (78). Several critics including María Rosa Olivera Williams and Invernizzi Santa Cruz have observed that it is precisely the life of disorder and chaos after the expulsion from Eden that the novel explores (Olivera Williams 84-85, Invernizzi Santa Cruz 38). However, this does not imply that Equis' ultimate goal is a return to the origins of mankind. While Equis is fascinated by the tapestry, the reader is pointedly told that the cloth provokes no nostalgic reaction in him (20).

While the skilled execution and comprehensible narrative of this medieval work of art make it worthy of admiration, the initial description in the novel of a peaceful and harmonious creation is gradually inverted. The harmony presented in euphoric terms in the first descriptive fragment is almost immediately tinged with malevolence as it is said to assume "la destrucción de los elementos reales que se le oponen" (20). As a result, Potvin observes that the tapestry's "original discourse, which is authorized by the first reading of the medieval fabric, is undone and inverted" (132). The tapestry comes to represent an absolute and autocratic worldview: a closed patriarchal system in which gender roles are fixed and meaning and power flow downward from the controlling and vigilant Pantocrator through the man to the woman allowed no freedom within the symbolic order. Lucía Guerra Cunningham states the problem in simpler terms: "El tapiz de la Creación resulta ser también la inscripción del orden falocrático en el ámbito de lo sagrado" (71). Equis will ultimately reject this disphoric system and his role in it despite

his initial fascination with the idea of idyllic happiness that the cloth depicts. By extension, Peri Rossi urges the reader to question some of the ideologies established by this vision of Genesis through her division of the cloth into fragments onto which the episodes connected to Equis' journey are woven. The reader's mental reconstruction and integration of tapestry and text forces her to confront the violent yet accepted social practices that are revealed as a result.

Subverting the Tapestry

According to Bianco, the description of the different fragments of the tapestry "va normalmente acompañada de reflejos especulares que sitúan en *abyme* algunos de sus enunciados" (81). This becomes clear after one considers a few prominent examples. On either side of the tapestry's Pantocrator sit a pair of angels: on the left is the angel of darkness while the angel of light is to the right. In the novel, each angel is described in a separate fragment and the angel of darkness is revealed first. In between this pair of descriptions Equis, who has just stumbled upon an island town called Pueblo de Dios, has a sexual encounter with an obese elderly woman with whom he cannot fully communicate. This twelfth section of Equis' journey is called "El ángel caído" while the woman herself is described as having the face of a "querubín envejecido" or that of an angel "que ha engordado entre los placeres de la gracia". Equis decides that the adolescent male angels of art and theology – and implicitly those of the tapestry - have in fact fallen from grace while "los verdaderos ángeles tenían más edad" (76). This woman appears to Equis as a divinely beautiful being in defiance of the traditional male aesthetic of adolescent beauty.

The power of naming is also a frequent theme that is ultimately linked to a specific scene in the tapestry. After the world has been created, man is asked to organize it by giving things proper names. The tapestry depicts a nude Adam alone in a field of flowers verbally baptizing various animals among which he does not find his like. Adam's loneliness is emphasized in the description: "Adán se hallaba muy solo…Sólo las plantas y esos curiosos animales recibieron su mensaje" (132). This segment of the tapestry is followed by episode twenty eight of the novel in which the child Percival, a reincarnation of one of King Arthur's most holy and innocent of knights, is found in the anti-idyllic setting of a polluted park.[10] The pristine natural scene in which Adam names the animals is inverted here: the lake is slimy, the shores are littered with bottles and cans, and people have forgotten the names of all of the trees, thus contributing to the general disorder of the place. While the birds of the medieval tapestry fly majestically towards the Pantocrator, Percival's ducks are decrepit and threatened by poisoned bread crumbs. Like Adam, the child is also alone – without his like – but rather than encounter Eve, he instead finds the writer Morris who asks the boy for his name. Percival studies Morris intently before entrusting him with his name and explains that "La gente cree que los nombres no tienen ninguna importancia, por eso lo preguntan enseguida. Pero nombrar las cosas es apoderarse un poco de ellas" (139).

The reluctance to reveal one's name is a trait that many of the characters share, including Graciela. After she meets Equis for the first time, she pre-empts the question by remarking: "Me fastidia la pregunta de quién soy y de qué hago…Mi respuesta sería muy complicada. Imposible de resumir; el peor modo de empezar una conversación." She eventually relents in part before shifting the balance of power in her own favor: "Si

quieres, puedes llamarme Graciela, dado que hay que dirigirse a las cosas y a la gente por un nombre" (87). Equis, on the other hand, believes that names and gender are both irrelevant (25). He even entertains several possible names for himself including Ulises, Ivan, and Archibaldo before embracing (literally) the letter X. Perhaps he is the only character who can afford to think in this way, having adopted a genderless and enigmatic letter as a name and therefore belonging to no place and to no one.

Another recurring image that originates from within tapestry's circle of creation is that of the dove, the symbol of the Holy Ghost that hovers above green-colored water. Percival is annoyed by the presence of the doves that perch in an oddly symmetrical fashion on the park's bandstand railing. He senses that the doves "cumplían un rito, oficiaban un culto que él no conocía y como el paria, como el marginado, se volvía un poco rencoroso" (136). Resenting his exclusion from their gathering, the child throws stones at them but they never leave him in peace. Equis is also associated with doves on several occasions: drinking causes the protagonist to feel affectionate and sentimental "como la paloma que vuela sobre las aguas" (72) while he also develops an attachment to a clay dove that he doesn't remember receiving (34). Percival's uneasiness in the presence of the doves is contrasted with the connection between the divine symbol of the Holy Ghost and Equis. Peri Rossi also implies that strong ties exist between her protagonist and the tapestry's Pantocrator which will be discussed later.

Finally, one of the most important themes established in the tapestry and questioned throughout the text is that of the traditional relationship between men and women and, in particular, the role often reserved for Eve. While this particular fragment is introduced fairly late in the text, it precedes an entire section devoted to Eve and the

resolution of the enigma that Equis has been trying to solve: what is the greatest tribute a man can offer the woman he loves? As is often the case, this tapestry scene that describes the creation of woman reads like a short entry in a museum guidebook. Adam is asleep and a woman, a woman much *smaller* than he is, is emerging from his side. The new couple is surrounded by flowers and plants and in the distance stands a tree that is reminiscent of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil from which Eve will eat (150). In yet another inversion of an idyllic tapestry scene, Peri Rossi follows this segment concerning Adam and Eve with an unpublished fragment from Eve's confessions that describes what happens to those women who refuse to collaborate in perpetuating the myths that oppress them.

> El castigo, para la iniciada que huye, es el desprecio, la soledad, la locura o la muerte. Sólo resta permanecer en el templo, en la casa de los dioses severos, colaborar en la extensión de los mitos que sostienen la organización y el espíritu de la tribu, sus ideas dominantes y ocultar para siempre los conflictos que esta sujeción plantea. (153)

Yet by the time the reader encounters the biblical account of the birth of Eve as depicted by the tapestry, Peri Rossi has already presented the reader with many opportunities to begin questioning the oppressive nature of the unequal partnership between the sexes that originates in Genesis.

The arrival of Eve is dramatized in the first episode of the journey that opens the novel. Equis is at work in the fields and time has no presence. Suddenly, she arrives and interrupts his work. She notices the weeds and the stones and takes pity on a mouse. Upon her departure, Equis is left confused and unsure of the world around him: "Cuando

se fue, quedé confuso. La paja me parecía más bella y los granos, torvos. La duda me ganó. Desistí de mi trabajo. Desde entonces, la paja y el grano están mezclados" (9). It is this uncertainty that he will resolve by the novel's end when "he" decides to share power equally with "she".

After this initial unsettling of certainty is introduced, Peri Rossi describes an episode involving Equis and Vercingetórix. They are watching a scene from the 1977 film *Demon Seed* in which Julie Christie is raped by a super computer. Vercingetórix, who will later be disappeared, cannot stomach the events unfurling before his eyes because the computer strikes him as "invisible pero omnipresente, como las dictaduras" and leaves: "No la aguanto más. Me voy. Ya tuve bastante." (23). Equis, however, is fascinated and left to fight off the desire to see his own fantasies projected onto the screen. He paternalistically wants to save Julie Christie from this and all of life's dangers but his desire to protect her is eroded by his "secreta, maligna complacencia con lo que va a ocurrir" (23).

Yet as he leaves the cinema, he is confronted by a poster that reads: "el hombre es el pasado de la mujer". Man is the origin of woman in Genesis, but the poster advocates for an empowering subversion of the story of her creation. If she is a product created of man by God, than implicitly man, who cannot create life on his own, is her "pasado tosco, anterior a la conciencia, deplorable, como todos los pasados" (24). Equis soon has a vision of Julie Christie whispering these words to him and he is able to recognize that the computer represents a "gran símbolo fálico, estructura del poder invincible" (24). Of course, the poster is not allowed to exist for long and Equis finds an inebriated Vercingetórix tearing it to shreds, insulted. When asked why he persists in doing this, he

replies “Estoy haciendo pedazos el futuro del hombre” (25). Man has re-established his presence and woman, once again at the service of man’s future, has been relegated to the inconsequential role of yet to be.[11]

The pervasiveness of this inherited belief regarding gender roles is tested towards the end of the novel when Graciela surveys forty students between the ages of 7 and 12. She asks them to describe Adam and Eve in Paradise and several of the responses are included verbatim in the text. Predictably, the children depict Adam as a valiant, honorable, intelligent, responsible, and obedient hard worker whose only flaw is that he listens to women. Eve, on the other hand, is credited with only one dubious virtue: her beauty. Her failings include excessive curiosity, a tendency to gossip, frivolity, laziness and a bad temper. The female characters in the novel, however, do not conform to this image of woman. Graciela herself is independent and eventually leaves Equis to join Morris in Africa where she will study infibulation. She is unsatisfied with the option of working as a cosmetics saleswoman, a chamber maid or a stripper (178).

However, the strongest challenge to the children’s perception of Eve is the character of Eve herself as embodied by Percival’s mother, who lives alone as the unpublished confession of her namesake foretold.[12] The first facet of her character that is revealed is her intelligence. She is multilingual and well read. She was also smart enough to divorce a husband who wanted only a cook and mistress and had no use for a true life partner. Her only limitation is what Percival calls her “versión más tradicional de las cosas” when confronted with relationships like the one he is establishing with Morris. Eve later joins Morris and Percival on their voyage to Africa which is perhaps an indication of the “mature attitude” her son wants her to cultivate. However, in addition to

her intelligence Percival equally emphasizes her sensuousness and observes that because men lack this very trait, they can never understand Eve. Eve the contemporary mother is the antithesis of Adam's biblical companion, but in Peri Rossi's post-Eden world her rejection of the traditional role of wife (which Equis equates with behaving like a domesticated animal) has pushed her out to the periphery.

The oppression of women continues to be depicted in forceful ways throughout the novel, including the evocation of Nazi Germany and the experiments carried out on pregnant Jewish women (169). This historical past is juxtaposed with an equally monstrous present in which pregnant women are herded onto a bus bound for London where they will receive abortions from *carniceros*. The women, who unfairly shoulder the social, physical, and financial consequences of their undesired pregnancies, are treated condescendingly by a fat man called José. Equis accompanies the women on the bus and makes sure that they all return safely and quickly. While he initially makes no personal connections with any of the passengers, he suffers from a growing sense of shame that doesn't affect either the driver or his boss. When Lucía attempts to secure a place on the bus but is rejected in a cruel manner by José, Equis secretly intervenes and gives up his own seat so that she may make the journey. Profoundly unsettled by his encounter with the girl who swears "Jamás, jamás", Equis falls in love and his quest to be reunited with Lucía leads him to ponder a woman's place in the world: "¿Qué hacían las mujeres cuando estaban tristes? ¿A qué lugares iban? ¿Dónde ventilaban su melancolía?" (177). It is only when Equis finally confronts Lucía's androgynous reinvention of herself in the sex show that he understands how the two genders are inseparably connected:

> Descubría y se desarrollaban para él, en todo su esplendor, dos mundos simultáneos, dos llamadas distintas, dos mensajes, dos indumentarias, dos percepciones, dos discursos, pero indisolublemente ligados, de modo que el predominio de uno hubiera provocado la extinción de los dos. (195)

By recognizing that neither sex must dominate the other, Equis resolves the enigma and the incestuous king of his dreams is killed.

Ultimately, the reader follows Equis as he moves towards his rejection of the binary male/female relationship that the tapestry is seen as establishing. Prior to this eventual result, Peri Rossi draws at times a clear parallel between the Pantocrator and the protagonist. When Graciela is first introduced in episode thirteen, which follows the description of the tapestry's angel of light, Equis initially attempts to assume his role as the dominant male: "Como el Pantocrátor en el tapiz ordena y mira la creación, conociendo, desde ya, su futuro, adivinando en el presente el desarrollo del avenir, Equis observó a la muchacha que con paso firme y seguro se aproximaba…" (86). Her gender, beauty and youth causes Equis to make certain assumptions about her lack of intelligence and to compare himself favorably to her: "era un hombre civilizado, un ser social, reprimido, acostumbrado a domar sus impulsos, como este otro potro (una sana y robusta yegua salvaje) no debía ser" (86).

However, Equis is not successful in swinging the balance of power in his own favor. While he thinks about offering her wine or ice cream, Graciela offers him a cigarette that Equis equates with "el humo de la paz de una guerra que quizá solo había existido en su imaginación de macho" (87). Graciela dominates the conversation as well as the negotiation of the terms of the sexual encounter she proposes. When she forces

him to reveal that he doesn't carry condoms, Equis finds himself being labeled as one of those who "pretenden que una se arruine la salud tomando píldoras o abortando en una clínica sólo-para-mujeres…" (91). When Graciela later opens her guitar case, she reveals her few possessions including underwear and a box of condoms instead of the expected musical instrument. Equis is initially humiliated by this revelation, but rather than criticize Graciela's lifestyle, he is ultimately accepting of this surprise: "A Equis le pareció una delicada forma de viajar" (93). Equis is not above opening himself up to the experiences that defy the old order and learning from the resulting loss of mastery.

The Medieval Sea Monsters: Swimming with the Smaller Fish

While the majority of the text works towards the subversion of the worldview that the tapestry represents, Peri Rossi simultaneously draws attention to the fantastic or arguably monstrous elements that have been subtly included in this divinely authorized vision of creation. In the very first description of the medieval embroidery in the novel, the author highlights the harmonious mixture of "criaturas fantásticas y reales: pájaros con cola de pez y perros alados, leones con caparazón de tortuga y serpientes con cara de lobo" (20). The tapestry invites the observer to take his or her part in creation "al mismo nivel que el buey de cabeza de loro" (20). Among the animals that Adam names the reader finds a horse with the head of a tiger, a winged deer, and even a unicorn, whose classification as mythical Peri Rossi questions and attributes to its role as a companion for women: "Es muy posible que los unicornios hayan existido, y quizá, como animales domésticos, compañeros de mujeres" (42). In the tapestry none of these strange creatures are consigned to the margins as monstrous or fantastic creatures and races often are on medieval world maps or *mappaemundi*.[13] Instead, they form a part of the very heart of

creation within the Pantocrator's circle, a circle sealed by the embroidered inscription of the biblical declaration that God saw that all the things that he had made were *good*.

The emphasis on the presence of strange beings within the circle of creation as opposed to the margins of the world culminates in the novel's longest description of one of the tapestry's sections, that of the creation of the sea and sky. This scene, the tapestry's largest, is perhaps the most beautiful and vibrant and immediately draws the observer's eye. The corresponding narrative segment is not only placed in the middle of the text as though it was the novel's crossroads, but also illustrates one of the key facets of Peri Rossi's project: the acceptance and inclusion of difference. As Gabriela Mora explains, "El deseo de hacer *naturales* tipos y actos transgresores de tabúes, se enlaza con el tapiz medieval, al insistirse en la armoniosa integración en él de los 'monstruos', que se acomodan plácidamente entre otras criaturas" (345). Yet while the birds are depicted in a relatively realistic fashion, some of the creatures of the sea may strike the contemporary observer as considerably more whimsical.

Amidst the undisturbed small fish of the tapestry swim a pair of what Peri Rossi describes as "maravillosos monstruos".[14]: "Uno tiene cabeza de perro, cuerpo de reptil y una gran caparazón roja, provista, además de dos aletas. Otro tiene cabeza de cocodrilo, orejas de burro y cola de pescado" (113). Despite their strange appearance, these creatures do not seem intended to inspire fear and they have not been expelled from society as were the medieval fools or the modern desaparecidos.[15] Unlike other surviving artistic representations of Genesis that are contemporary with the tapestry and that also include similar scenes of the creation of the sea and the sky, the sea creatures of the tapestry of Girona are depicted in a non-threatening manner. Rather than baring their

teeth, they seem to be looking upwards towards the center, like the birds above them, and perhaps even smiling slightly as they swim peacefully with the smaller fish.[16] Peri Rossi pointedly observes the following of the tapestry as though she were describing her own ideal universe free of aggression:

> Se integran armoniosamente al gran sistema de la creación, junto a las aves y a las plantas. Son criaturas curiosas, pero no terroríficas o extravagantes, como la anfisbena o el mirmecoleón. Se deslizan por las aguas de una manera natural, sin aparentes deseos de sobresalir y los peces que las rodean no experimentan ninguna sensación de competencia o de peligro. (114).

These few sentences make obvious reference to certain people and phenomena of contemporary life (Mora 346). In contrast to the inclusivity that Peri Rossi ascribes to the medieval tapestry in this segment of the novel, Jean Dangler explains that as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries variance became a threat to the integrity of the emerging nation state that increasingly relied on the division and expulsion of inappropriate elements with the purpose of reinforcing a new social order (6). The sea monsters of the tapestry that live in harmony with the smaller fish are seen here as included in the very system that Peri Rossi depicts as having devolved into a present of oppression, violence and exclusion at the hands of man (114).

Peri Rossi draws attention not only to the non-threatening depiction of the monsters in the tapestry, but also to the fact that their segment is the cloth's largest, "como si los monstruous del mar fueran la parte más importante de la creación" (113). And this very well may have been true. The didactic purpose of the monstrous is apparent from its etymology: the Latin *monstrum* is associated with the verb *monstrare*,

to show or to instruct and in the context of medieval Christianity monstrosity or monsters were often viewed as constituting a legitimate part of God's divine plan.[17] St. Augustine, among other early Christian writers, believed in the simultaneous wholeness and diversity of God's creation and chastised anyone who did not understand the meaning and value of variance. The monstrous were considered to be divinely formed subjects and things and St. Augustine emphasized their worth (Dangler 113).

This is not to suggest that the Middle Ages were especially tolerant nor that the monstrous represents a universally recognized set of phenomena independent of the experience of the observer. However, Dangler argues that "While medieval people clearly saw one another as different, powerful groups did not automatically seek to expunge other subjects, because medieval alterity did not center on hierarchies of value between esteemed and denigrated peoples" (1). Founded on ideals including negotiation, balance and integration, this arguably more ambiguous attitude towards alterity that Peri Rossi observes in the tapestry is promoted in the text in order to meet certain narrative goals. The fact that the novel does not attribute physical deformities to its characters does not exclude them from the possibility of being perceived as strange or even monstrous in that a monster may be a person who exhibits a repulsively unnatural character or set of behaviors. While medieval manuscripts are full of illustrations of hybrid creatures, Bettina Bildhauer argues that it was not necessarily the appearance that made the medieval monster but rather its relationship to other social or individual bodies (75).

In the novel, the hostile, violent or fearful reactions that the characters often inspire are indicative of their vulnerable place in the social order: Vercingetórix is

disappeared for two years (55-63); a girl with whom Equis is conversing decides that he is mad and runs away (28-32); Kate, with whom no one will speak, commits suicide (70-71); and people are distrustful of Morris whenever he dares leave his house (99). In most cases, however, the characters are not acknowledged by anyone at all, which is why Equis is overjoyed when approached by a dog: "en sus numerosos viajes había llegado a países y ciudades diversas, pero nadie nunca lo había salido a recibir, ni sonrío de satisfacción al extranjero" (75). Mora notes that the actions and behaviors of the characters "que muchos lectores calificarán de 'monstruosas', revelan además que son seres ciertamente no integrados armoniosamente al sistema" (346).

The text is obviously populated by strange beings that the reader is encouraged to associate with the monsters of the medieval tapestry. Yet while contemporary society may have marginalized them, Peri Rossi advocates for the subversion of the binary operations that act violently to exclude so many of these "monsters" that are truly nothing to be afraid of. Mora observes that the positive portrayals in the novel of what would traditionally be considered abnormal personalities and perverse relationships are in direct contrast to the horrific depictions of other more violent social phenomena that society accepts with complacency (346-47). Equis and his companions are the supposedly anomalous members of the world, but Peri Rossi strives to rearticulate the relationships between her characters as tender, gentle, and non-threatening – much like the sea monsters of the medieval tapestry that not only took part in the creation of the world, but may very well have represented one of its most crucially didactic components.

Conclusion: The Monstrous Past and Present

The Middle Ages is often depicted as a temporal monstrosity between antiquity and modernity.[18] As Bildhauer and Robert Mills have observed "if the Middle Ages is popularly imagined as a time full of monsters, then it can also be said to operate itself as a kind of historiographic monster" (3). Yet when confronted with Peri Rossi's world in which women are bussed to London for abortions, prostitutes are beaten, and people disappear while their fellow citizens go about their lives conveniently oblivious, the reader is left to wonder if the present is any less monstrous than a medieval past frequently depicted as inhabited by all manner of strange creatures.

The Middle Ages are also at times envisioned as an unchanging past without progress and on one level, the tapestry embodies this view, functioning in the novel as the static antithesis to the perpetual movement and growth of Equis and the other characters. However, Peri Rossi also challenges this perception of the tapestry's sacred past as unalterable by focusing on the winds in the novel's penultimate description of the medieval cloth.

> En estos fragmentos, todo indica movimiento: la expulsión del aire, los pellejos repletos, la cuidadosa disposición de los miembros del cuerpo de los ángeles, como si fueran a caballo. Bordeando el círculo de la Creación, al lado del Pantocrátor, esta inclusión de los vientos, en los cuatro costados, sugiere que en el universo, todo es movimiento, nada está quieto. (162)

The author emphasizes the possibility of change even in this holy and often unconditionally accepted vision of creation just prior to revealing the key to unlocking a better future: the forfeiting of male virility in favor of a world in which both sexes share

power equally. In Peri Rossi's universe, both the past and the present are always in motion, changing and evolving, and the creation of a society without aggression is ongoing.

While questioning without nostalgia a sacred past infused by a patriarchal order, Peri Rossi also draws attention to the once important presence of the monstrous to help the reader comprehend and accept those among us today who are perceived as subversive, deviant or different. By allowing all to participate equally in the creation of the re-imagined social order, old power structures are unsettled. She will subvert and simultaneously expand the medieval tapestry's divinely authorized depiction of society to allow for the presence of such outsiders as Equis, Morris, Gordon, Percival, and Graciela and thus present her reader with the possibility of a universe of difference without violent exclusion.

Notes

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1. See Blanco-Arnejo and Bianco for in-depth analyses of the reader's role in the novel.

2. Some examples of behaviors that could be considered deviant include: the relationship between Morris and the child Percival that hints at pedophilia (133-145), the sexual encounter between Equis and the obese elderly woman (76-83), Vercigentórix's obsession with a blond female dwarf (57), and the gender-bending erotic show in which Lucía participates (189-94).

3. The novel's title obviously evokes the allegory of the Ship of Fools that has long been used in Western culture to describe the world as a vessel full of deranged inhabitants who did not know nor care where they are going. Yet in contrast to many other entries in this literary tradition (including works by Sebastian Brant, Katherine Anne Porter and Pío Baroja, among others) Peri Rossi's novel is not a didactic parade of archetypal madmen among whom the reader is to find his or herself. Instead, she shows us that those often classified as fools or monsters and expelled from society are in fact its key members. Gina Canepa explains that this more ambivalent attitude towards "fools" is actually rooted in the Middle Ages: "En épocas de angustias, pestes, guerras y miedos apocalípticos, el loco como disidente tiene prestigio como poseedor de una sabiduría especial que supera las limitaciones del sentido común cotidiano, incapaz de resolver los enigmas de su tiempo" (120).

4. As Hugo J. Verani observes, one of the more delightful "juegos intertextuales" in the novel involves constant reference to the work of Julio Cortázar via the names of some of the characters. Verani notes the following examples: "Vercingetórix, héroe galo que se rebeló contra Roma en el año 52 A.C., merece una estatua y extensa discusión en *62: modelo para armar*; Lucía es el nombre verdadero de la Maga en *Rayuela*; más directamente, se descartan varios nombres posibles de Equis (Ulises, Archibaldo, Iván), para terminar: 'Y Horacio era imposible, después de *Rayuela*' (Peri Rossi 26)" (Verani 83).

5. Dejbord explains that the novel does not rely on a "discurso del llanto" in order to convey the experience of exile but rather on humor and parody, and she also notes the break with other traditional features of "la novela tradicional del exilio" including first-person biographical narrative, regional vocabulary, nostalgia and folkloric elements (351).

6. All quotations from the novel are taken from the first edition: Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1984.

7. Another example involves Equis explaining that there are only two things in life that he hates and the second is waiting (25). The reader continues on, expecting to be told what the first thing is, but is left to infer the answer.

8. While often referred to as a tapestry, the cloth is technically embroidery that was probably produced by women. Pere de Palol, who has devoted his life to the study of this cloth, believes that it was produced in a Catalan workshop (154) and explains that it was restored for the second time in 1975 (13). According to Barbara Baert, the stitches and techniques used include self couching and the stem stitch "in which a comparatively long vertical thread is stretched on a woolen base, and then wrapped with another thread and stitched fast" (125). Thérèse de Dillmont notes that this is a technique described in medieval handbooks for nuns (146).

9. The role of the reader arguably parallels that of the tapestry's Pantocrator who gives life to the world, a link that Peri Rossi encourages in her initial description of the cloth. She describes how the tapestry "responde a la intención de que el hombre que mira…participe de la creación" (20). Potvin observes that "Although never totally distant from the periphery, the spectator finds him/herself to be a prisoner of the *fabula* since a force projects him/her towards the center." (132)

10. This segment of the novel is full of references to the legend of Sir Percival, the archetype of the Seeker. Initially presented as a fool, Percival was a very innocent knight who was raised in a forest ignorant of any indoctrinating cultural practices, thus making his reincarnation as a child in the novel feel appropriate. The second most holy of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, Percival was also involved in the quest for the Holy Grail. According to medieval legend in general, the Fisher King charged with guarding the Grail has been wounded. As a result, his kingdom becomes a wasteland: infertile land, dead animals, trees that won't bear fruit. Only Percival is pure enough to heal the king's wounds and recover the Grail. In Peri Rossi's text, the child Percival is in the polluted park full of seedy characters watching over the ducks, with which he feels a strong affinity: "Mirándolos sentía como si una dulce hipnosis fuera dominándole los sentidos, desplazando el presente hacia un pasado que él no conocía con la memoria ni con la razón pero que indudablemente había existido" (134). The medieval Sir Percival's affinity for poetry is also referenced in the novel when Morris observes that the child's language is "muy bonito y menos arbitrario que otros que conozco. Hasta pareces un poco poeta" (140).

11. For an especially careful and insightful reading of this episode, see Blanco-Arnejo, p. 446.

12. This is yet another reference to the medieval mythology surrounding Sir Percival, who is typically described as having been raised by his mother alone in the forest away from all civilization.

13. Dangler remarks that the outer limits of the known world were often illustrated "as the land inhabited by deformed monsters, suggesting that the farther one traveled from

the central, known world, the more distorted the margins' inhabitants became" (132). For an in-depth overview of the history of *mappaemundi*, see chapter eighteen of the first volume of the *History of Cartography* edited by J.B. Harley and David Woodward.

14. I will refer to the animals depicted in the tapestry as monsters because Peri Rossi does so with a specific purpose in mind: the actions and behaviors of her characters would also be classified as monstrous by many readers. One of the large creatures swimming in the sea has been labeled with the Latin CETE GRANDIA taken from Genesis 1:21 of the *Latin Vulgate Bible*: "creavitque Deus cete grandia et omnem animam viventem atque motabilem quam produxerant aquae in species suas et omne volatile secundum genus suum et vidit Deus quod esset bonum." ("And God created the great whales, and every living and moving creature, which the waters brought forth, according to their kinds, and every winged fowl according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.") CETE is the nominative plural neuter form of a Greek noun borrowed by Latin. The singular CETUS often refers to the constellation traditionally viewed as a sea monster with paws, a rearing head like a dog's, and a curled fish's tail. Often translated today as "whale", CETUS can also refer to "sea monster" according to the revised edition of the *Bantam New College Latin & English Dictionary* (91).

15. In the novel, the episode that describes the medieval practice of setting adrift at sea a boat full of the undesired elements of society, most often the mentally ill, is paired with the episode in which Vercingetórix is disappeared and forced to work for two years in a cement factory while life for those who were complicit in his kidnapping goes on as before: evil is always accomplished with the collusion of the good, a theme shared with Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*. In episode fourteen, Morris and Equis decide that the world's seas – which could be an allusion to the pure and green waters of the tapestry - have now been polluted by the bodies of the desaparecidos. Morris declares: "pincharé también esos mares, esas aguas envenenadas" (101).

16. The monsters of the Girona tapestry seem to be represented in a uniquely non-threatening manner that Peri Rossi emphasizes in her description of this particular segment. The contemporary Genesis mosaic in St. Mark's Basilica in Venice also contains a scene depicting the creation of the sea and the sky that is strikingly similar to that found in the Girona tapestry. The mosaic and the tapestry form part of a similar artistic tradition, but the sea monster found in St. Mark's is a snake-like being with the head of a dragon and the claws of a lobster. Rather than an upwards glance towards its creator, this creature stares ahead menacingly while baring its teeth.

17. While there were several poles of thought concerning the monstrous during the Middle Ages, including the view that monsters were a manifestation of God's divine wrath, I believe that this is the attitude that Peri Rossi discerns in the tapestry and emphasizes in her text because it serves her own narrative goals. For discussion of other views of the medieval monstrous, see the anthology *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations* edited by Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger, *The Monstrous Middle Ages* edited by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert

Mills, John Block Friedman's study *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, and *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen.

18. For a more in-depth discussion of this historiographic tendency, see Deborah Youngs and Simon Harris.

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