

Masking and Unmasking the Subject(s): Julián Ríos's *Puente de Alma*

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"The death . . . of a beautiful woman," insists Edgar Allan Poe, "is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (165); an affirmation that Julián Ríos embraces in multiple and unexpected ways in his most recent novel, *Puente de Alma*, published in 2009. Ríos, who writes in Spanish but lives in France, has found in the accident that killed Princess Diana a seemingly inexhaustible subject matter that has allowed him to cross the boundaries of Anglo-American, French, and Hispanic literary cultures and to fuse fiction, from classical to postmodern, with non-fiction. His work is at once critical, journalistic, and biographical in keeping with the *bridge* metaphor of the title. In Ríos's own words: "La novela es ya género de géneros, un patchwork de remiendos" (*Puente* 269) and "La imaginación es un país o nación cuyas fronteras elásticas, imposibles de delimitar por ninguna línea Maginot porque sería quitarle sus poderes mágicos: Y *magie non...* Magia negra sobre blanco, claro, la de la escritura" ("La Europa de las imaginaciones" 281).¹ "Diana," simultaneously signifier, signified, and referent, determines the raw material of the fiction, whose expansion through countless associations, allusions, and analogies takes readers on a textual journey through the imaginary, that is, the *written*, city of *Paris*.

Given the intricacy and critical inexhaustibility of *Puente de Alma*, this essay, despite the promise of its title, can necessarily explore only a limited number of the subjects and textual strategies at play in the text. Moreover, as we will see, the paths one chooses to follow into and through Ríos's dense, labyrinthine, multilayered "tower of Babel" have as much, if not more, to do with the activity of the reader than with that of the writer.² In a 1991 interview designed by its author to introduce Ríos to an English-language public, he describes his ideal "lector"³ as an "elector," a "selector," "an active participant," and a "curious reader" who is "interested in getting into the text and its hidden nooks and

¹ In keeping with the characteristic wordplay of "Y magie non" [imaginons] and "Maginot" ("L'Europe des imaginations" 280) a number of the texts included in Ríos's *Álbum de Babel* appear in both French and Spanish on facing pages (as in "L'Europe des imaginations"/"La Europa de las imaginaciones," from which I quote).

² This is the metaphor that Ríos himself uses to describe his work: "I would like my tower of Babel or babble to have many stories, different floors and different tales" ("Julián Ríos" 242).

³ The word is in Spanish and placed between quotation marks in the original.

crannies" ("Julián Ríos" 241-42). If, as he notes in the same conversation, "a book is no more than the sum total of its readers" (242) and "reading is open to all possibilities" (241), it is not only appropriate but inevitable that *Puente de Alma* should be continuously enriched by the future readers whom I seek to attract to a novel that may well be, in keeping with the woman who inspired it, Ríos's most irresistible work to date.

At the same time, every reading (including my own) can be expected to unmask something of the complexity of both this novel and of Ríos's work in general. The novelist, for whom verbal and visual languages are inseparable, has the narrator of *Puente de Alma* compare one of the many paintings in the novel to an "iceberg," which "esconde más que lo que muestra. Y lo oculto sostiene y da fuerza a lo visible" (238).⁴ Ríos also sees reading and writing as indivisible, and essentially, identical activities ("Julián Ríos" 241-42). *Puente de Alma* thus offers an interesting challenge to Roland Barthes's distinction between "lisible" and "scriptible" texts. The novel's familiar stories—and their inspiration—make it accessible to a wide reading public in search of the passive pleasures of narrative consumption at the same time that the intricacies and the self-reflexivity of the narrative structure invite the participation of an active reader willing to engage in the metaphorical reconstruction of the text.

In the same context, the narrator also notes that "[u]n cuadro puede ocultar otro" (230) in one of the novel's many variants on an expression of French origin, "un train peut en cacher un autre." The possibility that "one train may mask another" announces one of the key thematic and formal devices of *Puente de Alma* in which words, images, motifs, characters, and stories constantly prove palimpsestic, and spatially coincidental, as they metaphorically open up or move aside to reveal the complex doublings that govern their transformations and their appearances, disappearances, and reappearances. Indeed, in the case of Camille Larocque's still life, not only do visible objects—a book, a vase, a mug, a folded letter, and a letter opener—serve as objective correlatives for different chapters of an important episode in the artist's life but the invisible—the illegible title of the book, the vague design on the mug, and the unreadable content of the letter—also functions importantly in the unmasking of the hidden story. In this case, Camille's "*naturaleza muerta*" (my emphasis) is more accurately (indeed, quite literally) a "still life," a palimpsestic pun that may well be intentional on Ríos's part given the frequency of multilingual wordplay in *Puente de Alma* (230).

Were there any doubt that Camille's picture also unmasks the novelist's own strategy of narrative generativity and serves as one of the many *mises en abyme* in the novel, the actual painting that Ríos describes hangs in the kitchen of his home in Vétheuil.⁵ Appropriately, the Flame of Liberty that stands on the Place de l'Alma, the primary setting of Ríos's novel, is itself a replica of the torch held by the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. Moreover, the Paris monument has been diverted from its original purpose to become a memorial to Princess Diana, transforming it into what Antonio Bentivegna has called a "palimpsesto social." The objects left by mourning admirers—flowers, candles, photographs, messages—allegorize Diana's legend much as those chosen by Camille resume unhappy events of her

⁴ "... tous mes livres entretiennent un rapport avec l'image. Ma passion des mots est indissociable de celle pour les images" (qtd. in Pagès 164).

⁵ A colleague and I interviewed Ríos in his home on July 23, 2012.

own life. Indeed, one of the only two visual images included in *Puente de Alma* portrays these objects at the foot of the flame in a direct duplication of Camille's canvas (179). "Candle in the Wind," the Elton John tribute referenced by many of the mementos left at the Place de l'Alma, is itself palimpsestic. John rewrote the song, which was originally composed to honor the death of Marilyn Monroe (yet another beautiful—and equally poetical—woman). By chance, Diana's accident displaced still one more diva, similarly adored and unlucky in love, who died in Paris. Without the August 31 crash, the Place de l'Alma would have been renamed "Place Maria-Callas" on September 11, 1997, ten days after Diana's death (Philibert).

From an analogous perspective, Ríos would surely find it not only amusing but entirely fitting that web search engines prioritize his double, an American pornographic actor of the same name, especially since this "Julián Ríos" (aka Julián Ruiz, Julian Andretti, and Jordan Rivers) has a number of alternate identities. Similarly, the "1000 aliases" embedded in the name of "Emil Alia," the first-person narrator of *Puente de Alma*, both mark—and mask—the protean identity of Ríos himself.⁶ An essayist and art critic as well as a novelist, Ríos has also described himself as the undisclosed: the masked "co-translator" of several of his works into French ("Interview with Julián Ríos"). In addition, *Puente de Alma* in particular, given its Parisian setting and the importance of French artists and writers to its network of intertextual allusions, seems to invite simultaneous readings in Spanish and French. Not only does Ríos require an audience of *rereaders*—"A book starts to exist truly only after it is reread" ("Julián Ríos" 241)—but he views the relationship between the "original" and the translated versions of a text in a manner that recalls the connection between the two proverbial trains: "I consider translation as a second opportunity for the text" ("Interview with Julián Ríos").⁷

The French saying that I have privileged allows for a number of other translations as well, some of which—"Another train might be coming" or "Beware of hidden trains"—more explicitly foreground the potential for an accident to occur, thus highlighting another of the most important of Ríos's thematic and structural principles. In conjunction with a narrative progression so heteroclitic and unexpectedly associative that it appears to be accidental, *Puente de Alma* also recounts a number of accidents. No fewer than seven take place in the first chapter alone, in which Ríos also alerts the reader that "[...]os accidentes pocas veces se producen por accidente" (28). In what I believe is an appropriate, if not an inevitable, duplication of Ríos's own practices, I would suggest that another French expression, the *fait divers*, offers an important analogy for the form of the novel. The *fait divers* identifies a news story with sensational themes—accidents, murders, scandals. One might cite as exemplary the death of a famous princess in a car accident in Paris, caused, moreover, by paparazzi—or drunk driving—or an assassination plot, one which may even have involved

⁶ Emil Alia also narrates other of Ríos's novels, notably *Monstruario* (1999). Under the name "Milalias," the character first appears disguised as Don Juan in *Larva: Babel de una noche de San Juan* (1983), Ríos's *magnum opus*.

⁷ Ríos is married to Geneviève Duchêne, one of his French translators. I initially reread *Puente de Alma* in French in preparation for a collaborative interview conducted with a colleague in Spanish at their home outside Paris. Ríos is widely read and admired in France, as indicated by the only collection of essays, edited by Stéphane Pagès, exclusively devoted to his work to date: *Julián Ríos, Le Rabelais des lettres espagnoles* (Toulouse: PUM, 2007).

a mysteriously disappearing second car.⁸ In a coma-induced hallucination caused by an automobile accident that coincidentally lands its victim in the same hospital as Diana at the same time, a double of the princess is warned that “Maquillar el asesinato de accidente es una de las más bellas artes” (78). Significantly, the *fait divers*, like Ríos’s novel, exceeds traditional generic boundaries: it cannot be categorized in any of a newspaper’s conventional rubrics. Though the event reported may initially seem inconsequential, it often turns out to have an unexpectedly broad reach (in part, no doubt, because the *fait divers*, like the death of a beautiful woman, is perceived to have a particularly strong appeal for the general reading public).

In combination, the *fait divers* and the deceptive appearance of trains serve to identify one of the aspects of Ríos’s fiction that is, much like the subject of his latest work, *attractive* in every sense of the word. Although critical studies of his novels focus primarily on their linguistic and literary game playing and compare their author to a canon of modernist and surrealist experimental writers such as James Joyce, Stéphane Mallarmé, Lewis Carroll, and Raymond Queneau, *Puente de Alma* unmasks the original text, *original* in the sense of archetypal as well as innovative, that is hidden behind its brilliant display of avant-garde pyrotechnics. In his most recent novel, Ríos reveals himself to be a virtuoso storyteller whose collection of the curious, the unexpected, the amazing, and the marvelous recalls such precursors of the traditional novel as *The Arabian Nights*, *The Decameron*, and *The Canterbury Tales* whose unifying frameworks open up to release multiple narrators to recount a wide variety of fascinating tales.

Ríos’s superficial respect for unity of time, place, and action—the story of Diana’s death, set among the mourners of the Place de l’Alma, begins on the night of the accident and ends on its first anniversary—also recalls, albeit ironically, the origins of literary theory, the rigid structure of neo-classical theatre derived from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The content of *Puente de Alma*, to the extent that it can be classified, imitates that of the *fait divers* or its popular culture counterparts: the novel’s combination of mysterious deaths, unsolved mysteries, missing persons, unhappy love affairs, and supernatural occurrences allows the reader to travel widely through time, space, and genre. Moreover, despite a clear emphasis on the imaginary, Ríos’s stories, like the *fait divers*, are often unexpectedly grounded in factual reality. In this context, Pagès’s conclusion to an analysis of Ríos’s *Poundemónium* (1985) is pertinent to *Puente de Alma* as well; objecting to critics who argue that Ríos’s formal innovations create self-enclosed texts divorced from the real world, Pagès maintains that they actually have “une valeur de roman-témoignage” and are deeply invested in history, geography, and biography (167-68).

The description above might seem broadly reminiscent of Poe,⁹ whose detective stories and fantastic tales deal with similar themes and whose passion for cryptography and professed interest in a philosophy of composition indirectly recall Ríos’s linguistic and

⁸ The one specific example of a *fait divers* in *Puente de Alma* is directly linked to Diana’s death. A friend of Emil’s shows him the newspaper account of an incest case: “El padre intentaba reforzar la defensa asegurando que la niña mayor, Elodie, era su Lady Di, su princesa.... El fantasma de Diana sigue alejando todos los fantasmas...” (350).

⁹ In “The Philosophy of Composition,” the 1846 essay from which I have taken my opening quotation, Poe describes the extremely methodical composition of “The Raven” although there is considerable controversy over the extent to which he, in fact, put his principles into practice.

generative games. Conversely, it is, in fact, a French writer whose work is most importantly hidden behind that of his Spanish successor. Although the relationship between Ríos and Raymond Roussel (1877-1933) merits an in-depth study of its own, my intention here is simply to highlight a few of the overlooked similarities whose revelation enriches my reading of *Puente de Alma* as, among many other things, a compelling work of popular genre fiction. As in the case of Ríos, it is somewhat ironic that Roussel owes his critical reputation almost exclusively to the interest aroused among the surrealists and the French *new novelists* by his famous *procédé*, a compositional method based on intricate formal and linguistic constraints. Indeed, although Roussel is one of the very few writers, cited as potentially influential on his own work, to whom Ríos himself has devoted an essay, he too essentially focuses on generative wordplay in "Raymond Roussel o la fuerza de las palabras." On the other hand, Ríos also privileges Roussel's first book, *La doublure* (*The Double* and/or *The Understudy*), whose intriguing title points not only to the hidden technique that Roussel waited in vain for readers to unmask but also to one of the recurring motifs in the fiction of both novelists, which accentuates their affinity.

Briefly, then, the marvelous machines and exotic characters that populate Roussel's fiction, unified only by time, place, and voice within an overarching narrative framework, offer the reader, as does *Puente de Alma*, a virtual encyclopedia of *faits divers* and fantastic tales. In *Impressions d'Afrique* (1909), for example, which also originates in an accident, the multi-talented survivors of the shipwreck mount an extravagant gala whose different acts, each more puzzling than the last, are explained only long after their introduction and description. On prominent display is the body of a deceased king whose life story, not unlike that of the House of Windsor, eventually unfolds like a soap opera. Its many subjects include murderous family rivalries replete with jealousy, adultery, revenge, betrayal, secret liaisons, kidnappings, and abandoned children.

Corpse is one frequently forgotten, if not largely hidden, meaning of the word *subject*, and although the obsession with death permeates Roussel's work as it does that of Ríos, the former makes particularly prominent use of the theme in one memorable episode of *Locus solus* (1914). The principal attraction of the scientist Martial Canterel's eponymous estate is a series of *tableaux vivants* or "living pictures" that recall the paradox of Camille's "naturaleza muerta" in reverse. The actors are, in fact, dead bodies periodically brought back to life by Canterel's latest invention to perform repeatedly the most significant episode of their lives. By chance, the cast of characters includes a beautiful young English noblewoman. In *Puente de Alma*, Camille attends a hallucinatory masquerade ball in which theatrical impersonators of famous celebrities, including Diana and other luminaries who died in Paris on an August 31st, act out their characters' roles, ending, in the case of the princess, in a final flight into the tunnel where her real counterpart will die. Elsewhere, the fictional resurrection of Diana takes the form of reincarnation, material manifestations, or, in one particularly whimsical variation, embodiment in the cat to whom Emil relates Ríos's novel.

I want to use the fifth chapter of *Puente de Alma* to illustrate more fully my reading of the novel. Located in the exact center of the book, this chapter incorporates a number of strategies that, to some extent, allow it to stand as a *mise en abyme* for the work as a whole. In the 1991 interview, Ríos identified titles as the crucial generative and structural element of his creative process, comparing them to "tight tale[s]" or compressed stories: "The entire

story is contained in the seed of a title, which harbors many possibilities" ("Julián Ríos" 247). Chapter 5, titled "Apariciones y desapariciones en París" (181), announces at once the hero-narrator of the section, one "Aparicio"; the plot, controlled by his unpredictable appearances and eventual disappearance; and the genre, the literature of the fantastic on whose conventions the chapter draws. Indeed, the first sentence introduces us to an apparition on a dimly lit train, a classic ghost-story setting:

El hecho o hechicería ocurrió en el París de las maravillas de la época romántica, entre las atracciones y enjambres de curiosos del bulevar del Crimen, como era conocido entonces por sus teatros de melodrama el bulevar del Temple; pero llegó a oídos de Aparicio con siglo y pico de retraso, en 1969, al regreso de un viaje a Londres, cuando se alejaba de Calais hacia París en un compartimento de tren casi a oscuras con un desconocido que parecía traspuesto. (183)¹⁰

Characteristically, the vagaries of Ríos's syntax double the wandering movement of the novel. The multiple conjunctions, prepositions, and relative pronouns duplicate the twists and turns of his narrative *flâneurs* as they wind their way through both the narrative itself and the streets of Paris.

As will be immediately clear to many readers of Ríos, the text cited above is transparently palimpsestic, simultaneously masking and unmasking Marcel Carné's *Les enfants du paradis* (1945). This intertextuality not only fuses art forms, adding the dramatic and the cinematic to the narrative, but it reinforces the difficulty of distinguishing between the *real* and the illusory, which is key to fantastic literature. A similar difficulty arises in attempting to categorize Ríos's performance of the different types of intertextual strategies that Gérard Genette groups together under the general heading of "transtextualité." Of the five subtypes Genette defines, Ríos draws in this chapter alone on "paratextualité," the relationship between a text and its title, "metatextualité," an unmarked intertextual reference, and "transtextualité," the adaptation of an unmentioned prior text without which the present text could not exist. More generally, *Puente de Alma* depends on "architextualité," the unarticulated relationship between a given text and the genre(s) to which it belongs (see Genette 7-14).

Carné's film, grounded in the history of Paris in the 1830s, superimposes fiction and fact, notably in the character of the actor Frédéric Lemaître, who, coincidentally, is the very person that the man on the train, whom Aparicio perceives to be his double (same age, same physical appearance, same background), tells him that he was on his way to meet one morning in 1838 when he paused on the boulevard du Temple to have his shoes shined and ended up selling his soul to the devil. The pact involves the fulfillment of the passenger's overwhelming desire to be first in something. One hundred and thirty-one hellish years later, the appearance of Volume 17 of the 1969 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, whose entry on Louis Daguerre is illustrated by a photo of a man having his shoes shined on "a Paris boulevard," confirms that Aparicio's double is the first man ever photographed. The reproduction of the image in Ríos's novel, the second of the two photographs in *Puente de Alma*, may serve less to expand the generic limits of his text than to foreground the

¹⁰ In the French translation, the passage, which begins with "les faits ou forfaits diaboliques" (155), linguistically evokes the *fait divers* with which it will deal.

figurative importance of spatial coincidence in his work. The inevitable superimposition of the photo, devoid of street traffic and human beings other than the tiny shoeshiner and his client, and the opening sequence of *Les enfants du paradis*, whose crowded street with its throng of people passing by is so clearly evoked in the opening sentence of the chapter ("enjambres de curiosos del bulevar del Crimen" 183), creates an endless sequence of doubling, a series of apparitions, that continuously mask and unmask each other.¹¹ The eerie effects of the fantastic in fiction or reality often depend on the way in which the ordinary unexpectedly appears extraordinary—or vice versa. In my case, this was less the result of discovering the multiple reproductions of the source of page 197 of *Puente de Alma* on the internet than in seeing a set of the 1969 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, whose seventeenth volume does indeed contain the photo in question, on a bookshelf in Ríos's own living room.

In one of his many efforts to escape his fate, the first man ever photographed attempts to destroy the daguerreotype of his likeness but succeeds only in setting fire to another of Daguerre's inventions. In its original form, the diorama alternately unmasked and masked one of two images depending on the source of the illumination. The second half of the fifth chapter of *Puente de Alma*, which provides a different perspective on a number of the motifs introduced in the first part, offers the reader an infinitely more complex variation on such a model, as does the novel as a whole. In the course of a highly circuitous repetition of Aparicio's story to another photographer, who coincidentally lives on the rue Daguerre in Paris, Emil describes two drawings: "El de la izquierda representa a un hombre caminando por unos números crecientes, 1 2 3 ... 9 0, sobre un acantilado" (202). In the second drawing, "un hombre minúsculo está encaramado en un gran signo de interrogación al borde de un precipicio. Recordé entonces cómo llamaba Aparicio a su amigo: Question Marc... Un interrogante que siempre hacía preguntas, capciosas. ¿Un interrogante sin respuesta?" (205-206).

To use language in keeping with Ríos's wordplay, the motif of interrogation is *unquestionably* pertinent here, given not only the enigmatic drawings but also the fact that Marc, as well as Aparicio, has disappeared. Indeed, Emil is convinced that the latter has gone in search of the former, but he also proposes an explanation for Aparicio's disappearance that provides further encouragement to look beyond the visible: "La radiología, su especialidad primera, que revela lo oculto, tal vez le abrió en cierto modo los ojos de la imaginación y lo empujó a querer descubrir lo que está velado" (207). The inquisitive reader will soon realize that what is masked by the drawings described by Emil is the work of the artist Saul Steinberg. The first sketch is an impeccably accurate reproduction of a cartoon that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1962. Although the second sketch does not appear to be an exact replica, its ekphrasis, even more than the drawing itself, is certainly suggestive of a 1961 *New Yorker* cartoon by Steinberg, which shows a man confronted with multiple question marks of different sizes and designs.¹² "Masks," a

¹¹ Because Daguerre's image required an exposure time of over ten minutes, everything that moved—the crowds and the carriages—was erased from the scene. Only the man having his shoes shined stayed still long enough to appear in the photograph.

¹² Given the importance of titles as clues in Ríos's work, that both of Steinberg's drawings are "Untitled" adds to the whimsy and the mystery.

series of works in which Steinberg drew different versions of faces (including his own) on brown-paper bags, highlights the aesthetic interest in masquerade, disguise, and metamorphosis that he shares with Ríos.¹³

Marc, whose real name is Griffon—"Marc 'Griffonneur', emborronador de cuartillas" (206)—suggestively serves as Steinberg's diegetic double. In a later chapter of *Puente de Alma*, in which the narrative literally spirals back to the disappearance of Aparicio and Marc, the artist himself is finally unmasked in the form of a famous 1948 drawing. A self-portrait of the artist, the drawing doubles as a remarkably accurate depiction of Ríos as well: "... un dibujo de Saul Steinberg que representa una línea ... que se va arrollando en la espiral que encierra a un hombre que la está tranzando" (293). *Puente de Alma*, in which characters map in detail the famously snail-like geography of Paris even as the multiple allusions and complex narrative strands of the stories they tell create the illusion of great depth, offers the verbal equivalent of Steinberg's transformation of a two-dimensional line into an intricate three-dimensional picture.

In the second version of a strange encounter made by Aparicio on another train trip from London to Paris, he meets a young woman and her elderly companion whose obsession with blood (including a fondness for *boudin noir*) engages parodically with the conventions of vampire fiction. When the full moon, however, reveals her "perfil gatuno" (218), and she begins to meow ("maullido" 219) and purr ("ronroneando" 219), to lick ("lamiéndolo" 218) and to bite ("mordiéndolo" 218) in the course of an increasingly aggressive sexual encounter, generic references to Gothic literature open up to unmask *Cat People* (1942), Jacques Tourneur's classic horror film, as a more specific intertextual allusion (218).¹⁴ The story of this adventure also includes an overt reference to one of Poe's tales, "The Gold-Bug," in which the American writer illustrated his passion for cryptography or *secret writing*, a suggestive metaphor, as noted above, for Ríos's literary strategies. Aparicio describes a scarab ring engraved with a skull as a "memento mori" (213), reflecting not only the theme of death (which is, of course, one of the clearest generators and recurring motifs of *Puente de Alma*), but more explicitly, his own suicide attempt at the pont de l'Alma when he believes, mistakenly of course, that he has murdered one of the undead.

Whether the mysterious young man who prevents Aparicio from disappearing into the Seine is the archangel Raphael, in keeping with the supernatural, or "un travestido" (226), in a self-reflexive allusion to the theme of disguise, the fictional story of a foiled suicide attempt is immediately and explicitly doubled by the true one of the actress Martine Carol, which brings us back both to reality and to the theatre. There may also be yet another embedded film allusion since the reader is reminded that Carol was once kidnapped by Pierre Loutrel, also known as "Pierrot le fou" (224). Given that Marc writes a message reading "Sálvese el que pueda" prior to his disappearance, the evocation of the titles of two films by Jean-Luc Godard may well be intentional (206).¹⁵ More typical of Ríos's intriguing

¹³ Steinberg collaged the walls of the Galerie Maeght in Paris with his mural, *Le masque*, in 1966.

¹⁴ "[Ella] lo recorrió lamiéndolo y mordiéndolo desde al cuello a las ingles.... [A]l mismo tiempo ... prolongaba su maullido. No había otra palabra para describir ese maullido ronco.... [Ella] se arrodilló a la cabecera arrullándolo ronroneando..." (218-19; my emphasis).

¹⁵ Godard directed *Pierrot le fou* in 1965 and *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* in 1979.

literary strategies, however, is Emil's offhand reference to what Aparicio—and probably many readers—do not know or will not remember: that an unnamed German-language poet jumped into the Seine from a nearby bridge a few months earlier (221). What is left to the reader to uncover is the suicide of Paul Celan, whose jump from the pont Mirabeau inevitably unmasks Guillaume Apollinaire's haunting poem of the same name about memory, loss, and the inevitable passage of time.

It is, however, the female victim of a drowning of uncertain origin whose face haunts *Puente de Alma*, as illustrated, once again, by its central chapter. On the verge of committing suicide, Aparicio remembers his childhood awe at the sight of "la mascarilla mortuoria de una ahogada, la desconocida del Sena, una chica de expresión serenísima, casi risueña en su sueño eterno" hanging on his grandfather's wall (220). The unknown victim, whose body was found in the Seine in the late 1880s, became a mythical figure much like Princess Diana did after her mysterious death when the pathologist at the Paris morgue was reportedly so captivated by her beauty that he made a plaster cast of her face. The story itself may well be apocryphal but the charm of the "mascarilla mortuoria" was such that it was subsequently reproduced in multiple copies and inspired a number of artists and writers. Ríos, in fact, names some of his most famous precursors: "... esa desconocida del Sena inspiró a autores tan distintos como Aragon y Nabokov, pasando por Rilke y Supervielle" (69). In *Over Her Dead Body*, Elisabeth Bronfen chooses the image of the young woman known only as "l'inconnue de la Seine" as the iconic figure of her comprehensive study of "death, femininity and the aesthetic" (see esp. 206-07). Given Poe's similar conviction about the poetical power of imagery of female death, particularly evident in "The Oval Portrait," it would not be surprising to learn that he too owned a replica of "l'inconnue de la Seine."

The widespread fascination may well stem in part from the literalness of this emblematic *mask*, which hides the identity of the victim as well as the circumstances of her demise. Her enigmatic smile is frequently compared to that of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (*La Gioconda*) as well as the subjects of other sculptures and paintings, and the image is sufficiently impersonal that the model might well be any number of attractive young women (including, of course, Diana herself). Although photography replaced death masks in the early twentieth century, there are no postmortem pictures to be seen of the woman who was arguably the most frequently photographed in the world until her death.¹⁶ Although it does not appear on the long list of similarities that one of Emil's interlocutors presents as proof of his conviction that Diana was none other than Louis-Ferdinand Céline in a previous life,¹⁷ he might well have pointed out that the French author, asked for a photograph of himself, sent his editor a picture of the mask of the unknown woman of the Seine instead (Zeidler). The first fictional incarnation of "l'inconnue de la Seine" in Ríos's novel—"la misteriosa desconocida del túnel de Alma"—explicitly links her to the site of the fatal car crash (84).

I would suggest, in conclusion, that Ríos's novel as a whole serves as Princess Diana's "mascarilla mortuoria" not only because the accident that killed her is its initial inspiration, but also because her name, her persona, her history, and her myth underlie the countless subjects that coexist within the textual space of the fiction. In illustration of Poe's aesthetic

¹⁶ The photos taken by paparazzi at the scene of the accident have never been publicly released.

¹⁷ Céline died on July 1, 1961, the day that Diana was born.

premise, *Puente de Alma* unmasks the cultural plethora and ubiquity of images of “[t]he death . . . of a beautiful woman.” I encourage other curious readers to seek out many more.

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