

2 Monstrous/Wondrous Transformations of the Female Body: A Reading of Daniela Tarazona's *El animal sobre la piedra* and the Gothic

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After the death of her mother, a woman travels to a beach to escape her emotional trauma. In this new setting, she begins to experience a number of physical transformations: her skin becomes green and coarse, her limbs are too flexible to be human, and her senses are inexplicably altered. As she slowly metamorphoses into a reptile, leaving the reality of her woman's body behind, she heals her pain and finds a new identity. This is the story of Irma, the reptile-woman in Daniela Tarazona's *El animal sobre la piedra* [The Animal on the Stone, 2008]. This work has been defined as "literatura fantástica" [fantastic literature] (Díez Cobo) and as "ficción de lo inusual" [fiction of the unusual] (Alemany Bay); my analysis, however, proposes an understanding of the novel as Gothic fiction. This perspective, as I aim to prove in my chapter, supports an interpretation of the narrative as a transgressive text.

The ambiguous characteristics of the Gothic make it a literary form akin to the monsters that it portrays: concealed but striking, enigmatic, multifaceted, and obscure. Whereas there is still some academic resistance to admitting the Gothic as a narrative mode in Spanish and Latin American cultural productions,¹ contemporary criticism seems to agree in considering it a tradition that survived its generic conceptualizations, managed to adapt to different times and places, and is still present in contemporary literary and filmic texts worldwide. The common stance among critics is that the Gothic is a mode which, as it adapts to different societies and cultural realities around the world, also becomes a distorted mirror of societal fears. The understanding of a text as belonging to the Gothic mode also allows for an analytic focus on

specific elements of the texts, such as the role of grotesque bodies, claustrophobic spaces, and Otherness, and how these relate to social fears.

This understanding of the Gothic does not attempt to reject or obscure previous readings of regional fiction, but rather aspires to advance criticism by offering new tools to examine cultural creations. In an increasingly globalized world, it seems fair to learn from, adapt to, and utilize the resources of different fictional modes that originated worldwide. An interpretation of *El animal sobre la piedra* as a Gothic text will allow me to read the tropes of incarceration and metamorphosis of the heroine as gendered processes, to explore the transgressive possibilities of the novel, and to interpret the active undoing of binaries as a subversive endeavor. As Irma is seen, in my reading, as a Gothic heroine, the patriarchal systems that oppress her (and all the women she represents) become the Gothic threat. With this thesis in mind, I use contemporary feminist and Gothic criticism to explore how the protagonist's metamorphosis represents an excess in the limits of her own corporality. As the undoing of dichotomies situates the source of fear outside of the female body and the possibility of change embedded in it, Irma's new corporeal reality throws different types of binaries into crisis. In order to explore these issues, I will look at the incarceration of the heroine inside her body and her home and study the different ways in which liberation from such prisons is attempted. Finally, I will analyze the return of the protagonist to the oppressive phallogocentric systems that aim to define her reality. This order recognizes the novel's circular structure, which transforms an allegory of the cycles of nature (evoked by the protagonist's change of skin) into the dark realization of the impossibility of escape.

Imprisoned Bodies

The advent of the supernatural is announced in the first line of the novel: “Mi casa fue el territorio de un suceso extraordinario. Después de la muerte de mi madre un gato de color gris entró en mi cuarto y orinó bajo mi cama” [My house was the sight of an extraordinary event. After the death of my mother, a grey cat came into my room and urinated under mi bed] (Tarazona *El animal* 11). The protagonist tries to force the cat outside of the room, but she is unsuccessful: “El gato se metió bajo la cama. Es imposible sacarlo de ahí, pensé... parecía estar en celo” [The cat hid under the bed. It’s impossible to get her out, I thought... she seems to be in heat] (11). The beginning of the story also anticipates some of the themes of the novel: the extraordinary that invades the quotidian, the longing for motherhood, and the claustrophobic impossibility of progress. It also reflects, according to Scott Kissick, the protagonist’s initial identification with the animal kingdom (28).

The initial accounts of Irma’s self-reflective experience also situate her in the long tradition of Gothic heroines trapped in the domestic space: “Era profundo el temor que me producía mi propia casa, por eso sentí la necesidad de huir. En los momentos de pánico los contornos de las cosas me amenazaban: las esquinas de los muebles, la irregularidad de la escalera o el perfil de la azotea” [It was profound the fear that my own house instilled in me, so I felt the need to run away. In moments of panic the outlines of things threatened me: the corners of furniture, the irregularity of the stairs or the profile of the rooftop terrace] (Tarazona *El animal* 27). Her feelings of sadness and mental distress are reflected in the space of her home, which transforms into a menacing enclosure. This quote also presents the edges of household objects as threatening for the heroine (whose later metamorphosis will question spatiotemporal borders) and therefore anticipates such blurring of boundaries. As in many examples of Female Gothic, the domestic space that Irma inhabits becomes an extension of her body as she feels imprisoned by the walls

of her house and trapped in her own skin. As well as feeling frightened by the space surrounding her, she confesses that she feels terrified by “nuestra carnalidad” [our carnality] (27). At this point, Irma is talking about her and her sister—who, as it is suggested later, committed suicide. The word *carnalidad* refers both to sensuality and/or sexuality and to the quality of being — which, in Spanish, has the same root as *carne*, meaning both “meat” and “flesh.” Irma is scared by her own sexual body and her corporeality as a woman: she is as imprisoned in her house as she is in her flesh, which will soon become the space where self, Other, fear, desire, suffering, and hope merge into one.

As in the Female Gothic, this entrapment can be read as a representation of “the containment of women within patriarchal social and legal structures” (Mulvey-Roberts 109) and the symbol of the classical female body (as opposed to the transgressive female Gothic body) as a closed (and therefore silent) mouth. Irma confesses: “No quiero hablar con nadie. Espero que crean que soy muda” [I don’t want to talk to anybody. I hope they think I’m mute] (Tarazona *El animal* 18). Before her transformation, Irma is thus a silent/ced and restrained woman with a wish to escape the corporeal and architectural walls that entrap her. She states: “No quiero estar en mi cuerpo” [I don’t want to be in my body] (13) and “mi cuerpo me era extraño” [my body was strange to me] (25). The only possibility of escaping these claustrophobic circumstances involves a metamorphosis. As other Gothic heroines have done before her (such as Jane Eyre, upon discovering Bertha Mason), Irma detects a “Hidden Woman” (Delamotte Qtd. in Allen 21) who, in her quest for self-reflection, becomes her own Other. Irma’s Other lives inside of her body and it/she manifest it/herself as bodily changes: “Los cambios en mi organismo ya comenzaron... Los músculos que antes respondían de manera infalible ahora están aletargados y, a cambio, tengo mayor elasticidad en las extremidades. Si me lo propongo, tuerzo los brazos al punto de

poner mis dos palmas sobre los omoplatos” [The changes in my organism have already started... The muscles that used to react infallibly are now lethargic and, instead, my limbs are more flexible. If I want to, I can twist my arms to the point where my two palms touch my shoulder blades] (14) and “no era mi brazo, era el de otro ser, el de un animal de otra especie” [it wasn't my arm, it was that of another being, of an animal of a different species] (26). As the narration advances, Irma's Other reveals itself in bodily changes that end up becoming part of her—an animalistic, fluid self who, at least for a limited period of time, is free from oppressive structures of domination. These changes, which instill both terror and wonder in the protagonist, are, at the same time, abject² and magical: as Irma transforms into a reptile, she frees herself of the weight of the past and disposes of patriarchal definitions of the female body, like a serpent who sheds its old skin.

The Transformation: The Fluid Body in the No-place

One of the most salient characteristics of Gothic fiction is the mode's recreation of contrasting elements (dark/light, dead/alive, past/present, self/Other) and the systematic blurring of boundaries between them. If the Gothic is “a writing of Otherness” (Khair 5) that opposes such binaries, it also “functions to blur the distinctions that exist when oppositions ... are presented” (Beville 41). A reading of Tarazona's novel as Gothic fiction illuminates the narrative's exploration of a transgressive undoing of dichotomies that not only alters preconceived definitions of space and time, but also—and most relevantly—of the female body. Once Irma manages to escape the prison of her own home, her gradual transformation into a reptile allows her to break free from patriarchal definitions of her corporeal reality and her role in society. The heroine's metamorphosis blurs the boundaries between interior/exterior, animal/human, and subject/abject, and, read as a Gothic narrative, becomes a transgressive text that aims to propose

a redefinition of patriarchal definitions of womanhood. It is relevant to note, however, that the distortion of borders that Tarazona's novel presents is not perceived as threatening. Instead of functioning as a text that stems from a well-defined reality that is dislocated by a Gothic effect associated with danger, *El animal* seems to present these blurring of boundaries in a positive light. As Irma's metamorphosis entails the possibility of hope, the text rejects the conservative belief "in the utter simplicity of the power of One signifier" that is exemplified by Tzvetan Todorov's understanding of the fantastic (Braidotti 142).³ Tarazona's protagonist embraces the vulnerability that her new nomadic condition implies, and, in doing so, situates the Gothic source of fear outside of the female body, pointing at (and denouncing) the structures that placed it there in the first place.

Irma's attempt to escape the prison that her home has become takes her to an unnamed place with a beach. In this unspecified space, the protagonist meets a stranger who becomes her partner (only referred to as "*mi compañero*" [my partner]) who has a pet anteater named Lisandro. As Irma narrates her story in the first person, present events are mixed with memories and anticipations of incidents to come, generating a complex web of meanings in which different times are intertwined. Irma accepts her metamorphosis, but she is hurt by her past: the memories of her dead mother and sister conjure feelings of isolation and confusion, building invisible walls of sorrow that engulf her as if she were inside a Gothic castle. In this context, Irma's metamorphosis is described as a way to escape this claustrophobic situation: "El presente ya no es el tiempo que vivo, ahora me encuentro aletargada dentro de un cuerpo propio pero alterado... Para mí esta vida es de placidez... mi sublimación se sostiene en la firme convicción de vivir con plenitud" [The present is not the time in which I live anymore, now I feel lethargic inside a body that's mine but altered... For me this life is placid... my sublimation is supported by the utter

conviction that I live fully] (Tarazona *El animal* 131). Her body in transition manages to exist outside of time, but also in an ambiguous space that mirrors this changeability. Kissick considers the beach as symbolic of Irma's metamorphosis, as it is a space in which the borders between the sea and the sand are constantly negotiated (30). The seawater can also be understood as a symbol of regeneration and new beginnings (Eliade 165) that will also be evoked by other cyclical processes in the novel, such as Irma's change of skin. The mutability of the coastal space is also present in the interior of the house that she shares with her partner in which, as her transformation advances, the objects start to lose their contours and materiality: "Los objetos son transparentes, como si fuesen hechos de aire... No hay en los objetos un comienzo y un final, se encuentran unidos sin que pueda definir uno sin otro... las sillas son parte del suelo, la mesa y el espacio" [The objects are transparent, as if they were made of air ... In the objects there is no beginning and end, they're connected so that I can't define one without the other ... the chairs are part of the floor, the table and the space] (Tarazona *El animal* 132). As in the beginning of the novel, the space not only contains the corporeal reality of Irma, but also reflects it: they are both fluid, ambiguous, and undergoing a constant negotiation of their borders.

One of the most salient changes in Irma's body is the slow but unremitting shedding of her skin. What starts as a gentle peeling "en algunas partes de mis brazos la piel de desprende" [on some parts of my arms the skin is detaching] (32) ends in a radical detachment of skin from body: "El pellejo es mi historia... Me desprendí de él con movimientos cuidadosos. Recojo el pellejo y lo llevo al basurero del baño" [My skin is my story... I got rid of it with careful movements. I pick it up and take it to the bathroom bin] (39). This change is not described as painful flaying, but instead can be understood as a metaphor for renovation, cleansing, and growth. In her study of the cultural meanings of skin, Claudia Benthien traces the *topos* of flaying as purification and

development in Western cultural productions. In this understanding of a change of skin, “[t]he act of radical self-alienation is stylized into a moment of self-becoming. A process of cyclical regeneration that occurs in the reptile world is transferred metaphorically to human beings” (83). This motif also appears in pre-Columbian Mexican myth, more specifically, in the attributes and symbolism of the Aztec god Xipe Totec. “Nuestro señor el desollado” [our skinned Lord] (Caso 69) is the god of spring. His worship, one of the most bloody of ancient Mexico, consisted in covering the priest with the flayed skin of a victim as a symbol of the arrival of spring, a time when the Earth changes skin (Caso 70). Xipe Totec thus represents renewal, change, and the liberation from obstacles in the path of the individual subject (Laurette 284). Irma, like Xipe Totec and the metaphorical spring he represents, changes her skin as she welcomes a new beginning. This process, which symbolizes the cycles of the natural world, also epitomizes the cyclical nature of the narrative.⁴

Both the *topoi* of renewing skin as a liberating act that entails progress and the Aztec myth are intrinsically associated with masculinity. On the one hand, Xipe Totec is a deity belonging to the masculine sphere of the cosmos (Solís 101). On the other hand, Benthien links the metaphor of the empowering renewal of the skin with literature written by male writers (83) and underlines the telling lack of images of skinning in female bodies in cultural and medical production.

Whereas images of men lifting their skin to show their internal organs were common in anatomical studies in the sixteenth century, there are “no partially skinned female torsos or skulls intended to expose and demonstrate the nervous system, the lymphatic system, or the network of veins. To this day [Benthien's book was first published in 1999], just about the only time anatomical atlases depict the female body is to show the reproductive organs” (85–6). This fact implies an understanding of the male body as the “normal” one and the female body as the

Other: deviant and sexualized. For Benthien, in this structure, the female skin is understood as a veil: “Undressing a woman of her skin would fundamentally destroy the myth of her being other” (86). In this light, Irma’s empowering transformation becomes not only transgressive but also strongly gendered. In opposition to the defining and stigmatization of female corporality by patriarchal law, Irma’s is an “unruly or transgressive female Gothic body” (Mulvey-Roberts 107) that opposes the classical model.

As a Gothic entity, Irma’s reality refuses to be reduced to a binary and trapped into institutionalized definitions of female corporality. The ambiguity of her new existence is emphasized by references to fluid natural elements with unstable borders, such as water and fire, that represent the characteristics of her newly discovered being: “es posible que mi alma humana sea líquida o una flema transparente” [it’s possible that my human soul is liquid or a transparent phlegm] (Tarazona *El animal* 124), she comments. Later, she adds: “el fuego era como yo” [fire was like me] (125). As her body grows into a borderless territory that mixes different categories of being, Irma represents a Gothic take on what Braidotti defines as the subject of feminism:

a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity... She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process, a mutant, the other of the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis. (12)

In both Braidotti’s thought (significantly influenced by Luce Irigaray’s) and Tarazona’s story, female sexual difference is not understood as the binary opposite of the phallogocentric subject, but as a starting point to track and redefine essentialist definitions of male and female identities. Irma’s corporality becomes a “cuerpo en fuga” [body in flight] (Vivero Marín “Cuerpos” 212) that encourages the conception of fluid and diverse alternatives to patriarchal definitions, but it is

also decidedly female. This implies an acknowledgment of sexual difference and the role of sexually specific bodies in defining individual subjects that is distinctive of feminist discourses. Thus, according to Elizabeth Grosz, “[s]exual difference is ... a mobile, indeed volatile, concept” that locates the body as a central term in negotiating the intersections between feminism and philosophy (ix). Irma’s volatile “body in flight” embodies this understanding of sexual difference while collaborating in challenging a number of phallogocentric presumptions “which have hidden the cultural and intellectual effacement of women” (Grosz ix). In Irma’s metamorphosing, the female body becomes an intersectional vessel where different codes are inscribed: she is a woman and a reptile with skin and scales, who simultaneously suffers pain and pleasure, inhabits a no-space, and is, at the same time, subject and abject.

The characteristics of Irma’s pregnancy emphasize the blurring of boundaries that render her body fluid while stressing this volatile conception of sexual difference. After her partner masturbates on the beach, she decides to sit on his semen left on a rock. Then, almost like a feminist version of the Virgin Mary, Irma becomes pregnant: her body never gets dominated or penetrated, but she manages to engender a daughter. The physical attributes of Irma’s body, which is partly human and partly animal, allow for a hybrid pregnancy and labor. She gives birth to an egg, inside which a placenta protects her unborn child. The imagery of a woman engendering hybrid offspring is, of course, not new in the Female Gothic tradition which also reproduces similar anxieties related to women’s bodies and their ability to procreate: for example, Victor Frankenstein’s worst fear when attempting to create a female companion for his creature was the possibility of her having his offspring (Mulvey-Roberts 111). The progeny of witches and undead women would imply a dissolution of binaries separating life from death, and human from monstrous, which is necessarily threatening to a patriarchal and religious agenda

that constructs the world in absolute binaries. However, the undoing of dichotomies represented by Irma's pregnancy—both human and animal—is not presented as monstrous but as a symbol of hope: a type of hope that is specifically female.

As a marker of sexual difference, the maternal, according to Irigaray, is the instance that articulates the specificity of female sexuality (Whitford) and the site of women's capture into patriarchal roles subservient to the masculine. As Braidotti reminds us, however, maternity "is also a resource for women to explore carnal modes and perception, of empathy and interconnectedness that go beyond the economy of phallogocentrism" (23). As the phallus is not directly involved in Irma's pregnancy, her maternity is understood as a hopeful process that acts as a symbol of matriarchal connection that includes the rest of the women in her family: "Mi estirpe durará para siempre, al menos por un tiempo inmenso que la mente no puede imaginar. Mi madre, mi hermana y yo tendremos descendencia" [My line will last forever, at least for an immense period of time that the mind cannot imagine. My mother, my sister and I will have descendants] (Tarazona *El animal* 93). Irma's pregnancy allows her to discern the possibility of a future governed by selflessness: "mi nueva condición también acepta la posibilidad de que existiesen... hombres que regalan sus bienes" [my new condition also accepts the possibility that there might exist... men who give away their goods] (118) and a reality based on the acceptance of difference. It also exemplifies a feminist attempt to theorize the corporeal through creative imagination.

Tarazona's imaginary of unusual female corporality can be connected to the literary imaginations created by other contemporary Mexican women writers. In her analysis of fiction written by Mexican women in the past fifty years, Natalia Álvarez theorizes a contemporary attempt by these authors to question the patriarchal vision of the world, to allow the development of

personal subjectivity, and to stop the simplification of the description of women's realities (90)—represented, among others, by the binary virgin/whore, Guadalupe/Malinche.⁵ Tarazona's own considerations of contemporary non-mimetic literature written by Mexican women coincide, in general terms, with that of Álvarez's. In her critical analysis of the narratives of three contemporaries (Patricia Laurent Kullick, Cecilia Eudave, and Adriana Díaz Enciso) which portray women protagonists whose bodies are infected, invaded, or transforming, Tarazona recognizes a number of tropes which, according to the author, define women's realities ("Los cuerpos" 181). These tropes, which include the invasion of territories, the foreign, the expulsions, and the body as prison (among others), also appear in *El animal*. In this sense, Tarazona indirectly defines herself as belonging to the tradition of women's writing (and, more specifically, the Mexican tradition of women's non-mimetic literature represented by Laurent Kullick, Eudave and Díaz Enciso, among others) used as an exploration of womanhood and its monstrosities.

According to Paula Smith Allen, the transformation of the heroine in narrations of female metamorphosis—to which *El animal* belongs—implies an awakening to the realization that "she [the heroine] is no longer compatible with the terms of her former existence" (6). Escaping the entrapment of her former self, defined by patriarchal expectations, the heroine must engage in a process of self-reflection. In this sense, "the narrative itself is the means of escape" (6). Irma's testimony in the first person, therefore, becomes not only a means to propose a creative alternative to patriarchal definitions of the body, but also the heroine's own way out from the prison built from these expectations. The first-person narration, thus, becomes an empowering and radical act in itself. As Irma states: "En la vida propia, en ese limbo donde uno es uno mismo y se percibe el pulso de las vísceras, no hay otro que pueda hablar en nuestro nombre" [In our

own life, in that limbo where we are ourselves and perceive our heartbeat in our guts, there is no one else that can speak in our name] (Tarazona *El animal* 47). This reflection, which is the result of an empowering process of transformation, contrasts with the silencing of her own voice at the beginning of the story. Tarazona's heroine refuses to be described by somebody else and claims the importance of embodiment as the source of self-reflexive language, and, in doing so, escapes the prison built by patriarchal assumptions of the female body. In doing so, her story invites us to connect Tarazona's text to other writings by Mexican female authors of the non-mimetic literature that aim at escaping defining constructions of women's experiences, femaleness, and femininity.

The Return of the Oppressed

By the end of the novel, Irma has gone through a process of self-exploration that, through welcoming the Other into the self, has allowed her (and the reader) to grasp a freedom coded in self-reflexivity and the reimagining of female bodies from a feminist perspective. The ending of the story, however, suggests the impossibility of escaping the patriarchal order, which becomes the real Gothic terror. Irma wakes up in a psychiatric hospital where she learns that she never had a daughter. Under her bed, she finds the egg in which her daughter should have been, but, in the last lines of the novel, Irma reveals that it is empty.

Irma's admission into a hospital has been interpreted as a sign that her whole experience was imagined by a sick mind. According to this interpretation, the ending allegedly revokes the feminist project suggested by the previous sections (Vivero Marín "Los roles" 79). In my view, however, this reading simplifies the complex webs of meaning coded in the ending of the novel. As Rosa María Díez Cobo has explored, the uncertain descriptions of Irma's experience in the hospital maintain the story's ambiguity (145). It is thus suggested that the medical team in the

protagonist's new setting also accepts her hybrid nature: "Tras mi llanto, mis lágrimas son de sangre y [la enfermera] por fin lo acepta: 'eres un fenómeno de la naturaleza', dice" [After the tears, I cry blood and [the nurse] accepts it at last: "you're a natural phenomenon," she says] (Tarazona *El animal* 169).⁶ Additionally, the egg itself is a palpable entity that both Irma and the nurse recognize as real and, as such, becomes another element that denies an absolute interpretation of the story as the delirium of a sick mind.

The narrative has a circular structure in that Irma returns to a situation of imprisonment: while at the beginning of the story, she was a prisoner in her body and home, the process of liberation through transformation eventually ends in incarceration in the asylum. In her analysis of different narrations of female transformation, Allen recognizes the heroine's return to a reality structured by the patriarchy as the final part of the voyage: "The metamorphosis is curtailed before the dancer can escape from her imprisonment. Her awakening brings about the 'tragic happiness' of the newly born woman, a creature who is complete in her being, but nonetheless entrapped for utilization in a man's world" (4). Irma's return follows this scheme, and, as she becomes imprisoned, she feels betrayed and confused in a setting that represents the structures of patriarchal oppression: "Tengo la idea de ser engañada" [I'm under the impression that I'm being deceived] (Tarazona *El animal* 166). Kissick, drawing from Michel Foucault's notion of madness as an established discourse of the state, theorizes Irma's captivity as a representation of the institutionalized exclusion of the Other (32–33). Female subjects, being the Other of the patriarchal same, have been imprisoned by phallogocentric medical discourse, as exemplified by the history of the diagnostic category of hysteria. Constructed as "a woman's disease" that links female biology to emotional excess, hysteria was believed to be caused by the impossibility of some women to have children, therefore being denied the integration into the traditional female

role of being a mother (Kissick 33; Beizer 37). Hysteria has also been associated with women's mutability (Showalter 286). The connection to Irma's situation, who has just lost her own mother and considers her own pregnant and mutating body as a symbol of hope, is obvious here.

Examples of women exhibiting symptoms of hysteria are common in Gothic fiction. Examples of incarcerated Gothic heroines in the Mexican context include the protagonist of Adriana Díaz Enciso's *Odio* (2012), among others. The duality of the novel's portrayal of the body as imprisoned, but also as a prison in itself, is analyzed by Tarazona in her examination of contemporary Mexican women writers. According to the author, the protagonist's body "es definido mediante las identidades que le son ajenas" [is defined by identities that are foreign] ("Los cuerpos" 195); its mere existence and the ability to be interpreted subvert such impositions. Reading *El animal* from this transnational tradition of entrapped Gothic heroines allows us to consider Irma another one of these transgressive women and understand the novel's ending not as a return to patriarchal models (as Vivero Marín claims), but as a revindication to change the phallogocentric *status quo*. This revindication is attained through the self-reflexivity allowed by a narration in the first person and by exposing the real Gothic terror: a patriarchal system that transforms heroines into prisoners and reminds them of the impossibility of escaping its menacing walls.

Conclusion

Tarazona can be considered part of a group of Mexican women writers who aim to subvert patriarchal expectations defining women's bodies, realities, and roles in society through the use of supernatural, marvelous, mystic, or simply unusual literary creations. In this sense, the non-mimetic imagination allows these women to represent femaleness and the feminine which have not only been underrepresented, but also colonized by the male imaginary. In doing so, these

texts aim to generate, using Braidotti's nomenclature, "[f]eminist counter-genealogies" that can pave a path toward "a new symbolic system by women" (26). By subverting the binary systems that reduce women's experience to archetypal images generated in a phallogocentric system, *El animal* suggests the possibility of other models to understand the female body outside of these imprisoning definitions. Irma's body becomes fluid, ever-changing, and powerful because of its ability to adapt and welcome difference.

A reading of *El animal* from the Gothic tradition allows a theorization of the protagonist's incarceration and metamorphosis as gendered processes. Irma becomes a Gothic heroine who manages to escape the prison of her own reality by welcoming the Other into the self, only to realize there is no real possibility of breaking out of the oppressive system of patriarchal domination. This system, therefore, becomes the real Gothic monster. In her process of becoming Other, however, Irma has managed to define herself, her body, her reality, and even her imagination through a process of self-reflection that becomes subversive in itself. The Gothic allows us to define the transgressive possibility of the literary text (and, more specifically, of Irma's account of her own story) and to rediscover the spaces of terror: the house haunted by the dead mother, the female subject imprisoned by the body, and the asylum as the final assault of the patriarchal.

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¹ The term "Gothic" was not respected by the English highbrow culture in the eighteenth century, and it is still often rejected in academic circles worldwide. In the Latin American context, as I have argued elsewhere, the reasons for

the marginalization of Gothic criticism have to do with both the perception of this mode as naive, repetitive, and “de mal gusto” [in bad taste] (Bioy Casares 7), as well as representative of foreign (and even colonizing) perspectives (Ordiz and Casanova-Vizcaíno 1–3).

² As defined by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*: “What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4).

³ In her feminist analysis of Todorov’s classifications of the fantastic, Rosi Braidotti points to the conservatism of the author’s definitions. According to Braidotti, Todorov’s theory “reiterates a fundamentally humanistic belief in the need to uphold those categorical distinctions between Man and His others, which nomadic thinking is committed to dislodging. In so doing,” she continues, “Todorov demonstrates another crucial point: that the blurring of boundaries or distinctions is often perceived as threatening or dangerous.” This idea, which is often evoked in criticism of the Gothic and the fantastic, is, when divorced from an analysis of the historical context that produces the fears being evoked, “a very conservative position that aligns neo-humanistic beliefs with a nostalgic denial or distance for historicity” (142).

⁴ The use of the motif of natural regeneration through a change in skin is, therefore, a point of contact between the Western tradition and non-Western systems of thought (like the pre-Columbian ones) that, in general terms, define much of Mexico’s postcolonial cultural realities. In the case of *El animal*, this combination of models enhances the hybridity of Irma’s corporeal reality.

⁵ The cult to the Virgin of Guadalupe is one of the beliefs more historically rooted in Mexican religious and identity systems. Some historians associate Guadalupe, a Catholic virgin of mestizo appearance, with the Mexica cult to goddess Coatlicue (or Toci), worshipped during pre-Columbian times in Tepeyac (the area, north of Mexico City, where Guadalupe is believed to have appeared for the first time). Malinche, on the other hand, was a Nahuatl woman who acted as interpreter, counselor, and lover of Hernán Cortés. In Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, a key text in the theorization of Mexican identity in the twentieth century, Malinche becomes the mythical mother of all Mexicans, who are, according to Paz, “hijos de la chingada” [children of rape]. These two female characters represent the role of woman (which, as Jean Franco points out, is not the same as “women”) in the formation of Mexican national identity. Whereas Guadalupe becomes the symbolic icon of *criollo* nationalism, Malinche represents the scapegoat, the ultimate representative of female treachery (Franco 19). As mythical figures, they stand on opposite ends of the essentialist dichotomy virgin/whore.

⁶ *Un fenómeno de la naturaleza* is an expression that translates both as “a freak of nature” and “a natural phenomenon.” In my view, Tarazona is playing with this ambiguity, which is untranslatable.